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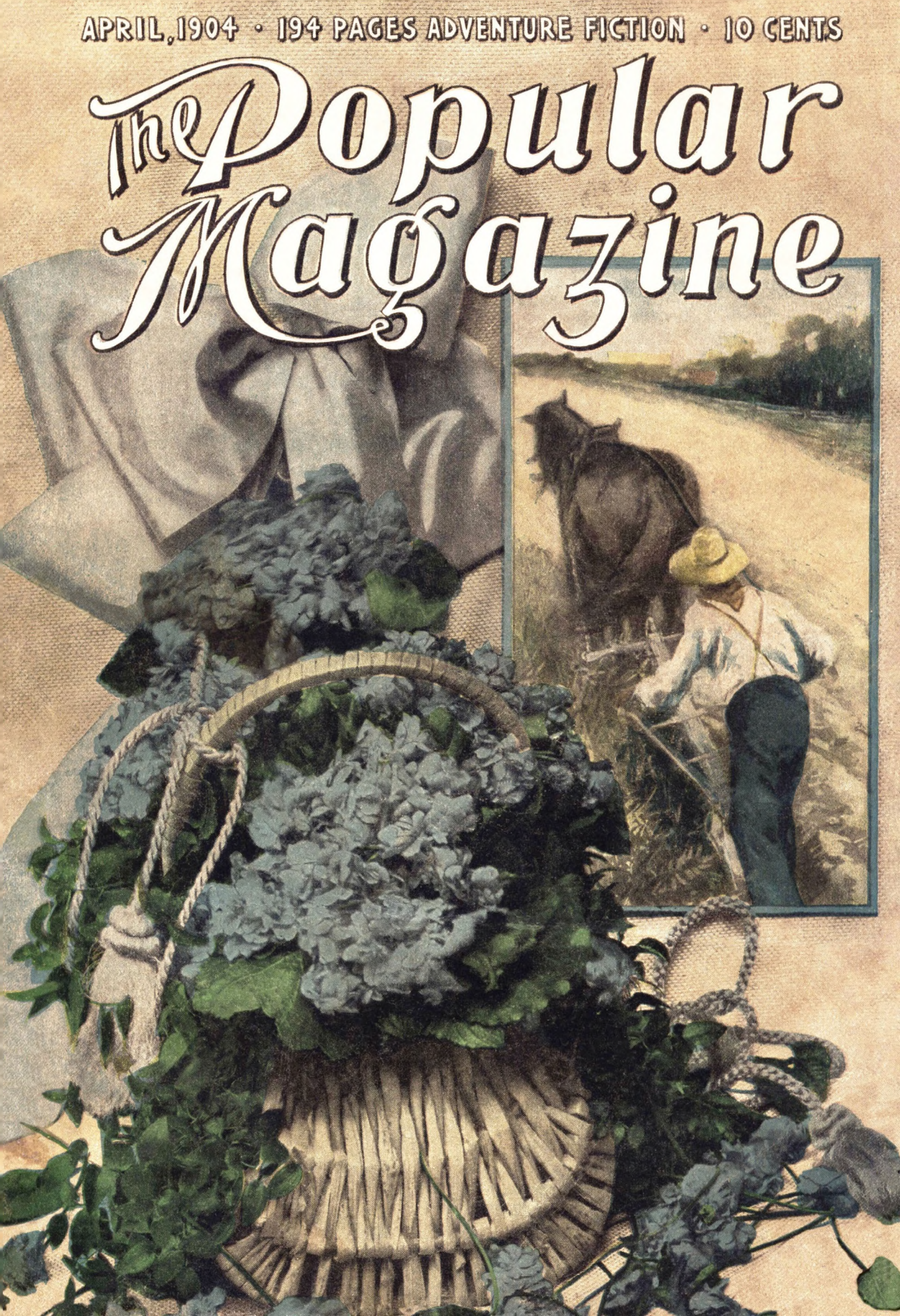

If you should live until the year 1921, and should happen to be a personage of some importance, it is possible you may meet with a fate similar to that which befell Senator Grosvenor, of New York, and his Secretary, Miss Ethel Verity, as described in the remarkable story, "THE INTERNATIONAL DISAPPEARANCE SYNDICATE, Ltd.," appearing in the next number of The Popular Magazine

P.S.—The May Number will also contain two sparkling new features, "ROMANCES OF THE RACE COURSE," and "LITTLE STORIES OF THE STAGE."

THE POPULAR MAGAZINE

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THE POPULAR MAGAZINE

VOL. I. APRIL, 1904. No. 6.

WANTED, A HIGHWAYMAN

BY WILLIAM WALLACE COOK

The strange methods adopted by an eccentric uncle to thwart the love affairs of his two nieces, and the astounding results which followed his interference.

(*A Complete Novel.*)

CHAPTER I.

IN JEST OR EARNEST?

"GREAT Scott!" cried the prosecuting attorney, rushing into the sheriff's office, and wildly waving a newspaper. "What's the country coming to, I'd like to know, when crime stalks brazenly through the public prints? By Jove! The insolence of the thing! The monumental nerve! The——"

"Sit down, old man," interrupted the sheriff. "I haven't seen you so worked up since we got word that Chet Quinn had been chased out of the Black Hills. Calm yourself, Joe. If crime has gone to stalking around where it doesn't belong, I'll get a grip on it and turn it over to you."

"Right in our county seat paper, too!" fumed the prosecuting attorney, throwing the poorly printed sheet down on the sheriff's desk, and striking it with his clinched fist. "The hydra-headed monster dares to flaunt itself right under our very noses, Tom!"

"Come, that's not so bad," laughed Tom. "For weeks, Joe, you and I haven't done a thing to earn our salaries as officials of the county, so we ought to feel obliged to the hydra-headed monster for flaunting itself. What's the matter, anyhow?"

"Look at that, by jings!" answered the prosecuting attorney, indicating a paragraph with his finger. "You just look at that, Tom Bryce! Nice country, this, to bring a couple of young ladies into, isn't it? I'm going to wire Ethel and Trix, right off, to stay in Chicago, and that you and I will manage to get there somehow instead of having them come here!"

The prosecuting attorney whirled around as though to leave the room, but Tom grabbed him by the coat tails, pulled him back and pushed him into a chair.

"You are going to do nothing of the kind, Joe Wickersham," said Tom, quietly. "You and I couldn't both get away to go to Chicago, and I don't think that crime has this country so fast by the ears that it isn't safe for Trix and Ethel, with you and me to look out for them. Quiet yourself, man!"

"How can I be quiet with an orgy of lawlessness, a carnival of crime, staring Blackfoot in the face?" retorted the prosecuting attorney. "Things have

been quiet here since we assumed office —altogether too quiet. I have felt all along that clouds were gathering between us and the supreme happiness we have been counting upon. That 'ad' in the Blackfoot *Bugle* is the first low muttering of impending trouble, you mark my words!"

"If we had trouble every time the *Bugle* muttered," remarked Tom, dryly, "the offices of prosecuting attorney and sheriff wouldn't be the sinecures they are."

"Well," was Wickersham's impatient response, "why don't you read that 'ad'?"

"I shall be glad to if you will cool off, and not take any rash step while I'm doing it."

"I'm as cool as a prosecuting attorney can be, under the circumstances. When you learn how lawlessness has reared itself in our midst, and defied us, I guess you'll be a little excited yourself. Read the paragraph—read it aloud!"

Joe Wickersham sank back in his chair, knitting his brows, and Tom Bryce read the display "ad" at the head of the first column on the first page of the *Bugle*.

"'Wanted, a Highwayman; one thoroughly skilled in this line of endeavor; no amateurs, no triflers. References exchanged. Address, Ambitious, General Delivery, Clarion P. O., D. T.'"

The sheriff leaned his elbows on his desk and covered his face with his hands.

"There!" cried the prosecuting attorney. "Now I guess you can understand why I got worked up. I wouldn't take it so much to heart though, Tom. We are men, and we can face the music, but we ought to wire Ethel and Trix to——"

The sheriff's hands dropped away from his face, and he gave a roar of laughter. The prosecuting attorney bounded out of his chair.

"Oh, confound it!" he growled. "This is no laughing matter. Can't you see through the whole thing? Are you so dense, Tom Bryce, that you fail to recognize the lawless hand of Chet Quinn back of that 'ad'? The robber has been hounded out of the Black Hills, and he has come up here to Blackfoot to organize a gang and terrorize the country. That's the way he takes to get his lawless party together! And yet you can laugh at it as though it were a joke!"

"That is just what I think it is, Joe," answered the sheriff, sobering. "It's a joke, a hoax. When a robber like Quinn wants to get a gang together he doesn't resort to advertising in the newspapers."

"That's where we differ. If the man were any other person than Quinn I should agree with you. But Quinn! Well, we've heard enough of him to know what *he* is. He is a daring rogue and capable of anything."

"Here is something that interests me a good deal more than that paragraph about the highwayman," said Bryce, a happy light in his gray eyes and a flush of embarrassment crossing his face. "Nugent, the editor of the *Bugle,* has certainly got a nose for news. I think you've been letting the cat out of the bag, Joe."

"The prosecuting attorney never does that," replied Wickersham, with dignity. "If any cat has got out of a bag the sheriff must be responsible for it. What is it, anyhow? Official news?"

"Hardly. Didn't you read the locals?"

"No. That confounded paragraph about the highwayman upset me so I didn't read anything else. What's it about?"

"Listen," and Bryce read the following:

"'Rumor has it that Blackfoot will soon rejoice in the presence of two charming young ladies, who are coming from Chicago as fast as train and stage-coach can bring them. But it will be useless for lotharios hereabouts to spruce up and seek introductions. It is understood that the ladies are spoken for by two of our rising young men, not a thousand miles from the courthouse.'"

Frontier editors are not noted for their modesty, nor for any particular *finesse* in setting forth this sort of news. The paragraph jarred upon the Eastern

sensibilities of the two young men, Wickersham's particularly.

"By Jove!" spluttered the prosecuting attorney, bridling with indignation. "Nugent ought to have a cowhiding for that! I'm going straight to his office and demand an explanation."

"Wait, Joe," said Bryce.

"What am I to wait for?"

"Why, until I tell you that you can't afford to have any trouble with Nugent. You will make yourself the laughing-stock of the town, and people will at once know who the 'rising young men' are. It is rather a coarse statement of the truth, but this is Dakota, you know, and not Chicago. I am going to call on Nugent myself and make a few inquiries about the fellow who put that highwayman 'ad' in his paper. While I am there I will just hint to him that the less he says about the 'charming young ladies,' the more the 'rising young men' will appreciate it."

"Have it your way, then," muttered Wickersham. "You are going after Nugent about that highwayman 'ad,' are you, Tom?"

"Just going to make a few inquiries about it, that's all."

"Sober second thought has convinced you that it is not such a laughing matter, after all."

"Right the contrary. I am more than ever convinced that the 'ad' is a hoax, but I should like to know who put it in the paper."

"You'll find that it is no hoax; I am just as sure of that as that I am sitting here this minute."

Tom Bryce laughed as he picked up his hat and started for the door.

"Time will tell, old man," he called back. "Don't send that telegram to Chicago, though. It would be rank nonsense."

Nugent, editor of the *Bugle*, could give the sheriff no information relative to the man who had caused that peculiar advertisement to be inserted in the paper.

Copy for the "ad," accompanied by a five-dollar bill, had reached the sanctum in an envelope postmarked at Clarion. A short, unsigned note had accompanied the copy and the bill, stating the "ad" was for one insertion, the large payment being for the purpose of securing for the paragraph the best place in the paper.

"The best place in the paper," said Nugent, with a genial wink, "is at the top of the first column, on the first page."

"I'm surprised that any amount of money could make you give space to such an 'ad' as that," said Tom.

"It's a joke, of course," returned Nugent, "and while I am not publishing a humorous paper, I don't see why I shouldn't print a joke if some one wants to pay for it."

"Have a cigar," said Tom, and gave the editor one of the Cuban brand which he and the prosecuting attorney usually kept for themselves. "It would be a favor to a couple of young men, not a thousand miles from the courthouse," he went on, "if you would kindly refrain from making any more comments about the young ladies in whose presence Blackfoot is soon to rejoice."

"Society notes are pretty scarce," said Nugent, after a pause, during which he reflectively lighted his weed. "However, I have had my say—for the present. I should prefer to get such news at first hand rather than be obliged to exercise my ingenuity——"

"Let's call it your imagination," broke in Tom. "Whenever anything transpires regarding those young ladies, in which Blackfoot may be at all interested, I'll agree to let you have the news at first hand, providing you do not give free rein to your imagination meanwhile."

"It's a go," chuckled the editor.

When the sheriff got back to his office, he took a piece of light-brown wrapping paper, trimmed it into a small square, and wrote on it, in backhand, with a lead pencil:

"My Dear Sir: Having just arrived in this section from a career of successful endeavor in the hold-up line, in the Black Hills, I deem myself abundantly qualified to execute any little commission you may have in this particular field. Hence, I take it upon

myself to answer your advertisement in this week's issue of the Blackfoot *Bugle*.

"My specialty is single-handed work, and I point with pride to the time when I made the passengers of two stage-coaches stand and deliver—consummating both transactions without aid in less than an hour. Dick Turpin himself never equaled this feat, which, so far, constitutes my *chef-d'oeuvre*.

"Circumstances will not permit me to give you my name, but the exploit above mentioned should identify me. If you care to communicate with me further, please address,

"R. TURPIN, Blackfoot, D. T."

The sheriff laughed softly to himself as he folded the letter, placed it in a plain manilla envelope, and addressed it to "Ambitious, General Delivery, Clarion P. O., D. T."

"If some practical joker is at the bottom of that *Bugle* 'ad,'" he muttered, "I'll help his little joke along, and possibly turn the tables on him."

In leaving to post the letter, Bryce halted in front of the prosecuting attorney's door. Should he tell Wickersham, or not? He decided that he would not, and went on out of the building whistling a march, a wedding march.

CHAPTER II.

THE JOKE BECOMES SERIOUS.

In those days, the two Dakotas were united politically, the population was meager, and the basis of wealth was gold and cattle. Settlements, for the most part, clustered along the rivers, the Missouri River in particular.

Blackfoot, county seat of the county of the same name, numbered five hundred inhabitants, and mustered its shanty buildings on the right bank of the "Big Muddy." There was no railroad, and communication with the outside world was had by means of a biweekly packet plying between Standing Rock Agency and Bismarck, and a daily stage service from Hawkeye, the nearest railroad town, a hundred miles away.

Although an outpost on the frontier, Blackfoot was inhabited by law-abiding Eastern people, who had committed themselves to "local option," and voted out the saloon. The surrounding country was a cattle country, for which the town formed an outfitting point and base of supplies, furnishing everything but strong drink.

Obstreperous cowboys, whose ideas of fun were rolled up in the two words "lawlessness" and "whisky," gave Blackfoot a wide berth. Twenty miles away, in the next county, was Clarion, and there they could drink, shoot, gamble and disport themselves to their heart's content.

Crime of any sort was so rare a thing in Blackfoot that there was little or nothing for a sheriff or a prosecuting attorney to do. But there must be legal machinery in every community, even if its representatives find themselves mere figureheads, so Tom Bryce had allowed himself to be nominated by acclamation and elected unanimously to the office of sheriff, even as Joe Wickersham had assumed office as prosecuting attorney.

The young men were old schoolfellows and college chums. Bryce had picked his slow way up the Missouri with a barge full of merchandise, and had ultimately made landing in Blackfoot. Once established in the place, he found business so good and the outlook so promising that he sent for Wickersham.

Wickersham was a lawyer, but he could not have earned his salt as a lawyer in Blackfoot. It was only when he added to his shingle the legend, "Real Estate—Money to Loan," that many clients came flocking to his door.

Bryce sold everything, as he expressed it, from "saddles to sardines," owned the biggest store and stock in the town, and employed half a dozen clerks. For a young man, starting in life without a dollar, with a much better education than he needed and with the will to make his way, he had won an enviable rating in the commercial directories.

He was only twenty-four and a year his friend's junior. No sooner had prosperity come to the two young men, and made it certain that she had come to stay, than their thoughts flew back to their old home in the East, and

spurred them to take steps in consummating a joint romance begun in their school days.

The paragraph published in the *Bugle,* concerning the "charming young ladies" and "rising young men," was entirely correct; but if Nugent's scent for news had been keen enough, he might have hinted at a double wedding to take place as soon as the aforesaid charming young ladies reached Blackfoot.

There was a telegraph line to Blackfoot, by way of Hawkeye and Clarion, and Bryce and Wickersham were constantly expecting a message stating that Beatrix and Ethel had left Chicago, on their journey to the Northwest.

On the morning after that surprising "ad" in the *Bugle* had been brought to Bryce's notice, and he had written and mailed his letter to "Ambitious," he was on his way to the courthouse, when he met Wickersham just hurrying out of the telegraph office.

"You don't mean to say that you have been telegraphing Chicago!" exclaimed the sheriff.

There was a look of worry on the prosecuting attorney's face, and it filled his friend with foreboding.

"No, Tom," answered Wickersham, catching step with Bryce, and walking with him in the direction of the courthouse; "I was strongly tempted to wire Ethel, but I did not. Instead of sending a telegram, I was looking for one. I was at the telegraph office half a dozen times yesterday, and this makes the second time I have been there this morning."

Tom whistled. "What's the matter with you, Joe? When the message comes it will be delivered. You can't bring it any quicker by haunting the telegraph office."

"I know it, but I'm nervous, that's what's the matter with me." Wickersham took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the perspiration from his forehead. "There is a world of trouble between us and the happy day, Tom. I know it, because it has been borne in on me for a long while. Worshipers at the shrine of Hymen——"

"Oh, hang it!" exclaimed Bryce, petulantly. Abruptly he halted, caught his friend by the shoulders, and looked him in the eyes. "If you keep on at this rate, Wickersham, you'll go from the shrine of Hymen to an insane asylum. Go off and take a trip somewhere, can't you? Go fishing. I'll be prosecuting attorney, *ad interim,* and send you word when to come back."

"Leave Blackfoot!" cried Wickersham. "Go away *now?* The idea! You are as coldblooded as a catfish, Tom Bryce. From the way you talk and act one would think that the rôle of a Benedict was no new thing to you."

The sheriff laughed, thrust his arm through his friend's, and led him on up the street.

"Fretting over it like you are, Joe," said he, "won't make anyone useful as an understudy. Has that 'ad' in the *Bugle* got onto your nerves? Are you afraid of Chet Quinn?"

"I am less afraid of Chet Quinn," acknowledged Wickersham, "than I am of Uncle Mort."

"Oh, I see!" chuckled Bryce.

Mortimer Jones was an uncle of Ethel's and her sister's, on the spindle side. He was a crotchety old fellow, headstrong, obstinate, and full of whims and prejudices.

Tom Bryce and Joe Wickersham had never won Uncle Mort's favor. As legal guardian of the orphan girls, he had interposed every obstacle he could think of in the way of the young men.

"I feel pretty sure," said Wickersham, "that Uncle Mort is manipulating matters to suit himself. When a man like Uncle Mort lays by a few millions out of the pork trade he is likely to hunt through 'Burke's Peerage' in order to find some one good enough for his marriageable relatives."

"Trix and Ethel are of age, Joe. They have outgrown Uncle Mort's authority. The happy day will arrive in spite of him, and all he can do will be to give us his blessing and make the best of it."

"If I could only think so!" sighed Wickersham.

The sheriff, had he found his friend in any other mood, would then and there

have told him of the letter written to "Ambitious" the preceding afternoon. But that knowledge would merely have added fresh care to Wickersham's already grievous burden, and Bryce refrained.

Among the sheriff's letters, brought by the afternoon's coach, was one bearing the Clarion postmark. The writing on the envelope had a familiar look to Bryce, and the fact that he had seen it before, together with other impressions not at all pleasant, grew upon him as he read the letter's contents.

"SIR: Your letter has the right ring. I am in pressing need of a highwayman's services, and from the sense and phrasing of your communication I gather that you are a gentleman who has fallen upon evil days, but one possessed of courage, tact and resource. Another answer to my advertisement is at hand, and I shall retain its author as a second string to my bow. Therefore, if you fail me, all may not be lost. If we enter into an arrangement you will be well paid for your work. I must meet you personally, however, satisfy myself of your sincerity and, if satisfied, enter into further details. Kindly meet me to-night, at twelve o'clock, at the foot of Coyote Bluff. There will be a full moon, and the light will answer our requirements. Come alone, for I shall do likewise.

"AMBITIOUS."

The sheriff heaved a deep breath, and leaned back in his chair.

"There has been an attempt to disguise the handwriting," he said to himself, "but I have seen it before, I am positive. Am I getting into this thing over my head? Or is 'Ambitious' pushing his joke to the furthest limit? What if it should be no joke at all!"

Bryce winced at the part he, as sheriff of Blackfoot County, was playing.

"If it is a joke," he muttered, "it is certainly reaching a serious phase. But I'll see it through! Yes, and in approved style, too."

The matter had reached an acute stage which made it impossible to take anyone, much less the prosecuting attorney, into his confidence. After locking the letter in a private drawer of his desk, he set about making preparations for his meeting with "Ambitious," at the foot of Coyote Bluff.

CHAPTER III.

STARTLING DISCOVERIES.

Coyote Bluff was an ideal place for such a meeting as "Ambitious" had suggested. It was about midway between Blackfoot and Clarion, at a point where the stage trail picked its devious course through a spur of the "Bad Lands."

When the world was making, titanic forces of nature had waged battle all around Coyote Bluff. Huge masses of lava were scattered everywhere, and the bluff itself seemed to have been pushed bodily upward through some gigantic seam that had opened in the earth.

Under the spell of moonlight these lava forms took grotesque shapes, the bluff resembling a colossal coyote, *couchant,* and threatened by a legion of wondrous stone warriors. Midnight was no hour for a superstitious man to visit that section, but Tom Bryce was not superstitious, nor, presumably, was "Ambitious," who had summoned him to the spot for conference.

On the stroke of twelve a team and buckboard, with a solitary passenger, halted fairly in the stage trail at the foot of the bluff. The passenger was muffled to the ears, and, as a further precaution, had a handkerchief tied about his face, under the eyes.

Clattering hoofbeats struck on the man's ears the moment he brought his team and buckboard to a halt. Straining his eyes westward along the trail, he was able to make out a horseman galloping steadily toward him, now emerging from the mysterious shadows and now disappearing into them again.

The man in the buckboard twisted nervously in his seat, holding the reins with one hand, and, with the other, clutching a revolver that lay beside him. Evidently he was of the opinion that he was playing with edged tools, and had wisely prepared himself for any emergency that might arise.

Presently the rider drew abreast of the buckboard, and halted his horse. He was a tall, slender man, enveloped

in a cloak and wearing a mask that completely hid his face.

"Turpin?" queried the man in the buckboard.

"Ambitious?" was the equally laconic response.

The recognition was mutual, and therefore sufficient. Bryce crooked one knee about the saddle pommel and turned a little sideways, resting easily and waiting for the other to proceed.

"You are a man with a record, I take it?" remarked the man in the buckboard.

There was a nasal twang to the voice, and the sheriff started and stared.

"If the terms of your letter are correct," continued "Ambitious," "you are none other than Chesterfield Quinn, whose field of operations has until recently been the Black Hills."

As before, Bryce, in his astonishment, found no words to reply. He understood now why the handwriting of "Ambitious" had struck him as being familiar. The peculiar voice of the man in the buckboard had completed his identification, and the sheriff knew him to be Mortimer Jones!

"Why don't you talk?" asked Jones, petulantly.

"There is little I care to say about myself," answered the sheriff, pulling himself together. "I answered your advertisement, and I am here at your request. If you are satisfied of my sincerity, I shall be glad to consider any proposition you care to make."

"The fact that you are here proves your sincerity, I think. What I want you to do, sir, is to 'hold up' the Hawkeye, Clarion and Blackfoot stage."

"Is it your desire to take a course of lessons that will enable you to qualify as an expert highwayman?"

"Sir!" thundered Uncle Mort. "I'll have you understand that I am a law-abiding citizen. I want no lessons in the craft of highway robbery."

"You signed that 'ad' with the name 'Ambitious,' and I thought——"

"Kindly allow me to do most of the thinking, for the present," came the irascible response. "I am ambitious, but not in the sense you imagine. My ambition is to save two young ladies, relatives of mine, from a *mésalliance*. I am a man, Turpin, or Quinn, or whatever you choose to call yourself, who balks at nothing that will forward the cause of right and justice. Do you follow me?"

"Not very clearly, I must admit."

"In a few moments you will understand me better. I have pointed out to the young ladies in question, with much care and at great length, the supreme folly of the move they are contemplating. I have shown them conclusively, as I believe, that a pettifogging lawyer and a Western character, whose chief claim to distinction is that he holds the ruffianly office of sheriff, are not worthy of their regard. Although the young ladies are my nieces, yet they have paid no attention——"

"What has all this to do with holding up the stage?" interrupted Bryce. "I don't care particularly for your family history. What am I to do, and what am I to be paid for doing it?"

"That's the point, of course. I was merely explaining so that you might understand my motives for hiring a highwayman."

"I think I understand your motives," replied Bryce, dryly. "Your nieces are not of your mind regarding the pettifogging lawyer and the Western character, and you are determined that you will have your own way in the matter."

"When they are older they will thank me for considering their best interests," was the spirited reply. "The lawyer and the sheriff live in the town of Blackfoot, and my nieces are going to that place to meet them. They are coming very soon, and intend to make their arrival a surprise to the young men. Did you ever hear of anything more absurd, or more foolishly sentimental?" Uncle Mort almost shouted the words. "But they shall not carry out their plans!" he added, vehemently. "I will circumvent them with plans of my own!"

"Are the young ladies old enough to know their own minds?"

"When is a woman ever old enough

to know her own mind?" retorted Uncle Mort.

"Are they of legal age?"

"That's it!" stormed Uncle Mort. "Legally they can do as they please, and I'm going to do as I please—illegally. I have exhausted every reasonable argument, but I have an iron will, sir. As I said before, I shall balk at nothing that promises to forward the cause of right and justice."

"Are the young ladies now on the way to Blackfoot?"

"I shall be informed when they are. Then, if you agree to assist me, I shall wire you when to proceed."

"How am I to proceed?"

"The young ladies will come by stage to Blackfoot. You are to hold up the stage right at this point, and remove the young ladies and myself, for I shall be with them. You are to have three led horses in readiness and take us to Quigley's ranch. Do you know where Quigley's ranch is?"

"Very well."

"Good! Hiram Quigley is a friend of mine, and, after you leave us at his ranch, your services are to be no longer in demand. I shall pay you one thousand dollars for your work."

"You are extremely liberal."

"You will help me, then?"

"I shall be very glad to do what I can to save the young ladies."

"That is settled, then. As a proof of my confidence in you, allow me to tender a first payment of one hundred dollars on account."

Uncle Mort reached for his pocket, but the sheriff raised one hand deprecatingly.

"When I make a demand for the money," said Bryce, "you can pay it."

"My word is good?"

"I don't care anything about your word. You will be in my hands, remember, from the time I take you from the stage until you are left at Quigley's ranch."

Uncle Mort was a little perturbed at this, as Bryce could tell by his manner.

"I warn you," said he, "that I shall have no more money about me than just enough to pay your hire."

"That will be all I care for," answered Bryce, coolly. "In case I am not successful—what then?"

"I have thought that, in spite of your record in the Black Hills, you might have some trouble. If you will recall my letter, perhaps you will remember my statement that I have another string to my bow?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that I have engaged another highwayman to assist you. Half an hour before the stage bearing the young ladies and myself passes along this road, you and the other highwayman will meet, at this place."

Bryce had made some startling discoveries and already he was groping about in his mind for ways and means to checkmate Mortimer Jones. But this other man, who was to join in the attack on the stage, was an uncertain factor and likely to play havoc with the equation.

"I prefer to do the work alone," said the sheriff.

"That is out of the question. I have already arranged with the other man."

For some time the sheriff had found it almost impossible to keep from denouncing Mortimer Jones and his harebrained scheme. He would have liked to strip away the mask, reveal himself, and tell Uncle Mort to his face that his precious plot was the acme of folly and utterly impracticable.

The conference over, that is exactly what Bryce would have done, had it not been for this other man who had intruded into the case. Now it seemed as though he must go on and find other means for bringing Uncle Mort to his senses.

For a man who had amassed a snug fortune in the pork trade, Mortimer Jones was strangely visionary. Bryce had always known him to be obstinate and eccentric, but had never dreamed that he was quite so Quixotic as the present matter indicated.

"If you have already secured the services of this other—er—highwayman," said Bryce, after a period of reflection, "I presume we can work together."

"You will have to work together," was the tart rejoinder. "That is all there is to it."

"You say you will wire me when I am to stop the stage?"

"When the two of you are to stop the stage, yes. Where will a message reach you?"

"At Blackfoot. But will it be safe to use the telegraph?"

"Sir, allow me to inform you that there is not one detail in this comprehensive plan of mine that has not been thoroughly worked out. In wiring you I shall use a cipher, Here is a copy of the cipher by means of which you may translate my message when it comes."

Uncle Mort had long since made up his mind that he was in no personal danger. His right hand was no longer connected with the revolver, and he used it to draw a folded paper from his pocket and present it to Bryce.

"We understand each other, I think," said Uncle Mort, drawing a long breath of relief.

"Perfectly," agreed the sheriff.

Uncle Mort gathered up his lines, and then dropped them again.

"One thing more," he added. "When the stage is stopped I shall be very furious at the interruption of our journey."

"That is," returned Bryce, "you will pretend to be furious."

"Exactly. I shall make a desperate resistance, using a revolver loaded with blank cartridges."

"Don't make it too desperate," cautioned Bryce.

"I am a veteran of the Civil War," was the haughty reply, "and have a reputation to sustain."

Bryce was smiling grimly behind his mask.

"Very well. Don't let your reputation suffer."

Two meanings could be drawn from this remark, and one of them made Uncle Mort uncomfortable.

"What I want you two highwaymen to remember," went on Uncle Mort, nervously, "is not to allow yourself to be carried away in the excitement incident to the hold-up."

"You and the ladies are the ones to be carried away?"

"You don't grasp my meaning. I mean that in the confusion following your attack and my resistance, don't let my—er—ardor deceive you into thinking I am not acting a part."

"So far as I am concerned the fact will be remembered."

"The other man has been warned. It is needless to remind you that no one about the stage is to be injured."

"I understand."

"You, sir, will be catalogued and referred to as number one. The other man will be known as number two. As the affair is not to be sanguinary, you gentlemen must look out for yourselves."

"I shall look out for number one," answered the sheriff, with emphasis.

Once more Uncle Mort gathered up the reins.

"There is no need for further talk," said he. "Hold yourself in readiness, for my cipher telegram may reach you sooner than you expect."

"You may count on me."

Uncle Mort turned his horses and drove briskly off, Bryce watching and listening until he was out of sight and hearing.

"Jupiter!" exclaimed the sheriff. "Now what do you think of that? Uncle Mort, of all men! And what a maggot he's got in his brain! Great Cæsar! I'll have to tell Wickersham about this—two heads are wiser than one. It was a lucky thing I answered that 'ad'—lucky for Joe and me, and perhaps for Trix and Ethel."

Bryce galloped swiftly back to Blackfoot. A mile outside of town he removed the mask and other paraphernalia, wrapping the "properties" in a tight, innocent-looking little bundle.

After leaving his horse at the barn, he hurried to his boarding house with the bundle under his arm. Admitting himself quietly with his latchkey, he crept softly upstairs.

He and his friend lodged under the same roof, and he halted at Wickersham's door and tapped on it lightly. No answer was returned.

He gave a louder summons. Still no answer, and he caught the knob and tried the door.

The door was unlocked, and he stepped into the room. "Joe!" he called, groping his way to the bed.

Still there was silence. An exclamation of surprise escaped Bryce's lips as his hands passed over the bed without encountering his friend's form.

Quickly he lighted a lamp, and made assurance doubly sure. Wickersham was not in his room, and had not occupied his bed at all that night.

Bryce gazed about him in perplexity. A scrap of paper was thrust into the frame of the mirror, over the washstand, and the sheriff pressed hastily forward to examine it. On the scrap was this message:

"DEAR TOM: For once your advice is good, and I am going *fishing* for a few days. There will be nothing doing officially for the short time I shall be gone, so don't bother yourself to act as prosecuting attorney *ad interim*. My whereabouts I keep a secret, not caring to be bothered with any business aside from what I have in hand. Be a good fellow and don't get inquisitive. All I want is to be let alone. Yours, JOE."

CHAPTER IV.

ORDERS IN CIPHER.

The night was far spent when Tom Bryce turned in. The remainder of it he passed in fitful slumber.

When he slept he dreamed; dreamed of Uncle Mort, of Trix and Ethel, of Chet Quinn, of hold-ups, catching vagrant visions of Wickersham calmly fishing, while he, sheriff of Blackfoot County, played a disreputable star part in scenes of wildest outlawry.

He arose anything but refreshed.

"I like this!" he grumbled, as he got into his clothes. "Everything is thrown onto my shoulders. Wickersham took French leave, packing himself off last evening without so much as a word concerning his intentions. By Jove! It looks as though he had tried to avoid me; it does, for a fact."

Then as he laved his fevered face and completed his toilet, his reflections took another cast, even less agreeable.

"Think of a sheriff, nominated by acclamation and getting office by a unanimous vote, personating a highwayman and hiring out to a crotchety old pork-packer to hold up a stage! Gad! What an opportunity for Nugent if he ever heard of it."

Something pleasanter drifted through his mind, at that moment, and he smiled.

"But it's lucky all around that I answered that 'ad.' Trix and Ethel will be saved an unpleasant experience, for my hand and brain have lost their cunning if I can't foil this precious uncle of theirs. A pettifogging lawyer and a Western character, eh? The old—curmudgeon!"

Bryce ate but little breakfast, parried as best he could his landlady's questions concerning Wickersham, and hastened from the boarding house to the telegraph office.

It was his intention to send two telegrams, one to Chicago and one to Hawkeye, both addressed to Miss Beatrix Amory. Each was to be a request for the young ladies to wait in Hawkeye until they could be joined by Bryce and Wickersham, who would escort them personally over the final stage of their journey.

Bryce did not send either message; in fact, he did not even write them out. As he leaned over the counter and drew a pad of telegraph blanks toward him, he observed carelessly to the operator:

"If a telegram comes here for a person named Richard Turpin, kindly consider it official business, and get it into my hands without delay."

"Well!" exclaimed the operator. "That information comes in pretty pat, Bryce. I know every man, woman and child in Blackfoot, and for the last fifteen minutes I have been puzzling my brain to discover who this Richard Turpin might be."

"Have you a message for Turpin?" inquired Bryce, with falling jaw.

"Yes, here it is. Reads like a Chinese puzzle, but probably you can get more sense out of it than I could."

The operator pushed a yellow envelope through the window, and the sheriff grabbed it and rushed away. There was no use in sending telegrams to Chicago and Hawkeye if that cipher dispatch was a call to immediate action.

Once secluded in his office, with the key to the cipher and the message both on the desk before him, Bryce labored until he had the following translation written out on a scratch block:

"CLARION, D. T., Wednesday A. M.
"RICHARD TURPIN, Blackfoot: This afternoon is the hour to strike. Be at Coyote Bluff, as planned. Number two will join you there. Have secured another highwayman. Number three. Very determined, resourceful and aggressive. If you and number two fail, number three will intercept stage between the bluff and Blackfoot.

"AMBITIOUS."

Bryce dropped back in his chair with a groan. He was in the last ditch. Nothing remained for him but to join number two, and consummate this felonious assault on the Hawkeye, Clarion and Blackfoot stage-coach.

Relays of horses, coaches and drivers brought passengers and luggage over the hundred miles separating Hawkeye from Blackfoot. Leaving Hawkeye in the morning, some twenty odd miles brought the traveler to Piersol's ranch.

At Piersol's, dinner was had; the first coach, driver and horses returned to Hawkeye, the traveler covering the next thirty miles of prairie in another coach, and landing in Sioux Center in time for supper; after supper there was a ride with another driver and outfit to Clarion, which place was reached late in the evening. The following afternoon a team, stage and driver from Blackfoot brought the weary passenger the rest of the way.

The driver from Blackfoot was well known to Bryce. He left Blackfoot in the forenoon and returned from Clarion in the afternoon.

As the sheriff figured the matter out, Trix and Ethel, pursuing their plan to make their arrival in Blackfoot a surprise, were at that very moment with Uncle Mort in Clarion, where they must have passed the night! Under the vigilant eyes of Uncle Mort, to communicate with them by wire would be impossible.

Folding the cipher key, the message and the translation all together, Bryce thrust them into his pocket, leaped up from his desk and hurried to a window overlooking the street and the stage station. The Clarion stage was even then in readiness, driver on the box, and merely awaiting the scheduled hour before starting.

Bryce had to think quickly. Could he not take passage on the stage to Clarion and ride back with Trix, Ethel and Uncle Mort?

Such a move had its advantages—and its disadvantages. There was no doubting the utility of the sheriff's escort from Clarion, but the mere presence of the sheriff on the box with the driver would not preclude the possibility of trouble with road agents number two and number three.

Not the least of the disadvantages was a clash with Uncle Mort, in case Bryce went personally to Clarion. On the ladies' account he had no desire for a wordy encounter with their esteemed but obstinate relative.

"Oh, where the blazes is Wickersham!" muttered Bryce, perplexed, confused and never so much at sea as he was at that moment. "I need him now, this minute—I need his advice, his cooperation—and he's loafing away his time up or down the river, or at some lake, or——"

Bryce broke off abruptly. A daring expedient had suggested itself to him.

Why not proceed as planned? Why not ride to Coyote Bluff, armed and accoutered for his lawless rôle and leading three horses, two with side saddles?

Why not capture road agent number two before the stage passed the bluff? Why not arrange with Ike Pettengill, the driver of the stage, to make a show of resistance but really to yield up his three passengers without any real hostility?

There would be no danger from road agent number three. The ladies need not be taken to Quigley's ranch, but

conducted leisurely to Blackfoot on horseback.

The plan chimed in excellently with the sheriff's daring nature; furthermore, it offered opportunities on the side of law and order, and put the sheriff well within his rights as a county official.

"I'll do it!" he exclaimed, bringing his clinched hand down on the window sill to emphasize his resolution.

"All aboard for Clarion!"

It was Pettengill's voice, wafted distinctly across the street. In answer to the summons a drummer hastened out of the station, passed a couple of sample cases to the driver and climbed into the coach.

Bryce threw up the window and leaned out. "I say, Ike!" he called.

"What is it, Bryce?" the driver answered, turning his face in the sheriff's direction.

"I want a word with you before you leave," called back Bryce.

"It's time for me to be leavin' now."

"I can't help that; my business with you is important."

Pettengill sent one of the bystanders to the horses' heads, jumped down from the box, and came across to the sheriff's office.

"I have a little business on hand, Ike," said the sheriff, after carefully closing his office door, "and I want your help."

"Official business?" queried the driver.

"Certainly."

"That's somethin' new, ain't it?" returned Pettengill, grinning broadly.

The uselessness of a sheriff in Blackfoot County was a theme of general remark, and the driver could not resist having his fling.

"It may be new," answered Bryce, "but it is a fact, nevertheless. May I count on you?"

"Of course you can count on me."

"You know that Chet Quinn has been driven out of the Black Hills, don't you?" went on Bryce.

The driver gave a startled jump, and was on the *qui vive* in a moment.

"Everyone knows that, I guess. Are you goin' to try and catch the fellow, Bryce?"

"That is my intention."

"How am I to help?"

"On your return trip from Clarion you will have three passengers, two ladies and an old gentleman. They are traveling together. At the foot of Coyote Bluff a masked man will order you to halt——"

"Goin' to be held up, am I?" came the excited question.

"Yes; and you are to allow yourself to be held up. Resist, if you feel like it, but don't carry your resistance too far."

"Blame it all! If I don't carry my resistance far enough I'm liable to be shot off the box."

"No, you won't. Do as I tell you, and you won't be hurt."

"But I couldn't let my passengers be robbed, Bryce."

"They won't be robbed; they'll be carried off, that's all."

Pettengill gave a long whistle, and gazed at the sheriff with troubled eyes.

"Allowin' them to be carried off," said he, "is worse than just allowin' them to be robbed."

"Don't you understand, man, that it is only part of my scheme?"

"If Quinn stops me, and I let him take off my passengers——"

"Quinn won't stop you. I'll be the one who does that."

"Oh!"

"And you are not to know me from Adam. And when you get back to Clarion you are not to breathe a whisper about what happened."

"Oh, but say! The stage company will have to know about it."

"Not necessarily. When I get ready to have the stage company know I'll tell them myself. Keep perfectly quiet, that is your cue."

A five-dollar bill found its way from the sheriff to the driver. The latter chuckled as he thrust the money into his pocket.

"All right, Bryce. I don't know how I'm goin' to help out your little scheme by allowing myself to be held up—and by you, at that—but I'll do as you say,

ask no questions and keep everything to myself."

"What time will you pass the foot of Coyote Bluff, on the return trip?"

"About four o'clock this afternoon."

"Very well. Carry out your part of the performance, and I'll remember you to the extent of another five."

Pettengill left the courthouse, mystified, but deeply impressed with the important part he had been cast for in the proceedings of the afternoon.

The sheriff's heart was lighter than at any time since receiving the letter from "Ambitious." Duty, not only his official duty, but the duty he owed to Trix and Ethel in that critical time, appeared to be shaping his course and pointing him onward.

"Now," he thought, "if road agent number two is Quinn, and if all goes well, I can see one outlaw behind the bars, and Trix and Ethel rescued from this precious plot of Uncle Mort's. Go on with your fishing, Wickersham! There will be a surprise in store for you when you return to Blackfoot, or I'm no prophet."

CHAPTER V.

ROAD AGENT NUMBER TWO.

By one of those mysterious processes of the mind, so potent yet so difficult to account for, it had been borne in upon Tom Bryce that road agent number two was none other than the notorious Chesterfield Quinn. And this, be it understood, in the very face of the fact that he himself was posing as Quinn, and had been so recognized by Mortimer Jones.

In an effort to be logical, the sheriff was persuaded that road agent number two had kept his identity a close secret in dealing with "Ambitious." Uncle Mort probably knew little about him.

Highwayman number three had not come in for a very large amount of the sheriff's attention. Who he might be, Bryce did not even try to guess. It was sufficient to know that he was a factor in Uncle Mort's scheme; a man to be resisted, and, if possible, captured. But Bryce believed that he would have a great plenty to do if he made a prisoner of the fellow who was on the programme to give him aid at Coyote Bluff.

All in good time Bryce secured his bundle of "properties" from his room at the boarding house, told the landlady he might be absent from town for a day or two, hired four saddle horses at the livery barn, mounted one and rode off, leading the other three.

The official revolver was in his pocket, and a sense of official responsibility rested heavily upon him as he trotted off along the Clarion road. According to the plans of Uncle Mort, he was to be at the foot of the bluff half an hour before the coming of the stage. In order to take time by the forelock, however, and thus have every advantage of road agent number two, he had made his own plans to reach the scene a full hour before the stage was due.

Travel was light along the trail, and he passed no one. A convenient defile, gashed by nature across the slope of Coyote Bluff, afforded an excellent hiding place for the four horses.

After the mounts had been securely tied to bowlders in the defile—there were no trees—Bryce got into his long Turpinesque cloak, affixed his mask, put on his slouch hat and stood forth, as forbidding a figure as any stage-driver had ever beheld. Whatever he did he tried to do well; and now that his heart was in this unusual work, he was playing the rôle of highwayman with his customary energy.

His eyes gleamed searchingly through the holes in his mask as he darted like a shadow from rock to rock. Here and there he prowled, slipping from cover to cover, every sense keenly alert to discover some sign of road agent number two.

"Three-thirty," he murmured, looking at his watch, as he cowered under the shelter of a heap of lavalike stones. "Where is this other fellow? Isn't he coming? Has his courage failed him at the last moment?"

The last word was cut short by the spitting snarl of a revolver, and a bullet flattened itself against the stones less than a foot from Bryce's head. In half a second the sheriff was on the other side of the stone pile, reconnoitering cautiously.

The attack surprised him. What sort of a man was number two, anyway? Taking pot shots at number one wasn't the sort of co-operation number one was expecting.

Instead of being the one to make the attack, Bryce had suddenly found himself on the defensive. It was singular, to say the least.

"It's Quinn, beyond doubt," thought the sheriff. "He thinks I am not what I seem; something I have done has aroused his suspicions."

Twenty feet from Bryce's breastworks there was a large bowlder. A cap was visible at the side of the bowlder, and under the visor of the cap two eyes could be seen peering out of a mask.

The sheriff showed his revolver, and cap and mask dodged out of sight. Bryce kept his gaze fixed on the point where the head had vanished, and presently it showed in another place, the tip of a glimmering weapon level with one eye.

It was Bryce's turn to dodge, and he did so. Thus for some time the two men maneuvered.

"If we keep this up much longer," grumbled Bryce, "the stage will come and go, and number three will be left to take care of Uncle Mort's work. This will never do."

In the hope of hitting upon some plan that would bring matters to a speedy close, the sheriff took a careful survey of the rough ground in his immediate vicinity. Below him, in the direction of the trail, there was a clear stretch of sand; but above him, beginning a few feet from the stone heap, there was a ridge extending nearly to the top of the bluff.

If he could dart across the open space and reach the ridge, he could ascend the slope under cover and reach a position from which he would be able to look down on the other man's fort, and command all sides of it. That would put number two entirely at his mercy.

The move was no sooner thought of than executed. Apparently taken by surprise, number two made no hostile demonstration as Bryce raced from the rock pile to the ridge.

"Caught him napping that time," exulted the sheriff. "I'll get him now."

On hands and knees he crawled some fifteen or twenty yards up the ascent, then halted for a look in the direction of the bowlder. What he saw astonished him.

Number two was running like a deer among the rocks, bent on getting out of harm's way. Evidently he had divined the sheriff's intentions, and did not propose to sit passively and let his enemy make a target of him.

"Oh, well," said Bryce to himself, "if he wants a foot race all right. I'm a pretty fair runner and think I can overhaul him."

Jumping over the ridge, Bryce started in pursuit. Nearer and nearer he drew to the man, who was making frantic efforts to get to another place of security.

Such was the fugitive's haste that he missed his footing, slipped over a shallow embankment, and plunged from the sheriff's sight.

"Now or never!" muttered Bryce, and hurried to reach the top of the embankment before the highwayman could recover himself.

As he leaped to his point of vantage and looked downward, Bryce saw number two on hands and knees, cap and mask off and revolver lying on the stones beyond his reach. For a moment the man above and the man below stared at each other; then the man below raised himself erect and thrust his hands into the air.

"Don't shoot, Quinn!" he shouted. "This accident gives you the upper hand, and I surrender."

"Joe!" cried the astounded sheriff. "Great Scott!"

"Merciful powers!" exclaimed Wickersham, starting back as from a blow. "Is that you, Tom?"

CHAPTER VI.

WHAT WAS THE MATTER WITH PETTENGILL?

"Man alive!" gasped Bryce, dropping down on the rocks. "I thought you had gone fishing. What are you doing here?"

"What are *you* doing here?" demanded the prosecuting attorney, excitedly. "Don't you know you might have got shot?"

"You ran the same chance I did. Good heavens! What if one of us had shot the other!"

"I—I thought you were Chet Quinn," said Wickersham, weakly.

"I took you for the same fellow."

"I didn't tell you anything about it, Tom, but I answered that 'ad' in the *Bugle.*"

"So did I."

"You laughed at it, and I didn't think you would pay any attention to it at all."

"I answered the 'ad' out of curiosity, and when I received a reply from 'Ambitious,' I concluded to follow it up."

"Just the way I proceeded," said the bewildered attorney, creeping up the embankment and sitting beside his friend.

A silence followed, broken at last by a hearty laugh from Bryce. Wickersham was not slow in perceiving the ludicrous side of the situation, and joined in the mirth. But suddenly the laugh died on his lips.

"It is all right to enjoy the joke," said he, soberly, "for we have certainly made fools of ourselves. But there is something serious about this, too. Don't you know, Tom, that 'Ambitious' is none other than Uncle Mort?"

"Of course I know that."

"And do you know that he intends to have the stage halted, Ethel, Trix and himself removed from it, and——"

"I am familiar with the whole harebrained scheme. Uncle Mort is chasing one of his chimeras. But let us get at this matter in some sensible way, Joe. Tell me what you did."

"Well, I got a letter from 'Ambitious' asking me to meet him over on Mustang Creek——"

"My letter told me to meet him here, at Coyote Bluff, at midnight last night."

"I was to be at the blind *coulee* on Mustang Creek at ten o'clock," proceeded Wickersham, "and I went there in an old suit and wearing that cap and mask. When I left Blackfoot I hardly knew how I was going to account to you for my absence from town; but the idea came to me to write that note, and put it in the frame of the mirror."

"It threw me off the track completely. Go on with the rest of it, Joe. I presume you recognized Uncle Mort just as I did, by his voice?"

"I thought his voice sounded familiar. When he told what business he had for a highwayman to attend to, his identification was settled. By ten-thirty I had finished my business with Uncle Mort, and had started for Quigley's ranch to pass the night and to wait for further instructions.

"About noon one of Quigley's cowboys rode out from Clarion with two letters, one for Quigley and the other for me. The note addressed to me contained just two words, 'This afternoon.' I already had my orders from Uncle Mort, and had formed my own plans."

"What were your orders?"

"To get to Coyote Bluff at three-thirty, join road agent number one, and wait for the stage."

"And you thought road agent number one was Chet Quinn!" laughed Bryce.

"I was sure of it, Tom."

"What were you intending to do?"

"I was going to capture Quinn, who seemed to constitute the one point of danger. Then, when the stage came along, I was going to put Quinn into it and ride to Blackfoot with Ethel, Trix and Uncle Mort."

"How delighted Uncle Mort would have been!"

"The old rascal! It would have served him right to be checkmated in just such a way."

"I wish we could teach him a lesson,

and, incidentally, lift ourselves a notch or two in his opinion."

"If you were a marquis and I a duke, Tom, we'd be all right with Uncle Mort. As it is, he thinks that——"

"That you are a pettifogging lawyer and that I am a Western character whose chief claim to distinction is that I hold the ruffianly office of sheriff."

"That's it. I shan't lose much sleep if I never stand very high in the opinion of such a man."

"Nor I, Joe. But we must think of Trix and Ethel. Couldn't you and I halt the stage, and take Uncle Mort and the girls off somewhere—to Cooper's ranch, for instance; I know Cooper, and he's a good fellow—and give the old schemer a good scare?"

"The trouble is, Tom, that would give the girls a scare, too. We must avoid that."

"We could contrive to let Trix and Ethel know it is only a joke. The lesson would do Uncle Mort a world of good, and is just what he needs."

"No, I don't think we had better," said Wickersham, after a moment's thought. "I think we ought to halt the stage, and get in and ride to Blackfoot. When Uncle Mort finds out who his highwaymen really are it will be lesson enough for him."

"He would probably think less of us than he does now."

"What he thinks one way or the other won't make any difference."

"But I can't ride with you in the stage, Joe. I have four horses in a gully on the other side of the bluff."

"I have a horse, too, over behind those bowlders. We can jog along and convoy the stage in. How's that?"

"Jupiter!" cried Tom, suddenly. "There's number three. I came pretty near forgetting him."

"Number three?" echoed Wickersham.

"Didn't you know Uncle Mort had a highwayman in reserve? If the stage gets away from us, this third man is to try his hand somewhere between Coyote Bluff and Blackfoot."

"You don't tell me!" ejaculated Wickersham. "I hadn't heard a word about that."

Bryce brought out the telegram, or rather the translation of it, and read it to the prosecuting attorney. Wickersham was excited and uneasy in half a minute.

"Number three is Quinn!" he declared. "Now we *are* in for it. Quinn is an experienced hand; he knows how, and he might carry out Uncle Mort's plans in spite of us!"

"Quinn is a wonder even if only half we hear about him is true, but I don't think he could fight the two of us and the driver, and accomplish very much."

"But there would be shooting! Think of that! We don't want any shooting, with the girls in the stage-coach. That is not to be thought of."

Wickersham was up and tramping back and forth, waving his arms despairingly.

"Now," proceeded Bryce, "if you and I were to stop the coach, as planned——"

"That would mean shooting, too. No, no!"

"There would be no shooting at all, except what Uncle Mort does with blank cartridges."

"But the driver——"

"I have arranged with the driver."

"Arranged with him?" asked Wickersham, staring blankly at Bryce.

"Yes. My plan was something like yours. Thinking you were Quinn, I was going to capture you and send you on to Blackfoot, while I conducted Uncle Mort and the girls to Cooper's ranch in place of Quigley's. You know Pettengill. He's the driver, and he has agreed to make a show of resistance, but, in the end, to let us make off with his passengers."

Wickersham rushed forward and grabbed his friend's hand.

"Tom, that arrangement of yours saves the day! I'll do anything to prevent an encounter with Quinn."

"You were willing enough to try to capture Quinn yourself," said the sheriff, quizzically.

"That was different. Trix and Ethel were not to be involved in my encoun-

ter with Quinn. Their presence changes everything."

"And we'll halt the stage, and take Uncle Mort and the girls to Cooper's?"

"Yes."

"And teach Uncle Mort such a lesson that he'll never forget it?"

"Oh, if we could, if we could!" Wickersham was fairly hugging himself at the bare thought.

"We can do it, old chap!" cried Bryce.

He whirled around, and looked Clarionwards along the trail. His view from the slope commanded the stage trail for a long distance, and far off in the east a blot of shadow could be seen moving slowly in the direction of the bluff.

"There is the stage," said Bryce.

"This hold-up, Joe, must be strictly according to the accepted traditions of highway robbery."

"We must make it dramatic," agreed Wickersham.

"Dramatic, but not tragic. It isn't often that a sheriff and a prosecuting attorney, in good standing, attempt such a proceeding, so we must do it well."

"Of course," laughed Wickersham. "We have got to do something to earn Uncle Mort's money."

Wickersham hurried down the embankment, and put on his mask and cap. After he had done that, and recovered his revolver, he ascended, and once more stood at Bryce's side.

"We will get behind that bowlder—the one you used as a fort when you peppered away at me," said Bryce. "It is close to the trail, and will answer our purpose in good shape. We crouch there, understand? When the horses are abreast of the bowlder we leap out, revolvers in hand. You will give your attention to the horses, Joe, while I draw a bead on Pettengill, in approved style, and say 'Hands up!' How's that?"

"Good! Only put more vim into it, Tom. A husky voice and a snap of the jaws ought to go with an order of 'Hands up!'"

Bryce rehearsed the order half a dozen times, and finally got it to his friend's liking. Then, as the stage was approaching rapidly, they made haste to hide themselves.

"Steady, Joe!" whispered Bryce, as they stood listening to the fall of hoofs and grind of wheels. "Why, you are all a-tremble! I'll warrant you didn't shake like that when you were after me, thinking I was Quinn."

"If anything should go wrong, Tom!" murmured Wickersham.

"Nonsense, man! Brace up."

"But I've got a feeling——"

"Hist! Here they come. Remember, you are to take care of the horses. Now for it!"

They sprang out into the trail together, their sudden appearance frightening the horses and causing them to halt and rear back. Wickersham leaped to the bits and Bryce leveled his revolver at the driver, and shouted the order:

"Hands up!"

But, alas! for the coaching Wickersham had given him. It was not a brusque command, nor did he finish it with a "snap of the jaws" as his friend had recommended.

The "up" quavered off into an incoherent gurgle, and a whoop of dismay came from the horses' heads, where Wickersham was hanging to the bits.

It was not Pettengill on the box, but a stranger—a perfect stranger! He looked particularly dangerous, and was swearing in a voluble and hearty way which proved he wasn't in the plot.

CHAPTER VII.

THE HOLD-UP.

Tom Bryce knew that Pettengill was fond of the "flowing bowl," and that whenever he found himself in Clarion with a spare dollar he perambulated the main street grimly resolved to drink in every saloon he passed as long as his money held out. In the excitement of the moment Bryce neglected to take account of this, and that five-dollar bill changed owners.

Although he appreciated the fact that he would need a clear head and steady nerves on his homeward trip, Pettengill could not resist the temptation to have "just one." The moment the drummer got out of the stage and the hostler took the team, Pettengill climbed down from the box and took his dram.

As usual in the case of confirmed topers, instead of assuaging the driver's thirst a single glass merely augmented it. He took another, and another, then started up the street following his customary practice to give no saloon keeper a chance to complain of his patronage.

The hour came for the stage to leave Blackfoot. Horses were at the pole, passengers were aboard, and luggage—two huge Saratoga trunks and "grips" galore—was in the boot. But no Pettengill.

The station boss was wild, and dispatched the hostler on a tour of observation. The tour was successful. Pettengill was found in Max Gunder's palace of refreshment and temple of chance, stupefied beyond recall.

The hostler carried his report to the station boss, and a new man was secured to make the run to Blackfoot. Thus it was that fate had conspired against Bryce and Wickersham.

To say that the sheriff and the attorney were startled on finding a stranger in Pettengill's place would not do their feelings justice. For one fleeting instant Bryce lost his head, and his limbs seemed paralyzed. Wickersham drooped at the bits, but he was not holding the horses—they were supporting him.

A shout of indignation, fury and desperate valor came from the coach. Uncle Mort's head was through the window of the door, and he had already begun the exhibition previously arranged for with Bryce.

His wild clamor found an echo in feminine screams—sounds which did more to give Bryce the whip hand of himself than anything else could have done. There had been a mistake, but that was no time either to make or to demand explanations.

The stranger on the box had reached down in front of him to secure a rifle that lay at his feet. A longer delay on Bryce's part would mean a fatality, perhaps two fatalities, entailing the expense of a special election in Blackfoot County to replace important parts of its legal machinery.

"Hands up, I said!" roared Bryce, throwing a fire and spirit into the words that made Wickersham quake in his boots.

The driver gave over his imitation of the army in Flanders. He hesitated, the rifle half raised. The muzzle of Bryce's revolver looked large to him, and the steely gleam of the eye behind it was enough to make anyone pause.

"It's up to you," remarked the driver, coolly. "If you'd given me half a minute more there'd have been a different story. What do you want?"

"Throw that rifle out here in the road. Stop! Catch it by the barrel. I don't want those fingers of yours to get too near the trigger."

"There you are." The rifle clattered into the road.

"I am glad to see that you are a sensible man, driver," observed Bryce, suavely.

"If a man can't be sensible when he's looking into a gun like yours," returned the driver, "I guess his case is hopeless."

"Cover him, number two!" shouted Bryce to Wickersham.

By that time the hot blood was tingling in the attorney's veins. The business-like manner of Bryce and the novelty of the situation had fortified him with grim courage.

A decided stand meant that shooting would be dispensed with; a result particularly desirable on account of the presence of the ladies. Wickersham's revolver was leveled at the driver from between the horses' heads.

"I'll be good," said the driver. "Be quick, and do what you're going to so we can get the agony over."

The instant the driver was covered by Wickersham's weapon, Bryce lowered his, and stepped to the door on that side of the coach. Uncle Mort was fairly raving.

"What does this mean?" his thin voice rasped out. "You rascals! you robbers! How dare you stop us in this manner?"

"Oh, Uncle Mort, do be quiet!" implored a frightened voice inside the coach, a voice that caused Bryce's heart to beat rapidly, for he recognized it as belonging to Beatrix.

"The villains will do something desperate if you provoke them!" wailed the voice of Ethel. "Oh, if Joe were only here!"

Joe was there, between the horses' heads, and he heard the words distinctly. An insane desire to drop the revolver and spring to the other side of the coach almost overmastered him.

"Pardon this interruption of your journey, sir," said Bryce, in his pleasantest tone. "We mean no injury to any of you, but we are quite determined."

"So am I determined!" bellowed Uncle Mort. "Be off with you! What do I care for your paltry weapon? I have faced cannon, sir!"

Then Uncle Mort fired a blank cartridge.

Terrified screams broke from the girls. To their amazement, the masked and cloaked figure still stood erect at the coach door, and, what was more wonderful still, did not return Uncle Mort's fire.

"Ethel," said Uncle Mort, chivalrous and undaunted, "I must beg you to calm yourself. Beatrix, don't you realize that I stand between you and any possible danger?"

"Step out into the road, sir," requested Bryce. "But no more foolishness with that popgun."

"There are ladies with me——"

"The ladies will also descend."

Uncle Mort fumed, even to the point of overdoing his part. In the end, however, he got out of the coach and assisted the young ladies to follow him.

Then they stood at the trailside, a melancholy little group, the ladies clinging to the arms of the gallant Uncle Mort.

"But for the presence of my companions," said Uncle Mort, fiercely, "I should resist to the bitter end. In order not to prolong this trying ordeal, I will yield up my personal property so that we may continue our journey."

It is needless to say that Bryce was making little display of his revolver now that the ladies were on the scene. Turning curtly to the driver he ordered him to drive on.

"What?" screamed Uncle Mort. "Drive on and leave us here, in your hands? Wait, driver! You will not leave us, you cannot leave us!"

"I hate to," said the driver, picking up the lines, "but I don't see anything else to do. All I can promise is that I will get the sheriff, and come back here with a posse large enough to rescue you."

Wickersham stepped aside, and the coach rolled on.

The one point of greatest concern to the sheriff and the attorney was the alarm caused the ladies.

To give them an understanding of the whole matter, thus dispelling their fears and securing their aid, was what Bryce wanted to do without any unnecessary delay.

"I shall have the law on you!" declared the indignant Uncle Mort.

The ladies, to their credit be it said, were bearing up wonderfully well.

"The driver will come back from Blackfoot," said Beatrix, "and he will bring Tom with him."

"And Joe," added Ethel.

Another furious desire to cast aside cap and mask and proclaim himself was taking hold of Wickersham. Bryce saw it very plainly, and made haste to take the next step.

"No harm will happen to you," said he, "but you will have to ride with us. If Uncle Mort, as you call him, will come with me, we will secure the horses and start at once."

Something in Bryce's voice must have commanded the attention of Beatrix, for she gave a little cry and looked at him closely. Bryce felt that her woman's wit was furnishing a key to his identity, and he whirled away.

"Come, sir," he ordered, sternly.

Uncle Mort was sure that the excuse to go for the horses was merely a ruse for number one to obtain a few words with him in private. He was mistaken, however.

It was a ruse to leave Wickersham with the ladies, and give him a chance to explain while Uncle Mort was out of the way.

"I will go with him," said Uncle Mort, to his companions, "and I will learn what the rascal's intentions are. Be brave, my dears."

The girls were loath to have him go, but he insisted. Before walking away with Uncle Mort, Bryce gave Wickersham a meaning look, receiving a slight nod in return to signify that his meaning was understood.

When out of sight among the rocks an exultant laugh escaped Uncle Mort's lips.

"Gad, that was well done! Mr. Quinn, you are a highwayman *par excellence!* You are a credit to your profession—that is," added Uncle Mort, catching himself, "if any man *can* be a credit to such a profession."

"Thank you," said Bryce, glumly.

He was thinking of the strange driver, of the story he would tell on reaching Blackfoot, and of the disagreeable things that might then happen.

"If you want some of your money now," began Uncle Mort, a little apprehensively, "I can——"

"Not yet," returned Bryce, shortly.

"Well, when you leave us at Quigley's, then, I will settle with you and with number two in full."

"It will be time enough for you to make a settlement when we ask for it."

"I am in no hurry if you are not," replied Uncle Mort. "How did I carry it off, eh? Do you think my actions stood the test of my experience?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Gad, but it was exciting! I think I can understand the secret charm of the life led by you gentlemen of the road. But, tell me," and some nervousness was apparent in the pork packer's voice, "do you think this Blackfoot sheriff is to be feared?"

"I have no fears of him whatever."

"That relieves me. I should regret having him interfere with my plans just as they are on the eve of such splendid success. I have always understood that this sheriff is a——"

At that juncture they turned into the rocky cut where the horses had been secured. The horses were there, just as Bryce had left them, but there was another horse added to the number and the fifth horse had a rider.

The sight of the horse and rider sent a chilling fear to Bryce's heart, and caused Uncle Mort to break off his words abruptly.

The man was tall, spare, and sat his mount with a certain air of distinction. He was somewhat elaborately dressed, considering the place and time, and his face was carefully masked.

"Ah, ha!" cried Uncle Mort, "number three!"

"At your service!" exclaimed number three, blandly. "The coach passed me, empty, the horses at a gallop. From that I knew that number one and number two had been successful. As I rode cautiously in this direction I chanced to stray into this ravine and discovered the horses. From the side saddles, I gathered that two of the horses were for the ladies, and that identified the animals with the other highwaymen. I have been waiting here for them, and for you."

"Your aid was not needed, sir," said Uncle Mort, "but you may still prove useful to me. Number three, allow me to present to you number one, otherwise Chesterfield Quinn, of Black Hills fame."

Bryce stepped forward. It was in his mind to greet his professional brother with a handclasp, drawing a revolver with his left hand at the same moment; but the professional brother stiffened in his saddle, and the sheriff could see that his right hand was plunged suggestively into his coat pocket.

"There is something strange here," said number three.

"How so?" asked Uncle Mort.

"Why," said number three, "I happen to be Chet Quinn myself."

CHAPTER VIII.

COOPER'S.

Mr. Chesterfield Quinn, according to those who had been so unfortunate as to meet him in his professional capacity, was a man of parts. Chivalrous, resolute, daring to the last degree, he brought into his calling an air of *bonhomie* that had had the indirect result of changing his Christian name from Chester to Chesterfield.

He never halted a stage without excusing himself and pleading his pressing necessities; he never took a purse without a word of thanks; he never drew weapon without begging his victim's indulgence; and, withal, he was courtly, tempering his *sang froid* with a dash of sympathy.

If one had to be robbed, it was the general impression that it was a pleasure to be robbed by such a man. As a Boston gentleman, who had yielded tribute to the extent of a pocketbook and watch, happily described him, he was "the Beau Brummel of the road."

An embarrassing pause followed the remark of Quinn. The sheriff tingled with a desire to spring at him, and drag him from the saddle, but it was altogether too plain that Quinn was on guard and ready.

"Since my name carries my reputation along with it," resumed Quinn, "I am naturally a little jealous of it. I choose to bear it alone, and am frankly hostile on meeting a man who has taken it without so much as a 'by your leave.'"

Uncle Mort felt aggrieved. "Have you deceived me in this matter, number one?" he demanded, turning to Bryce.

"You deceived yourself," answered Bryce. "I did not tell you that my name was Chet Quinn. And I do not suppose," he added, turning to number three, "that anyone envies Mr. Quinn his name after what has happened in the Black Hills."

Mr. Quinn laughed genially.

"Quite so," said he. "I myself, at sundry times, have kept my name discreetly in the background. I did so, in fact, while negotiating with our friend here," and he indicated Uncle Mort with a graceful wave of his gauntleted hand.

"In your letter to me," said Uncle Mort, severely, still addressing Bryce, "you mentioned the fact that you had held up two stages, single-handed, and stated other things to convey the impression that you were Quinn."

"Chesterfield Quinn is not the only one who has distinguished himself on the road," observed Bryce. "While I am playing the rôle of highwayman I care little what I am called so long as it is not by my real name. But enough of this. Others are waiting for us, back in the trail, and safety demands that we return to them and leave this vicinity as quickly as possible."

"My safety points me in another direction," said Quinn. "It will not take the stage-driver long to get to Blackfoot, at the pace he was going, and when he gets there he will set the town by the ears."

"What will happen?" asked Uncle Mort, a note of alarm in his voice.

"What will happen?" echoed Quinn, with a cool laugh. "My dear sir, the Blackfoot sheriff is a man of energy. In the present case you can easily imagine that he will be doubly energetic. His—er—interest in one of the young ladies who is being spirited away will lead him to exhaust every resource to rescue her and bring her abductors to justice."

Uncle Mort's jubilant mood was rapidly waning. His growing concern could plainly be detected in his face and manner.

"I rely on you, Quinn," said he, nervously, "to see me through. You are to escort myself and the ladies to Hawkeye. Go with us now! Stay with us——"

"You are in safe hands," interrupted Quinn, "and it is not necessary for me to go with you now. You are going to Quigley's, but for me to go there is out of the question. After you leave Quigley's, in the morning, I will join you on the road."

Bryce had listened quietly to this talk

between Quinn and Uncle Mort. And while he listened his brain was busy.

Uncle Mort, angling in the waters of lawlessness, had hooked a pretty large fish in the person of Chesterfield Quinn. That the highwayman should have been attracted by such a lure was passing strange to Bryce.

Yet there the fellow was, in *propria persona,* and the sheriff was gratified. To capture Quinn just then, alert and on the defensive as he was, would have been physically impossible. But Bryce was thinking of a return to Blackfoot to assemble a posse and make thorough search of the country, spreading a net through whose meshes Chet Quinn could not escape.

Bryce went over to the horses and untied them. Uncle Mort mounted one of the animals, and rode thoughtfully out of the rocky ravine and Bryce spurred after him, leading the two remaining mounts. From motives of precaution, presumably, Quinn was last to quit the defile.

As he galloped out of the cut, he waved his hand in a graceful parting salute to Uncle Mort and Bryce, then turned his horse's head the other way around the base of the bluff, and vanished. A few moments later, the sheriff and his companion had joined Beatrix, Ethel and Wickersham.

The ladies still wore a melancholy and depressed air, but that was for Uncle Mort's benefit. Indications were not lacking to assure Bryce that Wickersham had improved his opportunity to reveal the whole situation to Trix and Ethel.

"It is a relief, Uncle Mort, to have you safely back with us again," said Trix.

"I have talked with this man," returned Uncle Mort, nodding his head in Bryce's direction, "and I am positive that no harm is intended us."

"Why were we taken from the stage if no harm is intended us?" cried Ethel, carrying out her part admirably.

"It is a matter of money entirely," explained Uncle Mort, "but just a little more money than I have about me. I will take immediate steps to get the extra funds and then we shall be free to go where we please."

"We are in something of a hurry," put in the sheriff, dismounting and holding out his hand to Beatrix, "and I must ask you ladies to mount without delay."

"Since we are your prisoners," said Beatrix, "I suppose there is nothing for us to do but submit. We are in your hands."

"Yes, and for life!" whispered Bryce, as he assisted Beatrix to the saddle.

She flashed him a mirthful glance, and her small hand gave his a quick pressure. Uncle Mort neither saw nor heard anything of this, being anxiously surveying the trail in the direction of Blackfoot.

"Where are we to be taken?" demanded Uncle Mort.

He asked the question as a foil to his purpose. He had arranged with Quigley to receive himself and his nieces, and, of course, thought they were going to Quigley's.

Bryce was certain he knew little of the country, however, and that there would be no difficulty in conducting him to Cooper's. The difficulty would come when he saw Cooper's ranch and failed to recognize it as Quigley's.

"You will please ask no questions," said Bryce, briefly. "Number two," he added, turning to Wickersham, "you will ride ahead, and take great care that that young lady does not escape you. Also pick up that rifle in the road, and carry it along. You will ride fifty feet behind number two," he said to Uncle Mort, "and I will follow with this lady at my side. It is safest for us to proceed in open order."

Bryce thought he heard a chuckle from behind Wickersham's mask, and certainly the shadow of a smile flickered across the faces of Ethel and Beatrix. The road to Cooper's carried them a mile back on the road to Clarion, and thence straight across country for another mile.

They proceeded in the "open order" suggested by Bryce, Uncle Mort riding moodily between the young men and the young ladies—out of hearing, if

voices were pitched low enough, and out of sight of Bryce and Beatrix save when he chanced to turn in his saddle.

Leaning sideways from his horse, Bryce gave the fair girl at his side a swift embrace.

"Oh, Tom," she murmured, "this is dreadful!"

"That precious uncle of yours is the cause of it," returned Bryce. "Joe told you all?"

"Yes. But was there no other way?"

"Well, Trix, I'd have found another way if I had known that Pettengill was not to drive that coach."

"Have you any idea why Pettengill disappointed you?"

"Not the slightest. His failure to be on the box has complicated matters, but after Joe and I had rushed out from behind the bowlder, weapons in hand, there could be no turning back."

"I am afraid you will have more trouble over this than you think for, Tom," said Beatrix, anxiously.

"I don't care how much trouble I have, Trix, if we can only find means to reconcile Uncle Mort to the—the inevitable. He has been a stumbling-block in the path of Joe and myself for a long time."

"You and Joe succeeded very well in spite of the stumbling-block," smiled Beatrix.

"That may all be, little girl," said Bryce, reaching across to let his hand rest on hers for a fleeting moment, "but for your sweet sake, and Ethel's, as well as for the peace of mind of Joe and myself, it is better to come into the family *persona grata* to Uncle Mort."

"Of course, Tom."

"Whatever caused that crotchety, windmill chaser of an uncle of yours to get such a bee in his bonnet as this hold-up, Trix?"

"You tell! He argued with Ethel and me up to the very last moment, then suddenly seemed to fall in entirely with our plans. The meat industry called him to Dakota, he said, and he would meet us in Clarion and ride with us to Blackfoot. It was he who suggested that we neither write nor telegraph, but make our arrival a surprise to you and Joe."

"The old—villain!"

"No, no, Tom; don't say that. Uncle Mort means well—his intentions are good."

Bryce thought of a place that is supposed to be paved with good intentions, but kept his own counsel.

"I have so many things to tell you, dear," went on Beatrix, "but they must all wait until we are safe in Blackfoot. Mercy! What if this terrible affair should ever get into the papers?" A note of horror thrilled in the girl's low voice.

"I shall do my best to keep it out of the papers," said Bryce.

"And you will spare Uncle Mort?"

"We will spare him everything but the lesson. That is something he is not going to escape."

"Tell me, please, how you propose to administer the lesson."

Bryce proceeded to set forth his counterplot, and Beatrix's eyes brightened, and a smile overspread her face as she listened.

"Why, what a plotter you are, Tom!" she exclaimed, when he had finished.

"I have already laid that flattering unction to my soul," he answered, with mock gravity. "But here we are, in sight of Cooper's. Uncle Mort seems to be laboring under more suppressed excitement than is good for him."

The sun had set during the ride to Cooper's, and the shadows had begun to lengthen. The ranch, however, with its rude but comfortable house, and its outbuildings, lay in plain view.

Uncle Mort failed to recognize the place as Quigley's, and was wriggling nervously in his saddle and casting many backward glances at Bryce. In accordance with the prearranged plan, Wickersham and Ethel halted, and Uncle Mort and Beatrix and Bryce rode forward and joined them.

"What place is this?" demanded Uncle Mort, staring wild suspicions at Bryce.

"This ranch belongs to a man named Cooper," answered the sheriff, calmly.

"You are to make your quarters here for a short time."

"But I thought——" cried Uncle Mort, then abruptly broke off, to add, meaningly: "I must have a word with you, sir; a word in private."

They rode apart.

"What do you mean by bringing us to this place?" demanded Uncle Mort, alarmed and apprehensive. "You understood that we were to be taken to Quigley's. Quigley is a friend of mine, and I have arranged with him to——"

"I do not consider it safe to go to Quigley's," said Bryce, coldly. "It is near the Clarion road, and directly on the line of march the sheriff will make with his posse. We have our own safety to consider as well as yours."

Uncle Mort, fearing the sheriff as he did, was suitably impressed.

"Will we be received here?" he asked, faintly.

"I can promise you that. As soon as you are safely in the house I will ride to Blackfoot and see what is going on there."

"Can you do so without detection?"

"I would not be much of a highwayman if I could not."

"Very well. I am in your hands, and shall expect you to aid me to the utmost of your ability. But"—and here a spasm took violent hold of Uncle Mort—"what about Quinn? He is to join us on the Clarion road to-morrow, and he expects that we will be at Quigley's to-night."

"I will look after Quinn," said the sheriff. "I will go forward now, and make arrangements for your stay at the house. The sooner I can do this, and get away to Blackfoot, the better."

They returned to the girls and Wickersham, then Bryce and Beatrix rode on to the door of the ranch house. There were no lights in the building, and a vague uneasiness had taken possession of the sheriff.

Mr. and Mrs. Cooper were intimate friends, and he was relying upon them to make the young ladies as comfortable as possible in their home. He knew that if he told Cooper everything the rancher would give willing assistance.

As Bryce lifted his hand to knock, a square of white paper pinned to the door caught his eye. Scratching a match, he held it in front of the paper, and read the following: "Gone to Philander's. Back Saturday. Cooper."

Bryce gave a whistle of surprise and dismay.

"What is the matter, Tom?" asked Beatrix, quickly.

"Why, Trix," answered Bryce, "Cooper has gone to his brother's, over south of Blackfoot, on a visit. I had counted on him and his wife to help us out."

"And what are we to do now?" murmured Beatrix, breathlessly.

"We shall have to get along without them," said he, as cheerfully as he could. "We'll take possession of the place, and you girls can keep house for Uncle Mort and Joe while I go back to Blackfoot."

The door was locked, but Bryce pried open a window, and unlocked the door on the inside. Then he lighted a lamp, and called to Wickersham to come on with the other "prisoners."

The ranch house was comfortably furnished and well supplied with provisions. In fact, it was just the place for the quiet retreat Bryce had been looking for, and further consideration had led him to think that, after all, it was probably just as well that Mr. and Mrs. Cooper were not at home.

Wickersham stabled and cared for the horses ridden by himself, the girls and Uncle Mort. Bryce's mount was left tied to a post in front, for immediate use.

As Wickersham came back from the stable he found the sheriff mounted and ready to start for Blackfoot.

"For Heaven's sake, Tom," said the attorney, "keep those Blackfoot fellows away from here. It would never do to have them come down on us."

"That is one of the things I am returning to Blackfoot to accomplish."

Not a word did Bryce tell Wickersham about the meeting with highwayman number three in the defile at Coyote Bluff. Knowing his excitable

nature he did not choose to alarm him unnecessarily.

In a few moments the two friends separated—the sheriff spurring in the direction of Blackfoot and the attorney going into the house.

CHAPTER IX.

THE EXCITEMENT IN BLACKFOOT.

The arrival of the stage-coach, drawn by two spent and lathered horses, with a strange driver on the box, a boot full of luggage and no passengers, caused a sensation among the hangers-on about the Blackfoot station. Five minutes later the driver's story had set the whole town agog with excitement.

The stage held up by two masked men at Coyote Bluff! Three passengers, an old gentleman and two young ladies, taken off, and the driver compelled to proceed without them!

The startling news spread like wildfire. People rushed into the street from stores and dwellings, eager for all details, and, as usual at such times, getting many details that were purely imaginary.

The old gentleman had fought like a tiger. It was variously estimated that he had slain, single-handed, anywhere from two to a half dozen bandits. And this in the very teeth of the driver's declaration that only two masked men had committed the outrage.

The young ladies had fainted. One of them had "gone into hysterics." The principal bandit had presided at the affair as at some social function, suave, courteous, but determined. The second bandit was more ruffianly, and had shown a disposition to commit slaughter, being held in check only by his comrade.

Who were the young ladies and the valiant old gentleman? The initials on the Saratoga trunks and suit cases furnished a slender clew, but nothing very definite.

At last! At last a crime had been committed within the borders of Blackfoot County!

Even the most indignant citizen was conscious of a smothered but unmistakable feeling of satisfaction. A morbid desire for some sort of a crime to break the peaceful monotony had been appeased, and a delicious thrill of excitement went pulsing through the general alarm.

Now, then! Let the sheriff show his 'prentice hand! And the prosecuting attorney—what a chance he might have to thunder his maiden speech!

Men gathered in groups, and talked heatedly and wildly. They rushed pell-mell to the stage station, and made the driver tell all he knew for the hundredth time.

Then, as one man, the crowd raced for the courthouse. The sheriff was not in his office. They broke across the hall into the legal headquarters. The prosecuting attorney was also gone—some one said he had gone fishing!

A gasp of anger went up from the crowd. What business had these paid representatives of law and order to be absent at such a time?

At the boarding house the news as to the attorney was verified. He had really gone fishing! And at Bryce's store it was learned that the proprietor had left town to be gone "for a day or two."

Dismay deepened to the point of helplessness. What was to be done, under the circumstances, and who was there to do anything?

There was little doubt, in any citizen's mind, that Chesterfield Quinn was abroad in the county, carrying on his notorious Black Hills practices?

The outlaw's very name carried a spell. Stories at once began to be told of his wonderful skill as a marksman, and of his polite disregard for the lives of those who attempted to pursue him.

The stories caused an abatement of the feverish activity. People grew calmer and less warlike. They began to ask themselves if Tom Bryce did not have a deputy somewhere in the town.

One man remembered that old Peter Nodaway had helped Bryce serve a writ of replevin, or a search warrant, or something, on a man at the O. G. cattle

ranch. So they went after old Peter Nodaway, and found that worthy deputy at his home, suffering from a hard attack of fever and chills.

Nodaway explained that he was a deputy only when it came to serving writs and "sich like"; when it came to hunting outlaws, he declared, that was the sheriff's business, and he had no official standing.

The crowd went away, puzzled and exasperated. The stage-driver *pro tem* seemed the only determined man among them, and was crying out against the delay.

"Half a dozen of you get horses," said he, "and we will ride to Coyote Bluff and pick up the trail of the bandits. Is there such a thing as a bloodhound anywhere in this vicinity?"

Some one answered that they had a bloodhound at the Tin Cup ranch, so a man was mounted on a fleet horse and sent over to the Tin Cup outfit. He got back in an hour, and said that the dog was a collie.

Quinn had already had time to put many miles between himself and pursuit, and the stage-driver, *pro tem.*, was wild to the point of profanity. If he could not get any one to go with him, he declared he would go alone. Anyway, it was more than doubtful now whether Quinn could be overhauled at all. This expressed doubt fired several with daring zeal, and they scurried away after saddle horses.

In time, six men, well mounted and armed to the teeth, were ready for the start. But they failed to start.

Through the gloom of Main Street a man came galloping on a jaded horse. A tightly rolled bundle swung at his saddle cantle.

"By George, here's Bryce!" went up a joyful cry.

"The sheriff! The sheriff!"

"For goodness' sake, Bryce, where have you been?"

"Do you know what's happened, man? The stage was held up at Coyote Bluff, and——"

Bryce drew rein close to the mounted men, and raised one hand to restrain the clamor.

"I know all about what has happened," he said. "I have been over towards Clarion, and the hold-up is no news to me. I have an idea that Chet Quinn had something to do with this trouble, and if you will all go home and get a good night's rest, we will take the bandit's trail in the morning."

"Do you mean to say you're not going to do anything to-night?"

It was the stage-driver, *pro tem.*, who spoke. Bryce recognized the man, but, of course, did not say so.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I drove the stage."

"Where was Pettengill?"

"In Clarion. He got hold of some money somehow, and got drunk. So I took his place."

The sheriff gave due attention to this bit of news. He saw the folly of that initial payment to Pettengill, and knew that the fault was his for neglecting to take account of the driver's failing.

"You won't wait until morning before following those bandits, will you?" persisted the other man.

"There is nothing to be gained by following the trail at night," answered Bryce.

Nor was he dissembling, although there was another reason for deferring pursuit. He did not wish to turn a horde of men loose in the vicinity of Cooper's ranch, fearing they might discover Joe Wickersham in his outlaw regalia. Such a result would not only have been disastrous for the attorney, but would have rendered it impossible to administer the lesson which was coming to Uncle Mort.

"All the while you are hung up here," demurred the driver, *pro tem.*, "the bandits will be getting out of the way with the prisoners."

"I happen to know that that will not be the case, my man."

The sheriff's tone of quiet confidence had its effect upon the crowd of citizens, and upon the stage-driver, as well.

"You must have been doing a little work, Bryce?" remarked one of the horsemen.

"I have," replied Bryce. "Naturally, I am as anxious as any of you to cap-

ture Quinn. I have figured out what I am going to do, and you must trust this matter to me entirely. I want you mounted men to report to me at the courthouse at seven o'clock to-morrow morning."

Thereupon Bryce rode off to the stable and left his horse, but brought away the bundle strapped to the saddle. The proprietor of the barn wanted to know where the other three horses were.

"You have been careful to say nothing about my taking those extra horses, have you?" the sheriff asked.

"I haven't told a soul," answered the liveryman. "You told me to keep quiet about that, and I have done so."

"Then please don't ask any more questions of me. You will get the horses back in due time, and be well paid for their use."

The landlady at the boarding house had a large bump of curiosity, and while the sheriff ate his supper she plied him with questions. He succeeded in satisfying her curiosity without giving her any information, and immediately after the meal took his way to his office.

He found the lamp lighted, and Nugent waiting for him. The editor had his feet up on the sheriff's desk, and was smoking a cigar out of the sheriff's private box.

"Howdy, Bryce?" said Nugent. "I'm making myself at home, you see."

"Yes, I see," answered Bryce, pulling a drawer out of the desk and removing therefrom a pair of rusty handcuffs, an heirloom of the office. "Don't let me interfere with your comfort," he added, thrusting the handcuffs into his pocket. "To-morrow may be a busy day for me, and I'm going to my lodgings and turn in early."

"That cigar you gave me yesterday was so good I couldn't resist the temptation to help myself to another."

Bryce was not very well acquainted with Nugent, but that in no wise checked the editor's familiarity. Nugent had bought the *Bugle* at a comparatively recent date, and he and the sheriff had not had many dealings together.

In many ways the editor was an accomplished person. And he was known to have a predilection for jokes, practical and otherwise.

Like most jokers, a joke of the boomerang variety was never appreciated by Nugent. So long as it remained on the other fellow and did not rebound on himself, he could enjoy it thoroughly.

"What can I do for you, Nugent?" asked Bryce, halting on his way back to the door.

"I merely called to ask if you have anything more for publication concerning those—ahem!—those charming young ladies."

"When there is anything more to be printed on that head," returned Bryce, sharply, "I'll hunt for you, Nugent."

"Kind of you, I'm sure," laughed the editor. "But, I say, I have been putting two and two together, in my feeble way, and have about come to the conclusion that the charming young ladies were the ones who were taken from that stage."

"Yes?"

Nugent gave a nod. "But you take the matter so confoundedly cool," he went on, "that I confess my theory doesn't seem to be well grounded."

"You missed your calling," remarked Bryce. "You should have been a detective instead of an editor."

"Every editor, if he amounts to anything, must be his own Vidocq. The instinct is so strong in me that I am willing to bet that I could go out into the hills to-morrow, and, single-handed, return to Blackfoot with the passengers taken from the stage."

"You have a good deal of confidence in yourself, Nugent," said Bryce, quietly.

"You can find out very easily whether the confidence is misplaced. Do you want to bet?"

"I don't care to make a bet on such a subject. Could you also bring in the two bandits?"

"N-no, I wouldn't guarantee to bring in the bandits."

"If you could be of so much service to the community, why haven't you been out in the hills long ago? Why aren't you there now?"

"Like yourself, Bryce," chuckled the editor, "I prefer to stalk my bandits in broad daylight. I am going, however, whether I can get a bet out of you or not. It will make a couple of racy columns for the *Bugle*."

"Possibly it will make a notice for the obituary column," suggested the sheriff.

"Hardly that."

"If you can do so much why don't you offer me your services?"

"Because I prefer to go it alone."

"Very well, go it alone, then. If you succeed you will be a candidate for sheriff at the next election."

"I couldn't think of supplanting you," said Nugent, getting up, and tossing aside the remains of his cigar.

"I would be obliged to you," answered Bryce. "Here, take another weed—take a handful. Glad you like the brand."

Nugent took half a dozen cigars from the box, put five in his pocket and prepared to light the other one.

"'El Teniente,'" he said, reading from the band that encompassed the cigar. "Wonderful flavor, Bryce. I haven't found anything so good since I struck Blackfoot."

"And you never will unless you come to me. The grade is a notch too high for Blackfoot. I send all the way to New York for them."

"I shall have to get the address from you, and send for some for myself."

With that, Nugent walked past Bryce, pausing at the door to turn and give him a knowing wink.

"Now, what is the matter with that fellow?" mused Bryce, as he walked back to the desk and turned out the light. "Wonder if he has found out anything about Uncle Mort and the girls being at Cooper's? If he has, and if he gets out there ahead of me, I can see the work Joe will have to do."

This interview worried Bryce not a little. He was not wholly himself again until next morning, when he galloped out of Blackfoot at the head of six mounted men, bound for Coyote Bluff.

The bluff was reached in due course, and there the sheriff divided his posse into three divisions. Three men were to go to Quigley's ranch, and search the surrounding country, and three more were to comb the hills along Mustang Creek. The sheriff himself made for Cooper's ranch, stating that he would later join the three who were to search in the vicinity of Quigley's.

The stage-driver, *pro tem.*, did not form one of the posse, it being necessary for him to take the stage back to Clarion that forenoon. Bryce was just as well pleased, for the fellow would have been hard to manage.

When within half a mile of Cooper's, Bryce drew rein, took the bundle from his saddle cantle, unrolled it, and soon transformed himself into highwayman number one.

No smoke was arising from Cooper's chimney, nor could Bryce detect any other signs to prove the house was occupied. But this did not cause him any uneasiness.

As a precaution against discovery, Wickersham was probably keeping the ladies and Uncle Mort closely within the house. Dismounting, Bryce hitched his horse to a post and went to the door.

Without pausing to knock, he laid his hand on the knob, and pushed the door open, stepping quickly inside. Then a gasp escaped him, and he recoiled in astonishment.

His friends were not there—at least, not in that room. A well-dressed man in a black mask seemed to be the sole occupant.

The man wore his hat, and was sitting at ease in a rocking-chair close to a window which had commanded a view of the sheriff's approach. There was a freshly lighted cigar in his mouth, and in his right hand he held a revolver.

The revolver was leveled at Bryce.

"Quinn!" cried the sheriff.

"Certainly, my dear sir," came unctiously from the Beau Brummel of the road. "Pardon this show of hostility, but it is unavoidable. Do not make an unpleasant scene; anything in the nature of a brawl is distasteful to me. Will you take a chair? There is one by the table—allow me to suggest that you take that."

Bryce went over to the chair, and seated himself, the point of the revolver following him as he moved.

CHAPTER X.

A TENSE SITUATION.

How came Chesterfield Quinn to be at Cooper's ranch? And where were the girls, Wickersham and Uncle Mort?

The passing of the first shock of surprise left Bryce a better use of his faculties, and he began asking mental questions. Perhaps Nugent had been there! Or perhaps Wickersham's fears had so preyed upon him that he had departed incontinently for Blackfoot.

Bryce, however, could not be sure of anything except that he had been "hove to," and was lying becalmed under the threatening muzzle of Quinn's gun. He waited impatiently for Quinn to proceed, hoping to gather some clew that would set his mind at rest.

"What is the matter with you, Quinn?" the sheriff asked, feigning indignation and a hoarseness of speech. "I understood that we were working together."

"So did I," answered Quinn, courteously, taking the cigar from the opening in his mask and laying it on the window sill. He did not remove his eyes from Bryce while doing this, nor allow the point of his weapon to stir a hair's breadth. "Please draw your chair a little farther to the left," he went on. "I feel a trifle uncomfortable while your hands are hidden by the table top. There, that's better."

"Is this your idea of working together?" demanded Bryce.

"Your idea of working together differs somewhat from mine," said Quinn, softly. "The old gentleman and the young ladies were to be at Quigley's ranch last night, but you and the other road agent failed to take them there."

The sheriff's fingers had crept carelessly under the long cloak he was wearing. He started to make some reply to Quinn, but the latter halted him with a wave of the hand.

"When your fingers reach the revolver they are groping for," said he, calmly, "kindly bring it out and lay it on the table. Remember, I have the 'drop.' You know what that means."

Bryce did know, and complied meekly with Quinn's request.

"Have you another weapon?" asked Quinn.

"No."

"You are a gentleman, I think, and your word is quite sufficient. Now we will proceed with our chat."

There was something about the man, the tone of his voice, the inflection he gave it, his manner of speech, or action, that struck a familiar chord somewhere in the sheriff's memory. The excitement attending his previous meeting with Quinn, at Coyote Bluff, had caused him to overlook this point then, but he gave it due attention now.

Furthermore, Bryce strove to be as much unlike himself and as much like the bandit he was supposed to be, as he could. If he had had the pleasure of Mr. Quinn's acquaintance, previous to that encounter at Coyote Bluff, he was particularly desirous that Mr. Quinn should not recognize the fact.

"Go on," said Bryce. "What have you to say?"

"Why did you bring our friends here, instead of taking them to Quigley's?"

"How do you know they *were* here?"

With his left hand Quinn drew a handkerchief from his pocket, a dainty bit of linen edged with lace. He dropped the handkerchief in front of him, so Bryce might see it plainly.

"You will hardly insist that that belongs to Mrs. Cooper?" he said, tentatively.

"Did you find that here?" asked Bryce.

"Yes."

"And the prisoners were not here when you came?"

"No. Will you tell me where they are? I have an account to settle with the old gentleman."

"I don't know where they are."

"But you will admit you brought them here?"

"Yes, I did bring them here."

"Why?"

"Because I thought it was safer than to take them to Quigley's. How long since you came here, Quinn?"

"Only a few moments before yourself. I was driven to seek refuge somewhere, and, as I passed this house, the card on the door appealed to me. No one was at home, so I came in, surprised somewhat at finding the door unlocked; and still further surprised—and enlightened—to chance upon that handkerchief."

Bryce was depressed. A premonition of trouble sat heavily upon him.

"Every highwayman," proceeded Quinn, "must of necessity be his own Vidocq——"

Bryce jumped at that. He had heard a similar expression not long before.

"You appear startled," said Quinn.

"I *am* startled," said Bryce, naïvely. "Where are the prisoners I left here in charge of number two?"

"Why did you leave them in charge of number two?"

"To ride to Blackfoot and learn, if possible, what the sheriff was doing."

"And on the road to Blackfoot you met the sheriff, who, as I happen to know, was away from town yesterday afternoon. And you told the sheriff that the notorious Chet Quinn would be somewhere in the vicinity of Quigley's early this morning."

"I did not meet the sheriff," said Bryce, stoutly. "If a man like myself met the sheriff is it probable that he would be at large as I am now?"

"There are such things as entering into a business transaction with a sheriff, number one. An insignificant highwayman, for instance, might agree to furnish information against some other highwayman of more importance—for a consideration. I have my own ideas on that point. But what I think is alien to my present purpose. What I want to know is this: Has number two started for Hawkeye with the prisoners?"

"You are as well informed on that point as I am."

A sound of distant galloping broke on the ears of Quinn and Bryce, at that juncture, and Quinn flashed a quick glance through a window.

"Three men are coming," said he, "and they are riding hard. They are probably members of the sheriff's posse, although the sheriff himself does not appear to be with them."

Bryce leaped up. The time had come, as he thought, to throw off his robber's disguise and make a prisoner of Quinn.

But Quinn had something to say. His coolness at that critical moment was admirable.

"Steady!" he called. "Do not allow the coming of these men to excite you. Step to the door and turn the key in the lock."

The sheriff hesitated. Quinn arose from the rocking-chair and advanced a step.

"Do not force me to do anything desperate," he added, sharply. "Lock the door!"

Bryce locked the door. By that time the clatter of hoofs had come to a stop outside.

Quinn, peering steadily at Bryce, backed toward a door leading into a rear room, passing close to the table and taking Bryce's revolver as he did so. The next moment he had vanished through the door, closing it after him.

The sheriff rushed to the door, but found it locked. Although he made a furious assault upon it, it resisted his efforts.

Then he started for the front door, but halted abruptly at the window beside which was the rocking-chair in which Quinn had been sitting. The partly smoked cigar caught his eye—held his attention as by a spell—while blow upon blow fell on the front door and loud voices demanded admittance.

CHAPTER XI.

THE RETURN OF THE "PRISONERS."

Bryce was some time in realizing the awkwardness of the situation, so far as he was concerned. To be found in Cooper's house by members of his own

posse, wearing the traditional garb of a highwayman, would have been unpleasant to say the least.

Suddenly something occurred to rescue the sheriff from what threatened to be a grave predicament. A fall of hoofs came from without, the hammering on the door ceased, and the three men could be heard taking themselves off.

"There he goes!" Bryce heard one of the men shout.

"That's the fellow! That's Quinn!" yelled a second.

"He got out of a rear door!" added a third.

This alarm brought the sheriff to himself. From the window where he was standing he could see the three men he had sent to Mustang Creek hurriedly leap to their saddles and dart away, evidently in pursuit of Quinn.

Bryce started for the door, but halted abruptly, came back, picked up the lace handkerchief, and placed it carefully in his pocket.

In unbuttoning the cloak to get at his coat pocket, the consequences that might ensue if his posse saw him in that disguise dawned on him, and he stripped off the cloak and mask, rolled them together and thrust them under a couch. Then he ran out of the house.

Quinn, as well as the three members of the posse, were out of sight and hearing by that time, and Bryce halted with one foot in his saddle stirrup, ready to mount. It was unnecessary for him to take part in the pursuit, he reasoned. If the three men overtook Quinn, and captured him, well and good. If they failed, Bryce had another plan.

Leaving his horse, he went around to the rear of the house. A kitchen window was open, showing how Quinn, retreating from the front room, had made his way to the rear and effected an exit.

Standing at the front of the house, as they were, it had been impossible for Bryce's men to see Quinn when he got out of the kitchen window, but he came into their line of vision when he raced around the house and started for the barn to get his horse. The kitchen door was locked, and there was no key; from which it appeared that the practice of the Coopers, on leaving home, was to lock the front door on the inside and leave through the kitchen.

Bryce climbed in at the window, lowered and fastened it again, went through to the door communicating with the front room, and unlocked it. As he passed into the front room he heard footsteps outside the front door, and halted just as the door was pushed open.

Wickersham, still masked, stood in the doorway. A little way behind him were Ethel and Beatrix, and bringing up the rear of the little procession was Uncle Mort, his face bruised, his clothing torn, and a sad and weary look on his face. None of the party seemed very much surprised at encountering Bryce. The sheriff's horse, still hitched at the post, had probably given them a clew to his presence.

"Ha!" exclaimed Bryce, clapping a hand to his hip pocket. His revolver was not there, and he could not draw it, but nevertheless he kept his hand under his coat.

"Tom!" cried Beatrix, starting forward. "Oh, Tom! You have come at last!"

Uncle Mort gave a hollow groan, and tossed his hands despairingly.

"Just a moment, little girl; just one moment," returned Bryce, waving Beatrix away with his left hand, while still keeping his right hand under his coat. "Surrender, you!" he added, sternly, to Wickersham. "Attempt to draw a weapon, and you will never live to fire it!"

"You have the best of me!" returned Wickersham, raising his hands in the air. "Who are you?"

"Tom Bryce, sheriff of Blackfoot County!"

"Then it's all over," said Joe, sulkily. "I surrender."

This little play was all for Uncle Mort's benefit, and the young men did it well. Instead of drawing a revolver, Bryce drew the rusty handcuffs.

"Hold out your hands!" he commanded, fiercely.

Wickersham dropped his hands, and as the handcuffs were snapped about his wrists another hollow groan came from Uncle Mort. That "snap" had sounded the death knell of all his cherished hopes.

Bryce looked toward him in feigned amazement, then joyfully caught Beatrix in his arms.

"Rescued, darling!" he murmured. "If you could only know how hard I have struggled to find you, how fiercely I have followed the trail of these bandits! But it is all over now, and you and Ethel and Uncle Mort are safe."

"Where is Joe?" asked Ethel, demurely, giving her hand to Bryce as he released Beatrix.

"Oh, he'll materialize after a while," said Bryce. "There is much to tell, and this is hardly the time to tell it. What is the matter with you, Uncle Mort?" he inquired, turning on the dejected old gentleman, and taking his limp hand in a hearty clasp. "I heard how gallantly you had resisted the bandits, but I hardly thought they had treated you so roughly."

"Don't ask me about that," sighed Uncle Mort; "please don't talk about it. Let us go in—I want to sit down, I want to rest."

"There is another bandit," said Bryce, as though suddenly remembering the fact. "Where is he?"

"He went away last night," answered Beatrix.

"Indeed! Well, let him beware if he tries to come back. I am one happy man, I can tell you! But what will you think of the country, Trix? A country where such lawless things can happen!"

"You are the sheriff, Tom; so I don't think I shall mind it," answered Beatrix.

"And Joe is the prosecuting attorney," added Ethel. "Certainly, Tom, between you you can take care of any lawlessness that shows itself."

"Undoubtedly! But step into the house, ladies. Poor Uncle Mort is so worn out he can hardly stand. Let me take your arm, sir."

Uncle Mort drew himself up with a faint assumption of dignity.

"I can get along without any of *your* assistance," said he, and walked into the house.

Beatrix and Bryce exchanged glances, a faint smile on the girl's face and a twinkle in the sheriff's eyes.

"He is not reconciled yet," whispered Beatrix, and followed Ethel inside.

"I will have a little talk with you, my man," remarked Bryce, taking Wickersham by the arm and walking him into the front room. "You will excuse me, ladies," he said, to Beatrix and Ethel, "but my motto is 'Business before pleasure,' and I shall have a little talk with this rascal behind closed doors. I must learn something about—about what has happened."

Uncle Mort had dropped weakly down on the couch, but he raised himself on one elbow, and watched with some interest while Bryce opened the rear door and conducted Wickersham into the other room. When the door had closed on the pair, he fell back with a sigh of resignation.

"Now, Joe," said Bryce, as he removed the handcuffs from his friend's wrists, "tell me what happened."

"Uncle Mort tried to get away from us," answered Wickersham, taking a chair. "By Jove! but he gave us a run of it! I don't think we could have caught him if his horse hadn't stumbled and thrown him from the saddle. That is how he got his face bruised, and his clothes torn."

"Where was he going?" asked Bryce.

"To Quigley's, looking for Quinn."

"Jupiter! He doesn't know anything about the country. He never could have found Quigley's ranch."

"He was desperate, and was going to do his best to find it, anyway."

"Tell me all that occurred after I left you."

"Nothing happened worth telling until Uncle Mort made his rush to get away this morning. We built a fire, and the girls found plenty of provisions and got us a supper, soon after you left. After the supper things were

cleared away Uncle Mort began arguing with the girls to get them to go back with him to Hawkeye, and leave the country.

"The old boy had overlooked the most important part of his Quixotic scheme, and that was to persuade the girls to give up going on to Blackfoot. The girls, of course, would not agree, although Uncle Mort spent half the night begging and threatening.

"When he found he couldn't bring them around to his way of thinking, he drew me aside for a private conference. If his nieces wouldn't go to Hawkeye of their own free will, he said, they would have to be taken against their will, and you and I and Quinn would have to be the ones to take them.

"I never saw such a persistent rainbow chaser as Uncle Mort is. Gad! The old fellow is as obstinate as a mule. I don't believe he knows how to give in and acknowledge himself beaten."

"He will learn how before we are through with him."

"I hope so," was Wickersham's doubtful reply. "But the lesson will have to be heroic."

"It will be."

"The girls got breakfast for us this morning," proceeded Wickersham, "and as time passed, after the meal was over, and you did not come, Uncle Mort grew nearly frantic. He took me out of the house, and ordered me to leave without waiting for you to come. He said Quinn would join us on the trail to Clarion, but that it would be necessary for us to start early, as had been arranged.

"I refused to leave. Then Uncle Mort made his attempt to escape. Ethel saw him riding his horse out of the barn, and gave the alarm. I went to the barn, saddled all three horses—for the girls insisted on going along—and we had a merry chase of it. Uncle Mort was close to Coyote Bluff, when his horse stumbled and threw him.

"The fall took the fight out of him, and I had no trouble in lifting him into the saddle and leading his horse back here. What did you think when you got here, and found that we were gone?"

"I didn't have time to think much about it, Joe. Quinn was here, waiting to see me."

"Quinn?" was the excited response.

"Yes," answered Bryce, and proceeded to tell Wickersham all about the encounter. After he had finished the recital, he aired his suspicions as to who Quinn really was.

"By gad!" cried the prosecuting attorney. "Did you ever hear of such a thing? Well, well! To think that *he* would take a hand in such a masquerade!"

"Why not he," returned Bryce, whimsically, "if a sheriff and a prosecuting attorney would stoop to the same thing?"

"But what we did was in the interest of right and justice. What he did was—was——"

"Was for a joke, perhaps."

"Possibly not! He's a newcomer in Blackfoot, and what do we know about him? He may be a sort of a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde."

"We'll find out all about it before we are done with him. Just now, Uncle Mort claims our attention. Those three members of my posse may come back here soon, and this matter of Uncle Mort's must be disposed of before that."

"All right. If you are ready to play the rest of this farce comedy, I am."

"You are sure you remember all the details of the plan?"

"Yes," returned Wickersham. "I am to turn informer, and you are to arrest Uncle Mort as an accessory. It's simple enough."

"We'll have a clear case against Uncle Mort," laughed Bryce. "If this won't break his stubbornness, nothing will. Come on, Joe. You haven't the handcuffs on, and, for the sake of appearances, I had better take your arm."

Bryce conjured a stern expression to his face, ran his arm through Wickersham's, and the two passed back into the front room.

CHAPTER XII.

UNCLE MORT'S LESSON.

Uncle Mort was still lying on the couch. Beatrix and Ethel had been doing their utmost to make him more presentable, and his appearance was somewhat improved.

The girls, when Bryce and Wickersham returned, were sitting in rocking-chairs near the couch. They could hardly repress their excitement, for they knew the critical moment had arrived.

Ever since Uncle Mort had wrung his large fortune out of the pork trade, he had stood watch and ward over his two nieces. In his doting mind he saw himself addressing the girls as "Lady Beatrix" and "Lady Ethel," visiting annually at their large English estates, hobnobbing with a pair of distinguished "my lords," and cutting a very wide swath through the ranks of the nobility.

The lowly source of his revenues seemed to have fired him with a desperate resolve to use them as a ladder in reaching down a title to his nieces. To his credit, be it said, he would cheerfully have parted with the bulk of his fortune in attaining his desire.

When Bryce and Wickersham were fairly in the room, the former pointed to a chair and commanded his friend to be seated. The attorney took the chair indicated, and Bryce faced the couch.

"Mortimer Jones," said he, sternly, "sit up!"

Uncle Mort, taking alarm at the sheriff's tone, struggled to a sitting posture, and turned a despairing look in his direction.

"Beatrix," continued Bryce, "I have forced a confession from this bandit. Your Uncle Mortimer, I am grieved to find, has been guilty of a crime which, as an officer of the law, I cannot overlook."

"Me? Crime?" stuttered Uncle Mort. "Why, I never committed a crime in my—my life."

Bryce paid no heed to this denial, but addressed himself to Beatrix.

"Why," he asked, "do you think your peaceful journey to Blackfoot was interrupted in this terrible manner? Why were you dragged from the stage-coach and made prisoners in this house? Ah, you little imagine the true cause! It was by Uncle Mort's order. He was the head and front of the whole conspiracy!"

"Why, Uncle Mort!" exclaimed Beatrix, and gave Bryce a meaning look that warned him not to be too relentless.

"What did Uncle Mort do?" inquired Ethel.

"I will let this bandit answer," returned Bryce.

"Lady," said Wickersham, humbly, "I have not always been a highwayman. It was your uncle who prevailed upon me to assist in halting that stage. Otherwise I should not be here now, as you see me."

"Spare us your regrets, sir," said Bryce, impatiently. "Have you a copy of the last issue of the Blackfoot *Bugle?*"

"I have," and Wickersham brought out the paper, folded so the highwayman "ad" could be easily seen.

Bryce took the paper, and handed it to Ethel.

"Read that," he said, indicating the right paragraph.

"'Wanted, a Highwayman,'" read Beatrix, then finished the paragraph, reading it aloud so Ethel could hear.

Uncle Mort sat with bowed head, cringing now and then as some word in the "ad" struck him with peculiar force.

"Who is 'Ambitious'?" asked Beatrix, as she let the paper fall.

"Your Uncle Mortimer!"

Silence followed, and the girls gazed at Uncle Mort's bowed head with such deep sympathy that Bryce had to wrinkle his brows in a dark frown. He was afraid their sympathy would bring the "lesson" to an abrupt close.

"How do you know 'Ambitious' is Uncle Mort, Tom?" inquired Ethel.

"This bandit," resumed Bryce, "answered the advertisement. Have you the letter you received in reply?" he added, addressing Wickersham.

"Here it is."

Wickersham produced the letter, and Bryce handed it to Beatrix.

"Please read that aloud," said he.

Beatrix complied. It was of an even tenor with the letter received by Bryce, merely changing the place and hour set for a meeting between the supposed highwayman and Uncle Mort.

"You followed out the instructions contained in that letter and had a conference with this old gentleman?" demanded Bryce of Wickersham.

"I did."

"And what were you to do?"

"I was to join another highwayman at the foot of Coyote Bluff, halt the stage and remove 'Ambitious' and two young ladies."

"What then? Proceed, sir, proceed."

"The young ladies were to be taken to Quigley's ranch. Quigley, so 'Ambitious' said, was a friend of his, and was to help him."

"How much were you to receive for your services?"

"I was to receive one thousand dollars."

"What was the object of 'Ambitious'?"

"To prevent his nieces from reaching Blackfoot, and meeting two young men whom they are engaged to marry."

"And those young men, according to your employer in this lawless work, are a pettifogging lawyer and a Western character whose chief claim to distinction is that he holds the ruffianly office of sheriff?"

"Those were the very words of the gentleman whom I now know to be Mortimer Jones."

"You see how it is, Trix," said Bryce. "After being referred to in such a manner, how could I overlook my duty in your uncle's case?"

Another silence intervened.

"All that is left for me to do," said Bryce, finally, "is to arrest your uncle as an accessory and take him to the Blackfoot jail. The pettifogging lawyer will then enter proceedings against him. Highway robbery is a crime which receives very severe punishment in this part of the country."

Bryce rattled the handcuffs which he was holding in his hands, and took a step toward Uncle Mort. Uncle Mort looked up.

"No, no, not that!" he wailed. "Don't take me away from here like a common felon. Merciful powers!" Uncle Mort almost collapsed as a sudden thought darted through his mind. "What if this ever got into the Chicago papers? Trix—Ethel—think of that! Oh, *just* think of it!"

In the bitterness of his spirit, Uncle Mort groaned aloud. His head dropped into his hands, and he rocked back and forth on the couch.

"They might even print my picture," he whimpered. "That would be the last straw!"

"Do—do they ever send highwaymen to the penitentiary?" asked Beatrix, trying to tell Bryce with her eyes that he must stop and go no further.

The sheriff, however, was inexorable. Uncle Mort had placed himself in his uncomfortable position and must abide the consequences of his folly.

"I never cared for notoriety," said Uncle Mort, apparently communing with himself in plaintive tones, "and this would be simply awful!"

In fact, it seemed to be the newspaper notoriety and not the penitentiary that caused the old gentleman the most concern. As he sat gazing dejectedly at the floor another idea suggested itself to him, and he lifted his head abruptly.

"Thomas Bryce," said he, his voice strengthening as hope arose in his heart, "I am a wealthy man. You know that."

"If you had been less wealthy," answered Bryce, "I feel that Wickersham and I would have been more acceptable to you as——"

"Never mind that," interrupted Uncle Mort, with a deprecatory gesture. "You don't need to be told that there has been no criminal intent in my case."

"I should like to know what you call it, then," said Bryce. "You were striving by illegal means to wreck the happiness of four human beings. Two of the four are near and dear to you, and their happiness should have been your first consideration."

"I do not care to discuss that phase of the matter." Uncle Mort drew an oblong, morocco-bound book from his pocket, and extended it toward Bryce. "There is my check book. Write out a check payable to your order for any sum you please, and I will sign it. My only stipulation is that you allow me to leave this country, a free man, and take my nieces with me."

"You can't bribe me, Mortimer Jones," cried Bryce, drawing back; "that is," he added, "not with money. I should be compounding a felony."

"Nonsense, sir! This little matter is between ourselves. Make out your check, make out your check."

In his eagerness, Uncle Mort endeavored to force the check book into Bryce's hand.

"Even if I allowed you to bribe me," said Bryce, "it does not follow that your nieces would leave the country with you."

"Write out a check, and I'll warrant that Trix, at least, will go back with me."

"It's no use, Uncle Mort," returned Bryce, pushing the check book away decidedly. "But I am open to bribery of another sort. You have never been friendly to Wickersham and myself——"

"You and Wickersham are a pair of fortune hunters!" said Uncle Mort, hot with disappointment at his failure to induce Bryce to write out a check.

"Sir!" cried Bryce, bridling with honest anger.

"Take him to the lock-up!" exclaimed Wickersham, betrayed for the moment out of the rôle he was playing. "Are you going to sit there and listen to that sort of talk, Bryce?"

"What business is it of yours?" flared Uncle Mort, whirling to look at Wickersham.

Heeding a quick glance from Bryce, Wickersham subsided. Uncle Mort once more fixed his attention upon the sheriff.

"You know," said he, keenly, "and of course Wickersham knows it as well, that my nieces will some day have my money. I know your game, my lad; you needn't tell *me!*"

Uncle Mort was red and wrathful. The conversation had drifted to a point that caused him to forget, or disregard, his own personal danger.

He sprang up. So did Bryce, Wickersham and the girls.

Bryce started to speak, but Beatrix laid her hand on his arm restrainingly.

"Uncle Mort," said Beatrix, her cheeks flaming, "you are unjust, cruelly unjust. I do not want any of your fortune, and neither does Ethel. As for Tom and Joe, they have never given a single thought to your money. Ethel and I know them well enough to know that."

Bryce placed his arm about Beatrix's waist, and drew her close to him. He was proud of her love and loyalty.

Wickersham lifted his hands to his mask. He felt that he must strip away his disguise, and face Uncle Mort in his true character, but he caught a warning glance from Ethel and his hands dropped.

"Allow me to say a few words, Mr. Jones," said Bryce, coldly.

"The fewer the better," snapped Uncle Mort. "If my nieces persist in this sentimental fol-de-rol, I shall leave every cent of my fortune to the Home for Superannuated Domestics."

"I am sure we don't care how you dispose of your money," proceeded Bryce. "Wickersham has earned a competence since coming to Dakota, and I have more than enough to keep the wolf from the door. In spite of your dislike for us, Wickersham and I cherish only the kindliest feelings towards you. For the sake of Beatrix and Ethel we want you to consent——"

"Never!" screamed Uncle Mort, stamping his foot and tossing his arms wildly.

"The only way you can bribe me into letting you go free is by giving your consent to the marriage of Ethel and Beatrix to Wickersham and myself."

"I won't!" cried Uncle Mort. "Put those handcuffs on me, take me to jail, send me to the penitentiary for ninety-nine years, if you will. It won't be the

first time I have suffered for a principle. Make me a martyr! I defy you to make me a martyr!"

"I told you, dear," Beatrix murmured to Bryce, despairingly. "You cannot change him—nothing can change him."

Uncle Mort had the courage of a cornered man. Bruised and baffled, he planted himself firmly in front of the couch, and glared his defiance at the sheriff.

"And in a court of law," he went on, fiercely, "what judge and jury will take the word of a nameless bandit against that of Mortimer Jones? You and your case would be laughed out of court, sir!"

"Nameless bandit!" The words came scathingly from Wickersham. In another moment he had cast aside his cap and mask. "I think my integrity will stand side by side with yours," he added.

Uncle Mort dropped back on the couch, literally dazed.

"Wh-what does this mean?" he mumbled, brushing a trembling hand across his forehead. "Is that you, Wickersham?"

"I am the prosecuting attorney of Blackfoot County," returned Wickersham, grimly.

"You were the man who held up the stage?".

"He was one of them," put in Bryce, "and I was the other."

In order to prove his assertion, Bryce pulled the bundle from under the couch and donned the disguise.

Uncle Mort got up and walked the floor, his head bowed.

"Wickersham and I want your friendship, Uncle Mort. If you will yield us that, and your good will, I will gladly make an end of this little comedy of errors."

The sheriff spoke manfully, ranging himself shoulder to shoulder with his friend. Both Ethel and Beatrix started toward Uncle Mort, but he waved them off, and plunged through the door.

Through a window they could see him walking back and forth in front of the house, smoking a cigar and gazing sadly into the wreaths of vapor as they rose in the still air and drifted away. Like the smoke from his cigar, Uncle Mort's dreams were dissipating and vanishing. His fanciful projects for Beatrix and Ethel had never been anything but dreams, dreams which could never come true. He realized it now.

Presently he tossed away his cigar, and returned into the house.

Halting just across the threshold he extended a hand each to Bryce and Wickersham.

"It—it's all right," he said, stumblingly. "I made a very grievous error, and—and——"

The old gentleman nearly broke down. When the sheriff and the attorney released his hands, Beatrix and Ethel flew to him, entwined their arms about his neck and kissed him again and again.

CHAPTER XIII.

EXIT MR. QUINN.

Thursday afternoon.

Nugent sat in his cubbyhole of an office, puffing at a corncob pipe, and covering sheet after sheet of print paper with none too legible copy.

He smiled as he wrote. It was the complacent smile sometimes worn by the metropolitan editor when he springs a sensation which is certain to be a "scoop."

Nugent had covered many sheets, and, from his ardor, it might be inferred that he was going to cover many more. But he did not.

In the midst of his scribbling, a door opened and two callers entered unannounced. One was Thomas Bryce, the sheriff, and the other was Joseph Wickersham, the prosecuting attorney.

"Ah, gentlemen!" the editor exclaimed, breaking off his pencil work regretfully. "Allow me to congratulate you on your success in finding the valiant old gentleman and the charming young ladies. I am just writing up the affair for the *Bugle*."

"Yes?" Bryce stepped over to the desk. "I should like to see the article before it is put in type."

He reached for the copy, but Nugent

gathered it up hastily, and thrust it into a drawer.

"Heavens!" he laughed. "You wouldn't steal my thunder?"

"I fancy it isn't the sort of 'thunder' Wickersham and I wish to hear from the *Bugle*. You have a fervid imagination, Nugent."

"And you give it too free a rein," spoke up the attorney.

"This article is based on astonishing fact," smiled the editor. "Truth, you know, is sometimes stranger than fiction."

"We'll have a look at that copy, Nugent," said Bryce, firmly, "if we have to get out a search warrant."

"You wouldn't muzzle the press?"

"No, but I'd muzzle some of the editors," was the grim retort.

"Sit down," said Nugent, affably. "You gentlemen are not in the mood I should expect of you. The charming young ladies having been restored to——"

"That will do, Nugent!" cut in Wickersham.

"Oh, very well," and the editor dismissed the subject with a wave of the hand. "You have covered yourself with glory, Mr. Bryce," he went on, "and some of the honors, of course, fall to your versatile and respected friend."

"Thank you."

"Oh, I know how to give credit where credit is due. The luster of your achievements, however, would have been vastly increased if you could have brought in the highwaymen."

"Quinn is captured," said Bryce.

"What! Where is he? In the town jail?"

"No, in the *Bugle* sanctum."

Nugent paled. "I fail to comprehend," said he.

"Oh, you do?" chuckled Bryce. He advanced and rested a hand on the editor's shoulder. "Mr. Chesterfield Quinn, alias Nugent," he added, "you will consider yourself under arrest."

"Is—is this a joke?" stuttered Nugent.

Snap! In a twinkling Bryce had affixed the rusty handcuffs to the editor's wrists.

"Does that look like a joke?" the sheriff asked. "You have been playing fast and loose with the law, Mr. Quinn; but you have finally overreached yourself."

The editor straightened out rigidly in his chair, his glaring eyes on the manacles. Then he swore.

"This is an outrage! I'll have the law on you!"

"When the law is done with you, Quinn, you can invoke it in any way you see fit. A pretty sort of an editor you are. Hiding behind this peaceful profession, and assuming the name of Nugent, you have sought to save yourself from the consequences of your many crimes in the Black Hills. But murder will out. Eh, Wickersham?"

"Always," replied the attorney.

"Man alive!" cried the editor, violently agitated, "my past record is as clear as your own! I was never in the Black Hills in my life. I lived in Bismarck before I came here. Wire Bismarck, and ask what they know about Chris Nugent up there."

"It isn't necessary to wire anyone. We have your own statement of your guilt."

"How? Where?" The editor was perspiring, and raised his manacled hands to brush away the moisture from his forehead.

"Yesterday afternoon, at Coyote Bluff, you told me distinctly that you were Chesterfield Quinn."

Nugent sprang up as though a lighted bomb had exploded under his chair.

"Told *you?*" he cried.

"I was highwayman number one," said Bryce, calmly. "Wickersham, there, was highwayman number two. We assumed the rôles in the interest of justice, but had no idea we should run to earth the notorious Quinn."

Nugent dropped down again, stupefied. The self-contained manner, which had always been his, left him utterly. He shook like a leaf, and his troubled eyes passed blankly from the sheriff to the prosecuting attorney.

"Were you the man I met at Cooper's?" he asked, in a husky voice.

"I was the man. The revolver you took from me at that time is the official weapon of the Blackfoot sheriff. It is county property, and can easily be identified if you have any doubts."

"But how—how did you know—how did you know *I* was the man who posed as Quinn and took the revolver?"

"When I entered the house, if you will remember, you were smoking an 'El Teniente' cigar. I had given you several on Wednesday evening in my office. It is an exclusive brand, Nugent, and the evidence against you was conclusive. You had your fun with me at Cooper's, but I am getting even with you now."

"If I had known you were the sheriff," mumbled Nugent, "I should never have treated you as I did."

"No? Well, what is done cannot be undone. I am very sorry for you, but the strong arm of the law is not to be evaded. Wickersham is preparing the case against you."

"Can't you understand, Bryce?" implored the editor. "It is all a joke. I answered that highwayman 'ad' merely for the fun of the thing."

"Ah!" came incredulously from the sheriff. Wickersham lifted his brows and shrugged his shoulders.

"I received an answer from 'Ambitious,' asking for an interview at Coyote Bluff, at one o'clock Wednesday morning."

"I met 'Ambitious' at the same place, an hour before you did."

"We must have missed each other on the road, some way, going and coming. That is easily accounted for, though. I was advised to take a roundabout course in going to the bluff."

"What else did you do?" asked Bryce.

"I heard what 'Ambitious' had to say, and agreed to lie in wait for the stage between the bluff and Blackfoot, in case the other two highwaymen were not equal to the emergency."

"And then?"

"I told you, in the defile at the bluff, how the coach had passed me and I had ridden on to where the horses were tethered."

"When you left the cut you came back to Blackfoot?"

"Yes."

"And you were to assist the valiant old gentleman in his task of taking the young ladies to Hawkeye?"

"That is what the old gentleman supposed, but my real purpose was to bring all three of them back to Blackfoot, and have a good laugh on you. That is the sum of my criminal intent in the affair. I had no other object, I assure you."

"He tells it well," commented Wickersham, dryly.

"It is the truth, the whole truth!" declared the editor.

"What were you doing at Cooper's ranch?" asked Bryce.

"I was looking for the old gentleman and the young ladies, and merely dropped in there. When you came, Bryce, I had no idea that you were one of the highwaymen. Great guns, but you played your part well! I never dreamed that you were the sheriff."

"I didn't smoke any 'El Teniente' cigars," said Bryce.

Nugent plucked up heart enough for a mild laugh over the cigar incident.

"He seems to misunderstand the matter, Bryce," said Wickersham. "He doesn't realize what serious consequences are to spring from his little joke."

"What serious consequences can follow the playing of such a harmless trick?" asked Nugent, alarmed.

"If we take you to jail, and lock you up until you prove who you really are," answered Bryce, "the consequences will be serious enough. If you are found to be Chesterfield Quinn, you will go back to the Black Hills with an armed escort."

"I am not Quinn!" was the frantic assertion. "You will find that out, and so will everyone else."

"Then the joke will be on you, and I think the town will enjoy it."

"I should have to leave the place," groaned Nugent. "I never could stand it to stay in Blackfoot."

"Why did you tell me you were Quinn, if you are not?"

"That was to give zest to the matter.

I was playing a part, and wanted it to be a good one."

"It was a good one," said Wickersham, "too good—for you."

"If I had happened to be Quinn myself," added Bryce, "the zest you added to your joke might have resulted in a fatality."

"I made an idiot of myself," confessed Nugent, abjectly.

"Enough of this," said Wickersham, starting for the door. "Bring him along, Bryce."

"You won't take me to jail?" cried Nugent. "Leave me here, under guard, until you wire Bismarck and get my record. Don't let anyone know about this! Be reasonable, can't you?"

"What are you willing to do if we spare you?" asked Bryce, seeming to soften.

"Anything!"

"Will you tear up that article you have been writing?"

"Yes."

"And print nothing about Wickersham and myself and our affairs without first letting the article pass our censorship?"

"Willingly!"

"And you will not breathe a whisper concerning what happened in our joint attempts to serve 'Ambitious'?"

"I will be deaf, dumb and blind about the whole affair!"

"What do you say, Wickersham?" inquired Bryce, of the attorney.

"Do you think you have had value received for the way you were treated at Cooper's, Tom?"

"I think so."

"Then I guess we had better compound another felony."

Wickersham could hold himself no longer, and broke into a loud laugh. Bryce joined in, and the two dropped into chairs and enjoyed themselves to the utmost.

Gradually Nugent scented the joke back of recent proceedings, and as his alarm subsided his normal condition of mind asserted itself.

"It's one on me," he admitted. "If I had a supply of 'El Teniente' cigars I'd give you a box apiece."

"I'll give you the address, Nugent," said Bryce, "and you can send to New York for them."

"I'll do it! Here, take these things off before some one comes in."

He held out his hands, and Bryce removed the handcuffs, slipping them quickly into his pocket. The moment his hands were free, Nugent took the copy he had written out of the desk drawer, tore the sheets in pieces, and flung them into the waste basket.

"That was an article," he said, sadly, "that would have been talked about all over the territory. But, see here," and he whirled around in his chair to peer humorously at the sheriff, "what if I should turn out to be the real Quinn, after all?"

"I'll chance that," and Bryce took a yellow slip from his pocket and laid it down on the desk in front of the editor. "That message was waiting for me when Wickersham and I rode in from the hills with our friends," he went on. "It will make a good news item for the *Bugle*, and you can have it. Come on, Wickersham."

As the county officials took their leave, Nugent read the message:

"SHERIFF, Blackfoot: Chet Quinn captured and in jail at Cheyenne, awaiting trial.
"Chief of Police, Deadwood."

CHAPTER XIV.

CONCLUSION.

The six members of Bryce's posse returned to Blackfoot in the afternoon, three of their number bringing an exciting story of a chase after a robber supposed to be Quinn, the fellow finally slipping away from them.

Pettengill had so far recovered from his spree as to be able to drive the stage back from Clarion Thursday afternoon. He paid the sheriff a melancholy and repentant call.

"It was the five dollars that did it," he acknowledged. "And then, too," he added, "Blackfoot is so dry that when a man gets over in Clarion he's got to

be temperance clear through or he's liable to lose his head."

"Have you kept still about the affair?" asked Bryce.

"I haven't said a word. What worries me is payin' you back the money I didn't earn."

"Don't worry about that, Pettengill. I'll consider that you have earned it if you will simply forget what I hired you to do."

"Cheap enough," said Pettengill. "No one will ever get a word out of me. But, say! that driver that took my place *was* wrathy."

"So I judged from the way he talked. Does he belong in Clarion?"

"No, in Hawkeye. He's gone back to his home town, and says he wouldn't live over on the river if you'd give him the hull country."

By Saturday, matters had quieted down almost to a normal degree. Then Cooper caused a troubled ripple to float through the town by bringing in a story that he had found a rifle, two masks, a cloak and a slouch hat; when he and his wife returned home from Philander's.

Some provisions were gone, Cooper declared, and both house and barn showed unmistakable signs of having been used during the absence of himself and his "better half." He brought in the rifle and other gear and left the things with the sheriff.

The rifle was identified as belonging to the stage company, and was surrendered, but the bandit equipments were never claimed. After they had been on exhibition for a week, during which time the curious came in crowds to look at them, they were removed and destroyed.

Only a select few were acquainted with the inside history of that mysterious Hawkeye, Clarion and Blackfoot stage hold-up, and these few were not talking for the benefit of the public. They had entered into an agreement to keep what they knew entirely to themselves.

Bryce, indeed, succeeded in forcing upon Cooper the sum of five dollars. This, the sheriff stated, was remuneration for the use of his premises and the loss of his provisions.

Cooper wanted to know why Bryce should pay "the damage," and Bryce responded that he was paying it in an official and not in a private capacity. Cooper was satisfied, although not wholly enlightened.

Wickersham had troubles of his own in trying to explain to the landlady at the boarding house how he could go fishing and yet put in a timely appearance over at Coyote Bluff, ten miles from the river and twenty or more miles from any lake.

He never entirely satisfied the landlady's curiosity, and it was a great relief for him when he finally exchanged the boarding house for an establishment of his own.

For several days Bryce and Wickersham did their utmost to give Uncle Mort a good time. They took him fishing and hunting, drove him out to the various cattle ranches, and gave up their time to making themselves as agreeable as they could.

Under this gentle treatment Uncle Mort's opinion of the two men underwent a decided change. He had profited by the lesson administered by Bryce and Wickersham, and as the days passed, the conviction that the young men were in every way worthy to hold in trust the happiness of Trix and Ethel grew upon him.

Before very long there was a double wedding in Blackfoot, and the friends of the sheriff and the prosecuting attorney assembled from all quarters to witness the joyous event. The offerings were "costly and elegant," according to the *Bugle*, which used three full columns, double leaded, in describing the ceremony, the dresses of the brides, and in giving an alphabetical list of the guests.

Uncle Mort seemed happy. Everyone else was happy, and if the valiant old gentleman's actions belied his feelings, there was certainly no excuse for him.

And it is safe to assume that he has advertised for his last highwayman. One experience of that kind was enough.

THE RIXBY CONCESSION

BY CHARLES W. MILLER

The misadventures of two Americans who attempted to introduce modern methods in a Central American republic.

RIXBY turned the paper over to Walters, then he carefully filled his pipe with English twist and lighted it. His actions were slow and deliberate, but he showed unmistakable signs of perturbation.

"It gives us until this day week, Jack," he said, puffing away. "I am sorry, deuced sorry; but I guess it can't be helped."

Walters read the document calmly. He was tall, thin and preternaturally solemn, the direct opposite of Bixby, whose rotundity and general air of good-humor appealed to most observers. Rixby never showed temper. Walters seldom smiled.

"She's unnecessarily polite, it seems to me," commented the latter, studying the paper. "Once upon a time I was fired from my boarding house in Texas. The landlord stood in the doorway of the grub room with a club. When I said I couldn't pay just then, it wasn't convenient, *et cetera,* he hit me a crack, and said 'Git.' In this man's country they do things differently. Just listen."

He translated from the Spanish as he read:

"SENOR RIXBY: I give you salutation, and trust that you are enjoying that fine condition of health to which you are entitled. It grieves me to intrude my troubles; but, a thousand pardons, dear Mr. Rixby, circumstances over which I have no control compel me to request the payment of the small sum owing for board. I am sure your well-known generosity of nature would——"

"Cut it out, Jack," interrupted Rixby, grinning. "What the old lady means is that we must pay the thirty-six pesos or walk. Well, what are we going to do?"

"Walk," replied Walters, solemnly.

Rixby left the hammock, and looked down over the railing of the little veranda. The narrow street below was untenanted save for a bare-legged boy driving a flock of geese. From a distance came a musical jangling of bells, and the discordant cry of a *boleta,* or lottery-ticket seller.

It was almost noon, the beginning of the daily hour of *siesta,* and the sun, hot with the fervency of a Central American latitude, smote the multi-colored walls of the city, sending within doors all who were not compelled by stress of business to be abroad.

There was little in the scene which met Rixby's eyes as he gazed from the crumbling balcony of his *casa de huespedes* to encourage him. He and Walters, two friends in an Illinois town, had come to Guatemala with the hope of mending their fortunes, and incidentally to see a little of the world that seemed so attractive, viewed from the dullness of a rural home.

They had selected Guatemala City as a field for their efforts, because they had read that it offered fine inducements to men with large ideas and small capital. They had both.

Six months in the country had served to decrease not only the small capital, but also the large ideas, and they were about ready to accept the inevitable. Rixby in particular did not wish to confess defeat. He rather liked the climate, and then——

A girl emerged from the doorway directly beneath his feet. Rixby's rotund, rather boyish face assumed a more rosy hue and he coughed slightly. The

girl—she was eighteen and as attractive as the Latin-American damsels generally are at her age—glanced up from beneath her mantilla.

She blushed and bowed. Rixby returned to the room, and confronted his friend's accusing gaze.

"I heard the door," said Walters, solemnly. "It was Señorita Mercedes. Humph!"

"Well, what of it?" demanded Rixby, defiantly. "I like her. She's a fine girl."

"But she's not an American."

"What difference does that make?"

"And her mother keeps this boarding house."

"Hotel."

"Humph!"

Walters rose and stretched his legs. After a while he began tossing articles of clothing from an ancient bureau into the open mouth of a steamer trunk.

"Getting ready to vamose, Jack?" asked Rixby.

Walters nodded, and proceeded with his task.

"Going to leave me?"

"You are coming along," declared Walters, throwing a collar, an old vest and a pair of time-worn slippers into the trunk with fine impartiality.

"Durned if I am."

Walters paused and eyed his friend.

"Now, see here, Rix," he said, slowly. "You can't stay, and you know it. There's nothing in the blamed country for you. You can't work as a *peon*, you don't know Spanish well enough to accept a clerkship, and you haven't the money with which to start in business."

Rixby placidly puffed away.

"And furthermore," continued Walters, "you haven't a ghost of a chance with Mercedes even if you had money. You know she favors that mud-colored, black-muzzled government chap."

Rixby scrambled from the hammock, dropping his pipe to the floor.

"What! Barbosa!" He laughed derisively. "Why, he doesn't stand one, two, three. Mercedes hates the sight of him."

"How do you know?"

"She told me so last night."

Walters whistled slowly and solemnly.

"It has gone pretty far, after all," he said. "Well, Rix, luck be with you. The señorita is not a bad sort. I would rather see you spliced to an American girl, and I am thinking the folks back home in Galesburg won't fancy the idea of a Central American wife for you, but you're twenty-one. When is it to be?"

"Quit your kidding," grinned Rixby. "We haven't talked dates yet. And as for Barbosa, Mercedes says she told him she couldn't be more than a half sister to him. He wasn't so cut up; in fact, he wished us luck. He isn't such a bad —come in!"

It was a knock at the door.

"Another billy-doo from the landlady," muttered Walters.

It was not. The *mozo*, who acted as the Poo Bah of the establishment, waiting table, running errands, and doing the most of the cooking, entered the room bearing an official-looking envelope.

"From Señor Don Jose Barbosa, señors," he said. "The señor's messenger waits below."

"It's addressed to you, Rix," exclaimed Walters, who had reached for the missive.

"For me?" said Rixby, amazed. "What the devil——"

"It's an invitation to attend a beheading bee in the execution chamber of the palace, I'll bet a centavo," replied Walters, solemnly. "If I were you I'd refuse to go."

"Rats! This isn't Turkey. Of course I'll go. Here, Pedro, tell the gentleman's messenger to give Señor Don Jose Barbosa my esteemed compliments, and add that I'll be at his office instanter.

"He wants to see me on important business; business concerning my future prosperity," he added, tossing the note to Walters. "It's only ten minutes' walk to his place. You wait here. I'll be back in a jiffy."

It was fully an hour before he returned, however, and when he did make his appearance he was treading on air like a man who had just shaken hands

with Dame Fortune. He burst into the room, dragged Walters from his chair, and capered about him in a most unseemly manner.

"Whoop! it's great," he shouted, enthusiastically. "You couldn't guess it in a year. What do you think? We've got a chance."

"A chance for what?"

"We've had a concession offered us. Say, Barbosa is all right. He's a white man. He talked to me like a Dutch uncle. Said he hated to lose Mercedes, but that if he couldn't have her, he was glad it was me. Said he would do anything for her happiness and was going to help me along, and——"

"But the concession, man," interrupted Walters, impatiently. "What is it?"

"Steam laundry."

Walters sat down. The match with which he was about to light his pipe remained suspended in air until it burned his fingers.

"Steam laundry?" he gasped.

"Yes. It's the chance of our lives," replied Rixby, cheerfully. "You know they haven't such a thing in Guatemala, and it's a city of sixty thousand inhabitants. Where is the washing done? You know where. Down in the river by a lot of old women who pound your blooming clothes with a stone and smash all the buttons. Look at that last lot of shirts."

Walters nodded. It was a sore subject with him. He fished a linen shirt from his trunk and held it up to view. It was almost in shreds, and the collar band seemed frayed for half its length.

"There's no doubt they need a steam laundry, Rix," he confessed. "I declare the first time I saw that gang of females washing clothes at the edge of the river and beating them between two flat stones, I felt like going home, but——"

"There are enough foreigners in the city to make a laundry pay even if the natives wouldn't patronize it," interrupted Rixby. "What strikes me as rather queer is that no one has noticed the deficiency and established a laundry."

"It is queer," acknowledged Walters, thoughtfully puffing at his pipe. "What did his nibs say?"

"Barbosa? Ah, there's a man for you, my boy. He's going out of his way to help us along, and I'm a rival, too."

"Confound your rival yarns, what did he say?"

"When I entered his office he met me with extended hands and smiled like a brother. 'My dear *amigo,*' he said, 'I have heard that you contemplate returning home. So. You must not do it. My country can ill afford to spare such good material as you and your friend. We need you here. I understand it is a question of money, that you were disappointed in getting a business.' Here he put his hand upon his heart, and bowed into a knot, then he went on, 'I, even I, my dear Señor Rixby, will help you. I will give you a concession. We need one of your well-equipped steam laundries. We know it. The visiting stranger calls our attention to it. The honorable president said to me only yesterday, "Jose, *amigo,* see that we have one without delay." I then heard that a steamer is now at the port with an entire set of machinery shipped from Panama. It is providential. I wired at once, and got an option on it for three days. The cost is six hundred dollars; a paltry sum.'"

Walters slowly pulled at his pipe.

"I have three dollars and a bad Mexican," he said, solemnly.

"We can wire home," suggested Rixby. "You know we can raise the amount if we have a good thing."

"How about writing and ordering the stuff from the States?"

"Won't do," exclaimed Rixby, emphatically. "That German chap, Reinwurts, will snap up the concession. Barbosa said he spoke to him about it yesterday. No, if we want it we'll have to hustle. What do you say?"

Walters remained in meditation for several minutes, then he stood up and knocked the ashes from his pipe.

"It's a go," he said, quietly. "Come, we'll wire Galesburg. I'll attend to that while you fix matters with Barbosa."

And so it was settled. Within three days the necessary money had been ca-

bled, the machinery bought and a site selected for the new enterprise. At Rixy's suggestion a new boarding place was secured.

"I want to surprise Mercedes," he said. "I want to go to her and say, Mercedes, I have a paying business. It is a concession that I obtained—I and my good friend, Walters—through the kindness of Señor Barbosa. Then——"

"You will be married, and live happy ever after," interrupted Walters, with a grunt. "Well, have it your own way."

So they took up their quarters in a house next door to the site selected for the steam laundry.

The latter was a large, one-story adobe building that had been used as a storehouse. It stood on a corner in the suburbs, and possessed ample room for the rather scanty lot of machinery with which the two Americans were to inaugurate their scheme.

With the machinery had come a representative of the former owner. This man installed the plant even to the putting up and testing of the boiler and little engine, and cheerfully instructed the partners in the mysteries of washing and ironing.

Then he left, wishing them good luck.

The task was finished late one Saturday afternoon. Tired and begrimed, Rixby and Walters hopefully regarded their own.

"We'll have a grand opening Monday," said the latter. "And by the powers, I'll send my best shirt through the mangle first. I have it on now preparing it for the test."

"We'll get our posters and inform the town, at least that part of it that wears clothing, that we are prepared to do business at so much per do," grinned Rixby. "With the schedule of prices we have fixed up we should rake in the Mexicans hand over fist. I tell you, Jack, the more I think of Señor Barbosa's kindness the more gratitude I feel. He's a fine chap, and I'm sorry it was necessary to disappoint him in the way of love."

Walters smoked in silence, his eyes roving about the great room with its well-arranged machinery, its pulleys and belts, and the businesslike little office railed in near the door.

As he looked, a man entered from the street. The newcomer, a stolid-faced, bushy-bearded individual, evidently a German from his appearance, stopped several paces inside the room and glanced about in evident approval.

"So," he exclaimed, in a gruff, deep-chested voice, "so, mine friends, you are ready, eh? You look very well here. You have the goot thing in this concession; plenty money. You want to sell?"

"Not just yet," smiled Rixby. "We are fairly well satisfied, Mr. Reinwurts. Perhaps, by and by, when we have made a fortune, but not now."

"When you commence the business?" asked the German, stolidly.

"Monday morning. Grand opening at ten. Machinery running, free beer, lunch; friends all invited. Glad to see you."

Reinwurts pulled thoughtfully at his pipe for a while, then he took paper and pencil and figured at some length. He rose heavily at last.

"Going up to the plaza, Mr. Rixby?" he asked. "I go there. Come and we talk some."

Rixby donned his hat and followed him to the door.

"I'll be back presently," he said. "While I'm uptown I'll arrange to have the posters sent out."

Left to himself, Walters took a turn around the big room and then selected a comfortable seat inside the railing of the office. From where he lounged he could see the entire interior.

It was very warm. The sun beat pitilessly down upon the tiled roof, and sent scorching rays through the open windows. Occasionally the wind brought a faint "rub-a-dub-rub-a-dub" from the direction of the little plaza several blocks away, where the *"tumba"* band was practicing for the Saturday night's concert.

Walters felt sleepy. The languorous air caused his eyes to close. His thoughts drifted back to the Illinois town, so vastly different from this tropical place.

He had dropped deep into slumber,

when suddenly a shuffling noise caused him to look up. What he saw was surprising enough, but he gave no sign that he was awake.

The outer door was open, and into the room had come a strange procession. At least a score of women of various ages ranging from twenty to fifty were marching down the center aisle between the rows of machines.

They stepped noiselessly, and peered from side to side as if eager to see all that the place contained. They examined the mangles, and gave careful attention to the washing machines and the drying room, then they turned, and made their way back to the door.

As they passed Walters he saw that they were native women dressed in the thin cotton garments of the lower class, and that each and every one seemed to wear a stern and implacable expression as if bent upon a most serious and important duty.

The visitors did not see the apparently sleeping man until they had reached the door. The leader, an old dame with a surpassing degree of ugliness, paused, hesitated and then deliberately shook her clinched fist in his face.

One after the other, the rest imitated the threatening gesture; then the procession passed from sight into the street.

Walters slowly rose to his feet.

"That's deuced funny," he said, lighting his pipe. "Now, I wonder——"

He kept his thoughts to himself, and smoked in silence until Rixby returned. The latter sauntered jauntily into the room. He was smiling, and seemed to be well satisfied with himself.

"Got a date for both of us to-night, Jack," he chuckled. "We'll dine at the Hotel Globo. Surprise of your life. Say, this is a great country."

Walters did not say anything about his little surprise of the afternoon. He wanted to think it over and decide certain conjectures which had occurred to him.

It was long past midnight when the partners sought their beds, and it was not until the following afternoon that Walters told Rixby of the strange visitation. Rixby looked puzzled.

"Are you sure it wasn't a dream, Jack?" he said, doubtfully.

"Sure. Not one of them was a dream," replied Walters, solemnly. "It was a crowd of those females you see washing clothes down at the river."

"Think it was curiosity? That would be natural."

Walters puffed away in silence for a while, then he slowly knocked the dottle from his pipe, and replied:

"They didn't look very curious. They acted as if I had stepped on the tail of their skirt. The old lady that had the lead would have made a fine *Ophelia* in a Central African vaudeville show. It's my opinion the wash ladies of this burg are real vexed."

"We can't help that," grinned Rixby. "Competition is the life of trade, you know."

"Yes, it doesn't make much difference —now. Going to see the fair Mercedes to-night?"

Rixby nodded.

"Couldn't miss it for a farm," he replied, cheerfully. "I want to invite her to the opening to-morrow."

It was past eight o'clock when Rixby, attired in his best, presented himself at the door of his former "hotel." He found Mercedes in the *sala,* but not alone. The custom of the country necessitated a duenna—in this particular case a maiden aunt—whom Rixby blessed profanely under his breath.

"I have a great surprise for you, dear," murmured Rixby, after the usual topics had been exhausted. "I suppose you think I have been spending my time in idleness. Not much. Since I left here I have been working hard. We—that is, Walters and I—there is a concession."

He said it proudly as befitted the occasion.

"A concession?" echoed the girl. Rixby, observing that the maiden aunt had fallen into a doze, took Mercedes' willing hand.

"Yes, dear," he said, tenderly. "Our everlasting fortune is made. Now when your mother consents we can get mar-

ried and build our little nest. And who do you think has been our good fairy? You never could guess. It was Señor Barbosa."

"Señor Barbosa?" cried Mercedes. "You don't mean that you are——"

She rose to her feet, and looked at him with startled eyes. One hand strayed to her bosom, and she breathed quickly. "You don't mean that you are the foreigners who got the laundry concession. Enrique, tell me that you——"

"What is the matter?" interrupted Rixby, amazed. "Why this excitement?"

Mercedes dropped back into the chair, and covered her face with both hands. Her shapely shoulders, peeping coquettishly from beneath a filmy wrap, shook with emotion. Something like a sob came to Rixby's ears.

He disregarded the duenna's presence, and quickly seized Mercedes' hands. Then he saw that she was laughing.

"Forgive me, Enrique," she gasped. "But it—it is so funny. Why, the whole town is laughing. Oh, *cara mio,* it is what you call the put-up job. And me, stupid that I am, I did not dream it was you."

"Put-up job?" echoed Rixby. "Why, what——"

"It is Barbosa," Mercedes interrupted, speaking rapidly. "He has played a trick on you. He gave you a concession to bring you trouble because—because"—she blushed prettily—"you are his rival in—in love, you know. There never has been a laundry here. There can't be one. The women that do the washing will not permit it. Oh, they are very strong. There are many of them, and they have families, and the people sympathize with them. Once before, an Englishman tried to start a laundry, and—it was terrible—they almost killed him. They attacked his place, and tore it like this, piece from piece. And the government did not stop it. And the people laughed and helped. Now you——"

She ceased speaking. Rixby had collapsed into a chair where he laid fairly convulsed with laughter. The maiden aunt, roused from her doze, looked on in amazement. Mercedes was no less astonished.

"This is too funny," gasped Rixby. "It is the best joke I've heard in a year."

"Do you consider it funny to lose your money?" demanded Mercedes, severely.

But Rixby only chuckled the more.

"I must see Walters," he said. "I must see him at once. And I want to see Barbosa, too."

"Do not be rash," cautioned Mercedes. "He is very powerful here."

"Oh, I won't hurt him," said Rixby, preparing to leave. He chuckled all the way from the room, and, still chuckling, told the great news to Walters, whom he found in their common apartment.

"I thought as much," said Walters, solemnly. "The grand promenade of the ancient order of suds yesterday convinced me that something was doing. Say, Rix, wouldn't it jar you? Fancy Barbosa playing a trick like that. When is the raid to take place, did you say?"

"Mercedes said she was told by one of the servants that the fun would commence at the hour we had selected for the opening, ten o'clock."

"Humph! Well, I have a plan. If it pans out we'll have our innings. Ten o'clock, eh? D'ye think you can get Barbosa here an hour earlier?"

"He'll come all right. He won't miss the fun."

Walters almost permitted himself the unaccustomed luxury of a smile.

"I'll see that he doesn't," he said, dryly.

. . . . . .

The partners were abroad early the following morning. They were in a merry mood notwithstanding the fact that a disastrous change in their fortunes was scheduled to take place within a few hours. Precisely at nine Rixby drove in a hired carriage to the residence of Señor Barbosa, and returned with him to the plant.

"Your grand opening promises well, my dear *amigo,*" remarked Barbosa, glancing at the crowds which even then

were gathering. "Ah, this is a great day for Guatemala City. You and your *compadre,* the Señor Walters, will be hailed as benefactors. And you will make the money. And——" he glanced slyly at his companion, "you will marry the beautiful Mercedes and be happy."

"I'll marry Mercedes all right," replied Rixby, bluntly. "Here we are, señor. Pile out, and we'll have a friendly drink before the ceremonies begin."

The crush was so great that the two had difficulty in pushing their way to the door. After they had entered, Walters locked the front entrance.

"We don't want to be disturbed," he said, grimly. "The mob will be on top of us next. You would think there was a fight on or a lynching bee. I suppose the people are anxious to see us start up. Well, I hope they will be satisfied. Rix, the whiskey. Give the señor, our very good friend, that large glass. And pass the siphon."

"I see that you have not got your working people yet," remarked the señor, gazing curiously about the room. "Won't you be late with your opening?"

"Not at all," replied Rixby, carelessly. "Everything is in readiness. The force will report at nine-thirty. Steam is on now. Señor, here's to your very good health." He raised his glass and bowed profoundly. "We owe a great deal to you, Walters and I, and although we will try our best to repay you very soon, we are afraid our small efforts will not cancel the debt. *Salud!*"

The señor took his whiskey at a gulp. He smacked his lips, placed the glass upon the table, then staggered slightly.

"Strong stuff that," he said, "but it was good. Deuced strong, I say. *Carramba!* it is making my head whirl round. I feel——"

He lurched to a chair and sat down. His sallow face paled, then reddened; then he tried to regain his feet, but failed. The next moment he had slouched heavily across the table with his arms sprawled out in a grotesque fashion.

"Quick, off with his coat," whispered Walters. "Here, help me, Rix; we haven't a moment to lose. The drug worked faster than I thought it would. And the effects will wear off just as quick."

Working rapidly the partners stripped off the señor's coat, garbed him in an old one belonging to Walters, then clapping a cap upon his head instead of the silk hat he had worn, they arranged him at the desk in a natural position.

"Hark! do you hear that?" suddenly exclaimed Rixby, looking toward the front door. "Here they come."

A hoarse outcry, a menacing shout that only a mob can make, sounded in the street, then something struck the wooden entrance with a thud. Rixby and Walters snatched a last glance at the unconscious Barbosa, then fled incontinently by the back way.

They were not a minute too soon. As Rixby slipped from sight the front door gave way, and a howling mob, composed principally of native women, poured into the interior. Pandemonium followed. There was a crashing of glass, a rending of wood, and then, just as the two Americans, unobserved, gained the adjacent corner, they saw a part of the mob stream back into the street.

Two stalwart Amazons were in the lead, dragging with them what appeared to be a bundle of rags. It was Barbosa, tattered, bruised and only half conscious. It was not long before he was recognized, and the mob drew back in alarm, leaving him prone upon the dusty street, a disgraceful and altogether unsavory object.

"Guess we'd better be going, Jack," whispered Rixby. "This part of the town seems unhealthy."

Walters puffed solemnly at his pipe.

"Luck always was with us, Rix," he said. "Where would we have been if we hadn't sold the concession to Reinwurts Saturday night?"

"That's true," replied Rixby, reflectively. "It was a lucky move. Now it'll be the German Navy coming here to settle this claim, and not Uncle Sam's. Well, I guess I wouldn't have cared for the steam laundry business, anyway. And neither would Mercedes."

BEATRICE, OF VENICE

BY MAX PEMBERTON

Author of "A Daughter of the States," "The Giant's Gate," "The Iron Pirate," Etc.

A new story by this gifted author is an event in literature. There is a subtle charm in his stories and a spirit of adventure so enthralling that his readers both in this country and in England are legion. In the present story Mr. Pemberton has taken as a background that most interesting period in the romantic history of Venice when Napoleon Buonaparte was scheming to add it to his empire. In action, in interest and in wealth of adventure, "Beatrice, of Venice," represents the culmination of the author's best efforts.

CHAPTER I.

THE GARRET AND THE ROSE.

"SO, there is a woman, after all." Gaston, Comte de Joyeuse, utterly surprised to hear a voice in the room, flung the red rose down upon the coverlet of his bed and turned a flaming cheek to the speaker.

"You, Villetard—you in Venice?"

"No other, my dear fellow, but Joseph Villetard, arrived this instant from Maestre. Well, are you not glad to see me? Ah, my dear boy."

The men embraced with the warmth of a friendship which, for long months, had been but a memory; and a dozen questions asked but unanswered passing between them, the elder at length removed his cloak, and began to cast a quick eye about the shabby room which the young count had made his home since he came to Venice three months ago.

"The general is at Gratz," he said, as he moved; "your letters have interested him, but they are too vague, my friend. This is no work for the hussars; he has come to see that, and so I am here—in your little dovecote, Gaston, where the red rose blushes. Ha, ha, say nothing—I count each petal a story, every thorn a rebuff. Where would Joseph Villetard be this day but for the women? A common scrivener, my boy, a lawyer's hack, a one-windowed jailbird with quills for his fetters. No, God bless them, I love the women. We are nowhere without them. You have done very well—I shall say so to the general."

"Better say nothing," retorted Gaston, a little curtly; "this woman won't help you, Villetard. There, that's all—you are thirsty, tired, hungry. We'll have old Crook-Back up and try his wine of Cyprus. You can tell me your news while you eat. Remember I've seen no one but official messengers for a month or more. It's a cursed exile, and I'm tired of it."

Villetard had already noticed his friend's lassitude and weariness, but his shrewd judgment refused to ascribe it to that confidential mission with which the count had been intrusted in Venice; nor did he believe that any common

affaire du cœur would wring as much as a single sigh from the hard heart of a traveled hussar. Some graver matter troubled the count, and of this it should be his instant business to learn.

"Yes," he said, "a man may weary even in a marble city. I think I understand, Gaston. And this is no good house of dreams for one of your age. What sent you to such a garret, my boy? Is there no decent inn in Venice, then? Is it money, wisdom—what? They told me you were——"

Gaston put his fingers to his lips, and Jean Mareau, the landlord of the White Lion, stood bowing before him. A Frenchman to the finger tips; Venice, nevertheless, had played the deuce with Mareau's tongue, and so sharpened his avarice that, by the common saying, he would have sold his own mother to the devil for a scudo. Bent as a bow, with sagging jaw and a parrot's beak, he now washed his hands in imaginary waters (the need of something more substantial being evident), and declared his pleasure to see one of his own countrymen.

"Excellency, I knew the boot upon the stair. None but a hussar walks like that——"

"Well said, Monsieur Jean—and since I am not a hussar——"

"Pardon, excellency—had you permitted me to finish I would have said none but a hussar walks like that except it be a dragoon. The step was that of my lord count's friend. I need no other surety. These are strange times in Venice, gentlemen, strange times for my countrymen; but here you are as safe as in your own house."

"In which case I should be a dead man before the morning. Come, Monsieur Mareau, that's a poor beginning, and if your wine be no better——"

"My wine, excellency, shall speak for itself. His holiness has named it the wine of Galilee. If that be not enough——"

"Agreed, agreed, Monsieur Mareau, his holiness' wine and plenty of it. And upon that a mullet or a capon and one of your golden cheeses, with a little flask from Zara. Eh, Monsieur Mareau, am I not an artist?"

Mine host shrugged his shoulders, and with a gesture of deep distress admitted that the artist was there, but that the canvas was lacking.

"Excellency," he declared, "though you carried a skinful of ducats from Brescia to Maestre, you shall not find a capon for your pains. My countrymen have many virtues, but abstinence is not one of them. They have eaten the very leaves off the trees. Ah! my poor Venice!"

"*Your* poor Venice, Mareau?"

"That is to say, my glorious country, excellency, which has filled this beautiful land of Italy with devils. And, saving your excellency's presence, I would say the same to Gen. Buonaparte if I had the honor to stand before him this day."

"The honor shall be yours, Mareau—I promise you no long delay. Let everyone know it in this house—the gentlemen that were playing a little game of *écarté* as I came up the stairs. Let them know that Gen. Buonaparte will ask how they have dealt with my friend, the count, here—and with me, Mareau, a traveler that has some little acquaintance with the general. Do you understand? Then, away with you, my man. Go—and mark ye, Mareau, prudence, and upon that prudence, and again I say unto you prudence; or, as heaven is above me, this house shall first burn when my master comes to Venice."

Joseph Villetard knew precisely the value of a threat and when it might be properly employed. A tried master of intrigue, he had all moods at his command; could be gallant before women, honey-tongued to men, persuasive, accommodating, even humble in his art; but opposition or circumstance could reveal another side less amiable and often unaccountably passionate.

Old Mareau, the landlord, remained dumb before the threat, but his lifeless eyes were lighted for an instant while he listened, and his first words in the kitchen below were to summon his assistants and to send a message to the Capo del Sestiero that one of Buonaparte's emissaries had arrived from Gratz, and was then dining in his house.

"And you others," he cried, to a loitering crowd of *bravi,* "up to the leads. Lose no word of it. He comes from Gen. Buonaparte—he has said so himself. If you value your ears, use them, my children. Prudence, and again I say unto you prudence. He has threatened me, Jean Mareau, his countryman. I will teach him with whom he has to deal."

Quite unconscious of the annoyance which the excellent Mareau suffered, and greatly interested in his friend Gaston's story, Joseph Villetard meanwhile had drawn a chair to the window of the little room, and there was pressing the count for news, both of the city and himself.

A slim, awkward figure at the best, the searching beams of light and the deeper shadows behind them played odd tricks with Villetard's scanty locks, and showed the angular head in all its quaint ugliness of dress and shape.

No sharper contrast between two men could have been found in all Venice that day; the spring of age, the summer of youth, the man of the *salon,* the soldier of the camp, such was the brief verdict an observer might have passed upon Villetard, the emissary, and Gaston, the hussar. And in their talk they did not disturb these impressions, for while the words of one were weighed as gold in a balance, so was the other impulsively loquacious and quite indifferent to the consequences of indiscretion.

"Your landlord is an impostor, and that is a bad beginning," Villetard resumed so soon as the door was shut. "How did you come here, Gaston—what made you choose this house? The general will ask me why, and I must make him a satisfactory answer. It would never do to let him think that his servants are careless—I am sure you have some good reason? Let me hear it before we go any further?"

Gaston drew a chair to the window, and looked out over the busy canal, away toward the Giudecca and the south. It was midday, and a winter sun shone coldly upon the dome of the Salute and caught up ripples of light from the falling waters. Upon the piazza at the canal's edge doleful players in a moribund carnival, raised droning cries, like a dirge for the misfortunes of their city and the misery that had come upon it.

Gondolas passed swiftly, carrying their messages to and from the palace as though the fate of Venice might yet be decided by their diligence—but everywhere the pall of doubt lay heavy upon the people and even cowed the children to silence.

"I lodge here," said Gaston, turning from the window as from some spectacle which by no means gave him pleasure, "I lodge here, my dear Villetard, for two reasons—the first, because its poverty is a cloak; the second, because my landlord is a rogue, but a French rogue, and, therefore, one degree removed from his Italian neighbors. It is quite true that his friends are listening at this very moment to every word which is passing between us; but the same delicate attention without that measure of control which nationality demands, would be more dangerous, and so I suffer it. As to the poverty of the house——"

But Villetard did not give him the opportunity to reply. He was already upon his feet, examining the shabby room with an eye long trained in espionage.

"You suffer them to spy upon you, Gaston?"

"Assuredly I do; would they be happy if I did not?"

"Yes, but your own business, the general's affairs——"

"Oh, I transact my business in a gondola, Villetard; it is safer."

He laughed softly, as though pleased with the obvious lie which he uttered for the benefit of eavesdroppers. Villetard, however, was very far from satisfied, and he continued to examine the room with a searching eye, tapping the walls, peering into closets, and even opening the inner doors to be sure that no one listened there.

Much mystified both by the soundness of the brickwork and the apparent difficulty of espionage, he would have resumed his seat, and continued to press his argument, but for some sound as of a heavy body falling in the garret

above; and at this he looked up swiftly, and, detecting an aperture at the base of the hook from which a puny glass chandelier depended, he thrust his sword twice into the ceiling thereabouts and then withdrew it, white with plaster upon which a crimson stain was spreading.

"There is the luck in your armor, Gaston," he said, quietly. "Listen to them. The rats are running, you hear, and one is wounded. Go on, my dear fellow, we can now speak freely."

A low groan from the garret above answered Villetard's taunt; the scurrying feet moved heavily, and the witnesses to sudden agitation added the fallen plaster to their number. The emissary laughed lightly at his own work; he had played the part too often that this page of it should surprise him.

"An ear at the keyhole is never dangerous, my dear Gaston," he continued, "if you have elbow room to cut at it. Those fellows have gone to find a surgeon. You surely would not tell me that you are in any way concerned about them. Oh, come, this is not the Gaston de Joyeuse I have known. What! You turn pale and start because—because——"

Villetard paused, as though some new idea had come to him. For an instant—for just one—he linked the story of the red rose upon the coverlet of the bed with that of the young count's perturbation and evident distress. But, in truth, Gaston de Joyeuse was not thinking of the White Lion at all, nor of that which was passing within it.

His eyes had been fixed upon a distant gondola which swept by the Dogana on its way towards Rialto, and he told himself that Beatrice, Marquise de St. Remy, had just left the palace and was returning to the Casa degli Spiriti, or, it might be, to the house of her kinsman, the Lord of Brescia. Villetard's momentary hesitation angered him, and he betrayed more animation than he had yet shown in the presence of his guest.

"My dear Villetard, you have not come to Venice to talk nonsense. Really, you excite yourself about very little things. I am so accustomed to all this, it has become second nature to me. I provide against it; that is all. If the French are to remain in Venice——"

"If—if—will the general like your 'if,' Gaston?"

"Permit me to finish, Villetard. If the French are to remain here and their lives are to be accounted of as much worth as that of any dog that guards a kitchen, a man must put up with something more than eavesdropping. He must be patient, conciliatory and alive to the customs of the people. These Venetians are all spies—sons on fathers, husbands on wives; the police everywhere, every corner a trap, every alley a dangerous place—does it not all come to this, that we must accept it or go; fall in with the common practice or admit that Venice is untenable? I have seen that from the first. When the general sent me to protect the interests of France, he knew the risks we were running. I will give my account when the time comes, but meanwhile, I say to you, act prudently, and if you have anything to say, say it where everyone can hear you, and where no one will listen. Come, we will go to Florian's and drink coffee. You will find some of our countrymen there—such as have lived through it, Villetard. They are not many—it has been a dreadful time, my friend, and some of us had begun to think that the general had forgotten us."

"He never forgets, Gaston. I am here to tell you so. Be sure of one thing—they shall be avenged; the humblest servant of France shall not be forgotten in our bill. A heavy total, Gaston; a terrible total when a Buonaparte adds it up."

He gathered up his cloak, and they quitted the house together in the count's gondola, which ferried them across the canal and left them upon the steps of the Piazetta. Short as the journey was, it yet sufficed for the *sotto-voce* curses of the boatmen, and more than one insulting epithet from the felze of a passing gondola. In the great square itself, men drew their cloaks about their breasts when the hated Franchese passed, and women stepped aside into

porch or doorway to avoid the more open expression of their contempt—a feminine display of annoyance which greatly amused the self-satisfied Villetard.

"No roses here, Gaston," he exclaimed, staring offensively at his pretty enemies. "Nothing but the thorns, you see. Well, some people will find them sharp by and by. Is this the famous Florian's? Ha! then we will make ourselves at home. Did you say that I should find Chateaudun here! Well, I shall be glad to see him——"

Gaston said "Hush," and looked about him a little anxiously to be sure that no police spy was in hearing. When the waiter had served them, he leaned upon the table, and making it appear that he was staring with unusual curiosity at the domes of the cathedral, he said, very quietly:

"Chateaudun is dead, my dear Villetard. Did not you know it?"

"Dead? Chateaudun! You mean it, Gaston?"

"They nailed him by the throat to the door of the Frari. The Savi have offered a hundred silver ducats as a reward. It is a colossal sham. They know the hand and kiss it. Then there was Rampeau—thrown like a dog from the Fondaco del Turchi and buried by a fisherman's charity. Sevennes dies in church, and they call poison an apoplexy. Richard is murdered in broad daylight in Rialto, and the police say: 'What could we have done?' My blood boils, Villetard, when I think of these things. I wonder that the general leaves one stone of this cursed city standing upon another."

"It suits him to leave it, Gaston. We are at peace with the republic, remember. Peace is a blessing to any country. We burn the farms and eat the corn, and carry away the women on terra firma, and it is still peace. The general does not wish for war with Venice—why, because he is a servant of the people, and the people must rule. In his own good time he will deal with your Doge. I give them three months more, Gaston, three months for your serene prince, and your holy candle, and your cap of state, and your sanctified cushion. After that, they will be no more, wiped out like a face from a canvas—forgotten in curses, and the people's execration. And those who war against France, your Pesaros, your Faliers—the dotard Lorenzo, Beatrice, my lady of the roses—they shall first answer, Gaston, to a rope with a noose in the end of it. What, you are sorry for them! Oh, come, I understand you less than ever."

But this was a lie; for observing the young count's agitation, the sudden pallor of his face, and the light which had come into his eyes when my Lady Beatrice was mentioned, Villetard arrived at once at a conclusion; and to himself he said: "She is the woman."

CHAPTER II.

THE LORD OF BRESCIA.

Lorenzo of Brescia was a man of attitudes, and he flattered himself that the particular pose he adopted upon that day of February, when Beatrice, Marquise de St. Remy, was to hear the fateful news from his lips, was in all things worthy of the style and dignities he maintained in the city.

Seated in a great carved chair in a vast *salon* of the Palazzo Burano, pens and ink and costly volumes were set out upon the ivory writing table before him, while his clothes of purple velvet, and the little velvet cap which hid his snow-white crown, were more characteristic of a dandy of twenty than a schemer of fifty-seven ill-lived years.

But for that matter, Lorenzo's heart was young, and in his shapely head there were ideas enough to have made the fortunes of an empire. An intolerably vain man, his power was a woman's, but he would not confess as much even to my Lady Beatrice. "You do much for me," he would say, "but the secret is here"—and he would tap his forehead expressively while my lady laughed in his face, and retorted, "A secret you will keep until your death, my lord."

There was no doubt whatever that my lord would do so.

And yet in the gentle art of self-deception this stranger to Venice who had won her confidence so strangely, stood veritably a master. The people accepted him; the senate, grown old in incapacity, lent him a ready ear.

He was named in the clubs and coffee houses for a wise man. The eloquence of his orations, and the wit of his printed matter delighted the city, which had yet to learn how little they were his own. A splendid head, which might have served for a portrait of the great Tintoret himself, added to a dignity and charm of manner, learned in the courts of Italy, and chiefly at Rome, were in themselves some passport to the claim of infallibility. Venice, clinging to any straw in the flood tide of her destruction, stretched out an arm to Lorenzo, and called upon him to save her.

And Lorenzo, taking my Lady Beatrice aside, would ask her: "What shall I write; how shall I answer them!"

Now, my lord had posed to receive his guest at the hour of noon upon this February day, and when Beatrice did not come, and he must change his position frequently, even take a pen in his hand, and scribble idle words upon the paper, or strike a new attitude, or rearrange the folds of the great purple cloak spread out upon the bench beside him, his temper, rarely childlike, became at length intolerable, and he rated the lackeys, and sent out the messengers, and threatened this fellow, and threatened that, until none but his personal servant, Noello, remained for the service of the chamber; and even he was sneaking away from such an ill-mannered outbreak, when what should happen, but that a lackey opened the door of the *salon* without warning, and there stood the marquise, and there my lord in as woeful a disorder as ever she had discovered him.

White with passion, his purple cloak trodden underfoot, his hair awry—he could but stand and gaze at her as at some child who had surprised him in naughtiness—while she on her part clapped her hands delightedly and begged him to continue with it.

"My lord," she cried, "here is Settecervelli with his cloak upon the stones—where, then, is his dog? I beg you continue—oh, my lord, it must be well with us, since our leaders dance."

Noello, the valet, picked up the fallen cloak, and Lorenzo, conducting the marquise to her chair near his table, made such apology as he could—and in the matter of apology, as a wit has said, few were better than he.

"Marquise," he said, "set foot upon the cloak, and it shall lie upon my heart. It is true that I was angry. Well, since it is upon your account, why not? If there be any proper cause of anger, and I could name many, surely a woman is the first to be thought of. Your letter said noon—it is now one o'clock. Judge if I have not a reason."

"The best, my lord, and yet the worst, for if reason be a woman then is folly at her heels. I received your letter and I came—when I had the mind to. Say that I distress you and I will return again. If Lorenzo has such a mind for carnival that he must play Settecervelli at the Palazzo Burano, why, then I at least may remind him that my gondola is still at the *riva*."

He silenced her with a torrent of protest, gathering up his papers and books, and recovering what he could of his fallen dignity. My lady herself, radiant in youth and laughter, watched him from the depths of her round black eyes, and said that of all the empty heads in Venice, this empty head amused her the most. But she was very curious, none the less, to know why he had summoned her to the palace.

"The police say that Joseph Villetard has crossed from Maestre this morning," she began; "the news and your letter came by the same messenger. Shall I add one to the other, my lord, and say that I am here because of them? Or shall we speak of the Signorina Rizzi and the players at San Luca—oh, there's a profitable thing now, and French, my lord; as French as I am, who was a little while in that happy country. Yes, it shall be the players at San Luca."

My lord raised his hands in dumb protest, although his eyes blinked queer-

ly when she spoke of the Signorina Rizzi. Her quick perception in naming the purpose of his message offended him, for he wished it to be a great surprise to her; and he was annoyed that a woman should be early informed of such grave matters. It had been his hope to spring a tragic surprise upon her with many a dark hint and fearsome gesture; but here she was full of the affair, and so little put out by it that she could remember the players at the San Luca Theater.

"Marquise," he retorted, while he fetched a deep sigh, which he meant for a reproach upon her flippancy, "if you speak of the players to-day, you will find a dull audience. I sent for you, yes, because Villetard is here. You know Paris and you know the man. We shall rely upon you to tell us all you know, that we may act as becomes those who are the guardians of a people's honor, I may say of their very existence. This paper before me, it must go to the serene prince within the hour. You see that my need is great—and yet you delay?"

My lady leaned back upon her couch, and perceiving her own fair figure looking out at her from one of the many mirrors which decorated that splendid apartment, she delighted herself with an instant's appreciation of it before she answered my lord.

"Why not," she exclaimed, presently; "why not delay, Lorenzo? Since nothing will be done, is not soon as good as late for the doing it? I have been in Paris, true, and I know Villetard. Shall I tell you that he is clever? What does it profit? Would such a man as Buonaparte have sent him here if he were a fool? Shall I say that he is shrewd? You will learn as much for yourselves before to-morrow is old. Oh, no, I am too French to speak of it—go elsewhere, my lord, while you have the time; go to San Luca and acclaim Goldoni, who would have taught you had you the ears to listen."

She laughed a short silvery laugh and watched my lord indolently while he wrote something upon the paper in a fine flourishing hand worthy of the writer. He cared nothing for her cynical address—his one aim was to let the Savi understand that he knew all about Villetard and could advise them wisely. And to this end she had already given him a clew, for had she not said that nothing would be done? He made a note of it—nothing would be done, and Villetard was dangerous.

"My dear lady," he said, "no one is better able to speak of it in all Venice. This man is shrewd and clever, you say, and he comes as Gen. Buonaparte's own ambassador. Well, what then? Are we ignorant why he comes, we who have suffered this French adventurer's exactions, who have bled for him and died for his caprice? Are we to bow the head because yet another schemer comes among us and brings new demands? If the Savi listen to me, they will make short work of Joseph Villetard, believe me. I would pack him out of Venice neck and crop, and with him every French rogue who works a mischief among us. Therein lies safety—but you know how it will be. We shall temporize, bandy words, fill our drawers with documents—and Villetard will remain, the fox in the henroost—the wolf in the fold, to be petted and made much of because Napoleon has sent him. So much I foresaw when the news was brought to me. It is the beginning of the end, I said; Venice has gone mad and in madness she will perish."

He spoke now with something of a fanatic's temper and earnestness, and my lady watched him with pity, for the truth of it was not to be gainsaid. And yet their ways of wisdom were as far asunder as the poles, and while he would have found salvation in enmity to France, she believed that by friendship alone would the city be saved.

"If Villetard goes, another will take his place," she said, a little sadly. "Write that in letters of gold and read it to the Senate, Lorenzo. Five years ago opportunity came to you in white raiment—but you flung her gifts aside, and she will never return. I tell you the same story every day—when one man is to be found in all this city, then may Venice hope. For what are you doing

to save her—where is your cleverness? You defy Buonaparte with wands in your hands; you cry heaven to witness your wrongs and avenge them with pamphlets; you crave delay when terra firma is wet with woman's tears and the sky is dark with the smoke of burning houses. Five years ago you would have done all. This man offered you alliance, honorable and to your profit. You rejected it with evil words and eternal promises. You sought no alliance, you said; Venice must stand alone. Oh, brave independence, written upon parchment and defended by courtesans. And now, when it is too late, when all is wagered and lost, you answer Buonaparte by insulting his ambassador. I worship your wisdom and bow to it, my lord. As an honorable company of assassins, you surely have no equal in Europe."

My lord did not like this new turn, and finding that she had ceased to inspire him, he rose from his chair and began to pace the long room, pausing at last before a silver candlestick in which five tapers were burning, despite the sunny morning and the brightness of the day. These tapers Lorenzo touched with gentle fingers, petting and fondling them as a man might fondle a spirited child.

"I know nothing of assassination," he rejoined, with some asperity; "that is for the people, my lady, who have yet to learn the Corsican's title. They suffer, they retaliate; who will blame them if they do so?"

He went on fingering the candles with a caressing touch, and presently he said:

"They tell me that Chateaudun is dead. I am sorry for it. Now, if it had been Joyeuse——"

"You said, my lord——"

"That if it had been Joyeuse, my candlestick would burn a taper the less to-day."

There was something so pleasing in this idea that Lorenzo continued for many minutes to fondle his beloved candles (which his enemies said were but one more evidence of his dotage), and presently, blowing very softly upon one of them, but not to extinguish it, he went on:

"But Joyeuse must go. That is quite decided. He is too active for us, marquise."

"You would say, my lord, that he is too zealous in protecting the lives of his fellow countrymen?"

"As you please—his view is something like that, no doubt. I mean that he is a dangerous enemy and as such must be removed."

"From Venice, Lorenzo?"

"From Venice, my child."

"I am told that it is a long journey—sometimes, Lorenzo."

"But never tedious, marquise. Well, the count has no one to blame. He has been warned. A month ago the serene prince cautioned him that the French *émigrés* must leave Venice. His answer is to summon this man, this sphinx Villetard. They quarter their ruffians upon us as though our palaces were barracks and our piazza their drill ground. Can they blame reprisal? No, Joyeuse must go. It will be a lesson to Buonaparte."

"They tell me that the Corsican is dull as his books, Lorenzo."

"So far, but we shall quicken him. When he understands that the friendship of Venice is to be had at a price——"

"At your price, Lorenzo?"

"It may be; but at a price which the signori will approve. I am merely the instrument of a wise decision. What I am going to put down upon that paper to-day is the final expression of a great resolution. There must not be one Frenchman left in Venice in ten days' time. You must help me with that, marquise; we must surpass ourselves; appeal, entreaty, irony, wit—we must employ them all. The French must go; Joyeuse must die."

"Must die, my lord?"

"Ah, my tongue is foolish. I should say that he must leave us. If he will not——"

"In that case?"

"Oh, I shall blow out a taper."

Beatrice, who had not taken her eyes from my lord's face while she questioned him, did not betray herself by so much

as a word or movement; but the effort cost her much, and there was a note of hardness in her voice when next she spoke.

"Do you know the count, my lord?"

"I have met him at the Palazzo Grimani."

"They tell me that he is a man of many accomplishments, and much beloved by Buonaparte. Have you heard anything of that?"

"There is some talk of it; my opportunities were brief; I cannot be expected to interest myself in accomplishments, marquise."

"Indeed, you cannot, Lorenzo. Superficially, then, the count does not interest you?"

"He interests me so much that when I meet him at your house——"

"At my house, Lorenzo?"

"At your house, one week from to-day—I give him a week, marquise—I will applaud him for an Admirable Crichton whom Paris cannot match. Come, fall in with that, and tell me it is clever. If there is one house in Venice to which a stranger goes with an easy conscience, it is to that of the Marquise de St. Remy. You do not know him, but you have only to lift a finger and he will obey. Procure an introduction this very day; you can do it without remark, for the inquisitors will know and understand. I shall lay my idea before them this morning with the appeal to patriots. Meanwhile, justice demands that Joyeuse be warned. Let him leave Venice while he may go in peace."

"You are generous, Lorenzo. A noble heart beats beneath that purple robe. I do not wonder that the people love you. And all for my poor country, too."

My lord lifted his saintly eyes to heaven and protested that it was, indeed, for the sake of Venice and the children of Venice (a phrase he had uttered many times in the market place) that he so effaced himself; and believing that he had won her wholly, he took up a pen and prepared to write.

"We must begin the address—I deliver it to-night," he said.

"You are assured of my help, then?"

"I have not the least doubt of it."

"We are to tell the people that their safety lies in the banishment of every Frenchman from Venice?"

"I hold it vital. We must let Buonaparte know that our patience is exhausted."

"And threaten him with sugarsticks from Florian's. Valiant nation. Well, I am ready, Lorenzo—write on."

He knew my lady's habit of satire, and bore with her when she stood a little while at the window of the room and watched the busy canal below, the darting gondolas and all the garish color in which Venice mourned her departing liberties. Beatrice would help him presently—there was no tongue more eloquent in all Italy; and when she began to speak in a sweet, lingering voice, my lord cared for nothing but that he should catch every word of that golden logic.

"How they will applaud us," he kept saying to himself; "what wit, what fervor, what pathos." He could hear himself already declaiming the rolling phrases, and he licked his lips as though mouthing a masterpiece. Half an hour passed before my lady finished, and when she did so he crossed the room and kissed her hands with rapture.

"You have the eloquence of Demosthenes and the grace of Venus, marquise," he said. "How can I repay you?—impossible. I will write my gratitude in diamonds and hang it about your neck." She pushed him away, and gathered her cloak about her shoulders.

"You weary me," she said, with a sudden change of mood which astounded him; "some day you will not be so grateful, Lorenzo."

He followed her to the gondola, protesting that though not one stone of Venice remained upon another, he would still find some temple wherein he might worship her—but when she had left him and he returned to gather up his papers, he said to himself:

"A little while yet and I shall have no need of you, marquise."

And Beatrice, alone at last with her great fear, said in her turn:

"Your address to patriots is your death warrant, my lord."

CHAPTER III.

A DOUBLE DOOR OF BRONZE.

Joseph Villetard, unlike the majority of his fellow countrymen, was not an early riser, for he had acquired the habit of reading and working in the silent hours of the night, and the dawn usually found him heavy in sleep. This habit his visit to Venice did not interrupt; and when his new servant, Zannuchio, the Dalmatian, entered his room at six o'clock upon the morning following his arrival, he discovered his master in so deep a slumber that words would not wake him, and a touch of the hand upon his shoulder merely elicited a dismal groan. When the emissary at last opened his eyes, he stared about him for some while as though quite lost to the sense of time or place or the identity of the intruder, and his morning greeting was far from civil.

"Who the devil are you?" he asked, curtly.

"Your servant, Zannuchio, excellency—engaged yesterday."

"Yesterday, yesterday—and why yesterday——"

"As good a day as any other, excellency—better than to-morrow, for instance. I am here to tell you that it is six o'clock, and that your friend has gone to church."

Villetard laughed that such an accusation should be brought against any friend of his, and when he had rubbed his eyes and grumbled sufficiently, he looked again at the somewhat terrifying figure of his servant, and began to recollect the circumstances under which he had engaged him.

"Yes, I remember now," he conceded; "you are the Dalmatian rogue my friend, Bernardi, recommends to me. Is not that so?"

Zannuchio bowed with stately acquiescence.

"I am that person, my lord."

"And you have done what I told you to do?"

"Everything—my friends are now your friends, excellency, for the trifling payment of ten ducats a week. Suffer no anxieties—I, Zannuchio, have ordered it."

"Wonderful man! Did you wake me up to tell me that?"

"I intruded on your excellency's leisure for the purpose of telling you that my lord count had gone to church. When your excellency reflects upon it, you will remember——"

"Yes, that I commanded you to do so. Let me have hot water at once. I am going to follow the count, Zannuchio."

"I imagined that your excellency would desire to imitate so worthy a young man. There is but one thing more, my lord."

"And that?"

"The honorable tailor, who craves leave to inspect your excellency's body."

Villetard sprang from his bed, and began to dress himself hastily. A friend had recommended this fantastic creature, half Italian, half Slav, for his servant; and he had taken him upon the principle that a thief is best set to catch a thief. Zannuchio's pompous phrases, learned upon his knees at Eastern courts, amused the emissary, and he was assured that a trifling sum expended among the *bravi* in this man's employ, was a better passport to security than any document with which the inquisitors might furnish him.

The Dalmatian, indeed, knew every face and figure of note in the city, and the mere fact of his engagement as courier by a traveler assured that traveler's safety. None the less, his presence was not a little embarrassing, and conducive to a renown, sometimes undesirable; for he was garbed like a Greek, and his flowing robes were multicolored as Joseph's coat—moreover, his loquacity was unenviable, and scarcely to be suffered by a man of silent habits. This Villetard discovered when he quitted the White Lion, and being come to the *piazzetta*, set out to walk to the cathedral to find Gaston. Zannuchio would have given him the history of every pillar—as false as it was clever—if he would have suffered it.

"Yonder, my lord," he began, "yonder are the two columns——"

But Villetard silenced him upon the instant.

"Their name is 'Prudence,' and 'Speak-when-you-are-spoken-to,' friend Zannuchio. Have the goodness to remember it."

The old man lifted his hands in an attitude of reproachful amazement. What, he said to himself, a stranger who did not care for the columns of St. Mark! Such a surly rogue, surely, had never been known in Venice.

"But, excellency——"

"No buts, Zannuchio—silence until I speak. The count, you say, is in the cathedral?"

"Taken there neither by 'Prudence' nor by 'Speak-when-you-are-spoken-to,' excellency. Yes, he is in the cathedral which was formerly the chapel of the Ducal Palace. And if I may be permitted to point out to your excellency that the spot upon which we are standing——"

"Oh, go to the devil, old man."

"I follow your excellency."

Villetard laughed at the thrust and sauntered on leisurely under the arcade of the piazza. There was no sun yet and lights still twinkled in the houses of the great square, while the cloaked figures of men and women moved briskly in the raw air, some towards the shuttered shops, others towards the open doors of St. Mark's which invited the worshipers.

At this hour of the day no sign was to be read of Venice's unrest or of that apprehension which colored every act of her citizens in their leisure moments; bells did not ring out less musically because the French had crossed the mountains, the fishwives were not less numerous, the cries of the fishwives less raucous because of the Senate's incapacity or the inquisitor's impotence. The city awoke to her common affairs, briskly as though no political debauch of yesterday night had wearied her, and she did not stand upon the threshold of her doom.

Villetard, indeed, passed almost unobserved to the very narthex of the great church, and even in such a place few remarked that he was a Frenchman or penetrated the disguise which a newly purchased cloak had won for him. The object of each was worship—or a rendezvous; and Villetard told himself that this was a strange people, which made love in a church before the sun was up. Then he went and stood by one of the pillars of the nave and listened to the monotonous chanting of the priests who were singing the morning office.

The darkness everywhere was almost that of night; a few tapers burned upon the side altars where mass was being said; but elsewhere nothing relieved the heavy gloom, and it was impossible to distinguish one face from another. Villetard delighted in the protection which this darkness afforded him, and, becoming bolder, he entered the chapel upon the left hand of the high altar, and there perceived his friend the count.

Gaston knelt before a *prie-dieu,* apparently absorbed in his devotions; and quite near to him, so near that he could have stretched out a hand and touched her, was Beatrice, Marquise de St. Remy. Observed in the mellow light which a branch of tapers burning before an image cast upon the figures, even Villetard, the emissary, could admit that they justified the Venetian practice and said much for it.

The marquise herself added to her youth a certain vague air of dignity and self-possession rarely seen in one so young. Had she sat for one of Bellini's Madonnas, or to Titian for his Ariadne, the masters might have searched afar and found no model more typical of these faces they loved to paint.

For her charm was of a pensive beauty which a question could awake to splendid vitality, and the dreamy eyes, drooping now beneath heavy lids, could, in an instant so assent, affirm, or contradict, that she had little need of her silvery tongue, and better conversed thus.

Very fair, with an abundance of dark chestnut-colored hair, her features were sufficiently classical to give her grace, but pre-eminently feminine, so that they justified the critics in all their fabulous stories of her intrigues and their conse-

quences. When Villetard first saw her, a heavy mantilla, almost in the Spanish fashion, covered her shoulders and hid the shapely hands from observation.

She appeared, indeed, to see nothing but the frescoes above the altar and the figures of the saints which looked down upon her; but just when the priest said, "Peace be with you," the round, black eyes opened widely and a flash, wherein was written every message which a woman can utter, passed to the young count at her side. Villetard felt it like a ray of warm sunshine striking even him in that gloomy chapel. And he said again: "There certainly is a woman."

Henceforth it was for him an enchanting comedy. Each time that the priest said *"Pax vobiscum"* the black eyes flashed and the stately head was turned —but so rapidly with such apparent unconsciousness that any casual observer would have remained entirely ignorant both of the play and the players. Villetard, however, missed no detail of it—his friend Gaston's prayers must be sad stuff to-day, he thought, and he numbered those trifling episodes, the message of the eyes, the deep sighs, the restless play of the hands upon the book, and the hands beneath the mantilla.

These two were lovers, he said, excellent actors, both worthy of Molière's house. How beautifully the girl timed her favors—but four in all during the mass; and when it was done, she rose from her knees and went straight out through the great doors as though Gaston, the hussar, did not exist for her. But she did not deceive Joseph Villetard; nothing was to be hidden from him—the abrupt parting, the count's swift stoop, as that of a falcon upon quarry—he could have described it all exactly a month after it had happened.

"Ha, ha!" said Villetard, "a rose upon the pavement; well, we shall have a veritable Jardin des Plantes by and by."

He allowed Gaston to leave the church, and then following leisurely, he beckoned the aged Zannuchio to him and began to question him.

"Who is that woman, Zannuchio?"

"A very great person, indeed, in Venice, excellency—no less than the sister of the Lord Zorzi."

"Her name?"

"They call her the Marquise de St. Remy. She lives in the old Casa degli Spiriti quite near to the Church of San Zaccaria. It dates, your excellency, from the reign of the serene——"

"For the love of Heaven, get on. Who is the woman, and where is her husband?"

"I have told your excellency that she is my Lady Beatrice, sister to the Lord Zorzi. As to her husband—well, he is dead, and how shall I know where he is?"

"She was married to a Frenchman, then?"

"To no other than the Marquise de St. Remy, ambassador from his majesty of France to our late serene prince, Paolo Reinier, who has a brass by Sansovino upon the knocker of his house, excellency."

Zannuchio was very pleased to have relieved his feelings in this way, and he nodded affably and repeated the words, "upon the knocker of his house," as though they lingered pleasantly upon his palate; but Villetard remained for a little while plunged in deep thought while he endeavored to recall the circumstances of the embassy and the story of the ambassador.

"St. Remy, St. Remy—ah, they did for him at Lyons in the year '92. At which age do you say the girl was married, old man?"

"She was married in her sixteenth year, and lived two short years with her husband in France. She should now be twenty-three, your excellency; but one never knows with women."

"True enough, my Socrates. Woman is as young as her power for mischief, and when that passes she is old. Is she rich, this Venus?"

"So rich that the least of the treasures of her house would furnish me white wine of Cyprus for the rest of my days, excellency. The marquise did not buy Beatrice Zorzi for nothing—and then, she has inherited her uncle's fortune, you must know. There are pictures in her house by all the masters, even of the

great Francesca Guardi, whom Titian has painted in the year——"

"Yes, yes, valuable pictures and other treasures—I understand. And her politics, Zannuchio? Does she love my countrymen?"

"So little that, whenever a throat is nailed to a church door, they say, 'That man supped last night at the Casa degli Spiriti.' Observe how little gratitude women possess, your excellency. Your republic cuts off the head of a husband thirty years too old for her, and she thanks you by flinging the bodies of your countrymen into the canal before her windows. There's a pretty kind of tame dove for you."

"We shall teach her a lesson, Zannuchio, and soon. Call me a gondola—I wish to go to the Casa degli Spiriti. Did you not say that was the name of her house?"

"The old *casa*—there are two of that name in the city. But your honorable excellency would not think of going within. Even I could not protect you there."

"Have no fear. My throat is too precious, and I dislike water, Zannuchio. Bid this fellow go straight to the house. I am curious to see it."

A gondola, hooded with the felze, came swiftly up to the steps, and they entered together and were rapidly carried away from the *piazzetta* toward the public garden and the church of San Zaccaria. The gloom of the morning had passed by this time, and a warm sun shone down upon the lapping blue waters of the lagoon and the picturesque brown sails which dotted it.

Venice presented her most entrancing aspect, and as all things were new to Villetard, the silence of the city, the busy waterways, the rare music of voices and bells, and that indefinable sensation of interest and exhilaration which such a scene can awaken, he was too content for a little while to lie back upon the cushions of the gondola and to enjoy the present without any reference to the future. All Europe surely could show him nothing like this—those ramparts of marble and glittering domes and great lateen sails, and the black gondolas darting hither, thither, like small fry pursued by some drowning fish. And then the azure blue of the unclouded sky, and the life-giving breeze blowing in so freshly from Lido, and the warm sunshine upon that which should have been a winter's day.

Venice, he said, justified her reputation, and he remembered in the same breath that the hour of her glory was passed and that the iron hand of his master, Buonaparte, was already closing about her expiring energies.

They turned off from the open lagoon by the Riva degli Schiavoni, and so to the beautiful church of San Zaccaria, upon which the eloquent Dalmatian had begun to be reminiscent when Villetard interrupted him a little brutally by asking:

"Whose gondola is that at the steps of the house, Zannuchio?"

The old man craned his neck that he might answer the question truly, but before he could speak his patron anticipated him and saved him the trouble of replying.

"Surely it is the woman herself, and that is her house, old man?"

Zannuchio nodded his head as who should say: "This is my business, please leave it to me;" but he admitted at length that Villetard was correct.

"As you say, excellency; that is the gondola of the Lady Beatrice, and yonder is the Casa degli Spiriti, where you may wish to remark the exceedingly handsome pergola in the Gothic style."

"I wish to remark nothing of the kind, ancient. If you would do me a service draw in that ugly head of yours lest my lady take alarm. Let me see—the second house from the second bridge and a double door of bronze."

"Which Sansovino cast, your excellency——"

"And a double door of bronze. Thank you—that is quite sufficient. Now show me Venice—you understand—show me the city, fellow, and the best place for a good dinner. Is that to your liking?"

The old man uttered a loud cry of gratified license, and turned the gondola instantly toward Rialto and the palaces.

Henceforth he talked like a book, but Joseph Villetard did not hear a word of it. In plain truth, the emissary saw little either upon land or water, for he was telling himself all the time that he must remember a house with a double door of bronze and an exceedingly pretty woman, its mistress.

When, toward two o'clock of the day, he returned to the White Lion, his first question was for Gaston, his friend; but they told him that the hussar was not yet returned to the inn, and the same reply was made upon his repeating the inquiry at a later hour. So the day passed in some curiosity, and when the night fell and Gaston was still absent, Villetard became really anxious.

"There certainly is a woman," he said; and added, as the poorest possible consolation, "a woman who nails the throats of my countrymen to the doors of the Frari."

CHAPTER IV.

AT THE CASA DEGLI SPIRITI.

Now that which had befallen Gaston, Count of Joyeuse, was this—that he had spent the morning in such work for his fellow countrymen as Buonaparte had sent him to Venice to do; and thereafter, having breakfasted at Florian's, he was about to return to his gondola and his inn, when a young girl, dressed like any other girl of St. Mark's (of whom there were scores about the café), brushed lightly by his table, and shooting a meaning glance from mischievous eyes, she permitted a single white rose to drop upon his plate and then ran on, laughing loudly at her own cleverness.

Gaston, who had now been three months in Venice, was too well schooled in the common code of armors to mistake either the meaning of the glance or the act which accompanied it, and feigning an indifference he was far from feeling, he covered the rose with his napkin and so conveyed it stealthily to the shelter of his cape. Having paid his bill, he now sauntered off as though for a ramble through the Merceria; but turning abruptly into a narrow lane by the Palace of the Patriarchs, he first made sure that he was neither watched nor followed, and then drew the flower from his breast and examined it more carefully.

That some letter or message was concealed amid its leaves he did not doubt; and when he had torn the petals from the stalks, a tiny roll of white paper rewarded him, and he read these words:

"To-night at six o'clock upon the Riva degli Schiavoni a friend would speak with you."

Gaston tore the scrap of paper into the smallest of pieces, and then sauntered on again, but so deep in thought that those he elbowed cursed him for a clumsy Frenchman, and even the girls at the doors of the shops found their eloquence and their flattery quite vain.

Knowing what he did of the precarious favor in which the French were then held by the Venetians, and of the dangers which compassed them about in the streets and upon the waters of the city, this message appealed first to his instinct of prudence, and he determined to be trapped by no such transparent artifice—but this reflection was a mere tribute to his own sagacity, and it gave place speedily to a train of reasoning more in accord with his own desires.

And this was the argument:

"I am a soldier, and I have known many women. This message undoubtedly comes from the marquise, for the white rose is her emblem. I would trust my own life to her with the surest conviction of her fidelity. One has only to look into her eyes to read her character and disposition. She must know that I should have made it my business to be presented to her upon the first opportunity—therefore, she has some good reason to anticipate our meeting. I can imagine none sufficient unless it be something which concerns me very closely—my fortune, perhaps my life. It is true that she is said to be no lover of the French, but that which is said in Venice is so often untrue that I shall believe it when I know it. After all, the marquise is greatly in the confidence of certain men who might be useful to us—that old rogue Lorenzo for one of

them. She may think it more prudent that we should remain strangers here; and if she has anything to tell me which will be useful to the general, it is plainly my duty to go."

He added nothing of his own inclinations. When a man very much wishes to meet a woman and is quite aware that such a rendezvous is imprudent, he rarely suggests that inclination is the spur and desire the argument. So it was with friend Gaston—and from the moment he surrendered his volition and determined to go to the Riva degli Schiavoni, he abandoned himself wholly to the plea of benefit, while in his heart he knew that Venice could reward him with no hour more ecstatic than that which would bring him face to face with Beatrice, Marquise de St. Remy, in her own house by the church of San Zaccaria.

It was wholly a pleasant argument, and Gaston whiled away the long day chiefly in the contrivance of an excuse which should satisfy the curiosity of the prying Villetard. Determined that his purpose should not be thwarted, he was careful to avoid the White Lion Inn for the rest of the afternoon, and, having breakfasted at an obscure coffee house and visited certain friends who had the latest news of the French colony and its welfare, he embarked in his gondola at a quarter to six, and was upon the Riva degli Schiavoni precisely five minutes later.

Night had come down by this time, and lights were shining out upon the broad waters of the lagoon. An unclouded sky gave promise of a clear moon later on, and so big and bright were the stars in the heavens that some of them appeared to hang like lamps of the purest gold above the domes of the churches, there to keep watch upon the sacred mysteries. Gaston loved Venice, and every stone in that city of the treasures had become dear to him; but this bewitching hour of soft, gray lights and hazy shadows and fantastic buildings shaped so oddly against the radiant zenith cast upon him a spell of enchantment which he never could resist.

Above all else was Venice a haven of mysteries, he said; and every cloaked figure that passed by, the music of a voice upon the waters, the lingering harmonies floating away on the lapping tide could retell some story of her romance, perchance of her tragedies. But for himself they should tell a story of my Lady Beatrice, whose voice he would hear for the first time to-night, and whose hand he would touch.

Gaston's heart beat quickly when he repeated this. Yes, whatever befell afterwards he would see my lady to-night.

There were many citizens upon the busy Riva degli Schiavoni: lumbering porters worked by torchlight and dragged bales from the crowded ships; sailors of many nationalities loitered in noisy argument or quarreled in drunken good-humor; hussies from the coffee shops coquetted at the verandas, or kept a court upon the steps of bridges—but not among these did Gaston find his messenger.

A quarter of an hour passed, and he began to wonder if it were but a hoax, after all—or might it be something of greater moment than the jest, the first fruit of that folly which had brought him to the quay on an errand so quixotical. Here was a suggestion to send him with wary steps and with a hand upon his sword. He was a man of iron courage, but the lurking danger of the shadows affrighted him because he knew that courage would serve him not at all against it.

So many of his friends had set out upon such an errand as this, and the dawn had found their bodies floating on the tide of death or nailed by the throat to the doors of those houses whereto dark eyes had beckoned them. And what right had he to believe in the good faith of any woman? Absolutely none, he said, and, saying it, he looked up and perceived the messenger.

A gondola had come up to the steps of the *riva* while he walked, and a torch being held aloft for an instant and then as quickly extinguished, Gaston beheld the laughing face of the flower girl who had cast a rose upon his breakfast table at noon that day. He was astonished to discover how all his fine figures of

fear and argument vanished before this dainty vignette which the flare permitted to him, and he had no hesitation whatever in going down to the water's edge and entering the gondola.

The girl herself was still laughing when she made a place for him beside her, and he could see her black eyes shining and feel the touch of her soft flesh even in the darkness of the felze. So without a word changed between them they put out into the lagoon, and there making a wide detour almost as though their destination were the island of the Giudecca, the boatman cried *preme* anon, and with a dexterous sweep of his oar he brought the gondola and set her prow for the bridge of the church of San Zaccaria. Then, for the first time, Gaston addressed his merry companion.

"Signorina," he said, "your jest goes in a circle, then."

"To its profit, signore, since there shall be no end to it."

"But at least I must hear the message——"

"Oh, signore, the white rose is the message."

"In a language unfamiliar to me, signorina. Admit, however, that I accept the emblem, since I am here at your disposition. If we are to begin and end with a torn petal, yonder *riva* is as good a hunting ground as any other. You will not forget that you carry a hungry man."

"Men never permit us to forget that, signore."

"One, nevertheless, who has great faith in the virtues of your hospitality."

"I am sure of it, or I would not say to him, 'There is the house where the roses grow, signore.'"

Her laugh was a little triumphant, and yet struck a note which Gaston did not find it altogether pleasant to hear—for there was an after echo as of half-uttered words which applauded her own victory. He did not heed her, however, for he had already determined to carry the adventure to its end; and, besides, the gondola had already touched the steps of a house, and, when he looked up, the hussar perceived double doors of bronze, and beyond them, for they stood half open, a well-lighted marble hall, and a crimson carpet upon a marble staircase. To say that he was in any doubt as to the name of this house or its mistress would have been to charge him with an ignorance of Venice which would have been childish.

This was the Casa degli Spiriti, he said, and yonder, in one of the rooms above that great staircase, its mistress, Beatrice, Marquise de St. Remy, awaited him. Gaston would have been less than human if his heart had not been stirred by the favor of one who was then accounted the most beautiful and the most influential woman in the city. In truth, he was scarcely master of himself when he stepped from the gondola, and he had no words for the lackey who received him and closed the bronze doors behind him.

That it should end in this—that merry flirtation, those idle hours when the eyes spoke, but the lips were silent. He would not ask whither such a road was leading him—he believed that he had won a woman's love, and he knew that he would shield her honor with his life.

Now, there were two lackeys in the hall to receive him, and a third upon the staircase to usher him into my lady's *salon*. Gaston had imagined that he would be received in the great apartment upon the first floor as is the common custom in Venice; but herein he was mistaken, for the servant turned to the left at the stairhead (an unlucky omen), and going some way down an empty corridor, he opened a heavy door at the end of it, and beyond that, the second door of an antechamber, leading to one of the brightest and most perfect little nests the hussar had ever seen.

Everything was French here except the exquisite chandeliers of many-colored glass and the goblets upon the buffet, which were the work of Beroviero, and many of them priceless. Gaston might almost have believed himself in one of the smaller rooms at Versailles or Fontainebleau, so closely was the French fashion followed, while the perfect art of every detail, the rich frescoes of the ceiling and the delicate

silken panels upon the walls spoke eloquently of a discreet taste and ample means to gratify it.

Here, as in the hall below, a multitude of pure wax candles cast a mellow light upon the treasures of the house, and so thick was the carpet, so heavy the curtains, that no footfall was to be heard, and scarce a sound from the city without. Gaston said that so far he would have been hard to please if his reception had disappointed him; and then he looked at the dainty white cloth upon the table, and he remarked a strange thing. But one place was laid there; no provision at all had been made for guests; and, not a little astonished, he turned to the servant, and asked him a question.

"Your mistress expects me?" he said.

The young man who answered him had a striking face, gentle and not a little attractive; and his dress and manner were not those of a common lackey, nor was his tone subservient when he replied:

"Your excellency is expected. Do you wish me to serve supper?"

"My good fellow, I did not come here to sup, as you may imagine. Please to tell madam le marquise that I am here, obedient to her order and awaiting her pleasure."

The young man crossed the room and drew the curtain a little closer, when he answered:

"I will tell her excellency. Nevertheless, supper is prepared, and if you—but your excellency will be pleased to ring."

The accompanying gesture indicated a silken bell pull upon the right-hand side of the chimneypiece, and having done as much and set a chair straight, and snuffed a candle, the youth went to the door of the room, then repeated:

"Your excellency will consider yourself master here?"

"With the greatest possible good will——"

"And command us according to your pleasures?"

"I have already done so. Let your mistress know that I am come."

The young man bowed and left the room; and Gaston, excited not a little by the manner of his reception, but convinced, nevertheless, that he was about to meet my Lady Beatrice face to face, fell to pacing the little room with uneasy step—which diversion he varied upon occasion by a critical inspection of himself in one of the many mirrors which the apartment displayed.

Such a concession to his vanity by no means displeased him, for he beheld a face there which many a girl of Venice remembered and many a woman had studied closely—though rarely to the satisfaction either of girl or woman, since Gaston's devotion to his duty and passionate belief in his master, the Gen. Buonaparte, were far too real to admit of such rivalry. Then in his thirty-first year, the long oval face was still very youthful, while the silky hair (for the army had abandoned the tie wig since the revolution), with the black ribbon as a relic of a former habit, had something of the Northman's auburn abundance, and was not a little becoming to such a face.

The eyes, however, were almost black, so matching my lady's—and here was no uncommon thing that some in the city had remarked the resemblance these twain bore the one to the other and maintained that they would pass for brother or sister should the occasion arise. Certainly an air of intellectual refinement was common to both, and if Gaston's mouth and lips seemed to contradict the promise of the open forehead and the clear-cut features and to speak of a latent sensuality, the whole cast of his countenance was distinctly pleasing and inviting to confidence.

His dress, too, (for he invariably wore the uniform of his regiment of hussars), matched his fair skin excellently well, and the short cloak added to the breadth of an unusually fine pair of shoulders and showed his sturdy limbs which the hard school of campaigns had robbed of every ounce of superfluous flesh.

In short, he was a man to win remark in any company; and being neither more nor less vain than other men, he was pleased with that which the glass showed him, and he turned away with some sat-

isfaction to pace the room again and wonder what kept my lady. In this pursuit of an idea the half of an hour passed; and it becoming plain to him at last that an assignation for one was an exceedingly poor amusement, he rang the bell, and it was answered instantly by the civil young man.

"Well," said Gaston, a little impatiently, "did you inform your mistress?"

"Excellency, it was impossible—my mistress is at the Palazzo Burano with the Lord Lorenzo."

Gaston stood like one petrified—but his astonishment was not unmingled with amusement.

"Your mistress is at the Burano Palace—then what in Heaven's name do you ask me to wait here for?"

The young man cast down his eyes demurely, and following a pattern of the crimson carpet with his foot, he said:

"My mistress will return, excellency."

"A fine story. Has she been delayed there?"

"Undoubtedly—my lord has much to speak of."

"And little to do, eh? Is that all you are commanded to tell me? Come, you are keeping something back."

The young man advanced a step farther into the room, and looking Gaston full in the face, he continued: "Madame la marquise desires you to make this house your home, excellency; at least, until other arrangements can be made."

Gaston laughed outright now. If the young man had said: "Please carry away the Casa degli Spiriti, and keep it in remembrance of us," it would not have astonished him more. To take up his residence under an Italian roof, he, Gaston, a Frenchman, detested by every good patriot, the *attaché* of Gen. Buonaparte—was ever so preposterous a suggestion made? Nevertheless, he would not argue with a valet, so he merely said:

"Convey my compliments to madame, and my regret that I cannot avail myself of her kindness. It would have been better had she been frank with me at the beginning. And be good enough to summon my gondola."

He snatched up his cloak and his sword while he spoke, and was about to leave the house, when the young man again interposed in a voice as gentle as before:

"Then your excellency has not read the letter——"

Gaston paused, cloak upon his arm and sword belt still unbuckled, while he asked:

"Letter—what letter do you mean?"

"The letter from madame—there, upon the table, excellency."

He had not seen it, though it had been there all the time, white upon the white cloth, a perfume-scented note with my lady's golden chalice for its crest, and the motto of the house, *"Foy en tout,"* upon its fantastic scroll. Be sure that Gaston tore apart the seals with trembling fingers, and smoothing out the paper, he read these words:

"There is no excuse but one, my Lord Count, for the pretext upon which you are brought to my house and the manner in which you will be received there. It is that of your own personal safety and of the honor of the city of my birth and of all my hopes. Since the hour for plain speaking has come, and nothing but plain speaking will save the lives of those who have trusted in the sacred promises of this Republic, I say to you that in no harborage which Venice can offer you to-day, in no alley, however remote, neither upon the land nor upon the water, save in this house alone, are you safe from the vengeance of those who pursue and presently will destroy you. Rest here, I beg of you, my lord, until this danger be passed by and a sure means be found to avert it in the future. And if your friends must know, trust in my servants as in your own, and let the message be sent to such as deserve it—remembering this, that the many invite a curiosity which few may brave with little risk either to themselves or to others. I pray you, monsieur, destroy this letter when you shall have read it, and assuring you that the need of writing shall presently be no hazard to us, I crave permission to offer the assurance of my cordial esteem,

"BEATRICE, MARQUISE DE ST. REMY."

Gaston's first action, when he had read this letter, was to fold it carefully and there and then thrust it into the flame of one of the candles upon the table. When it was quite consumed, and he had cast the ashes into the open grate, he remembered that he was not alone, and, looking up, he perceived the

young man's eyes fixed upon him, but with such an air of gentle approval and abashed solicitude that his acquaintance with the contents of the letter was self-evident, and Gaston questioned him immediately.

"What is your name, young man?"

"I am known as Galla, your excellency; Giovanni Galla."

"You have been long the servant of madame la marquise?"

"Since her childhood, monsieur. I was with her in France."

"A trusted servant, I am sure!"

"Excellency, I seek to merit trust."

"And find it. I see that you are pleased with me, friend Giovanni. Is not that so?"

"It is not for me to be pleased, monsieur. But, if you will forgive me for saying so, your excellency is very wise."

"You mean in that I have burned your mistress' letter?"

"Yes, excellency. There are few letters so precious that their loss may not be our gain."

"A diplomatist, truly. I will ask you another question. If you were in my place, what would you do, Giovanni?"

"Excellency, I should command supper."

"Most excellently said. Let it be served at once. Your supper, Giovanni —and then my gondola. Is that your wisdom?"

"No, excellency; I would sup and leave the rest. We can only do one thing well at a time."

Gaston liked his humor, and dismissing him upon it, he sat at the table, and was instantly served with a supper worthy of the Casa degli Spiriti and its reputation in the city. An excellent vegetable soup preceded a dish of red mullet, and after that came lampreys from Binasco, then wild fowl from the Dogado, the renowned veal of Chioggia, poultry from the Polesine of Rovigo, quails from Lombardy, and the famous cheese of Piaceriza. The wine was both red and white, the former of Capri and the latter from the Hungarian vintages then so popular in Venice.

The season of the year being unfavorable for fruit, a pretty basket of grapes, all molded in sugar, with an epergne, similarly contrived, to carry oranges, were offered for dessert, and accompanied by a flask of Maraschino from Zara, and that which Gaston had seen once or twice in Venice already—little rolls of tobacco covered over with paper and brought from the East as curiosities.

Both these and the sweets, however, he dismissed abruptly; and rosewater having been served in a great silver dish, he addressed one of the lackeys and commanded his gondola—upon which the two men left the room noiselessly and closed the door after them.

It must be said here that Gaston had not the remotest intention of remaining at the Casa degli Spiriti. So far as it would have brought about acquaintance with the mistress of the house, and perpetuated that flirtation begun happily in the cathedral, he liked it well enough; but he was too sure a servant of his duty to be turned from it for a moment either by the marquise's fears or her stratagem.

Her warning was a friendly act for which he would thank her when he had the opportunity; none of the dangers of the waters of Venice were unknown to him—so many of his friends had been the dead witnesses of the truth; but for such dangers he personally cared little; if, indeed, he did not feel a certain satisfaction in confronting them. More than all those was the conviction that he must carry news of this night's work to Villetard and other Frenchmen in the city.

His position as *attaché* to Buonaparte and immediate guardian of the safety of his countrymen demanded that much, and when the quarter of an hour had passed and the lackeys did not return to speak of his gondola, he rang the bell impatiently, not a little angered at the delay.

But this time no one answered him. Not a sound was to be heard in the house. Gaston hastily donned his sword and cloak, and determined to end the matter for himself. He went to the door of his room and opened it. The antechamber beyond it was in darkness.

He returned for a candle, and finding the second door, a heavy door of mahogany, he turned the handle vainly.

The door was locked. He was the prisoner of the house.

He returned to the *salon,* and set the candle in the stick again. To a friend he would have confessed that his heart beat a little wildly; but his hand was steady and his head cool. That he was in a trap, a trap prepared by a woman, who he had begun to believe would awaken the knowledge of womanhood within him, even his admiration for and faith in Beatrice de St. Remy could not deny. And was this faith misplaced? Was he but a child in folly paying to the uttermost farthing for his credulity? He was almost compelled to believe it.

Premonition said that he might lose his life in the house—as others of his countrymen had lost theirs in the dark places of Venice. He knew that the work he had done in saving many of his countrymen from the hand of the assassin and the cloaked vengeance of the Savi had earned for him the hostility and the unavowed dislike of the Senate and even of the people. Was the mistress of this house the agent of these? Gaston was not very willing to think so; but the idea forced itself upon him and compelled him to take it into account.

He set the candle down, we say, and listened intently for any sound. The *salon* itself interested him anew, and he remarked a door at its farther end which he had, indeed, already observed, but with no particular curiosity. Now, however, he tried the handle of it, and, finding it unlocked, he passed through and entered a second apartment, lighted as the first by many wax candles and furnished also in the French fashion.

Here was a bed with a stately canopy and a Buhl writing table with a clock in the panel—books also in multi-colored bindings gave a bright air to the heavy furniture, while many of the appointments were of silver. These evidences of wealth interested Gaston less, however, than the more personal preparations for his comfort. All that a young man of fashion might need for his toilet was set out upon the table near the window; a flagon of wine stood upon a buffet—and more significant still, a complete suit in silk and velvet, such a suit as any Venetian of position might wear, lay spread, garment by garment, upon his bed.

"She would make a Venetian of me," Gaston said; but the circumstances reassured him, nevertheless, for no woman, he argued, would wish to dress a man up in fine clothes that her servants might throw him from her windows. Very far from it, for his shrewd judgment told him that my lady had some purpose in offering him this disguise, and it could not be any other than the security he might find therein.

Greatly relieved, he examined the room more at his leisure, and trying one of the two large windows by which it was lighted, he discovered that it opened readily and showed him the black shape of a tree, and beneath that, when he shaded a candle from the wind, an old fountain with a broken faun and an empty marble basin. He remembered the Casa degli Spiriti for one of the few houses in Venice which possess a garden, such as it was, and saw that the presbytery of the church of San Zaccaria lay beyond the high wall. Let a man pass safely across the rusted *chevaux de frise,* and he would find himself in that narrow canal by which he might regain the Riva degli Schiavoni.

This idea thrust itself upon Gaston while he stood at the window; and then, more to his liking even than the idea, was the sound of a man singing—in a gondola, no doubt—such a wild, jarring note, so strange from an Italian throat, that he laughed at its very discord.

"By all that's wonderful—it is Joseph Villetard," he said.

And this surprised him more than anything he had heard in the house.

CHAPTER V.

THE FRIEND OF THE FRIEND.

At five o'clock upon the afternoon following Gaston's adventure at the Casa degli Spiriti, a servant entered the

library of the Palazzo Burano to inform my Lord of Brescia that the Chevalier Joseph Villetard desired to see him upon an affair of urgency. Very much surprised at this, and but little prepared for that imposing display he was careful to make before strangers, my lord would have excused himself but for the presence of madame la marquise, who had hardly heard the name of the visitor when she ordered him to be admitted. When the servant withdrew, a momentary difference of opinion prevented the astonished Lorenzo even from arranging his purple cloak upon a chair—and this fact he regretted for some days afterwards.

"I positively cannot see the man, marquise; you know that I do not receive to-day."

"But, my lord, this man does not present himself at any house twice."

"If you think, Beatrice, that it would be wiser——"

"He is coming up the stairs, my lord. Yes, that will do—but I would rest the chin upon the hand; it becomes you better so. The *affaire* Joyeuse brings him here, no doubt. You will be firm, Lorenzo? We know nothing of this—we have everything to hear."

"A great deal more than will be pleasant, no doubt. Well, if you wish it, madame la marquise." A courtly emphasis rounded off the sentence for the emissary's benefit, and Joseph Villetard, coming into the room with catlike tread, discovered my lord wearing an air of paternal benevolence, while Beatrice, seated upon the ivory couch near the window, might have been the cherished daughter listening dutifully to her father's goodly admonition. Villetard, however, was the last man in Venice to be deceived by such an artifice. Although he had been but twenty-four hours in the city he was perfectly well aware both of my lady's influence and of Lorenzo's reputation for sagacity and other statesman-like qualities; and he understood that these two had been preparing themselves to answer him since they heard his name.

"Madame," he said, bowing low to Beatrice, "I am fortunate in this encounter. And you, my lord, I regret that these letters should reach you from such a reluctant messenger. My grief, however, needs no apology, since it is for one I mourn as my own brother."

"It is, indeed, deplorable," interposed my lord, with the readiness of a genius in the *maladroit,* and while Beatrice opened her eyes very widely and stared both at him and at Villetard, he would have recovered himself with a *riposte* which was little less than fatuous.

"You speak of Gen. Buonaparte's departure from Gratz, chevalier. Of course, we must regard that from different points of view. I, for instance, as a stanch servant of this republic, can, I trust, still find sympathy for those of the general's friends who regret that the enterprise is abandoned and the alliance between Venice and your master confirmed beyond any cavil. At the same time, as an Italian, I rejoice—frankly, I rejoice, chevalier, and am honest enough to confess the same even to you."

The speech pleased Lorenzo very much, and he leaned back in his chair as though to measure upon Villetard's countenance the full worth of it. But Villetard's face wore the oddest of expressions, and fleshy rivulets of contempt and amusement had formed upon either side of his ill-shaped mouth. He was looking at Beatrice when he answered Lorenzo.

"Honesty is a great virtue in these days, my lord. I thank you for your confidence. If my master, Gen. Buonaparte, has left Gratz and moved his army upon Verona——"

"You don't say so," gasped Lorenzo. "But that would be a crime against us, chevalier."

"A question for the diplomatists, my lord. Crime is a word we leave behind us with the women at such times as these. You will excuse me the argument—and yet I came to speak of crime to those who must lend a readier ear than Gen. Buonaparte is likely to be troubled with. Let me name it without delay; you are acquainted with the Comte de Joyeuse, my lord!"

Lorenzo glanced at Beatrice, whose deep breathing had not escaped the em-

issary's vigilant eye; but feigning a very negligent interest he rejoined, idly:

"The young Frenchman who has taken upon himself the quite unnecessary office of *agent provocateur* in the city—do you speak of him, chevalier?"

The chevalier continued, in his mildest voice:

"Of no other, Gen. Buonaparte's aide-de-camp, sent to Venice when your police were no longer able to protect either the lives or the property of my countrymen. My lord, the count is dead—he was assassinated near the church of San Zaccaria last night. My servants were the witnesses of that atrocious crime, for which your city must pay a heavy penalty later on. If I come to you to speak first of it, set it down to your known influence and your acknowledged wisdom. I loved the count as my own brother, and I am determined that I will not rest until he is avenged. My lord, this I came to tell you. I doubt not that you will find me an unwelcome messenger."

Now, the emissary had really come to the Palazzo Burano to learn how much my Lady Beatrice knew of his friend's disappearance, and although he affected to address Lorenzo, his half-shut eyes were fixed upon the marquise, and he could have recounted afterwards every shadow of emotion which crossed her handsome face. And first he read great surprise there, and then fear; and, upon fear, he could detect the quick working of a subtle mind which was weighing the circumstance for and against, until finally a certain content gave a new and happier expression to her countenance, and she leaned back upon the sofa and became again the mistress of her self-possession.

"Chevalier," she said, "if your servants witnessed the death of Monsieur de Joyeuse, why did they not arrest the assassins, that the police may punish them?"

Lorenzo applauded this. He tried to think that it was just what he would have said himself.

"Of course, of course—it is incredible," he exclaimed, "no one would believe such a story. Your friend left Venice for his own reasons, and will return. I am not his guardian, chevalier—I know nothing either of his going or coming. If the count has disappeared, well, young men have their reasons. You and I have been young ourselves. I trust that our temporary absence from the house of our fathers has never laid so grave an accusation against a people. You will see, chevalier, that you find us incredulous."

My Lord of Brescia could wear the air of amused paternity as well as any man in Venice; and for his reputation's sake be it said that it became him as well as any other. For himself he had not the smallest doubt that the Count of Joyeuse had reaped at last the fruit of his own misplaced zeal, and been struck down in some secret place of the city. But the man was no friend of his, he said—he would not have known him had he met him face to face; and if some bravo had ridden the Senate of the sharpest thorn in its flesh, who was he, Lorenzo, to complain? Joseph Villetard, however, cared nothing for the man or the argument. His eyes were fixed upon my lady's scarlet cheek, when he said:

"Incredulity is not always wisdom, my lord. I appeal to madame la marquise. She will defend the count, I am sure. Is it not so, madam? You differ from my lord? I can see that you do; and this permits me to say that if my witnesses are mistaken, then I am sorry that Venice should be compelled to answer so grave a charge upon such a sorry pretext. I do not believe that it is so, however, and when I write to my master to-night——"

He dwelt a little upon the words, waiting for Beatrice to look up; and in this he was not disappointed, for she turned immediately, and her eyes meeting his, he said: "My friend is safe, he is in her house."

"Do you speak of Gen. Buonaparte as your master, chevalier?" she asked him.

"Since I have no other—yes, madame, I speak of the greatest soldier that lives among us to-day, who will one day judge you and your people. He must know first that this crime has been committed—and, believe me, madame, I am

glad that a letter stands between me and his anger. To you, my lord, I would say—what influence you have with the inquisitors, let it be turned to your defense without delay. The assassins must be found, madame; justice must be done. I will rest neither night nor day until my poor friend is avenged. That is the oath, my lord, of a man not given to oaths. I beg you remember it."

He rose to take his leave, but not before Lorenzo, aware suddenly of what this might mean and the consequences that must ensue, had implored both delay and consideration.

"I cannot believe it—I refuse to," he reiterated again and again. "At least defer your letter to Gen. Buonaparte until some inquiries be made. Such a crime would be detested by every honest man in Venice, chevalier. I repudiate it in the name of the citizens."

"Repudiation, my lord, is a very negative virtue. Your republic, it appears, has done little but repudiate for many weeks past. When Gen. Buonaparte is here, I trust that repudiation will save you, but I cannot forbear the advice that a little zeal in the protection of my countrymen, and some measure of justice upon their murderers, would be more acceptable to my master. Please think of that. And to madame, a wise word—the friend of the friend is dangerous. I leave her with that."

He bowed with curt grace, and Lorenzo following him to the great staircase, he changed his tone suddenly to advise my lord that the friendship of Gen. Buonaparte might yet be the most precious possession of which Venice could boast; and from that passed to speak of the commonest affairs—of my lord's pictures and the beauties of the house, and other trivial subjects, to Lorenzo's great perplexity.

But his last word was both peremptory and even threatening, for he demanded again the names of the assassins and immediate judgment upon them, and added: "The Senate must make an example, my lord; and from all I hear, it will concern you little whether the innocent or the guilty be judged. See to it that it is done without delay;" and with that he quitted the house, and was rowed away in his gondola.

Lorenzo, however, did not immediately return to his apartment; but catching the ear of Noelo, his valet, he said: "There goes a man we could very well do without;" and Noelo, being a faithful servant, went down to the *bravis'* kitchen, and looking through the barred windows, he repeated the words, "There goes a man we could very well do without," which vague remark waked Zucca, the bravo, from his sleep and sent others to the window to stare after the gondola. My lord in the meantime returned to Beatrice, and asked her what might be the meaning of Villetard's wise word that the friend of the friend is dangerous.

"Do you know the man, then? Were you acquainted with him in Paris? I remarked the attention with which he favored you. The friend of the friend—surely he does not mean to say that you are known to the Count of Joyeuse?"

Beatrice, who had spoken but twice while Villetard was in the room, and had been thinking deeply since he left it, suddenly turned to Lorenzo, and addressed him with great animation.

"I do not profess to read oracles, my lord; and there is no need of your Delphic wisdom, believe me. You ask me if I know Joseph Villetard—I say 'Yes.' I knew him in Paris five years ago for the shrewdest lawyer the convention could employ. If you value your interest with Napoleon, conciliate him. The friend of the friend is sometimes less useful than the friend of the enemy. Conciliate Joseph Villetard and you are doing more for Venice than the signori have done for many a long day. That is a woman's wisdom—she gives it you for what it is worth."

Lorenzo plucked at his long beard a little thoughtfully—it was evident that he had some compassion for her sex and pitied her fatuous longing for a French alliance.

"If I were to preach that from the people's tribune, they would hang me between the columns of the *piazzetta*.

No, my child, resolution is our watchword, glove for glove and threat for threat. If the Comte de Joyeuse be dead—well, what then, are we to become policemen because the French descend upon us like locusts? I say, let the Senate repudiate the deed and regret it. We can do that with light hearts, since the dead do not return."

"And yet, Lorenzo, before many weeks are passed you may be ready to give half your fortune to restore this man to life—you and the wise men who work with you. Do you think that Villetard's master will be content with your repudiations—now when he is knocking at your gate, and you have not a thousand honest men to shut it in his face. No, indeed. You may live to pray for the miracle; and these, my dear lord, as your master, Voltaire, has taught you, are not the days of miracles. Let that go into your oration. It will be the kindest deed you have done for many a long day."

My lord shook his fine head a little sadly.

"You are a woman, and you do not always understand," he said; "moreover, Villetard may never speak. I count the chances and take them. This man's silence may be one of them."

"My lord, you have always loved high stakes—at least I admire your courage. If this man's silence be your high card, well, I don't envy you when you play it."

"You do not understand," my lord repeated; and he was thinking of the words he had spoken to Noelo, the valet.

It would be a strange thing, my lord said, if he could not find a short way with such a man as Joseph Villetard; and this idea pleasing him greatly, he presently took pen and paper, and began to prepare such a defense as might serve the city when the charge was made. Herein he relied greatly upon my lady's eloquence; and she falling in with the humor of it, helped him to dictate a screed which denounced the late Gaston, Comte de Joyeuse, as a traitor to his own country, and a spy within the city of Venice.

But if my lord had observed her closely, Lorenzo would have remarked an abstraction of manner entirely foreign to her—for in plain truth, Beatrice, Marquise de St. Remy, told herself as she wrote, that her prisoner in the Casa degli Spiriti might yet save the city from Buonaparte's anger.

. . . . . .

Joseph Villetard quitted the Palazzo Burano in a very easy frame of mind, for he had satisfied himself entirely as to the whereabouts of his friend, the Comte de Joyeuse.

"Gaston is at the Casa degli Spiriti," he argued. "Excellent quarters; I would willingly change my own for them. Madame, too, is divine—a head that Velasquez should have painted and Paris loved. Yes, Gaston has done very well for himself, and those who say that she nails throats to the Church of the Frari are most obliging liars. Madame la marquise pleases me. A head of her own; eyes to see with, black and violet and reading deep. I wonder what she thinks of me. Not very much, Master Joseph—you did not please her at all. She said, as plainly as she could say it, 'This man may be dangerous, I will conciliate him.' Gaston goes to her house to be saved from the old man's assassins. A monstrous paternal rogue that—self, self, self from the sole of his foot to the top of his crown. Not a scruple in him. He was talking to his valet as I came out. I shouldn't wonder if the fellow were following me now."

His gondola had set him down upon the *piazzetta*, upon his way to Florian's for supper, and, being quite alone, he began to look about him with some vague uneasiness, for it was quite dark and he could make nothing of the figures which moved swiftly in the shadows. If he regretted that he had left the ancient Zannuchio at his hotel, it was not lack of courage, but a concession to prudence, which said, they will value your body at twenty ducats—so much and no more. And a man lives but once, and is a fool to die be-

cause a bravo has been hired and the lamps are few, and a cry in the night is heeded no more than a woman's laugh.

Villetard admitted that he had been foolish, but he pushed on beneath the colonnade, choosing the middle path and using his ears as one trained to pursuit and its perils. Most of the shops were shut by this time, and of those who moved abroad, some were merrymakers who would sup at the casinos of the islands, while others were upon their way to the opera or the theater of San Luca.

Many a dainty glimpse did the emissary catch of stockinged ankle and laughing eyes plainly to be seen in the aureole of torch or flambeau; and he reflected, with some irony of the remembrance, that even the name of Buonaparte could not keep the Venetians from their pleasures.

Here they were, marrying and giving in marriage, loving and shameless in love, crowding the theaters, gaming at the casinos, flaunting their vices in every stranger's face, an idle, dissolute race that must presently submit to the iron hand of conquest; and not one of them had the leisure to ask what the morrow might bring, or how the Corsican's victory would affect him or her. Even at this eleventh hour, the raucous voice of carnival was as loud, the antics of old Tamburino as childish, the waterside pantomime as puerile and as popular as any the great Gozzi had defended. Venice laughed and ogled upon her moribund way. She would have the energy even to regret that which she could not defend, Villetard said—and with one scornful reiteration of contempt, he took up the thread of the argument again, and went back to Gaston.

"My friend is quite safe at the Casa degli Spiriti," he argued, "and it has happened very well. I shall write to the general to-night, to say that we fear the worst, and things will then go a bit faster. Buonaparte will certainly be moved by such a story as this, and these poltroons will pay the price for their homage to 'Monsieur,' and their love of Master Facing-both-ways. Yes, it is very fortunate, since at one stroke I silenced madame la marquise, and settle old scores with——"

A shadow upon the pavement which the light of a stray oil lamp in a doorway lengthened and made intensely black, interrupted these pleasant reflections, and caused the emissary to remember his own warning, and the prudent counsels he had recently bestowed upon himself. An adept in all that concerned the shadowing of men, he knew now that his surmise had been correct, and that some one followed him from the Palazzo Burano.

Instantly, the blackest tales which Venice had been able to tell him flashed through his mind, and he recalled his interview with Gaston yesterday, and the story of Chateaudun nailed by the throat to the door of the Frari, and Rampeau, and Sevennes, and the many others who, perchance, had died on such a night as this; and his hand closed upon the hilt of his sword, and he quickened his steps, and wondered that he should be so much afraid.

"Certainly, I should have brought Zannuchio," was his reflection, as he began, like one who plays a game of hide and seek, to number his chances and to pick the best of them. A younger man, perchance, would have been all for the open—the great square itself upon which he was about to debouch and the clear heaven above him, and, it might be, the young voice raised in youth's appeal; but Joseph Villetard knew something of the Italian and his disposition toward the French, and he said, wisely: "Though a hundred men were supping in yonder café, not one would lift a finger to save me." And this was as true as the irony of the scene and the hour—for there, across the dark piazza, were the lights of Florian's, and here from a house upon his right hand was a veiled woman going out upon a man's arm, and a torch to cast a golden patch upon the flags below and the roof of a colonnade above, and a servant to follow them for prudence sake. Villetard quickened his step, and walked a little way in the torch's light, until, indeed, the servant turned about, and, perceiving he was a

Frenchman, abruptly bade him begone. He thanked the fellow with a fine courtesy; but the delay cost him a precious moment, and he knew—for every right instinct told him—that the men who followed him were close upon his heels, hidden there in the black darkness of the colonnade. And the question in his mind now was this: Should he throw dignity to the winds, and take to his heels; or, playing a bolder part, seek fortune of the unforeseen, and win safety in attack. The latter idea was much to his taste.

He argued, rightly, that the same darkness which hid him from his enemies must conceal his movements from them; and putting the matter to the test, he stepped into a doorway, and there stood so close to the wall that a hand stretched out to touch his might well have missed its mark. Here he had rested but a moment, his sword unsheathed and his cloak flung aside, when a pattering of steps upon the flags and the whisper of a voice in the darkness told him that his unknown friends had come up to the place and were as yet in ignorance of the ruse he had played upon them—an ignorance which carried them thirty or forty yards up the colonnade, and would have taken them farther but for the presence of a watcher at the farther end, who whistled softly and was immediately answered.

Brave man as Villetard was, this witness to so close a plan could not but haunt him; and he began to believe himself compassed about by enemies on all sides, and so desperately beset that nothing but the darkness could save him.

He could hear the footsteps hither, thither, now heavy and distinct, now distant and faltering; and as they drew near or receded from him, so did hope befriend or fail him.

Once, indeed, he was upon the point of quitting his refuge and boldly running across the piazza, but before he had taken a single step, a whisper of voices almost in his ear warned him how ill he had placed his enemies; and he crouched back still farther into the doorway, and forced himself to admit that by his sword alone would the light be won.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

BY GRACE OF HIS MAJESTY

BY FRED M. WHITE

A question of sentiment that came to the ruler of Farsala and the manner in which he followed the dictates of his conscience.

I.

"YOUR majesty," said the chancellor, "is so pig-head—so headstrong!"

His majesty replied with some heat that the chancellor was perilously on the verge of becoming a dreary old—well, fossil. Then Rudolph remembered himself and apologized almost as humbly as he used to do when Count Ferrera was acting regent over the kingdom of Farsala.

"You are not a bit like your father, sire," Ferrera said, half regretfully.

For Rudolph I. had been a puppet in the hands of this terrible old man with the flashing eyes and white hair. The man of fire and marble had dragged his frightened master after him over the flaming bridge of the reeking, breathless years, to plant him, dazed and be-

wildered, upon one of the strongest thrones in Europe. Then Ferrera returned to his whist with a comfortable sense of accomplished destiny.

But fire and marble, blood and tears, like dragons' teeth, leave their crop behind them, and thenceforth the anarchists were a sore thorn in the side of the terrible old chancellor. He could hold them under, and he did. But this did not tend to save the life of poor Rudolph I., probably the kindest and most amiable monarch who ever sat uneasily on a throne. The story of that senseless, useless, sickening tragedy is still fresh in the mind of Europe.

And now Rudolph II. stood in the shoes of his murdered father. There was no frightening *him*. He had the strength of a Hercules and the heart of a lion. He was brave and quick and accomplished, and a rare handful for Ferrera, who was loath to relinquish his power. Rudolph was going to cut his name deep in the granite front of history, only Ferrera had no wish to see it done all at once.

"If your majesty were less wild and daring!" he murmured.

"Of course I am!" the king cried. "Did you ever know a promising young man who wasn't? Look at your own youth—twice in prison, once a narrow escape of being shot! There was Madame Le Genlis and the beautiful Bertha——"

Ferrera hastened to change the subject. If his majesty would only take proper precautions to guard his sacred person, the rest would not matter so much. In sooth, the grim old chancellor loved the boy as if he had been his own son, though he would have cut off his right hand rather than own it. His majesty ought to consider his people. Going out hunting alone was all very well, but ill would assuredly come of it. And did his majesty know that Carl Brema was known to have returned to Farsala again?"

"*The* anarchist!" the king cried. "The most picturesque outlaw in Europe. Egad, Ferrera! I'd give half of the coal dues to meet him."

"If your majesty pursues your present life," said Ferrera, dryly, "you are likely to meet him on far more economical terms."

In spite of all warnings, Rudolph went off with rod and fly-books, with nobody but a favorite groom for company. He had but recently purchased the "cottage" at Farma, some eighteen miles from the capital of Farsala, where the trout fishing was almost a proverb. And Nello, the groom, knew every inch of the water, for he had been bred and born at Farma, and many a day's poaching had he known on that famous chalk stream.

"Now we are going to enjoy ourselves," the king said, gayly. "The Stadt is up for a month, and there is nobody but Count Ferrera to worry me, unless Carl Brema turns up, which would be annoying. Did you ever hear of Brema, Nello?"

Nello flirted a shining cast of English-made flies out across the stream dexterously.

"I have seen him and spoken to him lots of times, sire," he said.

"And you never told me! Have you seen him here?"

"He lived here," Nello explained. "The great English artist, from whom your majesty purchased the cottage just as it stands, in turn bought it from the government. It belonged to Carl Brema's father, who also was a great artist in his day. The government forfeited the property on account of the treason of the elder Brema. Carl Brema's mother was turned out at death's door, and died in the garden where the fountain is. Those were bad days, when the sword ruled in Farsala. Carl Brema was a boy then."

His majesty remarked impatiently that it was a beastly shame—he had been two years at Eton, and hoped to marry an English princess; that, upon his honor, he should have turned socialist himself under the like conditions; and a great many other indiscreet remarks that fortunately could not reach the ears of his sage chancellor.

"Tell me some more about Carl Brema," he demanded.

But Nello had not much to say.

There was a deal of local tradition, for the neighborhood was proud, in a way, of its nihilist celebrity. But it was in Russia and Italy that Brema had made his great reputation. Like Stepniak, he had had many adventures. He was a widower, with one beautiful daughter, who was dying of consumption. And years ago, during one of the nihilist's secret visits to his old home, the girl had been born here.

All of which information his majesty kept discreetly from the chancellor what time he returned to dinner in high good humor and with a full creel of trout. He was delighted with his cottage, charmed with its unique old oak and pictures and china. He was going to take up painting again. It was a pity to have so handsome a studio, filled with lay figures and everything to woo the brush, and yet not use it. Ferrera said that was all very well, but he should like to see a few soldiers about the place.

"Not a scarlet coat nor a wisp of gold lace!" the king cried. "No menservants, no lackeys, nor anything besides Nello and the maids. This is freedom, Ferrera; and upon my word, I revel in it."

. . . . . .

His majesty was smoking cigarettes in the studio. He had dined, he was tired, and he was at peace with all the world. Ferrera had gone posthaste to the capital on business connected with some laggard diplomacy. He had departed much as an anxious peasant mother might have done who leaves the children alone with a box of matches. And to soothe him, his majesty had promised not to leave the house.

Presently there was somebody at the telephone. For once, royalty regretted the absence of retinue. Perforce he had to get up from his nest of Persian rugs and answer the call in person. It was Ferrera, calling aloud from the capital for a red dispatch box. Would the king allow Nello to ride as far as Cammes, where a mounted messenger from the capital would meet him?

"Consider it done," his majesty yawned. "Hi! Nello—the red dispatch box from the count's writing table; you are to ride with it as far as Cammes. Get me a fresh box of cigarettes and begone!"

Thus the king was alone in the house, and the women of the household had gone to bed. As a mere precaution, the ruler of Farsala strolled round the house and locked the doors. The blinds were down, save in the studio, where there were no blinds. Shaded lamps had been lighted everywhere. Verily, the cottage was a museum of rare and beautiful things. Rudolph could imagine anybody growing passionately fond of so refined and artistic a home. It seemed almost impossible to imagine this as the birthplace of a bloodthirsty anarchist. Carl Brema's father had got all this antique oak and china together. His nihilism had been of a type that even Russia tolerates to-day. It was hard lines, Rudolph thought.

He was thinking it all over as he stood musing in the studio by the dim light of a crescent moon. Carl Brema had seen his mother die outside yonder on the grass. That was the sort of thing that drives headstrong men to crime. The lay figure yonder might have been an anarchist ready to spring. A shadow crossed the bare window—perhaps that was another. But the shadow came again, all in white, and a pair of white hands beat passionately on the long windows opening to the lawn, and a piteous voice begged for admission. Without a minute's hesitation, Rudolph flung back the French sash and caught a faint, light, silked body in his arms. The girl hung there breathlessly for a moment.

"Get me to the light!" she gasped. "Your life depends upon it—quick!"

II.

Under the streaming lamplight, Rudolph saw a beautiful face like marble, save for the hectic flush on the cheeks; he saw a pair of liquid eyes filled with terror and a fearsome gladness. He poured out a glass of wine,

and coaxed a little of it past the girl's lips.

"Now tell me who you are, little one?" he asked, gently.

"Sire," the girl replied, "I am Enid Brema. Carl Brema is my father. He is close by, and there are two others. It was a mere trick, a tapping of the telephone wire, that deprived you of your servant's assistance. It was here that my father's mother died in his arms. Oh! your majesty understands?"

Rudolph nodded grimly. He perfectly understood the situation; his imagination grappled with the dramatic scheme of vengeance. Three of the most reckless and dangerous criminals in Europe were close by, and he was alone. The frank, boyish look had gone from his face. He had often pictured some such plight as this. And now the time had come to act.

"I owe you a debt I shall find it hard to repay," he said. "I see you have risked a deal to come and save me. Why?"

"Because I am dying," the girl said, simply. "If I had done nothing, I should have been a murderess. I *couldn't* die like that. And so I came. You look upon my father as a man without heart or feeling?"

"It is the accepted point of view," Rudolph said, guardedly.

"Then it is wrong!" Enid cried. "No nobler or kinder man breathes! And he has never soiled his hands in crime. And there are some men who are sane on all points but one. And then to find you here, of all places in the world! It seemed like a foul insult to my father's mother's memory."

"I did not know till yesterday," Rudolph murmured.

"I believe you. They say you are good and kind. I argued with my father, I fell on my knees before him, I asked him to see you, and he laughed me to scorn. And I am afraid, terribly afraid, for both of you if you meet. Listen!"

There came the sound of stealthy feet outside. Rudolph turned down the lamp.

"Which way are they coming?" he asked.

"By way of the studio. There is a patent catch on the window which anyone familar with can undo. One comes first to make sure of the ground, then the other to guard the exits, and, after him, my father. Let me go and draw them off. Let me go and make a diversion while you escape——"

Rudolph shook his head grimly.

"I am not going to escape," he said. "I have a plan. Do you creep upstairs and into the first room you come to. Even if you hear the sounds of firearms or strife, be silent. And if I am successful, there is a reward waiting for you far beyond your wildest dreams. Now go."

The girl obeyed silently. She was tired and weary and worn out. Rudolph heard her laggard steps impatiently, he heard the door close, and then he hastened to the studio. His own coat and smoking cap were whipped off and hastily huddled on to the lay figure lounging on the sofa. A briar pipe was thrust into the mouth—a pipe filled with damp tobacco, into which a hot *fusée* was rammed. Swiftly, and yet without hurry, Rudolph looked around him. His eyes fell upon a score or more of fishing reels holding hundreds of yards of strong salmon lines. Then he crouched behind a suit of armor close to the couch and waited. There was no fear in his heart, nothing but a deep lust in the joy of the coming strife.

His patience was not unduly tried. Presently there came a crunching footstep on the gravel, a dark shadow fell athwart the floor, a hand was laid upon the catch of the window. After a little time, there came a cold gust of air, that caused the pipe in the lay figure's mouth to glow. The studio was filled with a pungent smell of fresh tobacco.

In the dim moonlight the shadow was coming nearer. Rudolph could hear heavy breathing and a subdued chuckle. Then the intruder became aware of the lay figure and paused. Here was the object of the raid, utterly unconscious of danger, ready for the

knife. The anarchist slipped towards the victim; Rudolph crept out and stood on tiptoe behind him.

The king calculated his distance to a nicety. He jumped forward, and passing his hand over the intruder's shoulder, gripped him by the throat. Once the feeling of utter surprise was past, the anarchist struggled violently. He might as well have tried to free himself from the grasp of some powerful machinery. And the hold on his throat was bringing the red stars before his eyes.

"If you utter one word," said the king, "you are a dead man!"

But the other had abandoned the useless struggle. He suffered himself to be bent backwards and a handkerchief stuffed into his mouth. His hands and legs were bound in yards upon yards of the fishing line, until he was trussed up like a silkworm in its slimy net. As if he had been a child, Rudolph picked him up and carried him to the dining room. The lay figure, with the still glowing pipe in its mouth, seemed to look on with grotesque approval. Rudolph dumped his burden down and rolled him under the table. A long tapestry cover hid that evil fruit of the night from view. With a deeper, fiercer joy in the combat, the king returned to the studio.

So far fortune had favored him. With strength and prudence on his side, he felt confident of the issue. It would be assumed by those outside that their colleague was guarding one of the exits. It was just as well that the anarchists were so prudent. And here was another of them coming. The draught came in strongly, there was a deep glow in the dummy's pipe.

The second man displayed a little more caution than the first. There was something more creepy and murderous in his step. Once in the studio, he stopped. Obviously he was scared by the appearance of that still, brooding figure with the pipe in its mouth. The first marauder could never have passed that. But then it was just possible that the other man had skulked into the cottage, and that the king had just come here. The newcomer stepped back, hesitated, and stood still for a moment.

If he took real alarm now, Rudolph felt that he had had all his pains for nothing. It would never do to let this fellow escape. The next few moments were anxious ones. What would the intruder do?

Apparently he decided to go on. Probably he reflected that Brema's watchful eyes were near, and that he would see that the victim made no escape. He crept within a few inches of Rudolph, and the next instant half the life was being crushed out of him by a pair of strong arms. The attack was so sudden, so fierce, that the victim could do no more than gasp. In the moonlight the king could see a pallid, shifty, mean face, and he laughed silently. This was not the kind of thing that anarchists were made of. This fellow had come for nothing more than loot.

"Don't speak," Rudolph said, grimly. "If you do, I shall break your neck. What is the signal? Whisper it."

"The big Venetian clock in the hall," the white-faced man gasped. "Calo was to have moved the hands on to midnight, and make it strike before its time. Brema can hear the signal outside."

"Um. That is very clever, and not in the least likely to excite suspicion. Come this way. And if you make the faintest sound, you will cease to be interested in things mundane any more. Give me your handkerchief."

The trembling man obeyed. Rudolph gagged him as he had done the other. Then his palsied limbs were trussed up like a partridge ready for the spit, and he also was dragged into the dining room.

"There!" Rudolph exclaimed, in high good-humor. "You will find yourself in excellent company, although you will not be bored with too much conversation. Now, I am going to make the family party complete by the addition of the most distinguished Carl Brema!"

He passed into the hall, where the great Venetian clock stood. It still wanted some five and twenty minutes to

the hour. Rudolph opened the face and put the hands on till it pointed close to midnight. In the studio the dummy still sat smoking. The king threw a cloak over it; his decoy was no longer needed. He stood back in the shadow of the window and waited. Something gleamed fitfully in his hand. There was a buzz of wheels, and the silver bells of the great clock chimed twelve.

III.

The vibrating echo of the chimes died away. From a distant somewhere a lamb was bleating. Beyond the village a dog whined. The sounds only served to mark the intense silence. Rudolph was unpleasantly conscious of the beating of his own heart. Brave as he was, he knew the enormity of the task before him. Brema's scouts he had tricked with contempt. Brema himself was a different matter.

He was coming. The king's strained ears told him that. A shadow of a long head and a close-fitting hat crossed the moonlight. Like a shadow himself, Brema crept into the room. Almost instantly the cool rim of a revolver pressed upon his temple.

"Put up your hands, Brema," the king said, quietly.

With a gentle sigh, Brema complied. He expressed no emotion; he did not seem in the least surprised or disappointed.

"That was neatly done," he said, coolly. "Your majesty should be one of us. And you are all alone, too!"

"I am all alone, as you say. And your friends are being carefully looked after. Precede me to the dining room; you know the way."

Brema's teeth clicked together. He caught his breath with something like a sob. He knew the way only too well.

"I am not likely to forget it," he said, slowly. "By all rights, divine and human, this place belongs to me. The sight, the scent, the smell turns my heart to water. And then the knowledge of my wrongs——"

His voice was quiet, low, almost caressing. In the hall, Rudolph looked at his victim. He was slight and spare, with a white, gentle face and deep, melancholy eyes. His thick hair was prematurely gray. It seemed almost impossible to believe that here was one of the most dangerous revolutionaries in Europe. And yet it was so.

He stepped back involuntarily half a pace as if to admire a picture. In some magical way his heels crooked in between the king's legs, and they came to the ground in a heap together. Rudolph's revolver was jerked from his hand and kicked to a safe distance. Then followed a struggle, short but severe. Brema seemed to fight with the strength of a dozen men. He was elusive and slippery as an eel. They fought along the floor and into the dining room, until by mutual consent they parted breathlessly, sobbing and gasping for air. Swiftly Brema locked the door and dropped into a chair.

"Now we are man to man," he gasped; "we will parley. On the whole, I have rather the advantage of you."

Thinking of the helpless figures so close at hand, the king was discreetly silent. Brema was gazing round the room avidly. Though his eyes were shining with the lust of battle, his lips quivered. He took a little Mazarin-blue spill-cup from a bracket behind him.

"Your majesty's predecessor showed rare good taste in leaving everything here severely alone," he said. "The pictures and cabinets and china are as they were when I was a boy, with dreams of being a great artist. This cup is the one strange item, and I fear it is a forgery."

He held it at arm's length critically.

"I believe you are right," the king said. "It is out of place here. Therefore, we will dispose of it—thus."

There was a muffled report, a puff of smoke apparently exuding from his majesty's person, and the spill-cup splintered into a score of pieces. The king lounged smilingly in his armchair, his hands deep in the pockets of the shooting jacket he had donned after dinner. Brema was shaken out of his equanimity now. He regarded the fragments at his

feet with an astonishment absolute and complete.

"Your majesty is not alone, after all!" he stammered.

"Indeed I am," Rudolph smiled. "You thought you had the advantage of me, but you are mistaken. You are covered with my spare revolver at the present moment. It is in my jacket pocket. I learned that trick of shooting through the pocket in America. I practiced it with a perseverance that has been rewarded, as you see. I have only to crook my forefinger slightly, and you are as useless as that bit of Mazarin-blue. If I did so——"

"Your majesty would have the applause of the civilized world."

"I know it. And you came here to murder me?"

"I came here with an open mind. Also there were men with me ready to do my bidding. It was I who tapped the telephone wire and imitated Count Ferrera's voice. I had planned this thing out carefully. It seemed like the irony of fate to come and kill you here whence your minions expelled the best of mothers, the woman who died close by of a broken heart. My father was a loyal citizen, sire."

"I am prepared to admit it, Brema. I have been making a careful investigation of your case. Your father's sentiments to-day would be held to be no more than radical views. But at that date, in the then perilous condition of Farsala, we could not afford too much liberty. Still, Ferrera's servants were wrong. The expulsion of your mother was an act of barbarity—one of many, I fear, in those troubled times. You loved this place?"

A queer spasm of emotion trembled on Brema's lips.

"With my whole heart and soul," he said. "I loved all the treasures here—every inch of the orchards, and cornlands, and vineyards was familar to me. And it was my dream to be a great artist like my father. And he was a true patriot, sire, as sure as I am a wandering outcast whose life you hold in your hand. I have been driven to this. When I shut my eyes, I can see my mother lying yonder on the grass, with the soldiers thrusting her on with their rifles. She said she was dying, and they laughed. And she died there and then. When I think of that, the red light comes into my eyes and I am mad. Not that I hold with the slaying of rulers—save one."

"Meaning myself, of course?"

"Yes, your majesty. As your father died before you. But I had no hand in that—violence is no part of my policy. I would have asked pardon ten years ago; I came back to serve my country, but the police ignored my suggestions. It was a bitter pill, but not for myself."

"You are alluding to your daughter now?"

"Yes, sire. A girl as sweet and tender as she is beautiful. And she is dying—dying under my eyes, of consumption. God help me when she is gone! Men call me a wild beast now—what shall I be like then? And the cruel irony of it all is that the doctors say she might recover if she came back to her native air. I—I thought if I could make you my prisoner to-night, if I could stand over you with a revolver to your breast, I might, I might—but that is all a dream now."

Brema's words trailed off to a broken whisper, his head fell upon his breast. The king watched him in a dreamy kind of way. It seemed almost impossible to believe that this slight, white man, mourning upon a half-made grave, could be one whom half Europe held in terror.

"Why?" he asked. "Why should it be a dream? Kings, like nihilist leaders, are only human, after all. You have been badly treated, Brema—your father was badly treated; and when I think of your mother, I am filled with shame. There!"

From his shooting jacket he produced his revolver, and tossed it on the table. It was magnificent, but it was not war. It touched Brema, it brought the tears into his eyes. Here was a monarch whom he had heard well spoken of. The splendid audacity of it touched the anarchist to the soul.

"My daughter told me you were a good man," he said. "She warned me for the best. Ah! if you knew, your majesty; if you could only see her! If you could only give me an amnesty for a day, till I could bring her to your feet."

"Nonsense!" Rudolph cried. "I would kiss her hand. She has done me a service to-night that I can never forget. And as to seeing your daughter, I have had speech with her already."

"Your majesty is pleased to jest!" Brema gasped.

"On the contrary, I was never more in earnest in my life. As a matter of fact, your daughter is under my roof—*this* roof—at this very moment."

IV.

It was some little time before Brema spoke. When at length he looked up, there was a curious smile on his face.

"My daughter came to warn your majesty of your danger?" he asked.

"And at the same time to betray you into my hands. You can imagine the agony and distress of mind of the poor girl. She looks upon you as the best and noblest of mankind. It is your boast that your hands are free from blood——"

"Pshaw!" Brema cried. "The brute beast methods are none of mine."

"Yet, my good Brema, you cannot touch pitch without being defiled. Depend upon it, your daughter thought the whole matter out carefully. She would come to me and save my life, and plead for you afterwards. Under the circumstances, she argued—quite logically—that I must be merciful. So she came. I laid a little trap for your confederates, and they fell into it. I set the clock for your benefit also. Your accomplices are under the table. Bring them out."

Brema complied. The king took a knife from his pocket and contemptuously indicated that their bands should be cut.

"Wait!" Brema cried, hoarsely. "When I came here to-night, I meant to kill your majesty! When I crept into the house and saw all the old, familiar objects about me, a madness filled my brain. I should have struck you down without mercy. And now you have me—have all of us in your power. For Heaven's sake, don't be rash!—don't place such a hideous temptation in my way!"

He spoke as if pleading for some boon. Great drops stood on his forehead.

"Release them!" Rudolph commanded. "I am not afraid of them, seeing that I am not even afraid of *you!* You will never cut deep with two such poor, pitiful fools as these. Set them free!"

He stood up—big, strong, powerful, with the light of resolution shining in his eyes. Brema slashed the clinging cords away; he pulled the gag from the mouths of his discomfited allies. They looked small and mean enough now, but they would have done murder at the instigation of their chief. And the king of Farsala stood alone in their midst. All the hot anger died out of the anarchist's heart.

"Bid them go!" Rudolph cried. "Dismiss them!"

They needed no second bidding. They passed like bats into the night. The king's manner changed, a ripple of laughter came from his lips. "Confess it!" he cried; "you are not sorry now that your daughter came here."

"From the bottom of my heart I am glad," Brema cried. "Your majesty has beaten and humiliated me in every way. Never will I raise a hand against you again. Now call my child, and let us go, before——"

The anarchist hesitated; he moistened his dry lips. There was a curious gentleness on his face, yet his eyes were troubled as he looked about him.

"The madness will not return," Rudolph said, quietly. "Sit down and talk, Brema. I have need of men like you, Brema. Farsala wants you. And they tell me your child may recover in her native air."

"If I could only leave her here!" Brema murmured. "If your majesty would permit——"

"And why not? The girl saved my life. Incidentally, she has probably saved you from the gallows. She shall stay here; and if you like to take the oath of allegiance, there is a commission in the army ready for you. And if I come here occasionally——"

"Your majesty!" Brema said, falteringly. "What do you mean?"

"That the place is yours. It was forfeited to the crown quite unjustly. And I am going to restore it to you just as it stands. Ferrera will laugh at me—oh! he will laugh at me most confoundedly! Brema, shall we show him that the laugh is on our side?"

Brema sat there speechless. There were tears in his eyes. Some mumbling words escaped him. He turned to Rudolph. The latter was sniffing like a hound in the air.

"Don't you smell something burning?" he exclaimed. "Egad! it would be a pity to lose the place just as you came into it again, Brema. I know! When I threw that cloth over the lay model, I forgot the lighted pipe——"

There was a little cry outside and the patter of light feet. Without ceremony, Enid Brema dashed into the room.

"Your majesty!" she gasped, "I dared not stay any longer. A fire has broken out in the house—in the studio. Father!"

"I am here in the service of my king!" Brema cried. "No more wanderings, my child. You have saved my soul to-night, and I have found the one man I can call my master. Come along. Where shall we find water?"

In the studio the fire had gained a good grip. A heap of picture frames and easels were glowing and flickering, the lay model, the cause of all the mischief, one gleaming mass. The place was full of acrid smoke, beyond the veil a series of crocus blue and yellow eyes flared.

"Stand back, child!" Rudolph cried. "I am going into the little fernery to the right yonder. There is a hose and tap there. Brema, do you try and close the window, to keep the draught down."

Rudolph plunged into the smoke with the zest of a schoolboy. At some considerable risk, Brema contrived to close the window. Presently there was a roar of delight from the fernery, followed by a spurt of water and the hiss of steam. At the end of half an hour the flames were beaten flat and dead.

"I hope your majesty is not hurt," Enid said, timidly.

"My majesty is as jolly as a sandboy!" Rudolph cried. "I never remember enjoying myself more. A perfectly delightful evening of adventures. Farce to tragedy and tragedy to farce. And that is life!"

"Farce enough!" a deep voice growled. "What's the meaning of this? Still, I am only too thankful to find you alive, sire."

"Ferrera!" Rudolph cried. "Why back so soon?"

"Because I have been hoaxed!" Ferrera thundered. "And Nello here was dragged out on the same fool's errand. I came back expecting to find that some ghastly tragedy had been enacted. Brema is close by——"

"At your elbow," Rudolph said, coolly. "Brema, this is my devoted and dear old friend and tutor, Count Ferrera. Ferrera—Brema. The house was on fire, and Carl Brema took the risk of getting it under. He has been of the greatest service to me."

"It seems to me that I have arrived in time," Ferrera growled.

"Just in time, count. Brema has saved the house—he and his daughter between them. And Brema had come all this way to place his services at my disposal, and to—er—become a credit to Farsala. That being so, it is my good pleasure to restore his family property, and to ask permission of his daughter to stay here for the present. Ferrera, there is a lady present."

"Perhaps, on the whole, it is a good thing," Ferrera said, *sotto voce*.

There was something bitter in his politeness. Rudolph cast a warning glance at Brema, who understood that the early events of the evening were to remain a secret between his sovereign and himself. He took the king's hand and carried it silently to his lips.

BELOW THE DEAD LINE*

BY SCOTT CAMPBELL

[NOTE.—When Inspector Byrnes commanded the New York Police Force he found it necessary to issue an order calling for the instant arrest of every crook found day or night in that part of the metropolis lying south of Fulton Street. This stringent order quickly gained for the district the title "Below the Dead Line," at least in police circles. As the lower part of the city contains Wall and Broad Streets and Maiden Lane, where the great diamond houses are located, various efforts were made by the "under world" to evade the order. For several years a number of crooks headed by an unknown but extremely clever criminal succeeded in operating in the district despite the police, and it is to chronicle their doings and their ultimate capture that Mr. Scott Campbell has written this interesting series of stories. Each story will be complete in itself.—EDITOR.]

III.—THE CASE OF THE STOLEN CIPHER

I.

IN Wall Street, wealth and power stride hand in hand. Quite frequently the combination makes a man autocratic, arrogant and severe. Such a man was Mr. Jason Barlow, of Graves & Barlow, bankers, who entered the Pine Street office of Mr. Felix Boyd at half-past eight one breezy September morning.

Mr. Felix Boyd, that mysterious individual whose vocation below the "Dead Line" was a persistent thorn in the sides of the curious, was seated in his private make-up room, when his office boy entered, and quietly announced the visitor.

"Mr. Jason Barlow, sir."

"Of Graves & Barlow?"

"Yes, sir. He wants to see you at once, sir."

Boyd laid aside his pipe, drew from over his knee a blond wig he carefully was combing, and placed both wig and comb on the dresser. Pointing to a flashy plaid suit, which he had had occasion to wear professionally the previous night, he said, quietly:

"Stow those traps away, Terry, and close the door when you come out."

"Yes, sir. Trust me to close the door, sir."

Boyd knew Barlow well, and he had a way of handling such men with a sort of frigid blandness not easily overridden. He found him, a portly, forceful man of fifty, nervously pacing the floor.

"Good-morning, Mr. Barlow," said he, sedately. "You're downtown early."

"Yes, and I'm mighty glad to find you in," cried Barlow, bluntly.

"Why? Anything wrong?"

"Something very serious threatens us."

"Ah!" murmured Boyd, with a subtle gleam from his keen, gray eyes. "That is better than a blow already dealt. One that only threatens may possibly be warded."

"That's precisely what I want done, and why I am here so early."

Boyd complacently took the chair at his desk, and waved his visitor to one near by.

* This series of complete detective stories "Below the Dead Line," began in the February issue. The back numbers can be secured through any newsdealer or direct from the publishers for twenty cents.

"Sit down," said he. "You interest me. What's the trouble?"

"Are we alone here?" Barlow curtly demanded.

"Except my office boy," drawled Boyd, just as Terry Gowan emerged from the side room, snapping the catch lock after him. Boyd turned to him, and added: "You may hang about the corridor, Terry, until I call you."

"Yes, sir."

"Can that boy be trusted, Boyd, not to listen at the door?" asked Barlow, after the lad had left the room.

"Better even than that. He will insure us against other listeners. You may speak freely, Mr. Barlow."

"And confidentially!" was the sharp reply. "What I have to say to you, Felix Boyd, must never go further."

Boyd glanced indifferently at a red leather book on his desk.

"The house of Graves & Barlow is listed among those responsible for my very important duties and secret operations in this part of the city," he said, with rather dry significance. "You already should know, Mr. Barlow, that you may confide in me as freely as one trusts his attorney—or his confessor."

"Surely; surely!" muttered Barlow, a little perturbed by the quiet rebuke. "But this is a very serious business, Boyd. Very serious!"

"The more binding my obligations, then. Come to the point, Mr. Barlow."

The Wall Street magnate no longer demurred. He drew from his pocket a document envelope, yet before he opened it he jerked his chair nearer that of his companion, and said, forcibly:

"As you are well aware, Boyd, our firm operates very heavily in the stock market, and frequently engineers deals which involve many millions of dollars."

"Yes, I am well aware of it."

"Necessarily such tremendous operations are very secretly planned and conducted," Barlow went on, with an energy quite in contrast with Boyd's odd quietude. "If our designs and plans were prematurely published, or so much as suspected by rival operators and the great army of habitual speculators, market values might be affected in a way that would cost us millions—millions, Boyd! and perhaps hopelessly thwart our designs."

"It is not at all necessary to impress these facts upon me," said Boyd, dryly. "Does your business with me this morning relate to such tremendous operations?"

"Precisely; as I will show you," said Barlow, now instinctively lowering his voice. "After nearly four months of cautious work in several of the great markets, we have acquired control of most of the stock necessary to rushing through a deal that already has cost millions."

"Well?"

"Briefly put, it is to consist of a merger of two large midland railway systems into one of the most powerful Western roads. Confidentially, Boyd, in case we now are able to rush it through, this merger may meet with serious opposition from the attorney-general at Washington, and perhaps be turned down as illegal; but we are going to take chances against that, and fight to a finish any litigation that arises."

"I see," nodded Boyd, not just liking the project.

"Our firm," continued the financier; "has not been alone in this work. We have had the co-operation of some of the strongest banking houses both in Boston and Chicago. The work has been very gradually and cautiously done. From their very inception, Mr. Boyd, our designs have been concealed even from most of the employees of the several firms engaged in the work; while that done by us, who are solely directing the work, has been removed from our main office to temporary quarters in the same building, where we employ only a stenographer and one thoroughly trustworthy clerk."

"Continue."

"One of us, either Graves or myself, is constantly there during business hours, to guard against any miscarriage of our plans, for the successful execution of which we are directly responsible," Barlow continued. "We have deemed absolute secrecy to be so im-

perative, moreover, that we have not relied upon ordinary communication with our Boston and Chicago correspondents, lest a mislaid letter or a leak in a private wire should betray our designs."

"Then you have been using a code, I infer, or a secret cipher?"

"Yes and no," replied Barlow, now reverting to the envelope in his hand. "Can you make anything of this, Mr. Boyd?"

With the last he displayed a sheet of paper, foolscap size. It was thin and nearly transparent, yet was quite strong, and was irregularly perforated with rectangular holes of various sizes, each of which was carefully numbered with pen and ink. In appearance, though on a much smaller scale, it somewhat resembled the perforated music sheet recently invented for attachment to an organ or piano.

Felix Boyd merely glanced at it.

"I should have known," said he, "had your remarks given me no hint of it; it is a part of your secret cipher, or code. By properly placing that sheet upon some printed page, a duplicate of which is possessed by each correspondent, and reading in numerical order the words visible through the perforations, a communication easily and safely is imparted. That sheet alone conveys absolutely nothing. To use it at all, one must possess a printed page corresponding with that on which the sheet was laid when the perforations were made and numbered. That method of secret correspondence is not new or original, Mr. Barlow."

"True," admitted Barlow; "yet it is the one we adopted. We have not used a page from any book, however, very few of which would contain such a diversity of words as our business requires. Instead, we had a printed page expressly prepared, containing a vocabulary adequate to our needs, and a copy of which is possessed by each of our correspondents."

"Certainly."

"Now, Boyd, to state my business," said Barlow, bracing back in his chair. "I told you that we were very seriously threatened. In a nutshell, we suspect that a copy of the printed page from which our secret correspondence sheets are prepared is possessed by some outside party."

"Is that so?" rejoined Boyd, his brows knitting slightly. "Yet in that case, even, the printed page alone would convey nothing. For an outside party to read one of your secret letters, he must possess also the perforated sheet."

"We believe, also," cried Barlow, "that duplicates of several of these sheets have gone into outside hands, either from our own office or those of our correspondents of the cities mentioned."

Boyd leaned forward with increased interest.

"Why do you believe that, Mr. Barlow?" he demanded.

"It is indicated by recent heavy operations in the market, on the part of a house we have serious occasion to fear."

"Kennedy & Peck?"

"Precisely. Not only have they opposed us from the first, being interested in one of the roads of which we aim to get control, but lately they have gone very long of the stock. Every act on their part points to the fact that they suspect our designs. Furthermore, we have learned that they recently have employed a private detective, from some agency below here, in an effort to secretly ascertain what we are about. I am quite confident of this."

"Why so? From whom do you get your information?"

"Frankly, Boyd, we get it from Jimmie Coleman, of the central office, whom we secretly employed as a foil to the other."

"Coleman, eh? Why, then, have you called upon me?"

"You should know why," said Barlow, bluntly. "Because our operations in the market have reached a stage where the least slip may ruin all, and we require the services of a man of the greatest acumen and ability. Our affairs have taken an unexpected and serious turn within twenty-four hours."

"Ah, I begin to see."

"Upon receipt of advices expected

from Chicago, we must be prepared to go into the New York market at once, and strike a culminating blow. There can be no delay in this, no hesitation, owing to lack of funds, or because of failing courage. Our entire project is involved; and if, on receipt of such a letter from Chicago, its contents were to be disclosed to those opposed to our immediate operations in the market, the perversion of our entire scheme might result, and ruin come where we look for success. That is why I have come to you, Felix Boyd, and why I am here so early this morning. For all I know to the contrary," quickly added Barlow, "our morning mail may bring the Chicago letter."

"A perforated sheet?"

"Surely! surely!"

"Then you as surely can prevent its being removed from your office, or any duplicate of it treacherously sent out," said Boyd. "Although my contract with you insures you my best services, Mr. Barlow, I do not quite understand just what you require of me."

"I'll tell you what I require," declared Barlow, with an emphatic nod. "I want to learn whether or not Kennedy & Peck have any definite knowledge of our designs, and if so, how it was acquired. This cannot be done too quickly, either."

"Yet you give me but brief notice, sir, if this game that you are secretly playing has suddenly become so strenuous. Still, I will do my best for you, Mr. Barlow."

"No man could do more."

Boyd swung round to his desk, and prepared to take a few notes.

"Now, tell me," he cried. "Who printed the several pages from which your perforated sheets are prepared? I mean the pages sent to your several correspondents."

"The work was done in our own office. A typewritten page, having six columns of words covering our needs."

"Do you suspect any person in your own office of treachery?"

"Not one."

"What about the offices in Boston and Chicago?"

"I have assurances from both."

"That everything is all right?"

"Certainly."

"That brings the trouble very near home," said Boyd, bluntly. "Who is the clerk employed by you in this work?"

"A man named Gardner, who has been in our service for twenty years. I could not distrust him."

"You spoke of a stenographer, also."

"Yes. A Miss Dole, who——"

"Wait," interrupted Boyd, quickly. "Dole, did you say? Describe her."

"She is a tall, handsome girl, with reddish hair, and has been in our employ for nearly a year," replied Barlow. "She came to us with recommendations from——"

He again was interrupted, now by the sudden, sharp ringing of the telephone bell; and Felix Boyd, with eyes glittering in a way indicating his mental excitement, caught up the receiver from the stand on his desk.

"Hello! Yes—yes!" he at first cried; then hurriedly added, to his visitor: "It is Mr. Graves, your partner. Did he know you were coming here this morning?"

"I told him I should stop here on my way down," cried Barlow, hastening to take the instrument.

Boyd silently waited.

At first only the conventional calls passed between the two men using the wire. Then Barlow listened silently for several moments—and then Felix Boyd saw the color leave his face until his skin was as gray as ashes.

"My God—oh, my God!" he abruptly gasped, with eyes half starting from his head.

Then the instrument fell from his shaking hands, and the Wall Street operator sank back in his chair like a man suddenly stricken with overwhelming illness.

Boyd instantly caught up the telephone receiver, crying sharply:

"What's wrong, Mr. Barlow? What's wrong?"

"The worst—the very worst!" groaned Barlow, staring with ghastly despair at Boyd's forceful face. "The Chicago

cipher sheet came in our morning mail. Graves had it—had it——"

"Had it!" shouted Boyd, when Barlow choked and faltered as if bereft of speech. "Hasn't he still got it? You don't mean that he has lost it?"

"Yes—yes! It is missing from our office, and——"

"Silence! Wait!"

Boyd spoke with a half-smothered growl of excitement, then caught up the telephone, and quickly commanded Graves to do absolutely nothing about the matter until he and Barlow arrived. Next, with countenance grown dark and threatening, he seized a revolver from his desk drawer and thrust it into his hip pocket.

"Pull yourself together, Mr. Barlow," he cried, hurriedly rising. "This is no time for going lame. Do you know that the stolen cipher requires your move in the market this very day?"

"There can be no doubt of it—no doubt of it!"

"Look lively, then! It is just nine o'clock! In one hour the market will open!" Boyd rapidly cried, with a glance at his watch. "Within an hour, Mr. Barlow, that missing sheet must be recovered! To your office without delay!"

Boyd's influence over others at such crises was irresistible. The invincible spirit of the man imparted new strength to his hearer, and Barlow already was upon his feet. Together the two men rushed from Boyd's office, and down the stairway leading to Pine Street.

II.

Since this narrative relates chiefly to the remarkable detective work of Mr. Felix Boyd, there is no occasion for details of the extraordinary game then being played in the stock market, the magnitude of which already has been suggested. Men of the street will promptly recall the bitter strife of that brief but strenuous period, and will at once recognize the extreme gravity of the situation threatening the house of Graves & Barlow that morning.

It is needless, too, to point out at this time the causes for Felix Boyd's suddenly increased interest in the case. This will become apparent as the story progresses.

As the two men emerged to the sidewalk, Boyd collided heavily with a third, just about entering.

"Beg your—ah, Jimmie, is it you? How lucky!"

This third man proved to be Boyd's most intimate and confidential associate —Detective Jimmie Coleman, of the central office.

"What's up, Felix?" he cried, before he fairly had caught his balance. "Are you going for a doctor?"

Boyd did not answer him. He had hailed a passing cab.

"Tumble in, Jimmie! I want you with me!" he commanded, in a way precluding any delay for discussions. "You'll have to walk, Mr. Barlow."

"But," protested Barlow, "I wish to reach my office as quickly as——"

"There are no buts about it," Boyd decisively interrupted, as he followed Coleman into the cab. "If I'm to do you any good, I must do it in my own peculiar way. To the office of Graves & Barlow, cabbie, and don't spare that horse. A dollar a minute is yours if we bag our game. Away with you!"

They were away before the promise was fairly uttered, leaving Barlow resentful and frowning on the curb, while Boyd settled himself on the seat beside the central office man.

"What's the meaning of all this, Felix?" demanded Coleman, as the vehicle swung quickly into Nassau Street and headed for Broad.

In a very few words Boyd outlined the situation, adding, in a way that left no room for doubts:

"Every instant is now of value, Jimmie. We've got to recover that perforated sheet before its message can be learned, or Graves & Barlow are dead dogs. And we have mighty few minutes in which to turn the trick."

"You're off on some clew," cried Coleman, quickly.

"One as fine as a spider's thread, but I've an idea 'twill hold."

"State it."

"They have a stenographer named Dole, tall and red-headed—you remember her," Boyd rapidly cried. "That girl employed by Curry, Gale & Fiske, at the time we nailed that bond robbery in the Howard Building, when you sent Mason Gorman over the Styx."

"Surely!"

"If this girl is the same, Jimmie, we certainly have our game uncovered, and it remains only to drop 'em. If I am right about this girl, I am convinced of another fact."

"Namely?"

"That we again are up against that obscure and crafty gang in which that fellow Wykoff figures, as a subordinate to some head infinitely superior to his own. 'Twas Wykoff, you know, whom we suspected in that bond case, also in that affair which cost Dickson, the diamond dealer, his life; but the crafty scamp was so shrewdly directed, and both knaveries so craftily planned and executed, that we could get no hold on him. Jupiter Ammon! I'll not sleep nights until I get some traceable clew to the master back of these subordinates."

Felix Boyd never rattled on in this fashion except when he was deeply stirred and bitterly determined; and his glowing eyes, his unusual paleness, his drawn lips and fixed jaws, all indicated that he was launched into this affair for Barlow in a way quite irregardless of himself.

Coleman read these signs aright, and hastened to rejoin:

"You'd better have a care, Felix. This girl may recognize you as the man who queered the game against Curry, Gale & Fiske."

"Not likely," Boyd quickly answered. "I guarded against her seeing me when at their office."

"Bear in mind that you wish to remain in the background, Felix, until some clew to the chief of this gang can be obtained."

"I have all in mind, Jimmie," cried Boyd, impatiently. "Even if this girl should recognize me, she can report no more of me than already is suspected. At any cost, Jimmie, I must recover that cipher sheet in time to save these men by whom I am secretly employed. We have not an instant to spare—ah, here we are! Do you know where their temporary offices are located?"

"Top of the building," tersely cried Coleman, as both sprang from the cab. "I'll nail the elevator."

"Wait here, cabbie!" commanded Boyd, pausing for an instant on the curb. "Not a move, if you value your license. I may want you again in three minutes."

"And it's here you'll find me," shouted the cabman, as Boyd dashed up the steps of the skyscraper before which the vehicle had halted, and vanished into the corridor.

Coleman luckily had discovered the elevator just about starting up, and in precisely six minutes after telephoning to Graves from his quarters in Pine Street, Boyd led the way into the banker's office.

It consisted of two rear rooms, with a door between them, located on the top floor of one of New York's loftiest buildings. That into which Boyd entered opened upon the corridor, and had only a single side window looking down upon the street. It was conventionally furnished after the fashion of a broker's office, and Boyd found Graves and his clerk, Gardner, anxiously waiting his arrival. There was no sign or sound of the stenographer, and the door between the two rooms was closed.

Graves quickly sprang up when Boyd entered, and was about to speak, but the latter cut him off with a gesture, crying sharply:

"Not a word! Not a word, Graves, except in answer to my questions. I know just what you wish to tell me, but every second is of value, and I'll not hear a needless word. Just answer my questions, sir, and as briefly as possible."

There was no dodging such a beginning as this, say nothing of the look on Felix Boyd's white face, and for an instant Banker Graves was fairly nonplused. Before he could open his mouth, however, Boyd had sprung his

first question, with a voice that had the ringing snap of a steel trap.

"Just when did your Chicago letter arrive?"

Graves caught his breath and steadied himself to answer.

"At quarter-past eight this morning."

"Were you then here?"

"Yes."

"Did it come direct to you?"

"It was sent up from our lower office."

"Was it opened down there?"

"No. All secret letters bearing on this business are marked personal, and sent directly up here."

"Did you open it personally?"

"Yes."

"Have you transcribed its contents?"

"Yes."

"Where was that done?"

"On yonder desk."

"By whom?"

"Gardner and myself."

"Where was your stenographer then?"

"In the next room."

"Has Gardner been out of this office since you missed the cipher sheet?"

"No, sir; not out of this room."

"How long since you missed it?"

"I at once telephoned to your office. You can estimate the time as well as I."

Boyd snatched out his watch from his pocket. It was precisely ten minutes after nine.

"Eleven to twelve minutes," he muttered. "Now answer! When did you last see the missing sheet?"

"I took it into the next room to dictate a letter to my stenographer," replied Graves, now talking as rapidly as possible, and wondering in a vague way what sort of a brain this man Boyd could have, to determine with such celerity the significance of each and every atom of evidence which his avalanche of questions might suggest.

"Go on! Go on, sir!" cried Boyd, impatiently stamping his foot. "You must see the need of haste. Go on, I say!"

Again the banker steadied his shaking nerves.

"While dictating the letter to Miss Dole," he hurriedly continued, "I laid the cipher sheet on a table near by. When done, I returned to this room to plan my morning work in the market. I was thus engaged for about twenty minutes. Then I wanted the cipher sheet again, and I sent Gardner into the other room to get it. It was not there. Miss Dole at once informed me that I had brought it out here, which I absolutely know to be wrong. We at once began a vain search for it——"

"Stop!" cried Boyd, sharply. "You now have told me all you really know about it?"

"Everything. We cannot find it, or——"

"That's enough!" snapped Boyd, with indescribable asperity. "If you value my efforts, don't get in the way of any move that I now may make."

Few men, in fact, would have cared to oppose one so intensely exercised as Boyd appeared to be. Yet his every word was uttered, and his every move made, with such amazing celerity and decision that one could not doubt that he was working along a clearly perceived and very definite line.

With an ugly look in his eyes, with his forceful white features severely drawn, Boyd now threw open the closed door and strode into the adjoining room, where a single glance at the banker's stenographer revealed her to be the girl he suspected, the same one he had seen in the office of Curry, Gale & Fiske at the time of the famous bond robbery.

Halting abruptly, Boyd pointed his finger straight at the breast of the startled girl, and cried, with terrible sternness:

"Tell me, girl! Tell me at once! What do you know about this missing sheet?"

Miss Dole instantly sprang up from her chair at the typewriter, and turned to face him. She was trembling violently, and was as white as the lace at her pulsing throat; yet her flashing eyes, her frowning brow, her attitude of mingled resentment and defiance, all indicated not only that she was a girl of superior nerve and daring, but also that she was

fully prepared for just such a scene as this.

"I know nothing about it!" she cried, indignantly. "I've not seen it since Mr. Graves took it into the other room."

"You are sure of that?" thundered Boyd. "He says he left it here, and——"

"I don't care what he says!" Miss Dole passionately cried. "I have eyes, sir! I have eyes, and saw him take it from this room! If he charges me with——"

"He makes no charges against you," Boyd sternly interrupted, at once perceiving that the girl felt sure of herself and of the attitude she had assumed.

To search the girl, or the room, he now was convinced would prove vain.

With one swift glance he took in the pertinent features of the room. It had no exit except into the room adjoining. To have reached the corridor of the building, or to have communicated with any person there, Miss Dole must have passed through the office occupied by the two men.

"Has this girl left this room since entering it this morning?" cried Boyd, swinging sharply around and addressing Graves, then at the open door.

"No, she has not," cried the banker.

"You are sure of that?"

"Absolutely. I can swear to it."

Boyd instantly turned to the two broad windows, the only avenue by which, under the conditions stated, the missing sheet could have been conveyed to any outside party. With a bound he reached one of the windows, and threw it open to look out.

At a glance he took in the meager possibilities presented. The two windows were in the rear elevation of the building, and near one corner of it, that in the next room being in the side elevation and above the adjoining street. Far below him, so far that they appeared dwarfed, was a maze of smaller buildings, the numerous roofs of which appeared in uneven and disorderly confusion from the altitude at which he gazed. To have dropped the missing sheet with any accuracy to a person on one of the roofs below would have been next to impossible; and Boyd saw at once that so hazardous an attempt to dispose of so valuable a paper would not have been made.

"Who occupies the room under this?" he hurriedly demanded, glancing back at Graves.

"Cavendish & Page, publishers," cried the banker.

"Do they employ many hands in the room just below?"

"Yes. A dozen or more."

Boyd instantly dropped the theory which had impelled these hurried questions; a theory that the sheet might have been tied to a string and lowered to some person at the window below.

"Not feasible!" he muttered, under his breath. "Too many observers down there! This affair precludes many confederates! Yet that missing sheet, to have been made available this very morning, which Barlow assures me would be imperative, must have in some way been conveyed to an outsider."

While thus measuring the situation, Boyd drew back into the room, then paused to gaze at the flat roof of a much lower building about a hundred yards distant. Of this building only two of the upper windows commanded a view of that in which he stood, the view from the others being obstructed by the irregular roofs of the intervening buildings.

Suddenly Boyd wet the palm of his hand with his tongue, then thrust his hand far out of the window to learn the precise direction of the wind—a method common enough among sailors. Then, moving like a flash, he sprang back into the room.

"Graves, don't let that girl go until I return," he cried, vehemently. "Keep her here until——"

"I will go if I wish——"

"If she attempts to leave this room, call an officer and place her under arrest!" thundered Boyd. "This way, Jimmie! Come with me at once! This way—this way!"

And Felix Boyd, with Coleman close upon his heels, tore out of the banker's office, and headed for the stairway making to the street.

Just a minute later Mr. Jason Barlow rushed into the office.

"Isn't Boyd here?" he demanded. "Hasn't Boyd arrived?"

"Arrived—yes! And gone!" replied Graves.

"Gone!"

"Yes. He asked several questions, and then left in a hurry. He has some plan. I do not know what it is, but if he doesn't find that cipher——"

"We will go under as sure as fate," finished Barlow, despairingly.

III.

Felix Boyd did not wait for the elevator. People who observed them stared dumfounded at the two men, one close after the other, descending at breakneck speed the successive flights of stairs, with never a word one to the other, and never a stop for breath until they reached the busy street and the waiting cab.

In a few hurried words Boyd gave the driver his directions, adding, breathlessly:

"Don't lose a moment, cabbie! Make your own price for the service, but don't lose an instant! Millions depend upon you!"

Like all who had encountered Boyd during the past ten minutes, the cabman was a little rattled. Boyd's potent influence over others at such times constrained prompt obedience, however, and well within three minutes the cabman drew up his horse at the building which Boyd had particularly observed from the bankers' office windows.

"Find the janitor, Jimmie," cried Boyd, as he leaped to the sidewalk. "Rush him up to the top floor in case I require his keys. I'll go right up. Follow me as quickly as possible."

Most of this was spoken while both men dashed up the steps and into the building. While Coleman began a hurried search for the janitor, Boyd caught the elevator just about rising, and at once started for the top floor. On his way up he studied the face of the elevator conductor, a crooked-back Irishman, with decidedly crafty gray eyes, and asked in a casual way:

"Who occupies the office farthest east on the rear corridor, top floor?"

The Irishman glanced sharply at him.

"How wud I know," said he, with an oily brogue. "I niver waz afther hearing his name."

"Do you know him by sight?" inquired Boyd.

"I've sane him, but he's not afther being here long."

"Do you know whether he now is in his office?"

"Sure, sur, I couldn't soy if I wud."

Boyd needed no more to convince him that the Irishman had been cautioned against being communicative, very possibly by the tenant in question, and he let the matter drop. On arriving at the top floor, however, he hastened to the rear corridor, and presently reached the door of the office mentioned. He had located it with absolute precision; it was the office containing the windows which commanded a view of the lofty offices of Graves & Barlow.

Boyd tried the door and found it locked. Then he vainly attempted to open it with several keys which he had in his pocket. Next he stood for a second or two impatiently stamping the floor, vainly waiting for Coleman to bring the janitor. The delay irritated him like nettles. He glanced up and discovered a transom above the door.

"Glass!" he muttered, half in his throat. "I must get in at once. If I'm on the wrong track, I can make apologies later. If on the right track, however, one second's delay may cost me the game. I'll force an entrance!"

Leaping up he seized the sill below the transom window, and fixed his foot on the knob of the door. Then he drew his revolver, gripping it by the barrel, and with several rapid blows he scattered the pane of glass in fragments over the office floor.

The noise caused by the breaking glass brought half a score of men rushing from the adjoining rooms, from whom cries for the janitor and the police quickly arose. To none of them, however, Boyd paid the slightest attention;

and before any could arrive to prevent him, he worked his way with the agility of a contortionist through the broken transom, and dropped headlong into the office.

There he sprang to his feet, and darted to the window to make sure he was right. A glance assured him. Far away over the intervening roofs, and high above him in the lofty skyscraper, the windows of Graves & Barlow's office were quite plainly visible.

Still moving with unabated haste, and ignoring the uproar now in the adjoining corridor, Boyd looked sharply about the office. In every way it was inferior, containing only a cheap desk and two wooden chairs, with a small stove and hod in one corner—a condition which instantly convinced him that the place had been rented only temporarily, as a means for some project out of the ordinary lines of business.

The temperature of the room was higher than in the corridor, a fact which Boyd promptly detected, and he darted to the stove and opened the door.

"Ha! there has been a fire here!" he muttered, peering sharply at the smoldering black refuse in the stove. "No embers left! Yet this burned rubbish has been vigorously disturbed, as if to destroy all indications of its character. Was it excelsior—no! Aha, I have it! It was—string! The poker—by Jove! the poker!"

This humble adjunct to a stove was lying upon the floor near the hod, and Boyd now pounced upon it like a terrier upon a rat.

"Warm!" he muttered, feeling of the crooked iron end. "Still warm! I am right, and must be close upon his track. The poker is not yet cold. He can have left here but a few moments ago. I'm right—and now to get out again. Now to get out, and after him."

With eyes glowing brighter, even, and reflecting the triumphant fervor that was inspiring his haste, he darted towards the office door. Yet before he had reached it a key was thrust into the lock, the door thrown violently open, and Coleman and the janitor appeared upon the threshold.

Before the astounded janitor could speak, Boyd brushed rudely by him, and fell to forcing his way through the excited crowd of men in the corridor, at the same time shouting loudly:

"Follow me, Jimmie! I've hit the nail on the head! Lose not a moment. Follow me, and——"

"Not yet!" roared the janitor, springing upon him from behind. "You have broken into this office. The police shall——"

"Police be blowed!" thundered Coleman, throwing open his coat to display his detective's badge. "Make way there! I'm a central office man, and will answer for this. Room, gentlemen, room! Make way, I say! Make way!"

He had hurled the janitor aside while speaking, and now the awed crowd fell back and opened a way for the two men to pass. Boyd led the way, again at breakneck speed, through the corridor and down the stairs, and again the previous scene with the cabman was repeated.

"To the corner of Broad Street and Exchange Place!" shouted Boyd, as he followed Coleman into the waiting vehicle.

As they sprang down at the corner mentioned, Boyd caught Coleman by the arm and pointed to a huge office building some fifty yards away, in which were located the offices occupied by Kennedy & Peck, bankers and brokers.

"To the rear door, Jimmie!" he cried, rapidly. "If you see a man resembling Paul Wykoff, arrest him on the spot. You may head him off there if he attempts to sneak in a back way—barring that we are too late! Leave the rest to me."

Coleman hastened towards the narrow street making to the rear of the building, and just thirty seconds later Mr. Felix Boyd walked composedly in the elaborate rooms occupied by Kennedy & Peck. With merely a glance at the numerous clerks in the several inclosures, he made his way unceremoniously into the private office of the firm, and promptly closed the door. Precisely as he expected, he found both members of the firm seated in the room; and,

which gave him a quick thrill of triumphant satisfaction, he observed that they were alone.

By the clock on the wall it was precisely half-past nine—just thirty minutes since Boyd left his office in Pine Street.

In an open grate at one side a wood fire was burning briskly, the September morning being a little cool. The two members of the firm were seated in the sunlight near one of the broad windows, apparently discussing some business matter. Both looked up sharply when Boyd entered. The latter at once removed his hat.

"Good-morning, gentlemen," he said, politely.

Kennedy started to his feet.

"Excuse me! This is our private office," he snarled.

"Precisely where my business brings me," retorted Boyd, dryly. "Sit down again, I beg."

"I cannot call you by name, sir," cried Kennedy; "and I know of no business that warrants this intrusion. Leave our private office at once; or I'll call the police, if you——"

"Stop right there, Mr. Kennedy!" said Boyd, sternly. "I have business here, very serious business, as you presently may discover. Until that business is completed, gentlemen, not one of us will leave this room!"

"Are you a madman?" Kennedy exclaimed.

"No, sir; but I am a very determined man! Now, understand me, gentlemen! If I am mistaken, I shall offer you very humble apologies a little later. If I am not mistaken, however, a man named Paul Wykoff will soon enter this room.

"Now once again—understand me! When that man enters, if he does, the first word or slightest sign from either one of you will bring a bullet from this revolver. If you doubt that I mean all I say, attempt to leave this room! Sit down, Mr. Kennedy! That's right, sir! Now not a word while we sit and wait!"

It was a remarkable scene, so quickly yet forcibly was it enacted. Boyd had drawn his revolver, and advanced to take a chair near the table in the middle of the room. That each of his hearers was quelled more by his own guilty conscience than by Boyd's weapon, appeared in that each had glanced apprehensively at the other, and both had grown deathly pale. At Boyd's final command Kennedy had resumed his seat, and a silence covering several minutes ensued.

Then hurried steps were heard approaching through the outer office.

Boyd glanced sternly at his observers, then took his revolver from the table and concealed it back of his hip. He scarce had done so when the office door was rapidly opened, and the very man he expected, Paul Wykoff, rushed into the room.

At such a moment, and under the sudden stress of excitement and dismay he must have felt on seeing Felix Boyd, only one man in ten thousand could have commanded his emotions. But the nerves of Paul Wykoff evidently were as firm and flexible as steel. His dark features scarcely changed. Only one sharp gleam and glitter showed in his coal-black eyes, like the glitter seen at times in the eyes of a snake.

Without an instant's hesitation he said, in perfectly conventional tones:

"Mr. Kennedy, I wish to borrow five hundred shares of Atchison common. Can you let me have them until to-morrow?"

Even while speaking, and without so much as a second glance at Boyd, Wykoff turned a little to one side and brought his back within a foot of the open grate. The very next instant Felix Boyd beheld the flames of burning paper directly behind the crafty scoundrel.

With a bound like that of a leopard, Boyd left his chair and sprang towards the grate—only to catch sight of a charred sheet of thin, perforated paper just as the draught caught it and wafted it swiftly up the chimney.

"Hello!" coolly exclaimed Wykoff, thrusting Boyd aside. "What the devil's the matter with you?"

"Nothing at all," said Boyd. "Why do you ask? Why do you push me away from the grate?"

"Grate?" echoed Wykoff, inquiringly, with a backward glance to see if the sheet he so quickly and craftily had dropped into the flames had been consumed. Then he turned with a smile, one not easily described, it was so like a mingled sneer and threat, and added, coolly:

"I pushed you aside, sir, only because I thought you were about to lay violent hands on me."

Felix Boyd came one step nearer to him, and for a moment fixed his piercing eyes upon the fellow's sallow, cold face.

"I shall lay violent hands on you some day, Wykoff, and when I do—I shall confine them in bracelets!" he retorted, slowly.

Then Boyd turned abruptly to Kennedy and Peck, and saw that both were smiling.

"There is no occasion for apologies, gentlemen," said he, with icy sarcasm. "Plainly enough you all know why I am here. Also that my business now is completed—and, in a very great measure, successfully completed! Gentlemen, I bid you good-morning."

And without another word Boyd strode out of the office, and went to seek Coleman.

"It's all off, Jimmie," said he, upon rejoining him.

"Not failed!" cried Coleman, anxiously.

"Not by a long chalk, Jimmie!" laughed Boyd, with a toss of his head. "Failures are not in my line. I have queered the game of Kennedy & Peck all right, yet I have not turned the trick quite as nicely as I would have liked. Drop round to my office in time for lunch, and I will explain the whole business. I first must hasten to reassure my clients."

It was a quarter of ten when Boyd reentered the offices of Graves & Barlow. He silenced both men with a gesture, then turned to the inner room, and confronted their stenographer.

"Miss Dole," said he, with quiet severity, "if you are at all wise, you will immediately make a decided turn for the better. If you do not, I shall land you behind prison bars some day. Not a word! Put on your hat and go!"

The girl grew very red, frowning resentfully, but the gleam in Boyd's steadfast eyes awed her to silence. She arose and put on her hat, then hurriedly departed.

Boyd turned to the amazed bankers, over whose faces the light of reviving hope had begun to appear.

"Gentlemen," said he, "I understand that you have a copy of the message conveyed by your missing cipher sheet?"

"Certainly!" cried Graves. "I transcribed it myself."

"All is well, then," said Boyd, smiling oddly. "I congratulate you. The cipher sheet has gone up in smoke. I saw it burned in the office of Kennedy & Peck less than ten minutes ago. I give you my word that it has not been read since leaving this office, and I trust that my positive assurance of that will enable you to enter the market with perfect confidence this morning. Gentlemen, it is for such emergencies as this that you employ Mr. Felix Boyd, and the provisions of my contract with you are very properly executed."

. . . . . .

Boyd smiled when Jimmie Coleman asked him about the case at lunch that day.

"It was simple enough in a way, Jimmie," said he. "The only disturbing feature of it was the serious need of extraordinary haste. To run down that cipher sheet in a single half hour certainly was a task to have staggered most men, and I am inclined to think that most of our observers thought us out of our heads."

Coleman laughed as he recalled some of the incidents of that wild pursuit.

"But the line on which you worked, Felix," said he. "I don't quite see it."

"Simple as two and two, Jimmie," said Boyd, carelessly. "To be of any use the cipher sheet had to be conveyed to outside parties this very morning. Miss Dole was the only person who had any opportunity to do this, yet she dared not leave her office for that purpose. A

brief investigation there showed me that it could have been done only by the window, and this girl's previous relations with Wykoff convinced me that he again was her confederate."

"That's plain enough, Felix."

"A brief survey from the window," continued Boyd, "showed me that she could not have safely dropped the sheet, and that other means must have been employed. Necessarily, since Wykoff could not have known just when the cipher sheet would arrive, some signal from the girl must have informed him of its arrival this morning. The only available point from which Wykoff could have been constantly watching for her signal, was the window of the office I next visited."

"Ah, I see!"

"I tried to get there before Wykoff could leave, not then feeling sure just how the job had been done. I began to suspect it, however, when I observed the direction of the wind. I arrived too late to catch Wykoff in his office, but in the stove there I found a lot of burned paper and string."

"Oh, ho!" cried Coleman, quickly. "A kite!"

"Precisely," laughed Boyd. "I since have learned that two of the janitor's children have lately been in the habit of flying a kite from the flat roof of the building. Probably they were put up to this by Wykoff himself, that the incident of this particular morning might not be specially observed. Wykoff certainly did the work this morning, and so skillfully manipulated the kite that Miss Dole was able, from her window in the skyscraper, to attach the cipher sheet to the tail of the kite without being seen. You remember that the window of the adjoining room, where Graves and Gardner were, was in the side elevation, and probably the girl's clever work required but a few minutes."

Coleman laughed deeply.

"That was the way of it, surely," said he. "Boyd, you're all right!"

"All that saved us, however," smiled Felix Boyd, "was the fact that Wykoff required considerable time in which to reel in the kite, and afterwards burn the string and kite itself, thus destroying this evidence against him."

"Oh, he's a crafty dog, for a fact!"

"On finding the stove and poker still warm, I knew he had been gone but a few moments, and I at once aimed to head him off before he could deliver the cipher sheet to Kennedy & Peck, where Graves & Barlow knew it was wanted."

"I see the point," nodded Coleman.

"I got there ahead of Wykoff all right," laughed Boyd. "The moment Wykoff entered and saw me, however, he very quickly and cleverly decided to sacrifice the cipher sheet in order to save himself and Miss Dole. It was done before I could prevent it, for which I'm a bit sorry; yet I served my clients very successfully, for all that."

"It now is plain enough, and it was well done," bowed Coleman, approvingly. "After the burning of the sheet, you really had no good hold on these scamps."

"None worth anything," replied Boyd. "Hence I made no arrests. I am convinced that Kennedy & Peck hired this job done, however, and that it was the work of the same gang that perpetrated that bond robbery, and attempted to relieve Dickson of his diamonds."

"No doubt of it, Felix," cried Coleman. "Yet as for this obscure gang, and the prospect of locating it, you are not much better off than you were this morning."

"Not a whit better, Jimmie," grimly answered Boyd, laying aside his napkin. "But I will land them! Jimmie, take my word for it—I will land them!"

The fourth story, "The Case of the Man Who Vanished," will appear in the next number.

THE DEVIL'S GOUGE

BY R. H. FARNHAM

Author of "At Jupiter's Call," Etc.

The way that a railway official's daughter proves a theory in physics by an unexpected practical application.

THE division engineer removed his glasses, and wiped them carefully.

"No, sir," he continued, in his explanation, "I didn't dare chance it. You see, the tunnel anyway is almost too narrow and low for modern rolling stock. But this plow—I haven't the exact measurements—but I don't believe it would go through there with a three-inch clearance, top or sides—let alone the coat of ice on it."

The yardmaster nodded reflectively.

"I guess the height of her'd be all right," he said, with a respectful grin, "if it wasn't for Mr. Feeney's boiler."

The division engineer laughed, and both men walked across the snow-covered tracks to where the rotary had been side-tracked by a downbound freight, Molly, still bearing her father's dinner pail, followed.

The "rotary," technically known as a centrifugal snowplow, was of the customary pattern, except in size. It consisted of a round-roofed, boxlike iron car, terminating in front with an immense horizontal auger designed to bore a train's passage through the greatest depths of snow. Seen from in front, this auger, with the ironwork behind and inclosing it, formed a solid, flat wall, extending from the rails to the height of a car. The roof above it rose still higher.

The steam for operating the drill was supplied from inside the car, and this, pet boiler, was of more than ordinary height. Because of these unusual proportions, it had been deemed best not to send the plow through the narrow, single-track tunnel three miles below.

"Brannan," said the division engineer, as they stood beside the huge, snow-crusted monster, "here's a funny idea. Suppose Devil's Gouge should cave in—we know it's done that times enough—but suppose its roof should fall again, say a mile or two from this entrance, and fill the shaft completely from floor to roof. Then suppose a train should come down the grade——" And here he entered into a scientific dissertation, with an occasional gesture at the plow, and a careful segregation of details with forefinger upon palm. Molly listened with alert if awed attention.

"Why, it simply couldn't help it!" concluded the speaker, throwing out his hands with a laugh. "Impossible for anything else to happen! Well, good-by, Brannan, we'll lay out that cross-over for you as soon as the snow lets up."

He strode away toward the station, glancing at his watch. Molly walked beside her father to the door of his grimy little yard office, and leaving the lunch pail started homeward.

Quitting the yards presently, she struck into a path across the vacant lots toward the family cottage, in sparsely settled "railroad town." The ugly environment of coal trestles, tall chimneys

her, nor did the cheerless, ill-painted house with its coating of grime from the yards.

If she noticed these things at all it was through the rose-tinted spectacles of enchantment. For two evenings before had not gallant, dashing Terence Kildare, engineman of the Seaboard Mail, asked her to be his wife? This very night would occur his down trip, when she might see him at the station; might stand in the crowd while he deftly "oiled round" during the one-minute stop; might catch his smile and the wave of his gauntleted hand as he swarmed back to the lofty cab. Ah, fate had indeed been kind! Brave, brawny Terence, with the lovelight in his honest eyes! And to-morrow he was coming up from the end of the division to spend his "layover day" with her.

All the afternoon the girl's voice rang clear and happy over the household work, and her face was transfigured with a tender light. At evening, when her father returned weary from the yards, she met him at the door, where he yielded the frost-rimed dinner pail with a sigh of relief.

"We've got a picnic ahead of us now," he said, as he discarded the snow-beaded reefer and cap. "There's been another cave-in in Devil's Gouge."

"In the gouge again!" exclaimed Molly, in surprise. "Why, when did it happen?"

"Not two hours ago. It's a week's work, anyway, to fix it. They'll turn the rush freight and the passengers over to the Orient, here; but I don't see what'll save us from a yard blockade."

"It's too bad, father," sympathized the girl. Then a sudden light of comprehension dawned upon her.

"Why, the mail will be annulled here, won't it?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered, "and everything else. But," with an assumption of great gravity, "of course the crew'll double right back with a special."

"Father! They won't, either." Molly had detected the overdone seriousness of the tone. Brannan threw back his head, and roared with laughter.

"Never mind, little woman," he said, still persisting in the fiction; "them fellows, 'specially the enginemen, gets good pay; and this'll give 'em a chance for some overtime."

Molly, over the stove, tossed her chin disdainfully, and hummed a little air.

Supper over, and the dishes duly disposed of, she left her father to his pipe and the "Headlight," and donned her coat and hat.

"Daddy, I'm going to the post office," she said, "and then—then over to Schwartz's, to try and get some squashes for Sunday."

"All right," grinned her father. "And you'd better get a roast of beef, too. Can't tell; some hobo might come in here to dinner."

Molly blushed and made a little face; but her eyes were bright with pleasure. Passing quickly up the half-lit street, she reached the business portion of the town. At the post office she got her father's mail—a printed postal card invitation to the switchmen's ball—and continued through the noise and roughness of a junction Saturday night to the little market grocery.

Here she arranged carefully for the Sunday provisions, and coming forth, turned her steps toward the railroad station. It lacked a quarter to eight. The mail was due at eight-ten. She would learn whether the train was on time, and then run in for a moment and see Kitty Mahoney's new dress.

As she approached the long, low station, the light from the telegraph office at the end streamed cheerfully out upon the snow. Advancing to the window she tapped on the glass, and drew back into the shadow. The sash was raised promptly, and a youth two years her junior protruded a shock of black hair.

"That you, kid?" he asked, peering out above the window bars. It was Molly's cousin, the messenger boy.

"Yes, Danny," she answered; "how's the mail?"

"Ten minutes off at Richmond. Haven't heard since. But they'll be here on time, all right, 'cause the Orient's to take their passengers. Say, kid," he added, proudly, "I'm running

the shebang alone. Johnson's mother took sick, and he's been gone an hour."

Molly looked at him admiringly. "I didn't know you could telegraph as well as that," she said.

"Me? I'll have an office in the spring. Going up for examination next month."

Molly quickened her pace toward Kitty Mahoney's. Only ten minutes late! Terence could be trusted to make that up in thirty miles, especially, she thought with a smile, for the chance of a visit with her.

That evening Miss Mahoney received the shortest call she could remember from her bosom friend. Even the bright new raiment could not dispel a certain flutter in the region of Molly's heart. She was soon back in the frosty air, retracing her steps to the station.

It was eight o'clock. The hour was marked plainly on the luminous orange-colored disk in a clock tower down the street. Ten minutes more! She approached the building slowly, her footsteps creaking sharply on the hard-packed snow. The platform was still empty. The wheel inspectors, porters, every available man who would be at the station at train time, had been pressed into service to prepare the work train in the yards above.

She was still some distance away, when the door of the little telegraph office was suddenly torn open, and Danny, hatless and coatless, rushed out upon the platform. He halted for a moment, bent forward, staring wildly up the track, ran a few steps, paused irresolutely, and once more turned back. Molly sped forward and seized him by the arm.

"Danny, Danny!" she cried; "what is it? What makes you look so?"

"The mail!" he panted. "We've got to stop her!"

At the confirmation of the fear she had not dared express, it seemed to the girl that the world was crumbling beneath her feet. Then, instantly, she was herself again—more than herself; cool and clear-headed as a general on the battlefield. She twisted a hand into Danny's vest lapel, and pushed him sharply against the wall of the building.

"Tell me what's the matter," she commanded. The boy, looking beyond her with unseeing eyes, spoke automatically:

"They broke a side rod at Valley Farm—right in front of the station; the operator heard it crash. It smashed the cab, and snapped off again, so they didn't tip over. But they didn't stop, or slow. They passed Hollywood only a minute late, with both men out on the tank, making for the train; and they've just come over the crippled bridge at Lampson's, sixty miles an hour. *They can't stop*—and there's the tunnel!"

He sank back against the building, repeating the last words absently, as though rehearsing a lesson. Molly shook him fiercely.

"Brace up now, Danny, or you're no cousin of mine. Where's the four hundred and ten? Get Nugent to run her out ahead of them and slow them down."

Danny shook his head.

"She's gone. Went east helping one hundred and six. Won't be back for half an hour."

"Isn't there another engine in the yard?"

Again the boy shook his head in silence.

Molly turned away with a wild sob of despair.

"Oh, isn't there anything——" she cried, in agony; "isn't there a car—*Danny!* the snowplow!

"Hurry," she screamed, disregarding his amazement, "get a switchkey and a bar."

With this mysterious ray of hope the boy's wits returned. He plunged into the telegraph office, and was back in an instant. "Here's the key," he said, breathlessly, "we'll get a bar in Connolly's toolhouse."

With the girl in advance, they sped down the snowy yards. Danny diverged across the tracks to the toolhouse, while Molly continued to the side of the giant plow. Gazing up at the dim, ponderous bulk of iron, the girl was overwhelmed by a shrinking fear of consequences, a crushing sense of her own weakness. She felt an almost uncontrollable desire to leave it all and run across the fields

to the warmth and safety of home. But it was only for an instant.

"Terry, my darling," she whispered, "I'm daring it for you. I'm sure I'm right," she added, in the courage of resolution formed; "I heard what the division engineer said. He ought to know."

She hurried on to the end of the siding, where she opened the switch connecting it with the main line. Speeding back, she found Danny awaiting her with the bar.

"Get ready," she said; "we must start it as soon as we hear the train." Then suddenly she halted in a new and hopeless fear.

"Can we ever do it?" she gasped.

"Sure!" answered Danny, promptly. "The grade will fix it."

He sprang upon the plow, and released the brake. Jumping to the ground he inserted the starting bar behind the wheel. Molly stepped to the main track and bent forward, listening. Her ears caught the rumble of the train, far up the grade.

"Now, Danny; now!" she cried.

Danny swung down upon the bar with the full measure of his youthful strength. Springing to his side, Molly contributed her own. The great plow moved an inch, two inches, three! Clang! clang! went the bar against wheel and rail. And then, in the grip of the sharp down grade the great mass rolled slowly forward to the main line.

"Fix it so the engine will couple it," cried Molly, faintly, "and—and shut the switch!"

Danny sprang after the receding plow, wrenched open the drawhead jaw, and leaped aside to the switchstand.

Already the rails were clicking with the approach of the train.

He drew over the switch lever, and groped for the fastening.

His hand was snapping the padlock, when suddenly the alley between the lines of cars lit up like noonday, as the electric headlight swung into range around the curve; and the gigantic "Mother Hubbard" racer, hot, black, redolent of bitumen and frying oil reeled past with the crashing roar of a tornado, its succession of darkened sleepers scurrying madly behind.

There was a wild tattoo of wheels on rail joints, a final hollow roar, a red blink of taillights, and the Seaboard Mail was gone to meet its fate.

On board the dismantled engine two men were awaiting death. Crouched on the narrow runway between the cabs, they watched the fleeting white landscape with the numbness of half realization.

The crash of twenty miles back had come without warning. At the top of a steep grade the huge main rod, in whizzing oscillation beneath the engineman's cab, had snapped its crank pin from the driver, and whirled aloft, to the destruction of all in its path.

Staggering back from the ruin with a broken arm, Terence Kildare had tried to close the wide-open throttle; but the terrific blow had bent the valve stem immovably in its socket. The air-brake crank was likewise wrecked, and the brakes still loose—a fact which proved the entire air of the train to have failed.

The whistle rigging was gone; he could not call for the hand brakes; and the blind baggage behind precluded entry to the train. With the single hope remaining them the engineman and fireman had failed.

They had climbed to the platform of the baggage car and attempted to cut loose and hold back the train. But the fireman, with an iron bar inserted in the brake wheel, for leverage, had in his excitement pulled too suddenly, snapping the frosty chain; and the couplings had remained intact.

By unspoken word it was agreed that neither man should jump. Together they had silently returned to the engine, and sunk upon the runaway—to wait.

One station, two, had passed, scarcely noticed. And now came a glimmer of switch lights, a vision of a crowded station platform, the tinkle of crossing bells, the rattle of wheels flung back by standing cars—and the junction was gone.

Three miles ahead was Devil's Gouge!

Kildare bowed his head upon his arm.

Poor little Molly! He wondered if she knew.

Then suddenly the fireman gripped his shoulder, pointing ahead with a half hysterical cry. Far down the track, just within the headlight's rays, a huge unwieldy object swayed and tossed its way down the grade before them.

Kildare gazed at it with wide, uncomprehending eyes. Then as their approach brought it clearly into view, he cried:

"It's the rotary, Jimmy! And it's on the main track."

The ponderous locomotive swept down upon the flying plow like a hawk upon a sparrow, and struck it with a stunning shock. But the plow's momentum saved it from derailment, and the couplers snapped shut, holding it firmly to the engine.

There was a long, reverberant roar, and the mellow winter starlight disappeared as if snuffed out. The train was in Devil's Gouge!

The two men sank back again in silence. The filmy anthracite smoke swept down upon them in choking clouds. Through the doorway the red gauge lamp cast its quivering light on the shattered cab; and forward the headlight's glare fell against the snow-frescoed end of the plow in mocking brightness. But beyond everything was black.

Suddenly the engineman turned upon his companion with wild, questioning eyes. The rattle of the wheels on the rail ends was becoming slower! Was it only a merciful delusion to cheat the parting soul? No; for the fireman heard it, too.

The speed of the train was decreasing!

"What's doing it?" gasped Kildare, half deliriously. "Look!"

Already they were moving less than twenty miles an hour. From this the momentum declined sharply, as under an emergency brake. Then there came deafening explosions, as the cylinders on both sides blew out; and, rebounding as from collision with an India-rubber wall, the train stood still.

Less than half an hour afterward the wrecker from the junction coupled into the rear sleeper, and drew the train to the open air. It had barely stopped, when a disheveled little maiden sprang from the caboose steps and pushed through the crowd to the baggage car, where engineman Kildare sat waiting for the surgeon.

"Terry; oh, Terry!" she cried, and fainted on his breast.

"There, my little one," he said, when, on the cushioned locker, she again opened her eyes. "Nobody's hurt. Thanks to Providence, a miracle has saved us all this night."

"It was a miracle," said Molly, with a shaking laugh; "but Danny and I let out the plow."

The wondering assemblage drew closer.

"Tell us about it, please," said the trainmaster, kindly.

"Why, you see," explained Molly, "the division engineer told my father it would happen under the right conditions, and all of the conditions came out to-night. He said that the plow and tunnel were of almost exactly the same size, and that if the plow came in there on a fast train when there was this kind of a cave in, it would form an air cushion that would stop the train."

There was a moment of absolute silence. Then the air was riven by a deafening tumult of cheers. Passengers, trainmen, wreckers who only half understood, crowded forward in wild congratulation. But Molly hid her face on Terence's shoulder.

"Tell them I don't deserve it," she whispered; "I did it all for you!"

O'Rourke, Gentleman Adventurer

A TALE OF THE EMPIRE OF SAHARA

BY LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

Author of "The Moccasin Lode," "The Squeeze in 'Transit,'" Etc.

SYNOPSIS OF CHAPTERS PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED.

Terance O'Rourke, a soldier of fortune who has fought under many flags, finds himself penniless in Paris. While staking his few remaining francs at roulette he attracts the attention of a well-dressed Parisian who follows him from the resort. The two engage in an altercation and O'Rourke, after knocking his antagonist down, hurries away to avoid arrest. During his flight he takes refuge in a fiacre and finds that it is occupied by a young woman. Under the mistaken impression that he has been sent to her for a certain purpose, she has the driver take them to a palatial residence on a fashionable boulevard. O'Rourke reveals his identity, but on learning that his mysterious companion really is seeking a trustworthy man of military training to accompany her brother on a foolhardy voyage to the Saharan Desert, offers his services. A friend of the young woman appears and proves to be the man O'Rourke had knocked down earlier in the evening. While the woman is out of the room the two resolve to fight a duel, and as there is only one pistol they draw cards. O'Rourke loses. Just as the woman returns, the Parisian fires at O'Rourke.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SCHEMERS.

THE report crashed and echoed between the four walls of the study that bandied the sound back and forth. The woman screamed once.

There followed a moment's silence, during which all three actors in the little drama stood as though stricken motionless.

O'Rourke saw Chambret slowly lower the revolver, saw the whites of the man's eyes gleaming in the lamplight; while from the muzzle of the weapon a thin, grayish spiral of smoke trickled up to join the heavier, pungent cloud that hovered near the ceiling.

He saw Madame la Princesse standing, swaying ever so slightly, her hands clasped before her, saw her lips moving in mute inquiry, her eyes, horror filled, fixed upon his face.

Monsieur Chambret stepped back and cast the revolver upon the desk, where it fell with a thud, shattering the silence and breaking the tableau simultaneously.

Madame started toward O'Rourke with a low cry.

"A good shot!" he said, composedly. "A very good shot, Monsieur Chambret; for which accept my congratulations."

He held out the card in a hand that was steadiness itself.

"Observe, madame," he said, calmly, "the bullet penetrated the precise center of the ace—and in this half light!"

She was near enough to him now to snatch the card from his fingers, not rudely, but in an agony of suspense. Then she held it up to the light, verify-

This story, "O'Rourke, Gentleman Adventurer," began last month. The number containing the first instalment can be obtained through any newsdealer or direct from the publishers for ten cents.

ing his statement; and he noticed that her hand was shaking.

A vague sense of triumph made him look toward Chambret; who bowed ironically.

"But—but you are not injured, monsieur?"

It was the princess who addressed him; O'Rourke dared to smile at her—a smile that was at once triumphant and a triumph of dissimulation.

"Not in the least," he hastened to reassure her; "Monsieur Chambret is too skillful a shot to have chanced a mistake."

"You are satisfied of my skill, then, monsieur?" inquired Chambret.

"Quite—and for a long time to come." He remembered his rôle in the deception which they were practicing upon madame, and laughed again.

"I yield the point, monsieur," he added, "and likewise the palm. You are a finer shot than I, by long odds."

But it is a question as to whether or not they were successful in deceiving the princess; the glance that she shifted from the one to the other was filled with doubt.

She felt instinctively, perhaps, that here was something deeper than appeared upon the surface; but she might not probe it courteously or with any propriety, since both seemed to desire her to believe that the affair had been nothing more than a test of M. Chambret's mastery of the weapon.

"In the future, messieurs," she announced, frowning, "I trust that you will confine your exhibitions to more appropriate hours and localities. Moreover, I do not like it. At best it is dangerous and proves little. Col. O'Rourke, your arm."

She gathered up the train of her evening gown, and moved away with the Irishman. The latter by now was so far recovered that he could not repress his elation.

This, he felt, was in some way a distinct triumph over his saturnine rival; for as such he already chose to consider Chambret. And he ventured to turn and wink roguishly at the Frenchman as they left the room.

As for Chambret, it seemed that he was not bidden to the conference with the brother of Madame la Princesse; they left him staring glumly at the floor and twisting his mustache, in a mood that seemed far from one of self-satisfaction.

"It's strange to me," volunteered O'Rourke, "that the shot startled no one—the servants, or your brother and his guests."

"The servants," explained madame, "are trained to ignore the unusual in this house; besides, their presence is not desired above stairs at present. As for my brother, he is closeted with his friends in another wing of the house."

Thereafter she lapsed into a meditation, from which he made no attempt to rouse her; he kept the corner of his eye upon her fair, finely modeled head that was bowed so near to his shoulder; and he recalled jubilantly the look of keen anxiety that had been hers when she had fancied him wounded.

To be able to think of that, and to be in her company, O'Rourke felt that were happiness enough for him—enough and far beyond his deserts.

Thus quietly they traversed a series of broad, dimly lighted halls, meeting no one; but, after some time, his princess stopped O'Rourke outside a certain door.

"Monsieur," she said, softly, nor raised her eyes, "it is here that I leave you to return to my home. Within this door you will meet my brother, M. Lemercier; my husband, M. le Prince de Grandlieu, and—and others. You may—I fancy you will find them uncongenial—I could almost hope that you would.

"I can only hope that you will be able to endure them, monsieur. You know what I—I expect of you; and will presently learn what other duties will be yours to perform. I think I can trust you to play your part."

"Madame," he replied, lightly, yet with earnestness underlying his tone, "I know that I'm, in a way, a forlorn hope. But you may trust me."

"I believe so," she said, soberly. "I

shall not—may not see you again for some time. You—you will——"

"I will do all that you wish me to, madame, so far as lies in my power—and a trifle further, perhaps."

She smiled, amused by the boast, then gave him her hand.

"Then," she breathed, "then, good-night, my friend."

"Madame!" cried O'Rourke.

For the tenth part of a second her fingers rested in his, then were withdrawn. He sighed; but she merely turned and knocked.

Almost immediately the door was opened; a man peered out, then, recognizing the princess, left the room, closing the door behind him.

"Oh, it's you, Beatrix," he said, languidly.

"Yes, Leopold. I have brought you the gentleman of whom I spoke: Col. O'Rourke, Chevalier of the Legion of Honor; once of the Foreign Legion in the Soudan—my brother, Monsieur Leopold Lemercier."

The young man turned to O'Rourke, offering his hand with a ready, engaging smile.

"Col. O'Rourke!" he cried, with a hearty intonation. "The very man! I'm glad to meet you, monsieur; I have heard of you before."

"The divvle!" muttered O'Rourke. "And, by that token, I've heard of you—you little scamp!" But aloud he returned the greeting blandly.

"Thank you, Beatrix," continued Lemercier. "And——"

"I am going home," she replied. "Good-night, messieurs. Col. O'Rourke, *au revoir*."

Lemercier, instead of immediately returning with O'Rourke to his companions, waited until his sister was out of ear shot, with the manner of one who has something on his mind.

He was very youthful in appearance—a mere slip of a boy, attired a trifle too exquisitely in the positive extreme of the fashion.

No force of character was to be seen charted upon his smooth, lineless countenance—just then somewhat flushed, but whether from alcohol or excitement O'Rourke could not determine.

His eyes, which were small, were of a vague, indefinite gray, his hair light, of a neutral tint, and inclined to fall across his forehead in a stringy bang. His mouth was weak, indecisive, his nose a smooth arch, giving no impression of mental strength. As a rule, he kept his hands uneasily in his pockets; at other times they were constantly playing with some object—his watch chain, or the heavy, gem encrusted rings with which his slight fingers were laden.

O'Rourke was inclined to take his measure thoroughly, not only because of the strange and interesting manner in which they had been thrown together, but also because the '*petit* Lemercier' was a national character of France—or a national laughingstock.

For some time this weakling, the enormously wealthy son of a rich chocolate manufacturer recently deceased, had kept Paris agape with his hare-brained pranks, his sybaritic entertainments, his lavish disbursement of the money which he had inherited.

Rumor had it that already, in the two years that had elapsed since he had come into his fortune, he had not only expended all of his income, huge as that was known to be, but had made seriously heavy inroads upon his capital.

This was undoubtedly due to his lack of business instinct, and to dissipation; the *petit* Lemercier kept himself surrounded with a circle of scheming flatterers and panderers, who had always some fresh scheme ready to help part the young man from his money.

And now that he knew whom it was that he was to protect, O'Rourke felt as if a blindfolding bandage had suddenly dropped from his eyes; not only did he realize that the fears of Madame la Princesse for the welfare of the *petit* Lemercier were well grounded, but he had no difficulty in identifying that lady with the young girl, who, fresh from the seclusion of a convent, had been induced by this same brother, Leopold, to contract a marriage with Prince Felix, the dissolute and impoverished head of

the insignificant principality of Grandlieu.

He remembered very distinctly the sensation the marriage had created, a year or so back; as well as the public indignation and sympathy for the ignorant and unsophisticated girl who had given her hand and her immense fortune into the keeping of the most notorious rogue in Europe.

A sudden rage welled in O'Rourke's heart, as he thought of this, and a faint disgust stirred him as he gazed upon the weak, watery-eyed, self-complacent stripling who was negatively responsible for the degradation of his sister.

But the *petit* Lemercier put an end to the meditations of the Irishman.

"One moment, monsieur, before we enter," he suggested. "You understand what circumstances have induced me to accede to Beatrix's absurd notion?

"Well," he went on, without waiting for a reply, "it *is* absurd, anyway; and just to keep my word with her, I've had to tell them inside that I've known you for a long time, and sent for you on purpose for the work in hand. I couldn't insult my friends by telling them the real reason why I'm employing you."

"Very well," assented O'Rourke, between his teeth, his blood seeming to boil in resentment of the assumption of superiority with which the *petit* Lemercier was treating him.

"Yes, monsieur; since that's understood, and you won't be making any blunders, we'll go inside, if you please."

He turned the handle of the door, and his back insolently to O'Rourke, and stalked stiffly into the room; the Irishman swallowed his rage at the other's impertinence, and followed.

The room which he entered was almost a duplicate of the one wherein he had conferred with his princess, save that it was somewhat smaller, and, instead of the desk, a huge table occupied the center of the floor.

Round it were ranged chairs, wherein were four men, who rose at the entrance of the stranger.

Lemercier marched to the head of the table, and sat down.

"Messieurs," he said, negligently, "allow me to introduce Col. O'Rourke, of the Foreign Legion—the gentleman to whom I have referred as our future commander-in-chief.

"Col. O'Rourke—M. le Prince de Grandlieu; Messieurs Valliant, Mouchon and D'Ervy."

The messieurs bowed ceremoniously—and most coldly, apparently resenting this intrusion upon their circle; on the principle, possibly, of the more birds of prey, the less gorging of each individual crop.

O'Rourke returned their greetings with scarcely less of frigidity in his manner. He constrained himself to bare civility, but was unable to feign any considerable pleasure because of the association in which he found himself.

Lemercier indicated a chair, into which O'Rourke dropped unwillingly; had he followed his own inclinations he would have delayed not one moment ere leaving before he knew more, before pledging himself and his sword to the schemes of this gathering of blackguards.

But he recognized that he was, as he put it, "in for it"; he had given his word to his princess, and the desire to serve her outweighed his personal feelings in the matter.

The *petit* Lemercier invited the Irishman to help himself to the wine and cigars on a convenient buffet; then concerned himself no more for the comfort of his guest. He got upon his feet unsteadily—it became apparent that he was drinking too deeply for the clearness of his brain—and began to talk in a halting fashion, leaving the half of his sentences unfinished, inconclusive.

The attention he received was flattering; barring the prince, his sycophants hung upon his words with breathless interest. Only O'Rourke allowed his eyes to stray from the face of his host to the countenances of the others, mentally inventorying their characters, cataloguing them for future reference.

M. le Prince de Grandlieu he had not expected to like; what he saw of him did not tend to remove the prejudice—a slim, tall figure of a man, padded

at every point possible, and corseted until his figure resembled a woman's; hatchet-faced and dark, with evasive eyes, of a saturnine, sneering cast; impeccable as to dress, elegant, ostentatiously rakish.

Apparently returning O'Rourke's disdain with interest, he sat slouched in an armchair, airily twirling an end of his black mustache, occasionally eying the intruder with no friendly glance.

As for the others, they were ordinary types of Parisians: Valliant, a heavy, swaggering growth of the boulevards, red-faced and loud-voiced; Mouchon, pasty of complexion, nervous, slinking and apologetic in manner; D'Ervy, a vice-marked nonentity of Lemercier's grade, pimply, heavy-eyed, ungracious and vacuous.

Meanwhile, the *petit* Lemercier was talking—rambling on in an aimless fashion, inconsequential, chiefly in praise of his own wonderful sagacities and abilities in planning an enterprise which he as yet had not named. Suddenly, however, he broke off, filled and flushed his throat with a glass of champagne, and the narrative took on a complexion which commanded O'Rourke's undivided interest.

"Messieurs," said Lemercier, importantly, "we are assembled on the eve of a movement which will astonish and compel the admiration not only of all Europe, but of the civilized world as well."

He paused, and turned to the Irishman.

"O'Rourke, *mon ami,*" he continued, familiarly, "these, my comrades, are already intimate with my project. For months we have been planning and perfecting it; latterly we have waited only for you, *mon brave,* a soldier tried and proven, to work with us for glory and for—empire!"

"Do tell!" interjected the disgusted O'Rourke, to himself.

"In a week, monsieur, we start upon our expedition. In two weeks or less the empire of the Sahara will be inaugurated—in a month it will be a fact accomplished."

He gestured toward the wall, D'Ervy sprang from his chair, and unrolled an immense map of Northern Africa which hung thereon. The *petit* Lemercier, swelling with pride, went to it and indicated his points as he talked.

"Here," he said, drawing O'Rourke's attention to a spot on the west coast of the continent, "is Cape Bojador. Here, again," moving his finger a foot north upon the coast line, "is Cape Juby. To the north lies Morocco; to the south lie the Spanish Rio de Oro possessions. But between the two capes is unclaimed land.

"Here, messieurs, is the land that shall be our Empire of the Sahara. Here shall we establish and build up a country greater even than France!"

Valliant rapped his applause upon the table; Mouchon cheered weakly. O'Rourke looked doubtful.

"Pardon," he said, "but is that not the coast of the Sahara? Is it not desert land, waste, arid?"

"Ah, yes, monsieur; that is the general impression. But you shall see what we shall do in this No-man's Land which the grasping English have overlooked, which France disdains, which Spain forgets.

"In the first place, the land is not arid; to my personal knowledge there is a large and fertile oasis a short distance inland from the coast, in one spot; and beyond doubt there be others.

"Here, monsieur," he continued enthusiastically, pointing to an indefinite, ragged line winding inland a little distance below Cape Juby, "is the Wadi Saglat el Hamra—the dry bed of an ancient stream——"

"Dry?" queried O'Rourke, beginning to be interested in spite of himself.

"Now, *mon ami;* but wait—wait until we have discovered its former sources, wait until they have been reopened and made to flow again. Then shall the Wadi Saglat make its majestic way to the ocean—a mighty stream, fertilizing and irrigating the surrounding land.

"Moreover, artesian wells shall be sunk wherever practicable; around them oases shall spring to life, rejuvenating the desert. We—*we,* messieurs!—shall be the vanguards of empire, the reclaim-

ers of the waste lands of the world, making the desert to blossom as a garden!

"Cities shall be built, colonists shall flock to us, homes shall be established for thousands of families. The sands of the desert will yield up their gold to us. A port will be furnished as a terminus for the thousands of desert caravans who now take their goods to the Senegal.

"Messiers, the Empire of the Sahara, within two years, shall obtain recognition from the powers of the world. Within five it shall be a power itself. And I—*I*, messieurs!—shall be emperor!"

The ardor of the *petit* Lemercier was infectious; the Irishman found himself listening eagerly.

"There's something in it!" he whispered. "My faith, I do believe it might be done." His adventurous spirit kindled, flashing from his eyes. "There'll be fighting," he considered, shrewdly.

Lemercier turned to him, breathing quickly with excitement, carried away by his own schoolboy eloquence.

"Col. O'Rourke," he demanded, pompously, "you are to be commander-in-chief of my forces, with the pay of a corps commander of the French Army. Do you accept?"

"Faith," said O'Rourke, rising, "I do that. 'Tis a great scheme you have, monsieur."

He filled him a glass of champagne, turning to the others.

"Messieurs," he said, "I give you the health of M. Lemercier!"

"No!" interposed the prince, also rising with his glass. "You forget, Col. O'Rourke. The health we drink is the health of Leopold le Premier, l'Empereur du Sahara!"

He flashed a hinting gaze upon the others; they, too, rose, with *bravos,* and drank standing.

O'Rourke's gaze fell upon the stripling, wine-flushed and staggering, complacent and conceited—a mere vain child, dreaming of empire as a plaything for his vanity.

And then the eyes of the Irishman turned to the others—the motley, self-centered crew of leeches, who, to this vapid youth of a multi-millionaire, bent

"the pregnant hinges of the knee, that thrift might follow fawning."

It sickened him; he put down his glass, and for a moment watched the cold, calculating, sardonic Prince de Grandlieu, who was with meaning glances showing the way to his associates to half madden the *petit* Lemercier with flattery. And the warning of that man's wife, of the princess, returned to the Irishman. Again disgust stirred him.

"The divvle!" he muttered. "I'm in for it. Sure, there *will* be fighting, or I'm no O'Rourke!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE STANDING ARMY.

Thus it was plotted; and in such wise Col. Terence O'Rourke came to cast his fortunes with those of that man concerning whom the Parisian boulevards were soon to be gossiping—the youth who called himself Leopold the first, Emperor of the Sahara.

The conference lasted until a late hour in the next morning; the conspirators breakfasted together, gathering up the loose ends of their schemes and giving and receiving final suggestions and instructions.

It was settled that O'Rourke was to be commander-in-chief, with the title of lieutenant-general, of the forces presently to be assembled on the west coast of the Sahara Desert.

M. le Prince de Grandlieu was to be chief adviser to his majesty-to-be; when the government was finally organized he was to be premier, or prime minister.

M. Valliant, who, it appeared, was a member of the French bar, received the appointment of chief justice of the empire—when it should exist and the administration of justice should become necessary. In the meantime, he was to remain in Paris, and, with the help of associates (whose salaries, be sure, were to come out of the pocket of the

petit Lemercier), formulate a Code Leopoldan; a judicial system which was expected to combine all the good points of existing codes and contain none of their defects.

Messieurs Mouchon and D'Ervy were to rejoice respectively in the portfolios of commerce and agriculture, their absolute unfitness for the holding of any office whatsoever being their greatest recommendation in the eyes of Lemercier, to all appearances.

It was understood that the two latter gentlemen were to collaborate, in the beginning of things, to entice colonists to the promised land; and they also had charge of the purchasing of all supplies for the new empire—a sinecure in which O'Rourke shrewdly scented large and gratifying "commissions" for the purses of the two secretaries.

But the Irishman had little time in which to criticize or to pass judgment upon his associates. He was ordered immediately to the south of France for the purpose of recruiting troops.

He had one week for the work; it was the sense of the conclave that forty picked men would be required for the work of annexing the sands of the Sahara, and in the judgment of O'Rourke this number was none too large, if the expedition was to lack that element of opera *bouffe* which he feared would prove one of its integral parts.

It was characteristic of the adventurer that, little faith as he had, on calm reflection, in the imperial scheme of M. le petit Lemercier, he threw himself into his work heart and soul, determined that, should failure come to his employer, it would be through no fault of his.

He sent to his lodgings for a change of clothes, which was brought him while breakfasting; when through he took the first express toward Marseilles, having been provided with funds and authorized to draw upon Lemercier should that become necessary.

He set about his work with the systematic purpose of a born organizer and old campaigner; he knew his ground thoroughly, had full powers to work as a free agent, and to offer liberal inducements, the better to enlist the finest body of men that could be found either within or out of the borders of the French republic.

In such case, he felt that success was assured from the start, so far as he personally was concerned; in five days he had his force complete—chiefly composed of seasoned veterans.

Spahis from the Soudan were there, and swart Turcos—lean, brown, lithe and wiry little fellows, all of them ready to fight at the drop of a handkerchief; discharged artillerymen and marines of the republic; and, for leaven, a sprinkling of his own countrymen, and a few adventurous spirits—mercenaries—of other lands; a villainous-looking gang, taken as a whole, fearing God nor man nor devil, fighters born, every mother's son, ready to fight for the highest bidder or for the pure love of battle; but, for the most part of them, brave and loyal to their masters for the time being, to be depended upon in any emergency.

Thirty-nine they were, of the rank and file; and for a second in command, with the rank of captain, he placed over them one Timothy Burke—red and hot-headed, but cool and temperate in his element—which was in time of danger; whom O'Rourke had known and served with in Guatemala, years since.

These, in small batches, the better to excite no comment, he provided with transportation, and sent ahead to Las Palmas, with instructions to await him there; trusting to the discipline of Burke to keep them in order and partially sober until his coming or the arrival of the *Eirene,* the *petit* Lemercier's colossal steam yacht.

Upon this vessel, whereon were expected Lemercier, Grandlieu, Mouchon and D'Ervy, O'Rourke's mercenaries were to embark for Cape Juby and the Wadi Saglat el Hamra, in the neighborhood of which was the rumored oasis that was to form the site of the future capital of the Sahara Empire.

The last of his men were dispatched to Las Palmas about the first of June; a day or so later O'Rourke followed them, per packet.

He arrived at the Puerto de la Luz on a simmering night, and at once had himself conveyed to the city of Las Palmas itself.

CHAPTER IX.

THE FIRM HAND.

By night Las Palmas resembles any other Spanish colonial city in semi-tropical lands; select at random a city of equal size from any of the Spanish-American countries, transplant it bodily to an island of volcanic origin and with sparse vegetation, and you have Las Palmas of the Grand Canaria.

There is the inevitable plaza, with its despondent garden and its iron railings; there is the inevitable palatial residence of the governor; there are the cafés and restaurants, the municipal band that executes by night, the señoritas with their immense, fanlike tortoise-shell combs and their mantillas, the señors adorned in white ducks and cigarettes, the heat, the languor, the spirit of *manana* and *dolce far niente.*

The nights are long, warm and sticky and sickly sweet; darkness is soft and so thick as to seem well-nigh palpable; the sky hangs low, velvety, embossed with huge stars.

It was on such a night that O'Rourke arrived; on the way to his hotel he kept his eyes open for members of his corps, but saw none of them.

He was disturbed; Las Palmas is not a metropolis so great that forty fighting men can be set down within its boundaries without creating comment.

Nor is it so puritanical in atmosphere that forty fighting men with graduated thirsts and eruptive dispositions are like to become childlike once under its influence—to content them with a diet of cow's milk and crackers, to sleep and spend their days in the ordinary processes of tourist sightseeing.

O'Rourke knew his men well—that was why he had chosen them; with him at their head he had little fear of trouble, for he was wont to command with a firm hand, and they were accustomed to be commanded by him or by the likes of him.

But, with only Burke to keep them in order—Burke, himself of a nature none too pacific, and merely by chance their superior officer—O'Rourke was by no means satisfied that his lambs were being safely shepherded; he was anticipating trouble. Nor was he disappointed.

His carriage rolled through the winding, darksome streets—strangely quiet, thought the uneasy Irishman—swiftly from the boat landing to the Grand Hotel. O'Rourke leaned back in the seat, on the watch, chewing a cold cigar.

But not a sound nor a sight of his command did he come across; he swore softly, bit the cigar in two, in his agitation, threw it away and set his lips in a firm line.

He realized that his work was now to his hand; and he was promising himself that, should Burke have failed dismally, there would be a new second in command before another sun had risen.

The *Eirene* was due to make port about the following noon, if the calculations of the *petit* Lemercier went through without change; by that hour, if O'Rourke was to show his fitness for his position, peace must obtain among the mercenaries, a united, complete and lamblike corps must be ready to salute its employer.

He alighted from the carriage, in front of the hotel, paid the driver, surrendered his light luggage to the attendants, and turned to look out over the plaza.

Now, the plaza itself was lively enough; the band was playing an explosive Spanish national air; the lights were blazing in the cafés and before the residence of the governor; the crowds were parading, smoking, laughing, chattering, flirting—the walks thronged with the volatile, light-hearted inhabitants taking their constitutionals in the only cool hours of the day.

From the middle of the plaza two men emerged, arm and arm, strolling toward the hotel; two men in the ragged uniforms of Turcos, respectably amusing themselves and—O'Rourke thanked high heaven—sober!

He waited for them; they approached

slowly, suddenly, became aware of the military figure of their waiting commander, dropped their arms, stood apart and saluted.

O'Rourke returned the salute.

"Bon jour, mes braves!" he greeted them, showing no trace of his worriment. "Where are you quartered?"

They indicated a side street.

"Your captain?" he inquired.

There was silence for an answer; the two Turcos glanced uneasily from their commander to each other, and hung their heads.

O'Rourke repeated his question shortly.

One of the Turcos stepped forward, saluted again, and reported with a military brevity that won O'Rourke's approval, if the tidings he heard were ill.

The two, they asserted, were of the last party to arrive at Las Palmas; they therefore spoke on hearsay knowledge, for the most part.

Among the ten men whom Burke had accompanied, there was peace and good feeling, until the arrival of the second detachment of fifteen.

The twenty-five had, according to good military usage, fraternized; despite Burke's prohibitive orders, they proceeded to take possession of the town.

To this the authorities had made no objection, at first; the five and twenty were not overly well supplied with ready money; a mercenary rarely is when he enlists; they spent what they had, but it was not enough to fire their martial spirits to the fighting point.

But with the coming of the third installment of legionaries—ten more men—there had been disorder (the Turcos regretted to state). Among them had been one with much money—a Frenchman who had served in the desert. The Turcos were desolated to admit it, but their comrades had become disgracefully intoxicated.

Capt. Burke had done what he could to quell the disturbance; one man against thirty-five, however, was at an obvious disadvantage. At the time of the arrival of the last five men he was struggling vainly against fate and overwhelming numbers.

The men were drinking, and anarchy threatened in the peaceful island of Grand Canaria. The authorities were scared, powerless.

Burke, almost at his wits' end, connived with the five and the gendarmes. Fortunately the rejoicing ones were unarmed. That simplified matters muchly, in Burke's opinion. At the head of his five—with the police politely umpiring the game—he descended upon the roisterers and gave them battle.

The Turcos sighed regretfully; from what they said O'Rourke gathered that it had been a joyous conflict, lasting many hours, fought freely and fairly throughout the many streets of Las Palmas; it was not often, said the Turcos ruefully, that one came upon so satisfying a fight in times of peace. They licked their lips reminiscently, as one remembers a favorite dish.

The end had been for the lawful; one by one at first, later by twos and threes, finaly by squads, the legionaries had been overcome, even to the thirty-fifth man, and kicked into the *carcel.*

"But Burke?" demanded O'Rourke.

It was terrible, the Turcos admitted, but by grave misfortune the attire of Capt. Burke had become disordered in the *mêlée;* the police had been unwilling to discriminate between him and his soldiers, saying that one so disreputable in appearance deserved imprisonment at the least, on general principles. For two days the captain had been disciplining his troops in the *carcel.*

O'Rourke laughed, his heart suddenly lightened. They were by now sober, in such case; and Burke had undoubtedly succeeded in reducing them to submissiveness. On the morrow O'Rourke would go to the governor, pay their fines and procure their releases.

He tipped the Turcos liberally, ordered them to report to him in the morning, and went to bed with a lightened heart, to sleep soundly the night through, and wake with his campaign planned to his hand.

During his breakfast a man entered the dining room of the hotel, walked

directly to his table and tapped O'Rourke on the shoulder. The Irishman looked up in surprise, then jumped to his feet.

It was Chambret.

"You here, monsieur?" cried O'Rourke.

"Precisely, monsieur—as a colonist?"

"Sit down and join me," the Irishman invited him.

"Thank you, but I have just breakfasted on the yacht."

"The yacht?"

"The *Eirene*, monsieur."

Chambret took a chair and seated himself, smiling pleasantly at O'Rourke's bewilderment.

"I do not understand," admitted the latter. "The *Eirene?* A colonist? But I thought that you——"

"That I was at odds with the little emperor, monsieur? That I disapproved of his enterprise?" Chambret's mood was of the most friendly, judging from his expression—and that notwithstanding the peculiar circumstances attendant upon the last encounter of the two.

"There you are right, monsieur," he went on. "It's folly—madness. The scheme will never succeed; it spells 'Ruin' for M. Lemercier. Nevertheless——"

"Proceed, if you please," begged the Irishman, striving to conceal his astonishment, and entirely unable to understand this move of Chambret's.

"Nevertheless, upon reflection I have been led to change my mind. You behold in me, Monsieur O'Rourke, the first colonist of l'Empire du Sahara!"

O'Rourke put down his knife and fork, tipped back in his chair, and accepted the cigar which the Frenchman offered him.

"Chambret," he said, slowly; "I'm playing a lone hand in this game. I hardly know what is trumps. You know the sole consideration that induced me to draw cards? No? I'll tell you—candidly.

"It's just what I believe is keeping you in the game: the desire to serve Madame la Princesse. So far as I can judge from the backs of your cards and the way ye play them, that is your motive, also.

"Listen, mine enemy." He fixed his gaze upon the eyes of the other, which met his own unflinchingly. "We have our differences, you and I. Let them pass, for the time being; at the end of this affair we'll balance accounts; I'm thinking that 'tis me own turn now to demand satisfaction, and I'll claim it when the time comes."

"Monsieur will find me ready"—composedly.

"Very good; but—let it pass, as I've said. At present we two have a mutual object in view, a common quarrel. Let us combine forces. Let us play partners against the pack of 'em. Show me your cards, and I'll show ye mine."

Chambret's answer was instantaneous: a hand held out to O'Rourke.

"The proposition," he said, warmly, "would have come from me had it not from you, monsieur. It was decided upon between madame and myself en voyage."

"What!" O'Rourke colored. "Madame——?"

Chambret laughed slightly. "One moment, monsieur—I begin at the beginning of my account.

"In the first place, Madame la Princesse has full confidence in you, monsieur, as, you will permit me to add, have I. Nevertheless, it seemed to us both advisable that you should have reinforcements—backing, I think you term it.

"For this consideration I went to madame's brother, Leopold, feigned interest in his plans, and offered myself as his first colonist. He was overjoyed—received me with open arms. At the same time, madame decided to accompany M. le Prince upon his journey—and insisted, despite his decided objections. This morning, the *Eirene,* bearing us all, made this port.

"The situation, monsieur, is this: Prince Felix conspires for the death—I speak bluntly—of his brother-in-law. The reason is simple: madame is her brother's heir; Felix already has run through madame's fortune, and counts on enjoying Leopold's when she comes

into her inheritance. You comprehend?"

"The hound!" O'Rourke ground, between his teeth.

"Precisely. My cards (as you call them, monsieur), consist simply of my skill as a pistol shot, of which you have some knowledge. M. le Prince is a noted duelist; M. le Prince has no liking for me, as you may guess. He will seek the first opportunity of calling me out. In that event, the end is a foregone conclusion, I flatter myself."

"It should be," growled O'Rourke. "Faith, when *we* two fight, monsieur, it will be with rapiers."

Chambret bowed courteously. "It is your choice," he said, gravely. "But now, my friend, you understand my position. To follow out your simile, monsieur, will you disclose your own hand?"

"I will that," affirmed O'Rourke. "Come with me, if you please."

In the *patio* of the hotel his two Turcos were waiting, with their comrades —three grim Spahis. He signed to them to follow, and went out into the plaza with Chambret.

"M. Lemercier sent you to look me up, I presume?" he inquired, of the mystified Frenchman.

"Yes, monsieur. I came ashore to see if you had arrived as yet; and, if you had, with instructions to tell you to bring your command to the yacht at once."

"M. l'Empereur is contemplating no delay, then?" pursued O'Rourke, leading the way across the square to the residence of the governor.

"He is wrapped in visions of his future glory," laughed Chambret; "impatient for his scepter and purple raiment."

O'Rourke turned and passed into the *patio* of the government house. Chambret, troubled by his companion's reticence in this time of confidence, put a hand upon his arm.

"But, monsieur," he objected, "this is not reciprocation of my frankness?"

"In half an hour," promised O'Rourke, "then you shall understand me."

He begged an audience with the governor, stating his business; under the circumstances that harassed official delayed not a moment in according the honor, despite the unholy earliness of the hour for the transaction of business —according to Spanish notions.

It was soon settled; upon O'Rourke giving his word of honor that he would immediately take the thirty-five mercenaries out of the island, he was permitted to pay their fines and received an order on the jailer of the *carcel* for their immediate delivery.

Then, still accompanied by Chambret and followed by the Turcos and Spahis, he went to the *carcel* itself—a gloomy, shedlike structure, more resembling a pig pen than a municipal prison in a civilized age.

Their arrival was at a critical moment—for the jailer; breakfast, or what passed for it, was being distributed to the prisoners; when still blocks away the ears of O'Rourke and his party were assailed with an indescribable chorus of shrieks, oaths, growlings and grunts that proclaimed the supreme joy of the incarcerated at the sight of food —or possibly other emotions that had been roused by the quality of the meal.

"My angels," indicated O'Rourke, with a smile.

"Certainly their singing is heavenly," agreed Chambret.

Admitted by the jailer—a surly, low-browed Spaniard, who gave sincere thanks to the entire body celestial for this blessing—they passed into the building.

Its center—for it was but one room, open to the sky save around the walls, where a partial roofing served as protection from the elements—they found occupied by a swirling, seething mass of men, from whose throats proceeded the unearthly concert. They were surrounded by a cloud of dust; above their heads rose fists, fragments of torn clothing, hats and bones.

Slightly in advance of his men, O'Rourke paused, his presence for the time being unnoticed by the combatants. He watched them in silence for a time, his mouth curving into a grim smile.

Then, raising the walking stick which he carried—a slim wand—he opened his mouth, and let out a stentorian command:

"Fall in!"

In the excitement it was disregarded. Again he called, and again:

"Fall in! Fall in!"

Gradually his voice carried meaning to the intelligence of the rabble. One turned, saw the motionless, commanding newcomer; he shouted the news to his comrades. Others observed. By degrees the tumult stilled.

At the third command they were quiet, with one accord turning to watch the rash intruder. Suddenly he was recognized; at the fourth command the trained soldiers sprang to their places as if electrified—one long line of thirty-nine figures stretching across the *patio*.

"Attention!" roared O'Rourke, angrily. "Silence in the ranks!"

There was not a whisper to be heard, where had been the uproar of a chaos.

"Capt. Burke!" he demanded.

From around the end of the line stepped the shape of a man whom O'Rourke entirely failed to recognize at first glance. Presently he placed him. Burke, but Burke well-nigh disintegrated—a Burke clothed in rags and tatters, with two black eyes and a face swollen and misshapen from cuts and bruises. One of his arms hung in a sling; the other he raised to salute.

"Yer honor!" he responded, out of the side of his mouth.

"Be silent!" cried O'Rourke. He walked down the line, sternly examining each man as he passed; they stood stiffly at attention, eyes to the front—soldiers all in the presence of their commander.

O'Rourke returned to the center of the line.

"Burke," he demanded, "how did this come about, sir?"

"Yer honor—faith! Gineral O'Rourke, Oi mane—'tis the forchunes av war-r. Wan av the prisoners has a wad av money, sor, an' wid this an' wid that trick he's conthrived to have liquor passed into th' place ivery noight.

"As f'r meself, sor, Oi've been thryin' to lick thim into shape for yez. Some av them Oi've licked twice over, but it does no good, sor."

"That will do. Who is this wealthy volunteer?"

There was a moment's silence, a hesitation, then slowly a man stepped forward, saluting carelessly. O'Rourke watched him like a cat, his brows clouding.

"Your name?" he demanded.

"Soly," responded the fellow, insolently.

O'Rourke took thought.

"If I mistake not," he said, "you came to me in Marseilles with a letter of recommendation from M. le Prince de Grandlieu."

"Monsieur is correct in his surmise."

"Where did you serve last?"

"In Algiers."

"In the camel corps?"

"Yes."

"*A sans souci?*" thundered O'Rourke, naming that branch of the French service to which criminals and deserters are condemned.

"What of it?"

O'Rourke made no verbal reply. He approached the man, dropping his cane; the fellow must have anticipated what was coming, for he sprang suddenly at O'Rourke, flourishing a knife.

Before he realized what had happened, he was on his back, his wrist clinched as though by a vise; the knife was wrested from him, and broken by O'Rourke.

"Get up!" commanded the Irishman.

The malcontent arose, mumbling guttural threats, brushing the filth of the prison from his clothes. When erect a clinched fist caught him in the mouth, knocking him down; he arose again, was bowled over again. Finally:

"Are you satisfied, *canaille?*" snarled O'Rourke.

The man drew himself up, saluted.

"*Oui, mon commandant!*" he said, clearly.

O'Rourke turned to the motionless line; not one man had moved to the aid of his comrade.

"Are there any more of you, *mes*

enfants," he inquired, sweetly, "who desire to know my discipline?"

The answer was an unanimous shout.

"Non, monsieur le commandant!"

"You are ready to follow me, at my command?"

The shout swelled to a roar.

"To the death, monsieur!"

"Very well. Capt. Burke, form your men in fours, and march them to the landing. Let no man dare to fall out on the way!"

Burke wheeled about, raised his hand and issued the command. In ten ranks of four men each the lines moved out of the prison. O'Rourke watched in grim quiet, his eyes testifying his satisfaction as to the qualities of his "children."

"Spirited, you see," he told Chambret, as they left.

"Those, monsieur, are *my* cards!" he added.

The Frenchman nodded.

"You play with a full hand, monsieur," he said; "thirty-nine cards—all trumps!"

CHAPTER X.

VIVE L'EMPEREUR!

To the northwest a drift of inky smoke trailed just above the horizon; otherwise there was no sign of man nor of life on the sea save the *Eirene,* fighting forward on her way, palpitant with the vibration of the screws, panting hoarsely, ramming her keen nose into the sullen, strong swells.

On her decks men clustered wherever one found a bit of shade; but men motionless, staring ahead with straining eyes, reluctant to lift a finger—crushed by the oppression of the heat.

Where the sun struck the pitch bubbled in the planking; the iron stays and the brass fittings were so hot that they blistered the hand that dared touch them. The man at the wheel dripped, bathed in perspiration, his thin shirt and light duck trousers sodden with moisture, his face a dull, reddish purple.

By his side an officer languished, opening his mouth regretfully to deliver low-voiced orders. Everyone, man and master, was sunk deep in a daze of suffering caused by the heat.

Madame la Princesse kept her stateroom; Mouchon, D'Ervy, the prince and Chambret, sat listless in the main saloon, hugging the windows for a breath of air; in the chartroom the *petit* Lemercier hung over the table, his eyes glued in fascination upon a map of the neighboring coast. The captain stood by his shoulder, poising a pair of compasses to indicate a particular spot on the map.

"If your information is correct, monsieur," he said, "here is the oasis. Here is the mouth of the Wady Saglat—and here is the *Eirene."*

"So near?" breathed the visionary. "So near?"

"In two hours, monsieur, we make the coast."

"Yes—yes," responded Lemercier, devouring the map—his future empire!—with his gaze.

Some minutes passed, the captain waiting with his head to one side, his eyes narrowed, as a man that harkens for an expected sound.

Presently he was rewarded; the ship seemed to spring to sudden life. There was a commotion upon the decks, the sounds of excited voices crying, "There! there!" to one another; and then the voice of the lookout:

"Land ho!"

The *petit* Lemercier turned with a strangled cry of expectation, and rushed from the chartroom, the captain following.

In the saloon, Chambret rose, startled for the moment.

"Cape Juby at last, messieurs!" he cried.

M. le Prince turned upon him a cold, malicious eye.

"Monsieur is excitable," he observed, sneering offensively.

Chambret fought down his resentment of the personality; he had agreed with O'Rourke not to permit the prince to quarrel with him, as yet.

"Possibly," he admitted at last, placidly. "I go on deck to observe the fringe of the new empire," he added.

Prince Felix yawned and stretched himself.

"Monsieur is at liberty to go whither he lists," he remarked, with the same jeering air.

"Without obtaining permission from M. le Prince?" inquired Chambret, respectfully. "For that, many thanks."

He met Prince Felix's gaze with one so steadfast that the *roué* duelist dropped his lashes; and then Chambret, with a short laugh, went on deck.

As he emerged from the companion way he met O'Rourke, walking forward.

The Irishman was dressed for his coming part; there would be an immediate landing, as all guessed from a knowledge of the impatient nature of the *petit* Lemercier, and O'Rourke would be expected to head the army of occupation.

He was, therefore, attired in khaki, with a pith helmet and puttees of the same dust-colored material; on his shoulders were the straps bearing the insignia of his rank, and by his side a light sword; a leathern holster hung at his belt, holding a revolver of respectable size.

Thus togged out, he looked uncommonly comfortable and at peace with the heat; the light-green lining of his helmet threw over his brow a pale tint that added to the general effect and aroused Chambret's humorously expressed jealousy.

"If monsieur will consent to become an officer of the army," retorted the Irishman, "he may wear one of these beautiful uniforms."

"It is gay and tempting," admitted Chambret. "Does your offer include the accouterments?" glancing at the revolver.

"All," returned the Irishman.

"I've a great mind to accept," said Chambret. "I desire to wear one of those pretty popguns that you affect, monsieur."

"It would adorn you."

"And add immeasurably to my peace of mind."

O'Rourke raised his brows in inquiry.

"M. le Prince?" he asked, in a low tone, nodding his head significantly toward the companion way.

"More offensive than ever," said Chambret. "How you stand his insinuative insults is more than I can comprehend in you, monsieur, whom I know to be a man of spirit."

"Thank you; I'm all of that," agreed O'Rourke, readily. "But for the present I'm cold-bloodedly biding my time. It will come."

"And——"

"And from the moment M. le Prince attempts any funny business ashore, Chambret, he will begin to lose prestige. In fact," he drawled, "I think I may state that he will be the most astonished princeling that ever came to Africa."

"I do not comprehend——"

"Wait—wait, *mon ami*."

Laughing confidently O'Rourke went forward, accompanied by Chambret.

Lemercier was hanging over the bows, the captain by his side; O'Rourke drew Chambret's attention to him.

"Drunk with imperial glory," he observed; "a sad sight."

He entered the wheel house familiarly, and returned at once with a pair of binoculars. Chambret had already climbed to the bridge; O'Rourke joined him, adjusted the glasses, and began to watch the nearing coast line with a painstaking attention.

Time and again he swept its outlines with the glasses; then, at length sighing as though with relief, he turned them over to Chambret.

The latter, who had marked O'Rourke's intent scrutiny with wonder, suited the binoculars to his own eyes eagerly, and imitated his companion's use of them. When he put them down, "There is nothing," he said, blankly.

"Nothing," affirmed O'Rourke, "save sand and heat and silence, so far as one can tell. Praises be to the saints if it is so in truth!" he added, piously.

"What do you mean, monsieur? What did you fear to find in this uninhabitable desert?"

"Tawareks," answered O'Rourke, briefly.

"Tawareks? What be they, monsieur—bird or beast, or——"

"Devils," the Irishman indicated, sen-

tentiously. "Devils in human guise, my dear Chambret."

The Frenchman frowned, perplexed.

"I do not comprehend."

"You've never heard of the Tawareks, monsieur? 'The masked pirates of the desert,' as your press terms them? The natives that made you more trouble in the Soudan—around about Timbuctu—than any others?"

Chambret shook his head.

"I knew that there was resistance, but, as your song says, monsieur, 'All coons look alike to me.'"

"The Tawareks are not niggers," objected O'Rourke. "They are the inhabitants of the desert, of the Sahara proper—a branch of the Berbers, perhaps the root of the Berber family tree. They are almost white.

"They infest the desert, hanging about caravan routes; they are robbers—pirates, in short—and rule their country with a rod of iron. Not a caravan passes through their territory unscathed that has not paid tribute in the shape of toll money to the Tawareks. They are—devils incarnate! That's about all."

"And you fear them here, monsieur?"

"Much. Why else should I have insisted on a force of forty fighting men, rather than the original ten which M. le Prince suggested?"

Chambret pursed his lips and shrugged his shoulders.

"I will join your army, monsieur," he volunteered, "and wear one of your pretty uniforms—and the revolver."

"You're welcome," said O'Rourke, simply, again assuming the glasses. After a second reassuring inspection he nevertheless called Burke, and issued to him orders concerning the arms and ammunition of the troopers.

The *Eirene* plowed on toward the coast; gradually it loomed before her bows until its configuration could be discerned with the unaided eye—a long, low line of shelving beach that rose, back from the sea, in yellow sand hills, irregular, studded with clumps of stunted grass; hills that reached inland to the eastern horizon in an unbroken array of rounded forms, sweltering beneath the sky of brass, beneath the unblinking sun; lonely, desolate, barren—a monstrous bald place upon the poll of the earth.

Not a sign of life was there; nothing but the sand and the silence and the sun. The sense of solitude was overpowering. Not even a bird of prey hung poised in the saffron sky; for here was nought to prey upon.

Those of the ship's company who were to land—that is, all save the sailors—watched the scene unceasingly, with increasing perturbation. Surely, they said one to another, it was inconceivable that man could win him a foothold in this place of barrenness. They turned their eyes to the *petit* Lemercier, the more outspoken grumbling, fomenting mutiny among their fellows.

Was he to take them there, to keep them in the solitude; the place without shade or water? Did he dream of this?

Even Lemercier himself was disturbed; the rosy visions that had been his faded. For an instant he was perilously near to disillusionment, near to turning back and abandoning his project.

The land was so different from what he had been led to expect, from the land his wishful imagination had pictured to him. Had he been deceived—or had he been merely self-deceived? Should he persist? Would his plans bear fruit?

Thus he vacillated; and would probably have acknowledged defeat ere giving battle with this wilderness but for M. le Prince de Grandlieu.

Instinctly the latter had dreaded the effect of Lemercier's first sight of the land he had come to conquer. Now he was ever at his dupe's elbow, an evil genius whispering encouragement in his ear.

"Irrigation—wait, *mon ami,* and observe what irrigation shall do here! The oasis? We have been misled; our information was erroneous. Beyond doubt it exists, either here or hereabouts. The makers of maps, even, are liable to mistakes. Let us go on, down the coast——" etc.

Lemercier's mood changed under the stimulus of his mentor's encouraging words. His brow cleared; he straight-

ened his slight form, throwing back his shoulders proudly, frowning at the desert.

He had come to fight it. So—he would fight it—and he would conquer it, or die in the attempt.

By his order, for hours the *Eirene* shaped her course southwards, down the coast. By degrees almost imperceptible it changed in aspect; the dunes became higher, more solid appearing to the eye. the lay of the country more rough and rugged.

At about four o'clock in the afternoon the yacht rounded a point, to come suddenly upon what seemed to be, at first glance, a broad bay, a natural harbor.

The captain of the vessel was the first to discover its true nature; after a hasty inspection of the chart, he announced:

"The mouth of the Wady Saglat."

"A river!" cried Lemercier, triumphantly.

"A dead river," amended the captain; "its mouth forms an estuary of a kind. There should be anchorage here."

"But the oasis?"

At this moment Prince Felix entered the chartroom.

"The lookout," he said, "reports a large clump of trees a considerable distance inland."

Lemercier danced with excitement, shrilling out orders; M. le Prince watched him with an amusement tempered with disdain—which, however, he took care not to let appear in his expression.

The yacht was brought to a stop within the mouth of the Wady; the anchor was dropped and the surmise of the captain proved correct; the holding was good.

Boats were rigged out, and the troops piled into them—M. le *petit* Lemercier in the foremost, standing at the prow with the pose of the heroic leader of an invading army, his helmet in his hand, his hair, the color of tow, tossed back from his narrow forehead, his head high, eyes fixed, lips smiling—an object, in short, of derision to the more light-minded members of his expedition, of pity to all.

O'Rourke followed, in the second boat, with some of his troops. He was the second to step ashore, and at that just in time to catch the arm of the impetuous Lemercier and save him from a fall in the sands.

The Frenchman who would be emperor, in his overwhelming desire to set foot upon the lands he designed for empire, was over-hasty in jumping ashore. He slipped, stumbled, plunged forward with wildly grasping hands.

"An omen!" he cried, turning toward O'Rourke, when by his aid he had regained balance.

His countenance had lost its proud smile; he seemed a very child to O'Rourke—a child frightened by the darkness or by an old woman's tale. His lip trembled, his eyes were filled with dread—and with tears; he quivered with a sort of terror.

"An omen!" he repeated, pleadingly; "an inauspicious omen!"

"Nonsense!" derided O'Rourke, filled with a sudden pity for the child. "Monsieur stumbled, it is true; the way to empire is not smooth. But he did not fall; he stands firmly on his feet.

"I would ask monsieur not to forget by whose hand," he added, significantly, yet laughing.

Lemercier brightened.

"I shall not forget, *mon ami*," he promised.

"The memory of monarchs is short," O'Rourke told himself.

Other boats followed, discharging their occupants, returning to the *Eirene* for more; within a short time the toiling sailors at the oars had landed the expedition in its entirety.

So far there had been no demonstration.

Now Lemercier stood surrounded by his associates and friends—by no means to be confused; on the one hand, Madame la Princesse—charming, beautiful and distinguished and utterly out of place in her Parisian summer gown—O'Rourke, Chambret; on the other, Prince Felix, D'Ervy, Mouchon; and behind them all, in double rank, the forty troops commanded by Burke—all now neat and soldierly of appearance in

khaki uniforms, all armed with Mausers, bayonets, revolvers.

Mouchon, bearing the jacketed standard of the new empire, offered it to Lemercier, judging that the time was ripe. The *petit* Lemercier, however, was of a different mind.

"Not here," he decided; "not upon the seashore; I am not inclined to imitate King Canute. Let us go inland—to the oasis."

The procession moved off, plodding desperately in the hollows of the dunes, guided by men who climbed the hills to report the way.

But it seemed that it was farther than the leader had calculated; he himself grew weary of the tiresome journey, and when O'Rourke stepped to his side, and suggested that it would be impossible to reach the oasis before dark, he halted.

"Mouchon!" he called. "Give me the flag. At least it shall be unfurled in the sun's rays."

They halted in the center of a natural depression, something like a square half mile in area, almost level, bounded by the silent, forbidding hills of sand.

Again the little company took up its position. Lemercier took the standard, unwrapped its waterproof covering. He stepped to the fore of the assemblage, raising his shrill, nasal voice.

"In the name of the progress of God's civilization," he announced, "I, Leopold, do declare this country mine by the right of discovery; and I name it the Empire of the Sahara!"

There was a moment's silence; Leopold had been schooled to his part. He sank upon one knee and bowed his head, appearing to invite the blessing of the Diety upon his empire. Then, abruptly, as though moved by a spring, he jumped to his feet and unfurled the standard.

It waved in the breeze created by his own frantic movements, from side to side—a purple flag, fringed with gold, with three golden bees embroidered upon it in a triangular arrangement, in the center of which was the emperor's initial—"L." The last crimson rays of the dying sun caught it, and lit it up brightly.

From the group about the emperor a feeble cheer arose; then Capt Burke rose to the occasion.

"Cheer, ye tarriers!" he growled, in a undertone, raising his sword aloft and waving it. "Yelp, ye scuts, as though ye believed in him yerselves! Prisint ar-rms!" he roared. "Now, byes, wan, two, three——"

The soldiery, grinning, filled the little valley with their shouts.

"Vive l'Empereur!"

"Again!"

"Vive l'Empereur!"

"Wance again, la-ads! Now——"

For a third time they gave the *petit* Lemercier a crashing cheer; it thundered from their throats and—was lost. The silence that lay upon the hills, lifeless, dull, empty even of echoes, fell upon and crushed the sound to nothing.

But, for all that, the noise, the spirit of the words cried in his name, was meat and drink to the *petit* Lemercier, and a joy to the soul of him.

He raised his head, regally, smiling, and began a speech.

"Messieurs!" he cried, "I——"

His voice died to a whisper in his throat; his flush paled; he collapsed suddenly from the statue of an emperor to the frightened child again.

"Gen. O'Rourke——" he faltered.

The eyes of the company followed the direction of his gaze.

Abruptly, noiselessly, the summits of the surrounding hills had become peopled; out of the wilderness men had sprung to look upon this man who declared himself their ruler.

Col. O'Rourke cast his eyes about the whole circumference of the little valley; on every hilltop there were men, seated silently upon the back of camels, watching, it seemed, sardonically the show beneath them; men of giant figures and lordly bearing, clothed for the most part in flowing white burnooses and headdresses of white. Each bore upon his hip, as a cavalryman carries his carbine, a long rifle; and each was masked with black below his eyes.

For a full minute the tableau obtained; the forlorn little company in the valley motionless with astonishment, transfixed

with a chill of fear; the spectators upon the dunes gazing grimly down—quiet and sinister, bulking against the darkling sky like some portentous army of ghosts.

O'Rourke was the first to move; he realized that the time was little for what must be done. Already the sun was down; there would be a few fleeting moments of twilight, then the sudden swooping desert night.

"Tawareks!" he shouted. "The masked Tawareks! Men, form a square! Burke, run back and see if the way to the boats be clear; if not, we'll have to fight through them!"

He turned to his princess.

"Madame," he said, "there is but one place for you—the center of the square! We fight for our lives now, and against odds."

He drew his breath sharply, thinking of the two long miles that lay between them and the boats.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

The Courage of Flint Dickson

BY W. BERT FOSTER

Author of "The Peril of Horace Dunn," "Who Was George Bryson?" Etc.

In which it is shown that the attribute of personal bravery does not always go to the strong.

"I DUNNO what's the matter with that feller," Capt. Amasy declared, as the old double-ender just scaled the bell buoy at the entrance of the Old Harbor, and left a perfect crescent of foam-streaked green water in her wake as she bore off for the Sou'-east Light. "He's got my blood in him, I 'low—leastwise, the Dickson blood—but we never had a craven in the fam'bly before."

"That's what comes o' too much schoolin'," grunted Abner Mott, who sat, Turklike, on the *Mary Etta's* littered deck near at hand, and polished his "iron" with a bit of shark skin. Old Ab had been many a voyage in whale ships, and although striking a swordfish was petty work beside striking a sperm whale, he continued the old habits of the full-fledged whaleman and kept his iron bright.

"Don't I know how it's acted with my Amarilly? That gal was likely enough 'fore her mother let her go off'n the island for an eddication. Bah! What your Flint wants ter know is how to find fish, or to raise corn and spuds on a grav'ly hillside; and my Amarilly'd better be dish washin' an' knittin'. Times is out o' kelter, skipper."

"I 'low so—I 'low so," acquiesced the other old fellow, jogging the tiller a trifle that the *Mary Etta* might give the land a little wider berth.

And the old fellows were not alone in their poor opinion of Flint Dickson.

"The name don't fit him—durned if it does!" Sam Dundee declared, rolling his quid and spitting emphatically beyond the low rail. "Flint nothin'! Flint can be ground inter sand, I swan; but that feller ain't got enough grit in his craw ter be healthy."

"Babied too much," suggested the other member of the *Mary Etta's* crew, Sol Parry.

"Widder's son; never turn out wuth a hang when they're brought up tied ter th' petticuts," said Sam. "Wonder his Uncle Amasy has him aboard. We might ha' had a good man in Josh Smedley. He'd like ter mess 'ith us this season."

Meanwhile, the unconscious cause of all this comment lay dreaming upon the deck, forward, his arms under his head, his cap visor shading his eyes, and those same eyes fixed upon the panorama of the island as it passed.

He was Flint Dickson, twenty years of age, slight but athletic of build, with a good head and more in it than is usually the case with the island boys, whose opportunities for education have been, in the past, extremely limited.

But Flint had begun life with a passionate desire to be something and somebody higher than his mates. His mother had been "a foreigner," in the eyes of the islanders; she had not been born out here in the ocean, with only Point Judith and Watch Hill in sight to remind the inhabitants that Manises had not floated away from America altogether.

So, when the poorly equipped old school on the West Side offered him no further advancement, Flint had gone across to Newport, and worked days while he attended night school through a winter or two. Then he fared farther afield, going to the State capital and working to pay for his tuition at a private school. Finally he had entered a medical school, and was now home on his first vacation.

But he could not remain idle. There was a chance for him to "buy in" for the season with his Uncle Amasy on the *Mary Etta.* He hated fishing—as a business; but when the swordfish run well there is good money made by the dirty old double-enders with their rusty "pulpits" in the bows, and their nests of dories amidships.

It was early in the season yet; but if the swordfish came early and stayed late on the banks, Flint would carry back a tidy sum to school with him in the fall. Just now, however, he was glad there was little likelihood of their sighting a swordfish that day. He wanted to lie right where he was, and rest his eyes on the brown and green checked heights of the east shore of the island.

He did his share of the work; but he wore gloves to save his hands, walked gingerly about the smack when she pitched in a rough sea, and was awkward in a dory. And, later on this day, when a wind-driven hand's patch of inky cloud rolled up the sky behind them and finally spit a nasty squall upon the tossing double-ender, Flint Dickson actually turned pale. He had been too long away from the sea to be callous of danger, and his lack of "sand" was more apparent to his mates than ever.

Nevertheless, when night came and the effort to beat back to the island in the face of the off-shore gale which followed the squall, proved fruitless, even the hardened fishermen grumbled a bit over the inconvenience of remaining away from home overnight. Often they did it in good weather and when the swordfish were to be captured; but this was different.

Indeed, before midnight the old *Mary Etta,* with scarcely a rag of sail showing, was pushing her nose into the smother in the direction of the coast of Spain, for they had actually been obliged to turn tail and run for it!

Pale-faced, Flint said nothing; but his heart *did* belie his name. The *Mary Etta* seemed an exceedingly small craft out here among the tumbling waves.

The gust blew itself out by daylight, however, and the sky cleared promisingly. They were not far out of the path of incoming craft, Old Ab assured them, and the *Mary Etta* was as sound as a dollar. Besides, they had company—a big, black-hulled and rather weather-beaten bark, which stood in for the distant land with her tattered sails spread as well as might be.

But she was "lame." It took but half an eye, said that deep-water sailor, Old Ab, to tell that.

"She's a flag upside down at her masthead," observed Capt. Amasy. "That's meanin' distress, I've no doubt."

They beat up toward the big bark, and the little crew of the *Mary Etta* grew excited. The old wrecking instinct is still rife in the Block Islander. Time was when two "wracking companies" prospered on its treacherous coast. The thought of salvage brightened the eyes of all but Flint.

He was quite as interested, but from a different cause. The bark, which proclaimed herself in dingy paint under the stern, the *Sally Mulholland,* of Liverpool, had evidently made a long and hard voyage of it. Her paint was blistered—was off entirely, in fact, in patches—her upper spars a mere tangle of splinters, and her bulwarks smashed in more than one place. She rolled uneasily in the gray seas.

"There's som'at wrong with her crew as well's with herself," declared Capt. Amasy. "No decent skipper'd leave his upperworks in such shape. What d'ye think, Ab?"

"Right," grunted that oracle.

"Look's like as though Flint was takin' a wondrous interest in the craft," said Sam to Sol, motioning towards the medical student who had gone into the pulpit and clung there with both hands to the iron rail while he stared at the bark. The *Mary Etta* was crawling up very slowly upon the ship in distress, for the wind was ahead.

The sky having cleared, the summer sun shone exceedingly warm upon the sea now. It was almost tropical, and as the island smack drew nearer the high hulk of the stranger, Flint inflated his nostrils and sniffed eagerly. An odor—oppressive, sickening, appalling to one who recognized its cause—was wafted down to them from the laboring bark. They were now almost within a rope cast of the hulk.

"Where d'yeou s'pose the crew is?" Sam was just demanding, when suddenly two clawlike hands appeared upon a guy, and there was slowly raised into view a blotched, emaciated face—a horrid caricature of the human countenance.

"Looker that! looker that!" yelled Sol, with bulging eyes, and pointing a wavering digit at the apparition.

"The man's sick," declared Capt. Amasy. "They're down with bilious fever—'r suthin'. I wonder can we help 'em?"

"I reckon we gotter try," declared Old Ab. "Think o' floatin' around here in the ocean without men enough to man the old barkie! No wonder she's damaged."

Sam was getting a dory ready to drop over the side, and now called to Sol and Flint to help him. The latter came slowly.

"Aw, come erlong!" growled Sam. "Don't be such a baby. Thought you was studyin' to be a doctor, anyway? 'Fraid of a little fever?"

"It isn't fever," said Flint, gravely.

His uncle turned to look at him. The young fellow's voice did not shake, but there was a strange timbre to it. "What's got into you, Flint?" he demanded.

Flint glanced up again at the bark's rail, seemingly almost over their heads. The terrible face had disappeared.

"It is not fever on that ship," he said. "I knew what it was before I saw the man. I could smell it."

"What is it?" demanded Sol, shaking visibly.

"Smallpox," said Flint. "The *Sally Mulholland* is a floating pesthouse. We'd better not all go aboard her."

All go aboard! The two old men like the two younger, shrank at the words. To lend a hand—even in the nursing of men afflicted with a contagious fever—was all right. But smallpox!

"God help the poor critters!" burst from Capt. Amasy's throat. "There ain't no help for 'em, then."

"We'd be flyin' in the face of Providence ter go aboard," agreed Old Ab.

" 'Member when the Portugee had it down on the South Side?" gasped Sam. "He died horrible, they said."

"Sheer off! sheer off, skipper!" cried Sol. "That ain't no place for us. My! my! jest smell that, will ye?"

"Be yeou sure, Flint?" demanded his uncle.

Flint nodded, and dove below. He came up in a minute with his arms full. "What are you doing?" he shouted, as

he saw the *Mary Etta* bearing off from the pest ship.

"What are *you* doin'?" demanded the skipper, in turn.

Flint cast his burden into the dory Sam had been getting ready. "I'm going aboard there, of course. What do you expect? You wouldn't sail away, and leave these poor devils alone, would you?"

"But it's smallpox!" cried Sol, wildly.

"You ain't foolin' us, be yeou, Flint?" demanded Sam.

Flint ignored this as beneath notice. "You get this boat over and give me the oars," he said. "I don't ask any of you to go with me. But somebody must do what they can for the crew of that ship."

His companions seemed numbed by the apparent change in the fellow. He who fished in gloves, and was afraid of a squall, and seemed to hate work, stepped into the dory as calmly as though he were bound on a visit to a pleasure yacht. They saw him go in stunned amaze; then his uncle wondered why he had allowed it. What would his sister-in-law say? And she a widow!

The dory was rowed to the bark, and Flint hailed, standing up waveringly in the boat and screaming at the top of his voice. Those left aboard the smack forgot to laugh at his awkwardness. They were too deeply impressed by the occasion—too deeply conscious that what the young man was doing was a very brave thing indeed!

There was no reply to his hail. That horrible face did not appear again at the rail. So the undaunted Flint rowed up till he could fasten the dory's painter to the anchor chains. There was danger of the light craft being smashed at every roll of the bark, but he tossed his bundles aboard, and then climbed up himself, leaving the dory to its fate.

The sight on that deck! Well, Flint Dickson can never be got to tell of that. Once he came to the rail and hailed his friends through a speaking trumpet, begging them to stand by the bark unless the weather turned bad. Her lower sails were spread—the last work of her unfortunate crew—and her wheel was lashed. She was moving landward at a snail's pace, but still making in the right direction.

After dark those aboard the *Mary Etta* saw a light appear at the bark's lea rail, and then, one after the other, they counted five heavy splashes in the now quieting sea. Sewed in canvas and heavily shotted, five of the crew of the *Sally Mulholland* sought their last resting place on the Block Island bank.

The next evening two more followed their comrades. But there were no more after that. There were plenty of drugs aboard the pest ship, and properly applied, together with the health-giving air (for he brought them all up from below and attended them on deck) the seven remaining members of the *Sally Mulholland's* crew began to mend.

This second day, too, the *Mary Etta* spoke an ingoing steamer, and on the evening of the third day a towing vessel, with a corps of surgeons and nurses from New York, came to the assistance of the medical student. And it was well they did, and that the weather remained fine until they arrived. When he was relieved, Flint keeled over, himself—but not with the dread disease which had ravaged the crew of the bark. They had him around, as chipper as ever, before the bark finally anchored in Quarantine.

It was some weeks, of course, ere the authorities allowed anybody to leave the ship, and even then Flint did not go back to the island. "I don't want to be lionized," he wrote his mother. "Besides, one of the surgeons here has taken a fancy to me. I'm going to study with him until school opens again. And the owners of the *Sally Mulholland* have treated me so handsomely that I reckon we can afford to lose my share of the *Mary Etta's* profits this season."

But he didn't. Capt. Amasy religiously turned over to the widow a fifth of the sales. And as for Old Ab, and Sam, and Sol—well, you ask them their opinion of the courage of Flint Dickson!

THE ETERNAL SNARE*

BY ARTHUR W. MARCHMONT

Author of "When I Was Czar," "A Dash for a Throne," "By Right of Sword," Etc.

SYNOPSIS OF CHAPTERS PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED.

Mervyn Ormesby, who tells the story, is the secretary of Cyrus Grant, an American multi-millionaire, who has plans to Americanize a part of the Turkish Empire for commercial purposes. The two, while walking in a suburb of Constantinople, rescue a Greek woman named Haidee Patras from assassination. The Greek is engaged in a plot to remove the Sultan, and Grant, notwithstanding his affiliation with the Turkish Government, becomes so fascinated with her that he decides to join the conspirators. Enid Grant, his sister, is present in Constantinople. She promptly denounces the Greek, and attempts to deter Grant from involving himself, but without success. The secretary, Ormesby, returning, from a brief absence, is told that his employer, Cyrus Grant, has been mysteriously poisoned.

CHAPTER IX.

"CYRUS HAS BEEN POISONED."

AS I was turning in to the great gates I met Lord Angus Markwell rushing out in a condition of breathless excitement.

"Is that you, Mr. Ormesby?" he cried, as he all but ran me down. "Where the deuce have you been?"

"About my own business," I answered, curtly, anything but pleased by his inquisitiveness.

"I've been looking for you in every bally place in Pera I could think of."

"That's very interesting."

"There's the devil to pay here."

"Then pay him. Good-night," I said, in a surly tone, and moved on.

"Wait a second. Grant's been taken ill, and Miss Grant sent round to me to try and hunt you out. I'm positively done up."

I did not wait to hear him out, but dashed on up to the house.

"What has happened, Stuart?" I asked my own servant, who always waited for me in the hall when I was out.

"Mr. Grant was taken suddenly ill this evening, sir, and Miss Grant has been asking most anxiously for you. I have been out looking for you, but——"

"Tell her I have come in," I interrupted, "and ask where I can see her. Bring me word to my room."

"I beg your pardon. A moment, if you please, sir," said Stuart, in a low voice. "Something has happened in your private room, and thinking you might wish to see it for yourself I locked the door. Here is the key."

I took it and hurried to the room, and the instant I entered I saw something that caused me intense surprise.

A number of papers which I had left on my table in their usual order had been disarranged, and in the middle of them lay a small heap of ashes, as if some of the papers had been burned, and close to the heap was a half-smoked cigar.

I was staring at all this in bewilder-

* This story, "The Eternal Snare," began last month. The number containing the first instalment can be obtained through any newsdealer or direct from the publishers for ten cents.

ment, when Stuart came to say that Enid was waiting for me in the drawing room.

"Get your mind quite clear about this, Stuart," I said, waving my hand toward the mess on the table, "and tell me presently exactly what has occurred." I locked the door behind us, and went off to Enid.

"Oh, where have you been and why were you away at such a time?" she cried, in a tone of distraction. She was ashen pale, and wringing her hands. "Thank God, you have come. Cyrus has been poisoned by that Greek woman."

"You must be calmer than this, and not make such wild, random assertions," I said, firmly.

"Calm! Would you have me calm when my brother has been murdered?" She was almost hysterical, and spoke in high-pitched, excited tones.

"Please tell me all there is to tell, Miss Grant, so that I can judge what to do. You are only making bad worse by this." I spoke very sharply.

The collapse came then, and she broke down, and, falling into a chair, commenced to gasp and sob vehemently and wildly. I called Stuart, sent for restoratives, and when, after some minutes, she recovered, the shedding of tears seemed to have given her relief, and she soon grew calmer.

Then she told me with many breaks and interruptions what had occurred so far as she knew.

Grant, it appears, had been with Haidee for some time after our return from Maraboukh Pasha, and had then asked for me, to learn, of course, that I was absent. He and Mrs. Wellings and Haidee Patras had dined together, Grant being apparently in very high spirits. Enid had dined by herself in her own rooms, as after the scene on the launch she and the Greek had not met. After dinner Grant had gone to my room for what purpose Enid did not know, and very soon afterward a servant had come rushing to her to say he had fallen down in a fit.

She had gone to him at once, and had taken command, acting very promptly, but in one thing with amazing indiscretion. She had Grant carried to bed, sent for a doctor, Dr. Arbuthnot, and dispatched Stuart for me, with orders to get Lord Angus Markwell to join in the hunt; and having done so far very well had lost her head and launched into a violent denunciation of the Greek, and given the servants peremptory instructions not to allow Mlle Patras near her brother's room, asserting her belief that Grant had been poisoned, and that the Greek was responsible. After that she had waited in feverish impatience for my return.

It was a nice caldron of troubles, and, woman-like, she finished with the extremely unfair reproach that it would probably not have happened had I been at home.

"What does Dr. Arbuthnot think?" I asked.

"I don't know. He won't say it's poison, but I know it is. He's with Cyrus now."

"Then I'll go up and see him," and we went up together.

Grant certainly looked so ill that I thought he was dying. His face was gray, the lips were livid, the closed eyelids were almost purple, as were the sockets, he was bathed in most profuse perspiration and his breathing was short, fearfully labored and stertorous, while now and again his limbs twitched under the bedclothes and his huge frame shuddered spasmodically.

Mrs. Wellings and a nurse were assisting the doctor, who did not take our intrusion at all kindly.

"Miss Grant, if you remain here I shall have two patients instead of one," he said, sharply; "and you, Mr. Ormesby, can do no good here. I don't like the room crowded."

"One word, doctor," I returned, as I drew him aside. "Will he recover?"

"I hope so now. I think so. He is a very powerful man, fortunately."

"What is the cause?"

"Apoplexy, Mr. Ormesby," he answered, loudly enough for the rest to hear, but giving me at the same time a significant look and whispering, "I'll see

you when I come down. Take Miss Grant away, please," and he went back to the bedside.

Enid was standing at the foot of the bed staring fixedly at her brother with a look of strained feeling and pain and distress; through her eyes her very soul was speaking of her love and fear for the sick man with an intense and consuming passion of sorrow. I touched her arm.

"Dr. Arbuthnot would rather we did not stay here," I said.

"For Cyrus' sake or mine?" she asked, her eyes hungry with desire to stay.

"For your brother's sake, Miss Grant," said the doctor, who had caught the whisper.

"Then I will go. Oh, if he should die!" It was a whisper to herself, and she sighed heavily and trembled.

"He will not die," said the doctor again, quietly.

"Thank you, doctor," she answered. "I can go now." She went silently to the bed and kissed her brother, and then came away with me. As soon as we were outside the door she stopped and leaned for support against the wall, her face the very presentment of white anguish.

"Wait one moment," she said, and I stayed in silence, marveling. How I had misread her! I had never conceived that this depth of feeling lay beneath the even surface of her usual bearing. It was a revelation and helped me to understand her passionate treatment of Mlle. Patras. "How weak you will think me," she said, presently, with a faint, wan smile, and then we went on down to the drawing room.

I was anxious to hear what Stuart had to tell me and to go to my room, but I did not see how to leave Enid. She sat with clasped hands in an attitude of deep dejection, her head bent and her eyes fixed on the floor, listening, as I guessed, for the footsteps of the doctor with news from the sick room. I watched her very anxiously, wishing I could do or say something to ease the strain, and yet unable to do anything, and presently she raised her head quickly, listened and then sprang up and looked eagerly toward the door.

"The doctor, at last," she cried, and a moment afterward the door was opened.

But it was not Dr. Arbuthnot. To my consternation, Mlle Patras entered, looking not a whit less distracted and anguish-riven than Enid herself. On seeing the Greek, Enid started and drew a deep breath, while a flush of pink rushed into her pale cheeks. The Greek on her side was equally moved, and the two stood for a space facing each other in silence. Then Haidee closed the door and turned to me.

"What is this terrible news I have just heard, Mr. Ormesby? Is Mr. Grant ill? Where is he? I wish to go to him."

"That you cannot do; you shall not," said Enid, instantly.

"Mr. Ormesby, I implore you to tell me the truth."

Enid laughed, a little, scornful, scoffing laugh.

"You act well, mademoiselle; but we were not all blind here. I can understand your anxiety. You have done your work well and now are anxious to know that it was well done, and but for the blessing of God you would have succeeded."

"What do you mean?" asked the Greek, turning then to her and speaking in a low tone of pain.

"Mr. Grant has been taken ill suddenly," I began, when Enid interrupted me almost fiercely.

"My brother has been poisoned, Mlle. Patras; poisoned by you, and he is now battling for life."

"Poisoned!" It was no more than a whisper, and for a moment she reeled and had to clutch the back of a chair to save herself from falling. I made a step forward to help her; but with a great effort she rallied her strength. "Holy Mother of God, it cannot be true!"

"Cyrus is not here to see you act, mademoiselle," said Enid, in the same hard, scornful tone. "Is not this a little—superfluous; this emotion?" But

Haidee appeared too overcome by the news to heed Enid's scorn.

"It cannot be true, surely it cannot," she murmured, in her own tongue. "What can it mean? My God, can it have come to this?"

"Mr. Ormesby understands your language. You should be careful," said Enid, in the same tone.

"Can I not see him?" asked Haidee, in English.

"No. You shall not go to gloat over your work. I have given the servants orders that you shall not be allowed to see him."

"Oh, God, how cruel you are!" came like a cry from the Greek's heart.

I confess I was deeply moved, and to me her anguish had all the look and ring of genuine feeling. But Enid was untouched.

"You had better return to your rooms, mademoiselle," she said, coldly. "Unless you would prefer to leave the house while the way is still open."

"I must see him, I must," cried Haidee. "I know he would have me go to him, if he knew."

"If he knew, mademoiselle!" retorted Enid, catching her last words and repeating them with pungent significance. "If he knew, you would never have had the chance to do this."

Anger began now to come to the Greek's aid as the first sharp sting of the blow abated. She met Enid's scornful look firmly, and, taking a step or two nearer to her, answered, in a tone of concentrated feeling:

"Do you dare to charge this terrible thing to me? To me, who love your brother with a passion that would make death for his sake welcome?"

"He is not here to listen to you and be cheated, and I understand you too well."

"And you are his sister? His flesh and kin; born of the same mother; nurtured at the same breast; and yet are—this!"

Her indignation was almost magnificent as she drew herself to her full height and flashed her eyes, all ablaze with anger, upon her accuser. But as if perceiving suddenly the futility of any anger, she changed in a moment to a tone of suppliant entreaty.

"Ah, do not heed my anger. I call back the words. I am sorry I spoke them, but you goaded me. I would not anger you. You are his sister, and you must have a heart. See, I am overwhelmed by this fearful thing. Holy Mother of God, what can I say to touch your heart and make you feel something of the tempest of grief in my own? I love him so. I love him so. I must go to him."

The scene was getting past bearing.

"He is quite unconscious, mademoiselle," I said, "and your going——" but Enid broke in upon me again.

"Is impossible. She shall not see him," she declared, vehemently, stamping her foot; and then to the Greek: "It was a pity to interrupt you. You would appeal to my heart, you say. I will answer the appeal. I love my brother with a love you do not understand, perhaps; and the very depth and strength of that love it is that fills me with passion against his murderers."

"Ah!"

Anger, indignation, protest, pain, all were in that one exclamation, and Haidee winced and shrank as from a blow, until with a strength of will that surprised me, she crushed back all feelings in the one consuming desire to gain her end. Knowing the fiery temperament of the Greek, her passionate resentment of insult, and the impatience of restraint and control which was the dominant note of her character; and believing as I did that she hated Enid and harbored a love of revenge for the former insult, her conduct seemed a supreme effort of self-restraint. If acting, then surely magnificent in its consummate realism.

"If you believe your own cruel words, oh, so deadly cruel, how can I hope to prevail with you?" she said, her voice vibrating with intense feeling. "But I would forget your cruelty, my ears would be deaf to your charge, I would have you think what you would suffer were you in my place, if the man you loved, if love you do, lay dying and you were kept from his side. You are a

woman and you know how a woman's heart yearns to succor the man she loves in the hour of darkness, suffering and pain. It may be but little we can do, but how gladly is not that little done, what comfort it gives us to do it; what heart rest there is in the mere acts of ministering! I urge you, therefore; I beg of you, nay, I supplicate you here on my knees before you, do not deny me;" and throwing herself on her knees she tried to take Enid's hand, and when that was hastily withdrawn, to clutch her dress.

If this were not genuine feeling and grief, surely it was a marvelous presentment of sincerity, and the motive must be powerful and absorbing indeed which could drive a woman of such self-strength, courage and pride to abase herself in this way. But Enid remained, outwardly at least, unmoved. She drew back from the kneeling, urgent woman, and in a voice as firm as before said:

"I do not wish you to kneel to me, Mlle Patras. If this sorrowing of yours is genuine, it will give you the measure of my own suffering. And so long as I can prevent it you shall never see my brother. You have done harm enough."

The Greek half raised her hands as if in protest or entreaty, but let them fall again instantly, sighed and shook her head slowly with a gesture of utter despair. Some moments passed in a silence which I found infinitely trying. Then Enid broke it.

"This scene has lasted too long already, mademoiselle. May I ask that you retire?"

"I have urged every plea I could think of to try and make you understand my feeling and suffering, and you answer by sending me from your room. Do you think what it may cost you to do this? If the man I love and who loves me recovers, will he thank you, do you think, for having accused me of being his would-be murderess?" Her voice was stronger now and her manner hardening.

"You have already used your influence to turn my brother against me, and would no doubt use it again. Do so."

"It is you who make me your enemy."

"I would rather have your enmity than your friendship."

"Do you mean that?" the question was asked fiercely, and almost threateningly.

"I do not fear you in the least," said Enid, proudly.

"Yet you may have bitter cause to regret your acts and words of to-day."

"Your empty threats have no more weight with me than your false entreaties. There is no more truth in one than the other. Mr. Ormesby, I wish you would see Mlle. Patras to her rooms. These theatrical displays tire me." And with an ostentatious shrug of contempt Enid turned away and threw herself on a chair with her back to the Greek.

Haidee winced and trembled with rage at this last act of contemptuous insult, and I looked for a violent outbreak; but it did not come, on fire though she was. She paused, still trembling with her passion, and then said:

"As you please, but remember it is your own act and choice that makes us enemies—and we Greeks do not forget."

The tone was one of concentrated, vengeful passion, in full accord with the look of hate she directed at Enid. Then after another pause she turned to me:

"Mr. Ormesby, you are Mr. Grant's secretary and I am his affianced wife. I demand in his name that you show me to him. I will see him. I have every right."

"Mr. Ormesby," said Enid, instantly. "You know the instructions I have given to the servants. No one is to see Cryus, and certainly not Mlle. Patras."

"I have the right, and will see him, Mr. Ormesby."

"I am not a court of appeal from Miss Grant, mademoiselle," I answered. "I have neither the right to take you to my friend nor to keep you from him, but if I had I should not let you see him at present."

"I expected some such answer, for I

know you are no friend of mine," replied the Greek, haughtily. "But remember that I made the request and you refused it."

"I am not likely to forget it."

I had felt genuinely sorry for her, but this overbearing tone of hers was more than I could stand complacently.

"I shall see him, sir, nevertheless," she said, angrily, and so indeed it proved. For at that moment, just as I had opened the door for her to leave, Dr. Arbuthnot came downstairs to us.

"How is Cyrus, doctor?" asked Enid, excitedly. "Can I go to him?"

"I'm glad to tell you, much better. The crisis is over, I believe, and he will recover."

"Is he conscious? Has he asked for me?" she cried, eagerly.

"He is quite conscious, but I regret he has not asked for you. He wishes to see Mlle. Patras."

The blaze of triumph in the Greek's eyes was a sight to see.

"I am Mlle. Patras," she said. "Will you take me to him, Dr. Arbuthnot."

The doctor glanced in turn at her and at Enid, and then looked questioningly to me for some explanation.

"Mlle. Patras is engaged to Mr. Grant," I said, quietly.

"And has tried to poison him, doctor, remember that," said Enid, interposing in a cold, cutting tone that bit like an acid. "His life may not be safe if she goes near him."

The doctor was sadly disconcerted for a moment.

"I have only to deal with the medical aspect of the case, of course," he answered, after a pause. "Mrs. Wellings and the nurse are there, and I am afraid I must say that in my opinion it would be highly inadvisable not to comply with his request. Of course nothing must occur at the bedside to distress or excite him unduly, or I cannot answer for the consequences in so critical a case."

"Then I will go as well," declared Enid.

"I am deeply pained, Miss Grant," said the doctor, interposing. "But I regret to say my patient expressly asked that you should not go to him for the present."

Poor Enid. The blow must have struck right to her heart, but she would not flinch nor show a sign of vexation. Haidee, however, was almost brutal in her triumph, and cried, with a sneer:

"That is good. It shows, indeed, how completely Mr. Grant has recovered. Will you take me or shall I go alone, doctor?"

"Can I see you the moment I come down, Mr. Ormesby?" whispered the doctor.

As Haidee left the room she turned a last glance of smiling triumph on Enid, who met the look firmly, taking her defeat without the least outward discomposure. But as soon as the door closed, she threw up her clinched hands high above her head, and let them fall with a long-drawn, half-suppressed cry of bitter mortification and suffering. Then her quick ear having caught the sound, she stopped abruptly as she was in the very act of throwing herself despairingly headlong on to a couch, and coming to me said, in a quiet, natural voice and with a smile:

"Is it not splendid that Cyrus is better?"

I didn't understand until hearing the door softly opened behind us I turned and saw the Greek look in.

She had come back to feast her eyes on her antagonist's humiliation, and Enid hearing her had vamped instantly this little bit of byplay, and so cheated her of her moment of triumph.

Need I say I was glad?

CHAPTER X.

THE PROBLEM OF AN UPSET TABLE.

Of all Haidee's actions in that trial of strength between her and Enid nothing produced a greater impression upon me than this return to try and catch her antagonist in a moment of weakness; and to me it seemed an almost irresistible proof of her insincerity.

She had been bitterly disappointed and angry that Enid had taken her de-

feat with such upstanding calmness, and the desire to witness her humiliation, to see her cast down, had dominated for the moment all the passionate wish to be at Grant's side, of which she had made so much in the interview.

Enid did not allow her feelings to again get out of hand even before me, and when the Greek had gone for the second time, she said, with quiet significance:

"Scarcely the act of a woman absorbed by a passion for Cyrus. What was the real meaning of all that display of hers?"

"It will intensify her hatred of you; and I wish you had not been so quick to denounce her. It was a terrible charge."

"You don't believe it?"

"I don't know what to believe yet."

"But you yourself said you would not have let her go to Cyrus. Do you know I did thank you for that; and if you wish to scold me I will listen to you for the sake of that."

"We can't unsay what's been said, and I never care to thrash a dead horse."

"But you believe I made a mistake? I suppose I did," and she sighed. "I shall be real sorry if it makes things harder for you. But if you had only been at home?"

"That's another dead horse," I said, shaking my head regretfully.

"What are you going to do next?"

"Find out things if I can; but it's a ghastly tangle."

"I can't help you to-night. I can't think. I suppose I'm just mad. I shall be better in the morning. Had I better go to bed? Cyrus won't see me; so there's nothing to do."

"I may have some news for you by then."

"If only that woman were not with him," she cried, despairingly.

"I fancy the doctor will see to that. His head's on quite the right way."

"Does he suspect her?" she flashed the question at me.

"He says it's apoplexy, and of course he won't have his patient excited."

"Then I shall go."

"I'll send you up a line by Stuart, if you like, when I've seen Arbuthnot."

"Oh, do! You are so thoughtful. You've been awfully good to me in all this. Don't think I don't see that; I shall never forget it."

"You're a bit upset to-night," I spoke as indifferently as I could, for the look in her eyes moved me more than I wished her to see, and I had to put the curb on. She stood a moment in hesitation, then said, almost nervously:

"I—I am sorry I lost my head about that woman. I can see you are right. I—I ought to have held my tongue, but I couldn't. But for the future I'll—I'll try and do what you think best."

"That's all right. It is a beastly muddle, but we shall pull together all right now. And, by the way, you'll be careful for a bit?"

"How do you mean?"

"I mean, have your maid to sleep in your room, and be a bit careful what you eat and drink for a while." She turned with a swift, questioning look.

"Then you do agree Cyrus was poisoned?" she asked, under her breath. "And you think——"

"We don't want to think too far at a time, but it's always best to be careful. I only meant it as a general hint. You see this isn't quite like New York or London, and queer mistakes are made sometimes; and—well, there's no harm in being on one's guard."

"But what of you yourself?"

"Oh, I'm nobody; not important enough to draw danger in my direction; besides, I do keep a lookout."

I did not wish to alarm, but merely to warn her, and when I saw to my surprise how scared she was, considering what tough nerves I knew she had, I rather regretted I had said even so much. But the truth was I was vastly puzzled by the whole business, and did not quite see the road ahead.

When the doctor came down his first words showed me that I had guessed pretty correctly his line with the Greek.

"Did you leave Mlle. Patras with your patient, doctor?" I asked.

"No. I'm afraid I've kept you waiting, but I thought it best to remain

while she was there lest Mr. Grant should be excited. She has left him now, and I have requested that she shall not go to the bedside again until I have seen Mr. Grant in the morning."

"Excitement is very bad, isn't it, in—apoplexy?"

"Yes, some kinds of excitement in that form of—apoplexy. We're alone here, I suppose?" he asked, glancing about him.

"Oh, yes. What is it upstairs?"

"I'm afraid it's poison of some kind. I shall be certain after an analysis I'm going to make, but I'm virtually certain now."

"You think he'll be all right now?"

"Oh, yes, if no complications ensue."

"Such as—any more of it?"

"Such as any more of it," he repeated. "I was called in time, fortunately, and his magnificent strength and constitution enabled me to save him."

"I suppose if he had been in bad health or a weaker man, like myself, say, or a woman, the thing might have been different."

"I don't think anything would have saved him."

"I see; well, it's a good thing for me I don't get it, then. You'll see him early in the morning, I presume?"

"Yes; but—have you any idea as to the cause?"

"I was out, and didn't get in till nearly midnight."

"You've been some years in the East, haven't you; long enough to know that queer things of this kind do happen at times?"

"If I hadn't known it before, this would tell me. If I should want your help and—and confidence, I may rely on you?"

"Certainly. Poisons are rather a specialty of mine; and if you find out anything, I should like to know. Good-night."

"Good-night, doctor; and of course we all understand this is only apoplexy."

I did not think it necessary to tell him any more at the present stage. It was enough for my purpose so far that the attempt had failed, and as soon as he was gone I went to my rooms and took Stuart with me, first scribbling a note to Enid to tell her what the doctor had done in regard to the Greek.

While Stuart was away I made a careful examination of my room. Very few things had been disturbed. The papers on my table, which I had left neatly arranged, for in those matters I am a person of some method and order, had obviously been moved, and some few of them were tossed about in confusion. A closer scrutiny led me to think that this had not, as I had at first thought, resulted from some one searching among them for any particular document. They had rather the appearance of having been tumbled over hastily.

I remembered, of course, that Grant had been to my room, and it was quite possible that he might have wished to find some particular paper, and in the hunt for it had tossed the rest over impatiently. But there were not any papers of real consequence on the table; they were all locked away, and he knew this as well as I. I didn't think, therefore, that he had done the work.

Then there was the little heap of burned papers, with the half-consumed cigar lying near it. It was cleverly planned to suggest that the cigar had caused the mischief; but here again there was a flaw which looked like the result of hurry. The cigar lay quite three inches away from the heap of tinder, and it had burned itself out on the document—an old legal draft—in which it still lay. I jumped at once to the conclusion, therefore, that the cigar had not caused the fire, but had been placed there afterward to suggest the cause.

Before I examined the burned ashes more closely I looked round the room. My desk drawers and safe were all locked and had not been tampered with, and it was therefore clear that whoever had been at work had either been interrupted before he could get to them, or had wished only to deal with the papers, or one of them, on the desk.

But I found that the small table by the side of my writing desk, on which

my coffee was usually placed by Stuart, had been upset, and the coffee, milk and cup were lying on the floor. A dozen suggestions to account for this jumped into my mind, and then gradually an extremely disquieting thought began to take shape.

I should explain that, not liking the thick coffee which the Turks delight in, it was my custom to have some made by Stuart, who had picked up the knack in Paris, and a small pot holding about two cups was always put ready for me in the evening.

Grant had also a great liking for the coffee as Stuart made it, and frequently, when he came to my room in the evening, would have a cup of it with me. Now, it was after leaving my room that he had been taken ill, and with this in my thoughts I became suddenly intensely interested in the little problem of the upset table.

I picked up the cup which was broken, and found coffee stains in it, but no drain of coffee, but in the coffee pot itself, which was fortunately undamaged, there still remained perhaps a tablespoonful or more of liquor; and there were also a few drops of milk in the jug. I smelt them both, but could detect nothing unusual in either, and it occurred to me as exceedingly unlikely that anyone would be so clumsy as to tamper with either.

I put them both away carefully under lock and key, however, and then another fact struck me. There was no sugar. I was speculating whether this could have any significance, when Stuart came back from delivering the note to Enid.

"Now, Stuart, tell me what made you lock my door to-night."

"There's not much to tell, sir, only that some one came in here to-night. I brought your coffee as usual, sir, at eight-thirty, and not seeing you here, I just left it as usual, and lit the lamp, and went out into the big hall, where MacPherson told me you had gone out before dinner. Then somewhere between nine and ten, sir, Mr. Grant passed through the hall, and seeing me, asked if you were here. I said 'I don't think so,' and he said he would come and see, and I came along with him. He was carrying a paper of some sort in his hand, and when he saw you weren't in, sir, he said it would be all right, that he'd stop and have a cigarette and was going to leave a paper on your table, which I was to call your attention to when you came in, and that I needn't wait."

"Was my coffee here then, did you notice?"

"Oh, yes, sir; because I asked him if I should make him a cup, as he often likes to have one, sir, as you know; but he said no, it didn't matter; and then I left him here. He didn't stay very long, sir; perhaps a quarter of an hour or so, and when he passed me in the hall again, he said: 'Don't forget to call Mr. Ormesby's attention to the paper, Stuart,' and I said I'd be sure and remember it; and then almost directly, not ten minutes, I'm sure, sir, I thought I'd go and see where he'd left the paper, as I thought it was so important. And when I got near the room I heard some one in it. I thought it might be you, and that you'd come in by the private way, but the door was open, and then I heard something fall down. I called out: 'Is that you, sir?' but no answer was made, and just as I reached the door the light went out. I felt sure something was wrong then, and ran in and struck a light. I heard a rustling, and was so startled that, foolish-like, I let the match go out, and when I'd struck another the room was empty, and in the mess you saw it, sir. So I locked the door and came away, and directly afterward I heard that Mr. Grant had had a fit and was ill."

"Was Mr. Grant smoking when you saw him?"

"Not at first, sir; he lit a cigarette in your room."

"Cigar or cigarette? Can you be certain?"

"Quite, sir; it was a cigarette."

"One thing more, Stuart. Be quite certain. Did you forget to bring any sugar with the coffee to-night?"

"No, sir, certainly not. I had to get it specially."

"Some one has taken a fancy to it, then; there's none left, Stuart."

"Perhaps it's got spilt, sir."

"Did you make any noise of any kind when you were coming to the room after Mr. Grant had been there? I mean a noise which anyone in here could have heard."

"I'm afraid I was whistling, sir; not loudly, but I'd got a tune in my head, and I think I remember stopping when I first heard some one and thought it might be you, sir."

"Ah, I wish you hadn't begun, but still you did, and we can't help it. Now, take a light and look closely about the floor; there may be a stray lump of sugar. Search carefully."

He did search very carefully, and I helped him, but we found nothing, to my mortification.

"Take the light and look along the corridor and in the hall and wherever it occurs to you to look," I said, and a moment later he came hurrying back.

"I've found one lump, sir." And he laid it on the table. "It's a very extraordinary thing."

"Well, go on looking, and if the servants say anything to you tell them you are looking for a gold coin or lira. It will be quite true. I'll give you that if you find another lump."

He looked at me in surprised mystification, rather scared, I think.

"Is it anything serious, then, sir?"

"You don't find me generally buying sugar at a lira the lump, do you? And look here, not a word about anything here."

"No, sir." And he went away puzzled, turning at the door to glance round at me with the same half-fearsome, quite baffled expression.

When he had gone I turned to the little heap of burned paper and the cigar. The cigar was one of Grant's. I knew it well enough, and this fact showed that whoever had got this thing up for me had done it realistically. These Easterners are great at realistic stagecraft—off the stage.

The paper was entirely consumed—mere tinder—but nevertheless that part of the business had been bungled—probably through haste. It had been burned on the table as it lay, but the burner had made a mistake. He was either careless or had been disturbed and had neglected to crush the tinder, leaving the leaves as they had been folded. With much care I managed to get off the outer envelope, and then by careful examination of the little sheets, holding them up gingerly to the light, I could distinguish Turkish characters, and on one of them part of a signature—"Rechad."

Then I sat down, and, lighting my pipe, set to work to put the pieces of the tragic puzzle together, and to see how they would fit with the solution already in my thoughts—that all this trouble had been taken, not on Grant's account, but on mine, and that but for an accident I and not Grant would have been at that moment battling for life against an insidious poison.

I recalled Dr. Arbuthnot's words, too—that had I had that kind of apoplectic fit, in all human probability I should have died, and the recollection of Grant's gray, deathlike pallor when I had seen him set me shuddering as with a chill of frost. I could not drag my thoughts away from the look and the words, and if I own to the truth I think I was for the time just horribly afraid.

I was still in the cold clutch of this phantom fear, when Stuart came back.

"I have found another lump of sugar, sir; but I don't know whether it's out of the same lot." And as he gave it me he started, and said: "Excuse me, sir, but are you ill? You look quite white, sir. Can I get you anything?"

"Yes, mix me a brandy and soda, strong. I've had a shake-up of my nerves. But where did you find this?" holding up the sugar.

"On the stairs of number three staircase. It's the back way up to the rooms of Mlle. Patras and her servants, sir."

"Then it's not very likely it's part of the same lot, as you say, Stuart."

"No, sir, perhaps not; but——" He was pouring out the brandy and stopped and turned to look at me. "It's funny, for it has the same green, faint smell."

"So it has," I answered, sniffing it.

"It may be as you put it, funny, but it's a kind of fun that doesn't exactly make me laugh." And, indeed, I had never felt more serious in my life.

CHAPTER XI.

THE RESULT OF THE ANALYSIS.

When I had packed up carefully the coffee, the milk and the two lumps of sugar, I sent Stuart off at once with them to Dr. Arbuthnot, calculating that he would be at work still on the other analysis, and then turned to consider my next step.

My theory was that the attempt had been made on my life, and not on Grant's, and that the medium of the poison was the sugar. Probably, after Stuart had placed the things in my room, the poisoned sugar had been substituted, in the expectation that I should return, take my coffee as usual, notice nothing in the sugar, and so—exit.

Grant's visit to my room had, however, upset the plan altogether. He had no doubt helped himself to a cup of coffee, and this had been immediately detected, the poisoner being on the alert, and what had occurred in my room afterward had been hurriedly done. The poisoner must have come back to the room almost the instant Grant left it—unless, indeed, as was possible, he lay concealed there all the while—with the object of securing the doctored sugar and then had had to deal with the paper on the table.

That paper was without doubt the Turkish document which Maraboukh Pasha had handed to Grant in the afternoon; unquestionably it was a forgery, which anyone knowing Turkish would discover, and thus instructions had been sent to his spies in the White House that it must not come into my possession. Thus the first idea was to use the lump of sugar to put me out of the fight altogether, and when Grant upset that scheme, the paper had been burned on my table, and the lighted cigar left there as if to suggest the cause of the accident.

While this was in the doing, Stuart had come whistling down the corridor, thus giving the alarm; a scramble had been made to get the doctored sugar, the light had been extinguished and the table upset in the excitement and hurry of the moment.

Who, then, was the spy—poisoner? The answer was easy enough, I thought. It was certainly not Haidee. She would never risk two secret visits to my room, and was far too conspicuous a person to move about the house unobserved. She could not have done it had she wished, indeed. But the case was very different with her two servants—the woman Lelia and the man Koprili—and I set it down to the man.

The question which really concerned me was how to bring it home first to Koprili, who was but the tool of some one else, and then to ascertain whether that other was or was not Haidee, the Greek.

I could better understand her attitude now in the interview with Enid. Her horror and emotion at Grant's sudden illness might be perfectly genuine, because of the mistake that had been made, and yet she might have been privy to the whole thing. On the other hand, this might have been wire-pulled without her knowledge, and by some one influencing her servant directly.

But in any case it was clear we might all be surrounded by very real danger, and that some decisive step must be taken.

I got no further that night, and went across first thing in the morning to Dr. Arbuthnot. Like myself, he had had no sleep, having been engrossed by the task I had given him.

"I'm puzzled, Mr. Ormesby. I've completed a rough analysis, and there's no doubt it's poison. That coffee and milk were all right, but I found it in the sugar, and found distinct traces in what I brought from the sick room. I'm not yet quite clear as to its exact nature, but I suspect it's a subtle and very powerful preparation with strychnine as the main basis."

"In both lumps of sugar, doctor?"

"Yes, certainly in both; but you needn't have sent two."

"It was rather a point in the case, that's why I sent both," I answered. It was a great point, of course. It was clear that Koprili had dropped both lumps in his hurry—one in the corridor of my room and one on the stairs near his own.

"I shall go on with my experiments as soon as I've time," said the doctor, "and will let you know the results."

"It will be a satisfaction, but it isn't really important now, as I know enough, and, of course, this thing won't come out. By the way," I added, as a thought occurred to me, "the sugar had what my man termed a queer smell."

"Nothing in that; it was a faint, very faint, scent of musk, intended to neutralize the odor of one of the drugs."

"Could you doctor a couple of lumps for me so as to deceive anyone who knew what the sugar might contain?"

"Easily, of course; but what do you want them for?"

"Merely for a little experiment I'm going to make," and in a few minutes he had complied with my wish. I returned to the White House, and my own opinion of the poison theory being thus confirmed by the doctor's analysis, I gave effect to a step I had had in contemplation.

"While Mr. Grant is ill, MacPherson," I said to the porter, a dry, dour Scotchman, an old soldier and a stanch, invaluable servant, whom Grant had brought from America, and who was ready to lay down his life for his master, "we must keep the house as quiet as possible. I leave the matter in your charge, therefore. Lock all the doors but this and yourself keep the keys, and allow no one to pass either in or out without a permit signed by me. We want no disturbance made and no exaggerated stories carried outside."

"No one at all, sir?" he asked.

"No one, except Miss Grant and Dr. Arbuthnot. Refer everyone to me. You will, of course, take all messages, and let me have them by Stuart. You understand, it is only because the house must be kept quiet while Mr. Grant is ill. And you will not leave your post on any consideration."

"I understand, sir."

There was a large door shutting off the wing where the offices were from the rest of the house, and this I locked, taking the key.

When I got to my room Stuart was laying my breakfast, and, giving him one of the lumps of sugar, I asked him in a casual tone whether it was one of those he had found. He seemed to know it instantly, and I was satisfied, and put the stuff carefully away under lock and key.

After breakfast, which Stuart made a point of telling me he had prepared with his own hands, I went to Grant's room, but as Mrs. Wellings told me he was still asleep and seemed better, having passed a satisfactory night, I did not see him. She was disposed to question me about poison, but I put her off with Dr. Arbuthnot's theory that the illness was really a slight attack of apoplexy, although I gave her a hint that Grant was never to be left alone in the room, and that she or one of the nurses must always be with him.

CHAPTER XII.

THE ORDEAL BY SUGAR.

My hands were very full of work that day, as may be imagined, and the detail was considerably increased by the step of making myself the one medium of communication between the house and the world outside. A large catch of trivialities were swept into the net thus spread, but only one or two of them were of any consequence. A Turk who gave no name called for Koprili, and a woman brought a letter for Mlle. Patras. The man I immediately had shadowed by one of my spies, and the letter I put aside, determining to deliver it with my own hands.

In the meantime, Dr. Arbuthnot saw Grant twice, in the morning and afternoon, and the result was not satisfactory. After the morning visit he enjoined absolute quiet, refusing to allow anyone but Mrs. Wellings and the

nurses to see the patient, and when he came to me in the afternoon he admitted that he was uneasy.

"I don't like the look of him at all," he said, with a shake of the head. "I can't understand it. He ought to have thrown off all the effect by this time and be well on the upgrade, but he is worse this afternoon, if anything."

"I wish to see him as soon as practicable, doctor; there are fifty things to be discussed and settled, and all important."

"My dear sir, it's out of the question to-day, absolutely. Indeed, I have been thinking I should like a consultation. There's something wrong that there oughtn't to be. He has a lot of pain he oughtn't to have; he can't take even the light food; can't retain anything—a preposterous state for a man of his strength. A gastric condition that worries me."

"By all means call in anyone you think of. I needn't tell you his life is a very precious one, and if there's anyone in Europe you think should see him we'll wire at once." His manner alarmed me. "You've *carte blanche,* of course."

"There's no one here," he replied, with airy criticism of his local medical colleagues; "but if Vienna were nearer I should like old Eberhardt to see him. Not that I believe in the German school of treatment as a rule, but Eberhardt does know a good deal about poisons. He'd come for me."

"We'll wire for him," I answered, and we drew up the telegram there and then, and the doctor said he would send it off. "In the meantime, is no one to see Grant?" I asked.

"No one, of course. If he asks for Mlle. Patras, send over for me, and I'll see about it. I'm very anxious."

The news was very grave and disturbed me profoundly, plunging us back into a mist of doubt from which I had thought we were just beginning to feel a way out. Why should there be this setback in Grant's progress? It was not possible that anything given to him since the attack could have been tampered with. Mrs. Wellings and the nurses in attendance were beyond suspicion, and Enid herself had so arranged that nothing for the sick room should pass through any but absolutely trusted hands. In such a case the cause must be looked for either in Dr. Arbuthnot's treatment—an improbability to be scouted—or in some conditions already existing in Grant himself. Could he have been the victim of any attempt previous to that of the night before?

Did Haidee know anything? Could this infernal business have been in progress before our suspicions were thus roughly roused? It was possible, of course; anything was possible in this land of intrigue and treachery, where cases of slow poisoning were anything but unknown.

But then why should they wish to poison Grant at the very moment when they were seeking his help and hoping to use his money and influence? The thing was inconsistent. I had probably got the idea of poison on my brain, I told myself, and was frightening myself with a bogy. I began to feel as if I was letting my wits get out of hand and making a fool of myself in consequence.

If anything was clear at all it was that Grant's life was as precious as any life could be to Maraboukh and the whole gang of conspirators, and so I was tossed back into the surf of distracting thoughts and baffled speculation.

While I was pondering this there flashed back into my thoughts the strange impression which Maraboukh's conduct had produced at that point of our interview when the money needed for paying the troops had been mentioned. That suggestion of some belated, unavailing regret with which he had declared it too late for Grant to find the money. Could that feeling have any connection with this horrible development? Could he have known that already the work he had planned had been done by his spies in the White House? The thought frightened me consumedly.

The truth was the thing was altogether beyond me. It was too big for me to handle, and the mystery was too great for my wit to solve. And yet

there was no one whom I could consult. I could not open my mouth to a soul without a gross breach of faith to the sick man, and while he lay ill all I could do was to go blundering along in my own way. Had he been well, his own vigorous, clear-headed self, he would have solved the whole problem readily enough; but without him I was like a rudderless ship, drifting any way and all ways at the mercy of the winds and waves.

I was in the midst of the most depressing uncertainty, and was debating whether I ought not to take the drastic course of bundling Haidee Patras and her two spies of servants out of the house, when Stuart came in to say she wished to see me at once, and he showed her in.

"Good-evening, mademoiselle," I said, and then ordered Stuart to light the lamps, as the dark had fallen during my meditations. While he was lighting them she sat without saying a word.

"You will know why I am here, Mr. Ormesby," she said, the moment he had withdrawn, and her voice was a sufficient indication that she was angry.

"There might be several reasons, mademoiselle."

"I wish to know why you dare to keep me and my servants prisoners in the house?"

"Prisoners? How do you mean?"

"You have presumed to give orders that no one is to leave or enter the house without permission from—you." She spoke with a fine contempt and scorn.

"There can be no objection whatever to your leaving the house when you wish. You are not a prisoner in any sense."

"Yet the servant refused to allow me to pass with my servant just now."

"MacPherson is a Scotchman, and an old soldier, and thus apt to interpret his orders very literally."

"Then he is wrong and we are free to go?"

"I shall be happy to go to him now and explain that so far as you are concerned the door is to be open."

"And my servants?"

"None of our servants are excluded from the order, and to make any exceptions in the case of yours might lead to trouble. You will see that, I am sure," I said, blandly.

"I see only the insult in this, sir," she answered, blazing up.

"I think you misunderstand the position, mademoiselle. My object, as MacPherson should have explained to you, is to secure that the house shall be kept perfectly quiet while Mr. Grant is so ill, and for this end all coming and going have been stopped."

"That is all hypocrisy; nothing else. You have aimed this blow at me and at me only, and it is only following up the dastardly charge made against me yesterday by Miss Grant."

"Pardon me, it has no connection whatever with that charge. I myself have told Miss Grant her statement was absolutely without any foundation. I have proofs of that."

"Proofs?" she asked, quickly, with a start. "Or do you say that only to try and blind my eyes? I do not believe you."

"As you please, mademoiselle," and then we sat for perhaps a minute in silence, until she asked, angrily:

"What are your proofs, pray? What do you pretend now was the cause of Mr. Grant's illness?"

"As you do not believe me, it will save time if I do not say any more," I answered; not that I intended the interview to end there.

"I did not mean that. Oh, Mr. Ormesby, why do you play with words when you know I am almost beside myself? Why will you always misunderstand me? Why insist on being my enemy? Of course it is your doing that I am kept from seeing Mr. Grant."

"I myself am not allowed to see him, mademoiselle. He is too ill. The matter is now entirely in Dr. Arbuthnot's hands."

"Is that true? I mean, is he really so ill? Oh, it will kill me," she cried, distractedly.

"You will best understand the gravity when I tell you that we have to-day telegraphed to the great Vienna special-

ist, Dr. Eberhardt, to come here at once." At this she caught her breath and stared open-mouthed at me, her face drawn in agitation and distress, and leaning forward asked, in low, tense tone:

"Is he really in such danger?"

"There is, I fear, no doubt of it, mademoiselle." At this she closed her eyes and sank back in her chair, and put her hands to her face, and I heard her moan under her breath in her own tongue:

"Oh, God, if he should die; if he should die!" followed by a long shuddering sigh of agony. It was impossible not to see, not to feel, indeed, that this agony was no pretense. The pause that followed was very painful.

"But he was so much better?" she said, presently, as if trying to find reason to ease her sorrow and doubt my statement.

"I know no more than Dr. Arbuthnot tells me, and, like you, I wish I could persuade myself that he exaggerated the danger. It is terrible news for us all."

"I can't believe it; I won't believe it," she cried, wildly. "Why, up to the moment of his being taken like this, he was so strong, so well. Oh, Mr. Ormesby, give me some crumb of comfort, some ray of light and hope. You would, if you knew what it meant to me."

And when I was silent, for I could give no satisfying reply, she threw up her arms and pressed her clinched hands to her face like one in a frenzy of despair. And another embarrassing and painful pause followed until she had collected some measure of self-control.

"And can I do nothing? Cannot something, some little thing be given me to do to help him? I don't care what it is; anything, anything, anything, rather than sit with empty, idle hands, parted from him, waiting, fearing, thinking, thinking, oh, God! ever thinking, and doing nothing. May I not even share the watching? Who can watch and nurse and tend like one whose heart and hands are inspired by love? Mr. Ormesby, you have power to do this for me. Pray, pray let me be with him."

"I am sorry, but I can do nothing; it is entirely in Dr. Arbuthnot's hands." I was sorry for her; I could not help it, as I saw her bitter suffering. "I cannot interfere, and indeed I have not the power to do so."

"But you know that Mr. Grant would have me with him. If you had seen last night how he greeted me, how his face lighted, and the smile he gave as our hands touched. Oh, do, do help me—help us to be together? It is such happiness for him! Think of that and of him, even if you are dead to my feelings."

"If Dr. Arbuthnot——" I began, but she cut me short.

"He will not, he will not. He has been set against me. I urged him last night to let me remain and share the watch. I prayed him, but he would not; he turned me away on the pretense that my presence caused excitement. You are all against me, all, all; now he is ill and helpless, I have not a friend in the house." And once more her agitation overcame her.

"But if I may not go near him can you not suggest some other way in which I can be doing something to help him? I am not like other women. I cannot sit down and do nothing."

"I think that is possible," I answered, slowly.

"Tell me, and I will do it. I will do it readily. Do you think Dr. Arbuthnot is doing all he should? Who is this specialist you spoke of—this Dr. Eberhardt?"

"I think you could help me, and helping me help Grant at the same time, of course; but you must be prepared to hear unpleasant things."

"Tell me, tell me quickly. Compared with what you have already told me what can matter?" she said, excitedly.

"You can probably help throw light on the cause of the illness."

"What do you mean?" she cried, her face alight, intent and eager.

"Dr. Eberhardt is the greatest living authority on poisons, mademoiselle, and Dr. Arbuthnot is anxious to have his opinion on that account."

"You are mad, Mr. Ormesby. Miss Grant has infected you. Mr. Grant is

not suffering from poison. If you think that, and the doctors think it, too, you are all blind and you will kill him."

"It is the doctor's opinion, not mine only; and—it is true. I know it."

"Put that delusion aside. It is a mere cobweb that must be brushed aside. Stay, listen," she said, as I was about to reply. "Who would take his life, do you think? Would I? Do you think my love for him is the love of a vampire seeking his blood? If not I, who in this house; nay, who in all Constantinople? Has he not just joined us and become one of us? Was not his help eagerly sought? Was it not as eagerly welcomed? You were present yesterday—only yesterday—within a few hours of this illness, with the pasha when the arrangement was made. You heard what passed; you know the help he promised to give. Do you think the pasha so blind and so foolish as not to see that of all Mr. Grant is the one whose life is the most precious?"

"Nevertheless——"

"Wait, I will tell you more, what should not pass my lips, had not a crisis like this come upon us. But you must know it now. The chief reason of my coming here was that I might persuade Mr. Grant to join us; and it was done at the pasha's wish and instigation. He is necessary to our success—and should we thus sacrifice his life? Why, there is no one whom we would one and all more carefully guard and protect. You are mad when you talk of poison."

"Then you will help to prove I am wrong?"

"I will do anything you wish."

"Will you tell me, then, precisely who is this man in your service, Koprili, and the woman, Lelia?"

"They are my servants, nothing more—except that they both know of the conspiracy, and are ardent workers in the cause."

"How long has Koprili been in your service?"

"Some months, and a faithful, confidential, reliable servant he has been."

"Did he come to you on the pasha's recommendation?"

"No, certainly not; but the pasha knows his whole life, and when he found him in my service, told me all about him. Shall I tell you?"

"It is not necessary yet. And the woman, Lelia?"

"I can vouch for her in the same way. They would both give their lives for me. I don't understand your questions; they mean nothing to me."

"If I tell you that my friend, Grant, was poisoned by your servant, Koprili, what would you say?"

"That you are mad, as I have said before. Oh, it is impossible."

"Nevertheless it is true, and I will prove it to you."

"You cannot," she cried, incredulously and disdainfully. "I will answer for him as for myself."

I rang my bell, and summoned my servant.

"Stuart, tell mademoiselle's servant, the Turk, Koprili, that his mistress is here and has asked for his permit to leave the house, and that he is to come here for it. Do not leave him until you reach the room; and when he is here, place the woman, Lelia, under lock and key, and then return to be within call should I need you. And stay, you had better have a couple more with you—Mr. Grant's man, Dennison, for one, and Milward."

"What does this mean, Mr. Ormesby?" asked the Greek, when he had gone.

"It means that I am going to prove my words to you, and that when I have done so, your servants will have to remain, for a time at least, in safe-keeping."

"It is almost infamous," she said, indignantly.

"One thing more, mademoiselle, I must ask you to be merely a witness of what passes." With that I got out the lumps of sugar which the doctor had given me and kept them in readiness, and we waited without speaking until Stuart returned with Koprili.

He came without a suspicion of what was in store for him, as I had intended by the form of my message; and as he entered he salaamed to his mistress and then to me.

"Stand there, Koprili, will you?" I said, in Turkish, putting him so that the light of one of the lamps was full on his face. He was a man of about my own age and height, and except that his complexion was bronzed, the cast of his features was European, and he had unusually light eyes for an Ottoman. They were fixed on me now with a light of expectation, but not fear or suspicion; and of the two of us I think I was the more nervous.

"Your mistress has told me you wish a permit?" I said.

"That is so, your excellency," he answered, salaaming.

"Where do you wish to go?"

"To do the commands of my mistress, and then to return."

"What were they?"

"May the light of your excellency's life ever burn strongly, they were but to purchase some few trifling things in the bazaar."

"That is all?"

"By the beard of the prophet, that was all."

"Before giving you the permit I have a question. You came to this room yesterday; what did you want me for?"

He smiled and spread out his hands to cover the start which the question provoked.

"Some one has misled your noble excellency, whose justice is known to all. It is not for me, who am but as a dog in your excellency's sight, to question your words. But, as Allah is my judge, I was not here."

"You are lying to me, Koprili," I said, slowly, "and that makes me think there was some reason in your coming which you would hide from me and from your mistress. She wishes you to tell the truth. Now, why were you here?"

There was an instant's pause before he answered, during which he shot a quick, furtive glance at the Greek.

"By the tomb of the prophet, your excellency has been misled. I was not here."

"Say so, if you were, Koprili," said the Greek.

"My words are words of truth, madam," he declared, with an elaborate gesture and profound salaam. "By the beard of the prophet, I swear it." He was a good liar, and had I not known, he would have impressed me.

"Then we'll go a step further," I said, slowly. "You were here not only once, but twice, Koprili; once, before Mr. Grant came here, and once afterward. Nor is that all. When you left the second time, you left something behind you," and I picked up the little packet and began to undo it. I caught the gleam of his eyes as they fastened upon it for a moment, but he covered them quickly and drooped the lids over them.

"I am but a thing in your excellency's hands; but, as I live, I know nothing of what you say."

"You are still lying, Koprili," I said, sternly. "But you will have to tell the truth."

Again as I paused and seemed to glance down at the twisted paper in my hands, I caught the gleam of his eyes as he stared at it. Your Turk is intensely curious, and he was just on fire to know what I was fingering. Intentionally I paused, and then looking up swiftly let him see that I had intercepted his glance. But he crossed his hands on his breast, and bowed his head, as though he were a martyr, ready for torture.

Mlle. Patras herself was scarcely less curious than the surly scoundrel in front of me.

"When you came in the first time my servant had just placed my coffee ready for me—for me, mademoiselle, you notice," I broke off to say to her. "And you brought with you some sugar." I paused and glanced at him to emphasize this, but he made no sign. "Some sugar which you substituted for that which Stuart had placed with the coffee."

He looked up now and made a gesture of complete denial and ignorance of the whole thing.

"When you came the second time you had more to do and were doing it when you were interrupted. You then seized the sugar you had brought before and put out the light, because you didn't

wish to be found in the room. In the darkness you overturned the little table on which the coffee stood, and in the confusion of escaping from the room you"—I paused again, took out the two lumps of sugar—"you dropped these, Koprili," and I held them up.

My lengthy description of his acts had given him time to think, and he allowed no sign of confusion or astonishment to escape him.

"Your excellency is of the just of the earth and would blame no man, not even a servant, causelessly. Some one has, I repeat, misled you and lied about Koprili to you. I repeat, I know nothing of this; I swear it by the tomb of my fathers."

"I quite thought you would," I said, calmly; "but you are lying, Koprili, and I know that as well as you." Then I changed and spoke with all the sternness I could put into my manner. "Now, I am going to have the truth; you have sought to take my life and I give you a chance to prove your innocence if you can. This is part of the sugar you placed here last night—you will know the scent of it and why it's there—you shall swallow that sugar to prove it is harmless, or I'll put you to the torture to drag the truth from you. Quick, decide," and I set it in his reach.

The light was full on his face as I stared into it fixedly, and the blood rushed from it as he looked at the two small lumps as though they were things accursed. The sweat came out on his forehead, his hands were clinched and unclinched in turn, and his features began to work convulsively. He tried to speak, but his lips were dry and refused to obey his will. He stood half paralyzed, speechless, with the fear of death in his staring eyes. A ghastly sight he made.

"Come. Quick, decide," I thundered out. "That, or the truth, or the torture."

His panic was heightened by my tone, and he started and stretched out a hand hesitatingly halfway to take what he believed was the deadly poison, but drew it back again shuddering, with a quick, convulsive movement, while his breath came fast and thick from his laboring chest. Again he tried to nerve himself, and again he failed, and then, with a wild cry of despair, he seized one of the two white lumps and hurled it from him as he fell on his knees and begged for mercy.

The ordeal had answered; I was to get the truth out of him.

CHAPTER XIII.

STEPHANI AGAIN.

The scene had affected Haidee Patras almost as deeply as Koprili himself, and her confident defiance of me gave place to horror and loathing of the man. She sprang to her feet, and commenced to pour out a fierce and vehement denunciation of his treachery and deceit, when I interposed and checked her.

"You are to be a witness only, mademoiselle, if you please," and I would not allow her to proceed. "Stand up, you, Koprili," I said, sternly, and he got up like a surly dog, hanging his head and glinting now and then at me from under his pent brows.

Then I made a last use of the invaluable lumps of sugar. There is one quality of the common Turk on which you can always play with a certainty of success—his superstition. Everyone who knows Stamboul knows the power of the wizards, or *hodjas,* over the people, men and women alike. I drew his attention to a little Maltese cross which I wore on my watch chain, and said, in as impressive a tone as I could command:

"You are not only a liar and a poisoner, Koprili, but you are a blunderer. You should have seen that I wear this *amulet* and should have asked your wizard what it means. He would have told you I am proof against every form of poison. See," and I took up the piece of sugar which still lay on the table and put it in my mouth.

This simple act seemed to move him quite out of himself. He started back, staring at me with wide-open eyes as though I were some evil spirit, and his lips moved as they formed the word of

incantation, but no sound came. There was no mistaking the effect. In his eyes I had become a semi-supernatural being, and his superstitious fear made him believe I had gained my knowledge of his actions by occult and mysterious means.

That was exactly the impression I wished to make; for I knew that even as he had lied in denying his crime, so he would lie now, as much as he dare, in giving me the reason for it. And lie he certainly did throughout the long examination to which I subjected him in the effort to drag something of the truth out of him.

I need not give it in detail. He denied all knowledge of the burned paper, swearing by the tomb of his fathers and every other oath which occurred to him that he had seen no paper and knew of none, and certainly had burned none, and that as he could not read he could not have distinguished one from another had he seen them.

He admitted having put the poisoned sugar with the coffee, and owned he did so to make me ill, not to kill me, and that his motive was hatred of me for having treated him harshly on one occasion and because I was hostile to his beloved mistress.

When I told him I knew that some one had instigated him, and who it was, he swore again that I was mistaken, and no threats of torture nor the assumption of knowledge of my own, no offers of pardon, nor any means I could think of could get any admission of the kind from him. It was just his own act, he swore, and nothing more.

I had to give in at last.

"I know the truth," I said, stoutly, at the close, "and I know you have lied to me again, and when the time comes you will pay a bitter price for every lie you have uttered. You will be kept here, a prisoner, and if Mr. Grant dies, we shall take your life for his," and with that I called in the servants, and gave him into their hands, with full instructions for his safe-keeping.

He had recovered his self-possession, and feeling, no doubt, rather proud of having succeeded in deceiving one whom he credited with occult powers, he stalked out defiantly between his jailers.

"Now, mademoiselle, can you read me the riddle?" I said, to the Greek, who had listened to the scene with intense interest.

"There is no riddle to read, Mr. Ormesby. Koprili has told you the truth. It is terrible; but you know all that is to be known."

"You see at last, however, the cause of poor Grant's illness. He came here and took what was meant for me, and Dr. Arbuthnot told me that had I taken it I should be now a dead man. Grant has a strong frame and physique, and he may recover, although, as you know, that is still uncertain."

"It is horrible," she said, under her breath. "But you do not hold me responsible for the private animosity of my servants. This fearful deed does not lie at my door." Her casuistry sickened and angered me.

"At least you brought the man here, but I leave to your own conscience the apportionment of responsibility and blame. I am not your judge. This villain is, however, your servant, and you will now understand why I, knowing what I do, and believing what I do, am anxious that you should not be allowed to see my friend."

"You dare to think that I would harm one hair of his head!" she cried, angrily and haughtily. "You dare to suspect me?"

"I think, mademoiselle, that you will do the best in all interests if you leave the White House, and do not return to it."

"You insult me, Mr. Ormesby," she said, rising. "I will not be driven away."

"As you please; but if you remain it will be under conditions I shall impose on my own authority. Your servants will be kept from you; you yourself will hold no communication with those outside, and if you leave the house the door will be closed against your return."

"You dare to make me a prisoner, sir?"

"No, because you can free yourself at any moment by crossing the threshold."

"We will see what your master says to this, Mr. Ormesby," she flashed.

"You will not be allowed to go near him, mademoiselle."

She faced me at first in a magnificent pose of haughty indignation; then changed and her features softened; she made a movement toward me as if to speak, but checked herself, and, with a gesture of mingled dismay, defiance and despair, went out of the room, leaving me, if the truth be told, not a little anxious and nervous as to the results of the line I had taken in regard to her, into which I seemed to have been in a manner forced.

Then I remembered the letter for her which had been brought to me, and I picked it up and examined it curiously. I would have given a good deal to know the contents, but we had not come yet to the pass which would justify any tampering with private letters, so I pitched it into my safe. She should neither send nor receive letters until this crisis was past.

Nor should she see Grant unless the doctor declared such a step to be absolutely necessary. I had burned my boats in that matter. If he knew what I had done in making her virtually a prisoner while in the house he would certainly not forgive it. And the sense of responsibility lay heavy upon me.

The doctor came again late in the night, and told me that Grant seemed a little easier and on the whole better and had asked for the Greek.

"I said, however, that she must not be sent for just then, as I wished him to be perfectly quiet. Like many men of strong will he makes a good patient, Mr. Ormesby, and when I explained things he acquiesced readily."

"I don't wish her to see him, doctor, unless it becomes positively unsafe to keep her away."

"Then you had better arrange that she sends him messages of some sort. He seems to think of little else but her, and his eagerness to get well is largely on her account."

The safest person I could think of as a medium for the messages was Mrs. Wellings, and when the doctor had gone I saw her about it, giving her a hint that they must be just personal wishes and so on, no reference to exciting topics to be allowed.

I had also a brief interview with Enid, and then, being as tired as a dog, I went to bed.

In the morning I had a short note from Count Stephani, saying he wished to see me on urgent business, and as I had to go out I left word that he was to be admitted to the house and shown to my room when he called. I was detained longer than I had anticipated, and on my hurrying to my room I was surprised to hear voices there raised in heated altercation.

They were those of Enid and Stephani, and when I threw open the door I found Stephani blocking the way with a smile on his handsome, wicked face, with Enid looking very angry as she ordered him to allow her to leave the room.

"How dare you attempt to stop me—ah, here is Mr. Ormesby," the change from indignation to relief on seeing me had a welcome ring in my ears. "Count Stephani has had the insolence to——" she began to me, but stopped abruptly, while a flood of rich color swept over her face. "He dares to keep me here against my will, Mr. Ormesby," she substituted.

"This has nothing to do with your brother's secretary, Miss Grant," said Stephani, turning with a frown on me, and using a tone of authority that jarred. "It is between you and me only."

"You will have the goodness to stand aside and let Miss Grant pass, Count Stephani—and at once, please," I said, firmly.

"And if I will not?" he answered, defiantly. "What will you do, little man?" This with a galling, contemptuous sneer. Never in my life have I so bitterly regretted my small physique as at that moment. I would have given the world to have been able to fling him out of the way, and have punished him for his

insolence. He stood over six feet, however, and was broad and strong and lithe as a mountaineer, but big as he was I was not going to endure this.

"I will throw you into the street for a scoundrel," I answered.

"Peace, little man, peace," he said, with another laugh, as he drew aside. "I have not come to quarrel. I was but overanxious to enjoy more of the sweet society of a gracious lady—a far too rare pleasure," and he made Enid a most courtly and graceful bow, as she passed him, trembling and angry, and went out.

"You can go, Stephani," I said, curtly. "I've done with you."

In reply he looked at me, smiled and held out his hand, and when I would not take it, laughed the louder and threw himself into a chair.

"Did you hear me? I will have no more to do with you," I said.

"I heard you, little man, and on my soul I like your courage, for I believe you meant to come at me just now, and then, alas! you would have been hurt, and I sorry. So I gave way. And that closes the chapter."

"No, the close will be when you leave the room."

"Just as you please, but I am not going yet; so we'll call that the first portion of the chapter, and will now turn to the second." He spoke imperturbably, lighted a cigarette, and lolling back in his chair gazed at me with a smile. Then seeing by my looks that I was in earnest he jumped up quickly, and came to me with his hand again held out. "Take my hand, Mr. Ormesby; if I made you angry just now, I am sorry and beg your pardon. By the cross, I do. I, Count Stephani, of Pristina, who never yet took back a word in my life, and care for neither frown nor favor of any living man, I beg your pardon. Come, shake hands," and he looked down on me with a winning smile.

He was a most engaging scoundrel, and, as I have said before, he had a special attraction for me, and I found it difficult to be angry.

"No, I won't take your hand, Stephani. I have done with you after this. I don't want to see you or speak to you again. Don't come here again."

"You English are devils for stubbornness," he cried, with a laugh. "But I've said I'm sorry; I have asked your pardon. Hell knows what more I can do. I *am* sorry; I like you; I have come today to do you a special service; and here you are turning your back on me, just because I made a fool of myself when speaking to that pretty American, and because I taunted you for being a smaller man than I am. I *was* a fool, and if I hadn't been one I shouldn't have done it. But don't let us carry it any further. I shan't do it again, and if I'd known how you'd take it, I shouldn't have done it once. For my part, I won't let it come between us."

"I am busy, if you please, Count Stephani," and I sat down to my desk.

"Well, then, I'll wait," and he threw himself back again into his chair with complete self-complacency, crossed his legs and gazed up at the ceiling, watching the smoke as it curled from his cigarette.

"If you do not leave the room I shall send for my servants."

"By all means," he answered, smiling, but as I stretched my hand to the table bell he started up.

"Stop, Mr. Ormesby," he said, very earnestly. "Wait at least till you've thought it over and thrown off your ill-temper. Now that Mr. Grant has been poisoned and is going to die, I may be of some use to you," and he looked at me with piercing significance.

"What do you mean?" I asked, drawing back my hand involuntarily.

"I have come to be frank with you. Your friend, this man of millions, this forceful American with the great scheme, has been shamefully betrayed, and he will die."

The intense conviction of his tone and look chilled me.

"What do you know, Stephani? Why did you not come before?"

"I knew it only last night, days too late to warn you."

"Days?"

"Yes, days—the thing was done days ago. That fiend, the man who calls

himself Koprili, has been days in the house here—though the devil himself alone knows why you ever let him come. Ah, my friend, you English and Americans are no match for the devils who are against you. You cannot fight with their weapons, and when beautiful women come beguiling you, instead of strangling them as they ought to be strangled, by hell, they ought, you take them to your home, and, simple souls that you are, you fall in love and want to marry them. That's how West meets East, Mr. Ormesby, and how East meets West, too," he said, with deliberate significance.

"You must speak in plainer terms, Stephani," I said.

"Plain speaking is no good now, friend secretary. It's too late to save, but not too late to punish and avenge." The dead connection of his tone and words appalled me, and for some moments I sat buried in troubled thought.

"What chance do you think you could ever have against the Turks? What was your scheme? How were they likely to view it? Think, man, think. You were to take a tract of land and develop it, only commercial, you said, and wished them to believe. Do you think they believed it? You got your concessions and laid your plans. Do you suppose they did not watch you? Are there no spies in the land save those of the palace and those in your own employ? What did they find? What is on your island away there near your concessioned lands? Do men plow land with rifles, dig for minerals with guns, make roads with cartridges? Oh, you men of commerce!"

"Go on, man, go on," I said, impatiently, when he paused.

"Do Americans make good sons of Islam? Were the men in your employ to develop your lands for America or Turkey? Bah, I have no patience. Were the Turks likely to look on with delight while their country was invaded, peopled with *Giaours,* fortified against themselves, and changed into a European colony to serve the God they hate and dethrone the God they love with a love and passion no man but a Mohammedan can understand? What is your Turk first, last and at all times but a son of Islam, ready to cut the throat of his dearest friend if he be deemed the enemy of Islam? Ah, friend secretary, I have heard you boast that you know this country and its people, and yet you don't know that."

He smiled derisively and paused again while he rolled a cigarette deftly and gracefully, as he did all things.

"And what chance could you have? Suppose you had succeeded, had founded your colony, had developed the land, and all had prospered exceedingly. What then? Have you never heard or read the history of Sidonia? What you wanted to do here was done there; not by Western, but Eastern Christians, mark you; and what happened? When was your Turk wanting in a reason for a massacre? It was found then, and would have been found now—had the scheme been allowed to go on. But there was a simpler means ready to hand. It is easier to kill one man by treachery than hundreds by massacre; and the death of one man was enough in this case. And that one man was your chief—the man of millions. And Islam decreed his death."

"It is not true, Stephani; it can't be," I cried, rebelling against the ever-growing and tightening conviction.

"You Westerners make poor plotters, for you plot with hands that shrink from the only means possible here—violence. See how you have been beguiled. Lest the man of millions should escape the death that surrounded him from the moment his scheme being understood, they lured him into this plot against Abdul; a plot that is indeed a plot and will succeed—perhaps. It is always perhaps here. But if it failed, who, think you, would be the first to be denounced to Abdul? Who but your man of millions; a hated *Giaour,* who came with his innocent commercial scheme and then turned conspirator? And if it succeeded, what, think you, would be the measure of reward for the man whom his plotters hate with the hate which only a son of Islam can feel for a *Giaour?* And yet, behold a wom-

an was given to him and he fell. What do you think now of your chances, Mr. Ormesby?"

I sat biting my fingers in distress, and pain, and shame, and useless regrets.

"But all is not lost if you are man enough to play a part," and he questioned me with a look of consummate cunning. "You cannot save your friend's life, but you can have revenge. Play your own hand; there are fine cards yet in it. You don't know all their scheme as they know yours, but you know enough. Go to the sultan; warn him; tell him all you know, and more than I can tell you; much more. Make him your friend, and save him and save yourself, and those with you before it is too late. You are surrounded by spies, but that one course is still open to you. Dare you do it? There is nothing that you could ask of Abdul that he would not grant to the man who saved his life and throne. You can be anything you will in this strange country. Now, dare you do it?"

I listened to him intently, and held in check the rising flood of wrath and indignation.

"Why do you counsel this?" I asked.

"Because that arch villain Maraboukh has insulted and scorned me, and because no man shall do that with Stephani and not pay the price. By the God of my fathers, I swear it."

"Why not carry the news yourself to Yildiz Kiosk?"

"Am I a fool that I should throw my life away? Who would believe me? No, no," and he laughed and shrugged his shoulders. "I prefer to keep my life while I can. I'm not swimmer enough to cross the Bosporus in a sack with my feet and hands tied as they know how to tie them in Yildiz?"

"And why do you come to me to do it?"

"Because they would believe you, and you would rise, and I should get my share for helping you."

"And what's your price?" I asked, shortly, scarcely able to trust myself to speak.

"Money—and what I am to have if the plot succeeds—the woman I desire for my wife."

"Who is that?"

"The sister of the man of millions and her money."

The cup of my anger was full indeed to overflowing at this wild and monstrous demand.

"By God, you are the most daring villain I ever met. Go," I shouted. "Go, before I have you turned out, or before I forget myself and shoot you where you sit."

He jumped to his feet and stared at me like a man bereft of his senses.

"Oh, that is——"

"Go," I shouted again, beside myself with passion as I flung the door open, "and take your lies and your insolence elsewhere." And when he had gone I slammed the door after him in impotent rage.

CHAPTER XIV.

IBRAHIM, THE JEW.

So enraged was I by Stephani's infamous proposals, and so disturbed and alarmed by what he had said in leading up to them, that I paced my room, my thoughts a very maelstrom of seething anxiety, panic and grief.

I gave little thought to the episode with Count Stephani. I had more weighty matters to engross my attention.

Everything had gone so smoothly—so long as Grant was at the helm, directing and controlling matters, that it had appeared just the easiest thing in the world to go right, and I hadn't a doubt that, had he been himself and well, these new complications would have disappeared like magic, just as a hundred others had in the past.

But the misfortune was that his almost magic gift of cutting knots and solving problems was lost to us at the moment when it was of critical importance. He had no doubt made a mistake in allowing himself to be won over by the Greek's influence into joining this confounded political intrigue,

but then he was just the man of all men to have grappled with the mistake and have turned it into a stepping-stone to further success.

I had had a perfectly free hand in this, and had always been disposed to plume myself on the completeness of my arrangements. And yet they seemed to have broken down absolutely in a vital crisis, and a most dangerous movement directed specially against us had been going on without even a breath of suspicion of the truth reaching me. I might well be mad at it.

The first thing to be done was clear, therefore. I must find the means somewhere and somehow of getting at the truth. I must get it at first hand, too, even if to do that involved some little risk; and it was then that a plan first occurred to me. It was to go in some disguise to the house of Maraboukh Pasha himself, and try to ferret out the facts. This was not so difficult as it would have been to many, for I had frequently had to pass myself as a Turk. My years of travel and residence in the East had turned my complexion so that very little make-up was necessary for the part, while my colloquial knowledge of the language had got me round more than one very ugly corner.

It was essential that I should gain admittance to the pasha's own presence, of course, and I turned over half a dozen ideas as to the character in which I could do this. I might play on his religious feelings as a half-mad fanatic or fakir, or work on his superstition as a wizard, pretending I had some occult message or mission to him, or, again, I might go as a provincial from his old vilayet and warn him of a plot against his life. But I liked none of these.

Then all suddenly the very thing occurred to me. I would personate the dog, Koprili, himself, and report to the pasha the progress of events here. Many things lent themselves to the plan and promised to help me greatly. Koprili, for instance, unlike the vast majority of Turks, always wore the old Oriental dress, and this would form an excellent disguise for me, while it would render it the more unlikely that Maraboukh, who was probably accustomed to interview Koprili secretly, would recognize me as Grant's interpreter.

There was one obviously rotten strand in the thread of my plan—I did not really know who Koprili was, or what were his real relations with the pasha. I had been so short-sighted as never to suspect he was other than just the Greek's servant, and had never bothered my head about him. But Stephani's hints in regard to him had startled me, and I resolved to ascertain all I could before taking the plunge. If I went in ignorance I might make a fatal blunder at the very threshold and so ruin everything.

This was a certain old Jew, named Ibrahim, who had played many parts in his time, and most of them ugly ones. He had been for some years engaged in a certain kind of horribly depraved and nefarious traffic which had brought him into vicious contact with all sorts and conditions of people in the capital, and as he was utterly without scruple he had used it to acquire a fund of information for the purposes of blackmail.

I had rendered him a service by rescuing his granddaughter, who lived with him, from a very dubious fate, and he had shown his gratitude in a hundred ways since. That has always struck me as one of the most singular characteristics of the Eastern. Let them be what they will, thieves, rogues, liars, cutthroats, anything; render them a service and touch them in some way that rouses their vivid sense of gratitude, and they will serve you with the fidelity of a dog.

Old Ibrahim lived in that most terrible slum in the world, Balat, the Jew quarter of Constantinople; and not wishing my visit to be too public, I stopped the carriage on the confines, and walked through the loathsome byways to his house.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

THE PRODIGAL

BY EDWIN L. SABIN

The chance that came to a human castaway and the manner in which he improved his opportunity.

CHOO! Choo! Choo! *Choo*-choo-choo-choo-choo-choo! Choo! Choo! Choo!

The heavy freight was climbing the stubborn grade known on the line as Miller's Hill. Part way up the ascent, from some mysterious nook among the cars near the center of the train, a man, exhibiting deftness born of much experience, lightly swung to the ground, and without answering aloud the curses bawled by the jeering train crew slunk off at a tangent with the track.

The train continued; and, having conquered the grade, triumphantly hustled over the crest and with rapidly increasing speed through the village of Proctor, just beyond. Soon its rumble, punctured by fitful shrieks of the whistle, had died away.

The man, proceeding to the right, plunged down the elevated roadbed, leaped the ditch which skirted it, scrambled up the side of the cut, slid through a barbed-wire fence, and entered a little patch of woods. Here he paused. The chill of an evening in early May was pervading the air, and mindful of the fact he raised the collar of his shabby coat, and thrust his hands into the pockets of his threadbare trousers.

He turned, and treading just within the fence, he advanced until he was at the edge of the clump. The grove was on a slight ridge, and now, before him, he saw the village roofs clustered in the twilight.

Over the scene rested an atmosphere of peace and contentment. Wreaths of smoke, betokening warmth and supper, drifted from the chimneys. Voices were faintly heard. The bark of a playful dog, the low of a cow in her stable, the caw of a crow in his rookery—all seemed to be in keeping with the subtle hour.

The man, standing still, gazed curiously; then he laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"Home again!" he said, speaking half mockingly, half bitterly. "Like a regular d——d bloomin' prodigal!" And in a ludicrously husky tone he croaked:

"Home again! Home again! Fro-o-om a foreign shore!" only to break off into a scornful sneering oath.

"Looks like the same old burg," he commented, having vented some of his ill humor. "Hasn't growed an inch. Too hidebound to grow—curse it. There's the schoolhouse where I was licked, and there's the church where I was preached at—Sammy Edwards, they thought he was a tarrer! Reckon if the parson could see Sammy now he'd sort er guess his sermons didn't do so much good, or the lickins, either. Well, you people, yer Sammy's back, nice as ever. He's a-goin' to make a call, and he's a-goin' to try and squeeze somethin' out er yer innerds, jus' as a souviner. He's a-goin' to put up with the old folks, in that there yaller house at the end of Hickory Street. And fust he's a-goin' to take a bath and make his twilit."

So saying the man descended to the ditch bounding the track, and squatting,

after a fashion washed his hands and face, drying them on the bandanna handkerchief which he untied from around his neck.

"There!" he declared, straightening up. "Sorry I ain't got a better hat," reflectively eying the battered felt which he had removed preliminary to his ablutions, "or my shoes ain't shined; but I'm disguised. Yes," and he chuckled, "that's the ticket—I'm disguised! They'll never know me," passing his palm over his stubbly cheeks and chin, "even if I did scrape off a layer or two."

He pulled his hat low upon his brow, and nervously fastened the one button of his coat.

"Now, Sammy," he instructed, "you're ready for biz. You 'member, when you cut yer stick, by way of the second-story winder, fifteen years ago, you clum this very ridge, and on the edge of them trees you stopped and shook yer fist at the town, and in partic'lar at that yaller house, and swore you'd come and play even, if 'twas the last thing you did on earth. You know, you never lie; only bad boys lie, and you was alluz a little angel! Now, 'member what you said, and don't forget you've had to hot-foot it out er Chicago, and the climate here'bouts ain't healthy, and yer needin' get-away funds mighty bad from yer pa and ma's fam'ly stockin'."

He shambled forward through the deepening dusk, and crossing the sloping point of the ridge, where the hazel brush was bursting into bud, made diagonally athwart the hummocky pasture land. Apparently the yellow house was his immediate objective point, for his course led him directly to it.

The house, a story and a half cottage, was on the outskirts of the village; a patient, weather-beaten sentry eternally standing guard at the juncture of country road with village street. Old Deacon Cole and wife—Grandma Cole—had lived here since time immemorial.

The tramp skulked through the vacant lot at the rear of the dwelling, and peered over the back fence.

"No dog, I bet. Of course not! Too stingy, the d—d skinflint. But all the better—I hate to hurt a dog, tho' I wouldn't mind wringin' the deacon's neck."

The fence creaked as he leaned upon it.

"Same ramshackle fence," he muttered, cautiously taking his weight from it. "Nary a new board; and that's a sign there'll be some weak winders—jus' like there allus was; wonder the hull house don't cave in—for Sammy to investigate, later.

"And now we'll peek a mite, to make dead sure that there ain't no mistake in the people. I wouldn't want to call on the wrong folks. Howsomever, seein' the fence, and all, reckon the devil ain't flew off with the deacon quite yet."

He was about to circuit, to find a favorable view of the persons within the cottage, when the door of the kitchen, across the short yard in front of him, was set ajar; and almost simultaneous with the appearance of the shaft of light was wafted to his nostrils a delicious odor of cooking. He sniffed greedily, reminiscently.

"That settles it!" he asserted, with decision. "Ma Cole is fryin' taters. Lordie, how she could fry taters!"

In his subdued tones was manifest a smacking of the lips. Aided by his awakened recollections, the odor and the light from the kitchen held him fascinated. He was conscious that he was cold and exceedingly hungry.

"And there's the old deacon!" he mumbled. "Helpin' so's to save havin' a hired girl! He mus' have a tidy little wad hoarded up by this time, hid in that wallet o' his'n under the floor. Mebbe it's well I didn't take it when I lit out that time, 'cause it's been drawin' interest and now there's so much the more for Sammy."

The door had been opened wide, and the bent figure of a man had been limned on the bright background, had pottered for a moment on the tiny porch, and then had re-entered. The door was again only ajar.

But such a flood of appetizing aroma had been released during the interval

that the tramp was tantalized beyond endurance.

He started, hesitated, wavered, and finally, with a muttered "'Twon't do no harm," vaulted the fence, and walked boldly to the kitchen steps. He mounted, and knocked.

The door swung, and left him blinking on the threshold, while the couple before him stared questioningly.

"Good-evenin'," he whined, pulling off his hat. "Can't you give a poor man a bite to stay his stumick till mornin'? I've got a job waitin' for me down the road, but I'm so hungry it don't seem like I could get there."

"Do tell!" exclaimed Grandma Cole, flustrated. "An' how fur be you goin'?"

"It's the feller who runs the liv'ry stable at Petersburg," replied the tramp, with ready tongue and servile manner. "He said he wanted a hostler, and I engaged to come to-morrer. But——"

"Hear that, pa?" interrupted Mrs. Cole. "Must be Jim Ingalls—he's the only liveryman there. But, massy sakes," she continued, in commiseration, addressing the tramp, "Petersburg is nigh on fourteen mile from Proctor! You didn't reckon on walkin' it to-night, did you?"

The tramp shuffled his feet uneasily. His attitude was a marvel of humility and irresolution.

"Well," he faltered, twisting his hat in simulated embarrassment, "I had calkilated to—but I hurt my knee slippin' on some clay, and I ain't had anything to eat sence las' night."

"Do tell!" again ejaculated the woman. "Come in, come in! Set where it's warm, an' I'll have supper on the table in jest a minute. You must be right starved!"

"Naw, naw!" snarled the deacon, with the irascibility of crabbed age. "We can't feed tramps. Nothin' for ye to eat. Clear out with ye—mebbe they'll feed ye next door."

"Shame on you, pa!" remonstrated Mrs. Cole. "He ain't no tramp; he's a worker. Didn't you hear him say so? We've got a-plenty. Don't you mind him," she said, apologetically, to the guest, "he's old, an' his eyesight's failin'. Fact is, we don't either of us see any too well."

She bustled about the kitchen, and from kitchen to dining room, from dining room to kitchen, paying no more attention to her husband's grumblings. The tramp had seated himself on one of the painted, stiff wooden chairs near the crackling stove, and with crafty glance was absorbing the details of the surroundings. How unchanged all was—glass lamp in its bracket over the deal table, table itself, stove, chairs, the very wall paper and the tea kettle, just as he had beheld them on the evening of his departure.

The deacon, also—furtive, cross-grained, miserly. And grandma—generous, unsuspecting, gullible.

"Sammy, you're in luck," congratulated the tramp, in thought. "Here's a layout—board and lodgin'. Grandma says you're a 'worker,' and so you are. Workin' other folks is yer strong graft." He chuckled. "'Spec' I must look 'most decent. That was a smooth move—takin' a bath in case I should go into sassiety. Sammy, you sure are a 'worker.'"

Here the deacon's ebullitions of wrath, from where he was laboriously essaying to slice bread on the deal table, overflowed in a sound very much like "durned tramp"!

"You jus' hold yer hosses," muttered the visitor, contemplating him with fierce calmness. "Mebbe you think you ain't got anythin' for me, but I reckon 'fore I leave you'll find you've got more'n you had idee—you old fox!"

"Supper's ready," announced grandma, cheerily. "Go an' set down, pa—you an' Mr.—Mr.——"

"DeForrest, ma'am," supplied the tramp.

"Oh," responded grandma, abashed by the imposing appellation. "I guess I didn't ketch your name at first. You set opposite to pa, an' I'll bring the tea."

Thus the tramp was again in the dining room of his boyhood, and at his boyhood's table. And after the lapse of a decade and half the deacon's mechanical,

hardly intelligible grace (which even caused him to duck his head involuntarily) was perfectly familiar to him.

"Some rigmarole!" he commented, beneath his breath.

He recognized certain articles upon the table. For instance, the thin silver spoon into which he had once sunk his teeth, having seen a circus performer bite in two a nail, and having been desirous of testing his own prowess. The blue majolica bread plate—there it was, under his nose!

The furnishings of the room, as well, apparently were unaltered. While stowing away his mouthfuls—and they were many, for indeed he was very hungry, his tale had not all been falsehood—he observed things narrrowly. Further, he observed his companions as he had not done in the kitchen—observed, with shifty, sharp eyes, that perhaps their hands trembled a little more, their shoulders were a little more bent, their countenances a little more wrinkled, and that the deacon was a little more sour, grandma a little more placid.

Practically, they were the same guardians—grandma the simple, the deacon the vulpine—from whom, with hatred in his heart, he had fled. He had waited fifteen years, and his revenge was to be sweet.

Few words were spoken during the meal. The deacon munched his bread and potatoes, and noisily sipped his tea between his toothless gums, and said nothing. Grandma hazarded the fear that there wasn't much to eat, and hoped that the tramp could make out a supper. The tramp responded only briefly, but his onslaught proved him not a whit dissatisfied with the fare.

"Now, pa," bade Mrs. Cole, every dish presenting mute testimony that supper was over, "you show the gen'leman into the settin' room, an' light the lamp, an' then you help me do up the work. 'Twon't take long," she remarked, to the tramp. "He alluz helps me, an' you make yourself to home, an' we'll be in in a minute."

The deacon surlily led the way into the sitting room, fumbled with the lamp, lit it, banged the chimney into place, and with a grunt which might mean anything ungracious shambled out.

"Grandma alluz *was* a fool!" soliloquized the tramp, left to himself. "Me here alone—think of it! Well, Sammy, she tol' you to 'make yerself to home'; so fust we'll examine that ele-gant paintin' hangin' in the corner."

He stepped softly before a picture in a corner of the room; with a searching glance at the curtained windows, and the entrance to the dining room, he knelt, swept rapid fingers over the carpet close against the wall, scrutinized the spot carefully, and, presto! was back beside the center table and the lamp.

"Sammy," he chuckled, resuming his husky monologue, "the safety vault's there, ready to be tapped! But don't be in a hurry—it'll keep a bit."

When his hostess, and his unwilling host came in, they found him established on the edge of the figured sofa, quietly biding their next proposals.

"We count on your lodgin' here for the night," said grandma. "You——"

"Don't either!" snapped the deacon. "Done more now than we kin afford. Let 'im go some'ers else—they'll bed 'im at the calaboose."

"Pa, you hush!" ordered grandma. "He can have Sammy's room, if he don't min' sleepin' in a bed that hasn't been slep' in for a long time. You see——"

At this point the deacon wrathfully stumped to the kitchen, and slammed the door behind him.

"He's techy," continued grandma, "an' kind o' childish. You mustn't let what he says make any difference to you. You see, this Sammy whose room I'll put you in was a boy of our'n—a second or third nevvy he was, re'ly—who we tuk to raise. An' somehow him an' us didn't seem to git along very well; mebbe he thought we was too stric' with 'im, an' mebbe we didn't understan' boys. He was a leetle wild, too, Sammy was—a leetle wild. An' he was that stubborn—my! The deacon can be jest as sot, an' with them pullin' opposite d'rections all my prayin' an' cryin' didn't do a mite o' good. The dea-

con he thrashed an' Sammy he acted up, an' at last, 'bout—wait a minute."

She trotted rearward, and called through the kitchen door:

"Oh, pa—how long's it been sence Sammy run off?"

"Fifteen year," rasped the deacon.

"'Bout fifteen year ago," she proceeded, returning, "he run away one mornin' bright and early, an' we ain't seen 'im sence! Poor Sammy. We didn't mean to treat 'im bad. I dream of 'im quite often, an' sometimes he's needin' us an' we can't get to 'im. I hope he's happy an' doin' well, wherever he is—or mebbe he's dead. We *did* hear that he went to the Phil'pines, an' was permoted for brav'ry, and was killed fightin'. I shouldn't wonder. Sammy wasn't no coward. He ought to have made a mighty good man, after he outgrew some of his stubborn tricks. We—but, pshaw, listen at me rattlin' on!" she interrupted. "Of course you don't care for all this 'bout Sammy. I reckon I'm jest as childish as pa—an' seems like when once I begin on Sammy I never let up. I only started to tell you 'bout the room. P'raps you're tired, an' would wish to go to bed now, so's to get an early start. Would you? All right—I'll go ahead with a light."

The tramp could easily have traversed the short route, through the hall and up the stairs, blindfolded. Carrying the lamp, grandma preceded him, and ushered him into the room with the sloping ceiling, under the eaves.

"There!" she said. "There's clean sheets on the bed, an' water and towels—I filled the pitcher after supper—an' here's one of pa's nightshirts. We'll have breakfast at half-past six, if that's not too late for you. You can ketch a ride to Petersburg, I reckon." She paused at the door. "We have fam'ly worship 'bout eight every night," she vouchsafed, falteringly; "but you'll be asleep then, chances are. You might read over that prayer hangin' on the wall, if you don't object; 'twouldn't do you no harm whether you're a prayin' man or not. 'Twas one Sammy learnt. His picture's on the mantel, under it—see? Well, good-night to you," and she groped her way down the dark flight.

The tramp gently closed the door, and without moving surveyed the chamber. Yes—the small single bed, its white paint now yellowed; the pitcher and wash bowl, with the swans on them in pink; the "splasher," protecting the wall above the washstand, and with a Jack and Jill embroidered into it; the squatty bureau, and its cracked looking-glass—the glass he had cracked; the slanting ceiling, once beyond finger tips, but now almost too low; the window, opening upon the roof of the side porch, and offering, as he well knew, ready egress.

Under a sudden impulse he strolled across the room, and scanned the picture. It was a photograph of a solemn, but not unattractive boy; an old photograph, considerably faded.

"That's Sammy, is it!" commented the tramp. "Don't believe I ever was acquainted with him. Died in the Philippines, fightin', did he? Tough luck, tough luck! The Sammy I knew wasn't no such fool!"

His eyes drifted to the prayer, in its frame just above. Although the light was bad, he unhesitatingly deciphered the lines:

> The Lord my pasture shall prepare,
> And feed me with a shepherd's care;
> His presence shall my wants supply,
> And guard me with a watchful eye.

"Pah!" muttered the tramp, disgustedly. "Let's cheese it!" Abruptly he strode to the bureau, and with an irritated, brusque puff extinguished the lamp.

He rolled his coat for a pillow, and extended himself upon the floor near the window. No bed for *him*. Soon he heard, quite plainly, the deacon's voice, below, reading a chapter from the Bible; then in quavering chorus: "Our Father who art in heaven——"

Presently the old couple ascended the stairs. The coast was clear!

For a brief space the tramp waited, lying flat upon his back. He sat up, and listened. He stretched out again. He

twisted and kicked, as though no posture was comfortable. An hour passed, and still he fidgeted. Finally he sat up with decision.

"Died in the Philippines, fightin', did you, Sammy? Permoted, too! No, you didn't—yer nothin' but a white-livered bum, without nerve enough to take a get-away wad when it's right in yer paw! 'Druther do the double-shuffle on a square hole, wouldn't you! You measly coward—git! And if yer pinched, don't holler! You had yer chance."

He roughly jerked high the lower window sash, groped outside with his foot—and was gone. And in the morning Grandma Cole, receiving no response to her summons, discovering the room empty, the bed unused, regretfully wondered; while the deacon, having ascertained that no valuables were missing, vowed that they were well rid of the "varmint."

AN UNSUSPECTED PARTNERSHIP

BY A. WALTER UTTING

In which two friends stumble upon one of the pitfalls of a great city.

I FOUND Higley Biggs, my corpulent friend, strolling miserably down the avenue, a look of downtrodden dejection upon his usually cheerful face.

"If you don't mind," he said to me, "I'd gratefully thank you for the loan of a 'V.' Until I get one somewhere, I can't go to my room."

"Broke?" I asked, knowing that at his house the rule was prompt payment or barred doors, and that yesterday was "due day."

"Yep," he replied, laconically.

"And you were paid day before yesterday!" I exclaimed. "Really, Biggs, I think you're acquiring a habit of extravagance. I happen to know you received twenty-five dollars in your accounting."

He looked wonderingly at my display of knowledge.

"So?" quoth he; "how d'ye know?"

"You threw the envelope which had contained the check on the floor, after you had figured up items to the amount of twenty-seven dollars and fifty cents, and had marked out two dollars and thirty-two cents from the total."

"Wise Willie!" Higley retorted. And then he asked, somewhat anxiously: "Do I get the fiver?"

"If you'll tell me how you got rid of the other," I said, knowing that my fat friend would "be good" for any amount I might advance, and having a great plenty of spare time on my hands. "You'll pay it back?"

"Little boy"—and Higley Biggs laid his hand on my arms in the most affectionate manner—"I'm positive to get it back to you. You see, I expect a money order from Chuckalutto in about a week. Do?"

I nodded affably. The night was a dismal one. The moon had grown disgusted and had retired from the skies at an early hour; the stars were fading one by one. A small breeze betokened a coming wind.

"I've thought it out," my companion said, when we had walked a block or so, "you lend me my room rent until next pay day, and we'll go to the room and I'll tell you all about it. After all," he added, in a more confidential manner, "I don't see why you shouldn't be interested in it. I am—ah—deeply." He sighed.

Soon we were seated in his room, and he was easy in the wisdom that he had shelter for his weary head for another week.

"It's about a girl," I remarked, as I sat down on the bed, and thus reserved the chair for his use.

He started, and looked at me keenly.

"A girl?" he repeated; "no, a young woman. Let me tell you all about it. She was fair as a summer's morning, and arrayed with the neatness of a summer sunrise. Her hair was the color of the summer sun, and her eyes were the ethereal blue of the summer sun's environment."

"In fact," I laughed, "she was the idyl of a summer sun."

"You won't laugh when you hear about it *in toto*," he went on, solemnly. "When first I saw her she was walking anxiously up and down Broadway. Her eyes were cast upon the entrances of buildings she passed. She wore an air of bewilderment and charming innocence."

"She has already become a living personage to me," I remarked.

"Listen! The time was ten of the clock in the morning hours. I was lounging in the corridor of one of the hotels, and could see her as she meandered up and down. At first I paid no attention to her, but her appearances and reappearances were insistent, and forced attention to her. It was not long before I noticed her face take on a worried look; she seemed greatly distressed. After walking past the hotel about fifteen times, she crossed the street, and went to a bench in Madison Square.

"I had nothing to keep me busy. Time was a luxury. I arose from my easy-chair and took my way across the street to the park. There I observed the young woman sitting on one of the benches. She was indulging in a generous fit of weeping. Of such actions are women made.

"My heart swelled to her. Here, thought I, is a young creature who has some manner of grave trouble. Perhaps I can aid her in clearing the wreckage of sorrow, and digging a path to the land of joy. But the problem as to ways and means popped up. I sat beside her, and braved the dangers of being considered a bold, bad man.

"'Pardon, me,' said I, 'but can I do something for you?'

"'N-no,' she replied, and the sobs seemed like to choke her; 'you are not known to me.'

"'Let that make no difference,' I told her. 'I will introduce myself if you will permit me. I am Higley Biggs, sometimes contributor to the *Beachly Pebble*, and with time to kill. To aid you in smiling I would rate as the greatest pleasure on this mundane sphere.'

"The boldness of my words seemed to affect her. She straightened herself up, and a little straggling tear broke away from her lashed eye and twirled down her nose. She tried to smile.

"It was a poor effort—her sore heart was too greatly troubled for opulent laughter—but it was an effort.

"'You cheer me greatly, Mr. Biggs,' she replied, and I was ready to cast myself at her feet for very inborn love of her voice, her fairness, her seraphimic attributes. 'But,' she added, 'what aid can come to one in such distress as I?'

"'Is it so awful?' I asked.

"She nodded. 'A case of absolute forgetfulness,' she said, and then smiled sadly. Ah, my little boy, you should have seen her when she heroically forced a smile to her pretty features.

"'Aphasia?' I asked. 'I shall take you to a doctor.'

"'No, no,' she replied, hastily; 'a mere ordinary case. Last night I entered New York with my mother, an old lady and infirm. You'd know her by the heaven that shines upon her face. We went to a hotel, and had our baggage taken there, and slept there last night. I am just from Vassar, where I was forced to forego half of my studies. We were to go home to Chuckalutto today. This morning mother and I started out to do a wee bit of shopping. I lost her in the crowds.'

"'New York is very large,' I replied. 'But surely you have found her? You must have seen her!'

"She shook her head. 'Not since we separated,' she said.

" 'Then she might have returned to the hotel,' I ventured.

" 'Perhaps so,' remarked my fair companion, 'but even in that event I am as badly off as before. I have forgotten what hotel we stayed in last night. I was looking for it for some time this morning.'

"I mentioned the names of several to her, but she said none of them was the one. It was plain she was in a quandary —as I was also. I did not know what to do. Evidently and obviously the thing to do was to find her mother for her. But how could that be done?

" 'I have an idea,' said I, after both of us had spent more than half an hour trying to figure out the situation and find a way to clear ground, 'we'll take a look at all of the hotels, if you don't mind.'

" 'If it will bring mamma to me,' she assented, and then began to weep once more.

"So we started out. We walked up Broadway, and more than once I forgot that I was supposed to be helping her. Her eyes looked at me with especial tenderness, I thought, and my thoughts drifted into channels of which the poets write.

"The hotel had not been discovered by one o'clock, and you may imagine that both of us were rattlingly hungry. I asked her to dine. She demurred daintily, or something to that effect, and stated that she hated to impose upon my good nature and generosity.

"You know when my generosity comes into play—when I know I am getting a reward—and in this case my reward consisted of those flashing glances from her eyes, and those occasional smiles.

"Well, we dined. It was not a princely repast, but it stretched out well. I did not know how soon it would be before we found dear old mamma, and I didn't want to break away quickly, you know. I just had a quarter in change, and that check for twenty-five dollars in my pocket. The coin I gave to the waiter, and handed the check to the cashier, receiving in change a twenty-dollar bill and a two-dollar bill.

" 'Now,' said I, 'what do you intend doing?'

"She was very thoughtful. 'Mamma will be sure to go home,' she told me. 'That was in our arrangements in case anything like this were to happen.'

" 'Then you will go home?' I queried, and experienced a great sense of regret at so short an acquaintance with her.

" 'I can't,' she replied. 'I hadn't told you, but mamma has the pocketbook. I haven't a cent with me, nor can I get one to pay for carfare home.'

"Again, little boy, let me remind you of my generosity, and the reward I had already obtained from this angel-let-loose—those smiles, those glances, those sighs, the sounds of that voice! And also let me remind you of the fact that I had money with me.

" 'Miss—ah—Miss—Miss Vassar,' said I, 'will you allow me the privilege of loaning you money for carfare? It would be pleasurable.'

"She would not hear of it. Indeed, no. Hadn't she already imposed too much upon me? And how could I be sure she would return the money? And all of that sort of thing.

" 'I'm sure that will be all right,' I said, and wrote my name and address for her, at her urgent request. 'You can send it back to me if you insist upon it.'

" 'I would not be a lady if I did not,' she replied. 'And believe me, Mr. Biggs, you have been very good to me.'

"We went over to the Grand Central Depot. She had insisted upon leaving for home so soon as we could get to the railway. The big clock at the end of the room registered two-thirty. The time had passed on wings of rapid moving. It seemed my heart—but—well!

"I handed her the twenty-dollar bill. 'You can buy your ticket with that, and take out what you like,' I said.

"She twisted the bill in her fingers. Of a sudden it flew to the floor and back of me. I stooped over and reached it for her. I put it back into her hands. She seemed very nervous.

"'Really,' she murmured, 'I don't think I need so much. You see, Mr. Biggs, it only takes one dollar and sixty-eight cents to get to Chuckalutto. I can get that out of the two dollars. I'd rather have that, than to change that big bill.'

"Of course I tried to tell her that she was welcome, but she wouldn't have it that way. She gave back the big bill, and I handed the smaller one to her.

"'Thank you, very, very much,' she said; 'I will send the sum to you next week.'

"Then she was gone. I walked away from the depot and to my room. I remained there the rest of the day. This morning I lost the big bill. That explains it, doesn't it?"

This was the only time I had ever heard Higley Biggs confess to love. But there were some details to his story that interested me.

"Did she give you a little something to remember her by?"

He blushed. "A little artificial rose," he said, and showed it.

I looked at it carefully, then took an artificial carnation from my pocket. "She deals in *boutonnières,*" I remarked, gravely.

"What do you mean?" gasped Higley, and paled.

"She deftly changed your twenty-dollar bill for a counterfeit, didn't she?"

He nodded, and hung his head shamefully. "How did you know?" he inquired, after ten minutes of silence.

"She worked me for ten dollars last week," I replied.

WINNERS, KNIGHT ERRANT*

A STORY OF RHODES

BY SEWARD W. HOPKINS

SYNOPSIS OF CHAPTERS PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED.

At a ball given by his mother, Bob Winners, a typical young American of wealth and energy, meets a beautiful woman known as the Princess Mella. With her is Bob's cousin who had married the supposed princess' father, a Greek. A certain captain in the Turkish service, Karusu, appears on the scene, and Madam Dvorolos and the princess leave suddenly for Paris. Madam Dvorolos sends Bob word to follow her, which he does at once. He learns in Paris that the two women have gone to Rhodes. Meeting Captain Karusu he accepts that officer's invitation to accompany him on his private yacht to Rhodes. During the voyage Bob is thrown overboard by the captain, but manages to reach a small island, where he is held for ransom by the inhabitants. He is asked to write home for a large sum of money, but having found a revolver, he prepares to resist the demand. Finally making his escape, Winners reaches the Island of Rhodes where he finds Madam Dvorolos conducting a revolution against the ruling pasha. Bob is induced to join and is sent to the mainland for reinforcements. During the voyage his lugger is sunk but he is rescued by a Turkish gunboat.

CHAPTER XIII.

ONE WAY TO TREAT A GUEST.

THE group of officers watched him anxiously, and when the boat was near enough a rope with a wooden buoy on the end was thrown toward him. With a mighty effort he reached it, and was drawn on board.

"I thank you for my life," he said, in French. "You are Turkish officers. I cannot speak your language."

"I speak French and English," said an officer with a showy uniform. "I am the commander. We saw you wave. You were in a bad position."

"I should say so. I don't think I could have held out another hour."

"But how did you come to be in that plight? Were you on a wrecked ship?"

"I was a passenger on a lugger that went down."

"A lugger? Did it belong to the Greek, Theopolous?"

"Yes."

The officer spoke to the others in Turkish, and a great laugh went up.

"Where is Theopolous?" asked the captain.

"I'd like to know that myself. He deserted me when I was asleep."

"Certainly. That is the sort of revolutionists we have. We were looking for that very lugger. We knew that you had been sent to Makry for reinforcements. But we can talk later. You need dry clothes."

A lieutenant took Winners in charge, and soon had him fitted out. His own clothes dried while he was regaled with brandy and food.

None of the officers attempted to speak to him save the captain, and he not until Winners had eaten his breakfast. Then he offered the American a cigar.

"Now tell me what fool you are," said the captain. "Excuse me for calling you that, but you are an American, and not interested in Rhodes. Why should

* This story, "Winners, Knight Errant," began in the February issue. The back numbers can be ob-

you go to Makry for troops to aid a forlorn hope?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, I don't know," replied Winners.

"Let me tell you," said the captain, with a laugh. "It was because Madam Dvorolos bade you."

"I guess that's right," said Winners.

"Well, it was unfortunate. Even though you failed you may be punished, though I think you are already punished enough. My orders were, however, to capture the lugger, and take all on board to Rhodes."

"But you didn't capture the lugger."

"No, I am sorry to say, I did not. But I have you, and must take you to Rhodes. As you are an American, and as Americans are making a stir in the world these days, I don't think you will be treated with great severity."

The gunboat steamed for Rhodes, and by the time she reached port Winners had grown quite friendly with the Turkish captain. But as soon as the boat was moored the friendship ceased.

With an officer on either side of him, he was conducted to a low, white building, where the kadi was holding court.

The kadi, an old and stern individual, looked surprised. The officers bent low before him, but Winners stood erect. The kadi asked a question in Turkish, which was answered in the same tongue. An attendant at once went out. Winners stood there, wondering what they intended to do with him, when the attendant returned. With him was Capt. Karusu.

The expression on Karusu's face was impossible to describe when he saw who the prisoner was. But this was momentary. He smiled and extended his hand.

"My dear friend!" he exclaimed. "I had given you up for dead. This is indeed a pleasant surprise. But I am full of sorrow to see you a prisoner. I shall not even ask what it is about. You are my guest and free from this moment. Pardon me while I explain this to the kadi."

The grizzled old judge looked wise while Karusu was explaining in Turkish, and after a few preliminaries Karusu linked his arm in that of Winners and led him out.

"Come," he said, to the American. "I must get you better clothing. These are the worse for your experience, whatever it has been. We will go to my house, and, after a chat, I will introduce you to the pasha."

"Are we friends or enemies?" asked Winners, abruptly, facing Karusu.

Nothing could exceed the look of amazement on the captain's face.

"Friends or enemies? Can you ask so strange a question as that? Why, my dear Winners, when I missed you from my yacht I was distracted with grief. I had boats out all night looking for you. What in the world happened? Did you walk overboard in your sleep?"

"I don't know. I found myself, when I awoke, on the shore of a little island they called Scartio."

"Scartio! How strange! My own island. And you never knew how you came there?"

"No, some fishermen found me, tried to hold me for a ransom, but I escaped. Then—well, I suppose you know all about that."

Karusu laughed heartily.

"Now I do," he said. "I heard that an American adventurer was assisting the revolutionists, but never thought of you. But that is over now. It does not matter. We are still friends."

They walked along the main street for a short distance, and turned into a court.

"Here is my house," said Karusu. "It is not pretentious, but inside you will be comfortable and welcome. Enter, my friend."

It was with a peculiar sensation that Winners walked through the portals into a cool corridor. Instinctively he knew that Karusu was his enemy. But, in view of his present situation, he could not decline the man's hospitality. A word, he knew, would lodge him in prison.

In a most luxuriously fitted room Capt. Karusu offered Winners a cigar. The American, still assailed by that uneasy feeling that Karusu was not the friend he claimed, but still unable to

decline his hospitality, accepted all that came with an easy grace.

"All this is strange," said Karusu. "You are again my guest, having been in some unexplainable way lost from my yacht. Have you never thought about it?"

"Yes," said Winners. "I have thought a good deal about it."

"And what were your conclusions?"

Winners fingered his cigar.

"I might just as well tell the truth," he said, after a pause. "I thought you had me thrown overboard."

Karusu laughed outright.

"This is as good as a play in Paris," he said. "Pardon me. I have some good wine here, which my religion forbids me to drink. Will you have some?"

"It is too early. It is but an hour ago I had dinner. The captain of the gunboat was exceedingly friendly."

"Certainly. We Osmanlis are not so bad. Yet your Christian papers make us out to be. I wish to ask another question. Why did you sail for Makry?"

"To be shipwrecked, I guess. That's all that came of it."

"True," said Karusu, with a laugh. "But it was not what you started for. Now let me tell you something. You were at the castle of M. Dvorolos."

"Yes, I chanced upon it after I escaped from your island."

"You say that peculiarly. Do not say from my island as if I had tried to hold you prisoner. You might say from pirates, robbers, anything, on my island."

"Well, I escaped. That's the thing. And in a boat that brought me safely to Rhodes. I chanced to land on the estate of M. Dvorolos."

"Exactly. And the fascinating madam won you to the absurd cause of rebellion."

"Not exactly. I care nothing for the rebellion. But I did like Madam Dvorolos."

"Well, let that pass. She is your mother's cousin. Now to continue, you went at her bidding, and in the lugger of George Theopolous you started for Makry. There was a gang of hired soldiers there ready to join madam's rebellion."

"I believe so."

"What interest had you other than obeying your mother's cousin?"

"None."

"Oh, yes, you had. You were—and are—in love with Adria Dvorolos."

"Well?"

"That brought you here in the first place. Now permit me, begging your pardon, to tell you that this is all madness. You are an American, and Adria is a Greek. You belong in New York, Adria belongs in Rhodes. Mulieman Pasha, my master, has long been enamored of Adria's charms. She does not love you, and I know it. So perhaps do you. With the pasha she would be as happy as with you."

"But she does not wish to become the pasha's wife."

"That makes no difference. The fact is that all maidens chosen by the pasha to be his wives are highly honored. Adria Dvorolos is no more than a rich vine grower's daughter. Think of the honor offered her! To be the favorite wife of the Governor of Rhodes!"

"True. But if she does not wish that honor, then why compel her to accept?"

"So argued Madam Dvorolos. Dvorolos himself might be reckoned with. But madam, being an American, is obdurate. She planned this miserable rebellion. It has cost us trouble and money, but that matters not. She is now practically a prisoner in the castle. My soldiers are everywhere. Even her own officers are not true. It was from one of them I received word that you had gone to Makry. I sent the gunboat after you. But I gave orders that you should be well treated."

"But a short time ago you did not know I was alive. At least, you said so."

"True," said Karusu, smiling. "I am speaking now of the man who went to obey Madam Dvorolos. I did not know it was you."

Karusu seemed desirous of keeping the conversation going on that one line, and no attempt on Bob's part could direct it to any other channel.

As they talked and smoked the little black eyes of Karusu seemed constantly studying Winners.

"I can read your very thoughts," said Karusu. "You still think I am not your friend. Your absurd suspicion that I had you thrown from my yacht sticks in your mind. I see it. Now, if it had been my wish to kill you, could it not have been done completely? It is as easy to throw a dead man overboard as a live one."

"There is no argument against that," said Winners.

"I wish to convince you that I am really your friend. When you see the pasha you will like him, and find yourself questioning the wisdom of this mad passion for Adria Dvorolos. But this is not the hour to see Mulieman Pasha. Have you noticed my decorations? I have what is called in Rhodes a beautiful house."

"I have seen only this room," said Winners, "and this is certainly beautiful."

"Let me show you my art gallery. You must remember I am as much Parisian as Turk. By the way, we never speak of ourselves as Turks. It might be used as a name of reproach, but we are Osmanlis. Let me advise you while in Rhodes not to use the word Turk. Still, I understand your use of the word, and do not resent it. I am, from your point of view, a Turk. Will you permit me to show you some of my statues and paintings?"

"Certainly," said Winners, and he followed Karusu from the room.

Certainly, if there was a luxurious house in Rhodes, it was the house of Capt. Karusu. A gallery of magnificent paintings interested Winners and held him captive for an hour. Beautiful statues from all parts of the world had a room to themselves. Carpets of thickest velvet were on the floor. Winners thought that for a man who was simply a captain, Karusu lived handsomely. But he realized that to be commander of the pasha's guard in Rhodes was a great honor, and there were two ways of looking at it. Karusu may have been rich enough to buy the place, or he may have been vile enough to get rich out of it. Winners did not know, and did not care.

"You know, of course," said Karusu, "that this island was once a stronghold of the Knights of St. John. Their dungeons, their fortresses and their castles are still here. It is true their great church is now a Turkish mosque. But in my own house here, or, as we call it, palace, I have preserved many of the old-time relics. Would you like to see them?"

"Why, if you wish me to," said Winners. "I like to study history in every form."

"The best way to study history," said Karusu, "is to study it from the very relics left by the men who are gone. You can read that Greece was great, or Rome was great, and not realize how great they were. But visit their cities, explore their ruins, study their sculpture, and you will know. Now let me show you something that will surprise you concerning the Knights of St. John."

They were standing near a broad stairway. It was of polished stone, and ornamented with carved pillars. Karusu started down, and Winners followed. From the lower corridor they entered a narrower stairway, and here Winners was several feet behind his friendly guide.

"I liked you the moment I saw you," said Karusu. "But somehow you did not seem to like me in New York. I suppose it was something that Madam Dvorolos said."

Winners made no reply. He was interested now in a vaulted cavern underneath the captain's house, and in the niched walls great chains and iron rings, rusted with age, were fastened. Winners had not read that the Knights of St. John tortured their prisoners, and the work, though rusted, seemed too modern.

"There is a legend connected with this place," said Karusu. "There was once a very beautiful lady in Rhodes, and a pasha loved her. She, however, did not love him, and favored another. Then Mulieman, who is a kind and

mild-mannered man, was not pasha, but a man who showed no mercy to his enemies. The young man she favored was brought here, and thrust into this dungeon. Here he starved to death, tortured daily by the sight of food placed out of his reach. It is, as you see, a reckless piece of business to trifle with the love of a pasha."

Karusu opened a heavy oaken door, braced with ornamental iron, and a dark little room sent out the stench of damp and stale atmosphere.

"Seems as if you were rehearsing," said Winners, as he looked in. "Didn't you say Mulieman, the present pasha, wanted Adria Dvorolos to be his wife?"

"Yes, but Mulieman is merciful," said Karusu. "He wouldn't do anything like that. He would not—do this—for instance."

With lightning-like rapidity Karusu lurched forward, struck Winners with his fist, and knocked him through the open door into the dungeon. Half stunned, Bob did not realize what was being done. The heavy door slammed shut, a bolt was turned, and in total darkness Winners realized that he had been the deceived guest of a traitor and an enemy.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE FLIGHT OF ENEMIES.

Mulieman Pasha could not have been called a handsome man even by his closest and most sycophantic friend. He was old, fat and gross. He waddled when he walked, and slobbered when he smoked. No one who knew anything at all wondered that Adria Dvorolos did not consent readily to become his favorite wife.

Mulieman was sitting cross-legged, with the stem of his *narghila* in his mouth as usual, and the remains of a sumptuous feast now being carried away, when Capt. Karusu came to him.

"Actual ruler of the earth, born of the sun," said Karusu, whose humility and overdrawn flourishes in greeting were never suspected of being sarcasm by the dull-witted pasha, "I greet you and trust that thy health is good, and that thy eating has nourished thee well."

"It is well enough," mumbled the pasha, without taking the stem of his pipe from his mouth. "How is it with thee?"

"Grand, my commander. For have I not just succeeded in obeying one of your difficult commands?"

"Good! If that is the case, your work shall be rewarded. What is it?"

"I have succeeded in capturing the American of whom you had heard, and who escaped when I tried to drown him from my yacht."

"Is the unbelieving dog here in our city?"

"He profaneth even my own house. But he is in a dungeon from which he cannot escape."

"Excellent! This is news worth hearing. And what is new from the seat of war? What had the American accomplished?"

"Now will your illustrious highness permit your faded and inglorious follower to answer one question at a time?"

"It is well to do so."

"There is nothing new from the seat of war save that there is still fighting going on. Those Dvorolos people certainly did well in Europe, and probably in New York. They seem to have money enough to accomplish almost anything. Their men are well armed, and while we will have no difficulty in defeating them, still we will lose men and money."

"I care not for the men," said the pasha. "There are other men. But how much money will it cost?"

"A million lira."

"A million lira!" repeated the pasha, with a groan and a tearful face. "Is that possible? The taxes must be raised. Curses on them!"

"Now as to your other question, most illustrious ruler, let me say that the American has not yet accomplished anything. He was on his way to Makry to notify the waiting forces there that Madam Dvorolos needed them. But a storm overtook the vessel, and the sailors fled, leaving him asleep. He saved

his life, but was picked up by a gunboat I sent to find the lugger. I did not know at the time that this was the same American I had brought from Paris for no other purpose except to kill him. He is, I think, in love with Adria Dvorolos, and, being rich, handsome and young, though not so handsome as your excellency, she will probably fall in love with him."

"Impossible! Am I not the Pasha of Rhodes? When this rebellion has been put down, then we shall see. But have the man brought here. I wish to question him. He may be able to tell us much concerning the people at the castle."

"But he speaks only in English, excellency."

"Not French?"

"Oh, I believe so. I think you are right. I will have him brought."

With two guards Karusu returned to the dungeon under his own house. With his own hand he unlocked the door, and found Winners digging with a rusty piece of chain at the crumbling mortar.

"Trying to escape?" asked Karusu, sarcastically. "Hundreds have done it before you, but none succeeded. But now I have something to say to you. You are familiar with the conditions at the castle of M. Dvorolos. You know perfectly well that this ridiculous attempt to overthrow the rule of Turkey in this island is going to be a failure. Why, the treaty of nations holds Turkey in absolute control. Yet, for a purpose of my own, it is desirable to have Mulieman Pasha think otherwise. I know as well as you do that Madam Dvorolos has a regiment of men at the camp around the castle. I have three regiments camped around them. There is little fighting, but Mulieman must think there is. I, and I alone, can save your life. I have had a talk with Mulieman, and he decrees that you shall be put to death in the cruelest way. But I have no animosity toward you. I wish to help you escape."

"Looked like it, when you locked me in that dungeon."

Karusu laughed.

"Didn't you hear voices? I had to do it. I didn't want you discovered. But now I see a way to save you. Of course, when I sent that gunboat after you, I did not know you were the American on board."

"I think you are a monumental liar. But, as I am unarmed, hungry, dirty and unable to do anything for myself, I must submit to whatever you say. What does this pasha want of me?"

"He wishes to hear from your lips a statement as to the condition of affairs at the castle."

"Oh! And I am to tell him what?"

"Tell him anything you like except the truth. Remember that we are in great danger. I have paved the way. I must have a million lira before another week. And it is only by frightening the fat fool that I can get it."

"And what do I get for assisting you in this conspiracy to rob the pasha?"

"You! Why you remain my guest until we can prevail upon Madam Dvorolos to stop her nonsense, and then you are free."

Winners nodded, and Karusu led the way, the two guards bringing up a close rear, with their rifles ready for immediate action.

Karusu did not walk again to the palace. He called an attendant, and ordered his carriage. In this; still with the guards watching every move of the prisoner, they went to see the pasha.

The little black beady eyes of the pasha gleamed as he saw this man of a nation he was rapidly beginning to think was the natural enemy of his own.

"So, dog of an unbeliever!" he shouted, "you thought to aid my enemies!"

"If you are Mulieman Pasha, I did the best I could," was the reply.

"But to what purpose?"

"None so far. As a matter of fact, my effort was not needed."

"Not needed? Is the rebellion ended?"

"No, it is so far from ended that it has scarcely begun."

"What is this you say! Are they so strong then?"

"Yes. Camped around the castle are five thousand splendid fighting men."

"By the beard of the prophet! Excellent captain, you did not discover that!"

"How could I? I could not go among them. I told you they were strong."

"And are these men well armed?"

"Armed and well intrenched. They have already one ship load of guns and ammunition, and expect more. They have cannon that could batter down your strongest fort."

Mulieman rolled his eyes.

"Dvorolos hates me because I taxed him heavily. And he will kill me if he wins. I tell you, Capt. Karusu, you must put down this Greek!"

The pasha's face gave every evidence of fear, and Winners placed him down as one of the most cowardly of men.

"You heard what I wanted," said Karusu. "I need more money for troops and ammunition. We cannot fight on wind. They have resources, and we must have the same."

"Well, I will give it to you to-morrow. Now what shall we do with this American dog?"

"Why—I have not yet determined. He is now a prisoner. If it is your command he shall be killed."

"He must not escape and return to our enemies to tell them that we are frightened. Keep him in the dungeon. We can determine his fate later."

"That, your excellency, shall be done."

The pasha, who was listening for every indication that might betoken the approach of an enemy, so fearful was he of assassination, heard a sound of distant firing before either Winners or Karusu noticed it. The guards began to look at each other with some measure of alarm.

"What is that?" gasped the pasha. "Is the fighting coming this way?"

A horse came thundering past the palace window, and a moment later a young Turkish officer entered. He was covered with dust, and the bloody marks of an encounter were on his face. He went at once to Karusu and saluted.

"Excellency," he said, breathlessly, "I have to report that we have been defeated. A ship load of men led by an American landed to-day, and instead of merely defending the castle, they attacked our position, with the result that we were driven back toward the city, and are losing ground every hour. The cry now is to kill the pasha."

"In the name of God and his prophet!" howled Mulieman, and springing from his divan the fat, awkward coward went waddling as fast as his slipper-clad feet could take him out of the room.

"Where will your excellency flee?" asked Karusu, who seemed to be now impatient to get off. "Is there any safer place than this?"

"This! With a victorious army? I must hide myself away!" And out he went.

"I am commissioned to ask for more men," said the young officer.

"Report to the commander at the fort, and say it is my order."

The officer bowed and went out. The two guards, wishing to get away, looked to Karusu for commands.

"Go join the company," he said. "I will not need you."

They went out, leaving Winners and the captain alone.

"I regret," said Karusu, "that circumstances will not now permit me to keep my promise. With these rebels so far victorious, I can risk nothing. You do not understand this game. But Madam Dvorolos, in raising that army, has really proven herself my able ally in a project I have had long in mind. It is not madam, nor yet the pasha, who will win. It is I, Karusu, and in a few days I will be Pasha of Rhodes. Galapo, the commander of that army, is my friend, and I am kept posted on everything that takes place. The pasha's army will be defeated, but it will be my army, and not that of Madam Dvorolos, which will win. Then, instead of Adria being the wife of Mulieman, she will be mine. In order that you make no trouble I must——"

His hand leaped to his side, and Winners saw the flash of steel. Like a panther he sprang upon the traitor, and

though unarmed, his powerful fist rained blow after blow upon the Turk's face.

Karusu tried to cry for help, but the news had spread, and the exodus from the palace had begun. No one would risk his life to stay there to fight for Karusu. In fact, no one heard his cries.

Twisting this way and that, making thrusts that meant death if he struck his mark, Karusu struggled desperately. But Bob Winners had fought against odds before, and now, with a chance for freedom before him, the fear of Karusu's knife gave the American's arm more strength.

"Dog! I will kill you," gasped the captain, and, as he spoke, Winners grasped him by the right wrist. The knife was in his right hand. With a tremendous effort, the American twisted the arm until with a howl of pain the captain let fall the knife.

Winners held him in a grasp of steel as powerful as that in any Damascus blade. Gradually he pushed his enemy backward, until, the pain rendering him almost helpless, he hurled him to the wall. Then stooping quickly he picked up the knife. But Karusu had his sword, which he drew with his left hand. Winners, taking the knife by the point, hurled it.

It struck the sword hilt, and with a slight change of direction, severed one of the fingers on Karusu's remaining serviceable hand. Curses flew in torrents from the Turkish captain's lips, but Bob had no time to waste. He seized the knife again, and bounded through a window. A short distance ahead of him he saw a carriage. It was that in which Karusu had brought him, and the fat head of Mulieman Pasha could be seen in it. With a glance in each direction, seeing all clear, unmindful of the clamor still made by Karusu, Winners ran from the palace.

CHAPTER XV.

THE PASHA'S CAVE.

It seemed to Winners before he had covered a quarter of a mile that the entire island of Rhodes had gone mad. There was fighting on every side, and the din and confusion, shouts, cries, screams of women and children, and the incessant firing of rifles, was enough to confirm his opinion.

No one seemed to bother with him. But they fought among themselves. He saw one mob make a rush for the pasha's carriage, and the dust they raised prevented him from witnessing what took place.

When they dispersed, to begin fighting somewhere else, Winners expected to see a dead pasha. But no, Mulieman was there, cowering in terror, but being carried as rapidly as possible toward some place of refuge.

The rate of speed was not much greater than Bob's for the reason that every few minutes the carriage would be stopped by a mob. Men on horses met infantry, and a clash occurred. One or the other would retreat, but only to meet another bunch and begin over again.

There was no central authority, no concentration of power. It was a bedlam of loose mobs fighting for something they knew nothing about. It did seem to Winners that casualties were few, considering the great amount of shooting, and the noise. Women he saw with young children rushing for shelter among the hills, but saw no one pursuing. The men had enough to do among themselves without attacking women.

"There's one thing certain," said Winners to himself, "if there is a safe spot on this island that duffer of a pasha knows it. I'll follow him till I drop."

But, having passed beyond the outskirts of the city itself, he found that he had apparently got beyond the fighting zone. Armed men roamed from place to place, and he frequently was compelled to make a detour to avoid meeting a group he did not trust.

In one of these cases, having approached a farm, and seeing a half dozen ugly-looking individuals with all sorts and conditions of weapons ahead, Winners leaped a wall and ran through a vineyard, the broad-leaved vines effectually screening him from view. He

passed around behind several buildings, and came out again on the highway, only to find the pasha engaged in a terror-stricken attempt to plead for mercy. Two Greeks had attacked his carriage, the driver had flown, and the fat ruler of Rhodes was helpless.

Winners did not stop to listen to what anybody was saying. It was without doubt an attempt to extort money, for his experience led him to believe that money was the only thing anybody wanted on the island. But, taking a flying leap, he landed on the driver's seat, picked up the reins that had been dropped, and the Greek who had been holding the bridle lay sprawling on the ground as the horse leaped forward.

"In the name of Allah! What is this!" moaned Mulieman Pasha, after they had left that danger behind. "What is this that has come upon us?"

"Looks like a riot," shouted Winners. "Where do you want to go?"

"To the caves! To the caves!"

"Tell me the way, and I will drive you."

"We are almost there! Will you protect me?"

"We'll see about that," said Winners. "I am thinking of a girl just now. I must find Adria Dvorolos."

The pasha moaned and groaned, and bent forward and backward as Winners drove along the country road.

"This way—to the left!" he shouted, and Winners saw a narrow, unused lane running from the road toward a rocky eminence. He turned toward this, and in a short time had reached a place where the horse could go no farther. He could see the waters of the Mediterranean in the distance, and black smoke on the horizon showed the presence of a steamer. The fat pasha stumbled from the vehicle, and waddled across some rocks, Winners following, having first set the horse free.

Right well the pasha knew the way, and a small opening in the rocks was the first indication Winners saw of a cave. With a glance of terror around him, the pasha ducked and disappeared. Winners followed, and bumped into the august personage inside.

"Hark! Look!" came the voice of the pasha, in terror. "There is some one here."

From a cavern hidden from view, but connected by passages with the first chamber, Winners could hear voices. There was also a faint sheen of light, as though the persons inside had a torch.

Listening intently, the voice of a woman reached Bob's ears.

"That's Madam Dvorolos," he said. "Come on. We've nothing to fear here."

Winners led the way toward the faint gleam of light, and shivering with terror the pasha followed. Passing through a narrow passage between two walls of moist rock, they came upon a scene that was strange for modern times. Three torches, held by Greeks, shed a smoky and unsteady light upon the chamber, which was very large. Pillars of gleaming rock upheld the roof, and a small lake was in the center. On the shore of this lake sat Madam Dvorolos, her husband and Adria, surrounded by about a dozen of her soldiers.

As Winners came into the light Madam Dvorolos sprang to her feet.

"Bob!" she cried. "Thank God that you are alive!" Then, seeing the pasha behind Bob, her manner changed. "That man! That man! Seize him!"

"No; wait," said Bob. "We are not quite through with this thing yet, though from the looks of things outside somebody must win soon. The pasha had to flee for his life the same as the rest of us. Nobody understands it. Nobody knows who is fighting against him. Let the pasha alone till we understand this thing better."

"These are my own caves," said the pasha, as he calmly sat down. "I offer you protection in them if you protect me. Is that not fair?"

"Yes, let's get at the gist of this thing," said Winners. "What happened?"

"Well, I scarcely know myself," said Madam Dvorolos. "You remember I was expecting the troops from Makry you were sent to bring. But when a

ship landed a thousand men under the very windows of our castle, we thought, of course, they were our men. A man whom I think is an American was leading, and instead of fraternizing with my troops they at once began an attack.

"I did not know what to believe. My troops were so bewildered that they seemed to go to pieces. Then the Turkish troops got in, and there was a terrible three-cornered fight. M. Dvorolos tried to bring about something like order, but he was attacked, and then some of the most faithful of the Greeks induced us to flee. We came here, for this is the most easily defended place on the island. A dozen men could hold out here against an army. There is absolutely but one entrance, and but one can enter at a time. We came, bringing nothing with us but weapons to protect our lives. Of course we realize that the rebellion has fallen, and our lives are all we've saved, for our property will be confiscated."

"This third element that has been injected into the game," said Winners, "seems to me to be an adventurer, who, knowing that the revolution was on, took advantage of the condition, and sought to make himself possessor of the place. It was impossible for me to tell who was which as I came along. But now let us settle this thing as to our safety. Mulieman Pasha, listen."

"Oh, I agree, only protect me!" said the pasha.

"We must have a full understanding. It is agreed on our part that these men, faithful to Madam Dvorolos, will defend the caverns against all comers, and thus afford you the protection you crave. That is all you want. But you must agree that you will refrain from punishing M. and Madam Dvorolos in any manner after this trouble is over. You must not interfere in any way with them. Is that agreed?"

"Yes," said the pasha, eying Adria, hungrily. "I could not injure the father of my favorite wife."

"Oh, forget that nonsense!" said Winners. "Adria shall not become your wife. Did you know that Kasuru was plotting against you? That Galapo, whom Madam Dvorolos thought was faithful, was really in his employ? Did you suspect that I was compelled by Karusu to tell you what I did at the palace, in order to get money from you? It is Karusu, and not Madam Dvorolos, you have to fear. And it is Karusu who intended to kill you and marry Adria himself."

"My heavens, Bob! Did he tell you that?" asked Madam Dvorolos.

"Yes, and more. He tried to drown me when he had me drugged and thrown from his yacht. He learned that you had sent a messenger to Makry, and a gunboat came to intercept the lugger. There was a storm, and the Greeks deserted me, and I was rescued by the gunboat. Then when I was taken to Rhodes I was thrown in a dungeon, then taken before the pasha. While we were talking the riot began, and everybody but Karusu and me got out. Karusu attacked me to kill me after promising to help me escape. I left him nursing some wounds that will give him a little trouble."

While Winners was talking, the black eyes of the pasha began to blaze. He strode to and fro, and the hands that had trembled before with fear now clinched themselves as a physical exhibition of the devouring wrath that was beginning to consume Mulieman Pasha.

"Tell me!" he shouted, turning to Winners, "is this the truth? Is that man I made rich a traitor to me?"

"I have told you the truth," said Winners. "I can do no more."

For a moment the fat form of the pasha swayed from side to side, and his face took on a demoniac expression.

"And you left him at the palace?"

"Yes."

"I need no protection," said the pasha, and he stalked out of the cavern.

"The man has gone mad," said Winners. "He is stark, staring mad."

"Oh, don't call him back," pleaded Adria. "Let him go. The sight of him fills me with unspeakable terror."

Bob went as far as the entrance to the caverns. He saw the fat, waddling pasha standing on a rocky eminence, looking toward the capital. His thick

lips were working convulsively. His fingers twitched. But he started away with a firm tread. If Mulieman was mad now, he was better than when he was sane. If he was sane now, he had been mad all his life.

Winners returned.

"He's gone," he said. "I don't know what to do. We are here. The fighting is not near us. Do you think it is safe to leave?"

"Leave! Leave this place of shelter!" exclained Madam Dvorolos. "You don't know this place. We'll have plenty to do before it is safe to leave."

"It was a mistake to let the pasha go," said Dvorolos.

"No, no!" said Adria. "Let him go. He'll get killed, or he'll kill Karusu, and either will make us safer."

"You, you mean," said Madam Dvorolos. "Well, he is gone. We must guard the entrance well, for now he knows we are here."

"Place two of your faithful men at the entrance," said Winners. "They are worthless in here."

Madam Dvorolos obeyed. It all seemed like a dream to Winners. He had been through so much, and in so short a time, and the changes had been so many in the apparent conditions, that he scarcely knew what to expect next.

"I think I'll take a rest," he said, sitting down by Adria. "By the way, is that the lake you said you bathed in to make you beautiful?"

"I used the words in jest. It is a legend among the ignorant."

"Hark! Our man is speaking!" said Dvorolos. "Leave your legends till we are safe."

"Excellencies," said a soldier, coming from the entrance, "a number of Turkish soldiers are coming this way. What are your orders?"

CHAPTER XVI.

"WE SHALL DIE."

It has just been said that Winners had become bewildered by the surprises and changes that had occurred during what one might call only a few hours. But nothing that had happened had affected him so much as the sight which followed the announcement that a band of Turkish soldiers was approaching. Every Greek in the place, even including M. Dvorolos, but happily excluding Adria, dropped to his knees.

"It is the end!" they cried.

"What the devil is this!" exclaimed Bob. "Are you afraid?"

"The enemies of the pasha who enter here never leave."

Winners stood a moment, and looked at the kneeling figures with an expression that in open daylight might have been disgust, but which in the glare of the torches was certainly ugly.

"Well, you are a lot of fools!" he said. "Here is this man, educated, rich, kneeling and howling because a lot of ignorant Turks have created a romance about this cave. Get up and fight!"

M. Dvorolos shook his head, and went on muttering a prayer.

One of the soldiers turned to Dvorolos and spoke. Dvorolos translated to Winners.

"It is agreed," he said. "We are all Christians, and we will pray till death comes."

"Holy smoke!" said Winners. "I don't wonder it's easy for the Turks to murder their Christian subjects. Confound you, get up and fight!"

He smote M. Dvorolos in the ribs, and that gentleman, but a few hours before ostensibly the commander of a revolutionary army, rolled over and continued to mutter, not even unbending the position of his knees.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" roared Winners. "I'll thrash the lot of you here, and then start in on Turks."

He was enraged clear through, and as good as his word. He sailed into the kneeling crowd, and with blows and kicks sent them one after another over on the stone floor of the cave. Madam Dvorolos seemed to be at a standstill, and permitted Winners to have his way.

"Get that fool of a husband of yours up here!" roared Winners. "I've got to guard the entrance."

"Get up!" said Madam Dvorolos, and dutifully her husband arose.

"I'll take the entrance," said Bob. "See that some of these fools hand me guns that are loaded."

He ran to the entrance. Several Turkish soldiers were approaching, clambering clumsily over the rocks. Leading them was an unarmed man who was at once recognized by Winners as the kadi before whom he had been taken in the capital. Winners held a rifle ready in his hand, but did not wish to take life unnecessarily. He wished first to see what the kadi intended to do. He waited for the Turks to begin hostilities.

There were perhaps twenty in the party, all well armed save the kadi, and he carried a book.

Peering through a crevice Winners saw the party descend to a spot before the entrance to the cave. Then the kadi, raising his hand, began an exhortation that Winners could not understand. The soldiers remained passive while the kadi talked, and, when he had finished, flourished their rifles. At the command of the kadi four stepped toward the entrance to the cave.

Winners examined his rifle. It was of an old pattern, one charge being its limit, having been picked up somewhere by the agents who purchased weapons for Madam Dvorolos. With an imprecation on it, Winners aimed at the foremost Turk and fired.

A roar of intense rage rose from the Turks as the soldier fell, and they huddled round the kadi as if waiting for his instructions. Winners turned to grope for another rifle. One was thrust into his hand.

"Oh," he said, without looking to see who had given it to him, "you did wake up. It was time."

"I haven't been asleep," said the voice of Adria.

"Heavens! Is it you?" cried Winners. "Are there no men to do this work?"

"The men are preparing to die," said the voice of Madam Dvorolos. "They believe this legend of the caves, which I thought was limited to Mohammedans. A Christian who believes such stuff must have a strange form of religion. However, we must make the best of it."

"My father was overcome by sudden fright," said Adria. "He will soon be with us."

Winners stopped to talk no more. He aimed at another of the party and fired again. This time he had come into possession of a repeating rifle. He fired three shots so quickly that it seemed as though so many men had fired. There was stampede on the part of the Turks, leaving two of the number on the ground.

"Have they gone?" asked the voice of M. Dvorolos, as he came from the inner cave. "I heard shooting inside. I feel that we can perhaps break the charm of the pasha's caves."

"We can if we work," said Winners. "Those fellows won't come in here to face certain death. I've learned more about human nature since I left New York than I ever dreamed of. Now collect those rifles, and every Greek that won't fight, is going to get thrashed. They are the meanest lot of—— What is that fellow saying?"

The kadi, now some distance from the cave, was again preaching with his hand in the air. Adria pressed forward so that she could hear what he was shouting.

"He says," she turned to Winners to interpret, "that these are the pasha's caves, or the Caves of the Seven Charms. He calls attention to one charm that is much credited, and that is that two who meet in here—in some room, I do not know which, must hate each other. And he also calls attention to another charm—or legend—that any enemy of the pasha who enters here must be destroyed. He is never seen again."

"But who told the old fool?" asked Winners. "The pasha hasn't had time to get back to the city."

"Perhaps it was Karusu."

"Well, if Mulieman don't kill Karusu, I will. Now watch me pot that kadi."

"Don't!" said Adria, laying a restraining arm on Bob's hand. "It would be all the worse. A soldier you

can kill in a fair fight. But a kadi does not carry arms, and is supposed to be safe. Should you kill him, we would have a hundred infuriated fanatics after us instead of that few."

"Well! Are we going to let him have his own way? I don't think so much of kadis. Let's tell him something. Here, Dvorolos, you've got a good voice if your nerve is weak. Get here where you can shout something."

"I will do my best," said M. Dvorolos, kneeling at Bob's side. "What do you wish me to say?"

"Yell like the devil after me. Ready?"

"Yes."

"Ten thousand devils are in this cave to kill the pigs who obey the commands of Karusu. Ten thousand Americans with guns and knives to kill and slay. But let the kadi take away his men, and we will go. But if the kadi stays he will be killed like a common soldier."

The voice of M. Dvorolos began loudly and bravely, but the difficulty of keeping up with Winners made him falter. In reply a shot came from the group, which Winners answered. The Turkish bullet rattled against the rock, but that of Winners made the kadi dance, for it just bit through the fleshy calf of his leg.

"My respect for kadis is diminishing," said Winners. "Let's have another rifle."

Adria handed him one, Madam Dvorolos another.

"Guess I'll pot a Turk," said Bob. "They seem ugly enough now. They would murder us."

He fired again, and one of the soldiers, who had been standing in the group, dropped his rifle and let out a yell. His shoulder had been shattered.

The position of the four in the entrance was none too safe, so Winners had them move back into the shadow.

"I'll watch," he said. "They must come in one at a time, and I can shoot them. But you must see that I have plenty of loaded guns."

They crouched together in a dark portion of the cave, and Winners, with a rifle ready, kept an eye on the entrance. But no Turk ventured to poke his head into that place where there was a man who hit what he shot at.

The Greeks, some of whom were still kneeling, and others searching for better hiding places, had been almost forgotten. Winners was kneeling with a rifle aimed at the entrance, ready for the first visitor, when like a shot one of the men dashed past him and out.

"What's that? Desertion?" asked Winners.

"Yes, they are all cowards. The Turks and Greeks and everybody else on this island are cowards. You are the only man."

It was Madam Dvorolos who spoke, and her voice trembled with emotion. Her pet scheme had failed. All the money she had raised was lost, and nothing gained. And now even life itself was in danger.

"I'll shoot the next man that tries to go out. Tell them that. No, don't! On second thought I'll shoot every man that don't go. Tell them that."

"But they may fight in an extremity!" said M. Dvorolos.

"Extremity! Isn't this extremity enough? Let them go. It just occurs to me that one man can tell all that forty can, and we won't have so many to feed."

"Feed!"

Madam Dvorolos laughed hysterically.

"There isn't a morsel in the place to feed a bird!"

"Yes, it will come true," said M. Dvorolos. "We shall die."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE TRUTH OF THE LEGEND.

Winners was not inclined to agree with M. Dvorolos. He had no particular fear of death, but a great love of life. He was not the kind to give up hope with full strength to fight. He was so enraged at the Greeks in the caves that he ordered them all to go. Some remonstrated with M. Dvorolos, but as it transpired, they wished to re-

main, not to protect Madam Dvorolos and Adria, but to be protected. M. Dvorolos himself added his command to that of Winners, and they went. This left Winners and M. Dvorolos, Madam Dvorolos and Adria, the only occupants of the cave. They had a dozen guns, and plenty of ammunition.

Outside, the Turkish soldiers were apparently nonplused. It was one thing to yell about Mohammed, and shout threats against the *giaours,* but it was quite another thing to tackle a hole in the rocks from which came unerring bullets. If they could have swarmed into the place it would have been all right. But to go one by one to a certain death, to each choose for himself that method of departing this life, did not appeal to them.

The kadi, still nursing his wounded leg, shouted and exhorted, and cursed the Christians. But not one of his followers would volunteer to enter the cave.

"We will starve them," said one of the Turks. "These Greeks say they have nothing in there to eat. Let us camp about the place, and soon they will surrender. Those Christian dogs eat much. We will beat them by their hunger."

The kadi could do nothing else than consent, and they camped outside of the rocks, where the rifle of Winners could not reach them.

And then began a long and wearisome vigil. Winners crouched near the entrance, well to one side, where he could see the first foot of the man who tried to come in. His rifle was ready for instant action, and by his side sat Adria, with another gun ready for his hand.

Dvorolos gradually recovered his nerve, and they talked among themselves, Winners doing but little of the talking, being so intent on watching the entrance for intruders.

And so passed the weary hours, each one bringing them nearer that dreaded night in which they expected something to happen they knew not what.

"After all," said Madam Dvorolos, "I believe we must submit. Think of it! Coming here with nothing to eat! We shall starve."

Adria shuddered.

"Rather die here of hunger than submit to them," she said. "We know what we might expect—their mercy!"

M. Dvorolos nodded. He realized the terrible situation.

"I shall never undertake a revolution again," he said. "Perhaps the day will come when the nations will take part. But, alone, we can do nothing."

As the day wore on, Adria watched the American's face more attentively. She had come gradually to look more to him than to her father for protection. M. Dvorolos had not, since the arrival of the Turks, acquitted himself with gallantry. She realized this, and knew that it was the brave spirit of Winners that kept them safe.

"Some day," said Winners, when there was a lull in the vain mournings of M. Dvorolos, "I am going to explore this cave. I suppose I should say these caves. Are they of great extent?"

"Yes," said Madam Dvorolos. "There are several caverns."

"I have seen the lake that makes you beautiful. Now where is the one—that chamber—where two who meet must love each other?"

No one answered.

"That excellent creature Theopolous, to whom you sent me, and who deserted me in time of danger, told me that there was one cavern in which two who met must love, and another in which they must hate each other. I hope we are in the former."

Madam Dvorolos laughed quietly, and Adria played with the stock of the rifle she was holding.

"Because," continued Winners, "a certain young lady said she hated me, and accused me of having purchased her. Certainly I am willing to do the latter now, but not with money. With my own life."

There was a nervous movement on Adria's part, and Madam Dvorolos laughed again.

"Oh, all my plans are ruined," she said. "I had such beautiful plans. I thought I would see M. Dvorolos president of a new republic, and you his chief advisor and executive. With you and

Adria, we could be so happy. And now —and now——"

The nervous force that had enabled her to maintain her remarkable calmness broke down and she sobbed.

"Yes, it is over," said M. Dvorolos.

"No, it is not," said Winners. "We'll get out of this all right. You see we don't know the way things are going in Rhodes. The pasha may be again in power. Or Karusu. But again neither. We don't know the American who led that gang of adventurers. Certainly, if he wins, we have nothing to fear from him."

"Oh, I don't understand it at all," said Madam Dvorolos. "It is so strange. And our plans were so well laid."

"Oh, never mind your plans. Let's talk business. Now when night comes we'll get something to eat."

"You will what?"

"Get something to eat, of course. Do you think I am going to stay hungry? Not much. I am not built that way. I could eat a horse now."

"So could I, but where is the horse?" said Adria. "I admire your courage, but don't see how you can accomplish it."

"I don't see much now myself. But wait."

And so the hours passed, Winners never varying his constant watchfulness at the entrance. Now and then one of the others would leave and go to some other portion of the caverns, and Winners felt a desire to explore them. But his duty was there at the entrance, and he remained. Night came on, and hunger really became a powerful ally of the Turks. Outside they could see the blaze of a camp fire. Some loud talking could be heard, but not sufficiently clear to know what was being said. Except for the light of the camp fire, the night was dark.

"Now listen," said Winners. "I am going outside to take a look around. I——"

"You can't see anything!" said Madam Dvorolos.

"Then I'll feel. Anyway, I am going. And you must guard this entrance. M. Dvorolos, I charge you with the safety of the cave. You can shoot as well as I. I don't really think they will attack, but if they do, keep the women out of the way, and shoot each man as he comes in. They will not come without a light, and you can see to shoot them. Now, when I return, I will give a low whistle, the same as if I was calling a dog. Don't shoot me."

He handed his rifle to Dvorolos, and started toward the entrance, groping his way. He had almost reached it, when a hand was lightly placed upon his shoulder.

"I hope you will return safely," said Adria, speaking in a tremulous voice. "I did not really mean those hateful things I said."

"I knew you did not. I will return. Don't worry. Perhaps, after all, the legend of the cave is true. Perhaps we are in the cave where we must love each other. Is that true, Adria?"

He placed his arm about her, and drew her toward him.

"I—think—the legend is true," she said, and he felt her head sink on his arm.

In the dark he stooped and kissed her. Then gently putting her away, he crept out of the cave.

He could see the Turks lying near their fire, and the sentry moving about. But no one could see him, for he was in darkness. He crept from the mouth of the cave, and away through a small opening that led to high ground in the rear. Here he was completely hidden from the Turks. He made a mental calculation as to his direction, and started slowly toward the highway.

Reaching this, he kept well within the protecting shadows of the trees and bushes, and proceeded for some distance without meeting or hearing any one.

A light in a small window attracted him, and toward that he made his way.

Winners knew that only the boldest measures would suffice, skulking would not bring food to the cave. He boldly knocked at the door of the house.

This was opened by a woman. A glance showed her to be a Jewess.

"Well, at least you are a non-

combatant," said Winners. "I have come to ask for some food."

"Hush!" she said, quickly. "We have Turks in the house."

"No place for me, then; but I need something for some friends who are hiding."

"I know," she whispered. "Madam Dvorolos in the cave. Is it not so?"

"Yes."

"Have you heard how things are?"

"No. Is there any news?"

"News! Plenty. Mulieman Pasha is dead. He went to the palace, it seems, and attacked Capt. Karusu. But Karusu killed him. Then Karusu was killed by the leader of the men who came last night. This man was supposed to be an American, but he is not. He is a man from Australia, and claims that he will now be king of this island. They will send ships of war here, and everybody will be killed."

While she was speaking she was busily gathering together bread, fruit and wine. These she gave to Winners in a basket.

He hurried back to the cave. On the way he was startled by the sound of cannon.

"Guess the ships of war have come," he said. "This is no place for us."

He changed his course, crept around through a vineyard, and made his way to the shore. Carrying his basket of food, he walked along the water's edge, hunting for a boat. He knew that the village where he had found Theopolous was not far from there, and he hoped to meet with some one who would take the entire party away from Rhodes.

In an hour he reached the village, and found it deserted. The men had gone, taking their women and children, and only one boat of the little fishing fleet remained. This was moored some distance out, but Winners waded out to it, carrying the basket. He could hear the Turkish guns booming incessantly at the capital, and his heart beat rapidly as he thought of the danger of remaining any longer at Rhodes. He reached the boat, and, without examining it, at once raised the anchor and the sail. It was a small and clumsy affair, and sailed slowly. But it was safe enough, and Winners exulted in his success.

But he had now a difficulty to contend with that kept him anxious. In the dark he could not make out the shore lines, and feared he would miss the cave. But he watched for the camp fire of the Turks. It was in this way that the very means the Turks adopted to prevent the escape of the prisoners of the cave, was the means of their rescue by Winners. For, guided by the light of the fire, now a smoldering heap, he sailed past, and anchored about an eighth of a mile beyond. He swam ashore, and made his way carefully to the cave, reaching it from the rear, and using the same method of entering as he had of leaving.

Remembering his warning, he whistled, and a cry of gladness came from Adria.

"And have you food?" asked Madam Dvorolos. "It seems impossible."

"Yes," said Winners. "But it is not here. I have a boat, and there is food in it. Mulieman Pasha is dead, and so is Karusu. The Turkish ships are now at the capital, and will soon possess the island. Of course, you know that your only safety lies in flight. We cannot remain here, for the successful Turks will grant no quarter. So come with me."

"What a man!" breathed Madam Dvorolos. But greater than that, in the mind of Winners, was the clasp of Adria's hand on his.

Taking each a rifle, M. Dvorolos and he assisted them, and, with the Turkish soldiers sleeping about five hundred feet away, they went to the rear of the rocks, and by the same circuitous path used by Winners, they reached the landing place.

Even though silence reigned, Winners could not feel secure until he had them all on board. He did not hesitate, but entered the water at once, and having raised the sail again and the anchor, came in closer, and M. Dvorolos carried madam and Adria to the boat.

"Now, thank God, we are safe, and that nightmare of a fool revolution is over," said Winners. "Never again

meddle with the affairs of nations. It is not a woman's duty."

Madam Dvorolos, leaving her beautiful estate to save her life, sobbed on her husband's shoulder. M. Dvorolos was moody and silent, but Adria was gay.

"I regret nothing," she said, "so long as we are all safe. Let them end it as they will; so that we have our lives, what do we care?"

"Care!" said Winners, as he felt the boat gathering speed. "Care! I have no regrets. I have experienced the charm of the pasha's cave, and know that I have found my own life's happiness."

And on the hand that held the tiller a soft, cool, smaller one was placed, and thus, from the island of unrest, sailed the boat bearing these four who would perhaps never set foot upon it again.

And two in that boat were happy and full of love.

. . . . . .

But little remains to tell of the now historic rebellion in Rhodes. It was like all the other recent ebullitions in Turkish provinces. It was quelled in three weeks, and a new pasha sent to govern. Taxes were raised again to pay the cost of the little war, and the whole thing has now passed into almost forgotten history.

The boat, guided and sailed by Winners all night, reached, at dawn, a small island in the archipelago, and there the four refugees found shelter in a family of Greeks, who had known and had business with M. Dvorolos. From there they sailed to Greece, and at Athens, where they stopped for a time, Winners and Adria were married.

These two did not remain in Athens, but went to Paris, and thence to New York, where they now live. M. Dvorolos, being a Greek of the Greeks, and Madam Dvorolos still retaining a liking for her husband's people, remained in Greece, and now occupy a fine estate in the southern part.

They lost heavily, their own estate in Rhodes having been confiscated, and the debts they owed for borrowed money being considerable. But through the financiering of Winners they are recovering, and Madam Dvorolos' latest letter said that the signs were good for a splendid harvest.

THE END.

"THE INTERNATIONAL DISAPPEARANCE SYNDICATE, LTD."

A new serial of extraordinary interest, bearing the above title, will be commenced in the May number. It deals with a remarkable condition of affairs following the final attempt of the great Trusts to combine under one head. The work of an author who conceals his identity under a pseudonym, it is a powerful presentation of the efforts made by the Central Trust to remove the obstacles that threaten to block its unrestrained progress. The story is bound to create a sensation.

How Billy Pi Broke the Strike

BY FRANK N. STRATTON

The novel weapon employed by a railway contractor to remove a disturbing element in his business.

"SPEAKIN' of strikes," said the conductor, glancing out of the window, "reminds me that right there, in that bend of the crick, a world's record was made for breakin' a strike. Ever tell you about it?

"It was when this branch of the line was bein' built, say ten year ago. The boss contractor sent me word to turn over my gang to Murphy and come to headquarters.

"'Baker,' says he, 'you can patter Dago pretty good, and I want you to take a couple of the men and a hand car and run down to the west end of the branch line. The Dagoes down there has struck for higher wages. They're a fresh importation, just over, and that damned Bald Pete has wandered down there and queered 'em. We're under bond to shove that branch through by the first of August, and something's got to be done quick. The quickest way is to buy Bald Pete off. Here's fifty dollars; run down and see what can be done. Report to-night.'

"You see, Bald Pete was an old Dago who'd been fired by the construction company, and had been makin' it his business to get even. Ugly devil, Pete was; his hide was the color of scum on an old frog pond, and his eyes—once I looked into the eyes of a live rattlesnake, not two feet away, and Pete's eyes was just the same. Once, when he was cookin' for a party up in the Black Hills, he'd had a lop-sided argument with a band of Sioux who lifted his scalp and left him for dead, and their bright smiles still lingered in his dreams. That's why we called him Bald Pete, and that's why he was prejudiced against Injuns. Mighty proud of that head, though, Petey was; kept it tied up in a red bandanna, with the knot hangin' down over one ear. Always braggin' to the other Dagoes 'bout bein' a terrific Injun fighter, and provin' it by that head.

"Well, when I reached the Dago camp first man I seen was Bald Pete sittin' in front of the shack, smokin' an old black pipe. He was polite as you please, grinnin' and flashin' his ragged, yellow teeth, but when I tried to talk business there wasn't but one side to it, and that was Pete's side. He was onto his game, all right—knowed that men was scarce and time precious—and the way the yellow fakir orated 'bout the wrongs of his dear countrymen was disgustin', while the rest of the gang crowded up, waggin' their heads and flourishin' their dirty paws and chippin' in whenever Pete stopped to get his breath.

"I seen I couldn't do anything with 'em just then, so I left my two men with the hand car, and took my Winchester, intendin' to hunt for a couple of hours while the Dagoes cooled off. There was game in these parts then. I strolled to the top of the slope, and lookin' across the river I seen an antelope standin', head up, watchin' a clump of trees on my side of the stream. It was a long shot, and when the Winchester cracked that antelope was gone quicker'n a boy

after breakfast when the lawn needs mowin'. At the same time what should walk out of that clump of trees and stand starin' up at me but an Injun. Couldn't hardly believe my eyes for a minute; then I seen it was old Billy—Billy Pi, I called him. His Injun name was too much for a white man's tongue—sounded like a bunch of sneezes and a cough—and mighty proud Billy was of that name; said it meant 'Eagle that soars.' I'd run across Billy and some of his relations two years before, when I was on a fishin' trip a hundred miles up the river, and they was as cowardly, dirty a gang of Piutes as ever boiled a root or eat a lizard.

"Well, sir, I don't know how the scheme struck me so quick, but the minute I seen Billy Pi I knowed the Dago strike was as good as broke. So I was mighty well pleased to see the old sinner, and he appeared tickled to see me. He come slouchin' up the hill, carryin' an old percussion smooth-bore that he shot pebbles out of when he could get powder. I met him halfway down the hill, for I didn't want them Dagoes to catch sight of him.

"'How! How!' he says, lookin' pompous, and stickin' out a dirty paw. 'Got any whisky?'

"I give him a swig from the cup of my flask, and he swallowed it at one gulp.

"'Any toback?' the old beggar asks next.

"I handed him a stogie and a match, and it was amusin' to see him squat down, shut his rheumy old eyes, and puff like a stalled locomotive.

"'Where's your people, Billy?' I asks.

"Without openin' his eyes he points up the river and holds up one finger, meanin' they was one mile upstream.

"'How many?' I asks.

"'Much people,' he says, throwin' out all his fingers three or four times. 'Billy's brudder there, too. All much poor, much hungry.'

"'Hungry, eh!' I says. "You come with me.'

"I took him near the top of the hill, made him lay down and peep over, and his eyes stuck out like a snail's horns when he seen them Dagoes down there cookin' supper. They had about a week's provisions yet, that the company had furnished, besides some Dago delicacies of their own importation, and when the smell of that garlic and macaroni and fried bacon floated up to Billy's proboscis I thought the old thief had took Saint Vitus' dance.

"'Friends of mine,' I says, pointin' to the camp, 'want to see Injun. Never see real Injun. I want to please friends. Billy come this evenin' and bring all his people. Plenty grub, much whisky, heap toback.'

"You ought to have seen how quick Billy hooked onto that proposition; the way he grunted you'd thought he had the colic.

"'All hide here,' I says, makin' signs, 'till moon comes up. Want to s'prise friends. Mustn't come till I shoot. Then all come quick. Run—yell—shoot Billy's gun—big show—s'prise friends—friends very glad.'

"'Good!' he says, poundin' his chest, and swellin' up. 'Billy un'stand. Billy great chief! Come like hell! Heap yell! Billy shoot gun! Big show! Huh!'" Then he trailed up the river faster than I ever seen him move.

"I knowed no one would get hurt, even if the scheme fizzled, for there wasn't a gun in the Dago outfit, and if they should put up any kind of a front, them cowardly Piutes would skedaddle back faster than they'd come. So I hurried back to the camp, lookin' very solemn.

"'What shoot at?' asks Bald Pete, quite pleasant.

"'Pete,' says I, loud, for some of the Dagoes could understand a little English, 'I shot at an Injun—and missed him.'

"He humped his shoulders, cocked them eyes at me, and grinned—thought I was lyin' to scare him away.

"'The señor is mistaken,' he says, with a sneer. 'Injuns all gone many year.'

"'Come with me and I'll prove it,' says I. 'I'll show you the Injun's tracks.'

"When Petey's eyes lit on them prints

of Billy's old moccasins he turned plumb green and jumped like he'd stepped on a tack.'

" 'Santa Maria!' he gasps, crossin' himself. 'Injun sure!'

" 'They've broke away from the reservation again,' I says, doin' my best to look scared. 'Five hundred mile ain't nothing to them Sioux when they're out for blood. We'd better get a move on us.'

"Honest, I had to pity the yellow coward. His eyes rolled as if they were loose, and his teeth chattered all the way back to the camp. I was afraid he'd take a sneak if he wasn't watched, so I told the gang myself what we'd seen. Some of 'em wanted to pull stakes right then, and some, with an eye for their job, talked big about fightin' it out 'under the brave and valiant Pietro's commandership.' I could see that 'the brave and valiant Pietro' was prayin' for a good excuse to flit, so I kept him to the front, remindin' the Dagoes of his skill and experience, and arguin' that mebbe there was only one Injun, after all. I wanted 'em to stay—wanted to see the fun. I kept the arguments goin', so as to give Billy plenty of time, till the moon was well up, and then, while they was chatterin' like a flock of scared parrots, I made a dash for the hand car, where my men was, and turned the Winchester loose.

"In less than a second it seemed to me that every Piute that had ever lived was pourin' over the top of that hill and down the slope for the Dago camp. Mebbe I was a little excited, but Billy and his brother certainly were prolific and hadn't left none behind.

" 'They're comin',' I yelled, and they was—comin' like a comet fallin' through space. Screechin'? A fleet of steam tugs wouldn't have been in it. Billy and his brother led the procession, on the jump, with the bucks next, and the squaws and papooses tailin' behind, and every beggar of 'em was wavin' some kind of a weapon, from Billy's old smooth-bore to a rusty fish knife. Halfway down the slope Billy let off the old musket with a roar like a Fourth of July anvil—like to have knocked the old scoundrel over—and when them pebbles come wailin' through the air that strike was broke. By that time the Dagoes had recovered their breath, which had left 'em when the irruption busted loose, and things begun to develop in that camp.

"First move Bald Pete made was to try to jump over a row of barrels—hadn't time to go 'round—and he didn't jump high enough. Must have fell twenty feet, and he was runnin' before he'd got up. It wasn't a minute till the prairie was dotted with Dagoes jumpin' like jack rabbits. Some of 'em headed for the hand car, and we shot her up the grade and round the bend, and waited till the racket died down; then we pumped back to the camp.

"The noble red man had full and undisputed possession, and he wasn't doin' a thing to that grub—just pitchin' it in, like that was the last half of the ninth, and the score tied. Billy's brother was experimentin' with a big, blue onion, one of the kind that will eat holes in anything but a Dago, and his eyes was squirtin' water like busted fire plugs. Billy had got busy with a mess of macarony in one fist and a hunk of raw bacon in the other, and he was sure a sight, with the grease drippin' from his mouth and runnin' down his skinny paunch.

" 'Whoopee—whoop!' he yells at me, thumpin' his ribs with the bacon. 'Skeezy-kee-mah-chuk'—that's as near as I can say his Injun name—'great chief! Tell friend come back. Billy not hurt 'em. Billy good Injun.'

"But my friends never came back—no, sir! not much! Next time I seen Bald Pete was about a year after, in New York—reckon he'd run all the way—and you couldn't 'a' got him West of the Hudson then without killin' him first.

"And that's how Billy Pi broke the strike and made me solid with the boss—put me in the way to get this job. Here's your station. See you on the down trip, I s'pose."

THE DERELICT HUNTERS*

BY HENRY HARRISON LEWIS

Author of "A Gunner Aboard the Yankee," Etc.

[NOTE.—A reward of one hundred thousand dollars offered by the little republic of Paraguay for the recovery of an important document of state stolen by an attache at the palace in Asuncion induces three American soldiers of fortune to offer their services. The absconding attache has been traced to a Spanish bark which, after sailing from Montevideo, becomes water-logged and a derelict. The three Americans start in search of the derelict on board the *Octopus*, a small steamer owned by them, and presently discover that another expedition commanded by an old-time enemy has been sent out by Brazil, which also is interested in the document.—THE AUTHOR.]

THE FOURTH ADVENTURE—THE PURSUIT OF THE FRENCH SAVANT.

I.

THE front veranda of the American Hotel at Key West contained its usual quota of indiscriminate tenants. It was shortly after the noon hour, and the entire city seemed lulled into a condition of stupor bordering on heat apoplexy by the torrid strength of the semi-tropical sun.

In front of the hotel the ankle-deep sand of the street sent forth a myriad of minute insects that buzzed and hummed about the heads of those brave enough to venture from the comparatively cool interiors.

The quiet of a deserted village rested upon the town. On the hotel veranda the half-dozen occupants yawned and made listless remarks about the weather and the current price of tobacco. Occasionally one would rise and saunter toward the hotel bar, whence he would presently emerge, a little more heated and a little more tired.

One of these excursionists brought back a newspaper, which he proceeded to read aloud in a languid voice. He droned on, while his listeners smoked in silence. Presently he leaned back and slapped his thigh.

"Well, them beachcombers over Tortugas way got a prize at last," he exclaimed. "And what d'ye think it was?"

No one replied. None was interested enough to make a comment.

"A blooming derelict floated ashore there last Tuesday. It was loaded with hides and hardwood, and they say——"

"What was the name of that derelict?"

The query came from a thin, sallow-faced man, who had suddenly sat up in his chair. He was clad in a clean suit of linen, cut in semi-naval fashion. On the floor beside him rested a huge pith helmet, and he dangled carelessly in one hand a stout ebony cane having a curiously worked silver knob.

The other occupants of the veranda eyed him with some curiosity, probably aroused by the crisp, stern tone in the man's voice.

"What was the name of that derelict?" repeated the sallow-faced stranger. "Speak, man, or give me the paper."

"You are in a mighty big hurry."

"Will you——"

"When I get durned good and ready. What, you——"

There was a crash, as the chair in which the sallow-faced man had been

*This series of complete stories began in the January issue. The three back numbers can be procured through any newsdealer or direct from the publishers for thirty cents.

sitting tumbled back upon the floor, and then there came a sound of tearing paper, and before the spectators could rise from their seats the man who had been reading found himself staring stupidly at his empty hands.

The sallow-faced man stood a few feet away, eagerly scanning the paper. Suddenly he gave a shout and sprang into the air, knocking his heels together in an ecstasy of excitement.

"Great James! Whoopee! it's the *Santa Isobel*, just as I thought!" he cried. "It's the Spanish derelict we've been looking for over half the Atlantic. And she's drifted ashore only a few——"

He ceased speaking and thrust his lean face close to the paper. Those who were watching him saw him give a start, and then he turned to the man he had treated so cavalierly. His excitement had disappeared as if by magic.

"This bit of news possibly means one hundred thousand dollars to me, sir," he explained, quietly. "I hope you are not offended."

"You didn't need to snatch that paper," replied the man, surlily. "And now you can give it back."

"It is worth a great deal to me."

"You don't say. Who are you, anyway?"

"My name is McCrea, and I'm the captain and part owner of that steamboat you see anchored off the dock. Would you sell me this small part of the paper, sir?"

The question was asked in a most conciliatory tone, but the bystanders saw that McCrea's eyes were snapping and that his right hand had closed in a suggestive manner.

"No, I will not sell an inch of it, confound you," retorted the man, aggressively. "Will you give it back, or must I take it out of your hide?"

"Take it out of my hide?" The words were fairly screamed. "Damn your eyes, you couldn't lick a flea! You fat, blasted stuff! You apology for a rotten sponge! You—you——"

There came the sound of a smashing blow, and the man who had claimed the paper went off the edge of the veranda as if propelled by a cyclone. McCrea lowered his arm, stepped back and began to fleck the dust from his shoes with an immaculate handkerchief.

"When that big bluff recovers, kindly tell him that I receive visitors between twelve and four in the afternoon," he said, acidly, to the spectators. Then he slowly sauntered down the steps and turned toward the docks. Once out of sight of the hotel he started off at a run.

His speed quickly carried him to a landing near the Tampa Line dock. Hailing a boat, he was rowed out to where a graceful, low-lying steamer, white painted, and with rakish masts and funnel, was riding at anchor. A stalwart, fair-haired man, slouching over the after-rail, hailed him as he went alongside the gangway.

"You're back soon, Angel," he said, listlessly. "Anything doing?"

"Plenty," was McCrea's brief reply.

As he boarded the steamer he was met on the quarter-deck by the fair-haired man and a rotund individual with a round, good-humored face.

"Chesley, and you, Gravatt," snapped McCrea, "get up steam and weigh anchor as quick as your fat wits will let you. We must be out of here in an hour."

"Anything happened?" asked Gravatt, the stout man.

McCrea turned on him as if he intended to make a sarcastic reply, but he changed his mind and flung the fragment of paper which he still carried at Chesley; then he disappeared down the after companion way. The two men made a simultaneous snatch at the paper, but Chesley secured it. He read a few words beneath his breath, then a prolonged whistle came from his lips.

"Holy Moses! Gravatt, listen to this," he cried, wildly. Then he began:

"A BARK ASHORE ON THE DRY TORTUGAS. SPANISH DERELICT BLOWN ON GARDEN KEY DURING A STORM.

"DRY TORTUGAS, July 21.

"During the late severe gale that caused such damage along the Atlantic coast, a weather-beaten bark, which bore evidence of long drifting, was driven on the jagged reefs

to the southward of this island. The wreck was boarded as soon as the gale subsided, and it was found that her name was the *Santa Isobel,* of Cadiz. Nothing of value, except a few hides and several logs of hardwood, which had formed part of her cargo, was found. William Jones, the lighthouse keeper, picked up a tin box in the cabin which contained a queer-looking parchment having two triangular holes in one corner. There was no writing or other evidence proclaiming the nature or value of the document. The 'longshore wreckers began working on the hulk this morning, and it is expected that a few dollars can be obtained for the copper bolts and deck fixtures."

"Great Gosh! the *Santa Isobel!*" whispered Gravatt, his round blue eyes dancing with excitement. "And the parchment—why, man, the Tortugas are only a degree west of this!"

He spun about on his heel and waddled as fast as his legs could carry him to the engine-room ladder. Chesley hastened forward at the same time, and presently his stentorian voice was heard directing the men to get up the anchor. Within an hour the *Octopus* was under full head of steam, standing from the harbor.

II.

The run to the Dry Tortugas was a matter of only a few hours, and it was still daylight when the *Octopus* cast anchor off the lighthouse. A mile away, looming gray and desolate in the rays of the dying sun, was the weed-grown hulk of the battered derelict—the long-desired *Santa Isobel,* of Cadiz.

McCrea, using his glass from the bridge, gave her a disconsolate stare.

She lay plainly a hopeless wreck, a heavy list to starboard exposing an ugly wound in her bows, rammed high above the softly lapping waters, which barely concealed the rock reef upon which she had been driven.

About her was a cluster of small craft, like vultures about a dead animal—gorged with the wreckers' spoils. A perquisite of the beachcombing natives, she had undergone their thorough overhauling, and now was barely more than a skeleton of a ship—a thing which the first heavy roller would crush in like an egg shell.

McCrea silently passed the glasses to Chesley.

"Wow!" said Chesley, softly. "And that's the bird we've been chasing over three seas, is it? Well, all I've got to say is that it's a good thing for us that we know where that little tin box is, now."

"Do we?" asked McCrea, sharply.

Gravatt, who had swung his clumsy self up the bridge ladder, answered McCrea with a blank stare.

"'Course we do," he puffed, mopping his shiny, bald head with a bit of waste. "'Course we do."

McCrea looked him over from head to foot; Gravatt gathered that the captain of the *Octopus* held his intellectuals in poor esteem.

"What's matter?" he panted, indignantly.

"Then where is it, if you know so positively?" demanded McCrea, sourly.

Gravatt looked triumphant. "William Jones, lighthouse keeper——" he began.

McCrea snorted. "Oh, he's got it, has he?"

"But the paper——" Chesley protested.

"The paper," said McCrea, deliberately, "is dated July 22d. This is the first day of August. That notice has been stale news for nine days."

"Well?" said both in chorus.

"Well," drawled McCrea, "I merely want to ask one question: Did either of you two lightning calculators ever hear of a man named Craven?"

His thin lips curled ironically at their startled expressions.

"Do you think Craven has been squatting in a corner in a fit of the sulks all these days?" he inquired, with strained politeness. "Do you suppose that, even if he didn't want the reward, he wouldn't give his right hand to even the score with us—to keep us out of the reward? Huh! You fatheads!"

He turned away. "I'm going ashore," he said. "If either of my able assistants has breath enough left, I'd wish he'd order me a boat."

He sauntered down the companion way, from which he presently emerged, carefully loading a heavy Smith & Wesson .44 hammerless. Chesley had ordered and manned a boat. With a grim, determined expression about his lantern jaws, McCrea, without a word, clambered down the gangway and took his seat in the stern sheets.

Cravatt, watching the leader's back as the boat pulled away for the beach at the foot of the lighthouse, was moved to remark:

"I'd hate to be William Jones, lighthouse keeper, if he has gone and went and done anything hasty, now."

The sun bounced suddenly below the horizon. At the same instant the Loggerhead light blazed out, a pure white star of magnitude against the fast-darkening sky, to be answered by a blinding glare from the nearby bastian of Fort Jefferson, on the Garden Key, and a second later by the alternating red and white flashes from the tower on the Rebecca Shoals.

In one hour, to the minute, McCrea was back. He climbed up the gangway in a manner that indicated extreme haste, and which brought hope to the hearts of Chesley and Gravatt, depressed as they had been by McCrea's gloomy suggestions.

Hardly had the latter set foot upon the deck before they were upon him, each grasping an arm, and bringing him to a standstill.

"Well?" they demanded, in one breath.

McCrea wrenched himself impatiently away.

"Well, what, you lunkheads?" he snarled, savagely.

"You've got it?" gasped Chesley, instinctively falling back before McCrea's angry gaze.

"Got what? Got nothing," was the reply. "Got left. Gravatt——"

"But," interrupted Chesley, incredulously, "wouldn't he give it up?"

McCrea turned on him with an exclamation of disgust. He was perspiring freely, showing that he had hurried, and his deep-sunken eyes were glowing with a maddened light.

"Wouldn't who give it up?" he stormed. "Do you suppose for a minute that I'd let any six-foot living skeleton of a misbegotten lighthouse keeper keep that parchment from me, if he had it? Gravatt——"

He was a second time interrupted.

"Craven, then?" said Chesley.

"Craven nothing! Shut up, will you? Or shall I make you? Do you want to get that parchment—or is Craven to have it?""

"Oh, all right," acquiesced Chesley, sullenly.

"Gravatt," McCrea went on, "go below. You've got to get sixteen knots out of her to-night if it tears her heart out!

"Chesley," he continued, "get that boat up and the anchor. D'ye hear me? Don't stand there like a couple of obstinate asses! Hump yourselves, if you don't want to lose——"

He stopped shouting for sheer lack of breath and beat the air impotently with his arms.

Neither of his commands was being obeyed; neither of his comrades had moved.

With the growl of an infuriated animal he flung himself toward the motionless engineer. A free-for-all fight impended, and was only prevented by Chesley's prompt action.

The second in command jumped forward, just in the nick of time, and wound his long arms about McCrea's, pinning them to his sides. Seeing that the danger was over, Gravatt slouched from his suddenly assumed attitude of self-defense into one of dull despondency.

"Don't be a fool, Angel," Chesley advised, calmly enduring his superior's frantic kicks. "Listen to reason, will you?"

"That's what I say," chimed in the engineer.

"Reason!" raved McCrea. "Reason! You talk of—— And one hundred thousand dollars hanging in the balance!"

"One moment," begged Gravatt. "Where is it that you are so damned anxious to get to at a sixteen-knot rate?"

"Mobile," gasped McCrea, still struggling.

"Well," said the engineer, decidedly, "you can't!"

McCrea suddenly calmed. "Chesley," he said, in a tone as cool as the whine of the north wind, "let go. If you don"t, I'll——"

Chesley, understanding that his friend's mood was changed, complied.

"Why?" asked McCrea of Gravatt.

"No coal," was the reply. "We've got just about enough to take us from here to Key West. You know we were to have coaled there, when we started off on this durned wild-goose chase. Maybe we could get there and come back—no more on the quantity in the bunkers at present."

"Oh, Lord!" groaned McCrea. He let his hands drop listlessly by his sides and hung his head in an attitude of utter discouragement. "My fault as much as anyone's," he said, finally. "You chaps might as well give up all hope of ever fingering that parchment or the gold."

"Tell us about it, Angel," suggested Chesley, sympathetically.

McCrea bit off the end of a cigar and applied the match. "Here's how it stands: I saw Jones—a fool. He sold the box and contents to a Frenchman."

"A Frenchman!" Gravatt wondered.

"Did I say Chinaman? Keep quiet! He's a French scientist—a savant—named Bassompierre, who was poking around here looking for jellyfish, or something equally aside from the issue. Jones showed him the box; Bassompierre said he didn't want it, but finally gave Jones a dollar! *A dollar!*

"Then he suddenly decides that he's going home to that dear France. He packs up his duds and lights out day before yesterday for Mobile, where he's going to take the Coastwise Line's boat for New York—due to leave there this afternoon!"

"But what's the use of going there, then, if she sails this after——"

"Do you calculate that he will be permitted to keep it long?" said McCrea, in an acidulated tone. "Not by a long shot. Craven was here, with the *Shark*, last night, got the same news, lit out hot-foot on Monsieur Bassompierre's trail. If he caught him——"

McCrea ended with a significant gesture. "I was going to Mobile to look for Craven," he explained. "Chances are we'd catch him; he'd be so filled with joy of triumph that he'd start right in to hit the hoot-can, and in that event we might surprise him. However—I give it up."

"But," Chesley expostulated, in a cheerful tone, that made his companions turn to him in wonder, "just supposing that Craven doesn't get it? What then?"

"Well?" snapped McCrea. "What then?"

"Why, then, Bassompierre's steamer passes within sight of the Loggerhead light, over there. She's making for New York direct, via the Straits. And there's coal enough to let us loaf around out there in her path. It's a chance, but it's worth trying."

There was a pause, during which the three men looked from one to another. Two of them wore almost fearful expressions; the face of the other gradually cleared: McCrea even smiled—grimly.

"Get up that anchor!" he said, suddenly.

Gravatt moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue, hesitating.

"By George!" he almost whispered. "It's—it's piracy!"

"Are you afraid?" sneered McCrea. "Let it be piracy—it's night. We don't need to give the truthful signals."

He walked to the rail, threw his cigar overboard.

"It's a chance," he said, tensely, "a chance to outwit Craven! The more I think of that man, the less I love him, to tell the honest truth! Gravatt, are you going to get down to those engines, or shall I kick you down?"

III.

The steamer *John Starr*, of the Atlantic and Coastwise Steamship Company, carrying passengers and mixed freight from New Orleans and Mobile to New York, left her wharf at Mobile

on the minute of schedule time that afternoon.

By so doing she all but missed getting one passenger, who ran down the wharf and scrambled aboard at the risk of his life, just as the last lines had been cast off and the gangplank hauled in, and as the steamer was moving out into the bay.

The belated passenger did not seem greatly put out because of his accident. Rather he seemed to congratulate himself on his good fortune in getting aboard at all.

He was an extremely tall man, massively built, carrying a weight of years past middle age with the spring and spirit of youth. His length of arm, which was extraordinary, first attracted his fellow passengers' attention, although his face was equally deserving of notice, and would have seemed an enticing study to a student of physiognomy.

It was a cheerfully depraved face, betokening ordinary good-nature, but pitted with the marks of unbridled passions: typically English, and lean and grizzled. He gave his name as Burnside.

Tipping the steward liberally, he got himself a stateroom, a drink and a pocketful of cigars, and spent the remainder of the daylight in searching the ship. At last, apparently, he found what he sought, and entered into conversation with an emaciated and nervous little man who spoke with a strong French accent and answered to the name of Bassompierre.

At midnight, just as the last stroke of eight bells sounded through the steamer, the lookout's voice rang clearly upon the still night air.

"Light on the port bow!"

The white rays of the Loggerhead light were plainly discernible to the southeast.

For a few moments more the vessel plowed on in comparative silence; that is to say, the majority of the passengers had gone to their berths, and but a few deck chairs were being occupied by recumbent, white-clad figures.

An occasional remark, low-voiced, drowsily uttered, was all that broke the stillness—the silence of the sea at night, that outweighed the grumble of the powerful engines that were driving the *John Starr* swiftly and surely southward to the Straits of Florida.

Abruptly another sound brought the wakeful ones to their feet—a sound like that caused by the impact of the padded stick upon the bass drum.

Simultaneously the cry of the lookout: "Steamer on the starboard bow!"

The officers, deckhands and passengers rushed to the rail in wondering groups, jabbering excitedly, and were just in time to see a rocket throw a flaming trail across the firmament and explode into a multitude of crimson stars.

And again followed the dull, sinister growl: *Boom!*

A second rocket hissed, a third report trembled across the waters, and an officer of the *John Starr* replaced his watch in his pocket.

"Steamer in distress," he said, tersely. "They're firing minute guns."

He raised his night glasses and gave a prolonged scrutiny to the vessel whose night-lights and signals of distress were now plainly visible and audible enough to cause a tremulous fear in the hearts of those who could comprehend what it meant to be in danger upon the high seas by day or night.

"I don't see anything wrong with her," he muttered, half mystified. "However, they wouldn't be making all that fuss for nothing," and went forward.

A moment later the bells tinkled in the engine-room, and the *John Starr* altered her course. Within ten minutes the two steamers were near enough together to enable those aboard the *John Starr* to clearly distinguish the general outlines of the other.

"Looks like a private yacht," hazarded one, turning to the man who called himself Burnside.

The latter accepted the loan of a pair of night glasses and put them to his eyes.

"She's flying the signal of the New York Yacht Club," he said, "and the international code distress signal—'NC.'" He continued to gaze in silence for a moment or two. Then he started

as if shot and almost dropped the glasses. "By God!" he was heard to exclaim. "The *Octopus!*"

Hastily returning the glasses to their owner, he hurried forward to the bridge and demanded a word with the captain.

Two minutes later the *John Starr* suddenly altered her course, turned her nose away from the steamer in distress and made for the Straits at full speed.

A yelp of disappointment—or was it anger?—floated to the ears of the passengers. A tar barrel had been set afire on the decks of the other vessel, and by its ruddy glow men were seen busied about a shapeless black object on the forward deck.

In less time than it takes to tell it the black thing had resolved into a glistening rapid-firing gun; and a tense moment had hardly passed before a sharp report split the air and a screaming projectile winged its way, ricochetting on the surface of the sea, across the bows of the *John Starr.*

The effect was instantaneous. The engine-room bells rang frantically, the Coastwise Line steamer came to a stop almost within her own length. And the captain turned a white face to the place where the Britisher had been a moment before.

"I'm afraid you were right, sir," he said.

But Mr. Burnside was gone—gone swiftly to the lower decks, where were the staterooms.

But now the majority of the passengers had assembled on deck, in various states of disarray and alarm. They were treated to the sight of a short, stout figure standing by the gun on the forward deck of the other steamer, and heard the sound of his stentorian voice as it roared through a megaphone:

"Steamer ahoy! I'm sending you a boat. If you attempt to go on, or if the boat does not return in half an hour, I'll blow you out of the water!"

On the *John Starr* nervous little M. Bassompierre heard, shuddered and delivered himself of a fervent *"Mon Dieu!"* Then he, too, sought the safety and seclusion of the lower decks.

IV.

The first man to climb the passenger gangway and drop lightly upon the deck was tall and thin and slightly stoop-shouldered. He found himself in a press of sailors, officers and passengers, who were loudly vociferating threats, demands, expostulations.

He glowered at them in silence until his companion, a man of greater height and heavier build, joined him. Then:

"Where's the captain?" he said, sharply.

A red-faced individual in a blue uniform loudly claimed the identity.

"I am the captain, sir," he shouted, "and I demand to know the reason for this high-handed proceeding, sir! This is pir——"

He clicked his teeth together smartly, and his complexion took on a livid hue as he gazed entranced into the muzzle of a revolver.

"Shut up!" said McCrea. "You'll speak when you're spoken to. Now, look here, you liveried rooster, there's a passenger aboard named Bassompierre, isn't there? Speak up, if you don't——"

"Yes!" replied the captain, sullenly.

"Bring him here, then," commanded the tall man. "And be quick about it! Stand back, the rest of you! Ches, keep 'em at their distance!"

"Right, Angel," said his companion.

McCrea motioned with the revolver. The captain, with his eye on the muzzle and the fear of God in his heart, hastily ordered a search to be made for Bassompierre.

Chesley occupied the interval with driving the passengers to a safe distance.

"Get back, you chicken-livered numskulls!" he told them, pleasantly. "Keep 'way back, and you won't get shot in case of trouble!"

It seemed to work—the threat. What passengers did not immediately scuttle below decks were careful to maintain a respectable distance between themselves and the two law-breakers.

For his part, McCrea put in the time of waiting with pointing out to the captain the folly of reporting the affair to

the port authorities of the United States. "Who do you propose to report?" he inquired, sweetly. "And, besides, if you should by any accident make trouble for me, I'll camp on your trail until you die from insomnia!"

Two sailors put in an appearance at this juncture, supporting between them the figure of the unnerved Frenchman, who was so completely terrified that his legs refused to perform their functions.

"Stand up!" ordered McCrea. "Now, where's that tin box?"

"Tin box, monsieur?" chattered Bassompierre.

"Tin box, you whelp—the one you bought at the Dry Tortugas! Where is it, I say?'

"Oh, monsieur!" Unutterable gratitude seemed to fill M. Bassompierre's soul. He recovered part of his equanimity and thrust his hand into his side coat pocket. "I have it here," he said, and brought it to light.

With an eager cry, McCrea put his revolver back in his pocket and snatched the box from the Frenchman's hands. Holding it close to his face, he jerked the cover up.

A tiny puff of brown vapor arose from the interior. McCrea was seized with a fit of sneezing, which he overcame with some difficulty.

"Snuff!" he cried, furiously, rushing upon Bassompierre. "But the paper, man, the parchment! Where is that?"

The Frenchman squirmed and cringed. "I have it, monsieur—I have it!" he protested. "It is safe—safe in my trunk!"

McCrea, in his excitement still holding the open snuff-box in his hand, turned to Chesley.

"Stay here and keep this captain-thing quiet!" he said, sternly. And to Bassompierre: "To your stateroom, quick!"

Dragging the frightened Frenchman by the arm, McCrea hustled him along the deck and below, Bassompierre abjectly begging for mercy.

"Shut up!" roared the American. "Your stateroom?"

"There, there, monsieur!" was the whimpered response.

McCrea strode to the door indicated, laid his hand upon the knob, which was promptly jerked from his grasp as the door was opened from the inside. A man dashed out, collided with McCrea, staggered back against the wall of the passageway: it was the Englishman.

Recognition was mutual.

"Craven, you thief!" cried McCrea. "Give me that paper!"

Intuitively he had divined the purpose of his old enemy within that room, and as instinctively he knew that Craven would not have left without what he sought—the parchment with the two triangular holes in the corner.

Craven's response was a curse and a swift movement of his hand toward his hip-pocket—swift, but not swift enough. McCrea, who himself had not time to draw his weapon, dashed the open snuff-box into Craven's face.

"The parchment, you fool!" he cried.

Blinded, half-strangled, and wholly mad with rage, Craven threw himself bodily toward his enemy, thinking, perhaps, to seize him in those huge arms and overpower him.

In the narrow passage between the staterooms was little space for fighting. McCrea, taken by surprise at this unexpected move of his enemy's, had but time to swing himself around—knocking Bassompierre off his feet as he did so—and to send his fist crashing into Craven's face.

It was but a shoulder blow; he had not been able to put his weight behind it. But it served his purpose, staggering Craven for a brief instant, in which time McCrea gathered himself together and struck again.

The blow went home with one hundred and sixty-five pounds of bone and muscle behind it, landing on the very corner of Craven's jaw, just below the ear—a hit like the kick of a mule.

The Englishman's head twisted grotesquely to one side. He moaned once, pitifully, reeled, fell crashing backwards.

Instantly McCrea was on his knees by his side. He ran his hands into the Englishman's breast pocket and drew it forth with a gasp of triumph.

"The parchment!" he gloated.

"As for this, Monsieur Bassom-

pierre," he said, rising and touching the body of Craven with his toe, "I fear you will have a funeral at sea to-morrow. The man's neck is broken."

. . . . . .

An hour later, in the saloon of the *Octopus,* three men were bending over a shallow plate filled with some colorless liquid. The tall, slim man with the round shoulders passed a piece of parchment into the bath, let it remain for a moment and drew it forth.

It appeared covered with minute chirography in the Spanish tongue. McCrea read a word or two.

"This sympathetic ink," he said, critically, "is queer stuff; in an hour it will have faded out entirely, and it'll take another bath to restore it."

"But is it *the* parchment?" demanded Gravatt.

"And so," continued McCrea, with the air of one imparting momentous information, "Señor Hernandez will never know that we have read his state secret."

"But," cried Chesley, in a half-strangled tone, "is it——?"

"Of course it is," admitted McCrea. "D'ye suppose Devil Craven would have risked his life for it, otherwise? Oh, be easy; you'll finger the hundred thousand all right!"

THE END.

THATCHER'S CUB

BY GEORGE PARSONS BRADFORD

Author of "The Man With the Thumb," Etc.

A little drama of real life in which a war correspondent encounters a domestic tragedy on the field of battle.

I.

OUT of the blackness a man staggered into the ebbing circle of light around the dying fire, halted with a mechanical jerk, and looked about him.

He was a big man in more ways than one. But physically he was builded upon a generous plan; nature had not grudged ample thews and sinews to clothe fitly a massive framework of bone.

A battered, pith helmet was pushed back from his brows. His broad countenance was flushed crimson and dripped with sweat. On his temples and bull-like neck the veins stood out like wires, empurpled, distended, throbbing. He breathed heavily in sharp gasps.

He had no coat. A flimsy cotton shirt blanket, and abandoned himself to an lay open at his throat. His khaki breeches were sodden with moisture to the waistband, while the puttees wound around his calves and his heavy marching boots were slimed with black mire.

From time to time his features were distorted by a twinge of pain, directly traceable to a darkly stained bandage wrapped about the biceps of his left arm, the sleeve of which hung loosely, ripped to the shoulder.

Finding none of his associates, he

turned and plodded to one of a row of eight or ten tents that stood in the clearing. Within he unslung his belt and holsters and the fieldglasses which had swung from his shoulders. Then, without a murmur, he collapsed upon a invincible fatigue in expectation of a deep, dreamless sleep.

But he was in that overwrought condition termed "too tired to sleep." He rested motionless as a log, but his fevered imagination maintained a restless activity.

The bivouac of the war correspondents was very quiet. The fire lapsed into ash-clothed embers, filling all the air with incense from some fragrant burned wood. The jungle shadows crept into the clearing.

Night reigned black, torrid, still. Only the wilderness about the encampment was instinct with its nocturnal life, with odd rustlings and sibilant noises. And now and again a faint, vicious snap —the report of a Krag—came from a distant picket line.

In time another man trotted hastily out of the darkness, glanced quickly at the deserted scene, and called aloud:

"Thatcher!"

In the tent the tired man did not move, nor reply. The newcomer plumped down upon a cracker box, unhitched a muddy canteen, and put it to his lips. Then he kicked the fire into a blaze, added fresh fuel, filled and lit a pipe, and meditated.

Presently he was joined by others—five or six of them—who appeared suddenly, each alone. Some nodded simply, others muttered greetings. All flopped limply, exhausted, upon the damp sod, forming a circle with the fire for a center.

He on the cracker box—a wiry, seasoned campaigner: Bergen, the *Sun* man—broke the silence, querulously:

"Where's Thatcher! Anyone know?"

Receiving no response, he made plaintive moan:

"I want to know where Thatcher is. He's got beer concealed. I swear he has!"

The man in the tent smiled drearily, recognizing the voice.

"I say I want Thatcher's beer!" in the accents of an abused infant.

One man looked up from a battered memorandum book and grinned. "Now's your time for confiscation," he chanted. "You swipe it, and I'll give you half, Bergen."

Bergen regarded himself with infinite scorn. Another volunteered.

"I met Thatcher snooping around like a stealthy elephant, up on the north fork. He was making such a racket that he drew the concentrated fire of the enemy's pickets on the other bank. So I came away," he added, virtuously.

He in the tent smiled broadly this time.

"Anyone happen to know what's up the enemy's sleeve?" asked Loomis of the *Recorder.*

"Hell." The laconic answer came from the *Herald* correspondent.

"That seems pretty accurate. They were playing the devil with our pickets when I came in."

Conversation languished. Macroy, of the *Ledger,* conspired to stimulate it. He sat cross-legged, unhealthily fat, repulsively greasy, and leered maliciously, his little eyes twinkling with spiteful enjoyment. He licked his loose lips, and spake:

"Was the cub with Thatcher?"

"March?" asked the man who had seen Thatcher.

"Uh-huh," assented Macroy.

"Didn't see him."

"Cowardly little whelp," suggested Macroy.

The man in the tent opened his eyes and his ears, startled out of his lethargy. He noticed that none verbally encouraged Macroy; nevertheless the man proceeded:

"Some one ought to tell Thatcher. You fellows know what made him select March as his assistant, don't you?" He stopped. No answer.

"Well," he went on, as though all wished him to—which was not the case, "it was rank favoritism. I know a dozen first-class men who would have taken the job gladly. Thatcher selects March—a new boy, green as salad. Why?

"I'll tell you. His wife insisted. She knew it would make March a reputation. Say," Macroy insinuated with a confidential, loathsome sneer, "tell you what, March is the third party in the Thatcher home. Yes." He nodded sagaciously. "Thatcher's wife is infatuated with the shrimp. She's even a little brazen about her indiscretions with March——"

"Macroy!"

With that cry crashing upon their startled ears like the last trump, the men jumped nervously. But, after that, none moved a hand to save Macroy. They watched Thatcher with a curious expression of pleased expectancy.

As for the scandalmonger, he was suddenly upon his feet, his face gone greenish-gray in the flickering firelight, his eyes glinting with fear of the man who had been in the tent, but who now faced him.

Thatcher's face was white—a blazing pallor, wherein his eyes flamed large with the passion that made his whole huge body vibrate like a reed windshaken. He moved forward with measured steps, watching Macroy steadfastly.

The latter began to back away, stammering, with a hand upheld, pleadingly.

"Well—well, you ought—to know it, T-t-thatcher—I—I—your wife——"

Thatcher's great fist, landing on his open mouth, seemed to lift him off his feet. He fell some distance back, sprawling and whimpering. The big man leaped and stood over him, wrapped in fury.

"You miserable hound!" he cried. "You—you contemptible cur, you—— If ever again I hear you breathe my wife's name, I'll tear your head from your body!"

He stopped abruptly, making a tremendous effort to command himself. When he spoke again it was in an even tone, deadly distinct, appallingly earnest.

"Remember! I shan't warn you again. Next time will be your last. Now, you damned liar, get up and tell them that you lied!"

The prostrate man put an arm fearfully over his eyes. Thatcher stooped and twisted his hand in the other's collar. Macroy suddenly scrambled to his feet, and stood with shaking knees. Already his lips were puffed; he spat blood ere he spoke.

"I—I lied," he faltered, thickly.

"That'll do. As for the rest of you, *you* sat there and listened without a word! Well—we know one another. If a syllable of this reaches Jack March, some one will answer to me!"

Thatcher glowered upon the group for a moment. They hung their heads, shamed, nor dared to meet his gaze. With a little strangled cry he whirled about on his heel and vanished down the jungle road. Macroy whined, got no sympathy, and shambled, muttering, to his tent.

Bergen lifted his eyes from a prolonged contemplation of the stem of his pipe.

"Macroy," he said, slowly, "got what was coming to him, all right, boys. For one I'm glad of it. But——"

"Yes!" Loomis snapped, silencing him.

There was no need to finish the thought. The circle of war correspondents knew one another very well. Thatcher was their dean; to a man they liked him. But to a man they considered that Macroy, whom they despised, had spoken truth, however much he had deserved punishment.

They pitied Thatcher with a simple sincerity as one of the best of men, but blind to the treachery of the serpent he warmed at his bosom.

II.

When Thatcher returned the night was waning. A dank chill permeated the atmosphere. The fire was a heavy mass of cold, wet, white ashes.

Thatcher shivered involuntarily; because of the humidity his nether garments were still damp and clinging uncomfortably, and the coolness struck through their thin texture.

This time he went directly to his tent, neither glancing to the one side nor to the other. But he was aware that he was unobserved; his brother correspondents slept the sleep of worn and jaded men, snatching what fugitive refreshment they might ere the impending battle should make fresh demands upon their reserve strength.

Listlessly he changed his clothes; about his eyes the skin was drawn tight as upon a drumhead.

He needed rest more than in all his life he had needed it. But there was no rest for him that night; there was much to be done.

Hastily he swallowed some quinine, lit a candle, and sat down on a camp stool. With his knee for a desk he wrote for twenty minutes or so, driving the pencil across the flimsy paper by main will power. Then stopping, he searched his pockets, collected several odds and ends—among them the photograph of a dark-eyed girl, upon which he gazed for some time—and tied them all in a neat packet.

When this was done he blew out the candle, and wrapped himself in his blanket.

An hour passed; still he lay rigid and motionless, with wide, staring eyes fixed unblinkingly upon the wall of the tent.

Without, the chorus in the jungle stilled into that hush that precedes the tropic dawn. Peace and quiet possessed the world; and separated by a narrow, foul river, across which they watched each other with catlike vigilance, two armies rested sleepless upon their arms, waiting for the light to come and make sure the way to kill.

A twig snapped. Thatcher moved expectantly, for the first time. He heard an approaching patter of light footfalls. March pulled aside the front flap and noiselessly sidled into the tent.

Now Thatcher's eyelids were lowered; through his lashes—to all appearances asleep—he watched his assistant narrowly.

March was young, of medium height, slender and still boyish of figure, rather graceful of bearing, his face smooth and too delicately featured, rather handsome in an effeminate way; a type to which some women are strongly drawn.

Men mistrusted him. He lacked something of ease, of upright consciousness, that appertains to right men.

There was in his manner an indefinable furtiveness; an excess of caution; a slyness.

Thatcher tried not to dislike him. He recalled that he had fought against the selection; but his wife had insisted, as Macroy claimed. Dear Jack would gain so much by the experience, she had pled. Thatcher remembered how persistently.

But March did his work, and well; Thatcher couldn't deny that. And, after all, there was nothing against him but the damnable slander that had festered in the diseased brain of the despicable Macroy.

No; he couldn't believe——

The nature of the man triumphed over the rankling doubt. His was a broad, simple, friendly nature, given to faith. March seemed to be his friend and Thatcher trusted him, completely.

And his faith in his wife was so abiding as to be old-fashioned.

By force, almost, he freed his mind of prejudice, looking upon March as he had previously: as a raw, untried boy, his wife's third cousin, needing his help and advice.

He dissimulated, yawning and stretching wide his arms.

"Hello, Jack."

March had been standing with his back to Thatcher. He jumped as if struck and turned hastily, surreptitiously slipping a folded paper into his pocket. Thatcher failed to notice it.

"Just got in?" he asked, gaping enormously.

"Yes."

"Where you been all night?"

March's eyes wandered.

"At headquarters," he said, flushing unaccountably. "You told me to stay there."

"Yes. Anything new?"

"Gen. Mills expects Rojas to attack at dawn, I heard."

"Sagacious Mills!" jeered Thatcher,

with good-humored irony. "Wow!" he protested, rising. "But I am tired. I scouted up along the river last night. Had a run-in with one of their pickets and got this for my pains."

He motioned toward his wounded arm. "Bayonet," he explained, lightly. "Just a scratch."

March looked to the floor.

"Too bad," he said, automatically.

"Mail in yet?"

March squirmed. "Yes," he conceded, sullenly.

"Get anything?"

"No—yes—that is, I got a letter from a girl. I believe there's one for you from—from Bessie. They wouldn't let me have it."

"Why not?"

"Don't know," evaded March.

"Well, I reckon I'll just naturally go after it myself." Thatcher's eyes glistened happily; he was thinking of Bessie. "Dear old girl!" he whispered to himself. "She never fails to write! Thunder! it's something for a big dub like me to have a wife like Bessie. Wonder how it happened?"

For answer there came a peal of angry thunder.

Across the breathless, mist-swathed plateau the sound rumbled and growled, reverberating into the distance: *B-r-r-boom-boom!*

In the tent the two men stood as though petrified.

Into the deep, growling roar another sound leaped, vivid as lightning; crash upon shattering crash. And a drumming rattle, like mighty hail upon a tin roof.

"Maguire's batteries!" cried Thatcher. "Bleeker's rapid-firing guns, and Morton's machine guns. God! We're in for it!

"Here, Jack!" He thrust the little packet he had made ready into the hands of his assistant. "You follow me. If I cash in, send those to Bessie!"

Both ran from the tent.

The clearing was filled with a rabid mob of men—mainly the correspondents, dashing half dressed and wholly frantic to the field of action.

III.

Apparently ages passed swiftly.

Thatcher found a log in his path. He was moved to sit down upon it and rest for a moment. He doffed his helmet, and swabbed his streaming face with a handkerchief that once might have been clean.

The log was somewhere near the middle of a vast cane thicket.

How Thatcher had come there he could not coherently recall. There had been a charge, and he had been in its way. It had dashed onward, irresistible, to the tune of much yelling, and he had been swept aside like a chip on a stream.

Then a little brown man astride an enormous horse had taken a fancy to Thatcher, and had pursued him with shrill cries and a slashing sword that glittered like gold in the sunlight whenever Thatcher looked around.

For naturally he had fled from the little brown man. And now he was in this interminable cane brake.

It was broiling hot. Thatcher much desired a long drink of cold water. While he was debating ways and means for obtaining the same, a bullet snapped hungrily at his ear and he rolled off the log, simultaneously drawing his revolver.

It seemed that the little brown man still thirsted for Thatcher's blood. Presuming that he had killed the American he came up eagerly, leading his horse, and holding a revolver ready to administer a *coup de grace.*

So Thatcher shot him.

Inasmuch as the little man wore quite an elaborate uniform it seemed advisable to search him for incriminating documents. Thatcher's quest was rewarded beyond his wildest dreams.

He ran his devouring gaze through several papers containing information of the utmost importance, both to the commanding general and to the readers of the *Star.*

Then he swore delightedly, took the dead man's revolver, and threaded his way out of the cane brake. On the way he looked at his watch.

It was half-past ten, of a sultry morning; Thatcher had fancied it must be near to sunset.

IV.

Upon an eminence a number of men clustered. Once it had been a knoll in a wheat field—once, fully an hour gone; now it was a bald spot, a bog of moist black loam laced with golden straw.

From its edge the ground fell away, sharply graded, into the valley that lay shrouded with swirling reefs of smoke, stabbed now and again with swift strokes of crimson flame.

Dismounted and motionless, his hands idle in his pockets, Mills, the general commanding, glared into the steaming heart of the enigma. Somewhere, down there, his men were grappled with the enemy. And no man might foretell how the tide of battle should ebb or flow.

Aides dispatched into the gulf did not return. The day was being decided, and Mills stood with hands virtually bound, unable to sway events by cunning or by force of might.

Behind him his staff waited gloomily, sharing their leader's uneasiness. A little to the right the war correspondents stood, vainly striving to pierce the smoke reek with their fieldglasses.

Up the hillside, scrambling out of that gigantic caldron of simmering death, a man appeared in desperate haste.

Loomis saw him first. He lowered his glasses.

"Thatcher," he said, simply.

"No wonder he beats us all," commented Bergen. "He's been down there—there where none of us dared go!"

Thatcher gained the less steep slopes of the knoll. He reeled forward, panting, and thrust a number of papers roughly into Mills' hands.

The general scanned them, and turned upon Thatcher almost fiercely. "Where did you find these?"

"On the dead body of one of Rojas' aides!"

"Thank you. This saves us." He swung about, facing his staff, his face afire with hope. "Greer!"

A young aide cantered forward, saluting.

"Go tell Cullom to shell the swamp to the right. Mann—quick!—this to Homer!"

Thatcher removed himself to a distance, threw himself down in the shade of a tree, and began to scribble a dispatch. Presently he had it ready for the wire. Rising, he approached the knot of correspondents.

"March!" he screamed.

No reply. He caught Bergen by the arm, and shouted in his ear:

"Have you seen March?"

Bergen shook him off impatiently, glueing his glasses to his eyes.

"Damn March!" he growled. "No. He's not my cub."

Loomis tapped Thatcher on the shoulder. "Over there," he said, grimly.

Thatcher ran off in the direction indicated, half mad with anxiety to get his dispatch to the cable office. But he found time to wonder at the strange, ironic expression with which Loomis had regarded him.

Thatcher plunged on, determined to find his assistant, but with hardly even a vague notion as to where to look for him. He was dimly aware that this portion of the battlefield was getting rather too hot for comfort. Once a shell burst, it seemed, right at his feet, but he escaped unscathed and hurried on.

Somehow guided, he blundered into a native hut, fell over the threshold. When he picked himself up he turned to go. A faint call—it sounded like his name—arrested him. He searched the dim interior with his eyes.

"What?" he cried, impatiently.

A figure came out of a shadowed corner—March, shivering. He clutched Thatcher, demanding hoarsely: "Where've you been?"

"What's the matter with you?" asked Thatcher, angrily. "Why didn't you stay with Mills? I've been looking—— Are you afraid, man?"

"N-no, but——"

"You forsaken coward, come out of this!"

For a passing instant it seemed to him that March's eyes blazed angrily.

But he did not otherwise resent the epithet. Rather he tightened his hold upon Thatcher.

"You're wounded!" he declared, anxiously. "Is it—bad?"

Thatcher put his hand to his forehead, dizzily. It came away covered with blood.

"I didn't know it. No matter. Here, you've got to get out. Take these papers and rush 'em to the cable office."

He dragged the younger man out of the hut. A regiment of regulars was passing at the double-quick—young, lithe, lean fellows with thin-lined faces and hungry eyes fixed steadily to the front.

March, looking aloft, screamed shrilly. A ball of smoke, spitting red sparks, hung poised above the troops. In another moment it exploded, tearing a gaping hole in the side of the regiment.

March went down, spattered with blood.

"Wounded?" whispered Thatcher, stooping over him.

The assistant's eyes gazed into his, giving mute assent.

"Well, you can't stay here. Come, I'll help you to the rear."

He half lifted March to his feet, supporting him with much difficulty.

"Can you walk? Where's the wound?"

March groaned, watching Thatcher keenly, and pointed to his breast. Before he could stop him Thatcher had torn open his shirt, which was saturated with blood. But beneath it the skin was unbroken and white—hardly stained.

A gust of rage shook Thatcher.

"You're not even scratched," he shouted. "Take these papers, and get along with you to the cable office. Go, or I'll kick you every step of the way!"

March threw him an agonized glance, hesitated, and then mutely obeyed. Thatcher, snarling his disgust, watched him for the first few yards of his reluctant journey.

Suddenly March seemed to stumble. He flung out his hands desperately; stopped, and then fell. Instantly Thatcher was by his side. This time there was no shamming about it; an expanding bullet had torn a ragged wound in the assistant's shoulder.

Lifting him tenderly in his arms Thatcher carried him back to the insufficient shelter of the hut.

"I'll bring you a surgeon," he told him. "Lie still, my boy. Don't move. Here——"

He unfastened his canteen, and put it in March's hand; it was full of rank, muddy water, brackish, but he knew how precious to a wounded man.

Then, stooping, he took from March's breast pocket the dispatches which he had just given him. The outer papers were covered with a film of blood.

No matter; Thatcher put them in his pocket. He glanced at March, whose head had fallen forward on his breast; he seemed to have fainted.

V.

At the rear there were riot and rampant confusion. Fools had set afloat rumors of defeat. What had been the camp was an inextricable tangle of yelling and running camp followers, of frantic and rearing mules, of tent ropes and pegs, of stalled commissary wagons, of bewildered soldiers, who had lost their regiments, of poltroons back from the front screaming of ruin, of slaughter and of sudden death.

Thatcher threaded a perilous way through the maze, and finally gained the cable terminus, which he found deserted; the operators had fled. He sat down at one of the senders, tested the key, found it in working order, and clicked off his dispatch from memory.

When, after half an hour or so of incessant application to the task, he received the final "O. K." signal from the New York office, he rose, trembling with fatigue, and took up the dispatches which he had written on the field of battle, intending to destroy them.

Hardly had he touched them ere he became aware that one of the papers in his hand—the outer one—was not his property. He looked at it curiously; a square, folded sheet of note paper of fa-

miliar appearance, covered with thin, angular handwriting which had been blotted in part by March's lifeblood.

As though in a dream he comprehended that he knew that hand—knew it as he knew his own. It was like a stunning blow when he realized that it was his wife's chirography.

"Bessie," he breathed, tensely. "Writing to Jack!"

Beneath his eyes the blurred words took form, became a sort of coherent horror. He could not believe them, yet they existed in palpable truth: *"Dearest"—"mad with fears"—"your promise to me"—"my dear sweetheart"—"you know how madly I love——"*

He seemed to be walking in darkness, although he was faintly conscious that overhead the sun blazed with undiminished ferocity. But to Thatcher it was as though he stood, bound hand and foot, on the crumbling brink of an abysm of infinite blackness.

His reason tottered on its throne. His world was in convulsion, chaotic and terrifying.

Gradually he came out of the night. How long he had wandered in this slough of despair he could not tell. But now evening was shading the land. And still the battle raged.

Unconsciously his feet had guided him to that hut wherein he had left March—March, the traitor, the faithless, the serpent in what had been Thatcher's Eden.

He wondered blankly why he had come there, then suddenly knew. He had come to exterminate March. The man was not fit to live, to pollute the earth with his presence. Thatcher would see to that.

And but last night he had thrashed Macroy for speaking truth about this smiling, sneaking seducer.

Thatcher threw back his head and laughed aloud—a harsh, mirthless cackle like the laugh of a maniac.

He looked to his revolvers; they were in perfect condition. Holding one in his hand he entered the hut.

Level rays from the declining sun, blood red from the west, lit up the interior with an unearthly glare. March lay where he had been left, crumpled into a moaning heap of clothes.

As Thatcher entered, the prostrate man moaned pitifully. Thatcher, with a shock, realized that the cry of anguish was like music to his ears.

Cold iron had entered into his soul; he remembered the shifty falseness of this man to him, he called to mind the infinite sweetness that he had imagined in his wife's faithless eyes. His purpose became like steel in its inflexibility.

Gripping March by his sound shoulder, he twisted his face to the light. The eyes opened with a jerk, glazed, round, expressionless as a doll's. Then reason entered into them and the younger man screamed, partly from pain, partly from fear.

For indeed Thatcher was a fearsome shape, with his great face hollowed by suffering to the likeness of a Greek mask of anguish.

"A guilty conscience," he told himself of March's cry.

March had collapsed back into his former pose. Now he shuddered and covered his face with his hands.

"Sit up!" Thatcher told him, relentlessly, seizing him again by the shoulder, and roughly forcing him to obey his will.

"What—what——" gasped the wounded man.

Thatcher shook him. "Don't you know me? March, you cur! I'm Thatcher—Thatcher, the man who befriended you, the man you betrayed like the sneaking whelp you are!"

March seemed to rouse.

"Thatcher?" he said, dreamily. "Did you bring the surgeon, old man?"

"Surgeon be damned. I've brought you something that will do you greater service than a surgeon. I've brought you——"

He stopped, snarling. March stared, wonderingly.

"What?" he whispered.

"Death," said Thatcher, his fingers trembling on the trigger of the weapon he carried. But it was too early to kill him—yet.

The figure at his feet began to quake;

his eyes, like saucers, filled with stupefaction, which Thatcher read as fear.

"Death?" he iterated. "Why, Thatcher, *why?*" he asked, pitifully.

"Why?" A great tide of passion overwhelmed his reason; for a space he saw all things darkly, as in a mist. Only his own voice boomed loud and ruthless in his ears.

"Because you've killed *me*—you've slain the man in me, the man who believed in and trusted you. Because you've killed the man who saw honor and faith in the world. Because you stole from me the only woman in the world who cared for me——"

His vehemence brought March to full mental power.

"What can you mean?" he cried.

Thatcher laughed shortly. "You don't deny that you got my wife's letter this morning, I suppose? You can't deny that it is a love letter, for I have it here"—he tapped his pocket—"proof, man! proof positive of the guilt of both of you!" He paused for breath. "And for that you die," he concluded, slowly.

March did not speak. He kept his eyes, now steady, full upon Thatcher as the latter raised the revolver and brought it to bear upon him. He watched him as though fascinated. Thatcher held his hand for a moment longer to get the full relish of the mortal despair that he saw in March's gaze.

"For which you die," he repeated, deliberately.

Then his jaw dropped. He glared at March amazed. A transformation had come upon the latter; his lip curled with scorn, he faced the muzzle of the revolver with utter fearlessness.

"Shoot," he said, coldly. "Shoot, you damned fool!"

Abruptly a shell burst at the door of the hut. Thatcher was lifted and flung against the rear wall. Simultaneously an ecstasy of exquisite pain filled his being. From finger tip to shoulder blade his arm was like a white-hot brand.

Dumbly he knew what had happened; a ball had carried away his elbow, shivering the ulnar nerve—the "crazybone." He went mad with agony, lost all sense save the overwhelming consciousness of the pain.

VI.

The surgeon replaced the splints carefully, with a touch as sensitive and tender as a woman's.

"I think you can be discharged to-day," he said, pleasantly, "if you want to get out. Do you?"

Thatcher smiled feebly. "Yes," he assented, in a voice like an echo.

"You'll carry a stiff left arm for the rest of your life, I'm afraid; but that won't interfere with your pen hand, will it? Well, you can go, if you like. Lie still there until I get the boss' permission."

Thatcher complied listlessly, his gaze steady, unseeing, fixed on the ceiling. His mind was a tarnished mirror; yesterday was a blank, to-day gray and shadowy.

At his side his bandaged arm was numb and stiff; it felt as if he could not have moved it had he wished to.

The hospital ward was cool and bright. Sunlight and the sea breeze, salt and vivifying, came through the open window by the side of Thatcher's cot.

The place was filled with a soft sibilance of whispers, a faint patter as the nurses moved from cot to cot.

Presently the young surgeon returned, assisted Thatcher to rise and helped him out, into the sunshine and the clear air.

He felt light-headed, giddy. Presently, however, he was able to realize the world.

Bergen and Loomis, he found, were walking, one on either side of him, chatting cheerfully. At his request they went down to the beach, where he could sit and ask questions, and absorb health and reason from the tonic air.

Yes, they told him, the enemy had been defeated—routed with great loss, and driven back over the mountains, where now a species of guerrilla warfare was being waged by them. But peace might come at any day.

And his dispatch to the *Star*, sent on the day of the battle, had scored a twenty-hour beat over them all; the information he had been able to transmit concerning the enemy had not become the property of the other correspondents until the following noon.

Presently Bergen gave him an envelope.

"From your wife," he said. The two men looked away. Thatcher took it mutely. Its words were very sweet to his understanding; his heart was full ere he had waded through half its closely written pages.

Suddenly he turned to his comrades.

"Where's March?" he demanded, almost fearfully.

There was a constrained pause. Finally Loomis took the initiative.

"Bergen aad I saw it all," he said, awkwardly. "It was just at sundown. A regiment that our boys had hemmed in was refusing to surrender. They stood us off across that wheat field where we were in the morning with Mills.

"We two stood at the side of the field, on a little hill, watching through our fieldglasses. Their batteries over the river began to shell the field. One of the shells set fire to a little hut in the middle of it. It went up like—that." He snapped his fingers.

"The cornered regiment was firing at our men right across the field. Our fellows were giving them shot for shot. It was a rain of death, all right.

"First I noticed the hut afire. Then Bergen called my attention to you. You were running around the hut, holding your elbow, like—well, like a chicken with its head off.

"We gave you up, for sure. Just then I saw another man stagger out of the hut. It was March. And a horse came plunging along, dragging a dead man, with his foot in the stirrup.

"March grabbed the bridle, and stopped the crazy brute. Then, leading him, he went after you. You were clean out of your head. I saw him actually lift you into the saddle, where you slumped forward, lying on the animal's neck.

"Then March cut the stirrup straps that held the dead man. He slapped the horse sharply on the rump. It went off like the wind, you staying aboard by a pure miracle.

"March started to run toward our lines. When we found his body the next day there were eight bullets in him."

"Gave his life for you, old man," said Bergen. "Poor March! We were a little hard on him, I'm afraid. We thought him a coward."

Thatcher sat looking out over the sea, without replying. For a long time no one spoke.

Presently Thatcher fumbled in his breast pocket. He could not reach it easily with his sound arm. Bergen helped him to get what he wanted.

It was a sheet of folded note paper, stained darkly. Thatcher held it in a shaking hand, deciphering the contents. Through the dried blots the ink below rose plainly, making clear and evident the true meaning of certain disconnected phrases which had once seemed to spell the end of all things to Thatcher.

"DEAREST JACK: I am half mad with fears for the life of my sweetheart. I write to remind you of your promise to me before you left for the front. I know it seems selfish and heartless of me, but, oh, dear Jack, he is all I have in the world. He is more than my husband to me—he is my dear sweetheart, and I can't, can't live without him, Jack.

"It sounds selfish—it is selfish of me. Be generous, Jack—I'm half frantic. You know us so well; you know how madly I love him. Bring him back to me, Jack; bring him back to me, as you promised, even at the risk of your life.

"The talk is all of some great, decisive battle. And they tell me that Dan is utterly fearless. My husband will be rash, thoughtless—I know he will. I know he is recklessly brave. If you see him in danger—you promised to stick by him—try, try to get him to leave the field. Pretend to be wounded, so that he will carry you out of danger. Oh, Jack, Jack, I love him so——"

The words blurred, ran together. Thatcher bowed his head. The paper fluttered to the sands at his feet. A man's tears rolled unheeded down his cheeks.

A PERSONAL CHAT WITH OUR READERS

THE profession of editing is much like any other business. It has its routine of dull monotony and its occasional spice of variety. There are times, however, when the editor feels that his work is not entirely work, but an actual pleasure. This is when a ripping good story comes to his hands, a story that stands out from the usual mass of literary material like Gibraltar above the level sea. This happens only once in a great while, but when it does occur it marks an epoch.

Such a story came to us a short time ago. It was delivered through the mail, and, unlike the usual run of manuscripts, bore a pseudonym instead of the author's name. This suggested mystery was lost sight of when the reading of the manuscript discovered a most extraordinary and intensely interesting story—a work of adventure fiction of such strength and cleverness that it is bound to create a sensation.

The title given the story by the author is "The International Disappearance Syndicate, Ld." which, if titles stand for anything, certainly means an extremely attractive bit of fiction.

When the opening chapters—which will appear next month—are read it will be seen that the author has taken for his *motif* the remarkable conditions which must prevail when the great trusts have reached the zenith of their power and have formed the inevitable "Central Trust," or the combination under one supreme head of all the trusts controlling the necessities of life.

The author, who signs himself "Theta," describes with a most facile pen the desperate expedient resorted to by the trust to remove from its path of progress those daring enough to oppose it, and the final result. It is a story to be read by the capitalist and the workingman alike, and although its principal object is to entertain, the story also gives an almost prophetic picture of a possible social condition.

In addition to the usual array of attractive features there will be commenced next month two new series. One, entitled "Little Stories of the Stage," will consist of personal experiences of famous actors and actresses as told by themselves. To-day the theater is as much a part of our everyday life as anything can be, and the actors' profession occupies the public mind and the public press equally with medicine or the law.

There is a certain glamour about the stage, however, that is not found in the

other professions, and there is more interest in reading of it. Especially is there entertainment and interest in reading of personal experiences when the man or the woman more closely concerned does the telling.

The other new feature bears the title, "Romances of the Race Course," and will consist of cleverly written stories of the paddock and track, where the horse still holds to his own. The stories are by Charles S. Pearson, the racing editor of a well-known New York daily.

During the progress of the series Mr. Pearson, who knows his local color thoroughly, will describe the many intricacies of horse racing in this country, the life of the jockeys, the strenuous scenes in the betting ring, the tricks resorted to by unscrupulous race track men, the business side of racing, and the great events of the turf.

There is a remarkable fascination in the racing of horses, and this fascination is not entirely born of a gambling spirit. Some of the greatest devotees of the sport firmly refuse to stake money on the races. The spectacle to them simply appeals to that common trait of human nature which finds interest in the trial of brute endurance.

Max Pemberton's latest story, "Beatrice, of Venice," which begins in this number, is well worth reading. The scene selected by the gifted author, Venice, at the time when Napoleon was seeking to add it to his growing empire, is filled with the atmosphere of romance. It is a field particularly adapted to Mr. Pemberton's power of handling situations strong in love and romantic adventure, and he certainly has made the best use of his natural talent. The story will run through several generous installments.

Mr. Pemberton's previous work, published both in this country and in Great Britain, has made an enviable place for him in literature. His "Beatrice, of Venice," is, in the opinion of the critics, superior in interest and literary quality to his other stories, "A Daughter of the States," "The Giant's Gate," and "The Iron Pirate."

While on the subject of good fiction we would like to call your attention to a serial now running in this magazine, a serial you probably are reading with considerable satisfaction. It is "O'Rourke, Gentleman Adventurer," by Mr. Louis Joseph Vance. The story, like all good fiction, is founded on fact.

In relating it Mr. Vance used as the basis of his plot the extraordinary doings of M. Lebaudy, the Parisian multimillionaire, who is trying to found an empire in the western part of the Desert of Sahara. The attempt at self-glorification on the part of the young Frenchman forms a most picturesque episode in the world's daily news. Mr. Vance's story is no less picturesque and entertaining.
