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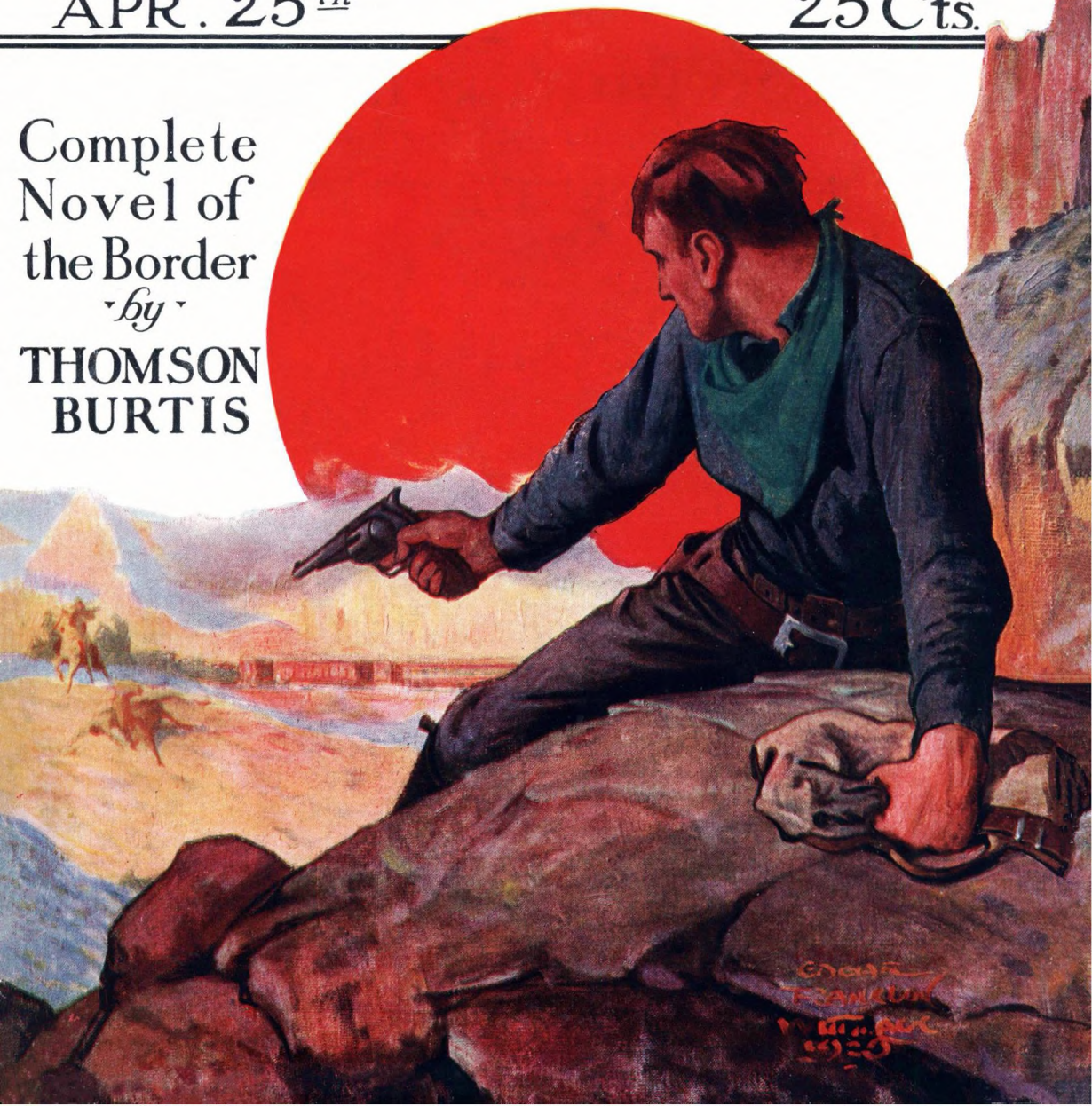

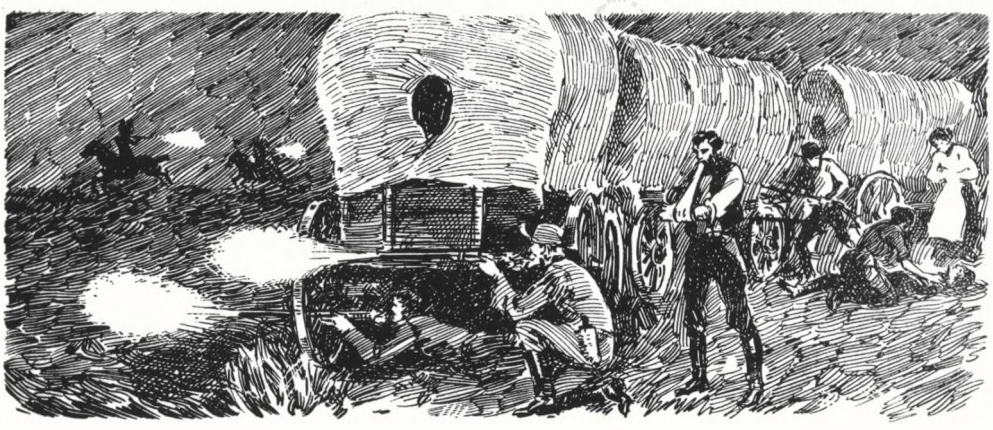

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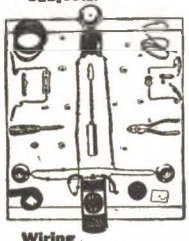

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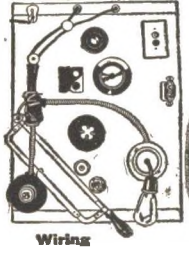

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The May Frontier Now Out

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Short Stories

Vol. CXI., No. 2 Whole No. 465

HARRY E. MAULE
EDITOR

D. McILWRAITH
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

"A HANDFUL WITH QUIETNESS"

WITHOUT retreating from our own complete belief in the strenuous life, the full life, as means of making the most of ourselves and of obtaining from our narrow span the maximum of happiness, it is a good idea now and then to take stock of our multiplicity of activities. How many of the things we do, in the name of business, for example, are really useful and contribute to our own advancement or the furtherment of our jobs, and how many of them are just a lot of running hither and yon causing only confusion? There was an article recently in one of the highbrow magazines which set out to prove that the business man with his everlasting conventions, meetings, and conferences, was really the prince of time-wasters. Being a very clever article it certainly jabbed the industrial get-together fellow in a weak spot. Of course it was unfair in its deliberate overlooking of the better informed and broader minded businessmen with all their outside activities.

Still and all, the idea has a wide application. Every one of us who thinks he is busy could probably examine his activities and find a few that could be eliminated just as well as not, without throwing any very big monkey wrenches into the wheels of progress. The point is that too much mere doing crowds out the necessary thinking, planning, studying, learning for the big and worthwhile things. In short we get to the place where we scatter our forces.

By so doing we may make more money, see more friends, attend more parties, acquire a greater sense of our own vast importance. Yet is it worth it?

Which brings us back to the point which started us off on this little reflection, a verse in Ecclesiastes: "Better is an handful with quiteness, than both the hands full with travail and vexation of spirit."

THE EDITOR.

CONTENTS

April 25th, 1925

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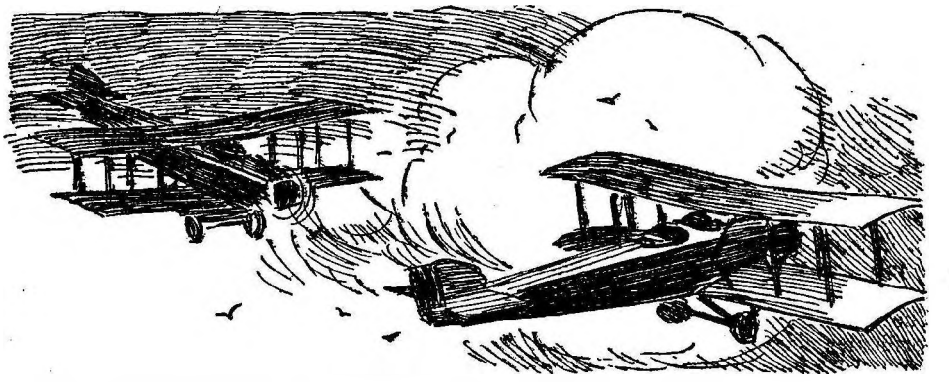


EVERY MOVE A PICTURE

By THOMSON BURTIS

Author of "Clindon," "A Texas Meteor," etc.

"DAREDEVIL DAVE" DARRELL, PROFESSIONAL AIR STUNT MAN WOULD CRASH A PLANE—OR A MAN, FOR THAT MATTER. COOL AND MIRACULOUSLY LUCKY AT POKER, TWO-FISTED AND CAPABLE IN A FIGHT, THERE WAS JUST ONE THING THAT DROVE HIM FRENZIED. THAT WAS A SUSPICION OF SUPERIORITY ON THE PART OF TEX MACDOWELL OF THE BORDER PATROL.

MR. DAVID DARRELL, who modestly termed himself "Daredevil Dave" and was destined to write his name indelibly on the far from prosaic pages of McMullen history, hit the aforesaid town with loud reverberations. His coming was not unexpected, although his name was not known in advance.

He made his arrival at the airdrome of the McMullen flight of the border patrol. McMullen is the most easterly of the border patrol stations, and the dozen flyers and observers there are entrusted with a two hundred mile strip of the Mexican border, starting at the Gulf of Mexico and extending part way to Laredo.

Mr. Darrell's coming had been announced the night before to the flyers. Not by name, however. Nor had his method of locomotion been described. The announcement happened in this wise. During the intervals between the end of the day's work and dinner, and the end of dinner and the commencing of the social activities of the evening, it was the custom of the flyers to recline at ease on the veranda of the recreation building, which was one of the unpainted frame structures rimming the southern edge of the airdrome. The night before Darrell's arrival they had been gathered as usual, talking lazily. Tex MacDowell remembers vividly that the topic of conversation was the advisability of constructing propellers and ships to fly backward in order to relieve the strain on a pilot's eyes providing his goggles broke.

This profound topic had been interrupted by a sound which, so far as the flyers knew, never had been duplicated on land or sea. This weird and uncanny series of squeaks, wheezes, groans and rattles invariably gave notice of the arrival of Sheriff Bill Trowbridge, aged but efficient limb of the law for Hidalgo County. His flivver was the only machine in the flourishing little city of McMullen allowed to run with the exhaust open, the reason being that the exhaust could not be heard above the rattles anyhow, and consequently created no additional uproar.

The flyers, as usual, perked up at the arrival of the Gargantuan old-timer who had been their partner in many enterprises touching on the preservation of the sanctity of the border.

Sleepy Spears, his customary daylight laziness slowly disappearing with the sun, got energy enough to lift his head and announce:

"Hizzoner Mayor Sam is likewise along tonight."

Mayor Sam was short and very fat. Sheriff Trowbridge was nearly six feet six inches tall, and weighed about the same as

his lifelong friend the mayor. "We ain't gittin' out!" boomed the sheriff as the car died into silence in front of the veranda. "Thought yuh might be interested tuh know that there's a motion picture outfit comin' in day after tomorruh tuh take some scenes around here. Likewise, they write Sam here that they got authority from Colonel Feldmore, up at Sam Houston, tuh use the border patrol ships fur some scenes. Heard anything about it?"

The captain shook his head while his subordinates immediately commenced to wonder aloud how many good looking girls there would be in the company.

Tex MacDowell lounged over toward the car. "What company is it?" he inquired. "If it is a comedy company, now, this flivver of yours would make your fortune —and theirs, too."

"We ain't all lucky enough tuh have D. H's," twinkled the sheriff, twisting his huge gray mustache. Tex's father, known throughout Texas as "Roaring Bill" MacDowell, had been a friend of the two oldtimers for forty years. "Where's the letter, Sam? Funny yuh ain't heard, Cap'n."

The other flyers clustered around the car while the fat faced ex-cowboy and ranger who was now a mayor read off the following epistle:

Outdoor Pictures Corporation
Los Angeles, California
Hiram Levy, President.

St. Anthony Hotel,
San Antonio, Texas
June 29th, 19——

The Honorable Samuel Edwards,
City Hall, McMullen, Texas.
My dear Mr. Mayor:—

This is merely a note to inform you that a company of the Outdoor Pictures Corporation, under my direction, will reach McMullen on Wednesday for a rather lengthy stay. The purpose of our trip is to shoot a good many outdoor sequences in a feature picture on which we are at present engaged.

I trust that the Outdoor Pictures Corporation and the city of McMullen may be of mutual advantage to each other. In return for the coöperation which we earnestly hope McMullen will grant us we will, in turn, see that the portions of our picture taken in and around McMullen will be an excellent advertisement for your city.

We are selecting McMullen for two reasons: first, because parts of the story require the shooting of a considerable number of airplanes, and you have a flight of the famous border patrol there; secondly, because we have heard very flattering reports of the climate as well as the surroundings of McMullen.

Trusting that our stay with you may be profitable and pleasant to us both, I am,

Yours very sincerely,
Hamilton Jerome,
HJ|GB Director, O.P.C.

P. S. Colonel Feldmore, Air Service Officer of the Corps Area, has gladly extended the full coöperation of the border patrol flight.

"Funny yuh ain't heard about that," commented the sheriff. "Well, anyways, prepare yoreselves for many balls and gala events. The Rotarians are already rotating dizzylike, the Kiwanises are ki-yi-ing and the Lions roarin' tuh see which can do the most entertainin' and push Hollywood right out o' the picture. As fur the chamber o' commerce—Hank Larkin's so excited he furgot he was married tunight and risked his life by eatin' supper in that Greek restaurant."

"Risked his life double," chuckled the mayor, "by eatin' the food—and runnin' out on Mrs. Hank. Well, let's go, Mill. The missus is waitin' fur us."

"We're gonna see a picture named 'She Was Only a Plaything!'" chuckled the sheriff. "Sally dotes on them kind."

And forthwith the flivver rocked off, leaving the flyers to speculate on what the future held forth. Particularly on the part of the younger men, there was considerable boredom affected at the prospect. Privately, most of them started shining their boots and Sam Brown belts that very night; and young Carson was caught peering at himself in the mirror with a helmet on.

Next morning there arrived a communication from Colonel Feldmore. "Do what you conveniently can for them," it read. "They have one D. H. and a professional daredevil flyer with them, so all you'll have to do is be background occasionally. They are switching the script a bit to bring in the patrol by name, which will be an excellent advertisement. God knows we need it; and they say Congressmen go to the movies."

This last remark came from the heart of the colonel, as MacDowell remarked. It is difficult to maintain a Delmonico service on sidearm lunch appropriations.

Consequently, when, that evening, Tex noted a growing speck in the darkening northern sky he remarked, "Here comes a ship. Two to one it's the movie ship instead of some Donovan Field bird who has a party scheduled in Mexico tonight."

"No takers," yawned Jimmy Jennings.

They sat up, and watched the plane approach. Finally it was almost directly over the airdrome, five thousand feet high, and they could see in the slanting rays of the sun that it was painted black and white; black fuselage and white wings. And it was a DeHaviland. All of which meant it was no army ship.

"Wonder if he's missed the airdrome?" speculated Tex. "He's high enough——"

Then they caught their breath in unison. For the D. H. had fallen off into a spin, and was whirling earthward at a dizzy rate. Not that they had not all spun DeHavilands *gently* at various times, but the big bombers are too heavy and too frail to be safe for excessive stunting. Official orders are that they shall not be stunted at all.

For a full two thousand feet the ship spun downward. Then it swooped up in a loop—and rapidly finished fifteen more of them. Then some barrel rolls, perfectly executed, and, for a finish, a "falling leaf" during which the great ton-and-a-half ship twisted and turned and fluttered downward like a leaf at the mercy of a hurricane.

"I don't know what salary he's getting, or whether or not there's a camera around, but a man who stunts a D. H. like that is going to land six feet under the ground instead of on top of it some day!" opined stocky little Captain Kennard. "Look at that!"

The ship had fluttered downward until it was less than a hundred feet off the ground. When it swooped out it seemed that the wheels actually tipped the hard-packed sand of the tiny airdrome. With a mighty roar the black and white ship zoomed over the hangars at the western edge of the field, turned sharply, dived down over them at the field, and went scudding across the ground like a comet, straight for the three other huge airplane sheds bounding the eastern edge. At the last second the great craft seemed literally to stand on its tail and climb up the side of the hangar. Then it made a turn on top of the zoom which headed the ship northward. There was not sufficient speed to insure a safe turn; and the ship stalled and settled a trifle. But with an uncanny skill which the veteran airmen watching could not help but admire, the unknown pilot caught the ship, straightened out, turned around back of the fence on the northern edge, and made a perfect landing.

It was flying as daring and skillful as it was totally foolish. It did not impress the airmen very much. Every border patrolman is a picked man, and to Tex MacDowell, for instance, one of the best and certainly the best known flyer in the service, there was nothing in the exhibition he could not have duplicated.

"We have a nut in our midst," stated Pete Miller, caressing his tiny black mustache.

"He's due to get cracked, apparently," drawled Tex, thereby proving himself a prophet.

Mechanics ran from the barracks to take care of the ship. Before Captain Kennard and the others could get under way to greet their guest a stocky, powerful looking chap had leaped out of the cockpit and was strolling toward the porch. Consequently, the patrolmen waited, standing up. There was something curiously alike about them as they lounged there on the porch—a sameness which went deeper than khaki breeches and shirts and deeply tanned faces. It came down to the eyes, really. There was the look of far spaces there, and the kind of clear steadiness which comes from quiet self-confidence. Men whose daily lot it is to fly the border —or any other section of the earth, as far as that goes—are bound to acquire a curious look of age about the eyes which gives the lie to the years indicated in the rest of their features.

Tall, lean MacDowell, resting his shoulders against a post, watched the approach of the movie flyer with casual interest. Already the man had been labeled a grandstander; and Tex was wondering whether his words would back up the impression of his flying.

As he came closer Tex could see that he was not as short as he had appeared to be at first glance. A very powerful build made his height seem less than it was. As he came forward, eyes sweeping the patrolmen without any trace of embarrassment at their return scrutiny, Tex could see that he was close to six feet tall. His face

was rather fleshy, and decorated by a thick, turned up nose and a very wide mouth. His eyes were small, and very bright below colorless eyebrows. There was a look of impudent, rather good-natured self confidence in his face and his swaggering walk.

"Well, how'd you like that?" he queried in a high voice.

There was an instant of surprised silence. Then Kennard, holding his scarred face straight with difficulty, innocently asked, "What?"

"The flying, of course. You're high cockalorum around here, eh? Must be Cap Kennard. Right? My name's Darrell, Daredevil Dave Darrell!"

"Glad to know you," grinned Kennard. "Meet the bunch."

As it came MacDowell's turn to shake hands he noticed that Darrell's grip was like steel. The stranger's bright little eyes darted up and down the tall form of the Texan like lightning. "Tex MacDowell, huh?" he remarked. "Heard about you. Your old man is Roaring Bill MacDowell, ain't he? Thought so. Hear you're supposed to be hot stuff down here as a flyer. Like to have a combat with you some day."

"Some shrinking violet!" Tex whispered to Jimmy Jennings, who was an ace. "I wonder if he's a sample of his crowd?"

"I'm going to stay out here tonight!" announced Darrell. "Didn't bring any clothes in the ship. Get me some chow, Cap'n, and a bed."

Tex scarcely could believe his ears as Daredevil Dave Darrell rattled on. He was not a callow babe, but a man of thirty or thirty-five, it seemed. Tex wondered whether he was a little off in the head; most professional daredevils are, at that.

"We haven't eaten yet, ourselves," stated the captain. "Orderly!"

This factotum having appeared to escort Darrell to a tent, the flyers treated themselves to a good laugh which lasted practically through dinner. Darrell announced in the course of the meal that he was supposed to be the greatest trick flyer in the world and was willing to prove it at any time. This statement, made between audible smacks as he imbibed huge quantities of nutriment, was met with polite interest but no remarkable enthusiasm.

Finally Tex, the corners of his mouth twitching, asked, "What sort of a picture is this you're going to fly in?"

"Don't know much about it myself," said Darrell carelessly. "Hero's supposed to be a flyer, but there won't be much flying in it on account of me doubling for that ham, Krader. We were going to shoot the principal flying field scenes at Donovan Field, but the boss decided to switch it to the border patrol. Hero's supposed to fly to his home town on the border, run into a lot of grief with bank robbers and that stuff, I think, and get 'em by plane.

"We'll use McMullen for his home town, and this field here'll be supposed to be a couple hundred miles away, I guess. I don't know much about it. Jerome's the only one does. The actors never do. Say, I heard up in San Antonio that a lot o' these McMullen hicks've made a lot o' money in oil down at Laredo."

"Quite a bunch got in on that field," Kennard answered him. "Old man Adams cleaned up a couple of million."

Daredevil Dave Darrell threw back his head and gave vent to a rather infectious, whole-souled laugh. "They were telling me about that. Like to meet 'em. He and the missus went in there to spend some of their dough, and all he could think of to buy was a saddle, wasn't it?"

Big George Hickman chuckled. "Uh-huh. And he hasn't got a horse!"

"They say the missus did his share for him, though," Darrell went on in his high, penetrating voice. "Somebody said she bought a hundred thousand dollar string o' pearls and a lot of other jewelry."

Tex, who happened to know the Adamses through Sheriff Trowbridge, nodded. It went against his grain to hear the loud mouthed movie man waxing contemptuous over the retiring little pioneer and his superdreadnaught wife. "She did, and she's going strong in McMullen society now," he drawled, his eyes resting steadily on Darrell. "That pair were pioneers on the border. Adams has killed more outlaws in real life than your company ever killed on the screen; and Mrs. Adams has gone through more grief than a few pearls can make up for."

"These old geezers are funny!" the unabashed Darrell ran on, leaning back in his chair. "That Chink o' yours ain't such a good cook, is he? Say, what do you do for excitement around here evenings when you're not sampling the terrific excitement of the city?" That was a fair sample of

his spasmodic line of talk.

"Poker and bridge," Kennard answered.

"Poker's my dish! Only lost eleven times in my life—and no man can help it when he gets big hands topped. Play about penny ante here though, I suppose?"

This casual insult to the favorite air service pastime resulted in a brief hiatus in the conversation. Then Tex leaned back and grinned. Why let this human phenomenon get on his nerves? "Twenty dollar takeout—table stakes," he said quietly.

"Well, that ain't so bad. Say, if any of you want to get in a good game—hundred dollar takeout and tablestakes and any amount you want behind your hand—just horn in on the game after the company gets here. Jerome, the director, and that ham Jack Krader, the leading man, and old Calvin have got money and they play it. I win more'n my salary and *my* salary's no small change! You can afford it, MacDowell; your old man's got plenty, ain't he? Maybe somebody else in McMullen can be found to make up a five or six handed game. Well, let's riffle the pasteboards, eh? And look out for me, because I'm a flying eagle and it's my night to scream!"

II

THE game was under way in short order, every man in it concentrating on the task of winning from Darrell. Tex was a poker player par excellence, having been brought up on the game under the watchful eyes of his sire. Sleepy Spears was extra good; big, placid George Hickman a conservative, plodding type whom it was not easy to get into very deeply, and little Pete Miller wild but lucky.

Carson, however, was a lame duck; and Tex tried to keep him out of the game by taking him one side and saying, "Listen, Jerry, this game's liable to be wild and you've been losing your pay check about every month."

"Aw, lay off, Tex! I want to get even. This bad luck can't last forever. I'm way in the hole."

Tex did not go further. Carson was only twenty-four, and, outside of being a really unusual flyer, was the sort of a fellow who could not seem to get the breaks. He was always in hot water of one kind or another, rarely had a nickel to his name, and was all feet and hands mentally as well as physically. There had been considerable discussion between Tex and Kennard as to what to do about the kid's gambling propensities, with the result that the captain had decided to do nothing so long as the happy-go-lucky youngster did not begin to lose more than he had. Nothing really worried Carson.

The other flyers played with silent intentness, but Darrell rattled on continuously. Tex was the type of poker player who loves the game, and plays it for all it is worth. Not a move, not even an expression on a player's face, got past him. It did not take him long to decide that Darrell was a mighty sound poker gambler.

The motion picture man bet his money generously, and varied his play continually. On the ninth hand Tex caught something which clinched his opinion about the talkative flyer. Darrell, after his usual monologue previous to making any bet whatever, opened the pot for ten dollars. By this time every man had bought in extra stacks; Hickman, Carson and Miller two each. Miller raised it ten, and Tex stayed. He had three sevens.

Darrell squinted at his cards. "Who'd have believed it?" he asked the entire world, in a loud voice. "Re-raise—let's see the stacks—don't want to force anybody out. Well, here's your ten dollar raise, and twenty more."

This dropped Miller and Hickman. Tex stayed, and drew two cards. Darrell drew one. "That sort of knocks you, doesn't it?" he queried loudly. "I'll check it to you—no, I won't, I'll step out with thirty simoleons."

Darrell had opened, Tex reflected. He had not announced that he was splitting openers, so he could be drawing to nothing but two pairs or threes. The chances were a hundred to one, inasmuch as he had re-raised with three men against him, that he had big threes. He would not have done it on two pairs except as a bluff. He was holding a kicker to make it seem as though he might be fool enough to draw to two pairs on a raised pot.

And yet Darrell had impressed himself on Tex sufficiently to make him wary. He might have caught to his hand. Any one of a number of eventualities might enter the question.

MacDowell rarely called; he raised or laid down his hand. This appeared to be a place where he had a chance to win—and, in any event, it would give him additional insight into Darrell's playing methods. Consequently he hesitated a while, fingered his chips, and then drawled softly, "Your thirty—and my stack. Forty-two more."

Darrell was further ahead than Tex but, of course, could only call the Texan at best according to the rules of the tablestake game. "You win, Tex," he said familiarly, and laughed loudly. "Came close to getting away with it, at that, eh? You must have a whale of a hand."

Having been the opener, he was compelled to show his cards. All he possessed was one pair of jacks. Tex never gave his game away any more than he had to, so he tossed his three sevens into the deck without showing them. To himself he was thinking, "He's a poker player! And came within an ace of winning a pot where three different hands beat him!"

It was audacious, unconventional play, and before two hours were up Darrell had every one in the game absolutely puzzled. Tex was willing to admit that it was harder to figure him than any player he ever had bucked. All of which meant two things; that Darrell played the situation and the psychology of the game without depending much on the cards dealt him; and that when he commenced to get good hands he was more sure of a call than any man present, save possibly Tex himself.

The big Texan, a born gambler, would have enjoyed the game to the hilt had it not been for two factors. One was the nerve rasping conversation of Darrell, who apparently was out for a nonstop talking record. The other was that little Carson was losing heavily—and could not afford it. He was commencing to have a strained look, and to bet wildly, trying to force his cards.

At eleven o'clock Darrell was seventy-five dollars ahead, Tex around a hundred, and Spears about even. Hickman was a moderate loser, and Carson was holding the bag for close to a hundred and fifty dollars. Which Tex knew was about his limit.

Then, abruptly, the game broke. Tex had a flush to draw to; Hickman had opened and drawn three, and the others stayed and drew but one card. "Reminds me of a game Link Peachem and I were in in Frisco in 1910," Darrell said. "This is the kind of a pot——"

"You don't mean the old flyer Peachem, do you?" inquired Miller.

"Sure. He taught me."

"Huh?" Miller plainly was surprised.

"Sure. Darrell's my movie name. My right name, being as you're flyers, is Granville—Speed Granville."

This temporarily put the quietus on a game where five men all had hands, for the name of Speed Granville was one well known in those early days when the pioneers of the air, almost without exception, flew ships which were death traps, and paid their lives to help conquer the air.

The flyers were not given to being overcomplimentary, nor to being fulsome in their praise. So they received the announcement quietly. Tex, already aware that there was before him a unique, not to say extraordinary, character, was aware of a great deal of respect for him. Bigmouth he was, but if he really was Speed Granville he had what flyers elegantly term "guts."

"Well, here's a good pot to be played," he said casually, and the other players peeked at their cards. Tex himself had filled his flush.

George Hickman hesitated elaborately, and then bet ten dollars. "Full house!" Tex decided instantly, knowing Hickman's game pretty accurately. Any time the observer bet into four one card draws without a packed house or fours it behooved ordinary hands to make for the tall brush for fear of the one more powerful weapon, a straight flush.

Carson, his round face pale below curly dark hair that clung to his forehead, raised twenty dollars. Miller called, and Darrell, after long and audible rumination, called likewise. Tex decided that Darrell had fours, and had neglected to raise before the draw to let everyone in. He decided this through a tiny detail that would have escaped nine hundred and ninety-nine players out of a thousand. Darrell, enjoying the surprise of the flyers at his announcement of his right name, *had not looked at the card he had drawn at all!*

Either he had fours and was not interested in the card—or he had nothing. If he had had nothing, he would not have called. He'd have raised. If he had fours, he was keen enough to figure that a conservative player like Hickman had something marvelous or he'd have checked; and he, Darrell, was lying back waiting to step in later with a raise. Tex gave Darrell that much credit; it was just the way the Texan would have played it, himself. He abandoned the five hearts quietly.

Hickman re-raised thirty dollars. This time Carson, looking very drawn around

the eyes and mouth, just called. Then Darrell re-raised a thumping fifty dollars. Carson threw his hand down in half hysterical disappointment, and sat with his chin in his hands, eyes on the table. His hand was face up, an ace high straight.

Hickman called then, and had an ace full beaten by four eights.

Tex had been thinking more of Carson than the game. He was certain who would win the hand. Poor Carson—in there with only a straight and not having the sense——

"Ho ho! Foxed you all then, eh? Make as much as you can out of a good hand; that's me!" came Darrell's voice as he scooped in the chips. "Now the ordinary player—let me show you how I made about a hundred more off that hand—hello! Who had the ace high straight? You, Carson? For God's sake, you ought to be playing dominoes! You play with Hickman here all the time, and figured an ace high was worth anything? Listen, little boy, don't you play in a real man's game!"

"Darrell, if you don't pull in your neck I'm going to *shove* it in!" It was Tex, lounging back in his chair and talking casually. Only the glow in his eyes differed in any wise from the appearance he had presented before Darrell had started.

"Say that again!" snapped Darrell, and into his high voice there had come a shrill note. He leaned across the table and his jaw seemed suddenly undershot.

"You heard me," said Tex, slower than was usual with him.

Carson had been pitiful, sitting there, before Darrell had so cruelly razzed him. The rest of the flyers waited silently; over in the corner of the recreation room where they were playing, the bridge fiends were motionless.

"Listen, Mister MacDowell!" Darrell leaped to his feet and strode around until he bulked large above Tex, who had not moved.

"I'll say what I want to, where I want to, with no wise cracks from any dolled up looey who thinks he owns the border because he's been in the papers—by accident!"

The other men were on their feet. "Sit down, Darrell!" barked Captain Kennard. "You talk too much and too fast and too loud. Outside of that your conversation is——"

"Where the hell do *you* get off to tell me anything?" Darrell had whirled on Kennard like a wolf at bay. There had crept into his tone a sort of toughness, as though he was talking the argot of the slums out of the corner of his mouth. And the ever present light in his small bright eyes was now menacing, as though a devil was peering forth from within.

The flyers literally were stunned. Tex, aware of utter dislike for Darrell, or Granville, was nevertheless constrained to feel admiration for the man's crazy nerve. With not a friend around him he was defying them all.

Then Darrell glared down into MacDowell's face. "Take that back, or I'll hit you so hard you'll freeze to death from the breeze if I miss yuh! Get that?"

"Listen!" yelled Kennard, pushing forward. "I——"

"Let me take him, Cap'n!" begged Tex, about one jump ahead of George Hickman. George was the only other man big enough to stand a chance with the powerful Darrell.

Kennard's eyes were snapping balefully below his mouse-colored hair. "Go to it, Tex. Teach him some manners. And when you get through with him, we'll kick him off the reservation pronto! Get out on the field, Darrell, and we'll see whether your fists can work as long and as hard as your tongue!"

"Come on, big boy!" yelled Darrell, and suddenly, inexplicably, there appeared a note of fierce enjoyment in his voice. It seemed that his wrath had disappeared in brutal delight of what was ahead of him.

The flyers gathered in a circle while Tex removed his shirt. Darrell did not deign to take his off. No sooner had Tex straightened than the motion picture man leaped in like a two hundred pound panther. Tex sidestepped, ducked, and sank one to the stomach. It was a terrific blow, but it brought only a grunt from Darrell. The muscles of his stomach were hard and resilient. Right then Tex decided to try for a knockout to the jaw.

Tex had height and reach, Darrell more raw power, probably. They both were fast. It was a pretty battle. Tex was giving ground all the time, around and around, for Darrell plainly wanted to get into close quarters. Tex stood him off, feinting and jabbing, and when his blows landed they carried all the sting born of

powerful shoulders and splendid all 'round condition.

Like some avenging fate which could not be shaken off Darrell bored in, doggedly pursuing. His blows were terrific, most of them the straight jabs and short uppercuts of the experienced fighter. At this game Tex was a master, however. Finally, though, he was aware of the thought that somehow, inevitably, Darrell would get in close; and that was a development the army man did not want at all.

Three, then four minutes passed. MacDowell knew that he, at least, could not stand the terrific pace much longer. Apparently he had not hurt Darrell at all; but he was tiring, for he was covering twice as much ground as the shorter man as he retreated, feinting and sidestepping while his long arms worked like piston rods.

Then, as Darrell made one of his catlike leaps forward, a wicked overhand swing lashing out at Tex, the tawny headed flyer took a chance. He threw his head to one side instead of ducking, and stepped in to meet Darrell with a short-arm jolt to the jaw that carried every atom of power in his big body.

By all ordinary calculations, even a professional fighter should have gone down beneath that terrific blow. It staggered Darrell, and MacDowell lost no time. He gave the motion picture man no rest, and for the first time had him in retreat. Darrell never got an opportunity to regain his balance. With vicious rights and lefts, coming straight from the shoulder, Tex drove him around a circle. And still the man would not go down. He fought back savagely, and there was a subtle change noticeable to the taut, silent observers who were ringed around the fighters.

At first there had seemed to be, particularly in MacDowell's face and more or less in Darrell's attitude, a sort of fierce joy in the conflict. Now, as the tide of battle suddenly changed, it seemed to wax more serious. They both were fighting for blood.

MacDowell was in a sort of trance as he waded in. Darrell's face was convulsed with fury, snarling in an animal-like way that somehow or other chilled MacDowell's blood. It had the effect of making him leap in with an insane fury which was unusual.

He took some terrible blows from the powerful stranger, but due to the fact that the latter constantly was off balance, retreating before the shower of rights and lefts with which Tex sprayed him, the army man was able to weather them. And gradually he was beating down his opponent.

The other flyers moved uneasily as the struggle grew in ferocity. Darrell was fighting with all the courage and stamina in the world, but he was swaying on his feet. He seemed beside himself. Grunts and guttural exclamations escaped him frequently; his face was a bloody ruin.

Finally there came a time when a full right swing made Darrell stagger, slip, and fall. Tex stood above him, his chest heaving and a leaping flame in his eyes that was new to the other flyers. Even the Texan himself realized vaguely that he was in a peculiar state, as though there was something about Darrell that aroused all the brute fury in an opponent's makeup.

Darrell climbed dizzily to his feet, only to be dropped again. He lay on the ground a moment, a steady stream of curses coming from his lips. Again he tried to get up, and again Tex dropped him; and this time he stayed down.

There was utter silence out there under the high riding moon as a dozen khaki clad flyers looked down at the plucky motion picture man. Tex, his hair in wild disarray and his tanned arms folded across his chest, was pumping his breath in great gasps. He felt sick and weak.

For possibly a half minute the tableau held. Then Darrell got to his feet, slowly. "First time I ever been licked," he announced through puffed lips. "And I wouldn't of been licked then if I hadn't slipped on a stone. You were about tired out. Now let's go in and finish the game, eh?"

The patrolmen were literally stunned at this—too much so for speech. MacDowell paid the tribute of a smile to his antagonist. Then, as his eyes met those of Darrell, he suddenly chilled. Somehow he sensed that Darrell was acting—and that he, Tex, had made an enemy.

The game proceeded silently, every man playing with grim concentration. At two o'clock, when it broke up, Tex was two hundred dollars ahead, Darrell about seventy-five, and Spears a few dollars winner.

"Tough luck I had tonight," Darrell told them. He was talking just as much as he had before the fight. "When I got that full beat, for instance. You were pretty lucky tonight, MacDowell."

Tex nodded easily, said good night and went out in time to be in his tent before

Darrell had started. In the bathhouse a few minutes later the tall flyer ran into Carson. "If you're short and want to borrow a few bucks—a hundred or so—you know whom to come to!" he told the younger man.

"Thanks. I can use a hundred tomorrow," Carson returned gratefully. He was dancing underneath the showerbath, so was talking under difficulties. When he got out he said, "Say, what do you know about this fellow Darrell? He came to me a few minutes ago and offered to loan me money!"

"Did you take it?"

"No, but what do you know about that fish? Is he nuts?"

"He's something unique and extraordinary," Tex told him with conviction, and departed for bed.

III

NEXT day the movie company arrived, and the evening following were guests of the chamber of commerce at a dinner. To this dinner the flyers came en masse, as did all the prominent citizens of the town. It was a big affair which taxed the dining room of the beautiful McMullen hotel.

There were only a dozen people in the company. Tex met them one by one, and was able to keep them accurately labeled. There were three women; one elderly character woman, and two breath taking brunette damsels named Florida Sanderson and Geraldine Travers, respectively. Clustered together they stood out in McMullen like a lighthouse in a fog, owing to thick veneers or makeup and a few pounds, more or less, of mascara on each eye. Nevertheless, they were of surpassing pulchritude, Tex decided; and it was apparent that all the bachelors present, as well as some whose better halves were not present, approved thoroughly of their guests.

Jerome, the director, was a distinguished looking gray haired man, perfectly dressed, suavely mannered, and possessing a pair of cold and piercing blue eyes. He was square faced, heavy jawed, and talked with a deep bass voice, in stately measures. Krader, the leading man, was sleek haired, tall, slender, and sported a tiny mustache. He was a perfect lounge lizard type. There were two elderly character men, a camera man, and four others. Two of the latter might have been actors; the additional pair probably were technical men of some sort.

Darrell was there, talking long and loud to the men on either side of him. On his left there was old man Adams, retiring as usual, and looking as though he did not know where his next meal was coming from rather than fitting the rôle of millionaire. Tex, gazing over at the incongruous pair, wondered where Darrell had learned so much about McMullen. He knew who Tex and the Adamses were, and had other items of information about the town.

After Mayor Samuel Edwards extended a cheery greeting to the movie folk, Jerome was introduced. He talked genially for a while—proving an excellent spellbinder—and then went into the technical details everyone was waiting to hear. "Our reasons for being in McMullen are many," he stated. "Let me explain about the Outdoor Pictures Corporation. It is a new company, small now but destined to be one of the greatest by grace of a new invention. Mr. Calvin here is the inventor; and we control the exclusive rights. Briefly, the device is a method whereby we can, at practically no cost and with only a few minutes work, install in any place with ordinary current, lights which will be sufficient to produce an excellent picture! This saves a great deal of studio expense.

"We want to take our picture in McMullen—practically all of it. We will use your streets, some of your homes if you'll let us, and other locations. For instance, there is a bank robbery scene in the script. We'd like to install our lights in your bank, and stage that scene right there, using the employees as the characters. They would play themselves, of course. In return for this favor we would be delighted to give everyone who appears in our picture a copy of the film. Then your children can go to their local theatre, years from now, and have it run off any morning.

"We hope that a great many of you will enjoy appearing in our picture. We'd like to use a large number of local characters, to back up the professional actors we have brought with us.

"We selected McMullen for several reasons. First, the story we are filming is laid on the border. Second, the town itself is precisely the type we need for the story. Third, you have a flight of the famous border patrol here. Before the end of the picture practically the whole town and its environs will have been incorporated as background. This beautiful hotel, your

bank, your streets, your surrounding fields—all will be there for the world to see. Can you imagine a better advertisement for McMullen?

"I hope that you will see eye to eye with me. You are doing something for us; we, in return, are doing something for you. I trust that you will enjoy having us here, and that you will realize of what advantage we can be to you."

He concluded with some further graceful compliments to the town and its people, and sat down to a salvo of applause. Ninety per cent. of his listeners were very much excited at the prospect of appearing in the movies, and it was plain that gaining the coöperation of every man, woman and child in McMullen was going to prove an easy task.

Jerome, who apparently was no mean rough-and-ready psychologist, seized his chance and got to his feet again. When quiet was restored he said, "You sound enthusiastic. That's fine. I see no reason why we should not get under way tomorrow. As all of you doubtless know, a motion picture is taken more or less at random. That is, scenes are not shot in the order in which they appear on the screen.

"Now, one scene in the script is that of two airplanes having a combat in the air. The idea is that the hero, visiting his home town where a flight of the patrol is stationed, tries to head off a criminal from getting over the border by airplane. Captain Kennard has said that he would cooperate in every way. He will loan us a ship to take pictures of the fight from the air.

"Now it is necessary for the picture that we have a crowd on the ground—at the field. The scene is supposed to be a flying circus, and the crime takes place at the circus. The villain steals a ship and tries to make a getaway over the border. I'd like to have a big crowd out there—we'll take a lot of ground shots of the gathering. Can we count on all you people who can get away, and all the friends you can bring?"

He could. This was indicated plainly by the demeanor of the crowd.

The flyers left early; there was bombing practice for the afternoon, and two patrols to be flown. Tex was surprised to see Darrell accompany them. The man had not moved from the field to take quarters in town. He seemed to take it for granted that he was welcome at the field. Tex had been at some pains to attempt to discover whether or not he was really the famous old flyer, Granville, and had been satisfied at last that Darrell was telling the truth. The man talked of revolutions in South America, of flying in China, and, most convincing of all, had told dozens of stories of the days when Beachey and Curtiss and others, including himself, were flying their frail bamboo planes at fairs and exhibitions all over the country.

They were riding in two official cars, and Darrell was in the car with Tex. The subject of the fight had not been mentioned since the end of the poker game, and Darrell was absolutely unchanged—on the surface, that is. Tex wondered whether he had misread the man's eyes back there after the fight. If he had not, Darrell was an actor as well as a professional daredevil.

"Tex, Cap says you're nominated to fly that combat against Darrell tomorrow, doubling for the criminal," Pop Cravath, the adjutant, remarked. "You and Darrell will have to frame it some way so that he can win convincingly."

"No need to frame anything," Darrell interrupted with a gesture of airy arrogance. "Just fly the best you know, big boy, and I'll be riding your tail."

"Oh, shut up!" It was short tempered little Pete Miller talking. Darrell got on his nerves most exceedingly. "Tex could fly you into the ground if he had a jenny and you a scout!" the little flyer went on angrily. "Where do you get this high hat stuff of yours?"

"He could, could he?" Darrell demanded with his usual maddening assurance. "Well, I've got any amount of money up to five thousand dollars that says I win the combat, fair and square!"

"You can have all the money McMullen can rake and scrape together!" blazed Miller.

"Come on, dry up, everybody!" Tex interrupted casually. "I'm not looking forward to flying with all you boys' money bet on me. Let's let it drop."

"Don't welch!" taunted Darrell. "We'll fly a straight combat. We're using two of your ships anyway, so they'll be alike, and shooting the footage from our own. Won't make any difference which ship wins; it'll be labeled the hero's. I'll take all the money you can raise, Miller, and the rest of the flyers can cover what you can't!"

Before the day was out the coming combat had grown into a considerable undertaking. The flyers of McMullen went to the bank, borrowed the last nickel they could on notes, and threw in what remnants

of their salary they possessed. Sheriff Bill Trowbridge, Mayor Edwards, and other leading citizens of McMullen, to whom the flight and its accomplishments were matters of personal pride, contributed considerable money. The members of the movie company backed Darrell. There was a six thousand dollar bet, cash, deposited with the sheriff as stakeholder; and the judges were to be Jerome, Kennard, and Mayor Edwards.

In a "dogfight" such as scheduled, the winner is the man who can maneuver into a position behind and above the opposing ship, this being the point from which a shot is easiest and most accurate, and "ride his tail." It was understood tacitly that the first man of the two to get that position would be flyer enough to hold it despite any twists and turns the other ship might make.

From a friendly contest the scheduled battle grew into a matter of life and death, as far as the flyers were concerned. Tex, at first amused, finally was very sorry over the whole thing. Being a master flyer, generally considered the best on the border, he had a quiet confidence in the result; but it was not pleasant to remember that the McMullen flight of the patrol would be penniless for three months in case he lost.

Darrell was in his glory. The main street of McMullen, the hotel lobby, and the flying field echoed to his high, thin, maddening voice as he told the world what he was going to do on the morrow.

IV

IF THERE was any doubt about the crowd, the wager removed it. At two in the afternoon the sides of the small airdrome were packed with cars, and people on foot. Those McMullenites who were unable to be at the field were waiting in town, watching the sky.

The black and white DeHaviland, with Jimmy Jennings at the stick, went up with a camera man and shot some pictures of the whole flight in formation, to get across the idea of the flying circus. Tex, lounging alongside his ship, noticed that Jerome was in the Adams' impressive car, conversing animatedly with the shy little millionaire's large and expansive wife. She had entertained for the troupers the night before, he had heard.

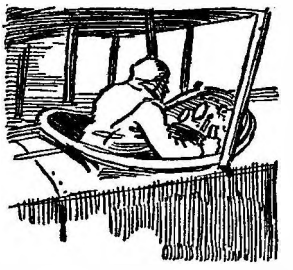
Before Darrell and Tex took the air Jerome directed several short bits on the ground, using his regular cast backed up by many fluttered McMullenites. The takes were run off in jig time; and the flyer wondered why Jerome was satisfied so easily. One rehearsal was all he used before any scene. He was a wonderful director; that grew plain, even to a layman. He did not shout or become excited, but put his people through their paces without the waste of a minute or a word. There were several shots of the crowd, and finally came the word for the two ships to take off.

Darrell, who had been swaggering through the crowd, talking to right and left in loud tones and basking in the limelight, was first off. He held his ship close to the ground until he was within a few feet of the buildings on the southern edge of the airdrome, and then made a sensational zoom. For two minutes thereafter he roared along a few feet above the crowd, diving and zooming and showing off to his heart's content. Every flyer there present paid tribute to his skill, while they cursed his foolishness. It was grandstanding, even if good.

"All right, Tex; freeze on that triple tongued blatherskite's tail and ride him right into the ground!" begged Captain Kennard as he leaned over the side of the cockpit and helped Tex adjust the straps of his seat-pack.

"I'm trying," grinned Tex.

The seat pack was an institution which the army air service just had made compulsory on all ships. It consisted of a parachute folded in the form of a pack on which the pilot sat, with straps attached over his shoulders. In case of an emergency where a pilot was justified in leaving his ship, a pull at the ripcord released a small 'chute which in turn pulled the big umbrella out and swung the pilot free of the ship.



The straps adjusted to his satisfaction, he took a swift glance at his instruments while he taxied across the field. Everything was in perfect order. As he turned and shoved the throttle all the way on, his eyes were glowing with the joy of the struggle before him. The fact that there was six thousand dollars at stake seemed to add the last touch of perfection to the prospect; and there was enough doubt as to the outcome to make that six thousand an open bet. If he should win, he wondered how Darrell

would take it. The man's vanity seemed boundless, and apparently there never lived a man who hated to play second fiddle as did Daredevil Dave of the movies.

The rules were simple. They were to rendezvous at five thousand feet, Darrell to the south of the field and Tex on the north. Then they were to start for each other, at a signal from the ground. The first man to gain a position on the tail of the other, and who succeeded in riding it for a half minute, would be adjudged the winner.

Tex sent his DeHaviland circling upward with the motor wide open. Southward the Rio Grande twisted and turned in dazzling silver coils, and far to the northward the great desert of mesquite between McMullen and San Antonio billowed away to the horizon in flowing, gray-green waves. Below, five thousand people were watching, their faces gleaming white in the flooding sunlight. The streets of McMullen itself were well filled with storekeepers and others who could not get out to the field, but who were anxious to watch the struggle.

Time and time again Tex automatically surveyed his instruments—the instinct of a veteran flyer—despite the fact that he would always be within gliding distance of the field. Oil pressure, air pressure, battery charging rate, tachometer, temperature—all the tiny needles which filled the instrument board told the story of a perfectly functioning motor.

As he got to five thousand feet and took his station at the northern end of the field Jimmy Jennings, in the movie ship, maneuvered into position five hundred feet above the level of the two contesting ships. Tex saw to it that he was exactly level with Darrell's ship. Then he rocked the big ton-and-a-half bomber from side to side three times. Darrell did likewise, and MacDowell's eyes sought the ground. In the middle of the field two men, under the supervision of Captain Kennard, held the edges of a big square of white signal canvas. Suddenly they whisked it away, and in an instant, with the Liberty in full cry, the Texan was sending his ship straight across the field to meet Darrell.

Head on, the D.H's roared toward each other, almost exactly on the same level. What Tex was about to do required iron nerve, for he did not know much about Darrell's flying. If both men did the same thing, turned the same way, there could be but one result—a collision. But that was the chance one took in any combat. MacDowell, a veteran with three German planes to his credit, was wise in the ways of air engagements. Ninety-nine flyers out of a hundred, when the time came to switch the course to avoid a collision, would bank. He hoped Darrell would do that.

Three hundred yards from the oncoming D. H., Tex nosed over a trifle. The air-speed meter jumped to a hundred and sixty miles an hour, although he was diving so slightly that Darrell would not notice it, Tex was sure. With his helmeted head over the side of the cockpit, he handled his ship automatically, watching his antagonist.

Darrell did not give way. He showed no signs of veering off. He wanted to force Tex to do that, of course. The man who held on longest in that breath-taking rush toward each other had the best chance to gain position.

Tex gave way, but on purpose. Like a flash he nosed his ship way over. The song of the taut flying wires rose to a scream as the DeHaviland dived steeply beneath the other ship. No sooner had the shadow of Darrell's ship hurtled across above him than Tex pulled back smoothly, unhurriedly, on his stick. The bomber arched upward in a mighty sweep, with the motor not missing a beat and plenty of reserve speed.

But Tex was not going to loop. As the DeHaviland reached the top of the loop, and was half on its back, his foot jammed against the rudder and the stick was pulled back sharply, and to one side. Lazily, as though it was a live monster performing smoothly graceful evolutions in its native element, the DeHaviland made a half turn, horizontally, and was right side up, several hundred feet higher than it had been when the loop was started, and was flying in the opposite direction to that in which it had been headed.

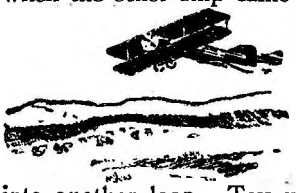
MacDowell's eyes swept the air. Perhaps the fight was won now, since Darrell must be nearly on the same level he had occupied——

The fight *was* won! Darrell evidently had performed a reënversement, which is merely a sharp one hundred and eighty degree turn, in an attempt to get on MacDowell's tail before he had a chance to turn. But MacDowell's maneuver, the real Immelman turn, left the latter at least three hundred feet above his opponent—and the fight was won!

Darrell put up a wonderful fight, however. Tex sent his ship roaring downward. It was only a question of time till he could get his position. In a real fight he could have shot Darrell down right then.

Darrell sent his ship into a desperate tail spin. Tex, careful not to lose too much altitude, spiraled down above his rival, occasionally pointing steeply downward in a nose dive, during which time he was on Darrell's tail.

Finally the other ship came out of the spin, only to go into a loop. That was MacDowell's opportunity. He dived, and when the other ship came level out of the loop he was behind it. And pointed downward at it.



Darrell saw him, and immediately went into another loop. Tex watched the ship go on its back, a little above him. Then he stalled his ship, waiting. As Darrell swooped out again MacDowell nosed down, and was riding him once more.

For a full minute, Darrell strove to shake off the Nemesis above him, but Tex rode him down without losing him for a moment. Down on the ground he could see people waving their arms, and rushing around, and in front of headquarters a dozen flyers were holding a six thousand dollar celebration. That first little maneuver had taken Darrell by surprise and won the fight, for altitude is everything. It is a fact that many experienced and expert pilots have never seen the real Immelman turn. Tex's combat experience had overcome Darrell's thousands of extra hours in the air.

At twenty-five hundred feet Tex, knowing that he had ridden Darrell far longer than was necessary to win, banked steeply, cut the motor to twelve hundred revolutions, and circled downward in a shallow spiral. A thousand feet above him the photographic ship, with Lieutenant Jimmy Jennings at the stick and a mighty sick cameraman in the rear cockpit, was going through the giddiest evolutions mortal eyes ever gazed upon. Jimmy had had five hundred even on Tex.

It was a relief to circle downward easily. During that short but terrific combat MacDowell's ship had been quivering and shrilling with the speed, and the roar of the motor had risen into a veritable diapason of frantic power. Now, by contrast, it seemed very peaceful and quiet to be winging downward in the sunlight at a mere hundred and twenty miles an hour, lazily sideslipping and stalling to vary the slow process of getting to the ground without cooling the motor too quickly.

He looked below for Darrell, and could not find the ship. He hadn't started down yet, it must be. Tex glanced behind casually. There was Darrell, five hundred feet above him now, and coming downward at a great rate. His ship was pointed at MacDowell's.

Tex watched him without particular interest. He saw Darrell get on his tail, perhaps a hundred feet back of him. What was he doing that for? Would it soothe his vanity to ride a spiraling ship downward which made no effort to get away from him? It might look good to some of the crowd, though.

He continued in the spiral, grinning sardonically as he saw Darrell follow him. Then Darrell came closer, uncomfortably close. He was riding within twenty-five feet of Tex now, and creeping closer, ever closer. Tex fell into the spirit of it, for it seemed a nice exhibition of close formation flying for the people on the ground. So he kept his ship in a bank the degree of which never varied, while he watched and admired the delicacy and perfect judgment of his ex-opponent's handling.

Then, fifteen hundred feet from the ground, Darrell nosed downward a bit more. Suddenly his ship seemed to leap like a monster at its prey, for MacDowell's craft! For a split second Tex was powerless to move. Darrell, his lips twisted below his goggles, was leaning over the side of the cockpit, and ahead of him the flailing propeller seemed to be reaching forth at MacDowell!

Tex's reaction was more or less instinctive. That instant, during which he seemed to have lived a lifetime, will always be a chaotic memory to him. Somehow his muscles obeyed a subconscious order, and with stick and rudder he sent his ship downward and to one side in a desperate effort to get out of the way of the madman behind him. He himself escaped being ground to pieces by the six foot propeller, which would have split him in half, but the next second there came a rending crash as the other ship passed him.

Then his accustomed coolness came back, and with narrowed eyes he looked behind as his hand cut the throttle. His tail surfaces—rudder, elevators, vertical fin and stabilizers—were a tangled mass of wreckage, and his ship was hurtling toward the ground at ever increasing speed!

His hand reached for the rip-cord of his parachute, but it stopped before pulling it as a thought made the big flyer's body tense and his heart sink. He was afraid to look

down, almost!

Then his heart bounded exultantly His ship was not over the crowd. So busy had he been in the combat and the flying with Darrell that he had not noticed, heretofore, just where he was. His ship was well back of the buildings on the southern edge of the airdrome.

He pulled the ripcord, unstrapping his belt at the same time. There came a jerk that nearly rent him in half, and then two stunning shocks as his body collided with the ship as the big canvas umbrella pulled him clear. Then he was swaying sickeningly in the air, watching his crippled ship drop earthward like a stone.

Then he saw Darrell. He was still in his ship, and his ship had one wing which was merely a mass of wreckage. That wing had collided with the tail surfaces of MacDowell's ship, evidently.

Tex, swinging quietly as he dropped earthward, wondered why Darrell did not use his 'chute. His ship was bucking crazily as it slipped and dived earthward, absolutely out of control. Darrell knew how to work the seat-pack; that was certain!

Then MacDowell realized what the man was doing. He was sticking to his ship, trying desperately to maneuver it so that it would fall in a spot where it would not hit any one of the milling mob below. For what seemed hours Tex watched the pilot fight his crazily fluttering craft above a crowd gone mad. A thousand feet, seven hundred; and finally it seemed, from MacDowell's altitude, as though the D. H. was going to crash any moment. It had been over the crowd at the start, evidently. Could Darrell do enough with it to drop it in a safe spot?

There came a blinding glare from the ground as MacDowell's ship crashed and the gas tank burst into flames. For a moment a tremendous ball of fire seemed to bounce upward from the ground, and then it resolved itself into an ordinary, huge bonfire.

A second later a white mass burst into view below, and Darrell left his ship. Not five seconds later his ship crashed in the middle of the airdrome, and once again that terrible red glow flared against the drab ground.

MacDowell had no eyes for the insane mob below, nor for Jimmy Jennings, who was spiraling around him, nor for anything else. One thing was occupying his mind. He had been absolutely certain that Darrell had deliberately tried to kill him back there.

And yet it did not seem possible, now. That man had stuck to his ship until the last minute to save people below from getting killed. And what possible motive could he have for so desperate an undertaking as killing Tex by a collision in the air? Was it conceivable that his defeat in the combat would force him into murder—and such a dangerous form of it, too?

Thinking it over calmly, such a theory seemed unbelievable. And yet, Darrell was a more or less unbelievable character. The collision might have been a mere flying error. Certain it was that after the fight two nights before the Texan had been certain that he had made an enemy. Likewise, murder in the air is one form of crime of which a man never could be convicted; that is, if he used the particular method Darrell had undertaken.

Still, Darrell had offered to loan Carson money. And he had risked his life to save the innocent bystanders below!

Right there Tex was compelled to turn his attention to mundane matters like landing without a broken leg. While he had been high in the air the dropping of the parachute had been unnoticeable. Now, as he came closer, descending at fifteen feet a second, it seemed that the ground came rushing up to meet him. With his hands ready on the shroud lines of the 'chute, he waited. At the last moment he pulled himself upward by the lines to break his fall, and landed with loosened muscles in one of the open plowed fields between the airdrome and the Rio Grande. There was practically no wind, so he was not dragged.

Three excited Mexicans came running toward him, but he was loose from his paraphernalia by the time they arrived. He hired one of them, for a quarter, to carry the parachute back to the field. In the wake of this peon, cogitating heavily, he set out for home. And, because he was the sort of a man to whom excitement is the breath of life, and a contest of any sort whatever the highest gift of the gods, his mouth twisted in a whimsical, one sided smile and his wide set gray eyes danced.

V

BY THE time Tex arrived back at the field, at least half the crowd had gone. He was met half a mile from the airdrome by a delegation of the flyers.

They were not worried about him, knowing the open fields south of the airdrome and his proved skill with a parachute; but they wanted to make sure.

Big George Hickman's face was red as fire below tousled blond hair, and his ordinarily placid eyes were blazing. "That skunk is claiming you stalled right up in front of him when he was flying a five-foot formation!" he said abruptly, before any one else could get in a word.

"It's my firm conviction," Tex started, and then stopped short. He might say that later, now now. "He was flying very close, and ran into me—that's all," he said finally.

Messers Kennard, Hickman and Mallory sensed something of import in MacDowell's half started sentence. Kennard, who knew Tex better than the big flyer knew himself, in some ways, scrutinized his subordinate with a funny gleam in his eye.

"You've got the look of a cat that spies cream!" he said in his raucous voice. "Which means you've got something in mind which you think may mean some fun. And fun to you means a fight of one kind or another. Want to let us in on it?"

Tex grinned, and then his tanned face became serious. "Maybe, Cap, but I'll be darned if I say it until I'm sure, even to you people!"

"Don't be a damn fool!" snorted stocky Mallory, the most experienced flyer on the border, so far as hours in the air were concerned. "All that means is that you think Daredevil Dave deliberately ran into you, and that's what all the rest of us thought!"

Tex nodded. "Let's see what we can find out back on the field," he suggested. "So Darrell is claiming I was to blame, eh? Well, that's natural, I suppose."

It was hot, and they walked fast, so there was no more conversation. Except for one remark of Captain Kennard's. "That fellow Jerome damn near went crazby!" he observed.

The first of the remaining crowd who were waiting for Tex to show up, surrounded him in a wildly milling mass through which the flyers had to fight their way. There was much backslapping and congratulating, to which the airman gave too little attention, perhaps. They made straight for a large gathering which was surrounding a man with a high, thin voice who was talking loudly.

They broke through, and Tex was facing Darrell. "Glad to see you got down all right!" he drawled, grinning slightly.

Darrell's square, curiously impudent countenance did not change. Perhaps his small eyes had a brighter sheen as they bored into the army man's. "Well, you made a fine mess of it up there, didn't you?" he said.

"I thought I won!" drawled Tex. He was too interested to become wrathful.

"I'm talking about the collision! Fine formation flyer you are!"

Tex stepped closer. The ever growing crowd surrounding the two was absolutely quiet. "And a clumsy murderer you are!" MacDowell said very slowly, in tones too low to carry beyond Darrell's ear.

He said it unthinkingly, on the impulse of the moment. There had flashed into his mind the idea that perhaps he could find out the truth through taking Darrell by surprise. Now he watched the other flyer's eyes, prepared for anything.

Darrell's small eyes widened, and his mouth gaped open. "Why, what the hell do you mean?" he sputtered.

The crowd now numbered several hundred, and there was tension in the air. It seemed that the onlookers sensed something more sensational, even, than the collision they had just witnessed.

Tex, striving to probe what was in Darrell's mind, was baffled. So he drew in his horns. "Flying as close as you were is suicide, almost, if it isn't murder!" he grinned. "Well, we're lucky to have got out of it, eh?"

"Yeh. Never again will I fool around with amateurs!" grunted the movie man. "I thought you were a flyer! Stalling right up in front of me——"

"By the lord Harry, you shut your mouth!" George Hickman it was who said it, and he was glaring down into Darrell's eyes with a murderous glare in his own. So murderous that Darrell was taken aback. There had been something unusually nasty in the man's attitude, subtly different from his usual good natured bragging. And Tex, hearing him make such a palpably preposterous statement as "stalling" in front of the other ship, had all his suspicions renewed.

Before a fight developed between Hickman and Darrell there was injected a new element into the situation. It was in the form of Mr. Hamilton Jerome. The director, backed by the two character men, Fuchs and Bevy, battled his way through

the muttering crowd. Tex, always cool when the tension was greatest, was aware of a growing ugliness apparent in the onlookers. No telling what wild rumors were in circulation back on the outskirts of the mob.

"What's all the trouble, gentlemen?" Jerome asked smoothly.

For a second it seemed that the distinguished looking, courtly director was cast for the rôle of oil on the troubled waters. His piercing eyes flitted from face to face, and his full lips were wreathed in a smile that formed wrinkles around his eyes.

Then George Hickman spoiled it. Ordinarily the most placid and unexcitable man in the world, when he went on a rampage it *was* a rampage! "Just this, Mr. Jerome!" he snorted, his face very red and his blue eyes blazing. "For no reason and through no invitation, this Daredevil Dave, Desperate Desmond, or whoever he is has parked on this airdrome and made himself a nuisance with his big mouth for two days. Up there in the air, either through deliberate intent or his own rotten flying, he damn near killed Tex MacDowell. And now he comes down here on the ground and has the nerve to put up a yelp about MacDowell's flying! I'm not the C. O. of this flight, and I'm not in the habit of butting in, but army or no army I'm telling you you'd better get this stinking nincompoop out of here or I personally will see to it, with great pleasure, that he gets off—and he won't be altogether, either!"

All this was poured out in a rush of words, and they were spoken in no low tones. Captain Kennard and Tex had listened without making a move. When Hickman got in temper a public place was no location wherein to handle him. And it was time for Darrell to get off the post.

Then there came a loud call, splitting the murmuring silence of the crowd, one of those calls which have sent many men to a sudden death beneath the limb of a tree, or even tied to a stake. "Let's string up the snake, cowboys!"

It did not take the Texan more than a split second to realize what was ahead. Like a Niagara of sound released, the crowd burst into a full throated roar. McMullen was proud of the flight, and in the four years it had been there each flyer had become like one of the local boys. And McMullen men would fight for their own.

"No, no, stand back!" Kennard was yelling, and the flyers surrounded Darrell.

From somewhere on the outskirts of the crowd gunshots could be heard, and then the loud bellow of Sheriff Trowbridge, shouting something indistinguishable. The mob was a milling mass of men, growing more ugly every moment. They pressed closer, as though to crush the little group of battling flyers.

"Keep back! Let us handle it!" Tex was pleading with men whom he had known ever since his stay in McMullen, and the other flyers were doing likewise.

"Back, hell!" yelled the ordinarily tractable Mr. Henry Timkins, garage owner of McMullen, and Tex was compelled to punch him back as he made a dive for Darrell.

Then there came a wild free-for-all wherein no man knew whom he hit, or why. Tex, holding his feet with difficulty, laid about him mightily. The flyers were pushed irresistibly one way and another, utterly powerless. They did keep their feet, however, and the cordon of khaki clad figures around the motion picture men did not break. In the rear, men were shouting wildly, stimulating the temper of the crowd into greater and greater frenzy. Tex went half to his knees under a tremendous blow from a towering stranger, who apologized for it in a loud yell just as Tex thought he would be trampled to death before he could get up.

For a full half minute the battle waged. Tex, his hair in wild disarray and his face unwontedly grim and set, was fighting as desperately as though his own life was at stake. There was no breath for pleading. It seemed hopeless, anyway, to bring the crowd to its senses. As blow after blow thudded home, the battlers forgot whom they were fighting and the reason for it; between man and man there sprang into being a temporary hatred and blood lust which took no account of the fact that they really had nothing whatever against each other. Tex himself was swept into the vortex of feeling, and only by a determined effort did he keep his poise and common sense. Big George Hickman was a devastating human tornado, and even little Pete Miller and Carson seemed animated bundles of flying fists and heels.

As the tide of battle swirled him around Tex got a brief glimpse of a picture which he never forgot. Pinned in the midst of the battling flyers he saw Jerome and Darrell, and to all intents and purposes neither man was aware of what was going on around them. Jerome, his face a granite-like mask of cold ferocity, apparently was giving Darrell his unadulterated opinion of him. And for once Darrell seemed fright-

ened—and impressed. Eyes on the ground as he was bumped around, he took Jerome's furious tongue lashing like a whipped dog!

Tex lost all notion of time. It seemed that his weary arms and legs could endure no more. He was fighting mechanically, almost hopelessly. Then there came a respite. Shattering the air there came a tremendous volley of revolver shots. A bull-like roar from a dozen throats rolled over the heads of the crowd, and drowned out the screams of some women and the animal-like grunts of the fighters.

"Stop! Do we have tuh murder our own friends for bein' fools?" bellowed Sheriff Trowbridge, and went into action. He was backed by a dozen or more of the leading men of McMullen. The old fox had taken time to organize a temporary posse, gained attention by the shots, and now took advantage of the opportunity given him by the temporary cessation of battle.

In a flying wedge the seasoned old-timers hit the rear of the crowd, battled their way through, fiercely. A continuous series of blistering epithets, signifying their contempt for the mob, served to bring the crowd back to normal. There was no resumption of the struggle before the sheriff and his aides reached the flyers. The huge old man looked like the incarnation of the breed which extended the frontiers of America as, his huge sombrero lost in the shuffle somewhere and his puckered old eyes blazing, he loomed above the crowd.

All was silence as he talked. "Git back home, children!" he boomed. "Yuh've had yore little picnic, and it's now time for all good little boys to go home an' git tucked in by their mammies. Yuh must remember, children, that in order tuh grow up and be big, strong men yuh must not strain yoreselves, but eat plenty of bread an' milk and git lots o' rest. Go on now, like good little boys; the party's over, and yore mammies are waitin' for yuh!"

It was not said wrathfully; Tex even suspected there was a slight twinkle deep in Trowbridge's eyes. For a moment there was quiet, while men looked at each other sheepishly. Then they noticed black eyes and torn clothes and disheveled heads. And all the ferocity which had turned them into beasts dissolved in a roar of laughter. Tragedy turned into farce in a moment.

"Can I say something, Sheriff?" pleaded Jerome.

"Shore, say yore piece, mister, an' see if yuh can make up fur the shortcomings of yore daredevils!"

The two motion picture actors lifted the big director up on their shoulders. Tex, who was well above six feet tall, could look out over the sea of faces. He could see a couple of hundred frightened women in the rear of the crowd, and many more in the automobiles rimming the field. He saw the two stunning young actresses, standing up in two different cars. They looked as though they had been frightened within an inch of their lives. Then, incongruously, off to one side he saw that a camera had been working—still was working. The camera man had been filming the spectacle.

"It ought to be simple to work in a mob scene!" Tex reflected with a chuckle.

Jerome began to speak, and the strength of his presence and his robust voice gained absolute attention. "Ladies and gentlemen of McMullen, I am heartbroken over this! Now, despite the presence of Mr. Darrell right here, I'm going to tell you something after I apologize profoundly for the fact that our company was responsible for bringing him into your midst.

"He is merely a hired man, hired to crash an airplane in a scene and to double for our leading man in some flying scenes. He is so vain of his proved ability that he talks too much. He blamed the recent collision, which we all regret so profoundly, on Mr. MacDowell. This is so ridiculous that it should not be taken seriously for a moment. It is merely the raving of a disappointed, humiliated braggart, and to be taken as such. It is beneath notice. Our company repudiates his words, and, despite the fact that it will cost us a deal of money and trouble, I will, if you say so, discharge him now and see to it that he leaves town. Personally, I lost several hundred dollars betting on Mr. Darrell myself; and I never paid a bet more cheerfully in my life.

"Do not hold this against the ladies and gentlemen of my company, please. And do you desire that the loose talking Mr. Darrell leave town?"

Just why Tex spoke out in meeting he scarcely knew, just then. Really, it was very easily understood by the men who knew him best. Because a contest of any sort was purest bliss to him, and because excitement was the nectar of the gods to

him, he wanted Darrell to stay. He sensed something unusual in the man, something hard to understand in all that had happened. It would add spice to life to see the thing through. The dim possibility of future action turned life from monotony into a thing of spicy beauty. So he shouted in stentorian tones, "Let him stay, folks! I got a little excited after the collision, maybe, and the boys of the flight took what Darrell said in a way he didn't mean, probably. One thing led to another until we all got in this row. Let's reshuffle the deck, let bygones be bygones, and have a new deal!"

Darrell, all this time, had been growing gradually more confident in his bearing. At the end of MacDowell's speech he had resumed his usual air of impudent assurance, his bright little eyes darting here and there and his wide mouth in a half smile.

There was a wave of handclapping after MacDowell's words, and under cover of it Darrell came over and shook hands with Tex. "I hated like hell tuh lose that fight—and I never would lose another one to you now that I know that trick o' yours! I didn't mean to bring on trouble. Suppose I say we were each half to blame for running into each other, eh? Me for flying too close to a man I hadn't flown with before, and you for—er——"

MacDowell's mouth widened from a half smile into a grin, and then a chuckle. Darrell couldn't come through. He had to salve his vanity, even under circumstances such as these! "All right, Darrell. That suits me!" grinned the Texan, and shook hands.

The crowd disintegrated slowly, breaking into groups. Jerome was talking to the mayor, Darrell to the two other actors who had been in the midst of the trouble; and the flyers were resting up by mopping their brows and saying little. Then a short, squat, bowlegged little man with a Colt on each hip and a black sombrero shading his face let out a shrill, *"Yip-pee,* Bill!" from the edge of the thinning crowd.

He hopped out of the Ford and shoved his way toward the sheriff, who was standing among the flyers. "Bill, the Adams' house was robbed this afternoon o' all Henrietta's joolry, every bit but a few rings she had on! That there new-fangled safe was drilled clean by a expert—combination lifted right out—and between faints she says there was seventy-five thousand worth!"

VI

AT DINNER that night Captain Kennard and Mallory, who had been to town in the meantime, served all the details of the crime hot off the griddle from the sheriff's office.

There was really little to tell. The Adams ménage had three servants; an old housekeeper, a chauffeur and general handy man, and a cook. The chauffeur had been at the field with his employers; the old housekeeper, an elderly lady who had lived in McMullen all her life, had been on the front porch watching the flying; and the cook, a negro woman weighing two hundred and forty pounds on the hoof, had been sound asleep. The small wall safe wherein Mrs. Adams stored her gems had been opened by the simple process of cutting out the entire combination lock in a skillful and speedy manner, denoting the work of an expert safe man. The jewels had vanished, and there was absolutely no clue discoverable. Whoever had done it had got in and out without being observed.

The worst feature of it was that the crook or crooks had at least an hour and a half's start. This meant little unless they had made for the border. Then it meant everything.

"Which wouldn't seem so dumb, at that," Tex pointed out. "They couldn't get rid of the stuff in Mexico very well, I suppose, but they could get back into this country by boat if they were supplied with plenty of cash. Or they might know fences in Mexico City."

"What puzzles the sheriff is that it was sort of an inside job. The crooks went for the safe, did it while everybody in town was getting the roofs of their mouths sunburnt out on the street watching the flying, and in general acted as though they knew the lay of the land perfectly!"

"Hello, there, Sing Low, Sing Hi, or whatever you're called!" came a well known and dreaded voice. "Plentee hotee chow, Cholly, right now!" With these commands to the Chink cook, Darrell appeared through the kitchen door into the mess hall. "Sorry to be late, gents, but better late than never!" Darrell said brightly, and sat down.

There was surprised silence for a moment, and then MacDowell's mouth

twitched. Then he chuckled. The storm broke. The flyers leaned back and laughed, bellowed, snorted and chortled. The colossal impudence of such a man had something of the sublime about it! He apparently had never given a thought to moving his residence into town; and, not only that, was not at all embarrassed at coming back into the midst of the flight! All their rancor melted away, although some sighed at what was ahead of them.

"Boy, that little robbery's sure got the town by the ears!" Darrell started. "The old sheriff's running around head up and tail up. Don't know what to do. He's sending out word, and combing the town for strangers, and guarding the border for no reason. If they went there they'd be over the river long ago. Pretty nifty cracksmen, whoever they were."

He described the location of the safe in detail, and gave a summary of Mrs. Adams' reactions in a way that made the airmen laugh in spite of themselves. The entire troupe had been the Adams' guests the night before at dinner, and Mr. Adams, in the course of showing off their brand new and blatantly palatial home, had included the safe among other items.

"The old birds *are* funny!" chuckled Darrell with his shrill, cackling laugh. "I get a kick out of 'em. Course they won't miss a mere seventy-five thou, eh? And the crooks made a nice haul, I'll tell you! Oh, by the way, how about a poker game tonight? Ham Jerome says there's nothing on, as far's he's concerned, and Krader and Calvin want to play. You all won money today on account of MacDowell tricking me up there—anybody game for a few big pots?"

"Just how big?" queried Tex.

"Hundred dollar takeout, table stakes, and everybody plays 'em high, wide, and handsome!" bragged Darrell. "Why, after the first couple hours, it ain't nothing unusual to see seven or eight thousand dollars worth o' chips on the table!"

"I never knew actors had so much money," observed Kennard.

"They ain't, as a rule. But don't worry about these fellows. Calvin's got money already for his invention, and he'll be a millionaire in a year, sure. Jerome's been a high class director for five years—you ought to see the home he's got out in Hollywood! And Krader; why say, that fellow's worked in three pictures at once for seven-fifty a week on each!"

"I thought your company was a small one, just starting."

"Sure. But it's got plenty of money behind it, and putting out good pictures with as little studio expense as we are, with that invention—why say, the bankers behind us ain't anybody's fools! Jerome's got an interest in the company, Krader's a chum o' his and I think was let in for a little, too. They got money, and are set tuh make more. Why else d'yuh suppose felluhs like them two are down here? Or me, that could work all the time on the coast? Because we're smart enough to look ahead, that's why!"

"I see," nodded Tex. "So they play really big poker, eh?"

"Yeh. Too big for you boys, I suppose. How about you, MacDowell? Your old man's got money. Why don't you contribute some of it to us in a game?"

Again Darrell was doing his old stunt. Despite every effort on MacDowell's part, and the same thing was true of the other flyers, he was unable to maintain a philosophical calm under the persistent irritation of Darrell's never ending stream of conversation.

"I might be persuaded," Tex admitted, because to him hours spent playing poker were hours of utter content. Perhaps the game was an outlet for the seething restlessness within him.

"How about the rest of you? Win enough to sit in on a game where you can win or lose a couple of thousand without turning a hair?"

"I guess not," Kennard put in, just in time to stall off Pete Miller. And the C. O. said it significantly enough to keep Miller's mouth closed.

"Know anybody around town'd like to get in?" Darrell inquired.

"The sheriff, maybe, but he'll be busy," Tex returned. He wondered why the captain had spoken as he had.

After the conclusion of the meal Kennard turned to Darrell. "We're going to leave you by yourself, Darrell, for a short, official meeting in my office," he said, running his hand through his bristly pompadour. "Come on, fellows."

The surprised flyers followed him into his office in the headquarters building. The stocky little captain's scarred face—veteran of twenty-three airplane wrecks—wrinkled into a wide grin. "I got a scheme!" he proclaimed. "Listen. That sounds like a good game, and I know well Tex hasn't got enough dough in the bank to buck it right. Likewise, he and Sleepy Spears are the best poker players in the crowd. What say to handing over our

winnings of the day to Tex and Sleepy, the whole six thousand, and letting them play with that bankroll behind them and all sharing in the proceeds?"

This proposition was carried by acclamation. Tex, however, put in his oar with a question. "Do you suppose there's any doubt about these bozos being good for the money if they lose?" he inquired. "Jerome looks like the goods, and probably this inventor is, but Darrell——"

"I don't know what his salary is, but it must be big," Kennard broke in. "And Jerome—I forgot to tell you this—talked with me quite a while about him this afternoon. Darrell really is Granville, as he claims, and he's been a soldier of fortune of the nuttiest brand all his life, starting back in the early days as a parachute and balloon man at county fairs. He's sort of a nut, been known around the coast for three or four years as a general daredevil in the movies. But what I started out to say is that Jerome remarked that he wished he had all the money Darrell has won from him at poker in the past few months, or that he'd won in Hollywood for the last three years. So he must have money to lose, if he *does* lose!"

"Not a crook, is he?" interjected Carson hopefully.

Tex shook his head. "He didn't deal a crooked card the other night."

"Jerome said the same thing," agreed the captain. "I'll call up Sleepy Spears; he's having dinner at the hotel, isn't he?—and prime him. Shell out your cash, boys; and then we'll all wait here and pray until Tex and Sleepy stagger home."

So it came about that stocky, square faced, indolent Sleepy Spears, and tall, lounging, soft voiced MacDowell gathered an hour later in the suite of Mr. Hamilton Jerome for a few hands of draw poker, with a capital of three thousand dollars each—and a great desire to win every dime that Mr. David Darrell happened to have lying around loose.

VII

JEROME'S suite was somewhat out of the ordinary in appearance. The hotel had gone the limit in furnishing it with especial comforts like easy chairs and pictures, and to their efforts Jerome evidently had added features of his own. There were a hundred books, all of them of the solid and substantial variety, and a dozen photographs of famous screen and stage stars, suitably framed, and all inscribed to the director. There was a plentiful supply of liquors of various kinds, an ornate pipe rack, several smoking stands and cigarette boxes. It looked less like the sitting room of a hotel suite than the apartment of a well-to-do and cultivated bachelor.

Before sitting down at the table Tex idly scrutinized a thin, leather covered booklet which was one of a number of similar ones. It proved to contain pages from a motion picture magazine, specially bound, devoted to an article regarding the rising director, Mr. Hamilton Jerome, and garnished by a variety of pictures. The other booklets all were copies of articles devoted to the same subject.

The card game started with Jerome, Darrell, Calvin the inventor, and the two flyers as players. Krader, Jerome explained, would be in a bit later and possibly Hornsby, one of the other actors. Calvin, as banker, just was finishing the process of counting out hundred dollar stacks of chips when the tall, slim, sleek-haired leading man came in, faultlessly arrayed in white flannels, soft silk pleated shirt, wing collar, and dinner coat. Rumor had it that Krader and Miss Genevieve Clark, daughter of a wealthy retired ranchman in McMullen, had been seen dancing and dining together often. Tex, looking at the rather effeminately handsome actor, wondered what kind of a man he was around women—and whether Krader really would not prefer being with a good looking girl, to playing poker.

Darrell characteristically started talking, waiting not on his superiors.

"Now the idea's this," he chattered. "We always play a hand of stud on every hand of threes or better. Not a round of stud, a hand. Now we——"

"Let me talk," Jerome interposed smoothly. "Does that suit you gentlemen?"

Tex nodded.

"We usually play a game where a man can announce, before any hand, any amount he cares to put behind his hand. Of course, if I announce a thousand dollars behind mine, and you announce nothing—and have only twenty-five in front of you—that doesn't prevent you from having a whack at the pot up to your twenty-five,

and being in for a call on the showdown."

"Regular tablestakes," Sleepy murmured.

"Surely," smiled the director. "Always pays to have an understanding, though, doesn't it?"

Each man, including the flyers, announced a hundred dollars behind his stack to start. "Which makes it doubly as steep right from the gun," Tex reflected. He and Sleepy exchanged smiles of unadulterated bliss.

Jerome started the deal. He was sitting at Darrell's right, between the flyer and Calvin. Calvin, the inventor, was a short, heavy set man, partially bald, whose round, fleshy face was half covered by horn rimmed glasses. He wore a black mustache, and his dark eyes were large and expressive beneath heavy black eyebrows. He seemed to have a touch of the Latin in him, despite his name, said very little and smiled rarely. Next to Calvin was Krader, then Sleepy, with MacDowell between Sleepy and Darrell.

Tex settled down in his chair, in an attude of deceptive ease, and gave himself to ferocious concentration on the game—one of the secrets of his almost invariable success. He had watched Jerome split the seals on two decks of cards, ordinary patterns procurable at any drug store, and from that time on nothing escaped his attention. Sleepy Spears was doing the same thing, possibly with less persistency, but very little wool ever was pulled over Sleepy's eyes, at that.

For a half hour both flyers played cautiously. Tex opened up a bit a little later, and bluffed a forty-five dollar pot by raising before the draw, asking for two cards, and stepping out with a bet which made Calvin, the opener, lay down two pairs. Tex had held absolutely nothing from the start.

The Texan had the players figured fairly closely at the end of an hour and a half's play. Darrell was infinitely the best of them. Calvin was very obvious and conservative. He drew to his hand, always had the cards when he bet or stayed, and was easy to bluff on an ordinary hand. Jerome was middling good—bluffed occasionally, but never started a bluff before the draw, and usually tried to work it on a one card draw. Krader was reckless, stepping out with big bets and trying to make his money win for him.

Not for a second did Tex relax vigilance. He had not the slightest idea that Darrell was crooked—and yet, stranger things had happened. Certain it was the man showed great cupidity at times. That bet on the flying combat, and his eagerness to get money men in the poker game, was ample evidence of a desire to clean up everything in sight. He figured Tex the son of a rich man, not knowing Tex had not accepted a dime from his father since the tender age of nineteen, and had been inordinately anxious that he be in the game. When a man gets avaricious enough he usually will employ illegal means; and there are thousands of men who will cheat at cards or dice or any other gambling game who would not steal a quarter if they were very hungry. So the Texan did not fail to live up to his usual motto when playing poker: trust nobody.

However, there seemed nothing to catch. Darrell's flashing fingers manipulated a deck wonderfully but fairly. Jerome, at his right, sometimes cut and sometimes waved it away. At the end of two hours and a half Tex was about even, Sleepy fifty dollars ahead, Calvin a hundred or so, and Darrell at least three hundred. There were twelve hundred dollars worth of chips on the table, both Krader and Jerome being losers.

The game had been slow, with little action. Darrell tried to talk as much as usual, but Jerome shut him up, none too gently, every time he started. Krader, black haired and almond eyed, showed his feelings plainly at each loss or winning; and Calvin was absolutely speechless, sitting stoically no matter what happened. The flyers said practically nothing, and drank circumspectly. Jerome and Krader were drinking fairly heavily; Jerome getting warmly genial.

Then with Calvin dealing, there came a hand wherein Tex had a four card open end straight. Darrell opened for thirty dollars. Every man stayed. Sleepy drew three cards, Calvin one, Jerome three and Darrell two. Krader, after much thought, took one.

Tex filled his straight to the ace. When the wild betting was over he had dropped, a hundred dollars loser. Jerome took the pot with a ten-high flush.

On Jerome's next deal Darrell got up to pour another drink. As Jerome was shuffling the cards—not flat on the table, but in his hands, off the board, Darrell inquired, "Where's the measuring glass, chief?"

As Jerome turned to answer he dropped some of the cards, and after locating the glass picked them up, with Calvin's assistance. He shuffled them a few times

again, by the same method—holding the deck edge-up in his left hand while his right picked up the cards in the rear and wedged them into the deck.

On that hand Sleepy, as it turned out, had a flush, Krader a full house, and Tex a smaller full. Tex had his on the deal, pat. Sleepy filled on the draw, and Krader, drawing two cards, filled his on the draw likewise. The hand cost the two flyers a total of seven hundred and fifty dollars.

"That'll never do," reflected the Texan. "Getting good hands beaten can't be helped, though."

Nothing of moment happened until a half hour later. On Calvin's deal he slapped the cards down in front of Krader to cut. As he did so Jerome, who had been up pouring a drink for the two flyers, stepped in between MacDowell's and Krader's seat to distribute the glasses. "The whisky sour is a great invention," he smiled, as he set them down.

On that hand Tex had nothing, but Sleepy had threes, raised the pot after Darrell had opened, drew a fourth seven, and got beaten by Darrell, who had drawn three cards and had four queens. The hand cost Sleepy six hundred dollars.

There was another lull, during which Tex, by nervy and daring play, made up eight hundred dollars. Six hundred of it was on one pot. It was his deal, and he got a pair of aces. Calvin and Krader stayed, each drawing two cards, and Tex drawing three. He got his third ace, and checked. Krader bet, Calvin raised, Tex thumped home a two hundred dollar raise. Krader re-raised, and Calvin called Krader. Tex took the bit in his teeth, acting on the instinct of a good poker player, and raised five hundred dollars. He took the pot without a call. He never knew what the other two had, but suspected that at least one of them was bluffing.

Somehow those earlier hands bothered him. It certainly was a terrible run of luck for the two flyers. Then Darrell got the deal, and it was stud, after Krader had held threes. Darrell shuffled rapidly, Jerome waved away a cut, and Darrell dealt.

Tex had a jack in the hole and a queen up—highest on the board. He bet ten dollors. Everyone stayed. By the time the fourth card was dealt he had an open-end four-card straight—nine, ten, jack, queen—and there was not a pair on the board. Spears had an ace, the only card in sight that beat Tex. Tex had been betting heavily, and had run out Calvin. On the fourth card he bet fifty dollars, which dropped Krader, and likewise Sleepy Spears.

Darrell had a ten as his highest card in sight. His other cards were three and four. "Well, I'm a betting fool; she goes up a hundred dollars, flyer!" he chortled in the exasperating manner at which he was such an adept.

He cocked his head on one side and his small eyes peered up out of his impudent, irregular face as though daring Tex to come in. Tex had an open end straight, with not a queen or a jack in sight on the board. Not a king had shown, either, although two of the sevens had been out. The best Darrel *could* have was a low pair!

So Tex re-raised three hundred dollars. The principal of winning at stud, to his mind, was to bet on the cards which were coming, until he got something, and then bet on the cards he had so heavily that no other player could play his—MacDowell's—own method by "sticking along."

Darrell hesitated. The other players leaned over the table tensely. All but dark, stodgy, taciturn Calvin. Krader twisted his mustache nervously. Jerome took a drink, and every eye was on Darrell's face.

For the first time, the stunter seemed to be at a loss. Then he raised again—three hundred. Tex stayed.

Darrell dealt slowly. To Tex he gave a deuce. To himself, a jack.

Tex bet four hundred dollars.

It was plain Darrell was worried. Finally, however, "You're called!" he said shrilly.

"Then I'm beaten," I guess," drawled Tex; and suddenly it seemed as though doors had opened in his eyes and let a hot flame from within shine through. "I've got merely queen high—queen, jack."

Darrell let out a yelp which probably was heard in the capital of Mongolia. "King high!" he shouted, scooping in the money avidly; and then showed his hole card. He had called all that money, and stayed all along, on a king in the hole, without a pair! That was poker playing, or——

There leaped into MacDowell's mind a way of dealing crooked stud which "Duke" Daly, ex-gambler and ex-flyer, had described to him. In brief, it merely was to learn what the top five or six cards were, shuffle skillfully so as not to disturb the

top cards, and thus know what everyone had in the hole—if there was no cut. And Jerome had not cut; frequently did not.

For ten minutes MacDowell's mind was preoccupied. He got very poor cards, and did not stay in a pot, so had plenty of time to think. If it was not so unbelievable, looking back on the game, he would have his suspicions about the whole thing. It was a fact that in every one of those big hands, when flushes and straights and full houses had come out in profusion, there had been an opportunity to put in a cold deck—if all the motion picture people were working together. When Jerome dropped the cards while Darrell was at the table where the liquor was; when Calvin had placed the cards for a cut in front of Krader and Jerome had cut off the two flyers' views of them. But it was unthinkable. However, that would not prevent Tex from watching more closely than ever.

Nothing happened for a considerable time. Then, for ten minutes, the game went wild—and it was absolutely square. Everyone seemed to start on a bluffing spree. Tex and Sleepy, hardened poker players and without any liquor to speak of to influence them, played with nerve and skill; and knocked off their opponents on ordinary hands, for about seven hundred dollars. That left Sleepy twelve hundred dollars behind, and Tex close to even.

Darrell got the deal on stud again. Again Jerome did not cut. Tex had a pair of tens, back to back. When he stayed in the pot Darrell dropped out, although he had a king up. On the second card, although Calvin had an ace, and Krader a jack, they both dropped. Jerome dropped on the next card, although Tex did not have a face card up. This was poor luck—rather remarkably poor, to his mind. And this he knew: Darrell had laid the hand he had had before his deal on top of the deck. Those cards had not been disturbed in the shuffle. Darrell's hand had been tens and fives and a king. Those same cards were the hole cards of Sleepy, Tex, Krader, Calvin, and Jerome. Which meant that Mr. Darrell, on occasions, dealt crooked poker. And there was an outside chance that the other men were in the game to win some easy money from the flyers.

The tall, wide shouldered Texan leaned back in his chair, and yawned. "Gentlemen, how about a five minute recess? It's nearly midnight, and before the restaurant closes my colleague, Señor Sleepy Spears, and myself would be delighted to take a little air and bring back a load of sandwiches for the later hours. We'll be out of luck as far as the hotel is concerned."

"That's a good idea," assented the director heartily.

Tex, with Sleepy, who surmised that something was up, went out to go after the sandwiches. As soon as they had reached the street Tex said abruptly, "Sleepy, Darrell's crooked!" And explained it.

"Furthermore," he went on, "I'm probably a libeling fool, and it sounds unreasonable even to me, but it's a dim possibility that those other birds had their clothes all cluttered up with cold decks to slip in occasionally."

"I can believe you about Darrell, but not about the rest of those fellows!" remonstrated Sleepy. "Why, look who they are! And there's no chance they're impostors; they've got by everywhere and have every proof of their identity!"

"But many a man—army officer, millionaire, even—has a funny twist in his mind about gambling," Tex pointed out. "However, as you say, it all may be a pipe dream—about the others, I mean. If they're crooked our absence will give them a chance to fix up more decks. Whether they are or not, we can find out more definitely before the game ends, and in future games.

"But we *know* about Darrell, and we're behind with our fellow citizens' mazuma! So you and I, Sleepy, my boy, are going to rook those babies out of plenty of money. If we should be caught, we'll tell 'em the reason. If not, we'll know how much we won. If we're satisfied that no one but Darrell is crooked, we'll hand back every cent later.

"In order to prove our good faith in advance, we're going to tell Sheriff Trowbridge, if he's still up, all about it and deposit such winnings as we gather, with him pending further proof. Then he can tell 'em later, why we had a right to be suspicious of them all, regardless of who they are. If we *prove* 'em crooks we'll keep all we can get! How about it?"

Sleepy, who always became lively and wide awake at night, agreed enthusiastically. Ways and means were well understood by the time they reached the jail.

"Look around, will you!" observed Tex surprisedly. "Something must be up. Hello, Sheriff! Having a convention of deputies?"

The iron-gray head of the old man was outlined against the light coming through

the open window, and he turned at the well known voice of Roaring Bill MacDowell's son. "Hell's poppin'!" he stated succinctly.

VIII

THE hell which just then was exploding hither and yon about the flourishing little city of McMullen, was another robbery. This time it was the jewelry store of Mr. Jacob Arnstein, a Jewish citizen who had hit the border with a pack on his back years before and now had a store with a hundred thousand dollars worth of stock in it. Forty thousand dollars' worth of jewels had been taken.

"It means a gang o' slick crooks from some city has descended plumb on top of us!" the sheriff pointed out. "And by the lord Harry I'm ashamed to say that we ain't got even the whisper of an idea who they are, or where they are!"

"What time did it happen?" MacDowell inquired, pleasantly interested. Events in McMullen recently had taken an eventful turn, which decidedly suited Mr. Lee MacDowell.

"Dunno exactly," responded the leonine old man, striding up and down prodigiously. "The funny part is that the light was lit—one or two of 'em—and the safe's in plain sight! They was bold enough to turn out the lights by cuttin' the wires on the outside. Then, by the mighty, with a hundred people passin' 'em every minute, they worked in the dark and got the stuff. This time they opened it by the combination; didn't use no tools. Can yuh tie that?"

"Any strangers in town?" suggested Sleepy Spears. "That is, unaccounted for——"

"Why, I even been combin' the Spig section ever since this afternoon; and I'm that near crazy I been askin' sleuthlike questions o' conductors, brakemen and travelin' salesmen. I even looked up where these movie folks was all evenin'. Everybody's present and accounted for—so I suppose the damn stuff must o' walked away!"

"Well, you'll land 'em, unless they made the border again," Tex comforted him.

It was a new thing for this border town to have expert safe work tried on it. The criminals with whom McMullen was familiar were smugglers, cattle rustlers, and gunmen. The old sheriff, an ex-ranger and a borderman for sixty years, was completely at a loss.

"Arnstein was insured, and that'll bring some jewelry detectives

rompin' in with ideas about thumbprints and stuff like that," Trowbridge told them. "We're guardin' the location, so to speak, tuh give 'em all the dope they can pick up."

"The town'd better start watching itself," Tex suggested, and the sheriff nodded vehemently.

"The varmints are tryin' tuh pick us clean!" he sputtered. "Why, the *nerve* of 'em!" His puckered eyes twinkled beneath his bushy white eyebrows. "They're insultin' me, I tell yuh, pullin' off two in one day. I'll bet them fulluhs didn't even go out o' town after robbin' old man Adams thataway!"

"Start patroling with your two six-shooters," grinned Tex. "Well, Sheriff, we've got to be galloping back to a poker game, and we've got a favor to ask of you. We want to tell you what we're going to do, and why, so that you can testify for us if we run into any trouble."

Sheriff William Trowbridge, of Hidalgo County, was a poker player of parts, himself. In four years, during which he had never missed a day at McMullen or one of its poker games unless official business called him, he had become accustomed to Tex MacDowell's uncanny faculty for getting into unusual predicaments, and squeezing his principal enjoyment out of life by extricating himself from them.

So he pricked up his ears, listened joyously, and finally declared himself. "Yo're on the wrong track, boy, and lettin' yore imagination git the best o' yuh on Jerome and Calvin. Them gents've got the goods. But this here Darrell; treat 'im rough! It's a shame you-all can't hold yore winnin's——"

"We'll see," Tex interposed softly, for the more his facile mind worked the more possibilities he was envisioning in the situation. And he had confidence enough in himself not to distrust the evidence of his own eyes. Their evidence was that the motion picture people, had they not been the men they were, would have been branded as crooks unhesitatingly by him after the incidents of the evening.

They procured the sandwiches, and rejoined their opponents in the gentle art of

making a poor hand look like a straight flush.

The company had been increased by four people, they found. Said additions consisted of Messers Lloyd Fuchs and Harold Bevy, the two middle aged character men, and the two stunning young women who were, respectively, leading woman and ingénue of the company. Florida Sanderson was rather tall and slender, and her face had the hard perfection of a diamond. She wore her jet-black hair plastered close to her head, and a black Spanish comb, aided by one red rose, made her look distinctly Castilian. Genevieve Travers, the little plump damsel who was the ingénue, was bobbed haired and large eyed, and to the casual observer seemed like a fresh young girl. When one looked closer at the well hidden wrinkles around her eyes one decided that she was nearing thirty, perhaps. All of which did not prevent her from being exceedingly attractive. Both women were in sheer white frocks, and were lovely in the softly shaded lights.

The flyers received a very cordial greeting from them. In fact, while the important matter of a drink was being attended to the airmen were fussed over considerably, and asked many flattering questions regarding their dangerous duties as border patrolmen.

Tex watched this with the corners of his wide mouth drooping in the half mocking smile which was frequent with him. For to date the onslaughts of the more romantic airmen, such as George Hickman and Carson and Pop Cravath, had been repulsed with heavy losses. Miss Sanderson had been in the company of a well-to-do real estate man in town almost from the moment of her arrival, and Miss Travers was being shown the sights of McMullen by a widower who was almost sixty and who possessed in fee simple the largest, most central, and consequently most valuable business block in McMullen.

The two men refused an invitation to enter the game, until Krader announced, after glancing at his diamond studded wrist watch, that he soon would have to be going. Then Fuchs took Krader's hand. He was a very stout, round faced, heavy jowled man with an infectious chuckle, and with deep wrinkles and pouches under his eyes.

"It's a little after midnight, and I've got to arise in the blithesome morn and canter through the ozone on the dawn patrol east," Tex remarked. "Let's go, eh?"

"The boss is sending me into San Antonio tomorrow, too," Darrell put in sourly. He seemed to be in an ugly mood, all of a sudden. Perhaps he was one of the many whom liquor makes nasty. Tex reflected.

"Do you mind if I watch you play, Lieutenant MacDowell?" the slender and delectable Miss Sanderson asked him.

Tex hesitated, momentarily embarrassed. Immediately the thought had come to him that if the game was crooked she might want to tip off his hand to the other players. He felt as though his imagination was carrying him a good way beyond the probable; but he intended to take no chances. "You'll probably think me an ill-mannered Texas lout," he smiled. "But letting any one in the world know my hand is practically the one superstition I have in poker playing."

Although his words were gentle, they were a flat refusal. He thought the girl blushed faintly, although it was hard to tell beneath the paint. So she roved around the table from time to time, never stopping for long behind Tex. And when she did she did not see his hand.

When it came Sleepy's deal—he was sitting at MacDowell's left—the indolent flyer remarked casually, "Mind if I deal a hand of stud? I sort of crave action."

"Let's make it a dealer's choice, anyway," Tex suggested. "We've only a little longer to play."

No one objected. Stud means swift action, and likewise this brand of the game gives a crook or crooks greater opportunities than poker. Which Tex had counted on.

As Sleepy finished picking up the cards he put the hand Tex had held, on top, without looking at the cards in any manner. Tex, however, knew every card, and the order in which they were placed. Sleepy shuffled rapidly, without disturbing the top cards, by the simple method of making sure that as his two hands riffled them the top cards always remained on top. When he gave them to Tex to cut the Texan waved them away.

Consequently, he knew what every player had in the hole. It was simply a refinement of what he conceived to have been Darrell's methods of dealing stud. The dealer, in this case, could not possibly be suspected, even if the other players were watching him. And Tex was convinced that the motion picture men held the flyers so lightly that they did not even watch them closely.

Tex had set himself an ace in the hole, and the hand was a prolific one. He had

a ten up, and bet twenty dollars. Every one stayed but Sleepy. On the next card Fuchs got a king up, giving him the bet.

Tex stayed, and when it came to Calvin that quiet gentleman raised forty dollars, on a queen and a nine up and a jack in the hole. Again everyone stayed, up to Tex, and Tex re-raised fifty. Fuchs raised him right back, and then Jerome, with a jack and a ten up and a queen in the hole, re-raised. It seemed as though the motion picture men either were drunk enough to be reckless, or working together to freeze Tex out of the pot.

After the next card there still were no pairs, making MacDowell's ace hand the high hand of the board. When the betting was over all but Fuchs and Tex had dropped, the others apparently being convinced that if Fuchs couldn't bluff it through alone they could be of no service, and that Tex must have a pair to linger so mightily. Fuchs last card had been a four.

Tex nearly had heart failure as the last card was dealt. It gave Fuchs a pair of fours, and himself no pair whatever. Merely ace high.

"Well, I guess you're satisfied now!" chuckled Fuchs. "But I'll bet two hundred anyway on the chance of a call."

"Call!" said Tex deliberately. "And me playing these tens all the way along. Well, we'll see. I'll call—no, by Jove, doggoned if I believe you've got two pairs. She's up six hundred dollars!"

There was a full half minute of utter silence. Tex had stayed and re-raised when the whole game was betting wildly. He must have something, they would figure, and that something was of necessity a bigger pair than fours. If he didn't believe Fuchs had more than fours now, he'd call anyway——

Thus Tex believed that they would estimate the situation, and for that half minute utterly delighted tingles chased themselves up and down his spine. Fuchs, regretfully, dropped. Darrell looked uglier, and the gray haired director drew a long breath. The eyes of the two girls were resting steadily on the Texan, something unreadable in Miss Sanderson's over-sized black ones.

The game waxed fast and furious. Jerome, Fuchs and Calvin dealt draw poker hands; Sleepy, Tex and Darrell, stud. Four different times Tex saw opportunities for the others to "cold-deck" the two flyers, and each time it happened that he and Sleepy had good hands which they did not play. In one case the two girls created a diversion by standing beside the flyers' chairs and inspecting their wings and ornaments to settle a bet; in another the apparently tipsy Fuchs knocked his chips on the floor and bent down to pick them up with the deck in his hand.

Each one of the four times presented an opportunity, and the cards seemed to bear out MacDowell's theory, providing the men were too smart to overdo it by putting out hands conspicuously too high, such as sets of four pat. But so cleverly was it worked that MacDowell, although he watched like a hawk, could not have sworn in court that he was positive they were cheating.

Darrell invariably dealt crooked stud by the same method, and here again the wary flyers stepped out of play gracefully. Tex, as alert as a poker player can be, which is very alert, was watching for signs that the movie people comprehended that he and Sleepy were dodging the hands which might be crooked. On the last occasion, when he deliberately threw away three aces, although without allowing anyone to see what he had done, he thought he saw significance in the looks which passed between his opponents.

That was the last time that anything happened which was in any way suspicious. The game became absolutely straight, except for Darrell's dealing and Spears'. But the four strangers adopted their tactics as their habitual method. They had used them before, on occasions; simply raising and re-raising each other until only a world-beating hand would stay in for the money.

They appeared, at least, to be getting very drunk, and bets were large. Two and three hundred dollars were habitual wagers. MacDowell lounged back with narrowed eyes that glowed with pure enjoyment, and played as nervy and intelligent and cold blooded a game as he ever had shown. Sleepy Spears, behind his mask of indolent boredom, was an able second. They took advantage of every "break," and luck, which had been below average for them, began to even up. They got good hands, and because of the tactics of

their antagonists two pairs or threes often were worth a five hundred dollar pot.

As money commenced to flow their way it appeared that the composure of the picture people left them. They became strained and anxious—over-anxious. All was grist for the flyers' mill, and their stacks grew into Woolworth towers of chips.

At two o'clock Tex announced, "I'm quitting in a half hour, without fail. But you can have a shot at all this money any night, gentlemen, so don't think I'm running out on you."

That last half hour was the wildest poker he ever had seen. That the arrangement between himself and Sleepy on the deal was not suspected was shown conclusively by the hand before the last one, when at the third card Tex had a pair of tens, one in the hole, Sleepy a pair of jacks, with one hidden, and Calvin a pair of sevens, one hidden. The others had nothing but large cards. At the third card each man had contributed three hundred dollars. On the fourth card, no one improved, and Jerome, who had an ace showing, bet five hundred dollars. Tex, building up the pot for Sleepy to win on his jacks, and to force out the men with high cards who might improve, raised it five hundred. Calvin, his hands shaking and his ordinarily impassive face twitching, re-raised.

On the last card the status was unchanged. Sleepy had the high hand, and both he and Tex knew it. But the motion picture people spent a total of three thousand dollars trying to drag in that pot.

On the count up Tex had won eighteen hundred dollars, and Sleepy, largely on account of the last pot, had won nearly four thousand. They were paid off in cash.

It was a wan, strained, hollow-eyed group of men who arose from the table. The girls were silent and distraught, as though afraid to speak. Their eyes roved from one to the other of their fellow troupers, as though in amazement and considerable perturbation. Bevy, who had watched the game without a word, had a few words with Darrell off in a corner, and said good night. Jerome, his keen, cold eyes seeming more piercing than ever as they probed in MacDowell's, was his urbane self, although he had lost twelve hundred dollars.

"Mr. MacDowell, and you, too, Mr. Spears, that was the most exciting pastime I'd had for some time. I look forward to many of them, although you'll pardon me if I hope you do not have all the luck!"

"Luck's right!" Darrell spat forth viciously. "If they fell off the Statue o' Liberty they'd come up with their pockets full o' diamonds. Give 'em a dime and they could run it into a million overnight!"

"Thanks, Darrell. You ought to—er—cultivate luck at cards," yawned Sleepy Spears. "Tomorrow night, eh?"

There was a chorus of "yesses." As the flyers were making their adieux the girls were cordial—exceedingly so, Tex thought.

"Let's have a nightcap each!" proposed Jerome. "Talk to the girls a moment, and I'll fix the glasses."

"Lieutenant MacDowell, I've been dying for a ride in a plane. Will you take me up?" begged the leading woman of Tex.

The southerner gazed down at her with twinkling eyes. "Against the rules of the army, fair lady," he told her. "Why not Darrell?"

"I'd rather fly with you."

"Sorry; I would if I could."

Her high powered eyes were doing their worst, and he wondered. Certain it was that the girls previously had given none of the flyers a single moment's time. To his somewhat cynical eye, it appeared that they had deliberately decided to use their blandishments on the two richest men in town. Just gold diggers, as far as men were concerned, he had decided.

"Maybe around ten thousand in our pockets has got something to do with her flirtatiousness!" he reflected, and then was somewhat ashamed of his suspicions. Certainly Miss Florida Sanderson was a charming girl, even if some of her beauty was kalsomined on her skin instead of blooming under it.

Once out of the hotel Tex glanced over at the beatifically grinning Spears, and chuckled. They both leaned against the official car which had brought them there and laughed until the tears came to their eyes. They were waiting for Darrell.

"Sleepy, my boy, we're on the road to riches. I'm sure they're crooks at cards; and yet I'll swear I couldn't prove anything, except about Darrell. And I can't believe my own suspicions. How about you?"

"Same boat, Tex," nodded Sleepy. "The other games'll tell more definitely though. Here comes Daredevil Dave now. Let's get to the sheriff and leave this dough to show good intentions and to prove we are

young men as pure and spotless as the snow on a convent roof, and then ram this heap of government junk home. Gosh, I'm tired!"

Sheriff Trowbridge, harassed and worried, relaxed and broke into a bellow which disturbed the peace and quiet of McMullen as he heard the story. They had left the depressed Darrell outside.

"Doggone, boys, yuh done 'em up brown! It'll be a shame if yuh have tuh return it."

"Listen, Sheriff, you, too, Sleepy." And without any preamble Tex outlined a surmise which had been in the background of his mind for two hours. So vague and far fetched it seemed that he barely had been able to get his mental teeth into it, himself. Perhaps the nightcap back at the hotel had something to do with his decision to mention it. Be that as it might, he pointed out to his two listeners, in tones too low for the deputies on duty to hear, some possibilities born of the evening's play.

Trowbridge, without a word, began pacing the floor, head down. Sleepy dragged on a cigarette, his eyes resting thoughtfully on the ceiling. It was too important a matter to make a hasty comment on.

Finally old Sheriff Bill stumped back to his desk and fixed Tex with a keen and glittering eye. "I'm goin' crazy by the minute," he stated flatly. "Right now I'd believe it if somebody told me Santa Claus was stealin' stuff around this town tuh give tuh the heathen Chinee fur Christmas. Tex, I don't aim tuh insult yuh. That scheme o' yor'n I don't believe comes within a mile o' the situation, but it's so doggone good it ought tuh be tried by some smart crooks, if it *ain't* been! And, God help me fur a loco old fool, I'll do what I done before over again, an' we'll see.

"Every deputy I got'll be told that if he says a word he'll be personally assassinated by me. Because if it ever got out how I was sleuthin' around I'd be laughed out o' town, or killed, or somethin'. Gosh! I wish a nice, two fisted, gentlemanly rustler or smuggler'd come along and let me ketch 'im, jest tuh help regain my self respect!"

In view of the fact that Sheriff Bill had been famous along the border for forty years as a minion of the law who could figure a situation or use his two tremendous, pearl handled six-shooters with equal skill, this last remark was ample evidence of the fact that the old border man was somewhat bewildered.

The rickety military car resumed its journey out to the field, Tex driving. Sleepy was beside him and Darrell was half asleep in the back seat. They hummed along through the tortuous streets of the Mexican quarter, and then hit the open highway which led to the airdrome.

They scarcely had left the environs of Spigtown, as the slums of McMullen were called, when the hum of a powerful motor behind them heralded the appearance of very bright headlights. Tex swung to the edge of the road, wondering who was on the way to the airdrome at that hour. Some flyer had been making a late call, and was being driven home by his host, probably.

There was a warning honk of the horn, and the car behind seemed to be slowing up. A few seconds later a long hood thrust its way into sight, very close to the little army car. The next second two flying forms, black against the wan light of the moon, flung themselves from the running board of the strange car, landing on the step of the khaki colored army machine.

It happened in a split second. As the big car shot ahead Tex got a terrific blow from the foremost man, and at the same time there was a startled grunt from Darrell in the rear. Half conscious, scarcely realizing what his half formed plan was, the Texan deliberately swung the steering wheel, and crashed sideward into the rear of the bandit machine. In a daze, his mind a chaotic whirlpool of surprised speculations, he saw the big car overturn in the ditch.

Careless of the fact that his own car skidded sidewards, and was about to fall on its side, he freed the steering wheel and grappled with his assailant. Just as the car started to tip over, the astounded Spears flung himself across the front seat toward the man who was struggling with Darrell.

Tex had a death grip on the thug's neck as the car smashed over on its side. He was flung across the seat, and his shoulders hit the ground with a thud. There was the crash of breaking glass, and the top wrinkled up. But despite his stunned condition, Tex held fast to his wildly struggling antagonist as the man strove to squirm loose. His legs were sticking straight up in the air, over one of the front doors, and Tex was on the bottom, holding on like death itself.

He had his man helpless, but from the rear came the indications of a heroic struggle. Ripping canvas, and the noise of boots against tin mingled with grunts and groans from the battling men. The car, resting on its side at the edge of the road,

quivered and shook as the fights went on.

Suddenly Tex felt his man being pulled from him, as a voice from above panted, "I'm all right."

The car seemed about to break into pieces as the battlers in the rear threshed around in the close quarters. Then Tex realized that Sleepy had lost his man, due to his cramped position on the bottom, just as Tex's own victim literally was torn from his hands by the man outside. He was the driver of the other car, no doubt.

"Let's go, damn it!" came a voice, and as the Texan scrambled up from his position on the ground and crawled over the door of the car he saw three shadowy figures running like deer toward town. They went through the fields, leaving the road, with MacDowell in full pursuit. He was winded and half-dazed, but his long legs gained at every stride. He wondered whether they would shoot, but apparently they had no guns.

One man he was after was a poor runner, it seemed, for he fell further and further behind his comrades. Finally Tex was only a few feet back of him. A few feet farther, and he launched himself through the air in a perfect football tackle. His clutching arms gripped the fugitive's ankles firmly. The man fell heavily.

At the instant of falling he twisted, and half gained his freedom. His feet lashed out, and Tex took a blow in the head from a heavy shoe that nearly completed the process of knocking him out. From his knees, swaying dizzily, he flung himself on his antagonist again, and for a few seconds they rolled around in the soft loam, fighting viciously. The man was small, but as slippery as a snake. He fought furiously.

Finally Tex got a grip on his throat, abandoning the grip around the man's body, and then he methodically choked him into unconsciousness while he took weak blows from his opponent's feet and fists. Sleepy Spears was running slowly toward them, making all the speed he could. Evidently he, too, had lost some of his stamina in the wreck.

Tex got to his feet weakly as Sleepy staggered into the picture. "Got one of 'em," he panted, talking very slowly. "Other two got away." They were out of sight behind the outlying shacks of the town.

Both flyers looked down at their captive, who slowly was regaining his senses. He was short, thickly built, and dressed in an ordinary dark blue serge suit, soft white shirt, bow tie and brown shoes. His face was broad at the cheekbones and forehead, and tapered down to a pointed jaw. It was pitted slightly, and even in the moonlight they could see that his long, thin nose was red, as though the man was a drinker. There was something very hard in that deeply wrinkled, old-young face.

"Get up, and we'll escort you into jail. Wanted to get the money we won at poker, eh?" said Tex.

"Did yer win?" inquired the captive, getting slowly to his feet. "Just my blisterin' luck!"

"Why?"

"We hear ye're in a big game, we takes a chance liftin' a car and grabbin' yer off, and then we gets the booby prize on account o' both cars tippin' over!" The little thug was profoundly disgusted, dusting the cap he had been wearing with vicious slaps at his leg.

"How'd you know—" began Sleepy, when their captive interposed, "Half the people in town knew there was a big game up to the hotel. Well, come on!"

They went back to the cars, and found Darrell apparently unconscious, although there were no marks on him. He came to as they lifted him out. He was not hurt, only shaken up. The big car which Tex's driving had overturned was empty. Had the army car not turned over, the outcome of the fight might have been different. Apparently the rear highwayman had put Darrell away, according to the picture man's statement, with the first blow. Tex had had no fair chance against his adversary, and Sleepy would have found it difficult to get into action.

"I'll walk on back to the field," Darrell told them. He looked thoroughly disgusted and depressed. "I got to start early, and get there and back tomorrow. Night."

Without another word he started down the road to walk the mile to the airdrome, while Sleepy and Tex took up their journey in the other direction. Their captive, hands tied behind him with MacDowell's belt, trudged in ahead. He did not seem unduly downcast, merely disgusted.

"Did Darrell put up a good fight?" MacDowell asked Sleepy in low tones.

"Saw him take one good swipe before making one," Sleepy told him. "Suppose this gang are the ones responsible for the other robberies?"

Tex grinned, and then said with loud abruptness, "Well, you boys got a nice haul here in those two robberies. What were you going after small change like a few thousand for?"

The prisoner stopped dead in his tracks, and his crafty, deepset green eyes flickered back and forth between the two. "Whaddyer mean?" he barked.

"The Adams robbery, and the jewelry store. Arnstein's."

"Say, d'yuh sniff coke or are yuh just balmy? We ain't been in town five hours. Come up from Mexico. Heard of this job by accident around the hotel."

He seemed to be dead in earnest. Nevertheless, when he was delivered to the jail, together with fragmentary descriptions of his aides, Tex pointed out the possibilities to Deputy Luke Saunders, a dumb but brave assistant to the sheriff. Saunders got busy, called up the three policemen and a half dozen deputies, routed Sheriff Trowbridge out of bed, and in general was very busy during the five minutes of the flyers' stay.

They left the jail by taxi before Sheriff Trowbridge, cursing profusely at his loss of sleep, got there. Tex did not even go to bed. After a large and hearty breakfast he was off, with George Hickman in the back seat, for his patrol. Sleepy would notify the gang of what had been done at poker, and likewise send for the car.

Hickman enjoyed that ride along the Rio Grande, his finances now being in excellent shape, and so did Tex. As he gazed down at the pearly mist which swathed the cool green earth, however, the big pilot was thinking but little of the romantic, terrible, wild, beautiful and blood soaked strip of border below. His thoughts were centered back in McMullen; he was wondering and trying to figure out a workable hypothesis which would account for all that had happened. The whole thing was a godsend, lent spice to the ordinary monotonous meal of life.

There was almost an overdose of this condiment, it appeared. He slipped his bomber over the northern fence, landed it, and had just climbed out of the cockpit on the line when the grizzled, lantern jawed chief mechanic told him the news. "Know them fellers that tried tuh hold yuh up last night, Lieutenant?" he asked eagerly. "Well, the car they stole belongs to Mr. Trimwood, and he left it in front of his house. About five this mornin' a gang of four men come to the jail, knocked out two guards and shot another, and went in an' got this feller you brought in! The gang held up Young's milk truck, kidnapped little Arthur Granger and threw him in the back, and set off fur the river. They throwed the kid out in the brush a mile from the river, and the truck's been found abandoned on the road. They're in Mexico now, and nobody knows who they are or where they come from!"

IX

THIS latest pair of sensations completed the process of knocking McMullen and the denizens thereof into a stupor. Poor old Sheriff Bill Trowbridge, terror of the border lawbreakers in years past, went around gnawing his huge mustaches viciously; it was as much as a man's life was worth to say "good morning" to him.

The worst of it was that there was nothing to go on. The sheriff, after long conversations with MacDowell and Spears, had investigated as thoroughly as any man could. The night clerk at the hotel swore that not a soul had left the environs of the hostelry after the two flyers and Darrell. Neither had anyone come in. There had been no outgoing or incoming telephone calls. In other words, the participants and witnesses in the game had given out no information regarding who held the money. Krader, who had left, had been back in the hotel an hour before the game broke up. All the motion picture people lived there.

The jail break had been comparatively simple, of course. At that hour in the morning there practically was no one abroad; four armed men had had but little difficulty in accomplishing the task.

It appeared to make a solution of the series of crimes almost impossible, coming down to the fact that a gang of experienced crooks had picked on McMullen as a likely field for a good haul. It was the general opinion that the same gang had been responsible for the three crimes, and finally had taken refuge in Mexico.

How they had gained their information that Tex and Spears were carrying a good deal of cash with them; how they had known the location of Mrs. Adams' jewel safe so accurately and had picked their time so cannily, and how they had known the combination of Arnstein's safe remained deep mysteries. The colossal nerve of

their operations, culminating in the attack on the jail, commanded the uneasy respect of the town. Despite the fact that everyone believed the danger to be over, McMullen's police force was quadrupled temporarily, extra deputies were on hand at all times, and shopkeepers, the bank, and even the hotel took particular pains to guard valuables.

Perhaps Tex MacDowell, that day, was the only one who was not certain that the last of McMullen's private crime wave was over. While Sheriff Bill and others wondered where the crooks had hidden themselves and learned all that they certainly had known, he continually was tantalized by vague speculations which he somehow or other could not sink his mental teeth into. It seemed as though there was an explanation which would clear away all the mooted points, and that he always was on the verge of a hypothesis which would be reasonable. But it eluded him.

The exultation of the McMullen flyers over their unwontedly flourishing financial condition was somewhat tempered by the thought that they undoubtedly would have to give the poker profits back. Sheriff Trowbridge was the only man thoroughly acquainted with what had gone on, aside from the flyers themselves, and he believed, with them, that MacDowell was entirely wrong about everything but Darrell's crookedness. And Tex himself was inclined to believe that he had had a nightmare.

There was a game that night, despite the fact that the motion picture people had worked a full day. For hours at a stretch they had shot scenes around the town. McMullen was a very modern little city, with wide, paved streets and stores which would not have been out of place in San Antonio. But the contrast of the border was there, too, unmistakably. Next to a department store, the windows of which were dressed by a former employee of a famous New York emporium, was a little shop which sold nothing but saddles, harness, chaps and other equipment for a horseback riding country. Rubbing shoulders with men and women dressed strictly in the mode there strode the sidewalks awkwardly walking cowboys in boots and flannel shirts. There were hitching posts and a drinking fountain for saddle horses, along with neatly painted white lines on the pavement indicating parking space for cars.

All this was meat for the movie company. They shot scenes on the streets, in stores, and two in the palatial residence of the Adams family. The flyers did not have time to watch, but they got full reports.

Darrell returned from San Antonio with some camera parts in time to take part in the game. Tex and Sleepy were watching like hawks, naturally. At the conclusion of the game Tex, though he hated to admit it, regretfully decided that the game was square. Three times only there had been diversions of a nature calculated to make cold decking an easy matter, but only in one case had big hands come out on the next deal, and that hand he won himself.

It seemed that the night before the big hands had been accidents. And yet—it might be that the way he and Sleepy had laid down their hands during the latter section of the game had made their opponents wary, given them reason to believe that they were suspected. Darrell, Tex was convinced, had dealt four hands of crooked stud, but, like the other operations of the gang—if they *were* "operators"—his was crookedness of a kind which it was hard to nail definitely.

The big Southerner was somewhat mixed in mind, and distinctly out of humor with himself because he could not come to a definite decision. At the end of the game he had won three hundred dollars, and Sleepy a hundred. Their luck on the whole had been very poor, but a couple of big pots had kept them in the running.

Tex decided on a daring stroke. Perhaps he could surprise Jerome into proving his own belief that the game was not strictly square. If he couldn't he was willing to throw up his hands—Darrell's dealing always excepted, of course. The point was, did the rest of the actors know Darrell was crooked, and help him, or not?

So at the close of the game Tex said casually, "Mr. Jerome, can I have a word or two with you in private?"

"Why certainly," the suave director returned.

He led the way into the bedroom. He was dressed in a silk dressing gown, and looked every inch the cultured man of wealth and leisure. "What is it, Lieutenant?" he inquired, and suddenly it seemed as though his extraordinarily keen, expressionless eyes were boring holes into

the flyer's brain. "Just this, sir. This game has got at least one crook in it! Last night it had three."

Jerome stiffened, and his already ruddy face became suffused with blood. He seemed to control himself with an effort. He flipped the ash from his cigar, and his gray eyebrows settled grimly over his eyes. "Explain yourself, sir!" he said, and there was iron in the velvet of his voice.

Tex, concentrating fiercely on the handsome face before him, was baffled for the moment. He went on, "Darrell is crooked, Mr. Jerome. He deals crooked stud, and your not cutting at all times behind him gives him a chance to do his stuff. Here's the way he does it; Sleepy and I both got wise to him."

He had brought a deck of cards in with him, and showed Jerome how it was done. The director's face was a study. It was difficult to say whether surprise, anger, or some other emotion was dominant there. At the conclusion of MacDowell's demonstration a vicious oath escaped the lips of the director. It sounded all the worse coming from him. "That devil will ruin us yet!" he snapped.

Then Tex went on to explain what he and Sleepy had done the night before. "You see, sir, you can't quite blame us," he concluded. "We know none of you. Had we really believed you were all crooked, I would not be suggesting now that we call the game all square, that you put Darrell out of it and that we begin again——"

"Never!" Jerome's hand hit the dresser a terrific blow. The buzz of conversation from the sitting room ceased momentarily.

"Excuse me," Jerome smiled, himself again. "I am—stunned. But you were absolutely right in doing what you did. And any idea you may have of returning any of the money is ridiculous. I wouldn't think of it for a moment——"

"Nor would we think of keeping our winnings," Tex told him.

All through the conversation he was weighing every word he said, and watching Jerome for some inkling of the director's participation in the dishonest playing.

He half expected that Jerome would weaken after a perfunctory refusal of the money. But he did not. Instead, he interrupted the army man to say with crisp finality, "You will keep every cent! You bucked a crooked game, and won. And do not think that I am making any sacrifice. Now that you have informed us regarding Darrell—and I can see now that you are absolutely correct—the rest of us will get together and do just what you did. We'll win back the thousands he has won from us, and don't forget *that!*" he finished grimly. "If we get any more, he'll deserve to lose it!"

It is a definite indication of the flyer's character to say that he felt instinctively disappointed that he was forced to the conclusion that Jerome was absolutely sincere. Not that he was not glad, in a way, but it did put the quietus on any expectation of future excitement in that poker game—and somehow the blurred outlines of something larger which had been predicated on that game were completely blotted out now. In other words half expected events of a pleasing nature which he had felt were coming receded into the shadows.

"May I ask one thing?" the director said at length. "Will you please keep this quiet. We will see that if any outsiders are in the game, Darrell will not play. He is not normal. He has been a remarkable man who, for some reason, has sold a marvelous birthright for a mess of pottage. But we need him for this picture—it isn't easy to find a professional daredevil who can fly—and we must have a man who will deliberately crash a ship. It will cost us many thousands of dollars to replace him."

"Not a soul off the flying field, with the exception of the sheriff, who knows it already, will have any information," promised Tex.

X

EVENTS so shaped themselves that the lean Texan was away from McMullen for the next three days. A telephone call to the flight apprized them of the possibility that a herd of cattle being driven across the river might be in charge of rustlers, and three planes took off at eight A. M. to investigate. But customs inspectors on the bank were spotted immediately, and that was that.

On the way home the motor started cutting out. Tex was forced into landing in a small clearing where stumps and rotting logs abounded; and in this precarious task he wiped off his landing gear. While another was being shipped and installed he had to stay by the ship, living in a Mexican shack with the family—including two pigs, several chickens and a dog full of fleas—and do nothing but work and think.

He took off and arrived back at the airdrome just before noon of the fourth day. Possibly because he had had so much leisure, he was in a somewhat different frame

of mind that he had been when he left. What he mockingly called his "penny dreadful" imagination had figured out several ways wherein his original suspicions regarding that game might have been correct after all. He was taking the events of that last night somewhat more lightly.

Reporting in at headquarters, he had a chance for a few words with Captain Kennard. Darrell had been in the office, and left as soon as Tex came in. "How has Daredevil Dave been behaving?" he inquired as he handed in his report.

"Not saying a word; that is, like he used to," the C. O. grinned. "He's talked plenty, but it's the kind of conversation you like to hear!"

"He's had more adventures in more ungodly parts of the world than anyone I ever heard of!" declared Pop Cravath, the adjutant. "But the bragging is out. Sudden change—and a funny one."

"How are the movie people doing?" was MacDowell's next question.

"Very well!" the captain answered with a chuckle. "Jerome practically owns the town. He's bought a lot—paid a thousand down on it to bind the bargain—and is talking of trying to persuade his company to move their studios here. They're going to build, he says. He made a speech in the theatre Saturday night for the drive for a statue to McMullen's soldiers in the war, and gave a hundred himself. Likewise, the two old coots who've been going around with those actresses—I forget their names—both took part in some poker sessions at the hotel, and rumor has it they dropped eighteen thousand between 'em."

"Darrell in the game?"

"Nope."

"They've been shooting pictures, I suppose."

"All day long every day. We've flown for 'em a lot," Cravath said sourly. "They're staging the bank robbery scene today, I believe. This town's gone nuts over acting in the movies. They use about everybody. They've got the sheriff and about six deputies in this bank robbery thing, to say nothing of the whole staff of the bank."

Tex wandered out, bound for his tent to get a change of clothes. Again, stronger than ever, something was knocking at the doors of his mind. It was maddening. "Don't be a damn fool!" he told himself severely.

He wondered whether, by any chance, the sheriff had any news. Probably he'd get a good razzing when he saw the old-timer, because on that night after the first game he had confided all his suspicions to Trowbridge.

Darrell was lounging on the steps of the recreation building. The other flyers were busy about their ground jobs—each flyer has an administrative task in addition to his flying duties—and out on the line a number of mechanics were working over their ships in the blazing sunlight.

Daredevil Dave greeted Tex cordially. This was somewhat of a surprise. The man seemed to have forgotten the past entirely. "Glad to see you got back all right!" he said. He seemed to be in excellent spirits, although a trifle nervous. His small eyes were unusually bright, and a smile decorated his broad, irregular, devil-may-care face.

"What's up today in your business? Is that your ship they're warming?" asked Tex.

"Uh-huh. Bank robbery scene today."

"Do you fly in it?"

"Sure. They're supposed to rob the bank and then the hero is supposed to come dashing out here, grab a ship, and get 'em with machine-guns before they get to the border. I'll go by ship after the camera gets from the bank a couple of miles out on the road, and do the flying. We took the shots of the takeoff and all that here yesterday."

"I see. So you've got old man Jenkins and all his tellers and bookkeepers working for you, eh?"

Darrell grinned. "Sure. Rehearsed 'em an hour yesterday, Jerome did, and they're tickled pink."

Tex, restless as a stormy sea, and not quite knowing why, dropped down beside his former enemy and lit a cigarette. "Just what's the idea of the whole thing? What kind of a robbery does the script call for, I mean?"

"Ordinary daylight robbery," Darrell told him. "The gang'll just walk in, pull guns, herd the staff to one side, and then they're supposed to grab the dough and beat it in cars. The sheriff and his men

are supposed to arrive just as they're leaving, there's the big fight with blank cartridges, the robbers get away, and then we take 'em by plane. See?"

Tex nodded. "Great game, isn't it?" he said idly, his brain circling around and around a center which he could not quite identify. Then, "Well, I might as well test that ship, I guess, before I clean up."

This was a very sudden decision. Although he was engineer officer and test pilot of the flight, he had had no intention whatever of testing any ship five seconds before he had spoken.

Darrell sat motionless for a minute, saying nothing. Then, as Tex glanced over at him with some surprise, the movie man said casually, "You won't be going over town, will you? It might create some additional excitement, make people look up, spoil the effect of the pictures and cause a retake."

"I'll stay far enough away," MacDowell promised, and wondered why he should be a-tingle with the prospect of excitement in the immediate future. He felt that something was coming off.

Sergeant Cary warmed a ship for him, while Darrell stayed on the veranda of the recreation building. Tex noticed that Darrell's ship had had machine guns installed on it, borrowed army guns, evidently.

He took off with wide open motor, and cleared the buildings with a clean zoom. He circled around the field a few times for altitude, and as he got higher the town seemed to be moving closer underneath him. At two thousand feet it appeared to be almost directly under him, and in the clear sunlit air every detail stood out plainly in miniature.

The bank was on one of the central corners of the wide, paved, closely built up main street. He could see a camera set up on the opposite side of the street. Two blocks south, a group of men were standing on a side street. Probably these were Sheriff Trowbridge and his deputies, waiting.

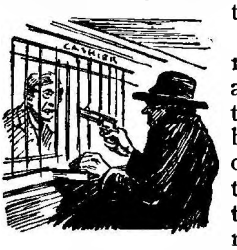
A block north of the bank two big cars were standing in the middle of the street, blocking traffic. It seemed that the main street had been closed, for the moment, to allow the scene to be taken. The sidewalks, however, held the normal number of people. Probably McMullen had become accustomed enough to the picture people so that the scene created no undue excitement, Tex reflected. Naturally Jerome would want conditions to be normal for the scene, but not unusually crowded.

Then the cars got under way, and as the camera men cranked away drove up to the bank, and all the occupants, except for two drivers, climbed out and entered the bank. He could see a man who was evidently Jerome using a megaphone. As the men entered the bank he dropped his megaphone and walked over toward the building.

Tex looked down at the field, and saw the motion picture plane circling upward. Darrell had taken off. He was about a thousand feet below the army ship. Tex watched idly as he waited for more action down below. They'd stage the robbery, and then have to take a shot of the cars leaving the bank, and another of the fight with the sheriff and his deputies.

Suddenly, like ants pouring out of an anthill, the actors rushed out and into the cars. Immediately the motors got under way, and dashed down the street. Tex, suddenly tense, wondered where the camera was. Taking a shot through the windows of the bank, perhaps.

But five seconds later Lieutenant Lee MacDowell, cursing himself for a brainless fool, was paralyzed momentarily as the meaning of events on the ground became clear to him in one blinding flash of comprehension! For as the sheriff and his deputies poured out for the struggle the cars kept on—and there was no camera to picture them! He could see the officers stop in their tracks, as though at a loss. Of course. Jerome was not there to direct them.



The pretended bank robbery had become an actual one, with the coöperation of the bank and the officers of the law! The latter, helpless down there with blank cartridges in their guns, were ignorant of what had happened. All the vague suspicions Tex had harbored for a week crystallized into the fact that the supposed motion picture company was a gang of versatile, audacious crooks.

With that realization the Texan's eyes began to glow as a leaping, dancing flame seemed to burn through his huge goggles. His tanned face was the mirror of fierce satisfaction. The joy in a struggle which was so much a part of him temporarily caused him to forget the bitter self contempt which had filled him at first. He could stop those fugitives, who were sending their borrowed cars at a dizzy rate to-

ward Mexico.

But there was Darrell. A blistering curse fell from his lips as he swept the sky and found that Darrell was above him, perhaps a half-mile back, and was diving fast at him. He had the strategic position, he had machine guns, and Tex could do nothing while he was in the air!

He must get rid of Darrell—the cars would make the border in less than fifteen minutes—and he was in a deadly position. A fight now would be almost suicide. He would chance it except that if he was shot the robbers would certainly get away. So he sent his DeHaviland into a terrific power dive toward the field. A hundred and seventy, a hundred and ninety, then two hundred miles an hour showed on the air speed meter as the ship seemed about to shake itself to pieces in that wild rush earthward. Behind it, like a grim Nemesis which could not be shaken off, Darrell was coming like a cannonball. Apparently heedless of the terrific strain on his ship, he actually was gaining on Tex.

Then a thought froze the Texan's face into a mask. He had figured on landing quickly, rousing the other flyers, and averting Darrell's suspicions of him at one and the same time. Now there were two angles to be taken into consideration. One was that Darrell, by remaining in the air, could shoot down every ship as it attempted to take off. The other was that the amazing outlaw, so curiously contradictory in his every action, was pursuing the Texan still; and at the moment Tex was absolutely certain that in that first combat the mad Darrell had tried to kill him. For what reason he did not know; but it was at least an even chance that the grudge he had held then he was holding now. Otherwise he would be winging for the border.

It meant a fight for his life, either way. He had to get rid of Darrell to stop those crooks. And Darrell was a quarter of a mile from him, behind him, on his tail, and gaining.

In a second the experienced army flyer had conceived a desperate plan. He made his dive a bit more shallow; a hundred and seventy-five miles an hour was the speed, and the shrill of the wires dropped a bit in its tone. Darrell's ship grew larger behind him. Tex, his head turned to watch, gaged the distance with a well trained eye.

Suddenly he nosed his ship down steeply. The terrific vibration increased until the struts were shaking in their sockets and the needles on the instrument board were shaking wildly. Then he pulled back smoothly, but swiftly, on his stick. If he had misjudged, and Darrell was close enough for an effective shot, he was a perfect target as the DeHaviland arched majestically upward in a loop.

Tex was crouched behind the windshield, his eyes trained along the guns in front of him on the cowling. As the ship was turning on its back, the nose still pointed upward, there leaped into his line of vision the pursuing plane. He was counting on Darrell's inexperience with aerial fighting, which carried with it, he hoped, no skill at aerial marksmanship.

Hanging on his belt, he pressed his machine-gun lever, attached to the stick. He held it down as a shower of bullets sped from his guns. For just a second the falling nose of his own ship, going further over on its back, kept a bead on the other ship as it dived for him. Then he jerked the stick all the way back, the nose fell abruptly, and the next second the D. H. was swooping out of the loop while Tex waited for the stunning impact of a bullet. He had seen the other ship turning a bit to get a bead on him—he had come at it from a slight angle. It must have it now, because he was helpless to control his ship for a moment.

But Darrell never was to take advantage of the absolutely open shot which MacDowell's ship presented as it dived downward out of the loop. As the Texan came level and immediately threw his ship into a bank to make it a more elusive target, he saw the other ship nose-diving for the ground. Darrell was through.

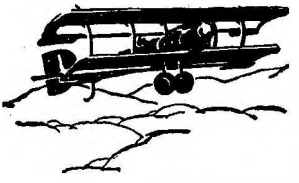
In a power dive—Tex now was fifteen hundred feet high—he sped across the airdrome for the border. He could see the flyers rushing wildly for the line. The fight in the air, and, undoubtedly, a hurry call from Trowbridge in town, had sent them into action. So MacDowell left the airdrome behind him, and never saw Darrell's ship come level just above the ground, and landed so fast that it ran into the recreation building as it overran the field.

The cars of the fleeing robbers were three miles from the border, speeding along the wide, level, sandy road. In a minute and fifteen seconds he had overtaken it. Here was another problem. He could kill every man, of course, which was a desperate expedient which he would shrink from until every other possibility was exhausted. If he was absolutely certain that the other flyers would arrive in time, the situation would appear differently. Besides, the women might be in those cars,

for all he knew, or the drivers be local men who were being forced to take part in the escape.

Then he saw a stream of cars dashing along the highway, a mile or more behind the fugitives. With that there came a possible plan which might prove effective.

A mile and a half ahead of the leading car there was a long, level stretch of road, and the mesquite did not extend within fifty yards of it. The DeHaviland was only three hundred feet high, and now the Texan sent it lower, and dived down ahead of the fleeing cars. His machine guns sent a burst into the road, a few hundred yards ahead of them. But they never faltered in their rush.



He swung the bomber southward again, and low to the ground flew toward the stretch of road he had in mind. He banked around until his plane was pointing directly up the road, and then cut the throttle.

Squarely in the middle of the road he brought the ship to earth, and for a breathless few seconds had all he could do to keep it rolling straight up the rutted pike. He used the motor once to make the controls more effective, and finally stopped safely.

He cut the motor, and dashed for the fence on the right hand side. He heard the faraway drone of the rising planes of the flight as he tore a fence rail loose and hurried back to the plane. It was not hard to raise the tail of the ship. He got his shoulders under it, and with the timber he propped it up. Thus his machine guns were angled slightly downward, and he commanded the roadway.

The cars were in sight as he got into the cockpit. The tremendous Liberty motor provided a perfect shield for bullets from the front. Of course they could get him from the side. But he counted on rescue before that eventuality arose.

He sent a stream of bullets pouring into the roadway before the cars came within range. Without the noise of the motor to drown out the vicious rat-a-tat-tat of the pumping guns, they sounded strictly businesslike. The cars stopped just as five DeHavilands, strung out in single file, came roaring over the road. Shortly after them came the pursuing cars. The men in the two stolen cars had alighted, and were holding their hands in the air.

Fate and the flyers had seen to it that the members of the Outdoor Pictures Corporation, Inc., were on their way toward a long stay indoors.

XI

WITH no possibility of acquittal for any one of them, all members of the gang talked freely. Jerome provided the most detailed story of clever criminal practice. Darrell was unable to talk, being very badly wounded. He had regained consciousness, briefly, just in time to save his bullet ridden ship from crashing.

Jerome had been an assistant director in California, before the drug habit had gained a hold on him. He and Darrell, with Jerome really the chief, had been the master minds of the scheme, which had netted his group in the six months previous to their descent on McMullen, close to two hundred thousand dollars and a life of luxury.

In Harvey, Missouri, a town of forty thousand people, and Janesburg, Mississippi, they had worked the same scheme which they had tried on McMullen, without the bank robbery. They really had incorporated a company, had bona fide picture equipment and really took pictures. Having picked carefully a town small enough to make their coming a real event, and their status assured, they had gone to work. The girls worked for two objectives; blackmail, and the inveigling of wealthy men into poker or crap games, depending on their pleasure. The cracksman of the outfit, previous to McMullen, had appeared openly under the guise of an assistant camera man. There were two other skilled burglars. Krader had been successful in victimizing silly girls of wealthy families for a certain amount of jewelry. They simply let local conditions and opportunities guide them, and they numbered in their group experienced confidence men, gamblers, and ordinary thieves. The secret of their successes had been twofold; their positions made them guests of honor and above suspicion; and their skill in operating; an important adjunct of which was the fact that they did not overdo their stealing. The two gentlemen in Harvey who had paid five and ten thousand dollars, respectively, to keep the mouths of the young ladies shut, were well able to pay more than that—yet never had been tortured into letting the whole thing out by incessant demands for more money than they could afford.

The crooks' undoing in McMullen had come through their determination to retire from the field of advanced criminality with a lifetime stake for each one. They had selected McMullen for one last big haul; and had come within a whisker of making it. It was a small town, comparatively, but a wealthy and up-to-date one; it was close to the border, to make escape an easy matter.

Consequently they had prepared elaborately. The airplane was used for several reasons. Darrell was a flyer in addition to being a skillful all around gambler; and the airplane lent additional weight to their claims of being picture people. Also, the plane had been used to transport the loot which they had procured from the Adams and Arnstein's store into San Antonio. Lastly, the three men who actually had performed the robberies had gone into Mexico, smuggled drugs valued at eighty thousand dollars in this country, and Darrell had carried them into San Antonio by plane. They had figured on making one big smuggling trip over the border itself by plane, later, after suitable arrangements had been made.

MacDowell, because of his knowledge of crooked poker and comprehension of their methods, had changed their plans completely. They had decided that McMullen might get hot for them. They had planned to stay at least a month, but then had decided to rob the bank immediately and scurry into Mexico, there to split into various countries where they would be safe. Miss Sanderson, so called, was Jerome's wife and the other girl, although not dignified with the title of "Mrs." was Krader's particular companion in private life.

The matter of Mr. Daredevil Dave Darrell was somewhat more complex. In the survey of the town which one of the gang had made before descending upon it, the fact that there were frequent and fairly large poker games at the airdrome came to light. Likewise, that Tex was the son of a rich man. Darrell deliberately had set out to act a part, with the object of taunting Tex into a big game.

Darrell was unable to talk, being very, very ill, but according to Jerome, who talked freely and without embarrassment, the man really was a bit of an egomaniac. He was the former Speed Granville, and had a vast opinion of himself despite the fact that years in all parts of the world had sent him steadily down into the depths of crookdom.

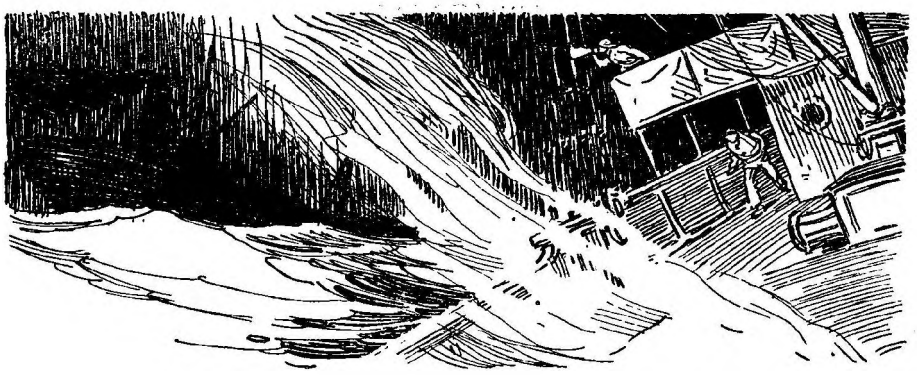
MacDowell's victory in the first fight had undoubtedly been the cause of Darrell's brooding over it. The matter of the bet on the flying contest, which had really been staged to allow for the Adams robbery, had been a purely fortuitous happening, although the gang had figured it easy money and so had Darrell. His humiliation there had made a temporary madman of the unbalanced flyer, undoubtedly, and he really had tried, although he had never admitted it, to kill MacDowell. The fact that the tall flyer overcame him in both things had turned Darrell into a jealous enemy.

The little mystery of how the three thugs had happened to waylay Tex, Spears and Darrell was easily explained. While the two flyers were out getting the sandwiches and laying their plans, the conspirators had come to the conclusion that it was probable that they would carry a considerable portion of their original six thousand, at least, back with them. And Jerome had felt that perhaps they were getting wise, although he had no particular reason for thinking so. So it had been decided that a holdup would be a very easy matter, on that deserted road; and Krader, when he left, arranged it with the three men who were in hiding in the mesquite two miles from McMullen, where a blind had been constructed which made them as safe as though they were in Mexico. They had stayed in the vicinity to hand over the proceeds of the Arnstein job so that they could be transported to San Antonio, thence mailed to New York.

Sheriff Bill Trowbridge, of Hidalgo County ensconced the prisoners safely in jail, and then went on a spree along with four of the flyers who had flown into San Antonio for the week end. Holding forth to a chuckling crew of airmen at dinner in the Officer's Club at Donovan Field, he closed his picturesque, blasphemous and self condemnatory yarn of what had happened with this sentiment, enunciated with twinkling eyes.

"And may all my children be sheep herders if I ain't aimin' tuh carry a rattle and a bottle back tuh McMullen with me; the rattle evidently bein' a suitable recreation for me, and the bottle tuh help me feel like a man ag'in!"

It may be inferred that the sheriff was not talking about milk.



BARRATEERS

By HOLMAN DAY

Author of "Killer Mackenzie," "The Sea Crutch," etc.

BATTLING FURIOUS WIND AND WAVE TO BRING AN ANCIENT WINDJAMMER THROUGH WOULD SEEM JOB ENOUGH FOR ANY MAN. YET WHEN IN ADDITION CAPTAIN DUNTON FOUND HIMSELF BESET BY TREACHERY ABOARD AND RASCALITY ASHORE IT ONLY GOADED HIM ON INTO BECOMING AN IMPLACABLE SEA-NEMESIS

SMASHING into the open sea from out of St. Simon's Sound, the barkentine *Christine Johnston,* John Dunton master, rounded the Brunswick Light Vessel and eased into her course up the long coast, Boston-bound. Full cargo of Southern pine and Georgia cockroaches!

The captain blessed the weight of the sou'wester, while he damned the light agility of cheeky roaches which used his chart for a skating rink and were hurdling his parallels while he hitched along the straight-edges in laying off his course.

He was giving the coast a wide berth. The glass had begun to crawl down bodefully toward twenty-nine in spite of the present sparkle of sunlight.

Later in the afternoon the wind showed portentous signs of backing instead of hauling reassuringly with the sun.

At supper the captain and First Mate Dave Warner listlessly canvassed the weather prospects for the sake of making a bit of conversation. According to custom they ate together; the cook would then spread the table for himself and the second mate and the engineer, the latter title being somewhat of a courtesy handle for the young fellow who tended the steam-heat boiler and operated the donkey engine.

After the cursory weather talk Dunton and the first mate ate for some time in almost complete silence. Warner was a bulky New Brunswicker, a "herring choker," who had been a shipmaster until rum had set him back a notch. That humiliation seemed to have implanted an everlasting grouch in him. He never had much to say except when anybody's misfortune furnished a topic and gave him an opportunity to vent his venom. Captain Dunton, younger, a big chap who laughed whenever he found an excuse and was charitable toward failings in others, had no taste for such rancor as Warner relished. Therefore, they seldom found a mutual topic and rarely talked except on matters of ship's routine and weather outlook.

In the midst of the meal, however, Warner started the conversation again, having apparently suddenly recollected something along the line of his favorite subject. "It was the talk on the Brunswick waterfront that Wiles has lost the *Peter Cranston,* sir," he observed slowly.

On this occasion the captain seemed willing for once to jog along with Warner on the topic of another's misfortune.

"That's right. I saw the news posted at the shipping commissioner's office. I'm sorry. That leaves the S. & M. folks only our *Christine* and three others, Mr. Warner."

"Well, Wiles can buy that farm up country now," growled the mate, helping himself to another plateful of stew.

"If he has saved the price of a farm he

has done better than the rest of us. Hard pickings in the windjammers these days, Mr. Warner, as well you know."

The mate gave the skipper a surly side-glance. "I'm not thinking, sir, that Wiles saved his farm price out of the regular fifty a month pay, and with charters down to where his primage don't pay a captain's cigar bills ashore. Oh, no!"

Dunton attacked his food and said nothing.

In past times Warner, having plastered a slur, would ordinarily have kept still. It was rather significant that in this instance he said more. "If nobody else will buy sailing-vessel property these days, I reckon the insurance companies will have to. It ain't human nature for owners to let vessels rot, waiting for the next charter."

Captain Dunton was known among his fellows for his Yankee bluntness. "Mr. Warner, you're intimating that Captain Wiles purposely wrecked the schooner. He has been unlucky with other vessels, I'll admit, but I don't believe he's renegade enough to do a barratry job. Damme if I do!"

"Why not?" persisted the mate.

"Because his folks before him built ships, Mr. Warner. The same as my folks did. As a boy he was around the yards, just as I was. And he saw the timbers hewed and the keels laid and the honest oak go into the ribs. He knows how the men built the wooden vessels, how they put patience and care and real soul into their work. Yes, sirree! So much of it that a sailorman, if he can claim any human decency, would no more wreck one of the old-timers than he'd stick a knife into his grandmother." He stood up and reached his hands above his head, patting a carline. "Perhaps if I'd ever got married, Mr. Warner," he added with a laugh, "I'd be dividing sentiment. As it is, I'm tacking it all on ships—on such a one as this, built in the days when men put their best into every tap of mallet and blow of hammer. And when they'd finished their job they sent every one down the ways, saying, 'Treat her square and she'll bring you through in spite of waves and wind!'"

Almost any listener would have reacted to the rugged eloquence of that honest outburst. But not a spark of sailorly response was struck from the flinty mate. He looked like a man who had been headed off in some intent and was angry and disgusted. He revealed his feelings as much as he dared, reaching over his shoulder to the small side-table in the corner, taking therefrom one of the two desserts of canned apricots and eating it sulkily.

"You get no kick out of my sailor sentiment, eh, Mr. Warner?" prodded Captain Dunton, his smile persisting.

"I ain't in love, sir, with anything that don't give me a decent living any more. These sailing-vessels—these *shes*, as you call 'em—seem to me like a lot of old deadbroke widders who expect men to chop their wood for nothing. The sooner the few that's left are put under, the better it'll be for sailormen. We've all got to go into steam. That's where I'm going, sir."

"And I, too, probably," lamented the master. "I have my papers already. But I'll use the widow right as long as I'm with her, Mr. Warner. I won't chop off her head as my last chore. And I can't believe it of Captain Wiles."

The mate, his dessert bolted, was leaving by way of the coach-house door, ship discipline barring him from the master's companionway aft. But at the door he halted, his back against the corner table.

"I ain't trying to tar Wiles in special, sir. But money is being passed to some skippers, and I'm knowing to it! Five of the S. & M. vessels have been piled up in a year—and the insurance has been paid. You and I know as how a new crowd took over the company a year ago. And even if I do work for 'em, they're foxy speculators, not the old style of owners like Searles and Marston was."

"I don't like such talk about the men who pay us our money, Mr. Warner." Dunton was sternly curt.

"But you're as sharp as they make 'em, Captain Dunton. I ain't telling you anything you don't know. The real Old Sirs ain't in the sailing vessel game nowadays in a lot of cases," persisted Warner doggedly, as if working up courage to pursue a purpose. "I don't care if the new fellows *are* our owners. They're out for a make, and they're getting it easy. They're slopping it around, too." He went on nervously, "When it's raining into their big hogsets, it's too bad the neighbors don't set out a few little buckets."

"Say it out, Mr. Warner!" The skipper's eyes were boring like augers. He roared the command with master mariner authority.

Warner took deep breath. Having

charged his lungs, like a human airgun, he shot his bolt.

"Excuse me, sir, but I'm a speck surprised because some kind of an offer hasn't been slyed up to you." He peered anxiously, betraying uneasy solicitude.

"It has been," bluffly returned Dunton. "Not longer ago than this afternoon when I was leaving the commissioner's office. The rogue was a good runner—else I might be now in the Brunswick lock-up, waiting to hear from a hospital and wondering whether the fellow would live."

Warner grunted, turned away from Dunton to hide a quick grimace of disgust and something else, then went on his way.

The cook came out of his pantry, handed Dunton the remaining saucer of fruit, and began to pick up the dishes. He was a one-eyed man, dim of vision in the remaining eye, but he always made his ears do double duty as collectors of information. "Heard you and the mate talking about a weather spell, sir. Reckon it's cooking hot stew to loo'ard. My pertaters burnt on twice, the water was boiling away so fast! That sign beats a barometer." But the cook promptly revealed that the weather topic was merely in the way of opening a conversation. "There's rum for' rard, Captain," he announced. "It's a tough gang, that new crew you shipped."

"I had to take what I could get in a hurry, Jim— H'm-m. Extra sourish lot o' apricots you brought aboard this time, seems like— But tell me. While I was uptown did crimps manage to get aboard and run off the other crew?"

The master made somewhat of an intimate of Jim Griggs. From ship to ship, as Dunton had been transferred in the past, he had taken the cook. Now the cook grinned.

"Apricots is always sourer than the last can before, sir. But crimps? Never a crimp got aboard, sir. You know me too well to think I wasn't always on the lookout."

"I was only giving you a lead to tell me what you know." The captain grinned. "When it comes to knowing, I hand it to you."

The cook came close and whispered. "I was going to tell you, of course, sir, but I was hating to come out with it. I don't believe it, no sirree! But the crew skedaddled on their own hook because the word got amongst 'em somehow as how the old *Christine* is going the same way as the *Peter Cranston.* The goofer-sign has been hung onto the S & M ships, and you probably know it."

"I do," confessed the master, now that he was speaking to a loyal friend. He cuffed from the table skittering cockroaches that were making for food remnants. "Even these hellions would have abandoned the ship at Brunswick if they could have understood the waterfront gab."

"Tongues are loose for'rard, sir. Rum is talking. Those tough birds have shipped, thinking they're going to be in on a split. Two of 'em, at any rate, were 'fore the mast on the *Logan.*"

The cook had named another S & M schooner that had bumped to her everlasting undoing on Tybee reefs. "Resks ain't nothing to that kind, Cappy Dunton. They'd chase a rolling dollar into hell and never wonder about the chances of getting back again."

The captain gave the cook a long and significant stare. "Did you hear Warner trying me out?" he asked bluntly.

"Sure. That's the way I took it."

"I know he doesn't believe there's any good in anybody, Jim. But damn him for the insult of wondering whether I could be bought. Looks like some sort of a chore has been turned over to him. Now we'll wait and see what's to be seen."

Dunton filled and lighted his pipe in his cabin and leaped up the companionway, two steps at a time. He did not bother to look under the binnacle hood, the telltale in his cabin having shown him that the vessel was on her course.

He did not glance at the first mate who was stumping the poop in the gloom. The master hurried forward, casting an appraising glance at the draw of the sails as he went. He was conscious of feeling personal rancor in the case of Warner, but he admitted that the mate had left no chance for a change of tack or sheet. Warner was on his job, at any rate.

Under other circumstances the master would have sent Warner forward to handle the liquor situation. But Dunton was admitting to himself that he was not trusting Warner overmuch that night.

The captain found the deck watch on duty. He carefully scrutinized their figures in the gloom as he went along.

The fo'c's'le was flush with the deck. He flung open the door and peered into the smoky interior, propping himself with palms on the jambs. He caught men in the act of drinking from pint bottles.

"Overboard with that stuff, all of it!" bellowed the captain. He swung to one side of the door and beckoned violently

with his arm. Three men, jumped by the surprise visit and cowed by the captain's vehement manner, stepped forward past him and flung away bottles which were nearly empty.

Two men, however, poked full flasks back upon their hips and glared with some insolence at the captain. They were shaggy, stocky, of the Russ type. Dunton guessed they were the men who had been in at the death on board the *Logan*. They were drunk enough to be stubborn and did not move when the master shouted his orders again.

"Do you want me to come in there, you two?"

"Yo' strike de hand on sailorman, sailorman tell de commish!" prated one, needlessly reminding Captain Dunton of the maritime law.

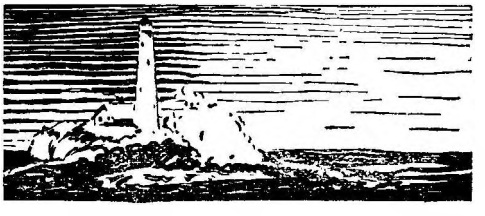
The captain in that moment of test of his authority was in no mood to argue with a sea lawyer. Leaping over the door-coaming he grabbed up the objector and dropped him on his haunches. There was a dull smash of glass and a spreading of wetness on the deck. Dunton served the second man in the same fashion. The other malcontents did not invite the treatment. They ran and heaved their bottles over the rail.

"If you want to report any of this business to the United States commissioner at Boston, go ahead!" Dunton advised the men who lay on the deck.

He made a swift survey of the fo'c's'le. The sea tramps had come aboard without dunnage bags. There was no bedding on the bare boards of the berths. Atlantic coasters do not provide any such luxuries for sailors. Therefore, Captain Dunton's eyes commanded all possible places for concealment.

He marched back to his quarterdeck. He did not comment to the mate on the discoveries forward.

Nearly abeam, elevated on its one hundred and fifty feet of massive standard, the



fixed white light of Tybee quivered above the western horizon.

Dunton took his bearings and ran below to lay out his change of course, to make a safe easting. He was mindful of the perils of Frying Pan Shoals though he still was many sailing hours to the south'ard of those foaming hazards which make Cape Fear a name meaningful for mariners.

When the clanging of eight bells marked the end of the second dog watch, Captain Dunton turned all responsibility over to the first mate and went below. The rush of a ship master's last hours before sailing are always tiring, but somehow tonight he felt unusually tired. He intended, however, to take merely a bit of a nap, in order to be on deck again in a short time, liking neither the looks of the glass nor the feel of the wind.

He turned in full rigged in his clothing as he stood, after he had kicked off his shoes. He placed his sea boots ready for his arising. Like most master mariners he set his mental alarm clock; it was for eight bells, midnight. He had always been able to depend on that post suggestion plan of waking himself. And he had not gone so far in his doubt of Warner as to apprehend that the mate would not give a prompt call, as discipline demanded, in case the master was needed on deck at any moment.

A half hour after the skipper had gone below, the mate trod softly along the lee alley and joined Catlett, the engineer. The latter had come aft over the deckload from his quarters in the engine house.

"Did you get anywhere with him, Mr. Warner?" he asked in a husky whisper.

"Can a schoolmarm bend a marline spike?" growled the mate. "And I didn't expect I could get to him, either. But there's never no telling how sick of his job a windjammer skipper privately is these days, and I was trying to give him his chance. No use. He preached me a sermon. It's a wonder he didn't sing a hymn!" The mate was manifestly working up his rage to stimulate his resolve, and was unduly garrulous with a subaltern.

"Going through with it, Mr. Warner?" The young chap's voice wavered.

"Ab-so-loot! You ain't paying-off to loo'ard on the thing, are you?"

"No—no-o, sir."

"This is no time for quitting, son. It's good money for us and it's going to be safe money because Dunton has such a clean rep. We're cashing in on that. And if it does turn out to look any ways phoney we'll hand the tarred end to the Old Man. He ain't big enough to outweigh the testimony of the rest of us when we're called before the Board."

"The crew is against him on general

principles, sir, after what he did to 'em in regard to the rum. I've had my ear to the fo'c's'le sheathing. They'll grab any kind of a chance to slash at him, and it's safer for them to use tongues than knives."

The mate squinted up into the dim hollows of the sails where the wind rolled in dull thrummings.

"Ain't this going to be awful resky business, Mr. Warner?" quavered young Catlett.

"If it wasn't resky there wouldn't be so much money coming out of the job," grated the mate. "But I want you to keep a stiff upper lip all through, and I also want you to listen to an extra amount of gab from me so as to brace your nerve! The wind is going to swing northeast, according to all looks. But there'll be enough of this breeze to take us free of Frying Pan, and we can afford to hug The Knuckle of the shoals. We've got to do that to make sure of what I plan on. When we're to the nor'rard of Smith's Island, then let 'er come from the no'theast all she wants to. We can heave to and take the drift back into the slough and the old girl will live it out on a soft bottom till our flares call the coast guard station. So calm your pucker, son, and give all your mind to the job."

Catlett gazed nervously about. The crests of surges raced past, white manes which came glimmering out of the night and were quickly blotted into blackness astern. "It's being out here that makes the job seem so tough. I suppose that's it, Mr. Warner. But the sea seems so cussed savage in the night and a feller hates to go monkeying with it!"

Schoolmarms were providing the mate with metaphors that night. He assured his uneasy coadjutor in roguery that the vessel would alight in the slough's mud as easy as a thistle-blow in a schoolmarm's hair. "But they'll never get her out and afloat again," was his grim verdict. Suddenly he turned and fixed his eyes fiercely on the pale-faced engineer. "Everything's all O. K. unless you fell down on your part of the game. And if you did——!"

Catlett, who among his other experiences as a rover had been an apprentice in a drugstore and had so informed the mate when taken into the conspiracy, shivered nervously.

"That dose of chloral hydrate was enough to stretch him out like a sleeping baby, if you gave it to him right."

"Oh, I gave it to him, right!" The mate laughed grimly. "Dumped it all in his apricots and then peeked through the skylight till I saw him finish it. Only you'd better be right on the amount of the dose. He mustn't be snuffed, 'cause he's worth more to us alive!"

"No, sir, it won't kill him," responded the engineer, still shaking despite his efforts to appear confident. "It'll just put him to sleep so in an hour a boiler explosion almost would fail to wake him."

"He'd better be dead to the world in two hours from now," said the mate succinctly, " 'cause I'm going to change course and I don't want him opening an eye on the telltale." Then he turned suddenly on the pallid man beside him. "Beat it, I got lots to do!"

Catlett scurried frightenedly in the direction of the engine-room hatchway. Crossing over, the mate plumped down on his hands and knees and listened at an open port. The port gave into his own stateroom, but for the sake of fresh air all the doors in the after quarters were wide open.

From the master's cabin farther aft where Captain Dunton slept came the sound of stertorous snorings.

II

MATE WARNER had his own undisputed way on the quarterdeck until midnight and he continued to have it after Second Mate Thorpe, heralding himself by the dry *Hek-hek, kerchek* of his chronic cough, came from below to take over the port watch. Warner did not go to his rest though he and Thorpe had a co-operating understanding as to nefarious plans.

The fact was, at that juncture two heads seemed better than one.

The weather was not working out according to Warner's cocksure prediction.

The wind had backed all right but the change was ahead of the mate's calculations. Furthermore that wind held doggedly to a point a little south of east and had an ugly thrust in it.

Thorpe, getting his eyes used to the night, blinked slowly at a far light in the west-nor'west which winked back at him at ten second intervals. Between the vessel and the far beacon were two white gleams which swayed and revealed to his sailor knowledge the lightship marking the southerly end of Frying Pan Shoals. The far flasher, he knew, was the great Number One-Order beacon of Cape Fear.

Then Thorpe tilted his nose to windward and sniffed and noted the struggle of the

ship to hold up to her course in her ratching offshore.

"My gad, Mr. Warner, we're going to have a devil of a time in weathering the Pan!"

"She'll do it, Thorpe. Of course I'm wishing I hadn't cut so close. But the glass has been moving slow and I thought the wind would hang sou'west longer."

"I'm doubting, Mr. Warner," persisted Thorpe. "Perhaps we ought to turn tail and run for the river."

"Leaving us no excuse except to drop killick and swing safe to a sheltered anchorage," objected Warner in surly tones. The two officers were at the rail out of earshot of the steersman. "Tonight's the only chance to get coin on this job. Do you think for a minute as how we're going to put Dunton to sleep with that sleepy stuff every night from now on? When he comes round from the present dose he's going to be the widest-awake man from West Quoddy to the Keys! And there's no telling what row he'll start with us when he does come to. He'll sail with a whole new outfit, prob'ly, if he's near a harbor where he can scrape together a crew. We'll weather the Pan, or else we'll never weather the job we're out to do. Go for-'rard and rout all hands and trim 'er up to the wind to the last fraction of an inch!"

Then began the fight of men who were keenly awake while below their captain slept as soundly and as heedlessly as though his vessel had been safe anchored in a landlocked haven instead of struggling for life off a fierce lee shore.

There are reasons which a sailor finds sufficient basis for his well known superstitions. The demons of the deep assume reality in a crisis, they seem to enjoy malicious teasing. They dangle hope, coax strugglers into bitter efforts, promise success and then doublecross promise.

For two hours Warner believed that he was weathering Frying Pan Shoals. Every few minutes he busied himself with bearings from the lights in the west. He tried to secure the comfort of accuracy by using a pelorus. Progress was slow, to be sure, but the promise seemed to be certain. The wallowing *Johnston* was pointed up as sharply as possible and though she inched ahead she was drifting off to leeward by feet—and Warner knew it! But for those two hours he did not give up hope. As ardently as he and his helpers were determined to wreck the barkentine for a reward, the value of the reward was contingent on the ability to spend the money. A wreck on Frying Pan would be a perfect job in the way of disaster, but there was little likelihood of any man in the crew needing money afterward, he pondered sourly.

During the third hour of the struggle Warner was in the hell of a doubt which inclined to despair. The demons were having a wonderful lot of fun with him in his desperate uncertainty.

During the fourth hour, and when the first streaks of gray heralded dawn, Warner and the men of the barkentine were without hope and were waiting for doom. They could see dimly the white sizzle of the bodeful Pan.

While the others whined or raved according to their bent, Captain Dunton slept on.

Catlett, heart stricken with the feel of coming disaster, was on deck trying to make his peace with God and was feeling particularly inept in the undertaking.

Jim Griggs was a hearty sleeper and always put in his best licks just before his alarm clock called him to turn out and start the galley fire. On this morning instinct instead of the clock popped open his one eye and brought him rolling out of his berth in the galley. Then he heard a wailing voice outside intone, "O Lord, I've been a missabul sinner!"

Cook Griggs instantly decided that matters must be in a bad way if the exigency could induce one of that tough gang to admit iniquity.

Griggs slapped on cap and pumps and was dressed.

He ducked out and leaped upon the roof of the galley from the jutting ends of the deck load timbers. The terrors of the shoals were revealed to his one-barreled vision. He went scuttling aft. His fears and his flaming queries outsped him. What had happened to Captain John Dunton? The *Christine Johnston* would never be floundering hellbent onto the Frying Pan if her master had been up and about and in his senses, Griggs was sure of that.

The cook failed to find the captain on the quarterdeck and shot shrill demands at Warner, venturesome in this time of general dismay.

"He must be below," vouchsafed the

mate, after making a pretense of staring around in surprise.

Down the companionway Griggs flung himself. He found Dunton asleep, breathing with stertorous regularity. The cook was not thinking clearly in the crisis but he could not believe that the captain had laid himself down for a nap, no matter how great might be his exhaustion after a night of vigil. Something was wrong! It seemed dreadfully wrong a bit later when Griggs had used all his efforts to waken Dunton and had failed.

At last the cook was helped in his anxious work over the master. But the nature of the help was demoralizing indeed. There was a shock which sent Griggs sprawling on his back. What breath was left in him was knocked out when Dunton, still unconscious, came hurtling from the berth and fell across the prostrate helper.

The vessel gave another heave. The bump which followed racked her from stem to stern. A slapping wave sent a volume of water through the ports and drenched the two men. The shock of the bump and the chilled sea water brought Dunton back to partial consciousness, and he rolled off Griggs.

The cook got upon his knees and beat his fists on Dunton's breast. "My good Gord, Cappy, she's piled onto the Pan!"

That cry was the real and final shock which put man's senses back into the master. He struggled to his feet and ran staggering toward the companionway, stopping for a moment and clinging to a stanchion when the craft careened almost upon her beam. His mouth was queerly bitter and his head was like a top, but somehow he scrambled onto the quarterdeck. It was swept by a wave as he emerged from under the hood of the companionway. When he came up, clinging to the abandoned wheel, he found himself alone.

He saw the whole crew, Warner leading, climbing the shrouds toward the maintop.

The captain shouted frantic questions while he stared from right to left and realized the ship's position. Also, a more puzzling realization, he perceived that dawn was breaking.

Not one word of reply came from the men who were climbing the maintop. For that matter they were having troubles of their own.

The *Johnston* had not as yet been rammed into her final lodgment on the shoals. Every few minutes she jumped and bumped. She was broadside to the seas. The oscillating hull swung the masts to and fro in long arcs and the loosening shrouds gave slack which was used on the climbers with bone-shaking violence when the masts fetched up short at the end of the tether. Only men with grit and toughened thews could maintain a hold. When the cruel jerks came they twisted arms and legs around the shrouds between the ratlines. Even as Dunton gazed, screaming his questions, one man was caught as he climbed with a slack hold and was snapped far out into the boiling smother of the Pan and went under to his death, his shriek cut short off.

Griggs came crawling up the companionway and halted for a moment, his head just outside the projection of the scuttle.

"What does this mean? How in the hell did I happen to sleep so long? Why wasn't I called?" Dunton roared the questions, trying to satisfy all his crazed bewilderment at once.

The cook ventured further out, in order to make himself heard. A roaring wave was toppling from starboard. It was coming on Griggs' blind side.

"I found ye—" he began.

But Captain Dunton never discovered from Griggs how the latter had found the master and why the finding had been delayed until disaster was full aboard. The big wave broke across the quarterdeck and

tore the incautious cook out of the companionway. At the same time the captain, clutching desperately the wheel, was half smothered under the rushing torrent.

When the wave had passed and when Dunton blinked water from his eyes he beheld the swing of an arm to leeward, a silhouette against the white foam. Involuntary gesture though it was, it served as the farewell of the faithful Griggs.

"Damn you, Warner, you'll pay me for this murder-work!" bellowed the master. Lacking answers to his questions, Dunton was depending on his suspicions and was convicting the mate.

The quarterdeck was no longer a tenable position. But Dunton made no try to run

forward along the deckload and get into the maintop with the others. He had expressed volubly and in full volume of voice his sentiments regarding their moral characters and their maternal forbears; he would be among enemies if he climbed the mainmast. Furthermore, the vessel had settled. The seas were rushing across the waist, now that she was lodged on the shoals. The timbers of the deckload one by one were wrenched loose and went adrift. Dunton would have no chance if he tried to make his way forward.

He seized an opportunity, ran along the lee alley and leaped into the shrouds of the spanker. While he climbed he was bitterly aware of the perils involved in his forced choice of a refuge. His owners had been resisting all his appeals for thorough repairs on the veteran barkentine. Especially, for instance, he had needed new chain plates, dead eyes and lanyards for the spanker mast. He had done his best to make the mast more secure by shroud stoppers, temporary rigging for the damaged parts. He could not hope that the supports of the mast would stand the strain now put on them.

When he reached the crosstrees he did what he could to prepare for the emergencies which he foresaw. He pulled his knife and cut a length from a top halyard and lashed himself to the mast. Already the makeshift repairs below were giving him their ominous signs. The mast was flopping so loosely as the craft swung that he would have been snapped overboard except for the lashings about his body.

He could see that the mainmast was holding. It had the support of guys to fore and mizzen, twin supports which the spanker lacked. The clustering men of the crew were managing to cling to it in spite of the lurching swing of the inverted pendulum. His own imminent danger compared with their more secure situation whetted the edge of his ire. Whenever he caught the first mate looking his way, Dunton shook his fist. He intended the gesture to be a declaration of implacable enmity.

But there came a time when he could no longer indulge in fist shaking. He needed both hands for himself.

Either the rusted eyebolts had broken or the shroud stoppers had parted, he could not determine which. But it was all the same. The starboard supports of the spanker had given way. The mast lurched downward dizzily when the huge seventh wave of the rushing series laid the *Johnston* over nearly on her beam ends. Dunton was sluiced under the boiling flood. The backstays and the guys to the mizzen held, however, and the mast was not permitted to go wholly by the board. But he found himself riding what was like a gigantic bucking bronco that seemed possessed of a devilish determination to bounce him off into the sea or to drown him by repeated dousings when the augmented seventh waves kept pounding the vessel far down on her side.

It became a nightmare of hideous punishment. His bones were racked, his thighs were rubbed raw. He was hardly recovered from one choking plunge when another succeeded. He found himself wishing that the seas would increase, would pound this torture vessel into splinters and give him the release of death. He cursed the *Christine Johnston*, anathematizing an honest ship for the first time in his life. But she no longer seemed worthy of respect. She acted as if she were using that spanker mast to give him especial castigation. On and on the cruel torture persisted, for how long he never knew. He was held in his place by the lashings which he had made with sailorman, A-1 knack.

III

BACK from a long wandering among phantasms and through weird scenes, Captain Dunton came into consciousness on a hospital cot. He gazed at the blank white ceiling for a time, then he pulled down his slow stare without moving his head.

"Good morning!" was the greeting from a bright faced nurse girl. She spoke a word over her shoulder and a doctor came from somewhere.

"You have made a noble pull for the shore, Captain," said the doctor. He took a look at the nurse's chart, made a quick examination of the patient and declared encouragingly, "and I'm sure you're on solid ground again."

After a murmured conference with the nurse, the physician turned to meet Dunton's gaze. The latter had become aware of the swathings which held him immovable.

"A gentleman representing the owners of the *Johnston* is in the city, Captain, and has asked us to tell him when you can be seen. I suppose it will ease your mind to have a talk with him."

Dunton was not sure as to the ease of mind in prospect but his curiosity itched. "I guess I'd like to be posted up by the

representative, sir. And what city is this?"

"Wilmington, North Ca'lina, Captain," returned the doctor, grinning. "I do reckon you didn't even know the time o' day when the Coast Guard boys fetched you up the river. You were sure in a bad way."

"How long have I been here?"

"This is the fourth day." The doctor was plainly anxious to be off to his duties. "I'll telephone to your man. He'll be here soon and can tell you all you want to know, I'm sure."

A fat and rather effusive man, a stranger to Dunton, came duly and sat beside the captain's cot. The nurse set the screen about the two and went away.

"You needn't worry about bills or anything, Captain Dunton. All looked after." The S. & M. man was making a great show of friendly cordiality. "And we have arranged the bail bonds, of course."

"Why the 'of course?'" queried the captain faintly, weakly, but in utter astonishment. "Why've I got to have bail?"

"Hush! Let's talk low. The Federal sharps got after your mates and the crew while their wits were still rattled. Too bad. And the insurance adjusters and inspectors were just as lively. They're all digging into losses more than they used to, you know."

Captain Dunton did not wonder at that, considering what had been happening along shore.

"The depositions put it all up to you, Captain. But your crew seems entirely loyal."

The master grunted, repressing his fiery convictions on that point.

The informant went on soothingly. "They had to put it up to you, of course. No direct charge that you acted with foul intent or any criminal purpose. Certainly not! Your record is too clean for any charge like that to stand, no matter how ugly the insurance people may feel. And the S. & M. folks don't think anything of the sort. No, no." The fat man was friendly reassurance personified. His rubicund face glowed with kindly sympathy. "But you did cut too close to the Frying Pan, considering weather prospects and barometer readings, which are all a matter of open record by the government stations. I suppose they must hold you culpable until the contrary is proved."

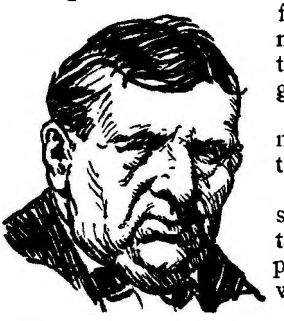
Dunton was stricken fairly aghast. Oh, if he only could stand on his two feet at that moment and bang fist into palm and curse out the liars! But he felt as helpless in his mind as he was in his body. Had his wits been normal, had he been cautious according to his usual New England shrewdness, he would have held back what he now proceeded to blurt.

"They say I cut too close? They say I —damn their lying tongues! I wasn't on deck from eight bells, the first mate's watch, till it was coming daylight!"

The fat man's round eyes circled into wider circumference. His lips were pursed into an O that was more expressive than the spoken ejaculation would have been. "Wasn't on deck? My, my! And where were you, Captain Dunton, with your vessel in jeopardy, may I ask?"

The master realized too late what a blundering fool he had been. In shifting all the blame to him the liars had at least left him the excuse of poor sailor-judgment; he had been given the credit of having been at his post of duty.

"Where were you, Captain Dunton, I ask again!" If the fat person were affecting astonishment he was certainly making a good job of it.



"I was asleep in my cabin, sir, all the time!"

"I can't understand that, Captain Dunton." Reproof was mingled with amazement.

"I can't either. The only man who could have told me anything about it was Griggs, the cook, and he was washed overboard while he was trying to tell me something. It's a devilish queer proposition, sir."

"So. I see, *now.*" The S. & M. man put much emphasis on the *now.* "Are you such a heavy sleeper, usually?"

"Never, aboard ship! I'm a master mariner, up and down at all times of night."

"Are—er—are you a drinking man, Captain?"

"Not on board my ship, sir."

"The—er—depositions admit that liquor was smuggled on board at Brunswick," probed the owner's man.

"There was. And what I didn't smash was thrown over the rail by my orders, sir."

The fat man set the tips of his fingers together and gazed musingly up at the ceiling. "We'll let pass for the moment

the fact of your sleeping so profoundly, as you assert, counter to the depositions though your earnest statement is. But, if I may say so, I wish you weren't so positive about the sleeping, Captain Dunton. It's a hard thing to explain in an admiralty court. And you're technically under arrest, you know, as I've intimated."

"And again I ask, what for?" The captain twitched his swathed, hampered legs and managed to be explosive in the query.

"Criminal negligence is assumed, for the sake of court investigation and to determine to what extent you are to be penalized by a further suspension of your master's papers. But you have muddled the matter badly by what you say. Even in spite of the position of the ship on a clear night when there was no excuse on account of the lack of bearings, I'm sure you'd have come nicely out of a trial, because of your past record. But this confession of sleeping through it all—I hate to be so explicit, Captain Dunton, but it does sound fishy. You must admit that much, yourself. Why, my dear sir, if you had been below, the mate would have called you the moment he was in doubt. Your statement upsets the facts of the commonest shipboard routine. The responsibility of the master dominates all discipline, of course. You have terribly mixed up the case, I repeat. First Mate Warner especially mentions in his deposition the exact time when he called you on deck."

Dunton managed to raise himself on one elbow. This act and the volume of the skipper's voice startled the fat man and his gaze snapped down from the ceiling.

"Where is that damnation scoundrel?" demanded the enraged victim of piled-up circumstances.

Rattled by the sudden violence and disturbed by the captain's stern glare, the visitor made rather ineffective pretense at surprise. "Why, my dear fellow, you sound quite vicious. What particular grudge do you hold against Warner?"

But once more Dunton was mentally kicking himself for disclosing too much to the hostile side. On that side he was now arraying this unctuous emissary from the S. & M. folks. The man must know the whole inside of the case! Dunton made no reply when the other demanded a second time. After waiting, the man went on.

"Warner seems to be a good friend to you, sir. When the Coast Guard managed to get a boat to the wreck Warner did all he could, I am informed, in having you attended first, though he was suffering much from exposure."

Dunton believed he knew why the mate was so solicitous about the preservation of the scapegoat, but he determined to hold a grip on himself and to calk in the foolish leaking of more revelations. "Where is Warner?" he asked mildly.

"He has been allowed to go off about his business, Captain. The authorities at first wanted to hold him as a material witness, but it really seemed unjust to keep him in jail for weeks. Same way about the others of the crew. It was felt that your examination, or trial, if it comes to that, would be only perfunctory at the most. Your record, you know——"

"Better cease paying out on that cable, sir," advised Dunton sullenly. "I know my own record, but it looks to me like it's due to get a devil of a ripping. A ship's crew scattered to hell 'n' gone. They can't be rounded up again. Men will depose, easy enough, when they don't dare to swear to the same things in court and risk being nipped for perjury where they stand!"

"Well, it seemed best to us, working in a friendly spirit for our employees, to arrange bonds for all, just as we did in your case, sir." The man's eyes narrowed. He responded in a measure to Dunton's hostility so illy concealed. "It won't need those witnesses to damn you in court, Captain Dunton. Your own story will do it, if you testify that you slept through the night. Their deposed testimony will help you, if you shift tack and follow it on your own account."

"I won't go into court and lie," was Dunton's defiant rejoinder.

"Then you'd better keep out of court, Captain. Forget the bonds we have posted for your appearance. The S. & M. will gladly stand the forfeit to keep you out of trouble."

Dunton was now thoroughly irate. He was a physical wreck, his nerves were on edge after his bitter experience, he was rasped cruelly by the conviction that all of them were taking advantage of his helplessness. "Look here, Mister Man, whoever you may be——"

"My name is Bucklin. Pardon me for being so late in telling you."

"And you've been just as long in getting to the real business that brought you here! That business was to advise me to duck out and never face a court. You want this thing kept covered, and you're not a bit sure about what will happen if the lawyers get witnesses on the stand. I'm not

telling *you* what was done to the *Christine Johnston*. Why waste the language?"

With much effort Bucklin held his temper. "Captain Dunton, I'm excusing your suggested slander on account of your nervous condition. You need a good rest. The S. & M. will look after you handsomely till you're on your feet and until steps are taken to give you back your master's papers."

"Sneaking in by the back way to get my own which never by rights should have been taken away from me! There's a brand on me as a shipmaster, as the thing stands. I'd never be able to get another command with real square-dealing owners."

"The S. & M. will take care of you in that line, as soon as you're on your feet and have your papers back," Bucklin assured him. "We're buying in more tonnage. We hope to be less unfortunate from now on. We consider you're a first class master. We do not hold your one error against you, Captain."

"But you'll hold the end of a dog chain on me if I even sign up again with the S. & M. and I know what kind of jerks I'll get if I don't trot along at heel," snarled Dunton, of no mind to mince words any longer. "Look here, Mr. Bucklin. I'm getting too much of a jolt for a sick man. I got jolts enough on one of your ships. I'll run no risks on another of 'em. Understand? And I'll walk in by the front way and get back my papers, somehow!"

The captain managed to turn over on the cot, his back toward Bucklin. There was a bit of cheer in the thought that he was able to move himself.

"Dunton, if you're leaving the matter this way I'm taking what you have said as a threat."

"Go ahead and take it. Also, take your hat and beat it!" snapped Dunton with sailorman bluntness. It was not reckless inviting of conflict or foolish bravado, as he viewed it. But all his mariner nature was in revolt. He had known well enough about the sinister influences at work in certain quarters when post-war stagnation tied up the overplus of wooden bottoms 'longcoast. And the more he knew the more bitter had grown his silent anger.

This was the second time he had been actually confronted by the thing itself—first by the suave agent in Brunswick when Dunton could fight on his feet, and now by Satan in the person of a fat man who sought to inveigle a stricken mariner whose honest record had still more coupons to be cashed in. Therefore without stopping to weigh chances Captain Dunton had struck out as vigorously as he could under the limitation of being flat on his back. He was determined to hit harder somewhere, somehow, when he got to his feet once more.

He heard Bucklin tiptoe squeakingly away.

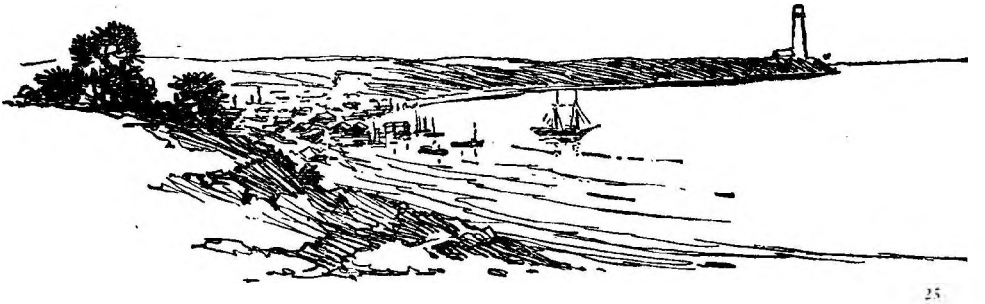
But the visitor came back and leaned over the cot. "Hark ye, Dunton. If you start something by trying to prove that the loss of the *Johnston* was not an act of God, strictly as the insurance regulations interpret, you'll get the pitch end as the principal in a barratry case."

The captain did not turn his head to look at Bucklin. "I give you the old packet toast," he said with grim humor that ended the interview more effectively than would have been accomplished by indignant retort. "Here's to salt hoss and brickdust! If you can't chaw meat you can scour knives!"

IV

ANYTHING which cannot be picked up in Norfolk regarding mariners' affairs along the Atlantic coast may as well be kicked aside as of no worth, anyway.

And Twohey's towboat office—up one flight, overlooking a dock where there's plenty of parking space for motor yawls and captains' gigs—may well be called the publication office of the word-o'-mouth Who's-Who and What's-What and Why-



is-Why of all maritime affairs between Grand Manan and Key West. Furthermore, the mental, moral, marital and money affairs of all master mariners are in for daily discussion by the constantly changing delegations from the arriving coasters.

Nor is it necessary to be admitted to the select circle of loafing master mariners in the second story office if one wishes to secure the latest intelligence. An aura of tattle seems to envelop the rusty buildings on the waterfront. When some stiff-legged sturdy chap goes stumping up the wharf, his loose trousers flapping against his shanks, his coat tails wagging importantly, even the darkies unloading oysters and garden truck from the clustered bugeyes canvass his identity and his doings.

John Dunton, discharged from the hospital after a long convalescence, went to Norfolk, naturally. He was questing a tip as to the whereabouts of Dave Warner.

Dunton looked at himself in a mirror as often as he found an opportunity. It was truly a strange person whom he saw in the glass, but he needed frequent reassurance in his belief that nobody would recognize him.

He was gaunt after his long confinement. His beard had grown. He cultivated a stoop and a shambling gait. He wore a suit which he had secured in a slop-shop, and the disreputable garb along with a Scotch cap slewed over one eye helped to make him anything but the upstanding, solidly built master mariner who had been often in the port of Norfolk in the past.

Dunton was not trying to elude any vigilance of the law in this suppression of his identity.

Before leaving Wilmington he had satisfied fully the demands of the law and had freed himself from any obligation to Emisarry Bucklin and the S. & M. folks.

Using the mails and the kindly offices of his nurse as amanuensis, he withdrew his savings from a Boston bank and was able to post cash bonds of his own, guaranteeing his appearance in court at a later date which allowed him a few weeks in which to delve for facts that would clear him. But he had scant time in which to work. He had a sailor's respect for land-law and was fearful of the sharp practices that might involve him unless he could go into court with proofs which would clear his record.

There was relief in the feeling that he now owed nothing to the S. & M. people; he was resolved to give them battle in man fashion.

On the other hand, the sense of relief was clouded by the need of haste. Dunton overlooked no opportunity and he did not count chances.

As he dared he offered himself to inspection by this one or that, gradually working up the list to men who had been more or less intimate with him—captains who were entering or leaving the towboat office. He haunted the outskirts of that news center. Not one of the captains showed a glimmer of recognition or a spark of interest, not even when this former associate humbly solicited a berth before the mast. In fact, old Captain Erskine scornfully said, blowing cigar smoke in Dunton's face, that the job-asker hadn't a single mark of the able bodied seaman about him.

"Sailor, hey? Go back to your swamp-pine tract, man! You've never smelt tar except in a kittle!"

Dunton keenly relished that slur; it was convincing endorsement of his rôle as a nonentity. He had sailed with Erskine as mate.

One day, sitting with other loafing rail-birds on the wharf stringer, he got what he was waiting for, his line on Dave Warner. Dunton overheard talk between a couple of skippers who had met on the landing float in the dock. One of them had given up his ship, it was evident. He was telling a "dinge" where to take the baggage with which the negro had loaded himself. Dunton knew the skipper as the master of the *Preston B. Keyes.*

"She has been sold to the S. & M." he told his questioner. "They have put in one of their own men."

"You ought to be glad of that," retorted the other captain. "Knowing what I do of her, and you probably know more, I'd haul on a cork jacket and be ready to jump as soon as I was ten feet to seaward of the Thimble. Who's got her?"

"A feller named Warner. The mate who was slicked over with so much newspaper praise for keeping Jack Dunton alive in the *Johnston* pile-up on the Pan."

"Well, she may do as a gamble for a boozefighter like Warner but not for a man in his sober senses."

"You're right. I was all ready to leave her, anyhow." The two went walking up the float gangway. "Last trip out o' here, with only four thousand tons of coal, she was hogged all of two feet extra length on deck and I had to use 'most enough iron

wedges in her old gap-mouthed rail seams to make up the full registered lo'd tonnage. I wonder how the S. & M. will be able to squeeze her in under that blanket insurance of theirs. But I suppose——"

By this time the speaker was out of Dunton's hearing, but the listener had heard enough.

He hurried to a street car, rode into the suburbs and dropped off in the vicinity of Lambert's Point. Through an atmosphere of coal dust he searched along the great sheds till he found the *Keyes*, a rusty four-master. Into chutes which led to her four hatches cars were dumping soft coal in a steady roar. Already she was well down to her full load mark; she would be in the stream before daybreak, he could see.

An aimless trespasser, attracting nobody's attention, Dunton sauntered out to the end of the wharf and came opposite the schooner's quarterdeck. He knew well enough that Warner was not aboard. Masters make it a point to keep discreetly away from their vessels while coal is going into the hatches. The smother of floating dust was settling to make a deeper smear over decks, rails and house. He would have welcomed a test by Warner's scrutiny. Since the meeting-up with Erskine the confidence of Dunton in his new guise approached bravado.

As he walked along the wharf he had seen Catlett fussing with engine parts in the door of his den. Dunton found the engineer's presence significant. Evidently Warner was bringing his own crowd with him.

In his trip to reconnoitre, Dunton hoped to get a sight of Thorpe. If Thorpe had stuck with Warner the fact would be even more significant than Catlett's signing-up. Dunton was not a bit surprised to see Thorpe sitting on watch outside the coach-house door. The mate squinted lazy eyes at the man who cast a shadow from the wharf. No recognition showed in Thorpe's countenance.

"Any look-in for a berth, sir?" asked Dunton humbly.

The mate did not exert himself to the extent of speech. He shook his head and gazed indifferently in the other direction, clucking his characteristic cough.

Spiritlessly Dunton turned and shuffled away.

If Thorpe was watching he apparently had no interest whatever in this spineless shiftless creature. He was lazily watching the swaying rattling chutes.

Cr-r-rr cr-r-rr-rrr! they roared as the rocky cargo pounded through them. They continued to roar while the sun sank beyond the west, and long afterward. Dazzled by the flaring cargo lights no one aboard noticed when, like a furtive shadow, something dark and moving slipped out of the pier's inkiness, over the vessel's rail, and merged soundlessly into the equally black obscurity of the fo'c's'le-head.

V

ONLY when the thump of feet and the roars of command told Dunton that the tug was casting off, did the stowaway come forth from his snug hiding place under the fo'c's'le-head. The mud with which he had coated himself the night before was caked on his skin and clothing. No sooner was he on open deck than a fearful roar from overhead greeted him. Thorpe was standing there, staring and cursing furiously.

"Blast me if it isn't a muddy scarecrow!" he ended breathlessly.

Dunton saw that there was no recognition whatever. Nothing but choking rage. In his guise as scared stowaway he stepped forward timorously.

"Please, sir!" he began earnestly. "Please, sir, you won't send me back, will you? You won't turn me over to 'em? They'll kill me aboard that dredger!"

"Send you back?" gulped the mate. "No—but you'll wish we had!" He purpled apoplectically. "So you're a deserter off that mudscow back there in the channel, are you?"

Dunton nodded eagerly. "Yes, sir. But please, you'll take me along with you, won't you, sir? I'll sure be killed if I'm put back. And I hain't done nothing except beg off from being kicked around, sir!" Dunton was suiting his language to his aspect; he was coated with slime and mud; from head to foot he was a woebegone figure of ignorant, poor-white, supreme misery. "I'll work for nothing, sir, from here to port, wherever it is."

"I'm not sure you won't be kicked around on board this schooner," suggested Thorpe grimly. Then he turned and walked aft, having been hailed by Warner from the break of the poop.

Dunton heard the query, "What the 'ell's to pay for'rard there?"

He failed to catch the rest of the talk but by the mate's manner when he came forward again it was plain enough to understand that the master was in no mood of cordiality toward uninvited guests. In fact Warner's first curt command to

Thorpe had been to send the man back to be killed, with the added regret that another engagement prevented Warner from being present at the festivities. "But just a minute, Thorpe!" He beckoned and the mate climbed the short ladder in order to be close enough to hear a murmured confidence. "Better let him stay. I see a way to use him. Two men lost from the *Johnston* was proof enough for the insurance folks that there wasn't any faking in the pile-up. One dead man out of the next fracas will give it a look like a piece of the real goods. Go give him a razz that'll make death seem good to him. Nothing like priming a man into a happy hankering for what he's going to get!"

Therefore, Thorpe swore at the interloper and sent him limping to the job of swabbing off coal dust from decks and rails. Dunton took occasion to smear plenty of grime on his face in order to complete a perfect disguise. The other toilers before the mast treated him with stolid indifference.

His scheme had worked out. He was in the camp of his foes. But beyond that strategic move he had no plans. His essay up to date seemed like a piece of lunacy, anyway. To go on with any definite plans about coping with such odds would be indulging in a crazy dream, he felt.

The tug had cast off below The Thimble. He was not ordered with the rest of the crew to the work of getting on sail. All day he was left to his scrubbing job, it being evident that he was receiving no consideration as possessing possible sailor qualities. Thorpe did not condescend to ask. The second mate, peering aloft as he strode along the deck, yelling profane commands to men shaking out the topsails, stubbed his toe against Dunton's pail and was splashed with dirty water. Thorpe relieved his seagoing feelings in general by cuffing Dunton; the act told much. This was not a signed-on sailor who could report assault by an officer.

Nor, in the case of the intruder on board, was there the matter of watches to be considered. As night came on, nobody gave Dunton permission to stop working, therefore he kept on. It was a mean job in the darkness. He worked his way aft and began on the quarterdeck rails. He was obliged to dodge Thorpe's kick when the master and mate came along the lee alley in conference, strolling slowly.

"Get at those skylights, man!" ordered the mate.

Warner and Thorpe, leaning on the rail, paid no more heed to the swabber in the gloom than they would have shown in the case of the ship's cat.

Apparently, Warner and Thorpe found this their first opportunity for their confidential talk after the duties incumbent on getting under way.

Dunton came into knowledge of a change of plans, whatever had been decided on previously.

"We can't turn the trick this side of the Vineyard and have it seem just right," stated Warner. "I've been getting a line on this spontaneous combustion stuff in a coal pile. It takes a long time for a fire to get going in good shape in a yard, and in a cargo with battened hatches it's slower business. By waiting till we're out in Nantucket Sound we can build up a better case. I'll signal Montauk or Gay Head that we're handling a leak. That'll get a notice in the ship news and be a good plant. Later I can hand Nobska a good eyeful of flags as we're heading into 'Tucket Sound. Then we'll give her the jab when we're held together somewhere between the Hedge Fence and the Cross Rips. We've got the lightships handy if the weather ain't right for a pull to shore."

"It ought to work out to the queen's taste, sir. Catlett has got everything set."

Warner walked aft. Thorpe, on his way behind the captain, shouted to Dunton, catching a glimpse of the swabbing lackey, "Go forward and turn in, you mud-lubber!"

As well as he had been able to observe, Dunton was quite sure that Warner had held together the former crew of the *Johnston* and had brought the compliant rascals along on this new venture. The two men of the Russ type had been marked by Dunton's scrutiny as soon as he emerged from the belly of the foresail.

Later in the gloom he had spotted the second mate, a string bean sort of a chap, with a vague stare, a listless manner and an everlasting trickle of tobacco stain on his chin; he had been bos'n on the *Johnston.*

When Dunton entered the fo'c's'le, going from his work of scrubbing, he found a group of his "witnesses," according to his well-founded surmise. And they met his doleful expectations in other respects. They immediately began an angry discussion as to whether the wretched outcast should be allowed to stay with them and have a berth on the bare boards. Looking at those well remembered faces, Dunton's New England sense of humor of grim contrasts found a relish in this situation, comparing it with the occasion when he had swooped on them as their lord and master.

Then came a pounding, evidently with a grate bar, on the sheathing between the fo'c's'le and the engine-room. "Lay off'm that twitter," yelled Catlett from beyond the wall, "or I'll have the mates on your backs!"

One of the men voiced the thoughts of the others when he growled, "Our boiler-bub sets all pretty as popper's pet. Better not let him start anything."

Dunton seized this opportunity and climbed into a berth. When the men scowled at him he snarled, "Keep off, or something will be started, all right!"

They did keep off but with ill grace. He found it an irritating and insulting tolerance because it was the same as that which would have been accorded to a mangy cur who threatened to rouse neighbors by yapping.

In the morning the men were able to show more safely their scorn of him. They elbowed him away from the galvanized tub which the cook placed for them outside the galley door. There is no setting of table for an Atlantic coaster crew. The tub is slammed into the alley and the men dip in with their fingers. They cut meat with their sheath knives.

After the others had gobbled their food Dunton got his from the leavings. But he was assiduously whetting the edge of a grudge and told himself that even these men were turning the grindstone for him.

He was set at work with a metal scraper on the decks in the wood of which coal grime was fairly ingrained. It was as meaningless a job on that ancient hulk as carrying water in a sieve for slushing purposes. In view of the planned destiny of the schooner, as he had been let in on it, the uselessness of the task gave still more wire edge to his rancor.

The days dragged on, one after the other, with devilish stretching out of his misery.

Flagging winds, fogs and futile tackings made it truly a long road to Boston, that trip.

Dunton could only wait and work and endure, according to his dogged determination.

On one occasion Thorpe halted and glanced down at the man who was rasping nerves and making fingertips still more raw with the everlasting *scrape scrape* in the foolish toil to which he was kept.

"Feel that you're earning your passage to Boston, man?"

"This is hell, sir," Dunton ventured to return in protest, hoping for the mercy of a change in work.

"Oh, no, it isn't," chuckled the mate, bold enough with this nonentity to vent in speech some thoughts which he found humorous. Furthermore, Warner was in hearing at the break of the quarterdeck. "You'll find out all about hell in a few days. And when you do, kindly drop me a postal card."

In the laughter in which master and mate indulged, Dunton found menace to himself of a personal and peculiar nature. He could not believe that they had recognized him. Also, a remark from Warner as Thorpe climbed to the quarterdeck gave Dunton a different slant from the quick and first suspicion that his identity had been betrayed.

"I guess he hasn't anybody else but you who'll be interested in where he's gone, Mr. Thorpe. They're never missed, that sort."

The threat of his impending disappearance, canvassed in such cold-blooded fashion, stuck out starkly in Dunton's thoughts after the men had gone along. With his life in danger he set to sharpening his wits as well as his grudge.

VI

ANXIOUSLY Dunton blocked off the slow stages while the schooner headed for the scene of her undoing, as he had caught the drift of the plans.

Block Island, The Sow and Pigs, Gay Head and then the progress up Vineyard Sound. They were nearing the threshold of the designed disaster.

By fire, that dread nightmare of the

mariner, was the schooner to be put in the graveyard of dead ships.

Dunton had read her fluttering signals which were run up when they were in touch with the coastwise stations. Warner was paving his way with hints, leaving the climax less open to suspicion of foul play. The news of the loss would come after the shipping world dopesters had wagged wise heads and commented on what might be expected in the case of racked old sea-wagons that had carried on too long.

On an evening masked by a fog scud Dunton at last heard the great Daboll trumpet of Nobska with its ready wail. Clanging alarm bells indicated that others had anchored as a matter of precaution. But Warner put a man forward with a bellows-horn and pushed through toward Nantucket Sound.

More than ever was Dunton conscious that he was up against a wall, and he felt especially lonely and helpless there. He perceived only one possible crevice—young Catlett. Dunton had pondered long and anxiously on that point. He knew Catlett pretty thoroughly. A weak character, a boaster who liked to be thought a handy jack in all sorts of affairs. Flattery, persuasion and a modicum of forceful threat were elements which would prevail in the case of young Catlett, so Dunton had noticed in past times. And the chap was absolutely avid for money. He was a swaggerer with girls in port. Dunton was able to understand clearly how Catlett could be wrought upon by Warner. And with sharp memory the ex-master hung onto those words overheard while he had swabbed at the skylights in the gloom of the first night: "Catlett has got everything set!"

Such being the case, with Nobska horn hooting over the port rail, Catlett at this important juncture would naturally be looking after what had been set.

Up to that time in spite of anxious curiosity Dunton had made no attempt to pry into the nature of Catlett's coöperation in the scheme. There would be danger, he considered, in flushing that timid bird too long before the eve of the exploit. Now the occasion demanded action according to the grim resolve which Dunton had been holding in leash.

With night and fog shrouding his movements, he went to the door of the engine-room and tried the knob softly. The door was bolted.

Hek-hek! Ka-chek! He imitated Thorpe's dry little cough and tapped on the door. The cough operated like the charm of "open sesame." The bolt creaked back and Catlett stuck out his head. Dunton's grip closed like a vise on the youth's thin neck. Thrusting his captive backward, he pushed his way in and kicked the door shut.

Catlett's eyes bulged in amazed affright and his tongue lolled. In spite of beard and grime and mudlark garb, this intruder was distinctly not the slaving menial who had been the butt of abuse on board the *Keyes*.

It was suddenly the animation of a shrunken mannikin by the desperate, intrepid soul of a man! The flames of fury in eyes, the gleaming teeth bared by snarling lips, features ridged in the climacteric of threat—it was transformation astounding. The demeanor of Dunton won the fight before a word was spoken, before the floundering wits of the youth had admitted what seemed to be a miracle of restored identity. Dunton was obliged to support the fellow by the clutch on the neck and when he shook the captive the flabby form wriggled like a dead snake. Conscience hit Catlett the final prostrating clip when Dunton rasped, "You know me now, do ye, ye rat!"

Catlett choked, trying to say something, and the captor loosed his grip slightly. "They had the bind on me, sir. They made me do it to you! But I only kept you asleep and——"

"Save all that for the witness stand! What are you up to now? Catlett, you were never so near hell as you are this minute! I've got you, I own you right now—but maybe you can buy yourself back. If you can't dig up the price, God help ye!"

All along Dunton had been conscious that to secure the full measure of results which would clear him and condemn the rogues he must be able to show actual and material proofs. Word o' mouth rebuttal was merely fighting their preponderant falsehood with its own weapons.

A side glance showed him something queer in the way of changes in the equipment of the engine room. His proofs

seemed to be established and in visible form.

Catlett feebly gestured and Dunton dragged him in the direction indicated.

For some moments the master puzzled over a makeshift contrivance. The steam radiator in Catlett's berth room had been removed and the end of the feed pipe had been connected with a rude sheet iron box affair. Other pipes led to the engine.

Vicious shakings of the captive constituted Dunton's command to come through with an explanation.

"I've tapped the steam pipes leading aft to the main house—planted kerosene firegobs all along between planking and inner sheathing," gasped the informer. "Can drive in balls of burning waste and torch her off by air pressure." He kicked an explanatory foot against the metal box. "I've come across, sir. F'r Gawd's sake, gimme a chance!"

The devil himself had helped the young knave in that cursed ingenuity, was Dunton's irate reflection.

He said nothing. His ominous silence intensified Catlett's fears and he begged for mercy. The youth knew to the depths of his agonized soul what he deserved in the way of vengeance from this horrific figure of a master mariner who had again resumed the sway which had overawed Catlett in past times on the high seas.

Dunton threw the engineer upon the sheet iron floor, half stunning him. Catlett fully expected to be ground under the master's heel. He apprehensively covered his face with his crossed arms. He relaxed limply in real relief when Dunton began to wind him in a rope retrieved from a waterbucket. With the bale of the bucket Dunton gagged his man.

The master was no longer fettered by any doubts. He had won through the crevice of that wall, he felt, and was on the inside of the big difficulty which had deterred him. From that time on he proceeded to deal with the situation as if he were the master of the *Keyes* and not a mutineer. He was wholly in the mood of the master. He looked upon the rascals hemmed with him in the narrow confines of the schooner's bulwarks as the real mutineers against the higher laws of the sea. He was rather glad that he was tackling the thing single handed. He was cleaning up the account of Griggs, himself and of the poor old *Johnston!* He was even glad that he had been through the hell of the recent miseries and had brought along within himself a plentiful supply of the hot fires.

He picked up a grate bar and a big wrench. He edged out of the engine-house door, setting the bar against the door and allowing it to drop into place as a Dutch lock. Holding the wrench ready as a weapon, he went aft.

His complete knowledge of shipboard conditions, as a master mariner, set for him a program which he was able to follow undeviatingly. In his mind he had located men and obstacles and checked as he went. The horn, manipulated on the forehouse, was squawking dismally. He saw the figures of the double lookout. The watch on deck was clustered in a dozing group in the lee of the longboat. He saw Thorpe propped against the windward rail at the break of the quarterdeck. The mate was hardly more than a shadow in the foggy murk.

Dunton dodged along close to the lee bulwark, ducked across in the gloom of the deck and seized his opportunity when the mate stooped to peer at the draw of the fore tophamper. He had waited for just that move of routine. A judicious tap with the wrench brought Thorpe tumbling to the main deck. Dunton was in no mood to ask himself whether he had killed the traitor or not. He dragged the mate along, entered the coach-house door, and pushed him into the slicker closet behind the hanging oilskins.

He did not bother then with the cook in his pantry berth, figuring the "doctor" as a noncombatant.

Nor did he disturb the second mate who was snoring in his port stateroom, stocking up sleep for his watch. A spineless creature Dunton knew him to be.

Warner, Dunton was confident, would be in command on deck, as ship's routine in a fog enjoined his duty on him.

There is always one weapon aboard a coaster—the captain's automatic. He seldom carries it on his person; he keeps it in the top right hand drawer of his desk.

Dunton passed aft into the saloon and secured the automatic, made sure it was loaded and slipped extra cartridges into his pocket.

He climbed the companionway noiselessly on his hands and knees, grabbed the moment when the patrolling Warner paused at the windward rail to take his regular squint, and then the avenger leaped on deck.

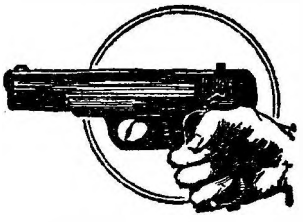
When Warner turned to stump back to the other rail he beheld Dunton. The latter had halted where the glow of the binnacle palely illuminated his face. It was

a purposeful revelation. He had steadied himself into stony ferocity. He knew exactly what he intended to do in the way of thorough intimidation, taking no half chances.

"I'm here!" He roared the announcement, believing that Warner would recognize the voice. It would be the first step in a guilty man's undoing.

The captain strode across to his ex-mate, his hand with the gun close to his side. "Know me now, Warner? All right. This with the compliments of Captain John Dunton!" Deliberately, inexorably, he picked a place on the man's thick leg and planted a bullet in it. Warner yelled and dropped, clutching the wound.

Dunton whirled on the steersman. At sound of the shot the fellow had ducked away from the wheel. The master fired again, purposely wild. He meant the second shot both as menace and signal. This disturbance would bring the crew thronging aft. He wished to collect his audience.



Warner helped the design. "Mutiny!" he yelled. "Tumble up, men! Smash this hellion!" It was the final rally of the rascal, in fear and despair.

Dunton found the steersman slow in getting back to the wheel as ordered. He kicked the sailor. He saw who the chap was. "Onto your job, you whelp! It'll be worse than that bottle-smashing, if I tackle you again!" That remark clinched the gaping man's suspicions of identity. He dodged back and grabbed the spokes.

There was no mistaking the mien of a master mariner now. Dunton was back in true form. Though the chrysalis of mean garb stuck to him, the loom of his figure on the quarterdeck and the booming of his voice of authority proclaimed him for the confusion of all who might question his right to command. He understood the psychology of rule at sea, the reaction to masterful manner and the power of the human voice in handling the affairs on shipboard. He bellowed in staccato all his speech and clicked his teeth on words.

The second mate came edging up the lee alley, mistrusting and wondering. The cook followed.

"You two, get a tourniquet on that man's leg if he's bleeding much!" He pointed to Warner, then leaped on the house and ran forward.

The men of the crew were straggling toward the break of the quarterdeck. He hailed them. "I am in command of this vessel! Mutiny will be handled forward just the same as I've been handling it aft. By bullets—get me? Stand by for orders. Get back!" He waved his weapon and they fled.

"Mutiny, eh?" snarled Dunton, breaking in on Warner when he stood over him and the two men who were knotting a cord around his leg. "If I wanted to waste my time arguing with you, Warner, I could mention for one thing that I'm not signed on as one of your ship's crew. You know what I hold against you. From now on you keep your tongue between your teeth!"

A few moments later he ordered the cook and second mate to stow Warner in the yawl at the davits and cover him with tarpaulin. This plan put Warner where merely casual attention would keep him from further plotting.

Dunton decided to push on in spite of the fog. The Sound was as familiar to him as a home dooryard. Stage by stage he picked up his bearings, the Hedge Fence's whistle with its hoot-hoot and its forty-five seconds of silence, the Cross Rip's isochronal blasts, then at last the whistler of the Pollock Rip Slue. The fog was thinning by this time, the gray of morning was appearing. He was able to see the white and the red of Monomoy Point light.

He was on the open sea, the coming sun pulled weight into the sou'west breeze, and he headed the *Keyes* on her threshing way up the Cape.

The seagoing tug *Orion* had fared far south of her usual cruising ground, looking for a certain schooner reporting from Nobska and asking a rendezvous off Cape Cod Highland Light. The *Keyes* was the only vessel which had come, poking through the ruck of the anchored craft off the Vineyard and Captain Dunton, sighting the tug, ironically thanked Warner for the desperate roguery which had kept her going. All night long Warner had not ventured to leave the yawl or open his mouth, even.

Dunton had allowed the revived Thorpe to come from below and seat himself on the house beside the skylight which had been so faithfully scrubbed by the come-by-chance. The master divided glances between the two men while he plodded to and fro on his patrol. He had not both-

ered himself about Catlett. A few hours of bitter expiation, bound and gagged, would give that young man's thoughts more salutary fodder than dreams about girls and the concoction of more schemes to help barratry.

In hailing the *Orion,* Captain Dunton was greeting an old pal in the person of Captain Goss.

The tug jockeyed in front of the schooner, caught a heaving line and dragged aboard the *Keyes'* hawser. To add a boost in the way of making good time up the coast, Dunton kept his sails spread. He stumped to and fro from rail to rail and hummed his paraphrase of the old song:

"It's a long road to Boston, boys!
Thank God, we're almost there!"

VII

WHEN the *Keyes* had been towed to an anchorage in Broad Sound late that afternoon Dunton found a reassuring goal post in the vision of the towering needle of Boston Custom House, set against the dull haze of a smoky sunset.

After the *Orion* had dropped down and made fast to the schooner's side Captain Goss came aboard to have certain brief bulletins, per megaphone, supplemented by full information in a conference. Captain Goss contributed both counsel and cooperation.

"I'll signal that water-boat," he said, pointing to a trail of smoke. "She'll hustle you to the foot of State Street. I'll stay tied up alongside here and keep school whilst teacher's away. And listen, Cappy Dunton," he went on, adding his counsel to his coöperation, "you head straight for T. J. Sommes Ee-squire's office because you and I both understand that what he don't know about admiralty law wouldn't make a lunch for a cockroach." He shouted to his mate and the tug's siren signalled the water-boat. "Don't stop to doll up. Your story'll sound better, looking like you are."

Dunton's appearance did seem to go with the statement which he made in all haste to the admiralty lawyer.

"We've just time enough to catch our parties before they shut up shop for the day," stated Sommes, after he had talked by telephone with the offices of the United States Marshal and the Federal Commissioner. "Come along. I've got a clincher in Exhibit A!" He slapped Dunton's shoulder. "And Exhibit B is waiting for us in the *Keyes'* engine room—that fire-rig thingamajig!"

On the way to the elevator the lawyer asked, "Aren't worried any longer, are you, Captain Dunton, about getting back your papers?"

"No, sir."

"Going into steam when you get 'em?"

The captain was silent.

While they were in the elevator Dunton took a little time to go over the matter in his mind.

In the lower corridor he announced himself. "I guess I'll stick to sail for a while, Mr. Sommes. Warner put an idea into my head when he spoke of 'em as 'old widders.' Reckon they can't spare any of their friends right now!"

HIGH FINANCE AND PETE HEWES

By ROBERT WELLES RITCHIE

Author of "The Desert of the Three Skulls," etc.

OLD PETE WAS A SPECIALIST IN SHAFTS; KNEW 'EM UP AND DOWN, INSIDE AND OUT. LIKEWISE HE WAS OF THE WEST—AND THEREFORE HATED ABOVE ALL TO BACK DOWN WITH A FOURFLUSH, ESPECIALLY WHEN THE OTHER MAN HELD LITTLE OR NOTHING

MISS FILOMENA FATE, the goddess lady who rolls snakes' eyes or sevens as the whim takes her, started out one broiling Nevada day to check up her favorite goat, Pete Hewes. She hadn't passed the bones to Pete for some time; last occasion was when she prompted him to step into an uncovered mine shaft in the dark and he fell thirty feet. Naturally enough the goddess lady thought her Peter must be suffering for lack of playful companionship.

As Miss Filomena had left Pete in a shaft, so she found him in one. But this happened to be an elevator shaft, wherein the going was up as well as down and very slow in both directions. The elevator shaft speared through all four stories of Carson City's mammoth skyscraper. Pete was both skipper and crew of the lugger that followed this confined course. And how it irked him, this dragging on a steel rope, this sedate traveling up and down through a square hole away from the sun! He, Peter Hewes, one-time prospector and connoisseur of salted mines, farer through waste places, child of the sun, to be sitting on a dinky stool and saying, "Going up—going down," from eight to six!

Yet one cannot fall thirty feet down a mine shaft and still remain undisputed master of one's destiny. Limitations entail.

So Lady Fate sought and found her orphan child and, veiling prankish eyes with her sleeve, began to work on him. Came to Peter's elevator, resting on the ground floor, one John Blake, mining engineer and scout for the greatest metals syndicate in America. A nice gentle trader in mining prospects, this John Blake, with the kind heart of a shark and all the scruples of a whale swallowing a kindergarten class of weakfish. Over several years he had possessed a hullo-so long acquaintance with our Pete Hewes.

He stepped in. The door clashed. The car started its snail's progress upward. Pete was droning some commonplace about how the sun could cook an egg when Blake suddenly interrupted, "Want to make two hundred dollars, Pete?"

Wham! The car stopped with a jerk as Pete threw his callouses against the steel rope. "'Tisn't the heat that's got you, Mr. Blake?" anxiously from Pete.

Thin lips under Blake's hawk nose tried to smile. "Two hundred, with a Prince Albert coat and a high hat thrown in. Yes,

and a gold headed cane. Sort of easy, eh, Pete?"

"You don't mean a reg'lar Comstock hat like the Floods and the Sharons used to wear over to Virginia City in bonanza days?" Deep awe thrilled in Pete's voice.

"You said it, Pete. And don't forget the little matter of two hundred."

The electric buzzer announced an impatient would-be passenger on the fourth floor. "Ring yer head off!" challenged the elevator's skipper in new found independence. But Blake counseled tolerance, even though fleeting, for the exacting duties of the old job. If Pete would come to see him in his office on the third floor after hours that evening he would learn the exact specifications for a silk hat, gold cane, $200 professional venture.

Wherefore during the remainder of an age long day Miss Filomena Fate's darling moved in his elevator from one cloud stratum to another. At each was a door looking out to vistas of silk hats, Prince Albert coats and gold canes; and each fluffy bank was tinged with the green of silver certificates.

When the planing mill whistle announced that Pete could run his lugger into safe harbor for the night he was at the third floor tapping on the ground glass bearing the name John Blake before a fly could wink. There he "went into conference"—classy business patter phrase—with the mining engineer, a conference which left the single track mind of Pete Hewes with block signals all awry. For Pete, you see, was not a business man. He knew a great deal more about dips and strikes and free milling ores than he did of contracts, lines and options.

"You say, Mr. Blake, I give this crazy nut whose mine you want to examine my note for a hundred thousand. What for a note, and what's it mean?" Pete broke into the other's exposition with childlike innocence. Blake snapped his thread of discourse with a helpless heave of the shoulders and began again in words of one syllable:

"This old cuckoo Lewis has a hole in a mountain he says is worth a million dollars. He writes to my outfit, offering to sell for that figure. They wire me to go and expert the thing; but when I reach the prospect over back of Gold City there's a fence around the tunnel mouth, a padlocked gate and Lewis himself with a rifle. Nobody gets a look at his million dollar mine, says the crazy old gopher, without first taking a thirty day option for a hundred thousand cash."

"Not so very crazy at that," Pete supplied judiciously.

"Crazy enough to give me a lot of grief," Blake snapped. "I know there's not enough gold in that whole country to fill a gnat's tooth. But orders are orders. My outfit tells me to go expert that mine of Lewis'; but they sure wouldn't relish paying a hundred thousand just to find out the ledge would make good headstones for a graveyard."

Pete inched himself forward in his chair. "Now 'bout that what-yuh-call-it note," he insinuated.

"Why, I told Lewis I would come back with my principal, the purchaser I represented, and of course if he was interested he would gladly take an option. You're going to be that principal." Pete visibly swelled; he'd heard of mining nabobs but never had seen one. "And when this old stinging lizard Lewis wants to see the color of your money before letting me into his tunnel you're to say——"

"'Sorry, Mr. Lewis, but I'm clean busted,'" Pete supplied with bubbling eagerness.

Blake lifted his eyes to the ceiling with a look to conjure its dropping on the head of the elevator pilot. "No, dammit all! You're a millionaire mine speculator. What 'm I buying you all the gaudy clothes for if not for that? You will say, 'That's a lot of money, Mr. Lewis, and I don't usually carry that amount around with me. But I'll give you a thirty-day promissory note for $100,000 and that will allow me time to sell some of my securities in the East.'"

"'Promissory—promissory note.'" Pete turned the unknown phrase over on his tongue. Blake could not suppress a vulpine grin.

"Promise to pay a cold hundred thousand at the end of thirty days," was his enlightening comment.

"Just fer that I get two hundred 'dobies?" Blake nodded. "*And* a Prince Willie coat? *And* a silk beanie? *And* a gold-headed cane?"

The mining engineer confirmed each item in the specification.

Pete gave him a boy's grin. "Why, Mr. Blake, fer all that I'd promise to give anybody a long look at my appendix, which I got in an alcohol bottle."

So a pact was sealed between John Blake, conscientious appraiser of metal prospects, and Peter Hewes, millionaire

moth in an elevator chrysalis. Before the

Red Front Cash Store closed that night its delighted proprietor had disposed of some old stock hard to move. Item: one Prince Albert coat with appropriate trousers and white waistcoat; one marked down silk hat which could be made a perfect fit with newspaper folded in the sweatband; one pair of No. 10 patent leather shoes and spats a little moth eaten. A nearby pawnshop yielded a rosewood cane with gold head, ancient and honorable patent to moneyed nobility in Nevada.

I have purposely delayed intimate portraiture of our Peter until such time as the reader should see him at his best—this out of kindly consideration for Peter's vanity. Behold him then, on the morning following his translation into the moneyed aristocracy and as he steps out of the Fashion Stable's emeritus hack at the train station.

Beneath the brim of the glossy hat a fringe of white curls and below that features drawn into a solemn mask of importance; features whose desert weathering recent confinement in an elevator has hardly served to erase. The merry blue eyes of him and the comedian's mouth under that Celtic upper lip frosty white from barbering; these signboards of humor belie his heavy majesty of mien. The frock coat is stretched tight as a drum head between Pete's husky shoulders, and the tails of it—for Pete was a little man, bandy-legged to boot—flap below the wrinkles at his knees. He walks with a limp, his old limp acquired by the fall down a mine shaft plus stabbing agonies induced by the mirrorlike shoes. Withal a figure to arrest the eye of Carson, Nevada, and calculated to have its weight upon the imagination of the Gold City mine owner down the railroad line.

Pete had a time of it holding his bright headed cane and his satchel in one hand while he burrowed for hack fare with the other. In the melée between hands his hat fell to the gravel. Pete was appalled; but Blake, who had preceded him to the station and now strode up to greet him, quickly retrieved the fallen treasure. He smoothed the ruffled nap on his coat sleeve.

"So that's the way you shine the durned thing." Admiration glinted from Pete's eyes. "I thought you had to have a comb an' brush."

The ride to Gold City was a delight to Pete Hewes. He allowed himself to rise to a nabob's heights of deportment with genuine gusto. Five times in an hour he strode the length of the car aisle to the water cooler—never forgetting his cane. His pace was magnificently dignified; the look of eagles was in his eyes. On one of his trips his toe stubbed against a wicker basket a Chinese passenger had left protruding from his seat space.

"Outrageous Chink!" Pete struck at the offending parcel with his rosewood cane. Fine haughtiness crisped from his tongue. He was the intolerant money lord crushing an earthworm.

Somewhere in the cindered heart of John Blake a little spark of humor flickered up. Perhaps even just a touch of humanity livened that spark. How far a few dollars invested in a junk clothing shop would go in dressing a stage for an old play boy out of an elevator.

Before Gold City was reached Blake undertook final rehearsal of the genteel fraud he hoped to perpetrate. "Now remember, Pete, you are Mr. Hewes of New York, who's hiring me to make a report on old Lewis' mine. Nobody from New York would look like you, but you look like what Lewis would expect to come out of New York. Cagey, remember—that's you."

"Say, Mr. Blake, this cane's skewed." Pete had the rosewood stick out in the aisle with his eye sighting along its polished length. "Somebody let it stand in the sun too long," he finished with a touch of sadness.

Blake slapped the cane down in exasperation. "What are you going to say when old Lewis holds us up for a hundred thousand?"

Pete knotted his brows under the new red lines stamped there by the silk hat.

" 'That's quite a sum of money, Mr. Lewis,' I says. 'I usual packs that amount 'round on my yat; but natchly you can't expect me to bring a yat-boat into Nevada.' " Pete's imagination was playing up to the part and Blake, not unpleased, let it ride.

" 'But seein' it's you, Mr. Lewis,' I says, 'why, I'll give you my—my—uh——' "

"Note for thirty days," prompted Blake.

" 'Note fer thirty days, signed, sealed *and* delivered,' " Pete finished sonorously.

They found a tall, gangling old man waiting for them at the Eagle House in

Gold City, one in whose eyes burned the fanatic fire of the typical searcher after mineral rainbow ends—Lewis. The miner, visibly impressed by Pete's exotic raiment and the air with which he carried it, acknowledged Blake's introduction with mumbled embarrassment.

"Mr. Lewis," quoth Blake in his brisk business manner, "after our last talk about your mine I thought it best to wire to New York and bring my principal, Mr. Hewes, here, out to look over the ground and see if we couldn't work out a proposition with you that would be mutually satisfactory."

"He don't look like a trifler," was Lewis' ungrudging tribute. "But my terms is unchanged. A million dollars, an' no expert sets his foot in my tunnel 'thout I gets first a hundred thousand, cash money in hand for an option."

"A hundred thousand's a lot of money to be packin' 'round, Mr. Lewis," Pete ventured at the cue to his rôle, then stole a side glance at Blake and read encouragement—and command. Then he threw in the bit about the difficulty in getting his yacht across the mountains to Nevada.

Blake interrupted. "I need not tell you my principal is a very rich man. But men of his class invest their surplus in sound securities, you understand. He would have to dispose of some of them to raise the amount of money you require."

"Let him dispose." Old Lewis was adamant.

"But Mr. Hewes can't stay here until his securities are sold in New York; can you, Mr. Hewes?"

"Some of 'em mightn't be so damn' secure," Pete ventured owlishly. A vicious kick on his shins was his reward. He took the plunge, "Seein' it's you, Mr. Lewis, how about my givin' you my note——?' "

Already Blake's hand had flashed to his pocket. He laid before the mine owner an eye dazzling document, elaborately decorated with stamps and a gold notary's seal. It was the note prepared in advance and with Pete's signature witnessed by Blake, all regular enough except for the implied ability of the signer to meet any obligation over about $2.75.

Old Lewis shared with our Peter an abysmal lack of knowledge concerning business paper. Never had he seen a promissory note. Perhaps he'd heard of gold notes and U. S. Treasury certificates. This ostentatious bit of paper with its ink flourishes and great gold seal qualified in that class most likely. After a few more honeyed words from Blake the owner of the dream bonanza reluctantly consented to pocket the paper.

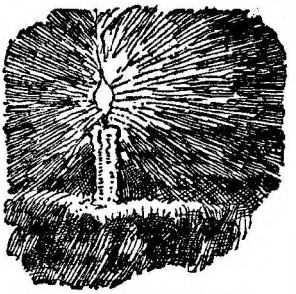
"Don't know's I'm so anxious to put this deal through at that," he mumbled vaguely. "T'other day I run across a stringer which sure's goin' to cross the main ledge; an' if she do I ought to get five million fer my property."

Blake, avid of bringing the whole farce to a close, assured the old man the matter of price could be adjusted after he'd given the mine a complete survey. The business irked him. He was certain before ever he stepped foot in Lewis' tunnel that the old prospect hunter had nothing worth buying, yet because the head office had commanded a report from him he must go through with this clowning. Perhaps Blake felt keen regret that the subterfuge centering about the exalted Pete Hewes was to yield nothing but a barren report. He was not a man given to killing fleas with a pile-driver.

A dusty ride through sagebrush in a livery rig brought the three to the fenced and padlocked Sadie Queen. Old Lewis was trembling with suppressed excitement when he let them through the gate of the stockade. Once again he complained that he'd been too hasty in accepting an option on a million dollar basis.

"Why, gents," he whined, "I got the straightest tunnel in all Nevada. Openin' up is all done. Timberin' neat as the floor of a hotel."

Blake gave a searching look at the dump below the tunnel mouth. He stooped and picked up several bits of chalky white bull quartz Worthless! While Pete sat on a dynamite box in the shadowed tunnel entrance Blake followed the owner down the slender track into obscurity. The



candles his guide lighted and set in neatly carved niches along the wall revealed the full measure of old Lewis' self delusion. The tunnel was like the corridor of a hotel done in white marble, beautifully neat. But that was its only recommendation. Of precious metal there was not a trace!

The engineer chipped off a few bits from the ledge at the tunnel's end just to fill the requirements of his rôle, then announced

himself as satisfied. With an indefinite promise, "Hear from us before thirty days are up," he drove off with Pete Hewes.

What time Blake and Lewis were in the tunnel Pete, on his dynamite box and with his silk hat and cane placed on a clean rock beside him, had been doing some high pressure thinking. What was he going to do now that his job of being a New York millionaire was nearing the end of its tenure? Go back to Carson and try to get his elevator job back again? The thought smote him hard under the interlocked horseshoes on his linen waistcoat; it sickened him. With $200—Blake had paid him before they left Carson—and all these high-'n'-lofty clothes, why go back to Carson at all?

He'd been playing at this millionaire business; by the ring-tailed rinkytink, now he'd keep right on being one while the two hundred held out to burn!

"Think if you're through with me, Mr. Blake, I'll take a li'l pasear down to Brigham City and look 'em over." This from Pete at the station where Blake was waiting for the down train to Carson.

"All right, Pete. You've nothing to worry about for thirty days." Blake gave him his best twisted smile, which could poison an ant-eater. Pete stared his perplexity.

"Because at the end of thirty days old Lewis'll be looking you up to collect his hundred thousand," the engineer threw in for a knockout.

"But you don't mean, Mr. Blake, that old kangaroo rat thinks he can get a hundred thousand off of me?" Pete's surprise registered itself in a thin shriek.

"Your name at the bottom of that promissory note he holds says he can," was Blake's happy reassurance. "Good-by, Pete, and don't sign your name again—not even on a hotel register!"

The train whisked Blake out into the desert, leaving Peter Hewes, silk hat in one hand and the fingers of the other rubbing the new red marks on his forehead.

"By golly, I never thought of that," said he to the station master's setter dog.

BRIGHAM CITY, newest boom town in Nevada, pointed with pride to three ultra-modern conveniences —a stock ticker, a revolving door on the President House, and a manicure parlor. One seeking excitement could take a whirl at all three and still live to boast about it. An air of hectic excitement pervaded the place. Even the dogs scratched fleas with a hind leg so galvanic as to blur the vision of an interested onlooker.

Pete Hewes, his hat at a daring angle and his gold headed cane swinging on a wide arc, descended from the hotel bus, negotiated the revolving door of the hotel and approached the desk with an air commensurate with the spirit of the welcoming brass band which was not at the station to meet him. He signed the register, "C. Peter Hewes, Capitalist, New York"; the "C" was a happy inspiration of the moment, giving class to the somewhat ordinary "Peter" his sponsors in baptism had pinned upon a helpless infant.

"With bath, Mr. Hewes?" The clerk patted his cowlick as he gave Peter a survey filled with approval.

"Haven't missed a Saturday night in three months," was our Peter's ready answer; then to himself, "Fresh young rooster! What's it to him, anyhow."

In his room and over the unpacking of his bag—a corkscrew, three plugs of chewing tobacco and extra socks—the capitalist out of an elevator could not keep his mind from reverting to a matter which had largely occupied it on the run down to Brigham City. That $100,000 promissory note; how about it? S'posin' at the end of thirty days that old gopher Lewis really began to camp on his trail and try to collect. Could he rely on Blake's helping him out? Fat chance! Well then?

Peter happened to catch a reflection of his face in the bureau mirror just that instant when perplexity was deepest. He studied the picture in the glass with a curiously detached interest. Silk hat pushed far back from a furrowed forehead; lines of strain about the corners of shrewd but honest eyes; long upper lip pulled down in intensity of thought—why say, that's just the way a reg'lar capitalist would look if he was worried! And a reg'lar capitalist might worry about a $100,000 promissory note, too!

Pete tried out the effect in detail. He paced away from the glass and turned. He took a step toward the bureau, halted, tucked his cane under an arm, and with a sweep of his free hand tipped back the hat to give his silk handkerchief free play for a swabbing run over the forehead. All the time his features were set in sternest concentration; aye, with just a touch of melancholy about the corners of the mouth.

"Of course, us capitalists invests our surplus in sound securities," said Peter to Peter; "and we has to—ah—dispose of some of 'em when a promissory note fer a

hundred thousand comes due. Damn nuisance!"

Peter liked this touch. It had its values. If a New York capitalist in a silk hat and Prince Albert possessed any circus virtue in the eyes of Brigham City, then a worried New York capitalist would be all the more distinguished.

He tried out his double barrelled swank on the hotel lobby just at the dinner rush hour when all the agile dollar chasers of the boom town were trooping to the dining room. Came to him the hotel manager, who thought he knew a big fish when he saw one. "Nothing wrong with your service, Mr. Hewes?" he fawningly insinuated. "You look sort of put out."

"Oh, no—no." Peter sighed prodigiously and tipped back his hat with that practiced gesture of weariness. "Just a little business matter on my mind—away from my office, you know—securities——"

"But we have a quotation wire direct from New York, Mr. Hewes." The manager brightened. "Just across the street in the office of——"

"Won't do me any good," mournfully from Peter, who didn't know whether a quotation wire was something from a book of grammar or a new fangled radio. Then with a sudden access of man-to-man confidence: "Y'see, it's a little matter of a hundred thousand on a promissory note. Got to dispose of some securities, of course, and——"

The manager had darted across the room and returned with a florid man in a linen suit tightly noosed by the arm. "Mr. C. Peter Hewes, shake hands with Jim Holman, president of our new Chamber of Commerce. Jim here'll go a long way to do anything for a stranger in Brigham City, particularly for a man like yourself, Mr. Hewes."

Just as easily as that! High hat, frock coat, gold-headed cane: these accessories plus a worried look and an ingenuous confession of temporary mortification over a $100,000 obligation, and Pete Hewes found himself taken to the heart of Brigham City.

The tip passed with the speed of light: "He owes a hundred thousand. Ye-ah, that little feller in the Wall Street rig; he says himself he owes a hundred thousand on a note."

Brigham City and its boom were builded on just such dream stuff. In the fine frenzy of mining excitement thereabouts men were rated not on what they had but on what they owed. Promises to pay printed on the face of U. S. Treasury certificates were not nearly so common as similar promises scribbled on the backs of old envelopes.

In the delighted eye of Brigham City Pete Hewes was a hundred thousand dollar man.

Witness our Peter, then, sprawled at his ease in the office of the Chamber of Commerce, hat cocked at a grand angle, cigar in teeth; about him men restive on the edges of their chairs—men with mines and stock in mines to sell. Here was he who but a short week before was saying, "Going up—going down," kinging it over all the hungry speculators of Brigham City!

Peter watched his step with unremitting vigilance. Mines he could talk with the best of them. He knew all the passwords and signs in the fellowcraft of wildcatting. While conversation on Brigham City's burning topic remained general he led it; but when some curly wolf with a hungry eye began insinuating purchases of bonanza properties Peter fell back upon his first happy inspiration. There was a little matter of a $100,000 note to be met; until that was done he could not be in the market.

The days passed snappily for Pete. What though he would not rise to any of the baits held out in confidential behind-the-hand whispers, his stock appreciated by very virtue of that reticence. No sucker, this wise one from Wall Street! Deep, that's what he was!

Not long before men commenced to come to him for advice on what to buy and what to sell. He was asked to go out into the sagebrush and look at certain prospects, to give expert opinions on technical aspects of shaft and stope. And Pete was qualified to do just that. Before the prankish Miss Fate let him step down an abandoned shaft he had been a first rate miner of the unschooled desert type; one who could smell gold in a garlic patch.

One riotous week of playing up to the part. At the end of it Pete settled his hotel bill in good gold, retired to his room and stripped himself to his money belt. He counted the dwindling fresco of double eagles in the canvas pockets and then

looked at the calendar on the wall. Seven from thirty left twenty-three. At the end of the twenty-third day how 'bout that crazy old gopher Lewis and the note for $100,000?

What was more, his silk hat was wearing out with too much bumping against mine timbers. And his bright-headed cane had got nicked in the hotel's revolving door.

Wasn't it hell the way just when a feller got to goin' good something was waiting round the corner to snatch him bald headed?

It was with this dour fit on him that Pete was slumped down in a lobby chair absently watching the revolving glass panels in the door. He saw a shambling dusty figure under a wide brimmed hat negotiate the stile and approach the desk with a hesitant air. At a question the clerk scanned the lobby and, seeing Pete, jerked his head to point where he sat. As the stranger approached our elevator hero got a start.

This gaunt old desert rat with the sun bleached eyes was one who not a month before had haunted the Carson office building housing Blake's place of business. A dozen times or more Peter had lifted him to the third floor; he even had commiserated him on his hard luck in not finding the mining expert in.

If this old tad should recognize the face of an elevator operator under the brim of a tile! "Mr. Hewes," the stranger began in a quavering whine, "I bin recommended to see you about a proposition—a mine proposition."

Pete sighed his relief; he hadn't been recognized. "I know too much about mines to buy any." He brusquely reestablished himself in the rôle so perilously endangered. The desert man gave him a weak smile and an appeal from doglike eyes.

"You ain't seen the mine I got yet, Mr. Hewes. I bin tryin' to get on the trail of a man named Blake down t' Carson. Just don't seem like I can catch him. So I heard of you an' how you might be on the lookout fer a likely property. If you an' me could go somewhere"—the old prospector cast a look of distaste around the crowded lobby—"somewhere alone, you might say, I got some right smart samples to show."

Three minutes later the stranger and Pete were behind a locked door in the latter's room. A make-believe New York capitalist had flown out the window; in his place stood Pete Hewes, practical mine swapper, smeller of gold. He lifted to his tongue and then held close to his eyes bit after bit of white quartz from which the free gold oozed like honey from the comb.

"I'll give your prospect a look," finally he said, trying to blunt with a tone of casualness the shake of excitement in his voice. The gouts of gold in those chunks of quartz filled the whole room, all of Brigham City with a glory!

AFTER nightfall the loungers in the lobby of the President House saw something to confirm their belief that C. Peter Hewes was a man of weighty affairs. A car stopped before the door; out of it tumbled the great man himself. He gave himself half a merry-go-round ride in the revolving door and developed a high burst of speed for the telephone desk.

"Gimme John Blake, Carson City! Quick, sister—quick!"

The important Mr. Hewes, dust covered, silk hat coated with mine slickings, shoes white with the drippings of shaft water, paced the lobby in dreadful impatience. Finally at a word from a bobbed blonde he dived into a telephone booth. What the blonde heard she later told her sweetie, the soda water jerker in the drugstore, and he told Brigham City:

"Mr. Blake, this's Pete Hewes—ye-ah, *Hewes!* Glory be, I got you, Mr. Blake! Grab a car an' step on her an' make Brigham City by morning!

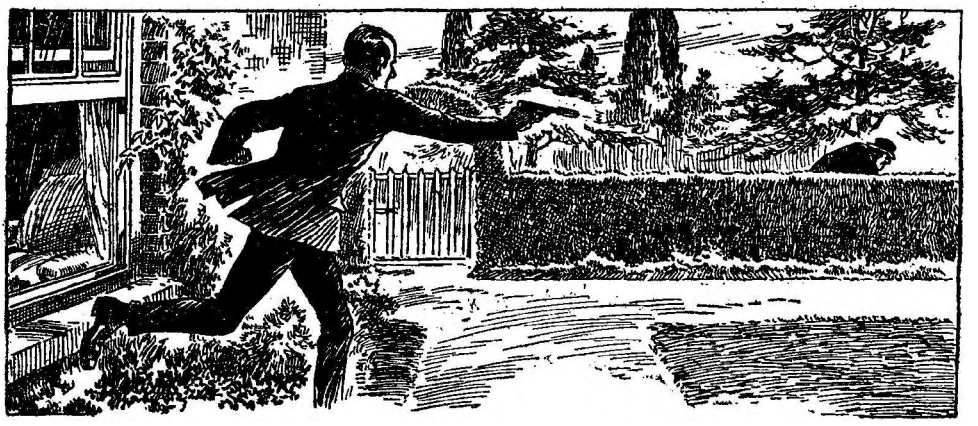
"A mine, that's what I got. Biggest thing in Nevada! Will run eighteen hundred to two thousand a ton, free milling——

"How come? Well, I guess you buy it off of me, Mr. Blake. I'm learnin' something about this note business. Ye-ah, I give the bird my promissory note fer a hundred thousand—thirty day option. Oh, I'm good at that note stuff.

"How's that? W-h-a-t! You say that crazy gopher Lewis come to see you an' tore up my other thirty-dayer? Didn't want to sell at any price? Well, glory be, Mr. Blake!

"Looks like when you buy this option off of me I can meet this second promissory business reg'lar-like and still have a coupla hundred thousand to the good.

"Me, I'm the ringtail'dest capitalist y' ever see, Mr. Blake!"



THE THREE JUST MEN

A Tale of Mystery and Strange Intrigue

By EDGAR WALLACE

Author of "The Three Oaks Mystery," "The Gray Envelope," etc.

Part II

Chapter IX

TWO SHOTS IN THE NIGHT

FIVE, ten minutes passed before the hall keeper tripped and stumbled and cursed his way to the smaller room. Smashing down the hired flowers, he passed through the wreckage of earthen pots and tumbled mold to the switch control. Another second and the rooms were brilliantly lit again.

The manager of the hall came flying into the annex. "What happened—main fuse gone?"

"No," said the hall keeper sourly, "some fool turned over the switch."

The agitated waiter protested that nobody had been near the switch box. "There was a lady and gentleman here, and another gentleman outside." He pointed to the open door.

"Where are they now?"

"I don't know. The lady was faint."

The three had disappeared when the manager went out into a small courtyard that led around the corner of the building to a side street. Then he came back on a tour of inspection.

"Somebody did it from the yard. There's a window open—you can reach the switch easily from there."

The window was fastened and locked.

"There is no lady or gentleman in the yard," he said. "Are you sure they did not go into the big hall?"

"In the dark, maybe."

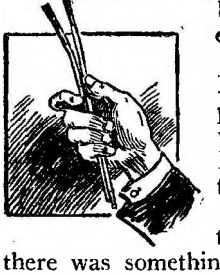
The waiter's nervousness was understandable. Mr. Gurther had given him a five pound note and the man had not as yet delivered the change.

Four men had appeared in the annex: one shut the door and stood by it. The three others were accompanied by the manager, who called Phillips, the waiter. "This man served them," he said, troubled.

"What was the gentleman like?"

Phillips gave a brief and not inaccurate description. "That is your man, I think, Herr Fluen?"

The third of the party was bearded and plump. "That is Gurther," he nodded. "It will be a great pleasure to meet him. For eight months the German Embassy has been striving for his extradition."



"The lady now—" Inspector Meadows was patently worried—"she was faint, you say? Had she drunk anything?"

"Orangeade, there is the glass. She said there was something nasty in the straws. These."

Phillips handed them to the detective. He wetted his finger from them, touched his tongue and spat out quickly.

"Yes," he said, and went out by the little door.

Gonsalez, Meadows was sure, had been an actor in this swift episode. But where had he gone? And how, with a drugged girl on his hands and the Child of the Snake? Gurther was immensely quick to strike, and an icy hearted man. The presence of a woman would not save Leon.

"When the light went out—" began the waiter, and the trouble cleared from Mr. Meadows' face.

"Of course. I had forgotten that," he said softly. "The lights went out!"

On the way back to Scotland Yard he left his companions and went alone to Manfred's house. There was a streak of light showing between the curtains in the upstairs room. The passage was illuminated. Poiccart answered his ring at once.

"Yes, George and Leon were here a little time back. The girl? No, they said nothing about a girl. They looked rather worried, I thought. Miss Leicester, I suppose? Won't you come in?"

"No, I can't wait. There's a light in Manfred's room."

The ghost of a smile lit the heavy face and faded as instantly. "My room also," he said. "Butlers take vast liberties in the absence of their masters. Shall I give a message to George?"

"Ask him to call me at the Yard."

Poiccart closed the door on him; stopped in the passage to arrange a salver on the table and hang up a hat. All this Meadows saw through the fanlight and walking stick periscope which is so easily fitted and can be of such value. And seeing, his doubts as to Poiccart's veracity evaporated.

Poiccart went slowly up the stairs into the little office room, pulled back the curtains and opened the window at the top. The next second, the watching detective saw the light go out. He departed.

"I'm sorry to keep you in the dark," said Poiccart.

The men who were in the room waited until the shutters were fast and the curtains pulled across, and then the light flashed on. White of face, her eyes closed, her breast scarcely moving, Mirabelle Leicester lay on the long settee. Her domino was a heap of shimmering green and scar-

THE THREE JUST MEN

EDGAR WALLACE

What has happened before

Doctor Oberzohn of Oberzohn & Smitts having advertised in a London paper for a secretary of scientific ability, Mirabelle goes to town from Heavytree Farm and takes the job. Oberzohn's firm really conducts various sorts of shady business with the West Coast of Africa, such as selling guns for revolutions which his agents have fostered, etc.

Suppressing Mirabelle's telegram to her Aunt Alma asking her to come to London to meet her, Dr. Oberzohn and his confederate, Monty Newton, substitute a telegram to Mirabelle's aunt, supposedly from Mirabelle, stating that she has the job but telling Alma not to come up to town until further instructed. They also concoct a telegram to Mirabelle from Alma telling Mirabelle that a couple of old friends of Alma, Montagne Newton and his alleged sister Joan, will put her up over night. Though she wonders at never having heard of these old friends of Alma, Mirabelle accepts the invitation.

Meanwhile at the house of the famous Three Just Men—George Manfred, Poiccart and Gonsalez—there has appeared a Mr. Barberton, just back from the West Coast of Africa, who asks them to find a certain Mirabelle Leicester for him, though he won't say why. Manfred, whom Barberton knows merely as the head of the "Triangle" detective agency, promises to help Barberton.

As a matter of fact, the Three Just Men (rich men who busy themselves punishing crimes the law cannot reach) have already learned through their spy system that a certain Miss Leicester has taken a secretarial job with the sinister Oberzohn.

That night Barberton is found dead, having been killed by the venom of the dread "Snake" which has been mysteriously killing people recently. Meadows of Scotland Yard takes up the case, the Three Just Men working more or less in touch with him, but reserving the right to follow their own ideas.

Monty Newton orders Joan to take Mirabelle to the Arts Ball, a mask affair, at which it has been arranged that one of Oberzohn's men named Gurther, disguised as a Lord Edington, shall help abduct Mirabelle, others of Oberzohn's "gunmen" aiding.

Gonsalez forces Monty Newton to admit that Mirabelle is at the Arts Ball and he comes to her there just as she loses consciousness from the drug given her in a drink by "Lord Edington."

let on the floor, and Leon was gently sponging her face, George Manfred watching from the back of the settee, his brows wrinkled. "Will she die?" he asked bluntly.

"I don't know. They sometimes die of that stuff," replied Leon cold-bloodedly. "She must have had it pretty raw. Gurther is a crude person."

"What was it?" asked George.

Gonsalez spread out his disengaged hand in a gesture of uncertainty. "If you can imagine morphia with a kick in it, it was that. I don't know. I hope she doesn't die; she is rather young."

Poiccart stirred uneasily. He alone had within his soul what Leon would call a trace of sentiment. "Could we get Elver?" he asked anxiously, and Leon looked up with his boyish smile.

"Growing onions in Seville has softened you, my Raymond!" He never failed in moments of great strain to taunt the heavy man with his two former years of agricultural experiment. The gibes were deliberately designed to steady his mind. "Ah! This woman is alive!"

Her eyelids had fluttered twice. Leon lifted the bare arm, inserted the needle of a tiny hypodermic and pressed home the plunger.

Mirabelle's eyelids fluttered and rose.

"You're a long way from Heavytree Farm, Miss Leicester."

She looked up wonderingly into the kindly face of George Manfred. Leon's hand was on her wrist, another at the side of her neck.

"Remarkably regular pulse. She has a good head."

"How long have we got?" Manfred asked Leon, and Leon shook his head.

"I don't know. Not long, I should think. Of course, we could have told Meadows and he'd have turned out police reserves, but I should like to keep them out of it."

"The Old Guard was there?"

"Every man jack of them. Tough lads! I saw them while I was looking around the place to get the—lay of the land—myself suitably masked, of course. They will be here just as soon as the Herr Doktor discovers what is going forward. Now, I think you can travel. I want Miss Leicester out of the way."

Stooping, he put his hands under her and lifted her. The strength in his frail body was a never ending source of wonder to his two friends.

They followed him down the stairs and along the short passage, down another flight to the kitchen. Manfred opened a door and they went out into the paved yard. There was a heavier door in the boundary wall. Here was the inevitable mews. The sound of an engine running came from a garage nearby. Evidently somebody was on the lookout for them. A long-bodied car drew up noiselessly and a woman—a nurse—got out. Beside the driver at the wheel sat two men.

"I think you'll just miss the real excitement," said Gonsalez, and then to the nurse he gave a few words of instruction and closed the door on her.

"Take the direct road to Gloucester," he said to the driver.

"Yes, sir. Good night, sir."

Leon watched anxiously as the machine swung into the main road. Still he waited, his head bent. Two minutes went by, and there came the faint sound of a motor horn, a long blast and a short; and he sighed. "They're clear of the danger zone," he said.

Plop!

He saw the flash, heard the smack of the bullet as it struck the boundary wall door, and his hand stiffened. There was a thudding sound, followed by a scream of pain from a dark corner of the mews and the sound of voices. Leon, smiling grimly, drew back into the yard and bolted the door.

"That chap had a new kind of silencer. Oberzohn is a clever old bird. But my air pistol against their gun for noiselessness, every time!"

"I didn't expect the attack from that end of the mews." Manfred was slipping a Browning back to his pocket.

"If they had come from the other end the car would not have passed. I'd like to get one of those silencers."

They went into the house. Poiccart had already extinguished the passage light. "You hit your man, Leon. Does that air thing kill?"

"By accident, it is possible. I aimed at his stomach: I fear that I hit him in the head. He would not have squealed for a stomach wound. At any rate I guess the enemy is scared away, for the time being."

He felt his way up the stairs and looked

out of both back and front windows. As he had expected the foe had vanished.

CHAPTER X

GURTHER HOLES UP

MONTY NEWTON dragged himself home, a weary, angryman, and let himself in with his key. He found the footman lying on the floor of the hall asleep, his greatcoat pulled over him, and stirred him to wakefulness with the toe of his boot. "Get up," he growled. "Anybody been here?"

Fred rose, a little dazed, rubbing his eyes. "The old man's in the drawing room," he said; and his employer passed on without another word.

As he opened the door, he saw that all the lights in the drawing room were lit. Dr. Oberzohn had pulled a small table near the fire, and before this he sat bolt upright, a tiny chess board before him, immersed in a problem. He looked across to the newcomer for a second and then resumed his study of the board, made a move. "Ach!" he said in tones of satisfaction. "Leskina was wrong! It is possible to checkmate in five moves!"

He pushed the chessmen into confusion and turned squarely to face Newton. "Well, have you concluded these matters satisfactorily?"

"He brought up the reserves," said Monty, unlocking a tantalus on a side table and helping himself liberally to whisky. "They shot Cuccini through the jaw. Nothing serious."

Dr. Oberzohn laid his bony hands on his knees. "Gurther must be disciplined," he said. "Obviously he has lost his nerve; and when a man loses his nerve also he loses his sense of time. His timing—how deplorable! The car had not arrived; my excellent police had not taken position. Deplorable!"

"The police are after him—for extradition. I suppose you know that?" Newton looked over his glass.

Dr. Oberzohn nodded. "The extradition so cleverly avoided is now arranged for by them." He smiled. "By tapping the telephone wire to Scotland Yard and throwing it out of order on the exchange end, much may be learned. But Gurther is too good a man to be lost. I have arranged a hiding place for him. He is of many uses."

"Where did he go?"

Dr. Oberzohn's eyebrows wrinkled up and down. "Who knows?" he said. "He has the little machine. Maybe he has gone to the house. The green light in the top window will warn him and he will move carefully."

Newton walked to the window and looked out. Chester Square looked ghostly in the gray light of dawn. And then, out of the shadows, he saw a figure move and walk slowly toward the south side of the square.

"They're watching this house," he said, and laughed.

"Where is my young lady?" asked Oberzohn, who was staring glumly into the fire.

"I don't know. There was a car pulled out of the mews of Manfred's house as one of our men 'closed' the entrance. She has probably gone back to Heavytree Farm, and you can sell that laboratory of yours. There is only one way now, and that's the rough way. We have time. Villa is coming this morning. I wish we'd taken that idol from the trunk. That may put the police on the right track."

Dr. Oberzohn pursed his lips as though he were going to whistle, but he was guilty of no such frivolity. "I am glad they found him," he said precisely. "To them it will be a scent. What shall they think, but that the unfortunate Barberton had come upon an old native treasure house? No, I do not fear that." He shook his head. "Mostly I fear Mr. Johnson Lee and the American, Elijah Washington."

He put his hand into his jacket pocket and took out a thin pad of letters. "Johnson Lee is for me difficult to understand. For what should a gentleman have to do with this poor Barberton that he writes so friendly letters to him?"

"How did you get these?"

"Villa took them. It was one of the intelligent actions also to leave the statue."

He passed one of the letters across to Newton. It was addressed, "Await arrival, Poste Restante, Mossamedes." The letter was written in a curiously round, boyish hand. Another remarkable fact was that it was perforated across the page at regular intervals, and upon the lines formed by

this perforation Mr. Johnson Lee had written:

Dear B., I have instructed my banker to cable you £500. I hope this will carry you through and leave enough to pay your fare home. You may be sure that I shall not breathe a word, and your letters, of course, nobody in the house can read but me. Your story is amazing, and I advise you to come home at once and see Miss Leicester.

Your friend,
Johnson Lee.

The notepaper was headed "Rath Hall, January 13th."

"They came to me today." He looked thoughtfully at his friend. "They will be difficult. I had that expectation," he said, and Monty knew that he referred to the Three Just Men. "Yet they are mortal also. Remember that, my Newton; they are mortal also."

"As we are," said Newton gloomily.

"That is a question," said Oberzohn, "so far as I am concerned." Dr. Oberzohn spoke with the greatest calm and assurance. The other man could only stare at him.

ALTHOUGH it was light, a green lamp showed clearly in the turret room of the doctor's house as he came within sight of the ugly place. And, seeing that warning, he did not expect to be met in the passage by Gurther. The man had changed from his resplendent kit and was again in the soiled and shabby garments he had discarded the night before.

"You have come, Gurther?"

"*Ja*, Herr Doktor."

"To my parlor!" barked Dr. Oberzohn and marched ahead.

Gurther followed him and stood with his back to the door, erect, his chin raised, his bright, curious eyes fixed on a point a few inches above his master's head.

"Tell me now." The doctor's ungainly face was working ludicrously.

"I saw the man and struck, Herr Doktor, and then the lights went out and I went to the floor, expecting him to shoot. I think he must have taken the gracious lady. I did not see, for there was a palm between us. I returned at once to the greater hall, and walked through the people on the floor. They were very frightened."

"You saw them?"

"Yes, Herr Doktor," said Gurther. "It is not difficult for me to see in the dark. After that I ran to the other entrance, but they were gone."

"Come here."

The man took two stilted paces toward the doctor and Oberzohn struck him twice in the face with the flat of his hand. Not a muscle of the man's face moved; he stood erect, his lips framed in a half grin, his curious eyes staring straight ahead.

"That is for bad time, Gurther. Nobody saw you return?"

"No, Herr Doktor, I came on foot."

"You saw the light?"

"Yes, Herr Doktor, and I thought it best to be here."

"You were right," said Oberzohn. "March!"

He went into the forbidden room, turned the key, and passed into the super-heated atmosphere. Gurther stood attentively at the door. Presently the doctor came out, carrying a long case covered with baize under his arm. He handed it to the waiting man, went into the room, and, after a few minutes' absence, returned with a second case, a little larger.

"March!" he said.

Gurther followed him out of the house and across the rank, weed grown garden toward the factory. A white mist had rolled up from the canal, and factory and grounds lay under the veil.

He led the way through an oblong gap in the wall where once a door had stood, and followed a tortuous course through the blackened beams and twisted girders that littered the floor. Only a half-hearted attempt had been made to clear up the wreckage after the fire, and the floor was ankle deep in the charred shreds of burnt cloth. Near the far end of the building, Oberzohn stopped, put down his box and pushed aside the ashes with his foot until he had cleared a space about three feet square. Stooping, he grasped an iron ring and pulled, and a flagstone came up with scarcely an effort, for it was well counter-weighted. He took up the box again and descended the stone stairs, stopping only to turn on a light.

The cellars of the factory had been practically untouched by the fire. There were shelves that still carried dusty bales of cotton goods. Oberzohn was in a hurry. He crossed the stone floor in two strides, pulled down the bar of another door, and, walking into the darkness, deposited his box on the floor.

The electric power of the factory had, in the old days, been carried on two distinct circuits, and the connection with the cellars was practically untouched by the explosion.

They were in a smaller room now, fairly comfortably furnished. Gurther knew it well, for it was here that he had spent the greater part of his first six months in England. Ventilation came through three small gratings near the roof. There was a furnace, and, as Gurther knew, an ample supply of fuel in one of the three cellars that opened into this one.

"Here will you stay until I send for you," said Oberzohn. "Tonight, perhaps, after they have searched. You have a pistol?"

"*Ja*, Herr Doktor."

"Food, water, bedding—here is all you need." Oberzohn jerked open another of the cellars and took stock of the larder. "Tonight I may come for you—tomorrow night—who knows? You will light the fire at once." He pointed to the two baize covered boxes. "It will be necessary because of those. Good morning, Gurther."

"Good morning, Herr Doktor."

Oberzohn went up to the factory level, dropped the trap, and his foot pushed back the ashes which hid its presence. With a cautious look round he crossed the field to his house. He was hardly in his study before the first police car came bumping along the lane toward his house.

Chapter XI

Mr. Elijah Washington of Chicago

MAKING inquiries, Detective Inspector Meadows discovered that, on the previous evening at eight o'clock, two men had called upon Barberton. The first of these was described as tall and rather aristocratic in appearance. He wore dark, horn rimmed spectacles. The hotel manager thought he might have been an invalid, for he walked with a stick. The second man seemed to have been a servant of some kind, for he spoke respectfully to the visitor.

"No, he gave no name, Mr. Meadows," said the manager. "I told him of the terrible thing which had happened to Mr. Barberton, and he was so upset that I didn't like to press the question."

Meadows was on his circuitous way to Manfred's house when he heard this, and he arrived in time for breakfast. Manfred's servants regarded it as the one eccentricity of an otherwise normal gentleman that he invariably breakfasted with his butler and chauffeur. This matter had been discussed threadbare in the tiny servants' hall, and it no longer excited comment when Manfred telephoned down to the lower regions and asked for another plate.

Members of the Triangle were in cheerful mood.

"We searched Oberzohn's house from cellar to attic," said Meadows when the plate had been laid.

"And of course you found nothing. The elegant Gurther?"

"He wasn't there. That fellow will keep at a distance if he knows that there's a warrant out for him. I suspect some sort of signal. There was a very bright green light burning in one of those ridiculous Gothic turrets."

Manfred stifled a yawn. "Gurther went back soon after midnight," he said, "and was there until Oberzohn's return."

"Are you sure?" asked the astonished detective.

Leon nodded, his eyes twinkling. "After that, one of those infernal river mists blotted out observation," he said, "but I should imagine Herr Gurther is not far away. Did you see his companion Pfeiffer?"

Meadows nodded. "Yes, he was cleaning boots when I arrived.

"How picturesque!" said Gonsalez. "An interesting man, Gurther. I have a feeling that he will escape hanging. So you could not find him? I found him last night. Except for the lady, who was both an impediment and an interest, we might have put a period to his activities." He caught Meadows' eye. "I should have handed him to you, of course."

"Of course," said the detective dryly.

"A remarkable man, but nervous. You are going to see Mr. Johnson Lee?"

"What made you say that?" asked the detective in astonishment, for he had not as yet confided his intention to the three men.

"He will surprise you," evaded Leon.

"Yes, as Leon says," remarked Manfred, "you will find Johnson Lee a very surprising man."

"Do you know him?"

Manfred nodded gravely. "I have just been on the telephone with him," he said. "You'll have to be careful of Mr. Lee, Meadows. Our friend the Snake may be biting in his direction, and will, if there is aroused a breath of suspicion that he was in Barberton's confidence."

The detective put down his knife and fork. "I wish you fellows would stop being mysterious," he said, half annoyed, half amused. "What is behind this business? You talk of the Snake as though you could lay your hands on him."

"And we could," they said in unison.

"Who is he?" challenged the detective.

"The Herr Doktor," smiled Gonsalez.

"Oberzohn?"

Leon nodded. "I thought you would have discovered that by connecting the original three murders—and murders they were. First—" he ticked the names off on his fingers—"we have a stockbroker. This gentleman was a wealthy speculator who occasionally financed highly questionable deals. Six months before his death he drew from the bank a very large sum of money in notes. By an odd coincidence the bank clerk who had given him the money, when going out to luncheon, saw this broker and Oberzohn driving past in a taxicab. As they came abreast he saw a large blue envelope go into Oberzohn's pocket. The money had been put into a blue envelope when it was drawn. The broker had financed the doctor, and when the scheme failed and the money was lost, he not unnaturally asked for its return. He trusted Oberzohn not at all, carried his receipt about in his pocket, and never went anywhere unless he was armed. That fact did not emerge at the inquest, but you know it is true."

Meadows nodded.

"He threatened Oberzohn with exposure at a meeting they had on the day of his death. That night he returns from a theatre or from his club, and is found dead on the doorstep. No receipt is found."

"What's the next point?"

"A man, a notorious blackmailer, homeless and penniless, was walking along the Bayswater Road, probably looking for easy money, when he saw this broker's car going into Orme Place, that night. He followed on the off chance of begging a few coppers. The chauffeur saw him. The tramp, on the other hand, must have seen something else. He slept the next night at Rowton House, told a friend, who had been in prison with him, that he had a million pounds as good as in his hand."

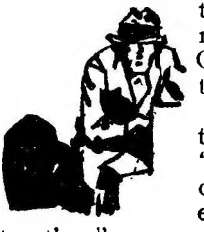
Meadows laughed helplessly.

"Your system of investigation is evidently more thorough than ours."

"It is complementary to yours," said George quietly. "Go on, Leon."

"Now what happened to our friend the blackmailer? He evidently saw somebody in Orme Place whom he either recognized or trailed to his home. For the next day or two he was in and out of public telephone booths, though no number has been traced. He goes to Hyde Park, obviously by appointment—and the Snake bites!

"There was another danger to the confederacy. The bank clerk, learning of the death of the broker, is troubled. I have proof that he called Oberzohn on the phone. If you remember, when the broker's affairs were gone into, it was found that he was almost insolvent. A large sum of money had been drawn out of the bank and paid to 'X.' The certainty that he knew who X was, worried this decent bank clerk, and he called Oberzohn, probably to ask him why he had not made a statement. On the day he telephoned the snake man, he died."



The detective was listening in silent wonder. "It sounds like a page out of a sensational novel," he said, "yet it hangs together."

"It hangs together because it is true," Poiccart's deep voice broke into the conversation. "This has been Oberzohn's method all his life. He is strong for logic, and there is no more logical action in the world than the destruction of those who threaten your safety and life."

Meadows pushed away his plate, his breakfast half eaten. "Proof," he said briefly.

"What proof can you have, my dear fellow?" scoffed Leon.

"The proof is the snake," persisted Meadows. "Show me how he could educate a deadly snake to strike, as he did, when the victim was under close observation, as in the case of Barberton, and I will believe you."

The Three looked at one another and smiled together. "One of these days I will show you," said Leon. "They have certainly tamed their snake! He can move so quickly that the human eye cannot follow him. Always he bites on the most vital part, and at the most favorable time. He struck at me last night at Corinthian Hall, but missed me. The next time he strikes —" he was speaking slowly and looking at the detective through the veriest slits of his half-closed eyelids—"the next time he strikes, not all Scotland Yard on the one side, or his agreeable company of gunmen on the other, will save him!"

Poiccart rose suddenly. His keen ears

had heard the ring of a bell, and he went noiselessly down the stairs.

"The whole thing sounds like a romance to me." Meadows was rubbing his chin irritably. "I am staring at the covers of a book whilst you are reading the pages. I suppose you devils have the A and Z of the story?"

Leon nodded.

"Why don't you tell me?"

"Because I value your life," said Leon simply. "Because I wish—we all wish—to keep the snake's attention upon ourselves."

Poiccart came back at that moment and put his head in the door. "Would you like to see Mr. Elijah Washington?" he asked, and they saw by the gleam in his eyes that Mr. Elijah Washington was well worth meeting.

The visitor arrived a second or two later, a tall, broad shouldered man with a reddish face. He wore pince-nez, and behind the rimless glasses his eyes were alive and full of bubbling laughter. He stood beaming upon the company, his white panama crushed under his arm, both huge hands thrust into his trousers pockets.

"Glad to know you, folks," he greeted them in a deep boom of a voice. "I guess Mr. Barberton told you all about me. That poor little guy! Listen, he was a he-man, all right, but kinder mysterious. They told me I'd find the police chief here—Captain Meadows?"

"Yes," said the inspector. "I'm that man."

"Glad to know you. My name is Elijah Washington, of the Natural History Syndicate, Chicago."

"Sit down, Mr. Washington."

"I want to tell you gentlemen that this Barberton was murdered. Snake? Listen, I know snakes. Brought up with 'um! Snakes are my hobby. I know 'um from egg-eaters to tigers—moccasins, copperheads, corals, mamba, *fer de lance*—gosh! snakes are just common objects like flies. And I tell you boys right here and now that there ain't a snake in this or the next world that can climb up a parapet, bite a man and get away with it with a copper looking on."

He beamed from one to the other; he was almost paternal.

"I'd like to have shown you folks a worse-than-mamba," he said regretfully, "but carrying around snakes in your pocket is just dog; it's like a millionaire wearin' diamond earrings just to show he can afford 'um. I liked that little fellow. I'm mighty sorry he's dead. But if any man tells you that a snake bit him, go right up to him, hit him on the nose, and say 'Liar!'"

"You will have some coffee?" Manfred had rung the bell.

"Sure I will. I'm on the wagon; got scared up there in the backlands of Angola——"

"What were you doing there?" asked Leon.

"Snakes," said the other briefly. "I represent an organization that supplies specimens to zoos and museums. I got a new kinder cobra."

He had met Barberton by accident. Without shame he confessed that he had gone to a village in the interior for a real solitary jag, and, returning to such degree of civilization as Mossamedes represented, he found a group of Portuguese breeds squatting about a fire at which Barberton's feet were toasting.

"I don't know what he was—a prospector, I guess. He was one of those what-is-its you meet along that coast. I've met his kind most everywhere—as far south as Port Nottosh. In Angola there are scores; some go native at the end."

"You can tell us nothing about Barberton?"

Mr. Elijah Washington shook his head. "No, sir. I know him same as I might know you. It got me curious when I found out the way of the torturing; he wouldn't tell where it was."

"Where what was?" asked Manfred quickly, and Mr. Washington was surprised.

"Why, the writing they wanted to get. I thought maybe he'd told you. He said he was coming right along to spill all that part of it. It was a letter he'd found in a tin box; that was all he'd say."

They looked at one another.

"I know no more about it than that," Mr. Washington added, when he saw Gonsalez's lips move. "It was just a letter. Who it was from, why, what it was about, he never told me. I dare say you folks wonder why I've come along." Mr. Washington raised his steaming cup of coffee, which must have been nearly boiling and drank it at a gulp. "That's fine," he said.

He wiped his lips with a large and vivid silk handkerchief.

"I've come here, gentlemen, because I've got a pretty good idea that I'd be useful to anybody who's snake hunting in this little dorp."

"It's rather a dangerous occupation, isn't

it?" said Manfred quietly.

"To you, but not to me. I am snake proof." He pulled up his sleeve; the forearm was scarred and pitted with old wounds.

"Snakes," he said briefly. "That's cobra." He pointed proudly. "When that snake struck, my boys didn't wait for anything, they started dividing my kit. Sort of appointed themselves a board of executors and joint heirs of the family estate."

"But you were very ill?" said Gonsalez.

Mr. Washington shook his head. "No, sir, not more than if a bee stung me, and not so much as if a wasp had got in first punch. Some people can eat arsenic, some people can make a meal of enough morphia to decimate a province. I'm snake proof. Been bitten ever since I was five."

He bent over toward them, and his jolly face went suddenly serious. "I'm the man you want," he said.

"I think you are," said Manfred slowly.

"Because this old snake ain't finished biting. There's a graft in it somewhere, and I want to find it. But first I want to vindicate the snake. Anybody who says a snake's always naturally vicious doesn't understand. Most snakes are timid, quiet, respectful things, and don't want no trouble with nobody. If a snake sees you coming—barring whips, black racers and a few like those—he naturally lights out for home."

Leon was looking at him with a speculative eye. "It is queer to think," he said, speaking half to himself, "that you may be the only one of us who will be alive this day week!"

Meadows, not easily shocked, felt a cold shiver run down his spine.

Chapter XII

Mr. Lee Comes to Heavytree

When Mirabelle Leicester awoke in the morning, her head was thick and dull, and for a long time she lay between sleeping and waking, trying to bring order to the confusion of her thoughts. When at last she summoned sufficient energy to raise herself on her elbow, she looked upon the very familiar surroundings of her own pretty little room.

Heavytree Farm! What a curious dream she had had! A dream filled with fleeting visions of old men with elongated heads, of dance music and a crowded ballroom, of a slightly overdressed man who had been very polite to her at dinner. Where did she dine? She sat up in bed, holding her throbbing head. She was still in a state of bewilderment when the door opened and Aunt Alma came in, an anxious look on her face.

"Hullo, Alma!" said Mirabelle dully. "I've had such a queer dream. I think it was about that advertisement I saw." And then, with a gasp, "How did I come here?"

"They brought you," said Alma. "The nurse is downstairs having her breakfast. She's a nice woman and keeps press cuttings."

"The nurse?" asked Mirabelle in bewilderment.

"You arrived here at three o'clock in the morning in a motor car. You had a nurse with you." Alma enumerated the circumstances in chronological order. "And two men. First one of the men got out and knocked at the door. I was worried to death. In fact, I'd been worried all the afternoon, ever since I had your wire telling me not to come up to London."

"But I didn't send any such wire," replied the girl.

"After I came downstairs," Alma went on, "the man told me that you'd been taken ill and a nurse had brought you home. They then carried you, the two men and the nurse, upstairs and the nurse and I put you to bed. I simply couldn't get you to wake up; all you did was to talk about the orangeade."

"I remember! It was so bitter, and Lord Edington let me drink some of his. And then I—I don't know what happened after that," she said, with a little grimace.

"Mr. Gonsalez ordered the car, got the nurse from a nursing home," explained Alma.

"Gonsalez! Not my Gonsalez—the—the Three Just Men Gonsalez?" she asked in amazement.

"I'm sure it was Gonsalez; they made no secret about it. You can see the gentleman who brought you; he's about the house somewhere. I saw him in Heavytree Lane not five minutes ago, strolling up and down and smoking. A pipe," added Alma.

The girl got out of bed; her knees were curiously weak under her, but she managed to stagger to the window, and, pushing open the casement still farther, looked out across the patchwork quilt of color. The summer flowers were in bloom.

With a sigh, she turned back to the waiting Alma. "I don't know how it all happened and what it's about, but my word, Alma, I'm glad to be back! That dreadful man! We lunched at the Ritz-Carlton. I never want to see another restaurant or a ballroom or Chester Square, or anything but old Heavytree! I wonder if it really was Gonsalez who saved me? If it should be he!"

"I don't see why you should get excited over a man who's committed I don't know how many murders."

"Don't be silly, Alma!" scoffed the girl. "The Just Men have never murdered, any more than a judge and jury murder."

"There's a gentleman downstairs; he's been waiting since twelve," said Alma.

And when Mirabelle asked, she was to learn to her dismay that it was half past one. "I'll be down in a quarter of an hour," she said recklessly. "Who is it?"

"I've never heard of him before, but he's a gentleman," was the unsatisfactory reply. "They didn't want to let him come in."

"Who didn't?"

"The gentlemen who brought you here in the night."

Mirabelle stared at her. "You mean they're guarding the house?"

"That's how it strikes me," said Alma bitterly. "But they let this man in. Mr. Johnson Lee."

"I don't know the name."

Alma walked to the window. "There's his car," she said, and pointed.

It was just visible, standing at the side of the road beyond the box hedge, a splendid, long bodied car, white with dust. The chauffeur was talking to a strange man, and from the fact that the latter was smoking a pipe Mirabelle guessed that he was one of her self appointed custodians.

Alma was waiting below in the brick floored hall when Mirabelle came down.

"He wants to see you alone," said Alma in a stage whisper. "I don't know whether I ought to allow it, but there's evidently something wrong. These men prowling about the house have got thoroughly on my nerves."

Mirabelle laughed softly as she opened the door and walked in. At the sound of the door closing, the man who was sitting stiffly on a deep settee in a window recess got up. He was tall and bent, and his dark face was lined. His eyes she could not see; they were hidden behind dark green glasses, which were turned in her direction as she came across the room to greet him.

"Miss Mirabelle Leicester?" he asked, in the quiet, modulated voice of an educated man. He took her hand in his.

"Won't you sit down?" she said.

"Thank you." He sat down gingerly, holding between his knees the handle of the umbrella he had brought into the drawing room. "I'm afraid my visit may be inopportune, Miss Leicester," he said. "Have you by any chance heard about Mr. Barberton?"

Her brows wrinkled in thought. "Barberton? I seem to have heard the name."

"He was killed yesterday on the Thames Embankment."

Then she recollected. "The man who was bitten by the snake?" she asked in horror.

The visitor nodded. "It was a great shock to me, because I have been a friend of his for many years, and had arranged to call at his hotel on the night of his death." And then abruptly he turned the conversation in another and a surprising direction. "Your father was a scientist, Miss Leicester?"

"Yes, he was an astronomer, an authority upon meteors."

"Exactly. I thought that was the gentleman. I have only recently had his book read to me. He was in Africa for some years?"

"Yes," she said quietly, "he died there. He was studying meteors for three years in Angola. You probably know that a very large number of shooting stars fall in that country. My father's theory was that it was due to the ironstone mountains which attract them, so he set up a little observatory in the interior." Her lips trembled for a second. "He was killed in a native rising," she said.

"Do you know the part of Angola where he had his observatory?"

"I'm not sure. I have never been in Africa, but perhaps Aunt Alma may know."

She went out to find Alma waiting in the passage, in conversation with the pipe smoker. The man withdrew hastily at the sight of her.

"Alma, do you remember in what part of Angola father had his observatory?"

Alma did not know offhand, but one of

her invaluable scrapbooks contained all the information that the girl wanted, and she carried the book to Mr. Lee.

"Here are the particulars," she said, and laid the book open before them.

"Would you read it for me?" he requested gently, and she read to him the three short paragraphs which noted that Professor Leicester had taken up his residence in Bishaka.

"That is the place," interrupted the visitor. "Bishaka! You are sure that Mr. Barberton did not communicate with you?"

"With me?" she said in amazement. "No. Why should he?"

"You're perfectly certain that nobody sent you a document, probably in the Portuguese language, concerning—" he hesitated—"Bishaka?"

"I'm certain," she said. "We have very little correspondence at the farm, and it isn't possible that I could overlook anything so remarkable."

"Have you any documents in Portuguese or in English? Any letters from your father about Angola?"

"None," she said. "The only reference my father ever made to Bishaka was that he was getting a lot of information which he thought would be valuable, and that he was a little troubled because his cameras, which he had fixed in various parts of the country to cover every sector of the skies, were being disturbed by wandering prospectors."

"He said that, did he?" asked Mr. Lee eagerly. "Come now, that explains a great deal!"

"It doesn't explain much to me, Mr. Lee," Mirabelle said frankly. "Did Barberton come from Angola?"

"Yes, Barberton came from that country," he said in a lower voice. "I should like to tell you—" he hesitated—"but I am rather afraid."

"Afraid to tell me? Why?"

"So many dreadful things have happened recently to poor Barberton and others, that knowledge seems a most dangerous thing. I wish I could believe that it would not be dangerous to you," he added kindly, "and then I could speak what is in my mind and relieve myself of a great deal of anxiety." He rose slowly. "I think the best thing I can do is to consult my lawyer. I was foolish to keep it from him so long. He is the only man I can trust to search my documents."

"But surely you can search your own documents?" she said good-humoredly.

"No, I'm afraid I can't. Because—" he spoke with the simplicity of a child—"I am blind."

"Blind?" gasped Mirabelle, and the man laughed gently.

"I am pretty capable for a blind man, am I not? I can walk across a room and avoid all the furniture. The only thing I cannot do is to read—at least, read the ordinary print. I can read Braille. Poor Barberton taught me. He once was a schoolmaster," he explained, "at a blind school near Brightlingsea. Not a particularly well educated man, but a marvellously quick writer of Braile. We have corresponded for years through that medium. He could write a Braille letter almost as quickly as you can print with pen and ink."

Her heart was full of pity for the man; he was so cheery, so confident, and withal so proud of his own accomplishments, that pity turned to admiration.

"I should like to tell you more," he said, as he held out his hand. "Probably I shall dictate a long letter to you tomorrow, or else my lawyer will do so, putting all the facts before you. For the moment, however, I must be sure of my ground. I have no desire to raise in your heart either fear or—hope. Do you know a Mr. Manfred?"

"I don't know him personally," she said quickly. "George Manfred?"

He nodded.

"Have you met him?" she asked eagerly. "And Mr. Poiccart, the Frenchman?"

"No, not Mr. Poiccart. Manfred was on the telephone with me very early this morning. He seemed to know all about my relationship with my poor friend. He knew also of my blindness. A remarkable man, very gentle and courteous. It was he who gave me your address. Perhaps," he mused, "it would be advisable if I first consulted him."

"I'm sure it would!" she said enthusiastically. "They are wonderful. You have heard of them, of course, Mr. Lee—the Three Just Men?"

"That sounds as though you admire them," he said. "Yes, I have heard of them. They are the men who, many years ago, set out to regularize the inconsistencies of English law, to punish where no punishment is provided by the code. Strange

I never associated them——"

He paused and meditated upon the matter in silence for a long while. And then, "I wonder," he said. But he did not tell her what he was wondering.

She walked down the garden path with him into the roadway and stood chatting about the country and the flowers that he had never seen, until the big limousine pulled up and he stepped into its cool interior. She waved her hand to the car as it moved off, and so naturally did his hand go up in salute that for a moment she thought he had seen her.

So he passed out of her sight, and might well have passed out of her life, for Mr. Oberzohn had decreed that the remaining hours of blind Johnson Lee were to be few.

But it happened that the Three Just Men had reached the same decision in regard to Mr. Oberzohn, only there was some indecision as to the manner of his passing. Leon Gonsalez had original views.

Chapter XIII

THE GUNMEN

THE man with the pipe was standing within half a dozen paces of her. She was going back through the gate, when she remembered Aunt Alma's views on the guardianship.

"Are you waiting here all day?" she asked.

"Till this evening, miss. We're to be relieved by some men from Gloucester. We came from town and we're going back with the nurse, if you can do without her?"

"Who instructed you to stay here?" she asked.

"Mr. Gonsalez. He thought it would be wise to have somebody around."

"But why?"

The big man grinned. "I've known Mr. Gonsalez many years," he said. "I'm a police pensioner, and I can remember the time when I'd have given a lot to lay my hands on him, but I've never asked him 'why,' miss. There is generally a good reason for everything he does."

Mirabelle went back into the farmhouse, very thoughtful. She was one who harbored very few illusions. She had read much, guessed much, and in the days of her childhood had been in the habit of linking cause to effect. That the advertisement had been designed especially for her, was her first conclusion. It had been intended to bring her into the charge of Oberzohn. Now she recognized a significant circumstance; never once, since she had entered the offices of Oberzohn & Smitts, and until the episode of the orangeade, had she been free to come and go as she wished. No doubt Oberzohn's surveillance had continued.

Dimly she remembered the man in the cloak who had stood in the rocking doorway of Corinthian Hall. Was that Gonsalez? She thought it must have been. Gonsalez, watchful, alert. Why? She had been in danger, was still in danger. Though why anybody should have picked unimportant her, was the greatest of all mysteries.

In some inexplicable way the death of Barberton had been associated with that advertisement and the attention she had received from Dr. Oberzohn and his creatures. Who was Lord Edington? She remembered his foreign manner, his 'gracious lady,' the curious click of his heels and his stiff bow. That was a clumsy subterfuge which she ought to have seen through from the first. He was another of her watchers and the drugged orangeade was his work.

Walking to the window, she looked out, and the sight of the two men just inside the gate gave her a sense of infinite relief and calm; and the knowledge that she, for some reason, was under the care and protection of this strange organization about which she had read, thrilled her.

She walked into the vaulted kitchen, to find the kitchen table covered with fat volumes, and Aunt Alma explaining to the interested nurse her system of filing. Two subjects interested that hard featured lady—crime and family records. She had two books filled with snippings from country newspapers relating to the family of a distant cousin who had been raised to a peerage during the war. But crime, generally speaking, was Aunt Alma's chief preoccupation. It was from these voluminous cuttings that Mirabelle had gained her encyclopaedic knowledge of the Three Just Men and their operations.

Only one public sensation was missing from her collection, and she was explaining the reason to the nurse as Mirabelle came into the kitchen. "No, my dear," she was saying, "there is nothing about the Snake. I won't have anything to do with that; it gives me the creeps."

"I've got every line," said the nurse en-

thusiastically. "My brother is a reporter on the *Megaphone.*"

Mirabelle came in to make inquiries about luncheon. Her head was steady now and she had developed an appetite.

The front door stood open, and as she turned to go into the dining room to get her writing materials, she heard an altercation at the gate. A third man had appeared, a grimy looking peddler who carried a tray before him packed with all manner of cheap buttons and laces. He was a middle aged man with a ragged beard, and despite the warmth of the day was wearing a long overcoat that almost reached to his heels.

"You may or you may not be," the man with the pipe was saying, "but you're not going in here."

"I've served this house for years," snarled the peddler. "What do you mean by interfering with me? You're not a policeman."

"Whether I'm a policeman or a dustman or a postman," said the patient guard, "you don't pass through this gate."

At this moment the peddler caught sight of the girl at the door and raised his battered hat with a grin. He was unknown to the girl; she did not remember having seen him at the house before. Nor did Alma, who came out at that moment.

"He's a stranger here, but we're always getting new people up from Gloucester," she said. "What does he want to sell?"

She stalked out into the garden, and at the sight of her the grin left the peddler's face. "I've got some things I'd like to sell to the young lady, ma'am," he said.

"I'm not so old and I'm a lady," replied Alma sharply. "And how long is it since you started picking and choosing your customers?"

The man grumbled something under his breath, and without waiting even to display his wares, shuffled off along the dusty road. They watched him until he was out of sight.

Heavytree Farm was rather pompously named for so small a property. The little estate followed the road to Heavytree Lane, which formed the southern boundary of the property. It was down this lane the peddler turned.

"Excuse me, ma'am," said the companion of the man with the pipe. He opened the gate, walked in, and, making a circuit of the house, reached the orchard behind. Here a few outhouses were scattered, and clearing these, he came to the meadow, where Mirabelle's one cow ruminated in the lazy manner of her kind. Half hidden by a thick boled apple tree, the watcher waited, and presently, as he expected, he saw a head appear through the boundary hedge. After an observation the peddler sprang into the meadow and stood, taking stock of his ground. He had left his tray and his bag, and, running with surprising swiftness for a man of his age, gained a little wooden barn. There, pulling open the door, he disappeared.

By this time the guard had been joined by his companion and they had a short consultation, the man with the pipe going back to his post before the house, whilst the other walked slowly across the meadow until he came to the closed door of the barn.

Wise in his generation, he first made a circuit of the building, and discovered there were no exits through the blackened gates. Then, pulling both doors open wide, "Come out, you," he commanded.

The barn was empty, except for a heap of hay that lay in one corner and some old and wheelless farm wagons propped up on three trestles awaiting the wheelwright's attention. A ladder led to a loft, and the guard climbed slowly. His head was on a level with the dark opening, when there snapped out the words, "Put up your hands!"

He was looking into the adequate muzzle of an automatic pistol.

"Come down, you!"

"Put up your hands, I said!" hissed the voice in the darkness, "or you're a dead man!"

The watcher obeyed, cursing his folly that he had come alone.

"Now climb up!"

With some difficulty the guard brought himself up to the floor level.

"Step this way and step lively," said the peddler. "Hold out your hands."

He felt the touch of cold steel on his wrist, heard a click.

"Now the other hand."

The moment the guard was manacled, the peddler began a rapid search. "Carry a gun, do you?" he sneered, as he drew a pistol from the man's hip pocket. "Now sit down."

In a few seconds the discomfited guard was bound and gagged. The peddler, crawling to the entrance of the loft, looked out between a crevice in the boards. He was watching not the house, but the hedge through which he had climbed. Two other men had appeared there, and he grunted his satisfaction. Descending into the barn, he pulled away the ladder and let

it fall on the floor, before he came out into the open and made a signal.

The second guard had made his way back by the shortest cut to the front of the house, passing through the garden and in through the kitchen door. He stopped to shoot the bolts, and the girl, coming into the kitchen, saw him. "Is anything wrong?" she asked anxiously.

"I don't know, miss." He was looking at the kitchen windows; they were heavily barred. "My mate has just seen that peddler go into the barn."

She followed him to the front door. He had turned to go, but, changing his mind, came back, and she saw him put his hand into his hip pocket and was staggered to see him produce a long barreled Browning.

"Can you use a pistol, miss?"

She nodded, too surprised to speak, and watched him as he jerked back the jacket and put up the safety catch.

"I want to be on the safe side, and I'd feel happier if you were armed."

There was a gun hanging on the wall and he took it down. "Have you any shells for this?" he asked.

She pulled open the drawer of the hall stand and took out a cardboard carton.

"They may be useful," he said.

"But surely, Mr.——"

"Digby."

"Surely you're exaggerating? I don't mean that you're doing it with any intention of frightening me, but there isn't any danger to us?"

"I don't know. I've got a queer feeling. Had it all morning. How far is the nearest house from here?"

"Not half a mile away," she said.

"You're on the phone?"

She nodded.

"I'm scared, maybe. I'll just go out into the road and have a look round. I wish that fellow would come back," he added fretfully.

He walked slowly up the garden path and stood for a moment leaning over the gate. As he did so, he heard the rattle and asthmatic wheezing of an ancient car, and saw a tradesman's auto come round a corner of Heavytree Lane. Its pace grew slower as it got nearer to the house, and opposite the gate it stopped altogether; the driver getting down with a curse, lifted up the battered tin bonnet, and, groping under the seat, brought out a long spanner. Then, swift as thought, he half turned and struck at Digby's head.

The girl heard the sickening impact, saw the watcher drop limply to the path, and in another second she had slammed the door and thrust home the bolts.

She was calm; the hand that took the revolver from the hall table did not tremble. "Alma!" she called, and Alma came running downstairs.

"What on earth—?" she began, and then saw the pistol in Mirabelle's hand.

"They are attacking the house," said the girl quickly. "I don't know who 'they' are, but they've just struck down one of the men who was protecting us. Take the gun, Alma."

Alma's face was contorted, and might have expressed fear or anger or both. Mirabelle afterward learned that the dominant emotion was one of satisfaction to find herself in so warlike an environment.

Running into the drawing room, the girl pushed open the window, which commanded a view of the road. The gate was unfastened and two men, who had evidently been concealed inside the car were lifting the unconscious man, and she watched, with a calm she could not understand in herself, as they threw him into the interior and fastened the tailboard. She counted four in all, including the driver, who was climbing back to his seat. One of the newcomers, evidently the leader, was pointing down the road toward the lane, and she guessed that he was giving directions as to where the car should wait, for it began to go backward almost immediately and with surprising smoothness, considering the exhibition it had given of decrepitude a few minutes before.

The man who had given instructions came striding down the path toward the door.

"Stop!"

He looked round with a start into the leveled muzzle of a Browning, and his surprise would, in any other circumstances, have been comical.

"It's all right, miss—" he began.

"Put yourself outside that gate," said Mirabelle coolly.

"I wanted to see you—very important——"

Bang!

Mirabelle fired a shot, aimed above his head, toward the old poplar. The man ducked and ran. Clear of the gate he

dropped to the cover of a hedge, where his men already were, and she heard the murmur of their voices distinctly, for the day was still, and the far off chugging of the car's engine sounded close at hand. Presently she saw a head peep round the hedge.

"Can I have five minutes' talk with you?" asked the leader loudly. He was a thick set, bronzed man, with a patch of lint plastered to his face, and she noted unconsciously that he wore gold earrings. "There's no trouble coming to you," he said, opening the gate as he spoke. "You oughtn't to have fired, anyway. Nobody's going to hurt you."

He had advanced a yard into the garden as he spoke.

Bang, bang!

In her haste she had pressed butt and trigger just a fraction too long, and, startled by the knowledge that another shot was coming, her hand jerked round, and the second shot missed his head by the fraction of an inch. He disappeared in a flash, and a second later she saw their hats moving swiftly above the hedge. They were running toward the waiting car.

"Stay here, Alma!"

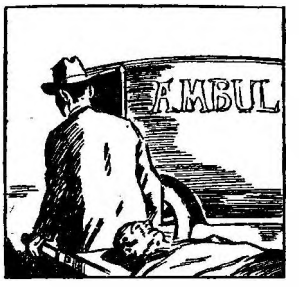
Alma Goddard nodded grimly, and the girl flew up the stairs to her room. From this elevation she commanded a better view. She saw them climb into the car and in another second the limp body of the guard was thrown out into the hedge; then, after a brief space of time, the machine began moving and, gathering speed, it disappeared in a cloud of dust on the Highcombe Road.

Mirabelle came down the stairs at a run, pulled back the bolts and flew out and along the road toward the still figure of the detective. He was lying by the side of the ditch, his head a mass of blood, and she saw that he was still breathing. She tried to lift him, but it was too great a task. She ran back to the house. The telephone was in the hall, an old-fashioned instrument with a handle that had to be turned. She had not made two revolutions before she realized that the wire had been cut.

Alma was still in the parlor, the gun gripped tight in her hand, a look of fiendish resolution on her face. "You must help me to get Digby into the house," she said.

The two women, returning to the man, half lifted, half dragged him back to the hall. Laying him down on the brick floor, the girl went in search of clean linen. The kitchen supplied all that she needed. She bathed the wound, and the nurse who had been absent on an errand during the excitement applied a rough dressing. The wound was an ugly one, and the man showed no signs of recovering consciousness.

"We shall have to send Mary into Gloucester for an ambulance," said Mirabelle.



"We can't send nurse; she doesn't know the way."

"Mary," said Alma calmly, "is at this moment having hysterics in the larder. I'll harness the dog cart and go myself. But where is the other man?"

Mirabelle shook her head. "I don't like to think what has happened to him," she said.

Together they lifted the heavy figure of their patient and staggered with him into the pretty little room, laying him at last upon the settee under the window. "He can rest there till we get the ambulance," began Mirabelle, and a chuckle behind her made her turn with a gasp.

It was the peddler, and in his hand he held the pistol which she had discarded. "I only want you." He nodded to the girl. "You other two women can come out here." He jerked his head to the passage. Under the stairs was a big cupboard and he pulled the door open invitingly. "Get in here. If you make a noise, you'll be sorry for yourselves."

Alma's eyes wandered longingly to the gun she had left in the corner, but before she could make a move he had placed himself between her and the weapon.

"Get inside," said the peddler. He shut the door on the two women and fastened the hatch.

"Now, young lady, put on your hat and be lively!"

He followed Mirabelle up the stairs into her room and watched her while she found a hat and a cloak. She knew only too well that it was a waste of time even to temporize with him.

"I suppose you saw the boys driving away and you didn't remember that I was somewhere around? Was that you doing the shooting?"

She did not answer.

"It couldn't have been Lew, or you'd have been dead," he said. He was examining the muzzle of the pistol. "It was you, all right." He chuckled. "Ain't

you the game one! Sister, you ought to be—" He stopped dead, staring through the window. He was paralyzed with amazement at the sight of a bareheaded Aunt Alma flying along the Gloucester Road. With an oath he turned to the girl. "How did she get out? Have you got anybody here? Now speak up."

"The cupboard under the stairs leads to the wine cellar," said Mirabelle coolly, "and there are two ways out of the wine cellar. I think Aunt Alma found one of them."

With an oath, he took a step toward her, gripped her by the arm and jerked her toward the door. "Lively!" he said, and dragged her down the stairs through the hall, into the kitchen.

He shot back the bolts, but the lock of the kitchen door had been turned. "This way." He swore cold bloodedly, and with her arms still in his powerful grip, he hurried along the passage and pulled open the door.

It was an unpropitious moment. A man was walking down the path, a half smile on his face, as though he was thinking over a remembered jest. At sight of him the peddler dropped the girl's arm and his hand went like lightning to his pocket.

"When will you die?" queried Leon Gonsalez softly. "Make a choice, and make it quick!" And the gun in his hand seemed to quiver with homicidal eagerness.

Chapter XIV

Leon Works Quickly

THE peddler, his face twitching, put up his shaking hands.

Leon walked to him, took the Browning from his moist grip and dropped it into his pocket. "Your friends are waiting, of course?" he said pleasantly.

The peddler did not answer.

"Cuccini, too? I thought I had incapacitated him for a long time."

"They've gone," growled the peddler.

Gonsalez looked round in perplexity. "I don't want to take you into the house. At the same time, I don't want to leave you here," he said. "I almost wish you'd drawn that gun of yours," he added regretfully. "It would have solved so many immediate problems."

This particular problem was solved by the return of the disheveled Alma and the restoration to her of her gun.

"I would so much rather you shot him than I," said Leon earnestly. "The police are very suspicious of my shootings, and they never wholly believe that they are done in self defense."

With a rope he tied the man, and tied him uncomfortably, wrists to ankles. That done, he made a few inquiries and went swiftly out to the barn, returning in a few minutes with the unhappy guard. "It can't be helped," said Leon, cutting short the man's apologies. "The question is, where are the rest of the brethren?"

Something zipped past him; it had the intensified hum of an angry wasp, and a fraction of a second later he heard a muffled "Plop!" In a second he was lying flat on the ground, his Browning covering the hedge that hid Heavytree Lane.

"Run to the house," he called urgently. "They won't bother about you." And the guard, nothing loth, sprinted for the cover of walls.

Presently Leon located the enemy, and at a little distance off he saw the flat top of the covered car. A man walked slowly and invitingly across the gap in the hedge, but Gonsalez held his fire, and presently the maneuver was repeated. Obviously they were trying to concentrate his mind upon the gap whilst they were moving elsewhere. His eyes swept the meadow boundary; running parallel, he guessed, was a brook or ditch which would make excellent cover.

Again the man passed leisurely across the gap. Leon steadied his elbow, and glanced along the sight. As he did so, the man reappeared.

Crack!

Gonsalez aimed a foot behind him. The man saw the flash and jumped back, as he had expected. In another second he was writhing on the ground with a bullet through his leg.

Leon showed his teeth in a smile and switched his body round to face the new point of attack. It came from the spot that he had expected: a little rise of ground that commanded his position.

The first bullet struck the turf to his right with an angry buzz, sent a divot flying heavenward, and ricochetted with a smack against a tree. Before the raised head could drop to cover, Gonsalez fired; fired another shot to left and right, then, rising, raced for the shelter of the tree, and reached it in time to see three heads bobbing back to the road. He waited, covering the gap, but the people who drew the wounded man out of sight did not show themselves, and a minute later he saw the car moving swiftly down the by-road and knew that danger was past.

The firing had attracted attention. He

had not been back in the house more than a few minutes before a mounted policeman, his horse in a lather, came galloping up to the gate and dismounted. A neighboring farm had heard the shots and telephoned to constabulary headquarters. For half an hour the mounted policeman took notes, and by this time half the farmers in the neighborhood, their guns under their arms, had assembled in Mirabelle's parlor.

Mirabelle had not seen as much of the redoubtable Leon as she could have wished, and when they had a few moments to themselves she seized the opportunity to tell him of the call which Lee had made that morning. Apparently he knew all about it, for he expressed no surprise, and was only embarrassed when she showed a personal interest in himself and his friends.

It was not a very usual experience for him, and he was rather annoyed with himself at this unexpected glimpse of enthusiasm and hero worship, sane as it was, and based, as he realized, upon her keen sense of justice. "I'm not so sure that we've been very admirable, really," he said. "But the difficulty is to produce at the moment a judgment which would be given from a distance of years. We have sacrificed everything which to most men would make life worth living in our desire to see the scales held fairly."

"You are not married, Mr. Gonsalez?"

He stared into the frank eyes. "Married? Why, no," he said, and she laughed.

"You talk as though that were a possibility that had never occurred to you."

"It hasn't," he admitted. "By the very nature of our work we are debarred from that experience. And is it an offensive thing to say that I have never felt my singleness to be a deprivation?"

"It *is* very rude," she said severely, and Leon was laughing to himself all the way back to town as at a great joke that improved upon repetition.

"I think we can safely leave her for a week," he reported, on his return to Curzon Street. "Have you done anything about Johnson Lee?"

Manfred nodded. "Meadows and the enthusiastic Mr. Washington have gone to see him. I have asked Washington to go because—" he hesitated—"the Snake is a real danger, so far as Lee is concerned. Elijah Washington promises to be a help. He is afraid of nothing, and has undertaken to stay with Lee and to apply such remedies for snake bite as he knows."

He was putting on his gloves as he spoke, and Leon Gonsalez looked at him questioningly.

"I'm calling upon friend Oberzohn," Manfred explained.

"The devil you are!" said Leon, his eyebrows rising.

"I have taken the precaution of sending him a note, asking him to keep his snakes locked up," said Manfred, "and as I have pointedly forwarded the carbon copy of the letter, to impress the fact that another copy exists and may be brought in evidence against him, I think I shall leave Oberzohn & Smitts' main office without hurt. If you are not too tired, Leon, I would be delighted if you'd drive me there."

"Give me a quarter of an hour," said Leon, and went up to his room to make himself tidy.

It was fifteen minutes exactly when the car stopped at the door, and Manfred got into it. There was no partition between driver and passenger, and conversation was possible.

"It would have been as well if you'd had Brother Newton there," he suggested.

"Brother Newton will be on the spot. I took the precaution of sending him a similar note," said Manfred. "I shouldn't imagine they'll bring out their gunmen."

"I know two, and possibly three, they won't bring out." Gonsalez grinned at the traffic policeman who waved them along. "That Browning of mine throws high, Manfred. I've always had a suspicion it did. Pistols are queer things, but this may wear into my hand." He talked arms and ammunition until the square block of Oberzohn & Smitts came into sight. "Good hunting!" he said, as he got out, opened the door and touched his hat to Manfred as he alighted.

Leon got back into his seat, swung the little car round in a circle, and sat on the opposite side of the road, his eyes alternately on the entrance and on the mirror which gave him a view of the traffic approaching him from the rear.

Manfred was not kept in the waiting room for more than two minutes. At the end of that time, a solemn youth in spectacles, with a little bow, led him past the incurious office force into the presence of the illustrious doctor.

The old man was at his desk. Behind

him, his debonair self, was Monty Newton, a smile on his face. Oberzohn got up like a man standing to attention. "Mr. Manfred, this is a great honor," he said, and held out his hand stiffly.

An additional chair had been placed for the visitor, a rich looking tapestried chair, to which the doctor waved the hand which Manfred did not take.

"Good morning, Manfred." Newton removed his cigar and nodded genially. "Were you at the dance last night?"

"I was there, but I didn't come in," said Manfred, seating himself. "You did not turn up till late, they tell me?"

"It was of all occurrences the most unfortunate," said Dr. Oberzohn, and Newton laughed.

"I've lost his laboratory secretary and he hasn't forgiven me," he said, almost jovially. "The girl he took on yesterday. Rather a stunner in the way of looks. She didn't wish to go back to the country where she came from, so my sister offered to put her up for the night in Chester Square. I'm blessed if she didn't lose herself at the dance, and we haven't seen her since!"

"It was a terrible thing," said Oberzohn sadly. "I regard her as in my charge. For her safety I am responsible. You, I trust, Mr. Newton——"

"I don't think I should have another uneasy moment if I were you, doctor," said Manfred easily. "The young lady is back at Heavytree Farm. I thought that would surprise you. And she is still there; that will surprise you more, if you have not already heard by telephone that your Old Guard failed dismally to—er—bring her back to work. I presume that was their object?"

"My Old Guard, Mr. Manfred?" Oberzohn shook his head in bewilderment. "This is beyond my comprehension."

"Is your sister well?" asked Manfred blandly of Newton.

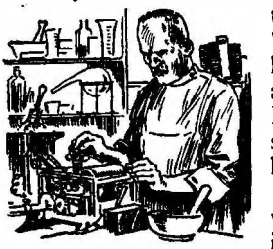
Newton shrugged his shoulders. "She is naturally upset. Who wouldn't be? Joan is a very tender hearted girl."

"She has been that way for years," said Manfred offensively. "May I smoke?"

"Will you have one of my cigarettes?"

Manfred's grave eyes fixed the doctor in a stare that held the older man against his will. "I have had just one too many of your cigarettes," he said. His words came like a cold wind. "I do not want any more, Herr Doktor, or there will be vacancies in your family circle. Who knows that, long before you compound your wonderful elixir, you may be called to normal immortality?"

The yellow face of Oberzohn had turned



to a dull red. "You seem to know as much about me, Mr. Manfred, as myself," he said in a husky whisper.

"More. For while you are racing against time to avoid the end of a life which does not seem especially worthy of preservation, and while you know not what day or hour that end may come, I can tell you to the minute."

All trace of a smile had vanished from Monty Newton's face. His eyes did not leave the caller's.

"Perhaps you shall tell me." Oberzohn found a difficulty in speaking. Rage possessed him, and only his iron will choked down the flames from view.

"The day that injury comes to Mirabelle Leicester, that day you go out—you and those who are with you!"

"Look here, Manfred, there's a law in this country—" began Monty Newton hotly.

"I am the law." The words rang like a knell of fate. "In this matter I am judge, jury, hangman. Old or young, I shall not spare," said Manfred evenly.

"Are you immortal, too?" sneered Monty.

"The law is immortal. If you dream that, by some cleverly concerted coup, you can sweep me from your path before I grow dangerous, be sure that your sweep is clean."

"You haven't asked me to come here to listen to this stuff, have you?" asked Newton, and though his words were bold, his manner aggressive, there were shadows on his face which were not there when Manfred had come into the room, shadows under his eyes and in his cheeks where plumpness had been.

"I've come here to tell you to let up on Miss Leicester. You're after something that you cannot get, and nobody is in a position to give you. I don't know what it is. I will make you a present of that piece of information. But it's big—bigger than any prize you've ever gone after in your wicked lives. To get that, you're prepared to sacrifice innocent lives with the recklessness of spendthrifts who think there is no bottom to their purse. The end is near!"

He rose slowly and stood by the table, towering over the stiff backed doctor.

"I cannot say what action the police will take over this providential snake bite, Oberzohn, but I'll make you this offer: I and my friends will stand out of the game and leave Meadows to get you in his own way. You think that means you'll go scot free? It doesn't. These police are like bulldogs; once they've got a grip of you, they'll never let go."

"What is the price you ask for this interesting service?" Newton was puffing steadily at his cigar, his hands clasped behind him, his feet apart, a picture of comfort and well being.

"Leave Miss Leicester alone. Find a new way of getting the money you need so badly."

Newton laughed. "My dear fellow, that's a stupid thing to say. Neither Oberzohn nor I are exactly poor."

"You're bankrupt, both of you," said Manfred quietly. "You are in the position of gamblers when the cards have run against them for a long time. You have no reserve, and your expenses are enormous. Find another way, Newton—and tell your sister—" he paused by the door—"I'd like to see her at Curzon Street tomorrow morning at ten o'clock."

"Is that an order?" asked Newton sarcastically.

Manfred nodded. "Then let me tell you," roared the man, white with passion, "that I take no orders for her or for me. Got swollen heads since you've had your party, haven't you? You look out for me, Manfred. I'm not exactly harmless."

He felt the pressure of the doctor's foot upon his and curbed his temper.

Manfred raised his eyes slowly and met his. "You will be hanged by the state, Newton, or murdered by Oberzohn, I am not sure which," he said simply, and he spoke with such perfect confidence that the heart of Monty Newton turned to water.

Manfred stood in the sidewalk and signalled. The little car came swiftly and noiselessly across. Leon's eyes were on the entrance. A tall man standing in the shadow of the hall was watching. He was leaning against the wall in a negligent attitude, and for a second Leon was startled.

"Get in quickly!" Leon almost shouted the words, and Manfred jumped into the machine as the chauffeur sent the car forward with a jerk that strained every gear.

"What in—?" began Manfred, but the rest of his words were lost in the terrific crash which followed.

The leather hood of the machine was ripped down at the back, a splinter of glass struck Leon's cap and sliced a half moon neatly. He jammed on the brakes, threw open the door of the car and leaped out. Behind the car was a mass of wreckage; a great iron casting lay split into three pieces amidst a tangle of broken packing case.

Leon looked up; immediately above the entrance to Oberzohn & Smitts was a crane, which had been swung out with a heavy load just before Manfred came out. The steel wire hung loosely from the derrick. He heard excited voices speaking from the open doorway three floors above, and two men in large glasses were looking down and gabbling in a language he did not understand.

"A very pretty accident. We might have filled half a column in the evening newspapers if we had not moved."

"And the watcher in the hall—what was he doing?"

Leon walked back through the entrance. The man had disappeared, but near where he had been standing was a small bell push which, it was obvious, had recently been fixed, for the wires ran loosely on the surface of the wall and were new.

He came back in time to see a policeman crossing the road.

"I wish to find out how this accident occurred, constable," he said. "My master was nearly killed."

The policeman looked at the ton of débris lying half on the sidewalk, half on the road, then up at the slackened hawser. "The cable has run off the drum, I should think."

"I should think so," said Leon gravely.

He did not wait for the policeman to finish his investigations, but went home with Manfred at a steady pace, and made no reference to the "accident" until he had put away his car.

"The man in the hall was put there to signal when you were under the load," he said. "I am going out to make a few in quiries."

Gonsalez knew one of Oberzohn's staff, a clean young Swede, with that knowledge of English which is normal in Scandinavian countries; and at nine o'clock that night he drifted into a Swedish restaurant in Dean Street and found the young man at the end of his meal. It was an acquaintance, one of many, that Leon had assiduously cultivated.

The young man, who knew him as Mr. Heinz, was glad to have a companion with whom he could discuss the inexplicable accident of the afternoon. "The cable was not fixed to the drum," he said. "It might have been terrible. There was a gentleman in a motor car outside, and he had moved away only a few inches when the case fell. There is bad luck in that house; I am glad that I am leaving at the end of the week."

Leon had some important questions to put, but he did not hurry, having the gift of patience to a marked degree. It was nearly ten when they parted, and Gonsalez went back to his garage, where he spent a quarter of an hour.

At midnight, Manfred had just finished a long conversation with the Scotland Yard man who was at Brightlingsea, when Leon came in, looking very pleased with himself. Poiccart had gone to bed, and Manfred had switched out one circuit of lights when his friend arrived.

"Thank you for attending to what I phoned you about, my dear George," said Gonsalez briskly. "It was very good of you, and I did not like troubling you, but——"

"It was a small thing," said Manfred with a smile, "and involved merely the changing of my shoes. But why? I am not curious, but why did you wish me to telephone the night watchman at Oberzohn's City Road offices to be waiting at the door at eleven o'clock for a message from the doctor?"

"Because," said Leon cheerfully, rubbing his hands, "the night watchman is an honest man; he has a wife and six children, and I am particularly wishful not to hurt anybody during—whatever may happen." He smiled. "The building doesn't matter; it stands, or stood, isolated from all others. The only worry in my mind was the night watchman. He was at the door. I saw him—and can now proceed with a clear conscience."

Manfred asked no further questions. Early the next morning he took up the paper and turned to the middle page, read an account of a "Big Fire in City Road" which had completely gutted the offices of Messrs. Oberzohn & Smitts. Because of Leon's precautions for the safety of Oberzohn's night watchman, he fully expected to read it before he had seen the paper.

"Accidents are accidents," said Leon the philosopher that morning at breakfast. "And that talk I had with the clerk last night told me a lot; Oberzohn has allowed his fire insurance on his City Road building to lapse!"

Chapter XV

THE SNAKE IN THE DARK

IN ONE of the forbidden rooms that was filled with the apparatus which Dr. Oberzohn had accumulated for his pleasure and benefit, was a small electrical furnace which was the center of many of his most interesting experiments. There were, in certain known drugs, constituents which it was his desire to eliminate. Dr. Oberzohn believed absolutely in many things that the modern chemist would dismiss as fantastic. But his supreme faith was that somewhere in the materia medica was an infallible elixir which would prolong life far beyond the normal span. It was to all other known properties as radium is to pitch-blende. It was something that only the patient chemist could materialize. Every hour he could spare he devoted himself to his obsession; and he was in the midst of one of his experiments when the telephone bell called him back to his study.

He listened, every muscle of his face moving, to the tale of disaster that Monty Newton wailed.

"It is burning still? Have you no fire extinguishing machinery in London?"

"Is the place insured or is it not?" asked Monty for the second time.

"It is not."

"It was incendiary," said Newton angrily. "The fire brigade people are certain of it. That cursed crowd are getting back at us for what happened this afternoon."

"I know nothing that happened this afternoon," said Dr. Oberzohn coldly. "You know of nothing either. It was an accident which we all deplored. As to this man, we shall see."

He hung up the telephone receiver very carefully, went along the passage, down a steep flight of dark stairs, and into a basement kitchen. Before he opened the door he heard the sound of furious voices, and he stood for a moment surveying the scene with every feeling of satisfaction. Except for two men, the room was empty. On one side of the deal table stood Gurther, white as death, his round eyes red with rage. On the other, the short, stout Russian Pole, Pfeiffer, with his heavy, pasty face and baggy eyes, his little mustache and beard bristling with anger. The cards scattered on the table and the floor told the Herr Doktor that this was a repetition of

the quarrel which was so frequent between them.

"Swine!" hissed Gurther. "I saw you palm the king as you dealt. Thief and robber of the blind——"

"You dog! You——"

The doctor saw the hand of Gurther steal down and back.

"Gurther!" he called, and the man spun round. "To my parlor, march!"

Without a word, the man strode past him, and the doctor was left with the panting Russian.

"Herr Doktor, this Gurther is beyond endurance!" His voice trembled with rage. "I would sooner live with a pig than this man, who is never normal unless he is drugged."

"Silence!" shouted Oberzohn, and pointed to the chair. "You shall wait till I come," he said.

When he came back to his room, he found Gurther standing stiffly at attention. "Now, Gurther," he said—he was almost benevolent as he patted the man on the shoulder, "this matter of Gonsalez must end. Can I have my Gurther hiding like a worm in the ground? No, that cannot be. Tonight I will send you to this man, Gonsalez, and you are so clever that you cannot fail. He whipped you, Gurther, tied you up and cruelly beat you. Always remember that, my brave fellow; he beat you till you bled. Now you shall see the man again. You will go in a dress-for-every-occasion," he said. "The city-clerk-manner. You will watch him in your so clever way, and you shall strike. It is permitted."

"*Ja,* Herr Doktor."

He turned on his heels and disappeared through the door. The doctor waited till he heard him going up the stairs, and then he rang for Pfeiffer. The man came in sullenly. He lacked all the precision of the military Gurther; yet, as Oberzohn knew, of the two he was the more alert, the more cunning.

"Pfeiffer, it has come to me that you are in some danger. The police wish to take you back to the continent, where certain unpleasant things happened, as you well know. And I am told—" he lowered his voice—"that a friend of ours would be glad to see you go, eh?"

The man did not raise his sulky eyes from the floor, did not answer, or by any gesture or movement of body suggest that he had heard what the older man had said.

"Gurther goes tomorrow, perhaps on our good work, perhaps to speak secretly to his friends in the police. Who knows? He has work to do; let him do it, Pfeiffer. All my men will be there, at a place called Brightlingsea. You also shall go. Gurther would rob a blind man? Good! You shall rob one also. As for Gurther, I do not wish him back. I am tired of him. He is a madman. All men are mad who sniff that white stuff up their foolish noses, eh, Pfeiffer?"

Still the awkward looking man made no reply.

"Let him do his work; you shall not interfere, until it is done."

Pfeiffer was looking at him now, a cold sneer on his face. "If he comes back, I do not," he said. "This man is frightening me. Twice the police have been here—three times. The man is a danger, Herr Doktor. I told you he was the day you brought him here."

"He can dress in the gentleman-club-manner," said the doctor gently.

"Pshaw!" said the other scornfully. "Is he not an actor who has postured and painted his face and thrown about his legs for so many marks a week?"

"If he does not come back I shall be relieved," murmured the doctor. "Though it would be a mistake to leave him so that these cunning men could pry into our affairs."

Pfeiffer said nothing; he understood his instructions; there was nothing to be said. "When does he go?"

"Early tomorrow, before daylight. You will see him, of course." He then said something in a low tone, that only Pfeiffer heard.

The shadow who stood in stockinged feet listening at the door caught only two words. Gurther grinned in the darkness; his bright eyes grew luminous. When he heard his companion move toward the door, he sped up the stairs without a sound.

RATH HALL was a rambling white building of two stories, set in the midst of a little park, so thickly wooded that the house was invisible from the road. Since the main entrance to the estate was a very commonplace gate, without lodge or visible drive beyond, Gonsalez would have missed the place had he not recognized the man who was sitting on the moss grown and broken wall who jumped

down as Leon stopped his car.

"Mr. Meadows is at the house, sir. He said he expected you."

"And where on earth is the house?" asked Leon Gonsalez, as he went into reverse.

For answer the detective opened the gate wide and Leon sent his car winding between the trees, for close at hand he recognized where a gravel drive had once been, and, moreover, saw the tracks of cars in the soft earth. He arrived just as Mr. Johnson Lee was taking his two guests in to dinner; and Meadows was obviously glad to see him.

Meadows excused himself and took Leon aside into the hall, where they could not be overheard. "I have had your message," he said. "The only thing that has happened out of the ordinary is that the servants have an invitation to a big concert at Brightlingsea. You expected that?"

Leon nodded. "Yes. I hope Lee will let them go. I prefer that they should be out of the way. A crude scheme, but Oberzohn does these things. Has anything else happened?"

"Nothing. There have been one or two queer people around."

"Has he showed you the letters he had from Barberton?"

To his surprise the inspector answered in the affirmative. "Yes, but they are worse than Greek to me. A series of tiny protuberances on thick brown paper. He keeps them in his safe. He read some of the letters to me; they were not very illuminating."

"But the letter of letters?" asked Leon anxiously. "That which Lee answered. By the way, you know that Mr. Lee wrote all his letters between perforated lines."

"I've seen the paper," nodded the detective. "No, I asked him about that most important letter, but apparently he is not anxious to talk until he has seen his lawyer, who is coming down tonight. He should have been here, in fact, in time for dinner."

They passed into the dining room together. The blind man was waiting patiently at the head of the table, and with an apology Leon took the place that had been reserved for him. He sat with his back to the wall, facing one of the three long windows that looked out upon the park. It was a warm night and the blinds were up, as also was the middle window that faced him. He made a motion to Mr. Washington, who sat opposite him, to draw a little aside, and the American realized that he wished an uninterrupted view of the park.

"Would you like the window closed?" asked Mr. Lee, leaning forward and addressing the table in general. "I know it is open," he said with a little laugh, "because I opened it! I am a lover of fresh air."

They murmured their agreement and the meal went on without any extraordinary incident. Mr. Washington was one of those adaptable people who dovetail into any environment in which they find themselves.

"Do you mind?" suddenly broke in Leon. His voice was urgent as he signalled Washington to move farther to the left; and when the big man moved his chair, Leon nodded his thanks. His eyes were on the window and the darkening lawn. Not once did he remove his gaze.

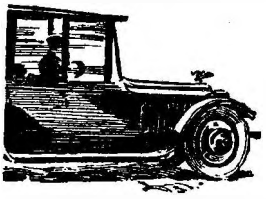
"It's an extraordinary thing about Poole, my lawyer," Mr. Lee was saying. "He promised faithfully he'd be at Bath by seven o'clock. What is the time?"

"Half past eight," Meadows said.

"It is extraordinary! I wonder if you would mind——"

Mr. Lee's foot touched a bell beneath the table and his butler came in. "Will you telephone to Mr. Poole's house and ask if he has left?"

The butler returned in a short time. "Yes, sir, Mr. Poole left the house by car at half past six."



"Half past six? He should have been here by now."

"He may have had tire trouble," said Leon, not shifting his fixed stare.

"He could have telephoned."

"Did anybody know he was coming—anybody outside your own household?" asked Gonsalez.

The blind man hesitated. "Yes, I mentioned the fact to the post office this morning. I went in to get my letters, and found that one I had written to Mr. Poole had been returned through a stupid mistake on my part. I told the postmaster that he was coming this evening and that there was no need to forward it."

"You were in the public part of the post office?"

"I believe I was."

"You said nothing else, Mr. Lee—noth-

ing that would give any idea of the object of this visit?"

"I don't know. I'm almost afraid that I did," he confessed. "I remember telling the postmaster that I was going to talk to Mr. Poole about poor Barberton. Mr. Barberton was once very well known in this neighborhood."

"That is extremely unfortunate," said Leon.

He was thinking of two things at the same time; the whereabouts of the missing lawyer, and the wonderful cover that the wall between the window and the floor gave to any man who might creep along out of sight until he got back suddenly to send the snake on its errand of death.

"How many men have you got in the grounds, by the way, Meadows?"

"One, and he's not in the grounds but outside on the road. I pull him in at night, or rather in the evening, to patrol the grounds. He is armed."

"Excuse me," said Leon. "I think I heard a car."

He got up noiselessly from the table, went round the back of Mr. Lee, and, darting to the window, looked out. A flower bed ran close to the wall, and beyond that was a broad gravel drive. Between gravel and flowers was a wide strip of turf. The drive continued some fifty feet to the right before it turned under an arch of rambler roses. To the left it extended for less than a dozen feet, and from this point a path parallel to the side of the house ran into the drive.

"Do you hear it?" asked Lee.

"No, sir, I was mistaken."

Leon dipped his hand into his side pocket, took out a handful of something that looked like tiny candies wrapped in colored paper. Only Meadows saw him scatter them left and right, and he was too discreet to ask why. Leon saw the inquiring lift of Meadows' eyebrows as the latter came back to his seat, but was willfully dense. Thereafter, he ate his dinner with only an occasional glance toward the window.

"I'm not relying entirely upon my own lawyer's advice," said Mr. Lee. "I have telegraphed to Lisbon to ask Dr. Pinto Caillao to come to England, and he may be of greater service even than Poole."

The butler came in at this moment. "Mrs. Poole has just telephoned, sir. Her husband has had a bad accident; his car ran into a tree trunk which was lying across the road near Lawley. It was on the other side of the bend, and he did not see it until too late."

"Is he very badly hurt?"

"No, sir, but he is in the Cottage Hospital. Mrs. Poole says he is fit to travel home."

The blind man sat open mouthed. "What a terrible thing to have happened!" he began.

"A very lucky thing for Mr. Poole," denied Leon cheerfully. "I feared worse than that, and——"

From somewhere outside the window came a *"snap!"* It was like the sound that a firecracker makes when it is exploded. Leon got up from the table, walked swiftly to the side of the window and jumped out. As he struck the earth, he trod on one of the little bonbons he had scattered and it cracked viciously under his foot.

There was nobody in sight. He ran swiftly along the grass plot, slowing his pace as he came to the end of the wall, and then jerked round, gun extended stiffly. Still nobody. Before him was a close growing box hedge, in which had been cut an opening. He heard the crack of another of the scattered bon-bons behind him, guessed that it was Meadows, and presently the detective joined him. Leon put his fingers to his lips, leaped the path to the grass on the other side, and dodged behind a tree until he could see straight through the opening in the box hedge. Beyond was a rose garden.

Leon put his hand in his pocket and took out a black cylinder, fitting it, without taking his eyes from the hedge opening, to the muzzle of his pistol. Meadows heard the dull thud of the explosion before he saw the pistol go up. There was a scatter of leaves and twigs and the sound of hurrying feet. Leon dashed through the opening in time to see a man plunge into a plantation.

"Plop!"

The bullet struck a tree not a foot from the fugitive.

"That's that!" said Leon, and took off his silencer. "I hope none of the servants heard it, and most of all that Lee, whose hearing is unfortunately acute, mistook the shot for something else."

He went back to the window, stopping to pick up such of his crackers as had not exploded.

"They are useful things to put on the floor of your room when you're expecting to have your throat cut in the middle of the night," he said pleasantly. "They've saved my life more often than I can count. Have you ever waited in the dark to have

your throat cut?" he asked. "It happened to me three times, and I will admit that it is not an experience that I am anxious to repeat. Once in Bohemia, in the city of Prague; once in New Orleans, and once in Ortona."

"What happened to the assassins?" asked Meadows with a shiver.

"That is a question for the theologian," said Leon. "I think they are in hell, but then I'm prejudiced."

Mr. Lee had left the dining table and was standing at the front door, leaning on his stick; and with him an interested Mr. Washington.

"What was the trouble?" asked the old man in a worried voice. "It is a great handicap not being able to see things. But I thought I heard a shot fired."

"Two," said Leon promptly. "I hoped you hadn't heard them. I don't know who the man was, Mr. Lee, but he certainly had no right in the grounds, and I scared him off."

"You must have used a silencer: I did not hear the shots fully. Did you catch a view of the man's face?"

"No, I saw his back," he said. Leon thought it was unnecessary to add that a man's back was as familiar to him as his face. For when he studied his enemies, his study was a very thorough and complete one. Moreover, Gurther ran with a peculiar swing of his shoulders.

He turned suddenly to the master of Rath Hall. "May I speak with you privately for a few minutes, Mr. Lee?" he asked. He had taken a sudden resolution.

"Certainly," replied the other courteously, and tapped his way into the hall and into his private study.

For ten minutes Leon was closeted with him. When he came out, Meadows had gone down to his man at the gate, and Washington was standing disconsolately alone. Leon took him by the arm and led him on to the lawn.

"There's going to be real trouble here tonight," he said, and told him the arrangement he had made with Mr. Johnson Lee. "I've tried to persuade him to let me see the letter which is in his safe, but he is like rock on that matter, and I'd hate to burgle the safe of a friend. Listen——"

Elijah Washington listened and whistled.

"They stopped the lawyer coming," Gonsalez went on, "and now they're mortally scared lest, in his absence, the old man tells us what he intended keeping for his lawyer."

"Meadows is going to London, isn't he?"

Leon nodded slowly. "Yes, he is going to London, by car. Did you know all the servants were going out tonight?"

Mr. Washington stared at him. "The women, you mean?"

"The women and the men," said Leon calmly. "There is an excellent concert at Brightingsea tonight, and though they will be late for the first half of the performance, they will thoroughly enjoy the latter portion of the program. The invitation is not mine, but it is one I thoroughly approve."

"But does Meadows want to go away when the fun is starting?"

For apparently Inspector Meadows was not averse to leaving at this critical moment. He was, in fact, quite happy to go. Mr. Washington's views on police intelligence underwent a change for the worse.

"But surely he had better stay?" urged the American. "If you're expecting an attack. They are certain to marshal the whole of their forces?"

"Absolutely certain," said the calm Gonsalez. "Here is the car."

The big car came out from the back of the house at that moment and drew up before the door. "I don't like leaving you," said Meadows, as he swung himself up by the driver's side and put his bag on the seat.

"Tell the driver to avoid Lawley like the plague," said Leon. "There's a tree down, unless the local authorities have removed it, which is very unlikely."

He waited until the tail lights of the machine had disappeared into the gloom, then he went back to the hall.

"Excuse me, sir," said the butler, struggling into his greatcoat as he spoke. "Will you be all right? There is nobody left in the house to look after Mr. Lee. I could stay——"

"It was Mr. Lee's suggestion you should all go," said Gonsalez briefly. "Just go outside and tell me when the lights of the big auto-bus come into view. I want to speak to Mr. Lee before you go."

He went into the library and shut the door behind him. The waiting butler heard the murmur of his voice and had

some qualms of conscience. The tickets had come from a local agency; he had never dreamed that, with guests in the house, his employer would allow the staff to go in its entirety.

The big closed bus came lumbering up the apology for a drive, and swept round to the back of the house, to the annoyance of the servants, who were gathered in the hall.

"Don't bother, I will tell him," said Leon. He seemed to have taken full charge of the house, an unpardonable offence in the eyes of well regulated servants.

He disappeared through a long passage leading into the mysterious domestic regions, and returned to announce that the driver had rectified his error and was coming to the front entrance: an unnecessary explanation, since the big vehicle drew up as he was telling the company.

"There goes the most uneasy bunch of festive souls it has ever been my misfortune to see," he said, as the bus, its brakes squeaking, went down the declivity toward the unimposing gate. "And yet they'll have the time of their lives. They are not aware of it, but I am removing them to a place where they'd give a lot of money to be—if they hadn't gone!"

"That leaves you and me alone," said Mr. Washington glumly, but brightened up almost at once. "I can't say that I mind a rough house, with or without gunplay," he said. He looked round the dark hall a little apprehensively. "What about fastening the doors behind?" he asked.

"They're all right," said Leon. "It isn't from the back that danger will come. Come out and enjoy the night air. It is a little too soon for the real trouble."

But here, for once, he was mistaken.

Elijah Washington followed him into the park, took two paces, and suddenly Leon saw him stagger. In a second he was by the man's side, bent and peering, his glasses discarded on the grass.

"Get me inside," said Washington's voice. He was leaning heavily upon his companion.

With his arm round his waist, supporting half his companion's weight, Leon pushed the man into the hall but did not close the door. Instead, as the American sat down with a thud upon a hall seat, Leon fell to the ground, and peered along the artificial skyline he had created. There was no movement, no sign of any attacker. Then and only then did he shut the door and drop the bar, and, pushing the study door wide, carried the man into the room and switched on the lights.

"I guess something got me then," muttered Washington.

His right cheek was red and swollen, and Leon saw the telltale bite; and saw something else. He put his hand to Washington's cheek and examined his fingertips.

"Get me some whisky, will you—about a gallon of it."

Washington was obviously in great pain and sat rocking himself to and fro. "Gosh! This is awful!" he groaned. "Never had any snake that bit like this!"

"You're alive, my friend; and I didn't believe you when you said you were snake proof."

Leon poured out a tumbler of neat whisky and held it to the American's lips.

"Down with prohibition!" murmured Washington, and did not take the glass from his lips until it was empty. "You can give me another dose of that. I sha'n't get pickled," he said.

He put his hand up to his face and touched the tiny wound gingerly. "It is wet," he said in surprise.

"What did it feel like?"

"Like nothing so much as a snake bite," confessed the expert. Already his face was puffed beneath the eyes, and the skin was discolored black and blue.

Leon crossed to the fireplace and pushed the bell, and Washington watched him in amazement. "Say, what's the good of ringing? The servants have gone."

There was a patter of feet in the hall, the door was flung open and George Manfred came in, and behind him the startled visitor saw Meadows and a dozen men.

"For the Lord's sake!" he said sleepily.

"They came in the big auto bus, lying on the floor," explained Leon, "and the only excuse we could think of for bringing an auto bus here was to send the servants to that concert."

"You got Lee away?" asked Manfred.

Leon nodded. "He was in the car that took friend Meadows, who transferred to the auto bus somewhere out of sight of the house."

Washington had taken a small cardboard box from his pocket and was rubbing a red powder gingerly upon the two white edged marks, groaning the while.

"This is certainly a snake that's got the

cobra skinned to death and a rattlesnake's bite, by compare, ain't worse than a dog nip," he said. "Mamba nothing! I know the mamba; he is pretty fatal, but not so bad as this."

Manfred looked across to Leon. "Gurther?" he asked simply, and Gonsalez nodded.

"It was intended for me obviously, but, as I've said before, Gurther is nervous. And it didn't help him any to be shot up." He thought in silence for a moment. Then, "In the present situation I don't think I can improve upon the tactics of the admirable Miss Leicester," he said, and went up to Mr. Lee's bedroom, which was in the center of the house and had a small balcony, the floor of which was formed by the top of the porch.

The long French windows were open and Leon crawled out into the darkness and took observation through the pillars of the balustrade. The Old Guard were in the open now, making no attempt to conceal their presence. He counted seven, until he saw the cigarette of another near the end of the drive. What were they waiting for, he wondered? None of them moved; they were not even closing on the house. And this inactivity puzzled him. They were awaiting a signal. What was it to be? Whence would it come?

He saw a man come stealthily across the lawn. One or two? His eyes were playing tricks. If there were two, one was Gurther. There was no mistaking him. For a second he passed out of view behind a pillar of the balcony. Leon moved his head. Gurther had fallen! He saw him stumble to his knees and tumble flat upon the ground. What did that mean?

He was still wondering when he heard a soft scraping and a deep-drawn breath, very near him, and tried to locate the noise. Suddenly, within a few inches of his face, a hand came up out of the darkness and gripped the lower edge of the balcony.

Swiftly, noiselessly, Gonsalez wriggled back to the room, drew erect in the cover of the curtains and waited. His hand touched something; it was a long silken cord by which the curtains were drawn. Leon grinned in the darkness and made a scientific loop.

The intruder drew himself up on to the parapet, stepped quietly across, tiptoed to the open window. He was not even suspicious, for the French windows had been open all evening. Without a sound, he stepped into the room and was momentarily silhouetted against the starlight reflected in the window.

"Hatless," thought Leon. That made things easier. As the man took another stealthy step, the noose dropped over his neck, jerked tight and strangled the cry in his throat. In an instant he was lying flat on the floor, with a knee in his back. He struggled to rise, but Leon's fist came down with the precision of a piston rod, and he went suddenly quiet.

Leon loosened the slip knot, and, flinging the man over his shoulder, carried him out of the room and down the stairs. He could only guess that this would be the only intruder, but left nothing to chance, and after he had handed his prisoner to the men who were waiting in the hall, he ran back to the room, to find, as he had expected, that no other adventurer had followed the lead. They were still standing at irregular intervals where he had seen them last. The signal was to come from the house. What was it to be, he wondered?

He left one of his men on guard in the room and went back to the study, to find that the startled burglar was an old friend. Lew Cuccini was looking from one of his captors to the other, a picture of dumbfounded chagrin. But the most extraordinary discovery that Leon made on his return to the study was that the American snake charmer was his old cheerful self, and except for his unsightly appearance, seemed to be none the worse for an ordeal which would have promptly ended the lives of ninety-nine men out of a hundred.

"Snake proof; that's me. Is this the guy that did it?" He pointed to Cuccini.

"Where is Gurther?" asked Manfred.

Cuccini grinned up into his face. "You'd better find out, boss," he said. "He'll fix you. As soon as I shout——"

"Cuccini—" Leon's voice was gentle and the point of the long bladed knife that he held to the man's neck was indubitably sharp—"you will not shout. If you do, I shall cut your throat and spoil this beautiful rug. He nodded to the soft hued rug on which they were standing. "What is the signal, Cuccini?" turning his attention again to the prisoner. "And what happens when you give the signal?"

"Listen," said Cuccini, "that throat cutting stuff don't mean anything to me. There's no third degree in this country, and don't forget it."

"You have never seen my ninety-ninth degree." Leon smiled like a delighted boy. "Put something in his mouth, will you?"

One of the men tied a woolen scarf

round Cuccini's head.

"Lay him on the sofa."

He was already bound hand and foot and helpless. "Have you any wax matches? Yes, here are some." Leon emptied a cut glass container into the palm of his hand and looked blandly round at the curious company. "Now, gentlemen, if you will leave me alone for exactly five minutes, I will give Mr. Cuccini an excellent imitation of the persuasive methods of Gian Visconti, an excellent countryman of his, and the inventor of the system I am about to apply."

Cuccini was shaking his head furiously. A mumble of unintelligible sound came from behind the scarf.

"Ah! Our friend is not unintelligent. Any of you who say that Signor Cuccini is unintelligent will incur my severest displeasure," said Leon.

They sat the man up and he talked brokenly, hesitatingly.

"Splendid," said Leon, when he had finished. "Take him into the kitchen and give him a drink. You'll find a tap above the kitchen sink."

"I've often wondered, Leon," said George, when they were alone together, "whether you would ever carry out these horrific threats of yours of torture and malignant savagery?"

"Half the agony of torture is anticipation," said Leon easily, lighting a cigarette with one of the matches he had taken from the table, and carefully guiding the rest back into the glass bowl. "Any man versed in the art of suggestive description can dispense with thumbscrews and branding, 'iron maidens' and all the ghastly apparatus of criminal justice ever employed by our ancestors. I, too, wonder," he mused, blowing a ring of smoke to the ceiling, "whether I could carry my threats into execution. I must try one day."

Manfred looked at his watch. "What do you intend doing—giving the signal?"

Gonsalez nodded.

"And then?"

"Letting them come in. We may take refuge in the kitchen. I think it would be wiser."

George Manfred nodded. "You're going to allow them to open the safe?"

"Exactly," said Leon. "I particularly wish that safe to be opened. Since Mr. Lee demurs about showing us that letter, I think this is the best method of getting at it. I had that in my mind all the time. Have you seen the safe, George? I have. Nobody but an expert could smash it. I have no tools—did not provide against such a contingency. And I have scruples. Our friends have the tools—and no scruples!"

"And the snake—is there any danger?"

Leon snapped his fingers.

"The snake has struck for the night, and will strike no more! As for Gurther——"

"He owes you something."

Leon sent another ring of smoke up and did not speak until it broke.

"Gurther is dead," he said simply. "He has been lying on the lawn in front of the house for the past ten minutes."

CHAPTER XVI

THE LETTER FROM AFRICA

LEON briefly related the scene he had witnessed from the balcony.

"It was undoubtedly Gurther who fell, out in front," he said. "I could not mistake him." He threw his cigarette into the fireplace. "I think it is nearly time," he said. He waited until Manfred had gone, and, going to the door, moved the bar and pulled it open wide.

Stooping down, he saw that the opening of the door had been observed, for one of the men was moving across the lawn in the direction of the house. From his pocket he took a small electric lamp and sent three flickering beams into the darkness. To his surprise, only two men walked forward to the house. Evidently Cuccini was expected to deal with any resistance before the raid occurred.

The house had been built in the fifteenth century, and the entrance hall was a broad, high barn of a place. Some old time architect, in the peculiar manner of his kind, had built a small minstrel gallery over the dining room entrance and immediately facing the study. Leon had already explored the house and had found the tiny staircase that led to this architectural monstrosity. He had no sooner given the signal than he dived into the dining-room, through the tall door, and was behind the thick curtains at the back of the narrow gallery when the first two men came in. He saw them go straight into the study and push open the door. At the same time a third man appeared under the porch, though he made

no attempt to enter the hall.

Presently one of those who had gone into the study came out and called Cuccini by name. When no answer came, he went grumbling back to his task. What that task was, Leon could guess, before the peculiarly acrid smell of hot steel was wafted to his sensitive nostrils.

By crouching down he could see the legs of the men who were working at the safe. They had turned on all the lights, and apparently expected no interruption. The man at the door was joined by another man.

"Where is Lew?" In the stillness of the house the words, though spoken in a low tone, were audible.

"I don't know. Inside somewhere. He had to fix that dago."

Leon grinned. This description of himself never failed to tickle him. One of the workers in the library came out at this point. "Have you seen Cuccini?"

"No," said one of the men at the door.

"Go in and find him. He ought to be here."

Cuccini's absence evidently made him uneasy, for though he returned to the room he was out again in a minute, asking if the messenger had come back. Then, from the back of the passage, came the searcher's voice. "The kitchen's locked."

The safe cutter uttered an expression of amazement. "Locked? What's the idea?"

He came to the foot of the stairs and bellowed up.

"Cuccini!" Only the echo answered him.

"That's queer." He poked his head in the door of the study. "Rush that job, Mike. There's some funny business here." And over his shoulder, "Tell the boys to get ready to jump."

The man to whom he gave the order went out into the night and was absent some minutes, to return with an alarming piece of news.

"They've gone, boss. I can't see one of them."

The "boss" cursed him, and himself went into the grounds on a visit of inspection. He came back in a hurry, ran into the study and Leon heard his voice. "Stand ready to clear!"

"What about Cuccini?"

"Cuccini will have to look after himself. Got it, Mike?"

A deep voice said something. There followed the sound of a crack, as though something of iron had broken. It was the psychological moment. Leon parted the curtains and dropped lightly to the floor.

The man at the door turned in a flash at the sound. "Put 'em up!" he said sharply.

"Don't shoot." Leon's voice was almost conversational in its calmness. "The house is surrounded by police."

With an oath the man darted out of the door, and at that instant came the sound of the first shot, followed by desultory firing from the direction of the road. The second door guard had been the first to go and had drawn the first fire. Leon ran to the door, slammed it tight and switched on the lights as the two men darted from the study. Under the arm of one was a thick pad of square brown sheets. He dropped his load and put up his hands at the sight of the gun; but his companion was made of harder material, and, with a yell, he leaped at the man who stood between him and freedom. Leon twisted aside, advanced his shoulder to meet the

furious drive of the man's fist, then, dropping his pistol, he stooped swiftly and tackled him below the knees. The man swayed, sought to recover his balance and fell with a crash on the stone floor. All the time his companion stood dazed and staring, his hands waving in the air.

There was a knock at the outer door. Without turning his back upon his prisoners, Leon reached for the bar and pulled it up. Manfred came in.

"The safe-cutter who bellowed 'Cuccini,' here, scared them—the gang outside. I think they've got away. There were formerly two cars parked on the road."

His eyes fell upon the brown sheets scattered on the floor and he nodded. "I think you have all you want, Leon," he said.

The detectives came crowding in at that moment and secured their prisoners while Leon Gonsalez and his friend went out on to the lawn to search for Gurther.

The man lay as he had fallen, on his face, and as Leon flashed his lamp upon the figure, he saw that the snake had struck behind the ear.

"Gurther?" murmured Leon, with a doubtful frown. He turned the figure on its back and gave a little gasp of surprise, for there looked up to the starry skies the

heavy face of Pfeiffer. "Pfeiffer! I could have sworn it was the other! There has been some double-crossing here. Let me think."

He stood for fully a minute, his chin on his hand.

"I could have understood Gurther; he was becoming a nuisance and a danger to the old man, and Pfeiffer, the more reliable of the two, hated him. My first theory was that Gurther had been put out by order of Oberzohn."

"Suppose Gurther heard that order, or came to know of it?" asked Manfred quietly.

Leon snapped his fingers. "That is it! We had a similar case a few years ago. The old man gave the 'out' order to Pfeiffer—and Gurther got his blow in first. Shrewd fellow!"

When they returned to the house, the three were seated in a row in Johnson's library. Cuccini, of course, was an old acquaintance. Of the other two men, Leon recognized one, a notorious gunman whose photograph had embellished the pages of *Hue and Cry* for months.

The third, and evidently the skilled workman of the party, for he it was whom they had addressed as "Mike" and who had burnt out the lock of Lee's safe, was identified by Meadows as Mike Selwyn, a skillful bank smasher.

The prisoners were removed to the nearest secure lockup, and by the time Lee's servants returned from their dance, all evidence of an exciting hour had disappeared, except that the blackened and twisted door of the safe testified to the sinister character of the visitation.

Meadows returned as they were gathering together the scattered sheets. There were hundreds of them, all written in Braille characters, and Manfred's sensitive fingers were skimming their surface.

"Oh, yes," he said, in answer to a question that was put to him, "I knew Lee was blind, the day we searched Barberton's effects. That was my mystery." He laughed. "Barberton expected a call from his old friend and had left a message for him on the mantelpiece. Do you remember that strip of paper? It ran 'Dear Johnny, I will be back in an hour.' These are letters," he indicated the papers.

"The folds tell me that," said Meadows. "You may not get a conviction against Cuccini; the two burglars will come up before a judge, but to charge Cuccini means the whole story of the Snake coming out, and that means a bigger kick than I'm prepared to laugh away. I am inclined to let Cuccini go for the moment."

Manfred nodded. He sat with the embossed sheets on his knee. "Written from various places," he said.

It was curious to see him, his fingers running swiftly along the embossed lines, his eyes fixed on vacancy.

"So far I've learned nothing, except that in his spare time Barberton amused himself by translating native fairy stories into English and putting them into Braille for use in the blind school. I knew, of course, that he did that, because I'd already interviewed his sister, who is the mistress of the girls' section."

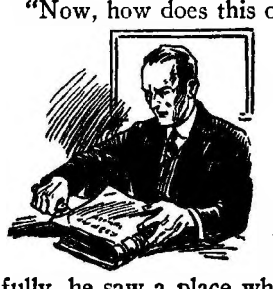
He had gone through half a dozen letters when he rose from the table and walked across to the safe. "I have a notion that the thing we're seeking is not here," he said. "It is hardly likely that he would allow a communication of that character to be jumbled up with the rest of the correspondence."

The safe door was open and the steel drawer at the back had been pulled out. Evidently it was from this receptacle that the letters had been taken. Now the drawer was empty. Manfred took it out and measured the depth of it with his finger.

"Let me see," said Gonsalez suddenly. He groped along the floor of the safe, and presently he began to feel carefully along the sides. "Nothing here," he said. He drew out half a dozen account books and a bundle of documents which at first glance Manfred had put aside as being personal to the owner of Rath Hall. These were lying on the floor amidst the mass of molten metal that had burned deep holes in the carpet.

Leon examined the books one by one, opening them and running his nail along the edge of the pages. The fourth, a ledger, did not open so easily—did not, indeed, open at all. He carried it to the table and tried to pull back the cover.

"Now, how does this open?"



The ledger covers were of leather; to all appearance a very ordinary book, and Leon was anxious not to disturb so artistic a camouflage. Examining the edge carefully, he saw a place where the edges had been forced apart. Taking out a knife,

he slipped the thin blade into the aperture. There was a click and the cover sprang up like the lid of a box.

"And this, I think, is what we are looking for," said Gonsalez.

The interior of the book had been hollowed out, the edges being left were gummed tight, and the receptacle thus formed was packed close with brown papers; brown, except for one, which was written on a large sheet of foolscap, headed, "Bureau of the Ministry of Colonies, Lisbon."

Barberton had superimposed upon this long document his Braille writing, and now one of the mysteries was cleared up.

"Lee said he had never received any important documents," said Manfred, "and, of course, he hadn't, so far as he knew. To him this was merely a sheet of paper on which Braille characters were inscribed. Read this, Leon."

Leon scanned the letter. It was dated "July 21st, 1912," and bore, in the lower left hand corner, the seal of the Portuguese Colonial Office. He read it through rapidly and at the end looked up with a sigh of satisfaction.

"And this settles Oberzohn & Smitts, and robs them of a fortune, the extent of which I think we shall discover when we read Barberton's letter."

He lit a cigarette and scanned the writing again, whilst Meadows, who did not understand Leon's passion for drama, waited with growing impatience. First he read the letter from the Portuguese Colonial Office—to Professor Leicester. It ran:

Illustrious Senhor,

I have this day had the honor of placing before His Excellency the President, and the Ministers of the Cabinet, your letter dated May 15th, 1912. By a letter dated January 8th, 1911, the lands marked Ex. 275 on the Survey Map of the Bishaka district, were conceded to you, Illustrious Senhor, in order to further the cause of science—a cause which is very dear to the heart of His Excellency, the President. Your further letter, in which you complain, Illustrious Senhor, that the incursion of prospectors upon your land is hampering your scientific work, and your request that an end may be put to these annoyances by the granting to you of an extension of the concession, so as to give you title to all minerals found in the aforesaid area, Ex. 275 on the Survey Map of Bishaka and thus making the intrusion of prospectors illegal, has been considered by the Council, and the extending concession is hereby granted, on the following conditions: The term of the concession shall be for twelve years, as from the 14th day of June, 1912, and shall be renewable by you, your heirs or nominees, every twelfth year, on payment of a nominal sum of 1,000 milreis. In the event of the concessionaire, his heirs or nominees, failing to apply for a renewal on the 14th day of June, 1924, the mineral rights of the said area, Ex. 275 on the Survey Map of Bishaka, shall be open to claim in accordance with the laws of Angola.

Leon sat back.

"Fourteenth of June?" he said, and looked up. "Why, that is next week—five days! We've cut it rather fine, George."

"Barberton said there were six weeks," said Manfred. "Obviously he made the mistake of timing the concession from July 21st—the date of the letter. He must have been the most honest man in the world; there was no other reason why he should have communicated with Miss Leicester. He could have kept quiet and claimed the rights for himself. Go on, Leon."

"That is about all," said Leon, glancing at the tail of the letter. "The rest is more or less flowery and complimentary and has reference to the scientific work in which Professor Leicester was engaged. Five days—phew!" he whistled.

"We may now find something in Barberton's long narrative to give us an idea of the value of this property." Manfred turned the numerous pages. "Do any of you gentlemen write shorthand?"

Meadows went out into the hall and brought back an officer. Waiting until he had found pencil and paper, Leon began the extraordinary story of William Barberton—most extraordinary because every word had been patiently and industriously punched in the Braille characters.

CHAPTER XVII

SOLID GOLD

THE Braille letter ran:

"Dear friend Johnny,

"I have such a lot to tell you that I hardly know where to begin. I've struck it rich at last, and the dream I've often talked over with you has come true. First of all, let me tell you that I have come upon nearly £50,000 worth of wrought gold.

"We've been troubled round here with lions, one of which took away a carrier of

mine, and at last I decided to go out and settle accounts with this fellow. I found him six miles from the camp and planted a couple of bullets into him without killing him, then decided to follow up his spoor. It was a mad thing to do, trailing a wounded lion in the jungle, and I didn't realize how mad until we got out of the bush into the hills and I found Mrs. Lion waiting for me. She nearly got me, too. More by accident than anything else, I managed to shoot her dead at the first shot, and got another pot at her husband as he was slinking into a cave which was near our tent.

"As I had gone so far, I thought I might as well go the whole hog, especially as I'd seen two lion cubs playing round the mouth of the cave, and bringing up my boys, who were scared to death, I crawled in, to find, as I expected, that the old lion was nearly gone, and a shot finished him. I had to kill the cubs; they were too young to be left alone, and too much of a nuisance to bring back to camp. This cave had been used as a lair for years; it was full of bones, human amongst them.

"But what struck me was the appearance of the roof, which, I was almost certain, had been cut out by hand. It was like a house, and there was a cut door in the rock at the back. I made a torch and went through on a tour of inspection, and you can imagine my surprise when I found myself in a little room with a line of stone niches or shelves. There were three lines of them on each side. Standing on these at intervals there were little statuettes. They were so covered with dust that I thought they were stone, until I tried to take one down to examine it, then I knew by its weight that it was gold, as they all were.

"I didn't want my boys to know about my find, because they are a treacherous lot, so I took the lightest, after weighing them all with a spring balance, and made a note where I'd taken it from. You might think that was enough of a find for one man in a lifetime, but my luck had set in. I sent my boys back and ordered them to break camp and join me on top of the Thaba. I called it the Thaba, because it is rather like a hill I know in Basutoland, and is one of two.

"The camp was moved up that night; it was a better pitch than any we had had. There was water, plenty of small game, and no mosquitoes. The worst part of it was the terrific thunderstorms which come up from nowhere; and until you've seen one in this ironstone country you don't know what a thunderstorm is like! The hill opposite was slightly smaller than the one I had taken as a camp and between was a shallow valley, through which ran a small shallow river. Rapids would be a better word.

"Early the next morning I was looking round through my glasses, and saw what I thought was a house on the opposite hill. I asked my head man who lived there, and he told me that it was once the house of the Star Chief; and I remembered that somebody told me, down in Mossamedes, that an astronomer had settled in this neighborhood and had been murdered by the natives. I thought I would go over and have a look at the place. The day being cloudy and not too hot, I took my gun and a couple of boys and we crossed the river and began climbing the hill.

"The house was, of course, in ruins; it had only been a wattle hut at the best of times. Part of it was covered with vegetation, but out of curiosity I searched round, hoping to pick up a few things that might be useful to me, more particularly kettles, for my boys had burned holes in every one I had. I found a kettle, and then, turning over a heap of rubbish which I think must have been his bed, I found a little rusty tin box and broke it open with my stick.

There were a few letters which were so faded that I could only read a word here and there, and, in a green oilskin, was a long letter from the Portuguese Government. (It was at this point, either by coincidence or design that the narrative continued on the actual paper to which he referred.) I speak Portuguese and can read it as easily as English, and the only thing that worried me about it was that the concession gave Professor Leicester all rights to my cave.

"My first idea was to burn it, but then I began to realize what a scoundrelly business that would be, and I took the letters out into the sun and tried to find if he had any relations, hoping that I'd be able to fix it up with them to take at any rate fifty per cent. of my find. There was only one letter that helped me. It was written in a child's hand and was evidently from his daughter. It had no address, but there was the name 'Mirabelle Leicester.'

"I put it in my pocket with the concession and went on searching, but found nothing more. I was going down the hill toward the valley when it struck me that perhaps this man had found gold, and the

excuse for getting the concession was a bit of artfulness. I sent a boy back to the camp for a pick, a hammer and a spade, and when he returned I began to make a cutting in the side of the hill.

"There was nothing to guide me, no outcrop such as you usually find near a true reef, but I hadn't been digging for an hour before I struck the richest bed of conglomerate I've ever seen. I was either dreaming, or my good angel had at last led me to the one place in the hill where

gold could be found. I had previously sent the boys back to the camp and told them to wait for me, because, if I did strike metal, I did not want the fact advertised all over Angola, where they've been looking for gold for years.

"Understand, it was not a reef in the ordinary sense of the word; it was all conglomerate, and the wider I made my cutting the wider the bed appeared. I took the pick to another part of the hill and dug again, with the same result, conglomerate. It was as though nature had thrown up a huge golden hump on the earth. I covered both cuttings late that night and went back to camp.

"Early next morning, I started off and tried another spot, and with the same result; first three feet of earth, then about six inches of shale, and then conglomerate. I tried to work through the bed, thinking that it might be just a skin, but I was saved much exertion by coming upon a deep rift in the hill about twenty feet wide at the top and tapering down to about fifty feet below the ground level. This gave me a section to work on, and as near as I can judge, the conglomerate bed is something over fifty feet thick and I'm not so sure that it doesn't occur again after an interval of twenty feet or more, for I dug more shale and had a showing of conglomerate at the very bottom of the ravine.

"What does this mean, Johnny? It means that we have found a hill of gold; not solid gold, as in the story books, but gold that pays ounces and probably pounds to the ton. How the prospectors have missed it all these years I can't understand, unless it is that they've made their cuttings on the north side of the hill, where they have found nothing but slate and sandstone. The little river in the valley must be feet deep in alluvial, for I panned the bed and got eight ounces of pure gold in an hour, and that was by rough and ready methods. I had to be careful not to make the boys too curious and I am breaking camp tomorrow, and I want you to cable or send me £500 to Mossamedes. The statuette I'm bringing home is worth all that. I would bring more, only I can't trust these Angola boys; a lot of them are mission boys and can read Portuguese and they're too friendly with a halfbreed called Villa, who is an agent of Oberzohn & Smitts, the traders, and I know these people to be the most unscrupulous scoundrels on the coast.

"I shall be at Mossamedes about three weeks after you get this letter, but I don't want to get back to the coast in a hurry, otherwise people are going to suspect I have made a strike."

LEON put the letter down. "There is the story in a nutshell, gentlemen," he said. "I don't, for one moment, believe that Mr. Barberton showed Villa the letter. It is more likely that one of the educated natives he speaks about saw it and reported it to Oberzohn's agent. Portuguese is the *lingua franca* of that part of the coast. Barberton was killed to prevent his meeting the girl and telling her of his find—and incidentally warning her to apply for a renewal of the concession. It wasn't even necessary that they should search his belongings to recover the letter, because once they knew of its existence and the date which Barberton had apparently confounded with the date the letter was written, their work was simply to prevent an application to the Colonial Office at Lisbon. It was quite different after Barberton was killed, when they learned or guessed that the letter was in Mr. Lee's possession."

Meadows agreed. "That was the idea behind Oberzohn's engagement of Mirabelle Leicester?"

"Exactly, and it was also behind the attack upon Heavytree Farm. To secure this property they must get her away and keep her hidden either until it is too late for her to apply for a renewal, or until she has been bullied or forced into appointing a nominee."

"Or married," said Leon briskly. "Did

that idea occur to you? Our tailor-made friend, Monty Newton, may have had matrimonial intentions. It would have been quite a good stroke of business to secure a wife and a large and auriferous hill at the same time. This, I think, puts a period to the ambitions of Herr Doktor Oberzohn."

He got up from the table and handed the papers to the custody of the detective, and turned with a quizzical smile to his friend.

"George, do you look forward with any pleasure to a two hundred and fifty mile drive?"

"Are you the chauffeur?" asked George.

"I am the chauffeur," said Leon cheerfully. "I have driven a car for many years and I have not been killed yet. It is unlikely that I shall risk my precious life and yours tonight. Come with me and I promise never to hit her up above sixty except on the real speedways."

Manfred nodded.

"We will stop at Oxley and try to get a phone call through to Gloucester," said Leon. "This line is, of course, out of order. They would do nothing so stupid as to neglect the elementary precaution of disconnecting Rath Hall."

At Oxley the big car pulled up before the dark and silent exterior of an inn, and Leon, getting down, brought the half clad landlord to the door and explained his mission, and also learned that two big cars had passed through half an hour before, going in the direction of London.

"That was the gang. I wonder how they'll explain to their paymaster their second failure?"

His first call was to the house in Curzon Street, but there was no reply.

"Ring them again," said Leon. "You left Poiccart there?"

Manfred nodded.

They waited for five minutes; still there was no reply.

"How queer!" said Manfred. "It isn't like Poiccart to leave the house. Get Gloucester."

At this hour of the night the lines are comparatively clear, and in a very short time he heard the Gloucester operator's voice and in a few seconds later the click that told them they were connected with Heavytree Farm. Here there was some delay before the call was answered.

It was not Mirabelle Leicester nor her aunt who spoke. Nor did he recognize the voice of Digby, who had recovered sufficiently to return to duty.

"Who is that?" asked the voice sharply. "Is that you, Sergeant?"

"No, it is Mr. Meadows," said Leon mendaciously.

"The Scotland Yard gentleman?" It was an eager inquiry. "I'm Constable Kirk, of the Gloucester Police. My sergeant's been trying to get in touch with you, sir."

"What is the matter?" asked Leon, a cold feeling at his heart.

"I don't know, sir. About half an hour ago, I was riding past here—I'm one of the mounted men—and I saw the door wide open and all the lights on, and when I came in there was nobody up. I woke Miss Goddard and Mr. Digby, but the young lady was not in the house."

"Lights everywhere?" asked Leon quickly.

"Yes, sir—in the parlor at any rate."

"No sign of a struggle?"

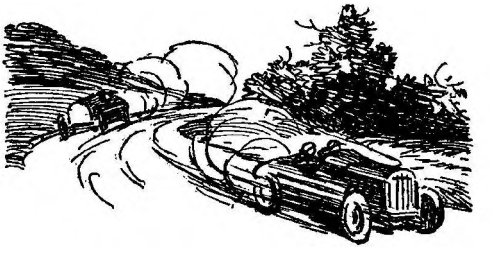
"No, sir, but a car passed me three miles from the house and it was going at a tremendous rate. I think she may have been in that. Mr. Digby and Miss Goddard have just gone into Gloucester."

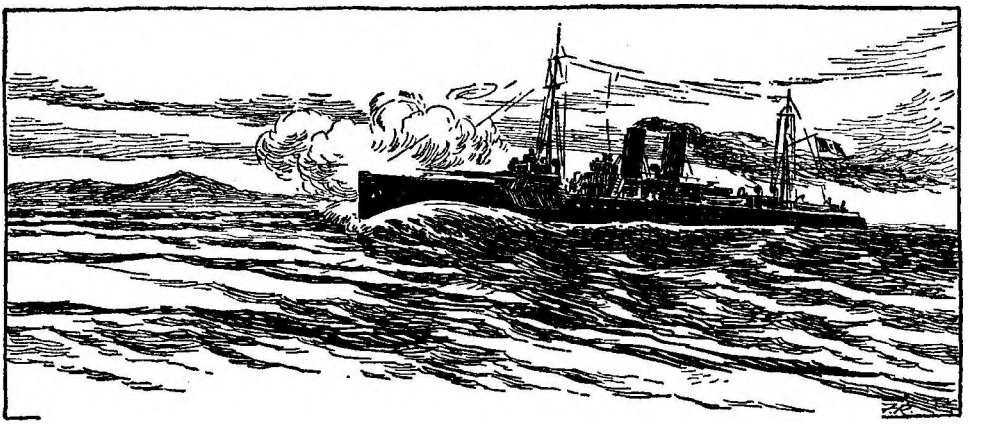
"All right, officer, I am sending Mr. Gonsalez down to see you," said Leon, and hung up the receiver.

"What is it?" asked George Manfred, who knew that something was wrong by his friend's face.

"They've got Mirabelle Leicester after all," said Leon. "I'm afraid I shall have to break my promise to you, George. That machine of mine is going to *travel* before daybreak!"

Part III will appear in the next issue of SHORT STORIES





SILK

By CHARLES TENNEY JACKSON

Author of "Bill's Business," "Captain Catt Came Back," etc.

A GREAT RED EYE ON CANVAS, A MAN IN TORTURE, AN INDIO MAID OF THE "LAGUNAS," AND SHELLS FROM A MEXICAN GUNBOAT FALLING ALL ABOUT—WHAT HAD THAT DAY OF AGONY TO DO WITH THE RHYTHMIC SWIRLINGS OF SAVAGES IN SILK? THE SCARS ON CULLINAN'S WRISTS AND ANKLES WERE THERE TO TELL

FEAR seemed the last thing one would expect in Edgar Cullinan's makeup. A tall, sinewy lad with his quiet, impassive face bronzed from years in the tropics about which he had very little to say for some reason or other.

Fear, either nervous or physical, was just about impossible to associate with him, and it was surprising to me when I saw his dark eyes close in a sort of agony as he shrank back against the wall in the little alcove of the hotel roof garden where we had dined and watched the women dancing.

Such a little thing to produce this tremor in a man who seemed all iron and red blood of the out of doors. A girl swinging past our table in the arms of her partner had flirted her silken gown out rather saucily at him and smiled. Cullinan had been reaching out for my cigarette case, and the fold of her blue silk had brushed his wrist, it seemed.

Anyhow, Cullinan whirled back as if a hot iron had seared his flesh; then he was staring at me in a sickly fashion and hastily pulling the cuff of his dinner coat down over the wrist.

But I had seen, and he knew it. In the healthy brown flesh of his lower forearm was a red scar. A deep, twisted scar encircling his wrist as if a white hot handcuff had burned there and slowly cooled. He turned nervously to me and laughed.

"Where did you get that mark?" I said interestedly. "And look here, Cullinan, you act as if you were scared of women!"

"Scared?" he muttered stupidly. "No—not exactly——"

"A funny brand, that on your wrist," I said, and watched his odd trick of gripping his two arms absently which I had noticed before. I knew young Cullinan well, as I knew his elder brother, Hubert, and his father before him. It had been our oil company that had sent Edgar down into Mexico three years ago on his first fling at business after he left college.

And now that he was home I had purposely taken him to this crowded roof garden tonight, thinking that a high spirited lad who had been quite out of the bright world so long down in the hot lands would be eager to see it all again—the music, the flowers, the beautifully gowned girls, dancing on this open roof in the summer night.

I had offered to introduce him to some of them, and he had hastily declined—in a sort of panic, it seemed. It was hard to understand, just as it was now when the

touch of that pretty girl's silken gown seemed to sear his flesh like a hot iron.

Scared—that was it! And some of the women knew it. I saw them watching him curiously as if he knew too much about them, or not enough; as if, between the beauty of women and this good looking young man lay a gulf that neither could pass. He was staring at them now, and his tight lips were muttering. "Savages!" he whispered.

"Who branded you that way? Both arms, Cullinan?" I demanded abruptly. "Old boy, I wouldn't ask, but I feel something like a dad to you. You're changed since you came back from Yucatan, or wherever you were knocking about after the Tampico business blew up. I just don't understand. Something took the punch out of you down there. These devilish scars on your arms——"

He sat back and lit a cigarette with a glance at the dancers. Then he laughed as if amused at my mystification. "My two arms, eh? Look here, Jerrold." He took a quick survey of the tables and the crowded dancing floor, and then, thrusting his left foot behind our table by the wall, he slipped down his sock. There was that same mark as if torn muscle had surged against some inexorable bond.

"And this—" He deftly exhibited his right ankle, and then dropped his trousers' cuff over it. I don't think a soul in the place noticed this discreet exhibition. Then Edgar saluted me with a wave of his hand and a droll smile as if it were all right now. He had got control of his touchy nerves.

But there were, then, four brands upon his body—deep, vivid, cruel! Wrists and ankles—and the memory of them was something he could not shake out of his brain.

"Reckon I'd better tell you, Jerrold. Maybe it would help me. Maybe you could explain. I want to get over it. I like women. I'd like to be among 'em again and dance and laugh. But—well, light up. I'll try to make you understand. That girl—her silk gown touching me—made me think of a snake. Sort of slithery; then it made me think of warm salt sea water slipping over you, into your wounds. Oh, like silk—yes!"

"Shoot away," I grunted. "Sounds interesting. We'll have some more coffee. You can talk back in this alcove all right."

He laughed again briefly and leaned back in the shadows of the artificial palms on the wall back of us and caressed those red wounds on his arms as if they had hardly healed yet either in flesh or mind. Then he went on musing over his yarn, halting at times as if he thought parts of it might be a dream.

"Took me months to get my brain cleared," explained Edgar, with his set smile. "But I can talk about it now."

"Go ahead." I shoved the cigarettes and coffee nearer to him. "Your hands and feet look as if you'd been crucified!"

Cullinan shot a queer glance at me. "Crucified? Jerrold, it's queer you said that! Sure is. Well, you know when the company sent me down to Tuxpam three years ago, and their oil business went bump because of the last attempted revolution, I was about as green as a fellow could be just out of college. As far as the kind of game I ran into was concerned, I mean. The company ordered us all home and the gang all pulled out except myself. You know my brother, Hubert, was down there, too."

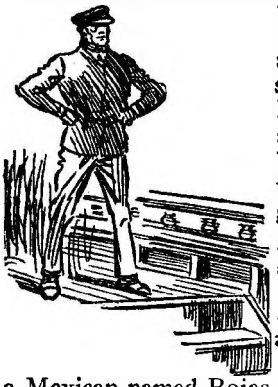
"Mixed up with the revolutionary outfit, wasn't he? A gun runner or an artillery instructor, or something like that, we heard back here."

"Yes. He had been. And Jerrold, that's what started me off hunting him. I was in a native *cantina* one night loafing around when I heard something that scared me. Heard that a gang there had sworn to get Hubert, because he had exposed some of their grafting deals. Hubert had been in the gun-running game, too, but he was playing straight with this rebel junta government he worked for. So he'd turned up the crooks who were getting the money and not delivering the goods. The talk was that a couple of 'em were lined up and shot by the Huertista outfit at Vera Cruz. Anyhow, this crowd that had been operating out of Brownsville blamed Hubert and were out to get him."

"He was with the rebel navy, later, wasn't he?"

"Yes. And safe enough from this bunch of renegades from Texas if I'd only known it. But I got scared at the talk around the hotel and barrooms in Tuxpam. Determined that I'd get to my brother and warn him about these threats, I was trying to figure how I could get down the Gulf coast and join him; and then one night a schooner put in from Galveston. She was an arms-runner, all right, and she'd had to get out of American waters when our Government clamped down the embargo. I reckon the fellows on her must have heard about me about

the same time I picked up with her captain.



"He was a Yank, all right. A big squarehead named Hester, and he said he knew my brother well. Said this schooner was going on down to join the Huertista gunboats at Vera Cruz. He knew all about Hubert, and so did the second in command, a Mexican named Rojas. The two of 'em got mighty friendly with me a couple of nights in the *cantina*. I reckon it was a fool thing to do but I told 'em I had to get to my brother somehow, and when they offered to take me on board I jumped at the chance."

Young Cullinan sat back and blew out a ring of smoke as he watched the dancers. Then laughed. "Oh, I was a fool all right! I sneaked out on the quiet with them lest somebody try to interfere, as Hester said. I didn't know any Spanish, so Hester was the only one on board I could talk to. Well, we got away, but this schooner didn't put into Vera Cruz. Hester said that the Federals had captured the port that very week, and the rebel gunboats were down past Frontera. I didn't know, but the ship went on. It was all hot stinkin' river-jungle coasts and reefs down where we went. Me, like a lamb with that sullen, broken crew of filibusters, gun-runners, pirates—God knows what!"

Young Cullinan didn't look like a lamb now as he swung forward over the table gripped by these memories. But that was three years ago, and something had put the steel into his soul since. He sat back with that grim challenge to the silken clad dancing women of the roof garden. For the moment I knew he hated them, the lights, the laughter and the music. Then he went on quietly.

"Jerrold, I don't need to bore you with the first of it. I remember that, off Vera Cruz, we passed some of our blessed Yankee destroyers out of the port. Oh, man, if I'd known then what I was in for!

"But they were clever, this black browed Hester, and the snaky Mexican renegade, Rojas. They were leaders of the very gang that had sworn to kill my brother, but I never guessed it. They strung me on, pretending that they'd put me aboard of the *insurrecto* gunboat where my brother was. I sure was happy, thinking I'd be with old Hub again, and doing him a good turn.

"Then, the last night. Well, I had a drink or two with Hester and Rojas in the dirty cabin. They were going to deliver their arms the next day, they said, to the revolutionist outfit. I don't know—that night was the last I remembered. A rotten hot night and the noisy old motors pounding in some *laguna* through a pass. I just remember drinkin' with 'em to my brother's health. He'd been a king pin gunner's mate during the war on the Atlantic convoy lanes, and I was proud of big Hub. Well——"

He stopped wearily, and I saw he was trying to recall something that troubled him. Presently he opened his eyes slowly and smiled. "Jerrold, a moment ago, you said, 'Crucified.' Now, it's odd, but that was the next thing that came to my mind. I knew I'd been drugged, and the stuff was wearing off. I became conscious. And I felt some dull grinding pains in each hand and foot. First I was half paralyzed, and then, when I got so I could twist about, my whole body was wracked. Man, ache is no name for it! I couldn't tell where I was or what was the matter. I just was looking off into drifting white mist. When I got sense enough and strength enough to lift my head I saw the fix I was in.

"Jerrold, it was mighty like being nailed to a cross. My arms were stretched out tight and my legs drawn down but I was in mid-air! Spread-eagled in the air by ropes about feet and wrists, pulled tight —everything tight. My body kept swaying in and out, in and out. I couldn't understand that until I stared down in the mist. Then I saw drifting water, and then I made out the rail of a ship. Broken and grimy and wet with sea mist. I saw it all. I was spread-eagled between two masts of a derelict schooner!

"The ropes ran from my hands and feet cornerwise to these sticks, and there I was stretched in the center of a web, swaying a bit as the old hulk lifted in a slow swell. The light was coming through the fog and pretty soon I saw the deck planks and broken housing of this schooner. A rusty chain was over her bow and I guessed she was anchored in some *laguna* or river inlet.

"Anyhow, I knew the sun was clearing the mists, but I was in too much pain to notice things clearly. That drug which the gun-runners had doped me with was wearing off, and I began to suffer. Man,

you can't realize how I ached in every bone and muscle. If I struggled it was worse than ever.

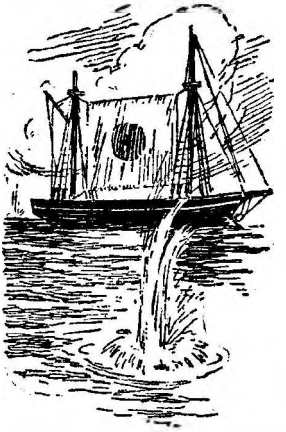
"So I just hung there trying to think. It was plain enough that Hester and Rojas had done this out of revenge upon my brother Hubert, who had exposed their grafting deals to the rebel government and ruined their profits. I figured it all out while I hung there with my head lopped down on my breast. The gang couldn't get to Hubert so they took it out on me. But at that I didn't understand everything yet. Just why they had drugged me and triced me up on this abandoned schooner off the coast somewhere. God knows, I was to find out quick enough!

"That light morning fog was thinning. I could hear a sea bird scream, and pretty soon I thought I could see sand bars dimly off in the mist. The sun was brightening over the sea and it aroused me out of a stupor. It was shining in my eyes, and it sounds funny to say this hurt them when you consider all the other pain I was in. Then I discovered what that light was reflected from. It was from my shirt. I'd been wearing a fine silk shirt with blue and pink stripes, one of those gay loud Panama shirts which the young *caballeros* buy in the native stores and sport around the *fiestas*. I'd got it in a village near our oil terminal, and thought it was a joke to wear it. But I'd had on that loud silk shirt the night the Hester gang strung me up unconscious. It was clean and hardly ruffled, and I reckon they'd handled me carefully lest I come to out of the dope. Anyhow, I hung there with the sun shining on that silk shirt, my feet six feet from the decks, spread eagled.

"Then, pretty soon a little breeze came. I felt something touch my shoulder. It scared me, Jerrold, as if a ghost had tapped me. Up till now I hadn't had the strength to look around. But I did then. It cost a lot of agony, but I twisted my head around over my shoulder. At first I couldn't understand. There was a great red daub of paint right behind me. It weaved in and out slowly, and I saw what it was. I was triced up against a great square of dirty canvas, and this red eye was painted on it.

"Suddenly, the whole thing flashed on me. This old hulk was a sea target! I remembered what Hester and Rojas had grinned about last night in the cabin of their schooner. I had been bragging about my brother Hubert's gunnery, and they'd told me that his gunboat and some others of the revolutionist outfit were laying off some place called Laguna del Toro for target practice. They'd told me that I'd be landed there today and meet my brother. Well, I saw now what they meant!

"They'd spread-eagled me on the reverse side of this target cloth, and probably gone inshore to deliver their stuff to the Huertista people. They knew what was coming off by some means or other after they'd done me in with the dope. Hub had some four-inch rifles on that crazy rebel boat he commanded, and Hester and Rojas had strung me where I'd be blown to pieces by my own brother. He'd never know!"



Cullinan laughed as he remembered it. He conceded it was a clever revenge on Commander Hubert Cullinan of the Huertista navy. They'd promised Edgar that he'd meet his brother that day!

"Well, I just hung there, sometimes conscious, sometimes in a stupor," Cullinan went on. "I got numb, with the dull throb of pain everywhere. And hopeless. There wasn't anything to expect except death, whether I was blown to bits or just died there on the ropes. Once I lost my nerve and tried to yell. Why, it wasn't much more than a gasp. The muscles were constricted so tight across my breast that I hardly made a sound. The whole weight of my body sagged down on my shoulder sockets and it was hard to breathe right, let alone shout aloud.

"So, I reckon I gave up hoping for anything. Began to see the pale misty sky as the sun cleared the coast fog. I must have fainted again from the pain, for I forgot about time passing.

"The thing that aroused me after a while was a shot. I remember listening without any curiosity. Didn't even raise my head as it hung lolled down on my shoulder like a dead man's.

"But I heard a smash and stirring of water somewhere, and then the screaming of gulls off on the sand bars. I could see the reefs now and a dim blur of swamp woods off beyond them. And I got to thinking about that shooting. Not that I knew

much of it. The other side of the cloth was facing the guns some thousands of yards off to the south, so even if my brother or some of the Mexican officers were watching for hits through their glasses they couldn't see me behind the bullseye.

"I didn't see any chance for getting out of it. I just hung there waiting and knowing that my arms and legs were swelling and turning black in the tight knots about them. Even when the next shot came the only thing I remember was cursing because it struck close—off the bow—and set the hulk to jogging. It exploded and tore the water in a gray spray off to my left. The infernal gulls came screaming in close, staring at the big red eye of the target cloth and sailing off. They were mad about this disturbance. Funny, how I realized that!"

Cullinan laughed again. It all seemed a bad joke now as he told it. But he watched those dancing women with a twisted smile. They recalled something that he'd rather not tell. But presently he went on quietly as if he had to get it out.

"Well, Jerrold, it was after the third shot that the big funny thing happened. I'd listened to the distant boom of the gun coming regularly before, but this third shell exploded mighty near the hulk. Right after it churned the water up back of me off the bow, I heard a sound. It was a human voice right close to me and below along the line of the target cloth!

"I twisted my head down and saw. It was an Indian girl. She had scrambled along the deck scared by that shell. Her brown back was wet with the spray from it. She came crawling along the waist jabbering and wailing. Then I saw, over the broken rail, a native swamp dugout in which she must have come out from the pass to the hulk, not knowing what it was anchored here for. She got to her feet now just below me, parted the long black hair from her brown shoulders.

"She just seemed dumbfounded that this was a man hanging there. And alive. From the reef I reckon she saw it was a human figure, and the sun shining on that gay striped silk shirt I wore. Anyhow, she just stared at me silently. A regular coast swamp savage, slender and sinewy, and with a wet blue *rebosa* twisted about her like thin paper. Wasn't bad looking either, but I could see she was just an ignorant savage. Some of those coast people of the *tierra caliente* hid off in the jungles of tropical Mexico hardly know a thing of white culture.

"I muttered feebly, but she didn't know English of course. She stood staring at me, and her eyes were as unreadable as a cat's. Her broad face and high cheek bones and firm chin made me think of a bronze medal. You just couldn't guess what she was thinking about. Only I saw she was getting over her scare at the shells which had broken around the hulk. She was just dumbfounded to see a live white man hung against that big red eye.

"Well, I was dumb, too. Just stunned to see her there. First I thought I was delirious, for I forgot the pain and the boom of those guns off there gauging the range on me shot by shot. I just stared back at her. Once, overside, past her canoe, I saw a shark turning in the channel. It was dirty white, and it made me think what would happen when the shells sank the hulk, even if I wasn't killed outright. Those sea wolves would swarm over the wreck and find me later.

"This girl could save me perhaps. I tried to talk, but my lips were cracked and swollen, and I just moaned. Tried to wriggle a bit to show her I lived so's she'd cut me down quick. She watched as if she was scared of me. Maybe she thought I was some human sacrifice of the white men's gods strung up there for some ceremony. I don't know what she thought."

Cullinan grinned again. "That's what worries me now—what that little savage was thinking. It's a mystery to me!"

Then he rambled on. "I'll bet she'd never seen a big gun fired or been close to a ship. Curiosity had drawn her out to this hulk and she got scared by the shells and fled on board. I thought she didn't realize they were shooting at the target.

"But no other shot came for a long time. Reckon old Hub was maneuvering his green crew to a new position as they hadn't hit the hulk even, let alone the bullseye which I was strung behind. I don't know. I was just watching that girl. She could save me.

"Finally she mustered courage to come closer. She put out a hand and touched my foot. She could just reach to my knee and she stood there fingering the cotton cloth of my trousers with a curious fascinated look in her eyes.

"Funny about her eyes! I just couldn't understand them. She was studying out some problem. I understood that much. She peered toward the distant shore and listened. She pulled on one of the leg ropes gently and it hurt me awfully. My

feet were swollen against those bonds till I had no feeling there, but my whole body was just raw with pain. God, I didn't know a man could feel so much! I must have been a sight, gaunt faced and sweating, and looking down at her, begging her to save me in a tongue she could not understand.

"And then she smiled. I saw she understood. She'd got over her fear of the white man's big guns, and the mystery of me hung up there crucified in the ropes. She ran back a step and looked about. Getting me down would be a problem. I saw her black expressionless eyes studying the ropes and lashings. Then she went to one of the mast stubs and reached a brown arm up to the knot that secured my right foot to it. She had one big brass bracelet on her arm, and that's all in the way of decoration. And I tell you those Indio girls love pretty things as much as any civilized one. Every woman does, sure.

"Well, she started to work on that knot. She twisted and pulled, looking up at me now and then like a cat watching a mouse that can't get away and yet is liable to try it. She laughed once and then fought and struggled with that leg rope.

"We were just that way when the last shell broke. I thought I heard it dimly, but the thing happened so quick. All I knew was that the old hulk seemed to squat back and then leap forward. There was a tremendous roar, and a great bloom of smoke and spray with splintered wood and stuff come over us. The schooner must have been hit along the water line forward a bit, and the shell knocked everything crazy loose below. I don't know—I forgot everything after that.

"Yes, sir, I passed out. Just remember that the deck was splintering beneath me and the mast crashing out. The ropes jerked me so that I raved with pain. And I knew the target cloth was coming overside on top of me, but I don't remember hitting the water. I just saw black and red and passed out.

"The next thing was a feeling of great peace. I knew that somebody was moving alongside of me and I opened my eyes to stare up in the blue sky. I was in a native dugout, with ropes still cutting deep into the swollen flesh of arms and legs, but I was free of that infernal wreck. Then I saw that Indian girl. She was paddling and the brown muscles of her back had a powerful play as she dug into the water. I laid behind her in a mess of torn cloth and ropes. She had cut or untied me from the wreck of the masts when the stuff all blew over the rail. Then I saw one of the rope ends, and it looked as if she had chewed it free. Well, I didn't know or care. I was in a blessed peace, Jerrold. This swamp Indian girl had saved me. She had braved the big guns and the splashing fountains where the shells broke, and then the smash of the hulk at last to save me. And now she was paddling up the swamp channel to get me out of it.

"I didn't worry. She'd get me to her swamp tribe and they'd do something for my torn, swollen hands and feet. I tell you I admired her pluck in sticking by me, for the smash of those guns must have been frightful to an ignorant swamp savage. She must have fought like a tigress to get me out of that wreck. I tell you I was grateful, and just as limp and helpless as a child.

"Pretty soon I noticed the forest shade closing over us as the canoe traveled on into the shore swamps.

Then she turned in alongside a rough sort of landing. I was almost fainting again when this girl got her arms under my shoulders and dragged me out of the canoe. She was strong and surefooted, and as tender to me as if I'd been a baby. She got me under a palm thatched shed and put me down on some dried grass. I swear, I was too numb and weak to lift a finger. I felt her working again at my wrist ropes. She bent over and chewed at one of them again. Her teeth were as strong and white as a panther's. She'd work at the bonds and then stop to watch me. But she couldn't get those tight wet ropes off my arms, I reckon, without a knife. This hut was some old swamp landing long abandoned and nobody living near as I found out later.

"When she failed to get the knots untied I felt her begin to slip the sleeves of my shirt over them. She worked the shirt up to my shoulders and over my head, all the time as soft and tender as a fellow's mother would be. It was great to feel her cool fingers on my bruised shoulders. I had been twisted and racked until I felt actually pulled out of shape.

"You can't imagine, Jerrold. I just

dropped back in a blessed slumber when she had got that shirt off. I heard the slither of it when she stood back and folded it in her hands. She was holding it out to a little gleam of the sun which came in under the thatch frame. Admiring it, I think. It was pretty—pink and blue stripes, all wet but clean, and not torn a bit.

"She came back and knelt by me. My eyes were closed but I knew she was studying me, wondering what she could do next to help me. Then I heard the twigs crack and I knew she had gone off to find some of her tribe who'd cut those ropes off me and give some care to my wounds. I just went to sleep then, as I said. Just trusting her as a baby would its nurse."

"She must have been great," I murmured, and young Cullinan nodded slowly, his eyes out on the silken clad dancers of the hotel roof garden. "Then she came back with her people and they carried you to their camp and cared for you and——"

"I wish I knew!" said young Cullinan suddenly. "Oh, man, if I was sure she came back for me! It would make all the difference in the world!" And he waved his scarred arm out to the other girls.

"But don't you remember? Why not?"

"Some native *cargadores* found me. Mule packers who were heading down the coast trail to Laguna del Toro. They discovered me unconscious and slung me on a mule. I was in a delirious fever for weeks afterward in a hospital at Frontera. My brother, Hubert, got me there after word reached him that I had been found by the packers. Took me weeks to get in shape to travel home."

"And that Indian girl? You never heard of her again?"

Young Cullinan looked at me queerly. After a silence he went on: "Yes, I saw her once again. After I got on my feet, and Hub had quit the rebel gunboat, for the revolution was busted.

"We took in a native fiesta in a rotten little coast village near Laguna del Toro. I saw that girl in the crowd that was waiting for the religious procession to pass. There was a strapping young *caballero* with her. He wore a spangled jacket and tight, fringed trousers. A regular swell, and he was mighty proud of his senorita. And damned if she didn't look like all the candy! I saw that all the other native girls were crazy jealous of her getup."

"The girl who saved your life?"

"The girl who saved my *shirt!* She had made it into a gorgeous silk scarf. No other girl had anything so pretty. She was the hit of the show, and she knew it. Think of it! Daring the white man's big guns, pulling me out of the wreck and saving me from the sharks, and all because she saw that bit of bright silk out there on the hulk. You got to hand it to her, Jerrold, for nerve and knowing what she wanted."

"Didn't she recognize you at the *fiesta?*"

"Yes. And that hurt worst of all. For she cut me dead—socially. The procession came along, and the girl knelt when she saw me. She turned her head aside into her silk scarf just as Our Lady of Mercy passed by."

Young Cullinan grinned at me sheepishly, and I laughed. I couldn't help it. It was the look on his face and his aversion to the swish of silk as another of those white skinned, pretty girls of the hotel garden swept by our table.

"You know, Jerrold," young Cullinan grumbled at last, "I want to think she came back. Came back to help me, and meantime the *cargadores* had found me and lugged me off. I really want to believe so. Then, sometime, I can dance with one of these white girls again."

"Believe it!" I retorted. "It'll be best for you. Shut your eyes and your mind and believe it. Have some more coffee

and then I'll introduce you around. I know some charming little savages in silk up here. They'll go through you for anything from a dinner check to a million dollars."

Young Cullinan raised his scarred arm and saluted them all with a brief smile. "Come on, then! I'll take a chance on anything after the girl who got my silk shirt. In a way I can't blame 'em. Sisters under the skin. They all love pretty things."

AN ENIGMA IN BLACK

By ANTHONY M. RUD

Author of "The Quota Kayo," "Brass Checks," etc.

IT WAS A LONG CHANCE THAT MAX KURTT PLAYED IN HIS SEARCH FOR OLD TREASURE ON THE PARCHED PLAINS OF ARIZONA—AND AS PERILOUS A QUEST AS TREACHEROUS CHOTTY BEDELL COULD MAKE IT. IT WAS LUCKY FOR MAX THAT BILL HALLIDAY WAS SEARCHING FOR TREASURE, TOO—AND LUCKY FOR HALLIDAY THAT LITTLE MAX DIDN'T KNOW WHEN HE WAS LICKED

I

THE most far sighted buzzard that scanned the southern reaches of La Abra Plain, Arizona, must have missed Bill Halliday. Bill had started for Singapore by the most direct and geometric route, that is, straight through the earth. At the rate of nine inches an hour for the whole of his excavation, Bill had progressed nearly ten feet two inches toward Penang. As he was hunched from delving with a pick and spade, even when he stood on the high slope of the side of the hole, the knobby lankness of his six feet three did not raise itself above the brink of alkaline sprinkled gumbo.

Bill had a precious secret. It did not concern gold directly, though many desert rats knew that gold was to be found in the ancient river wash of La Abra. Bill, prospecting during his collegiate vacation the previous year, had dug into the trickle of a spring only faintly alkaline. In La Abra that was a treasure, indeed. There was no more water than could be consumed by one prospector and a single burro; yet it gave leeway for a time of delving untrammeled by the limits of casks and canteens. Bill Halliday had brought to the plain which lies below the Sierra of Quitobaquita, bacon and beans for two whole months, together with ammunition sufficient both for his inherited Remington frontier single actions, and his own Spanish War Springfield.

Two days had passed. Bill, in spite of gold fever, was wise enough not to dig under La Abra's grossest heat. Early morning, and evenings until late, he worked, smiling rather ruefully at the shovelfuls of grating dirt he threw into the circling dump. All that mud and gravel and alkali held *some* gold, as he knew. This time he was going deeper, instead of panning out a pittance as he had done each earlier vacation. He was confident that below soil which bore flake and grain gold, as did this, he must discover either placer pockets or ore.

A MAN who that moment lay with blackened tongue extending his blackened lips, a man who breathed with difficulty, could have told Bill Halliday much. He could have said that this silt gold meant nothing beyond; that in order to find the bed rock of the river which once had made a broad bed through this desert, a prospector would have to dig more than sixty feet. And even then he would glean little.

But little Max could not tell. He had

reached the end, or near to that. Two days he had wandered, after his water had given out, and he had come again to the marks in the alkali which he recognized as his permanent camp, just deserted!

THE strange contraption skittered jerkily across the desert. Sometimes it slid along the level white ground like a knotted finger creasing its dividing mark. Then it halted. What seemed a fine string slanting upward from one end, sagged, then tautened again. The contraption's skidding, jerky progress continued. Back along, fleeing from westering sun and the rise of the sterile sierra, the queer, skipping track wended backward. At times, when the wind had blown fiercer than usual, the track was missing, though *not* sanded over!

Skip. *Sliz-z-zip.* A pause. A tugging as a sparse upthrust of greasewood tried to halt the skittering thing's advance. Logy at first, then hastening quicker and quicker across the bleached alkali until it plowed up the fine white dust as the prow of a speed cruiser curls foam of the sea, the queer ship of the desert, heavy, yet speeding at the end of the line that slanted upward, zigzagged onward.

It was not aimed at that mesquite screened hole in the ground where a man shoveled, tossing up the soil in his search for greater gold. It almost passed, but then veered suddenly as a changing breeze played in the sky.

Bill straightened. Not to his full height, for that was impossible. After hours of digging his untrained back was warped like case-hardened siding. Hours of sleep on the bare, straight ground would be required to bring it back to military set-up.

He wiped his brow, and grinned at the trickle of water which was his desert secret. There was a whole bowl of tepid water waiting now. He would drink a little and lave his face, neck and arms with the rest, after refilling the empty canteen. He——

That instant something skipping fast reached the crumbled brink of the twenty-foot-wide hole. It fell, the light end strangely upheld while the bulging heavy end swung like a club in downward sweep, striking the unsuspecting man bruisingly upon the ear and temple.

Bill went down, grappling with nothing, seeing red splinters and swelling stars. The weighted bludgeon hit him and stopped, sank to the bottom of the rude shaft, jiggled across the roughness there, and hung up against the pick. It would go no further despite the jerking and pull upon it.

Bill wasn't out. He never lost consciousness. It took him a time to lurch to his knees, however, and blink about the cone shaped excavation for a possible enemy. The single Colt still hung at his right hip. The other gun with the spare belt was in sight on top of his grub pack, undisturbed. And the canteens were there; they gurgled with fulness when shaken.

All right, what then? Had it been a falling rock, precursor of a cave-in? Bill believed not. He searched for an adversary, and finding none, looked for the weapon which had felled him.

He found it, and stared in frank bewilderment; lifting, tugging at a taut cord which stretched upward and angled over the edge of the rough stope. The weapon was one of the queerest with which a man ever was felled. It was a composite of mesquite branches tightly bound together; a slab of twisted root at the heaviest end. About and above this, making the business end of the club, was wound and buckled *a filled cartridge belt* of webbing holding twenty-six unused .44's! Above this two rawhide shoelaces held together the strange knobkerrie!

Bill Halliday was jerking at the cord, however. It pulled steadily! Could this be some practical joker, or worse, an outlaw harpy of the desert taking this outlandish means to attempt murder? The notion was too fantastic, and Bill knew it; yet as he climbed to the brink he held ready his six-gun.

A moment later an astonished grin quirked the corners of his generous mouth. He was staring at an angle of thirty degrees toward the northeast sky, along the string of a bobbing, ragtailed *kite!*

There was no doubt about it! Up there, flying strongly in the brisk, hot desert wind, was just such a six sided toy as he had made for himself often as a boy! This, perchance, was larger, and not perfectly balanced. Wonderingly Bill set down the affair he had thought a club. Immediately the kite, able now to pull its drag, started away on its slithering way to the northeast, toward the far blue shaded peaks of the Nariz Range.

But Bill was not ready to let it go; the thing was too astounding. As far as he knew, he was the only human being within a radius of forty-five miles, alone, save for a couple or three dirty little adobe villages beyond the sierra, in more than one hundred and twenty miles of land avoided even by the swift-footed lobo. He dashed the perspiration from his eyes with the back of one grimy forearm, and strode after the drag. Jerking experimentally at the kite, which soared in response, he brought the ensemble back to the mouth of his hole in the ground. There he cut the cord, tying it to the handle of a spade thrust to the depth of half its blade into the grating clay.

"What do you make of this, Watson?" he demanded half jokingly, addressing the one sleepy, shabby coated burro who stood in the patchy shade of a discouraged clump of mesquite, waiting only for his tri-daily pan of water and dole of frijoles.

The burro opened one somnolent, infinitely sophisticated eye a thirty-second of an inch more, then closed it. The blood of his blood had known and yawned at every happenstance of the desert five, eight, ten burro burden-carrier generations before he was born. And really, his name was not Watson; whenever scoff was ready the master called him Jethro Jason Theophilus Jorkins, Junior.

But Bill simply had to spout at something. He had formed the habit of apostrophizing Jethro. "I've more'n half a mind——" he began, with that sonorous decisiveness certain very bashful platform speakers affect in private, especially when they have no idea what they are talking about.

He broke off suddenly. Bound beneath one of the tight rawhide laces was a tight wound quill of linen. Bill drew it forth; and even before he had that twenty inch square of handkerchief smoothed out his own heart was pumping in the excitement of premonition.

Written lightly and carefully in ink with a stylographic, scarcely blotted at all, was this terse, tragic message:

I am dying of thirst here at the eastern foot of Sierra Quitobaquita, before the blockhouse of stone. Who finds and buries my body, and sends word to the faculty of U. of C., will own the gleaming treasure of Itimixtl, of the Spaniard, Mendez!

Maxwell Kurtt.

II

BILL'S preparations were swift. Urged to the utmost of action by that grimly tragic message, he slung a pair of filled canteens from a web sling from shoulder to hip, made a light pack of provisions and cooking utensils, and saw to it that both six-guns were oiled. One of the latter was buttoned down tightly in a "suicide flap" holster, a protection against the swirling grit which the stiff breezes of La Abra drive into every corner of a man's outfit, while the other weapon swung in the pivoted "half-breed" sheath at his right thigh.

His rifle he cached with his provisions in a tarpaulin covered with rocks too heavy for the paws of prowling coyotes. Turning loose the burro, so the wise little beast could drink at the spring trickle as soon as that artificial basin below was replenished, he jerked down the lid of his sombrero against the blaze of the dropping sun, and strode out southwestward. There probably was no chance now to help the sufferer who had sent the message, yet Bill, grim faced at the horror he expected to find there at the rock battlements, would cut every corner and shave every instant that Maxwell Kurtt, whoever he proved to be, might have his chance for life.

"Blockhouse?" Bill muttered in reflection, as he swung into that easy, hip-swinging, apparently loose jointed stride which desert dwellers acquire. "Must mean those honeycombed, straight-up stone walls——"

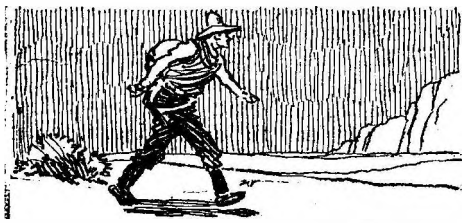
Bill once had passed the eastern end of Quitobaquita, but at a distance. He was certain, however, that there could be no fort or other edifice in the region, though possibly the ruins of some ancient pueblo or Indian sun-dance shrine.

For a time now, as the light waned, he followed at a rapid pace the skipping, partially obliterated track made by the kite drag. This did not pursue an absolutely straight course, but bent in long sweeps to north or south—always returning to the general southwesterly direction. With the far distant line of Quitobaquita showing as a waved, black silhouette in the west, and the promise of a half moon at an early hour, Bill finally deserted the scarcely distinguishable trail, and made for the sierra, hoping later to cross the sign.

The wind was subsiding, now, as always with evenfall, and the quick coolness of shadow also aided his progress. With the straight away shuff-shuff of his bootheels

in the grit, the miles trailed away into the gathering night. Over his left shouider Bill saw the evening star, and for a time, roughly keeping this in the same position, he had a bearing by which to reckon the whereabouts of his objective.

Eighteen miles of malpais cannot be traversed in a hurry, even by a lanky, earnest



giant who improves every minute with a hundred or more forty-inch strides. On the most level stretches Bill bettered four miles an hour. There were broken, miniature mesas, however, and shallow arroyos and bare rock barriers like denuded bunkers—miles through which it seemed impossible that the kite drag could have passed without hanging up even as it had done in the stope of his mine. Here progress was more difficult.

Somehow the contraption *had* come this way, though; and somehow Bill shuffled, climbed, slid and dogtrotted the declivities and broken barriers. He once had seen the body of a man who had died of thirst, and the thought of that worst of all fates now confronting a fellow creature set his usually pleasant if homely features in a mask upon which two curling, dust whitened eyebrows met in a line above the bridge of a big, bony nose. Though himself partly a product of city knowledges and customs, Bill had turned to the stretches of harsh nature unadorned when he had weeks which could be given to venturing on his own. All the more, too, when in the completion of his war-delayed college course he had been swept by that burning urge of mystery which less shy men openly proclaimed as adoration, love.

The girl—well, for this tale of La Abra she need not appear. Suffice it to say that she smiled at Bill's ungainly strength and awkwardness, still smiled when in perspiring, shivering solemnity he encircled her slender waist with a forearm which could have pulped a sack of potatoes, and waltzed like a great, precise Golem. There was a world of understanding behind the amusement in those gray eyes, too. She was *real*, and Bill knew that, but didn't reckon it as any advantage to himself.

Dapper men, rich men, men who came in racing sulkies behind horses alleged to be blood cousins of Star Pointer or Salvator—*and* men who even could *schottische* with ease!—realized as well as Bill the one great, outstanding truth; namely, that in this daughter of a great railway president was the prettiest, decentest to a fellow, and altogether the most lovable bit of femininity between the High Sierras and the Golden Gate.

She might have let Bill know something that had occurred to her more than once; and yet who may fathom gray eyes that have *warmth* as well as common sense? She let him go back to his beloved desert where he said gold was. And if the smile that remained after his stiff, stammering half agonized farewell, seemed a little wistful during ensuing days and evenings, the strutting swains who imagined themselves in favor simply conceded by a unanimous, tacit vote that Dorrie Richmond became more beautiful every day she lived. And since she lacked a month of her twenty-first birthday, that was even probable.

The desert moon rose. It was not the full silver dollar of a few nights back, yet even its waning half-face threw a light over La Abra which seemed unearthly. Every greasewood clump and higher clustering of chaparral loomed up in magic. The great sierra, nearing now, seemed to Bill a silvered wall.

The rescuer had run when he had not walked at the limit of his stride True, the run was little more than a doubling of the long paces combined with a shortening of their length. Yet he had made unbelievable time. The fourth hour of his journey was not expended, and he was almost before the honeycombed walls which flank the desert.

Here he would have to trust to the moonlight, and cast about until he discovered the tracks of the drag. Any attempt to guess the particular involution of the rock walls called The Blockhouse by the dying man, would be well-nigh hopeless. Bill had reached the formation he supposed to be the one named, but there was no sign of a camp or a human body. The wind had died completely, so he could not use even the unsure method of tracing back the source from which the kite must have flown. At this point the Sierra, ravaged by the age-long assault of sand and dust, was cut into sterile bayous and canyons of rock. And somewhere in here a man lay dying, or was dead.

Bill took his third drink from the first canteen, a long, gurgling, throaty swallow.

He had earned it by abstemiousness. Then, capping the felt covered retainer, he began a thorough scanning of the parched soil, a search which took him first a half mile to the north, then, more slowly, more than that distance to the south of the place he had stopped.

The moonlight was excellent, yet it did not show up the sign of the drag. Perhaps that trail had been drifted under long since. At any rate Bill snorted as if in pain. He suddenly straightened. "I'm not asking anything for myself I don't deserve," he began abruptly, "but if there's a poor devil out here——"

He had been walking as he talked. And he broke off short. Of what use is prayer to an Almighty, if that Great One cannot guess its full import before it is phrased?

Bill's eyes caught the reflected flicker of a fire. It was a tiny fire, and well hidden in a one hundred yard break in the rocks; yet Bill's eyes, used to the flooding of silver, caught the red-yellow twice reflected. He started, stopped in his tracks. In a moment he was loping speedily for a part of the sierra more than a half-mile distant.

He came upon the scene with startling suddenness. Rounding a turn of the rock he stopped suddenly. Ahead was the hand-wide blaze of twigs used by desert wanderers. Crouching there, short necked like a buzzard in the queer flare of light and shadow, was the figure of a man whom Bill stared at and found oddly familiar. It was not more than a fugitive sense of something wrong that stirred in him, yet it called for caution; and Bill respected the desert and its messages so greatly that he would not knowingly disregard a single one of its occult waves. Hunches, some men called them. Well, they often were right.

He abandoned his forthright stride. He bent, tying the rawhide strings which bound his right, pivoted holster, to his thigh. Silently, as his eyes searched that bent, scavenger-like figure near the fire, he transferred the protected six-gun from its sheath at the left. And he allowed the butt of the discarded gun to remain outside the hampering flap.

There was something here he had not expected to find; that was sure. He crept forward silently. That man crouched, apparently searching through a pack. *That* was not one dying of thirst!

Had Bill *not* seen something sinisterly familiar in that neckless crouch, he doubtless would have strode to the fire and paid the penalty for his rashness. As it was he looked upon "Chotty" Bedell, fugitive rustler, supposed murderer, cowardly gunman, with only a straining of memory, and caution finally confirmed itself. Bill caught a glimpse of the features of the human vulture, and remembered. Two years before Bill had seen the man in Ajo. At that time several drinkers at the bar had been able to whisper guardedly of the outlaw, though none thought it his business to kill, or inform upon the man.

The big fact stuck upright now; if Chotty Bedell had sent that kite—— But of course he had not. His low-caliber, piggish brain, for all its cunning, was not capable of such imagination.

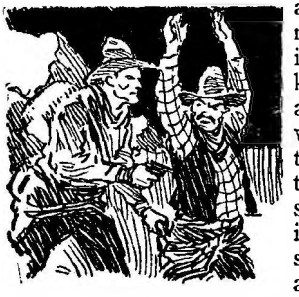
What then, was the answer?

Bill found it moments later. Creeping up as silently as an Apache, and entirely unsuspected by Chotty, who thought himself alone, save for the poor fool now unconscious and dying to whom this outfit belonged, Bill saw the ravaging of another's possessions even before he glimpsed the limp, tragic huddle of dried-out human that was Maxwell Kurtt. Chotty had wasted only a second upon the man—a glance which determined that while not quite dead yet, the venturer into this desert never would regain consciousness unless helped. And Chotty was callous. He could use some of these supplies. He only failed to figure the help that Max had summoned as he lay there dying from lack of water.

III

"PUT 'em up!"

The words grated out harshly. The crouching figure of Chotty Bedell straightened, leapt upward. A squeaky sound was wrung from his own dry, greed-tightened throat, yet this involuntary reaction ceased almost as soon as it began. He knew the desert and its men of violence; only too well he knew them! With the steady, unyielding prod of a six-gun muzzle against the small of his back, he lost not an instant in complying with the curt demand.



"Wh-wha-a-at?" he gasped in sudden terror.

Bill Halliday was in no mood for explanations. Back there in the darkness, just an instant before he had flushed this

ghoul of the wastes, Bill had heard a faint sound—the gasping, faint croak of a sufferer almost beyond help. It was the one who lay there untended, the man left to die while Chotty Bedell rummaged in his pack for valuables!

With one hand Bill emptied the outlaw's holsters, thrusting the long, butt-notched irons into his own belt. Then, after a quick slapping search, he drew a keen bowie from its special sheath in Chotty's right boot seam.

"Take that canteen—yours. Come here!" The command was uncompromising, gritty with a revolt of anger that anyone could be so lacking in common, human sympathy.

Chotty spat, made another queer sound, but complied without argument. In his heart he was quaking, but already scheming, seeking a possible way of avoiding the censure which must follow this revelation. Oddly, he feared the accusation of utter heartlessness, blame given for breaking the first and greatest tenet of all waterless lands—that anyone in need of water shall be supplied immediately—more than he worried over possible retribution for his previous more open crimes.

"The guy cashed in afore I come," he offered. "Musta——"

"Liar!" The word was a knife edge of only half repressed fury. Chotty's lowering brows raised suddenly. He clumped down to his knees, unscrewed the canteen cap, sloshed it appraisingly, shook his head. "I ain't got much water left——" A sudden glint of recognition came into Chotty's eyes. This was the damned dude tenderfoot he had made dance to the spitting of his guns in the saloon at Ajo, the previous spring!

"If that man dies I shall shoot your head off!"

"Yuh go to hell!" snarled Chotty in sudden defiance. He dropped his hands, forgetting the empty holsters.

Crack!

The lobe of Chotty's right ear splashed a faint streak of red lead through the moonlight, and was gone. In its place remained a dribble of warm fluid and a stinging.

Chotty caved. He did not know for certain that the man had not aimed at his head and missed by that inch margin. It looked far more like shooting such as *he* could do when completely sober! And an unwavering Colt with the hammer thumbed back admits no argument, anyway. Somewhere, somehow, this despised tenderfoot dude had learned things which newcomers to the La Abra wastes often take years or decades to make their own.

Under Bill's snapped directions, the sufferer's head was raised, his face bathed with precious water, a trickle passed back of the caked and swollen tongue. For a moment it seemed that the man was too far gone even to swallow the lifegiving fluid; but then came a bubble, a choking. The first small mouthful choked down the man's throat.

Chotty's hands were shaking, now, but he was parsimonious with the water. Since much of the liquid would have been nearly as disastrous as none at all, Bill made no objection. Little by little, with long pauses between each two mouthfuls, a pint or thereabouts was administered. Then, as Maxwell Kurtt's eyes came open and he croaked hoarsely for more water, trying to snatch the canteen, Bill made Chotty screw up the container and then carry the man over to the dying blaze.

When this fire was replenished, Bill forced Chotty to lie flat on his back at the farther side of the fire. The outlaw whined, obviously becoming more and more frightened of what was due to happen to him. "Gimme back my guns an' I'll git," he offered. "I ain't done nothin——"

"Correct," said Bill with quiet deadliness. "You simply *didn't* do anything. Until dawn, you'll stay right there. Then we'll see."

The job of resuscitating Kurtt was by no means finished, but now Bill took it over. Allowing Chotty to get up only at times when the fire needed more mesquite branches, Bill made a small pot of coffee. The aroma of the boiling liquid reached Kurtt's nostrils and appeared to give him a trifle of strength. He rolled over to his elbow and raised his gaunt, wizened visage. "Thank you, friend," he managed to articulate. Thus far he had not noticed Chotty.

Bill grinned. "I was struck by your novel method of sending a message, old timer," he replied. "Fairly bowled over."

"The—kite?"

"Yep. Don't talk much now. Try a cup of this. We'll have plenty time to chin later. When you feel up to it, I'll stir a mess of biscuits and fixin's."

The little chap smiled weakly.

"I—all I think I ever shall want is water."

He tried to lift a hand and take the tin cup of steaming liquid proffered, but Bill pushed it away. Sheathing his six-gun,

Bill thrust an arm behind Kurtt and helped him drink.

Whatever Chott Bedell may have imagined would happen to him at dawn only may be surmised. Probably he envisioned a return to Ajo under guard, a mob of enraged citizens all too ready to believe anything of which this scarcely tolerated holdover from the quick-triggered nineties might be accused, a rope from that convenient beam stretching streetward from the ridge of the blacksmith shop——

At any rate he had been watching Bill. The hot rage which caused his piggish little eyes to glitter with more than the reflection of the firelight, crisscrossed each second with questioning. At the first false move or lapse of attention on the part of his captor Chotty meant to regain control of the situation. He looked at this tall, bony youth with the contempt that chunky, muscle bound men often feel toward a rangy capability far beyond their own. City dude! Sure, the guy could shoot, but that didn't mean nothin'. Give Chotty just one chance to get his knotty, short fingered hands on that long piece of string, and *he'd* show him! He'd——

Then, unbelievably, came the awaited chance! With Bill's two hands occupied, his revolver back in its holster, and no more than eight feet separating him from Chotty, what more could the latter ask? With a suddenness next to incredible in one of his stodgy proportions, Chotty leapt to his feet, bunched and sprang, a wild, throaty scream of combined hatred and fear making audibly terrible the contorted visage and outreaching, crooked arms.

Straight over the fire he came, flopping in a plunge like some ungainly toad. Bill

had not relaxed vigilance, yet he had not counted on such surprising agility in a man of Chotty's stature. With one powerful shove he tossed the wisplike body of Kurtt to one side, threw the hot coffee as ineffectual spray, and himself leapt in the opposite direction. For the split of a second the stubby, clawing talons raked his shoulder. They almost held, but shifted suddenly to an iron grip on Bill's ankle.

"Arrh!" The throaty sound told of triumph; but it was shortlived. Realizing to the full that encumbered as he was by the weight of four guns, he was handicapped badly, Bill acted so speedily that his backflung boot seemed merely a continuation of his leap.

The heavy leather caught Chotty full on the breast bone, and while it did not deprive him of wind, it brought forth a grunt of beastlike acknowledgment. His hands loosened imperceptibly.

It was enough. With a sudden twist Bill freed himself, rolled over like a flash, and gained his feet in a backward leap. His eyes, often a smiling blue, were hard and glittering with the joy of combat and recklessness. He detested this chunky scoundrel, loathed him as he loathed Gila monsters and the scaly, legless things that slithered into the warmth of a man's blankets at night.

With a swift motion he unbuckled the heavy belt, tossing it with the knife and the two loose revolvers, sidewise toward Kurtt, who now had hunched up, his eyes widened in misery and terror.

"If he gets me, protect—yourself!" cried Bill. The pause came as he ducked beneath the spreading arms of Chotty's headlong rush, instantly hooking back a rabbit punch to Chotty's short, columnar neck, a blow which surely would have broken Bill's own, but which had no more effect upon the outlaw than to make him stagger slightly and mouth horrible curses as he wheeled, again threw down his head and rushed.

Except for the man's astounding speed and desperate anxiety to rend, tear, destroy, Bill might have found him ludicrous. As matters stood the prospector had no difficulty hitting Chotty Bedell. He did so, delivering solid, foot-long smashes and twisting uppercuts that smashed into the solid midriff, that broke a wide flap of skin from one side of the outlaw's mouth, made him spit fragments of blackened teeth, yet which did not stop or even appreciably slow him!

Grunt, curse, dash, grab, Bill did not escape unscathed or easily. At each meeting of those two fighting men the clutching fingers nearly got their hold. They tore Bill's flannel shirt to shreds, gouged across his arms and right cheek deep nail wounds that welled blood. And once, as Bill inadvertently stepped in the fire while dodging, Chotty grasped a small handful of

hair and ripped it out.

Bill grimaced with the pain. His reflex was instant. Leaping *forward* this time to meet the attack instead of dodging or sidestepping, he planted a straight right to the bent forehead which almost caved the brute's skull and actually stopped him in his tracks! The piggish eyes blinked redly. Chotty swayed. That second a stinging, terrible left cross slammed into Chotty's wounded ear.

Without impetus or a good clutch on balance, it sent him spinning like a stick of bowling alley wood struck by a heavy ball. Bill was after him like a cat, striking, plugging home short lefts and rights of punishment the instant Chotty reeled upward from his knees.

Down he went again, and this time inertly, although no other blow had been of knockout quality. Bill failed to realize this, and was satisfied. Breathing in great gulps he stood with arms hanging an instant, then backed away. "A—rope!" he managed to gasp. "Tie him—this time."

But Chotty was not quite finished. Driven by desperation, and actually not unconscious for as much as a second, he struggled back to his feet, intending one last rush.

That instant there came a stunning report from Bill's side, and an answering scream from Chotty. Kurtt, evidently viewing the combat far differently than had Bill, had decided to take a hand.

"Oh!" he gasped, looking at the smoking Colt and then at the man he had hit. "I didn't—mean to——"

But whatever he had intended, he had creased Chotty Bedell most painfully. The heavy slug caromed from his shinbone midway between ankle and knee, inflicting a wound agonizing though not at all dangerous.

In a whisk Bill had the weapons again, and was reproving his unwanted ally in no uncertain terms. Kurtt, summoning all his strength, as it seemed, burst forth in shaky explanations that he had meant only to frighten Chotty; that the gun had been aimed far to the left but had swerved with the trigger pull, as doubtless was the case.

Bill paid little attention. He had run to Chotty, who now was on the ground, cursing and moaning as he clutched his leg. Considering the extent of his facial damage the wound really was not worth such a powwow; yet it is doubtful that the outlaw quite understood that his temporarily paralyzed leg ever would be fit for service again.

"Well, you had all that coming," decided Bill briefly when he saw the gouge. "That, and a hell of a lot more! We'll let you get away this time, though. Lie there and don't make any funny moves. It's a couple or three hours till dawn, and *that's* when you're going to be well enough to travel!"

IV

SO IT was done. The first red edge of desert sun saw Chotty Bedell limping, packless, weaponless, on the long, arid trail to Sediente, nearest of the adobe towns on this, the Mexican side of the line. Chotty had his own canteen, one quarter full. For a tenderfoot this would have been a ration insufficient, but Chotty, with one cupful tendered him following the fight, would win through.

Perhaps he would not have much to spare, traveling in the day; yet Bill calculated just exactly how much he himself would need as a minimum, and had given the outlaw exactly that amount. All Chotty's whining and pleading moved Bill not a jot. He and the little man had none too much water as it was. Unless Max Kurtt perked up enough to travel during this day, it would mean that Bill would be forced to a round trip back to his own digging.

Chotty's swollen, distorted face inclined toward the ground. Hate unmentionable held him in its searing grip, yet now had

come something near to a sane appraisal of his predicament. He had less than a quart of water, and more than thirty miles of hard trudging, part of which could not be done in the heat of the day. So he emitted no sounds save an occasional gritting moan, and kept to his elliptical course about the sierra.

Oh, there would be a reckoning! Though for all his bullying brutality and bestial code Chotty did not lack one whit of a killer's courage, something approaching a total loss in morale kept him now from contemplating any open revenge upon that blaze-eyed knotty youngster whom he had decried as an unruly dude. Bill Halliday was pizen, and Chotty had found out the fact. As long as he lived he would carry the scars of that epic combat. And he would

kill the man who dared to joke.

First need that Chotty mulled over was, of course, water. He would swash down untold gallons of the bitter hogwash that passed for water, at Sediente. He even might douse himself in old Ramon's horse trough! Three years before, following a prolonged carouse, he had done that, as a nerve tonic, when he learned that a rival gunman had come to town, boasting of conquests greater even than those accredited to Chotty Bedell. Since then he had not thought of bathing. Right now, as he grudgingly wet his bruised and swollen tongue from the tepid canteen, Chotty pictured himself lying full length in the trough, luxuriating, drinking in moisture through every pore as once in the memory of man had the desert lava in the astounding cloudburst of '95.

No, Chotty was not thinking of what he would do to Bill Halliday. After water would come a jug of Old Ramon's twice distilled maguey juice, a beverage three lusty swigs of which would make a sand tortoise stand up on its hind legs and make passes at a sidewinder.

With mescal or tequila sufficient, Chotty could think and plan. Meanwhile, even his rudimentary brain could envision six or seven satisfying things to do to that half dead little tenderfoot Kurtt whose rich stores almost had provided Chotty with a grubstake. Not that he would have used the grubstake himself. Far from it. With that much to offer, though, he could have gone to Ajo or any other town peopled by unfortunate prospectors, and bought a half share in a whole season of gold seeking. Chotty rather liked that sort of thing. He didn't object at all to the desert, or to the arid crags where men sought flecked white quartz or veins of knife-soft silver; but the pick and drill, or even the circling pan of the placer hunter, did not appeal. As all the deluded or wise old rats who made their home where nature's skull is bare to the fangs, he loved gold and desired it.

That little hombre, Kurtt, would be alone *sometime!* That day would be a time of sordid horror in the Kurtt family. Damn him! He'd rue that shot, and even the moment when he had struggled back to life! Chotty, his alkali dusted, lashless lids nearly closing, saw clear and stark the little scientist pegged out in the manner of the Digger Indians of California, suffering untold agony.

There were no ants here, worse luck. There was alkali, though. Some of that, with sand, poured into the eyes was a torment—well, a first notion, anyway. Then——

Chotty's thoughts and lusts may be forgotten. He dismembered little Kurtt by degrees, the saliva coming to even his thirsty mouth when he gloated over the precise moment the little man would die from the multiplied agonies.

And before ten o'clock of the next morning the outlaw had his trough of water, and likewise his jug of tequila and a full sack of strong, sweetened cigarette tobacco. His thoughts had shifted to the greater hate.

When he embarked upon even the lesser of the two ventures, however, he met an obstacle. Two days later, sneaking upon the spot where that tiny campfire had blazed, Chotty found the spot deserted and the sifting grains of white and yellow unwilling to tell of the direction in which Bill Halliday and his charge had disappeared.

WHEN Bill looked upon the figure of his conquered enemy receding, he dismissed Chotty Bedell for the time being, and gave sole attention to the little man whose life he had saved.

Max Kurtt was an odd figure for La Abra. He was a man no more than five feet four inches in height, slight of bone and slighter still of flesh. Much poring over pestles and microscopes and classroom desks had given him a premature stoop of both shoulders and spine. His skin, on his face and the back of his hands, was the color of weak tea, rather muddy tea, with milk. Below his collar, above the wrists of his cambric shirt, and over the rest of the skimpy, rather pitiful body, however, it was the dead white of the blond Germanic races.

His hair remained only as a ring of spiritless, grayed straw above the prominent ears which bore the marks of heavy spectacles. The forehead was a vertical expanse of buff seamed by squinting during the time he did not wear the spectacles. He was fifty-one, a bachelor who still could blush and quaver in speaking if any woman smiled and spoke to him.

Oddly enough, Bill did not discount the man even in his present rôle of desert wanderer. It was not exactly coincidence, for in certain circles the name of Kurtt was looked at quite as, in that same day, electrical specialists regarded the signature of Steinmetz, the terse and marvelous, hunchbacked wizard of Schenectady.

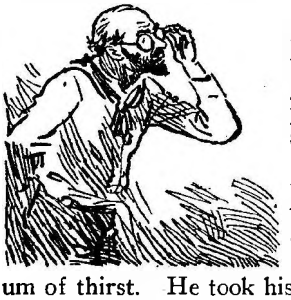
It had come to Bill on his long, rapid

hike. His dogeared textbook on geology had been written by Kurtt and Bradley. Also, a folio tome with many colored plates in his course of study called "Archaeology 6" had borne the name of Kurtt alone! And these were standard books, conned by many hundreds of students, from Bowdoin to Southern California!

So this was Maxwell Kurtt! The hold of the college still was strong on Bill Halliday. He took care of the little scientist with all the meticulous assiduity a turfman of that day would have expended had he come upon a blood son of Dan Patch screaming and neighing from an enmeshment of barbed wire, and felt as though he were performing in a righteous cause.

"My glasses," said Kurtt, reaching his feet for the first time. He wabbled. "Well, no matter. I fear they were broken. In my pack are two more pair."

But Bill had started the search. He found both reserve pair, fortunately uninjured. "Here you are, Professor."



Kurtt donned the horned spectacles, duplicates of those lost in the mad delirium of thirst. He took his time. Then he scanned his rescuer from head to foot, taking full advantage of his first opportunity to get a clear-sighted look at his deliverer.

And then they talked—and hadn't been talking two minutes before they were started on the subjects that were of such deep interest to each of them—the subjects of this little old world's make-up and antiquities. Bill had seen to this.

"And you still study geology—at college," asked the professor.

Bill grinned and shook his head. "Nope. I cleaned up on my college degree last June. This is my last vacation. Maybe I shouldn't take it, but I think I'm right. I've got to have gold—or something like it."

"Something like it," repeated the little man. A crinkle, inscrutable, came into the eyes behind the glasses. "Ah, yes. Your school?" He seemed to be enjoying a joke which Bill did not share.

"U. of M."

"Eh?"

"Michigan!" explained Bill explosively, not without a remembered pride.

"Oh, yes. I thought you meant something else. I am from the U. of P.—Pennsylvania. And you know me?"

"I think you're damned well wrong in your chapter on Moundbuilders!" was Bill's surprising, half belligerent reply. "I've been into three mounds myself, and I've——"

"Say no more!" snapped little Max Kurtt, surprisingly. "I *was* a little bit in error, but I didn't think—oh, good for you! I'll tell you I have revised the third edition of that book. It'll be out in two months more. You referred to the fool notion I got concerning certain fragments of bronze I tried to correlate with the waved-blade Malay kris? Was that it, sir?" Unconsciously the little man, tightening his spectacles across the bridge of his dented nose, was again the lecturist, striding his board dais in front of an irreverent class. And loving it.

"It *was!*" grinned Bill, and extended a huge palm. When the scientist looked down, frowned to collect his far distant thoughts, and then smacked down his own frail hand, Bill did not squeeze very hard. But a trifle of the new, combative color drained from the face of Maxwell Kurtt, nevertheless.

Another twenty-four hours passed before Max Kurtt could try the slow, seven-hour trip which Bill had traversed in little more than half that time. They had been on strict water rations, however, and the trip for one or both was necessary. They started. And then, oddly enough, Bill found that if he talked to Kurtt, half-disputed with him, or even discussed points of the two subjects upon which they hitherto had touched minds through the medium of books, the scientist forgot thirst, forgot everything and kept going, strengthening rather than weakening as the miles passed. Bill was a positive sort, especially where his hunches were concerned. And little Max, trained by long experience to encourage youths to think for themselves, qualified his replies and smiled even when Bill Halliday asserted things scientifically difficult of credence.

In those miles came to each an understanding of the other. Bill needed gold; or thought he did. He was not aiming to dodge a life work, in any sense of the term. The big actuating force now was that with every fiber of him he loved a girl. That girl could not wait, or Bill thought she couldn't. The job that Bill wanted would pay him only twelve dollars a week to start, a fair enough price in that early year of the twentieth century.

In order even to stand his little chance in the graces of Dorrie Richmond, a chance homely, awkwardly strong Bill Halliday counted something less than one hundred to one even if he became a millionaire within the year, he simply *had* to have invested capital to supplement that income for the first few years! This was his last chance, and the days were precious. He believed gold was here in quantities that really would pay.

The next day after reaching the seeping spring and the deep hole Bill Halliday showed the working to little Max. The latter saw a pan of the deep silt washed, regarded owlishly and without saying much the tiny yellow flakes which remained. About three hundred of the pans would make an ounce of dust. With the amount of water required for washing—water that seeped out of the soil so reluctantly that little more than that required for drinking could be secured—a washed ounce apparently would take Bill Halliday weeks or months to secure.

The young prospector, however, was looking for something more. There was no chance here for panning out a fortune, or even for sluicing it in case some outside chance gave the requisite water supply. He was looking toward the gravely bed of this ancient stream, toward a spot deep below this silt, where pockets of the heavier gold might lie. Max Kurtt frowned a little deeper at that. He, too, was seeking treasure, and more than likely his search was fully as harebrained, though he did not think that.

A quick survey of the surrounding formations of this old stream bed, once wider than the Platte at flood, convinced him that his enthusiastic friend was wrong; that even if his guess concerning the gold of that ancient river bed was correct, the pockets would not be reached until Bill had delved fifty or sixty feet below the surface. One man, digging with pick, shovel and spade, could not hope to accomplish such a thing short of a fairish lifetime. Even now Bill had to lift out his dirt in buckets. Soon he would need a ladder.

V

"BACK there where you hid my effects, Bill," said Max Kurtt, dropping all hint of the dictatorial in the free and easy comradeship now established, "I, too, have the key to a treasure, one I think far less problematical. It is a little case of beaten gold, much the same size and shape as a modern cigarette case. Once it may have held the royal seal of the Montezumas, or so the inscription says."

He proceeded to relate to the vastly interested prospector the tale of this case and certain other relics which he had discovered in a dry cave deeper in the Quitobaquita rocks at a point some miles from the spot at which Bill had found him. There had been a mouldered arquebus, and thin sheets of metal that powdered into dust when touched. The latter probably had been parts of the armor of a Spanish knight in some day long past.

Fortunately Max had more to rely upon than mere supposition. Within the golden case had been two small rectangles of parchment, yellowed, yet legible still. The first, written in archaic Spanish, seemed to be little more than an inventory of some trifling articles in gold and silver, of which no description was given. At the last, however, was an entry of possibly greater interest. Max quoted. "'*The burdens of four and twenty heathen slaves!*' That

may have meant a summary of what has gone before. Yet I doubt that very much," he said. "The other sheet is a hasty map. It designates the so-called 'blockhouse of stone' which I am certain is that honeycombed cliff near the spot you found me. At the top of this sheet are scrawled the Spanish words, '*Treasure of Itimixtl!*'"

"The dickens you say!" Bill was half inclined to scoff, for he had not glimpsed either of these inciting parchments. Yet the age old thrill to hidden treasure even now raced in his blood. "And you were hunting for that, eh? Did you find any trace that would make you believe that this treasure had not been discovered long ago? What was it, anyway? Gold?"

"The last I do not know," responded Max, smiling gravely. "Itimixtl was not an Aztec deity, but a small city beyond Tehuantepec occupied for a time by the fleeing followers of Cortez. It is a matter of record that one of these knights, against the will of his commander, took back to Spain with him a weight of base metal found at this town, thinking it of value, and stubborn in his belief. For this poor judgment the knight, one Don Sebastian Vicente Mendez, was exiled by his Most Gracious Majesty the King of Spain,

and was said to have joined then an expedition to Black Cathay in search of the fabled court of the Christian monarch, Prester John. No record remains of the fate of this expedition.

"It is mere supposition now, yet it would not surprise me to find that one or another of those doughty *conquisitadores* had ideas of his own. In one of the days of defeat, seeing a way, as he thought, to separate himself from a tragedy which must have seemed inevitable, he took the opportunity for individual flight. Perhaps he had a few retainers. Certainly he then came North with some burden bearers, who probably were members of a subject tribe gathered in as servants by the thinning Spaniards.

"We may guess at what happened then. He reached this land of no water. His Indians deserted. With his companions, if he had any, he cached the treasure in a place deemed secure, made a map, then started to find water and possible assistance. His armor would explain why he did not travel far upon the Quitobaquita Sierra!"

"You're a plausible cuss, Max," breathed Bill. His eyes had caught a gleam of the little man's fervor, and the beginnings of a smile, which was all for a girl far across the wastes, tugged at the corners of his wide mouth. "Well, *did* you get it?"

"Not as yet, my friend," answered Max quietly, "but it is there, I think. I have studied the rock, and the age of exposure changes as one ascends."

"Huh?" asked Bill curiously, excitedly withal. "What's that got to do with it?"

Max smiled. "You are my partner now, so I shall tell you. If we discover the treasure of Itimixtl, I shall take my half and equip a private laboratory where I may putter through my old age in happiness; for *that* is my great dream, friend of mine! You—you will take your portion, and with it you will go to a city where dwells a girl you love. Also, however, you will carry with the treasure what I might term an agent for happiness—an old man's advice!"

"Shoot!" grinned Bill, albeit he waited anxiously for the deliberate narrator to reach his point.

"Now, at the university from which I come, there is an instructorship in geology vacant for the fall. I offer it to *you!* The salary is nearly thrice that of the job of which you spoke. But do not interrupt! I have not finished. If you discover with me this treasure, you then will go to the girl of whom you spoke to me. Say nothing of more money than a pittance. Tell her only this, 'Beloved, I am offered a place in a great university which pays sufficient so that we may live. I love you!' Say no more until you have her answer. If an old man's observation counts at all, it is the painful truth that no marriages made for money yield permanent happiness. Of course if this young woman loves you she will take you. If she does *not,* the wealth that you may find will no more than cloud the findings of her heart. And Bill, there are just three things in the world which every true man must seek, or be *less* than a true man! One is the handclasp such as you offered me back there." Max nodded and gestured in the general direction of the sierra. "The second is accomplishment, for which money sometimes is a symbol and sometimes is not. The last, and greatest by far, is reciprocated love!"

His face an odd mixture of exaltation and pathos, the little scientist stood there a space of seconds. Then he sat down abruptly and dipped out from the basin four cups of water which he spilled into a pan and took to the sleepy burro. The animal opened one eye in surprise at this unusual offering, but drank.

"You're right enough, old timer," said Bill lightly, coming over to him. "I'll never forget that; but I'll likely enough never follow the advice, either. I've gambled too much. If I don't put down my stack all on *this* one whirl of the wheel, I'd feel as though I was piking! But weren't you saying something about the—er—exposure of the rocks?"

"Oh, yes." Max straightened up and was all business now. "You remember the kite with which I sent my message? Well, I was using that kite in the endeavor to get a string, and then a rope drawn by the string, across the blockhouse of stone. There are caves up there. I am quite certain that more than three hundred years ago less than half of this cliff projected from the sand. The treasure actually was hidden there, as I firmly believe, and now is twenty or thirty feet above the level on which we stand!"

Bill looked at Max the half of a minute, his blue eyes crinkling in admiration. Then he slapped his thigh.

"Tomorrow we go back!" he decided heartily. "Darned if I believe in most of these treasure tales, but in this case I'm *with* you! The treasure of Itimixtl!"

VI

ALMOST the first task, once Max was furnished with a rope knotted for scaling the sheer cliffs, was a round trip to Ajo, and at that pining settlement an arrangement whereby a Mexican youth would bring each week two sixteen gallon kegs of water on his burros. The first keg and some additional provisions Bill brought with him.

On the out trip he was consumed by the seeker's fever—but now, after long, lonely thought, a worm of unease had squirmed into his consciousness. After all, this search for an ancient treasure of gold or other metal left there through the centuries was worse than foolish, without much doubt. For two or three generations the Indians of this sierra and plain had known the many things good and evil which gold could buy. Had none of them discovered the cache, even supposing that none of the Spaniards or Indians had come back to claim it in the first place?

Despite his real respect for little Max in the latter's professorial aspect, Bill took leave to doubt much concerning the scientist's latest trip to La Abra. On rock formations and the like he doubtless knew his stuff, none better. On treasure trove, though——

Well, Bill himself had been thrilled by the two parchments. That they were genuine he had not the shadow of a doubt. He had helped Max scramble like a human ant to the first level of those queer, worm holes in the rock which Max claimed to be the domiciles of an ancient, dwarfed people existing even before the Mound-builders, or possibly contemporaneously with them.

And Max had discovered exactly nothing. The treasure might have been here once. If so, it was gone from the eight shallow caves they found. These caves contained nothing whatever indicative of man.

The scientist, though, refused to admit any such conclusion. Faced by barren failure, he traced back through his own premises, and built up so convincing a structure of theory, that Bill Halliday, though doubting still more strongly, was fain to allow Max Kurtt another go at the ancient hiding place. Therefore the new water stake and additional grub.

The long trip to and from Ajo, however, instilled another notion. At his own diggings he had *some* gold, fine stuff which could be panned out of the dried soil. And he had a theory concerning what must lie deep down below this surface silt, when once he had excavated to a sufficient depth. It simply stood to reason that in a river bed the heavier bits of gold had gone to the bottom. When once he reached the gravel and rock he would have rich placer pockets, a fortune, and—Dorrie Richmond! Four of her letters had awaited him at the town. So, on his way back from Ajo Bill made a decision. In spite of the allure of these maps, he would spend only one more week with little Max.

If in Bill's absence, or after another week of the younger partner's coöperation the scientist failed to discover the whereabouts of his half-mythical treasure trove, Bill would surrender his share and go back to the more prosaic job in which he put more faith, his work of muscle, sweat and persistence.

Max greeted him with undiminished excitement and enthusiasm, but with a forced admission of failure for the period of Bill's absence. Max had two other rock face possibilities now, having explored his first bet to the uttermost without finding even a trace of corroboration. Sooner or later they must come across the cave in which this cryptic treasure was stored, he swore. Perhaps a greater understanding of the meaning of the map only would come to them after great labor and exploration of the terrain.

Bill grinned, but rather wryly. He was thinking in the perfect confidence for his success expressed by Dorris Richmond—bless her!—and said nothing much, but cooked supper that night. Max had been subsisting upon tepid water and canned beans. Bill told him of the arrangement made for water supplies and food rations, but voiced nothing that night of his own decision.

But ten days of the greatest striving, optimistic always, though fruitless, followed. Even Max looked somber. And then Bill said his piece.

"Max, old man, I'm sorry. I don't believe in your treasure any more. You don't think I have a chance for mine.

Well, call it a day! I'm going back. So long!"

And Max Kurtt, though his eyes widened, and his small mouth quivered as though he were about to voice many protests, spoke no word of argument. There was in him a shining loyalty which even Bill would have to learn.

"To the death—my partner!" he whispered huskily, extending his hand. And meant just that.

BILL toiled back, with his own burro and a portion of the food supplies. After the dreams and promising realities of Quitobaquita the drab hole in the desert ground which was his own, loomed discouragingly. Yet he set to work. Occasionally during his rest periods he lay on one elbow in the scant shade of chaparral or manzanita, and panned a heaping double handful of his last excavation; though without real hope, for this was not particularly promising stuff. For him the way lay downward, though how far downward he only could guess—and hope that Max Kurtt's estimate was far shy of the truth.

Days of toil went onward. Weeks. A month and one-half. And at last, with thirty-two feet of excavation which he had been forced to widen at the mouth many times, Bill sat down at one eventide, mopped his brow, and admitted failure. His provisions were gone. The last evening he had boiled the canvas sack which once had held his coffee. Two handfuls of dried beans now soaking for the night, constituted his whole food supply. Breakfast would see them devoured, for he was ravenous, lean and hungry from a week of stinted rations.

Only water he and the burro had possessed in fair measure. On that these two would have to make it more than fifty-five miles across the desert, landing nearly destitute.

Not since he had parted with Maxwell Kurtt had Bill spoken to any animate thing save his pack animal. Now he turned a little north of the sunset, the hard self-understanding smile on his features which distinguishes those of the Nordic tribes who fight to the brink of death without encouragement, fools in chase of their own vindication, perhaps, but men in spite of all. "Girl," he said simply, "I've done my durndest to back a fool hunch. Now I'll back the old fashioned maxims! Pray God you wait!"

That was all. Bill Halliday, as much in love as any of the men over whom history and poetry have raved, said and thought just that. In his mind there was no compromise, and never could be. For the girl there would have to be an offering of success. Otherwise even the delirious happiness of her love would always be tinged for him with the bitter of self contempt—self destroying love, better never admitted to the forge blast of a full flame! Such men ever have been the despair of girls born to riches; yet how many of the latter would have had that barrier of self respect unrecognized?

VII

AN OCCASIONALLY honest game of three card monte was run in Sediente. Chotty Bedell, flushed and belligerent from some days' acquaintance with Old Ramon's jugs of yellow-white fluid dynamite, thrust down ten dollars Mexican on his guess at the flipping shuffle and spread of Pedro Meanix, the cross-eyed halfbreed dealer. He won. He fixed the shifty Pedro with a cold stare—and won again.

Two hours later Chotty owned the game and the entire gambling bank roll. Instead of continuing Pedro at his task, Chotty sat himself at a table of burned baize, and awkwardly thumbed a full deck of pasteboards. To play here at any game one must give the house one white chip on every deal.

Always Chotty had loved poker, but had hated to give up the house percentage. Now, entirely disregarding Old Ramon who dared not interfere, Chotty was the house and the bank. He could stay out of pots and make money just the same. He enticed customers and played, but with great conservativeness. And he drank little while he played. He made money; for though these Mexicans and stray white men customers feared his guns, they looked upon him as too awkward to cheat at cards. They were right in a measure—except for two or three simple tricks. Still Chotty won. In eleven days he had increased his bank roll by more than one half.

Then the inextinguishable urge for tequila struck to his marrow again. It was not possible for him to keep more than two

thousand pesos in his corduroys, and not drink. At least not indefinitely. With many lurid threats then he re-employed Pedro for the monte, handed over half the bank roll, and went out with two one-gallon stone jugs, receptacles an eighth full of sand and dirt, never cleaned during years of use.

A half hour later, forgetful of all else, he recalled his uncompleted vengeances, *"Diablo!"* he yelled, straightening suddenly from the heel-squatting position he had learned from his years about the desert camp fires.

The half emptied jug fell, struck a rock, and splintered, which caused an additional curse. A sleeping *mozo* suddenly wakened from his siesta, and ran for shelter from the bullets he thought must fly. For the first time in some days Chotty Bedell clearly recalled his humiliation at the hand of that accursed tenderfoot, Bill Halliday. And, inspired by much of the acrid liquor, Chotty outdid his best in the matter of language.

Chotty's brain was working again. He wondered at his period of spineless quiescence. *Why* had he not inquired, done something against the day when Bill Halliday would foot the long score of indebtedness? Foot it involuntarily, of course. Chotty still recalled the resolution he had made, which was, in short, to creep upon that lanky tenderfoot from the rear, and shoot. If the young man was not *quite* dead when Chotty crept upon him afterward, so much the better; Chotty would take no big chance there, however! Even the delights of Injun torture paled before the stern necessity for precaution. Bill Halliday was pizen.

So it came about that Chotty, imagining that his arch enemy must be prospecting northward, near Six Bones in Quitobaquita, a place many another tenderfoot had tried to his sorrow, started on a long detour in search of Bill Halliday. Chotty reached the arsenic spring of Six Bones, which he knew right well, even as Bill Halliday was throwing the shovelfuls from his hopeless diggings far away on the plain of La Abra.

Then, hazing his lone burro, liquor reddened eyes ever searching the horizon for signs of either of the men he wished to destroy, Chotty skirted the arid sierra and came again to the site of that old camp of Maxwell Kurtt which Chotty had stalked and entered—to his sorrow.

There was nothing here save signs of a later visitation, the smudges of a dozen fires, yet Chotty looked at it with malign interest. Two men had been here *after* the day upon which he had come, intending revenge upon Maxwell Kurtt! He thought he knew the answer—water. They had gone away, and come back with a drinking supply. Why? And where had they gone?

The sign was impossible to read, but Chotty found a clue much more exciting than any tracks in the shifting alkali. He sniffed. To his corroded nostrils came the waftings of a faint fragrance which he could not help but recognize—burning piñon branches! Somewhere within a mile or two, a man had a cooking fire!

After an hour of careful reconnoitering, Chotty discovered that heap of hot ashes upon which a meal had been cooked. That was all he found. Footprints, yes. The trail led to a blank wall of rock more than fifty feet in height, and ended there! Around the camp site was not so much as an empty canteen or a crust of bread. Whoever had built this fire had decamped, apparently over the cliff, without leaving a sensible trace.

Chotty was confounded, angry. He had a ripping headache, and could not concentrate satisfactorily upon the puzzle. After an hour of casting about, much as does a hound at the inexplicable end of a hot trail, he growled his anger and set out for Sediente. This was no place for a man and burro to linger. In addition to its lack of water, the place had spooky qualities.

For fifteen miles the open desert stretched in every direction save over this cliff of rock—and in the direction Chotty himself had traveled from Six Bones. To get away a man would need wings, or two-three hours in which to travel. Chotty failed to estimate the fact that from the top of the rock cliff there before him, a watcher could scan a score of miles, and two hundred degrees of a circle. Max Kurtt had seen and focused binoculars upon the newcomer when Chotty and his burro were mere dust wisps on the horizon.

THE meaner the dog, under some circumstances, the quicker he has his day, however. While Bill toiled in his widening and deepening hole in the ground, and little Max with patience infinite climbed one after another of the rocky involutions of Quitobaquita, Chotty Bedell drank and gamed. His money melted, particularly after he killed the man at Sediente who made fun of the scars and

toothless gaps in Chotty's face. For then Chotty had to recross the line, and take his chances that Ajo had forgotten his looks and character.

Ajo had not; yet, such was the somnolence of summer heat, that when Chotty came in without ostentation and paid cash for his liquor—forthwith taking plenty of the stuff to kill a den of rattlesnakes, for his next day's consumption—Ajo yawned and said that heat and tequila would finish Chotty Bedell. Good riddance, and simpler than a trial, by far.

They would have done so, too, except for gambling. In one night at draw poker with three seeming tenderfeet, Chotty lost two-thirds of his remaining wealth. The next day he was grumpy and venomous without imbibing a single pint.

Through forty dull hours he glowered at the world, meditating crimes varying in character from stage robbery to plain murder. And then his reddened eyes blinked open to gaze upon a figure somehow familiar, a little man who wore spectacles. Maxwell Kurtt!

It was the truth! Kurtt, spurred by the immense and joyous news he held contained within his modicum of inches, two weeks earlier had come to Ajo—because he believed Chotty Bedell hung out at one of the Mexican towns the other side of the line.

Kurtt on that earlier day had many fussy little errands. First he did some inquiring, and found out right away that Chotty, his arch enemy, had been in town—and probably would be back! Max's eyes popped open at that and he looked sick. He did no more than write two letters, though, and then he asked more questions. Could a man take gold or silver or precious stones from Mexico into the United States without paying duty? Bullion, yes; precious stones, no. The trouble with dust or bullion was the fact that if the Mexican petty officials knew of the transportation the lucky prospector was all too apt to find that special laws limiting mineral rights on his particular district were passed overnight; that in addition to losing all of his gleanings, he was barred from entering Mexico, and some gold braided official took over the claim from which the wealth had come.

Kurtt thought long over that. He was still thinking as he instituted widespread inquiries for Bill Halliday, and hired two destitute prospectors to search for the young man. Each of the prospectors bore a letter—a cryptic message to all but the addressee—and one of the letters was destined safely to reach its goal.

Chotty Bedell laid eyes upon Maxwell Kurtt nearly two weeks later. In the meantime the little professor had sent an urgent message by stage, and had received

in return four queer oblong boxes and two small but heavy buckskin bags which he cared for gingerly. On each box was a flaring red label, "CHEMICALS — DANGEROUS! HANDLE WITH CARE!" Beside these there were two heavy packs of canvas and buckskin.

With his hands shaking, and his little red eyes glinting long repressed fury, Chotty staggered into the nearest bar. He drank whisky straight this time, three brimming glasses. Ten minutes later he sat down involuntarily in the sawdust and remained there, muttering incoherently. The mixture with his sodden hangover from tequila had done something to him; had temporarily incapacitated him for walking or shooting.

He finally surged erect, and then he was shaking, but deadlier than a sidewinder with a broken tail. He spoke no more, but weaved a way outside. In the course of an hour, sobering and becoming steadily uglier, he found that Maxwell Kurtt, with a halfbreed boy and six rented pack animals, had taken the southward trail.

Chotty raged. Still he did not lose his head entirely. He would follow, of a certainty. To venture into the Quitobaquitas again demanded plenty of water, when one took into consideration his long debauch and its demands, however. He had to have a burro, at least. Four hours and nearly all of his remaining money went for this final grubstake and carrier rental. And that time was just sufficient to give Maxwell Kurtt a chance for life.

The following morning Chotty met the mozo returning. Beset by a crazed gringo, the lad lost nearly all his wit. Finally, under cuffs and bloodcurdling threats of abuse, he managed to blubber out the news that he had left the four-eyed Americano there just a little way beyond the abutments of the sierra—two miles, no more, from the spot at which Chotty had surprised his camp that first time!

What were the boxes?..*Por Dios,* the boy did not know. He had left them there with the señor.

Chotty dismissed him with a kick, and made for Sierra Quitobaquita.

This time Chotty was more lucky. He found the camp. As before, the bird had flown, but this time much remained to testify to the truth. One of the water kegs and a single pack of the provisions had vanished. Likewise a small case containing binoculars. All the rest of the load which had been distributed upon six pack animals lay here in a heap, however. Mostly clothes and food. Chotty sniffed at it. The clothes he could not wear, and he had enough food of his own to last a week.

Where had the damn' little tenderfoot flown?

Sober now and vengeful beyond all limits, Chotty read the sign. As before it led to a rocky cliff ordinarily unscalable. "Up there, huh?" snarled the pursuer. "Well, yuh gotta come down sometime!"

And that night he saw, thirty-five feet up in the honeycombed rock, the yellow flicker of a fire, a fire that was blown to excessive heat by blasts of a skin bellows, hand operated. Right then little Max was engaged in a task which made him chuckle over and over again. For the time he had quite forgotten the existence of Chotty Bedell. But the outlaw, unable to solve the mystery of cliff-climbing, made a pretense of leaving. With his own burro and effects cached in a neighboring gulch, he crept back to watch and wait. Sooner or later that damn' little stiff would have to come down. When that event occurred, Chotty would be waiting, like a pudgy, evil spider on the edge of his stretched web.

And in the course of two days' time Chotty Bedell was right. The quarters up there in the narrow treasure cave were none too good. Max Kurtt withstood them and the heat of the fire through two full days. Looking down he saw the water butt and the remnants of his outfit. Apparently Chotty Bedell, fearing Bill Halliday's stern retribution, had hesitated to molest anything this time, and had gone away. Max heaved a sigh of infinite relief, for he dreaded the sinister bully with all his heart. Using the rope with which he had climbed—and which, fastened only by a hempen cord hard to discern from the ground, and a rock for weight, had been thrown over the upward eight feet, while Max was in the cave—little Max first lowered some bulging, heavy sacks, and then came down slowly and painfully, his feet against the rock and every sinew strained.

He was tired. As he neared the ground he almost slipped, but held, grinning at the knowledge that now he had prepared a riddle which none of the curious, nosey ones at Ajo or beyond could solve out of hand.

He lowered himself another foot, another—and fell into the waiting arms of the one man on earth whom he feared, Chotty Bedell!

VIII

THE work was done with savage dispatch. Straining Max's arms behind his back until the joints cracked, Chotty lashed the wrists cruelly, then tied the ankles in a way which soon would stop the circulation. He uttered no articulate words, but from his thick lips issued smackings and grunts of animal satisfaction. All he wanted was time to gloat over his prey, to think, and drink tequila. Then a program of hellishness sufficient even to sate his burning desire for vengeance would formulate in the slant roofed, cunning brain. This was one of the two men he thirsted to destroy.

Flinging the fright stiffened scientist aside as he might have tossed a fagot, Chotty made certain first of all that he was alone for all of the horizon bounded desert miles. This time no dude tenderfoot would come to interrupt his enjoyment or his takings. Then, totally disregarding the first stammered whispers Max was able to enunciate, Chotty pounced upon the boxes and lashed sacks—the latter eleven in number. These were not the buckskin and canvas containers which the scientist had brought from the railroad; and they were not the four mysterious cases, though the bags and the cases were there, the latter filled with heavy jars that held colored liquids and crystalline substances, the Latin names on the labels of which looked like queer, outlandish swear words to him.

He had no use for the boxes, but the sacks were another proposition. When first he bent to lift one, a cry of greed and exultation sped his lips. The little, cubical sack, stuffed and bulging through its sides of nine ounce duck, weighed at least ninety or one hundred pounds, perhaps more! He could lift it all right with one arm, and did, though not without red lights of anticipation starting to his small eyes, and the enormous arm and shoulder muscles bulging with the strain. How little Max had managed to lower it from the cliff, was inexplicable.

"Gold!" shouted Chotty in a sudden frenzy of exultation. He danced three steps lumberingly, weighted down by the sack. "Gold!" This hoarsely. Then suddenly he squatted, jerking out his jackknife and pulling at the single big blade with the blackened snags of teeth. He failed to see a faint, derisive smile which permeated the drawn lines of suffering on Max's face.

The apish outlaw cut the strings and tore at the neat folds with hands that shook with excitement. He peered, blinked, plunged in one hand—and came up with a broad fistful of grayish black stuff resembling nothing more than the screenings of coke! Some of the stuff was sooty black, but there were enough gray particles and slaglike lumps of the same color, so that the general tinge was several shades lighter than a dead black.

"*Arrh!*" snarled Chotty Bedell, stricken by an awful disappointment. "What t'hell? What's this-here, huh? Hey *you!*" He half rose from his haunches, grimacing, threatening, his hamlike fists clenched, one about the valueless dirt he had found where he expected the dull glint of nuggets and dust of gold.

"That's—that's——" Max cleared his throat and seemed to be trying to answer. In truth he was sparring for something, the name of some substance which would sound plausible. Something—*anything*——!

"Yeah, *what?* Talk quick, or I'll——"

Max saw him leap upright, and terror sped the little man's tongue. "It's—I think it's hydrogen peroxide—*nearly pure ore!* Immensely valuable deposit. The treasure of Itimixtl! At New York it's worth about a hundred dollars a pound, I think. I know jewelers who use it—oh, all the time! If I could get it back there—w-with you for my partner, I think we both would make a lot of money."

"Mph!" Chotty's enthusiasm had waned suddenly. He frowned suspiciously at his bound prisoner. "I never seen nothin' like it," he growled. "It's heavy like gold. What——"

"Yes, and it's valuable, too!" broke in Max, whose brain just now had envisioned the slightest of possibilities for escape. "Of course it isn't gold, or anything like that, and it can't be sold at a bank—only jewelers and big chemical jobbing firms handle it—but because of its—ah—extreme rarity a man who knows the ropes might get as much as ten thousand dollars. *I* could!" Max, tense, and well aware that he was playing a bobtailed flush against a strong hand, and for a stake that was his life, resolutely thrust from his voice all the quivering and terror which had invaded the sensitive body.

"Uh!" growled Chotty. He still was under the sting of disappointment. Still, ten thousand dollars! That was more money than he ever had owned at one time. If these sacks had held a thousand pounds of ninety per cent. gold, now, the thing would be different. Chotty knew just how to run gold out of Mexico, sneak it into one of the many border back doors at this time practically unpoliced, and sell it through the teller's grill of a national bank.

But then, even if this was not gold, it was stuff that was worth a lot. Ten thousand simoleons, five hundred great big yellow boys, more than he could carry in a half dozen money belts, would put him on easy street for life! Even in this instant, as his brain was envisioning some plan for duping the little man into telling him the methods of marketing the lesser treasure, Chotty did not dream of letting Max Kurtt escape. The situation called for a little more guile than usual, that was all. His vengeance might be delayed a few hours, no more.

"I getcha," he said slowly, deserting the one sack and going over, prodding each of the other ten in turn. "If I took this stuff in, I'd probably get stuck, huh? Mebbe couldn't get rid of it?"

"You'd be left with it on your hands!" stated Max with conviction. "I am a geologist and chemist, and I am known. I'd get the very best price, perhaps even as much as twelve or thirteen thousand!"

"Yuh don't say!" Chotty's tone suddenly had become unctuous. "Well, mebbe I kin forget lots of things, if it's thataway—and you'll go halvers. Is that O. K.?"

"Absolutely!" breathed Max Kurtt fervently. "You come back with me, we'll sell the—er—ore, and I'll give you a full half! Honestly I will. You'll get from five to seven thousand dollars!"

One side of the sagging mouth twitched sneeringly, but Chotty managed something

of a smile. "Cracked down!" he bellowed heartily, and yanked open his knife. He strode to the captive, and though Max shivered, half expecting the blade in his flesh, Chotty cut the bonds with two jerking sweeps, and then lifted Max to his feet.

"And now, little-feller-pardner," he said with a noisy, forced joviality. "You an' me'll run this stuff into the old U. S., so as the Greasers won't take it away from us. And on the way—guess we'll have to make five-six trips with only one burro to carry—yuh can tell me all about how a city guy'd go about sellin' the stuff."

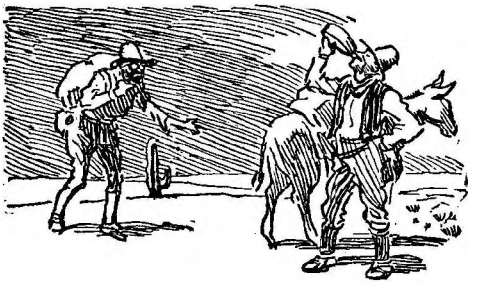
Chotty's purpose became glaringly apparent in a few minutes thereafter, but Max was helpless. He still had a pint whisky flask full of water on his hip—all that had been left of the water he had taken to the high cave—but was unarmed. Chotty took charge of all the provisions, and forced Max to make a cache of stones to protect those which would be left behind on the first trip northward. Sudden flight into the desert could avail Max nothing.

From the start, when a pair of the heavy sacks—too much of a load for any burro to carry handily—were loaded on, and Max was weighted down with all the non-essentials of camp equipment while Chotty took care of the canteens and food, it was a barely disguised inquisition. Chotty intended to find out minute details concerning the method of marketing the valuable ore, "hydrogen peroxide," for he intended to do that marketing himself. While Max was valuable to him as a pack animal, and until that necessary information was in the outlaw's possession, Max would live. That is, possibly he would live; that depended. On the pretext that he did not trust the scientist at all, Chotty demanded the imaginative details of the selling, from Max. And, little by little, despite the latter's squirmings and evasions, desperate now, got an imaginative version of them. Even before they departed this edge of Quitobaquita, Max knew his fate was sealed.

But he could not envision in cold blood the crafty, devilish scheme which had come to the other. Chotty successively, while he drank two thirds of his lone remaining bottle of liquor, had thought of roasting Max's feet in a slow fire, slicing him to bits, and even the quicker and more merciful process of strangulation. But a better thought, one bound to give all the excitement and anticipation of a delayed game, occurred. Chotty had remembered the placard and the six grinning skulls set near the beautiful-seeming water hole of Six Bones!

From that moment on the searing, thirsty northward trip, he saw to it that Max got no water from the canteens and marched ahead, stricken by the full enmity of the broiling sun. No water now, no water for twenty miles of day travel!

Chotty grinned to himself as he drank



from the gurgling canteen. How good that gushing spring of deadly quality would look to this little man he hated!

"We gotta keep what water we got, till we get back to the keg," he stated, when six miles had passed. And grinned again at Max's woebegone face. "Yuh kin fill up, though, at the spring ahead. There's where we'll cache this stuff. It's inside the U. S. line, and we kin come down after it with six-seven reg'lar mules what kin carry somep'n. Great water at the spring ahead, cool and sweet like sody! Once yuh try it yuh'll never want no other, like the travelin' show medicos say!"

All at once a grimace of horror contorted the face of Maxwell Kurtt. He had remembered something Bill Halliday had told him—good, mistaken old Bill! The prospector had been talking about the country roundabout, and had warned especially concerning this enticing water hole on the northward route! *Arsenic!*

But Max gave no further outward sign. It was noticeable, however, that in spite of the terrific thirst which obsessed him that day, he made no move to broach the pint bottle on his hip.

CHOTTY'S banter, hellish when one knew the key, went on unceasingly. He drank at will from the canteens, seeming to take pleasure, as indeed was the case, in the scientist's drawn and anguished countenance.

For some reason a strange light of courage and desperation had come into the little man's washed out eyes. Physically he dreaded this brute of a companion far more than he feared death. So far as

Chotty's evident plan was concerned no flaw appeared. But, in heaven's name, was there no way out? It seemed not. Yet, on the long, long trail, weighted with his packs and beaten by what seemed a shaft of white hot steel from the heavens, the face of Maxwell Kurtt took on a queer expression of abstraction, of preoccupation. It might have been that he forgot the taunts and half-veiled innuendoes of the outlaw, and even the discomfort of thirst and heat, for Kurtt could concentrate.

At any rate, an odd, uncompromising half smile twisted his blackening lips—just once. It was strange enough, but immediately thereafter, though he had not seemed to notice his thirst before, he began pleading for water. Chotty taunted with renewed enjoyment. He drank, even more than the allotment he had made for this journey, just to see that little man writhe.

And Max satisfied all expectations. He seemed to cast aside restraints, and begged. He seemed not to understand at all the hideous trap being prepared for him. He went down on his knees, emitting piteous cries, and Chotty cuffed him erect, cursing. Thereafter, staggering more and more—and little of *this* on Max's part had to be feigned!—the two and the overloaded burro covered the last hours of travel beneath a westering sun.

Within sight of the grotesque barrel cacti which formed a sparse line of outposts about Six Bones, Chotty pointed. He began again an extolment of the virtues of that bubbling, crystal cold water for which his "pardner" had waited so long.

But he was deserted suddenly. Max, a dry, horrid sound of water appetite and longing breaking from his caked throat, stumbled into a run. Once he fell headlong, whimpering the extremity of his thirst, but got up, paying no attention to Chotty's commands to stop, and even ignoring a bullet which came dusting by his feet. Water was ahead!

Well, Chotty himself could not desert the burro here, lest the animal follow Max's example; Chotty needed the burro. He made the beast hasten to its plodding limit, however, and kept his eyes fastened upon Max.

The scientist apparently was a creature of but one idea. Stumbling, mouthing queer, dry sounds of extremity, he went straight for the scintillating green pool there at the base of the honeycombed rocks. He splashed through the encircling, white-crusted greenish slime which would have warned any true desert rat, and threw himself headlong, burying his face in the chill water! His shoulders worked convulsively, as if in the effort of swallowing great draughts. Chotty came. For an instant he stopped, jerking out his six-gun. A frown creased his brows. For a second he even contemplated a murder of mercy.

Then with a short, ugly laugh he slapped back the weapon into its holster. None of that pity stuff; this was going to be *good!*

It was, just that. Max came up to his knees, then tottering to his feet. He was breathing great gulps. "Fine—stuff!" he gasped, and then wiped his lips with the back of his sleeve. "I don't know that I ever enjoyed——"

Of a sudden he stopped. A blank expression, then a spasm of pain contorted his drawn countenance. "My gracious!" he gasped. "Maybe I drank too much—ahh!—of a sudden. Bill—*Owww!*"

The last was a piercing howl. He clasped both hands to his stomach, ran a few paces, howled again and again as if in the most terrible agony, and then fell squirming.

Chotty Bedell laughed long and hoarsely, reaching deliberately for the canteen at his hip. He quaffed in deep measure, grinning.

IX

DURING the next few hours much happened which is pertinent to the enigma of Six Bones, and of the black treasure. Bill Halliday, convinced that he had wasted valuable months of his time, had reached Ajo. There, with less than two ounces of dust to his credit, he sold Jethro Jason, the burro, and all the rest of his equipment except his cartridge belt and six-guns, at a bargain. He went in for a drink. At the saloon bar a weak-mouthed, broken down desert rat wobbled up to him. Bill disgustedly signed for the barkeep to set up another whisky. Why try to save pennies?

This was not all the bar-fly seemed to want, however. Tremblingly he inquired Bill's name, the while thumbing out an old wallet containing a few photographs, some dirtied papers—and a letter. The letter was addressed to Bill. He recognized Bill from some past visit.

Wonderingly Bill Halliday tore it open, glanced at the signature, and then signaled for the barkeep to leave the half emptied whisky bottle in front of this strange messenger. Freckie Pinkham took advantage of the tacit invitation.

A few seconds later a wild yell burst from the lips of Bill Halliday! He stared at the precisely written lines, and whooped again! Everyone in the saloon turned to gaze. All saw a man transformed. No longer a dejected, dusty prospector, returned with nothing to show for his greatest hopes, Bill had torn off his sombrero and was dancing a wild fandango of joy, and whooping as often as he could get breath for more noise!

Of a sudden he crouched, then leapt upward mightily. His boots landed full upon the scratched cherry bar. *"Yowww-eeee!"* he yelled, and yanked out the slim poke which represented his whole summer of striving. Planking this down on the bar he made circling, inarticulate invitations with his arms, and grabbed up the whisky bottle, but not to drink. Bending, seizing dazed and shaky Freckie Pinkham by the latter's thin locks, he treated that scandalized but unresisting oldster to a generous and whole-souled whisky shampoo.

"What is it? Struck gold?" yelled a snoop-eyed faro dealer who had lip-licking memories of Goldfield.

A glimmer of sense flashed through Bill's delight. "No!" he bellowed in return. *"My stepmother's got the mumps!"*

AT THAT exact moment Chotty Bedell was fumbling about the convulsive body of his "pardner," as the little man lay stretched on the sand. Max had some money, a trifle over two hundred dollars, and that went. He had a small case containing utensils such as men use in the care of their finger nails; with a curse of disgust Chotty tossed this into the arsenic spring. Every item from the clothes that could be used went into Chotty's voluminous pockets.

The only important fact to this story which must be noted, however, was that even though Chotty emptied the handkerchief and the folded checkbook from Max's hip pockets, he saw nothing whatever of a pint flask full of water! At that moment the flask was under two inches of hurriedly scraped soil, which the little man, lying with his back to Chotty, had barely found time to scoop out while Chotty had been tantalizingly quaffing from his canteen. And Max's body lay prone atop the small mound of replaced earth.

Having completed his rifling, Chotty moved away, but continued to watch Max until presently he saw the professor's body become motionless—and stiffen. Some suddenly born superstitious fear kept Chotty from going near the body of his erstwhile partner, either then or later.

Well satisfied with his work, however, and tired, Chotty then moved back to the spot where he had tethered the still loaded burro. He unhitched his belts, then removed the animal's weighted packs. In the morning he would have to cache them in a certain hole he knew in the rocks beyond the poison spring, a regular feet-first hideout he had used once when chased too strenuously by a pair of deputies.

For now there was one necessary job. Water was scarce, so Chotty chopped off a big section of a barrel cactus, and placed strips from this in front of the straining animal. They would have to do, and burros were tough. Chotty himself had drunk more water than he should have drunk, using it time and again as tantalization. Now he would be forced to go carefully. Not so much was left in that keg back at Quitobaquita, considering the number of trips that would be necessary before the valuable "hydrogen peroxide ore" was transferred safely to United States soil.

Chotty made camp, but because of water lack did not bother with supper. He finished the last two drinks of his tequila, and then rolled in a single greasy blanket. Within five minutes, completely at peace with accomplishment and conscience, he snored in raucous cadence.

Next morning with the sun, cold sober for the first time in weeks, he frowned over at the body of Max Kurtt, and then looked at it no more. He was hungry, and thirsty. He drank no more than the single swallow remaining in one canteen, however, and ate a tin of beans.

Then, chewing on a strip of the water bearing cactus to assuage a greater thirst, he got up and away, ahead of the sun at its broiling power. He had cached the sacks and was four miles to the south before he discovered that the second canteen, which he supposed to hold two full quarts untouched, *barely sloshed* when he shook it! A hurried examination disclosed that it held now less than one pint!

But Chotty merely cursed his own over-

anxiety to tempt the four-eyed fool the arsenic spring had killed. Probably he had reached for the wrong canteen. He did not suspect for a moment that any lips but his own had touched that felt covered receptacle. Anyway, the discrepancy did not matter much. That keg down there had four-five gallons of water remaining. Coming back, he'd take one of the sacks himself, and that way save some of the trips.

X

MAX'S ears had served him well during the thirsty time he had lain doggo. He knew within a yard the spot where Chotty had hidden the sacks of "hydrogen peroxide," and found it quickly. The outlaw's cache showed up easily to the eyes of one who knew approximately where to look. At a four foot height there was an irregular opening leading backward and downward. A chunk of paper thin shale fitted that aperture fairly well, but came away at the first pull.

Max climbed in. His reaching arms found the sacks without difficulty, and also found something else, as it seemed, for instead of backing out of the nearly horizontal shaft, he inched inward! His feet scruffed a little, then disappeared!

Ten minutes, twenty, a half hour passed. Then he crawled out, *head first,* and with a smile upon his lips! For a moment after reaching the ground he dusted his garments. Then he took the slightest of swallows from his pint bottle—he really did not need any more water just then, but this was something in the nature of a toast of rejoicing—and gazed up at the sinister exhibit of skulls and the plain warning placard above, the stop, look, desist from drinking sign which the Geological Survey had posted at this rendezvous of death.

"Seven *skulls! Seven Bones!*" he breathed sibilantly, but said nothing more to explain this cryptic comment—or was it prophecy? Thus far only six of the grinning, jawless relics rested upon the ledge.

There were more about, however. Max passed up the first two ancient, shattered relics he came across, and went on in a wider circling to the far side of the hellish spring. Out there he found a whole skeleton, one to which tatters of cloth still clung. The coyotes had disarticulated some of the joints, yet with his scientist's skill the rearranging in an attitude would be simple. "Larger skull than mine," he commented aloud. "Chotty never will see the difference, though."

First dropping to his knees and offering a single sentence of prayer for this unknown one who had died so terribly, Max lifted the bones in small armfuls and carried them back to the spot where he had lain with his thirsty mouth pressed against the ground.

When all the whitened framework had been transported, he took off his own shoes, his trousers and his shirt, and carefully ripped them in a way that resembled the tearing of sharp eager teeth. Then he left them with the pitiable, disarranged bones. That story was for the eyes of his lying partner, Chotty Bedell. Carefully at the last, obeying a new knowledge of the desert places, Max smoothed and dusted over his own knee and hand prints.

And now to exist until the outlaw gunman came again! Max ran over to the same barrel cactus which Chotty had chopped in half for the use of his burro. The pulp had not hardened too much. Max delved, and found the juicy, water-bearing stuff just what he needed. Perhaps the rasping roughage of it contained no real nourishment, yet it would enable him to stave off the imediate pangs of hunger and thirst until Chotty came again. And after this next visitation Max either would be alive and alone, or dead and uncaring. He had not been able to plan a whole campaign while lying there immobile, but now a true reprisal was clear in his mind.

ONCE started out of Ajo, as a result of the letter he had received, Bill Halliday lost little time on the way.

When at last he tromped into Six Bones and threw down his canteens and pack, he made direct for one of the cacti. He knew better than to use his precious store of water when anything else was available. His knife was drawn. He saw that one of the barrel stemmed giants had been cut not long since, so he went to it. He was peering toward the juicy pith of the center, a part scooped out by an eager hand, when of a sudden he straightened with a jerk. A cold round circle seemed to press into the small of his back!

Such is the power of ready imagination.

Actually it was the stiffened forefinger of Max Kurtt.

"Put 'em up!" commanded a husky voice, one which nevertheless held a quaver of what inexplicably seemed to be joy.

Bill looked as far as he dared from the corners of his eyes, but failed to see. He obeyed without hesitation.

"Put 'em *down!*" came the next curious command.

"Eh?" But Bill obeyed, wondering.

"Put 'er *there!*"

With this a thin hand grabbed at the prospector's shoulder and spun him about. Facing Bill, grinning, extending a hand consisting of little more than small bones and skin for a shake of comradeship, was a thinned, grotesque caricature of the little man, Maxwell Kurtt, with whom Bill had sought the treasure of Itimixtl!

"You!" breathed Bill in gladness and infinite relief. "Gosh, *compadre,* I thought it was that chunky monkey, Chotty Bedell. Fella, c'mere!" He seized the frail little man by the shoulders. "I got your letter —about the treasure. *Is it so?"*

"It is so, my friend. So—so—so—so—SO!" Max grinned, delighted beyond measure at what he saw in the face of the younger man.

"YOWWWWEEEE!" Bill's yell of delight echoed and re-echoed, but none beside Max heard it. "Well, pardner, I'm sure rooting for gold plated test tubes in that research laboratory of yours!"

"Bill," chuckled Max, who knew far better than Bill could guess, the extent of the treasure represented by the sacks of "hydrogen peroxide," "to you belongs fifty per cent. of the treasure. Yet it is in my mind that a full forty per cent. of that still is to be earned! Will you listen?"

"Dr. Kurtt," responded Bill Halliday, "according to what your letter hinted, I'm yours. What is it; arson? murder?"

The little man did not respond to that lightness of tone. In the searing forge of that terrible trip northward something had been taken from him, and possibly it was his Germanic ability to sustain a joke. Now his eyes seemed suddenly to pale almost to whiteness. They flashed, and his body became rigid.

"Eh, what—I think I'm in wrong, my friend!" said Bill, with a catch of breath. "What is it? Has that skunk Chotty Bedell been bothering you again?"

"Come here," bade Max. He led the way to the pathetic heap of bones near the spring. "You had not noticed how I was clad?"

"Why—er—no, I hadn't. Gosh! You're going kind of light! What——"

"There lies Dr. Maxwell Kurtt," said the other, with a simple yet somehow dramatic gesture. "He was murdered by Chotty Bedell. And, if I mistake not, tomorrow evening will see Chotty back here again. Come, I shall show you our task!"

XI

CHOTTY was superstitious enough. He wore what decades since had become a mummified bag about his neck suspended by a thong long since black from sweat and dirt. The bag was made from the cheek cuticle of a stillborn Apache girl babe. The contents were unknown even to the wearer; only the old medicine man who taught Geronimo his wiles and the powers of chieftainship, could have told what weird gleanings went into that fetich made to ward off perils of the musket ball, the arrow and the spear.

Chotty gave no thought to the pendent bag, now. He wished heartily that he had not left those first bags of ore at the poison spring. Something indefinite—though not a fear of that sprawled body left where it had fallen—urged him not to return to Six Bones.

It was a genuine hunch, an intuition—let anyone call it as he wills. Desert wanderers feel it strongly and quite often. Most pay some attention to it, though scoffing as they obey. It seldom is wrong. It may be an occult sense of self preservation such as many of the large carnivori and the vultures possess. At any rate, Chotty Bedell was uneasy; yet he went forward. Perhaps he attributed the state of nerves to the fact that he was without liquor, and faced a long dry spell while he brought up the sacks of "hydrogen peroxide" to their cache on the United States side of the line.

"I wish t'God at first I'd gone the other way!" he exclaimed aloud. "But what t'hell? There ain't a thing—unless I see that there Bill Halliday——" And at the subconscious suggestion his stubby right gun hand flashed to the notched butt of a Colt. The next time he met Bill Halliday in the desert there would be no parley, no monkey business. Chotty would shoot on sight, and to kill.

In spite of everything, he went on toward the poison spring. He had cut himself down to a minimum of water this time, and was carrying one of the heavily loaded sacks, in addition to the pair on the back of his tired burro.

When he saw ahead the stubby thumbs

of the barrel cacti which surrounded the spring, however, a croak of rejoicing sounded in his throat. Already he had drunk more than half his water allowance. He would make up for that by subsisting on the cactus, though. It would do for him at a pinch as well as for the animal.

Men and beasts that can do so avoid this spot with reason. At first sight that seems queer, for on the northernmost declivities of the honeycombed, sun-baked Sierra Quitobaquita, Six Bones appears a green oasis in a hell of reds, yellows and alkaline white. To the east is the thirsty plain of La Abra. Six shots from a rifle, such as Chotty Bedell carried, would take one from this fag end of Pima County, Arizona, into Mexico. To the west and to the south, arise the craggy nakedness of Quitobaquita.

A bubbling spring, sufficient water to start the first trickle of a Mississippi or a Red River if brought to light in other soil, splashes and gurgles down a face of worn granite. The granite is stained curiously. This water, chill as a breath from the vaulted caves from which it issues, looks innocent and inviting enough as it splashes away nine feet, forming a brimming, two-yard wide pool that spills a steady rivulet into the absorbing alkali beyond.

Yet around this pool for a radius of many yards, are skeletons and old bone fragments near to dust, half dust. The spine of a coyote. Two heaps of flaking, disordered things that once were the rib frameworks of steers wandered far from the range.

On a shelf of granite, white topped with sifted alkali, just to the north of the spring, on this evening rested a pair of grim warnings. High above the main exhibit, angled down so that all coming to the spring might read, was the terrible placard of the survey. "DANGER—DEATH! THIS IS AN ARSENIC SPRING! DO NOT DRINK! POISON WATER!" And just below that sign, on the shelf within tiptoe reach of a man on the ground, were the six grim relics which had given the place of death its name with the Government cartographers. Six Bones!

They were human skulls, of course. Rather pathetic, lonely, downward-ogling things, for not one had a lower jaw or teeth. Each represented a desert tragedy, as none of the original six presumably had come with a tillicum. At least, no two skulls had been found together. Men died thus in the sun madness and arsenic agony, staggering alone. Some perhaps had read the sign but did not care. Most, without doubt, had sighted the water, or their mounts had smelled it, and had come madly athirst. Their terrible fate was the same as that of the many desert animals who had left the arches of their ribs half in the sand for rods about the sinister lure. Animals wounded or aged and unable to struggle further against the wiles of thirst.

Thirst. Arsenic in the bubbling water. Six morosely staring skulls upon a rock shelf below a placard. White sifted mesquite, scrubby piñon and gaunt cactus. These were the lures of the shunned oasis, Six Bones!

CHOTTY BEDELL came with one heavily loaded burro; came from a toilsome circuit of the Quitobaquitas which extended leagues into the plain La Abra, and on which baking heat is the only unflinching constant, the only thing not called queer.

Chotty snickered dryly and without more than a sniffing sound as he saw the water. He took precaution as usual that the burro did not reach it; but that was the only real care he gave the animal. True, as before, he sliced down a barrel cactus and chopped long, white slices of the water-bearing pulp for the beast, which chewed resignedly, slaking its thirst in small part. It knew from past trips that no water was to be expected until it came to Le Clare's Well or the town of Ajo, many miles to the north.

The man sloshed the contents of his one remaining canteen. He listened. Three quarters full. Well, that was enough, though not quite as much as he figured to have by the time he reached Six Bones. Enough to make out, though, particularly since the burro would be freed from the heavy weight it had been forced to carry.

Chotty lifted off the heavy sacks one at a time. He carried the three sacks to the

cache and stowed them away. On the way back, he stopped to look at the half dozen morose and ominous relics facing him from the rock shelf.

"What d'yuh think now, old timers?" he queried with rasping facetiousness, exposing his snaggled, stained teeth in a tobacco juice grin.

Chotty found something of humor in regarding these skulls, the last of these which he meant to replace, however. He paid no more attention to the other five mementos than he gave to the human coyote and vulture bones which fringed the poison spring; but skull number six meant something to his shrewd low mentality.

For a moment he sank to a seat made in the rock shade. He unhitched the big canteen from his hip, sloshed it gaugingly, then unscrewed the top. A short swallow. Ah! He held the ounce of liquid in his parched mouth, rinsed it back and forth between his broken teeth, enjoyed it to the full. Soon there would be no need of such parsimony. Instead of water he would drink good, heavy dark beer—champagne, even, if he wanted it!

Well, ten thou wasn't a real *big* fortune, at that. Beer would be good enough for Chotty as an everyday drink, however. Big, long, cool-sweating porcelain steins of it like Max used to describe. Sharp and yet smooth, a real drink. Plenty of high proof, aged liquors, too; none of this hogwash he got in Sediente and Ajo. Absently his left hand strayed toward the felt-covered canteen, strayed—and circled without touching anything. Circled, suddenly grabbed. It met *vacancy!*

He looked about sharply. He stared, goggled unbelievingly. He had leaned it against the rock face no more than a yard away. *The canteen was gone!*

There was no doubt about it. Chotty staggered erect. He stared. After a full minute his gaze fastened upon a perfectly unresponsive jutting of the rock. Then, inch by inch, his horror stricken eyes raised to the skull, to number six, the skull he meant to replace with that of Max which was lying out there. Did the damned thing grin? Did it *know* what had happened?

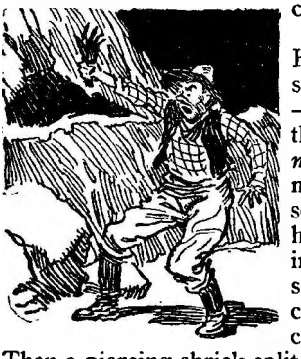
For minutes he stared, leapt about, scanned the stretches of sifted white for the footprints of one who had come and gone. *There were no footprints!* No one had come or left. Chotty and the burro were alone; not even the vegetation, sparse as it was, could have harbored as much as a lizard when he finished searching!

"A pack rat! The damn' thief!" he muttered in a dry, anguished croak. But he knew the habits of these rodents too well. For every article stolen they invariably left something in exchange—always a bone, a chip, *something!* The spot where the indentation of his canteen showed was bare. *The canteen simply had vanished!*

Or had he picked it up absentmindedly, and done something else with it? The thought seared across Chotty's mind, and suddenly he laughed. The cache! Somehow he had thrust the canteen in among one of the treasure sacks when he had put them away. Darn' fool! Still, it was almost certain. Any alternative was crazy to consider. There weren't any such things as spooks. A dead man was *dead!* His skull and bleaching skeleton out there couldn't even see or hear the taunts Chotty had been throwing out toward the immensity of the desert for the last weeks!

Quickly, almost feverishly, the broad, bent-shouldered man ran to the walled mouth of the niche ordinarily approached with such excessive care. He fumbled with fingers that scratched at the outcropping of shale of the sort which was hollowed for the honeycombed caves beneath the granite of Quitobaquita. He jerked. The paper thin shell of rock came away, small fragments dropping with a rattle of brittleness.

Before him loomed the shallow hole of the cache, an irregular tunnel not more than twelve feet deep and approximately large enough for a full grown desert wolf to enter upright and crawl downward. It was dark there. Chotty, shaking now with an anxiety his dim cunning could not have interpreted, with fine cold beads of perspiration on a brow long baked by the desert sun, thrust in a hand, clutching for the last sack he had thrust into the cache. Clutching, circling in the dark. He did not stop to make a light, deeming none necessary.



It was not. His hand struck something—something cool, that *moved*! His mouth opening soundlessly as his eyes widened in a sudden, stark terror, he closed down a convulsive grip. Then a piercing shriek split the cynical desert silence. He leapt backward, fell to his

shoulders. He squirmed, reached his knees. A—h-h-h-*a-w-w!*" The breath left his lungs in a sheer, indescribable gibbering of undiluted terror. Grasped crushingly in his paw were the dried, brown-tendoned bones of a skeleton's hand and wrist!

Not in vain had Chotty Bedell spent more than two decades in the desert, fruitless decades, in which the acme of accomplishment was this despoiling of that shriveled, bald-tufted, queer little rock-cracking sharp who had not even known enough to pack a gun. Now, however, with a staring panic of things he only half believed surging his heart at double beat against the walls of alkali salted arteries, Chotty still kept his senses to a degree. He was stricken to the marrow with cold, unanalyzable fear. Yet one gun was out, wavering to take in a huge sector of the unresponsive landscape, ready to throw down with iron precision, nevertheless, did anything move.

He had backed into the spines of one of the remaining barrel cactuses, the mute friends of the thirsty who came to the supposed spring, friends that for most part went unrecognized by those desperate ones or tenderfeet who fell victim to the poison water.

There Chotty Bedell was at bay; but nothing happened. Even the single black speck which was a buzzard sailing high in the darkling sky came no nearer. Wise, content to wait, perchance. The bird of ghoulish prescience.

The scare ebbed slowly from Chotty's mind and limbs. His wide eyes kept a focus, half hypnotized, upon that black blotch which was the entrance to his stolen treasure horde. All the sacks were there. Also there was a skeleton. *Whose* skeleton? Through his mind only one thought could get right of way. In the weeks now past he had clasped hands with one man whose bones were thin—like those that lay trampled in the alkali. Max!

But Max, the partner, was dead, and his bones lay out there, scattered by the winged and quiet footed scavengers!

Time ebbed. Chotty had planned to wait, to rest in the shade. He had not thought to crouch against a cactus, gun in hand, unshaded even at sunset, staring at the sunburned rock as if he expected it to belch forth an army of malignant specters. He was thirsty now. His mouth and throat caught and grated as he tried to swallow. He suddenly remembered and shut his broad mouth through which he had been breathing. A suicidal failing that, one that a desert man such as Chotty ought never to allow; for always at the elbow of those who venture into or through the wastes is the gaunt, greedy hellion of thirst, waiting, sneering. What man of the alkali has not lived to see the day when the thirst devil has come upon him, altering deep laid plans, forcing a quick retreat or a flight, or worse?

Simply nothing at all happened. Chotty and his burro alone were there, night fell, and no one else was within sight, or appeared. After an hour Chotty allowed the gun to drop from his aching wrist. He sheathed it. Still, as the light failed, shifting position to take a final look behind, a fleeting look as had been all the others, he did not go nearer the gaping black irregularity from which he had plucked the skeleton hand.

There wasn't any sense in acting like a damn' fool, even if he wasn't afeared. That canteen——A-course the skeleton just *somehow* had been in the niche, and he hadn't seen it. A spooky thing, a-course, but nothing much if it had been out in plain sight at the poison spring. Lots of them around.

Chotty talked aloud in a dry, grating voice. He was making preparations now for the long trip across the night stretches of alkali; and he was doing the job well, hacking down the last two of the cacti, stripping off pieces to chew, to assuage his brain, swollen tongue and throat. Even with the half-dry stuff to yield him a modicum of water, he would be a thirsty man by the time he reached the destination, which would be elsewhere, this time than the cache back on the other side of Quitobaquita. But he *would* reach it! With unburdened burro which he would ride a while before he slew it, he would win across at least eight or ten miles. The rest on foot. He had done more than this before. He would make it. The treasure?

Well, he had taken that with something of a grain of salt, anyway. After a time, if his small sample proved up to be anything, he would come back. Not too soon, though. Nobody came to Six Bones! His caches here and back around the other side of Quitobaquita were almost as safe as if he had closed the thin shale cover to the niche and had never seen the down-swinging rope of Maxwell Kurtt. Anyway, if this cache was emptied when his buyer came to delve—for Chotty never would summon nerve to thrust his hand inside that blackness again—it probably would be small loss.

Dirty, gray-black stuff like slag; that's all it seemed to be! Chotty knew just enough to trust to some extent his chemist partner's enthusiasm, and to distrust his own scoffing. The stuff was *almost* heavy enough to be gold, but it certainly was *not* gold, or silver, or any other rich natural ore that Chotty recognized. Max, whose secrets the old map and the treasure had been in the beginning, never had explained.

But night was here. Chotty shivered. For the first time in some years he glanced about him fearfully, and then touched the bag which dangled above his breast bone. "I ain't scared. I ain't scared!" he assured himself in a mounting voice. But he was, and for no tangible reason beyond those which exuded from intuition or from conscience, two sources which may be the same. He had seen the tattered fragments of cloth, and the scattered bones which lay upon the spot where his partner had died of the arsenic poison. In daylight these did not now mean much more than a remembered satisfaction to Chotty. At night—well, he did not care to camp too near. Chewing on the watery cactus strips, lapping at his wrists when the juice ran down, he mumbled scaredly back to his blankets. Before seeking out the wherewithal for a fire and his supper, which he suddenly remembered, he gave one last look around. The sun had sunk, but twilight still clung on the peaks of Quitobaquita. Down here it was darkening, but up there, almost vertical from his position, the Sierra, rocky here as in several places southward, was tinged with a golden, mocking luster.

Treasure!

Chotty banished his instinctive fears. He still was nervous, even after eating the viands he prepared from Max Kurtt's stores. Perhaps the jumpiness was due to some extent to the fact that he had not possessed a drink this day. Perhaps it only was lack of coffee; a low supply of water kept Chotty from making a pot of coffee, though he yearned for it as only a confirmed desert rat can wish. This time, though, the sacks of ore must take precedence.

Chotty, still chewing on a strip of cactus, lay down and rolled in his blanket.

XII

HOURS passed. With the first gray finger of dawn stirring the murk of the zenith came that hour when nerves surrender, when outdoor men in the grip of fatigue sleep as in death. Chotty had dreamed, had tossed, had wakened in a perspiration, gripping for his six-guns. But all that was past. He snored in long, deep measure, attaining a stridence and an enthusiasm in the cadenced sounds which would have done credit to a man of God, straight from a dole of Christian charity.

Now a stealthy shadow came in the pale

light, came from nowhere, seemingly! It crept upon the recumbent man, not wasting time yet not hurrying. It reached the dark body in the blankets, felt stealthily here and there, drew forth two weapons. A few moments later it was at the packs, where it stayed a longer time. Then back through the darkness it went, inching backward like a crab, doing strange things to the surface of the ground, erasing the sign of its visitation as no true specter would have bothered to do.

"He had no other canteen!" reported Bill Halliday in a whisper. "I got all his cartridges."

FORTY minutes before the sun Chotty awoke. At first he regarded his surroundings dully, and pottered into the first details of breakfast making without as much as recalling his fears. Things were wrong, however. He could not find his canteen. Great heavens, *it was not there!*

In a rush all recurred to him. He snatched out a gun. Thereafter, even while he rushed madly hither and thither in the panic of deadly fear, he did not relinquish the weapon for an instant.

Without water he could not make coffee; and he had no more liquor. He could not eat, for that only would increase his thirst. He scarcely dared attempt the backward trip to his erstwhile partner's cache—and certainly not onward to Ajo through the burning heat of the day. Sediente now lay almost fifty miles distant.

Of course the stumps of the last cacti would yield some moisture, enough for himself, probably. The burro did not cross his thoughts any more than did the

sooty treasure, the value of which he now doubted. Probably that little shrimp had been crazy as well as foolish; had dug up some worthless rock just because of its peculiar color.

Stern and swift was the reckoning dealt out to him. Before he could touch a knife to the cactus which was to yield him a water supply for this day on which he already was consumed by a maddening thirst, a long drawn, reverberating howl sounded, apparently coming from the depths of the narrow cave in which he had cached the five bags of treasure!

The skeleton! Chotty remembered, with rising hair, the hand and wrist of bone he had plucked from that supposedly empty chamber! It——

But *It* was running the show! "He has taken my ha-a-a-and!" bewailed the horrific voice in a tone of awesome despair. "What shall I do-o-o? My right ha-a-nd!"

"Take his-s-s!" counseled a shrilled, still more terrible voice in answer. "Take both of his—and then you'll have a spa-a-are! Take his skull-l-l too-o-o! Put it up there!"

In narrative there can be no true appraisal of the fright that gripped Chotty Bedell. All his life a victim of superstitions, he listened now to vengeful voices which proceeded from the bowels of a rock—and on the scene of a murder he himself had committed! He clasped the fetich bag. His eyes fairly started from their sockets, and he drew in great gasps of the dry air, paying no attention to thirst or the future perils thereof. The spirits were after him, were planning to cut off his hands and his head! For some seconds Chotty was paralyzed, frozen to the spot.

Queer, choked sounds came from his throat. Without aiming, without even being conscious of the fact that his finger was on the trigger, he snapped the hammer of one gun. It fell with a *click*, but no shot resulted. He did not hear it or know. With a sudden, choked scream he recovered use of his leg muscles and dashed for the thirsty burro tied there beyond the cacti, yanked loose the tether, and vaulted astride.

That second a hollow *zoomp!* like the noise of a firecracker exploding inside a very large, covered can, sounded. Chotty was breathing loud, stertorously, and barely heard it. He did not need to hear, however. The faithful, overtired and thirsty animal between his shaking knees stopped, reared spasmodically upward, then dropped backward to the ground, stone dead. A red hole showed squarely between its eyes!

Chotty had not got out of the way in spite of the fact that he had not been using stirrups. The dead burro fell upon his left leg, but did no particular damage. Chotty was up, limping, in an instant. He cursed loudly, and with a break in his voice. Above everything else, above every thought for his own comfort, rose the hideous fear of that Thing concealed back there in the cave cache! The skeleton had shot at him!

"Oh Chotty! Chotty! Give me back my hand!"

The beseeching, eerie cry cut through the moiled fog of his consciousness. He swung about, screaming an oath. He recognized that voice!

From a shoulder of the rock, walking in stiff, somber strides, *and holding out a right sleeve from which no hand extended,* came a ghastly, stiff-haired likeness of his dead partner, Maxwell Kurtt!

That was all Chotty could stand. He tried to fire at the Thing. Both his revolvers clicked unavailingly. Then Chotty shrieked in the extremity of terror. Flinging away his guns he swung about, and dashed on shaking, palsied limbs out past the spring, beyond straight into the desert where its arid width bleaches the long slopes of the sierra.

"Very good," said Bill Halliday grimly, stepping from the fissure which had given them access to Chotty's cache from a greater cave behind. "You're an actor as well as a scientist. I hope they try you out as Banquo's ghost, sometime."

"He's still going," said Max, who had not taken his eyes from the fleeing figure of his enemy.

"Yes, and he's got a darned long way to go—in that direction," assented Bill. "A good hundred miles before he comes to water. I think, little tillicum, that we may write off Chotty Bedell's many sins as expiated! Now—" and Bill Halliday changed the subject abruptly because he detected signs of weakening in the countenance of Max—"won't you give me the lowdown on this mysterious treasure. Gosh, I'm *aching* to have a look at it. Is

it in those sacks back there in the cave?"

"Yes, part of it. Come with me," said Max. "Do you know, I kind of wish we'd let him off with his life?"

"A rattler's fangs fill up with poison overnight," responded Bill Halliday tersely. "When one tries to bite you, *squash* it!"

When the professor had pulled out and opened one of the cached sacks, Bill touched the dirty gray black stuff which Max called treasure, sifted some of it through his fingers. He looked up, not at all sure that the savagery of desert experience had not turned the brain of his little comrade. "This is worth a lot, you claim?" Bill asked doubtfully. "It sure looks like coke and slag to me. What about it, anyway?"

Max smiled. "Platinum black, my friend!" he said. "The treasure of Itimixtl was of pure platinum, carried away by the *conquistador,* Mendez. I discovered it at length, as I wrote to you. Knowing that I should have great difficulty bringing in such a treasure—over half a million dollars' worth of it, I believe——"

"Wow!" interjected Bill truly astonished, his eyes boggling down at the uninviting looking metal. "A half *million!* Impossible!"

"It's not all here yet," Kurtt hastened on to explain. "All of it I changed over into platinum black, while I was back at the place I called the Blockhouse of Stone. It will be easy to transport it across the line to this point, and then bring down a mule train for the carry to the express company. Once we have it in a laboratory again, the reclamation of the pure platinum will be child's play. We have some work to do, and a little more hardship to face, yet——" He stopped, the smile fading.

"Yet you get your research laboratory, and I—I—well, I have a chance, maybe—to—oh well, you understand!"

"I do, my friend," responded Max, offering his hand for a firm clasp. "If now I only could bring it about that Chotty would not perish out there——" He stopped to gesture at the arid waste beyond. "Then I should be perfectly happy!"

Ever to remain unknown to the pair, Max's merciful wish was granted. Late the same day four Mexicans from Sediente, temporarily fleeing the town because of a visit of the *rurales,* came upon a staggering, mumbling things out in the wastes. They recognized Chotty Bedell, but Chotty did not recognize them—and never would. Listening to him, crossing themselves as do those of some Indian blood in the presence of insanity, they cared for his wants and took him with them. A year later a dull-eyed Chotty who mumbled, and who was denied his guns of sweeping death, rinsed glasses behind Old Ramon's scarred makeshift of a bar, in Mexico.

THE INCOMPARABLE BARRY

CASE NO. 101, in the records of the court of Richard C. Barry, Sonora, California. Barry his own recorder.

"In a caze where one James Knowlton brings sute agin Jose Sanchis fer feloniously, and surreptitiously, taking, stealing, and robbing said James Knowlton, late of San Francisco: one buckskin purs or sack of gold dust of the value of $4000.

"After hearing the evidence projuced in the caze, I demand of Jose Sanchis whether he was going to plead guilty or not. Jose answered me thus, you find out. For which insolent and abominable contempt of coort I find him 3 ounces, and adjudged him guilty. I sentenced him to receive well lade on 40 lashes on his bare back, and to restore the gold dust to the Coort, and to pay the Coast of the Coort 5 ounces, which Jose not having I rooled that James Knowlton should pay. Deducted the amount (from the stolen sack) and returned the balance to James Knowlton."

SHADOW-SOULS

WHEN a West African steps from his hut of a morning he is always careful to make an offering to his shadow—a cowrie or a red feather; red because the spirits like red and the shadow is something of the spirit world. The rainbow is a net spread in the sky to lure away and trap shadow-souls, and for that reason when there is a rainbow the African will keep to his hut.

MISSING MEN

By VINCENT STARRETT

Author of "The Perfect Crime," "The Fugitive Statue," etc.

WHEN AN IMPORTANT BROKER AND AN EMINENT ACTOR MYSTERIOUSLY AND SIMULTANEOUSLY VANISHED, IT HAD THE POLICE WORRIED. WHEN ON TOP OF THAT THE BEAUTIFUL DAUGHTER OF A RETIRED BUSINESS MAN HYSTERICALLY REPORTED HER FATHER GONE WITHOUT A TRACE, IT BECAME A MATTER FOR THE FAMOUS DETECTIVE LAVENDER HIMSELF

MY FRIEND Lavender dwelt up four flights of steps, a wearisome climb unless one were in training. Only the little landings at the end of every flight kept me from perishing of thirst and fatigue on more than one ascent. So at least I told Lavender. The journey offered no difficulties to that agile young man himself. The trouble with me was that I inclined toward—well, stoutness.

"The rooms are comfortable," he would reply to my protests, "the windows afford an excellent view of an interesting corner of town, and the stairs are at once a protection and a blessing. The exercise I get in going up and down is distinctly beneficial, while four flights are sufficiently formidable to daunt bores and any but very determined clients and friends. Thus my practice is kept within reasonable bounds, my bank account is not the envy of the criminal class, and my circle of intimates does not overflow the social space at my disposal. Besides, the rooms are cheap."

The really important thing about Lavender's rooms was their convenience to transportation. Overlooking a minor business section, not too far from the Chicago Loop to be remote, the windows fronted north and west and beneath them to the north actually lay an elevated railroad station.

And Morley of the Central Detail, who patronized the "L," never found the place too far nor the steps too numerous. He was a clever young detective sergeant of the regular force, who occasionally visited Lavender—clever chiefly in that he had sense enough to come to Lavender when he was in difficulties. One morning he came up the steps in an unusually bad humor, and that is part of the story I have to tell.

I had spent the night with Lavender and we had just finished breakfast, sent up by the restauranteur on the corner, when we heard Morley's footsteps and shortly beheld his morose countenance. He gave me a patronizing nod and shook hands warmly with Lavender.

We listened to his tale of woe. It seemed this time that one Peter Vanderdonck, a picture broker of some importance, had disappeared and that Morley was at his wit's end.

"Usually," said he, "there's some sort of a clue, but in this case there isn't any thing that resembles one. I can't get started without a clue of some kind," he grumbled with pathetic profanity.

"Who reported him missing?" asked Lavender.

"His damn landlord," said Morley. "This Vanderdonck didn't send a check for his rent or something like that, so the

guy—name's Giles—sends for the police. Thinks we're bill collectors, I guess. Damn silly in my opinion. Vanderdonck's probably just gone out of town and forgotten his rent."

Lavender grinned. "Is the usual 'foul play' suspected?"

"By the landlord and the newspapers, sure!" replied Morley with heavy irony. "There's nothing to indicate it. I've been through his office. No signs of a struggle. Nothing! Just as he must have left it. Not a thing moved. He might never even have used it, for all the evidence."

"Well," smiled Lavender, "murder doesn't *always* occur in a man's office. It's conceivable that a man may be killed in the street or in his home."

"Sure," agreed the detective. "I ain't a fool. But where do I start when there ain't a clue? Nobody seems to know Vanderdonck but this Giles person, and nobody seems to know where he lives or whether he's got relatives or when he was last seen. It's just a blank wall," he ended, with more profanity.

"A blankety-blank wall, evidently," observed Lavender. "Well, Morley, I don't know what you expect me to do. I can't reach into my vest pocket and pull out the missing man. Wish I could! I'm going down town this afternoon though, and I'll look over this fellow's rooms with you if that's what you want. Give me the address, and let's say two o'clock."

He smiled and picked up a morning newspaper.

"By the way, Morley," he continued, "I hope an epidemic of disappearances is not about to begin. There are two others recorded in this morning's paper, and your case makes three."

Morley looked suspicious, as though he thought his leg was being pulled.

"I didn't notice 'em," he admitted.

"Charles Merritt is one of them. Know him? Rather well known and popular comedian. He was playing in the 'Tinfoil Revue.' He didn't show up at the theatre a few nights ago, or at least, nobody seems to have seen him. And nobody missed him until his first cue, which seems strange. When he didn't respond, of course everybody missed him. He wasn't to be found and there was some excitement before the difficulty could be straightened out. Eventually they went ahead without him. The case is several days old but the press has just got hold of it. The theatre tried to keep it quiet. A queer case, don't you think?"

"Drunk!" declared Morley without hesitation. "Who's the other fellow?"

"It's not a fellow, it's a woman," replied Lavender. "A Mrs.—Mrs.—" he referred to the paper—"Mrs. Jameson of Rogers Park. Nice little suburban widow. She went shopping yesterday morning and didn't come home."

"In a hospital somewhere," asserted Morley promptly. "Run down, unconscious, and can't tell who she is. She'll be found before night."

Lavender sighed whimsically.

"It's uncanny the way you solve these mysteries, Morley," he said. "I wish I could do it in twice the time! Well, well, I'm not trying to suggest that there is any connection between your case and these others. I'll see you at two."

He cocked an eye at me when our visitor had departed.

"The worst of it is, Lavender," I said, "he's probably right about one or both of those cases. One case *does* resemble another very closely, for the most part, and the obvious solution is often enough the correct one as you yourself told me."

"True," agreed my friend. "He may even be right about his own case. This Vanderdonck may have gone out of town very innocently, as Morley suggests. It's because it is so nearly always the expected that happens, in spite of the old maxim, that the police are on the whole a successful body of men. But, hello! Who's this?"

There had interrupted him a long ring at the doorbell.

"I hope, speaking of epidemics, that an epidemic of visitors is not about to begin," he continued. "No heavy steps this time, Gilruth, nor do they come two at a time. Light—rapid, but light. Chuck the dishes out of sight like a good fellow, Gilly. We are about to receive a woman."

"I have a feeling," said I, "that we are going to hear about another mysterious disappearance."

Lavender looked interested.

"The deuce you have! Do you know, Gilly, I also had one for a moment. But it is really too much to expect, right on the heels of Sergeant Morley."

The lady's knock fell upon the door panel.

"Nevertheless," whispered Lavender, "I am sure you are right."

He opened the door, and there entered Miss Shirley Minor.

Of course, we did not know her by sight or by instinct. We learned her name from her own lips some seconds after her ap-

pearance. We knew only in that first glance that an extraordinarily lovely young woman stood on the doorsill. Small, dark, alert. Her eyes, blue and anxious, looked from one to the other of us and settled upon Lavender. A little smile at once eager and wistful played about her lips.

Then she said, "I am Shirley Minor. May I come in?"

The name meant nothing in the world to either of us but we smiled in unison, like a vaudeville duo.

"Of course," said Lavender, and I think I added, "Please do!"

"You had a visitor," she said, "so I waited until he had gone."

We seated her near the window where she at once exploded her bombshell. It was not quite unexpected.

"Mr. Lavender," she said piteously, "my father has disappeared!"

I looked at Lavender. He was looking at Shirley Minor. He was not in the least surprised nor excited. He merely smiled encouragingly at the girl.

"Yes?" he said. "And of course you want me to assist you to find him. I shall be happy to aid, of course. Just take a fresh grip on your nerves, Miss Minor, and tell us all about it. It is our business to help."

His calm interest and his cheerful smile had the desired effect. The anxiety faded from her eyes, and in a moment she smiled back at him.

"I'm afraid you will think me foolish, for after all father may have disappeared in a very usual manner. I mean, he may have gone away for a little while without bothering to leave word. Just the same I am anxious. You see, I have been away for some time myself. Only yesterday I returned from New York where I have been for some months. Father is hardly a notable correspondent, but I did hear from him once in a while, just a note to say that he was well. He always hated to write letters. I wrote reams to him, of course. Yesterday when I returned I found my three last letters to him in the mailbox. Apparently he hadn't been home to receive them. And I hadn't heard from him before I left New York for nearly two weeks."

"Was he expecting you to return?" asked Lavender, still cheerful.

"No, he wasn't," admitted Miss Minor with an air of guilt. "You see, I was somewhat anxious about not hearing from father, but not actively alarmed. I supposed that he didn't feel like writing. But in the background of my thought there was a slight fear that perhaps he was ill. I

knew that if I wired that I was coming home and he was ill, he would wire back to stop me. That's his way, he doesn't like to be fussed over. So as I was tired of New York anyway I just thought I'd come home and surprise him."

"When did he expect you to return?"

"Well, not for another month at least, I'm afraid."

"And your mother——?"

"My mother is dead," said Miss Minor.

"I see! Your father, I fancy, is Cyril Minor? I thought so. Well, Miss Minor, you are probably alarming yourself about nothing in particular. Inasmuch as he did not expect you to return there was no reason why he should not leave town for a while, if it occurred to him. Still you probably did well to come to me. If anything has happened it is well to know about it early, isn't it? You have no idea where he might have gone, supposing him to have left town for a visit?"

"None in the world. His interests were all in Chicago, in recent years anyway; in his home and his club. Except for an old aunt up in Canada I don't believe he has a relative in the world, other than I."

"Most men have friends," said Lavender, "and if I remember your father's reputation, he had no enemies. You haven't been to the police, I suppose?"

Miss Minor had not.

"Good," nodded Lavender. "Don't bother them just now. Leave the matter in my hands for a time. Probably you'll hear from your father when your mail is forwarded from New York, but in any case don't worry. Now tell me something of your father's habits."

After considerable questioning it developed that Cyril Minor was quite a creature of habit, with a trail that ordinarily a blind man could follow. He arose late as a rule, breakfasted at home, and went for a walk. His walk led him usually to his club, the Waldron, where he lunched and read the papers. Presumably he remained at the club during most of the afternoon, and dined there. He had no office of his own, for although only forty-four years of age he had retired from business. A man of considerable wealth obviously, with wide

interests that brought him a constant and comfortable flow of money without the necessity of desk labor. In the evening he often went to the theatre, usually alone, since he was a widower, and he reached his home about eleven o'clock or between eleven and twelve. Very seldom was he later than midnight.

It was a commendable and consequently prosy record.

"There were three of your letters, I understand, that he did not receive," continued Lavender, probing for a gleam of light. "About when would the first of them have been written?"

"About a week ago. I wrote pretty often."

"So that he may have been away for a week, possibly a little less. All right, Miss Minor, I'll make the proper inquiries and report as soon as I have anything to report. And be sure to let me know if you hear of anything."

I looked at Lavender when she had gone. "Well?" I said.

"Well what?"

"The fourth disappearance!" said I. "It does look like an epidemic, doesn't it?"

He smiled. "Well, yes, superficially. Of course it's nothing of the sort. People disappear every day, I'm sure, and most of them don't get a line in the papers. This looks significant to us because of Morley's visit and because of my remarks about the two cases mentioned by the press. Miss Minor's visit so immediately followed Morley's that the temptation to find a connection is natural. Natural, but romantic," he added dryly. "Which is not to say that both cases are not serious. They may be very serious indeed, and again they may be very trifling and unimportant. At the moment I prefer not to reach conclusions."

He lighted a cigarette and lost himself in thought for a few minutes. Then, looking at the clock, he got quickly to his feet.

"Just the same, since I've undertaken this case and have promised Morley to have a look at *his* case, I must not waste time. But I'm bound to say, Gilly, that on the face of things I never knew two cases that promised less."

Even Lavender, however, was no prophet.

II

WE DREW a stiff though courteous blank at the Waldron. Without being outstandingly eager to aid us, the club staff was polite and answered what questions Lavender had to put. This was natural, for we had said nothing about Miss Minor's visit to us and the club attendants naturally wondered what our call portended. Lavender is a plausible person, however, and merely let it be known that he was anxious to get into touch with Cyril Minor, who was not to be found at his home.

Mr. Minor, it seemed, had not been seen about the club for a week. Yes, it was a bit unusual but not perhaps extraordinary. There was no mail waiting for him. He received very little mail at the club, however. None of his particular friends were in, at the moment. Perhaps Mr. Minor himself would be back before long. Who was he to be told had called?

As this latter suggestion was something more than a possibility Lavender penned a brief note, sealed it, and left it to await the return of the missing man. In it he advised Mr. Minor to get into immediate communication with his daughter who was at home and anxious about him.

"Whether the fellow is a good citizen or a scoundrel, I suppose he's fond of his daughter," remarked Lavender as we left the building. "I would be," he added. "And now, Gilly, we are exactly where we began. I shall have to visit Miss Minor in her home apparently, and look over her father's papers if she will permit it. Meanwhile we are in the general neighborhood of Morley's difficulties, suppose we have a look at Vanderdonck's office."

"It's a long way to two o'clock," I reminded him.

"So it is," agreed Lavender, stepping out briskly. "The absence of Sergeant Morley at the scene of his failure will greatly expedite our own investigation, I am sure."

A few blocks lay between us and the building in part occupied by the picture broker's establishment. We covered them rapidly. A dingy building it was, too, when we had found it. A building occupied for the most part by second-rate lawyers and booking agents, with one creaking elevator and four flights of toilsome, reminiscent stairs. We took the elevator for choice and ascended to the third story, where in time we came upon the dismal office of Peter Vanderdonck. The name was on the door. On the door also was a fly-specked card with the legend in black, "Back in an hour." No doubt it had been used for years; it looked as if it were never taken down. No doubt also it had been put up on the occasion of Peter Vanderdonck's last farewell to his office. Had he

expected to be back in an hour, I wondered? Or had his going been voluntary and final? Or for the matter of that, had it been *involuntary* and final?

It was an old key-lock, typical of the building, and Lavender had hardly touched it with a little steel instrument that he carried when the door opened. Used to my friend and his ways, I was not at all shocked. I had watched him pick many a lock in my time, although I had never seen him pick one with greater ease.

There were two rooms within, an anteroom and an inner sanctum. The anteroom, into which we first penetrated, was soberly, even dingily, furnished with a table, a couch, three chairs, and a telephone. Some framed prints were on the walls, some books and magazines were on the table beside the telephone. It was all old but in good enough taste, and it reminded me of a small doctor's anteroom more than anything else. I wondered why a picture broker should inhabit such a dull hole.

With a comprehensive glance Lavender pushed through into the inner chamber. To our surprise it was no more handsomely furnished than the outer room had been. A great safe stood alongside one wall, with the name "Peter Vanderdonck" upon it in letters of red and gold. There was a small rolltop desk standing open, a swivel chair, a small table, and a telephone extension. In a corner, quite unscreened, was a porcelain washstand, and in the closet we found towels—three of them, one of which was dirty. There were no pictures whatever on the walls, although there were marks to show where pictures once had hung, and there were screw holes in the floor near the window where evidently something once had been clamped to the floor. All in all it was an amazing office to be occupied by a "well known picture broker." Lavender thought so, too.

Besides the closet door there was one other. It was paneled with ground glass and was obviously another entrance, or exit, giving onto the other corridor of the building. No lettering appeared on it and the door was locked. There was no key.

I looked my distaste.

"Queer place, isn't it?" Lavender answered my glance. "I don't wonder that Morley was stumped. I begin to think better of this case than I do of my own, Gilly."

He picked the lock of the door leading to the second corridor and looked out. He tried the door on its hinges.

"Works well," said he. "I suppose Vanderdonck has the key, wherever Mr. Vanderdonck is! A place with two entrances and exits is always useful."

He examined the dirty towel hanging in the closet, carrying it to the light for a better scrutiny. Then he cocked an eye at the big safe. I knew that he was seriously considering a more serious pick-lock job than the earlier ones. Finally he walked over to the washstand and examined the bowl. He touched the porcelain with his sensitive fingers, looked at his forefinger, sniffed it, and turned on the water.

"Doesn't run out very readily," he remarked at length. "A bit clogged, I fancy. And notice how the drops at the last cling to the sides of the bowl."

"Very interesting," I smiled, "but what do you gather from that?"

"I'd like to see the contents of that safe," he answered thoughtfully.

Once more putting temptation away from him, however, he turned his attention to the holes in the floor, then to the small desk. The latter yielded little. There was a quantity of stationary, letterheads and envelopes, all bearing the name of Peter Vanderdonck, and the top sheet and envelope of each pile was dusty save where a thumb had smeared the dust into a smudge.

"Morley's thumb," grunted Lavender, staccato.

In the meantime I devoted myself to an investigation of the anteroom. But the table drawer was empty and nothing offered but the books and magazines. In

the heap of the latter was one newspaper a month old, which I resurrected and idly glanced over. Then I noticed that a paragraph had been ringed with a blue pencil mark and I read the notice. After which I carried it to Lavender.

"Do you suppose this is important?" I asked and handed him the paper.

He carefully read the marked paragraph and a quaint wrinkle appeared above the bridge of his nose.

"An interesting coincidence, at any rate," he said half to himself.

"A dramatic criticism—" I began.

"In which he happened to be interested?

Just that, Gilly. But why was he interested, supposing Vanderdonck to have marked the paper? For that matter, why was he interested, supposing someone else to have marked the paper and sent it to him? Did you note the cast of characters?"

"Yes," I replied, "I did." Then an idea struck me, and I added with a smile, "But Charles Merritt's name is not in the cast, Jimmie. You can't connect up *that* case."

"So you thought of the Merritt mystery, did you? Well, it's true that his name isn't here, but someone else's name is. The part of 'Mabel Greensleeve' is played, if you please, by Miss Sidney Kane. And who is Miss Sidney Kane, Gilly?"

"I don't know. Do you?"

"She is, although somewhat elderly, one of the bright and shining stars, I believe, of the 'Tinfoil Revue,' in which Charles Merritt played a character sketch until his disappearance."

I considered this in silence.

"It's pretty thin, Lavender," I said at length.

"Of course it's thin! But she's there, and it's an interesting coincidence, as I remarked. In connection with the disappearance of Mr. Vanderdonck and the condition of his washstand, it's doubly interesting."

"His washstand?" I echoed feebly.

"And his towel," said Lavender.

A moment later his eye was again on the great safe against the wall.

"I'd give a cookie to see the contents of that thing," he observed thoughtfully. "But it's Morley's job after all, and if it's to be opened it must be his responsibility. I suspect the police are waiting for relatives to turn up."

Saying which, he strolled over to the safe and began to play with the knob. What would have happened had he continued, I have no idea, but he had barely begun when a key was inserted in the outer door, and Lavender desisted and rose to his feet.

"Morley. Ahead of time," I ventured.

But it was not Morley. There entered instead a little old man with a warty face, hooked nose, and wide mouth. These with his stooping shoulders and small beady eyes gave him a generally inferior presence that was offensive. The apparition looked from Lavender to me and back at Lavender.

"What are you doing here?" it barked.

"Mr. Giles, I believe?" responded Lavender with suave couresy. "Your question is surprising, to say the least. I had supposed our investigation to have been undertaken by your desire and authority."

The extraordinary ability possessed by my friend to convey a false impression without falsehood always has been my envy and delight. The ironic purport of the remark quite bowled over the little man in the doorway.

"I beg your pardon," he stammered. "I thought Sergeant Morley was in charge of the case."

"Sergeant Morley will be here at two," said Lavender icily. "But it's all right, Mr. Giles. Now that you are here perhaps you can give us some information."

"Anything at all, anything at all," stuttered Giles. He now appeared to be eager and able to solve any difficulty we might propound to him, including the riddle of the Sphinx.

"How long had Mr. Vanderdonck been a tenant of yours?"

"Two years, Sergeant——"

"Lieutenant!" I said severely. "Lieutenant Lavender!"

"I beg your pardon! Two years, Lieutenant Lavender."

Lavender threw me a venomous glance and proceeded. "He had never vanished this way before, of course?"

"He always paid his rent promptly, that's all I know," responded Giles. "He sent a check the first of every month. When it didn't come this month, or on the second or third, neither, I came over to see him. Hadn't seen him since he took the rooms. Well, he wasn't here and he hasn't been here since."

Lavender appeared to be shocked by this delinquency.

"So you very properly went to the police," he agreed. "Do I understand that you only saw this Mr. Vanderdonck once in your life?"

"The day he took the rooms," answered Giles with a nod. "I don't bother them that pays their rent, and this Vanderdonck never bothered me."

"Hm-m!" mumbled Lavender. "Do you remember him? How he looked?"

"I never forget a face," declared Giles with emphasis. "He was middle aged, rather dark, and his hair was beginning to get gray. Pretty tall man he was, and heavy I should say, though he didn't look it."

"You know nothing about his business?"

"Not a thing. Looks to me now as if he didn't have any!"

Lavender smiled sweetly.

"You are quite right, Mr. Giles. He didn't!"

"What!" cried the landlord.

"Who occupied these rooms before Mr. Vanderdonck took them?" demanded Lavender.

"A dentist fellow named Bradbury."

Lavender chuckled and rubbed his hands. "Ah," said he, "it's a black, black case. But we have it in hand, Mr. Giles. Trust us, leave it entirely in our hands, and say nothing!"

We got rid of the old fool at last, and Lavender looked at his watch.

"Half past dinner time," he announced. "We're wasting moments, Gilly. I'll leave a note here for Morley to say we've been here and won't be back, then we'll go to luncheon and afterward we'll transfer our attentions to the more pleasant and lucrative task of aiding Miss Minor."

"But what did you mean by telling that fellow that Vanderdonck had no business?" I asked.

"Just that," was the reply. "He came here as a blind. The whole office shows it. Everything is practically as the dentist left it two years ago. Vanderdonck just moved in. The holes in the floor indicate where the chair of pain used to be, the walls have not been cleaned since the dentist took down his pictures, and the books and magazines for the most part were left there by the old tenant. The place was never intended for occupancy. Vanderdonck came here when it was necessary only. But someone else came here, too—came here and didn't leave again. The safe will tell the story. I'll tell Morley enough to make it look like *his* discovery. But the fact is, Gilly, I'm as sure as I'm here that the safe contains all that is left of Charles Merritt!"

I spun about and looked with horror at the great black hideous thing, and a dreadful picture formed in my mind as I seemed to see the door swing open, upon—what? But Lavender, without a shudder, sat down to pen his note to Morley.

III

AT LUNCHEON I questioned Lavender vigorously, but he had little information to impart. He ate in silence for the greater part of the meal and afterward smoked several thoughtful cigarettes.

"I've told you practically all I know about the case, Gilly," was all he said in direct reply to my questions. "And what I know, I know chiefly because it *must* be so. Of actual evidence I have very little, but there certainly have been many significant indications."

"And now we go back to Miss Minor and her troubles?"

"Exactly! You've no objections to going back to Miss Minor, surely?"

I laughed. "None in the world. I like her very much. But what did you say in your note to Morley, Lavender?"

"Just this: *Morley, open safe at earliest opportunity. It contains the solution of two mysteries. See morning papers.* Now will you call a taxi?"

On that we fared forth to attack the problem we, or at any rate Lavender, had been employed to solve. As we drove north across the Loop in a swirling ocean of traffic my mind became occupied with thoughts of the charming young person we were going to see, and I looked forward with pleasure to our second meeting. Lavender, whatever his thoughts were, smoked many cigarettes and drummed impatiently with his fingers on the narrow window ledge. When he had finished with one cigarette, he lighted another from the glowing tip of the old one and resumed his drumming. I supposed him to be in deep thought.

The progress of the taxi was slow, for the press was bewildering. A mounted policeman, dancing his horse in the maelstrom, recognized Lavender and gave him a nod of greeting. The line of automobiles had stopped for perhaps the twelfth time. The officer's greeting called my friend's wandering attention back to his surroundings, and suddenly he was sitting straight up and looking at a shop window within line of his vision. It was a barber shop, as it happened, and as vastly uninteresting as most barber shops, as far as I could see. But Lavender had seen more than the shop.

"See the placard, Gilly," he nodded. "The 'Tinfoil Revue' again. We can't dodge it, it seems. The woman in the picture, if I'm not mistaken, is the very person we were discussing. No, not Miss Minor. I mean Miss Sidney Kane."

I looked and saw that he was right. Her name appeared below the portrait in letters of some size.

"An atrocious podtrait, too, I should

imagine," he continued. "Do you know, Gilly, on second thought I think I shall be altruistic this afternoon. You shall go alone to Miss Minor, pay our respects, and listen to anything she may have to tell us. I will inform you what further you are to ascertain. As for myself, I shall—this is Wednesday, isn't it, Gilly?—I shall go to a matinée, I think, against the sterner labors that lie ahead of us. Thus we shall both be benefitted, according to our tastes."

I am, of course, frequently a fool, but I am never as big a fool as Lavender's remarks often would suggest. I looked back at him sternly.

"What you mean is, that you will go to the 'Tinfoil Revue' and see Miss Kane," I corrected.

"Well, if you put it that way, yes," he grinned. "The fact is, Gilly, the lady attracts me, and there already has been so much coincidence in this case, or in these cases I should say, that I'm determined to check them against each other and see what happens. The theatre, I believe, is just around the corner."

"What am I to ask Miss Minor?" I demanded.

"First, whether she has heard from her father. I'm inclined to think that she has not, but ask her anyway. Tell her that I think she will hear from him shortly, but not to be too sanguine. Then ask her permission to look casually over his desk, or whatever he uses, to see if there are any clues to his movements. Probably the young lady will have done this herself, but you will make a more thorough job of it. Look at the letters if there are any, however far back they may go, and don't leap at any wild conclusions whatever you find. Your principal task is to remember what you see so that you can tell me about it tonight."

"And when shall I see you?"

He hesitated. "You have a key. Be in my rooms at six. I may join you for dinner. If I'm not there by six, though, I won't be in for dinner. Sit around until about eight, as I may call you up if I don't come. If you don't hear from me by eight—well, I'm darned if I know when you will."

It sounded very dubious indeed. "Look here, Lavender," I said uneasily, "does that mean that you are going into some danger?"

"Without you, Gilly? Not by a large majority! I wouldn't think of going into danger without my second line of defense. No, it means that I may be detained longer than I now expect, that's all. If there is any danger it will come later and you shall have your full share, I promise."

With that I was forced to be content, although what new idea had possessed my eccentric friend I could not imagine. No doubt he would see Miss Kane and confront her with her apparent knowledge of Vanderdonck, and no doubt he would ask about the disappearance of Charles Merritt. I thought again of that sinister safe in Vanderdonck's rooms, and in fancy I saw a slow dark stream issuing from the impassable crack of its heavy door.

Lavender climbed from the machine, and with a wave of his hand disappeared for a moment in the throng of cars. An instant later I saw him standing before the barber shop window, studying the libelous portrait of Sidney Kane. Then again I lost him as the whirlpool shifted, and he did not reappear. I continued on my way alone.

It was a pleasant enough ride to the Minor mansion far out on the north side, and it was pleasant to find Miss Minor at home. Her exclamation of delight at sight of me was enough to pay for any disappointment caused by Lavender's desertion.

But charming as was Miss Shirley Minor and happy as was the hour or two I spent in her company, I learned not a thing calculated to further our investigations. There were few letters from persons other than Miss Minor herself. Her letters, Cyril Minor had saved for years back; he seemed to have saved all she had ever written to him. But for the rest I found nothing but a scattering of business communications of no particular interest save as they furnished the names of a number of Minor's early ventures. As Lavender had foretold, Miss Minor had heard nothing from her father, so at the close of my visit I made her happy with my friend's message of cheer, and took my departure. I was convinced not only that I was in love with Shirley Minor, but also that I was a very poor detective indeed.

It was growing toward dusk as I climbed the interminable and familiar steps to Lavender's rooms, and as I let myself in the clock struck five. I helped myself to a cigar, placed the humidor within reach, and picked up a magazine. But I did not read. I dozed instead, and finally I slept. When I awoke with a start, it was quite dark outside and the clock, when I had flooded the room with light, showed the hour to be well past eight. Lavender had not come and there had been no call. Evi-

dently he had found work to do. So I went downstairs to dinner on the opposite corner, and then climbed the stairs again. I read diligently until past midnight, then as there was still no sign of Lavender I turned in on the bed I called mine.

It seemed that I had been asleep for no time at all when something wakened me. I sat up in bed to find Lavender in the room. It was two o'clock in the morning and he was whistling quietly to himself as he undressed.

"Jimmie," I said sleepily, "where the devil have you been?"

"Hullo, Gilly," said he. "Didn't intend to wake you. I was later than I thought I'd be, but it was worth while. I've got half the mystery solved."

My brain cells began to function. "Tell me!" I commanded.

"Can you follow me? All right." He lighted a cigarette and dropped into an easy chair. "Well, after I left you, Gilly, I had a look at the portrait of Miss Kane, as you probably saw, and then I went to the matinée and had a look at the lady herself. She's very clever, although nearer forty than thirty. After the show I sent around my card with a few words penciled on it, and she consented to see me."

"What did you write?" I asked, deeply interested.

"I wrote under my name, 'In connection with the case of Charles Merritt.'"

"Go on!"

"Well, she saw me. I told her I was looking into the Merritt affair and asked her if she could tell me anything. She asked why I had come to her. I said I had heard that they were friends. She replied that it was a fact but she didn't know who could have told me. Anyway, she told me about the disappearance which was much as it was reported in the newspapers. He didn't answer his cue, and wasn't to be found. He hasn't been seen since. Was he a drinker, I asked. She was indignant. Not more than the average man! Had he any love affairs? She hesitated, then she believed not. I was shooting more or less in the dark, of course, although not entirely so. When she had told me all that I already knew and all that she cared to volunteer, which wasn't much, I asked her point blank if she knew Peter Vanderdonck."

He paused and chuckled.

"She nearly fainted. I thought she was going to faint. Then she said, no, she did not. I asked her what had frightened her. She said she was not frightened but that her part tired her. I asked whether it were not a fact that Merritt and Vanderdonck were friends or acquaintances. I phrased it that way on purpose to put her mind at ease. She replied that she believed they were. She thought she had heard Mr. Merritt mention Mr. Vanderdonck but she couldn't be sure. Anyway, she had not deceived me; she did not know Mr. Vanderdonck! I let it go at that. But I asked her if she did not think it strange that Mr. Merritt and Mr. Vanderdonck should disappear at the same time. She did not know that Mr. Vanderdonck had disappeared, she said, but if it were so, why certainly it was strange. You see, she was getting her wits back more rapidly than at first and the longer I talked the better she became. Finally I told her that I knew where Merritt was, and that threw her into a funk again. 'Where?' she asked. I looked her in the eye and said, 'He's in Mr. Vanderdonck's safe!'

"At this point she sat down. She'd been standing, up to then, hoping I'd go. 'Just who are you?' she demanded. And I said, 'Actually, Miss Kane, I'm just a private investigator hired by a Miss Minor to find her father, who is missing. But accidentally I blundered onto this other case, through helping a friend in the police department. I'm still helping him.' I told her I was sorry to have had to disturb her, thanked her for her information, and got out before she had time to catch her breath. I hope I didn't upset her so that she could not play her part in the evening."

"Did you, Jimmie?"

"No, I didn't," he chuckled. "She was there, for I saw her come out after the show. She appeared quite calm and perfectly at ease, and I fancy she was, too. I have no doubt that she did some important telephoning as soon as I'd left her in the afternoon."

"And where have you been until this hour?"

"Out scouting in the neighborhood of Miss Kane's home, which is in Elmhurst and a jolly long way from here."

"Looking for Vanderdonck? You think she has been concealing him?"

"Well, yes, I do. I think she is still concealing him. Anyway, I didn't find him. Of course, he may not be there."

"You think that this Vanderdonck murdered Merritt, don't you, Lavender?"

"My dear fellow, no. There's no murder in this case, not yet, anyway. It's plain comedy from beginning to end. I played with you a bit about it and I played with Morley, but I'll quit now since you

won't see for yourself. Morley, in point of fact, has seen, for he took my tip and opened the safe."

"And he didn't find the body of Charles Merritt?"

"Not even a hair. Well, yes, perhaps a *hair*. What I told you, Gilly, was that the safe contained *all that was left* of Charles Merritt, and it was strictly true. In other words, it contained his clothing and part of his makeup. You see, old man, Merritt and Peter Vanderdonck were the same individual. Vanderdonck decided to quit being Merritt, so he quit and packed Merritt, so to speak, in the safe. Then he vanished himself. Of course it was guesswork until Morley opened the safe, but it was *safe* guessing, if I may be permitted a bad pun. Everything pointed to the accuracy of my deductions—the unused office, the greasy wash bowl to which the water clung as it receded, the dirty towel smelling of grease paint, the notice in the paper of Miss Kane's success, and so on. Merritt made certain changes at the theatre after his performances but the final cleaning up he reserved for Vanderdonck's rooms, where he was safer from recognition in the event of an uncontemplated meeting."

I digested all this in silence. At length I said, "And Miss Kane is concealing Vanderdonck from pursuit? Why?"

"She probably loves him," opined Lavender, "and for reasons of his own he doesn't want to appear as yet. I called Morley and told him all this, after he'd told me that he'd opened the safe, and now I suppose the police will drop the case. There's no real crime in it after all, and they are not hired to catch Giles' delinquent tenants."

"Meanwhile," I said ironically, "we continue to search for another missing man, who is as far away, or as near, as ever. Probably he'll turn out to be the missing Mrs. Jameson about whom we read in the paper this morning."

Lavender laughed at my bitterness.

"No, Gilly, nothing like that. But I'm afraid that by morning we, too, will be out of a job. I expect that by morning Miss Minor will have heard from her father and will call off the hunt. I have been so sure of it all day that I haven't bothered much with *that* case. Somewhere along the line of our investigations, he will have received word of our search and he will instantly communicate with his daughter, whom, you must remember, he does not know to be in town."

IV

AS USUAL Lavender was right. His prescience was astounding. We were not finished with breakfast in the morning when the telephone bell rang, and at the other end of the connection was Miss Minor. Lavender listened to her message.

"I see," he replied. "Yes, I quite expected it, Miss Minor. In fact I have been waiting for your call. Naturally there is no further occasion for my services. Was it a phone call, may I ask, or a wire?"

He listened again.

"I understand. Very well, Miss Minor. And if ever again I can be of service to you, remember that I shall be glad to serve. Good-by!"

The last words fell like clods upon my heart. Lavender was smiling oddly as he turned away.

"Finis coronat opus," said he. "That means, Gilly, 'the end crowns the work. We are politely, courteously, but definitely and conclusively 'fired,' as it were. Miss Minor has heard from her father—a wire early this morning, saying merely that he was well and would be home soon."

"How did you know she would hear from him?" I asked morosely.

"I knew that she was bound to. You see, he found out that I was on his trail and was afraid that I would make his disappearance look like something it was never intended to be. When he went away he had no idea of the publicity that would follow his action, and he had no thought that his daughter would return and start a hunt for him. He managed it all rather badly, as a matter of fact."

"Do you suppose he returned to the club and they told him there that we were looking for him?"

"No, I don't believe he's been near the club. I think Miss Kane told him."

"Miss Kane!" I shouted. "What has Miss Kane to do with *this* case?"

"A great deal," said Lavender, "since she was undoubtedly at the bottom of Minor's disappearance, as she was at the bottom of the Vanderdonck-Merritt disappearance. You remember I told you that I had contrived to bring Minor's name into my conversation with her yesterday? I did it purposely, so she *would* tell him. I thought it would inform him of his daughter's return and that this action would follow."

"Good Lord," I groaned. "What is the

secret of it all, Lavender? Why did he go away? Why did Merritt masquerade as Vanderdonck, or Vanderdonck as Merritt? And what has Miss Kane to do with all of them?"

"I'll tell you how it works out, Gilly, as nearly as I can. And I must tell you about my investigations of last night. They have a bearing on your questions.

"I went to Elmhurst, as I explained. In fact, I went twice—once after leaving Miss Kane in the afternoon, and once after the evening performance. On the latter occasion I followed Miss Kane. In the afternoon I merely made inquiries in the neighborhood. Miss Kane has lived there for about three months, I was informed by the rental agency, with an invalid brother and a maid. At first I naturally thought that the invalid brother was the man I wanted, but the three months knocked that idea in the head for Minor has been living at home and has been at his club until a week ago, while the invalid brother lives with Miss Kane and doesn't go out any place."

"Then he's Vanderdonck!" I said.

"Well," demurred Lavender, "I suppose it's conceivable, but I don't agree, Gilly. Really, the same objection applies to Vanderdonck. No, in my theory of this amusing case, he can't be Vanderdonck, either. I may as well tell you at once that I believe not only that Vanderdonck was Merritt, but that Minor was both of them!"

I sat up very straight in my chair and stared at him for a moment in silence.

"I'm not crazy," he replied to my glance. "I don't think I am, Gilly. I'm admitting that the invalid brother *may* be Vanderdonck, and that Minor may be some place else. I'm even admitting that the invalid brother may be just himself, an honest-to-goodness invalid brother of Miss Kane. But I don't think so. Everything points to the truth of my idea that Merritt, Vanderdonck, and Minor are one and the same individual, playing a game. And Minor isn't anxious that his daughter shall discover what that game is, as least not until it is played out. That's why he wired Miss Shirley and why we were called off. We were getting too 'warm,' as the boys say. Of course Miss Minor had no idea that in releasing us she was playing her father's game."

He shook his head. "What puzzles me, however, is that invalid brother. If he isn't Minor, and isn't Vanderdonck, to accept your idea for a moment, who is he, unless he is just himself?"

"I think he's Mrs. Jameson," I said with a grin.

Lavender laughed. "No," he replied. "She, at least, has nothing to do with this case. She just happens to have disappeared on the same day.

"Well, to continue. Having learned nothing in particular yesterday afternoon, I followed Miss Kane home last night. I wanted to see whom, if anybody, she would meet at her home. She met nobody. There were lights in the place for some time, chiefly upstairs, but after she had closed the door I didn't have even a second glimpse of Miss Kane. Not a shadow on the blind. Finally darkness fell over the house, and I came home. I'm very much afraid indeed that the invalid brother is not a myth, that he actually exists—if for no other reason than to complicate this case."

"And you have no idea why Minor is doing all this?"

"Oh, yes, a sort of an idea, Gilly, but it isn't complete. I don't understand why Miss Shirley has not known all about it from the beginning. There's nothing heinous in it, that I can see."

"And now I suppose we shall never know," I suggested.

"I think we will," said Lavender. "I think that Minor himself will look us up to see how much we know, and to tell us the rest, so that we will keep our mouths shut."

However, it came about rather differently, for we had talked barely an hour when again our telephone bell rang and again it was Miss Shirley Minor who called. Lavender's expression was one of comical relief as he listened to what she had to say.

"Quite right, quite right!" he said. And a minute later, "Yes, I think I can. Can you join us? Then please do. Come at once!"

There was a gleam in his eye when he had hung up the receiver.

"Off again, on again," he chuckled. "It gets better, Gilly! Miss Minor distrusts her wire. She doesn't believe her father sent it and she is more alarmed than ever. It seems that the telegram was signed 'Father,' instead of 'Dad,' and I think the young lady's point is well taken. If he always signed himself 'Dad,' he should have done so this time. It is such slips

that betray criminals. Now I know what happened. Minor didn't send the wire and Miss Kane did, probably unknown to Minor.

"Well, it should be over shortly. Miss Minor asked me if I knew where her father was. She had an idea that I did because I had told her that she would hear from him. I took a chance and said 'Yes!' She's on her way here now."

I looked startled. "Can you make good on that, Jimmie?" I cautiously asked.

"Well, I can at least bluff Miss Kane," he replied, "and that is what I propose to do. We'll drive out with Miss Shirley herself and surprise the actress lady at her tardy breakfast. I think something interesting will develop. It will be dramatic and you had better possess your soul in patience till we get there. I won't spoil it for you."

He flung himself into a chair and gave himself over to some deep thinking. "Please don't talk for a few minutes, Gilly," he cautioned me.

It was exactly twenty minutes before he sprang to his feet, in which time he had smoked a great many cigarettes. A new gleam was in his eye, and without a word he strode to the telephone. From his pocket he produced a list of numbers, then lifted the receiver. In a moment or two he was talking apparently to a shopkeeper in Elmhurst.

"You remember my asking you yesterday about Miss Kane and her brother?" he queried. "I forgot one thing. Do you often see Mr. Kane, the brother, in the streets?"

He listened eagerly to the reply.

"Thank you, that's all."

He swung on me. "Gilly, what do you think the fellow said? He said, 'No, nor anybody else. He don't go out. Nobody ever sees him.'"

"Well, that's natural enough," I started to reply.

But Lavender was calling another number and asking the same question. Again he turned to me.

"That was a neighbor," he crowed. "She said, 'I only saw him once. That was about a week ago. It was getting along toward dark, and I didn't see him very clear. I guess he's pretty sick.' Excuse her grammar, Gilly, but digest her remarks. Don't they tell you anything? What an ass I was not to have guessed before!"

"I confess—" I began.

"Don't!" he laughed. "I've been as big an idiot as you have. Bless our poor innocent hearts! Why, it means only one thing. This invalid is never seen, and never has been seen, except once by this neighbor—and then at night—for the very good reason that he never existed. Until a week ago, when this neighbor saw him going in, he'd never been there! For three months he had been an invention of Miss Kane's, to take care of emergencies. She knew that sometime Minor would come, and that when he did he might be seen. She had to provide for that. I'll bet she moved in at night. She started the fiction somehow or other, right after she moved in, so that if ever Minor came and was seen at a window, his presence would be accounted for; so that if Minor even had to leave in daylight, he could do it without talk. A week ago he came, and for the first time the 'invalid brother' was seen, and whoever saw him thought he *was* the 'invalid brother.' And he's there now, too, keeping out of sight. The place isn't thickly populated, the houses are pretty far apart, and not many people would be inclined to ask questions. What gossip there has been about the 'invalid brother' has come from the shops, where I have no doubt Miss Kane herself began it. The shopkeepers talked as they always do, to any who will listen, and those of their customers who were interested, remembered."

"Very clever," I commented.

Lavender agreed heartily, except that he was thinking of Miss Kane's scheme, and I was thinking of his solution of the problem.

So it came about that an hour and a half after our conversation Lavender and I and Miss Shirley Minor rang a doorbell out in Elmhurst, or at any rate, one of us did, and directed a startled maid to take our cards to Miss Kane. At the same time Lavender quietly inserted his foot in the door opening. The maid had no alternative. She let us into the sitting room.

And then a curious thing happened. Miss Minor's eyes fell upon a photograph on the mantel, and a puzzled look spread over her face. Following her glance I saw what must have been a portrait of Miss Kane taken some years before, and I, too, was startled. For it might have been a portrait of Shirley Minor herself.

Lavender was watching us. He smiled very kindly at the girl.

"Yes," he said, "it is a little older than Miss Minor, of course, but on the whole a very good portrait, don't you think?"

Shirley Minor turned to him swiftly.

"You are going to tell me something very strange," she said. "Tell me at once! Who is that woman?"

"I believe her to be your mother," answered Lavender, quietly.

The girl's hand shook and her face twitched.

"My m-mother," she stammered, "is dead! I knew her! She died about three years ago, Mr. Lavender!"

"God knows, I have no desire to cause you distress," replied my friend, "but I firmly believe the original of that portrait to be Miss Sidney Kane, your mother."

Then the curtains were swept aside, and a tall handsome woman was in the room. Her entrance was theatrical. Her face was the face of Shirley Minor, but older and sadder.

"Yes," she said, in a harsh strained voice, "he is right. I am Miss Sidney Kane, dear—and your mother. After this, there is nothing to be concealed."

"Surely there never has been?" suggested Lavender.

"Cyril thought so," she replied defiantly.

"No doubt," was Lavender's reply. "It it too bad."

"Oh, tell me!" cried Shirley Minor. "Tell me before I scream!"

The older woman crossed the room and laid a hand on her daughter's head. The gesture was timid and caressing.

"I hope you will love me," she said simply. "Listen, dear. Your father and I were divorced when you were a tiny baby. There had been trouble. His family objected to his marrying an actress. Shortly afterward, he married again. She was a charming woman, and she treated you as her own daughter and loved you. Your father tried to forget, and as part of the effort he allowed you always to believe that

his wife was your mother. I think they were happy; I hope they were. You grew up, the years passed, and at length Mrs. Minor died, as you know. While she lived your father was content. After her death, he had *you*, and your face was a constant reminder of *me*. He felt that he had treated me badly and he set about finding me. He did find me, and we loved each other again. We have been married now for more than a year, but until recently we had not been together except for a few days at a time. I kept my position on the stage, and your father, who as a young man had wanted to be an actor, decided to join me there for in that way he could often be with me. He actually became popular as a comedian, to the great surprise of us both."

She smiled almost brightly for a moment, then her face saddened again.

"But he had to keep it all very quiet, or he thought he did. He hated publicity and he didn't want the old story raked up. You had been happy with your second mother, and he didn't want to take that from you. So he became two other men. On the stage he was Charles Merritt, but he never left this city. He played only here in Chicago. And he loved his work so much that he didn't care to leave it. When his part was over he would quietly dress for the street, leave the theatre, and become for a time Peter Vanderdonck. But Peter Vanderdonck was only a myth. He used the office as a place to hide himself while he became again Cyril Minor.

"I knew that some day he would break under the strain of the situation. I could see it coming, and I made a home ready for him to go to when the time came. A week ago, he became ill—don't be alarmed; he is better now! Someone had to care for him, and I had the best right. I brought him to my home here, but at the same time, of course, both Peter Vanderdonck and Charles Merritt also disappeared. I couldn't even explain Charles Merritt's disappearance without betraying Cyril. And so I did nothing."

Lavender nodded, and took up the tale.

"And, of course, you had no idea that Shirley would come home and miss her father, nor that this old idiot of a landlord would start a search for Vanderdonck. It was all unfortunate in a way, and yet it has ended very happily. But Mr. Minor would have done better to have trusted Shirley entirely from the beginning."

"As if I would have cared!" cried Miss Minor, springing to her feet. "Where is he?"

The look in her mother's eyes stopped her. She retraced her steps, and pulling down the older head to her own kissed the sorrowful eyes.

"I'm sure I shall love you," she said, "but it is still so strange and new, and, of course—Dad——!"

"Of course!" said Miss Sidney Kane, and with a lift of her finger to us, she led the way upstairs.

OLE LONGHANDLE SHOVELSON

By HERBERT FARRIS

ONE THOUSAND DOLLARS IN GOLD BY THE STROKE OF MIDNIGHT MEANT EVERYTHING IN THE WORLD TO OLE. TORPEY, THE MISER, THOUGHT HE HAD OLE BEATEN; BUT THE GIANT SWEDE WAS A SPECIALIST IN FINDING RICHES UNSUSPECTED

THE active life of Nugget City, like that of the average placer camp in Alaska, had lasted about seven years. The restless turmoil that once characterized the live little camp had ceased and the mad scramble for easy money was there no longer. Twelve years before, when production ebbed to low water mark, the "live ones" set sail. Active adventurers, accustomed to navigating the stormy seas of placer mining, did not wait for the tide to flood again. They simply left. Miners, prospectors, gamblers and saloonkeepers, quietly set sail for new ports, and left in their wake, a few derelicts, a few ancient hulks that for one reason or another preferred to remain in dry dock.

Thereafter, around the stove in Torpey's general store, such expressions as, "Let's hit the trail," or "What does she go to the pan?" were no longer heard. Instead, one was regaled with "I can remember——", or "When I first hit this country, back in the fall of——"

It was in this decrepit condition that Ole Skovelson found the village and its ancient workings. Forty miles down river, some wag of the wilderness had very seriously told him that Nugget City had a great future, but neglected to tell the good-natured Swede of the camp's past. At first sight of the somnolent village, Ole's candle of hope flickered violently. A number of empty shacks leaky and dilapidated, and dozens of weather checked sluice boxes, warped and blackened from the sunshine and snows of many years, told most of Nugget City's story. Yet, in spite of the discouraging outlook, Ole beached his river boat and headed for Torpey's store.

Much against his will, Ole decided to take up his residence in Nugget City. He was out of funds and out of grub, so he really had no choice in the matter. Three months before, he had left Seattle with little money, but much hope—the hope of acquiring four thousand dollars. The amount was the exact sum fixed as the purchase price of a small place on the Sound, and Ole yearned for that little place during his waking hours and dreamed of it at night. And his reason for this was excellent. She was just twenty-two; her hair was—But this is not the poem story of slender, smiling Selma Halvorson; it is the prose tale of Ole Skovelson.

Before entering Torpey's store, Ole verified his belief that it was almost dinner time, by consulting an alarm clock, which he carried in a bulged pocket of his mackinaw coat. A month before he had broken his watch, and, until he should again be in funds, the clock was doing double duty. It

aroused him at six in the morning, and during the day it faithfully took the place of his broken watch. The clock was Ole's one earthly possession, and since he regarded it as indispensable, he safeguarded it with a rawhide thong tied securely to his lapel buttonhole.

Ben Torpey ceased swinging his heels against the counter on which he was seated, and stared in amazement when Ole entered the store. Never in Nugget City's history had such a man as Ole made his appearance in camp. Big men are not uncommon in Alaska, but Ole was huge. The biggest blue flannel shirt he had been able to buy in Seattle, had not the length of sleeve to hide his immense, bronzed wrists; his mackinaw trousers flapped loosely above the tops of great hobnailed shoes, and a cap, which failed to cover the half of his thatch of long, yellow-brown hair, further accentuated Ole's more than generous proportions.

"Well, stranger," Torpey greeted as soon as he found speech, "anything I can do you for?"

Ole displayed a double row of giant's teeth, set wide apart, as he grinned good-naturedly. "Ay bane broke, and Ay want a yob," he announced simply.

Ben Torpey, Nugget City's storekeeper grew thoughtful. By dealing that was none too scrupulous, he had put away a small fortune since his arrival in the little camp. True, the storekeeper who had sold to him at the beginning of Nugget City's decline, had left with a chuckle for the man who had bought him out; yet Torpey had fared well. From fifteen miles below the village, a tribe of Indians came to trade with him; then there was an occasional hunter, and a score or more of trappers who regularly outfitted with him. His expenses were light; his profits exorbitant, and he was prosperous. Torpey shrewdly appraised the Swede.

"So you're broke, eh?" He seemed to be considering a weighty matter. "Well, I think I can fix you up. You come along, and I'll pick you out a good cabin, one that don't leak, and with a good stove in it. You see," he went on importantly, as he led the way to the door, "I own about every building in Nugget City, and I'm mighty glad we're going to have one man in camp who's not afraid of work. After you're settled, I'll show you a place to dig."

At the door of the cabin to which Ole was piloted, Torpey paused and pointed out the ancient diggings, strewn with dozens of weather checked sluice boxes. "More than a million dollars went through those boxes in the old days," he said impressively. "Last winter I began burning them for firewood. You can do the same if you want while you're working for me, for it's more than two miles to the nearest timber."

So it came about that Ole Skovelson, armed with pick, shovel and crowbar, was piloted to the White Elephant by its owner, Ben Torpey, who indicated a huge gravel bank at one side of a tiny creek.

"Here's a mighty good place to dig," he said curtly. "If I was you, I'd run a cut into that hill, and see what happens."

Ole flashed an appreciative grin at the man who had provided him with work. The unsophisticated Swede, unlearned in the ways of mining, bent his broad back and went to work with a will. For a few minutes Torpey watched the gravel fly; then with a pleased smirk, took his way to the village. Well might Torpey be pleased. Nothing whatever had been said about wages, and there was no understanding about a "lay"; the latter being, in mining parlance, an agreement between mine owner and worker, that a certain percentage of the gold recovered, if any, goes to the one doing the work. Torpey's scheme had been cleverly conceived. If Ole failed to strike pay dirt, which was most likely, he would be told by the wily storekeeper that theirs was a "lay" agreement. If, on the other hand, gold should be found in paying quantities, Ole would be blandly informed that he had been toiling for what is known as "going wages." At best then, Ole could not receive better than wages, and even receiving a wage hinged upon the remote contingency that he might by some chance uncover a pay streak.

Like a faithful malemute in harness, Ole strained and toiled in his narrow cut. He had been working three days, when "Chaw" Casey paid him a visit. Chaw owned the adjoining bench claim, and consequently had a mild interest in Ole's work. Within a few hundred feet of the White Elephant, Casey stopped dead in his tracks and softly whistled his amazement to the tundra clad hills.

"Criminy!" he ejaculated when he found his voice.

And no wonder Casey was astonished. On either side of Ole's narrow cut, was a great rounded pile of boulders. Chaw

Casey had mined a little—as much as his carefree, not to say lazy, disposition would permit—and before him lay the undisputed evidence of the performance of a miracle. He removed his black slouch hat, and thoughtfully ran his fingers through a tangled mass of black hair.

"Sure, an' it's not possible!" he exclaimed. "No living man could handle boulders the size o' them. No, an' neither could any *two* men in Alaska do the like! An' still," he went on in helpless bewilderment, "it's got to be, for so it is!"

Casey broke into a run, and arrived breathless at the cut. He started to climb upon one of Ole's fast growing mounds for a glimpse below, when a great, rounded boulder whizzed past his head, struck the ground with a thud, and came to rest fully thirty feet distant. Casey scurried to safety. For a moment he regarded the boulder with protruding eyes, and estimated that it would easily weigh from seventy-five to a hundred pounds!

"The small stones," said Casey, as he meditatively transferred his gaze to the biggest of the boulders, "he piles up right nice an' pretty; while the little pebbles, he throws 'em away."

Casey descended the shelving bank into the bed of the creek, and proceeded to the mouth of the cut. He eyed with disgust the gleaming, black slate bed rock. "Slick as glass," he muttered. "If all the gold in the wurrold had come this way, that bed rock wouldn't hold a piece the size of a flax seed!"

He regarded the bent back of the giant. Thirty feet up the cut, Ole was loosening a boulder which was imbedded in a gravel bank that was steadily growing higher, as the powerful Swede went forward. "Would ye look at 'im now!" With surprising ease, Ole had just tossed the boulder to the bank above. Following this, his long handled shovel went into play, and a stream of gravel swished from cut to bank. "An' the 'number two' now," Casey went on; "it's the shovel that's givin' the lad the real sport; though of course, there's none of it he'd call wurruk!"

He quit the mouth of the cut, and walked slowly toward the village. "An' I meant to have a bit of a talk with the lad, but—why sure, an' it'd be like askin' a million dollar dredge to shut down an' listen to your gab."

When Casey entered the store, he was chuckling softly. As usual, he found practically all of Nugget City's population grouped about the stove. Though the day was warm and the stove cold, the men still gravitated to the chairs they were accustomed to occupy during the long winter evenings. One of the men shifted his chair to make room for Casey, who dropped to a soap box, his back against the counter. Casey was generally liked. He was talkative, and the crowd enjoyed listening.

"Boys," he began without preliminary, "I've been out watchin' him wurruk, an' he's a hootin' hoojus!"

"Watchin' who work?" someone interrupted.

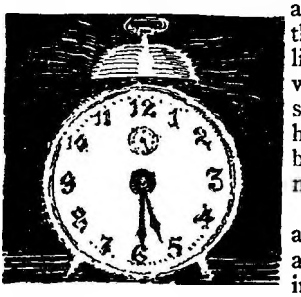
Casey looked scornfully at the offender. "Now who in thunder would I be after watchin' wurruk around *here?*" he asked sarcastically. "I mean this new man of course, Ole Shovelson."

"*Skovelson;* Ole *Skovel*son," corrected Ben Torpey from behind the counter.

"I've just come from takin' a look at him, an' I'm tellin' ye his name's *Shovel*son," Casey retorted. "Ole Longhandle Shovelson is his *full* name, an' he's the wickedest man with a number two that ever hit Alaska!"

Casey paused while the crowd laughed appreciatively at the nickname given to the newcomer.

"It's a hard wurrker he is," Casey resumed thoughtfully. "An' while he's diggin' away in his cut, and he has that big tin alarm clock—the thing he carries like a watch when he's off shift — facin' him from the bank. It's funny——"



"I don't see anything funny about the clock," interrupted Ben Torpey. "He goes to work and quits by it, and having it propped up in front of him that way seems to make him ambitious. *You* ought to have a timepiece like that, Casey."

Casey goodnaturedly joined in the laugh at his expense. "Sure an' my ambition fits the town I'm livin' in," he retorted. "If I owned a watch like that, I might find myself wurrukin' for exercise, like Ole."

Two weeks passed. Quite unexpectedly, the bedrock Ole was following took an abrupt upward slant which brought the big Swede's work to a close at the top of the hill. Ole promptly went to the store and reported this to Torpey.

"Well," said Torpey, "go back and run another cut. Here, wait a minute; I'll go out and show you where to start."

"Ole," said Casey, who was watching Torpey intently; "if you locate good pay on the claim ye're wurrukin' on, ye're goin' to make me rich; did ye know that?" There was just a suspicion of a twinkle in the Irishman's eye, as he went on with his joke for Torpey's benefit. "Now I don't think it's right for ye to do all the wurruk ye're doin' an' maybe make me rich, without gettin' anything out of it for ye that's doin' the wurruk. Tell ye what I'll do, Ole; for a dollar I'll give ye the option to buy my claim by November first, an' at the same time, I'll pray that ye make a million on the deal."

"If," said Torpey angrily, as, hat in hand, he came from behind the counter, "you think so little of that claim of yours, why have you been doing a hundred dollars' worth of assessment work on it every year?"

"Exercise, an' nothin' else," retorted Casey pleasantly. "An' sure an' that's all anybody'll ever get off the two claims together. Ole's showed us two hunderd feet of the slickest bed-rock in the country, an' for one, I'm satisfied. An' if it's jokin' ye think I am, I'll sell ye the claim for—for a hunderd cash."

"I'll take the option you offered for a dollar," Torpey countered in a passion. "Write it out!"

"Sure, an' nobody offered you an option for a dollar," said Casey coolly. "I offered it to Ole. He's the lad that's doin' the wurruk."

Torpey fidgeted uneasily. With this mad Irishman making light of the possibilities of finding gold on the two bench claims, there was danger that Ole would lose interest in the work of prospecting.

"Take him up, Ole," he urged eagerly. "Give him a dollar for the option. Then if you do find good pay by the first of November, you have the right to buy the claim for a thousand. If you don't run into the money, you're only out a dollar for the option."

Ole grinned uncomprehendingly. He understood but little of business.

"Give him his dollar!" thundered Torpey.

"You tank so?" asked Ole, with childlike simplicity.

"Sure," said Casey, grinning happily at the confusion he was causing. "Give me the dollar, an' I'll write ye out a bit of an option." He turned to the counter, and Torpey set before him pen, ink and a tablet. Laboriously Casey scrawled the following:

"For one dollar I give to Ole Skovelson the option to buy my bench claim known as The Booby, for the sum of One Thousand Dollars, cash. Dated, September 5, 1924, and this option to buy expires November 1, 1924."

Casey signed the paper, pocketed the dollar which Ole handed him, and addressed the group at the stove. "Boys," he said solemnly, "it's the first minin' deal of real importance that's been made in Nugget City for ten years. Here's hopin' the big fellow'll be pickin' up nuggets the size of hen eggs in less'n a week, from Torpey's White Elephant. But," he concluded, "whether anybody makes as much as the dollar I have in my pocket—well, as the monkey said when he filled the sugar bowl with molasses, 'it remains to be seen.'"

"Since you think so much of that claim of yours," said Torpey, "maybe you'll give me a chance to buy it November first for a hundred, in case Ole can't take it off your hands by that time? If you want to put it in writing, why——"

"Always lookin' for somethin' for nothin'," interrupted Casey. "I said a hunderd cash, *today*. It's the cash in hand that talks, an' I'll tell ye what I *will* do. For fifty dollars, cash, I'll agree right now to give ye a deed to that claim on November second—that's if Ole don't take up his option before that time," he added with a grin. "Now, if it's not worth fifty, what's the use keepin' Ole workin' like tophet?"

"You're on," Torpey cut in nervously. He seized the tablet and hurriedly wrote a brief agreement, which Casey signed with a flourish.

"Maybe Casey won't feel quite so wise about the fore part of November," said Torpey. He gave Ole a patronizing slap on his broad back. "We'll know more about it in a week or so, what?" he asked pleasantly.

"Ay tank so," Ole replied with a puzzled grin.

Ole went back to work. This time Torpey started him at the upper end of the White Elephant, and directed him to run another cut, which, when completed, would parallel, and be about fifty feet distant from, the lower end of Casey's Booby claim. After watching the gravel fly for a few minutes, Torpey struck off for the store. He was much pleased with himself.

"The chance," he said aloud, "is pretty

slim, but it's certainly worth every cent it cost me. And if that fatheaded Swede *should* happen to make a strike, there'll be one sick Irishman in Nugget City that'll sure need a doctor!"

For almost a month, Ole worked in his cut. Several times each week, Casey strolled out to the White Elephant and looked over the Swede's work. The cut, like Ole's first, exposed a bed rock that looked hopeless. It was always the same; why, the man was a fool to waste his time on such ground!

Casey finally gave voice to his disgust.

"Ole," he said one day as he watched the big fellow loosen a huge boulder in the face of his cut, "do you know what I think of you?"

"Ay tank so," said Ole without so much as looking around.

"Well, I don't tank you do! I think you're the biggest fatheaded squarehead I've ever seen in the North! Don't ye know there's no gold in this hill?"

Ole tossed his boulder from the cut and swung about. "Gold, she bane where you find 'em," he remarked sententiously. His positive manner, and the rising inflection with which he concluded, irritated Casey.

"Gold's where you find it," he retorted, "if you're lucky enough to dig where the gold is. Of course, it's a good thing for a man to work——"

"Ay tank so," Ole interrupted, as he seized his shovel.

And three weeks later, in the middle of the afternoon, Ole entered the store, his broad face beaming like a full moon. It was most unusual. In the two months that Ole had been working on the White Elephant, this was the first time that he had quit before six o'clock. He advanced to the counter, and with his usual welcoming grin, gazed down at Torpey.

"Ay tank we got one rich claim," he said and displayed a half dozen nuggets which he held cupped in the huge palm of his right hand. "I find 'em where she is," he said to Casey, who had reached him at a bound. Casey took one careful look at the nuggets, and raced from the store.

Fifteen minutes later, every man in Nugget City was in or near Ole's cut on the White Elephant claim. Where Ole had quit work, Torpey was down on his knees excitedly pawing over the last few feet of bed-rock Ole had uncovered. It was disintegrated slate, cracked and seamed, and Torpey busied himself with a pocketknife; he dug deep into the cracks, and in the few minutes he had worked, he proudly displayed two nuggets, each weighing, the onlookers estimated, a half ounce. He had also found a number of smaller nuggets.

"It's *rich*, boys!" he shouted. He looked above at the faces craning down at him from both sides of the cut. Presently he saw Casey. "Now, Irish," he called jubilantly, "what do you think of me and my White Elephant!"

"Not any more of either of you than what I did right along—not an awful lot," Casey answered promptly.

This was a poser. Torpey looked his astonishment. "I've known all along that you've got no use for *me*," he said, "and as far as that goes, I've got about as much for you. So much for that. But when it comes to this claim of mine—what are you trying to hand me when you say you don't think an awful lot of it?"

"Sure, an' I don't mind tellin' you why it's no good," said Casey agreeably, "an' it's this. When Ole started runnin' this cut, he started about fifty feet from the end line of my claim. He run it at an angle though, and now, right where you're standin' he struck the pay streak within about two feet of my line. That means that you've got about two feet of pay dirt to work out before you run into the Booby claim. An' that again means that you're just about through minin' before you begin! An' if you think I don't know what I'm talkin' about, crawl out o' there an' take a squint at our corner posts!"

Several things went through Torpey's brain like a flash, but he remained silent. Casey was almost certainly right about the White Elephant. But just as certainly, the Booby claim above was rich, and in five days, unless Ole could exercise his option by paying Casey a thousand dollars, he, Torpey, would be entitled to a deed from the fiery Irishman. Ole was broke, and there was no one in Nugget City who could loan him the money, all of which meant that on the second day of November, the Booby would belong to him, Torpey. He climbed from the cut, his elation perfectly concealed, and addressed himself to Ole.

"Come on down to the store; I want to talk to you," he ordered. "I've cleaned up that bit of exposed bed rock, and so there's nothing more you need to do."

"An' right after you get through talkin' with him," said Casey, "I'd like to have a little talk with ye myself. Come on down to my cabin when ye're through with Torpey."

Torpey frowned, as he struck out for the village. There was no doubt but that Casey would make some sort of attempt to violate his written agreement to deed the Booby claim on November second. After briefly considering the matter, Torpey felt more easy in his mind. After all, the thing shouldn't be so difficult. He had only to outwit the dumbbell Swede trailing behind him, and a windy, loafing Irish "chaw."

That night in his cabin, Casey talked for an hour to the most disconsolate Swede in all Alaska. Much to Ole's surprise, Torpey had refused to make any sort of settlement. The storekeeper had spoken vaguely of paying the big fellow off at the rate of six dollars a day, but refused to do even this until the fifth of November.

"He's stallin'," said Casey. "Afraid he is, that with the wages he owes ye, the rest of it might be dug up some way, until ye'd have enough to make up the thousan' ye'll be owin' me on the first. Sure, an' ye'd ought to go up an' take it out o' the skinflint's hide!"

"Ay tank so," said Ole, but so pacifically that Casey exploded.

"Sure, an' ye tank so, do ye!" he shouted. "An' I can tell by the way ye speak of it, that ye wouldn't hurt a flea! Listen, while I tell ye somethin'. In the old days, all the claims that's now worruked out carried the same kind o' bed rock that's uncovered at the upper end o' the White Elephant. An' always it run for a distance of three hunderd to a thousan' feet. It's nothin' else but an old creek channel ye've found, an' it's sure to run half way—maybe all the way—through that Booby claim o' mine. It means that the Booby has on it from fifty to a hunderd thousan' dollars, an'—*do you know ye've only five days to dig up a thousan' dollars?* Are ye goin' to sit tight an' let Tightwad Torpey come to me for his deed on the second?"

"Ay tank so."

"What!"

"Ay got no money. Ay bane——"

"Sure, ye tank an' ye bane, but does that get the money for the option ye have? It does not. An' ye've a head big enough to carry the brains of a dozen men, but I'm thinkin' a flax seed is bigger than that brain ye now have, even before it shriveled up!" Casey paused and glared fiercely at the huge bulk, seated dejectedly on two thirds of the Casey bunk. "An' do ye expect *me,*" he demanded wrathfully, "to do *all* the thinkin' for the likes o'——"

"Ay tank so," Ole interrupted hopefully. "You bane——"

"Sure, ye hammerheaded squarehead! Here ye've only five days to raise a thousand, an' ye sit here an' *tank* at me! Get out, an' give a man a chance to think that's used to thinkin', an' maybe I can pull ye out!'

His confidence restored, Ole grinned broadly and walked to the door. His hand on the knob, he looked at Casey thoughtfully for a moment. "Ay tank——"

"Get out!"

Casey was something of a philosopher. He cared but little for money, and the fact that he had seen a fortune go glimmering within a few days' time worried him not at all. He was much more concerned that the big Swede was making no apparent effort to take up his option on the Booby claim. To be sure, Casey was interested to the extent of a thousand dollars, but he was much more interested in helping out Ole and in outwitting the crafty Torpey. After a lapse of three days, during which he scarcely saw Ole, Casey followed the river bank to the cabin which Ole temporarily called home. Ole met him with a broad grin of welcome.

"Yust come in," he invited cordially. "Ay tank Ay got 'em now."

Casey entered storming. Ole indicated a seat of honor on his bunk with a wave of a hamlike hand. Casey took the proffered seat, but instantly sprang up with a shrill exclamation. He was staring in amazement at a rounded, dark heap of what appeared to be dirt, and nearby a tub two-thirds full of water.

"An' now what the divvle are ye doin'?" he demanded. "Weakminded ye was when ye hit town, but it's entirely crazy ye are now! An' what do ye think ye're doin'?"

"Ay yust pan a little," said Ole. He seated himself, filled a rusty gold-pan, and with a fair degree of skill, began to manipulate the pan in front of the indignant Casey's eyes. "Yust watch," said Ole laconically.

"Sure, an' I *am* watchin'!" Casey howled. "But what's the stuff ye're pan-

nin', an' where the divvle did it come from?"

"Yust ashes," Ole replied, calmly proceeding with his work.

"Ashes!" The word came in a whispered exclamation from Casey, who was too dumbfounded now for further utterance. His eyes widened perceptibly as he continued to gaze in fascinated silence. Ole was carefully tailing off a blackened residue in the bottom of his pan.

"Yust tak' a look," he said, and passed over the pan to Casey.

Casey took a look, and the sight of gold loosened his tongue. For fully five minutes he fired questions at Ole, but without hesitating for an instant to permit a reply. Ole grinned and patiently awaited an opportunity. At length Casey paused in sheer exhaustion.

"Gold," remarked Ole, "she bane where you find 'em."

"It is," said Casey, in a small, awe-struck voice. "But *how* did the gold get in the ashes, an' where did ye find the gosh-dinged ashes, anyway?"

"Ay yust burn two boxes for wood." Ole pointed to a small pile of boards by the stove. "Then when Ay tak' out the ashes, Ay——"

"An' ye mean ye were burnin' sluice boxes?" Casey interrupted excitedly. "But a pile of ashes like that, man! A pile like that don't come from two sluice boxes!"

Ole's grin broadened. "Torpey bane burn boxes for——"

Casey suddenly saw the light. "Sure," he broke in hurriedly; "Torpey's been burnin' the camp's old sluice boxes for years, but how in thunder does it come that none of us old timers ever thought that them old boxes would every one of 'em have a bit of gold stuck around in the cracks of them? An' you, as green as they make 'em, drop onto a thing I never heard of before!" Casey paused and laughed uproariously. "An' when ye found the bit of gold in the ashes from your stove, ye had the nerve to go ask Torpey for his ash pile. Is that it?"

Ole nodded.

"But what in thunder did the man think ye wanted with his ash pile?" Casey asked breathlessly. "How did ye go about it?"

"Ay yust say Ay tak' the ashes; Ay want exercise."

"How much," Casey began speculatively, "do you suppose is in that bunch of ashes?"

Ole, as if reminded of something, went stolidly to work. "Ay can tell more, when Ay pan 'em," he said.

Without reply, Casey went to his cabin, and returned with a gold pan and a tub, which he filled from the river. Then, seating himself he went to work with a will and on the following day the pile of ashes had disappeared. Casey went to his cabin then for gold scales. Hopefully they weighed the gold they had recovered. The result was disappointing.

"About seven hundred an' sixty dollars," said Casey. "It's two hunderd an' forty more ye need an' ye've only till tonight at twelve o'clock to beg, borrow or steal it. An' there's no chance to do any one of the three. If only ye had the Booby ready to mine, but ye haven't an' it'll take at least three weeks' time to open the claim up. Good night an' a few kind words!"

Ole's light blue eyes suddenly opened wide as he gazed through the open door. His broad face beamed, as he turned to Casey.

"Ay tank tonight we burn some more boxes," he said, waving a huge hand at the old diggings. "Ay——"

"I don't care whether ye're goin' to say ye bane or ye tank," interrupted Casey. "You keep still till I think this thing out for ye. On the old claims out there we'll probably find forty more sluice boxes. Now, as I think it all over," he went on patronizingly, "a bunch o' boxes that've had the gold they've had sluiced through 'em—why, it's a cinch the cracks an' seams in each box will be holdin' from five to ten dollars! But listen. We must go easy. We mustn't let a soul know what we're about." He cocked an eye toward the ceiling. "Tell you, Ole; you meet me out there after dark. We'll go behind a hill, clean out o' sight o' town, an' burn 'em there." Casey seized his hat. "Lucky thing for you," he said as he reached the door, "that I'm here to be thinkin' this thing out for ye. Don't forget. Come by the cabin early tonight, but be sure it's after dark!"

That night, behind a hill a mile from the village, Ole and his garrulous friend went to work. From the abandoned claims, Ole carried the heavy sluice boxes, while Casey pyramided and burned them. The boxes weighed upward of a hundred pounds each,

yet Ole was carrying two of them on each trip. At the end of three hours, he staggered to the fire with his last load. It was cold, but Ole was fairly dripping with perspiration; his long, yellow-brown hair clung in a damp mass to his forehead, and his great hamlike hands were trembling from his prodigious labors. Thoughts of Selma Halvorson and the home on the Sound caused him to glance hurriedly at his alarm clock, which he had placed near the fire. It was ten o'clock. By working fast, the job would be finished by midnight.

"An' ye're loafin' again," Casey scolded. He prodded the fire with a long pole, and tossed a charred box end into the flames. "All evenin' ye've hardly been able to carry the boxes in as fast as I could burn 'em! Get busy now, an' load the tubs!"

Ole grinned. He had filled one of the tubs with ashes before Casey had begun to thunder his instructions, and there was now an enforced wait until the last of the boxes was burned.

"Ay tank Ay had a hard yob; two boxes, she's a good load," he suggested.

"Good load, is it!" Casey exploded. "An' ye're kickin' now about your wurruk! An' all ye've done is to pack the boxes, whilst I burned 'em! Good load is it! Sure, an' I've packed *horses* out in Idyho that carried their two hunderd pounds, an' carried it all day! An' here the likes of a big lazy Swede kicks, when half the time he was travelin' without any load at all! I tell ye, we've got to hurry. Torpey'll be lookin' me up by twelve o'clock. He won't lose a minute's time demandin' his deed, an' if ye're a minute late payin' me my thousan', ye're a goner. Hurry!"

It was twenty minutes of twelve, when they finished their panning in Casey's cabin. Casey was overjoyed as he poured the gold from gold pan to blower, and thence into a pair of gold scales.

"It's two hunderd an' forty ye need to make up the thousan', Ole," he said, as he began carefully weighing the gold, "an' I'll bet my old hat that ye've got more'n enough. Sure, an' it's a lucky Swede ye are!" He turned to two of his cronies, whom he had aroused for the occasion. "Step up, boys, an' watch me weigh this. Ole's got to have you boys witness the whole thing, so Torpey can't work any funny business in court. Ye've already seen the seven hundred an' sixty dollars weighed. Now watch, an' ye'll see that this comes to two forty, or I miss my guess. Now—that's blame funny—" Casey fumbled with the weights, then worked feverishly with a stub of a pencil for a moment. "Boys," he went on with a gloomy shake of his head; "I'm askin' no man to lie for Ole. The big Swede has only nine hunderd an' seventy-three dollars to his name. He needs but twenty-seven dollars to make up his thousan' an'—Ole! Ye have but ten minutes left! What in thunder are ye goin' to do about ——"

The door had opened, and Torpey, whose expression had quickly whisked from that of satisfaction to suspicion and distrust, was standing at Casey's side. Instantly he saw the gold and caught the significance of the presence of Casey's friends. His face went white.

"What are you trying to pull off?" he demanded. "That Swede's broke, and—where did that money come from?"

Casey grasped at the fabled straw. "The Swede's not broke!" he retorted, "an' he's got ten minutes left to take up his option. But I'll tell ye, Torpey. We're shootin' square. He's already paid me nine hunderd an' seventy-three bucks, an'—I'm takin' his I. O. U. for the rest of the thousan'."

"You'll do nothing of the kind!" Torpey yelped. "That option calls for a thousand dollars *cash*, and now that he's failed to make good, I want my deed. I can beat your little deal in any court in Alaska, and I'll——"

"It goes just like I said, Torpey," Casey interrupted. "If ye can beat Ole in court, ye'll have to do it there; but I'm givin' him his deed tomorrow!"

Ole, who had been silently listening, now came forward. "Ay tank Torpey's got me licked, if Ay——"

"Sure, I've got you over a barrel!" Torpey exclaimed with much enthusiasm.

"If," Ole continued jerkily, biting off his words with extreme difficulty, "Ay don't pay you that thousand dollar cash." He seized Casey with a hamlike hand and propelled the little Irishman to a far corner of the room. At the end of a brief whispered conversation, Casey gave a shout of delight, and rushed back to Torpey.

"Sure, an' Ole's got ye now, Torpey!"

he exclaimed, clapping his hand to his hip pocket. "An' the Swede's right, too! Ye see, Torpey, I've been broke so long, I'd forgot all about the fifty dollars ye paid me. I've forty of it left, an' I'm makin' Ole a bit of a loan. So now, ye see, he can pay me the thousan', an' I can give him his deed!"

The two men Casey had produced for witnesses laughed outright. Like everyone else in Nugget City, they disliked Torpey, and were highly pleased that a way had been found to circumvent the wily storekeeper.

Torpey leaped forward to prevent the exchange of money. "It's collusion!" he screamed at Casey. "It's fraud, and I can beat you in court on that, too! You can't be an interested party, as you are, and loan the money to pay yourself, you idiot!"

Casey considered this, and at last shook his head solemnly as he looked up at Ole. "I'm afraid you've lost out, Ole," he said disconsolately. "Anyhow, I'm thinkin' Torpey's right, for if I lend ye the money, why—" His eye strayed casually to the rawhide thong fastened to the lapel buttonhole of Ole's Mackinaw coat, and followed it to the bulging pocket where Ole carried his alarm clock. Casey woke up. For the first time, since he had taken part in this intricate business deal, his brain actually functioned. "Listen, Torpey!" he exclaimed gleefully. "Do ye remember the time ye told me I'd better get me a clock like the Swede's? Well, ever since Ole blew into Nugget City, I've been admirin' the pretty little watch he carries, an' if he can bring himself to part with the trinket, I'll be buyin' it."

Torpey quickly caught the drift of Casey's speech. Once he opened his mouth to remonstrate, but closed it with a snap, as he realized that he was beaten.

"An' now, Ole," Casey went on, "Torpey gave ye the ashes with over seven hunderd in 'em, an' he gave me the money to buy that watch. He's furnished nearly all of the thousan' to pay me for the claim! Thank him quick, Ole, before he gets out!"

Torpey was on his way to the door, growling unintelligible things as he went. Casey grinned.

"I'll give ye thirty dollars for the little beauty, Ole!" he fairly shouted, determined that Torpey should hear. "Is that enough?"

Ole solemnly held the clock forth. "Ay tank so," he said.

"WHERE TO FIND IT"

CALIFORNIA placer gold fields are estimated to have produced a billion dollars' worth of dust and nuggets since their discovery in 1848, but a statement by the California state mining bureau recently puts at $600,000,000 the value which still may be recovered by modern methods of working pay gravel.

The bureau recently completed an investigation of mining conditions. The principal placer area of the state lies in the Sierra Nevada mountains between Susanville and Mariposa. This area is tributary to the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers. There was also found a big yardage of available gravel remaining on the tributaries of the Klamath River in the northern part of the state.

According to estimates based on the investigation there are seven billion yards of gravel, of which the bureau assumes sixty per cent can be worked. It should yield about 15 cents a cubic yard, said the report, and under hydraulic mining more than a billion dollars worth of gold should be recovered.

Opposition to hydraulic mining with dredges is encountered from agricultural interests, who allege that the worked over ground never can be farmed.—L. R.

THE INVISIBLE PEOPLE

WHEN the African goes through the jungle he is surrounded on all sides by malevolent spirits. All his gods and spirits are evil. His religion is founded on fear. He starts at every break of twig, flutter of falling leaf. Nothing is natural; the hand of unseen things is in everything. There are the Mionde, or disembodied spirits, which are jealous of human beings in the flesh, and Manu, a sort of Dryads, and Abambo, or ghosts, and Ombwiri, which interfere with and upset human plans. He has charms against each and every kind, but the best charm, if he can get possession of it, is a human eye. Ah! a human eye is great medicine against the spirits.

THE PETRIFIED TREASURE

By ALLAN VAUGHAN ELSTON

QUINN'S SON, HIS GRASPING EX-PARTNER, AND A CITY GUNMAN-SWINDLER ALL SOUGHT THE MYSTERY CACHE IN THE STRANGE CABIN. HALF OF THE SECRET WAS KNOWN IN THE SUMMER, YET HALF OF IT REMAINED TO BE TOLD BY THE FIRST SNOWFALL OF WINTER

THE snow was falling when Quisenberry, of the late partnership of Quisenberry and Quinn, emerged from the petrified forest and saw on the horizon of a fading day—the petrified cabin. He approached it afoot, with mingled emotions of self ridicule and faltering hope.

This deserted homestead was his, Quisenberry's, now. Once it had been his partner's, Quinn's, but, like everything else of Quinn's, even the old petrified cabin had fallen into the rapacious grasp of Quisenberry. Thirty years before, in his old prospecting days, Quinn had built the domicile of stone logs. Here it stood now, an appropriate monument to the queerness of its deceased builder. Old Quisenberry saw it for the first time, as he approached in the gloom of twilight to pick the bones of its half revealed secret. Snow, he recalled, was to reveal the other half of the secret.

He assured himself that he did not believe the first half of it; yet the bare possibilities had lured his greed. So it was with mingled emotions of self ridicule and hope that he pushed open the door and, together with a considerable flurry of snow, entered the petrified cabin.

As he closed the door he saw trespassers in the room, two of them. They were men. At the moment of Quisenberry's entrance one was in the act of lighting an oil lamp, and the other was tossing a stick of wood upon the hearth fire. Quisenberry was startled. His first reaction was one of fear that he had stumbled upon some nest of outlaws, lurking in the deserted homestead. However, as the lamplight settled into clarity he saw the nearest man and knew him. His momentary fear subsided.

But what was young Ralph Quinn doing here in the petrified cabin?

Then Quisenberry saw the other man, the one by the fire, and fear in part returned. He was Bulger, one eyed Blackie Bulger! The newcomer saw the man turn from the hearth with a snarl at his intrusion—saw the quick hand flash to hip. Then followed the killer's recognition and his grumbled query, "What the hell you doin' here?"

Quisenberry was not particularly afraid of Blackie's gun. Back in Pease City he had known the other, had used him himself in some schemes. What he did fear was the motive of Blackie's presence. Did Bulger, always a vulture of easy money, know anything about Quinn's cache? If not, what was he doing this far from his line of man traps?

The voice of the youngest of the trio, the son of old Quinn himself, interrupted Quisenberry's apprehensive reflection. "If it isn't old Quissy! Who lost you out here, Quissy?"

Quisenberry had regained his poise. He was the master here. Though it was his

first visit, he owned the petrified cabin. It now irritated him that two fly by night trespassers should dare demand a reason for his entry. He exploded wrathfully, "It's my place, I reckon. What—?" It was on his lips to question their own reasons for being there. But he checked himself. He was sure that he knew the reason. They were after the famous Quinn cache.

He spoke no further, but glared at the two men confronting him. Then he threw his light pack down on the floor and moved toward the fire. With his back to this, he contemplated young Ralph Quinn, ignoring, for the moment, Blackie Bulger. The young man was opening tins and spreading food upon the table.

There were two bed rolls in the room. Both of these men then, considered Quisenberry, must have come ahorse. Quisenberry himself had brought but a small pack, intending to stay only the one night for a preliminary reconnoissance of the place.

The unexpected presence of the other two men, together with the increasing volume of snow, might alter the situation. Quisenberry dared not leave them at the cabin and go away. As for ordering them off—well, Blackie for one, probably the only armed man in the party, would hardly accept such a mandate. And as for young Quinn, he seemed to have an assortment of food on hand, which would make his company an asset during any protracted period of confinement.

Quisenberry recalled that Blackie Bulger, during old Quinn's lifetime, had made frequent and successful plays upon the ex-prospector's confidence. Possibly he had wormed the secret of the petrified cache from the old man, or, at least, he might have obtained some clue to its location. That would explain Blackie's presence here.

Of course young Quinn was on the same errand. It was but natural that the father, before he died, should have confided the thing to his own son. Yet perhaps not, for the old man had passed away suddenly while the boy was away at mining college. Quisenberry knew that his deceased partner had intended the cache for his son, because there had been those typed instructions as to its finding that had been left for Ralph in Quinn's private box in the firm vault. Quisenberry knew this because he himself had pilfered the letter from the box.

But he had hardly known whether to take seriously the peculiar and mysterious language of the instructions. It had told but the half of a story. The other half of it had been left, strangely enough, to be read on the white page of a new fallen snow. All this had seemed a hoax to Quisenberry. Though inwardly scoffing at himself, ridiculing his own folly, he had not been able to resist the temptation to investigate. But now here was Bulger. Here was Ralph Quinn. They were the only two men who might have learned the key from the lips of his old eccentric partner. Here they both were, skulking before him in the petrified cabin on the eve of the first winter snow. Fortuitously one of them might have come—but never the two.

"Git some more firewood," came the order growled in the voice of Blackie Bulger.

Quisenberry started. He was not used to receiving commands. This one had been directed at him. What did the crook mean? Relegating him to the office of chore-boy on his property? But there was a threat in the one eyed stare of Bulger that checked Quisenberry's retort.

Ralph Quinn spoke cheerfully enough, "Come on, Quissy, I'll go with you and fetch a pail of water." The younger man picked a bucket as he spoke, and moved toward the door. Quisenberry followed, inwardly raging at himself for so doing. The two ducked out into the storm.

Around the house, and near to it, Quisenberry saw the squat profile of the one outbuilding. Reaching it, at the heels of Ralph Quinn, he classified it as a shed, like the cabin itself built from the snags of petrified trees. At the door of it there was a well. Here Quinn stopped and began to fish for water with a rope and an oaken bucket. "Wood's inside," he directed Quisenberry.

"See here," rasped the older man, unable to repress himself any longer, "what are you doing here? How long have you been here? Don't you know the place belongs to me?"

Ralph Quinn laughed in good nature. "Good thing for you, I'd say, that I *am* here! Good thing I've been here three days and got in plenty of fuel and grub. Oh, I know the cabin's yours. I've just been camping in it for a few days while I prospect around. It was dad's old hang-out, you know."

"What about Blackie Bulger?" demanded Quisenberry.

The younger man shrugged. "Don't know anything about him. He just blew

in an hour before you did, and made himself at home."

Quisenberry entered the shed to get an armful of wood. Inside, he saw that one end of the shed was occupied by two horses, now munching grain, and that there was about a half cord of firewood stacked in his own end of the building.

With a load of wood in his arms he turned and scowled after Quinn, who was retracing the dozen yards toward the cabin with the bucket of water. "Prospectin' round, eh?" muttered Quisenberry. A sneer came to his lips, for he knew that it was not the way of young mining engineers, fresh from college, to go prospecting in a winter wilderness. The thing confirmed his guess. Ralph Quinn was here, waiting for the first new snow, to track the petrified treasure. Here, too, was the snow itself. There might have been a carbon copy of that purloined letter!

And Bulger? The one eyed bone picker of the living as of the dead? Bulger, heeled with a gun, was here, too. Quisenberry swore between his chattering teeth as he stumbled outside and made his way through the thickening flakes to the cabin.

There he found Blackie Bulger wolfishly devouring the cold food that had been set out by Ralph Quinn. Quisenberry had little appetite himself. He retrieved the pack which he had thrown upon the floor, opened it, and after eating a single cracker, rolled it up again. Moodily he sat by the fire, wondering how to rid himself of the other men, or how to defeat their obvious purpose.

After an hour, Bulger began to arrange his bedding roll upon the floor. Young Quinn did likewise in another corner, after first offering the half of it to Quisenberry. Quisenberry snappishly refused. He would sit up the night, he said.

This he did. For the life of him he could not have slep that night with ever so downy a couch. For what—ran the chorus of his thought—for what if the paper within his sheepskin coat spoke truth? What if old Quinn, after all, had written a fact and not a fancy? What if, notwithstanding the entire absurdity of it, the morrow's blanket of snow would blaze the trail to the cache of old Quinn's treasure? For himself, Quisenberry? Ah, yes, but if so, then, too, for Blackie Bulger and for the younger Quinn.

The man on the hearth stirred uncomfortably as the room grew colder. The fire smouldered, and once or twice during the early hours of the night he was forced to go out to the shed for more wood. The flakes were coming fast and the snow was ankle deep. Returning each time, he would toss the wood upon the fire and glance spitefully at the two men sleeping upon the floor.

Sleeping? Not always, for once he observed the lone, baleful eye of Blackie Bulger open and fixed upon him. Quisenberry attempted to return the stare with assumed bravado until the man drew shut the single window of his sight; but the eye remained open. Quisenberry gave it up, and hitched his chair so that his back was toward Bulger.

In a moment he looked quickly over his shoulder. Bulger was asleep again. Quisenberry hunched down in his seat to a night of scheming. How might he outtrick Bulger and Quinn? How might he learn, in the first place, just what they knew? Did they know as much or more than he?

His mind referred to the eccentricities of the elder, the late deceased Quinn. In the long partnership he had plucked Quinn many times. But Quinn, plucked, had never failed to come back for another plucking, always with new feathers. Always when he had had the man's last dollar the fellow would go away, for a day, two, ten—and then return well supplied with money! Of late years he had managed to put young Ralph through the mining engineering college. Gullible though he was, easily swindled, old Quinn had seemed to have a perennial stake in the offing.

Where had the old ex-prospector gone for it? Quisenberry knew. Blackie Bulger over there knew. Everybody in Pease City knew. For old Quinn had been trailed on more than one of his recuperative trips. Always had he gone to the deserted homestead of his prospecting days, always to the petrified cabin. It was assumed that he must have had some hidden source of wealth about the place. For years men had named it "the petrified treasure."

There had been nothing elaborate about Quinn's trips. Always he left alone, riding a burro, without tools with which to bore or powder with which to drill. Al-

ways, and with a degree of promptitude, he returned with a new stake. None knew the form of this mysterious wealth, whether of dust or cash or nuggets or sterling. For the deposit would always arrive at Pease City in the shape of a certified draft on the bank of a larger city. But invariably had the voyage to the petrified cabin, nearby the petrified forest, preceded the increment to the man's checkered fortune.

In his last years old Quinn himself had accepted the name with jocular acquiescence. "Time to go and dig up some more petrified treasure," he would say; and then he would depart burro-back for the stamping grounds of his old prospecting days.

Many had sought to discover the trove of Quinn's treasure, in his life; none more so than Quisenberry, who now hovered by to claw at it. Unless it was Blackie Bulger——

Quisenberry, hunched by the fire, jerked his head sharply to look at the prostrate form of Bulger. He winced. The one eye of the man again was open and upon him. The sightless socket of the other eye, the one stabbed out in an old gaming house affair, marked a sinister contrast to the luster of hate smouldering within its living mate. Quisenberry felt the cold defiance of the gaze. Balefully it accused the machinations of his scheming mind.

But the Cyclops closed the muscled lid, and slept once more.

Quisenberry turned again his back squarely upon Blackie Bulger. He was sure now that Bulger was his most dangerous competitor. It was reasonable to assume, after all, that old Quinn had not disclosed the key to the boy, Ralph, and had not left a copy of the letter, for why then should he have left written directions in the safety box?

The man on the hearth moved his hand stealthily toward the pocket of his sheepskin coat, and felt the rustle of the paper within. The written direction itself!

Pondering on the bald and unbelievable language of that letter, Quisenberry felt again, as always, the inclination toward doubt and self ridicule. Stranger than all the strange acts of Quinn's life, more so even than that first singular achievement of his youth, when he had built a house from the snags of stone trees, was this last and bequeathed letter to his son, purloined now by Quisenberry.

The thing was a paradox; it defeated its own language. Yet now, with a last fleeting glance toward the sleeping men, Quisenberry took it from his pocket and read it again. Between the lamplight and the firelight he perused the directions for finding the cache.

My son: Men say that I possess a petrified treasure. If so, it is because I have searched and toiled to find it. Yours, too, should be some measure of search and toil, but I shall make it easy for you. When cold grips the petrified cabin, when a new snow covers the ground, the first man-tracks leading away from the cabin through this snow will guide to the petrified treasure. Doubt not the wisdom of an old man. Where these man tracks stop, where they halt to proceed no more, stop you, and search nearby.

Almost with a feeling of repulsion Quisenberry crushed the paper within his hand. For a moment he considered casting it upon the flames of the hearth; but he restored it to the pocket of his coat. Man tracks leading from the cabin! Bah!

Well Quisenberry knew that no men were within ten miles—none but the three of them, snugly nested inside this room. Outside, the new snow was falling, first of the season, first since the death of old Quinn. Therefore the direction defeated all logic. None of the three of them knew the location of the cache. At best the other two knew no more than himself.

Obviously the first track of man or men to mar the surface of the new snow must be of their own making. It would probably lead back to Pease City, where they one and all must return when supplies gave out. Or it might meander in any random direction, wherever the unguided footsteps of the first of them led.

Grunting skeptically, the man on the hearth glanced toward his unsympathetic companions. Both were sleeping; even the wakeful Bulger was snoring now. So Quisenberry tiptoed to the door, opened it and looked out. The snow was still falling. He utilized the occasion for another trip to the woodshed, and brought a load of fuel.

Sinking in his chair again, he pondered the puzzle of whether or not these other two men were his competitors in the search for the hidden cache. Would they watch, in the morning, as would he, for a message printed in snow?

Then he thought of an easy way to trick them into displaying their hands. He evolved a scheme to find out whether they knew about old Quinn's direction, provided the snow stopped falling before morning. He could not only discover the extent of their knowledge, but, if they possessed such knowledge, he could turn it to his own advantage. He could lead them on a false trail. He, Quisenberry, could make man tracks leading from the petrified cabin!

For another hour he sat, scheming his scheme. At last he arose and went softly to the door, looked out. It had quit snowing. He put on his hat to venture forth, and salt this new fallen snow with the booted heel of a man.

But on the threshold, he sensed an unfamiliar something in the room, a sound, or a lack of one. Then he knew that Blackie Bulger had ceased snoring. He looked at the man, saw the baleful eye open again, bent darkly upon him, challenging him.

Quisenberry scooped up the water pail by the door. He would defeat suspicion by making his exit logical. He traversed the dozen yards to the well at the door of the shed, filled the bucket and returned. He put the bucket down outside cautiously, and peered into the room. From its confines came again the snore of Blackie Bulger.

Quisenberry did not enter, but turned and dashed off at random across the snow. He paid no attention to direction. East or west or south or north, he cared not where his tracks might lead. Away from the petrified cabin; that was his only goal.

How far? He considered, as he slowed to a walk. Well, he would lead his cheated trackers off the petrified cabin homestead. That would do. A quarter of a mile would accomplish the thing, for the tract was a quarter section. And if indeed there were a buried cache, it would of course be on Quinn's own old filing, and not on the surrounding government land.

Gaging his distance, Quisenberry chuckled as he trudged on through the snow. Finally he was aware that gaunt shapes were about him. Their shadows fell grotesquely across the whitened snow in the moonlight. He touched one of the shapes—a stone snag. He was in the petrified forest. Then he had gone far enough, more than a quarter of a mile. He turned and retraced his footsteps, stepping carefully in his own tracks.

So he reached the petrified cabin. Picking up the pail of water, he entered the house. Blackie was snoring still. From Ralph Quinn came the easy breathing of youthful slumber. All was well. Chuckling still, Quisenberry seated himself by the fire to await the revelation of dawn.

Yet when the first pink streaks of it came, Quisenberry himself paced nervously from window to window, anxiously scanning the mantle of white upon the desert without. More than half he believed the fantastic prediction of old man Quinn. More than half he was prepared to see some phantom trail leading from the petrified cabin to the cache of old Quinn's hoard.

But as the light grew, the undisturbed blanket of snow mocked his superstition. There were no tracks, none but his own, leading off to the petrified forest. As the light grew and grew, he scoffed at his momentary doubt. The day revealed no path of a spectral guide through the snow. So Quisenberry scoffed and turned to face his two companions of the night, now arising from their beds of sleep.

Satisfied himself that there was nothing but the fantasy of an unsettled brainstorm in old Quinn's last instruction, he turned to witness the reaction of the planted evidence upon the faces of his competing treasure seekers.

Would they rush to windows and look for tracks in the snow? Seeing his own, Quisenberry's, would they follow them? Their actions would at least give away their degree of knowledge of the weird instruction itself.

Blackie Bulger was the first to rise. Quisenberry watched him covertly; but Bulger made no move to a window, either at once or later. He moved sourly toward the hearth, remained there warming himself by the fire, displaying no interest whatever in the outside world.

After all, conceded Quisenberry, Bulger probably had not wormed anything out of old Quinn. Very likely he was simply lying low here at the old petrified cabin to mark time after one of his frequent misdeeds. Regarding him, Quisenberry mentally chalked Blackie off the list of competitors, although now, of course, there was nothing for which to compete. The direction was a proved hoax.

Then young Ralph Quinn rose from his bed. Quinn did not go to the fire. Without even pausing to draw on his boots, he ran to a window; then another, then to the last one. Quisenberry watched the boy study at length the man tracks leading

away from the petrified cabin. He noted the preoccupation on the youth's countenance as he turned to put on his shoes. The expression of eagerness in his eyes told the tale.

Silently and swiftly young Quinn made his toilet at a basin. Ralph was not his usual congenial self, thought Quisenberry. It was not like the young man to omit the greetings of the morning.

During the time that Ralph consumed a hasty breakfast, consisting of the contents of a can of sausages and some bread smeared with syrup, Quisenberry, watching him, became more and more sure that he would rise to the bait of the false trail. When the boy declined the warm coffee that Bulger had prepared over the fire, and began to button on his heavy coat, the baiter was certain of it.

The thing became a fact when Ralph put on his hat, left the room, and began to trudge out toward the petrified forest, following the tracks made by Quisenberry in the night.

Fool! thought Quisenberry. So much for a college education! By now he had forgotten his own recent and anxious peerings out upon the snow. He did not charge against himself his own season of doubting. He did not realize that had he seen tracks other than his own leading off from the cabin, he long since would have been on their trail. Now he scoffed at young Quinn, dashing off on the fool's quest.

Blackie Bulger, by the fire, busied himself with his own breakfast. He displayed no interest in the sudden exit of Ralph Quinn.

But Quisenberry could not draw himself from the door, where he watched the retreating figure of the young man. He saw him attain the edge of the petrified forest and in a moment stop at the end of the trail, Quisenberry's trail, the swindling trail, the random cheater of fools. He saw the boy pause where the planted spoor stopped, where it halted to proceed no more, and then begin to dig rocks from the snow and pile them up.

Quisenberry laughed outright now. Old Quinn himself had been easy, but his son was the prize mark of the line! There he was actually building a mining monument to protect the buried cache! Swindler though he was, Quisenberry would have hardly believed that such puerile faith could exist. Surely no rainbow had ever led to a less promising vein; surely no path had ever followed to a more futile adventure.

One thing however was certain now. The young fellow knew of the "man tracks in the snow" direction. The boy knew it, and moreover, he believed.

It was just as certain that Blackie Bulger knew nothing, for he had followed no trail, nor had he even looked out to see if one existed. Quisenberry joined Bulger by the fire and partook of bread and coffee.

At the window again, he saw young Quinn returning to the cabin. The young man did not enter but went directly to the shed and saddled his horse. Quisenberry, curious, stepped out to find his intention.

Ralph did not speak till he was in the saddle. Then he called out with his old geniality, "Going to Pease City, Quissy, to file me a mining claim. Anything I can do for you, Quissy?"

Quisenberry suppressed a smile. So the boy was going the limit, was he? But he recalled his own situation, facing as he did the prospect of a ten mile tramp through the snow.

"Yes," he answered. "Stop at Merton's livery and tell them to send a buckboard out here to get me."

"Sure thing," agreed Quinn, and then left on a trot for Pease City.

Quisenberry returned to the cabin. All that day he sat by the fire, in the sullen company of Blackie Bulger. Bulger himself left the cabin but once, to feed and water his horse. Quisenberry was convinced now that the man was simply hiding out here in this lone spot, after some shady transaction.

Night came, and the buckboard from Merton's livery had not arrived. Quisenberry slept on the bed roll left by Ralph Quinn. He slept soundly, making up for his loss the night before. The matter of the hidden cache did not disturb him now. Perhaps one existed; but it certainly did not exist where young Quinn was bent on searching. And there was solid proof that the track in the snow clue had no sound virtue. So Quisenberry slept.

The next morning the sun shone warmly upon the snows about the petrified cabin. By nine o'clock Quisenberry did not need his sheepskin coat, as he stood in the open doorway and watched the horizon for the

approach of the livery rig.

At last he saw a team coming through the snags of the petrified forest. Merton's outfit, no doubt. But no, it was a loaded wagon and he saw it stop beside the rock monument that young Quinn had erected the day before. He now could see that Quinn was there himself, and with him were two other men who began to unload the wagon.

Quisenberry thought to walk the five hundred yards to the spot and find out about his own buckboard. Too, he could not resist the impulse to chaff young Quinn about his new mining venture.

By the time Quisenberry arrived at the place, Quinn and his helpers had shoveled a spot bare of snow and were erecting a tent. They next proceeded to unload an outfit of picks, shovels, drills and camp supplies.

"Greetings, Quissy," called out Ralph. "I ordered your buckboard; they promised to be out some time this morning."

"Opening up a new claim, eh?" commented the older man. "What's all the hurry?"

"Oh, I just thought I'd get some test pits started to show proof of occupancy. That's according to Hoyle, you know. I don't want anybody jumping this claim."

When Ralph seized a pick and began hacking at the ground at the very spot where the false trail had originally ended in the snow, Quisenberry could withhold his mirth no longer. He threw back his head and laughed uproariously.

"You poor boob," he cackled; "you poor deluded boob!"

Ralph Quinn paid him no attention, but continued to hack at the frozen ground with the pick.

In the distance now, from the direction of Pease City, Quisenberry could see a buckboard laboring through the snow. His own relief was coming. So he walked back toward the petrified cabin to get his coat and pack and be ready for the trip home. He would leave the environs to the folly of Ralph Quinn and to the skulking residence of Blackie Bulger.

When he entered the cabin, Blackie was not there. Bulger was gone and so, too, was Bulger's bed roll. Intuitively Quisenberry sensed that something was wrong. Why should Bulger, who had hardly stirred from the house in two days, have developed this sudden activity and fled the place in his own brief absence?

Quisenberry picked up his sheepskin coat from the table and began to put it on. Then he recalled that he had left the coat on a chair. His hand went instinctively to the pockets of it. His money? No, he had brought no money with him. Quisenberry felt for the paper, the indirect direction of old Quinn for the finding of the petrified treasure. The paper was gone.

He knew that Blackie had rifled his coat of this one worthless content. Worthless? Quisenberry paled. Now that Blackie had the thing, it seemed somehow to regain an importance. Blackie had been a sharp crook. Maybe Blackie could read the hidden code of the message that had seemed such nonsense to Quisenberry.

Was Blackie really gone? His horse? Quisenberry hurried around to the shed to ascertain if Bulger's horse was gone. It was.

But the thing that paralyzed his senses was the condition of the interior of the shed. All of the sticks of fuel had been thrown topsy-turvy. The mangers in the stalls had been pulled to pieces. The grain boxes lay battered to one side. Quisenberry saw, too, that certain of the stone logs of the petrified shed were loose, and had been pried from position. And above all he saw that one of these loose logs, aslant now to the floor of the shed, was hollow; that its inside had been lined with gunny sacking!

He opened his lips to shriek a curse on Blackie Bulger. But his very rage choked the muscles of his throat. Here was the cache of old Quinn. Here had been the hoard that had replenished the old man's visible fortune from time to time. Here indeed had been the petrified treasure!

When his brain began to function Quisenberry saw the supreme error of his calculation. In his effort to perceive the supernatural he had overlooked the natural. Straining his eyes to detect some phantom man track through the snow, he had overlooked the beaten path to the shed door where he had gone himself many times through the night for fuel and water. Old Quinn must have known where the first track of a snow bound dawn leads inevitably.

Here in this hollow stone log had been the petrified treasure. Now, whatever it had held of dust or cash or sterling, was gone, gone with Blackie Bulger.

Near the hollow log of the cache was a tin box. Quisenberry knew it must have been the depository of the hoard itself. It was open, and empty of course. Bulger would have seen to that.

Nevertheless, Quisenberry threw him-

self on his knees beside it and shook it. He clawed the ground about, delved a quivering hand along the gunny sacking of the hollow log, as if to find some one gem, some stray nugget or pinch of dust to salvage from the lost loot of the cache. None came to his finding.

But he did grasp a paper near the box, and in the gloom of the shed he recognized the handwriting of old man Quinn. Rising, he tottered to the light of the doorway to read its message. The sun on the snow outside almost blinded him for a moment and he put his hand before his eyes.

To his ears came the sounds of picks and drills, clicking at the frozen ground, off there in the petrified forest. Even in his own defeat Quisenberry heard these sounds, and they almost brought him comfort.

At last he turned his back to the sun and read the note. He read, and read twice, the last dictum of Quinn, the old prospector, to Quinn, the young mining engineer:

My son: Grieve not because this box is empty. The last of its store has gone to buy for you the wisdom of the great college.

Now that you have learning, follow not in the footsteps of your father. Follow not on a jackass, as have I, hither and yon, seeking the dust that glitters in the pan, leaving underfoot and behind the fundamental riches of the earth.

Dig up the petrified forest, boy. There shallow to your drill, you will find a magnet of gold. And when men grow cold, and new snows fall, their tracks will make a beaten path to bring treasure from your door.

Dig in the petrified forest. There lies the petrified treasure—coal.

ONE DOLLAR ROUND-TRIP TICKETS

A DOLLAR for a first class round trip ticket from Los Angeles to points east as far as Missouri by the Southern Pacific, was the rate in effect in 1886! The Ess Pee and Santa Fe had got into bitter rivalry. Freight rates had been slashed to a ruinous point. Carloads of coal had been shipped to Los Angeles from Chicago at a dollar a ton. Harris Newmark, a merchant of Los Angeles of those times, writes in his diary, "Such an opportunity never again will present itself to Los Angeles." It's likely that he made a safe prophecy!

But that dollar round trip passenger rate. The fare had been cut in the rivalry between the two roads, to fifteen dollars, when suddenly the Ess Pee's agent, Charley White, flung a final challenge at the Santa Fe by advertising a dollar fare. Thousands of Easterners took advantage of the rate to emigrate to California; and Los Angeles experienced its first of many sequent sudden leaps in population and wild booms. Of course the rate lasted only till the Eastern offices of the Ess Pee could get in touch with Charley White and tell him in an unprejudiced way their reactions. But it was great while it did last.

BARRY LAYS DOWN THE LAW

CASE NO. 606, in the records of the court of Richard C. Barry, Sonora, California. Barry his own recorder.

"This sute was between two gamboolers. E. Krohe the gambooler who sooed Sam Head the gambooler to recover 300 dolers won at ceards. After much swearing one way and another the lawyers, H. B. Barber and Leander Quint, argooed the caze, which after a long time they got through with. I discided that Barber was right, whereupon Quint said please your honor I never can git justice in your coort; putting out his thumb and finger. I told him the like of him in my country (Texas) often lost their fingers stealing corn or chickens, and that if I had anything to say he never shood have justice here. I ordered him to hold his mug and shet up; when he went out of coort he began to grumble again; I ordered John Luny the constable to arrest him and bring him into coort before me, which he done, and I then fined him $25 for contempt of coort."

WOLVES OF LAC LA FOURCHE

By REGINALD C. BARKER

Author of "A Tenderfoot of the Snows," etc.

BESET BY THE STARVING HORDE, OUT OF AMMUNITION, INEXPLICABLY DESERTED BY A PARTNER WHOSE LOYALTY ALWAYS HAD BEEN UNQUESTIONED, MARCEL DUPREZ FOUGHT HIS WAY MORE THAN TWO HUNDRED MILES TO SAFETY—AND AN UNDERSTANDING OF TRUE MANHOOD

STANDING in front of his trapping camp on Windy Arm, Marcel Duprez gazed into the dusk that was gathering over the frozen surface of Lac La Fourche and listened to the howl of the distant wolves.

"The Black Pack, she is go long time hongree," he muttered, "but me, I should worry, for the winter, soon she will be past and with the furs which Pierre Langroise and I have caught, I will return to my Angeline."

Pushing aside the caribou skin curtain that served in lieu of a door, the trapper entered the cabin. Replenishing the fire he squatted in front of it and, puffing contentedly at his pipe, from time to time cast an appreciative glance at a half dozen dark brown, orange throated marten skins that hung from the rafters.

Little did Marcel care that seventy miles of snow trail lay between him and his main camp; his thoughts were dwelling on the little black haired maiden who had promised to become his wife when the ice went out in the spring.

It had been a good winter from the trapper's point of view. Over in his main camp on Caribou Crossing five thousand dollars' worth of marten, fox and fisher furs were hanging from the rafters. Half of those furs were Marcel's and half of them belonged to Pierre Langroise, his partner.

"She will be one grand wedding," ran Marcel's thoughts, "and afterward there will be the homestead where we shall dwell like two little birds, me and my Angeline."

"By Gar!" he raised his head as once more the howl of the wolves came drifting across the ice of Lac La Fourche. "I don' like that sound, me. The loneliness I can almost smell her when the Black Pack howls. Me, I will wait until the sun she shine before I go back to the camp on Caribou Crossing."

An hour passed. Night settled down on Lac La Fourche and the howl of the wolves sounded nearer; the awful, deep toned hunting cry of the gray wolves that will cause the bravest man to shudder.

There was good reason for a man to shudder at the voice of the Black Pack, a horde of wolves that had swung down from the Hudson Bay country with the coming of the coldest and stormiest winter within the memory of Pierre Langroise's grandfather, who had lived in the little settlement for nearly seventy years, before succumbing to the epidemic of smallpox which that winter decimated Sainte Robelaire.

Some said there were two hundred wolves in the Black Pack. Some said

more; but the estimates were based on hearsay. Certainly there were enough to be a menace to human life, for they had attacked and eaten old Pere Marquette on his way into town for his Christmas mail, and two little girls who had gone coasting just outside the village never again came home. It was after that that the French Canadian habitants began to refer to the wolves as "Les Bêtes Noirs," which freely translated means the Black Pack.

From north of Marcel's cabin on Windy Arm to the village limits of Sainte Robelaire the Black Pack ranged seeking whatever and whomever they might devour; until even the hardiest and bravest trapper dared travel alone only in the broad light of day.

Poison baits had been tried without success, and when the men left in Sainte Robelaire organized and hunted in one well armed party, the Black Pack seemed to recognize the danger, for they kept out of sight. It was only when they caught a man, or two men alone that they ignored the death spitting rifles and by sheer ferocity and weight of numbers dragged down their victims.

So it was small wonder that down at Sainte Robelaire the people left after the epidemic had passed watched with misgivings the departure of Pierre Langroise and Marcel Duprez for the trapping grounds above Lac La Fourche. "Me, I will pray for you each day you are away," sobbed Pierre's sweetheart Angeline, as she flung her arms around the young trapper's neck, "and may Le Bon Dieu send you safely back to me in the spring!"

"There will be no Black Pack when Pierre and I get through with them," asserted Marcel, as he stroked her shining hair. "We will bale their pelts and bring them back in the canoes when the ice goes out on Lac la Fourche."

Four months had passed since then, but save that it had lost two of its youngest members who had lingered on the hunting trail one night until gray dawn made them visible over the sights of Marcel's rifle, the Black Pack was as powerful as ever. Poisoned mice they spat out, traps they robbed of bait; and, skulking among the trees, they kept well out of sight of the rifles between the hours of sunrise and sunset. Only when the twilight came creeping over Lac La Fourche did they begin to rove.

They were howling now. That long drawn howl that carries a message of death to whomsoever shall be caught alone in the woods at night. A rabbit-hunting weasel heard it, and sitting up on the snow like a little white ghost, he drew back his lips in a soundless grin and his red eyes blazed with savage hatred. Lucky it was for the Black Pack that the weasel's size didn't equal his courage and fighting ability. But what would his few ounces of incarnate fury have availed against the eighty pounds of the smallest wolf in the Black Pack? Nothing, nothing at all. Realizing this, the weasel slipped out of sight and for the rest of that night hunted among the mice haunted logs that lay beneath the snow.

Tired out from his day on the trap lines, Marcel Duprez did not hear the padding of the wolves around his cabin that night; but at dawn the snow around the camp was trampled down by the tracks of the Black Pack. Dozens of tracks, hundreds of tracks that measured four inches from heel to toe.

"Sacred name of a pig!" exclaimed Marcel. "That Black Pack, she is one big one. Me, I will take the trail while the sun she shine! Two day and I will be back with Pierre at Caribou Crossing; me, I have lose no Black Pack. She is too many."

Furs and grub packed on his back, rifle in hand, hunting knife in belt and five foot web snowshoes on his feet, Marcel Duprez turned his back on the red ball of the winter sun just rising above the horizon beyond Lac La Fourche. As he strode through the thickets of spruce his thoughts were on the girl he had left at Sainte Robelaire and the joy in him bubbled up until he parted his lips in the words of an old French chanson left to the country by some Acadian dead a hundred years.

"Brave heart beating high with hope,
The agile chamois hunter
Scales the snowy mountain side
In the golden dawn."

Marcel Duprez sang it in French with all the éclat and passion of the race from which he had sprung, and his voice rang through the silent woods like the notes of a bugle at dawn.

He did not stop at noon to make tea, but

pulled a piece of pemmican from his pocket and munching at it, kept on going through the short winter day. Before the wolves had begun their evening dirge he was safe in the wickiup he had built half way between Caribou Crossing and Lac La Fourche. In all that day he saw no living thing, but he had seen tracks.

"By Gar!" he exclaimed, "the Black Pack, she is watching; she is waiting for Marcel Duprez!"

Pierre Langroise was seated in the cabin mending his webs when Marcel reached Caribou Crossing. "Ah," he said, "so you are back. Me, I thought perhaps the Black Pack she had eaten you."

"Not once did I see the Black Pack," said Marcel Duprez, "but I heard her howl; every night she howled."

"The wolves are going north," asserted Pierre Langroise, "they will not return this winter. The Black Pack and the Black Death will go North together."

"The Black Pack she is range Lac La Fourche contree now," said Marcel, "but she watch; three times I see her track cross my trail, all the time the Black Pack is watch us. But the Black Death she has pass us by."

"You make good catch this trip?" Pierre Langroise did not raise his head, and his black beard almost covered his huge hands as deftly they interwove the *babiche* thong into the webbing of his racquets.

"Six marten, one fisher, three mink," replied Marcel. "The fur she is beginning to show sunburn. It is time to go back to Saint Robelaire."

"You are in one big hurry, *mon beau,*" Pierre's voice was little more than a whisper, "to get back to your Angeline."

"We have make good catch," said Marcel. "More than two thousand five hundred dollars for each of us. It is enough."

Pierre Langroise arose to his feet and stood in a corner the racquet he had been mending. "By Gar!" he exclaimed. "You speak the truth, Marcel; it is enough. Tomorrow we will begin to take up the traps. You take the line to the south, and me I will take the line to Lac La Fourche."

"Why the change, Pierre? All winter I have run the trap-line to Lac La Fourche."

"Me, I am tired working the same contree all the time," explained Pierre Langroise.

"All right, then," assented Marcel, "we make the change. One day, two day she cannot matter."

It took Marcel three days to take up the traps on the south line and hang them up in trees near the river where they could easily be picked up by the canoes when the ice went out in the spring. At sunset on the evening of the fifth day he returned to the cabin at Caribou Crossing.

Or rather he returned to where the cabin had stood. For all that was left of it was a pile of ashes walled in by smoke stained banks of snow.

"By Gar!" It was all Marcel could think of saying. Struck dumb by the immensity of his loss he stood leaning on his rifle staring blankly at the ruin of his hopes.

For a long time he stood there in the gathering dusk. Suddenly he was recalled to himself by the howl of the wolves as they gathered for the night's hunt. "Sacred name of a pig!" exclaimed Marcel. "The cabin she is burn, the grub she is gone and also the fur—five thousand dollar gone! Eh, *mon Dieu,* what will I say to Angeline?"

But miserable though he was, he knew that he must take measures for his own safety that night. The howl of the Black Pack already sounded nearer; hauntingly nearer to Marcel Duprez, as in spite of himself, he thought of the dreaded Black Death that had ravaged the village of Sainte Robelaire.

With his belt ax he cut a pile of dry wood and started a fire among the ashes of the cabin, and while it burned he cut more and more wood until satisfied that there would be enough to last him through the night.

Squatted near the fire he summed up his resources. There was a pound of pemmican and a little package of tea left in his pack. There were seven cartridges for his rifle and he had plenty of matches, a hunting knife and his belt ax. But it was two hundred and seventy miles to where Angeline awaited him in the village of Sainte Robelaire.

"Two hundred and seventy miles and the Black Pack between me and my Angeline, and only one day's grub!"

So overwhelming had been the catastrophe which had befallen him, that only then did the thought of his partner occur to him. Where was Pierre? Had the fire occurred before he left or had it happened since? There was one way by which Marcel could tell. Arising to his feet he circled the smokestained banks of snow around his camp-fire and carefully examined some of the charred sticks protruding from them. Then he straightened up with an exclamation of satisfaction. He knew now beyond

all shadow of doubt that the cabin had burned before Pierre had left; for there were five distinct layers of frost crystals on the sticks. That meant that the fire had been out for five days.

"I bet you the Black Pack she has eat up Pierre Langroise," muttered Marcel, "or he would not have run away and lef' me all alone. Sacred name of a pig! Me, I will get that Black Pack yet, if it take me all my life."

Like mocking laughter the howl of the wolves answered him from out of the forest.

In his pannikin Marcel melted enough snow to make a pint of water, then he dropped in just enough tea to color it and sat sipping the hot beverage. Alone amid the ashes of his cabin, he formulated a plan by which he might yet live to reach the village of Sainte Robelaire.

Bold though was the Black Pack they dreaded fire too much to come within rifle shot of the yellow flames that all through that long night leaped high above the smokestained banks of snow that encompassed the ashes of the cabin on Caribou Crossing.

Another pinch of tea in a pot of water and a single bite of pemmican formed Marcel's breakfast at dawn. After eating he put on his webs and, traveling in a circle, made a careful examination of the wolf tracked snow. Gradually widening his circling he came at last to where the wolves had followed on each side of and parallel with the waffle-like print of a pair of web snowshoes. By the depth of the tracks Marcel knew that his partner had been carrying a heavy pack and by the thickness of the frost crystals over the snowshoe tracks, he judged that they were five days old.

"Sacred name of a pig!" exclaimed Marcel as he studied out the story written on the snow, "that Pierre Langroise, he is in one big hurry to leave the contree; I bet me already he is at Saint Robelaire."

The more Marcel thought about it, the more convinced he became that with the lead his partner had achieved it would be useless to hope to catch up with him. What puzzled Marcel was Pierre's reason for leaving so soon after the destruction of the cabin. Surely he would have had time to have saved some of the contents—some of the food at least, if not the furs. Struck by a sudden thought, Marcel retraced his steps and looked up into the trees around the ruins, hoping that his partner had hung some of the provisions up out of reach of the prowling wolves. But there was nothing left; nothing at all.

Satisfied that he was left entirely upon his own resources, Marcel turned south, prepared to carry out the plan he had formulated during the night.

Four hours later he returned to the ashes of the cabin. From one shoulder there dangled twenty of the steel traps he had taken from where he had hung them by the river. In his pack were two headless squirrels he had shot that day.

Kindling a fire Marcel made a meal out of the hindquarters of one squirrel; the hindquarters of the other he saved for his breakfast.

"I am take the long chance," he muttered as he counted the remaining five rifle cartridges, "but me, I will yet reach Sainte Robelaire!"

Using the remains of the squirrels for bait, he set some traps high up on a bluff overhanging the river where he had seen the tracks of a Canada lynx. That night he chuckled over his campfire when he heard the savage yelping of the Black Pack as attracted by scent of the bait they circled the foot of the bluff, where with one foot caught in a steel trap a lynx grinned down defiance.

A man doesn't have to be very hungry to enjoy a meal of the white flesh of a lynx, and Marcel ate heartily of it next morning. Then down on his knees in the dawn he lifted his clear eyes to the sky and gave thanks to Le Bon Dieu for his good fortune.

The next three days he spent in bringing in the remainder of his traps. They were of all sizes; one hundrd and fifty in all. Among them were forty-three number fours, each capable of holding the largest wolf in the Black Pack.

No more lynxes visited the traps Marcel set on the bluff, but he caught two large porcupines and a half dozen flying squirrels. With the exception of the viscera, Marcel saved all the meat, even that of the flying squirrels; for it is not wise to be too finicky when one is in danger of starvation.

With forty pounds of fresh meat on hand for his immediate needs, Marcel started on the second part of the plan he

had devised for the capture of the Black Pack. For he had made up his mind that somehow or the other he must try and regain part of the stake he had lost by the burning of the winter's catch of furs.

There were times when he wondered why he hadn't thought of it before. Why hadn't he remembered the story told him by the old grandfather of Pierre Langroise. For before his death old Grandpère Langroise had forgotten as much about wolves as now was known to any trapper on Lac La Fourche.

True it was that Marcel had repeated the old man's story to his partner, but Pierre Langroise had only stroked his black beard and parted his lips in a white toothed grin. "The babble of an old man," he had said scornfully, "with one foot in the grave."

That might be, too, thought Marcel, but at least the plan was worth trying. Should it prove successful, when he reached Sainte Robelaire he would certainly have the laugh on his partner.

The more Marcel thought about it, the more reasonable did the advice of Langroise's grandfather sound; especially in the case of the Black Pack. For the Black Pack had already tasted human blood.

A half mile from the ruins of the cabin where Marcel was camped, there was an open glade surrounded on all sides by a heavy growth of timber. There, decided Marcel, was the natural setting for the first act toward the destruction of the Black Pack.

Through the centre of this glade ran the pattern left by Pierre's snowshoes on his way out. It was still plainly visible, although covered with many layers of frost crystals. Night after night the Black Pack left fresh tracks parallel with the prints of the racquets, as though in expectation that some night they would encounter the man who had left them.

A week passed; then the weather changed. Looking up at the snowflakes drifting down through the spruces, Marcel rejoiced. He had been waiting for the snow. It was essential to the success of his plan.

Standing by his fire he took his hunting knife and deliberately severed a vein near the knuckle of his left thumb. Then holding his hand down at his side he strode through the forest and let the blood from his wound fall drop by drop on the clean white snow.

In the centre of the glade he set three large traps in the form of a triangle; making fast the five foot chains to a large log which he concealed beneath the snow. Then he held his wounded hand over each trap until it was plentifully sprinkled with blood. Subsequently he covered all the traps with snow so that no sign remained of them.

A hundred yards from the concealed traps he tied a red handkerchief to the top of a long stake which he drove down into the snow. Then, backing up, with a green spruce branch he swept out all sign of his own tracks.

Hunched over his campfire that night he chuckled to himself, for it had been snowing for hours at the rate of an inch an hour, thus completely obliterating all sign of his traps.

Suddenly the hunting cry of the Black Pack sounded from very far away. Nearer it came and nearer; and into it crept a more savage note as the gray horde caught the scent of the blood trail.

Then the howling ceased suddenly and Marcel guessed that the wolves had found the red handkerchief which he had left to arouse their suspicions that a trap was planted near it.

Would they approach near enough to the concealed traps? Would they——?

A sharp yelp of pain broke the silence, then it changed to a piercing yell of terror, and the listening trapper knew that his ruse had been successful. Pierre's grandfather had told the truth about how to catch wolves.

Would the Black Pack now flee in terror or would they turn on the trapped wolf and tear him to pieces? That was something Marcel did not know. Upon it depended the ultimate success of his plan. There was but one thing to be done; he must try and drive away the pack before they had recovered from their surprise and fear. Springing to his feet the trapper slipped into his pack containing pitch kindlings already whittled for the emergency. In another moment he had tied the thongs of his snowshoes, and rifle in hand was hurrying through the night and the falling snow.

The howling of the wolves ceased as he approached the glade where he had set the

traps; but here and there he caught sign of green eyes gleaming from among the trees. Yet not for one instant did those eyes stay in the same place. Warily the wolves kept slinking from cover to cover, until they had completely encircled the lone man.

Once or twice the eyes came so close that Marcel raised his rifle, but he did not fire, for reasons of his own he wished the Black Pack to believe that he was unarmed.

At the edge of the glade he stopped and taking a handful of pitch kindlings from his pack touched a match to them. As the fat pitch burst into a sputtering yellow flare the green eyes of the wolves drew farther away, until at last the trapper could no longer see them. Breaking dry spruce limbs from the low branched trees he soon had a big fire roaring; then he laid his pack beside it and strode over toward the traps he had set that morning.

Caught by a hind foot and a fore foot a huge gray wolf growled menacingly at the man who had outwitted him. With the wiry hackles erect on his shoulders, ears laid back and fierce eyes gleaming, he bared his yellow fangs in defiance of death.

"By Gar, my infant!" With exultation shining in his brown eyes Marcel looked down at his captive. "You are one smart wolf, but not so smart as Marcel Duprez."

The big wolf growled again at that, then he fell silent and with head down watched the man as he removed the thongs from his webs and tying them together made a slipknot in one end.

Handicapped though he was by a trap on each of two feet, the big wolf put up a desperate fight, but soon Marcel had him choked down so that he could be handled. Then he removed the strangling noose from the beast's neck, and fashioning it into a rude muzzle tied the slavering jaws together before slinging his captive over his shoulder and wallowing his way through the half mile of snow back to his campfire at Caribou Crossing.

In an hour the trapper had linked together the five-foot chains from four traps. With the twenty foot chain thus obtained he fastened the gray wolf to a tree. Then he slept the rest of the night.

It was still snowing when next day he returned to the glade and took up the traps in which he had caught the wolf. He also removed the handkerchief he had used as a decoy. Just as he had expected, the Black Pack had been so sure that the traps were set immediately at its base that they had not come within fifty yards of it. They had never suspected that the "triangle set" was two hundred yards away.

Around the edge of the glade Marcel set a circle of thirty traps perfectly concealed beneath the snow. Then in the centre of the glade he picketed the wolf he had caught, so that even when it had reached the limit of its chain it was fifty yards from the nearest trap.

At dusk he returned to his campfire and listened to the howling of the Black Pack.

In ten nights he caught forty-seven wolves. After that he heard them no more. Stung at last to a realization that they were completely outwitted, the remainder of the Black Pack left that part of the country.

"Forty-eight fine pelts," exulted Marcel, "at ten dollar the pelt, that will be nearly five hundred dollar. Me, I will take the trail to Saint Robelaire—and my Angeline!"

As it was obviously impossible to carry all the wolf hides with him, the trapper baled them and left them on a platform built of interlaced branches high up between two trees. He would return for them with the dog team he had left at Sainte Robelaire.

With him he took the complete skin and skull of the first big wolf he had trapped, it would do to show the villagers. Afterward he would have the hide made into a rug and give it to his Angeline.

Long before that the Black Pack had either killed or driven off the caribou with which at certain seasons the country swarmed, and there were few game birds to be found at that time of the year. Once, between Caribou Crossing and his first wickiup, Marcel shot a spruce partridge, but except for that he subsisted entirely on squirrels and a few pounds of wolf meat which he carried in his pack. For one will eat even that strong flavored, sinewy stuff in case of stress.

Fifteen miles the first day, twenty-two miles the second day; then once more Marcel stood in the afterglow of the sunset, leaning on his rifle and staring dumb-mouthed at a hole in the snow. The wickiup had been burned down.

"By Gar!" Hard as the ring of iron against iron the words came at last, "the first time, that fire she might have been acci-dent; but this time it is Pierre Langroise! He is think the Black Pack she will eat up Marcel Duprez! He is go to steal my Angeline!"

For hours Marcel Duprez sat staring into the campfire he had built. What had he ever done to Pierre Langroise that he

should have played him such a dirty trick? Doubtless by now Pierre was safe in Saint Robelaire with the five thousand dollars' worth of furs he had stolen. For he could easily have carried the fifty or sixty high priced skins.

"Sacred name of a pig!" muttered Marcel. "I have never the leetle suspicion of what he would do. But I, Marcel Duprez, will track him down even if he go to the Nort' Pole. Between Pierre Langroise and me there will be a reckoning!"

Dawn came at last and wearily Marcel arose and gazed into the falling snow. Somewhere far away in the forest a downy woodpecker was tap-tap-tapping against a tree; the sound seemed to accentuate the silence and desolation. The tapping ceased; then it came again. It was nearer this time and unconsciously Marcel raised his head in search of the first living thing he had heard for days.

Then he stared wide-eyed, for within ten feet of where he had built his fire, the bark had been stripped from a two foot section of a tree trunk. Yellow against the whiteness of the surroundings it advertized the work of man. Floundering over to the girdled tree, he stared again, for some words had been scrawled in letters of red on the peeled section of the trunk.

"By Gar," two tears rolled down the trapper's cheeks as he deciphered the message, "that Pierre he write me in letters of his own blood. By Gar, he was a MAN!"

On a platform of interlaced boughs, high above the reach of predatory animals was the five thousand dollars' worth of furs which Marcel thought had been burned with the cabin at Caribou Crossing. Yet he did not touch them. The reason was there in rude letters of scarlet: "SMALLPOX—MUST BE FUMIGATE!"

Night was falling when Marcel Duprez slowly climbed the last hill between him and Lac La Fourche. Would he find the cabin on Windy Arm burned? Certainly he would if Pierre Langroise had ever reached it. But it wouldn't matter, Marcel understood now; there was nothing to forgive.

Reaching the top of the hill he peered down at the ice covered lake and around the shore until in the dusk he picked out the cabin on Windy Arm. "By Gar!" he exclaimed, "that Pierre, he did *not* reach Lac La Fourche."

A hundred yards from the cabin Marcel stopped and raised his voice in a woodsman's halloo. Many times he called before he heard an answering halloo, faintly borne.

"Thanks be to Le Bon Dieu!" cried Marcel Duprez, "I have found him!"

Hardly did he recognize the gaunt, black bearded man who came tottering out to meet him, for the mighty form of Pierre Langroise had wasted away until his clothes hung on him like rags on a scarecrow, and above his black-beard his eyes gleamed out of deep sockets set in a face all scarred with the terrible pits left by smallpox.

"Eh, Mon Dieu!" Marcel choked over the words. Then true to the excitable nature of the race which had given him birth, he flung his great arms around his partner and kissed him once on each cheek. "Ah, *mon brave,*" he exclaimed, "you burn the cabins and run away so that *I* would not catch it—the Black Death! By Gar, you are a MAN!"

"For you!" A haunting laugh came from the lips of the giant as he disengaged himself from his partner's embrace and stood staring across the frozen expanse of Lac La Fourche. "Me, I do that for the little Angeline who wait for you down at Sainte Robelaire!"

THE STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

CRIME ON THE HIGH SEAS

FROM the real tragedies, comedies and straight adventures of life must be drawn the stories of worth. In respect to "Barrateers," his splendid tale of this issue, Holman Day allows us an interested glance behind the scenes.

"My son-in-law, Captain Ralph Drisko, lost off Hatteras last winter, was the youngest master mariner on the Atlantic coast, a captain from the time he was eighteen. Only twenty-eight when he was swept to his death, poor chap, from the deck of the steamer *Lillian Luckenbach*. It was only his second trip in steam. But as he told me the last time he was in this port there was not much chance in sail any longer for an enterprising young fellow. And we had talked that matter over previously when I had been aboard with him in the East.

"He also let me in on sad conditions. Certain speculators have been getting hold of the old windjammers and are paying the exorbitant rates demanded for marine insurance. In a number of cases the crooks have been able to corrupt previously reputable skippers. Vessels have been wrecked under circumstances in which there has been no comeback on account of the presumed integrity of the masters. Prospective barratry was put up to him several times but he turned it down, of course. He and his father before him were of the best type of masters.

"This is primarily an adventure story and is not designed as any kind of an exposure; but I wanted you to understand what conditions exist. You'll note that I have carefully excluded from such plots the oldtime type of owners. As to the wreck on the Frying Pan, my old friend Captain Dodge of Portland, Maine, had the experience of riding the bucking mast. I have used it merely as an incident in my tale. Captain Dodge had a long story to tell of the details of his sufferings. And his prayer uttered at that time is a classic. 'Oh, Lord, I hain't ever bothered Ye before and hope I sha'n't have to dew it ag'in! But if Ye mean to dew anything for me in this scrape, *Ye'd better dew it damn' quick!*'

HOLMAN DAY."

A METAL IN DISGUISE

LONG, long ago a Spanish adventurer in South America, one Ferdinand Ulloa, discovered a quantity of metal in the sands of a river. With crude placering he separated out a considerable weight of what he thought to be free silver in nuggets. Believing himself in possession of a great treasure, he took it with him back to Spain. There he was undeceived. The stuff was not *plata* (Spanish for silver), though somewhat similar in appearance and weight. The metallurgists of Madrid pronounced it worthless, calling it by a patronizing diminutive, *platinum*. Ulloa sadly consigned it to the waste heap, where possibly it still remains.

Telling this in respect to his novelette, "An Enigma In Black," Anthony M. Rud continues, describing in brief the shrewd deception employed for guarding that treasure of Quitobaquita Sierra.

"Kurtt, knowing chemistry, realized that while metallic platinum in its usual form would certainly get him into all sorts of trouble, decided to transform the precious metal into a *black* instead of a silvery *white* treasure. And this was easy enough.

"As you know, there are four allied forms of pure platinum. Besides the ordinary metallic form we have spongy platinum, colloidal platinum—and platinum black. Kurtt decided upon the last mentioned form. In order to attain it he first transformed the white metal into one of

its amine salts, then reduced it with weak acid. The result was a black mixture of stuff that looked like soot and slag—and which effectually deceived Chotty Bedell.

ANTHONY M. RUD."

BRIEFLY—WE HOPE SO!

ALLAN VAUGHAN ELSTON employs a typewriter equipped with what, in his Colorado country, would be termed a "Lazy M." Perhaps that's the brand of the old, newly-dammed family ranch he mentions in this bow to SHORT STORIES' readers. His first tale, "The Petrified Cabin," appears in this issue.

"I sincerely appreciate an acceptance from SHORT STORIES for, to requote Mr. W. J. Bryan in his speech after the election returns of 1912,

'the day has come I long have sought—
and pined because I found it not.'

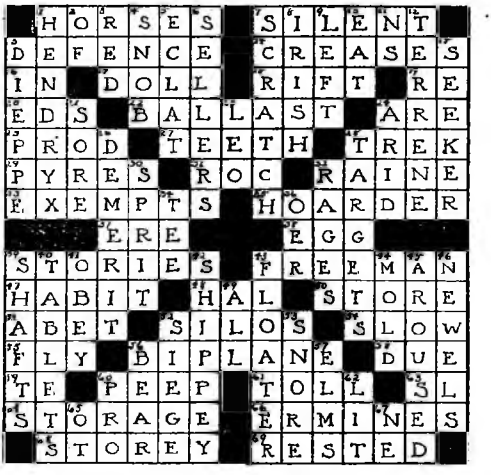
"Leaving college in 1909 with an engineering degree, I spent the next six years working for seven North American railroads, and ended up with a construction residency in Chile. It was in the mineral hills of this last country that I belonged, together with a group of English and Yankee engineers, to an organization known as 'The Llampera Club.' Llamperas were thick about, these being caves and caverns in the vicinity from which the Incas were supposed to have gleaned their early treasures. There I was intrigued into writing my first story, eleven years ago. It was called 'Buried with Inca Gold,' and I sent it in nine thousand inky words many miles across the seas to SHORT STORIES. It is not necessary to add that whatever Gold there was in that story is still buried. . . .

"War led my next adventure to France, where I was a billeting officer and saw no action more dangerous than an occasional altercation with the mayor of the town. After the Armistice I settled in a Middle West city to practice my profession in a consulting capacity. During the short-lived boom times I made money. This, and all I could borrow, I expended in building a dam on an old family ranch here. Beside this dam I now sit, watching the floods that strike it in the spring and fall, waiting for its sequel, wondering what it shall be—writing stories?

ALLAN V. ELSTON."

CROSSED OFF

HEREWITH is presented the solution of our crossword puzzle of last fortnight's magazine—the final brain teaser of this series, and the last we shall run unless SHORT STORIES' readers demand more.



One Southern university, believing in the educational value of the crossword puzzle, has added a new department specializing upon the construction and solution of these verbal nightmares, we understand. Our opinion is a slender lance indeed with which to puncture fatally any such rip-snorting dragon as this craze became at its height. Yet now the dragon is showing signs of shedding scales and shrinking in size. And so, thrusting discreetly, we wonder aloud if everything save the amusement value of these puzzles hasn't been overrated? Of course we learned a few dozen new and strange words, most of which we'll never use. Then comes the funny part, as the old rumhauser croaked in "The Face On the Barroom Floor." Crossword puzzles certainly have *not* been constructed, in the main, by etymologists or even philologists. The definitions given ordinarily failed as synonyms. Many times really monstrous errors crept in. The net result, barring certain circulation gains made by newspapers and magazines actually has been to break down the sacred bars of *meaning* between words! To encourage loose speaking—and therefore, thinking. Very possibly we are wrong, yet when we face a set of squares in which we are to give a synonym for "wound" (11 letters), and work it out *"assassinate,"* it seems to call for a halt and an accounting!

ANOTHER COVER PAINTING PRIZE

BEGINNING with this magazine, and lasting through six issues, there will be another oil cover painting offered in competition for letters especially submitted criticizing SHORT STORIES. The previous contest, ending with the date of the last number, was won by Mr. Willis K. Jones, The Department of Romance Languages, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio. His letter:

"The adjective 'machine-made' is the one used by critics to describe so many American short stories. Authors, with one eye on movie possibilities, rush impossible heroes through thrilling escapades with beauteous heroines for whom they have grand and glorious fights with villains, everything ending when some machine-made and unexpected coincidence brings the lovers together.

"The chief criticism I have of the six issues of SHORT STORIES in question is that too many of them topple unsteadily on the fence between art and craft. Especially is this true of the long stories. Of course it would be inconceivable to expect every story to be like the well-knit, logical 'Wizard of the Outlands' by that master of technique, H. Bedford-Jones; neither need they be the other extreme like 'White Trail's End,' depending on misunderstanding that every veteran novel reader knows will be cleared up before the end of the story—which may be foreseen easily. 'Shadow Canyon' had misunderstanding for its obstacle, too.

"Coincidence is the other big help that too many authors use, causing a jar to readers who use their brains as well as eyes in the perusal of a magazine. Mrs. Mumford, whose beautiful carnival story I shall long remember, sins in both her stories. 'It just happens' that the pet alligator gets fouled in the pirogue at the proper moment, as in the other yarn it happens that a black cat appears and reappears. And as a parenthesis, it seems to me that the very short stories like those have to be very good to overcome the handicap of so little space to get under way to make their impression on the reader. That is no doubt the reason why the long stories get the votes on the Readers' Choice Coupons. Serials for me have no interest because I have to get up steam for each new installment. But that is a personal opinion only. My wife likes the serials in SHORT STORIES better than almost anything else in it.

"The best story in the six issues is, I believe, 'Clindon.' The various other aviator stories by Mr. Burtis did not greatly impress me, but I thought this one fine. I should not be surprised to see it considered for some one of the 'best' collection of stories. It records real people doing things in a real way and being thwarted by something besides the god of chance. It is one of the few that stand a second reading and a detailed analysis.

"Second on the honor roll I would put 'The Testing Ground,' which makes one sense Tampico. After reading it I am sure I should have caught the atmosphere of Mexico even had I never been there.

"Third of the stories that mark high points is 'Green Blot.' I was led to read this through the enthusiasm of the editors and I was glad they praised it beforehand, and kept me from missing it.

"Lest the sum of my remarks seem a destructive criticism of SHORT STORIES, let me hasten to say that it is my favorite all-fiction magazine. Very few of the other magazines that I see go well for a sustained diet. The first issue of SHORT STORIES that I ever read I found in the forecastle of a schooner. Another I ran across worn ragged by Canadian fire rangers, and in between I have bought copies regularly, though from widely separated newsstands. Except for the serials, I read religiously every word in SHORT STORIES from the excellent editorials (which should be longer) to the Story Tellers' Circle, the Mail Bag, and now the cross-word puzzles. Up to date, no?

"As a suggestion, don't you think it would add to the interest to have pictures of the authors? Of course, logically, an author's appearance ought to have nothing to do with one's enjoyment of his story, but I like to see them, as well as read about them. Now that the paper stock has been so vastly improved, couldn't we have some line drawings or coarse screen reproductions of them?

"And you never say a word about the artists who draw the covers and whose illustrations increase interest in the stories.

"Regarding illustrations, didn't you use to run a map of the world starring the scenes of each story? I'd like to have that custom revived. Except for the Western stories (which form too great a majority for my taste) I'm not always sure of the setting of the tales, and often I am far from an atlas. Have pity on us ignorant ones.

"A final suggestion. Some readers like

serials, so, though I don't, I'll say nothing about them. What I do like, however, are stories in series, like those of the Major, the Argo movie men, and so on. Don't let them die yet, unless you have more of other kinds. Having once become acquainted with a group of characters, I like to know more about them and I suspect that there are many like me.

"I have yarned at length, but the editors invited it, and I've wanted to take advantage of my chance to tell those who make SHORT STORIES how grateful I am for the fine way they're succeeding with our magazine.

WILLIS K. JONES."

SHEEP IN THE COW COUNTRY

ALWAYS they were anathema, the signal to start shooting, throughout all of the old Western rangeland. With modern conditions came changes in the methods of pasturing and raising, however. In "The Fighting Intruder," the complete novel by Arthur Chapman, which begins the next issue of SHORT STORIES, a Westerner who would not accept defeat when fences doomed cattle raising on the free range, brought in sheep *and made them stick*—through adopting a method then untried in that part of Colorado.

Besides this and the third generous slice of Edgar Wallace's fine London mystery, "The Three Just Men," the forthcoming number will be chockful of yarns which will banish thoughts of bedtime. Holman Day presents a gripping Maine woods novelette of heartbreak and chivalrous sacrifice, "A Case At Castonia." Charles Tenney Jackson brings the Arizona desert—and the inarticulate loneliness of desert men—to the roof of a Chicago office building, in "A Date With O'Ryan." T. Von Ziekursch tells one of his very finest animal stories, "The Way of a Dog." Fairfax Downey comes to bat with one of the funniest and most original baseball stories we have read in years. Other contributions of more than casual excellence are presented by Thomson Burtis, Henry Herbert Knibbs, Frank Richardson Pierce and others.

THE MAIL BAG

THE following is a serious, splendid letter. It ranked second in the cover contest won by Mr. Jones and mentioned earlier. Though we cannot quite agree with every sentiment expressed, or with a few of the results obtained in the analyses, we feel certain that thousands of readers will find herein a clear statement of their reactions toward SHORT STORIES and other better quality magazines in the field of outdoor adventure fiction.

Editor, SHORT STORIES,
Dear Sir:

I take it that you are interested in securing information that will lead to the magazine's wider appeal and the better satisfaction of the readers, a condition satisfactory to all concerned. Let us then proceed to a detailed analysis of the magazine, dividing it into two parts, first all parts excluding the stories and second, the stories themselves.

The cover is fine.

Next in order come the advertisements. Now, as you know, magazine reading is a hobby which grows upon the owner, so that once a reader always a reader. And again, anything which pertains to a man's hobby is of interest to him. We come now to the point. Devote a certain number of pages to book reviews and advertisements regarding books This is an attractive feature of many other periodicals.

Next in order comes the title page which can be improved. Remove the editorial from the title page, for crowded in such fashion it loses its force, detracts from the titles themselves, and gives an appearance of skimping wholly out of place.

We come now to the page used in forecasting stories. This is an excellent and convenient feature. Whether or not they might well take the place of the fact articles at the end of the stories is a question of judgment, but it appears that the fact articles might well disappear, for they add nothing to the magazine.

Now the Story Tellers' Circle. This is one of the most interesting features in the magazine, but I believe it would be more interesting if the editor made this his department, writing little sketches concerning the writers and the stories—indeed, combining the editorial with the Circle. Again, the success and merit of the "Golden Book" proves emphatically that stories of excellence may well be reprinted. Now, if you reprinted, say, one story an issue, the editor could well draw comparisons, trace developments, in short open up the whole field of short story technique and development. For example, suppose you printed "Ladig the Babylonian" by Voltaire, and suppose your recent story, "The Pipe," were in the same issue, the editor could trace the development and organization of the detective story from "Ladig" to the "Pipe."

In the Mail Bag it might be well to observe caution in printing congratulatory letters. In this section it would be interesting to discover by a vote who the most popular writers of magazine fiction are. A contest of this sort tabulating results *month by month* is always interesting.

We come now to the analysis of the stories themselves and the following tabulated forms indicate my findings in four issues which I take it can be considered average.

The stories were analyzed as to setting, time, plot and individual points of excellence.

Setting

West	North Woods	City	Foreign	Others
16	5	4	5	7

Time

All in the present or near present.

Plot

A.

Crook brought to justice by fear, greed, conscience, superstition, etc. 13

B.

Rejuvenation of a character by love, disaster, gratitude, etc. 8

C.

Character under a cloud—clears name 5

D.

Escape of character from a difficult position 3

Others 8

Points of Excellence

Characters	Setting	Humor	Plot
12	10	3	3

Excellent on 1 point	18
Excellent on 2 points	10
Excellent on 3 points	2
Excellent on 4 points	0

Best Stories

Those excellent on 2 points or more

Shadow Canyon	*Cottonwood Gulch
Beaver Island	The Pipe
*Law Comes to Whisky Flat	$2,000 Reward
Returning Emeralds	Buffalo Bear
Clindon	
Nemesis Comes to Whisky Flat	

Those marked * 3 points of merit.

The analysis now becomes interesting.

57% of the stories have a setting in the West or North woods.

11% in the city.

13% foreign.

19% various others.

78% have fundamentally thus plots, of which 35% are of plot A.

8% are notable for plot development.

8% for humor.

24% with no notable point of excellence.

5% notable on 3 counts.

21% notable on 2 counts.

49% notable on 1 count.

This 49% redeems the magazine while many read only the 26% with any great pleasure.

A perusal of these findings clearly shows that the scope of the magazine is too limited.

A. Too many stories have a setting in the West or North woods.

B. They all take place in the present.

C. A certain set of plots predominate.

D. The excellence of the stories lies wholly in the setting and characters.

E. The similarities of style are a drawback.

F. 24% of mediocre stories is rather too large.

Now as to the remedy. If the analysis (which I have verified as far as possible) is correct, the remedy is astonishingly easy.

Secure an additional staff of writers whose fields are more diversified and whose styles differ.

A contest is always interesting. Plan a contest giving a large enough prize to draw the *best* writers. Print the stories in the magazine (say the first 10) and let the readers by the Coupons determine the winners. To make the story out of your usual run specify that it is to be of modern business or 500 years ago. It should interest authors and intrigue the readers, give you plenty of advertising, and a lot of good stories.

This is an honest effort to analyze the magazine as I see it (verified as far as possible by other readers) and to offer suggestions where the need appears, along with a couple of schemes which could perhaps be of interest to the readers and profit to the magazine. If the criticism seems severe it is not unique, for it applies to nearly all magazines of its class. I have observed that *heavy readers* follow authors and do not read a magazine from cover to cover but pick out what appeals to them. And it appears that the more diversified a magazine is the wider its appeal.

JAMES ALBERT,
116 N. Walnut St.,
Colorado Springs, Colo.

DON'T FORGET THE COUPON! CUT IT OUT TODAY AND LET US KNOW YOUR OPINION OF THE STORIES IN THIS NUMBER

READERS' CHOICE COUPON

"Readers' Choice" Editor, SHORT STORIES:
Garden City, N. Y.

My choice of the stories in this number is as follows:

1_____ 3_____

2_____ 4_____

5_____

I do not like:

_____ Why?_____

NAME_____ ADDRESS_____

Missing Page

Inside back cover

Successful Breadwinners

Know the Value of Internal Cleanliness

IF you spend your day indoors, you are facing the problem of every indoor worker—insufficient exercise. Leading medical authorities agree that unless you maintain internal cleanliness, your health will eventually break down. Your mind will lose its keenness. Your ambition will be dulled. Others will win the rewards you strive for.

Internal cleanliness means complete freedom from constipation. It is responsible for your physical well-being. Moreover, says a noted specialist, if you lack internal cleanliness you are working under a severe handicap. Internal cleanliness is the secret of a clear eye and an active brain. With it work becomes a pleasure; without it, a drudgery.

Your doctor will tell you laxatives and cathartics only aggravate constipation and often lead to permanent injury.

Physicians Advise Lubrication

Medical science has found in *lubrication* the best means of maintaining internal cleanliness. Nujol lubricates and softens the food waste. It enables Nature to secure regular, thorough elimination. Thus it both prevents and overcomes constipation.

Enjoy abundant health and an attractive appearance *all the time.* Take Nujol. Hospitals use it. Physicians all over the world are recommending it.

Take Nujol as regularly as you wash your face or brush your teeth. Nujol is not a medicine. Like pure water it is harmless. Nujol makes internal cleanliness a habit—the healthiest habit in the world. For sale by all druggists.

Nujol

REG. U.S. PAT. OFF.

For Internal Cleanliness