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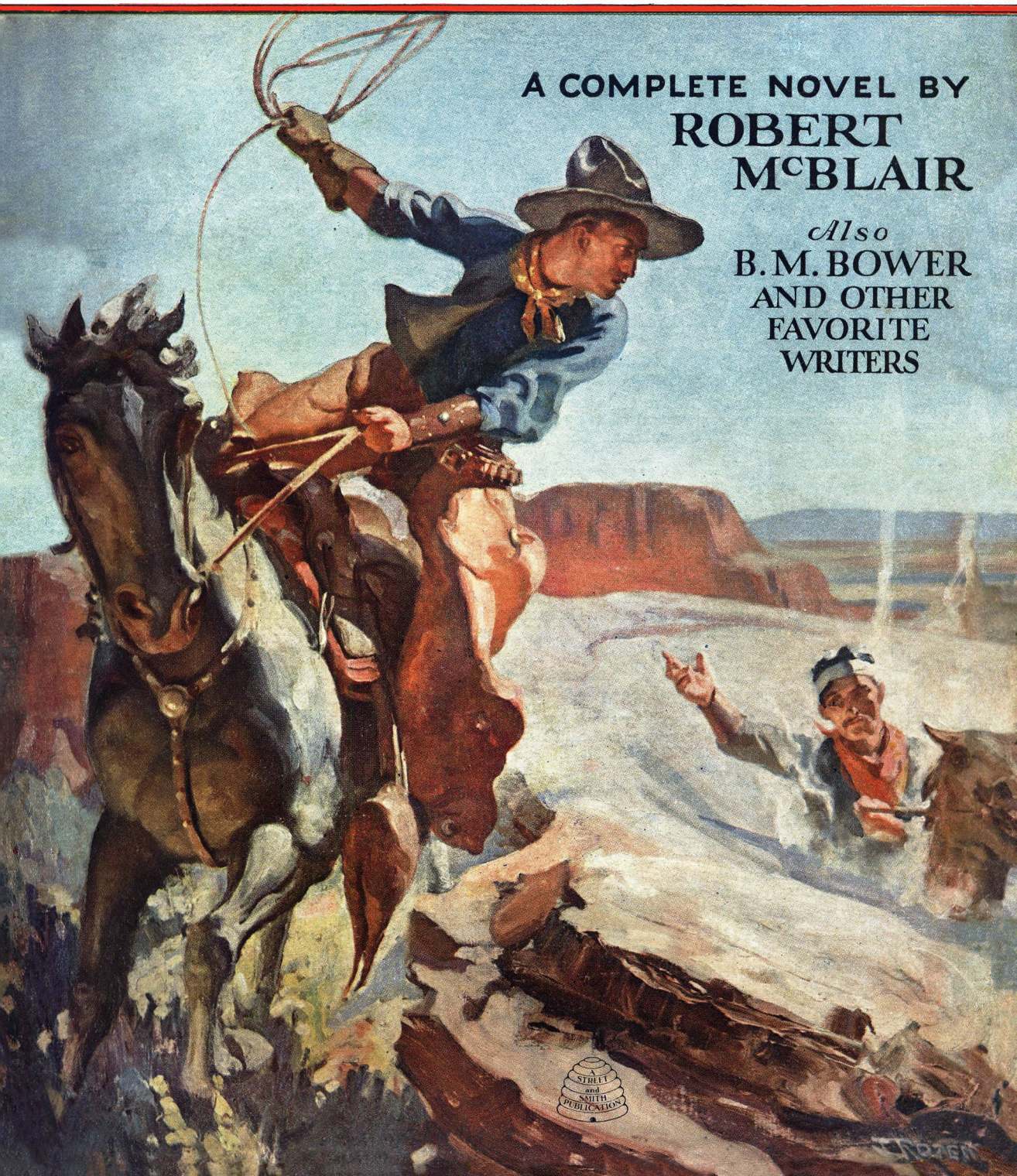

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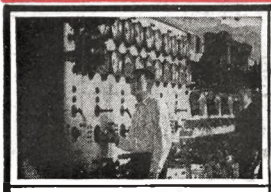

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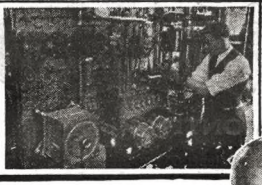

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IN THIS ISSUE

Among the other good stories listed below, we want especially to call your attention to the second and concluding part of "THE RED EAGLES OF THE TYROL." There is a good synopsis, so don't fail to get in on this genuinely extraordinary tale. Nor do we want you to miss the moving charm and refreshing breeziness of "BLACK CHARLEY COMES HOME."

Volume XCIII Number 4

The Popular

TWICE-A-MONTH

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CHARLES HOUSTON

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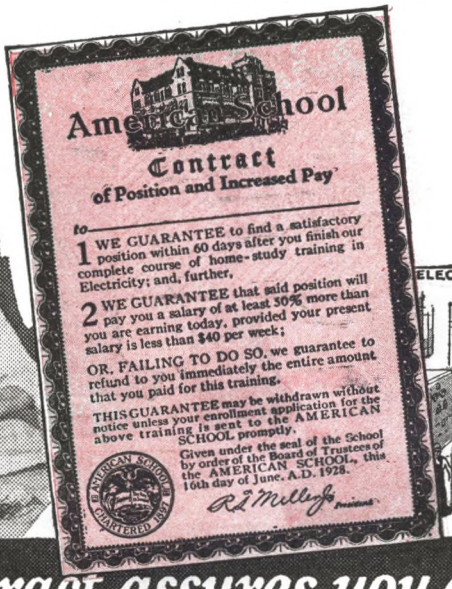

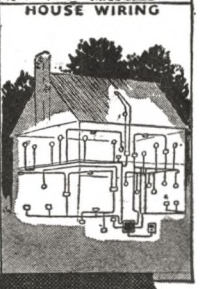

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THE POPULAR

VOL. XCIII FIRST NOVEMBER NUMBER No. 4

The Silver Spoon

by Robert McBlair

Author of "The Black Rider," Etc.

To young Bruce Ogilvie, as he rode his pinto in the Bad Lands, it seemed that one mysterious thing after another was happening that day. The illusion of the ghostly coyotes, the strange behavior of his friends and of the girl he loved—these forced upon him the presentiment that trouble was coming.

A COMPLETE NOVEL

CHAPTER I.

THE SHADOW.

THE stillness was broken by the wail of a coyote. It was one of those still and hazy days, common to the Bad Lands—a stillness so intense that Bruce Ogilvie, riding his pinto bronc down the creek valley, fancied that he could almost hear himself thinking. And the haze was as thick as it had been the day before, when, strangely, in the afternoon an uncanny eclipselike twilight had fallen over ranch and plain and butte. Now the morning sun seemed slowed up in its course by the curious and unnatural element which had taken the place of the usual thin and bracing air. The sun was a round ball, still strong and glow-

ing, but casting an unnatural light upon the straggling cottonwoods along the creek bottom. The leaves hung motionless and gray with dust.

Hardly had the echoes of the first coyote's wail died away when an answering wail came from another quarter. It had a peculiar sound. The coyote's howl is never cheerful or musical, but this cry had in it a curious quality of misery, and also—it seemed to Bruce Ogilvie—a quality of menace. It sounded like a lost soul, bewailing the hell fires which were burning it; but as an overtone it carried a threat, as if the lost soul were planning to return to earth and soothe its sufferings by drawing some human being into the circle of its misery.

In quick succession after this, and from different points of the compass, came other coyote cries. The long-drawn-out, weird reverberation rose and swelled, echoed against the brightly painted buttes and tumbled back upon themselves into the valley. The heavy air, resting oppressively upon the creased and tortured earth, seemed to tremble and waver, as if the heavens themselves were in danger of falling.

"Steady, Circus," said the young man, for the pinto was betraying signs of uneasiness. "Steady, boy. You know there's nothing about a coyote to be afraid of."

But as he said this, the horse shied, and stood still, trembling. The man spied a pair of coyotes at the side of a low butte just across the creek. They were sitting motionless on their haunches, following his every movement with their evil, rust-red eyes. At the same moment he spotted three more sneaking down a gumbo slope a bit farther along. He glanced behind. Four coyotes, the one in the lead of unusual size, were rounding a point with their noses to his trail.

"There's another one on the top of that scoria butte, Circus," said the young man, taking off his broad felt hat and wiping his brow with the back of a gauntleted hand. "Now that's curious, ain't it? That's ten of 'em, all at once, and I don't remember ever seein' more than three or four of them together at one time before. Never heard of a coyote attackin' anybody. I reckon it's just this curious weather; looks like the devil's in it. Well, I'll draw down on those across the creek, and the rest will run."

He drew the silver-mounted revolver from its holster on his thigh and fired twice. To his surprise, he missed. The marks of the bullets were plain in the clay bank over the heads of the two malignant-looking animals. He was an excellent shot with a revolver, but he had missed, and the animals had not moved, which was even more astonishing, for the coyote normally is a cowardly, sneaking creature. He fired twice again. Two more marks appeared in the clay bank above the heads of the coyotes. And the two animals still sat on their haunches, unmoving, regarding him with evil, rust-red eyes.

Bruce Ogilvie was not afraid; but a cold draft seemed to blow down his spine beneath the blue-flannel shirt, and under the sombrero his sandy hair crawled with chilly touches over his scalp. The wailing of the coyotes had ceased. Three others had appeared from another side of the place. He was surrounded by the animals, but more than this he minded the stillness. The silence was as deep as eternity, it seemed. And nothing upon the face of the earth had motion.

He raised his six-gun carefully. He was not conscious of being nervous. A month before he had won a turkey shoot, knocking the heads off of two turkeys with his six-gun, and he did not see how he could miss an object as large as a coyote. He noted that his previous shots had gone high, and he took pains to fire lower this time.

The coyotes waited while he aimed. They seemed like demons out of hell. They seemed fit denizens for these weird gullies, these striped and painted buttes, these creeks of treacherous quicksands, these smoking uplands of burning lignite coal cunningly baked over with a deceiving crust. One of the animals let its jaw fall and its red tongue to come out. It was as if it were smiling.

Bruce Ogilvie fired. Over the smiling coyote's head a whitish mark appeared against the yellow of the dry clay bank. Ogilvie fired again. Another mark appeared, even higher, and to one side. At the same time, he saw out of the side of his eye five more of the animals slink around a bank ahead of him and line up across his way. And the coyotes across the creek had not moved.

"The devil's in it, Circus," said the young man, and as he reloaded the smoking revolver he swallowed with a dry throat.

He was not afraid. That is, he was not afraid of anything he could understand, or see. But there was something demoniacal about this silent closing in of the usually cowardly coyotes, about the deathly stillness everywhere and the uncanny haze. For himself, whatever the danger, it did not matter. He had been on the range since childhood—although it was south of the Bad Lands that he had learned to ride and rope and shoot—and like any rider of the open West he had learned to meet the misadventures of an active life with courage, and to borrow no trouble from the morrow, for in that hard and adventurous existence the morrow might never come. But Bruce Ogilvie's life had become of recent months unbelievably complex.

He had fallen in love.

He had fallen in love with Celia Saunders, who lived with her invalid mother and her stepfather and stepbrother on the small ranch between Bruce Ogilvie's ranch and the canvas "boom town" at the end of the railroad.

Before he had fallen in love, life had been simple. He owned a third interest in the Two Seven Ranch from which he and Circus had ridden forth this morning. His uncle, a hard-headed Scotchman fresh from Edinburgh, owned another third. It was he who, in honor of the bleakness of the winter of his arrival and the barren aspect of the snow-blown buttes, had named the ranch house Blawweary and had cursed the snell, blae and scowthering winds.

The other third interest belonged to "Limpy" Hardy, the big cow-puncher who brought the practical knowledge of a wide experience into the partnership.

As a rancher—not a "gentleman rancher" in silk shirt and sealskin chaps, but a working rancher, who wrestled his own calves in the branding—Bruce Ogilvie had found life simple and agreeable. Then Jake Olds, the old fellow who owned the Dogtooth Ranch between them and town, had gone East for a spell, taking his son, Frank, with him. When they returned, Jake Olds brought with him a wife, a delicate creature whom he had known, it was said, in his young manhood; and with the wife came her daughter by a previous marriage.

The daughter was Celia Saunders.

Bruce Ogilvie had seen her rounded, lissome figure as he rode by one day on his way to town. He had turned in to examine more closely that coil of chestnut hair in which the sun lighted ripples of copper. He had dismounted to shake a small, soft hand, to hear a liquid voice flowing from between lips redder than chokecherry. He had looked once into deep, dark eyes, and he had been lost. After that life was simple no more.

One time, after a day in the saddle, he would lay him down and sleep in

unconscious bliss till the cook's raucous cry of "Grub pile!" roused him in the morning. Now when he lay down at night he heard a certain liquid voice, rising clear and distinct in the moonlight above the voluble, cheery notes of the brown thrushes singing all night long. He would rouse in the morning hollow eyed, eat his breakfast absently, and go dreamily about his work.

This was not serious; at any rate, it had not proven fatal. But when, in the branding corral one afternoon, he had dreamily twirled his rope and caught the hind legs of the foreman's horse, instead of the hind legs of a bawling calf; when the horse had gone down and the foreman with it, and he himself had had nothing to say in reply to the foreman's sulphurous comments and to the cowhands' blank stares of amazement—then it was that Bruce Ogilvie saw that something would have to be done.

And that was why he was riding forth this morning from the Two Seven Ranch. He had determined, after several more sleepless nights, to ride down and put his fate to the touch. In the effete East—a land of dance floors, and parlors, of going-to-church-with-her-on-Sundays, of candy boxes, palm readings and valentines—a man may see as much as he will of a girl and allow the minutes to pass until the preacher, and the best man armed with a wedding ring, are standing before him unaware.

In the West of the ranches it is different. Bruce Ogilvie had held quiet converse with Celia no oftener than he could count on the fingers of two hands. But he thought he had seen something in her eyes. So he saddled Circus and started forth with high hopes and a beating heart.

As he rode, however, his heart and his hopes had begun to sink. He couldn't say why. For two days he had felt as though a sinister shadow had been creeping over him. Being a lover, he included Celia within the circle of himself, and feared for her, too. It had hastened his decision to go to her; she needed him, to protect her from the dangers of the world. He did not consider whether the extraordinary character of the still haze had affected his thoughts these last two days. He thought only of himself and of Celia, of his love for her and of his fears for her, and—sometimes—of his dread that she might not feel toward him as he felt toward her.

"The devil is in this, Circus," he said again.

Thrusting the loaded revolver back into its holster, he drew the Winchester rifle from the holster at the left side of his saddle, at the same time urging the trembling horse toward the five animals which had lined up across his way. The two coyotes across the creek began to slink toward him; Circus did not want to advance. Bruce Ogilvie aimed at the largest of the waiting coyotes, and fired.

The animal toppled over. He fired again, and dropped another. Then he sank the spurs into Circus, who jumped forward. The coyotes ahead of him slunk sidewise uneasily as he passed between them. At the top of the rise beyond he turned and looked back. All of the animals were converging upon the two of their kind who had been killed. No doubt, Bruce figured, they would make a feast of them.

He was glad to be out of that elbow in the creek bottom and to have the coyotes behind him. He could see now, far ahead, the ranch house of the Dog-tooth Ranch; he thought he saw the flutter of a white dress in the doorway, but this was his lover's heart lying to him.

He rode on. Across his way fell a curious shadow, falling from a scarred butte of crimson and black, brown and yellow, which rose with an arm outstretched like a gallows tree between

him and the single eye of the blotted sun. When he had passed, he looked back. The shadow made a mark on the dry grass and the green-gray sage like a pointing hand. In fact, it was so unmistakable—the shape of the wrist, the thumb above the pointing finger, the ridges of knuckle below, the contour of the fisted palm, that Bruce Ogilvie, in the supersensitive state that his mission and the strange atmospheric condition had brought upon him, felt an impulsion to turn and follow the way that it indicated.

It was pointing backward, toward the Two Seven Ranch. It seemed to be urging him to return immediately the way that he had come.

Bruce Ogilvie drew up his horse. At the Two Seven Ranch his uncle was remaining alone, nursing a toothache, while his partner, Hardy, was off with the cowhands at the opening of the general round-up. Bruce could think of no reason for going back, despite the strong impulsion that the pointing shadow continued to give.

His uncle, the financial rather than the practical head of the ranch enterprise, was on bad terms with no one, if you excepted old Jake Olds, Celia's stepfather, who claimed he had been cheated when he sold his herd to the Two Seven Ranch. While Bruce had had no part in the transaction, he knew that Jake Olds' claim was obviously silly, for his uncle was not the man to cheat any one. A hard-headed, hard-favored, black-bearded Scotchman, he was a close trader, but as honest as the multiplication table.

The eye of the dull sun looked down upon a well-built, sandy-haired young rancher, in bullhide chaps, high-heeled boots, a blue-flannel shirt, a gray vest. A round tobacco tag hung from a breast pocket. A red-and-yellow neckerchief was knotted about a strong neck, burned a brick red. The glare from the gray ground lit from below the contour of a resolute chin, the high color of a man of Scotch descent, the yellow eyebrows frowning above the alert blue eyes.

Ogilvie turned his horse and spurred him toward the south and Celia Saunders. He rode with long stirrups, straight up, on the pinto. The sun looked down upon him with a dull eye, and behind him the finger on the dry grass continued to point toward the north.

CHAPTER II.

THE SILVER SPOON.

AS Bruce Ogilvie came nearer the Dogtooth Ranch, he was surprised at its appearance of being deserted. No one was working on the cow shed which the coming of the womenfolks from the East had inspired Jake Olds to build.

A lone horse rubbed his head against the snubbing post in the horse corral. Two shorthorn milk cows chewed their cuds in the pasture far beyond the ranch house, which was of the shack variety—its walls made of logs stuck upright in the ground, its roof overlaid with gumbo clay, its chimney running up on the outside and—the only sign of life—sending a straight, thin lance of orange smoke up to spread and flatten against the heavy, sullen air.

On the right the creek ran in separated pools of shallow water, to disappear into an elbow of cottonwoods. On the left and straight ahead, shimmering and indistinct in the distance, rose the strange towers of the many-colored buttes. All was so still that the scene had the appearance of having been created by enchantment.

"Hello!" Ogilvie shouted as he neared the open ranch-house door. "Hello, Olds!"

A small figure appeared in the dark oblong of the doorway; it stepped quickly out upon the porch, where the sun made a gleaming helmet of the chestnut hair. It was Celia, and Ogil-

vie's heart bumped against his breast bone, his throat went dry.

She put a finger to her mouth and ran on light feet down from the porch and across the dusty ground toward him. She wore a dark-blue dress, sand-colored silk stockings—which showed she was recently from the East—and ridiculously small high-heeled shoes. The white ribbon of a small apron was tied around her slim waist.

"Hello, Bruce," she said in a subdued voice, as he swung down from the saddle to meet her. "I came out because mother is asleep."

"How is she?" asked Bruce Ogilvie; but even he recognized that his voice didn't sound natural. It was one thing, in the brave darkness of his bunk at night, to think of riding down to the Dogtooth Ranch and asking Celia Saunders to marry him. It was quite another to look at her and maintain his daring. Her eyes seemed to hold all the dark life of this dark day between their long lashes. Her cheeks, so softly rounded, so delicately flushed with loveliness, the very way she walked, seemed to put her apart from him and above him. He swallowed.

"She hasn't been well at all," Celia was saying. "She didn't sleep last night, and now that she has dozed off I didn't want to wake her."

"Well, I was just ridin' by," said Bruce Ogilvie.

"Oh, I don't mean to be inhospitable," said Celia earnestly. "I am glad to see you, and I plan for you to stay for lunch. But I thought we could talk outside for a little while. I thought maybe you'd walk down to the stables with me. Mr. Olds got some hens from the East, and sometimes we find an egg for mother."

"Sure," said Ogilvie. He threw his horse's reins over to the ground and let it graze while he walked awkwardly on his high heels, his spurs jingling, beside the girl whose chestnut hair came below his shoulder. He didn't feel that his conversation had so far been very brilliant, so he cleared his throat and added: "Sure!"

"I had two eggs yesterday," Celia added, "but those terrible pack rats got them. Aren't they awful?"

"Sure are," agreed Bruce Ogilvie warmly.

"They'll take anything," said Celia. "Why, Mr. Olds says he actually found a revolver in one of their nests."

"Well, now," said Bruce. "Is that so?"

Conversation languished after this. Bruce stood around, feeling very tall, dirty and awkward while Celia looked into the nests already found and explored for others in the hay. She found no eggs and looked up at him with her dark brows drawn together above her slightly aquiline nose, her red lips pursed somewhat ruefully, her face flushed from stooping.

"Celia——" Bruce blurted, and stopped, feeling his face go hot. He took off his wide hat and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand.

"What, Bruce?" She looked startled.

"I—I got something I wanted to say."

"There's not an egg here anywhere," said Celia, hurriedly looking down and poking into a place she had searched twice before. "I suppose we might as well go back to the house. I don't like to leave mother long."

"Sure," said Bruce Ogilvie, following her.

She walked fast. He had to walk fast to keep up with her. She talked about eggs, and about pack rats. Bruce hardly heard her. He was cursing himself for his clumsy inability to get the words out. He prickled with embarrassment at the idea of the next attempt, which must come at once. He almost wished he was out of it, but he felt he had said too much to withdraw.

"Celia," he said in a weak voice, as they neared the ranch-house porch, "I rode down here to-day to ask you something."

She flashed her deep eyes at him and he thought she looked startled and that her face had gone white.

"Wasn't that mother calling?" she asked somewhat breathlessly, and ran into the house, leaving him standing by the porch. He had heard no sound from within the house. As he heard her light footsteps hurrying into the farther room he became aware that he had rolled his sombrero into a ball between his hands and that his knees were actually trembling. In spite of the confusion of his faculties, he managed to be aware of a mild astonishment. He was used to the dangers from the outside, the clash with hostile men or animals. This was his first realization of the fact that there are forces within a man which may be more destructive to him than anything from without.

"She is awake," said Celia, reappearing. He saw now that her face was indeed white. And her eyes showed too much of their whites. She was scared of something.

"She isn't dangerously sick, is she?" he asked.

"Oh, no. Won't you come in and talk to her?"

"I wanted to say something to you first," he said in a tight voice.

"Is it something important?" She tried to smile.

"Yes. It's this——"

"Wait, Bruce!" she cried, and now he saw that she was really frightened. "Don't let's talk about anything important now. Will you do that for me?"

"What's the matter?" he asked. "You seem scared. You don't have to be scared. Just tell me what's wrong."

"There's nothing wrong," she replied. But where the tanned pillar of her throat showed above the dress collar, he saw the motions of swallowing.

"Is Olds mistreatin' you? Or is his son?"

"Oh, no! No!" she said earnestly. "No, Bruce, I—I just don't want to talk seriously now. Won't you come in and talk to mother while I fix some lunch for you?"

"No, thank you," said Bruce Ogilvie. "I reckon I'll be ridin' on. I just dropped by."

He waited for her to persuade him. She said nothing; stood there with her small, tanned hands twisting against her apron, her deep eyes open upon him in dark anxiety.

"Well, so long," he said, and swung away.

He did not offer to shake hands. His heart was heavy. The still, hazy day, its curious suggestion of something evil impending, came back into his mind. As he threw the reins over the pinto's head and swung up into the saddle, his eye was caught by a blot of smoke against the buttes beyond the worst spot in the Bad Lands, known as Hell's Back Yard.

Always bubbling with treacherous slime, cunningly covered over with an inviting crust of clay, always somewhere smoking with subterranean fires, always gashed and tortured by devious barren gulches, it was the essence of the worst of the Bad Lands, and in it the spirit of the worst things seemed to live. And to-day seemed to be their day.

He turned the horse without looking back and spurred it toward the north. Before he had gone a dozen paces, however, his intention suddenly changed. He could not face the thought of going back to his bunk at night with this situation unresolved, with this ache in his heart and no knowledge of whether it was a reasonable ache or not.

He reined in so abruptly that the pinto came up on its hind legs and wheeled about that way. He dug the spurs in and a moment later had flung

himself off before the girl who stood with a hand at her heart by the ranch-house porch.

"I rode down here to-day," he said grimly, and yet afraid, "to ask you to marry me. Will you?"

"Please don't ask me that now, Bruce!"

"I've got to know."

"Please don't ask me that now," she repeated, in evident agitation.

"Is there some one else?" he demanded.

"No," she answered, after a moment's hesitation.

"Is it Limpy Hardy?"

He recalled that Hardy, the partner of the Two Seven Ranch, had been riding to town rather often of late. Of a sudden the big, dark-skinned man with the long mustache became dangerously attractive in a woman's eyes.

"No, Bruce," she replied.

"You swear you don't love anybody else?"

"Yes. Won't you promise not to ask me anything more now?" she pleaded.

She was so in earnest, and so worried, that he could not refuse. Besides, his heart had lightened enormously. He wanted to ask her if she loved him, but he was content now to wait for a while. There was no one else, she said. And he thought he saw something in her eyes.

He turned away from her and vaulted into the saddle. Riding off, he turned and waved his hand to her. She waved back and then—it was like a miracle—she lifted her hand to her lips and blew him a kiss.

He tore his sombrero off and waved it wildly around his head to her. He let out a whoop, pulled his gun, put spurs to Circus and galloped off, shooting his revolver in the air and whooping like a madman.

As he came around the corner of a butte farther up the creek valley, he caught a glimpse of the rump of a roan horse just vanishing behind a thick bunch of undergrowth on the other side of the creek bed. The horse did not come out on the other side, which was peculiar; his rider must have pulled him up.

The young rancher was in a mood for sociability. He turned his horse back and down the bank, crossed the shallow creek and galloped up the grassy bottom of the other side. The horse had not yet come beyond the thicket. Probably it was a loose horse, grazing.

Bruce Ogilvie emerged beyond the thicket that hid the horse, and drew up suddenly. The roan horse was there with a saddle on its back. On the other side of the horse, peering over the saddle along the blue gleam of a leveled Winchester, stood old Jake Olds.

"What the devil's the idea of this?" demanded Bruce.

For some moments Jake Olds stared intently at him above the sighted Winchester. He seemed to be trying to read the young man's face. Evidently his scrutiny satisfied him, for he pulled the rifle down, swung up into the saddle and stuck the weapon back into its holster beside the saddle.

"What's the matter?" Bruce repeated, somewhat sharply.

The elderly, angular man on the roan horse contemplated the young rancher without replying. His jaw muscles stood out; his sunken cheeks, with their stubble of pale, sunburned beard were unquestionably paler than usual; the pale, staring eyes, even the sparse, drooping, pale mustache had an unusual look. The man looked scared.

"What the devil's the matter with everybody to-day?" Bruce Ogilvie repeated. "Why should you throw a gun on me, Jake?"

The elderly rancher took a deep breath which expanded the bony chest under the dust-grayed flannel shirt. He reached in his hip pocket and drew

forth a flat bottle with a blue label. Out of his pants pocket he produced a silver spoon.

"I ain't been feelin' too good lately, Bruce," he said, closing one pale eye and twisting the sparse mustache far to one side as he carefully poured out a tablespoonful of a thick, tarry liquor from the bottle. "I heerd you a-shootin'——" He left the sentence unfinished and exposed a bony Adam's apple to the sun as he swallowed the concoction and—it seemed at first—most of the spoon.

"Didn't aim to shoot you, Bruce," he continued, smacking his lips and pocketing his medical outfit. "Ain't got nothing agin' you. Not a-tall. Well, so long."

"The devil's in everybody and everything to-day," thought Bruce as he recrossed the creek a bit farther up.

Jake Olds had disappeared. The stillness had come back. The haze had thickened over the sultry land. The young rancher happened to notice again the shadow of the pointing finger, and pulled up, startled.

The shadow had changed. The movement of the sun had brought the pointing finger around until the hand now was pressed against the outline of the top of the butte, and this outline was in the form of a man's head. The head was bowed. The whole shadow, lying on the gray dust of the dried grass, had the aspect of a man who had been shot or wounded—who had been flung or had fallen into a grotesque attitude and was lying there, his head on his hand, because he could not move.

Despite the rebukes of his better judgment, Ogilvie felt a prickle run over his scalp, a cold breath breathe upon his spine. He recalled the finger that had pointed him homeward and which he had ignored. He remembered Celia's curious aspect of fear, old Jake Olds' unaccountable behavior. Even that silver spoon, flourished in the sultry Bad Lands where silver spoons are rare, glittered in his memory with some sinister significance.

He reloaded his revolver rapidly and spurred the pinto to a gallop, eager to get back to the Two Seven Ranch as soon as he could and shake off this unpleasant premonition which had been piling up on him all day long.

CHAPTER III.

MURDER.

THE pinto had both bottom and speed. Bruce Ogilvie drew in sight of the Two Seven Ranch within something over an hour after he had parted from old Jake Olds. The haze over the Bad Lands had deepened as noon was reached and passed. The sun had grown dimmer and the air heavy to breathe, and Ogilvie's feeling of uneasiness had increased.

No smoke arose from the stone chimney of the substantial ranch house as Bruce Ogilvie galloped over the dried grass and sage toward it. This was not necessarily significant of anything; his uncle's toothache might have explained his failure to cook himself any midday dinner, and the cook, of course, was off at the round-up.

As he drew nearer, Ogilvie saw a saddled horse grazing in the ranch-house shadow, the reins trailing on the ground. It was Limpy Hardy's horse—a big bay with a white nose and white "stockings"; he had seen Limpy ride off on it this very morning to overtake the round-up outfit—the remuda, the cowhands and the chuck wagon—which had started out earlier.

It was strange that Hardy should be back again. Ogilvie by now was convinced that something was wrong. He remembered Celia's appearance of fear this morning; he recalled again that Hardy had been going to town rather often of late, and even remembered that one of the cowhands—to Hardy's ob-

vious pleasure—had chaffed him upon stopping over at the Dogtooth Ranch en route. Wrapped up as the young man was in his thoughts of Celia, the only thing that could be wrong and be important in his impulsive imaginings as he spurred his horse forward, would be something concerning her.

As he drew up sliding at the ranch-house door, Hardy came limping rapidly out of the house into the sunlight. Ogilvie swung down from the saddle and was astonished as he faced his partner to see that Hardy was drawing his revolver.

They faced each other, Bruce Ogilvie speechless for a moment in surprise at the other's attitude. On Hardy's sun-browned, heavy countenance was something of the same intent stare, the suspicious questioning that Bruce had witnessed upon the furrowed face of old Jake Olds an hour earlier. In that flashing speed of thought which comes at tense moments he recognized that he was seeing Limpy Hardy clearly, his past and present, for the first time. The lightning celerity with which his stalwart partner's gun had come out was a comment on the school in which he had learned.

"What the hell's the matter, Limpy?" Bruce demanded. "What's the idea of throwing a gun on me?"

For answer, Hardy continued to hold the gun waist-high, pointed at Ogilvie's heart. The heavy shoulders, powdered with alkali dust in the black-flannel shirt and black vest, were lunged forward, ready for immediate moment. The sharp, black eyes, a straight up-and-down crease between the wiry, black brows, studied his face searchingly, glancing at times beyond him along the way he had come. The powerful, protruding jaw was like a rock and between the out-and-down-curving thick, black mustache the lips were set in lines of iron.

"There's matter enough," replied Hardy, apparently satisfied with his scrutiny, for he holstered his six-gun. "Somebody's shot Mr. Galt."

"Uncle is shot?"

"Killed," said Hardy laconically, as Ogilvie rushed past him into the house.

There was no doubt about the truth of Hardy's announcement. Bruce Ogilvie's uncle lay propped up on pillows, just as he had been lying on the same cot when Bruce had started out in the morning to call on Celia. On a chair beside him stood the bottle of iodine, and a pepper cruet with the top off—articles with which he had been endeavoring to assuage his toothache. His powerful arms, in the sleeves of a clean, white shirt, lay relaxed at his side. Under the black beard could be seen the swelling of his jaw.

Only the staring eyes, and a leg in blue overalls drawn up unnaturally, connected themselves with the red area already darkening upon his big chest.

"Who did it?" demanded Ogilvie with icy calm. Whoever did it would have to pay, and he would see to it.

"That's what we want to know," replied Hardy grimly. "We found him layin' jes' like you see him. So far as we know, you was with him last, Bruce."

"Who is 'we'?"

"Me and 'Wall-eye.'"

"Where is Wall-eye now?"

"He rid off to town, to find the sheriff, maybe. I thought maybe they'd come onto you. Didn't you go to town, Bruce, like you said you was this mornin'?"

"Why are you lookin' at me like that?" asked young Ogilvie. "You don't think I did it, do you?"

"I ain't doin' any thinkin'," answered Hardy, his black eyes very keen, his hand near his gun.

"But—what reason would *I* have for doin' it?"

"Well, some folks might say you would get yo' uncle's share in the

ranch," said Hardy; "but I tell you straight, I don't take no stock in that."

"But you suspect me?"

"Well," answered Hardy hesitantly, "I tell you straight, Bruce—you been actin' kind of queer lately, Bruce. All the men been talkin' about that."

"But that—that——" said Bruce, and stopped. He took off his hat, looking down at the silent figure, and Hardy took off his hat, too, in imitation. The bulky, dark man and the young man with the butter-colored hair stood staring down at the man on the cot, who ignored them and stared at the ceiling.

"He was shot through the window," said Hardy. "Listen, Bruce, do you remember ropin' the foreman's horse and throwin' it, with him on it? You remember doin' that?"

Bruce Ogilvie turned to the big dark man, his blue eyes widening with a sudden thought.

"Limpy," he asked, "did you see old man Jake Olds around here when you and Wall-eye arrived? I met him down the creek and he acted mighty strange."

Hardy stared out of the window with his mouth open, a grimy thumb nail pressed at the parting of his heavy black mustache, his brows contracted with thought.

"No," he said slowly, shaking his head. "You couldn't make the boys believe old Jake would do this. He's been around too long; they know he ain't got any nerve. He'd fight if he was cornered, all right; but he ain't got the nerve to shoot a man that a way."

"But Jake had something against uncle, didn't he?"

"Well, even if he did." Hardy shook his head again.

"Just what was their argument?"

"Old Jake Olds sold Mr. Galt his herd by the book."

"By the book?"

"Yeah. For every calf of Jake's as was branded—in the general round-up, I mean—that would mean five head of cattle belongin' to Jake on the range. Nothin' new about that."

"Well, what happened?"

"Well, old Jake had to go East at the round-up. Seems like this here wife he brought back was sick or in trouble or somethin'—and there was somethin' about the settlin' of an estate that Frank was heir to—or expected to be; so old Jake and his son, they went on back East at the time of the round-up. When they come back, Jake claimed he didn't get a fair count."

"Was there much difference?"

"Right smart. Jake, he counted on gittin' a hundred head of calf, which would be five hundred head of cattle, but his calves didn't brand but fifty. That ain't only two hundred and fifty to the herd."

"Anything in his claim?"

"Not a thing. I was on that round-up myself and I kept an eye on the tallyin', like I always do."

"And you didn't see him around here to-day?"

"No," said Hardy grimly; "but I seen somethin' else." He made as if to move abruptly toward the door; stopped, looked down, then waved Ogilvie after him with a sweep of his dusty black hat. "Come on," he commanded. "I'll show you."

Ogilvie put on his hat and followed the burly figure as it limped along in the thick, goat-hair chaps to a tinkle of long-roweled spurs. Hardy had got his cow-punching in the South and he still wore the hair chaps, though they weren't needed as much up here as down in the land of the big cactus and the prickly pear.

Out in the dull sunlight, Hardy limped rapidly on his high-heeled boots to the white-faced bay; Ogilvie mounted his pinto and rode up beside him as they started at a smart gallop in the direction of a broken section of the Bad Lands.

"Cattle killin'," explained Hardy,

his large bony nose moving up and down over his dusty shoulder as he looked back and shouted. "That's why Wall-eye and me come back this mornin'. Wall-eye had gotten wind of somethin' like that, and we thought this 'u'd be a good time to ketch the scoundrels at it, when they'd be thinkin' eve'body was away."

They rode on without further talk, Ogilvie feeling ill and grim at the thought of the good Scotchman lying dead back there on the cot. He felt in a sense responsible. It was he who had written to persuade his dead father's brother to come over from the old country and join him in the venture of the Two Seven Ranch. If he had stayed in Edinburgh, enjoying the use of his small fortune, he would have lived to a ripe old age.

"Here it is," said Hardy, pulling up at the crest of a divide. "See that there carcass? I reckon he see Wall-eye and me and cleared out. Likely he had a pal on a ridge with glasses, watchin'. But there's a track here. See it? The right hind shoe is turned out some; you could tell that track if you seen it ag'in. And he wa'n't only killin' beef to sell over to the railroad; he had a brandin' fire, too. See them ashes? Get off and put yo' hand on 'em. They're right warm, ain't they? Yep, warm still; I thought so. Now let's ride over this a way a spell and see if we kin git a line on which a way that there coyote was headin' when he left these parts. Likely for Hell's Back Yard. I shore hope he ain't layin' for us. This here location, all busted up like God had got a hatchet to it—a man could be bushwhacked every fifteen feet——"

The smack of a rifle and the cessation of Hardy's voice came together. Ogilvie's pinto shied as the heavy body in the goatskin chaps slid from the bay horse's back and fell to the dusty ground with a great thud.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MISSING SPOON.

THE sound of the shot had come from a point forward and to the right. Bruce Ogilvie was pulling his Winchester from the saddle holster when his eye caught the flash of a gunshot from the pinnacle of a sloping gray-and-red butte. At the same instant, it seemed, he felt a tug at his hat and the bullet, ricocheting from a rock in the creek bed behind him, went whining straight up in the air.

In a second Bruce had flung himself from the saddle and behind the protection of the creek bank, which was six feet above the sandy and dry gulch along which he and Hardy had followed the track of the horse with its right hind shoe turned out.

Ogilvie's first thought was of Hardy, who lay motionless where he had fallen. Risking a shot from the bushwhacker, he ran out and dragged the heavy figure to the shelter of the bank. A bullet had struck the left upper peak of the big man's forehead, gouging out a chunk of bone, but not, Bruce thought, reaching the brain.

Ogilvie made a pad of the red-and-yellow neckerchief from his own neck and tied it firmly in place with Hardy's bandanna. Picketing Circus to the root of a mulberry bush and holding the rifle ready, he next ran along the gulch toward the slanting butte from which the shots had come.

The gulch twisted on itself so that twice he had to cross to the other side, exposing himself, in order to get the shelter of the bank. But no shots came. The man either had fled, or, hoping he had wounded both of the ranchers, was working his way up the gulch with the idea of finishing his work.

In view of this possibility, Ogilvie proceeded with some caution, occasionally stopping to listen, for he felt it would be foolish to run headlong into

a bullet and give the murderer the free opportunity of killing him, which meant also the death of Hardy.

His progress, however, was not slow, and reaching the base of the sloping butte, he climbed noiselessly up from the shelter of the bushes along the bank until he was under the butte but invisible to any one on its top.

He crept now around the side of the butte, for from the down-gulch end it sloped up from the ground and he would be able to spot the man on its top. Reaching the last outcropping piece of weather-worn rock, rising layer upon layer to a height three times that of a man's, Ogilvie slipped into view of the top, his Winchester ready.

The serrated top of the butte stood outlined in ruddy streaks against the coppery glare of the hazy sky. There was no man on it.

Ogilvie's alert blue eyes found the trail of the high-heeled cowboy boots leading from the butte to the bed of the gulch, thence down the dry stream. He followed them at a run. They led around the tortuous curves of this broken edge of Hell's Back Yard and ended at a place where a horse had been picketed.

The print of the horse's hoofs was perfectly plain in the dry, sandy clay. The right hind shoe turned out, and more than this—to make the print unmistakable should it be encountered again—Ogilvie noted that the outer end of the same shoe came to a ragged point as if it had been broken off; a rare thing indeed.

After a moment of careful scrutiny, Ogilvie raced down to the next turn of the gulch and there, seeing no sign of the man ahead, climbed up upon the higher ground and thence along a ridge of gumbo clay, to the top of a small butte.

He could see no sign of the fleeing killer. This part of the Bad Lands was little more than one rocky gully emptying into another, a barren prospect, cut deep by the rush of rain, cloud-burst and melting snow, dotted by rare areas of dried grass, and with avenues in it as devious as a catacomb's.

The gargoyle shapes and shadows of the buttes standing up in it gave it a seeming of being populated by inanimate demons, an unpleasant impression emphasized by the frequent occurrence of fossilized plants, shells and fish upon the surface of the rocky soil—these being locally grouped under the title of "stone clams."

Bruce Ogilvie saw that there would be no profit in pursuing the mounted man farther on foot. After looking a while longer to see if the fellow might pop into view over one of the ridges, he climbed down from the butte and ran back to the horses.

Hardy had come to. Very yellow about the gills, his black eyes dull and heavy, he sat leaning back against the bank, his black mustache drooping mournfully beneath the promontory of his whitened and bony nose.

"Water!" said Hardy hoarsely. "Got any water?"

"Not a bit," said Bruce.

"Me neither." Hardy's relaxed lip fluttered over the expulsion of his breath. "Give me a hand up, Bruce."

Bruce Ogilvie helped the big fellow into the saddle, set his hat on so that it would stay despite the bandage, and rode slowly by his side toward the ranch. They had come farther than he had realized. The sun, well past the meridian, had become more sullen; the haze was deepening till over the uneven land had drifted some of the aspects of twilight. Shadows scooped in the dark ground between ridges had an appearance of great depth at a little distance and their deeps were impenetrable to the eye.

It was a fine day for another ambush; Bruce did not think that the bush-

whacker and cattle killer had been working alone—especially as he had built a fire for branding. And, as Wall-eye and Hardy had come upon him before he had been joined by his partners —there was only one horse's print at the fire—the chances were that the others were still somewhere about.

He was relieved, therefore, to get Hardy back to the ranch safely. The big man, as strong as a bull buffalo, grew stronger as the shock from the bullet and the fall wore off. At the ranch he disdained Bruce's offer of help in dismounting, and after a long drink of water, and a half tumbler of whisky raw, he began to return rapidly to normal.

"Jes' wait," he announced in something more like his usual bellow. "Wait till I git my eyes back—they'll be all right in half a hour. When I fust come to I thought he had done blinded me, but I reckon the bloodshot is workin' off now. I'm goin' *git* that ornery coyote, and feed 'im to the buzzards."

"I'm goin' to get a fresh horse out of the corral," said Bruce, "and see if I can ketch up with that critter. You be all right here, will you?"

"Shorely, Bruce. Wall-eye'll be along pretty quick now. He and me'll come along after you."

"I mean, can you see well enough to shoot now if anybody should come lookin' for trouble? These fellows know everybody is off on the round-up."

"I could see well enough to kill that sidewinder in the darkest corner of hell," said Hardy, stretching his goat-skin chaps out from the chair and pouring another drink. "I shore should 'a' kilt him long ago, and I'll git him if he comes here or goes away. This here earth ain't big enough for me and a coyote like that."

"Well, I'm goin'," said Bruce. "You'd better keep an eye out of the door and window."

As he passed through the next room, Bruce paused to take a blanket from another bunk and draw it over the quiet figure of the big, bearded Scotchman. As he did so his eye fell once more on the chair beside the cot, on the bottle of iodine and the pepper cruet with the top off. Then he started.

When he had left his uncle lying on the cot in the morning, a silver spoon had been on his chair. Mr. Galt had been using it to mix a paste of pepper and water, which he would apply inside his mouth, between the tooth and the gum. Now the spoon was gone.

His uncle had been as methodical as an old maid. Bruce knew that if he had taken the spoon away himself it would be in the marmalade jar on that shelf in the cupboard where he kept a meerschaum pipe, his well-thumbed Bible, a volume of Bobby Burns' poems and a few heirlooms which he brought over with him, including four silver spoons. Bruce went to the cupboard. The three spoons were there, but the fourth was missing.

"You didn't move that spoon, that silver spoon, from uncle's chair by the cot, did you, Limpy?" Bruce called.

"What the hell would I be doin' movin' spoons?" demanded the wounded man testily.

"I just wanted to know," said Bruce, and a picture came up before him of old Jake Olds taking a drink of sticky medicine in a silver spoon, after he had held a rifle on Bruce while examining his face. "So long, Limpy."

A grunt came from the other room. Bruce Ogilvie ran out, roped a fresh horse in the corral, changed the saddle and bridle from the pinto to the black, turned Circus loose to graze and spurred the black toward the south. He had decided on the flash that instead of tracking the cattle killer's horse in the growing twilight over the rocky mazes of Hell's Back Yard, he would make a bee line to the Dogtooth Ranch.

The Galt spoons had the Galt initials on them.

At the same time, he thought it would be a good idea to bend his course a bit to the left and see if he could pick up the trail of the horse with the out-turned shoe. If the cattle killer had headed for the boom town his trail would as likely as not come over near the creek valley which led to the Dogtooth Ranch.

By taking cross-country, to the left of the creek valley, although he did not know this until afterward, Bruce Ogilvie missed Wall-eye, riding, by way of the Dogtooth Ranch and the creek valley, back to the Two Seven Ranch.

CHAPTER V.

A SURPRISE.

BRUCE rode toward the Dogtooth Ranch in a grim and rather miserable state of mind. He had been fond of his uncle; his sudden death, and by violence, had shocked him to a degree that made him realize the truth of the saying that blood is thicker than water.

Not only this. If the spoon should connect Jake Olds with the slaying, Jake Olds would have to pay. In that country justice was neither slow nor encumbered by formalities. And a thing that weighed upon Bruce Ogilvie's mind was the fact that Jake Olds was Celia's stepfather.

This alone would not have been important, but the man's wife, Celia's mother, was in a very delicate state of health; Celia had told him that any little cause for fretting endangered her loose hold on life. A violent death for her husband, whether by hanging or at Ogilvie's hand, might well result fatally for her. And Celia was a devoted daughter.

The way to the Dogtooth Ranch seemed all too short as Bruce tried to see some happy solution for this unhappy problem. And at the same time his heart was hot against the killer of his uncle. He saw no signs of the cattle killer. The land was dreary and uninhabited except for a few groups of shorthorn cattle, a smaller number of longhorn trail dogies, a couple of coyotes at different spots and, once, a pair of curlews that rose about him and his horse and followed him for a mile or so with raucous, inquisitive cries. Finally he cut over to the creek valley and kept down it until he reached the Dogtooth Ranch.

This time the ranch shack with its gumbo roof seemed more deserted than ever. The horse that had been rubbing its nose in the horse corral was gone and the corral was empty. No smoke rose now from the uneven stone chimney which leaned against the outside of the upright logs of the shack.

Under the glare of the coppery sun the far buttes were shimmery and unreal, the nearer land seemed to writhe under the pressure of the sultry air. Ogilvie's earlier feeling of premonition came back to him, and he felt that there was more trouble in store.

"Hey, Olds!" he cried. "Hello, Olds!"

There was no answer. He rode his horse to the ranch doorway and called again. Still nothing replied but a faint echo from the wall of some distant rise.

"What's up now, Blackie?" he said to the horse.

Dropping the reins over the animal's head, he swung down and mounted the step to the porch. His boot heels rang loud in the silence and his spurs jingled on the hewn log floor as he stepped inside. The possibility had occurred to him that Olds might be waiting for him with a gun, and he kept his hand ready by his holster. Thoughts, in fact, jumped in rapid flashes through his mind.

He wondered, for the first time, whether it might not be that Jake Olds

had ridden off to the cattle killing after he had met him in the creek valley. The fact that he had hidden behind the clump of trees was suspicious. He would have had ample time to get to the scene of the cattle killing before Bruce and Hardy had arrived there. But if so, why should he have shot at Hardy and himself then when he did not shoot Bruce when they met?

These thoughts went through his mind as he crossed the floor of the first room in the ranch shack. He entered the second room, evidently the one the women occupied, and stopped short upon seeing Celia's mother, now Jake Olds' wife, lying on the bed in the corner.

A bright yellow-and-black coverlet of crocheted worsted was drawn up to the sick woman's chin, and her body beneath it was so slim as scarcely to make a mound. Over the red tassels of its edge the wasted face regarded the intruder with large gray eyes from which the demands of illness had drawn the light and the life. They examined Ogilvie dreamily, between a slow raising and lowering of the lids, as if trying to associate him with some memory out of a past that already was slipping away. The dry, brown hair lying loose upon the pillow showed traces of the coppery gleam that now had given way to gray. The face itself, lined and sunken, showed vestiges of a vanished beauty.

That such a woman, a friend of Olds in his youth it was said, and so evidently of a finer clay than Jake, could have slipped down through brighter days to where the very tenure of her life might depend upon some brutal happening in these dreary Bad Lands—the idea of this struck young Ogilvie with the uncertain fate of man. It filled his heart with a fear for Celia, because he remembered Celia's fear.

He tiptoed silently out of the sick woman's room, and after a tour of the stables and outbuildings without finding Celia or any one else, he returned to his horse, undecided now whether to seek Jake Olds down in the boom town or up in some of the innumerable hiding places of Hell's Back Yard.

Just as he put his foot up to the stirrup he happened to catch sight of a horse's footprint in the beaten space that lay in front of the porch. The outer end of the shoe print was what caught his eye; it came to a ragged point as if it had been broken off.

He threw the reins over Blackie's head again and made a rapid examination of the tracks leading to and away from the ranch house.

The tracks leading to the house showed a right hind shoe which turned out and which had a ragged point at its outer end—the unmistakable print of the killer's horse. This print had come right up to the porch; it had then wandered toward the back of the house and toward the horse corral, as if the animal was free to graze.

Then it left the house again, from in front of the porch, and headed in a straight line it seemed for a point which would either lead to a roundabout way toward the Two Seven Ranch, or into the edges of that broken, burning section known as Hell's Back Yard.

The tracks were fresh; on the edges of one of the outgoing prints the dirt was still crumbling down into the new depression. With an ejaculation of satisfaction, Bruce Ogilvie leaped into the saddle without touching the stirrups, put the spurs to Blackie and went racing in a cloud of gray dust toward an indentation in the dark horizon line, the point that the tracks were heading for.

He slackened the pace after a bit. His black horse of course was fresher than the other, which had no doubt been working since dawn. He could run the other down, but it might be a long chase and there was no use exhausting his animal in a sprint. He

might lose the trail up on the shaly highlands and have to ride all afternoon looking for it—and looking for the hiding place for which, no doubt, the cattle killer was heading.

He kept the horse at a good gait, though. The trail was so fresh he intended overtaking, as soon as possible, the animal with the out-turned shoe. So he pressed on rapidly, leaving a trail of gray dust behind, rousing grasshoppers and, occasionally, butterflies before his horse's hoofs. Once a flock of the little cattle bunting rose and accompanied him, flying just ahead of the horse and feeding upon the various insects which the horse stirred up. The pace was too fast for them, however, and they left him for a small bunch of longhorns which stood gazing after the galloping horse and its straight-up rider.

The trail grew steadily fresher and Bruce Ogilvie's heart began to beat with a grim expectation. The hoof prints led up a dry coulee, bottomed with grass longer and less dry than that up on the higher ground. During the cloudbursts, and in the spring when the snow melted, this would be a channel for a torrent of water, evidence of which was seen in the depth to which the ravine had been gashed. The banks were about seven feet high.

In the sand, where the other horse's print showed occasionally, it had grown now so fresh that Ogilvie drew his six-gun, expecting to come in sight of it around every turn.

And at last his expectation was justified. Coming around a shoulder of the bush-lined coulee he heard the hoofs of the other horse slipping over a stretch of rock ahead, apparently just beyond a second shoulder thick with bullberry bushes and brier.

Ogilvie touched the spurs to Blackie and, keeping him carefully on the turf or on sand, turned the second shoulder and found the other horse not a hundred feet ahead. The noise of its progress had doubtless prevented its rider from hearing the near pursuit.

But it was the person on the horse which caused Bruce Ogilvie involuntarily to exclaim aloud. Those narrow, small-boned shoulders in the dark-blue material, that splash of ruddy copper beneath the small sombrero, could belong to but one person.

He looked down to make sure that there was but one trail. There was only the trail of the horse with the out-turned right hind shoe with its jagged outer corner. He shouted aloud:

"Celia!"

Sure enough. Celia looked back upon him with a white face over her shoulder.

CHAPTER VI.

IN HELL'S BACK YARD.

BRUCE!" she exclaimed. "Oh, I am glad!" Bruce Ogilvie rode up beside her, noting again as he did so that the horse's shoe print was unmistakably the one he had been trailing.

"What are you doin' up here?" he demanded.

Her dark eyes widened in a quick access of fear.

"I've been looking for you, Bruce. I wanted to warn you. Wall-eye came by and told me."

"Told you what? Warn me of what? What are you doin' on this horse?"

"Why do you ask me that?" she asked. "Wall-eye told me that—that the sheriff and a lot of men are coming after you, Bruce. He told me if I saw you to tell you you'd better not let them get you—better fight them off, because the sheriff was drunk and had sworn he wasn't going to bother with a trial."

"What are you doin' on this horse?" Ogilvie repeated.

She was very lovely in his eyes as she sat like a man in the divided skirt upon the clay-colored horse. He observed that it was not the horse Jake

Olds had been riding. Jake's horse had been a roan. Nor was it the horse he had seen rubbing its head against the snubbing post in the Olds' corral that morning, for that had been a black-and-white horse. Celia was staring at him in a sort of intense puzzlement, her soft red lips just parted so that the sun lit a tiny snow spot between them. The red neckerchief cast a faint glow upward upon the smooth roundness of her chin and throat.

"What are you doin' on this horse?" he said again.

"I told you," she replied. "I was riding up to the Two Seven to warn you, Bruce. Wall-eye said you had killed your uncle."

"And you believed him?"

"No, but I wanted to warn you," Celia replied.

"I've been trailin' this horse all mornin', Celia."

"What!" she cried, and went pale. "Why? No! It is impossible that you suspect Frank of doing that—shooting a sleeping man. He wouldn't do that, Bruce."

"So this is Frank's horse?"

"I will tell you nothing, not unless you answer me," she answered with spirit.

"Why are you protectin' him? Is this why you wouldn't promise me anythin' this mornin'?"

"I don't understand you, Bruce," she replied coldly, her chin in the air, her deep eyes under their dark brows staring over his shoulder.

"Then I'll speak plainly," he retorted bitterly. "When I saw you this mornin' you seemed scared. When I rode home I met Jake Olds and he held a gun on me until he saw I wasn't after him, then he took it down. When I got home I found that my uncle had been killed—no, *murdered*. I rode out with Limpy Hardy lookin' for clews and found a freshly killed steer and beside it the hoofprints of this clay-colored horse. This is the horse, all right. While we were there, some one shot Hardy from ambush."

"Killed him?" she cried. Her small face had grown steadily paler at Bruce Ogilvie's recital.

"No, but that wasn't the killer's fault. He climbed on this horse and got away. Now, Celia, listen to me. My uncle has been murdered. I'm goin' to find the man and kill him or take him to town for trial. Now I want you to tell me two things. Where is Jake Olds? Where is his son, Frank Olds?"

She was twisting the plaited end of the quirt in her fingers. Her white teeth gnawed at her pale, lower lip, her dark eyes, seeming very large in her white face, stared blankly upon the bed of the coulee.

"Are you goin' to tell me, or not?" he asked.

"Oh, Bruce, I don't believe Frank or Mr. Olds would shoot a sleeping man."

"Where is Frank?" he asked implacably.

"I'm not going to tell you while you are in this mood," she said, pressing her lips together. "Frank wouldn't shoot anybody, not unless he was cornered and was in the right. If you will wait, you will find this out, I am sure. The sheriff and his men are after you, Bruce, but that doesn't make you guilty."

"So you are protectin' him!" Bruce cried.

"I was riding up here to protect you, Bruce."

"Naturally!" he retorted, laughing bitterly. "You wouldn't want an innocent man hung for what your beloved had done himself. It's obvious, you love him."

She looked Ogilvie in the eye. She seemed to set herself, moistened her lips and spoke with her dark gaze holding his.

"No, Bruce," she answered; "I love you."

"You didn't love me this mornin', before there was any necessity for protectin' your precious stepbrother!" cried Bruce Ogilvie. "After I have found him out, and you want to save him by influencin' me, you change your tune. I've read and heard that women are like that. This is the first time I've seen it proved."

Overwrought by his uncle's death, jealous of Frank Olds, his words, shouted into the sultry silence, carried pain and conviction to himself and heated his blood. He felt no remorse, rather a sense of pleasure when she winced at his words.

"If you love me," he added furiously, but in a lower tone, "you will tell me where these men are."

For answer, with head held high, she turned the clay-colored horse back down the coulee, swept the quirt against its flank and disappeared with a small clatter round the shoulder of the bushy bank.

"And that's that," he said bitterly, as he stared at the corner where she had disappeared. "I had a feelin' that the devil was in this day. Uncle dead, and Celia——"

His jaws came together with a snap. He set the spurs to the black horse, who responded readily and bore him up the coulee. A hundred yards or so ahead the coulee flattened and divided. The gash to the left, winding and twisting abruptly on itself in a thousand angular changes of direction, joined by hundreds of smaller coulees, which in turn had hundreds of other gulleys, ravines and coulees emptying into them, most of them dry but some with treacherous quicksands and others with hidden springs—the gash to the left wound off toward the Two Seven Ranch. The right branch bore off in the direction of that very devil's caldron, known as Hell's Back Yard.

"I bet she wasn't lookin' for me at all," said Bruce to himself, not so much because he believed it, but because he wanted fuel for the fires of his bitterness and his hurt. "I bet she was just ridin' up to where Frank, and likely his old man, are hidin' out till they have a chance to make a clean get-away. Or until they kill off me and Hardy. They could come back then because nobody would try to prosecute them, they claimin', they've been cheated."

He turned to the right and rode up the coulee toward the depth of Hell's Back Yard.

"What I can't understand," he mused, "is why old Jake didn't shoot me when he had the draw on me this mornin'. Maybe Frank did the killin' and the old man was just wonderin' whether I had found it out yet."

His horse, which had been picking its way gingerly for the last five minutes, now stopped abruptly, then began backing away from a wet spot of sand.

"Quicksands, eh, Blackie? All right; let's try it out this way."

He turned back to where the bank was sloping and urged the black horse up its sides, breaking through the bullberry bushes and saved by his chaps from the briers.

The rocky, uneven, chopped-up land on this side of the coulee proved no more agreeable to the wise little cow horse than the treacherous bed of the coulee had been. The gumbo crust over the beds of lignite coal had been baked into a bricklike substance in spots, of course by the burning out of the coal underneath, and in places this crust had given through. In others it crumbled under the horse's hoofs; and the whole area of the small basin—for it was surrounded on three sides by higher ridges of the same kind of ground—was acrid with the smoke that issued, at wide intervals, from fissures in the ground.

Ogilvie, after trying without success

to make the intelligent pony cross a brittle space, turned it back and went through the coulee bed to the higher land on the other side. Here, before he had gone more than a mile, he discerned a cattle track which was fresh, so he directed the horse along the way that the cattle had gone, cropping lazily as they moved from one sparse patch of stem-cured grass to another.

"Go ahead, Blackie. What are you stoppin' for?"

The cattle trail had led to a ridge crest and thence down into a gray-bottomed basin as smooth as a billiard table. The black horse, on reaching the crest of the basin's rim, however, had refused to go farther, and continued to refuse, even bucking a bit when Bruce Ogilvie held him to it and used the spurs.

"All right, old boy," said the young rancher, letting the horse go around the side of the rim instead. "You know more about this than I do."

And as he neared the center of the basin's outer edge he saw that the horse indeed had been right. The cattle tracks were plain on the basin's smooth bottom; evidently they had been heading for a triangle of good grass growing on a sort of mound in the basin's center. But their tracks never reached the mound. They stopped suddenly at a place where the crust of the billiard-like floor had broken. And from the middle of this broken area a thin stream of blue smoke was rising straight up into the thick and hazy afternoon sunlight.

"Shorthorns, or else trail dogies, Blackie," said Ogilvie, his skin creeping at the thought of what had happened to the poor beasts. "A Bad Lands cow would never get caught like that. Let's get back down in this coulee bed. This land up here gives me the creeps."

He pushed on up the bed of the coulee, which grew gradually more and more shallow. It was nearing by devious ways the crest of the divide from which it had its source.

Bruce Ogilvie was thinking of dismounting and climbing up the side of the slope above the coulee, to take a look around from a butte which was visible to him above the brush on the bank, when he heard on the other side of the ridge on the left the sudden raucous cry of a curlew. Stopping his horse and looking through an opening in the branches, he saw the curlew and its mate circling widely above something on the other side. They dipped and disappeared.

He knew what this meant. Oftentimes, when out hunting on the prairie, these birds would come circling around and even accompany him for miles, frightening away all game. It meant now that some one was on the other side of the ridge, for they wouldn't pay this attention to a steer.

He swung down, tied Blackie to a bush, walked up the coulee to a gulley and crept up this toward the top of the left-hand ridge, at the same time taking his six-gun out and carrying it ready in his hand. He didn't want to kill Frank Olds, or the old man, if he could help it; he preferred to take them back and see that they had a chance to prove their innocence, as slight a chance as this seemed. But if he couldn't take them alive, he would have to get them the best way he could.

He was creeping along, thinking of this, listening for the approach of any footsteps up to the crest which he was nearing, when he heard a rock roll at his left, beyond a thick cluster of bushes which rimmed the bank of the gully.

He peered around the edge of a bush. For a moment he saw nothing. Then a movement higher than he had placed the sound attracted his eye.

Wall-eye, the big cow-puncher with the walled eye and the red birthmark, was cautiously raising himself from where he lay on his stomach just this

side of the crest of the ridge. He was carefully drawing his gun from its holster. He had seen Ogilvie.

Just as Ogilvie saw him, Wall-eye had his gun free. He pointed it at his employer and fired.

Bruce was so taken by surprise that he dodged down under the bank without firing back. He had recognized Wall-eye, and Wall-eye had recognized him. Yet Wall-eye had fired, had tried to kill him.

While he crouched there in the shade of the bank, listening for some sound of movement by the big cow-puncher, his mind sought rapidly for some explanation of the man's action. The first thing that came to him was the thought that Wall-eye, thinking he had killed his uncle, thinking also perhaps that Bruce had been acting queer as Hardy had thought, had fired, so to speak, in self-defense.

This, however, didn't seem to hook up with the facts. Wall-eye had seen him first; he could have got the drop on him and at least have given him a chance to hold up his hands until there was time for an explanation. But he hadn't done this. Unless, Wall-eye had fired out of fear and nervousness —and even a normally brave man may be a bit afraid when confronted suddenly by a man he thinks is a murderous lunatic—there must be some other explanation.

It was entirely possible that Wall-eye himself had killed Bruce's uncle. He might have arrived at the ranch before Limpy Hardy; he might have done the killing and Hardy might have believed his story. This would hook up with the message Wall-eye had sent him by Celia—to resist arrest by the sheriff. For if Bruce tried to fight off the sheriff and his men, it would probably mean that he would be killed—killed as a fugitive from justice—and this alone would clear Wall-eye of any suspicion.

But, Bruce Ogilvie reasoned—all these thoughts went through his mind in perhaps no longer than it would take a clock to tick two seconds—if this were the case, why had Wall-eye come out here to the dreary recesses of Hell's Back Yard, to the same locality in which, no doubt, the cattle killer on the clay-colored horse had fled?

There could be but one answer to that, apparently: Wall-eye had been in league with the cattle killers and the brand runners. It was possible that his uncle, this morning, had come upon him at his work and that Wall-eye later had stolen upon him and killed him on the cot.

A small, remembered detail tended to confirm Bruce Ogilvie in this hypothesis. He recalled now that when he had roped his fresh horse in the corral he had noticed that the white-eyed horse, his uncle's favorite, was streaked with sweat as if he unquestionably had been ridden that morning.

Bruce's reflections were interrupted when his alert blue eye caught a movement upon the crest of the ridge toward which a moment before he had been heading. The gleam of two guns, close together, appeared.

Bruce Ogilvie fired, twice, just as two faces came cautiously into view for a second and then went down out of sight. The faces were those of old Jake Olds and his son, Frank—Celia's stepfather and stepbrother. The old man, upon seeing him crouching by the bank in the gully, had fired. Frank Olds, probably from surprise at his ready shot, had ducked without firing.

Whether either of his shots had taken effect, Ogilvie did not know. But he realized that with three men firing down upon him in the comparatively exposed gully, it behooved him to become active if he expected to live long enough to avenge his uncle's death.

As he backed down the gully, planning a flank attack, it came to him, too,

that the sheriff and his men were riding up from the boom town now. Wall-eye, no doubt, had told an exciting story to the easily inflamed executors of the frontier law. They had sworn, Wall-eye had told Celia, not to bother with a trial when they found Bruce. Young Ogilvie hoped they would not arrive too soon.

CHAPTER VII.

THE DEVIL'S SOUP.

BRUCE backed cautiously down the gully, keeping his eyes and ears alert for any sign of attack from the two men just in front of him and the one man in front and to the left. No sign or sound came from them as he rounded the first bend of the bank and, running rapidly to where his black horse was tied, jumped into the saddle.

His first plan had been to back down the gully until he was below Wall-eye, and from behind the bushes get a shot at him if possible. As he had backed down the gully, however, he realized that this was just the maneuver which Wall-eye would expect and be ready for. Also the two other men, having seen him near the corner of the bank, would expect him to reappear somewhere farther down the dry stream bed and open hostilities.

He decided, therefore, to use a more profound strategy—to endeavor to come upon them from a quarter whence he would be unexpected, and have thus a chance of bringing the odds nearer to equality. He spurred the black horse to a rapid pace down the wider bed of the coulee. The bullberry bushes, the high banks, the uneven nature of the higher ground beyond, hid him from the sight of his enemies.

He kept the horse to the sand or upon the grass, so that its footsteps would be noiseless. And he covered ground at a good pace, considering the necessity for continually changing the quick little cow pony's course as the grass appeared now on one side of the center of the coulee, now on the other.

He had reached the quicksands which had caused his first detour before he heard any shots behind him. Three shots were fired, almost together.

"They are shootin' into the bushes, Blackie," he said to the smart little Bad Lands horse, which was refusing absolutely to move forward into the treacherous footing. "They'll be busy tryin' to locate me while I slip down and make my way up this gully to the other side of that tricky billiard-parlor basin which you were too smart to enter. I wonder where poor Limpy Hardy is? If he has come ridin' out here alone after that cattle killer, he's liable to have run into some hot lead. There now," he added, tying the reins to a root, "you stay here and keep your mouth shut."

Bruce Ogilvie wondered further about Hardy as he crept up the gully toward the rim of the basin. If Hardy should arrive pretty soon, he would be a welcome reënforcement. He had said that he was going to wait at the ranch house for Wall-eye. If he had waited, and gotten tired of waiting, and had started out alone—which was likely, for Hardy was a Texas-trained cowpuncher and afraid of nothing—he should put in an appearance pretty soon—if he hadn't already been shot, or if his horse hadn't gone into a hole.

Hardy didn't know the ways of this treacherous patch of Hell's Back Yard. No one really knew it except the few men who, for reasons of their own, had made it a place in which they had spent a good deal of time. The Bad Lands cattle and horses had developed a sort of instinct which protected them from the worst of its traps—though even they were lost in its quicksands, its smoky pits or its soapy morasses at times. But Hardy's white-faced bay was an Oregon horse, famous for bottom and speed, but strange to the Bad Lands dangers.

Strangely, just as he was thinking of this, he heard a cry. It sounded like a cry for help, and it sounded like Hardy's voice.

Bruce Ogilvie wasn't to be drawn into such a clumsy trap, if trap it was. He realized further that the voice might have sounded like Hardy's merely because he had just been thinking of his partner. He turned out of the gully abruptly, however, and climbed up the shaly incline toward the rim of the basin.

Behind him and toward the right where he had left Wall-eye and the two Oldses he could see nothing except the uneven rock-strewn land, spotted with clumps of stem-cured grass and dotted with curiously shaped buttes, rising like tombstones up out of the desolate hillocks.

Behind him and below, the high banks crested with bushes hid the black horse from his view. To his left, toward the Two Seven Ranch, at first he saw nothing except the same desolate butte-spotted landscape, burning to a rust red, a crimson, a gray-green in a series of blotted colors, deep and rich under the heavy haze of the sun.

Then he saw a horse's head. the lips flapping open as its yellow teeth reached up above a gully bank and stripped the dried leaves from a twig. The animal was perhaps a hundred yards away. It wasn't the roan Jake Olds had ridden. It wasn't the black-and-white which he figured Frank Olds had taken from the Olds' corral. It wasn't Limpy Hardy's white-faced bay. It was, he concluded, the horse Wall-eye had ridden; but it was strange to find a cow-puncher and his horse so far apart.

He had kept on climbing as he examined the landscape. Turning his eyes away from the horse, he moved up to the rim of the basin. As he did so he heard once again the cry, seemingly for help, although it was strangled as if by terror. At immediately following it, in accents that made his scalp prickle, he heard a horse's scream.

Edging along on his elbows through a patch of short, dry grass, Bruce Ogilvie raised himself gradually, peering with one eye around the edge of a stratified butte which protected him on the right. He raised up until he could see the floor of the smooth, gray basin into which his Bad Lands cow pony had refused to go.

Then Bruce Ogilvie cried involuntarily aloud and, careless of concealment, jumped to his feet.

There was something eerie and terrifying to the blond young rancher in the scene immediately below him. Limpy Hardy and his white-faced bay from Oregon had gone through the crust of the smooth, gray basin which had swallowed up the cattle without a trace.

The horse already had sunk. Bruce saw the last appearance of its forefoot, raising as if in an effort to swim in the ropy, pale-gray, sticky mass which bubbled and changed beneath the thin crust which the hot sun had baked on its surface. Now it was all under except its head. Its ears were first back and now forward. Its eyes, in their terror, were terrifying to see; they seemed to be telling of the devilish hands which were grappling with it down under that soupy, gray surface. Its white face now seemed curiously appropriate to its predicament.

As Ogilvie stood up, the white-faced horse's chin touched the slime. Once more it screamed, a last appeal to the men who had been its friends; possibly, in horse language, a final desperate appeal to the universe and its Maker. The dull sun glinted for a moment on its foam-flecked teeth. Its starting eyeballs seemed to fix themselves in a last appeal, tinged with reproach, upon the man on the basin's rim. Then the whole surface of the slimy, gray mass seemed to rise up over it victoriously.

The horse had disappeared, and there remained only the man. The spectacle Bruce Ogilvie had witnessed had taken but a few seconds, although it had seemed to him an age. Limpy Hardy had stayed on the bay's back when it plunged into the soapy pitfall; as the animal had sunk he had climbed higher. Now when the horse had gone under he was standing on the horse's back, no doubt, for the ropy gray muck reached no higher that his cartridge belt, and he was leaning with his fists clenched as if precariously balanced. Even as Ogilvie watched, the gray slime rose and blotted out the yellow gleam of the cartridges.

With a muffled exclamation, Ogilvie turned and raced awkwardly on his high-heeled boots down the rough incline to where his black horse stood tied. He mounted and spurred the beast back up the gully, but as it neared the rim it began to balk and, when spurred, to buck, as if the bay's screams had infected it with the other's terror.

Time was speeding, and Ogilvie jumped from the saddle, snatched his rawhide rope from the thongs that tied it to the side of the saddle, shook out the loop and, trailing it behind him, ran over the rim.

The gray muck now was above Hardy's waist. The big cow-puncher's black brows, black eyes and down-curving black mustache showed conspicuously against the paper-gray of his skin. His eyes as they regarded the young rancher, just beginning to twirl his rope, had in them the same agony of terror that the horse's eyes had shown. A man may be brave enough to look down the muzzle of a six-gun with a smile, and still fear the evil clutches of the Bad Lands when they have reached up out of the smoky and nameless depths to draw him down. And Hardy was scared; scared, not so much perhaps of death, as of something nameless and horrible the other side of death.

Ogilvie's loop whirled through the air with a whistle, settled around the big figure. The goat-skin chaps, the cartridge belt and the revolver were under the muck; only the black hat, the black-flannel shirt and black vest, powdered with alkali dust on the shoulders, and the big bandaged head, remained visible. Hardy caught the rope and drew it up about his chest as Ogilvie ran back with it and brought the noose snug and the line moderately taut.

What to do next became a problem. The crust beneath his own feet had begun to undulate, as "rubber" ice on a pond will begin to give under the person standing still. He walked sidewise and the crust sank, so that he was forced to move backward, toward the rim.

Even here the crust was not secure; if he put his strength to trying to draw Hardy toward him, the added weight would most probably break the crust through beneath him. More than this, it was doubtful whether pulling Hardy off the horse, even though that support was slowly sinking, was exactly the best thing to do.

To lighten his weight, Ogilvie, with the sweat streaming down from his fair hair and beading his ruddy face, pulled out his gun and threw it far behind him. Twisting the rope about his body, he loosed his cartridge belt and flung it after the gun. He tried to kick off his high-heeled boots, but with a cowman's vanity he had bought the boots which fitted the snuggest, and they would not come off that way. Bruce was furious.

He cursed. The evil spirit of this sultry, brooding day seemed to be gaining its ends. The spirit of the Bad Lands was taking revenge upon the mere human beings who had pridefully invaded its fastnesses to wrest a living from it. His uncle already was dead. The white-faced bay had been sucked into the maw. Limpy Hardy would fol-

low the bay if he did not manage somehow to save him.

Cursing bitterly, Bruce Ogilvie swore to himself to save this man if he could. If the universe was against him, he would defy it; at the worst, it could only draw down one extra life into the depths. Hardy was sinking farther, and Ogilvie saw that there was only one thing to do—risk a break in the crust under him and try to pull the man to a place where he could somehow manage to climb out.

As he leaned back upon the rope and felt the crust giving under him, he realized the real cause of his bitterness. He saw her dark eyes looking over his shoulder coldly, heard her soft voice saying in a cold tone: "Frank wouldn't shoot anybody, not unless he was cornered and in the right."

That was why he felt so careless of his own life. To know it only made him the more bitter, the more stubborn. He would save Hardy, his uncle's partner, regardless of any cost.

And so he continued to pull on the rope. Even when he saw Hardy gesticulate. Even when he glanced over his shoulder and saw Frank and Jake Olds appear over the basin's rim.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DEVIL'S SUPPER.

IF Bruce Ogilvie had intended to defend himself, instead of saving Hardy, he could have done but little in that direction. He had thrown his revolver far enough to make it safe from any crumbling of the crust; as a result, Frank Olds, running down from the rim, reached the gun before Bruce could have untwisted the rope from around his body.

But Bruce, after the glance over his shoulder, had turned back to Hardy. Whether the body of the horse, upon which the big man was standing, had struck a less-yielding layer of the ropy muck, or had met perhaps with an upswirl of the bubbling brew, Hardy's downward course had apparently slackened. The gray slime was half a foot above his waist, but his arms were still free. His face, however, had become as gray as the muck, in terror; it was as if he had begun to believe that nothing now could save him from the same hungry maw which had swallowed the handsome bay.

Bruce, tugging on the rope while Hardy leaned back against it to preserve his balance, wondered in a flash of thought how soon the gunshots would come from the fugitive and now victorious Oldses. In the same flash, hope which is loath to desert a brave man in danger, told him that in the West men do not often like to shoot down men who are unable to defend themselves. Opposing this, however, was the fact that cattle thieves are given no mercy and consequently could not be expected to spare their enemies.

Whatever the outcome, Bruce had hardened himself to it. He was correspondingly surprised to hear a whistling sound and see a second rope wind through the air and drop into the muck around Hardy, then be pulled up tight around him.

"Wait a minute, Frank!" It was the voice of old Jake Olds shouting. "Don't you rope him. Tie the end of your rope to this here end. That's right. Now run back up to Ogilvie's horse and snub it."

There was the scramble of feet as Frank Olds ran back up to the basin's rim. After a moment the two lengths of rope, tied together, tautened.

"Hold on, Frank," cried Olds. "Hold on. Slack her up."

"No, Jake!" Hardy screamed, his face contorted with fear and disappointment. "Make him pull!"

The rawhide ropes slackened, however, and Jake Olds turned his sunken cheeks with their stubble of sunburned

beard, the sparse, drooping mustache, the pale, staring eyes, upon the frowning Ogilvie.

"Befo' I pulls him out," said the elderly, scrawny man in the dust-grayed flannel shirt, "you and him is after me and Frank for cattle killin', ain't you?"

"Don't waste time, man!" cried Ogilvie, pulling again upon his own rope while Hardy's agonized mouthings filled the air. "I'm after the man that killed my uncle. Your son, Frank, shot at Hardy, yes; I trailed him by the hoof-prints of that clay-colored horse."

"Shore you did," agreed Olds. "And why wouldn't Frank shoot Hardy?"

Mr. Olds showed no haste. In fact, he turned to look speculatively upon Hardy, who had sunk now till his elbows rested upon the gray slime and only his head and shoulders and his upheld forearms remained above the soapy spring. He seemed to derive a certain quiet satisfaction from the spectacle of the big man cursing and raving and yet so helpless.

"Hey, Limpy!" he hollered.

Hardy stopped his shouting and cursing instantaneously, as if he recognized that life or death hung for him in the balance of the scrawny cowman's decision.

"Hey, Limpy," Jake Olds repeated. "Me and Bruce is talkin' about brand runnin' and cattle killin'."

"Pull me out, Jake! Hardy begged. "Don't let me die like this!"

"You was a pardner in the Two Seven Ranch," said Jake without haste. "You had the say. Now I wants you to tell Bruce here whether you didn't give me and Frank permission to kill them cattle. My story is that you let us kill one cow for every cow we run a new brand on. Is that right, or wrong?"

The big bandaged head under the black felt hat nodded in agreement. Hardy seemed trying to swallow as his protruding black eyes turned beggingly on Bruce Ogilvie. His face was a gray mask, painted with black lines for the eyebrows and the down-curving heavy mustache.

"Yes, Bruce," he assented huskily, but quietly, as if he were assured of the truth and force of what he had to say. "I done it, but the Two Seven didn't lose nothin' by it. They only paid for two hundred and fifty head when they bought Jake's herd. Two hundred and fifty head was all the Two Seven was entitled to. I'm tellin' the truth now. Jake he had five hundred head, but the Two Seven bought his whole herd on the basis of payin' him for two hundred and fifty. It was the other two hundred and fifty we was workin' on."

"I reckon that's about the truth of it," agreed Jake Olds, nodding his deeply wrinkled countenance beneath the dusty Stetson. "Didn't nobody lose nothin' but Jake and Frank Olds when we sold our herd to the Two Seven. So we was willin' to git back half of our loss and that's why we run the Box O Triangle brand on them cattle. I don't reckon you knowed Limpy had a brand named the Box O Triangle, did you, Bruce?"

"Yes, I did," replied Ogilvie. "He told me he had an interest in that brand."

"You think we ought to pull him out, then?"

"Why, of course. He didn't figure he was cheatin' anybody."

"Not in that, mebbe," said Olds, chewing thoughtfully. "Though I ain't startin' yit 'bout how I happened to git fifty calves on the book, when I had a hundred comin' to me. But what I'm talkin' about—this here coyote in the muck here, he was aimin' to run me and Frank out of the country. I reckon he allowed as how if we knowed of his brand runnin', it would be healthier for him if we was to be somewhar else. And he was aimin' to run us out by tellin' on us for cattle killin' if we wouldn't go no other way. Frank seen him showin' you the carcass; that's how

come Frank took a shot at him. You reckon we ought to pull him out, Bruce?"

"Yes, damn it!" said Bruce Ogilvie. "And do it now. The mud's up over his shoulder. I'm not goin' to raise any hell about the cattle killin'. The only man I'm after is the man that killed my uncle. Where's Wall-eye?" Bruce added suddenly.

"Frank shot him," said Jake Olds.

"Killed him?" Bruce exclaimed.

"Shore," said Olds calmly. "Wall-eye was tryin' to kill him, wa'n't he?"

Their conversation was interrupted by a scream, louder than any before, from Hardy. His shoulders had disappeared beneath the bubbling slime. Only his head, his hands and wrists now showed above it.

"For God's sake, Bruce, make him pull me out! Don't let me die this way, Bruce!"

"All right, Frank, pull him out!" Jake Olds shouted.

Frank, beyond the rim, on the back of the black horse, started forward. The rope pulled up from the sticky slime and tautened.

"Look out, Jake!" Ogilvie screamed.

The crust where Ogilvie and Jake had been standing had sunk slowly and imperceptibly, as they had stood near together talking about Hardy's fate. Bruce had just seen it cracking beneath the feet of the elderly man, who was watching Hardy at the end of the rope.

At the same time, Bruce felt a large slab of the crust tipping beneath his own weight. He felt the same terror that he had seen in the eyes of the white-faced bay, in the eyes of Hardy. He leaped backward, tripped and fell backward. With a shout, he rolled his body over, scrambled to his feet and climbed up the side of the basin's rim, Jake Olds along with him.

And none too soon. Where they had stood the crust already had divided. A pale-gray bubble rose up an inch or two in it, before it burst. The slab of crust which had broken beneath Ogilvie's feet was tipped sidewise with its edge already inundated by the ropy, greedy slime.

Frank Olds was on the back of Blackie. The lariat was snubbed around the heavy pommel. The sturdy little cow pony, headed downhill, was pulling on the two lengths of rawhide rope which had snapped up from the muck and now hummed under the tension, shaking off drops of gray.

Hardy had turned sidewise as the pull of the rope began; or the way it hung about his chest had pulled him sidewise. At any rate his inert and invisible body was forging slowly landward. A gray hump showed where his right shoulder emerged. His black hat had fallen off and his black head, lying on one side, had passed it. Only the twist to the neck, contriving to keep the man's mouth and nose turned sidewise and above the strangling liquid, told that the creature moving slowly toward the safe land still had life and hope within him.

The rawhide either had been damp at the point where it was tied, or the knot had not been securely drawn. With a twang and a whistle half of the joined rope leaped writhing past Ogilvie's head. The other half twanged back and struck the gray liquid near the black hair just showing above it.

The next minute the black head had disappeared. Only the rope, and the dusty black-felt hat, remained on the surface of the smooth, gray basin to remind the dull, coppery sun that a short while before a big man on a handsome white-faced bay had ridden bravely down from the rim.

Ogilvie shuddered and turned away, closing his eyes. When he opened them it was to see a cavalcade of horsemen winding toward him through the tortuous butte-strewn ways of the gray-and-ruddy ascent to the basin. At first, so

great was his recent shock, he saw them only as horsemen. Next he sensed something strange in the fact that so many men should be riding silently into the treacherous uplands of Hell's Back Yard. Then he recognized the man in the lead. It was the sheriff.

CHAPTER IX.

THE TRIAL.

BRUCE had forgotten about the sheriff. It came to him now, as he watched the riders winding higher and nearer, that, having failed to save his partner, he might well be in danger of losing his own life, and all of the owners of the Two Seven Ranch be wiped out the same day.

Wall-eye, who had accused him—nay, convicted him, before the sheriff—was dead and could not be prevailed upon to retract his accusations. And any light that Hardy might have been able to shed upon the matter of his uncle's death was now quenched beneath the gray, soupy slime of the treacherous basin.

Ogilvie looked in some bewilderment upon the men as they approached. There was no point to fighting them off. At best he could succeed in but killing a few men who had done nothing to deserve death at his hands, and his very beginning of hostilities would be in itself a confession of guilt. If conscience makes cowards, innocence makes men bold.

Ogilvie stood with arms folded, his cartridge belt still lying over in the basin behind him, the westering sun touching his yellow hair with light, for his hat, too, had fallen on the basin's gray crust. He watched as the sheriff rode up to him. His jaws came together grimly as he glimpsed, behind the foremost men, a clay-colored horse and on it a slim figure with a crimson neckerchief. Only Celia had seen the way that he had gone. He felt a sudden sadness and an indifference to what the meeting might bring forth.

The sheriff rode slightly past Ogilvie and peered over to confirm his impression that the young rancher was really unarmed. He reined his horse back then and turned upon the half dozen riders who had aligned themselves in a semicircle on the rocky slope.

"Well, boys," said the sheriff, a bony gentleman with a clawlike brown mustache and a spade chin, "we done agreed to have a trial, and I reckon here and now is as good a time and place as any, ain't it?"

There was no reply from the men, so the sheriff cleared his throat and swallowed, causing his sun-bronzed Adam's apple to jump with surprising vigor.

"I reckon they ain't no use to repeat the charges," he allowed, and forthwith repeated them. He seemed to be conscious of the presence of a feminine eye; he sat the saddle upright, held the reins daintily high in his gauntleted left hand, while his bare right hand rested upon the mother-of-pearl handle of one of his revolvers.

"You-all done heered from a witness how the accused has been actin' kind of queer round here lately—even goin' so far as to rope the foreman's horse instead of a calf in the brandin' corral, and not bein' able to say why he done it. You-all is become acquainted with the fact that the accused was a podner of the man he shot and killed, and was therefore and thereby goin' to profit by his act, which provides the crime with what the law calls a motor. We ain't doin' nothin' unfair and hasty, and before we proceeds to hang the accused justice requires that his crime be provided with all the legal trimmings and embarrassments as required by law and the oath of office."

"Git on with it, Bill," said a man in a pale-blue shirt and black-and-white-checked trousers. "I got a big game on down at the Palace."

The sheriff threw him an angry and affronted look, cleared his throat and proceeded.

"The accused ain't from this part of the country, nohow," said the sheriff. "Furthermore, he was the onliest person on the ranch beside the dead man when the dead man was killed, and ain't nobody around here never accused the dead man of killin' hisself. The accused, not being in good sense, naturally anything he says will be used agin' him. How 'bout it, boys? Is the trial over?"

"Hey, wait a minute!" It was old Jake Olds speaking, and holding up a scrawny hand covered with sunburned hairs. "You-all aimin' to say that Bruce killed his uncle, Mr. Galt?"

"Reckon you kin hear English, can't you?" asked the sheriff, somewhat irritated apparently at the interruption to the smooth and orderly progress of the carrying out of justice.

"I couldn't quite make out jes' what you *was* drivin' at," confessed the gentleman with the sparse mustache calmly. "Here was three of us standin', and for all I knowed you might 'a' been a-tryin' me. Bruce Ogilvie didn't kill him."

His words created a sensation.

"Who did then?" demanded the sheriff suspiciously.

"Why should he?" countered old Jake, without haste. In the curve of the deep wrinkles about his pale eyes and weak, small mouth, in his easy garrulousness might have been seen the reason why he had never succeeded, yet had never entirely failed, as a rancher. He was shrewd in his way. "Bruce didn't have nothin' agin' Galt."

"What's this!" The voice was that of Frank Olds, and in accents of astonishment. "You-all chargin' Bruce with killin' Mr. Galt?"

"What the hell's the matter with you-all? Ain't you got no ears?—excusin' the lady's presence!" added the sheriff, coloring.

"I didn't git no head nor tail of that there legal talk," said Frank Olds, a good-looking, dark young chap. "Like pap says, I thought you might be tryin' him or me or somebody. We was standin' here. Bruce Ogilvie ain't killed nobody. Hardy done it."

"Limpy Hardy?"

"Shore."

"How do *you* know?"

"I seen him when he done it."

"How come you seen him when the testimony——"

"I was on the high land lookin' for pap who was goin' to come up and join me. We was—ah—ridin' out lookin' for some strayed horses, and I had the glasses with me. I put 'em on the ranch house, rememberin' pap said as how he might drap by there on his way up, and I seen Limpy Hardy creep up to the ranch-house window and shoot Mr. Galt."

"How come you didn't do nothin' 'bout it?" demanded the sheriff.

"I did take a shot at him, didn't I, Bruce?" asked Frank, turning to the young rancher, who nodded confirmation.

"Well, that's it, then," Jake Olds broke in, with more excitement than he had shown before. "I run into Limpy Hardy when I was on my way up the coulee valley in the mornin'. Hardy told me that Mr. Galt had been shot and that I better make myself scarce if I didn't want to git hung, because I was the only man anywhere near the ranch when it happened. He said I'd be shot by the first Two Seven man as seen me.

"I started back down the coulee, like he told me to. Then I detoured round and come up here to git hold of Frank and tell him—I reckoned he was tryin' to put the blame on the both of us, seein' as how we had been arguin' with Mr. Galt about that buyin' of our herd. But I never had no chance to tell Frank nothin', because time I got

up here, Hardy and Wall-eye and Bruce was up here after us, tryin' to kill us."

"You say Hardy done it?" repeated the sheriff, frowning sullenly at all these needless complications. "Well, where is Hardy then?"

"He went in the Soap Springs on his white-faced bay," explained old Jake, swinging a straight arm around to point over the rim. "Bruce and me roped him and tried to git him out, but the knot slipped and the crust busted."

The men pushed forward, their mounts tossing their heads jinglingly and jostling together with great creakings of leather as they tried to resist being spurred up to the rim of the treacherous basin. Ogilvie and the two Oldses fell back before them and turned to look.

The bottom of the basin was now in shadow. A dim mist rose from a point near its middle, however; and even in the hazy twilight of its smooth, treacherous surface they could see the crest of a black felt hat and the single writhing contour of a lariat, all that was left to show where the handsome bay and the big man had gone down. The other rope, which Frank had unsnubbed from Blackie's saddle and was looping up, furnished further confirmation due to the gray mud that dripped from it.

"Well," said the sheriff, "I reckon it's too late to hang *him.*"

"Let's go, Bill," said the man in the pale-blue shirt.

He turned his horse and spurred it down the slope. The others, without another word, followed him. In a few moments the entire posse was filing off the way that it had come.

All except Celia. She sat her clay-colored horse, her face a bit pale above the crimson neckerchief, and waited while old Jake and his son retrieved their horses from the brush coulee beyond the basin in which they had been hidden.

Bruce slid down into the upper edge of the basin and secured his gun and cartridge belt and his hat. He put them on and mounted Blackie. He was not elated at his acquittal. His heart was heavy. The thing that was going over and over in his mind was the fact that Celia had been right. Her faith in Frank Olds had been justified. The good-looking young fellow, her house mate and stepbrother, would not shoot a man unless he was cornered and in the right.

Bruce tipped his hat to her in parting and said:

"Good evenin'."

She vouchsafed no reply.

He put the spurs to the black horse and rode as fast as the broken terrain would permit toward the Two Seven Ranch. The sun hung for a while, a dull-red ball, in the west. Then it slipped down rapidly, leaving the gargoyle land, ridged with buttes and gulfed with shadow.

Bruce Ogilvie rode along in the afterglow as the stars began to peer dimly down through the hazy night. He arrived at the ranch house accompanied, high on his right, by the crescent moon and her attendant star.

The first thing after he had unsaddled the horse, he buried his uncle, digging the grave under the wild-cherry tree, tamping it down and covering it with stones to circumvent the wolf. He had buried the black-favored, honest Scotchman Western fashion, with his boots and spurs on and his big hat over his face.

But he remembered the well-thumbed Bible on the shelf in the ranch house. So, as the last thing that he could do for this man, he contrived a cross out of two sticks and a bit of rawhide. And while the moon and its star looked down, and among the lonely buttes a coyote wailed its private sorrow, he hammered the cross into the ground at the head of the grave, and went back into the lonely house.

CHAPTER X.

THE SILVER SPOON AGAIN.

FOR the time being, the incident of the silver spoon had erased itself completely from Bruce Ogilvie's mind. He awoke the morning after the eventful day with a feeling of something heavy upon his heart. He knew that it was not due alone to the death of his uncle, but he would not let himself speculate upon what it might be.

He remembered, with a mild feeling of surprise, the garrulity and sharpness that old Jake Olds had developed in the crisis of the visit from the posse. He recalled, at the same time, that the Two Seven Ranch, due to some trickery by some one at the time the calves had been branded, had obtained title to five hundred head of old Jake's cattle, while paying him, according to the five-to-one arrangement, for only fifty calves, or two hundred and fifty head of cattle. The Two Seven Ranch owed Jake for two hundred and fifty more cattle than it had paid for.

The cattle killing and the brand running that the Oldses had started hadn't progressed very far, and such cattle as had been lost to the Two Seven by this, Bruce was willing to overlook, in view of the service that the Olds had been to him when the sheriff's posse had arrived.

Telling himself that this matter should be settled as soon as possible, Bruce saddled his pinto as soon as he had cooked himself some breakfast, and rode south toward the Dogtooth Ranch. The air was thinner, the haze lighter than it had been for the last two days. Ogilvie's heart, too, grew lighter as the Dogtooth Ranch grew nearer; he even permitted himself an occasional snatch of song:

"I'm six foot seven
And I'm called the 'Fightin' Fool,'
For I'm half-breed polecat
And three thirds mule."

If anybody had told him that his heart was heavy because of the indifference of a certain dark-eyed girl, and was growing lighter because he was nearing her home, he would have cursed him for a liar. Certainly it was that he did not ask for Celia when he rode up to the Oldses porch.

Old Jake greeted him and took him inside, where Frank was sitting by the single window, mending a bit of bridle. Bruce got a glimpse of the inside of the next room and saw that no one but the frail Mrs. Saunders-Olds was there.

He explained his proposal to old Jake and to Frank. They raised no objections, except to insist that he deduct from the settlement the twelve cows that they had either killed or changed the brands on, and Bruce made out to old Jake's order a check in full for the balance of the Dogtooth herd.

"This'll come in fine," said the wrinkled old rancher. "My wife's been ailin', and this'll give us all a chance to go back East, where she's pinin' to go. What you say we start to-day, Frank?"

"Suits me!" said the good-looking young fellow, his eyes sparkling.

"Well, so long," said Ogilvie, shaking hands with each of them solemnly. "I wish you all the luck in the world and I hope Mrs. Olds gets better fast back East. Tell Celia good-by for me," he added, as he climbed on his horse.

He rode back up the valley of the coulee toward the lonely Two Seven Ranch, but this time he did not sing. In fact, he rode listlessly, slumped in the saddle, his chin on his chest, and so immersed in his own thoughts that he was startled into pulling the pinto up on its heels and snatching at his gun when a horse leaped out from behind a series of buttes and a voice cried:

"Stand and deliver!"

The rider was Celia, and she was laughing uproariously at the way he had jumped. He quieted the pinto and

regarded her with something thicker and deeper than gloom.

"What's the idea?" he asked solemnly.

"Heavens!" she ejaculated, her deep eyes alight beneath her narrow, arched brows. "Are you going to stay mad at me all the rest of our lives?"

"I'm not mad with you now," he said. "You were right. Frank wouldn't have shot at Hardy without a good reason. I must say, though," he added, and his teeth clicked together, "I don't exactly appreciate why you should have led the sheriff up into the Bad Lands yesterday."

"I did it," she replied, "because I got a bargain out of him. He promised me there would be a fair trial."

"And Frank was cleared!"

"Oh, Bruce!" she exclaimed in a low voice, riding up near him. "How can you be so stupid?"

He hardened his heart even while his eyes fed upon the round, soft cheek, the lips like an opening red bud; he had been disappointed too deeply to have it happen again.

"What do you mean?" he asked stiffly.

"I told you yesterday, Bruce."

He stared unyielding into the deeps of her eyes. A long wisp of glinting chestnut hung tantalizingly across her flushed cheek and curled at the dimple of her mouth corner. He knew what she meant. He felt himself weakening and he searched his mind for something with which to bolster his anger against her.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, for it had come to him suddenly, and with it many doubts. "When I came down to—to see you yesterday mornin' you were scared about somethin'. Why?"

"Can't we let sleeping things lie?" she asked. "I *was* scared, Bruce. You know how delicate my mother has been. And—and Mr. Hardy—well, he had asked me to marry him. When I hesitated, he said he had things against Frank and Mr. Olds which would get them hung. He said he would tell on them unless I——"

"I see. Frank again," said Bruce Ogilvie.

"Oh, Bruce, how can you be so mean!"

They looked at each other until their expressions melted into smiles. The horses seemed to understand and moved closer together, and stood still in spite of the unusual thing of riders putting their arms about each other.

And this was another reason why Bruce Ogilvie happened to forget about the silver spoon, for a while. Still another reason was their marriage, which took place at once, before the Oldses should go away.

And it was not until the day after the wedding over at the new boom town —a wedding and a celebration which became a classic for the number of headaches with which the citizens awoke the next morning—it was not until the day after the wedding, which was the day the Oldses were leaving, that Bruce Ogilvie, going to the cupboard in his ranch house, happened to notice that there were only three silver spoons in the marmalade jar.

The fourth spoon was missing. In a flash it came back to him vividly—the spoon missing from beside his uncle's cot. Jake Olds taking the black, sticky medicine with a silver spoon.

He stood there unhappy, and undecided. If this trail should lead to Jake Olds as the slayer; if Jake had merely lied to the sheriff and had laid the crime on the head of a dead man who could not answer; if this should end in Jake Olds' violent death——

Well, it would also end, very likely, in the death of Celia's mother from shock. It might end also in the reproach that Celia would heap upon him; whether she ever wanted to or not, she could scarcely forgive the man who

with his eyes open had been the means of her mother's death.

From the kitchen at the rear of the ranch house he could hear Celia's clatter as she busied herself happily in her new home; could hear her soft, sweet voice rippling and crooning to herself in unspeakable tenderness in an old song of love.

It would be cruel, it would be terrible to trace this crime to Jake Olds. Yet Bruce knew that, being the person he was, he had to go in a straight line and call Jake to book if it so happened that he was guilty. His resolution only hardened as he heard Celia calling him from the kitchen. He did not answer; he wasn't ready to speak to her; and she came running to where he was as if even an instant's failure of a response from him was a threat to something very near and precious.

"Oh, Bruce! Bruce! Lo-ok! I told you about those pack rats at our house. Now look what I've found in the nest under the flour barrel."

He looked. The sun from the window glinted on the top of a pepper cruet and on the blade of a rusted razor. The bright spots of reflection jumped about the log walls and across the timbered ceiling. But Bruce was staring at something else. He moved nearer and took the spoon out of her hand. It was of silver, and had the Galt initials on it.

Celia was peering at him, her lips parted.

"Why, Bruce," she inquired, "why are you staring at me like that—and so suddenly?"

"I am thinkin'," said the owner of the Two Seven Ranch, "of how pretty you are. And of how happy we are goin' to be."

Another story by Robert McBlair will appear soon.

WHEN THE DIPLOMATS WORK

WHEN the Honorable Charles Stewart, minister of the interior for Canada, was a luncheon guest of the National Press Club of Washington, he was introduced to the company by the Honorable Vincent Massey, Canadian envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary to the United States. Massey in the course of his remarks admitted that diplomatic work was not one of the world's easiest jobs. He further intimated that it was sometimes rendered abnormally difficult because of the diplomats' tendency to work at cross-purposes. And this reminded him of a story.

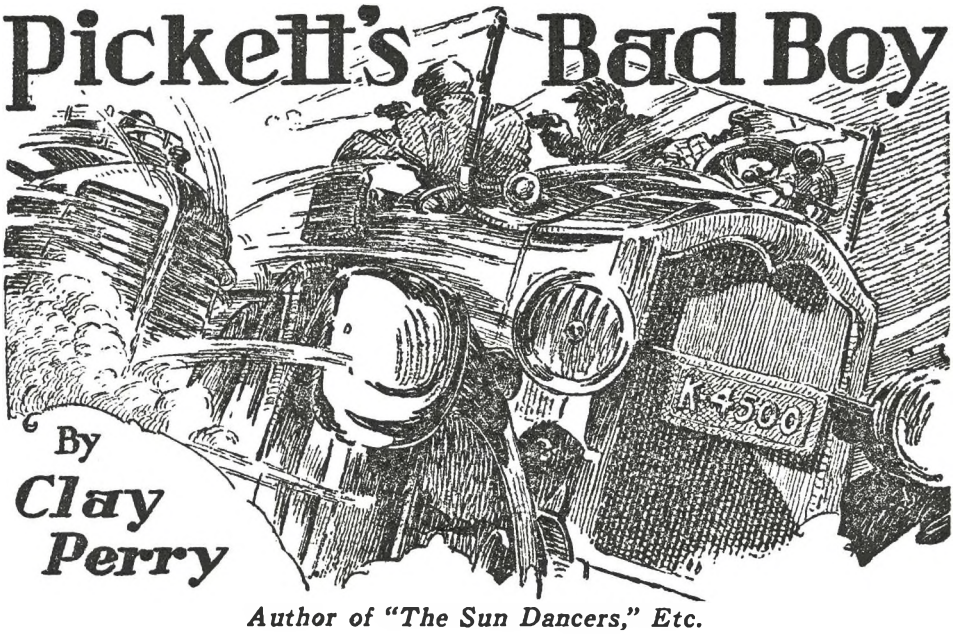
A thrifty woodsman up in Canada, he said, bought a new stove and, after hauling it through the forest, started to carry it into his cabin. But it was too large to get through the cabin door. It stuck midway; and in spite of his tugging, pulling, lifting, prying, and straining, it continued to stick.

Just then one of his friends came along and offered to help, and powerful and herculean was his assistance as puller and lifter. The two struggled with the stuck stove for forty minutes. They struggled until the woodsman, utterly exhausted, fell to the ground.

"It's no use!" he lamented. "We can't get it in."

"Get it in?" shouted the friend. "For the love of Mike! I thought you were trying to get it out!"

Pickett's Bad Boy



By Clay Perry

Author of "The Sun Dancers," Etc.

The folks in Pickett called Bud wild and bad. Well, he certainly wasn't a *tame* one—and that's a fact!

A COMPLETE STORY

LUDWIG DORFENBACH, night watchman at the Pickett Emery Works, was hoeing his garden, in his front yard, next to the long, low, dark-red building which housed the simple machinery of the manufacturing industry which kept the mountain village of Pickett from degenerating into a graveyard. The sun sank, red as fire, behind Round Mountain, lighting up the bulging, arid slopes of Black Mountain, making it actually beautiful.

At other times it was ugly, being barren of any foliage, a rude outcropping of rock into which great gashes had been carved to get at the abrasive stone and sand which were the raw materials for the Pickett Emery Works products. At about this time, too, even the ugly red factory became picturesque. The glow of sunset lighted up its windows, painted it a brighter red, made it a part of the mountain.

Ludwig Dorfenbach did not notice these things. He was intent upon making cabbages grow where cabbages had grown before—keeping one eye on the factory, meanwhile; for he took his job seriously, as he took all things, including himself. The job was handy, though it paid but a pittance. Up to dark he could hoe and plant, smoking his long pipe, in his own premises.

When darkness fell he knocked out the ashes from his pipe and gravely and grimly carried it into the house, deposited it on the mantel, and plodded to his post at the mill, where, contrary to comic traditions, he remained wide awake, all night long, his eyes entirely open. He deprived himself even of the solace of tobacco, for fear of fire.

Over in his own back yard, which adjoined Ludwig's to the west, Bud Ward, eighteen-year-old ne'er-do-well son of Josiah Ward, retired farmer, tinkered

at a contraption of wheels, gas engine, steel and tin which he intended to make into the fastest motor car in the world. At a junk yard in Fredonia, the metropolis twelve miles north, on the railroad, he had picked up various accessories which he was joining to the once lumbering old four-cylinder car that had been built for hill climbing by a factory that had failed, it was said, because they put too much into their product for the prices they could get.

In fact, Bud had got the car itself from a junk yard, removing the seven-passenger body and reducing it to a chassis with seat for two. Bud's father, who was rheumatic of muscles and mind, had been bitter about Bud's purchase and at first had refused to allow him to drive it into the yard; but Bud's mother prevailed.

"Better for Bud to be putterin' around that thing at home, than out raising Cain on the streets," she advised.

"And when he gets it puttered up he'll be out raisin' dust all over the streets—and kill hisself," grumbled Josiah Ward.

They were both right, to some extent. On the other hand, if Mrs. Ward, pale, anæmic, washed-out wife of a retired farmer, prematurely bent and blasted by years of toil on the hopeless farm they had sold, expected her son would be kept out of mischief by being busy in his own back yard, she was woefully mistaken. Among the accessories Bud had acquired with which to decorate his junk bargain was a large mirror for the wind shield.

At this moment of sunset over Round Mountain Bud was adjusting it, not to the wind shield, but to the sunset. He became so absorbed that he sat down behind the hedge that divided Dorfenbach's holding from Ward's and entered into a period of absolute silence. Ludwig forgot he was there.

Ludwig forgot everything but the horror of the calamity suddenly thrust upon him five minutes later. As he straightened from planting a cabbage his eyes caught a fiery glow in the windows of the factory, and, unmistakably, the flicker of flames inside. He dropped his hoe—but clung to his pipe—and ran. He ran silently, save for his wheezing and his gurgling pipe, but imagined that he was shouting the alarm. He made for the valve that turned on the sprinklers all through the factory. They were not of the automatic variety; that was one reason the company hired a night watchman.

Ludwig turned the valve wide open, heard the hiss of innumerable tiny streams of water spurting from the pipes, and then, panting and wild-eyed, rushed through the door from the engine house into the main portion of the factory, to try to save what he might from the flames.

To Ludwig's utter astonishment there *were* no flames. It was as dark and cool all through the interior of the long room as it might well be, at sunset, with a row of windows all along the west side. Ludwig was so astonished that, heedless of the artificial rain he had created, he walked, like an amateur Jupiter Pluvius, the whole length of the room to the windows where he had so plainly seen flickering flames.

A flash of stabbing light hit him in the eyes and made him blink. The next moment he knew what had happened, and, swearing rotund, rumbling Teutonic oaths, he hustled his bedraggled form back to the engine room and turned off the valve. Then, still rumbling with rage he went back to his own yard, to the hedge, and stared open-mouthed at the begrimed youth who was busily attaching to a crackled wind shield a large, round mirror that no longer cast reflections, either on the factory or on the youth who was handling it.

After Ludwig had stood there for a

long moment, speechless, and yet inwardly boiling, Bud Ward turned around, wiping sweat from his bronzed face with his sleeve, waved a wrench at his neighbor, and remarked cheerfully:

"Hullo, Ludendorf. What's the matter? Has it been raining over in your yard?"

"*Ach!* By *Gott!* It's anodder of your *verdammt* tricks. Vit de lookin'-glass it's a fire from de factory you make it seem inside. I know—I know. Und my name it is *not* Ludendorf, by *Gott!*"

"Oh, all right, Hindenburg! The looking-glass, you say? What the devil are you looking in the looking-glass for? To see if your pipe's on straight? Say! Have you been inside the factory *with your pipe in your mouth upside down?*"

Ludwig's enormous hand opened; it closed on the meerschaum bowl of his pipe—it was upside down. It had twisted on the stem, in the excitement and speed of Ludwig's maneuvers. As he removed it from his mouth and stared at it he was not more astonished at this reversal of the fire box than he was to find he had held its stem clenched in his teeth all the time. He turned a sort of green color; his round eyes bulged, blinked; and without another word of the angry reprimand he had intended to hurl at Bud Ward, Pickett's bad boy, he turned and went into the house, holding the pipe gingerly in his palm.

This was, indeed, only "another of Bud Ward's tricks," and quite the most harmless and innocent of the series which had given Bud another nickname for his Christian title of "Bernard." They were beginning to call him "Bad" Ward in Pickett. It was gravely and sternly said of him by his elders, and repeated freely by his peers and his juniors, that during his residence in Pickett since the age of seven, Bernard Ward had done about everything bad he could think of.

This was untrue. He was only eighteen. At the age of eight he had made life so miserable for the young woman teacher of Pickett's public school that she had resigned and a male teacher, fresh from normal school, had been imported for the express purpose of subduing the irrepressible Bud. The newcomer had lasted five years; then Bud had thrashed him—during vacation, when his authority was nil. He had not even bothered to resign; he had quit town.

There was said to have been something other than mere boyish revenge for a succession of petty punishments behind Bud's terrible attack on the teacher. No one ever really discovered what it was, but it was hinted that behind Bud's white rage had lain a remark made by the teacher to pretty little Mary Daresta, daughter of an Italian stone mason and a County Tipperary mother. The remark had got giggles from the whole school—and brought tears to Mary's black eyes.

But the Darestas soon after moved to Fredonia, where the father became a prosperous contractor, a member of the Elks lodge, an alderman—and, later, a stockholder in the Pickett Emery Works. There was no more talk of Mary. And, of course, it seemed absurd to think that a boy of thirteen should care what a smart teacher said about the great American melting pot being personified in the person of Mary.

Pickett was indifferent to the Darestas, except that it prided itself on having little or no foreign population. The German, Ludwig Dorfenbach, and the few laborers of Italian extraction in the quarries were the only persons of alien blood in the village; and they did not "melt." Ludwig, moreover, was an institution something like the Swiss Guards at the French court. He and

Henry Hicks, the stage driver, shared the honors of tradition as official personages in Pickett.

Henry Hicks was a Yankee, of course. But he was something more than that: He was Pickett's Jim Bludsoe, guardian of the mails, the express and the company pay roll, operator and conductor of what Bud Ward facetiously called "the Fredonia-Pickett Shuttle Express"—a truck more or less converted into an omnibus that plied twelve crooked miles between the railroad station at Fredonia and the Pickett post office and the Emery Works.

Pickett was off the railroad, off the main highway, and would have been off the map, except for the Emery Works. Tucked away in a corner of the lower Green Mountains, nurtured by Black Mountain's stony breast, it had not even the prestige of an incorporated town or village. It was a settlement, a suburb of Fredonia, so far as governmental matters went. In tradition it was rich and old and narrow. Surrounded by the almost entirely deserted landholds dating back to Revolutionary days and beyond, it had survived, when threatened with entire decay, by the discovery that the gritty heart of Black Mountain was of value for making tool-grinding articles such as scythe stones and emery wheels and paper.

Fully one half of the inhabitants of Pickett were retired, discouraged, hard-bitten, hard-up farmers trying to live on the money they had managed to get from the sale of their farms, the revenue from timber-salvage operations, and odd jobs of various sorts about town. The revenue of tourist baiting was not theirs, for Pickett was not on any tourist trail—it was too ugly and inaccessible to attract visitors. Old houses of Colonial pattern settled and sagged and cracked, were patched up, went unpainted "till next season." A narrow movie theater competed only too successfully with a narrow white church in stimulating the narrow souls of old and young. There was also a pool hall.

It was difficult to account for Bud Ward. Certainly he had not inherited from his little, weazened, hypochondriacal father, or his thin, faded mother, any of the exuberance and astonishingly imaginative tendencies that he had —nor his boundless and sturdy vitality, his blooded cheeks and curly hair, his big, husky voice, his blazing gray eyes. He had developed muscle at an early age, lugging stones from thin-soiled fields to their borders, to build stone walls on the farm. Later he had cut wood on the abandoned farmstead hills at one dollar a cord, in blazing sun and blinding blizzard.

Hard work had failed to crumple him or cramp his bubbling love for life and mischief. It was predicted that, soon enough, iron bars would end it. He was believed to be headed straight for perdition. He had spent every cent he had earned at hard labor; and the broken-down old car was his most elaborate investment. He was being sent to high school at Fredonia, a sophomore at the age of eighteen, with this paternal dictum laid down for his conduct:

"Go my way or go your own. I'm sendin' you to high school to learn you somethin', not to sport around playin' football and wearin' floppy clothes. You've a'ready got a bad name in Pickett. Don't think you can knock the roofs off the tall buildings in Fredonia; they won't stand for it. I'm goin' to pay your tuition and transportation, that's all. I'll board ye until you finish —and when I say 'finish,' I mean until you get kicked out of school. Then you got to paddle your own canoe."

Josiah Ward believed his advice was good. He had sold his home nest, and the fledgling, to learn to fly, must be pushed off a branch. Josiah Ward did

not realize that Bud knew more about how to fly, now, than his father would ever know. The stripped car was as near to a heavier-than-air plane as Bud could get; and sometimes it did actually threaten to leave the ground. Bud had got it to run. He used his weekly bus fare and what few pennies he could scrape up to buy gasoline and oil for his car, and drove to and from Fredonia in it. He passed Henry Hicks and the "Company bus" twice a day going and twice returning. It was not this which annoyed Henry. It was Bud's robbing him of fares at the station by picking up other high-school students, and, now and then, employees of the Emery Works.

One day, in front of the Pickett post office, Henry Hicks, taunted by Bud as a road hog, with his huge, wide bus, declared Bud a penny-snatching road-runner, which was pretty snappy for Henry. Bud knocked him flat in the dust.

"I don't knock down fares, like you do," he explained to Hicks, with keen penetration to Henry's real reason for jealousy, "so I'll just knock down the knocker. I'm a has-been from an old hill-billy family that has lived off rocks and ruin for years, but I don't have to take pennies from the baby to live. My passengers are carried free."

The truth was that now and then some one insisted on buying gas for Bud's buz-buggy in return for a ride. Henry Hicks complained to the road commissioners and Bud was forbidden to accept any sort of gratuity, or else be liable to prosecution as an operator of a taxi without a license. A garage man at Fredonia, who had become interested in Bud's rather successful conversion of a heavy old touring car into a speedy roadster allowed him to use tools and materials at times, to perfect his own original ideas of how to gear up the car, and talked about entering it in the dirt-track races at the Barrington Fair in the fall. Bud listened intently. He began taking longer runs, to test out his machine. The road to Pickett was too narrow and crooked for successful speeding.

In the meantime Bud fell in love—with football. He made the eleven and showed signs of becoming a whirlwind at half back; then was dropped because his marks were too low. This outlet for the exuberant energy closed, he organized an outlaw eleven, which, playing as scrubs, wiped up the grid-iron with the varsity. In an "exhibition game" played in a field halfway between Fredonia and Pickett, "for blood," such crowds attended that out of his share of the profits Bud was able to buy new tires for the car, have its cylinders rebored, and paint it red with black trimmings. He also managed the purchase of a new suit of clothes.

The high-school principal forbade Bud and his outlaw associates to play against the varsity, so Bud took his organization on tour—mostly hanging to the frame of the *Living Skeleton,* as he had christened his car.

Then he turned his attention almost exclusively to tuning up the *Skeleton* for greater speed. He began to get it. Many a fine, crisp autumn morning, at dawn, he was off on the roads, almost empty of traffic at this hour. He had to elude his eternally irascible father, who was angry at his son's expertness in football, at the expense of scholarship, and was afraid of the expense which might come to him if Bud smashed up some other car on the road.

Bud continued to be "bad"; that is, he used an oath frequently, he smoked cigarettes, played pool casually, and climbed up the drainpipe to his room when he found the doors locked at midnight. Also he made life miserable for Henry Hicks, whom he openly called "road hog" and "robber," and who hated Bud with the hate of a man for

a youth who has humbled him, literally, in the dust of his native town.

Ludwig Dorfenbach had never forgiven Bud for the false fire alarm. He had been forced to spend the entire night mopping up floors and wiping off machinery. Furthermore, by a new ruling of his employers, he was now forced to forgo sunset gardening and spend all his ten hours at the factory, on watch.

And then Mary Daresta came back to Pickett. She had left it, at twelve, a raving little beauty with braids and short skirts. She came back a veritable panic with bobbed hair and even shorter skirts. She had the lovely olive skin of the sunnier clime where her father had been born, his sloe-dark eyes, the piquant tilt of Tipperary to her nose. The ensemble was such as only a mother, among the female sex, could love—because all the others would be jealous. She came back as private secretary to the president of the Pickett Emery Company, for Daresta had become quite a power in the little corporation. The Darestas lived in Fredonia. Mary commuted by bus. She was not only the daughter of a heavy stockholder; she was a good secretary who knew her pothooks and her Ps and Qs.

Best of all, she knew Bud. He invited her to ride over from the station, one morning when he had been out on one of his interminable road tests; and she accepted. After that Bud's road test seemed always to end at Fredonia station, and from there on he had a charming passenger.

Then one day Bud asked Mary to go for a ride with him in the evening. Her big black eyes grew bigger. She shook her pretty head.

"Oh, no," she said; "I wouldn't dare —to go riding at night with Pickett's bad boy. They would tear me to pieces."

Bud knew what she meant. It sent a cold chill to his heart, countered by a hot stab of rage. He drove to Fredonia at a dangerous speed.

The next day Mary declined to ride with him even in daylight. She did not explain. The fact was that Henry Hicks had got in his hand again. It had been carefully intimated to Mary, at the office, that as an employee of the firm, and to set an example, she ought to patronize the company's enterprises—meaning the bus—and she was handed a strip of commutation tickets from Fredonia to Pickett and return.

Bud left Fredonia station that day ahead of the bus, but he did not arrive at Pickett ahead of it. At a curve in the road his *Skeleton* left the ground and sailed over a steep bank and finished its flight as an amphibian—at the bottom of a pool in Black Brook. Fortunately it dumped its driver out on a sandslide on the way down.

It was characteristic of Bud that he crawled at once to the car and inspected the speedometer, half under water. It had locked at seventy-two miles an hour.

"By gad! I knew she had it in her!" he cried. "And now I know what she needs. She needs ballast."

For some time after he had made that remark he sat and stared at the car, or what portion of it was visible, while the babbling brook seemed to repeat the words: "Needs ballast, needs ballast."

Single-handed, Bud fashioned crude floats or pontoons out of dry white-pine fence posts borrowed from a nearby lumber stack, and when the mill shut its sluice gate Saturday noon and the water backed up in the brook, he floated the car onto a gravel bar at the foot of an old wood road that climbed the bank to the main highway. After draining it of water from end to end, he was able to drive it, under its own power, up the wood road and to the Fredonia garage, to have its frame straightened.

Since the car was laid up, Bud de-

cided to go all over it again and see what he could do to infuse more speed into it. Seventy-two miles an hour was not enough. Also, there was the problem of ballast. He pledged himself to enter the free-for-all races at the Barrington Fair and to repay the friendly garage proprietor with prize money, if he won.

For a week, Bud had to ride in Henry Hicks' bus—with Mary near. But Bud didn't sit beside her. There were other girls commuting, too; but Bud preempted the seat beside Henry, high in the front of the vanlike vehicle, and proceeded to make life miserable for the driver. And for himself, for he was troubled with a heartache even as he made flippant remarks about girls to Henry.

It was curious about Henry Hicks. Seated high up at the wheel of the bus, wearing a cap with a brass plate on it, a coat with brass buttons, packing his gun on the outside, he was a veritable Jehu, clothed in authority, his staring blue eyes bearing out the tradition which had grown up about him—as the grim, silent guardian of the mails, the express, the pay roll. It was curious to think that such a tradition could exist about Hicks, for he was a mild-mannered, middle-aged man, really—the sort of man who sternly boasted that he had never had an accident, never lost an express package, or a letter, or a cent of pay-roll money.

He was repeating this to Ludwig Dorfenbach when Bud Ward hopped on the seat right in front of Ludwig with a gay:

"Howdy, Ludy. Been to Fredonia to buy cabbage plants? Oh, no, a sauerkraut cutter. Howdy, Henry. How's the old crate hanging together? Never had an accident, eh? No, and you never gave anybody a free ride, never passed the tobacco, kissed your wife, or spoke a kind word to a crippled baby in your life. Nobody ever *tried* to take any mail or money away from you, did they?"

The girls began to giggle. Henry Hicks disdained to answer his torturer.

"Now, what would you do, Hen, if you met a bunch of hold-up men with sawed-off shotguns, just around that bad curve on the big hill, where you have to shift into low?"

Henry jammed in the lever and started the bus, letting the grinding gears speak for him, spitefully. His face was red and grim.

"I bet you'd jump into the big pool of the brook," Bud went on. "Oh, no, I guess not. You can't swim and you never did take a bath. You'd climb a tree."

If Bud was looking for appreciative laughter, he got it; and it might have been imagined that Pickett's bad boy was having the time of his life. No one dreamed he was putting on a swagger and making nasty remarks because Mary sat back in the bus, looking out of the back window.

Henry found a cutting, savage answer, at last—five miles from Fredonia station, not far from the foot of the big hill.

"You figgerin' on turnin' road bandit, now?" he inquired sarcastically. "You done about everythin' else you can think of that's wild and useless."

"If I did turn road agent, Henry," Bud retorted, "I'd know where to begin practicing without any danger. Which end of that cannon you wear do you point away from you?"

He tapped the butt of the automatic in its holster. Henry grabbed at it and snarled:

"Keep your dirty hands off that gun! Don't you go monkeyin' with me when I'm carryin' the mail and express."

"And the females in distress," laughed Bud, "and General Ludendorf of Cabbage Patch Dugout," he added, to include Dorfenbach in his kidding.

The old German snorted and saved up his anger. Henry Hicks shifted gears and got redder than ever. He disdained further badinage.

"Why, I don't believe that gun is even loaded," Bud went on. "If it's real."

"Like to know, wouldn't you?" growled Henry; and thereafter kept silent and grim.

Some of the girls affected to be frightened. Halfway up the big hill a gravel pit yawned at the right, opposite a stone wall along the top of the banking built up out of the gravel pit to let the road hang on the side of Black Mountain. Below the bank the brook flowed.

"Ladies and gentlemen," megaphoned Bud through cupped hands, "right here is the very spot where the intrepid Henry Hicks fought off a gang of highwaymen who were armed with sawed-off shotguns and tried to hold up the Fredonia-Pickett Shuttle Express. D'you see that deep, dark hole on the right? That is where the bandit car was hidden. And over across the road, behind the stone wall, they knelt and leveled their wicked shotguns at Henry Hicks' honest heart.

"In the face of these odds Henry Hicks deliberately drove his equipage at top speed of ten miles an hour into the pit, crashing into the bandit car and disabling it, tipping over the shuttle and tangling up the passengers, mail, express, and the pay roll for the Emery Works, in a heap. He barricaded himself behind the engine, which he kept running, pulled the choke and gas at the same time and retarded the spark and shot off his exhaust so red-hot and hard that it burned every bandit to death through the thickness of the wall."

The girls were in paroxysms of laughter by this time, and Henry Hicks was as red as the visible sleeves of his red-flannel underwear. He and Ludwig Dorfenbach did not laugh. Ludwig looked pained and personally insulted for Henry, and Henry looked like a bull being insulted by a bottle fly.

Out of the corner of his eye Bud saw Mary Daresta biting her lip. Well, he had touched her, somehow, anyway. He was bitterly satisfied. If he could make her hate him, that was something.

Bud was taking home with him this day the accessories to complete his week's labor on the *Living Skeleton*. He had driven the car home the day before and had partly dismantled it again in his own back yard, but had it all together now except for a few jiggers. The accident he had suffered had broken his wind shield. He had studied the situation and had picked up something he believed would give him more speed, because it gave less wind resistance than the old, perpendicular, square-ended shield. It was a bullet-proof steel shield taken from a wrecked military truck. Curved and with an oval top, it had a large square hole in the center, intended for the muzzle of a machine gun.

At the expense of several hack-saw blades Henry had enlarged and extended this hole to a slit about six inches wide, extending almost across the shield; and into it he had fitted nonshatterable glass, salvaged from another wreck. His seat, lowered until his legs were almost straight out in front of him on the pedals, let him down below this shield, his eyes on a level with the glassed slit.

Steel, also, went into his ballast, in the form of a length of railroad rail, salvaged from around the Fredonia station, which he intended to bolt underneath the chassis frame, to give the *Skeleton* a lower center of gravity and the road-gripping qualities he had discovered it lacked. He was almost ready for the races. A few more road tests and he would try the track. He hoped to take one of the three cash prizes offered—perhaps more than one. There

were money prizes for the "free-for-all," the "special," and the "best lap."

Automobile racing was in its infancy in this part of the country. The speedway at the fairgrounds was simply a two-mile circular horse-race track, perfectly flat, even at the turns. It had, however, been used for bicycle and motor-cycle racing. The fair was declining as an agricultural exhibition; it needed thrills, dangerous as it might be to send fast cars around this track.

Bud intended to play safe with that ballast. Just before the race he planned to shift the heavy rail to the left side of his car, to hold it down when he took the curves at high speed. Until then he would hang it in the middle of the frame, or nearly so.

It was early afternoon when Bud got home, and almost five o'clock when he finished his job, fitting U-irons on the rail and bolting it to the frame, adjusting the new supercharger his garage man friend had loaned him. Then, without waiting to eat or wash up, Bud roared out of Pickett for a run.

Henry Hicks was just driving the bus from the mill with its load of passengers for Fredonia. Mary Daresta was, as usual, in her seat near the open rear end of the vehicle. Bud saw her. She seemed to miss him—though it would have been impossible to overlook the begrimed monkey clinging to the red-and-black roarer that darted past, the driver waving an insolent hand at Henry Hicks.

Bud went slowly at first, to get the hang of his newly balanced craft. It seemed to pick up slowly and he was about to stop to readjust the carburetor, when a rain that had threatened all day burst in a typically furious mountain storm. He kept going, telling himself this would be a good test for a wet track.

"If she holds to this road in the wet she'll hang to the track O. K.," he told himself. "I wonder why Mary——"

He caught a glimpse of his face in the mirror and grinned. Any one might be excused for not knowing him—except one who knew no one ever drove that car except Bud Ward.

It grew dark. Not dark enough for lights, fortunately, for Henry had disconnected his wires to adjust his ballast and had not taken time to hook them up again. He drove on. As he passed the gravel pit, descending the steep hill, he swerved wide to avoid a car which seemed to be trying to turn around there. It halted as he passed, far over onto the shoulder of the road opposite the pit. A man sat in the seat, twisted around, and gave Bud and the *Skeleton* a long, close scrutiny. Bud was used to this, but something in the man's look stung him. It seemed suspicious, hostile.

"Suppose he wanted me to stop and help him?" he asked himself. "May be in trouble. Oh, well, Henry will be along. He'll stop—and charge him for it. That was a Hepper straight eight. Costs a lot to run 'em. Gad! I wish I had that engine in this car. They can go to seventy-five in a stock car, they say. Stripped, it would do a hundred."

Out on the main highway the *Skeleton* picked up better. There was smoother, less hilly running, the engine was warm, and the thunderstorm had bettered the atmosphere for the gas mixture. Bud drove twenty miles out before he turned back. The clouds had cleared some and it was lighter. It would not be dark until after seven. He was pleased with the *Skeleton*. He had taken curves at sixty miles, and without a skid or a slur. He had hit eighty-two miles an hour at one time.

At twenty minutes of seven Bud turned back into the Pickett road and eased his car down the narrow way between the rock hills. He saw the distinctive treads of Henry Hicks' bus in the freshly wet gravel and knew that Henry had started the return trip from

Fredonia. Bud speeded up to overtake him. He wanted to slip past him, easily, then open up with a roaring exhaust and perhaps startle the driver. Henry would be alone, unless he had picked up a drummer or some transient along the way.

At the small hill before the big one a car came toward Bud, traveling at terrific speed for this road, and without lights, rocking back and forth and taking most of the road. Bud squawked his tiny hand horn and drew close to the bank on his right, slowing down. The other car did not slacken speed a bit. It came down the hill like a bullet. It came so close to him he felt the wind as it *whooshed* past. Bud yelled a sarcastic comment. The next instant he recognized the car as the Hepper he had seen at the pit. Now there were three men in it, instead of one. Two were in the front seat, and one behind, who was looking back, and apparently sitting on a box or something on the floor of the tonneau. It was a touring car with the top down. Bud puzzled over its speed, lack of lights, the three men, his backward position—and then came to something else which brought his conjecture to a climax.

It was the bus, headed into the gravel pit, standing almost on its nose. Bud braked down, jumped out, leaving his engine idling, and ran toward the wreck. He called, "Oh, Henry! Never had an accident, eh?"

There was no answer. He inspected the bus. It was empty. The front wheels were buried in gravel. The engine was hot but dead. He looked under the seat.

"It's gone!" he exclaimed.

The familiar black iron chest used to carry valuable express and, especially, to hold the weekly pay roll for the Emery Works, several thousand dollars in bills and coin, had vanished. He saw, as though it were a moving picture, the thing that had happened.

"A holdup! Just where I thought it would happen—if ever. That Hepper—strong box in the rear! Man sitting on it, watching. He had something in his hand—a gun!"

Henry—well, there were some footprints leading almost straight up the perpendicular gravel bank toward the woods that crowned the ridge above it. Henry's footprints, no doubt. The bus lights confirmed that they were Henry's.

"He's running yet," Bud chuckled nervously. "Or flying—or climbing a tree. I knew he would!"

All this, from the time he had met the speeding Hepper, had taken less than five minutes. Bud stood for a few seconds, hesitant, then scrambled back to the *Skeleton*. It was purring and spitting like a wild cat, dark and destined to remain so, a blind engine of destruction waiting—for what?

Bud Ward never had felt more than at this moment that the *Skeleton* had a personality. It had become, under his grimed, loving hands, a live thing that he had gentled and trained. It had done eighty-two. The Hepper had five minutes' start on him, and he had heard that car could do seventy-five.

"Was that a gun he had in his hand?" he muttered.

He turned the *Skeleton* around. The speed at which it picked up brought a grin to his face. He could catch that Hepper if he drove hard. It was getting dark fast, but he knew every inch of the road. He need not bother to try to see the speedometer, even if he could. He went around the curve where he had once sailed off, at greater speed than when he took the air that time—and the car held to the road.

Where the dirt road joined the macadam, a mile from Fredonia Station, Bud turned to the right. He might have gone into town to raise the alarm—but he didn't. The Hepper would have gone the other way, away from

town, into the forty-five miles of wilderness through which this tourist trail had been laid. He passed a motor cyclist tearing along at some speed—passed him as if he were anchored. The single glaring light helped Bud get a squint at the next curve. He thought the man wore some sort of uniform, but couldn't be sure..

"Come on, you cop!—if you are one," Bud cried, and the wind tore his words.

Cars coming toward Bud seemed to waver. Angry voices shouted, "Lights!" --and other things.

"Thanks for the advice," Bud chuckled.

He passed cars traveling in his direction, taking quick side looks at them. They were not Heppers; nor did they have the speed of the Hepper. At last, a long way ahead, on a considerable straightaway Bud saw a car which kept at about the same distance from him. It had lights, now. His heart pounded, but his foot went down farther toward the floor on his accelerator.

The *Skeleton* made a frightful noise as it roared, with unmuffled exhaust, along that black road. It sounded like an airplane, flying low. Perhaps that is what saved it from collisions with other cars. It gave warning without lights. The speeding car ahead ducked around a curve—another. Bud lost it, but when he emerged again to a straight stretch he chuckled: "She'll do it!"

He was gaining on curves, holding his own on the straightaway. The other car had to slow up for the bends; and there were getting to be plenty of them, for the road wound tortuously in and out among the hills. Travel was light, because of the bad storm and threat of more. The other car, in a way, cleared the track for him. It was still showing its tail light to him, and unless he could get better speed——

He shoved the spark up a little. The *Skeleton* answered. At the next curve he went almost off the road. It was a reverse curve, downhill. Had he met another car there, it would have been the end. Coming around the last bend of the S, he had his foot ready for the brake, for the tail light and dark bulk of the car ahead was within seventy feet of him. Its speed told him that it was the Hepper.

And another little thing told him, too. It was a flash of fire over the lowered top of the car, the whizz of a bullet over his head. Another came—another. The last struck his wind shield and ricocheted, with a scream, into the air. Bud ducked, then laughed.

"Shoot, you son of a gun! I'm in the army, now!" he yelped.

The fourth and fifth shots hit the steel shield, too. The sixth hit glass. It cracked, a white splotch showing where it had been hit! but the bullet did not come through. A fusillade followed, two guns barking. Bullets fairly rained on his steel hood, but Bud kept on and kept on grinning—and gaining. He hoped they'd keep aiming at him—not try a tire.

He crept closer to the red tail light every second. He saw little else, except shadowy shapes lying along the lowered top, fire flashes, not only from guns but from the hot exhaust. The other car lighted the way for him. Suppose they slowed down? Well—— Even as he thought of it, the thing happened. The tail light seemed to rush toward him. The other car was turning. He reached for his brake, touched it—and through his high-keyed imagination streamed a picture of what was going to happen—and the aftermath.

He saw the *Skeleton* a crumpled, twisted ruin, the Barrington races all off, for him, his ambition checked. He had intended to try the "short ship" circuit, taking in county fairs all over the State, trying to clean up some real money. The Fredonia garage man had offered to back him, for a percentage,

and if he made good, take him into the business as junior partner. They would transform the old boat into a modern passenger vehicle, ply it between Fredonia, Pickett, Hartswell and Barrington. They would compete with Henry Hicks, and give real service. Bud never thought of *himself* as a wreck. It was all the good old *Living Skeleton.*

He was close enough to see a man leaning out over the folded top, with his arm out. A flash—another! Two more white spots in the glass; and then a section of it fell out and a slap of wind rushed in his face.

He blinked as if from a blow. So, that glass was nonshatterable—but not unbreakable! Bud stepped on the gas. A curve had leaped up from the black road. The Hepper tried to take it without losing speed. It did take it; but instead of keeping over on the inside it shot over to the outer edge. Bud cut closer, thrust the ugly nose of the *Skeleton* up beside the other car, and as the Hepper swung back, careening, Bud stepped harder on the gas and deliberately rammed the Hepper in the right rear wheel.

He was fully conscious of what he was doing, of what might happen; he had *seen* it, in his mental movies. The strange thing was that what might have happened, *didn't*—quite. The Hepper slued, swung, tipped to the right, then to the left, as the *Skeleton* hung to it like a bulldog with its teeth set; then it turned over on its back, like a licked cur, its wheels in air—and the *Skeleton* rose and climbed right on top of it.

One reason it did this was because of Bud's ballast. The rail, so recently bolted in place on the frame, had come loose in the U-irons. Bud had used oil to help get the nuts on the rusty bolts. He had squirted it on generously. Some of it had got in the Us and made them slots for steel to *slide* in. The heavy section of sharp-edged rail kept right on going when the *Skeleton's* front wheel struck the Hepper's rear one. That rail shot right through the Hepper's gas tank, into the body, up through the back seat, and over the top of the front seat.

One man shot from his seat on the end of the rail, landing in a condition which lasts forever—he was dead. Another man went through the wind shield, and might better have been dead. The third one, the hard-boiled driver, simply vanished in thin air. Nothing was ever found of him, except a cap. He never came back.

The front end of the *Skeleton* tilted up at such an angle that Bud never left his coop, at all. His steel shield saved him from being hurled out on one side; and his legs, being straight out, on the pedals, held him from being flung too hard against the shield. However, his head did strike. He sat there, in his car, perched atop the overturned Hepper, the wheels and brakes and underhung rods and braces of the two cars in a tangle. He was dazed for a time. When his head cleared, he dared not get up. It was not because he feared he was badly hurt. He feared to find the *Skeleton* a *"Living" Skeleton* no longer. He knew it must be a wreck.

Mary Daresta came running home from a neighbor's, white-faced, and found her father preparing to go to his lodge. The neighbor was a sister to a Fredonia traffic cop.

"Get the car, quick!" she gasped to her father. "They've held up the Pickett bus and got the pay roll. Henry Hicks was taking it back from the six thirty train, you know."

"Who did?" inquired Daresta.

Mary's pretty face was a mask of anguish.

"You know Pickett, father," she said significantly; "you know Pickett. You know Henry Hicks. Well, he says—he swears—that Bud—Bernard Ward—did it."

"Bad Ward? That boy?"

"I don't believe it. I think Henry is crazy. I know he's a coward. He ran all the way from the gravel pit, through the woods, to Pickett—seven miles. He told them he saw Bud Ward in his racing car, waiting for him at the gravel pit, and that Bud shot at him and he only escaped by driving the bus into the pit and jumping out and climbing the bank into the woods."

"Oh, he didn't stop to *see?*" inquired Daresta, who had a quick way of getting at vital truths.

"No, he ran. They've organized a posse in Pickett to go after Bud Ward. They're boiling. You know Pickett. Father, we have got to go—and find him—and prove it's not so—and——"

"Hush a minute, Maria! You like this bad boy?"

"He is *not* bad. I—I love him."

"Ah! Pickett's bad boy. Ah! So, Henry Hicks says so. Hum!"

Mary prayed while her father deliberated. It seemed an hour. It was one minute. Daresta had an interest in the Fredonia garage where Bud had tinkered up his *Skeleton*. He also had a cousin who was a famous automobile racing driver.

"Come along then?" he inquired gently of Mary.

He picked up Ivan Skolwitz. Ivan was the garage man. He was what is sometimes called a hyphenated American. But Ivan wasn't called so, to his face; he had red hair.

A motor-cycle policeman stopped them at the station crossroads.

"Yeah, Mr. Daresta, that speed devil passed me twicet this evenin'," he said. "Oncet before dark and oncet after. He didn't have no lights. He was the second car that give me the exhaust to-night. I went up to seventy-five and chased 'em both into Hartswell, then quit and telephoned ahead to the troopers at Rouse's Four Corners. They phoned back a while ago that there is a bad wreck down the line about thirty miles, and——"

Mary gripped her father's arm.

"Listen!" she said. "Did you ever know Bud Ward licked that fresh school-teacher because he called me a little melting pot?"

Daresta let Skolwitz take the wheel. He was a better driver. They went down the State highway.

"I hope he didn't ruin that *Living Skeleton,*" Skolwitz said anxiously. "It's cost me money. He'd 'a' won the races at the fair, too."

He did not say that he had as good as bet on Bud. He looked into Mary's eyes; and he said no more about money or wrecks.

"You see," said Mary, after a long silence, "they'll think Bud planned this robbery."

"How is that?" asked her father, who was leaning over the back of the front seat.

"Why, because he told just how it might happen, some day, on that road, by the gravel pit. Just this noon he described it—to tease Henry Hicks."

"He did? I see. Well, I already imagined that, myself," said Daresta. "That's why I got the directors to buy theft insurance on our pay roll and make a standing offer of one thousand dollars reward for information——"

"Oh, my, I can't think he'd do it! He isn't really bad. The motor cop said there was another speeding car. Oh, I hope——" Sobs choked her.

"Well," remarked Skolwitz to a State trooper, an hour later, as he surveyed the ruin of a Hepper and a once *Living Skeleton*—"well, maybe there is enough left out of these two cars to make up one, stripped down. Anyhow, I'll pay for this junk to be hauled in, and maybe we can get a good Hepper straight-eight motor out of it, to start with."

"And ballast," said Bud, trying to

wipe grime and blood from his face. "I found out I needed ballast."

"What did you say, Bud?" asked Mary, pulling at his arm.

"I said——" He heard the brook babbling in his ears—or perhaps the noise of the rushing wind he had made in his swift and desperate pursuit. "I wonder," he went on, with seeming irrelevance—"I wonder if you'd ever ride with me any more?"

"For ballast?" asked Mary.

"Anyhow, we're goin' to start a bus line," declared Skolwitz cheerfully. "You get that thousand dollars, Bud. We will take Henry Hicks' trade away, so he can't knock down no more fares."

"He did that?" queried Daresta.

The posse arrived. Henry Hicks and Ludwig Dorfenbach, the latter willfully absenting himself from duty as night watchman to become a willing witness to Hicks' testimony of how Bud Ward had bragged he could hold up the stage were prominent among the armed citizens.

"Diss," spluttered Ludwig, when Bud greeted him cheerfully as "Ludendorf" —"diss is anodder of your tricks, *hein?* You already haff done eferyt'ing bad in Pickett you can t'ink of—ingluding false fire alarms, *hein?* You almos' ruin dot machinery vit vater which it I haff to turned on."

"But if you had been there, Ludwig, instead of hoeing cabbages," remarked Daresta unexpectedly, "it wouldn't have happened, eh?"

"I come here to hellup catch de robber vot holt up de stage——" began Ludwig, growing red.

"There is the robber!" declared Henry Hicks. "I saw him——"

But you could have knocked Henry over with a feather when the State trooper told the leader of the Pickett posse just what had happened.

"What is the matter with your eyes?" demanded Daresta.

"I'll tell you—I'm so nearsighted I can hardly see ten feet away," choked Henry.

"But you can see how to knock down extra fares, eh? I think there will be some changes at the Emery Works. We will need a new night watchman and a new bus driver."

"Oh, say, look here, Mr. Daresta!" broke in Bud. "Let the old wiener wurst and the old stuffed shirt have their jobs. You know Pickett."

"My Lord, yes, I know Pickett! I moved away from it. All right, if you say so. But say, Bud, how would you like to come to Fredonia and live until you finish that high school? I need a good driver for my car sometimes. Mary and I are going to go to Indianapolis to see my cousin drive in a big race. We will need a driver for the trip—and afterward. You could learn something about racing."

Bud Ward swallowed hard.

"Wouldn't you like it, Bud?" asked Mary, in a whisper. "Oh, come over here, out of those lights. I want to ask you something—tell you something, I mean."

Daresta slapped Bud Ward on the back. "You be good, now," he said. "And you be careful, Maria. That's Pickett's bad boy. He might steal from you."

But Bud didn't have to steal the kiss he got. It was given to him—for ballast.

Watch these pages for other stories by Clay Perry.

Bent-Leg

By George Marsh

Author of "Sunset House," Etc.

Concerning a crippled North Country dog that overcame a serious physical handicap with the finest sort of intelligent, loving loyalty.

THE sun was already well below the bitter ridges to the west of the white shell of the Little Drowning before Jim Laird thought of making camp. Because he wished to reach the trading post the following night and was still far upriver, he had traveled long after the wise dog driver looks for a good windbreak in which to build his fire and sleep. Then, ahead, protected from the north by a ridge, he saw a thick growth of spruce.

"*Marche,* Zero!" he called to his lead dog; and the tired team broke into a trot on the ice-hard river trail.

They were approaching the timber already thick with shadow, where Laird had decided to camp, when a shrill wail from the ice ahead straightened the ears of his huskies. From the tail of the sled where he ran, Laird looked past his dogs to make out a small, dark shape in the snow fifty yards up the trail.

"*Kekway!*" he hailed whimsically, in the Cree salutation. "Where in thunder did you come from, pup?" he added in amused surprise.

As the team approached, the whimpering of the diminutive shape beside the river trail rose to staccato cries of distress. Stopping his curious huskies, Laird went to the black-and-white dog in the snow. It did not budge from the spot.

"A three-months-old pup!" muttered the dog driver. "Deserted. Hurt, too!" He bent over the ball of fur, which attempted to sit up on its forelegs only to fall back with a cry of pain.

Dropping his mittens, Laird knelt beside the puppy to learn the nature of the injury which had seemingly crippled him. As the man placed his hand on the black-and-white head, the dog exhibited neither fear nor shyness, but touched the hand with a small red

tongue, and then, with a shivering sob, lifted slant brown eyes to the stranger.

"Gentle pup, ain't yuh? Well, let's have a look at those legs," said Laird, soothingly, as he stroked the thick fur of the dog's back, then carefully took the puppy's forelegs in his hands.

"Hum! Broken. No, the knee joint's hurt; twisted. Must have fallen under the sled."

With a cry, the dog caught the hand of the man in his teeth. But the teeth did not close. Instead a moist tongue licked the hand which had caused the pain.

"Game! Affectionate, too. You've been run over and they've left you to freeze. Didn't even put you out of your misery by knocking you on the head! Figured you'd never grow up to work, with that leg. That's the Indian of it!"

For a space, Laird looked down at the shivering puppy, his brows knotted in thought. Then, with a low whimper, the dog strained toward the man, and the small black nose found his hand. Again the man felt the caress of the red tongue, as the brown eyes looked fearfully into his.

"Poor little beggar!" muttered Laird. "I can't do it. Just as if he knew what I was thinking! No, I'm goin' to take him home."

Lifting the puppy, Laird carried him past the fretting, hostile dogs to the sled, loosed the lashings, and put him in a bag. Then he drove his team ashore into the spruce.

Later Laird sat before his fire on the bed of spruce brush in the lean-to he had built and banked with snow. Curled near him, the injured leg and shoulder wound with a bandage, the puppy whimpered softly where he lay in the comforting heat.

It would surely be on the side of mercy, ruminated the man, to destroy this dog who was destined to grow up a cripple. Unable to protect himself or avoid the quarrelsome sled dogs at the post, the puppy would, in the end, receive injuries which would only necessitate doing what might now be done mercifully by a blow on the soft little skull. Laird exhaled a cloud of smoke as he watched the blazing birch, convinced that his pity was misplaced. Then something plucked at the sleeve of his parka.

Glancing down, Jim met the quizzical brown eyes in the black-and-white face. In spite of his injured leg, the puppy had worked to the side of the silent man gazing into the fire, and asked his notice. The brush of a tail waved its mute declaration of friendliness and faith.

"Well, I'll be skinned!" muttered the surprised Laird, gently rolling the delighted puppy on his back and rubbing his stomach. "If you're game enough to crawl over here with that leg of yours thumping with pain and ask for attention, Jim Laird's going to give you your chance."

"Good Lord, Jim! What've yuh got there?" demanded Laird's father, the following night, as Jim brought the puppy into the trade house.

"Found him on the trail—deserted, run over," said the youth, staring defiantly into the faces of the older Laird and Omar Souci, the half-breed head man.

"But you don't mean to tell me that you're goin' to doctor that scrubby pup's leg and keep him?"

"Yes, that's what I mean to tell you," answered Jim with finality.

"But he'll never be any use as a hauler, with a stiff joint. He'll just lie around and eat his head off, lad," protested the older man.

"I know it, but I'm goin' to keep him, just the same. I'll look after his grub," glaring into the grimacing face of Omar Souci.

So, ignoring the smiles and gibes of the Indians at the winter trade, one of

whom had abandoned this puppy to a freezing death, Jim fed and nursed his dog. In a month the puppy could bear his weight on his leg. But the knee joint was permanently stiff and the leg badly bowed. Shortly, at the post, the black-and-white dog with the limping gait was known as Bent-leg, and Bent-leg he remained.

But if Laird's crippled puppy was the constant source of good-natured raillery from his father and Omar, as the dog grew it became increasingly evident to the youth who had grown to love him that Bent-leg was no ordinary dog. What he lacked physically he amply atoned for, in his master's eyes, by the keenness of his wits. When the injured leg grew strong enough for traveling, the dog became the constant companion of Jim Laird on his rounds of the traps and snares he had set within a few miles of the post. Once a new fall of snow proved too much for the stamina of the four-months-old pup and he returned to the post riding the trapping sled drawn by his master. This spectacle drew a dry comment from the factor.

"Suppose you figure on putting on a collar and having him drive you, when he grows up, Jim?" he teased.

"Well, father," retorted the stubborn Jim, "so long's I'm doin' the haulin', whose legs are gettin' tired?"

As Bent-leg grew in size and wit, he seemed to sense his position of mere sufferance at the fur post, and with the elder Laird and Omar he attempted no familiarity. For him there was but one god—the man who had picked him up on the river trail in December. Because she was kind to him, with Jim's mother the puppy was friendly; the others at the post he merely ignored. Often in the trade house, to annoy Jim, Omar or his father would attempt to lure the puppy from his master's side with the bait of a hidden bit of moose meat or rabbit, but always the dog conquered the urge of his tempted nostrils, and refused to leave the one he worshiped.

"One thing I'll say for that useless runt of a dog of yours, Jim," his father frequently remarked: "he's your dog, for sure. Never saw such a one-man puppy in my life!"

"Yes, he's my dog." And Jim would take the puppy in his arms and soothe him with low crooning in a grateful ear.

So youth and dog grew in mutual understanding, for constant association with his master sharpens a dog's wits as a whetstone edges steel. And it was not long before John Laird and his head man, however strongly they might protest against the wasting of food on a dog who would never work in harness, were forced to admit the uncanny intelligence of the crippled puppy.

For the dog certainly understood English. At a command from Jim he would leave the trade house and return from the factor's quarters carrying a pair of mittens, a moccasin—anything in Jim's room that was portable. Titbits of moose, caribou or frozen whitefish, thrust to his black nose by his master, were ignored when that master accompanied his proffer with a quiet, "No!"

Often Mrs. Laird made use of the dog's intelligence by dispatching him across the clearing to the trade house to announce supper. Scratching at the closed slab door, his staccato yelps swiftly brought the hungry father and son to the evening meal. But it was the idolatry in which he held Jim Laird that was the most marked characteristic of the puppy.

Spring came. The wedges of the geese cut the sky above the post on the Little Drowning. The April sun and the south wind melted the snow, and the ice churned past on its way to the salt bay. May brought soft days when the air reeked with fresh odors of wood mold and the sled dogs frolicked on

the young grass of the clearing. And with them romped an undersized black-and-white cripple. Quick and active though he was, notwithstanding his stiff leg, the puppy was ever at the mercy of the doubtful temper of the older dogs. For he could neither defend himself from the attack of, nor successfully flee from, their threatening fangs. And summer found him wearing many a scar, for Jim Laird's watchful eyes could not always shepherd his dog.

One day early in June Jim and his father were sitting on a rock on the shore talking of the spring trade with the Ojibwas, whose canoes would shortly be due. A hundred yards above them, the floats of the post gill nets, anchored at right angles to the beach, rippled the surface of the river. Suddenly the elder Laird removed his pipe with the exclamation:

"Well, if there ain't an otter monkeying with that net! The infernal little thief!"

On the downstream side of a net a small black object appeared, only to dive again. Jim hurried up the shore, followed at a distance by his father. He had reached the anchor line of the one-hundred-foot net when, suddenly, there was a thrashing in the water, halfway out, and a well-known head was lifted, while a stifled yelp reached the ears of the man on the shore.

Then, to his amazement, the approaching factor saw his son make a headlong dive into the river and swim with powerful overhand strokes along the net out into the stream.

Again the black head appeared above the disturbed surface, followed by a choked cry of distress. Then Jim reached the imprisoned Bent-leg.

"Well, I'll be skinned! That dog!" murmured the amazed factor as his son freed the caught leg of his half-drowned puppy, and brought him ashore.

When Jim had forced the water from Bent-leg's stomach and started his circulation by vigorous rubbing, the father remarked sarcastically:

"That's a smart pup, Jim, for sure. Now he's learned to rob the fish nets, what'll he do next?"

But Jim Laird was too chagrined to answer. There was nothing to say. His dog had been caught red-handed. His father would now insist that the puppy go. Already useless as a future hauler in the sled team, Bent-leg had now become a thief—a menace to the post food supply.

"Guess you'd better take him into the bush and put a bullet where it'll do the most good," rasped John Laird as he left his son beside his reviving dog.

For answer, Jim leaned over the exhausted puppy, whose breath was again becoming regular, and muttered into a hairy ear: "Think they've got rid of you now, do they? Well, they ain't!"

The black-and-white head lifted in feeble response to the caress of Laird's hand. As it fell back to the beach, the slant brown eyes rolled upward in a look of gratitude to the master who had come to his dog in the moment of his stark need.

The following morning, at daybreak, a man and a small husky with a bowed foreleg stood on the river shore at the fish nets.

"Go on out there, Bent-leg, and get some breakfast!" ordered the youth.

Huddled at Jim's feet, the dog shivered, his eyes shamefacedly avoiding those of the man.

"Go on, Bent-leg!" urged Laird. But the cringing dog only whimpered as he trembled at the feet of the man he worshiped.

"Well, if you're afraid of fouling up in the net again, mebbe you'd take this?" And Jim dropped a two-pound river pike at the nose of his dog.

Swiftly, as though the morsel was a thing odious to the palate of a husky, Bent-leg backed away from the fish,

his eyes avoiding the cold gray gaze of the man, his tail limp between his legs.

Time and again this humiliating treatment was repeated by Laird, until, from sheer pity of the distress of the sensitive dog, he desisted.

"Bent-leg won't touch the fish nets again," Jim announced to his father at breakfast.

"When he does, he goes," was the curt reply.

But, in spite of the frank skepticism of the trade house, Bent-leg never again robbed the gill nets, and, for weeks, when fish was all Jim had to offer, went supperless.

September found Jim and Omar on a meat hunt for the post. Against the protests of the half-breed, Bent-leg accompanied the hunters. Among the accomplishments he had learned was the ability to smother, at the command of his master, his yelp when game scent was in the air. As a husky is, by nature, not a silent dog, this trick spoke volumes for the training of Laird and the intelligence of his puppy.

On the edge of a blueberry barren, at dawn of one still August morning, Laird and the dog watched for caribou. Slowly the shadows lifted from the heath, to uncover patches of gray reindeer moss, splashing wide areas of ripening berries. Suddenly the roving eyes of Jim Laird checked to focus on the edge of the barren a hundred yards distant. His left hand groped for, and found, the collar of the dog at his side.

"Quiet, Bent-leg! Quiet!" he commanded.

The trembling dog whimpered softly, choking the yelp in his throat, for his dilating nostrils had already caught the scent of the game Laird was watching.

Slowly, in a rolling shuffle, a black bulk broke from the scrub at the rim of the barren and ambled out where the thick-clustered berries lured him in their purple abundance. Jim cocked his gun and waited, his dog at his side, for the bear, following a deeply rutted caribou trail, was masked to his shoulders as he fed toward the ambush.

As his keen nose sucked in the air rank with game scent, the shaking Bent-leg crouched beside his master, muffling the cries which swelled his shaggy throat. Then, as the approaching bear stepped from the worn trail, offering a clean shoulder shot, Jim fired.

With a snarl of pain, the brute bit savagely at the wound. Laird's rifle cracked again. The black bulk sank from sight.

"Got him that time—plumb in the heart!" shouted Jim, as the excited dog bounded through the heath and began to worry the sprawled carcass of the bear.

"Be careful there, old boy!" Laird warned, as Bent-leg viciously snapped at a limp foreleg. "He might have a kick in him yet and kill you."

Standing his rifle against some bushes and drawing his skinning knife, Laird had started to make an incision between the forelegs, when a blow on the head sent him reeling away to the ground.

As hands and knees met the dry ground, one thought dominated his confused brain: the rifle! It was there, a few feet away! Scrambling to his feet, he threw himself at the gun—had it in his hands—when a roar sounded in his ears and he was again struck and knocked forward on his face. Crawling desperately, he twisted and swung the cocked gun. But, at the same instant, the enraged brute turned from the man to slash savagely at the dog, whose sharp fangs gripped him in the inside of the hams.

Leaping back, the dog avoided the sweep of razorlike claws. Then the rifle roared. Again the bear threw himself at Laird; but with a lunge, Bent-leg's teeth closed in the same grip. With a squeal of pain the beast whirled and struck at the dog. Then the muzzle of the rifle thrust at the hairy ribs spat its red flash.

With the groan of a stricken human the bear crumpled to the heath. Swaying where he stood, his brain giddy from the blow on the head, Laird pumped another shell into the chamber of his Winchester and fired again at the coughing bulk at his feet. Then he fainted away.

Consciousness returned to Jim Laird in the impression that the bear was on him, tearing at his face. But he opened his eyes to see the black-and-white head of Bent-leg on his chest, to feel a hot tongue on his cheek, and hear low whines of canine grief. He sat up slowly, his brain in a whirl of dizziness, while the overjoyed Bent-leg beat with hairy paws the master he had mourned.

"We're a couple of damned fools, Bent-leg!" grimaced the hunter, raising a hand to his aching head. "A couple of lucky ones, though!" he added, as he felt of his scratched scalp and moved his arms and neck, to find himself bruised but not crippled. "A clip on the head and back and still kicking! Thanks to you, you old cripple, I'm here!"

With a surge of gratitude to the puppy who had fought the bear like a veteran, Laird gathered the dog into his arms.

"They say you're no good, do they? If they'd seen the way you stopped his rush when I was down, they'd sing a different song. No good, eh?" Jim buried his face in the thick ruff of his wriggling puppy. "Why you've got more brains than the whole sled team. You saved old Jim's skin. You darned old crooked-legged cripple, you! I wouldn't swap you for a sled load of silver fox."

Tail thrashing like mad, Bent-leg struggled in Laird's arms in an attempt to express in the caress of his tongue the affection of his heart. Then, with a fierce swelling of his throat, he ran to the stiffening carcass and vented his hate of the master's late foe by a furious show of white fangs.

When Jim Laird reached the hunting camp on the river and, at the supper fire, gave the details of the fight in the barren to Omar, the half-breed dryly replied:

"Waal, eet may be as you say—dat dog pull de bear off you. But I t'ink de bear was ver' sick from de two shot."

"I told you that the second shot barely creased him over the spine," Jim protested with irritation. "The first got him high in the shoulder, I tell you, and when I pricked him with the knife to skin him, he came to like a flash. He was only stunned."

"Ah-hah!" rejoined the skeptical Omar. "You t'ink dat ees good dog, so you tell me he save your life. I know."

"He did save my life!" insisted Laird. "If he hadn't grabbed the bear I'd never have got the gun. He's got more brains than any husky I ever saw, and he's game to the bone, too. Because he's crippled and small, and will never work in harness, you and father have no use for him."

"All right, he ees your dog; you can feed heem. Eef I had heem, he would not see de snow dis year."

"Well, he's goin' t' see the snow!" rasped Jim. "After what he did to-day he gets his grub, if I go hungry myself."

"You hunt for heem, eef dog grub get scarce dis winter?" laughed the head man.

"Yes, I'll hunt for him. He can't catch rabbits like the other dogs because of his leg. I'll snare them for him."

Back at the post, the only sympathetic ear turned to Jim's story of Bent-leg's heroism in the bear fight was that of his mother.

"Jim, you're so daffy about that useless runt of a dog," said his father, "that you've just hashed up this tale to

give him some standing—save him from being called what he is, a good-for-nothing drone who can't earn his grub by working with the sled team. Remember, if dog grub is scarce this winter, he gets a bullet in his head."

The lean face of Jim Laird went dark with blood.

"I told you I'd hunt his feed, and I will. But I want to give notice, here and now: there'd better be no accidents here."

"What do you mean?" The older man flushed in turn.

"I mean"—the eyes of the younger Laird glittered with passion as they pierced the masked look of embarrassment of the factor—"that any one who touches that dog, hurts or kills him, accidentally or not, will have me to settle with. Accidents won't go!"

"You're hinting that we might do away with him?"

"No, father, I don't think *you* would; but I wouldn't put it beyond Omar or Joe—if they thought you wanted it."

"Well, son," said the other sheepishly, "if you rustle his grub, it's all right; but we can't feed a loafer."

"That's agreed. I don't touch your dog cache; but you see that Omar and Joe understand—no accidents!"

And Jim Laird left the trade house, joined the dog, who waited for him at the door, and strolled to the river shore, to smoke and listen to the cries of the geese passing south under the glittering stars.

"They don't believe you fought the bear, Bent-leg," he said to the dog, who had squeezed between his knees, where he sat on a boulder. "They don't like you, old boy, because you'll never work in the traces. If they could drop a tree on you, or drown you, some way, they'd do it for sure. And you must keep away from the other dogs when I'm not around. They'd set 'em on you."

For answer, with a grunt, Bent-leg rubbed against Jim's knee.

"I don't trust Omar and Joe. They think father'd like it—your goin'. But you're not goin', old man. You're goin' to run trap lines with Jim this winter, and we'll set the net in the lakes and pile up a cache of fish for you. They needn't fear; we won't ask them for grub."

Then, one day, when Jim dropped downstream to look over a little valley for game sign, with the idea of trapping when the snow fell, Bent-leg did not come to his whistle. Evidently, the dog had left the post to nose about in the forest, so Jim left without him. On his return he found, outside the dog stockade at the gate of the factor's quarters, a huddled heap which rose painfully at his approach and feebly wagged a black tail.

"Good Lord, Bent-leg! What's happened?" And Laird bent over the shivering dog, whose neck and shoulders were bleeding from the deep gashes of long fangs.

"The dogs!" choked Jim. "They've set the dogs on you!"

Hot with rage at the brutal attack on the crippled puppy, and fearful of the gravity of his wounds, Jim picked his protesting dog up in his arms, and carried him into the kitchen.

"Look what they've done to him, mother!" he said to the woman busy at the stove.

"Bent-leg! I heard them a while ago, Jim, but I thought it just the sled team. Why he's terribly bitten! Poor puppy!" And while Jim washed the wounds of his whimpering dog in warm water, his mother prepared bandages.

"This is a case of Omar or Joe, mother," said the gray-faced Laird quietly. "He was outside the stockade and they must have given him a bone, so the others would take it away from him and start a fight. He keeps away from the dogs, but, of course, would fight for his bone."

"If I'd only known Bent-leg wasn't with you, I might have stopped it—saved him this," regretted Mrs. Laird.

"Somebody must have stopped them, or they'd have killed him. These are all skin slashes; they didn't get to his throat. Poor old pup! You'll feel worse to-morrow, but better in a few days." And Jim Laird patted the head protruding from the bandages which swathed neck and shoulders. "He can stay here, can't he, mother?"

"He can stay right here behind the stove, where it's warm, 'till he's well, son."

"Thanks, mother."

And Jim headed for the trade house.

"Well, you've done it!" Jim's face was black with anger as he met the surprised looks of his father and Omar.

"What's the matter now?"

The voice and eyes of his father were so devoid of guile that Jim doubted the soundness of his suspicions.

"Matter? You don't know?" he stormed.

The older Laird shook his head in surprise at his son's vehemence.

"Some one's set the dogs on Bent-leg —tried to kill him!"

"Not guilty," said the factor. "First I've heard of it. Know anything about it, Omar?"

Jim's half-shut gray eyes probed Omar's swart face, but the leatherlike features of the half-breed were inscrutable as he answered defiantly:

"I hear no fight. If I evair start dem dog at dat crook-leg, I mak' dem feenish eet."

The eyes of Jim Laird flamed. "You will, eh?" he bit off, and in his voice was the ring of metal. "Well, if you or Joe ever do set a dog on Bent-leg you want to have your coat off when I reach you, for you'll have to fight!"

"Here, here! What kind of talk's this?" snapped the factor.

"I told you that no accidents would go with my dog!" raged Jim, all self-control vanishing in the face of the half-breed's veiled threat. "If I find that you or Joe did this, Omar, you're in for a pounding—and you know what I can do with my hands."

Deaf to his father's attempted defense of Omar's innocence, Jim flung himself out of the trade-room door, while the head man puffed coolly at his pipe, his small eyes snapping in amusement at the spectacle of a father and a stubborn son quarreling over a useless cripple of a dog.

But Jim never learned how the dog fight started. Meanwhile, with the aid of his mother, he nursed Bent-leg's wounds; and by late October the puppy was again running around. But never again did Jim leave him loose beyond the stockade, where the sled dogs could attack him. Snow came, and with the snow began preparations for trapping the streams and ridges within reach of the post. How they jeered from the trade-house door when he first appeared with Bent-leg harnessed to the small trapping toboggan which Jim drew himself when he spent the night at the far end of his lines. In spite of his stiff foreleg the dog trotted bravely off with the light sled, followed by the ridicule of the onlookers. But once the bush hid them from sight, Jim slipped the harness from his dog, and, lashing his tumpline to the sled, threw the headpiece over his wide shoulders and took Bent-leg's place. This was what pride and the love of a crippled dog did to Jim Laird.

One December day found Jim driving his father's dog team down the wind-swept ice of Rapid River, a small tributary to the Little Drowning. On the sled was a heavy load of moose meat Jim was freighting from Lost Lake, back in the hills, but the toboggan slipped easily over the hard river trail. Ahead, sniffing here and there at the fox and rabbit tracks in the alder and birch

thickets of the shore, trotted Bent-leg with his hitchlike gait. Stopping briefly at noon to rest the dogs and boil his tea pail, Laird hurried on, for the post lay but ten miles away, on the main stream, and a steady pace would bring him home before the midafternoon dusk closed in on the valley.

Reaching a stretch of mounded and badly broken ice where the stream, falling rapidly from the divide, had not as yet wholly closed, Laird was forced to cut and break a trail around the rapids. Taking his ax from the sled, he started to clean out the portage through the brush, packing down the snow with his snowshoes to give footing to his dogs. Finishing his work, he returned to the waiting team.

The shores of the stream at the rapids were bold, and on the descent to the river ice, the heavy sled required careful handling. To protect the dogs from injury from a sliding toboggan, Jim leaned back on the tail line, snubbing it on saplings as he eased the heavy load down the slope. At last the team stood at a sharp drop, a few yards from the shore, while Laird held the sled from running over them with a turn of the tail line around the trunk of a small birch.

"*Marche,* Zero!" he called from his stand in the rear of the sled, easing the line as the dogs started.

But the sled did not move.

"*Marche,* you!" he commanded sharply.

The dogs threw themselves into their collars, but the heavy toboggan which should have started down the slope seemed anchored.

"Must be a stub or root under her!" muttered Jim, dropping the line and sliding down to the caught sled. Standing below it, he again urged his dogs forward.

With a lunge, the huskies leaped. The sled suddenly moved and Jim tried to spring aside. But his right shoe held to the snow. It was caught in the web by a cut stub!

Anchored, helpless, where he stood, the desperate youth wheeled and braced himself against the plunging sled. But the four-hundred-pound toboggan shot down, pushed him aside, rode over his trapped shoe and slid out to the ice behind his yelping dogs.

The pain which stabbed his leg above the ankle told the shaking man on the snow the story. Slowly he twisted to a sitting position to examine the injured leg, his heart cold with fear—then the snow slowly went black.

But the keen air soon revived him. He sat up, dazed. At his side whimpered the puzzled Bent-leg. On the ice near him fretted the team.

The situation was desperate.

"Well, Bent-leg," muttered Laird, his face twisted with pain, "we're in for the toughest night of our lives. She's broken—both bones, I guess. How're we goin' to rustle wood and weather it out?"

On his sled were food and blankets. He could get to them, gather small stuff and cook his supper, but how was he to chop sufficient big birch to keep from freezing through the bitter night ahead? He shivered as the keen air cut through his capote. Drawing his knife, he slashed the rawhide loop holding his heel and released the foot from the shoe; then painfully crawled, dragging his broken leg, out to the sled. He would have to keep on downstream to some windbreak where he would not freeze, and could find grounded timber for a fire.

As Jim drew himself over the ice to the sled, the crippled dog leaped around him, yelping in protest at the strange actions of his master, alternately sniffing at the shattered leg and nosing the pinched face, gray with pain.

Drawing himself up on the sled, Laird started the dogs. They had traveled hardly a half mile when, turning a bend,

Jim saw the broken ice and heard the fretting water of a second rapid.

He was blocked! He could not pass!

Like those of the quick-water above, the shores at the second rapid lifted boldly from the stream, and the crippled Laird could neither cut nor break a trail for the sled through the brush and snow. Here, with little shelter from the knifelike thrusts of the wind, and with only birch saplings for a fire, he would have to weather it.

He found a place where the dogs were able to draw the heavy sled a little way up into the light scrub, then, when he had bandaged the compound fracture as best he could with a shirt, he painfully crawled around with his ax and collected some wood, scraped away a fire hole with a shoe, lit a fire, and started his tea and stew pails.

Jim fully realized that his hope of keeping from freezing in his exposed position on the side of a hill depended solely on the amount of wood he could gather. But crawling in two feet of snow, which wrung him with pain at every movement of the smashed leg, kneeling on a shoe while he chopped, then dragging in the wood, was nerve-shattering work. Still he labored on in agony, while the light held, collecting the pitiful store of fuel which might keep his blood moving in the ghastly hours to come. For, as the afternoon waned and the three-o'clock December dusk fell, the cold steadily increased.

Without the repeated stimulation of hot tea, Laird could not have worked on, so greatly did the pain drain his strength. But the love of life was strong in his powerful frame, and slowly he added to the little pile of birch in his fire hole, while the nervous Bent-leg, worried at the strange actions of his master, hovered near him, asking with low whines the cause of this strange crawling on the snow, punctuated by repeated thrusts of a moist nose at Laird's gray, set face.

At last, as the freezing dusk began to smother the little valley, the man ate his moose stew and lay in his blankets by his small fire.

"I haven't enough birch to last the night, Bent-leg," he said to the dog crouched at his side, "but I'm dead beaten out and I couldn't stand the pounding of that leg any longer."

With a whimper, the dog snuggled close to the man.

"You know what a sled can do to a leg, old pup, don't you? You had it worse than this a year ago. Didn't cry much about it either! Just swallowed the pain, game as could be!"

For a space Laird was silent, his mittened hand stroking the head of the dog, whose questioning eyes searched his face.

"Wonder what'll become of Bent-leg, if I don't wake up in the morning? It's easy, you know, to freeze in your sleep. I've got to crawl out and get more wood, some time to-night, or I won't wake up. Suppose you'll get that bullet in the head, now, if Jim snuffs out."

For answer, the dog sprang from the muffled figure in the blankets and, lifting his nose to the stars, waked the night with a wail that was at once taken up by the aroused sled dogs.

With a shudder, the stricken man in his blankets wondered if this were an omen, a portent of what the grim hours would bring, when the cold strengthens before dawn. Then he roughly silenced the dogs.

After a time, his strength seemed to return, and with a dogged will to battle off the freezing death which menaced him, Jim Laird again crawled out with his ax, sliding his snowshoes before him with his hands. As he labored, stopping often to writhe in agony as a movement of the dragged leg ground the broken bones into nerves already raw, Bent-leg whimpered around him, restless, uneasy.

Again Jim Laird lay wrapped in his blankets by his fire; at his side a pile of birch saplings pitifully small to fight the withering cold of the northern night through to sunrise. After a space, the exhaustion from his exertions drugged the pulsing pain in his leg, and he slept. Shortly the dog rose and thrust a black nose at the muffled face under the hood in the blankets. Once, twice, the nostrils sniffed. Then with a low whine, the dog circled the fire, and, sitting down, lifted his nose to test the snapping air.

Again the restless dog circled the fire, then ran down to the river ice. There his head lifted and the keen nostrils dilated as if the bitter air carried strange scents. Returning to the sleeping form by the fire, the dog whined, poking the blankets with his muzzle, but he could not rouse his master.

Then, seeking the river ice, Bent-leg started off in his stiff-legged lope through the starlight, and shortly was lost in the shadows.

"It's a snappin' cold night, Omar!" said John Laird, as he stood in the snow outside his trade house, on his way to his quarters and bed.

"Eet mak' de spruce crack before sunrise. Coldest night dees long snow," replied the head man.

"Don't understand why Jim didn't show up. He can't be campin' far out with that meat."

"We see heem een de mornin'."

"Now that's a cool one!" suddenly said Laird, gazing up the white river. "Look at that fox takin' the river trail right into the post!"

"Ah-hah!" muttered the half-breed, watching the small black shape approaching the post at a lope over the ice. "No—dat no fox."

"What in thunder is it, then?"

For a space Omar's keen eyes watched the small dark shape moving toward them, then he suddenly exclaimed: "By gar! Dat's dat stiff-leg dog of Jim!"

"What!" cried the startled factor. "Jim's dog? Here, at night? What's happened? There's something wrong with the boy! The dog'd never leave him!"

"Ah-hah!" agreed the half-breed. "Somet'ing strange about dis, for sure!"

Nearer came the moving shape on the river trail. As it approached those who watched, the hitch in the gait was unmistakable.

"That's Bent-leg, all right—see the limp? That's Jim's dog! He's tuckered out, too! There he goes—he's down!" cried John Laird, as the dog fell, regained his feet, and continued. "The boy's in trouble and his pet dog deserts him," he added bitterly.

"Ah-hah! He come home for hees supper."

A hundred yards from where the men stood on the river shore, the running dog again faltered, fell, then got to his feet and limped, panting with hanging tongue, up to the man who waited, in his heart a great dread. Reaching Laird, with a whimper the exhausted dog sank to the snow.

"Bent-leg!" said the factor, bending and placing a shaking hand on the black-and-white head. "Where's Jim?"

At the familiar name, the winded dog yelped piteously into the bearded face of John Laird.

"What d'you make of it?" demanded the factor, turning from the spent husky lying at his feet. "He's almost talkin', ain't he?"

Omar nodded. Again Laird repeated his son's name and again the dog manifested great excitement. Then they waited for the weary Bent-leg to regain some of his strength.

"Where did Jim say he got that moose, when he came back for the dog team?" suddenly asked Laird.

"On Lost Lake."

"Then he'd follow the ice of Rapid River or Moccasin Brook to the Drowning."

"Ah-hah; I t'ink de brook."

"He might have broken through——"

But the panting dog on the snow was up and, leaving Laird, ran yelping out to the river ice. Returning, he sprang at the factor, beating him frantically with his forepaws, then again ran out on the river trail in the direction from which he had come.

"Get your pack, some grub, blankets, and tea pail, quick—and wake Joe!" ordered John Laird huskily. "That boy's in trouble, upriver, and this blamed dog's pretty near tellin' us."

Shortly three dark figures, bundled in heavy capotes, swung up the Little Drowning under the freezing stars, for the only sled dogs at the post were with Jim Laird. Leaping ahead of them on his stiff foreleg, Bent-leg led the way. Often, as they traveled, the river ice, contracting under the increasing cold, split with the boom of a distant cannon. And on the timbered shores, spruces snapped like rifle shots.

Six miles above the post, at the mouth of Moccasin Brook, the men turned in from the river trail.

"He tak' dees brook," said Omar, as he cut in, followed by his two companions.

But the dog who had passed the brook mouth and was a hundred yards upstream, stopped them with his furious yelping.

"What's the matter, Bent-leg?" called Laird, interested.

Returning to Laird, the excited dog yelped his protest; then again headed up the main stream.

"He wants us to stick to the river," said the factor doubtfully. "Besides, I don't see his tracks coming out of the brook, here."

"Dat ees fool dog," Omar protested. "Jim tak' dis trail for sure from Lost Lak'. He nevaire travel de Rapeed *Rivière*. De dog would travel cross countree through de bush. He mak' no track here."

"Here, Bent-leg! Come here!" ordered Laird. But the husky deliberately sat down on the trail above them and pointed his nose at the frosted stars in a mournful wail. "Plain as the nose on your face that dog wants us to follow him," mused the troubled man. "Joe, we'll play this safe," he added. "You follow the brook up to the ridge. If you find Jim, fire a shot; if not, cut over to the Rapid River."

Omar was plainly disgusted. "You goin' foller dat fool dog?"

"Right! Come on!"

Two miles above, at the mouth of Rapid River, Bent-leg turned in. "See that? He's cut up the river!" cried Laird to Omar as the shadowy shape of the dog disappeared into the black shadows of the shore.

Inside the stream mouth the dog waited for them; then, when he saw that he was followed, he disappeared ahead.

After an hour of hard walking and snowshoeing up the little valley through the bitter night, the anxious Laird heard the distant yelping of dogs.

"Hear that!" he cried.

"By gar! He fin' dem!" muttered the surprised Omar.

Cold with fear of what the seconds would reveal, John Laird saw ahead the feeble glow of the fire in the brush beside the river, where the aroused team dogs welcomed them noisily.

"Hello, Jim!" he called, his voice rough with emotion.

But to the running men came no answer. Through the brush, Laird recognized the black shape of the loaded sled, near the dying fire.

"Jim, lad!" he sobbed, as he plunged up from the river ice. "Jim!" he gasped at the blanketed shape, which a black-and-white dog was vainly attempting to arouse.

But the man in the blankets did not move.

Kneeling, Laird uncovered the gray face of his son, felt of the cold hands in the mittens, under the blankets; then, frantically opening the capote, listened for a heartbeat.

Lifting his head, his face lighted with hope, he rasped: "Get a fire goin'—quick! He's alive, Omar!"

The ax of the panting half-breed rang as it bit viciously into the frozen birches, while the father of Jim Laird desperately fought for the life of his son. Then, when the roaring birch threw out its life-giving heat, and Laird threw back the blankets to rub the blood into the feet and legs of the unconscious Jim, he gasped in horror.

"Leg smashed! That explains it. Poor old Jim."

Heat, hard rubbing and hot tea drew Jim Laird back from the frontiers of the white death into which he had been fast slipping. His vitality was great, and as the blood again throbbed through his arteries and his eyelids opened in returning consciousness, the rough tongue of the dog at his side touched his cheek.

As the bearded face of his father bent over him, the word the elder Laird heard the lips of his son utter was, "Bent-leg!"

In the morning, as they put Jim on the sled and started for home, he looked up at John Laird and Omar with a wide grin: "Does he get his share of the dog grub now, father?"

There was a look strange to the eyes of John Laird as he rested his mittened hand on the black-and-white head of the dog and answered:

"He's worth more than the whole damned team. *Marche,* you, Zero!"

Other stories by George Marsh will appear in these pages from time to time.

MR. COOLIDGE AND THE HERO

WHEN Andy Payne, winner of the Pyle "bunion derby" from California to New York, entered Washington in a blaze of glory to shake the hand of the president of his country, the newspaper correspondents wondered how much interest he would arouse at the White House. They remembered the time that Jack Kearns took Jack Dempsey to see Mr. Coolidge soon after Firpo had been knocked down more times in fewer minutes than anybody could count.

The president received them as usual, politely but with no show of flaming enthusiasm, nor did he indulge in a flow of small talk and chatter. Ensued a sepulchral silence. Dempsey, not knowing how to start a conversation with a president, began to look embarrassed, whereupon Kearns leaped to the rescue.

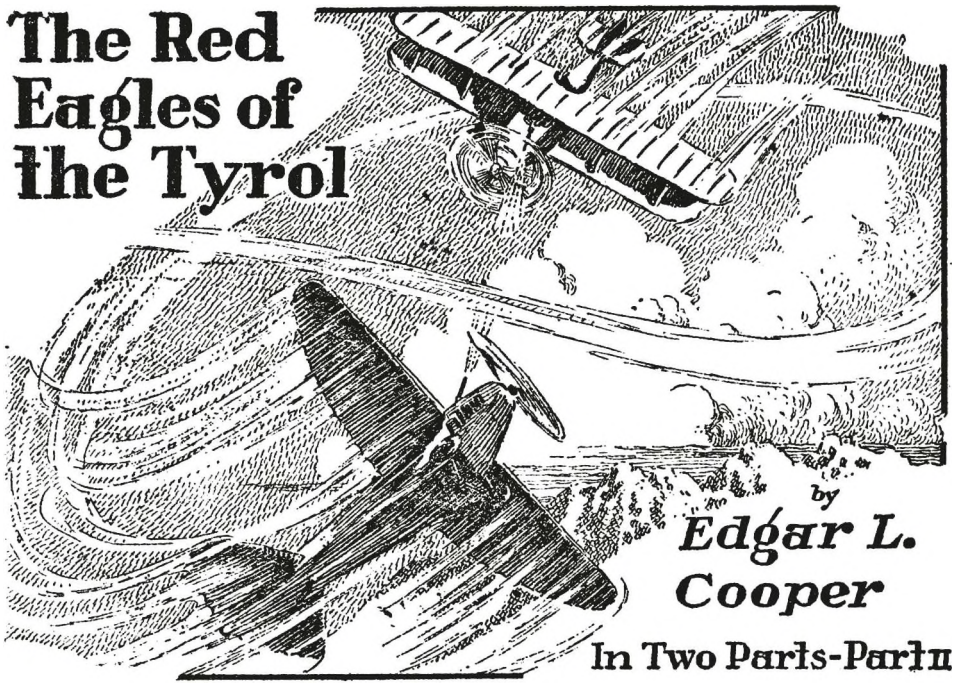
"Show the president your left hook," he advised.

The champion did so, without much change in the chief magistrate's expression. Kearns, still hopeful of stirring things up, took another shot.

"That," he said, "is the punch that knocked Firpo flooey!"

"Is that so?" responded Mr. Coolidge, evincing interest for the first time. "When was that?"

The Red Eagles of the Tyrol



by Edgar L. Cooper

In Two Parts—Part II

While hiking in the Tyrolese Alps, Dirck (Hap) Hazzard, an American, rescued the lovely Baroness Wanda von Trenck. Accidentally, he killed her treacherous chauffeur. Hap became the new chauffeur. The girl's father, the baron, was at the head of an imminent uprising of the Tyroleans, who chafed under the Italian rule. Hap was, then, in two entanglements—the revolution, and his love for Wanda. The Fascist soldiery suspected him of being in league with the "Red Eagles," as the Tyroleans called themselves. His other entanglement—his love—was dangerous, also, for Wanda's fiancé was the insidious Duke Wessenfels. One evening Hap abandoned his rôle of chauffeur and visited a casino. There he danced with Wanda, and, under the spell of the Austrian moon and an old waltz, won a kiss. But, temperamentally, she slapped him. He expected to be discharged, but was not. Then, one day in the mountains, while exploring a cave, he fell into a subterranean stream. Fighting clear of it at last, he groped along passages, and blundered upon the hidden, underground stronghold of the Red Eagles!

CHAPTER XVII.

"STRIKE!"

HE had entered by a passage unknown even to them! They might be aware of that last tunnel, probably were; but beyond that chute he was satisfied no man had ever been before, certain no human had ever traversed those siphons. And he was going to have to use their way out—if he got out. Discovery, in there, would mean quick death. But what the devil was that thing hanging on the wall?

He went up and looked at it. A wonderfully carved wooden shield, bearing the old imperial double eagles of the empire. But instead of black they were red—red with real feathers—and the heads were real, supporting crowns of blue and gold. The coat of arms rampant on their breasts was minutely carved in black and white; their talons

were real and cleverly attached. And below was bitten into the shield:

Zwei Seelen und ein Gedanke!
Zwei Herzen und ein Schlag!

"Two souls and one thought! Two hearts and one beat!" The insignia and motto of the *Rothen Adler,* here in their secret stronghold in the bowels of a mountain! And he, Hap Hazzard, American, had blundered right upon it in his search for the light of day. And, he decided grimly, he'd better get out while the getting was good. Once more he halted to look, though, at a shrine set up in a corner.

A carved crucifix placed in an arch, with a rude slab of rock before it holding two long candles. A moment Hap gazed, then passed on to where the cavern narrowed and turned lighter. An entrance there, surely.

Caution tapped him warningly, the old sixth sense buzzed. He stopped, listened, then crept forward. Passed a tall, arched doorway; turned to his right up a flight of rough stone steps, saw murky daylight filtering down to a slablike landing where other stairs led up from the left. Very warily and noiselessly he stole a look around the edge.

On another platform two mountaineers sat smoking, rifles across their knees, their eyes peering out over the rocky *parado.* The light was dim, the day was almost night. Hap heard a mule whinny, somewhere near. Heard, too, the drip of the rain and the howl of the wind.

One of the men pointed. "The first arrive, Saltner."

The other nodded. "*Ja.* And many will follow soon."

Hap crept back into the cavern, found his way to his steps and mounted. His o. p. was some twenty-five feet above the floor of the grotto, and he would be invisible from anywhere below. He eased down behind his parapet, got as comfortable as possible, and prepared to wait. He couldn't get out now.

For perhaps an hour nothing happened, the place was still. He squirmed around in his damp clothes, cold and muddy, and swore under his breath. It must be dark out by this time, he decided. It had been almost that when he looked and saw the men. If he could smoke it wouldn't be so bad, but his tobacco was wet, his pipe lost, and his watch had stopped, waterlogged. What were those fellows talking about? Somebody coming——

A group of five or six, followed by others. Hap heard their guttural voices, saw their shadowy movements in the grotto. Lights were struck, and touched to huge pine torches lined around the walls, illuminating the blue cavern in an eerie flicker. The two long candles before the Calvary were also lighted, throwing the shrine into golden relief against the dancing shadows. The Red Eagles stood out boldly, starkly, their dyed feathers and painted eyes gleaming. More men came down the passage; others and still more.

The place was fast filling with the brotherhood. Tall, supple mountaineers —bronzed peasantry—alert, commanding persons who swung about with authoritative air. Men in sheepskin coats and feathered hats, men with alpenstocks and fur caps, men in the smoke-green tunic of Austria-Hungary. Old *soldaten.* They milled and talked and conversed in knots and groups, and all the while new arrivals swelled their ranks. Looked like Hap Hazzard had arrived on an important night. Regular meeting, or something. He lay very still, watching. He saw no reason to expect discovery, so long as he kept quiet and well under cover.

Presently a great shout arose; every eye turned toward the entrance and hats came off to wave in the air. Hap, glancing quickly, saw Baron Graff von

Trenck entering the cavern, muffled to the ears in a heavy bearskin coat. And behind him came the Duke of Wessenfels and a priest in cassock and cap. The cheering and uproar continued for many minutes, and the old nobleman touched a thin hand to his fur shako, smiling grimly. The duke smoked a cigarette in a long amber holder and looked around indifferently.

The tumult slowly subsided. The gaunt priest, a big fellow with coal-of-fire eyes and long red beard which mingled with the bristles on his chest, knelt before the shrine. The assembled brotherhood knelt also. And for the space of thirty seconds, a half minute, silence lay over that blue, fantastic grotto, broken only by the words of the padre.

The pine torches sputtered redly, painting the upturned faces in bronze and giving a lifelike effect to those crimson birds of war paneled on the wall. It was a scene from some Dantesque region, ghostly and unreal, and Hap Hazzard felt a nasty prick of gooseflesh creep along his spine.

Proud mountain folk, these. People who, on long winter nights when great wood fires crackled on bare hearths, sat before a zither or carving board and drew melodies or shrined deities, while their *fraus* busied themselves at a spinning wheel. Musical, wine-loving, legend-ridden, those men who knelt on that shimmery, yellow floor in the shadow of the eagles.

The priest arose, turned, spread his arms. Spoke briefly. The assemblage rose, eyes switching to the baron.

And the grim old man of Edelweiss walked direct to the shield on the wall, halted beneath the twin birds, threw off his coat and stood revealed in the uniform of an Austro-Hungarian corps commander, with orders and decorations blazing on his breast. A little rustle ran around the watching men; almost imperceptibly they edged closer.

"Tyrolese!" his voice rang out. "The hour has struck!"

Breaths caught in tight throats all over the grotto, a murmur like the sea heard afar filled the cave, as he paused. They pressed nearer, faces alight, voltage suddenly mounted.

"In this black moment in the life of our country I come to you, free sons of Etschland! An hour when the heels of oppressors grind upon our bone and sinew and heart. We are persecuted in our own homes, our loved ones prisoned, murdered. Our native tongue is made a thing of mockery by them; a travesty; we cannot now read the Book of God in the speech of our fathers and father's fathers before us. Are we to be treated as a lot of contemptible slaves, bow humbly to the yoke of these rascalities?"

The moan of the sea rose, grew stronger, more ominous. Like the slash of combers on rock. The old man of Edelweiss was playing upon their hearts like fingers touching a harp. Expertly, shrewdly, Hap perceived. But the baron's voice was husky with emotion as he continued:

"I speak, comrades of the Eagle, from the depths of my being! I speak, and venture to act, because of my faith and trust in you! I love this land of ours —every stick and stone and bit of earth. I love every mountain and valley, rock and rill of our Motherland. I am ready to die for it—now, this night, to-morrow! Any time, at any place, to free her of this bondage. Liberty! That we cherish, and have cherished, from time immemorial! Liberty! That we are willing to die for, if need be!"

The surf pounded now, roaring and crashing. "Etschland forever!" shouted a voice broken with tears.

A huge fellow garbed in startling costume—leather jacket decorated with boar's teeth and claws, knife and pistol at embroidered belt, a moundlike hat grotesque with colored plumes, tufts of

fur and two foxtails hanging over each ear like monster curls—leaped up and stood beside the old baron, waving his arms wildly.

"Sing, sons of Tyrol!" he bellowed.

The battle chant came in a swelling roar from scores of throats, making bedlam in the cavern. The torches danced, the shadows sprang in crazy patchwork patterns on wall and roof and corner. Dirck Hazzard lay as one frozen, his heart jumping, as they swung into that rousing, crashing chorus:

"Eagle, Tyrolean Eagle,
Why are thy plumes so red?
'My plumage hath been dyed
In blood my foes supplied;
Oft on my breast hath lain
That deeply scarlet stain!'"

"Warriors!" cried the baron, tears trickling down his cheeks. "The crucial second is at hand! The fate of our beloved country—the responsibility, rests upon all. Strike! We march not as dreamers to our goal, but as soldiers engaged in the establishment of our old, former state. Free men, on the tips of your bayonets will gleam honor, liberty and right! Free men, who will enter history so that the world will write on our graves: 'They died, but they were never slaves!'"

"Eagle, Tyrolean Eagle,
Why are thy plumes so red?
'From suns that fiercely shine,
From drafts of Etschland's wine,
From blood my foes have shed—
From these I am so red!'"

"Forward, men of the Tyrol!" The old man's face was a mask of hate and his voice came slowly, like breaking ice. "Many wings will beat down from the crags as the Eagle strikes. From Alpwald to Pfalztadt, down the Oetztaler—the Brenner—Höhe Gaisl, he will swoop, down the valley even as far as Planta hospice, above Schleizdorf."

He hesitated a split second, leaned forward with clenched fist.

"And the hour is"—his voice rang suddenly like the call of a bugle—*"to-morrow night!"*

CHAPTER XVIII.

HALLS OF DESOLATION.

TO-MORROW night! For one fraught, tingling moment, while one could count five, perhaps, deathly stillness gripped the mountaineers. Then pandemonium broke loose, swelled into an unleashed tempest. Men danced, and wept, and shouted; hugged each other and raised their right hands in awful oaths. Hap Hazzard caught a glimpse of Wessenfels in that frenzied mob, his long coat thrown back, his sleepy eyes wide and flashing, a Luger strapped at his waist. Saw for an instant the contorted face of Franz Fieseler, his fists doubled and flung high.

The Baron Trenck stood silent, in his hands a bundle of envelopes. Several trig aids were near by, also holding letters. Men were disengaging themselves from that milling, martial muster in the cavern and reporting to him with snappy salutes. To these he handed a *communiqué*, shook their hands, jerked his own up in return. *"Glück auf, kommandant!"* he said. And they stood very straight and saluted again.

Kaleidoscopic, the scene. Hap pressed his face closer to the crevice, swore under his breath. This was no ordinary gathering of the clan—it was a rendezvous of their leaders, and they were ready to strike. No more sniping at isolated patrols or sudden forays for them; they were out for blood this time—ready to spill every bean in the mess kit.

The head *lammergeier* was giving his minions their battle orders, and the Red Eagle would swoop down from the Alps. The tip of its right wing on *Schloss Edelweiss* and Comarolo, its left at Santa Caterina (where they had left Colonel Scharfenstein), and its

spread talons clawing down the valleys past Fontanella, Cardano, Ebenferner to pinch together at the little hospice of Planta in the pass above Schleizdorf (now called Falzarego).

The plan was good. It would bottle up that segment of the Etschland between the Brenner and Höhe Gaisl—a long, narrowing, V-shaped strip containing a half dozen towns of considerable size, three military roads and a railway. The lower neck of the V could be held at Planta against a vastly superior force, for the pass was very high and narrow. And when the enemy rushed troops to the involved sector, the second phase of the push would be launched, viz., all in and around Botzen —Meran—Brixen, to the south. Yes, it was good.

But Dirck Hazzard didn't learn what was to be H hour on the following night. It was in those sealed orders given out by the iron-faced old warrior of Edelweiss.

A bustle of activity followed the demonstration. The oaken door at the foot of the honeycomb stairs was unlocked, and a file of grunting men came out carrying boxes, crates, sacks. Rifles, grenades, ammunition; machine guns, bayonets, machetelike trench knives. These were loaded onto waiting mules and donkeys tethered outside, Hap gathered from chance remarks. Most of the munitions had already been removed and secreted, he also learned. Some one had been doing some lively gun running in these parts—the insurrectos were going to be well armed.

Slowly the gathering dispersed, the pine torches were extinguished, the guttering candles burned out. Blue silence hung over the grotto, save now and then furtive whisperings and soft gutturals. Some remained, down there. And Hap twisted restlessly, swore and wondered.

The night seemed endless. He crawled back through the slit of rock into the tunnel, and tried to sleep. Time ceased to be measured by the tick of a watch—it became as personal as his own heartbeats. What could he do? Not a damned thing. He would still have to ride down the swifting stream, with shipped oars, and watch the white rapids looming dead ahead. This thing was on the knees of the gods, and all he could do was to stand by the girl in the pinch.

Right now he would gladly have traded the contents of his money belt for a drink and a smoke and some hot food. His head ached dully, there was a growing stiffness in his left leg. The immersion in that icy siphon hadn't done the old muscle any good. Finally he dozed off, with questions still passing through his mind, converted into weird dreams by his subconsciousness. He slept fitfully, waking often.

Morning dawned with wet, slippery earth and threatening skies; the cave was quite deserted. Hap made his way outside, up the steps past a curiously split boulder at the entrance—a divided rock with a huge, scraggy pine growing in the fissure. He crept cautiously down a narrow goat track hugging the rim of a gorge, into a deeply cleft valley. Glancing back, he could see no sign of the cavern's mouth. It was an inaccessible, hidden aerie to any one not familiar with its location.

He had trouble orientating himself, for the mists and clouds hung low and heavy, and a cold, raw wind whistled over the mountains. Twice he was stopped—by tall, lynx-eyed men in fleece coats with rifles across their arms, who demanded his business. His answer, that he was the chauffeur of her excellency the baroness, lost overnight in the storm and just out of a small, shelved refuge far down the valley, seemed to satisfy them, and they directed him to the *schloss*.

But it was midafternoon before he saw the valley and village of Comarolo

and Castle Edelweiss on its crag. And little flurries of snow were falling out of a gray, windy sky.

He hurried on, taking short cuts to avoid the hamlet. But as he came to the highway he pulled up, futility and a presentiment of catastrophe slipping onto his shoulders. For down that road came a convoy of camions from the direction of Schleizdorf, some twenty or thirty of them, accompanied by motor cycles and staff cars. Hap crossed over, stopped and watched them rumble up.

One of the army cars halted with a crunch of brakes, and a captain of *arditi* stepped jauntily out, came straight over to the American.

"Who are you?" he asked shortly.

"A *touristo*," Hap replied. "Staying at a *schloss* near by."

"*Americano?*"

Hap nodded; showed his passport, now wrinkled and damp from its wetting. The officer shrugged, handed it back.

"If you speak truly I advise you to stay there for some hours, signore. There will be troop maneuvers—it would be most unfortunate if a *touristo* should be accidentally shot!"

He flicked his hand, smiled without humor, and hopped back in his car. Hap watched it zoom away toward Alpwald; watched, too, until the last grating lorry rolled past with its load of soldiery. Trucks which flew a piratical flag—a white death's-head and crossed bones on a sable field.

Implacable, relentless shock troops, knife-and-grenade fighters, always to the fore when heavy work was in the offing. Military maneuvers, hell! The *arditi* knew that *putsch* was coming off, to-night, and they were fixing to jerk the noose tight. Those misguided Eagles! There was a leakage somewhere.

Dirck Hazzard turned and ran as fast as he could toward *Schloss Edelweiss.*

Where the devil was everybody? He stood before the fireplace in the great hall, and there was silence in the castle, except for the popping of the birch log. The mottled cat slept by the hearth, now and then stretching herself languidly. An old servitor told him that his excellency the baron, the Duke of Wessenfels, Franz the chauffeur, her highness—all had departed. Only a few aged retainers remained. And in the gray, firelit silence the ancient's face was white with apprehension.

Both cars were gone, the truck also. And the hour was four in the afternoon—a bit later, ten minutes, maybe. Hap Hazzard changed clothes, slung the revolver under his armpit, downed a fiery dram of *schnapps* and smoked countless cigarettes. What had happened since he left the castle yesterday? How, where, could he warn Von Trenck that the plans of the *Adlers* were known to the authorities?

Time was fleeting—every minute ticked on relentlessly to a terrible finale; he shut his eyes against the picture of it. But what to do? Purposeless action would accomplish nothing. He could question no one. Hell, no! From six persons he would hear six different tales—and none of them would be the truth. And down in the village a battalion of *arditi* swarmed the *gasthaus,* overran the streets and waited, their eyes polished with expectancy.

A car whined into the court, braked up; he sprang to the entrance. Wanda von Trenck was alighting, alone!

CHAPTER XIX.

"——FOR MURDER AND CONSPIRACY."

THEY faced each other in the hall, under the age-blackened beams and the cold, painted stares of her ancestors. And he saw that she was agitated, though her voice was cool and impersonal when she spoke.

"So. You have returned, then? Did you have the nice walk?"

Hap gestured impatiently, quickly, his face grim.

"I had a most enlightening one," he replied. "There is no time to bandy words, your highness. Action is imperative, and at once. The Red Eagle flies to-night."

For a split second she stood like one petrified, the slow widening of her eyes the only sign that she heard. They dilated, then swiftly narrowed, and something glacial and hard as ice froze in their blue.

"So," she said deliberately, contemptuously, "so, after all, *Amerikaner,* you have been spying!"

The words cut like a cat-o'-nine, and Hap retorted coldly:

"What I know I learned through chance, and by the slimmest chance, at that! But no matter, now. To save your father we must act at once. Do you know where he is?"

Her gaze stabbed him like a poniard.

"And suppose I do, Yanqui? Do you think I will tell *you?* So you can go with more information to your masters?"

The taunt, the venom in her words brought him up blazing. He strode angrily to her, grasped her wrist none too gently.

"Listen!" he commanded shortly. "Believe what you will of me, no import. If you know where the baron is, and don't trust me, you had better get word to him that his plans are known —that even now the village is full of *arditi* waiting for his *putsch.* And if you don't know the *arditi*—well, I do!"

She jerked free of his hand, but she was suddenly white to the lips. She knew, too; very well she knew.

"Listen again, and I will tell you what I learned," he went on rapidly. He sketched the happenings of the past twenty-four hours, and as he talked he saw desperation deepen in her eyes, her slender figure grow tense as a fiddle string.

"That's the layout," he finished briskly, "and now the play is up to us, milady."

"Yes," she whispered through stiff lips. "Yes. Forgive me, my friend, I made a grave mistake. But"—she threw up her arms, turned quickly away—"I am so alone, alone! There was no one I could go to for help—I stood alone against them all. It is madness—sheer, utter folly! Madness that can have but one end. And now it is late. Too late I fear, Hap Haz-zard!"

Fine girl. She knew the inevitable result of those plans, was long headed enough to see the finish. Loved, and sympathized with her father in his madcap scheme, loved her country as she hated the conquerors, but this uprising meant ruin and the lives of brave, misguided men.

She looked out the window into the darkening day with its snow squalls and fine drizzle; winked away the hot tears that burned her eyes. Could they find her father? Was he where she had reason to believe he would be?

Loud voices at the outer entrance brought both about sharply, glances questioning. Footsteps rang on the flagging, came down the corridor. The door was flung open, and a young lieutenant of the *arditi* stood framed in the portal, two uniformed carabineers behind him. Hap noted that they were the same pair who had talked to him in the Café of the Pelican.

"Signorina and signore," he said suavely, "his excellency the general, Luigi Mareselli, desires the pleasure of your better acquaintance. You will accompany me to Comarolo, and at once, *per piacere.*"

Hap looked at the fellow. The baroness had stiffened, flung up her head haughtily. The officer stared at her with a devil in his black eyes, a smile on his lips. The two gendarmes stood waiting, their glances alert.

"You mean we are under arrest?"

Dirck Hazzard asked very thoughtfully. Resistance was out of the question; from the corner of his eye he had noticed soldiers outside.

The *tenente* shrugged indifferently.

"If you prefer the word, *signor il chauffeur*. If the lady will be so obliging as to get her coat there——" He pointed to a chair, left the rest unfinished. The *carabinieri* entered the room.

Hap picked up the fur coat, held it open. She slipped into its folds, looked enigmatically at him a second. He turned to the officer.

"Is it permitted for me to get my own coat? One of your men, here, can accompany me."

The *tenente* bowed.

"Of a certainty. The lady will wait here until you return. Go with him, Lippi."

The officer who had examined his passport went. While Hap got into his heavy trench coat the man said softly: "Your employment ceased sooner than I anticipated, *Americano*. But perhaps you will find other very queeck not so pleasant."

"Meaning?" asked Dirck casually.

The gendarme raised a shoulder, gestured airily.

"That," he replied, "will be made clear by the general of division and the magistrate. Are you ready?"

They went back down the stairs to the hall, walked outside and entered the car that waited. Wanda von Trenck stopped and ran her hand across the arched-backed tiger cat on the hearth, just before she left. "Good-by, Raca," she said softly. It was her sole word of parting.

As the machine whirred down the drive and toward the valley, she looked at the leaden sky.

"We will have snow, much snow, before dusk," she said absently. Hap turned to speak, but the carabineer cut in:

"Talk in Italian or keep silent!"

The rest of the trip passed that way. And they got out before the old *rathhaus,* now *palazzo municipiale;* were ushered into a rear room and stood before a graying, jet-eyed man who looked at them inscrutably. He laid down his cigarette, motioned the officers out, waved the head carabineer to a place near the door.

"Your names?" he said crisply. They told him in turn, standing before his desk.

"Yes," he said. "You, my lady, are under arrest for conspiracy; you, *Americano,* for the murder of one Giorgio Bendenelli. I have time to listen to anything either of you care to say."

Not by the twitch of a muscle did Dirck Hazzard betray the chaos of thoughts that came tumbling through his brain. So that limb-choked grotto had given up its secret, at last! But how—how did they connect him with it? How, why, what? He wisely said nothing, neither affirming nor denying; the baroness also was silent, a little move of her shoulders the only sign that she heard.

"Very well," said the general. "You may be seated, over there, signorina. As for you——" His eyes swept back to Hap.

"Just a moment, signore," put in the American. "You have accused me of a crime, and a very serious one. I ask your proof before I am incarcerated. That is but fair."

The officer studied him a moment.

"The corpse of the former chauffeur of her ladyship was found this morning at the place you hid it some days past," he replied. "Also, that day past, you traveled across the frontier at *Il Croce Pass* using the passport and *triptyque* of that man, and you drove the car of the baroness. Furthermore, you were wearing his uniform. Do you wish to know more?"

"Yes," said Dirck Hazzard. And he was steel eyed, grim jawed.

"*Bueno.* You struck this man Bendenelli across the head on a mountain road, killed him, rifled his pockets and stole his personal effects before doing away with his body. It is a clear case; we have witnesses who saw all. And there is a penalty in this province for acts like yours. It was the deed of a *condittori,* a brigand. You will be tried as such."

Treachery, clicked Hap's brain. Some one had betrayed him. Some one who knew. Franz? Not likely. The baron and Wanda von Trenck were out. So was old Agö von Wolfram. Who else then, but Wessenfels? The baroness had told the duke, and he had turned Hap over to the Italians. Suspicion became a certainty.

He looked the general full in the eyes.

"Your charge is not true, signore," he said quietly. "If people have told you these things, they lied. I am not guilty of murder, and I have been delivered into your hands, on a trumped-up indictment, in the hope that I will stand before a firing squad or swing from a scaffold. It is a cheap trick, a poor sort of revenge, that stoops to the underhand when one has not the nerve to face an antagonist squarely."

The general's eyes narrowed as he probed the hard face before him. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"That some one, and I have a reason to believe I know who, informed you, and your officers, of the false statements you have just made to me. You are older than I, my general—wiser in the intrigues of life. Think a moment before you refuse to answer my question. Suppose you stood in my shoes and with a stiletto thrust in your back, given in the dark from behind. Was not your information supplied by an anonymous, unsigned letter?"

Clever, that guess. There was a silence as the officer toyed with a pencil on his desk. Dirck Hazzard heard the girl catch her breath—the general looked sharply at her, then back at Hap. Comprehension lit up behind his cold eyes.

He nodded almost imperceptibly. "It is very irregular, *Americano,* but I am a just man." He pulled open a drawer, took out a portfolio, selected a paper, and after a second handed it to Hap.

"That arrived at the *palazzo* yesterday afternoon," he said grimly, "by messenger. Unfortunately, he was not detained before the contents were made known; later he could not be found."

Hap scanned the scrawl swiftly, handed it back. It contained just what the officer had told him. Unsigned. He had not heard the soft step behind him, but now he looked around into the eyes of the baroness. She, too, had read, and recognized the handwriting.

"Do you know who wrote this?" asked the general.

"I can guess," said Hap, the words like a knife edge.

Wanda von Trenck spoke quietly:

"I know. It was one named the Duke of Wessenfels."

"You do?" shot the officer. "And how?"

"No matter," she retorted. "I know."

"Where is he now?" he rasped. She shook her head.

"That I don't know, *excellenz.*"

"Probably meaning you won't tell," the officer grunted. "No matter, now. It means this man's life, without doubt. And you, young lady, will be held as a material witness—in addition to facing a charge of conspiracy. This village is under martial law at present. Carabineer!" He motioned the statue-like gendarme. "Take them away and put them in confinement for the time being. Guard them closely. I have other matters more pressing to attend to. To-morrow they go to Meran and the *Castello.*"

CHAPTER XX.

DESPERATE CHANCES.

HAP laughed shortly as he turned away. The duke had framed a neat disposal of him. Saved himself the trouble. Bribed witnesses would not be hard to secure; Hap's record on file in Meran was bad. The gendarme swiftly ran his hands across Hap's hips, searching for a weapon, then jerked a thumb toward the door. "March!" he commanded brusquely.

He had not found the automatic strapped beneath that armpit.

Side by side they walked out, Wanda von Trenck and her chauffeur, across a narrow side street, down to a small hut behind the *rathhaus*. The officer who had come to Castle Edelweiss for them twisted his Chaplin mustache and smiled at a companion.

"So like a magazine cover!" he murmured. "So very beautiful!"

The carabineer unlocked a heavy door, motioned the pair inside. Wanda von Trenck stepped through the narrow portal without a glance at him; Hap Hazzard hesitated a half second, then followed. His eyes had picked up the dots of two planes winging from the south. Air police, likely.

Another smaller room was in back of the one they entered; and after locking the front door, the officer threw open the second giving onto the rear, and bowed them in again. The lock clicked; they heard him draw out a chair and sit down, strike a match. There were no chairs in the second room.

Nor anything else, much. One small, barred window, head high. A raffle of telephone wires in a corner, a coil of stout hemp twine, a pair of pliers on a little shelf. A few odds and ends strewn about; an arctic atmosphere. The girl and Hap Hazzard looked at each other.

"I'm sorry," she said at last.

"No fault of yours, milady," he replied tersely. "And there's nothing so useless as regrets. We had better not talk much; that chap outside probably listens."

He did not mention the Wessenfels phase, but as he stood at the slitlike window, looking out at the approaching planes, he would have given ten years of his life to come to grips with the informer. Likely as not, too, he had told of the *putsch;* perhaps he was even paid for his information. Some one had let the cat out of the bag, that was certain.

Get the old brain to functioning, buddy! You've been in as close places as this, several times. And you've got a gat under your shirt, fully loaded. Some time soon it's going to be dark and—— He peered out of his window. The swashbuckling *arditi*, with knives at their belts and chips on their shoulders, were swarming over the village, drinking wine and singing "Giovanezza," their battle song. They had adopted it as their anthem now. But other troops were arriving in lorries—*bersaglieri* with black cock plumes sweeping from their platelike hats; they were singing, too. Roaring out the words of "Piave." Their bayonets glistened in the mist as they rode on through, bound for the frontier.

This was going to be a battle proper! These crack units were like hounds about to be loosed upon the chase. Surely somebody, some one, would see, understand, and get word to those laired mountaineers! The dice of the gods had fallen crooked for him this time, no mistake. But then they were always loaded, as he well had reason to know. Locked up as a felon, and his neck at stake. The odds were all bad.

Absently he watched the planes swoop down and land in an open field not far from the hut; saw three men alight. One ship was a single seater, a scout —the other a two-seated monoplane.

He eyed the three fur-coated and helmeted figures walking toward the village, then stared suddenly and hard, his fingers gripping the cold bars of the window.

By Heaven! It was he! He could not be mistaken, despite the haze of years and distance between! It was Gian Cortese.

Hap's mind flicked back nine summers, 1918, and a war going on. The *Altipiano di Asiago,* and Arronzio's escadrille, and Gian Cortese, mercurial young *pilote,* one of its aces. He, Hap Hazzard, attached as a combat flyer. An afternoon above *Col di Rosso,* a dog fight in the clouds. A devil's chase in mad swoops, nose for tail and around and around, hearts straining with their motors, exhaust vapor searing cheeks and hot oil streaming down over goggles and faces. Stunting ships with jagged streaks of flame spitting over the motor cowling—ships tumbling like hit birds—ships flaming earthward like falling meteors.

And he had shot down an *aviatak* hard on Cortese's tail, saved the young Italian's skin. He had never forgotten—that dare-devil young firebrand. Now, nine years later, had he?

Hap's mind worked like a cold machine those seconds as he watched and made identity positive. The trio had halted to talk to another officer, very near the hut; they would have to pass by the entrance on their way to the one street of the hamlet. He turned to the silent, sultry-eyed baroness, placed a finger on his lips, stepped lightly over to her. And what she saw in his eyes made her own grow very dark.

"Crouch in a heap in that corner," he whispered, "hide your face and make noises as if in pain. I have a plan—perhaps it may work. We can but try. But hurry."

She said nothing, but did as he ordered. Huddled down, and made a little whimpery, frightened noise. The carabineer, who had been whistling "Ragazza di Trieste" between his teeth, ceased abruptly. Again she moaned, louder this time.

Hap rapped sharply upon the door.

"Ufficiale!" he called. "Come here quickly! The lady has stabbed herself with some scissors!"

The chair legs hit the floor with a thud, and the next moment a key grated in the lock. Hap, the pistol thrust inside his waistband, was bending over her, a handkerchief in his hand. He did not look around as the officer came rapidly to them. "Stand aside!" growled the man.

Hap Hazzard stepped one pace back, flicked a glance at the closed door, another at the stooping gendarme, pistol in hand. And as the carabineer reached out with his free hand to pull back the fur coat hiding the girl's face, Hap flashed his own hand to his belt and swung. Hit straight for the side of the fellow's head, above his ear.

He suspected, but too late. The blow cracked like a cleaver mauling a side of beef. And the carabineer went down like a poleaxed steer, all in a heap; nor did he even grunt. Hap yanked him away from the prostrate girl, pulled her to her feet in a jiffy.

"Guess he'll pick daisies for a while," he said grimly. "Quick, now!"

He frisked off the man's overcoat, pocketed his gun, nimble fingers searching for the keys. Found them in a side pocket of his tunic. Grabbed a length of telephone wire and quickly bound his wrists behind his back, his ankles together, and connected both with another strand. Gagged him with a spool and handkerchief. If he came to and tried any funny kicking it would be with very unpleasant results to himself. That finished, he surveyed his job with satisfaction.

He pitched the overcoat to the watching girl, had a quick look into the other room, then shut the door behind them.

The last lock opened under the guard's key, and he stepped carelessly outside, flinging a swift glance up and down the side street.

Wanda von Trenck waited just inside, her blue eyes alight and her breath uneven. She was a thoroughbred. A wave of admiration tingled over Dirck Hazzard as he looked at her, a picture of fierce young beauty, very calmly red-penciling her lips and rubbing down her cheeks, her keen little nose, with a pink powder puff. Peering intently into the tiny mirror of her vanity, a small felt hat set rakishly on the back of her head and her tawny hair shimmering. Perfectly cool and collected, following his lead without question, brave and clever as she was beautiful.

And the blood hammered in his temples as he turned away, his mind functioning icy clear. "Steady, old son!" he muttered to himself. "Got a fighting chance now—don't mess it up!"

The group of officers, who had been conversing when he left the window, had dispersed; Gian Cortese and a companion had already walked by the door and were a short way up the street. Hap gave a halloo.

"Cortese!" he called. "Gian, *amico mio!* To me!"

CHAPTER XXI.

IN EXACTLY FIVE MINUTES——

THE pair stopped, looked back. Hap waved a hand, motioned the flyer to return to the hut. He said something to his comrade, shrugged and started back. The other one kept on.

Hap threw a swift look all about. The strolling or idling *soldati* paid scant attention to him; probably they did not know that the place was the local hoosegow. The Italian approached, stared closely and sharply at the American, then recognition leaped into his eyes. Recognition, and a great, joyful surprise.

"Captain Hazzard!" he cried. "What, in the name of the Twelve Saints, are you doing here?" They shook hands hard, a man's grip, eyes laughing into each others. "Tell me, Hap Hazzard!" finished Cortese.

"Trying to get away," said Hap truthfully. "How about you?"

"Hunting," smiled Cortese. "Hunting eagles." They bridged in a moment the span of years which lay between, thinking back of the days of war. The Italian slapped him on the shoulder.

"I'm damned glad to see you again!" he exclaimed for the third time. "This reunion should be fittingly baptized in the cup that cheers. Not so?" Hap looked at him a minute. Slender and graceful still, and handsome as a cinema hero, with two reckless devils lurking in his black eyes and a ready smile on his lips. Many the old adventure they had known together. "Come on, man!" said Cortese impatiently. "I've got to hop it presently; go on patrol—curse the luck! I'm in the air police now, so watch your step, *soldato!* Meanwhile, we have time for a flock of drinks. What are we waiting for?"

Hap swore softly, a bit regretfully.

"No can do, *amico.*" Then, abruptly: "Come inside here a minute. Cortese."

Something in his voice made the Italian look at him closely, raise his brows. But he followed him in the room, and Hap kicked the door shut. Cortese stared wonderingly, first at the baroness, then at Hazzard, then placed his hands on his hips and smiled quizzically; nodded. Hap presented him to the girl, and he grinned at Wanda von Trenck. She nodded almost imperceptibly—he saluted a trifle ironically and knowingly.

"May one congratulate you on most excellent taste, signore?" he remarked to Hap. The baroness flushed, turned away, biting her lip to keep back the surge of anger that leaped to her teeth.

Hap's eyes were gray with green flickers.

"Don't be a fool!" he said shortly. "And attend you!" He stepped close to the aviator, his face suddenly hard as granite. "We are under arrest, the lady and myself, and facing very serious charges. My neck is at stake for a murder I did not commit, as I killed a crook in self-defense. The baroness is charged with treason and conspiracy, and equally guiltless of both. To-morrow we go to Meran, and then bastile. *Capisce?*"

Cortese's face had gone grave swiftly, his eyes were very puzzled.

"Under arrest!" he echoed. He looked at the open door, around the room, then back at Hap. "I don't understand."

Hap held up the key, walked over and threw open the inner door, pointed to the bound, gagged and unconscious carabineer. Cortese stared hard. "I begin to see," he remarked casually.

"Yes," said Hap Hazzard. "I did not give him the choice I am going to put up to you, Gian. And you will have to decide, and that quickly. For I do not intend to remain here."

Cortese slowly lighted a long cigarette. "Carry on."

"Just this. Your word of honor that you will remain here five minutes after I leave that door, and give no alarm. That you will stay a prisoner for that time, and communicate with no one. Time up, you can do as you please."

The Italian trickled smoke from his nostrils, ashed his fag. His black eyes were suddenly hooded, inscrutable.

"And suppose I don't give that word, Hap Hazzard?" he asked softly.

Hap smiled thinly. "Then the gendarme Lippi will have a companion. I'm man enough to put you in there with him, Cortese, and I will. The choice is right up to you."

Silence a moment. "I could but call, and men would come running," said the Italian, looking Hap in the eye. "If you use a pistol—which I presume you have—it would be your finish as well as mine. A struggle would bring the curious to investigate. So, you see!"

Hap did not reply. And after half a minute: "The ice is thin, the water deep and black beneath, *amico*. If I go west I'm going fighting, Gian. And Time is not waiting."

Their eyes locked, battled; like a duel between two evenly skilled fencers, handling evenly tempered blades. The blare of *arditi* bugles came into that silent room—a snatch of the rousing chorus of "Giovanezza." The baroness stood tight lipped, silent, her eyes on the dueling men. Tartar staring at Tartar. Falcon staring at falcon.

Gian Cortese snapped away his cigarette, glanced at his wrist watch.

"I have not forgotten the *Altipiano di Asiago,*" he said quietly. "But we are quits now, *Americano*—the slate is clean. Five minutes, not a second more. And I make no promises after that last tick, understand? On guard, you!"

He slipped out of his flying coat like an eel, ripped off his helmet, tossed both to Dirck Hazzard. Lit another cigarette as the American slid into them and wrapped the carabineer's overcoat around the baroness. Their eyes met again in farewell.

"Come and get me, Gian Cortese," Hap said, touching two fingers to his forehead, "in exactly five minutes."

The Italian's eyes flamed; he suddenly thrust out his hand, gripped Hap's hard.

"If you get off the ground, *capitano mio!*" he said, very softly. *"Si! Buona fortuna*—and may the devil take the hindmost!" He looked at his watch. "Time!"

Dirck Hazzard gently closed the door, swept the street with roving glance; then he and the baroness walked swiftly down the road toward the field

behind. They would have to be quick, for every second was fraught with the peril of discovery. It would be touch and go, at best. He thanked his lucky star that most of the troopers were on the main street. "Count your beads, milady," he whispered to his companion. She glanced at him sidewise, but said nothing.

The fringe of the village—the open field before them. A snow-powdered pasture and two planes. A gawkish-looking youth leaned against the back door of a hovel, staring at the machines with curious eyes; three or four soldiers were across the road in easy rifle shot of the busses, grouped under a larch shed, playing cards. Hap's fingers pinched the girl's arm.

"Tell that boy to walk along with us, a few paces behind," he said. "Tell him when we get in the ship to suck that prop, then spin it and jump backward. Understand what I mean?"

She nodded. "My brother was an *aviatak;* I know." She spoke low-voiced to the youth, who gaped a moment, then bobbed his head in comprehension. Again she repeated the instructions; he grinned vacantly and slouched after them.

Every second, on that seemingly endless walk to the planes, he expected to hear a shout or a shot, yet every studiously unhurried step brought them closer. The soldiers were evidently absorbed in their straw-jacketed flask of wine and their noisy game; no doubt the flying coat of Cortese and the helmet made a fair disguise. Perhaps they thought, if they did give them thought, that *"signor il ucello"* of the air police was about to show his signorina the machine or maybe take her for a spin. Anyhow, Hap Hazzard and the girl wearing a carabineer's coat reached the first ship, the one-seater; passed around its sleek, red tail to the larger monoplane parked beyond.

Dirck came to life then. Quickly he picked up Wanda von Trenck in his arms and placed her in the rear cockpit, snapping the buckle of the safety belt about her as he did so. He jumped into the pilot's tight-fitting seat, with a swift glance at the instrument board. Throttle and controls were familiar—once in the air he would have little trouble handling the plane. A pretty little bus, this; she would not require much of a ground run.

"Keep low in your seat and hang on," he flung over his shoulder at the baroness. Then, to the waiting boy: "Twist the prop! Up till it sucks—then swing down *hard*—and jump!"

The youth did as told, and the ship, gunned for the take-off and the motor still warm, roared into life first try. Hap in a twinkling had jockeyed it clear of the rock blocks that barely held the wheels, and taxied straight across the field with wide-open throttle. The Italian soldiers sprang up as two men in uniform raced toward the speeding plane—sprang up and grabbed for their rifles. Others were pouring out of the village fast, shouting and pointing.

Hap laughed recklessly as a bullet *whanged* into the fuselage. Another hit a strut and pinged off, baffled. The tail lifted and the wheels left the ground. How that little thoroughbred climbed! He hedge-hopped a woodshed and a clump of trees, circled, and began going toward the "ceiling." The earth dropped away as the nose of the plane pointed toward the gray sky.

CHAPTER XXII.

WINGED GLADIATORS!

FIGURES were boiling like ants in the town and on the field. Excited, gesticulating figures. He had New Yorked 'em that time, by the grace of Heaven and a lucky break! Cortese would be after him like a hawk, once his time was up, and that Macchi monoplane of his was faster than this two-

seater. Hap looked grimly at the *mitrailatrice* mounted upon the fuselage and synchronized to fire through the prop, tripped it briefly and nodded approvingly when the gun spat fire. It would do. The baroness would be a handicap, but that couldn't be helped; if the Italian tackled him he would fight it out and to hell with the odds! He looked back.

Wanda von Trenck waved a hand at him, smiled with a flash of white teeth, her eyes sparkling and her cheeks flying red banners. Lord, what a girl! Did nothing faze her? He was going to win through on this deal, someway, somehow—he couldn't come a cropper, now. Hap wiped the goggles he had taken from Cortese with the silk stocking attached to the top of the helmet, grinned at the typical Cortese *geste,* and glanced at the altimeter. Eighty-five hundred and still climbing.

He leveled the ship to an even keel, cautiously felt out all controls. She handled fast, but perfectly; he headed her north toward the Austrian frontier. He failed to see the red Macchi wasp leave the ground and start climbing in short circles; he was too busy slapping his hands together and stamping his feet against the flooring of the cockpit. The cold cut like a knife. But it was the old life, this flying!

Aye. The life of a war bird, sporting and deadly, each day a vivid cinema unreeled to the chant of the singing wires. A life of combat, of tournament in the blue, with the morning young and the wind strong in your face; combat in which the tiniest error wrote *finee* in the book. Death with a viking's funeral in a flaming ship—life with steady eyes peering through ring sights of machine guns and iron hands tripping triggers that spewed "the dark." It had been a long time since he had flown, and the old, wild thrill of it came beating into his blood as the *Kestrel* droned along without a skip and soared upward and onward like a dragon fly under his experienced hand. Riding the sky!

The peaks and valleys and gorges spread below in a vast, billowy pattern, obscure and misty in the flurrying snow. Yonder were the towers of the Wildspitze, in whose shadow he had met the girl who was now sitting behind him—ages ago, it seemed. There was the snaky skein of road crawling down to Plattkofel, then on up the Pass of the Cross over to Waidbrück. Farther to his right stretched that wild terrain of a chamois preserve, where almost he had lost his life in a subterranean river and then found the redly lit cavern of the *Adlers.* Lord! This cold was awful—the mercury in the thermometer must be right down in the basement, his hands, face and feet were losing all feeling——

His passenger tapped him on the shoulder, and pointed a finger down over the fuselage. He looked, and stiffened in his seat. Half a mile behind, and a good bit above him, a red ship was coming at terrific speed, circling and climbing dizzily to a vantage point. Gian Cortese! Damn! Almost caught him napping! He hadn't figured that Macchi with anything like the flying speed it was capable of—it was chain lightning!

Dirck Hazzard's face set in the old battle mask as he held his bus steady, reached back and showed the baroness how to slip on the chute. He stood up, adjusted his own "umbrella" and signaled the girl to keep as far below the lip of the cowling as possible. Then he busied himself with the controls, for the red wasp was upon them.

Cortese banked sharply, and for an instant the nacelle of his ship lifted into high relief. For a moment he held it so, propeller idling, looking down at the American. Suddenly he flung up his right hand, palm outward, in the Roman salute—Hap Hazzard answered it in kind. The salute of gladiators! And

Hap finished with an oath that was half a prayer as the wasp wheeled far over and dived to the attack, its motor roaring and streaks of flame shooting from red-hot exhaust.

A wing of the *Kestrel* went down and the two-seater met the rush halfway.

It was a battle of experts, of veteran combat pilots, that duel in the sky. Round and round in ever-narrowing spirals, jockeying for position, the superior speed and climb of the Macchi counterbalanced by the wariness of the *Kestrel.* Down in dizzy dives and tight spins; up in breath-taking vertical zooms; bank and roll and sideslip with wires screaming and hot oil spraying back into the cockpits. Both ever losing altitude and dropping closer to the snowy peaks below.

The red wasp shot its nose straight for the ceiling, lost speed swiftly and tailed down in a whipstall, then like a rattlesnake snapped out of it—and the cowling behind the prop flamed red. Zipping steel hornets sang their banshee through the fuselage and rigging of the *Kestrel;* a splinter flew from a longeron, another from the camelback—stream-lined steel jacks that bored through wood and fabric and whined viciously in ricochet from struts and wires.

Hap Hazzard's plane tumbled off on a wing and rolled. Close, that! Close as hell. Pretty cute little trick. The *Italiano* was out for blood, and hazed his crate like a Guynemer. A wave of cold anger clicked through Dirck Hazzard's brain and his jaw set like a steel trap. Like a striking kingfisher he dove for the red ship, his *mitraliatrice* spitting fire.

Cortese, watching him like a hawk, kicked his rudder, slipped and banked, then pointed straight beneath the hurtling *Kestrel* like a darting swallow and raked its belly with a burst. Holes sprang in fuselage and linen in queer patterns, a glass gauge on the instrument board shattered to bits, the two-seater lurched drunkenly. Hap snapped her nose up and rolled into a half-outside loop, fell over on a wing tip. For a split second the Macchi was outlined in his ring sights, and Hap tripped his gun savagely.

An old stunt, that. As utterly surprising and unlooked for as it was dangerous. A daring maneuver perfectly executed—the same with which he had sent Hugo Buddecke, the ace, to his death in a blazing Fokker high above Saint Quentin. And it worked, too, on Gian Cortese, that mercurial young Boccaccio. For his red wasp went into a *vrille,* a spinning nose dive down, down, down toward the wooded shoulders and escarpments below, a maroon speck against the slaty sky and snowy conifers.

Hap straightened out and glided lazily after him. He had roweled the Macchi from stem to stern; was positive he had hit its pilot. Damned queer world! He had saved that chap's life, once—now he probably would be, or already was, the cause of his death. The chances of landing without a crack-up in that wilderness was about one hundred to one, with the odds wrong. But the Italian had taken the air meaning to get him, had opened fire ruthlessly when he knew a woman was in the other plane. His was the faster bus, his all the edge. *C'est la guerre!* Hap regretted it; always he had liked Gian Cortese.

He glanced back at Wanda von Trenck. He had almost forgotten about her! Her face was white as the whipping snow frosting the cockpits, her lips ashen, her eyes wide and the color of wet harebells.

"Are you hurt?" he asked anxiously.

She shook her head negatively.

"No," she said through a mouth stiff with cold. "But a little ill. All that twist and fall and loops—*Gott!* I feel so fonny! Did you kill that *Italianer,* Hap Haz-zard?"

"Who can say!" He leaned over and watched the falling ship. Young Boccacio wasn't dead, not by a damn sight. For he jerked out of that dizzy spin, flattened almost over the dim ribbon of road in the shadow of a sheer bluff. Slipping to kill his speed, he pulled the wasp's nose up and pancaked to a one-bounce landing; the tail skid scraped on the highway and his plane rolled to a stop.

A top-hole piece of flying skill, expertly done, and Dirck Hazzard swore admiringly between blue lips. He leveled his own ship out of the glide a short distance above the grounded Macchi, saw Cortese standing beside it, staring upward. The Italian pointed a finger first at the front of his plane, then at his head, and waved a hand in farewell. Hap waggled his fingers in return and gave his *Kestrel* the gun. It had been a *bon* scrimmage, at that. Now for the other side of the saddle.

And he must put the old crate's ears back to make it, too. The day was almost spent; it was murky dark, already, and the air was bumpy and difficult to navigate over the ranges. The snow fell thickly, now; the intense cold stung him numb, the driving sleet squalls drubbed him like flailing brambles. The girl huddled in the rear cockpit must be frozen, he thought commiseratingly, his ice-rimmed eyes darting from instrument board to the leaden clouds and down to the sea of drab obscurity beneath. To hell with this autumn flying in the mountains!

His plan had been to cross the range somewhere in the vicinity of the Otztaler and land near Waidbrück; that was still his intention if he could get any visibility at all in the fogged atmosphere. So he held his course, flying into the teeth of the storm and damning the gathering, early dusk.

Fighting through air pockets, and bucking the strata at twelve thousand altitude, he cleared the frontier unknowingly. And it was well, for a cylinder began to skip. It didn't correct itself, as he hoped, and a few minutes later a second one joined the discordant note in the motor's rhythm. He had no idea where he was, could see almost nothing, yet there was only one thing to do. He nosed the sputtering engine downward into those darkening, woolly clouds and mentally pulled his left one.

The wet, cutting wind screamed past his ears, the propeller swirling in the plunge. Clammy fingers of cloud pressed upon his face—it was so smothering thick that he could not tell whether the blades moved or not; he could not even see the nose of his ship. Every second, every heartbeat, he expected to hear and feel the crash of the plane against a slope or bare crag—shut his eyes a moment against the hell of it. Dirck Hazzard, face to face with imminent and unpleasant death, saw no panorama of his past life. A single face seemed to be in front of his—the oval, blue-eyed face of Wanda von Trenck, drawn and weary and worn with exposure, but gamely smiling. His kind of woman!

He reached back, fumblingly unbuckled the belt that held her to her seat, snapped free his own. No good to jump—might as well ride her down! Fifty-fifty, even-up either way. He suddenly peered sharply over the fuselage, gripped the stick so hard his hand looked white as a leper's. He *felt* the earth was near—the air in a jiffy grew lighter and warmer, the lowering clouds thinned, the wind in the wires sang less shrilly. Was that a road, that dimly pale streak there ahead? Hap guided by balance and touch, holding the bus as nearly level as he could to still maintain flying speed.

He was across! Over the crest and in Austrian territory, for no mountains spread beneath in the dusk, but a valley, and that ghostly streak *was* a

road! He cleared it with twenty feet to spare, and something rushed up at him out of the darkness. A hayrick. He missed it by inches, eased the plane lower. Now! He hadn't the faintest idea what he would strike when he hit, but he had to chance that. The wheels struck sharply—the *Kestrel* bounced, quivering, into the air—hit again, lurched, flung its tail skyward and crashed into a ditch with a splintering, crunching *whack!*

Hap and the girl were thrown clear, landing none too gently on the snow-fleeced ground. That split second which connects life with death had flitted by, this time, leaving them on the right ride of the stream. He sat up, bruised considerably, then limped over to the baroness and helped her to her feet.

"Hurt?" he asked again. She placed her hands before her face a moment, a shiver quivering through her. Then she got herself in leash. "No"—the second time that wild afternoon—"no, Hap Haz-zard! But it is a miracle that we stand here, speaking."

And Dirck, looking at the wreck of the plane, nodded slowly, in perfect agreement. One of the wings was broken, the landing gear bashed, the engine buckled and the prop snapped in two. The *Kestrel* lay, a mass of twisted wreckage, cluttering a deep and narrow ditch. Close again! Closer than that, old son!

They made their way across the pasture, passing the haystack and climbing a little rise. Found the road and struck off along it, presently coming to a cross-roads with a marker at the junction. Hap pulled out his *briquet*, thumbed the knurled wheel, and read the Gothic-lettered legend:

Weg nach Waidbrück 1 km. Weg nach Erkelburg 5 km.

The flare of the *briquet* went out; he and the Baroness von Trenck shook hands exultantly, impulsively. Not for nothing had they lived through that sky battle, not for nothing had they survived that crack-up in the dark! The lights and food and drink of Waidbrück were less than a mile away; roaring fires would be blazing on great open hearths. Perhaps they were not too late, after all. A coin in the air had fallen heads, and the fifth Sazerac had stayed down. On, then.

Soon the first shrine, set in its niche of rock-hewn wall, appeared, the first dim lights glowed. On to Castle Sigmundskron!

CHAPTER XXIII.

INTO THE TRAP.

THE baron cut short the flow of talk with an upraised hand. Like an aged, wrinkled vampire he sat before the birch log, the blanket drawn about his hips, the corners of the big room thick with lurking shadows. Wanda von Trenck closed her lips, her narrative halted; in the ensuing silence a clock faintly chimed the hour. *Tinked* nine times, then was still, its echo bell clear through the still halls.

"You can do nothing," growled the old one, stirring. "The Trenck will attack even if the entire hostile army waits beyond the pass. Even now he and his *jägers* are in the Höchste Eggen, *mädchen!*"

Dirck Hazzard, standing with hands behind him at the hearth, saw desperation deepen in the girl's eyes.

"I am going to him!" she burst out, beating her fists together. "I know that place—know of a little-used trail across the frontier! Perhaps I can reach him in time. Dear *Gott*, yes!"

The old eagle looked at her dully. "You speak of the *'Dämmerung Thal'?*" he asked. "Impossible—more than impossible! Not even an Alpen guide could traverse it this night. No—you can do nothing. You can but wait—and pray, if you like."

"No, my cousin," she replied. "I go

by the Twilight Trail, as you say. And I want one of your cars."

"Can you stop the flight of time?" the old man rasped. "Can you halt tide or the elements? Can you stay the hand of death when it strikes? You speak foolishly. What is written, is written. If the Trenck marches to his end to-night you can not raise one finger to interfere. Wait, my daughter. That is all you can do."

Hap Hazzard took a step forward. "By Heaven, we'll see!" He wheeled to the girl. "Do you know where this place is? Do you know how to get there? And can we make it, by hook or crook, in a car?"

She laid her fingers a moment on his hand.

"I know where he is, and I know the route. But it is full of peril—I know not if we could reach the goal. My kinsman speaks wisdom, but I cannot stay here and wait. Yes, wait—thinking, knowing——"

"I understand." He smiled tersely. "We can but try."

The old Wolfram peered at him keenly.

"You are a fool!" he snapped. "And hurt, also—there is blood upon your leg."

The baroness turned with a little gasp, but Dirck shrugged carelessly. "A scratch of no importance. I did not even know it was there until a few minutes past." Which was not quite true. One of Cortese's bullets had raked the calf of his left leg when the wasp had turned loose that volley through the *Kestrel;* with circulation coursing again after the numbing cold the wound stung him uncomfortably. But examination showed it to be a slight flesh one, of little matter.

The matter of saving this girl's father from walking into a trap was vastly more serious. So he said to her:

"Perhaps we had better be going, milady."

Ten minutes later the panting engine of a rusty flivver coughed them down the hill and away from *Schloss Sigmundskron.* And Dirck Hazzard carried away with him the picture of an old, old man seated before a fire—an ancient with the face and eyes of a hoary *lammergeier,* his head drooped forward on his chest.

He had made no further objections, and even told them to take the little-used car parked in its snowy shed. But Hap Hazzard knew that it was a tiny, pitiful chance—that race to stop the Trenck from marching into an ambush; a possibility so remote and infinitesimal that the word "chance" was too strong for it. It was not a chance at all. But inaction, to this girl who shared the seat with him, was maddening; they could only have a go at it. Warmed, and with hot food in his midriff, he was ready to toss the dice with fate.

"You have forgotten nothing?" she asked him again.

"No," he replied. "Not this trip. I've even said my prayers."

They tooled through the dimly lighted hamlet and struck out straight for the pass. By her guidance they turned off on the same road he had taken that day he talked with Kurt the cowherd—if one could call that trail a road. It led up into the ranges, a narrow, breakneck path, and he rolled it with breakneck speed. The arctic breath of the mountains beat down upon them—a frigid, cutting blast, penetrating clothes and eating into the marrow of one's bones; one hell of a night for an offensive, Hap thought grimly. The snow flung back upon them in pelting waves, now and then laced by sleet; the lamp of the moon was shrouded under drab, low-lying clouds. The fitful eyes of the flivver were two golden tunnels boring into the white swirl ahead—a fleecy swirl stippled with pitchy blackness.

The village of Waidbrück slid behind, squatted like a heap of tumbled black

rocks in the whiteness; the last dull lights of its houses faded from view. Hap spurred the car recklessly, taking hairpin and switchback at dangerous speed—and there were no parapets to halt a plunge on that cart road curving away into sinister shadow ahead. They drove in silence, save for now and then a short direction from the girl.

The frontier was closed, the old *lammergeier* had said. But no customs posts studded this unused byway, no cars traveled it save that wheezy "Detroit limousine" that essayed its crooks and turns and menaces, that wild October night in the teeth of an Alpine storm.

With cold-stiffened hands Dirck Hazzard pushed the bus to the limit, braving the dangers of the Twilight Trail, en route to that wooded basin in the hills called Höchste Eggen.

Tyrolese mountaineers were assembled there, gathered from far and near for a swoop upon a place once named Plattskofel, now called Fontanella. And at their head was a thin-lipped old man who staked his life upon one fall of the cards.

Foolish—aye. As madcap as this perilous ride. They must be well across the line by now, bumping and joggling over the mule path, dodging boulders and shaving jaggy edges of cliff that bulged out to block the way. The snow drifts became deeper and more difficult, and the car panted like a spent thing. What a tale it would make to set down in prosaic black upon white paper, the happenings of these past twenty-four hours! And more was ahead, for ambushed *arditi* waited somewhere along these mysterious reaches.

Dirck braked up abruptly, throwing the car back on its haunches; they had crested a hill and the trail below was lost in deep drifts—even now the rear wheels spun impotently as they tried to claw foothold. No use trying to go farther; the car would stick and bed down in that gulch. They had reached the end of their rope.

"The Höchste Eggen is over there," said Wanda von Trenck. "But there are no sentries posted. We arrived too late, my friend. They have gone!"

She lowered her head a moment, then turned quickly and came to him; placed her gloved hands on the lapels of his coat.

"You can never know how I thank you, for this, Hap Haz-zard! You are a brave gentleman—one who understands! But there are limits to even a stout heart's intentions. The fate of my father rests in the hands of Providence, now!"

Hap stared off up the gorge. A torrent stormed through it, to lose itself somewhere ahead; snow-plastered rocks dotted its bed thickly. He turned to the girl.

"Are you afraid to wait here for me? I will push on afoot—maybe make liaison with some one. Your father's men can't be so very far ahead, now."

She gripped his arm quickly, swayed close.

"Look!" she whispered. "Oh, look, Hap Haz-zard!"

He stared past her pointing finger; saw. Saw the white-mantled peak of Wildspitze, rearing ghostly in the night, with a queer, freakish play of light above its pinnacles. A curious light, a greenish, unearthly glow creeping up and up and quivering on the horizon like flashes of lightning. It brightened, trembled, flowed like an aurora borealis, hovering over the spires of the mountain, hanging there, suspended.

It shimmered, shifted its folds, seemed to crackle. A light glowing and crackling in the sky—one seemed to see it crackle, not hear it. It parted, swayed and danced, separated into sparkling fragments, then joined again, pulsing, unreal.

"The Dance of the Dead!" breathed Wanda von Trenck, her fingers shaking

on his arm, digging in his muscles like pincers. "They come again, this night, to look down from the mountain! Ghosts who live once more to welcome dead men to their ranks! It is that, Hap Haz-zard!"

And Hap Hazzard, peering at that spooky phenomena, wondered if old Graff von Trenck was up there, and Franz Feiseler, and Wessenfels. That fellow Giorgio he had done in and pushed into a lonely brook; Scharfenstein and Grehl the innkeeper and Ernst the sleuth! Creepy, those lights! A dance of shades who once had fought and died, one-time enemies now with their guns stacked, bivouacked together in their white silence—shades who looked down upon men and the ways of men with an aloof, remembering pity. Lights that suddenly, while he watched, dimmed and faded as swiftly as they appeared, leaving inky darkness in their wake.

And they stood there, voiceless, with the snow pelting down and a wild wind whistling; staring into the black mystery of the gorge, with only the song of the torrent to break the quiet. And, sharply, while they watched, a gun cracked somewhere up ahead—spat viciously, and was echoed by a swarm of others.

"The end!" muttered Wanda von Trenck. "They have walked into the trap!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

WAR!

DIRCK HAZZARD plunged through the downy drifts, barging on toward that sound of combat. The girl had slumped back against the car, hopelessly, helplessly, when that first crackle of rifle fire came to her ears. Hap had jumped into action, hurdled the rocks and gone charging up the *val,* pistol in hand. He did not know exactly what he intended to do, but he went ahead, anyhow. The blood buzzed in his ears, his face felt numb, his hands frozen. And death was stretching out bony fingers toward him, searching, clawing.

The racket grew closer. Shouts mingled with the crack of guns, and a *mitraille* took up the chant, raving like a mad thing. Hap fell over a prostrate body, measured his length on the snow, crawled clumsily to hands and knees. The fellow was dead; he fumblingly salvaged the corpse's gun and ammo, tucking away his own revolver. Pushed on, head up and eyes alert.

Without preliminary he came into the heart of the struggle. Bullets whined, spattered and ricocheted all about him; figures darted shadowlike from tree to tree and boulder to boulder. Cries smote his ears—those of the *arditi;* those of the Tyrolese. Their wild songs of battle surged all around and about, and he slowed a moment, getting his bearings. Tongues of flame stabbed through the gloom of the gut—a gut called Glöckner Gorge.

Men flitted like goblins between the pines, while a whining barrage of steel whistled and crackled and spat through the rocks. He brushed an arm across his eyes, stumbled on. Was this Dirck Hazzard doing these things? His mind seemed to be clear of his body, looking on speculatively, impersonally, viewing his muscular actions with a sort of surprised wonder, a detached shade grinning a little at his puny antics.

A slug of steel thudded into his shoulder and sent him spinning like a top. Funny!—he couldn't lift his left arm.

He bungled into a boulder. Sparks flew through his brain. What the hell! Men in coal-scuttle helmets firing from behind rocks and trees—scores of figures shouting, advancing toward them. Laggards in Alpen caps going down under the red sweep of their knives, firing to the last breath. Steady, old son! In it to the hubs, now! Whether you like it or not. Shoot! Cut loose at that dodger skating between those rocks!

He's out after your scalp—pour it on him! Dirck Hazzard's rifle spewed flame.

Glöckner Gorge and chaos and a girl waiting for him! Where was the old one? A flaming wave shot through his skull; the cold snow on his face roused him to sit up, but its white surface was stained with scarlet. He put an unsteady hand to his head, and it came away dyed. Creased him, that shot! One through the shoulder—and now his head. He staggered to his feet, and a stinging hornet slapped his side. Down again—ribs this time!

One hell of a finish for him, he thought grimly. What was he mixing up in this racket for, anyhow? None of his affair. His left arm was numb, and crimson from shoulder to finger tips—he couldn't see. Blindly he fired again, cursing into the night and laughing madly at the wolfish *arditi*.

Leg, head, shoulder and side—as thoroughly shot up as he cared to be! He flung down the dead man's rifle, tossed away the bandolier of cartridges. Must get out of this, somehow. A girl was waiting for him back at a car. Couldn't do a nose dive now—he'd have to carry on. He caromed off another stone, and a rough hand grabbed his arm.

"Get down!" said a husky voice. And he looked into the eyes of Franz Feiseler, saw a contorted face streaked with red. "And listen," the voice went on. "I need your help. The Trenck is shot through and through, hurt beyond repair. We must get him away. Can you walk?"

A bullet whizzed off their boulder, and Dirck Hazzard sneered; shook a red fist at the trees ahead.

"Gimme a gun!" he coughed. "Hell, yes, I can walk! Where is the old *adler?* You and me, Franz! We got to ferry him back to the car! C'm' on!"

His head was reeling drunkenly, his brain afire; his wrists burned as if hot irons were searing them. The baron's chauffeur looked at him, then staggered to his feet.

"Over here!" he barked. "And where is that car?"

"Not far. C'm' on! Carry on, you!" They staggered across the open, gained the refuge of another boulder, dived on into the trees while bullets whined past their ears. The machine guns were spraying death down the *val* as they threaded their way into the pines and cedars. Scent of crushed cedar! Hap Hazzard sniffed it hungrily as he dashed the crimson out of his eyes. Smelled like Christmas, and yule logs, and red berries——

"Give me a hand!" The curt command roused him, he saw a figure prone on the ground, groaning a little, choking a little. Graff von Trenck! Drilled through and through, still trying to direct the combat, clad in the uniform of an Austrian corps commander, his medals gleaming in the wan light. Franz raised him to a sitting posture, supporting him with an arm.

Dirck Hazzard slipped his own arm beneath the dying man's shoulder and drew him to his feet. Trenck's head wallowed forward on his chest, his knees buckled, he was a dead weight in their hands.

"Have we carried the town?" he asked thickly, wetting his lips with a dry tongue. "It is the key to the valley, Tyrolese!"

"Just so, *excellenz!*" muttered Franz. "The enemy are in retreat, spitted on the tips of our bayonets. As far as the hospice the Etschland is ours! *Hoch!* But we must get you rearward—you are gravely hurt, *majestat!*"

"That is of no matter," mouthed the baron. "My life for the freedom of Tyrol is a small pawn. But the firing seems to be thickening—do the *arditi* counterattack?"

"No, no, *excellenz!*" soothed Franz. "Our *jägers* are but seeking them in

their hiding places." And, aside to Dirck Hazzard: "Hurry, you! His life slips between our fingers."

Up and down, over rocks and stumps, floundering in drifts and stumbling across ledges. Hap's head reeled dizzily; time and again he wiped the red from his eyes, holding tight to the limp figure between him and Franz. He could guess direction roughly—the car ought to be on the spine of that next slope.

"Not much farther, now!" he mumbled. "Keep tight hold, Franz!"

"Don't let the men loot," mumbled the baron. "Remember, it is a Tyrolese town!"

"I've got him," panted Franz. "Hold up your own end!"

A car, and a dark figure coming to meet them. Another near by, advancing with ready rifle. The two men laid their burden on the ground, then straightened up, breathing heavily. Hap, through the swirling fog in his brain, saw a cloaked and hooded figure bending over the prostrate baron, saw her pillow his head in the crook of her arm. He swayed a moment on his feet, unsteadily; the shaky hand of Franz Feiseler balancing him. That last climb up out of the ravine had been grueling.

"The war's over," he muttered unsteadily, "and I'm a casualty! Muchly so. What happened out there, Franz?"

"Treachery," the chauffeur said brokenly. "We were betrayed, and walked flush into an ambuscade. Those *arditi—Gott!*"

A pity. Many widows would weep that night for the black tragedy of Glöckner Gorge, many would be the hearths and beds left lonely. And that grizzle-haired, lion-hearted old man of Edelweiss, dying so peacefully in his daughter's arms, was the personification of Tyrol, the Tyrol that he loved.

He passed out calmly, quietly, flinging a command to his *jägers* with a last breath:

"Forward, my eagles! Forward, for the honor and freedom of Tyrol!" His right hand was clenched, thrust upward like it gripped a sword——

Wanda von Trenck gently laid his shoulders on the snow, put her hands before her face a second.

Franz crossed himself, the tears running down his bloodstained cheeks; the man with the rifle stood with dry, hard sobs shaking his body. Dirck Hazzard brushed the red from his eyes, a lump in his throat. Like a blade of steel, that girl! Not a cry, not a whimper—just a stony stoicism! Thoroughbred clear through.

It hadn't been like a fiction or cinema finish, this—saving the old man's life or raising the mortgage on the old home place at the last, crucial moment. But the old eagle had died with the wine of battle wet on his lips, died quaffing the cup of victory. He did not know that his *jägers* were dying to a man back there in the gorge, and selling out at a dear price. It was all a damned shame!

"We must hurry!" said the mountaineer with the rifle. "They advance fast, those villains!" He laid down his gun and spun the crank of the car.

Hap watched him dizzily. Something was wrong, very wrong, with his internal machinery—his neck stiffened, his knees wavered, red spots and dashes and hyphens darted and danced before his eyes. Physical strain and fatigue and loss of blood closed swiftly in upon him, striking with deadly relentlessness; the whole scene went vague a moment then vanished like the flame of a candle in a high wind. He rocked a second like a poplar in a gale, then crashed forward in a nose dive on the snow. He was *kaput,* finished.

He did not see Wanda von Trenck come quickly to him with a little cry—did not feel her raise his head in her arms while other arms lifted him into the car. He did not hear the hoarse

shouts, the spat and whine of bullets among the rocks as the auto wheezed back along the Twilight Trail. He did not hear the terse, quick conversations. Unconsciousness was his lot.

Once, æons later, he opened his eyes to the agony of punchings and probings —dimly saw a huge fellow with spade-bearded face bending over him. Dull candlelight, and other faces, and his back sinking into a big, soft bed. Then oblivion snatched him again. A nightmare shot by branding irons pressed to his flesh, then the dark.

CHAPTER XXV.

SLICKEST DEVIL IN EUROPE.

"WHAT the devil happened?" Birck Hazzard asked weakly. His eyes roved around a small, neat room, out a window where snow glittered in the sunlight, then came back to a tall fellow with a mustache standing beside his bed, and passed on to the grave young face of Kurt the kineherd. The lad put a finger to his lips.

"It is not good for you to talk, *mein Herr,*" he said. "The doctor said you must keep very quiet."

"Talk to me, then!" said Hap. "And tell all. Where am I?"

"In my home, *excellenz,*" replied the boy. "My brother, here, can tell you of last night—he drove the car, then with the noble lady of Trenck went for the physician. You were badly injured."

Hap looked at the tall fellow, recognized him as the man with the rifle. Comprehension gathered loose threads in his brain as the mountaineer took up the tale. They had escaped the *arditi* by a narrow margin, unloaded him at this place, then gone on with the body of the old baron to *Schloss Sigmundskron,* and returned with a doctor. Tomorrow they would bury the Trenck; to-day the *arditi* swarmed on the peaks, hurling threats and taunts. But the *Herr Amerikan* was safe here in this mountain hut; there was no danger of capture.

The baroness had come that morning again, visited him while he was yet sleeping; on the morrow she would return.

"What time is it?" Hap asked.

"Past midafternoon. As soon as you can be moved they take you to *Schloss Sigmundskron.* But the *arditi* want you badly, *Herr!* They say you stole an airplane and escaped a murder trial. They are demanding that Vienna hand you over. But our local gendarmes are not looking for you, very hard. They shrug and know nothing."

"I see," Hap said thoughtfully. "Tell me some more."

Werner, for that was his name, did. He told him of the collapse of the *putsch,* its breakdown everywhere. The storm and the arrival of the *arditi* and *bersaglieri* and *alpini* had made confusion, uncertainty, wavering. At no places did the Red Eagles attack save at Fontanella and the ambush in Glöckner Gorge, and both columns were wiped out.

The Duke of Wessenfels, who led the assault on the town, paid with his life, as did the master of Edelweiss. Wessenfels might have lived a rotter and double-crosser, but he died a man, at the head of his troops.

Went down scrapping to the last, said Werner. Attacked despite treachery and traps, despite hell and high water. There had been a leak, or a betrayal somewhere; no one knew. But the *Adlers* were now without a leader and lairing up in their roosts, a price on their heads. It had been a catastrophe.

And what price? Wanda von Trenck was without a home, her castle confiscated, her belongings swept away in one swift stroke. She was a refugee in Austria, subject to criminal prosecution in Upper Adige if she crossed that frontier. All through no fault of her own; she realized, and fully, the sheer

madness of her father's act. But it was all spilled milk, now. And the finger scrawled *"Finis"* on the wall.

Cursing under his breath, Dirck Hazzard turned his face and stared at some pictured saints in their frame. She could not marry Siegfried von Wessenfels, now! And he was sorry that he could not have the chance of thrusting that noble one's chicanery down his gullet. It was an underhanded trick, that unsigned letter. He wouldn't forget that, soon; not even if Wessenfels had died like a soldier.

They buried old Graff von Trenck the next day. In the cemetery of Waidbrück, and the padre with the coal-of-fire eyes and red beard muttered the invocation. Took him to his last parade on a two-wheeled cart drawn by a pair of white oxen, his pine casket draped in an old imperial flag, while many people followed, carrying long, lighted tapers The *kirche* bell tolled measuredly. An Italian Caproni droned high overhead, pilot and observer watching.

Dirck Hazzard looked out of a window of his room and saw all. Peered into a pair of field glasses, and saw the dry-eyed, stiff-lipped girl go through the ordeal without a tear, viewed old Wolfram staring at the coffin with brooding hell in his eyes, the blanket drawn tight about his body.

Aye, he witnessed all that, while Kurt the kineherd squatted in the doorway, wearing a coat of many colors, sharpening his jackknife on a whetstone and humming to himself a song about the Alps of the Tyrol, where——

"A white mist rolls into a valley and sleeps,
O-layee, O-aye-ee, Oooo!
There's a knife in the mist, and a young girl weeps,
O-layee, O-ayeee, Ooooo!"

Two days later he sat in a vine-laced arbor on the hill of *Schloss Sigmundskron,* on an afternoon when the sun struck clear and sharp and glaring off the snow mantle of the ground. A skull cap of white bandages turbaned his head, his left arm was in a sling, his left leg tightly wrapped. He smelled mannishly of Harris tweed and shag tobacco as he puffed his pipe and played one-handed solitaire with a deck of frayed cards, now and then stopping to take a drink from a tumbler of wine.

Damn those ribs! Two of 'em busted, and his torso swathed in gauze like a mummy's! Guess he'd have to hobble around on a cane a while, and take things easy until his side patched up. The scalp wound didn't bother him much, but that smashed shoulder pained him a lot and his leg was stiff as a poker. Lucky, he was, at that—if those *arditi* had plunked him a few more times he would be pushing up daisies this afternoon instead of loafing in the sunlight.

The baroness and Franz Feiseler had carted him down from the hut the night previous—Franz, with white wrappings about his cranium, the girl with tight lips and pale cheeks. Tough on her, this; losing her father and birthright and fiancé in one swift hurricane, yet saying no word of the misfortune. Hap wouldn't hang around here very long—there was a little chalet over in Switzerland that he had in mind, just the place to hide out a while until this affair blew over. The Fascisti might make it so hot for the local constabulary that they would start looking for him in earnest, and hand him over.

Idle, lazy thoughts; a pull at his pipe, then a swallow at the wine, a move of the cards. It had all been a kaleidoscopic adventure; his life these past few days, especially. Like some weird figment of the imagination, the whole proceeding. Incredible and unreal, yet here he was. Still sticking it—standing by for a girl named Trenck. The roar of an airplane motor cut into his reverie, drew his glance upward. A red wasp was hurtling down above the towers of

the castle with terrific speed, the wind whining in its wires. What now?"

The ship flattened level just above the walls and the pilot leaned far out of his cockpit, dropped something, waved a blithe hand and sped on. Servants were rushing around, staring and pointing and huddling uneasily as a little white 'chute swung earthward. It landed, and one of them retrieved it and came running to the squinting American.

Hap scanned the cloth parachute. Weighted with a cartridge it was, around which was wrapped a sheet of paper bearing his name. It read:

Salutè, old falcon! Two of your bullets went through my gas tank, another nearly grooved my scalp and parted the so wavy hair! It was a neat trick, that outside loop and barrel roll, and you shot damned true! My congratulations.

When the hue and cry lets up, and you can visit my fist-shaking country again, I will be looking for you, to split that bottle we missed out on in Comarolo. Admiration for your exploit vies with condemnation on this side of the pass; it is too bad the lady loses her castle and properties. I hope the two of you will be very happy, Signor Hazzard!

GIAN CORTESE.

P. S. Don't wonder that I know where to drop this—many more *Italiani* do also. As one old combat *pilote* to another, *amico mia*, I think an entire change of scenery would be most good for you! *A rividerci!*

Gian Cortese, a regular sportsman, all said and done. Hap folded up the letter, watched the speck of the plane disappear over the Pass of the Cross. Yes—he had better move out, and pronto.

A commotion in the courtyard aroused him presently, and he saw Franz and the loutish Ernst engaged in loud argument with two fellows unmistakably reporters. Damn those pests! They had been bothering him all day—French and Swiss and German news sleuths who tried every means to get to him. Dirck Hazzard looked at this pair, suddenly straightened up.

"Franz!" he called. "Show those men over here."

The surly chauffeur did as directed, eying Hap in puzzled surprise. Orders were not to allow any men of the journals to bother him—now he took down the bars for these! "And you might bring another bottle and two glasses," the Yanqui finished.

He grinned at the pair. They thrust out cards to him, bowing. Alan Benson of the London *Mercury;* Max Reinhardt of Vienna *Tageblatt.*

"Sit down, won't you?" Hap invited pleasantly. "And have a drink."

"You are a very notorious character, Herr Hazzard!" smiled Max. "Please just tell us of this affair in your own words."

"We shan't ask too many questions," said Benson, surveying him over a wineglass. Hap lit his pipe and began.

From that first afternoon on a Tyrolese road—the underground stream and the cavern; his arrest, escape and air battle; their wild ride to save the Trenck, its failure and the subsequent struggle in Glöckner Gorge in the shadow of Höhe Gaisl. The scribblers listened, now and then taking notes.

"You certainly stumbled into something!" said Benson at last. "It would make a top-hole story. However did you manage it all?"

Dirck Hazzard grinned lazily.

"I owe you two fellows this yarn. For the pair of you, and especially Herr Reinhardt, gave me two earfuls of very interesting, very helpful information."

"What is that you say?" asked Max, staring. "How so, Herr?"

"In the garden of Innsbruck's Casino, a week or so ago," said Hap. "You were telling Mr. Benson about Red Eagles. I sat at a near-by table and eavesdropped. You see, I was the Baroness Trenck's chauffeur."

Benson exploded with an astonished oath. Max only stared the harder. And Hap Hazzard chuckled at the bewilderment, then comprehension in their faces.

"It all panned out very neatly," he added.

"What about the baroness?" queried Reinhardt. "All her property is forfeited, now. Are you going to marry her?"

"That is out," retorted Hap coolly. "Ask something else."

They did; they asked several "something elses." And in the course of their talk the name of Colonel Scharfenstein came up. Hap had remarked that he took him and Baron Trenck to a place called Santa Caterina.

"The devil you say!" said Benson, sitting up straight. "You saw that artist, eh?"

"What do you mean, 'artist'?" asked Hap. "He looked like the usual stiff-necked Junker, and damned efficient appearing, if you ask my opinion."

"Don't you know, then?" demanded the Briton. Hap shook his head.

"Well, here's where you get another earful!" said Benson. "The fellow was no more Scharfenstein than I am, or you, for that matter. The real Scharfenstein, who is an old, expert strategist of imperial days, has been held a prisoner at a castle in the Cadore for over a month. Guess they will turn him loose now."

Hap's turn now to stare. "Then who the hell was he?"

"Vigo di Fassa," chuckled Benson. "The man of forty faces, the chief of their secret service, the slickest devil in Europe. His agents kidnaped Scharfenstein, and old Vigo stepped into his shoes and worked hand and glove with the *Adler*. And he got away with it, learned all their plans and was never once suspected. Luck was with him there, for the real Scharfenstein was not so well known in the Tyrol. But his impersonation was faultless, evidently."

"I see," said Hap slowly. "Yes."

So there was the leak, the treachery, the betrayal. He put two and two together, dovetailing seemingly trite facts —the arrival of Di Fassa in Santa Caterina the same day "hizzoner" the provincial Fascist secretary came up from Meran. All pretty simple, now; the Red Eagles of the Tyrol played right into their hands. And old Graff von Trenck paid with his life.

"Satan himself is not more diabolically clever," said Max. "And a soft-hearted weakling does not become chief of a country's secret service."

No, one didn't. And Di Fassa hadn't minced matters. The rebellion had been stamped out with ruthless hobnails, and the eagles were *kaput*. It would be a long time—a long, long time, before they took the air again.

The two men left a bit later, shaking hands and thanking him.

"Look us up when you come to Vienna," said Max. "The Pilsener there is still fairly cold."

"You're bloody lucky, to my thinking!" said Benson. "All the way around, Hazzard."

"Perhaps," thought Hap. "Perhaps" —as he watched them foot it back to Waidbrück. There would be no fat Burgher Grehl to serve them at the Inn of the White Goose, for Grehl had died in Glöckner Gorge. His widow would do it.

It was a good omelet, golden with greens peeping from the edges and the butter hot and running over it; the coffee was just so, the Tyrol cakes not too sweet. But his supper tasted like sawdust to Dirck Hazzard, and it finished, he sought again the vined-in arbor and pulled at his brier.

CHAPTER XXVI.

ANCIENT WIZARDRY.

HOW blue and sharp, in the still air, were the stars to-night! Clear, crackling cold of starlit silences, with a red moon coming up behind the Alps and painting their snowy peaks in eerie

light. He huddled deeper into his coat, his brain and mind casting, roving about, etching that scene indelibly on his memory. Moonlight in the Tyrol! A cloaked, lithe figure was coming across the courtward toward his retreat.

"Is it wise for you to stay out so late?" she asked.

"I suppose not," he said. "Let's remain a while, anyhow—it's too pretty to go indoors."

She sat on the bench beside him, throwing open the collar of her coat, pushing back her fur cap until the glint of bronze shone in the gold of her shingled hair. "May I have a cigarette, Hap Haz-zard?" she requested. "And the *briquet?*"

Once more the lighted glare of its tip drenched her face in rose wash as she drew sharply upon it, then her blue eyes met his squarely.

"I have not thanked you, for everything, my friend. I do so now."

Dirck Hazzard leaned forward, and very quietly gripped her hand in his.

"I love you, Wanda von Trenck!" he said huskily, for a fog was in his throat. "Once again I say those three words—all my life I shall say them."

She sat very still a moment; then: "Why?"

"Because you're you. I can say no more."

Suddenly she flung the cigarette away, suddenly was close in his good arm, tight against his heart. Their moment had dawned—the moment Dirck Hazzard had awaited, the time Wanda von Trenck knew must come. She had met it halfway like a thoroughbred.

"Oh, Hap Haz-zard!" she cried, in a fierce little voice. "I am a creature of impulse—wild, mad impulse! I am headlong, thoughtless, incautious! I do foolish things and then regret. Sometimes I am cruel, a savage. Do you want that kind of woman?"

"Until the sands run out," said Dirck.

Her eyes were bright with diamond tears.

"I have been so unhappy! Seeing this thing that has come upon me, yet helpless. Unable to prevent it, watching it creep closer, day by day! And now—alone! All alone! My world has vanished!"

"No!" said Hap. "For you and I met, very dear, the day the world was made!"

Silence a moment. "You mean that, Hap Haz-zard?" she asked slowly. "You really mean that?"

"Just that," he said.

Her lips burned upon his, in a swift rush that intoxicated; they breathed a sentence on his own.

"Remember, Hap Haz-zard, this face of mine will some day lose what attracts you now. Is there enough of my real self to hold you?"

"God, yes!" he said savagely. "I love you, Wanda."

And she whispered: "My dear! Oh, my dear! Mine—*mine!* Out of all the world!"

Moonlight and white snow and black cedars, and a faint, unnamed perfume tingling in his senses. The fire of her lips that went through and through him like a shining sword. What a woman! There would never be another one like her. Never! And she loved him.

No more would he follow the beck of vagabondia across the hills and down dim trails, dwelling alone in the tents of Ishmael. No more would he be the wandering bird, his home where his head happened to rest, always peering beyond the next rise. Now he knew why the gods of fortune yanked him from that mountain torrent with its siphons, brought him from the cave of the eagles. Now he knew why he had come through arrest, air conflict, crack-up and Glöckner Gorge; understood why he sat under the moon of the Tyrol with this girl so close in his arms.

A mountain legend had surrounded

those two, would follow them through the rest of their lives; men and women would tell their children and grandchildren of them at night before roaring hearth fires—for days and weeks and months Alpine folk would talk of little else.

Dirck Hazzard, looking up at the crackling, ice-green stars said: "Did you ever see the Milky Way so clear and beautiful? All those tiny pin points twinkling so merrily down at us——"

"You name it that?" she replied softly. "The Milky Way? "We Tyrolese call it 'The Path of the Warriors.'"

Aye, it was that. The road to Valhalla. His arm tightened about her, this girl alone in the world save for him.

"I'll make one hell of a husband, milady!" he said ruefully. "But if loving you will tilt the scales my way—well, they're far, far down."

"Nothing else matters," she answered. "There will be times when you will hate me, Hap Haz-zard. But always you will love me more. I did not love the Duke of Wessenfels—it was my father's will that I marry him. But I could not have, not after knowing you. From the very beginning my heart told me so truly! And I fought back against the wondrous strangeness of it. But it was all so futile!" Her eyes smiled into his.

And they sat there in the night, thinking back on those things that were over and done with, the adventures lived together. And a cloaked figure riding a black horse peered silently into the vines, a shadowy figure who looked at the girl one last time, then turned his mount down that road which led over the Pass of the Cross. A dusky rider who bore on his caped shoulders all the disappointments and heartaches, and tragedies of an old life across the border; a phantom who stood for soldiers, and frontiers, and statesmen, and all their jugglery. The ghost of Castle Edelweiss, carrying away with him the last gesture in the fall of the house of Trenck.

She stared back a moment. In exchange she had love. A love like the voice of some ancient wizardry, touching that secret chord in her self no other thing in life had reached. Love that balmed the hurt and healed the scars of these past black days. The future would take care of itself; was even now taking care of itself.

She stirred in his arms, and her lips brushed his like a whisper. The shadowy horseman was gone.

Watch for more stories by Edgar L. Cooper.

HE WANTED TO SING

SIX years ago, when Joe Shaute was pitching for Juniata College in Pennsylvania, his one ambition was to be a great singer. He was as full of minstrelsy as a saxophone is of wails. He provided his fellow students lavishly and often with the stuff that hath charms to soothe the savage breast. One day Charlie Hickman, a former member of the Cleveland ball club, watched young Shaute pile up strike-outs against an opposing team and decided that he could do Cleveland much good. After the game he introduced himself to Joe, and suggested that he sign up.

Shaute couldn't see it at first. Determined to be a singer, he failed to perceive how professional ball would help him achieve a career on the concert stage. Hickman replied that it might not put him on the stage but would give him plenty to eat and make him famous. And at last Shaute was persuaded to give the big league a try.

To-day he is Cleveland's famous pitcher and heavy hitter.

Tiger River

By Moran Tudury

Author of "The Sword of Roses," Etc.

Bull Haddock cursed the mighty river—said he would make it do his will, as he made men do.

A COMPLETE STORY

THERE was nothing either singular or peculiar in the coming of "Bull" Haddock to Plaquemines Parish. Haddock was a sugar planter from San Domingo who was now desirous of becoming a sugar planter in Louisiana. He had the money, he knew striped purple from plain cane, and roller crushers were his passion. All of this was, then, perfectly legitimate. But what this man Haddock did when he came to Plaquemines is another story. And it is also the story of a river.

Young Clayton, who owned a near-by sugar plantation of his own, was moved to remark on the peculiarity of the newcomer. "He has a yellow look—yellow skin and all. Almost as if he had come up out of the depths of the roaring Mississippi River with the water still on him."

Another planter waved the swarm of mosquitoes away with a palm-leaf fan and stared up to the high parapet of the levees. "Evil, if ever I saw a man so." He was French and therefore expressed himself in amusing fancies. "They say that down there in the depths of the Mississippi there is a devil. I think this man Haddock is he."

Now all of this may have been mere supposition. Because when a man lives a long time in the sugar regions of Louisiana he sometimes becomes as men become in the tropics. And so it may have well been that when Bull Haddock got a bad name even before he had

earned one, it was only the result of a ready impressionability in the minds of men who yearly face the fever regions where swarming mosquitoes sing a monotonous song of ill omen and the dreaded yellow jack lies always just around the corner.

But after Bull Haddock had been in Plaquemines a couple of months—after he had gone from the dubious evidence of making a bad impression to that of committing questionable deeds—then the matter no longer assumed the aspect of mere conjecture. Because if it is true—and the Cajans believe it is—that a man's eyes are the windows of his soul, then the thing that looked out through the red rims of Bull Haddock's eyes was an unpleasing thing indeed. In their dull stare was that which a too long stay in San Domingo sometimes puts in a man's eyes. And in his thick, arrogant voice was the sullen undertone that is sometimes acquired by a man who, for too long, and through too many seasons of malaria, has bossed negroes.

"I will show you how to make sugar here," he told young Clayton, the first time they met. "I will teach you how we do it in San Domingo. You are puling here—puny. In San Domingo we know how to run laborers."

"And once," young Clayton said softly, "there was an insurrection in San Domingo. Once there were white women killed."

"A long time ago!" Bull Haddock said impatiently. "The world has changed. But you shall see. Some day I will be the big man here. There must always be one big man among the plantations. I will be him. You can laugh. I will be him."

The fellow's egotism was colossal Young Clayton stared, almost in disbelief. But there was no merriment in those dogged red eyes, and the mouth was like a vise. A big man, Bull Haddock gave the effect of even greater bigness—of a sort of yellow immensity; and it was that last which made Clayton remember his friend's words: "They say that down there in the depths of the Mississippi there is a devil. I think this man Haddock is he."

Now Plaquemines is French. When the sugar planters sit of a murmurous summer night among the Spanish daggers and the crape myrtles, their talk is of an old man named De Bore, who is the father of Louisiana sugar, and of the Jesuit fathers, who brought their cane secrets from the islands. They maintain the quick judgment of the French, as well as the curiosity. And when both of these factors dwelt upon the stranger, Haddock, the result was not heartening.

From the very beginning the man proved himself a tyrant. During the irrigation process, and when the swamps that lay on his property were being drained for seed planting, he was to be seen upon horseback, cursing his negro laborers. Once he received a muffled protest from one of his hands; and in a twinkling Haddock had descended from the saddle. He had in his hand, at that moment, a riding crop, and it fell through the air with the suddenness of a bird's flight. There was a groan; and the offender wiped blood away from his mouth with the back of his hand. That night Plaquemines knew definitely what manner of planter was this Bull Haddock.

When a delegation of planters, young Clayton among them, called upon him in complaint, his bearing was monumental in its egotism. "You have your methods," he grunted coolly, "and I have mine. This is my place, and I'll run it as I damned well please."

"But you can't get away with this stuff," Clayton put in hotly. "The Civil War's been over for years. These negroes aren't slaves any more."

"In San Domingo," Haddock said smoothly, "we make our own rules.

When I need advice, I'll come for it." He climbed into his saddle, pausing to survey the indignant little group of outraged gentlemen before him. Then he leaned over and, looking evenly at young Clayton, added: "Remember what I said? I will be the big man here."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed the young planter irritably.

"You will see," Haddock said pleasantly. "I will be the man in Plaquemines to make the rules." Then he clucked to his horse and went off.

Much as the parish grew to dislike Bull Haddock that spring, it nevertheless would not have continued to regard him as something evil, something which one might almost have imagined to have emerged from the muddy yellow depths of the river, had it not been for one fact. For almost simultaneously with the advent of Haddock, the spring floods began. The old Mississippi was uneasy that spring, sweeping headlong and sullenly down to the Gulf. And for miles along the big river's banks, by hill town and levee town, they watched the water rise. The State engineers came down to pile sandbags atop the mud levees, to raise the long barricades ever higher, as they had been doing for over two hundred years. They talked about spillways, about cutting off all natural outlets, about forcing the old Mississippi to stay within her bounds by digging ever deeper her own channel. But still, as it did each year, the river went rising on its way. And down behind the levees, below the tiger river, the plantations and the little towns talked in whispers. And there were some who saw a resemblance between the yellow, parched skin and ill-concealed savagery of the man Bull Haddock and the yellow flood tearing at the levees.

It was, that river, an evil thing. Men felt it down below in the sugar plantations, as young Clayton had felt the potential power for evil in Haddock. People came up from their plantations to stand on the levees, shaking solemn heads. Came planters with dark, keen faces. Came circuit riders who faced the stream as though it were the work of the devil. When they went back to their revival meetings, the Southern piny woods listened to the long wail:

"His track I see, and I'll pursue,
Glory hallelujah!
If you get there before I do,
Tell all my friends I'm coming, too,
Glory hallelujah!"

A solemn, somber, endless stream of human faces, they watched the old Mississippi in that puzzled, disconcerted way in which man looks upon that which he is unable to combat. Negroes in the little whitewashed cabins stared and shivered, a natural optimism dumb in the face of something dark and unconquerable. They went back mournfully to sing a benediction that was not a blessing but a hope:

"Fare ye well, ye ladies all——"

And still the old Mississippi swirled headlong on its muddy, yellow way. Once young Clayton came up to watch its rush, to stand like all the others with doubts and misgivings. The engineers had said his own levee would hold, that there would be no crevasse. But he wondered. "Tiger river!" he found himself muttering. And then he caught sight of another man standing on the levee top. It was Bull Haddock, and the yellow parchment of his face so closely matched the hue of the water that it almost seemed as if there was a reflection flooding up to him.

"Pretty bad this time, huh?" Clayton said softly. "Might be we'll catch hell this trip with her."

There was a crazy, cunning look in Haddock's eyes. "Water—that's all it is!" he said contemptuously. "I've got my levee piled so high with sand that there's no danger at all. There's a way

to lick everything—laborers, river and all."

Clayton stared thoughtfully.

"The big man of Plaquemines—that's me." Haddock shook his heavy head seriously. He flung one disdainful arm out toward the fierce stream of the water. "There's a way to use everything—if you know how." He nodded. "Some day I'm going to turn that yellow scum to my account. Some day," he went on arrogantly, "I'll make it work for me—get me something."

He was still standing there, a scowl on his face, as Clayton walked soberly away. "A little cracked, that guy," Clayton told himself. Once he turned, aware that Bull Haddock was repeating something to himself. And the words he heard were:

"The big man of Plaquemines. I'll make that damned river work for me before I'm done!"

And young Clayton, shaking his head slowly, grunted: "As like as two peas—that fellow an' that river. If he tries to buck her it'll be like a man turning against his own mother. But if he *does* try——" Clayton shrugged. "Well, somethin's goin' to happen, sure as hell!"

It is hard to indicate the exact point where Bull Haddock's enmity for young Clayton began, but it must have begun that spring day when he decided that he would buy the youngster's plantation. That was the day when first Bull Haddock put into action his plans for becoming the big boss of Plaquemines.

"I want that place of his," Haddock told Bud Creeper. "He don't have the money to run it like it ought to be. With my money and my brains I'll make it the best sugar works in this parish."

Creeper was a small, wizened soul. And if ever a name fitted man, Bud Creeper's name fitted him. That he had been a hireling of Haddock's in San Domingo, that he had done questionable jobs for the big man, nobody in Plaquemines knew. That was because, so to speak, Bud Creeper had crept stealthily from the wilds of San Domingo and, as furtively, into the life of the sugar center of Louisiana. People knew him only as a third-rate lawyer who did small jobs for small fees. Nobody knew that, even as he had once been Bull Haddock's thing in one sugar region, so he was still, in another one.

Rubbing thin, peaked, bloodless fingers together unceasingly—that was Bud Creeper. Beside his towering, brawny boss he was like a skinny shadow of the bigger man's queer impulses. An affirmative, a cunning, echo of Bull Haddock's savagery—that was Bud Creeper. He was rubbing his hands together now, like a man washing fingers with invisible soap.

"Ought to be easy," he admitted. "He's got the irrigation—and a good levee. The engineers say it'll hold up, no matter what the river does." He blinked rapidly his cold, faded eyes. "Ought to be easy," he repeated.

But it was not easy, as Bull Haddock discovered when he called upon young Clayton. Blunt as always, Bull Haddock came to the point at once.

"What'll you take for it?" he said shortly.

"The plantation?" Clayton's eyes softened. He came from sugar people. His grandfather had stood among the kettles beside old De Bore, that day in a forgotten sugar house, while he proved that Louisiana cane would granulate, and so founded an industry. "It's not for sale," Clayton said quietly.

Bull Haddock's eyes closed slightly, squinting. Like everybody in Plaquemines, he knew that young Clayton's heart was not in his plantation. He knew, as they all did, that the boy only held his plantation from an odd little feeling of family loyalty to old traditions—that, in fact, young Clayton's

heart was in New Orleans, where a young girl waited for him—a girl whose delicate health would not allow her to brave the malarial regions of the sugar area. For this reason Bull Haddock did not despair.

"I'll give you ten thousand dollars cash," he pronounced stubbornly. "This ain't the life for you; you've got fever in your eyes, now. This place'll kill you, I tell you. And ten thousand dollars——"

"No," said the boy quietly; "it's not for sale."

Something seemed to stir in young Clayton at that moment. It was true, what Bull Haddock said—that it was no life for him. He knew it, just as he knew his place was in New Orleans, beside that girl who waited for him. But to surrender his plantation, the Clayton plantation, to this man, went against his grain. It seemed like sacrificing everything that had been fair and honest in an old tradition to a man who stood for the exact opposite of these things.

So Clayton said again: "No; it's not for sale." He might have added: "Not for sale to *you*." But he didn't; he let it go at that. But he was aware of the sudden rush of crimson to Bull Haddock's face, of the swelling of ugly veins, and of a mouth that closed into an extremely unpleasant line.

"Once I told you I would make the rules here," Haddock reminded him sharply. "Once I said I would be the big man in Plaquemines."

"I know," Clayton said easily. "You even said you'd wind up by breaking the old Mississippi's back. But"—he laughed a little now—"I'm not selling this plantation to you." Then he turned away.

Now, for all of his bluntness, Bull Haddock was not without finesse. And when he next sought out Bud Creeper his directions were explicit. "I'll have that plantation of Clayton's—or something's going to happen," he said shortly. "I'm putting eleven thousand dollars to your account and I expect you to buy it for me. Get to work—I want that plantation."

Bud Creeper took the hint. But unlike Bull Haddock, his master, he pursued his course less aggressively. He was all blandness and courtesy as he appeared a week later before young Clayton. He was bowing and scraping as he opened the interview. And he was a long while in coming to the point. But at last he made it.

"I've been lookin' round for a plantation of my own," he confessed. "I've heard you were thinking of giving up yours. Is it in the market?" His face, thin and hollow, was a network of wrinkles meant to signify benevolence.

If it had not been that just a week ago Clayton had refused to sell to Bull Haddock, it is highly possible that he might now have considered an offer from Bud Creeper. This for the simple reason that Clayton, like the rest of Plaquemines, did not know that Bud Creeper was Bull Haddock's man. He knew the diminutive lawyer only as a newcomer who seemed to be having difficulty in making a livelihood. But the act of refusing to sell his plantation once had served to exaggerate in young Clayton's mind his sense of a duty not to sell. A word from his father in New Orleans would have made such a refusal impossible, because his father was in need of money. But as long as the elder Clayton felt it a duty to hold on to the old plantation, his son was willing to sacrifice his own plans.

Thus it was that again he said: "No." He thought of a girl in New Orleans who waited for him, and of an old man whose pride refused to let him accept relief at the expense of parting with a family heritage.

And Bud Creeper, unlike his master, took the decision philosophically.

"Some time you may change your mind. I'll be waiting."

He said it quietly enough, but it gave the younger man a queer little feeling of fate. It made him think of that big, yellow river flood waiting out there above the levees.

"This country," the lawyer went on smoothly, "is strange. This river works in queer ways. Some kind of men it likes—works with. Some other kind it breaks." He was talkng now of the flood; and Clayton listened, oddly moved.

"Maybe," young Clayton answered, at last. "But I'll hold on for a while. The engineers say my levee's safe."

Bud Creeper nodded and departed. He had met a rebuff, but he was prepared for it. He would come back again to renew his offer. For, in his way, he was as persistent as his master. But when he reported to Bull Haddock he made the case seem even more difficult, for obvious reasons. "May not ever sell—this young Clayton," he advised Haddock. "Stubborn as hell, he is."

Bull Haddock's frown deepened. "He'll come my way in the end or I'll come his way," he said thickly. "And if I ever start his way, I won't stop until I break him."

He was surely like the river, this man Haddock. People had said it when he came, with his yellow skin; they were saying it now, as he stalked savagely among the negroes, ill using them. They said it while they turned to gaze up at the fierce flow of the Father of Waters, menacing them day and night.

And all the while young Clayton went about his duties at the little run-down plantation, thinking his thoughts. Ten thousand dollars would have put his father on his feet, given young Clayton his own start, and brought him back to that girl in New Orleans. But until word came from his father, he would hold out. Once he shivered a little in the hot spring sunshine, once he frowned a bit at the sullen, heavy roar of that big river overhead. Then he thought of Bull Haddock's words: "Some day I'll turn that river to my own account. Some day I'll make it work for me."

And, once again, young Clayton said: "He will—like hell!"

Some rivers, in an easy, leisurely flow of existence, scarcely affect the life of surrounding communities. But the old Mississippi is not that way. For all of her days she has been an extremist: She has made the soft-drawling, sleepy inhabitants of the Delta country, and she has made the firebrands who began with La Salle and De Soto and came down to Lousiana in the brawling steamboat mob. She has a habit, in flood time, of evolving some pretty bad specimens. This spring her yellow, sinister influence, her terrible torrent, made Bull Haddock.

It was almost as if that fierce swirling flood was the thing that motivated this man Haddock. He would stand atop the straining levees, scowling at the river, cursing it with that contempt which one outlaw holds for another. And the old Mississippi, as if conscious of its power, seemed, in suspicion, to scowl back at him.

In New Orleans the newspapers were writhing with the headlines: "City in Danger. Levees May Go." Here and there, above the wide crescent curve of the river, some levees did go. And gallantly the little launches and relief boats set about the business of rescuing refugees from treetop and housetop, slipping through the floating swamps of live oak and Spanish moss on errands of mercy.

But while there was a flood, while it seemed to howl almost at his very doorstep, this Haddock still remained undisturbed in his egotism.

"This river'll never lick me!" he

promised himself stolidly. And he meant what he said.

Once again Bud Creeper had reported an unsuccessful interview with young Clayton. The eleven thousand dollars put in cash to Bud Creeper's name by Bull Haddock remained unclaimed. And now Haddock was beginning to be impatient. Like the river, smashing against the levees, he was tired of waiting for his prey. With a temper naturally short, he was almost unruly. And his impatience was in no wise alleviated by the words of Bud Creeper.

"He's a stubborn customer, this kid Clayton," Creeper reported after his second unsuccessful attempt to buy the plantation. "He may never loosen up." The man rubbed his dry hands together in that peculiar washing motion. It was his game to make his job appear even more difficult. If, in the end, he did put the sale through, it would increase his value in the eyes of his master.

"Some day," Haddock said, his upper lip twitching, "I'm going to get a bellyful of this kid's bullheadedness. Some day I'm going to show him who he's fooling with."

Bud Creeper shrugged. "It may come to that," he admitted. This was Creeper's hour—the time when, for all of his own power and drive, Bull Haddock looked to him for aid. And Creeper was not reluctant about prolonging it.

However, as a matter of truth, there did seem small likelihood of young Clayton changing his mind about selling. Even Bud Creeper admitted it to himself. In some way, by gossip and intuition, he had come to the true state of affairs. For himself, young Clayton would have gone back to New Orleans; what held him on his pathetic remnant of an old sugar kingdom was something personal and sympathetic. And when Bud Creeper picked up little odd bits of information he began to see the truth.

"It's his father that makes him stick it out," a Cajun told Creeper. "The kid's game. If he thinks his father wants it, he'll stay on that plantation all his life. A single word from his father, perhaps, will change his mind."

Bud Creeper nodded and thought: "Some day my chance may come. I'll be waiting for it." But to Bull Haddock he said nothing, merely maintaining his usual show of pessimism.

But in the end it was Bull Haddock himself who broke under the strain. It was the master and not his man who lost the final shred of patience. And for this there was a reason.

Bull Haddock was alone that afternoon. But Creeper had gone down to town, ten miles away, on a small matter of business; he was to wait there until the evening train would carry him to Baton Rouge and the completion of one of the minor ventures which he transacted to his employer's account. For a long while after Creeper had departed, Haddock remained alone, irritable and fuming. At last he rose, caught the ferry, and crossed to the other side of the river.

Almost unconsciously his steps led him toward the plantation of young Clayton. Almost by instinctive desire he plodded along the clay roads until the dilapidated old plantation hove in view. It was a Saturday afternoon and the field workers were gone. An air of drowsy stillness hung over the granulation shed, the crusher and roller huts. The tall, swaying cane stood up against the blue sky.

It was a scene calculated, ordinarily, to soothe.

But it assumed no such aspect to Bull Haddock. In its well-planned irrigation, its sheds and fields, its boat landing up on the levee, he saw what he wanted—location and possibilities. Its ownership would give him two planta-

tions facing each other across the river. It gave him an eager, hungry sensation. Almost without realizing it, he walked upon the levee, which was all that stood between plantation and flood.

The place was deserted, the hands paid off for the week. But on the veranda of the old house Haddock found Clayton. Even at a distance Haddock saw the look of displeasure that came over the younger man's face. But he steeled himself.

"I've come to talk business again," he said, dropping into a chair without the invitation. The lack of that courtesy only increased his belligerency. "Maybe you've had time to change your mind."

Clayton shook his head slowly. "No," he said; "it's not for sale." The boy knew that back in New Orleans they were getting almost hourly reports on the river. He knew that his father had also seen the State engineer's bulletin which attested the fact that his levee was safe. Still, he could not know whether or not his father would worry.

"Ten thousand dollars," Haddock said temptingly. "You could do a lot with that much money. It could mean a lot to a young man like you."

"The plantation," Clayton said shortly, "belongs to my father." Young Clayton was a tall, thin sort, with high cheek bones and a thin, sensitive mouth. Even in his deep-set solemn eyes there was something that seemed somewhat austere to Bull Haddock.

Haddock began to lose his temper. "I've been here twice to ask you to sell," he said evenly. "It isn't often I go to so much trouble."

For the first time Clayton began to get what this fellow was driving at—that he was frankly trying to bully him.

"I don't follow you," Clayton said, in a tone that should have warned the other man, but didn't. "Just what are you saying?"

Now, for one fleeting instant, caution checked Bull Haddock. Something told him that in those deep-set eyes and that straight mouth was a thing that was not to be cowered. But when a man has been a bully all his life he does not learn restraint easily. And now, facing young Clayton, Bull Haddock went the limit.

All at once his reserve was gone; he laid his cards on the table. He spoke now in the sullen voice that had boomed down the tall grasses of San Domingo and made its owner a terror throughout the islands. It was the voice of a man who knows what he wants and is going to get it. "You'll sell to me," he roared, "or you're through! Get that? You'll sell or I'll make you wish you'd never seen this place!"

Very quietly young Clayton looked up. "Get out," he directed coolly. "Get out of here quick."

"Why, you little whippersnapper!" Haddock growled, climbing to his feet. "With one hand I could——"

Clayton shot suddenly from his chair and pushed his face close. "I've told you to go, understand? You're looking for trouble—and you'll get it."

Impulsively Bull Haddock's fist clenched, his muscles straining. But young Clayton's right arm went back curving; and in that instant he beat the other man to the blow. Clayton's fist collided smashingly against the other's chin, and Haddock went down in a puzzled, kicking mass. When he shakily arose, the younger man was waiting.

"More of it?" Clayton asked. "Or will you get out and float?"

For once in his life Bull Haddock was bewildered; he hadn't even seen that smashing fist coming. But his eyes were bloodshot and his lip twitched like a whipped animal's. "I'm going," he mumbled confusedly. "I'm going"—he was shuffling off—"but when I come back I'm coming for keeps. You'll see."

Young Clayton's laugh, soft and mocking, reached Haddock. Its composure infuriated him, as he rubbed clumsily at his sore chin. "You can laugh!" Haddock shouted, all the while retreating. "The next time you'll laugh on the other side of your face!"

He was in a cold, murderous fury. He had been humbled first and then actually licked, by a kid. Blackness was before his gaze as he stumbled off; he was muttering unintelligibly as he found his way along the levee. He would get this young fool for keeps now! "I'll show him!" he cried wildly. "I'll show him!"

And then he stopped. Suddenly, above even the mad beat of his own aroused passions, there seemed to come another echo of fury; and he stopped to listen. For a moment he waited, wondering. And then he knew what made that sound. It was the savage, onward rush of the river's flood. It was like himself, at that moment, in its unbounded ferocity. He watched it straining against the mud levee—all in the world that kept it from flooding down and wreaking disaster on young Clayton's plantation.

Then Bull Haddock suddenly laughed. He slapped his sides in his pleasure. "Once I told that kid I'd make that river work for me—that I'd turn it to my account." He laughed again, harshly and loudly, his eyes on that terrific flood which pressed so hungrily against the levee bank. "I'll lick him," Haddock went on, as he hastened toward the ferry. "And I'll lick him with this damned river, into the bargain!" He was still grinning over his idea as he stepped down the gangplank of the little ferry.

It was perhaps three hours after sunset when, for the second time that day, Bull Haddock crossed the river to the side where lay young Clayton's plantation. It was a thick, black night, and he met nobody, once he had left the ferry. Over his shoulder was a sack; inside the sack was a pick and shovel.

His feet found the levee with difficulty, but he plodded determinedly ahead. It would be risky to chance a lantern, so he went carefully through the heavy pall of the night. All the while he went along he could hear the steady roar of the river, like the deep, humming drone of a monotonous bird. It had a hungry, eager sound; and several times Bull Haddock laughed to himself, hearing it.

"I'll give you something to howl about, in a minute," he said aloud. For the time had come when Bull Haddock was to keep his promise to bend the old Mississippi to his will.

The river, roaring out there in the darkness beyond the levee, seemed to hear his threat, to whine as it sped along. It was almost like a caged animal that sees the threatening whip of its master. Bull Haddock felt that likeness, undiscerning as he was. It seemed that echoes and whispers came out of the night from the river to him —things that he felt dully but did not understand. They were the ghosts of the men who had fought the Mississippi—the Spaniards with De Soto, the hot, fever-eyed French who had come with La Salle, the hundreds of steamboat pilots who had struggled with the river's endless fury. And now, another time, had come a would-be conqueror: Bull Haddock was attempting what other men had tried to accomplish before.

He found young Clayton's levee without much trouble; he knew it by the shadowy outline of the boat landing which he had seen earlier that day. As near as possible he marked the spot in the levee which lay almost on a line with Clayton's house and machine sheds.

"Do it right," he promised himself. "Give it to him where it'll stick!"

Then he opened his sack and removed the pick and shovel.

Once, twice he heaved the pick overhead and brought it down savagely into the levee. He was astonished at how deep a hole he made. At this rate it would not take long. Within an hour or so his work should be done. In that length of time he could dig through the levee wall and take himself off. Afterward it would be a matter almost of minutes before the river flood found the cavity, seeped slowly through, and then swept in its great fury down upon the plantation below.

"And then," Haddock told himself with a grin, "it'll all be over."

There was no light in the dark plantation house that nestled below among its pecan trees where the wax-white flowers of the Spanish dagger glowed eerily. There was no sound, either—no sound save the steady but cautious thud of Bull Haddock's pick as it cut deep into the levee; no sound but the full, frightful roar of the big river. Its sound alone would mask the noise of the pick that so unceasingly rose and fell.

There, in the darkness, with pick and shovel, Bull Haddock was bending the old Mississippi to his will—compelling it to wreak his vengeance on young Clayton. The thought gave him almost as much satisfaction as the knowledge that shortly the breaking of the levee would loose the mad waters that would wipe out a plantation he couldn't buy.

Many things were stirring there in the darkness by the Mississippi's flow. And many things went on down the line of its course.

For one thing, and while Bull Haddock worked, another man leaned carelessly against a post at the railroad station ten miles away. It was Bud Creeper; and the train which was to have carried him on his master's business to Baton Rouge had departed an hour ago without him. For Bud Creeper was taking no trains this night. And as he leaned against his post, glancing at his watch, he appeared to be expecting somebody.

Whistling softly, Bud Creeper was a queer picture at that moment. And his thoughts were as strange. For a half hour back he had come into the railroad station, idling time away while he waited for his train. And in his idling, he had wandered into the little telegraph office, where a busy operator tapped his key. For one moment Creeper had lounged, until his eyes strained on a mass of undelivered telegrams; when he read one lying at his elbow, he had suddenly started.

"These wires just come in?" he asked, trying to keep the excitement from his voice. His pulse was racing and he quivered curiously.

The operator looked up from under his green eyeshade. "Yeh," he said, in an unhappy tone. "And they gotta go out to-night. Tough life for us guys!" And he turned back to his key.

But Bud Creeper was satisfied; he knew all that mattered. Within five minutes he was at the telephone booth putting in a call. And when he heard his party pick up the receiver at the other end he was quiet and cool. For ten minutes he talked; and when he emerged from the booth he stopped at the warning call from the station master: "Here's your train comin'!"

"Let her roll," said Mr. Creeper, without interest. "I changed my mind. I ain't doing any traveling to-night." So he took up his stand, leaning against a lamp-post.

And, ten miles away, the man who believed Creeper was on that train, sweated and grunted with a heaving pickax over an ever-deepening hole.

No man, not by nature a wrecker, could have pursued the course Bull Haddock followed for almost two hours, without having had doubts or qualms. But Haddock was not a crea-

ture of sensibilities. As he sweated and toiled and grunted, while he swung his pick, he only warmed to his work. Behind him was that evil foundation which San Domingo sometimes lays within a man's soul. His days had been days of power, of iron rule. A man, thus bred, does not weaken soon. And all Bull Haddock saw, as he did his work, was repayment for an injury. He was a man who follows one course to the end. And this time his years of tropic-nurtured malevolence had led him to the edge of a flood-swollen river.

Bull Haddock stopped once to wipe the dripping sweat from his brow. "Just a little more," he muttered softly. "Just a little——"

There was a danger. To make the hole too wide would be risky; he must allow time for himself to get safely away before that hell of rushing water broke loose through the cavity. Several times he knelt, feeling with his hands for the first signs of moisture that would tell him it was time to leave. But his fingers still came away dry.

"The big man of Plaquemines!" he grunted sullenly. "The fool didn't believe me. But I told him. I told him when I came back it would be for keeps!" He laughed without mirth. He stood up for a moment to turn his eyes toward the great, wavering bulk of the house down there in the darkness. Then he picked up his pick again.

Once a stupid loon moaned among the live oaks, clattering its wings among the festoons of moss; once to Bull Haddock came the slumberous song of the locusts in the trees. But he did not raise his head at all. There was a wild, vicious savagery to his swinging pick now; and he had to remind himself to cut more carefully. And finally, when that investigating hand went down into the dark cavern it came away damp.

"Finished!" Bull Haddock said triumphantly.

He hesitated a moment, undecided as to whether it would be best to leave the incriminating pick and shovel behind. Then he made up his mind. He placed both in the sack, knotted the ends, and hurled the thing far out over the top of the levee. The splash sounded loudly on his ears. He stood there momentarily, shaking his fist at the doomed plantation. Then he laughed.

"The big man of Plaquemines!" he pronounced oddly. The words had a queer sound. "The guy who licked a planter and a river at one crack!"

Now, just before he took to his heels, Bull Haddock halted a moment to hear the first, gentle but ever-increasing flow of the river through the hole in the levee. It made a gurgling, trickling sound. It was an odd noise; it did not sound to Bull Haddock at all like a thing that had been tamed. As he hurried away into the darkness he carried with him a vague hallucination. It seemed as though the old Mississippi, insinuating itself at last through that mud-piled levee, had been chuckling.

For a long time Bull Haddock scurried along the riverside. A half hour later, safe at the ferry landing, he hurried aboard the little boat. He was shivering queerly. And he actually started when, suddenly, far in the distance, came a dull, rumbling, booming sound.

"Now, what the hell was that?" the ferry captain grunted. He waited as if to hear the sound repeated. But that noise never came again. And only Bull Haddock knew that at last he had gained his vengeance—that the levee above young Clayton's plantation, betrayed by a pick and shovel, had given way.

It was a pale, wan sun that looked down the next morning upon the floating debris that had once been a sugar plantation; and it looked down upon an active scene of rescue boats, chugging

busily along. But there had been no loss of life. Indeed, the fact that the plantation had been pitched in a small valley had to some extent saved the rest of the countryside, restraining the flood within its own area. But what had been young Clayton's family heritage was now merely a sluggish yellow sea.

News of the breaking of that levee was slow in reaching the other side of the river and beyond. In fact, it had not yet reached Bud Creeper, when, early that morning, he climbed out of bed, put his clothes on, and set off for Bull Haddock's plantation, a mile away. Bud Creeper had been busy that previous night and had had insufficient sleep. But he carried himself well as he walked along.

Forty-five minutes later he was being shown into a room where a great, towering man sat peaceably smoking a cigar. There was an air of contentment about Bull Haddock. But Creeper saw it at once. He marked the glow of gratification in the other man's eyes. It made him wonder. And he wondered even more at Haddock's salutation:

"What in the devil are you doing here, Creeper? I thought you were in Baton Rouge!" He was almost genial.

But there was an atmosphere of mystery about Bud Creeper. He seated himself carefully, rubbing his lean hands together. "I didn't take the train," he explained slowly. "I never left the station last night."

For the first time Bull Haddock was attentive, puzzled. "But that business in Baton Rouge——"

"It'll keep," interrupted Bud Creeper. "What I pulled off last night was a hell of a lot bigger deal than that Baton Rouge thing."

"It was this way," Creeper explained. "Last night I was waiting in the station for my train. You know how you get restless in a station? Well, I ambled into the telegraph operator's office and I seen a pile of undelivered telegrams lying on the desk." There was a steady glow of triumph in the little man's eyes now. "On the top of them telegrams was one that caught my eye. It was marked for this youngster, Clayton. Wait, I think I remember even what it said: 'Afraid of flood. Better sell.' It was signed, 'Father.' "

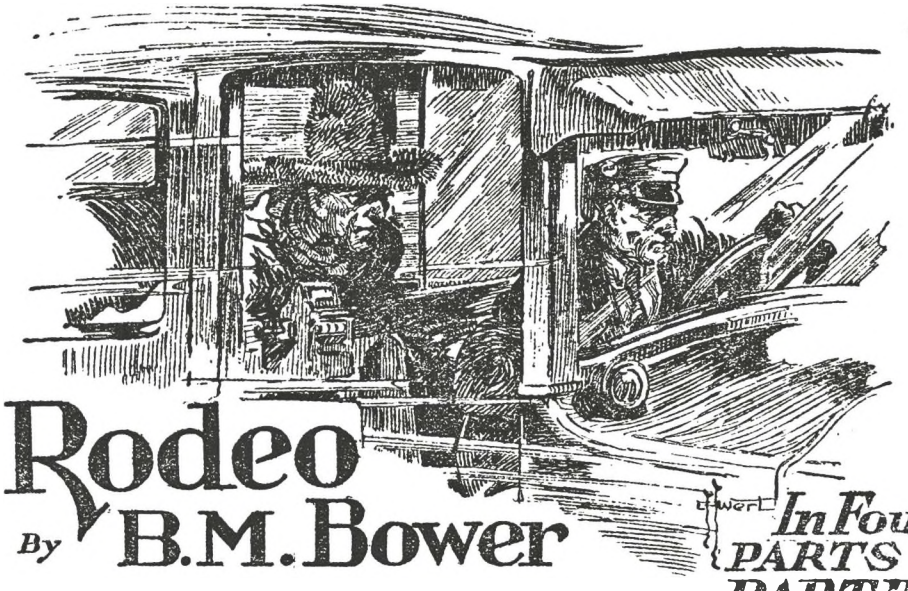
At that instant Bull Haddock suddenly felt his veins turn to ice, and he was leaning forward wild-eyed, as the other went on: "That was all I needed —see? It was what I was waiting for all the time." All at once, aware of the chalky whiteness of Haddock's face, Bud Creeper halted. "What's the matter with you? Sick or somethin'?"

In his terrible rush of sickening panic, Bull Haddock was temporarily without power of speech. He made one wild, savage gesture with his hand for the other to go on. And, conscious of something being terribly wrong somewhere, Bud Creeper said hurriedly:

"Nothin' much else. I got this kid Clayton on the phone and told him I had accidentally seen this wire for him. I told him I'd meet him if he came to town at once. In two hours he was with me and we signed the papers. I got the deed for his plantation; and I paid him that eleven thousand cash you put in the bank to my name." He groped into his pocket for the paper, found it and held it out.

But Bull Haddock did not take it. In that moment, his jaw sagging, his brain whirling in a crazy muddle of confusion and helplessness, he could only stare like a stricken man. In his ears there seemed suddenly a ghastly, roaring sound as of the abrupt flooding of water. Once again it seemed to Bull Haddock that the old Mississippi, splashing along its way, was chuckling.

Moran Tudury will contribute another story to an early issue.



Rodeo

By B. M. Bower

In Four PARTS
PART III

Author of "The Truth Trapper," Etc.

After years away from the Flying U, the cowboys of the Happy Family returned for a reunion. How they had changed! thought the Kid, who had grown up during their absence. Now they were sliding into middle age, dressed in city clothes, and successful. He felt distant toward his former heroes. They were all there—Mig, Andy, Pink, Weary, Chip, the Little Doctor, the Old Man and the others. When they bemoaned the passing of the old West, the Kid declared that the modern cow-punchers were as good as the old-timers. His actions led to a quarrel, and he rode to Chicago, to join the rodeo there. His aim was to make Western horsemanship an international sport. In Chicago he met Mr. Harlan, whose influence secured him good quarters at the arena. The days before the event were dull, but soon other participants arrived. Harlan turned up with Dulcie, his daughter, and the Kid met her. When he finally rode and roped in the rodeo, he was unhappily aware of her presence in the grand stand. The Happy Family, including his mother and dad, were there, too. But he showed them all something when he won the big relay race.

CHAPTER XI—*(Continued.)*

THE COWBOY RELAY RACE.

THEY got away smoothly, Stardust leaping into his full stride with the third jump, as was his way of running. In the first furlong he passed a brown and a gray and was creeping up on a lean-flanked black that was streaking it in long leaps like a greyhound. The Kid had studied that black in its stall, a little uneasily, a bit doubtful. It had the look of speed, but he selfishly prayed that it would blow up at the station, too nervous for a quick change. Certainly it was a horse to fear on the track.

Coming into the last turn down by the Indian camp the black's rider began using the whip, and the horse lengthened its stride and crept ahead a length. But Stardust laid back his ears and took the home stretch in a burst of speed that brought him nearly even when the black horse was being pulled in for the change at station No. 2. Just as the Kid had hoped, the black overran and had to be brought back—a circumstance that won a grin from the Kid's tightened lips.

Stardust surged up past five stations

to where Bill stood out on the track, waving his arms to point the Kid in, and the wise little sorrel turned and stopped with a stiff-legged jump as if he had used four-wheel brakes. In that jump the Kid was off and pulling the saddle, swinging it into place on Sunup's back. Another swift motion caught the cinch and tightened it, and he was on and gone from there as a little pinto streaked by. Others came tearing up behind him. The Kid leaned low and implored the horse to show his stuff, while the thunder of hoofbeats filled his ears and he rode in a smother of dust from the first lap they had run.

On that last sharp turn the pinto shortened his stride. But Sunup leaned to the curve and took it full speed, like the trained rope horse he was, that could follow at the heels of a dodging animal and never slacken his pace. He shot by the pinto just as it was yanked back on its heels at the station.

Stardust, watching for him to turn in, was trembling like an aspen leaf with eagerness to go again. The Kid was on the ground with his saddle when Sunup stopped. He was on Stardust and gone two long jumps ahead of the black. He needed that extra space—every inch of it.

He was leading the field, but inexorably the black horse was lessening the distance between them. He was taller than Stardust, longer, and his full stride covered more ground. The crowd was yelling for some one to "Go on! Go on!" The Kid thought they were beseeching the black horse, and his jaw set to the stubborn angle his parents would have recognized instantly—or the Happy Family, for that matter; they had seen him wear it upon occasion, years ago when he was being a "ril ole cow-puncher" and wanted to do whatever his heroes did.

"Git outa here!" he hissed close to Stardust's flattened ears. "Want 'em to walk on yuh? *Move!"*

Stardust moved, but the tall black inched up until they were running neck and neck on the home stretch and the black was pulled down for his station.

This time the Kid landed running alongside Stardust, his fingers at the cinch. That gave him a second or so. He flung the saddle on Sunup, gave one yank at the latigo because that was the rule, that saddles must be cinched, and yelled to the horse. Sunup was running when the Kid leaped to the saddle. He leaned low. He could hear the pinto coming close behind. That darned pinto! Stuck like a guilty conscience. What was the crowd hollering about? Did they think he was going to be a flop? The pinto and the black—he'd show 'em both! He'd show the folks!

"And you thought you'd make a doctor out of that Kid!" Weary turned whimsically to the Little Doctor, who was relaxing into her seat as the Kid rode through the gate close by—winner by an inch or so of Sunup's nose.

"That boy shore can ride!" Andy Green paid tribute as he relighted a forgotten cigarette.

"That dog-gone committee's went and let 'em run in a race horse on the Kid!" the Old Man heatedly accused. "That black horse's got no business in a cowboy relay race. Somebody oughta tell 'em about it."

"I notice Claude held his own," the Little Doctor pointed out crisply. "He's looking thin. I wonder——"

"Now, Dell, for the Lord's sake, don't get weak-kneed and go honeying him up again," Chip warned her, so sternly that one suspected he was bolstering his own resolution.

"I'm not. I want Claude to get a thorough lesson, since it has come to a crisis between his parents and himself. But he *does* look thin. That doesn't mean I'm going to encourage him in this crazy idea of being a champion. I might have suspected it was in his mind." She bit her lip. "I do hope

he isn't going to try and ride any bucking horses! If he does——"

"Why, Mrs. Bennett! Do you mean —is Montana Kid your son?" Miss Dulcie Harlan's eyes were extremely bright and wide open. She had been looking from one to the other, puzzled until the truth dawned suddenly.

"Montana Kid—what a name to call himself! Yes, he's our son Claude, behaving like a wild colt that has broken out of the pasture. I'd like to shake him!" She laughed unevenly and wiped her eyes as unobtrusively as was possible in so public a place. "To think my own son would look me squarely in the eye and never give a sign!"

"Let him alone a while and he'll come around," Chip counseled. "Young cub —he'll come around fast enough when he runs out of money!" Which was, of course, a normal father's conventional reaction. "Or when he finds we aren't worrying a bit over his not speaking to us," he amended more keenly. "He's too satisfied with himself right now, Dell. He'd only patronize us."

"I was hoping he'd be beaten," she told him half-heartedly. "He's altogether too sure of himself."

"They ain't goin' to beat *him,*" her brother stated, with grim boastfulness; "not if they pull that race horse outa there, like they oughta. The Kid knows what he's doin'. Perty level headed, for all the chance he's had. He can handle a horse!"

So they talked, while the cowgirls rode bronchos unheeded. To the party occupying the north end of the officials' box, just south of the gate into the arena, the rodeo had resolved itself chiefly into the presence and the performance of one slim young fellow who never glanced their way if he could help it.

The Little Doctor relapsed unconsciously into a maternal solicitude that concerned itself with little things.

"I wonder where he got that peacock-blue shirt," she said. "I never saw it before—and he's too dark for that shade of blue."

CHAPTER XII.

THE STOLEN BLUE SHIRT.

OUT in the field midway between the chutes and the Indian camp the flagman on the big sturdy bay dropped the white flag as the Kid flung both hands aloft, stepping back away from the huddled black calf on the ground. A pause, and the booming voice of the announcer:

"Mon-tana Kid-d—t-i-m-e—twen-ty-n-i-n-e and four fifths *sec*-onds!"

Not so good. The perfunctory applause that followed told how the crowd had failed to thrill over the Kid's calf roping. It ought to have been better—it would have been if the Kid had not missed his first throw. Those black calves were quicker to duck aside than the tame bull calves the Kid had been practicing on at home, and this one fooled the Kid.

He untied the little beast, all but yielding to the impulse he had to lift it on the toe of his boot for the trick it had played him, and rode scowling back to the chutes. No day money for him on this event; already his time had been beaten by a lanky man from Oklahoma. The Happy Family were crowing themselves hoarse over the bloomer he pulled, he thought savagely, as he tied Sunup to the fence for Walt to ride back if he wanted to.

The Kid went over and stood beside Billy and Beck, who were not contesting this event, and tormented himself with imagining what that bunch over in the box was thinking. It's rather a pity that the Kid could not have overheard a few of the remarks.

"Fast work, that—considering he blew his first loop," was Weary's comment. "Prettiest throw and tie I've seen, so far."

Chip, beside him, gave a nod and a snort.

"Darned chump, if he'd told me what he was up to I could have put him wise to the fact that those bulls are slower than contest calves," he grumbled. "What he should have done was give them a longer start. But that's it—you can't tell a young rooster like him anything!"

"Wonderful horse he's got," the Native Son observed. "I wonder if he'd let me use it in a few roping scenes tomorrow morning. He'd photograph like a million. And that other one, the little sorrel——"

"Stardust, he calls the sorrel," Chip supplied wistfully. "Trained them himself, as near as I can find out——"

The Little Doctor gave a sudden exclamation, pointing to a certain name on her program.

"He's going to ride broncs!" she cried tragically. "Chip, can't you go to the judges and forbid him to ride? Why, he isn't of age! He can't ride without your consent, can he?"

"I guess he can," Chip told her dryly. "I sure am not going to try and halter-break him now at this late day. Let him ride if he wants to—he won't be the first young gander to get piled. Do him good. Knock a little sense into him, maybe."

"Oh, I want to see him ride a bronc!" Miss Dulcie Harlan eagerly exclaimed. "I'm sorry you don't want him to, Mrs. Bennett—and I'm afraid you must blame me, really. He hadn't entered for bronc-riding, but I got him to do it. He's really riding for my sake, sort of——"

"Why, when did you meet Claude? I didn't know——"

"Oh, ages ago," said Miss Dulcie sweetly—as her name implied. "I think your son is the best-looking thing, Mrs. Bennett! I'm crazy about him, really. But when Dad told me he knew your brother long ago, and asked if I might stay with you, I never dreamed Montana Kid was your son that had run away from home. He'll be simply paralyzed when he discovers—well, I think he must suspect something already, for he looked straight at me, here with you, and he had the funniest expression on his face! I'm simply dying to see him ride a bucking horse; I bet him he'd fall off. I do hope he does!"

"Well, I don't!" his mother retorted, rather too sharply for perfect politeness. "A bucking horse nearly killed his father, and I saw the whole thing. I shall never get over the horror of it, I think. If Claude should be thrown and hurt——"

"Say, he plays football, and that's a darn sight more dangerous," Chip broke in upon her worrying. "I wish I had a dollar for every time I've been thrown off a horse!" His eyes went to Weary and Andy Green.

"Same here," Andy spoke up promptly. "Why, getting piled is part of a kid's education."

"Dog-gone it, the Kid ain't piled, yet!" The Old Man glared around at them. "No use hollerin' before you're hurt, Dell. He ain't piled, and he ain't goin' to be piled, neither!"

So the squaw race went lurching past before their inattentive eyes while they argued and discussed the Kid, whose chagrin magnified his failure to make good and sent him into the bronc riding in the mood to do or die.

Billy Perry and Walt Myers rode first, and caused a flutter of excitement in the box because of the blue shirts they wore.

"There he goes!" squealed Dulcie, regardless of the announcer's statement that Walter Myers was riding Dun Gone out of chute No. 5.

"That's not the Kid," the Native Son corrected her. "Too stocky for him."

Two other riders hurtled from the chutes with more or less skill and courage, and then another blue shirt of a

certain unusual shade; but it clothed Billy Perry's wiry little torso and drew upon that innocent youth the scathing sarcasm of Miss Harlan.

"Blue is being worn this season," she opined, and got a worried little smile from her chaperon.

"I don't mind it—on other young men," she said whimsically. "But I do object to blue satin on my son!"

"He must look darling in a dinner jacket," mused Dulcie irrelevantly—dreaming aloud, it may be.

"Mon-tana *Kid!* Riding *In*valid—outa chute No. 4!"

Abrupt silence in the box, while their gaze fixed intently upon chute No. 4. Through the stout bars of the gate a heaving brown body could be glimpsed. A dull, wooden clatter, a dark head thrust suddenly up above the top bar. More clatter.

"Oh, don't *let* Claude ride that outlaw!" the Little Doctor cried under her breath to Chip.

"By golly, that Invalid is working off all his steam before he starts!" Weary exclaimed in a purposely exuberant tone. "Bet he won't more than crow-hop when they let him out."

"There he goes, climbing up now to get on!" cried Dulcie, wriggling in her chair with anticipatory excitement, as the Kid climbed the gate and sat astride the top, waiting a chance to lower himself into the saddle. If she could only have read the Kid's thoughts just then!

"Mon-tana *Kid,* folks—chute No. 4," the amplifiers admonished.

The Little Doctor's hands clenched together in her lap as the blue-satin shirt slowly disappeared within the chute. She could see it now between the bars—the Kid setting his weight carefully in the saddle, fitting his feet to the stirrups. The Happy Family, knowing of old just what was taking place in those few preparatory seconds, leaned forward in strained silence.

In the chute the Kid settled himself, picked up the one rein in his left hand—purposely leaving it loose—pulling off his hat, held it aloft in his right hand and grinned through at the gate tender.

"Let 'er go!"

The gate was yanked open. For a taut second horse and rider stood framed within the narrow pen, then, with a squeal of rage and a high forward leap, Invalid dashed into the open. The Kid reached forward with his wrapped spur rowels, high on the shoulders with a backward swing. One, two, three, four, five—"scratching front five times," according to the contest rule. (Gosh, but this Invalid horse was certainly throwing his feet!)

Backward with the spurs—one, two, three, four, five—and that also was the rule. (Wonder what would happen if a horse didn't jump that many times?) Swing your hat and *yip-yip-yip.* (Beginning to get good! And that coyote yell for the Harlan girl's especial benefit, darn her picture! Wanted to see him take a spill, did she? Well, it was just too bad, that was all; but he couldn't seem to pour himself out of the saddle very well to-day!)

Invalid wheeled upon his hind feet, gathered himself together and came down with all the force his twelve hundred pounds could put into the landing. (Aha! so that was the game, eh? Bet there was another one.)

There was, and the Kid felt as if his neck had shortened four inches after that jolt. Then the whistle blew and the assistants galloped up on either side, one taking the halter rein from the Kid's willing hand while the other rode close so that the Kid could hop off.

"That Kid's a born rider, Chip!" Weary declaimed. "I told you he had the look of a rider, didn't I? And you'd make a doctor outa *him,* would you? Oh, mamma!"

"He oughta be in pictures," Andy declared with a shade of reluctance.

"Yeah—his head is almost big enough for a star, right now!" Pink reminded him bluntly. "It'd just take one picture to ruin that boy for life!"

"Oh, didn't that horse buck just *darling?*" Dulcie enthused. "Of course, Montana Kid will have to fall off *some time*—if he doesn't I'll never be able to face him again. You're right, Mr. Perkins; he's terrifically lofty."

"I don't want you boys to encourage Claude in this sort of thing," the Little Doctor here cautioned the group earnestly. "I simply won't have him losing his head over wild-West contests. He can't keep it up without getting hurt or crippled, and it's a shame to waste that splendid strength of his on bucking horses."

"Too late now—you've got to let him go ahead and get a spill or two, Dell," Chip contended. By the light in his eyes Chip was betraying a definite pride in his recalcitrant son and heir; and by his tone he was merely letting an unruly child discover for himself that fire will burn. But tones, as we all know, can be kept somewhat under control Eyes seldom lie.

The Kid felt better after what he hoped was a hundred-point ride. Walt and Billy had made good rides, too, and some one in the team was almost sure to draw a day prize into the treasury—where it certainly would be welcome. As he rode back to the stables to change mounts for the fancy-riding event, his hat was set at a jaunty angle over one handsome eyebrow and his whole being exhaled an aura of conscious excellence. He could even fling a glance upward to Dulcie Harlan, and an airy wave of the hand to his mother and dad and Uncle J. G., as he eased through the gate which some one obligingly opened.

Later, when he reappeared with Stardust for the trick and fancy riding, the little girl in the blue-satin knickers and blouse was riding to the gate; slowly because of the crowd gathered there and because, too, she was a little timid about riding out alone into the arena.

As the Kid came up she sent him the same wistful little smile that had made him want to cheer her somehow before the trick roping began. Still, it was not altogether the smile that brought the Kid boldly to her side. Partly it was his consciousness of Dulcie Harlan there in the box just behind him.

"Going to ride?"

"Yes. Are you?"

"Going to try," he said lightly, and pushed the gate open for her to pass, following her as the loitering men made way for them. "We better be getting over that way, I guess."

"Oh, no. They told me to ride down to the other end of the arena, and be ready to come dashing up this way when we're called," she told him shyly. "I came out here so I wouldn't have to ride down through those dark stables alone."

The Kid nodded, and they rode together down the track. He hoped that Harlan girl was getting an eyeful; and he was glad this little girl had chosen to wear blue. If she made good, he thought, he might invite her to join their team. Two or three good girl riders might be just the touch they needed to make a team popular.

With that nebulous idea in the back of his mind the Kid watched her when she rode alone up the center of the arena, doing her special stunts. Cute little rider, all right. Needed some coaching on that crawl around under the horse's neck; too risky, the way she did it, and not so showy as a safer way he knew.

A fine lot of riders, take them all through; the little girl in blue giving promise of being one of the best, with a bit more confidence and another stunt or two. Light as thistle seed, she was. Kind of lonesome; didn't seem to know a soul. None of the other girls seemed to know her—or to want to, either.

In the intervals between the Kid's

own breakneck rides up the middle of the arena, he watched the girl. One or two of the boys ventured to speak to her, but so far as the Kid could see they got scant encouragement; and that did not displease him much.

But after all, he did not ride back with her, for the event closed with a wild dash down the arena, which brought them to the neighborhood of the lower stable entrance. Stardust had done enough for one day, and he needed a rubdown. The Kid therefore rode in and unsaddled the horse and rubbed him dry, before starting back afoot to the chutes to see how the boys were making out with the steer riding. All three had entered for that, and had entered, too, for the wild-horse race which closed the program just after the Indian buck race.

The Kid's work was over until evening, and take it all in a lump, he felt fairly well satisfied with the day. He was walking along down the passage behind the horses and taking his time for it when Boy came running down to find him.

"Kid! You said—you said somebody stole one of your shirts, and I seen a man a little while ago, and he was wearin' your blue shirt! And somebody stole that drunk man's chaps and hat, too, while he was asleep. I was in here before, but you was gone. And the drunk was sure cussin' a blue streak! I know it wasn't any of your team."

"Where was it you saw him?" The Kid's face hardened as he quickened his pace. "How long ago, Boy?"

"Not very long. It was when you was out there trick riding. I was comin' along from the men's room this side the telephone place, and this guy come along with white, hairy chaps on, and your shirt. And I watched him, and he went in, and I come to get you and you was gone. So I went back, but I didn't see him any place, and then I come to git you ag'in. Kid, he's sure got nerve, wearin' your shirt!"

"I'll say he's got nerve!" The Kid took such long steps that Boy had to trot to keep abreast as they went up the incline and into the outer corridor, empty now of all save a few scattered concession stands doing no business, the keepers busy setting their booths to rights after the rush. Even the ticket boxes outside were empty and closed, the gatekeepers sitting idle.

From above them came the muffled buzzing of the crowd, bursts of laughter and cheering now and then punctuating the hum. The Kid looked in the dressing room, found it empty and turned to Boy.

"I'm going to the chutes, and you aren't allowed. Go back to the folks—they'll have a fit if you aren't there when this crowd begins to move."

He struck off, hurrying now to see the boys ride steers. But just as he passed the curve in the wall he glimpsed, far down the corridor ahead of him, a tall man wearing a blue-satin shirt of a shade there was no mistaking.

CHAPTER XIII.

ROBBERY.

HARLAN went through the outer office where a few cowboys, eager to get out ahead of the crowd for a visit to the city, were putting away chaps and spurs in their lockers. At the door of the inner, business office he met Blair standing before the closed door, and to him Blair turned with some surprise.

"Why, hello, Harlan! I thought you were having some secret confab inside; going to get away with the gate money, maybe. The door's locked——"

"Locked?" Harlan tried it himself. "Who's in there?"

"Don't know who—Smith, maybe. Oughta have the money checked up by this time; the wagon's waiting for it."

"No reason why he should lock the door." Harlan knocked sharply with the cane he carried. As one of the most important members of the rodeo committee he did not fancy being locked out of the office where the money was kept. He was knocking again when Tex strolled up, a fat, brown cigar in the corner of his humorous mouth and his hat on the back of his head. It had been a good show. The crowd was twice what he had expected and its enthusiasm was heartening music in the ears of the manager.

"Say, Harlan," he drawled, "what's the matter? Boys actin' up on yuh? What yuh locked out for?"

"Something wrong in there!" snapped Harlan, his face no longer smiling and boyish. "Smith must be checking up, but that's no reason why the door should be locked."

"Where's Barney? Ain't he supposed to hang around keeping cases till the money's out?"

"I saw Barney going over toward the chutes a few minutes ago," said Blair.

Harlan was knocking again, a peremptory tattoo. A curious group was forming behind him. Tex suddenly tapped him on the shoulder.

"Say, I'll bust the damn door in if yo'-all will stand aside a minute," he offered, and as Harlan stepped back Tex leaned his shoulder against the door. "I could shoot the lock," he said, "but that might draw a crowd in here."

His strength was prodigious. The third heave did the work and he staggered in, Harlan and Blair following close at his heels. The two stopped in amazement at the scene before them, but Tex took a long step into the room and yanked the gag from over Smith's mouth.

"Give us the dope while I unwind yuh," he said tersely. "Who did it, and how?"

Smith, trussed to his chair, worked his jaws silently until speech returned. Blood was still oozing slowly from a broken bruise on the side of his head, and he seemed dazed.

"Ask Jennie," he mumbled. "She saw more'n I did."

"Keep that bunch outa here," Tex commanded, tilting his head toward the doorway where the cowboys were crowding in. Blair turned to do his bidding. "Tell 'em to keep their mouths shut, and send an officer in here. Get McNarty. Boys"—he raised his voice so that they could hear—"the first feller that yeeps, quits the contest, I don't give a damn who he is. McNarty's out by the gate—send him in. Tell him I want him, but don't say why." The group by the door melted, and he turned to where Harlan was freeing the secretary from the bandanna gag.

"A cowboy put his head in the door and told Barney he was to go over to the north gate," the girl explained nervously. "Mr. Smith was working then on the accounts. The fellow had a badge and looked all right. Barney went, and in a minute or two I saw this same man come out of that closet behind the door. He had a gun. He pushed the door shut with his foot and locked it. Then he came over here—he pulled another gun after he locked the door—and he struck Mr. Smith on the head with it. He kept the other gun pointed at me.

"Mr. Smith crumpled down and the man gagged me before I realized—he tied my hands behind the chair, and then he gagged and tied Mr. Smith. He was very quick, but he wasn't nervous. Then he gathered up all the paper money—I had just finished making it up in packages—there was an awful lot—a whole armful stacked up. He carried it into the closet and came back and got a bag of silver dollars. He took that into the closet."

"Into the *closet?*" cried Harlan and Tex together, and turned to investigate the place just as McNarty came hurrying in.

Tex, first inside the narrow place, stooped and stared through a square hole cut through the wall, down near the floor.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he murmured to himself and wriggled through, Harlan crawling after him, regardless of the damage to his neat blue serge. In two minutes they were back. The secretary had just finished her very lucid repetition of the robbery.

"He went through the wall, into the dressing room," Harlan explained. "Must have had a suit case or something hidden in there so he could carry the money away. How much did he get, Miss Gray?"

"Close to thirty thousand, Mr. Harlan. Of course, there's that much more in silver, and here are several piles of paper money he didn't get. I laid this in the drawer out of the way after Mr. Smith had checked it and found it O. K."

"Good girl. Now, tell us how he looks. Size, how he was dressed, and so on."

"Well, I think I've seen him around outside, Mr. Harlan. He's tall and very slender and he wore a blue-satin shirt; a brilliant parrot blue, almost green. You can't mistake it. I have seen several of the boys wearing that color."

"I know the shirts you mean," Harlan said crisply. "Four of the contestants have them. Three are Wyoming boys and the fourth came from Montana—rode through on horseback and camped here in the stadium for a week or more. Nice, well-mannered chap—Montana Kid. Contestant No. 1. He's no stickup man."

"Three of them blue-shirt boys are contesting right now," drawled Tex. "That lets them out, looks like. Montana Kid left the arena right after the fancy riding. I saw him heading for the stables on that sorrel of his." Without in the least realizing it, Tex was demonstrating his eagle-eyed knowledge of what went on in the arena. "There's your four blue shirts, and one of 'em could be in on this deal—far as time goes. I don't hardly believe he's that stripe, though."

McNarty, already at work on the case, was talking into the telephone.

"Aw ri'—send 'em to the office fast as yuh pick 'em up," he said, and hung up the receiver.

"Murphy's posting men at all the exits," he said. "No cowboy can leave the stadium till this thing's cleared up. Every man wearin' a blue shirt will be brought here for identification. If he didn't slip out aleady, we're pretty sure to get him. Hole in the wall, you say?" He went with Tex to look at the place.

Quiet as they tried to keep the affair, whispers went round that the office had been robbed, and by a cowboy at that. Beck, Billy and Walt were trailed from the arena after the wild-horse race and asked, as a matter of form only, to come and let Miss Gray look them over. Other blue shirts—but none of the right shade or anywhere near it—were brought before the secretary, who looked at them and shook her head.

"No, he was tall," she insisted. "This shirt was just like those three young men wore that you brought in first. But I'm sure it wasn't one of them."

"So am I," said Tex. "They must have been riding the steers just about when this was pulled." He chewed his cigar thoughtfully. "You got a good look at his face, didn't you?"

"Why, no. When he looked in at the door his hat was tilted so his face was hidden, and anyway I didn't pay much attention. When he came out of the closet he had his neckerchief—a black one—pulled up over his nose, just under his eyes. But I'd know him, I think, by his height and build."

That brought a peculiarly grim look to Harlan's face, because it had just been demonstrated to him that it would take some little time to dig through the wall and make as clean a job as had been done.

"You remember the young fellow I gave No. 1 badge to—the one we hunted through the box for?"

"Yes, Mr. Harlan," she said, her gaze lowered to the desk. Perhaps she remembered Harlan's boyish eagerness to find that badge for the first cowboy.

"He's the fourth contestant who wears that shade of blue," he said flatly. "It seems they have formed some sort of team—one of the boys explained it to us. It isn't a nice thing to think—but did you notice the number on the fellow's badge?"

"I—no, Mr. Harlan, I knew he had a badge on, and that's all."

"But his general build?"

"He was over six feet, I think, and slender." She bit her lip and her swift glance upward was troubled.

"Do you think"—Harlan cleared his throat—"could you say it was Montana Kid?"

"I—no, I'd have to see him again with just his eyes showing. I couldn't be sure."

"Did it look like Montana Kid?" One knew now that Harlan was an attorney, pushing his witness slowly, inexorably toward a definite avowal. One knew it, too, by the way in which the group stood back and let him question her. "Was there a resemblance?"

"I—I'm afraid there was, Mr. Harlan; a resemblance."

"He had the run of the place," Norm reminded Harlan. "All the chance in the world to doctor that wall." He did not add that it was Harlan's fault that a strange cowboy was given the freedom of the stadium, but Harlan could not fail to read his tone.

"I don't believe he did it!" snapped Harlan. "But we'll know in a few minutes. They'll bring him in and let Miss Gray identify him if she can. He's around somewhere, I feel sure."

But after an hour had passed with no sign of the Kid, Harlan did not feel quite so sure. The police were still combing the stadium's seething underworld, the gatekeepers were turning back all the big hats and tanned faces, and blue shirts were rapidly being weeded out from the crowd. More police were coming in response to McNarty's call for help. The Kid, however, had vanished. Even Harlan's faith began to waver before that cold fact.

CHAPTER XIV.

WHEN COWBOY MEETS CROOK.

WITHIN half an hour fifty plain-clothes men and uniformed policemen were quietly searching the stadium for Montana Kid. It was deemed best to keep the search as secret as possible and to suppress all news of the robbery for the present, but never in his life again would the Kid be such a sought-after young man.

The Kid was very busy on his own account just then. He ducked through the gate thirty seconds behind his stolen blue shirt, past a gatekeeper—who was afterward found to be color blind, by the way—and saw his quarry lift a pair of white, hairy chaps into a yellow cab and follow them hurriedly. The car slid from the curb as the Kid waved down the next one.

Cabs were swarming on that one-way street to catch the rodeo crowd as it poured out, and the Kid flung himself into the first that stopped and waved the driver on.

"That guy ahead there has got my shirt on!" he announced heatedly. "Get 'im, cabby! I'll have it off 'im and his hide with it!"

"O. K.!"

The Kid sat forward on the seat and stared through the windshield with

squinting eyes that held the light of battle. In the cab ahead he caught glimpses of his blue-satin shirt—no mistaking it for any other blue shirt. It was his. The fellow surely had gall, to steal a shirt and put it right on his back and wear it where the owner could see!

The fugitive must have sensed the need of hurry, for the cab he was in went speeding to the corner, swung north at a reckless clip and shot up past the eastern side of the stadium, weaving in and out among slower cars.

"Pay my fine if I get pinched for speeding?" the Kid's driver shot over his shoulder. "That guy's doing forty. Still want me to catch him?"

"Hell, yes!" snapped the Kid, in a tone that would have shocked his mother. "That's my blue shirt he's wearing! Stole it right out of my suit case to-day—and he's got the nerve to wear it!"

"I'll git 'im, cowboy!" And then, to show how little he minded the speed he must keep: "How's the contest comin'? Awful big crowd—biggest since the army-and-navy game. Big as Lindbergh had, almost."

"He's turning the corner!" barked the Kid, ignoring the flattery. "Hit 'er up, can't you?"

"He's playin' right into our hand, cowboy. Don't worry; I'll run 'im down 'fore he makes Michigan Avenue."

They took that corner with a lurch that reminded the Kid forcibly of Invalid as he grabbed for the robe rail.

"Making me pull leather," he grinned. "I guess you're doing all right, at that."

"Crawlin' up on him!" The driver honked blatantly at a shiny new limousine and shaved by, with an inch to spare.

At the next corner they met the full press of southbound traffic, with two policemen stationed there to handle the crowd which would soon come pouring into town from the stadium. The fleeing cab halted perforce, and the Kid's cab pulled up alongside, the driver looking back, grinning approval of himself. But the grin froze to a stare of amazement. The Kid was making a dive through the window and into the other cab—the door being locked by a device which cabbies use for reasons of their own.

The Kid landed headfirst and fighting the astonished thief, his legs writhing briefly upon the fender and running board. He had kicked himself inside, however, before two motor cops with shrieking sirens drew up alongside. Where they came from and how they had got there so soon will always be a deep mystery to the Kid. While the car rocked on its springs and the driver ducked splinters of glass, the officers tried to make themselves heard or heeded. It was only when the Kid smelled a gun barrel directly under his nose that he subsided sufficiently to see who was blocking the westering sunlight that had streamed in through the window. He jerked back his head, away from the gun, and blinked surprisedly at the policeman.

"Cut it out, here! What ya think ya're doin', fightin' like that?"

"He stole my shirt!" cried the Kid. "He can't pull anything like that—ah-h, yuh would, eh?" He lunged again and grappled with the thief, twisting a wrist until a knife dropped silently upon the chaps tumbled on the floor. "That's the kind of a bird he is! Tried to knife me, and you looking on!" The Kid fell once more to beating the fellow's head against the hard windowsill.

"Hey, quit it, now! Want me to lay you out with this gun?"

"Well, you want him to knife me, and you stand there and watch him do it?" The Kid's eyes blazed. "Two of you—and you don't do a damn thing to him!"

"I'll do a plenty to the both of you," promised the officer with the gun, wink-

ing across at his fellow who was evidently acting merely as a guard to prevent any attempt at escape from that side. "Drive on to the station," he ordered the cab driver. "And you, in there, cut out that fighting, or I'll slap the irons on the both of you. Don't you know you'll get life, fightin' on the street like that?" The twinkle in his eyes somewhat belied the harshness of his voice, but the Kid was not looking at him just then.

"I know I'll get my shirt off him," he retorted stubbornly. "And I know he won't pull any knife on me in a hurry, either."

"Well, hold 'im, then—but don't yuh hit 'im again or I'll come in there to the both of you! Drive on, you; you're jamming the traffic a mile back!"

Convoyed by two motor cops and the yellow cab that had lost its fare, but whose driver might be useful as a witness, the Kid ultimately arrived at the police station intact, furious, but savagely victorious, with his stolen shirt within his grasp; literally, since the thief persisted in trying to wriggle free —until the Kid delivered a punch under which his captive wilted.

Not until afterward did the Kid understand that he was being treated with much leniency and consideration. He did not know much about jails, but he did wonder a little when he was held in the office instead of being thrown into a cell as he had expected, or that repellent place he had heard spoken of as a tank. His companion sagged limply on a chair in the corner, his stolen hat on the back of his head, his evil mouth half open. The blue shirt had lost its sheen in spots. The Kid had been rather thorough.

His cab driver conferred with the cops, and the cops leaned over the desk and conversed in undertones with the man behind it. They did not seem to be in any particular hurry, nor did they seem particularly wrought up over the affair. Young fellows, the cops were; the Kid guessed maybe they could sympathize with a fellow in his position. Maybe they'd have done the same as he had, if they weren't cops and had got on the trail of a sneak thief.

Finally the cab drivers signed their names to something or other—the Kid was too busy keeping an eye on his thief to see all that transpired at the desk—and, buttoning their coats and settling their caps in obvious preparation for departure, came over to where he waited.

They wanted their fare. The Kid's driver wanted fare from the stadium to the branch police station, though the Kid didn't see how he figured it, and told him so, pointing out that he hadn't ridden in the cab more than half a mile at the most, and he certainly hadn't asked him to come way downtown. But the driver repeated the amount that he expected—which was a dollar and a half. It was a poor place to argue, so the Kid paid it and made a mental note of the driver's number. Some time, maybe, he'd see that driver again when no cops were by.

"Well, whenever you wanta start somethin', just let me know, will ya?" grated the driver, and walked off, grinning impudently back at the Kid from the door. Oh, well, there was a whole week to settle with *him*.

Harlan's name, spoken by the man behind the desk, brought the Kid's full attention back to his present predicament. The name had been spoken into the telephone, and the sergeant—if that was his official rating—was evidently waiting until Harlan could be located. The Kid waited also, hot with resentment and shame. Why drag Harlan into it? What business was it of Harlan's if Montana Kid went to jail for fighting in a yellow cab? If Harlan knew anything about this, he might mention it to that darned girl, and then she *would* razz the Kid the next time—

but there wouldn't be any next time; he'd see to that.

The desk sergeant was talking into the phone, telling his name, which was Dugan, and the station—all Greek to the Kid. He wondered if Harlan was at the other end of the line. The cab driver who had brought them here was still hanging around, probably wanting to collect damage for that glass partition. Well, he could take it off the thief; the Kid would be darned if *he'd* pay it; not when this fellow had rammed his big foot through it.

The Kid started and gave another look at the fellow's feet. Since when had low shoes come into fashion with riders? Even if he had felt the need of stealing shirt and chaps and hat, a contest rider would have worn riding boots; old and run down at the heels, maybe, but boots of some sort.

This fellow was no rider, in spite of the fact that a contestant's badge dangled from the breast of the blue shirt. Now that his attention was called to it, the Kid was sure of it. His face, for instance, mean and pasty and untanned —certainly no range man, with that indoor pallor. He never had been tanned. Why, then, had he stolen these things? He wasn't even wearing the chaps; meant to sell them, maybe. The Kid decided within himself that the fellow was just a plain nut, though a hard one.

"Yeah, two of them," the man at the telephone was saying in a voice that carried distinctly to where the Kid sat. "What's that? . . . Yes—yes, both of them. . . . Yes, that's . . . Well, I didn't book 'em yet. . . . Y' —yes, that's the idea. . . . Yeah. . . . Sure, I'll hold 'em here till you come. . . . Well, I didn't want to. . . . Yeah, that's right. Look bad for the rodeo. . . . O. K., Mr. Harlan—g'-by." He turned and fixed a speculative gaze upon the Kid, let his glance move slowly to the other and come to rest there. After a minute or so of staring he beckoned to one of the policemen and mumbled something. Both stared.

The shirt thief stirred, tried to lift himself from his slumped position. He opened his eyes, glanced around until he saw the chaps lying on the floor where one of the policemen had flung them. A peculiar, furtive look crept into his eyes; his thin mouth pinched in at the corners.

The Kid, watching him suspiciously, followed his glance to the chaps—clumsy, long-haired Angora, lying there almost as if they had legs in them. The Kid thrust out a long leg and pushed them with the toe of his boot, pushed them again, leaned forward and pulled them toward him by the buckle while the other snarled at him to leave them alone—a muttered oath and a threat which the officers would not hear.

"Mind your own business! You stole these, too, and the hat. I know the fellow you took them from. The badge, too, very likely. What are all these strings for?" The Kid's fingers were poking and prying. "What's the big idea, here?" He lifted the chaps, pulled them across his knee, began to twitch at certain knotted thongs crudely lacing the chap legs into bags.

"Damn you, leave 'em alone!" The thief lunged toward him, snatching at the chaps. But the Kid eluded his clutching fingers as the two policemen grappled with the fellow and snapped handcuffs on his wrists. The Kid was still busy with the strings. They loosened and he plunged his hand into the orifice thus opened.

"Well, for the heck sake!" he ejaculated, and dragged the chaps toward the desk. "You better do something about this, Mr. Officer. This thing's full of money! Where do you suppose he got it? That drunken cow-puncher he robbed certainly didn't have it on him, and there certainly wasn't any money in

my suit case for him to steal." The Kid stared bewilderedly at the package of bank notes in his hand.

"Give it here, young feller," said the desk sergeant. "Mr. Harlan just reported that some cowboy held up the business office and robbed 'em. Looks like this is the bandit, eh? You grabbed more'n your shirt when you grabbed that guy."

"Well, for the cryin' out loud!" gasped the Kid, unconsciously borrowing Boy's favorite expletive.

Harlan arrived, anxious eyed and in a desperate hurry. His face cleared when they showed him the contents of the hairy chaps piled on the desk, and he almost hugged the Kid when they told him how the thief had been caught.

"I must call up the office. Cowboy, you certainly have saved us a big loss, and you may be sure you won't lose anything by it; nor you, sergeant, for the splendid way you've handled the case."

The Kid could not see where he had done anything unusual, nor the sergeant either, who had merely sat there at the desk killing time. The Kid wanted his shirt. When Harlan was through telephoning he told him so.

Harlan laughed.

"Take that boy's shirt off the crook and let him have it," he directed in the easy, authoritative tone he had used to his chauffeur. "He's earned it, don't you think? If he hadn't kept right after that shirt, there's no telling when we'd ever have caught this fellow. When you look him up, sergeant, I think you will find he has a criminal record already. The nerve and the cunning he displayed proves to my mind that he's a professional. How he managed to make that hole in the closet wall without being detected—it certainly looks to me as though he had planned this robbery away in advance. He must have been hiding in there for some time."

A great light broke upon the Kid's mind. He looked so full of information that Harlan stopped and waited expectantly.

"I never told anybody I rated a spook the first night I stayed in the stadium," said the Kid. "I kept missing things out of the kitchen every night—some one always cooked a meal in there. I thought maybe it was some hobo, or else Norm was trying to kid me, perhaps. I used to try and catch him at it, but I never could, and anyway I kept pretty close to the horses at night. A little grub wasn't so important; but with some one prowling around there nights, I couldn't take a chance. Those horses are about all I've got, and I couldn't contest without them. So—well, maybe that sounds pretty self-centered, but I can't help it. That's the way I felt about it."

"Just about as self-centered as going after your shirt the way you did, cowboy! We can forgive that kind of self-centeredness, but I'd call it persistence, myself. Hope it wins you the championship—it certainly ought to, at least." Harlan laughed and patted his arm. Harlan could well afford to laugh and pat, with thirty thousand of the rodeo's dollars back in his possession.

"This is your spook, without a doubt," the desk sergeant declared. "We'd like your secretary to come and identify him—as a matter of form, of course. I've got an idea we'll find this man's finger prints and mug in our gallery, Mr. Harlan, and that will let him in for the limit. Could you bring your people over in the morning? Needn't bother to-night."

"I certainly shall. And sergeant, I want to thank you for the splendid way you have handled this matter. If you had simply booked these two men and locked them up, we'd have been put to no end of trouble and worry before we discovered the thief. We certainly are grateful to you for calling the office."

"Oh, that's all right," grinned the sergeant. "Our boys are pretty easy on cowboys, right now. Can't expect 'em to know all the rules and regulations; we aim to give you all the cooperation we can, Mr. Harlan. Any of your boys get in trouble for small offenses—like fighting in cabs"—he grinned slowly at the Kid—"and collecting shirts on the main thoroughfares, you can rest assured we'll do the best we can for 'em. This cab driver has got a claim for damages to his cab, by the way."

"Oh, I'll take care of that, and glad to!" chuckled Harlan. "Our first cowboy has been distinguishing himself in several events to-day, but personally I think he's won the trophy for thief catching. Eh, cowboy?"

"Thanks, Mr. Harlan. I was merely trying to get my shirt back. And," he added dryly, "I haven't got it yet."

"Hey, you, shuck that shirt!" roared the policeman who had held the gun in at the cab window. "Don't let me tell yuh again, either!"

While the thief sullenly divested himself of the now-celebrated garment and flung it savagely at the Kid, Harlan spoke briefly and privately with the cab driver; and from the quick smile of gratitude on the driver's cynical mouth as he turned to the door, one might assume that the damages had been paid several times over. Which was merely Harlan's way.

"I'd like to take the chaps and the hat and badge back to the fellow who owns them," the Kid next suggested. "And if you're through with me here, I'd like to get back to the stadium right away. The ponies ought to be fed; they've got a lot of work ahead of them this evening."

No one stopped him, so the Kid took that as permission to go. He shook the legs of the chaps to make sure the money was all out, flung them across his arm along with the shirt from which the square, gun-metal badge dangled by its narrow, black strap, snatched up the stolen hat and dashed out in time to hail the cab as it was easing away from the curb.

Inside the substation office two policemen, the desk sergeant and the influential Mr. Harlan looked at one another. One policeman shook his head in a gesture of complete bafflement, and the other thrust his tongue in his cheek to head off a delighted grin.

"He'll win," the sergeant observed sententiously, nodding his head toward the door. "Steam roller couldn't stop that boy when he gets started!"

Had you told the Kid that he had walked off with Exhibit A, B and C of the evidence, he wouldn't have known what you were talking about; though of course they were not especially needed just then.

"That boy could get away with murder!" one policeman said to the other, as they mounted their motor cycles to ride away.

"Sure could, with Jim Harlan to back him," said the other.

CHAPTER XV.

HERO OF THE HOUR.

IN that singleness of purpose which had brought him to Chicago, the Kid dismissed the affair as settled and done with. He had his shirt, Harlan had his money back, the police had the thief. Beautifully simple, eminently satisfactory and no more to be said—except when he ran across the driver of yellow cab No. 19.

That gratitude stuff of Harlan's was, in the Kid's opinion, all blah; polite but foolish, because he had merely been attending to his own personal affairs and had served the rodeo committee by accident, as it were. He was glad they had their money again, but no more glad than he was to have his shirt back. It had cost him two dollars and

a half in cab fare, but he would have more money that night unless something went wrong in the relay race.

That thought remained to harass him until he reached his horses and found the Laramie boys waiting, full of the contest and the robbery and the mystery of the Kid's absence. When they spied his tall, slender figure coming down through the stables, clad in the familiar blue and taking long steps in his haste, they whooped and made for him, fairly babbling their relief.

"D'you feed the horses, Walt?" the Kid broke into their chorus.

"N-o, never thought of it." Walt shook his head. They had been haled before the committee to be identified as bandits, had answered innumerable questions about themselves and about Montana Kid, and had been wild with worry over his disappearance. How could he expect that they would remember to feed the horses? Hadn't they just come, in the faint hope of finding him there?

"Where you been, Kid? Don't you know——"

"After my shirt. Got it, too," the Kid answered succinctly, flinging the chaps and hat down upon the saddle of the owner and picking up the oats basin. "Have to send it to the cleaner's, darn it! That'll bust me flat if I don't get some day money." He filled and carried the basin to Stardust, who nickered eagerly for his supper and set the other two pawing and teasing.

"Say, the office was held up and robbed, and——"

"Yeah, I know. They've got it back. Got the fellow in jail," the Kid casually informed them, coming back for more oats.

"They did? When was that? How do *you* know?"

"Saw Harlan a little bit ago," the Kid evaded, busying himself with the horses. "Fork some hay in here, will you, boys? Then we'll have to go eat. Six o'clock—we'll have to make it a light supper, for that only gives us two hours and a half till contest time again. I've got eggs enough, and bread—it'll be toast and soft-boiled eggs for us tonight. Good thing I forgot to turn in the key of the kitchen. If it isn't in use——"

"Kitchen?" Incredulity sharpened all three voices.

"You bet. Kitchen. Where you cook stuff. I've been batching here for a week and more. Fellow gave me the key to a swell kitchen—wait till you see it!" On that subject the Kid was loquacious enough to satisfy the most inquisitive.

Once more the stadium was magically empty, except for the hostlers and a few laggard contestants and the clean-up gang at work getting ready for the evening performance. Rows of lights twinkled in all the corridors; their footsteps sounded loud and clumping as they made their way to the kitchen.

"I should think they'd use this now, but I guess everybody eats downtown —but us. We're the only broke guys in this show, looks like. How'd you fellows make out after I left?"

While he boiled coffee and eggs and made toast for the four, they told him in great detail how they had fared. The Kid listened and nodded approval, distributing sympathy and praise impartially as the recital seemed to require.

When they swung to the robbery, however, that remote look which his mother so dreaded to see crept into his face; though with three young men eager to give his version and explain his reaction to the implication that he might possibly be a bandit, the Kid's reticence passed unnoticed.

"And they didn't grab you and search your soul for guilt?" Walt finally demanded curiously. "How come?"

"Well, the fact that the thief was already in jail and they found the money

in his possession before I saw Harlan, might possibly have something to do with it," the Kid squelched them. "They aren't going to keep right on looking for him after they've got him, do you suppose? Snap out of it, fellows! Get your gigantic intellects to work figuring how I'm going to nick a few more seconds off my remount in the relay. That's what's worrying me now."

Beck Wilson looked up from breaking an egg into a tea cup.

"Can't nick many seconds off nothin' flat," he stated positively. "I'll bet money you weren't two seconds in station any time to-day. Only way I can see is for you to leave before you arrive, Kid."

"That's right," Walt attested. "You've got to get off on the ground, take your saddle and put it on the other horse and get on. It's humanly impossible to do it much quicker than you did to-day."

"Much! There you are—there's the slack I've got to take up, boys. I've been thinking about the cinch. We're allowed any kind we want—it's got to be fastened, or I'll pull it loose mounting. I'm going to make it a flying mount from now on. I've got to. That black and that pinto—*ow-w!* D'you see what they nearly did to me? I thought my ponies were fast, but——"

"You've got 'em beat at the station, Kid. They don't handle the way yours do," Billy comforted. "That guy's got to take up his brakes; he sure has! They can run, all right, but they can't stop. Why, that black horse——" He broke off abruptly, staring at the door.

Two men were letting themselves into the kitchen which the Kid had told them was not being used by any one save himself. The first pulled a key from the lock as he came in, and the second glanced around at the room with what is sometimes called a photographic eye, which he presently fixed curiously upon the group at the end of the long table.

"Hello, cowboy," the leader greeted, with a heartiness that smacked of insincerity, as if it had been manufactured for the occasion.

The Kid, who was officiating as cook, had just lifted an egg out of a pan of boiling water and was watching to see how quickly the air dried the shell, which old Patsy at the Flying U had taught him as a simple and efficient way of testing its inner degree of hardness. He glanced up from the egg, his eyes veiling themselves instantly with that aloofness of his. As plainly as words, his look asked the intruders what they wanted there.

"Hello, Mr. Norm," he said, and laid the egg on Walt's plate. Norm had probably come to kick them out of there. The Kid decided to have his supper first, anyway. By to-morrow they might be rich enough to eat in a restaurant uptown.

But Norm had no such harmless design upon the Kid. He turned with a forced laugh to his companion.

"Well, Mac, here they are, where they can't get away. The tall one dishing up eggs is Montana Kid in one of his gentler moods. Don't know the other boys, but they're the blue-shirt bunch, and that's what you wanted." He looked at the Kid, who stood there eying them, his big hat pushed back on his head, his blue sleeves rolled to his elbows, the egg spoon still in his hand.

"This fellow's from the *News*," Norm explained. "He wants you to tell him all about how you captured the bandit that looted our office. Somebody saw you fellows headed this way—well, I guess he can make out all right, now he's found you, I'm busy." He grinned and retreated, carefully closing the door upon himself.

"This is simply great, finding you fellows all here together and no one to butt in," said the reporter, coming for-

ward and helping himself to a seat. "I've got to rush this story in—wish I could have brought a camera man—we'll get your pictures to-morrow. Now, Mr. Montana Kid, I wish you'd tell me just how it was you got on the trail of this bandit? What first roused your suspicion?"

The Kid simply stared at him for a minute and then turned his back and dipped out another egg, watched it dry all too soon and offered it to Beck and Billy.

"Which of you likes the yolk set?" he asked. "Billy, think you can handle it?"

Billy nodded absently, his eyes clinging fascinatedly to the stranger.

"Is he stringing us, Kid? Or what?"

"You tell 'em," the Kid advised shortly. "I'm no mind reader."

"Say, don't you ever think he's no mind reader!" The reporter laughed, unabashed by his cool reception, as reporters must ever be. "I'll say he's a mind reader. If all I heard is true, he read that bandit's mind a block away. Made the prettiest capture this burg has seen in many a day. Oh, I've got the whole story," he boasted to the Kid, who looked ready to do murder. "All I want is your own personal reactions."

"I haven't got any personal reactions," said the Kid. "I don't carry 'em any more. They ain't safe. They're liable to go off unexpected."

"Did you catch the bandit—honest, Kid? You told us it was only your shirt you wanted."

"Well, it was. How about another piece of toast, Walt? Riding broncs is exercise, what I mean."

The reporter was busy scribbling something on a small pad of paper he drew from his coat pocket. Billy Perry, who sat alongside him and had eyes like a bald eagle looking for breakfast, told the Kid afterward that he saw "Shirt hero modest—denies—tall, slim, handsome as Greek——" and he would have read more if the reporter had not moved his elbow and blocked the view.

"You won the relay race this afternoon, they tell me. You expect to win again this evening, of course?"

The Kid just looked at him and said, "Hunh!" eloquently, under his breath.

"I hear you boys have clubbed together to win all the cups in the contest this year," Mac insinuated smilingly.

"That's a thought," the Kid observed gravely, handing Walt a slice of toast on the end of a long-handled fork.

"Dandy start, too, I hear. They say you're a knock-out at fancy roping and riding, Mr. Montana Kid."

"Washout, you probably mean." The Kid poured himself a cup of coffee, took off his hat and sat down to his supper.

"No, knock-out. And what are you going to do with all the money you'll win? Don't mind telling me, do you?"

"Delighted," said the Kid. "I'm going to send my little sisters and brothers to school, and buy maw a washin' machine and—and take 'em all to the movin' pitchers and set in the best darn seats they got."

The reporter gave him a sharp look but he wrote it all down, so Billy said; probably because it came under the heading of personal reactions.

"Now tell me, Kid, what were your thoughts when you collared that bandit? You know, they've identified him as the 'Weasel,' one of our slipperiest crooks Just what did you think when you grabbed him?"

The Kid studied the question while he salted and peppered his eggs.

"I thought, 'Gosh, I hope I don't tear my shirt,'" he said finally.

"He tried to kill you, they tell me."

"The cops in this town sure have telling ways," said the Kid.

"But he did try to kill you, didn't he?"

"Oh, say not so!" The Kid picked

up the cup of sugar, looked at it reflectively and set it down again without taking any.

"Ease through with the info, Kid," Beck Wilson advised. "We're all excited. Is this straight goods, or is it a plant?"

"It's a plant, Beck," the Kid answered him, smiling for the first time since the unwelcome visitor arrived.

"Oh, come now!" the reporter protested. "You may as well face the thing, you know."

"I'm weak on botany," the Kid explained further to Beck, "but it's some kind of loco." Whereupon the three Laramie boys chortled with glee.

"You were born in Montana, weren't you?"

"Oh, no. Chicago."

"But——"

"Well, what's wrong with that? Lots of people are born in Chicago, aren't they? That's where my mother says I was born, and you can like it or not." Since he was telling the truth, the Kid was not believed. At least, Billy said afterward that the reporter wrote down "Born—Mont."

"Well, come on, boys," said the Kid, reaching for his hat and standing up. "Sorry we can't stay and visit, mister, but we're busy right now."

For some distance in the corridor the reporter kept up with the four, and he asked questions as long as he had breath. But they outwalked him at last and retired to the stables and did not appear again until the grand entry.

They had to plan some means of speeding up the Kid's changes of mounts in the relay, impossible though it seemed to do so; and they had to get the true story of the Kid's adventure with the bandit, though that, too, was next to impossible since the Kid belittled his own part in the performance. Still, they forced the main facts from him bit by bit and had to be content.

"And I want you fellows to keep still about it, too," the Kid finally told them, as they were riding out to the slope for the grand entry. "I headed off that darned reporter, so that's all right and we won't hear any more out of him, I guess; and if you boys don't talk, the thing will die down. It wasn't anything, anyway."

CHAPTER XVI.

"GO ON, MONTANA KID!"

ONCE more the waving banners, once more the flags and the blare of music that sent the double column forward, up the track, past the grand stand and around the oval to the point where they rode straight out across the arena and drew up in semimilitary formation before the cheering thousands. But now the great arc lights threw a white radiance upon the scene, and the visiting celebrities did not participate in the opening ensemble.

The Kid missed the Happy Family, and in spite of his other distractions he wondered where they were. Also he had sent a quick, searching glance up at the box as he passed, and saw it filled with strangers. His folks hadn't cared to come out in the evening, then. Bored already, he supposed.

The Kid told himself that it made no difference, that he was really glad they stayed away; but for all that he was conscious of a queer, lonesome, heavy feeling in his chest. All those thousands and thousands of people staring down upon him, and not a single one he knew, or that knew him or cared whether he lost or won! He was just one contestant among a hundred and fifty or so; part of the show, the same as one of the horses. Only for Beck and Billy and Walt there beside him the sense of desolation would have been intolerable.

But he had his work to think of—the relay, and the calf roping especially. That was where they counted the sec-

onds on a fellow—yes, the fractions of a second. He was contesting against a fast bunch of boys, too. He'd have to buck up and put his mind strictly on his work; forget the crowds.

As he rode back for Stardust and his ropes, however, the mood of depression still held him. What ailed him? Eggs too hard, giving him indigestion? That bandit stuff? That darned reporter nosing around? A little of all three, he decided, and immediately felt better. Anything like that he could handle; but he certainly would be disgusted with himself if he thought for a minute the folks' staying away had anything to do with it. No, he was actually glad they weren't here. There was nothing now to distract his mind.

He was standing with Stardust in the passage before the gate, waiting for the bareback riding to finish and the roping act to be announced. He was thinking all these things about his mood, when Harlan appeared from nowhere, apparently, and grasped him by the arm.

"Tie your horse here, cowboy. I want you for a minute," he said briskly. And when the Kid had done as he was told, Harlan opened a smaller gate and led him into the press box, which was just behind the fence and filled with chairs and people.

"Mrs. Bennett, I want to introduce Montana Kid, the hero of this rodeo," he said cordially. "This is the boy who caught the robber with the money hidden in the legs of a pair of stolen chaps, as I was telling you. Mr. Bennett, Mr. Whitmore, this is Montana Kid."

Had Harlan dashed a quart of ice water in his face the shock would have been less. The Kid stood in bleak silence while they looked at him.

"Well, Claude, aren't you going to give your only mother a kiss?" the Little Doctor demanded with a short laugh that eased the awkward situation perceptibly.

"Sure," said the Kid, and kissed her while the blood pounded like hammers against his temples. "How are you, dad? Hello, Uncle J. G. Taking in the rodeo, are you? How's your rheumatism?"

Afterward, the Kid tried to remember what he had said and how he had acted while he said it, and found that his memory, as if at the actual moment of a collision, refused to register. He was afraid he had been a complete washout, as he expressed it.

But he couldn't have been that, because in discussing him afterward his mother spoke of his absolute poise and coolness, and wondered where he had learned the grand manner. His dad had called it a swelled head and declared that he'd be damned if the young whelp could patronize him like that. It would have comforted the Kid no doubt to have overheard them and to know that at any rate they did not suspect his actual stupefaction.

"Why that particular shade of blue, Claude?" his mother asked irrelevantly; probably because it was the most trivial thing she could think of at the moment.

"Why? Don't you like it?"

"It would make a gorgeous sofa pillow."

"I'll try and remember to save you the pieces, then. How do you like the show, dad?"

"Pretty good, in spots," said Chip, stubbornly refusing to praise the young whelp.

"They've run in some race horses on yuh, Kid," grumbled the Old Man. "Why don't yuh complain to the judges about it? A relay is for cow ponies. Dog-gone it, they got no business to let in track horses."

"Oh, that's all right, uncle. Stardust's got running blood himself. I guess I'll get by, all right."

"Cowboy," cried Harlan, "I never suspected I was making a family re-

union of this! Now I know why I sort of liked you, that day I met you on the road; because you look and act so much like your dad, that's why. You must have wanted to keep it a secret—your dad knew there would be nothing too good for his boy, here! But you see, blood will tell, no matter how you try to hide it. You're your father's own son, I can see that now. You'll win, all right. You're too much like your dad not to win!"

"Oh, I don't know," drawled the Kid, and sent a swift, sidelong glance at his father staring out across the arena at a convulsive bronc that was hopeful of shedding his rider. "I guess we don't notice so much resemblance, in the family."

"Well, it's there, nevertheless. See you a little later, folks. Good luck to you, cowboy!" And Harlan, having innocently done what damage he could, hurried away and left them.

But there was scant leisure for embarrassment, for another person breezed into the roomy press box.

"Oh, hello, cowboy-blue! Has dad been blowing your horn, as usual?"

The Kid turned and found himself looking down into the impish eyes and the demure face of Dulcie Harlan.

"Where's your bandit?" she asked, not waiting for him to answer her first thrust.

"Back here in a cage," the Kid retorted, his brain still functioning without the help of his mind, it seemed, since he had no idea that he was going to say just that. "Tame him and train him for a pet, if you want him."

"I know how you tame them! I heard all about that terrible beating you gave him. Aren't you the least bit ashamed of yourself?"

"No. I love to torture dumb brutes."

"I know. I saw you doing it to-day. But it does seem——"

"Claude," said his mother, turning half around and looking up at him where he stood behind her, "you might come and see us, don't you think?" The Little Doctor must have been greatly perturbed, not to have noticed Dulcie Harlan behind her.

"I don't know where you're staying."

"Write down the address. The Drake Hotel, corner of Michigan and —well, I don't remember the other street."

The Kid unbuttoned the flap of his shirt pocket, drew out a small memorandum book in which he had started a condensed schedule of his team's contest record, and obediently wrote down the name of the hotel.

"I don't know when I can come," he hedged uncomfortably. "I may not get out at all. I'm—I'll be busy every minute of the contest, just about."

"Why? You running the whole show without any help at all?" Chip spoke dryly, glancing over his shoulder at the Kid.

The Kid winced under his father's well-known sarcasm, then his lips formed the stubborn, bitter lines they had worn in that last interview at the Flying U.

"Well," he retorted, "I'm running my part of it without any help, you notice."

Here Miss Dulcie took it upon herself to distract his attention and avert the impending unpleasantness.

"Will you explain to me, bandit beater, why you are wearing that S. A. E. pin out of sight under your pocket flap?" she demanded severely. "A Sigma Alpha Epsilon pin on a wild, man-eating, bronchobusting——"

"Oh, that?" The Kid tilted the diamond-shaped, jeweled pin of his favorite fraternity so that the letters showed more definitely. "You're all wrong, Miss Harlan. That stands for 'Some Are Easy.' It refers to bandits, broncs, flappers——"

"Claude!" This, of course, from his mother.

"Well, glad to have met you all," drawled the impenitent Kid as he turned to go. "Have to tear myself away; got to collect a few more records —cups and things." It was sheer bravado, flung out in desperation lest his father should see his hurt.

"And you'll go on collecting long time on your alleged calf roping, too, I suppose!" twitted Chip, quite as angry and hurt as was the Kid.

"It would be just too bad if I won the championship, wouldn't it?" sneered the Kid, and got out of there before his dad could think of another unforgivable taunt.

"You know that only makes him worse, Chip," the Little Doctor reproached in an undertone. And then to the girl: "You mustn't mind Claude, Dulcie. I'm afraid he's a spoiled boy."

"Mind him? Why, I think he's terribly funny!" She laughed quite convincingly when she said it, but there were tooth marks in her under lip, and there was a look in her eyes, as she watched the Kid mount his horse and ride out through the gate, that boded no good for him when they met again. And she hoped it would be soon.

The Kid did not share that hope. On the contrary, he was thinking how he hoped some one would shoot him if he ever spoke to her again, or gave his dad another chance to insult him like that—when the little trick roper eased her horse closer and sent him her shy, wistful smile.

The Kid smiled back and, because they were within speaking distance of the press box, rode boldly to her side and stayed there until they were called for the roping event. He could not afterward recall their conversation, but he learned that her name was Joella Germain, a jingly combination which he remembered.

But Joella could not erase his resentment for Dulcie, nor his hot anger against his dad. He went to the trick roping half hating it because he felt his father's scoffing gaze upon him. He was probably saying—or at least thinking—that the Kid was out there showing off. There was no danger, no risk, not even an element of chance in this performance. The Kid was sorry he had entered for this particular contest. It came too close to the relay race, anyway.

While he hopped in and out of his whirling loops, gyrated and stood on his head and turned somersaults, the Kid made up his mind that this was the last time he'd do it. He had thought it was easy money, and it was for one of his agile skill. But it was taking just so much energy, and he was going to need it for the other events; especially now that he had taken on the bronc riding which, previously, he had not intended to do.

He had to think of the relay race which followed immediately. He had to beat that fast string, the black and the pinto. Using Stardust in this roping act and then putting him right out against that black horse—the others he dismissed from his mind—was asking too much of any horse. It was asking too much of himself, for that matter. This was hard work, and while he liked it, he had to use some sense. It was the relay race that counted most in the beginning of the program.

He did not own to himself that he couldn't face the prospect of clowning out there before his folks and Dulcie Harlan, but he was conscious of their scornful regard and he hated every minute of the act.

The applause was too loud and too continuous—it sounded to him derisive, especially when he knew he was not doing as well as he could; not half as well, for he was leaving Stardust out of it except at the last, when he let the horse gallop back and forth a few times, more to warm him up for the race than for any other reason. And he couldn't

get away from it—the clapping was out of all proportion. He didn't like it.

What the Kid did not know was that the rodeo had a keen and enterprising publicity man who had told the story of the robbery, the Kid's exploit in the taxi, the blue shirt and all—told it arrestingly into a dozen pairs of ears best fitted to receive it in the proper spirit. The Kid never dreamed that every broadcasting station in town had repeated that story during the dinner program.

It was legitimate news, so fresh that it had not yet seen print. It was picturesque, it was amusing, it was just the kind of thing that could be talked about and laughed at over the dinner tables of Chicago. Think of the very name of the hero—Montana Kid! Montana Kid, hot in pursuit of a blue-satin shirt, jumping into a yellow cab and tackling one of Chicago's most dangerous crooks as he was making his get-away from one of his most daring robberies!

It tickled Chicago the sophisticated, weary of gang wars. Families who had not thought of going to the rodeo that night put on their bonnets and hailed the early busses so as to avoid the crowd. They went because they wanted to see Montana Kid, and his blue shirt that he valued so highly. Even those blasé skeptics who declared it was all framed, a publicity stunt pulled off to bring out the crowds, even they went, some of them, just to see how many dumb-bells had fallen for the story anyway. You know, it really is amazing how little it takes sometimes to start the world running after a hero; or any man, for that matter.

But the Kid did not know all that. When he lined up with his rivals for the relay race, he had no idea what the crowd was yelling about. Had any one told him the truth, that they were yelling at him and his blue-satin shirt, he would have taken it for granted he was being razzed for some reason, but it never would have occurred to him to believe the statement.

Once more Stardust got away cleanly and left the field streaming behind like the lengthening tail of a comet, with the black two lengths ahead. And a roar of voices kept pace with them, like a tidal wave of sound sweeping abreast of them around the track.

"Go on, Kid! Go on, Montana Kid! Go on!"

It caught the Kid by the throat, it thrust him down upon the straining neck of the sorrel; a yellow streak with a blotch of parrot blue shining along the whipping mane. It lifted Stardust over the space, pulled him up and up along the side of the black horse. It brought him under the wire nose by nose, and flung the Kid off at his station—which was No. 1 to-night—and up and on past the lunging horses and frantic riders trying to tighten cinches and mount.

"Go on, Kid! Go on!"

That steady cry surging around the great oval, Sunup running like a scared rabbit and the fast little pinto inexorably lessening the distance between them, but never quite passing—and so into the station where Walt was holding Stardust.

"They're with yuh, Kid!" Walt shouted, and had no time for more, because the Kid was off again, picking up the black horse as he flashed past, almost uncannily like a friendly agreement. But always that tremendous, composite voice rolling around the stadium:

"Montana Kid! Go on!"

The horses felt it and responded. Strides lengthened. Legs worked like speeded pistons. But the black, on the last curve, failed to hold his stride. Stardust flew like a sweeping yellow bird, blown before a gale. Then Sunup, seconds ahead of the pinto in the start, flashing past the laggards not yet in from their third lap.

When the Kid rode under the wire

on the last lap, safely the winner, the mass mind that had urged him on brought the crowd upon its feet, cheering and shrieking. No Olympic game won for America ever sent the onlookers into greater hysteria, perhaps. It was the moment of madness that sometimes seizes a crowd.

The radio story, told with a full appreciation of the human-interest angle that always clicks; the Kid himself, unwittingly revealing a certain lovable quality of youth and grace and skill in the roping, and then the thrill of that race—even the subtle mind of the publicity man must have been astounded at the magnitude of the results he produced that night.

And the Kid, sore at heart and holding himself aloof from every one, never suspected the truth.

Not even when he rode out to rope his calf, with his teeth clenched and his mind stubbornly determined to show his dad something, did he realize that the applause was abnormal. He had the best time made that evening—eighteen and one-fifth seconds—and that seemed reason enough for the tumult.

It was the same when he rode the bronc assigned to him. Chile Bean was a bad one, the kind the cowboys called "salty." The Kid rode him and broke no rules, so far as he knew. The crowd cheered wildly, but the carping criticism which he imagined as emanating from where his folks sat in the press box neutralized the frenzied enthusiasm of the seventy or eighty thousand other people who watched him.

Dad hated him, was his bitter thought. Dad didn't believe he could do anything as well as the Happy Family. Dad would go out of his way to crow over him if he made a flop at anything. Dad was sneering at everything he did—but he couldn't sneer at that calf roping!

So far as the crowd was concerned, that was the Kid's night. Every one knew it, save the Kid himself, who could not forget the things that had been said in the few minutes he spent with his folks. He tried to forget, tried to interest himself in the trick riding. Joella Germain was a sweet little thing—she'd kill herself doing that crawl, unless she learned the proper hand hold. The Kid forced himself to smile, to talk, to explain, and wound up by making a date with her for the next morning, to show her and let her practice under his coaching.

But his heart was not in it and he was glad when it was all over and he could ride back into the quiet of the stables, away from the noise and confusion and the staring strangers who eyed him curiously, as if he were some strange animal.

He had won the relay race for the day—a hundred dollars. He stood third in the calf roping, was "in the money," to the extent of forty dollars. For the bronc riding he had the second place and sixty dollars. Walt won third money, Beck Wilson first in the steer wrestling, Billy Perry third in the steer riding. As a team they could pat themselves on the back and feel proud and plutocratic, and did.

But the Kid himself was bitter and rather heartsick and could not glory in anything at all.

CHAPTER XVII.

PUBLICITY AND PICTURES.

OVER by the chutes the Luis Mendoza company—or that part of it which was on location at the Chicago rodeo—was waiting while director and camera man conferred together concerning the side lines they should use for some "full shots" they meant to take.

A nice question of authenticity was at stake. They must give their leading man plenty of scope for the bronc riding he was to do this morning, and yet

they must preserve the illusion of a crowded stadium; simple enough, if only they could be sure that the bronc would be amenable to direction and would do his bucking within the side lines.

Andy Green, a director's megaphone in his hand and his soft hat pulled over his eyes, squinted and studied and decided that it would be cheaper to hire more extras and string them along the fence beside the chutes than it would be to risk having to remake the bucking scenes and endanger the star's neck further. The Native Son was one leading man who refused to do his stunt stuff by proxy. The color, the crowds, what in picture parlance is called "atmosphere," would of course be taken during the regular programs, but it was obvious that the actual sequences of the story could not be injected into the contest. These had to be made during the forenoons when the arena was empty and the movie company could have free run of the place, and work without embarrassment.

Andy Green and his aids and actors had sat through the afternoon performance that they might grow familiar with the routine and get the feel of the rodeo. Now they were ready for business—or as nearly so as any motion-picture company ever is when the camera is not actually clicking its record of a scene.

"I want to pick up Luis just as the gate opens and he leaves the chute," Andy explained carefully to Gray, the camera man who always shot the full action of a scene while his two assistants worked at different angles. "Carl up there can follow him, no matter what direction he takes, but I want you to get this full shot as he comes out toward us. The boys tell me this bronc is a sure-fire bucker—a regular walking beamer; oughta be a dandy on the screen. What I want to know is, how far will I have to spread the extras to hide that aching void around the arena?"

"As far as the horse bucks, if you want me to get all of it," said Gray. "Once he's out and the action starts, there's no telling what angle he'll take, is there? The fence might be in the picture and it might not. I'd use all the men available, Andy. If you want it to match up with yesterday——"

Andy nodded and walked hurriedly toward a big man who was just entering the arena through the main gate. Andy hailed him at once.

"Morning, Tex! Say, where's all those gaudy riders that's been prognosticating around the place?" he wanted to know. "I need some background over there. Luis is going to make his ride—you'd think they'd all be out to see the show," he said plaintively. "A Western star riding a bronc——"

"Quite a few of 'em saw stars riding broncs yesterday," Tex drawled, his eyes atwinkle. "Them that didn't is liable to this afternoon—we've picked a bunch of broncs that's bound to weed out the would-bes. But I reckon I can maybe haze out a few. A lot of the boys are uptown. Some went up last night, and they're mostly bedded down in the hay, tryin' to sleep it off. There's a few wranglers around, though. How many you want?"

"All you can haze out here. I just want 'em to drape themselves along the fence while Luis does a little riding and bulldogging and maybe rides a steer and ropes a calf or two. The light's good this morning and I want to get a lot of good contest action. Then this afternoon I'd like to shoot some good contest stuff, if you don't mind." He cast a critical glance up at the sun, as a gentle hint perhaps to Tex that sunlight was a precious thing to a movie director and not to be wasted. Andy Green made a good director.

So Tex went down through the stables and routed out all the fellows he

could find there, and in the course of his search he came across the Kid sitting on a hay bale, scowling at a morning paper which he held spread out before his wrathful countenance. Hats pushed back so the wide brims could not block the view, his team stood close grouped around him and gazed at the bold, black headline spread across the front page of the morning paper:

RODEO ROBBED! COWBOY CATCHES BANDIT!

MONTANA KID, COWBOY, HERO OF DARING HOLDUP AT STADIUM LAST NIGHT

$30,000 Stolen When Lone Bandit Binds Office Force During Show.

Handsome young bronchobuster loses his shirt, which bandit stole for disguise. Seeing his shirt on bandit, he leaps into speeding cab and subdues one of Chicago's most notorious crooks, recovering shirt and stolen cash.

The article itself flowed amusingly along from scene to scene, humorously stressing the distress—since alliteration was made a part of the comedy—of Montana Kid when he missed his blue-satin shirt. His grief was vividly painted, also his life-and-death determination to find his shirt or perish in the attempt. The robbery was described briefly and accurately enough for newspaper purposes, also the Kid's pursuit of the bandit, though this was exaggerated. Chicago must have been highly entertained by the alleged antics of a young, simple-souled—simple-minded as well—gawky young savage from the West; a young David of the great open spaces boldly attacking a Goliath of crime.

Even the Kid's remarks to the police and the desk sergeant were repeated in garbled form and the conventional dialect of fiction cowboys. It was all very funny, no doubt, and the writer had managed to make the Kid seem engagingly unsophisticated and picturesque and brave. He was also the best rider, the trickiest trick roper, the fanciest fancy rider, the fleetest relay rider of the entire ensemble of champions. He was chain lightning with a rope, he was the fightingest broncho fighter the city could ever hope to see—and personally he was of godlike beauty and as shy as the justly famed violet. Indeed, the violet was mentioned—along with other things.

The writer declared:

Montana Kid neither smokes, drinks nor shoots craps. He is anxious to win the championship and the more than generous purses, so that his little brothers and sisters may enjoy the benefits of the education he has been denied. He is dreaming of the happy day when he can give his aged mother a vacation from the ranch and take her to see the sights of the nearest city. His idea of luxury is to occupy loge seats in a movie house where they play a band—a real band—and not to care a darn what it costs. His mother——

"Why, the dirty bum!" The Kid, goaded past the endurance point of reading further, crushed the paper viciously in his hands.

"Wait a minute! Listen to this, Kid:

"Over his simple repast of toast and tea last night Montana Kid blushed to the brim of his ten-gallon hat and denied——"

"Ah, shut up!" The Kid glared furiously at Walt. "One yip out of you fellows about this thing and I'll lay yuh cold! For two cents I'd quit the damn rodeo and the——" He choked off further anathemas which were scorching his tongue and stood up, breathing hard through nostrils that quivered like a frightened thoroughbred. The rodeo manager stood regarding him quizzically, his lips caressing an unlighted cigar.

"Fame's a tricky animal, hard to snare," Tex observed obliquely. "You never know your luck, but I'd take all that comes if I was in your place, Kid. Better get out there in the arena, all you boys. They want you in the picture."

The very word "picture" was like a dart in the flank of a fighting bull. The Kid's face showed a line of dead white around his mouth.

"You tell them to go straight to hell!" he said, with a quiet vehemence which could not be questioned. "You tell them if they come within gunshot of me with their damned cameras, I'll shoot the things full of holes! And that goes for my boys, too."

"No need to get riled up over it," Tex drawled soothingly. "All they want is——"

"You tell them what I said, will you, please? Or if you won't do it, I'll tell them myself—and there won't be enough left of their cameras to carry home. I'm sorry, Tex, but that's absolutely final." The Kid walked off, and the three followed him, apologizing with their eyes to Tex, who gazed after them curiously before he turned and made his way back to the chutes.

To be concluded in the next issue, October 20th.

WHERE THEY MAKE HASTE SLOWLY

EVIDENCE of how and why our progress toward permanent world peace is somewhat crablike:

Senator William H. King, of Utah, speaking on the floor of the upper house: "The state department, we are told, is engaged in negotiations to bring about disarmament among the nations and to secure the adoption of treaties calculated to 'outlaw war,' and yet with these professions in behalf of world peace, the executive department has urged direct appropriations and authorizations for military and naval expenditures aggregating nearly $2,000,000,000."

HOW TO START TO THE WHITE HOUSE

A THUMB-NAIL sketch showing how a boy may prepare himself for the highest party honor, nomination for the presidency of the United States:

The son of a blacksmith was orphaned when he was ten years old. Sent to a preparatory school at the age of eleven, he paid his way through the whole course by doing chores. Deciding that he wanted to be an engineer, he got his degree at a Western university, earning every cent of his expenses by waiting on table and collecting and delivering the laundry of other students. In urgent need of money after his graduation, he got a job as a day laborer in a mine, saved most of his wages, and in this way financed himself while he was looking for an engineering opening.

He was Herbert Hoover.

Black Charley Comes Home

By Paul Hovey

Two live-wire location-men for Zipco gas stations get mixed up in a strange and marvelous horse story.

A COMPLETE STORY

YOU saw it last summer and the summer before that, as you jogged and jounced over the meanest detour in New Hampshire on your way to the mountains: a tiny gray house and a tiny gray barn, rubbing shoulders in a friendly sort of fashion, and standing at a bit of a distance from the road, like a couple of timid old folks. Nothing unusual about the house or the barn either, except that on the roof of the latter, in faded black letters, was painted:

HOME OF BLACK CHARLEY CLAY

And if you weren't too busy dodging the bumps and trying to decide whether to stop at Conway for the night, as *you* preferred, or push on to Crawford, as the wife dictated, you probably wondered who the deuce Charley Clay was, anyway.

Bill and I wondered when Bill—we always drive in six-hour shifts—jammed on the brakes and stuck the old left mitt out.

"This is the place," says he.

"Kee-rect," says I. "There's not even a hot-dog stand, and not a sign of a fried clam or a bear cub."

We're location men for Zipco gas, you see, and we cruise around the State trying to find places to edge in. Easy sounding, maybe, but not such a cinch when you consider there are as many kinds of gas as there are swimming champs churning up the Channel from Grease Necks to Dover. Zipco had been on the market for a year or more, and we'd pushed ourselves in about everywhere, but usually there'd be half a dozen different stations in a row, and people who hadn't heard of Zipco naturally wouldn't pick it out from the

bunch. What the company wanted, and what Bill and I were paid to find for 'em, were exclusive locations where a guy would have to buy Zipco or go dry.

This place we'd spotted was one that ought to make 'em slip an extra five in the pay envelope. A. B. Zinks, our manager, had advance info that the State was going to put a concrete road through Paynton in the spring, where the detour was now. When the other concerns got hep to the fact, they'd all be up—Rocony, No-carb, Colony and the rest. Bill and I were scouting in the fall so that Zipco would have the laugh on them in the spring.

"Bet we can buy this for a song," says Bill as we hopped out.

"Depends on who sings," says I, "but I guess they won't ask more'n ten thou'."

"Ten cents," snorts Bill. "The old shack's ready to fall to pieces."

It did look rather shabby. As I walked up the path, I could see that the shingles had rotted and fallen off, leaving cheery invitations to the rain to drop in any time. The house was higher here and lower there, swollen here and shriveled there, as if it had had a bad attack of rheumatism. It was neat enough, though. White curtains stuck out at all the windows like a lot of little petticoats; about thirty pots of geraniums were sunning themselves on the stone steps; and a smell was coming from the kitchen that made my nose wiggle like a rabbit's.

"Cookies, 'Sandy,'" sniffs Bill. I'm "Sandy" because my name's James P. MacCaffrey and my hair's red. Reason enough, even though I've never seen the bonny braes they talk about. "Now, if you didn't look like a corn-fed hog," says Bill, "we might stand a chance of getting one."

"Not with that evil eye of yours," says I, getting in a crack at Bill's left eye, which toes in a bit. Then I lamped the painting on the barn. "Black Charley Clay," I says. "I didn't know they had many darkies up this way."

"Neither did I," admits Bill. "Well, I'll do the dialect act, Sandy, while you sit on the doorstep and give 'em 'Mammy in Alabammy.'"

"Must be some coon to have his name on the roof," I whispers, for we were on the steps then and trying not to knock over the geraniums.

"Believes in advertisin'," hisses Bill. "Probably gives banjo lessons or sells corn cure. Darn these plants!"

Just then the kitchen door was opened, and instead of a pancake ad standing there, saying something about, "Whut you-all want this mo'nin'," a little old lady about as big as a sparrow, with white hair, blue eyes and pink cheeks, smiled at us and says: "Well, boys?"

Boys! James P. MacCaffery and William F. Conroy, location men for Zipco gas!

Bill recovered first. "Good morning, madam," says he, with his eye on the pan of cookies in the little old lady's hand. "Is Mr. Clay, Mr. Charley Clay, in?"

Just then I made a step to the side and bumped off one of the thirty geraniums; but I didn't worry long, for at the words, "Charley Clay," the little woman turned white, dropped the pan with a noise that drowned my own smash-up, and clutched at her throat, where a big cameo pin bobbed up and down.

"Have you news of him?" she whispers, her eyes popping.

"We didn't mean, ma'am——" commences Bill, realizing he'd got into an awful jam by mentioning Charley.

"We saw the name on the barn," says I.

"And we thought——" puts in Bill.

"But we want the man of the house," I concludes.

"The man of the house is Mr. Jacob Lawton," says the little old lady quickly,

her cheeks getting pink again, "and you'll find him in the barn."

As we left the steps, dodging the geraniums, we could hear her sputtering about scaring a body to death and dropping all those cookies.

"For the love of Mike, don't mention Charley, white or black," says Bill.

"Trust me," says I. "All the old lady had in her hands was cookies. The old gent may have an ax."

It wasn't more than six steps to the barn. The farmers certainly used to have things handy for themselves; and you can't blame them, when they had to get up at four a. m. The door was open about an inch, and we slid it back on the rollers and squeezed in.

I don't know why it was, but we both took off our hats, just as if we were going into a church. The place had that dim light that churches have, for one thing. There was only a small patch of a window, and the sun couldn't come through very strong on account of the layers of dust. I saw a couple of mice run across the floor and dive into a convenient exit. I didn't mind the mice; but the spiders! Honest, they made me feel sort of creepy—a hundred or more of 'em, sitting up in the eaves like fat, cross-legged tailors, spinning away as if they had the contract to web up the whole barn.

At first I didn't see the little old man, but when I did, I was almost sure I was in church. Like a priest standing before the altar he was, with his hands clasped together and his head bowed. His face shone in the light that filtered through the dust, and his hair was white and wavy.

After my eyes were accustomed to the darkness I could see he wasn't any priest and there wasn't any altar. He was sitting at a roll-top desk. It was a wreck, too—like the furniture you see outside of a "shoppe," where, as Bill said after he got stuck forty cents for a duck sandwich filled with tuna fish, "I'll be damned if I'll stoppe." Near the desk, just as if the old man had been keeping school, were five or six chairs. The legs had so many initials, circles, and weird marks on them, that they looked like those jiggers the Indians used to decorate the landscape with to let people know who was who and why. Totem poles, I think you call them.

The little man just sat staring straight ahead of him, and Bill and I gasped around. On one side there was nothing but six empty stalls.

"Pipe the art gallery!" says Bill.

I looks over on Bill's left. Gallery was right. There were five times as many pictures as there had been geraniums; pictures all yellow and wrinkled, and curling at the toes, where the tacks were missing. On the top row were the presidents, that is, from Lincoln to Roosevelt. The old man had struck out Wilson, Harding and Coolidge completely. All the generals of the Civil War were there, a couple of the Spanish, but not a one of the big-best fracas of all. Bill never left Devens, and I got only as far as Havre—we weren't eighteen until the last of it ——but we knew all about the big fuss, of course.

"Look at the prize fighters, Sandy," says Bill. "John L.'s the latest bird there. How did they ever get a left hook across on them clothes. Pink pants, blue waists, ribbons—Lord!"

"Some speed to the bikes," I says. "The only place you see models like those is in the museum. Wonder what the little wheel in the rear was for. To run over the guy after he'd fallen off the big one?"

We didn't laugh, though, until we came to the girls. And honest, you couldn't help it—they had so darn many clothes on!

"Miss America of 1776," hisses Bill, giving me a poke. "D'you suppose they had to pay a tax to look at them! I'll

bet that one in the middle could shake a mean shimmy. What's the rigging she's got in—a hustle?"

"Bustle," I corrects him. "Say, what's all those animals? Horses?"

And then the little old man coughed.

We both jumped. And if I didn't blurt out with: "Mr. Clay, sir? Mr. Charley Clay?"

The little old man was at my neck in a second. He wasn't so little, either, when he stood up. He was actually taller than I am. His hands, thin as claws, kept twitching the lapels of my coat; his eyes, black instead of blue like the little old lady's, burned a hole right straight through me, and he kept saying in a husky voice: "You've got him! Where is he? Where is he?"

"Of all the idiots!" says Bill, looking as if he would choke me if the old man didn't. "It's all right, Mr. Lawton," he shouts, taking one of the claws off my coat. "It's all right. That boob—er—my friend, here, made a mistake. He saw the name on the roof, you know. It's you we want, Mr. Lawton. We want to interest you in a little proposition that——"

"Out!" thunders Lawton. "Out!" And he waved his hand toward the door, as if he had the big line in a play. Then he turned his back on us and went to his desk, slowly and with his head bent.

"There are times," remarks Bill sarcastically, when we were blinking in the sun again, "when I wonder why I don't wire the office and ask 'em to relieve me of a flat tire like you."

He blew off a lot of smoke—and I let him, my defense being rather weak—until we came to the geraniums, where the little old lady was waiting with a plate of cookies..

"Would you boys like some?" says she, smiling. "Did you find Mr. Lawton?"

"Thank you, ma'am," says Bill, reaching for the biggest cooky. "We found him all right, and if this nut—er—my friend, here——"

"How was I to know if I said 'Charley Clay'——" I starts to protest.

"Dearie, dear," clucks the little old lady. "You didn't say anything to Mr. Lawton, I hope." Her blue eyes began to grow dark. "But then, I suppose you boys didn't know," she muses, and her eyes looked soft and twinkly again.

"Who—what was Black Charley Clay, anyway?" says I, feeling that the mystery ought to be cleared up, even if we did get run out of the yard.

The little old lady straightened, as if word had been passed that the queen was coming. "Black Charley Clay," says she with dignity, "was a horse." I'm spelling it proper, with an "r" and an "e," but the little old lady called it plain "hoss."

A horse, eh? Bill and I cocked eyebrows at each other. I'd begun to think Charley was a chap who'd jumped his bail or something like that, and Bill had in mind a circus freak, one-half white and one-half black. Nothing but a horse!

"It must have been some horse, ma'am," says I politely, "to have his name on the roof."

"He was," agrees the little old lady, her eyes shining. "Twenty years ago he was the greatest horse in New England, and he would have been the greatest horse in the country, if——"

"Couldn't you tell us about it, ma'am," says Bill, in that oily voice he works on the women.

"I don't know," the little old lady hesitates. "Mr. Lawton might not like it. But you boys come in the kitchen. It's sort of nice to talk to somebody once in a while. You see, we don't have no near neighbors."

At first I was peeved at Bill for getting us roped in on a yarn about a dead nag. When the little old lady commenced on Charley in a once-upon-a-time tone of voice, I looked out of

the window and thought of a letter I was going to write to Miss Evelyn Anderson, who may or may not be Mrs. James P. MacCaffrey one of these days. Before long, however, I was looking straight at Mrs. Lawton, and had left off my letter with, "My own beautiful sweetie-pie!" or some such dignified expression, when the races were on——

It really was quite a story about Charley. Mr. Lawton—Uncle Jake, the little old lady called him—was a big horse trainer in his day, which was about thirty or forty years ago. All he did for a living was train horses and drive 'em. They had a race track right there in the town then—Paynton Plains. Now it's all sliced up into house lots, the way everything is; but it used to be the place where all the sports in New England met.

They were no jockey affairs, either. The little old lady didn't have much use for that kind of stuff. Harness racing was the only kind that was worth mentioning. Uncle Jake drove from the time he was a boy. He drove from the old-style wooden-wheel sulky, and was one of the first to try his hand at the snappy rubber-tired models which came in about thirty-five years ago. When he guided a horse, it won; that is, if it was running on all four cylinders.

They used to have great old times in the barn during the winter before the spring season opened, according to the little old lady. Uncle Jake was the leader, of course. He'd sit at the desk, and the others would locafe themselves in their favorite chairs—which explained the whittling I'd noticed on the legs. They'd chew over all the dope about the horses.

"I used to bring 'em a big platter full of these cookies," says the little old lady, her eyes sparkling, "and a pitcher of my elderberry wine. And I'd stand in the doorway and listen, for I loved to hear about the horses. I knew all about the great Dexter and Flora Temple, and I could tell what time Smuggler, Maude S., Rarus and Nancy Hanks had done."

Those names meant nothing to Bill and me, but we didn't display our ignorance, because by the little old lady's proud bob of her head, you could tell they'd all been Man o' Wars once.

"There were six stalls in the barn, and they were full of horses my husband was training," goes on the little old lady. "Most of 'em were winners, too. But Jake wanted a horse of his own. And I did, too. So we saved all he earned, which wasn't very much, considering how open-hearted he was with all he had, and bought Mountain Maid. She was a pretty little mare with Morgan blood in her, and Uncle Jake did pretty well. Got several good-sized purses.

"Then he bought Saul," says she excitedly. "We had to work hard with him. You see, he was troubled with lameness, and everybody said he was no good except for the stud; but Uncle Jake doctored him, and in a year he was racing with the best of them. Saul was out of Night Wind by Davy Darling," says she impressively, "and he was a Clay!"

I learned a lot about horses. Funny thing, but I never knew much about them. Automobiles were starting to come when I was little, and since I'd always lived in the city, I'd been brought up with them, more or less. Of course, I knew there were such animals as horses, and I'd been to races and bet on them, taking tips from people who didn't know any more about them than I did. And when the English horse, Papyrus, came over, I read all about it in the papers, and bet on the Yankee horse as a matter of loyalty.

But I had no idea there were different makes of horses, as there are of automobiles, and that they all have their special points. I can tell you the name of every car on the market, U. S. and

foreign, from a Ford to a Fiat, and give all its big features, its engine, gears, body, hood, spark, throttle, carburetor, crankshaft, centrifugal pump, cellular radiator and drum-type lamps; but when the little old lady went on about Morgans, Messengers, Hambletonians, Pilots, Mambrinos, Stars and Narragansett pacers, and reeled off about withers, cannon bones, pasterns, croups, gaits and hobbles, I was over in my corner holding up the sponge. As for Bill, he just sat with his mouth open.

I did manage to get the main point, and that was that the Clays were the Rolls-Royces up in New Hampshire, and that in Saul, Uncle Jake had got this year's model. He won a good bit of money with him, anyway, and picked up a couple more horses. He wasn't satisfied, though. He wasn't content with a local celebrity. He wanted a world-beater.

So they put their heads together over the cookies and elderberry wine, Uncle Jake and his pals; and a chap by the name of Jo Dillon—the little old lady broke off to say he'd been dead six years come next May—proposed a plan. He had a mare, Lady Bess, a little black bay, who, although she never came in first, was always within the money. She was a Clay, too, and was out of —— But there, I can't remember. Anyhow, her ancestors were all A no. 1. Uncle Jake had his Saul. The kid of the two ought to be pretty good, thought Dillon. Uncle Jake thought so too and, being a sport, made a bet. If the youngster was a filly, Jo could have her, since he liked fillies better. If not, it would be Uncle Jake's. In either case, they'd go divvies on the first big purse the horse won.

The luck was with Uncle Jake! When Mrs. Lawton told about the night Charley was born, with a crowd around waiting the news—for everybody in Paynton had got wind of the bet—I sat so still that when I swallowed I jumped at the noise I made. Better than a movie, it was.

"You could tell he was going to be a king," says Mrs. Lawton, "as soon as he could stand on his wobbly little legs. He had the grace of Lady Bess and the strength of Saul. His neck was long and slender; his shoulders and back were sloping; his head was bony; his eyes were deep-set and intelligent; his legs were slim and firm. He was all black except for four white feet. Uncle Jake had a very dear brother, Charley, and since he also wished the horse to be known as a Clay, named him Black Charley Clay."

You know how it is with a brand-new bus—you have to drive it easy the first thousand miles? Well, it's about the same way with horses. They don't do anything in the way of racing until they're two years old, and according to Mrs. Lawton, three years is better. They're at their highest value when they're four or five. Of course that's where they differ from automobiles, which depreciate so darn fast that if you've used one five years you generally have to pay some one to take it off your hands.

Charley won his first purse when he was a two-year-old, and kept right at it. He and Uncle Jake went all over New England winning yards of blue ribbons. Then they left the home territory in search of more and prettier tiebows, and got them, too. Charley must have been a wow of a horse from the tales the old lady told. He was chockfull of temperament, like all the big artists. He wouldn't do a thing for nobody except Uncle Jake, unless the old man explained it all out to him and told Charley the guy had his personal O. K.

"Uncle Jake thought much more of Charley than of me," says the little old lady, and with no sour grapes either. "They were together night and day. Jake used to sleep in the barn so that

nothing would happen to Charley. That's why when the blow came, it was so hard for him to bear."

She stopped, and her eyes were misty. Then, when Bill and I say nothing, she remembers we're not in on the secret, and goes on.

"Charley was four that spring. Jake was dated up for almost all the fairs, and the Grand Circuit, as well. The season had started with Charley more of a sensation than ever. A two-minute horse, he was!"

I had no idea what a two-minute nag was, but I had a hunch it was something as slick and as seldom found as a three-minute egg.

"The one thing that bothered Jake was the trips where Charley was in strange places and where he might be touched by strange hands. He always feared some danger to the horse. When they traveled, Jake stayed with Charley every minute, even slept in the stable with him at night. All his friends told him how foolish he was, and I guess I talked more than they about it; so when he went to New York State that year, he promised to leave Charley with George more. George was the groom, and a nice trustworthy fellow. Charley like him as well as he could like anybody besides Jake.

"Jake said that the first night in the hotel away from Charley he couldn't sleep, but when he found the horse all right in the morning and George on hand, he made up his mind not to worry. The second night passed calmly, and the third. But in the middle of the fourth night Jake woke up all hot and cold, and thought he could hear Charley whinny. Jake dressed, hurried to the stables. The door was open. He found George unconscious on the floor and Charley gone!"

"But—but what did they do with him?" blurts out Bill.

Mrs. Lawton shook her head. "The men who stole him—there were probably several mixed in it—couldn't very well have raced him, for he would be easily recognized. They might have shipped him abroad, although Jake had all the ports watched. They might have taken him to Mexico or Canada. Maybe they wanted him for breeding purposes; but the racing rules are pretty strict about identifying a horse's sire and dam.

"Jake spent all the money he had won, trying to find Charley. That's why he's sort of——" The little old lady rubbed her forehead with a thin blue hand. "He couldn't get over it, you see. He couldn't race any more. He tried to, but he'd lost the knack. The rich owners who had always hired him to drive their horses, dropped him. For years, now, he's done nothing but sit in the barn, looking at the stalls and the chairs. Sometimes he calls out to me to bring in some cookies and wine for the boys."

Her voice was commencing to shake, so she broke off with a cough. "I haven't asked you boys what you want. Are you sellin' something?"

"No'm," says I, for Bill looked as if he'd forgotten what we were there for. "We've come to have you sell us something. We'd like your place here, ma'am, for a station for Zipco gas; and we'd offer five hundred for it."

The little old lady didn't appear very interested at the mention of gas; but at "five hundred," she registered.

"Five hundred dollars? For what?" says she, blinking.

"For your place," says I. "House, barn, and land in front."

"What would happen to the house and barn?" says she.

"Torn down," says I cheerily. "Zipco puts up a classy outfit, ma'am. Stucco, with red-tile roof, and a gold ball on top like the statehouse. The tanks are painted red with a gold ball on top, too. There's something for the kiddies—a cage of bear cubs or a pool

with baby alligators; and there's a writin' room for the ladies, with free stationery. A radio's going for the gents. No other gas gives you the extras and fine service that Zipco passes out."

"Five hundred dollars," repeats Mrs. Lawton slowly. "But we couldn't live very long on that."

"As managers of the station, you could," puts in Bill quickly. "That's the generous proposition Zipco always makes. You have the first chance of being manager, at the flat salary of twenty-five a week."

"A week." The little old lady's voice shook. "Why, if we could only have that—— I wish, I wish Mr. Lawton could—— Do you suppose you boys could come back to-morrow? I'll talk to him first about it. And you might as well call me Aunt Sarah. Everybody does."

"We'll be back," we agrees, calling the sale ours. When a wife decides to talk to a husband about something, it's usually all over but the arrangements for the first installment.

The next afternoon, when we saw Uncle Jake, we weren't so sure. He scowled at us when Aunt Sarah introduced us, and sat in a chair by the window where he could see the barn. Twice he went to the door, mumbling something about hearing somebody coming. He wasn't so cuckoo as I thought, though, for while Bill was explaining about the deal, he pursed his lips and looked at us with those black eyes of his that didn't miss a thing.

"Where will Charley stay, then, when he comes back?" he demands of Aunt Sarah.

"Why, Jake, dear! Charley ain't comin' back," says the little old lady patiently. "It's twenty years ago, you know, when he went off. He'd be twenty-four now, and it ain't likely he's alive."

"Twenty years ago," says the little old man, as if he didn't believe it, "an' he'd be twenty-four now. Jay-eye-see was twenty-eight when he died, warn't he? And who was that big brood mare that lived to be thirty-two? How do you know Charley ain't alive!"

"But it's not likely, dear," says his wife gently. "Course, horses do live to be older'n twenty-four, but it's seldom."

"Humph!" snorts Uncle Jake. But he sort of slumps in his chair, as if he knew Charley'd been eating his celestial oats for a long time back.

"And we'd have five hundred to put in the bank for our old age," coaxes Aunt Sarah, "and twenty-five a week to live on. Just think, Jake. Twenty-five a week! We ain't had more'n that a month."

"And what will I do?" snaps Uncle Jake. "Squirt gasoline into autymobiles and putter around with a lot o' foul-smellin' oil? The hell I will!"

We went two times more, Bill and I, and found Aunt Sarah just as patient and eager for the twenty-five per, and Uncle Jake just as balky.

"Where can I sit and smoke and think, in that stucco place?" says the old man. "And all my pictures'll have to come off the walls when you tear down the barn." Bill and I think of Miss America of 1776, and give a hearty cheer in sign language.

As a matter of fact, we'd practically given the deal up, and been dickering with the owner of some wooden land just south of Uncle Jake's place. Then, at the last call on the Lawton's, if I didn't hit upon a stunt that shows what a first-class salesman I am.

"Too bad you folks can't come down to Boston in March for the auto show," I says, casuallike, when we were saying good-by.

"Show?" Uncle Jake, nodding in his chair, perks up. "Did you say a show and autymobiles?"

"I did," says I. "And one week, and a whale of a show, too."

"But with autymobiles," persists Uncle Jake, frowning. "Of course you can have a show with horses, cows, dogs, anything alive. But autymobiles?"

"Well, just you come and see," I baits them. "Bands playin', mobs of people shovin' and pushin' to get a good look at the busses. Some fun!"

"It's ten years since I was in Boston," says Aunt Sarah longingly. "I went to visit Sister Lettie. We had an awful good time."

"Ten since I was there," puts in Uncle Jake. A show, eh?"

Before we left, we made them promise they'd come to the auto show as our guests and not decide about Zipco until after that. We had an option on the piece of wooded land, and since we had put our hooks on five other nifty spots between Paynton and the mountains, we felt we were sitting pretty.

We were kept busy during the winter. I had insurance for a side line, and Bill had vacuum cleaners, so that March came around before we realized it. There was going to be something new at the auto show, something that the Zipco people were talking about night and day. For the first time the different gasoline companies were going to be represented; and it was up to Zipco to make a hit, as A. B. Zinks, our manager, had a tiresome habit of observing.

Colony was going to be there with its Colonial mansion, consisting mostly of white pillars and green blinds; No-carb, with its log-cabin outfit; Peninsula, with its crazy lighthouse; and all the rest of them, with their bungalows, Spanish loggias and brick taverns. Good old Zipco was to have a life-size model in stucco with red roof and big gold ball, with bears and alligators floating around in the bargain. We were going to pass out tickets for five gallons of gas for the price of three. Even this, though, wasn't enough for Zinko the Zealous.

"The other fellows will be doing the same," growls he. "What I want is some kind of a stunt, something different that will make the crowd stick around. You guys get busy and dope it out."

I thought, but nothing startling happened, so I decided to let somebody else lose sleep over it.

Well, to come back to our friends, the Lawtons, I wrote a letter, reminding them of their promise, telling them all about what train to take, and sending them money for their fares. Two days later I got an answer from Aunt Sarah, written in pencil in tiny shaky letters, saying she and Uncle Jake were coming as I directed.

"What in the deuce will we do with them tagging around?" says Bill, not exactly pleased.

"They'll be no trouble," says I. "We'll put 'em in a hotel. The bill will go on our expense account, after the deal's closed. They'll have the time of their lives. After the old man's seen the show, he'll forget he ever had a horse by the name of Charley and will want to buy a bus of his own."

When I met them at the North Station, I almost wished I hadn't proposed the trip. I had no idea they'd look so funny. Up there in the little gray house they seemed to fit, but down here with the flappers tearing around, and the city men and women trailing after porters, they looked as if they were advertising a show at the Orpheum. I could see people staring at them and laughing.

Aunt Sarah's dress, some kind of rusty black thing, was clear to the platform and about five yards wide. I'll bet the coat she wore, another black affair, was the one she had at her wedding. Her hat, black with some wabbly pink roses on it, sat right on top of her head. Uncle Jake didn't look any better. He was in mourning, too, in a

green-black suit preserved in moth-balls for thirty years or so. His hat wasn't big enough for his head, and his coat was large enough for both him and Aunt Sarah together.

At first I was going to be snooty, not liking the idea of having people gawk at me, but when I saw Aunt Sarah's pink cheeks and her eyes all excited, and Uncle Jake looking scared and holding tight to Aunt Sarah's arm, I just cruised forward with a, "Howdy, folks!" And when Aunt Sarah kissed me, I gave her a hug and let everybody in the station know I was proud to belong to them.

It wasn't until after dinner that night that I got the idea for the stunt A. B. was pining for. Bill and I had taken Aunt Sarah and Uncle Jake to a restaurant, and I'd seen everybody smiling at them, not in a catty way, but just pleasant and amused. I worked the old bean most of the night and the next morning I went to A. B.

"Here's the dope," I says. "There's a couple of enemies of daylight saving down here from Paynton, New Hampshire, that look like a down-East act out of vaudeville. They're serious, you know; don't know they're funny, and will do anything I tell 'em. We'll get a gig somewhere, a plug that won't move without a charge of TNT, and have a sign——

THEY RODE ON OATS.

We'll put the old folks in the gig. Then we'll get the latest model of a sporty roadster—the Mercury'll let us have one—have a slick young sheik and his sugar inside, and the sign in front——

THEY RIDE ON ZIPCO.

A. B. was impressed, you could tell, but he didn't like the idea of a horse. "It's a nuisance handlin' anything alive," says he. "The brute will be just as apt to kick over something as not."

"We'll get one that won't be able to lift his feet," says I. "I know an old duffer who runs a livery stable, and I'll see him about it. We'll have the act on just a couple hours in the evening when the crowd's the thickest."

"Well, see what you can do," growls A. B.

As I had a date with Evelyn, I sent Bill to the stable with full instructions about the kind of a nag to get.

"Is it an old bird?" I asks, when Bill reported he'd hired the beast.

"Methuselah's private mount," says Bill.

"No danger of his kicking?"

"Won't even lift a hair of his tail."

"No kiddin'!" says I.

"Honest," insists Bill, "he's most a hundred, I should judge; and too lazy to move, according to the man I saw."

I told Aunt Sarah and Uncle Jake about their act, feeling guilty all the time, as if I were trading on them. I let them think they were to represent the riding customs of fifty years ago, and the kids in the auto those of the present time. "It's historical and educational," says I, "and will give you a chance to see the show from the inside."

"Of course we will," smiles Aunt Sarah, "if it will help repay you boys for being so nice to us." That made me feel cheaper than ever.

That was on Saturday. Sunday we took the Lawtons to church and the public gardens. Monday the show opened. Uncle Jake had been quiet until then. "The show starts this afternoon, does it?" says he. "Good enough!"

Bill had a date with his girl that day, so I had the heavy job of guide. The show opened with a bigger crowd on hand than ever before. Even though it was in the afternoon, the entrances were jammed with people. The hall looked great, with crape paper flying all around, and palms, century plants and a lot of Christmas trees stuck here and there. The bands were playing, and

the people were talking and laughing. I could see Uncle Jake's eyes light up and his lips open as if he were going to speak. Then he squeezed Aunt Sarah's arm.

"He'll forget Charley," thinks I complacently. "He's got the auto bug already."

Soon, however, I noticed something was wrong with the old man. We hadn't looked over more than four or five cars, when he pulled at my sleeve and says, puzzled: "Is this all there is to it?"

"Sure," says I. "Poke around and get a line on the different busses, and see what new features they've got to offer."

Just then we came to an Apollo limousine that made you want to hang over the ropes and drool. Leastways, it hit me that way, but it didn't make any more of a dent on Uncle Jake than if it had been the 1898 model jitney that meets the trains at Paynton depot. A queer gleam was coming in the old man's eyes, as if he'd caught somebody playing tricks on him. Aunt Sarah didn't say anything except: "Lots of silver there to shine."

"Want to step in and get the feel of her?" says I.

"No!" snaps Uncle Jake.

Next we came to a Sizzler Six, where a slick young salesman, all doggy in a hired undertaker's outfit, was getting a man and his wife to the point where they're dying to sign on the dotted line. "For beauty and power," says he confidentially, "there's no car on the market the equal of this."

"Beauty and power," hisses Uncle Jake, giving me a poke. "What's he talkin' about?"

"Why, the bus, of course," says I, sort of peeved.

I hurried them along after that—no need of prolonging the agony—until we came to Zipco, with its gold ball looming up pretty.

"You two sit here," I says, dragging out a couple of chairs for them, "and feast your eyes on that station that's going to be in your front yard this spring. I've got to leave for a second."

I skipped off, beginning to feel rather uneasy about that hotel bill on our expense account. I was also afraid Uncle Jake might be temperamental about appearing in the act I'd outlined for him.

"We promised," says Aunt Sarah primly, when I mentioned the matter to them later, "and we never go back on our promises. Do we, Jake?"

But Uncle Jake muttered something about "show" under his breath and said nothing.

I was a little nervous that night about the old folks, but they listened to all my instructions and said they'd carry them out. I sneaked them in a side way so they didn't see the signs about oats and Zipco, and then I told them a few things I hadn't told them before.

"We've got a little orchestra," says I, "special for the act. When they play a Virginia reel—you know, tiddle-de-diddle-de-tiddle——"

"I won a cup for dancin' the reel," interrupts Aunt Sarah proudly.

"Good!' says I. "Well, when you hear it, you and Uncle Jake go out, and if you can manage a few steps, so much the better. Then you climb into the gig. The band will play, 'My Baby Loves Me,' and out will come the kids who are to sit in the auto, Erna Epstein and Benny Frisk. They'll do the Charleston and hop in."

"We sit?" says Uncle Jake scornfully. "Can't the hoss move?"

"There ain't enough room," says I. "Besides, the boss wants him to stay still. Erna and Benny will probably get out and dance, but you and Aunt Sarah can take life easy."

"Humph!" snorts Uncle Jake. Then he peeked out and saw the gig. "Not much of a buggy you got there."

"We tried to get a better one," I says

soothingly. Of course we'd taken the worst-looking affair we could rake up.

"I can't see the horse," says he, squinting. And I sent up a prayer. Bill had certainly been right about the animal's age and general lifelessness. It took Bill and me and the man who brought the beast a half hour to push and cuss him into the hall. He just wouldn't move, and kept looking at us with a cool, mean eye. The man said he'd traded another horse for this one and had got stung. I'll say he had!

The reel started up, and Aunt Sarah and Uncle Jake went on. Aunt Sarah, bless her heart, danced as well as she could in five yards of black silk, while Uncle Jake, balky as ever, trotted after her with his funny bandy-legged walk. They got a great hand from the folks, and there was a good crowd, too. While they were climbing in the buggy, Erna and Benny glided in, but the audience was rather fed up on the Charleston and didn't give them much applause, although they're two of the best dancers in the city.

Uncle Jake sat there looking around dazed, and the people hooted, thinking he was all made up and acting Hiram. Benny and Erna finished and got in the Mercury roadster. So far, so good. Then I'll be darned if Uncle Jake didn't take the reins!

I can't tell you exactly how it happened, but he'd no sooner touched them, than that lumbering old horse that had been all hunched over, half asleep, straightened, cocked his head and let out the weirdest noise you ever heard. Then Uncle Jake did something else with the reins and made a funny sound with his lips, and the plug that we'd had to shove by inches into the hall stepped off so fast that Aunt Sarah was knocked clean off the seat, backward.

Didn't the crowd beat it! Uncle Jake stopped the nag right at the ropes, though, and then everybody clapped and hollered. "'Ray for oats!" says some one. "Come on, Zipco! Show your stuff!" And all Benny Frisk could do was look foolish, for of course there wasn't a drop of gas in the bus!

Soon I heard a voice above the noise. "Charley!" it says, all ashake. "Charley!" I saw Uncle Jake out of the buggy, fairly hugging the black head of the old plug. For the first time I noticed the four white feet. Black Charley Clay! Can you beat it?

Hotfoot came A. B. "I told you a damn hoss would act up like this and spoil the whole show," says he, boiling over, he's so mad.

"Spoil it?" says I. "Didn't you want a crowd around, and ain't you got one? And we've found Charley Clay, the greatest horse in New England twenty years ago. Who gets the credit? Zipco!"

I left him and went to Uncle Jake. Honest, I almost had to use the silk handkerchief with my initials embroidered on it that Evelyn gave me when I saw the old man patting that horse, half crying and half singing.

"Charley," he'd croon. "Charley! Jake's back! He didn't mean to leave you, Charley. He ought never to have left you. He'll never leave you again. Charley! Jake's here!"

The horse would rub his nose on Jake's arm, lay his head on Jake's shoulder, and look at him as if he thought twenty years was a long time, but since his master was back, he'd ask no questions. Aunt Sarah hopped around, patting first Uncle Jake and then Charley.

Of course the reporters were on hand. Some of them had called their sporting editors and been told to get all they could on the story. They managed to dig up a head cheese in some racing association and a big gun in a driving club. The two of them knew Charley, and they poked all over him as if he had a knock in his engine.

"It's Charley Clay, all right," says they, wagging their heads solemnly.

Then the reporters dragged in the livery-stable man to tell all he knew, which wasn't much. He'd traded a horse of his for Charley two years ago and got stung on Charley's age.

It would take too long to give the ins and outs of the confab, especially the pedigree part. The head cheese, the big gun, and the reporters all agree that the gang that had stolen Charley had found him a white elephant. You may have read of a chap who swiped a famous picture from some art gallery and all he could do was sit and look at it, until one day it got so on his nerves that he shipped it back, parcel post. Well, the thieves had to sit and look at Charley. There was such a fuss raised that they didn't dare ship him out of the country, and they couldn't race him as was. The head cheese and the big gun didn't think they'd even used him for breeding purposes, on account of the strict rules about registering a horse's pa and ma.

Uncle Jake didn't pay much attention to the ifs and buts. It was enough for him that Charley was back. He wasn't even listening when the head cheese and the big gun, who were as excited as if they'd found King Tut's golf pants and his match score in the hip pocket, proposed a fund and started it off with two thousand from the clubs they're presidents of. Then everybody around got the fever and chipped in. When the pedigree chaps presented Uncle Jake with a check for five thousand, the little old man was floored, and just opened his mouth and forgot to close it.

"To keep Charley in his old age," says the big gun jokingly. He was a prosperous guy, himself, enjoying both gout and high blood pressure, by the looks of him, and he could tell at a glance that Uncle Jake and his wife were up against it.

"Gentlemen, I thank you," says Uncle Jake, in a way that made me start to hunt for my silk handkerchief again. "I assure you the home of Black Charley Clay will be perpetuated."

As I was wondering how Uncle Jake managed to cough up such a jawbreaker, and whether it meant no Zipco or not, Aunt Sarah took me by one arm and Bill by the other, and says in a shrill, piping voice: "These are the boys who must be thanked for our good fortune. They discovered Charley!"

The pedigree fellows and the reporters turned on us, then. Bill looked as if he'd had a ticket given him for parking on the wrong side of the street, so I did the speech-making.

"It was no credit to us," says I modestly, addressing the head cheese and the big gun. "It was just chance, although we sure are glad we perpetrated Charley." There, thinks I, is as good a one as Uncle Jake threw at 'em! "And if you'll just mention," I goes on, turning to the reporters, "that William M.—for Mosquito—Conroy and James P.—for Pineapple—MacCaffrey, are location men for Zipco gas, it'll be O. K. with us."

The next morning we went to the station to see the Lawtons off for Paynton. Charley was riding de luxe in the baggage car, and Uncle Jake was going to ride with him.

"I paid my bill when we checked out," says he proudly, "and if you boys will come up this summer, Sarah and I'll make up to you for everything else. About the gas station," he goes on, as we look fierce and pretend we're going to choke him if he doesn't lay off the money business, "I'm afraid I can't consider it, now."

"That's all right," says I. "The fellow down the road will sell us his woodland. I wired him last night."

"But I wasn't going to let you have it, even if Charley hadn't come home," says the little old man quickly, with that angry gleam in his eye I'd noticed the afternoon before. "A show!" says he. "That was a great show you boys

took me to. Thought if I saw all them tin things shined up with furniture polish, that I'd be willin' to sell my house and barn.

"Show! You youngsters don't know what a show is. I'll take you to one some time. Horses don't need no crape paper, palms and revolvin' platforms. You don't know a thing about horses." He looked at us pityingly. "That man yesterday that pointed at that autymobile and talked about beauty and power —you believed him! Beauty! What do you know about beauty, you fellows with your bolts and screws?

"Power! What do you know of power?" he goes on, looking at us sort of wild. "You step on a starter, shift gears, and gas goes through tubes and coils. What's that? I give a twitch to the reins with my little finger, and blood, rich warm blood, races through straining veins; legs swing into action; head bends forward, and muscles snap. But it's the blood that counts, the blood of a king and a conqueror, and it comes until it flecks the reins, shoots from the nostrils, and drips from the sides. Show!" says he, quieting down, to Bill's and my relief. "That was a hell of a show!"

You'll see it this summer as you whiz and honk over the slickest piece of concrete in New Hampshire on your way to the mountains: a tiny gray house and a tiny gray barn, rubbing shoulders in a friendly sort of fashion, and standing at a bit of a distance from the road, like a couple of timid old folks. Nothing unusual about the house or the barn either, except that on the roof of the latter, in brand-new black paint, in letters big enough to be seen a mile off, is:

HOME OF BLACK CHARLEY CLAY.

Watch for another story by Paul Hovey in a future issue.

WHERE FOLKS ARE FIRE HAZARDS

W. B. LEWIS, superintendent of the Yosemite National Park, was discussing forest fires with a group of friends in a Chicago hotel lobby.

"During June, July, August, and September," he said, "scarcely a drop of rain falls in Yosemite Valley or upon the more heavily timbered belt along the western border of the park. The ground cover becomes as dry as tinder, presenting an extremely dangerous forest-fire hazard. The main roads to the park traverse this belt of highly inflammable timber so that every visitor becomes a potential source of great fire danger."

THE FINANCIAL ARGUMENT

CRIME costs this country so much and prevention of it is so cheap that we Americans, as a nation, are stupid to let it hit us so hard. This is the logical conclusion to be drawn from a statement by William Lewis Butcher, chairman of the Subcommittee on Causes of the New York Crime Commission.

"America," he says, "spends a billion dollars a year for her courts and police and prisons. It costs $400 a year to keep a prisoner in jail. Organizations striving to work with boys and girls and keep them away from crime cost but $15 per year per capita. Which is the better investment?"

A Chat With You

WE were just glancing through a metropolitan telephone directory which lists the occupations first and then the names. Almost every vocation in the world is represented there—everything from accounting to the zinc business. It is remarkable, when you come to think of it, how many ways there are of making a living. It is still more remarkable that any one is ever able to decide upon a career, when there are so many from which to choose.

* * * *

NOTHING shows more graphically the vast differences in human beings than the many and varied means by which they obtain food and shelter. It proves again their superiority over animals, for each brute species has but one way of getting these necessities. The tiger hunts; the spider lies in wait. The buzzard soars, alert; the frog loafs on his haunches and waits for the fly to come within reach of his long tongue.

* * * *

MAN is free to choose. Of course, his heredity and environment and education determine, to a large degree, his tastes; but these help instead of hinder him. Unlike the majority of animals, however, men are not lone hunters. They work together—in offices, factories. There is more security and comfort in having the companionship and aid of other people.

Very few men prefer to labor alone—far removed from their friends and families. But we admire those who do, because there are times when we secretly would like to seek solitude. We read of the lone prospector, the scientist who digs into the jungle, the man who flies, unaccompanied, across the ocean, the forest ranger, the border patrolman, and we pay tribute to their spunk. They are men who do great things, and do them alone.

* * * *

SUCH a man is Matt Gaylord, about whom you will read in "A Man of the Border," by Holman Day, in the next issue. Matt is a border patrolman who tackles a powerful and insidious ring of the most fiendish smugglers in the world—those who sneak in narcotics that ruin the lives of unfortunates. Holman Day, in this complete novel, draws a strong word picture of one of the finest types of men—a border sentinel, a man whose courage goes, for the most part, unsung but who faces daily as much danger as any soldier at the front.

* * * *

THE wilderness, though, is by no means the only place where character undergoes severe tests. Look at the cities; think what dramas are enacted there hourly on the stage of life. Look at the towns, the villages, the farms. Everywhere the struggle of wills, the business of life, surge on. Clay Perry's short story, "Crutch Freeman," illustrates this better than we can tell you. It is a tale that tears open the hearts of human, elemental people and shows them amid their soul-racking dramas—told only as Mr. Perry, who is a student of humankind, can tell it. In the next issue.

* * * *

LOOK forward to that number—October 20th. There is a list of its contents at the end of this Chat. The two-part mystery story by W. B. M. Ferguson is a startling yarn with a

neat surprise at the end. See if you can guess the solution.

Harry Irving Shumway's offering, "T'anks, Gentlemen," is very amusing, and gives you a new slant on that great American game—golf. He is fairly new to these pages; we know that you will like his writing.

"The Hound of the Macraes," by Meade Corcoran, is a story with the strength and the pride of the Scotch Highlands. B. M. Bower and Frederick Niven round out the issue—an issue well worth reading.

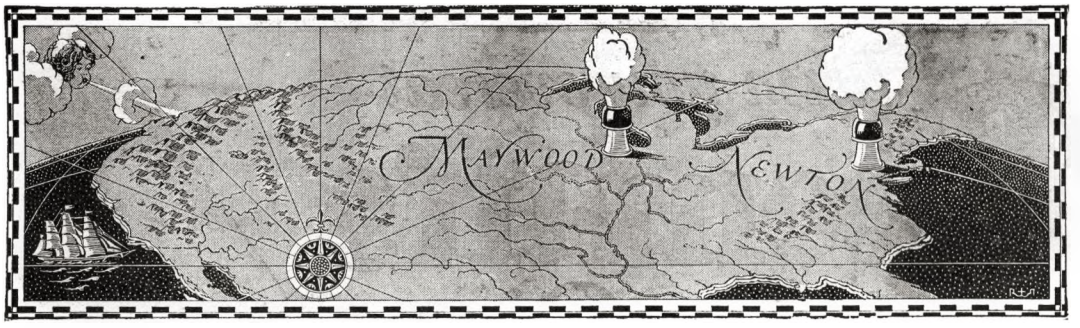
KEEP on watching THE POPULAR this fall especially. There are some great features in store—stories by favorite authors and new authors. Autumn is the time, you know, when everybody is full of pep. There's a tingling in the air. Life seems worth living. The days are bright, the skies blue. At night you light the first log fire of the year—what a pleasant ceremony, that!—and you settle down in an armchair for a cozy evening with THE POPULAR opened before you. It makes ideal reading.

THE POPULAR

In the Next Number, October 20th

A Man of the Border A Complete Novel	**HOLMAN DAY**
"T'anks, Gentlemen"	**HARRY IRVING SHUMWAY**
The Hound of the Macraes	**MEADE CORCORAN**
The Imperfect Crime In Two Parts—Part I	**W. B. M. FERGUSON**
Crutch Freeman	**CLAY PERRY**
The Scarlet Sign	**FREDERICK NIVEN**
Rodeo In Four Parts—Part IV	**B. M. BOWER**

And Other Stories You Are Sure to Like.



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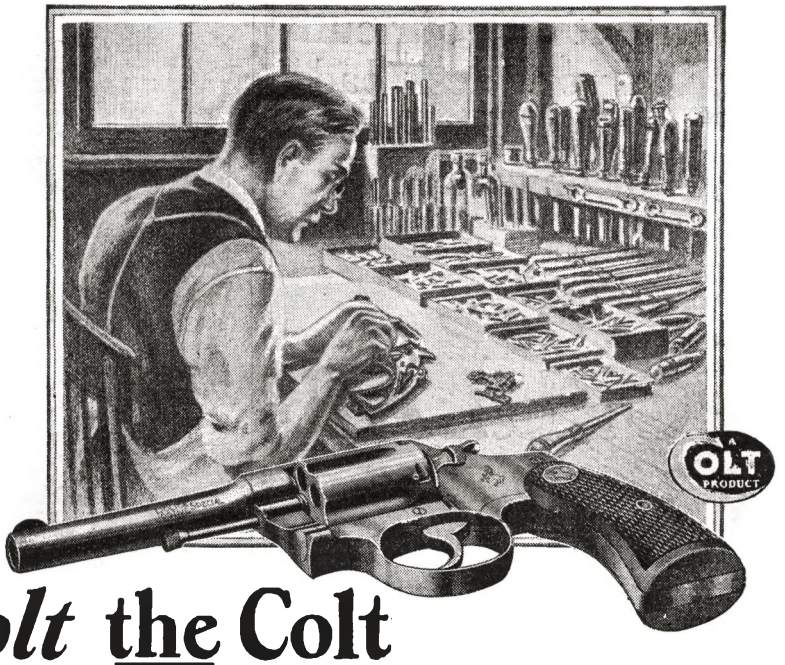

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How long is it since you looked at all your snapshots?

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That's the time to get out all your snapshots. The farther back they go the more fun they'll be. Nothing draws a bigger laugh than the picture of some one you know dressed in the style of ten years ago.

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When you see a well-loved face or scene, you immediately think of all that has happened since the snapshot was made and the evening becomes one of delightful reminiscence.

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