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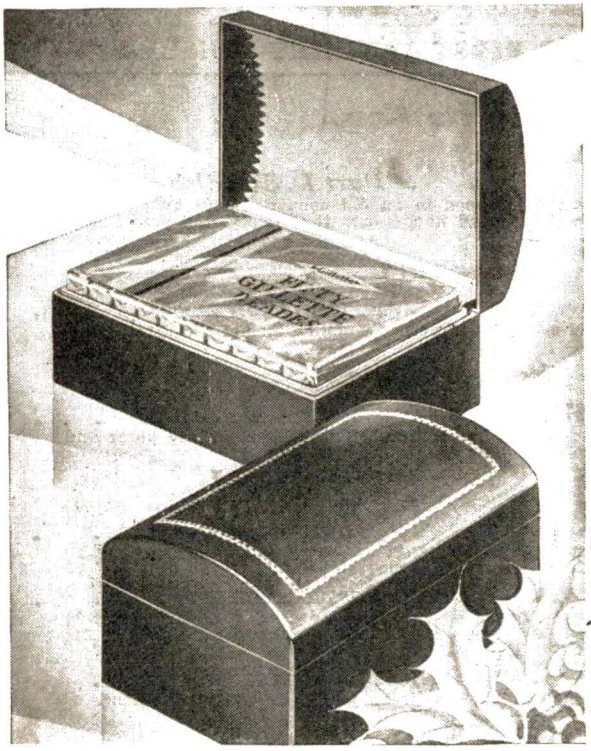

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TWICE-A-MONTH MAGAZINE

Volume LXXX Number 3

CONTENTS FOR FIRST JANUARY NUMBER

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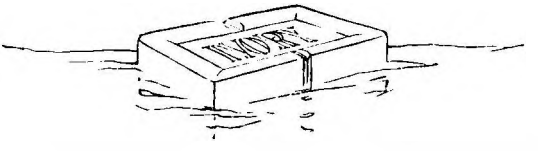

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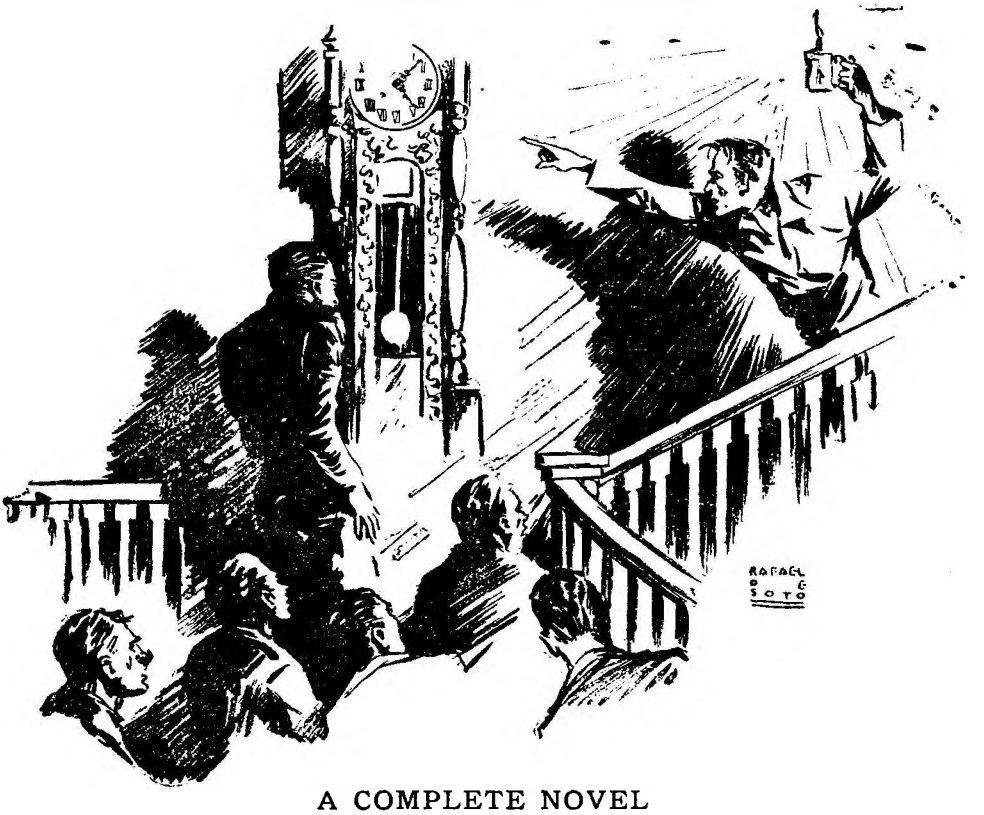
Frank Merriwell At Gray Gables

By Burt L. Standish

The author of the famous Frank and Dick Merriwell Stories.



A COMPLETE NOVEL

CHAPTER I.

BEYOND HIS WILDEST DREAM.

ONCE more the Harvard cheer came in a mighty roar from the throats of the exultant thousands above whose heads the crimson pennants flared like leaping flames in the waning light of this dull November day. The madly cavorting cheer leaders seemed to tear that bellowing burst of sound from the throats of the Harvard crowd, with their wildly waving arms.

Once more the Harvard machine was rolling irresistibly across the trampled chalk lines. Once more that terrible machine, like a deadly Juggernaut, was leaving its bruised victims scattered on the frozen turf. With true bulldog spirit, Yale varsity was fighting to the last dying gasp.

The score boards, set where they could be seen by every human being in the mighty throng that packed to the limit the seating capacity of the vast Harvard Stadium, showed that the game was in the last quarter. In less than two minutes the final whistle would sound.

The score board showed: Harvard, 12; Yale, 7.

Wrapped in his long fur coat, his mobile face aglow with excitement, Graham McNamee stood before the microphone in the press stand. By the magic of the radio, his vivid description of every movement of the game was being carried over a vast hook-up to the four quarters of the country, and beyond.

"It was Onderdonck—Onderdonck, Harvard's 'Flying Dutchman'—who made that last gain of seven yards," McNamee was saying. "You'll remember it was Onderdonck, also, who scored Harvard's two touchdowns—one in the first quarter, and one in the second. This man, Onderdonck, is a whirlwind, a flash of lightning—undoubtedly the fastest back-field man in the country to-day. He's sure of a place on the All-American.

"It was Onderdonck who stopped Yale's desperate thrust in this quarter, when the Blue was less than five yards from Harvard's line. After he had rested through the third period, he was put back into the game to check the menacing Elis. He checked them. He halted Yale in her tracks. He did more than that. He turned the Harvard team into an irresistible, smashing, driving force once more.

"That force is battering the last Yale reserves groggy. It has taken the ball back into Yale's territory again. The Bulldog is wabbling. His tongue is hanging out It begins to look like another touchdown for——

"They're lining up! Here comes the play! There goes the ball! It's an end run by Waddey! No—no, it's a forward pass! It's completed! Onderdonck's got it! He's off! Five yards! Ten yards! They've got him in a pocket! Somebody tackles! He's down! He made fifteen yards. First down, and only twenty more to go for another touchdown."

The man who had tackled Onderdonck lay writhing on the ground, with a broken collar bone.

"Time out," was called.

The panting, desperate-eyed remnants of Yale's shattered team looked at one another hopelessly.

Bad fortune threatened to turn impending defeat into something resembling disaster.

The return of Onderdonck to the game at a moment when the Blue warriors were sacrificing themselves in the mad smashes that had almost given them a second touchdown, was the main reason for the abrupt change in the tide of battle. The other reason had been a song.

THINKING they scented a victory they had scarcely dared hope for, the packed tiers of human beings beneath the fluttering Blue burst into a song that was taboo:

"Oh, more work for the undertaker!
Another little job for the cabinet maker!
In a local cemetery they are very, very busy
on a brand-new grave;
No hope for Harvard!"

The Yale band had attempted to drown out the song with "Boola," but the vast Yale crowd had bellowed its way through to the end.

Then, as if inspired by the return of Onderdonck and by tremendous resentment over the irritating "Undertaker's Song," the Harvard team had become a stone wall against which the Blue flood battered itself into frothing helplessness.

As far as offensive work was con-

cerned, that seemed to be Yale's expiring effort.

Now, with all the dignity, confidence, and pride for which Harvard is traditionally famous, the crowd beneath the crimson pennants chanted the hymn that always quickens the blood of every Harvard man:

"Fair Harvard! thy sons to thy jubilee throng,
And with blessings surrender thee o'er,
By these festival rites, from the age that is past,
To the age that is waiting, before.
O relic and type of our ancestors' worth,
That has long kept their memory warm,
First flow'r of their wilderness! star of their night,
Calm rising through change and through storm!"

Crippled and out of the game, the Yale captain looked round at his crippled men. Where could he find the reserves, either fresh or rested, to replace the staggering, used-up players who had shown themselves no longer able to stem the tide of Harvard's rush? His desperate eyes met the grim eyes of the new head coach, who had taken the place of the lamented "Tad" Jones.

"There aren't any more, Webb," said the coach, holding his empty hands before him. "Not one left!"

"There's one—just one," said Webb. "We took him off the Blue squad to fill out the quota that the Princeton game depleted. There's Merriwell!"

"But he's only a freshman."

"What of it, coach? What of it? Carney's through. They're coming with him now. You've got to send out somebody."

"But a freshman——"

"You've got to send out somebody! Who else is there to go?"

"But," said the coach, "the rule regarding freshmen——"

"You know that rule has been suspended by agreement," returned Webb. "We can use a freshman if we want to."

They were bringing Carney, weeping and begging to be put down, off the field.

The coach turned. His eyes sought and found a blanketed figure. Sharply, he spoke a name:

"Merriwell!"

For a fraction of a second, Frank Merriwell appeared dazed a little. Then, he leaped to his feet.

"Yes, sir!"

"Get in there! Do your best!"

Never in his wildest dreams had Frank imagined this would happen. Not even when they had taken him along on the varsity squad to fill out the broken quota.

That, he thought, had been a compliment—a compliment in recognition of his possible value as a candidate for the varsity squad next season. It had been tactful encouragement, probably coming from Captain Webb. But now he was to have a chance.

Frank flung aside his blanket. Out onto the field, to take the place of the luckless Carney, he hurried. He reported to the referee. The acting captain of the Yale team, filling Webb's boots as well as he could, merely nodded as he motioned Frank into position.

THE referee's whistle sounded again. The Harvard huddle whirled into a crouching formation. The ball was snapped. Onderdonck had it. Onderdonck was going round the end. His interference was battering would-be tacklers aside.

There was one tackler, however, who shot past all interferers and brought Onderdonck crashing to the frozen ground.

"They stopped him!"

"It's no gain!"

"Who did it?"

"The new man—the one who took Carney's place."

In the midst of the staring Yale crowd, uprose a tanned-and-leathery-

faced freshman, from whose lips pealed a wild Western yell:

"Whoopee! That's my pard! Didja see him down the Dutchman? Mr. Onderdonck flew onto his head that time."

Rockwall Bowie, "the Pride of the Panhandle," could find no words to express his joy.

Around Bowie, "Freckles" Chatby, Jasper Stretcher, and other freshmen friends and admirers of Frank Merriwell were smashing one another on their backs and giving vent to yells and whoops of satisfaction.

A freshman on the varsity! And he had brought down the mighty Flying Dutchman for a loss of two yards in the very first play in which he had participated!

In another section of the Yale seats, Merriwell's most implacable enemy was expressing his surprise and disgust.

"Yale's in a pretty bad way when she has to use a frosh on the varsity," said Kirk Bargot. "I call it a shame—a disgrace!"

His sister, Cynthia of the red-gold hair, was almost squeezing an arm off her friend, Aliene Deering. Aliene was the sister of Jack Deering, the Harvard center.

"Oh, Aliene!" Cynthia was saying. "Oh, Aliene, he's the fellow I've told you about! That's Frank Merriwell, Aliene! Did you see it? Did you see him tackle that man?"

Aliene laughed. "Oh, yes. He was lucky, Cyn. He can't do it again. Onderdonck's too fast. Jack says he's the best back-field man in this country. They're chums, but I don't like him, just the same. He's frightfully conceited. Thinks himself a great athlete, and frightfully clever. Boasts. Always showing off. Imagines every girl is crazy over him. You know the kind."

Harvard huddled. The teams lined up, crouching. There was a sudden lunge. A smash. It was a thrust at Yale's right wing.

Ahead of Onderdock, who again had the ball, interferers battered an opening. Onderdonck shot into that opening. Merriwell met him again. Down they came, together, upon the hard ground.

Before the microphone, Graham McNamee was saying: "The freshman Yale's using in her desperation is doing pretty well. He got Onderdonck again. Third down. Three yards to go. Onderdonck made about two yards that time. He'll have to do better next time or——

"Here comes the play! It looks like a forward pass. It is! Scope's after it! He's got it! No—no, he hasn't! Somebody—a Yale man—cut it off. Why—why, it's that freshman! It's Merriwell! He's got the ball! He's running with it! There goes a Harvard tackler at him! He dodged him! He's seesawing through a broken field. Onderdonck's at his heels. Onderdonck will get him He can't escape the Flying Dutchman."

On their feet, gasping thousands watched the thrilling race between the Yale freshman, Frank Merriwell, and Hans Onderdonck, the Mercury-footed half back of the great Harvard team.

They saw Merriwell get through into an open field. They saw him fly over the chalk marks, straining every nerve to keep beyond the reach of his pursuer. They saw Onderdonck likewise straining every nerve to cut down the gap enough for him to tackle.

From the Harvard stands burst a thunderous roar: "Onderdonck! Onderdonck! Onderdonck!"

But Onderdonck could not gain an inch, even though he put the last atom of his energy into the effort. In a desperate attempt to stop a touchdown at the last minute, he launched himself headlong through the air, clutching with hooked fingers. His fingers barely

touched the heels of the flying freshman. Empty-handed, the baffled Dutchman crashed to the ground.

A blast from the referee's whistle proclaimed the end of the game at the very instant that Frank Merriwell made his touchdown.

No matter whether or not the try for goal should add another point, that touchdown had given Yale the game. The score was now: Yale, 13; Harvard, 12.

The amazed and dismayed Harvard crowd was silent. The amazed and joy-maddened Yale crowd was shrieking:

"Merriwell! Merriwell! Merriwell!"

CHAPTER II.

A HARD NIGHT AHEAD.

APPARENTLY most of the well-dressed, happy-looking people in the splendid lobby of the Hotel Statler were wearing the Yale blue.

All those people seemed to be talking about the game. They were saying, over and over, that not in years had there been such an astounding and sensational climax in the concluding moments of a great football contest. The name of Merriwell seemed to be on everybody's lips.

"Yes, sir," one ruddy-faced old grad was saying to a corpulent friend, whom he was holding by the buttonhole, "I knew that boy's father well. That is, I knew him pretty well. He was only a freshman when I was a senior, and he hadn't really made his mark then. But he, just like this son of his, was a lively freshman."

"You don't have to tell me what he was, old chap," returned the stout man, poking his thumb into the first speaker's ribs. "I graduated before he entered college, but I guess I know pretty near as much about him as anybody.

"He was an honor and glory to the old school. He was the greatest athlete and finest gentleman who ever lived. This son of his is good. I'll admit that. But he'll never be his father's equal, Dickson. He just can't. They don't grow 'em any more."

"Well, maybe not, Spofford—maybe not," Dickson allowed. "But you never can tell. The youngster gave us our chance to celebrate to-day, after Johnny Harvard had Old Eli licked to a tottering frazzle. That's something you've got to admit. I guess the boy's a chip off the old block. Think of him outrunning the Flying Dutchman in an open field! Gosh! I've got to see my doctor about my heart."

Then a third old grad, who knew them both, came dragging a blushing youth up to them, and shouted:

"Here, you old has-beens! Here's the boy for you to take your hats off to. Here's his father's own son, the glory and pride of Yale, just like his daddy was before him."

"Please, gentlemen!" begged Frank Merriwell as they wrung his hands. "I hope to use these arms again some time if they ever get over it. Have mercy!"

Twenty-four hours had passed since he had made his appointment with Cynthia to meet her here after the game. Had he ever dreamed, even vaguely, what might happen in that game, he would have chosen another meeting place. In the glance he now cast around him there was helplessness and appeal. He seemed to be mutely begging some one to rescue him.

Through the swarming crowd that pressed around Frank, came Cynthia herself. No strong man could have commanded and obtained room to pass through that throng with such ease. A soft word from her lips, a touch of her hand, one look at her radiant face—no more was needed. The human barrier parted and let her through.

"Oh, Frank!" she said. "I've been trying to signal you from the mezzanine. They just kept jamming around you so that you couldn't see me."

"Thank heavens, Cynthia!" he exclaimed. "I'm pretty near sunk. Get me out of this and I'll be your humble slave to the end of my days."

There was about him no appearance of the posing hero. Clearly, he was not one who would seek the limelight. Indeed, at this moment, he seemed almost frightened and overwhelmed. How could this shy and modest lad be the fellow who had twice stopped the great Onderdonck in his tracks and toppled him, crashing, to the frozen ground on the football field?

"It must have been an accident, after all," one man murmured into the ear of a companion. "Why, this boy's a mere kid! Onderdonck's at least four years older and fifteen pounds heavier. He's hard as flint. Merriwell's supple and well put up—that's right; but he looks as if the Flying Dutchman ought to go through him like a sharp knife through cheese."

"It's his clothes," returned the wondering man's companion. "He looks slimmer and lighter in his clothes than he really is. But it's true he's pretty young. He's only a freshman, you know. If a freshman can do what he did to-day—well, what'll he do in another three years?"

LAUGHING over his appeal to her, Cynthia took Merriwell's arm. "I want you to meet some friends of mine, Frank. They're waiting over yonder."

"Oh, good gracious! Have I got to meet somebody else? I just wanted to see you——"

"Come," she insisted.

Once more the barrier opened to let her pass. A few moments later the "Flash" was bowing to Aliene Deering, a truly pretty girl of the best New England type.

"And this, Mr. Merriwell," said Aliene, motioning toward a compactly built, broad-shouldered, fine-looking young man at her side, "is my brother, Jack. He was one of your opponents to-day, you know."

"Merriwell was one of *our* opponents to-day, much to my regret," said Jack Deering, giving Frank a hearty handclasp. "If they hadn't put him into the game——"

"Oh, let's not talk shop, old fellow!" interposed Frank quickly. "What happened just happened, that's all. The luck broke good for me."

"I'll say it did!" Deering nodded. "Luck breaks good for any man who stops Hans Onderdonck twice in one minute. But I'll allow that you can run, Merriwell. You must have internal-combustion motors in your feet. That's all I've got to say about it. I've got it off my chest."

"I did hate to see Harvard lose," stated Aliene, "but still I was glad somebody could take some of the conceit out of Hans Onderdonck. He's almost insufferable."

"Oh, that's just his way, Aliene," said her brother. "Hans is a fine fellow. You're prejudiced."

She shrugged her slim shoulders. "Maybe. I'm pretty well fed up with him, Jack." Then she turned to Frank again. "We want you to come with us to-night to our place out in the Berkshires, Mr. Merriwell. You must come. The football season's over, and you don't have to go straight back to New Haven. You surely can break training now."

Jack supported her promptly. "It's about two hours' run to Gray Gables," he said. "The roads are fine, all except the last two or three miles. Gray Gables is our summer place, but mother's stopping there yet. There's a little bunch of our friends coming out to-night—two or three fellows and two or three nice girls. Miss Bargot is one of the latter, you know. You can't get away from us, old man."

"Oh, but I'm going back to New Haven in a car with three of my class-

mates, Deering. I can't desert them flat, like this. They're my particular friends. Here they are now."

Bowie, Chatby, and Stretcher came up and were introduced by the Flash.

"You've been trying to dodge us, Merriwell," accused Stretcher. "Don't tell me you haven't. I see through you, as the eyes said to the spectacles."

"The old tub's all primed up and r'aring to go," put in "Rocky" Bowie. "It looks some like we'd better be galloping on our way. I sort of smell snow in the air. If we dally around too long we may buck a blizzard before we can roll over the trail into New Haven town."

"And I'm not yearning to buck a blizzard with this wild Texan at the throttle, Flash," said Chatby. "He opens her wide and lets her hum. I never could see any great sport about piling up in a ditch."

"You're all coming out to our place in the Berkshires," declared Jack Deering. "It's a nice old country house where we can have a party without disturbing the neighbors. My mother's very deaf, so she won't object if we make whoopee some. There'll be open fires, plenty to eat and drink, and a big living room to dance in."

"Me for the Berkshires!" cried Freckles instantly. "But how'll we ever find the place in the night?"

"I'll fix that," promised Deering. "I'll take Merriwell away from you, and give you Williams, our chauffeur, in his place. Williams will get you there. Much as he'll hate it, Merriwell will have to ride with Miss Bargot and the rest of us in our car."

Bowie objected. "But I'm no good in a party. I can't dance, and when I sing the coyotes take to their holes. As a wet blanket on a party, I simply drip all over."

"Oh, dear Mr. Bowie!" moaned Chatby. "Don't let your inferiority complex rob us of a chance to get into a perfectly good party with some real people. Don't be so backward."

"No, don't be so backward," supported Stretcher. "I'll help you get ahead."

"Then it's settled," said Deering. "I'll find Williams and tell him how it has been arranged."

"But you can't go, partner," said Rock to Frank. "You've got to go back with the team. You've got to be on hand at the celebrating, the banquet, the——"

"That's what I want to get away from," Merriwell declared. "I never would live through it. I'll fix it with Captain Webb. I'll make some kind of an excuse. He'll have to give me a chance to get out of it."

"Tell him your family's wired for you," suggested Chatby. "Tell him your rich aunt's sick and you're her pet heir. Tell him to go to—— Hello! what am I saying? Tell him anything you darn please—only get off, get off for this lovely party, or I'll die of disappointment."

"But — but the — the snowstorm," mumbled the Texan weakly. "What if a snowstorm comes on?"

"Let 'er come," cried Chatby. "I hope she does. All I ask is that we reach that port in the Berkshires where there are open fires, plenty to eat and drink, and some nice girls to dance with in the big living room. Then she can snow us in for the winter if she wants to."

Outvoted, Bowie lapsed into silence.

AS they moved away, a man with an intensely pale face and pin-point eye pupils rose from a seat which had enabled him to hear practically everything they had said. This man made his way to the elevators, stepped off at the third floor, and knocked at the door of a room. Kirk Bargot admitted him to that room.

The man told Bargot what he had

heard, speaking out of the left side of his mouth.

"Do you know Williams, the Deering chauffeur, Jason?" asked Kirk.

"Yes, sir."

"Can he be handled?"

"You mean, sir—just what?"

"Can he be bribed?"

"To do what?"

"To lose that party he's going to drive out to the Deering place?"

"Well, sir, I suspect he might be bribed to do something like that," answered Jason. "It wouldn't be anything serious, and he might make it seem to happen naturally."

"Then bribe him. Tell him that under no conditions are those three fellows to reach Gray Gables to-night. If it storms they may not be able to get there to-morrow. However, we'll let to-morrow take care of itself. Maybe it won't make any difference then."

"Well, if I'm going to see Williams and bribe——"

"You'd better be about it while I'm checking out. I'll meet you in the lobby, near the telephone booths."

Bargot discovered his sister and Aliene Deering awaiting the reappearance of Merriwell and Jack Deering on the mezzanine.

"Didn't know as I'd be able to find you before I left for New Haven, sis," he said. "I'm going right away. I hope you enjoy your visit with Miss Deering." He bowed easily to Aliene.

"It is so good of you to let her stay with me," murmured Aliene.

"Let her stay!" Bargot laughed. "Why this sister of mine has a way of doing about as she wants to, regardless of me. You see, she's an obstinate chee-ild. She has a way of thinking she knows what's good for her lots better than her big brother does. Well, I've become resigned. I've decided to let her go her headstrong way, and pray that fate be kind to her."

Jason was standing near the telephone booths when Kirk came down to the main floor.

"It's all fixed," said the man with the pallid countenance, the pin-point pupils of his eyes shining brightly. "Williams drove a bargain, but I've got him greased. Even if it doesn't storm, Mr. Merriwell's friends won't reach Gray Gables before some time late to-morrow."

"Very good," approved Kirk. "Meet me with the car, in thirty minutes at the corner of Tremont and Boylston Streets. Meanwhile, I'm going to drop in to see a bootlegger I know. It promises to be a hard night!"

CHAPTER III.

THE PARTY AT GRAY GABLES.

DORA SNELLING, wrapped in her warm fur coat, called Jack Deering's attention to the first fluttering snowflake that drifted down through the golden glow of the big car's headlights. That first flake was followed slowly by another and then by still others.

"I say, Merriwell!" Jack called to Frank, who was occupying the rear seat between Aliene and Cynthia. "I guess your friend Chatby's going to get his wish. The snowstorm's beginning. It's beginning right to be a good one, too. We're liable to find ourselves snowed in at Gray Gables."

"Oo-oo!" half yawned Aliene, waking up from a nap. "Won't that be jolly? I just hope everybody gets to Gray Gables, that's all."

"Some of 'em ought to be there ahead of us," said her brother. "I fancy they all got started before we did. It took about a half an hour for that dumb mechanic to locate a broken spark plug. That was a setback."

Aliene stretched. "Arms and the man," she murmured, snuggling over against Frank. "Cynthia Bargot, if you don't let me have one of this man's embracers, I declare on my soul I'll do

my level best to cut you out with him. What good is a fellow on the back seat of a car with two girls unless he uses both his arms?"

"But you were asleep, Miss Deering," said Frank as he accepted the plain invitation. "I didn't want to disturb you."

"Oh, my soul! How could a man disturb a girl by holding her against his shoulder when she was napping?" Aliene laughed. "I guess you were afraid I'd disturb you and Cynthia. Well, just wait till everybody gets to Gray Gables. With your three friends, there'll be more fellows than girls, and I'll get some attention then or know the reason why."

"Oh, you bet you will!" Dora Snelling flung over her shoulder. "You always do. You're wise to beware of her, Miss Bargot. She's got a way. Any girl who wants to keep a man to herself for a while had better keep him away from Aliene."

"You pay attention to my brother and stop slandering me, Dora Snelling," advised Aliene.

She smothered another big yawn. "Where are we, Jack? How long before we'll be there?"

"Not long now, old girl," he answered. "We've struck the last three-mile stretch of road. Can't you tell by the way she bumps and lurches?"

The road, bordered by bare trees and heavy black evergreens, wound its snakish way up through the silent darkness that blanketed the Berkshires. In the ruts and hollows of the frozen highway the bright headlights revealed faint traces of white, produced by the steadily increasing snowfall. When another morning came, this road would doubtlessly be buried beneath a pallid shroud.

"Only three miles," sighed Aliene, "and then a nice warm, big, old house. Old Hester ought to have plenty of coffee and lots of good things to eat waiting for us."

Presently they saw a faint, warm glow through the veil of darkness and falling snowflakes. The glow grew more distinct with each passing moment, and Jack Deering announced their approach with blasts from the car's horn. There were answering shouts and calls.

Deering swung the car in through an open gate, beside which stood a small building like a keeper's lodge. At the end of the private drive, the windows of Gray Gables shone like warmly welcoming eyes. Through a door, which now stood open upon a long veranda, they saw the bright flames leaping in the huge stone fireplace of the big living room. From the veranda, two fellows and two girls were calling to them.

"Well, here we are," said Jack Deering, swinging the car up to the steps. "And some of the bunch have arrived ahead of us, anyhow."

A small man, sickly, sallow and sullen, came down the steps and opened the car doors.

"You're late, Mr. Jack," said the man in a raspy, metallic voice.

"A little, Hugo. I drove myself. Williams is coming with another party. You can put the car up, Hugo."

A FEW moments later, Jack was introducing Frank Merriwell and Cynthia Bargot to his mother, a quiet, smiling, gentle-looking woman, in the living room.

Mrs. Deering hid her affliction of deafness well, by her ability to read the lips of those with whom she spoke. She gave Cynthia a look of admiration, and an old-fashioned welcoming kiss upon the forehead. Her slim, cool hand pressed Frank's fingers as he lifted it to his lips with a touch of old-fashioned gallantry, that seemed quite as genuine as her own.

"My children have such splendid friends!" she said.

The Leighton twins, two kittenish,

beamy, dark-eyed girls, were introduced next. Then came a slim, suave, cool-looking young man by the name of Strake Hardy.

"Strake is Harvard's champion fencer, you know," Deering explained.

Frank had heard of him. He looked at the supple, cool-faced, reserved young man with interest.

Another fellow, with fine shoulders, narrow hips, and slender, well-built legs, stood with his back to the fire, a pipe between his lips. His eyes, bright blue but lacking in warmth, were surveying Merriwell from head to foot. The heavy tan in his cheeks was heightened by a flush.

"My friend, Hans Onderdonck, Merriwell," said Jack Deering, smiling. "You two met before, to-day, though I don't think you've ever been introduced to each other."

Onderdonck's hands were behind his back. He did not remove them.

"How do you do, Merriwell," he said. "I think maybe you're pretty pleased over your good luck. It was, of course, good luck, you know. Such things sometimes must happen."

Frank's pleasant smile lost none of its agreeableness. "That's true, Onderdonck. It's the surprises, not the supposed certainties of football, that makes it a game that draws bigger crowds than any other game. I was lucky, indeed—to get into the game to-day."

"And afterward you still luckier were," replied the Flying Dutchman. "It was the slight stumble I made when I sprang to tackle you that gave Yale the game. Myself it is, I blame for that, Merriwell."

"But I hope, Onderdonck, that you don't burden yourself with too much blame. I hope you don't assume the blame for the failure of your interference to prevent me from blundering into your way on the twenty-yard line and spoiling the third touchdown you were expected to make."

The flush deepened in Onderdonck's cheeks, and his china-blue eyes glittered still more brightly. "With perfect interference, that touchdown would have been certain, Merriwell. No blundering tackler would have touched me."

Cynthia Bargot's cheeks were burning, also. She put a leash on her tongue with difficulty when Deering took Onderdonck's arm and turned him toward her. Her acknowledgment of Jack's introduction was merely a slight inclination of her haughty head. That, however, did not prevent Hans Onderdonck from striding forward with one great step, to catch her hand into his broad, strong hand and lift it to his full red lips.

"My friend—my very best friend, Jack—great pleasure has given me, by saying you'll be his sister's guest for some days to come, Miss Bargot. That is wonderful. We may, I hope, become very well acquainted, Miss Bargot."

"Oh, just look at that, Connie," whispered Millicent Leighton to her sister, Constance. "He's fell for her so quick! What I mean is that he likes her a lot in just no time at all."

"Sh-sh!" hushed Constance. "Don't be like that Milly. Don't be jealous. He's only doing it to get Frank Merriwell's goat. Don't be like that. Don't be sil'."

"Well, I can't help it sometimes," sighed the other twin. "What I mean, I don't like to see him kissing every girl's hand."

Merriwell looked around the living room.

It was a great room with a ceiling of heavy beams. There were not many pictures on the walls. Instead of pictures, there were odd articles of adornment: a genuine Indian bow and a quiver of flint-headed arrows; two ancient flintlock muskets; heavy pistols of the Revolutionary period, also with flint locks; a pair of crossed cutlasses, with blue hand-forged steel blades; an an-

cient sword in its battered brass-tipped scabbard, which was adorned with faded woolen tassels. These were a few of the strange collection of many weapons, all of which seemed to date back at least to Revolutionary times.

"It was my father's hobby in his last days, Merriwell," explained Jack Deering. "Every implement on these walls has its story. You see our ancestors were early settlers in Massachusetts. They fought the Indians before the colonies rebelled against the English yoke. Like Israel Putnam, one of them, Captain Charles Deering, left his plow in the furrow and hurried to Boston to fight at Bunker Hill. That old sword in the scabbard is the sword of Captain Charles Deering."

"It's wonderful, old man," said Frank. "Your father's hobby was a splendid hobby."

"Well, it gave him occupation and interest when he could no longer follow his profession. He was a surgeon, you know."

Frank nodded. "I know. Everybody has heard of Doctor Richard Deering."

OLD Hester, the housekeeper, a dark and somber woman, appeared in a doorway and announced that coffee and a buffet lunch were ready. As the young people streamed toward the dining room, Cynthia Bargot avoided Hans Onderdonck as an escort with difficulty.

"That man's going to make himself a nuisance, Frank," she murmured in Merriwell's ear. "I can't bear him. His conceit is unlimited. Think of his insolence in telling you that everything you did in the game was purely accidental."

Frank laughed. "Don't mind him, Cyn. Let him have that sop for his pride. There *was* a lot of good luck in it, you know."

"I don't know anything of the kind! It isn't true, either. You're just too modest, Frank."

"Would you have me like Onderdonck?"

"Oh, no—no! But there's something in the saying that people take one at one's own estimation."

"Every sensible person despises a braggart."

"But you don't have to brag, Frank. It's just a mistake to let some insolent fellow make it out an accident when you've really done something unusual."

"In the long run, it's actions that count, not words, Cynthia."

No one seemed more at ease or happier than Frank, as the laughing, jesting group partook of the buffet lunch and the golden-brown coffee that the housekeeper had prepared. For the time being, he had forgotten his absent classmates. They were brought to his mind by the entrance of Hugo, the sickly son of the housekeeper. Hugo's shoulders and hat were covered with snow.

"Pardon me, sir," he said to Jack Deering. "I was thinking about Williams. If he doesn't get here pretty soon he'll have a hard drive of it, sir."

Hugo had a deeply lined face and a cold, blue-lipped mouth.

"Don't worry about Williams, Hugo," replied Jack. "He's as reliable as a clock. I've never known him to let the elements or bad roads prevent him from reaching a destination. He'll bring Mr. Merriwell's friends through if he has to shovel a road to do it."

The sickly fellow bowed in answer to this. But he was not looking at the speaker. His small, sunken eyes, round and bright as the eyes of a scavenger bird, were fixed upon Frank Merriwell.

Cynthia Bargot saw this. She had seen Hugo looking at Frank instead of the one he was addressing, when he first spoke. There was something in the bitter expression of the man's face, something in the way he gazed at Frank with those round, deep-set eyes, that gave Cynthia a queer, shivery feeling. She grasped Merriwell's elbow after Hugo

had backed slowly out of the room and departed.

"Oh, he's dreadful, Frank—that sickly creature!" she whispered. "He looked at you so strangely—just as if he hated you and longed to do something terrible to you."

Merriwell laughed, his strong warm hand closing over the slender white hand upon his sleeve. "Why, I believe you're nervous, Cyn. That's queer for you. That poor fellow's harmless, of course. Fate has been cruel to him, and I'm sorry for him."

"Oh, I'm sorry, too, Frank," she murmured. "But still—still I'm sure he looked at you as if he longed to kill you."

CHAPTER IV.

ONDERDONCK IS ANNOYED.

BACK in the big living room again, they settled in an irregular half circle before the huge stone fireplace.

Mrs. Deering had explained that she had waited up to meet them some time after her usual hour for retiring. She had bidden them good-night, and gone away, accompanied by Aliene, to her chamber in a distant wing of the old house. Aliene had returned to find the other grouped like worshipers before the fire that threw its ruddy, shifting beams over their eager young faces.

Onderdonck, sprawled on a big chair, was smoking his pipe again. Aliene found the others, all but Frank and Cynthia, smoking cigarettes.

The giggly Leighton girls were trying hard to handle their fags sophisticatedly, while Dora Snelling watched their efforts with open amusement. Lithe, tawny-eyed, slightly pantherish of aspect, Dora manipulated her cigarette like an expert. She inhaled deeply and with relish.

Sitting on the floor beside her chair, Strake Hardy leaned against Dora's knees. The association seemed natural.

Aliene lost no time about lighting up also. Her first deep whiff made her cough.

"And they say there isn't one in a carload!" she exclaimed, looking resentfully at her cigarette.

"Oh, one has to cough," said Milly Leighton. "What I mean, it's really the proper thing. Everybody does it. You know what I mean."

"But I notice that Miss Bargot isn't smoking," said Jack.

Onderdonck unsprawled and made haste to offer Cynthia the silver box that held the slender, paper-wrapped cylinders of tobacco.

"Thank you, no," said Cynthia, with a little shake of her bright head.

"Oh!" he exclaimed in surprise. "Do you smoke never?"

"Well, hardly ever," was her smiling answer. "I've tried it, of course. Every girl does. But I don't like it. Why should I do something I don't like to do, just to appear rakish and up to the minute?"

"Oh!" said Onderdonck again. "It is conventional, you are?"

"No, unconventional. The conventional thing is what everybody does."

There was a touch of scorn in Dora Snelling's short laugh. "You see, Hans, she's determined to be different. She just won't be like the riffraff and hoi-polloi. In spite of her name, she eschews sin."

Misunderstanding the word, Onderdonck said: "And I would choose sin always, when it's so fascinating, so alluring." With which, he planted himself, worshipfully, on the rug at Cynthia's feet. "I hope," he added, "that my words don't give her umbrage."

"Oh, don't mind about that, Hans," said Milly Leighton, "as long as she doesn't get mad."

Then she stared around blankly when everybody laughed. "What I mean," she hastened to add, "you're such a perfect gentleman you'd never offend a real lady, anyhow."

"Sh-sh!" said Constance. "Don't be like that. Don't talk so free."

"Now, you're always shushing me, Connie," complained Millicent. "I mean I'm getting tired of it. You shush me sometimes before I really get ready to speak. You say you can read me like a book."

"What she probably means, Milly dear," came sweetly from Miss Snelling, "is that you're a very plain type."

"I don't smoke the cigarette," said Onderdonck, "because it is harmful to the wind. It is not good for footbaall men. The pipe, it does not so much hurt them. Do you smoke the pipe, Merriwell?"

"I've never acquired the habit of smoking at all, Onderdonck," answered Frank, "and so I don't miss it."

"Men smoke," said the Flying Dutchman, almost as if speaking to himself. "Very few do not."

Cynthia Bargot could not help saying: "Do you consider yourself a criterion of fine manhood, Mr. Onderdonck?"

"Oh, I'm a good judge, rather. It so hard is not for one to tell the real man. Sometimes a young fellow looks like one and never the promise fulfills."

JACK DEERING rose quickly. "I think we ought to have some music," he said, going to the radio and starting to tune in.

A moment later, he was saying: "Hush! Listen to this. Here's a résumé of our football game to-day."

The voice of the broadcaster came forth from the horn, distinct and mellow, as if the speaker were in that very room:

"It was Merriwell, the Yale freshman, who blasted Harvard's hopes and robbed the Crimson of a victory that seemed already in the bag. With Yale battered and broken in the final quarter, the coach amazed everybody by sending that unknown freshman in to take the place of Dan Carney behind the line.

"Merriwell proved to be the sensation of the day. Not only did he stop the rushes of the swift and terrible Onderdonck, he snatched a Harvard pass out of the air, got through a broken field, and made an eighty-yard run for the winning touchdown, with Onderdonck vainly trying to overtake and tackle——"

Hans Onderdonck leaped to his feet.

"Off! Off!" he shouted, his face brick-red. "Turn it off, Deering! Already enough of it I've heard! A very great swelling of the head it will give Mr. Merriwell."

Jack had turned the radio off. There was a moment of silence, disturbed only by the cheerful crackling of the fire. Then Frank laughed like one highly amused.

"Don't worry about that, Onderdonck," he said. "You shouldn't judge everybody by yourself, old fellow."

The Flying Dutchman wheeled around to glare at the smiling speaker, whose steady eyes wavered not a particle before his gaze.

"Gott in himmel!" burst from Onderdonck's lips. "It is too much!"

He strode across the floor, yanked open the door to the veranda, went out, and crashed the door shut behind him.

"Oh, dear!" gasped Milly Leighton, who was greatly agitated. "Now he's mad. I mean he's just dreadful offended. Isn't he the grandest thing when he gets angry? He makes me tremble all over."

"Don't be like that, Milly," remonstrated her sister. "Don't be so silly over Hans. I guess he had a right to be offended if he wanted to be. Don't be like that."

"It's nice and cool out there," said Cynthia Bargot, moving a little closer to Frank on the big settee. "Mr. Onderdonck appears quite feverish. Maybe he'll be calmer when he returns."

"Somebody ought to go out and keep him company," said Millicent Leighton. "It's lonesome out there, and all snowy, and the wind is beginning to blow. Maybe I ought to——"

Her sister grasped her wrist. "You stay right where you are, Milly. He's a he-man, and they say no he-man wants a girl running after him. You've just got to stop being like that."

The door opened to admit the sullen servant, who entered with both arms full of wood. When he had put the wood down, Hugo spoke to Jack Deering again.

"The storm's getting very bad, sir. The snow's coming down heavier now, and the wind's making it drift. If Williams doesn't get through in another thirty minutes he won't be here to-night. Take my word for that."

"It'll be too bad if your friends don't get here, Frank," murmured Cynthia. "They were eager to come—all but Bowie. I wish they were here. Somehow—I don't know why—I feel it would be better if they were here."

She stopped with a little catch on her breath, as Hugo gave Frank another look with his stabbing eyes, before he turned away and left the room.

CHAPTER V.

THE STORY AND THE CLOCK.

"HE'S such a sullen-looking creature," said Dora Snelling, shrugging her slim shoulders. "I don't see how you can bear to have him around, Jack."

"There's a reason, Dora," Deering answered. "You see this old place has been in the Hix family ever since it was built, back in pre-Revolutionary times, until they lost it through a foreclosed mortgage. With the exception of a distant cousin, Hugo Hix and his mother are the last of the heirs. They expected to inherit the property. My father decided to give them both a home here as long as they lived. I've found Hugo useful. He's really very clever and ingenious—almost a genius in his way."

"Is it true," asked Dora, lighting a fresh cigarette, "that this house is haunted, Jack?"

Both the Leighton girls uttered little squeaky screams of alarm.

"Oh, gracious goodness!" cried Millicent, snuggling toward her sister. "I never heard anything about that."

"Now don't be frightened, Milly," said Constance. "Don't be like that. It's only a story."

"Only a story is right," Jack nodded. "It's a rather doleful and gruesome story, too."

"A ghost story!" exclaimed Cynthia. "A ghost story, told in a haunted house on a wild winter night. Why, I'd love it! Won't you tell the story, Jack?"

Onderdonck came in again, stamping a little snow from his feet. He sat down at the far end of the circle, away from Merriwell, and began to refill his big pipe.

"Why, if the others would like to hear it—but maybe they wouldn't?" said Jack Deering.

To his surprise, even the Leighton twins urged him to tell the story. He piled more wood onto the fire, resumed his seat, and began the narrative after a moment of thoughtful silence:

THIS is one of the few houses built in this neighborhood, back in the days of Indian wars and massacres hereabouts, that escaped destruction. Nearly all the others were burned by the redskins. Some were burned after the families that occupied them had been butchered, and some were burned after their frightened families had abandoned them to hurry to the safety of the nearest settlement blockhouse.

"The Reverend Jeremiah Hix was the builder of this house. He was a fanatically religious man. The superstitious savages of that day would not harm one whose mind was affected.

They said that such a person had been touched by the finger of the Great Spirit. That, probably, is why Jeremiah Hix and his family were spared.

"Apparently the Reverend Jeremiah was even more than a religious fanatic. He was distinctly crazy. It was a tragic blunder for such a girl as the light-hearted, laughing Prudence Ware to marry a man like Jeremiah. It was a mating of opposites, both in temperament and age; for he was at least twenty years her senior.

"It seems that Prudence had been a rather lively girl, for those days. She had had a number of suitors.

"It's pretty certain that none of her suitors, previous to the Reverend Jeremiah, was acceptable to Prudence's parents. The old folks interfered with her affairs repeatedly. One of her sweethearts, named Reuben Elliot, coaxed her into running away with him. They did not get very far. They were overtaken and separated."

"Aren't fathers and mothers just perfectly horrid!" interjected Milly Leighton. "Anyhow, they were once, before young people got so they could stand up for their own rights and tell the old fogies where they got off."

"Sh-sh!" shushed Connie. "You mustn't interrupt. Don't be like that."

"Reuben Elliot was horsewhipped and banished," Jack Deering went on. "Prudence was kept under constant and rigid surveillance until the Reverend Jeremiah, then a middle-aged widower, cast his covetous eyes upon her. She was young and strong, and more or less buxom. Good qualities for a hard-working housewife of that day. So Jeremiah fixed it up with her father and mother, and the marriage was pulled off in spite of the poor girl's wishes or desires.

"Jeremiah Hix brought his young wife here to this big, lonely old house. He was the parson of a little church in a settlement a few miles distant. There he preached regularly every Sabbath day, and there he took Prudence to listen to his harsh sermons.

"Not satisfied with that, this fanatical, crack-brained man talked his cold iron-bound religion to her constantly, every day of her life. That she had been a frightful sinner who could only escape eternal damnation by daily supplication and repentance, was something he never let her forget for a moment.

"Is it strange that in time the sound of a church bell should throw that tormented young soul into paroxysms of weeping? Is it strange that the sound of congregational singing should seem to crush her with the weight of millstones? Is it strange that she grew thin and worn and haggard and old long before her time?"

"The poor thing!" whispered Milly Leighton. "Why didn't she put arsenic in his coffee?"

"Oh, what a dreadful thought!" gasped her sister. "Don't have such terrible thoughts, Milly dear. Don't be that way."

Deering continued:

"One icy, winter day, as they were starting out for church together, the Reverend Jeremiah's wife fell and injured her back so severely that she never walked again. After that, of course, it was impossible for her to mount a horse and ride to church, as she had been compelled to do so many, many times. All she could do was lie bolstered amid pillows and listen to the cold, iron sermons which her husband repeated for her, word for word, before delivering them to his congregation. But there seemed, at first, to be some relief for her in the fact that she no longer had to listen to the chanting of hymns nor to the tolling of the church bell.

"The Reverend Jeremiah told her that surely her misfortune was the visitation of the Higher Power, punishing her for her wickedness.

"Then the Indians attacked the little settlement, burned all the houses and the church, but spared the Reverend Jeremiah. He recovered the church bell from the ruins and brought it here to this old house. He installed it in a tower built for it in one of the wings.

"Here he delivered his sermons to such few persons as ventured to come to hear them. And every time he preached, he had his wife brought into the room on a stretcher, that she might listen to him like the others. Also that she might hear them sing their hymns. And, of course, she was compelled once more to listen to the tolling of the church bell when it made the surrounding forest echo with its clangor.

"That soon drove Prudence Hix insane also. She became a raving maniac. It was necessary, in order to prevent her from doing herself injury with her bare hands, to shackle her with heavy chains. She died."

"And she never, never got a chance to put arsenic in his coffee!" sobbed Milly Leighton.

"Is that all the story, Jack?" asked Connie.

"All of it except the ridiculous part about this old house being haunted by the ghosts of Prudence and Jeremiah Hix."

CLINGING to each other, the Leighton twins tried to stop their teeth from chattering.

"Bub-bub-bub-but there aren't any gug-gug-gug-ghosts, are there, Jack?" asked Milly.

"Of cuc-cuc-cuc-course not, Millicent," said Connie. "Don't bub-bub-bub-be silly."

"If there are," said Deering, "none of us has ever seen them. None of us ever heard the sounds said to announce their presence at certain intervals. We've never heard knocks, moans, shrieks, or the rattling of chains. The old clock on the stair landing in the hall has never gone crazy and struck all sorts of hours in a few minutes. None of us has heard the tolling of an unseen bell.

"Yet others who have occupied the place before us claim to have heard all these things. It is said that the hidden bell has always tolled before some one died in the house.

"Now"—he finished with a laugh—"there's a nice jolly story for a party like this. You wanted it, and I've given it to you."

"Well, it's given me the squeegees," confessed Dora Snelling. "Do find a musical program on the air, Jack. Get a dance orchestra. Let's dance. Let's do something to shake this off, for the love of warm blood!"

The furniture was set back. The rugs were removed. Eagerly they paired off and began to dance to the lively strains of a fox trot, snatched out of the air by a fine radio set.

Frank danced with Aliene, and Jack with Cynthia, while Dora Snelling and Strake Hardy footed it like professionals. Milly Leighton dragged the reluctant Onderdonck onto the floor. Only Connie was left to watch them, brooding over the tragic story of Prudence Hix.

Presently the music ceased, and the broadcasting station made its announcement. In the momentary pause following the announcement, Connie Leighton suddenly exclaimed in a startled voice:

"What's that! I heard something! Listen! I heard a moaning sound!"

They all heard the moaning distinctly enough.

"It's only the wind in the chimney," said Jack Deering, laughing.

But he turned the radio off and listened.

"There's something else!" gasped Connie, rushing forward to clutch Jack's arm. "Hark! Hear it! Hear it!"

Faintly, from some unseen spot, came a sound like the clanking of heavy chains.

"I'm going to faint!" declared Milly Leighton, falling heavily against Onderdonck. "Hold me, Hans! Don't let me fall!"

"*Gott in himmel!*" gulped the goggle-eyed Dutchman. "On your feet, stand, young lady, and give me a chance my ear to hear with."

In the silence that followed the singular noise, each person in the room seemed to hear his or her heart pounding violently.

"It certainly did sound like the clanking of a chain," Jack Deering alowed presently. "Could anybody tell where it seemed to come from?"

"From right under my feet," whimpered Connie Leighton, still clinging to him.

"From over our heads," asserted Milly. "I mean, it seemed to be sort of upstairs somewheres."

"Oh, Milly, you never get anything right!" said her sister. "Don't be like that! I tell you it was somewheres underneath us—in the cellar or somewheres like that. Don't be ridiculous!"

"I thought it came from outside the house," said Strake Hardy.

"Now I had a notion it came from some other room on this floor," put in Dora Snelling coolly. "What's your idea about it, Mr. Merriwell?"

Frank shook his head. "I couldn't seem to locate it at all," he admitted quietly.

Aliene was gazing at her brother. "Haven't you any idea what caused the noise, Jack?" she asked.

"Not the remotest, old girl," he confessed, "but I'm positive there wasn't anything supernatural about it. The wind made something rattle so that it resembled the clanking of a chain. That's all. After listening to my story, you were all in a mood to accept any unusual noise for a ghostly sound."

THEN the old-fashioned clock on the landing of the hall stairs commenced striking. There seemed to be something hard and cold and pitiless in the voice of the bell, like the hard, cold, pitiless nature of the Reverend Jeremiah Hix. Steadily and remorselessly it beat out twelve strokes.

"The hour when churchyards yawn," said Merriwell lightly.

"You better get that old timepiece regulated, Jack," advised Strake Hardy, looking at his wrist watch. "It's only a quarter past eleven."

"Be still!" hissed Onderdonck, with uplifted hand. "Again the clock is striking!"

It was true that the clock, which had made a pause after it had struck twelve times, was striking again. Coldly, solemnly, and deliberately, as before, the bell sounded—eleven times! Then it stopped.

"It seems to be trying to correct itself, Deering," said Frank. "It was thirty minutes nearer right that time."

"This is thundering queer!" muttered the youthful host. "How could a clock run backward?"

He caught his breath and was silent. Once more the clock was striking. This time, however, it ceased after the tenth stroke!

"*Mien Gott!*" said Onderdonck in awe.

Gray Gables was not provided with electricity, so Deering picked up a kerosene lamp and started toward the hall, bearing it in his hand. The others followed him.

As Jack stepped into the hall and held the lamp above his head to look at the tall clock on the landing of the stairs, it began to strike swiftly and furiously in a most erratic manner, as if enraged.

"Look!" gasped Strake Hardy, pointing up at the old timepiece. "Look at the hands! What in the devil is the matter with the thing?"

The hands of the clock were whirling about in an astounding manner.

CHAPTER VI.

OUT OF THE CLOSET.

NEVER before had they seen a clock behave in such a crazy way. It continued to strike with the fury of a thing gone mad. At the same time, its hands revolved on the dial with such swiftness that they were almost a blur before the eyes of the bewildered group of young people at the foot of the stairs.

At first, both hands moved in the same direction, but with unequal speed. The minute hand appeared to be turning two or three times as rapidly as the hour hand.

"Well, if it's a race," said Frank Merriwell, "the short hand is certainly getting the worst of it."

Barely had he uttered the words when the minute hand stopped abruptly and stood still. The hour hand contined to spin around.

A low, nervous laugh came from Cynthia Bargot's lips. "The big hand is giving the little one a chance to make up for the laps it's gained, Frank," she said.

Cynthia's laugh was echoed by Milly Leighton, who was now clinging convulsively to her sister.

"Oh, my! Oh, dear! Oh, gracious!" cried Milly hysterically. "It's awful funny, but I'm so scared my knees are ready to let me drop. What I mean, they're all shaky and weak. Did you ever, see such a funny old clock? I mean it's just gone completely cuckoo."

"Now don't be like that, Milly," remonstrated Constance. "It isn't a cuckoo clock, you know. Stop your silly giggling and quit pinching me. I'll be black and blue all over. For goodness' sakes, don't be like that, Milly!"

"That," said Strake Hardy, a bit hoarsely, "is certainly a remarkable timepiece, Deering. Look at the minute hand now, will you? The darn thing's running the wrong way!"

The long hand had now begun to whirl around the dial in the opposite direction from its natural course of travel. For a moment or two, it spun rapidly in that manner. Then both hands stopped and stood perfectly still for barely a second.

Following this, they began to behave in a manner even more peculiar than before. Forward and backward they spun. Sometimes they moved simultaneously in the same direction, but they seemed to travel more often in opposite directions. They kept stopping and starting as if they were confused and did not really know what they wanted to do.

"Never, never in my life did I such a clock as that see," muttered Hans Onderdonck. "It's playing tag by itself."

Aliene Deering twitched nervously at her brother's elbow. "They said it would happen, Jack," she whispered. "Now we've seen it at last. The clock has gone crazy."

He did not answer her. With his jaws set, he started to climb the stairs to the landing on which the clock stood.

Barely had Deering placed his foot on the lowest stair, however, when the clock ceased to strike and the hands stopped whirling. In a moment, the old timepiece was again ticking in its usual sedate, solemn manner, with the hands on its dial pointing to approximately the correct time.

Deering mounted to the landing and stood before the clock. He stared at it in puzzled bewilderment. After a moment, he opened the long door in the front of the case, and revealed the suspended cylindrical brass weights and the swinging pendulum. There was now nothing unusual in the appearance or behavior of the ancient timepiece.

"Well," Jack observed in a harsh voice, "I'm going to find out what made

you kick up that way, or I'm going to take an ax and make junk of you."

Peering upward over the banister from the dimness of the lower hall, old Hester, the housekeeper cried shrilly:

"Smash it! Smash it, Mr. Jack! I'll get the ax for you if you'll smash the thing! Twice before it has behaved like that. I haven't dared tell you. I haven't dared tell anybody but my boy, Hugo. I thought you'd say I was crazy if I told you about it. I won't be able to stay in this house much longer, sir, if you keep that mad clock here."

"So it's happened before, has it, Hester?" said Deering. "Well, maybe there's something wrong with the works that makes it do so. I'll have it inspected by the best clock man in Springfield, just as soon as I can. I haven't a doubt but he'll be able to tell us what makes it kick up so queerly."

Cynthia Bargot spoke to Merriwell once more. "What do you really think about it, Frank?" she asked in a low voice.

"I don't know, Cyn," he admitted, also keeping his voice repressed. "But I've got a notion that there's some sort of deviltry behind it all. Of course it may be nothing but a practical joke. If that's the explanation and Deering's in on it, he's a pretty good actor."

"You, Merriwell," said Hans Onderdonck, "some actor are yourself. You are nicely doing to pretend you are your nerve keeping so well. Still, I should expect that you are very much frightened."

"But in that case," replied the Flash, "you wouldn't look for me to alarm the girls by showing it, would you, Onderdonck?" He smiled pleasantly into the scowling face of the Harvard man.

Jack Deering reclosed the clock. As he did so, a mournful wail sounded through the upper part of the house. This was followed by a loud banging noise and a rushing gust of cold air, like the breath of a frozen monster. The gust of air extinguished the lamp in Deering's hand, plunging the hall into darkness.

THEN Cynthia Bargot cried out: "Help, Frank! Something's got hold of me!"

Trying to find her in that darkness, Merriwell received a blow on the side of the head that staggered him. In a moment he plunged forward again, with outstretched hands.

"Where are you, Cynthia?" he called.

He was seized by a pair of powerful arms, and a desperate struggle followed in the dark.

Both of the Leighton girls shrieked with terror.

Jack Deering, feeling his way down the stairs, sought to reassure his guests and quiet the confusion.

His ears told him that a furious battle was taking place down there in the unlighted hall. He could hear the panting of the participants as they careened about in the blackness. They crashed against the walls, first at one side of the hall and then at the other. Presently they went down with a thud that jarred the floor.

Strake Hardy came back from the living room, bearing another lamp. By the light of that lamp, they saw Frank Merriwell holding the writhing Onderdonck beneath him.

The Dutchman was furious. "For this," he snarled, "you shall make payment, Merriwell!"

Frank sprang up immediately, and helped lift Onderdonck to his feet.

"I'm sorry," said the Flash. "Somebody nearly knocked my head off in the dark, and I thought perhaps I had grabbed the fellow. I hope you'll accept my apology, Onderdonck."

"Should you expect it when you have attacked me so?" roared the Harvard man. "In the darkness you something did which you could not in a thousand years do the light in."

"That may be true," Merriwell allowed mildly. "I heard Miss Bargot cry for help. I merely responded to her appeal."

"Too quick you are, Merriwell. Had you not been, you would have found out that I only took hold of her to let her know she was quite safe."

"I accept your explanation. You haven't accepted my apology."

"Times there are when an apology is not enough."

"Oh! Is that the way you feel about it? If it is, Onderdonck, I withdraw the apology."

"Stop it, you two!" commanded Deering, relighting his lamp. "This is no time for a row. Something happened upstairs. You all heard the wailing sound, just before the gust of wind blew my lamp out."

"Oh, dear!" sobbed Milly Leighton, whose face was pallid and drawn with terror. "I want to go home! I can't stay in this terrible house. I mean, I just can't stand it."

"But we—we can't go now, Milly," said her sister, who seemed to be no less frightened. "It's just a frightful storm, you know, and we can't go now. Don't be like that, Milly, dear."

"Well, I'll just die, Connie! I know I'll just die! I'd rather die in a snowdrift than in the hands of a ghost."

"There are no ghosts," declared Jack Deering. "But my mother occupies a room in the east wing, and I'm wondering if anything has happened to her. Come, Aliene. We must find out if mother's all right."

They climbed the stairs together, Jack holding a hand to one side of the top of the lamp chimney to keep the cold gusts of wind from extinguishing the light again. Bearing the other lamp, Strake Hardy followed. The rest of the party came after him.

The wind was whirling the snow in through an open window of the upper hall. The window, which was hung upon hinges, had apparently been burst open by the force of the gale. Deering reclosed it and examined the catch. Then he stated that it had simply given way before an extra heavy blast.

"But that doesn't explain the wail we heard," he added. "Not unless that too was made by the wind. But it doesn't seem possible it could have been."

He led the way into the eastern wing, where Aliene found the door of her mother's chamber unlocked. She came out of that chamber again, in a few moments, looking greatly relieved.

"It's a good thing for mother that she's so deaf," she said. "She's sleeping as quietly and soundly as if there hadn't been the least disturbance in the house."

Her brother took a long breath. "Well, now we can look around without worrying about her. I don't think we're going to find a thing, though. I guess that noise that we took for a wail really was made by the gale when it burst the window open."

"What do you think, Frank?" whispered Cynthia.

"I think you've got remarkable nerves, Cyn," he replied evasively.

"You're dodging my question."

"I'm speaking the truth."

"Then, if you believe I've got such good nerves, tell me what you think about that cry like a wail."

"I don't see how the wind could have made it."

"Nor I, Frank. It sounded human—or inhuman—to me."

THEY followed the host through every room on the second floor, and came at last into the combined library and study of Deering's father.

"Everything here is just as father left it," Jack explained. "I shan't apologize for the dust. None of us comes here very often, and we are careful not to disturb things. That's the way mother wants to have it."

By this time the coldness of the unheated rooms had chilled all of them to the bone. The pale faces of the Leighton girls had taken on a bluish tinge, and Milly's teeth were chattering.

"It was at that desk that my father passed away," Jack went on. "He was engaged on a book to contain his lectures concerning surgery. He expired at his work."

"For mercy sakes, give me a light, Strake!" implored Dora Snelling. "I need a whiff to buck me up."

He struck a match and held it to the tip of her cigarette.

"Where does this door lead to, Deering?" asked Frank, standing before the only door in the room besides the one by which they had entered.

"To a closet, that's all," was the answer. "That door's usually locked, Merriwell."

"Don't you think we ought to take a peep into the closet, just to satisfy our curiosity, old man?"

"Maybe so. Perhaps it isn't locked. Try it."

Frank turned the knob, but the door did not move when he gave a slight pull at it.

"It is stuck, maybe," said Onderdonck. "Try again, Merriwell."

Frank complied, and the door yielded suddenly. The force of a sharp pull brought it wide open.

Forth from the closet, as if propelled by a mighty leap, came a ghastly human skeleton that fell upon the Yale freshman and wrapped its bony arms around his neck.

CHAPTER VII.

ONDERDONCK'S CHALLENGE.

WITH a shriek, Milly Leighton collapsed to the floor. Retreating into a corner, her sister fell to her knees and commenced to gibber.

There was no one who had not been shocked by the startling occurrence.

Staggering backward, Merriwell now grasped the skeleton and released himself from its embrace. In flinging it aside, he unwittingly tossed the rattling thing upon Onderdonck.

The Dutchman almost hit the ceiling. The choking sounds which came from his throat were indescribably queer. Seizing the skeleton, he dashed it to the floor, where it lay in a twisted, grisly, broken heap.

Onderdonck's eyes were almost popping out of their sockets. He was shaking like a person with the ague.

"You—you, Merriwell!" he raged. "On purpose you did that to me!"

"No," denied Frank. "That's not right. I didn't do it on purpose, Onderdonck. I just got rid of the thing somehow—anyhow—as quickly as I could."

"On purpose you did it, Merriwell!" insisted the infuriated Onderdonck man. "On purpose you did it to frighten me."

"But it—it's a real skeleton!" said Dora Snelling, staring down at the thing. "It's enough to scare a person with nerves of iron."

"I'm sorry about this," said Jack Deering. "I was pretty sure that door was locked. In fact, it's always been kept locked. I knew the skeleton was in there. My father used it to illustrate his lectures. I hope you'll forgive me, Merriwell."

"*He* forgive you!" bellowed Onderdonck. "How about me? It is not you I blame, Jack. You saw him at me throw it."

"I believe he told you the truth, Hans, when he said he didn't throw it at you intentionally."

Frank stooped and picked the skeleton up. It was strung together on wires, two of which had broken before the violent handling it had received. Deering picked up the pieces.

"It always hung from a hook at the rear of the closet," he said. "You see

there's also a hook on the inside of the door. Somehow it must have been transferred to the latter hook, but who it was that moved it I haven't an idea. Let's put the thing back in there, Merriwell. It's too bad anything like this should happen to ruin the party."

"Well, some other things have happened, old man," reminded Strake Hardy. "If the party isn't ruined, I'll say what's occurred has made it a bit unusual, anyhow."

"Well, I believe everything is understandable but the queer behavior of the clock," asserted Deering. "I'm going to look into that, some more myself, after I get warmed up again."

He led them back to the living room, where they heaped fresh wood on the fire and gathered about it to get the chill out of their bones.

Presently they began discussing the queer things that had occurred since Jack Deering had told them the story of the Reverend Jeremiah Hix and his unfortunate young wife.

Onderdonck took no part in this discussion. He remained silent and sullen, casting occasional sidelong glances of resentment toward Frank Merriwell.

Suddenly he spoke up: "Merriwell, you will have to give me satisfaction!"

"I beg your pardon?" said Frank.

"In the hall you attacked me."

"I answered Miss Bargot's call for help."

"In the hall you attacked me," repeated Onderdonck. "You threw me down. My friend, Deering, he has below a gymnasium room. Down there we can meet."

"Meet? What do you mean, man?"

"I mean you are challenged to wrestle with me. I shall show you that you can not again do what you did in the hall when it was dark, and you by surprise took me."

"Oh! Is that it?"

"It is."

"Then, if you insist, Onderdonck, I'll wrestle you to-morrow in the gymnasium."

"I do insist, and it must be right away. Until to-morrow is too long. I shall not sleep until a lesson I have given you. I shall not sleep until I have shown you Hans Onderdonck the better man is."

Frank was forced to laugh. "Maybe there are other reasons why some of us won't sleep much to-night, Onderdonck. Just now a wrestling match doesn't seem to fit in very well."

"That's right, Hans," supported Jack Deering. "If you and Merriwell want to test your skill in such a match, there'll be plenty of opportunities later. No one knows how long we'll be snowed in here."

"Against you I will not persist, of course, my friend," Onderdonck yielded with great reluctance. "Nevertheless, to me it seems that Mr. Merriwell is lacking in courage. Accidents such as happened to-day the football game in, and a short time ago, the darkness of the hall in, have made him like a lion appear. To be shown up for the lamb that he really is, he does not wish. Maybe if I were like him—which I am not!—I would not care to have myself shown up also."

"Just a moment, Hans," interposed the host, frowning. "Don't forget that Merriwell is my guest, like yourself. I'm sure you didn't realize how obnoxious your language sounded. I'm sure you're not deliberately trying to insult a guest in this house."

"Not for anything would I do that, old man," the Flying Dutchman hastily replied. "It is my way bluntly to speak, perhaps. You know me, and you understand. Of course the wrestling match, if Merriwell courage had to wrestle, would be in its nature entirely friendly. Maybe he has not so considered it. Maybe that is why he is afraid."

"Maybe," said Frank, with unruffled good nature, "you are mistaken in believing I'm afraid, Onderdonck. You seem to have forgotten the young ladies entirely."

"How do you mean, forgotten them?"

"Why, after what's occurred to make them nervous and alarmed, it would scarcely be thoughtful of us to leave them here while we went down into Deering's gymnasium to pull off a wrestling match. I very much doubt if they would wish to be left alone like that."

"Of course not, Mr. Merriwell," said Dora Snelling, showing her fine white teeth in a smile that gave her an oddly tigerish appearance; "but maybe we'd all be willing and ready to go down into the gymnasium with you and watch you wrestle. Something like that might be a real relief. It might serve to get us out of this shivery funk. Personally, I think I'd enjoy it."

Frank bowed to her. As he did so, he caught a covert signal, like a warning gesture, from Cynthia. The usual brightness of her face appeared to be clouded by uncertainty or apprehension. The Flash, on the point of agreeing to wrestle immediately, was restrained.

"You've spoken for yourself only, Miss Snelling," he replied unoffensively. "Perhaps the other young ladies feel the same, but you should remember that my friends, who started for Gray Gables with Mr. Deering's chauffeur as their guide, haven't yet arrived. I prefer to wait for them to appear before engaging in this wrestling match."

Onderdonck's loud laughter filled the room like the bursting explosions of an aërial bomb. "It is not so much like the lion he is, after all. More like the jackal, that must have its pack behind it."

"Now that," cried Jack Deering, "is pure insult, Onderdonck! You're offending me, as well as Merriwell. You're forcing me to apologize to him for your surprising rudeness."

Frank's eyes were shining, now, in the firelight. Though he still appeared absolutely cool and self-possessed, the nature of his smile had changed. Had his friends been present, they would have recognized that smile as being closely related to the singular and dangerous laugh that sometimes came from his lips, when circumstances compelled him to meet an antagonist in battle. He bowed to the irritating Dutchman.

"If arrangements can be made to leave the girls under conditions that will not add to their nervousness," he said, "I'll wrestle with you immediately, Mr. Onderdonck."

Then, in the silence that followed this unexpected acceptance, a loud and clamorous knocking resounded through the big living room. It came so unexpectedly and with such suddenness that every person in the room was given a start. Even Merriwell felt his nerves twitch and tauten.

Milly Leighton uttered a scream and flung herself upon her sister, whom she clasped around the neck with a real strangle hold. She continued to scream as Connie endeavored to free herself from the choking embrace.

"Stop it, Milly!" Connie gulped. "Stop it this minute! Don't be like that! You're just scaring the daylights out of me."

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" Milly wailed. "It's the ghost that knocked! He—or she—or it—is right at the door! What I mean, it's trying to get in here! Oh, don't let it in! Please, don't let it in!"

"It must be a pretty healthy ghost to rap as loudly as that," said Jack Deering, starting toward the door.

They watched him swing the door wide open.

Into the room swept a wild flurry of

snowflakes that seemed to bear a white human figure in their midst.

CHAPTER VIII.

SILAS WESTON'S STORY.

THE wild wind whistled and roared through the gale-lashed trees that surrounded Gray Gables. There was something demoniac in this premature winter tempest.

Deering slammed the door shut again, and turned to look, with questioning eyes, at the white figure that was now shaking the snow from its clothing. He saw what appeared to be a roughly dressed, middle-aged man, whose face was almost as pallid as the snow scattered over the floor around his feet.

"Well," said the stranger, speaking queerly from one side of his mouth, "I'm sartin in luck. It's the devil's own night or I ain't never seen one yit."

"I agree with you, sir," said Jack. "And it surprises me that any person should be out in it at this hour."

The man looked at him with a pair of eyes having shiny pupils which seemed scarcely larger than pin points.

"Don't ye think for a jiffy," he returned, "that I've been out in it by choice. Silas Weston ain't that big a fool."

"So your name's Silas Weston, is it?" Jack queried.

"That's me, young fella."

"Well, where are you from, and how did you get here?"

"I'm from Turnerville, down the valley a ways, and how I got here is a yarn. I ain't tellin' it, though, till I kin warm some of the ice out of my bones. Holy poker! But I'm almost friz stiff."

He tottered stiffly toward the fire, every movement being that of a person brittle with the cold. Standing on the hearth, and crowding close to the flames, he rubbed his benumbed hands and beat them together to start his blood circulating. The warmth quickly turned to steaming vapor the snow that had impregnated and clung to his rude garments.

"I guess this must be the old Hix place that's ha'nted," he observed, as he looked around. "If that's right, I s'pose you're young Mr. Deering, ain't ye?"

"Yes, I'm Jack Deering," replied the host.

"Well, what ye want to live up here in this lonesome old place for is something I don't understand, any more than other people. Ain't ye never heerd or seen any signs of the ghosts?"

Jack smiled. "I'm sure, Weston, that whatever we've seen or heard is in no way related to anything ghostly."

"Oh, how can you say that, Jack?" cried Milly Leighton. "I mean, what makes you say it when we've all been 'most frightened to death by the strangest noises and actions? What I mean is, I'm sure my hair has turned gray in the last hour, right here under this roof."

"So, ye *have* seen and heerd things?" said Silas Weston out of the left corner of his mouth. He bobbed his head up and down, knowingly. "I ain't no rich man myself, but I wouldn't take this place to live in if it was gave to me and somebody paid me to stay here. Holy poker! I should say not!"

"But what can we do?" Milly Leighton wanted to know. "We're here, and we can't very well leave in this storm. Still I wouldn't wonder if I was driven right out into it to die somewhere in a snowdrift, if any more terrible things take place."

"Don't talk that way, Milly," remonstrated her sister. "Don't be like that."

"I thought maybe it was this old Hix place when I see the light shining through the snow," said the man on the hearth. "I didn't see it from far off, though. I was so nigh I could almost spit agin' the wind and hit the side of the house. But arter what I'd been

through, I was ready to git under kiver any old place, even if it was just runnin' and rampin' over with spooks."

"You haven't told us how you happened to be caught out in the storm," Deering reminded.

"It was a fool piece of business," admitted the pale-faced man with the pinpoint eye pupils. "You see, I was over in Newton Center, tother side of Hatchet Ridge, looking up a man that owes me some money. He wa'n't to home, and I had to stay 'round till he got back, arter it got dark.

"Even then," he added dolefully, "he didn't have no money to pay me anything with, and I had all my trouble for my pains. I'd sue him, by thunder, if he had anything but the clothes on his back! And them I hear he ain't paid for yit."

"Luck certainly was against you today," said Jack.

"Oh, hard luck's my middle name," returned Mr. Weston very dejectedly. "'Most everybody I ever knowed has had a little good luck some time in his life, but it ain't been that way with me. I've allus thought it would turn my way if I waited long enough. Now I'm sort of gitting discouraged, settin' round and waitin'. Arter what's took place to-night, I guess I might jest as well give up expectin' the bad streak'll ever break."

"I don't see how you got here on your way back from Newton Center, on the other side of Hatchet Ridge," said Jack.

"Well, I wouldn't 'a' got here if I'd took the regular road round by the way of Jackson's Mills. But arter I'd waited so late to see my man, and I figgered there'd be a storm before mornin', I decided to take the short cut over the ridge. It's a pretty tough climb, but my old flivver allus would climb anythin' when she was goin' right. The short cut would cut off 'most eighteen mile. It ain't traveled much of any nowadays, but I took it just the same, cussed fool that I am!

"Jest to show you how bad luck sticks to me," he went on, "my old ingine begun to kick up when I was on the steepest part of the road and couldn't turn 'round. My brakes wasn't fustrate, either. I didn't know but I'd go skihooting backward down that declivity. The only thing that saved me was a tree right close to the edge of the road, that I let the old cart back into."

"And there you were," said Jack.

"And there I was." Weston bobbed his head. "There I was, hung up on the side of Hatchet Ridge, with two cylinders of the flivver's old ingine firing when they wanted to, and not wantin' to very frequent.

"Dark! Young gentlemen and ladies, it was darker than two hundred black cats in a well. 'Bout that time it begun to snow a little, too. Holy poker! Wasn't that a mess!

"There I was, young gentlemen and ladies, stuck for fair unless I could tinker up that old splutterin' ingine in the dark. Well, I went at her. I knowed I'd got to fix her so she'd pull, dark or no dark. I found two busted spark plugs, and I pulled 'em out and put in two old plugs that was pritty well burnt, in place of 'em. That fixed the ingine so she fired better, though she didn't have all the kick she oughter have."

"Seems to me," put in Deering, "you're next move was to find a place to turn round and get back to Newton Center."

"Turn round!" yapped Weston from the side of his mouth. "Turn round on that road—in the dark? Young fella, I'd jest as soon thought of tryin' to jump over the moon. All I could do was keep on till I got up to the top of the ridge.

"Arter I got up there, there wasn't any sense in turnin' round. I might jest

as well go down one side as tother. So I kept on. It was snowing pritty consarned hard by the time I got up there on the ridge, and my headlights wasn't none too good, nohow. 'Bout the time I got coming down this side they nigh petered out entire. Young gentlemen and ladies, that was a sichuation for Silas Weston.

"Betwixt dim headlights and a thick snowstorm, which it had turned into by then, gittin' down the old road along the edge of Devil's Slide was ticklish business. I guess I'd made it, though, if the snow hadn't got all piled up in places so I couldn't see the road at all. I knowed I was 'most down when I slipped off from the edge and went bumpin' and hoppin' and somersaultin' into Black Trap Valley. That must 'a' been where I landed, but I didn't know anything about it when I brought up.

"Fact is, I was so muddled when I at last climbed out of the snow that I didn't know what had happened to me. I didn't know how long I'd been there, either. Maybe it wasn't long, and maybe it was hours. I left the flivver where she'd taken her last nose dive, and muckled all the energy I had to git somewheres under kiver. That's how I come to arrive here."

"Maybe you're naturally unlucky the most of the time," observed Jack, "but you must have had some good luck to come through that experience. Why, I don't see that you're even bruised or cut up by broken glass."

The man grinned. "There wasn't no glass on my old cart to break. She'd had her wind shield busted long ago. As for bruises, she sort of pitched me out into a snowdrift, so I wasn't smashed up any."

Jack pulled a bell cord, and the sullen son of the housekeeper answered the summons.

"Ask your mother to send in some fresh sandwiches and coffee for this gentleman, Hugo," Deering directed.

Hugo bowed. "Mother has just made fresh coffee. I was having a cup, myself. I'll bring it at once."

Once more Cynthia Bargot was beside Merriwell on the long settee. She had listened attentively to Silas Weston's story. Now her fingers lightly touched the back of Frank's hand.

"I don't like that man, Frank," she whispered. "I don't like his little shining eyes, or the way he speaks from the side of his mouth. But his story was really thrilling. It must have been a nerve-racking experience."

"It would have been if it had ever happened," answered the Flash, also in a whisper. "His story, from beginning to end, was a lie. I don't know why he came here to-night, but I'm certain he never came the way he claims he did."

As if he heard their whispering, almost as if he had understood their words, the stranger turned his shining eyes upon them and scowled darkly. A singular, twisted smile appeared upon his pale face.

"Strange things happen on this kind of a night," he said from one side of his mouth.

CHAPTER IX.

THE PHANTOM BELL.

MERRIWELL watched Silas Weston eagerly gulping down the hot and fragrant coffee which Hugo had brought.

"This's the stuff to warm ye up when yer can't git a drink of good liquor," said the man with the pallid face. "I've tried hard cider and other things, but gimme coffee."

He attacked the sandwiches like a person nearly famished.

Presently, Merriwell began to laugh softly.

"What is it, Frank?" Cynthia asked. "What amuses you?"

"Our friend, Weston, is pretty clever, but I just detected him in the act of

slipping two or three of the sandwiches into his pocket."

"I suppose he's taking them so that he'll have food later," she replied. "Maybe the poor man doesn't get enough to eat, anyhow."

"He's had so much that he's almost choking himself in the effort to get outside two or three of those sandwiches, Cyn. Why, that man isn't hungry at all. He's making believe. He's not only a fabricator, he's likewise a fraud."

Now Onderdonck, who had been silently sitting apart from the others, rose to his feet, strode forward, and planted himself before the Yale freshman.

"Are you now ready, Merriwell?" he wanted to know.

"Ready?" Frank gave the Flying Dutchman an inquring stare. "Oh—oh, yes! I'd forgotten."

A sneering smile appeared upon Onderdonck's face. "You may try, but I shall not let you forget. You said that with me you would wrestle right away."

The Flash shrugged his shoulders. "Who'll act as referee? Somebody ought to."

"My friend, Deering, can so do. He has so done before. You will not to him object?"

"Far from it. I was going to suggest him myself."

"I think I ought to let you know, Merriwell," said Jack Deering, "that Hans is one of the best men on the Harvard wrestling team. I'm sure he wouldn't want you to face him on the mat without being aware of that fact."

"Of course not," said Onderdonck. "I supposed that already he knew it. Otherwise, already I would have told him."

The man's manner was that of an egotist who presumed that his accomplishments must focus the attention of the public in general upon him.

"For my second," he announced at once, "Strake Hardy shall act."

"Which leaves me, with my friends still absent, to choose a second among the young ladies," said Frank laughingly.

"Oh, my gracious!" exclaimed Milly Leighton. "Please don't take me! I'd be so excited and nervous. What I mean, I just wouldn't be any good at all."

"Of course I was joking," said Frank. "Of course I don't expect any one of you girls to——"

"I'll be your second, Frank," spoke up Cynthia Bargot decisively. "I've seen wrestling matches, and I'll do the best I can."

Jack Deering bowed to her with a flourish. "This adds a touch to the match, Miss Bargot. But really, are you sure you can keep your nerves? You know wrestling isn't child's play. It's pretty rough."

"It preposterous is!" cried Onderdonck. "It cannot be so done. It is something not for the ladies to see at all. They should here sit by the fire."

"The others can sit by the fire if they want to," put in Dora Snelling, "but I'm going to see the sport."

"You are different," allowed the Dutchman. "If somebody should be hurt you would not away faint."

"Oh, girls don't faint away nowadays," reminded Aliene Deering. "They've stopped doing the silly things their grandmothers thought they had to do in order to be ladylike. They take in prize fights and wrestling matches and anything they feel like seeing."

"Maybe I old-fashioned am," said Onderdonck. "It is cold the gymnasium in. No fire has there been in it since we arrived. Is that right, Jack?"

"That's right," Deering nodded. "But I'll have Hugo start a fire. Next year I'll certainly put furnace heat into this place. I would have done so before, but it necessitated opening the floors and walls if the steam pipes were to be

hidden, and the mere thought of that seemed to disturb both Hester and Hugo. Besides, it's only recently that we've considered making use of Gray Gables in very cold weather. This is the first year my mother has wanted to stay here so late."

"A fire in the gymnasium will too hot make it for wrestling," objected Onderdonck. "Besides, only a few minutes will be required for me to show Mr. Merriwell that he has a mistake made in thinking he can down throw me except by a great accident. For such a very few minutes it is needless a fire to have."

"Unless we should feel like playing billiards in the billiard room off the gym," allowed Jack. "But it's pretty late for that to-night. I'll have the rooms warmed to-morrow so anybody can do anything he wants to."

In spite of Onderdonck's objections, Cynthia Bargot persisted in her decision to act as Frank's second. Finding a moment when no one was noticing them, she again spoke to Merriwell in a low tone.

"That man is malicious and cruel, Frank," she declared. "He means to do you bodily injury. That's why he doesn't want us girls as witnesses."

He shook his head. "Oh, no, Cyn. He's just a big conceited chap whose pride has been hurt. His manners are rude, but I'm sure there's no real malice in him."

"Nevertheless," she replied, "I'm going to be right there at the side of the ring to watch him. If he tries any tricks I shall call everybody's attention. Now don't try to dissuade me, Frank. If your friends were here it would be different."

ALREADY, Jack Deering had directed Hugo to light up the gymnasium and make ready for the wrestling bout, and the sullen fellow had departed to carry out instructions.

"You see," Jack explained to Frank, "I'm something of a boxing enthusiast and, therefore, I've had an arrangement put into the gymnasium by which the roped-in space for either boxing or wrestling may be prepared in a few moments. We've pulled off a few amateur matches down there. Of course Hans has always defeated any of my wrestling friends who've had the courage to meet him. Now, if you were a member of your class wrestling team at college——"

"One can't be a member of all the teams, you know," replied the Flash, smiling. "He has time to do only about so much. Still, I'm not absolutely green at wrestling. My father has done his best to teach me to take care of myself in any kind of an encounter. It's his theory that every man should be perpared to protect himself at all times and under all circumstances."

"Your father was a very unusual athlete, Merriwell," Deering replied. "If the stories they tell about him are true, it's practically certain that no one living to-day can even remotely be considered his equal."

Frank's face glowed. "I'm glad to hear you say that with such evident sincerity, Deering. A great many nitwits sneer when they speak of my father. By ridiculing him, however, they simply make themselves ridiculous."

"That's right," supported the young host. "It's only the fools who talk that way. Why, Merriwell, it was the example of your father that made me go in for athletics. Only for what I've heard about him, I might never have played football or taken up any other athletic sport. I guess I would have been contented to look on."

"Furthermore, his example has inspired me to clean living and clean sportsmanship. I don't believe any man ever born has had such an influence for good upon the youth of the country.

The name Merriwell stands for something high and strong and clean and admirable."

Frank's hand found that of the speaker and gave it an enthusiastic grip. "I'll never forget what you've just said, Jack Deering," he declared with a little huskiness in his voice. "Your words will always be more precious to me than pearls. If that sounds a little too flowery and sentimental, just consider that I am the son of the man you were talking about."

Frank's blood was warm enough as he stripped down in one of the gymnasium dressing rooms and got into wrestling trunks.

In the midst of this, the door opened softly, and Silas Weston slipped into the room. He shut the door behind him and turned to look Merriwell over with a critical eye.

"Well, by gosh!" he said admiringly. "I never s'posed ye was so well set up, young fella. Ye ain't got no big knotty muscles, but you're built pritty darned good, I'll say. Still, that Dutch fella's heavier and older'n what you be.

"You'd better look out for him. You'd better take keer he don't git ye into some sort of a holt so he can twist an arm or a leg off from ye. I know something about this wrastlin' business, being as I was the best wrastler in Franklin County when I was a youngster."

"Thanks, Mr. Weston," replied the Flash. "Your intentions seem all right, even if your warning isn't necessary."

An odd, cold smile stole into Weston's pale face. Stepping nearer, he spoke again in a whisper, from the side of his mouth:

"Maybe it ain't so unnecessary as ye think it is, young fella. A while ago you mentioned that your friends hadn't got here. Well, lemme tell ye they won't git here to-night."

"I realize that the storm may keep them from——"

"They wouldn't git here if there wasn't no storm," whispered Weston, the tiny pupils of his eyes glittering brightly.

"Why not?" Merriwell asked, suddenly impressed by the man's words and manner.

"Keep your voice down!" cautioned Weston. "Ye never can tell who's listenin'."

"But I don't understand——"

"There's something going to happen here to-night that ye ain't got no hint of, young fella."

"How do you know so much about what's going to happen?"

"Never mind how I know it. Your father's a rich man, and I guess ye ginerally have plenty of money yerself. There's something ye ought to know that ye'd pay well to find out. If ye jest realized how important it was, ye wouldn't hesitate about coughing up five hundred dollars to know it. Well, for five hundred dollars I'll tell ye the whole thing."

The Yale man stared incredulously at Silas Weston. "What sort of a game are you up to, man? Have you picked me for an easy mark? Do you imagine I can be frightened into giving up five hundred dollars to——"

"Yes, sir," Weston interrupted loudly, "you're pritty well built, my boy, but 'tother fella's got the best of yer in weight."

Behind his back, the door had opened again, and Hugo had come into the dressing room. Without looking around, the man with the pin-point eye pupils had seemed to see or hear Hugo. He had instantly changed his manner and his tone of voice.

"Mr. Onderdonck is ready, Mr. Merriwell," said Hugo.

"Very well," answered Frank, slipping into a long robe that Jack Deering had provided for him. "I'm ready, too."

He walked out into the gymnasium,

without another glance at Silas Weston.

Cynthia met him outside the door. She had donned a wrap that protected her from the chilliness of the gym. There was a glow in her cheeks, a warm light in her eyes.

"No one else thinks you have a chance against Onderdonck, Frank," she murmured. "I believe you have if only you'll remember to be on your guard against tricks. I've seen you do so many surprising things that I believe you'll surprise him and defeat him."

Onderdonck, also wrapped in a robe, was sitting in a corner of the roped arena, in the middle of the gymnasium floor. Strake Hardy was talking to him in a low tone. In the opposite corner, Frank's chair waited for him. Merriwell smiled as he noted how "regular" the preparations were.

Aliene Deering, Dora Snelling, and the Leighton girls occupied chairs at one side of the ring. Jack Deering was talking to them, but he turned and nodded to Frank as the latter approached.

"We'd better make it snappy, Merriwell," Jack said. "Maybe you and Hans will be warm enough, but I'm afraid some of the girls will catch cold unless the match is brief."

ONDERDONCK ignored his opponent as the latter stepped into the ring and sat down for a moment.

Smilingly, Jack Deering made a semiserious announcement of the match, and stated the conditions. A single fall was to settle it.

"Oh, dear!" chattered Milly Leighton. "I'm so excited I just can't keep still. What I mean, I'm all quivery and shaking."

"Don't be that way," remonstrated her sister. "If you squeal, I know I'll jump out of my skin."

"I don't think it's necessary to examine the wearing apparel of the contestants to see that no hooks or injurious soles are worn," said Deering. "I furnished that wearing apparel myself, and I know it's all right."

He then summoned the wrestlers to the center of the ring, where he spoke a few final words of instructions to them.

Onderdonck merely touched the fingers of the hand Frank held out to him. Both turned back to their corners and dropped their robes into the hands of their seconds, who had already removed the chairs.

"Now, remember, Frank!" whispered Cynthia. "Be on your guard, and I'm sure you'll win."

At the same moment, Onderdonck was saying to Strake Hardy: "I shall throw him in less than one minute. But I shall first make him look ridiculous. You shall see."

"Time!" called Deering.

The contestants came out from their corners cautiously. They stooped a little, with every joint flexed. They leaned forward, their chins low, backs bowed, hips and knees bent. Both were balanced on the balls of their feet so that they could shift quickly and easily, forward, backward, and to either side. Suddenly they began to feint.

The feinting moves continued for some moments, as they shifted warily about. Onderdonck tried, repeatedly, to deceive Frank into giving him an opening. His efforts to force the Flash into awkwardness or a loss of equilibrium were fruitless.

At precisely the same instant, each fellow snapped forward his left hand and caught his opponent around the back of the neck.

Onderdonck immediately assumed the aggressive. He ducked under and went down to his right knee, seizing Frank's left heel with his right hand and clasping his left arm around Frank's knee of the same leg. With a twisting surge, he toppled Merriwell to the mat.

Thus far it had really seemed too easy and simple for the Dutchman. The reason for this, however, was that Merriwell had scarcely resisted Onderdonck at all. On the contrary, he had let himself go. As he fell, however, he was prepared, long before he struck the mat, to make his escape.

Frank turned on the mat with the quickness of a twisting cat. He turned toward the side upon which his foot had been grasped. By doing this, he stepped completely over his opponent and secured a safe position on his hands and knees. From that position he bounded to his feet like a leaping panther.

Baffled in obtaining the crotch hold he had sought, Onderdonck leaped up also.

"So!" he growled. "It's slippery you are! Next time we shall see what happens."

Once more they circled, seeking a hold. Once more they met, and again Onderdonck slipped under in the same manner as before. Again Merriwell went down. But now the Dutchman got the crotch hold, which he followed swiftly with an attempt to secure a half nelson.

With a snap, Merriwell broke Onderdonck's hold. Sitting up, he turned away from the aggressor, weakening the latter's leverage. This caused Onderdonck's hand to slide off the back of Frank's neck, and his advantage was wholly lost.

"Slippery, you are!" panted Onderdonck, as they twisted swiftly about on the mat.

Up to their knees, and then up to their feet they came.

Frank laughed in Onderdonck's face. "That's two chances I've given you," he said. "If you lose the third, you'll never get another."

Now the Harvard man went after his opponent with the fury of a charging bull.

Deering had warned them that the strange hold was barred. For this reason, Merriwell was unprepared for the trick that gave Onderdonck that hold.

Down they went again, to their knees, with the Dutchman's arm locked around Frank's throat and shutting off his wind completely.

"Break!" shouted Deering. "Break, I tell you!"

But Onderdonck merely tightened his killing clutch, and Frank's face began to turn purple beneath the pressure.

From above or below, inside or outside—where it was no one could tell—came the clangor of a great bell. It filled all the air with its crashing sound, and in that sound there seemed to be the agitation of terror and destruction, the presage of doom.

"The bell!" exclaimed Dora Snelling. "Somebody is ringing the bell in the tower!"

"But there is no bell in the tower," said Aliene Deering. "It was removed more than fifty years ago. There is no bell anywhere around Gray Gables."

CHAPTER X.

THE BODY ON THE HEARTH.

JACK DEERING sprang forward to seize Onderdonck and break the strangling clasp of his arms upon Merriwell's throat.

But it was Frank himself who broke his opponent's hold. The Flash accomplished this feat when his antagonist, hearing the amazing clangor of the bell, appeared to hesitate and relax his clutch for an instant. Snapping himself free, Merriwell was on his feet in a twinkling.

Onderdonck, leaping up also, found Deering before him. Jack had stepped between the wrestlers. He placed his hand firmly against Onderdonck's chest. Holding the Flying Dutchman in check, the host gave him a silent look of sorrowful accusation.

The hands of Cynthia Bargot, who had cried out charging Onderdonck with a foul, were tightly clasped together. Had Deering made no move to break the Dutchman's strangling hold, Cynthia herself would have interfered.

For two or three moments, every person in the gym was as motionless as a statue. No one spoke. Scarcely did any one seem to breathe.

Outside, the roaring wind seemed to be sinking and dying away. With this lulling wind, the irregular crazy clamoring of the bell was also lessening and sinking into silence.

"I'm sorry, Onderdonck," Deering's voice broke the hush. "I specifically stated that the strangle hold was barred. You heard me, and you understood. Through your foul you have forfeited the match to Merriwell."

Jack was about to add that Onderdonck had likewise forfeited his respect, when the Flash interposed.

"If you please, old man," Frank said to Deering. "I'd rather not have it that way. Neither Onderdonck nor I will be satisfied until a fall has been obtained by one or the other. I'm sure he forgot, that's all."

"That's right," Onderdonck hastened to assert. "It is as Merriwell says. For my forgetting I offer apology."

"Which I accept," said the Yale man instantly.

"But no satisfaction can there be till I have him thrown," added Merriwell's opponent. "Not always can he out slip from my holds."

"Very well," Jack yielded. "As Merriwell declines to accept my decision, you may go on. But be careful, Hans—be careful!"

Even as Deering opened the way for him, Onderdonck went forward with renewed eagerness. He now wasted little time in feinting movements. He pressed the attack with intense vigor and determination.

For every movement of his antagonist, Merriwell had a guard or a countermove. In vain, the Dutchman tried the cross-buttock, the flying mare, and the hip lock. In vain, he strove with all his skill and strength to bring Frank down in such a manner that he could pin both shoulders flat to the mat.

Always the Yale freshman seemed to know in advance what his antagonist would attempt to do. Always he escaped at the last moment, just when Onderdonck felt sure he could not escape.

An odd impression that Merriwell was playing with him crept into Onderdonck's brain, after a while.

This impression was strengthened by the fact that the Yale man had not once sought to take the aggressive. On the contrary, he appeared to be letting his opponent wear himself out in fruitless assaults. He appeared to be demonstrating how simple it was for a man, with genuine wrestling skill and the quick mind that makes for "class," seemingly to give an antagonist the advantage and then baffle him at every turn.

This suspicion, taking root in Onderdonck's mind and growing like a weed, spurred him to recklessness. Merriwell's continued delay in taking the aggressive, also, led Onderdonck into increasing carelessness. The suspicion that his opponent's skill consisted mainly in defensive tactics grew into assurance.

Then, abruptly, as Onderdonck was once more seeking to get a half nelson, Frank nearly obtained a fall for himself by using the arm roll.

On the mat, to which they had both thudded, Onderdonck sought to clasp his opponent in the rib-crushing scissors hold. Had he been successful, the punishment he could have administered would have been no less excruciating than the agony produced by the deadly strangle hold.

Apparently it was Merriwell's amaz-

ing faculty of foreseeing the intention of his antagonist that enabled him to avoid the clasp of Onderdonck's legs.

By this time, in spite of the chilliness of the gymnasium, the bodies of both men were shining with perspiration. They were slippery, also, as Onderdonck found when he sought to keep Frank from getting away.

Again they were on their knees. Again they came to their feet. Once more Onderdonck plunged forward to get a hold.

Frank stepped well in with his left foot. Stooping, he clasped his right hand into the flexure of his opponent's left knee. His left arm was thrust between Onderdonck's legs to encircle the man's left thigh. This brought the Dutchman's body across Merriwell's left shoulder.

The Flash moved with a speed that justified his nickname. He straightened up to his full height, hoisting his opponent into the air. In making this movement, he removed his left hand from Onderdonck's crotch and grasped the outside of the man's right knee. That gave him an outside hold on both knees.

Still moving so quickly that the staring eyes of the watchers scarcely perceived how he did it, Merriwell dropped the Harvard man from his shoulder, jerking forward with his hold on the Dutchman's knees. By doing this, he whipped his opponent violently to the mat.

Maintaining the double hold on Onderdonck's knees, Frank followed him down with his body. Onderdonck made a twist that kept his right shoulder from the floor. For an instant only. Merriwell's left knee struck the fellow's right chest, high toward the shoulder, and the force of Frank's weight drove that shoulder down to the mat.

"Fall!" cried Deering, slapping Frank on the back.

Even before he rose to his feet, Onderdonck knew that his younger and lighter opponent had led him on to his undoing. Depending upon his ability to escape from his opponent's holds, Merriwell had continued to baffle Onderdonck until weariness and vexation had caused the latter to yield an opening through which his defeat had been accomplished.

AGAIN there was a brief period of utter silence within the gymnasium.

Outside the old building, there was silence also. The wild wind had died down to a dead calm, and not even the faintest sound of the mysterious bell that had clamored so furiously in the midst of the tempest was now to be heard.

Onderdonck, his shoulders drooping, his aspect dejected, stood looking at Frank Merriwell as if he found it impossible to believe he had actually been defeated by him.

There was no shade of taunting triumph in the winner's face; no expression, even, of the high satisfaction that a person triumphant in such a contest would naturally feel. With a forward step, he grasped Onderdonck's hand and wrung it.

The defeated wrestler made no response. His hand, released, fell again to his side. He turned dejectedly away.

Cynthia, her face glowing with relief and pride, met Frank as he stepped out of the ring. She put both arms around him, and kissed him impulsively.

"Oh, Frank!" she said. "I was sure you'd do it unless he beat you unfairly. He came near doing that, too. My heart stopped beating when he got the strangle hold on you. I really thought he meant to choke every single spark of life out of you!"

"He was exasperated by his failures before that. I'm sure he didn't quite realize what he was doing, Cyn."

"*You* may be sure, but I'm not. The

strangle hold isn't allowed any more in amateur wrestling, is it?"

"It's generally barred from professional matches, as well as amateur."

"Then he knew—he knew that what he was doing was wrong," Cynthia insisted. "I'll never believe differently."

The dressing rooms were provided with running water, piped from a source higher in the hills. Frank sponged off in that ice-cold water, and finished up with a rub that set his body glowing. He was half dressed when Deering came in.

"I've got to tell you, Merriwell," said Jack, "that you performed a remarkable feat in throwing Hans Onderdonck. It may be that some day you'll become a worthy successor to your father."

"But if that doesn't happen, Jack," replied Frank smilingly, "I hope I'll never do anything to disgrace him."

"Everybody's talking about that bell now," Deering said. "You must have heard it. I couldn't believe my ears. I don't know how to account for it. The old church bell that Jeremiah Hix installed in the tower was taken away more than half a century ago."

"In that case," said Merriwell, "the ringing of the bell, like the crazy behavior of the clock on the hall stairs, would be interpreted by a superstitious person as supernatural."

Deering was plainly troubled.

"But you and I know these things were not supernatural, Merriwell. We know there's some other explanation. If I wasn't sure about that, I'd want to get out of this house to-night, storm or no storm; for you know it's said that the tolling of the phantom bell always precedes a death beneath this roof."

They continued to talk of the mysterious affair until Merriwell had finished dressing. When they left the dressing room, they found that the girls were still huddled together in the gymnasium, and that Strake Hardy was doing his best to dispel their nervousness.

"The whole blamed business must be some sort of a joke cooked up by Jack Deering himself," Hardy was saying. "I'm going to charge him with it, anyhow."

"I have!" declared Milly Leighton. "I mean I've told him I thought it was just terrible for him to let anybody scare us with such goings on."

"I kept expecting to hear that bell again," put in Connie. "I keep listening for it. How still it is! The wind has all stopped blowing. You can't hear a sound of it now. Everything's as still as death——"

A SUDDEN scream, like the scream of a woman, sounded from some spot above their heads. It struck every one of them motionless and breathless. With eyes wide and staring, and mouths agape, they seemed to wait for a repetition of that fearsome cry.

There was no repetition. There had been but one short, wild scream, apparently uttered by a person in terror. Silence followed.

"I think, Deering," said Frank Merriwell, holding Cynthia Bargot's hand firmly within his own, "we'd better investigate that at once."

"You're right," agreed Jack hoarsely. "I believe it came from the living room."

Onderdonck had rejoined them, and now the four young men climbed the stairs to the main floor, with the shivering girls pressing close behind them.

The fire in the big open fireplace of the living room had died down into a great heap of glowing hardwood coals, which cast a reddish light over a human figure that lay stretched upon the stone hearth. They were halted for a moment by the sight of that prostrate figure. Then Jack Deering strode forward, followed closely by Merriwell.

"It's Weston!" said Jack, staring down at the ghastly face of the man on the floor. "Look at his head!"

From a gash in the man's scalp, blood was dripping to form a pool upon the hearth.

"Somebody his head open has split!" said Onderdonck, peering down over Merriwell's shoulder.

Deering knelt and placed a hand on Weston's breast, feeling for his heart. After a moment, he turned to whisper to Frank.

"The man is dead!" he said.

Afar off amid the wooded hills, the wind was rising again. The murmuring roar of it grew louder as it swept toward Gray Gables. The first waves of the advancing blast surged through the trees around the old house.

Then they heard the bell once more. It tolled, at first, slowly and solemnly; but with the passing moments, its ringing became louder and more irregular.

Deering had risen to his feet. Pale but steady, he listened to that mysterious sound.

"It's outside, somewhere, and very near," he said in a low voice. "Perhaps we can tell where it is now."

Swift strides took him across the room. He flung the door open and went out onto the veranda. Merriwell, Hardy and Onderdonck were at his heels.

"Oh, mum-mum-my soul!" exclaimed Milly Leighton. "They're lul-lul-leaving us here with a dud-dud-dud-dead man!"

The Leighton twins led the flight of the girls from the living room to the veranda. Not one of them lingered in that room where a silent human figure lay stretched in the red glow from the fireplace.

The snow, still falling thickly, was driven in sheets and whirling clouds before the roaring wind. The bell was still ringing—ringing crazily, apparently from some place high amid the storm-lashed trees that surrounded Gray Gables. Even Merriwell found himself fighting against a feeling of awe as he listened to the clamoring of the unseen bell.

"Where is the thing, Deering?" demanded Hardy harshly. "Let us in on this, will you? The joke's gone about far enough."

"There's no joke that I know anything about, Strake," Jack answered slowly. "I give you my word of honor on that."

"Then what does it mean?"

"I wish you could tell me."

The wind was dying down again. The highest fury of it had apparently passed over, and it was roaring away into the distance.

Likewise, the clanging of the bell was relapsing into a tolling sound of a more regular nature. Little by little it slackened and ceased, with the ceasing of the wind in the surrounding trees. Finally, not even the faintest sounds of it came to their straining ears.

Then they heard the voice of Onderdonck calling to them from within the living room. He was standing near the fireplace, gazing down at the floor like a person astounded and horrified.

"What's the matter, Hans?" asked Deering.

"Mien Gott in himmel!" gurgled the Dutchman. "The dead man is gone!"

The body of Silas Weston no longer lay upon the hearth!

CHAPTER XI.

THE FLASH MOVES.

A POOL of crimson on the stone hearth reflected the gleam of the fire, but the body of the man from whose gashed scalp the crimson drops had flowed was gone. As if unable to believe their senses, they stared in silence at the place where that body had been.

Merriwell picked up a heavy iron poker that had been lying at one corner of the fireplace.

"This," he said, after he had in-

spected it, "is the implement with which Silas Weston was struck down."

"That is no matter," said Onderdonck, in an awed voice. "What we now want to know is why the man who is dead should away vanish. If that you can tell us, Mr. Merriwell, we shall be obliged."

But Frank, still gazing at the iron poker, was silent again.

Not even the faintest wind was stirring in the trees around Gray Gables at that moment. The world seemed to be hushed, holding its breath.

Faintly, in that profound hush, they heard a sound like the moaning which Deering had previously attributed to the wind in the chimney. Now, however, that explanation would not suffice.

Jack turned toward the hall door. "I'm going to find out what that is."

Merriwell, Hardy, and Onderdonck started to follow him.

"Oh, don't—please, don't leave us?" gasped Milly Leighton. "If you do, maybe there won't be a single one of us alive when you come back."

"You can't leave us to be scared to death by the horrid ghosts and things," chattered Connie. "It would be perfectly horrid. Don't be like that."

Onderdonck turned back. "I will with them stay. I will give protection. Nothing will I permit to touch them."

"That's right, Hans," said Deering. "The rest of us are enough to find what it is that's moaning and wailing."

The doleful sounds were traced to the servants' part of the house. There they found old Hester, sitting upon a chair in the kitchen and wringing her knuckly hands. Seeing them, she smothered her sobbing moans by burying her face in her apron.

Beside her stood Hugo, apparently striving to quiet her. He looked up at the three young men who had entered the kitchen, a black scowl upon his unpleasant face.

"My mother is very frightened," he said, in his harsh, metallic voice. "I wish you would go away and leave us alone."

The distressed housekeeper ceased to moan. Without appearing to notice the others, she gazed pathetically at her sickly looking son.

"Oh, my boy!" she whispered. "My poor, poor boy!"

"If there's anything we can do——" began Jack Deering.

"There isn't anything, sir," Hugo replied quickly. "She often gets this way. You can see that she has stopped now. She'll be all right in a few minutes."

They backed out of the kitchen.

"She ought to be resigned to the fact that her son is sickly," said Strake Hardy.

Merriwell felt sure that Hugo's physical misfortune was not the cause of his mother's grief. He told himself that something more recent in origin had brought about the housekeeper's paroxysm.

They were surprised, when they reentered the living room, to see Onderdonck crawling across the floor on his hands and knees.

"What are you looking for, Hans?" asked Deering.

"I've found it already," answered the Dutchman.

"What have you found?"

"The way the dead man out went. On the floor—see them—the drops of blood!"

"Maybe you've found the direction he took," allowed Deering, "but that doesn't explain how he did it."

"If we follow the drops," said Onderdonck, "we shall to him come."

Deering opened a cabinet drawer and took out a powerful electric torch. Using the torch, he traced the trail of crimson to a rear door of the house, in a room beyond the living room. That door had been recently opened. Some of the snow that had banked against the foot of it had fallen into the room and

prevented the reclosing of the door, which stood slightly ajar.

The host opened the door again, and the white beam of his torch revealed a path that had been made by a single person, who had wallowed through the deep snow. The path zigzagged into the trees behind the house.

"One man went out here," said Jack. "Only one."

"You can't be sure of that, old chap," came from Strake Hardy. "Dead men do not walk."

"You think——"

"I think that maybe the man who made these tracks was carrying a burden in his arms or on his shoulder. Look how he staggered through the snow."

"Let's go!" urged Merriwell eagerly. "We ought to find something at the end of this trail that'll throw a light on the mystery."

"The whole of us should not go," said Onderdonck. "Again I will with the girls remain, for their safety and protection. You three should be enough."

DEERING took the lead, with Merriwell and Hardy following in his footsteps.

"If the wind had continued to blow," said Deering, "the drifting snow would have obliterated this trail in a short time."

"It's rising again," observed Frank, noting a stirring in the treetops. "What an infernally queer night! It can't seem to settle down, either one way or the other."

Hardy, close behind him, reached out a hand and grasped his arm.

"I heard the bell then!" came from Strake in a husky whisper.

Merriwell and Deering had heard it also. A single, faint, clanging note had sounded somewhere in the air above them. They stood in their tracks to listen for a repetition of the sound.

As the height of the passing gust of wind swept over the treetops, the bell rang slowly, giving forth a few strokes and then lapsing into silence once more.

Unlike his companions, Frank Merriwell had not remained in his tracks while the bell was sounding. He had left them there and moved away as swiftly as he could through the snow. After the bell had become silent again, he spoke to them from a distance of some thirty feet.

"Come here with your torch, Jack," he called. "I think I've located the thing."

They found him standing beneath the bare limbs of an ancient oak.

"Just shoot your light up into this tree, Jack," he requested.

The white beam flickered over the denuded limbs of the oak. It came to rest upon a black object that was suspended from one of those limbs. They recognized the object as a small, old-fashioned church bell.

The bell was hung from a pulley block, attached to the limb with a heavy strap. The rope with which the bell had been hoisted ran back through a second block on the same limb, close to the bole of the tree. From the second block it ran down to a heavy iron spike that was set into the side of the tree. It was made fast to the spike.

"There," said Frank with satisfaction, "is your phantom bell, Deering. Suspended from that limb and left to itself, it rings whenever the wind blows hard enough to swing it."

"But there were times," returned the wondering host, "that the bell was not heard when the wind blew."

"At which times," returned Frank. "I imagine it was lowered into the snow by some one who knew we would be liable to find it if it rang long enough for us to trace the sound to its source. Anybody could raise and lower it with this tackle."

Deering made a few remarks of a decidedly violent nature.

"After hearing you express your emotions in that fashion," said Hardy, "I'm convinced this was not a joke in which you were concerned, Jack. You won't have to tell me so again."

"Joke!" cried Deering. "There's something more than a joke behind this business, gentlemen, and I propose to get to the bottom of it without further loss of time. Come on! Let's follow that trail to the end, before the wind can rise again and cover it."

They were not destined to pursue this program without interruption. Barely had they returned to the trail when another cry, like a scream quickly cut short, came from the direction of the house. Following the cry, they heard the voice of Onderdonck, lifted in roaring shouts of alarm. With his shouts were mingled a series of screams from the girls.

"Good heavens!" gasped Strake Hardy. "What's happened now?"

MERRIWELL did not waste his breath in words. Like a leaping deer, he dashed away through the snow toward Gray Gables. The others followed.

The Leighton girls, clasped in each other's arms, were still screaming when Frank burst into the living room. Neither Aliene Deering, Dora Snelling nor Onderdonck was paying the slightest attention to them, however. The Dutchman was at the veranda door, which again stood wide open, and Aliene and Dora were near him.

"What, for the love of Mike, is the matter, Onderdonck?" the Flash wanted to know.

"She is gone!" was the man's hoarse answer. "Miss Bargot—she is gone! She out went a moment for a breath of air. We heard her cry—just a short cry that quick stopped. I ran out to find her, but she was already gone."

"But she can't—she can't be really gone," said Jack Deering, who had followed Merriwell closely. "There's nowhere she could go."

Frank snatched the electric torch from Deering's hand. He wasted no words. He found tracks which led away from the veranda steps toward the gate.

The tracks, however, had not been made by a girl. They were surely the tracks of a man.

The bright torch in Frank's hand made it possible for him to follow without faltering. He made the best speed possible under the conditions. Through the open gate he dashed, flashing the ray over the white expanse ahead of him.

The beam fell upon an automobile, buried to the chassis in snow, and headed away from the gate. It fell upon two figures beside the open door of the car. One of those figures, with head and shoulders still muffled in a blanket, was struggling desperately with the other.

Frank knew it was Cynthia. He knew she was trying to escape from the man who was hoisting her into the car.

The light of the electric torch, turned upon them, caused the man to drop his burden and whirl to face the pursuer. His hand went into a pocket, but he was bothered in getting out the weapon he had reached for. Apparently it caught in the lining of his pocket. Uttering a snarl, he tore it free.

The light was full in his eyes when he fired at Merriwell. Dazzled, his aim was bad. Yet Frank felt the breath of at least one of the three bullets that whistled past his ears.

Having no other weapon to use, the Flash hurled the electric torch at the fellow's head. It struck him fairly between the eyes, and he went down as if he had been hit by a bullet himself.

The Yale freshman was pinning the man beneath him in the snow when the other male members of the party arrived on the scene.

"We'll take charge of that ruffian, Merriwell," said Deering. "But I'd like to know what the devil he thought he was trying to do."

"It's plain he was trying to kidnap Cynthia," said Frank, as he turned the captive over to them.

"A kidnaper!" roared Onderdonck, clutching the prisoner by the neck. "Hard it will go with him. Behind stone walls he'll spend a time for this."

To their surprise, the fellow who had attempted to abduct Cynthia Bargot laughed shortly

"If I haven't got a right to look out for my own sister and protect her, I'd like to know who has," he said.

"Great Scott!" cried Deering. "It's Kirk—Kirk Bargot!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE JIG IS UP.

KIRK BARGOT stood in the center of the big living room, the focus of a circle of accusing eyes. His bearing was that of a proud and haughty person. Dark, handsome, bold and defiant, he met their accusing glances with a smile of disdain.

"Well?" he said, shrugging his shoulders.

Milly Leighton caught her sister's hand and whispered: "Oh, isn't he handsome, Connie! Isn't he just the grandest thing! I mean, did you ever see anybody so good looking?"

"Don't be sil'," remonstrated Connie. "Don't talk like a dill pickle, Milly. You get all goofy every time you see a new fellow. I do wish you wouldn't be like that!"

Jack Deering stepped forward a pace. "I hope, Bargot, old man, you can make a satisfactory explanation of your amazing action. We have reason to believe we have one coming to us."

"Why should I bother to do that?" replied Kirk, shrugging again. "Still," he added at once, as if he had immediately changed his mind, "I don't know but I will, Deering.

"I presume you'll all laugh at me when I say it is my opinion that young girls of to-day have altogether too much freedom," he went on. "They're allowed to do anything they want to. As a result, the most of them are running wild."

"That's old stuff," said Dora Snelling, cigarette smoke dribbling from her mouth as she uttered the words. "I've heard so much of it that it makes me very, very weary."

"You are a shining example of the truth of my assertion," said Bargot cuttingly.

"He's perfectly horrid!" breathed Constance Leighton.

"He's perfectly grand!" murmured her sister. "I'll bet he's some cave man!"

"They don't exist any more," declared Connie. "Cave women have tamed them."

"It isn't the fault of the girls of to-day," Kirk went on. "The blame lies on the shoulders of their parents."

"Three rousing cheers!" mocked Miss Snelling. "Where did you get your stuff! It sounds about as new as the Ten Commandments."

Bargot ignored her now.

"The mothers of to-day can't do much with their daughters without the coöperation and support of the fathers," he went on. "Most fathers are too busy making money or kicking up a little deviltry themselves to bother their heads about what their daughters are doing. My father has never seemed to find time to support my mother in advising and restraining my sister."

"Don't forget that your sister is present, Bargot," cautioned Jack Deering.

Kirk glanced toward Cynthia, a short distance away. She met his eyes with a calm, unwavering gaze. Not by a word, not even by a gesture, did she attempt to check him.

"You can see," he continued, "that I have a remarkably handsome sister. She's just as willful as she is good-looking. Neither my advice nor my entreaties affect her. I'm only her brother, and she does what she wants to, regardless of me. This has compelled me reluctantly to decide to restrain her by force."

"I told you he was a cave man!" whispered Milly.

"Oh, do keep still!" protested Connie.

"For good and sufficient reasons," Bargot went on, "I didn't want my sister to return to New Haven. That place, you know, is not her home. She was staying there with friends. But even if I induced her to go home, it was certain that she would return to New Haven whenever she wished. She has a way of getting around father, and mother would not be able to check her.

"So I tried to induce her to visit our uncle, Gaston Kirk, who lives not far from here in the town of Ashfield. Uncle Gaston is something of a recluse. He has withdrawn from the world, in a way, because the times are out of joint with his ideas. He is rigidly against this modern freedom. He agrees with me and with his sister, my mother, that Cynthia should be restrained for a while until she's older and wiser."

"So you were trying to get her into the clutches of this old hermit, for him to lock her up, were you?" cried Dora Snelling indignantly.

"Not exactly for him to lock her up," objected Kirk, "but for him to keep her with him a while. It was arranged, you see, that mother should visit him at the same time. Between them, they might be able to do something with Cynthia."

Bargot laughed. "So you see the apparent attempt to kidnap my sister wasn't such an offense as it appeared to be. It was sanctioned by her own mother, who instructed me to take her to Uncle Gaston by force if necessary. As she refused to go when I urged her to, force became necessary."

"But I don't see how you ever got here in this storm," said Jack Deering.

"I didn't come alone. I engaged a guide who knows this section of the Berkshires well."

"Where's your guide?"

"I sent him into this house some time ago to find out what the situation was. He was to give me a signal, but I haven't seen or heard from him since he left me."

"Why, that must have been Silas Weston!" said Strake Hardy.

"The name of the man who guided me is Jason Hix," stated Bargot. "He claimed that Deering's housekeeper and her son are his relatives."

"Great Scott!" Jack Deering exclaimed. "Then Jason Hix and Silas Weston are one and the same person. I've never seen Jason Hix, but I've heard of him as a wandering ne'er-do-well, a jack-of-all-trades. Still, I wonder why Hugo failed to recognize his cousin, if the man who called himself Weston was really Jason Hix."

"But what *I'd* like to know," said Dora Snelling, "is what terrible thing Cynthia has done to lead her mother and her high-minded brother to try to pack her off and shut her up somewhere with a hermit uncle?"

"She's become dangerously friendly with a very common fellow," answered Kirk Bargot. "He's the cheapest sort of a bounder. He's an adventurer who's fascinated her, hypnotized her, deluded her utterly."

He lifted his hand and pointed at one of the party, whose eyes had never left his face for a moment while he was speaking.

"There he stands!" Bargot cried. "Frank Merriwell is the scoundrel!"

For a lapse of a half a minute following this denouncement, no one moved or spoke. Then a great roar, a

roar of wrath, burst from the lips of Hans Onderdonck.

"It is a lie!" Onderdonck thundered, striding forward and shaking his fist in the air above Bargot's head. "No word of truth is in it! A clean, fine gentleman, Frank Merriwell is, from his toes to the ends of the hairs on his head! No one in my presence can a scoundrel call him. If *you* a scoundrel call him in my presence again, I'll break you in two with my hands!"

Never had any of Hans Onderdonck's friends seen him so aroused, so indignant, so infuriated. Kirk Bargot shrank before the wrath of the Harvard man's countenance.

Deering leaped forward and grasped Onderdonck's uplifted arm. "Steady, Hans, old man! You've forgotten yourself. You've forgotten the girls."

Onderdonck remained fixed in that pose for some moments before he slowly lowered his fist.

"I should not the young ladies forget," he muttered thickly. "But if he such words repeats again, I'll throw him into a snowdrift."

"Do it, Hans!" encouraged Dora Snelling. "Do it at once! Look! I'll hold the door open for you to do it."

She moved swiftly to the door, and flung it wide open.

THE voice of a man, raised in a hail, came out of the darkness.

The hail drew the eyes of every person in the room to the open door. They saw a figure materialize, like a ghost, in the midst of the falling snow. It mounted quickly to the veranda and then was framed, like a living picture, in the doorway.

"Great hopping horned toads!" said a voice that made Frank Merriwell give a start of joy. "This sure is some sidewinder of an old night."

"Bowie!" Frank cried. "Rocky Bowie at last!"

"Right here, partner," confirmed the grinning Texan. "And the rest of the lost sheep will be here pronto. Here they come now."

He was followed into the room by Stretcher and Chatby, who were supporting a tottering man between them. A crimson handkerchief was tied around the man's head. He was the person who had called himself Silas Weston.

"We found this here maverick floundering around in the snow, with a busted head," explained Bowie. "He says somebody around these diggings clouted him on the topknot."

"But—but, Jack," stammered Strake Hardy, "you said he was dead!"

"He wasn't breathing, and I couldn't feel his heart beating," Deering replied. "It's evident, now, that I was deceived."

"He's the hombre who tried to bribe Williams, in Boston, to keep us away from this yere ranch to-night," stated Bowie. "Williams pretended to agree to the proposition, though he couldn't find out just why our company wasn't desired at the party."

Stretcher and Chatby helped the wounded man to sit on a chair that Deering had hastily pushed forward.

The eyes of the injured man had found Kirk Bargot. Weakly, he lifted his hand to point in Bargot's direction.

"Ask him," he said faintly.

Kirk's lips curled, but no words came from them.

"We'd been here long ago," Bowie stated, "if we hadn't got ourselves pinched in Worcester for reckless driving. That held us up plenty."

No one had seen Frank Merriwell slip out of the room. But now they were startled by the sounds of a sudden scuffle in the dark hall, followed by exclamations of anger and remonstrance, uttered by the harsh and metallic voice of Hugo. In a moment, the Flash appeared, forcibly dragging the sullen servant into the room.

"I heard something out there," said

Frank, "and I found him monkeying with the clock."

"What's he got in his hands?" wondered Deering. "Why, on my soul, I believe he's got the works of the clock!"

"No, he hasn't," said Jason Hix, drawing himself up on his chair. "Anyhow, they're not the works that were in the clock originally. They're the ones I furnished to take the place of the works that the clock contained. I had them made by a clock maker who used the original works, which Hugo had taken out and given to me, to pattern by."

"You fool! You traitor!" screamed Hugo, casting the works down to the floor where they were smashed into many parts. "You tried to betray me. You offered to tell our plans to Merriwell for five hundred dollars. I heard you when you were alone with him in his dressing room in the gymnasium."

"You are the fool," retorted Jason Hix. "That wasn't it at all. I was talking about Bargot's plan to kidnap his sister. You poor fool, Hugo Hix! Now I know why you hit me with the fire poker and mighty near killed me."

"But I—I thought—I thought you meant to betray our plan," stammered Hugo.

Jack Deering placed himself before Jason Hix.

"What was that plan?" he demanded.

"There was a little arrangement between us—he's my cousin, you know—to frighten you into giving up this property, which we should have inherited. Hugo and his mother promised me my share if I'd help them make you believe the place haunted.

"That's how I came to have the works made for the clock so the hands would whirl around queerly and the thing would strike in a crazy fashion. That's how I came to furnish Hugo with the bell that you heard ringing in the midst of the storm. That's all there is to it, sir."

Old Hester had crept into the room. Now she flung herself on her knees at Deering's feet.

"Don't turn us out, Mr. Jack!" she begged, clinging to one of his hands. "This is our home. Maybe we did wrong, but what will become of us if you turn us out?"

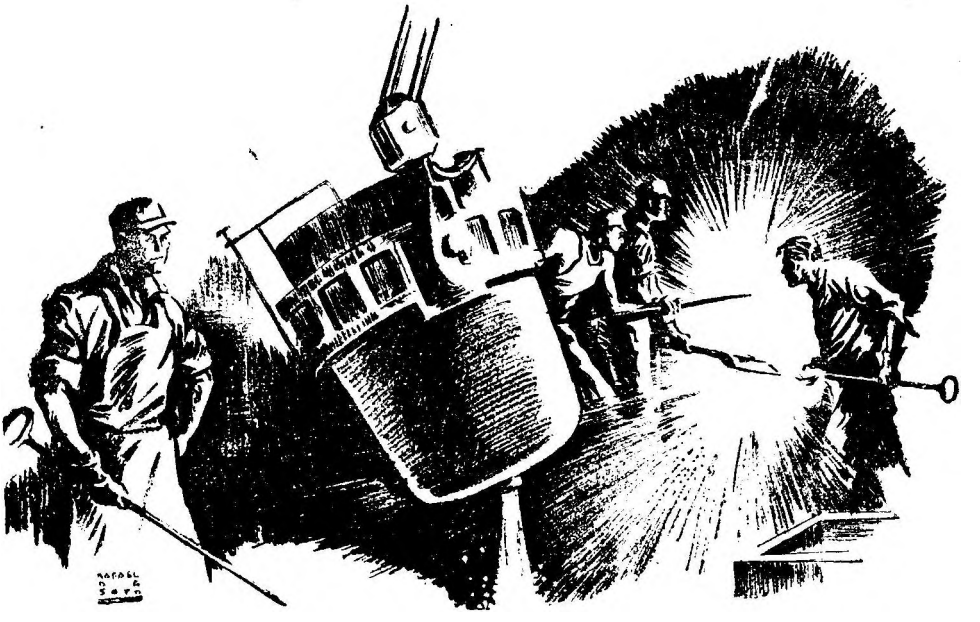
"Take your nephew into the kitchen and wash and dress his wound, Hester," directed Jack quietly. "We'll talk this matter over later."

APPARENTLY no one had observed Kirk Bargot when he slipped out of the room. He had improved his opportunity, when the attention of everybody was focused on Jason Hix. He was gone, and an investigation revealed that he had departed in his motor car.

At two o'clock in the morning, the party in the big living room of Gray Gables was dancing as gayly as if none of the members had been disturbed on this eventful night by ghostly sights and sounds.

Spirit, Incorporated

By Edmund M. Littell



COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

CHAPTER I.

MEN OF STEEL.

THEY became acquainted, the little man and the two big ones, at the timekeeper's gate of Midwest Steel. That is a place where the formalities of social procedure are seldom observed; but even so, their method of introducing themselves was one that drew universal attention.

The time was seven forty-five a. m., the day was Tuesday, July 5th. Several hundred men had already filed through the six passageways, each of which was marked off by pipe railings and walled by two expansive check racks.

It was a time for business, this period when the eight o'clock shift moved its brass checks from the "Out" racks to the "In," so, except for an occasional voice lifted in greeting as men of all sizes and races passed through, there was no sound save the shuffling of feet on the concrete floor—until the unmistakable tinkle of a brass check striking concrete was heard.

Instantly, as though the sound were a signal, a tangle of voices was lifted in one of the middle passageways. Snarls followed. There was a scuffling of feet. Then two husky figures burst out into the unconstricted expanse of cinder-covered yard, locked in a furious struggle.

"Hey! Cut it out!"

The voice of authority came from a gray-clad special policeman of advanced years. He thrust his portly body through the quickly-gathered crowd.

"Cut it out, I tell you!"

He stepped up behind one of the fighters—just as a fist was drawn back. The elbow jabbed the officer squarely in the most prominent part of his anatomy.

"Woof!" he grunted, and seated himself with an undignified suddenness that raised a cloud of dust. The fight went on.

The officer scrambled to his feet. He may have been a trifle portly, somewhat white of hair as well, but he was an old-timer. He had spent most of his life in the mill. He had grown too old for heavy work and now was practically a pensioner.

Yet his spirit was all there. He charged in again, and this time he had help. Another officer appeared on the other side of the brawlers, who thereupon found their movement somewhat hampered.

But they seemed to know exactly what to do. Without a moment's hesitation they turned upon the representatives of law and order as laid down by Midwest Steel and put them in their places. This happened to be in the arms of those on the inner side of the improvised ring, where they were hurled, staggering. Then they returned to their fight.

Once more the gray-clad minions of peace charged in. Being old steel men themselves, no doubt they would have preferred watching what promised to be a first-class fight; but there was the matter of duty as embodied by uniforms of gray, to say nothing of a couple of sadly ruffled personal dignities.

And once more they found themselves, by circumstances over which they had no control, forced to become bystanders.

Just how long this would have gone on, just how many jobs would have been unfilled at the appointed hour of eight o'clock, no one will ever know. Certainly the ancient policemen were helpless against the virility of the two young giants, for they had no clubs nor guns; and certainly none of the fortunate bystanders showed any disposition to stop a perfectly elegant fight.

But just then another kind of a voice made itself heard.

"HEY! Whadda you think this is—a amachoor prelim'?"

Shrill and piping, it came from somewhere down near the fighters' belts. Their activity stopped. There was nothing else to be done, for a taut little body was standing squarely between them.

"This ain't the Coliseum," the little fellow piped on, "this is the timekeeper's gate. This fightin's got to be cut out."

Here was interference of quite a different sort. Two special policemen were merely obstacles to be thrust aside, but this undersized half portion of a man who had reached the arena by the simple expedient of crawling on his hands and knees through a forest of legs—just what could be done about him?

The light-haired fighter solved the problem. He reached out and seized the little fellow firmly by the shoulders.

"Out o' the way, runt," he growled. "You might get stepped on."

Then he set the little package carefully to one side. The battle was ready to proceed—when the little one jumped between them again.

"Cut it out, I tell you!" he shrilled. "We got jobs, us guys, and if we ain't there on time, we'll all get docked."

A couple of menacing frowns were bent upon the impertinent little fellow. He returned them, first at one then the other, with interest.

"And that ain't all," he piped. "You guys'll get canned if you keep this up

and you know it. This is a place for workin'. If you want to fight, go join the marines."

There was wisdom in what he said. The two policemen, who stayed in the background once they saw how well the situation was being handled, looked at each other and wondered why they hadn't thought of such a method themselves. And every one else saw that the two fighters were being impressed. The doubled fists were slowly relaxing.

"All right," growled one of them. He was dark of sulky eyes, just as black of hair, which was something more than six feet higher than his heels. "But nobody's gonna call me a clubfooted lummix and get away with it, not for very long."

"Is that so?" the other wanted to know. Except for the fact that his eyes were a happy blue and his hair taffy-colored—and that he was grinning—he might have been a twin of the dark one. He was cast in the same magnificent physical mold.

"Now I'm wonderin' about that, just a little bit. Maybe I am a ham-handed Swede, but—any time you want to try it, buddy."

"That'll be all, that'll be all," piped the one who had been dubbed "runt." "If you want to know what I think, you're a couple o' dirty bums, that's what you are. Now clear out o' here. Get goin'."

And they obeyed him! They turned their backs on the timekeeper's gate—and a pair of policemen who looked at each other, grinned, and watched them walk away—and set out for the other end of the long yard as though the little fellow were twice as big as both of them put together.

And then it was, as the big ones strode along with the little one trotting between them and an interested crowd keeping pace, that the reason for their fighting was brought out by a shrill-voiced cross-examination.

THE light-haired one—"Chick" Williams was his name—was a newcomer. He had just arrived from Pittsburgh to take on a second-helping job on the open-hearth floor. This was his first appearance on the mill. In coming through the gate he had inadvertently dropped his time check. Stooping to pick it up, he had set his heel upon the toes of the man behind him.

The black-haired one—Joe Harden, by name, and a second helper of long standing on the open-hearth floor—had promptly blown up. He called Chick a ham-handed Swede, to which Chick retorted that if he hadn't been clubfooted he'd have kept out of the way. The rest was known.

"Yeah! Tough, ain't you?" the little one jeered at last. "Hard! On blue Tuesday. Been hittin' the raisin' jack since Saturday night, ain't you?"

"Not me," Chick Williams said quickly. "I never drink. It spoils you for fighting."

"I wasn't talking to you," snapped the little one. "I'm talking to Joe. Every time there's a holiday lay-off he comes around lookin' for somebody to fight. Look at him. Eyes all bloodshot and black rings under 'em. I bet you ain't had a wink o' sleep since Saturday night, Joe Harden."

"What's it to you?" Joe Harden growled. "And who the hell are you, anyhow? This ain't no place for runts. Who let you in?"

"The same guys that thought they was hirin' a man when they took you on—Personnel," retorted the little one. "I'm a craneman on the open-hearth floor. My name's Baldwin, Chester Baldwin. And——"

"Why, Chester!" Chick Williams tried to make his voice sound effeminate, but coming from a forty-two-inch chest by way of a sixteen-inch throat, it wasn't so good. "Does your mother know you're out?"

"Chester! Haw-haw!" Joe Harden

bellowed. "Why, you ain't big enough to pull a switch lever."

"I'm big enough to make you guys walk the chalk," Chester shrilled back at them. There he made a mistake, for they were reminded of the unfinished argument. Joe frowned at Chick, who grinned back at him. Each was thinking that there would be plenty of time to settle the debate since from now on they would be working on the same open-hearth floor.

"And I'll be watchin' you, too," Chester Baldwin added, having caught the exchange. "Me and Jock Campbell. And if either of you try pullin' anything——"

He stopped. They had reached the ramp which was the roadway from ground level to the elevated open-hearth floor. At the top of it stood none other than big Jock Campbell himself. There was something about the huge man that said: "I am the boss."

Williams stopped, unnecessarily prompted by a nudge and a whispered, "That's him," from Chester. The other two said "Mornin'," and went on. And that was the beginning of as strange a relationship as ever prevailed within the high wire fence of Midwest Steel.

CHAPTER II.

ONLY A CRANEMAN.

FOR big Jock Campbell had already made arrangements which quite innocently furthered the affair. Chick Williams, except for one thing, had come highly recommended as a second helper. A quick survey of his stalwart frame and his good-natured blue eyes had made Jock set that thing aside because he needed a man like him.

Result: Chick Williams reported for duty at No. 7 furnace. That was all—except for the fact that No. 7 was immediately adjacent to No. 8, where Joe Harden worked as one of the crew of three. Jock Campbell, of course, was not familiar with the events of the morning—not as yet.

But every one else knew the story, and that within a very few minutes. There was plenty of work to be done along that second-story street. Walled along the inner side by the eighty-foot fronts of ten great furnaces, the center of the floor was littered with sprawling piles of the stuff of steel, which every so often had to be transferred into the furnaces.

This was done with shovels, in the face of such blasts of heat and light that sweat poured out of crinkling skins while eyes shrank behind the protection of blue glasses. But in between times they loafed, otherwise they never could have stood the grind.

The loafing places were along the outer edge of the floor, where only a handrail served as a wall to keep out the weather and where benches and lockers and water tanks were provided for each crew.

And there, as the incoming shift took over the duties left by the outgoing one, tongues began to wag.

The story was told by members of the crowd that had accompanied the trio from the timekeeper's gate. The audience had thinned out as it moved along the yard. Each of the buildings they passed had drawn away its share of the men.

But there were a few who walked the whole distance, and these were hard-working callous-handed shovel wielders, men who had to be in love with their jobs or they wouldn't have stuck; men who loved almost as much the prospect of a fight—or the shrill-voiced promise of a little man to keep two big ones apart.

"Say, you oughta seen what I did just now." Such was the opening remark of the fortunates who had seen and heard the whole thing.

"What was it—a fight?" was the inevitable answer.

"I'll say! And that ain't all." Whereupon the lucky one related the tale, chuckling the while.

"Him?" So the skeptical comment came back. "What can he do? He's only a craneman. Besides, when Joe Harden's in the shape he's in this mornin', he's goin' to get him a fight."

Absolutely correct, that comment. That is, correct in so far as any previous experience on the floor was concerned. For "only a craneman" meant simply this:

There were two traveling cranes that bridged the floor high overhead and trundled up and down its quarter-mile length. One of them delivered hot metal to the furnaces, the other was the general-service crane. Both ran on the same track, and both were exceedingly valuable in the business of getting out the tonnage. Their electric hoists lifted many a hundred ton of stuff for the men down below.

But the operators of the cranes were never a real part of the life that went on beneath them. They spend their days in the little coops that hung down from the outside ends of the cranes, their hands on switch levers and their feet on pedals. Their faces were vague bits of white that looked continually down, watching for hand signals, which as likely as not were waved without so much as a glance in their direction.

Yes, Chester Baldwin was only a craneman. How in the world could he hope to make good on such a big promise?

AS for Joe Harden—at that very moment he was proving the comment to be right. He was growling. Even before he opened the door of his locker he had found another reason for showing his mood. His practiced—and slightly jaundiced—eye had taken in the situation at furnace No. 8. He saw that the departing shift had left behind them a most unpleasant job.

The fault was not theirs, and Joe should have realized it. He should have remembered that, while there is a definite system to the making of steel, the melting down of any single heat is a process that cannot be held within time limits. Any one of a hundred things can happen to delay the tapping of a heat.

That is why steel making never stops but goes on, except for an occasional holiday, through twenty-four hours of every day. But Joe wasn't thinking of that. He was grousing because he saw ahead of him the delightful task of making bottom.

A white-hot furnace. No flame soaring across the eighty-foot oval pan of its bottom because it was shut off just before the last heat was tapped. But still a white-hot furnace, incandescent with the heat that has soaked it for hours. And dotting the bottom were pockmarks—some of them are as large as tubs, some of them are smaller. But all of them have to be filled before the next heat is charged.

In the center of the floor a sprawling pile of dolomite. Dotting the furnace bottom, pockmarks. Between, three opened doors. Transfer that dolomite, a shovelful at a time, from the floor to the pockmarks—that is making bottom.

Blue glasses set halfway out on the nose, shovel in hand, walk to the pile of white, chalklike pebbles. Looking over the tops of the lenses, scoop up a load. Then walk up to the mouth of hell and shoot it in. The head is tipped up a little. This raises the blue lenses to a position in front of the eyes, which otherwise would be blinded. Then do it again, and again, and again. In such a heat, and with two furnace crews working at the job, there's nothing of a picnic about the job of making bottom.

Joe Harden knew it. He also knew that, coming at eight a. m. as this one

did, the job would have to be done again before the day was over. This in addition to the necessity of helping the crew that helped him on this job. So he hit the ceiling. He swore. He cursed the departing crew for having planned this deed. Which prompted his boss, Tom Hicks, to make a little remark.

"What's the matter, Joe? Some one step on your toes this morning?"

He couldn't have said anything more unfitting, and he afterward maintained that he was absolutely innocent of any wrong purpose, that he hadn't heard a word about the story yet. But you never could tell about Tom Hicks, first helper; he always had a twinkle in his eye.

"No, nobody stepped on my toes!" Joe Harden snarled. "What I'm talkin' about is this heat-nursin' conglomeration of lally-gaggin' furnace tappers that——"

"Oh, it won't be so bad," Tom Hicks soothed. "Not with No. 7 crew helpin'. They got a new second helper, I understand. He just came in this mornin'. Name's Chick Williams, and he sure looks like a steel man. Ever meet him?"

Another snarl from Joe Harden.

"Well, it'll be over pretty soon. Then you can lie down and take a nice long sleep for yourself. Let's go!"

THEY went, both crews. Six men, stripped to the waist, in a glare of light and heat from open furnace doors. It glinted on blue glasses and the polished blades of shovels. Very soon it glinted on the sweat that appeared on naked torsos. And the men circled and circled.

Here was when Joe Harden proved his mood. He had, by accident or design, fallen in behind Chick Williams, who was completely intent upon doing his full share of the work. He did it, too. He kept his place in the moving circle like one who had done it before. He neither crowded the man ahead nor slowed up the one behind; and when he shot a load of the white, chalklike pebbles into the mouth of hell, it went precisely where he wanted it to go.

That is something only a trained man can do, especially when the target is some twenty-five feet away on the far slope of the bottom. Every one noticed that. So, it developed, did Joe.

"Not so bad, for a ham-handed Swede." Such was the message he slipped up behind Chick to deliver.

Chick, busy scooping up a load, paid no attention.

"I said, 'Not so bad, for a ham-handed Swede.'" This on the next round and in a slightly louder voice.

Still no response from Chick.

Then Joe found another way of attracting Chick's attention. Approaching the dolomite pile, where Chick was scooping again, he stumbled, or seemed to. His forward charge flung him squarely against Chick.

Another man might have been driven face down into the pile of white stuff, but Chick must have had a premonition. He braced himself on his shovel, with the result that it was Joe who lost his balance and toppled sidewise.

Then Chick lifted his load and went on, leaving Joe to scramble to his feet, his sweaty body caked with white powder. And he kept steadily on. He made no slightest effort to retaliate in any way—until the job was done.

Then, when the last load had been heaved and the last door closed, dripping wet with sweat as he was and undoubtedly worn down by the siege of hard labor, he sought out Joe.

"Now, you clubfooted hellion," he snarled, "we'll see whether I'm ham-handed or not!"

Smack! The sound of bare knuckles landing on bare flesh was heard as far away as No. 5. It was the outburst every one had been expecting. All of

them started to run, Jock Campbell's great strides following them up from the rear. They expected to see a fight, but what they saw was something else. They had forgotten to keep in mind the promise of little Chester Baldwin.

CHAPTER III.

PAIR O' ROWDIES.

ONLY a craneman? Yes, and no. Chester had disappeared immediately after his arrival on the floor. He had become a vague white face in the pilot house of the service crane. And he had been very busy. His job was to replenish the piles of dolomite, ferromanganese and ferrosilicon that were shoveled from the floor into the furnaces.

He delivered the stuff on trays. They were loaded at the rear end of the floor and he picked them up on four chains. He unloaded with the help of a man on the floor. Two of the chains were unhooked, then he hoisted on the other two, thus sliding the stuff off the tray and onto the floor.

But all the while he had managed to keep an eye on Joe and Chick. When the bottom making began at No. 8 he was going back with an empty tray. When the stumbling incident occurred he was coming up with a load of ferro, headed for No. 5. He was moving slowly because the hot metal crane was lumbering along ahead of him on the same tracks.

It never moved fast, for swinging beneath its great girders was a gigantic bucket of steel lined with fire brick that held thirty tons of molten pig iron. Total load, almost fifty tons. That didn't permit much speed.

So Chester had plenty of time to watch for any further outbursts. And when the bottom making was nearing its finish he was on the way back again, the great square tray dangling by two chains, empty.

He must have had a hunch that something was due to happen, for he loafed a little in front of No. 7. He also lowered the tray till its bottom edge was close to the floor. When Chick walked toward Joe with threat in his stride, Chester eased his crane along toward No. 8.

And when Chick began his remarks, he threw his crane into high, put his foot on the button of the warning gong, and let her ride. The stone-battered wood came to a swaying halt—with Joe on the one side and Chick on the other. It was a clever bit of cranemanship—entirely unappreciated by either one of them.

"Hey!" His shrill voice came to them from somewhere over in the eaves. "Didn't I tell you guys to cut out the fightin'?"

They weren't interested. Chester Baldwin's voice made no impression. They were both too much concerned with the bothersome wall that hung between them.

Joe tried to push it aside and failed. It was made of heavy timbers bound with steel and was a load for a crane, not a man. He cursed, capably and with feeling, and went around it.

Chick, on the other side, was animated by the same grim desire. He, too, went around it. But his journey was made around the edge opposite from Joe. Each then found himself alone on the other side.

Voices were promptly raised. "The other way, Joe!" "Hey, fella, the other way!" The crowd was wanting another kind of action.

That put them both in reverse—a situation not without its element of humor—to all but the two most interested. Another series of yells, this time punctuated by laughter, brought them into contact.

By this time Jock Campbell had arrived—and come to a halt on the outer edge of the crowd. One glance covered

the scene: two huskies distinctly outlined against a back drop of splintery wood—suddenly parted by the bristling little figure of Chester Baldwin, craneman.

The ladder by which he generally descended from his pilot house was quite a distance from there, so he must have jumped the dozen feet that separated him from the floor.

"Cut it out!" Chester shrilled. "You can't fight around here. I told you that before, and you ought to know it, Joe Harden!"

HERE was a time when big Jock Campbell generally charged in and took matters into his own great hands. Accidents he feared because there was no preventing them; fights he abominated and always stopped instantly.

But it didn't seem necessary for him to step in at the moment. The two huskies, for some reason that he couldn't figure out, were making no attempt to defy the little one's ultimatum. So he decided to stay where he was, knowing himself to be quite invisible because all eyes were focused on the trio.

He had an excellent reason for doing this. Joe Harden, he knew, was an excellent man. He was fully capable of taking charge of a furnace, and Jock was ready to promote him. But as yet he had shown no inclination to assume responsibility. He was so filled with the energy of youth that he preferred playing to working. He loved night life.

The result was that he sometimes came to work in a state of nerves that brought about situations like this one. Already he had done it three times, and each time Jock had horned in. The last time Jock had said:

"Once more, and you're through."

As for Chick Williams—Jock recalled a sentence in his letter of recommendation: "He's a first-class second helper, but he is also a first-class fighter, so we don't want him."

That was the thing he had decided to ignore, for otherwise Chick looked good.

Now, if he horned in, he would have to make good his promise to Joe. That meant that Chick would have to be treated the same way. Two young men of spirit would thus be lost. But if he left the matter to Chester Baldwin, if he stayed where he was and acted only when he had to, they might be saved. So he stayed—and heard little Chester go on.

"A fine pair o' rowdies you are!" Chester piped. "You, Joe; ain't you ashamed o' yourself, rammin' Chick in the rump like that! He's a better man 'n you are, or he'da lammed you over the head with his shovel. And after what I told you less'n an hour ago——"

"Aw, cut out the gab! We want some action!"

The heavy voice came from the ringside. A hairy hand reached out, grabbed Chester by the shoulder, and jerked him roughly away from where he stood between them. And even as he was jerked, Chester twisted about to face the owner of the hand.

"Yeah," he shrilled, "you want action! You don't care if a couple o' good guys lose their jobs. It won't be no hide off your back. Leave me loose!"

The hairy hand relaxed its grip. Perhaps it was because of what Chester said, more likely it was because Chick Williams had taken one great stride toward its owner and was leveling at him a cold glance. Joe Harden was glowering, too. And Chester, released, promptly resumed his lecture.

"Less'n an hour ago," he piped, "I told you guys you couldn't fight around here, and that goes, see? You want to eat, don't you? Well, you won't if you pull any more o' this stuff, and you know it, Joe Harden."

"He socked me with his fist," Joe Harden growled.

"After you tried to shove my face in the dolomite," Chick reminded him.

"And I ain't takin' that from any man," Joe went on stubbornly.

"Ah, baby stuff!" Chester shrilled. "Actin' like a ten-year-old! Go on, get back to your jobs. And if I catch you guys tryin' to mix it again, I'll crack your two heads together."

That, coming from little Chester Baldwin, was entirely too much. A mighty laugh went up. Even Jock Campbell chuckled, though no one heard it because it was soft with something besides mirth.

Little Chester Baldwin; he had wanted so badly to be a steel maker! He had fought a shovel-swinging job for all there was in him, would have died of exhaustion right in front of his furnace rather than call quits. He had aroused the admiration of not a few of the men who now were laughing at him; in Jock he had inspired something more.

Steel always has a place for a man like him, no matter what his size. It has plenty of machines that can multiply puny strengths by the hundred, and onto one of them Jock had put him.

Spirit; that was Chester Baldwin. The right kind of spirit, one that gave itself to the job, and with an admiration for those who had the strength he lacked, that amounted almost to wistfulness. He was showing it now; and if he happened to make the men laugh, so much the better. When men are laughing, they don't fight.

JOE, though, was refusing to be amused. Chick guffawed with the rest of them, but Joe's scowl was diluted by the merest twitch of his lips. He growled:

"I sure am goin' to show him whether I'm clubfooted or not."

"That suits me," Chick said agreeably. "I've got a couple o' ham hands all set for you any time."

"Ah!" Chester jeered. "Just got to fight, don't you? Don't make any difference about a job."

Then a shrewd light appeared in his bright little eyes. He had a sudden thought.

"All right, I'll fix it," he said. "I'll fix it so you can do it up right. I'll get you two birds scheduled for the next amachoor prelim'."

A brilliant idea, that. Or so the chorus from the ringside indicated. Also quite a natural suggestion, as Jock Campbell happened to know. One of Chester's manifestations of his esteem for full-sized manhood was his shrill-voiced presence at every bout pulled off at the Coliseum.

But it didn't appeal to Joe. "With gloves!" he sneered. "Who the Sam Hill wants to fight with pillows on his fists?"

"Oh, you'll get enough," Chester assured him. "Won't he, Chick?"

Chick's answer was a most satisfying grin.

"You'll get more'n enough," Chester added.

"Oh, I will, will I?"

"You sure will. Unless you cut out this hellin' around nights and do a little trainin'."

Shrewd? Chester couldn't have made a neater bull's-eye if he had spent a day thinking it up. There was Joe Harden, hollow-eyed and sullen from a week-end of joy followed by a heavy siege of labor.

There was Chick Williams, smilingly ready for whatever came because his labor, while fully as heavy as Joe's, had been preceded by a good night's rest. And Chester Baldwin's bright little eyes had spotted the difference; his shrill voice had driven it home.

Joe got it, too. He flung a scowl at Chick, whose strength he had already

felt. Then he lowered one upon Chester.

"Oh, is 'at so?" was the best he could do, whereupon he swung on his heel and elbowed himself away through the crowd.

And there it was, a delicate situation smoothed over in a way possible only for a little Chester Baldwin.

CHAPTER IV.

HOT METAL.

BUT how long would it stay that way? Such was Jock Campbell's thought during the moment of dazed silence that followed. It was all very well to promise a legitimate fight as a means of solving the situation, but Jock Campbell happened to know that the Coliseum was closed for the summer. In the interval Joe and Chick would be neighbors—surrounded by men who loved to see a fight.

Chester wasn't thinking of that, though. He was turning to the crowd. "All right, you birds," he said briskly. "Suppose we do a little steel makin' for a change. You, Chick; come here and gimme a boost. I jumped down, but I ain't good enough to jump back up again."

All business, Chester Baldwin. He wasn't taking time to preen himself over his victory. And the crowd dissolved slowly. Voices began to lift in talk of this newest development. One, lifted higher than the others, made another very neat bull's-eye.

"When is the next fight scheduled?" it said.

"Search me! If you want to know, why don't you go ask 'little Jock Campbell'?"

That brought out another laugh—from every one but Jock. He was tickled to death, but not because it was funny.

Little Jock Campbell. That was perfect. Moreover, it suited him all the way down to the ground. He didn't care how many men thought the same way he did. Tonnage was what he was after, every day in the week. Breaking records wasn't easy any more. His men and his machines had outdone themselves so many times that now it was practically impossible.

But during the days that followed Jock began to have a hope. He also thought more earnestly of that "little Jock Campbell" remark. For little by fractional little the totals on the daily production records began to mount.

The reason, he knew, wasn't hard to figure out. No matter how much a man may love his job, there always comes a time when he gets bored. Day in and day out, the same old grind. Charge a heat, work it, tap, make bottom; charge, work, tap, make bottom—over and over again. He wonders what it's all about.

Pay on tonnage basis? Maybe. But that isn't very exciting. Suppose, though, that the man has something to think about—the sight of two huskies throwing themselves into their jobs in order to get right for a scrap, for instance. Then watch him forget his boredom completely.

"Say, that's goin' to be a fight and I don't mean maybe! Look at the way them boys are workin'. Why, they're even huntin' extra jobs so they'll get good and hard. Little Jock certainly started something, didn't he? And when they get together—— What's that? Oh, think so? Well, I got a little jack 'at says that guy'll be flat on his back before the end o' the tenth."

Such was the talk Jock heard. He saw a new light in the eyes of his men. He saw them diving into their work even as they talked. And he knew that the men were up on their toes.

The same thing applied to Chick and Joe. However misguided the motive for their interest in the job, they were doing exactly as reported. Joe worked with a grim determination that told

every one what he was after. Chick did his work with an easy good nature that said he was ready at any time.

They worked together at bottom-making time without exchanging a word, too. The only signs they gave of recognizing each other were the measuring glances each bestowed upon the other from time to time.

The situation was packed with dynamite, though, and Jock Campbell was fully aware of it. They worked and rested in an atmosphere of fight talk. No one would let them forget what each had coming. And any time, something might happen.

JOCK could have removed a part of the strain by merely passing the word. He could have separated them by several furnaces and thus removed an ever-present temptation to mix. But he decided against it. Discipline is something not peculiar to armies alone, and Jock proposed to maintain it.

Both Joe and Chick had been warned. If they couldn't control themselves now, there was little hope that either of them would ever control a furnace. So Jock left them where they were—and found occasion to have a chat with a certain bright-eyed little fellow who was no longer, "only a craneman."

"I understand," he said one morning, "that there's a man around here they're callin' 'little Jock Campbell.'"

His great voice rumbled ominously from the barrel of his chest, but there was a twinkle in the keen gray eyes above. Chester spotted it when he looked upward quickly. He grinned.

"Well, maybe I was. For a minute. But it's all over now."

"Oh, is it?"

"Ye——" Chester stopped himself and looked up again.

There had been a peculiar inflection in Jock's voice.

"Oh!" Chester said then. "Well, if that's the way you feel about it——"

And the oddly-matched pair exchanged smiles of complete understanding.

"The Coliseum is closed till Labor Day," Jock informed him.

"Don't I know it!" exclaimed Chester. That was because he never made a trip along the floor that some one didn't tell him so.

"Labor Day's a long time from now," Jock added.

"It sure is. Six weeks."

"And if Joe gets tired o' this trainin' business——"

Chester nodded and frowned.

"—and if I have to step in——"

Chester threw a glance down the floor toward furnaces Nos. 7 and 8. The shifts were changing without any untoward commotion. He nodded slowly.

"I was thinking——" Jock spoke as though to himself, and paused.

"Yeah?"

"That maybe you'd be better off on the floor. Suppose——"

"Off my crane?" Chester cried it as man to man, not as employee to boss. "Say, how do you expect me to keep an eye on 'em if I ain't up where I can watch 'em?"

"The idea being," Jock continued without heeding his remark, "that if I happen to see a man or two that looks willing to take on the responsibility of runnin' a furnace——"

"Ain't I been pumpin' that into 'em right along?" Chester demanded. "Ain't I been tellin' 'em every night that there's good jobs waitin' for 'em if they cut out the rough stuff?"

Well, maybe he had. But Jock had no way of knowing it. He had seen Chester leaving with one or the other of them every night. He had also observed their willingness to have him for company. But he couldn't know what they talked about, though now that he thought it over, what else would the little fellow say?

Jock chuckled. "I thought," he said,

"that the 'little Jock Campbell' business was over."

Chester's intensity vanished. A twinkle appeared in his eyes. Slowly, he grinned.

"I guess I talked a little too quick," he admitted. "I guess it ain't all over. Not with Joe and Chick."

"Oh," rumbled Jock. No, it would never be over. The very basis of Chester's interest in the pair was his determination to "pump" his spirit into them. But Jock didn't put the thought into words. Neither did he mention his real reason for putting Chester on the floor. That move was intended as a promotion, but it could wait. Instead, he repeated the words his namesake had used at the beginning of their talk.

"Well, if that's the way you feel about it——" and so terminated the interview.

SO Chester was still handling the service crane on the morning when Joe showed signs of what they both had been fearing.

This time he wasn't growling. There was nothing to growl about. The preceding shift had left behind a furnace completely charged. Barring the addition of a little ferro-silicon—a few minutes' work with shovels that would come later on—there was nothing to do for the next hour but get up occasionally and pull the lever of the water valve that shifted the course of the draft from one side of the furnace to the other.

But there were other ways of showing an ominous mood, and his was a silent one. He sat on his bench and stared blackly at nothing.

He was alone. Tom Hicks, his boss and the one who had made the remark about toes being stepped on, had read something ominous in his face and gone away from there. Jock Campbell was responsible for that. Jock had told him very bluntly that he could do one of two things: joke or work; but that he couldn't do both.

So Joe was alone with his mood. He was staring in the direction of No. 5 furnace, which was ready for a charge of hot metal. The center door was open. A blast of light came out, sun strong, to illuminate the trough of brick lined with fire clay which the crew had set up there. Its outer end was supported by steel legs, its inner end stuck into the furnace.

Soon it would conduct a stream of molten pig iron into the melting charge of pig iron and scrap and limestone which had been there for an hour. But Joe wasn't seeing this familiar sight. He wasn't seeing any of the operations about him.

The hot-metal crane lumbered by overhead. From the center of its bridging girders hung the ladle, a giant-sized bucket that held thirty tons of hot metal. Its gong *clank-clanked* dully. Its gears ground as it labored with the massive load. But Joe didn't notice that either.

Then Chester came along. He was following the hot-metal crane, a trayload of ferro-manganese dangling from his crane. He was going to No. 8, and was moving slowly behind the ponderous, rumbling advance of the hot-metal crane. And he saw Joe, who sat almost directly below.

Joe was slumped down on his bench with his feet thrust out in front of him. His chin was on his chest. His hands were plunged deep into his trousers pockets. And Chester read in the pose the something that he and Jock most feared. He stopped his crane and called down.

"Hi, Joe! How's tricks?"

No answer. Joe didn't look up. He only lifted his broad shoulders in an indifferent shrug and kept on staring blindly at the brightly-lighted place into which the big round bulk of the hot-metal ladle was creeping.

"What time you lunchin', Joe?" Chester called.

"How do I know?"

Joe didn't have to lift his voice. His growl was low. At the moment there was little noise on the floor. The hot-metal crane had stopped, the great bucket that swung beneath it spot-lighted by the glare of light from the furnace so that every detail of its steel shell was clear and distinct.

Then the popping of relay switches began to resound. Sam Barr, the crane operator, was maneuvering the crane into a position where its bucket could be tipped on its trunnions and slowly emptied into the trough, as is a bucket of water into a funnel. The crane moved in little jerks, a man on the floor signaling to Sam with little waves of his hands.

But neither Joe nor Chester was seeing it. Joe was blind; Chester was leaning far out of his pilot house and looking down at him.

"Well, you can guess, can't you?" Chester asked, trying to break through Joe's mood. "Gosh, it ain't very often that a guy like me offers to eat with a fella. I'll buy, too. That's the kind of a sport I am."

Pop! Grunt. Pop! Grunt. So said the relay switches, so answered the crane. The ponderous bucket swayed on the great hooks that supported it like a gigantic handle. And Joe lifted his voice impatiently.

"I don't know when I'm goin' to eat, I told you. How can I——"

CHAPTER V.

RIVER OF DEATH.

LOOK out!"

Terror was in that yell. It ripped through space like a bolt of lightning. And even as it chilled every heart, the thump of a ponderous weight striking the floor vibrated through the building. The hot-metal ladle had dropped.

Every eye saw what it was. The yell that meant disaster had jerked every head around, so quickly that in the brilliant light that poured out of the furnace they had seen the man who yelled it flying away from there like the fragments of a projectile.

Fear was what sped him, and well it might. He knew, as did every one else on the floor, that the great steel bucket filled with molten death was intended for swinging through the air, not for sitting on the floor. It had a rounded bottom.

Followed a period that was years long in its passing. Not a man moved. Every heart stopped beating. Muscles were inert.

No time to wonder now why the electric hoist overhead had failed. That would come later on. The fearful question that stopped every heart was, would the ladle tip over?

Hanging where it had been, its drop had ended squarely in the center of the floor. That meant that it must have struck one of the piles of steel stuff there. If it had landed in the center of a pile, the enormous weight had probably crushed a nest for itself and would stay upright. If it had struck the edge of one of the piles——

Above, in the rosy glow that lifted from the metal in the ladle, they could see the cable that normally held up the load. It hung slackly. The handle of the giant bucket was sagging sidewise helplessly. There was no way to hold the ladle erect.

Below, in the spotlight brilliance that poured out of the furnace, they could see every detail of the ladle itself. The great round tank of its body, the three hoops that bound it, top, middle and bottom, the heads of the rivets that bound the whole together—all were as clear as though magnified. So was the beginning of a slow and deliberate tipping motion.

It was teetering. Slowly, with a de-

liberation that only a ponderous weight could have, it was beginning to move as would a round-bottomed bucket of water dropped on a kitchen floor. The crunch of the stuff that nested in its bottom was like the roll of distant thunder. A surge of liquid fire lifted up over the brim and fell to the floor. Millions of sparks flew up.

If it went on, that soup of death would sweep the floor like a tide. If the surge of metal inside should cause it to stop and begin to teeter the other way, then——

The overflow of metal stopped. So did the movement of the ladle. It hung there—centuries, it seemed. Then slowly, almost imperceptibly, it began to move in the other direction.

That was when action began—action on the part of Joe Harden! He had been one of the few who had actually seen it happen. Staring directly at it, he had seen the ladle drop before he heard the cry. He had jumped to his feet. And now—the man whom Jock had thought to have no sense of responsibility was racing toward the ladle.

It wasn't his furnace. He was not obliged to do anything. But he was doing it. The long days of strict attention to his job for the purpose of conditioning himself for a fight, the things Chester Baldwin had pumped into him besides, had done more than any one dreamed. He was thinking of steel now, not of himself.

And Chester tried to stop him. "Joe!" he yelled. "Joe! Come back! You'll get killed!"

But Joe paid no attention. He charged across the floor, leaping the piles of steel stuff there, and stopped in front of No. 6 furnace. A pile of rabbling bars lay there. They were twelve-foot lengths of steel bar, with a handle at one end, which were used for stirring the heat from time to time. One of these he picked up. Then he went on to the ladle.

"He's goin' to prop it!" some one yelled. "Attaboy, Joe! Here I come, right behind you!"

Chick! He had been a frozen statue in front of No. 8. Now he leaped after Joe with enormous strides. No one else seemed to be capable of motion yet —no one but Chester Baldwin.

"Stay back, Joe!" he shrilled. "Stay back! I'll catch it!"

With a crash of crane gears he threw his crane into high. Just what he proposed to do, no one could guess. He was swinging a trayload of ferro-manganese beneath his girders. His hoist was busy. But he was charging toward the spot just the same.

JOE got there first. Dragging the rabbling bar, he leaped across a rivulet of metal that trickled between the piles. He stood on a pile of dolomite and upended the bar. He was going to make a brace of it. His plan was to stop the tipping of the ladle by inserting the bar between the upper hoop of the ladle and the floor.

And just then Chester arrived. He flung the bumpers of his movable bridge into those of the other one. His idea now was plain.

He wanted to move the useless crane aside and make his own of some service. But he forgot the load of ferro-manganese that was piled on the tray. The crash of the collision jerked the tray violently. It vibrated like a toy on a string. A shower of the stuff it carried tumbled off.

The heavy, fist-sized chunks struck Joe on head and shoulders—and he dropped like a pole-axed ox. He tumbled backward onto the pile of dolomite on which he stood—and began to roll down its slope toward the stream of metal below.

"Joe!" Chester's scream had agony in it. "Joe!"

Then Chick arrived. In one great leap he was beside Joe. He grabbed

his senseless body. He dragged it, unburned, to the top of the pile and left it securely there.

Then he picked up the rabbling bar that had fallen from Joe's hands and did what Joe had started to do. The loop of the handle he set beneath the topmost hoop of the ladle, the pointed end he braced against the floor.

On came the ladle, its motion as inevitable as time—slow, age-long seconds of time. Standing beneath the bulk of it that towered twice his height, Chick looked like a midget. The rabbling bar that he held in position looked as futile as a toothpick. A slosh of metal rose up over the brim of the ladle and splashed on the floor in front of him.

"Hold it, Chick!" screamed Chester. "Joe's there. Hold it!"

Down came the hoop at the top of the gigantic tipping bucket. Slowly, ponderously—down.

The upended rabbling bar began to receive the load. A slow bend began to appear in its slim length. The bend increased until it resembled a bow drawn back. Another slosh of metal rose up, fell, and splashed with a shower of sparks. Then—the bar bent.

The ladle didn't stop. On it came, over and over. A stream of metal poured out. There was a grinding of the stuff beneath the bottom of the ladle. The tide increased. Then—over went the ladle.

But Chick wasn't there to receive the torrent of death. He had felt the collapse of the bar he held. Dropping it, as quick as a flash he had turned to Joe, picked him up, and leaped across to a pile of steel stuff removed from the oncoming tide of metal. It wasn't far enough away to miss the flood, though; and there he stood with Joe in his arms, surrounded by liquid fire.

How could he be reached? There was no way. He was on a tiny island surrounded by a river from which blue and yellow flames rose up. He couldn't live long there. His lungs would collapse in that awful heat. He and Joe would be gone together.

But Chester was still thinking. He had been unable to do anything toward stopping the tip of the ladle. A wooden tray hanging by four chains is useless as a hook. It was good for something else, though; and Chester saw its value. He ran it over to where Chick stood and lowered it down beside him.

"Grab it, Chick!" Chester screamed. "Get on it, Chick! Climb on!"

Every one else heard the yell. They knew, too, that here was the only way of rescue. A platform waited beside Chick, a movable platform that could swing him away out of hell. And Chick didn't see it. Neither did he hear. Even as Chester yelled at him, the hell that surrounded him had gotten in its work. He crumpled slowly down. He and Joe lay together in a heap.

NOW they were gone for certain. There was absolutely no hope. Until——

"Comin', Chick!" yelled Chester, and every one looked up.

There was Chester, running across the great girders that bridged the hell below. He came to the electric hoist that supported the tray. He disappeared. Then he reappeared again—below the girders. He was sliding down the cable to the hanging tray.

Now he was on it. He was crawling to the edge of it, his face was screwed up tightly in the blast of heat from below. He reached over and twined his fingers in Chick's shirt. He hoisted. It must have been a mighty task, thus to hoist a dead weight almost twice his own, but for once his strength was as great as that of a full-sized man.

Chick was up, dragged over the edge. His clothes were smoking in places but he was safe. Then Chester made an-

other trip to the edge of the tray, another downward reach. This time the effort was greater. Veins stood out on his forehead. His eyes started from their sockets. His mouth gaped open.

Once, twice, thrice he poured his indomitable spirit into his arms and back. All failures. Then he tried once more. A new grip, a new heave—and up came Joe. After that little Chester Baldwin collapsed.

By this time Sam Barr had found something to do. He had managed to scramble across from his pilot house to Chester's, and it was only the work of a moment to hoist the smoking tray and swing it away down the floor. In another moment many hands had brought the three of them to the floor.

Joe and Chester and Chick; the three of them side by side. This time they were inert figures, all of them unconscious. The plant doctor had already been summoned. Very soon he was there.

His white coat bent over Joe. He straightened, nodding his head. "Ammonia," he ordered. He repeated the same with Chick. But over Chester—his head went down much closer.

"I don't know," he muttered. Very softly.

But in the tense silence every man there heard it. A low moan floated up, much higher than any roof.

"You don't know what?" Jock demanded. His voice was very harsh.

"Small man, big job," said the doctor. "His heart——"

"Huh? What's that? Whose heart?" Joe was talking. A few whiffs of ammonia had brought him around. He saw the doctor bending over Chester. "His heart?"

The doctor nodded.

"That heart?" Joe was scared. "Ha! There's nothing wrong with that heart. It's as big as all outdoors."

"But they break," said the doctor. "Sometimes."

Another groan from the crowd.

"Chick!" Joe shouted in the silence. He was calling for help. "Chick!"

Chick sat up with a start.

"Chick! For Heaven's sake——" Joe was on his knees. He pointed to Chester. "His heart."

Chick grunted and stared—and Chester sat up, calling:

"Joe! Joe! I didn't mean to knock you out, Joe!" His eyes were staring wildly. His voice was very faint.

JOE slid over close beside him and flung an arm about his shoulders. "Here I am, buddy. Here I am. You didn't hurt me, boy."

The agony faded from Chester's eyes. He looked wonderingly at Joe. "You're —all right?"

"Sure I'm all right." Joe's voice was much too loud. "You couldn't hurt me with a ten-ton ingot, fella."

A smile spread across Chester's face —the smile of a child, not a man. He lifted a hand and patted Joe on the cheek. "I wouldn't want to hurt you, Joe."

Then his mind cleared a little more. He remembered what had happened after he knocked Joe out. He stiffened. "Chick. Where's Chick?" he cried, his voice harsh with sudden fear.

"Right here, old kid," from the other side of him.

Chester's eyes rolled around. He gave Chick another one of those soft smiles.

"Chick—and Joe," he whispered. Then, with stronger voice, he added: "You ain't goin' to fight, are you, Joe?"

Joe laughed, much too loudly again. "Us? Hell, no!"

"What do we want to fight for?" Chick demanded roughly.

Joe leaned down and put his mouth close to Chester's ear.

"Do you know what I was thinkin' when that ladle dropped?" he said. He thought he was being confidential, but

every man there heard what he said. "I was wonderin' just how I could go to Chick and call this battle off."

"Sure," Chick put in quickly. "I wouldn't hit Joe. He's a good fellow, Joe."

Another smile from Chester. His eyes closed. His head settled back against Joe's shoulder. "Tha-a-t's nice," he sighed.

Followed a long, long silence. A hypodermic needle flashed in the doctor's hands. The next time Chester's eyes opened they were bright with their old-time light. His gaze fell on the doctor.

"Hello," he said. His voice was normal too. "Somebody hurt?"

"Yes," said the doctor. "A couple of your friends got burned a little."

"Where's Jock?" Chester quickly demanded.

A mighty cough resounded from over beside Joe. Jock was trying to clear an obstruction from his throat.

"Right here," he managed at last, in the voice he used for giving orders. He came around and knelt before his smallest man. "Right here," he repeated.

Chester smiled. "Well, they came across, Jock. Didn't they?" he said.

"They sure did, my lad! And so did you."

"And I'm little Jock, and you're big Jock." Vaguely, as though dreaming. He was going away somewhere. They could see him going.

"Right you are," Jock rumbled. "For keeps. No more crane for you after this."

"What?" His voice was faint now, but Chester had paused on his journey. It was as though he were looking back over his shoulder.

"You heard me!" Jock called after him. "You're little Jock Campbell from now on. You're my assistant, Chester. Assistant open-hearth superintendent of Midwest Steel."

CHESTER didn't answer. Not in words. But through the windows of his wide-open eyes the silent, watching men saw that which sent another soft, low sound floating up beyond the roof.

A light was appearing far behind the surface of his eyes, a faint, dim spark. Rapidly it grew brighter, as though a lantern, being carried away into darkness, was being brought back again. Spirit—Chester Baldwin had given lavishly of what he had, but there was more in reserve and it was taking hold. Chester Baldwin wasn't going away after all. He had decided to come back.

"With Joe and Chick first helpers?" That was his reply, made in a much stronger voice.

"With Joe and Chick first helpers," Jock confirmed.

Then Chester smiled. He turned his eyes on Joe, then Chick.

"All right," he said. "A-l-l right. And as soon as I get me a little sleep I'll——"

That was as far as he got. His eyes closed. His head settled back against the steady support of Joe's shoulder. Another low sound escaped from throats that ached with the strain of the moment. It didn't bother Chester. He couldn't hear a thing. He had suited the action to the word. He had dropped off into a restful sleep.

Fooled Him!

A POLICEMAN approached a lake in the park. In front of the lake a huge sign bore the following ultimatum: "No Swimming Allowed." In the lake a man was splashing about.

The officer, walking to the edge of the pond, said: "I'm going to arrest you as soon as you come out of there!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" the man laughed back. "I'm not coming out—I'm committing suicide!"

The Hungry Sentry

By Will R. Bird

COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

PRIVATE OTTO HUMMEL stood stiff and straight in his sentry box and watched the rain splash up like bouncing crystals as it hit the pavement under the nearest lamp.

Liebe Gott! What a night! Not a person was abroad in the streets of this French village he had come to know so well. The streaming dark was enough to drive any one indoors.

"It is a bad storm," grunted Otto, "but I am not one to grouse, for this is nothing compared to the trenches. I have served my time there and I know. Give me more to fill my stomach and I will attend these swine without ever complaining."

Otto had the habit of talking to himself. Two long years of post duty at the front and months of sentry-go at this prison camp had formed it. In all other ways he was an ideal soldier; which explained his presence on this most important of beats on the Rue de Masmilly.

Only officers were confined in the huge brick building that lined the street, and some of them, especially the airmen, were constantly trying to escape. It took an old war dog, an experienced soldier, to be an efficient sentry there.

"A night for one of those *verdammte* fools to try and escape," Otto murmured as he thrust his helmeted head into the rain. He stretched himself and stepped out.

There was nothing in sight, right or left, to cause alarm. The murky glow of the lamps revealed the brick walls and their barred windows.

Only the next sentry box was indistinct, and it had been placed, like all the others, in the spacing shadows. He stood back in his box.

"One month from to-night and I have

leave," he muttered, dashing hanging drops from his helmet with a wet finger. "Bertha will be glad to see me again."

He ceased his muttering with his finger half raised. A sound had come, the faintest of thuds, and he was instantly alert. Very cautiously he peered out, then slid a hand down his rifle, seeking the bolt and trigger.

DOWN the wall, dangling from an upper window, hung a makeshift rope of knotted sheets and blankets. It was weighted by a pair of boots and these had made the thudding noise as they collided with the pavement, a scarce ten paces from his box.

Otto's grim countenance set like rock. He would like an excuse to put a bullet in one of these officers. He had always hated them, as much as he did his own. They were but boys, many of them, and their contempt for him was a thing he could sense as plainly as a change of weather.

He leaned back in his box, waited, then looked again. There it was, a leg, with a foot seeking hold on the projections of the lower story. *Donnerwetter* —the fellow was slow! His very slowness was enough to foil him, and, this was the second time such an escape had been tried on a rainy night.

Were these officers all fools? It must be an Englishman, for the others would know that the trained German mind was superior at this matter of tricks.

Down came another leg, then the man was in view, a slight figure in a dark-blue uniform. Otto's upper lip curled slightly, he recognized the cut of tunic. The officer was one of those smooth-faced pups of the naval air force.

He tightened his grip on his rifle and moved out silently and swiftly to meet him, his bayonet ready.

Otto tingled with anticipation. Then, like a prick in the flesh, he remembered. The other officer who had tried to escape had hoarded food with him. They had searched him and the *feldwebel,* fat, over-fed dog that he was, had seized the supplies with cunning greed. He would do the same this time, unless——

HALT!" Otto gave the command sharply.

The figure that had slid down the rope slunk back against the wall. Then came his voice, husky and unsteady. "All right, sentry. You've got me cold. What's next?"

Otto liked the note of despair in that husky tone; he would have prolonged the suspense, but there was no time for that.

"To my box, quick," he ordered. "For once you have a chance."

"The devil you say! It's mighty good of you, sentry. Where did you learn to speak English?"

"That does not matter," returned Otto harshly as he crowded his captive in the dark of the sentry box. "One is qualified who is a sentry here. You are stupid to think to escape. Now, the food you have, and quick."

"The food—er—how did you know —I——" The prisoner's voice was unsteady again. He did not finish his sentence. Instead, he unbuttoned his tunic and began slowly to feel inside.

Otto grunted his impatience. He thrust in his own wet hands in exploration and found two tins of bully. He felt in the breeches and found a tin of meat paste and several large army biscuits. More fumbling, and he discovered three tins of sardines. His mouth almost dribbled. He could scarce control his delight.

He stepped back and brought up his bayonet until its point was on the officer's neck. "Swear you will never report of this and you may up your rope go," he said sternly.

"Swear to it—you bet I will," shot back the eager answer. "I'll never tell

a soul." Anxious sincerity was in that whisper.

Otto looked up and down the street. It was as empty as before. "Then up your rope go, and quickly," he growled.

A moment later and the slim figure had vanished in the window and immediately the knotted sheets followed him.

Otto looked around. The rain pounded as heavily as before and made fine spray as it struck the stone-paved street.

He flashed his electric torch on his booty and carefully stowed it about his person, all but one tin of sardines. That he opened and ate, licking out every morsel. Army rations had been scanty for weeks. He was very hungry. Later, in the morning, he could contrive to get by himself and have a feast.

IN the room high above, the man in rain-soaked blue drew a long breath as he turned away from the window.

Then he whispered into the darkness. "It worked—but did Tom and Gregory make it?"

"They did," came the answer, tense and thrilling. "You were in that box four minutes. They went down the rope like spiders. There won't be any alarm till roll call and they'll go far on a night like this."

Not the Type

A MAN applied to a moving-picture director for a part in a picture he was producing. After looking the man over, the director shook his head. "You won't do—you're not the type."

"What type do you want?" the man asked.

"We need a man," he was told, "who has flown around the world, hunted elephants in Africa, and had his leg bitten off by a crocodile."

The applicant went out and did all these things. He went around the world in an airplane, hunted elephants in Africa, and went to Florida and let a crocodile bite his leg off. Then he returned.

The moving-picture director looked him over again.

"You're still not the type," he said; "that's the wrong leg!"

Both Dizzy

THE new clerk at a certain soda fountain had been dubbed a half-wit by a regular customer. The customer who made this comment also happened to be the possessor of one of those fractional intellects.

"A glass of plain soda without any flavor," was the customer's order.

"Without what flavor?" asked the man behind the counter.

His customer pondered this before replying, and then answered:

"Without strawberry flavor."

"But you can't have it without strawberry flavor," objected the other semi-idiot, "'cause we haven't any. You'll have to have it without vanilla!"

A Christmas Story of the Far North

MUSHING THE YULETIDE TRAIL

By J. WENDEL DAVIS

Six To One

By Gordon Lord

A SERIAL—PART I

CHAPTER I.

THE BODY IN THE RAVINE.

ON March twenty-third, about five thirty in the evening, Charles Swanson finished cleaning the spark plugs of the big Wendell limousine, swept off with his whisk broom the last speck of dust on the gray upholstery that lined the seats, and walked upstairs to his room over the garage.

Preparatory to washing up before driving to the factory and offices of the Rockville Concrete Flooring Company, to call for his employer, Peter Wendell, he took off his mechanic's overalls and spread out on the bed his blue chauffeur's uniform.

He then bent over his small wash basin and spread the special grease-removing soap over his hands. The thick coating of black rubbed off easily, and the rinsings turned the water in the basin to a thick inky fluid. He unstoppered the sink, turned on the hot-water tap, and proceeded to lather his hands and face with soap.

He was in the midst of so doing when he heard a step behind him. He had time to turn around and see an enormous gorillalike figure. The man wore no hat on his head of tousled red hair. The face was large and full, though covered with a heavy growth. On one cheek was a livid scar.

So much Swanson had time to observe before he also noticed, as if he were in a dream, a short billy descending in the uplifted hand of the big man. Probably no more than a second and a half, at most two seconds, elapsed between his seeing the man and the crashing of the billy on his bare head. Certainly, Swanson had no time to cry out before he dropped, unconscious, on the floor.

It is evident that a second man, who

was of about the same physique as Swanson, proceeded to put on the chauffeur's uniform. The two men then tied a handkerchief soaked in chloroform around Swanson's nose, carried the limp body down to the garage below, threw it into the limousine, and drove down the gravel road to the highway.

The broader and deeper tracks on the gravel path showed where, just this side of the entrance, the car had been braked and stopped. A bit of trodden grass, a few almost formless footprints in the dust, indicated that there Swanson had been carried from the Wendell car and deposited in another machine.

The man in the chauffeur's uniform had driven down the hill overlooking the town, and on which the Wendell home—and, for that matter, all the homes of importance—was situated, and through the town of Rockville. At the corner of Main and Hale he stopped and bought the early editions of the two New York papers that Peter Wendell always read on his way home from the office, and placed them on the back seat.

He then continued across the bridge that spanned Two Man River, turned left to the factory, and entered the yard on which the office fronted. He stopped the car in the shadow cast by the small porch pillar, and blew three short blasts on the horn.

PETER WENDELL, president of the Rockville Concrete Flooring Company, was inexorable in his habits. He always had the arrival of his car announced by three short blasts on the horn. He always waited until the office force had gone. He was always the last person to leave the office. He always stepped into the car with a courtly "good evening" to the night watchman and to his chauffeur. He always went home alone and glanced at the two evening papers on the way.

Peter Moore, night watchman for the past twenty years, saw no variation of those habits on the evening of March twenty-third.

Moore saw, however, the limousine draw up in the yard, and strolled over to talk to his friend Charles Swanson.

"Evenin', Charley," he said to the figure at the wheel. "Been a fine day for the race, ain't it?"

The figure at the wheel grunted in a manner less affable than that of Charley Swanson.

"What's the trouble, Charley?" he asked. "Just indigestion or have the ladies been givin' you the go-by?"

"Nothing," was the mumbled answer. "Just tired."

"Why, you ain't Charley Swanson at all," said the watchman. "You can't fool me on a voice."

"Never said I was, did I? Charley took sick, and I'm subbing for him until he's ready to work."

"Stomach again, is it? He's always ailin' a bit, an' I knew he'd be took down if he didn't lay off the bum booze."

"Stomach it is."

At that moment the dignified form of Wendell appeared on the small porch in front of the office. Moore had been standing with the light from the porch in his eyes, whereas the man in the chauffeur's uniform was in heavy shadow, his cap drawn down over his eyes, so that Moore at no time was able to see the man's face.

"Good night, Moore," said Wendell, as Moore opened the door of the car for him.

"Good night, Mr. Wendell," he replied.

"Good evening," said Wendell to the chauffeur.

These, so far as is known, were the last words spoken by Peter Wendell.

The man at the wheel started the motor and put his foot down on the accelerator. The racing of the motor concealed the tones of his voice as he answered: "Good evening, Mr. Wendell."

Peter Moore said to himself, "I hope it ain't anythin' serious the matter with Charley." Then he stood watching the Wendell car cross to the far side of the yard and to the entrance to the main road.

He heard the horn toot twice as the car slowed down to make the sharp turn to the other road. He noticed the back curtain of the limousine was drawn down. As it was about to make the turn, another car, without lights, sped in front of it. He heard the squeak of brakes as the Wendell car came to a stop.

"Close call," Moore said to himself.

He thought he saw a figure move toward it, against the black background of trees, but it was impossible to see clearly. Certain he was that he heard the door of an auto slam shut, and certain he was that the light in the tonneau of the limousine went out. Then it shot to the right, and was lost from view.

Moore shrugged his shoulders, and walked over to lock the office door.

IT was nine o'clock when Charles Swanson came to. His head ached heavily, and he felt sick from the nauseous odor of chloroform. He was lying in a field behind some bushes. He rose to find he was but a few feet from a side road. He walked shakily to the road and found his limousine parked on one side.

He climbed into the driver's seat, but the ignition was locked. He searched unsuccessfully for the key. Then he got out. His head was still spinning, but presently he was able to recognize a few landmarks that told him he was on the short cut to Hammersville. He turned toward the State road, leading in to Rockville, and commenced to hike. He had little more than a mile to go before he struck the main highway.

When he reached the crossing, he sat down and waited for a hitch. Two cars passed. The second one slowed down, but when it had caught him full in the beam of its headlights, the driver changed his mind, and sped ahead.

The third car, fortunately, was Labbey's delivery truck. Mike Ritter stopped for him, and asked him what the trouble was. He was astounded both by Swanson's condition and by the story he told. He drove him to the small room next to the smaller jail on White Street.

Rudolph Benenson, chief of police, listened to Swanson's story with excitement. The two other policemen were already searching for the Wendell car, and he left a note on his desk in case either of them should return.

He then climbed into his flivver, with Swanson next to him, and drove out to the Hammersville Road. He stopped behind the parked limousine. In the glare of his searchlight, it was easy to follow the track of trampled grass to the edge of a small ravine. There the trail stopped. It stopped significantly, for the grass was stained with blood.

Benenson turned his light toward the bottom of the ravine. It was not deep. At the bottom was an object. He climbed down the side and approached the object. Despite the terrible disfigurement, he recognized it as the body of Peter Wendell. Wendell had been strangled to death by means of a wire tightened about the throat.

But it was not the fact of strangulation that made Benenson blanch, there in the darkness. It was something on the face. The face was distorted in feature and bore the marks of great agony.

But it was not the agony that made Benenson blanch. Branded on the forehead, burned into the flesh, was the figure 1. The odor of charred flesh still hung in the air. From the expression of what remained of the face, it was probable that the man had been branded before he had been strangled.

Benenson ascended the steep slope of

the gully and approached the limousine. He examined it thoroughly. He found one thing only. It was a small brass button. On it was an anchor, such as worn on the uniform of an officer of the United States Navy. Subsequent examinations revealed no finger prints, even on the steering wheel.

SO much might any one have learned about the Wendell murder from the newspaper accounts of the next few days.

So much did Donald Harper learn, who had, that very evening, motored through Rockville on his way back to New York.

So much did Thomas Witherby, co-director of the Rockville Concrete Flooring Company, learn at the breakfast table next morning.

And Thomas Witherby shuddered, and grew ashen gray, and left his breakfast uneaten on the table. His lips formed mechanically the words: "It has begun."

CHAPTER II.

HELP WANTED, MALE.

DONALD HARPER sat in a large chair in the main room of his New York club, and sulked when old Dawson Grange, that great sportsman of a generation ago, crossed the floor and sat down in the vacant chair next to him.

"You look like an outcast," he greeted him.

"I am," was the dry reply.

"You take it too seriously," said Grange. "Because Hexibar and Bennett snubbed you in the breakfast room this morning, you sneak into a corner and lie there like a sick pup. What are you going to do about it?"

"Fight them, I guess. There's nothing else to do."

"Don't be a fool, Harper. What will you get out of it? More annoyance and more publicity. Every one knows what happened. Every one knows a friend of yours was framed by a cheap chorus girl, and that you got on the witness stand and lied about it to get him out of the trouble.

"Nobody believes you ever saw the girl before in your life. What they object to is the publicity. And they're right about it, too."

"You think that?" exclaimed Harper. "You line up with the snobs?"

"What do you want? You're playing the society man, aren't you? As long as you make it your vocation, you have to play according to the rules. Either that or chuck it.

"Chuck the whole business, and make a man of yourself. Get out in the world and see things; do something. It's all right for an old-timer like myself to hang around clubrooms and teas, but you're a young man, Harper. You have the world in front of you. Think it over."

Dawson Grange abruptly rose from his chair and walked from the room. Harper remained, musing over the older man's words. But his thoughts were soon interrupted by a club attendant who came up to him and handed him a letter.

"This just came for you, Mr. Harper," he said.

Harper glanced at the writing. His heart beat a little faster and the world seemed a little nicer as he recognized the hand. It was that of his fiancée. It read:

> Don, dear! May I ask my boy a favor—not to stop in at my reception this afternoon? People are talking so, that it seems wise to wait a bit until things blow over—you know I still believe in you, but that's no reason for being foolish—you understand, don't you? My love as ever, RITA.

So that was it! Her mind was poisoned, too. She was afraid to stand up to people. Well, he had fighting blood in him, and he was through with any woman that wanted to crawl away as soon as people began to talk. He

was through with her, and through with everybody else, too.

Dawson Grange was right. What he needed was to get away from everything; get away to some strange country, Africa or the Orient; or to surround himself with different people, where he would be occupied with new affairs. After all, there was no sense in making himself miserable by trying to outstare a pack of fools.

Besides, he'd had enough of their silly social affairs and sillier boredom. He'd wasted almost two years, since his graduation from college, thinking about their sort of things. Stupid of him. He should have been working or seeing something of life. Time enough when he was an old man to spend his days in clubrooms and at teas.

And Rita! He'd never realized she was like that, not until this very moment. Well, he realized it now, and he'd do something about it. Adventure of some sort was what he needed. What was happening in the world?

He picked up the newspaper beside him and commenced to read it. He might find something interesting there. He looked at the front page. He turned the pages aimlessly. Carelessly he glanced at the Help Wanted ads. Not many of them. A man who needed money must have a devil of a time getting a job.

Hello! What's that? Something on the page had attracted his eye. It was a peculiar enough ad.

Wanted, YOUNG MAN, strong, agile, resourceful, to act as bodyguard. Must make good appearance. Apply Room 1809, Merchants Building, between nine p. m. and midnight, to-night or to-morrow night.

Donald Harper dropped the paper for a moment and considered. Why, that was just the thing he could do. And what an adventure!

Surely no one would think of searching him out to pester him there! It was the very sort of change that he wanted. And his qualifications were perfect. "Young man?" He was twenty-four.

"Strong?" A hundred and eighty pounds of muscle, all-American plunging half back of two seasons ago, kept in perfect condition with polo and boxing; college heavyweight boxing championship for three years, and now a first-rate amateur.

"Agile?" If football and boxing did not require agility, there was no such thing.

"Resourceful?" His present situation was entirely due to the fact that the cleverest theatrical lawyer in New York had been unable to catch him in a single contradiction in the space of almost two days of steady grilling on the witness stand.

"Must make good appearance?" He smiled, not in vanity, but he knew that if he looked at a mirror he would see an athletic figure set off in a well-tailored suit, and a regularly featured face, just saved from being too good looking by the lines of humor above the mouth.

And the glory of it, the adventure of it! Donald Harper, prominent in the world of society and of sport, hired as the personal bodyguard of some wretch who was receiving Black Hand letters, or some crook who had double-crossed his gang and lived in deadly fear of being bumped off.

But why so mysterious? "Apply between nine p. m. and midnight." The adventure, at least, promised to be something out of the ordinary. His blood was pounding with the hope of it, with the excitement of it. He had forgotten already the nastiness and pettiness that he was slipping away from. He looked at his watch. Barely eleven thirty. About ten hours in which to wait around, doing nothing.

At least, however, that would give him time to arrange his affairs so that his presence would not be required for

some time. His lawyer he would see first to settle his finances during his absence, and then his valet to arrange for his domestic affairs, such as they were, and to provide himself with a line of communication in case he should at any time wish to be reached.

IT was almost ten o'clock that evening, however, before Donald Harper walked into the elevator of the Merchants Building and said: "Eighteenth floor, please." Room 1809 was a suite consisting of a large reception room and a number of private offices, from one of which a mild-looking man would emerge every now and then and say: "Next."

Certainly the assortment of applicants was curious. Most of them looked like pugilists. There was an average of perhaps one-and-a-quarter good ears to a man, the rest being of the variety known as cauliflower. The conversation directed itself to Harper immediately upon his entrance. He was the only dude there, and his evident prosperousness aroused their displeasure.

" 'Gentleman Joe,' the boy bodyguard from Harlem," said a burly tough in a black cap, thumbing in his general direction.

The entire room laughed, and Harper felt called upon to say something to maintain his self-respect.

"Clever, aren't you?" said Harper, addressing himself to the man. "If you don't land this one you might try getting a job on the stage. A real talent for wise-cracking shouldn't be neglected, even by a born bodyguard like yourself."

"There's something under those clothes besides B V D's after all," was the retort: "Shake hands with a guy what appreciates yer qualities." The man held out a paw approximately the size of a six-egg frying pan.

Harper took it, expecting what happened. The hand gripped and closed like a vise, the tough evidently expecting a whimper of pain. But the grip in return was, to his surprise, as strong as his own.

The large face grinned. "There ain't many what can shake hands wit' me like that," he said. "Yer O. K. wit' me, Joe."

The big man's approbation was the approbation of the rest of the room, and the tension relaxed. Harper was able to look around with more ease and observe what he could. The chief topic of conversation was concerning the purpose of the job.

"Yer can't never tell," said a man in a red jersey. "She might be a snap, and she might not. She might be keepin' some guy out o' trouble, and goin' around enjoyin' life, or she might be real scrappin' wit' one o' them Eyetalian vendettas. Not for mine, though, if she's one o' dem. I'll scrap wit' any ghesabo what feels like it, but I ain't playin' around wit' no stielettos."

"If y' ask me," was the contribution of a rather stringy looking individual sitting in a corner, "there's something phony about this. A guy don't go puttin' things like this in the paper when he jus' wants some un t' stand by. He goes round, friendly like, an' asks his buddies fer a guy what's got a pair o' good mitts on 'im. I ain't sayin' it ain't on the level, but if y' ask me, there's somethin' phony some 'ere."

"Well, nobody's askin' yer, see?" said the big burly who had first spoken to Harper.

Harper gradually lost the thread of conversation as he became absorbed in his own thoughts and the incongruity of the situation. He, here, amongst a mob of toughs, competing with them for a mysterious position, offering unknown, perhaps even criminal, possibilities.

Somehow, when he had first seen the advertisement, he had assumed he would get the job. He had made all his arrangements that day on the basis of the

assumption. Now, for the first time, his confidence began to dwindle. At least twenty men had entered or left the room since he had been there, and more than double the number would be sure to apply. His meditations were cut short, however, when his turn came, and he was ushered into the private room.

A RATHER sallow-faced man in a blue-serge suit was seated at the desk. He half rose as he saw Harper, then, as if recollecting himself, resumed his seat.

"Won't you sit down?" he said, motioning Harper to a chair. "Your name, please?"

"Harper."

"You don't look like the rest of the applicants. In fact, you appear to belong to a different class of society."

Harper smiled to himself. The aspect of the man, his suggestion of servility, combined with the obvious attempt to appear the master considering the application of a servant, told him that here was unquestionably the valet handling the employment of a man for his boss. It might have been his own valet, Perkins, as far as the type went.

"At least," Harper answered, "I'm better qualified than the rest. I wish there were some way of proving it, but that's probably impossible. But first, I'd like to know something of the position. The advertisement doesn't tell any too much."

"I'm afraid I can't tell you a great deal on that score. As a matter of fact, I am merely engaging you for some one else, and the exact nature of the enterprise is not entirely clear even to me. I can, however, assure you that there is nothing dishonest about it, if you have any doubts on that point."

"Merely curiosity on my part. I dislike not knowing what I'm doing."

"May I ask you, then, why it is that you apply for this situation?"

That was the question he was expecting and which he did not wish to answer. Nevertheless, a refusal would undoubtedly lose him whatever chances he had of landing the job. The approximate truth was as good as anything. It was, for that matter, the only thing he could say.

"Certainly," he replied. "The details of why I want it are hardly important. I'm simply anxious to change my manner of living for an indefinite time. I want to bury myself in something new to my experience. If you're asking for a 'character,' or a pedigree, I can give it, as a confidence, to the man who is employing me. I'd like to give you letters of recommendation from all the people I formerly served as a bodyguard, but that's hardly possible. I'm a first-rate boxer. I'm quick. I'm intelligent. That's about all I can tell you."

"Very good. There's one thing only I must mention. It may be that the position will involve a certain amount of danger—real danger, I mean. Would you be fully prepared to run a risk that might be against your very life?"

Harper smiled. "That, Mr.——"

"Rawley, sir."

"That, Mr. Rawley, is what makes it attractive to me."

"Then, I think we've covered everything. If you can come here to-morrow morning about ten o'clock, I can give you my definite answer. And if it should be favorable, can you be ready to leave for the country at about noon?"

"Certainly. What part of the country?"

"I'm afraid I'm not at liberty to tell until I am ready to offer you the position. It is, however, in New York State."

"That's quite agreeable," said Harper, as he rose to leave. "At ten to-morrow, then." He walked toward the door through which he had entered the room.

"Oh, not that door, please!" said Rawley hastily, going to intercept him.

"Come through this way." He opened a door at the opposite side of the room.

Harper hesitated a moment. The others had returned by the same route that they had entered. Oh, well, perhaps it was merely late and the other door was locked. Nevertheless it seemed peculiar.

Rawley was still holding the door for him. He thought he caught a certain anxiousness of expression that slipped away when he turned in the direction indicated. Rawley preceded him through the next room, then opened another door that gave on the corridor.

"You'll find the elevator this way, around the corner," he said. "Good night!"

Harper heard his footsteps as he walked back behind the locked door.

CHAPTER III.

THE MAN IN THE CORRIDOR.

DONALD HARPER stood there a moment and considered. Although Rawley had not given him a definite answer, he felt sure that when he saw him the next morning he would offer him the position. Probably Rawley had to consult somebody that night before taking any definite steps. Then Harper turned and walked toward the elevator.

There were two men waiting there, one a husky truck driver with a flannel shirt and a three-day beard, the other man somewhat smaller, but still looking as if he could take care of himself.

The big fellow was leaning against the panel on which the elevator bell was fastened. Probably a couple of applicants for the position that Harper expected to obtain. He greeted them affably.

"Any luck?" asked Harper.

"Whatcha mean, luck?"

"On the job."

"Whatcha mean, job?"

"Let it go, then."

"Let what go?"

The man was evidently in a nasty humor. Harper decided not to bother him, and to wait for the elevator.

"Dja hear me talk tuh yuh?"

No answer from Harper.

"Ain't cha gonna answer a question?"

"Did you ring the elevator bell?" said Harper, beginning to lose patience.

"What's 'at tuh you?"

"Better move away from there while I ring that elevator bell."

"Don't be hard on him, Mike," said the other of the two. "He's just one o' them guys that was tryin' to get the poison job."

"Naw," growled Mike. "He's too soft lookin'. You ain't bin after that job in 1809, have yuh, 'Bud'?"

"I'm about to ring that elevator bell, and if any one gets in the way there's going to be trouble."

"Listen, Bud," said Mike. "We'll settle that elevator business in a minute, and you ain't goin' to bulldoze me into nothin'. But I don't like to see a guy get bumped off if I can help it. So I'm gonna be good tuh yuh, see? If y'ure mixed up in that 1809 business, yuh kin take my word, an' lay off. That's plain enough, ain't it?"

"Why, what's the matter with the job they have there?" asked Harper.

"Nothin', only the last two ginks what had it got nailed up in nice wooden boxes. One of 'em was a black box with nice yaller trimmin's, an' the other was just a plain wood box, 'cause they didn't have time fer a fancy one. We come down when we see the thing in the paper, an' then we see the guy what's dishin' out the jobs, an' me an' Bill here leave. I ain't scared, an' Bill ain't scared, but we're givin' that thing the go-by."

"Well, it happens that they offered me the job, and that I took it, and that I'm not scared of any man alive. And

now it's about time for me to ring that elevator bell."

"Pretty cocky, ain'tcha?" said Mike. "Lemme tell yuh sumpin. If it's jus' men yuh ain't scared of, yuh better not take that job. An' I know what I'm talkin' about."

"What do you mean? There's nothing else, unless you're going to tell me a ghost story."

"Ghosts, nothin'. I mean poison."

"Poison!" exclaimed Harper. "What do you mean?"

"I told yuh plenty," said Mike, surly again. "An' I don't like guys tuh talk to me too much what ain't bin interdooced properly."

"In that case, I'll trouble you to move aside so that I can ring that elevator bell."

MIKE still slouched up against the panel. Harper, angered at his insolence, walked up to him, and, seeing he still blocked the bell, gave him a push. The man was, for a second, too surprised by Harper's action to do anything.

Then he let out a growl. "Yuh will, will yuh!" he exclaimed, and came at Harper like a bull, head down and both fists ready to come up in a double uppercut.

Harper half turned his body and lurched toward him, taking both blows on the shoulder, and countering with a swift jab in the man's face. At the same moment he saw, from the corner of his eye, the man, Bill, coming into action from the other side of him.

With lightning speed, Harper shoved the back of his hand up against Mike's chin, and gave him a sudden push. It was on old schoolboy trick, but Harper did it with such suddenness, and it was so unexpected, that the man went back on his heels and gave Harper the time he needed for the other and the smaller man. Bill was easy. He was less strong and less aggressive than the other. Harper came at him with a slashing attack, taking the man's blows and pounding fiercely back at him. It lasted but a few seconds. Bill went hurtling backward and down to the floor at the same moment that Mike came back to the fight.

Harper clinched and forced him over to the elevator where the two men, locked body to body, smashed up against the bell. Harper heard the buzz, which was all that he wanted. The other heard it, too, and broke away immediately, with a loud oath.

Bill had, by this time, picked himself up. The two men turned and ran down the stairs at the other side of the landing, long before the arrival of the car. Harper was glad enough to be rid of them without making any attempt to follow.

Besides, he had been lucky enough to block their two attacks, and he might not be so fortunate if he continued the fight. It was with relief that he saw the elevator door swing open and the attendant's smiling face appear.

ONCE down in the street, Harper filled his lungs with fresh air, and decided to walk home. He felt exceedingly wide-awake, and was anxious to digest the events of the day.

It had been full enough—he had been snubbed by two friends; he had been jilted by his fiancée, he had decided to change his entire manner and purpose of life and to turn bodyguard; he had had a fight with two bums, and he had been warned that two previous incumbents of his job had been poisoned in some mysterious manner.

He fell to wondering whether Mike and Bill had been telling him the truth. But, after all, why should they lie to him? Certainly, they sounded convincing enough. But who could they be if they were trying to dissuade him by some trumped-up story? Perhaps they were the hirelings of whomever his un-

known employer was trying to protect himself against, and had simply been detailed to scare off all applicants for the position.

Somehow, that hardly seemed convincing, and even if it were the case, it would merely serve to weed out the timid. Assuredly, they were not the henchmen of any future enemy of his. That they were telling the truth appeared to be the only other alternative, so on that basis he decided to act.

But by the time he had reached his apartment, his thoughts were back on his fiancée. He had determined to write her a note rather than drop, unexplained, out of her life. Accordingly he sat down at his desk and wrote the following:

DEAR RITA: Adopting your suggestion, I did not appear this afternoon. Your note, however, suggested certain other things to me, as a result of which I have decided to make some alterations in my life. If you should ever see me again, it will be in the distant future and purely by accident. I'm sure you will agree with me that it is far wiser so. I should esteem it an honor if you kept the ring as a souvenir.

Once yours, DON.

He reread the note and sighed. After all, it was much that he was leaving behind him. Then he reached for the encyclopedia, the volume marked "Pay to Pol," and turned to the article on poison, and the division devoted to antidotes.

CHAPTER IV.

THE WITHERBY HOME.

THE next afternoon Donald Harper sat in the parlor of the Witherby mansion in Rockville, waiting for his interview with Thomas Witherby. At any rate, he had the job, though Rawley had told him it would not be definite until Witherby's approval was given.

Harper wondered vaguely what his new duties would be, and whether there would be any connection between them and the Rockville murder. Suddenly he was startled by a voice, a young and a vibrant voice.

"Who are you?"

He turned to see the speaker. She could be scarcely twenty, and looked at him from underneath a head of tawny, sand-colored hair. The face was pretty, but small, and seemed even smaller because the eyes were so large.

They were fine, gray eyes, and looked at him with an intense seriousness such as to suggest that the question she had just asked was the most important that had even been posed since the construction of the universe. Then there was a ripple across the eyes, and the whole face sparkled as she burst into laughter.

"You needn't look so scared about it. Was my question so difficult?"

"Well, in a way, it was," he replied, "because it's something I haven't been able to determine yet. A few days ago it would have been much easier. But one of the things I'm waiting for now is to find out."

"Oh, how interesting!" she said. "Is it amnesia?"

"Not exactly. I can remember who I was, but I don't know who I am."

"And is daddy going to tell you?"

"Who is 'Daddy'?"

"Well, he's Thomas Witherby when he's out, but at home he's mostly 'Tom-Tom.'"

"Yes, I expect he's going to tell me who I am."

"Is he going to tell you your name, too?" she asked, not without purpose.

"Oh, no. I know that now."

"You're not ashamed of it, are you? Mine's Patricia."

"Mine's Don Harper. May I call you Pat?"

"I wish you would. Every one else calls me 'Sandy,' and I hate it."

At that moment Rawley entered, beaming to find himself a servant once

more, with the weight of the world on other and stronger shoulders.

"Mr. Witherby will see you now, sir."

"I hope he makes you somebody nice," called Patricia as she turned to go out of the room. "And if he doesn't want to, you must bully him or wait until he's in a better mood."

HARPER followed Rawley down a broad corridor and into a large room, the walls of which were lined, to a height of perhaps eight feet, with books. At one end of it, behind a mahogany desk, sat Thomas Witherby.

Harper was conscious of being scrutinized closely as he walked down the room to the seat to which he was motioned. The feeling was almost uncanny—he felt as if the man were looking clear through him in an intense effort to size him up.

The light came from a window behind his chair, so that it struck Harper full in the face, half blinded him, and prevented him from seeing the other clearly.

Nevertheless, Harper could see that Witherby had a remarkable face, remarkable for its strength and expressiveness. It was heavily wrinkled, and, at the moment, rather tired looking. There were lines of care, lines of sentiment, lines of keenness, lines of suffering. But the eyes were clear.

"Well, young man," he said when Harper was seated opposite him, and the voice was deep and gruff. "So you've decided to take a job as bodyguard. What for?"

"Chiefly because you put an ad in the paper," replied Harper.

"Don't try to be clever. I'm trying to find something out. Just because you came up here doesn't mean you'll get the job. Rawley doesn't know anything. I do."

"If you care to consider my qualifications——"

"I don't," interrupted Witherby. "I know all about them, including your fight at the elevator which was a put-up job to see if you could handle yourself. You can. But you've got to be able to do something besides fight. Any fool can shoot himself out of danger and get away with it if he has any luck.

"I want a man to keep me away from danger, and not to get me out of it when it's too late. I need somebody who is resourceful and loyal. If I like you, I hire you. If I don't, you go back on the next train. It happens that I like you."

"Then," said Harper, "I wish you'd tell me what it's all about and take away some of the mystery I've felt about this ever since I first saw the notice in the paper."

"That's something I won't do altogether. First of all, you're a stranger to me, and I can't trust you that much. In the second place, I don't want people to know about this. As far as every one else is concerned, particularly my daughter, you're here as my secretary."

"You can count on me," he replied, perhaps a little too warmly. "I'll see that she doesn't worry."

"Eh?" said Witherby, looking up. "Your job will be simply to stand by and do what I tell you, regardless of what. And I tell you now, it's all aboveboard and square, no matter how it may appear to you. Is that understood?"

Harper was about to retort hotly something about his being capable of judging for himself as to its honesty, but checked himself. Discretion, after all, had its merits.

"If I have your word as to its rightness, yes," he said instead.

"Since I may want you at any time, day or night, you will naturally live in the house with us. There is just my daughter and myself. I warn you about Miss Witherby. She specializes in making damn fools out of young fools."

"And I——"

"All young people are fools," he said dryly. "I hope you'll be comfortable here, Harper. And I think we're going to get along together."

He held out his hand and smiled. The gesture was simple, almost noble. Harper decided he liked him—that he liked all the Witherbys, in fact.

PATRICIA was waiting outside in the corridor.

"Well," she said. "Do you know who you are now?"

"I'm a private secretary, if it pleases your highness," he replied with a bow.

"In that case I'd like to speak to you. Will you come with me?" And she led him back to the parlor where he had been waiting before the interview with Mr. Witherby.

"Now," she said, as soon as she was seated. "I don't know whether Tom-Tom mentioned it or not, but the real boss of this household is Patricia Witherby. Tom-Tom merely pays the bills. He's the taxpayer, but I'm the government."

"He didn't put it quite that way, but he did say something about your influence. He was quite pointed, in fact."

"Then we don't have to go over that. What I want to know is why you're here."

"I told you. As private secretary."

"Tom-Tom told me that, too. But why are you here? No more fibs, please."

"I'm sorry you don't believe me——"

"Of course I don't," she cut in. "There's something the matter with Tom-Tom. He's dreadfully worried, and hasn't the sense to tell me why. He's been that way ever since Peter Wendell was murdered, but it's not just grief. And your being here has something to do with it. Now will you tell me?"

"I assure you I don't know," he said.

"Possibly you don't, but I'm sure you know more than you're telling me. But men are such fools about secrets. They always keep them."

"I promise you I'm completely in the dark, but if there is anything, I mean to find out what it is."

"I don't know whether to believe you or not, but I want you to understand you can trust me absolutely. When it concerns Tom-Tom, I'm your chief ally!"

She held out her hand. He grasped it. It was warm and soft, and he felt something more than the emotions of an ally in grasping it.

CHAPTER V.

DEATH WARRANT NUMBER TWO.

THE town of Rockville borders the right bank of Two Man Creek, then stretches to the east and up the hill. At the top of the hill is the residential district, below it the town proper, and, straddling the river, is the institution that made the town possible—the Rockville Concrete Flooring Company.

Twenty-two years ago, Rockville was nothing but an unimportant little village. Then five young men got together and set their minds to work. The result was a formula for the manufacture of a cement that could be used for flooring purposes, that would look like wood, and yet be fireproof.

The leading spirits were Peter Wendell and Thomas Witherby. It was Witherby who went to old man Nearing down in Brewton, and by promising and cajoling, by impressing through sheer enthusiasm and brilliance of speech, obtained the loan they needed to start manufacturing.

And, two years later when he went down with the check that paid off the last installment of the loan, he brought back Margaret Nearing, the old man's daughter, as his wife.

But it was chiefly Peter Wendell who, in the later days, provided the financial and organizing genius necessary

to make the works one of the largest concerns in the State.

The application and loyalty of the five men was proverbial. Richards and Burton and Kinney, though not on a par with their two other associates, were able men in their way.

But perhaps as great an achievement as the mass production of flooring concrete was the friendship and loyalty that existed among the five. The absolute honesty and unflagging effort of any one of them could be implicitly relied on in any matter that concerned the organization.

Naturally, with such traditions of behavior between them, their relations had become rather informal, and the monthly meeting of the directors rarely took up more than a half hour before setting down to the more serious business of the evening.

It was then that John P. Richards would take command. He would walk to the big safe in the corner of the room and say: "Gentlemen, are we ready to apportion the profits of our concern?"

He would be greeted with an unanimous "Aye! Aye!" as he drew forth an old pack of cards and the larger part of a case of beer.

He would then pronounce: "All in favor of a game of stud, Marquis of Queensbury rules, please signify by extending the tongue the greatest possible distance from the mouth and as nearly as possible to the nose."

The five millionaires would then devote themselves to the difficult feat of touching their noses with their outstretched tongues, and the order of the evening would commence.

It was, therefore, not surprising that a cloud hung over the four men gathered about the directors' table for the first meeting since the death of Peter Wendell. Thomas Witherby, as chairman, sat in the seat customarily occupied by Wendell.

He was glancing over certain papers left there by his secretary, when he saw amongst them a letter addressed "Board of Directors," and, in the corner, the word "Urgent." It was sealed.

He ripped open the envelope with his thumb, and read the contents. His face went chalk white. He handed the sheet of paper to Burton, who sat on his left. Burton said nothing, but his hand trembled as he reached across the table to show it to the two other men. It read:

Death Warrant No. 1. "And the Scripture was fulfilled which saith: And he was numbered with the transgressors." Mark 15:28.

GEORGE KINNEY passed the back of his hand through his hair twice, in rapid succession. Richards' lips moved, but no words came. Thomas Witherby stretched out his hand for the sheet. He took a cigar lighter from his pocket, snapped it on and held it to the corner of the paper.

The flame caught and licked its way across the typewritten words. As it approached his fingers, he dropped the paper in the ash receiver. The four men watched the char move to the corner that Witherby had held in his hand, watched the flame die out and leave nothing but blackened tissue.

Then Witherby spoke. "The meeting is called to order. Is there any business?"

George Kinney evidently had not even heard him, for after a moment of silence he said: "I think I had No. 4."

"Three," said Richard Burton.

"Five," said Witherby.

Richards remained silent.

"Gentlemen," said Witherby in his most pompous tone, "may I remind you that this is a directors' meeting?"

"Yes," said Kinney weakly.

"There's a bottle of whisky in the safe." said Burton. "I think we could use it."

Witherby walked to the corner of the room, fingered the combination, and

brought out the bottle and four glasses. He poured out drinks. Each of the four took his glass and downed it in a gulp. There was no toast.

"I think," said Witherby, "we can go ahead now. Our first problem is the distribution of the functions that—er" —he hesitated a moment, seeking for a word—"our former chairman used to perform."

Richards cleared his throat audibly. Then he spoke.

"It may be a bad time in some ways for me to leave, and may give you fellows extra work, but I'd been planning a trip to Europe."

"It may be best, for all of us," said Kinney.

"Yes," said the other two men. "As long as you like."

Witherby looked at the pile of papers in front of him, and commenced to sort them. The light shone full in his face. He looked old for his age, but there was an energy and a resoluteness about him that gave the others a certain calm, and they commenced to feel normal.

But suddenly there was a loud bang, the crash of shattering glass, and the noise of some object bouncing on the floor. The three men jumped to their feet, but Richards remained slumped in his chair, his head limp on one shoulder.

"My heavens! What's that?"

"Richards!"

"What's the matter, man?"

"He's just fainted."

"Rub his hands."

"The whisky."

Almost at the same time there was the sound of feet clattering on the stairs. The three men, bent over the inert form of Richards, looked at each other. Then the door opened.

"Anything the matter, sirs?" It was Peter Moore, the night watchman. "I thought I heard a noise." Then his eye noticed the shattered window. "Somebody throw something in?"

"Some hoodlum," said Witherby. "It's all right now."

"Shall I notify the police?"

"Don't bother. It's probably no use, anyhow."

"No, it's no use," murmured Kinney, to himself.

"You can go now," said Witherby to the watchman. "We'll be all right."

It was not until he had left, and they heard the noise of his footsteps on the stairs, that any one spoke.

"I'm better now, I think." Richards opened his eyes. "What happened?"

"There was something thrown in," said Witherby. "I heard it fall."

In the far corner, to where it had evidently bounced, was a small iron bar, and round it was tied a letter. He picked it up and read it aloud.

"Death Warrant No. 2. 'For I say unto you, that this that is written must yet be accomplished in me. And he was reckoned among the transgressors; for the things concerning me have an end.'"

A small crescent moon shone directly through the jagged hole in the window. Around it were reflected in the glass the objects in the room, lit by the large chandelier.

"I think we can adjourn the meeting," said Witherby. "The secretary won't have to bother writing minutes."

Richards was still seated in his chair. "I'll stay here a moment," he said. "Don't wait for me."

Burton walked up to him and held out his hand.

"Good night!" he said. "I hope your trip's a success."

Kinney followed, and shook hands without saying a word.

Witherby placed his hand on his shoulder.

"Jack," he said, and his voice was husky, "you might run into a little trouble. Good idea to have some one along. I have a man, sort of bodyguard to me. I've looked him up pretty

thoroughly—good family, honest, and all that. Just burying himself away while some little scandal blows over. You can trust him. Name of Harper. Might be a good idea to take him along with you until you get on the boat."

"Thanks," said Richards dully.

Witherby made as if to say something more, then changed his mind and left the room.

As soon as Richards was alone, he dropped his face in his two hands.

"Have mercy!" he sobbed. "Have mercy!"

CHAPTER VI.

A WOMAN FAINTS.

RICHARDS lost little time in carrying out his plans. Less than a week later Harper found himself following a nervous, white-lipped man into a private drawing room of the *Flyer,* which had made a special stop at Rockville for the Richards party, consisting of Richards, Don Harper, a valet, and a quantity of baggage.

The train was in motion again before they had fairly mounted the platform. By the time they found the drawing room, they were hurtling past farms and fields at sixty roaring miles per hour.

Harper preceded the older man into the compartment and sat down. He did not notice that the other carefully bolted the door. His mind was on other things. He was thinking of the past two weeks at Rockville—of the days he had looked into the depths of two gray eyes; of words tumbling toward the brink of love that he had said to the blonde loveliness of Pat; and of the gnawing gray fear that was disturbing Witherby and edging its dim cloud over his romance.

Then, as Harper happened to glance at his companion, he saw written on his face the same gaunt fear that he was getting to know so well in Witherby.

"Harper," said Richards, "Witherby said you could be trusted to manage things. He didn't tell you why you were to come with me, or where we were going, did he?"

"No. He just asked me to come along, and see you through whatever might turn up."

"That's right. There's not a man in the world who knows where I'm going." Then, almost to himself, he added: "No, not even *he* knows."

"Who?" asked Harper, alert.

"Nobody. Nobody knows," snapped the other. "Here are your instructions. I want you to follow them carefully. I have a ticket on a foreign steamer. She sails at midnight. The train gets in at ten. My man is taking care of the baggage. You won't have to worry about that.

"You stick to me. Stick close! When we get off the train at the Grand Central, follow me closely. We go to the upper level, out the Vanderbilt Avenue exit, and find a blue Lackard, license number X7-3843. We get into that and drive to the dock.

"You walk up the visitors' gangway, and wait for me on deck. I have to show my ticket and passport, and come up another gangway. Wait for me at the head of the passenger entrance.

"Then we go to my stateroom. We wait there until the boat leaves. You'll have to go down the harbor with me. I've arranged to have a launch come out and take you off when the ship drops her pilot. All you have to do is stick to do what I tell you. I'll make it worth while."

"What does he look like?" inquired Harper innocently.

"Who?"

"So that I can watch for him."

"Watch for whom?"

"The man, of course."

"What man? Are you crazy?"

Richards was not to be trapped. If Harper could only get him to talk! That his fear was the same as Wither-

by's, and that both men knew of what, or of whom, they were afraid, he had no doubt. He knew that neither man would talk voluntarily, but he felt that if ever he were to learn the danger from the lips of the victims themselves, it was Richards, in his now highly-strung and nervous state, who would tell him. He decided to try bullying.

"See here, Mr. Richards," Harper said. "I've been around Mr. Witherby for almost two weeks. I'm being employed by him to keep him out of some danger. I'm now trying to keep you out of the same danger.

"I don't know what it is. I only know I'm probably risking as much as you in being here. Mr. Witherby told me as much. If, in common decency, you won't tell me what it is, I'm through, and you can keep your own hide out of danger without my help. Am I clear?"

"I don't know why Witherby hired you. I don't care, either. But I don't know what you're talking about. I've been overworking a bit, and I'm going to Europe to rest up. My nerves are shot. I wanted a companion to take care of the details of starting off. Witherby said: 'Why don't you take Harper along? He'll manage, and you won't have anything to worry about.' I thanked him, and here we are."

"Mr. Richards, you're lying."

"I've had enough of this nonsense." The man was getting angry, and losing his fear. "If you're scared of anything beat it. Get out. Step out of the compartment, and be damned to you!"

"I'm not afraid, and you know it. Furthermore, I know there's more to it than you admit. If you won't tell me, you won't. But don't worry about my leaving you in the lurch. I'm not that sort. I'd like to know what this is all about. If you won't tell me, there's an end of it, and let's forget about what we just said to each other."

Richards readily agreed, and appeared quite normal for the rest of the journey to New York. In fact, the slight altercation, with the threat of leaving him to face his danger by himself, appeared to have braced Richards, to have restored his confidence, rather than to have increased his fear. He was almost jaunty when he took a final look at his papers as the train rolled into the tunnel.

"Last roll call," he said, looking through his pockets. "Passport, steamship ticket, letter of credit—all present. Forward march, and damned be he who first shall call the bluff!"

THE spring to the step of the man who walked onto the platform of the Grand Central was totally alien to the fear-racked old man who had boarded the train at Rockville. Harper walked behind him, a step or two to one side, watching carefully for any sign of returning fear, for any person who might disturb his charge.

Nothing, however, seemed to happen, until they were mounting the runway to the upper level. Suddenly, without warning, the woman who was walking ahead of Richards keeled over, and fell fainting in his arms. For a moment, Harper did not know what had happened. The woman was screened from him by Richards' big shoulders.

Harper saw Richards stop dead, and lean back to support the weight in his arms. Harper felt the crowd start to mill and press. Then he pushed with his shoulders and came up level with Richards, and saw him holding the woman in his arms.

Harper reached out immediately and took her. She was a woman of perhaps thirty, well but rather flashily dressed. She had obviously fainted. Richards bent over her sympathetically. Then people behind began to serge, and it was all Harper could do to stand his ground.

"What's the trouble?"

"Move along there."

"Where do you think you are, home?"

"Woman fainted!"

"No reason for holding up the Grand Central Station. Does she own it?"

"Move away, there. Give her air."

Then she opened her eyes, small brown eyes of a hunted animal.

"I'm afraid I fainted," she said slowly. "I'm all right now. I can walk."

"Come along, Harper," said Richards suddenly. "Better get out of this."

Harper handed the girl over for support to some one who chanced to be standing next to him. Then he followed at a quick pace up the runway. He caught a glimpse of the valet making for the Forty-second Street exit behind a pile of luggage beneath which, miraculously, a pair of porter's legs was moving.

Richards walked directly across the vestibule, ascended the long flight of steps, and walked to the right where a number of private cars were parked. To the driver of a large Lackard limousine, bearing the license plate X7-3843, he spoke.

"Waiting for J. Sullivan?" he asked.

"Yes, sir." The man touched his cap. "To drive to the pier."

"Right you are. Get in, Harper." Richards jumped in after him and slammed the door.

THE car, seeming to get caught by every red traffic light in the city, fairly crawled. The slower it went, the more nervous Richards became. Suddenly he turned to Harper with a question.

"That girl that fainted—who was she? Why did she faint?"

"She seemed weak—maybe sick."

"Why should she faint in my arms? I can't understand. Must have been a reason for it."

"Sure there was a reason."

"What?" snapped Richards.

"You happened to be nearest. That was all. She couldn't faint in the arms of a man on the other side of the station."

"That's just it. Why was she in front of me? I can't understand."

"Did you know her?"

"Know her? No! But there must have been a reason."

"You're worrying over nothing," said Harper. "A woman fainted, you were next to her. It might happen to any one."

"It might," admitted Richards, "but I have a feeling about it. It must have a meaning. I won't feel safe until I'm sailing up the harbor. And even then there may——"

But they had reached the Fourteenth Street pier, and the car drew up before the entrance. Rather than enter the crowded elevator, Richards chose to walk up the stairs to the floor above. It was almost eleven as they walked toward the gangway. The theater crowds, the gay farewell parties that end up at a midnight sailing, had not yet arrived, but the great pier was already hustle and bustle.

Harper was walking slightly in front, thrilling to the activity and excitement about him. Suddenly he felt, rather than saw, his companion stop dead. He looked at him. His face was white and scared.

"That woman!" he said. "I knew there was something!"

"What about her? She's not even here."

"My passport!" His voice was hardly above a whisper. "It's gone!"

"Gone! Are you sure?"

"It's gone! And my steamship ticket, too. And my letter of credit. They were all together. You saw me put them away together, didn't you?"

"Yes. Are you sure you've looked in all your pockets?"

"It was in my inside pocket. You

saw me put it there, didn't you? It's gone!" He searched nervously, turning all his pockets inside out. The passport had disappeared!

CHAPTER VII.

GRUESOME AWAKENING.

FACED with a normal danger, Richards exhibited the resourcefulness and confidence of a man considerably braver than the average. But faced with any event which he chose to connect with this mysterious danger, with this mysterious somebody, he was as helpless as a child, as fear-stricken as the lowest coward. And at present, he was in a panic. Harper had to take complete charge and to order him about like a baby.

"It's gone! It was there when we left the station, and now it's gone!" he repeated automatically.

"Buck up," said Harper. "People have lost their passports before, and still sailed. Your name is on the passenger list, tell the purser you'll pay your passage back if you can't enter France, and help him along with ten or twenty dollars. He'll find a way to put you on. It's nothing but a slight inconvenience."

Harper steered him up to the desk of the man who was inspecting tickets and papers, and told him of the loss.

The inspector looked up with unconcealed annoyance, and said to Richards: "Well, can't you talk yourself?"

"Lost my passport."

"Gotcha ticket?"

"Lost with my passport. Stolen on the way down."

"That's a nice story. What do you want me to do about it?"

"I have to get on the boat. I'm John P. Richards."

"I don't care who you are. You can't get on without a passport. Move along. You're holding up the procession."

"I have to get on. I'll see you're fixed up." He held up a twenty-dollar bill.

The obvious awkwardness of the bribe served only to infuriate the inspector the more.

"D'you think you're going to bribe me? Get away from here before I have you pulled in. You're wasting time."

"You'll find my name on the passenger list. I can prove who I am. You've got to let me on."

"I've gotta let you on, do I? You can't get on without a passport. Them's rules. Now get."

A crowd began to gather, some amused, others concerned, but most of them just mildly interested. A couple of the ship's men edged over significantly. Harper took his man by the arm and pulled him away.

As they walked to one side, a drunk in a tuxedo and rompled shirt came dp.

"Whasha matter?" he said. "Lose pashport? 'Shnothing. I'll help."

"What can I do?" asked Richards, grasping at any straw.

"Shimple. I got an exshtra pashport. All we gotta do is get the pashport an' change faces."

"Prefers his own face," cut in Harper.

"'Ashall right," returned the drunk with perfect good humor. "Jush like to help a frien' in trouble. Shay!" he called, as the two started to go away. "He couldn't have my face anyhow. It 'shtuck on me."

Harper took Richards to one side of the pier.

"I have a scheme," he said. "All you have to do is brace up, and forget your nervousness. Then you walk up the visitors' gangway. You don't have to show any papers. Go to your cabin and stay there until to-morrow. Once you're at sea, they can't put you off.

"Meanwhile I'll see what can be done about getting another passport here. I'll radio you as soon as I've fixed it.

They'll probably cable the consul at Havre, and he'll get you off the boat until your duplicate papers arrive. At the worst, you'll have to stay in Havre a few days.

"Wait until you see a few people walking onto the ship, and then mix with the crowd. They can't possibly spot you. Your baggage is undoubtedly on board. I'll wait here until the ship leaves, and keep you in touch by radio with what I'm doing."

"I'll try it. I don't think it will work. I have a peculiar feeling about this. But I'll try it. Good by, Harper, in case I don't see you again."

"Good-by, and good luck."

Harper watched him walk to the visitors' entrance; watched him wait there until a party of a half dozen visitors approached and prepared to board the ship. He watched him slip in among them, and watched his big figure walk up the incline to the saloon deck.

He did not, however, see a man of medium height, who limped slightly and who wore a heavy black mustache, approach the inspector's desk. And he did not, of course, hear the man say to the inspector:

"These man wizout a passeport, he go up wiz ze veesitors, now."

He did, however, hear the inspector's voice boom out: "Hey, there, master at arms! Stop that man going up—the man with the brown hat!"

And he did see Richards grabbed when he reached the deck, and hustled unceremoniously down the exit gangway. He rushed over, arriving at the same time as the irate inspector and a policeman.

"This man's been trying to get on board without a passport," said the inspector to the policeman. "Tried to bribe me to get on, and when it didn't work, he thought he could just walk up the visitors' entrance."

"Get along there," said the officer, "unless you want to stop in the jug to-night. Get off the pier, and stay off. If I see you here again, I'll run you in. Got that?"

Harper stepped by his side as he walked toward the street. "Tough, but it was our only chance," he said. "We'll have to stop in a hotel to-night. We'll see what we can do to-morrow morning. It will be Saturday, and there are plenty of sailings if we can arrange things in time."

"It's no use," said Richards dully. "It was all fixed. That woman that fainted, to give them a chance to get the passport. The inspector that wouldn't take a bribe. His spotting me on the gangway. It's no use, Harper."

"Hop into this taxi and forget about it. A good sleep will make a new man of you."

"I don't think I'll sleep much to-night. I feel worried. Do you mind sleeping in the same room? I feel worried. Anything might happen. I don't know what. But anything might. You never know."

Much as Harper disliked such close contact with a man in Richards' state, he could hardly refuse the request.

IT was almost midnight when the taxi deposited them at a good midtown hotel. They walked to the desk to register. Harper asked for a double room and signed the two names to the register. As he did so, another late arrival approached the desk to secure a room. He was a man of medium height, who limped slightly and wore a heavy black mustache. He spoke with a marked French accent.

"Room 1253," said the clerk to Harper. "Have you any baggage?"

There was no baggage. Harper paid for the room and went upstairs with Richards.

"The best thing for you," said Harper as soon as they were in their room, "is a stiff drink of whisky. Otherwise you won't sleep a wink. I'll ring for

the bell hop. It will be a little expensive, but they always know where to get it."

Many a time, during the ensuing months, and, for that matter, the ensuing years, Harper wished that that bell hop had not been able to get the drink, or had refused to get it. Many a time he wished that a nervous Richards had lain awake all night, on the bed next to his.

But, whatever his later wishes, fifteen minutes of waiting and a ten-dollar bill were enough to bring back the boy with a quart of Scotch.

Richards poured out a half tumbler for himself, tossed it off at one gulp, and immediately refilled his glass. Then he carefully locked the door, leaving the key in it, and went to bed. Soon after, he was snoring heavily, in a half-drunken slumber.

Harper lay awake for some time, thinking of what might cause this strange fear on the part of John P. Richards, but finally he fell asleep, too.

HARPER awoke the following morning with a severe headache, and a peculiar odor in his nostrils. For a moment, he could not remember where he was. Then, through the window next to his bed, and which he faced as he lay on his side, he saw the tall skyscrapers of New York. The events of the previous day came back to him.

But what was the sickening odor about him? As he recognized it, his heart stopped beating. It was chloroform!

Afraid to turn toward the bed on his other side, he remained motionless, trying to gather his wits before looking for his companion. He felt with his hand. Just below his head, he found a chloroform-soaked handkerchief, which had evidently just slipped from his nose, allowing him to awake. And then, through the nauseous sweet odor of the chloroform, his nostrils caught another odor. It was unmistakably the odor of burned flesh.

This time he jumped up to a sitting position and looked at the other bed. John P. Richards was lying on it. The bed clothes covered the lower part of his body, and half the chest as well. Around his neck was a piece of wire, drawn tight. The face was almost black. On the forehead was branded the figure 2!

Donald Harper walked over to the whisky bottle. His hand trembled violently as he poured out a drink. He put on a pair of pants, a shirt, and his jacket. His shoes he did not lace. Then he stepped to the telephone.

"Hello," he said. His voice sounded very dry and shaky and he found that it took a great effort to make it function. "Room 1253 speaking. Will you send somebody up? There's been a murder committed."

He replaced the receiver on the hook. He found he was still very shaky on his legs. He poured himself another small drink, keeping his back to the thing on the bed. Then he stepped out into the corridor and commenced to walk up and down, trying to collect his thoughts.

His head was growing steadier. There was something he was trying to remember. What was it? With an almost painful effort, his memory began to come back to him.

HE had a recollection of waking during the night, and being surprised to find the lights were lit. He was seeing something as though he were behind a curtain, as though there were a wall between him and the other objects in the room. It must have been after he was chloroformed, and when he was struggling for consciousness.

Then Harper remembered feeling that the whole world was about to burn up. That would be when the branding iron was being heated He tried to

reconstruct the events that had happened at second hand, so to speak.

The man or men would have entered while he was asleep and chloroformed him without his ever waking up. Then they would have lit the lights and committed the crime. Perhaps during his unconscious struggles, the handkerchief that drugged him had been loosened, and he had almost succeeded in waking.

Then one of the men had spoken. He could remember distinctly that one of the men had spoken. He had heard the words and realized they were important. He had told himself to remember them. He could recall that dim effort and admonition to remember. That was all.

Probably at that moment the loosened handkerchief had been noticed, for he knew that some one, who, as he remembered, assumed the proportions of a giant, had approached, and blotted out all consciousness. A second or two later, and he might have remembered. But now it was gone. Try as he would, he could not remember those words, except that he knew they were important.

But at that moment, a group of men turned the corridor and came toward him. He noticed that one of them was a policeman in uniform.

The second installment of this murder-mystery serial will appear in the next number of TOP-NOTCH, on the news stands December 15th.

Pay in Advance

A CERTAIN judge who was writing a book on criminology, always made a point of asking prisoners up before him how they went about their work.

It so happened that on one occasion a well-known pickpocket stood before him.

"How is it that you managed to extract this man's watch from his pocket without his knowing anything about it?" asked the judge, with his kindliest smile.

The prisoner considered the question an unfair one. He glared at the judge for a minute or two. Then, drawing himself up proudly, he made answer:

"My fee, your honor, is fifty dollars for the full course of six lessons!"

Up and Across

THE office force were startled to see the chief clerk enter the room wearing horn-rimmed spectacles.

Hitherto his eyesight had always been perfect, and, naturally, there were many comments passed about the sudden development.

At last the man who had been in the office even longer than the chief clerk, ventured to ask the reason for the glasses.

"Well," returned the chief clerk, "if you must know the cause of the trouble before you'll do any work, I'll tell you. I've done so many cross-word puzzles that one eye began to see vertical and the other horizontal."

Remarkable!

EVERY year inexperienced automobile drivers leap behind the wheel and "learn" how to navigate a car. Some of them haven't quite finished learning.

Two cars were standing radiator to radiator outside a post office. A girl was driving one, a man the other. The man, having transacted his business, jumped into his car.

The girl, wishing to be polite, called out: "Shall I get out of your way?"

"Please," came the reply.

She backed a few yards. The man started his car, and as he came abreast of hers, he said in a voice of genuine astonishment:

"How did you do that? *You went backward!*"

H. C. N.

By F. N. Litten

A NOVELETTE

CHAPTER I.

A CLIMBING CRATE!

"ACE" DALLAS, pilot of the air intelligence, flying a Curtin biplane, bored through the sky above the prairies of Dakota. He was hurrying toward the Homestead, that great English-owned gold mine in the Black Hills where three murders had been done and three shipments of precious yellow metal stolen.

A vital mission, Washington had wired. The gold, security for a loan to Britain, had disappeared en route to the subtreasury in Denver. It must be found and the murderer caught or grave consequences, international in importance, might result.

But Dallas was not pondering on his mission. The ship had all his thoughts and admiration. She was a two-place job with a 500 h. p. D-12 motor in her nose, a full sweep-back and a dihedral that was minus.

Speed! The Curtin factory said she'd do a hundred eighty, level flight. The pilot grinned. *She would.* He'd proved it just this morning, out of Sioux Falls.

His face became reflective. How about her climb? Did she have a ceiling that was worth making whoopee over?

He shook his head. You couldn't eat your cake and have it. Speed *or* climb; but not both. Still, there was the built-in supercharger. Maybe she *would* climb. He'd see now, before he made a landing. The hogbacks of the Black Hills were in sight.

The stick moved back and the ship's nose lifted higher over the horizon. Dallas gave the throttle arm a shove, watching the round dials on the board. The altimeter needle quivered. It hitched upward jerkily. The air speed was holding constant in the climb.

Minutes passed and the pilot began rubbing his fingers, kicking his toes against the rudder. He smiled widely though, despite the chill discomfort of the high air. His ship had already passed twelve thousand. And with no blower on! But her engine was sputtering a little now and coughing out gray smoke. He cut in the supercharger, and the motor steadied.

Higher she climbed, more slowly as the air thinned, but never faltering. Dallas' ears begun to hum. His face, where the prop wash struck below his goggles, felt the bite of frost. He shot the altimeter. Eighteen thousand. Good enough! She was a climbin' crate; and it was time to step down, for he was feeling just a little giddy.

His fingers gripped the stick. But as the plane tilted downward, Dallas stiffened. Over his top-wing surface he had caught the glint of sun on a white fuselage. Another ship! Far above him, too. Eyes wide in astonishment, he stared at the white plane as it spiraled higher.

At length he grinned. Some "lone eagle" of the prairie making a try for altitude. Getting up there too. Dallas judged the plane must be touching twenty thousand feet.

Then his motor stumbled. The thunder of exhaust broke; picked up; broke again. He gunned her; but the right bank cut out entirely. Dallas, with puzzled frown, clicked both ignitions on and off. Perhaps the carburetor jets had fouled. Suddenly the engine went dead, and there was only the sharp whistle of the air stream against the wires.

THE pilot worked methodically. Plenty of time to clear the trouble. His battery showed hot, the main tank was two-thirds fueled. Oil and water temperature, they were O. K. too. He pumped the primer. No response. He switched on the belly tank. No answer.

Dallas thought things out. He went through it all a second time. Still the motor was inert. Well, better look below for a "spot" and bring her in dead stick.

He had forgotten the white ship. He glanced up. She too, was planing toward the earth. Dallas saw two helmeted figures in the cockpit. One was, it seemed, leaning forward as though ill. Altitude, maybe.

Suddenly his motor roared. The cylinders, all twelve, came in at once. Puzzled still more by this cranky stunt, Dallas let the ship glide flatly down. Ignition trouble; a loose wire likely. But he had a dangerous job ahead, the telegram from Black advised. And if his ship was not tuned, she might fail him in a pinch. A bad break, that would be. He landed.

A man wearing a Stetson and blue overalls tucked into high-heel boots moved out from a corral to meet him.

"Howdy, stranger!" he called as the pilot came in range. "Flyin' the mail, are yuh?"

"Well, I get my pay from Uncle Sam," said Dallas, smiling. "My ship's bucking a little. I want to look her over if you'll let me park a while."

"Parkin' free," returned the other. He held out his hand. "My name's Kingsley. This here's the Rail-J Ranch. Make yoreself to home."

They shook hands. Then Dallas

climbed on the wing, opened the engine cowl and carefully timed out his wiring. All was in order; every lead intact, every terminal clamped tight. Kingsley was watching him.

"You an 'lectrical expert? Say, tell me this; I've got a gas engine on my windmill pump, an' lately every time that white plane from the Homestead mine gits up, my engine quits. What you reckon makes that?"

Dallas sprang down. He gazed at Kingsley silently a moment.

"Just now—did your engine quit?"

"Sure did," nodded the rancher.

Dallas whistled. "I didn't know it, but my job started when the motor conked up there," he said enigmatically.

The cattleman looked bewildered.

The pilot went on: "Wonder if you'd let me stake down this airplane in your corral, Mr. Kingsley? And throw a tarp over it? Then *drive* me over to the Homestead. I'll pay you right."

Kingsley blinked. "Sure can. My car's in that shed behind the house. Boy, yuh reckon that white airplane fouled yuh, too?"

Dallas shrugged. "Let's not say anything to any one about it yet."

He opened his leather flying coat. Kingsley saw a winged cross pinned to the khaki shirt.

"I'm going to the Homestead to check off—well, some ugly work."

"I know," said Kingsley. "It's got around. You're after H. C. N." He shivered. "Let's be ridin'."

CHAPTER II.

THE FOURTH VICTIM.

TWO hours passed. Dallas, leaving Kingsley at the foot of the long slope gashed by the Homestead workings, had climbed past the racketing stamp mills to the office on the hilltop.

Here he asked for Carrier, the superintendent of the mine. A clerk, strangely white-faced, directed him to the hospital farther on the ridge. The pilot set out for it, touched by ill forebodings.

He paused at the open door of the low hospital building, knocked. Above the rumble of the stamps, the metal clanking of conveyors, he could hear voices within; but no one answered. He stepped inside to a long room.

On a white cot, a man lay, very still. Another, the mine surgeon, bent down above him. He removed a stethescope from the other's loosened shirt; folded it away.

"Dead," he said, a strained note in his voice. He wiped sweat from his temples. "The initials!"

There were two others standing by him. One, a great, broad-shouldered man, broke out hoarsely, running a hand through his white hair:

"We don't want to hear a dying man's delirium. *How* did he die, Holland?"

The doctor hesitated. "A cardiac lesion," he began. "Or—the work of H. C. N."

"Talk sense, man. And if quoting those initials is all the doctoring you know, shut up. Four men gone, and every time it's H. C. N.!"

Holland flushed at Carrier's anger.

"I've given you my honest diagnosis in each case. My resignation will be on your desk to-night, Carrier."

The tall, thin man at Carrier's left touched the superintendent's arm. He whispered:

"My friend, why so impetuous? The young doctor, perhaps, is right." He smiled nervously and lifting a thin hand, pulled at his black pointed beard. Then, he, too, repeated: "Those initials!"

The pilot stepped forward. "Mr. Carrier, I'm Dallas of the air intelligence—detailed on this case. You had a confirmation from Black, my chief, at Washington."

Carrier stared. His anger left him instantly. A harried, furtive light came in his eyes.

"Dallas!" he stammered. "We—we don't need you. I—I——"

The thin, pallid man laughed mirthlessly. He caressed his beard.

"Need him! Why say we do not, when a *fourth* victim lies before us?"

Dallas' jaw snapped shut.

"Another murder!" He sent a strange appraising glance at the mine superintendent. "I'm afraid I can't agree that I'm not needed. Suppose you tell me just what's happened."

Carrier laughed jarringly.

"You were sent here by the secret service—and you ask me that!"

He turned to the thin man. "We can't expect much from this fellow, Merridore. He wants to know *what happened.*" Again came the jarring laugh. But it held a note of—fear, was it?

His companion shook his head. His face, with its strange livid tinge, was grave.

"You are, assuredly, unstrung, Carrier. Why should not the young captain—Dallas, is it?—desire full information of these thefts of gold bullion? And this death of poor Malloy?" His thin fingers suavely stroked his beard. "Let us show him what we have found. First, my dear Carrier, assure Doctor Holland his resignation cannot be thought of now."

Carrier scowled. Dallas thought a furtive terror touched the superintendent's face, too. It vanished almost as it came. The man lifted his broad shoulders hesitantly.

"Sorry, Holland," he muttered. "No offense meant. This thing's got me."

Then, beckoning Dallas, Carrier turned abruptly on his heel, strode from the building.

THE thin man called Merridore, thrust his arm through Dallas', walked with him down the hospital steps to the path that led along the hill crest. Carrier was already yards ahead.

"You will solve this, captain," he said softly but with admiration. "You are one of the cleverest, I am told. Ace Dallas; greater than those great sleuths of fiction; Lecoq, Dupin, or Sherlock Holmes, because *you* are real, alive." His fingers clamped suddenly on Dallas' arm and he repeated: "Real, alive."

Dallas shook himself free. He grinned.

"Yes, I'm alive. You don't need to pinch me. But not a captain, just a pilot of the air intelligence." Then, with a frank stare: "What's your job around the Homestead, Mr. Merridore?"

The thin man turned. For the first time Dallas looked into his eyes. They were strange eyes; topaz colored. There was an inhuman chill gleaming in them—a cold, compelling fire.

Instinctively Dallas stepped back. His sudden movement started a cascade of pebbles rattling down the path. At once Merridore halted. He exclaimed bitterly:

"Yes, stand clear. You have seen my cursed yellow eyes. From this time you will distrust me, as do all others whom I meet."

He added, his voice still low: "Captain, if my glance seems evil, it is because I am almost blind. That is why I held your arm. As for my work here at the mine, I am chief metallurgist; by the charity of Carrier."

"I'm sorry," said the pilot reddening.

He took Merridore's arm again. In silence they continued crossing the hill ridge. But after a minute passed Merridore moved from Dallas' side.

"There; it is better. I can see now. You understand it is when I go from a dim room to bright sunlight that the eyes fail utterly. At night also I become a stumbling fool. Research in the laboratory, seeking a new cyaniding treatment for low-grade gold ores, has caused my affliction."

"Your work here? Then, if you lost

your eyesight in his interest it is no charity for Carrier to employ you."

Merridore shook his head.

"It was in the Witwatersand, the Transvaal, that I became disabled. Carrier is my one friend. He might ask my life; I would give it, willingly enough."

Carrier had halted on the hilltop. As the two men behind him reached the summit, Dallas gave a wondering exclamation.

"Some plant, this Homestead mine!"

Below him, covering the long slope, lay the huge stamp mills and the leaching plant. The slanting metal roofs of buildings stretched over vast acres.

Merridore nodded. "An efficient plant. It would have to be. We crush eight hundred tons of ore each day. Much of it shows values less than two dollars to the ton."

He pointed to the valley where steam shovels were digging in a deep quarry-like gash and a panting locomotive hauled a string of cars loaded with gray rock up the steep grade to the mill.

"We mine the ore in open cuts. Shafts and tunnels would not pay in so low grade an ore. Yet we send to the subtreasury in Denver—by airplane—gold ingots worth better than a million, each month."

"And your shipments have been tampered with en route," said Dallas reflectively. "And four men flying with the bullion ship have died while the plane was in the air. Is that correct?"

"The last four trips," confirmed Carrier, his voice hoarse, "have meant death to the guard and short-weight ingots substituted for our bullion blocks."

"Queer that a thief would switch the ingots. I don't get that. Why not make his run-out with *all* the gold?"

Dallas drew a cigarette from his case, broke it in pieces absently. "And who's your pilot—the man that ferries this cargo to Denver?"

The chemist sent a meaning glance at Carrier; tugged at his black beard impatiently. The superintendent, halting by them, gazed desperately about him.

Merridore said: "You have crossed the trail. The pilot! Carrier, this young captain, he is no fool. You can shield Norman no longer. Take Dallas to the hangar; let him question this man whom we—whom I, at least—suspect. This cashiered lieutenant, *H. C. Norman.*"

At the name Dallas started. The crushed cigarette fell from his hand. But Carrier, his voice shrill and, it seemed to Dallas, futilely imploring, cried:

"Don't say that, Mischka! You have no right——"

Dallas' eyes narrowed. What was it Carrier had called the chemist that made the thin man's livid face flame and the pupils of his topaz eyes contract to cruel pin points? Merridore tugged at his beard furiously; his lips trembled. Suddenly his anger checked, his face became expressionless. He turned to Dallas.

"Captain, my friend is loyal. This Norman is his sister's child; yet he is a renegade. Still, because of the blood tie, my friend will believe no evil of him. But I—well, I insist that you talk with Norman."

Dallas laughed shortly. "I certainly expect to. He is the key man, this pilot." With a curious glance at Carrier, he added: "And why not talk now?"

Merridore nodded. A strange expression touched his face and then almost instantly was gone.

"You see, Carrier, the captain is of my opinion. A keen detect——"

"I am of no opinion," interrupted Dallas, cutting short the flattery, "But I think this Norman should have a lot to tell us, if four men have been murdered in his ship."

"Exactly," confirmed Merridore. His eyes stabbed Carrier. "Come then."

CHAPTER III.

THE DEATH WHISPER.

HE led the way down a long trail past the thunderous, clattering mills, past the leaching plant with its great vats of tailings. Crossing the valley he ascended the farther slope to an isolated group of buildings.

Over one of these, Dallas noted a wind cone fluttering in the upcurrents from the valley. Trees studded the hillside, glossy green conifers and tall black oak. A bad layout for a landing field, thought Dallas.

They were approaching the buildings when Merridore paused. He pointed.

"The large brick structure is our refinery. Laboratory, furnaces and cupelling plant. It is here the gold is cast into its final form; ingots weighing from forty to sixty pounds, depending on their fineness and freedom from base metals. And you see the hangar; where Norman has a room." He smiled coldly. "We will doubtless find him at home. I warned him to remain."

Reaching the hangar, Dallas saw that a small portion of the hillside by it had been cleared of trees to provide a narrow runway paralleling the contour of the hill. Safe if the wind was right, but dangerous when it swept across the summit.

A white biplane, a mail-type ship with but one cockpit aft and a load compartment running the full length of fuselage forward of the seats, stood in the hangar door. Dallas tensed. He had recognized the plane. On the nacelle, tinkering with the engine, crouched a slender figure in khaki overalls. Dallas halted suddenly.

Merridore called: "Norman!"

The man snapped upright. Dallas dropped back behind the other two and, from the protection of Carrier's wide shoulders, gazed at the slim pilot.

"Come down, Norman, we will talk with you again," continued Merridore.

The youth turned. As his glance fell on the three men at the door, Dallas suddenly began a series of queer gestures. Had Carrier or the chemist seen, they would have thought him mad. He pointed to his breast and shook his head violently. Then he touched a warning finger to his lips. Twice he went through the pantomine.

Merridore, catching the bewilderment on Norman's face, swung round. Dallas halted and, his expression bland, said:

"A pretty job, that crate. Wing slots, stream-lined motor, retractable landing gears. I'll bet she'll step."

The chemist nodded, stroking his black beard complacently.

"And this is her pilot; Lieutenant Norman, *late* of the air corps." There was a cruel edge in his voice. Norman flushed to the roots of his yellow hair and his gray eyes clouded.

Carrier broke in: "Why torment the boy, Merridore?" The superintendent bit his lips. "Norman, this man here is an investigator of the secret service. Dallas is his name. I want you to tell him all that's happened."

Norman looked fixedly at the flyer of the air intelligence.

"Tell it again? I can't——" He stopped, held by something in the other's face.

"The whole story," warned Dallas, "from the time you came here."

NORMAN was silent a moment. Then he said:

"I've been with the Homestead mine since"—he flinched—"since I left the service. Ferrying bullion shipments, carrying supplies; you know, anything that turned up. Last month was the first—accident. Daly, the assistant in the cupel room, was flying with me as the bullion guard, in the double seat to my right. We had been up only a little while—we were over Harney Mountain—about eight thousand feet.

"Daly hadn't slipped on his goggles even. It was misting. He raised his hand to his helmet to pull them down, I guess, and fell forward on his belt. I circled back, landed." Norman shivered. "But Daly—it was too late."

"And the bullion?" urged Merridore, chilled as steel.

"It had been tampered with when I arrived in Denver with Connell, who substituted for poor Daly," said Norman dully. "But it was still under seal when the mint officials removed it from the ship."

"Three thousand forty-six troy ounces short in weight," said the chemist.

He went on relentlessly: "But Daly was not dead when you landed. You called Doctor Holland. And he heard Daly's last words. So did you, Norman. Tell this man what they were."

The slender pilot trembled.

"Tell him," repeated Merridore.

"They were—'H. C. N.'"

"What was Doctor Holland's question that brought so strange an answer?" pursued the chemist, his thin hand at his beard.

"Holland asked him what had happened. Daly could not answer. He was cold, limp, and his tongue seemed paralyzed. Then—Holland asked: 'Was it murder?' Daly nodded. He struggled to speak—fearfully. He whispered the three letters."

"H. C. N.," nodded Merridore, his topaz eyes cruelly alight. "And you, lieutenant, what is your name?"

The youth did not answer.

"Come; your initials then?"

"H. C. N.," said Norman brokenly. Then with a cry, despairing: "But it's a terrible mistake! I couldn't kill a man! Merridore, Carrier—you know that!"

MERRIDORE'S eyes held no pity. The mine superintendent, his face twisted, turned away. Dallas was the only one who appeared unmoved. He took out his cigarette case, proffered it to Merridore.

"Smoke?" he asked. "Perhaps you won't like the brand. "They're Alphonsos; got them in Mexico. Bitter as poison." He paused, nodded at Merridore. "I've begun to like 'em though, myself. Well, I've heard how this poor Daly died. The other three—was it the same with them?"

Merridore answered, his face somber. "The same. The next two, Connell and Banning, were dead when the airplane came to earth. Malloy—you have just seen his death. He, too, whispered the initials 'H. C. N.' before he died."

Stepping close to Dallas he pointed at the biplane.

"Captain, tell me how high—to what altitude—might such an airplane rise?"

Dallas visioned the ship as he had seen her flying high above the clouds.

"She's equipped with a supercharger," he replied. "Why, she might have a six-mile ceiling. Might be jockeyed higher, even, if her pilot had an oxygen helmet."

"An oxygen helmet?" Merridore repeated. "*You* have one, Norman." Again he swung to Dallas. "Without a helmet, what would happen to a man at the altitude this ship would reach?"

"At twenty thousand he'd be altitude drunk; freezing, too. At thirty—well, his heart would have stopped ticking long before he reached that height."

Merridore let the full weight of Dallas' words register. At last, in a voice cold and triumphant, he said:

"The four men, my best men, died of heart failure. That was Holland's diagnosis." Suddenly his face convulsed. "Carrier, this farce has gone on too long. If Norman is your nephew, he is a murderer as well. I have heard the stupid coroner pronounce his post mortem, 'Death from causes unknown,' for the last time. The district attorney's office in Pierre——"

"Mischka!" The name was wrenched from Carrier like a groan. "Wait! Harry, my boy—my boy! On trial for murder! No! No!"

But Harry Norman had thrown off his fear. He stood, head lifted, shoulders back, and though lines of suffering were deeply etched on his face, there was no faltering.

He said: "It is, after all, the best way. Call in the law, and let the law decide. I am no criminal and I ask nothing except justice." He faced Carrier. "You are my uncle; you have been kind. My employment here, the first since—since——"

"Since your unfortunate court martial," interrupted Merridore coldly. He gnawed his beard, his face working. Every gesture expressed an indecision, a bitter struggle that went on within. Finally the lines in his pallid face smoothed. He crossed to Carrier.

"I, too, owe you much. More than I owe my conscience, Carrier. So I will close my eyes to the death of these four men who were"—he paused—"like sons. Vengeance is slow but the guilty in the end are punished. I ask only this; remove him." He raised his hand, pointed at Norman in somber accusation.

The superintendent bent his head. He trembled like a broken man.

"Harry, I shall—— You must go. Oh, my boy!"

CHAPTER IV.

HIGH-AND-CRAZY.

DALLAS was crumpling an unlighted cigarette to bits. He threw it down.

"Hold everything," he broke in. "This is where we tear up the deck and call for fresh cards. Sending Lieutenant Norman on his way won't suit my boss at all. And he's the big brass collar in Washington. If Norman killed four men and switched this gold, he's an international criminal. Your company is British owned. This bullion is to be held in the Federal subtreasury to secure a shipment of American machinery for England's account to her colonies in the Transvaal."

"It will mean trouble among the nations if this gold delivery is longer delayed," Carrier cried in harsh anxiety.

"Well," Merridore asked in a voice that was again eagerly vindictive, "*you* will call in the prosecutor, then?"

Dallas glanced at him. "No, Mr. Merridore," he replied firmly. "It's a Federal case. And I want more facts. Here's something that puzzles me. Why would Daly's death cause you to suspect the bullion shipments had been switched? Also, how could Norman have done the job in the air, and with only a few minutes between his take-off and landing? Looks like Houdini stuff. Or he had a smart gang on the ground working with him."

The slender Norman laughed mirthlessly. "You're a pilot, Dallas; take my ship to-morrow. Fly this Black Hills country. See if you can spot a clearing in these hogbacks where I could land and contact with a gang."

Merridore had listened with impatient scorn. As Norman concluded, he said with a note of accusation in his voice:

"Daly's death we thought was an accident—illness. We did not suspect a theft of the gold. Connell was sent on in Daly's place with Norman the same day. And they made the flight without event. Not until the bullion arrived at Denver and was weighed in at the mint did we know of the theft.

"A week later came Connell's murder. We weighed the shipment as soon as Norman landed with Connell's body and found short-weight ingots had again been substituted.

"On Banning's death we found the same conditions. And the shipment Malloy started with this morning"—he drew a memo from his coat—"is short three thousand ounces—approximating sixty thousand dollars."

"Where are the ingots stored before shipment?" questioned Dallas.

"In a vault lined with reënforced concrete, which is below us on the hillside," answered Merridore. "Come, I will show you that, too."

He strode down the path. Turning off at the cleared landing field, he crossed it and disappeared in the thickets beyond. Dallas followed him, but Carrier remained at the hangar. Glancing back, the aviator of the air intelligence saw him talking with Norman.

Dallas plunged into the brush guided by the voice of Merridore calling his name. Fifty feet he pushed on, then came out in a tiny clearing.

Before a massive rusty door cut in a dyke of granite, Merridore was waiting. Two men—guards, evidently, from the rifles slung across their shoulders—stood beside him. He turned a key in a padlock and, with Dallas, swung back the steel barrier. A second door with a combination lock was recessed behind the first. This Merridore opened easily. And as it moved, Dallas saw a third door, a barred grating, padlocked also.

"Three doors, a double guard posted night and day," said Merridore. He stepped up to the bars, pointed into the shadows.

"This is our bullion cave. Thirty ingots are stored there. To-morrow they must be delivered. As you say, her unruly subjects in the Transvaal will rise against Britain if this loan fails. There has been bad blood between *them* since the Boer revolt of '99."

Without replying Dallas peered into the dim vault. Thirty gold ingots lay a few feet from the door. Each was about the size of a shoe box cut in two. They gleamed like tarnished brass. The vault was painted with a tarry substance, but tiny pools of water standing about a circular drain in the corner showed the waterproofing had been unsuccessful. The air had a dank yet pungent smell.

Merridore touched Dallas' shoulder. "The concrete walls exude moisture. Pitch does not keep the water out. Fortunately gold will not rust, nor *dissolve.*"

He laughed. Dallas swung round. Merridore's eyes in the semidarkness of the cave mouth were startling. They gleamed with a greenish iridescence like the eyes of a night animal.

The pilot repeated mechanically: "Not rust nor dissolve." He backed into the sunlight. Why had the chemist emphasized that word *dissolve?*

Merridore hesitated; stumbled after him.

"The sun; wait, I cannot see."

Dallas halted.

A pause, then Merridore said: "It is all right now. Well, captain, do you think our bullion cave is safe? I will say also that the two guards, under the eye of Carrier and myself, have loaded the ingots in the plane each time a shipment has been made. And only Carrier and I have the combination and the keys."

Dallas shook his head. They walked on together.

"It would be hard to break down a triple door," he murmured. Then, "Where does the floor drain discharge?"

Merridore pointed down the hill.

"A hundred feet below us." He laughed. "A six-inch drain. You may dissmiss the possibility of a thief crawling through it to the vault."

At the hangar they rejoined Carrier and Norman. Dallas gave the young pilot a long scrutiny.

"Norman, I'll make the flight to Denver as guard to-morrow. Meanwhile, you'll have to consider yourself my prisoner. Go to the hotel and wait there.

"If you'll take me to the mine office, Mr. Carrier, I have some telegrams to send."

It was noon when Dallas completed coding his two telegrams. One went to Black, chief of air intelligence, in Washington. The other he sent—via El Paso

for decoding—to Doctor Arnold, the professor under whom he had studied chemistry at college.

Arnold was retired and maintained a private laboratory on Telescope Mountain, near San Diego, on the California coast. He was a consultant of national repute.

THEN the pilot returned to his room in the company hotel built on the hill that overlooked the Homestead workings. Norman was waiting in the lobby, sunk down in his chair, a figure of abject misery. At Dallas' touch, he sprang up.

"Come to my room." The pilot of the air intelligence glanced around him quickly. Then he stepped close to Norman, whispered: "Say, 'High-and-crazy,' why did they wash you from the air corps? Stunting again, I'll bet my silver-plated crash boots."

Norman stared, amazed. Bewilderment was pictured on his face.

"Who—who told you my nickname?"

Dallas smiled. "Suppose we go to my room. There may be a lot to say."

Norman followed him upstairs. When they were seated, Dallas resumed.

"I was a 'dodo' at Brooks Field when you were a lieutenant instructor there; when you earned your name climbing to ten thousand and diving on headquarters lawn. I've kept tab on you since. Held the altitude record for a military plane once, didn't you?" He sobered. "What went wrong, lieutenant?"

The bitter hopeless lines returned to Norman's face. He looked at the other as though he could not speak. But there was sympathy in Dallas' keen eyes, an alert friendliness that brought hope.

"The old stuff, Dallas," he said wearily. "Hard liquor; fast company. From Brooks I got a transfer to Selfridge, with the Pursuit. Then, one morning I wrote off a supercharged D. H., coming in to land. You have to set down those old crates with your air speed touching eighty, or the nose'll drop.

"I'd been up two hours that morning, trying for altitude; had a bottle in the cockpit to keep me pepped. Well—I had too much; couldn't see the ground, cut the gun too soon. Crashed on a hangar roof—court-martial—curtains!"

"Booze doesn't make safe cargo for a pilot," Dallas said. "After that—you came here?"

"After that I spun in—to the gutter. My uncle picked me out; gave me this chance." He laughed bitterly. "Now, I'm a murderer, he thinks."

"Are you, Norman?" Dallas' voice was steel hard.

The young pilot sprang up. "No! No! On my honor as an officer——" He stopped. "I forgot. Dallas," he went on brokenly, "those men were my friends."

"But this morning," returned the pilot, measuring each word, "with Malloy as passenger you flew your plane to a high altitude. Just as Merridore said."

The young pilot stared at him. Sinking down into his chair, he buried his head in his hands. When he looked up Norman seemed to have grown old.

"How do you know that? Well then, it's the end of things."

"Perhaps it is." Dallas shrugged. "But, Norman, you don't check with my idea of a killer. If you'd come clean—tell me what it's all about—maybe we could find a way out."

THE boy's haggard face set.

"I'll tell you. But you won't believe me. Dallas, I say again, these men who are dead—Daly, Connell, Banning and Malloy—were my friends. They helped me fight the craze for drink that comes back sometimes. They knew who I was; what I'd been.

At the Cleveland air races this fall there's a prize hung up, a trophy and twenty-five thousand dollars for the

best altitude reached by a civilian pilot. These men staked me to a supercharger. I installed it in the company's ship.

"We told no one, not even my uncle. I was to have a week's vacation in October, slip off to Cleveland. If I won, we'd split the prize five ways."

"Go on," said Dallas.

Norman's lips trembled. "The day Daly—died—he asked me to climb the ship. We had just taken off for Denver. I gave him the oxygen helmet. We have but one, a crude affair made in the laboratory. We were only at ten thousand feet when he collapsed. None of us knew his heart was bad."

He paused. Clenching his hand he struck the chair arm.

"If I'd only been warned then! But the others all begged me to fly them high. Wanted a thrill. I made Doctor Holland look them over. Then came Connell's death. After that I refused to climb the ship for Banning or Malloy.

"Dallas, may these be my last words if they are untrue! The altimeter was registering but three thousand feet the instant Banning fell over on his belt. Malloy, this morning, urged me until I lost patience. I climbed too high again. It will haunt me always. Poor Malloy!"

"Malloy, and the other two who followed Daly—they did not wear the oxygen helmet?" Dallas' voice sharpened. He had taken a cigarette from his case, was crushing it in his fingers.

"They *all* wore the helmet," Norman answered grimly—"even Banning, though at the low altitude it was unneeded. He had just slipped it on. He wanted to try it. They all did. They were curious to see how it acted."

"I noticed the tank was separate; hung on the fuselage; larger than the breast tank which is customary," Dallas said reflectively. "If it contained some deadly gas, *that* would offer a way to commit murder."

The young pilot whipped forward, his eyes flaming. "You mean that I——"

But Dallas laughed. "You're not that devilish clever, Norman. No, the trail is leading *from* you, I should say. But will you do this; and don't ask why. Bring me that helmet. There must be a spare tank, too."

"Yes. In the laboratory. Malloy, who was Mr. Merridore's first assistant, saw to it that a charged tank was always ready."

"Well, get that tank. And any other tanks you see. But *listen!* Choose a time when Merridore's not there."

He rose. "The third degree is over. Norman, if the breaks come as I think, maybe you'll have your try at the Cleveland trophy yet."

Amazed yet stirred by the optimism in the other's words, Norman rose and, his face reflecting a faint hope, left the room.

CHAPTER V.

HIS LAST ENTRY.

DALLAS for a long time remained quiet in his chair. He stared at the blank wall opposite, absorbed in thought. His mind went back to the near disaster of that morning.

What had made his motor conk, almost at the moment Norman's plane began its earthward glide? He returned to the mysterious deaths of the four laboratory assistants. Even if the helmet tank *was* filled with lethal gas, would the murderer trust to chance that these men, one after the other, would don it?

Suppose Norman had put it on? And what was the motive behind these four mysterious crimes? A desire to block the gold delivery, prevent the loan to Britain and, in consequence, the shipments of American machinery to the Transvaal? The temper of the Boer was none too friendly to his English guardian.

Perhaps Merridore was secret agent

of some power attempting to fan into flame the red embers of an old hate between Boer and Britain. An African revolt would go hard with England now. Her colonies were none too stable.

And it might involve the world. That was the thought at which Dallas' face turned grim.

A knock brought Dallas from his reverie. He rose to admit a boy with the answers to his telegrams. An eager gleam touched the flyer's eyes as he dismissed the messenger. Closing the door, he slit the yellow envelopes, laid the two sheets on his dresser. One, from Black, his chief at Washington, was disappointing. Decoded, it read:

Merridore, Mitchel. Age fifty-nine. Born Minsk, Russia, 1870. Degree M. D., Ch. D., University of Leidon, Holland, 1898. Exiled by Imperial Russian Government, 1900. Nihilistic activities. Escaped Siberia and served enlistment in Pretoria Rifles (a volunteer British regiment, Boer War), 1901-02. Became naturalized British subject, 1903. From 1903-21, no history. Resident of U. S. A. since 1921. Occupation mine technologist. No criminal record.

(Signed) BLACK.

Dallas, his expression baffled, turned to the second telegram. This he studied long and earnestly.

In the order given: Pseud-aconite, hydrocyanic acid, a gas, mercury bichloride, are most toxic poisons known. The first is lethal in minute doses, but slower than hydrocyanic, which kills on single inhalation. Mercury far too slow according to your description of deaths. Chemical antidote for hydrocyanic acid is ferrous chloride.

(Signed) ARNOLD.

Of the message one phrase clung to Dallas: "Kills on single inhalation." If he could prove it was this poison gas which had been stored in the oxygen tank, it would mean a long stride toward solution.

The ore-leaching process at the Homestead depended on the use of cyanide. He knew this deadly gas could be produced from cyanide. But Merridore, the man on whom Dallas' suspicion rested—Black's telegram bid fair to clear him. A British subject, a volunteer *against* the Boers, and for years a peaceful resident of the United States! He would not wish to stir up cruel war. No, Merridore must be checked off.

Who then? Carrier? A vision of the mine superintendent's furtive eyes, his gestures which betrayed hidden fear, came to the flyer.

Impulsively Dallas sprang up. Carrier might be the man! He halted to hastily review his reasoning, then left the room and a moment later, was striding down the board path to the superintendent's office.

CARRIER greeted the flyer with a dull apathy, a despondency that puzzled Dallas. If guilty, the superintendent was a super-clever actor, for his bearing was that of a man crushed by misfortune.

The flyer began frankly. "My instructions from Washington say that grave international complications—a revolt from British rule by her subjects in the Transvaal—may result if the gold is not delivered as agreed. The amount stolen from the first three shipments totals nearly two hundred thousand dollars. Is that correct? And today's loss——"

"Sixty thousand dollars," muttered Carrier. "Always the same. One-fifth of the shipment disappeared with each theft." He groaned. "Yes, we have lost a quarter of a million."

"But the count of gold bars is never short?"

"No." The superintendent twisted in his chair. "The thief has substituted light-weight ingots. An insane man's act, this, Dallas. For he might have had five times that sum!

"Even so," he muttered, "the shipment of machinery to the Transvaal will not be made. Only five days remain. We cannot possibly mine and refine a

quarter of a million gold in five days. But my company has received payment for the gold from England, in imperial four per cents." He sank back, his head shielding his quivering lips. "Oh, Harry, Harry!"

"You're naming Norman. You think then that *he* is the criminal?"

"No, no," murmured Carrier, but the denial faltered. His eyes avoided Dallas'.

"Why do you believe your nephew guilty?" Dallas leaned forward, his voice an accusation.

"I—I——" The older man broke suddenly. His shoulders sagged. His shaking finger pointed to the desk before him and on it Dallas saw a small leather-covered book. It lay open, face down, as though Carrier had left it so to mark a place.

The pilot took it in his hands. A diary. On one of the opened pages was this short paragraph:

October 17th.—Banning died to-day. The third of us. I am convinced now it is H. C. N. I shall go to Carrier to-morrow, after I return from Denver—if I do return. But will Carrier believe me—listen to my suspicions of one so close to him?

Dallas looked up. "This is Malloy's diary? His last entry, I suppose; written yesterday."

Carrier only shivered. The pilot rapidly leafed through the little book. He stopped as again the initials H. C. N. leaped at him from a page. This time the diary chronicled the death of Daly; and of the second man to die in the death plane. The entry was a week old.

October 11th.—We are still engaged on our research. The long hours—the hazard of it—are getting me. Or perhaps it is Daly's death. And now, Connell's yesterday. I wonder if, as Banning says, it *could* be H. C. N.? If Harry succeeds my share will speed me from this place.

"H. C. N.," repeated Dallas. The superintendent's eyes were glazed with suffering. Carrier was not the criminal, the flyer of the air intelligence was convinced of that. Nor Harry Norman, Carrier's nephew; though his initials tallied with those in the diary.

"What is the research Malloy writes of here?" the pilot asked, his eyes on the book again. "And this about Harry's success?"

"They are engaged on a new process for removing gold from the cyanide," Carrier replied. Then he flinched. "Success? Harry's success? I—I don't understand."

BUT Dallas knew the words, "if Harry succeeds," were, to the superintendent, proof of Norman's guilt. He glanced up sharply.

"You have used this name, Mischka, a dozen times to-day. It is Merridore you mean, but why do you stumble on the name?"

Carrier's haggard face was crossed by faint annoyance.

"He is Russian born. A naturalized British subject. When I knew him in the Rand he was called Mischka Miradof. He does not like the name. Under stress I have let it slip."

The pilot frowned. He copied "Mischka Miradof" on a blank leaf of the diary, and resumed:

"Merridore was with you in the Rand—the gold mines of South Africa?"

Carrier shook his head.

"Merridore? No. We fought together with the British in the Boer Rebellion. He saved my life at Pieters Hill; the siege of Ladysmith."

"And came to America with you?" Dallas spoke indifferently.

"No. Mischka — Merridore — came here three years ago. After the World War he was exiled by the Soviet. Deported to the tundra country, bordering the Arctic Sea. Fifteen years he battled cold and famine in Siberia. There his sight was ruined by the white glare of snow. Then he escaped."

"A man of adventure," nodded the pilot. He rose, slipped the diary in his coat. Carrier, rising, failed to note the movement.

"Harry?" he questioned. Misery tinged his voice. "He is like a son to me."

"A man who has killed four——" Dallas did not complete the sentence, but his inference was plain.

Carrier dropped heavily to his chair. To the pilot came again the feeling that had possessed him for some moments past—there was a listener outside the door. He swung and quickly opened it.

Merridore was standing there. But the dismay in his thin face disappeared at once. He tugged at his beard, said sternly:

"I *have* been eavesdropping. Norman ransacked my quarters a half hour ago. Looking for me, perhaps, to add another victim to his list. I thought he might be here."

"Your quarters—at the laboratory?" Carrier cried.

Merridore nodded grimly.

"A workman, Castro, who has been helping me since my four men—are gone—saw him break in."

He turned to Dallas. "Norman should be under guard."

Dallas, as though reaching a decision he regretted, slowly bent his head.

"I shall find him at once. One question, Merridore—was there bad blood between Malloy and Norman?"

"All my men hated Norman; Daly, Connell and Banning too. He was arrogant and at times a dangerous, drunken beast."

"Booze, too," said the flyer, lifting his eyebrows as though he believed the other and assented to his conclusions. "Well! I'll find Norman, don't worry. There's another wire to send if the case is closing."

Merridore turned to the superintendent.

"He might use the company's airplane, Carrier, and deliver Norman into custody of the police at Pierre. My opinion is that he's insane. He may kill us all!"

"Your idea is good," confirmed Dallas. "As closely as I can, I'll follow it." Hurriedly he left the room.

CHAPTER VI.

AIR DANGER.

A SECOND telegram dispatched to Black, and Dallas returned to the hotel. But first he stopped at the mine commissary and from the druggist bought his entire supply of iron chloride, the antidote which Doctor Arnold's wire had named.

Norman was waiting in his room with the oxygen helmet and two tanks.

"I had to break in, but I got them," he said.

Dallas placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Within the next half hour we may be knocking at the pearly gates, you and I. We're going to fly the death ship, and take these tanks to a laboratory for analysis. Here's hoping it may clear you."

"Clear me!" repeated Norman. His head lifted. "Is there a chance?"

"Why, it's not a betting proposition even," Dallas grinned. "Empty my grip. I'll pack the helmet and tanks in it. Here's some life insurance." He patted the package of chemicals. "Keep that where I can reach it pronto. Hurry, Norman, I've some evidence here. If your uncle should tell Merridore it's missing, he'd go a long way to get it back."

Dallas transferred the little diary to an inside pocket. Drawing out a pair of handcuffs, he continued:

"You'll have to wear these, Norman, till we get aloft, just to help the play along."

Five minutes passed and the two were climbing the hill to the hangar, Norman carrying the grip, his left wrist chained

to Dallas' right. At the plane, the pilot of the air intelligence unlocked the cuffs until his prisoner had climbed the fuselage and settled in the seat. Then he made fast the bracelet to a longeron.

Castro, the man Merridore had mentioned as his new assistant, helped Dallas roll the ship to the line. He seemed familiar with airplanes. He pulled the prop through carelessly to prime, stepped back, shouted: "Contact!" Then he spun the blade.

The motor thundered instantly. Dallas held the stick down, waiting with patience until the cylinders were firing evenly. He waved the chocks away. The biplane roared across the narrow field. Carefully he let the stick come back and, pushing the throttle to full quadrant, rose in a straight climb off the hilltop.

At a thousand feet he bent over, unlocked the cuff from Norman's wrist. He looked back at the hangar and the flat-roofed laboratory building by it. A man stood on the laboratory steps gazing at the fleeting ship. As the pilot watched, he disappeared inside the building. Dallas could have sworn the man was Merridore.

The plane had a tremendous climbing angle. Power and wing lift to spare. At five thousand feet Dallas leveled off, then dropped the nose. With the ship planing gently toward the valley eastward, he throttled his motor and, bending close, touched Norman's arm.

"Merridore is sure he has you 'on the spot.' Still, if these tanks"—he pointed to the grip at Norman's feet—"carry poison gas, *that* will be another something for *him* to explain."

The younger pilot stared; first at Dallas, then at the grip before him. His lips moved soundlessly, repeating the words: "Poison gas!" He swung and, his face close to his companion's ear, called loud enough to penetrate the whistle of the slip stream:

"Merridore—*poisoned* them? How did I—escape?"

Dallas pointed to two clips on the side struts inside the fuselage at Norman's right. They were meant to hold the oxygen tanks in place and relieve the pilot of the weight.

"You—were—not on the same side—as the tanks. Lucky," Dallas checked.

The grip at Norman's feet moved; bulged queerly. The leather swelled as though by pressure from within, and while the two men gazed, suddenly the grip burst open.

On the instant Dallas, snatching out the sack of iron salts, scattered the red powder everywhere! He bent out into the screaming wind. But Norman fell limp against his safety belt.

The flyer of the air intelligence forced back his companion's head, poured the powder in his mouth. Norman's face was livid. He breathed slowly and with convulsive effort. His body was relaxed, limp. There was for an instant a faint bitter odor in the air, but the air stream quickly whipped it away.

The ship, with Dallas' hands off the controls, plunged into the first turn of a spin. Instinctively, the pilot moved to right her. A quick impulse made him pause. Let her go a turn or two. If some one on laboratory hill was watching, he would think the plane with her two passengers was spinning down to crash.

Below the rims of the hogbacks the biplane corkscrewed. The hilltop on which stood the laboratory, disappeared. Dallas snapped the stick ahead; kicked the rudder straight. The plane dropped from her spin into a dive. Slowly he brought her level, and banking, set a course northeast.

THIS done, the pilot turned again to his companion. Norman was regaining consciousness; the color ran back to his face. He moved feebly. Dallas touched his cold hand.

"Atta boy! If Merridore's out to get us, he'll have to put more stuff on the ball!"

The other, through the battering exhaust, missed Dallas' words, but he smiled grimly, clenched his fists. The pilot of the air intelligence settled to his task. Shoving the throttle full on, he tore a straight course above the alkali plains, the air speed at one hundred forty, and a stiff wind on the biplane's tail.

A half hour passed and Dallas glimpsed the stark outline of Specter Butte on the horizon. He sank lower. The buildings of the Kingsley ranch came in sight. He saw his ship too, the sun glinting from her yellow wings, staked by the corral as he had left her. Dallas, sputtering his motor, planed down over the ranch, banked into the wind and landed. He saw Kingsley running from the house.

The cattleman halted by the ship.

"Rustled another o' them things, hey, boy?" he called as the pilot sprang down.

Dallas helped Norman climb from the fuselage. The younger pilot staggered as he tried to stand.

"Kingsley, drive into Pierre, get a doctor for my friend. I can't explain now, but I'll make everything right later. Stay here, Norman; pull yourself together. It'll be late when I get back, but I'll need you then——"

"Going? Where?" Norman protested faintly. "Let me go. He said it was H. C. N. I've got to clear my——" He swayed dizzily.

The old cattleman thrust an arm beneath his shoulder.

"Wait here," Dallas said again. "I must cover three hundred miles to Sioux Falls before dark. There's a government chemist in the Federal Building there. And some time tonight, the return flight. Merridore may decide to leave the Homestead suddenly. I'd feel bad to miss him."

TEN o'clock at night in the Federal Building at Sioux Falls. Dallas stood by the lead-covered laboratory bench. He tore a cigarette to pieces, threw it down—a gesture of impatient anger. Tarshall, the government chemist, took a reading of the liquid in the slim burette before him, shrugged.

"Sorry, Dallas. But this is the third analysis. It checks; must be right." He glanced at a pad lying on the bench. "Nitrogen, forty-two per cent plus; acetylene, forty-eight per cent minus. No quick poison in either. You must have picked up a tank of carbide gas by error. Hydrocyanic acid, the deadly gas that you suspected—well, there's not a trace of H. C. N. in this."

"Of what?" cried Dallas.

"I said there's no trace of hyrocyanic acid. H. C. N. is the laboratory name, the chemical symbol, you understand?"

The pilot drew a deep breath. The chemist's words had solved the riddle of the initials in the diary. H. C. N. did not stand for Harry Norman, but for a deadly poison which Malloy feared some one—some one he dared not name—had used.

Dallas' blue eyes grew cold. The net was drawing about Merridore. He thought of Carrier and smiled. He would be shorn of sorrow in the knowledge that his nephew was not guilty. With the thought, another came, a disconcerting thought. The proof had failed. Dallas' face fell. The gas in the tank was inert, only faintly poisonous. It could not have killed these four men.

Tarshall exclaimed suddenly. He had picked up the oxygen tank, was staring at it with a puzzled frown.

"What are these tiny perforations in the base? Why, this base plate is brazed on—a false bottom!"

Dallas gazed intently at the tank. Then, lifting his head, he looked about him. A short crowbar stood in a cor-

ner of the room. He seized it. Returning to the tank, he swung the steel bar above his head. It clanged down on the cylinder. A crack appeared around the base. A second blow, a third, and the brazed base fell away.

The chemist knelt beside the opened cylinder.

"There's a magnet-controlled valve that must release the gas when it is opened. A high-tension spark coil too; built into the cylinder. A spark coil." Tarshall frowned. "What for?"

Dallas was like a hunting dog who picks up the lost scent.

"A spark!" he cried. "I could explain that. But I'm no chemist. Nitrogen—acetylene—what's the answer, Tarshall? There's some tie-up between the three. Think, man! It's late and I've got to find the answer to this mystery to-night!"

The other gazed at him blankly. He repeated, his voice doubtful: "A spark; acetylene and nitrogen."

At the far end of the room a case of textbooks lined the wall. Tarshall moved to them, lifted down a heavy volume. He carried it beneath the light, studied it. Shaking his head, he replaced the book, withdrew another; a third; and then a fourth. Dallas, watching, crumpled cigarette after cigarette, and threw them away.

Suddenly the chemist gave a cry of victory.

"Dallas, you had the answer! Listen." He read:

"Jules Le Clerc of the French Société de Chémique, in 1876 produced gaseous hydrocyanic acid by the passage of induction sparks through a mixture of acetylene and nitrogen.

"There it is—the gas in the tanks could be made deadly——" He halted, bit his lips.

"But how was that spark produced? Was this tank wired to the ignition system of the plane? Surely they would have noticed——"

The flyer laughed. "Radio!" he said simply. "It's old stuff. If you examine that magnetic valve you'll find contained in it a micro-sensitive relay. A directional wave impulse from a Marconi transmitter on the ground would start a spark and open the valve too, Tarshall."

Dallas took his leather helmet from the table.

"There's work ahead. I'll be flying. Some time to-night, I told Norman, but it will be morning now before we reach the Homestead. Keep this data, Tarshall, a report will be called for. Many thanks. Good-by!"

A quick handclasp and the chemist was alone listening to Dallas' footfalls on the stair. They grew faint and died away.

CHAPTER VII.

STORED GOLD.

ALL through the return flight to the Kingsley ranch Dallas pondered, turning over in his mind the unsolved elements in this mysterious death of four. Merridore was guilty, but what moved this man to wholesale murder? The gold? Why, then, had he replaced the ingots with other bars of lighter weight? And how had he done this? And when?

There was but one answer possible. Replacement of the full-weight bars was done to throw the guilt on Norman. The bars had been switched while lying in the bullion vault below Laboratory Hill. No doubt the guards were in Merridore's pay.

Still, Dallas could not be satisfied with his reasoning. The motive—that was the weak link. *All* of *one* shipment would have meant more loot than a *fifth* of *four*. Had Merridore hoped that if each theft was small, Carrier would not realize that their total meant failure of his English contract until too late?

Was there, as Black had hinted, an international plot behind it all? Eng-

land was the loser then. Her Transvaal dependency would be furious at the failure to keep faith. The Boers might revolt. But Merridore would not want that. *He* was a British subject, had fought for the crown *against* the Boers, so the secret-service files showed.

The pilot shook his head. It was too devious, too complicated. Let Washington untangle it. One thing *he* must uncover—how the gold was stolen. He glanced at the instrument board, touched by a circle of illumination from the cowl light, then ahead into the black wall of night. Far away twinkled a tiny spark which he knew was the beacon at the Pierre Airport. He swung south and planed lower.

Slowly another light appeared on the terrain, a weaving, leaping flame. Closer he planed. The light became distinct. It was a camp fire, built on the prairie near the Kingsley ranch. Dallas dropped a flare and landed. Norman, swinging a lantern, ran out to meet him.

It was then just three o'clock. The pilot of the air intelligence drew Norman aside, gave him a brief story of what he called "Tarshall's find." His own part in the discovery of how Merridore produced the lethal gas, Dallas did not mention. That was his way. Concluding the account, he said:

"There's still a lot to do. To find where Merridore has cached the gold, and the men who were his mob. And, last—*to take Merridore!* Death in that job, Norman."

"Let me have it!" cried the young pilot, clenching his hands. "It's mine by rights!"

Dallas shook his head. "You don't know Merridore. He may outsmart us both. If we lose, it will be our last fight. Norman, I'm going on to the Homestead; in your place. At daybreak you follow in my ship. Set down on the outer fringes of the hogbacks and wait. Before ten o'clock I will have won—or lost.

"If it's victory, I'll make a short flight over Laboratory Hill, a signal for you to come in. But if there's no signal—at ten o'clock—fly on to Pierre and send this wire." By the lantern light, on a leaf of Malloy's diary he wrote:

BLACK, — B Street, N. E., Washington, D. C.
Merridore guilty. Send ships to Pierre Airport. Ask for Norman. DALLAS.

Handing the paper to his companion the pilot straightened.

"Dallas," Norman cried, "I won't stay here—it's my fight——"

Dallas touched his shoulder. "It *is* your fight; if my luck fails. But I'll need a buried ace to beat Merridore. That's you, Harry." He held out his hand. "Wish me some good cards in the draw."

The old rancher had stepped close. Dallas shook hands with him too, then climbed his ship. Soon, only two wavering points of green and red, the wing-tip lights, marked his swift passage through the sky. Presently these vanished and the west horizon was a black wall, graying slowly with the dawn.

LABORATORY HILL was screened by drifting mist when the pilot of the air intelligence spiraled down above it. On the opposite slope, the lights of the mill buildings glittered through the fog and Dallas saw vague shapes of workmen moving in and out the buildings. The night shift of the Homestead was going off.

He banked the biplane over, sideslipped down, edging for the indistinct outlines of the landing field. The dim terrain loomed right below. He kicked the rudder straight, hauled back the stick and felt the quick jar of tail skid and landing gear. With the wheel brakes Dallas checked his speed and rolled up to the hangar.

Merridore was waiting when he sprang from the fuselage. In the dull glow that precedes daybreak his face

seemed more pallid, ghastly. He came close, pulling his black beard nervously.

"You returned," he said, "after a long delay. And your prisoner?"

"Safe," replied the pilot. "But no questioning will break his story. Which is," he added, his glance direct on Merridore, "that *you* are guilty, and not he."

The chemist laughed softly. "Yes? He is insane. I have never even ridden in this death plane of Norman's. Fortunate for me."

Dallas nodded. "Yes, you're lucky. Something wrong with this ship. We almost cracked up taking off last night. You saw that, didn't you?"

Merridore bent nearer in the dim light to peer into the pilot's face.

"No," he replied. "I did not remain to watch your flight. My work just now is pressing." He took a step toward the laboratory building.

"The laboratory!" exclaimed Dallas. "I'd like to have a look at it. If you're going there, I'll come along."

"I can offer you nothing of interest," demurred the other. "Since the death of my assistants, little has been done."

But the pilot was striding toward the building. Merridore, with a strange evil lightening of his yellow eyes, a sinister look that boded ill for Dallas, followed.

Dallas halted at the door. He glanced at what appeared to be a screen of vertical wires on the flat roof. They were ranged in a semicircle.

"A horse-shoe antenna," he said. "You are experimenting with directional sending? A ham, eh? Well, I'm a radio bug, too, Merridore. What luck are you having?"

The chemist's answer was like silk, but his topaz eyes glowed venomously.

"That was poor Malloy's hobby. I have no time for amateur radio."

Dallas had stepped inside. An alcove of the laboratory held a radio transmitter. The flyer stepped close. It was a powerful set, the tubes water-cooled, and a shielded tuner.

"Power there," the flyer said in admiration. "So this was Molloy's." He glanced about him. As though struck by a sudden thought he swung on Merridore.

"About Norman; I'll confide in you. There's a book, a diary. Norman didn't let me see it. But it connects you, Merridore, with the theft of the gold ingots, so I understand. What would you say if I told you that Norman told me if I visited the vault early to-day I'd find the gold ingots already stolen—and lighter ingots in their place?"

He stopped. The chemist's face was ghastly. His mask of cold contempt had vanished. To gaze into the slitted eyes was like looking in a furnace of molten yellow metal. The long fingers twisted in his beard.

"Norman!" Merridore spat out the word as if it were a curse. Then came change. His face cleared; became inscrutable again.

"You repeat these insults—why? Do you believe the word of a murderer? Well, let us go down to the vault. *Now.*" He laughed; a threat lay in the sound. "Then, when I have proved my innocence, Carrier shall dismiss you."

THE two watchmen were at their posts on the hillside beside the iron door. At Merridore's command they took the keys, unlocked the rusty barrier, swung it wide. The chemist with steady hand turned the combination of the inner door and opened it too.

Behind the grating lay the bullion bars, thirty of them, gleaming dully as the flat shafts of sunrise touched their surfaces. Merridore unlocked the grating, turned to one of the guards. It was the man Castro.

"Castro," said the chemist, "take this man with you. Bring from the laboratory the balance used for weighing gold. You know it. It's by the cyanide pump,

the *special* pump, that you have used. Close the pump switch, Castro, before you return."

The guard's face was wooden. He swung about, motioning to the second watchman. The two set off, pushed through the thickets and were gone.

Merridore smiled coldly. "You will see the gold weighed. The weight of each ingot is stamped on the end. There is a record in the office to check by. I am a fool to submit to this procedure; but your tongue would spread poison if I did not prove my innocence. Come, help me carry out these ingots. It is too dark inside the vault to read the scales."

Dallas stepped hesitantly forward. Intuition told him that dark vault held death. A spotted frog, torpid with the chill of early morning, lay by his foot. He moved his shoe, pushed the frog to the doorsill. In alarm the frog hopped in, squatted by the vault drain.

"Come," urged Merridore, "you are a young man and I old. The bars weigh half a hundredweight. Go in."

Dallas took another slow step. By the drain the green frog gave a convulsive twitch, turned belly up. The pilot froze. Death *was* waiting; an arm's length away.

A staggering blow between the shoulders sent him reeling into the murky darkness of the vault. He snatched the red powder from his pocket, pressed it to his nostrils and mouth. He stumbled to his knees.

Merridore's voice cried mockingly: "A breath! One breath! A greater poison will still your poison tongue."

CHAPTER VIII.

BOOMERANG.

DALLAS exhaled, dusted his handkerchief in the iron crystals, crowded it against his face. Merridore's voice came again but more faint against the thudding clamor of the mill. He was calling to the guards. They had returned too soon.

"We will not want the balance after all. Take it back, you two. And, Castro—close down the pump."

Dallas rose. His lungs seemed bursting; a giddy weakness held him. The lethal gas was sifting through his mask. He staggered to the threshold of the vault. Though the thickets and the hillside weaved before his vision, yet he could see Merridore a half dozen paces from him. Carelessly, the chemist's back was turned—no one could enter that vault and live.

Teeth clenched, driven by the iron of his will, Dallas crept from that portal of quick death. His body, an inexorable weight, dragged him down. A pain-filled lassitude from the poison in his lungs made every step exquisite torture.

He gained the cover of the thickets, sank to his knees, drew in great gasps of clean morning air. His healthy body rapidly threw off the toxic gas. His vision cleared again. Merridore turned, and the pilot, moving cautiously but swiftly, climbed down the steep wooded hillside toward the mill.

Carrier, crushed by his grief for Norman, had found no rest the previous night. He had gone to his office early, hoping to find forgetfulness in work. The drone of the arriving plane had only served to deepen Carrier's misery. He did not want to talk with Dallas.

Daylight came and Carrier had risen to go out when the door was violently thrown open. The superintendent turned. In startled wonder he saw leaning on the casing a man in disheveled aviator's clothes. A yellow stain spread on his face from chin to nostril.

"Dallas!" Carrier cried.

The pilot stepped inside. Quickly he closed the door.

"A gun if you have one! And phone your mine police. Throw a cordon of armed men around the Homestead. Stop Merridore at any cost!"

"Merridore!" echoed the superintendent. The telephone rang loudly. He lifted the receiver; listened. "Merridore!" he said again.

Dallas leaned across his shoulder. With malignant clarity the chemist's voice came from the instrument:

"Carrier, I'm taking the last of the gold. Castro and I. It was a mistake to kill the four—too much publicity. The poison in the tank was only meant for Norman. But the others blundered in. So they died too. This bloodhound of the air escaped; but he will never take me. I have your ship. Good-by, Carrier—poor doting fool!"

A click—and the instrument was silent. Carrier lifted his head; his eyes stared blankly at the flyer. He wet his dry lips. For the third time: "Merridore," he murmured.

"Yes," said Dallas softly; but his eyes burned with cold fire. "Merridore, the murderer of four; the thief of the Homestead gold; who would have sent your nephew to the gallows." He paused, cried harshly: "The telegram! Was there a wire for me last night?"

Carrier swung about. Lifting a yellow envelope from his desk he gave it to the pilot, watched as he opened and decoded it. And with the reading of the message a change came over Dallas. It made Carrier shiver, the steely menace in the blue eyes, the cold inhuman quality that radiated from the youth before him. No man, but a machine of vengeance.

Then Dallas said:

"This is a record of the lost years of Merridore's life. Listen!

"Miradof, Mischka. Birth, no record. Nationality, Russian. History antedating 1907, none. In this year presented at court in St. Petersburg (Leningrad) by Gregory Rasputin, the Russian monk, whose pernicious activities marked last years of Czar Nicholas' régime. Miradof associated with Rasputin in political intrigue. 'White Book' contains history of his career. He plotted against his colleague. Suspecting him of this and of Bolshevist activities (a well-grounded belief) Rasputin broke with Miradof. In December, 1916, at a dinner in the Yussupoff Palace, Rasputin was poisoned (cyanide) and afterward shot. The Empress of Russia ordered Miradof to trial, but he escaped. Was Bolshevist spy in World War. Believed now to be at large in South America as secret agent of Soviet Union. Miradof dangerous international criminal. Have you information? Reply immediately. BLACK."

Dallas laid the telegram on Carrier's desk.

"You will note that thirteen years ago Merridore had begun to play with poison; the same poison he used to kill Daly and the rest."

"Daly and the rest!" The superintendent leaped up. "Then it was not——"

"Not Norman," broke in Dallas' voice. "Your nephew is innocent."

Briefly he told the story of the night, his work with the government chemist, Tarshall, his late encounter with Merridore at the cave. Then, in conclusion, he said:

"There is of course a pipe line from the laboratory to the cave. Through that line this workman, Castro, pumped the deadly gas. Could a gold solvent, some liquid that would eat into the bullion bars, be pumped into the vault and then drawn out?"

The superintendent stared. His eyes widened, then glowed in quick assent.

Dallas, you have solved the riddle. The ingots were short weight *when they were loaded* on the plane. Without reweighing we would never suspect that. There was no gang to switch the bars, replace them with others. *They were dissolved by cyanide.*"

"Then," continued the flyer, "the missing gold must be concealed in the hilltop laboratory. Probably this 'research' of Merridore's was a blind to hide the reclaiming of the gold from the liquid in which it was dissolved."

He stepped to the door. His body tensed.

"Merridore is taking off!" The words ripped from the pilot's throat.

He bounded up the hillside toward the landing field. The ship, exhaust stacks spitting fire, hovered on the runway.

HALFWAY to the field Dallas cried again, a cry of baffled anger. The ship was rising from the ground, her thunderous exhaust fading as she climbed.

But the flyer of the air intelligence was not done. To Dallas' mind flashed a way by which he might yet trap the fleeing Merridore.

On he ran, gaining the hilltop, past the doorway of the laboratory. Three sacks of canvas, oozing what looked to be fine yellow sand, lay on the threshold. The missing gold reclaimed from the solution! Merridore, in his haste, had abandoned it.

Dallas leaped across the sacks, sprang down the aisle between the laboratory tables to the radio alcove. Halting here an intent moment, Dallas scanned the control board with its black-handled copper switches. He closed a switch.

The quick hum of a motor followed. Rheostat and synchronizer; he set them carefully. Then, bending close, Dallas watched the transmitter tubes glow into life. He grasped the wave-length dial. What was the dialing of that beam which, projected through the sky two days before, had killed his motor?

There was on the dial a red marking, a tiny dot against the black graduations of the circle. But glimpsing it, the pilot's eyes lit grimly. Retribution was at hand. Merridore's own tools would bring quick vengeance on him. Steadily the dial moved, stopped as the red dot met the control arrow. From the roof came a sharp crackling hiss. The generator hummed with sudden load.

Dallas, striding to the door, gazed upward. High in the air, but almost over Laboratory Hill, circled the plane of Merridore. Sure of his escape he had fled at once. Instead, his plane climbed through the sky in twisting spirals.

Twelve thousand feet above the earth circled the white plane, and still mounting. Then, as Dallas watched, a tenuous thread of vapor trailed from her exhaust—the smoke of unburned fuel. The motor had begun to miss. The radio wave had killed the spark. Her climb flattened, the nose dropped, and she planed downward.

The pilot, watching from the laboratory door, smiled—a smile that was not good to see. Lower the ship sank, gliding at a flat angle that would land her miles out on the white plains of alkali where there was no cover, where she would be seen for miles. Dallas' tension slackened. The murderer of four was trapped.

CHAPTER IX.

CRASHING PLANES.

SUDDENLY he heard the stuttering thunder of a second plane. He whirled. Against the eastern sunrise, pluming out black ropes of smoke from her exhaust, he saw—his own ship! She was faltering too; her wings rocked. The noise of the prop ceased and she dived for the terrain.

Norman! He had seen the plane in which Merridore was fleeing. Thinking it was Dallas' signal, he had taken off. Now, within the radius of the same wave that was bringing down the murderer, his ship was crippled too. And so close above the hills was Norman's flight that he could never make a landing. He would crash!

Instantly Dallas acted. Darting back into the room he pulled the master switch. The crackling hiss above him on the roof died out. Snatching up a cloth that lay beside the motor base, he ran out on the landing field, waved it furiously above his head.

Freed of that paralyzing wave, the

two planes were flying strongly now. Merridore's ship began to climb once more but quickly flattened to a southward course. Norman, close down on the hilltop, saw the fluttering white signal. With deft skill, which the older pilot even through his bitter dismay could not but admire, Norman dived the plane into a forward slip, snapped her level as a wing tip scraped the rough turf of the landing field.

Swift flying seconds and Dallas was beside him. He leaped upon a wing, hurled himself in the empty cockpit of his ship. Snatching the controls, he gunned her down the field. As the plane tore upward at a vicious stalling angle, he turned, cried harshly:

"Merridore!" and pointed to a white blur against the south horizon.

The scream of flying wires, the clamorous drumbeat of exhaust, drowned his words. But Norman understood. Bending out into the propeller wash, he stared menacingly at the white shape far ahead, then past Dallas' shoulder at the air-speed meter on the board.

With the altimeter at a thousand feet, Dallas whipped out of the climb. Speed! He must have speed! The quivering needle flicked to ninety-five; rose steadily. One hundred and ten—one hundred and twenty—still it moved around the dial. One hundred and forty. He glanced up at the plane ahead, looked down. One hundred and sixty, now the needle said. He cut in the supercharger; riched the mixture. Sometimes that would help. The needle touched one hundred and eighty. At three miles a minute, he hurled through the sky. And the white plane was dropping back!

The pilot's lips twisted in a crooked grin. Five minutes—ten, at most—would bring Merridore in reach. He released the throttle, unhooked his sub machine gun from its slings, passed it back to Norman. Next the feed drums, each with fifty rounds of nickeled cartridges. He was ready.

But the ship ahead was rising. She corkscrewed up in ever-tightening spirals, almost hanging on her prop. Dallas frowned, then laughed coldly. A fight for altitude. Well, his ship could climb too.

Now he was beneath Merridore. He banked, and as though following a clock-tower stair, his plane nosed steeply through the sky.

He gained. At ten thousand feet the white plane was not five thousand feet above, off to the right. Her shadow touched the banks of cumulous white clouds near by. Twelve thousand feet; then fifteen thousand. Now the air was blue, and knifelike in its chill. A frosty mist gleamed on the cowl shield. Dallas' hands were numb and his feet, in the metal stirrups of the rudder, ached with cold.

Eighteen thousand. Then nineteen! Dallas felt a giddy numbness creeping on him. The motor sputtered. He bent down to tinker with the altitude control, and straightening up, could scarcely breathe. It was like a hand throttling his wind. His arms were leaden. Again and the engine dropped her rhythmic beat.

Painfully he moved the stick ahead, flattened the angle of climb. The altimeter needle had crossed twenty thousand. A dull thumping in his breast. His heart was going wrong. How—much more—altitude? He glanced at the white plane. Smoke was spitting from her stacks; she faltered. And suddenly she fell a hundred feet. Dallas' hands were clenched so that the nails bit deep into his palms. He did not know it. He was watching the white plane as it drew closer—closer as he climbed.

It was less than a hundred feet above him now and milling a slow, unstable course. He must climb that last hundred. Dallas pulled back the stick

slowly—then with fierce anger. The controls were loose. In the rare air, four miles above the earth, his ship had found her ceiling. Twenty-three thousand feet, the altimeter said. The motor rhythm changed again; became a labored thud. The "lube" was freezing in the lines.

Slowly the two ships circled; wounded eagles waiting for the last taloned grip of death. A minute slowly passed. Another dragged on, carrying the agony of years. Dallas felt the salty taste of blood on his lips. His lungs were going. Well, he—would—stay—until—the—last——

A HAND roughly thrust his shoulder. Dizzily he turned. In the rear cockpit Norman had stood up, bending forward against the slip stream. His hand was on his ripcord ring. He leaned close across the turtleback and Dallas heard his voice—far away and dull it seemed.

"I'm going—to bale out—lighten the ship. Get Merridore!"

The pilot swung. His dimming vision showed a figure, that was Norman, diving past the fuselage. Below, a mushroom of white bloomed; and sank into the clouds. The plane, relieved of half her load, lifted. The air stream whistled louder through the rigging.

Dallas wiped a hand across his blurring eyes, stared. Then, teeth clenched in a last marshaling of vital force, he pulled the stick back, pointing his ship's nose for the wavering wing tip of the white plane. His vision blurred again. An abyss of seconds.

Then the ripping crash of fabric and wing strut. A shock that battered him against the instrument board, snapping his web safety belt like paper. The stick cracked against his knees. A sear of blinding light. Then he was whirling earthward in a tightening spin.

But at the lower levels there was air! He breathed it in deep. A spin, he could take her out.

Below him streaked a scarlet comet, plumed with black jets of smoke—diving straight and trellised in bright flame. The last ride of the sinister Merridore!

A moment Dallas glimpsed its course. Then it was hidden in a mad churning of earth and sky. The wild revolutions of his plane recalled Dallas to his peril. He had no chute—he must level off—quickly! He tried the stick. It failed. A forward throttle gave no hint of power. His prop was gone; sheared off the crash. The rudder answered.

Again he worked the stick. Through a whirling maze he saw the right wing fin move. But the control wire to the left aileron had snapped. Dallas' thoughts spurred on. A dozen heartbeats—and his missions for the service would be ended. If he could bring her level! But with no ailerons the hope was futile. Yet he still had altitude. Suddenly the flyer stiffened.

Leaving the stick ahead of neutral and the rudder straight, Dallas climbed up on the seat, out on the wing, picked up the loose control wire. The wind tore at him and the sing of the harried wire shrieked death. On to the crippled aileron.

He fumbled for the hinge, grasped it, spliced the loose wire. He turned; crawled back. Somehow he was in the cockpit again.

Cautiously he pushed the stick down. The plane shivered; weakened struts and cross brace groaned; but at last, straightening from the spin, she fell into a dive. The pilot waited. Then when the air speed made it safe, Dallas eased into a glide that flattened as the speed increased.

He came in dead stick on the wastes of alkali that lie east of the hills. Landing gears crunched through the floor stays—the battered ship nosed over. But Dallas crawled from the fuselage and, staggering to his feet, smiled.

For he had seen chugging across the prairie Kingsley's car, and, standing in the seat beside the driver, waving his helmet wildly, was Norman!

The car came close and stopped. Dallas, like a drunken man, weaved toward it.

"We got him, Harry!" Dallas cried, half delirious. "Say, you missed the whoopee! Wing walking—I stopped her up there at ten thousand feet—got out to make repairs——"

Dallas halted. A stranger was behind Norman, a big man with piercing eyes—Black, the big chief from Washington.

"I hope you didn't stop your ship in traffic, Dallas," he said mildly, glancing at the battered plane. "But she rather looks as though you had. Anyway, the man that bumped you, or you hit, is done for. And *that's* what I came from Washington to see about."

SIX o'clock that night found Dallas in the Homestead Hospital, arguing with Doctor Holland. His was a complete recovery, Dallas said. The doctor disagreed.

"You'd better give those fractured ribs a chance to knit. Might mean lung inflammation, pleurisy, unless you do."

Dallas sat straighter, groaned.

"It's too darned lonesome here. Where's everybody?"

The door swung to admit Black, Carrier, and Norman.

Dallas scowled. "Well, I thought you'd left me flat. Doctor Holland won't let me get up. Not for a week, he says. But I'll fool *him*."

"Why worry, chief?" soothed Black. "The Mobile quarters won't be ready for *two* weeks."

"The—what?" Dallas' voice trailed off.

"The Mobile quarters," Black repeated. "A new division of the air intelligence; offices at Mobile. A wild pilot is slated for division chief. I guess you'll be surprised—Ace Dallas is the new chief's name."

"Ace—Dallas!" the pilot echoed faintly.

"You said it," answered Black. "That air nut stopped a war in Africa, brought in an international murderer, and tied a broken ship together in the sky. He has *something* coming, don't you think?"

Dallas was silent a long time. He stared at Black in stark amazement. Finally he grinned.

"Well, chief," he said, "as one chief to another, I think this new chief's just a lucky bum!"

SIX TO ONE

A murder-mystery serial

By GORDON LORD

Keep up with this exciting story!

BEFORE COLUMBUS

EXAMINATION of a piece of American chestnut tree found by a well driller in New Jersey recently showed evidence that the chestnut tree grew in New Jersey sixty million years ago. The wood was only several feet below the ground and, unlike most fossils, it was well preserved and the texture of its fiber was plainly visible. This announcement was made by the State department of conservation and development and the piece was placed in the State Museum. The wood was found in the formation known to geologists as Englishtown sand.

Borealis Tries Again

By John Talbot Lynch

COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

CHAPTER I.

HOT TEMPERS.

EVERY dog has his day. And Aurora Borealis, once the hero of every greyhound-racing fan from New York to San Francisco, apparently had had his. In the opinion of the worldly-wise folk who followed the game closely, he was all washed up.

Never again, they protested, would he sweep to victory across the finish line, with the cheers of the crowd booming in his ears, with his lyrical name trumpeting from every one's lips. Never again—according to the wiseacres—would Borealis win a cup.

But he still had one faithful admirer, one stanch backer. And that was his one-time trainer, "Mickey" Bradshaw, the blue-eyed, carefree youth who had once taken him to England, where he romped away with the famous Waterloo Cup, winning over the best of them by a good length.

Mickey Bradshaw was standing near the track-fence in Celtic Park, Long Island. Borealis was parading at the rear of seven competitors—sleek, slender, muscular—the gloss of his red-gold hair accentuated by the glare of the lights.

Until the pack was placed in the starting traps, Bradshaw did not become aware of the fact that Borealis was an outsider in the betting.

He had been absent from home several months, drumming up business for the Ridgewell Brass Works of New Jersey, a growing concern in which Bradshaw, Sr., held the controlling in-

terest. Consequently, he had been too busy to keep tabs on the fortunes of Borealis, of whom he had hopes of becoming part owner.

On every side of him now, people were busily engaged in the lively sport of oral betting. Right by his side a tall, handsome, garishly attired man was challenging all and sundry with: "Twenty to one against Borealis! Twenty to one against Aurora Borealis!"

Bradshaw took an instant dislike to the fellow. He sized him up quickly as a loud-mouthed braggart and cynic.

"Who'll take it?" the man pursued. "What say, Carey?"

"Nothing doing, Manson," declined the man addressed as Carey. "I'm off Borealis for life."

The better went on shouting, "Twenty to one against Borealis. Twenty to one——"

A trifle dumfounded, Bradshaw tapped Manson on the shoulder, and questioned him .

"Did you say 'against'?"

"You got me right, kid," answered Manson. "Want to take me up?"

"If you mean it."

"Course I mean it—what d' ya think? How much?"

"Fifteen dollars."

"Chicken feed!" snorted Manson. "Can't ya double that?"

"Not just now."

"Well, you're on, kid, you're on," Manson agreed. "And just to show you I'm a pretty good sport, I wish you luck!"

On Bradshaw's left, a dapper old gentleman commented on the bet to a gangling youth.

"Beats the band," he said, "how there's always somebody ready to back that Borealis, don't it?"

"Why not?" returned the youth. "Borealis was once a great dog. He may come back yet."

"Was he really as good as they say?"

"Well, he once won a Waterloo Cup in England. And shortly afterward, Frank Thompson refused all of five thousand for him."

"That may be," articulated the old man. "But if it's true, it's a darned shame that Borealis can be bought now almost for a song."

Several ridges formed on Bradshaw's forehead, indicating a troubled state of mind. It hurt him to think that Borealis' lights had been dimmed. But his faith in the dog's greatness remained unshaken.

The starter's gun cracked. And the greyhounds—fierce-eyed, eager, yelping—whirled swiftly from the boxes. Two female hounds took the lead.

Nine seconds later, Borealis flashed through the rear lines, and the vast audience whooped wildly when it saw him hurtle spectacularly past the front rank.

A broad smile illuminated Bradshaw's clear, finely molded features. His blood tingled in his veins.

"There he goes, Manson!" he called to the better. "The old racing fool isn't all washed up yet, by any means."

"The hell he ain't!" Manson growled. "I'm still bettin' against him."

Skimming over the ground like a red hawk, Borealis promptly separated himself from the pack by a good length. At the halfway mark he increased his lead by a neck, and looked sufficiently strong to continue at top speed. For the first time in many months, his musical name came booming from a thousand throats.

But he wavered suddenly—all but dropped in his tracks. A groan of disappointment emanated from certain portions of the crowd, while the backers of a dog called, I'm Coming, split the air with wild ovations.

The entire pack shot past Borealis. I'm Coming beat him to the finish line by six lengths.

"Well, kid," Manson observed, "here's where you're out fifteen bucks."

"That's nothing much to worry about," Bradshaw smiled. "I'll make it up some other time, dead easy."

"Figuring on making it on Borealis?"

"No one else but. I'm convinced he's still a threat to the best of 'em."

Manson gave vent to a short laugh—a sardonic, somewhat contemptuous laugh.

"Listen," he said. "Take a wise man's advice and quit backing Borealis. He's all shot, that fellow. Anybody who knows a thing about dogs will tell you he can't ever come back. I know," he added. "I ain't been followin' the game two or three years for nothin'."

TAKING leave of his chance acquaintance, and never thinking that he would meet him again, Bradshaw went in search of Frank Thompson, Borealis' owner, fully determined to reassume charge of the dog and lead him back to the paths of racing glory.

Thompson, he was informed, had quit the field and taken Borealis with him. So he decided to defer his project until the morrow, and spend the evening at the races.

Next morning, toward noon, he walked up to the Thompson home, an immense brownstone house, situated on the outskirts of Jersey City. Thompson met him at the door. He was a tall, huge-headed man, rather hostile of eye and mien.

"Well, Mickey, what's the nature of this visit?"

"I dropped in to talk about Borealis. I want to take charge of him again, and help him stage a comeback."

Thompson laughed sardonically. "You're dreaming, young man. Borealis is all done as a racer."

"I'm sick of hearing that cry," Bradshaw protested. "Borealis is still there. I'll prove it if I get the chance."

"Why, then, has he been losing steadily, if he's still there?"

"I can't say for sure; but I think he's probably gone stale from overwork, or possibly overtraining."

"And you think you could whip him back into shape, eh?"

"I know I could."

"Well, you won't have a chance to."

"Why not?"

"Because I sold him two hours ago."

Bradshaw's eyes flashed. A curl of cutting contempt formed on his lips.

"Sold the best dog you ever had, eh?"

"Yes, damn him!" Thompson fairly snapped. "I parted with him for a measly fifty bucks. And he's lucky I didn't let him have a bullet, considering all he's cost me these past six months."

Bradshaw's contempt expressed itself now in words—hot, lashing words. His fists doubled. Respect for Thompson's age was the only influence that held them in restraint.

"Keep cool," Thompson urged. "Why go off the handle over it?"

"You know why," Bradshaw fired back. "You promised me an interest in him six months ago, didn't you?"

"Oh! So that's it, eh?"—caustically. "So that's why you're so fond of Borealis?"

"No, Thompson. You're well aware of the fact that I like him for himself, not for the money and cups he's capable of winning. Whom did you sell him to?"

"I'll see you in Hades before I'll tell you. You're too danged huffy."

"Do you want me to forget you're an old man?"

"I'll have you understand that I'm still young enough to knock your impudent block off!" Thompson retorted.

Whereupon he seized a baseball bat, and tested his aim on Bradshaw's head.

Bradshaw ducked; the bat swung in his direction again. He had to depend on the speed of his feet to keep his head intact, as he could not very well

retaliate with his fists, out of consideration for Thompson's age.

But the encounter was short-lived. It was quashed by a curly-haired young lady who rushed out from the house and stationed herself between Bradshaw and the bat wielder.

"What's the matter, Mickey?"

"Why, we're arguing over Borealis," Bradshaw told her. "Your father won't tell me whom he sold him to."

"What do you want to know for?"

"I want to find him. I'll buy him if I can and get him into shape for a few good races. Do you know who's got him?"

"Yes. A fellow named Richie——"

"Muriel!" Thompson warned her. "Muriel!"

But Muriel—a chip of the old block apparently—had her own way, and told Bradshaw to look up Richie, whom he would find "somewhere" in the poor quarter.

"I hope you get Borealis back, Mickey. It was mean of dad to sell him."

"Thanks!" Bradshaw smiled. "I'll never rest till he's under my wing again."

CHAPTER II.

BATTERED AROUND.

POOR Borealis! What an unspeakable comedown he had suffered! What ingratitude had been shown him in return for the many fine prizes, including the coveted Waterloo Cup, which his matchless feet had won for that violent, truculent, impatient man, Frank Thompson!

Borealis had been treated ignominiously. He had even been insulted. He felt very keenly the change from the luxurious life he had known to the miserable, unsanitary life that was strange to him.

The place he came to was permeated with unpleasant odors. It was a grassless back yard. There he was tethered securely. There he lived three weeks, the unwilling playfellow of street arabs, whom he detested because of their unwashed hands and clothes. The glossy luster vanished from his coat, leaving him looking not unlike a back-alley mongrel.

But there came a day when his fortune took a decided turn. A group of urchins from a neighboring locality wandered into the yard, accompanied by half a dozen dogs of various breeds, mostly the half-caste variety.

Upon sighting Borealis, two of the strange animals bristled their thick necks and made for him with evil intent. In the ensuing scrimmage, Borealis' tether snapped in the vicinity of his lean neck. In a flash, his fangs engraved a seam in the ribs of an antagonist.

Richie emerged from the back door—stout, swarthy, bleary-eyed—a heavy razor strop in his hand. He invoked a yowl of pain from Borealis with a withering smack of the stiff leather; then turned his attention to the invading pack.

Borealis, realizing that freedom was his for the taking, leaped toward a high board fence in the rear of the yard.

The run he took in preparation for the leap was inadequate. And consequently, he failed to negotiate the barrier. He turned toward the entrance, Richie and the strange dogs harrying him, but found that the entrance was blocked by the urchins. The dogs swirled about him; attacked him from every side at long range.

Borealis had never fought a battle of teeth. But he was fighting now like a veteran—ripping, slashing, snapping—scoring throat and rib with upward drives, and snarling viciously whenever the fangs of an antagonist grazed his hide.

Once more he swept toward the board fence—the pack, the man, and the children howling behind him. He

got a clean, swift, unbroken run. He cleared the barrier as neatly, as gracefully, as an expert pole vaulter.

Purple with anger, the man who had failed to win his affection turned upon the street arabs.

"Who brought them dogs here? Hey?"

"We dunno. They just *came*."

"Uh-uhh-hh!" His pudgy face was contorted ludicrously. "I'll wring your necks for you! I'll give you all a beating if I lose Borealis!"

BEING free now, Borealis very soon found out that he had transferred himself from the frying pan to the fire. At Richie's he had had regular meals, if not the careful grooming and clean bedding to which he was accustomed. But now he had neither grub nor home. Nor was he welcome anywhere in the great city.

His unpresentable appearance was a detriment to him. People with whom he endeavored to form a friendship put him off with curses; and not a few discouraged his advances with an inhuman larrup in the ribs.

Once he invaded the back yard of a prosperous-looking mansion, where he separated two chow dogs from their evening meal. He ate ravenously, paying no attention to the clamorous resentment of the chows.

But he was forced to evacuate in a hurry when a can of steaming water—which he evaded—came like a flying cascade through a window.

A little over three weeks of this sort of life transformed Borealis into a bum. He spent his days wandering from alley to alley. He depended for subsistence upon the ubiquitous alley cans, and became so lean and gaunt that his ribs assumed the cast of crude washboards.

Now came another change in his fortune. If he had been able to read the newspapers, he would have learned all about it. The city was up in arms against him, on account of his pilfering. Dog catchers were hot on his trail. Certain death awaited him in the canines' execution house—an inglorious, ignominious ending for a star of dogdom.

HIS wanderings brought him one sunny afternoon into a short business street. He had been there previously. All at once he became aware of the fact that the place was familiar to him. Having spent most of his time in Ridgewell, prior to his transfer to Richie's house, he knew practically nothing about Jersey City.

But Bradshaw had often brought him to this street, in his sea-green sedan, and stopped in front of an art store in which he took orders for the shop.

Borealis now saw that store. He knew it was the one Bradshaw traded with, because he remembered seeing an angora cat in the window—which cat was there now. Also, a green sedan was standing in front. It looked to Borealis like Bradshaw's car, and he came to the conclusion that Bradshaw must be in the store.

He trotted slowly toward the sedan, while two men, who had just alighted from a cagelike truck, farther up the street, followed him stealthily. The men were official dog catchers. Each was armed with a long pole, to the tip of which was attached a cup-shaped net. Borealis halted; examined the sedan critically. And with a swift, sudden movement, one of the stalkers cast a net over his head. He swept back, snarling; whirled about on his hind legs.

Then, as he braced himself for a dash, the other catcher's net enveloped him, and he was hustled off to the cagelike car, into which he was forcefully shooed.

"Nice work, boss," commented one of his captors. "He's about the speediest cuss I ever tried to nab."

"I'll say he's fast," agreed the other. "But I'm too old a hand at the game to be outwitted by any of them.

"Jump in," he added. "We got to give this bird the gas right away."

As they slithered aboard, a gigantic truck, laden heavily with bananas, came lumbering up the street. It was a fast-moving vehicle. It bore on both sides the name, "J. E. Richie," and was being piloted by the very man in whose filthy back yard Borealis had had to endure three fretful weeks.

As it drew near the dog wagon, it lurched violently over an excavation, and a hefty bunch of bananas, pitching clear over the hood, fell in the path of a rear wheel. The truck swerved sharply as the wheel passed over the fruit.

The latticed railing caught a corner of the dog-wagon's side boards, and ripped a wide orifice in the wire-net covering, under which Borealis was incarcerated.

Ever sensitive to opportunity, the vagrant greyhound was quick to take advantage of the present one. He vaulted like a cat through the opening, and landed nicely on his front feet. The dog catchers saw him vanish round a convenient corner—and how they cursed his luck!

A SANGUINE argument ensued—a violent controversy from which Richie gathered that the escaped vagrant was Borealis. He was told that Borealis' owner was as bad as Borealis himself, and that the S. P. C. A. was endeavoring to learn his identity.

This bit of news Richie received with a gulp. He knew from actual experience that the S. P. C. A. was a good friend to maltreated animals, and consequently, he kept quiet regarding his ownership of Borealis.

The dog catchers jotted down his name, address, and license number, and moved on. Richie hung around, his puffed, bleary eyes scanning the vicinity for a possible glimpse of the dog. Presently his scouting eyes were rewarded.

For Borealis, following a conviction that the coast was clear, emerged from an alley, walked boldly to Bradshaw's sedan, and placed his front paws on the lowered door panel.

"Damn him!" Richie hissed to his helper. "I'll kill that dog," he continued, unbuckling his belt. "I'll teach him something!"

Borealis saw him coming; saw the ready-for-action belt. The belt was wide, thick and heavy. It reminded him of the razor strop, but it struck no fear into his heart.

In place of scuttling to safety, as might be expected of him, he spread his legs on the sidewalk, and awaited the atttack unflinchingly. His great brown eyes were hostile. The hatred which he felt in his heart for this ungentle man was reflected in them.

With a whistling whir, the belt cut an arc in the air. And Borealis, who had become an expert in the art of dodging, avoided the blow easily. The leather moved again. Borealis swooped up to meet it, caught it as it begun to descend, and succeeded in wresting it from Richie's hand.

Clever work that. And daring work! It argued strongly in favor of reasoning power—which power, people will tell you, no dumb animal possesses.

Richie endeavored to retrieve the belt. But he promptly abandoned the venture when Borealis threatened him with bared fangs. His eye fell upon a stick which was near by, and he reached for it.

Borealis leaped toward him, intent apparently upon slashing his hand. And just then, Bradshaw appeared in the door of the art shop, and checked the dog's advance, with one word.

"Damn him!" Richie bristled. "I'm going to get him!"

He suddenly went speechless when

he saw Borealis and Bradshaw breast to breast, like emotional lovers; each pommeling the other in hearty fashion, and Bradshaw's white shirt front taking clouded impressions of Borealis' dirty paws.

"You own this dog?"

"Yes," Richie responded surlily. "I bought him some time ago."

Bradshaw smiled. He had anticipated some difficulty in the purchase of his hero; but now he saw that it would be an easy and inexpensive undertaking.

During the preceding six weeks he had called upon scores of people named Richie, and combed the streets in search of the reported vagrant. But he had made no headway whatever.

"How much do you want for him?" he questioned bluntly.

Richie's bulging eyes dilated. "You want to buy him?"

"I'll give you fifty dollars for him, if you sign him over to me right now."

"Sold!" Richie said.

The deal was closed.

CHAPTER III.

THE TESTING CHASE.

ON the way back to Ridgewell, Bradshaw dropped into Frank Thompson's, a smile of triumph on his face.

Thompson frowned ominously upon Borealis. His curly-haired daughter gathered the dog up in her arms and hugged him warmly. For the first time during his acquaintance with the girl, Bradshaw became conscious of her beauty and budding womanhood.

"Well," he observed, "I just came to tell you that Borealis is going to try again. He's going to show what a mistake you made in parting with him."

"No, he won't," Thompson asserted. "But he's going to show you what a blamed, sentimental idiot you are."

"Would you bet on that?"

"I'd bet anything on it."

"Sure, now? You'd bet *anything?*"

"Yes—*anything!*"

"Good! Then we'll make a bet, and you'll have to keep your word."

Bradshaw smiled; winked to Muriel who was still rumpling Borealis' rose ears. Then, to Thompson:

"Here's the wager. If I win, you'll walk barefooted round Jersey City. I'll do the hoofing if I lose."

"Do you want to make a holy show of me, you rascal? Have you no regard for my dignity?"

"I can't help your dignity," Bradshaw went on. "You said you'd bet *anything,* didn't you? Are you going to go back on your own word?"

"No, by heavens!" Thompson was a trifle aroused. "I'll stick to my guns, young man! I'll accept your fool bet, and have the pleasure of seeing *you* pay it!"

BACK once again in Ridgewell—back with the old pal he loved—Borealis received an immediate introduction to a much-needed bath. He appeared to be in excellent health, albeit his loss of poundage. There was a light in his eyes that bespoke a fighting spirit—a newly kindled light that was a banquet to the eyes of his new master.

A month of summer went by—and one more. Borealis, the supposedly washed-up athlete, rounded into condition in a decidedly satisfactory manner.

During that period Bradshaw received encouragement from no one save Muriel Thompson. She and he constituted the sum total of Borealis' faithful friends.

The three of them were sitting one evening near a little brook at the foot of a hillside, when the barking of dogs suddenly disturbed the peace they were enjoying.

Borealis jumped up quickly, his eyes and ears alert, and went off on a sudden through the autumn-tinged under-

brush. His master opened his mouth to recall him. But when he saw what was taking place on the hillside, he urged him on to action.

In the west the autumn sun was setting, round as a disk and apple-red. Under the fading, lingering light of it, the grassy, sparsely arbored slope shone like some fantastic fairyland of blazing gold and bronze, and soothing, shimmering green.

Two men were standing on the summit of the hill. Far down the slope, not more than a hundred yards from where Bradshaw and the girl were stationed, a brace of greyhounds was hot on the heels of a swift hare.

The quarry was evidently in the pink of condition; it had the nimbleness of a chamois, and greater sped than an antelope. Going northward across the hill, and veering obliquely upward, it managed to maintain a safe lead on its pursuers, both of whom were abreast, but widely separated.

With one hound on its right flank, it found itself in a desperate situation; for that dog's position meant certain death for it if it essayed an upgrade drive. A hare usually steers uphill when pursued by its age-old, fleet-footed enemy. The upgrade chase is decidedly in its favor—that's why.

The hound on its right, a lanky, speckled animal, was apparently wise to this, for he refused to relinquish his position. Yet, when the quarry doubled back, and passed between himself and Borealis, he failed to make the kill, despite the favorable opportunity presented.

He checked himself very skillfully, though, and described a sweeping uphill semicircle which served one admirable purpose—that of preventing the fugitive from chartering the course he wanted.

Borealis, too, executed a neat turn. The other hound ran himself out of the chase by taking a tumble in a cluster of boulders and bushes, and going hobbledehoy down a steep ravine.

Coming direct to where Bradshaw and the girl stood, the hare wrenched backward suddenly, then struck out toward the crest of the hill—straight up.

Its pursuers lost all of fifty yards, as both traveled at top speed, and neither expected the fugitive to double back between them, as it had previously done. They checked themselves simultaneously. Both went galloping up the slope, neck and neck.

Bradshaw was all smiles. The heart within him was singing. "Gosh, Muriel, I'm glad this thing came off."

"Why, Mickey?"

"Because it has proved to me," he told her, "that Borealis has come back—that a lay-off was the only thing he needed."

SWINGING up the grade now in masterful fashion, Borealis kept his nose—but only his nose—in front of his rival. Not once did he betray a sign of unsteadiness. Not for a fleeting moment was his gaze diverted from the bounding quarry, nor his concentration slackened.

The speckled hound was fiery, vicious, jealous—manifestly resentful of Borealis' intrusion. Coming close to him, he exhibited his feelings by snapping at him, and cleaving his ear at the tip.

Borealis retaliated. He missed a drive intended for the eyes, but scored with a glancing slash across the shoulder. Though both kept running, their pace was diminished to such an extent that the brown fugitive managed to escape in a near-by thicket.

The men at the summit, neither of whom had moved during the exhibition, called the speckled dog to order, and rained a shower of rocks on Borealis.

Bradshaw took leave of the girl; rushed up the hill as speedily as the grade permitted. His eyes were blaz-

ing. His heart was full of fear for Borealis.

No cessation in the barrage of rocks followed his arrival on the scene. He was not a little surprised to note that one of the assailants was Manson, the fellow who had won fifteen dollars from him that night in Celtic Park.

"Lay off!" he admonished. "Do you want to hurt him?"

"Not by a damn sight," Manson laughed. "We won't hurt him—we'll kill him!"

"If you fire another one——"

"Here it goes," Manson cut in. And another missile whirred through the air at Borealis, who dodged it with remarkable agility.

Bradshaw wasn't given to fighting on slight provocation. But this occasion was provocative enough for a small war, since the bone of contention was a valuable dog. He whipped into Manson, shooting straight for the chin.

Manson avoided the blow with the ease of an expert ringman, and came back with a sizzling punch on the "button"—a punch that sent Bradshaw to the ground.

"Tough luck, sweetheart," Manson smirked. He was wearing a cocksure, cynical smile. "Got enough?"

"No! Not half enough!"

"Then come and get more," Manson grinned, cutting a caper with his feet. "I used to be an amateur heavy, old scout. I guess I'm still there with the old haymaker."

Bradshaw regained his feet. And there on the hilltop, under the fading light of the setting sun, he traded blow for blow with Manson. When his head cleared, he observed that his opponent was a trifle flabby about the middle, and this spot he determined to concentrate upon. He attacked ferociously; sunk his fists, with all the power at his command, into Manson's midriff. Manson wilted. He bent over, his hands guarding his solar plexus. Bradshaw's artillery aimed for his head and chin, and leveled him.

"Tough luck, kid," Bradshaw mimicked. "I used to be an amateur welterweight myself, old scout. I guess I'm still there with the old haymaker."

Returning to the brook, Bradshaw bathed Borealis' ear. He was in high spirits—which condition was the result of Borealis' engagement rather than his own lively work-out.

"Supposing he had got hurt bad, Muriel?"

"Isn't that cut bad enough? Won't that set him back a while?"

"It's nothing," he assured her. "Nothing at all to worry about.

"To-morrow," he added, "I'm going to get him entered. And just to show that I've got confidence in him, I'll try to match him with a few of the best."

NEXT day Borealis was booked for a four-hundred-and-ninety-five-yard hurdle race. The recording clerk drew Bradshaw's attention to the fact that Blue Lance, one of the three other hounds listed for the same contest, was a formidable foe in flat races, and a supposedly unbeatable hurdler.

Bradshaw glanced over Blue Lance's roll of victories. He seemed pleased with it. He thought Blue Lance an undeniably worthy opponent for Borealis.

That afternoon, as he rode through Jersey City, he saw Manson standing on a street corner. He steered his sedan toward the curb, halted right in front of Manson, and made an inquiry regarding his physical condition. Manson snarled. The midriff battering of the previous evening had apparently coarsened his temper.

"By the way," Bradshaw pursued, "how about another bet on Borealis? I'd like to win back that money I lost to you."

"He's going to run again, is he?"

"He was booked to-day. One of his best opponents is called Blue Lance."

Manson smiled; gave vent to a throaty laugh.

"That's a good one," he remarked. "Borealis has about as much chance to whip Blue Lance——" ·

He broke off suddenly and stared at Borealis, who had just then risen on the tonneau seat, his snout tilted upward solicitously.

"Say," he queried, "isn't that the pup you lost your temper over last night?"

"That's him," he was informed. "That's Aurora Borealis himself. And me—I'm his owner and trainer, Michael Bradshaw."

Manson's eyelids flickered. A look of concern—a look that bespoke disturbed equilibrium—engraved itself for a moment on his visage.

"What say on the bet?" Bradshaw pumped. "I'll take you on at ten to one this time."

"No, thanks," Manson declined, turning on his heel. "I'm through bettin' against deadheads. And, anyway, I placed all I could on Blue Lance yesterday. Several hundred, if you'd like to know."

CHAPTER IV.

STREAKING FLASHES.

THE ensuing few days were a period of anxiety for Bradshaw. Once he discovered a chunk of poisoned meat near Borealis' kennel. And on another occasion, when he was crossing a street with his greyhound companion, a light speed truck almost succeeded in running the dog down.

Some one, apparently, was interested in Borealis to the extent of incapacitating him, and thus preventing him from staging his comeback.

Bradshaw was quick to sense this. He had had encounters galore with shady gamblers, and was fully conversant with the surreptitious tricks their ignoble profession called for.

It was with some relief, accordingly, that he stepped aboard the ferryboat with Borealis and Muriel Thompson, and set out for New York. Long since, the sun had set behind the metropolis. Now a vast wreath of skyscrapers' lights loomed through the gloom.

The evening was snappy, yet delightful. There had been a stiff breeze that morning—the tail end of some far-off storm—and it had left the water between New York and Jersey City in a choppy, surly state.

The ferryboat was scarce halfway across when some unobserved persons showered an avalanche of booming firecrackers under the feet of the passengers occupying the bow, among whom were Borealis and his escorts.

Pandemonium ensued—a veritable panic, in fact. Women screamed hysterically. General disorder threatened the well-being of the frail and delicate. A two-hundred pound damsel flopped into Bradshaw's arms, causing him to lose his grip on Borealis' leash.

But he dropped her on the deck—and none too gently—when Muriel's voice, cutting clear through and above the din, communicated a startling message.

"Borealis! Borealis!" the girl shouted. "He's gone! He's been thrown overboard!"

Realizing now that the panic was an invention of Borealis' enemies, Bradshaw leaped to the starboard side rail. Beneath was the greyhound, hugging the passing boat closely, and struggling hard against the sucking current. It looked as though he was bound to be sucked under the gigantic propellers—and crushed to death.

There seemed to be only one sensible thing to do for the dog. That Bradshaw did, without thinking twice about it. He rushed back toward the stern, swung over the side rail, dumped himself in the chill, angry flood beside Aurora Borealis, and grabbed him.

Setting his feet against the boat, Bradshaw managed to sweep clear of the great propelling wheel, but got drawn into the swirling, foamy trail behind it.

Muriel saw him sink, and she felt her heart beating with violence. But her fears died suddenly when she saw him rise again and strike out for calmer waters, with Borealis pawing along by his side.

The friendly passengers, now over their momentary panic, helped them aboard.

Bradshaw's first consideration was for Borealis, whose lights of stardom he hoped to see rekindled again this evening. A dry off was first in order, with everybody manifesting a willingness to assist.

The female passengers offered their inadequate handkerchiefs. A deck attendant rustled up a warm old overcoat, in which Borealis was wrapped comfortably.

BACK in the stern, a big policeman in plain clothes was putting two surly looking fellows through the third degree. Bradshaw moved down toward them. He was beginning to wonder if Manson hadn't had something to do with the attempted drowning.

"Come now, fellows," the cop was urging, "what was the big idea? Why did you light those crackers and fling that greyhound overboard? Speak up!"

The men were acting like dummies. Each one appeared to be desirous of the other making a clean breast of it. Bradshaw collared one of them—the one he considered the weaker willed. He pressed his knuckles against his throat and threatened him with suffocation.

"Out with it!" he snarled. "Tell the officer why Manson ordered you to get rid of Borealis."

This was a bold stroke. It was only a guess, too. But it served to produce the desired result.

"If you know it was Manson, I'll cough up," the cornered one surrendered. "Manson paid us for this. He's got a lot of dough bet on Oldham's dog, Blue Lance, an' he was afraid Borealis would whip him, since he showed him up one night out in Ridgewell."

"For heaven's sake!" Bradshaw was very much surprised. "So that speckled dog was Blue Lance, eh?"

"Yes; that was him. An' that was Oldham what was with Manson that evening," answered the hired one. "Manson didn't know who you was then. He didn't reco'nize Borealis, neither."

Bradshaw shook the fellow's hand; thanked him for the information. He was well satisfied with the way things had turned out—even though he was all wet.

"Ain't you goin' to press charges against these guys?" asked the cop.

"I'm not," Bradshaw told him. "These poor eggs didn't really know the value of Borealis. And Manson—well, he'll be separated from a few sheckles this evening; and that's punishment enough, I guess, for a braggart."

BOREALIS was in the starting pen—wild-eyed, yelping, wiggling—anxiously awaiting the call to action. Bradshaw was near the fence, attired in an evening suit which he borrowed from a friend in New York. Muriel Thompson was by his side. Manson was near by, talking sulkily to Mr. Oldham, owner of the crack hurdler, Blue Lance.

Off went the gun. Out from the pen sprang four diminutive ponies, all in good trim. Blue Lance got away to a good start; took the first barrier like the master he was. Borealis struck out bravely, boldly—sure of step and wide of leap. At the second hurdle he caught Blue Lance. Halfway over the

next flat stretch, he won first place by a head.

"Do you think he'll really make it, Mickey? Do you really——"

"I know it, girl; I *know* it! He's right this time. And that means a barefoot stroll for your sweet-tempered papa!"

No one had bet a cent on Borealis. But now, as he sped over the flat stretches in his old-time form, and swept over the boards as beautifully and bravely as an Irish hunting horse, it seemed that every soul in Celtic Park was desirous of backing him.

From nearly every throat and lip his poetic name was trumpeting. And almost every heart that beat took him into itself, so stirring was his gallant comeback. His star had fallen. Now it was shining again—shining as brightly as that meteoric phenomenon from which he derived his name.

He held his lead grimly; flashed across the finish line with a good length between himself and Blue Lance. The fans applauded him. His victory pleased even the backers of his rivals.

Next day an old gentleman with a truculent eye was seen parading barefooted in Jersey City. The sidewalks were hot. Everybody in town seemed to be out shopping. All of which meant misery for the barefooted man.

At a certain corner Bradshaw hailed him. The young man was sitting in his car with Aurora Borealis and Muriel, a triumphant smile on his visage.

"Jump in, *father*. We've got your shoes here."

"Where do you get that 'father' stuff, tell me?"

"Ask Muriel," Bradshaw said smilingly.

The young lady exhibited a dazzling diamond ring—which was more eloquent than words.

"I'm licked," Thompson admitted, his eyes softening. "I guess I'd better take the 'back seat' right now."

Just Shopping

First Stenographer: "I'm so tired."

Second Ditto: "Do you want any new shoes?"

"No."

"Neither do I, so let's go into this store and have a rest while we try on a few pairs."

Away from Home

The old gentleman felt very sorry for the tramp.

"Goodness!" he gasped. "And you say you are fifteen thousand miles from home?"

"That's right, sir," answered the tramp, hopefully.

"And where is your home?"

"Australia."

"Dear me! Take this, my good man. And how do you expect to get back?"

The man looked hard at the five-cent piece in his hand.

"Well, if I don't do better than this," he said thoughtfully, "I suppose I'll have to walk!"

Simply Priceless

The auctioneer held up a battered fiddle.

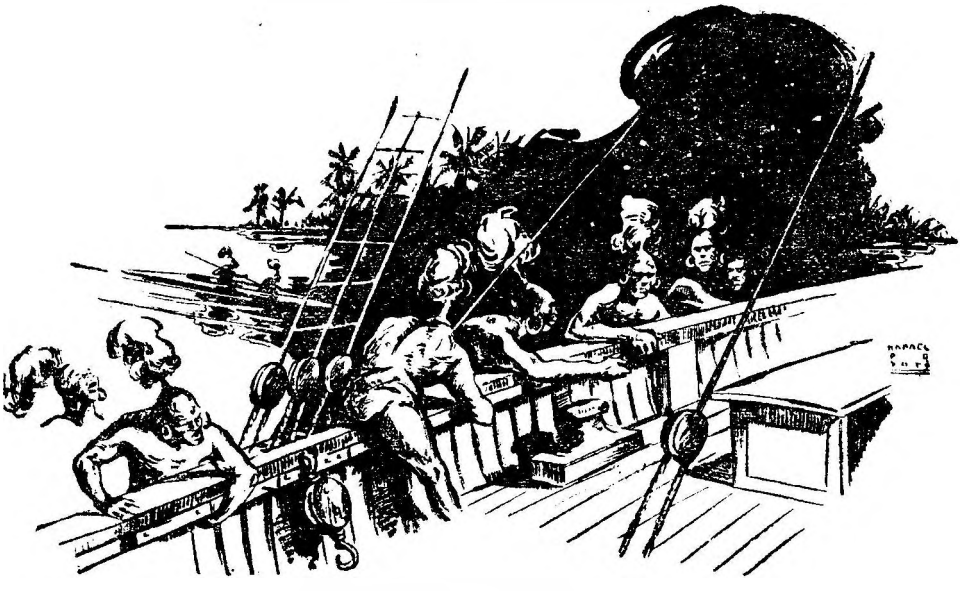
"Lot No. 24," he announced. "Now, what am I offered for this beautiful violin? Take a look at its case. See the blurred finger marks of remorseless time. To the merry notes of this fine old instrument colonial dames may have danced the stately minuet, while George Washington, the Father of His Country, looked on. Now, gentlemen, what do you offer for this priceless instrument?"

"Fifty cents," said one.

"It's yours," declared the auctioneer cheerfully. "Now for lot No. 25."

The Grim Garland

By Bassett Morgan



COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

CHAPTER I.

TRADING FOR HEADS.

CAPTAIN DAUNT seemed fascinated by the grim trophy handed to him in the company's office, while solemn-faced officials sat around debating ways and means of halting the wickedness of trade in such curios.

"It's a nice piece of work," said Captain Daunt. "The use of agate and quartz pebbles for eyes is a new wrinkle. Some white man taught them that trick. The only thing of any help in locating the tribe responsible for this new supply of heads for traders, is the lip sewing. I think the source is north-shore black men. The north shore is very bad country to penetrate."

Captain Daunt's manner was arrogant and impertinent, but a man needed some defense. They had hardly phrased a request when he hotly demanded why he should go into north-shore hells for the purpose of informing Papuans that trading dried human heads for tin dippers, alarm clocks and music boxes was inadvisable, indelicate and immoral.

"When I was young the blacks prized their war trophies," he said. "You couldn't beg, borrow or steal a dried head. They'd sooner trade their wives for bolts of printed cotton.

"Then we let them know it was wicked to take heads, especially for trade purposes, and curing them would land the killers in very tough luck. Finally we buy heads. Now why should I attempt——"

This dreadful business could not go on, they said. If a white trader was

encouraging the natives, he must be apprehended. And no one knew the perilous north-shore country like Captain Daunt. No one was more respected by ingenious black fiends adept at treacherous reprisal.

The thing was to obtain proof. It would not do to accuse a white man innocently, but if Captain Daunt would obtain proof of his suspicion that "Black Harry" Wade encouraged the horror by trading for heads, he could have their backing and assistance and they knew his conscience would not let him refuse.

They knew also, but did not mention it, that Black Harry Wade had figuratively thumbed his nose at Daunt for months. And Daunt had openly accused Wade of foul play when Daunt's big Swede mate, Sven, disappeared after a night of drinking in a Port Moresby dive.

"When I meet Wade," he replied to that thrust, "I'd like a chance, man to man, with my bare hands. I'll wring the truth from him about Sven."

The manager nodded to a boy, who brought in a mat and opened it on the table. Daunt stared at its contents and the color was drained from his sun-and-wind-browned cheeks.

"All right. I've got my proof about Sven," he said huskily. "Now I'll get you the proof you want about Wade."

IT was not easy to locate a shore tribe likely to assist him in finding Wade's smart auxiliary schooner. Daunt envied Wade that ship, which showed clean heels to any pursuing vessel. He had a glimpse of it on a day when a lurid sundown of sultry crimson sky foretold a squall.

The squall shut down and drove Daunt's vessel on the perilous reaches of the Banda. At dawn there was no sign of the *Signet,* but a small outrigger proa streaked toward Daunt's ship. A little later he picked up its navigator, who stated that his name was Tuoa, son of Pipi, son of Tcew, son of——

"All sons of devils," Daunt interrupted the man. "What tribe?"

The native invited Captain Daunt to come ashore and trade with Chief Pipi who had very good trade, paradise skins and pearls. Captain Daunt needed his water butts refilled. He headed for a lagoon entrance, on a flooding tide.

While his men were ashore filling casks from springs gushing out of vine-clad rocks, Daunt regretted his faith in Tuoa, son of Pipi.

From the mouth of a river, flooding darkly between mangrove roots and fouling the clear lagoon with murky water, a flight of war canoes exploded from the jungle tunnel of green arching the river. About his canoe they clustered—slender, black craft paddled by warriors whose killer crests of paradise shook pridefully. Shell armlets held bright blades. Spears flashed.

They were pronged for trouble, but, as a small drum pulsed its low steady *thrump,* their betel-stained mouths opened for the long-howled note of a jungle song. Their yowls of welcome boomed in a tuneless long-drawn ode of barbarism meant to show good will. Yet Daunt knew a breath might turn the sound to yells of slaughter.

He invited Chief Pipi on board and offered grenadine syrup and soda water, which Pipi poured down his throat. Then Pipi asked for drink. Captain Daunt knew he was spoiled by trade whisky, but he produced some. It was not his job to reform savages whose taste had been vitiated by white men.

Chief Pipi had a grievance, goods to trade and no traders. He wanted Daunt to come ashore. Two giant warriors leaped to Daunt as he tried to parley and dropped him skillfully into the chieftain's canoe. Daunt saw no sign of his men, who had doubtless dived for cover at the first drum note. His ship was in charge of a half dozen Tonga

boys—as gutless and effective as so many trained monkeys as a bodyguard against savages of this undaunted aspect.

Daunt held the canoe long enough for one of the Tonganese to drop a metal box of parlor magic into his upheld arms. He carried no other weapon. One man, in a mob of head-hunters, must depend on his wits and his own diplomatic ingenuity.

The little drums kept up their throbbing tempo. The jungle song boomed and the canoes shot into gloom of river jungle, where breaking oily bubbles told of muggers dropping fanged jaws from the tree roots.

In the leafy river tunnel the booming song was deafening. In it was the threat of primal simmerings, which recalled to Daunt the flare of fire blazoning the shore night, coloring the lagoons, washing the death-white coral with red gold. Daunt had seen those fires. He was to see them again and under different circumstances.

The blacks swept to a widening swamp and hauled on shore. Daunt rode the shoulders of a young warrior until they emerged on a village of thatched stilt-legged huts in the lagoon south of the reef inclosing the one where his ship lay.

CHAPTER II.

JUNGLE DRUMS.

COOKING fires were burning and old women were tending pots of turtle stew. Children chased along the shore. In twenty minutes Daunt was facing a feast at which gourds of kava passed freely and warriors swigged. For reasons of their own, the tribe were giving him a royal welcome.

The reason disclosed by Chief Pipi amazed Daunt. It was true they had goods to trade and no market. The tribe of Lawoo, north of their lagoon, made good trade. Also they were a powerful fighting tribe who raided Pipi's village from time to time, taking the prettiest girls and whatever of value they wanted.

For trade with pearls thieved from Pipi, the other chieftain acquired a chin-chin box which Pipi agonized to have for his own. If Daunt carried a chin-chin box, Pipi would disclose good trade.

Daunt wished he had brought a gramophone. Meanwhile he wanted to see Pipi's trade. The pearls brought out were small, old and inferior. The paradise skins were poor. Daunt waved them aside and looked meaningly at the gorgeous crests of the warriors and the bulging neck bags of the young men, which contained folded plumes waiting the day they won manhood by killing an enemy.

Chief Pipi was cautious in fetching out further treasure but when *it* swung from the hand of one of his wives Daunt knew he was on the trail of triumph or trouble. The head was old, green-molded from hanging as a hut decoration for a long time.

Daunt opened his metal box, brought out his tricks, and, ignoring the chief's expectant eagerness, entertained the warriors with card and coin vanishing tricks, plucking paper roses apparently from thin air, pulling a shower of coins from the nose of a near-by urchin. He was rather proud of his skill after years of practice. As the coins were poured clinkingly into his box he inquired:

"Oh, chief, your trade goods are old. Is it because you do not want to trade with me?"

Pipi sulked while Daunt unfolded his stock of trick magic, which held the warriors and outer circle of women spellbound. He was growing more apprehensive. Kava whetted the warriors' throats in copious drafts. Daunt lighted a roman candle and sent colored stars among the palm branches.

The crowd scattered in fear for a moment or two, then crept close again.

"Powerful magic," muttered the old chief in lingo.

"Powerful magic," echoed Daunt. "Those balls of fire are debbil-debbil eyes that grow dark in the trees. They see the trade in freshly cured heads along these shores, which is forbidden by the white governors, oh, chief!" He was lying readily, fluently.

Pipi gulped more kava, wiped his wet lips and pondered that assertion.

"Do the fire eyes of your magic see the bodies of my warriors cooking for the feast, and the wreath of heads they have cured for the great black-bearded trader who brings chin-chin boxes to Lawoo?"

It took time for Daunt to grasp that incredible horror which Lawoo's tribe prepared for Black Harry Wade. A wreath of heads.

It required all the wits at his command and his stock of dialect to frame a suggestion that Pipi lead his warriors to Lawoo's village and fetch back that wreath of heads along with the pearls they had thieved from Pipi.

Daunt was promulgating war, the dread raiding of the killers of Papua. Yet Black Harry Wade was a worse evil.

The war of black men would cut off Wade's source of supply, drive him from those shores to other trading lagoons. But Daunt would have all the evidence required to set the authorities on the trail of Wade, who would worry out the rest of his life in prison, if indeed he did **not swing** for his crimes.

The only thing wrong about that plan for Daunt was that it would prevent his personal revenge for the loss of Sven, and the blind rage roused at the sight of Sven's head, nicely cured, in the company's office. He wanted to meet Wade face to face with nothing but their bared fists as weapons to settle that business of Sven.

BUT there was no chance that Daunt would leave Pipi's village unless he could elude their surveillance. His card and coin tricks, his pyrotechnics, were powerful magic indeed. Pipi was insisting that such magic must be taken to Lawoo's village to aid Pipi's warriors.

Daunt realized that if he escaped alive he would be extremely lucky. He was pondering a way to reach his schooner with his own head on his shoulders.

Excited warriors crowded nearer, yowling in guttural lingo. They were ripe and ready for war, urging Pipi to say the word. One young savage had climbed a tree and chattered a request for silence.

Daunt's magic had silenced the drums of Pipi's tribe, but somewhere drums were speaking, tom-toming a message from one hilltop to another in the code that was universal through hill country of Papua, whether tribes were friends or enemies.

Feather-crested warriors stirred uneasily as they interpreted the drum talk. Then as the man in the tree called news, they leaped in wild contortions.

The fire was heaped high. Drums throbbed close at hand. The kava-drunken Pipi grunted thickly to Daunt the news that the great trader's ship was in the lagoon. Black Harry Wade had come for heads!

Unless Daunt drove Pipi's warriors to a raid at once, his evidence would be gone, carried away in the hold of Black Harry Wade's smart *Signet*.

Daunt forgot caution in his attempt to rouse the reluctant Pipi to fighting ardor.

"My ship and men are on the lagoon," he said. "We will keep the *Signet* there. Take your men to Lawoo's village, fetch out the heads and your own pearls, and you shall have the finest chin-chin box in Wade's stock, and all your men shall divide his trade goods."

Pipi's small eyes glittered in their bloodshot balls. But he insisted that without Daunt's magic, the fight would go against his warriors. No matter what happened, Daunt and his magic should never leave Pipi's tribe. Perhaps Daunt would teach how to make such magic before he went away.

Daunt smiled grimly. Once he had taught the old fellow those tricks he was capable of performing, his usefulness would depart. It was probable that Pipi would devour his heart, roasted, to imbibe the secrets concealed therein. Pipi did not intend Captain Daunt to leave his village alone! The trick magic was a boomerang.

Daunt felt that he must get within reach of his boat and crew. He started pinwheels spinning sparks from tree boles and set off a flock of sky rockets, which were more powerful persuaders than talk.

"More better your warriors come lagoon," he agreed as if the debbil-debbil of his magic advised that course.

YOWLING and dancing they rushed to the canoes. Among them Daunt was swept along, the vortex of a horde of savages, drunk with kava. Among the oiled bodies crowding close, he struggled to retain his grip of the metal box of tricks.

They tolerated him merely because of his magic. He was bundled roughly into a canoe, which followed Pipi's sleek black craft.

Like gorgeous reptilian monsters, the canoes swept in a long curve on darkly gleaming water tinted by sunset's fading light, then dived into the channel mouth of a river connecting the two lagoons.

Darkness enveloped them through the forest-sheltered stream, then Daunt could see the lagoon water shining. The paddlers ceased work. The canoes crowded silently at the widening river mouth, and he looked for his own boat.

It was then the blood of Daunt congealed. His boat was gone. Some demoralizing fear had driven his crew to flight. But on the lagoon, graceful as a gull at rest, necklaced by lights, pretty as a glass ship illumined from within, rode the *Signet,* the only vessel within the coral reefs of that almost landlocked harbor.

A yellow tiger moon crept stealthily from beyond the crouching black hills. Against its glow the spars and masts of the *Signet* were darkly etched, as fair a picture as a seaman ever saw. But Daunt would have given all the pearls in Papua for a sight of his own tubby schooner.

He was marooned among savages whom he had roused to fighting fury. The only white man along that coast so far as he knew was Black Harry Wade, his enemy, as relentless a killer as any Papuan head-hunter of the jungle.

On the deck of the *Signet,* Daunt saw Wade, bare to the belt, swaggering among his native crew, with something of that foot grip of deck planking that betokens the prehensile great toes of savage heritage. Shaggy black hair and beard like a feather brush emphasized and pointed the rumor that Wade was a breed. Wade trucked with Wan Poo, the Celebes blackbirder, the wiliest devil in Malaysia. He shaved bargains with port blackguards. The seas would be well rid of Black Harry Wade if Daunt would carry forth the evidence from Lawoo's village. With his schooner gone from the lagoon, that hope dwindled.

CHAPTER III.

CIRCLING FIRE.

THE canoes slipped into pontoon formation, three lines of them side by side, filling the river mouth. There was no sound except the buzz of jungle insects avid at night for blood, the rus-

tling of leaves and swish of branches as small monkeys fled the presence of humans, and the distance muted sounds from the *Signet.*

In the silent waiting of savages who greatly feared that white ship on the lagoon, came the crash of a branch as an orang-outan swung low, then released a tree limb.

Wade saw Daunt, on the deck of the *Signet,* turn and stare at the river tunnel. There was a perceptible movement among Pipi's warriors, which swayed the canoes and sent ripples widening on the smooth lagoon water. Wade saw those ripples and suspected their cause. For he stalked along deck to a small brass gun.

Without waiting for a word of command, the canoes moved aside and backward, with scarcely a sound of water dripping from the paddles. There was a woolly puff of smoke, a crashing *booom,* which roused the jungle. Leaves and branches rained on Pipi's warriors. Something fell and struggled feebly on Daunt's knee. He tossed a wounded monkey overside and instantly the dark water spouted the snapping jaws of a mugger. Daunt shuddered at the presence of death everywhere, close at hand.

Wade turned his gun and clipped the jungle foliage on the north and west, the boom of his cannon echoing in the hills. Over the water came his voice commanding his men to lower a boat. Black Harry evidently knew that the sight of his ship had frightened Daunt's schooner to sea. He was landing boldly. There was something to admire in the smart handling of his launch lowered overside. Wade was a good sailor.

He dropped into her, lithe as an ape, and the *sput-sput* of her engine shattered the lagoon silence as it headed north, towing a small boat loaded high with trade goods and the natives of his crew.

On the hills, small drums were talking, chattering back and forth. Every tribal village for a hundred miles would know that Black Harry Wade was out for heads. They would know what he did not yet know, that Pipi's canoes were in the river. But Lawoo would know it and give him that news the moment they met.

There was menace in the talk-talk of hill drums. There was gossip of feast fires lighted, of young men fetching home grim trophies of their prowess to prove their right to the orgy of manhood rituals and wives.

Daunt uncoiled his cramped legs and snapped his fingers to draw the attention of Pipi. A gunshot could not have startled their waiting tensity more effectively, and the canoes were moved alongside in deft manipulation.

Daunt laboriously unfolded a plan to the drink-drowsy Pipi, who was entirely incapable of understanding. His warriors were quicker witted. Their scarlet-stained lips smacked at the plan, which required patience and waiting until the early rising moon had rolled beyond the crinkling sea horizon and darkness had fallen.

Even Daunt marveled at their stoic patience, until he remembered how they obtained the blistered cicatrices on their backs and the enduring agony of tattooing.

In time the shadow of jungle trees on the lagoon softened, then merged into enveloping darkness. The drums on the hills were louder, more insistent, reporting the glare of feast fires for Wade's welcome.

But the hill drummers could not see Pipi's canoes in the river mouth, not even when they nosed along the shore shadow in a long black chain which only ended short of the betraying white coral.

Then at a signal, paddles stabbed the water, each canoe swirled a half length and pointed like a spear toward the *Signet.* Daunt's white-shirted arm lifted, and the canoes, like spokes of a great

wheel, shot forward, a thickening belt of black death surrounding the yacht!

THE cry of a man on watch was too late to prevent those ape men of Pipi's from huddling their canoes close alongside. The brass cannon barked, killing jungle birds and monkeys, but over the heads of the enemy. Daunt had caught a line forward and swarmed to her bows, crouching outside the rail as Pipi's men closed in on the *Signet's* crew, who were leaping overside to escape the slaughter.

Daunt had no intention of hand-to-hand fighting in that heaving, yowling mob of savages. He was opening his box of tricks, threading powder along the outer side of the rail in a thick stream, as the screeching died down, a sign that the ship was taken.

On deck Pipi's men were already looting whatever was not nailed down. Daunt worked faster, more free about the business until he had circled the deck, scattering the powder in a broad band. When he saw that the men were heaving Pipi overside from the royal canoe which had waited until the fighting was over before arriving, Daunt knelt and struck a match.

There was a *puff*, a running blaze of light exploding, shooting in a veil of gayly colored flame that circled the ship. There were the wildest screeches of the night and savages leaping through the flame, jumping overside, swimming for canoes or shore, whichever offered more certain security.

Daunt could not gauge the success of his Roman fire. He had leaped for the mooring line astern and swung a knife. Released from her anchor, the *Signet* turned. The colored fire swayed in a night breeze which blew in heartening steadiness from the grim mountain country on his lee bows.

Daunt sprang to the main sheet. Through the shrieks of Pipi's men sounded the creak of blocks and slatting of bellying canvas as the mainsail was masted.

The yacht was handy as a bird, curtseying to the command of her wheel as Daunt swung it hard over. Then she swept through the swimming savages and scattering canoes and flew for the reef entrance. The Roman fire was dying down, spitting and sizzling in a smudged band about the deck, its service ended.

Daunt wanted to cheer at taking a vessel single-handed against such odds, but between the white reef jaws the *Signet* hesitated. There was the thud of an obstacle, the dull grinding of crumbling coral. Then she slithered to the outer side, free again. A half hour later and he would have been held captive in the lagoon by the ebbing tide.

HE allowed the *Signet* to head into the wind and looked back. Star-silver on the lagoon water shimmered over a clear expanse. Pipi's canoes had fled for the shore shadow. Daunt thought he heard drums from far away, coming nearer.

Then his heart missed a beat. That sound was the staccato sputter of a launch engine purring in a jungle-roofed river channel. Black Harry Wade was returning to his vessel. Daunt remembered the wreath of heads which would prove the villainy of Wade, without which this capture of the *Signet* would be merely unwarranted piracy.

He wanted to head out to investigate a small moth-winged patch against the stars which might be his own schooner, but dared not leave the lagoon entrance unguarded. Wade would escape along the coast to another hiding place. Then he reflected and hoped that the *Signet's* crew could scarcely give Wade a true account of what had transpired.

It was doubtful if Pipi's men knew Captain Daunt was alone on the ship. Daunt wished he had even one Tonga

boy to take the wheel while he forced Wade to deliver the wreath of heads.

Then he heard the launch emerge from the river tunnel, the sound of her engine swelling as if a lid was lifted. She shot into the lagoon, slowing her speed and rocking as she turned in her own length.

Wade stood in her bows boldly staring at the *Signet* beyond the reefs. Daunt heard his yelp of command and the quickening engine beat. Wade was driving straight for the *Signet,* and after his launch came canoes with Lawoo's men, a formidable company who would board the *Signet* unless they were halted.

Daunt leaped to the pug-nosed barker on deck, a thrill of battle warming his blood as he manipulated the gun mechanism. He had a feeling of envy for the perfection of Wade's yacht and all her appurtenances.

CHAPTER IV.

A GRIM GARLAND.

"*SIGNET*, ahoy! Tama, you dog!" Wade called his mate.

"Keep back, Wade, or I'll use your gun. And I won't aim at treetops!" called Daunt.

He heard Wade's curses of surprise.

"I've taken your yacht," Daunt called. "I'm willing to take you and the wreath of heads, but no other passengers. And come alone or you'll stay there with your head-hunting friends!"

"It's Daunt, so help me!" yowled Wade. "By all that's holy and some that ain't, it's Captain Daunt turned pirate on the high seas. And that's bad business, that is.

"You'll go to jail for twenty years for that, Captain Daunt, which I'm good enough to warn ye. Not that I blame a man fer wanting a smart ship after sailing that round-bellied tub you command. But it's a hell of a way to git yerself a decent vessel."

The launch was speeding toward the *Signet,* with her convoy of canoes. It was death swarming in darting black proas, close enough now. A flight of spears sang through the air, stabbed the *Signet's* sails and deck house, narrowly missing Daunt. He crouched to aim the gun.

His hand jerked and an answering *boo-oom* cut off Wade's yelling. Two canoes were capsized, the others halted a breathless moment, then backed. Wade's launch alone came on. There was no cowardice in the rescal.

"Now you've gone and added murder to piracy," he howled. "And you'll swing fer that, mark my words. Don't be a crazy fool, Daunt. I'm comin' aboard and talk sense into ye."

"You fetch that wreath of heads and come alone and I'll talk," Daunt demanded.

But he doubted if Wade would put himself into the power of any man with the fruits of his villainy in his hand.

"Wreath o' heads, is it? Well, well, Pipi's been talkin'. An' s'pose I fetch it aboard, what do I git, Captain Daunt?"

"A passage to the port," Daunt offered, and did not add "in irons."

"And what then, Captain Daunt?"

"A chance to clear yourself of the murder of my mate, Sven, if you can. That's all I've got against you, Wade. Anything else is up to the white governors."

"And will thievin' my vessel be up to the governors also, Captain Daunt? Have ye thought how that will sound in a court of law?"

"I don't blame you for liking your yacht, Wade. She's a sweet ship to handle. Which is one reason I don't intend to stay here chinning with you. And don't worry about how I'll explain to anybody where and how I got her. She can show heels to anything overly curious. Sorry you don't want to come aboard. So long!"

He had a feeling the loss of the *Signet* would be worse to Wade than facing a criminal court. Daunt turned away to give weight to his bluff and let the vessel fall away a point. Then a cry caught him.

"Marster! marster!"

A BLACK man was swimming from the launch, holding a mat-wrapped bundle in one hand. Wade had sent him overside, and Daunt knew there was a trick although he could not grasp its significance. Wade's voice disconcerted him further.

"You black thief, you devil, fetch back that mat," Wade yelled, adding oaths which should have seared his lips, shaking his fist at the swimmer, and sending the launch closer. Her engine stopped but she had speed enough to swing alongside the *Signet,* bumping her hull. Daunt wanted that mat, but was forced to choose between attention to the swimming native and Wade who was swarming up overhand.

Daunt caught a coil of line and twisted a loop about a cleat, dropping an end overside for the black man to climb. Then he whirled to face Wade, who was on deck, a gun in his hand.

Daunt leaped aside as it spattered, emptying the clip in a fusillade. Before Wade could hurl the weapon Daunt leaped at him, fists doubled and crashing into the bearded face.

The fury of his onslaught staggered Black Harry, who fought with gun and knife better than with fists. But his long arms reached for Daunt, who was hammering home his fists. And behind Daunt there was the thud of a wet bundle dropping on the deck.

"Get him," yelled Wade. "Knife the beggar, Choom. I'll hold him."

Daunt felt the catlike tread of the savage to whom he had tossed a line, but he was twisting in the grip of Wade, all his strength forced into an endeavor to wheel his antagonist, whose arms hampered his own fists. He was clutched so close in an ape hug that Wade's beard ground against his shoulder, from which the shirt had been stripped.

The wind came in sharp spurts, the *Signet* was turning like a saucer spinning, the slatting canvas jerking her boom as it swung over the low-lying deck house.

Daunt heaved Wade backward and his muscles were cracking with the effort. Over Wade's shoulder he saw starlight gleam on a knife in the grip of Choom. The savage had taken a moment to dodge the swinging boom. In that instant Daunt heaved his body so that his back was toward the bow. Choom shot forward and the knife swept a downward curve.

There was a bellow of pain from Wade, suddenly throttled. There was a splash as Choom plunged overside. Wade's hands limply released their grip of Daunt. Wade tried to straighten to his height and was fighting for breath in his flooded lungs. Then wind from the black-hill country swung the *Signet's* mainsail.

Daunt had barely time to step backward as it fell hard over. From the slanting deck, Black Harry Wade slumped against the rail, which caught him in the middle of his back. The *Signet's* boom swept him backward. There was a splash. His arms outspread on the clear lagoon water as he sank slowly.

A dozen other splashes followed. The launch crew would save him from the Tridacna traps, which close their opened shells on a man and hold him until he drowns. But Captain Daunt had no time to see the end of that loyalty of his crew.

He was at the wheel, twirling its spokes, holding his own breath until the ship's sail grew taut. Then she leaped like a deer at the seas ahead. He had neither the strength nor wish to take

Black Harry Wade with him to justice. There was no need. In the mat on the after deck was Lawoo's work of many moons, for which Wade had promised him rich trade goods from the *Signet's* hold.

Lawoo would not forgive the loss of the heads without trade value. It is not safe for a white man to break his word to a savage, and Lawoo would save the white governors the bother and expense of a criminal trial, without the slightest doubt.

Captain Daunt felt a little sorry for Black Harry Wade. He hoped Choom's knife thrust had reached his heart, which was likely. That it was meant for Daunt's heart did not matter now. He was strengthened by authority and righteous indignation over the fate of Sven. That advantage, and the gift of thinking a little faster than the savages, including Black Harry Wade, had served him well.

THE *Signet* needed all his attention. She was a sweet vessel, pretty as a woman, and like a woman needed a master.

Also, far to the south that small patch like a moth's wing against the stars was growing larger. He snatched the glass from a neat rack in the wheelhouse and steadied it against the framework. As he thought, his cowardly crew had decided to return on the chance of picking him up. And they had seen the *Signet*. They were putting the schooner about to run from the peril of Black Harry Wade's vessel with her snub-nosed guns and her hold full of trade goods.

Captain Daunt laughed grimly. There wasn't a chance for the schooner in a race with the *Signet*. He'd swoop down on her in two hours. He'd send a shot over her bows that would head her meekly into the wind. He'd tell those men of his to put on petticoats, and he'd take the meekest of them on board to man the *Signet*. He was weary, tired to death. He needed sleep.

Time enough to relish the punishment for his crew, who ran away and left him stranded, which would be a refusal to let them sail with him in the *Signet* in days to come.

For she would be his reward. He'd turn in the schooner to the company and demand the *Signet* as his share of salvage. And they would agree. He knew how they feared Wade's growing trade in heads, which threatened the heads of white pioneers along the flanks of Papua, to which Daunt had put a stop.

The proof of it lay aft, wrapped in a sea-wet mat; a wreath of heads; a grim garland!

Bait Wanted

A DUB of a golfer was playing alone. Two boys kept following him around the course.

At the ninth hole he turned to the boys and said:

"You'll never learn to play watching me."

"We're not watching you," said one of the boys. "We're going fishing as soon as you dig up some more worms."

Not an Accident

HE was being medically examined before taking out an insurance policy.

"Ever had a serious illness?" asked the doctor.

"No," was the reply.

"Ever had an accident?"

"No."

The doctor looked surprised. "What? Never had an accident in your life?"

The man shook his head. "Never—except last month, when a bull tossed me over a fence."

"Well, don't you call that an accident?"

"No, sir. The bull did it on purpose."

On The Up-and-up

By Bruce Hosford

COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

WE sprinted fast, the big part of that hectic thousand miles or so. Yah! Though we did jog trot in a few rough spots, walked a little in others, and rode a mite—after we stole some clothes. And all this with ten thousand, real, talking smackers in our mitts—if what come about hadn't have come about when it was fixed for something else to happen!

It was this way: "Beany Sock," my latest boy, and me was for business reasons barnstorming the West. Beany Sock, of course, wasn't his real name. But that was how the announcer introduced him, the night Beany crawled through the ropes for his first rosin foot race in the ring.

"Beany Sock?" I said to myself. "Well, why not? It wasn't so worse, at that. And who, anyhow, without a clipped tongue, could pronounce Benarious Soccrensen?"

Beany took that four rounder as much by using his bean as his fists.

So I talked to myself again. "Um. He uses his ivory. Name, Beany, fits, O. K."

A fine piece of man machine was Beany—a natural light heavyweight; with wiry, reddish-sandy hair, deep-set blue eyes, and a jaw that could take it plenty.

Seeing possibilities in him, I talked business. After that I seen to it that he was fed easy ones till he got a nailing good opinion of what he could do. Still he was beany enough to low-down himself to the fact that between him and champ light heavy was thick, solid wrists and lots of heavy, slugging fists.

Here and there around the corn and wheat country, we took whatever we could get. Then come the idea of that Far Western tour. I'd been out that way once with a couple of boys, doing the railroad towns, mining camps, and cattle burgs, and found the gents would bet even their pants—if that was all they had left.

Well, things went along like onions in a mulligan stew till the day we Pullmaned into the roaring cow town of Saddle City; also a railroad division point and the shipping outlet for a dozen rich mines, which were on some hills three miles to the north.

No need to tell you what we expected here, especially when I heard there was to be a rodeo the next week.

Saddle City would be wide open, with nothing short of murder looked upon as a crime worth bothering about. Everybody would have money—and be as itchy as if they were wearing cocklebur underwear to get it working.

THERE was sure to be some sort of a coming champ here—if not local stuff, something imported. And there was, too—a strapping, black-haired black-eyed cow-puncher of twenty-one, with a coffee-brown face and a pair of fists that was as big as Beany's. His name was Lee Winters, though his fellow toilers of the sagebrush flats and hills called him "Lodge Pole."

He was a product of the country. For two summers past he had been working on the Double Circle Ranch, fixed up old, picturesque, and uncomfortable, as a dude ranch for Easterners. A rich, fist-handy New Yorker had learned Lodge Pole to use his dukes some, and he'd had a number of neighborhood mills.

No sooner is it noised around Saddle City that I've got a fighter in town than along comes this sporty Easterner and the big-hatted bovine tender, with slippery Sam Grandison—bald, double-chinned, and fat-paunched like myself.

The first thing that Sam does is to give me a look, which says most as plain as if he had put it in words: "Me and you is strangers, Mack. Never met till right now."

Sam was Lodge Pole's manager. And what he proposed, when me and him was alone, was—— Well, considering he was Sam, it was no more than I expected.

"Woof this bunch of beefsteak builders, locomotive nurses, and horny-handed toilers after wealth!" he said, lacing his stubby fingers across his gorgeous shirt front.

"All of 'em makin' good money, havin' little chance to spend it, and just cravin' for excitement. Leave me make it worth your while to let the cowboy win."

I shook my head. "What? In this violent burg? Where everybody packs a gun, most likely? And some of the bovine knife slingers can slice a hair in two, as far as they can throw their already blood-stained stickers! No, Sam, I and Beany is still too fond of life to kick in that way."

Sam only laughed—and finally asked: "Have you got any money"

I nodded.

"How much?"

"Oh, fifty or seventy-five grand."

Sam grinned. "Yeah, Mack, I know. I know! But how much regular money? The kind that buys things?"

That made me grin back.

"Oh, two or three thousand—or a little better—between us."

"Fine, Mack! Fine!" Sam hitched his chair up so that he could get his

forefinger prodding on my knee, and went on talking.

What he said don't much matter. Enough, that the night Beany and Lodge Pole clouted each other in the rodeo grounds, Beany and me stood to leave that beefsteak-factory country with ten thousand, including our own pile bet on the lasso hurler. Mr. Sock was to take a dive in the unlucky seventh.

Until this, Beany and me had been strictly on the up-and-up. And there hadn't been no need for Sam to remind me if it was, because it had been the easiest way to pull down the purses. Yah! Always on the up-and-up—with, of course, lots of thoughts of heading for New York with a good boy and jack enough to eat for quite a while, besides being in a position to put on a good front.

You know how it is when you show a fight promoter a choking roll. He ain't then so liable to squeeze you down to just enough coin to keep a man from actually panhandling around kitchen doors for fish heads.

To get that roll was one reason why Beany and me had been working the West. In consequence it seemed like business to meet Sam halfway—even if Saddle City was one notorious hell-roarer of a town.

Things certainly looked right golden, the big night of rodeo week, when this here puncher, Lodge Pole, and Beany crawled through the ropes to their corners. And it seemed to me as if everybody in sagebrush country was there in the rodeo grounds. Grandstand packed! Ringside seats full, and an overflow of standees, easing one foot by resting it on the other!

There was cowboys, cowgirls, railroaders, miners, Saddle City business folks, and a hundred Easterners from the dude ranch. Lodge Pole's own special Easterner was with Sam Grandison in Lodge Pole's corner.

CLANG! The gong opened the first round.

Out rushes Lodge Pole—dark fighting face on, well-built body, nut-brown from training in the sun, and hair enough on his chest to make a rug. He's atop of Beany pretty close to Beany's own corner, and slams in a flurry of lefts and rights all the way from Beany's head to his belt.

This naturally brought a roaring yell from the bovine boys, though Beany is taking only what he wants to—just to make the customers think he ain't got a cinch. Same Beany as he had always been—using his ivory for something besides an ornament for a pillow.

Soon as the flurry was over, he went in to make a respectable round of it. He found, because the black-haired puncher had had tussles enough with glove peddlers of one sort or another, that it was easy to give a nailing show. When it looked good to take one, Beany let it come through. When he thought the crowd ought to have something besides clever footwork and so on, he mixed it, plenty fast and furious—both boys showing some wear and tear at the end of the first round.

Round No. 2 was pretty much like the first—except that there was a trickle of claret coming from Beany's nose most of the time, and Lodge Pole had a cut under his left eye and his right showed that it would soon be black. It wouldn't do to let this hairy-chested cow-tender have things too easy.

During the minute rest, Sam and the Easterner, while patching Lodge Pole up, told him how to go right out and bring Beany down. Yah! Just like that!

So when the gong sounded, Lodge Pole attempts to carry out instructions, plenty quick and plumb thorough. What he didn't try to hit my boy with, was only what he didn't have. And Beany, being forced to fight or get marked up bad, made round No. 3 so much like an

old-time, bad-blood mill that everybody was on their feet, yowling.

Still and all, it wasn't a marker to the fourth. That one is something they're still talking about in Saddle City. Smack! Biff! Slug! Sock! Lodge Pole's face looked as if somebody had been careering around over it and with a dull meat chopper.

Beany, knowing how much punishment a man can take around the mug without it bringing him down, was doing noble in keeping his punches away from the button. Yet, too, the appearance of his own map was quite a bit contused and unfamiliar.

Did it look like the real thing? I'll say it did! They couldn't have done better.

"Am I doin' it all right, Mack?" Beany whispers, breathing hard, as he settles himself on his stool in his corner.

"Great, kid!" I told him. "Swell! If either one of you would get killed right at this minute, I don't b'lieve there's a customer here who wouldn't think he'd had his money's worth. Keep goin' as you are. The seventh ain't fur off."

It was a tick or two after this that Beany's roving lamps happens to light on something that makes his muscles set.

One of the cowgirls, you're wondering?

Naw! Twenty cowboys—twenty of them in a bunch! Big hatted, neckerchiefed, fancy shirted, hairy panted, and all; with long-barreled six-guns held sort of readylike across their laps!

"Why do you s'pose them punchers is a settin' like that fer, Mack?" Beany of a sudden asks, showing by the way he hitches around that he's now a heap more interested in the cow nurses than in having his own cuts tinkered up.

"They look kind of bloodthirsty to me. And you know how round here they slaughter men for most nothin'. Do you think they've smelled something?"

"No never!" I assured him, hearty. "Take my word on that. I'd be on my way from here right now, if I thought they had."

SOME more assurance would have been good for him. But then come the ten-second whistle, soon to be followed by the bell. Consequently, before Beany got a fair start out of his own corner, he took one just above the belt, and another on the jaw that made his knees sag and caused him to hold on.

The roar that went up at this must have started jack rabbits sprinting, ten miles away.

Lodge Pole didn't need Sam's orders to wade in. He did that, electric-quick and panther-nimble.

Only Beany's ring generalship and stabbing left kept him from sweet slumber before the first minute was over.

All the time me and Sam was wondering: "Why don't he take one, and dive? Oh, why don't he? It would look as natural as ham with eggs—the shape he's in now."

But we didn't know what was going on in poor Beany's skull—fear that if he got knocked out, those cowboys would cut loose at him, six shots to the gun. And just as much fear that if he gave Lodge Pole the K. O. they would do the same thing. Was he 'most tore apart with emotion? I'll say he was!

He was so emoted that he let Lodge Pole have one square on the button, sitting him down—*kerslap*—and flopping my heart clear into my socks.

Where, oh, where, was our ten thousand, now? Lodge Pole was hurt. Bad hurt! He was hearing, maybe, the sweet music of bawling calves or the even sweeter music of a freshly hung sheep-herder, who had been a pest to the cattle range.

Sam looked at me, mad as an old-fashioned picture of a storm at sea.

"One! Two! Three!" the referee roared, keeping his arm swinging up

and down with the count. While Beany, guard up as if to ward off one hundred and twenty, .45 bullets, stands goggle-eyed, staring at the group of gun-packing cowboys.

Lodge Pole never even so much as tried to close his sagged-open mouth. The yowling of the crowd meant nothing to him.

"Four! Five!" The referee's count sounds like tacks in my throat to me. And that ain't all. What is liable to be handed to us by the people, Beany and me has double crossed? Even Sam may have turned a gunman and may now pack a bowie knife in his boot.

Yet, I've got an idea my feelings ain't to be compared with Beany's. He has done it. Now, what's he going to do with what he's done?

"Six!"

And happy day! Lodge Pole stirs.

"Seven!"

He makes a try at getting up. But as my rising heart commences to leave my socks and Beany lets out the breath he's been holding for what most likely seems to him a year or so—over flops the tender of live beefsteaks on his side.

"Eight!" bellowed out the count, over a crowd that was still as a graveyard at midnight—and with me a-wondering if I had a chance to even make a break before red-hot bullets would tear through my fat vitals.

"Nine!"

I've seen them come up when it didn't look as if they had any more chance of getting to their feet than a mummy'd have. But never anything like this bulldogging cow-puncher! He just seemed to heave himself up, jaws clamped and mitts working.

Throbbing emotion still the biggest part of him, Beany let drive what looked as if it was meant for a haymaker, but what in reality curled around Lodge Pole's neck, bringing the boys into a clinch and giving Lodge Pole's head a chance to clear.

Sooner than I wish he had, the referee broke them apart

Two weeks before, Beany would probably have lost his left glove in his antagonist's mid-section in an effort to bring his guard down, and then have tried to shoot in a slumber potion right on the button.

Now, afraid to win and just as much afraid to lose, he stalled at piling all over his man, so as to give Lodge Pole another chance to clinch.

Which Lodge Pole did, hard and solid, same as if he had been bulldogging a three-quarter-ton, mouth-frothing steer.

The referee had a pretty hard time breaking them apart, 'cause Beany is holding as much as the battered puncher.

At last they're separated. And then what does that hairy-chested maverick do but sail right after Beany, wild as a locoed bull!

Naturally, Beany is again tore with somersaulting anxiety as to what them unsmiling cow-punchers is liable to do. If he slugs one through, and——

He doesn't do anything like that, at all. It was Lodge Pole who done the slugging—with a right-hander that starts clear down near the floor and comes streaking up to catch Beany flush on the jaw.

"Birdies!" I sighs to myself. "He's out for the rest of the rodeo show."

But he wasn't. He didn't even take the count of one before he's on his feet and diving into a clinch. He got that sock because his brain was running on a two-track road. But even a steam hammer smashing him on the skull, couldn't drive out of his mind the sight of those gun-toting cowhands—or his growing fear that maybe the miners and railroaders were heeled, too.

Once more it was only Mr. Soccrensen's bean that kept him from getting the k. o., before the bell sent him to his corner.

THERE, the first thing he asked was: "What had I oughta do, Mack?"

"Stay down the next time, you get a good one," I whispered.

"But them cowboys?" Beany comes back, worried. "They've got cannons. They look grim. And I'll bet any one of them can send a bullet through the eye of a needle at a hundred yards. If I drops this puncher——"

"He drops you," I cut him off. "That will——"

"Maybe it won't," Beany persisted. "Maybe they've bet on me. If they have, and I dive—what? Or maybe this Lodge Pole is a bosom pal of theirn. So if I drop him, I'll get it just the same."

That was the brain muddle Beany was in, when the gong sounded.

At that moment he was so much of a problem to me and Sam, we was most ready to sob. What, oh, what, if he should go crazy and bang in a finisher?

Then of a sudden, in the midst of a swirl of fists, Lodge Pole finds Beany's button with a right-hand jolt, that drops him, face down, on the canvas.

While the bellowing roar is going up I swallows hard as I tells myself: "This time, there ain't no fooling. He's down for the count, sure as a hundred cents makes a dollar."

And that's the way it ought to have been, if Beany'd have been at all human. But some hole in that groggy brain of his must have let in the roar of the crowd and the thought of them cowboys.

For at the count of five, he wabbly-like hitched up onto his knees, his gloves on the canvas.

I'm not worrying, though. Neither is Sam. Beany ain't going to get on his feet before the count of ten or even twenty. That howl brought him this far, but he won't make it any farther.

That was then. But what happened right atop of it even yet makes me feel all gone in my stomach.

Maybe Lodge Pole oughtn't be blamed too much for what he done, either. With the crowd fair screeching, he was afraid he hadn't laid his man away proper, and with everybody in the world seemingly squalling for him to do something, it made him goofy.

Still and all, he might have kept himself under control a little, considering—well, considering I and Beany had bet every cent we owned on him—purse money and all. Yet what did he do but—with Beany on his knees, half supporting himself with his hands on the canvas—but sock Mr. Soccrensen with a solid left, then follow it up with two stiff rights.

I won't say it was a deliberate foul, 'cause the fool puncher was loony, from the smell of victory and a million other things. Yet the result was the same. He had lost the fight on a foul—nothing else to it.

Before I had time to feel sorry for myself, though, that back-firing ring blunderer wasn't bothering me a bit. For like one—in mass—in total—everybody there bounced to their feet and come a charging, wild, furious and yowling, for the ring.

What I ought to have done, maybe, was stayed there and been shot, knifed or hung, stoical as a proud Injun chief.

But, knowing how that bout was fixed, what I really done was slosh Beany with a bucket of water, which brought him to. Then with him right behind me, we butted our way like a couple of scared bull elephants to open country.

Soon we was out of town, in the sage and thorny brush, panting something awful as we dashed south. While Sam and Lodge Pole—though we didn't know it at the time—was charging through more brush, northward.

Every time my foot hit a sharp rock, I made a resolution. It's on the up-and-up for me in the fight racket from Saddle City on!

You—and Your Career

By John Hampton

A Department of Interviews with Successful Men, and Information and Advice for Ambitious Men.

THOMAS A. EDISON, Inventor

GET into the business for which you're best fitted. You'll be happier and healthier and—possibly—more prosperous if you do. Decide to devote an hour's time a day, for the next two weeks, to the question of finding out just what your vocation is.

Every one can't be a first-class aviator. Many men would be miserable sitting behind a bank president's desk. People to whom machinery is a mystery make very poor automobile mechanics. Some unsuccessful writers could be very prosperous salesmen. What field interests *you* most?

Some success in almost any field is within the reach of the man of average intelligence. Persistent effort will bring reward of a kind. But most men want to do more than "just get by." The chances are that you will progress further and faster if you're engaged in the sort of work that interests you exceedingly.

What do you particularly want to do? That's the first question for you to answer. The answer varies with different people, for every one hasn't the same ambition. Select your line.

Then learn something about that particular field of endeavor. What natural abilities have you? Do these improve your chances for success in the vocation you have selected?

By all means consult men who are already in the field that appeals to you. Some men leave all thought of business behind them when the day's work is done. Others are prone to talk business all the time. You'll have little difficulty in securing information from them.

Since you're going to make this vocation your life work, read biographies of men who are its outstanding figures. Analyze their characters. Emulate their good qualities. Learn from their mistakes and failures.

What educational qualifications are necessary for great success in your selected vocation? What subjects must be mastered? How familiar are you with these subjects?

Begin at once to study for your life work. Spend your spare time in research. Thoroughly examine the most recent publications that treat of the occupation that interests you. Get in touch with prominent persons who are engaged in the vocation you have selected. Write to them. Tell them your ambition and ask for advice.

If you are handicapped by environment, lack of early training, or a paucity of self-confidence, redouble your efforts. One point often brought out in these articles is that determination destroys obstacles.

In your own community you'll find many men who have succeeded in spite of handicaps. Look around you, and get fresh enthusiasm and inspiration from these men. Ambition spurred them. Determination kept them strug-

gling on. Handicaps, to some men, are merely incentives for greater efforts. Be that sort of a man.

By investigating, you can make sure that the vocation you select is not limited in future possibilities. Anticipate developments in the business, instead of ignoring the chance of change. Before taking up a course of study, secure proof that graduates of that particular course have been able to market the knowledge gained from it.

Perhaps you are undecided as to what vocation to select. If so, investigate a number of vocations. Secure information from different sources about several occupations. Become curious about a number of ways of making a living. Get all the information you can, from everybody you know.

The choice of a vocation should not be made impulsively. Don't decide upon your life's work merely because a friend is interested in that line. Compare different occupations, businesses, professions.

When you've decided upon your vocation, ask yourself why you've selected it. Are you interested primarily in the money to be made in that business? Do you believe you'll be happier in that line than in any other? Are you motivated by the prestige or glamour surrounding that particular occupation?

The desire for money, the desire for happiness, the desire for the admiration of your fellow men—these three motives are strong. If possible, select a vocation that will satisfy these three desires.

When you've picked your vocation, and have gathered all the available information concerning it, start planning, working, progressing toward your goal. Whatever you're going to be, be a good one. Artist or zoölogist, bookkeeper or xylophone player, carpenter or business man—no matter what the trade, profession, or sphere of activity—be first-class at it. Make this your goal. Keep striving for it. When you deserve a good reputation, you'll get that kind. When you have that reputation, you'll be a success.

Here's the story of a man whose name is a household word. He has affected mankind beneficially in innumerable ways. He can command wealth. He is happy. He enjoys the commendation of his fellow men. His name is Thomas A. Edison.

Two characteristics marked Edison as a youth—his restless curiosity and his unconquerable patience. These traits are within the reach of every man. In school, Edison stood at the foot of the class. In after life, he educated himself. That the dull schoolboy became the famous inventor was due to his restless curiosity and his unconquerable patience.

He was continually observing. Every process of nature and every application of mechanics was watched and studied. Whatever was strange, unexplained, or considered impossible became the subject of inquiry in his laboratory.

Thomas A. Edison's mother had been a school-teacher. His father was a man of roving spirit, given to believing that wealth was waiting to be picked up just around the corner or over the top of that hill.

The youngster's tireless mental activity alarmed his parents. They tried to discourage his continual thinking, wondering. They decided not to send him to school. He was not going to be taught letters, for that would lead to reading—and reading would start his mind off on new and complicated thoughts and investigations.

So young Tom Edison learned his letters from the signs over the stores in the town of Port Huron, Michigan. He was soon able to read. What could anybody do with a boy like that? And he would ask questions—shrewd, clever questions that were almost impossible to answer.

So the youngster was sent to school. His teacher reported that the boy seemed "addled." So Edison's mother took him from school and taught him herself. And always he was experimenting, investigating, gathering information, trying out his ideas.

Aged twelve, and Thomas A. Edison evolved a wonderful scheme. Flying was a matter of lifting weight by the force of lighter-than-air gases. His father's chore boy, named Michael, was allowed to be the weight that was going to be lifted. Young Edison's theory was that seidlitz powders would produce the gas. Michael took the large quantity of seidlitz powders, but didn't rise in the air. He became deathly sick instead.

This was but one of dozens of experiments that young Edison made. He filled the cellar with apparatus and had a big shelf full of bottles, each one labeled "Poison," so that inquisitive people would not bother them.

He sought and gained his parents' consent to work as a newsboy on the Grand Trunk Railroad. He walked into the railroad office, negotiated a contract to sell papers on its trains. He was twelve years old at the time. The money he made he planned to use to finance further experiments.

He began with the local train, soon employed another boy, and presently took over the express run between Detroit and Port Huron and points beyond. He brought vegetables from Detroit, hired another boy to sell them from a stand in Port Huron. He did a thriving business along the line in butter and berries.

The baggage car on his train had three compartments—for baggage, for mail, and for smokers. There were no windows in this smokers' compartment, so its use was forbidden. Young Edison installed a printing press in this compartment. He was the publisher of "the first newspaper ever printed on a train." Price, three cents a copy, or eight cents a month. The project caused much talk. The great London newspaper, the *Times,* referred to its new contemporary, *The Weekly Herald.*

While not otherwise occupied, young Edison was busy in his traveling laboratory—part of the smokers' compartment. One day the train lurched around a curve. A stick of phosphorus was flung to the floor, before the young man could grab it. Instantly there were flames. The baggageman grabbed a pail of water, gave young Edison a whack alongside the head, then put out the fire.

Deafness did not follow at once. Eventually, however, Edison's hearing was affected. The baggageman placed young Edison, together with his printing press, his belongings, his laboratory, on the platform of the next station the train reached. The train continued its journey, but Edison did not.

He was taught telegraphy by a friend, and soon qualified as an operator. His deafness increased, but he found this an advantage, instead of a handicap. He says that being deaf enables him to think, even though in a crowd.

Edison's experimenting continued. Every statement of a mechanical or chemical process he read about was studied, conjectured about, checked up, if possible. He worked and studied, his curiosity at white heat, busy and happy.

Finding time in which to sleep was difficult. He hit on the idea of having an alarm clock awaken him before the arrival of each train running on his "trick." Some one learned of this scheme, and informed the chief train dispatcher.

Young Edison was ordered to report every half hour. Being an inventor, the rest was easy. He connected the alarm clock and the telegraph instrument in such a fashion that the necessary signal was sent automatically every half hour.

This invention worked perfectly, for a time. Then, one night, the chief called Edison by wire. For fifteen minutes the chief tried to raise the sleeping operator. Worried, the dispatcher boarded a hand car and set off for Edison's station. The future famous inventor was discharged.

Then followed a period of wandering from place to place, from one job to another. He eliminated extra strokes so that his handwriting was pruned down to the fewest possible strokes. Eventually he landed in Boston and got a job with the Western Union.

His experimenting took a practical turn—or so he thought. He developed an automatic vote recorder, his first patented invention. He went to Washington, anticipating wealth and fame. He found no market for his machine. He went back to Boston.

He began to tinker with the existing ticker machines used for stock quotations. He invented, tried out improvements, discarded failures, and came to New York, without money, friends, or prospects. Soon he had developed an improvement on the ticker device then in use.

Edison had mentally decided his idea was worth five thousand dollars. He thought that he'd take three thousand—if he could get it. Marshall Lefferts, president of the Western Union, offered him forty thousand dollars! Edison had arrived.

Perhaps the best illustration of his methods of work is the story of the incandescent electric light. In the effort to wrest a great secret from nature, Edison spent over forty thousand dollars, worked day and night for a period of nearly two years, pondered, and experimented with incredible patience.

He started by buying the back numbers of every obtainable periodical dealing with illumination, the proceedings of scientific bodies in their bearings on the subject, and dozens of incidental volumes. Then he read all these books and periodicals, meanwhile beginning his experiments.

He decided that the incandescent lamp had to glow in a vacuum, or as near a vacuum as could be produced. He had to have a glass bulb, which would embody all the resistance possible, with the least weight. While endeaving to capture the spark, he experimented with the glass to hold the spark. He tried to carbonize paper for the filament, but the heat burned up the oxidized paper.

The power of reasoning that preceded each step in his development of the electric light is remarkable. First he divined—decided what he needed. Then he sought for what he needed. Eventually he found what he needed.

He wanted a filament that had high resistance to wear and destruction. He wanted a light that any one could turn off and on at will, without regard to other lights burning on the same wire. Scientists smiled when they learned that a young man named Edison expected to solve the electric-light problem, which they had declared to be insolvable.

Edison made hundreds of experiments in an effort to find a filament. He coated a filament of carbon with powdered glass, hoping the melting glass would inclose the carbon and so provide a filament of the needed resistance. That experiment failed.

He tried platinum and iridium wire. By April, 1879—after more than a year's work—he had devised a means whereby platinum wire, that melted in the open air when it gave a volume of light equal to four candles, would glow in a glass globe and generate the light of twenty-five candles.

The cost of the platinum wire was too great. He had to have a filament made of an inexpensive material and capable of withstanding two thousand degrees of heat for about a thousand hours. Edison and his staff worked

with feverish intensity, for his funds were running low.

One day his hand fell upon a piece of ordinary sewing thread. He looked at it sharply, wound the tiny filament between his fingers, and thought swiftly. He'd tried scores of different possible filaments—why not try this?

The bit of cotton thread was introduced into a globe and carbonized and burned for forty hours. The electric lamp was achieved on October 21, 1879. But the cotton thread lacked the strength for resistance to intense heat. More research!

Threads of manila rope were dipped in tar and carbonized. Combinations of lime and other chemical bodies were used as a coating for the fiber, but all failed to meet the exact need.

Once more chance seemed to interfere. But it was not chance—for Edison was constantly thinking of his problems. One hot day in 1880, Edison, fanning himself, observed the tough strip of bamboo running around the fan. A few minutes later it had been cut into strips and introduced into lamps.

It gave an excellent light and showed the much-wanted heat resistance. A world-wide search was made for better bamboo for this purpose, but none ever discovered was better than the variety first used.

Over two years of work! The expenditure of almost all the funds in Edison's possession. An impossibility accomplished, due to persistent, never-ceasing research and experimenting.

This discovery has vitally affected the life of practically every citizen of the United States to-day. You accept the electric light unthinkingly. Just imagine getting along for a week without using an electric light of any kind, not even a flash light!

In order to apply the principle of the electric light on an adequate scale, Edison needed a better dynamo. So he invented one. Within a decade, the distribution of power for private consumption became a considerable part of the power station's business.

This distribution of power brought about a new idea of industrial operation. Instead of every plant having its own engine and boiler, industry could buy its energy from a central point. Then another development occurred.

Now, instead of bringing coal by train and ship to distant points, and there manufacturing electric energy, large plants are being built beside waterfalls and near coal mines. And dams are being built to gather energy. And this energy is sent across the country over great transmission lines, strung on steel skyscraper poles!

All this can be traced to the persistent curiosity of one man, a man who experimented, whose patience was inexhaustible and whose concentration was exceptional.

In your search for the right vocation, display that willingness to seek untiringly that is Edison's strong characteristic. Devote time and thought to this search. Keep on investigating until you have sound and worth-while information.

Then, when you've decided on the sort of work you like, and have started to work in that line, display some of Thomas A. Edison's willingness to work persistently. Edison is industrious. He does a day's work every twenty-four hours. How about you—are you as industrious as Edison?

Perhaps, even though you've secured some information about a business or occupation that interests you, you're still undecided as to what to do. If so, jot down arguments for and against this particular way of making a living. Ask half a dozen of your friends what they think about it. Be impartial—don't let a good talker convince you, or permit a gloomy bozo to discourage

you. Listen, think, compare, estimate, judge, and come to a decision.

If you care to, drop me a line, giving me your reasons for selecting that vocation. This information may be valuable when an undecided reader of this department writes in for data concerning a particular trade, business, or occupation. If you have difficulty deciding on your vocation, write to me, presenting your difficulty. Talking over your problems may help solve them. Letters marked "Do Not Print" will not be answered in these columns.

All communications from readers will be answered direct. Only questions of general interest will be used in this department. There is no charge connected with this service. Address all "You—and Your Career" letters to John Hampton, care of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

S. S. You haven't given me enough information for me to advise you. Talk this matter over with your wife. She is vitally interested in your career. Your decision will affect her, as well as yourself. She is entitled to a say in the matter.

Though you may not be aware of it, your wife is very well acquainted with your character, disposition, possibilities, and limitations. She has studied you, observed the way your mind works, analyzed you thoroughly. The fact that, every time you bring up the topic, she begins to argue shows she has been thinking about it.

Stop ignoring her. Listen to her. Weigh what she says. Try to comprehend her viewpoint. She must have some good arguments on her side, or you wouldn't get angry when you discuss this matter with her.

T. W. Before buying this stock, investigate thoroughly. The returns promised seem unusually high. Why do these people want you to invest your money, when an enormous profit seems a certainty? Why don't they put their own funds into this stock instead of coming to you, an utter stranger, and trying to persuade you to put your savings into it? If they are wealthy men, they are not in need of your comparatively small bank account.

Don't be carried away by the impassioned selling talk of a high-powered salesman. Better be cautious. In another five years, at your present rate of saving, you will be independent for life. Don't risk this future security by being reckless now.

L. G. You are aware that your sharp-edged tongue is making enemies, instead of friends, yet you say you can't control it.

By saying whatever comes into your mind, no matter how much you offend, annoy, or humiliate others, you advertise to every one your lack of good taste. People are perhaps wondering why you were not thrashed soundly and often when you were younger. Certainly they think your early environment was not all it should have been. That you have not learned to control your tongue reflects, as you may be aware, upon your ability to learn since your childhood days.

The above comments are intended to shock or shame you into a realization of how other people view you. It's about time you made a sincere and desperate effort to overcome this fault in your make-up. This flaw, unless corrected, will prove a handicap throughout the rest of your life. You can correct it.

Briefly, think before you speak—and think slowly. Read up on psychology, so you can understand yourself better. A list of books has been sent to you. And, all the time, during your waking hours, think before you speak—and think slowly.

A Talk With You

News and Views by the Editors and Readers

DECEMBER 1, 1929

WE have had so many queries about Mr. Burt L. Standish and about the new Frank Merriwell stories now appearing in TOP-NOTCH that we appealed to Mr. Standish to help us out. He's a very fine gentlemen and he did, though he didn't tell us as much about himself as we think our readers would like to know. He likes to write, but not about himself. Here's what he has to say and here's his picture.

BURT L. STANDISH

WHEN Harold Lloyd made the motion picture called 'The Freshman,' a few years ago, he was threatened with suits for plagiarism by the late H. C. Witwer, the humorous writer, and Owen Davis, the dramatist. In reviewing the situation, a certain motion-picture magazine said: 'If Burt L. Standish were alive he could sue Lloyd also.' I immediately wrote the editor that, as Mark Twain had once said, the report of my death was greatly exaggerated.

"Since the appearance of the first of the series of Merriwell stories now runing in this magazine, I have received many letters, asking if I were really writing them. The writers of the letters, all old Merriwell readers, admitted that the yarns sounded very much like my 'stuff,' but added that they were under the impression that I had ceased to write and had retired to live on my immense income.

"Of course, I was forced to confess the shameful truth, to wit: I have never retired, and I am still writing Merriwell stories.

"At the present time I'm writing about the son of the original Frank Merriwell, who, like his brother, Dick, was my creation.

"In young Frank I'm attempting to give the readers of this magazine a worthy son of his father, a modern boy, clean, upright, fearless, loyal and attractive. He is not flawless, even though drinking and smoking are habits he has not acquired, and I have sought to depict him as not unduly or ridiculously heroic.

"It was my plan, however, to have him progress and develop as the stories went on. I hope you will like him somewhat, at least, and will find the stories interesting.

"It is my intention to surround Frank with a group of modern characters similar in a way to some of the characters in the original stories, which I created and found no small pleasure in writing about.

"Such characters, for instance, as 'Cap'n Wiley,' 'Brad Buckhart,' 'Bruce Browning,' 'Dale Sparkfair,' 'Old Joe Crowfoot,' 'Ephraim Gallup,' 'Inza Burrage,' 'Elsie Bellwood,' and many others.

"I've even contemplated bringing 'Old Joe,' now something over a hun-

dred, back into the present series. 'Heap old, mebbe,' but still able to play a crafty game of poker and outwit his own and young Frank's enemies in a pinch.

"But everything will depend on how the stories are received by the readers of TOP-NOTCH. If they are well liked I shall, I'm sure, enjoy going on with them. If they are not liked there will be no enjoyment for me in writing them and no profit to the publishers in printing them.

"The only way that we, the publishers and the author, can tell whether you like or dislike them is by your letters. So won't you please be good enough to write to the editor of the magazine and express your honest reactions to the yarns? Don't say you like them if you don't, but please say you do if you do.

"And here's a salute, and my most sincere thanks and gratitude, to my old readers and friends of long ago, and to new readers and friends of to-day, whoever and wherever they may be.

"Yours sincerely,
"BURT L. STANDISH."

You'll have to admit that Mr. Standish is a straight shooter. He knows that our readers are the final judges of the worth of his stories, and he's asking for their opinion. We feel sure that you, our readers, will respond to his request.

CHRISTMAS is in the offing and, naturally, we've got a Christmas story for you in our next number. It's "Mushing the Yuletide Trail," by J. Wendel Davis. Mr. Davis knows his Northland and he's written a splendid story in a setting of snow, ice and blizzard. Then, there's a complete Frank Merriwell novel in this coming Christmas number, as well as stories by such popular writers as Vic Whitman and Sewell Peaslee Wright.

We want to call special attention to the novelette in our next issue. It's "Deep Black," by W. Ryerson Johnson. In this story Mr. Johnson carries you down into the depths of a coal mine, and through a series of events that are intensely exciting and starkly realistic. It's a story that commands the reader's attention from beginning to end. And there will be other good stories and John Hampton's article, "You—and Your Career," that is rapidly becoming famous. This time he writes about William Fox, the moving-picture magnate.

"The same advice I gave your Dad . . . Listerine, *often"*

Do you remember—

When the good old family doctor came into the house, how your heart began to thump? You didn't know but what you had cholera morbus or something equally dreadful. You saw yourself dying in no time.

Then his firm gentle hands poked you here and there. His bright kind eyes looked down your gullet. And, oh, what a load left your mind when you learned that your trouble was only a badly inflamed throat and that Listerine would take care of it?

The basic things of life seldom change: Listerine, today, is the same tireless enemy of sore throat and colds that it was half a century ago.

It is regularly prescribed by the bright, busy young physicians of this day, just as it was by those old timers—bless their souls—who mixed friendship and wisdom with their medicines.

Used full strength, Listerine kills in 15 seconds even the virulent Staphylococcus Aureus (pus) and Bacillus Typhosus (typhoid) germs in counts ranging to 200,000,000. We could not make this statement unless we were prepared to prove it to the entire satisfaction of the medical profession and the U. S. Government. Three well-known bacteriological laboratories have demonstrated this amazing germ-killing power of Listerine. Yet it is so safe it may be used full strength in any body cavity.

Make a habit of gargling systematically with full strength Listerine during nasty weather. It aids in preventing the outbreak of colds and sore throat. And often remedies them when they have developed. Lambert Pharmacal Company, St. Louis, Mo., U. S. A.

It checks

SORE THROAT

KILLS 200,000,000 GERMS IN 15 SECONDS

Judges of Quality

"One thing you can say for the men—they know a good smoke."

Their judgment has made Camels the most popular cigarette in the United States.

Camel

CIGARETTES