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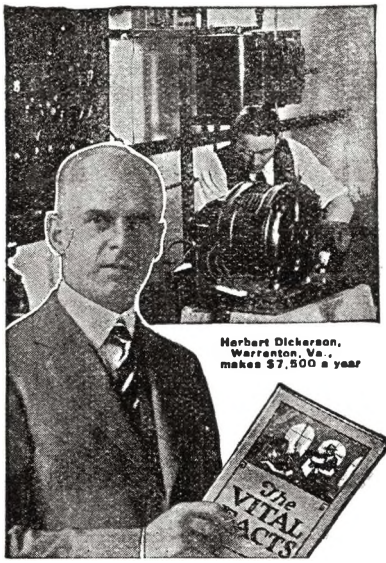

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Vol. LXXVIII JANUARY 7, 1926 No. 6

Twice-a-month publication issued by Street & Smith Corporation, 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York. Ormond G. Smith, President, George C. Smith, Vice President and Treasurer; George C. Smith, Jr., Vice President; Ormond V. Gould, Secretary.

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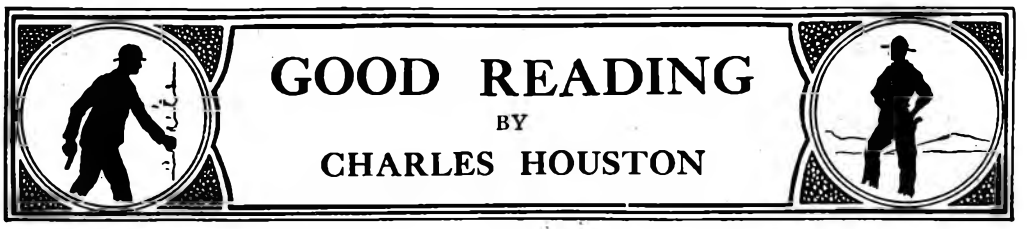

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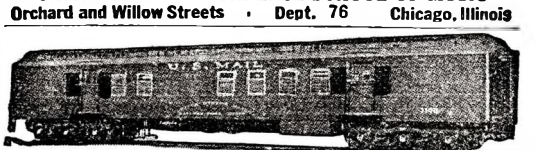

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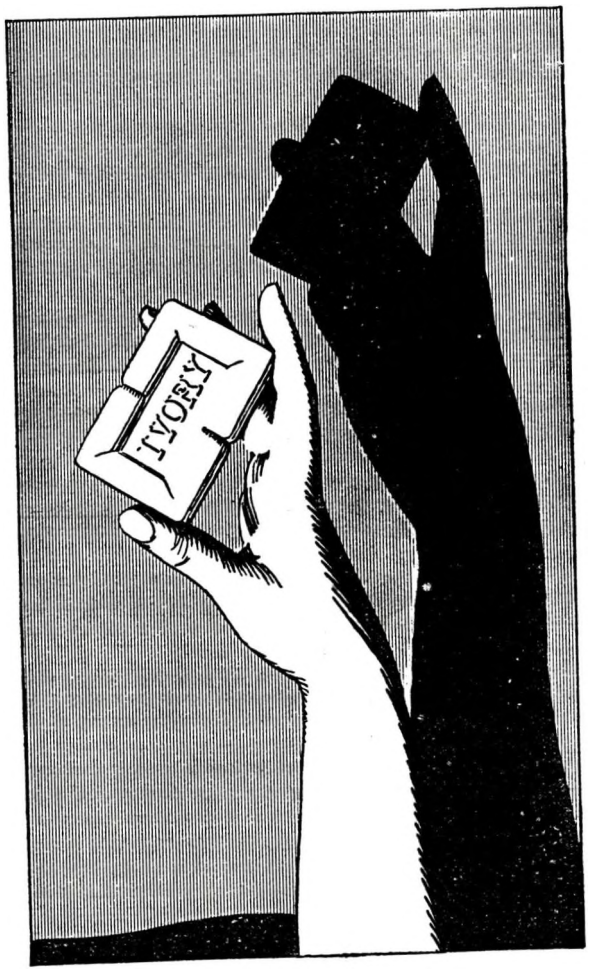

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THE POPULAR MAGAZINE

VOL. LXXVIII JANUARY 7, 1926 No. 6

Liquid Doubloons

By Norwood Pinder

The Ten Thousand Islands, clustering about the southern tip of Florida, have gone down in history as the abode of the lawless. Seventeenth-century freebooters made of this archipelago a base for their piratic adventures; during our American Civil War fugitive negro slaves and escaped Union prisoners of war found here a refuge; this was the last stronghold of the Seminole Indian; and to-day the tradition of daring enterprise lives on in the descendants of these adventurers of old.

CHAPTER I.

FIGHTING THE SEA.

I CONFESS that I was considerably disturbed by the possibility of sharks—that touch of dismay at the moment of finding myself derelict in the open Gulf was not without reason, but the very fact that I was alone and on my unaided resources in this unusual situation was a potent counteractive. There was a peculiar thrill in the lift and soaring swing of the long rollers coming in from those outer reaches. I felt part of the ocean, the ocean's life, and, stretching myself out in the blue, milk-warm water I inhaled its elemental savor as a country boy might inhale that of his beloved sod.

Oddly enough, it had been a feeling of chagrin at my clumsiness that occupied me as I went overboard. This continued for several minutes after my unexpected plunge and the frantic signals from my comrades on the wildly careering little schooner informing me that rescue was impossible. I had been

born and brought up near the sea and was perfectly at home in the brine.

This, however, was a new experience, I realized, as I watched the water-logged craft recede rapidly before the towering seas after several futile efforts to come about. But I waved my arm reassuringly from the crest of a comber and got busy to reduce the handicap between Old Nep and myself, the shore being something over a mile away. To divest myself of shoes and trousers was easy enough and I turned landward and fell into a long side stroke that I figured would, in the course of forty-five minutes or so, bring me to the broken water.

As the minutes went luxuriously by and my peace was not shattered by the nightmare apparition of a triangular fin slitting the heaving surface, I began to wonder at what point on this coast I would, Crusoe fashion, be cast up. When the heavy weather struck us we were below Sanibel and had been driven southward for hours, fighting away from the breakers. There to the leeward now were the Ten Thousand Islands, I judged.

They broke the sky line for me when I soared on the crests, as far as my glance could reach, and I realized that they were defended from would-be marooned mariners by a very dickens of a surf. Its thunder had been growing steadily louder and it now dawned on me that these mountainous waves that I was utilizing so patronizingly would, with the right set of tide, break up into an inferno of froth and powerful, heartbreaking undertows and cross currents.

I looked anxiously for signs of an inlet, but there were none. The long, watery ridges rolled shoreward, mounting higher and higher, and disappeared in a tumult of flashing foam. I was still fresh and contemplated briefly the advisability of coasting along, on the chance of reaching an inlet. A moment's thought, however, decided against it—better put it to the test now, while my strength was undiminished. So I bore steadily in and presently shot landward on the breast of an enormous roller. It dropped me behind in its race for the watery battle ahead, but the next one picked me up and flung me into the liquid mêlée.

I had often fought the surf before —though never such as this—and I knew what to do. Below the surface in the helpful, solid water, I struck out strongly, remaining under as long as I could. But when my head emerged and I snatched another lung full of air, I saw that I was not appreciably nearer the beach and I knew that I was in the grip of the undertow. A second effort brought the same result. I altered my course then and, buffeted mercilessly by the endless, charging monsters, strove to head in diagonally.

THERE is nothing more exhausting than the pounding of a surf. I was beginning to despair when I found myself nearer in. A salt Niagara hurled me into shallow water and I dug my fingers and toes in against the backwash. A moment later I staggered out and flopped down on the sand.

When at last I sat up weakly and looked around, I saw that the tide was high. The beach was but a narrow strip, steadily yielding to the onslaught of the voracious seas, and just here it skirted a very jungle. I had never seen anything just like it, I thought, feebly surprised. There, a few yards away, were the familiar gray columns and waving fronds of coconut palms, but this formidable wall of brush—— Then I saw that it was, it must be, the work of man; a barrier of brush, a line of defense of some kind, on the very points of which I was all but impaled, as it were. But I was not allowed time for conjecture. A leafy embrasure just over my head was thrust open; a long,

muscular arm, bare to the shoulder, reached down and gripped my shirt in back and, helpless as a kitten, I was hauled unceremoniously up and over.

It was a queer sensation, this being gathered in without a sight of one's captor other than his extremities. I was no lightweight, but it made no difference to him. Retaining his grip, he "toted" me as easily as the rifle which he carried at trail in his left hand. I was too weak to struggle, anyway, and had to submit to the kidnaping, my feet scraping painfully along the shell-strewn path.

THE steady thunder roar of the surf lessened and we entered a coconut grove, in the center of which was a small hut. In the lee of this I was deposited and immediately rolled over on my elbows to see what sort of being had acquired me. He was big enough —over six feet—and his immense bulk was that of huge muscles over a massive frame. He seemed a good-natured giant, though; his large, pale-blue eyes, slightly crossed, twinkled a little as he surveyed me, sprawled there in the sand, much the worse for wear.

"You be fond o' bathin', young fella!" His deep voice rose easily above the shrilling of the branches overhead and the whishing of the nearer thatch.

I nodded, with a sickly smile.

"Wait a bit," said he, stepping inside the door.

A moment later he came out with a small demijohn and a tin cup, into which he poured a stiff dram and handed it to me. I needed a stimulant of some sort, but this stuff was so much liquid fire. I coughed and sputtered, at which his laughter rose boomingly.

"Ho, ho, ho! Did hits muvver treat it mean?"

I handed the cup back with a grimace. Aguardiente was not first-aid for me—I was not that far gone!

"Wull, then," he said soothingly, "ef it can't stummick a grown-up dose, its muvver will hunt up its milk."

He returned immediately with the same cup, filled this time with wine—wine, I knew, that must have drawn its ardent mellowness from some vineyard of ancient Spain. It was heady on an empty stomach and I said so, adding that so much hospitality was spoiling me; whereat he vanished once again, reappearing this time with a colossal cheese sandwich.

"Guess you ain't swallered much salt water, after all," he commented. Then his countenance became businesslike. "Your boat, out yander," he said abruptly. "Where bound?"

"Any sheltered place," I replied gravely, "or else Davy Jones' locker. Is there an inlet south, where she could run in?"

"Three mile. But there'd be a slim chanst in this weather, without they know the chann'l. 'Ow many aboard?"

"Three, all pals of mine. On a cruise out of Tampa. No crew. We did our own navigating."

"So I would jedge," he remarked dryly, but still studying me and stroking downward with the palm of his hand the huge mustaches that made him look so like a blond walrus.

He stepped inside again and I heard the rumble of his voice, but the words were indistinguishable. When he emerged he said:

"You'll find a pair o' pants you c'n 'ave. There's a bunk, too. Go in an' lie down if you wanta."

As I was getting on my feet, he added:

"If the tellyphone rings before my pardner comes in, beat it down to where we become acquainted jest now an' lemme know."

Telephone! My face must have shown my astonishment, for he added:

"Field outfit."

He removed one brogan from a sock-

less foot, shook out the sand and replaced it, then the other.

Rising, he looked at me steadily.

"I like you, young fella, an' you'll like me as long's you do whut y're told." He took up his rifle and without more ado went back along the way we had come.

I entered the shack and found it surprisingly wind-tight and cozy. Its circumscribed space was packed with all manner of litter. There was no room for furniture, but a case of condensed milk stood on end to make of itself a stool, while a one-burner oil stove on a barrel furnished the elements of a kitchen. There was the bunk, built of rough pine boards, so hemmed in by the tiny abode's contents that it resembled a primitive, built-in bathtub. It was filled with dry seaweed and turtle grass and ripped-open burlap sacks were the coverlets. I threw myself into it, full length, and found it surprisingly comfortable.

"Talk about the simple life!" thought I. "Here it is." Then my eye fell on the telephone, a jarring, sophisticated note, indeed.

My thoughts came back to my new acquaintance, who had picked me up like a bit of flotsam. I wondered who and what he could be. Not a beach comber; the telephone discounted that. Some sort of coast guard, most likely, though why he should stand watch with a rifle was a matter for conjecture.

"Watching for smugglers, I'll bet!" The thought brought with it a tingle of excitement.

Here was I, not long out of college, itching for experience—the dean had worded it more academically at commencement, I believe—given a taste of it on that brief cruise, my first in the Gulf of Mexico, now to witness stirring scenes, be a participant, perhaps, in the endless warfare between the minions of the law and those who acknowledge no law. Here it was, as I had so often craved it; life in the raw, life in the open, where high-power rifles were evidently necessary equipment.

"Wow!" I said to myself. "Smugglers or what not, I ought to have some sort of hardware. Not even a pocketknife!"

I had heard tales of this subtropical archipelago, sanctuary of outlaws and refugees, and some of these came to mind now. I left the bunk and rummaged around the cabin, but the most formidable weapon I could find was a table knife, of the basest sort of metal. The trousers which my friend had mentioned were hanging on the wall; they were faded blue denim suitable for a shipwrecked mariner. They must be the property of the absent partner, for they were only a little too large. I put them on, with a piece of rope for belt, and continued my search, but fruitlessly.

I WAS about to crawl disgustedly back into the bunk when a thought sent me dredging energetically under the burlap and into the rustling depths. Sure enough, there was something hidden at the bottom. I brought it up, a flat, compact bundle done up in oily rags, and by its weight and shape I knew I had a military-model automatic pistol, one of the kind that had been heard from in the recent "Big Noise." The war had come to Armistice Day before I got out of Paris Island, but my training had included the use of just this sort of "gat" and I was highly elated over my find.

The gun was loaded and a farther delving brought to light three cartons of the plump, effective-looking cartridges. I put the contents of one package in a trousers pocket, wrapped the others in the rags and buried them in the very middle of the dry, sandy floor. The pistol, at half cock, I put inside my shirt, wedging it with its holster well down in the waistband of my bor-

rowed trousers, and lay back in the bunk. Now, if hostilities should break out at this outpost of government, I could give a good account of myself.

Had I known then what I was soon to learn, I should not have slumbered so readily. But I was tired; there appeared to be no likelihood of immediate alarms; and the steady rush of wind with its bass accompaniment from beyond the dunes was very lulling. I drowsily turned to a more comfortable position. With a fervent hope that my comrades had been as fortunate, I fell asleep.

CHAPTER II.

THREATENING GUNS.

I AWOKE with a feeling of malaise. I had been dreaming of sharks; once more swimming in the deep, the center of a narrowing circle of the sea tigers, their leering eyes and grinning jaws held me in a rigor of helplessness that I shall never forget. Although it was November, I was uncomfortably warm, my throat and mouth were parched and the prickling of my salt-encrusted body added to my discomfort.

I started up and went to the door, noting as I passed the alarm clock on the wall that I had been asleep nearly two hours. The gale had died down and breaks in the clouds swept the grove with successive waves of light and shadow. The branches swayed with a pleasant, rustling sound and only the heavy pounding of the surf told of the recent severe "blow."

Other than this shack, there was no sign of habitation. Here was solitude, a brooding solitude. Gradually I came to feel that the place was peopled with entities other than those of the present; that below the surface of the actual swarmed an activity no less real, of a nature determinate with their character. Here had been the haunts of the early pirates and buccaneers, scene of the knife-to-the-hilt struggle of rival ascendancies, of the abominations of savage warfare.

The conviction persisted, and grew, that the genius of the place was malign. True, nothing had happened to justify such impressions, and yet—— But my imagination was running away with me. Moreover, I reminded myself, I had come in search of adventure; here was the reality—why not, then, savor it to the full? My depression was accounted for naturally enough. The uncertainty of the fate of my pals aboard the *Amberjack,* my dispiriting struggle with the surf and, last but not least, my need of a good hot meal.

As I explored the primitive pantry for eggs as the viand best suited to my culinary skill, I caught the distant but unmistakable drone of an airplane. A searching party! My spirits ballooned accordingly. I was not so enamored of adventure that I would shun rescue. Also, it might indicate that my friends were safe. What ho, for a continuation of our cruise! Dashing out, I ascertained that the plane was to the southward and approaching, though I could not see it for the trees.

I made for the beach, pulling off my shirt as I ran, to use as a signal. Behind me, in the cabin, the telephone jangled, but I gave it no heed and dashed recklessly into the little cut in the barrier dunes through which I had been brought a while before. Ahead of me, peering with the aid of field glasses through a break in the wall of foliage, was my salvor. He turned quickly at the sound of my approach, then dropped the binoculars with an oath and snatched up his rifle.

"Stop there an' put 'em up!"

There was no mistaking this command. I put on the emergency and come to a halt with both hands over my head, surprised and angry. The rifle remained pointed at my middle.

"Well?" I demanded. "What'll you have?"

"That!" he said sharply, glaring at my waist line and advancing slowly. "Keep 'em up. I'll 'elp m'self."

I glanced down and there in plain view was the butt of the .45, nestling in its holster.

"W'ut are ya totin' that for?" he snapped, removing it with a jerk. "Friends o' yours up yander, hey? Goin'ta flag 'em down, hey?"

The hum of the plane was loud and louder, dominating even the sound of the surf.

"Take them glasses an' give yander a squint."

I did as directed and presently picked up the air voyager, a seaplane a little offshore and about a quarter of a mile up.

"They're no friends of mine, as far as I can make out," I informed him.

"W'ut she look like?" he insisted.

"Seaplane, painted gray all over."

He circled so as to bring me in line with the object of interest.

"Know who he is?" I ventured.

"No, but I 'ave my suspish." After a moment, he added: "We'll git back to the shack now. Walk ahead."

FOR the second time I negotiated the beach trail with him, the manner a trifle more dignified this trip, though I was acutely conscious of that shiny muzzle focused on my spine.

"What do you take me for—smuggler?" I called over my shoulder, as we reëntered the grove.

"Maybe I do. And maybe I don't. Mostly I do."

"Well, what do you think I'm smuggling into your precious island—myself?"

"There, now!" he exclaimed, in a tone of ironic admiration. "If y'ain't a right smart guesser!"

I laughed aloud.

"I'm a heap more interested in smuggling myself out of it! And I must say that for a government man you're the limit. Win a leather medal every week or so, don't you?"

He made no immediate reply, but as we drew up before the hut, he said:

"Y'ain't smugglin' yourself out. Jest git that out o' y'r 'ead. Set 'ere in the door w'ile I report again."

He whirled the old-fashioned bell handle and addressed familiarly central, wherever she was:

"Sis, ring 'eadquarters."

There was a short delay.

"'Ello! This is Watkins . . . Flyin' boat jest passed, goin' north. No marks . . . Yes, I guess so. Say, my customer 'ere that fell off the schooner I reported at noon—bring 'im in? . . . All right. W'ut become of the schooner? . . . Ho, yes, of coorse!"

"How about my pals?" I asked eagerly, as he hung up the receiver.

"Safe enough," he answered dryly. "One o' Bilbo's boats got 'em through the Middle Pass, glad enough to git back again, most likely. 'Ow long 'ave you been with Bilbo, son?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," I replied shortly. "A man who has completed his senior year objects to being addressed as 'young fellow,' and 'son,' even by one old enough to be his father. How old are men where you come from, anyhow?"

He ignored this, taking a generous helping from a package of cut plug, which he carefully replaced in his shirt pocket.

"Don't know w'ut I'm talkin' about! Well, there now!" He said it musingly, but I caught a mocking glint in his eye. "Never 'eard o' Bilbo?"

"Bilbo *who?*" I asked testily.

"Bilbo! Thought ev'rybody knowed him, pertickly 'is own crew."

"Well, I don't know Bilbo and I'm not one of his crew. I told you who I am—Blake Kennedy, on a cruise."

"Ho, yes. W'ut business you in, Mista Kennedy?"

"Business! Who said anything about business? I haven't settled down yet. My dad's a marine architect and I expect to go in with him one of these days, after I've knocked around a bit."

"Expects to settle down," he said, still in that mock-musing tone, "one o' these days. Goin' after y'r pile first, so's not to be a silent pardner, hey?"

"Look here!" I exclaimed angrily. "I'm tired of this. I've given straight answers to your questions. I'll answer no more."

"Easy, now, son. Don't forgit——" He chuckled. "Jest tell me this: Why did you root this up an' tuck it in y'r belly band?" He patted the butt of the .45, which was protruding from his trousers' pocket.

"I've heard there are all sorts of people in these keys—smugglers, wreckers, escaped convicts. Sort of happy hunting ground for 'em."

"'All sorts' is right. You've heard so, hey?"

"Yes, that is what I said. And I thought if there was to be fighting, I ought to be able to take a hand."

"Huh! W'ut did ya do with the ca'tridges?"

"Buried 'em in there," I replied grumpily. "Middle of the shack. If you do get attacked, you'll get no help from me, gun or no gun. I don't like your way of treating company."

"It's the way uninvited comp'ny gits treated in these parts, these days. Bilbo and 'is gang's likely to start somethin' most any time, since we knocked off a couple of 'is scouts last week. You come off lucky, son. Arrivin' as you did, you might be a scout, but you wasn't right dangerous, an' we've figgered if you could come for information, you could give us some."

"Little enough information you give to what I say," I retorted.

"Wull, there's ways of extractin' the truth, the 'ole truth an' nothin' but the truth, so 'elp y'r God!" he said grimly. "The Old Man's a bit hard-hearted, when they don't come clean. An' the first lootenant——"

"You mean the third degree? Well, let me tell you——"

"Third, thirteen, or thirty-third, or whatever you may call it, it works."

"It'll be reported to Washington, this time. Our senator'll see that your 'Old Man' is attended to!"

"All right, son! Plenty of time for that, though. Remember, my advice is, come clean. I like ya and 'opes we'll be friends. My advice is, come clean."

He dug in the place indicated and soon brought up the package of ammunition, which, after a brief inspection, he replaced in the bunk, with the pistol.

SHORTLY afterward I heard footsteps crackling on the dead coconut branches that littered the ground and there hove in sight a sturdily built man, plainly of Latin extraction, with the rolling gait of a sailor. He, also, carried a rifle and he regarded me with extreme disfavor.

"Tony," called my friend from within, "this is my prisoner. I'm takin' 'im to 'eadquarters. The night shift'll be comin' along right soon."

He turned to me. "Let's go, Mista Kennedy. One minute, though!" Removing the bandanna handkerchief from his neck, he made as if to blindfold me.

"No, you don't!" I blazed, grasping his wrists, as the situation revealed itself. But a sinking feeling within acknowledged the hopelessness of a struggle.

Watkins—if that was his name—raised his eyebrows and said mockingly:

"Ho, my! Is it thinkin' o' puttin' up a fight? Ho, my!" And he stood waiting.

The Spaniard—or whatever he was—stood by with a wicked glitter in his black eyes and his carbine, held care-

lessly at his hip, was trained straight on the middle of that sinking feeling.

"What's the big idea?" I demanded, with all the bluster I could, as a horrid vision of violent ending flickered in my mind's eye. "I don't know the why of all this, but I won't be led like a sheep——"

"'Tain't as bad as all that," said Watkins. "This is reg'lations, son, as to uninvited comp'ny. So you won't learn too much of our joggerfy—that's all."

His voice and his eyes reassured me.

"You promise me that?" I demanded.

"Yes, of course I do!"

I felt he was telling the truth and dropped my hands.

HE bound the cloth over my eyes and made a knot, then turned me around and around until I had lost all sense of direction but for the sound of the surf. We set off immediately, he guiding me with a hand under my elbow.

"Keep y'r 'ands away from that bandage," he admonished.

"Funny how it takes blindfolding sometimes to open a man's eyes," I said sardonically.

He chuckled.

"Jest as you was completin' y'r plans for gittin' a bunch o' too smart depities fired, eh!" He chuckled again. "My, but you was a long time ketchin' on!"

"Yes, I suppose I was," I said sheepishly. "But your line of chatter might have been an officer's pumping a supposed smuggler. If you're one of the gentry yourself, I certainly don't understand——"

"My talk about Bilbo? Wull——"

I stopped short, as something started up just ahead and hoofed away through the brush.

"Cow," he explained. "We keep a few 'ead on this island—all it'll keep in feed."

"Oh, that explains your barbed-wire reënforcement to your barricade back there in the cut!"

"Right."

"How far is it to the next island?"

"'Alf a mile."

"With an inlet between, I believe."

"Right again. Why?"

"Nothing much. I was just wondering if the cattle were so fond of sea bathing that you had to fence the island in with barbed wire to keep 'em from becoming manatees."

"Haw, haw! You've got a right cur'us turn o' mind, son. Only don't wonder too much; it ain't pop'lar with the Old Man."

The boom of the breakers had become deadened to an even rumble in the distance.

"Taking me inland?" I inquired.

"Wull, after a manner o' speakin'," he replied. "'Ere we are! Look out now for the wire."

"Oh, we approach the sea pastures again, I judge."

I placed my unprotected feet gingerly, with a thought to sandspurs and barbed wire, and presently felt wet sand.

"'Ere we are. All aboard!"

He helped me over the coaming of a small boat. There was a clank of iron as he lifted the anchor inboard and a moment later the keel forward released its hold on the beach.

It is surprising how, when sight is shut off, one's attention fastens on every trifle. Every other faculty I must keep on the alert, storing up details for the moment of my opportunity, for I was already planning escape. Though my present companion seemed a decent sort, there was no knowing what band of rascals he might be associated with. His recent references to the "Old Man" had been charged with significance and I had a premonition that whatever I possessed of nerve and wit I should shortly need.

Our craft was speedy. I knew that

from the way she raised her nose when Watkins let in the clutch and the hum of the motor told a tale of its own.

CHAPTER III.

MASK OF A DEVIL.

IN spite of my uneasiness, I was intensely curious as we landed. From the numerous turns that I had sensed in our course and the time elapsed, I concluded that we were now well enmeshed in the Ten Thousand Islands. The place was evidently populous. We were hailed constantly and, from my companion's salutations, it was apparent that he was at home. "Got a nacherlist," was the explanation he appended. "Strained 'is eyes lookin' f'r sea cows, and I 'ad to bind 'em up." A burst of rough laughter was the response each time.

From a little distance came the recurrent *wha-a-ang* of a sawmill. A sound of nailing on the dock stopped and we were immediately the center of a group that commented freely and humorously at my expense.

My escort did not pause to bandy words. He marched me down the dock, heading a procession that was joined presently by an excited specimen of the canine tribe. We seemed to be in a camp or village, as voices called back and forth, some of them feminine. The latter, though making me acutely conscious of my ludicrous plight, somehow lightened my apprehension. This might be a smugglers' settlement, but the presence of women would doubtless soften the asperities of an inhospitable reception.

In a few minutes we tramped a board walk which terminated in a smooth platform, grateful to my suffering feet. Here my guide ordered the followers to "Clear out!" and guided me forward with a whispered:

"Th' executive mansion, son. The Old Man's office right ahead. Talk straight, now, an' don't take too long with y'r answers."

With that he whipped off the bandage and I saw that I was within canvas walls, a canvas ceiling, all khaki-colored. The room was of fair size, large enough to accommodate a modern roll-top desk of quartered oak, a stenographer's desk completely equipped, several chairs and a row of folding canvas stools around the walls. A coal-oil heater, unlighted, stood in the middle.

Having noted the telephone, I was not surprised to see electric lights.

"You're well equipped here in this uninhabited wilderness," I remarked, endeavoring to appear facetiously nonchalant. The truth was that I had expected to face a tribunal of some sort and have it over with; this waiting was beginning to shake my nerve.

"Yep. Field outfits. Ev'rything's portable 'round 'ere, case we should 'ave to move sudden—which ain't likely!"

I wondered a little at the confidence behind his last words before it occurred to me that the businesslike system in evidence was doubtless thoroughly organized as to intelligence service and defense. A few hours ago I should have scouted the idea of such an institution within hailing distance of civilization. Yet here it was—and what was it? I hadn't begun to learn, yet.

"Old Man gits early supper. It's after business hours, but 'e'll give y' an interview, all right."

Into these prosaic surroundings, which had somehow reassured me, came a woman's voice, vibrant, arresting.

"It must stop! It must stop! Blood —blood—blood! I tell you—everything you've got isn't worth it!"

A man's heavy rumble replied, but the words escaped me.

I strained my ears for the next. It came in a disagreeable tenor drawl:

"Oh, dear, yes! No melodramatics —— Entirely unnecessary." Instantly I hated the owner of that voice.

The woman answered angrily.

"Who is she?" I whispered.

"The Old Man's private sec'etary, you might say. The other one, with th' 'igh voice, is 'is first lootenant, as you might call 'im. Smart as a steel trap, 'e is. But tricky, too. And 'e makes a bad enemy, I'm tellin' ya——"

The door was flung open and a girl of about twenty stood there staring at me. She was beautiful, but stormy.

Behind her entered a rather tall and slender man, in the early thirties apparently, with the most coldly arrogant face I have ever seen. He was eying me superciliously as my glance traveled by him to the other man, whose powerful bulk filled the space at the big desk as he seated himself and swung around.

THE Old Man I rather liked, even as he glowered at me. With his dark brows, nose, chin and air of authority, he might be the head of some big corporation. His expression was domineering, with a touch of recklessness in the glint of his eye. He was clean shaven, florid, forceful.

"Well," he boomed, "what have you to say for yourself?"

"All that's necessary," I replied, but my voice sounded unconvincing in my own ears.

"Oh, you have! Well, shoot!"

As I launched as vigorously as I could into the recital I had given a while before to Watkins, the girl's blue eyes surveyed me with a not unfriendly expression.

I felt that other's—the first lieutenant's—sardonic gaze, but ignored it and addressed myself to the chief.

"Right lively spiel," he said roughly, when I ended, "but you don't expect me to believe it, do you?"

"Why not? It's true, on my oath!"

"Oh, on your oath!" he returned mockingly. "That doesn't go very far out here, young man. How long have you been with Bilbo?"

"I never heard the name until your man Watkins mentioned it."

As the younger man leaned forward to whisper in his chief's ear, I saw the girl signal Watkins with her eyes and the two went to the door, where they stood conversing in low tones.

"It's a bad thing in this community," boomed the Old Man, "to be known as one of Bilbo's gang; but it's a lot worse to be found trying to lie out of it."

"I'm not lying!" I began hotly. "It seems to me——"

"Not so fast," interjected the first lieutenant, in that hateful drawl; "not so fast. There are ways of uncovering a spy and the end justifies the means."

"You mean the third degree, eh?" I was trying to bluster, but I fully realized my helplessness in the event the man had it in his power to be as inhuman as he looked. His eyes dilated. They were so pale as to be almost colorless, giving me the impression of drawn shades through which a devil looked.

"Ho!" boomed the older man again. "That jumps you, does it?"

"Just let me serve warning on you ——" I began again, but again the first lieutenant interrupted.

"Oh, yes," he drawled contemptuously, "we'll hear all about your congressman, I suppose, and all be slapped on the wrist." He leaned forward malignantly. "You'll learn what we think of such threats!" His nostrils, too, dilated, as he turned to the chief. "It will take about two minutes to find out whether he's one of the rah-rah boys, as he says, or one of Bilbo's spies. Shall I make arrangements?"

"Indeed you'll not!" blazed the girl. She came forward, white with anger. "Can't you see he's telling the truth?"

The satanic aid lifted his eyebrows.

"Such clairvoyance is not granted to us all. This is war, as far as Bilbo and we're concerned. We can't take chances."

The cold sweat came out on my forehead as I looked at him. Could this be possible—here—less than a day's run from civilization?

"What do you propose?" demanded the Old Man of her. "You come interfering where you've no business. What is your alternative?"

"I know he's telling the truth!" She stood there, superbly defiant, as he frowned at her. "You can prove it, easily enough. He has told you how they started out from Tampa. Have inquiry made there? That's simple enough!"

"Ahem! Who is it in Tampa knows you and your folks, young fellow?" There actually seemed a measure of relief in the Old Man's tone.

"Why, the man I bought the schooner from knows my father. He can tell you what you want to know."

He nodded.

"That'll do."

I felt suddenly limp.

The first lieutenant's face was a mask, but I saw his fury. Through those colorless curtains it was burning, first on me, then on the girl, then on me again. But the horror had lifted, even though it might be only temporarily. I gazed back at him lifelessly.

"You're a prisoner, young man," said the chief, rising. "Understand that and govern yourself accordingly." He said something in an undertone to his assistant.

"Lock him up, Watkins," ordered the latter. "Leg irons, too."

"No. No leg irons," dissented the Old Man. "The jailer's onto his job."

The girl turned to Watkins.

"Take him to the commissary and get him an outfit, first."

" 'Aven't said anything to the boss, yit."

The chief nodded.

" 'S all right."

Watkins touched my shoulder. I was used by now to his "touch-and-go system," as he named it, and arose awkwardly. Worn out as I was by all that I had undergone, I was suddenly conscious of my appearance—my ship wrecked shirt and Charlie Chaplin trousers—but, most of all, of my bare feet, which seemed to dwarf the rest of me

The girl smiled.

"Don't mind how you look. Think how you arrived! You must be a good swimmer."

"I had to be," I replied, a little weakly.

She laughed and I knew instantly that we should be good friends.

Just before my guard replaced the bandage, I glanced back into the little office and two of them were smiling, the private secretary and the first lieutenant. As I went forth, only one thing filled my consciousness. It was the first lieutenant's smile.

CHAPTER IV.

IN THE FRYING PAN.

I CAME to myself with a start the following morning, and was half out of my bunk before I remembered where I was and what had happened. If I needed verification, the pale morning light furnished it, where it entered, high up, through iron bars.

The room was small and bare, but well floored and ceilinged, with a very substantial and tight-fitting door. The small window was the only source of light and air. There were no electric lights in the cells. Watkins had told me; one went to bed betimes in the coop, as it was known. A heavy ringbolt was let into the wall and I was heartily thankful that I was not connected to it by a length of chain.

NOTHING was to be gained by getting up, so I lay down again on the narrow mattress furnished with an army blanket and reviewed the events of yesterday.

I was satisfied that this was a stronghold of outlaws and evil and desperate things might be done by them; I felt that such was more than probable, remembering the first lieutenant. Yet matters might be worse. True, I had an enemy: I knew that as well then as I was to realize it later; but I also had a friend—two, in fact, for I had developed a great liking for Watkins and felt his for me. But the other, the girl, was a friend at headquarters and one who had proved to have a great deal to say in the administration. Gratitude and admiration glowed as I thought of her. But for her, that first lieutenant would have taken the trick; I was convinced of that amidst my warring doubts.

The Old Man evidently had two advisers, one pulling one way, the other the opposite. The outcome, I figured, would be decided by the one who should prove to hold the stronger hand, and between them lay my fate.

"Well, here's hoping she continues trumping!" I thought. Besides, it was delightful to think of the first lieutenant as a loser. But something warned me he would not remain a loser. He was a hard player and unscrupulous —Watkins had told me that—and, as his curtained smile implied, a dangerous one.

I felt that I had made a good start. Following the hearing the night before, Watkins had escorted me to the commissary, a strongly constructed cabin of almost warehouse proportions, stocked with a great variety of stores. A loose-jointed, mahogany-hued individual—evidently the quartermaster—had assisted me to a fit in the matter of a brown wool shirt, khaki trousers and brogans, topped off with a familiar peaked felt hat, converted to civilian uses by a narrow ribbon band. I also had been allowed to fill up on canned sardines and crackers before being removed.

IT was a long time since I had had a decent meal; this burdened my thoughts as I lay there watching the daylight paint a significant pattern on the wall. "Behind the bars" often meant a bread-and-water diet!

But when the door opened, it admitted a tray of hot food—I saw that first—borne by a broad-beamed rascal who eyed me curiously as he put down his burden.

"Mister Watkins had this sent," said he. "Orders from headquarters."

"That's enough conversation!" snapped the jailer from the doorway, where he stood, lynx-eyed, a gat on each hip. "Get out of there, Jerry!"

I applied myself to the contents of the tray as the turnkey left, grinning. That was a wonderful breakfast. It included a fruit that I had never tasted before. And hot coffee—excellent coffee! Life began to take on some color.

It was a long day, however, and would have been longer had I not received some magazines and newspapers, "from headquarters," I knew.

After supper, Watkins came in from his long watch. He smiled broadly and said over his shoulder to the keeper:

"I'll rap when I'm ready to leave."

As the door closed, he shoved out his hand and, as I gripped it, he chuckled.

"I told ya to come clean an' that's w'ut got ya out of it. The young lady seen ya was tellin' the truth, jest as I did, an' she giv' ya the chanst."

"Yes, she's a wonder," I said fervently. "That first lieut was licking his chops in anticipation. What do you suppose he would have done, if he had had his way?"

"Well," said Watkins, considering, "think of y'self strapped in a chair specially invented, so ya can't turn y'r 'ead; then y'r eyelids is 'eld back so ya can't wink, even; then a wery bright light is 'eld close up to y'r eyes until ya cries quits—w'ich ain't very long."

I was properly impressed.

"I overheard the young lady's remarks yesterday—about blood. Would they really bump me off, if they were satisfied I was a spy?"

"I ain't answerin' that, son. Ain't aimin' to answer all y'r questions, as you've found by now." He looked at me soberly. "Blood? Yes, there's blood in this business. Always w'ere there's gold enough, there's blood bein' spilt over it. This ain't no exception."

"There's as much money in it as I've heard, then?"

"You bet! And all the 'ijackin' an' pirootin' an' dog-eat-dog that ye've 'eard about—an' then some! If them in the business didn't fight each other, it 'u'd be pie, mostly."

"Then why doesn't each attend to his own business?"

Watkins laughed. "A good manager like the Old Man wouldn't ask nothin' better. It's pirates like Bilbo that makes the trouble. It started over a year ago, when Bilbo lost two shipments from Nassau; one foundered, the other captured with the goods. So 'e jest turned round and 'ijacked a couple of the Old Man's shipments an' there's war ever since."

I whistled.

"I see now why everybody in this colony is so interested in Bilbo. He must be a right bad egg——"

"Wull, sometimes the pot can rightly call the kittle black, son. The Old Man's one o' the few 'onest men in the business and 'e jest natcherly 'ates Bilbo with an 'oly 'atred. If them two ever mixes up person'ly—wull, I 'opes to be there to see!"

"Yes, that would be worth seeing," I agreed. "And the joke of it is that neither the pot nor the kettle can call for help!"

Watkins' laugh was rich with enjoyment.

"Egzackly. It's 'ijack the 'ijacker an' the 'ighest 'ijacker wins out."

"Well, from what you tell me, I hope your Old Man has the last hee-haw."

THE smile left Watkins' face. He glanced at the door, then said in an undertone:

"The first lieutenant, now—I wish the Old Man was rid of 'im. 'E's smart, as I said, but 'e's nasty. Did ya see the way 'e looked at the girl when she stepped in for you?"

"Did I? I felt like a brand snatched from the burning."

"Ye'd 'ave been shakin' in y'r boots if ye'd 'ad 'em on, hey!"

He got up to go.

"Well, it'll turn out all right. All you've got to do in playin' the game with the Old Man is to play it straight—an' keep y'r eyes on 'is pardner."

"I'd already decided on that, but thanks, just the same."

As he went to the door, he spoke in his official voice:

"You're well off, son. Ain't nothin' could 'appen to ya 'ere that wouldn't be worse if you'd 'ave made y'r crawl on Bilbo's beach."

Struck by a fresh terror—not for myself—I grasped Watkins' arm.

"How about my pals? They're up against it?"

"That's w'ut," he replied soberly, "if Bilbo takes the notion they're the Old Man's spies, as mos' likely 'e will."

I stood staring distractedly at my companion, who was rapping on the door.

"Yep," was his last word, "you showed good jedgment in choosin' the fryin' pan. They natcherly crawled into the fire."

CHAPTER V.

ONE OF THE GANG.

THAT was a most unhappy séance I held with myself following my illuminating interview with Watkins.

The dire possibilities conjured up by my imagination for my three chums

needed only my sense of utter helplessness to make my misery complete. It was in vain that I told myself that their combined resources ought to pull them out of any difficulty. The truth of it is that my nerves had not yet recovered from the recent ordeal and I was now suffering for my comrades all of the pains and perils I had overcome in my own case.

Of the three, little "Bud" Roumillat somehow appealed to me most, with his sanguine temperament and the delicate physique that had brought him for a prolonged trip South with the rest of us. Then there was Buchanan Bucknell, affectionately known as the "Big Swede," because of his "beef," which had made him a varsity full back, and because he looked like a Scandinavian which, ancestrally, he was. This was "Buck."

"Red" Gary was next in my thoughts, the irrepressible Red who had made many a minstrel program go round. It was almost as though our frat had gone on a jaunt and we had had the best possible time from the moment we stepped aboard the Pullman in the heart of Manhattan until—until that unexpected beastly blow had come along and cast us up on this piratical strand. It is true that our seamanship might have been better and I felt chiefly to blame, because I had had more nautical experience than the others. Of them, Buck alone knew anything of the art of sailing, having done some catboating on Buzzards Bay. And yet—I tried to console myself—a trim yacht, meant for regatta, races could not be expected to stand everything in the way of weather.

I paced up and down in my restricted quarters, wondering why a perverse fate—or my clumsy tripping over the mainsheet—had sent me here, when by rights I should have been with Bud, Buck and Red, one of Bilbo's "uninvited company." As far as I could see, the element that made my situation better than theirs was the girl. The Old Man was influenced by her. Well, why not take up the matter with the Old Man and learn what, if anything, could now be done? He would have nothing to lose. I pounded on the door.

Ignoring the gruff curse from the other side, I announced that I had something important to divulge to the Old Man. My earnestness seemed to make an impression, for after a grumpy "All right," the footsteps receded and my feverish brain resumed its activity.

In about an hour the chief appeared and, to my delight, he was accompanied by his private secretary. The turnkey ushered them in and provided a couple of chairs, then withdrew, closing the door. In a very short space I related what was troubling me. They sat regarding me steadily. The Old Man raised his eyebrows in a pompous manner and said:

"Well, what on earth do you expect me to do?"

"Anything that you can suggest," I replied. "I throw myself, as your guest, on your good will, your judgment. Those three friends of mine didn't wish themselves at Bilbo's any more than I wished myself here. You will have proof of my good faith as soon as you hear from Tampa. Surely you have no objection to doing what you can for chaps in their situation!"

He frowned heavily.

"What can you or I—or anybody else—do with Bilbo, in the matter of securing humane treatment for his prisoners? I should think you'd rest satisfied with your own luck."

"Would you, under like circumstances?" I countered.

The girl's eyes encouraged me.

"If you could arrange for me to get a message to Bilbo," I suggested, "to the effect that those three fellows are not dangerous to him or his affairs—they're not even interested in him!—

and that he can check up what they say, as you are doing, why, that would do the trick."

"Well, among the three of them, don't you think one of them will be bright enough to suggest it?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. In any event, won't it have a restraining effect on him to know that his holding them is known outside of his domain and that it may make trouble for him if he mistreats them?"

"It depends on whose friends they are. You don't know Bilbo, young man. It would be worse than useless for me to send such a message, even if I wished to. And I'm not asking any favors of Bilbo."

"Let me make a suggestion," the girl said. "Let this young man—Mr. Kennedy, you said?—let him send the message."

He stared at her for a moment, then frowned judically. It dawned on me that once again she had bridged the gap of difficulty.

"Why, yes!" I cried. "As owner and master of the *Amberjack,* I can send him such a notice."

"Hem!" he remarked, to the girl. "You can fork up suggestions after somebody else cooks 'em, can't you!"

"It strikes me that her suggestions are worth forking up," I said fervently.

"Ahem! Well, I suppose they are, sometimes." He looked at the girl. "You mean the plane, I suppose?"

She nodded, her eyes brightening.

"I'll take the message down and drop it myself, if you'll let me." She rose. "Shall I tell Albert to get ready?"

"Wait a bit—wait a bit!" he said testily. "There's some preliminaries. Young fellow, I agree to this on one condition: That is that you throw in with us."

That was a large morsel for my mentality at that moment. I made feeble attempts to digest it as all the possibilities loomed.

"You mean," I said waveringly, "that I turn pirate?"

He laughed.

"You needn't call it that. Save that for Bilbo, son. I mean this: Say you check up O. K. at Tampa; I can't let you go—you understand that. I might make a place for you if you would come in with us out and out."

"If I go in, how can I convince you of my sincerity?"

"Oh, we have a little ritual for the occasion. It's brief, but it answers." He turned to the girl. "Write it out."

She busied herself with a small pad and pencil and presently produced the pledge.

I READ it. In substance, it was to bind me fast to the Old Man and his enterprise, for better, for worse, until death should us part, or something to that effect. I did not like the last illusion and said so, but might have held my peace.

He gave a deep-throated chuckle.

"That simply means that you give a bond to me for your good behavior and fidelity."

"You mean my life is the bond?"

He nodded.

"Sure! They all take it, all my recruits. There's no risk, you know, after that. That's the beauty of it—no risk for either of us."

"And I suppose you have the means," I said slowly, "to collect the bond?"

"Oh, yes," he replied softly, and with a very emphatic drawl. "O-oh, yes! If it's forfeited, by all means." He was looking fixedly at me and I read how ruthless he could be when he felt justified.

The girl's face went suddenly haggard.

I scrutinized the pledge. "If you don't mind my adding a rider to this —er——"

"This is a clean-cut business propo-

sition. It doesn't need any amendments."

"Not as a rule, perhaps. But in my case—well, I have several things to consider."

He moved impatiently.

"Well, I may give you an inch, but you'll not get the ell. Shoot!"

"It's like this: I have some more or less prominent connections and, to be quite frank, I'd prefer it to appear somewhere that I'm a conscript in your forces, as it were, and not a volunteer. Then, if the government should romp on you at any time and rope me in with the rest, I'd have a satisfactory explanation for being among those present."

"Not much gambling spirit in you, is there?"

"Don't misunderstand me—I'm not a tinhorn sport. This is a sort of mutual benefit organization divided up into a system of shares, if I understand correctly. Well, I waive my right to share. You can't turn me loose, that's understood, and, to gain a point for my pals, I'm agreeing to throw in, bag and baggage, with you. I'll take that pledge, but all I shall claim are the bare necessities."

"Bed and board, eh? Yes, I suppose that would give you a loophole in the event of the remote contingency you mentioned. Well, I've no objection. Let it go in the record."

It was also understood and agreed that I should under no circumstances be expected or required to fire upon an officer of the law or representative of the State or national government. After a brief demurrer, he granted the ell as he had the inch.

"I can use you against Bilbo," he said.

IN this way, prisoner yet not under duress, I was voluntarily drafted for the Old Man's service—civil, military, naval—wherever I might be assigned.

But I was in a fever of impatience to dispatch my note to Bilbo and gave the private secretary a memo. It soon came back, neatly typed.

BILBO, ESQ., The Ten Thousands Islands, Florida.

DEAR SIR: As owner and master of the schooner-yacht *Amberjack*, I wish to notify you that the three men found aboard are my friends, to wit: Anson Roumillat, George R. Gary, and Buchanan Bucknell. I am detained in the camp of your business rival.

You can check up on us at Tampa. I bought the *Amberjack* about ten days ago and the sale is on record in the customhouse there. See the party of the first part for particulars.

Doubtless you are entitled to reasonable salvage. But take good care of my vessel and crew as I expect to get both back in first-class condition.

If you agree to the above, spread a white cloth in plain view. Yours truly,

BLAKE KENNEDY.

The Old Man read it with some amusement.

"I see I shall have to make you correspondence manager. An architect, you say? Well, you sure can construct a letter that says a lot in a little."

"Chief," I said anxiously, "you'll make a conspicuous package of that, so it will be sure to be delivered?"

"We know how to take care of those details," he informed me condescendingly, as he arose to go.

"With the special delivery I've been promised"—I smiled at the girl—"my mind's at rest."

"Well, she's a clever girl, if I do say it."

The roar of a circling plane passed overhead, a very little later. My message was on its way to Bilbo.

CHAPTER VI.

FLASHES OF FIRE.

NOT many days later I stood on the deck of the *Susan*—one of the Old Man's cargo carriers—and watched the low green coast unfold southward. The *Susan* was not meant for speed by her designer, but under lower canvas she

was doing good work in that spanking breeze. Beneath her deck were two newly installed powerful motors. Competition was close, altogether too close, the Old Man had decided, according to Watkins, who had received permission to come on this trip. And he had made two screws grow where only one grew before. With both engines tuned up, the *Susan* could drive at a clip in excess of that of any of the revenue cutters, though she could not be expected to cope with the submarine chaser which the prohibition navy was reported to have put in service farther north.

We were under sail only now, as the Old Man's administration was economical wherever possible. As the little ship raced through the indigo, sun-sparkling water, I blessed my luck that I was on her deck instead of languishing in prison ashore.

Watkins and I had helped load her cargo, back yonder in the labyrinth. She was carrying coconuts. I was thirsty and the thought of a drink of the cool coconut milk sent me below. I chose a nut and was hacking at it when Watkins' voice boomed at the hatch:

"Ho, ho! What you doin' down there, son?"

"Thought I'd have a drink." As I spoke, the point of my knife went through and my nose was assailed by a suspicious, pungent odor. "Great Cæsar's boots!"

"Nothin' less," said Watkins laconically. He took the thing from me and, with a few deft movements of his sheath knife, revealed the secret.

"Gosh!" I exclaimed. "I'd noticed that you were a bit more careful in handling them than seemed necessary for——"

"Haw, haw! You'll learn lots more in time. But this 'ere's against the rules. I'll 'ave to turn this in."

"It isn't what I came for, anyhow," I retorted.

He instructed me further:

"Takin' a drink on dooty? No! An' drunk at any time? No! That's strict!"

As we went above, he added:

"This is big business, son. There's reg'lations."

Standing on the slanting, unsteady deck, drinking in the tonic air, I thought over that remark of Watkins'. Yes, it was big business. Yet I was glad to be in, not of, it. There was a distinction and it allowed me to enjoy to the full the excitement of adventure.

There was nothing to diminish the zest with which I had entered into my new life since learning from the returning plane that my pals were safe, for Bilbo had displayed the signal specified. The private secretary had reported with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, exultation in her voice.

"We were shot at by one of his outposts, too!" Strange girl of many moods!

My thoughts strayed to the first lieutenant. I had had proof of his animosity immediately following receipt of the favorable report from Tampa. Attempting to tie me to the drudgery of handtrucking at the wharves! But the Old Man had argued that my Paris Island training would serve him best at "the front." Promptly thereafter he placed me in charge of a fine stand of rifles, all using the .30 government '06 cartridge, with its tremendous range and power, and now I had a creditable squad of marksmen under me, all hankering for a chance to show what they could do.

The Old Man had chuckled as I lined them up on the Susan's deck for his inspection before we sailed and showed him the day's scores.

"That's the stuff," was all he had said; but his assistant, who accompanied him, had smiled sourly and strolled off.

I brought myself to the present with

a jerk as a sail was announced over the starboard bow, northbound.

"Any ship round here may be an enemy's ship," said the master, a short, thickset individual with bright, keen black eyes. "Better get your men ready." He focused the ship's telescope for a long squint.

I thrilled. Things happened thus easily, ushered in as informally as this. I soon had my men posted; two forward, three amidships, one aft with me; rifles and ammunition, covered with oilskins, by the side of each of us.

"On the present courses," announced the captain, "we'll pass pretty close. He's got the weather berth and I don't want to tack to avoid him. I'll keep off the wind a little." He rapped out an order.

"Another thing," he said, turning to me with a wink, "the sun's not very high yet and it'll be right in their eyes."

The other vessel was not quite dead before the wind, both booms out to starboard. She was larger than the *Susan,* painted an unobtrusive gray.

"Never saw her before," said Captain Jenkins, "but she don't mean to let us by without saying 'Hello!' "

The approaching schooner had squared away still more and apparently would cross us a couple of hundred yards astern. As she came athwart our beam, a rifle flashed and several spurts of water shot up in rapid succession landward, marking the course of a ricocheting bullet.

"Across our bows!" cried our helmsman excitedly.

"Keep her full!" ordered the master, and shouted down the companionway to the engineer.

Almost instantly the little vessel began to throw to the drive of her powerful twin motors.

I had signaled to my men to make ready and now passed the order along that they were to fire at will, if I should shout the word.

WE were surging ahead much faster and in a moment there was another flash from the stranger, followed instantly by the unpleasant *whop* of a bullet through our mainsail, not three feet over my head.

"Wherever a head shows, boys, fire!" I yelled, grabbing up my own rifle and cutting loose at the helmsman of the other schooner.

He was the only one visible, unfortunately for him. As the volley rang out from our deck, he dropped. Another sprang to the wheel and shared the same fate. But their riflemen had recovered from the shock of surprise and replied spiritedly from the cover of rails and deck houses. Our own helmsman, profiting by the object lesson, was crouched low, whooping us on.

Holes were multiplying in our taffrail and there was a wicked flying of splinters. Popping sounds above and behind us proclaimed that our sails were receiving most of the punishment. Heeled over away from the enemy, we were a masked battery and thus far there had been no hits among us.

With a free helm, the other schooner, of course, came up into the wind, enabling us to rake her decks as she presented her stern and circled to a standstill with fluttering sails. We raced by with sails full and humming engines, spitting fire fore and aft.

"I'm going to tack and cross his bow," roared Captain Jenkins. "Rake him again, boys!

"Stand by!" he yelled to his seamen. "Ready about!" And away we swung on the other tack.

One of our sailors pitched across the deck and lay with clutching hands.

"Number one!" I counted to myself.

I snatched up the master's megaphone. "Now, boys!" I shouted. "Dum-dums—slam 'em into his water line!"

The vicious, snapping fire broke out afresh. A couple of rifles were crack-

ing at us as we swept across their bows. I contented myself with firing at the flashes. The yells and curses and general confusion on the enemy craft told all that we needed to know.

We romped along on the starboard tack, rapidly drawing away from our discomfited assailant, though the streak of foam at her stern showed that her auxiliary was at work. Their rifle fire was renewed and my men shouted with laughter as some frenzied fool yonder went to work with a shotgun and black powder, making a great show, but showering us as harmlessly as the spray over our weather bow.

We were soon out of range of both shotgun and rifle. I hastened to our single casualty—a fledgling seaman known only as "Joe"—evidently a runaway from some home of the better class. At first glance I saw that there was no first aid for him; he was beyond aid of any sort. He lay with wide eyes. As I stooped over him, he muttered something about a letter in his bag that must be mailed. I promised and, a moment later, he was gone.

It was my first naval engagement. I hoped the other ship was Bilbo's. I said so to Watkins, as he stepped up and wrung my hand.

"We'll 'ope it's one of 'is new arks that we've jest christened. Anyhow—it's 'ip, 'ip, 'oo-raw!"

I stuck out my chest, slapped my boys on the back, tried to keep my thoughts from the young sailor lying there where a soft-nosed bullet had flung him. Soft-nosed bullets do shocking work. I had done what I could for him. His eyes had been those of a hurt child.

CHAPTER VII.

CHASED OUT.

I SAT on the wharf at Cayo Grande, near where the *Susan* was berthed, looking idly down between my feet at a squadron of pilchards flashing in the pellucid, emerald water. I had not yet shaken off the depression induced by Joe's death and his burial, canvas-shrouded, in the effacing sea. Detail by detail it was reënacted as I sat there in the hot sunshine—the men drawn up on deck, a motley group, but all with serious faces; the body lying there in its casing of clean, white canvas; no sound but the surge of our bow wave and the occasional creak of cordage; Captain Jenkins standing silently by the rail.

"God judges the lives of men, the chances they have had. He alone is the judge of Sailor Joe—whose soul we consign to God—his body to the deep sea——"

This was the first death by violence that I had witnessed and it made a profound impression on me. The hard work incident to the unloading of the *Susan* had come as a welcome distraction.

The coconuts were already being removed by their consignees, who were quite matter of fact about it, with some rough humor. This dodge, an experiment of the Old Man's, lessened the chances of hijacking by its very brazenness.

"It'll work about one time," Watkins had prophesied, "then everybody'll know w'ut's the milk in the coconut!"

Cases and hams were the standard unit of delivery, and one purpose of our present trip was to establish connections for the landing of a cargo on one of the islands just north of Cayo Grande. Watkins was again my mentor.

"There's an organization that calls themselves 'Cormorants' and they watches South Beach from end to end. Let a load be sent ashore—they pops up with guns an' badges an' captures it. Them that brings it in can't wait to see if it's officers or not an', not wishin' to buck the law, they gits out to sea ag'in. Except Bilbo. 'E shot it out with 'em last week, law or no law. But the Old

Man don't favor that. 'E avoids mixin' up with officers."

THE captain, at present, was busy arranging details on shore. The men were scattered about town, enjoying a bit of shore leave, with orders to report on board at a certain hour.

I had taken a drive around the quaint little city, with its air of dreamy quiet, where time was not. The atmosphere of *dolce far niente* already was having its effect on me, I realized, gazing out over the placid harbor. It was a dead calm and the cloudless sky found its own color in the sea, so that the tiny, remote keys were strung like a necklace on the horizon.

I thought of the message—signed by a nickname known only to my family—that I had telegraphed home, that I was safe and well and would write soon.

Why did I stand by my pledge of allegiance? I asked myself the question. I need not betray my employer; indeed, I had no wish to do so. It would be a simple matter to conceal myself in town, wire my people for funds and, on receipt of same, take the first train North. No! Deserting Bud and Red and Buck was out of the question. Well, why not hide out, get some employment here in the island city, while working out a solution? Also, was it not really my duty to sever my connection with the lawless, violent business which had bound me to itself?

No, I would go back. I was slow in arriving at and in recognizing the reason back of my decision. It was the girl.

Face to face with that unconsidered reason, I refused it acknowledgment. But it would not be thus easily snubbed and presently I accepted it, wondering if I was a sentimental fool. Aside from her undeniable charm, there was another appeal; there were big issues back there in that queer world of which she was part, unseen forces at work—as everywhere—forces of which people are the pawns, and I knew that the force which she essentially represented and strove for was not evil.

I had an instinct that the private secretary was playing the game as best she could, with its own appliances, forms and rules. And I knew suddenly, beyond any shadow of doubt, that we were in a tacit alliance, that I had a part to play, though it were only to strengthen her hand. I could not explain, but I knew that I knew. With only a vague idea as to where or how I could help her, I would go back, a voluntary prisoner.

Several of our shore men had returned and were now lounging on the dock and on board. Presently I heard Watkins' deep voice behind me:

"I'll be blamed, young fella, if they wouldn't 'ave said ya was a lively enough corpse if they'd 'ave seen ya in action yestiddy! Look!"

He and the captain had their arms full of newspapers and magazines which they were taking back to the islands. With a blunt forefinger Watkins indicated an article, a press dispatch to the effect that the schooner-yacht *Amberjack* and the owner and crew, four young men more or less well known in collegiate circles, had been lost in the Gulf of Mexico. Our names were given and I was greatly disturbed. I should have wired my pals' relatives when I wired mine. The article went on to relate that search and inquiry had been made and that there was no trace of the missing vessel, which had been lost with all hands on board.

"Well, we're not *spurlos versenkt,*" I muttered, and busied myself with another telegram to my father, which should repair my omissions.

I was back on the *Susan,* rigging up a fishing tackle, when an automobile shot up to the wharf and stopped with a shriek of brakes. A little, red-faced man leaped out and ran to Captain Jen-

kins where the latter stood watching the rapidly disappearing coconuts.

The little man's message was galvanizing in its effect. Our master exclaimed, and in a moment appeared to be in several different places, shouting orders that we should leave "right now!"

I scrambled to cast loose the shore lines. The motors were already tuning up as I leaped aboard again. Two of my marksmen and a couple of the crew had not yet arrived, but there was no tarrying. With his eyes turned anxiously shoreward, Captain Jenkins took the wheel. In a jiffy, we were clear of the dock and tearing up the channel.

"We'll be through the Northwest Passage in no time at all, at this rate," Watkins chuckled.

On the wharf there was a commotion where the remainder of the coconuts were piled. A man ran to the edge and gesticulated violently with his hat, then pulled out a pistol and went to popping at us. Several bullets ranged uncomfortably close, but we were soon out of the danger zone, going faster every instant.

The water front rapidly receded. Flat Cayo Grande grew flatter, diminishing; the lofty wireless towers dwarfed everything else. Soon there was but a toy town on the edge of the distance, engulfed in limitless blue water and sky.

As soon as he left the vicinity of the irate skipper, I questioned Watkins as to the cause of the excitement.

"Bilbo ag'in. Tipped off the customs, 'e did! That was one of 'is vessels we peppered yestiddy an' this is 'is answer!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A HAIL FROM THE SHORE.

THE return to our island depot was in approved blockade-running style. Owing to our loss in personnel, Captain Jenkins was anxious to avoid all contact with the enemy—Bilbo, of course—and kept well away from the coast until after dark.

"After that licking we gave him," he observed, "the old pirate'll be layin' for us with everything he's got."

I was filled with admiration for the skill Jenkins exhibited in piloting us through those tortuous channels, aided only by the moon. Even its light was blanketed by clouds much of the time, but we glided steadily along between seaweed-covered banks, touching now and again, but never sticking, feeling safer every minute. A fitful little breeze sprang up, rippling the surface of that inland waterway and making it even more difficult to navigate. Several times the muffled engine beat ceased as we felt our way among those dark islands and at each pause we were engulfed by the vast, oppressive stillness.

The fascination of this region had me already in its grip. How many unchronicled, thrilling tales of days long gone—and others, more recent—did it hold in store! I wondered what it held for me.

It was in one of these intervals, our craft barely under steerage way, that a hail came with startling force from a near-by bank:

"Who goes?"

Instantly our master responded with the countersign, adding the vessel's name and his own.

"Good boys!" came back in hearty tones. "Good stuff!"

Thrice again this happened before we reached our wharf, demonstrating how safe was the Old Man's domain from a surprise attack by water. His island fastness was as secure as human ingenuity could make it. Behind it all I recognized the first lieutenant and his Prussian efficiency. I was his unwelcome subaltern. His wry smile at the review on the deck of the *Susan* came back to me. Well, he might be efficient; he would not find me less so.

WE disembarked quietly and marched up the street, which lay eerily deserted in the moonlight between the long rows of tents and shacks. The distant, insistent barking of a dog but emphasized the stillness. From all appearances, I might have been in the heart of a respectable little lumbering or fishing community instead of in the capital of a domain established beyond the law for its own lawless purposes. A few miles down the coast was another, but more flagrant—outrageous, if half of what I had been told was true.

I accompanied Captain Jenkins, and one more man into headquarters, for the captain had indicated that he wished me to accompany him and supplement his report.

The Old Man and the first lieutenant, both in dressing gowns, were in the main office. The chief beamed at us.

"Welcome to our city!" he said, and added with a twinkle: "Bilbo's anxious to see you fellows."

Captain Jenkins scowled at mention of the name.

"Yes, a little more and your agent would have had to bail us out—likewise the *Susan.*"

"What! that devil turned the tables on you, after all?" The Old Man's face darkened.

"That's what! Luckily I'd collected for our cargo. But coconuts'll be the same as forbidden fruit, after this." And Jenkins gave a brief recital of our hasty clearance from Cayo Grande.

"Well," said the chief, "I thought I'd give it a try. It'll give 'em something else to worry over. As far as the men you left behind are concerned—they'll be taken care of and they'll come filtering in when convenient."

He turned and clapped a heavy hand on my shoulder.

"Well, young man, you gave Bilbo's scow a good lesson, didn't you!"

"Don't give me all the credit. My men did the shooting, and"—I glanced at Captain Jenkins—"if the *Susan* hadn't been handled as she was, we might have come off second best, after all."

The captain looked a little self-conscious, but pleased, and I saw that I had made another friend.

The first lieutenant perceived it also. Did anything escape him?

"Well," concluded the chief, "you'll have more men and ammunition as fast as possible. I have a hunch we'll need 'em!"

He reached into a desk drawer, took out a slip of yellow paper and handed it to me, eying me quizzically.

"This came for you to-day, special delivery."

It was a brief note, typewritten.

Since you've joined in with my enemy there is nothing to discuss. I have put your vessel —and crew—into my service. If you want them, come and get them! BILBO.

"This is something else again," I muttered. "What on earth am I to do!"

"Oh, well," said the chief, laughing at my discomfiture, "I'll make good the loss of your *Amberjack.* What did you pay for her?"

"That's not what I'm worrying about! My pals—in his 'service'—Bilbo's!"

The first lieutenant smiled maliciously.

"Yes," agreed the Old Man, "and he didn't give 'em an inch nor an ell when he drafted 'em, you can count on that! Well, go to sleep on it. You'll feel better in the morning."

But it was a long time after I turned in before I fell asleep. This was war, indeed. The matter-of-fact way in which this community had greeted the return of the conquering heroes indicated that pitched battles were nothing to lose sleep over. True, I had not expected brass bands and fireworks, but

I had been a trifle dashed at the lack of a reception committee, or something of the sort, even at that late hour.

"Well, they're darned good snoozers, anyhow," I grunted.

Buck, and Red, and Bud were pirates! The thought of Bud as a pirate tickled my fancy. At the same time, it dismayed me. He had never been cut out for that sort of thing. Well, the two others would look out for him.

I all but wished that I was with them. No, I had pledged my allegiance to a better man than Bilbo and to a girl who needed me more than my pals did. The realization of this came with a jolt. I glowed, remembering her gallantry, the friendliness of her eyes that seemed to understand me better than I understood myself. And then I fell asleep, as the gray triangle of my doorway marked the coming dawn.

CHAPTER IX.

BULLETS NEEDED.

DEAR me, but you've taken to this life like a duck to water!" was the private secretary's comment as I finished the recital of my adventures since I had seen her last. She was smiling, but her eyes were—well, not happy.

"I'll never perish of monotony, at all events," I remarked. "I like it, but I mustn't let myself like it too much."

She nodded.

"I felt you would look at it that way."

We sat there on the sand ridge, contemplating the deserted range.

She had accompanied me down here for the morning's target practice, declaring that she, too, would be a sharpshooter. There had been some skepticism among the riflemen, but she soon did remarkably well, drawing a steady trigger and ignoring like a veteran the sharp recoil of the military piece. I asked her if it jarred her.

"Oh, yes, a little," she confessed, "but you don't suppose I'd let them know it, do you?"

Now, she was still holding the rifle, drawing an occasional bead on this or that object.

"It's very still to-day," I said. "Some time I'll explain the mysteries of the wind gauge, if you like."

"Yes, that would be interesting. But it looks terribly scientific and I'm not scientific a bit."

"You'd get the hang of it in no time, just as soon as your imagination takes hold. I've found that my men, as a rule, make better marksmen for knowing the underlying principles. I make those principles appeal to their imaginations; it's easy, after that."

She bent over the weapon and rubbed an imaginary speck of rust from the silky blue of its barrel.

"You keep it in beautiful condition. You love it, don't you?"

"Well, I'm strongly attracted by whatever approaches perfection. That instrument was designed to function undeviatingly and it does. I admire it accordingly and my men get to do the same."

"You engage their imaginations," she said musingly. "That explains why you made crack shots of several that Lieutenant Smith failed to get anything out of. He Prussianized over them."

"Yes," I agreed, "he probably made them keep their pieces spotlessly clean because discipline required it, never explaining, in addition, just how a little corrosion of the rifling would impair the accuracy that the pieces were designed for. Prussian is a very descriptive word."

"Well, let it go at that," she said somberly.

I WATCHED idly a great man-of-war hawk soaring on high. I wondered what he made of the two mortals on the sand so far below him.

"Why did you come back?" she demanded suddenly.

"What?" I was taken a little aback.

"Why did you come back into this, when you might have made a get-away while you were in Cayo Grande?"

"Why, er—I suppose because I wanted to come back."

"Wouldn't you have felt justified in deserting?" she persisted. "You were cast away here and had to fall in with conditions. But it would have been easy to step on a train there and in a few hours be out of reach, wouldn't it?"

"Why, yes, I suppose it would."

"Yet you came back!"

"Well, you see, my three pals—I had to think of them. I felt that I might do something for them, as close to them as this, even though I'm in their enemy's camp."

"Oh!" she said in a curiously flat tone. She looked up a moment later and said gravely:

"Do you know that you would have been taking your life in your hands if you had tried to trick us in any way, even by slipping away?"

"You don't mean it!"

"I do! I knew you wouldn't turn traitor, and—I thought you would come back, but I was uneasy. You remember that taxi driver, who was so obligingly summoned for you by Captain Jenkins? Well, did you notice that you weren't out of his sight until you returned to the *Susan?* You noticed that several of her crew were lounging around?"

"Good heavens, yes!"

"Well, you were in custody all that time, during your interesting drive around town! Just as you are now, sir!" She laughed.

I saluted with a flourish.

"At your orders, sergeant of the guard! And to think—I've been training you to be able to drill my spinal column if I should try to escape!"

"Just like that!" she said fiercely, drawing steady aim on a near-by tree trunk. Her jocular mood did not last long. "Well, you know about it now," she remarked.

"I'm certainly obliged to you," I said slowly. "But there wasn't any risk of my trying to leave."

"No. You had your pals to think of."

"I said three—I meant four." It rolled out and I could have bitten my tongue off. I hadn't meant to say it at all.

A slow wave of color on her neck and face was the only sign that she had heard.

"I beg your pardon," I said slowly. "I had no right to say that. I don't know why I did."

She looked at me then and, to my amazement, there were tears in her eyes.

"I'm glad you did," she returned quietly. "Every one needs a pal and here—— Well, there wasn't a soul on these islands that I could chum with until you came."

I was in a whirl.

"I'm certainly proud——" I began awkwardly. I held out my hand and we shook.

In more conventional surroundings, it would have taken us some weeks, probably, to bring us to the understanding at which we had so suddenly arrived. I looked at her. There were now no traces of tears; her eyes were sparkling.

"Doesn't it make a difference!" she exclaimed.

"It makes all the difference," I returned. "But see here. We're pals and I don't know your name, even. You know mine. Come across!"

"Ruth."

"Ruth. Shall I call you that?"

"By all means, when nobody's around."

"All right," I agreed. "At such times

I'll be careful to refer to you as the private secretary, or—Miss Ruth?"

"Yes, that will be best."

We got up then and set out for headquarters. The lilt that was characteristic of her had come back to her movements and her voice. I had to step to keep pace with her.

"Let me carry your gun, guard. I'll give it to you before I run."

"Very well. It needs some more bullets, please."

I had to announce, chagrined, that I had not another cartridge.

"A fine instructor of sharpshooters!" I added.

"And I'm a fine guard!"

We laughed together.

At the moment we were passing through a little fringe of woods which separated the range from the outskirts of the village. I thought I heard a movement in the dry leaves, but could see nothing but trees and some scattered cactus. Nevertheless, I was conscious of surveillance.

This was irritating.

"Are they supposed to spy on the private secretary?" I inquired, as we walked on.

"No. Why?"

"There's some one following us. Didn't you hear that twig crack then?"

"No, I didn't notice."

We turned an elbow in the path, where it cut through thick scrub. I touched her elbow and we stopped, facing the turn.

A few moments later a face appeared there cautiously. It was the first lieutenant.

"Hello!" he said airily, stepping up to us. "Don't shoot, commander of sharpshooters, especially as you haven't any more—bullets, I believe they are."

I looked at him disgustedly.

"I don't need any."

For a moment he stared at me, as on that first occasion when he had been balked.

We turned and, uninvited, he fell into step at the girl's other elbow. She kept her face averted from him and I saw a glint of anger in her eye.

CHAPTER X.

A QUESTION OF FACT.

THE first lieutenant's animosity now became unremitting, doubtless because I remained at the island for a fortnight and was frequently in the private secretary's company. In spite of Ruth's coldness and my ill-concealed irritation, he would leave any business that he might have on hand to join us. Nevertheless, I was his subordinate and often had to swallow my anger, though I had become strongly intrenched in the Old Man's liking and Smith must perforce keep within certain bounds.

I had been invited to sit at the Old Man's table aboard his palatial house boat, the *Immokalee,* an Indian name of Ruth's choosing. Here, amid the sparkle of crystal, the sheen of damask and silver, perfection of service, the girl's beauty assumed a new aspect, took on a subtler glamour.

On this, the one formal occasion of the day, the Old Man insisted on a punctilio in keeping; every one, except destitute me, dressed for dinner. In the skirmishes that frequently developed, the girl and I were, as a rule, more than a match for the first lieutenant. The Old Man maintained a sort of benevolent neutrality, always endeavoring to lessen the brunt of defeat for either side; although he seemed to derive most pleasure from the scoring by his private secretary. I was glad of this, for more reasons than one.

THE animus that edged all such encounters between Smith and myself came plainly to the surface on one of these occasions. Coffee had been served on deck and, as we sat talking, the pale mirror of the lagoon was

broken by the swirl of a big fish. This brought up the subject of sharks. I confessed, as a swimmer, my fear of them.

Smith laughed derisively.

"Well, I've yet to find a person who has actually witnessed even an attack by one of them upon a human being." This he spoke in his overprecise English and hateful drawl.

I felt my face reddening.

"I have," I said, looking at him steadily.

He raised his eyebrows.

"A sea captain, a friend of mine," I continued, "says there are two general types of the beast; one, a shore shark —dog sharks, I think, is what he calls them—and the other, a deep-sea kind that invades harbors and inlets occasionally. It is this second type that is the man-eater."

"Yes," Smith said gently, "but had this captain ever seen a man attacked by one?"

"No," I had to admit grudgingly, "but another shipmaster, a friend of his, it seems, lost a sailor overboard in the Indian Ocean. Just as they were about to haul the man into the lifeboat, a hammerhead got him. The thing was witnessed by at least a dozen."

"Ah! He told you that a friend of his had told him! A hammerhead, eh? I have always understood that hammerheads aren't considered dangerous. Now, if it had been a deep-sea, or tiger, shark, how much more effective, blood-curdling——"

"It was a hammerhead," I said doggedly. "He knew what he was talking about!"

"Sailors' yarns," he commented lightly.

Ruth came to the rescue.

"I've heard of instances, here in Florida, of persons being badly bitten by sharks."

"Dear me, yes! You've 'heard.' For all that is known to the contrary, the barracuda may have been responsible for those nibblings. I understand that he is said to have such irritable or experimentative moments."

"Nibblings, yes," I retorted, "but a full-grown, man-eating shark is many times larger than the biggest barracuda. A nibble for the barracuda would be only a titbit for a man-eater. A snap of the jaws and——"

"How long do they grow to be, you say?" He eyed me mockingly through the haze of his Turkish cigarette.

"Captain Anderson, the friend I spoke of, has seen them twenty-five and thirty feet long," I answered.

"How tactless to relate this to you, who are so fond of swimming!"

I controlled myself with an effort.

Ruth joined in again.

"I can furnish an instance. Only last summer, Watkins and another man killed a big shark that had a man's arm in its stomach."

Smith smiled across at her.

"The man was dead before the shark began operations, no doubt. They're notoriously great cowards—sharks, I mean."

"Well, how about this!" boomed the Old Man. "It is well known that, before the days of the slave trade, Havana Harbor was free of sharks. Afterward, it was infested with them. They had followed the slave ships all the way from Africa."

"Naturally," replied the first lieutenant. "The blacks had an irritating way of dying and were thrown overboard without weights attached, but that proves my point, not yours."

"Not at all!" rejoined the Old Man, a bit testily. "Whenever a slave ship was overhauled by a man-of-war, it is said the live ones were thrown over—men, women and children."

"My dear sir, yes: they are *said* to have done so——"

"I'll put it this way," I cut in, with

an effort at my opponent's suavity. "Would you be willing to go swimming in the Gulf?"

"No, I'm an exceedingly poor swimmer. However, were I as expert as yourself, I shouldn't object in the least."

"Perhaps you'd be willing to make yourself expert"—a hammer was pounding in my temples—"to prove your point?"

"Dear me, no! I'm really not interested to that extent." He laughed softly. "I begin to understand the state that your imagination—in connection with sharks—had reduced you to when you arrived here from offshore." He waved his hand toward the Gulf.

"See here, Smith——"

"Lieutenant," he interrupted mildly.

I got to my feet.

"It is very clear, at least, that whatever else you mean or don't mean, you are insulting!"

"Oh, come!" intervened the Old Man decisively. "That's enough, both of you. No need to make it personal."

"He intends to make it personal, chief," I said. "I've no objections——"

"Well, I said that's enough! Cut it out, Smith!"

That ended the conversation; but the subject was destined to come home to some of us, one day, with proof unanswerable.

CHAPTER XI.

SHOTGUNS WANTED.

IN the space of two weeks I was able to accomplish a great deal with my latest awkward squad. With no attempt at more than the bare rudiments of drill, I was determined on the maximum in the way of marksmanship. Most of the rookies did surprisingly well and several became crack shots. Three or four went back to sailoring or some other of the thousand and one things that our community life, and the traffic on which it was based, required.

Bilbo had been unwontedly quiet. Other than an exciting instance, in which one of his seaplanes had figured, he had let us suspiciously alone. The seaplane in question had ventured too close to our outpost—that which Fate had chosen for my arrival in these islands—and had been fired upon. It had turned and enfiladed with a machine gun the bushes in which the sentinel lay. Our man stuck to his post and by a fortunate shot smashed the plane's propeller. The plane went into the surf. The crew, after an exchange of shots, were killed, and the airplane, not badly damaged, made a trophy of war.

"I can use it," said the Old Man, with satisfaction. "Leave the markings exactly as they are. It can be identified, on some convenient occasion, as Bilbo's." He chuckled. "One thing, though—see here, Smith, Kennedy—Lake, I mean"—I was using the name of "Lake" officially—the fellow's ahead of us. How about those machine guns? We've got to get 'em and get 'em quick. This one we've captured is the only one we have."

"They're ordered," said the first lieutenant complacently, glancing at the calendar. "Should be here by the fifteenth of the month. I ordered them immediately after the subject came up, you remember, as you directed!"

"Good!" The chief slapped his hands on his knees and leaned on them, a way that he had when pleased. "And ammunition! How about that?"

"Two hundred cases."

"Good! I've got to mount enough machine guns around town here to put up an antiaircraft defense in case our neighbor should take it into his head to visit us that way."

"It wouldn't be a bad idea, chief," I volunteered, "to place some on the boats. They could easily be stowed away when in port."

"Fine, fine! Coast defense, naval

artillery—Bilbo will have to go some to keep up with us. Will there be enough, you think, Smith?"

"Hardly. We'll need three dozen more. I'll order them from various sources in order not to attract undue attention."

"Another thing, chief." I noted Smith's frown as I spoke. "In case Bilbo should insist on coming to close quarters—as he likely will, sooner or later, at this rate—oughtn't we to have trench guns for both land and sea defense? Repeating shotguns, you know, for buckshot and equipped with bayonets."

In delight, he slapped me on the shoulder. "Splendid! How about it, Smith? When can we get 'em here?"

"I don't know, exactly," he replied, a little sullenly, I thought. "I should say in three weeks at the outside, possibly two."

"All right, order them! One for every able-bodied man in my service. *Then* if Bilbo and his crew decide to come to our loving embrace, we're ready. We've been tantalizing him pretty sharply lately; we can't be any too well prepared."

The first lieutenant went into the adjoining office and in a moment his typewriter was chattering spitefully. It always angered him when I won the chief's approbation, though he usually managed to conceal the fact.

I began to whistle as the Old Man left, but something—the reaction from the enthusiastic mood, perhaps—suddenly blanketed my good spirits. What about the holocaust, for which I was helping so diligently to prepare? I felt a little sick. It was dreadful!

I WAS so uncomfortable that I went in search of Ruth, who was on the porch with the mail.

Her aspect was judicial enough to satisfy any one, as I enlarged upon my theme.

"You see," I said, concluding, "even if we are finally victorious over Bilbo, we'll have a far bigger war on our hands. And we'll be crushed!" I paused to make sure that the first lieutenant was still busy at the typewriter. "And, frankly, I couldn't take part in that. After all, though the chief is a fine fellow, he's a lawbreaker, you know."

She scanned my face for a moment in a way that puzzled me.

"I think I can promise you," she said then, slowly, "that if it should come to that—— Well, it won't come to that! I know! The chief is planning to heap up enough profit so as to drop the whole business if it should come to a show-down. Besides, he's not a Bilbo!"

"Well, if that's the case, I'm glad enough to do what I can. But are you not promising a good deal? I don't see how you can be so sure about the Old Man; his first assistant is Smith, you know."

"I am quite sure. Besides, as his daughter, I would have some influence with him."

The Old Man's daughter! I was speechless. How incredibly stupid I had been!

She motioned toward Smith's office. The typewriting had stopped. Scribbling something on a pad, she tore off the sheet and handed it to me. I read it hastily:

After dinner to-night, at the cove.

I nodded and, tearing up the note, thrust the pieces in my pocket as I left in a daze. She was the Old Man's daughter!

CHAPTER XII.

NEWS OF BILBO.

I WAS early at the rendezvous. Since that inadvertent admission of hers—or had it been inadvertent?—I had gone mechanically on my rounds, my mind occupied with one matter only:

Ruth and her situation in the light of that revelation in all its profound significance. Why had she made a secret of her relationship to the Old Man? Or was it a secret? Or had not my ignorance been—it suddenly dawned upon me—but one of those absurd stupidities that obtain for a time, prolific of misapprehension which the simplest question would have obviated? Well, Ruth would give me the answer, herself, presently.

The cove was merely a widening of the little creek that all but bisected the island, running almost parallel to the village and so close to it that it might be said to be at its back door. It had been deepened to accommodate craft of light draft, but the dredging had not marred the picturesqueness of the beach here. Though just back of headquarters, it was out of view owing to the thicket of Spanish bayonet and palmetto that screened it effectually, yet aloof enough to make us secure from eavesdroppers.

Here I waited, while a sultry moon floated up over the mangroves opposite and took her languorous course into the clear blue night. More definite each moment, the idle beauty of the *Immokalee* detached itself from shadow. At intervals a sizable fish splashed in the lagoon.

At that moment Ruth appeared and stood beside me, regarding me with her boyish smile.

"So young and yet so solemn!" she said. "Weighty thoughts must needs be! May they be divulged?"

"They may. Shall we go sit on the log there by the water? I was thinking about doing some fishing when you arrived."

We moved to the edge and watched a shoal of startled mullet break for the safety of depth.

"To be frank," I added, "I was thinking of you, really."

We sat down on the log and she rested her elbows on her knees, her chin in her cupped hands.

"Of me?"

"Yes. I hardly know how to vindicate myself. Still, it is your fault that I was led into expressing myself as I did about your father. I had never dreamed——"

"You mean——" She paused in amazement. "You actually had accepted me as the confidential secretary of the Old Man—as you call him—trying to convert him to better ways at a salary of so much per, and——"

"No, I had just accepted you—that's all." There was a silence. "I did hope, however, that, now—you would tell me about yourself."

"There isn't much to tell, Mr. Kennedy——"

"Blake," I reminded her. "We're pals, you know."

"Blake," she conceded, with a faint smile. "There isn't much." She fell silent, tracing with a bit of reed an intricate design in the smooth sand. "Mother died in my last year at college and I came home to be with dad. I had heard of his going into this business and—I didn't care about graduating. I told dad I was coming home to stick with him until—he'd make a change. But he hadn't done it for mother and I didn't much believe he'd do it for me. You've heard him argue."

I thought of some of our after-dinner talk.

"Yes, he can argue," I admitted. "And he has the courage of his convictions."

"And in spite of it all," she said, staring ahead of her, "he's perfectly splendid!"

"You don't need to tell me that," I responded warmly.

"I'll tell you the rest of it. You see, dad was rich once, in another business, and certain legislation indirectly caused him to lose it all—depreciation of values in some way—and it embittered

him. Then he got to know Smith—that's his alias; I don't believe even Dad knows his real name. Well, the result, of course, was a foregone conclusion. With dad's organizing ability and connections, the thing was bound to succeed. They make a wonderful partnership."

"Yes," I agreed, "they'd make a success of any undertaking."

"Exactly! You see, now, what I've been working for. My chief obstacle is the lure of adventure there is in it all, their delight in the game for its own sake. Dad sees things in a big way. He says he can make a second Venice down here—in time, of course—he and Smith together."

"Smith's a bit too cold-blooded, I should say. Is he as dangerous, do you think, as he looks sometimes?"

"No, but he's hard as iron. But the conditions—you've seen enough already—tend to make one hard. Spies, for instance: Bilbo's are in our colony, just as ours are in his. Dad and Smith are the court-martial. If the case is proved—well, the spy disappears, that's all." She sighed.

"Luckily for me, I had a good defense," I remarked. "You say your father and Smith are the court-martial? How about you?"

"Well, I insist on being present, sometimes."

"Sort of silent partner who refuses to remain silent," I commented.

"Simply this: Just as you and I are more than a match for Smith in our discussions, dad and I hold him down in that other."

"I think you are very brave," I said fervently.

She made a slight gesture of dissent.

"It is a strain, though," she said presently. "I feel sometimes as if it were making me an old woman before my time."

I glanced at her and chuckled.

"I wasn't joking." She looked at me, faintly smiling.

"You're a brave girl," was all I could say.

INTO our silence floated the sounds of a party in the village, shouts of laughter and the excited competition of a miscellaneous orchestra. There was nothing sinister in this merriment. Many of the colonists were married and their wives and daughters flocked to such entertainments, very different from the reported orgies of Bilbo's colony.

"Tell me about this man Bilbo," I said.

She laughed.

"I should think you'd know enough by now."

"I want to learn all I can," I persisted. "My pals are down there, you know. I don't feel very comfortable about that. And some day I'm going after the *Amberjack!*"

She turned to me with a quick movement.

"Do you realize just what it means?"

"I think I do."

"It's not worth it—not for a dozen *Amberjacks!*"

"But you forget my pals," I reminded her.

"Will you promise me something?"

"If I can."

"I want you to promise me that you'll let me know, before you go."

I thought for a moment.

"Yes, I'll promise that. Now tell me some more about Bilbo."

"Well, dad and Smith were a going concern before any one ever heard of Bilbo. Of course, there's always been smuggling and that sort of thing in these islands, but it was unorganized. Dad soon made it just one corner of a big business and then——"

"Just one corner!"

"Yes," she returned defiantly. "You may as well know the whole truth. He

has an organization and connections all the way from St. Pierre to Galveston."

I gave a low whistle.

"'Big business' is right!"

"It's worked on a different plan over on the Atlantic coast. There he delivers f. o. b. the beach or consignee's boat at intervals. This is a—what you might call a reservoir, so regulated as to allow a steady flow. The customers come to designated spots and the stuff is delivered, cash down."

"Delivery guaranteed, any old time, any old place, eh?"

"Well, it's been perfected almost to that point. And, as I was saying, it was bound to attract competition, just as it did on the East coast. What Bilbo lacks in connections and organization, he makes up for in unscrupulousness and ferocity."

"Is that all?"

"Not quite. He's a dead shot with a revolver and—never argues!"

"I don't know that there's such a difference between him and Smith," I said. "Smith has never had a free hand, you know."

"Sometimes I've wondered—— But Bilbo, he was never meant for a partnership. He plays a lone hand."

"From what I've heard, he couldn't play any sort of hand straight."

"No, that's the reason he's never been able to cut more seriously into our—into dad's trade. Dad has always made it a point to supply unquestionable goods and the trade knows it. But Bilbo—— Well, he has a factory down on one of his islands where 'shine, smuggled liquors—pure or adulterated—anything that smells of alcohol—are utilized. The stuff is bottled and sold with or without labels, but that sort of trade can't stand up against the other, more regular business."

"A sort of little, local competitor," I summed up, "trying to get ahead by any sort of methods. However, there's more to it than that, it seems to me; his attitude has something personal in it. It's not simply a business enmity."

"Oh, yes, we all know that."

"Have you ever seen Bilbo?" I asked.

"Yes, once."

I was intensely curious, but she added nothing further.

It was getting late.

"I must be getting aboard," she said.

We made our way to the *Immokalee's* tender, near by. Then I sought my humble canvas abode.

For once we had had the pleasure of a séance free from risk of Smith's intrusion. A new chapter in our relations had opened and I was conscious of a deepened regard for the girl. It seemed wonderful that I should be her confidant. I felt grateful for the storm that had dumped me on this coast and furnished me for the part.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN THE LAW'S HANDS.

NEWS of some sort from our agent at Bay City took the Old Man and the first lieutenant there on a hurried trip. Ruth accompanied them and the glamour of the islands faded, surprisingly, to commonplaceness.

On their return a few days later, orders were given to change the *Susan's* name and general appearance—a simple enough job for our well-equipped, if small, shipyard. This I supposed was the result of our brush with the customs officials at Cayo Grande; but I was busy with my part of the preparations for a trip to that port after a general cargo and did not learn any particulars. The *Susan* being in dry dock, we put the *Enterprise* in commission.

Prior to our departure, a slight incident connected with the first lieutenant puzzled me and aroused my suspicion. He was not as a rule friendly with the men; but, just before we left, he came aboard and mixed with the crew, chatting freely with them in their own argot.

He unbent particularly toward one individual—the least prepossessing of the lot—and spent some time in conversation with him. Not once did Smith's glance turn in my direction as they talked, but the other's stole furtively to me from time to time and I had an irritated feeling that I was the subject of their discussion. When I swung by, Smith was in the midst of some commonplace remark, but I felt that my surmise was correct.

I glared at the evil-looking young seaman. Just let me have some trouble from him, thought I! Smith might receive some punishment by proxy. I was spoiling to administer it then. A little later, the first lieutenant was waving an airy good-by to our captain, Burt Roberts.

The trip was uneventful until we approached Marathon, in the lower, or southerly, keys, where we sighted a small, two-masted schooner, her sails partly set in most slovenly fashion, apparently hard and fast aground. There was no sign of life about her, but we were not to be too easily decoyed and lost some time before we ascertained that she was, in fact, abandoned, like a derelict at sea.

It was a trim craft, very like the *Amberjack,* though painted gray instead of white and rigged a little differently. I was of the boarding party and my foot was no sooner on her deck than I was certain—here was my little yacht!

What a landlubber would call earmarks were here and there and the heavy coat of ugly paint plastered indiscriminately over pine, mahogany and brass could not conceal her identity. She was in terrible condition. The cabin was bad enough, but the hold forward was worse. I came out of it hastily, swearing. That fellow, Smith's confidant, was lounging by the hatch and I caught his sly smile as I emerged angrily.

"Here, you! Did Captain Roberts send you aboard?"

He looked at me insolently.

"Sure! We figgered there'd be a prize crew."

"*We!* Since when do you say 'we?'"

He made no answer, gazing over at the *Enterprise,* where she rode motionless on the flat sea.

"I must say he shows poor judgment in picking hands for a prize crew," I said, and went aft again.

"Captain Roberts," I said, "this is my schooner—the *Amberjack.* The pigs that have been aboard couldn't cover her with enough dirt to keep me from recognizing her."

"Yours?" He squinted at me doubtfully. "How come?"

"I lost her in the blow last November. They know all about it at headquarters."

"All right. Can you identify her?"

"Let's see! My bunk was on the port side. The clothes locker just for'ard had a number stamped in the wood inside the door. I don't know what it was put there for, but it was 2X."

On coming aboard, we had entered the cabin together, but had not looked in the locker. I followed him down the companionway again and, on opening the locker door, there was the number. The locker itself was half full of empty but odorous whisky bottles.

"Also," I informed him further, she's got a layer of brick ballast and it happens I know the trade-mark on the brick. On the for'ard end of the centerboard box there's——"

"No argument," he said, with a wave of the hand. He was a little grumpy. "I was hoping for salvage, but no chance, now."

I laughed.

"This is one time the owner does the salving. But what on earth do you suppose she's doing here?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"They must have run ashore and got

scared off by officers, or what they thought was officers."

I SCANNED the shore. So it must have been, basking in the hot air, when those early treasure hunters anchored hereabouts in their high-pooped ships. But a locomotive whistle, floating distantly from the epoch-making viaduct, was a sufficient reminder of the unromantic present.

I resumed my survey of the interior. A good-sized motor had been installed and hastily removed, as the freshly uncovered engine bed showed.

"Looted," I commented. "Compass gone; instruments gone; no furnishings much, but empty whisky bottles—plenty of those!"

"Bilbo doesn't leave much of value. Wonder he didn't fire her when he left."

A dingy little fishing smack was gliding by, sculled lazily by a mahogany-colored, straw-hatted individual standing in the tiny cockpit.

"Hey, you!" called Captain Roberts. "How long's this schooner been here?"

The fisherman turned his head slowly once or twice in a negative, noncommittal manner, evidently intended to convey that he didn't know and didn't care, and went on about his business.

"Well, captain," I said, "with a couple of men I can make Cayo Grande. I want to haul her out for a thorough examination. I don't believe she's damaged, as there's no sign of leaking, but I want to make sure."

"All right. You can take the two that's aboard now."

I looked at them. The mean-looking young seaman did not meet my eye.

"I don't want *him,*" I said. "I don't like the cut of his jib."

Captain Roberts shrugged.

"Best I can do."

"I'm owner of this craft," I said irritatedly, "and master, too, and I don't want him."

"Well, I'm master of my vessel, too, and I don't choose to let any of the others go."

"All right. Can you spare a couple of my marksmen?"

"No," he replied bluntly. "My ship's been given her armed guard and I'm responsible for her safety. You're leaving her without authority and takin' two more."

He was right and I knew it, but I was sure that the chief would sanction what I was doing.

"Very well," I said. "Give me a tow until a breeze springs up. If we get one, I'll hold her back so's to stay with you."

"You've a great idea of her speed!"

"I know," I said. "I hope we get the right breeze!"

He turned and let himself down into the *Enterprise's* boat and cast off. Three kits were sent aboard presently and I placed mine temporarily in the bunk where I used to sleep and would sleep again, after suitable precautions.

Without much effort we were pulled off the shelving sand bottom and were soon sliding along at the end of a hawser. Disfigured as she was, my little ship felt like home under my feet and I was eager to have her out on the ways for a thorough going over. She would be as handsome as ever.

We ran into a fresh northeast wind in Florida Bay, which enabled me to show Captain Roberts what I had hoped. The slight change in rig had not noticeably affected the *Amberjack's* fleetness.

THE *Enterprise* anchored in the bight as the sun went down in a gorgeous spread of color, but I went on, to the marine railway. On mooring and going ashore, I found that it was too late to make arrangements.

"All right, you two," I told my crew. "Nothing doing, this evening. Mañana."

They took themselves off and I went to work at once to make my quarters habitable. An old negro on the dock was pleased at the opportunity of making a little change for a few hours' work. I put him at the cabin.

"This first, Hercules," I said. "After you get your hand in, we'll go after the galley. By then you'll be in trim to tackle the stables in the hold."

He grinned.

"Yassuh. Dat's me. Ain't anything I won't tackle, boss, if I gets pay fo' doin' it."

The circle of arc light on the wharf was suddenly peopled. Five or six men were advancing briskly, in a manner which brought to mind a disquieting remembrance of my part in the recent escape of the *Susan*. They swarmed aboard.

"What vessel's this?" snapped the foremost.

"The——" I stopped short. "Unnamed. I'm about to have her overhauled."

"Overhauled, eh? Unnamed—oh, yes! Listen, bo, I'm a customs inspector. This man's a deputy collector; this here's the deputy United States marshal; here's the immigrant inspector. We've——"

"Say, neighbor," I interrupted, "I'm a peaceful and law-abiding citizen of the United States. I don't know what I've done, but I surrender. Keep the army and navy in reserve."

"Don't get sarcastic! You've got enough to explain already. What trade are you in? Coasting, I suppose!"

"This is a private yacht. She—er—I found her ashore and abandoned near Marathon to-day." I was thinking fast. If I announced the name *Amberjack*, I'd be in the telegraph news to-morrow. "I'm going to claim salvage," I added.

He looked at me hard, pulling a big electric torch from his coat pocket.

"Come on, men, we'll do the overhauling. Marshal, kindly keep an eye on this man."

The others went below. I turned to the officer.

"Am I under arrest?"

"Not exactly. As the customs inspector said, you've got a lot of explaining to do. Stand by, until I tell you where you're at."

The searching party was not long. I heard an exclamation of triumph and wondered what they had discovered. The empty bottles—generally known as "dead soldiers"—had been thrown overboard before we reached Cape Sable.

"How about this?" demanded the inspector, as his head emerged from the cabin. He had in his hand a log book, from which he took some papers. "Entries here show this vessel's been smugglin' in aliens, just as we thought. The government wants this, bad."

"Aliens!" I echoed feebly.

"Yes. Chinese. How long since you've been in Cuba?"

"I've never been in Cuba. I hope to, some time."

"Never been in Cuba! Where have you been, then?"

This was extremely awkward, but just then there was a diversion. One of the men came out of the cabin, dragging my bag.

"Is this yours?" he asked sternly. The rays from his torch fell on the insignia, "B. Lake," neatly stenciled on the canvas.

"Yes," I replied.

"All right-o." He reached in and pulled out a wide tin can, then another. "Here's two one-pound tins of gum opium. Not satisfied with bringing in Chinese, you fetch their *ping-yen* for 'em, eh?"

I was snared. Some one had done a thorough job.

"This is a frame-up," I began. "I've heard of such things——"

One of the men chuckled.

"See here!" snapped the inspector.

"You may as well come clean! The two men you sent ashore have given us information. You are the master of this vessel. The Chinese were all captured. Mister Marshal, this man is under arrest; we'll take out warrants as soon as we can get before the commissioner."

As I saw it, there was but one thing to do, so I did it. The surface closed over my heels as I clove the friendly, familiar brine in a quick, clean dive. I had taken in air to capacity, as I knew the phosphorescence would betray me at the end of my submergence, and a lucky shot from one of the officers might terminate my career, then and there. Coming up at last, I snatched another supply of oxygen and doubled under again. A bullet smacked the surface smartly, and I thought, "Your last chance, old coast defense!"

When I repeated the performance, there was no further indication of artillery practice. Emerging, I saw that, traveling with the swift-running current, I had put a good distance between the battery on the *Amberjack* and myself, so I sought a landing place.

Spying a promising spot, I headed for it, noting beyond it several rows of port windows and deck houses. Above, towered a raking funnel. Steam fumed impatiently. The boat was not very large, but everything about her suggested power, speed, held in leash. It was the mail steamer. Was she bound for Bay City or Havana?

I RESOLVED to take passage, regardless of destination, and climbed out circumspectly. I sat there on the shore a minute or two to allow some of the water to drain out of my clothing. I was a fugitive from justice. Well, it was none of my making. As a fugitive, though, it were best to make travel arrangements. My watch had stopped. I hoped it was not too near the ship's sailing time.

In a small clothing store up the street I selected a suit of dark worsted with cap to match, informing the salesman that I had stumbled and fallen into the water, losing my suit case. I inquired casually whether he happened to know where the mail steamer was bound tonight.

"Bay City," he replied, looking at me curiously.

"I just got in," I explained, "and wasn't sure about connections. Do you happen to know the fare?"

He stated it, approximately, and a moment's computation told me that I had enough cash for the several articles of clothing needed, in addition to the fare.

When I went up the gangplank in my mushy shoes, I carried in my pockets, besides my watch, a handkerchief and my ticket, one other thing—my last quarter of a dollar.

I sat by the rail watching the inevitable last-minute bustle and presently the great organ note of the ship's farewell whistle roared out, spreading, I knew, all over the island and far beyond. Surely it must announce to those officers over on the *Amberjack,* whose spars I could discover from my present perch, that Blake Kennedy—B. Lake, rather—was aboard here, fleeing from arrest. I wish that it could carry on and on up the coast and announce that fact to the first lieutenant. I was thoroughly convinced, reviewing matters, that he was responsible for the trap into which I had fallen. How had he done it? Was he in collusion with Bilbo? I ground my teeth. Sooner or later, I determined, I would find out!

CHAPTER XIV.

MUCH NEWS.

AFTER arriving in Bay City, I lost no time in looking up the Old Man's agent, as I had given my last two bits to the steward before disembarking.

The agent was connected with a small ship chandlery near the river. He was out, I was informed, but I might sit down and wait for him. I did. The dingy little office was unoccupied and there was not much activity in the store. I picked up a magazine and read for fully an hour before the door darkened. A little, middle-aged man with gaunt, sallow cheeks and faded slate-blue eyes paused there, studying me.

"Wanter see me?" he inquired mildly.

"I sure do!" I answered, with a smile, and introduced myself in the manner of our freemasonry. He was soon convinced of my identity and I told him frankly that I wanted an advance of money, relating all that had led up to my present situation, from the time of Smith's interview with that ill-favored sailor on the *Enterprise*.

"Sure, I'll help you," he said, when I concluded. "'Pears to me you've made an enemy of the first lieutenant."

"Yes. I don't know how or why. Instinctive, I suppose."

"There's been interestin' happenin's," he drawled, as he counted out the money and had me sign a voucher. "Bilbo's been busy with the law courts." He chuckled. "It's funny. Everybody's talkin' about it."

"Let's hear it."

"Well, our *Susan* had a pitched battle not long ago with one o' Bilbo's ships, a new one that he'd just bought in Cuba."

I nodded eagerly.

"He'd been in Cuba," the man went on, "on one of his business deals and was on his way home with a load when he meets up with the *Susan*. 'Glory!' thinks Bilbo, 'here's another prize!' an' sends a shot across her bows."

"Yes," I said, "I know about it, but it's interesting to hear it from a new angle."

"Well, the prize keeps on and the next shot comes through 'er mains'l. So she ups an' gives Mr. Bilbo a broadside, bein' very well equipped with high-power rifles an' ready an' anxious to use 'em, an' Mr. Bilbo and his vessel, crew and cargo suffers right smart afore he could turn loose."

"So he was aboard!" I exclaimed.

"Sure. Two or three of 'em was killed, Bilbo bein' not included, unfortunately, and overboard they went. 'I don't want no dead uns gummin' up the works,' says Bilbo, and the corpses delicti went to the sharks. His ship was punished so bad he had to beach her and discharge her cargo."

"Wow! I'm glad to know we punished him that bad," I exclaimed. "I happened to be in charge of the *Susan's* riflemen."

"Congratulations," he said dryly. "Keep up the good work. You ain't heard about the libel suit Bilbo's undertakin'?"

I confessed my ignorance.

"He certainly has a nerve to start," I said.

"Nerve? If nerve is what makes th' Ol' Nick what he is, then Bilbo's Satan's twin brother! He libels the *Susan*, claimin' assault and battery, or whatever it is on the high seas, bein' damages to himself—I believe he got a scratch—and crew and likewise damages to ship and cargo. But before the marshal could get started with the writ—the *Susan* bein' mostly in parts unknown—Bilbo finds he's made a mistake bringin' up one point, namely, cargo!"

"What was his cargo?"

"Chinese. He hadn't mentioned that to his lawyer and inter the libel it went—cargo. The chief, who is a smart one himself, has been posted by his intelligence men, so he and his assistant hikes up to Bay City and reads the libel. Then the chief sends a note to Bilbo somethin' like this: 'I know your consignee's name and address and other particulars. Call off this libel foolish-

ness and confine yourself to straight rum runnin', yuh big crook, or the U. S. attorney gits a bill of particklers, right quick.'

"Well, Bilbo drops his libel like it was a scorpion. But he ain't above smugglin' in another cargo whenever one offers. He's crooked, he is. He'll do *anything*. He's even taken money from some poor Cubans for smugglin' 'em inter this country, when they could have come in legally, bein' born here an' jest visitin' in Cuba an' he knew it! 'It's all grist to the mill,' says Bilbo. He knows the chief ain't anxious to start somethin' by goin' ter the gov'-ment with information."

"Well, what bearing do you think this has on my schooner?"

"Mos' likely this: The Chinamen that Bilbo landed down the coast was all captured and the gov'ment's been makin' quite a hunt for the ship. Bilbo had run her inter Port Byers an' repaired her, so he gits word to the authorities that a vessel of the description of yours is the one wanted. Your little boat, you see, is worth not a fourth of the big one an' sooner or later, besides, you'd bring up the question of ownership and possibly make trouble."

"That's what I was counting on."

"So he killed two birds with one stone. As far as that opium's concerned, it looks to me as if Smith framed that with the little crook you took aboard. That was easy."

"Yes, I suppose it was. But can you tell me how Smith knew so much about Bilbo's plans? How did he know we'd run into the *Amberjack* on that trip? Has he got a foot in the other camp?"

My informant rubbed his nose.

"Sev'ral of 'em," he replied, smiling.

I started. My suspicions were correct, then!

"Not like you think, though," went on the man. "Smith's straight as a die. You forget we've got spies around, as well as Bilbo. Smith had everything sized up straight before he got back. The rest was play."

I SAT back and drew a deep breath. As easy as that! He had come close to putting me in the penitentiary. "See here!" I exclaimed. "If he turns any trick that gets me in trouble with the authorities here, I'm looking to you to bail me out. The chief will back you up."

He nodded.

"Sure."

I rose.

"Think I'll get out and look the town over. I'm going to hang round pretty close, however. Let me know as soon as one of our boats comes in."

"Sure. One due next week, about Thursday. Hang around."

I went out with a comfortable feeling that, if anything untoward should happen, this well-posted old bird would take me under his wing.

CHAPTER XV.

SUSPICIONS AROUSED.

I ENJOYED being in Bay City. It was like a little vacation. I was a good deal in the park, watching the horseshoe pitchers and taking a turn, myself, occasionally. I saw a couple of movies and went on one or two short sight-seeing trips. It was after nearly a week of this when, most unexpectedly, I ran into Red Gary, one of my pals who had started out with me on the *Amberjack*. I was going up the broad post-office stairs as he was coming down.

"Red!" I exclaimed.

"Blake! I'll be durned!"

We shook hands and kept on shaking until some of the passers-by began to stare.

"You old bum!" he exclaimed affectionately.

Glad as I was to see him, I was troubled to note how intensified his old

reckless, devil-may-care expression had become.

"Red, old man," I said, "you're going the gait, aren't you?"

"Come on!" he exclaimed. "You used to swing a wicked stein and sing 'Yip-I-addy' with the rest of us, if I remember correctly."

"Different thing from hobnobbing with Bilbo and his gang. He's the original Old Ned, I understand, and he's got a gang of ruffians."

"Thanks." He bowed elaborately.

"How are Buck and Bud? Tell me all about yourselves."

"Well, we're having a big time. Bilbo made us take the oath of office straight off the bat, as you've probably guessed. 'Bill,' as we call him, is a wise guy, though. He doesn't take chances. He put each of us in a different line of work. 'If one of you double crosses me,' he says, 'I've got security. I keep one of you close all the time, you notice.' And that's what he does. There's a wad of money in it, though, as you've probably discovered before this. We'll all be well heeled if this continues, as appears likely."

"Having a big time?" I asked slowly. "All of you?"

"Well," he said, a trifle reluctantly, "Bud isn't as crazy about it as we are. He'd be ready to chuck it if we'd do the same. He doesn't realize how difficult Bill would make it."

"Let's find a bench somewhere," I suggested. "Let's have a good chin while we're at it. How long have you been here?"

"Got in this morning, old-timer. Certainly is luck, running into you like this."

"You know, Red," I said soberly, "I'm not preaching, but I got you fellows into this and I'd like mighty well to see you out of it."

"Don't feel so bad about it!" he cried gayly. "We certainly don't. Biggest experience of our lives."

"It's a difficult situation you're in, I know that. I wish I could have a palaver with the three of you. Where are Buck and Bud now?"

"Buck is in Cuba. Say, did you know your gang came near puncturing him with those others, on that mix-up off the coast recently?"

"What mix-up?" But I did not need to ask. I knew. I had come near to killing Buck!

"Oh, you know, the two-round fight in which we lost two men and a Chinaman."

"Red," I said, looking at him steadily, "human life doesn't mean much to you any more, does it?"

"Sure," he replied promptly, looking straight back. "Only don't let anything ruffle you; that's the motto a fellow adopts after he's seen a little of this life."

"I wish you wouldn't hit it up too fast," I said miserably.

Some one stopped close by and, when I looked up, a short, stocky middle-aged man was regarding me keenly.

"Your name Lake?" he asked. "B. Lake?"

"Yes," I replied, looking warningly at Red. I had an uncomfortable feeling that I was in trouble again. I usually was when I admitted that I was B. Lake.

"Good! I've got some papers that will interest you."

Informing me that he was a deputy United States marshal, he produced a small packet of papers.

"This here's an attachment. Your vessel, unnamed schooner, is under seizure at Cayo Grande. We located you here and wired for the papers. If you're master, agent or owner, it's my duty to serve this monition on you."

"Go ahead. I'm master and owner," I said doggedly.

"All right; read it for yourself. Here's a copy of the libel they sent along."

RED and I pored over the documents. The libel was versus a two-masted schooner, unnamed, B. Lake, master:

The libel of information of the United States of America by its undersigned attorneys, who prosecute in its name and behalf in a cause of seizure and forfeiture against the two-masted schooner, unnamed, B. Lake, master, shows unto the court:

I

That on to wit, November 3, 1922, the said two-masted schooner, unnamed, B. Lake, master, arrived within the Southern District of Florida, to wit, at or near Cape Sable, Florida, from a foreign voyage, to wit: from a port or place in Cuba, a more complete description whereof is to the libellant unknown, then and there having aboard said two-masted schooner, unnamed, certain aliens, to wit, Wing Song and eleven (11) other aliens, said vessel being then and there in command of one B. Lake; that said master did land and cause to be landed in the United States, to wit, at or near Cape Sable, Florida, in said district, said twelve (12) aliens aforesaid who were not then and there entitled to enter into and reside within the United States——

and so forth! There were several other articles in this document, and the sum of the various fines to which I was alleged to be liable was three thousand dollars.

"Caramb'!" ejaculated Red, the chameleon Red, with his local coloration.

"If I get you," I said to the deputy, "my vessel and I are both in Dutch!"

"That's it." He nodded. "Here's the warrant." He read it, Red looking on more soberly.

"As this isn't a hanging offense," I said, "I suppose I'm entitled to give bond?"

"Of course. But just a minute, here's a capias, too. Our grand jury's been busy."

I looked at it dully and saw something about smuggling, in violation of this act and that statute.

"Come on, Red, let's go up there and see what's left to be done."

"Sure thing, old-timer. I'll get busy and help you get up the bonds."

Arrived in the marshal's office, I asked to see the indictment and was presently faced with the information that, on the date named:

——one B. Lake, whose names are otherwise to these grand jurors unknown, did, within the said division and district, and within the jurisdiction of this court, then and there fraudulently, willingly, knowingly, unlawfully, and feloniously import, smuggle, and clandestinely bring into the United States of America from a foreign port and place, to wit, unknown, certain merchandise of foreign growth and manufacture, to wit, two pounds of opium prepared for smoking purposes, the said opium being then and there subject to duty by law, and the duty thereon not having been paid or secured to be paid to the United States, he, the said B. Lake, then and there bringing the said opium into the United States, as aforesaid, without making any report to the Collector of Customs for the District of Florida, or to any other officer of the customs, contrary to the form of the statute in such case made and provided, and against the peace and dignity of the United States of America——

THERE were several other counts of similar import. To this long list of charges was appended the significant words: "A True Bill."

"Well," I said bitterly, "the first lieutenant has done his worst, I hope!"

"What's that?" asked the deputy.

"Just a pet name for a friend of mine," I said.

"Is he in town?" whispered Red eagerly. "If he is, old-timer, we'll fix him soon as you get out."

"I've got to get a bond—several of them."

I was allowed to telephone and called up our agent. He was there and drawled that he would be right down.

He came in with a matter-of-fact expression which, however, changed suddenly as his glance fell on Red.

"What's he doing here?"

"Friend of mine," I informed him. "Going to help with my bond. Several sureties are required, I understand."

He glared at Red and back at me with increasing hostility.

"All right! You don't get any help from me!" And out he stalked.

I was dumfounded, staring at Red. He looked at me with a twinkle in his eye.

"He doesn't care to be associated with me, you see. Took it quite to heart, didn't he? Well, I think I can arrange for your bond."

In about an hour he was back with three men, all prosperous looking and businesslike.

The United States commissioner also was businesslike and in a trice I was out, walking down the street with Red. Once again I was a free man, but under bond.

"It's the first time in my life," I said aloud.

"What is, old-timer?"

"This arrest and bond business."

"Let nothing ruffle you, old sport. It's not worth it!"

I stopped short.

"I just thought of something else. We'd better shake each other, Red. I'm in bad with my crowd, now. They'll be sure I'm double dealing."

He cocked his eye at me.

"Not a thought has he for his pal, who's saved him from the bars! How about me? Tainted with *your* accursed company?"

"You're right, Red. We're just making bad matters worse."

"Blake," he said laughing, "as far as I'm concerned, you're wrong. If I were to tell Bill Bilbo what I've done, he'd say I was a good sport. However, it's a good idea to shy off from each other, on your account." He held out his hand and I gripped it.

"Adios!" he said, winking at me. "And better not let those bonds be estreated! *You*—asking me to reform!"

"Take care of yourself, Red. And tell the others howdy for me."

He went on with a wave of his hand.

With a heavy heart I sat down on a bench in front of the courthouse and watched the people go by. But my thoughts were not with them. Bud and Buck and Red were in Bilbo's gang. Bud would chuck it if the other two would. And I—— Well, the fugitive was one no longer; he was under heavy bonds, furnished by the enemy camp. And what report would the agent forward to headquarters?

CHAPTER XVI.

TRAILED BY TWO.

THE less I see of you, young feller, the better!" said the agent, glaring at me as he had glared earlier in the marshal's office. "Stay away from here!"

"I thought you told me to hang round."

"Mebbe I did before I seen as much as I have since! I'm not traffickin' with your kind. Hike round to Bilbo's junta and do your hanging round there."

"You're clean off the track!" I exclaimed. But I saw that it was useless to argue.

Thoroughly dejected, I strolled over to Aragon Avenue, where I drifted along, staring at the shop windows bursting into electric bloom. The lights and the crowds drew me, a night moth from beyond their dazzle sucked into danger by their lure.

But this was no time to dream. Since our agent had so ruthlessly severed connections, I must look for another source of information. I lingered over my dinner as long as possible, studying the matter. I must be more than discreet, I realized, else I should be treading on dangerous ground at every turn. But there must be some joint, probably along the water front, where rum-running gossip was bandied about. By keeping eyes and ears on the alert, I should doubtless pick up something

that would post me as to the arrival of one of our fleet.

As I left the restaurant, I had an uneasy sense of being trailed, but could not at once verify my suspicions. There was one individual who was always somewhere in sight, but with an apparently plausible reason. On the less-frequented street into which I turned, he was still on the horizon, slim, well-dressed, unmistakably Cuban.

A noisy little coffee shop, advertising its presence through the olfactory medium, appealed to me as a likely center of gossip. Choosing a vacant table in a corner, I ordered black coffee.

The air was thick with the odor of heavy foods and the blue smoke of many Havanas—maduros, to judge by their strength—and I was confused by the flood of effervescent Latinity. It was a joke on me, who knew but a smattering of their tongue. I could keep my feet against a trickle of it, but was hopelessly out of my depth here, buffeted and overpowered by a torrential gabble. This was the last place to serve as information bureau for such a thorough Anglo-Saxon as I.

I finished my coffee and left, drawing on my sense of humor to put a better face on matters. I glanced about for my faithful shadow. There he was, more self-effacing than ever, only now there were two of him. Casual observation soon gauged their respective distances to be that of a scant block, one on either side of the street.

"I must be a personage, indeed," I told myself. Well, having no other entertainment, I decided to give them a run for their money.

A STREET car rattled by the corner and I chased after it, catching up at the next corner. It was going in the direction of Spanish Town. I fell into conversation with the conductor, keeping a lookout over his shoulder. As I expected, a taxi was following.

"Say," I said to the conductor, "is there any place around here where it would be safe for a fellow to go in and put in his order?"

"Needn't beat about the bush, buddy. You want a drink, don't you?"

"Well, since you mentioned it——" I laughed.

"Just the joint for you, half a block off this road. Three fingers, half pint, gallon, case—anything in reason. We'll be by there in a minute."

"You're my friend for life," I assured him solemnly. "How is it?"

"The best in the trade," he asserted enthusiastically. "I know. The ol' reliable!"

I waved him good-by and got off in a little island of light in an ocean of blackness. I located the place, one light burning over the doorway, and went briskly toward it, stumbling over the pitfalls of an abominable sidewalk. It was one of the Old Man's exchanges, no doubt, from the conductor's description. Once inside, I should feel safer. I kept one eye cocked over my shoulder.

I was at the door, when the taxi whirled around the corner and began a surprising performance with its headlights, decidedly tipsy in effect. I stopped short. It was signaling violently. The next moment I was assailed, smothered beneath heavy, active bodies. They—I never saw who "they" were—had me gagged and bound in a trice, the taxi rolled up and received my inert form and, for the second time in these past few eventful weeks, I didn't know where I was going, but I was on my way.

CHAPTER XVII.

IN A TIGHT FIX.

GRISLY visions flitted in my imagination as I lay there on my back in that narrow berth in the cramped cabin of an unknown vessel. I thought of all

the sinister disappearances that ever I had read about, of people found mysteriously slain. The daily press was full of such occurrences. If I were in Bilbo's hands, as I feared, then I might well be facing the worst.

Still bound and gagged, as when brought aboard by my invisible captors after that breathless taxi ride, I was immensely relieved to be no longer blindfolded. It was daylight now. Enough of it filtered in through the partly open hatch to make plain that I was in a sailing vessel, rather roughly fitted up. Judging by her carlings and deck beams, she was not very large, about the size of the *Susan*.

I was horribly uncomfortable from lying so long in that cramped position, but my discomfort was not so acute as to dull my apprehensions. If that modern Blackbeard had me by the heels, I did hope he would give me a chance to die in the open. Emphatically, I shrank from thought of "disappearing"—unwept, unhonored, and unsung! The thought of Ruth stung me like a whip. She would think I had deserted her. I writhed.

Not long after, cargo or stores began to come aboard. This continued for at least an hour, then came the rapid padding of bare feet overhead; an order to "cast off the bow line;" the vibration of an engine told that we were departing. A little puff of wind came down the hatchway and I inhaled it greedily.

We ran steadily for some time, when a door opened in the after end of the cabin and there entered—Captain Jenkins. But it was not the friendly Captain Jenkins that I had known. He stared at me coldly for a space, then bent down and worked at my fastenings.

I was utterly stumped. Had I so misread the man's character? Was he a traitor? "You're taking me back?" I asked.

"Right. No talk; that's orders. You're in bad."

He was as good as his word and opened his mouth again only to inform me, as he went out, that he would send in breakfast and that I might not go on deck until he should give permission.

What a comedown! Being suspected of complicity with Bilbo's crowd, I was being brought back to headquarters to face the Old Man, Smith and Ruth! She would not be fooled, though. This conviction brought a ray of comfort. She would make them see the truth of my story, as before. After all, the worst that I had done was to happen upon one of my pals, to accept his assistance after our agent had refused his.

Nevertheless, it was with a heavy heart that I sat on the deck of the disguised *Susan*—for the *Susan* it was—as she wound in and out through the tortuous channels of the Ten Thousand Islands, bringing me closer to an ordeal that I dreaded immeasurably, knowing that my enemy would have so plausible a charge to present, with what ingenious pains to the closing of every possible loophole.

THE interview at headquarters was just as I had feared. The Old Man's countenance was as hard as granite. The prosecution, I perceived, had already closed its case. Smith sat by, coldly complacent, blandly meeting my glance. Ruth was not present. My heart sank.

"You know the offense," growled the Old Man, "but it's the form to repeat it. You've deserted, breaking your pledge—you remember the terms of that bond, I suppose—and have been caught, red-handed, dealing with the enemy."

"You mean I'm charged with those offenses, chief."

"Well, we'll hear what you've got to say."

"I'll start at the beginning and I'll answer any questions that either of you may wish to put."

As I was about to begin, Ruth entered. I rose, forgetting for an instant the other two, questioning her with my glance. So we stood looking at each other and, in that briefest of moments, I read in her eyes that she believed in me. She moved to a seat next to her father, passing Smith with averted head.

I launched confidently into my recital which the three followed with the closest attention. I looked steadily at Smith as I told of his crooked little accomplice on the *Enterprise* and he looked straight back. I warmed as I went on and, when I concluded, I saw that I had shaken the Old Man's conviction of my guilt.

"I've lost my schooner. I've given her up for good this time. I'm under heavy bonds, to be tried on framed-up charges and perjured evidence perpetrated on the authorities by my superior officer——"

"Hold on!" Smith held up his hand. "You'll be called on to prove what you say!"

"I was deserted by our agent at a critical moment," I continued, ignoring the interruption, "and I'd be in jail right now if my friend—one of my pals of the *Amberjack*—hadn't stepped in. Technically, of course, he's an enemy. But before he was 'technically' your enemy, chief, he was my friend and he's my friend now. I still have some friends in this world, notwithstanding the hard straits I am now in, and the apparent desertion of my erstwhile allies!"

The Old Man considered me, frowning, drumming heavy fingers on the desk. Presently he cleared his throat and spoke.

"I'd like to believe you, Kennedy. I want to believe you. But can you explain why, after our agent told you to go to one of Bilbo's hang-outs, that that's exactly what you did? Why didn't you try to get in touch with me instead of——"

"What!" I exclaimed, bewildered. "One of *Bilbo's* hang-outs?"

"Sure!" he said impatiently. "You were about to go up the front steps when our pickets grabbed you."

I was staggered.

"Bilbo's?" I repeated stupidly. I had taken the place for one of our exchanges, the conductor merely having functioned faithfully as propagandist; that is, one of Bilbo's propagandists.

"I'll never jump at conclusions again," I declared.

"That's no answer," said the chief gruffly. "I want facts."

"The fact is, I'm a fool. I admit it freely. But that's all I plead guilty to."

He was silent for some time, then said:

"Well, I'll hold my verdict in abeyance. Remember—you stay close! Don't leave this island without my permission."

Smith assumed an injured air.

"How about the question of——"

"The matter will rest where it is for the present." The Old Man rose, paused a moment for Ruth to precede him, and went out.

Smith and I—left together thus! Our eyes met. I tore my way past those curtains behind which the real Smith lay concealed, fiercely determined to beat him down—to beat him down—to beat him down! And this I did. His eyes wavered and dropped. He forced a smile and lighted a cigarette. Neither of us said a word. I turned and went out.

I had won, but one of my little guardian angels that I call intuitions whispered in my ear:

"You've mastered him, but he's more dangerous than ever!" I was elated, nevertheless.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ANOTHER ALLY.

I WAS now consigned to the side lines and the game went on without me. What wore on my spirit, in this reduction to the status of noncombatant, was its connotation. I was under a cloud and every one on the island knew it. Their various shades of hostility and contempt were plainly exhibited. What saved me from more uncomfortable experiences was Watkins' outspoken partisanship and the fact that my offense had not been adjudged sufficiently heinous to warrant a sentence to the coop. Notwithstanding, I was just as truly a prisoner.

Keenly I missed the former unrestricted companionship with Ruth. Herein lay the sting of my punishment.

It was at this time that I became friendly with old David Macklin.

"No alias," he assured me. "It's the name I was christened by and we'll stick it out together. It'll never be ashamed of me!"

One of the "characters" of our community, he was as Scotch as his name, though only a trace of accent clung to his speech. However, among our cosmopolitan population, peculiarity of speech would never be remarked. What had set him apart was a quaint religious bent that had resulted in the reputation of being "touched." In the matter of fighting, he was a lone Quaker in that community and so, for a time, our paths ran together in a course of peacefulness.

I originated the plan of camouflaging this, our main settlement, as a protection against possible air raids. Rumor had it that Bilbo was building up an air fleet—the fact that we were developing one, ourselves, was taken as proof—and it occurred to me that a well-executed protective-coloration scheme might, in the end, pay for itself many times over. Accordingly I braved the Old Man's displeasure by appearing unsummoned at headquarters.

"Yes," he agreed, after a moment's consideration of my suggestion, "it will make matters more difficult for Bilbo and may deceive any government planes that may stray over this way."

The two weeks before the necessary materials were at my disposal, I spent in a study of the landscape, the grouping of the tents and buildings, and the very day that the *Enterprise* delivered my consignment of stuff, old Mac and I got to work. It was just the sort of odd job he had been tinkering at ever since his "naturalization." Immediately grasping the principle, he proved a very able assistant, often making valuable suggestions.

It was no small job. I found it necessary to recruit several other men and two boys and for some days there was a great splashing of paint, of which the whole island smelled.

From time to time I went aloft in a plane to take a bird's-eye view of the effect and it surpassed my expectations. The single long shed that was our hangar, opening on the rifle range, which was also our landing field, alone proved impossible. Its telltale shadow on the open space of white sand marked it up as the single failure. It might later prove disastrous to our aërial navy, too, so I induced the chief to abandon it, letting it stand as a blind, and erect canvas hangars in the shelter of the screen of woods.

SOON after old Mac became my assistant. He set his tent near my own, on the edge of the small grove of splendid mango trees in the midst of which lay the headquarters group. After working hours, we spent the evenings in conversation, taking turns at playing host. But I had known him some time before he spoke of himself. Then, one evening, over our coffee, he told me his secret that was no secret.

"Lake," he said, his eyes half closed in the firelight—it was December and the night was cool—"have you ever thought what an uncertain thing life is?"

"I have had ample illustration," I laughed. "But lately I dined in luxury on the *Immokalee*. Now I am banished to outer darkness."

Old "Mac," laughed at as "cracked" by most, while they were hale and hearty, in times of sickness and death was sought after. He came and went freely in these households and, next to "The Doctor"—a young physician whose professional skill made him an important unit in the civic organization—was much in demand. Mac was without pretense, a born physician without the technical training. He never interfered with the doctor's treatments and they had the highest regard for each other. There was nothing about nursing, apparently, that the old man did not know. His mere presence in the sick room worked wonders.

"Ups and downs," he continued presently, "they are life, but not all of it, nor the end. People forget that."

I had related to him my recent adventures and the part that I was convinced Smith had played in them. So I was not surprised when he veered on that track:

"It's a bad enemy you've made of the first lieutenant. I'm sorry. He's bound to make trouble."

"No fault of mine," I reminded him. "I've never met Bilbo, but I'll wager there's little to choose between them!"

Old Mac held up his hand.

"There's where you're wrong," he said quietly.

I stared at him in astonishment; he had spoken with conviction.

"He is your personal enemy for some reason. I have my suspicions why. He doesn't want you round and will stoop to just the sort of thing he did, to get you out of the way. But he'll stop at that. Bilbo would remove you with a twitch of his trigger finger and make you an object lesson to his followers into the bargain. I know Bilbo!"

Possibly he had not intended to say that last. But he did not seem perturbed when I caught him up. "You know Bilbo?"

He nodded.

"Before I came here, I was with Bilbo."

"What did—— How did you come here?"

"As a spy." He gave a little laugh. "That shocks you, doesn't it!"

I stared at him. He was in earnest.

"I tried to do good down there," he continued musingly, "but he would none of it. Cursed me for a hypocritical old fool and ordered me here, to get information. I came. 'A wise man feareth and departeth from evil; but the fool rageth and is confident.' I came, but I did not go back. I shall not go back. He who is in charge here may have his sins, but they are not the crimes of a Bilbo. And I belong here, in these islands. They are my children, these people. I have lived among them for years and I expect to die here. It won't be so long; I'm already beyond the allotted span."

He did not look old but rather like a man in the prime of life.

"Do you mind telling me," I asked hesitatingly, "how you came to be at Bilbo's?"

"Not at all, my young friend—I was there, on the island, first! He and his evil crew came and took possession. My island suited them and they stayed. What could an old man like me do? One of my neighbors decided he would keep his island for himself. Bilbo took it and—stepped on him."

"I see," I said slowly. "You surrendered gracefully?"

"Yes. But I would not traffic with 'em! 'Better a little with righteousness

than great revenue without right.' I cast that in Bilbo's teeth when I left!"

I looked at the fearless old man with new respect.

It was after midnight when we rose to turn in. He was one of the best-informed men I had ever conversed with and his dramatic intensity strangely heightened his every subject to epic proportion.

"I am tolerated here, at least," he said. "I am allotted sufficient for my needs, allowed to go my way in peace. That is one of the things that our head has to his credit.

"And he is a big man, does things in a big way. He and his first assistant have developed a settlement that is almost self-supporting. I know his plan—the installation, by degrees, of more houses in place of tents; of sponge warehouses, clam factories, to lend another color to the manifest industry hereabouts. Oh, yes, a long head, has the chief!

"Able to enforce a system of laws and regulations, he is in the midst of a great prosperity. Is it any wonder that his people all but worship him? His prosperity is theirs.

"But, I tell you, plan and execute as he may; provide for this and that—he cannot succeed: He has left God out of his system. A house built upon the sands. The wind and the rain, the flood—and great will be the fall thereof!"

"Have you spoken—had the opportunity——"

"Ah, yes, yes! Like Pharaoh, he hardened his heart. And I had come to him at the request of his own daughter!"

So Ruth had enlisted old Mac in her cause! The contest began to assume a broader aspect.

"He who will not, cannot see," I said. "Can that be cured?"

"Yes. But he is a stubborn man; he will suffer accordingly." The chill of some shadow over Ruth's father, extended inevitably over her.

I looked at the old man—amazed. This simple old man in his sun-faded garments, his steady, burning gaze, he was a puzzle.

CHAPTER XIX.

A HAWK STRIKES.

THE first lieutenant was not the man to remain inactive after a backset, however slight. While I had not been able to restore myself to favor, Smith was also in disesteem for the part he was suspected to have played in the seizure of the *Amberjack* and my arrest. Nothing had been proved against him—he had been clever in retaining first-rate liars in his little scheme—but Ruth was convinced of his guilt and she seemed to have influenced her father to some extent; in fact, she told me as much in one of the few conversations vouchsafed me at this time.

Smith's opportunity came on wings, biplane, powered with multicylindered motors. Word had gone forth of the bizarre protection from the upper regions we had drawn over our settlement, but the thousandth of an inch in thickness, yet effective enough in Bilbo's estimation to cause him to send hither one of his best planes for observation.

Notice of its approach, a mile up in the blue, was telephoned in from one of our outposts and immediately there was a great scurrying to and fro, impelled and intensified seemingly by the booming of the great bronze gong in the public square. Yet there was order in this confusion.

A CASUAL observer might have remarked: "So do the fowls of the barnyard behave on the approach of an eagle!" But I knew the temper of this collection of fowls. No panic here! And we had our own eagles, too. One

of them swept out over the range, singing his deep war song, going aloft in a splendid spiral that brought from those of us congregated below with upturned faces a great shout of enthusiasm and encouragement. I was tingling from head to foot with the unexpected drama. Happening to catch sight of Ruth, I saw the same excitement in her eyes. She came over to me.

"Isn't he splendid!" she cried.

"Who is it?"

"Smith. He's gone up alone!"

It was true. He had taken one of the speedy little chasers without consulting the Old Man or anybody else and there he was, winding upward on his aërial course for a tilt up yonder that must bring death and destruction to one if not both contestants. At this time our planes were not well equipped as to machine guns, their armament being limited mostly to high-power automatic rifles, effective enough in their way. The first lieutenant was a crack shot.

"He drove a Spad in the war," Ruth informed me.

"I can see he's at home," I returned.

The tiny monoplane had made a great curve inland and, when it headed out to sea, it was between the enemy plane and its home roost. I dashed for my tent and returned with my binoculars. But Ruth held out her hand for them. In that clear air and strong sunlight, I needed no glasses to see what was happening.

The scrappy little hawk had mounted to a position far above and behind the enemy's eagle's tail. And there he was, coming down like an arrow, a heroic pounce.

"Ah-h-h-h!" A deep-throated sound came bursting from the throng of spectators, as the great eagle, crippled, came hurtling to earth, its buzzing little antagonist continuing unharmed in a graceful glide, following the death plunge of the other.

As quickly as that, it was over. A mad rush ensued, to the south shore, where two airmen had just made their last landing in a tangle of wood and steel. I was aware, then, that Ruth had handed my glasses to me and was walking slowly away, dabbing at her eyes with a bit of cambric.

As I followed the crowd to the scene of the wreck I was turning this over and over: "She was weeping! He could bring tears to her eyes." Well, it had been magnificent. Honor to whom honor was due.

It was strange how events—the second waiting on the first, obscured by it until its own time had come—finally overlapped yet did not merge, grinding against each other, diamond against diamond.

After that thrilling air duel, Smith was, of course, the hero of the hour and he bore himself very gracefully. But it was not difficult for me to perceive that he was savoring that delicious draft—the toast to himself—sip by sip, that nothing whatsoever of its bouquet might be lost. And the irony of it was, that his spectacular and brilliant feat directly introduced a chain of circumstances and a second event that turned his wine to black and bitter lees.

His exploit had greatly augmented the warlike spirit in our camp, one result of which was that attention was distracted from me for a time and Ruth and I were together far more than otherwise would have been the case. Greatly to my mystification, she had suddenly withdrawn the graciousness she had accorded him after his daring exploit in the sky.

IT was the general feeling that big things were brewing. Therefore, Ruth and I were left to our own devices, for which I was duly thankful and showed my appreciation by making the most of the opportunity.

I hung back at first, until I saw, to

my unbounded surprise and gratification, that she was making it plain that my diffidence was overdone. Then began a series of meetings despite her father's disapproval and a direct slap in the face for Smith. My remonstrance, that it was bad taste for disgraced, demoted me to be seen so much in her company met with no consideration.

"I know what I'm doing," she would reply calmly. "Let's go fish in the creek."

We did go fishing, in the *Immokalee's* small tender, a tubby, conservative little launch. The Old Man had, in a padlocked boathouse on the shore of the lagoon, a perfect marvel in the speed-boat line, thirty-odd feet of hydroplane hull, polished to a piano finish, with twin prodigy motors sticking up their rows of brass exhaust pipes that made her resemble some great musical instrument. Oh, she could play a tune!

A special little joke of mine, now, when Ruth mentioned fishing, was: "Yes! Shall I get out the *Wildcat?*" And she would reply: "It's *Tabby* for you, sir!" And I would let *Tabby* down from the davits into the element through which she would never go at better than nine knots in her wildest moods. Even the speedy tender I was bashful of, for I was trying to be as inconspicuous as possible and as Ruth would allow me these days. It was *Tabby* for me and that came to describe my existence. No more wildcatting—at least, for a time.

And so it came about that in these weeks of curtailed activity, Ruth and I came to know each other better. They were happy occasions for both of us. In their magic duration we were in a world of our own and all the rest withdrew into a dim background.

The association was a continuous revelation of her fineness. With it, there was a soundness, an underlying spiritual fragrance, to be enjoyed moment by moment and later laid away in lavender. I came to know all her little mannerisms, to look for them with a never-failing delight. One, a little moue of distaste whenever I mentioned Smith—it was inevitable, I suppose, in the incorrigibility of human nature, that I should take pains to provoke.

"Why do you drag him in?" she asked.

"Well, to be frank, I'm curious. I am not able to understand why you, apparently, go out of your way to flout him since his splendid feat the other day."

She did not answer for a minute and I began to fear that I had been presumptuous. Then she raised her head sidewise suddenly, as she had a way of doing, and said:

"Smith has to be kept in his place. It was a brave deed—thrilling! But, unfortunately, he presumes on it."

"Then I owe to him these delightful times with you."

"Yes, if you like. Does it matter to you to what, or to whom, they are due?"

"No, indeed!" I said fervently. "I know if you didn't like me, you wouldn't grant me your company, even to bring Smith to taw."

THE conversation languished for a space. We tried a new "drop" this trip, not in the creek, but around the northern bend of the big channel that opened into the Gulf a mile or so above the spot where I had come ashore, years before, it seemed. I was baiting the hooks with cut crawfish, having tested the bottom and found it suitably hard.

"After all," I resumed, "I do owe all this to him. If he hadn't brought about my disgrace—— Well, I'd be off on some jaunt most of the time, with my sharpshooters."

"He makes it difficult for one to give him credit for his good qualities," she observed.

"No doubt. But do you know, I really have never been able to shake off my first impression? I thought—I suppose everything shaped to contribute to it, at the time—that I had run afoul of the devil incarnate. Mostly my imagination, I suppose."

"I think he has to keep a pretty firm hold on himself," she admitted. "But in justice to him I'd like to tell you one or two things I happen to know. His little sister, for instance. I have seen her picture; she's the dearest thing imaginable. She is attending my Alma Mater. He consulted me as to where to send her. He loves her dearly. You should see the expression in his eyes when he speaks of her."

"Unfortunately, he never speaks of little sister to me."

"Then there's the infirmary he plans to establish in our settlement, for the sick and crippled. He is going to build it, himself, though a tax on the revenues will support it. It will be due to him that it's instituted as a free clinic and infirmary, not only for our people, but for any deserving individuals in the islands—not adherents of Bilbo."

"That's a fine thing," I acknowledged.

"Yes. And do you know that, when any one dies, he makes it his business to see that the property goes where it belongs? So many of these people are ignorant and shiftless. With old Mac as his aid, he has been able to do a world of good."

"You give me a very uncomfortable feeling." I laughed ruefully.

"He dislikes you intensely, so naturally you see only the worst side of him."

"He doesn't want me here; that's plain. Surely you can understand how I feel, after all he's done to me."

"Yes, it wasn't fair," she said; "it wasn't fair! I don't blame you."

I had a good strike and was busy for a bit with my light tackle, presently landing a fine red snapper. But my mind was still occupied with Ruth and her problems.

"I can see that it angers your father for you to be so much with me," I said.

"Yes," she agreed frankly. "I think it will do them both good. Besides, I flatter myself that it is making it easier for you, with the people here."

"Right you are," I returned warmly. "But for you and Watkins and old Mac, I suppose I'd have been tarred and feathered at least!"

"It would be easy for a mob to start in a community like this," she said gravely. "Let's hope there'll never be such an occasion. I don't believe there will; there's such good discipline."

"The laws are well enforced," I agreed. I thought of the founder, our chief; of the counterpart of the Code Napoleon he had established, his works and ways as summed up by old Mac. But I could not distress Ruth with this.

When the tide turned, and our luck with it, we decided to go back. The wire basket hung over the side was almost full of sheepshead and a snapper or two. But when I went to start up the engine—having brought the mud hook aboard—it back fired, chugged a few chugs in the way it ought to and stopped.

"The pesky little brute!" I exclaimed, cranking rapidly. There was no response. A spell of tinkering brought no results, so I cast over the anchor and went to work in earnest.

"We're dragging," Ruth announced.

I saw at a glance that we were. The channel here was deep and narrow and the current swept through it like a great, blue mill race. Our anchor rope was not long enough to give the light hook a chance.

"We should have had a better anchor for a fairway like this," I said, looking anxiously around. Unless picked up by one of our boats, we should be swept out to sea, or gathered

in by Bilbo's pirates. The thought sent cold chills down my spine.

A hundred yards ahead was the tip of a sandy islet, the last land between us and the open sea. I hauled up the anchor hastily and untied the rope from its ring.

"What are you going to do?" inquired Ruth apprehensively.

"The only thing I can," I replied, drawing off my shoes. "I can make that point all right."

I made a noose and slipped it over one shoulder and, as Ruth rose in protest, went over the side.

SWIMMING hard, I was able to tow the little boat diagonally across the channel. I realized that I had acted none too soon; a few seconds of delay would have snatched our last chance.

A wild scream from Ruth as I neared the point and my heart seemed to stop beating. I glanced backward, to see her standing with white face and staring eyes.

"Shark!" was the word I caught.

I went madly into the crawl stroke and, literally, I crawled! It was a horrible moment. I reached the steeply shelving sand bank just as another scream broke from Ruth. It sent me out with a great fling as, behind me, with a surge and swirl, there disappeared a sinister lateen fin.

Ruth crouched down her face in her hands, sobbing. I hauled the launch in, running its nose well up, and stepped aboard.

"Ruth," I said shakily, "don't do that. It's all right. A miss is as good as a mile." I patted her shoulder.

She turned on me then, a blue-eyed fury.

"You had no right to take that risk! You had no right!"

"It was all I could do," I faltered, taken utterly aback.

"You shouldn't have done it; we might have been picked up."

"Yes," I said grimly, "I hate to think about it—picked up, by Bilbo's outfit!"

She made no reply, but sat down again, turning her back to me. Once again I pondered over the incomprehensibility of the feminine mind. In her sudden changes, she reminded me of the face of this country; one moment, bright sunshine, the water a beautiful turquoise shading off into incredible tints; then, in a trice, a cloud coming over the sun the water, cold and unfriendly looking, the shore, somber and unsmiling.

As I turned my attention again to that mulish one-lunged motor, it dawned on me that perhaps Ruth's anger was not because of what I had done, that it might be a reaction, an emotional rebound, directed at me because I had witnessed her tears—tears on my account. I paused in my inspection of the coil for a glance at the eloquent hunch of those shoulders. Disgust—that was what they seemed to express, anger at herself primarily.

Some instinct warned me, however, that I must not appear to note this. Well, she should never learn, I resolved, that I had deduced anything. I was slow in the uptake where women were concerned, anyway, as she had doubtless discovered ere this. I was a little proud of this bit of insight.

"You'd better remember what happened to Smith," I said to myself. "Don't dare to presume!"

I was in a glow, however. The girl whose friendship I prized above all others liked me as well as that! Ruth had wept on my account.

CHAPTER XX.

DISSENSION IN CAMP.

THEN occurred an event which aroused in the Old Man a bitter determination to content himself no longer with staying on the defensive and fighting back only when attacked. On

Christmas Eve night, Captain Jenkins and the *Susan*—renamed the *Stingaree*—were virtually wiped out. This was Bilbo's answer by massacre to the bringing down by our ace of his observation plane. Our chief then decided to take the offensive.

There was no booty aboard the *Stingaree;* she was in ballast, approaching the three-mile limit when surprised and those aboard mercilessly shot or cut down—all but one, who escaped and nearly a week later brought in particulars. An ironical detail, in the way of a lost opportunity for Bilbo, was his missing the small fortune in cash that Captain Jenkins was bringing to the famous West Indian market place.

It was cleverly concealed by a double bulkhead and Bilbo, in his haste and heat to balance matters by blood and fire, failed to find a treasure that was under his very nose. Securely locked away in an iron safe, it went down in the smoldering hulk for a final deposit to Davy Jones' credit.

How our chief raved when the news was brought in! I was not present, but received accounts from several who were and, later, beheld him striding furiously about the place, intent on business.

That afternoon the settlement was liberally posted with small dodgers from the headquarters' printing press, proclaiming a mass meeting for the following Saturday night, at eight o'clock, in the square in front of headquarters, on urgent public business.

Messengers were sent with these posters to the outlying islands and I spent an entire twenty-four hours in a small motor boat on this duty. Most of the keys were mere mangrove-covered areas, overflowed at each high tide, so that a great deal of travel was necessitated to visit all of the inhabitants under the Old Man's suzerainty, scattered as they were on the higher islands.

My first intimation of the extensiveness of the archipelago—back in the time when I was in reputable standing—was on a trip in the *Immokalee* to the oyster bars. The Old Man was in the habit of referring to them thus: "We'll run out and feed off the oyster bars to-morrow, if the weather holds," as if the bivalves were spread at our disposal just outside the Big Pass, an hour's run away. As a matter of fact, the *Immokalee,* plowing along at her comfortable seven or eight knots, would be five hours on the trip. These oyster bars had been recently the scene of more than one clash with Bilbo's crew, as they were in a sort of No Man's Land between the two colonies.

Saturday night found the main island seething, congested. In addition to the electric lights at headquarters and its vicinity and the coal-oil street lanterns, a plentiful supply of torches on long poles stuck in the ground added their baleful illumination. They stood about—these islanders—in sullen groups; men, women and children, to whom the loss of the *Stingaree* and her crew was a personal bereavement. Here and there as one or another showed signs of having sought consolation too prodigally of John Barleycorn, he was promptly taken in charge and escorted to the coop for the night. This was no ordinary occasion.

"Hey there!" called Watkins, sighting me in the ruck. "Let's go over yander." He indicated headquarters with a nod. "It looks to me like a big night to-night."

Directly in front of the main headquarters' tent a low platform had been erected and here the crowd was densest. We worked our way through, until we were in the foremost ranks.

SHARP, at eight o'clock, an orderly came smartly to the front rail of the platform. I had never seen him on duty in this capacity. He raised a bugle to his lips and high and clear on the

night sounded the assembly. An instant hush was the response to this theatrical touch.

The first lieutenant, who had probably initiated this effective prelude, came forward, his pale face as impassive as ever, and stood for a moment looking out over the sea of faces.

"Fellow citizens"—he spoke without effort, but his voice had a rare carrying quality—"we are assembled to-night to consider and discuss matters of the gravest import, touching as they do the life and death of our community. We are——"

A high-pitched, unmistakably cockney voice from the middle of the concourse interrupted:

"In short, we says, we're wi' ye. To 'ell wi' Bilbo!"

A roar of assent greeted this declaration. Smith waited imperturbably for silence. It was granted him almost instantly.

"Yes, this matter has to do with Bilbo. He has forced the present situation. We are now to be addressed by our chief and, after that, any one here may come on the platform and be heard." He turned with a slight bow and the chief came forward, to receive a tremendous proof of confidence and regard. The sound of it, I thought, must surely reach to Bilbo's ears. There was a savage note in it.

When it ceased, the Old Man began speaking in slow, measured tones that rolled out over the sea of faces like the booming of a bell.

"My friends, as you already know, we are here to-night to discuss ways and means to suppress an insolent upstart, a thorn in our flesh who now dares to add to his other piratical misdeeds such a dastardly, bloodthirsty crime as the attack on the *Stingaree* and her unfortunate crew. Captain Jenkins"—emotion showed in his face and rang in his voice—"was one of our best men, one of the most loyal, we have ever had with us. Ten good men and true have been sent with him into the Beyond. One of our best schooners lies at the bottom of the sea, with sixty-five thousand dollars in currency and bonds.

"The man who has done this thing is incapable of carrying on a straightforward, honest business and is constantly obstructing such by all manner of nefarious, contemptible schemes. It is only a matter of time when the government will stamp him out. The question is, will he put us out of business first?"

"Not on your life!" a voice rang out. "Let's beat the gov'mint to it," came another. "Lead us to it, chief!"

"That's the talk!" he shouted. "Bilbo's policy is, 'Rule or ruin!' His hand is against every man; every honest man's hand should be against him; he's an outlaw, a pirate and a murderer. *Bilbo must be wiped off the map!*"

THE ground seemed to shake under the reply. Hats went into the air; men thumped each other on the back, shook hands, shouting themselves hoarse.

The Old Man, face flushed and eyes gleaming, hands clenched on the rail, surveyed them. When quiet was restored, he spoke again, a trifle huskily.

"I knew you would be with me in this. However, we'll put it to a vote. Resolved, that Bilbo be wiped off the map! All in favor of this necessary step for our self-preservation say 'Aye.' Contrary-minded, 'No.' Those in favor?"

"A-a-a-aye!" came the answer, like a roll of thunder.

"Contrary-minded?"

"No!" A single, clear familiar voice sounded behind me, a little to my left.

An immediate uproar of protest followed. Threats were shouted, questions, "Who is it?" "Show him up!"

"Throw him out!" "Let's give him a lesson!"

The white head and mane of old Mac emerged from the front ranks of the audience and he strode onto the platform with one hand held high, like an exclamation point following his emphatic, unpopular "No!" He advanced, shouting:

"Give me the silence you gave the others. I have a right to be heard as well as they!"

Somewhat to my surprise, they granted it. Old Mac spoke in a fearless, unfaltering voice, with glowing eyes.

"You say 'Yes!'" He turned toward the chief and the first lieutenant. "I say 'No!'" He swung to the crowd. "You say 'Yes'—I say 'No!' Bilbo is an evil man. Evil are all his works. Evilly has he treated us!" His glance swept the mass, as he paused for a moment, then added solemnly: "But 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.'" Again he shouted it aloud: "'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord!'"

He strode up and down the platform, glanced back at our leaders leaning forward in their seats, frowning at him, and shouted:

"Oh, my brethren, do not make haste to shed blood. We have other sins to answer for—let us not add that, the greatest; let us not make haste to shed blood!"

Smith leaned forward in whispered conference with the chief, then rose and came forward.

"This is out of place," he said coldly. "We must have a common-sense facing of the facts. Debate is allowable; yes, desired, but no preaching. We are not children, to be frightened by these vaporings of yours!"

Hawklike, the old man turned on him. "You dare call them vaporings!" he exclaimed harshly. "Vaporings! They are not my words; I am but the humble mouthpiece. You blasphemer!"

The Old Man rose hastily and, standing by Smith, said to old Mac:

"You are officious, sir! Your stand is uncalled for and unsupported. We have taken our stand and will see the thing through. I have no fear of the consequences."

"No," retorted old Mac boldly, "you have no fear of the consequences. You have not, God forgive you! You are strong in your own strength, sir. But do you remember the parable of the Rich Fool, the lesson of the house built upon the sands? The wind and the rain—the flood—and great was the fall of it!"

A curious pause ensued, the two leaders staring at the old man. He stared back at them with eyes that seemed to look through and beyond them, beyond the multitude, waiting in gaping wonderment in the midst of a great hush.

There was an uneasy shuffling in the crowd; men conversed together in undertones. Some psychic spell had been wrought by the old prophet there on the platform; it settled down, blanketing the assembly like a visible pall.

OLD Mac came to the rail, taking from under his arm the Bible he often carried. "Listen, my brothers!" he pleaded. "Bilbo and his followers are foredoomed to destruction. We have ample assurance of it." He searched for a moment in the Book, and read in a loud voice: "'They shall be as the morning cloud and as the early dew that passeth away, as the chaff that is driven with the whirlwind out of the floor and as the smoke out of the chimney.' Let us take heed, lest the same thing befall us!"

He walked to a farther corner and stood, his hands clasped behind him, motionless as a statue.

A great hubbub broke forth. Shouts, altercations, threats, the sound of the waters when, running in a strong tide, they are blown upon by an adverse wind

and disquieted. The volume of it increased.

The Old Man and Smith, who had been sitting with heads together, rose suddenly and advanced, the chief holding one hand aloft for silence.

"Old Mac's started somethin', 'e 'as!" Watkins shouted to me, above the uproar. "'E said a mouthful, 'e did! 'E's got 'em thinkin'!"

They were thinking aloud and in such fashion that the bugler had to be called on. The high, imperious notes soon brought comparative quiet. The chief stood, looking back and forth, and presently he could be heard.

"My friends," he said earnestly, "it is evident that some dissension has been created in our midst, by one who may mean well, but who has allowed his fanatical ideas to get the better of his judgment——"

"Hooray for old Mac!" shouted an ardent disciple.

The chief ignored the interruption and continued:

"There is but one way to settle a question like this, as provided by our laws and by-laws; we must put it to a vote. The question is: Resolved, that this business we have organized for be carried on against all opposition, to the end that Bilbo be wiped off the map! Bilbo must be wiped off the map!" He thundered this last, as when he had first announced it, with flushed face and flashing eyes. "All those in favor?"

"A-a-aye!" It was not the confident, enthusiastic roar that he had evoked before. There were undertones in it that bespoke sullen determination.

"Contrary-minded?"

Compared to that other, it was a still small voice that answered "No!" This was the articulate protest of a scattering hundred or so. I lent my voice to it and saw Smith's cynical eyes upon me.

"A bunch of 'em," said Watkins over my shoulder, "didn't speak up neither way. They're up in the air."

I could tell from his tone that he was among the number.

The chief was speaking again, satisfaction written large upon his face.

"I knew we should have a big majority on that. And now it is necessary that every one put his shoulder to the wheel and shove, with every ounce he's got, for the common good! Those who have dissented, will, I am sure, accept the decision of the majority and fall into line as usual. Our future is at stake—*our very lives!* That is all for to-night."

Old Mac came forward. "Just a moment," he shouted. "Just a moment!"

The crowd, that had started to dissolve, froze again, expectantly.

Old Mac had his book open and was holding it on high. "It's just a word," he said, "but you'll remember it. I want you to remember it." He read very slowly and distinctly:

"'When I bring the sword upon a land, if the people of the land take a man of their coasts and set him for their watchman; if, when he seeth the sword came upon the land, he blow the trumpet and warn the people; then whosoever heareth the sound of the trumpet and taketh not warning; if the sword come and take him away, his blood shall be upon his own head!'"

He turned abruptly and left the platform, the chief scowling after him. Smith gave a wave of his hand, indicating dismissal, and the meeting was over.

We were committed to it, a hewing to the line, regardless of the chips.

CHAPTER XXI.

WOULD HISTORY REPEAT ITSELF?

I LAY awake most of that night going over the striking scene: The chief and the first lieutenant, working on the emotions of that motley following; the

dramatic interjection of old Mac, directing a new and unauthorized force against the policies of the other two; Ruth, there in the background, a witness of this advent of a militant ally, the shock of his onset, his defeat that was not a defeat; her father's victory that might lose all.

The conviction persisted that old Mac had come off first in this remarkable encounter; that, in defeating him, they had defeated themselves. I had never been superstitious, yet his threat of supernatural forces of vengeance had its effect. I acknowledged this to myself and went deeper, in consideration of the whole matter from another angle.

I was well versed in pirate lore. Pirates and smugglers had always held for me a great fascination; it was largely this glamour of the past, investing these regions, that had brought me here, to find these gentry very much in the present. Recent economic cause and effect had brought in their train a defiant sea-borne commerce as extensive as our coasts, ingenious and daring, prolific of vast gains.

The system is simple. An American vessel meant for "the trade" is transferred to British registry—move No. 1. A slight difficulty is caused by the British law requiring that vessels to be entitled to such registry must be owned by British subjects; this is evaded by paper transfers to such subjects resident in the Bahamas, the real ownership remaining vested in the American rum runner.

Nassau is the principal source of supply—Nassau, "the Klondike of the bootleggers," almost overwhelmed with prosperity that descended upon her overnight. The fountain is inexhaustible; the greater the demand, the greater the supply. Larger vessels, such as the auxiliary schooners of the Old Man and Bilbo, bring their cargoes direct to our coasts. But let not a boat owner despair for lack of tonnage or freeboard. Bimini and Gun Key, hospitable stepping-stones, hang out their signs: "Transshipment, Quick and Easy." The mainland is distant but a day. All this works to the advantage of the west-coast merchant. Public and official attention mostly being concentrated on the shores opposite the West Indies, the operations along the Gulf coast have gone almost unnoticed.

The formula followed by the master of a rum-running ship at Nassau is carefully worked out and affective in its simplicity. True, it involves obtaining two sets of clearance papers. But two are so much better than one and who is there to grumble? With two sets, then, our shipmaster goes forth: one issued for Halifax, Tampico, or St. Pierre; the other, "in ballast," for some American port. Suppose an officer of the United States boards unseasonably.

"Here, sir, are our clearance papers. A bit off our course. We're on our way."

Nothing like putting the best foot foremost and keeping a good countenance on matters, else to what end a double face? Thus, if the officer boards after discharge, we are "in ballast," having paused long enough off some bare strand to become a fabulous turtle, laying golden eggs; or perhaps having dispensed them over the rail. What is there now to hinder an honest merchantman from coming into port?

GENIUS goes farther, extending to such matters as packing those eggs. Cases are good, but it is possible that straw jackets may obviate breakage and that a small package may be geometrically devised to save space in the hold and labor in handling. The idea is embodied, found good and they increase and multiply, by the tens of thousands, each with a carefully tailored burlap covering, each to be a unit of delivery

hereafter known, in the new commerce —because of a certain ludicrous similarity in appearance to that other, unromantic article—as a "ham."

What a profit is attached to the movement of the aforesaid hams and eggs to satisfy the prodigious appetite! In the short journey from the foreign shore, the value jumps one hundred, or one hundred and fifty per cent. To the perils of the sea, piracy is once again added. Vast sums are changing hands, most of it in cash. There is not slow to appear a class capable of the most daring preying on this tempting business, largely unprotected because itself illegitimate. And of these hijackers, one is preëminent in ruthlessness and recklessness, a true pirate of the Volstead age—Bilbo, by-product of the times.

"Gentlemen adventurers," like our chief, looked upon such ruffians as Bilbo with the greatest hatred and contempt. Professional ethics were unknown to him. He turned a profit where it offered and took his fill wherever he found his prey. "I'll give you the Bilbos," had come to be a colloquial threat most dire to the recipient to be.

With Bilbo, piracy was an avocation, a recreation as opportunity offered, from his regular lines of trade—rum running, "dope" smuggling and the unlawful entry of aliens. Of these, the second was perhaps the most reprehensible. The amount of money changing hands in this hideous trade is beyond computation, but it had come to be well known in the underworld that Bilbo received, through the importation end of the game, a larger share than any other one participant in this part of the world.

The attitude toward Bilbo was intensified by his connection with the smuggling of unqualified aliens. The extensive coast line of the peninsular state was his natural opportunity. In the matter of ruthless brutality, his methods were his own. Recently the bodies of three "agents," foreigners, reported to have transacted business with him, drifted ashore—having been poorly weighted, or not weighted at all —miles up the coast, bearing marks of the most cruel treatment. Whispers, unverified at the time, were laying this latest crime at our archenemy's door.

The modern buccaneers and their liquid treasure are the duplications of their forerunners—the "boucaniers," piratical adventurers of various nationalities, leagued together primarily against Spain, their center in the Caribbean Sea in the seventeenth century, the age of Mansfield, Morgan, L'Ollonois and others famous for their bravery, resourcefulness and—only too often—cruelty. Their power grew and spread until their operations covered the Caribbean, the western Pacific.

"Heave or sink it; leave or drink it, we were the masters of the sea!"

What brought about their disintegration, their final disappearance? From their beginnings the elements of decay were clearly defined. Largely, they were the disruption of different clans and nationalities along the lines of natural cleavages and the universal gambling which resulted in an unequal distribution of wealth and general dissatisfaction.

Drawing deductions from this, I felt that the prospects were bad for Bilbo, whose organization so palpably lacked requisites of stability. His whole system was flimsy, based on expediency; his people, in more senses than one, a floating population. Besides, he was proceeding so recklessly that it seemed likely the government would shortly take steps against him, just as in that last recrudescence of piracy in the West Indies the United States and Great Britain, in the absence of aggressive action on the part of Spain, combined to stamp out the pirate lairs on the south shore of Cuba.

However much this might and did apply to our archenemy, I could not see that it applied to our community. If ever brains and organization had gone into the establishing of an enterprise, it was here. The principal settlement was being beautified as well as improved; streets were being straightened, sidewalks laid down, flower-bordered; in the center, a spacious pavilion, to be equipped with a powerful radio outfit, was under construction. Most important of all, the shacks and tents were being replaced by attractive bungalows.

The chief had on one occasion boasted that his enterprise was as firmly rooted as the red mangrove. The red mangrove fringed the shores in these parts, not content with one root, or two. It dropped myriads of them, from trunk and branch, each with a point, that it might strike deep into sand or mud. Were a point knocked off, others sprang forth above the wound, to secure it the more firmly. Even the seed seemed possessed of conscious instinct. It was cigar shaped, four or five inches long. It dropped off, stuck up, immediately began to grow; or, falling into the water, drifted along upright, rooting itself wherever it found soft bottom. Avid of life, insistent on perpetuation—considering it now, I felt that the Old Man's symbol was not ill chosen. And, like the mangrove, our enterprise depended for its existence on the sea.

Was old Mac wrong, then? There was something to be said on both sides. Time would tell.

CHAPTER XXII.

A PROBLEM TO SOLVE.

WATKINS was copperpainting the bottom of his fast little runabout, drawn up at his landing.

"I'm surprised at you," I said, laughing.

"Why?"

"I hardly expected you'd vote 'Yes,' last night. I thought you might vote 'No'—possibly. But you had nothing to say, either way."

He plied his brush in silence for a space.

"I guess I was among them that was up in the air," he said, at last.

"It was a plain open-and-shut proposition, wasn't it?"

"Well, I'm of'n divided in my mind, even on plain propositions. I'm not in favor of marchin' on Bilbo's establishment. It's too much like climbin' in y'r enemy's back window and 'im a-knockin' off y'r 'ead while you're a-doin' it!"

"Getting wiped off the map, yourself," I supplemented.

"Egzackly. Let 'im come climb in our back window, instead. Now, as far as keepin' on with our business is concerned—well, that's our business. It's like this: My people 'as always gone about their business an' done what they wanted with what they 'ad or what they could get. Now, I never 'ave believed it was right, what the wreckers used to do a long time ago—puttin' up false lights to bring ships ashore for plunderin' and all that. That's not fair."

HE stirred the pail of paint vigorously.

"Not but what some of my people," he said matter-of-factly, "was among the wreckers at Tavernier Key, way back in the old days. 'Ad a good time, too, from all I've 'eard. The other side of my fam'ly's from the Bahamas, direct.

"But I've never seen anything wrong in smugglin'," he emphasized; "least of all, in smugglin' licker, which belongs to anybody c'n git 'is 'ands on it!"

"You mean," I said, in seeming astonishment, "that you think smuggling isn't wrong?"

"Yes," he said defiantly. "I wouldn't be 'ere, otherwise. People like me goes about th' 'igh seas a good deal an' to furrin parts sometimes, like Cuba, or Mexico, or Nassau. For the sake of argument—s'pose I 'ave a piece of movable property that I've picked up in one o' them places or on th' 'igh seas; ain't that my property and ain't I got jest as much right to it 'ere as there? Is it right to cut off a piece of it as dooty jest because I've moved it a ways?"

"The government has a right to say that," I asserted; "just as when you have a house and lot, in Cayo Grande, we'll say, the city authorities have a right to assess a tax on that property and collect it. Money has to be collected to carry on government."

"Yes, I've 'eard all that before. But smugglin' is a game. Goods is smuggled in and always will be on a coast like this and so the dooty is 'igh enough so that them that 'as to pay pays for them as don't."

I laughed.

"It's a game!" he repeated vehemently. "A game between a poor man like me an' the gov'ment. The gov'ment says, 'This 'ere's the law. If you break it an' I ketch an' convict ya, I make ya pay a fine or go to jail, one out of th' two—mebbe both. Very well! I accept those conditions an' do my best not to git caught. If I *am* caught, well, I'm loser; I pay."

"But you violate several laws when you smuggle in liquor," I observed. "How about that?"

"As far as licker is concerned, it's like this: Licker is licker, whether it's in Nassau or Florida. If it's a sin t' 'ave it in Florida, it's a sin t' 'ave it in Nassau. No, it's all a part of th' game and th' gov'ment sets th' stakes."

"I'm afraid I can't do anything with you!" I laughed. "I'll set old Mac on you."

"'Im?" he said crossly. "You needn't. I've 'eard all 'is argyments before, frontward and backward and crosswise. 'Im an' I can't argue." He straightened up, looking at me bellicosely. "'E needn't think that because 'e can quote Scripture that 'e won't get what all th' rest of us gits if things goes wrong!"

"Aha! You admit, then, that you may have to pay consequences?"

"*We*, why don't you say, buddie?" he said, with grim humor. "You'll 'ave a share in it, too. Votin' 'No,' last night, won't 'elp you none.'

"Well," I returned, "at any rate that shows a guilty conscience, doesn't it, Old Socks?"

"Guilty conscience is somethin' I've never 'ad yet," he retorted. "We might lose th' game, of course. An' that might be twenty years from now! An' when it comes, if we should git wiped out some'ow—though I don't believe it's in th' almanac—why, far as you an' old Mac's concerned, it'll be like th' little song: ''E was right, dead right, as 'e shoved along, but 'e's jest as dead as if 'e'd been wrong!'"

"Yes," I agreed; "we'd all be losers."

"Ho, yes," he boomed, getting to work again hardily. "But good losers, hey?"

"I hope so," I said, and went in search of old Mac.

THERE was a sound of sawing in back of Mac's tent and I found him at work on a cabinet of some sort. He was expert at this craft, in spite of his advanced years.

"Hello!" he said cordially. "I saw you at the meeting last night. Sit down."

I brought a steamer chair from his tent and sat where I could watch him at his work.

"Was that the first time you've taken the bull by the horns like that?" I asked.

"It's the biggest opportunity the

Lord's sent me yet," he replied, reaching for his square.

"It was pretty near what might be called treason—it would be, in Bilbo's camp, wouldn't it?"

"So much light as we have, we must share," he replied. "I must do what I can."

"Something may come of it yet," I encouraged him.

"God alone knows," he said.

"You might have been mobbed."

"If it's right, I do it. Did not the Lord say to Ezekiel: 'And thou, son of man, be not afraid of them, neither be afraid of their words, nor be dismayed by their looks?'"

A man who had bearded Bilbo in his den, I concluded, could do anything and get away with it.

"I've just been talking with Watkins," I said presently. "He won't admit it, but you impressed him last night."

"Did he vote?" Old Mac cast a sharp glance at me.

"Neither way. He says calamity may be in store, but he doesn't believe it's in the almanac for us."

"Almanac, eh? Why doesn't he make the Old and the New Testament his almanac?"

"I suppose he was speaking figuratively. Unless he meant a hurricane."

"It might be," he said reflectively.

"I have a feeling that things are going wrong," I said, at length. "I'd like to see Ruth out of it. When it comes, whatever it is, it will fall on all alike, as Watkins said. I'd like to see her out of it."

Old Mac looked at me gravely.

"She'll never go without her father."

I nodded.

With idle hands, he stared into space.

"There's nothing we can do except what we are commanded to do: 'Watch and pray.'"

"This is not the place for a girl like that," I persisted. "Don't you suppose you could make her father see it? He could leave Smith in charge and take Ruth away."

"He will go North in the house boat in the spring, when he's ready and not a moment before."

"Well," I said getting up, "I'm going to stick around, on her account, all I can. I know you'll do the same."

"And Smith," he added quizzically.

"What?"

"Yes, he'll be her bodyguard; you can count on that. The man's mad about her! You must have seen it."

I sat down again, with a feeling of being hemmed in, blocked in all directions. From that moment began my recognition of the real difficulty of the situation. Every thought and act, henceforth, must be directed to one end: The setting up of all possible barriers against the possibilities suggested by that simple statement "The man's mad about her."

"You know," I said, greatly upset and not attempting to conceal it, "if anything happens to her father—Smith's not the man to look out for her. She doesn't love him"—a swift glance from old Mac, and I made haste to add—"I don't believe."

He made no comment.

"I'm going to stick around. Can I count on you, sir?"

He laid one hand on my shoulder and said gently: "Yes."

In that moment I was raised from an anxious contemplation of threatening possibilities to a strange contentment.

CHAPTER XXIII.

WITH MACHINE GUNS READY.

THE following day I had a few minutes alone with Ruth. The Old Man and Smith were inspecting the planes and hangars and, except for the orderly, we were alone at headquarters.

There was a subtle change in her, a tinge of aloofness that puzzled and hurt

me. I realized it at once. It was nothing that I could put a name on. I refused to believe that she could make so much of the trifling emotional display following my escape from the shark, yet there it was, an impersonal note that was a denial, somehow.

As nothing could be done about it, I determined to ignore it.

"What do you think of the way things turned out the other night?" I asked, making conversation.

"Old Mac is right. It is a great mistake to take steps toward crushing Bilbo. We should stand on the defensive; sooner or later, the government will dispose of him. Enough rope is the best solution for men of that stripe."

"Yes, it's a mistake," I agreed.

"At one time, there," she continued, "I thought old Mac had worked a miracle; that the whole question would settle itself by the voice of the people. But I suppose it was too much to expect of such an aggregation, even after all the work he had done among them. Moses, I imagine, must have looked like that when he smashed the tables of stone."

"He is a wonderful old man; queer, fanatical, perhaps. I may be mistaken, but I believe that those who think he met his Waterloo the other night are off the track. There's no telling what may result from that meeting, yet."

"No," she said hopelessly. "I know these people better than you do. They don't change."

"Well," I rejoined cheerfully, "it's something to have been able to discuss changing. I shouldn't have thought it possible."

"Steps are already being taken," she informed me. "And I've messed things up—for you."

"For me?" I said, surprised. "Let's hear about it."

"Beyond words, I dreaded to see an attack in force on Bilbo's establishment, such as was proposed. He knows all about it by now, you may be sure, and his place will be another Gibraltar. You know what that would mean."

"Oh, well, there's more than one way to capture a Gibraltar."

"Without a battle?" She smiled wanly. "Oh, no! Not Bilbo!"

"There's more than one way of killing a cat."

"I thought of kidnaping him and pressed the idea and finally induced dad to try it. Smith also favored it, said, if we were lucky enough to get him, we could lock him up in solitary confinement and if his followers wanted him badly enough they could come for him —and that would give us the advantage."

"It's a corking idea!" I agreed warmly.

"That's what they said," she went on, in that monotone. "They've decided it's well worth trying and they're going to send you."

"Send me!" I repeated, as if unable to assimilate the portent of the words. "To kidnap Bilbo? You mean it, Ruth?"

Of course she meant it. Her eyes told me that.

"Well, now!" I exclaimed a little more cheerfully than was called for. "Don't look so tragic. I'll prove a first-class kidnaper. You watch."

She rose, smiling in a queer constrained way, her eyes still on mine, and held out her hand. "Good-by," she said, in a low tone.

When I took it in mine, she left it there limp for a moment, then turned and hurried from the room.

A WEEK later, the *Shearwater,* a two-masted ship bought to take the place of the ill-fated *Stingaree,* refitted and renamed, went through the Big Pass and stood out to sea under sealed orders.

I had been commissioned master, so

that my authority aboard would be complete, but a native familiar with every foot of these waters had been assigned as navigator, leaving me free for other matters. In addition to the crew, we carried a force of twenty men, each equipped with a service rifle, a trench gun with bayonet and two heavy automatic pistols. We also had two machine guns, already set up below, in shape for quick use on deck or ashore if needed.

"Knowles," I said to the navigating officer, when we were three miles offshore, "there's a difficult job on hand. I can't tell you what it is until we open the orders. We'll go over them together."

"All right," he said. "I'm ready."

The instructions were brief and to the point. We were to proceed at once to Port Byers, where Bilbo was due about this time, and take him dead or alive and bring him to headquarters.

This capias caused Knowles to blink once or twice, as if just jolted out of sleep.

"Lemme see," he said, taking the document, which was signed by the chief. He went over it again, as if doubting its obvious purport.

But this was no acrostic message. We hauled around to the north, beating for the mouth of the Caloosahatchee, which is Seminole for "crooked river."

I was in no hurry to reach our destination, as I did not wish our boys to be hanging round the water front ahead of time.

"Knowles, we won't give particulars to the men until we have arrived and located Bilbo. Then we'll just take him and get away as fast as possible."

It was a long run and my mind was busy with many things in the interval. Standing on the spray-soaked deck, gazing at the low coast, my thoughts reverted again and again to Ruth, try as I might to concentrate on the job ahead. Was I in love? I asked myself the question seriously. I did not seem to be afflicted with the symptoms usually described in connection with that state. I felt no wild urge to cast myself on my knees at her feet with fervent avowals. I was not impelled to get out writing materials and lay my heart bare on paper. I did feel a great sense of solicitude, tenderness, as I thought on her situation. But that was no more than natural in such circumstances. I should be a sorry specimen, otherwise.

OVER and over, I relived those last moments together. There was a barrier between us and neither of us could reach out and tear it away, as her eyes besought me to do. I racked my brains, going over our former meetings. Had I done anything, said anything, that she could have taken amiss? I could think of nothing, except that absurd scene connected with the shark. It irritated me now, whenever I thought of it.

Well, it all boiled down to this: I wanted to be with Ruth, to clear it all up. I felt that I could clarify the whole situation between us by telling her frankly that I, too, was conscious of that veil that had come between us, that refused to be ignored, that was not the less there because we could see each other through it. It had no business to be there, I told myself savagely. Why were people such puppets of the psychic?

I tore myself from these unhappy reflections as we picked up Sanibel Light, shortly after sunset. Sails were stowed and we went in under power, for several hours plowing against the strong current, following an apparently interminable line of beacon lights.

Arrived at Port Byers, we dropped anchor near the municipal dock and Knowles and I went ashore. My companion, I had learned, knew Bilbo by sight and where he could be found—

or news of him. I waited at the corner of Bay Street and in a short while he was back, saying, in an excited whisper:

"He's 'ere. That's his schooner, the *Rosalie,* near the end of the dock."

"Where is he now?" I asked eagerly. "How many men has he with him?"

"A full outfit," he said, in answer to the last question. "I 'aven't seen 'im yet, but 'e's 'ere and intendin' to sail at daylight."

"You're sure you know him when you see him?"

"As far as I can see 'im! Always wears a yachting cap and dresses like a sport."

"To avoid a rumpus in town," I said, "our best plan will be to have the *Shearwater* ready, with anchors tripped and engines running, moored with her stern to the wharf. He can't get aboard his schooner there without our seeing him and he won't try to steal aboard, as he won't be suspecting anything. We'll just lie low until the time comes, posting our men here and there along the wharf, and as he comes by our stern we'll rush him. If they start shooting, we'll give 'em all they're looking for! Mount both of the machine guns aft and train one of them on the *Rosalie.*"

The *Rosalie* was on the other side of the wharf, near the end. One machine gun would take care of any reënforcements from that direction.

The men were sent off in pairs, fully instructed as to what they were to do. Fourteen of them disappeared into the darkness and with the first pair went one of the sailors, a man who, like Knowles, knew Bilbo by sight. He was to lounge around the street near the dock entrance and, on Bilbo's appearance, would accompany him at a little distance with unsteady gait, as if under the influence of liquor. This was to be the signal for our pickets, who were all armed with gats, to close in. Our "drunk" was to rush Bilbo from the rear, supported by the pickets, and Knowles and I, with the huskiest of the flying wedge, were to come from the other side. With one machine gun trained on the *Rosalie,* the other covering the wharf shoreward,, we felt reasonably safe from reënforcements.

So, in a tingle of anticipation, we waited. All was quiet aboard the enemy ship and the indications were that Bilbo would come with a formidable bodyguard. If so, a pretty scrap would result, such as I should like to avoid. The increasing boldness of Bilbo and others of his kidney was creating a growing public sentiment against lawlessness and there was no telling what might be the outcome of a pitched battle here on the water front. On the other hand—my duty was plain. Here, at a stroke, the war between Bilbo and ourselves might be ended. We would capture him if we could; if necessary, we would kill him. No ruffian who ever sailed under skull and crossbones in the old days, and walked his captives into eternity over a plank, deserved it more richly.

MIDNIGHT came and quiet drew over the town. A piano all too noisily evident aboard a house boat moored near the breakwater became silent and several departing guests, with noisy good nights went up the street, arm in arm. A guard on the *Rosalie's* stern rose, stretched, looked shoreward expectantly. We waited breathlessly.

"Damn him!" muttered Knowles. "Why don't he come!"

It was almost one o'clock when we became aware of a sort of restlessness there in town. A door slammed in the distance, a dog barked violently and was given immediate support by others of his tribe. I was sure that I heard the sound of running feet. Then, in the bright moonlight, a boy on a wheel appeared, coming down the wharf, riding hard. He jumped off, panting, and

grabbed Knowles by the arm, whispering hoarsely:

"There's sumthin' doin'! He's turned in an alarm to the police that you fellers is plannin' to rob the bank! They're forming a posse. You'd better git."

Knowles grabbed the boy.

"Who sent you, kid?"

The youngster glanced at me, gave a name and pattered out something that sounded like a quarter-back's signal.

"Come on to the shore end of the wharf," I said to Knowles, "and bring the boy."

The bank was straight down the street, on the corner, and, sure enough, lights were coming on there and people were appearing from every direction. Commands were shouted and there was altogether an unpromising air of bustle. Our seaman scout came, hotfoot, with no trace of unsteadiness in his gait.

"We've got to git out of here!" he cried excitedly. "The whole town is after us!"

It was only too true. A company of citizens had formed and was marching in our direction, headed by a squad of white-capped policemen. Port Byers and its county had summoned a posse comitatus and this reception committee was bent on business. We must be taken in custody for an investigation, or fight them off—which we had no intention of doing—or run out to the open Gulf.

"Get aboard, quick!" I called, as loudly as I dared, waving my arm.

There was a thud of sneaker-shod feet on the planks.

"Boy, vamose!" ordered Knowles, giving him a shove, and boy and wheel went up the side street like a shadow.

Both propellers were churning and the *Shearwater* was straining at her stern line. I counted the men as they came over the rail and, when the tally was complete, I whipped the line aboard and with Knowles at the wheel we headed for the open Gulf, the two six-cylinder motors opened up to capacity, enabling our trim little craft to live up to her name. As Knowles put it:

"We split the Caloosahatchee wide open!"

"Everybody flat on deck!" I shouted suddenly.

Bullets whined overhead and beat into our topsides. But we had too good a start and were soon at a safe distance.

This, of course, is not the general version of the "Thwarted Bank Raid."

CHAPTER XXIV.

A GREAT DISCOVERY.

AFTER cruising off the mouth of the river for several days in the vain hope that Bilbo and the *Rosalie* would show themselves, we returned, crestfallen.

The chief swore roundly when I had made my report.

"I believe you're a Jonah," he grumbled. "Too many damn things going wrong. He's put it over us again. All right, don't stand round here looking sick. Get out!"

I had hoped to see Ruth, but she had not appeared. I had the hardihood to ask about her.

"She's sick," he said gruffly.

I went to my tent, to see whether my bag had been brought ashore, and paused at old Mac's.

"I hear Ruth is sick," I said anxiously.

"Yes. She's worrying too much. We must do what we can, I told her, and leave the rest to God. It will all come right finally. How about your trip?"

He nodded when I narrated briefly what had taken place on our man hunt.

"What did the chief say?" he asked, looking at me keenly.

"He's sore, of course!" I said gloom-

ily. "Says everything's going to the devil and that I'm a Jonah."

The old man laughed shortly.

"Don't you worry about that. The Lord took care of Jonah!"

"What's the latest here?"

"Well, your failure's the latest. But there's been some trouble. A lot of drunkenness and fighting. The police force has been busier than they've ever been and the chief's been busy, hearing cases and handing out sentences. He's beginning to bear down on 'em hard."

"What's all the quarreling about?" I asked uneasily.

"Most anything. There seems to be a general disposition to quarrel. Mainly, it's the question we fought over at the mass meetin' the other night."

I pricked up my ears.

"I told you I didn't think it was settled. Looks as if it might make a serious division, does it?"

"I don't know that it will come to much of a split; we're too few to change the policy, without the Lord wills it. I told the chief that. He cursed, thundered mightily and ordered me out."

"There's one thing——" I began.

"God's in His heaven, my son," he said serenely.

I went my way, feeling better, but I was unhappy because of Ruth. Somehow, I had failed her. She had seemed to lean on me. Well, I had proved a sorry sort of staff.

That afternoon I saw her sitting on the after deck of the *Immokalee*. Even at that distance, I noticed wretchedly how dejected was her attitude. She raised her hand in a listless gesture. I took a skiff from the headquarters' landing and rowed out.

"I can't take a trick any more," I called out ruefully, as the little boat sidled up the *Immokalee's* white topsides.

She gave me a warm smile of disbelief.

"I declare, Ruth," I said, "it's worth coming back empty-handed, to have you look at me like that."

She colored faintly, the smile lingering in her eyes.

"I have a lot to tell you," she said, and suddenly there were tears in her eyes.

"Ruth!" I exclaimed, in dismay.

"I didn't know I was going to be so silly!" she murmured.

"Ruth," I said, my hands on the rail, "I'm coming aboard."

"I think you'd better not," she said. "Dad—dad hasn't been very nice."

"When can we have a talk, then? I must! It's been so long!"

"We might go off on a little picnic, take some sandwiches and go off in *Tabby* by ourselves a little while. I'm so tired!"

"Shall we go now, Ruth?" I asked eagerly.

"It's a little late, now. Let's make it to-morrow morning, at nine. Dad will be furious, but I don't care! He hasn't been nice to me."

"All right," I said jubilantly. "You provide the sandwiches."

"And you, sir, provide a real anchor and plenty of rope!"

"Served me right, that did, Ruth. I had it in mind, but served me right!"

"Well, good-by. No! Good night!" she added, with a little smile.

I headed for the landing.

WE were fortunate in having perfect weather for our outing. We had chosen a short but beautiful stretch of sandy beach on one of the seaward islands, backed by a fringe of coco palms. The graceful trees, waving their shining fronds in the brilliant sunshine, reminded me of friendly aborigines. A number, I observed, bore young nuts, just right for milk and jelly kernel. I disembarked with an armful of cushions

which I arranged in the shade of the palms. Looking up at them, she put my thought into words.

"They are hospitable natives," she said, "saying, 'This is our land. Come and stay if you like. But it is ours!' And now let's explore!"

We set off.

"Isn't it beautiful?" she sighed.

It was. The wide arc of the horizon showed not a sail nor streamer of smoke—blue below, matchless blue above and, in the farthest reaches of the sky, great piles of cumulus cloud that seem to grow like mushrooms in this atmosphere.

"Now tell me all about it," I said gently.

"It's dad," she said, in a low tone, looking out to sea. "I had a scene with him yesterday morning. He said that he's having enough trouble already, without my making more."

"How, Ruth?"

"He said I had no business being seen so much with you. That you are a ne'er-do-well. That some of the people are talking. I flared up a little. And he got angry. When I told him that I had nobody here to chum with but you, he said if I had to chum with somebody, there was Smith. I said I didn't like Smith, that I didn't like any of them, that I didn't like this rotten business and wanted to go home. For the first time in my life, he was m-mean to me!" She was weeping like a heart-broken child.

"Sweetheart!" I whispered, drawing her close.

I was in a daze. The word had sprung to my lips because, all along, it had been in my heart. And I hadn't known.

We walked up and down. Presently, she was comforted. Her hand nestled in the hollow of my arm in a new way.

As for me, I was a new being in another world, a world in which I had found Ruth—waiting for me!

A strange loveliness, an ineffable bloom, was on everything, the sea, in the air and sky, on the wings of the snowy gulls wheeling overhead; even on the close-packed sand on which we walked.

"Ruth," I whispered, "have you, too, been—waiting?"

Slowly she came into my arms again, with a little sigh that was in itself an answer and I knew that, whatever life might henceforth bring, we had been vouchsafed the greatest moment of all.

CHAPTER XXV.

A CHOICE OFFERED.

I HAD to put up with another scene last night," Ruth informed me, on an afternoon several days later, as we sat by the lagoon back of headquarters.

"Your father?"

She nodded.

"Smith saw us from the other shore, that day of the shark. He was watching, it seems, with field glasses! Saw it all except the shark, that is; he scouts that part of it."

"Thinks we have to produce one for the occasion, eh?" I laughed, though angered. "But what matter whether he believes it or not? I've got over the necessity of arguing with Smith!"

"It wouldn't matter if dad weren't on his side."

"That's true." I was sobered a little. "Did it last long?"

"Not very. I'm cut off with a penny."

"Ruth!"

"Well?" She was suddenly constrained.

"Do you mind telling me about it?"

"Not at all. Dad is tremendously wealthy, as you know. He's gone back into stocks and bonds and his luck has held. He's invested in oil and his luck has held. In New York, and in the oil fields, he's known under his real name. He's going to will it all to char-

ity and to perpetuate this business unless I give you up—and marry Smith. He has wanted me to for a long time."

"Unless you marry Smith!" I repeated.

"Yes. He feels that Smith has his brain and heart and soul in this business," she said bitterly. "He said I might have our old home in the country. There's a bit of farm and tenant income connected with it, enough to keep me going. It's the only thing he didn't get out of this business, so I asked him to let me have it. Some day, you'll see it. It's lovely. Not big and imposing, or anything like that, you know, but—lovely!"

"Ruth"—I took her hand—"are you sure you don't care?"

"Do you?" She held back a little.

I laughed.

"What do you think, darling?"

There we were again and again observed, as we afterward learned.

If we flattered ourselves that acceptance of the Old Man's ultimatum closed the matter as far as he was concerned, we were greatly mistaken. He was enraged at Ruth, for what he regarded as willful stubbornness; at me, of course, for a worthless interloper; at himself, for having contrived the cul-de-sac into which his daughter's prompt acceptance had forced him.

In that situation there was but one tactical move left him—left them, I should say, including Smith. They were not slow to see it. So it came about that I was now assigned to a series of most important and most dangerous duties.

"Well, Ruth," I said, as matter of fact as possible, when she informed me, with much agitation, of the decision arrived at by headquarters and which her father, in a characteristic outburst, had disclosed inadvertently, "it may give me an opportunity of proving myself worthy of you. I've done nothing —nothing! Why should you love me?"

"You dear, stupid thing! Love isn't like that. You don't have to *do* things to be loved, don't you see?"

I saw, but I would not agree.

And so we fortified ourselves against the coming deprivation by much brave assertion that it would be only for a little while and that, between assignments, we would meet.

The Old Man, sitting at his desk at headquarters, bent an angry frown on me.

"I suppose you know what you're here for?" he snapped.

"I think I do."

"Well, I'm going to make you a clean-cut proposition that, if you're wise, you'll accept."

"I can't say, chief, until I know what it is."

He leaned forward, his eyes emphasizing his speech.

"You're too much with my daughter and she——" He stopped abruptly, a flood of angry red suffusing his face. "She is backing you up in it. Well, it's got to stop! I have my own plans, and I don't intend to have you butting in. Understand?"

"What is your proposition, chief?"

"This! You can choose between being restored to favor, your former status, cutting out this sentimental tomfoolery, or——" He paused to give his words full effect. "I'm going to send you against Bilbo. You and she can take your choice."

He sat back, regarding me expectantly.

"You're planning to have Smith marry her?" I asked. "Is that the arrangement?"

He turned dark red again. "It's none of your damn business! Well, yes, if you want to know. That is the arrangement."

I rose, saying as steadily as I could:

"Your proposition is impossible, sir. You leave me no alternative——"

He rose also, bellowing:

"Impossible! Then by the great——" He stopped sputtering. "Boy, are you crazy?"

"I don't know that I can make you understand, chief. It's simply this: I love Ruth and she loves me. That's all there is to it. You can't stop that. You might kill me, but you couldn't change us."

"It may mean that. You know all about Bilbo by now."

"Yes." This was worse than I thought. "Chief," I said miserably, "you can't change us. This will be hard on her."

He looked at me a long time, drumming on his desk. His expression softened a little.

"It won't be a forlorn hope. I'll see that you have a fighting chance."

This was all I wanted to know. I stretched out my hand and, somewhat to my surprise, he shook it.

As I turned to go out, he said:

"You're a young fool, Kennedy. Is there any chance you'll change your mind?"

"I couldn't."

"Well, I've given my word. I've given it to you, too, though."

"Thank you, chief." I went out.

He had given his word to Smith, of course. Smith was responsible for this. Smith—— I took hold of myself, figuratively, with both hands. Seeing red wouldn't help at this juncture.

CHAPTER XXVI.

WHINING BULLETS.

WHILE the plans for the drive against Bilbo were still under way, news came from our Cayo Grande agent that a large cargo of Cuban rum had been taken by Bilbo from a wrecked ship near Sombrero Key, brought ashore and secretly buried. There was a flavor in this exploit that reminded me of that incident, away back in the seventeenth century, when about fifteen Spanish galleons loaded with gold and silver were stranded on the Martyr Reefs. The Spanish wreckers were surprised and driven off by Captain Henry Jennings with a buccaneering expedition from Jamaica and something like three hundred thousand pieces of eight captured.

Bilbo's ingenuity, it appeared, had been exerted in a new direction. Happening on the scene in one of his largest two-masters, he had gone aboard the stranger representing himself as a wrecking master from Cayo Grande, exhibiting forged papers as credentials. To take the liquor ashore at Cayo Grande would mean having it promptly confiscated by the government, so Bilbo and the master of the wrecked vessel entered into an agreement for the wrecking schooner to stand by with the salvaged cargo and help the other ship, which was little damaged, get off the reef, running her anchors and performing other needful and customary services. After floating, the smuggler was to have her cargo reloaded, the weather and other conditions being propitious. The wrecking master and crew were to receive a handsome consideration for their services and all, in the language of the narrator, would be "hunky-dory."

The affair went off according to schedule until the stranger was afloat. Then Bilbo showed his teeth, told the other that he was lucky to have his vessel and suggested that he "sail on, sail on, sail on." This he did, there being no other course open; one enlightened look at Bilbo and his outfit probably convincing him that he would lose ship as well as cargo if he lingered.

Bilbo's schooner was too heavily laden for a trip up the coast, it was said, and, being en route to Cuba on business of his own, he decided to land his prize cargo on the keys and proceed. The landing was done at night, and it was there now, in its cache, the exact location having been ascertained by our

Cayo Grande secret service and reported to headquarters. Doubtless it would remain there until small vessels could come and get it, or until our crowd should see fit to appropriate it. It would be "a dead cinch," in the words of the report.

"Lake, I'm going to send you and Knowles," said the Old Man curtly. "Get ready."

The enterprise was little to my liking. It appeared to me to be putting ourselves on a level with Bilbo and I had the hardihood to say so.

"Nothing of the sort!" retorted the chief angrily. "It belongs to anybody. Go get it and keep your opinions to yourself!"

There was nothing for me to do but to "sail on," as Bilbo's latest victim had done. The *Shearwater* was soon made ready and we departed in mid-afternoon. Following the notice from the Old Man, I had had a snatched moment alone with Ruth, there in the main office—a swift embrace, a lingering exchange of glances that was more than had left her behind and was speeding words—and immediately, it seemed, I for the lower keys.

OUR Cayo Grande agent had brought his informant—a Cuban, dark, active. On the way down, the agent went over the details with Captain Knowles and myself. The stuff, it appeared, was buried in a mud bank almost surrounded by mangroves and covered at each high tide so that no footprints would betray it. It would be necessary for us to work on a falling tide if we were to dig it out.

"Does he know it's there, personally?" inquired Knowles, looking at the Cuban. "He knows the exact spot? Ask him."

"The agent turned to his informant. *"Estas bien seguro de eso, Felipe?"*

"Seguro!" replied the other animatedly. *"Esta enterrado en el fango cerca del arroyo. Es como dinero encontrado!"*

The agent turned to us with a smile on his saturnine countenance.

"He says it's buried in the mud near the creek. That it's easy money."

"Seguro!" added Felipe excitedly, finishing in English: "Cinch!"

"That's good enough," responded Knowles, ending the conversation.

WE anchored off Boca Chica a little after midnight, but it began to rain and to blow so that landing was postponed. About eight o'clock next morning, the weather having moderated and the tide being about right, we went ashore in force. The *Shearwater's* tender went ahead, with a machine gun mounted forward, towing three large boats wide in the beam, with most of the seats removed, intended for just this sort of work. We carried a full supply of light digging instruments.

A distinct channel stretched shoreward as the water shoaled, running straight into the mouth of a small creek almost masked by a heavy growth of mangroves. On the higher ground, coco palms waved and, under those to the right, two small, apparently abandoned houses appeared. We stopped and reconnoitered. There were plenty of footprints visible in the sand under the trees where last night's weather had not obliterated them, but the houses were empty, mere shells that the wind whistled through.

We left two men on the beach as sentries, with orders to fire three shots in rapid succession in the event any vessel approached or there was other sign of interference. Then we wound our way up the creek, sliding along in clear green water, almost overhung in places by the mangroves. A big crane, disturbed at his breakfast, squawked angrily and took himself off with slow, disgusted wing beats. Silence settled down as the engine was stopped and

the purling sound at the bows died away.

"I don't like the looks of this," muttered Knowles, to me. "Fine place for ambush here. I don't like so much woods."

Felipe stood up, pointing to a slight break in the bush screen on the south shore. We disembarked, the agent and the Cuban leading the way, and waded through the light-gray mud into a sort of bay, the bottom of which had just been left uncovered by the falling tide. Our guide halted, with the rest of us, laden with guns, ammunition, shovels, around him in an expectant circle.

"Right here," he said.

"Go to it, boys! You've got a job ahead of you. Better begin at the center," directed the agent.

I caught sight of a printed label, or circular of some sort, among the spraddling roots and retrieved it. "'Macardi,'" I read aloud. *"Llamado ron Macardi."* I halted, noticing that it told all about the product in English and French, as well as Spanish. "This is the first time we've handled this," I said, after a brief perusal.

"Yes, but it won't be the last," laughed the agent, just as a pleased exclamation from one of the diggers announced that he had struck something.

Necks were craned and the shovels were plied with renewed vigor.

All this froze into immobility as three shots sounded on the beach. Our guide made a dash for the bushes. The agent snatched out his pistol, yelling, "You damn double crosser!" and fired twice at the retreating back.

"Me han matado!" shrieked the Cuban. "They've killed me! *Madre Mia!"* Then he lay still where he had fallen.

An appalling volley crashed out from the encircling woods then and our men went down in every direction.

"Get into the bushes and lie down!" I yelled. "Get into the bushes——"

Several more pitched or collapsed into the mud before we survivors reached cover, where we were on something like equal terms with the enemy. Then ensued a hot exchange of rifle and pistol and trench-gun fire. Here and there we could glimpse a figure, but it was mostly a matter, now, of firing at their flashes and they fired at ours. Our machine gun was silent and I knew without looking that the men in charge of it had gone down at that first deadly volley. A groan or two came out of that snare of death behind me, but we had the satisfaction of knowing, from outcries among the inclosing forces, that we were taking toll.

But it could not last. We were outnumbered and being picked off one by one. Only four or five of us were firing and our ammunition was giving out. Bullets whined viciously above me, as I lay there among the roots, and once I was nearly blinded by flying splinters.

The firing died down. Not far away a raging voice shouted:

"Don'a spare one! Stamp 'em in the mud!"

This must be Bilbo. Remembering the fate of the men of the *Stingaree,* I resolved to feign death. I had several more cartridges in my .45 and, though I could scarcely see, I emptied the magazine in the direction of that voice and flattened down.

Knowles, lying near by, was cursing in a low tone. "Don't spare one, eh? I know you!"

Men were approaching cautiously, shooting at any movement of our wounded. Hearing Knowles move suddenly, I watched with tortured eyes what ensued. He had snatched up a trench gun with its long bayonet and, with a roar, suddenly charged the man ahead. I caught a glimpse of a long revolver barrel and a flash—and poor Knowles went down without another sound.

"Got him!" laughed the same sneering voice.

I felt that my time had come. Ruth was my one thought, as I waited there, helpless. "God bless and keep her!" I repeated it over and over in anguished realization of what this day would mean to her. And all around me Bilbo and his men were finishing their work.

Heavy feet came by my head and stopped. I was turned over suddenly and heard a gasped "Ken!"

I forced my eyes open, recognized Buck and sat up, when he swung his fist viciously against my jaw and I knew nothing further.

CHAPTER XXVII.

BILBO'S OFFER.

I LAY in the dark, ill-smelling hold, sick at heart. My head still ached from that terrific jolt that had put me to sleep and I was altogether wretched. That nightmare massacre back there in the mangroves—would I ever be able to push it to the back of my mind, keep my thoughts from dwelling on its ghastly details?

Buck had saved me, I realized, by that swift blow. But how had he kept them off afterward? All I remembered was regaining consciousness in a boat packed with men who were shouting and singing and reeking of rum. I was crammed into the bow, with Buck's broad back shutting out most of the view that my still-inflamed, painful eyes might have had. I must have groaned as I came to, for he turned suddenly and gave me a warning look. I subsided promptly. Then I had been hoisted roughly over the rail of a strange schooner and, as I landed on her deck, Buck gave me a shove, exclaiming: "Get for'ard there! You'll learn some sense after a while, with the right bunch." Then he had escorted me to this hole, with a muttered word of encouragement.

WELL, here I was, now, in the clutches of Bilbo, no doubt about it, this time.

A strip of light appeared overhead as the hatch opened. A moment later Buck was wringing my hand.

"Wait a minute!" I exclaimed. "First, you knock my block off, then you come along and ruin a perfectly good right mitten!"

"Say, but I'm glad to hear you talk like that! I thought once back there you were a goner."

"So did I! Don't go away, Buck. How did it happen? Was it a frame-up? We walked into a trap, didn't we?"

"A trap, yes; not a frame-up. Your agent didn't double cross you. He's gone west with the others, out to sea," he said soberly. "Bilbo had one of our bunch to spill the beans for your agent's benefit. He swallowed it, bait, hook and sinker, poor fellow!"

"Where was your ship?"

"Several miles to the south. We were already ashore, waiting, and the schooner came up as soon as it was certain you were all in the trap."

"How about our two sentries? Did they get away?"

"Yes. But the guard on the *Shearwater* was cleaned up. Bilbo's thorough, you know. Isn't it horrible!"

"He can't go on indefinitely," I said passionately. "He'll get his!"

"Yes, he'll get his."

"Why don't you fellows cut it, Buck?"

"Well," he said slowly, "it's Red. He thinks it's a great life. Can't shake him loose. And Bud won't quit unless we do. Besides," he added, "there's you, now."

"Me!" I slumped back with a groan.

"Say, Ken," he said, his earnestness vibrant in every syllable, "we've got to handle this thing right, if you're to keep a whole skin!"

"You mean——"

"I mean that that gang won't care what they do to you, if they get the idea that you're for the other camp. We've got to make them believe you're coming in with us."

"I won't come in! Not with Bilbo!"

"Well, make believe, then, until you get a chance to escape."

"Make believe! That's a large order, Buck. I'd as soon hobnob with the devil himself!"

"That's about what it means," he remarked glumly.

"Tell me this, Buck," I said, as an afterthought seized me. "That rum we heard so much about—it wasn't there?"

"Certainly it was there. Macardi, taken from a wrecked vessel. Half a million dollars' worth, market value."

"And Bilbo figured he'd use it to club our chief over the head?"

"That's it. Your *Shearwater* and our schooner, together, handled it fine. We're taking it away now."

"I can see why the Old Man hates Bilbo as he does," I said. "Buck, after this, there's nothing he won't do to Bilbo if he gets the chance!"

"I guess not," he replied. "That is, if he doesn't get put out of business first!"

He got up.

"Remember what I say. Swagger round a bit like a tough one and let on that you're sick of the other crowd and want a change."

Bilbo's headquarters was in a weather-beaten, two-story frame cottage on the largest island in his section, the one appropriated from old Mac. After lying in the stuffy hold all night, with the waves pounding against my head apparently, for it was stormy and we were riding deep, I had come to the conclusion that the only course open to me was to follow Buck's lead. I was glad beyond words that he was with me now, as we went up the steps to the "office."

Who should come out of the door then, but Bud! He rushed to me and grabbed me by the arms, then slapped me on the back, crying:

"Old Blake! Here's old Blake, who fell overboard because he couldn't get shut of us any other way. Glad you're with us again, old man."

Some of this I perceived was acted and the reason was plainly evident. There was a crowd there in the office and some of them were already in the doorway, glowering at me.

I looked back at Bud. His eyes looked larger and darker than when I had last seen him and he was thinner. He smiled at me.

"Red told us all about meeting you in Bay City," he said, raising his voice.

"Where's Red?" I inquired.

"In Cayo Grande. Be there several days yet, I guess."

"Come on," Buck muttered, as some one in the office called out:

"All right, there! Bring in your prisoner."

IT was an evil-looking lot that I was steered past. They eyed me with unpleasant grins and exchanged uncomplimentary remarks about me that made my ears burn.

I was ushered into an inner office where two men were in a noisy discussion and I instantly knew which was Bilbo. I knew him, not so much from his costume that had already been described to me, not from any impressiveness of stature—he was wiry and well set up, though not of commanding figure—but, as he turned and looked at me, I recognized his eyes. I turned a little cold, sensing something not entirely natural in this embodiment of evil before me. It was an eerie experience, as if the man were possessed of a devil. I had heard this expression applied to people; once or twice I had known those to whom I thought it might apply. It fitted Bilbo.

He reverted to his discussion, but in

that first swift scrutiny I had obtained verification of all that I had heard and known about this man. No swashbuckling pirate in a cocked hat beneath a flaunting Jolly Roger would have impressed me more than this flashy exponent of the modern version. His coat was off and I saw the two long-barreled revolvers for which he was infamous, one on each thigh. I noticed, too, that his hands never strayed far from those checkered butts, that his right particularly retained a poised, clutching appearance, as if about to snatch forth one of those death-spitting instruments. This was Bilbo, "two-gun" man, born killer, the smuggler and pirate whom I had heard about from the first day of my landing in these parts.

"Well, it's going to be done that way, Jack," he was saying to the other man, a powerfully built, reckless-looking young fellow in khaki and blue denim with a cap on the back of his blond head. "Hop to it!"

Jack saluted with a grin, glanced at me without interest and went out, whistling. I gathered that he was rather a favorite with his chief.

Bilbo sat down and turned to me, his eyes narrowing a little.

"Well, here you are!" he sneered. "I've heard about you. Quite a hell-popping young lizard, ain't you!"

I did not know what to reply to this.

Buck spoke up.

"He's coming in with us, chief."

"Oho! Seen the error of his ways, has he?" He sat there, looking me up and down, with a half smile on his deeply lined, saturnine face. Then he began firing at me a long series of questions having to do with the Old Man; his state of mind when he heard of the loss of the *Stingaree;* his present means of offense and defense and so on. It occurred to me at the start that he was probably checking my replies with other sources of information, so I answered truthfully, cursing my luck as I did so.

"He has a very charming daughter, I believe," he said, at length. "You know her, doubtless."

I stared at him and swallowed hard.

"Yes."

"Charming girl. I met her once. Ha! you needn't glare your eyes out! Met her in New York. I was going by my New York name. Proud? High and mighty? H'm—no name for it! Probably would have acted different, if she'd known it was Bilbo she was snubbing.

"Well, it's in her power, or her father's, I should say," he continued, "to put an end to this little feud. Since he fetched this latest cropper, I've sent him word that we'll call it off if he'll give me Ruth, is that her name? I've been thinking of marrying for some time."

"He'll never do it!" I blazed.

The ugly glare returned to his eyes.

"He won't, eh?" he snarled. "You don't think he's had enough by now? Looks to me as if he'd realize his foolishness, as you say you have."

"You forget," I said slowly, "that she's his daughter, his only child. He'll never do it."

"He won't forget," he retorted, "that I'm his enemy. Don't you think he might rather consider me in the light of son-in-law, huh? Make it a family business, sort of? The combination would be unbeatable!" His eyes glittered. "That's something for him to think of, huh? Success instead of failure, huh?" He lighted a veteran brier and puffed rapidly.

"He'll never do it," I said evenly.

"Can't you see it that way yourself?"

"Yes, I see it. But he'll never do it."

HE smoked in silence for some time, regarding me speculatively.

I gazed back at him, striving to conceal my thoughts.

"He's sworn to put me out of business," Bilbo said, at length, complacently. "It seems to be working the other way. If he doesn't agree to my proposition, I'll put him out of business for keeps. I have a little plan in mind. I can use you in it. A little coöperation behind the lines—if I let you go back—clipping telephone wires at the proper time, creating a little confusion. You could do it swell! You could do some great work there for us."

I was treed, but strove to hide the fact while trying to whip my brain into activity.

"Well," he said impatiently, "do you want to show your mettle?"

"Tell me this," I said in desperation. "If I should agree to go back, what assurance have you that I would stick to the bargain?"

He threw his head back and laughed loudly.

"Several of 'em and first-rate ones, too. For instance, you don't enjoy the thought of being found dead in your bunk some morning, with a knife hole between your ribs and the sign of the double cross carved on your forehead, do you?"

I stared at him.

"No," he went on smoothly. "That wouldn't be a satisfactory experience for a healthy youngster like you."

There was an empty chair back of me. I sat down.

"Well?" he barked. "Lost your tongue? I begin to have my doubts of——"

"I might consider going on parole," I said, with a gleam of hope. "I'd take oath not to fight against you any longer. My three chums are with you and we've come near killing each other several times——"

"I don't parole!" he broke in savagely. "You're either with me or against me. Do you accept my proposition?"

"No," I said, with set teeth.

"All right! We'll put you on hardtack and rain water, in a hole in the wall, until you think better of it. Take him to the lockup!"

Bud was standing by the door, pale and wide-eyed. He and Buck started out with me, but one of the roughnecks in the outer office elbowed him off and added himself to my personal bodyguard.

"A little too thick," he said insolently. "This three-friends business don't set right wi' me."

Hard-looking men and women eyed me malevolently as I passed down the narrow, crooked street, littered with paper and other trash. Back-yard piles of empty tin cans tainted the air and drew swarms of flies.

Here I was, finally, in the nest of this terrible criminal. It was as utterly sordid as I had been led to believe and, to the last degree, sinister.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

RAGING FLAMES.

IN that dark little cubby-hole to which Bilbo had sentenced me, I appreciated for the first time how hell, in the twinkling of an eye, can visit us here on earth. It would have been a relief to walk up and down, but my cramped quarters denied even that. I was in a room just long enough to lie down in on the floor and not quite as wide. It was an interior room, too, for the narrow window, high up, covered with an iron grating, that I had noticed, when my door opened to admit the fare prescribed by Bilbo, admitted no light and very little air.

Of all the fantastic twists and turns that Fate might plan with malevolent ingenuity—and I had long since come to believe that anything could happen in these isolated lairs—that proposed by Bilbo was probably the last that would have occurred to my imagina-

tion. Not for an instant did I think that the Old Man would consent to such an arrangement, but Bilbo had an uncanny way of accomplishing his purposes. He was a savage, utterly unscrupulous man. And he had looked at me very confidently when he spoke of moving on our settlement.

Then there was Smith. He was mad about Ruth. In the event Bilbo should acquire enough force to storm our island, Smith, I felt, would save her, by some means—by airplane most probably.

My former feeling toward the Old Man, Smith, virtually all in our community, had undergone a transformation. In the face of the reality of Bilbo and his menace, they had become, with all their sins and shortcomings, "my people." I was surprised, as I realized now, how many friends I had among them. And the chief—my attitude toward him was almost filial. He was a big man, in spite of his blindness, his pride and self-sufficiency. And I had attained a curious respect for the first lieutenant; almost liking, it might have been.

Counting the passage of time by the appearance of my meals, three days of confinement went by. On the night of the third, I was awakened by a heavy detonation, not far away. It was followed immediately by another and a flare of light appeared in the narrow space under my door. I heard shouts, muffled by walls and distance; a stunning series of explosions that made the building rock; the rattle of rifle and machine-gun fire. The air was permeated with the organlike, symphonic diapason of a number of airplanes, the unforgetable musical accompaniment of an attack by air.

I sprang up, a wave of excitement prickling and tingling to my scalp. Was it a government force, or ours? It was ours; the answer was instant, as I thought of the boundless fury of our chief by this time. This was his retaliation.

The suffocating smoke of burning pine became noticeable and I saw with horror a red, flickering light slowly growing in the strip under the door and in the interstices of the grating. I hurled myself madly against the door, beating it with my fists, kicking it, shouting at the top of my voice. It was useless in that terrific din, but I kept frenziedly at it as the air thickened and grew warm.

The door flung open, letting in a great wave of sound, and, as I caught myself up from falling, I saw Buck silhouetted against the glare. He grabbed my arm and we rushed out, seeking shelter under a small tree.

Houses and tents, even trees in places, were afire and it was light as day. The planes had ceased dropping incendiary bombs, either because the supply was exhausted or because no more were necessary; but they were still circling up there, swooping down with bursts of machine-gun fire. Occasionally this was varied by high explosive that tore up the ground with a thudding *boom,* sending debris flying in every direction. When a building was struck, it vanished in a cloud of smoke and splinters.

Men were lying here and there, most of them motionless. Others, under trees and shrubs, were shooting incessantly at those vengeful birds of prey that seemed tireless in their work of destruction. But even as I looked, one of them pitched downward, crashing into a big gumbo-limbo tree and swinging over on one broken wing. Its crew struggled free, firing right and left, but were shot down almost immediately.

And then as suddenly as it had burst, the raid was over. The exultant symphony died into a drone and, except for a scattering shot or two and the crackle of flames, comparative quiet ensued.

IT was like an ant heap that has been crushed. From every conceivable place of cover, men rushed or crawled out and a babel of commands, shouts, curses followed as they devoted their attention to the fires that were raging in every direction.

"Get over there," shouted the young fellow called Jack, "and help save the planes!" He hurried thither and we after him.

A long shed under a row of coco palms was burning fiercely at one end anl men were hard at work with fire extinguishers and buckets of water, while others were trundling the planes into the open. We joined a bucket brigade and, as I glanced around at the fire fiend's raging in this settlement, I thought of the Old Man's splendidly efficient fire department and of what it would do in a situation like this.

Bud came up and joined us and we toiled on.

"I hoped Buck would get to you in time," he panted. "Isn't this an inferno!"

At that moment Bilbo rushed up, in a demoniacal rage.

"Why didn't you tell me they were planning this?" he yelled, at me, with a string of oaths. His right hand darted down and whipped out one of those six-shooters.

"Don't!" screamed Bud. "How could he tell!"

It was no accident. Bud had come between and Bilbo could have avoided him, as he was larger and more active. Instead, he turned the weapon on poor Bud and fired. There was a bull's bellow from Buck as Bud fell and, before I could move, he had swung an empty bucket with terrific force against the side of the murderer's head. Bilbo went down and out and Buck and I made for him; but men were all around us now. They flung themselves on us with kicks and blows and curses. Fighting madly, we were crushed into the dust and would probably have been beaten to death then and there had not some one in authority intervened.

Bruised and bleeding, gasping for breath, hardly able to stand on our feet, Buck and I were hustled away and thrust into a shack some distance off and locked in there.

"You'll get yours," snarled one of the gang who brought us here, "soon as Bilbo can get to it!"

"Why didn't I finish him!" groaned Buck. "I gave him the round of the bucket instead of the edge. Poor Bud! Poor Bud!" He stamped heavily on the ground. "If I can only get my hands on that devil before I die! If I can only get my hands on him!"

"Buck, old man," I said shakily, "this won't help any. We've got to plan to get out of here, if we're to get Bilbo. I'm with you in that. But we've got to get at him first."

"Yes, yes! We've got to do that. But Bud—poor little Bud!" He gave way to tears.

CHAPTER XXIX.

LOCKED IN.

THOUGH our prison was not a pleasant place, it was infinitely better than the cell in the jail building, now lying in ashes. The floor was made of rough, wide planks and we thought it possible to pry up a couple of these and dig out from under the low-lying hut.

I had never seen the Big Swede like this before—silent for the most part, with now and then a deep sigh. He worked methodically, but I knew where his thoughts were.

First we tried the windows, but they had been nailed on the outside with heavy boards across them. Nothing but a battering-ram would do here, or against the door. There was no article in the room that could be utilized as a lever, so we inspected carefully the junction of walls and ceiling, all

around; what appeared to be weak places in the walls; and all of the floor. Finally we found a floor plank that was loose at one end and this we forced up. Some of the nails, however, drew with a protesting squawk and our jailer hurriedly opened the door.

He saw at a glance what we had been doing.

"All right," he said, with an ugly grin, "try it if you wanter. Me and my mate, at the back there, has orders to shoot if you tries anything. We don't wanter spoil things for the boss, if we can help it, though!" He slapped his hand on the gat hanging at his belt, looked from one to the other of us and shut the door again.

Several days of this mournful existence went by, on a diet of hard-tack and water. Any food then, however, would have been as hard-tack. We wondered dully why Bilbo did not come or send for us and have it over with. We scarcely dared hope to be able to "get" him, but we might force him to kill us, if this step appeared advisable.

"Ken," said the Big Swede heavily, one night, "I'm tired of this. I'm going to knock that guard stiff the next time he opens the door. His mate's at the back and, if he comes, we'll use this fellow's gun on him."

"I'm with you," I agreed. "It's our only chance. As you swing on him, I'll grab his gat."

Dinner had been served at about four o'clock and, as there was little chance of a visit from the jailer now, after ten, we settled down for the night.

We sat up suddenly a little later, hearing voices outside and a laugh now and then. We concluded that our guards were getting together to share some liquid cheer. The voices ceased after a little and we had dropped off to sleep again when there came a fumbling at the lock. Instantly we were on our feet. A dim light shone through the cracks in and around the door.

The man outside was clumsy with the lock and muttered under his breath. We waited, ready and set.

The door opened, but slowly, and an unmistakably cockney voice said in a low tone:

"All right, mates. Ready to travel?"

I gave a light snore in answer to this and the door opened a little wider. The man was small, but that was all we could distinguish about him. He advanced the lantern and Buck grabbed him by the wrist and, with a tremendous jerk, brought him flying into the room, flung one arm around him and clapped a hand over his mouth, while I extracted his gun and poked it into his middle. So far, so good!

OUR captive twisted and squirmed, but only a low, inarticulate murmur came through Buck's hand.

"Shut up!" the Big Swede ordered angrily, "or I'll knock your bean off for you!"

The wriggling and attempted articulation stopped.

"What's the situation outside?" demanded my companion in a whisper, standing with doubled fist ready. "Anybody up?"

"Not that I know of," came in a whimper. "This is a 'ell of a way to treat a fella w'ut's tryin' to do y' a good turn!"

"What do you mean—a good turn?" demanded Buck. "Pick up that lamp and light it!"

The door was wide open and everything appeared to be quiet. As the lantern light came up, I closed the door and we turned our attention to our young prisoner. He sat there on the floor, a woebegone object, if there ever was one.

"How long have you been doing guard duty, Tom?" asked Buck in some surprise.

"Ain't doin' no guard dooty," came the sulky response. "Come around 'ere

to 'elp you fellers out and this is w'ut I gets! 'Ell of a note!"

"Come on!" said Buck impatiently. "Help us out? Stop your kidding!"

"It's the truth, believe it or not. The fellers was doin' guard dooty's dead drunk; that's 'ow."

"What's behind all this?" I demanded. "Why do you want to help us?"

"Bud," he said sniveling. "That damn Bilbo killed my pardner. Croaked 'im for nothin'!"

I looked at Buck and Buck at me.

"Bilbo!" said he slowly, with a break in his voice. "So you want to help us get away, to get even with him?" He said to me, looking away: "Tom and Bud were chums, ever since Bud nursed him through a bad case of flu."

"Wanta get away m'self," added Tom. "Sick of this d-damn life. I'd croak 'im before I go," he went on, slapping his empty holster, "only he's gone a'ready."

"Gone!" exclaimed Buck and I together.

Tom nodded.

"Gone to Cayo Grande to tellygraph. 'E's bringin' men in an' swears 'e's gointer wipe out the outfit north of 'ere. Says 'e'll make it gettin' even once an' for the las' time. 'E'll do it, too, if they don't watch out!"

"How long's he been gone?" I demanded, with a sickening twinge of apprehension.

"The mornin' follerin' the raid, when they blowed us to 'ell, almost."

"I wish those planes had all burned up," I groaned. "Buck, I've got to get out of here. You think his gang will follow him on as big a job as that will be?"

"He'll feed 'em up on rum," Buck said soberly. "They'd go through Hades itself then."

"Don't let's hang around this place any longer, Buck," I said; "we're wasting time."

"Let's go," he replied, and stopped short. When I saw the expression of his face, I understood.

"Don't 'ang back for no funeral," said Tom, sticking his fists in his eyes. "They throwed 'im in one o' the burnin' 'ouses."

Buck turned away.

"Got a boat?" I asked the young Bahaman.

"Fast launch. Run ya up to your place in three or four hours, wi' the weather like this."

"Come on, then."

We extinguished the lantern, locked the door behind us and Tom replaced the key in the jailer's pocket.

"You won't be missed until the mornin'," he whispered, "and you'll be out o' reach then."

DAYLIGHT was breaking when Tom shut down the engine and announced that we had reached Green Turtle Point and the Big Pass was just ahead.

"Buck," I said, putting into words what I had been turning over in my mind for the past hour, "I don't want you to come. S'pose you go on down to Cayo Grande and see what you can do with Red."

"You don't suppose I'm going to leave you, do you?" he asked roughly.

"Listen, old man," I pleaded, putting an arm over his shoulders, "we owe it to Bud. He wouldn't quit until the rest of us did. I can't—yet. You know why." I had, in our confinement together, told him something of the situation, of Ruth, her father, Smith, my relations with each of them.

"Can't help it, Ken," he said doggedly.

"Buck," I said, in desperation, "this is hell for me. I got you fellows into this mess. I feel under obligations to —to poor Bud, to get you out of it. I must. There's no telling what will take place in yonder, but this part of it's

my affair. You won't help; you'll only make it that much harder. I'll have you on my mind in addition to everything else."

"Can't help it," he returned. "It would be quitting you."

"We owe it to Bud to quit, Buck, as fast as we can. You go and get hold of Red; that will make two out of it. Besides, you and Tom couldn't come ashore here. The temper of these people by now—— Don't you see what will probably happen when you're recognized, as you surely will be?"

"Y'r damn right!" piped up Tom, who was listening in. "I'm not goin' ashore. I'm goin' on down. You better come, too!"

"No," responded Buck.

"Well," I said, rising, "I'm on my own stamping ground now. All I've got to do is inform our outpost that you're undesirable—not dangerous, but undesirable. That will be sufficient. They'll run you off! Speed 'er up, Tom."

We turned out of the troughs, in which we had been rolling along, and plowed in through the Big Pass.

"Another thing," I reminded Buck. "Bilbo's still in Cayo Grande, probably."

" 'Ee's *my* meat!" snarled little Tom venomously. He patted the gat, now restored to its place in his holster. " 'E's *my* meat!"

"Don't you see," I said to Buck, "between the two of you, you can mess him up one way or another and probably settle the whole question?"

"All right," said Buck at last grimly.

CHAPTER XXX.

READY FOR A FIGHT.

THE place where I came ashore was the beginning of a long, narrow channel leading directly into the heart of our colony. There was an outpost here, armed with machine guns, and several men were on duty, day and night. Here I hoped to find Watkins, as he had been stationed here in charge for some time. I did not know the password, so began shouting Watkins' name as we slid along with the flood tide and engine shut off. To my great relief he answered, recognizing my voice.

I shook hands with Tom, then with Buck, who wrung my hand and wrung it again.

"Good luck," I said.

"Good luck," he replied, in a low tone. "If we don't get Bilbo, I'll be back for him!"

They disappeared in the darkness.

I waded ashore and Watkins came out on the beach to greet me. He was delighted beyond measure and nearly knocked the breath out of me with a slap between the shoulders.

"We thought you was finished!"

"How's Miss Ruth?" I asked eagerly.

"All cut up," he said. "Terribly cut up. So's everybody. I s'pose you know about the comeback we visited on Bilbo?"

"I should say I do!"

"Come on an' tell us about it while we're waitin' to 'ear from 'eadquarters."

Watkins' telephone message brought an immediate response; the chief was coming in person for me, in the *Wildcat.*

" 'E'll be 'ere in no time," said Watkins. "That boat sure does travel on the straightaways and, if it wasn't for the turns, it 'u'd be all straightaways."

While waiting, I related all that had happened to a circle of listeners who hung on every syllable, with now and then a smothered exclamation.

We heard the *Wildcat* long before she arrived. The chief was the first ashore and he came forward with both hands extended.

"I did the best I could," I said.

"It's all right," he said shortly. "Tell me about it, later. What I'm most anxious to know is how much damage did we do 'em? That was some raid Smith pulled off, eh?"

"It certainly was!" I agreed. "I was the innocent bystander."

Then I gave details. He frowned when I mentioned the approximate number of planes that Bilbo had saved.

"Sorry to hear that."

"It was one in the solar plexus, though, chief. Too bad you didn't quite stage a knock-out."

"Yes. Come, get aboard. I know something of what he's doing at Cayo Grande and up the Atlantic coast. Well, I can bring in some more gunmen myself. And I've installed a system of powerful searchlights that will make him keep pretty high up with what's left of his air navy."

"How's Ruth?" I inquired irrelevantly.

"Ruth? Well, I'm glad you're back. There's no doing anything with that girl." He cleared his throat. "I haven't changed, you understand."

Speeding up in the straightaways, we were soon at Headquarters Island, going up the creek into the lagoon where the *Immokalee* lay anchored. Ruth was standing on the deck.

"You may go aboard for a minute or two before reporting at headquarters," said the chief ponderously. He looked at his watch. "Be up there in fifteen minutes."

"Right," I responded, swinging off and up the house boat's ladder.

"Ruth," I said. Then we were folded in each other's arms.

After a time, I remembered. I had to report at headquarters and left her. I had to make a more detailed report to the chief and there were many things to be done to prepare for Bilbo's next move.

I found our whole community fearful, apprehensive. I have seen men in seaports, when a hurricane was predicted, stepping outside and anxiously scanning the heavens, the sea, then coming in to "look at the glass," waiting a little while, repeating the performance. Of course, there are preparations—battening down skylights, securely fastening all windows and doors, propping trees, securing windmills and floating property. The business of safeguarding helps relieve the tension of waiting, which would otherwise be almost unendurable.

I THOUGHT of all these things as we toiled in the next few days, propping here, securing there, improving something else that, when it was first done, appeared to admit of no improvement. This work relieved our minds and hearts and we were silently thankful for it.

The news of the terrible damage inflicted on Bilbo's settlement by our raid had, of course, gone abroad. All of our people were well aware that what we had done to him, he would try to do to us, with something over for good measure. So no stone was left unturned, no defensive measure overlooked. Smith worked night and day with his air squadron and was ready to take the air on short notice at any hour of the twenty-four. He and I were, for the first time, on good terms. Suggestions from one to the other were willingly heard, often followed.

This same spirit was in evidence everywhere. Much hard feeling had appeared of late; many enmities had sprung up in the division which old Mac had brought about. These differences were healed now, or at any rate forgotten. There was very little quarreling or lawlessness, but a number of desertions. The latter, however, were more than replaced by the new men imported by the chief.

My time was spent principally between drilling some of the new men and

throwing up additional earthworks. We made rapid progress at this, as, unlike the structure of the lower keys—largely plate rock—ours was sand and shell. At one point, where there was a prehistoric shell mound overlooking a little bay that would make an excellent landing place, I constructed a masked battery of machine guns. While we were at it, young Curry, one of my assistants, laughed and said:

"There's skeletons in these mounds, they say. There'll be more, if Bilbo's fool enough!"

Back of headquarters, in a little clump of trees, I built a bombproof and called Ruth's attention, and her father's, to it. I was glad to hear him insisting on her remaining there during a raid. She finally gave her promise to both of us.

Other shelters were constructed in the woods for the sick, the women and children.

Reports came in daily, almost hourly, of Bilbo and his activities. One day he would be reported as returned to his lair, then a rumor would come that he was in the Bahamas, next we would hear that he had disappeared entirely. Our scout planes reported greatly increased activity in the islands south of us and a number of strange sail were observed. A swift raid by Smith, with three bombers, disposed of several of these, it having been ascertained definitely that they were the enemy's.

Up and down the coast, for a distance of sixty miles, there was taking place a voluntary double mobilization, as it came to be realized that the trouble between the two chieftains was coming to a head. To the southward drifted the ruffian element, who scorned our chief and his "highbrow" methods and were looking forward hungrily to the prospects of a rich plunder, if our defenses were once broken down. Our community, on the other hand, drew to it men of the better element; men who had been helped by this administration or who favored it because of its policies as contrasted to those of Bilbo. Many of them had been wronged by him in one way or another. There was not one in these regions who had suffered at Bilbo's hands who by this time was not supporting us directly or otherwise. Feeling ran high. More than one household was disrupted, brother to take up arms against brother, father against son. It was, in a peculiar sense, the gathering of the clans.

CHAPTER XXXI.

WITHOUT MERCY.

AS expected, the attack came at night. We received ample warning from our lookouts, who reported rockets to the southward. A watchtower of skeleton steel had been erected on the common and, hearing the first booming notes of the great gong suspended there, I rushed out and ascended the narrow ladder. I was informed at once that the telephone was dead; not a single one of our outposts could be raised, not a single warning came in over it. Undoubtedly the wires had been clipped.

To forestall such a contingency, our outguard posts had all been liberally supplied with giant rockets and smoke bombs. Fog being virtually unknown in this region, these appliances would give ample warning in the absence of telephone connections.

Far down the coast, the watchman told me, the first rocket had ascended, then others nearer. As I looked, from the spot where Watkins' station was, directly in the enemy's path, rose a graceful, slender line of fire, mounting higher and higher, bursting at last in a brilliant cluster of stars. Something clutched at my throat. Was that message, traced there in fire against the southern sky, for us a handwriting on the wall, destiny's warning directed to our incredulous chief?

But there was a more immediate meaning. Enemy planes were on the way and already the sounding board of the sky told of their approach. Dazzling circles of light flashed from the ground, shooting their long white fingers into the heavens. I descended hastily and found my men all at their posts and ready.

Long lines of hose stretched in every direction, for use at a second's notice. There was much hurrying to and fro, but no panic, no confusion. Here, I thought, was where efficiency, discipline, came into their own.

I was disturbed then to note that some one had taken a leaf from Bilbo's book and had put a plentiful supply of liquor in circulation.

"Hey, there!" I shouted at one fellow, with his arms full of bottles. "We don't need any Dutch courage!"

"No," he returned with a laugh; "Scotch and Irish!" He ran on.

"Viva, Cuba libre!" whooped another, waving a flask in the air. "Hooray for Macardi, too!"

There was no time to attend to this. Already the stunning shocks of bombs shook the earth and air. I dashed to the bombproof and found Ruth within it. Here there was comparative quiet.

"Ruth," I said, "anything may happen. Have you——"

"I have," she said, exhibiting an automatic pistol, of large enough caliber. "I could hit the bull's-eye with it before you taught me to shoot a big gun."

"Put out this light," I instructed, "and, if anybody comes in, turn your flash light on him."

Then I was out again, into a pandemonium of explosions, crackle of rifles and machine guns, blending in a roar.

A DESPERATE battle was in progress in the air, for at the alarm Smith and his air fleet had taken off. But this did not prevent the dropping of bombs and the incendiary projectiles soon had everything brilliantly illuminated. And now came our first disaster.

One of Bilbo's planes had sacrificed itself to bomb our water tanks.

"No water!" shouted one of the firemen, rushing past me to headquarters. "No water!"

The flames were already spreading.

Old Mac was standing at the door of his tent, chanting:

"'For behold, the Lord will come with fire and with his chariots like a whirlwind, to render his anger with fury and his rebuke with flames of fire!'"

I called to him, but he did not heed. Louder he cried:

"'Thrust in thy sharp sickle and gather the clusters of the vine of the earth; for here grapes are fully ripe!'"

"Come on!" I shouted angrily, taking him by the arm. "It's the devil, this time!"

He looked at me strangely, as if seeing me for the first time.

"Yes," he nodded, "I'll have to get a bucket and help."

I assisted the fire chief to establish bucket lines from the creek and, as I ran by headquarters again, one of our planes fell with a crash near by. It burst into flames before our eyes.

Small chemical appliances and extinguishers were at work and, with the bucket brigades, availed to some extent. But a wind was fanning the flames. The scenes that I had witnessed in Bilbo's village were being reenacted in ours.

A heavy volume of firing and loud shouts to the northward took me there. The enemy had landed and were advancing in force. Our men, behind breastworks for the most part, had a tremendous advantage, and mowed down these "shock troops" of Bilbo's, shouting to them to come on and fight.

Word came that headquarters was in flames. I remounted my motor cycle

and hurried thither to find the chief coming out with his arms full of files.

"Put 'em in the bombproof!" I yelled, and dashed in the direction of the wharves.

Here there was great confusion. Vessels, warehouses, were beginning to burn and severe fighting was taking place. Bilbo, I realized, had staged a simultaneous assault on our island from all directions. He would take it by storm!

Machine guns mounted to sweep the wharves and streets were keeping the enemy back at present. But was it only to dam them up until they would burst irresistibly into and over us? They seemed to be thickening.

I looked to the supply of ammunition here, found it satisfactory, and hastened back to headquarters. Already the flames were licking the ground where the main tent had stood.

To my dismay then, I saw that our men were being beaten back from the northward, fighting like demons, but outnumbered. And now to the south and west the roll of firing deepened, as the encircling forces closed in. Above, the struggle had ceased. The visiting planes had done their worst, had either departed or been shot down. One of them must have bombed the *Immokalee,* for that once beautiful fabrication was now a roaring torch of oil and gasoline.

I was wondering where I ought to turn, when there came a shock in my side and I found myself staggering. Putting my hand to the place, I found it covered with red. My shoulder, too, felt numb. The ground seemed to beckon. Suddenly yielding, I spread myself there, leaning on one elbow, staring around fascinated at the ghastly saturnalia.

FIGHTING without uniforms, flags, or means of identification, as these men were, the inevitable had happened once the enemy broke through. The combatants split up into groups, a desperate struggle in which rifle and pistol, the bayonet and the deadly slashing machete were all in use. It was a question of killing—of which side could kill the other off. No quarter was thought of. Kill! Kill! It developed into a general hand-to-hand mêlée and series of duels, men often being killed by their own comrades in the diabolical confusion. Kill, or be killed—military offensive and defensive forgotten, only primitive fury surviving.

This inferno of slaughter had moved in my direction and savage encounters were taking place all around me, in an uproar of yells, oaths, agonized screams. I snatched up my rifle to use it as opportunity offered and found that it was empty. When I had fired the last cartridge, I did not remember.

I was now experiencing a curious anæsthesia. My eyes continued to see and my brain to comprehend, but with a gradually increasing disbelief, as if observing a fantastic cinema display more and more impossible.

The thought of Ruth stabbed through, rousing my sluggish body and brain. With great effort I got to my feet.

Through an interminable interval, fighting against the weakness that would drag me down, I toiled to the bombproof. At last I stumbled down the steps, into the darkness.

"Ruth," I called. "Ruth!"

There was no reply. In an agony of apprehension, I sent the powerful beam from my electric torch around the cell. It was empty!

The shock restored all my faculties; there was no unreality, now. Ruth was gone!

I crawled back up the steps, each foot seemingly weighted with lead. Ruth was gone! This—was the end!

At the top, I was forced by weakness to sit down.

Some time later, my eyes cleared. A

man was running toward what remained of headquarters. I saw that it was Bilbo. Revolver in each hand, he hurried from one tent to another, shooting once to save himself from a man armed with a dripping machete. Another bore down on him and Bilbo fired again. As his opponent staggered, I saw that it was the chief, his expression that of a maniac. I tried to get up, but my strength was gone. All I could do was, lie there, staring.

The chief had him by the throat! Bilbo raised first one weapon, then the other, but there was no flash. They were empty. He dropped them and seized the powerful hands that were throttling his life out. He was forced to his knees, now, his head bent back, eyes bulging. He was being shaken, a helpless cat in the grip of a mastiff. It ended with a last, savage jerk. The Old Man knelt there, gasping, supporting the other by the shoulders, watched the head fall limply. Then he hurled the slack body into the dust.

Rising with difficulty, the chief took a few steps toward the bombproof, seemed to change his mind, sat down quietly on the ground, then stretched himself full length, his face turned toward the body of his enemy. Once or twice he closed his eyes, as if drowsily, then he relaxed suddenly, as if invisible wires that had been sustaining him were inexorably parted.

Then Ruth came running forward, a look of horror on her face.

CHAPTER XXXII.

MENACE OF THE AIRPLANE.

IT was a familiar, very mournful voice that I heard, like a dirge, far off, rising and falling, on and on.

I forced my eyes open and there was old Mac sitting by me, the tears running down his wrinkled cheeks. His eyes were directed beyond me. At once I remembered everything. All of that horrible picture flooded into my mind. I raised up a little, pulling, it seemed, a great weight. Mac started, laid a hand on my head. I fell back upon my pillow.

"Ruth?" I asked weakly.

"She's in there, in my tent, with—with her father."

I glanced around and saw that I was in my own quarters. It was strangely undisturbed.

"I must get up," I said. "I must go to her." There came a low, moaning wail that I had not heard before. It was breaking my heart. "I must get up!" I cried desperately.

"Not now—not now! You may be able to, later."

He made me drink something from a tin cup and, struggling against it, I was overpowered again by unconsciousness.

Matanzas—"The Butcheries, Slaughters." Several places in the New World bear this appellation, come down from the Spanish conquistadores. There is another deserving of the name; an island for which the future will doubtless find a designation as was found for that spot in the sand dunes on the east coast of Florida, or like Bone Key—Cayo Hueso—that is now known as Key West, found by the first settlers to be the Place of Bones remaining from some far-distant massacre.

I AWOKE as dawn was breaking, a ghastly down! Unlike the other dawns I had known here, fresh and fragrant with the breath of countless mango blossoms, this one was oppressive with the smell of battle and conflagration.

I knew, as I lay there with fever-weighted eyes, that above and beyond and around us nature was going on her oblivious way, about her own business; that this had been, of itself, a brief, smiling night season. Somewhere that

feathered marvel, a mocking bird, burst into song.

There had been no convulsion of nature connected with this sudden wreck. This, then, had been the house built upon the sands and the winds and the rains—a fiery whirlwind, rather—had beaten it down.

Old Mac was asleep with his head on his arms. I wondered if I could get out without awaking him. I felt my heavily bandaged side and wondered how much of a hurt it was. I was conscious of pain, now. But I must get to Ruth.

After what seemed an endless time I achieved the doorway and stood there, holding myself up by the pole.

A faint breeze was blowing. Where the pearly tints along the eastern sky blended with the fading night blue was the morning star. It burned there, serene, remote. It snatched me for an instant from this tortured place. Then it was obscured. I was shut in again by circling, pungent wreaths of that terrible incense.

It was not very light yet and people were moving slowly around with lanterns. I experienced then a strange illusion. It was the same place, but another time. Men in breastplate and morion were walking out there on the battlefield, surveying its fruits, perhaps on errands of mercy. No, it was plunder they sought. I shuddered. Even there they were after—gold! There was no question about it. Some of them were quite near and I could see better. What was this one doing, sitting against a tree there, a weapon across his lap? Was he wounded? Perhaps there had been a battle.

I came slowly out of this trance as, staring at the man sitting under the tree, I recognized Smith. He was facing these two tents, but his eyes were turned toward the other. Pale and drawn his face looked. He had sat the night out, on guard there.

He saw me instantly as I stole out, in the direction of old Mac's tent.

"You're not needed in there," he informed me.

I went on, ignoring him and he interfered no further.

I found Ruth on her knees by the couch, her face pressed into the coverlet. Her hand was cold and limp.

"Go back," she moaned. "You mustn't be up."

"Yes," I whispered, and returned to my quarters, eased in mind to know that she was safe.

THE announcement that I overheard later was not calculated to soothe a fever patient. Old Mac had gone out on one of his ministrations that would have kept many like him busy. I heard Smith's voice accost him:

"We've got to get out of here, what's left of us. Case of devil take the hindmost. The government has an expedition under way at Cayo Grande, to clean up this place and Bilbo's, what's left of them. Couple of deserters from his place are acting as guides."

"Yes?" came old Mac's voice. "Where'll we go?"

"To Halifax, if you like! You and Lake better take the *Wildcat.* Nothing around here can touch her. I'm getting a plane ready to take Miss Ruth."

I had made several strange departures from various places in the past few months, but none like this. Ruth and I and old Mac, with a young fellow to help with the engines, in the *Wildcat,* sped swiftly down the creek, past the smoking skeleton of the *Immokalee,* away from all this, away from Smith.

He had given the order to the survivors to scatter; they might take whatever they could carry. Already they were leaving in various directions, in anything that would float—from old rowboats to motor speedsters.

"I've got some friends up the coast a

ways that will take us in," old Mac had announced. "We'll make it."

He had attended to many things, to the burial of the chief, with Ruth and me and Smith, present.

I had the wheel now and the three others were crowded there in the after cockpit with me.

I went out of our course a little, to stop at Watkins' station. Nobody had seen or heard anything of him since the raid. Getting out with difficulty, I found him there, covered with wounds, by the side of a machine gun. Empty cartridge cases all around, and certain inert bodies, told the tale.

"Faithful unto death!" I stood looking down at him, my first friend in these islands. Like that Roman soldier stationed at the gates of Pompeii before her doom descended, he was at his place of duty. No one had come to dismiss him from his post. So he was found there.

"Old man," I said sorrowfully, "you might have escaped with the others; you could have. You said it once—'Men don't change.' They haven't changed since Pompeii, anyway!"

I returned to the boat.

Undoubtedly we presented the appearance of a bird in frantic, headlong flight, shadowed by a great hawk with a cruel mastery of each maneuver of its prey, dallying with it, choosing its own time to strike.

I had steered well out into the dark blue of the Gulf, to avoid any danger from sand bars, and was running with throttles wide open. We were tearing along at express-train speed, spreading two great white wings from under our planing hull. I was regarding Ruth with a pang of misgiving, so utterly crushed was she, when——

"Plane coming!" yelled the boy.

Old Mac and I looked back and then at each other. The pursuer rapidly overhauled us. We soon saw that it was one of our armored seaplanes.

The boy looked up at me importantly.

"One motor in the air's worth two on the water," he announced.

Now we were rushing along, the objective of that wide-winged monster up there, scrolling its masterly course in the more yielding element.

Each time that the plane soared by, I sensed the hawk's fierce gloating in the first lieutenant, neither hidden nor revealed by his pale, immobile face and goggle-protected eyes. But was there, or was there not, a slight smile about his lips?

He swooped lower and Ruth, perceiving the muzzle of his deadly automatic rifle protruding over the fuselage, moved between us the shield of her body.

Passing, he would zoom up and swing off in a great, graceful arc, coming a little closer on his next forward rush.

On one of these passages he reached out his arm and dropped something small and weighted. It sped straight into our forward cockpit and the boy retrieved it. This was his scrawled note, short and to the point:

Stop or I'll shoot your hull to pieces.

He must be mad!

I leaned over and shouted to the boy:

"There's one chance for us. Take that gun from under the seat and shoot at his propeller when I give the word. With this arm—I can't."

His eyes shining with excitement, the youngster pulled out the trench gun and, under cover of the coaming, got it ready.

"All right," he called.

The great winged thing was sloping toward us. I looked at the blur of its propeller.

"Shoot!" I yelled.

He whipped up the gun and fired, exactly as if from a blind. A wonder-

ful thing happened. Between buckshot and centrifugal force, the propeller burst into fragments as if it had exploded.

BUT Smith had a last desperate throw of the dice. He deliberately nosed down. I understood his plan. He would crush us with a dive!

I swung madly at the wheel and we were almost flung from the cockpit as we heeled on that terrific turn. Down came the plane with a meteorlike rush and missed us, plunging into our curving wake with a tremendous burst of spray.

I looked around and saw that Smith had jumped clear, just before the impact. I continued in a wide circle, thinking angrily that he ought to be run down. But the thought intruded itself that the man was crazy.

The plane had capsized and was slowly sinking. Smith, with barely effectual strokes, was making toward it. He had been delivered into the hands of the pursued.

I throttled down, just as Ruth gripped my arm. A great fin had appeared, then vanished leisurely, there in Smith's wake. Nothing happened for a moment, then the smooth surface heaved. The man in the water screamed; was choked off suddenly below the surface. I was cloven with the agony of brief, bitter struggle there, against implacable doom. As we glided to a standstill over the scene of the horror, the water—deep blue elsewhere—was tinged here with a reddish brown. We glimpsed a giant tail, slowly sculling into the depths.

Ruth was blanched, staring. I was suddenly weak, ill.

Old Mac bent over Ruth as she sank limply on the coaming.

Later, much later, Ruth and I sat in our room on the northbound Limited, leaving Tampa. Old Mac, who had assisted at our wedding which had taken place when the raging fever that swooped down on me had abated—a month ago now, nearly—was smiling to us from the platform. The train pulled slowly out.

Ruth leaned against me with a quivering sigh.

"I'm so tired," she whispered, as I put my arm around her.

Outside, a newsy was barking: "All erbout the million-dollar piracy off the coast. Gov'mint takin' ack-shun!"

Greed still lured. The war was still on. It had burned itself out in our quarter. We, battered casualties, were out of it. Peace and quiet, happiness, beckoned, there in that waiting home in the hills.

The complete book to be published in the next issue of THE POPULAR *is "The White Wolf Pack," by B. M. Bower. It is a Western story of an artist and a strange picture, an outlaw who had redeeming traits and a fascinating mystery.*

WANTED! A COLLEGE GRADUATE

FRANK B. KELLOGG, who as secretary of state for this country has to know the current and past history and diplomacy of the entire civilized world in greater detail than any other American citizen, never went to college. Furthermore, he was the first American ever sent to the Court of St. James who was without college training. After receiving a public school education, Mr. Kellogg qualified himself for admission to the bar by reading in a country lawyer's office. He was at one time a United States senator.

The Roleo

By Clay Perry

Author of "The Timber Trail," "The Heart of the Tree," Etc.

What the rodeo is to the broncho-busting cowmen of the Western plains, the roleo is to the log-rolling huskies of the Northwestern timberlands—both combats call for championship qualities in their contestants, and these qualities "Cuffer" Tom White had in good measure.

"CUFFER TOM" WHITE limped to the cobalt edge of Blue Water Bay, feeling as if the pit of his stomach had become a bottomless cavern and without an idea how he would pave it. Tom looked as if he had about as much chance of winning the log-rolling championship as a licked pup has to taking the honors in a dog fight. His own mother would scarcely have recognized him. His best friends would have had to admit he was under a sickening handicap.

The trouble was that Tom's friends were not there. Tom had gone without supper cheerfully, expecting "Rubber Sam" "Whitewater Joe" and "Spruce" Nelson, with whom he had started from Eau Claire, would surely blow in on the midnight train. He had left them, with no small reluctance, at Wapoo Junction, after the fracas.

"No, no! You go on ahead and get rested and fixed up by one of them osseyopaths," Rubber Sam advised, as he and Joe heaved Tom, struggling and protesting, on the train. "We'll stay and change the bones on those birds and get revenge enough for you, too."

Only when he was miles from Wapoo did Tom discover his greater loss.

It was morning, now. Tom began disconsolately to brush off the clinging sawdust which had sifted all over him, inside his clothing, into his pockets.

"Wooden gold!" he muttered, as he dumped the pocket which *had* contained his wallet.

"But he grinned as he fumbled and found his "high-water pouch" safe

about his neck, the mark of the true riverman. It contained tobacco papers and matches. Tom rolled a cigarette.

Black eye, bruised muscles in the thigh of his right leg, threatening to become a Charley horse, empty stomach and pockets notwithstanding, Cuffer Tom intended to enter that roleo if for no other reason, because "Waddy" McGee had bragged he was going to win the championship, this year—and Waddy was rushing Mary Zane of the brown eyes.

Tom knew Waddy and his methods. He blamed Waddy for his black eye, sore leg, torn clothes and the fact he had been forced to burrow in the damp-warm pine sawdust in the rear of the McGee mills for a bed. But Tom was able to grin and take it as part of the game.

THE McGees were entertaining the tourney in their home town. From where Tom stood, he could see the outlines of the sprawling log lodge on Bay Point where the McGees were entertaining Paul Zane, chairman of the tourney committee, and his daughters, Elsa and Mary. That hurt Tom worse than the pains he had got from the "entertainment committee" which met him and his pals at Wapoo.

Flipping his cigarette carefully into the water, Tom drew back between slab piles, stripped off his clothing and took a running dive into the sparkling cold water of the bay. He knew he was taking chances. He was a trespasser on McGee property. He looked like one and, furthermore, cold water was not the best treatment for a threatened Charley horse and an empty stomach.

Scarcely had Tom left shore and begun swimming about when a dark-visaged, skulking figure crawled down the alley Tom had left and possessed himself of Tom's clothing. He squatted down and began working feverishly over the bundle. He was restoring the clothes to their original cache in a hole in the slab pile when he heard the shuffle of bare feet at the entrance to the alley. Bending low, he ran like an Indian and dodged out the other end. He whistled twice, shrilly.

Tom White sped after him, but, finding his clothing where he had left it, halted and hustled into it, regardless of wet skin. Glancing sharply up and down the alley, he stepped out into the sunshine.

A burly man with a cant hook in hand came running down the beach toward him.

"Hey, you bum! What you doin' in this mill yard?" he roared.

Tom did not stop to explain, but began trying to get out of it. But another peavey-armed individual confronted him, in the other direction.

"Get him, Bill!" the one behind cried. "It's that dam shingle thief."

Tom came to a dead stop, looked to his right and saw a third man emerging from the slab piles, with a club in his hands. He looked to the left—and saw a drift log lying high and dry on the beach. The bay was his only avenue of escape. Stooping, he snatched up a long strip, trimmed from the edge of a plank.

Turning sharply, as the three men bore down upon him from three directions, Tom charged the log, thrust one end of his stick under it and heaved. It rolled over and over into the water. Tom waded in and pushed it farther out and, as the trio came together at the water's edge, he was on the log, shoving it swiftly and safely away. Tom was perfectly at home. He disregarded the angry shouts of his pursuers and the cry "Get a boat and catch him!"

An hour later Cuffer Tom White rode up to the roleo reservoir at the end of the bay with an effect as sensational, upon some of those who stood

on the booms, as if he had dropped from an airplane or as if he were a cowboy, left for lost in the desert, who dashed up to the rodeo corral on a sweating steed and tossed his hat in the ring.

It was plain that somebody had not expected Cuffer Tom to appear. The first person to greet him was Waddy McGee. Waddy was on the boom helping his father, Jabez, and Paul Zane superintend the work of skidding roleo logs into the water. With the three men were Mary and Elsa Zane. The girls were booked for a fancy log-birling exhibition at the roleo. High up on the bank, which made a splendid gallery for the spectators, stood Waddy's big gray car.

"Well, well!" boomed Waddy, with hollow heartiness. "Here he is, now."

"Hello, Tom White!" came Mary Zane's musical voice.

Tom did an awkward right turn to hide his black eyes, when Mary came toward him.

"We were wondering whether you were going to default," she said.

"Yes," agreed Waddy sourly.

"You bet I am not!" Tom responded. "There isn't enough in it for me to default."

HE said this with a deliberate, cold glance at Waddy. Waddy had emerged as third best in the roleo of the preceding year in which Frank Gay-on-tosh, the old Menominee, had taken the championship. George Gay, a half-breed, distantly related to Gay-on-tosh—and sincerely hated by the champion—had defaulted at the last moment, giving McGee the edge. This defaulter had proceeded to go on a long spree, spending money like water. It was more or less a scandal, but it had been hushed up.

"We were looking for you last night," chirped Elsa. "Thought you'd like to be in on the rockfry out at Bay Point. We had steak, bacon, onions, potatoes, watermelon, ice cream and——"

"I'm training!" laughed Tom, with an effort, for he tasted and smelled each viand she named. He shifted his weight to his right leg and winced. He began to redden, for as he reached for his hat, his hand encountered thin air. He felt as unclothed without that narrow-brimmed felt as he had been in swimming.

"Well, I was kept pretty busy, up to midnight," Tom drawled.

"You look it!" growled McGee. "For the love of Mike, what were you doing? Look as if you had been entertaining—or being entertained. You didn't go and get mixed up with any of that tough pulp-wood gang from St. Croix, did you?"

"Nope! I did a little mixing between trains at Wapoo," Tom replied. "But that reception committee seemed to smell of white pine." He glanced meaningly toward the towering decks and stacks of logs and lumber down the bay. It was all white pine.

"Your friends didn't stick with you?" Waddy inquired slyly.

"No, they stuck with the white-pine gang," Tom drawled, "I did expect they'd finish with 'em in time to get the midnight train. I had trouble getting accommodations last night. And there were three men after my quarters this morning, when I turned out, and they acted as if they wanted 'em bad. I've just been out for a little practice spin on the bay. I suppose you and I are paired for the roll-off, to see who meets Gay-on-tosh."

McGee smiled commiseratingly. "Oh, didn't you know?" he exclaimed. "They held the drawing last night and, since your name wasn't in, the committee had to shove you down among the preliminaries. Nobody could find you, nor any trace of you and—you see we——"

Tom saw with a brilliant flash the immediate purpose of the "reception committee" at Wapoo, which had been to keep him away from Blue Water Bay until the drawing was over.

"Oh, well, that's all right!" He laughed dryly. "I'll just about get good and warmed up for the semifinals. Probably the entry committee depended on the entertainment committee to inform 'em where the late comers were."

Since Waddy was chairman of the entertainment committee, he could not dodge that thrust—but he parried it.

"I hear there was quite an exciting little game down at Wapoo last evening," he remarked. "I don't blame you for staying—as long as you could."

Tom did not reply to this. He had heard enough to convince him beyond any doubt that Waddy was behind that little game. Not that Tom believed Waddy had instructed his lumber wrestlers to "roll" him for his wallet. That was, apparently, an original inspiration with the gang.

THINGS were beginning to buzz with the business of preparation, the arrival of motorists and "whoopeeing" rivermen who had come to participate in the rolling or to roar encouragement to their favorites. Wool-shirted, high-booted river rats in "stagged" trousers or army O. D. breeches tucked inside their boots mingled their gay plaids with the gayer dresses of women and the picturesque beaded and fringed best of Indians, who had flocked from near and far reservations to back old Frank Gay-on-tosh with whoops and cash.

Here and there, a man on horseback or a settler with a team of horses, or even an ox team, maneuvered for position along the bank, between the automobiles. Bright, polished pine logs, sixteen feet long, thundered down a skid and plunged with a splash into the clear water. Girls shrieked and rivermen gave wild yells of excitement.

Tom limped stiffly along the boom toward where Paul Zane stood, his tall, straight form, iron-gray head and sonorous voice marking him among them all. Tom hitched up his trousers, from which two belt straps had been ripped in the fracas at Wapoo. He stepped over peaveys and pikes and nails and tools, careful to avoid striking anything with his sharp steel calks. He had filed and whetstoned them himself and, for fear of losing that precious pair of drive shoes, he had worn them all the way from Eau Claire, at no little inconvenience to himself—and others.

Tom sought Paul Zane for the purpose of registering at once and having only a few things to worry about, such as the absence of Sam and Joe and Spruce and how on earth he would get his pike pole out of hock and when he would eat. Tom had shipped his precious pike pole C. O. D. from Eau Claire to Blue Water, the express agent at Eau Claire lacking change for the twenty-dollar bill Tom had offered him. Now, Tom had not the money to pay the express charges.

Within a few steps of Zane, Tom halted, with a sickening feeling. He had just remembered he had not even the registry fee to hand over. He glanced about, looking for some acquaintance who might loan him the money, found none in the immediate vicinity and passed on. He could wait until afternoon, anyway.

He sought a secluded spot and sat down, groaning a bit as his leg muscles protested. He felt of his swollen eye, reached for his hat brim to pull it down and grinned at himself. A voice came to his ear that made his pulses leap.

"Tom White, won't you come and have a little snack with us? Some coffee and doughnuts and apple pie we brought with us?"

It was Mary Zane who had sought him out. Tom got stiffly to his feet, thrusting his right hand in his pocket

to keep it from wandering skyward and, with a downward sweep of his eyes that showed him a badly soiled shirt and torn trousers, he blushed.

"Thanks!" he said. "It's awfully good of you, but—but I'm waiting for my chums, you know."

"Oh, I see. They aren't in town yet?"

"I expect 'em on the ten-o'clock train."

"Why, you want to eat something before then! The rolling begins at ten thirty and you ought not to eat just before that."

"Why, I am not very hungry, just now, thank you," he told her.

"Tom White—what happened to your eye?" she demanded. "Now tell the truth."

"I was hit by a loose fist," Tom replied truthfully. "At Wapoo. It wasn't anything."

Mary regarded him with sudden disfavor and suspicion, "Tom White!" she cried. "What were you doing, on the night before the roleo, to get in such condition? I think it's a shame!"

He could see the rosy wave rising into her cheeks and he could feel his own reddening deeply. He bit his lip and turned his head to one side, trying to hide the offending eye. The best he had been able to do for a toilet he had done, but wet hands run through wet hair which is naturally unruly doesn't make a man look too slick. And he was without a hat—and without a shave——

"Yes-s, ma'am," he stammered, "I'm sorry about it."

"Well!"

She whirled and left him and he watched her gay, neat-knickered figure swing stormily away, while he kicked at the turf with his calks miserably and wondered just what it was she meant.

The whistle of a train electrified him. He walked as rapidly as he could, without total loss of dignity, toward the station.

It was Tom's luck to be invited, a second time, to eat breakfast. The invitation came from a strolling, broad-hatted riverman who named himself "Rolling Rob" Simmons, from Astoria, Oregon. But Tom, loyal to his friends and confident of meeting them at the train, passed this up, too.

THE three musketeers were not on the train. And his pike pole had not yet reached Blue Water Bay. The agent opined it would come in on the noon local, being long stuff.

"By jinks!" exclaimed Tom, in comment.

It was time to get back to the reservoir again. All down the street, odors of cooking greeted him.

"Why, darn those three nuts, anyhow!" he complained mildly. "I wish now I'd made 'em come along with me, instead of lingering for revenge. Prob'ly they got cleaned worse and haven't even got train fare."

Halting at a friendly lamp-post, Tom leaned against it and rolled a cigarette and watched the world float by. Soon his leg was brushed by the fender of a gray car and he turned and looked again into Mary Zane's brown eyes.

"Hello, Tom White!" she greeted him, with cheerful kindness in her voice. "Did your friends come?"

She was sitting in the front seat with Waddy McGee, but it was no trouble at all for Tom to keep from looking at Waddy.

"No, ma'am, not yet. I expect 'em in on the noon local, though."

"That's too bad. They'll miss the prelims and they ought to see that because"—her eyes sparkled mischievously—"because you and I are paired for the special man-and-woman roll-off."

Tom's bad leg very nearly gave way beneath him. Beyond Mary's shining

face, Waddy smiled fatuously. It bucked Tom up.

"Well, I'm sort of glad they aren't here, then." He chuckled. "I'd hate to have 'em see me ducked first thing." Then a flash of memory stabbed him. "But I'm not even registered yet!" he cried.

"Oh, I registered for you, Tom White," said Mary Zane coolly. "The committee looked all over for you and I put your name in. That was before I knew we would be paired for the special," she hastened to add.

"How—how much?" stammered Tom, fumbling helplessly in his pocket and scraping up a few loose bits of sawdust.

"Oh, Mr. McGee advanced the fee!" Mary cried, with a laugh.

Tom's heart turned a somersault, because she had called him "Tom White" and Waddy "Mr. McGee," but something made his face very white as he looked questioningly at McGee.

Waddy waved a grandiloquent hand. "Don't mention it," he sniffed. "Any time you're heeled again."

"Tom, have you had any breakfast?" demanded Mary sharply.

"Oh, I—I had another invitation," Tom blustered. "A friend of mine from Astoria, Oregon."

"You might have eaten with us! A morning like this gives a person an appetite, I should think."

"I should think it did!" Tom responded, with feeling. "But—but a fellow—a person has got to be careful not to eat too much just before rolling. I'm being mighty careful."

In fact he was supporting that lamppost hoping to encounter Rolling Rob Simmons again.

He felt Waddy McGee's eyes on his feet and, with a keen comprehension which perhaps was sharpened by hunger, he paired Waddy McGee with that skulking figure between the slab piles. So it was his shoes they were after! Tough cowhide, greased and worked, handsewed, made to order they were, those high-laced, stub-tied, thick-soled boots with their rows of gleaming steel spikes in the soles.

The next instant he was thinking that, shortly, he would be standing in those shoes on one end of a peeled pine log, facing Mary Zane, before a roaring crowd—and he must either be ducked or duck Mary in the cold water of the reservoir. He almost shivered at the thought—of ducking Mary.

Waddy spun his engine with unnecessary speed.

"I'm just going," Tom remarked, with a drawl. "Very much obliged to both of you." But he was looking exclusively at Mary when he spoke.

With sudden inspiration, he exaggerated his limp.

AT the reservoir, all was set for the roleo events. Tom White drew his black-leather belt another notch tighter, rolled a cigarette and sat down against the balloon tire of a car to wait for things to happen. It was all he could do, now.

Below him hummed the action of the score and more of entrants, who were swarming the booms, testing out their calks, matching pikes for length and balance, arguing over the respective merits of twisted steel point and wrought iron, and hooked pikes and hookless pikes, and tamarack and yellow pine for handles.

The bay opened out upon a dazzling expanse of blue water which stretched to a horizon of blue sky, beyond which lay Canada. He began to feel less hungry, like a runner getting his second wind. Confidence flung back at him. So far everything had come out all right—except that bothersome sore spot in the leg.

Paul Zane's booming voice roused Tom from reveries as Zane spoke through a megaphone from the boom.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the preliminary events of the great log-rolling championship of the Northwest are about to begin——"

Zane went on to compare the great rodeos of the cattle country with this event, the roleo suffering nothing by his description of it as one of the two great American institutions worthy of perpetuation to preserve the spirit of the frontier.

Zane got thunderous applause. He was followed by Jabez McGee, who extended a welcome to log riders and spectators in the name of the Roleo Association, the McGee Lumber Company and the town of Blue Water Bay. But the applause was as nothing to the thunder that broke loose when Paul Zane, again taking up the megaphone, announced:

"By request of the competition committee, I am happy to call the first event, a fancy log-riding exhibition, by the Zane sisters, Mary and Elsa."

He turned to the girls and his gruff "Come on, you log cuffers!" was drowned in the roar which swelled louder as the Zane sisters trotted onto the boom with their long slim pike poles over their shoulders, gay toques bobbing up and down and calked boots flashing in the sun as they leaped simultaneously for opposite ends of a log which had been floated broadside.

Tom White forgot himself, watching the play. It was a pretty exhibition of grace and skill. The girls performed feats fully as difficult as any tight-rope walker's, with the bobbing, rolling, slippery log as their base of operations and ten feet of cold water waiting to catch them if they missed a step or lost balance for an instant.

But Tom was brought abruptly to himself when Paul Zane boomed out the "special" which would bring "the acknowledged woman champion" and "last year's runner-up, young Cuffer Tom White, of Eau Claire, together in a genuine roll-off." Tom slid down the bank and hunted for a pike pole. He took one offered him by Frank Gay-on-tosh and all the time he felt as if his heart had stopped beating.

SOMEHOW, Tom felt that Fate had played a cruel trick upon him, in thus forcing him to enter the first preliminary with the alternative either of rolling Mary Zane off into the water and humiliating her, or losing his chance to continue in the tourney and contest for the championship. Up to now he had thought the "special" was to be merely an exhibition. He went into a sort of daze when he heard it was to be a competitive event.

"Ba gosh, Tom, you look lak a log been cuffin' you las' night, or some-t'ing!" exclaimed Gay-on-tosh, with a shrewd glance at Tom's white face and purpling eye. "Ba gosh, you look seeck!"

"Well, by jinks, I'm going to cuff 'em back to-day!" Tom replied, bracing up. "You want to watch me!"

"Ba gosh, I'm goin' to!" declared Frank, puckering up his leathery face. "You de onlee man I'm 'fraid of a-tall. W'at's mattaire yore laig, eh?"

"*Coup du pied,*" responded Tom, in language which meant much to the old Canuck.

"Ba gosh! Who keeck you lak dat?"

"Stranger to me, Frank. I didn't stop to ask his name. I only had time to twist his foot a little and lay him down gentle on the ground back of Wapoo station."

"Ba gosh, you cain't cuff long wit' dat laig! You let me feex heem. Me, I got snake-oil liniment wit' me. Take all dat sore out lak dat!" He snapped his fingers. "Ba gosh, you don't t'ink I want to roll wit' cripple!"

The old champion's generous offer warmed Tom sufficiently, so that he managed to grin and he was himself again.

"Thanks, Frank! After the preliminaries," he said.

Tom and Mary were called for the third and last time and in a moment Tom found himself standing on one end of a log, facing Mary. All his blood seemed to rush into boiling water when he met her smiling brown eyes and realized that the time had come when he must douse Mary ingloriously in the pool before the eyes of several thousand persons—or *allow* her to burl him from the log and put him out of the tourney almost before it had begun.

By Mary's attitude, he knew that she was determined to give him a contest from the start, though she knew and Tom knew and every log roller knew it was absurd to think that any woman could outroll a man who had gone as high in the roleo of the preceding year as Tom White.

TOM'S problem was solved for him in a very unexpected manner. At the first tilt of the log—Mary taking the aggressive at once—and as he dug in his calks to keep his footing, his right foot shot from the pine as if the calks were paper and the log was soap. He slipped into the water sidewise.

When he came to the surface after his brief dive, he emerged into a dead silence. The crowd was incredulous. Then, as he swam for the boom, came a roar that was mostly laughter. But Tom paid no attention to anything save that right foot. At the boom he pulled it up, regardless of the stab of pain, and looked at the boot sole.

He knew then why he had slipped. It was not his lame leg that had caused it. He knew that something had been slipped over on him—and the next instant he knew that Waddy McGee had slipped it.

The grooves cut by a thin, sharp file showed up cleanly at the base of the calks, next to the boot sole.

Half the pointed steel brads on the sole had broken off entirely. The first side strain upon them had done the work. Tom sat and stared at the sole of his shoe until others began to cluster around him. To questions, he gave no answer at all. He was unable to speak. it seemed. The hot rage that writhed within him scorched his tongue.

Then the crowd parted and Mary Zane came up. She gave one glance at Tom's shoe, pulled his end of the log close to the boom and bent over it, rolling it about with her hand until she came to where the broken bits of the calks still stuck in the wood. Then she marched straight off the boom and up to where her father stood, waiting impatiently and perplexed, for news from the boom.

A few minutes later the buzzing, quizzing crowd heard Zane's voice booming out:

"The man-and-woman special has been called off. An accident to Cuffer Tom White's drive shoes is responsible for this. The contest committee has ruled that Tom White may remain in the contest and has given him until after the noon recess to have his shoes repaired."

A laugh started, but Zane stopped it.

"This is no laughing matter, ladies and gentlemen. *Tom White's calks were filed halfway through!*"

Laughter turned swiftly to indignation. Tom ducked for the bank and made his way through the crowd, dodging questions, and found a shoemaker's shop close to the water front.

Joe Scratti, the proprietor and only workman, was bent over his last, busily at work. Several pairs of heavy shoes stood about in various stages of repair and disrepair. Tom knew that Joe was accustomed to calking rivermen's footgear. He did not stop to ask or even wonder why Joe was working so busily, on the day of the tourney, but later he did understand why.

"Got to have a brand-new set of calks all around, Joe!" he panted. "How quick can you do it and will you wait till afternoon for your pay? I'm broke until my friends strike town on the noon train."

"Feex you up in one half an hour," Joe promised, with an eager cheerfulness which Tom remembered distinctly, later on, but which gave him no sort of warning at the time. "Sure! You take off dose shoe and I trust you, all right."

"That's the stuff! By jinks, Joe, I'll make it worth your while when I get some money!"

TOM unlaced his boots and prepared himself to wait for them. But as he straightened up from removing the second one, he looked directly into the unsmiling, hostile face of a hard-bitten man in a baggy suit who held an automatic pistol on a line with Tom's nose.

"Been lookin' everywhere for you, young feller," came a voice like the growl of a dog. "You're wanted for shingle stealing. Come along of me to the calaboose."

Tom noted two significant circumstances. The man had entered from the rear of the shop—and he had waited until Tom had his shoes off.

"Oh, no, mister, not for shingle stealing you don't want me," he retorted. "Where's your warrant?"

"Shut up! Feel of this." The automatic jabbed Tom in the shoulder. "Move up and along!" was the barked command.

Tom complied, with a warning to Joe Scratti to finish the shoes and be sure to remember which pair they were, a warning given in a low tone, but with a glance that caused Joe to swallow hard and promise.

"Nice day, isn't it?" Tom remarked as he stepped out of the door, with the gun helping him to travel. "I don't mind going barefoot if you'd rather have me take off my socks, too."

The man made no reply. The street was empty. Every shop and store had been deserted for the roleo. It was striking twelve in the town-hall belfry as Tom limped along the cement, thinking hard, trying to gain time.

Sotto voce he muttered: "If you're the sheriff, I'm going to give you a run for your office when this is over. If not—that goes more! I don't like being jabbed with a gun after being kicked in the leg, having my calks filed off and called a shingle thief in the bargain."

"Shut up! Want to see this gold star they gave me for being the best sheriff Blue Water ever had?"

Tom turned and caught a flash of a large medallion on the gunman's vest—but his quick eye caught letters engraved thereon which shot a thrill through him. The letters he saw were "POO."

"You taking me to jail?" he queried.

"County jail. On the noon train and I want you to walk nice and remember I'm holding this gun in my pocket, two inches from your damn carcass, all the time."

"Shake you two bits for the star," said Tom, with a grin. "It ain't going to be worth that when the roleo committee finds out what's being done to spoil their program."

"Shut up!" yelped the sheriff—of *Wapoo*.

"I'm shut, padlocked. I'm keeping the evidence to myself—now—and you can't make me talk."

"Say, you trying to insinuate I'm framing you, or something? Huh?"

The sheriff of Wapoo was getting nervous as he approached the railroad station—and Tom was getting more and more confidence and hope. He did not reply. The sheriff halted him. Tom glanced up and down the street as if looking to see no one was nigh to overhear—if he cared to talk again.

"Suppose we hold court right on the station platform," Tom suggested, at length. "Tell you what—I've got reason to expect a shipment of jack on that train to bet on the roleo. I could bail myself and I figure it would be worth the price of—of a gold star as a bail fee—to you."

The sheriff of Wapoo licked his dry lips.

"On the train," he said. "On the train, not on the platform. Too much of a crowd. In the train with y'u!"

"K. O.!" agreed Tom pleasantly. "But I got to see a man and get the jack, first!" he added excitedly.

"One man," warned the sheriff.

Whitewater Joe, Rubber Sam and Spruce Nelson swung off the local train before it had stopped and, catching sight of Tom White, began plowing toward him, roaring a vociferous welcome. Tom, wth the dangerous end of a gun against his hip, yelled to Spruce —in Swedish.

Spruce Nelson understood quicker in that language than in English—and thought quicker, too. He turned upon Joe and Sam, somehow made them comprehend they were not wanted and bade them an elaborate farewell. They slipped about behind the station and Spruce Nelson advanced blandly toward Tom and his captor.

"Hello, Spruce!" Tom greeted him in English. "Meet friend of mine, Mister Woosish. Going north on this rattler. Hop on with us."

Spruce goggled at him.

"He don't savvy much except Swede," Tom informed the sheriff, apologetically. Then he spoke to Nelson in his native tongue.

Nelson brightened up immediately.

"Sure, sure, Aye go along wit'," he agreed. "But first Aye got to see deem boyss and gat moneys. You wait. Aye be back."

Tom saw a baggageman unloading a long, yellow-pine pike pole up ahead and it gave him a thrill. It was his pike pole. The distant roar of the crowd at the roleo penetrated even the hiss and clang of the locomotive and the babel of late comers to the tourney.

Tom stepped upon the smoker platform, groaning and making much of his lame leg, as he saw Nelson's broad face loom up, near by. On either side of Nelson were Whitewater Joe and Rubber Sam, their hats pulled low. The sheriff was shoving on Tom's kidneys with a hard something when he got to the top step. Then Tom suddenly launched himself across the platform and off the other side of the train.

He cleared the opposite steps without touching them and landed on his hands and feet in soft cinders; that is, they were not hard packed. The edges weren't so soft. But he dodged sidewise as soon as he struck.

THE sheriff of Wapoo came down after him, but not of his own volition and impulse. He came with Spruce Nelson on his back, long arms wrapped tightly about the sheriff's waist, clamping his arms down, long legs wrapped from hips to knees of the sheriff's lower limbs. The sheriff struck the soft-hard cinders mostly with his face and stomach.

They held court right there, behind the gear of the smoking car, out of sight, and so quietly that nobody came to inquire what was the verdict. Tom assumed a judicial position, cross legged before the sheriff of Wapoo, who craned his neck in order to look up from where he lay. Spruce Nelson maintained his position, upheld by justice, while Joe and Sam served on the jury.

The verdict was unanimous—that no sheriff, even of Wapoo, would dare show himself at a roleo without gun, star, hat, coat, belt, boots or dignity. Lest he violate probation, the quartet shoved him on the smoker platform as

the train started and induced him to remain there until the local had gained some speed. Tom had told the sheriff of Wapoo some news and the sheriff was thinking it over as he sped westward.

Tom paid for his boots out of a ten-dollar bill which was one of a roll the size of a plug hat. The three musketeers had got revenge aplenty on the gang at Wapoo, though it had taken them until daylight, and then some, to do it.

"And we ain't eat yet!" announced Rubber Sam.

"Is that so?" inquired Tom.

"We changed the bones on 'em," Sam explained, over a platter of ham and eggs.

"Sacree! It change our luck a lot," Joe detailed.

"By gol, we clean dem out goot!" Nelson continued.

"What did you do with the remains?" Tom asked.

"Oh, they come in on that train!" Sam replied. "Those boys all belong here in Blue Water. Work in the mills."

"Yes, I thought so. The McGee mills. Um-hum! Well, now, look here! I'm going to be busy. And I've been busy." He told them a few things that made their eyes stick out and which indicated to them that their "revenge" was not quite complete and in consequence of which they all separately and severally swore to renew their acquaintance with that "Wapoo Gang" and "find out somethin'."

Armed with his pike pole and a brand-new, short-brimmed felt hat hastily fashioned out of a broad-brimmed Stetson, Tom returned to the roleo reservoir early after dinner.

On the boom Frank Gay-on-tosh accosted him.

"W'ere you been gone? I got to feex your laig."

"Where you stopping at?"

Frank grinned and led the way to an ancient flivver sedan parked with its front wheels in the water, as close to the reservoir as Frank could drive it without pontoons under it. They curtained the rear windows with blankets. Tom stripped from feet to waist and stretched out as best he could for the massage.

THE snake oil had an aroma that was powerful enough to cure anything. Tom bore it with the stoicism he knew Frank expected, as well as the wrenching and digging and twisting and pounding and pulling of Frank's long, strong, clever fingers about the sore spot.

Twenty minutes of mauling and a final burning application of what Tom called "serpent juice" and the old Menominee declared:

"Ba gosh, dat snake she chase dat Charley hoss way off de track, eh?"

To Tom's surprise, when he got out, stretched and did a *pas seul* on the sand, he found that every trace of stiffness had disappeared from his leg muscles.

"Ba gosh, eef dat Waddy McGee beat you I lak to drown you!" grunted Gay-on-tosh, and this was the only hint he gave of his motive for being so much concerned about Tom's condition.

It was enough. Tom remembered George Gay, Tom thought he had seen George Gay somewhere in Blue Water that day. It was a faint memory, just now. Later, it came to him where he had seen Gay.

Mary Zane greeted Tom as he stepped out on the boom. Her sympathy for him and her indignation because of the trick that had cost him a fall in the "special" seemed tempered now by severity. Her expression sent Tom's heart down the elevator.

"Tom, I've just learned what you did last night and I'm ashamed of you!" she burst out. "Especially as I know

what you have at stake to-day and that we were all pulling for you to win. All my friends have bet on you and the odds have dropped six to one against you, since the story got out."

Tom listened, with burning ears and palsied tongue. At last he gasped:

"W-what story? What I did last night? Oh! At Wapoo? Well—— say, can I ask you one question?"

"If you wish." Mary's tone was colder than lake water.

"Did you bet on me yourself?"

The toque tassel quivered as Mary's head went up and a flush darkened her tanned face.

"At no odds," she confessed.

"Hum! Say, by jinks, if you think I faked that fall and those filed calks why——"

"I never accused you—of that!" gasped Mary quickly. "It was your fault, though, for getting—for breaking training at Wapoo."

"Oh!" Tom got the implication like a shot in the neck.

Mary Zane thought him guilty of getting drunk the night before the roleo! And he thought he knew who had caused her to think so.

"I don't care about the money, Tom," she said. "In fact, the men I bet with refused to hold it at the changed odds and made me take it back."

"Whew!" Tom whistled. "Well, I think I can fix that. You just wait a minute or two."

Tom vanished in the crowd. He sought for Rubber Sam, found him, whispered to him—and shortly there was a sudden flood of Cuffer Tom money being offered—even money.

"Now, I'm going to ask you a big favor, Mary Zane," Tom said to the girl, when he got back. "I've got three hundred I want to place on myself to win. It isn't allowed for a contestant to do it himself. I want you to handle it for me, along with your own. Will you?"

"Well, of all the nerve!"

But a spark of something other than indignation appeared in Mary's brown eyes.

"I bet you three pieces of leather you could get it covered without ever leaving that big gray car," he went on coolly, and his coolness was the sign of how earnest and desperate he was. "There isn't a doubt in the world how that story about my breaking training at Wapoo got started. I'm willing to back myself on the hunch to the limit. I bet you could get it—at the odds."

He held her eyes until her glance wavered.

"The Blue Water crowd has been tipped that I can't possibly win," he continued, "but I've got new spikes in my shoes. And I'm going to win—to show *you*."

Mary's eyes became steady again. Her red lips tightened. She shot out a soft, brown hand and gripped Tom's.

"I'll try to place it, Tom White," she said. "Your three hundred—and a hundred of my own. And I'm going to lump it where it will tell the story, straight!"

She darted for the gray car where Waddy McGee sat, talking out of the corner of his mouth to men who came casually up beside him and whose pockets bulged significantly.

WADDY McGEE came through to the semifinals along with last year's champion. By the rules of the roleo, he was matched with Frank Gay-on-tosh. At the same time Tom White eliminated Rolling Rob Simmons of Astoria, who had proved worthy of his title of Pacific coast champion, but not equal to the best white-pine rollers of the Great Lakes. Two roll-offs remained, with three men to compete. A default had caused this lop-sided semifinal. Ed Beauregard, of Mankato, Minnesota, had failed to show up.

Frank Gay-on-tosh was beaten before

he started. The fact was that Frank had topped his limit the year before. Tom White had put him in the water, once out of the three roll-offs which gave him the championship—and a year added to fifty-nine makes sixty, which was Frank's age. This remarkable Indian, who had remained on a slippery log, without a pike pole, for two hours and forty minutes, for a world's record, was now on the end of a log opposite the burly, aggressive Waddy McGee, making his last stand.

Tom White watched, with a lump of sympathy in his throat. Like a seasoned old totem, Gay-on-tosh stood, lean and tall and brown, his little eyes watching McGee's feet as they revolved the glistening yellowish white cylinder, as clean and smooth as the proverbial hound's tooth.

It was plain that Gay-on-tosh was on the defensive. With pike poles in hand, however, the contest might have lasted all afternoon, for McGee was unable to shake the wily old brave from his hold. Frank met McGee's fierce spurts with impassive and seemingly effortless skill, but age was telling on him. He was being worn down and only his natural impassivity kept McGee from knowing it and winning right there.

At the end of half an hour of as pretty work as had been seen in any tourney, the judges ordered the pair to throw their pike poles aside and roll with their calked boots until one or the other spilled off.

The first fall came quickly—and it was a double one. That is, it looked as if both men struck the water at the same time, but keen-eyed judges ruled that the Indian had gone first, shoving the log from beneath McGee as he fell. The fall went to McGee.

Tom studied the play closely. He was learning his lesson. He must roll McGee next. Tom knew he could never meet Waddy's aggressiveness with the same tactics the bigger man used.

It was a weary, heavy-footed Indian who crawled out of the water after that first ducking, while McGee seemed to have added vim and aggressiveness. He rushed the rolling so savagely that within five minutes Gay-on-tosh slid off a second time, McGee keeping his balance by the exercise of desperate skill. A roar of applause went up from the Blue Water crowd. Frank's Indian backers sat in stolid silence as old Frank slipped beneath the cobalt blue of the bay.

Frank ignored all the other hands reached down to help him onto the boom and seized Tom White's. As he crooked an elbow and drew his head close to Tom's, he whispered wheezily:

"You can do. Me, I'm too old, but I got hee's numbaire, Tom. De long roll do it! *Comprenez?*"

"Comprend," murmured Tom, "I was watching you. Bet your shirt on me, Frank."

"I have do dat."

Waddy McGee came strutting along the boom and faced Cuffer Tom as he rose from helping Gay-on-tosh. Without even offering his hand to the defeated Indian, McGee shouted to Tom:

"You're next! Say, you better come over to the car and have a nip. You look like you needed a hair off the dog that bit you."

"Thanks, no!" drawled Tom, fixing McGee with a stare, "I don't swallow it, a-tall. I'm aiming to put the dog that bit me in the water, pretty soon. Laugh that off!"

McGee cursed, doubled his fists and lurched toward Tom. The roleo might have ended in a fist fight, then and there, but for Gay-on-tosh, who seemed to stumble between them, his bony, sinewy arms sweeping the two apart.

"Dis ees roleo, not dog fight!" he snapped.

McGee recovered himself. His tem-

per had come near getting the better of him, Tom White grinned. This was one thing he had hoped to accomplish with his remark. The other thing was to let McGee know he was wise to the attempts made to disable and disqualify him and render him unfit to compete.

McGee was white and his gaze uncertain.

"I don't know what you mean by that kind of a joke," he growled.

"No joke, Waddy," Tom responded easily. "You won't think so after you've lost six to one against that four hundred I sent to you to cover."

"You——"

Tom smoothed his sore eye and with the other hand rubbed his leg.

"Yes," he drawled, "it was me. I figured you'd be the sort that would give a lady a chance to try for a good long shot—when you figured your bet was a sure thing When you lose, you'll have to call on the old man for help to pay the sheriff of Wapoo and a few others I might mention, but won't—until it's the right time."

McGee turned as much paler as was possible. What he might have said or done was a question, but at this moment Mary Zane, with Elsa beside her, appeared. Elsa eagerly congratulated Waddy. He received her words in sullen silence.

Mary's were, somehow, different.

"You won that fairly enough, Mr. McGee," she said flatly.

She turned away and leaped on a log and Elsa followed her. They began another exhibition to allow the finalists time to rest and get ready for the climax of the roleo. A brass band blared.

Tom White had no idea of framing up a revenge on Waddy McGee for his underhanded work. He had set Sam, Joe and Spruce to making inquiries partly to forestall any further efforts and partly to satisfy himself that McGee was responsible for the several attempts to put him out of the rolling. Tom's sole purpose now was to beat McGee and prove to Mary Zane that he was on the square—with himself as well as those who were backing him to win.

THE contest committee, however, had not dropped its investigation. Before the first call for the finals, Tom and Waddy were summoned quietly before the committee.

Tom was questioned, first, as to what he knew about the filed calks. He endeavored to make a denial of any knowledge. He was afraid Waddy might be disqualified now. He did not want that to happen. Paul Zane was merciless in his examination and Tom sensed he had something up his sleeve. He admitted, finally, that he might recognize the man he suspected of the job, if he saw him.

Zane turned to Waddy.

"Do you know anything about this disgraceful affair?" he demanded.

"Hell, no!" came Waddy's gruff retort. "Why should I?"

"Because one of the witnesses we have questioned swears he was employed by you to shadow Tom White from the time he left Eau Claire and to 'do a job on him.'"

"That's a lie!" roared Waddy, his face turning red, then white.

Old Jabez McGee, his face filled with shame and pain, stood with drooping head, his fingers working nervously at the buttons of his coat.

"No need to use any emphasis, Waddy," came Zane's cold voice. "It looks bad—but for the sake of your father and the honor of the town of Blue Water, the committee has voted, in advance, to let your denial stand until after the finals. That is, unless Cuffer Tom wishes to enter a formal complaint."

"I do not!" came Tom's quick declaration.

"I'd like to know who the liar is who accuses me of——"

"George Gay," Zane interrupted quickly, and with a meaning look.

Tom had a flash of memory. He knew, now, where he had seen Gay. It was in the mill yard.

"That breed: Damn his soul! I'll ——" Waddy was off again, but Zane cut in on him a second time.

"And the sheriff of Wapoo has wired us from St. Paul, confirming some of Gay's statements. Do you still make formal denial?"

"Yes, I do!" was Waddy's sullen reply. "I don't know a thing about it and the sheriff's a liar if he—— How did he happen to be in St. Paul?"

Zane turned with a grim smile to Tom White.

"I think Tom could enlighten you on that subject, if he cares to," he said.

Tom merely grinned and rolled a cigarette.

WADDY McGEE faced Tom White, on the boom, badly shaken by the inquisition through which he had just come. He knew very well he had escaped disqualification only by his father's influence and that his father had played his trump cards out. He knew that even if he beat Cuffer Tom, he might be forced to relinquish the title. His elaborate entertainment of Paul Zane and his daughters seemed to have been more than overbalanced by his "entertainment" of Tom White, en route to Blue Water Bay.

McGee saw himself losing more than the championship, though, if he failed to go through. He had placed an appallingly large amount of money up on himself. And the sting of Mary Zane's "congratulations" bit deep, together with the knowledge that Mary had acted for Tom White in placing Tom's money. Waddy had covered it all, out of sheer bravado, intending, if he won, to be magnanimous and return to her what she had put up for herself. It would be a good lead for what he wanted to ask her. It might win him the girl he wanted, he thought.

Up to the moment he stood before the committee, Waddy had not admitted the possibility of defeat. He had let no chance slip to pave the way for victory—and his easy defeat of Gay-ontosh had so bolstered his natural egotism that he considered Tom White easy money—particularly with that bad limp Tom had. Waddy had been watching Tom closely—and he had one more card up his sleeve.

A long blare of brass from the band quieted the excited crowd. Zane made the final call and announcement:

"Finals: Cuffer Tom White of Eau Claire, runner-up in last year's tourney, and Waddy McGee of Blue Water Bay. The winner will be declared log-rolling champion of the Northwest. To win, he must put his opponent in the water twice out of a possible three rolls. Contestants ready? Judges ready? Jump your log! Roll!"

Bla-a-a-a blared the brass and *R-r-r-room* rolled the drums in a fanfare which was outblared and outrumbled by the howl and hand spatter and feet rattling on planks as the crowd surged forward for a better view of the duel of steel-shod feet.

Tom White was late at the log. He had found his pike pole only after a search of a pile stacked up on the boom by an extremely energetic and officious boom tender. McGee stood with his pole thrust over the log, holding it against the boom, waiting, as Tom hurried up.

The first roll-off was to be with pikes—that is, the rivals were to keep their pike holes in hand and try to roll each other off, for half an hour. Failing in a fall, the pikes must be discarded and the game continued without them.

Tom slid his pike to bottom, over

the log, like Waddy's. They jumped the log, then brought their pikes up in an arc and jabbed points in the boom, shoved away and straightened up, balancing, pulling their pikes free and holding them across their breasts in a sort of salute.

Midway on the log a blue circle of paint marked each man's half, beyond which he must not step or he would lose a fall automatically.

THE spectators saw, poised there, as evenly matched a pair as had ever pawed timber in a roleo. But the spectators did not realize this, for McGee looked twenty pounds heavier—he weighed five more actually—and his short, thick neck, bulging shoulders and calves made him appear much the stronger. His quick conquest of Gay-on-tosh had made him favorite in the final match.

Tom's black eye, his pronounced limp, his seedy clothing, unshaven face and tapering build all helped pile up the odds against him. Sloping shoulders, rather slender neck, narrow hips, symmetrical arms and legs—the build of an all-round athlete, which is very deceiving beneath ordinary clothing. The build and the coördination of muscles of an all-round athlete were Tom's—and coördination of muscular play to the finest degree was what log rolling demanded.

The quickness of a cat, the strength of a gorilla, the wind and stamina of a Marathon runner, the balance of an ace of the air—all these were needed for the man who would be champion log cuffer of the Northwest. Cuffer Tom had won his name, as all rivermen do, because he was a wonderful "log cuffer." Waddy McGee had won his for his wadded-looking shoulders and legs—and the wad of money he was forever displaying.

"Zip!" This was Waddy's pike plunging suddenly to bottom.

"Whir!" This was the log, birling suddenly and swiftly to the right.

"Zip!" Tom's pike shot to bottom, on the opposite side of the log and a grin lighted his face as his countermaneuver proved the right one.

Then—as suddenly as had been his awkward slide from the log in the morning, when Mary Zane rolled with him—Tom lunged out, off the log, his pike pole seeming to crumple beneath him.

"A-a-ah!" A windy groaning sigh went up from the crowd as Tom splashed at full length in the water.

Waddy McGee, dancing on his end of the log, with an evil grin on his face, waved his pike aloft at the judges to show how easily he could stand floating timber.

Waddy had won the first fall—and with pikes.

Tom kept his hold on his pike handle and shoved it ahead of him to the boom. There he raised it high.

He had only a handle to raise. Point and hook were gone. The yellow spruce had broken sheer off where the wood entered the iron ferrule. Tom sought, with red rage in his heart, for the boom tender, but that individual was missing. There was nothing to indicate how the break had been caused. The ferrule held this secret, at the bottom of the reservoir.

"McGee takes the first fall," came Zane's megaphonic decision. "Discard pikes and roll on your own!"

The crowd hushed. This was what they wanted. Tom looked up and met Waddy's grin with set lips and blazing eyes.

"Now," he said, "I guess you're all done, McGee."

He did not hear what Waddy's sneering reply was, for another voice sounded close to his ear.

"Go get him, Tom! You can do it. Two straight falls. You can do it; I know you can!"

He got a flash of Mary Zane's flushed face and her eyes, with her soul in the glowing orbs, and when he landed on the log, Cuffer Tom felt as if he were a feather or a toy balloon. His calks spurned wood as a toe dancer's spurn the tapis, uplifted by the glorious throbbing of a symphony orchestra.

The long roll! He must wait his chance? McGee used the same aggressive tactics he had used with Gay-ontosh. A sudden wabble of the log between his feet, then a quick leap and he pawed at it, his feet beating down side by side, across it, until the water rippled up and over and the sharp edges at the ends shot up spray, Tom met the savage rushes with light-footed, sure-footed ease. It had to be with ease. Only one who treads timber as a fly on the wall could meet them at all and stay up.

Tom kept on the defensive for all of twenty minutes. He was waiting, watching, marking time, letting his hot blood cool as he concentrated upon Waddy's feet, regarding them as inanimate things and forgetting the enemy who owned them. He got his temper down.

He could not quite dissolve that lightness of feeling, though, and he didn't want to, when his soul seemed to have expanded and was lifting him in air without any effort of muscles at all. Tom White knew very well that Mary Zane's encouragement had not been merely the result of friendliness. There was a deeper, stronger emotion back of her words.

McGee was working like a fiend—and he had begun to perspire. With a sweep of his hand, he knocked off his hat.

Tom grinned. He had not even begun to exert himself. The only warmth he felt was at his heart and on the spot where Indian Frank had rubbed "serpent juice"—and had banished the Charley horse.

McGee relaxed from his succession of swift whirls and birls and that instant Tom sprang vigorously into action. He started the long roll.

THERE is this difference between long and short rolling, as practiced by the rivermen of the North and West. It is the difference between the sprint and the distance run. The short roll requires stamina, strength and quickness of foot like a boxer's, abnormal muscular development to sustain the strain upon them.

The long roll requires fleetness the equal of the short roll, but it takes wind, too, and endurance and then more endurance and more and more until, with the final kick, there is extra speed, the spurt of a two-miler who has saved himself for the stretch.

Once started on the long roll, Tom White knew he must never stop; he must outrace Waddy McGee in a treadmill run until McGee's feet faltered and slipped. There was no stopping until his man was off, for the very effort to stop would dump the roller—and his opponent, perhaps, but not surely.

McGee was on the defensive, now. He used the "drag" by which a cuffer brakes down on the birling timber and makes it as difficult as he can for his antagonist to keep up speed. McGee's five pounds gave him advantage in dragging. He needed it, for his furious tactics had slowed him up just a bit. He had already spent the stimulated energy obtained by taking a "bite of hair" as a bracer just before he jumped the log.

The crowd went wild as the long roll began and it grew wilder as it progressed. Tom White was giving them an exhibition of such speed as no one yet had seen in a cuffing contest. It looked like recklessness, desperation, considering what he had at stake. His feet flashed like the revolving spokes of

a wheel as he whipped the gleaming pine. The ripple of water and *rip-rip* of calks biting in and pulling out sent up a liquid-sibilant sound which, at intervals, was the only noise to be heard, except the tattoo of racing feet.

FRANK GAY-ON-TOSH squatted on his haunches at the boom's edge, with his body swaying back and forth as if he were working up to a war dance. He squinted his old eyes at Tom and grunted, now and then, in a satisfied manner.

Tom increased his already terrific speed. It seemed impossible he could do so, for he was running like a man in a hundred-yard dash. Not only did he spurt, but he kept on increasing speed. Waddy McGee lurched forward, forced to abandon the drag by the necessity of moving his feet faster and faster.

He stubbed the toe of his right foot against the heel of his left and went off, backward, in a feet-first dive. He came to the surface spluttering and gasping.

The crowd went crazy—or at least it seemed as if it did. The "whoopees" of the rivermen mingled with a genuine, old-time Indian war whoop from Gay-on-tosh and his people as Frank raised his hand in the air and made a sign.

"Second fall to Cuffer Tom White. Honors even. The next fall wins the championship."

Again there was silence. Then an excited murmur rose from the spectators. The ten-minute interval allowed for the contestants to get their wind before they jumped the log again—a fresh log, this time—found the sentiment of the crowd quite changed. Tom White's exhibition had won him the admiration of every person at the rolea, so it seemed.

"The Cuffer's cute; he faked that lame leg," opined one of McGee's own men ruefully. "I got took in by it. That long roll was a runaway."

"Yeah, and he faked that first fall, too, I suppose—and his busted pike pole!" snarled Rubber Sam, beside him, and then he raised his voice:

"Six to one on Cuffer Tom to win!"

Sam had made up a pool among the men from the Eau Claire River district and was offering reversed odds on White. A few plungers of the McGee faction covered, in the desperate hope that sending a little good money after a lot of bad might work a miracle.

"Contestants ready? Judges ready? Jump your log! Roll!"

The final spin was on. Tom White had another attack of lightness. In the recess he had opportunity for one look into Mary's face—and that was enough. Her brown eyes met his without wavering, bravely, and with all the promise he had read in them before.

"He won't try the long roll again," muttered McGee's trainer to Waddy, as the call sounded," and he can't lick you at your own game. Rush him fast!"

But the prophet proved false. Cuffer Tom set the log in motion the moment he landed upon it and, almost before McGee could get set, they were off on another runaway roll.

Tom's tactics brought the crowd to its feet. Every one had settled down to watch an hour or two of grueling birling, but Tom was giving them swift action from the start. Under cover of the rippling roars that burst forth in waves of sound, Tom broke one of the rules of the roleo. He began to talk to Waddy. He spoke from the corner of his mouth, his lips scarcely moving, but he made Waddy hear.

"Some dive you took. Find that pike point? Quick job you had done for me on that. Good shoemaker you keep on your pay roll. Did a good job on my calks, though. Better than the breed that filed 'em."

With each phrase, Tom spurted faster. Waddy dragged in vain. The momentum of the spotless, untouched pine cylinder increased. Tom was rolling it away from the boom, having landed sidewise when he jumped it and, with a quick twist, turned his face to the boom so that he could whip the log out into the reservoir and avoid his long roll being halted by the judges. If it touched the boom, this would happen.

"Sheriff of Wapoo had a nice gold star—once," said Tom. "I'll drop it in, if you want something to dive for. Must cost you a lot to try to jug a shingle thief. Roll, you bum cigarette, roll! We've got a forty-mile track!"

Waddy swore violently and he could ill spare the breath for it. When he came out of the water after his fall, he had been very bad off for wind. He was panting again, already, from the speed of the roll—and perhaps as a result of the sting of internal, infernal snake cure he had taken during the ten-minute interval.

"Want me to dump you now, or give you a real run for your money?" queried Tom, sotto voce. "Say the word!"

"Go to hell!" sputtered Waddy, and with the words he lunged dangerously, but he recovered.

Tom laughed.

"Want a smell of pine, eh?" he taunted. "Why, any pulp-stick chaser could roll you. Like that Wapoo gang you asked me about. Three hundred of my own was in that roll I sent up to you—which my pals got back from your outpost at Wapoo. Pay up like a man, now, and shut up for good! Oho!"

Goaded to desperation, Waddy had resorted to a trick drag which was at once dangerous and daring. It consisted in jumping in air and coming down hard on the heels, with the heel calks digging into the log on the side opposite its direction of revolution. The result, when Waddy tried it, was merely to plunge his end under water, slacken the roll a trifle and cause Tom to relax his body to take up the tip of the timber. He was off on a faster spurt before Waddy could recover from the jump.

McGEE knew the end was near and he took a desperate chance. His maneuver had sent up a yell from his backers, with shouts to "Do it again, Waddy! That's the trick!"

It was his only hope. He could not outrace Tom and he knew it. His leap was timed at the end of one of Tom's fast spurts—or what seemed to be the end. But it was Tom's countertrick. Tom slowed down deliberately and, when Waddy jumped, Tom's feet whipped down across the log like drumsticks on the snare. Waddy's heels struck hard, but instead of checking the log from its mad whirl, the momentum of the birl snapped his feet back so swiftly that they plunged into the water.

He fell across the log on his stomach.

McGee lay with glazed eyes, unable to move. The fall had done for him utterly, knocking what little breath he had from him and completing the exhaustion which had been gripping him fast, in his effort to withstand the long roll.

Tom White, doing a quick reverse to keep his balance, looked down on the sodden form and then did a thing which won him a greater roar of applause than his victory. Instead of spinning McGee clear off, as he had a right to do, in order to continue to ride the log for a one-man record against time, he slid into the water, gripped his end of the log hard under his arm and began swimming toward the boom, towing Waddy with him.

McGee's condition was such he had to be lifted bodily onto the flat timber of the boom. Winded, his face had

gone under water and he had sucked some into his lungs.

"Cuffer Tom White takes the fall and the championship of the Northwest!"

Paul Zane's megaphone could scarcely be heard above the frenzied shouting of the crowd. A messenger from the chairman pushed his way to Tom's side and asked the latter a question.

"The chairman wants to know if you ain't going to roll for the time record, to try to beat Gay-on-tosh's time," he said.

WADDY McGEE struggled up on one elbow and shot out his hand. Thinking he wanted to be pulled to his feet, Tom grasped the outstretched hand. Waddy gripped it with a feverish clutch.

"Say, you're good!" he rattled huskily. "You go ahead and beat that Indian. I'll make 'em let you count your time with me in just the same as if you——"

But Tom White shook his head and returned McGee's pressure, with a hearty clasp.

"No," he said, speaking to McGee and the messenger as well. "No, I'm going to let old Frank's record stand. That Indian is too white and game for me to try to rob him."

McGee stared for a second unbelievingly, then he gripped Tom's hand again; this was as near as he got to making an apology.

But Cuffer Tom was satisfied. He hunted up Frank Gay-on-tosh. He found Frank at the end of the boom, trying to get through the milling throng to his old sedan. Mary Zane, her gay blouse bulging at the waist grotesquely, pulled herself onto the boom by grasping Frank's shoulder and thrust out both hands to Tom.

"Tom, you did it!" she cried. "I knew you could! Tom, I've got it. Where can I give it to you?" She patted the bulge in her blouse.

Tom turned to Gay-on-tosh.

"Say, Frank, can I borrow your car to make the trip to Eau Claire? You just as soon go on the train with Joe and Sam and Spruce Nelson?"

"Ba gosh!" exclaimed Gay-on-tosh, his little eyes sliding a glance at Mary Zane's face, "Ba gosh! You take dat car for couple of days eef you need heem. Me, I jus' soon walk to Eau Claire, now you beat Waddy McGee and let me keep dat time record. Ba gosh, I don't ever forget!"

"Come on, Mary!" Tom requested still holding one of her hands, "I guess the old bus will run."

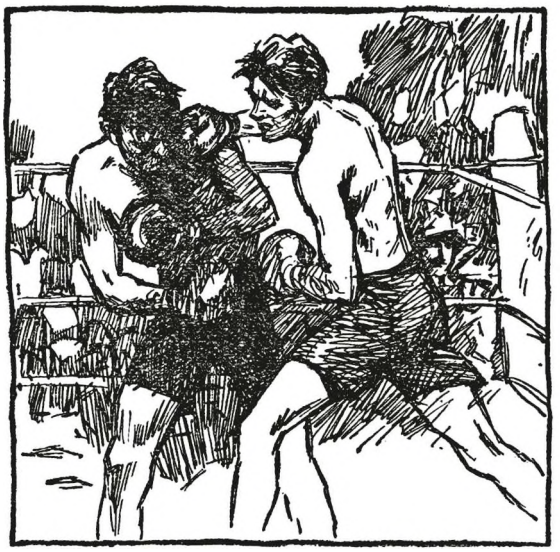
In the silent, deep-shadowed shelter of a tote road, far out in the spruce on the way to Eau Claire, Tom accepted the great roll of bills. Mary drew from her blouse. Then, drawing a sack and some rice papers from his pocket, he rolled a cigarette. His fingers shook.

"Mary," he said, "you keep that money. *We're* going to need it, pretty soon."

Other stories by Mr. Perry will be published in subsequent issues of THE POPULAR.

HAD YOUR GERMS TO-DAY?

Subways and crowded city streets are every bit as healthful as—perhaps more healthful than—the open country, according to Doctor William H. Park of the New York City health department. He says that city dwellers breathe in so many germs that their systems become used to them and that they do little damage; and that in their rapid transit from home to home the germs use up some of their virulence.



The Mysterious Mauler Shows Up

By Roy W. Hinds

Author of "The Second Battle of Shiloh," "At the Bottom of the Bag," Etc.

To the mid-Western mill town of Midland came a pugilist and his manager intent on playing a game of chance with the cards stacked in their own favor. Unfortunately for them there was a joker at the bottom of the pack.

THEY called it fighting in those days, not boxing. In the bigger and more formal contests the fighters wore gloves and fought by rounds and rules. In certain impromptu affairs, arranged at the last minute for local celebrations in out-of-the-way places, the contestants fought with gloves if they happened to have them and by rounds and rules if any one could be found who knew the rules and was man enough to get in the ring and enforce them. More often, though, the enforcement of rules was left to the crowd, whose clamor was sufficient to warn a fighter that he hadn't better repeat some unfair trick.

That was the sort of ring fights they put on in the old logging days in the Saginaw region and the fighters were usually men who had achieved fistic renown in the lumber camps.

Midland was a small town, but it was also a gay one. It was patriotic, too, if a town's patriotism can be measured by its enthusiasm and the quantity of whisky absorbed on the Fourth of July. There were numerous big days in Midland, but the anniversary of the nation's birth overshadowed all in point of din and glamour. In that district the most enthusiastic celebrants and the hardest drinkers, the lumberjacks, were snow-bound in the woods around Christmas and New Year, but in midsummer they were gathered in the towns, most of them at work in the sawmills, cutting into lumber the logs they had taken out of the pine forests during the winter.

By the Fourth of July the lumberjacks had recovered from the physical and financial ravages of the spring carousal and were ripe for a bust.

Midland's nine saloons would place big orders with the distilleries and lay six inches of sawdust on their floors. Sheriff Joe Blackmore would appoint a special force of deputies and the mills prepare to shut down over the headache period. Main Street would be decorated with bunting and festooned with tree branches. Lumberjacks would get out their old grudges and dust them and swear to have a settlement if they lost their front teeth in the effort. Ice cream and firecrackers and pop corn would be assembled for the women and children and a rousing time had by all.

NEWS traveled, even in the early 'nineties. The little mill town of Midland, tucked away in its Michigan forest, would have been surprised to learn that its coming Fourth of July celebration was being talked of in a hotel in Kansas City. This was as far ahead as mid-May and furthermore the celebration was a subject of earnest conversation and not one merely of casual reference. The character of the two men in that hotel room would have aroused considerable interest in Midland, too.

They were not men of the woods, though one of them was big and broad and strong enough, and sufficiently rough, for that matter, to have held a job in any logging camp. He had a small head as round as a pool ball and wore his sand-colored hair in a close crop. His neck was thick and his hands were huge and hard-knuckled. He looked like a gorilla dressed up. He was none other than the pugilist known in certain sections as the "Mysterious Mauler."

His companion was a sly, skinny little man of middle age, who wore expensively tailored clothes and jewelry which told of a recent streak of prosperity. He was Amos Spooner, the Mauler's manager, and his cunning, avaricious face was sufficient to assure any one that the twain were after the money, fair means or foul. They had prospered throughout the winter, mostly by fair means, for the Mysterious Mauler really could fight, but with almost a fightless summer staring them in the face, Amos Spooner had turned his attention to the less creditable side of the pugilistic game.

Despite the fact that there was plenty of money to be had squarely by a fighter of the Mauler's attainments, this pair was not above turning a crooked stunt.

"Might pull the forfeit-and-bet stunt up there," Amos Spooner was saying.

"Uh-huh," the Mauler rejoined. He was big enough to twist his manager's neck with two fingers, yet he was no more than putty in his hands. "We ain't never be'n in—— Wha'sa name o' that State?"

"Michigan. It's a long ways from any place we ever been at. Lumberjacks up there. We can slip that game over, like we slipped it over on them Montana cowboys last summer and the California miners summer before. It's a racket we can't play much and not too close to the last victims, but it'll be safe up there in Michigan."

The prize fighter blinked his tiny eyes.

"I got 'o be a lumberjack, uh?" he suggested.

"Sure," his manager rejoined. "That'll be easy this time o' year. No lumberjacking to do in the summertime, no work in the woods. They hang around the towns and work in the mills, wrastling logs. You can do that. It takes muscle, but no brains."

The Mysterious Mauler took no offense at this remark. He had been made aware of his stupidity on numberless occasions. So long as one con-

ceded that he could fight, the Mauler was indifferent to a man's opinion of his intellectual attainments. He had the satisfaction of knowing that he could whip any college professor in the country, which was the clinching rejoinder he sometimes made when his manager lost patience and spoke scathingly of his lack of gray matter.

"This burg's up near Saginaw," Amos went on. "Midland—that's the name of it. It's the livest little town in the State, just the spot for the forfeit-and-bet stunt. I met a traveling man this morning and his talk give me the idea. They always pull a big Fourth o' July celebration in that town —with a prize fight, if they can get the fighters. We'll get on the job early and lead 'em into it. We ain't got nothing else to do. We'll drift up to Chicago, or Detroit maybe, and I'll go up to that town and look it over right. I'll see just what you'll hafta do there and lay it out so's you won't go wrong —like I did other times. If it still sizes up good, we'll take a few thousand off'm the lumberjacks and the wise sports of Midland. I'll go down now and see about trains."

He did, with the result that the Mysterious Mauler and his manager reached Detroit a few days later.

THE preliminary trip which the wily Spooner made to Midland, in the guise of a traveling salesman, must have produced glowing prospects, for he and his fighter got into the game with extraordinary enthusiasm. Being without initiative himself, the Mauler was sure to follow instructions with painstaking care, as a man will who has no confidence in his own judgment. And leave it to Amos Spooner to lay out a thing like this.

At any rate, along toward evening on a day in early June, the swinging doors of the Oscar House bar parted to admit a stranger in Midland. He was a large, strong, hulking man, dressed in the customary garb of the region. The fact that his clothing was almost all new occasioned no comment. He made a capital lumberjack in appearance and of course his new raiment could be attributed to the fact that he was in funds. He proceeded directly to the bar and tossed off a stiff jolt of whisky, additional evidence that he was a lumberjack.

He got into conversation with "Dandy" Burns, the bartender. Asked if he intended to look for a job in the mills until the camps opened in the fall, the stranger said he might, but first he meant to get rid of what money he had. None would dispute now that he was a lumberjack. He said his name was Jones.

He made friends during the evening. He was disposed to buy drinks for every one, and none objected. He carefully avoided talk of the mills and woods and he used only a few phrases calculated to impress his hearers that he was in his natural environment. Dandy Burns, a keen young man, found himself interested in the stranger who was such a good sport.

Dandy noticed for instance that the man did more talking than drinking, but the others set him down as a man who couldn't stand much. He seemed to get fairly well inebriated on very few drinks, though he did not stagger nor talk thickly. His intoxication, it seemed, took the form of hallucinations as to his gifts as a fighting man.

He talked louder and louder. Dandy Burns watched him narrowly and Jones, as the Mysterious Mauler now called himself, was too dense to perceive that he was being watched.

Yes, he seemed to have hallucinations. Surely none but a man who made a business of fighting could accomplish all the fistic wonders he credited to himself. The crowd good-naturedly agreed with him. So long as

he didn't get personal, he might get by with it.

It happened that there was a card game in progress, participated in by four men, each of whom had a local reputation as a fighter. One of these was young Tom Paxton. The voice of the stranger grew more strident and challenging. The card players exchanged pointed glances.

"Seems to be lookin' fer trouble," Tom Paxton remarked.

Yet the stranger looked like a fighting man. He was big enough and his hands were hard-knuckled. The scars of battle were plentiful on his countenance. Evidently it wasn't just talk, he was indulging in.

"I c'n whip any man in Michigan!" Jones announced.

The card players looked at one another again.

"Er any man in this county!" came the voice from the bar.

A hand had just been played at the card table. Tom Paxton was shuffling the cards.

"I want first crack at him," he said quietly.

"We'll cut the cards fer it," another player suggested.

The voice from the bar went on: "There ain't a man in this town I can't whip!"

The four men at the table cut the cards.

"Er in this s'loon!" Jones added.

Tom Paxton got up from the card table and walked toward the belligerent Mr. Jones and announced:

"I've lis'ened to ye shootin' off yer bazoo long enough, about all the men ye've whipped. Ye're a stranger an' seemed sociable when ye first come in —but now ye're lookin' fer trouble. There's four of us just cut the cards over there, to see who'd put ye in yer place. I won. We didn't mind yer talk about fightin' so long's it was gen-'ral. But ye got too damn spee-cifick just now. We got to perteck our own town when outsiders come in lookin' fer a rumpus. It's you an' me fer it, stranger."

This was the exact situation which the Mysterious Mauler had sought to create.

During Tom Paxton's speech, the others in the room had instinctively formed a circle. There was an evil, exultant glitter in the eyes of the professional pugilist as he faced the young lumberjack.

It is a common notion that the man who blows the loudest is not the best fighter, but Jones disproved this in short order. He wasted no time, remembering Amos Spooner's injunction to prove himself a ferocious battler on the jump.

TOM PAXTON was a big fellow and young. He wanted a rough-and-tumble go and sailed in with that expectation. He was not prepared for the scientific defense and onslaught which followed. Tom did not land one effective blow. He did not fathom the shift and attack of his antagonist. A look of bewilderment crossed his tortured countenance as he soaked up a volley and variety of blows. Even then, his dizzy brain failed to grasp the fact that he was up against a man of science.

Tom did not keep away and make an attempt to spar it out, to utilize any of the natural instincts of cautious defense and subtle attack. He continued to rush, in baffled rage, and to swing sledge-hammer blows and of course this was duck soup for Jones. Smash, bang, crack—a long, lightninglike, overhanded wallop to Tom's exposed chin and it was all over. Tom Paxton lay still on the floor.

Dandy Burns, the keen young bartender with slickly parted hair, stared over the rim of the bar.

The stranger turned a slow, baleful

glance around the circle of faces. He addressed the three men who had cut the cards with Tom Paxton.

"You fellas next," he said. "One at a time."

Being men of courage, they stepped in, one after another, long after it had been established that Jones was all and even more than he claimed to be. Having warning, they fought more cautiously, but they couldn't turn the trick on the powerful fighting machine there in action. In the end, Jones had beaten four of Midland's best battlers—and in a decisive manner.

The news spread. It was a heroic achievement in a region and at a time which put so much stress on physical prowess. The community itself lived by might—men cut and handled huge logs, they fought floods and forest fires. Jones became a hero before the night was over. Men came the length of Main Street to look at him as he held forth at the bar of the Oscar House and small boys squirmed through the crowd and stared in open-mouthed admiration. Some one asked Mr. Jones his first name. He said it was Bill—plain Bill Jones. He accepted this adulation as a matter of course. Evidently he had fought his way into popularity in other sawmill towns.

A mill foreman offered Bill Jones a job.

"Like to keep a feller like you here in Midland," the foreman said.

"I'm gonna stay in Midland," the fighting man announced. "I jus' wanna git started right—tha's all; 'n' let the fightin' men know they hadn't better monkey with me. But a job—— Well, I don't need no job now. I got money. When I go broke, I'll go see yuh about a job."

A chuckle of admiration went the rounds. Bill Jones was a lumberjack through and through. Did any lumberjack ever take a job with money in his pocket?

The town adopted Bill Jones. Even the men he had whipped became his friends. They counted his fistic prowess as one of their town's assets. Midland got to boasting that it had a citizen who'd whip any man who could be produced by Saginaw or the neighboring communities. Bill Jones finally took a job in the mills, a job that took strength but no skill and no previous knowledge of the work.

All this happened before the twentieth of June, on which day another stranger appeared in Midland.

THE newcomer wasn't exactly a stranger either; he had been in Midland a day or so some few weeks previously. He reminded Dandy Burns of this. The bartender remembered. The man was a traveling salesman, he said, and he had a plausible story to prove it. He said his name was Smith—indeed he was registered as William Smith at the hotel desk just outside the barroom door.

"Hear you've got a tough fighting man in Midland," Smith said.

"Yeh," the bartender rejoined. "Where'd you hear about him?"

"In Saginaw yesterday. Somebody said he'd cleaned up on the best men in town. Name's Jones, ain't it?"

"Yeh. Working in the mills now. That bird sure can fight. He whipped four men right on the floor there."

"He ought to go in the ring."

Dandy Burns pushed the bottle toward Smith, as an invitation to have one on the house.

"That's right, he had," he agreed. "He's better'n lots of 'em I've seen in the ring. Boys're talking about getting a match for him on the Fourth."

"Putting him up against some other lumberjack, eh?"

"Well, there ain't hardly no lumberjack who'll tackle him. He whipped four of our best men and he give it to another bird that got fresh with him

down to the mill. There ain't no lumberjack wants any of his stuff."

There was a pause.

"Say," the visitor suggested, "why not stack him up against a regular pug?"

"Been thinking about that," Dandy Burns returned, "only they're hard to get. We——"

At this juncture William Smith seemed to become possessed of a brilliant idea. He thumped the bar with his lean white fist.

"Say!" he announced. "I'd certainly like to see that fight. Yes, sir," he went on musingly, "that'd be a daisy!"

"What fight?"

"Well, you know—I was just thinking. Ever hear o' the Mysterious Mauler? No? Well, he's a pug who's been batting around out West couple o' years or so. Whipped everything out there, no champions, you know, but fighting men at that—heavyweights. He's a big fella and he can fight. He'd whip your man here sure. Maybe you wouldn't like that, eh?"

"Anything for a fight," Dandy Burns replied, like a true sportsman, "and the best man win."

"That's the talk. If Jones—your lumberjack here—agreed to take the Mauler on, that's Jones' lookout, if he gets a trimming. Thing to do is tell Jones just what the Mauler is. If Jones says he'll fight him—why, that's square enough, ain't it?"

"Seems so."

Smith bent confidentially over the bar.

"The Mysterious Mauler's in Detroit right now," he said, "him and his manager. I seen 'em in a hotel there. I seen the Mauler fight out West once and I spotted him. I got to talking with his manager and he told me they'd be in Detroit couple o' months, but he asked me to keep it quiet. Resting, they are, after a busy fight season, but I bet the Mauler'd come up here to fight a lumberjack, if there was dough enough in it. I don't mean a purse, see? I mean bets."

"He'd find plenty o' Jones money here," Dandy Burns promised. "We're all strong for Jones."

"Sure! But don't forget," the supposed traveling man urged, in a friendly tone, "that Jones ain't got much chance with the Mauler. Don't put all your dough on Jones just 'cause he's a home-town man."

Dandy Burns looked evenly into the drummer's eyes.

"I usually bet a little on the Midland man," he said, "to show my loyalty. But I do my real betting on the man I think will win."

"Just what a fella ought 'o do," William Smith assured him.

Thus did Amos Spooner, in the guise of William Smith, traveling man, set the real game in motion.

THE sporting element of the town was let into the thing. It seemed a good chance to provide a rattling fight for the Fourth of July. It would draw spectators from surrounding towns. It looked open and aboveboard. A delegation called on Bill Jones, at work in the mills.

"I'll fight any man," Bill Jones told them. "I'll fight John L. Sullivan, if yuh c'n git him!"

"But you know this fella's a professional pugilist," the man known as William Smith suggested.

"Don't care if he is," Bill replied. "I'll fight him—'n' I'll lay bets on myself, too."

That settled it, so far as Bill Jones was concerned. He'd been duly warned. If he got an unmerciful beating, he could blame none but himself. He was being matched against a professional pugilist, but he'd been made aware of the facts. There was no trick in it.

It remained then to get the services

of the Mysterious Mauler. William Smith, who seemed like a good fellow interested in a fight for the sake of the sport, volunteered to take the matter up with the Mauler's manager, on his return to Detroit that night. The Midland men appreciated this.

Things moved rapidly. Charley Oscar, the hotel man, one of the leading sportsmen of Midland, soon got a letter signed by Amos Spooner, manager of the Mysterious Mauler. Spooner said he'd learned that there was a desire in Midland to match a local fighter with the Mysterious Mauler. The Mauler was ready to fight, he said. The match would be agreeable. If he received word binding the bargain, he'd arrange to arrive in Midland on the morning of the Fourth with the Mysterious Mauler.

He suggested that a thousand-dollar forfeit be put up by each side and, in order to speed matters up, he was inclosing his check for that amount and asked that word be sent him from the Midland bank that this check and a check for an equal amount, signed by some backer of Bill Jones, had been deposited for the purposes stated. If Jones had changed his mind, Mr. Spooner asked only that his check be returned, but that if the Midland lumberjack still wished to fight, and changed his mind after the checks were deposited, Midland should forfeit its one thousand dollars to the Mysterious Mauler.

Furthermore, Mr. Spooner, in the absence of any considerable purse, must insist that whatever bets were made must be paid if Bill Jones did not appear in the ring. He'd had experience with nonprofessional fighters, he said, who failed to appear, or backed out at the last minute, particularly when they got a look at the Mysterious Mauler. He'd wasted his time in such deals.

So, if Midland bet on Jones and Jones backed out before entering the ring, the bets must be paid as though the men had fought and the Mauler won. Of course Amos Spooner offered a guarantee that the bets he made on the Mauler would be paid likewise, but he treated lightly the mere thought that his man wouldn't appear.

This all seemed fair enough. It was plain that Mr. Spooner and his fighter couldn't enter into an engagement for small money, that they depended on their bets as recompense and that they couldn't be expected to rely on a nonprofessional fighter as strongly as on a professional. The fighter's manager seemed to be fair and square, and his forfeit check was sufficient evidence of that.

The Midland sportsmen again interviewed their lumberjack hero. They read to him certain clippings they had received from the Mysterious Mauler's manager, all from far Western papers, recounting the pugilistic valor of the Mauler. But the lumberjack was not abashed. He was eager to fight the Mauler. He gave his pledge that he wouldn't back out.

The forfeits were posted.

AMOS SPOONER, lurking in Detroit, received word of this. He wrote back to Midland and reiterated his pledge that he would be there on the morning of the Fourth with his man. He suggested that it wasn't necessary for any one from Midland to call on him, as he had a previous engagement with the Mauler down in Ohio, and it would be difficult for any one from Midland to get in personal touch with him. His thousand-dollar forfeit precluded suspicion, as did the clippings, which mentioned more than once the name of Amos Spooner as the Mysterious Mauler's manager.

So, in effect, the Mysterious Mauler was matched with himself.

The newspapers of that day gave little space to nonchampionship pugilistic

affairs. That accounts for the fact that a fighter of second or third-rate class might be fairly well known in one section of the country and unheard of in another. Seldom did a picture or drawing of even a champion get into the papers. No likeness of the Mysterious Mauler had ever appeared in print anywhere. Amos Spooner's game appeared to be tight and taut.

The man whom Midland knew as Bill Jones let it be known that his old father lived in Detroit and blamed if he wasn't going down there and tap the old man for all he could and bet it on himself. He was gone three days and returned with three thousand dollars. He sought bets.

Within a few days he succeeded in getting up all his money, at odds favorable to himself. There were some who refused to bet against a Midland man, but there were many whose judgment told them to bet on the Mysterious Mauler. There had been the clippings and the printed word is powerful. Those clippings had told of professional fights won by the Mysterious Mauler, of his bulk and punch and speed. Bill Jones was, it seemed, just as big and he had shown class that took him out of the rough-and-tumble crowd, but what could he do against a real professional?

It was a curious thing for the Mysterious Mauler to be betting against the Mysterious Mauler, but Midland didn't know.

If Bill Jones won, he'd collect the three thousand dollars he'd got up on himself as well as seven thousand which had been posted against him at various odds.

Then Amos Spooner returned to Midland, as William Smith, the traveling man. He looked Bill Jones over carefully. Saginaw money had begun to appear. The pseudotraveling man got numerous bets. He succeeded in getting up two thousand dollars on Bill Jones and he stood to win three thousand. All told, he and the Mysterious Mauler would win ten thousand dollars in bets, as well as a purse of five hundred dollars. What cared they about the thousand-dollar forfeit?

Every bet would be paid the moment the victory was awarded and, if one or the other fighter failed to appear in the ring, the victory would automatically go to the man who did appear.

IT was quite simple. Bill Jones would appear in the ring. But, then, the Mysterious Mauler wouldn't show up at all.

The train from Detroit would arrive at ten a. m. The alarm would be sounded. Frantic telegrams would be sent. Amos Spooner would be twenty miles away, in Saginaw. About twelve o'clock he'd file a telegram to Midland, saying he and his fighter had missed connections, but would arrive in Midland at one thirty, on the local train from Saginaw. Those who had bet on the Mysterious Mauler would send up shouts of joy and suspicion would be allayed. Efforts to get at the truth would cease.

Of course Amos Spooner would arrive on the one thirty train, but he'd come as William Smith. He'd be as much surprised as any one that the Mauler and his manager hadn't shown up. Once again, there would be despair among those who had bet on the Mauler.

The hands of the clock would creep relentlessly ahead. That half hour would go by seemingly as two minutes. Two o'clock—the dead line!

Bill Jones would be alone in the ring. The Mysterious Mauler would have forfeited the fight. Those who had bet on Bill Jones would collect. William Smith and Bill Jones, laden with spoils, would slip out of town and be heard of no more. And they would go so far

away that any chance of identifying them as Amos Spooner and the Mysterious Mauler would be fetched down to a minimum.

Midland might penetrate the fraud and it might not. At any rate, that twain had pulled it successfully on two previous occasions and were emboldened. Midland might decide that the men they knew as Jones and Smith were swindlers, but none would suggest that they were really the Mysterious Mauler and his manager. They'd think they were simply two crooks who utilized the names of the pugilist and his manager. Therein lay the safety of Amos Spooner and the Mysterious Mauler.

A HOT sun ushered in the day. Midland, clothed in his holiday decorations, looked forward eagerly to train time.

Things went exactly as Amos Spooner calculated; that is, up to two o'clock. There had manifested itself all the excitement attendant on the coming fight, the nonarrival of the Mysterious Mauler, the reassuring telegram and still another moment when he failed to appear. Men ran around in circles, drank furiously and set up deafening clamors.

"Maybe they're drivin' through," some one suggested.

A ray of hope and it was seized upon avidly. A man on horseback was sent out along the Saginaw road.

At five minutes of two, the fighter known as Bill Jones was sitting in one corner of the ring which had been built on the flats down by the Larkins mill. In the ring with him was Paddy Miles, a big two-fisted Irishman who'd been chosen as referee.

Four minutes of two, three minutes, two minutes! Amos Spooner mingled with the excited crowd, yet sought to efface himself. His only interest now was in getting by as quietly as possible and in collecting his bets. Bill Jones would collect his bets, too, and the purse. Not a protest had been heard against paying the bets. Midland might lose, but it would lose in a sportsmanlike fashion. This was a quality on which Amos Spooner had previously preyed, among the cowboys in Montana and the miners in California.

It was one minute of two and Paddy Miles stood inside the ring, gripping the ropes and gazing expectantly out over the sweltering crowd.

"Here he comes!" he yelled.

"Who—who?" the crowd roared.

"Th' Mysteeryus Mauler!" Paddy cried.

A curious look crossed Amos Spooner's face. He dared to exchange a glance with the fighter in the ring. It must be a joke.

But it was no joke. A man in fighting togs had emerged from a shed at the edge of the flats and was making his way, along with two handlers, through the crowd. He was a big man, young and clean muscled, pillar necked, with a fighting eye and a shock of black curly hair. He neared the ring.

Amos Spooner stood close to the ropes.

"Who's that?" he asked Paddy Miles.

"That's the Mysteeryus Mauler," Paddy replied. He partly closed one eye in a threatening squint and added:

"An' ye hadn't better say he ain't."

Whatever lay behind this surprising —not to say dumfounding—development, Amos Spooner knew that he must not venture a protest. If his game had been uncovered, he stood in mortal danger there. His only safety lay in complete acquiescence and then perhaps in flight.

There were cries of "Gates—Gates! Pete Gates!"

The newcomer crept into the ring and stood up straight.

"Friends an' fella cit-e-zens!" Paddy

Miles roared. "Our old friend Pete Gates, a Midland boy who showed us all he c'd fight like a cycloon, is nobody else but the Mysteeryus Mauler that ye've heard of. He kep' his secret well durin' the two years he's be'n away, but he couldn't resist this opportoonity to come back an' show hisself in this surprisin' way. So we have here t'-day, fella cit-e-zens, a fight atween two Midland men—Bill Jones, who we've come to love an' respeck fer his manly qualities, an' Pete Gates, who we all knowed as a boy an' who went away from here t' make a ring fighter of hisself. An' may the best man win!"

Still Amos Spooner could say nothing. He didn't dare dispute Paddy Miles. A controversy would start an inquiry. An inquiry would land both Amos Spooner and the genuine Mysterious Mauler in jail, if they were rescued alive from the crowd.

A roar went up from the mob. The Mysterious Mauler had at last appeared and in a thrillingly dramatic manner, too. The crowd forgave the engineers of this surprise for the poignant grief it had endured when it seemed that the Mauler would fail them.

As for the real Mysterious Mauler, he simply sat dumbly in his corner, staring toward Amos Spooner. This was beyond the Mauler. He had proceeded on program up to this point; now he was wholly at sea. Amos Spooner edged around the ring and managed to convey one word to his fighter unbeknown to the crowd:

"Fight!"

That was something the Mauler could understand. It offered hope, too. Despite the feeling of cards stacked against him, Amos Spooner realized that if the man fighting as Bill Jones won, he'd have some chance to collect the bets. The substitution of Pete Gates might be simply an effort to provide a fight and those responsible for it still have no suspicion of the real swindle. In that case, if Bill Jones won, Amos Spooner and his confederate would yet reap a big reward.

But would Bill Jones win?

They were at it hammer and tongs in the middle of the ring.

Pete Gates—Amos Spooner had heard of him, as a coming pugilist. He was yet a second-rater, like the Mysterious Mauler, but they had been fighting in different sections of the country. Amos knew nothing about his style of battle and neither did the Mauler. On the other hand, if the men who brought Gates there had coached him, no doubt they'd given him what points they could on how Bill Jones fought.

PETE GATES wasn't long in revealing a bit of his style. Pitted against a rough-and-tumble fighter, the Mauler's science showed up to advantage. He let the other fellow do the rushing. But with a skillful boxer in front of him, he became a rusher himself. That was his ring style, being a big bull-necked fellow of tremendous strength and well aware that his science wasn't so much when put against another professional boxer. There was a difference between fighting a rough-and-tumble lumberjack on the floor of a saloon and a trained pugilist in a ring.

Almost at once the Mysterious Mauler fought and rushed Pete Gates into a corner and there sought to annihilate him. But Pete didn't propose to be annihilated. He'd been in corners before. He squirmed his way out and fetched the Mauler's head back with a snap by employing an uppercut while the Mauler was in pursuit. The speed of that uppercut assured Amos Spooner and the Mauler that Pete Gates could fight. The Mauler swung.

Pete caught the blow on his shoulder tip. It was a powerful wallop and rocked Pete off his balance, but of course it did no damage. Yet it looked

to the crowd, some of whom couldn't see just where the blow landed, as though the Mauler, or Bill Jones, had got in a good one. There were no cheers and, by that, Amos Spooner understood that Midland in general was onto his game and that the town was rooting for Pete Gates. Amos hovered around the men who were handling the Mauler.

He couldn't say a word to the Mauler between rounds. The Mauler was in the hands of Midland men. He was without the tips and advice of his regular manager. He looked helpless and hopeless, for he was a fighter who relied much on his manager. He hadn't recovered from the shock of seeing another man crawl into the ring under his own pseudonym. He hadn't been prepared for a fight—and now he was up against a real fighter.

AMOS SPOONER had to stand silent, and filled with doubts, while his man took his beating. Round by round the outcome became less in doubt. The long, clean, ringing blows of Pete Gates were sapping the Mauler's vitality. He charged around the ring, blinking his dazed eyes and seeking to come to close quarters, to trade punches.

There came a time when Pete Gates ventured to trade punches, but the Mauler's strength had oozed away by that time. Pete lit into him, prepared him for the finish with a fierce tattoo on his ribs and midriff—knocked the wind out of him—and then let him have it.

Down went the Mysterious Mauler, blissfully insensible. Amos Spooner was wide awake, however. Flight was the thing now. The money he and his fighter had bet on Bill Jones was gone. The cheers for Pete Gates rang in his ears and then came the voice of Charley Oscar:

"See me in my office, at the hotel. I'll get you out of town."

That was encouraging, to a man fearing mob violence. Spooner worked his way out and soon reached the safety of Charley Oscar's office. The men handling the Mysterious Mauler had their orders. They restored him to sensibility, got him into his clothes and spirited him into the hotel. Midland resumed its drinking and its holiday celebration.

"We got onto your game," said Charley Oscar, "got onto it when we found that you was William Smith, the traveling man, and Amos Spooner. A little trip to Detroit settled that, after we got suspicious. Dandy Burns, my bartender out there, had this fellow from the first as a professional pugilist. He mentioned it after the forfeits were posted. We looked into it and saw your game.

"Well, we had you in a hole, didn't we? You couldn't dispute us when we put a man in the ring and said he was the Mysterious Mauler. Your man had to fight. You can't say we didn't give you a chance for your money, even if we did know you were a pair of crooks. You had your money on your own fighter. He lost in a fair fight. Midland won. Guess we've cleaned you fellows out.

"Yes, sir, knowing your game, we saw to it that the betting men were warned," he continued. "They knew what was coming off. Some of 'em still thought the Mauler would win and they kept their bets up, but most of 'em covered up by betting on Pete Gates. All in all, I guess it's a fair shake all around. Now see here," he added, "this news is spreading wider and wider. It won't be healthy for you fellows around here. I'll fix you up with a horse and buggy and a driver and you can light out for Saginaw—catch a train there. Midland won't get its hands on you then."

Amos Spooner and the Mysterious Mauler sneaked out of town.

By

H. R. Marshall

Author of
"Flaming Cañon,"
"One Ring Too Many," Etc.

King of

WITH a snarl, "Spike" Carruthers picked himself from the rocky bed of a barranco. He had landed there with a body-wracking thump after bouncing down the railroad embankment. Biting spines of cholla cactus penetrated his skin; red oozed from a jagged cut on his forehead; his clothes were torn and dust-covered, but his spirit was undaunted.

He turned fiercely toward the freight train which was chugging heavily up grade to the mining settlement of Quartz City and shook a vindictive fist at the brakeman who had suddenly, unexpectedly, pushed him from his precarious perch on a tank car.

"Maybe," he mused, "I had it coming, at that. No business riding on a train. No, sir. Not even when I'm man hunting. A cowboy on a freight train! Say, no bronch' in the world could throw me like that. But trains and brakemen—they're different."

He picked up his huge sombrero, straightened and patted it solicitously, then climbed the railway embankment. Grinning grimly, he plugged along the twisting roadbed.

It was easy now to see how Spike Carruthers had acquired his nickname. Very thin, very tall and very hard, he was. From the top of his head to the tips of his high-heeled riding boots the man was like a rusty spike. His lean, bony face and the sombrero above it made the head of the nail; his long thin body, clad in brown khaki and flannel was the shank. His face was not handsome. The bone-showing jaw was too heavy; the clear blue eyes too closely spaced to the rather beakish nose.

Yet the boyishly frank eyes and the determination of the jaw were distinctly attractive. His bronzed forehead bore the horizontal "squint furrows," mark of successive years of desert glare, and in his eyes was the patient, far-away look which desert distance and desert silence brings. His stride was awkward, rolling, bow-legged—that of a man at home only on horseback.

Spike, accustomed to the desert

The mining town of Quartz City knew a boss, and his name was "Blondy" Pecorney. But Blondy came in his own way to know a master, and his name was "Spike" Carruthers. The faster the draw, the longer the life.

the Killers

beauty, was too tired now to appreciate it. His tongue was swollen and his throat parched. The sun's rays quivered on the stone roadbed in front of him, gleamed from the rails as from diamonds of many facets. The rock walls beside him caught the sun's light and refracted it as a white, pulsating calcium. Spike half closed his eyes in the glare and sat down to let the sun's healing rays permeate his battered body.

The clatter of stones aroused him. Some one was coming down the roadbed. Spike raised his head and saw a man approaching, a man quite like himself, only dirtier, more ragged. Wearily the newcomer slouched down beside Spike, glad of an excuse to rest.

For many moments the two hunched silently on the railroad embankment.

"Going out?" asked Spike, at last.

"Yep. Going in?"

"Yes."

Again there was silence except for the occasional scurrying of brown sand lizards over brittle brush and the angry bankment.

"Better turn around," the stranger advised Spike. "Rotten place."

"Quartz City?"

"Yep. A hard-boiled town. I'm no angel myself, but I couldn't last there. Too tough for me. Got chased out. Yep."

"Mining towns are generally hard," Spike opined. "I've been in them before. Fact is, I enjoy them. Always plenty of excitement."

"Quartz City is harder than any town you ever saw," the stranger declared. "Tough? Say, there ain't a respectable person in the place except the mine superintendent and he keeps out of sight. Quartz City is buffaloed, that's what. Buffaloed by one man. That one man hated me like poison and chased me out ahead of a six-shooter."

"That's interesting," Spike remarked. "Who was the man chaser?"

"Man-killer, you mean. Name's Pecorney. 'Blondy' Pecorney. Man-killer I said and man-killer I mean. Say, he's got that town down on its knees to him and that town ain't a

bunch of schoolboys either. He has the reputation of being the quickest man on the draw in four States and me—I believe it. He's killed more than one man who tried to beat him gun pulling in the open and he and his gang have killed others after dark and not in the open. That's the reason, stranger, I'm advising you to keep out of Quartz City. Sure as shooting, Blondy Pecorney will meet up with you. And if you don't go down on your knees to him pronto, you're fresh out of luck."

Spike Carruthers sighed.

"I suppose so," he said. "Only I'm not much of a one to kneel. All out of the habit." He was silent for a moment. "I've come two hundred miles to meet your friend Pecorney and now I'm damn anxious to see him face to face."

"Must be," surmised the stranger, "walking two hundred miles——"

"I rode most of the way," Spike explained. "Rode fast, too,. Had to leave Egg Eye, my first-string horse, at Cactus Springs. All in. And Thunderhead, my second, at the Duckfoot Ranch. Then I hooked a leg over a tank car and got thrown. I've only walked three miles. Not much farther, is it? My legs are plain wearing off short."

"Two miles, maybe. And I'm still advising you to turn around and go down grade with me."

"Suppose," said Spike, "you turn around yourself! You'll have some excitement, I promise, and maybe you can help me. Personally, it wouldn't sit well with me to be driven out of town by any man. And if a stranger came along like me and offered reënforcements, I'd take him up."

For several moments there was silence while the young man from Quartz City considered the offer.

"My name is Bole, Ted Bole," he said, then. "I'm accepting your offer. You're out gunning for Blondy Pecorney, I gather. Well, if I can help you get him, it's a good day's work."

"Gunning for Blondy Pecorney?" repeated Spike Carruthers. "Well, maybe. Come on, let's go."

The two men rose and slouched wearily up grade toward the mining town of Quartz City.

LAWLESS, independent, reckless, Quartz City is perched on the mountainside above the billowing desert. Saloon, pool room and restaurant lean against saloon, pool room and restaurant along the straggly main street. Dirt and liquor and tough men, all half hidden by the clouds of smothering smoke from the ore crushers—such is Quartz City.

The softer influences of civilization have not reached the mining town. Statute law means little compared to the law of automatic or six-shooter. Slinking cutthroats who "frisk" drunken miners and stab them in the back for a few dollars; brutal bullies, Finn miners or negro teamsters who swagger into a fight and crow over their battered victims; bartenders, slow-moving but quick-thinking, roughly generous and generously rough; natty gamblers; and finally at the top the "killers"—such is the social caste of the mining town of Quartz City.

Yes, the killers, with brazen indifference for human life, are at the top of the social order and the king of the killers was Blondy Pecorney. It was he who ruled the city from the Golden Lode Saloon, where poisonous liquor and inflaming moonshine were served day and night. Around him was gathered a gang of henchmen as brutal and cunning as he, but a fraction of a second slower on the draw. Therefore they were henchmen and he the leader. Some day Fate would depose him and Quartz City would have a new master. Perhaps that day was coming now. Spike Carruthers and Ted Bole, enter-

ing Quartz City along the railroad track from the south, had such hopes.

"Let's see our man first," counseled Spike. "Make sure he's the one I'm after."

"You'll find him at the Golden Lode," Bole declared. "It's that big frame building across there. See? I suggest, friend, that we slide up the alley and take a look in the side window first. It won't please Blondy any to see me again. He gave me twenty-four hours to get out of town. I still have an hour or two left, but he thought I had vamosed and now he'll suspect I intend to defy him. Anyway, let's get the lay of the land. There's a side window opening over the bar into the alley."

"I'd rather walk straight in," Spike Carruthers said, "but I'll take your advice this time."

The two crossed the street and slid behind the sprawling wooden buildings.

"Here's the back end," Bole pointed out. "Let's go slow." His hand was resting on the butt of his gun. "Probably nothing will happen, but——"

"Sh!" warned Spike.

From the little window above their heads issued the sound of a voice. It was hoarse, rasping, vainly trying to muffle itself.

"Got it straight now, haven't you?" came the words. "I'll take the damn Englishman and his daughter up Bear Trail to look at a fake mine. Savvy? You come down on us, Ramon, with your gang at Roaring Creek crossing. Might pink the old man. Not bad, you understand. Just an arm or leg. I'll pretend to fight you; then I'll topple. Plenty of gun play, see? You take the girl on up the trail and then down into the old pueblo on Juniper Mesa. I'll cut across and attack you there. You'll leave the girl and I'll rescue her. Hero stuff. Then vamose and don't come back. Now tell it all back to me, Ramon, so's I can see if you've got it through that damn thick head of yours."

"We jump you on Bear Trail at Roaring Creek crossing," repeated a voice brokenly. "We shoot old Pelham in arms and legs. We fire over your head and you fall dead. We tie up girl and carry her to Juniper Mesa. You come and drive us off. We run like hell into the hills and not come back."

"Right-o. And here's something on account."

The dull clink of silver dollars came to the ears of the two men outside.

"Blondy Pecorney," whispered Ted Bole.

Spike Carruthers nodded.

"Come on. I'm going in."

Ted Bole lagged a little behind the hastening steps of Spike Carruthers. Anxious the cowboy was to meet Blondy Pecorney, excited, too, at the words he had overheard. Obviously the "king of killers" was planning a little rough romance on the side.

STRAIGHT through the door of the Golden Lode strode Spike Carruthers and up to the bar. Bole edged in behind him.

"Two good drinks, Mr. Quartz," ordered Spike, planking down a dollar.

The bartender glanced up superciliously from a little pocket mirror in which he had been examining his yellow teeth. He was a huge man, barrel-chested, thick-necked and red-faced with sagging jowls.

"Sure," he said, "only don't be so anxious."

"Not anxious," declared Spike. "Only thirsty. Tired, too. I'll sit at that table over there if you don't mind, Mr. Quartz. Come on, Bole."

The bartender brought the liquor to the round table in the corner at which the two men had seated themselves. He whisked a sodden, dirty cloth

around over the table top, then slapped down the drinks.

"Where from?" he asked.

"Down below." Spike Carruthers waved a hand to the southward.

"If you're a revenue officer," the bartender remarked, "you'll go out of here feet first."

"Cowboy," said Spike laconically.

"Cowboy?" repeated the bartender. "Huh! Well, Blondy Pecorney will deal with you. He hates cowboys for a pastime. Here he is now. Hey, Blondy!"

From the door leading into a back room strode a huge blond-headed man with piggish blue eyes. Three parallel scars, livid and glistening, on his left cheek gave his face a permanently leering, repulsive expression; his head was thrust forward belligerently on his huge shoulders; his steps were swaggering.

"Blondy!" called the bartender. "Here's a stranger with your old friend, Ted Bole."

"Bole," repeated Pecorney. His hand rested at his hip. "I thought——"

"You gave me twenty-four hours," explained the white-faced Bole, from the table. "I've still time to make my get-away."

"Better hurry," advised Pecorney. "And who's your friend?"

"Don't know. Just having a drink with him."

SPIKE CARRUTHERS was studying the blond giant and the sallow little Mexican who had followed him from the back room. Fellow conspirators the two were; the brutal, unscrupulous American and the slinking, rat-eyed little Mexican.

"Now let's look you over," said Blondy Pecorney, stepping to the table. "Cowboy, eh?" He surveyed the lithe form of Spike Carruthers from his huge sombrero to his high-heeled boots and the Spanish spurs which decorated them. "What's your business up here?"

"Sight-seeing," answered Spike promptly.

"I don't like your looks," Pecorney pronounced sentence rapidly. "Cowboys are too damn fresh, anyway. Your pal here, Ted Bole, is leaving town pronto. I suggest you join him."

"Must bat around for a day or two first," Spike declared. "My stomach's like a sponge, needs a good soaking and——"

"Listen, stranger, don't monkey with the buzz saw. My name's Pecorney, Blondy Pecorney. Ever hear of me? If you haven't, look out! If you have, you know there's no foolishness about me. There ain't a man in the world who can whip out a gun as quick as I can. Don't tease me into pulling it on you, because when I shoot I shoot to kill. Savvy? I kinda run this town and I kinda run the men out I don't like. I don't like you. That's fair warning, ain't it?"

With his left hand, Pecorney pulled out a watch.

"It's ten minutes to five. At six o'clock you'll be out of town or you'll go out feet first. Cowboy!" he sneered the word. "Say, the last cowboy we had up here caused a peck of trouble. Trouble like a flea. Now he's pushing up daisies. You'll be sleeping beside him if you don't mind your teacher."

"Yes," said Spike, "I heard about that. You murdered 'Chuck' Sayles."

"Shot his mouth shut," corrected Pecorny. "Did you know him?"

"He was just a pal of mine, that's all. A bunk mate at the Terrapin Rancho. A square, straight-shooting——"

"Then he's a good example for you. You've got one hour to obey the orders which Chuck Sayles didn't obey."

Spike Carruthers sighed heavily, as if disappointed in all mankind.

"Hate yourself, don't you?" he said. "And hate your gun play, too. Well, I've seen some lightning work on the trigger myself. Fact is, I've been

mixed up in it and have a little reputation of my own, down south of here. I'd like to see you at work, Mr. Pecorney. Yes. Very much. Fact is, I guess I'll stay around a while and watch you show your stuff."

"One hour you'll stay," declared Pecorney. "After that you won't be in condition to see anything—ever!"

"One hour," echoed Spike Carruthers. "Say, Mr. Pecorney, you seem to be itching for some gun play. Suppose we commence hostilities right now. They're bound to come, apparently. You're too blamed proud of your quickness on the trigger. Suppose you stand over there at the bar and I'll sit here. Some time in the next hour I'll try to beat you to the draw. That's fair enough, isn't it?"

Blondy Pecorney whipped his gun from its holster. It was a lightning move, faster than the eye could follow. A flash of his hand and a huge German Luger automatic was trained on Spike Carruthers. The cowboy didn't move; the half smile on his lips didn't flicker.

"Yes," he declared judiciously, "you're pretty speedy. Now put the shooting iron back in its bag. I'll pay for the drinks. Lean against the bar and keep your eye peeled. When I start to tote out my gun, try to beat me to it. Or doesn't that appeal to your gaming blood, Mr. Pecorney?"

"Committing suicide, are you?" sneered Pecorney. "All right. The game's on. Start to drag your gun whenever you're ready. But make your will first."

Spike Carruthers grinned.

"Nothing to give away except this gun. I'll present it to you either way. Dead or alive, I mean."

THERE was the situation in the Golden Lode Saloon that summer's day. Leaning against the bar was Blondy Pecorney, his eyes glued to the figure of Spike Carruthers seated at the table across the room. One huge hand rested negligently on the holster at his right hip. Opposite him the cowboy drew figures on the wet table top with his long, brown fingers. Some time in the next few minutes the strange duel must start; shots would crack out. Then Spike Carruthers would crumble lifelessly at his table or Blondy Pecorney would be beaten at the draw for once in his life.

A strange, bitter, waiting contest, it was, there in the saloon. News of it spread like a brush fire through Quartz City. The henchmen of Blondy Pecorney piled in, curious to see their leader's lightning hand shoot down another victim. Impersonal onlookers crowded the door, waiting the outcome of that challenge the stranger from the south had the temerity to issue.

Minutes passed. Spike Carruthers' long fingers continued to draw figures on the table top while the piggish little blue eyes of Blondy Pecorney watched his every motion. The room was quiet, tense. At last Spike Carruthers reached into the breast pocket of his flannel shirt, found a cigarette and placed it between his lips. Then he searched for a match.

"Mr. Quartz, may I trouble you for a match?" he called to the bartender.

Watching the two contestants fearfully from under his heavy eyebrows, the bartender waddled across the room and dropped a half dozen matches on the table in front of Spike Carruthers, then ducked back. The cowboy picked up a match and inspected it cursorily, then tried to strike it on the table top. With an exclamation of disgust he tossed it away and reached for another. He ran it quickly along the sleeve of his shirt. It failed to light.

He frowned and clucked his tongue as if the little thing vexed him. Every person in the room was watching the cowboy; each appreciated his disgust. He gazed intently at the match, then

drew it briskly along his leg, under his thigh, and up to his cigarette. Again the match failed to light. Once more he tried it, this time with more rapidity, more determination. The fourth time he whipped his hand up straight to his face.

Crack, crack—crack, crack! Four times the revolver in the hand of Spike Carruthers crashed. From the bar came a roar of pain, oaths. Four bullets had gone through the hand of Blondy Pecorney, the right hand which had been resting in readiness on the holster. For a second the bully gazed at the red stream trickling down his fingers. Then his left hand jerked across his huge body to his side. The saloon emptied itself instantly; men tumbled and crawled for cover, ducking behind the bar and out the door.

"Up with 'em!" shouted Spike Carruthers. He had risen from the table now and had a gun in each hand trained on Blondy Pecorney. "Reach for the sky! Quick, or I shoot!"

Pecorney hesitated. He realized he was at the other's mercy. For once in his life he had been beaten to the draw. A trick, maybe, that of lighting the match, but a trick of consummate skill and daring. Sullenly the king of killers raised his hands above his head. The red stream was running down his right wrist now and the pain was bringing a torrent of oaths from his lips.

"Keep them covered, Bole," called Spike. "His gang, I mean. Shoot the first one that raises his head. This big-blowing Pecorney! I've got him fixed for duck soup! Out now!"

THE cowboy and his companion backed out of the Golden Lode Saloon. Outside, the awed crowd parted and made way. From their places of safety the gangsters of Blondy Pecorney gazed at Spike Carruthers in wonderment and awe. This stranger from the south had shattered their idol; he had beaten the unbeatable, drawn a gun before the lightning-flash Pecorney could pull his. For a moment the toughs hesitated, almost ready to swing their allegiance to the courageous newcomer. A blasting oath from Blondy Pecorney checked their wavering. From force of long habit they rallied to their old master.

"Back and run!" shouted Spike, at the door. He had seen the signs of action, retaliation, among those henchmen of Pecorney's. "Quick!"

Down the alley beside the Golden Lode he raced, Ted Bole beside him. They ducked to the right and to the left again. Behind them sounded shots; bullets whined around them or sank with cracking impact into the frame building beside them.

"I've got a shack two blocks ahead," panted Ted Bole. "This way! Cover!" And they raced down the street.

Spike turned to empty his revolver at his pursuers, then whirled ahead again. That pause of his was almost fatal. Before he had taken three steps he collided violently with a person hurrying for cover, like all others on the street. Down he went in a heap, the other person with him. He was on his feet again instantly.

"Sorry!" he called. Then he realized that he had knocked down a girl. His apology was voluble. "Very sorry. Sorry, indeed," he said. He stooped and lifted the girl to her feet. Just a momentary impression he had of her—large, blue eyes, a white, oval face crowned regally with a mass of yellow hair, a slight form. "You see, I was in a hurry and——"

"Never mind me!" the girl cried, pushing him away. "They're shooting at you. Run, or they'll hit you!"

Spike glanced back. Blondy Pecorney's gangsters were at his heels now. Momentarily they had ceased firing for fear of hitting the girl.

"Yes," agreed Spike, "I'll have to

excuse myself. I beg your pardon once more."

"Quick!" the girl called, pushing him frantically with her little strength.

Spike raised his sombrero, bowed low and swept the ground with it.

"Our next meeting—more peaceful!" he panted.

Then, head down, he pounded zigzag down the street after the retreating figure of Ted Bole. The particular god which watches over babies, lovers and foolhardy men was with him. Shots whined around him; one lifted his sombrero from his head; a second ripped through his chamois vest and flannel shirt; yet another, better aimed, barked his shoulder and brought a little gasp of pain.

Now he whirled into the little shack at whose opened door Ted Bole was waiting. Down the street the gangsters paused indecisively. Their quarry had reached cover.

"You know," announced Spike Carruthers, to Ted Bole inanely, "I saved two shots in my revolver for Blondy Pecorney's gizzard, but damn my soft heart, I couldn't let them loose at him cold-bloodedly!"

"I noticed that," said Ted Bole. "And now we have all hell unfastened on us." In spite of the rebuke his words carried, there was admiration in the eyes and manner of Ted Bole. Suddenly he cried out, startled. "You're punctured! Look on your shirt!"

"It's nothing," Spike declared, pulling his shirt away from his left shoulder with his right hand. "Could you —er—do you happen to know who the girl was I knocked over?"

"That was Marjorie Pelham. She's Archie Pelham's daughter, the one Blondy Pecorney's going to kidnap tomorrow. But for the love of Pete quit thinking about girls and get ready to defend yourself! That murdering gang is separating to surround us."

"Right-o," said Spike. A moment later he added: "She sure is one queen among girls."

THE easterly end of Main Street, Quartz City, became no man's land that summer evening. The little box-like shack in which Spike Carruthers and Ted Bole had taken cover was the fort guarding it. Dead lines had been established seventy yards away in each direction. Whenever thoughtless or temerarious pedestrians crossed the line, they were warned back by a bullet which scruffled the dust at their feet.

Ted Bole's little house was typical of the residence in Quartz City. Shaped like a box, its one room had front and back doors and a small, square window in each side. It nestled against the mountain behind and in front was raised from the sloping ground on three-foot posts. A flimsy, inconsequential fort it was, advantageous only because it was surrounded by open space.

The mountainside, arising abruptly from the back door, had been cleared for a hundred yards; in front was Main Street and across it a precipice dropping a sheer four hundred feet toward the desert floor. Westward lay the principal structures of Quartz City; to the east straggled the tail-end houses of the town.

"Not bad protection, at that," Spike Carruthers declared to Ted Bole, squinting out the west window preparatory to driving back a couple of tired miners who were walking home. "Good oak planking."

"Fair enough," agreed Bole. "That is, until dark. After dark they can sneak up on us and wring our necks like hens in a coop."

"After dark," corrected Spike, "we won't be here. We've got to get away first chance. I'm tempted to make a dash for the mountains now. Haven't seen hide nor hair of any of Pecorney's men for ten minutes."

He had barely finished the remark when a dozen bullets crashed through the side windows. Spike and Ted Bole ducked to the floor.

"I suppose," Bole said lugubriously, "that they'll sneak up on us after dark and shoot us down. Or else they'll set fire to the shack and pot us when we try to run."

"Sounds reasonable," Spike Carruthers declared cheerfully. "All we've got to do is to wait and see which is the right guess. Hello!" He had risen to peek out of the west window again. "That little girl is coming right down the center of the street! Bless her heart! What's her idea? Look! They're trying to stop her, but she's paying no attention. Walks like a queen through a bunch of peasants. She knows, right-o, that we won't shoot her. For the love of Pete, what's her game? Trying to lure us out so they can pot us? Giving them courage by example? By all rights I ought to crease her. But I can't do it. Not a girl. That girl particularly. Keep your eye peeled, Ted. There's some deviltry afoot, sure."

AS unconcernedly as if she were just taking a stroll, Marjorie Pelham sauntered toward the shack. From beyond the dead line townspeople watched her with anxious eyes; within the shack Spike Carruthers studied her even more anxiously.

"Lord, look at her!" he called to Ted Bole. "Head up like a queen, paying no attention to any one." He was silent for a moment, while the girl stepped nearer. "Do you suppose they are using her for cover in rushing us?" he demanded of his companion.

Now the girl was directly in front of the shack. Her eyes looked straight ahead. She seemed oblivious to the improvised fortress and the desperate men it contained, but suddenly she spoke, low-voiced, through immobile lips.

"Watch out from behind," came her muted warning. "They're planning to crash a boulder down on you."

That was all. Onward she sauntered, staring abstractedly out over the desert. To all appearances she had not spoken. Just a strong-willed girl, she seemed, walking where she chose to walk.

"Well, I'm damned!" muttered Spike Carruthers. "Came down here to warn us. Took her life in her hands. Say, she's dead game from her boots up."

"Sure enough," agreed Ted Bole, "but she didn't bring any good news." He had taken his post at the back and was staring up the mountainside. "Denizens of hell! There they are, sure enough!" he called excitedly.

Spike Carruthers hastened across the room and studied the spot far up the mountain at which Ted Bole was pointing. Three or four men were digging and prying around a gigantic thirty-ton boulder which was perched precariously on the declivity. The huge, swaggering figure of Blondy Pecorney could be distinguished, directing operations.

"It'll be on us in three minutes!" Bole cried excitedly. "We've got to run for it!" He whirled across the room, reloading his revolver as he advanced.

Spike Carruthers stopped him.

"We'll be potted sure if we run. We're surrounded. It's death if we try to get out now. Against that certainty there's the chance of being crushed into a grease spot by that little pebble up there. Ted, we'll wait. There's a lot of area for that rock to bound into. Even chances, at least, it'll never touch us. Hold tight, man, and if you ever prayed, try it now."

There was silence in that little shack, silence except for the buzzing of greenbottle flies and the nervous tapping of Ted Bole's foot on the floor. Waiting, the two men were, waiting the moment when chance would decide for them—life or death.

QUARTZ CITY was silent, too. Back of the dead line there was a crowd; spectators of a sporting match. But the sport this time was a mortal one, that of seeing thirty tons of rock plunge down a mountainside, crush a little shack like a match box and batter down the two men inside it. Minutes dragged while townspeople and the intended victim silently watched the fiendish labor on the mountainside.

Spike Carruthers spoke at last.

"Some girl," he said, "and damn me for not having sense enough to warn her of what's in store for her to-morrow."

"You might quit worrying about the girl," suggested Ted Bole sourly, "and worry about us for a while. The way those men are standing back and the crowd at the dead line's retreating, it looks like that rock's ready to come down right now."

"Well," said Spike wearily, "we can't stop it, can we? Might just as well think about the girl as anything else. A little better, in fact, because there's some pleasure in that."

"Aw, shut up!" shouted Bole. He had reached the limit of endurance. His nerves were taut, his eyes strained on that immense boulder above them.

Suddenly a cry sounded from the spectators, a brutal, excited roar. Far up the mountainside the boulder moved slightly. It hesitated, seemed to balance itself. Then it tumbled. Down the mountainside it crashed, gaining impetus at each leap. Like a living thing it seemed, pouncing at that little shack below, crashing through brush, bounding over smaller rocks, flattening slender trees, roaring devastation toward its two intended victims.

"God help us!" muttered Ted Bole.

"Check," agreed Spike, through set lips.

Suddenly the two men became powerless to move. That crashing boulder seemed to fascinate them, as it fascinated Pecorney's gangsters and the spectators down the road. One glimpse from the side window Spike had, of Marjorie Pelham far down the road to the east. She was standing there, her white hands raised to her eyes which were strained toward that crashing rock. Her face, even from that distance, seemed white as paper, horror-stricken.

The thirty-ton boulder was veritably on the house now; it seemed certain to crush it to kindling. Involuntarily a cry of horror sounded from the spectators. Inside the shack Spike Carruthers and Ted Bole instinctively clung to each other.

"Now," whispered Bole, licking his dry lips, "we're done!"

One final leap the boulder took, as if determined to throw its irresistible force atop the target. But, like a leopard underestimating its strength, it leaped too high and far. It cleared the back of the house, almost missed it entirely. Then, as if checking itself in mid-air, it crashed down through the front south corner, bounded onward and over the precipice across Main Street. From far below rose a series of vibrating shocks as the boulder battered itself to pieces on granite ledges.

A strange sigh, like the soughing of wind, involuntary and breathless, rose from the spectators. It lessened the tension. Suddenly people laughed shrilly, talked too loudly. And inside the little shack the hands of Spike Carruthers and Ted Bole rose to their white faces and wiped away the perspiration. Spike grinned feebly.

"We aren't dead yet," he said, "but of course we aren't in a church house, either."

TED, we have about ten minutes before they rush us," Spike Carruthers declared judiciously, a half hour later. "It's dusk now. They've stopped firing. Darkness will hit us all at once and Pecorney's gang about five min-

utes later. They're organizing now. Pecorney has been all around us, both sides and back, in the last fifteen minutes. I can spot him by his bandaged hand. Damn me for a fool for not plugging him in the Golden Lode when I had the chance!"

"Check!" exclaimed Bole bitterly. "Well, let's get it over with. I'd as soon be shot down now, as ten minutes from now."

"Might miss us ten minutes from now," Spike counseled. "Might, in the dark." He was silent for a moment, thinking. "Ted, have you any rope around here? Any old stuff?"

"A couple of worn lariats in that pile of junk in the corner. Why?"

"Well, we can't get away to either side nor in back, that's sure," Spike explained. "Suicide to try it. That leaves only the front way open."

Ted Bole laughed mirthlessly.

"Tell us a funnier one!" he scoffed. "That precipice across the road drops straight down four hundred feet. We'll take two forty-foot lariats and let ourselves down, eh? You're a humorist!"

"Let ourselves part way down," corrected Spike seriously. "By gad, I think it'll work. Pry a good stout board from the floor, man, and give me the lariats."

Skeptically Bole obeyed and Spike Carruthers carefully knotted a lariat around each end of the plank.

"Now," he said, "when it's about four minutes darker, we'll drop down through the opening we've made in the floor and snake our way to the cliff. There are a couple of scrub live oaks right at the edge. If we can get that far, we may fool these murderers yet."

"What the devil you talking about?"

"Let's go! I'll show you."

IT was the zero hour in Quartz City. On three sides of Ted Bole's shack the gangsters of Blondy Pecorney were gathering; they paused to imbibe liquid courage preparatory to the assault. The cordon had been carefully placed and tested by Pecorney. No chance, there seemed, of the two men getting through. Already the semicircle was narrowing on the shack. As it narrowed, Spike Carruthers and Ted Bole dropped through the hole in the floor.

Slowly, carefully, they snaked their way toward the edge of the precipice, trailing the board noiselessly behind them. Many minutes it seemed before they reached the live oak trees just across the road. Rapidly Spike tied the free ends of the lariats around the base of the trees, then lowered the board over the edge of the sheer granite bluff.

"Slip down," he whispered to Ted Bole, "and watch yourself. One mistake and you drop four hundred feet."

"Don't tell me," answered Bole. "Here goes." He lowered himself down one lariat while Spike descended the other.

In a moment they were on the plank, dangling twenty feet below the top of the precipice. Like painters on a scaffold they were, only the structure against which they leaned was a four-hundred-foot precipice instead of an office building.

"Now," Spike whispered, "unless that gang up there is smarter than I think they are, they'll not find us. They'll never in the world think of looking over the precipice. Why should they? With a four-hundred-foot——"

"And if they do," interposed Ted Bole lugubriously, "all they'll do is cut the rope and let us bounce on those rocks below."

"I'll bet you my sombrero, which is back in the middle of Main Street, against these two old trustworthy lariats that this stunt is too smart for those birds."

"You can't lose that bet," Bole grumbled, "because, if you lose, we're both dead."

"You know," said Spike, grinning in

the darkness, "there's something rather funny in this. Two cowboys dangling out over space like a couple of batty chimney sweeps and——"

"Listen!"

From above sounded a fusillade of shots followed by shouts of Pecorney and his gangsters.

"They're charging," Spike announced gleefully. "They'll be some surprised when they find us gone. They'll figure we escaped out that hole in the floor and managed to crawl up the mountain without being seen."

"Hope so," agreed Bole fervently. "For the love of Pete sit still! Twice now I've almost plunged down into that damn darkness."

"Steady," warned Spike. "We're here for a long time."

"Maybe. And maybe——"

"Sh-h!"

THERE were many breathless, heart-rending moments for the cowboys during the next hour. Foot by foot Pecorney's henchmen combed the terrain above. More than once footsteps sounded at the edge of the precipice overhead, as the searchers extended their hunt. Once gangsters approached the two trees from whose bases the lariats were stretched. Voices came clearly to the two men dangling in the darkness below.

"Search these trees," said one.

"Naw,' came the answer. "I can see every branch against the sky. There's no one up there. They got away clean, that's what, back into the mountain where 'Dutch' Miller was supposed to be watching."

While Spike Carruthers and Ted Bole held their breaths in the darkness below, the sound of the footsteps and voices receded.

Another hour passed, another. All was quiet overhead now. Spike nudged his companion.

"Time to beat it," he whispered. "You climb that rope. I'll take this one."

The man hunters of Blondy Pecorney would have been astounded had they seen appearing above the edge of the cliff the heads of their quarry for whom they had spent hours in search.

"Never mind the lariats," Spike ordered. "Come on. Keep low, fall flat if you hear anything."

Two figures made their way silently through the night, eastward out of Quartz City. Behind them sounded the night life of the town: Maudlin cries of drunken miners, sudden exuberant shouts as inexperienced gamblers won big pots, the occasional crash of glasses and the banging of doors..

At last Spike Carruthers stopped.

"What's the idea of waiting?" demanded Ted Bole. "Let's get as much distance between us and Pecorney as we can."

"No," Spike said. "You show me the way to the old pueblo on Juniper Mesa. We're going there."

"We're what?" demanded Bole fiercely.

"Now, Ted," Spike soothed, "I know too much excitement isn't good for your heart. But you wouldn't forget the little girl that Blondy Pecorney's planning to kidnap, would you? You'd be willing to break up that game?"

"Yes," Bole grudgingly agreed, after a moment of mental debate. "Especially as you couldn't be dragged away with a twenty-mule team."

"Right-o. Let's go."

The two cowboys turned northward toward a cut in the mountains which led to Juniper Mesa and the old Indian pueblo where Blondy Pecorney planned to have Marjorie Pelham carried.

WIDE-EYED, white of face, Marjorie Pelham stared through the crumbling roof of an old adobe house at the china-blue desert sky. Around her, talking and gesticulating excitedly,

were a dozen black-eyed, tattered Mexican gangsters.

Strange things had happened to Marjorie Pelham that morning, happened with stunning suddenness. In spite of her objections, her father had insisted on seeing a gold claim which Blondy Pecorney described as unbelievably rich.

"That's what I'm here for, Marjorie," Mr. Pelham had said, to silence her expressed aversion to Pecorney's company. "I've come five thousand miles in the interests of the Anglo-American Mining Syndicate and I mustn't overlook this opportunity."

"I hate that Pecorney!" the girl had insisted. "He's unscrupulous, totally treacherous. I'll stay here while you two——"

But Mr. Pelham had overruled this arrangement; he would not feel safe leaving his daughter alone amid the brutal surroundings of Quartz City. So the three—Marjorie, her father and Pecorney—had ridden up Bear Trail early that morning. Where the trail crossed a little stream misnomered Roaring Creek the three had been attacked. The rocks and scrub undergrowth seemed to spout Mexican gangsters.

In the first fusillade of shots Mr. Pelham had fallen from his horse, wounded in his right leg and left shoulder. Pecorney had apparently fought with courage, according to his prearranged plan, but at last had toppled limply on the rocks. Then the Mexicans swooped in like buzzards, trussed the desperately struggling girl and carried her over the ridge to the abandoned Indian pueblo on Juniper Mesa.

Now it was time for the next act of the tragic farce to unroll. Blondy Pecorney, miraculously restored to strength, would steal up among the crumbling adobe walls and suddenly attack the Mexicans. They would run away, of course, well paid for their acting, and Pecorney, the hero, would be alone with Marjorie Pelham, to press his attentions in such manner as he saw fit. Yes, a splendid plan it was, this trick by which Pecorney would gain possession of the girl, miles from civilization. Almost foolproof it seemed!

The Mexicans were squabbling among themselves now. The volatile natures of the younger members of the gang had become inflamed by the beauty of Marjorie Pelham. Insistently they were advocating treachery to Blondy Pecorney. Why not shoot him down when he appeared and claim the girl for their own? She suddenly seemed worth far more to them than the silver dollars Pecorney had promised.

Angrier, louder, rose the argument among the Mexicans. Fortunately Marjorie Pelham could not understand their language, could not know what they were discussing. All she realized was that she was lying helplessly against a hard adobe wall, at the mercy of these men. Undoubtedly she would welcome even Blondy Pecorney now.

He came. While the Mexicans' argument was at its hottest, his head appeared through a weather-beaten aperture in the adobe wall. He bellowed, then emptied his revolver over the heads of the Mexicans. Momentarily the gangsters hesitated. Some of the younger ones would willingly have shot down the blond giant. But his reputation saved him. Blondy Pecorney, the king of the killers, the quickest man on the draw in four States—what cowardly Mexican would dare train a gun on him?

The Mexicans debouched from the crumbling adobe house like bees from a hive, fleeing in all directions. Blondy Pecorney entered. He swaggered to the girl. His very stride seemed to say, "Here I am, the rescuer, the hero!" His leering face smiled triumphantly; his plan to gain possession of the girl had worked perfectly.

Marjorie Pelham sighed when Pecorney released the lariats which bound her and lifted her to her feet. She should have been happy at her rescue, but there was a look on that leering, repulsive face which frightened her.

"How's dad?" she asked.

"Fine," Pecorney declared heartily. "Just mildly punctured. I bandaged him and put him in the shade with a canteen of water beside him. He'll be all right. You're the lucky one, to be rescued like this."

"Yes," Marjorie Pelham said simply. "Thank you, Mr. Pecorney."

"Is that all I get for rescuing you? Fighting off a dozen Mexicans single-handed?"

"Father will thank you, too. He'll reward you, if that's what you want."

"That isn't what I want," Blondy Pecorney declared incisively. He pulled the girl toward him with his left hand. "You might——"

With all the strength of her young body the girl struggled, tried to wrench free, interrupting him. She twisted, pulled, jerked her head aside. But she was no match for the bull-like man, even though his right hand was useless. His left arm was around her shoulders now; his left hand was under her chin, slowly twisting her face toward his thick lips. Suddenly he cried out and jerked away his hand. The girl's white teeth had sunk into his wrist.

Momentarily Marjorie Pelham was free, but only momentarily.

"You little spitfire!" roared Pecorney, advancing toward the corner where Marjorie Pelham was braving herself against the adobe wall. "I'll pull your teeth for you!"

The girl was cornered, trapped in a baked mud cage miles from civilization and she knew it. But she would fight to the last atom of her strength.

Pecorney swaggered toward her. Wary, he was, but determined. Suddenly the girl leaped forward in the desperate hope of dodging him and reaching the door. Pecorney sidestepped with an agility his huge size belied; his long left arm reached out, caught the girl in mid-flight. Irresistibly he crushed her slender body to his barrel chest. From his throat issued a sound of satisfaction.

THE crow of triumph was suddenly checked. Pecorney went whirling across the room. He landed with stunning force against the adobe wall and lay there limply.

"Keep him covered!" sounded the voice of Spike Carruthers. He had caught the tottering form of Marjorie Pelham in his arms. "Shoot the pup if he moves!"

But Blondy Pecorney had no intention of moving. He was dazed by the impact with the adobe wall, dazed, too, by the sudden fiasco which was the end of his carefully laid plan. From the floor his piggish little blue eyes blinked their astonishment.

"All right, Miss Pelham?" Spike asked solicitously. He had lifted the girl from the floor, totally unconscious that he was carrying her.

"Why—yes—yes! Please put me down now."

Carefully Spike Carruthers lowered the girl to the floor.

"Sorry we were so late," he said, "but we were hiding in one of these damn—beg your pardon—these 'dobe huts and had to wait for the Mexicans to get out of sight."

"Sorry you were late?" repeated the girl. Her voice no longer quavered. That tall, lank, brown form of Spike Carruthers, his boyishly frank eyes, restored her courage and strength. "I'm so thankful you came at all. Odd thing, too, when I was struggling with that ——" She hesitated and pointed to the figure of Blondy Pecorney. "I had a sudden flash of hope you might come." She rested her slender, white

hand on Spike's forearm. "I can trust you. I know that."

Spike was embarrassed. A red flush crept slowly under the bronze of his face. "Nothing at all—nothing at all," he mumbled, then turned to Blondy Pecorney. Some way he must relieve his embarrassment in action.

"Pecorney," he said slowly, "you and I have several scores to settle. I'm aiming to settle them once and for all. Right now! Stand up. No, first let Ted Bole have your guns. There, that's it. Now stand up."

Slowly the huge form of Blondy Pecorney rose from the floor.

"Now, Ted," Spike ordered, "tie that wounded right hand of his behind him. His belt will do it. Fine. Now treat me the same way. No, I mean it. Tie my right arm just like you tied his. We're going to fight even."

Undoubtedly Spike Carruthers was playing to the gallery just then and the gallery to him was a slender, golden-haired girl whose blue eyes darted from man to man, mystified by their actions.

"Step out, Blondy Pecorney," ordered Spike. "You and I'll settle our grudge in a man's way." He stepped forward; his left hand shot out and slapped Pecorney's face resoundingly.

Pecorney needed no further urge. With a roar he charged.

Strange struggles there have been on the desert, for the desert is a land of struggles. First and eternal is the terrific fight between man and desert, an epic fight, day and night, between the patient, insidious, withering forces of the desert and man's resourceful, indomitable spirit. Second only to that great and everlasting fight is the bitter struggle of man and man. Guns, maybe, are the weapons, or fists, or fatal treachery. Of these fights, man against man, the struggle between Blondy Pecorney and Spike Carruthers in that crumbling adobe house was one of the most terrible.

There was no time now for science, no time for mercy, time only for flailing fist to crunch against set face, time only for straining, gasping bodies to contort grotesquely as they struggled one against the other.

IF there be spirits flying through the desert air, as old cowmen claim, a strange tableau they saw that day through the holes in the crumbling hut. At the door stood Ted Bole, a tall, tattered, weary man of the open; against the far wall, eyes wide, fists clenched, with all the power of her mind and will instilling courage in her champion, was a slender slip of a girl and, in the center of the room, charging, milling, gasping, two powerful men were gripped in a terrific struggle of hatred and vengeance.

Too fierce that fight was to endure long. Fists crunched home; powerful left arms flailed in wide semicircles; head butted head, blood flowed from swollen, cut lips. Blondy Pecorney realized he was being beaten by the other's young strength, his indomitable courage. One last desperate attack Pecorney made. His huge foot shot forward, kicking at Spike's abdomen. It was a fatal action.

Spike dodged; his left hand shot down and caught Pecorney's foot. One jerk he gave and the huge, barrellike king of the killers plunged backward to the floor. Instantly Spike was atop his opponent. His left hand caught the other's throat.

"Enough?" Spike's blazing eyes asked the question; Pecorney's swollen ones blinked their answer.

Spike Carruthers rose to his feet. He turned to Marjorie Pelham, who had averted her face from the last seconds of the struggle. For a moment he couldn't speak.

"S-sorry," he gasped, "but it had to be done."

"Yes," the girl agreed, "it had to be

done. I'm glad you did it. I think—I think you should have killed him."

"Maybe," Spike said doubtfully. "Maybe. I've had two chances now and passed them up. But I'm saving him this time. He has some work to do for us."

"Work?" repeated the girl.

"Yes. I suppose your father is lying wounded back near Roaring Creek. That was according to Pecorney's plan and——"

"My father!" exclaimed the girl. In the terror and excitement of the last few minutes she had forgotten him. Now her eyes were anxious; impulsively she moved toward the door. "Let's hurry," she said.

"My idea," explained Spike, "is to have this truck horse here"—he nudged the form of Blondy Pecorney with his foot—"carry your father across to the railway tracks. There's a train coming down from Quartz City about seven o'clock to-night. We can stop it at Coyote Siding. Jist a caboose to ride in, you understand, but I think it's best for all of us to avoid Quartz City. You know, a lot of explaining and maybe trouble and——"

"Oh, I never want to see the place again!" the girl exclaimed. "Father won't, either. Let's hurry to him now."

"Get up!" Spike ordered Blondy Pecorney. "Come on! You aren't half as exhausted as you'll be after you've carried Mr. Pelham two miles over the ridge to the tracks."

THE engineer of the night accommodation train, southbound from Quartz City, swore volubly as he set the brakes on his train.

"Damn these desert rats!" he sputtered. "Think they can stop a train anywhere! We've got to stop, too, for fear they're dying of thirst."

The brakes shrieked and shrilled the train to a stop. As the engine passed the little group beside the track, the engineer called his astonishment to the fireman.

"Damnedest bunch I ever saw!" he shouted, above the hiss of excaping steam. "One big man with a little fellow on his back; two cowboys and a girl just out of a convent. Now what do you make of that?"

His surprise would have been greater had he heard the conversation which was taking place at the caboose steps.

"Now, Blondy," Spike Carruthers said, "you can go. But I think I'd keep away from Quartz City if I were you. That town doesn't want a master who's ever been beaten and you know it. What's more, that right hand of yours will never be lightning quick again. I'll tell the boys back at the Terrapin Rancho that I avenged the death of Chuck Sayles. It'll please them mightily."

Spike Carruthers grinned; Blondy Pecorney glowered fiercely; Mr. Pelham muttered at the pain in his arm and leg; the girl smiled happily as Ted Bole and Spike swung her into the car.

"My, the Terrapin Rancho will seem restful and quiet after all we've been through," Marjorie Pelham said. Her hand still clung to Spike's.

"The Terrapin Rancho?" repeated the cowboy. "Are you coming——"

"Surely. Father will need some place to convalesce and I'd like—I'd like a chance to study you, Mr. Spike Carruthers, at closer range. You know you seem——"

"Oh, pshaw!" mumbled Spike.

The desert air vibrated with the clang of the engine bell; the train bumped backward, then jerked ahead. Soon it was a long, squirming caterpillar, crawling toward the desert floor. Behind it a huge barrel-chested, blond-topped man with a perpetual leer on his face scowled and muttered. Momentarily he hesitated. Then, head down, very slowly, painfully, he limped after the train, away from Quartz City.

Sandollar

By Charles Neville Buck

Author of
"All the King's Horses,"
"The Rogue's Badge," Etc.

An Epic of the Turf in Four Parts
—Part III.

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

At an Eastern race track the aspiring young sculptress, June Lee Middleton, meets Martin Petrie, a youthful Kentuckian who is interested in breeding and racing blooded horses. Petrie is strongly attracted by this charming young woman and induces her to visit the paddock where is stabled his most valued colt, the jet-black Sandollar, in whom Petrie believes he has a future winner of the great Kentucky Derby. Here, too, she is introduced to Jimmy Rockwell, the acknowledged king of American jockeys. But that very day, Rockwell crashes in his race and is so badly crippled the doctors believe he will never be able to ride again; the sages of the turf add that, even if his bones should mend, he has lost his nerve and will be of no use as a jockey. Rockwell believes in neither prediction, but expects to be soon again piloting winners to the tape. Petrie finds his liking for June Middleton deepening into love, and, feeling it is not unreciprocated, asks her to marry him. But June tells him she is determined upon success in her sculpturing and cannot think of marriage. With a heavy heart he resigns himself to his fate, with art as a rival for the girl he loves. His sobriquet of "Lucky" seems irony. The young attorney, Tom Burton, also hopes to marry June Middleton and dislikes Petrie in whom he senses a rival. Burton is to be sent to Kentucky by Eastern coal interests to sponsor legislation which will tax the local coal men out of competition. To secure the passage of such a bill it will be necessary to support the farmers in abolishing betting at the Kentucky race tracks. A pulled tendon results in Sandollar's failure to even place in his first Eastern race, but Petrie's faith is not destroyed and he retires the colt to his Kentucky estate, there to rest a year and then train for the Kentucky Derby. Due to a bad fall in a steeplechase Petrie has trouble with his eyes, but thinks it unimportant. Jimmy Rockwell recovers, to find that no one will hire him. Disheartened but not beaten he determines to show that he has not lost his nerve.

CHAPTER XII.

TEST OF COURAGE.

WHEN the day before the opening of the first Maryland meet came, Jimmy Rockwell, the jockey, was at the track. Entries in overnight events were being filed in the box and boys were being picked for their mounts.

Among the group of jockeys who had always looked upon his arrival among them as that of greatness, he encountered dubious glances. Among the horsemen he noticed no eagerness to approach him—and yet the newspapers had announced that this season he had bound himself by no contract in order that he might ride as a free lance. And he was Jimmy Rockwell.

At length, rather desperately, he went to the owner of a somewhat cheap string, who, he heard, had not found a boy yet to ride a selling plater in a six-furlong sprint on the morrow.

"Mr. Appleton," said the boy, "I hear you haven't a jock yet for the three quarters, to-morrow. I'm riding again now, you know. Can you use me, do you think?"

Last year this man would have plumed himself with peacock pride on having had the name of that lad linked with the name of any horse he owned or saddled. Now he looked the great performer of the past up and down with a chilly unresponsiveness.

"The riding fee for these races," said the owner contentiously, "is ten dollars for a start and twenty for a winner. I'm told you have always asked a hundred flat, win or lose."

"I've been getting that—for some years—at least," answered Rockwell. "But I wasn't talking price to you. I want to ride to-morrow because it's the first day of the season. I'll ride Swamp Angel for nothing."

"Well, I don't know," was the dubious response. "You wouldn't be offering yourself to me if owners were falling over themselves to get you." Then came an almost grudging decision: "All right, I'll take a chance with you, Rockwell."

Swamp Angel had a good chance in that field, but he was not a favorite and, whoever rode him, he was no certainty. If, mused his owner, he gave Rockwell his first mount, whatever the outcome, it would mean good newspaper publicity for his colors. The reporters were certain to make a story of the great cripple's return to the saddle, a story of triumph or journalistic pathos. The general feeling that Rockwell was a spent power would tend to make the price on Swamp Angel long —and if he did go over for a win, it would be worth a sizable bet. To this man the gambling instinct was a gluttonous urge.

As he rode out of the paddock to answer the post call, Jimmy was given an ovation from the stands. But that was sentiment and he knew that most of the men who cheered him with their voices were backing others with their money. He felt a certain contempt for the colors he wore, as though he who had been accustomed to the silks of famous stables had donned the livery of an unsavory gambler.

But when the barrier flew up, Jimmy Rockwell thought of none of these things. He had his chance. This was not merely a cheap race of selling platers, but his answer to a world which had chorused so insistently: "You can't come back."

INSTINCTIVELY, almost without realization of any action, he had old Swamp Angel away winging, with the best of the break. With his old judgment acting automatically, Jimmy had put him into good position and taken him back off the first pace. With a certainty of time sense he was rating him under wraps. Then they were in the stretch and something swerved in.

It was not rough riding in any sense that called for punishing a jockey, and the horse that failed to run straight did not knock any other contender off his stride, but he closed up from free spaciousness to a narrow and dangerous slit the opening through which Rockwell must bring Swamp Angel, if he were to have any chance and any part of that purse.

The more expert onlookers who were following that finish realized with a flash of dramatic suspense that, quite by accident, the race had developed into a definite and immediate test of Jimmy Rockwell's nerve. The jockey who had been terribly smashed must show now whether his confidence had broken or whether he dared to take the sort of

desperate chance that he had already ventured once too often. Against the prospect of clear sailing which had an instant ago been his, a door had closed to a narrow gap. A flawless courage would drive into it, taking the chance of a farther pinch. A flawed courage would take back and look for an outside passage.

And when the opening narrowed, Swamp Angel, in fourth place, was coming with an amazing burst of speed to the front.

If they could have read Rockwell's face from the stands, they would have seen a smile flash across the tenseness that always characterized his racing features. They would have caught in his eye a gleam of something like triumph, as if he had raised his voice and shouted: "Now watch me, damn you, all you knockers who said I couldn't come back!"

His bat rose and its sting drove Swamp Angel into the narrowness ahead, drove him into it, through it and out of it before it could pinch in farther, and this though there was hardly room to wield a bat, though his knees were all but brushing knees to right and left.

It was close on the wire and the crowds were already yelling, but many there were who forgot to yell and held their breath. To the less initiated, nothing was happening except that the fourth horse had moved up to second. To the initiated, the question of Rockwell's nerve was answered.

In the last twenty yards old Swamp Angel appeared to have the wind in his heels. He ran down and collared the tiring leader to win by a full length and in the stands there was pandemonium.

In the press box a veteran turf writer turned to a colleague and drawled: "It seems that the emperor is back from Elba."

But Rockwell's face was matter of fact as he rode into the circle and raised his whip in salute.

Appleton had been right. Upon the incident of Rockwell's return to the races, the news writers fell with an eager avidity. It sounded a new note and supplied an element of "human interest" upon which a florid style could ring many changes and the portraits of rider, horse and owner found their way into print. Yet through it all ran a vein in which Rockwell himself felt a discounted triumph. Most of the writers praised it as a complete vindication of a courage which should never have been impugned. They hailed it as a spirited and gallant gesture—but no more. Back of the praise lay always the imputation that, beyond a sort of moral victory, it meant nothing else. The boy might have the courage, but the healed suture would remain weak. At best he could ride an occasional, brilliant race. Never again could he take as many mounts a day as he had taken in the past. His spirit was unbreakable, but his physical strength would crack and give way.

THE horses from Hickory Hill were to follow the custom of that farm. They would not be seen under colors until Kentucky racing began at Lexington and, with that preface, they would go on to Churchill Downs. Several promising two year olds had developed and Sandollar, the forgotten star that had been quenched at his rising, seemed again to show something of his old, bright form. He had trained well and yet Petrie thought that as a three year old he seemed to lack that amazing dash and spirit that he had demonstrated so lavishly last year, before he went wrong.

Had he not known this youngster as a juvenile, had he not known the blood that ran in his veins, he might have regarded him merely as a good sort of a horse—not as a truly great colt. Since

that was true, he could not be sure that he had better ground for faith than sentiment, which is no ground at all.

His face these days wore for the first time a habitual, almost painful, sobriety. The old dancing challenge had gone out of his eyes and he no longer walked gayly as with a chip on his broad shoulder, inviting combat.

The letters from June Lee had rung of triumph in her work—and that meant that her life was adequately filled and that he stood outside its border.

She had been spending six weeks with her family in South Carolina, her first visit for more than a year. Now that she went back with her faith in herself vindicated, she could go gladly, and Martin had written, begging her to return to New York at the end of that visit by way of Kentucky.

He had written urgently, but with little hope. He had explained that his aunt would be at Hickory Hill as hostess and that she would go as hostess to Louisville for the Derby, where June Lee should see Sandollar make his bid for enduring fame. Sandollar would not try for the Preakness, which is run a week before the Derby, but if the Preakness winner came down to Kentucky, they would meet at the Downs.

Then to his delighted amazement came a note of acceptance. June Lee would have to leave Kentucky on the evening of the Derby, but before that she would see Hickory Hill and then she would see the race which had come in this country to stand as the English Derby stands across the sea—the richest combat of horseflesh, in point of racing sentiment, that the turf has to offer.

Yet back of the Kentuckian's delight lay a foreboding that now the girl came in the shining armor of success and that, before she said good-by, she would make it plain to him that friendship was the best she had to offer him.

And they called him "Lucky."

Mrs. Carlton, Martin's aunt, made an ideal chatelaine and never had Hickory Hill been more beautiful than it was that spring. It was as though about the place hung all the flavor of those old days when women wore hoop skirts and danced the Virginia reel with men in varnished boots and wide-skirted coats of blue or plum color, days when speech and custom were gallant and life was colorful.

Yet all that pervading spirit of older times went side by side with a fresh spirit of the present, as a lovely old grandmother may move in the same room with a golden-haired child.

ON the night of the girl's arrival there was a moon and, though this was so unlike, Martin's mind went back to the other moonlit evening when, down by the wash of the sound, they had sat together on a stone bench. Memory rehearsed how he had taken her in his arms and had thrilled to the discovery that in their grasp her resistance to him had broken into submissiveness —even though it had stiffened again to a declaration of war when he had released her. It seemed to him that he could feel again the combined sense of warmth and coolness as he had pressed his lips to her cheek.

The moon had been near the full that night, too, when the Prince of Wales had interrupted them. Now they sat on the veranda of the brick house and shadows of the dark columns were deep blue. The shadow of the shag-bark hickory there by the driveway, where the orange and jet of the Baltimore oriole flashed by day, was a pattern of cobalt lace thrown on a blanket of silver. Everywhere other ancient trees threw down blue shadows, shadows from oak and walnut and maple, and through the air crept the heavy incense of locust bloom.

But now the man, who had begun his acquaintanceship with this girl in a

spirit of impudent raillery and challenge, sat almost subdued. He was realizing that she was at once the same girl and another. She was the same in her allurement, the same in her power to waken a hunger in him that nothing else could appease. Yet she was different, because now the rival that had always stood between them had grown mightily in possessive power.

The ambition which she had determined to serve was no longer a fox fire followed from afar and with doubt. It was a bright light which she had made her own and could trim and keep burning in her altar lamp. She had succeeded and, despite her sweet graciousness and modesty, there showed about her a self-confidence, an assurance against which he knew his lances would shiver and break. She had passed beyond his reach.

Last year he had been confident of his power to defeat that rival and all rivals. Last year he had felt that Sandollar could defeat all rivals, too. Now he stood in the shadow of great, almost hopeless doubt, just as he felt that Sandollar stood in doubt on the verge of his Derby start. The colt somehow seemed mixed up with it all. His own future and Sandollar's had been first threatened about the same time. Now the shadow enveloped them more deeply.

As he looked at her face, with a nimbus of moonlight about its crown of hair, and sat with much worship in his heart and little conversation on his tongue, he thought of all these things —and said nothing of them. Upon him lay the obligation of a host and a sportsman.

SOON came the opening of Churchill Downs—the Derby one week off. Martin Petrie, who meant to make no starts there until the great day itself, sent his horses, including the splendid-looking black colt Sandollar, on ahead in the charge of his trainer and dallied at Hickory Hill.

It was on the night before Martin and June Lee were to go with Mrs. Carlton to her house in town that the man and the girl stood against the whitewashed fence between the garden and the lawn of the house. They stood there because, though there was no moon and only starlight now, the scent of the locust blossoms was like music in the nostrils and the girl wanted her memory of the last evening here to have that association for the future.

"I wonder," said the man slowly, "if by any chance Sandollar should step into the chalk circle, after the big race, you could be persuaded to model him and let me have him cast in bronze?"

"Why," she demanded, "do you qualify it by saying only if he wins?"

"Only a great colt," he answered, "deserves great portraiture."

"A great colt or a greatly beloved one," she corrected him. "He is that to both of us—and besides my portraiture isn't great. It's just because it's moderately successful that I'm inordinately puffed up with pleasure." He made no immediate response and she went on: "You know I want to do Sandollar—and you know how much I'm hoping he'll win. What do you really think of his chances now?"

For once, and it was the first time she had ever heard it, a note of despondency sounded in his voice.

"I'm afraid his chances are those of the Petrie luck—and the Petrie luck seems to have waned. There will be some twenty horses at the post. The public and the bookmakers will think so little of Sandollar that he will be bunched in the parimutuel field. That means one can't even make a bet on him in his own name. One will have to play him with all the horses above ten in number that are classed as the rank outsiders. That in itself is a badge of contempt."

"The greater his glory if he wins!"

Together they had read the columns of advance talk and predictions in the papers. It had been discussion growing in excitement like the headway of a forest fire. They knew that Lyric, coming from his winter triumphs, would be a short-priced favorite and that Joe Garden would have the leg up on the first choice. Though a late ailment had incapacitated Barnswallow and put him out of the running, Little Son would come as the champion of the East, fresh from a stirring victory in the Preakness, and Maltby would ride him.

IF the South was certain in advance of Lyric, the New Orleans champion, the Eastern contingency had only derision for that youngster when he must look in the eye the victor of the Preakness. And the Eastern contingent were hard betters. Here in Kentucky, where local pride runs high, the "hardboots" would gamble as if the race were already over on Red Bird and Major Tom, two Blue-grass colts not yet known to the East but established in Southern hearts on the strength of dazzling training performances they had been turning in.

"I see," said the man, "that Jimmy Rockwell has arrived and that rumor has it he will be given the mount of Lyric. If that's true, the Louisiana Derby winner will be a hard horse to beat."

"But Garden was to ride Lyric, wasn't he?"

Martin nodded his head.

"He was, but Lyric's owner seems willing to do a thing the rest of them still back at—to let Rockwell ride his horse in a really important event. Garden feels that he owes Rockwell a good deal. He may—or may not—step back for his friend. With all these chances against Sandollar, you can see into what vapor the legend of the Petrie luck bids fair to evaporate—on the turf."

There was a change of voice on the last three words and the girl caught it.

"On the turf?" she repeated softly. "Is your luck waning anywhere else, Martin?"

He wheeled suddenly and she saw that his face was pale. His hands were momentarily clenched.

"Have you ever thought," he demanded tensely, "that the racing of horses was the most vital thing in my life?"

"No," she answered steadily, "but neither have I ever thought that misfortune had pursued you elsewhere."

"I hadn't meant to say this here because you are my guest, the most honored guest I have ever had," he told her; "and it's poor hospitality to say unwelcome things, but——"

He broke off and she prompted.

"I want you to say it. A guest has the right to demand that her host say what is in his heart."

"You know that no one," he replied, in a tone that had become almost husky, "is prouder than I of your success, but you know, too, that that success was my rival and it has beaten me. What I have left, and all I have left, is to show you that I can stand defeat. You wondered about that, you know."

"I've wondered about a good many things," she answered, and her voice was hardly more than a whisper. "I haven't achieved any real greatness yet. Perhaps I never shall, but I've gone far enough to imagine what greatness as an artist would mean to me, its fullness and its limitations."

"And the fullness," he declared forcing a semblance of enthusiasm, "doesn't lie far off."

"When it seemed so far off as to be next to impossible," she went on, "it seemed worth giving up everything else to gain. When it came a little closer, I began to wonder—and have doubts."

"What doubts?" he demanded, in bewilderment.

"Why do you suppose I came to Hickory Hill, Martin?" she questioned.

"I think you came because you were very gracious and because, being able to give me nothing else, you wanted to let me have the memory of your presence here."

She shook her head and tears stole suddenly into her eyes.

"Memories of disappointment aren't good gifts, Martin," she answered; then inconsequently she added:

"I want to be a much better sculptress."

"One always wants to go forward."

"But I don't want——" she paused. Her eyes met his for a moment and through them she showed her soul. Then they dropped and she added: "But not only in clay."

It was less the words than the glimpse through the unmasked eyes that carried revelation. Again he had her in his arms. Again there was no resistance, but instead a full responsiveness. Her lips turned up to meet his and the universe appeared to him to whirl to a vast music.

"I want medals and honorable mention—only if I can share them with you!" she told him.

CHAPTER XIII.

A MILLION-DOLLAR RIDE.

NOW, when a miracle had stricken away the bleak hopelessness to which he had been seeking to adjust himself and had translated it into a happiness too great for immediate realization, Martin Petrie recognized how bitter and overpowering that hopelessness had been. For a moment he felt himself on the verge of a toppling reason, much as a famished man might tremble at the prospect of a Lucullus feast spread without previous expectation before him. But, as he stood wondering and tremulous for the moment, that uncertainty passed and in his veins the flow of blood was a rush of triumph, a triumph which at once exalted and humbled him.

"Now let them call me Lucky Petrie!" he exclaimed. "Now it's true. This is all utterly impossible—and yet it's utterly undeniable."

She was still in his arms and he could feel that the beat of her heart was as palpitant as his own. He could feel her full responsiveness in the fragrant stir of her breath on his face and read it in the eyes that glistened under the starlight.

"It's only lack of faith in oneself," she was saying, "that makes one set out to find the answer alone. It's as false as for a hermit to fancy that he can know life better by tasting none of it—and, anyhow"—her sudden laugh was as blithe as bird song—"besides, even if it hurt my little art—even if it killed it, what difference would it make?"

But that talk belonged to them. Those moments were their own and the heavy fragrance of locust blossoms, the vast spread of deeply purple skies spangled with millions of solar systems, were only incidentals to a moment in which they possessed the universe.

At length the girl announced:

"We must go to the barn. We must tell Sandollar."

Martin laughed.

"I like to see you so absorbed that you forget such paltry things as facts," he told her, "but you know Sandollar isn't in his stall. He's dreaming of conquests, perhaps, in his barn at Churchill Downs—and when you stroke his nose next I want it to be with your left hand—because that hand will be wearing a ring."

She sighed contentedly.

"I suppose we must wait till to-morrow, then," she said, "and, after all, Martin, you don't mind so much, do

you, if I fought it out before I surrendered? I was sincere and, when I knew, I didn't wait for you to force the confession out of me."

"Mind!" he exclaimed. "Can a man exalted to the seventh heaven mind anything? Besides, it was the finest way."

THE roads into Louisville were arteries swollen with congestion. The city was flag decked and its world was horse mad. Special trains were already rolling in and the incautious visitor who had failed to take thought of early reservations found himself almost as doomed to sleep on a park bench as though his money-lined pockets had been empty. Once a year the city sought to defy that law of physics which asserts that the container must be greater than the contained.

Along the streets for the space of these few days there was no news, save the news of horses. The list of Derby starters with their weights, jockeys and probable odds was all news for the first pages and the fact that twenty or more were likely to face the flag stimulated discussion to a clamor as inconclusive as that which raged about the Tower of Babel.

At the barn where Lyric stood munching his oats with the supercilious hauteur of arrogant royalty; at the stalls, too, of Little Son, newly arrived, and the half dozen other candidates that rated highest in public esteem, reporters appeared, gathering bulletins and duly setting down vital statistics as to appetite, condition and work.

Well-known jockeys were arriving to supplement those who had already been riding in Kentucky and, when Jimmy Rockwell was seen in conference with the owner of Lyric, the news gatherers drew closer and the horseman and his visitor retreated for privacy behind the closed door of the tack room.

"Rockwell," said the horseman, in answer to a question that had been candidly put to him, "you've ridden in a fashion since you staged your comeback to satisfy me conclusively. To have you take Lyric to the barrier would be a dramatic thing and a splendid thing. If I were free to offer you the mount, I'd have been coming to you before you came to me. But that isn't all of it."

He paused and lighted a cigarette and then went on again, his brow gathered in a thoughtful frown:

"You know, though, I'd committed myself to Joe Garden. I had employed him to take the leg up on my colt before I knew you would be in the saddle again. If Garden will step aside in your favor, I'll not only be willing, but delighted!"

"Of course," said the former star, "it would have to be with Joe's consent."

"Garden is a sort of protégé of yours," suggested the owner. "But here he has the chance of a lifetime to ride the favorite in a Kentucky Derby. It's a big thing to do and a hard thing to give up—I couldn't in decency say a word to influence him. Have you spoken to Joe?"

Rockwell shook his head.

"Not yet. I couldn't go to him until I knew how you felt about it," he answered slowly. "I know how a fellow feels about riding such a favorite in such a race. My idea was to suggest to him I'm willing to let him take the winning jockey fee if he lets me take his place—and if I come home first. I understand that five thousand will be the fee in this race. I was going to offer him three thousand more—win or lose—for his contract to ride the race."

The horseman's eyes widened. His only comment was:

"I should infer that a jockey who was willing to pay that price for his chance meant to ride one hell of a race!"

"I mean to ride the best I know how, if I have a mount."

"Let's call Joe in," came the almost eager response, "and see how he feels about it all."

Garden in street clothes entered the tack room and stood listening as Rockwell stated his proposition. But his face fell and one could see that to his imagination, kindled into blazing with the hope of a triumph, the eight thousand dollars failed of beguiling effect. It was as if stage money were being offered him.

He opened his lips, closed them again and flushed red with embarrassment. Into that silence the horseman interpolated a comment of his own.

"Remember it's entirely up to you, Joe. I'm satisfied either way," he said. "If you decide to give Jimmy your place, I don't think it will keep you out of the Derby. There are still two or more starters with no riders announced. There's Sandollar, for instance. You've ridden in the sky-blue and white before. You won the Brooklyn in those silks."

Joe Garden began to sweat and it was the sweat of something like agony. He stood confronted by a hard problem of ethics such as had never before been presented to him for decision. Against consent warred all his wishes, but he had decent stuff in him and he managed a beginning.

"Jimmy Rockwell taught me all I know," he admitted rather huskily; "it's right hard to refuse him——"

But Rockwell cut him short.

"That's all right, Joe," he declared hastily. "I didn't know how much your heart was set on it and yet I ought to have known. I don't make the offer. I take it back. You go on, boy, and give Lyric the best ride you know how. If I have a mount, I hope I beat you by a city block. If I'm watching from the ground, I'll be rooting for you to boot him in."

Headlines went across the sporting editions that day, announcing that Jimmy Rockwell had failed to buy the privilege he coveted of piloting the public's choice, though turf history recorded no other instance in which a rider had offered thousands instead of being offered them to wear a set of silks. The lad who had been conceded position as the greatest of his profession, until he had been physically wrecked, might watch the running of the big race from the ground, or he might, as a last resort, parade to the post on one of those unconsidered starters whose only backing would come from long-shot gamblers "shooting at the moon."

BUT the papers did not tell of a quiet visit made that day to the home of Mrs. Carlton by the jockey whose heart was set on participation in the classic.

"I'm going about, Mr. Petrie," Rockwell said, with a rueful smile, "begging for a ride. Your colt Sandollar and myself were thought pretty well of a year ago. Now he's bunched in the field with a lot of plugs that will be running in selling races before the season ends. I'm worse off than that. It seems I can't even get in the field. I wonder if both of us aren't a bit out of line in the betting. I wonder if we aren't a shade better than some folks think."

For a moment Martin Petrie studied the eager eyes of the boy, eyes lit with a falcon keenness, then he seized and almost crushed his hand.

"Do you mean, Jimmy," he demanded, "that you'd consider taking the mount on my colt in spite of what the talent thinks of him? Don't hold out such a hope unless you mean it!"

"The question isn't whether I mean it. I'm asking the chance," declared Rockwell. "The point is will you have a jockey that nobody else seems to want?"

"I will not," announced Petrie emphatically. "I want the best jockey in America—and I want you! The Petrie

luck, Jimmy, is in the ascendency once more. That colt has a chance to win—but only one chance. He can do it with a million-dollar ride and no other way. With you in the pilot house, none of these alleged cracks can take liberties with him." He paused, then added soberly: "Don't forget that the last time you rode in the sky-blue and white cross sashes—it wasn't lucky for you."

"Then it's high time I changed that luck," announced Jimmy, with a confident laugh. "I don't guarantee you any million-dollar ride, but Sandollar will get the best I've got."

"We don't have to announce you as jockey till the morning of the race!" Martin grinned. "Let's keep it a secret. There's just one other person I'd like to tell in advance."

They talked a little of the final workouts that certain Derby starters had been given that morning and of those races already run at this meeting, in which others had foreshadowed their prospects in action.

Red Bird had romped away from his field in the Derby trial, but that race had proven a misnomer, since none of the more prominent candidates for the classic had engaged in it. These celebrities had preferred to reserve for the moment of climax itself whatever they had to show, undulled by lesser appearances, and Red Bird had not met such foemen as he must battle with in the sterner test.

Major Tom had worked a phenomenal three quarters this morning and his stock had soared—but six furlongs is not a mile and a quarter, nor is morning work, racing. Sandollar had been sent along under wraps a mile in one forty-two and had pulled up sound—but a mile in one forty-two is not sensational and no one could say how much better he could have done had he been asked, or how little better.

The final preparations of both Lyric and Little Son had been pronounced brilliant and excitement mounted, each man arriving, by his own system of handicapping, at a conclusion favoring his own choice.

It was on the day before the Derby that Rockwell came up to Petrie's box at the Downs with a grin on his face.

"Carroll was to ride Red Bird, you know," he told Martin, "and a telegram has just come saying he's sick. They're hunting for a boy to pilot the pride of Lexington in his place."

"And they've been after you? That's it, isn't it, Jimmy?"

Rockwell's grin broadened.

"They did come to me," he admitted, "but the joke of the thing is that they couldn't understand why I refused. You see, people don't know yet that I have a mount already—and they do know I've been moving heaven and earth to get one. They know I've been almost panhandling owners for a chance."

"Perhaps," remarked Petrie gravely, "I ought to release you. Red Bird is a good bit nearer the top of the form, according to all these handicappers, than Sandollar. He might give you a better chance."

"Forget it!" commanded the jockey crisply. "We've made our deal and, if you're satisfied, I am. I may not ride Sandollar into the circle—but I'm going to show Red Bird the way home."

ON the day of the Derby, the gates were opened at eight o'clock in the morning though it would be near five in the afternoon before the post bugle blared for the classic itself. Long before noon the bricked area between grand stand and track fence was packed to congestion. Men and women who had dragged benches to the rail camped on them and grimly held them, lunching out of paper parcels and quenching thirst out of soft-drink bottles.

In the greatly augmented clubhouse inclosure, the early pressure of human-

ity was almost as taut. There, too, the only onlooker who could afford to drift unhurriedly about was the box holder whose place was labeled with his name. For the one great race, parimutuel machines were thrown open early and, around them all, mobs elbowed and scrambled, since from sixty to eighty thousand human beings would have passed through the turnstiles by two o'clock and there were few among them who would content themselves to look on without backing their judgment.

THE Downs was looking its best, with a bright sun picking out and flinging back all the flashing brilliance of its color for one of the world's major occasions of sport.

The infield was vivid with a greenery still fresh, with flower beds and hedge rows trimmed to formal perfection. Its great central flagstaff reached skyward, festooned like a May pole with radiating lines of lesser flags. Overhead droned airplanes, circling and dipping. In the clubhouse restaurant, thronged to its doors, sat parties gathered from the four corners of the country. On stools, about less ostentatious lunch counters in the general-admission quarters, men and women ate and laughed and wrangled over the issue to come in the forthcoming race.

Back in the spacious areas between the stands and the entrance turnstiles where program sellers, pencil venders and form-sheet peddlers hawked their wares, the freshly painted white façades and the time-ripened brick walls seemed to press in narrowly on the massed humanity. The names of every Derby winner from Aristides to Black Gold —an even half hundred, crowned monarchs in all—shone bright in the fame of green paint along the copings. The announcement boards which would later declare the approximate odds, as the clicking meters of the "iron men" registered them, as yet offered only the "morning line"—and that only on the Derby itself.

This "morning line" is not official, but it carries the probable odds as reckoned in advance by the official handicappers on the strength of past performance. Now the thousands fought and surged for a hasty glance at that indication before struggling to the advance machines to place their wagers.

Humanity which would have suffered such crushing only under compulsion in other circumstances, and suffered it then with rage, laughed now, exchanging apologies and forgiveness gayly—because the spirit of blithe excitement was as colorful as the green of the shrubbery, the tricolor of the flags and the brilliant sparkle of the sun.

Just why this particular race has become so hallowed among horse worshipers, many of the assembled thousands did not know and, of that, took little thought. Down at Tia Juana, across the Mexican line, the Coffroth Handicap, at the same distance, had given its winner as great or greater prize last winter—yet the Coffroth was to the Kentucky Derby, as is a profiteer's wealth to the established pride of an ancient aristocracy.

Here near the breeding plants, where the blue-grass pasture and the limestone water builds bone and makes stamina, stood a track upon which the best and bluest horse blood had been tested in many famous battles. In the name Kentucky itself was an essence of adventuring romance and horsemanship and about the plant hung an aura of tradition. Here valor and fleetness had established their shrine.

A shade more than a half century ago the originators of this association had gone to England to study the best of racing methods. They had come back with an ambition to build up here a fixture which should make Churchill Downs stand to American appreciation as Epsom Downs stands to the English.

It was a promise made in strong, good faith and love of clean sport. It has been faithfully kept.

Since that May afternoon in 1875, when Price McGrath's "little red hoss" Aristides, under the skillful black hands of Lewis, had led home the first Derby field, with Volcano second and Verdigris third, there has been no breach in standard or continuity. The names of successive victors that are spread to the eye about the copings of the entrance lawns spell out a long scroll of honor.

That is why to-day, East and West, North and South, were spilling their complements of eager racegoers into the beautiful reservoir which looks south to blue hills.

Jazz bands blared and megaphone-armed singers shouted choruses that were drowned in clear air a few yards from the gyrating vocalists.

IN short, it was Derby day in Kentucky.

There in the judges' kiosk waited the piece of plate that should go to the winning owner, the gold stop watch that should be the reward of the successful trainer, the pair of gold spurs that should grace the boot heels of the victorious jockey. The distinguished statesman who was to make the presentation speech had rehearsed his eloquence. All was in readiness—and overhead droned the pirouetting planes.

Like children waiting for a Christmas tree, the crowds endured rather than enjoyed the earlier events—but when, between the second and third races, the winner of last year's Derby paraded the empty home stretch, under the colors that last year had been victorious, the crowds came to their feet and blew off steam in an eruption of frenzied cheering.

Yet last year's winner was to-day an obsolete interest.

June Lee sat in Martin Petrie's box, trying to seem sane. She was happy to-day, perhaps as happy as she could ever be, and for both her and the man she was to marry it would take more than a Derby defeat to cloud the skies.

Yet carnival excitement was a fever in her veins and Martin had never pretended that his outward calm was real, where Sandollar was concerned.

Under the new ruling, the girl could not go into the paddock itself—only as far as the rail, since inside that space only owners and trainers might penetrate.

By the time that the earlier events had been run off the skies had clouded and black threat of storm came piling up on the southwest horizon.

The infield had been kept clear, save for a score of mounted police, but beyond the back stretch, barn roofs and high fences were black with perching humanity. Just as the third race finished, a panel of the burdened wall gave way and quietly at first, then eruptively, a few of those no longer shut out began leaking onto the field.

The police galloped over to drive them back, but at once the small advance guard swelled and multiplied. The green over there, at first dotted with running figures, was in a few moments black and, before the defenders had reached the flagstaff, an army, fifteen hundred strong, was charging toward the rail beyond the home stretch. Augmented with swelling reënforcements they came on and massed there until the place that had been parklike and green was thronged with a new multitude and the policemen contented themselves with riding them back far enough to protect the track fence itself.

A few preliminary drops of rain fell warningly and across a sky suddenly altered from singing blue, flecked with white-cloud fleece to a pall of darkness, livid streaks of lightning ripped to a cannonading of thunder.

Back from the uncovered lawns, fear-

ful for their carefully planned finery, pressed the crowd that seemed already compacted to the limits of possibility. In a few minutes such a deluge promised to spill out of those inky heavens that the track, now lightning-fast, would be a sea of mud.

"The skies," said Martin to June Lee, "were wearing our colors a few minutes ago. Now they are wiped out—but never mind. Our colt doesn't mind the mud."

With a weather eye on the storm-laden heavens, the stewards advanced the great event ten minutes, in an unannounced race against the elements, and it was between a prefatory shower and a promise of cloud-burst that the jockeys came to their stalls in an artificial twilight.

Sandollar's place was near the paddock end. Over the rail hung June Lee, watching. The colt's feet were stamping with impatience and his corded neck tossing with the restiveness of combat. Then June Lee saw Rockwell, again in the sky-blue and white cross sashes—as she had seen him first—just before he went down in a welter that had broken and almost destroyed him.

She saw him shake Petrie's hand and ask a question.

The race against the storm shortened the interval between saddling and mounting bugles. She saw Petrie take the boot of his jockey and fling him upward into the saddle. She did not hear what passed between the two, but she saw that it was a matter of a few words.

Leaning over as he knotted his reins, Jimmy inquired, after the custom of his craft:

"What are my instructions, sir?"

Martin met his eye and smiled.

"You don't need any instructions, boy," he declared. "Go out there and win!"

Back in their box again, the girl and the man looked out at that great parade of twenty colts, all aspirants for the highest honor of their age. Already she knew by heart every set of colors and every number on the saddle cloths—but the skies had blackened to such a pall that the brightness of the silks was dulled as if seen through smoked glass and she knew that over there in the back stretch one would not be able to distinguish sky-blue from orange.

Already the rain was dashing fitfully down, but, as that queue of aspiring horseflesh paraded and turned to go back to the quarter pole, the grand stand, clubhouse lawn and even roofs beyond the outer walls flung back a thunder that seemed to drown the echo of the darting lightning.

Then, as if cowed by human voices, the artillery of the heavens stilled for a while and the rain slackened—but the scowl of the clouds grew blacker.

RED BIRD had the rail at the start and the start was prompt, but even and fair. The line straightened quickly for a moment and the barrier was sprung.

To be shut off on the rail at the start would mean sure defeat for Red Bird and his rider went to the bat in the effort to hustle him out of danger in the first strides. But Red Bird did not have it in him to answer that almost superpossible demand made on him, a demand to outstride the explosive getaway of that fleetly breaking score, and a howl tore out of many throats as it was seen that Jimmy Rockwell had broken on top with the despised Sandollar and that, at his saddle skirts, Major Tom, also a Kentucky horse, had outfooted the rest to share the choice of racing positions between them. The whole field, except for these two leaders, were bunched close at their heels.

The first great thrill of the Derby comes as the horses pass the stand for the first time, with a quarter run and a

mile yet to go. It is a thrill which kills no man's hope, because so much of courage test and racing luck remains ahead, but it is a thrill, too, that comes with seeing what jockeys and what colts have broken from the barrier to such advantage that they may choose their route.

It was the sky-blue and white sashes that raced first by the judges, with Major Tom lapping his flank and Little Son running third.

But all three boys were still rating their mounts under double wraps and every whip was held in abeyance, save a few at the tail end, hustling for a chance to better positions at the turn.

SO they rounded into the back stretch —and there in the strange darkness color died so that one horse and one boy looked like another.

Eyes glued on the contest could see, even in the murk, that the second horse had passed the first as they straightened for the race down the far straightaway and now led him by two clean lengths. One could see, too, that Little Son had moved up and was lapped on the second horse. So Major Tom was setting the pace, with Sandollar second and Little Son third. Back of that it was a blur of scudding monotone, yet from that blur some unidentified thing had detached itself and moved up to make the flying advance guard a quartet instead of a trio.

Then, with an instant suddenness, the skies brightened a little, bringing a rebirth of color as the leaders rounded the far turn.

Neither Petrie nor June Lee had spoken. The girl doubted if she had even breathed. It seemed to her that her heart itself had suspended its action—then, after the jumble of the turn home, she could see that Rockwell had made his move on that double curve and that once again he had forced the blue and white to the fore.

This time he had come outside of Major Tom, where he was sure of clear sailing. But, with a nose at Sandollar's girth, Major Tom was straining every valiant nerve in his fine body and every gallant impulse of his heart to recapture the lead.

"It's a question of lasting," declared Petrie shortly. "Sandollar can't hold it unless Rockwell can make him. It's a question of lasting!"

So far the black was holding it, but Major Tom was running like a wild horse and only a neck back of him came Little Son with Cranberry, forgotten in the betting, crowding him close.

Roars and bellowings that were like artillery thunder lifted and reverberated along three furlongs of track fence. Women shrieked and gesticulated like Valkyries riding a gale. Names invoked in prayerful supplication blended into a chaos of noise. The crowds cut off behind other heads and shoulders sought to climb on those in front—but Martin Petrie and June Lee made no sound. Sound seemed beyond them.

Jimmy Rockwell, with the threat of twelve other hoofs almost upon him, lay flat along the black neck of Sandollar. His hand nursed the black head and his whip rained a timed punishment on the black flanks.

He seemed to lift his mount and throw added length into each stride. He appeared by some alchemy of his own to be converting the silver of sprinting speed into the gold of staying power—and under that drive Sandollar not only held on—but in the last seventy yards stretched his lead from a scant half length to a full length and a half. It was so he crossed the wire, with Major Tom second and Little Son separated by nostrils for second and third and Cranberry saving his entrance fee by finishing fourth.

Comparatively few had played Sandollar, yet all the popularity that had

once been Rockwell's flared and blazed into a new incandescence—and as the wire was crossed sixty thousand throats found new energy and hurled it all into a mighty burst of welcoming sound.

Martin Petrie turned to June Lee.

"Major Tom was the better horse," he said quietly, "but we had a million-dollar ride—and we won!"

CHAPTER XIV.

SWIFT DARKNESS.

IT seemed that every form of pandemonium broke loose with a single percussion as the field flowed across the wire, four horses, only, striving in the front division and sixteen trailing in bunches along an outstrung line.

While the howls of the thousands were still at the peak of their uproar, the heavens spoke in thunderclaps that rumbled into prolonged echoes—and the infield crowds, swollen now to perhaps two thousand, vaulted the fences and spilled chokingly over the track itself. There was no controlling them as they milled and swirled, dervishlike in a saturnalia of excitement, and the lathered horses, pulled up at the turn and beyond it, came back to their unsaddling along a way no longer clear but man clogged.

Movie cameras and still cameras were forming in batteries to greet the victor on the ground level and from the tops of stepladders precariously balanced amid swirling eddies of humanity.

Again the rain began to pour. When Lyric, the highly praised first choice that had been eighth in the procession, appeared, and Joe Garden slid from his saddle among the unplaced, no demonstration of any sort greeted him, either hostile or friendly. Already it was as if he had been consigned to oblivion and forgotten.

For Major Tom there was more favor. He at least had run a gallant race and had almost won it. His backers were already saying that, with jockeys reversed, he would have defeated his conqueror by as conclusive a margin as his conqueror had defeated him. The race-track better is not sentimentally concerned with making excuses for a beaten horse, but he is eagerly anxious to vindicate his own judgment.

Nineteen jockeys had returned and raised their whips in the murky light that was thickening again, when the black young winner trotted sedately up and stepped across the white semicircle which the rain was slowly but surely obliterating.

Then, as the boy in the sky-blue and white raised his whip and looked up, the howls that had died reawoke, swelled, cannonaded until it became obvious that no rider had ever before, on that track that was old in racing glory, received so thunderous an ovation.

Rockwell could not yet dismount. He had first to face the cameras, with the huge horseshoe of roses about Sandollar's neck; he was called upon to be photographed in this attitude and that. Afterward he had to ascend into the steward's stand, where already Petrie awaited him, and it was as if he were being lifted up the narrowly winding stairway on voice waves from human throats.

There again the photographers were busy, though the twilight of the newly charged storm recorded only silhouettes on their plates and the whole celebration seemed a thing taking place in the dimness of some unearthly cavern.

June Lee did not think of the rain or the darkness. She watched the senator making his speech, watched Petrie acknowledging his silver plate and Rockwell his gold spurs. There was brightness where she stood in spite of the clouds, as though she occupied a peak above their blanketing.

She and Martin left the track before the day's program ended and left it in a torrential downpour of rain. The de-

lays of pushing a car through the traffic that would soon spill outward promised discomforts and these must be avoided by an early start, since she had a train to catch for the East.

But as they drove townward, there was no melancholy of parting in the heart of either. Parting now was only a whetting of their eagerness for meeting again and in the essential sense they were not to separate.

"Did you ever really give up hope, Martin?" she asked him, as they sat later in his car at the station, before it was time for her to board her homeward-bound train.

The man considered the question for a little before he answered it.

"I told myself," he said, at last, "that my hope had died when your success became assured. I tried to resign myself to it—but I know now that a small, forlorn banner of hope still flew from the ramparts of my battered fort." He paused, then added: "I know that because I don't believe I could have managed to go on without that hope."

"You don't feel then," she inquired, "that the question has been answered even yet—as to what a crushing defeat would mean to you?"

He shook his head in honest admission.

"I have always rebelled at the idea that a lucky star shone over me," he said. "I have always wanted to feel myself the captain of my soul and all that sort of thing. Now I see that I've done nothing to deserve such gifts as have come to me—so I must acknowledge the luck." His voice was humble as he went on: "I have certainly never deserved you."

The girl laid a hand on his arm.

"I don't any longer wonder about how you would face disaster," she told him. "Somehow I know. You would face it steadfastly."

"I'd like to think so," he said, "but who knows?"

WHEN he came back through the depot gates after his farewell to June Lee, Martin's thoughts were still in the Pullman car and it took an effort to remember that the fullness of events which had trooped through the hours since noon had all taken place in a single day. He was glad it was over and that now he could go to his room at his aunt's house and sit quietly over his pipe and his thoughts, thoughts that were better than floral horseshoes or silver plate.

To-morrow would be Sunday and, after a visit to his barn at Churchill Downs for a talk with his trainer and an inspection of Sandollar, he meant to drive back to Woodford County and spend the rest of the day and the night there, where the place that had always been his home had now become enriched by so many new and hopeful associations.

But when he arrived at Mrs. Carlton's house it was to learn that the telephone had been ringing for him and that a summons had come which he could not ignore. An extemporaneous banquet had been planned by Eastern friends to toast the victorious trick of owner, trainer and jockey. Though the invitation reached Martin in that order of precedence, he knew that it was really a celebration whose honor guest was to be the rider of Sandollar—the rehabilitated king of jockeys—and, since that was true, he could in nowise fail either of presence or full appreciation.

Yet Martin sighed as he hurried into evening clothes. He had not known until now how tired he was. The excitement even of joy may be devastating in its nerve tax and now he realized with how heavy a current of such excitement his nerve circuit had been freighted. The mere matter of conditioning and putting on razor edge the colt that was to try for the Derby had been more than an ordinary training matter, because this particular colt was

more than an ordinary animal to him. But the conversion of his bleak hopelessness into unanticipated and, as it seemed to him, measureless triumph—a conversion coming without preface of gradual reaccommodation—had affected him as a mighty intoxication.

NOW the day's activities had yet several hours to run ere he could relax in solitude and a little while later he found himself placed on the right of his host at a table about which sat men whose names were linked with the interests of the American turf. On the left of the host sat Jimmy Rockwell.

When the cigars were lighted at the end and the toastmaster had eulogized the State and the race in terms of general and flowery hyperbole, he eulogized them further as particularized in the native-born owner and the home-bred colt, which had to-day led home his field. Petrie found himself on his feet responding to that sentiment.

In reality he was not responding to the encomiums addressed to himself, but was giving the credit where the credit belonged—to the jockey who had booted Sandollar across the line in front.

It was Lyric's owner who had arranged that dinner and who sat now at the head of the table. He was a thoroughgoing sportsman, but upon him the demands of after-dinner speaking sat as an unaccustomed duty and he had floundered a bit with his rhetoric, heaping Pelion on Ossa until he sat down mopping his brow, and Petrie rose.

Martin indulged little in either metaphor or simile, but his forefathers had been lawyers and public speakers for generations before him and so his words came with an effortless ease and his voice lent a color to the merit of simplicity.

"You have referred, sir, to the Petrie luck," he said smiling, as he faced the toastmaster, "and after doing so you qualified those words with a note of apology and spoke of a well-merited victory. You were generous enough to say that silks which had shown first in a Brooklyn and a Derby within a year must be more than lucky—and yet you are wrong. I myself have always flinched under the turf legend of being a child of fortunate chance. I no longer flinch, sir." He paused and into his eyes stole momentarily a far-away look, a look born in a thought that was neither of horses nor riders. "Now when a man calls me Lucky Petrie I say to myself: 'You have no idea how lucky I really am.'"

The speaker looked across at Jimmy Rockwell and Jimmy met his eyes.

"Gentlemen," said Petrie earnestly, "honesty is a good, solid virtue, even if others are more showy. Honesty stands prompting me as I speak and urges me to confess open-heartedly a thing which the newspapers will in all likelihood assert to-morrow. It is extremely doubtful if Sandollar was the best colt in the Derby to-day. There are perhaps three gentlemen sitting at this table now, any one of whom might be responding to this toast in my stead—had Jimmy Rockwell had his feet in that man's irons and his hands on the neck of that man's colt."

At this generosity of admission there was a little salvo of applause and, after it, Petrie went on:

"I told——" He paused for an instant, as he thought of whom he had told this thing, and then continued: "I told a friend before the race that Sandollar might win if he had a million-dollar ride. And he surely had it!"

"I shouldn't call that luck, though," some one interrupted, and the speaker turned a smiling face upon him.

"There was no more luck, sir, in the class Jimmy Rockwell showed to-day than there was in the class of Man o' War, but there was every element of luck in the good fortune that gave me his services."

Those men, who knew how the great jockey had gone begging a mount forty-eight hours ago, broke into fresh applause.

Petrie stood there waiting for that handclapping to die down and, as he stood, he smiled at the boy who sat across the white cloth, the porcelain and the silver. The room was brilliantly lighted and the glass and silver threw back its glint of many reflections.

SUDDENLY as he waited on his feet —it was all in a matter of seconds —an amazing and terrifying thing happened. The whole eye-filling picture comprehended between the walls of the room faded before Petrie's gaze. It was like the sudden darkness that had come over the track this afternoon when the inky clouds blotted out the sun, only it was a blacker and more complete darkness. It was not as sudden as it might have been had the electric lights gone accidentally out. It was a quick dimming and then a total, sightless blackness, as though the single opening of a cellar had slammed above his head.

In Petrie's ears still sounded the tailing off of the little dinner-table applause. When it had begun, he had been looking into the faces of men in evening clothes, across the bright detail of a banquet table. There had been the color of decorations, decorations in sky-blue and white. Now there was neither color nor shape and he stood abruptly sightless in the middle of a speech.

Across his face flashed a sudden tautness of agony, of encompassing panic and unconsciously he passed his hand across the eyes that had gone so abruptly dead, the eyes out of which light had been quenched.

If the diners noticed it, they thought that the speaker, who had been called on without preparation, was pausing to arrange and marshal his words.

An instinct acting more rapidly than consciousness had braced Martin against a visible flinching before eyes which could still see.

In the suddenness of the blow, the pain of realization had been as if a hot iron had burned out his vision, yet the bewildered gesture of the wandering hand had been all that betrayed him and that betrayal had gone unnoted.

But Jimmy Rockwell's glance was more intuitive. Jimmy Rockwell was trained to see things that happen quickly and pass quickly. He was trained to think and realize in spaces of time that others hardly measure in their realizations.

Jimmy knew that in some fashion his friend and employer had been stricken.

Petrie's pause was not long. He let the eyes which had no sight in them wander about the table as if they were seeing and appraising it all and he forced a smile to lips that seemed as stiff as dry rawhide.

Then, still unseeingly, but with a resolute disguise of his abruptly tortured feeling, Martin went on in a casual voice:

"Gentlemen, I predict another matter that will appear in to-morrow's news columns. There will no longer be any reference to Jimmy Rockwell as the man who was until recently America's premier jockey. That 'until recently' stuff will be already forgotten. Men will pretend that they never qualified the term. They will say, and say rightly, that this race is his victory and that my colt was the beneficiary of his greatness. The day is past when Jimmy Rockwell goes about offering his unsolicited services to any man."

He talked on for a few minutes longer and he had the presence of mind, while he was still speaking, to feel unostentatiously for the back of his chair, so that he might find his way into it again without the appearance of blind groping.

WHEN he was seated again, he raised his face as if looking at Jimmy Rockwell, but he did not venture to lift the glass from which he might spill his wine; then he heard the boy called on; he heard a chair scrape back as the jockey rose. It was strange, he thought, as he sat there without vision, how suddenly important had become little, hitherto unregarded sounds.

"I'm not much account, standing on my feet," began Rockwell, with his engaging grin of good humor, "especially when I'm on my feet trying to talk. It's all I can do to say it with bat and spur."

When the jockey had got that far, Petrie began to fancy he could once more make out his figure across the width of the table as vaguely and as distortedly as shapes appear when viewed under deep water, waveringly and bewilderingly foggy, yet in a fashion visible.

The speech was not long and some of it Petrie did not even hear. His mind seemed to break away from attention and to grapple with sudden fears, yet the vagueness of contours began to steady and focus. They ceased to have the appearance of flickering dark shadows against lighter shadows and became a colorless silhouette. Then color stole gradually back into things again and, though the table and the room were still blurred as they might be to a man who has forgotten his glasses, though features were not yet recognizable, Petrie knew that that particular moment of blindness was passing and that, unless it was followed by another, he would be able to leave the table without being led away.

"The colt," Jimmy was saying, "is a better colt than he's been given credit for. Mr. Petrie was kind enough to say I booted him in by my ride and I rode him the best I could. But, gentlemen, I couldn't have held him in front under a killing drive if his heart hadn't been the right sort of heart. I couldn't have brought him away opening space at the end if he hadn't had the courage to give me what I asked for, whatever it cost him. I asked for all he had and he was a good enough colt to give it. It turned out to be enough."

"Jimmy," said Petrie, to the jockey, as they stood at the hotel check room getting their hats, "I wonder if you would mind driving me home."

"Glad to," assented the boy readily, and he asked no questions until they were seated in the runabout, with Petrie this time in the passenger's seat and the jockey at the wheel.

"Nobody else noticed it, Mr. Petrie," began the younger man slowly, "and, if you don't want to tell me about it, say so. But I saw, while you were making your speech, that something happened to you."

For a moment Martin hesitated, then he answered:

"Yes, that's why I asked you to drive me home. I went blind——"

"Blind! Good God! And you went right on talking! Nobody but myself suspected that anything had happened and I only got it because a jockey has to see and act in fifths of seconds. You can see now, though, can't you?"

Petrie nodded.

"It passed," he replied, "but it jolted me for a moment. It jolted me hard."

"I should think it would. Have you had trouble with your eyes? Indigestion sometimes does that, you know."

"I had a fall about a year ago," said the horseman. "I was riding a 'chaser that went down over the Liverpool at Belmont. I've been going to the doctors since and several times my sight has blurred—but never like that before."

Jimmy drove the car for a half block before he asked bluntly:

"What do the doctors say?"

Suddenly Petrie laughed.

"It wasn't until you asked that question that I realized," he answered. "They haven't told me anything. I don't know what they've told each other. The business annoyed me, but I had other things to think about and I've kept putting it out of my mind. I've never actually demanded that they tell me much."

"You demand it now," ordered the boy who had always taken instructions from this man, instead of giving them. "You demand it straight and snappy —just to relieve your own mind."

But Martin stepped out of the car and went to his room and, sitting there, he picked up a night edition of the *Courier-Journal* and glanced at the racing news. Even where the type was small, he read as clearly and easily as he had ever read. The thing that had appalled him had passed like scudding cloud wrack. With a sudden reaction of spirit, he cursed himself for a fool who had let himself be frightened by the trifle of a passing ailment and his thoughts canceled out both that incident and the victory of the Derby. As he lay in his bed, he was thinking of June Lee; yet he resolved, as he grew drowsy, as a matter of precaution he would see the specialist to-morrow before he drove back to Woodford County.

Doctor Gay had known this man ever since his boyhood and, when Martin telephoned to him that Sunday morning, the celebrated eye-and-ear man directed crisply:

"Come over to my office at once. I have no office hours to-day, but I'll meet you there. It's a good day, because Doctor Maurice is here from New York. He came for the race and wants to congratulate you. Besides, I'd like you to see him."

Petrie knew the name and repute of Maurice. Frayne and he were accounted the heads of their specialty on this side of the Atlantic, but he did not know that, before he arrived to keep the appointment, the two physicians had been discussing his case, or that Maurice had been reading notes made by Gay and letters from Frayne which Martin himself had never seen.

Nothing made him guess it, either, when he entered the offices and shook hands and when the talk ran of yesterday's victory in terms of congratulation and acknowledgment.

IT was as if the three had gathered there as friends met by chance, until at length Gay prompted:

"Tell me about this little attack last night. What happened?"

Martin flecked his ash from his cigarette and laughed.

"It gave me a start," he said, "because for a moment I thought I had gone blind—but I guess I was just nervous. This morning I can see as well as ever and my spirits are so good that you can't even depress me by telling me I've got to wear glasses!"

Maurice, who had been standing, turned and looked absently out of the window of the office building. His face as he averted it grew abruptly sober and he heard his colleague asking with a well-simulated carelessness:

"Does winning one Derby set you up as mightily as that? I thought you were a hard-boiled racing proposition with a stoic's indifference. You fellows that run horses have to follow Kipling's advice to 'Meet with triumph and disaster, and treat those two impostors just the same,' don't you?"

Petrie looked around, remembering that the distinguished physician from the East was, after all, a stranger. Then he laughed again and it was a laugh of boyish joyousness.

"I haven't permission to tell names," he said. "But it's a bigger thing than the Derby that makes me feel as I feel to-day. I'm going to be married—and the girl wasn't easy to win."

"Oh!" exclaimed Gay, but the ejaculation ran between his lips as though, instead of hearing good news, he detected an element of tragedy in the announcement. At once he recovered himself and wrung the younger man's hand:

"You know I wish you all happiness," he said; then as if some abstraction still held him, he added: "Now for this business of last night. Tell us about it."

At the end of the recital, Gay commanded:

"Wait here and smoke a while. I want to confer with Maurice."

The two men went into another room and in the smoke wreath from his cigarette Martin sat conjuring pictures, while on his lips hovered a smile.

In the other room the two specialists exchanged meaning glances and it was the man from New York who spoke first.

"Do you dare let him have it straight?" he demanded. "Or must we prepare him by degrees? Can he stand it?"

"I'm not quite sure," answered the other, in a troubled voice, "just how well any man could stand it. You can see he doesn't suspect. You know, it's only this last conclusion of Frayne's that seems to stamp it with certainty and yet——"

"Yet what?"

"Yet he's arranging to marry. He's got to know. There are some men to whom total blindness is a worse thing than death."

"It would be to me," growled Doctor Maurice. "Of course you won't make it sound quite so absolute as we believe it to be. He must see every eye man that he will consent to see, before he accepts our opinion as final."

"Of course!" agreed Gay. "Nothing is ever certain, but that doesn't comfort me much and I fancy it won't comfort him much. He's bound to know that the opinion comes from you, from Frayne and from myself. I don't want to sound egotistical, but to whom can he go in whom he'd have greater confidence? We are not alarmists."

"I'd give a good bit to be out of this," declared the other. "However" —he paused and drew back his shoulders—"let's go in and tell him."

AS the door of the consultation room opened, Martin was sitting with the reminiscent smile on his lips, but, as he glanced up and saw those other faces, there swept over him an echo of last night's sudden panic and he rose, bracing himself. It was as if they had already spoken.

"I see you have bad news for me, gentlemen," he said.

Maurice made no response and Gay announced bluntly:

"It isn't just a question of glasses, Martin."

The young man's face paled under its outdoor bronze, but the nod of his head was steady. It was steady as it might have been had he been himself giving the signal to a firing squad.

"I take it you mean blindness?" he asked. "Will it be partial or total?"

"We may be mistaken," interrupted Maurice. "No man can speak with absolute assurance about a thing of this sort. You must, of course, consult others besides ourselves."

"I am getting the opinion of the three foremost men in the country," came the direct response, in slowly uttered syllables. "Why should I go to smaller men? I want the facts, gentlemen, as you judge them. I want the whole truth and no evasions—because I have matters to attend to. It's total blindness, is it, that you predict?"

"I'm afraid so, Martin," responded Gay. "I hope we are wrong."

"How long have I?"

There was an awkward hesitation, then came the sentence:

"About six months, perhaps, with increasing recurrences of—of things like last night's attack."

Martin was standing by the chair. He drew his cigarette case from his pocket, his hand acting from habit, but he did not light the cigarette. An unfamiliar and sudden fear came over him that his courage might break. This was no place to show trembling fingers in the handling of a lighted match.

Slowly he nodded his head.

There were six months in which to fight it out. Just now he must take his medicine, standing.

"Thank you, gentlemen!" he said briefly. "This has been a bit of an ordeal for both of you—as well as for me."

"Remember," cut in Doctor Maurice, "that no medical opinion is final. I, for instance, speak only from the record of examinations made by others. Don't accept our word too wholly, until others have spoken."

"Thank you!" repeated Martin, in a dull steadiness of tone. He opened the office door and went out.

Outside on the street he halted a moment and suddenly he wondered if his legs would support him. His mouth was desperately dry and his tongue was sticky against its roof.

Then he began walking outward along the street toward his aunt's house where he had left his car. In the space of minutes every foundation had fallen out in collapse from under his life. The love that he had won, he might not any longer accept. The house that he loved, he should soon be unable to see—and yet, as though a brutal sledge had struck at his brain, he seemed mentally stunned and for the moment it was the absurd, small physical things of which he was most poignantly conscious.

He had read of the manifestations with which agitation sweeps men under sudden and fatal blows. He felt none of those emotions as they had been described. He wondered if the motor nerves that controlled his legs would continue to drive them. He moved the tongue that was so stiff in his dry mouth and craved water. He felt small arteries jumping crazily here and there in his forearms and wrists, but a deadly calm seemed to brood over these trivial manifestations of destruction, a calm of helpless despair.

Six months more and then the dark! He must get back to Hickory Hill and sit down and think. There was a letter to write. There were things to do. Hickory Hill with the new promise that could never be fulfilled! And men called him "Lucky" Petrie!

CHAPTER XV.

FACING DESPAIR.

MARTIN had read the papers that morning over his early-breakfast coffee and the columns of those papers had rung of his colt, his jockey and himself. For this important occasion sporting editors from the larger dailies East and West had made pilgrimage to the Downs and each of them had invoked his best of descriptive power in writing the story of Sandollar's victory.

The Louisville *Clarion* carried across three pages, not only its own narrative of the great fixture, but also the stories which went out over the wires from these visiting scribes to their more distant sheets. Thus Martin was able to run through the summary of what the press of the country at large was saying of his success and, modest though he was, he had risen, at the end of his reading, agreeably flushed with a glow of triumph.

The fact that two thirds of the experts declared the race to have been won less by the horse than by the rider did not discount his jubilation. On the contrary, this tribute to Rockwell had sincerely pleased him. Even when one

writer of considerable reputation in the world of sport ventured the opinion that, with such a ride as yesterday's, Jimmy Rockwell could have brought home to victory any one of the first four, Martin Petrie added his ready amen to that opinion.

Yet the Derby prize was not his greatest. The woman he loved had not been easy to win, but a foretaste of despair had whetted happiness to exaltation. Only a man who has thirsted to the edge of torture can drink with a supremacy of zest.

He had encouraged her and helped her with the interest that had been his rival and, in the strength of her success, she had come to him in a willing surrender which was to her thinking better than the victory for which she had, at first, so obstinately fought.

The high good fortune recounted by these reporters was secondary, but it was like the magnificence of a durbar to celebrate the greater crowning of his life.

From his breakfast, Martin had gone to the track and, in Sandollar's stall, had looked over the youngster munching oats in the pink of condition. If this colt did nothing more, his place in the company of great colleagues was secure and, when he retired to the stud, he would be a sought-after sire.

Martin had left his car at his aunt's house, needing to throw into the outlet of exercise the exuberance of his spirits and, as he had walked the two miles to the doctor's office, he had been treading air.

Now he was walking back.

YEAR often slips into year, century into century with the almost imperceptibly slow current of a languid stream. But sometimes to-day breaks into to-morrow with the devastating violence of tornado or earthquake.

A half hour ago he had been marveling that men can cavil with life; ready to testify to the blazing glory of life; full as a brimming goblet with the effervescent joy of life.

Now he had six months and then the rest was to be for him an unlighted corridor of horror, leading on through black years to death. The death would be real from the first, in every essential thing, and it would be only the more intolerable because he must go on conscious of it, deprived of the lethal mercy of a grave.

At times he felt that he must have water to moisten the stickiness of a mouth that seemed coated with drying glue. It was as if about his eyes all the small facial muscles were strained and drawing in. At times he wanted to break into a run and always he felt the tiny nerves jumping quietly yet crazily in his forearms. He wondered vaguely why they did not quiver in his temples.

Yet he was walking along crowded sidewalks and, to other eyes, he was only a young man of straight-shouldered strength with a deeply preoccupied face.

In this town he could not go far without meeting acquaintances and such acquaintances could not pass him by on the day following a Derby victory without halting him for congratulations. In replying to these felicitations he distrusted his voice, which seemed to himself a betraying croak. It was as cruelly hard to have to endure such banalities just now as if he had been a poor condemned devil on the death march from his cell to the gallows, being constantly halted for small talk along the way.

But until he got back to Hickory Hill, as the wounded beast gets back to its den, he must hold the front of ephemeral disguise. He must at all costs of effort make the thick tongue, that clove so to the roof of his mouth, bend and twist to the shaping of decent acknowledgments. He must take the lash of the words "Lucky Petrie" with-

out whimpering. So one thing emerged out of the sudden smother of stricken chaos—and upon it he pinned his resolution. He must get back to Hickory Hill and, until he arrived there and closed his own door upon the outer world, he must be the Lucky Petrie of yesterday.

In his own library he could take stock of his wretched fate. Elsewhere he owed it to his blood and the record of his ancestors, to walk—not to shamble; to stand upright—not to grovel. A man must not whimper in the market place.

Mrs. Carlton, who had been in bed when he left the house, met him smilingly.

"June Lee," she informed him lightly, "sent a night letter from Indianapolis. It's on your table." She paused and her eyes twinkled. "I suspect that girl is fond of you," she added.

Martin forced a stiff smile which he thought must resemble the hideously sardonic grimace of a gargoyle, but his aunt did not appear to recognize it as such. He was wishing now a thing which two hours ago would have been inconceivable. He was wishing that June Lee was not fond of him. Then at least this destructive calamity would not have to touch and scar her.

HE packed his bag mechanically and put it into his car. He climbed in and started the eighty-mile run for home. A fury of haste seemed to drive him as though he were racing to reach haven before darkness descended on him, to get to cover before the light failed. It was only when a policeman halted him at a crossing, and came truculently alongside, that he realized how his nervous sense of flight had reflected in the speed of his machine.

But the officer recognized him as the owner of yesterday's Derby winner and the officer had in his own veins a bit of sporting blood. The affronted scowl of the law lapsed into an Irish grin.

"You've already won the race, Mr. Petrie," he suggested. "You can ease up now and take a breathing spell—the next cop may not know you."

"I'm sorry," said Petrie penitently. "I didn't realize what I was doing." To himself, he added: "After all, I have six months to get there."

"I don't blame you at that," the policeman assured him. "If I had your luck, I'd feel like joy riding, too!"

Coming the other way over that road on his last trip, June Lee had been beside him. He had pointed out to her every favorite vista of loveliness along the way, the rich roll of blue-grass pasture and woodland, the hilly picturesqueness of the Kentucky River hills and the flatter tidiness of the Bear-grass country.

He had always lived with his eyes. Now he knew how dependently. For music he had love, but for color and graciousness of contour he acknowledged a passion.

He had judged the sincerity or falsity of men less by their words than by the communion of eye with eye.

Now, before the snow flew again, hills, trees, skies and faces would all be memories, receding to greater and fainter distances day by day.

In a year he would begin to wonder what this thing and that had really looked like. Even the cherished beauty of June Lee's face would pass from the appreciation of his senses—but perhaps that would be as well. Of course he must not let June Lee tangle herself any longer in the snarl of his devastated life. She must be set free.

He saw again in memory the bronze bust she had modeled of his head; a faithful portrait save that its eyes had been blank. Those blank pupils had been prophetic. He had inveighed against it as the rival that had conquered him—a blind Nemesis. Now

again a face with sightless eyes would conquer him, if he permitted himself to go on and live in such an abject wreckage of existence.

THEN it was that an insidious temptation entered his heart and postured there as a genuine and courageous solution. His life had ended in all its sense of intrinsic worth. Henceforth it could mean only a broken and futile mockery. The Petries had never been inclined to submit to such indignities. When the genuineness of life ended, they did not cling cravenly to its shadow, or treasure husks out of which the kernels had been threshed. Why should he?

When he turned into the drive and halted at the front of his house, it seemed to him for a moment that he saw June Lee standing there at the door and, under the blow of that illusion, his sanity reeled and he feared lunacy.

For an instant he bent over the wheel of his car and caught his face in his two hands, then he took up his bag and entered the hall.

He had been thinking of his own house as a place of freedom where his own emotions might have play uncensored. Now as he entered it, and his servants appeared to meet him, he realized that there was for him no such place.

These servants were also part of his family. To them the fortunes of the sky-blue and white in a great race were matters of blood pride and they were as eager to receive in triumph the master of the house, as though he were a warrior fresh from the field, bringing back his enemy a captive.

"On the turf, and under it, all men are equal," and the Petrie negroes were waiting to hear glad tidings from the lips of the clan chief.

Before he could hide his misery behind a closed door, he must yet go through such formalities as lie incumbent on a man upon whom the cornucopia of good fortune has seemed to empty its contents.

It was not until the afternoon was far advanced that he could shut himself away with his somberness of thought.

Then he sat down mechanically at his writing table. The things that had seemed most urgent in his first appraisal of conditions were the writing of a letter to June Lee—and the drawing of his will. Now he reminded himself that there were six months of grace. He must first of all sit here in this room, and think out such matters as demand decision when a single blow has torn down the orderliness of a man's life structure and piled it in a rubble of débris about him.

Of course he might go up and down the earth, seeking another doctor to disagree with the verdict he had heard, but the Petries had a disconcertingly direct habit of thought and that weak possibility of hope he flung disdainfully aside. He had had the word of three men who were the peers of any other men in their line of research.

They, themselves, felt no doubt and had only sought to soften the blow by suggesting further inquiries. He could only delude himself by seeking to read comfort into any future consultations.

No, the thing was deadly certain. In six months he would be stone-blind—unless death released him first.

To be stone-blind meant that he must not marry. The first impulse that this news would awaken in June Lee's heart would be that profound pity which often drives women to martyrdom. She must be saved from that. It would make of her something scarcely better than the dog that leads a sightless beggar along the streets.

He must devise a way of releasing her from so bleak a bondage without her learning the reason—even if it were some such unkind, seemingly such a

cruel, way as would make her feel that she had escaped a catastrophe in escaping such a man.

Again the insidious temptation welled up in the guise of sound courage.

THE Petries had been long-lived. Some of them had been a bit mad. There was an old saying in the family that they never died unless some one killed them or they killed themselves. Two ancestors had died by their own hands and suicide is called cowardly. These men had certainly never been condemned as craven for any other act. Martin laughed with grim derision at the idea that they had lacked courage.

At this same table had once sat another Petrie, calmly arranging his affairs on the night before he was to go out to meet his former friend and neighbor, Colonel Vilette, on the field of honor—an errand from which he did not return.

Martin had often heard that story and had been repelled by what he had thought to be its false concept of chivalry. Except for his seconds, who also witnessed his will, no one in that household had known what the morrow was to require of this earlier Petrie. He had chatted with the wife whom he loved, but whom his code permitted him to leave widowed for a fancied point of honor. He had put everything in order and his signature had been affixed to his will with a hand that betrayed no suspicion of tremor. At the end, before going to bed, to sleep soundly, though less soundly than he would sleep to-morrow, he had mixed toddies with his friends and smilingly pledged their long life and prosperity.

Before the next day's sun was full-bright, he was being carried home lifeless.

That man had mortally hurt the woman he loved by dying without warning—and perhaps by dying needlessly. But Martin told himself his own case stood on another footing. It was his prolonged life, tainted with disability, that would more permanently and deeply hurt the woman he loved. He was not going to meet death to satisfy an arrogant vanity. He was sinking a derelict already wrecked.

It could seem an accident. There were many ways to accomplish that and, inasmuch as he had no close relations, it would be natural that he should leave his fortune to his fiancée. She would grieve deeply for a time, but youth would heal the wounds and she would not grieve through a wasted lifetime.

That, he assured himself, was a practical solution and one suited to a man of his kidney. Yet back of all his specious reasoning lurked some instinct that cried out at him and accused him as a coward.

"You are geared high—for success!" that instinct whispered, quoting a beloved voice that he must put out of his life. "I wonder how you would stand a crushing disaster?"

The windows were open as the sun began to set and they framed pictures of such loveliness as could hardly be borne together with the thought of relinquishing them. He could see the line of locusts, still holding the last of their bloom and freighting the air with their fragrance. About them was a drone of humming bees. It had been only a little while ago that he had stood under them in the starlight and listened to magic. He walked heavily to the door and looked out at the hickory tree. In its branches flitted the gorgeous orange and jet of the Baltimore oriole.

Martin stifled a groan.

AFTER the Derby, Jimmy Rockwell had planned to go East again immediately. There was little prospect now that he would have to haunt the race tracks unemployed. Already telegrams had begun to arrive and henceforth he

would have a flattering choice of mounts in feature races. But on that Sunday afternoon he went to Churchill Downs and visited the barn where was quartered the colt that had carried him back to a full rehabilitation of his life.

"Has Mr. Petrie been out to-day?" he inquired, and the trainer nodded.

"He went back to town early. I expected to see him again before he started for the farm, but he called me up on the phone—and I've been worrying."

"Why?" The question broke from the jockey with the quickness of suppressed anxiety.

"I hardly know, Jimmy. Maybe it's only a hunch. He told me to carry on here without him until further orders. He said he'd been to the doctor's and wasn't feeling quite fit—but what bothered me was his voice. I didn't recognize it at first. It sounded queer."

Jimmy Rockwell had on occasions to make swift decisions. Perhaps his profession had given him a sort of speed mania; at all events his next words seemed to the trainer almost irrationally strange, as did the explosive haste of their utterance.

"Can I get a plane to fly with me to Woodford County?" he demanded. "I've got to see Mr. Petrie right away."

"You might try Bowman Field," suggested the other vaguely.

An hour later Jimmy Rockwell was wearing new riding tack. Goggles covered his eyes and a leather helmet incased his head, muffling a little the roar of a maniacal engine as he swung himself over the side and into the rear seat of a training plane and hooked the iron fastening of the safety belt about his middle.

The pilot in the front seat leaned around the rear wind shield to inquire briskly:

"All set?"

The jockey nodded.

The noise of the idling engine mounted to a deafening machine-gun roar. Two ground helpers jerked the roped chocking blocks from under the wheels and the plane started taxiing along the field, turned into the wind and ceased to jolt on the lumpy clods.

At first Jimmy did not know it had taken the air, then the grassed earth began to drop downward and the roofs of houses were beneath.

For a little while they were climbing in widening spirals and the Ohio River, looping about the city, became a ribbon. The tiled housetops were bits of confetti, the truck farms amazing little patches of green and chocolate tidiness —and off to the southwest, beyond a net of railways, the two race tracks were absurdly small ovals.

The dropping terrain of earth and water, of brick-blocked town and wood patches below reeled this way and that, gyrated and tilted. The only steady and seemingly immovable point in space was the craft in which Rockwell was riding, with its wide spread of wing and the humming tautness of bracing wires, with its roaring song of engined power. There was no sense of speed and Jimmy was in a hurry. The mental realization that he was traveling eighty miles an hour, or better, did not offset that impression of hanging poised and motionless.

Then the disk of the aëronautical compass spun until the letter "e" showed at its center and the altimeter registered twenty-five hundred feet. The flight eastward had begun.

"A man like that," mused Jimmy, who was sorely fretting because here he could not lean forward and grasp reins and ply a bat and put more speed into his progress, "a man like that might get desperate at the thought of blindness. If he takes time enough to think it out, he'll be all right, but I'll feel better when I've seen him."

To be concluded in the next issue of POPULAR, *on the news stands January 20th.*

The Holdup Man

By Charles R. Barnes

Author of "Mrs. Sweeny's Boss," "What the Cards Knew," Etc.

With the scepter of humor, Belle Sweeny rules over her particular corner of the world, and that it is not a bad government, I am sure you will agree.

"WAS you ever held up?" asked Mrs. Sweeny.

"No, I'm glad to say," answered the Boarder.

"Well," she continued, "it ain't no nice thing."

"So I have heard," agreed the Boarder.

"My Danny got it once," she went on. "Them feetpads batted him over the head one night as he was comin' home, took a hundred and forty dollars off of him and tossed him in a snowdrift."

"Did he ever find out who did it?" inquired the Boarder.

"No," she replied, "but they had the nerve to say that they was fr'en's of his—the idee!"

"Friends?"

"Yep, they looked in his pocketbook and found out who he was from his cards. Then they called me up. I was alone in the house, when the telephone begins to buzz and, as it was pretty well along in the evenin', I thought it was some fr'en's of Danny's, callin' in to tell me that my husban's too stewed to come home. They often done them kind little things. So I says to myself: 'Oh, dear, I wisht he wouldn't do it so much—his drinkin' will get to be a habit, by and by.' And then I takes down the receiver.

"'Hello!' says I.

"'Hello!' says a strange voice. 'Is this Mrs. Sweeny?'

"'It sure is,' I says.

"'Well, mom,' says the voice, 'your husban's layin' in a snow pile,' it says, 'at the corner of Central Park West and Eighty-fourth Street,' it says.

" 'Call a taxi,' I says, 'and send him home.'

" 'If it's just the same to you, mom,' says the voice, 'mebby you better come and get him. We ain't fond of that neighborhood, mom. You see, we just stuck him up'——"

"What's that?" interrupted the Boarder.

" 'Stickin' up' is what the police calls holdin' up," she explained. "Now, don't butt in no more till I get through. The feller that was talkin' went on to say that him and his pal was scared to go back there where Danny was.

" 'We're fr'en's of his,' says the man, 'and we wouldn't of did it if we had knew who he was. So we thought we'd call you up and have you go get him before he freezes to death. We slugged him pretty hard.'

"Now, wasn't them nice men, mister? Everybody liked Danny and was awful kind to him. Gee, I wish folks was that way with me! But they ain't. I get mine everywhere. Well, of course I went down there and pried my poor, senseless husban' out of the snow and took him home. The doctor came in and sewed up his head and he was all right in a couple days. But what I'm gettin' at, mister, is how good everybody is to some folks, and other folks is only spectators; and, at that, they have to pay, in trouble and hard luck, for the privilege of sticking on earth and seein' other people get everything. Look at me! I ain't got no fr'en's. Everybody has got it in for me; nothin' nice ever happens. Here's the rent man comin' to-morruh and my di'mon' ring's got to be hauled out of pawn by day after, or I lose it—that's more'n fifty dollars—and, oh, mister, such a lot of stuff! I'm as poor as people says they are when you want to borrow money of them, I am. It seems to me that I'm alwus in trouble over money and nothin' else."

"Now, see here," said the Boarder, "why can't I pay a month's rent in advance?"

"We'll just ring the bell on that there sort of thing," she sharply interrupted. "Ting-a-ling! You know I wasn't hintin' for nothin', mister—you knew I wouldn't take nothin' from you when you began talkin'. I come in here to tell you my troubles, because you're more sympathetic than the iceman and seem to have more brains. Now, don't you never start nothin' like that again with me. I'm alwus in trouble about money, as I said; but, somehow, things come out all right. I don't understand that."

"You have a habit of doing things for people," suggested the Boarder, "and the bread that is cast on the water often returns."

"I don't do nothin' for people," she contradicted. "I just go along, livin' as I think my poor dead Danny would have me—though I ain't so sure about that holdup business and never was." She settled herself slowly in a chair and grew thoughtful. "I don't know what he'd of thought about that."

"About what?" questioned the Boarder.

"WELL," she told him, "about what I did then. You see, I didn't like that there holdup thing a bit. It didn't look right to me that my Danny should be biffed on the head and robbed, just like he was a millionaire's son, comin' home from feedin' wine to a chorus girl. He hadn't been up to nothin' like that. No, sir, he had just been drinkin', downtown, like a gent'man. He'd been with some of the prom'nent men in racin' circles, that was talkin' things over. And he wasn't out late, neither—it wasn't only a little after midnight when I got him.

"And the more I thought about it, the madder I got. I didn't care if the holdup men was fr'en's of his—though I sort of doubted that right along, it

not bein' any fr'en'ly trick to soak somebody in the head and take his money away from him. You can talk all night and you can't make me believe them fellers was fr'en's of Danny's, mister. Why, Danny hisself said he didn't know any stick-up men, except to have a noddin' acquaintance with a half dozen or so; and he said that when them fellers that slugged him claimed to be fr'en's they was presumin'. You see, mister, Danny was mighty putticular who he ran with. He didn't go with no one but the most classy gamblers; he said it hurt a man to be seen with any but respectable people."

"For instance?" inquired the Boarder soberly.

WELL, second-story men and piker gamblers, that didn't have any pull with the police," she elucidated. "Yes, sir, they had to class up before Danny would ussociate with them. I was awful proud of him for that spirit, too. And knowin' what I did about it, I made up my mind that it wasn't fr'en's of his that held him up, but puffect strangers, that had only seen his name in the papers, them times he got arrested. I had my suspicions that they was just common crooks that Danny wouldn't recognize, except mebby to say: 'Hullo, there, Mike, old pal!' or some such distant how-de-do thing.

"So I put this and that together, tryin' to figger out who done it and, first I'd make up my mind one way and another time I'd get altogether diff'rent idees. You see, mister, the first thing I knew, I went and was a detective. I couldn't get it out of my head that I was going to land them fellers and send them to Sing Sing. It got awful interestin', too. I remembered the voice—how it sounded over the telephone—and I kept askin' myself: 'Now, who could that of been, who could that of been?' Day after day it was that way and me puzzleder than a man tryin' to find his way 'round in a department store. Then, all of a sudden, I remembered that the voice was a ringer for the way Mister Eppler, our butcher, talked. It wasn't Mister Eppler's dialect, but I concluded that he was disguisin' himself by talkin' like a person ought to, for once.

"'Gee!' I says to myself, 'I wonder if it was him!'

"If you ever got a clew, mister, you know how excitin' it is. The thing keeps buzzin' in your head and hoppin' round and pokin' your brain, till you don't have no rest. And that's the way this clew did, till by and by my mind set up a little song: 'Eppler done it, Eppler done it, Eppler, Eppler, Eppler!' Honust, I couldn't sleep for thinkin' about it. I didn't say nothin' to Danny, but every time I bought meat I sized up that Mister Eppler pretty close and looked at him sharp for signs that he'd held up my Danny."

"Was he a tough-looking man?" asked the Boarder.

"Him!" she exclaimed. "Goodness, no! He looked like his name couldn't be nothin' else but Eppler. When he talked to you, his face would gradually twist clear round behind him, which was toward the corner saloon. It turned that way by instinct and when he hunted up accounts in his books, he alwus turned to the B's first, that bein' the first letter in 'beer.' He didn't look much like a criminal; but, then, I kept sayin' to myself, you never can tell. So one day I went in his shop, my mind made up to start somethin'.

"'Mister Eppler,' I says, 'robbers is a bad thing, ain't they?'

"'*Ach*, yes,' he says, 'but I guess they got to live—*so?*'

"'But,' I says, 'I should think they'd be scared of the police.'

"'Dey vas no goot, der police,' he says. 'Dey ain't got no sense. For what did they arrest me when I take

too much by the Turnverein Ball, last month?' he says.

"'When was that?' I says.

"'Chanuary tent',' he says, 'and they keep me all night in the chail.'

"Now, mister, Danny was held up in the night of the tenth of January, so I see right away that Mister Eppler was let out of everything and that my clew was a bum tip. To make sure, I got to tellin' Mrs. Eppler, ain't it a shame about the police locking up Mister Eppler for only being soused, and she says it was. And she tells me about bein' with him that night and beggin' the police to let him go, so I seen that I had for sure drawed a four-flush. I had to quit tryin' to put anything on Mister Eppler."

"Did you get any more clews?" the Boarder wanted to know.

"Yes," admitted Mrs. Sweeny, "but they all fell down like the Mister Eppler one. I couldn't stick nothin' on nobody, till one day I got a extra lady —her name was Mrs. Hovey—to come and clean the flat, my own hired girl havin' a cold and not bein' able to do no heavy work. Mrs. 'Gold Dollar' Cohen sent this lady to me. She was a nice, modest sort of young girl and she looked out of place scrubbin' round; so much so that I figgered she must be fightin' some tough luck. But she was a good worker, she was, and I had her come a lot of times and help with the work, just to give her a lift. Poor thing, I felt sorry for her; and she was that proud she wouldn't take no old clothes home with her, or what we had left from dinner.

"I guess she must of been workin' for me, off and on, for about two weeks when one day she sent word that she was sick and couldn't come.

"'Dear me,' I says to myself, 'she sure is up against it, the poor dear.'

"This was early in the mornin' that I got the message, and I was some put out about it, for them rugs of mine simply had to be took up on the roof and cleaned. I'd set my heart on havin' that done on that there day, for Danny was goin' to have a sort of party in the evenin' and I didn't want the house lookin' a sight when them people come. I tried to make up my mind to do it myself, but the idee of that lady layin' somewheres, sick and perhaps not bein' took care of, got to botherin' me. I was just yankin' up the parlor rug, I remember, when the thing got too strong for me.

"'I got to go and see how she is,' I says to myself, 'and Danny and his fr'en's can choke on the dust—anyway, they'll be too soused to notice it in an hour.'

AND so I winds a few wraps on myself, grabs my purse and goes to look Mrs. Hovey up. She had gave me her ad-dress, so I could write to her when I wanted her to come and clean for me; and, havin' that, I knowed where to go. It was 'way over on the East Side, where there's a lot of poor people. She lived in two rooms, clear up at the top of one of them tenement houses. That's where I found her, all alone and shiverin' with the cold. The bed had only a wore-out blanket on it —that was all she had over her.

"When she seen me, she sort of gasped and sat up in bed.

"'Why did you come here?' she says, in a funny, shaky voice; and I seen her eyes jerk toward a cluttered kitchen table near the bed. I didn't think nothin' of it just then—I thought it was supprise and sickness that made her so unstrung.

"'I come to make you comfortable, dearie,' I says.

"And then I starts to yip-yip about her bein' quiet and don't worry and all such a line of talk that you hands out to sick folks. I straightened out her bed and found a couple of coats that would do to keep her warm till I

could get somethin' better for her. Gee, mister, that was sure a bare place! There didn't seem to be nothin' in it. After I'd got her fixed up more comfortable, I skipped round, here and there, tidyin' up. But all the time I couldn't help noticin' how nervous and sort of scared she acted. And whenever I'd get near that table, she'd look at me, with the most pitiful, pleadin' expression in her eyes. There seemed to be somethin' about that table that fascinated her; all the time, her eyes kept rovin' toward it and from it to me. Honust, it made me feel creepy after a while. I had sized up the table in a hurry, but I couldn't see anything peculiar about it; it was just a common, ordinary pine affair, like people uses in kitchens.

" 'What,' says I to myself, 'can it be? Perhaps the lady is batty,' says I to myself.

"However, I decided to take another look and I did. Then I understood. Mister, what do you think was on that table?"

"I can't imagine," replied the Boarder.

MRS. SWEENY allowed an impressive silence to occur, before she said, in sensational accents:

"Danny's pocketbook!"

"The one the robbers took?" asked the Boarder.

"Yes," she replied, "the very one. It was a yellow leather bill fold, that I had give him for Christmas, and there was a burned monogram, D. S., on one side. That side was peerin' right up at me from the table. Gee, you could have pushed me over by blowin' your breath the other way! I was so flustered that I slumped right down in a chair, and says:

" 'Well!'

"The little woman on the bed seen what happened and began to cry.

" 'Oh, dear me—oh, dear me,' she hollers, 'we'll all be pinched! We'll all be pinched!'

" 'Who done it?' I says again.

" 'It wasn't me,' she says, growin' sullen. 'Oh, Mrs. Sweeny,' she says, 'what did you ever come round here for, anyway?'

" 'Who done it?' I says again.

" 'It wasn't me,' she says again.

" 'Of course it wasn't you,' I says. 'If a little thing like you was to swat Dan Sweeny over the head, he'd only wonder if somebody wasn't tryin' to attract his attention. You didn't hold him up. Who did?'

" 'I dassen't tell,' she snaps. 'Anyway, he's on the Island now for two months. They give it to him for another job somethin' like that—he'll be out next week.'

" 'Now, see here,' I says, 'you go on and tell me all about it.'

"I could see that she was awful weak from bein' sick and not havin' enough to eat and I guess her nerve was broke. Anyway, she began cryin' and just laid there and sobbed and sobbed and sobbed. She felt so bad that she made me feel bad, too, and pretty soon all both of us was blubberin' like a couple of lady clerks at a mellowdrammer. I had such a good cry I was right glad I come.

"Well, after this here business had went on for about five minutes, she up and says:

" 'Johnnie done it,' she says.

" 'Who's Johnnie?' I says.

" 'My husban',' she says.

" 'M-m!' I says.

"It was quite a little while before she could quit shakin' and sobbin' long enough to tell me the rest of it.

" 'Johnnie and me,' she says, 'come on here from Ohio, where he had a job as printer. He got work here, but after a while he was fired and couldn't get no more. In a couple of weeks, our money run out and he got desperate and so, one night, him and an-

other feller went out and held up a man. They made eight dollars and fifty-five cents apiece out of that deal and the business looked so good to them that they kept it up. Johnnie usta come home in the daytime and sleep. At night, he and his pal would go downtown and watch for some guy spendin' money and flashin' a roll. They'd foller him when he was goin' home, till they got him in a good place, then they'd rap him on the head and take what money he had. But they was like most all the crooks; they played the ponies and most of their earnin's went that way. It was out at the track that they learned who your husban' was.

"'Then, one night,' she goes on, 'Johnnie come home and tells me about them stickin' up Mister Dan Sweeny, the famous bookmaker. He was awful sorry about it. They hadn't followed him, but seen him comin' and just took a chance, because he looked like ready money. That's how I happen to have the pocketbook. Johnnie alwus wanted to get it back to your husban' some way, for it looked like a present and he thought your husban' set a lot by it. But Johnnie was afraid he might be traced through it, some way, so he never took the chance.

"'And now,' she says, sobbin' some more, 'you've found out all there is to know about it—you'd of knowed I knew something, even if I hadn't told. And then you'd of sent the police in here and mebby tell them to nab Johnnie when he gets out. His bein' locked up is why I go out scrubbin' and why we're livin' in this hole. When he was prosperin' at the stick-up business, we lived good, though I didn't exactly approve of what he was doin'. Say, are you goin' to have him pinched, Mrs. Sweeny?'"

The Boarder saw a puzzled expression cloud her face as she got to this point.

"That's why," she said, "I told you a while ago that I wasn't sure whether I done as Danny would have me. It was a queer hole I was in, mister! Here I'd gumshoed around after them fellers that hit my Danny on the head and had come near gettin' in wrong with a lot of folks by suspectin' them, like that Mister Eppler business. And now I'd got what I was after, but I wasn't yellin' my head off with joy. There was that little woman, sick abed and cryin' herself sicker. It didn't look right for me to do somethin' that was goin' to make her more trouble than she had already; and, on the other hand, I wasn't goin' to let gents loaf round and bat my Danny over the head. Now, what would you of did, mister?"

THE Boarder tapped on the desk with his pen. He had the manner of one who would take time for reflection.

"That's just the way I felt, mister," she declared, as she watched him. "I wasn't makin' any snapshot decisions. I was sittin' on the fence, trying my best to flop down on Danny's side, but bein' caught on a nail, as you might say, so's I couldn't topple where I wanted to. I guess I studied it out for all of fifteen minutes, with her lyin' there and lookin' and tearin' herself all to pieces with sobs. It struck me as so pitiful that I wanted to hop right out of the window. Then, all of a sudden, I seen the answer. It flashed on my mind like a spotlight on a actorine.

"'Belle Sweeny,' somethin' said to me, 'you ain't got any right to satisfy your selfish feelin's, when it means that this here down-and-out lady will be worser up against it than she is now, with her husban' in the pen for a year or so. Be a man, Belle Sweeny, be a man!' it says.

"That's the way that there somethin' talked to me, mister. It has did it before, too. And whenever it gets up on its hind legs and tells me to be a man, why, I just got to be one, ain't I?"

"It was your conscience talking," said the Boarder.

"I s'pose so," Mrs. Sweeny agreed. "But, whatever it was, I minded it was ——" The doorbell rang and she hastened out of the room. In a moment, she was back.

"Nothin' but the gas bill!" she exclaimed. "It's three-twenty this month, and I'll be——" She glared at the Boarder. "Yes, I will be, just that, if I see how I'm goin' to pay it. But about that there lady: After I'd got steered right by that gabby butter-in of a thing inside me, I goes over to the bed.

"'Gimme your mitt, dearie,' I says.

"She held up her hand and I grabbed it.

"'Here's to let you know I ain't goin' to do nothin' about that stick-up doin's,' I says. 'You tell your husban' when he gets out to turn square and do the right thing. I won't sick the police on him; I'll give him a chance. And now, I'm goin' out and find a doctor and send you up some stuff to eat and I guess you'll be all right in a day or two.' Then I staked her to a ten-dollar note and rushes out of the room, with her a-sobbin' her head off and the place soundin' like a madhouse with the fire gong ringin'. Gee, mister, but ladies can make a rumpus when the hysterics peddler leaves a little bundle of it round.

"In a couple of days," she went on, "I went back there, to see how she was gettin' along and to get that wallet of Danny's. And yet, I wasn't sure that I wanted it, because I knew that I'd have to explain where I got it and then mebby I couldn't keep my promise. Danny didn't have no silk-faced talk for them parties that stuck him up. He usta double up his fists and wish about three times a day that he knowed who they was. I didn't know what would happen if he found out that Mister Hovey was it. However, I was spared all that worry, for them two rooms was empty and I never seen the lady again. Three or four months afterward, a messenger boy came, with a note. There was ten dollars in it, and all the note said was: 'Thank you for what you done, Mrs. Sweeny.'"

The doorbell buzzed again.

"That's more duns," Mrs. Sweeny complained, as she loitered out to answer it. "This bein' the first of the month——" Her voice died echoingly in the hall.

A STOCKY, broad-shouldered man, with a determined face, peered closely at her as she opened the door.

"Well?" she asked sharply.

"Is this Mrs. Sweeny?" he queried.

"Yep," she admitted, "but if you've got any bills, it won't do you no good to stop around here. Come some day next week."

"I'm not a bill collector," he objected.

"Well, what do you want, then?" she asked.

He stood, regarding her uncertainly for a minute, shifting uneasily from one foot to the other. Then he suddenly blurted out:

"I'm one of the men that held up your husband that time!"

Mrs. Sweeny gazed in open-mouthed astonishment. As she did so, a frightened trembling seized her and she tried to slam the door. The man quickly shoved his foot forward.

"Help! Help!" screamed Mrs. Sweeny.

The Boarder came running.

"Say," growled the man, "quit it, won't you?" He made no move to escape, but doggedly maintained his position.

"What is the matter?" cried the Boarder.

"It's the stick-up man! The stick-up man!" shouted Mrs. Sweeny.

"Oh, stop it," advised the intruder.

"See here, you," he continued, addressing the Boarder. "I'm not a crook any more. I came here to have a talk with this lady about a matter. You tell her to let me come in and you can stay around and see that nothing happens. Hurry up, before all the people in this house run out to see what's the matter. I'm all right, I tell you. My name's Hovey."

"Well——" began the Boarder undecidedly, turning to Mrs. Sweeny.

"Are you the husban' of that little lady that usta scrub for me?" she asked.

"Yes," said Mr. Hovey.

"Come in, then," she told him, leading the way to her sitting room.

He followed, with the Boarder bringing up the rear.

"Now, sit down," ordered Mrs. Sweeny, "and don't you start nothin'. I let you go once, when I could of sent you to jail."

"Yes," he said, "I know that. Mame told me about it. You did a mighty Christian act then, Mrs. Sweeny, and I've come to thank you for it."

"Oh, forget it!" she snapped. "I didn't do it for you—I done it for that poor little wife of yours."

"I know," he admitted. "She's well and in town now. We're sailing for Europe to-morrow. She would have come along with me, only she was ashamed to."

"What?" cried Mrs. Sweeny. "Europe!"

"Yes, that's just what we're going to do," he insisted. "And it's all owing to you, Mrs. Sweeny. If you hadn't been white with us that time, I'd still be a crook, I s'pose, and Mame would probably be dead, or worse, by this time. But after she told me what you'd done for her, and what you'd done for me, I made up my mind that I'd try to be as square as some people; and I guess I didn't make a complete failure of it."

"How's that?" she asked.

"Well," continued Hovey, "when I got out, that time, I got a job at any old thing and Mame and I lived around New York until I had enough to take us away. Then we got on the cars and went up in the Northwest—Minneapolis and those towns. I ran into an old fellow in a little town south of there and we got along so well together that he made me a sort of partner. I took care of the outside business, scaring up job work, soliciting advertising and getting subscriptions, and he stayed inside and got out the little newspaper and saw to the printing. This went on for a couple of years, the business booming all the time. Then the old fellow died. His widow couldn't run the business and so, with a little help from some of the well-to-do business men who'd become friends of mine, I bought out her interest. After that, things seemed to happen as lucky for me as they were unlucky while I was in New York. It wasn't very long before I had a chance to buy a share in a pretty sizable newspaper in Wisconsin and, just when I wanted to do this, some politicians in our little town made me a whopping offer for my paper and plant. They wanted to use it as an organ for the party in the county, you know. I took them up and bought into the Wisconsin proposition. And as Mame and I seemed to have a little extra money, we decided to spend six weeks in Europe in a modest way."

PLEASED surprise shone in Mrs. Sweeny's face as Hovey ended his recital.

"Say!" she cried. "That's sure all right—that's grand! Just take it from me, Mister Hovey, I'm tickled stiff about it, I am. Here, shake!" She impulsively extended her hand to clasp his, but he hesitated.

"Wait," he said, "maybe after a while, but not now. There's more to

what I have to tell. I heard some time ago that your husband was dead. Did that blow on the head kill him?"

"No," Mrs. Sweeny assured him, "he got shot."

"Oh," said Mr. Hovey understandingly.

"Right through here," she told him, tapping her chest.

"That's too bad," sympathized Hovey. "I'm sorry to hear it, Mrs. Sweeny, but I'm also glad to know that the knock we gave him didn't have anything to do with it. We certainly hit him pretty hard. By Jiminy, I'm glad that's off my conscience; now I can sleep better nights."

He was silent for a moment, as if thoroughly assimilating the good tidings. Then he slipped his hand into the breast pocket of his coat.

"That's yours, Mrs. Sweeny," he said, bringing forth a neatly wrapped package and handing it to her.

SHE tore it open. When the outer wrappings were removed, a white pasteboard box came to view. She removed the top, and——

"Why," she cried, "it's Danny's pocketbook! It's Danny's pocketbook!"

Mr. Hovey grinned.

"That isn't all," he chuckled. "Open it."

She did so and there, nestling in the bill fold, was a crisp wad of new ten-dollar notes. Blank amazement filled her face, as she contemplated them.

"Count 'em," suggested Hovey.

"One—two—three"—she murmured, taking each bill in her fingers and placing it on the table at her side—"twelve—thirteen—fourteen. Why, there's a hundred and forty dollars here!"

"It's yours," said Hovey quietly. "It's what we took away from your husband that night. It's yours."

Mrs. Sweeny was mute with surprise.

"It's yours," insisted Hovey. "I couldn't feel myself a man until I had restored it to you. It belongs to you. It's conscience money, Mrs. Sweeny."

"You've just took my breath away, Mister Hovey," gasped Mrs. Sweeny weakly.

"I'll shake hands now," he said simply.

She was on her feet in an instant.

"I can't say nothin'," she apologized. "All the talk's been knocked out of me." Her hand went out and clasped his warmly. "I can't say nothin', except that you're a feller, Mister Hovey, that most any lady would admire to know."

Hovey laughed, like a pleased boy.

"I must be going now," he said, backing toward the door.

And there were tears in her eyes as she let him out and wished him and his wife a happy journey.

When she returned, the Boarder was grinning.

"Nothing nice ever happens to you," he quoted teasingly.

Another Mrs. Sweeny story by Charles R. Barnes will be published in the next issue of THE POPULAR.

THE PARTY MAN'S VIEW

Old Uncle Cy Blankenbaker, who has lived in Hickory Nut Gap for eighty-one years and voted the Republican ticket straight and unscratched for sixty, was addressing the gathering in the crossroads store on the rumors of a new political party being formed.

"In politics," concluded Uncle Cy, "like everywhere else, a nut goes with every bolt."

A Very Commonplace Hero

By Ralph D. Paine

Author of "Peter Burnham, Journalist," "A Case of Professionalism," Etc.

Among the unsung heroes of a college campus there are many such men as Josephus Watson. They sacrifice the material comforts of life in order to gain the far richer spiritual gains. Theirs is a struggle, but not in vain!

IN the slang of the Yale campus, Josephus Watson was a "grind." He was shy and poor, and he toiled incessantly, while the varied activities of the college swirled past and left him isolated. He seemed to have no chance to show that he had the qualities which win recognition, and the easy-going democracy of the place had failed to sweep him into the genial community of interests that flourished so vigorously beneath the elms.

After all, it was a world in miniature; and some few there were who had to look on as outsiders and feel keenly their failure to be counted as men who "stood for something." The popular men of the class were cordial to Josephus when they met him; but they never thought of dropping into his room on a top floor of the Old Brick Row, except to dun him for a subscription to the *Lit* or the *Courant*.

He had no time to try to train with the squads of athletes. Occasionally he walked to the Yale Field to look on at the football or baseball practice, or stood on the bridge near the boathouse and watched the crews swing down the river. At such times the simple heart of Josephus Watson was thrilled with loyalty for the dark blue and with pride in Yale's glorious prestige, afield and afloat. For the most part, his enthusiasm had to content itself with such minor inspirations as these. It cost more than he could afford to see the championship football games, or the boat race at New London.

His tuition bills were met by a scholarship grant to "poor students of good moral character;" in return for his

three meals a day, he served as waiter in an eating club of more prosperous classmates; and, in order to pay for his dormitory room, he tended the furnaces of several residences within a few minutes' walk of the campus. The amount of real money with which Josephus Watson was fighting his way through Yale was incredibly small.

Every morning he tumbled out of bed at five o'clock, hurried to cover his round of engagements with coal shovel and ash can, trotted to the eating club, where he donned a white apron, and hastily served breakfast to the clamorous company known as the "Hungry Dozen" and scurried thence to chapel, to act as monitor and keep the record of attendance.

The monitorship was an uncongenial task, for it made him feel that he was playing the spy on his own classmates. Whoever "cut" chapel received a black mark in the little notebook of Josephus Watson and a certain number of these marks brought a penalty. But this duty was a condition of the tuition scholarship and Josephus made the best of it, as one of the many sacrifices required to earn his education.

ACTING as waiter to the eating club was not so bad. The Hungry Dozen were a jovial crew of "the biggest men of the class"—athletes, managers and chairmen of college organizations and all-round good fellows who seemed to have no other claim to distinction.

With eager, sometimes wistful face, Josephus hovered between dining room and kitchen, listening to the intimate chat about fraternity elections, training-table news, flying visits to New York, and gay parties at different cabarets. He had no part in these exuberant, fascinating diversions and the Hungry Dozen had nothing in common with him, except to pay attentive heed to his timid queries:

"Roast beef or boiled mutton?"

"Apple pie, mince pie or bread pudding."

To the springtime of his junior year had come Josephus Watson, as inconspicuous a figure as when he had first viewed the campus as a freshman, entranced with the shining fact that he was at last a "real Yale man." The junior fraternities had announced their elections and a number of his classmates were waiting to pass the mysterious portals of the ivy-clad halls. While he had expected to be overlooked, yet he was conscious of vague longing and disappointment, as he stood on the campus in the early evening and watched the grotesque parades of the fraternity men on their way to the initiation ceremonies. One column, clad in crimson robes and bearing torches, was singing lustily:

> "And when in after years we take
> Our children on our knee,
> We'll teach them that the alphabet
> Begins with D. K. E."

From another quarter arose the lilting chorus:

> "Again we sing thy praises,
> Psi U, Psi U;
> Again we sing thy praises,
> Psi Upsilon."

Josephus Watson trailed after the noisy procession that moved toward the D. K. E. hall and saw it vanish behind clanging iron doors, while faintly came the jubilant refrain:

> "For we always are so jolly, oh,
> In jolly D. K. E."

Thus it had been from freshman year. The doors had always closed in his face. He was still an outsider and college meant little more to him than drudgery and self-denial. Unusually depressed—for Josephus had a bravely cheerful habit of mind—he wandered back to his room and sat staring at the battered stove. At length there en-

tered without knocking a round-shouldered, spectacled youth who dropped into a chair and remarked:

"Why the grouch? You look as if you had flunked all your recitations."

"Oh, bother the recitations, 'Deacon,'" cried Josephus. "I was just thinking that perhaps a fellow has a better chance for a good time if he goes to a small college. I mean a fellow who isn't a star of some kind. And isn't it possible to make too many sacrifices to get through college, anyhow?"

"A man doesn't get a fair show here, I know that," grumbled Deacon Snodgrass, who was a "soured grind." "Men are not picked on their merits. Look at Hector McGrath, for instance. He has loafed through college and is always on the edge of being suspended or dropped. Yet the class will give him anything he wants and he will be voted the most popular man in senior year. He hasn't done anything but sport around and spend money. How do you explain that?"

"Money doesn't count," replied Josephus, with some show of spirit. "Look at 'Snide' Hopkins. He is rotten with it, but nobody cares a hang about him. Hector McGrath has tried for every team in college, which is more than you and I have done. And he is good-hearted and attractive and—well, the whole class swears by him and they don't go wrong on sizing a man up. No, Deacon, Yale takes men for what they are worth, and if we haven't made good I guess it is mostly our fault. I don't intend to let it make me sore."

"The Hungry Dozen crowd has you hypnotized," sneered the Deacon, with a scowl. "But they don't make a 'dear classmate' of you when you take your apron off, I notice. Hector McGrath is one of that gang, isn't he?"

"Yes, and I propose to stand up for him."

"It won't do you any good, Josephus. He calls you a grind behind your back," exclaimed Snodgrass, with an unpleasant laugh, as he picked up a borrowed textbook and tramped toward his room across the hall.

Josephus sat alone for some time, reviewing in his mind the years of his life at Yale and wondering if, after all, the Deacon's jaundiced opinions might be right. Was it not as manly and deserving of recognition for a fellow to batter his way through college, on his own resource, as to gain a place on an athletic team? Was it not as plucky and self-sacrificing to toil from five in the morning until bedtime, as to train for the eleven or the crew? Josephus sighed and his eyes were sad as he thought of the great things expected of him at home. But he was sure he could win in the years to come and perhaps some of these men who treated him with such good-natured indifference might be glad and proud to shake his hand at some distant class reunion. Having coaxed himself into this more sanguine state of mind, Josephus wound the alarm clock and dived into bed.

AT breakfast he was disturbed to note the absence of Hector McGrath. This irresponsible member of the Hungry Dozen had become very erratic in chapel attendance and it was the duty of Josephus, as monitor, reluctantly to record the damnatory marks which were bringing the culprit nearer and nearer the danger line. Until the last moment Josephus hoped to see Hector dash into the dining room, chastely attired in sweater, rubber boots and a long ulster, and shout for coffee and eggs. It was his boast that he could jump into this emergency costume from his bed, get to breakfast and back to chapel in a total elapsed time of sixteen minutes and he had won a bet on the performance.

Alas! No Hector pranced in on this morning, and Josephus clung to the hope that he might have fled to chapel

breakfastless. But the pew in which he belonged held no Hector and with melancholy countenance Josephus jotted another absence in his telltale notebook and was shocked to discover that one more unexcused cut from chapel would invoke official action of a most disagreeable nature.

Josephus was grieved and alarmed; but his conscience dealt not in compromises and he would not have favored his own brother to the extent of marking him present, even in such an extremity as this. He wanted to warn Hector, however, and when that blithesome youth appeared for dinner he beckoned him into the hall and told him about his perilous status in the matter of marks.

THE serious demeanor of the monitor amused Hector, who grinned with his wonted cheerfulness and made careless reply:

"I must have made a miscount. I thought I had a margin of eight marks before my scalp was due to be lifted. But I always was weak on arithmetic. Flunked it on my entrance exams. Thank you, Josephus. I won't go to bed at all to-night, to make sure of being the first man in chapel to-morrow. Or I might sneak in there to-night and sleep on a pew cushion. My sweep wakes me up all right, but he is a scary darky, and when I throw things at him for pestering me he vamoses instead of yanking me out of bed."

The monitor had so much genuine liking for Hector Alonzo that he felt awkward at having to report his derelictions and stammered, with a blush:

"I don't like to mark you, McGrath. If—if anything happens and you get into trouble with the dean, I'll feel responsible, in a way. You will be careful, won't you? In two weeks more the term will end and you can have a clean slate and a new allowance of marks."

"Hard feeling against you? Not a bit of it!" Hector laughed. "You are only an instrument of the fates, Josephus. If I slip up again—which Heaven forbid!—just you mark me down as another good thing gone wrong and tell the dean to do his worst. Yale expects every man to do his duty, from monitor to half back. Now bring on the soup. This is my breakfast."

Poor Josephus got his orders mixed, dropped his tray and otherwise showed that he was absent-minded during the meal and the riotous Hungry Dozen chaffed him merrily, insisting that he was badly overtrained for "the lightweight higher mathematics stakes." Hector Alonzo McGrath had been very good to him, inviting his confidence in many a pleasant chat when he had purposely lingered behind in the dining room. When Josephus had been unable to hide his anxiety lest he could not make both ends meet, Hector had warmly offered to lend him some of his own lavish allowance, "to be repaid on demand, fifty years from date." Deep in his heart the struggling grind cherished the stanchest admiration for the impulsive, popular, devil-may-care classmate who lived in and frolicked through such a very different world.

Josephus took his day's work seriously at all times and he had reason to fear that Hector Alonzo McGrath would be unable to make a new record for regularity by appearing in chapel every day for two weeks on end; and one slip must spell disaster. The monitor was conscious of loathing the little notebook in which he was bound to record the marks of his imperiled classmate. When he scrambled from his bed in the chill dawn of the next day, the case of Hector Alonzo McGrath lay heavy on his mind and he made unusual haste to finish his round of duty as stoker of dusty furnaces and balky steam heaters. Then, at a breathless

gallop, he made a bee line for the gray-stone dormitory honored by the residence of Hector Alonzo McGrath, to make certain that this disturbing young man should not oversleep. Brushing past the negro "sweep," who was languidly polishing Hector's expensive footgear at the top of the stairs, Josephus hammered on the door, waited in vain for an answering shout and, abashed at his boldness, entered the sitting room and peered through an inner doorway at an empty bed which had not been slept in.

Retreating in an agitated state of mind, Josephus asked the weary-looking colored person:

"Didn't Mr. McGrath come home last night? Where is he? Did he leave any word? This is very important."

Mr. January Ferguson breathed heavily upon a pair of patent-leather ties, rubbed them pensively with a flannel rag and consented to impart, in a listless drawl:

"I reckon he ain't come back f'um New York. That's so—he sho'ly ain't, has he? I was jes' nachully blackin' his extra shoes f'um force o' habit. Come to study 'bout it, he yelled at me early las' evenin' an' said he was gwine run down to th' big town an' git some suppah an' come home on th' owl train. He 'lowed he was off his feed an' needed a snack o' Mistah Martinique's home cookin'."

"He went to New York to buy one meal!" cried Josephus Watson, aghast at such incredible extravagance. "But he must have missed the midnight train and now he will be late for chapel."

" 'Tain't th' fust time," chuckled January Ferguson. "I'se done tried to do mah duty by Mistah McGrath, but he is suttinly unreasonable an' rankabumptious 'bout tuhnin' out foh chapel. Las' week he tole me he'd give me a dollar if I stuck to him an' drug him out o' bed in time foh chapel. An' when I done tried he offered me two dollahs to leave him alone an' let him tuhn over foh jes' one more little snooze. This yere compulsified religion don't seem to 'peal to him."

Mr. Ferguson gathered up an armful of shoes and ambled toward Hector's bedroom, while Josephus Watson trudged sorrowfully downstairs and headed for the eating club, to await the invasion of the Hungry Dozen. He dreaded going to chapel service and marking Hector absent; for later in the day he must turn the record in to the dean's office.

OF the two young men involved, Josephus felt the greater distress; his duty caused him greater discomfort than any college punishment could bring to the nominal victim, Hector McGrath. Solemnly and sadly he recorded the other's fate in his notebook and was not surprised to hear, next day, that Hector had been suspended from college for irregularity of attendance.

The culprit promptly fled from New Haven, to serve his sentence in the peaceful village of Milford, as was the custom of such derelicts as he, and Josephus was spared the embarrassment of meeting him for a fortnight. Hector's popularity made him a shining mark and a rattle-headed member of the Hungry Dozen was moved to say, in the hearing of Josephus:

"I suppose he had to do it, or lose his job; but it doesn't seem as if the faculty ought to make an undergraduate do their dirty work for them. If I had been in Josephus Watson's shoes, I'd have chucked up the monitorship before I'd be the means of disgracing a fellow in my own class."

This unsportsmanlike sentiment was promptly disowned by the other members of the eating club, who squelched the offender without mercy; but Josephus did not hear the rejoinders in his behalf and the unjust opinion cut him to the heart. He was tired in mind and

body by too much work and too little play and he fell to brooding over the problem. He took none of his friends into his confidence and, finding him morose and unsociable, they let him alone.

SHORTLY before Hector Alonzo McGrath returned from his exile, Josephus learned that a waiter was needed by another eating club and left his place with the Hungry Dozen, among whom he foolishly believed he had "queered himself."

When Hector came back to his own, he made careless inquiry regarding the missing monitor. The young man who had shown resentment toward Josephus was rather ashamed of himself and Hector was left in the dark as to the real reason of the waiter's departure. In his own ingenuous and candid mind there was not the slightest ill will and he had enjoyed his rustication, deeming it just retribution, and determined to "take his medicine like a little man." He became instantly absorbed in picking up the broken threads of his many campus activities and promptly forgot all about Josephus Watson.

But the unhappy Josephus had not forgotten. Nervously on the lookout for Hector's slim and active figure, he avoided him on the campus and in chapel and lecture hall. Once they met face to face; but Hector happened to be in a daydream and made no sign of recognition. The cut was wholly unintentional; but Josephus winced and flushed and was convinced that Hector had deliberately refused to speak to him. Thereafter the monitor walked in a deeper cloud of dejection. He was glad when the college year came to an end. Without going home, he reported for duty at a large summer hotel on the Massachusetts coast, where he had worked as a dining-room waiter during the vacation of sophomore year. He would be able to save the greater part of his wages toward outfitting himself with clothes and books for his last year at Yale.

Early in August, Josephus felt so weary and listless that he had to drive himself to his task. The confusion of the crowded dining room, the heat and smells of the kitchen and the complaints of the pampered guests made him hate the place. With increasing difficulty he dragged himself to and fro and at times he felt light-headed and uncertain of himself. At length he was tactless enough to topple over in a dead faint, in the midst of serving an elaborate dinner to a peevish dowager and her friends. The annoyed head waiter ordered two of his underlings to remove Josephus from the scene and they lugged him by the shoulders and heels to his sweltering cubby-hole of a room up under the roof. There Josephus was even more inconsiderate; for the hotel physician was compelled to forsake a whist party and visit this nuisance of a waiter. A little later he reported to the manager:

"The young fellow has a low fever and a mighty poor constitution to fight it with. He is in for a long siege. What are you going to do with him? He ought not to be left in that red-hot kennel where he is. And what about a nurse?"

"I can't move him downstairs, damn it!" fretfully replied the florid manager. "Every room is full and I've got 'em sleeping on cots in the halls. Do you mean to say I've got to send to Boston for a trained nurse? Who's going to foot her bills? Why couldn't he have his fever in the dull season? I'll try to find out his folks' address and wire 'em to-night. They'll have to take him off my hands. I'll give you a bell boy to look after him till we know what to do."

"You talk like a brute," growled the doctor, his professional instinct aroused. "This boy is a college student, as I

understand it—none of your employment-agency scum. You send out and find him a room somewhere else and I'll move him at once."

"I'll bet you ten dollars you can't find an empty room in Rocky Point," snorted the manager. "Anyhow, I can't do it all in a minute. Do the best you can for him overnight, won't you? I've got four hundred and fifty people to look after."

The manager turned away to talk to several waiting guests and the doctor returned to the attic room, to find Josephus Watson dazed and heavy with fever and asking for his mother. A young man who was putting himself through Cornell by working as night watchman in the hotel entered on tiptoe and volunteered to care for the patient until morning. The doctor was grateful and declared his own willingness to stand by the case without sleep until the boy could be taken away from the "sty of a room and the pig of a manager." Next morning a telegram came from the little town of Hillsdale, in Pennsylvania. The doctor read the message aloud to Josephus:

"Will arrive early to-morrow. Please be good to my boy. CAROLINE WATSON."

"That must have made the manager feel ashamed of himself," growled the doctor, as he watched the flushed face of Josephus mirror hope and gladness at the tidings. "Now I am going to hunt quarters fit for his mother to find him in."

"We can't afford to pay fancy prices," quavered Josephus, stirring uneasily. "I'm not going to be a burden on her. This is all right."

"You shut up and leave it to me," rudely replied the other, as he hurried downstairs to seek the manager.

That autocrat was found in beaming conversation with two newly arrived guests, whom the bevies of girls in the breezy corridor were regarding with animated interest, for these were young men of the most eligible appearance. The taller of the two was so stalwart, tanned and good to look at that he rather eclipsed his slender, vivacious companion, who seemed to be the spokesman and pilot. The manager, as though this particular species of guest were what he most needed to please his feminine patrons, was declaring, in his most gracious tones:

"I have held the rooms for you, yes, sir. Two connecting rooms and bath, facing the ocean. Will you come up and see them?"

They followed after, two bell boys bringing up the rear with their luggage. The doctor swore under his breath and impatiently awaited the manager's return. Presently he overheard an athletic-looking damsel with a tennis racket remark excitedly:

"I peeked at their names on the register just now. The stunning six-footer *is* the great Jim Stearns, of Yale. I thought it was. I cut his picture out of a magazine last spring, when he was stroking the crew. The name of the other one is Hector A. McGrath. I suppose he is a Yale man, too. *Do* you think they play tennis?"

THE doctor headed straight for the elevator and went to the rooms of these warmly welcomed guests. The door was open and he entered without ceremony, just as the manager was making an effusive exit. Briefly introducing himself, the doctor addressed the two young men:

"I understand you are from Yale. You fellows have a way of standing by each other, so I am told. I have a patient on my hands who is helping himself through your college by lugging a tray in the dining room here. He is down and out with malarial fever and he needs decent quarters, nursing and money—and God knows what else. His name is Josephus Watson."

"Josephus Watson!" echoed Jim and Hector, with one voice. "He is a classmate of ours. You bet we will stand by him."

"Good for you!" cried the doctor, and his eyes glistened. "His mother is coming on to-morrow, but there isn't a room in the hotel for her. And she can't be allowed to find the boy in the sweat box the manager stows his help in."

"That's easy!" shouted Hector. "Bring him right down here and his mother takes the other room. Stearns here has been scolding me for extravagance in blowing myself to this gilt-edged suite, but the McGrath hunch was working, all right. I can sleep like a top on a billiard table and my long-legged friend will camp out on the floor somewhere. It will keep him in training and do him good. Poor old Josephus—still slinging hash to get his diploma! Lead us to him, doctor!"

"Right you are, Hector," said Jim Stearns. "I belong to the Hungry Dozen, even if I am at training table most of the time, and Josephus kind of belongs to us. We can fetch him downstairs right on his mattress, can't we, doctor?"

The doctor eyed them with affectionate admiration. Apparently they had no thought of arguing the matter, although it was easy to read that the neglected waiter in the attic moved in a different college sphere from theirs. Assuring them that it warmed the cockles of his heart to find such loyalty and swearing that it renewed his faith in humanity at large, the doctor led them upstairs, without bothering to consult the manager.

"You'd better go in first, Jim," whispered Hector. "I have a notion that Josephus thinks I am sore on him about that two weeks I had to spend in Milford. Pooh! He had to mark me in that dinky little monitor's book of his and I got what was coming to me. Just tell him we are a class committee delegated to stay on the job until he is all fit and shipshape again."

JIM crowded in at the doctor's heels and gazed pityingly down at the forlorn, fever-racked figure on the cot. Josephus had begun to skirt the border of delirium, but the unexpected visitation made him clear-headed for the time and he faltered weakly, with a ghost of a smile:

"It's Stearns, isn't it? Where did you drop from? Oh, I am so glad to see you! Did you really want to see me?"

"I am here to take care of you," said Jim, as he clasped the hot, restless hand of his classmate. "And a pal of mine has come with me—Hector McGrath. Just you hold tight and we'll have you out of this beastly hole quicker than you can say Jack Robinson."

All his old misgivings came trooping back to torment the sick lad and he murmured, in a scared, uncertain way:

"McGrath doesn't want to see me. You're joking. I was his monitor. I had to tell on him. He thought I was a sneak and—and he wouldn't speak to me again. I couldn't help——"

The doctor made a warning gesture and Jim withdrew. In silence the rescuers waited outside while Josephus was made ready for his journey. Then they picked him up, cot and all—a featherweight of a burden—and bore him to the bright, spacious apartment on the second floor, through whose wide windows came the crooning song of the surf.

Then Hector went to the office, issued various ultimatums to the manager, whose objections were stifled by the mere name of McGrath and its effulgence of millions made in the steel mills of Pittsburgh, and telegraphed to Boston for a trained nurse. She arrived three hours later—a capable, domineering young woman who drove Jim and Hec-

tor from the room as though she were "shooing" chickens. They retreated to the piazza and held council, heedless of the enchanting presence of no fewer than a dozen masterless maidens who had delayel promenading the beach for reasons of their own.

"This is a funny kind of a game," said Jim, "but it is distinctly up to us to see it through. How about his mother? If Josephus gets flighty and blabs that he never traveled in our crowd at all and that we sidetracked him as a grind, she will feel mighty uncomfortable. And how are you going to keep her from worrying about the expense of all this? If she takes after Josephus, she will be touchy about taking favors from anybody."

"It calls for some sincere and artistic lying and I suppose you'd better leave that to me," replied Hector, with an unabashed grin. "You are shy of imagination, Jim, and your methods are more bullheaded than tactful. This is my game, anyhow. I asked you down here to play around with a bunch of pretty girls and sail the briny in my yacht, which is due here to-morrow, and —lo and behold!—we are booked to play right bower to the Josephus Watson family. The expense cuts no ice with me. My mother is daffy over a social settlement in Pittsburgh; dad is always backing hospitals in a frantic effort to separate himself from some of his tainted wealth; and they will be tickled to death to hear that flighty little Hector is trying to do good to others."

All day and late into the night they hung about the hotel, now and then waylaying the nurse or the doctor, and retiring with gloomy faces at the news that Josephus' fever was steadily increasing. The manager bestirred himself to find them a room in a near-by cottage, but they refused to sleep until the implacable nurse chased them out of the hall in the small hours of the morning. Breakfast found them busy with time-tables and, after calculating the through connections from Hillsdale, they mounted guard on the piazza, to watch for the mother of Josephus.

THERE was no mistaking her among the throng that descended from bus and carriage to spend the week-end by the sea. Her "best black silk" bespoke the village dressmaker; she appeared lost and bewildered in this pretentious, flamboyant environment; and Jim Stearns hastened down the steps to meet her; for he, too, came from a small Pennsylvania town and his heart warmed at sight of her homely, countrified aspect.

"I am a classmate of Josephus. Two of us are looking after him, Mrs. Watson," he cried, as he took her satchel and escorted her into the office. "My name is Stearns."

"Not Mr. Stearns, the famous athlete!" she returned, looking up at him incredulously. "Why, it must be!" The weariness fled from her voice. "You are one of Josephus' dear classmates, aren't you? Tell me—tell me—how is he?"

"Fixed as fine as can be," cheerily answered Jim. "He will pull through in great shape, now you are here. Best rooms in the house, doctor subsidized to think of nothing else and a trained nurse that will bite your head off if you come between her and the patient. Your room is next to his. Come right along."

Hector caught up with them and added further assurances which made the distressed mother wonder more than before how a humble waiter could command such princely attention in this gorgeous caravansary. Timidly she followed her son's classmates, who left her at the door of Josephus' room and stood looking at each other while they simultaneously flourished handkerchiefs, solemnly blew their noses and mutually

muttered something about having caught a confounded cold that made their eyes water.

They met Mrs. Watson again when she came downstairs to dine with them. To their eager questions she replied, with a bright smile that went straight to their hearts:

"He is quieter and the doctor says he is doing as well as can be. He knew me and we had a little talk together. And oh, I have found out that you are doing all this for him! I don't know what to say. I am afraid we can't pay it back to you. It is wonderful to think that my boy has made such friends in college. You must be very fond of him, or you would not do such splendid things for him."

Hector blushed, looked at Jim and for once was at a loss for words. The vision of Josephus Watson, the grind, plodding his way through college, unknown and unhonored by his class, was tragic to recall. At all hazards, his mother must never know the truth; and with heroic disregard of the facts in the case Hector blurted:

"Of course we did what we could, when we found him ill in this strange place; for he is one of the finest, biggest men in our class and a most particular chum of ours. When a fellow is a side partner of Jim Stearns, stroke of the crew and captain of next year's eleven, he has to be a corker, Mrs. Watson. And Jim swears by Josephus—don't you, Jim?"

Jim scowled, for Hector was kicking him vigorously; but his handsome face brightened as he said, across the table:

"Josephus didn't go in for athletics because he had to work too hard, though I urged him to come out and try for quarter back on the varsity team. He is one of the solid men of the class."

"He never said much about his friends," murmured the mother. "But he is very modest and he might think it sounded like boasting to tell me of his friendship with you, Mr. Stearns. I am hoping to be able to attend his commencement next year. Then perhaps I can meet some more of these splendid friends of his. I hope they are as fine men as you two are!"

Jim tried to hide his agitation and lost his appetite. A visit to New Haven would demolish the mother's fond illusions in cruel fashion. Luckily, the conversation veered to other topics and Mrs. Watson became interested in gazing at the fashionable folk that filled the great dining room and trying to picture her Josephus running to and fro to serve their needs. As soon as possible she hastened back to her vigil in the sick room, while the conspirators twain strolled toward them each in lugubrious silence.

AT length Hector wheeled and exclaimed, with considerable heat:

"Now we *are* in a mess! If Josephus pulls through, of course she is coming to commencement, if I have to pay the freight. But what kind of a time is she going to have? She will hear the class histories read, for one thing—and think of the fun they will have with Josephus! Why, it will break her heart to find he cuts no ice at all. She is a lady, Jim, and she has sacrificed her heart's blood to get him to college. And she thinks he is the finest boy that ever walked on two feet. Maybe he is, for all we know. We never tried to find out."

"That is the deuce of it," Jim's face was grave. "Why, hang it all, we have *got* to make good, Hector! We are bound to keep up this game of false pretense, or turn our bluff into the real thing. You can be elected one of the class historians, if you want it, and that will let Josephus off easy on that score. And, if you and I tackle it in dead earnest, we can make Josephus one of the big men of the class in senior year.

We can swing sentiment most any way we want it."

"Maybe he won't be there," murmured Hector, glancing up at a hotel window, past which flitted the white cap and blue uniform of the trained nurse.

Josephus had, indeed, a sterner battle on his hands than winning his way through Yale.

DAY after day Hector and Jim lingered at the hotel, expecting a crisis of the relentless, wasting fever; for they had not the heart to go away and leave the mother alone in her great trouble. Simply, confidingly, she told them of herself, of her home and her three children, of whom Josephus was much the oldest. It was the story of the household of a country clergyman who had died in harness, leaving as a heritage little more than his example of shining self-abnegation in a very humble field of endeavor. Through her they came to know Josephus and to do him justice.

As Yale men of the best type, Jim and Hector admired "sand" and elemental manliness and what won their ungrudging praise in the case of Josephus Watson was the revelation that he had never let his mother know that college life had disappointed him in any way. His letters had been consistently cheerful, dwelling only on the brighter side of things, belittling the uncongenial toil with his hands, generously praising the men prominent in campus affairs. So tactfully had he ignored the social honors he had failed to win that she did not even know they existed. In her eyes he was a hero; in his own a failure. But little by little his two warm-hearted classmates came to see him through his mother's eyes.

It was just after they were told that Josephus was safely come out of the valley of the shadow of death, that Jim Stearns said to his faithful comrade:

"Hector, I think a man who makes that kind of a fight to get through college is the real thing and we are imitations. It has been the fashion to give all the applause to the fellow who is the big athlete. Don't you think it would be a mighty good thing for the college to recognize the Josephus Watson kind of man, just once? Think how it would put heart into all the other grinds who plug away, doing all kinds of poorly paid drudgery, just to be Yale men. If you are with me, I am going back this year to boost Josephus, as a matter of principle."

"Boost as far as you like," said Hector, "and I won't be much behind. We can play him up as a 'solid man,' and that always wins with the multitude. Let's give him a good time. Confound him, I'll make him borrow money enough to quit tending furnaces and juggling grub! He deserves it and, besides, this illness will leave him weak in the knees for some time to come, you may be sure."

When they were first admitted to the bedside of what was left of Josephus Watson, his eyes filled with tears and he told them, in a broken whisper:

"Mother has told me what bricks you are. Don't let her know that you fellows call me a grind, will you? I—I thought you were sore on me, McGrath. I don't understand."

"Forget it. You must have dreamed it when you were out of your head," retorted Hector. "You and your mother are going to keep these rooms and get some fun out of the seashore until you are as strong as ever. And I am trying to persuade her to send for your brother and sister. There will be oodles of room in the hotel through September. It will be just nuts for you to bully the waiters, when you are able to get down to the dining room."

Josephus tried to say something more, but the energetic nurse waved at the intruders and they meekly footed

it into the hall, where she tempered the dismissal by observing:

"That speech of yours will do him more good than all my nursing, Mr. McGrath, and that is saying a good deal. You have been dreadfully in the way, but your heart is cetrainly in the right place."

A few days later, Jim and Hector set sail for a week's cruise in the forty-footer which had been waiting orders and, after landing at Boston, hurried to visit their own homes before the opening of the college year and the resumption of their studies at New Haven.

WHEN Josephus Watson was able to return to Yale, his class had been forgathered for some time. To his surprise, men whom he had admired from afar off began to drop into his shabbily furnished little room of an evening and asked him to visit them. Jim and Hector insisted that he join the Hungry Dozen, but stoutly refusing to live beyond his means, he would only consent to return to the eating club as waiter. No longer was he permitted to feel that he dwelt apart from these fortunate young men. Jim Stearns had shrewdly heralded him as a "solid man," who should have been sooner discovered by his class.

The opinions of Josephus began to carry weight and in this stimulating atmosphere he developed and expanded in a way to make his sponsors proud of him.

Late in the following spring a fragile, tired-looking woman walked out of her cottage in the hamlet of Hillsdale, to meet the rural delivery postman, hoping for a letter from her son in Yale. She was handed a slim package addressed in the writing of Josephus; she opened it, to find a volume bound in blue, with the gilt lettering: "Class book of Yale, 192—."

Excitedly she tripped into the house and called her children, who knelt beside her while she turned the pages until she came to a chapter headed: "How the Class Voted."

"There is Brother Joe's name!" cried the young girl. "Oh, mother, read it out loud. It really can't be true."

"Of course it is!" The mother's face had no trace of fatigue, as she slowly read aloud:

"Class vote for the man most to be admired:
"Josephus Watson, one twenty-four.
"James Montgomery Stearns, sixty-seven.
"Peter Burnham, thirty-one."

The mother looked no farther. She was thanking God in her heart, while she said, with serene joy and assurance:

"The man most to be admired! Just think of it! I knew it long ago; but how proud it must make Josephus feel, to have his class find it out for themselves. I am sorry for only one thing. If Hector McGrath were as well known among his classmates as our Josephus, I am sure he would have received a great many votes."

"Now, aren't you glad you are going to New Haven to see Josephus graduated?" cried the daughter.

"It will be the most splendid day of my life, for Josephus has been recognized for what he is. But it is not one bit more than he deserves."

Other stories by Mr. Paine will be published in THE POPULAR.

SPEAKING OF TENNIS——

Conservative Britishers have become concerned about the shortness of the skirts affected by English woman tennis stars. It seems that before lovely woman stoops to volley she must make sure that Mrs. Grundy isn't in the gallery.

Ambition-broke

By Calvin Johnston

Author of "Mail for Roaring River," "The Agent at Showdown," Etc.

Tim O'Hare had a bee in his bonnet, and it buzzed a tune of ambition for greater things in life. When Tim let loose his bee, it stung many in its flight, but also got Tim his share of honey.

WITH chairs tilted back against the crossing-shanty, their heels on the rungs, the old flagman and his visitor, the Boomer brakeman, were sunning themselves on this first warm day of early spring. The hamlike countenance of the burly Boomer wore an expression of content beautiful to see; far more partial to comfort than to work, the Boomer dismissed with a yawn the fact that he would probably be marked up to go out that afternoon. Why spoil a perfect day of loafing in the sun?

Anyway, he was hidden out from the call boy and could say he had been seized with a misery on his way to look at the train board. And to-morrow was pay day and he would borrow two bits from his companion for this evening's eats. Drowsing in the reverie of this halcyon day, he gazed around reproachfully when the flagman set his chair legs down with an angry snort and a vicious wag of chin whisker.

"Oxen!" he snorted, glaring up the street where, behind slowly tossing horns, a lumbering vehicle creaked down upon them.

"Oxes, sure," agreed the Boomer.

"And they mean nothing to you who have not the responsibility of keeping the trafficways of a town and railroad open," snarled the other. "Omadhauns they are without the ambition of even a burro; and I will not have them blocking my crossing, half asleep with stupidity!" he shouted to the hulking countryman driving, and waved his flag violently. Instead of obeying his signal, the team stopped on the first track, and—including the driver's—

three pairs of bovine eyes stared at him with dull speculation.

"No doubt," said the flagman when indignation would let him speak, "you have the dispatcher's orders over the railroad trains." The driver and oxen stared and the flagman pointed out elaborately that they were across the rails.

"What of it?" asked the driver blankly.

"There is a train due in five minutes!"

"Then I have thirty minutes to an hour to move in—I done traveled on this railroad." Still expressionless, he lighted his pipe, laughed flatly in one syllable and moved on.

The flagman, having no comeback at the driver, turned morosely on the Boomer.

"The yokel didn't know any better," he said, "but don't tell me an ox hasn't sense enough to move if he wants to. They have no ambition. There are human beings," he added darkly, "who have no more."

The Boomer squirmed uneasily and his companion continued: "At least an ox keeps a job of a sort."

"I got a job," mumbled the Boomer.

"For how long? Listen! I will do you a kindness." The flagman began to feel that he was ungrateful to indulge a bad temper on this most affable of spring days. "I will do you a kindness and tell you the story of a young man who should be an example to you."

Two loafers sitting in the sun, musing and talking; and it was fitting that the stormy deeds of Tim O'Hare, man of ambition, should be resurrected in a hereafter of such bright peaceful weather.

ON the chain gang of the local freight between Barlow and Climax, worked Tim O'Hare at the time I am speaking of. But he was filled with ambition, asking any official for high places, though 'twas a special officer he most wanted to be.

"That is the job for me," Tim told himself. "I can smell out a scoundrel by the looks of him. I can smell out two scoundrels," and by these he meant Special Officer Kline and Ticket Agent Barnes, who often twitted him because he would rise to be an official, from the chain gang.

Sometimes he would sit all day upon a truck on the station platform figuring out those ambitions of his, his cap pulled over his round blue eyes so that he would not have to recognize Kline or Barnes if they came by. And at last, having tried out the minor officials without effect, he made bold to go up to Superintendent Rivets himself. As no one stopped him, he walked on into the private office and found Rivets, a wiry, hard-faced little man, with his feet on his desk which was covered with letters and telegrams.

He looked at Tim with a bleak eye.

"Stand where you are," Rivets snarled, "and if you come with grief of any kind—go silently!" And biting his cigar stub, he kicked some telegrams off his desk.

"Whist, sir," answered Tim with eagerness, "this is the last place I would bring grief. I——"

"Hold!" said Rivets, examining him with attention. "Say that again!" And when Tim did so: "What would you do about grief if you didn't unload it here?"

" 'Twould be the ambition of me to try straightening it out myself, and if that was impossible——"

"Go no farther!" said the superintendent. "I have discovered one man on the P. D. who has such an ambition."

"Then give me a position of some authority—in preference, the detective department."

"I'll bear you in mind," answered Rivets; "not for what you can do, but

for what you want to do. Accidents, pilferings, neglect!" he said, kicking off more of the correspondence. "The P. D. is going to hell anyhow and could not be much the worse for you." With which he picked up all the papers on the floor and, waving Tim to be gone, went to work on his grief.

"'Tis plain that he wished to encourage my ambition," thought Tim, "and if any trouble shows up I'll straighten it out myself."

Meeting Kline and Barnes on the platform, he told them of the superintendent's encouragement with pride.

"There is no doubt that you minor officials have been passing the buck to Mr. Rivets," he said, "and he is tired of it." Without taking account of their jeers. he sat down on the baggage truck again till supper time, then Dugan came by and Tim walked with him respectfully to their boarding house.

NOW, Dugan was a man who came lawfully by the respect of people—if few showed it; lawfully, because he was chief of the three Barlow officials of uniform rank and divil a crime which he could not make an arrest for. If the citizens hooted the first arrest, he pulled in somebody else.

"If that does not satisfy justice," he would say, "I will bring in the next one on a slab." Only once did they push him so far, and then, being a man of his word, he started a gun fight in the public square with a bad man and they broke plate glass which the city had to pay for.

It is not for me to repeat that Dugan had an old grudge against the bad man; the fact of interest being that the slab was there and people said that Dugan was a man of his word.

But Tim O'Hare reflected with more sagacity:

"Dugan is a man of ambition. He lived in this town, a poor ignorant bad man with a dozen feuds he could not settle without getting hung. By his own efforts he has risen till he draws a public salary for shooting his own enemies. Such a man can give many a pointer to a young man who wishes to rise high in the world."

So he made the acquaintance at the boarding house and lived in a small room next door to the chief's.

On this evening, then, the two walked home together—Dugan, the taller and brawnier and sometimes growling a word out of the side of his mouth. Supper had to be short for Tim, as he was going out as an extra. As he was making a bundle of his overalls in his room, Dugan growled in the door:

"If Rivets encouraged the ambition of you, call his hand. Y' got him where I got this town when it encouraged me."

Tim, thanking him for the pointer, lingered a moment in Dugan's room to watch him unstrap the .45 and to admire the new uniform with brass buttons as big as double eagles, which had just arrived from the mail-order house.

"Remember," warned Dugan, "that a man of ambition must finish anything or anybody he starts or he is ruined entirely. If it is only grief on the railroad, insist on straightening it out."

Not a reason had Tim to suspect the traitorous nature of his advice nor the cause of it—the last being Dugan's jealousy over the landlady's daughter whom he was determined to win. Nora was her name, a trim, dusky-haired lass who let her eyes follow Tim O'Hare in preference to any one present. But divil a moment has a man of ambition to spare for the girls, who all looked alike to Tim, and, too, Dugan might have spared himself the expense of the new uniform which was expected to make him a knock-out with Nora.

As Tim went down the stairs, the unprincipled Dugan, soft-footed as a big cat, peered after him over the ban-

ister and gritted his teeth to see Nora at the entry to say good-by. 'Twas not enough to quell Dugan's jealousy that the girl was answered by only a nod, Tim halting neither for words nor handshake.

"I would not trust him," said Dugan. "The world is full of traitors. How many men who knew me well have taken a shot at me!" But he rubbed his hands, knowing that Tim O'Hare would follow his advice to let nothing stop him.

"He will butt in somewhere on the official procedure of passing the buck," smiled Dugan, "and be fired bodily and that will be the last of him in Barlow."

The prediction is easily fulfilled, that a man intent on straightening out grievances beyond his authority will soon have plenty of his own. Yet Tim, mounted on the hurricane deck of No. 35 during its run to Climax Junction that night, on the lookout for infraction of signal or other rules by agents or train crew, was complimented at the end of the run.

Said the conductor:

"For once you stayed on top ready to answer the whistle for down brakes, instead of sleeping behind the store."

Tim, to conceal the reason for his conduct, made no answer, except to reflect:

"This conductor is not to blame for his opinion. Of the thousand brakemen sitting behind caboose stoves while the engineer is blowing for brakes, I am the only one to do so for the purpose of planning a career of ambition."

So far, he escaped the plot of the unprincipled Dugan, and going to his lodging, slept all day in preparation for his return run. It may be remarked in connection with the Dugan business, that upon leaving the lodging in Climax about dusk, he paused in the entry to gaze about, rubbing his ear, as if puzzled by the absence of Nora when starting on his run.

"Sure, this is not Barlow," he told himself impatiently, and was immediately on his way to the yard intent only upon his career.

Now, even those who have made no study of sorcery would not have failed to read the high sign of destiny in that chilly spring night. Tim O'Hare looked at the ragged cloud and the low-hung red moon; he listened to the thin wind telling fortunes in the voices of weird women of old. Such a night would set the old men sorrowing that they could not join its stir and mystery abroad; it would call to great men—and all the young are great—to seek the rewards of danger, who rewards all comers in one way or another.

Tim O'Hare stopped, looked, listened and walked onto the track of the G. S. in front of the westbound express.

THE G. S., y'understand, was the old name of the east and west line which crossed the P. D. at Climax Junction. It pulled up at the G. S. station just beyond Tim, who had jumped for his life, and then was gone, leaving a passenger who after an inquiry of the agent started toward the P. D. depot, several hundred yards away. Tim, standing where he had jumped, thought the creature seen by the dusk of the setting, cloud-covered moon, was a woman burdened with bags.

"A transfer passenger," he said, "and liable to break her neck because the G. S. has no light here." So Tim found the first grievance.

But when he started straightening it out by stepping up to lead the woman and carry her big old-fashioned telescope, she gave him a push that nearly sat him down on the track.

"You tend to your own business," she commanded, "or I'll call a policeman, or the agent in his uniform."

"But you are going to the P. D. depot yonder and I am a P. D. employee," said Tim.

"Yah!" answered the woman. "That's what the man in the Omaha depot said—only he was an employee of the G. S. He helped me by carrying my valise and is carrying it yet. And me being such a sucker, after the depot master in Chicago had warned me not to believe, in my travels, any man who didn't wear a uniform!"

"It is not for me to blaggard a man in uniform," said Tim, "though the most reliable officers, those of the secret service, do not wear them lest the crooks take warning."

"So, you pretend to be of the secret service!" sniffed the woman. "Even if you are, you violate the secrecy by telling it and are not to be trusted." And having arrived at the depot, she took up the matter with the agent at the ticket window.

The agent gave Tim a mean look.

"Secret service! Eh?" he said. "Well, you'll never serve the P. D. unless you do it secretly, after I report you for bothering passengers, the way you do."

The transfer passenger, a country-looking woman of about thirty, would not hear a word more from Tim in explanation and the eastbound passenger arriving about then, she boarded it with her big telescope. Then Tim saw her pointing him out to the conductor, he thought with dismay:

"She will spread that slander along the line and Barnes will take it up and Kline will want to arrest me."

He thought of beating the slander to Rivets but was afraid Rivets would fire him for passing the buck, if for nothing else.

"It is up to me to handle," he admitted and, remembering Dugan's remark that he had the superintendent where Dugan had Barlow, he felt better and went along to his train.

"The superintendent has encouraged me and I must make a showing," he reminded himself, and made the trip back with his eye open for any grief to be straightened out.

"If only I could get the goods on that big bluffer Barnes and his rat-faced friend," he thought and, arriving at Barlow about midnight, took a scout up to the passenger depot. This was a frame building; the ticket office at one end was dark, all trains having gone, but a gas jet was burning in the waiting room and he went in.

Only one passenger was there, the woman with the telescope, who said:

"What kept you? Is there anybody but me on the railroad to annoy——"

"You will get me in bad, talking like that," said Tim, but got only a stare for an answer.

"Are you waiting for some one?" he asked. "'Tis getting late and this is a lonesome place."

"Since you followed me all the way from Climax to find out," said the woman, "I suppose I should tell you that I am waiting for some man in uniform to come by and show me where to go. Now get out or I'll yell for help!"

"Never been off the farm before," thought Tim, and did not blame her for playing safe, particularly after being robbed at Omaha.

"The blaggard Barnes has neglected his duty as passenger agent, in not finding a policeman to show this woman," thought Tim. "I will hunt up one myself and put him in bad."

HE went several blocks along the deserted streets, then concluded that the night cop was hid away in some back room playing poker. But it was not for a man whom the superintendent had encouraged, to lie down on the job, and having thought till he had an idea, he hastened home. And there in the lighted parlor, reading, was Nora, who said in surprise: "Why, it is Tim in from his run," and offered him sandwiches and pie.

"I am engaged on important company business," explained Tim, "and must be gone again at once."

"You take no time off for the sociabilities at all," complained Nora, but Tim was halfway upstairs and she turned away, biting her lips which were as red as a cherry.

Now, Tim had been thinking to borrow the old uniform from Dugan and wear it while escorting the passenger to where she wished to go.

"If that is all she wants—a uniform," he reflected, "there is no use keeping her sitting up till the poker game is ended."

But he found Dugan's door open and the room empty.

"There is nothing for it but to borrow the new uniform," thought Tim. "I won't spoil it. And besides, Dugan himself told me to let nothing stop me."

The uniform being much too long, he was obliged to roll back the sleeves and trousers; at that, he felt more pleased with himself than he had ever been in his life. With a feeling of power and importance he said:

"After all, it might be better for me to join the uniform rank."

Queerly enough he felt a sudden wish to be seen by Nora, but reflected for the first time that perhaps the mighty Dugan would object to having his splendid new clothes turned up in arms and legs and worn by somebody else.

There was a gun in the holster hanging in the closet.

"That passenger woman is so particular she will check me up to the last detail," said Tim.

So he belted it on and slipped down the stairs and past the parlor now dark and empty.

NOW, directly before the gate of the yard was a lamp, and as Tim walked under the light, a man coming up the block saw plainly the glittering uniform and yelled so angrily that Tim without taking thought started the other way.

"Stop, you dom thief!" yelled Dugan, and Tim, understanding he was not recognized. judged it only common sense to run from a bad man in such a humor.

Dugan fired but Tim heard the bullet go through the trees and knew the chief thought too much of the uniform to be shooting bullets into it. But he did not linger to tempt him and, jumping a fence, crossed a dark lot with the speed of a race horse and, as if on a track, followed a curved course to the depot.

Satisfied that Dugan had been thrown off the scent, Tim stopped in astonishment before the depot. In astonishment, because, it was now the waiting room which was dark, and the ticket office, he thought, lighted. The window was curtained, but three or four feet above his head was a puncture which showed a tiny sparkle.

Barnes sometimes worked late on a report, but an hour ago he had apparently gone home; and there was the darkened waiting room to be explained.

"I will give a look," thought Tim and without noise moved up the baggage truck which he was accustomed to sit on while planning his ambitions.

Standing on this, he put his eye to the puncture in the curtain and was rewarded by a strange spectacle. The office was in disorder, with tickets scattered over the floor, and in the center were two men, one engaged in tying the other fast to a chair. The safe door was open.

"Barnes and Kline faking a robbery!" breathed Tim.

The man in the chair was the ticket agent, and Kline had just stepped back with a grin having finished tying him up.

"Kline will carry off the loot; and, of course, Barnes, found as he is, in the

morning, will report that a robber forced him to open the safe."

Kline raised his hand; the office was plunged into darkness. Tim stepped down as the door opened, and Kline found himself covered by the revolver of a policeman whose uniform glittered in the dim light on the platform.

"Hold 'em high—turn around!" said Tim, and took away his prisoner's revolver.

"What's going on there?"—in a low tone from Barnes.

"Only a cop gone crazy," answered Kline, and Tim had to admire the nerve of him. There was only one way to handle the situation, and that was to leave Barnes tied up and turn Kline over to the law.

"And in the uniform," thought Tim. "I'll be turning myself over to the law at the same time. Dugan is out to get me and will do no less than send me over the road for impersonating an officer. I will take him to Rivets!"

"Which cop are you?" asked Kline. "We can fix you up!"

"Move along!" ordered Tim, disguising his voice as much as he could; for if Kline learned who had arrested him he would not heed orders, knowing Tim would not dare shoot and risk being hanged.

RIVETS, living at the hotel, a couple of blocks away, was aroused by blows on his door a few minutes later and stepped back in amazement as Kline entered with a cop holding a revolver at the back of his neck. Kline frothed with rage when he discovered who had taken him.

"This half-wit has gone clean crazy!" he told Rivets. "He dressed himself in a stolen uniform and held me up while I was making a patrol about the yards."

The superintendent studied Tim and his pistol; and thinking to humor the maniac, listened to the story of the robbery.

"If there's been such a robbery, O'Hare must have done it himself," said Kline, "or how does he know about it? It's easy enough for us to step down to the ticket office and see if this dumb head really has Barnes tied up. But I wish you'd search me first, superintendent, to prove I haven't any loot."

Rivets did so and found nothing.

"They cached it somewhere earlier in the evening," said Tim. "and were just covering up the fake by tying up Barnes."

Rivets looked at him with a glimmer of respect as he dressed.

"Tell me one thing, O'Hare!" he commanded. "What were you doing around the station at that hour, dressed as a policeman, and armed?"

"Yes, tell him that!" sneered Kline.

"'Twas because of the ambition of me, which was encouraged," replied Tim. "There was a prospect of grief from a neglected passenger and I was straightening the matter out."

"'Twill be long before I encourage you again," said Rivets with bitterness. "But let's have the rest of the cock-and-bull story."

So Tim told of the lady transfer passenger who would trust no man not in a uniform, and Kline, after listening with glee, said:

"Did you ever hear such an alibi? He's crazier than I thought!"

Rivets nodded and had Tim turn over both guns before he should run amuck; then they went to the station and found Barnes straining at the knots.

"Was this crazy O'Hare masked when he held you up?" asked Kline.

"He was not!" replied Barnes. "Barefaced, he committed the crime. I have long suspected him."

"Well, we will turn him over to Dugan for observation," said Rivets, and that minute nearly saw the last of Tim on that division. For of all the people in the world he did not care to have

observe him, Dugan was easily in the lead. He had already stepped back toward the door, when a sharp rapping in the room gave them all a start.

"Is there a man in there in uniform?" asked a voice, and Rivets, throwing up the shutter of the ticket window, looked into the face of the woman transfer.

"How did you get in there?" demanded Rivets. "And how long have you been there?"

She answered these questions and added that she had put out the light and locked the door because of some rough-looking man who had kept staring at her through a window. Thus both Tim and the robbers had been made to believe that she had gone and the waiting room been closed by the janitor of the headquarters office.

"Is it possible, madame, that you heard anything of the robbery in here?"

"I heard some talk about one and I could see, through the crack under the shutter, that gentleman there tying his friend in the chair——"

There was a rush which bowled Rivets and Tim over and the two guilty men were out and gone.

"Will yon man in uniform show me where I want to go—— What! Is it you again?" demanded the woman, recognizing Tim's face.

"No use in our chasing 'em," said Rivets, "I'll get the police after 'em. Take that woman where she wants to go, O'Hare," and he ran to the telephone.

"Where to, ma'am?" asked Tim with importance, now that he had made good. Then his jaw gaped.

"Mr. Michael Dugan's," she had answered, "I am his sister."

Tim sat down feebly on the floor.

"I'm seized with a misery, Mr. Rivets," he groaned. "I can't take her."

"Sure, pass the buck to me!" snarled Rivets. "This phone is out," and he ran out to scare up a policeman.

"Strange to me," said the woman, "that after wanting to show me all night, you back out as soon as you get on a——"

"I get you!" said Tim who had come to hate the words. His only hope to escape the mighty wrath of Dugan was to get that uniform off before they met, and send it back to him by express from Climax.

"I will go with you as far as my strength holds out," he told the woman, "and point out Mr. Dugan's residence from there."

And this being settled, he started along of her, carrying the telescope and had not gone a block when, turning a corner under a street lamp, he came face to face with Dugan and Rivets.

Terrible was the growl of the chief who had been ranging the streets two hours in search of his clothes.

"So it's you!" he bellowed, "and I've got you——"

"And I've got you, too!" said the woman, stopping his rush with uplifted hands. "You *would* hide out from your wife, you spalpeen——"

"You're not! I got a divorce," he said hoarsely.

"When I was not looking! But the court busted it and now you're going back home or I'll know what to do!"

"It's a lie!" he declared.

"You call me a liar!" said she, and reached for him.

BUT he dodged, back-stepped with a whine of terror, and fairly took to his heels, his wife following a few steps in the rear and shouting at him.

"As usual," snarled Rivets, "I am left holding the bag. With two thieves to chase, the police chief chases himself! And he started as if he did not intend to come back."

"He won't!" said Mrs. Dugan. "The dirty coward! And him a policeman! 'Tis almost enough to destroy one's trust in uniforms."

Rivets snarled louder than ever.

"As if that makes any difference!"

Tim O'Hare spoke with reflection:

"You'd be surprised, sir; but it does. Never have I felt so much at home as, when dressed in blue and brass, I threw down my revolver on the scoundrel Kline."

At these words the superintendent stopped muttering curses and took new notice of his employee. He looked him up one side and down the other.

"You have raised Cain on very little encouragement," he said. "With a little more you would think nothing of shooting up a bad man before breakfast. Come with me!"

"Where do I go now?" asked Mrs. Dugan.

"You stay here or come with us for the present," answered Rivets. "There is business on foot which can't wait another minute," and he strode away with the others at his heels.

Back to the hotel he went and routed a man out of bed, taking Tim in with him.

"Meet the mayor of Barlow, Mr. O'Hare," he said.

Now, the superintendent of the P. D. was a power in the land, so that the mayor listened with politeness even at three in the morning. In so many words, Rivets told him of the robbery and the flight of Dugan.

"He is never coming back and if he was, this town would not have a wife deserter for chief!"

"He is through as chief," agreed the mayor politely.

"And we have thieves to be chased hotfoot; the town to be kept in order. I demand to know where we could find a man more ambitious in straightening out troubles, more desperate in action —— Mayor, appoint O'Hare! With a little encouragement he will raise hell!"

And it was done; in ten minutes, Tim was on his first thief chase and before daybreak, he had rounded up the robbers lone-handed in the box car of an outbound train.

NORA was arranging breakfast in the dining room when the new chief came in and started upstairs to his room. She had heard of his appointment from Mrs. Dugan who had been sent to the house by Rivets; but remembering how he had turned her down the night before, Nora did not go to meet him or call to him.

"Now he will be more busy than ever with the ambitions of him," she thought, listening to his footsteps.

But now she did not hear them and a dreadful feeling came to her that Tim was journeying so fast away from her that his footfalls had died in the distance. Tiptoeing to the hall door, she saw him standing halfway up the stair gazing down to the entry in a troubled way. Then slowly, he came down again.

"Nora! Nora!" he called, with a note of fright in his voice and, seeing her, hastened up, taking her hand and saying nothing at all.

"'Tis a queer way you have of behaving this morning," said Nora.

"'Twas a queer feeling seized on me just then," said Tim; "because of the empty hall. And only last night, when leaving the house at Climax, the same thing happened and I found myself searching for you. I do not understand it!"

"Nor I!" she said. "When you should be occupying your mind with ambitions entirely."

"I felt what we call grief, on a railroad," said Tim; "and the best of my ambitions is to straighten out a case of grief when I come to it. I cannot bear the thought that you would fail to be in the hall when I come, to say welcome home."

And she never did fail him after that, to the end of their lives.

A Chat With You

THIS number reaches you in the week of the year most commonly devoted to making good resolutions—and breaking them.

Making a good resolution is a gallant adventure; breaking it is a definite, though often imperceptible, weakening of the moral fiber. We have heard it said that it is better to make no good resolutions at all, since we are almost sure to break them. But we disagree with this. The hope that is said to spring eternal in the human breast, the faith that once in a long time appears to move mountains, the optimism and aspiration that bid us try and try again—these are probably our most precious gifts from the gods. Cynicism and pessimism are gifts from "the spirit that denies." Some poets have called him Mephistopheles, others, less poetical, call him the devil.

* * * *

A COLD bath is often the finest tonic, and cold facts about ourselves—bravely faced and grappled with—this is a tonic for the soul. The danger lies in false thinking, in imagining that when the resolution is once made the rest will be easy. It will not be easy. It will be hard, and it is well to prepare for it in advance. One magnificent gesture of renunciation never built up good habits—and good habits are the foundation of character. Rome was not built in a day, things are done little by little—that is, the things that count. It is not the great overmastering temptation, the affair of a soul crisis, that is hard to beat; it is the little nagging impulses that bid us shirk, that coax us to be self-indulgent, that urge us to live easily and selfishly—these are the dangerous enemies.

The great siege guns of the Powers of Darkness are fired but seldom. The smaller arms of evil, the little teasing, persuasive temptations are the more imminent danger. They are always in action.

* * * *

SOMETIMES we have heard THE POPULAR referred to as "red-blooded," or "a he-man's magazine." These phrases are almost worn out. So far as they connote brutality, lack of refinement, braggadocio, as applied to anything we get out, we don't like them at all.

So far as they indicate a sound opposition to any cowardly fashion of living, however, we want them pinned on us like medals.

What is a cowardly fashion of living? We all know. We are all cowards in some fashion just a little bit—some more and some less. Drunkards and drug takers are cowards, for they are afraid to face the bare realities without some veil to half hide them. For them the gray and rosy dawn is not a thing of beauty but of bleak horror. Gamblers are cowardly livers for they hope vainly to win by chance the things they lack resolution to strive for honestly. Those who put off till tomorrow what they should do now, those who abandon themselves to, any sort of slovenly or sensual living are the troops who run from the enemy, throwing away the weapons that better men use to repel him.

THERE is always a chance for the good resolution. It is never too late to mend. Sometimes a body racked by disease will repel at the last the thing that has almost conquered it. Sometimes a man will turn and fight off with his bare hands the foe that he feared to meet when he was armed.

It is a splendid idea to make good resolutions. But it must be remembered that, in the beginning, they are hard to live with. There is a certain most arduous passage at the first. While this passage lasts the adventurer cannot enjoy the easy comfort of his old way of living or the cooler-headed, more abiding satisfaction that comes with an accomplished self-control. Stick to it, however, long enough and the break will come. You realize one day that you have gone through the operation without an anæsthetic and that you are on the way to being cured. And each day is a little better and a little brighter.

* * * *

A MAN we know was once in a lumber camp from which it was necessary to cross each day a river. The crossing was by means of a dam, used as a bridge. It was thirty feet high. The water boiled among rocks at its foot and the top of the dam was extremely narrow, just a row of slim and slippery logs. The first time out, the tenderfoot felt his head swim and his ears ring. He got down on all fours and started to crawl across. But his guide would have none of this.

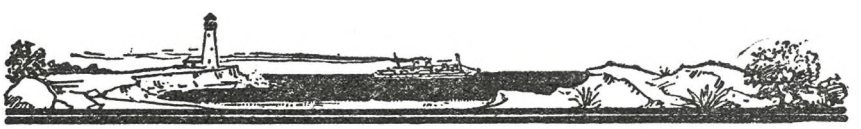
"Stand up," he said, "and walk across like a man. You can do it."

The tenderfoot told us afterward that standing up was the hardest thing he had ever done. But he did, at length, force himself to stand up and faltered his way across. For weeks he had nightmares of that crossing. It haunted his waking thoughts. It had to be crossed twice a day—each day it seemed harder and more horrible. And then for a while he found himself forgetting the dam and dreaming of it no more. And then, at last, he found himself marching confidently across it without a thought of fear or dizziness. The moment in which he realized how easy it had become for him was worth all the fears of the previous weeks.

* * * *

GOOD resolutions are something like that. Once taken they should be hung onto at all hazards. Let no man imagine that he can turn a new leaf suddenly and easily. The farther a man is off the rails, the harder it will be for him to get back. But it always can be done. It must be done anyway, some time, in some existence, and it is better and more nobly done under the compulsion of one's own will than of another's.

It would be trite and foolish of us to talk about resolving to give you a better magazine this year. We have always tried to give you the best. Were that not the case, we would not be writing this nor would you be reading it.



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Why They Stopped Calling Me "Sissie"

How a "Sissie" Became a "Samson"

By J. E. R.

"OH you sissie." "Oh sister." "Mary Jane." "Mamma's boy."

These were the pet names they used to call me. For years my blood boiled whenever I heard them. But I knew enough at least not to get into a fight—that is, except once. Here's what happened—and why I just had to swallow whatever insults were handed to me.

About two years ago I was standing in line waiting to get into a ball game. A little fellow about five feet four pushed me out of line. We had an argument—he swung on me—down I went and amid the most humiliating laughter I went back to the end of the line.

After that I "ducked" every argument. I wouldn't fight a ten year old boy. I became afraid of my own shadow.

I was fairly tall, but skinny as a rail, with muscles like soft butter. I looked, felt and acted like a weakling. On my way home every evening I had to pass a corner where gathered the neighborhood gang. And every night it was the same insulting line of remarks—"Hello Sissy"—"Good evening Clarence"—and so on.

There was nothing I could do "except bear it and grin." But that wasn't my worst trouble. At the office I was as meek as a lamb—never dared offer a suggestion for fear someone would jump on me. I was just plain scared. Everybody "bluffed" me. Everybody seemed to get ahead of me. I stuck in the same old job at pretty much the same old pay. I didn't have courage enough to think of a raise—much less ask for one. I was the office "goat"—the butt of all jokes, the target of all blame. It's a wonder I held my job—unimportant as it was.

And after office hours—in the long evenings—I was so quiet, so scared, so meek that no one cared to have me around. As soon as I could I would sneak away and go home to my room and brood. I didn't know at that time what my trouble was.

Well, to make my confession complete, one evening I met Sally. She seemed more interested in me than any other girl I'd ever met before. She was much too good for me—but she talked to me as only one girl can talk to a fellow. Finally I plucked up enough courage to ask if I could take her home. She lived near by—and we had to pass the corner "gang." This was "pie" for that bunch of rowdies. What they said to me you can well imagine—a "sissy" going with a fine looking girl! And what Sally thought of me for not lashing into them after those insults I hated to imagine. But like the wonderful girl that she is, she said nothing.

During the few months after that I always took Sally home by another street. In the meantime I heard of Earle Liederman and wrote to him.

Now they tip their hats when we pass by

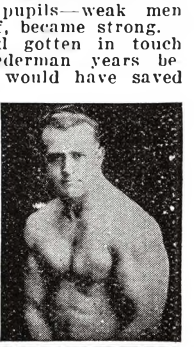
Liederman told me that mental courage is in many instances the product of physical courage—that is, the man with muscles isn't afraid to put his ideas forward and carry them through. He said that health is essential to right thinking—straight thinking. He asked me if I had ever heard of a weakling getting anywhere in the business world—or if I ever knew a "softy" who ever was popular in society. Men—just as much as women—preferred the company of real HE men instead of poor excuses for men! Well, I put myself in Earle Liederman's care.

To make this story short, I began to improve almost over night. My muscles began to grow firm and hard. Then they began to develop in size. My whole body began to tingle with energy, vitality, LIFE. My shoulders, my chest, my arms, all showed "through my clothes" that something was happening to me. Instead of a "sissy" I became a Samson. Sally was delighted. I became popular with her friends—and with my own. Even my boss treated me like a human being—and soon placed me in charge of a number of other people.

The other evening I passed the corner "gang." As they had several months before, they began to jeer and jibe—especially one great big fellow who was particularly offensive. I asked Sally to wait—and walked over to the big bully. I stood in front of him and told him I was going to give him the licking of his life. He laughed. I swung—and he dropped like a log. His friends rushed in to help him—and I smashed at them with right and left until the few who were still standing were glad to call it "quits." I take Sally home now—to OUR home—and no one ever says a word. The former rowdies tip their hats to Sally whenever we pass by.

Muscle isn't the only thing Earle Liederman gives. He gave me a strong, healthy body—unlimited "pep" and energy to do my daily work and do it well. I advise every young fellow to put himself in Liederman's hands. Write for his wonderful 64-page book. It is called "Muscular Development." All he asks you to pay is 10 cents to cover his cost of wrapping and mailing. You will enjoy reading the letters from hundreds of his pupils, and you will be inspired and thrilled by the forty-eight full-page pictures of Mr. Liederman and his prize winning pupils—weak men who, like myself, became strong.

I wish I had gotten in touch with Earle Liederman years before I did. I would have saved myself a lot of agony. Don't YOU put it off—mail the coupon or write a letter NOW. You'll never regret it. Just address



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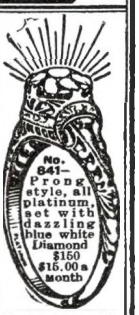

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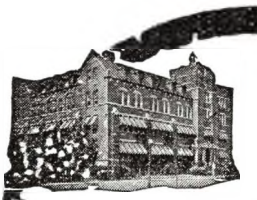

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