TWICE-A-MONTH

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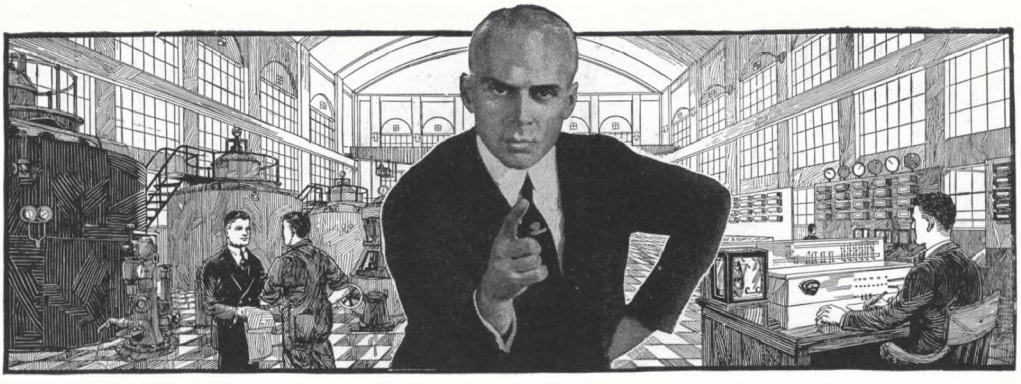
Top-Notch Magazine

JAN. 15, 1925

MANHATTAN MAGIC A COMPLETE NOVEL BY Roland Ashford Phillips



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Manhattan Magic

By Roland Ashford Phillips

(A COMPLETE NOVEL)

CHAPTER I.

A STARTLING SHOCK.

FOR a moment Kenyon stood in the narrow doorway of the remodeled brownstone front and peered out into the rain that had been falling steadily since dusk. The gloomy side street was deserted. No pedestrians were abroad, and cruising taxicabs had no occasion to prowl along its curb, particularly on a wet night when the near-by theatrical district with its pleasure-seeking throngs offered rich cargoes.

At one end of the long block an "L" train rumbled past; and at the other, under a murky, yellow glow, punctured by moving lights and hurrying forms, Broadway advertised itself. But where Kenyon was marooned, the street was a ribbon of black asphalt upon which the rain drummed monotonously.

He should have telephoned for a cab before leaving Randal's apartment above; that much he realized now. He frowned, however, upon the thought of climbing three flights of stairs and down again to remedy matters.

There was no telephone nearer than the corner, or the armchair dairy lunch in the middle of the block. The probabilities were, he reflected, the cab stands would be choked with calls and nothing but a promise would be exacted.

After waiting more or less patiently for a rubber-shod steed to show up, he decided to brave the rain and invade the sections where "cruisers" were plentiful.

Oddly enough, as he stepped from his

shelter and headed toward Broadway, a cab skidded around the corner and bore down upon him. His whistle brought it alongside the curb.

"Where to?" the driver inquired, thrusting his head over the oilskin apron that protected him.

"No. 733 Riverside," Kenyon ordered, opening the door and climbing into the dark but comfortable and dry interior of the cab.

"Say, boss, you in a big hurry?" The driver lowered the window back of his seat to address his fare. "If you are, I'll take you right up; but I was just headin' in here for a mug of Java and a couple of sinkers. Been on the go since five o'clock. How about it now?"

Kenyon, thankful for the cab and its shelter, was inclined to be tolerant. Just at present, time was not a precious asset. "No great hurry," he admitted.

"I won't be more 'an a couple of minutes," the driver promised, unbuckling the curtains and hopping out; "and I won't charge you for waiting time, either," he added, grinning.

"All right! Go to it!" responded Kenyon.

"Much obliged!"

The driver scurried off in the rain, his wet coat flopping at his heels, to disappear through a door farther down the street where the lighted window of an all-night lunch room cast a yellow radiance across the walk.

Kenyon settled back in the far corner of the cab, heaved a sigh of relief, and fumbled leisurely through his pockets for a cigar. Once it was going he felt more comfortable—as comfortable, that is, as an average man could feel after a scrimmage with Hard Luck, Esquire, and coming off second best.

Kenyon was bent, battered, and groggy; and he looked it. After a six-month exile he had returned to New York to catch his breath and meditate upon things that might have been. The city failed to provide its usual "kick;" but the blame was not Manhattan's.

None knew of his return except Randal; and barely three hours before, the latter had stared at him in wide-eyed astonishment when the unheralded guest appeared.

"So help me, Hannah!" cried Randal. "If it isn't Kenyon!"

"That's what they used to call me," Kenyon responded. "Put on another plate and invite me to dinner."

"What brings you back here at this season?" Randal asked when the newcomer was inside. "Why, I thought——"

"So did I, Ranny," Kenyon interrupted. "It's a long, harrowing tale. Let it wait until to-morrow. If you've an engagement, trot along. I'll dig up enough to eat in the kitchen. And you needn't hurry back, for I intend to turn in early, if your spare room isn't working."

"If you'd only wired I might have canceled my date. As it is now I'll have to hurry along. Tell me! What's happened?"

"Everything; and a little bit more."

"Well, you look it," Randal declared. "Don't tell me your Arizona proposition has blown up!"

"You're looking at the fragments, Ranny."

"Good Lord!" Randal exclaimed, stunned by the news. "Don't tell me that! What happened?"

"I'd keep you standing here all night if I answered that question," Kenyon responded. "It would make a couple of books—more thrilling than those you devour, Ranny. Put bluntly, the thing was a gigantic swindle. Dad didn't think so; and it might have gone across if he had lived. But when I stepped into his shoes, the rest of the crowd decided to play me for the goat. They disappeared, and I stayed. My own fault, I guess. Softhearted, so I've been told. But the Kenyon name was used to lure investors; and it's up to the last of the Kenyons to square accounts."

"You—alone?"

"Certainly! Most of the investors—trusting ranchers out there among the sand dunes—believed what my father told them, and——" Kenyon checked himself. "No use going into details now. I've simply come on here to raise some cash. If I'm lucky I'll be out of town again before the end of the week."

"Doesn't Andrew know you're back?" Randal asked, referring to the caretaker at the Kenyon house uptown.

"No. You're the only one, Ranny.

I'll see Andrew to-morrow or the day after. No use being in a hurry with bad news. The house is to be sold, of course."

"You know how I feel about it, Kenyon. No necessity for going uptown at all. Glad to have you roost here. Make yourself comfortable and turn in whenever you like. We'll have a talk in the morning."

When Randal had taken a reluctant departure, Kenyon found himself something to eat and skimmed through the newspapers. He was glad that the lightning had struck in Arizona instead of New York and that the rumble of thunder had yet to be heard in Manhattan.

The thought of taking a trip uptown never entered his mind until it occurred to him, suddenly, that he needed some data relative to a business appointment on the following day.

As the engagement was for ten o'clock, and he preferred to sleep a little late in the morning, Kenyon decided to make the unpleasant pilgrimage at once, despite the weather and the hour.

He did not telephone to Andrew. The caretaker would be in a flurry of excitement if he anticipated his arrival, and Kenyon concluded to walk in on him unannounced, explaining that he would be in town but a few days and did not propose to occupy his room.

After scribbling a note to Randal, in case his host returned earlier than anticipated and would wonder at the absence of his guest, Kenyon bundled into his raincoat and descended to the street.

At present, safely esconced against the weather, with the rain drumming upon the roof of the cab and blurring the windows, Kenyon was so deeply engrossed in his thoughts that he was scarcely conscious of the movement as the cab door swung open; nor did he emerge completely from his self-absorption until a shadowy form slipped into the seat beside him.

As the door clicked shut and Kenyon came to himself with a start, the intruder uttered a low cry:

"Oh, I'm sorry! I—I thought this cab was empty." There was a distinct note of fear and anxiety in the girl's voice.

In the dark cavern of the hooded car, Kenyon was unable to distinguish more than a blob of shadow that represented his unexpected companion; but the voice dispelled whatever suspicions he might have entertained. It appealed to him instantly.

Before he could speak, the girl started from the seat and opened the door, as if to make a quick exit from what must have been an embarrassing situation.

"Please wait!" Kenyon broke out quickly. "I'm in no great hurry. The driver will be here presently. You may have the cab. I'll find another one."

Part way out of the cab and with one foot on the running board, the girl hesitated, as if half inclined to accept the offer. "I—I am in a hurry," she wavered; "but I wouldn't put you to so much trouble."

"There's no trouble connected with it," he assured her. "I've the whole night before me. Please accept the cab with my compliments. I'll walk over to Broadway and——"

Interrupting him, the girl drew in a quick, audible breath; then, with amazing swiftness she jumped back into the cab, closed the door behind her, and huddled against the cushions.

Startled by her singular behavior and unable to account for it, Kenyon scowled; but before he could question her and seek some explanation, the girl broke into a frightened whisper.

"That man—coming this way! Please —he mustn't see me. Don't make me get out—now. He has been following me all evening."

"Following you?" Kenyon echoed, and turned to peer through the window in the rear of the taxicab.

He made out, dimly, an approaching figure. When the man reached the lighted window of the dairy lunch, he paused; then he stepped close to the window as if to survey whoever might be within.

"He mustn't find me," he girl broke out. "Not now!"

"He won't," Kenyon assured her calmly.

"But he may look in here," she suggested. "He's sure to. He—he saw me turn into this street."

Kenyon continued to frown at the situation in which he unwittingly found him-

self. He knew neither of the principals concerned in the mystery; yet he was prepared to shield the girl who had come to him and begged for protection.

"We'll forestall that emergency," he declared briskly, aware that if the girl had been seen to disappear along this street, the unknown pursuer would naturally investigate the parked cab.

"Just change places with me," Kenyon ordered, rising to permit his companion to move over on the far end of the seat. "I'll sit next to the window and play bulldog," he added, beginning to enjoy the part he had taken upon himself to play.

Quietly the girl obeyed. Kenyon lowered the window that commanded a view of the sidewalk. The slanting rain, coming from the opposite direction, did not blow into the darkened cab interior. Huddled against the door at the far end of the seat, the girl's coat completely enveloped her. Kenyon himself could barely distinguish the outlines of her crouched form. Unless a light was struck, her presence would not be discovered.

The man beyond, apparently satisfied that his quarry was not in the lunch room, turned and resumed his course. When he reached a point opposite the cab he hesitated, as if entertaining a suspicion that a dark and driverless taxicab might offer refuge for the one he sought.

As the man stepped forward, obviously intending to open the cab door and inspect the closed tonneau, Kenyon spoke sharply.

"Well?"

Startled by the voice from the window, the man fell back a step. "Excuse me!" he said curtly. "Didn't know the cab was occupied."

"What difference would it have made?" Kenyon asked, leaning forward in an effort—a futile one—to get a clearer glimpse of the newcomer's face.

The man shrugged, but did not seem inclined to answer the query. "How long have you been here?" he asked.

"Three or four minutes."

"See anything of a girl wandering this way?"

"No one's passed this cab since I've been here," Kenyon responded truthfully.

"Huh! That's funny. She turned this way off Sixth. Ducked me somehow."

"Well," observed Kenyon, "it's a fine night for ducks."

"You said a large mouthful," the other came back.

The man swung about, but instead of continuing up the street, he stepped into the shelter of a doorway. Presently a match flared in the darkness. Cupped in his hands, the light brought the man's countenance into sharp relief.

Kenyon was the recipient of a distinct and unpleasant shock, although he did not betray himself to the girl crouched on the seat beside him. The man who had talked with him a moment before, and who had stepped into the doorway to light a cigarette, was Lasky, a detective from police headquarters.

CHAPTER II.

SOMEWHAT EMBARRASSING.

WITH a mind filled with doubt and speculation, Kenyon leaned back in the taxicab. The appearance and identification of the police detective, Lasky, had thrown a new light on the little drama in which he was now more than a disinterested spectator.

He was not acquainted with Lasky, but Randal knew him very well; and on more than one occasion, usually in the vicinity of Times Square, Randal had spoken to the detective or pointed him out as one of the shrewdest of Manhattan's plain-clothes men.

Kenyon had been interested enough in the past to study the man at close range; and partly because of that, and partly because Lasky had a face not readily forgotten, Kenyon instantly recognized the detective in the swift flare of the lighted match.

The sight of Lasky, and all that his organization represented, brought back vividly to Kenyon the recollection of a year past, when his premises on Riverside had been the storm center of police activities; recalled poignantly to mind the excitement and unpleasant newspaper notoriety that followed the theft of the Desert Diamond, the amulet from the Navajo country, whose origin and history remained unsolved.

Swiftly and in sequence it came back to him as he sat in the dark cab: the

tracking down of the culprit, his escape by ship, his attempted capture, and his spectacular suicide by jumping overboard in midocean, carrying the diamond with him.

That had marked, it seemed, the blight on the house of Kenyon, for shortly afterward his father had died, and close on the heels of that followed the collapse of the great Arizona project.

All this, and more, swept through Kenyon's mind in the brief moment following his glimpse of Lasky.

"He doesn't fool with little game," Randal often remarked. "Not that bird! He does gunning for big stuff—and gets them."

That remark found a lodging in Kenyon's thoughts when he glanced at the girl huddled beside him. Lasky was on the trail, and Kenyon had, deliberately, blocked pursuit.

"Has he gone?" It was the girl who spoke in a whisper, doubtless puzzled at the silence of her benefactor.

"Yes," Kenyon answered, for he had seen Lasky step from the doorway and move off toward Broadway.

The girl straightened and broke into a nervous flutter of a laugh that was not wholly devoid of relief. "That—that was a close call, wasn't it?" she said. "I don't know how to thank you."

"Never mind trying," Kenyon responded.

He bent forward a little, baffled and curious, seeking to probe the indeterminate oval of her face, striving to penetrate the darkness that veiled her countenance; but in this he was unsuccessful.

The obscurity of the dark cab was a tantalizing mask that obscured her as completely as it did himself. He caught the faint, elusive redolence of perfume that his masculine mind failed to identify; heard her rapid breathing.

"I suppose you are waiting for me to explain," she began out of the prolonged silence that again hung between them.

"That's the last thing in my mind," Kenyon responded frankly, in a tone that must have revealed more than he intended it should.

The girl moved slightly, and he fancied she had turned to peer at him with something more than ordinary interest. As for Kenyon, he was not at all disturbed by the knowledge of what he had done. There was a charm and witchery in her voice that dispelled whatever vague suspicions he might at first have held against the girl. Somehow, in spite of the apparent evidence, he could not associate it with anything unwholesome—anything questionable.

"You have been very kind," she said.

His companion seemed to feel more comfortable in his presence; there was confidence in her tone. Her voice no longer wavered; it became more alluring than ever, more fascinating.

Kenyon's heart quickened as he bent forward to study the pale blur of her face. "You don't know how very glad I am to have been of service to you," he told her.

At that precise moment, Kenyon was wholly indifferent to the circumstances responsible for this rainy-night episode. For the first time in his grown-up life he had taken it upon himself to play the knight-errant, and it pleased him mightily. He held a sudden grudge against the whole police force. Come to think of it, he never did have any vast regard for detectives. In the storybook world they were forever sowing suspicion, persecuting the innocent and allowing the guilty to escape. The probabilities were, the same thing existed in real life.

As the conventional thing, romance stole forth on fairy feet in a setting of moonlight, summer breezes, honeysuckles, and far-flung stars; but on this occasion it wandered along a dismal side street in a blustering rain and took refuge in a commonplace taxicab. Kenyon, at least, was aware of its presence, and perhaps his companion suspected as much.

To a man whose world had turned topsy-turvy and who considered himself fortunate at being one jump ahead of the sheriff, Kenyon was not unwilling to reach out for romance wherever he found it.

"I've been in town only since morning," the girl remarked frankly. "I was unable to find the gentleman with whom I had an appointment until an hour ago. I phoned his residence."

"I'd consider it a privilege to accompany you to your destination in case——" Kenyon began.

"Thank you; but I hardly think that will be necessary—now," she told him. "We've eluded the man that's been trailing me."

"He's probably watching this street," Kenyon was quick to remind her. Lasky, he knew, was not so readily discouraged. "You must stay in the cab until you reach your friend's house."

"But you——"

"Oh, I don't mind a bit of rain. Did you say your friend was expecting you?" he inquired solicitously.

"Yes. I phoned him a short time ago, and he asked me to come up at once. He offered to send a cab; but I told him not to bother."

"Is it far from here?"

"I don't know. This is my first visit to New York. The address is Riverside Drive—No. 733," she replied.

Kenyon found himself genuinely interested. "It is several miles," he said. "I'm acquainted in that neighborhood."

"Perhaps you know Mr. Kenyon—Vincent Kenyon," the girl said.

"The name is familiar," he admitted, thunderstruck at the situation that had developed.

Confounded by hearing his own name and address spoken, Kenyon was on the point of springing a surprise and identifying himself; but a sudden thought checked him.

"You're acquainted with him, you say?"

"No. I've never seen him. It was through my father——" the girl began and stopped abruptly, as if she considered details superfluous.

"And you say you phoned Mr. Kenyon at that address?" he queried.

"Yes; half an hour ago."

"You talked with him?" Kenyon persisted.

"Yes."

Dumfounded by what he had heard, Kenyon might have challenged the girl's statement and probably brought about a climax; but for several reasons, any one of which would have been sufficient, he said nothing.

He sat silent a moment, trying to account for what had been told him. The girl seemed to be speaking the truth. It was difficult for him to imagine that she had invented the story. To what end? She had no occasion, so far as he could see, to reveal her movements. He had not cornered her; had not demanded that she account for Lasky's apparent activity.

Yet Kenyon could not for the life of him recall a man of his acquaintance with a daughter who would be seeking him out in New York. And to whom had she telephoned at the Riverside address? Surely Andrew had not taken it upon himself to answer the call and pass himself off as his employer! The idea was absurd.

The bit of romance that had stolen into Kenyon's life had come hand in hand with mystery. It set his pulses in tune with the drumming rain. He felt now that it was a mighty fine thing to get back to New York again, although he was unable to judge whether it was the thrill of unknown adventure that awaited him before the night was over, or the knowledge that, after all, he was not to lose trace of the gentle-voiced and frightened girl who had crept beside him seeking refuge from the storm—and a thing more sinister.

The taxicab driver loomed up suddenly. "Keep you waitin' long?" he inquired, scrambling into his seat and adjusting the curtains. "Say, I was sure hungry!" he ran on. "Now, let's see, where was it you was goin', boss?"

Kenyon, quick to act, opened the taxicab door and stood on the curb beside the car. "I want you to take the lady to No. 733 Riverside," he ordered.

"Lady?" The chauffeur turned to squint through the partly open window behind him. "Oh, I didn't know you had company. Ain't you goin' along?"

"No," Kenyon answered.

Moved by a sudden inspiration, Kenyon reached into his pocket and drew out a card. "Take this, please," he said, addressing the girl who sat far back in the shadows. "If anything happens—or you need help—you'll find a friend."

He felt her fingers touch his own—soft, warm fingers that thrilled him, that made him long to get a glimpse of the face above them.

"Good night," he said, as the engine started.

"Good night—and thank you," the girl responded.

CHAPTER III.

ON ADVENTURE'S TRAIL.

UNMINDFUL of the rain that drenched him, Kenyon, a lone figure on the curb, watched the winking red tail light of the taxicab as it wavered along the side street and vanished up Broadway; then, buttoning his coat and giving a jerk to his soggy cap, he sprinted in its wake, with but one purpose uppermost in his mind.

The Rialto's zero hour had come and gone. The lull that preceded the eleven-o'clock bedlam had ended, and all the Forties began to roar with life. Four dozen show-shop curtains had descended, and ten times as many doors were thrown open. Audiences belched forth; countless taxis, limousines, town cars, and cabriolets swarmed from curb to curb with sputtering engines and raucous horns.

Whistles sounded, policemen bellowed, and newsboys shrilled to-morrow's wares. The walks became a sea of bobbing umbrellas.

As Kenyon headed toward the activity, it was with a realization that the cab in which he had dispatched his mysterious passenger would be delayed in its journey northward. Already the vigilant traffic officers were waving the cars along one-way streets, making them take wide detours to avoid a hopeless snarl.

Since he was indifferent to the weather, Kenyon was in a position to snare a passing cab; but it proved to be more of a task than he anticipated. The first one was engaged, and the driver told him so in no uncertain terms when the prospective fare leaped upon the running board; the second and third ignored his signals. Where rich pickings were in order, drivers were inclined to pass up single fares.

It was not until the next two cabs had passed him by, and he had delivered himself of a few uncomplimentary remarks, that a familiar voice hailed him. He halted midway in the street, while protesting horns blared their wrath and brakes squeaked alarmingly.

The fender of a taxicab grazed his leg and stopped. "Hop in!" the voice commanded.

Kenyon did not wait for a second invitation. He squeezed through the half-opened door, slammed it behind him, and dropped upon the seat.

"You're a life-saver, Ranny," he acknowledged, drawing a relieved breath.

"What in blazes were you trying to do?" Randal demanded. "Collect some accident insurance? Say, you look like a drowned rat."

"I feel like two of them."

"Thought you weren't going out to-night?"

"So did I. Had another thought half an hour ago. Darned glad of it, too," Kenyon added.

He opened the window back of the driver. "733 Riverside, please! And step on it!"

"Hold on!" cried Randal. "You're not going home to-night."

"Wrong! I'm going there as fast as this bus will take me."

"How do you get that way? Commandeering my cab after I was kind enough to give you a lift! I admire your nerve."

"Well, you'll admire the tale I'm about to unfold even better," Kenyon returned. "Before the night's much older you'll be knee-deep in adventure—and it won't be second-hand, either," he added, remembering that Randal was the greatest armchair adventurer of his acquaintance.

Randal turned to survey his companion, apparently impressed by Kenyon's singular manner and speech; then he promptly demanded an explanation. By the time the cab had bucked and wormed its way through the traffic and reached Columbus Circle, Kenyon graphically had touched in the high lights of his recent side-street encounter with the mysterious unknown.

"Sure you didn't fall asleep in the cab and dream all this?" Randal queried.

"No; and I didn't read it in one of your romancing magazines, either," Kenyon retorted.

"Well, you've hit upon a fairish first chapter," the other admitted. "A presumably fair damsel blunders into your cab to avoid getting pinched, and after you have gallantly protected her, she mentions she is on her way to visit you, also letting it become known that she had

phoned your house and had been invited to call. Why in thunder didn't you call her bluff and save her all the taxi fare?"

"Why? Simple enough. I wanted the play to go on without interruption. I wanted to see another act before breaking up the show."

"But you might have remained in the cab with the girl, since you were both bound for the same address."

"Yes; I might have done that," Kenyon acknowledged; "but I wasn't sure who would be on hand to meet her at that address. I preferred to have the young lady reach her destination unaccompanied."

"And you never got so much as a squint at her face?"

"Unfortunately, no. But if she's half as charming as her voice," Kenyon added meditatively, "you're going to be the most jealous chap in Manhattan."

Randal laughed. "I've known cases where——"

"Sure; so have I," Kenyon broke in, unperturbed by the other's insinuation; "but this won't be one of them. I feel it in my bones."

"Feel your watch and bank roll still in your pockets?" Randal queried. "Your angel with a fairy voice may have had fairy fingers as well."

"Nonsense!"

"She was giving Lasky the slip, wasn't she? And he isn't out a night like this just to see if the rain is wet. The girl's a crook, and you've protected her."

"I'll require to have more evidence than that to convince me. Great Scott, Ranny!" Kenyon went on in mild exasperation. "You've devoured enough popular fiction to know by this time that almost invariably the police detective is all wrong from the start."

"Yes; but this isn't popular fiction. Besides, your glib-voiced siren handed you the lie direct when she said she phoned you at your house. We know you haven't darkened the door of it for six months."

"Great snakes, don't you get the idea? You're as dense as the weather. She doesn't know Mr. Kenyon. She merely had the Riverside address; and when she phoned the house a short time ago, some one answered and introduced himself as Vincent Kenyon. Moreover, this impostor asked the girl to come up at once. Don't you grasp what I'm driving at? Or must I illustrate it with colored picture slides?"

"I'm beginning to see a faint glimmering," admitted Randal. "If the young lady told the truth and is actually on her way to pay a visit to Mr. Kenyon, who at this moment is now riding in my taxi, then, as we would say in the classics, there's a dark-skinned individual lurking in the kindling."

"Well, you show some slight degree of ordinary intelligence after all," asserted Kenyon; "but it took a powerful long time."

The taxicab left Broadway and turned toward the Drive. Midway in the block a disconcerting report sounded. The car lurched and wabbled toward the curb.

"What's the trouble?" queried Randal.

"A tire's gone, that's all," Kenyon responded glumly.

The driver climbed out to inspect the damage. "Say, can you beat that?" he growled. "A good shoe gone blooey. Take me five minutes to put on a spare."

"That's four and a half minutes too long," said Kenyon. "We'll flag another bus."

The driver went grumblingly about his task of jacking up the car, while Kenyon, likewise grumbling, perched in the open doorway ready to hail a passing "empty." The five minutes became history. No rolling cab loomed up. Another five minutes were ticked off.

"Now step on it!" Kenyon ordered, when the new tire was in place and the driver climbed behind the wheel.

Randal had said nothing during the wait; but evidently his mind had been busy.

"Who the devil could be occupying your premises?" he asked at length as the car gathered headway.

"We'll find out within the next half hour, if this ash cart doesn't lose a wheel," responded Kenyon.

"You didn't have an engagement with a young lady—any young lady?" Randal persisted.

"I did not."

"And you can't recall any of your ac-

quaintances who might have a daughter they were sending——"

"I can not," Kenyon broke in emphatically.

"You might have spared yourself a lot of trouble had you confronted the shrinking sister with the facts and insisted upon hearing her side of the affair."

"Didn't I tell you once before that I wished to see the original program, whatever it may be, carried out? I was afraid if I interfered with any of the actors, the whole performance might be ruined."

"But couldn't the girl have carried out her part just the same? Wouldn't that have helped you?"

"Would she have believed that I was Vincent Kenyon, when she had just phoned Kenyon's residence and, supposedly, talked with him? I was just as much of a stranger to her as the one she phoned; and the other chap had the edge on me because he was at the Riverside address. No; that wouldn't have done at all, Ranny."

"What about Andrew? If your premises have been taken over as a theater in which to stage some sort of a questionable performance, I couldn't imagine Andrew being one of the actors."

"Nor I," returned Kenyon.

"I've a hunch that if there's dirty work at the old mill," Randal intimated, "your faithful caretaker is in need of succor."

The men fell silent as the speeding cab rumbled along the wet and glistening asphalt of the Drive. The street lights were blurred. The park was in shadow; and below it, vague and mist-hung, lay the river, out of which whistles boomed and pin points of lights twinkled.

Kenyon's house was a narrow, three-story structure of unpretentious gray stone, squeezed in between a mammoth apartment building and the sprawling, ornate dwelling of a film magnate. It came into view suddenly as the cab darted into a one-way branch of the drive.

Kenyon, peering through the mist, uttered an exclamation. "Lights on the parlor floor!" he declared.

"It looks very much occupied," agreed Randal, beginning to display his excitement.

Kenyon spoke sharply to the driver. "Go on to the next corner," he commanded, not wishing to excite suspicion by stopping in front of the premises.

The car rolled on with undiminished speed, swung around the far corner, and came to an abrupt stop with its headlights pointing toward Broadway.

The rain had turned into a heavy drizzle, and a cold wind whipped the river fog along the quiet side street, blurring the outlines of the tall apartments and reducing to mere blobs of color the few lights that struggled for existence.

"Got a gun, Ranny?" Kenyon asked as he stepped from the cab.

"Of course not!"

"Neither have I."

After a moment of deliberation, Kenyon thrust a bank note into the hand of the taxicab driver, who at the moment was regarding his passengers questioningly and with evident mistrust in light of the recent conversation he had overheard.

"You're to remain right here until further orders," Kenyon told him. "We may be back in five minutes, and we may be back in an hour; but you'll hold yourself in readiness in case you're called. Be on the alert, now. Get me?"

"Sure!" the other responded, brightening at sight of the bank note and its denomination. "I'll stick around the rest of the night if it's necessary. Depend on it!"

"Good!" Kenyon turned up his coat collar against the steady, penetrating drizzle. "Come along, Ranny," he said, taking his companion by the arm. "Let's start."

The men crossed to the park side of the Drive and walked under the dripping trees to a point opposite Kenyon's residence. The lights still shone from the windows of the front room on the parlor floor, but the shades were drawn too low for the men to glimpse within. Below the lighted floor was a half basement, its barred windows dark, which Andrew occupied.

"There's no use of your taking chances," Kenyon said after an interval of deliberation. "I'll do the investigating. You stand back here in the shadows and keep your eyes skinned. If any one comes out, trail him. Use the taxi if necessary.

I'll slip inside and see what's on the program."

"Good Lord, man!" Randal exclaimed, beginning to sense the danger that existed. "Watch your step! This is beyond the joking stage. No telling who or how many are inside the house. You can't accomplish anything alone. Why the dickens did you bring me along, if it was just to stand here in the rain and wait for an explosion?" he challenged resentfully. "I'm going to stay at your heels."

"Not this time, Ranny."

"It's foolhardy!" Randal protested vehemently. "Why not get hold of a cop? You can't prowl around alone. You haven't a thing to defend yourself with!"

"Nothing but my wits," responded Kenyon; "and they're pretty sharp just at present." His lips set grimly at the knowledge that was evident to him. "I don't want the police to interfere just yet. I've a gun in my dresser; and if the way's clear I'll have it in my fingers inside of five minutes."

"If you don't show up in the next ten minutes," Randal returned, "I'll ring the nearest police station."

"Better make it half an hour," said Kenyon as he turned and walked briskly across the street.

CHAPTER IV.

A CLEW TO FOLLOW.

KENYON had no intention of entering his premises through the front door, either by ringing the bell to gain admittance, or using his latchkey. That would have queered his plans and placed him at an immediate disadvantage. Still uncertain of the odds to be encountered, he preferred to enter upon the theater of events unannounced and plan his future movements according to the knowledge he obtained.

He was grateful for the mist and drizzling rain, for it obscured the street and rendered spying difficult. So far, Kenyon was certain that the conspirators had taken no precaution to post a lookout, otherwise his approach would have been heralded. Doubtless, he figured, those concerned in the mysterious drama were under cover, assured that interference or discovery were remote issues.

Once he had crossed the walk and reached the iron-latticed door that led to the service entrance, he breathed easier; and he was still more relieved at finding the door unlocked, for the key to it was in Andrew's possession. The unlocked door seemed to indicate that the caretaker was within. The knob turned readily, and the catches on the door and frame did not appear to have been mutilated. That offered convincing proof that the intruders had not entered by force.

Kenyon passed through the door, but a sudden, unexpected draft wrenched the knob from his fingers. The door closed with a thud that sounded ominously through the house. He swore softly and crouched in the darkness.

After a moment's hesitation, he started forward, walking along the dark, narrow corridor that led toward the kitchen. Advancing cautiously, he reached the kitchen and stood for a moment in the dense gloom, his ears alert. No sound greeted him; no voices or footsteps were audible from the floor above. The house was as silent as an arctic midnight.

Guardedly he ascended the rear stairs, intent upon reaching his chamber on the top floor, where a weapon might be obtained. Fortunately the rear of the house was in darkness, and he gained the third floor without mishap.

He entered his bedroom and, dark as it was, moved familiarly across the floor to the dresser. His groping fingers encountered the revolver after a short search. A quick inspection, by sense of touch, assured him that the magazine was loaded. He removed the wet raincoat that might hamper his future movements and, dropping the weapon into his pocket, experienced a decided thrill of preparedness. Armed, he felt primed to encounter whatever danger impended, even though the odds were against him.

The prolonged and unbroken silence that had prevailed since his entrance continued to puzzle him. There were two theories to account for it: Either the recent occupants had taken a hurried departure, prior to Kenyon's arrival, and neglected to switch off the lights, or they.

had been warned in some manner of his appearance and were lying in wait for him.

It was the latter supposition that took root in Kenyon's mind and put him on his guard. He crept down the stairs again, listening at intervals and hearing nothing. On the parlor floor he tiptoed through the serving pantry and reached the dining room.

A shaded light burned in the hall that separated the dining room from the living quarters. He crouched in the shadow of a buffet, his eyes fixed upon the hall and the parlor beyond, his heart thumping expectantly. The muffled whistles from the river and the rumble of a freight train along its banks came to his ears; but no sounds from within the house reached him.

Kenyon settled back against the wall and made himself comfortable. How long his vigilance was to last, and whether it would be rewarded in the end, were matters of doubt; but at all events, he resolved to play the waiting game. From his position he commanded a full view of the lighted hall and the front door beyond; and if the premises were occupied, the hall seemed to offer the sole avenue of escape for the intruders.

Minute by minute dragged by, and Kenyon began to stir impatiently. The game of cat at the rat hole became irksome, as well as trying on his nerves. Moreover, he recalled that Randal had threatened to communicate with the police and investigate the premises at the expiration of half an hour; and just at present, Kenyon preferred to operate alone. An interruption might complicate matters.

Suddenly, bringing him alert with every nerve tingling, the telephone rang. It echoed through the house with alarming shrillness. Kenyon waited expectantly, his eyes fixed upon the hallway where the telephone was placed; waited expectantly for some one to answer the imperative summons.

Then, midway in the prolonged ringing of the instrument, the hall light went out. Kenyon drew in a quick breath. The thing could have but one significance, he reasoned. Some one hidden near at hand meant to answer the call; had switched off the hall light in order to reach the telephone without detection.

Kenyon crept forward noiselessly under the shelter of the darkness, waiting for the sound of a voice. None came. The telephone rang again and again, more insistent than ever, it seemed. Whoever was at the other end of the wire must have known that the premises were occupied. It was not likely to be any of his acquaintances, for none save Randal knew of his arrival in town; and certainly Randal would not be trying to communicate with the house.

Fretful at the delay and unwilling longer to stand by helplessly, Kenyon, gun in hand, moved through the doorway and advanced toward the telephone. He was determined to bring matters to a crisis. Watchful waiting had become too painful.

He removed the receiver and clamped it against his ear. "Hello!" he spoke guardedly.

"Say," a voice snarled in his ear. "What's keepin' you? Goin' to stay all night? You'd better beat it! I just seen Lasky up the block and——"

"Lasky?" Kenyon echoed, cutting short the other's remark, startled at hearing the detective's name mentioned.

"That's what I said," the answer came back. "Maybe he's smelled a rat. That's why I'm phonin' you. Fade away now, and don't let the asphalt get cold under your feet. Don't want Lasky puttin' his nose into this."

"Where are you now?" Kenyon risked asking, and wondered if his query or voice would arouse suspicion.

"At a pay station in a drug store," the other responded. Apparently the man at the other end of the wire had no suspicions. "But I'm goin' to Ollinger's. You meet me there in five minutes. I won't wait no longer."

Kenyon's mind worked swiftly. He had no idea who Ollinger might be or where the place was to be found, although he figured it must be close at hand if the trip could be made in less than five minutes. Doubtless it was a rendezvous familiar to the person he was assumed to be; and to question its whereabouts would be fatal.

"I can't meet you there in that time,"

Kenyon replied. "Suppose you come past here. No danger."

He realized at once that his ruse had failed.

"Say, who's this talkin'?" the voice demanded.

"Who'd you think it was?" Kenyon returned.

An imprecation rumbled over the wire and the receiver banged. Kenyon hung up his own receiver with a scowl of disappointment. It would be useless to learn where the call had originated, even if the operator cared to divulge the information, for the man he hoped to snare would be far from that dangerous locality.

Kenyon had made some headway, however slight. Two men, at least, must have been concerned in the affair; one of them he had heard from, and evidently the other had failed to show up at the appointed place. His nonappearance had accounted for the telephone call and warning.

After a moment of reflection, Kenyon moved along the hall to the lighted parlor. It yawned before him, cold and empty —and mockingly. He was no longer fearful of a surprise attack, although he had yet to explain the mystery of the extinguished hall light. It was not until he attempted to switch on the light in the hall that the performance was accounted for. The globe had simply burned out.

The slight consolation it brought did not lift Kenyon's spirits. The realization that the performance he had hoped to view and take part in had been staged, and that the actors were now beyond recall, troubled him. What part had the girl played? Where was she now?

With a none-too-light heart, Kenyon strode to the front door, opened it wide, and called to Randal. The latter came across the street on a run, bounded up the steps, and followed Kenyon into the house.

"What's the news?" he demanded.

"Not particularly encouraging," Kenyon answered. "The lady of the taxicab has evidently visited here and departed, and the culprits that met her have vanished."

"That's tough. What——"

"Ever hear of Ollinger's?" Kenyon broke in.

Randal shook his head. "Don't recall the name. Why?"

Kenyon related what had taken place over the telephone a few minutes before.

"Seems a certainty then that your taxicab acquaintance kept an appointment here, doesn't it?" observed Randal. "And Lasky still figures in the affair. My advice to you, Kenyon, is to get hold of this gumshoe and compare stories."

"Eventually, yes; but if Lasky learns the trick I played on him to-night he may run me in," Kenyon returned.

"Needn't say anything about that incident."

"But he may want to know how I got wind of this affair. Curiosity is a popular sport with a detective. However, we'll let that slide and look over the premises. Perhaps our recent visitors have left some evidence behind. It's the conventional thing to do, isn't it?"

A thorough inspection of the lower floor revealed a few cigarette butts and any number of burned matches and scattered ashes.

"If your friend Lasky was here with his magnifying glass, he'd probably identify the smokers," said Kenyon, indifferently surveying the evidence; "but that is beyond us, Ranny, because the cigarettes are not monogrammed, and the matches are shy of finger prints."

"Well, your visitors rolled their own," declared Randal, after a critical inspection of the remains, "in preference to smoking tailor-mades."

"An indication of true economy," Kenyon observed. "Discover the frugal crook who has money in the savings bank and we'll be on a warm trail."

"You seem to be taking this thing as a huge joke," reproved Randal. "I'd think by this time——"

"By this time I'm tempted to do so," Kenyon broke in with a shrug, turning to ascend the stairs that led to the second floor. "My expectations have been rudely shattered. I still am not certain that my companion of the taxi visited here. I do know that my house has been entered recently; but so far as I can see now, trespassing is the only charge I could bring against the intruders. There isn't a thing of value on the premises to attract a crook."

"Speaking of an attraction for crooks," Randal remarked, turning to face Kenyon when they reached the head of the stairs. "It just occurred to me. What about the Navajo sparkler? The Desert Diamond?"

"Well, what about it?" asked Kenyon, frowning.

"You didn't see the Sunday supplement splash a few weeks ago, of course. I meant to send you a copy and forgot all about it."

"Still talking about the stone, are they?"

"I'll say so! It's good for a page every few weeks. This last sensation, presumably based on a story related by a dying Navajo medicine man, hinted that your father stole the diamond from the tribe, that his life had been threatened because of it, and that to protect himself as well as the stone, he gave out that the thing had been stolen from him."

"What rot!" exclaimed Kenyon. "They're getting hard up for copy. The stone was a gift to my father. He brought it East with him, never thinking it was other than a white sapphire. Plenty of them found in Arizona. It was crudely cut and unpolished. My father looked upon it merely as a curio—a good-luck amulet."

"Sure! I remember seeing it myself," acknowledged Randal. "Looked like a piece of glass."

"Yes; and you must remember how stunned we were when an expert pronounced it a genuine diamond! Father had it recut and polished. The stone created a sensation—as much because of the mystery surrounding it, as its size and color. All sorts of wild tales were in circulation. And less than a month afterward, some crook annexed it."

Randal nodded. "Yes; I know. This last newspaper yarn handed me a laugh; but it just occurred to me," he added thoughtfully, "that perhaps some folks would swallow the hokum."

"Suppose they did? What would it have to do with the problem we're tackling right now?"

"Some crook might decide to look over the premises."

"Under the impression that if we did have the diamond we'd keep it locked up here?" Kenyon asked. "Ranny, you're absurd!"

"Oh, well! Needn't get excited over it," protested Randal. "I merely made the suggestion. The world's full of queer people with queer notions."

"After listening to your remarks I'm inclined to agree with you," said Kenyon, stalking off along the hall.

Once the lights were switched on, the men tramped through the rear bedrooms, apparently to find nothing amiss, nothing disturbed.

"Doesn't look as if the house had been ransacked, does it?" Kenyon flung at his companion.

"No; not exactly," Randal admitted.

"You understand, of course," Kenyon went on as he opened the door of the library and reached for the light switch, "I wouldn't have the slightest objection if the Desert Diamond did turn up. The last price quoted on it would——"

He broke off with a gulp of surprise as the room blazed with light. Face down upon the floor, her arms outstretched, lay the form of a girl.

CHAPTER V.

THE MYSTERIOUS GUEST.

FIRST to recover from the shock that the lights revealed, Kenyon voiced an exclamation and crossed the floor to kneel beside the girl. The pallor of her face and her closed eyes alarmed him momentarily; but he discovered a fairly strong pulse an instant later and turned quickly to meet Randal's startled gaze.

"Here, lend a hand!" he ordered. "She's still alive!"

When the girl's limp form had been placed upon a divan, Randal was dispatched for water and aromatic spirits. Later he looked on in perceptible concern while Kenyon applied a first-aid treatment.

"What do you suppose happened?" Randall asked.

"This," answered Kenyon, pointing to a bruised and discolored spot that showed on the girl's temple when her hair was brushed back. "Don't think it's serious," he added; "but if she doesn't come to in short order we'll call a physician."

"Do you think it was from the result

of an accident—or something else?" queried Randal. "I mean that mark on her temple?"

"I'd say it was something else," Kenyon answered unhesitatingly. "Don't know why, either, unless she became suspicious of what took place here and attempted to escape."

"Then you think she's your lady of the taxicab?"

"Undoubtedly!"

Under the bright light the girl's face seemed a trifle hard and sophisticated; nor was it devoid of beauty-parlor artifices. She was not at all what Kenyon expected to find. She failed to match the vision he had conjured up—a mental picture based on the infinite charm of her voice. Yet her features were clean-cut and regular and her hair clinging ringlets of spun-gold tint. She wore a simple blue, one-piece frock with cuffs and collar of white.

"She's passing fair," admitted Randal, speaking as one who considered himself capable of judging feminine loveliness. "Not—er—disastrously beautiful, however," he added; "and not a criminal type, if you should ask me."

"Thanks, professor," Kenyon observed caustically.

"But I will say," the other remarked, with a glance at the girl's hands, "that she doesn't believe in leaving her rings at home. It's a wonder to me the reception committee didn't annex them."

The girl stirred, and her lips moved. The men watched her expectantly, but her eyes did not open.

"She'll be all right presently," Kenyon remarked; and somewhat remorsefully added: "I've been a brute to let her walk into a scrape of this sort, Ranny."

"Of course you've been one," Randal came back tartily. "Told you so all along, didn't I? You're solely responsible for what has happened. Ought to be horsewhipped."

"We've a lot to unearth yet," commented Kenyon. "If we can learn where Lasky fits into this affair and get at the facts without dragging the girl into the case, perhaps——"

He broke off suddenly, for the girl stirred restlessly and her eyes fluttered open. She gazed blankly at the men who looked down upon her, as if to question their presence.

"Don't be alarmed," Kenyon said quietly. "You're among friends. Just rest a while longer. Comfortable, are you?"

The girl's eyes wandered from the eager faces of the men who confronted her to the book-lined walls of the room. They were unusually large and decidedly blue eyes, fringed by dark, curling lashes that gave them a doll-like appearance. She seemed puzzled, uncertain of her surroundings.

"I'm sorry this had to happen," Kenyon resumed. "I might have prevented it—but I wanted to snare those who evidently have snared you. I meant to get here in time to take a hand in the conspiracy. Luck was against me from the first."

"I—I don't understand," the girl wavered, in a voice so low that Kenyon had to bend down to catch the words.

"Of course you don't," he assured her. "There seems to be a great deal that neither of us understand; but we will, presently. You see I was the occupant of the cab you took refuge in several hours ago. Do you remember that?"

A vague light of understanding seemed to dawn in the girl's wide eyes. She nodded. "You—you were that man?"

"Yes. Perhaps you'll remember telling me you had an engagement with Mr. Kenyon, at this address—an engagement made over the phone. I sent you up here in my cab, meaning to follow at once and thwart the performance that was to be staged for your benefit."

Once more she regarded him with a puzzled look. "Why? Why did you mean to do that?" she asked, her voice still low and uncertain.

"Because I happen to be Mr. Vincent Kenyon," he told her frankly; "and this is my residence."

For an instant the girl seemed bewildered, as if Kenyon's declaration had failed to register clearly in her still foggy mind; then with a start she raised herself to an elbow. A faint color crept into her sallow cheeks and lips.

"You—you are Vincent Kenyon?" she asked.

Kenyon nodded and smiled, quick to

realize the shock that must have followed his statement. "I'm profoundly sorry now," he said, "that I failed to identify myself before—at the time you mentioned my name. I never thought this would happen, or that injury would befall you. I tried to kill too many birds with one stone, when I should have made every effort to protect you.

"The situation is clearer now, isn't it?" he went on after a pause. "An impostor took possession of my house as well as my name. It was the impostor to whom you phoned and with whom, unsuspectingly, you made the appointment, although I have yet to learn for what purpose."

Briefly, but unhurried, Kenyon related all that had befallen him between the time he said good-by to the girl in the cab and the moment when he had looked upon her, prostrate upon the rug in the library.

The girl listened with amazed eyes to all he had to say, but did not offer to interrupt.

"This is Mr. Randal," Kenyon said, introducing his companion who remained in the background: "a friend of mine who joined forces with me to-night."

In a faint, uncertain voice, the girl introduced herself. "I am Miss Hollister," she said.

The name she gave failed to enlighten Kenyon, although he repeated it over after her. "Hollister?" he said. "I don't recall hearing it before. And you say it was through your father that——"

"Yes; that is what brought me here," the girl interrupted.

"And what was it brought you here, Miss Hollister?" Kenyon asked, determined to get at the bottom of the mystery without further delay. "Why did you wish to see me to-night?"

Kenyon's tone, perhaps unsuspectingly brusque, seemed to arouse the girl. She flushed, as if resenting her questioner's attitude; yet before she could speak, the sharp ringing of a bell on the floor below broke into the silence.

The men turned, instantly alert. "If that's the phone——" began Randal.

"It's the doorbell," Kenyon declared as the sound was repeated.

"Doorbell?" Randal glanced at his companion. "Who could be calling here at this hour?"

"We'll find out," Kenyon replied quietly, dismissing the other matter from his mind. "Don't be alarmed, Miss Hollister," he added, as the color seemed to drain from her cheeks. "No danger. Our visitor must be a legitimate one, otherwise he wouldn't have announced himself. Come on, Ranny."

The men descended the front stairs to the hall that was in semidarkness, for the burned-out globe had not been replaced. As a precaution against an unpleasant surprise, Kenyon reached for his revolver as he flung open the door.

A tall figure, barely distinguishable in the gloom of the stoop, confronted him.

"Is this Mr. Kenyon?" the stranger inquired.

"It is," Kenyon responded, striving to recognize his visitor. "What's wanted?"

"If you'll invite me in out of the rain," the man said, "I'll be glad to talk with you."

"Hello, there!" Randal broke into an exclamation. "It's Lasky! Say, what are you snooping around in this neighborhood for?"

"For you and Mr. Kenyon," Lasky replied.

With a mingled feeling of surprise and concern, wondering what new development awaited him, Kenyon ushered the detective into the lighted parlor.

Once inside, Lasky surveyed each of the men in turn. "Didn't know you were acquainted with Kenyon," he said at length, addressing himself to Randal.

"There're probably a lot of worse things than that you don't even suspect," Randal came back, grinning. "Kenyon's been a side-kick of mine for any number of years."

"Glad to find you here," declared Lasky. "Phoned your apartment a few minutes ago."

"What's the occasion? Authorities after me?"

"I happen to be. What do you know about a Miss Sutton?"

"Never heard of her."

"And you, Kenyon?" Lasky inquired.

Kenyon shook his head. "Don't recall the name."

"Well, perhaps she used another one."

Lasky scowled. "Nice-looking girl," he went on. "Said she visited you here to-night."

"I did have visitors," Kenyon admitted; "but unfortunately I didn't appear on the scene until half an hour ago and they had gone."

"Then you did not meet a young lady here?"

"I've had no callers since my arrival," Kenyon answered, choosing his words carefully. He decided it would be just as well to withhold information relative to the girl upstairs. Since he had protected the girl before, he saw no good reason for exposing her at the present moment—at least until the detective saw fit to explain his motive.

"Just as I figured," Lasky declared. "Trying to alibi herself. How about you, Randal? Did you meet a young lady—never mind the name she gave you—a couple of hours ago?"

"I did not."

"You didn't give her your card? Didn't request that she get in touch with you in case of trouble?" persisted Lasky.

"What in blazes are you driving at?" cried Randal. "I haven't given my card to any one to-night."

"How'd she get hold of it?"

"Search me!"

A swift glimmer of suspicion entered Kenyon's mind. "Where is this girl now, Lasky?"

"At the police station. Have detained her until I could verify some of her story."

"On what charge?" Kenyon asked.

"That has nothing whatever to do with what I'm asking," Lasky returned bluntly. "She led me a merry chase most of the evening; but I nabbed her half an hour ago."

"The same girl you were looking for in 38th Street about ten thirty?"

The detective swung about and favored Kenyon with a probing glance. "Oh, you were there, eh? Hold on!" Lasky cut in as Kenyon started to speak. "Thought your voice had a familiar ring to it. I get you now! The dark taxi I started to search! Huh! The girl was in it all the time and you steered me wrong! Remarked something about the weather being favorable for ducks. Correct?"

"I won't deny it," admitted Kenyon, his mind occupied with a host of amazing conjectures.

"Well, you had your trouble for nothing," Lasky said. "What was the grand idea? Romancing? I spotted the girl in the cab when it turned up Broadway; trailed it into this district and lost it in the fog. Half an hour ago I picked up the young lady again as she was heading downtown. Since then she's been spinning a pretty yarn, and I'm taking pains to unravel it."

"You're sure the girl you have now is the same one you trailed from 38th Street?" asked Kenyon.

"Of course! You don't think——" the detective began.

"Great Scott!" Randal broke forth, voicing what Kenyon was about to utter. "Then who is the girl upstairs?"

"What girl?" Lasky demanded sharply.

Without waiting to explain the situation or confide his suspicions, Kenyon darted through the hall and bounded up the stairs, the other men at his heels. The door of the library was open, and the lights were still burning; but the divan, upon which the injured girl had been placed a few minutes before, was empty. So was the room; and, for that matter, so was the house, which the three determined men searched thoroughly from top floor to basement.

The blue-eyed girl who had introduced herself as Miss Hollister had vanished.

CHAPTER VI.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS.

AT the expiration of an exciting ten minutes, the trio of searchers, having explored every apparent hiding place in which the girl might have concealed herself, reluctantly agreed that she must have left the premises.

"She's gone out the way I came in," Kenyon declared. "Went down the rear stairs and reached the street through the service hall."

"Evidently!" said Lasky, scowling. "Not much use in trying to find her now. What did she run away for?"

"I suppose she overheard our conversation and decided to vanish before we could ask questions."

Lasky seemed puzzled. "I don't get that. What did she look like?" he asked.

"Baby-blue eyes and golden hair," Randal promptly took it upon himself to answer. "I'd recognize her again anywhere. Gave her name as Miss Hollister."

"Huh," said the detective. "Sounds like a description of Rosie Watson. If I thought so——" He stopped and looked fixedly at Kenyon. "What was she doing here?"

"I'll be hanged if I know—exactly. So confoundedly much has happened in the last two hours that my mind's a mystic maze. The facts are, Lasky——"

"Limit yourself to them," the detective cut in briskly; "and make it snappy!"

"To begin with, we took this Miss Hollister to be the girl I met in the taxi on 38th Street," Kenyon stated.

"Why?"

"Because I knew she was to visit my house and—well, she didn't deny she wasn't the girl I took her to be."

"Did they look so much alike?"

"I can't say. It was too dark for me to get a look at my taxicab acquaintance."

"She drank in your story without batting an eye," supplemented Randal. "And you gave it to her from prologue to——"

"What story?" Lasky demanded, thoroughly mystified. "Your talk is all Greek to me."

For the third time that night Kenyon was forced into details relative to his experiences of the evening. He began with the parked-cab episode, followed with his belated arrival at the house and the phone call and closed with the discovery of the girl on the floor of the library.

"And just as we were starting in to ask questions," he wound up, "you rang the doorbell and brought us downstairs."

"Suffering cats!" Lasky breathed softly. "Why didn't you tell me this in the first place?"

"This seems to be the first place, doesn't it?"

"Some one took possession of your house, did they? Haven't you a caretaker on the premises?"

"I left one here; but he's not to be accounted for at present."

"Oh, vanished, eh? Just like their breed. Never knew one yet who wasn't ready to——"

"Not Andrew!" Kenyon protested. "I'll swear by him. Been in the family—in this same house for twelve years."

"They all fall sooner or later. Just wait!" Lasky moved toward the telephone. "We'll clear up some of this mystery right now."

When the number was called and the connection made, Lasky spoke in a brisk, businesslike tone. "Hello, that you, Turner? Lasky speaking. I want you to bring Miss Sutton over to 733 Riverside at once. And listen, Turner! The net goes out for Rosie Watson. Right away! What's that? You did? Say, that's a good tip. She's evidently the skirt we want."

The detective turned to his companions. "Rosie was seen early this evening not three blocks from here. I'll gamble she's the chicken you found upstairs. No wonder she made tracks when she heard my gentle voice!"

Lasky turned back to the telephone. "Say, Turner! Know anything about one Ollinger in your district? Must be around here. Yes? Suppose you send some one over to the place. Let him hang around for a day or so and see what he can pick up."

The detective, smiling now, hung up the receiver. "We can move briskly enough when there's something tangible to work on," he remarked.

"Who's Turner?" asked Randal.

"Police sergeant in this district. He just tells me Ollinger runs a pool room and soft-drink shop down near the 130th Street Ferry. Been in trouble recently through selling hooch. If his joint's the hang-out for the bunch who visited here to-night, we'll soon get a line on them."

At the moment, Kenyon's thoughts were straying far from the subject that Lasky had been discussing. "What have you against the girl you're bringing over?" he inquired.

"Nothing very definite—yet," Lasky admitted. "Haven't been able to get the dope straight."

"But the girl isn't a crook, is she?" Kenyon persisted.

"Well, I wouldn't go so far as to say she was; but her old man has the reputa-

tion of being an artist in that line. Ever heard of 'Parson' Phil? That's the bird: Phil Sutton. Lost track of him for years; then all at once I bump into him in a little burg up-State. Living under an assumed name and seems to have got religion. He's being watched, and so long's he stays put, we won't make trouble. Getting pretty old now—must be sixty; but they're never too old to turn a trick if there's money enough in it."

"What has all this to do with his daughter?" Kenyon wanted to know.

"Maybe a whole lot; maybe nothing," replied Lasky. "That's what I'm going to find out."

"So you simply detained her because once upon a time her father had a police record! Is that it?"

"We've got to keep our eyes open," Lasky returned evasively. "The girl may be straight as a ruler, although after living with a crook like Sutton, I'm doubting it. And if she is straight, our investigation isn't going to hurt her any."

"It's a rotten system just the same," Kenyon declared.

"If you knew the game as we do, you wouldn't think so," the detective came back. "Sutton's shrewd enough to know he's being watched and all his actions reported; but maybe he's taking a long chance that his daughter's free to come and go without arousing suspicion. If he can't operate, perhaps he figures the girl can. We were tipped off last night that she was headed for New York, so I made it my business to pick her up at the station and just naturally see where she drifted."

"She didn't try to conceal her identity when detained?"

"How could she? Didn't I talk with her at the time I visited Sutton up-State? She knew me all right," Lasky went on; "and it was evident from the first that she knew she was being shadowed and tried to lose me. You'll vouch for that, Kenyon."

Kenyon could not deny the fact. "The girl told me she had been avoiding some one all evening," he admitted; "and I considered it my duty to protect her from a persistent annoyer. I didn't recognize you, Lasky, until you stepped into a doorway to light a cigarette."

"Didn't it set you guessing?"

"Yes; and I've been guessing ever since."

"Lied to me deliberately instead of telling——"

"Wrong, Lasky," Kenyon put in. "You asked me if I had seen a girl wandering that way; and I said I had not. It was the truth. I never saw the young lady until she dropped into the seat alongside me."

"All right—if that's your alibi. At the same time I ought to pinch you for sheltering a fugitive."

"When you questioned the young lady did she admit visiting this house?" Kenyon asked.

"She did. That's what brought me here. But she didn't explain the nature of the visit; refused point-blank to account for it. Moreover, she intimated that Mr. Kenyon would not care to discuss the matter."

Kenyon frowned and shook his head. "That's certainly a puzzler. Of course she doesn't know that the man she met here was an impostor."

"She claimed her father was a friend of yours, didn't she?"

"Well, she inferred as much; but I can't place him. I've never met any crooks—not to my knowledge."

"A screw loose somewhere," said Lasky. "A couple of them for that matter. We found Randal's card in her purse; and he swears he didn't part with one tonight."

"He didn't," Kenyon answered. "I'm responsible for that."

"You?" cried Randal.

"Precisely! Neglected to explain before. You see I gave the young lady your card, which I happened to have in my pocket, when I bid her good night. Why? Because if I had given her my own, and she had read it, my plans might have miscarried. Of course they have miscarried in spite of my efforts; but it wasn't anticipated at the time."

"But why my card?" persisted Randal. "Why any card at all?"

"Well, I figured that in case we didn't meet again—if something unforeseen happened—the girl might feel tempted to get in touch with the gentleman who once came to her rescue. Naturally she would

come to you, Ranny, and I would make it my business to be on the scene."

"That was a brilliant idea—not!" declared Randal. "It might have let me in for a bunch of trouble."

"It hasn't, so far," said Kenyon. "I'll shoulder whatever blame is attached to it."

A cab sounded outside. A moment later, when the doorbell rang, Kenyon ushered in a police sergeant and Miss Sutton; he led the way into the parlor and turned expectantly to study the girl.

He found himself surveying with more than ordinary interest the companion of his recent taxicab experience. She was of medium height, with an attractive oval face of delicate charm and color from which eyes of soft brown looked out—eyes that, at the instant, held a look of uncertainty and wistfulness. Yet there was a determined outthrust to her firm chin, her head was held high, and her lips were set, but not too hard to mar their curves.

She measured up to his mental picture of her; perhaps exceeded it. The word pretty was inappropriate. She was wholesome, interesting, and lovable—particularly lovable; he realized that without hesitation and with a pronounced quickening of his pulse.

Miss Sutton glanced speculatively into the faces of the men, her eyes plainly resentful at sight of Lasky, who contemplated her coldly with a cigarette between his lips. Her eyes swept to Randal and on to Kenyon himself. There they rested.

She could not have recognized him—no more than he would have recognized her; yet somehow it flashed to him that the girl had probed his thoughts and felt comforted at his presence in the room. He smiled in open friendliness, and in return, he saw her lips unbend as if she understood and was grateful.

CHAPTER VII.

FACING FACTS.

LASKY opened the session, and his abrupt tone disturbed Kenyon's busy line of thought. "Well, Miss Sutton," he said, "it seems that you've led me into a complication of mysteries. Sorry I've had to detain you; but I guess when you've heard a few of the facts, you'll be mighty glad I didn't let you fade out of the picture."

The girl, apparently uninterested, waited for the detective to continue; but watching her narrowly, Kenyon felt that she was mentally on the alert; that she suspected a trap had been laid and was prepared to avoid it. Perhaps in no other way could she account for her return to the Riverside address.

"I haven't anything definite against you," Lasky went on; "and I don't count on holding you much longer. All I'm waiting for is that you give me some idea why you visited this house earlier tonight."

"My visit here could be of no interest to you," the girl replied. "There was nothing wrong in it; nothing to be ashamed of; nothing that the police should misinterpret. It was a matter that concerned only Mr. Kenyon and myself."

Kenyon found himself listening to the voice itself—the same unmistakable voice that had appealed to him so strongly before—rather than the significance of the words the girl spoke.

"Yes; you said all that a while ago," Lasky returned. "And on the strength of it I decided to see what Kenyon himself had to say. I thought he might be more considerate; but unfortunately, it seems, he is as much in the dark as I am."

The girl seemed puzzled at what the detective had to say and regarded him with a dubious glance. "You saw Mr. Kenyon?" she asked at length.

Lasky nodded, apparently enjoying the situation he had created and hesitating to bring it to a climax. "Yes. I saw Mr. Kenyon; talked with him. That's more than you've done."

Miss Sutton continued to survey the speaker with an unwavering glance. "What are you trying to tell me?"

"I'm trying to tell you that although this is Kenyon's residence, and you may have visited here a couple of hours ago, you didn't see Vincent Kenyon. If any one introduced himself by that name, he was an impostor. Isn't that clear enough?"

Involuntarily, the girl started and the color seemed to desert her cheeks; then just as quickly the color returned and

she favored Lasky with a skeptical smile.

"I'm telling you straight," the detective declared, as if he had read what passed through her mind. "There's no ruse about it. Here's Mr. Kenyon—Vincent Kenyon!"

The girl turned to survey Kenyon; searched his face narrowly, almost appealingly, he thought.

"Lasky is right, Miss Sutton," he said. "I am Vincent Kenyon, and this is my house. I came here an hour ago, to find the lights on and my caretaker missing. You have been the victim of a plot. I am unable to account for your visit or the bit of play acting that must have taken place."

"I—I don't understand," the girl faltered.

"Well, it's plain enough!" Lasky snapped impatiently. "You're not a dumb-bell. This is Kenyon. If we had time to waste probably he could identify himself. Do that to-morrow, if you insist. But right now we want to nab the conspirators that set this trap; and we can't make much headway unless you tell us what it's all about."

"Why—I phoned; it seemed——"

"Never mind the preliminaries!" the detective cut in. "We know what happened; the thing we don't know is why."

"Just a minute, please," Kenyon put in, resentful of Lasky's tactics. "This is a shock to Miss Sutton. I'm mostly to blame for it, and it's only fair that I explain."

Clearly, but briefly, Kenyon reviewed what had gone before. He identified himself as the girl's taxicab companion; and with that beginning made, he related in sequence all that had befallen him afterward.

Lasky scowled and several times interrupted; but Kenyon went on heedlessly, his sole desire being to convince Miss Sutton that he was speaking the truth.

The girl's leveled eyes never swerved from Kenyon's countenance as he revealed, step by step, his part in the night's affair; and as he went on unhesitatingly, he felt that she believed in what he said, where a moment before she had doubted Lasky.

The flush that had touched her cheeks vanished, and a look of abject fear crept into her eyes; but when the girl struggled to speak, a sound at the door interrupted.

Instinctively the men in the room turned. It was apparent that Kenyon had neglected to close the door after the arrival of Miss Sutton and her escort, for as he stepped forward to account for the disturbance, the door was thrown open and two men broke in.

In the lead was a burly police officer, flourishing a revolver; back of him was a slighter figure, coatless and bareheaded. The officer, quick to recognize Turner, stopped abruptly and lowered his weapon. The man behind him, pushing forward and recognizing at least one of those who confronted him, uttered a cry:

"Mr. Kenyon! If it ain't you, sir!"

"Good Lord!" Kenyon exclaimed, startled at the sight of his dazed and bedraggled caretaker. "Andrew! Where have you been?"

"Where 'aven't I been, Mr. Kenyon!" the man cried. "I'm 'ardly alive, sir. 'As anything 'appened around 'ere? I didn't expect to see you, sir."

"Whom did you expect to see, Andrew?" Kenyon asked, concerned at the plight and distress of his cockney servant.

"I 'ad thought to encounter a pack of scoundrels," the other returned. "I brought along the officer 'ere to 'elp me, I did. We rushed up the steps when we seen the 'ouse all alight, never thinking to find you, sir."

"Where'd you pick up this chap?" Lasky demanded of the officer, who seemed bewildered at his reception.

"I come upon him down in the park above the river," the officer reported. "Heard him groaning at first and found him crawling along on all fours. When I got him out and into the light he tells me about being slugged and carted off. Said he was a caretaker at this address and insists upon me coming along. That's all I know, sir."

"That's enough," said Turner. "Better get back on your job. We've had some trouble here to-night. If you run across any of the viaduct gang, bring them in to the station."

The officer departed, closing the door behind him.

"What's 'appened, sir?" pleaded An-

drew when the officer had gone out. " 'As there been a robbery? 'Oo are these people?" he asked, staring at the others in the room, none of whom, except Randal and his employer, were familiar to him.

"Never mind asking questions, Andrew," Kenyon returned. "I'll do that. Just tell us what happened to you?"

"I can't make it out," the caretaker began, touching a bruise that showed about his eye. "I'm still a bit 'azy in the 'ead."

"Come on!" Lasky rapped out sharply. "We don't care how you feel. We want to know just where you've been all the evening."

Andrew cast an indignant look at the detective. "I'll 'ave you know I'm addressing Mr. Kenyon and——"

"That's all right," Kenyon put in quickly. "Mr. Lasky is a police detective. Go on with your story."

"It was about eight o'clock," Andrew resumed, eying Lasky furtively, "when I 'eard a knock on my door. When I opened it a man asks me does Mr. Vincent Kenyon reside 'ere, and I says as 'ow 'e does when 'e's at 'ome. The man wants to know when 'e's expected in town, and I says maybe a month, 'aving no idea Mr. Kenyon was 'ere now. With that the man gives a laugh, and before I 'ad time to think 'e 'ands me a belt on the jaw.

"I started to mix with 'im, for I ain't the sort to run away, when another bounder looms up and 'its me alongside the ear, and I drops to the floor, cold."

"Didn't get a good look at either assailant?" asked Lasky.

"No, sir; you see——"

"All right! Then what?"

"Next thing I knew I was being 'ustled into a cab; but I was too groggy to fight. Seems like I was carried around for an hour or more, and wondering what it was all about, when the cab stopped and the chap 'oo was driving the cab jumps out and 'oists me over a wall. That's all I remember until——"

"Until the officer appeared?" Lasky intercepted, attempting to speed up the narrative.

"Yes, sir; 'e showed up, and I told 'im what 'ad 'appened and ordered 'im to make 'aste. 'E didn't want to believe me at first, and I 'ad a 'ard time——"

"And that's all you have to tell, is it?" the detective broke in, visibly disappointed.

"Yes, sir; it is."

Lasky bestowed a searching glance upon the caretaker, but it was evident that he accepted what he had heard as the truth. Andrew's condition, together with what little the officer had said relative to finding the cockney, seemed to impress the detective—to refute his earlier suspicions.

Kenyon had divided his attention between what Andrew related and Miss Sutton. The girl had been a most eager listener. What she heard seemed to decide the question that racked her mind. The caretaker's story was a convincing bit of testimony that contributed to, and fitted in with, all that Kenyon had related shortly before.

She leaned back against the wall with a stricken countenance and tightly clenched fingers. "Oh, what have I done?" she faltered. "What have I done? I—I never suspected——"

"Well, what have you done?" Lasky demanded irritably. "Come, out with it, Miss Sutton! We're waiting."

The girl faced him almost pathetically, her lips tremulous. "Oh, don't you understand? I came here to-night to return the diamond!"

Lasky scowled. "What diamond?" he inquired.

"Mr. Kenyon's. The Desert Diamond."

The detective bent forward with a sudden exclamation. "You had it with you to-night?" he cried.

"Yes."

"You mean the diamond that was stolen from my father?" Kenyon broke out incredulously.

The girl nodded. "I came to return it," she said.

Kenyon seemed too stunned for words. One bit of mystery had been revealed; another had taken its place. The Desert Diamond heard from again! Not irretrievably lost after all! The girl who had come to him out of the night had possessed it! More than that; she had apparently given the jewel to an impostor.

CHAPTER VIII.

HOW THE TRAP WAS SPRUNG.

THE amazing statement made by Miss Sutton heightened rather than relieved the tension of the moment. The men in the room gazed blankly at the girl; and in the silence that followed her astounding confession, she spoke again.

"Don't you believe me?" she cried. "Don't you understand now why it was difficult for me to explain my visit here?"

Lasky came out of his apparent daze. "I'm beginning to understand a whole lot," he returned. "You had that stone all day! And all the time I was trailing you, wondering what had brought Phil Sutton's daughter into New York!"

"But we can recover it!" the girl cried. "Surely you can do that much, Mr. Lasky."

"No doubt," the detective agreed. "Just as soon as I get my bearings. I remember when the Desert Diamond was stolen," he went on, turning toward Kenyon. "Didn't work on the case myself. Sick. Followed it, though. Why—the authorities ran down a suspect. Saw him with the stone; but he got away—on a liner. Was halfway across before the police got wind of it."

"And he jumped overboard when the ship's officers attempted to arrest him," Kenyon added. "The diamond wasn't found among his belongings, so we had to believe it went with him."

Lasky nodded. "And now we learn that Phil Sutton's daughter's been carrying it around New York! Wouldn't that floor you? Never connected the Parson with the job, because he was supposed to have been a thousand miles away."

"Oh, why will you waste time?" the girl protested. "The stone must be found. I've told you everything."

"Have you?" Lasky shrugged. "Not quite. Perhaps you'll tell us how the diamond came to be in your hands and how you knew it belonged to Kenyon?"

The girl flushed. "What good would it do now? You wouldn't believe me."

"I'd like to hear your story just the same."

"Why do you insist upon it? I had the diamond. I wanted to return it to its owner. Isn't that sufficient?"

"Hardly! It happens to be stolen property, to begin with. The fact that it has again been stolen does not change matters. I want to find out who turned the trick in the first place."

"It wasn't Phil Sutton!" the girl declared. "My father had nothing to do with the theft."

"Oh, hadn't he? What must I think, then?" Lasky went on. "That you took it?"

"I'm willing that you should," she returned.

The detective laughed derisively. "Noble girl! Want to shoulder some of your old man's burden, eh? You stole the diamond from Mr. Kenyon and, after a year, touched by remorse, you decided to return it. Splendid! A nice little story for the newspapers! Pretty girl crook, after baffling the police of the continent, becomes the penitent sister, turns from the wayward path, and comes back to the scenes of her crime to make amends. Returns to her victims the spoils of her career. To-morrow she will join the Salvation Army. Sweet, isn't it?"

The girl's voice quivered indignantly. "I knew—knew you wouldn't believe me," she protested.

"Believe you? Rubbish!" Lasky scoffed. "Your story's too thin. The Parson did the job, of course. And to think we never suspected him!"

"Why in thunder would he want to return the stone?" Sergeant Turner asked. "What was the idea?"

"Ask me something easy," replied Lasky. "I'm not so sure yet the stone was returned. But we'll find out soon enough. I'll have the authorities up-State corral him. If we can't get the truth out of one member of the family, we will another. There's something queer about this—blamed queer!"

"Hold on, Lasky!" Kenyon put in, deciding it was time to make himself heard. "Why stir up trouble now? It'll profit no one and get us nowhere. Let's deal with the thing at hand. If I hadn't tried for a coup this disaster wouldn't have befallen us. I'm responsible. I've bungled things and——"

"And I'm trying to straighten them out," the detective broke in.

"You won't make much progress unless you deal with what we already know, instead of what you surmise. What difference, now, who took the stone in the beginning? Suppose it was Phil Sutton? He evidently hasn't it now. It's immaterial to me——"

"It isn't to the police," Lasky reminded him curtly.

"But I'm the victim, not the police," Kenyon came back. "What if you do prove who purloined the diamond from my father a year ago? What good will it do me?"

"It'll give us a lot of satisfaction to hang something on old Parson Phil," Lasky replied. "Been waiting for the opportunity more than five years. A dozen clever jobs pulled off to my knowledge, and Sutton responsible for the majority of them. We know that. Still we can't dig up enough evidence to convict him."

"Then why exert yourself now? Forget past history. Devote yourself to clearing up this present mystery."

"The past and present may be hooked up together," suggested the detective. "It don't sound right to me, when a crook gets converted and begins to hand back his spoils. Why, that Navajo sparkler was worth thirty or forty thousand, wasn't it?"

"All of that; yes. And I don't mind saying that the cash it might bring in the market would be highly acceptable to me at the present moment," Kenyon answered, recalling his depleted resources.

"No doubt! That sum isn't to be sneered at. And that's just what I can't get through my head. Why would Sutton, or any one of his breed for that matter, be so ready and willing to separate himself from that size bank roll?"

Kenyon had no argument to account for it. "Why fish for motives? It's results that count," he rejoined. "When the culprits who staged their performance in this house to-night have been rounded up and questioned, we may be in possession of all the necessary information."

After a moment spent in profound contemplation, during which time he seemed totally oblivious to the others in the room, a smile touched the detective's lips.

"Very well," he said. "We'll see. In the meantime we'll accept things as we find them and get at reasons afterward. It may get us results just as quickly."

Whatever theory had come to him, or on what grounds he had figured out a plausible explanation for the singular affair of the night, Lasky did not choose to reveal. It was obvious, however, that the conclusions he had made were pleasing and that he intended to let future developments verify them.

"Now, Miss Sutton," he went on briskly and in a far more amiable manner than he had formerly shown, "let's get down to brass tacks. You came to return the Desert Diamond, arrived at this address shortly before eleven o'clock, and delivered the stone to a man you took to be Mr. Kenyon, who presumably introduced himself as such. Prior to that you had phoned for an appointment, and this alleged Kenyon held a conversation over the wire with you. Is that correct?"

"Yes, sir," the girl responded.

"I see; and naturally you did not suspect a trap. Since you phoned the Kenyon residence and spoke to a man who introduced himself as Vincent Kenyon, you were satisfied that things were as they should be. Now tell me, please, who besides yourself knew of your errand here to-day? Speak frankly, Miss Sutton."

"My father."

"Oh, he knew, did he?" Lasky smiled. "No one else?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Some one else must have known, of course. Otherwise the trap could not have been laid. Some one knew exactly what was coming off and prepared for it. Suppose you tell us just what happened when you arrived here?"

"The man who introduced himself as Vincent Kenyon met me at the door and brought me into the room—this room," the girl answered. "He was very courteous; and when I explained the nature of my errand——"

"You hadn't explained it over the phone?"

"No, sir; not fully. I didn't think it proper. I merely said I had some property that belonged to him and wished to return it."

"And what happened when you returned the diamond?"

"The man was overjoyed."

"I'll gamble on that," said Lasky. "Didn't he question you regarding it?"

"It was understood between us—in the beginning—that no questions were to be asked," Miss Sutton answered.

The detective pursed his lips. "I must say you were running big chances," he remarked. "Can you describe the man you met?"

"He was tall, good-looking, dark-complexioned," the girl replied after a moment of reflection. "He spoke in a deep, pleasant voice and——"

"You would recognize him again?"

"At once."

"Was he alone here?"

"There was another man whom I took to be a servant. An older man—baldheaded—who walked with a limp."

Lasky nodded as if the description tallied with some one he had in mind. "Is that all? No woman?"

"I saw none."

"Huh, probably kept out of sight. The Kenyon premises were not supposed to contain one of the feminine variety. The conspirators must have known as much. Well, what then?"

"A cab was called for me, and the man I accepted as Mr. Kenyon took me as far as the curb under an umbrella. He insisted upon paying the driver in advance."

"That was extremely gracious of him, wasn't it?" Lasky remarked. "A couple of dollars in return for a fifty-thousand-dollar prize. Somewhat of a bargain, eh? You took the cab, and I spotted you soon afterward. That is all, is it?"

"Yes, sir."

CHAPTER IX.

WITH GREAT EXPECTATIONS.

LASKY fell into a meditative silence, apparently reviewing all that Miss Sutton had to divulge, analyzing the salient points of her narrative and endeavoring to reconstruct, from the details given him, the whole of the daring drama in which she had played so significant a part.

The girl had spoken frankly and with pathetic eagerness. She had answered his questions without hesitation; and outwardly, at least, without seeking to conceal the facts.

"Thank you, Miss Sutton," he remarked at length. "We are making headway at last. You saw two men here. Kenyon and Randal claim to have rendered first aid to a stricken girl upstairs. From the description given me, I judge it was Rosie Watson. That makes a trio. It gives us something definite to work on."

"'Ow about the two scoundrels 'oo jumped me?" Andrew cried.

"Probably the same two who met Miss Sutton later," the detective answered. "Not likely they'd hired outsiders. Who does Rosie chase around with now, Turner?" he asked, turning to the sergeant.

"No one chap in particular," Turner replied. "I see her with a new companion every time she bobs up."

"Who was she with when you saw her to-night?"

"She was alone in a restaurant."

"Was she wearing a blue dress with white cuffs and collar?" Kenyon inquired.

"She was," said Turner; "along with a blue turban."

"And a whole jewelry store on her fingers?" put in Randal.

"Decidedly!"

"Then it was the same girl," declared Kenyon.

"No doubt of it," Lasky said. "Rosie Watson, of course. She's been the doll-face come-on in many a queer game, although she's always managed to keep out of trouble on a show-down. Can't see where she fits into this thing, though."

"Or how she got laid out," Turner supplemented.

"Huh, that's so, too. Bumped cold and left on the scene. That's a puzzler, isn't it? Well, we've labeled one of the trio. The baldheaded chap with a limp sounds like 'Baldy' Snyder to me. There's two we want. Can't place the ringleader yet—the supposed Kenyon."

"Your father have any visitors recently, Miss Sutton?" Turner asked, addressing the girl. "Any one who might answer the description of Rosie or Baldy?"

The girl shook her head.

"How about the chap that phoned

here?" queried Kenyon. "He must have known what was coming off—and evidently he knew you, Lasky."

"We'll probably get a line on him at Ollinger's."

"Rosie will squeal soon enough if she thinks it'll save her face," remarked Turner. "She's that kind."

"Then the quicker we round her up, the better," said Lasky.

"I hope you don't spill this to the newspapers," Kenyon put in. "There's been entirely too much rot about the diamond as it is; and with this new development——"

"Not a whisper if I can prevent it," the detective answered. "I'm not after publicity—yet. I want to have all the dope on hand when the explosion comes off. There'll be an eruption at headquarters when it's known that the Desert Diamond has reappeared—and disappeared all in one night."

Lasky favored his audience with a smile that to Kenyon seemed far from convincing. "Miss Sutton," he resumed as his glance lingered upon the girl, "I'm not going to molest you in any way. You are free to come and go as you choose; but I shall count upon your remaining in town until you have my permission to leave."

"You may depend upon that," the girl responded unhesitatingly. "And my father?" she asked.

"He won't be annoyed so long as you keep in touch with me," the detective promised. "You keep your bargain, and I'll keep mine. Is that perfectly clear?"

"Yes," she answered; "and thank you."

Lasky turned to Kenyon. "Where'll you be from now on? Here, or at Randal's?"

"If I'm not at one place I'll be at the other," Kenyon said.

"All right! I'll probably want you to identify Rosie to-morrow. Don't do any talking; and if anything new turns up, phone me at police headquarters."

With a brief nod, and followed closely by Turner, Lasky departed. From the open door, Kenyon watched the men enter the waiting cab and speed away.

"What do you suppose Lasky's got up his sleeve now?" queried Randal, when Kenyon came back to the room. "Changed his tactics mighty suddenly, didn't he?"

"Changed them because he had to," returned Kenyon. "Not so difficult to fathom him out," he added. "He'd like to arrest Miss Sutton and her father as well; but as the situation stands he hasn't a bit of evidence to back up his charges. Miss Sutton's word that she was in possession of the Desert Diamond isn't substantial enough to suit him. Besides, if the arrests were made now, the facts would get out; and without anything tangible to support him, the department and the newspapers would——"

"Then you mean he can't act until the Desert Diamond is found?" Randal broke in.

"That's it, precisely," answered Kenyon. "Well, so much for one night. It's been rather large and eventful, hasn't it?" he went on with a smile for the girl.

Miss Sutton made a brave attempt at returning the smile. "I'm afraid it's been disastrous as well," she said.

"That depends entirely upon how you look at it," Kenyon declared. "Why, the fact is, I'm a lot better off right now than I was two hours ago. At that time I never expected the Desert Diamond to show up again; now it is practically in my hands."

The girl regarded him through eyes that were suspiciously moist; and quick to surmise what must have been in her thoughts, Kenyon spoke.

"Let us understand one another, Miss Sutton," he said earnestly. "You have acted in good faith, irrespective of the result. I shall do the same. Had you returned the diamond to me, I assure you no questions would have been asked. That bargain was made between you and the man you were led to accept as Kenyon. Therefore I shall be bound by it."

"Thank you," she said. "I—I do not know what opinion you may hold of me. Perhaps what you have heard——"

"I am not influenced in the least by the remarks that Lasky felt called upon to pass," Kenyon assured her with a positiveness that left no room for doubt. "I am grateful that no harm has come to you to-night, for I feel in a great measure responsible for our unpleasant predicament; but whatever the outcome, nothing

that has been said, or may be said, will change the opinion I already have formed."

"You can put me down for the same speech, Miss Sutton," Randal chimed in. "What Kenyon's said goes double."

The girl flushed. "You are both very kind," she acknowledged. "You cannot know how much it means to me—just now."

"Let's call a truce for to-night and forget what's happened," Kenyon spoke up quickly. "It's after two now," he went on with a glance at his watch.

"Suits me," declared Randal.

"All right! Suppose you trot down to the corner and see if our taxi is still waiting? Bring it around here."

Randal opened the door and went down the steps. "Stopped raining," he called back.

"It'll be fair weather from now on," predicted Kenyon, stealing a glance at the girl. "Better get into dry clothes, Andrew," he ordered, addressing the caretaker. "Lock up the house after we're gone. Not afraid to remain here alone, are you?"

"Not a bit of it, Mr. Kenyon," Andrew responded. "I 'ardly think we'll 'ave other visitors to-night. Will you be coming back 'ere soon—to stay?" he inquired.

"I doubt it," Kenyon answered. "In case you want to get in touch with me, I'll be at Randal's."

When Andrew had left the room, Kenyon turned to find the girl's eyes fixed intently upon him. "Tell me," she began, "why was it you gave me Mr. Randal's card to-night?"

"It was the only one I had with me," he returned; "and I hoped—in some way—if the plans I had in mind miscarried, the card might bring us together again."

"Even though you hadn't seen me? Although you knew Lasky was trailing me?"

Kenyon's smile was reassuring. "I've nothing to regret," he answered in a tone that brought a deeper color to the girl's cheeks.

An instant later a horn blared outside. "There's Randal now," Kenyon said. "Perhaps we had better start."

The three rode downtown with few words. Miss Sutton had taken quarters at a little hotel in a quiet side street, not far from where Randal lived. There the men said good night and left her, Kenyon promising to call in the morning. They dismissed the cab and walked up Sixth Avenue.

An elevated train rumbled overhead and stopped. As the men passed the foot of the stairs that led down from the station platform, Kenyon put out an arm and drew Randal into the shadows.

A girl came down the stairs, turned and started briskly across the street. The blue dress and turban and golden hair were unmistakable.

"Great Scott!" Randal exclaimed softly. "It's——"

"Nobody else!" Kenyon broke in. "Of all the luck!"

"Let's grab her and phone Lasky!"

Kenyon shook his head. "Not yet. She may blaze a trail to the lair of her fellow conspirators. I'll tag along and——"

"I'm with you," Randal declared excitedly.

"No; you're not with me," Kenyon said. "This is strictly my affair, Ranny. You toddle off to bed, and I'll do the pussy-footing. If I should need you, I'll phone."

With that, leaving his disgruntled companion behind, Kenyon crossed to the opposite side of the street and followed the alleged Miss Hollister toward Fifth Avenue.

CHAPTER X.

COMPARING NOTES.

SOMETHING over an hour after he had telephoned the Kenyon house and scurried from the pay booth in the drug store upon realizing the blunder he had made, Baldy Snyder let himself into a dingy flat that occupied the top-floor rear of a walk-up apartment building, the windows of which looked out upon an unlovely vista of roofs, water tanks, and the elevated railroad.

His street was one of the lower, grimy East Thirties; his block was bounded by Lexington Avenue and the Third Avenue elevated; his neighbors were neither troublesome nor curious.

Snyder was well past middle age, bald,

with thick lips and dull, heavy-lidded eyes. An accident in his youth had left him with a twisted knee, a most lamentable handicap to one of his shining profession. It branded him unmistakably. A limp was a hardship visited upon him in more ways than one; it was an obstacle where speed was essential, and it frustrated any attempt at disguise.

Having been denied those highly desired qualities, Snyder was forced to rely upon a cunning and resourceful brain. What he could not execute in a physical way, he could plan in advance; and there were always nimble fingers and normal legs to carry out his bidding.

Upon entering his quarters, Snyder turned on the lights, glanced at the clock, and began to pace nervously across the floor. It was not until he had rolled himself a second cigarette that a knock sounded at the door. He opened it quickly to admit a tall, well-groomed individual who greeted him with a smile.

"Where've you been all this time, Vance?" Snyder complained when his visitor entered and sprawled into a chair.

"Why?" Vance inquired indifferently. "Think I wouldn't show up again?"

Judged from appearances, which in this case were not wholly deceiving, Vance belonged to the dashing, debonair, dinner-coat school of crookdom. His wardrobe was immaculate and his conduct and speech—upon the proper occasion—beyond reproach. He could adjust himself equally well to the drawing-room or pool hall and win respect in both places.

While practically a newcomer to the territory east of the Hudson, Vance had won the admiration—and envy—of his few business associates, and so far had been fortunate enough to avoid a clash with those of Lasky's calling, although some of the latter thought they recognized his trade-mark on a number of commendable jobs.

"I looked for you at Ollinger's," Vance went on. "Thought you were to meet me there. Ollinger said you'd left half an hour ago, so I figured you'd come home."

"I waited long enough," Snyder returned irritably. "Then I spotted Lasky and decided to move on."

"Lasky?" Vance echoed, a frown clouding his not unhandsome countenance. "Was he around that section? Thought his beat was Times Square."

"It is, usually; but he was uptown tonight."

"Funny! Wonder what's in the wind?"

Snyder shook his head. "I don't know," he answered, "unless Rosie's gone and talked."

Vance laughed. "She wouldn't do that. It wouldn't pay—now. Not when she was one of the party."

"Don't like a woman mixing in," said Snyder, plainly outspoken. "What did you bring her along for? She wasn't needed."

"Couldn't help myself." Vance shrugged. "She did her own inviting. Didn't want to have an argument and thought it would be just as well to humor her."

Snyder decided that there was more back of the business than Vance cared to reveal. "Where'd you leave her?"

"She left me. Ollinger said she hadn't been around his place, although I expected to find her there." Vance leaned back in his chair with a meditative smile. "Guess she's sore at me," he added.

"Why?"

"What are you so curious about? Interested in Rosie, are you?"

"I'm interested in what came off tonight," Snyder returned. "It ain't private, is it? How long did you stay at the house after I left?"

"Not long. Five or ten minutes maybe. We browsed through the house looking for pick-ups. Found nothing worth lifting, so we started off. And we'd no sooner got out of the door than Rosie discovered she'd lost her purse."

"In the house?" Snyder asked.

"Yes; figured she'd dropped it upstairs where she was hiding while we were doing the entertaining. Insisted upon going back to look for it, although it didn't contain anything much of value. I objected. Told her it was a risky thing to do, for the caretaker would likely be coming back with a couple of cops at his heels. We had a little argument, and when I tried to get her away, she put up a fight. Like a cat, she was. I didn't

want to make a scene or raise the neighborhood, so I had to get a bit rough."

"Rough? What do you mean?"

"What do you suppose?" retorted Vance. "Slap her on the wrist? Huh, not that dame! She'd have been hollering her head off in another minute if I hadn't shut her mouth. Oh, I didn't hit hard; but she flopped. And when I got her up she was too groggy to stage a come-back. I walked her up to the corner, thinking everything was fixed, when she jerked away from me and ran into the park. I was too mad to tear after her; besides, I didn't want to get mixed up in any trouble with the cops—not while I was packing spoils. So I let her go."

"Do you suppose she went back to the house again?" Snyder asked.

"Don't think so; not if she had any sense."

Snyder seemed on the point of making a statement, but hesitated, his heavy-lidded eyes fixed upon Vance. The latter leaned back in his chair and stretched himself, as one at peace with the world.

"Easy pickings, eh?" Vance smiled. "Told you so! Like taking a fly from a blind spider."

Snyder looked glum. "Don't like that Rosie proposition," he said. "Bound to be trouble."

"Aw, forget it! This is no time to be hanging crape. You got nothing to fret about."

"I'll feel more comfortable if I can get out of town for a couple of weeks," said Snyder.

"Well, what's to stop you?" Vance came back tartly.

"Nothing but my split."

"Where'd you get the split idea? This wasn't no fifty-fifty deal. A thousand's what you draw."

Snyder's eyes narrowed resentfully. "Say, you're liberal!"

"I'm paying you big enough for a half hour's time. All you did was to furnish a little background. A super!"

"I took the same risk as you," Snyder flung back. "If we'd been caught I'd had to stand the same sentence."

'Risk? How'd you get that way? Where was it? Most any ten-year-old could have turned the trick. After we got the bleating caretaker out of the way, the rest was candy. The girl walked in like a lamb and handed over the sparkler; then she turned around and walked out again. She don't know what happened, and she won't do any talking. She'll be pulling out of town first thing in the morning. She's the only one who could identify us in a pinch. So where's all the risk you're croaking about?"

Still Snyder did not speak what was running through his mind. "How soon do I get the thousand?" he asked, apparently resigned to accept the meager compensation offered him.

"To-morrow or next day," replied Vance. "What's the matter? Afraid you won't get it?"

"No; it isn't that. I'd just like to be traveling."

"You'll be safer right here. We've left no trail behind us. The caretaker'll never know what it was all about, and that Sutton girl will never suspect she was trapped. Even if she did she couldn't squawk—not without queering herself and the old man. And she's the only one who could identify us. Don't you see how pretty we're setting?"

"Suppose Rosie didn't get her purse?" Snyder asked.

"All right; suppose. It isn't likely she carried any visiting cards or her photo in it!"

"But what if she went back and was caught in the house?"

"That's her lookout!" Vance returned. "She won't connect us with the affair."

"Why won't she?" Snyder came back. "After you laid her out? She isn't the forgetting kind."

"Aw, for the love of Lizzie!" cried Vance. "Lay off the calamity stuff, won't you? What's got into you, Baldy? You're worse than some old woman."

Snyder at last spoke what was on his mind: "Did you leave the lights burning when you left the house?"

"No; of course not. Why?"

"Because they were on less than half an hour ago," Snyder answered.

"How do you know?" Vance got out of his chair and walked toward his companion. "Did you go back?"

"Yes; I did. I got worried when you didn't show up. I went down the Drive,

and when I saw the lights were burning I thought you were still in the house. And as I was heading for a phone I saw Lasky."

"Phone?" Vance repeated. "Who to?"

"The house."

"You mean Kenyon's?"

Snyder nodded. "I phoned there, thinking I'd reach you; and some one answered me."

CHAPTER XI.

LIGHTS OUT!

ASTOUNDED by what Snyder had imparted, Vance broke into an amazed exclamation. "What's that? You phoned the Kenyon house and some one answered you?"

"That's what I said. It wasn't Rosie, either. It was a man's voice. I thought it was you, of course."

"And then what?" Vance demanded swiftly, glaring at his companion. "Did you use my name? Did you let anything out?"

"No; of course not," Snyder lied readily. "Soon's the man answered me I rung off and beat it." He did not propose to incur Vance's wrath by revealing what had actually passed over the wire.

Vance scowled as he digested what little had been told him. "Some one in the house, eh?" he remarked at length. "And soon after we left. Think it could have been the caretaker?"

"No. He was a Britisher. I'd recognize his voice." Snyder gazed apprehensively at his companion. "See what's been worrying me, don't you? Wouldn't have thought so much about it if you hadn't mentioned the trouble with Rosie. If she went back looking for her purse and some one caught her in the house——"

"Who'd be coming there but the caretaker?" Vance broke in. "The house has been closed six months. Kenyon's in Arizona. There wouldn't be any visitors."

"But somebody answered the phone," Snyder insisted, unmoved by the other's argument.

Vance pondered the matter with knitted brows and troubled eyes. "Oh, well!" he returned, shrugging. "We're out of it, whatever's happened. I'll trust Rosie to take care of herself. Don't let it disturb you, Baldy. It isn't likely the chap who spoke over the phone could ever identify you by your voice."

"I'd just as soon fade out of the picture," Snyder remarked. "I'm not so young as you and some of the others. I'm not hankering to spend the last of my years up the river."

"All right; I won't stop you." Vance gave a grunt of disgust as he surveyed his companion. "You're getting old, sure enough. Be a good thing if you moved to the country and stayed there. Teach Sunday school or raise chickens. You'll be safe at that."

Snyder overlooked the sarcasm. "How soon'll you get rid of the diamond?" he asked.

"I'll carry the stone over to Horblitz to-morrow. He'll buy it quick enough. I can imagine the look on his face when I flash the glassware in his eyes! He told me the Desert Diamond was on the bottom of the Atlantic. The police think the same; and so does Kenyon. Old Horblitz won't be taking any risk in buying it. But more than likely he'll have it cut up. No chance of a come-back then."

"Cut it up?" repeated Snyder. "That'll be a shame. A fine big stone like that!"

"Easier to dispose of," said Vance; "and almost as much profit in it. Just as soon as I get my money, you'll get yours, Baldy. Then you can go into the country and raise cabbages."

"Where's the stone now?" queried Snyder. "I haven't got a flash at it yet."

Vance chuckled. "Haven't you? It's a pretty piece of glass." He reached into a bulging waistcoat pocket and drew forth a small leather case. "Not the biggest I've seen, but——"

A low hiss of warning came from Snyder. "Watch out!" he whispered. "Hide that stone!"

Instantly alert, Vance obeyed. "What's the matter?" he asked in an undertone.

Snyder looked toward the door. "I heard some one in the hall," he answered.

The men stood rigid and silent—listening. Snyder tiptoed across the floor and snapped out the lights; then, reaching out, he jerked open the door.

The dimly lighted hall was untenanted.

Snyder peered over the railing into the hall below.

"You must have been dreaming," scoffed Vance, but there was a note of anxiety in his voice.

Snyder came into the room again, closed the door and bolted it, but he did not switch on the lights.

"What's the big idea?" Vance spoke irritably out of the darkness.

"No use taking chances," Snyder cautioned him. "Some one's been listening at the door, I tell you."

"They'd better not fool with me," Vance growled softly. "I'll shoot first and ask questions afterward."

A sound drifted up from the floor below, too vague to be identified, nevertheless it put the men on guard.

"No gun play, Vance!" Snyder cautioned, stepping close to the younger man. "You don't want to start any excitement —not now. Not with that stone on you!"

Vance was breathing hard. "Maybe you're right," he said. "Don't want to be picked up and searched."

"There's no telling. You may have been trailed here."

"But who'd ever suspect? Lasky?"

"It's possible. Don't you know what would bring him into this neighborhood? More than likely," Snyder went on, "it would be Rosie's doings. You're trusting her too far."

"Rosie? Aw, she——" Vance began.

"Why take chances?" Snyder broke in. "You can't afford to. Rosie knows what you're packing. Losing her purse may have been a stall to shake you. She may have picked up a friend. They may be laying for you outside."

Vance seemed impressed. "Well, what are we to do? I'm not camping here all night. Isn't there any other way out of this place besides the front door?"

"The fire escape," Snyder answered. "It'll take you down to the court. From there you can get through to the other street. I've used it myself."

"All right! Show me where it is."

Snyder moved softly across the floor with Vance at his heels. They passed through another room into the kitchen. There Snyder guardedly raised a window.

The court below was in darkness, but a light from the street beyond sent a faint streak of yellow along a narrow areaway.

"Take that route," Snyder directed, when the men leaned from the window to peer below. "It'll bring you out below the corner."

Vance went over the sill to the narrow platform of the fire escape and, descending the iron ladder, was lost to view. Snyder leaned far out and listened to the faint sounds that marked the man's cautious descent. Presently he heard Vance drop to the paved court and an instant later saw him enter the areaway and disappear.

Snyder closed the window, pulled down the curtain and, making his way into the front room, switched on the lights. His face was flushed, and his eyes glistened. When he opened his clenched fingers he disclosed a small leather case. He held it on his palm and surveyed it with a chuckle of expectancy.

As he worked to loosen the cover, his tremulous, eager fingers fumbling at the catch, footsteps sounded along the hall, and a knock came at the door.

The smile vanished swiftly from Snyder's countenance, and panic surged through his mind. The thought that Vance might have discovered his loss at once, and had returned, was far from pleasant.

At all events, Snyder reasoned, the diamond must not be found on his person. An inspiration reached him as his roving eyes alighted upon a partly filled muslin tobacco sack. He snatched it up, rammed the leather case into it, drew tight the strings, and tossed the sack carelessly upon the table amid a litter of pipes, cigarette papers, and spilled tobacco. The most obvious hiding place was often the safest.

That done, he reached under a pile of newspapers for a revolver, backed against the wall, and switched off the lights. Armed and befriended by darkness, Snyder moved stealthily toward the door, his heart beating thickly, and his hand far from steady.

"Who's there?" he demanded when the knocking was repeated.

"It's me, Baldy."

At the sound of Rosie's voice, Snyder relaxed and breathed easier. An instant

later, no longer hesitant, he shot back the bolt and opened the door to admit the girl.

CHAPTER XII.

SURPRISING REVELATIONS.

LOOKING a bit bedraggled, Rosie Watson stood on the threshold of Snyder's apartment and peered into the dark room. "What's coming off, Baldy?" she asked. "Did I get you out of bed?"

"I didn't expect you," he replied with a glance up and down the hall. "Come in and shut the door."

As Snyder turned on the lights again, the girl's eyes followed him curiously.

"Who were you expecting?" she demanded, noticing the revolver in her host's fingers.

"I wasn't sure," Snyder answered evasively, pocketing the weapon and bolting the door.

"Looks as if you intended to give 'em a warm reception," the girl suggested. "Waiting in the dark with a gun! Calling out before opening the door! What's the trouble anyhow?"

"Where you been?" Snyder came back, ignoring the query. "Where'd you leave Vance?"

The girl made a grimace, and without answering she stepped to a mirror and surveyed herself. "I'm a sweet-looking child, ain't I, now? Look like the cat's convulsions. Who wouldn't, after all I been dragged through to-night!"

Snyder watched her speculatively as she opened a vanity case and began a hurried restoration of a damaged make-up.

"Vance was just here," he remarked at length.

"Vance?" The girl swung around to level a pair of blazing eyes upon the speaker. "Here? Well, what did he have to say?"

Snyder preferred to ask questions rather than answer them. "Did you go back after your purse to-night, Rosie?"

"Oh, so that was troubling him, was it? Did he say anything about this?" she demanded fiercely, pushing back her hair to display an ugly bruise. "Did he?"

"He mentioned it," Snyder admitted.

"And nothing else?"

"Nothing in particular. Why?"

The girl broke into a hard laugh. "He'll wake up pretty soon."

"What are you raving about? Did you go back to the house after you broke away from Vance?"

"Sure I did!" the girl responded. "And say, Baldy! I wriggled out of it by the skin of my finger nails. When it comes to acting there's none of these Broadway queens got anything on me! What do you know about me being taken for the simple sister that Vance grabbed the stone off of, eh? And what do you also know about the real, honest-to-goodness Kenyon being on the scene? And with Lasky himself in on the game!"

Snyder fell back with a choked exclamation. "Say, what in thunder you——" he began, unable to grasp the amazing statements that the girl hurled upon him.

"It makes me laugh now to think about the narrow squeak," the girl continued, "but it wasn't so funny at the time. If I hadn't done a lot of quick thinking I wouldn't be here chinning with you, Baldy.

"I went back to the house and lit things up on the first floor," she ran on excitedly; "but I hadn't done much else before I heard some one in the house. I beat it upstairs and hid. Stayed there a long time—so long I began to think I'd been mistaken; and then all at once the phone began ringing."

"That must have been me," Snyder declared.

"You? How'd that come?"

"I was trying to get hold of Vance. Saw the lights in the house and figured he was still there," Snyder explained briefly, adding a few other details that had been withheld from Vance.

"Well, I heard the man talking," continued the girl, "and pretty soon he went to the door and called. Another chap showed up. They kept on talking, but I didn't pay so much attention to what they said, for just then I was wondering how I was going to make my get-away. Next thing they started upstairs. I was so rattled I ducked back into the room where I'd been before, instead of making for the rear stairs; and when they got into the upper hall and turned on the lights, I saw I was trapped. I knew they

were searching the house and would be coming in where I was, so the only thing for me to do was to flop and do some play acting."

"Two men?" exclaimed Snyder. "Who——"

"Just wait! I'm coming to that. When they turned on the light in the room and saw me they were excited. They put me on a sofa and began to do the first-aid stuff. You see the trade-mark Vance put on me helped things along. They figured I had been laid out —right where they'd found me; and I let 'em think so, too.

"I kept my eyes shut and my ears open and listened in on all their chatter. Then, when I begun to get a slant on the situation, I pretended to come to. One of the men—it was Kenyon himself —done most of the talking. He seemed to be in a hurry to explain things. And can you beat it, Baldy! Kenyon himself had met this Sutton girl in a cab downtown, had found out she was bound for his house, and he'd let her come on without spilling the beans!"

"Suffering snakes!" gasped Snyder. "He knew what was up, and he let the girl come on?"

Rosie nodded. "What I make out of it was that Kenyon expected to tag along and make a killing. Gather all of us in; but he was delayed and by the time he showed up the trick was turned. And he took me to be the Sutton girl who'd been left behind."

"How was that?"

"Why, he'd done his talking with the girl in a dark taxi; hadn't got a good slant at her face. And I suppose he was looking for some dirty work, and when he spied me on the floor he naturally supposed I was the dame."

"Luck was with you, all right enough, Rosie," Snyder acknowledged; "but I'd of thought when you talked——"

"I didn't," the girl broke in. "No more than I could help. I just let him go on explaining and apologizing, while I nodded and looked blank. And when I did have to talk, I done it in a whisper."

"The man I phoned to must have been Kenyon himself."

"Sure it was!"

"Where'd he drop from?"

"Search me! Vance said he was out West."

"Well, what happened? How'd you get away from the house?"

"Kenyon didn't know what it was all about. I got that right off; so I took a chance and give my name as Hollister, not caring to bring the Sutton girl into it. That didn't mean nothing to him, of course; and all at once, wanting to get down to facts, I guess, he came out point-blank and asked what brought me to the house to-night.

"I was up against it there," the girl resumed. "Knew I had to frame up some yarn. Couldn't think of anything to save my life. I was just about deciding to fake a relapse, which wouldn't have been so hard to do, either, when the doorbell rang. That saved me, for the men ran off to answer the ring. And who do you suppose it was? Lasky!"

"Lasky?" Snyder repeated. "At Kenyon's place?"

"Nobody else. I crept out into the hall to listen. It was Lasky all right. And here's a new shocker for you, Baldy! Lasky had been trailing this Sutton girl all day, wondering what had brought her to New York."

"Trailed her—to Kenyon's?" Snyder gasped.

"No. She gave him the slip just before she reached the house. I'll have to hand it to her for that. If she hadn't, we'd be done for. But he picked her up on Broadway later; nabbed her that time. And when it got to Kenyon that Lasky had caught the girl he'd mistaken me for —well, the bomb went off, and so did I. I heard 'em racing up the front stairs as I went down the back ones. I got out of the house so fast it's a wonder I didn't scorch my feet. And here I am!"

CHAPTER XIII.

DESPERATE MEASURES.

SNYDER slumped back into a chair while he mopped at an exceedingly damp brow. The series of shocks his visitor had released left him a bit groggy and uncertain. It required an unusually alert mind to absorb the details and an interval in which to grasp their significance.

"Great guns, Rosie!" he ventured at length, once the situation was clear. I thought all along Vance's proposition looked too simple to be true. We got through with it just because we had our fingers crossed. Fool's luck! After what you've told me I guess the job's right in the spotlight. It'll be all over town as soon as the newspapers come out."

"I'll say so!" the girl returned. "That simple Sutton dame will spill all the particulars now that she knows she's been jobbed. She'll have to. It's a showdown for her. She'll be Johnny on the spot to identify you and Vance, too, if you're caught. And Kenyon and his friend will paint a sketch of me that Lasky'll recognize in a flash. I'll say we're in tight quarters, Baldy."

Snyder nodded. "It means a fade-away for us. When Lasky learns that one of the pair he wants has a hairless dome and a limp, every cop and plain-clothes bird in town will get orders to pick me up on sight. I could wear a wig, maybe," he added morosely, running a speculative hand over his glistening head; "but I can't straighten out a crooked knee."

"I'm in the same fix, Baldy," Rosie acknowledged with a grimace. "It's the price you have to pay for fatal beauty. A wig might cover my golden tresses, or I could dye 'em; but these winsome blue eyes of mine would give me away. I guess we're branded."

"Vance may get by. He'll be safe as long as the Sutton girl don't glimpse him." Snyder scowled darkly. "I don't exactly want to see him tumble into trouble; but I ain't proposing to tire myself by waving a red light."

"You and me both," Rosie declared with unexpected vehemence. "I'm through with him. He's a last year's bird's nest so far's I'm concerned. That's how Vance stands with me."

"Know what he expects to slip me for my share to-night? A measly thousand! That's all. And with him figuring to collect thirty, forty times that much."

"Sure! That's him all over!" Rosie's sapphire eyes became as frigid as a winter sun on a glacier. "I could have told you so before. I been waiting to get square with Vance, only he didn't know it. That's why I butted in to-night and made him invite me along. Made him sore, didn't it? But you notice he didn't turn me down. Figured he rather have me in the party than out of it, so's I wouldn't be in a position to blab."

Snyder failed to grasp all that the girl implied, but as he was grappling with a problem of his own at the moment, he did not take the trouble to ask questions.

"Yes; Vance told me as much," he admitted; "told me you'd horned in without an invite, and he figured it was safer to have you trail along."

"Didn't have anything else to say about me?" Rosie asked.

Snyder shook his head. "Nothing except that he knew you wouldn't queer the game. Why?"

The girl laughed. "Maybe I'll tell you later, Baldy. It's almost too good to keep. Now that I get how you stack up with Vance, you ought to appreciate the joke."

"It's past the joking stage—I mean between me and Vance," Snyder declared. His enmity toward the man had reached a point where he relished having an equally bitter partisan in the girl. "When Vance learns what's happened he'll likely blame you."

"He's got a lot to learn yet," the girl returned.

"And you know what he'll do, don't you?"

"Sure! Cut loose and let us sink."

Snyder broke into a throaty chuckle, his eyes straying toward the tobacco sack on the table. "We got to fade, Rosie. The quicker the better. How you fixed for coin?"

"It's been a long, cold winter, Baldy," the girl replied.

"Listen!" Snyder bent forward, his eyes glistening. "I got folks out West—Arizona. Jo Snyder—everybody out there knows him. He and his wife and kids got a ranch—near Sunrise. Great place! I was there a coupla years ago. They think I'm in business here—decent business. You understand?"

The girl nodded sympathetically. "I get you, Baldy. Used to have folks myself."

"I hear from 'em often. They're al-

ways wanting me to come back—and stay."

"You're lucky. If I was you——" Rosie began.

"I was thinking maybe you'd like to head that way yourself."

"Me? With your folks?" she exclaimed incredulously.

"Yes. I'll stand the cost. The woman out there is a good sort. She'll treat you fine and—and you'll like her, Rosie. And you'll like the country, too. All clean and fresh—and—wholesome. It'll make you feel different. Oh, I ain't trying to preach," Snyder went on; "but you know there's just one finish for the likes of us unless we quit in time. And you're just a kid yet, with all the years ahead of you."

The girl stared at her companion with eyes that suddenly misted. "Say, you—you're a decent sort, Baldy," she wavered. "Honest you are!"

"Maybe I'm starting late; but I mean what I say."

"Stop! You'll have me sentimental in a minute!" Rosie cried. "Quit it, Baldy! It ain't natural. Where'd you get the money? You told me the other day——"

"But that was the other day," Snyder interrupted. "A lot can happen in a few hours. Do you know who I thought it was when you knocked at the door a while ago? Know why I had the light out and the gun handy?"

A flash of understanding seemed to illumine the girl's mind. "Was it Vance?" she asked.

"Nobody else! Vance! I thought he'd be coming back and—and he wasn't going to catch me napping."

"Well?" she queried expectantly, her eyes fixed upon the other's flushed countenance. "What was the sense of the gun play? You and Vance had a misunderstanding?"

Almost exultantly Snyder blurted out the truth. "I got the diamond, Rosie! The Desert Diamond! I picked it off him to-night."

The girl sprang from her chair with a low exclamation, her eyes wide with mingled surprise and uncertainty; but before she could frame a reply, a step sounded behind her. As she whirled instinctively, with Snyder following her example, the pair found themselves staring at the rage-distorted countenance of Vance.

At sight of the intruder, Snyder flung an arm toward the table, on the edge of which lay his revolver.

"Cut that!" Vance cried menacingly, a weapon shining in his own fingers. "Back up! Against the wall! Both of you!"

As the pair obeyed, Vance strode forward, possessed himself of Snyder's revolver, and stared at its owner.

"Had the door bolted, didn't you?" he flung out. "Figured I'd be coming back, didn't you? Well, I'm here. Came in the way I got out. Forgot about the fire escape and the kitchen window, didn't you? I hardly expected to find you in, Baldy!"

"Well, I'm here!" Snyder retorted, making a brave attempt to keep his voice normal and fighting down the panic that surged through his mind. "What do you want of me?"

"Want? Why, you miserable, sneaking, double-crossing hound, you know what I want. Come across now! I'll give you one minute to fork over that stone you stole from me."

The girl found her tongue and rallied to Snyder's defense. "Aw, forget it, Vance! Baldy wouldn't hook the diamond."

"You keep out of this!" Vance snapped. "You've bothered me enough for one night."

Rosie laughed, undismayed at the man's threatening attitude. "Bothering you?" she jeered. "Huh, I haven't started yet."

Vance ignored the girl and confined his attention to Snyder.

"Come across now! Where's the stone?"

"You're talking foolishness!" Snyder exclaimed. "I never had a chance to see the stone."

"Don't start that stuff with me!" Vance cried. "You can't get away with it now. You turned a pretty slick trick, Baldy; and I never tumbled until I was half a mile from the house. Making believe some one was outside the door and giving you an excuse to turn off the lights! Crowding against me in the dark, after you saw where I put the stone! Pretty smooth!"

Snyder wavered, fully realizing his peril; but he did not give up. "You—you got me wrong, Vance," he protested.

"I might have thought so if I hadn't heard you boast to Rosie that you'd lifted the diamond," returned Vance. "I just heard you, Baldy. You can't deny it."

"I—I was just kidding," Snyder faltered.

Vance coolly pocketed his revolver; then swiftly his hands leaped out and his fingers clamped themselves in the soft flesh of Snyder's throat. "I'm done talking!" he snarled.

Snyder writhed and choked under the pressure of Vance's relentless fingers; his face purpled, and his eyes bulged glassily.

Rosie sprang forward to wrench at Vance's arm and to beat her fists upon his unprotected face. "Lay off the rough stuff!" she panted fiercely. "Lay off, I tell you!"

With an imprecation, Vance whirled, released one hand and shot a doubled fist against the girl's chin. She crumpled to the floor without a sound.

At the same instant, quick to seize his chance, Snyder hurled himself at Vance and grappled despairingly. Together they crashed against the table, overturning it; tripped and fell sprawling. On the floor they thrashed about like infuriated animals.

The end, however, was inevitable, for Snyder was no match for the younger man. Vance's fingers again found and dug into Snyder's throat; pressed deeply, grimly.

"Where is it, Baldy?" Vance cried at length, releasing his fingers. "Tell me! Come across! I'll choke the life out of you!"

Snyder lay still, his ghastly face upturned, his mouth open.

Vance glared at the man; came to realize that he had gone too far. Snyder was unconscious and beyond speech. He might remain so for a long time.

The abrupt termination of the unequal contest maddened him. He did not propose to wait. Swiftly he tore at Snyder's clothes, ripped open the pockets, and scattered their contents broadcast. Disappointed, he got upon his feet and began to ransack the room with wild and frantic haste. Despairingly he labored, kicking up the rugs, emptying drawers, exploring every nook and cranny like a man possessed.

At the end, baffled, he stopped, breathless, wet with perspiration, to gaze at the havoc he had created. Presently he knelt beside the quiet form of Snyder; then he lurched to his feet with a frightened look upon his face.

With barely a glance at the girl huddled on the floor, and giving no thought to what she might have to face, Vance unbolted the door and started into the hall. Abruptly he changed his mind, turned and stumbled into the kitchen where he crept out of the window and down the fire-escape ladder.

On the floor, almost within reach of Snyder's clenched fingers, hurled there when the table was overturned, lay the muslin tobacco sack and its contents. Baldy had reasoned well, for the most obvious hiding place had been the safest.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN ASTONISHING BARGAIN.

KENYON trailed his blue-clad, golden-haired quarry across town to midway in the block east of Lexington Avenue, keeping on the opposite side of the street and a proper distance behind. However, the girl did not seem to fear being shadowed. Never once did she look behind; and when at length she entered one of the many drab, ill-kept apartments, Kenyon quickened his pace.

He waited some time before crossing the street and strolling past the house in which the girl had disappeared. The hall door was open, and a dim light burned within, over the stairs that led to the upper floors. When at last Kenyon ventured inside, it was to glance inquiringly at the cluster of mail boxes; but the majority of them were without names.

No sound reached his ears. Apparently the tenants had long since retired. After waiting some time he risked ascending the creaking, carpeted stairs, treading them cautiously; and upon reaching the upper halls, he moved past the many doors, listening for voices.

Unrewarded, he descended to the

ground floor and walked across the street, reasoning that if his quarry did not show up again within the next hour, the house was doubtless her residence and she had retired. That much at least would be gained.

With the passing of a half hour, Kenyon began to stir restlessly. Not since he had taken up his post, concealed in a dark areaway, had any one entered or left the premises on the opposite side of the street. His lonely vigil grew tiresome.

At last, when an officer appeared at the far end of the street and began to stroll his way, Kenyon decided, to avoid questioning and perhaps a deserved suspicion, to make a second tour of investigation. He walked boldly into the hall and up the stairs.

On the top floor he noticed a partly opened door. He was certain it had been closed at the time of his former visit. Still, he heard no voices. After a moment of debate, he moved forward, uncertain as to what he would do or say in case some one appeared suddenly and demanded to know his business.

As he passed the door he glanced in and hesitated involuntarily, for the girl he sought was standing beside an overturned table, her back toward him, gazing down at something on the floor. If there were others in the room they were unseen and silent.

As Kenyon watched and waited, the girl moved slightly. He caught a glimpse of her unmistakable profile. It spurred him to a greater risk. He had found what he had sought; and whatever danger lay ahead it was his to accept, unfalteringly.

Grasping the revolver in his pocket and prepared for any unseen emergency, Kenyon moved forward, put his toe against the door, and swung it wide open.

At the slight squeak of the hinges, the girl whirled. Kenyon was struck by the pallor of her face and the frightened look in her eyes. They stared mutely, questioningly, at one another. As Kenyon advanced into the room, closing the door behind him, his glance swept the place; rested suddenly upon the quiet form on the floor beside the overturned table.

Once again he shot a questioning look at the girl. She continued to survey him, and for the first time, he thought, with a startled look of recognition.

"Where—where did you come from?" she blurted out presently.

"I followed you from the elevated station," Kenyon answered. "Just luck. You left my house so hurriedly to-night that——" He stopped and shifted his eyes to the man on the floor. 'Who is this?"

"Friend of mine."

"What has happened?"

"It—it's murder!" the girl answered, her voice choking. "I tried to stop it; but I couldn't. Just now I came back to my senses again. The beast!"

Kenyon's mind worked rapidly. "Who did this?"

"What difference does it make to you?"

"Perhaps a great deal. I might call an officer. There was one in front of the house as I came upstairs."

"But—but the skunk that done this got away!" the girl cried. "He got away. You don't think I did it, do you?" Almost pathetically she held up her slim, beringed fingers. "I couldn't strangle a man—a man like him—with these. Please—please, don't call a cop!"

"You're Rosie Watson, aren't you?" Kenyon asked.

"I won't deny it. I got nothing to conceal. You're Kenyon. You told me so. I haven't harmed you any," the girl ran on appealingly.

"I don't intend that you should," he returned.

It began to dawn upon Kenyon that he had stumbled upon a big and vital situation. The girl's presence, the murdered man who resembled one whom Miss Sutton had described, and the condition of the premises, all contributed to the support of a theory that reared itself in his alert mind.

"We'd both better get away from here before—before this is discovered," the girl spoke up apprehensively.

"We're not likely to be disturbed for a while," Kenyon said. "Now that we know one another better, perhaps you'll answer a few questions, Rosie. You say you haven't harmed me. Perhaps not; but you're in a position to help me. This

man"—he nodded toward Vance's victim —"was with you at my house to-night. His name was Snyder—Baldy Snyder. Isn't that correct?"

"Who told you that? Lasky?"

"The name—yes," Kenyon was frank enough to admit. "His description was furnished by the girl I first took you to be—Miss Sutton—the pawn in the game you and your fellow conspirators played to-night."

"There's no use in my denying it," the girl returned; "but I wasn't a conspirator. I had nothing to do——"

"And the other man?" Kenyon broke in. "The man who impersonated me. He is responsible for this crime?"

The girl nodded, her eyes filled with loathing and unspeakable hatred.

"What was the motive?" Kenyon demanded.

"What'll you do with the information you're trying to get out of me?" the girl came back mistrustfully.

"I'll keep it strictly to myself—so far as it's possible."

"And how far's that?" Rosie's early fright had passed. She was more herself again now. "What'll you do if I keep my mouth shut? Turn me over to Lasky?"

"I'm not going to threaten you, Rosie," Kenyon assured her. "We know what took place to-night. I'm no more interested in Lasky's activities than you are; perhaps far less. I merely want to regain my property; that's all."

"Do you think I have it?" she flared resentfully.

"No; I don't. But I think you know where I could find it. That's what I'm after, and that's what I'm going to get if it takes from now till Christmas. More than that," he added candidly, "I'd much prefer to find it myself—without police assistance."

Speculatively the girl eyed him, as if, in something he had let drop, she had discerned an entirely new angle on the affair. "Well, you've got eyes, haven't you?" she replied. "You can put two and two together, can't you?"

"I believe I can," Kenyon declared, not at all puzzled at her singular remark, for it echoed a suspicion that already had found lodging in his mind. "Snyder had the diamond, and the other man came after it."

"You're not far off," she acknowledged.

"You saw the diamond, did you?" he queried.

The girl shook her head. "No; I didn't see it. But Baldy told me he had the stone—picked it from the other man's pocket earlier this evening. Why? Because this other man was low-down and yellow and didn't aim to play fair with him," she finished contemptuously.

"And this man returned here when he discovered his loss," supplemented Kenyon. "I see now."

"Baldy was a decent sort. I liked him, and he must have liked me, for he was going to help me get away." The girl's voice and manner changed suddenly. She bit at her lips as if to hold back the tears. "I tried to help him; but it was no go. I was laid out cold. When I come to my senses again—Baldy was just as you see him now and the dirty hound who done the job was gone."

"But I followed you here," said Kenyon; "waited outside. No one has come in or gone out of the building since you went in."

"Oh, he probably went out the way he came in—through the kitchen and down the fire escape."

"You don't know where Baldy hid the stone?"

"Had it on him, I suspect."

"The condition of the room seems to disprove that," asserted Kenyon. "If the man had found the diamond on his victim, he'd hardly take the trouble to ransack the premises."

The argument did not seem to impress the girl. "Oh, he got it all right. Trust him for that. He knew it was here somewhere. He wouldn't have gone away without it."

"Who is he? What's his name?"

"Would it make any difference—now?" she asked.

"If he's the man I'm after, it makes all the difference in the world," Kenyon replied. "He has my property, and I'm going to get it back."

"He's a murderer besides," the girl said, as if to remind Kenyon of the greater charge. "Don't forget that! He's got to answer for it."

"All the more reason I should find him."

"I'll do that!" Rosie cried suddenly, fiercely. "I'll do that if you'll only let me alone."

"But I want to have a part in it myself," Kenyon reminded her.

"What can you do?" she demanded scornfully. "You'll never find the man —nor Lasky, nor all the police force; but I can. You want back your diamond, and I want to square accounts for Baldy's death. If you'll give me a chance I'll do both. I promise you that."

Kenyon hesitated, rather skeptical of the uncertain proposition. "Just what do you mean by—a chance?" he asked.

"Don't turn me over to Lasky. Give me twenty-four hours. I won't disappear. I give you my word for that, if it means anything to you. If the police get me I'll be locked up—helpless. I'll never give 'em a whisper of what I know. But if I'm free to work, I'll get the man. I'll get him—diamond and all. Please believe me."

There was a pathetic eagerness in her hard voice, aside from the logic of her argument, that seemed to impress Kenyon.

"I've been telling you the truth," she went on before he had an opportunity to commit himself. "I've answered all your questions but one. I wasn't in on the game to-night. You know there wasn't a part for a woman to play. The Sutton girl didn't see me, did she? No. Because I was upstairs. I made 'em take me along to-night because I had a score to settle. I've a bigger one now."

"Why didn't you leave the house with your companions?"

"I did; but I went back again alone—to get my purse."

"How about that bruise——" Kenyon began.

"The man hit me—the same man that struck me down here when I went to protect Baldy—the man I mean to get," she answered. "It happened outside the house. He didn't want me to risk going back, and we fought. But I had to get the purse. It was a gold-mesh one with fifty smackers in it," she added. "I couldn't afford to lose it."

Eagerly, graphically, she repeated the major part of what she had told Snyder an hour before, sparing none of the details. Kenyon listened in frank amazement.

"Then you were shamming when we discovered you!" he exclaimed.

"Of course! You couldn't blame me for protecting myself. I had to do something—in a hurry."

"And it was Snyder who phoned the house?"

"Yes. He thought the other man was still there. I'm telling you the truth, Kenyon! Don't you see I am? I had to use my wits to get away from Lasky."

"Then you recovered your purse?"

"Yes; and I ran down the rear stairs when you and the others came up the front."

Kenyon, reviewing all that had been told him, began to feel that the girl was telling the truth. At any rate her story was convincing, and it supplied logical solutions for questions that had come up during the evening; questions that neither he nor Lasky had been able to answer.

Apparently, Kenyon found himself in possession of many details and edifying facts relevant to the night's drama—a drama that had been turned into a tragedy. Rosie's confession fitted in perfectly with what few clews and bits of evidence he and Randal had stumbled upon.

Rosie, watching him hopefully in the silence, suddenly reached out and touched his arm. "What good'll it do you to show me up? I've told you everything I know—more than I'd ever tell the police. I don't think you care for 'em any more than I do," she remarked shrewdly. "Why should they meddle in the affair? Baldy's gone. I'm the only one who can help you now. I'll get the man. He's got to pay for this. Look there!"

The girl pointed to a bit of cloth that was locked in the rigid fingers of the dead man. "See that? Baldy must have died hard—fighting for his life. He's torn a button off the other man's coat and took some of the cloth with it. The police'll find that evidence; and I'll find the man with the torn coat. That'll be all the dope we need to convict him."

"It'll be enough," conceded Kenyon.

"Then give me the chance, won't you? Gamble on me just this once. Give me till to-morrow night. By that time I'll have the man and your stone. We'll both win."

Kenyon's response was instant. "I'll give you the chance," he said quietly, as if the matter had required very little debate, "provided you meet me again to-morrow night, successful or not."

"Say, you're the right sort, you are," Rosie cried in a choked voice. "I'll never fail you, Kenyon. I'll meet you again to-morrow night—at your house—sometime before twelve."

"My house? You mean uptown?"

"Of course! Safer than this district," the girl responded. "Besides, Lasky would never be looking for me in your neighborhood."

Kenyon pondered over the matter. "Very well. At my house some time before midnight."

Rosie turned for a last glance at Snyder, her eyes filmy. "Good-by, Baldy," she wavered. "We're going to square accounts; square 'em good and plenty."

She walked to the door, opened it, and peered along the hall. "I'll get started now," she said. "There'll be a lot to do before I see you again. Good night!"

As she closed the door and slipped down the stairs, Rosie wiped away the tears that threatened to damage her make-up and drew a long quivering breath of relief. Her second miraculous escape of the night! She certainly had to congratulate herself!

"Say," she murmured to herself as she reached the street and turned toward Third Avenue, "I ought to get me a swell job in the movies!"

And upstairs, prepared to leave the quiet, disordered room on the top floor, Kenyon, a bit more nervous than he would have admitted, reached into his pocket for something to smoke.

CHAPTER XV.

THINGS SAID AND UNSAID.

THE morning brought several interesting developments, at least one of which Kenyon anticipated. The newspapers contained a brief account of the finding of Snyder's body by the police, who had been led to the flat in the lower East Thirties through an anonymous telephone message. The body had been identified as that of Baldy Snyder, a crook well known to the local authorities. Evidence proved that he had been strangled and that robbery undoubtedly had been the motive for the crime. So far, the police were without clews.

In the police department, probably only Lasky and Turner were seriously interested in the tragedy.

The other item, given considerably more space, revealed the crash of a big irrigation project in Arizona. It mentioned that the late John Kenyon had been at the head of the organization, and at his death, less than a year before, his son had become active in the company's affairs. Now the officials, with the exception of young Kenyon, had disappeared, leaving the ranchers of the district, who had believed and invested in the project, to hold an empty bag.

The article went on to say, however, that Vincent Kenyon announced his intention of reimbursing the stockholders, had done so in part, and was expected in New York at an early date on a cash-raising mission. It was thought that the government would investigate the affair.

The distorted and garbled near-facts that went to dress up the story for metropolitan consumption stung Kenyon, and he expressed his displeasure in no uncertain terms at the breakfast table.

"What do you expect from the sensation mongers?" Randal inquired. "Glory! What if they knew about last night's affair? In hooking up one with the other, they'd have enough material to last a year! You're getting off light at that, Kenyon."

"I suppose I am," Kenyon was forced to admit. "There's always something to be thankful for. If a newspaper hound doesn't get on the trail of the Desert Diamond——"

"He'd have a hard time getting much out of you," Randal cut in pointedly. "I haven't heard more than a peep about your doings last night; but this Snyder murder that was pulled off in the section you were last headed for gives me a couple of hunches."

Kenyon had said very little to Randal upon his return to the apartment the night before, but it was sufficient to arouse Randal's highly developed curiosity.

"Where did Rosie lead you?" Randal insisted.

"To Snyder's flat," Kenyon told him.

"Thought so. Before or after the choking bee?"

"After."

"All right! Then what? Don't be a clam!" Randal implored. "You wouldn't take me along, but surely you can't refuse to tell me what I've missed. I'm entitled to some consolation."

Kenyon smiled. "Well, I trailed Rosie to a flat east of Lexington," he began, "and some surprising things happened there."

After that start, and while Randal listened wide-eyed, Kenyon sketched in the dramatic action that followed, ending with Rosie's departure. Several details were omitted; but they in no way impaired the story.

"And you let Rosie walk away?" Randal remonstrated. "The only clew we had! You fell for her line of sob stuff? Ten to one she finished off Baldy herself and had the diamond on her right at the time."

"I'll just cover that bet," said Kenyon. "How much are you putting up?"

Randal backed down. "Well, it was a fool thing to do at any rate," he admonished. "You're no better off now than you were before we ran across the girl last night."

"Oh, yes; I am, Ranny. Considerably better off! I've a theory all my own that's looking brighter every minute. I may be wrong; but it's worth following up. Rosie never could have throttled the life out of Baldy Snyder, to begin with; and she's mighty upset because it happened. Of that I'm certain."

"You are? Why? Because she squeezed out a few crocodile tears? Do you actually believe she'll trail this other chap, if there was one, and head him into the police net?"

"It's worth gambling on."

"And you think she'll keep her promise to meet you at your house to-night?" Randal continued.

"If my theory's at all correct; yes."

"And hand over the Desert Diamond in the bargain?"

"I'm not banking so strongly on that," Kenyon admitted.

Randal indulged in a sarcastic laugh. "You're a fall-guy for sure, Kenyon! That's all I have to say. No wonder the girl's a successful crook. If all her victims are as susceptible as you've been it's——"

"Wait till to-morrow at this hour, Ranny!" Kenyon broke in. "Then you can hand me a brickbat or a bouquet, and I'll dodge neither."

"You may have a whale of a theory," said Randal; "but it's the same as harpooned right now if you're counting on that blue-eyed siren to make good."

"Perhaps she's more interested in keeping her word than you suspect. Perhaps she's only afraid I won't keep mine and meet her on schedule time," Kenyon intimated.

"I'll be hanged if I know what you're driving at," Randal returned. "But if I'd been in your shoes last night, I'd have got the story and gently urged her toward police headquarters. With Baldy dead and Rosie locked up, two thirds of your troubles would have been over."

"You're forgetting, Ranny, that I don't want the police in on this any more than I can help. And if I had escorted Rosie to the nearest station last night, I would have let myself in for embarrassing questions."

"Yes; that's right," Randal reluctantly conceded. "Glory! What a fit Lasky would throw if he knew half as much as you've told me! See here!" he charged suddenly, as if the thing had just occurred to him. "What about the phone call that tipped off the police? Was that your doing?"

"I won't deny it," replied Kenyon.

"Holy mackerel! You'll have the authorities on a wild-goose chase trying to run it down. Of course they'll figure the criminal himself turned the trick."

"Just so long as they don't connect Baldy with the affair at my house I'm not worrying," remarked Kenyon. "If Lasky gets hold of the diamond it'll mean trouble for Miss Sutton. I mean to prevent that at any cost. And that reminds

me I promised to see the young lady this morning."

"As if you'd forgotten it!" Randal's voice was satirical.

Kenyon laughed. "Sour grapes, eh? Told you, didn't I, that when you saw the lady of the taxi you'd be the most jealous chap on this island?"

"Did you? I fail to recall any such prediction."

Interrupting any further exchange of pleasantries, the telephone rang, and Randal went into the hall to answer it. He returned a moment later with a grin.

"From Lasky. He's over on Broadway. When he learned you were here he said he'd drop in."

Kenyon shared his companion's smile. "Well, we'll listen to his theorizing. See how close to the truth he'll get."

In less than five minutes Lasky was at the door.

"Morning," the detective greeted shortly, nodding to the men as he entered the room. "Heard about Baldy Snyder, have you?" he inquired at once.

"Just been reading the newspaper account of it," answered Kenyon.

"And discussing it," supplemented Randal. "What do you make of the murder, Lasky?"

"Simplest thing in the world," the detective responded. "Baldy had your diamond, Kenyon; and the man that croaked him evidently got away with the stone."

"I figured something like that myself," said Kenyon, "after I'd learned the murdered man was Baldy Snyder and that robbery was thought to have been the motive for the crime."

"I been over the premises," Lasky went on. "You never saw such a mess. Baldy's pockets ripped open and the room turned into a wreck. Must have been some battle staged there, although none of the occupants of the building will admit hearing a disturbance. Birds of a feather they are, in that section. You'll never get one of 'em to admit anything the police want to know."

"Any clews yet?" Randal asked.

"Yes; a mighty good one. Found a button and a piece of cloth in Baldy's fingers. Must have torn 'em from his companion's coat. It's just the same old story of crooks falling out and fighting over the spoils," the detective went on assuredly. "We found the kitchen window open, so evidently the victor made a getaway by means of the fire escape. I'm satisfied he was the third member of the trio that visited your house last night, Kenyon—the chap who impersonated you. Of course I haven't been able to air my suspicions yet," he added. "If I did it would bring the Desert Diamond into the affair, and the time isn't ripe for that."

"Then you think you know this third member of the trio?" Kenyon asked, recalling that Rosie stubbornly had refused to divulge any information relative to her associate.

Lasky shook his head. "Can't place him. Rosie and Baldy were easy enough to identify by descriptions alone; but not this other bird. Any number I know of who'll answer fairly well to the description Miss Sutton gave us. However, the net's out, and we'll drag in a few suspects to-day for Miss Sutton's inspection."

"Do you think it possible the man didn't find what he was looking for?" ventured Kenyon. "You say Baldy's pockets were ripped open and the premises ransacked; but that isn't conclusive evidence the criminal found the diamond."

"No; not conclusive, perhaps, but a pretty safe bet," the detective contended. "At any rate it gives us a good line on the man we want."

"Do you think he was the chap that phoned police headquarters?" Randal inquired innocently, flashing a glance at Kenyon.

"Of course!"

"But why would he take all that trouble?"

"Just for the privilege of handing us the laugh," responded Lasky. "I've run across his breed before—the kind that enjoy crowing over a job. We traced the call to a pay station over on Lexington Avenue; but nothing came of it. By the way, where did you leave Miss Sutton last night?" the detective asked, turning to Kenyon.

"Don't you know?" Kenyon flung back.

The detective shrugged. "Perhaps," he answered evasively.

"I thought so. I was just starting over to see her."

"All right; come along," Lasky invited, unabashed. "I want her to take a look at Baldy's photo—want to be absolutely certain he was one of the men she met last night."

CHAPTER XVI.

ECHOES FROM THE WEST.

HER face bearing traces of a wakeful night, Miss Sutton greeted her visitors expectantly in the shabby reception room of the little, side-street hotel. Daylight had not robbed her of wholesome attractiveness; and the infinite charm of her voice remained to play havoc in Kenyon's heart.

Gazing at her with open admiration as he took her hand, Kenyon found difficulty in associating the girl with the sordid things Lasky had mentioned. The underworld with all its depravity and viciousness had left no mark upon her. Kenyon could not reconcile himself to the thought that she had been of that world at all and resolutely banished it from his mind.

From the photograph that Lasky showed her, Miss Sutton unhesitatingly identified Baldy Snyder as the counterfeit servant in the Kenyon house the night before. She listened without comment to the news of the man's violent death, but seemed disturbed at the theory the detective advanced to account for the tragedy.

"And you've found no trace of this other man?" she inquired anxiously.

"Not so far," Lasky answered. "There's nothing unusual or outstanding in the description you've given of him. That's the trouble. It fits any number of men I have in mind. All we can do now is round them up for you to look over."

"Just hurry," she pleaded.

"We'll do that. I want you to remain within phone call, so we can get hold of you when we've made our round-up, Miss Sutton."

"But I feel so—so helpless! Just sitting here idle when so much is at stake! Where would this man likely be found?" she went on quickly, before the detective had an opportunity of speaking. "Why couldn't I spend the day in the section? I might run across him. I'd know him again. Let me do something, please."

"I'm afraid you couldn't do much alone," Lasky returned. "Better remain here so that I can get in touch with you. I'll phone or see you again before night."

Lasky started from the room without further parley, with Kenyon at his heels; but a readily interpreted look from the girl arrested him.

"I'll be back," he told her, and hastened to follow the detective into the lobby.

"I'll be hanged if I can make her out," Lasky declared, turning to Kenyon. "Somehow I felt she'd vanish before morning."

"Vanish?" repeated Kenyon. "When you've doubtless had the girl under surveillance since she left my house last night? If I were you," he went on, while the detective eyed him resentfully, "I'd call off your watchdogs. Miss Sutton isn't going to run away."

Obviously Lasky did not relish the other's interference in what seemed to be a police matter. "You seem to be taking a lot of interest in the young lady," he retorted.

"What's to prevent it? At any rate I trust her; and that's more than you are doing."

"Well, as things stand——" the detective began.

"As things stand," Kenyon took up, "you can't do much against Miss Sutton—not openly. You have to mark time until the Desert Diamond puts in an appearance; and when that time comes you'll pounce upon her. Fact, isn't it?"

"I'm capable of running this to suit myself," Lasky returned. "If you hope to get back your property, I'd advise you to mind your own business."

"The return of my property has no bearing whatever on the subject we were discussing."

"Hasn't it? Wait and see!" And with that, Lasky turned upon his heel and strode away.

With kindled eyes and a rebellious mind, Kenyon went back to where he had left Miss Sutton. He was not in sympathy with Lasky's tactics and felt

privileged to say so; and if the detective did not approve of the stand he took in the matter, then the man could chase himself around the block. Those, at the moment, were precisely Kenyon's thoughts.

He did not class himself with those who considered the police bunglers, always in the wrong and always to be used as a target for ridicule; but he did object to Lasky's present methods in respect to Miss Sutton. There was a great deal he did not understand and perhaps never would; at the same time that did not prevent him from exercising ordinary courtesy in his treatment of the girl.

Kenyon did not stop to consider that perhaps he was viewing the young woman through totally different eyes from Lasky's; that where she was purely impersonal to the detective—one of the many factors by which he sought to achieve an end—she was distinctly otherwise to the present heir of the Kenyon misfortunes.

In the girl's company once more, and questioning her, he learned that she had not been annoyed in any way and was ignorant of Lasky's actions. However, she did not seem perturbed at the information Kenyon divulged.

"I wouldn't be surprised at anything he would do," she responded.

"I hope we can recover the stone without Lasky's figuring in the matter at all," Kenyon remarked. "It isn't so remote a possibility as you might think," he added.

"And what would that mean?" she inquired.

"Upsetting Lasky's program and protecting you, Miss Sutton."

The girl fell silent a moment, as if wondering by what miracle the man hoped to achieve such a goal; yet she did not question him.

Kenyon's eyes rested upon her gravely, intently. His glance traveled from the soft oval of her cheek to the slim, white fingers that lay in her lap. Somehow the cares and worries of the past slipped from his shoulders, and he felt at peace. The room was quiet and filled with sunlight that streamed from the big window overlooking the street.

Unbidden and vaguely, his thoughts drifted back to the open, sun-drenched spaces of the Southwest, the painted deserts, the turquoise skies, and the air that was wine. Poignantly he yearned for those blessings again—his wiry pony, the sight of sand and sage and cactus, the far horizon shimmering under the heat waves, the mysterious, age-old mesa with its glaring pink and vermilion and ocher-splotched sides that towered above his camp. And perhaps his thoughts embraced a girl, slim and eager and bronzed as the Navajo guides, who might be riding beside him into a glorious morning.

"Mr. Kenyon," the girl beside him spoke softly, shattering his daydreams, "I read of the—the disaster that threatens you. Is it as bad as the paper states?"

"Not nearly," he returned. "I had hoped the news wouldn't creep this far East."

"Would you tell me something of it?"

Kenyon wondered that she should interest herself in the affair—a matter seemingly so remote and unrelated to the present contingency. He wondered, too, that her thoughts should have been of the land where he had daydreamed all so briefly. But in a few, simple statements he revealed the situation that had come to pass and the duty that was his to discharge.

"Is it fair that you should assume all the blame? Make these sacrifices?" she protested.

"Fair to the poor trusting devils who believed in my father," Kenyon responded quietly. "He was sincere. I know that. He loved the country and the people in it. He had vision. Water was what the land needed, and water he was determined to obtain. Had he lived, he would have succeeded. It was the other men, after the spoils, who brought about this disaster."

"And they left you to pay the penalty?"

"If I saw fit to; yes. And I do," he added simply.

Again a silence fell between the two, and again it was the girl who disturbed his roving thoughts.

"Do you remember a Walter Graham?" she inquired. "A friend of your father's?"

"Graham? Yes; I remember the name," he answered after a moment of

retrospection. "I never saw him; but my father often spoke of the man."

"They met in the Southwest—out on the desert," the girl said, her voice low-pitched. "Your father saved his life there."

Kenyon turned to survey the girl with a puzzled, inquisitive glance. Strange that she should have recalled that affair, he meditated. "Yes; I remember that, too," he told her. "A number of years ago, wasn't it? Did you know Graham?"

Miss Sutton smiled. "He is my father."

Incredulously, Kenyon stared at her; he was too amazed at the moment to make reply.

"Walter Graham and Phil Sutton—Parson Phil—are the same," she went on. "Mr. Kenyon never knew, of course; but the man he saved from the desert was a fugitive, with a price on his head."

"Your father!" Kenyon exclaimed softly.

"I want you to know everything," the girl broke out fervently. "It is no more than right, after what has happened. I wanted to tell you last night, but we weren't alone."

"I respect your confidence," Kenyon assured her.

"I—I'm not defending my father's past," the girl went on. "Perhaps it was as unpleasant as Lasky must have told you; but he kept it from me, and I know he was accused of many things in which he had no part. When the police charged him with a murder, he fled West. He was innocent of the crime, but circumstances——" She hesitated and passed on, as if the details were immaterial. "There your father met and saved him; came to know him as Graham.

"A warm friendship sprang up between the men. Of that you know. My father returned East after another had confessed to the crime of which I have spoken. And from that time on, Phil Sutton became a changed man. Perhaps you will doubt me; perhaps you think, as do the police, that once a wrongdoer, always one; that those who have once broken the law never do reform. But I assure you my father has done this. Whatever wrong he may have done in the past has been paid for in full; and perhaps his record was not so black as the police would have you believe."

"I'm quite sure it wasn't," Kenyon said confidently, his mind still in the grip of the amazing revelations.

"The old life was put behind him; buried and forgotten; seldom referred to." The girl hurried on in quick sentences as if in fear of interruption. "When I came back from school, we lived together simply, happily, asking only to be let alone. Often he spoke of your father; of his great debt to him. A few letters were exchanged between them; but, with one exception, he never set foot in New York. It was not so much that he feared the police, but he knew that they would trail him to Mr. Kenyon's home and, later, question your father, and perhaps reveal the identity of his visitor. That was what deterred him—the fear that Mr. Kenyon would learn of a past he was trying so hard to live down."

A host of questions rushed to Kenyon's lips; but he crowded them back, content to wait until the girl saw fit to enlighten him.

"Then came the theft of the Desert Diamond," Miss Sutton resumed. "My father had little faith in the ability of the police; and when it was reported that the thief had jumped overboard in mid-ocean, carrying the stone with him, he refused to credit it.

"For the first time he braved a trip to New York; and in disguise, alone and unaided, he set about to ferret out the guilty man. When I pleaded against it and warned him of the danger, he told me that no sacrifice was too great where Mr. Kenyon was concerned.

"He was gone a long time, and I heard from him in Chicago and in Canada. I do not know the details, save that one day he returned and showed me the diamond. That was months after Mr. Kenyon had died. It was a blow to my father."

The girl stopped when some one came into the room; but, after a glance at the occupants, the man departed, and Miss Sutton resumed her story.

"It was about that time Lasky, passing through the little town in which we lived, recognized my father and followed him home. He made a report to the local

authorities, and from then on we knew our movements were being watched. That upset my father's plans, for he dared not leave town and dared not take a chance of having the diamond found in his possession; so at length I volunteered to act in his stead and deliver the stone to you, at your home."

"And Lasky picked you up the minute you stepped from the train!" exclaimed Kenyon. "He told me he had a report you had left your home up-State. Seems they were watching you as closely as your father."

The girl nodded. "Yes. I realized I was being shadowed; but I managed to phone your address and, as I thought, speak to you. I was too disturbed over Lasky's presence to suspect a trap had been laid for me. I gave him the slip at the time I delivered the stone, so I was not alarmed when he picked me up later."

Kenyon drew in a long breath and faced the girl with shining eyes. "What an adventure! Everything is clear to me now except how these wily conspirators knew what was coming off and planned your reception."

"I can't account for it," she returned.

"Don't you suppose some one knew all along your father had the diamond and, when you set off, suspected what was in your mind?"

"Something like that must have happened." The girl's voice wavered. "Oh, I've blundered! Lasky knows the truth. I had to tell what brought me here after I learned of the trap and the counterfeit Kenyon. Now they'll drag my father into trouble. They'll laugh at him if he tells the facts."

"They'll never get a chance to laugh at anything if I can prevent it," Kenyon came back spiritedly. "I'd almost as soon say good-by to the Desert Diamond forever as to have harm befall you or yours. Fortunately, Lasky is out to make a big killing on this, and it's a safe bet he won't make a move until he has the evidence he needs."

Once again a man strolled into the reception room—the same man who had intruded before—to interrupt the conversation; and on this occasion, when he had again departed after a glance at the occupants, Kenyon voiced a decided opinion.

"I'll lay a little bet that's one of Lasky's watchdogs trying to get an earful," he declared. "Perhaps we had better close shop for a while. Keep smiling!" he admonished cheerfully, as the two walked into the lobby. "We'll have our inning before the game's much older. I'll see or call you up later in the day."

With a comforting smile and a firm, reassuring pressure of the hand that was held out to him, Kenyon left the hotel.

CHAPTER XVII.

CONFLICTING OPINIONS.

WHEN he left Miss Sutton, Kenyon went on about other business, although he found it difficult to keep his thoughts from straying. The prosaic details connected with matters of real estate failed to interest him; but they were essential. He could not neglect them.

The girl's revelations, amazing as they had been, served to place her higher in his estimation. He realized, now, the desperate predicament that must have confronted her the night before; what a struggle it must have been to disclose the facts; to confess, before strangers and in the presence of Lasky, that the Desert Diamond had been in her possession.

He imagined with what scorn and derision Lasky would have greeted the girl's story, had she seen fit to divulge the whole truth.

Kenyon saw that the task confronting him was one requiring patience and ingenuity. He must prevent a Lasky triumph, even though it imperiled the safety of his property. The restoration of the Desert Diamond, with the detective's knowledge, would mean the immediate arrest of Miss Sutton and her father. Yet to regain the stone without Lasky's knowledge, which was the thing Kenyon hoped to bring about, looked to be a remote possibility.

Only the verification of the theory he had in mind—a theory that alternately cheered and depressed him according to the trend of evidence that presented itself like pictures upon a silver screen—remained as a buoy to his hopes.

Demon Luck had been battering him for a long time. Surely, he reasoned, it was time for a let-up. The Desert Dia-

mond had been called a charmed amulet. It had failed to live up to that reputation so far. Perhaps it would make good in the end.

It was late afternoon, when he had discharged the last of his business obligations and telephoned certain instructions to Andrew at the Riverside address, that Kenyon turned his steps toward the Randal apartment. Randal was plainly exercised over his companion's prolonged absence and greeted him with a lively bombardment of questions the moment he opened the door.

"Nothing much to report, Ranny," he replied; "except that I've disposed of the old homestead, possession to be given the first of the month, at which time the last of the Kenyons will set his smiling face toward the wide and untamed West."

"Didn't you learn anything from Miss Sutton?" Randal inquired.

"Oh, yes; many things. She identified the photo of Baldy Snyder, and she told me about an old friend of my father's —Walter Graham."

"Well, what's the old friend have to do with the Desert Diamond?" queried Randal.

"That's a story in itself," responded Kenyon. "Perhaps, if you'll keep your fingers crossed, you'll hear it."

"Really? How interesting!" Randal's tone was satirical. "Seems to me that's all I've done recently—keep my fingers crossed."

"Tut, tut, Ranny! Don't be resentful. Why, you're as crusty as Lasky. I had a few words with him this morning, after he'd exposed some of his activities, and he reminded me that I was hardly in a position to dictate to the police department."

"Well, you seem to have more inside dope than any one connected with the case," remarked Randal. "What are you doing with it? What about that theory you mentioned?"

"It's still with me," Kenyon answered.

"Then you think this third party—the one Rosie promised to dig up—has the Desert Diamond?"

"No; I don't think so."

Randal seemed baffled. "Why, I thought that was the dope! Have you switched around to suspect that Baldy Snyder hid the stone so well that his assailant failed to find it?"

Kenyon shook his head. "No; I don't think that, either."

"There's no one left to suspect—except Rosie."

"Rosie hasn't it," Kenyon replied.

"Well, great Scott!" cried Randal, thoroughly disgusted at his failure to extract any information from the other. "Do you know where the stone is at all?"

Kenyon shook his head once more. "I do not, Ranny," he admitted. "If I knew, I wouldn't be keeping you in suspense."

Randal shot a skeptical glance at his companion. "I don't know what you've up your sleeve, Kenyon," he remarked at length; "but whatever it is I wish you luck. Going uptown to-night, are you?"

"I believe you'll recall that I made an appointment."

"You'll pardon my smiling, Kenyon. Can't help it. You're the most trustful boob in Manhattan. Why, by this time Rosie's put a couple of hundred miles behind her."

"I sincerely hope not, Ranny," Kenyon returned.

"Don't suppose you'll invite me along to-night," Randal ventured.

"Your suppositions are correct," Kenyon replied.

When it was apparent that his companion was proof against ridicule, determined to carry out the plans he had formed and reticent about explaining many things that needed it, Randal gave up.

The men dined that night at a chophouse in Thirty-sixth Street and browsed through the evening papers that contained a brief item relative to Snyder's death. An account of Kenyon's Arizona fiasco, as the editor chose to head it, occupied a more prominent space; but fortunately the two were in no way connected.

The meal over, Kenyon hopped a bus, promising to communicate with Randal at a later period, provided he had anything of interest to reveal, and announcing his intention of remaining uptown for the night, no matter what the outcome of his prospective engagement. Moreover, he warned Randal against divulging any information to Lasky, should the

detective call up. Kenyon did not relish the thought of Lasky's appearing at the Riverside address that evening.

Arrived at his house, Kenyon spent an hour in conversation with Andrew, who was still distressed over what had taken place. The caretaker became more disturbed when Kenyon found it necessary to acquaint the man with the news of the day's realty transaction.

Andrew, who had spent so many of his years in the Kenyon family, was broken-hearted at the thought of leaving. "I 'ardly know what'll become of me now, sir," he wavered. "This 'as been the only 'ome I've 'ad for twelve years."

"That's all right, Andrew," Kenyon returned comfortingly. "I'm going to look after you. Just as soon as matters are adjusted here, you're going West with me."

"Out West?" the old man repeated, brightening. "That'll be fine. I've always wanted to 'ave a look at the country across the 'Udson."

"It's a long, long way beyond the Hudson, Andrew," Kenyon told him; "but you're going to like it."

Kenyon did not see fit to enlighten the man as to the identity of the anticipated visitor, cautioned him that he was to remain below stairs upon the girl's arrival, and in no circumstances to show himself unless called.

Afterward, alone, Kenyon went through the house again, subjecting the premises to a deliberate and systematic inspection. Later he telephoned to Miss Sutton at her hotel, only to learn from the operator that she was out.

"She left a few minutes ago," the operator replied in answer to Kenyon's query. "It was in response to a phone call, I believe. I saw her go out. She seemed to be excited and left here in a hurry."

Kenyon puzzled over what had been told him, but was unable to account for the situation. So far as he knew, no one but Lasky would have telephoned to the girl. What new development had arisen? Had the police picked up a suspect and called for Miss Sutton to identify him? That seemed to be the one plausible answer.

Before making himself comfortable for the evening, Kenyon switched off all the lights in the house, with the exception of those in the parlor and front hall, adjusted the curtains and rearranged some of the furniture in a manner suggestive of a critical stage director on a set just before the ringing up of his curtain.

Presently, satisfied, having established himself in an easy-chair with a pipe for consolation, Kenyon gave himself up to sober retrospection. The minutes ticked away swiftly, the sounds from the street outside lessened, and the house itself grew still.

The discordant whir of the telephone bell aroused him, and he hastened to answer its imperative summons. Randal's voice came over the wire.

"Hello! Kenyon? Say, Lasky just called up asking for you. I told him you had stepped out for a few minutes."

"Much obliged!" returned Kenyon. "What did he want?"

"Listen!" Randal's voice assumed a different tone. "No use of your staying uptown now. They've caught Rosie!"

"Caught her!" Kenyon repeated, his heart sinking.

"Yes; an hour or so ago. Plain-clothes man nabbed her at Grand Central. She must have been preparing to skip out of town. Lasky wants us at headquarters to identify her."

"All right," Kenyon said. "I'll be along presently."

He hung up the receiver and stood for a moment in the hall, chagrined and discomfited. Rosie Watson apprehended! That had been an unforeseen disaster—a calamity that had not entered into his scheme of things. It ended his prospects; entirely upset the program that he had outlined.

The fact that the girl had been arrested at the Grand Central Station looked ominous and seemed to corroborate Randal's statement. Apparently she meant to leave town; she had no intention of finding her companion or of appearing at the Riverside address before midnight. Her proposal had been merely a ruse to effect an escape from the Snyder tragedy. She had been actuated by no desire to bring an alleged murderer to justice. All of it had been a bit of play acting, the second of her attempts;

and both of them unquestionably successful.

Yet with all the evidence confronting him, a doubt reared itself in Kenyon's thoughts. When he weighed the matter deliberately against certain suspicions that remained unshaken in his mind, he found himself sailing along a new track. He must not be too hasty in his judgment; nor too quick at jumping at conclusions.

In the first place, had flight been imperative, why had Rosie waited fully eighteen hours? She must have known delay was dangerous and that she risked capture at any moment. Yet instead of at once leaving town, following her departure from Snyder's, she had waited until an hour ago. And after all, he reasoned, the fact that she had been picked up at the railroad station did not necessarily mean the frustrating of a getaway.

The girl had still three hours in which to fulfill her promise. Had she not been caught in the police net, how was he to know but that she intended to keep her promise? It was no more than fair to grant her the benefit of the doubt.

Indisputably it dawned upon Kenyon that in Rosie Watson rested the success or failure of his undertaking; and, along with that knowledge, an inspiration gripped him. The girl could not be held prisoner unless he and Randal identified her as the alleged Miss Hollister of the night before. What if they failed to identify her? Would it bring about the girl's release?

The thing might be worth the effort. Randal would not balk—not for long. Whatever deception was involved would entail no hardship or discomfort save to Lasky, and surely the motive that prompted it was justifiable.

Moving across the floor toward the telephone, eager to discuss the matter with Randal, Kenyon was brought to a sudden halt by the ringing of the doorbell.

Startled and not a little displeased at the thought of an intruder at that hour, he opened the door and fell back with a quick exclamation. Rosie Watson, flushed and breathless, had arrived to keep her appointment.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE FINAL EPISODE.

SWIFTLY, intuitively, Kenyon closed the door behind his visitor; and when he turned to confront the girl, he found that she had dropped into a chair, breathing heavily.

"Say," Rosie gasped, "I've done some running! Winded! I'm not much on footwork. What's the hour? I managed to show up before closing time, didn't I?"

Kenyon glanced at his watch. "You've an hour to spare," he answered. "It's just eleven. I didn't expect you to-night. How did you escape?"

"Oh, you know, do you?"

"Yes; through Randal. Lasky phoned him—not ten minutes ago."

The girl broke into a low, contemptuous laugh. "He crowed too soon, didn't he? There's been many a slip between me and police headquarters—many of 'em since last night. I had to break away to keep this engagement. Maybe you thought I wouldn't show up."

"Come inside," said Kenyon, leading the way into the parlor. "What's the news?" he asked when the girl had seated herself. "I was told you had been picked up in the Grand Central Station."

"Looked like I was trying for a getaway, didn't it? Wrong!" She smiled at Kenyon. "I've done what I promised to do. Found my man—and trapped him, too. He walked into the trap like a hungry rabbit. I let the Sutton girl do the honors. She had it coming to her."

"Trap? Miss Sutton?" Kenyon echoed, unable to connect the two.

"Sure!" Rosie glanced about the room "We alone?"

"Positively," Kenyon assured her.

"I'll take your word for it. Don't think you'd trap me. Not after all I've done."

"Please explain yourself," Kenyon urged impatiently.

"Well, I picked up Vance this afternoon. Easy enough if you knew where to look. He was hiding and scared stiff. He got the diamond all right enough, although I couldn't get him to admit it. I kidded him along and told him he wasn't in any danger and that there

wasn't anything to connect him with Baldy's murder. He was just a little afraid of me. You know why. But when he saw I was friendly, he thawed out."

"Vance?" Kenyon repeated. "So that's his name, is it?"

Rosie nodded. "Yes. No use keeping it from you now. He's being sweated by Lasky and his bunch right now." She added vindictively, her eyes flashing. "He's getting what he deserves. It's the chair for him."

She was silent a moment, her thin lips twisted into a hard smile as if gloating over what had been achieved.

"I got Vance out after dark—about eight o'clock. Steered him into a lunch room over on Sixth Avenue not so far from where Miss Sutton was staying. He never tumbled to what was coming off."

"How did you know where Miss Sutton was staying?" Kenyon asked.

"Oh, Vance knew. The girl told him when she phoned last night, and I remembered the name of the hotel. I took a chance she was still there. While Vance was eating, I made an excuse to get out for a minute, telling him I had to buy something up the street. He never suspected anything. Then I phoned Miss Sutton; told her where to come and what she'd find. You see my game, don't you? I wanted to give her the satisfaction of grabbing him."

Kenyon nodded. The telephone call had been explained. It had been Rosie, not Lasky. He readily understood, now, the reason for Miss Sutton's excitement and hurried departure.

"I waited around until the girl showed up," Rosie went on; "then I stepped to the window and looked in. Say, it was immense! She spotted Vance and jumped for him. He never had a chance. A couple of men helped her hold him. There was plenty of excitement, and I stuck around until I saw a cop run into the place. Then I ducked.

"Lasky's probably got him by now. They'll have Vance cold. He was wearing the same suit he had on last night. I saw where a button was torn from the coat and some of the cloth had gone with it. They must have found that evidence in Baldy's fingers."

"They did," acknowledged Kenyon, recalling Lasky's statement to that effect. "It'll convict Vance," he added emphatically.

"I left to come up here," the girl continued; "but a plain-clothes duck gave me a hard look as I headed for a bus, and I had to fade, cutting across town and figuring to grab the subway at Grand Central. Soon's I stepped into the station, another bird nails me; but while he was phoning headquarters for some one to come and get me, I spots a friend of mine, who saw the fix I was in and came to the rescue.

"He let out a yell, rushed up to the detective, and claimed he'd been robbed. In a minute there was a hundred people jammed about us; and in the excitement I broke loose and lost myself in the crowd. Then I started running, hopped a bus on the Avenue, and—and I'm still out of breath."

"It seems to me, Rosie," Kenyon remarked, after reviewing all that had been told him, "you've had your share of hairbreadth escapes. Your adventures outclass the thrill-packed movie serial. Vance's career is finished, and Snyder is avenged; but we haven't reached our climax yet," he added. "The Desert Diamond has yet to be recovered."

"Vance has it!" the girl exclaimed. "Lasky's probably found it on him by this time."

"I wonder," Kenyon said meditatively, almost to himself.

"You can gamble on it!" Rosie declared. "He wouldn't admit having the stone, of course; but I could read him. I couldn't get it away from him. I've done all I could, and I guess it's up to me to fade out of the picture," she went on with a resigned shrug. "Well, so much for that. I'm dying for a drink of water, Kenyon. Then I'll be traveling."

"Just a minute," Kenyon said obligingly. "I'll bring you a glass."

He turned and walked briskly through the dimly lighted dining room, the swinging doors into the butler's pantry closing behind him.

Rosie watched him narrowly; and when he had disappeared, she darted from her chair, crossed the floor into the dining room, reached a big Chinese vase

that stood near the buffet, and thrust her hand into its mouth.

The lights blazed on suddenly, as if the girl's groping fingers had come in contact with a hidden switch, and she whirled to confront Kenyon.

"Thank you, Rosie," he said, smiling. "I've been waiting for this move—the final episode in our little serial. It's an admirable climax."

The girl shrank back against the wall, dumbly, her face robbed of color, her eyes wide with despair.

"You see," Kenyon explained quietly, "after making certain discoveries and checking over bits of evidence that drifted my way later, I reached the conclusion that the Desert Diamond had been cached somewhere on the premises. Moreover, I realized that you were responsible; and I had to be real patient until you saw fit to point out where you had hidden the stone."

Still smiling and with a heart that beat exultantly, Kenyon crossed to the vase, dipped his hand into its mouth and, a moment later, brought up in his fingers the great Desert Diamond that blazed in radiant splendor under the lights.

"Welcome, little wanderer!" he murmured, holding out the shimmering stone on his palm. "Welcome home!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE BEST WAY OUT.

WITH baffled, apprehensive eyes the girl watched Kenyon. His gaze lingered upon the shimmering diamond, and for a moment he seemed oblivious of his companion's presence. Then slowly his fingers closed over the stone, and the words he spoke contained an unmistakable note of triumph:

"The final episode, Rosie! Our little serial has run its course; and we two are left on the scene at the finish."

The girl continued to survey him and without comment.

"Curious, aren't you?" Kenyon remarked, when he had placed the diamond into his waistcoat pocket. "Well, you've yourself to blame. You revealed a little too much all along—just enough to keep my theory alive. The second visit you paid to this house last night! That started it. You wanted to find your purse. You told me you had found it, had taken it away with you. Not true, was it? No. You did leave your purse behind; but you had an object in doing so. It was not a gold-mesh affair, as you wanted me to believe; and, judging from its weight, I doubt if it contains the fifty smackers you referred to."

Kenyon produced the purse from his coat pocket—a shabby, beaded thing. "I found it to-night wedged back of the cushions on the divan in the library."

Rosie accepted it in sullen silence.

"Last night," Kenyon went on, "when I accepted your proposal, you insisted upon meeting me here. The argument you offered didn't ring true; but I didn't object. I figured there was something back of it. Your motive is perfectly clear now. You had a reason—a very good reason, for wanting to visit my house to-night; and I would have been the most disappointed man in New York had you failed to show up."

The girl sneered. "It was a trap after all, wasn't it?" she flung out.

"Perhaps," admitted Kenyon; "but I was justified in setting it. You intended to cheat me, Rosie, and I saw fit to turn the tables on you.

"Baldy Snyder never had the Desert Diamond at any time," he went on quietly. "You knew he didn't. You tried to convince me that Vance had taken it from him last night. Baldy may have thought he had the stone; but the truth is, when he picked Vance's pocket, he simply lifted an empty case. The diamond had been taken from it long before. Evidently before he was given a chance to investigate, some danger threatened. He was compelled to hide the case."

Curiosity seemed to master Rosie's fear. "How do you know that—that Baldy merely got an empty case?"

"Because I found it," Kenyon replied.

"Where?"

"After you left me alone last night," he explained, "I felt the need of a smoke. I had nothing with me. But I saw plenty of cigarette papers scattered over the floor, and a sack of tobacco lay in plain sight. I picked it up, intending to help myself to the tobacco. When I opened the sack I found the leather case inside."

The girl broke into an amazed exclamation. "Inside! And the thing was on the floor—in plain sight—all the time?"

Kenyon nodded. "Snyder must have thrust the case there when danger threatened him, never suspecting the case was empty. And because the hiding place was so obvious, Vance overlooked it.

"When I found the case, it did not take me long to figure out what had happened. Baldy never would have troubled to cache the thing had he suspected the truth. Also Vance must have thought the stone was in the case, otherwise he wouldn't have returned to demand it. So we must conclude that while Vance had seen the diamond at the time Miss Sutton presented it to him, he never suspected it had been removed from the case.

"I reasoned that Vance had been tricked prior to the time of his first visit to Snyder's flat," Kenyon went on, summing up the evidence. "And quite naturally, my suspicions rested upon you, Rosie. You had the first shot at it. You and Vance roamed through the house; and during that time, you must have taken the case from his pocket, extracted the diamond and, to protect yourself, returned the empty case. You took a chance that he would not again investigate its contents while you were with him."

To Kenyon's surprise, the girl put back her head and laughed boldly, contemptuously. "You're some detective! You got Lasky trimmed. It would be a shame not to congratulate you, Kenyon. Go on; what else did you figure out?"

"You took the diamond," he continued, "but you were still afraid, for all your cunning, that Vance might discover his loss and suspect you. He would have, of course. So to rid yourself of the evidence, you managed to drop the stone into this Chinese vase. Also, you left your purse behind, for an excuse to reenter the house. You told me how Vance objected and how you broke away from him and how you returned here.

"Unfortunately, I arrived on the scene practically on your heels. You heard the door slam and were forced to conceal yourself. You were unable to get into the dining room again, first, because we trapped you in the library, and second, when Lasky showed up, because we were here on the parlor floor, and you were forced to escape by way of the rear stairs. So the diamond remained in the vase."

"No use of my denying it," Rosie declared with a toss of her head.

"You offered to turn up Vance last night provided I allowed you to remain at liberty."

"I'd of turned him up anyhow!" she cried. "I mean that. I can stand for crooked work; but I draw the line at murder."

"That's a great deal in your favor," Kenyon replied. "At the same time you wanted me to think well of you; so the bargain was made. You had to invent some excuse to get back to my house again. I saw that. You insisted upon meeting me here to-night, planned to get me out of the room for a moment and recover what you had cached."

"Well, I outguessed you a couple of times," the girl returned. "I couldn't expect to keep it up. But you can't say I didn't try. I've played a fast game, and I've lost. I'd rather lose to you, Kenyon, than to Lasky. I'll show you I'm a good loser. I'm not whining."

"I see you're not," Kenyon answered. "Who engineered this deal, to begin with?" he asked presently.

"Vance. He knew Phil Sutton had the diamond; and a pal of his, who got in as a servant in Sutton's house, overheard the dope about returning the stone to Kenyon. Vance figured Sutton didn't know you were out of town; so he and Baldy planned the job. I got wind of it and hooked up with 'em. I had an old debt to settle with Vance. I didn't know just how I would settle it; but I watched my chance."

A hard smile touched the girl's lips. "Vance was easy. Funny; but most crooks are. It isn't the first trick I've turned with these," she added, holding out her thin fingers.

"Nor the last?" Kenyon inquired.

Rosie shrugged. "Who can tell?"

Kenyon studied the girl through deliberate and calculating eyes. "You're a queer mixture of good and bad, Rosie," he said at length. "I shouldn't wonder, if in a new environment——"

"Don't start preaching!" she broke in. "I don't want your sympathy. I didn't have much for you. I know what I'm up against when I play my sort of game; and when I lose, I grin. I wanted that diamond—wanted it just as badly as you did. But you outguessed me. That's all there is to it. Go ahead! Break the glad news to Lasky. He'll be sore because you put something over on him; but you should worry."

"I don't intend to give Lasky that satisfaction," Kenyon returned.

"You don't?" she came back, gazing fixedly at him.

"No. I have the Desert Diamond. That's all that matters." Kenyon smiled. "This is just a little affair between ourselves, Rosie. It's going no further."

The girl continued to eye him narrowly, as if seeking to interpret his friendly smile.

"Get away, Rosie," he urged. "This town isn't healthy for you. I don't want to be called upon to identify you as the alleged Miss Hollister."

"You—you mean that?" Her voice wavered.

"Absolutely! Got enough money?" Without waiting for an answer, Kenyon brought out a thin roll of bank notes and thrust part of them into the girl's limp fingers. "Get away—at once. Don't wait!" he urged.

Rosie's eyes glistened, and the color that swept into her cheeks was not unbecoming. "Say, you—you're white, you—you are," she faltered. "I'll get away right now. It just come to me—where to go. Baldy wanted me to visit his folks—on a ranch in Arizona. Near Sunrise. He said they'd be glad to have me."

"Sunrise?" Kenyon nodded and smiled. "Yes; I know where it is. I'm going out that way myself—shortly."

The girl moved toward the hall door; then turned to look back. "Good night, Kenyon!" she called.

"Good night, Rosie!" he responded. "Good luck!"

Swiftly she was gone.

Kenyon stood alone in the hall, his eyes fixed upon the closed door, but his thoughts far astray. All he had hoped for and schemed to bring about had been achieved. Lasky was to learn nothing of this final episode. So far as the police were concerned, the Desert Diamond was lost forever. And the little girl downtown would never again be imperiled. That, above all, comforted him; justified what he had done.

The diamond could be disposed of secretly. Its disposal would mean the squaring of debts, the clearing of his father's name, and the beginning of a new life for himself—and others.

With a light heart he turned to the telephone and spoke a number. He thrilled at the sound of Miss Sutton's eager voice. She had been waiting anxiously. She had so much to tell him. He must come at once.

Kenyon laughed softly and promised. He had even more to tell her; and perhaps all of it did not concern the Navajo amulet.

Did you like this story, or did you not? If you liked it, please let us know why in a letter, briefly worded. If you did not like it, let us know that and why. And while you are about it, comment on any other story in this number, or give us your opinion of the number as a whole. The editors will appreciate any letter you may send.

Aid Requested

A MAN complained bitterly of the conduct of his son. He related at length to an old friend all the young man's escapades.

"You should speak to him with firmness and recall him to his duty," said the friend.

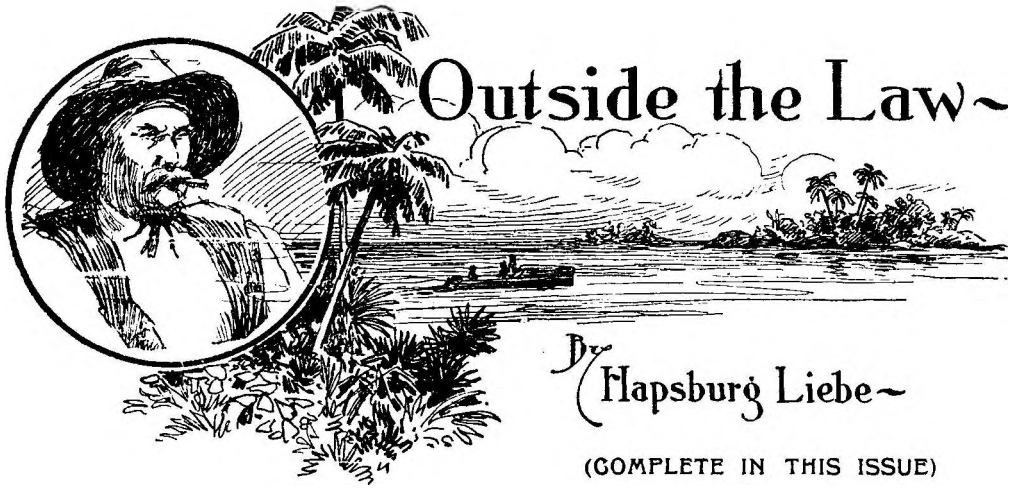
"But he pays not the least attention to what I say. He listens only to the advice of fools. I wish you would talk to him."

Painful Pity

AN old man went to the dentist to have an aching molar removed. The operation was completed; and the patient then instructed the tooth drawer to remove the next one.

"It isn't necessary," explained the dentist. "That one only aches in sympathy."

"Yank it out, then," growled the old man. "Darn such sympathy as that!"



Outside the Law

By Hapsburg Liebe

(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.

A MAN UNKNOWN.

SETTLING back in his chair on the Hotel Key West's palm-lined veranda, young "Bub" Cranford, of Cranford County, Kentuky, congratulated himself after the fashion of men when they have found a fine, new place in which to spend their vacational periods. Others might hie themselves to the mountains in the summertime, there to become material for the orgies of gnats and biting flies, spiders and beetles; as for him, his Blue Grass live-stock farm needed him every day of every summer, and he would continue to have his vacations just as he was having this one—in Key West, in January.

Suddenly the Kentuckian sat up straight in his chair. Coming up the veranda steps he saw the girl whose acquaintance he had made on the Florida East Coast train from Jacksonville the day before, and she seemed somewhat worn out. She was a little taller than the average young woman, rangily built, and exceedingly handsome rather than merely pretty. Cranford had liked her more than he would have been willing to admit, even to himself.

He rose and hastened toward her. "Did you find your father, Miss Brennan?"

The girl turned upon him in a queer mixture of exasperation and appreciativeness and began to eye him in a sort of absent-minded appraisal. It was not at all difficult to keep her gaze on this young man. Six feet without his shoes, lithe and a trifle lean, wonderfully sunburned, good-looking enough, and boyish in spite of himself—that was Bub Cranford. His four adoring sisters were collectively responsible for the nickname.

"I did not find my father," Carol Brennan answered emphatically. "Nobody in Key West knows him, it seems. His name is not in the city directory. I've asked a hundred people, and I've even been to police headquarters. It's the strangest thing in the world, Mr. Cranford, to me. Why, he's been in Key West for more than twenty years!"

"You're dog-tired," Cranford observed. "Suppose we sit down and talk it over? I'd be mighty glad to be of some help, Miss Brennan."

The girl was highly bred, and, being that, she was naturally reticent when it came to bringing her more intimate affairs before a man whom she had not known two days; but Cranford, by exercising all the tact and diplomacy he was able to muster, at last got the facts in the case:

James Brennan had been heartbroken at his young wife's death, which had immediately followed the birth of his daughter twenty-two years before. He had left Carol with his sister and gone to Key West; the old home in Virginia was home no more to him, and never

would be again. He had sent funds back to dress the girl finely and educate her thoroughly—she had been through one of the best colleges; remittances had come twice a year, and always by express, often in gold coin. Only once in all that time had he been to Virginia to see her; all of nine years ago, it was; she remembered him as a very tall, slightly lean, sad-faced man with a thick shock of all-white hair, a man who spoke no word that was not entirely necessary.

"I've written him lots," she told Cranford, "though he hasn't written me very often; it seems that he—that he just can't write letters. And now that my schooling is all over, I wanted to come down here and live with him. I feel, somehow, that he blames me for my mother's death, and I want to be near him and love him. You can't imagine how I sympathize with him, or how I love him! To me, he's always been a saint, Mr. Cranford.

"For years," she went on, "I felt that I couldn't wait until I was through with schools. I didn't want to go to college, for that required so much time; but he wanted me to go, and I went. I wrote him and asked him to meet me at the train yesterday, and I—I expected that he would. Of course, there's a chance that he didn't get my letter."

"It's certainly funny that he could live here for so many years and not be known at all." Bub Cranford frowned. "What business was he in?"

Carol shook her head. "He never told me, I'm afraid; but I got the idea, in some way, that he owned ships, and that he had a very fine house here, and that he was one of the really important men of Key West."

"Suppose we have lunch," Cranford suggested, "and then go to the post office and find out whether your letter has been called for; eh?"

"Fine!" The girl smiled. "It's nice of you, and I can assure you I won't soon forget it."

In the dining room a few minutes later, Carol took from her hand bag a very beautiful old locket of gold inlaid with silver; she opened it, and showed Cranford the little pictures it contained of her father and her mother. The latter had been strikingly like the girl herself. Brennan was a man of great power of will and strength of character, if one might judge by the little photograph, which had been made during his one short visit to Virginia.

"That thick, white hair would make him stand out as unique anywhere, because he certainly isn't an old man," remarked Cranford. "Did you show this picture to anybody here?"

"I never thought of doing that," the girl admitted.

At the post office Carol Brennan found two of her letters to her father, unclaimed.

At the express office, there was an old clerk who remembered very well sending remittances to the girl twice a year, but he was sure that the man of the locket photograph was not the man who had sent the money.

"It was a big, thickset, red-headed fellow," said the clerk. "He was the worst sunburned man I ever saw, and he always came in here bareheaded and barefooted; we always spoke of him as 'the pirate.' He gave his name as James Brennan, and we, of course, thought it was James Brennan. Sheriff Tod Osborne knows more people here than anybody else in the county; why not go to him?"

So the two went to Sheriff Osborne's office.

A deputy sat at a desk, writing. He rose and set out two chairs, which the visitors accepted, and went to call his superior officer in. Sheriff Osborne, an angular, keen-eyed man, proved to be kindliness itself; he hurried in iced water and palm-leaf fans, and would not permit any serious talk until the callers had assured him that they were entirely comfortable.

Bub Cranford explained the girl's dilemma in a few words, and Miss Brennan passed the locket into the sheriff's hands. The two watched Osborne's features closely in the hope that they would see some sign of recognition as he eyed the little photograph. They saw no such sign.

Then the deputy walked up behind his senior officer and saw the pictures. Involuntarily his lips formed the words: "Old 'Silver Tip!'"

CHAPTER II.

GOOD NEWS.

ONLY Sheriff Osborne caught the words spoken by the deputy. He executed a clever little movement that completely escaped the eyes of the visitors—he brought an elbow backward and nudged his deputy meaningly. The kindly face of Tod Osborne did not belie his true nature.

"Do you know him, sheriff?" asked Cranford.

Osborne seemed a little slow about talking. "Ye-es; I've seen this man, I think," he said at last. "If I'm not mistaken, he was here with a schoonerload of coconuts a month or two ago; there was a big, red-looking fellow with him, I believe. I—er—I really don't know just where you would be likely to find him now."

Cranford and Miss Brennan thanked the sheriff and went back to the hotel.

As they entered the lobby, the clerk beckoned Cranford to the telephone booth. The girl went upstairs to her room. Somewhat to Cranford's surprise, it was Sheriff Tod Osborne's voice that came over the wire:

"As soon as you can get away without arousing the young lady's suspicions, come back to my office, will you?"

"All right!" Cranford answered simply.

Half an hour later he was walking into Osborne's office again. The sheriff and two of his deputies were preparing to leave in great haste.

"Shooting scrape on Moccasin Key," Osborne explained, speaking rapidly. "Wish I had time to talk with you, but I sure haven't now. Cranford, you get that girl to go back home—on the very first train, if you can! Never let her meet Silver Tip Brennan, or find out anything about him. She stacks up ace-high, a real lady if ever I saw one, and it's better if she never knows. We've got to be going; so long!"

Cranford walked slowly back to his hotel. He sat down on the veranda and gave his mind up to the pitiful little tragedy that he was just beginning to understand. In no circumstances would Carol Brennan be willing to go back to Virginia without having seen her idolized sire, and Cranford knew it.

A heavy hour passed. Then there were quick but light footfalls beside him, and he looked up to see Silver Tip Brennan's daughter. Her eyes were sparkling like a pair of topazes, and her smile in that minute was one that haunted him long afterward.

"I have good news!" Carol cried girlishly, delightedly. "Father lives on a key that is all his own, somewhere south of Gallivan's Bay; it's northeast of here, you know; he has a big house there, in a perfect paradise of flowers, and a big coconut grove, and—isn't it wonderful?—a real, old-fashioned schooner! I've just found a man down on the water front who knows father, and knows where the key is, and he's going to run me over there to-morrow in his launch; it's too late to start to-day, he says. Rejoice with me, Mr. Bub Cranford!"

Through the Kentuckian's mind flashed Sheriff Tod Osborne's words: "Never let her meet Silver Tip Brennan——" However, Cranford found it possible to feign a sympathetic gladness.

"Of course, I rejoice with you," he said. He continued: "I'd like very much to make the voyage there and back; if there's room, would you mind my going with you?"

"Oh, not a bit!" She laughed. "There's room, and I'd be pleased to have you along, Mr. Cranford. We're to start at six o'clock sharp, going by way of Shark Keys and Cape Sable. You'll be ready, won't you?"

Certainly, he would be ready. The launch, she said, had a small deck forward, a cockpit under an awning aft, and a little cabin amidships; the wheel was in the forward end of the cabin. The owner of the craft was a squatty, bewhiskered, bronzed, hardened old Gulf sea dog named Ben Ruble.

That night Bub Cranford tried hard to find Ben Ruble and failed. Also, he tried to find the sheriff, but Osborne had not returned from Moccasin Key. Fate was determined to have her way.

They left the wharf promptly at six on the following morning. Carol Brennan had two large bags, and Bub Cranford a small one, and in the latter there was—purely as a measure of precaution—a very dependable, frontier-type "six-

gun." The girl had not forgotten to bring lunch for three.

CHAPTER III.

BETTER THAN A SAINT.

WHEN a dozen miles of the brightest of blue-and-green water lay between the launch and its point of departure, Cranford left Carol comfortably ensconced in a canvas chair under the awning astern and went forward to Ruble at the wheel.

"You know Silver Tip Brennan, eh?" he began, in tones too low for Brennan's daughter to overhear.

Ben Ruble's eyes narrowed as they searched Cranford's face. After a moment, he answered in a low growl: "Yeuh. I know Silver Tip." Another moment, and he went on: "I guess you're all right, or you wouldn't be with her, Cranshaw —Cranford, or whatever your name is. I was in his gang, but the life got too fast for me. I got a wife and nine children, Cranshaw."

"How much did you tell the girl about him?"

"Not much o' anything," Ruble answered quickly.

"I understand he's a hard egg," whispered the Kentuckian. "In fact, the sheriff advised keeping the girl from finding him. He thought, you see, that she'd be badly disappointed in her father. She thinks he's a saint, Ruble."

Ben Ruble thought hard for a full minute before he replied with a good deal of spirit: "Mister, Silver Tip Brennan is *better* than most o' saints!"

"Then why," Cranford demanded, "did Sheriff Osborne tell me—what he told me?"

"Silver is a outlaw," Ruble answered bluntly. "But he's a outlaw they cain't prove nothin' on, and a gentleman besides. He holds up rum runners after they've sold their cargoes; the runners won't appear ag'in him, because that would mean they'd likely git in bad theirselves; see? Tod Osborne knows very well that Silver is a robber, but he never can find any real proof of it; see? If the girl'd inquired for Silver Tip instead o' James Brennan, she'd found track o' him right off!"

"Why do you think he is better than most saints?" asked Cranford.

Old Ben Ruble flared out: "Because any plum' good man that'd crucify hisself on as lowdown a cross as Silver has crucified hisself on would haf to be better than most o' saints to do it! He done it all for that girl o' hisn; see? He's fought for her, bled for her, spittin' square in the face o' death for her, defyin' fate and the lightnin', laughin' at all men and all o' the laws o' men, pattin' the devil on the back and shakin' his fist at the mouth o' hell—for her!

"He used to hate the girl, I happen to know, because his wife died when the girl was borned," Ruble went on. "For years now he's been tryin' to make up for that hatin' of her. He told me that she looked so much like his wife—when he seen her some years ago, the only time he ever did see her—that it well-nigh killed him. Silver tried honest work a long time ago, but his heart was broke, and he couldn't even make a livin' for hisself at it; it was this heartbreak that turned his hair as white as snow."

Old Ben Ruble coughed and went on, after a glance backward to make sure that Carol Brennan had not overheard: "Yeuh, I'm for Silver Tip! Whenever he needs any one o' my hind laigs more'n I need it, I'll cut it off and give it to him. Cranford—Cranshaw, or whatever your name is—though I ain't told the young lady, and ain't aimin' to, she'd ought to know what her daddy has done for her!"

"That," quickly replied Cranford, "is all right from your point of view and mine. From her point of view, it might not be all right at all. Maybe it would half kill her to know that all her education, all her clothing, even the food she's eaten, had been bought with stolen money. I certainly wouldn't risk telling her. She's of a fine breed, Ruble."

There followed a quarter of an hour of silence except for the everlasting *put-put-put* of the launch's motor. Out of the corners of his eyes, the man from Cranford County, Kentucky, noted that Carol Brennan was watching raptly a tiny group of mangrove-lined keys that lay off to port in the distance; they seemed suspended, like a mirage, between the bright.

blue sky and the brighter blue water; the illusion was perfect and beautiful.

Then Cranford bent toward Ben Ruble, and spoke again: "There's a big chance that Brennan won't like your taking the girl to him like this. I suggest that you have a little talk with him before the girl sees him, if it's possible. Then he can get out of her way, if he wants to; understand?"

"Yeuh," Ruble agreed. "Maybe you're right, Cranshaw."

"Cranford," corrected the younger man. "Not that it makes any difference, of course."

Silver Tip's Key lay deeply hidden among a jumbled mass of keys of all sizes that maps call vaguely "Ten Thousand Islands," between Northwest Cape Sable and Cape Romano, just off Florida's southwest coast; it is an uncharted, little-known mass, a last frontier, a back o' beyond and never-never land rolled into one.

Most of these keys were low and flat, rimmed with deep-green and grotesque mangrove and covered with mud; but Silver Tip's Key was dry, and had sand beaches. Channels in these waters were narrow and crooked and treacherous, so much so that only those who knew them well could hope to get through them with a vessel of any real draft. Carol Brennan had been fortunate, superficially, at least, in finding old Ben Ruble.

Noontime came and went. They had passed Shark Keys, Northwest Cape Sable, and were almost through Lostman's Big Bay—which is not a big bay at all, but a very narrow and long one. On both sides the shores were lined for the most part with mangrove, that shrub of the devil himself, with an occasional ragged cabbage palm or dead live oak lifting its head heroically beyond.

Suddenly the motor sputtered and died. Ruble spun the wheel sharply to starboard, and the launch ran of its own momentum to a point within a hundred feet of a short stretch of white sandy beach. At the upper edge of the sand, half hidden under a moundlike copse of sea grape and palmetto, lay the weather-beaten old wreck of a small sailing vessel.

"Maybe I'll haf to work on the engine a little," Ruble told his passengers, and Cranford thought he saw the old sea dog wink. "If you two would like to go ashore for a hour, there might be some purty shells over there on the bit o' beach."

"I'd enjoy it!" Carol Brennan smiled.

Cranford took the six-gun from his bag and drew up the small boat the launch had been towing. Ten more minutes, and he was looking over the wreck with Carol. A storm had driven the little old schooner there.

The voice of Ben Ruble came to them then: "Wait there, Cranshaw, if you will. I'll give her a try and see how she goes."

Cranford understood perfectly. Ruble was going ahead to see Brennan, to apprise him of his daughter's coming.

The launch rounded a point of land, ran for half a mile, entered a narrow and crooked "creek," ran there for another half mile, and then shot out on a small, open bay. Over to starboard was a little wharf, and beside it a paintless and sun-warped schooner. Behind the schooner lay an old, high-speed motor boat that carried the marks of many bullets..

On comparatively high ground back of the wharf, in a thick grove of coconut palms, stood a big and rambling house which, except for its roof of thatch, had been built and furnished entirely from the wrecks of ships "outside;" Brennan had been a wrecker, too.

Only a few minutes of time were required for Ruble to nose in at the wharf and make his launch fast to a post. Hastily he negotiated the crooked path that connected the wharf with the house.

CHAPTER IV.

THE WITNESS OF THE BULLET.

ON the upper veranda step sat a big and thickset, badly sunburned, red-haired man who wore neither shoes nor hat; his shirt was faded and buttonless, and his trousers were rolled to his knees; he had a red-stained bandage around the calf of his right leg. As Ruble approached, he rose like a jack-in-a-box and leveled a high-power automatic rifle.

Then he recognized the newcomer and grinned a welcome.

"Hello, Big Red!" said Ruble, hastening up. "Put 'er there, old pal!"

Warmly "Big Red" Truesdell shook hands with Ben Ruble. Just then Silver Tip Brennan came out to the veranda. He, too, was bareheaded and barefooted. His shirt, also, was faded and without buttons. He was haggard, as though from the loss of much sleep; his thick, white hair was badly rumpled; on his chin was a two-week growth of beard.

"How are you, Ben?" he said quietly, putting out a hand, all his old iron poise in evidence.

They shook hands quite solemnly. "All right, Silver," Ruble answered. "I got news for you, Silver. Your girl has come down to see you."

Plainly, the tidings carried a shock to the tall, white-haired man. He dropped into an old canvas deck chair beside a small table, on which there was a handsome, old-fashioned water bottle of cut glass, half full of water. Ruble told the rest of it, finishing with this:

"Cranshaw's a real man, and your girl is a fine, purty girl. She's awful swell, and she thinks you're the greatest feller on earth. You'll let her come here to see you, Silver, won't you?"

"Ben," Silver Tip Brennan said finally, "I never wanted anything more than I want to see my daughter right now. But it's not possible. She mustn't know about me. Though I don't regret it, maybe I was a fool for doing what I've done, Ben; but—it's done, and she mustn't ever know me for what I am."

"Anything's possible, Silver." Ruble grinned, clawing at his sun-bleached whiskers. "You got a purty nice house here, with purty nice funnicher, and you used to have some nice white clothes. Let her visit you for a few days; eh? You can make some sawt o' excuse for havin' to send her back home so soon; see?"

"It might work," replied Brennan, frowning, "if only that quartette of hounds the Hinchcliff rum ring put on my trail would keep hands off for a little while. Two of them have prices on their heads for murder, and the other two are escaped convicts. Hinchcliff gave them speed boats and modern rifles and ordered them to either kill me or drive me off the face of the earth! They've found out I live here, and they've been pressing me hard. Big Red crippled one of the convicts last night. I could have killed the other one very easily; but, Ben Ruble, I had no blood on my hands, so far—and I didn't want any now, especially as I had already done what I'd set out to do. You saw, maybe, how they shot up my own speed boat——"

As though to bear witness to Silver Tip Brennan's story, there was the snap and ring and tinkle of broken glass—the water bottle on the table at Brennan's elbow had fairly exploded before the terrific impact of a steel-jacketed bullet. Then the keen thunder of a rifle came, apparently, from a copse of guava at the northern edge of the coconut grove.

Back at the wrecked schooner, on the short stretch of sandy beach, Cranford and Carol heard the report dimly.

"Somebody's shooting," the girl observed. "I wonder whether it is our launch man?"

Before Cranford could speak, there came the sound of a second shot, from the same general direction.

"It's the hunting season, you know," the Kentuckian returned, smiling. But he had to force the smile. "Perhaps it isn't Ruble, at all."

Brennan's daughter sat down on the sparkling white sand, and began to sift it through her fingers in an absent-minded fashion. Cranford guessed that she was a little worried. He sat down near her, and began to tell her about his wonderful live-stock farm in the Blue Grass region of Kentucky.

When he had finished, she looked up at him brightly. "You were trying to keep my thoughts off those shots, weren't you?" she asked. "I'm not so easily scared. If there's any danger, you'd best tell me about it, hadn't you, so that I'll be prepared?"

Cranford tried to laugh and made a fair success of it. "I know of no danger, so far as we are concerned," he told her.

The afternoon wore on, and still old Ben Ruble had not come back for them. Bub Cranford reminded his companion of the fact that there were dozens of things that might happen to the launch, any one of which would be enough to prevent Ruble's returning with it in anything like short order.

The sun set in a blaze of crimson on the outer rim of the Gulf, but there was only a small degree of darkness, for a great moon, almost theatrical in its splendor, had come out high in the east. Already Bub Cranford had kindled a fire with the wrecked schooner's bow for a windbreak. He had noted that a fire had been kindled at that identical spot before, and recently.

An hour after the color had faded from the west, there came to the ears of the two the sharp staccato of a gasoline motor's exhaust.

"Ruble's coming, at last!" cried Carol. "I'm so glad, Mr. Cranford! Not that you're such poor company, of course. I'm anxious to see my father, you know."

"I understand." Cranford nodded. Thinking it would be of aid to Ruble in finding them, he threw fresh wood on the fire, to make more light.

The sound of the motor became rapidly plainer. The craft carried no lights of any kind. It ran in fairly close without slackening speed, and Cranford saw that it was not Ruble's launch. It was a small speed boat, painted gray, and it carried two men, both of whom were standing.

"Come on, Dutchy!" hoarsely yelled one of the two. "Come on, Dutchy! It's all over!"

The fire blazed up brightly, bringing Carol Brennan's figure into plain view of the men aboard the strange craft; then the strange craft turned a semicircle dizzily, and started back. Bub Cranford walked down to the water's edge; his arms were folded, and his ready six-gun was hidden under the left side of his coat.

Though the motor had ceased to fire, the boat ran on until its bow touched the sand within two yards of Cranford's feet. The firelight now showed the Kentuckian that the two strangers had the hardest, most cruel, most disreputable of faces, and that each had a rifle within easy reach.

"Where did you pick up the jane, Dutchy?" one of them asked, grinning.

"It ain't Dutchy!" cried the other.

Bub Cranford whisked his big revolver from under his coat and covered the pair with its muzzle. "Hands up!" he snapped. "Up high, quick—quick!"

They obeyed, wondering. Cranford waded out until he was within arm's reach of them. With his left hand he threw the rifles ashore and felt over their pockets to assure himself that they had no smaller firearms.

"Now get away," he ordered sharply, "and don't come back!"

They were nothing loath. The boat was soon speeding like a great gray arrow for Lostman's Big Bay. Cranford turned back to Carol Brennan, but he tossed the two rifles into the sea grape before he spoke.

"Did you see their faces?" he asked soberly.

"Yes," she answered, vague dread in her voice; "and I never want to see such faces any more."

When midnight came and they had seen nothing of Ruble, Cranford began to fashion a couch of leaves and boughs between the fire and the wreck for the girl. While she slept, he stood guard.

CHAPTER V.

THE FRUITS OF HIS AMBITION.

WHEN the sun was an hour high on the following morning, Ruble's launch rounded the point of land it had disappeared behind on the day before, coming at full speed. Cranford and Carol were in the small boat and moving rapidly toward the launch when the old seaman cut his spark off.

"I've never had such a time with a danged old gas motor in all my life!" cried Ruble. "My engine broke down again, and I lost my propeller and had to dive for it, and then I lost my way. At last I had to give it up and wait until mornin'."

He had lied, truly, like a gentleman.

When they were well under way, Bub Cranford found an opportunity to whisper to Ruble: "Everything all right?"

"Absolutely!" Ruble whispered back.

There was something oddly desperate and oddly final in his voice, in his old eyes, in his bewhiskered countenance. It was something that forbade Cranford asking any more questions, and he didn't.

At last they ran out on open water before Silver Tip's Key.

"There," Ruble called back to the girl,

"is your daddy's schooner, and wharf, and coconut grove, and house; see 'em?"

The bullet-marked old motor boat had been hidden.

Had Carol Brennan been a little younger, she would have clapped her hands with delight, doubtless, at the tropical beauty that lay before her. As it was, her clear eyes glowed with a joyous expectancy. The launch crept in beside the sun-baked wharf, and Cranford helped the girl out.

"Go right up to the house, miss," said Ben Ruble, "and surprise your daddy. Ketch him over the eyes from behind with your hands and make him guess who it is! You go with her, Cranshaw."

Cranford followed her up the crooked path, under the beautiful, feathery palms. He noted that a tall man, dressed in spotless white duck and neat black tie, broad-rimmed Panama hat and white canvas shoes, sat, apparently dozing, in a deck chair on the veranda. A big and thick-set, red-haired man, also in white, was just tiptoeing into the house. Both were cleanly shaven.

Carol Brennan crossed the veranda noiselessly, reached a point directly behind her father, and stole soft finger tips over his eyes.

"Guess who!" she cried tremulously, but delightedly. "Guess!"

Bub Cranford had stopped at the veranda steps. He saw it all. There was half a minute that seemed a small eternity, and then a single tear crept from under Carol Brennan's finger tips and trickled slowly down the lean, characterful cheek.

"Carol, darling," Silver Tip Brennan said with amazing gentleness, "it could be nobody else on earth but you. I thank God Almighty for this hour."

She fell to her knees before him, her arms about his neck, her face on his breast, sobbing out her heart for the gladness of this meeting. He held nothing against her; he loved her—she knew it now: and nothing could ever take *that* from her. Brennan's hat fell off, and Cranford saw that his hair really was as white as snow. Bub Cranford, of Cranford County, Kentucky, though he was a strong man and sufficiently prideful of his strength, had to turn away.

Presently Carol Brennan called to him, however, and the next moment he was shaking her father's hand. The girl told of Cranford's enduring kindliness to her, and Silver Tip Brennan was profuse in his thanks without losing for a second the remarkable poise that was one of his most striking characteristics.

"It's a pity, dear," the older man said then to his daughter, "that I've got to leave you so soon after your coming to see me. I've never regretted anything more than that, Carol."

"You've got to leave me!" she breathed, wide-eyed with disappointment. "Where are you going, father?"

"It's a long voyage, dear, and I'm not sure just where I shall land before I am through. But it is worth all the world to see you before I start."

"I couldn't go with you?" she asked hopefully.

"Oh, no!" Silver Tip Brennan smiled. "There wouldn't be room—and maybe it wouldn't be a place for so fine a lady as you are!"

Reluctantly he broke the news to her that it would be necessary for her to go back to Key West on Ben Ruble's launch that same day. It was insufferable, of course, but his voyage couldn't possibly be put off; he was all ready to go, and everything.

It was quite the best day of Brennan's life. He had witnessed in the flesh, at last, the full fruits of his iron ambition. There is small room to doubt that it was the best day of his daughter's life, too.

Big Red Truesdell served the noonday meal. The outstanding feature of this was the magnificent little prayer that Silver Tip Brennan offered in the saying of grace. Carol must not know.

CHAPTER VI.

ALL THAT HE HAD.

AT two in the afternoon, old Ben Ruble announced that they must get under way soon if they were to make a safe voyage back to Key West. The parting between Brennan and his daughter is a thing that it were better not to try to write of. There are no words that will portray its fineness, its sadness, its sweetness, or the sacrifice of it. They left him,

that tall man in white, his white hair stirred gently by a vagrant breeze, standing at the foot of the veranda steps. And just back of him was Big Red Truesdell, also in white, also sad of eye, as faithful as the sun.

When they were well out of that jumbled mass of keys that maps call indefinitely Ten Thousand Islands, the youthful Kentuckian left Carol in a chair astern and went forward to put a question to Ruble.

"Old man, Miss Brennan has given me permission to go to Virginia to see her. I'm going to try to marry her. Do you think her father would object?"

"Not now," Ben Ruble answered sadly. "Silver Tip Brennan is dead now, Cranshaw."

"Dead!"

"Dead," echoed Ruble. "I don't believe you'd be rotten enough to tell, so here's the way it was:

"The Hinchcliff ring's rattlesnakes shot at him twice yesterday, and the second shot got him. We thought he'd die, last night. But he rallied, and swore he had to live long enough to see his girl; he refused to die until he'd seen her; and he didn't dare let her know he'd been shot; see? So we pasted up the bullet hole to keep it from bleedin' through his clothes, and it wasn't far from his heart, and I went after you two.

"I was afeared he couldn't last, and I hurried you off at two o'clock. You remember I rushed back to the house for a minute just as we was ready to start? I saw Silver Tip Brennan, God rest him, die in Big Red's arms. Now you know what that long voyage was he talked about, don't you? She'll natchelly think, you know, he was lost at sea; it was the best way out of it. Go back there and talk to her, Cranshaw. Don't let her git lonesome."

Cranford went. The sun sank, like a huge disk of gold, behind the Gulf's outer rim. On Silver Tip's Key, a big and red-haired man with earth stains on his clothes walked to the edge of the veranda in the satin twilight, and tossed a spade under the floor.

"Not even a mound, says Silver; not even a little cross for a marker," Big Red breathed thickly. Then Truesdell, the illiterate, sank to his knees. He turned his eyes toward the fading sky, put out his great hands as though to receive something in them, and addressed the Infinite:

"He gived her his body, and he gived her his soul; he gived her all he had. Good Lord, I hereby, a pore damn dawg of a sailor, want to tell You that a man like him is worth tyin' up to, and I want You to tie up to Silver Brennan. Please Sir, and thank You kindly. Aymen."

SNOWFLAKES THEN—AND NOW

By Frank Dorrance Hopley

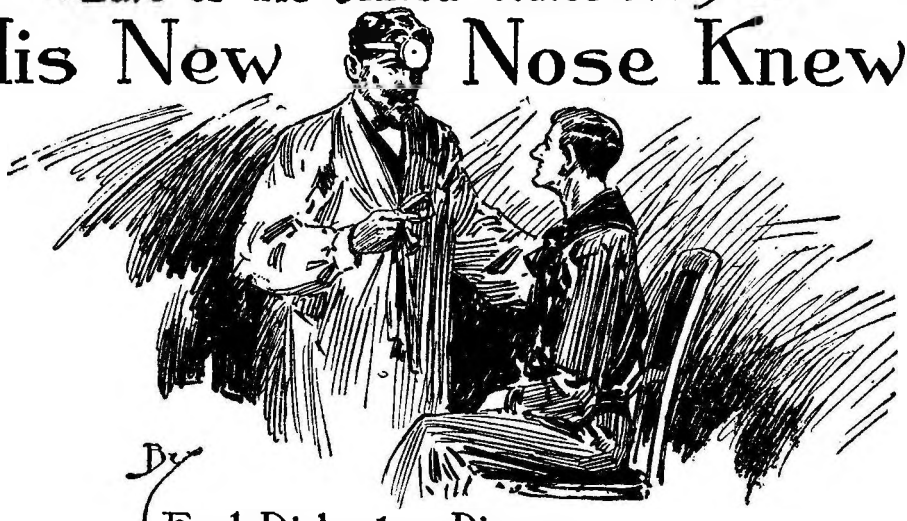
THE snowflakes do not seem the same
They did long years ago,
When soft they sifted through the pines,
So lazily and slow;
It seemed as if a molting cloud
Was sending feathers down
To cover up the earth, once proud,
Now sear and brown.

Then, hand in hand, dear, you and I
Walked down the country lane,
And sang our lilting songs of love,
And hearts had ne'er a pain,
But beat with young love's happy dream,
With hopes for future bright,
And eyes that shone, till yours did seem
Like stars at night.

But now the little snowflakes fall
Upon a city street;
On pavements hard and cold they lie,
Trod down by many feet.
And when at early morn I see
The roofs as white as chalk,
The snow's stern call to me is this:
"Go clear the walk!"

Tale of the United States Navy

His New Nose Knew



By Frank Richardson Pierce

(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.

ALL TANGLED UP.

THE quarter-deck was decorated with flags, pennants, and flowers. Even the six great guns overhead seemed a part of the decorative scheme. Two bands were standing by, ready to supply continuous music to the dancers. Close to the gangway, a number of young officers in dress uniforms awaited the arriving guests. Brisk young ensigns conducted the arrivals to the dressing rooms below. Throbbing motors paused at the gangway, discharged cargoes running heavily to pretty girls, then hurried away for more. The admiral of the battleship division giving the reception was dressing; so was Chief Gunner's Mate Cody.

Being an enlisted man, Cody naturally would not be among those present at an officers' reception; nevertheless he dressed with the utmost care, in his best uniform. From time to time, he surveyed himself in a mirror. His shoulders were broad and powerful; his strong jaw showed great determination and character; his eyes were dark and humorous. Then he contemplated his nose.

"I suppose I should have something done to that beak," Cody mused. "It looks as if somebody had been pounding it with a hammer! Still, it's a mighty good nose, and I can sniff fresh air from the mountains or a stack of hots or a bowl of Java on a cold night as well as the next man. The way it is now, it's something like a turret—the blows glance off. If it was different, I wonder if—— No; that wouldn't make any difference to Hazel. She'd love the man not the nose."

His mood was still thoughtful when he joined a number of chief petty officers in a lounging room reserved for them in hours off-duty. "I'll put it to a vote," said Cody. "Do you think I should put this nose of mine in dry dock and have it overhauled and repaired? Let's hear the ayes first!"

He listened, and the room was silent. "Now let's hear the noes!"

"No!" The compartment fairly thundered.

"The noes, so to speak, have it!"

"Listen, Cody, we like you as you are," said West, one of the men. "If that handle of yours was changed, you wouldn't look the same. Remember, you are fleet champion and——"

"Almost," corrected Cody. "There is Brower."

The mere mention of the name changed the expressions on the faces of the group.

"Brower!" snorted West. "He's sidestepped you. That was bad enough, but on top of that Dan Doran, a manager of professional boxers, has talked him into buying his way out of the navy, after all the navy has done for him. Brower may have the title, but not in the eyes of the men in the service! Every time we bump into a sport editor, we say so in a loud tone of voice. When Doran starts booming him for the big-league stuff, leaving the navy without meeting you won't help Brower at all!"

Cody grinned. "Why get excited?" He understood. It was loyalty to ship, shipmates, and service that had made West speak out in just resentment.

"Why are you all dolled up to-night?" asked West. "Been promoted to ensign or something? You can't go aft!"

The others looked at Cody with interest, but he merely grinned and sauntered out. That night he was going to do something because it was the square thing to do, but it was going to hurt. "The best man won," he muttered, as he glanced at the twinkling lights ashore. "I'm going to wish her all the luck in the world, and that comes straight from the heart."

Cupid shoots a lot of arrows when the fleet is in port, but it is not often the winged youngster tangles things up so badly as he did this time. His aim was poor, perhaps, for instead of plunging two arrows into the hearts of as many officers, he selected Ensign Walton as one victim and Chief Gunner's Mate Cody as the other. The unusual situation of officer and enlisted man interested in the same girl presented itself.

The affair was managed without attracting undue attention. When Ensign Walton was at Hazel's home, Cody was elsewhere. In turn, Cody managed to call when the ensign was aboard ship. Of course the ensign had the better of it, everybody agreed to that, while at the same time they admired Cody for trying.

Cody admitted to himself that the ensign was handsome, as the officer came over the side that night. Walton seemed particularly suited to wearing cape and evening dress, and the girl was superb. Cody had never seen her when she appeared to be more beautiful. She glanced about in frank delight at the brilliant scene. Ten minutes later, from a point of vantage, Cody again saw Hazel. The admiral himself had swept younger officers aside, as was his habit on these occasions, and was dancing with her.

"The old boy can step off, too!" the gunner's mate muttered. "Ah! Hazel had a hand in that!"

At the conclusion of the dance, the admiral had seated her on the opposite side of the ship. Before the last of the dancers had cleared the deck, she had made her way forward and was swallowed up in the darkness.

"Hazel! Did you get my note?" Cody emerged from concealment.

"Foolish question, Ray, or I would not be standing where I am. Quick, or Mr. Walton will be hunting me!" She glanced apprehensively aft. "Merciful heavens!"

Cody followed her glance and saw a bare foot protruding from a hammock. "We'll move a few feet away. The night is warm, and some of the boys are swinging their hammocks outside. I couldn't go ashore to-night, but I had to have a minute to wish you all the luck there is! I know you will be happy with Walton. He's a fine man, and—and—you'll be happy."

"Why, Ray, what are you talking about?" Her eyes were wide with amazement.

"I happened to hear one of the other ensigns congratulating him this afternoon," replied Cody. "He was showing a ring, and—I had to wish you well, Hazel, and you know I mean it."

"We are not engaged," she said quietly.

"You're not going to marry him?" Cody's voice was lowered, but a note of astonishment was in it.

"No; I don't care for him in that way!" She turned and started to hurry away.

Belatedly Cody caught her arm and led her beyond vision of the officer of the deck. "Do you mean——" he began. "Who do you care for in that way, or —er—— Do you—— Hang it, will you marry me, Hazel?" He had proposed at last.

"Yes, Ray!"

"Do you mean it?"

"Of course, Ray! I must go now, Mr. Walton is——"

Walton came onto the scene a moment later, but neither noticed him. He sighed, and being a good sportsman he muttered: "Cody is a fine man. She'll be happy, and she's entitled to happiness. I'll stand by until she returns—no, that won't do! I'll pretend to discover her after the next dance. Where's that little blonde in the black gown? It takes a girl to make a fellow forget, or try to forget, another girl."

Cody found himself alone several minutes later. In the palm of his hand was a bit of crumpled paper Hazel had thrust there just before she left him. The whole thing seemed incredible to him. "And she really loves me, and we're going to be married," he repeated. "She passed up an officer for me! Don't girls beat the deuce? Bless her!"

As if in a trance, Cody made his way to his quarters and examined the clipping she had handed him. There was a little note with it, as if she had feared he might take offense and would not thoroughly understand. The clipping spoke for itself. It was a brief account of a heavyweight champion boxer who had undergone an operation on his nose.

Cody looked into the mirror again. "Well, she took me as I was. But if I can improve these classical features of mine by an overhauling of the beak, then I should do it!" He tried to imagine exactly how he would look with his nose improved, but he found the task too difficult.

When he strolled into the lounging room later, his manner gave away the reason for his happiness.

"Out with it!" West insisted, backing him into a corner. "You've seen a mighty interesting somebody during the last few minutes!"

"Have a heart! Have a heart!" Cody pleaded, grinning.

"So that's it? She said have a heart and you said, 'Don't care if I do!' And you accepted hers and the hand that went with it. Old man, congratulations! I'll say this for Miss Hazel Main! She sees more than the decorations on a man's uniform."

It was useless to deny what had happened. In fact, Cody felt like proclaiming his good fortune from the crow's nest. In the midst of congratulations, Dan Doran entered the compartment.

CHAPTER II.

WHAT PUZZLED HIM.

SOME one had invited Doran to the ship. He looked uncomfortable in evening dress. Once aboard, he could not resist having another look at the only man Brower was side-stepping. Doran was one of those rare souls who could tell a good boxer either in or out of the ring. "Why all the joy, Cody?" he queried.

"Cody has just won the finest girl in the world. They all say that, but this time it is true," West explained.

Doran thrust forth his hand. "Congratulations! I suppose that means retirement, or does the lady approve of boxing?"

"For sport, yes, Doran; but commercially, no. I'm in the navy for life," Cody added pointedly, "and I've recently taken examinations for warrant gunner. Whether I pass or not, I'm in for good."

Cody fished in his pocket, brought forth a handkerchief, and mopped his brow. The compartment was warm, and congratulations had not tended to cool him at all. A bit of paper fluttered from his pocket to the floor and dropped, face up, where the others could see it.

"Dropped something, Cody," West said with a wink. "It's about a heavyweight champion getting his nose fixed up."

All eyes were upon Cody as he hastily picked up the clipping.

"Don't get any redder in the face, Cody," West went on, "or they'll be putting you to bed for high blood pressure. You can't fool men who live with you twenty-four hours a day. You plan to have that nose of yours straightened along classical lines. Out with it now! You're big enough to whip any man who laughs at you."

"Pipe down!" Cody snapped. "It's getting so a man can't have any privacy in this man's navy. If I want my nose fixed up, I'll have it fixed. No ifs or ands about it."

"Exactly!" the crowd agreed, but Cody did not like the way they said it.

He changed the subject. "Is it true that Brower's going to buy his way out of the navy, Doran?". Cody's query diverted interest from him immediately.

"Considering it!" the manager replied. "Brower's good! Under my training he should go far!"

"He's not the navy champion except in name. He hasn't met Cody," West pointed out. "I know your game, Doran. You're going to build up his reputation, and there'll be big money in it for you, even if he is whipped. Champion of the navy, as you'll tell the world, means something. Then, with a few set-ups you'll——"

Doran was accustomed to being under fire. He resented the words and inwardly raged because the men on board had divined his plan, but outwardly he smiled. He had not been in the boxing game many years without learning a great deal. His quick mind was several jumps ahead of the others.

"It's all right, I suppose," a gray-haired chief petty officer added. "He'll clean up the easy marks and grab the big money, but why doesn't he serve out his enlistment? The navy made him, gave him his chance, and made an idol of him. Then you come along, looking for some easy jack, and he plans to buy his way out."

Doran nodded, but he stood by his guns. "You doubt Brower's being navy champion?" he asked softly.

"Dog-gone right we do. So long as he side-steps any man in the navy, his record is not clear."

"Who has he side-stepped?" It was hard to fathom what was in Doran's mind as he put the query.

"Ray Cody!" The answer came from several. "Ray's tried to get him into the same ring, but it's no go."

"This comes as a surprise to me." Doran told the lie smoothly. "Are you willing to meet him, Cody?"

"I've given up all hope long ago, Doran," Cody replied.

"Then don't! I shall look into this matter at once. You'll hear from me again. If Brower continues to avoid you, Cody, I'll be surprised." Danny Doran masked his keen face with a disarming smile and left the compartment

"Well, can you beat that!" Cody exclaimed. "Who got the letters I sent to Brower asking for a match? Who advised him to side-step? It was Danny Doran, the manager who didn't want to see his future meal ticket punched. Why, confound him, he came to me with a proposition to buy my way out before he went to Brower, said he was sure I could beat Brower! When I turned him down, he went to the fleet champ, and Brower grabbed the chance like a trout grabs a fly. This stuff is too deep for me; I'd sooner tackle a problem in gunnery. I'm going to bed."

"Sweet dreams!" called the gray-haired petty officer with a grin.

"Oh, he'll have 'em!" said West. "You always have sweet dreams when you get that way. And speaking of noses——"

Cody turned and West raced away, chuckling.

CHAPTER III.

THAT NEW NOSE.

EARLY the next morning, Navy Champion Brower was greeted by his future manager. Doran brought important news and severely jolted his man by announcing: "Before you quit the service, you're going to meet Cody!"

"What's happened? Is Cody sick or something?" Brower did not intend to be humorous, but the manager's sudden change of front was something of a surprise.

Doran believed in inspiring confidence when confidence was the need and side-stepping danger when it presented itself. "I've always believed down in my heart you could stop Cody in six or eight rounds," the manager replied. "Yeah; he's sick, lovesick. And that's not all—he's going to have his nose fixed up. You can bet a girl had something to do with that. He didn't admit it, but when the crowd kidded him you could tell what was on his mind. And that came right on top of admitting he was engaged. Swiped an ensign's dame or something."

"Well, Cody don't punch with his nose," Brower pointed out. "He wades in, he-man stuff, the kind the crowd falls for."

"Be yourself! Be yourself!" the manager growled. "Don't you get the point,

or will I have to diagram it? Here is the scenario as written by yours truly, Daniel Doran, and it's a good one if I do say it myself. The sport writers all agree that the man who can force Cody into boxing will win. Cody doesn't give the other fellow a chance to box, see? The first reel is like this: Cody gets his nose fixed up to suit a dame. He's proud of the beak as a kid is of a new toy.

"Reel two, he meets you in the ring. You start pecking away at the new proboscis, and that worries him. He doesn't want it spoiled. It takes a mighty little worry for a man to lose a bout. When in the ring, the only thing you can think of is winning. If you are thinking about a nose, a dame, or the mortgage on the old farm, you're going to lose.

"It's happened too many times not to be true," Doran went on. "I'll lay you two to one he tries to box you, and if he does, he's gone. If he thinks about his nose, you'll find an opening, particularly if you pop him a few on the new toy. Reel three! You leave the navy with no unfinished business and the big jack ahead, because you'll be the undefeated champion of the United States navy."

It needed no arguing to convince Brower that the manager spoke the truth. He himself had lost a match once because he had been thinking of outside matters. "You positive he's going to have his nose operated on?"

"We'll make sure of it before we go too far! I've tipped the sporting editors off, and they're on his trail. You see, with a heavyweight champ doing it, and a navy boxer following, they'll wonder if it's going to develop into an epidemic. It'll make a good story."

"All right," Brower agreed. "If you say meet him, I'm ready. Somehow, I believe a surprise is going to happen."

Several weeks later, Ray Cody surveyed his new nose while a nurse held a mirror. A surgeon aboard the *Solace* had outdone himself in the matter. First, he had studied a number of handsome faces, then he put a nose on Cody that would look well with his other features. No man in the films could boast a more masculine profile—the chin, the nose, and the broad forehead.

Hazel Main visited him and expressed approval in no uncertain terms. A sport editor arrived along with a staff photographer. A "before" and "after" photograph was published that night. The interview was an interesting one. Its concluding paragraph read:

> Chief Gunner's Mate Cody denied personal beauty or a girl caused the operation which, to say the least, improves his appearance. He insists that his breathing was materially aided by the operation, and in this the surgeon who performed the work concurs. All this may be true, but just the same there is a girl in the case. The reporter saw her. She knew a new nose would improve the gunner mate's appearance—it has. Next!

Cody read the article twice. "It's difficult to beat a newspaper man," he said to himself. "Hello! Here's a statement from Brower. He's had a change of heart for some reason or other. He admits he is leaving the service and offers to meet any one in the navy whose reputation justifies a championship contest. He particularly includes me. Orderly!"

"Yes?"

"Send word to Brower that I will meet him any time and place he desires. You might see that the newspapers are notified that his offer is accepted. Thanks!"

The orderly hurried away, glad to be of service to a man he believed could win the fleet and probably the navy championship.

With Cody's return to duty, interest in the coming bout grew by leaps and bounds. Shrewd Danny Doran sent forth reams of publicity, some of which the sporting editors used. The men trained almost within sight of each other; the two battleships rode a short distance apart.

Seamen were looking about, eager to place a bet or two on their favorites. At first, Cody was expected to win; then whispers of a mental burden and the new nose spread through the betting fraternity, and he was given only a sporting chance. Rumor had it that Cody was boxing a lot and had developed a new style. Brower was in the finest condition. Any one could see that at a glance.

Danny Doran had found the woman in the case and by methods all his own had learned it was not for beauty, air, or himself that Cody had consented to an operation, but because a girl had wished

it. The manager also talked to the girl on other topics. Perhaps she might rather have her husband a top-line boxer, cutting into big purses, than for him to have only the pay of an enlisted man. Doran was considering the remote chance of Brower's losing and the necessity of connecting with a new meal ticket.

CHAPTER IV.

FLYING GLOVES.

THE important day found the armory packed. For the glory of his ship and the navy, one man was fighting; for himself and the future, the other. It was an unusual contest for a navy bout. Usually immediate glory is the prize, the ringing cheers of one's shipmates.

In his dressing room just before the contest, Ray Cody toyed with a note. It read:

DEAR RAY: Good luck! Do be careful of your new nose. Love from HAZEL.

It looked like Hazel's writing, but it wasn't. It was a clever imitation, made by a retired forger. Dan Doran knew a trick or two.

Cody did not doubt that she had written the note. "My nose!" he muttered. "Yes; I've got to look out for that."

Ringing navy cheers reached the dressing room. Brower had entered the ring. Cody tossed a bath robe over his shoulders and hurried to his corner. His shipmates stood up and roared their good wishes. He climbed through the ropes and shook hands with Brower.

The navy champion looked just below Cody's eyes—at the new nose. Even after instructions, when they had taken their seats, Brower continued his steady gaze at the nose.

"Keep it up!" Doran whispered. "It's getting his goat."

"What'll happen to that nose will be aplenty," Brower said, over his shoulder.

Again Danny Doran's cleverness came to the fore. "Peck at it, but don't spoil it, Brower. You don't want to stir him up; just keep him worried and watch your chance."

The gong clanged, and the crowd leaned forward as one man. Cody leaped forth with his old rush, then checked himself. He did not wade in as was his custom, forcing the other without mercy. Instead, he stood off and boxed.

"Right on the nose, Brower!" yelled a shipmate. "Drop a shell on his turret. They used to bounce off, but not any more!"

Brower's glove found openings others hadn't been able to see, because they had been busy defending themselves. The chin, cheeks, and eyes became the target of the champion's thrusts. Always his blows landed close to Cody's nose, but never quite on it. When the opening came, however, Brower planned to send crashing home the blows that were to win the battle.

The rounds passed swiftly. The crowd was in an uproar, cheering Brower, hurling advice to Cody. Surprise changed to disapproval; then criticism was expressed by the onlookers in no uncertain terms.

From the rows of officers, Walton leaned forward. "Wade in, Cody!" he shouted. "You're not a boxer and never will be. You're a fighter! Get it, a fighter! The navy doesn't box. It fights! Forget the nose. They'll give you another if you lose this!"

Walton's words stung because they were true. Cody had adopted different tactics. Just for a moment, he was the Cody of old, then as Brower danced back, pecking, pecking, he tried to outbox him.

From the crowd, a voice came huskily: "And he'll leave the navy a champion. Can you beat it? Cody, you cheese!"

Cody had not thought of that. For a second, he forgot his nose and waded in. His glove broke through Brower's guard. The champion gave ground, then retaliated when the opening came. The nose was the target. For a moment it stopped Cody, then he started again. Brower crouched, tense.

Danny Doran, reading what was in his man's eyes, leaped to his feet. "Don't do it!" he warned.

The shout was a half second too late. Brower's glove shot out swiftly. The blow caught Cody flush on the nose. Tears blinded him from the momentary flash of pain. He knew that the worst had happened. The nose of old would have sent the blow glancing; it was like a turret. The new one was built along

artistic lines. It was gone, and nothing mattered now.

He forced the fighting with sudden fury. The navy champion could not set himself for another blow. Brower fought instinctively, bringing to bear all his skill in footwork and boxing. Into his own corner he was forced. Doran shouted advice, but Brower did not hear it.

CHAPTER V.

HARD TO FIGURE.

FROM a clear sky, a projectile of some sort fell and struck Brower squarely on the chin. The explosion was terrible; whole cities tumbled about his ears; then he blinked his eyes. The dull, distant roar was not the sound of surf, after all. It was a cheering crowd. Somebody was helping Brower to his corner. It was Cody. Danny Doran clenched his hands, then thrust his head through the ropes. "You had the fight won!" he cried, close to tears. "Then you tossed it away. I told you not to hit him too hard on the nose. You had to do it, and his nose knew when to fight. You got him mad, you chump!"

Brower blinked foolishly at Doran. "Is the fight over?" the boxer queried.

"Sure! Over! Done! And so are we. You'd better stick in the service. You're navy champion no more. Good night!" Then the manager hurried around to Cody's dressing room.

The new champion was examining his nose. "In pretty good shape," Cody mused. "The doctor must have put in some reënforcing irons along with the concrete. She stood up great under that crack. Hello, Doran!"

"Hello, Cody! You were great! Listen, there's a fortune ready for you to collect. We can both become rich. Let me show you some figures, Cody!" He brought forth a piece of paper and began to write. "You see——"

"I sure see!" Cody exclaimed. "I see a great light. That's the same kind of paper that note I got was written on. You signed my fiancée's name to the note, wishing me luck and warning me to watch out for my nose."

"Now don't get peevish and don't hit me, Ray," said Doran. "That was to get your goat. It shows what a good manager I am. You and me, working together, will make a great team. All you have to do is to buy your way out of the navy."

"That's all, Doran, but that's too much. Money isn't everything. Gunnery is my life. Boxing, to me, is merely a game on the side; fun, not business. I'm sorry, but we can't agree. I forgive your writing the note. It did nearly get my goat, and it might have if Brower hadn't cracked in a punch that woke me up. Good-by, Doran, and good luck to you!"

Doran pondered thoughtfully for a second, then went away. Some men were hard to figure. "A fortune," he muttered, "and he's not interested!"

The skipper himself entered at that moment. Ensign Walton had conducted him to the dressing room. The officers congratulated the new champion, and the skipper called him "Mr. Cody!"

"Mr. Cody?" the boxer asked, and then understanding dawned upon him.

"Yes; you passed your examinations, and the warrant came through to-day. From now on, you rate a salute and will be 'sired' and 'mistered.' I refrained from giving you the news, for I understood a fortune in professional circles awaited you if you won this battle. You won! You won a greater battle with temptation."

"It was not a hard battle, sir. I never even considered leaving the service. Boxing is play; gunnery is the most important thing to me. Thank you!"

"You'll have to get some uniforms," went on the officer. "While they are being made, you may as well take thirty days' leave and enjoy your honeymoon."

Cody turned to Walton. "You're back of that. Thank you!"

Ensign Walton followed the skipper from the room. He had tasted the brew from a good loser's cup and found it sweet. Besides, the world is full of girls.

How did you like this story? Will you write us a short letter giving us your opinion of it? At the same time we should be glad to have any criticisms that you care to offer on any other story in this number, or on the magazine as a whole. Any letter that you may send will be appreciated by the editors.

Menace of the Mine

By Ernest Douglas

(A NOVELETTE)

CHAPTER I.

READY TO FIGHT.

"THIS will be a big sensation, Nagle," said Slonaker. "My report on underground conditions at the Azurite Central is going to tear things wide open and sure make it hot for 'Hardpan' Hardesty. I'll get the chief on long distance to-night and ask his permission to give you a copy for publication in the next issue of your paper."

Slonaker, the new deputy State mine inspector for the Northern district, was quivering with excitement as he leaned across the desk of the Azurite *Weekly Herald's* youthful editor-proprietor.

"Just what's wrong at the Central?" Fred Nagle inquired eagerly. "I've heard all kinds of stories, but never was able to obtain any information that I could swear was authentic. Hardesty won't let me down the mine, won't let any other American down, for that matter, unless it's somebody like yourself with official authority. He won't say a word, and it seems impossible to pry anything out of his Mexican employees."

"Of course it's impossible! Those peons know that if one of them blabs, his job won't last five minutes. Besides there's——"

"But just what is wrong?"

"What's wrong? What isn't wrong? I haven't time to go into details now—wait for my report. I sure hope you have the nerve to print it."

"Nerve!" Nagle laughed dryly. "Listen, Slon. It's both a duty and a pleasure for a newspaper man to print a really important piece of news, and in this case it will give me a lot of personal satisfaction to boot. Hardesty is the only real enemy I have in this camp. Because I had the audacity to get up in a meeting of our local Chamber of Commerce and Mines and move an investigation of persistent reports that the frequent accidents at the Central were due to flagrant violations of the State safety laws, he instituted a boycott against me.

"He warned all the merchants that if they patronized the *Herald,* they would receive no more business from the Azurite Central Copper Co., biggest and wealthiest mining corporation in the whole district," Nagle went on. "That's the reason I lost about half my advertising and am now skating on the ragged edge of bankruptcy, with not much idea of how the pay roll is to be met next Saturday night. Yes; it will be a pleasure to print your report and cause Luther P. Hardesty all the trouble I can."

"That's the spirit! See you first thing in the morning."

With keen appraisal, Nagle watched Slonaker depart. The lean, almost emaciated form assumed an unwonted erectness as the deputy inspector strode out into the blazing sunshine of Pyrite Street; for once the stooped shoulders seemed almost square, and the watery, rather shifty eyes flashed fire.

"Seems to have done old Slon a world

of good to get all het up," Fred Nagle murmured, as he turned to his work.

He had met Slonaker at Valentine, another mining camp, one that was on the other side of the Black Rock Range. Though for a year they had been tablemates at a boarding house there, they had never become very well acquainted. Slonaker had no real friends, being irritable, spiteful, suspicious, anything but a congenial character. It was even whispered that he "sold jobs" in the department of the Valentine Mine over which he had authority. Nagle wondered how he had happened to get appointed to his present position.

"Good morning! Are you the editor?"

Nagle looked up into the bright and earnest face of a boy some thirteen or fourteen years old, who was clad in a neat khaki suit of semimilitary cut. In one hand the youngster held a broad-brimmed campaign hat.

"I'm the editor," Nagle answered.

"My name is Dick Hardesty. I've been appointed press representative of our Boy Scout troop, and I've come to tell you about our hike to the peak of Mount Azure."

"Sit down, Dick. So your name is Hardesty? Any relation to Luther P.?"

"He's my grandfather. I came out West a few months ago to live with him. My—my own folks are dead."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Dick. You like Azurite, I hope?"

"I do now, since I got into the Boy Scouts. It's lots of fun to be a Scout. I'm only a tenderfoot now, but I hope to get promoted pretty soon. Our motto is, 'Do a good turn every day.'

"You'd never guess what good turn I did for to-day," he went on. "I saw a stray burro that had got his nose all stuck full of cactus spines, so I caught him and pulled them out. He kicked me some, but it didn't hurt very much."

Nagle laughed heartily. "That burro didn't have sense enough to appreciate a good turn," he commented. "Very ungrateful."

For an hour the newspaper man and his caller chatted on a variety of subjects. Nagle soon decided that Dick Hardesty was the most intelligent and lovable lad that he had ever met, and he made the youngster promise to drop in every day or two with news of the activities of the Azurite Boy Scouts.

"I'll have to go now, Mr. Nagle," Dick said, at last. "I'll tell all the Scouts about how nice you have been to me, and we'll watch for the piece in the paper about our hike. Sometimes I think I'd like to be an editor."

"Do you? I'll be glad to teach you."

"No; thanks just the same, but I'm going to be a mining engineer. My grandpa wants me to, and I've promised."

CHAPTER II.

TOLD TO KEEP QUIET.

PERHAPS because of his liking for Dick, Nagle felt less resentful than usual toward the elder Hardesty when he accidentally met the manager of the Azurite Central on Pyrite Street that afternoon.

"That's a mighty fine grandson you have, Mr. Hardesty," the newspaper man remarked.

The veteran mining man's countenance was immediately overspread by a proud and tender smile that sat oddly on his stern features, burned to the color of old leather by desert sun and wind. "Smartest kid in the world!" he boomed. "Say, let me tell you what he did the other day!"

Hardesty grasped Nagle by the arm, and as they pressed through throngs of indolent Mexican miners, he raved about his Dicky. The old man saw in the boy every quality that his father, Hardesty's only child and evidently a sore disappointment to him, had lacked. A side of his character that Nagle had never suspected was revealed.

A half-starved Mexican waif of five or six, unclothed except for a ragged shirt that flapped about his scrawny legs, ran in front of them and held up his hands beseechingly. Without looking at him, Hardesty threw him a quarter and went on with his account of Dick's first effort to ride a burro.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Hardesty, but did you notice that child?" Nagle interjected.

"What child? Yeah! What about him?"

"Do you know why he is begging on the streets?"

"All Mexican kids do that more or less."

"No; they don't. That boy is begging because his father, Victor Mendoza, was killed in the Azurite Central last month. The wife was left penniless, with this child and two smaller ones to support."

"Tough luck. But what about it?"

"What about it? Was the death of Mendoza absolutely unavoidable?" Nagle asked.

"Say, scribbler, how many times have I got to tell you to run your own business and let me run my mine?"

"Part of my business in the near future is going to be the publication of a report by the deputy State mine inspector on the underground conditions of your mine," Nagle told him.

"What? Has that fool Slonaker been shootin' off his head? He got down the hole yesterday when I was out of town. But I'll shut him up in a hurry." With that, Hardesty rushed away.

Nagle, smiling grimly but serenely, strolled back to the *Herald* office. It was late; the printers were gone; and Primitivo Molino, the one-legged janitor, had just arrived to give the premises their daily cleaning. Molino, though usually weighed down by the responsibility of providing for a large family, was humming a merry tune and seemed very happy about something.

"Have some good luck, Primitivo?" Nagle asked.

"Good luck! I shood say so, Meester Nagle. My *niño,* my little Pedro, has at last got a job as powder monkey in the mine. A dollar and a half a day. It will help much."

"Which mine, Primitivo?"

"The big mine, the Central."

"But aren't you afraid to let your boy work there? That mine is not safe."

"It is a very safe mine, señor. Have you not heard what Meester Hardesty did for the miners?"

"No. What did he do?"

"At every station he put up a shrine with sacred images, just as they have in all mines in Mexico. And as he goes on shift, each man crosses himself before a shrine and is quite safe."

"But what about those that have been killed or injured?"

"They forgot to cross themselves, señor. Or they committed some other sin."

"Primitivo, I have all the respect in the world for your religion. But you must mix common sense with it. If men go to work in a mine that is not properly timbered, which I understand is the case at the Azurite Central, no amount of crossing before shrines is going to keep the ground from caving. That's asking too much of the Almighty. Your own priest will tell you so if you will go and ask him."

The janitor laughed confidently as he wrung out his mop. "My Pedro will cross himself every time, and he will not be hurt," he declared.

"How old is he?"

"Just fifteen, señor."

Nagle filed this fact away in his mind for future use. He knew that the law expressly forbade the employment underground of any one who was less than sixteen years of age.

CHAPTER III.

BAFFLED FOR A TIME.

ON the following morning, Slonaker failed to keep his promise to deliver a copy of his Azurite Central report. Nagle waited impatiently throughout the day. Several times he telephoned to the hotel where Slonaker was staying, but always the clerk said that he was out. At last the clerk volunteered the information that the deputy inspector was planning to leave for Valentine at five o'clock. Nagle stepped around to the stage office.

Just before the long blue motor bus was to pull out, Slonaker appeared and threw his grip on board. He affected to be in a great hurry and not to see Nagle. There was something furtive in his movements, and the newspaper man's hopes sank to zero.

"What about that report, Slon?" Nagle asked.

"Which report?" As he spoke, Slonaker leaped aboard the bus.

Nagle followed and stood on the running board. "You know very well what I'm talking about. Wouldn't your chief

authorize you to give me a copy? I think —I'll telephone to him myself."

"No! No! Don't do that." Slonaker's confusion was pitiable. He squirmed in his seat and refused to meet Nagle's eye.

"Wouldn't he give his consent?"

"I—I didn't ask him. There's nothing in the report worth printing, really. Everything's all right down there."

"All right?" repeated Nagle. "Only yesterday you said that everything was all wrong."

"S-sh! Don't talk so loud. Maybe I was—well—drunk yesterday. I don't remember what I said. But I'm telling you that everything's all right."

"Say! Hardesty said he was going to shut you up. Probably offered you a chance to buy some Central stock for about half its market value. That's the way he bribed the coroner and some of the town officials he needed on his side. He got to your predecessor on this inspection job, too, I suspect. You cheap crook! But Hardesty hasn't shut me up," the newspaper man went on. "Not yet, nor ever!"

"All aboard!" shouted the driver.

Sick with disgust and disappointment, Nagle stepped from the running board of the bus. Slonaker did not even wave good-by.

Seated in his office, Fred Nagle fired up the ancient corncob pipe that was reserved for occasions when he had some particularly heavy thinking to do. He hoisted his feet to the desk and went over the present problem from every angle. Apparently Hardesty had him checkmated at every turn.

Slonaker had weakly yielded to temptation and sold out; it would be futile to publish the indefinite statements that he had made about conditions at the Central, for he would simply deny them. Except for the employment of a boy a year under the legal age, Nagle could not prove that any unlawful act had been committed.

Had there been any Americans among the Central's employees, he would have tried to pump them; but Hardesty had no use for Yankees and relied entirely upon labor that he imported from Mexico. The mining man claimed that the "bullfighters," as he called them, were less inclined to quarrel about wages and working conditions, that they could be controlled like children. Their naïve belief in the complete efficacy of shrines and the uselessness of modern safety methods was ample evidence of that.

For six months there had been an average of an accident a week at the Central, and several of them had been fatal. There was not the slightest doubt that they were caused, at least in large measure, by failure to observe the laws governing operations in metal mines. To prove it—there was the rub.

The telephone bell rang. Over the wire crackled the gruff voice of Hardpan Hardesty, vibrant with anger.

"Say, Nagle, what's this I hear about you interferin' with my men?"

"Interfering? Why——"

"Don't you try to deny it. I've got the goods on you."

"What do you——"

"You've been spreadin' propaganda among 'em. You told Primitivo Molino that his boy wasn't safe in the Central. You made fun of our shrines, of the Mexicans' religion. How long do you think I'm goin' to stand for stuff like that from a whippersnapper like you?"

"You——"

"Shut up!" snapped Hardesty. "I'm not goin' to argue with you. I'm just tellin' you that if you ever open your mouth about the Central again, or even mention the mine in that dirty little sheet of yours, I'll wring your neck! And if I catch you anywhere on our property, I'll shoot you as a trespasser."

"This is a land of free speech and a free press. You can't get away with that czar stuff in this country."

"Can't, eh? Try me and see."

A vicious click told Nagle that Hardesty had hung up.

"That settles it," the young editor muttered with a wry smile. "I'll go underground at the Central, see for myself just what the situation is, and write a story that'll take his hide off and show him how easy it is to bluff the Azurite *Weekly Herald*."

Nagle was not a mining expert, but he had been writing mining news for several years, had been through a score of mines, and knew enough about the practical side

of the copper industry to detect any major causes that might make underground workings unsafe. To get in and get out was the immediate problem.

Until far in the night, he pored over the State mining code. There were many paragraphs relating to headframes, lighting, and safety catches on the cages used in lowering and hoisting men. It would not be possible for him to inspect or understand the mechanism of the cages, he decided. He had better stick to matters that he could be certain about, make no statements that he would not be able to prove.

The sections relating to timbering he conned with especial care and memorized them almost word for word. He knew that the ground at the Central was soft, full of watercourses, moving constantly, and ought to be timbered heavily to prevent caving. The chances were that Hardesty was economizing on timber, an expensive item in the working of any big copper mine.

"Well, I guess I'll be able to spot most of the weak points, anyway," Nagle mused, as he closed the heavy volume. "That is, I will if I get in. And I'm going to get into that mine or—— Well, they can't rule me off for trying.

"But why can't old man Hardesty be halfway decent? Something like his grandson, for instance. Well, I hope Dick and I continue to be good friends, even if I do have to romp all over his granddad in my paper and make him be a good Injun."

With that Fred Nagle went to his room at a near-by lodging house and to bed.

CHAPTER IV.

A FOOLHARDY EXPLOIT.

SEVERAL mysterious purchases were made by the editor of the Azurite *Weekly Herald* the following morning. He bought blue denim overalls and a jumper of the same material; a miner's cap and a carbide lamp; a pair of heavy brogans; a bottle of brown stain.

At noon, Nagle told his printers that he would not be back that day and tramped out into the hills south of the town. At a lonely spot on the bank of Mescal Creek, hidden by a thicket of mountain laurel, he stopped and untied the clumsy package that he had brought with him.

First of all, he threw the clean new overalls and jumper in the mud, then sloshed them around carelessly in the creek water and hung them on a bush to dry. Next, he applied the brown stain liberally to his face, hands, and neck and surveyed the effect in a small pocket mirror.

Satisfied, he pulled on the brogans and deliberately scuffed them on the sharp edge of a granite boulder. This, with the addition of judiciously applied mud, made them appear old and battered. The cap, he kicked around in the dirt. He familiarized himself with the mechanism of the lamp, which had been filled with carbide by the salesman, until he could light it and shut off the gas at will.

By this time his "digging clothes" were dry. Nagle exchanged them for his business suit, which he folded and hid in the brush.

For a minute, he gazed doubtfully at a small revolver which he usually kept in his desk. "Better go heeled, since Hardesty threatened to shoot me," he at last decided, and dropped it into a side pocket of his jumper.

"Now!" he exclaimed. "If I'm not a Mexican, what am I? Surely no pencil pusher. If I only had a trick mustache, I'd be a regular *minero*. Let's see. Manuel Garcia is a nice, common name. I'll use it if anybody asks me who I am. But here's hoping that nobody fires any Spanish at me that's more involved than *buenas tardes* or *adios*. If they do, they're likely to get beyond my depth. *Andale,* Manuel!"

To reach the Central, which lay right at the north end of town, it was necessary to walk through Azurite or make a long detour. Nagle determined to risk the journey upon the streets of the town, as he doubted whether he had time to traverse the semicircular trail through the hills and arrive at the shaft collar before four o'clock, when the night shift was to go on duty.

With his heart in his mouth, he walked the full length of Pyrite Street. As he passed the *Herald* office, he did not even glance sideways. He met a dozen ac-

quaintances who brushed right by, without looking at him.

"Well, it's plain that to them I look just like any other Mexican," he reflected. "Good Lord! Here's Hardesty himself! And Dicky!"

Out of the corner of his eye, Nagle observed the Central manager and his grandson proceeding toward him along the sidewalk of beaten earth. Dick was chattering in his usual eager manner, and in Hardesty's expression, as he gazed down upon the boy, was both fondness and amusement.

"The old walloper has his good points," Nagle cogitated, as they passed. "For Dick's sake, I wish that I didn't have to fight him. But he has engineered a boycott against me; he's killing men in that mine in order to earn bigger dividends for the stockholders, of which he is the heaviest; he's bribing public officials to let him violate the law. Yes; it's high time for the *Herald* to strike back."

With an anticipatory thrill, he left the fringe of shacks at the edge of town and stepped over the Azurite Central's boundary line. He was defying Hardpan Hardesty's threat to shoot him as a trespasser. What would be the outcome? There was little doubt in Nagle's mind as to what would happen if he were caught and identified; Hardesty would do just what he had said he would do.

To Nagle's right, just down the hillside, there was a hoodlike structure of iron with a long extension, or funnel, at one side. From within the hood came a steady hum, and from the funnel was blown a strong current of dank air. The hum came from the huge electric motor which drove a fan that sucked air up from the mine workings through a ventilation shaft.

A little farther on was the main working shaft. Over a hundred Mexicans, most of them with lunch pails, were lounging in the vicinity of the towering steel headframe. Some were milling around the window of a little building marked "Time Office." A clerk was handing each man a small time card bearing his name, to be signed by his foreman and turned in as he came off-shift. With a chill, Nagle realized that for him to march up to that window and ask for a card in the name of Manuel Garcia would start an inquiry that might prove disastrous to his plan. And could he get underground without a card?

A pleasant whir came from the gigantic electric hoist in a building set back from the shaft. A big steel cable ran silently over the sheave wheel at the top of the headframe and was being reeled up on an enormous drum by the hoist motor. A little farther back, the air compressors chuff-chuffed industriously.

From the shaft mouth floated musical tones, faint, at first, but rapidly growing in volume. Up to the light of day shot a cage that exactly filled the opening. It was crowded with miners, and they were blithely singing some Castilian ballad.

The topman raised a bar and opened the cage door. The song died away, and the men poured out, their clothes caked with grime and dripping moisture and their faces splashed with partially dried grayish mud. Their places were immediately taken by members of the night shift, and the cage dropped back into the earth with its human freight.

Nagle saw two loads go down. Screwing up his courage to the sticking point, he set his teeth and crowded in with the third. The Mexicans were laughing and chatting in their own tongue. One threw a careless question at Nagle, but he affected not to hear. To them, he was just another new hand.

"It's too easy, so far," he thought. "This can't last. I'm bound to hit a snag pretty soon now."

Down plunged the cage, more swiftly than any skyscraper elevator. With the last gleam of daylight, Nagle felt his resolution melting away. All at once his exploit seemed fantastic, foolhardy. It was launched now, however, and there was nothing to do but to go through with it.

CHAPTER V.

AFTER THE FACTS.

THE cage stopped, and the miners stepped out into the gloom of a station but faintly pierced by a murky electric light, set overhead in the jagged arch of dusty stone. A big "6" in white paint told him that they were on the six-

hundred-foot level. He was fortunate, for most of the Central's ore was extracted from this and the level two hundred feet deeper. Probably he would be able to collect all necessary data without going farther.

On the wall opposite the station marker was a group of several images in wax, banked with gaudy paper flowers. As each man passed this shrine, he crossed himself devoutly. Nagle followed their example.

"Cartas! Cartas!" called a tall, thin Mexican, who was evidently the shift boss on this level.

The miners began passing him their time cards, which he handed back after a quick glance. A card was a certificate that the bearer had been examined by the medical department and hired in due order.

"Here's where I'm in for it," Nagle groaned inwardly. "If I could speak Spanish well enough, I'd tell them that I lost it; but as it is, I'll have to run." He edged toward the entrance of a drift that led off in what he supposed was a southerly direction.

"Carta!" the boss barked at him, having finished with the others. *"Dame su carta."*

Nagle turned and fled blindly down the drift. He could hear cries of surprise and warning from the men in the station.

Suddenly his head came in violent contact with the roof, and he was thrown down into the ooze between the tramcar tracks on the floor. The accident caused him to drop his lamp, which he had not lighted. With one hand, he groped for it and with the other felt of his aching head.

Behind him he heard swift running steps, and a pencil of light pierced the Stygian blackness. Nagle seized his lamp and straightened up; again his head crashed against the roof with an impact that brought a constellation of stars. He bent low, scuttled ahead, and was soon again in darkness.

Breathless, he paused to listen. There was no sound save for the beating of his own overtaxed heart and the plash of water dripping from the roof into pools below. A cold stream was creeping down his spine.

His pursuers must have turned off into some other opening, he decided. He knew not how many such he had passed. All mines that he had ever seen were a maze of drifts and crosscuts, and the Central could be no exception.

Cautiously he struck a match against the side of the box. By its feeble glow, he saw that the drift was about five feet wide and barely six feet high. Along the bottom ran a pipe, probably an air line, and a pair of small rails.

Not six inches from his head, terrifying in its threat of death, was a shiny copper trolley wire.

Realization of his narrow escape caused Nagle to reel against the wall in horror. What if his head had come in contact with that wire as he stumbled along in the dark! He would have died in less time than it took to think about it.

"But that's fact No. 1 for my story—if I get out of here alive," he murmured. "The law says that all underground trolley wires must be at least seven feet above the floor. I wonder how much money Hardesty has saved by having his drifts cut only six feet high? And I wonder how many poor devils have been electrocuted in this mine? Most of the Mexicans, though, are short, and long fellows like myself are supposed to duck."

The match flickered out. Nagle waited several minutes before lighting his lamp. When he was positive that he had shaken off pursuit, he sloshed along at a snail's pace, keeping well away from that terrifying wire.

He came to a crosscut that ran at right angles to the drift. It seemed dryer in there, but he hesitated to leave the trolley line, which, though fraught with danger, would at least serve to guide him back to the station.

A distant buzzing sound decided him in favor of the crosscut. He knew that a drilling crew must be working somewhere ahead. So he turned and found the going easier. Soon light streamed toward him from a knot of men toiling behind two air drills that bit viciously into the flinty rock. With the light came thick, choking dust. Nagle seized his windpipe and squeezed it hard, to smother a spasm of coughing that would have betrayed his presence.

He extinguished his lamp and crept on. When he was within ten feet of the drills, he reached a pile of steel bits, ranging from two to six feet in length. With one of the shorter bits, he retreated to the drift and relighted his lamp.

Just as Nagle had suspected, the drill steel was solid. There was no hole through the center for the stream of water which the law required. It was no wonder that the crosscut was full of dust. The fine powder created by metal striking stone was wafted back into the faces of the workmen, drawn deep into their laboring lungs, to pave the way for that dread disease known as "miner's consumption." The Central was "drilling dry," economizing by buying ancient outlawed solid steel and saving the expense of water pipes.

"Fact No. 2!" Nagle chuckled. "Now to look into the timber question."

The trolley, he reasoned, must lead to one of the main stopes. The men in the crosscut were not working in ore; they were merely prospecting. So he followed warily along the tracks.

Far down the drift loomed the headlight of a tiny electric locomotive. Nagle flattened himself against the wall, and the motorman paid no heed to him. Behind the locomotive rumbled a dozen squatty cars filled with brassy chalcopyrite, ten to fifteen per cent copper. It would be dropped down a chute into ore pockets on the eight-hundred-foot level and from there hauled out through a half-mile tunnel to the smelter in the valley below.

In this part of the mine, the rock was so hard that timbers were unnecessary. Soon, however, Nagle reached a formation that was not so firm. He realized this when a mass of talcky material crashed down from the roof just ahead of him. A Mexican came running with a shovel to clear the obstruction from the track. Nagle pushed by him, taking care to keep his face in the shadow, then stopped to stick his finger inquiringly into the wall, slimy and as soft as putty.

The law, he knew, expressly stated that ground like this must be timbered. There ought to be a square set every five feet and lagging overhead to prevent caving.

A little farther along, Nagle did find some square sets, but they were from ten to fifteen feet apart, and there was no lagging. Then he came to one that had proved unequal to the strain imposed upon it. The weight from above had crushed the massive timbers like matchwood.

"And if it does this to pine logs two feet square, what will it do to a man if it comes down on him right suddenly?" Nagle speculated to himself. "I can't be much more than to the edge of their soft ground, but I've seen enough. I know that the Azurite Central is not properly timbered. I know that its trolley wires are all of a foot too low. I know that its drilling is done with dry steel. I know that at least one employee is only fifteen years old. Guess that's enough to give Hardesty some anxious moments when I spring it.

"Now to get out of this hole." He turned back. "I'll bet that's a whole lot harder than it was to get in."

CHAPTER VI.

TIME FOR GUN PLAY.

NAGLE had no definite plan in mind as he followed the rails back toward the station. Dimly he hoped to get aboard the big cage undetected; once on top he would manage to make his getaway.

As the station lights twinkled into view, he turned out his lamp again and paused to reconnoiter. By straining his ears, he could catch muffled echoes of an excited conversation. Stealthily he moved on another fifty feet or so; he pressed into a recess cut in the wall and peered around a slight curve.

Hardesty was there; evidently he had been summoned very hastily, for he was still in his street clothes. His slouch hat and checked tie were awry, and he was furiously waving his clublike hands into the very face of the shift boss.

"He's a spy, I tell you!" the manager bawled. "A spy sent in here by that sneaking scribbler to see if we're livin' up to every crazy law that bunch of boobs in the State legislature put on the books!"

Nagle did not understand the sullen

reply of the boss, which was in Spanish, but Hardesty countered in English:

"Of course you're responsible, Carrillo! Don't try to squirm out of it. Haven't I warned you often enough to be careful about who you let into this mine? You ought to have followed him right up and nabbed him.

"That spy must be somewhere on this level still," the manager went on. "Have the whole mine searched thoroughly—use fifty men if you need 'em, but find him! Then bring him to me."

From his coat, Hardesty drew a heavy black revolver, which he fondled for a moment. Then he shoved it back out of sight. "No; I won't waste lead on the spy!" he cried. "Throw him down an ore chute; that's what I'll do. Ship him down to the smelter and make slag out of him. Only I wish it was Nagle himself instead of some *cholo.*"

Nagle shuddered. He had not the slightest doubt that, in his present temper, Hardpan Hardesty was capable of doing exactly what he threatened. Nor was there any doubt that the newspaper man would be captured and recognized. Himself with no knowledge of the Azurite Central's underground workings and sought by men who knew every nook and corner of them, he could not hope long to escape detection.

How glad he was now that he had brought his pistol! Nervously he gripped the handle in his jumper pocket. It gave him a chance to fight his way out. It was a slim chance, however, as he was six hundred feet down in the ground and surrounded by the minions of his enemy.

The shift boss left the station by another drift. Nagle crouched fearfully in his hiding place, striving to formulate some line of procedure that offered a chance of success.

Like a flash it came to him that his one hope was to walk casually by Hardesty and ring for the cage. There was no one else in the station now. He must act quickly, before Carrillo returned.

With an effort, Nagle forced his legs to obey his will. His heart was in his throat as he sauntered past the fuming manager, pacing about like some jungle beast impatient for its prey.

Before him were the station signals, printed on a big sheet of tin. Two bells followed by three was the signal for the sixth level, the placard said. His hand was rising to the button when he was interrupted.

"Hey, there! What you think you're doin'?"

Hardesty grasped him roughly by the arm. Nagle wheeled and jammed his revolver into the mine manager's middle.

"Up with 'em!" the newspaper man ordered in a tense whisper. "One peep out of you and I shoot."

The leathery face of Luther Hardesty paled, turned ashen. He elevated both hands. "So—so it's you, is it?" he gasped.

"It's I. The scribbler himself. Leave that gun of yours alone. Here, I'll take it."

Nagle leaned over, thrust his hand into Hardesty's pocket, and jerked away the weapon. "Now I'll trouble you to ring for the cage. You'll go on top with me."

Hardesty signaled tremulously. All was silent as the grave in the station. Every second seemed like an hour to Nagle, hoping that the cage would come before Carrillo reappeared. The manager was too surprised even to swear.

From below there rose a gentle purr, the soft shush of steel sliding on greased guides. The cage had been down at the eight-hundred-foot level, not on the surface.

It came at last. And it was full of men! Nagle had counted on its being empty. Now he must herd Hardesty in and hold them all at bay—no; that would be impossible in such close quarters. He must order them out and take possession of the cage for himself and his captive. But what sort of signals would they be sending to the hoist engineer while he was on his way to the top? Well, he would have to risk that. To get out of the mine was the important thing.

The door slid open. Keeping Hardesty covered with one revolver, Nagle waved menacingly with the other.

"Come out of there, all of you," he commanded with a show of confidence that he was far from feeling.

Maledictions and groans of amazement and abject fright quavered from the

Mexicans inside the cage. One ventured forth timidly.

"Faster! Faster!" Nagle urged, with another flourish of his weapon.

A piercing yell reverberated within the restricted confines of the station. Nagle glanced across to the farther side and saw Carrillo with a dozen, twenty, perhaps even more men at his back. A rock sailed through the air and struck close beside his head.

Hardesty dropped with surprising agility for one of his years and tackled him around the knees. Nagle struck viciously at the manager's bald pate, kicked loose, and darted into the drift that he had already explored. As soon as he was well away from the station, he paused and fired a shot into the roof to halt his pursuers. Then he ducked low and scurried ahead into the humid blackness.

Another stop of a second sufficed to light his lamp, which he had carried through the mêlée in a jumper pocket. Then he ran, scrambled, and staggered ahead until he guessed that he was almost to the timbered area. From there he took a crosscut that led to the right. Again he turned, then again and again, until he was completely lost in a network of old exploratory workings that had been driven before the Central found its ore.

CHAPTER VII.

A MEETING UNDERGROUND.

FOR the moment he was safe. Hardesty and his Mexicans would be exceedingly chary about following a man with two loaded revolvers into that labyrinth. He might even stand them off indefinitely, until hunger and exhaustion overcame him; but that would profit nothing. He was almost sorry that he had not started shooting there in the station, sold his life as dearly as he could. At the same time, he had no desire nor intention to take human life, certainly not the lives of the Central's ignorant peons. As long as he could make a grand bluff, well and good; when the bluff would no longer work, flight was the only possible course.

Aimlessly but watchfully he wandered on. One of his turns took him into a drift somewhat broader than those he had been traversing, with a strong current of air flowing through it. He judged that this must be a direct connection with the ventilation shaft. For one brief instant he was heartened by a flash of hope. Would it be possible to climb up that shaft? No, he quickly decided; by this time Hardesty certainly had armed guards at every outlet.

The ground here was soft, like that he had examined in the drift where the trolley ran. There were even a few of those sparse and inefficient square sets. Most of the timbers were dark and moldy, but some were still yellow, as though recently placed. There were other evidences that men had been working in this drift not so very long before.

It occurred to Nagle that he was wasting his carbine, that his lamp would not be good for many hours more without refilling. So he withdrew into the mouth of a crosscut and sat down on a boulder, to think his own miserable thoughts there in the inky darkness.

Around a curve appeared a pin point of light. Was it some one looking for him? What was that? It sounded like a child sobbing. But that could not be. That light, though, was not from a miner's lamp, but from an electric torch.

Nagle decided that he would do just as well to sit still and not betray his whereabouts by splashing away through the puddles on the floor.

The bobbing beam moved nearer. The bearer was drawing his breath in short, shuddering gasps.

It was a child! It was a boy! It was Dick Hardesty!

"Dick!" Nagle called impulsively, pityingly, without stopping to consider the possible consequences to himself.

The boy stopped and cast his flash light about uncertainly, hope and relief in his tear-stained face.

"It's I, Dick. This is Nagle, of the *Herald*. Here I am in this crosscut. Wait until I can light my lamp. And don't be alarmed at my appearance."

Dick threw back his shoulders, turned aside his head, and surreptitiously wiped his eyes on a sleeve. "I'm afraid I'm lost, Mr. Nagle. But I expect you know the way out, don't you?"

"I haven't much idea as to where we are just now, but I can probably guide

you in the right direction. How in the world do you happen to be here? Does your grandfather allow you to come underground?"

"No, Mr. Nagle; and he's going to be awful angry when he finds out, because he's told me to stay out of the mine until I'm older. But I wanted to do my good turn for to-day, and when Mrs. Molino, who washes at our house, said that Pedro had gone on shift and forgotten his lunch pail, I said I'd bring it to him."

"But how did you get in?"

"I went down into the valley and walked in through the haulage tunnel. Then a Mexican who couldn't speak very good English said that Pedro was up on the next level, and I climbed up a long ladder. But I can't find Pedro, and I'm lost. I haven't been crying, though. Some—some of this water got into my eyes. I didn't know a mine was such a wet place."

"That's all right, Dick. We'll——"

At that instant the ground beneath their feet quivered like jelly. A stunning noise, like near-by thunder, reverberated through the mine, followed a second later by a gust of air that staggered Nagle and threw Dick to his knees.

"The—the whole mine has caved in!" Nagle cried.

More thunderous roars, more cyclonic blasts ensued in quick succession. Nagle's lamp was blown out; he seized Dick's hand and turned the flash light upward. Ghastly terror froze him in his tracks when he saw that the whole roof was sagging, about to fall. The timbers within range of that feeble torch were being bent, rent, twisted, sundered.

Only for a moment did Nagle remain immobile. With a bound he sought the crosscut, dragging Dick with him. He thought that the ground was firmer in there. But a terrific rush of air, accompanied by portentous squeaks and crackling noises, forced them back into the drift.

He knew that it was foolish, futile to run; yet he did run blindly, panic-stricken, pulling Dick along by the hand. He retained presence of mind enough to run away from the main workings and toward the ventilation shaft, however. Slush and stone dislodged by the tremulous movements of the earth pelted down upon him.

A dam of boulders and mud that filled the entire drift brought them up short. They turned and retraced their steps. Not a hundred feet back, a similar obstruction had tumbled down behind them.

They were trapped.

"What has happened, Mr. Nagle?" Dick quavered.

"Plenty," was the newspaper man's laconic reply. "Lord knows what-all has happened out there, but I know that we're very effectually bottled up."

"But we'll get out, won't we?"

"Sure we will, son!"

CHAPTER VIII.

WHEN A SLIP MEANT DEATH.

THOUGH Nagle tried to appear confident and unconcerned, he was anything but that. He had his own private doubts that he and Dick would ever see daylight again.

Still using the flash light in order to conserve his precious carbide, Nagle began to look about them. The caving seemed to have ceased for the moment, though there were still alarming scrunches and groans all about them.

Into a section of wall that had remained undisturbed was set a narrow sheet-iron door, secured by a large padlock.

"Son, we're in luck!" Nagle exulted. "I'll bet that this is a powder magazine and that it's timbered inside—they always are. Only trouble is the lock. See if you can find a bar or something else to break it with."

They groped around in the gloom, and Dick soon found a piece of rusty drill steel. Nagle pounded vigorously at the padlock and in a minute or two smashed it completely. They opened the door and stepped into a compartment about six by ten feet. It was dry and massively timbered; they would at least be safe from caving ground here.

On the floor were a spade, a broken case of dynamite, a few feet of fuse, and a box of detonating caps. Nagle was interested only in the spade. Perhaps they could dig out to the ventilation shaft.

After a time they tried it. Nagle managed to burrow a narrow tunnel over the first obstruction, but beyond that there was another just like it. More digging was done. They came to another barrier, another, and yet another.

Nagle would dig until utterly unable to lift his hands, then relinquish the spade to Dick for a few minutes. He lost all track of the flight of time. It might be midnight; it might even be the next day.

At last those two weary, bedraggled gnomes won through to a tiny shaft station. They could hear the hum of the exhaust fan far above them.

This was the bottom of the ventilation shaft. Nagle and Dick stood on a planked floor and looked up. They thought that they caught a faint glimmer of light, but could not be sure.

No cage ran in this shaft, of course, but straight up one timbered side ran a ladder. Nagle tested the first rungs, of one-by-three-inch pine and about a foot long, and found them sound.

"It's six hundred feet up there, son," he said solemnly. "Do you think you can make it?"

"Of course I can. A Boy Scout can climb a tree or anything."

"All right. Stay at least a yard below me. And remember that I'll go very slowly, trying each rung before trusting my weight to it. Above all, don't look back, for you'll get dizzy if you do."

To be rid of their weight, Nagle had long since tossed away the revolvers. He had utterly forgotten that there might be enemies waiting above. All that had preceded the cave-in was gone from his mind as completely as the events of a previous incarnation. Now he also discarded the carbide lamp, which by this time was flickering low.

They started up, Nagle carrying the flash light lashed to one wrist with a handkerchief. Methodically and carefully he proceeded from one support to the next, now and then dropping a word of encouragement to Dick.

Would they never come to the last of those rungs? Surely they must be near the top now. Yes; here—no! it was only a station.

A figure "4" stared at them from a beam. They had come only two hundred feet.

"Anyway, that's one-third of the distance behind us!" Nagle rejoiced. "The rest of it can't be any harder."

There was another station at the two-hundred-foot point. From there they began on what they supposed was the last leg of their wearisome climb.

The buzz of the fan had now become a roar. The air that it was drawing up the shaft set them to shivering in their wet clothing.

At last, they reached the last rung! Nagle waved the flash light about overhead, fully expecting that another minute would find them on the surface, free.

They were still trapped.

The walls and roof of the shaft hood were of boiler iron, riveted to steel posts that were set in concrete. Seams in the iron on his right hand must outline a door, but if so it was fastened tight from the outside. There was absolutely no way of egress.

Some two feet back in its funnel was the fan, five feet or more in diameter, rotating at terrific speed. It was driven by a shaft from an electric motor inside a separate shelter to one side.

CHAPTER IX.

HIS GOOD IDEA.

NAGLE motioned downward, for he could not make his voice carry above the din. They climbed back to the first station. There Nagle outlined the situation to Dick.

"If somebody would only stop that fan!" he groaned. "Then we might make ourselves heard. Might even get past that fan and out through the funnel. But it never is stopped, except when the motor needs overhauling."

"Why not throw a rock into the fan?" Dick suggested.

"This is no house fan, son. It would just throw the rock right back at us. Monkeying with a buzz saw would be a lot safer. It must weigh all of a ton. I examined one like it once."

"Couldn't we blow it up with that dy——"

"Dick, you've got a head on you! The very idea! We'll blow that fan to smith-

ereens. I'll start after that powder right now. Hate to leave you in the dark."

"I'll go with you."

"No; you won't. I—well, I'd rather you wouldn't, Dick. And if I—if I don't come back, you try to stick it out here until that fan stops, then you go up there and yell your head off."

They gripped hands. Tears were springing again to Dick's eyes when Nagle swung down out of sight.

Knowing that the ladder was safe all the way, Nagle went down much faster than they had come up. Once at the bottom, he retrieved the spade and started along the caved drift toward the powder magazine. Some of the tunnels through which they had crawled out had to be dug again, but at length he made it. He wrapped a dozen sticks of dynamite inside of his jumper, dropped the box of caps into a pocket, and tied the fuse around his waist. With this cargo, he was soon back at Dick's side.

"You were gone an awful long time!" the boy exclaimed. "I thought sure you had been caught by another cave-in."

"Not much! All our bad luck is over. We're going to win sure now. Say, do you know anything about preparing dynamite for a blast? I never did it and never happened to see it done."

"Grandpa showed me how once," answered Dick. "Here, give me a cap. Stick it over the end of the fuse like this. And crimp it. We haven't any crimpers, but I'll mash it with my knife so it will stay on. Have to be awful careful about crimping a cap or it'll explode and kill you. Grandpa knew a man that did it with his teeth, and he lost his whole head.

"Now just dig a little hole in the end of a stick of dynamite, the one right in the center of the bundle," he went on. "Use a little piece of wood for that, not your knife. Now stick in the end of the fuse with the cap on it. How much fuse do you want? It'll burn about a foot a minute."

"Better cut ten feet—make it twelve for good measure. That will give me plenty of time to get back here after planting our bomb."

Nagle skinned up the ladder and laid the dynamite right at the end of the funnel, as near to the fan as he dared. The fuse dangled down into the shaft. He touched a match to the lower end, then rejoined Dick.

With throbbing hearts they waited for the explosion. Their very lives, probably, depended upon the success of their scheme.

"Pshaw! It's not going off!" Dick ejaculated, as he stuck his head out into the shaft and peered upward.

A mighty boom resounded. Débris rattled downward. Dick swayed and would have plunged into the shaft with the steel and rocks had not Nagle caught him and dragged him back.

"I'm hurt. I——" Dick Hardesty swooned. A crimson stream was gushing from a scalp wound.

Possibly his skull was fractured; there was no way that Nagle could tell.

"Dicky! Dicky! Wake up! Why did I let you do a fool trick like that?"

The lad's eyelids did not even flutter. He was breathing; that was all.

Sobs shook Fred Nagle's frame as he tore off his heavy denim overalls and Dick's khaki jacket. He ripped the garments into strips that made fairly strong ropes. These he passed under the youngster's body. Then he lay down on top of the boy, face upward, and tied the loose ends of the strips in front of him. Next he rolled over and lurched to his feet.

"Heaven help us both if these strips don't hold!" he muttered. "But I'm not going to leave you here, son."

To climb up that ladder with the unconscious boy on his back proved to be even more of a task than he had realized. Long before Nagle reached the top, his arms were like lead. He dared not stop and rest even for an instant, for his strength might fail him entirely. Nor did he care to think what would happen if the dynamite had not opened a way to freedom.

Could he make it? Could he make it?

He could. He did. Through acrid powder smoke, that made his head ache frightfully, he groped to the final rung.

The fan had been shattered to bits by the force of the explosion, and the drive shaft was no longer revolving. Doubtless the motor, relieved of its load, had

raced and burned itself out. Through the funnel, which had been damaged only slightly, Nagle could see a patch of moonlight on the hillside.

With his last ounce of strength, he threw himself headlong into the funnel. For a minute he lay there panting, utterly exhausted. Then he untied the bonds that bound Dick to him. Fearful that he would be overcome by the smoke, Nagle crept backward like a gopher emerging from a burrow.

He dropped from the end of the funnel and gulped his tortured, smarting lungs full of fresh, cool air. Then he painfully lifted Dick to his shoulder and staggered along a narrow path toward the winking lights of the town.

"There he is! Kill him!"

A hubbub of excited voices from the hillside above impressed his half-dormant consciousness only dimly. A company of vengeful Mexicans charged toward him. An untrousered scarecrow, too utterly spent even to think of resistance, Nagle stood swaying with his unconscious burden. Something crashed down upon his skull.

CHAPTER X.

WHITE MEN BOTH.

WHEN Fred Nagle again opened his eyes, he stared straight up at a bare white ceiling. Vague, disconnected memories fluttered through his still-torpid brain. He had gone underground at the Azurite Central. There had been a fight of some kind. There had been a terrible cave-in. He had some one—oh, yes; Dick Hardesty—had dug their way out. Dicky had been hurt. What had happened then? He thought that he had got Dick out of the mine and that somebody had hit him with a rock or a pick handle, but he could not be sure.

That must be the reason for all these bandages. Could he turn his head? Yes; he could.

His eyes met two merry blue ones, mere islands surrounded by seas of gauze, on another hospital cot not five feet away.

"Hello, Mr. Nagle! I watched you waking up. How do you feel?"

"Not so bad, Dick. How about you?"

"I'm all right. Lost a lot of blood, though. The doctor says it's a mighty good thing you got me out of there as fast as you did. He says you'll be all right in a few days, too.

"Say, what do you think of those crazy Mexicans?" Dick continued. "They thought you had murdered me, and they'd have killed you if grandpa hadn't come along just in the nick of time."

The door opened; Hardpan Hardesty walked in. His shoulders were stooped; his face was gray, seamed with lines of care that had never been there before. He could still smile fondly to his grandson, however, and when he saw that Nagle was awake, he took the newspaper man's hand in his great fist. "You—you—I'm not much on fancy talk, my boy. All my life I've been called 'Hardpan,' and I guess I deserve it. But you did Dick and me a mighty good turn last night, and we—we appreciate it. Don't we, Dicky?"

"We sure do, grandpa."

"You showed yourself to be a man and a half. No old-time miner could have handled himself better underground than you did. And you saved Dicky! You saved Dicky!"

"How bad was the cave-in?" Nagle asked.

Hardesty's shoulders slumped to an attitude of even deeper dejection. "Worst I ever saw, long as I've been minin'," he mourned. "How it is that only six men got killed and thirteen hurt is more than I can figure out. Your printers got out an extra edition of the *Herald* this mornin', tellin' all about it."

"Good for the boys! Did they——"

"No; they didn't say anything about the timberin' or the other things that you're goin' to give me hell about soon's you're out of here. You was right after all, lad. My system didn't pay, even in dollars. It'll take at least half a million to clean out the Central and get it in shape to produce again.

"Go the limit when you get around to writin' your story," he went on. "Don't spare me. But you can say if you want to that when we get the mine to goin' again, there won't be a safer one in the world. We're not goin' to ask the Almighty to do the things we ought to do to protect our men. Hardpan Hardesty has turned over a new leaf."

"I'll be glad to print that. And in the

circumstances I guess it won't be necessary to dig into what's past and gone."

"What!" exclaimed Hardpan. "You mean you ain't goin' to print anything about how I broke the law and——"

"What would be the use?" Fred Nagle asked. "It's the future we're interested in, not the past."

"Hear that, Dick? He's goin' to give old Hardpan another chance. And after all I did to him, too. But say, Fred, I ain't goin' to have all the obligation on one side."

"Don't want you to do a thing for me, Mr. Hardesty, except call that boycott off."

"It's off. I'll——"

"But I do want to ask you to look after the families of the men who have been killed in your mine and see that they don't need for anything."

"I'll do it! Listen to him, Dick. Thinkin' about Mexican women and kids when he could bleed me to death. If he ain't a white man, there never was one. Yesterday I wouldn't have believed it."

"And you're a white man, too, Mr. Hardesty. Only difference is, I suspected it all the time."

"Huh!" Dick snorted through his bandages. "I knew it all the time 'bout both of you."

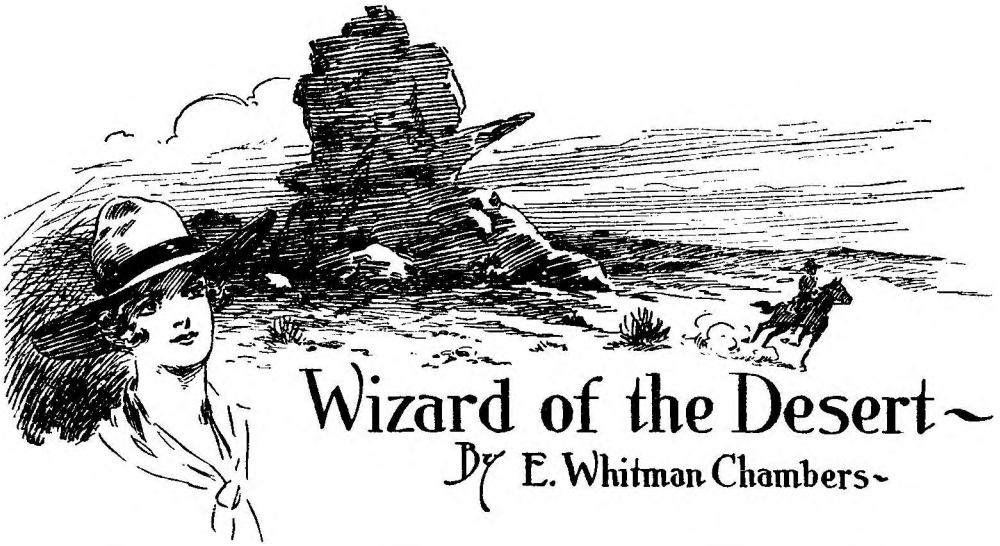
TRAILS THAT ARE REAL

By James Edward Hungerford

HERE in the seethe of the city street,
Where the millions come and go,
Here where the sky and the 'scrapers meet,
I'm caught in the ebb and flow;
I wander adown the concrete track,
Through cañon of stone and steel,
But always my heart is turning back,
Where cañons and trails are real.

I think of the cañons way out West,
Where the rippling rivers flow;
The snowy peaks on the mountain crest,
Agleam in the sunset glow;
I'm back on the winding trails again,
That lead to the Lord knows where;
I'm walking the concrete trails of men—
My heart's on the trails out there!

The buildings are tow'ring mountain-high;
Each street is a yawning gorge;
The river of life is rushing by,
Its millions to swift disgorge;
Down the concrete trails of the town I fare,
But deep in my heart I feel
The call of the mountains way out there,
Where cañons and trails are real!



Wizard of the Desert

By E. Whitman Chambers

BY inventing a process of extracting oil from shale, then retailing the gasoline at a very low price, Boynton, an invalid inventor, incurred the enmity of the big oil companies, which were headed by the Universal Oil Co. A price-cutting war followed. Mona, the inventor's daughter, was the actual head of the Navajo Oil Co.

Jack Symes, a former employee of the Universal, and Colt Bennett, a young man who had come to the desert for his health and who was in love with Mona, were fearful that their business rivals would try to strike at the old inventor through his daughter. This opinion was shared by Courtney Young, the Denver representative of the business. Sheriff "Hackmatack" Evers and his deputy, "Dutch Charley," who had both resigned as law officers, were allied with Boynton. The old inventor hoped, by selling gasoline cheaply, to force a number of investigations of the oil industry, to arouse public opinion until the big companies cut down on their profits.

From twenty-six cents—the price in Denver before Navajo gas was put on the market—the price was cut to thirteen. At this figure, the Navajo Oil Co. could still sell gas at a profit. Then the Universal cut the price to seven cents. Mona ordered that Navajo gas be sold at that figure, though it meant ruin if continued for long.

CHAPTER XXIV.

RISKING EVERYTHING.

THE three days that followed were trying, nerve-wracking days for the little group of people who were striving to make a success of the Navajo Oil Co. Despite every effort that was made to cut their overhead, the company suffered a loss of approximately five cents on every gallon of gasoline that poured through the long pipe line to Cortez. Another week, ten days at the most, and they would have to close down. Mona knew too well what that would mean; the loss of their Denver accounts, inability to gain new ones, utter and complete failure.

Charles Boynton grew steadily worse under the strain and was compelled to take to his bed. Mona became a sheer bundle of nerves, unable to sleep, without appetite for her meals, worried, despondent. Symes, "Hackmatack" Evers, and, for that matter, the entire crew, save the Indians, were little better.

Although Courtney Young had held out hope for the future, Mona had no idea in what direction it lay. It seemed that nothing could save them from ruin. It was small consolation that the Universal and the other rival companies were losing far more money than they through their most recent price reduction. The big corporations could afford to lose; they had surpluses that ran into the millions.

Cole Bennett came every day to the plant for news and in the hopes of cheering Mona. A slight barrier had come between them since the day the trader had taken Mona in his arms. Neither mentioned the occurrence, but Bennett swore at himself a thousand times for his lack of will power. It was a dark blot on his memory, and he tried valiantly to erase it by taking care that their friendship did

not again tend toward a different relationship.

To Mona, however, that instant when Cole Bennett had held her, unresisting, in his arms was a moment to dream over. She loved him and showed her love in a hundred different ways; in little things, which would have been easily interpreted by an interested observer, but which passed unnoticed by the trader. Or, if he did see them, to him they were evidences of friendship and, more hateful to his sensitive soul, evidences of pity. Mona harbored no illusions. She knew now that Cole Bennett loved her. And—hardest of all to bear—she knew that he would never tell her of his love.

On Monday afternoon, the third day after Courtney Young's disheartening message, Mona received the Denver newspapers of the previous Sunday morning. Cole Bennett was visiting her. In the hope of hastening the slow, eventless hours that were carrying them relentlessly toward bankruptcy, they decided to glance through the papers. It was Bennett who found the story which gave them new hope.

"Mona," he said suddenly, as they sat in the living room, "look here! I think this will interest you."

He spread the paper out on the table and together they read a half-page story that, to Mona, was the most interesting and important fabrication she had ever read. It ran:

"Millionaire Philanthropist Reduces Price of Gasoline in Denver to Seven Cents Per Gallon.

"New Process for Refining Oil Shale Used by Inventor to Provide Cheap Gasoline for Denver Motorists.

"Unprecedented Price War Results from Entrance of New Company into Local Market; Organization is Backed by Millions.

"Few motorists who fill their automobile tanks with gasoline to-day at the record-breaking price of seven cents a gallon know that the cost of their Sunday excursion will be more than cut in half through the inventive genius and the philanthropic qualities of Charles Boynton, millionaire sportsman and inventor, who is sometimes called the 'Wizard of the Desert.' Yet this unheard-of reduction was made possible only by this fabulously wealthy philanthropist and by the price-cutting tactics of the rival oil companies.

"Far down in Northern New Mexico, in the center of the great Navajo Desert, is Boynton's hobby, a huge plant for the production of gasoline and its by-products from oil shale. Here thousands of gallons of gasoline are produced every day in a plant that never stops. From that point in the center of the desert a steady stream of gasoline is pumped through an enormous pipe line to the railroad at Cortez, Colorado, shipped to Denver, and sold to the trade at a price which prohibits competition.

"Boynton's project is the culmination of a lifelong dream of philanthropy. He has been working on a process for producing gasoline from oil shale for more than fifteen years. Heir of three enormous estates in England, Boynton was at one time rated the richest man in the British Isles. Coming to the United States eleven years ago, he became a citizen of this country and decided to spend his huge fortune in philanthropic work and in realizing his dream of producing cheap gasoline from oil shale.

"His plant in New Mexico is the first of many refineries which he and his associates plan to establish in the United States. Interested with him in the project are eight multimillionaires, whose names Boynton refuses to divulge. It is understood that the combined capital represented aggregates more than one billion dollars.

"Boynton declared yesterday, in an exclusive interview with the *Times*, that the attempts of rival companies to force him out of business by indiscriminate price slashing are puerile and based on a total ignorance of the true financial situation of his organization. 'With gasoline selling at seven cents a gallon, we are operating at a loss,' the inventor said. 'But that loss, while the percentage is large, is so infinitesimal that we could continue to supply our Denver patrons with gasoline for ten years at that price without impairing our solvency.

" 'We are in business for the purpose of making a nominal profit,' he went on, 'but our ideal is to reduce the price of

gasoline to a fair and reasonable basis. The days of price inflation and enormous returns on small investments in oil are past. We will see to that. The proverbial snowball in the infernal regions had a fifty-fifty chance of survival compared to the chances of rival oil companies of putting us out of business. Navajo gasoline is on the market to stay. And I pledge my word that its price will always be fair, fair to me, fair to the men I represent, and fair to the consuming public.' "

Other statements and misstatements, facts and fancies, followed, most of them manufactured out of whole cloth. There was a three-column cut of a handsome, middle-aged man, captioned: "Charles Boynton, millionaire philanthropist and oil-shale magnate, who has reduced the price of gasoline in Denver from twenty-six to seven cents per gallon in the last month." The picture no more resembled Boynton than it resembled "Dutch Charley." There was a picture of the shale plant. Another, a picture of a huge castle, purported to be a magnificent dwelling on one of Boynton's enormous English estates.

Mona looked up at last; her blue eyes were dancing. "It's Courtney's work, every bit of it," she said.

"And apt to be very effective work, at that," Cole Bennett remarked. "Is there any basis of fact in it at all?"

"Some!" Mona laughed. "But the facts have been so distorted and exaggerated that they are almost deliberate lies. My father was English; that part of the article is true. And he did inherit three estates in England. If the Universal cares to look that up, they will find a record of it. The estates were very large, to be sure, but they were worth no such sum as one would be led to believe from reading that story."

"And the eight unknown multimillionaires?" the trader queried.

"Mere fiction, Cole. We're backed by no one."

Bennett gazed at the article reflectively. "His purpose, obviously, is to bluff the Universal into believing that it is impossible to put the Navajo out of business. Am I right?"

"It certainly looks that way. Courtney told me when he called up the other evening that he was preparing something that would knock them off their feet, as he put it. And I guess this must be it."

"I haven't a doubt in the world but what it will turn the trick," Bennett remarked. "Your sales manager undoubtedly has the brains of a financier."

"He's just a good-natured boy," Mona told him, "utterly loyal to us and ready to work until he drops. I don't believe we ever could have got along without him. And—he has ideas!" Mona paused. Her eyes half closed, and her slender, sad face became pensive. "Bluff!" she mused. "What a great game it is. And how important it is. Bluff—and courage—and, as Kipling says: 'If you can, make one heap of all your earnings, and risk it on one turn of pitch and toss.' " She jumped excitedly to her feet.

"Cole, I'm going to go Courtney one better!" she cried. "I'm going to risk our all, everything, on one turn of pitch and toss!"

She dashed excitedly to the telephone, called for the telegraph office, and waited breathlessly, her blue eyes gleaming with excitement, her lips parted. At last she was connected with the telegraph operator.

"This is the Navajo Oil Company," Mona said hurriedly. "Take a telegram, please. To Courtney Young, Bellingham Hotel, Denver. Cut price to five cents immediately. Mona."

Mona turned from the telephone elatedly. "It's bluffing, Cole. That price would mean ruin in less than a week. But—oh, I know it will turn the trick! I know it, Cole!"

"You've got courage, Mona!" Bennett exclaimed fervently. "I hope from the bottom of my heart that you will beat them."

CHAPTER XXV.

NEARING DISASTER.

FOR two days Mona Boynton lived the life of a condemned felon languishing in the death cell. Hers were the soul-chilling fears, the recurring hopes, the half-voiced prayers of one who is sentenced to death and who, though realizing that reprieve is hopeless, prays fervently for a stay of execution. The Den-

ver papers came, telling of the further reduction in gasoline by the Navajo Oil Co. Boynton was commended editorially for his stand in the fight for cheaper gasoline.

Prominent men gave the newspapers their views on the momentous question, upheld Boynton, complimented him, praised him, urged him onward in his great fight against the oil trust. One afternoon daily published a mythical interview with Boynton himself—undoubtedly dictated by Courtney Young—and went so far as to compare him with Lincoln, Washington, Garibaldi, and other saviors of their countries.

The stories were placed on the wire by the news services. Garbled and exaggerated, they were run in hundreds of papers throughout the United States. The name of Charles Boynton leaped to fame in a single day, became a byword on the lips of a sensation-loving people for courage, foresight, heroism, philanthropy.

It was a hollow sort of fame, however, to the weakening invalid—and to Mona. As the clock ticked off the hours that brought them closer and closer to destruction, the members of that little colony on the desert slowly gave up hope. Their doom seemed inevitable. Mona's brave bluff had failed. They were caught in the explosions of their own petards. It was small consolation to them that the reverberations of that same explosion echoed around the world; their financial destruction was made none the less complete, none the less pitiable, none the less devastating by the size of the conflagration.

On the afternoon of the second day after Mona's courageous order to reduce the price of Navajo gasoline to five cents, Boynton called his daughter to his room. Her heart went out in pity as she gazed at her stricken father. His face was deathlike in its pallor, emaciated almost beyond belief. His voice was very low and weak; his clasp, usually so strong, was feeble as he took her hand.

"I am going to close down the plant to-night," he told her weakly. "We can't go on longer."

"But it will mean the end, daddy!" the girl cried in sudden fear. "It will mean the end of all your hopes and dreams and work. And we still have money enough to run for a few days longer."

His head moved wearily on the pillow. "That same money will take care of you after I am gone. I don't dare to risk my last cent. I can't bear to think of leaving you penniless, to face the world alone."

"And you are planning to close down for that reason?"

"Yes."

Mona's slender face set determinedly. "Then the work goes on," she said quietly. "And it will continue to go on until our last cent is gone. Then we can think of quitting."

"But what will you do? Homeless and penniless and alone?"

"We'll worry about that when I am homeless and penniless and alone, daddy." Mona smiled bravely. "We're not beaten yet. Something will turn up; our luck will change; the Universal will weaken. I know it will."

The message came from Courtney at midnight that night. His words came over the wires delightedly. "Hurray for our side! The Universal announced to-night that their gas will go back to twenty-six cents! They've given up the fight!"

"Courtney! It's true?" Mona gasped, relaxing weakly against the desk.

"Of course it's true. I wouldn't be getting you out of bed at this time of night if it wasn't. The papers are full of it. And the other companies will follow the Universal. Our bluffs brought home the bacon, Mona."

"Oh, Courtney! I'm so happy!"

"And to-morrow our gas goes up, too," Young plunged on. "What'll we fix it at? Better make it eighteen, hadn't we? That'll recover our losses and pile up a reserve in case the Universal tries to cut our throats again."

"But that's awfully high, isn't it?" Mona asked, rapidly recovering from the shock of his news. "What will the people think after all those newspaper articles about philanthropy and all that sort of thing?"

"Just leave that to me. I'll fix everything up with the papers. I'll give them a good line of talk about recovering our losses. It's only right that we should

boost the price, after all we've been through. I'll put the publicity over easily. And with the Universal and the others charging twenty-six, our price is still eight cents under them. It'll get over with the public, I'm sure. Later, when we've piled up a good big surplus, we can reduce the price again."

"All right, Courtney. I'll leave it to you. Eighteen, it is. Bless you, Court! You've saved our lives."

"Me? Don't ever believe it, Mona. I got on first base with that cock-and-bull story about our billion-dollar backing. But your cut to five cents knocked the home run that won the old ball game. We gave 'em enough to think about to keep 'em busy for a year. Now I've got to phone the papers and give them the story in time for their final editions. So long, Mona! Hurray for our side!"

Mona awoke her father, Symes, and Evers to tell them the good news. Then she went to bed and slept like a tired child.

Two days later they received the Denver papers telling of the abandonment of the fight by the Universal. They contained a short article purporting to be an interview with Boynton and telling why he had raised the price of Navajo gasoline to eighteen cents, three cents higher than when he had first placed it on the market. To those who knew the situation, the story was Courtney Young at his best. It was perfect salve for the public's wounded sensibilities.

The *Times*, the least conservative of the Denver papers, had supported the Navajo Oil Co. from the first, quick to see on which side of the fight would lie the public sympathies. Now it published a lengthy editorial complimenting Boynton on his victory, commending him for open-handedly raising his price in order to retrieve his losses, and condemning the Universal for their unfair tactics in attempting to force their rival from the field. A portion of the editorial was in the nature of an exposé of the business methods of the Universal Oil Co. Part of the exposé was based on actual facts learned during the brief price war. The rest of it was mere conjecture and innuendo, so carefully qualified and so cautiously written as to be devoid of libel.

Again Charles Boynton was the public hero. His was the romantic figure of a courageous man, fighting a great corporation to the last ditch in order that he might serve the people. The papers would have had a wonderful time had they known that the famous Charles Boynton was bedridden and that a girl was at the helm of the Navajo Oil Co., guiding its destinies through those troubled waters.

The announcement of the president of the Universal was brief and sugar-coated. "Our organization has done its best to serve the people by meeting the ruinous price established by this wildcat oil company," he said, in an interview. "We have lost thousands of dollars. We have no regrets. Finding it financially impossible to sell our gasoline so far under cost, we have been compelled to raise our price to its former level. Twenty-six cents for gasoline is fair to the public and to us and returns us a profit which is only a fraction of a cent on each gallon. We have done our best by our patrons and will continue to serve them, at no increase in price, when this wildcat company has been proved a financial farce and is returned to the oblivion whence it came."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THAT BLINDING LIGHT.

SEVERAL days afterward, the first far-reaching result of the campaign was foreshadowed by a short news dispatch from Washington. It read:

"With gasoline selling at eighteen cents per gallon in the city of Denver and thirty-one cents in Washington, Senator Calkins, Republican, chairman of the Senate Industrial Committee, announced to-day that the committee would launch immediately a rigid investigation into the price of gasoline throughout the United States.

"Senator Calkins, who attained prominence in the recent coal investigation in South Dakota and who is credited with reducing the price of coal several dollars per ton in that State, declared that he had been studying the gasoline situation for some time and had reached the conclusion that the present price of the commodity was unwarranted.

" 'There is not only too much water in our oil stock, but I am of the opinion that the Sherman Antitrust Law is being flagrantly violated by these oil corporations,' the senator said. 'That fact that a small independent company can sell gasoline in the city of Denver at a price which is eight cents under that charged by the larger companies, whose operations are world-wide in scope, definitely proves, in my mind, that the price of gasoline is unwarrantedly high.' "

Mona read it to her father with a serious light in her pensive blue eyes. She knew the import of the article, knew that it was the first of many for which her father had been waiting and hoping. His aim, his great dream, his ambition of years was nearing realization. The invalid lay back on his bed in silence for a long time after she had finished, his eyes closed, his breath coming very slowly.

"So it's come at last," he murmured softly. "If only they will do something!"

"They will, daddy. And if they don't, there are others who will. As long as we sell our gasoline the Navajo Oil Company will be a living example before the eyes of the world. We have proved that gasoline can be made and sold cheaply. The whole United States knows about it now. And you can trust Courtney Young to keep the example of what we are doing always in the public eye."

"Here's the way I have figured it out, Mona," the old man said. "There are so many politicians in the United States who are searching for something to do, some wrong to right, in order to make a name for themselves. Take that governor of the Middle Western State who reduced the price of gas and this Senator Calkins, for instance. They are searching the country over for chances to make grand-stand plays, opportunities to distinguish themselves by doing something for the common people.

"I have no illusions, Mona. I realize perfectly that practically every investigation into the oil situation that will be started will have as its prime motive the selfish end of some politician. But I don't care about that. If we can keep our example ever before them, if we can gradually enlarge our plant and enter other markets, I know just so surely as I am lying here that some good will be done. And that is all I ask, Mona."

Mona sat with him a long time that day, chatting and joking and encouraging. His condition had been growing worse of late, due undoubtedly to the nervous tension of the price war, and Mona felt that he could not live for long. One thing alone seemed to cheer him; that was Mona's promise to stay with the plant and continue the work after he was gone. No one ever knew the sacrifice the promise entailed; Mona's eyes alone saw that mental picture of the long dreary future that stretched before her. For Mona told no one.

Senator Calkins' campaign progressed and waxed active in the days that followed, according to the papers. Presidents, directors, and executives of the Universal and the other large companies were called on the carpet of the senate committee room. The examinations of these men were reported in detail by the news services and read avidly by a hundred million people.

Senator Calkins was fast pushing himself into national prominence through the stand he had taken on the gasoline question. Some newspapers declared boldly that he was grooming himself for the presidency. The radical sheets went so far as to say that, while there was plenty of room for investigation, Senator Calkins was merely playing to the crowd for the purpose of furthering his own political career. They predicted that no arrests or prosecutions would result from the senator's inquiries.

The radical papers, to a large extent, were right. No grounds for criminal action were found by the senator, quite likely because it was not his intention to find any. The probe lasted for two weeks or more and then rising political issues of great national importance gradually crowded it out of the papers. Senator Calkins was evidently satisfied, for he quietly dropped the investigation. He had risen, however, one hundred per cent in the estimation of the common people through his noble efforts in their behalf.

Nevertheless, Senator Calkins' investigation had far-reaching results. The hue and cry of "Lower gasoline!" was taken up by half the papers in the country and

by ninety per cent of the politicians, good, bad, and indifferent. Overnight, almost, the price of gasoline dropped from one to two cents per gallon throughout the United States. Senator Calkins apparently assumed that the drop was the result of his efforts and issued an announcement mildly commending himself.

Each paper that had supported the fight and each politician who had plunged into the fray took some credit for the reduction. The oil companies announced at length in the press that the cut was the simple result of the law of supply and demand. Fall was approaching; summer touring was falling off. Besides, there was an immense overproduction of gasoline due to the fact that several new fields had been brought in.

Mona, however, and Charles Boynton and Courtney Young and the little group of loyal men at the shale plant knew that they and they alone had caused the reduction. They knew, too, that as long as their plant was in operation the example set by them in producing cheap gasoline would always be before the public, ready for the politicians and newspapers to take up the cudgel in defense of the rights of the people.

On a night a week or two later there occurred one of the strangest phenomena that had ever been seen in the Navajo Desert—in all of New Mexico, for that matter.

Mona had just bade her father good night and turned out the light in his room. At first, her eyes, unaccustomed to the darkness, noted nothing unusual. As she passed out into the darkened hall, however, she saw that it appeared to be dimly lighted, as from a conflagration outside. Her heart throbbed suddenly as she decided that the plant was afire. Dashing to the door, she flung it open and plunged outside.

The first person who caught her eyes was Hackmatack Evers. The old man was standing motionless in front of the bunk house, gazing out across the desert. Mona sighed with relief; if the plant was afire, Hackmatack would not be standing still. Turning, her eyes followed his gaze.

The sight she saw filled her with incredulous amazement. On the topmost pinnacle of towering Ship Rock, miles away across the desert, blazed the brightest light Mona had ever seen. Despite its distance, it was blinding in intensity. It illumined the desert for leagues in every direction, revealed the buildings of the plant, the surrounding mountains, even Cole Bennett's little trading post.

Half closing her eyes to protect them from the glare, Mona turned to Hackmatack. Then she saw that there were others near him. Symes, Dutch Charley, all the men at the plant were staring spellbound at the strange phenomenon.

"What is it?" she breathed softly to Evers.

The old man jumped as she spoke; Mona's were not the only nerves on edge. Hackmatack ran a hand through his thinning hair.

"I wish I knew, Miss Mona. I been watchin' it fer five minutes. I jest can't figger it."

"But think, Hackmatack! Think! What is it? What can it mean?"

"I been thinkin', Miss Mona. Been thinkin' right hard. An' it ain't done no good."

Suddenly Mona heard a low, wailing murmur, soul-chilling in its eerie, high-pitched monotony. She glanced down at the little Indian village that had sprung up below the plant. She saw scores of figures, men and women and children, kneeling in supplication. Then it dawned upon her startled senses that the strings of cars from the quarry were not running. All the myriad sounds that had floated down unceasingly, day and night, from the excavations had ceased. The plant, with the exception of the low roar of the furnaces, was strangely silent.

The significance of the lack of noise came to Mona in a flash. The Indians had thrown down their tools.

CHAPTER XXVII.

DIFFICULT TO EXPLAIN.

THE first to recover from the astounding realization that the Indians had stopped work was Hackmatack. "The yellow dogs!" he moaned, and broke into a shuffling run as he started toward the quarry.

Mona watched him in the revealing glow of the huge light that still shone

from the top of Ship Rock. She saw him gain the scene of the workings, saw his hands and arms moving in expostulation, heard the hoarse echo of his wrathful voice. The cars remained motionless, however, and at last she saw Hackmatack start slowly back to the plant.

"They quit us cold," he told her, when he stood beside her again. "They're moonin' round up there, half scared to death. They're actually white with fear."

Mona gazed back at the brilliant light. Above it, she saw rolling clouds of white smoke, billowing off into the clear atmosphere. It was terrifying, even to her, and she could scarcely blame the Indians for their dismay, superstitious and credulous as they were.

"But think, Hackmatack!" she commanded tensely. "What can be causing it? Surely it can't be anything supernatural."

Evers nodded his graying head. "Yes; you're right about that. It can't be anything supernatural. But that's about as fer as I can go. There's some way to explain it. But what th' explanation is—I don't know! It ain't no ordinary fire, 'cause the fire was never built that was as bright as that. Besides, nobody could git up there to build a fire."

"Ship Rock is over eighteen hundred feet high," Mona mused.

"And so blamed straight up and down that a mountain goat couldn't climb six inches up the side," Evers added thoughtfully. "Yeh; it's all-fired peculiar. Might not be a bad idea fer some of us to go down there and see if we can find out what's makin' it."

Mona nodded quickly. "You and I will go. And we'll start just as soon as I can get my hat and coat."

When she again emerged from the house, warmly clad against the chill of the night wind, she found Evers' flivver before the door. She climbed in beside him.

"Stop in front of the bunk house," she told him. "I want to see Jack Symes."

They found the little foreman of the refinery on the steps of the rambling building.

"We'll let the Indians take the rest of the night off," she told Symes. "They're worried and nervous, and we don't dare crowd them. Maybe in the morning they'll go back to work of their own volition."

Symes nodded. "We got enough shale in the bins to run us to-night," he reported.

Hackmatack swung down the road toward Ship Rock. As they bumped and bounced over mile after mile, the light on the pinnacle grew in brightness, became so intense that they could not look at it; its brilliance was almost beyond belief. Then, when they were two or three miles away, it began to die out, became smaller, and at last disappeared entirely. Save for the scanty light from the automobile, the desert was left in a darkness that was absolute and impenetrable. When they were almost at the rock, they caught sight of a small light at its base.

Hackmatack shifted his hastily donned holster to a more convenient position. "That's a lantern," he remarked. "I guess it was a good hunch to beat it right down here. The bird with that light is liable to tell us some right interestin' things," he added meaningly.

As they drew closer, however, they heard a cheery hail from the direction of the lantern.

"It's Cole," Mona breathed.

Two forms, one of them carrying the lantern, emerged into the lights of the flivver. They were Cole Bennett and Leeto, the trader's Indian servant. Hackmatack brought the car to a protesting stop. Mona threw open the door and stepped hurriedly out onto the sand.

"What was it, Cole?" she asked anxiously.

She saw him shake his head hopelessly.

"Leeto and I have been trying for half an hour to find out. It's beyond us."

"You didn't discover a single clew?" the girl persisted.

"Not one, Mona. It might have been a visitation of the gods, for all we have been able to find out. Although we know that is utter rot. There's nothing supernatural about it at all. There couldn't be. We know that. I suppose your Indians have quit work."

"Yes," Mona confirmed. "They are frightened to death."

"I knew they would be, as soon as I

saw the light. And you can hardly blame those simple-minded natives. It was awe-inspiring, to say the least. And the fact that it seems unexplainable makes it all the more terrifying."

"Find any tracks around the rock?" Hackmatack put in eagerly.

"Not one. The wind would take care of that, however. The sand is moving all the time. It's as bad as a snowstorm, so far as finding tracks is concerned."

"Somebody must be up on that rock, though," Mona mused.

Bennett nodded somewhat doubtfully. "It seems so," he agreed. "But how could any one get up there? That's what Leeto and I can't understand. The highest pinnacle of the rock is more than eighteen hundred feet above the level of the desert. That's more than a third of a mile. And the lowest point where a man could get a foothold must be nearly a thousand feet up. It is barely possible that if a man got up to that point, he could work his way to the top, where the light was.

"But how could one man, or even a score of men, work their way up that thousand feet of sheer, hard rock?" he went on. "The walls are practically perpendicular. It is possible that steps might be cut in the rock. But that would take time and patience and daring—months of painstaking effort. And if anything like that had been going on, we would have discovered it."

"Then it is impossible for any human being to have caused the light?" Mona queried.

Bennett smiled. "We can hardly say that, Mona. Rather, it is impossible that the light could have been caused by any other agent than a human one. But how any one could get up there is completely beyond my comprehension."

"What do you reckon they made the light with?" Evers asked, after a moment.

"I should say magnesium," Bennett replied. "It's the element from which flash-light powders are made. It produces a very brilliant light and lots of white smoke. I think that a considerable quantity of it must have been burned on top of the rock."

"Who would burn it? What would be their purpose?" Mona inquired.

"You have seen the results," Bennett answered quietly. "Your Indians have been frightened into quitting their work in the quarry. So I don't think you'll have to look far to find the motive behind the thing."

"You mean—the Universal?" the girl gasped.

"Why not? Who else is more vitally concerned with putting you out of business? And unless you can get some one to work your quarry within a week or so, that is quite likely what will happen."

"But it's such a petty thing——" Mona began.

"It's not petty in the least if it succeeds," Bennett reminded her.

She sighed and for a time no one spoke. Save for the low moan of the wind about the rock, the desert was silent.

"What can we do?" Mona asked bewilderedly, at last.

"I'd suggest that you go home and not worry about it," Bennett advised quietly. "There is no use in crossing your bridges until you come to them. Leeto and I have done everything possible to-night to find out how that light was kindled on the top of the rock. Daylight may reveal something. I don't know. But we'll do all we can to run the thing to earth, Mona. You can count on that."

"You're very kind, Cole," the girl murmured. "I guess we might as well go back to the plant, Hackmatack. Perhaps the Indians won't quit after all. We may be able to get them to go back to work in the morning."

Mona and the old man climbed wearily into the car. Leeto spun the crank, and the motor hummed.

"I'll be up in the morning, Mona," Bennett said. "Until then, don't worry! We'll get at the bottom of this thing some way."

Shortly, the little flivver was nosing its way back over the sand toward the plant.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

PUZZLE OF THE ROCK.

MONA was up at daybreak the next morning. She found Hackmatack down at the Indian camp, pleading, exhorting, threatening. The majority of the natives, however, had been thoroughly

cowed by the light on Ship Rock. The rest were suspicious, restless. By eight o'clock Evers and Mona had succeeding in inducing a few of the better educated and less superstitious Indians to go back to work. Both the girl and Hackmatack realized, however, the spirit of restless apprehension that had invaded the native camp.

"If that light comes again to-night, the whole flock of 'em will turn tail an' skin out," Evers remarked indignantly, as they trudged up the trail to the plant. "With the half dozen that stuck with the ship, we can worry along for to-day and keep the retorts runnin'. But if the whole gang leaves us in the lurch, we'll have to close down until we c'n git some more muckers."

"There are no more," Mona said drearily. "If these Indians won't work for us, there aren't any on the reservation who will. And we can't get white labor to come out here and work in the desert. Besides, we wouldn't have time. A shutdown of a week would ruin us. We'd use up our reserve in Cortez, and Courtney would lose his accounts in Denver as soon as the gas stopped coming through."

Hackmatack bit his lip. He wanted to swear roundly, but did not dare. "Maybe Bennett'll have somethin' interestin' to tell us when he comes up this mornin'," the old man returned weakly, and pulled angrily at his mustache.

"Maybe," Mona said, without enthusiasm, and went into the house to a breakfast which she ate mechanically.

Bennett, contrary to Hackmatack's prognostications, had little to tell Mona when he arrived at the plant shortly before noon that day. "We weren't able to find a thing," he reported. "There were no steps cut, no possible way that we could find whereby a man could scale that rock. But we know that a man must be there. Leeto and I watched the rock all night, and no one came down. Of course, there are dozens of crevices up there where a man, or a dozen men, for that matter, might hide."

"Then you think they are waiting on the rock? That we will see the light again to-night?" Mona inquired tremulously.

"I think they must be, Mona."

"And there is nothing we can do to stop them?"

"Nothing that I know of. However, when the time comes for them to come down from the rock, which will be at night, we can make it pretty hot for them."

"How soon do you think they will come down, Cole?"

"Probably not until they see that the Indians have quit and gone back to their homes on the reservation."

"And then it will be too late to do anything," Mona remarked softly, a far-away look in her sad blue eyes.

"It may not, Mona. Once we put a stop to that thing, I'll see what I can do with the Indians. I may be able to get them back to work."

"Will you, Cole?" Mona asked eagerly.

"Of course. But I won't promise success. I'll do what I can. But once they're off the job, it may be hard to get them back again."

"Maybe if you talked to them now, explained things to them, it might help," the girl suggested. "They think the light was something supernatural. Perhaps you can convince them that it wasn't."

"I was thinking of that," Bennett said. "I'll go down and see what I can do."

Cole Bennett returned at lunch time with the news that he had persuaded three more of the men to go back to work. "I don't know how long they will hold out if that light comes again to-night. But we'll cross that bridge when night comes. And Leeto and I will keep a careful watch on the rock. We may be able to do something to prevent a repetition of last night."

A strange, unwonted numbness took possession of Mona as the afternoon dragged slowly by. A certain stoicism came over her. Disaster had threatened so often of late. Would the time never come when she might wake in the morning without fear in her heart for what the day might bring forth? Would the time ever come when she might go to bed at night and sleep peacefully, unafraid of the morrow?

They had done nobly as far as they had gone, she reflected. They had fought the Universal and won, several times.

The price of gasoline had dropped slightly all over the country. Congressional investigations, State investigations, municipal and individual investigations were under way in a hundred different places. Gasoline would stay down, undoubtedly would be forced down lower, as long as the Navajo was in the field, setting the example.

If the Navajo were forced out of business, however, then the efforts of her father would come to naught; his bubble of philanthropy would burst; his dreams would be mere fancies unrealized—and he would die promptly and surely. It was that realization which had made Mona keep up the fight when long before she had prayed that she might drop it. The fact that she would be left penniless if the Navajo failed meant little to her. It was the thought of her father and of his dreams that urged her on in the struggle.

Boynton's condition had improved greatly following the winning of the price war. He was able to be up and around in his chair again. There was a faint tinge of color in his cheeks, new light in his eyes, new strength in his voice—and new enthusiasm. He seemed more like the man Hackmatack had met when he first came to the plant.

Mona's slender, wistful face became transfigured with determination; her small fists clenched until the nails bit into the flesh. The work must go on!

At eight o'clock that evening Hackmatack Evers came into the big living room and told Mona that the light on Ship Rock had appeared again.

"I'm goin' right down there in the flivver," he said. "Maybe me an' Bennett an' that Indian o' his can find out how that feller got on top o' the rock. By the gods, it beats me; it does! A thousand feet to the lowest pinnacle! And walls as straight up-and-down as a plumb line an' hard as granite! Yes, ma'am, Miss Mona; that shore beats me."

Mona reflected grimly that it was very apt to beat them all. "You'll let me know what you find out, won't you, Hackmatack?" she asked.

"But I'll probably be pretty late gittin' back, Miss Mona."

"I don't mind. I'll be waiting for you."

Hackmatack departed, and Mona moved her chair to the window, where she could look out across the desert to the brilliant light surmounting the towering rock. Small wonder that the Indians were frightened! It was the brightest light any of them had ever seen, save the sun.

It was not only its brilliance that puzzled them. That might be understood if it were on the surface of the desert, where man might have caused it. But on the top of Ship Rock, where no man had ever stood, where no man could ever stand! It was incomprehensible even to Mona. And if she could not understand it, what cause could the ignorant native think of other than a supernatural one?

The light burned for fully an hour that night. An hour after it had died into a coal of fire and disappeared, Hackmatack knocked hesitantly on the door.

"Did you find out anything?" Mona asked anxiously, as she answered the knock.

"Not a thing, Miss Mona." The old man was plainly crestfallen. "Bennett an' the Indian's been guardin' the rock all day. An' they didn't find a thing. And we couldn't to-night, neither."

"Did you stop at the Indian camp?"

Hackmatack nodded in silence.

"How—how did they take the light to-night?"

Hackmatack hesitated. Then his anger flamed out. "Th' dirty dogs skinned out on us, bag an' baggage. Took their squaws an' papooses an' everything else. There ain't a soul down there!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

HANGING IN THE AIR.

BY ten o'clock the following morning the big shale plant was silent and Jack Symes was submitting an idea to Mona.

"Suppose me and my gang o' white men turn to on that quarry," he suggested. "With the whole gang of us workin', we might be able to get out enough shale to run the plant part time. I got a good husky bunch o' men, and they're loyal an' willing to work. Might do some good, mightn't it?"

Hackmatack Evers, who was in the room, shook his gray head. "You an' your little bunch o' men could hardly make a showin', Jack. We'd have to cut production ninety per cent."

"And that would never do," Mona put in.

"No," Evers agreed. "We got to find some other way out. Either we get some more men from some place or other, or we find out who put the light on that there rock. If we knew who done that, an' how it was done, we might get Bennett to explain things to the Indians an' get 'em back to work. But they're the only two schemes I see. That is," he added lugubriously, "unless yuh want to close the plant down for good an' all."

Mona shook her head decisively. Her keen eyes had seen through a window a dust cloud on the road to Ship Rock. "Maybe that's Cole," she said quietly. "Suppose we wait for him before we decide anything definitely."

The trader's car drew up some minutes later, and Bennett jumped jubilantly from the seat. His dark eyes were alight with excitement; his manner was boyishly eager.

"Cole! You've found something!" Mona exclaimed.

"You bet I have, Mona!" he answered enthusiastically. "I've found a Lyle gun."

"A Lyle gun!"

"Yes. Don't you know what it is?"

Mona shook her head bewilderedly.

"Anything like a Colt?" Hackmatack asked.

"Not a bit." Bennett smiled. "It's a small field gun used principally by the coast guard in shooting lines to stranded ships."

The light of understanding shone in the eyes of the eager listeners.

"They shot a line over that low pinnacle!" Symes interjected.

"Exactly. The rock is very narrow there. They shot a light line clear over it and then hauled a heavier rope over, secured it on the other side, and some one climbed up. Whoever made the climb must have been a steeplejack at one time in his life, or possibly his assistants on the other side of the rock helped to haul him over. After he got up there, he evidently pulled the magnesium up after him. Then he hid the rope in a crevice and worked his way to the top of the rock. That part of it was probably quite easy. But his friends slipped up when they left the Lyle gun behind them, buried in the sand, instead of taking it with them. The wind uncovered the end of the muzzle, and Leeto found it."

"But when do you suppose that feller came down from the rock?" Evers queried.

"As near as I can figure, he hasn't come down yet," replied Bennett. "He probably took some grub and water up with him, intending to stay there and burn his magnesium every night until he saw that the Indians had gone home. Of course, they left us last night. But he couldn't see that. However, with a good pair of glasses, he could see that their camp is deserted to-day. Naturally he won't try to come down by daylight, so it's my guess that he'll try to make a get-away to-night."

"And we're goin' to capture him?" Evers asked eagerly.

"If we can!" Bennett smiled.

"Huh!" the former sheriff grunted. "If we can't, I'll buy me a cot in the old men's home and settle down for the rest o' my life."

It was arranged that Hackmatack, Bennett, and his Indian servant should guard the pinnacle that night, approaching it as soon as darkness settled down over the desert. Evers went back to the trading post with Bennett that morning, and the three men waited anxiously until dusk. As the towering rock faded into the gloom of evening, they crept forward from the shelter of the post and silently took their stations at the foot of the rock, one on each side of the triangular base.

Hackmatack turned up his collar as he waited. The night was chill with the frost of late fall. The mountains about them were already capped with snow. Winter would soon be there. Evers marveled that the nights could be so cold and the days so incredibly hot. New Mexico was a consarned funny country, anyway! He thought grimly of the mountains of Alpine, fresh and clean under the first snowfall. The old man felt a little homesick that night as he crouched at the base of Ship Rock. At

the same time, he experienced no regrets for the impulse that had kept him on the desert.

It must have been after midnight when Hackmatack heard a slight sound above his head, so slight that he was not sure but what it had been the mere sigh of the wind about the rock. He heard a "Sh-h-h-h!" and a hand was placed on his arm. Although the night was inky, Evers knew that it was Leeto. Hackmatack noiselessly drew his gun and waited, his muscles tense. Once more the thrill of the man hunt gripped him, held him in its spell.

The sound was repeated, the scraping of a shoe against the rock. Evers strained his eyes through the darkness. It was impenetrable. Several minutes passed. The old man grew restless. Once he would have stood up and flashed his light toward the rock had he not felt the pressure of that restraining hand on his arm.

Then, suddenly, the hand moved. A bright electric torch flashed on. The beam wavered but a fraction of a second and then came to rest on the form of a man suspended in mid-air some twenty feet above them. Evers heard a low exclamation of surprise.

"That you, Martinez?" came from the hanging figure.

"Quiet, you fool!" Leeto rasped.

Hackmatack wanted to laugh at the perfect imitation that the Indian had given of Martinez's voice. So that was it, Evers reflected. Martinez had come back, after he had warned him away. The old man's gnarled hands twitched; he'd sure like to get them on the throat of that greaser.

The man on the rope descended rapidly, dropped at last onto the floor of the desert. Leeto moved toward him cautiously, drew close.

"Better put up your hands now," the Indian ordered crisply.

The small, slender, rat-faced individual who had come down the rope like a monkey tried to pierce the darkness behind the flash light.

"Wot do you——" he began, his hands raising slowly above his head. "Say, who are you, anyway?"

It was Bennett who, having approached noiselessly, answered the man's question. "We're friends of the operators of the shale plant," he said quietly. "And we intend having a little talk with you."

"Go ahead and talk," the little man sneered. "There ain't no law against it."

Bennett turned to the former sheriff. "Search him, will you, Hackmatack?"

Evers ran his hand carefully over the form of the man and removed an automatic pistol.

"Now we'll go over to the post and talk things over," the trader said.

CHAPTER XXX.

THREAT OF THE POKER.

WITH the rat-faced man walking in front in the beam of the flash light, the four men started across the desert in the direction of the trading post. When they arrived there, Bennett went in ahead and lighted a lamp in the living room.

"Make yourselves at home, gentlemen," he addressed the others, when they had trooped into the house. "Leeto, build up the fire."

Their prisoner looked about nervously and rolled himself a cigarette with trembling fingers. No one spoke as Leeto threw sagebrush and greasewood into the fireplace, nursed a flame, produced a roaring blaze.

"Nice place you got here, buddy," the little man said with a feeble grin at last, apparently unable to bear the silence longer.

Bennett did not answer. Instead, he took the heavy poker from the Indian's hand and laid it very carefully in the center of the hottest flames. The stranger regarded him malignantly, his eyes half closed, his ratlike face drawn into a scowl.

"Take it off!" he snarled suddenly, showing two rows of uneven, yellow teeth. "I'll talk."

Bennett obediently removed the poker from the blaze, stood it beside the hearth, and turned to his unbidden guest. "I thought you would," he remarked. "Most of your kind usually do."

"All right, buddy," the little man growled. "Never mind the compliments. What do yuh want to know? An' make it fast. I got a date wit' me bootlegger."

"All right; I'll make it as fast as possible," Bennett consented. "First of all, who are you?"

"Me? I'm 'Eddie the Rat.' Right name, Edward James Fensworth. I admit I'm the best steeplejack in the country, barrin' none."

"Who hired you to climb that rock?" Bennett asked quietly.

"Bird by the name o' Martinez. Met him in Gallup. Paid me five hundred dollars to do the job. And he supplied the Lyle gun an' the lines and the magnesium."

"And where is your friend Martinez?"

"Don't know. He gave me the money, helped me with the lines when I climbed the rock, and then skinned out."

"You were to meet him afterward, weren't you?" the trader asked calmly.

"No. I was t'rough wit' him."

Bennett moved quietly toward the fireplace, grasped the poker, made a move to replace it on the fire.

"Put that back!" the little man whined. "I'm tellin' yuh th' trut'. I swear I am!"

The trader scanned him with his dark, keen eyes for a moment. Then he replaced the poker beside the fireplace. "What was your game in burning that magnesium on the rock?"

"I was supposed to burn it every night till I saw the Indians at that plant over across the desert beat it fer home. Then I was to flee to the railroad and clear out o' the country."

Bennett nodded thoughtfully. "Who was with Martinez when he helped you up the rock?" the trader pursued.

"Three other birds. One of 'em was an Indian. Th' other two were white men. One of 'em was a sailor, or used ter be a sailor. He was pretty handy at passin' lines an' all that sort o' thing. He helped me wit' th' gun."

Hackmatack suddenly grunted. "What'd this sailor feller look like?" he asked quickly.

"He was a little bird. Had yellar hair an' light-blue eyes. Spoke like an English gink."

"What'd the other one look like?" Evers inquired.

"Tall an' skinny an' bald as a billiard ball. He gave a lot o' orders an' seemed to be th' leader o' the bunch."

Evers turned to Bennett; his seamed face was very thoughtful.

"It's them," the ex-sheriff said shortly. "Cronan an' Beyers."

The trader nodded. "They must have escaped on the train going back to California."

Hackmatack groaned. "I knew I never should of trusted 'em to any o' them blamed deputies o' mine. There's not one of 'em that was worth his salt, 'cepting Dutch Charley. I had a hunch all the time that Judge Harris, back in Alpine, would send somebody after those two crooks that couldn't handle 'em."

"And you hadn't heard that they escaped?" Bennett asked.

"Naw," Evers answered morosely. "They don't even know my address back home. Never gave it to 'em, 'cause I wanted my resignation as sheriff to be final. Didn't want to be bothered with no letters askin' me to come back. I thought I was doin' my part when I made the pinch and put my prisoners in jail."

"Dangerous men, too, weren't they?" the trader mused.

"Murderers, both of 'em," Evers replied lugubriously.

"Say!" the rat-faced man suddenly broke into their conversation. "Do you birds want me to answer any more questions? If yuh don't, I'm gunna beat it fer th' bright lights. This desert gets my goat."

"I don't know as we have any more questions," Bennett remarked calmly. "But you're not going until I'm through with you. And we've got a little necktie party on for to-morrow morning."

"Necktie party!" the man gasped. "Say! How do yuh get that way? I ain't busted no laws. There ain't nothin' you can hold me for."

"Isn't there?" the trader returned evenly. "Do you know what I'm going to do with you to-morrow morning?"

"Aw, go ahead an' spill it!" Eddie the Rat snarled.

"I'm going to put a rope around your neck and lead you to a certain Indian camp about eight miles from here. I'm going to drag you all the way across the sand. If you walk quite fast and don't fall down, you may live until you get there. Then you're going to tell those

Indians just how you climbed that rock and how you made that light on top of it.

"You're going to give them all the details," he went on. "And you're going to tell them why you did it. Then, if you make a convincing-enough story out of it, I'm going to let you off with a good beating and start you off across the desert in the direction of Gallup. You may get there, and you may not. But my responsibility will end when I boot you out of that Indian camp."

The man regarded Bennett scowlingly, but said nothing. In the face of three well-built men, all of them larger than himself, there was little he could say.

Hackmatack applauded Bennett's remarks enthusiastically. "That's talking to him, Bennett! Think I'll stick around and watch the fun. It'll shore be worth seein'."

The rat-faced man grunted contemptuously, but did not speak.

The four men left the trading post at daybreak the next morning. Bennett was true to his word. Evers, Leeto, and the trader were mounted, while Eddie the Rat, scowlingly taciturn and swearing vindictively by turns, followed behind at the end of a lariat.

"I guess that bird'll steer clear o' this part o' the country in the future," Hackmatack predicted with a broad grin, as the calvacade started off across the desert.

They arrived at the Indian camp some two hours later. Eddie the Rat was much the worse for wear. His thin shoes had given out, and his soles rested on the bare sand of the desert, already blisteringly hot. From the top of his checkered cap to his dilapidated footwear he was completely covered with dust; it was caked on his face, his hands; it was in his bloodshot eyes and his dry mouth.

The interview with the Indians was short. Bennett explained the situation, and Eddie the Rat, after being plied with water, told his side of the story. The natives held a consultation and agreed to go back to work. Not until then did Bennett vary from the plan he had outlined the night before. Producing a canteen, a small store of food, and a pair of moccasins from his saddlebag, he handed them to Eddie the Rat. The little steeplejack, dust-covered and too weary to protest, started on his journey back to Gallup, the initial momentum being supplied by the toe of Hackmatack's boot.

Bennett gazed somewhat sadly after the forlorn, solitary figure heading out across the desert. "I guess we were pretty hard on him at that," he mused. "He might not even have known that it was a girl to whom he was causing all this trouble. However, we had to teach him a lesson. He and his kind are dangerous to have around. And I think we put enough fear into him; he'll never show his face around here again."

Bennett turned suddenly to one of the Indians. "Jose, I'd like to have you follow that man at a good distance and see that he gets through to Gallup all right. He'll probably catch a ride with some tourist going south, but I just want to make sure."

To Hackmatack, Bennett said: "I'm returning to the post now. You can take your horse and cut back to the plant with the Indians. You'll save six or seven miles, and I guess Mona is anxious to know how we came out."

Some ten minutes later, at the head of the vanguard of somewhat crestfallen braves, Hackmatack Evers started triumphantly back toward the plant.

CHAPTER XXXI.

IN DESPERATE HASTE.

ON his arrival at the plant Hackmatack was met by Jack Symes. The little refinery foreman ran up eagerly, anxious to hear the details of the night's adventures.

"Darned if yuh didn't get 'em to come back, Hack!" he exclaimed, as he looked down the line of trailing Indians.

Evers nodded. "No trick at all, once we got the bird that put the light on Ship Rock."

"You got him, huh? Tell me about it."

Hackmatack recounted the capture of Eddie the Rat and the happenings leading to the return of the native workers. Symes swore when Evers told him that the whole thing had been instigated by Martinez.

"Too bad we didn't kill that Mex!" Symes grunted angrily. "I always

thought he was tied up some way with the Universal. He's a bad hombre, an' it ain't safe havin' him runnin' round here loose. There's no tellin' what kind of dirty work he'll try to pull. He's sore at the whole bunch of us in the first place. And in the second place, the Universal has prob'ly offered him a good piece o' change if he closes down our plant."

Evers pulled thoughtfully at his straggling mustache. "You think the Universal's payin' him to do this, do you?"

"Must be. Course, it's likely that he never entered into any negotiations with officials of the Universal. They're too blamed clever for anything like that. Too much risk in case Martinez gets caught an' turns State's evidence against them. They probably sent one o' their agents to do business with him, an' the name of the company was never mentioned."

"Seems funny a gang o' big bugs would tie up with a crooked greaser an' pay him to do their dirty work."

"Yuh wouldn't think it was funny if you knew the Universal crowd an' the way they do business," Symes growled. "Besides, who else in the country has anything to gain by puttin' us out o' business?"

"Guess you're right," Evers agreed. "Where's Miss Mona?"

"She left for the trading post a couple of hours ago. Said she couldn't wait no longer to hear what'd happened last night. She was worried half to death about the way things was going. I don't think she slept all night."

"How'd she go?"

"On her horse."

"Alone?" Hackmatack queried quickly.

"Yes. I told her she better let me or somebody go with her. But she wouldn't listen. The boys all went to workin' in the quarry, an' she didn't want to take any of 'em off. We jest quit when we saw you comin' back with the Indians. They all ready to go to work?"

"Yeh; they'll start right in," Hackmatack answered abstractedly. "Got any shale in the bins?"

"A little."

"You can light off yer retorts, then. Might as well get goin' again."

"All right, Hack. We're off."

Evers hurried up to the quarry. From the higher eminence of the workings, he turned and scanned the road leading out across the desert toward the trading post. As far as he could see, about half the distance to the post, the trail was void of dust. He knew it was deserted. He went back to his work with mingled feelings of apprehension and misgiving. Symes never should have allowed Mona to start out for the trading post alone. Still, Evers reflected grimly, if Mona had made up her mind that there was no danger attached to the ride, it was quite unlikely that Symes or any one else could have persuaded her to take one of the men along for protection.

The morning dragged by slowly for Evers; fully half of his time was spent in scanning the road from Ship Rock. His apprehension grew apace. It seemed odd that Mona would remain away from the plant so long, particularly as the work was being resumed that morning. Still, he reflected, what could have happened? Martinez? The more he thought of the sleek-faced Mexican, the more worried and wrought up he became.

Noon found Evers hurrying down to the retorts. He drew Symes aside anxiously. "Miss Mona ain't back!" he said.

The old foreman looked into Evers' eyes, and his own were clouded with anxiety. He nodded slowly. "I guess yuh better go, Hack. I been puttin' it off, hopin' an' prayin' she'd show up. Hack, I know was all kinds of a fool to let her go alone! But she jest wouldn't listen to me. I done all I could, without deliberately crossin' her." He placed an unsteady hand on his forehead for a moment. "If anything's happened to her ——" he began huskily.

Hackmatack threw a friendly arm over Symes' shoulder. "It's all right, Jack. It wasn't your fault. An'—an' I guess we're jest a couple o' foolish old men, makin' a flock o' mountain ranges out of a few molehills. Now I'll git goin'." Hackmatack turned and raised his voice. "Hey, there, you Dutchman! C'me here!"

Dutch Charley, who had been on his way to the cook house, plodded over to Evers.

"Git our guns an' meet me at the car," Hackmatack ordered. "An' make it

fast!" Evers started toward the little shed in which he kept his machine. "So long, Jack! See yuh later," he called over his shoulder.

"So long, Hack. An' good luck!"

Hackmatack explained the situation to Dutch Charley as he drove wildly down the hill. Reaching the level, he pulled the gas lever down to the last notch and left it there, unmindful of the roughness of the road. The ride to the trading post was without doubt the wildest either man had experienced. Hackmatack showed his little car no consideration. In the light of the condition of the road, it was remarkable that the machine held together until they made the post.

Hackmatack brought the flivver to a skidding stop and dashed pell-mell into the building. He found the trader rising from his lunch.

"Evers! What's happened?" Bennett asked quickly, reading aright the alarm in the old man's eyes.

"Mona!" Hackmatack gasped. "Is she here?"

"No. I haven't seen her to-day," Bennett replied.

Hackmatack relieved his feelings by swearing.

"Evers! Tell me what's the matter!" Bennett fumed.

"Mona started down here this mornin' to find out what happened at the rock. She ain't showed up back at the plant. An' I didn't see nothin' of her along the road."

The trader mastered his chaotic thoughts with difficulty. He knew it was no time for useless questions, for sentimentalizing. There was work to be done, and necessity demanded that it be done promptly. "Had lunch yet?" he asked Evers.

"No. An' I don't want none. I want to git goin' after Mona."

Bennett turned hurriedly to Leeto. "Get Evers and Charley some lunch quickly. You've got to eat, Evers, before you start out on a trail like this one is apt to be. I'll get the horses. Thank the Lord we've got four good mustangs!"

"We can use the car!" Hackmatack put in.

"Worthless," Bennett called over his shoulder, as he ran from the room. "It's a job for horses."

Leeto, realizing the need for haste, prepared lunch for Evers and Charley in an incredibly short time. The two men ate hurriedly, their sole interest in the meal being to get the food under their belts. When Bennett appeared with their horses, they were just emerging from the kitchen. The trader tossed four saddlebags to his Indian servant.

"Fill them up, Leeto. You'll know what to take. And bring the two forty-fives and the rifle."

Canteens were filled, cinches tightened, and a few minutes later four grim-faced men set off across the desert at a steady, distance-annihilating trot.

"We won't follow the road," Bennett told Evers when they started out. "Mona always takes the short cut by way of the Rock. It's a mile shorter than the main road."

They traveled in silence for several miles. There was no trail, and the four horsemen rode abreast, following a slight depression in the terrain leading toward the shale plant.

"What do you think's happened to her?" Evers queried at last.

"Martinez, without a doubt," Bennett answered shortly. "The Mexican and his two friends were probably in the neighborhood this morning. They might have come to bring that steeplejack a horse so that he could make a get-away. Martinez probably saw us leave the post in the direction of the Indian camp with that little rat. He might have been in such a position that he saw Mona leave the plant at about the same time. Anyway, while we were palavering with the natives, he intercepted Mona."

"What do you suppose he's done with her?" Evers pursued.

"I don't know, Hackmatack!" Bennett answered. "We've just got to pick up the trail, rescue her from that merciless crook. Otherwise her father, the shale plant——" He spurred his horse onward.

The succeeding chapters of this novel will appear in the next issue of TOP-NOTCH, dated and out February 1st. It began in the December 1st issue. Back numbers may be obtained from news dealers or the publishers.

Sleuthing De Luxe

By Frank E. Carson

(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.

ANXIOUS FOR A JOB.

CHEWING the butt of an unlighted cigar, while he thumped the desk with a pudgy fist, Captain of Detectives Joe Meade shouted into the telephone: "Get two more cars! Draft that tin-starred sheriff an' half the town if necessary! Yeh! An' you stick to the main drag! Them birds are headin' for Cleveland, or I'm a bell-pullin' flatfoot, and if they make it we're—— What? Yeh! Right! G'-by!"

Replacing the receiver with a jerk, Meade glared belligerently at the stranger who had made an unobtrusive entrance during the conversation and was standing near the door awaiting recognition. "Who th' Hades let you in here?" he bellowed.

The visitor blinked and fumbled awkwardly with his hat. "I—I just walked in," he stammered.

"Well, just walk out!" snapped Meade, turning his scowling attention to a pile of telegrams upon the desk.

The other gulped desperately. "But, mister, I—I guess you don't know who I am. I'm a detective, an' I've come to take a job on your detective force."

This amazing declaration obtained for its author an openly curious glance of inspection from "Bulldog" Joe Meade. The youth—for he could not have been more than nineteen or twenty—was tall, loose-jointed, and skinny, and his suit, a new hand-me-down of cheap material, missed connections glaringly at the arms and legs. He wore a shirt of gorgeous hue, a necktie which screamed defiance, and his prominent Adam's apple peeped coyly out over the top of a glistening celluloid collar.

His face was long and freckle-dotted, and his hair—corn-colored and bristly—had been painstakingly greased and brushed back from his forehead. He appeared a perfect replica of an East Podunk young man about town, and despite his ill humor Meade grinned.

"Yuh came to the wrong place, son," he returned, not unkindly. "We're all cluttered up with detectives now. What we need most is bloodhounds—bloodhounds that'll follow a gasoline trail. Better run along an' peddle your peanuts," he added, turning back to his littered desk.

The visitor blinked vacantly at the top of Meade's head. "But the mayor said ——" he began haltingly.

"The mayor!" Joe Meade stiffened in his chair. As the proverbial red flag is to a bull so—even more so—was the word "mayor" to the gray-haired, ruddy-faced captain of detectives.

Joe Meade, who had seen mayors come

and mayors go, and who had stubbornly held his position in spite of rather than because of them, held the breed that they had been saddled with, and the petty grafters who clung to each like barnacles to the hull of a ship, in supreme contempt. A grim smile flickered across his grizzled face now as he mentally rehearsed the stinging barrage of uncomplimentary epithets he kept in reserve for vote-peddling favorites of the present incumbent.

"Yep," the youth was saying; "I went to his office first thing this morning soon's I arrived in town. The mayor was purty busy an' couldn't see me, but he sent word out by the young feller who works for him for me to come over here. He said you did the hirin' of all the detectives."

The corners of Joe Meade's mouth loosened; tiny wrinkles appeared about his keen eyes; he grinned. "Well, son," he said tolerantly, "we're full up on detectives now—such as they are—an' anyway I'm afraid you couldn't qualify."

"I betcha I can!" The visitor's voice soared excitedly. "I took the whole course of twelve lessons in the De Luxe Home Study School for Detectives, an' I got my diploma an' my badge. See!" He flicked his coat back with a snappy gesture and disclosed a glittering metal shield. The diploma, evidently in the inside pocket of his coat, was about to be produced when Meade interrupted.

"Never mind," he broke in; "I'll take your word for it. Hey, Mowry!" he called to a young man who had appeared in answer to his ring. "This young fella's a brother sleuth. Show him around a bit, will you?" The chief gave a grimace behind the visitor's back which read "Give him the air." "Glad you called, son. So long!" Meade turned to answer the telephone which had begun to ring.

With a deftness born of experience, Joe Meade's assistant ushered the intruder from the presence of his harried chief before that dazed young man could voice a protest. "What'd you say your name was?" he asked as they entered the outer office.

"You're the first feller that's asked me," the visitor replied. "It's Squeers—Elmer Atkinson Squeers."

"Boys!" Mowry sang out to the small group of newspaper men who were listlessly playing cards about a desk in the rear of the room. "Meet Elmer Atkinson Squeers, of Squedunk."

"Colby's Corners," Squeers hastened to correct. "Pleased to meet you, fellers!" He bowed dignifiedly.

"Mr. Squeers," the guide announced gravely, "is a graduate of one of our leading detective schools and has a badge to prove it."

"An' a diploma," Squeers added.

The audience rose and bowed as one man. Providence had been kind to them. Here was diversion—a break in the dull monotony of waiting at deserted headquarters while every available sleuth, and a few more fortunate members of their own profession, hurtled through the northern part of the State on the red-hot trail of two fleeing desperadoes.

The pair, "Greasy" Dorgan and "Butch" Mollay, had accomplished on the previous night one of the most spectacular jail breaks in the annals of local criminal history. About seven o'clock, at a prearranged signal, they had rushed the unsuspecting guards, overpowered them, obtained the keys to the outer doors and, accompanied by six other prisoners, had rushed on out to freedom.

In front of the jail the two leaders had leaped into a big red speedster—evidently parked there by confederates—and sped away in a blinding rainstorm, leaving their less fortunate companions to escape as best they could on foot.

The flying car had been sighted and fired upon by local sheriffs at several points along the route, and Joe Meade's men were burning up the roads in pursuit, while the police scoured the city for the six other fugitives.

The latter, however, were smaller fry. Greasy Dorgan, cool, audacious, daring, and Butch Mollay, less resourceful, but a willing follower, both gunmen, convicted bandits, and all-round tough customers, were the big game in the man hunt. It did not seem humanly possible for them to elude so determined a posse and an aroused countryside, yet they were still at large, and no authentic news had been forthcoming from the pursuers for hours.

Consequently the little group of wait-

ing newspaper men at detective headquarters welcomed Elmer Atkinson Squeers from Colby's Corners with open arms. Within an hour these professional interrogators had drawn from their hapless victim the complete story of his life, from the earliest point in his childhood recollections up to and including that great moment when he had clipped the coupon and subsequently become a full-fledged detective in twelve easy lessons.

At the conclusion of this interesting narrative, Paul Marberry, of the *News-Star,* who appeared to be the leader of the grinning questioners, spoke thus: "Elmer," he declared eloquently, "you look like the goods. And whether Joe Meade can see it or not, I'm inclined to believe that you're eventually going to make the exploits of our old college chumps, Sherlock Holmes and Nick Carter, read like the adventures of Little Rollo. Of course, though, you've got to show Joe something before you can hope to get on the force as a regular."

The rural Sherlock nodded eagerly. "I know it," he said. "That's why I come up here to th' city. There ain't nothin' ever happens down home exceptin' Christmas an' rain on Fourth o' July, an' I know a feller's got to get some actual experience afore he can get a real job at detectin'. It says so right in lesson twelve in the course."

Marberry nodded and frowned fiercely upon his tittering colleagues. "You've been reading all about the jail break, I presume?" he asked soberly.

Squeers bobbed his blond head.

"Well," resumed the reporter, "the police have rounded up only one of those six birds who flew the coop with Greasy and Butch last night. Now I am sure," he winked expansively at the others, "that if you dug up one or more of those fellows Joe Meade would fall on your neck and beg you to take a job. This one, for instance." He indicated the forbidding countenance of one of the fugitives in a paper which lay upon the desk.

Squeers leaned over and scrutinized the face of the desperado. Then he produced a clipping from his pocket. "I got that feller's picture right here," he remarked. "Cut 'em all out of the paper this morning so's to be ready to go right to work as soon as I got here. I s'pose," he went on thoughtfully, replacing the clipping, "I might as well go over to the jail first. They can prob'ly give me some good pointers about all these fellers over there on account of knowin' 'em so well."

"That's the place to start, Elmer," Marberry agreed enthusiastically.

"Keep away from squirrels on the way over," Bob Lewis of the *Courier* added dryly.

CHAPTER II.

MAKING A START.

SMARTING under the loss of eight of their prominent guests and the resulting "razz" from newspapers and public alike, and facing the inevitable investigation with its resulting shake-up of personnel, the jail authorities were in no mood for welcoming the intrepid man hunter from the great open spaces. Squeers' reception was frigid to the *n*th degree. His every question met with a surly rebuff, and he was finally savagely admonished to "Get outa here or we'll lock you up, too!"

"You've prob'ly got plenty of room," was his parting shot as he obeyed this command.

In front of the somber, grimy building Squeers paused to indulge in a bitter mental tirade upon the ungraciousness of municipal employees and their utter lack of respect for genuine ability. From their actions they apparently did not want their darned old prisoners recaptured.

With a lugubrious sigh Squeers strode away from there. At a corner near the Stockmen's Hotel he purchased one each of the city's trio of evening papers, paying exact change for them from a black leather purse and, after partaking of a hearty meal at a moderate-priced restaurant near by, proceeded into the lobby and thence to the room he had engaged upon his arrival in the morning.

Here, amid the litter of previously purchased editions, he adjusted his long frame to a reading position upon the bed and read and reread every item that concerned the spectacular jail delivery. Occasionally he made a note or two in a small, red-backed memorandum book. The red car containing the flying desperadoes had not been sighted since day-

light, when the night marshal of a small town up-State had fired several shots at it.

Wild rumors of its appearance in other spots were numerous, but not authentic. The pursuers were straining every nerve, and sheriff's posses were patrolling every avenue of escape toward Cleveland, for it was here—where both men were known to have countless friends among the underworld—that they were admittedly heading.

Another of the lesser fry had been captured in the city during the day by the police. Four were still at large and presumably in the city.

At nine o'clock Squeers yawned and began to remove his clothing. At nine fifteen he was snoring audibly. Even great detectives must sleep.

Following a light breakfast of fruit, cereal, wheat cakes, ham, eggs, toast, and two cups of coffee at six thirty next morning the sleuth from Colby's Corners wandered aimlessly about the deserted streets of the downtown district. At eight o'clock he returned to his room with a supply of morning papers and alternately read and reflected until noon.

Then, with a calm methodicalness which seemed a part of his nature, Squeers began to pack his ancient gray telescope. When that was done, he removed the glittering nickeled badge which read "Private Detective" from inside the left lapel of his coat and sewed it—with needle and thread procured from the dresser—securely inside the lower lining of the coat. Next he transferred his diploma—the De Luxe Home Study School's flamboyant certificate of success—from his pocket to an envelope which he sealed, stamped, and addressed to "Mr. Elmer A. Squeers, General Delivery, City."

With all evidences of his hazardous profession thus removed, he took up his bag and left the room.

CHAPTER III.

A WIDE-EYED LISTENER.

"HOW d'you do, ma'am," said Squeers to the woman who opened the door of a rather shabby, stone-fronted house on Eighteenth Street in response to his ring. "Kin I get room an' board here?"

The woman appraised him for a moment in the cold, impersonal manner of an experienced landlady and, apparently satisfied with the result, gave a curt nod and held the door open. "I have two vacancies," she informed him when he had stepped inside the gloomy hallway. "A large room on the second floor and a smaller one on the third floor, in the rear. The larger one is really a double room," she added, "and probably you'd prefer the smaller one—it's cheaper. Are you alone?"

"Yes, ma'am," replied Squeers. "An' I guess I'd better take the small room. You see I ain't workin' or anything yet, an' I ain't got no money to spend on luxuries. I'm aimin' to look around for a while, an' if I can get a job I'll prob'ly stay here in the city. My name's Squeers, Elmer Squeers, an' I come from Colby's Corners. I don't reckon you've ever been out that way, ma'am."

"No," returned the woman dully and led the way up the stairs.

At six o'clock—when they assembled for the evening meal—Squeers was formally introduced to his fellow lodgers. There were eight of them—a quiet, threadbare, elderly couple, evidently retired theatrical people; two widows; a slangy, overrouged woman of uncertain age; and three young men. The landlady did the cooking with the assistance of her daughter, a good-looking though tired-eyed girl of about twenty, who also waited upon the table. Toward the end of the meal the conversation swung around to the subject of the spectacular jail delivery.

"Well, Jen," one of the men gayly addressed the landlady's daughter when she sank into a chair at the table after bringing the dessert, "I guess your sweetie has give 'em the slip for sure this time."

The girl nodded wearily. "What does to-night's paper say?" she asked.

The man grinned. "The dicks and long-whiskered sheriffs are running around in circles with their tongues out up in the north end of the State," he replied. "Stopping every bus on the roads. They've got it doped now that the boys have wrecked the red car and have either took to the woods or swiped another buzz wagon."

"Probably have," another of the men put in with a laugh. "An' the apple knockers up there had better chain up their little red fire wagons or Greasy'll steal one of 'em just to show 'em he can do it. Great little joker, Greasy!"

"Well," spoke up the overrouged woman, "I hope he gets away. He was such a nice, gentlemanly young man."

"Get away!" the first speaker exclaimed. "Of course he'll get away. Why that bird's in Cleveland right now, laughing at the boob dicks who are looking for him; eh, Jen?"

Jen smiled. "How do I know?" she asked.

"What'd the cops do to you yesterday?" asked a sallow-faced, furtive-eyed youth who had so far remained out of the discussion. "Give you the third degree?"

The girl's eyes hardened, her hands clinched until the knuckles showed white. "Blast 'em!" she muttered fiercely. That was all.

The new boarder, who had been a wide-eyed listener to all this, turned slowly to the girl. "Third degree," he drawled bewilderedly. "Why, they only do that to desp'rate criminals. What in time has the police got against you?"

"Haven't you been reading the papers, Hiram?" the first man asked with a hoarse chuckle. "Jen, here, is Greasy Dorgan's sweetie. The fly cops think the girl had something to do with the break."

"Gosh!" ejaculated Squeers in an awed voice. He turned to the girl. "You—you didn't help 'em get loose, did you?"

Jen's tense face relaxed under his owlish scrutiny. "I refuse to answer," she returned, laughing, "until I've seen my lawyer."

The landlady, coming in from the kitchen to join the group about the table, felt it incumbent upon herself to enlighten the new boarder.

"The police," she explained, "seem to think that because Tom Dorgan roomed here for a while, and because he and my daughter were just friendly, that Jen—or maybe some of the rest of us here at the house—had something to do with his breaking out of jail the other night. Though," she concluded with a righteous sigh, "the Lord knows we didn't!"

After dinner Squeers wandered into the front parlor and buried himself in the evening papers. He had the room to himself until about eight o'clock when the landlady's daughter came in and, after idly glancing through a newspaper, moved over to the piano. Presently a big, handsome Airedale stalked gravely into the room and sank down at the girl's feet.

"That's a nice dog," Squeers commented admiringly.

The girl nodded and continued absently fingering the keys.

Squeers listened for a time in respectful silence and then got up leisurely from his chair and approached the sleeping animal. "Nice doggie!" he chirped and crouched on the floor to stroke its head.

"Say, you!" Jen whirled about quickly. "Keep away from that dog! He eats strangers."

"Aw, he wouldn't eat me—would you, doggie?" Squeers continued to pet the animal, which, after giving vent to a low, guttural growl at the first contact, had relaxed and was submitting blissfully to the caress.

The girl stared in frank amazement. "Well, you cop the asbestos earmuffs!" she exclaimed. "That's the first time Pat ever made up to anybody, an' some of these fresh yaps around here have been trying for six months to get as close as five feet to him. What'd you do—hypnotize him?"

Squeers grinned and rose to his feet. "I allers was handy at makin' up with dogs an' horses," he replied modestly. "Got a crackin' good Airedale of my own out home on the farm. C'me here, Pat!"

Obediently the dog scrambled to its feet and rubbed a friendly muzzle against Squeers' trouser leg. The girl gave a short laugh and turned back to the piano.

CHAPTER IV.

OUT ON THE TRAIL.

A POLICEMAN accosted the new boarder at the Eighteenth Street address when he emerged from the house early next morning. He was an inquisitive sort of a policeman and insisted upon knowing the surprised young man's

name, his former address, and his occupation.

"You moved in yesterday afternoon, didn't you?" the officer continued.

"Yes," replied Squeers.

"How'd you happen to come to this dump?" The policeman jerked his stick in the direction of the house.

"Why, I was scoutin' around for a boardin' house, an' I saw the sign in the window an' just moseyed in," Squeers answered. "What's the matter with the place—or with me?" he added innocently.

"H'm!" The other turned to a stocky man in a dark-gray suit who had joined them. "I guess this bird's O. K., Bill," he said.

Bill subjected Squeers to a thorough looking over. "Got any money on you, son?" he asked bluntly.

"Only two dollars an' seventy-five cents," replied the youth. "I put most of my money in the bank as soon's I got to the city day afore yesterday. I ain't takin' no chances on holdups."

Both men chuckled.

"He'll do, I guess," remarked Bill, turning away.

"All right, Zeke; on your way!" the officer commanded crisply. "And," he added, again jerking his club toward the house, "I wouldn't even keep my bank book in there if I was you. It ain't safe."

Squeers nodded soberly and wandered on down the street. "I wonder," he mused as he walked, "if they think I'm as green as I look."

The new boarder did not return to the house on Eighteenth Street until dinner time. A particularly spicy society scandal had replaced the jail delivery as a front-page feature in the evening papers. The fleeting desperadoes, according to all reports, had made good their escape either to Cleveland or Detroit. Singly and in groups Joe Meade's crestfallen detectives were returning from the chase, and all immediate efforts were to be directed toward capturing the four bad men still at large in the city.

By the next evening—Squeers' third at the Eighteenth Street house—three of these had been apprehended, leaving but one, the leader of a gang of automobile thieves, at liberty. Squeers, who was now accepted as a regular with all rights and privileges of the position, ate his meal in stony silence. He took no part in the customary table conversation, and his thoughts seemed miles away.

"What's the matter, Elmer?" one of the men inquired familiarly. "Got a new girl or something?"

"Huh?" said the rural youth vacantly; then grinned. "No," he replied. "I was just wonderin'."

"Look at what's wonderin'!" chirped the sallow-faced young man. "Watcha wonderin', kid?"

"Oh, nothin'," returned Squeers evasively.

He spent the evening in a corner of the tiny front parlor, deep in thought, and absently stroking the head of the friendly Airedale. At nine fifteen he rose, yawned, and clumped up the stairs.

Inside his third-floor room Squeers locked the door, secured his glittering metal badge from its place of concealment in the lining of his coat, pinned it carefully to its former position beneath the left lapel, then removed his clothing and crawled into bed.

He awakened and dressed, with the exception of his shoes, at the first streak of dawn, and with them in his hand and a suspicious bulge in both coat pockets he tiptoed down the stairs. In the dimly lighted lower hall he paused, every muscle taut, nerves tense, and listened. Then he proceeded cautiously out through the darkened dining room into the kitchen and thence down a wooden stairway which led to the basement. At the foot of these stairs he gave a low whistle and an answering whine came out of the blackness.

"Pat!" he called softly and advanced a few paces until he felt a cold, friendly nose fumbling eagerly about his hand. "Good ol' Pat!"

With a deft motion he unsnapped the light rope from the ring in the dog's collar. "Come on, boy! Tiptoe ol'-timer!" he commanded in a whisper, and together they climbed the stairs to the kitchen. Here Squeers paused a moment to put on his shoes; then, with a low word to the dog, he proceeded out through the hallway. The front door closed softly behind them.

CHAPTER V.

UNLOOKED-FOR RESULTS.

WAN and heavy-eyed from a succession of sleepless nights and nerve-racking days, Captain of Detectives Joe Meade was sipping his coffee and skimming through the morning paper when the telephone rang.

"It's for you, Joe!" called his wife, who had left the table to answer it.

With a sigh, which indicated that another day had now officially begun, Meade flung aside his paper and strode to the instrument.

"Hello!" he snapped brusquely. "Yes!" There was a pause, then: "What?" The word came like the crack of a whip; the speaker stiffened with a jerk, and took a firmer hold upon the telephone. "Great snakes, yes!" he yelled. "Just as quick as wheels'll get me there!"

A sudden dynamo of activity, Joe Meade slammed the receiver into place and made a wild grab for his coat and hat. "They've got Greasy Dorgan!" he flung over his shoulder to his amazed better half and was gone.

Twenty minutes later he shouldered his way through an excited group of detectives, police officers, and newspaper reporters to the door of his own private office. Inside sat Fred Mowry, his assistant, and a policeman. Between them, debonair, smiling, puffing a huge cigar, and clad in somber black female garb, sat Greasy Dorgan. A gray wig and a small, black, veil-draped hat lay upon the seat beside him, and at his feet crouched a big, handsome Airedale which was beating a joyous tattoo upon the floor with its tail and gazing devotedly into the face of the desperado.

"Hello, Joe!" Greasy called out genially.

Joe Meade, at once the poker-faced, shrewd-eyed hunter of men, surveyed the grinning prisoner for an instant. "Well," he snapped, "you gave us a fine chase, Greasy!"

The other guffawed. "Ain't that the truth!" he exclaimed flippantly. "And if it hadn't been for the mutt, here, you'd still be chasin' your tails." He leaned over and stroked the dog's head affectionately with both manacled hands.

Meade turned abruptly to his assistant. "Who brought him in?" he asked.

"Kelly," replied Mowry, with a curt nod toward the officer.

"Where'd you get him?" Meade faced the patrolman.

Kelly grinned and shifted his bulk in the chair. "Corner of Cypress Street and Bowdon Avenue," he replied laconically.

The captain of detectives stared. "Yes?" he asked sharply to hide his bewilderment.

"I'm pegging down Cypress Street to my regular beat in the north end," Kelly explained, "when I meet a tall, skinny bird pushing this," with a gesture toward the prisoner, "ahead of a big gun. 'Call the wagon!' yells the skinny bird before I can open my face. 'What's she done?' I ask him. 'It ain't a she,' says the fellow; 'it's Greasy Dorgan.' And he flipped the hat and wig off his nobs here, and sure enough it was.

"Believe me, I got the buggy in no time," the officer continued, "but the skinny bird didn't wait. 'See you later!' he yells and beats it. We couldn't tear the dog and Greasy apart, so we brought 'em both in."

Despite his self-control Joe Meade's mouth was partly agape when Kelly completed this brief explanation. A dozen questions flashed into his mind and were about to find utterance upon his tongue when the door swung open and a burly, scowling, hard-featured man plunged into the room. His huge, hairy wrists were joined in front of his body by steel handcuffs, and behind him, almost overshadowed by his ominous bulk, came a slender, sun-tanned, rural-appearing youth who beamed amiably upon the staring quartet.

Greasy Dorgan was the first to find his voice. "Hello, Butch!" he called out cheerfully.

CHAPTER VI.

THE LAST STRAW.

AFTER the photographers had snapped him to their heart's content, Elmer Atkinson Squeers—celebrity—sank into a chair in the outer office at detective headquarters and grinned embarrassedly at the eager, questioning group which swarmed about him.

"Aw, shucks," he muttered, fumbling with his hat and eying the tips of his shoes, "I ain't done nothin'. That is," he hastened to add naïvely, "nothin' much."

"But, Elmer," Paul Marberry of the *News-Star* spoke up, and there was a note of genuine respect in his voice, "how in the world did you know that those two birds were right here in town all the time?"

Squeers grinned mysteriously. "That's what Mr. Meade just asked me," he replied. "I didn't know they was in town," he added frankly. "But I had a sort of a hunch that they might be."

"How? Why?" chorused a dozen voices.

"Well, on account of a story I read one time, an' because it says all through the twelve lessons in the De Luxe course in detectin', that criminals always is safest from apprehenshun by stayin' right in big cities."

"But the red car?" some one broke in excitedly. "Those fellows couldn't be two places at once?"

"Course they couldn't!" Squeers replied sagely. "They never was in that red car—unless'n it was to ride to their hideout in it. Couple of confederates did the fleein' act in that car."

"But man alive, they saw them at——"

"They didn't neither see 'em! All they saw was a red car tearin' along like mad with all the curtains drawed down, an' they just natcherally figgered it must of been Greasy an' Butch. The fellers in that car just decoyed the posse into follow in' them, an' when the pace got too hot they prob'ly hid the car an' caught a train or something back to town, or on to Cleveland. Of course they was safe once they ditched the car because nobody was lookin' for them. Maybe they joined the posse an' had a good laugh."

Squeers' audience nodded in awed assent. It did sound logical. Anxiously they awaited further particulars.

"As soon as I got on the case," went on Squeers, who had overcome his original bashfulness and was beginning to enjoy the warming glow of the spotlight, "I figgered the break had been purty danged carefully planned out on account of this here Greasy Dorgan bein' a purty slick feller. All I had to start with was a hunch that the red car might be a decoy to lead the police off the real trail, so I moseyed over to the house where Greasy's gal lived an' took a room there to see if I could find out anything.

"Well," Squeers continued, "I didn't get much, except that the gal was keepin' Greasy's dog an' that her brother was janitor of an apartment house across on the other side of town. They kept the dog in the house all the time, an' locked him in the basement at night. This made me sort of suspicious that Greasy might be some place right here in town where the dog might find him if let loose.

"Anyway, I took to hangin' around that apartment house where her brother worked an' by a lot of fool questionin' got a line on just about everybody that lived in the buildin'. The only folks in the lot who looked suspicious was a widow woman who had an apartment on the top floor with her son who was an invalid. An' I guess the only reason I centered on them was because nobody in the place knew anything about 'em. They'd lived there more'n a month before the jail break, though, an' that had me guessin' until I got to thinkin' it over.

"Why, I says to myself, couldn't a couple of friends of Greasy's have took the rooms ahead of time—something like a story I read once—to throw the police still further off the scent? Natcherally they wouldn't be suspected, an' Greasy—who I read used to be an actor—could change places with the woman who was dressed like a widow since nobody had ever seen her face anyway. Butch could be the invalid son because he wasn't supposed to be able to get out at all.

"I figgered this all out in my room at night," Squeers went on, "an' while it was just a kind of a wild guess, the more I figgered it the more I thought there might be somethin' to it. Anyway, by hangin' around the neighborhood a couple of days I found out that the widow went out early every mornin' for groceries an' things. She allers kept the veil drawed down tight over her face, too. I was afraid to stop her myself, without knowin' for sure who she was. But I figgered if it was Greasy his dog would know him no matter how much he was disguised, so I just sneaked ol' Pat out of the house

this mornin' afore anybody was up an' we hung around waitin' for the widow.

"Out she come, about a quarter to eight. She spotted the dog first an' gave a sort of a jump. Then she stood still for a minute, maybe just a second." The narrator grinned. "An' when Pat began to yowl an' jump up an' down an' try to lick her face I just jerked out my gun an' says 'Han's up, Greasy Dorgan!' an' started out to look for a policeman. We ran smack into one on the corner, an' I took the key from the widow's pocketbook an' went back to the apartment. I waited outside about ten minutes so's not to make Butch suspicious, an' then I let myself in. The big feller was in his undershirt, makin' coffee, an' I just covered him, slipped the cuffs I bought yesterday at one of them pawnshops onto his hands, an' brought him down here in a taxicab.

"I guess," Squeers finished beamingly, "I just partly figgered the whole thing out like the boy whose paw sent him out to look for a calf that was lost. He just sat down an' imagined he was a calf, an' then got up an' played like he was tryin' to get lost, an' danged if he didn't run right smack into the real calf!"

Joe Meade, who had joined the listening group during the latter part of the recital, was the first to speak. "I suppose you know, youngster," he said, "that there's a total of fifteen hundred dollars' reward—a thousand on Greasy an' five hundred on Butch—comin' to you?"

Squeers nodded. "Yep," he replied gravely; "an' providin' you give me a job on your detective force I'm willin' to spend five hundred of it in supplyin' ten of your men with the same detectin' education I've got. The complete De Luxe Home Study course in twelve lessons is fifty dollars. I ain't wrote 'em yet, but maybe I can get 'em to let us have a dozen courses for five hundred dollars. You'll prob'ly want to take one of 'em yourself, Mr. Meade."

Joe Meade groped for a chair, sat down heavily, and stared dazedly at the solemn-faced youth and the sea of grinning faces. "Well—I'll—be—damned!" he gasped.

THE SPIRIT OF VICTORY

By Calvert McQuay

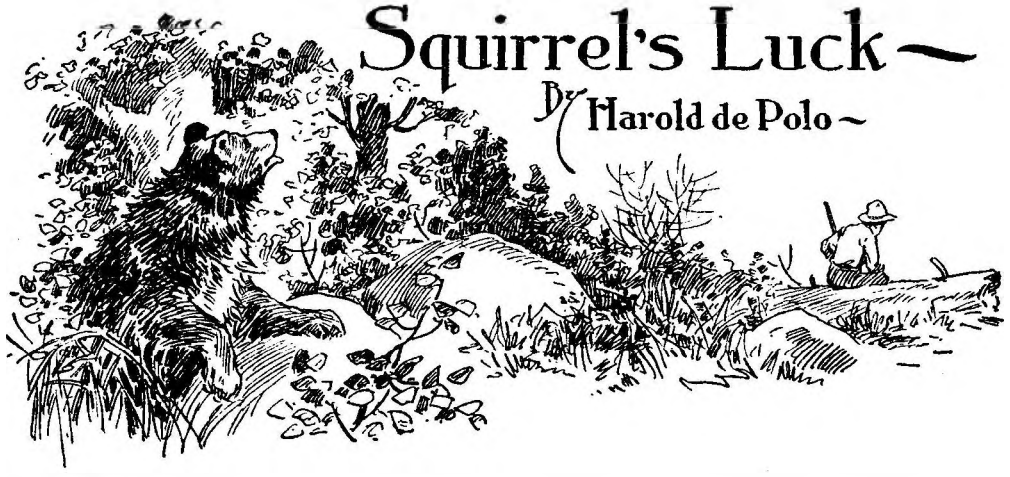
HELP yourself, by helping others;
Give, and you can't help but get;
Buck life's breakers with your brothers,
And you'll win on ev'ry bet.
Cheerfulness, you know, is catching;
Surest cure for ev'ry rile;
Happiness is always hatching
In the sunshine of a smile.

Life gives back just what you give it;
Give your strength, and strength you'll get;
Set your schedule, mate, and live it;
Ply your paddle like a "vet;"
Get an even stroke, and keep it;
Hold your temper and your place;
Row your best, and you will reap it—
Be a victor in the race.

Get together! Pull together!
Is the spirit that will win;
If the waves of life you'd weather,
Row your darnedest, with a grin!
Help yourself, by helping others;
Grab an oar and join the crew!
Try to win to help your brothers,
And they'll win the race for you!

Squirrel's Luck—

By Harold de Polo—



THAT sturdy backwoodsman, Eben Morton, who was one of the dogged army that prefer the wilderness, was naturally not the type to lose his head in even the most trying circumstances. When, however, he returned to his crude cabin and found another murdered body of a sheep—the second in two days—he displayed annoyance.

"Tarnation on that grizzly!" he exclaimed. He brought out the words gravely, a little frown on his wide forehead, and stood there with arms akimbo. He carefully studied the carcass at his feet, his lips turning bitterly downward at the corners. A single ugly bruise on the shoulder, a jagged rip along the throat, and the otherwise unmutilated dead form, told him that the marauder had simply killed for the sheer joy of it. That made it seem all the more inexcusable, all the more reason for his deciding upon a just and a speedy vengeance.

"Yessir," Morton said grimly, his lips tautening; "I reckon this ends it. That grizzly has got to be got, that's whatever!"

With a slight sigh, he stooped and picked up the ax he had dropped and entered his little home. He set about the business of preparing a lone supper rather dejectedly, for his second loss in as many days, depriving him of the only sheep he possessed, was no mean one. Like many another of his sort, he had come to this sparsely settled section with his two hands, the clothes on his back, and a few tools.

Clearing the land on which he intended farming, particularly in the first hard year, was certainly not remunerative. Therefore, the two sheep, which he had proposed to kill in the fall and hang up for the winter, were a severe loss.

The bear, some three weeks before, had appeared in the remote, rugged region. Since then, the beast had created more havoc, had destroyed more live stock, than any other marauder that had ever visited that section. In fact, the ancient Hi Whipple, who kept the general store over at Big Brook Crossing, had offered a hundred dollars reward—in trade at his store, of course—for the body of the killer. Considering that Whipple was known to be the meanest man in the country, although the wealthiest, it was evident that the neighborhood was pretty well stirred up.

It was not the reward, however, that had caused Eben Morton to make up his mind to get the grizzly; it was that within these last two days his own property had been destroyed. For he was the kind that is slow to start, but when once started goes grimly and competently to settle things for good.

II.

THE next morning, shortly after dawn, Morton proved that he had started. Instead of shouldering the ax that was his daily burden, necessary in the felling of trees preparatory to clearing his land more thoroughly, he sallied forth with his high-powered rifle in the crook of his arm. He followed the trail taken by the

bear on the previous day, after the killing of the sheep.

Eben Morton decided that the best thing to do would be to discover some particular spot—a watering hole, a runway, a cave, a special trail—which was more frequented by the bear on his wanderings than any other. It would be a slow and tedious task, perhaps, yet Morton was not discouraged by the difficulties of the undertaking.

He returned to his little cabin long after dusk, tired but quite satisfied. All day long, without cessation, he had tramped over mountains, through heavy timber and undergrowth, across streams. He had found numerous signs that told him something of the habits of the bear, but he had not been so fortunate as to catch the slightest glimpse of the animal. Morton had noticed a certain watering hole, however—over in the gully at the base of Old Mount Tom—that seemed to be the favorite haunt of the grizzly whenever he was in want of a drink.

Once more, before dawn on the following morning, Morton was up and out. This time, as well as his big-caliber repeating rifle, he carried two strong traps —heavy and dangerous contrivances with jaws and teeth of steel that would hold the most powerful of the wild folk. With them, he cut ahead on as straight a line as possible over the rough country, in the direction of the watering hole at which the bear apparently preferred to do most of his thirst-quenching.

Arriving there, the backwoodsman immediately attended to the business at hand. He did not hurry to the task, however. To a casual onlooker, it would have seemed as if Morton was stupidly cautious. The job had to be done properly, however. When he had finished, the pair of traps had been set so cleverly that the majority of men—and of men who knew the game, too—would not have detected anything wrong with the ground.

He did not travel to the watering hole on the following day until about midday. When he got there, he saw that the bear had been ahead of him. The carefully placed earth and leaves and twigs about the hidden traps had been disdainfully scraped aside. The two things of steel met his eyes in a way that made him think they were leering at him.

Eben Morton did not look sour or disappointed. The smile that slowly crossed his lips was one of amusement and admiration. Certainly, he told himself, that grizzly was an intelligent beast. The woodsman was dealing with an exceptionally shrewd enemy, and the knowledge of this fact, to a man of his type, added more zest to the battle of wits that lay ahead.

III.

NEARLY a month after the uncovering of the traps, Eben Morton sat on a fallen tree trunk beneath the wide-spreading branches of a gnarled old oak. It was noon of an early summer day, one of those days so hot, so stagnant, and coming so unexpectedly, as to make it seem even worse than the most scorching midsummer weather.

The past weeks, for the hunter, had been perhaps the hardest he had ever experienced. He had tried every wile he knew with as little success as on that first occasion at the watering hole. Morton had not grown discouraged, however. For the last month, he had been on the job sixteen hours—and sometimes longer —of the twenty-four. His face was thinner, his lips set tighter, his eyes dark from fatigue.

As he started to rise after his brief rest, he suddenly sank back into his former posture, as motionless as the very log upon which he sat. His eye, trained to be always on the alert, had detected what promised to be an interesting episode about a dozen yards away.

A plump gray squirrel, his bushy tail arched gracefully over his back, stood contentedly on his hind feet while he happily munched at a nut that he had just had the good fortune to find. This happening was nothing unusual for the woodsman to see. The thing which had drawn his attention was a dullish-brown head, followed by a sinuous body, that had come from under a rock about twenty feet from the unsuspecting squirrel. It was a copperhead snake.

Eben Morton, always attentive to any little happenings having to do with the wild folk, watched the drama before him with interested eyes and tensed nerves.

Like a stone image he sat, his fingers gripped tightly about the rifle that lay across his knees. He saw the snake move toward his quarry, slowly, surely, and wondered admiringly how the reptile could cross brittle leaves so noiselessly. The gray squirrel, with ears more attuned to wood sounds than the man's, remained blissfully ignorant of danger.

Eben Morton was a deliberate individual. He never acted hastily. From the beginning of this scene, he had been weighing the respective cases of the two participants before him. Usually, he did not interfere in tragedies or comedies of the forest creatures, but here was an exception. The gray squirrel was harmless. As food for man, he was of some value. The snake was worthless and also dangerous to man. Then, as the copperhead paused and raised himself for the death stroke, the human watcher suddenly leveled his weapon and severed the poisonous head from that dullish-brown body.

As the report crashed forth on the stillness, and the frightened squirrel went bounding off with a series of chatterings like a thing gone insane, Morton got to his feet with a laugh. "Don't mention it, little beggar," he said with another hearty chuckle. "Glad to do it!"

Then, as he started to walk off, an accident happened. Morton stepped on a round, loose rock no larger than an egg, and, even as he toppled over, he knew that he had seriously sprained his left ankle.

For an instant, Morton lay still, the excruciating dart of pain that shot through his leg causing him to bite his lips in agony. Presently he managed to right himself and lean back against the log. Then he got busy quickly. His foot was already swelling, making it impossible for him to unlace the moccasined boot. Extracting from the leather sheath the hunting knife he constantly carried at his belt, he slit the laces as well as part of the uppers.

"And that's bad luck," he grunted grimly, with the rueful air of a man to whom shoe leather meant much.

Traveling, at present, was going to be pretty hard work. Of course he could drag himself or hobble across the small mountain to the west and make the nearest habitation—the shack of one Ike Saunders, a trapper. It was between four and five miles away. It would be a difficult journey, yet it was the only thing to do. The chances of any one passing were a hundred to one, and he did not care to play against those odds. Ike Saunders' cabin, he decided, was the best bet.

Nevertheless, Morton intended resting for a quarter of an hour before he began the painful journey. Adjusting his body to an easier position, he closed his eyes. He could not, however, refrain from thinking bitterly of what now seemed like certain failure. He would be in no condition, for at least a few weeks, to continue his trailing of the mighty grizzly. By that time, without doubt, the bear would either have quit the region or been conquered by another hunter. Luck, anyway, was against him.

Just how long Morton ruminated the woodsman was never able to say. He had gone off in a slight doze, for the long weeks of dogged hunting, coupled with his wounded ankle, had told on him. Suddenly he was awake—tinglingly awake. Not a muscle of his body, not a movement of his face, portrayed the fact, however. It was some sixth sense—some weird premonition of those who dwell close to nature that had warned him. He was aware that danger was near him.

Not twenty feet away, gazing at him with a curious and almost childlike interest, was the bear that he had been trailing for so long, the grizzly that had beaten him at every play and that now appeared to hold the decisively winning hand.

IV.

AS he stayed motionless while the bear observed him, Eben Morton proved that his nerves were made of steel and his heart courageous. He knew from past experiences that the bear tribe is undoubtedly the most curious family of all the wild creatures. So long as he did not move, he was fairly certain that the huge beast, towering up into the air on his hind feet, would not attack him.

The animal, realizing that he held any situation that might arise completely under control, would humor his curious

streak and wait to see what the apparently sleeping and possibly lifeless man might do.

The woodsman was aware that he could not remain immovable indefinitely. Even if he were able to stall his enemy off for a time, of what use would it all be? His rifle, when he had fallen, had left his grasp. He could see it, but he could not reach it. It was four or five feet away, beyond his grasp.

If he reached for it—if he made the slightest gesture in its direction—that massive, upstanding bulk would be crashing on him and ripping out his life with a single slash of mighty claws even before his arm could travel half the distance to the firearm.

Despairingly black as the outlook was, Morton still kept his head. His alert eye, through a tiny slit of his lids, rested on a little gray form on a branch directly over the head of the grizzly. It was the same squirrel whose life he had saved by killing the copperhead. The animal, now, was tensely watching the scene below him, much in the same manner as the woodsman had watched that other drama. So intent was the squirrel that he had stopped eating, holding a partly munched hickory between his forepaws as he gazed downward, round-eyed and silent.

"Maybe if it wasn't for you, you lucky little beggar," Eben Morton thought, "I wouldn't be in this——" He gasped in astonishment.

It all happened swiftly. The squirrel, so absorbed in the events below, dropped his nut. Eben Morton saw it fall—fall and strike that towering bear squarely and surely on the tip of the nose.

From then on, events rushed to a climax. Morton heard a roar like thunder, he saw the gigantic creature whirl madly about—and then he flung himself at his rifle. Crouching behind the log, he leveled the powerful weapon and emptied the magazine at the bellowing form. When the smoke cleared, the murderous grizzly lay inert, his heart literally riddled.

"Well," mused Eben Morton with a grin, as he crawled off on his way to the cabin of the trapper several minutes later, "I may have a leg that'll hold me down for a few weeks, but it's mighty nice to know I'll have a hundred-dollar credit at the store this winter."

The gray squirrel chattered in fright for a time, then he ran down the tree and recovered the nut he had dropped.

ONE GRAND HOCKEY MAN

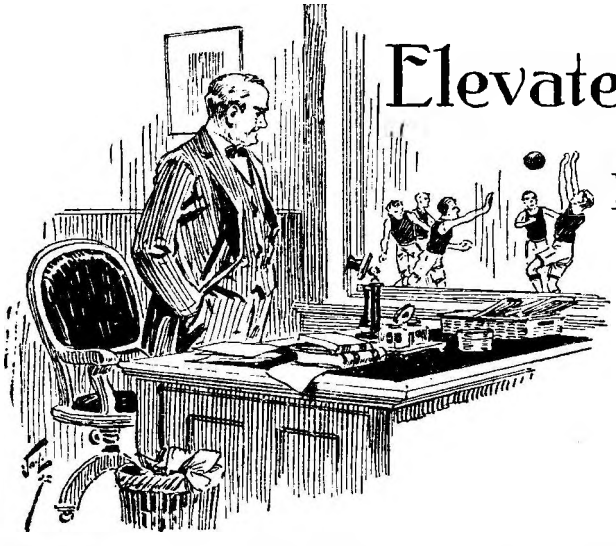
By Herbert L. McNary

YOU ta'k abat thees Baby Ruth, thees fighter Jacque Dempsey;
But if you want wan gran' athlete, *bien!* Lissong to me.
Pierre le Bon wan hockey man; no man can skate lack heem;
An' he can heet that puck so fast, that puck it can't be seen.

You t'ink that can't be so, m'sieu'? Lissong until you hear:
Wan day we play an' get no goal, the end we know ees near,
We fight for puck at other goal, Pierre, he fall down twice,
Then leap up queek an' skate away with steek pressed close to ice.

He skate lack fool, then turn damn queek, an' swing with all hees might.
Pierre, he jus' point to the cage—the puck, it ees inside!
Players an' people all look blank, m'sieu', a funny sight!
The foe, they howl an' crowd up close; they t'ink Pierre has lied.

They shout an' dance lack crazee man, an' cry "It ees a trick!
That time Pierre fall down," they say, "he shove thees puck in slick."
Pierre jus' shrug an' point to puck an' tell the referee:
"By gar, I heet thees puck so hard, the eye it cannot see!"



Elevated Victory

By Ernest A Phillips

AN amused sparkle flashed in Jerry McDowell's blue eyes. "You're funny, Andy," he remarked with a chuckle. "Pick me to do the dirty work. Why don't you go in and see old 'C. D.' yourself?"

Andy Borland, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, eyed the captain of the recently organized Hillyards basketball team curiously. "Well, you're the captain of the five, Jerry," he replied. "And it—it seems as though it's your job."

"Sure; he's the bird to see old C. D. and what's his idea in duckin' his duty?" declared Oliver McIntyre, a guard on the team. Facing Jerry McDowell, he continued: "All you gotta do, Jerry, is to brace the old gent, see? Explain to him the free advertising his firm'll get from the newspapers. Tell him how the sport pages will carry standings on the Merchant's League and how the name of his establishment will be in print during the season. Why, he'll snap at that like a salmon turning handsprings to swallow a fly!"

Arguments of various kinds continued as the members of the newly formed team tried to convince Jerry McDowell that he, as captain of the quintet, should step into C. D. Conery's private office and read the riot act to him.

How McDowell feared old C. D.! McDowell, who had been employed by the big wholesale firm for over two years, had never loved his boss. To McDowell, C. D. Conery, president of the Conery Wholesale Grocery Co., was a natural-born crab, a sour simp who absolutely refused to grow interested in anything save the difficult art of rolling up a fortune, a species of humanity who deprived himself of innumerable luxuries and amusements as he devoted eighteen of the twenty-four hours of each day to his business.

The Merchant's Basketball League had just been formed. Eight teams, made up of players employed by different business establishments, had entered. Jerry McDowell, after talking it over with followers of the sport he knew would be interested in the organization of a five to represent the Hillyards, as they had decided to call themselves, taking the name from a widely known brand of merchandise that the Conery firm handled exclusively, had succeeded in entering the team.

In two days, a forfeit of twenty-five dollars had to be posted to guarantee that the team would finish out its schedule. In two weeks, the season would open —and members of the team had decided that old C. D. should furnish the equipment and basketball suits.

At last Jerry McDowell, sighing wearily, shrugged his shoulders. "Seeing that I'm the goat, I'll go in an' break the news to the old wart," he said, and whirled about and started toward C. D. Conery's

private office, where he knew he would receive a cold reception.

"Atta boy, Jerry!" shouted Andy Borland. "Don't weaken, now!"

As he neared the door leading into the private office of old C. D., McDowell felt his throat grow dry and parched. He paused before the door uncertainly.

"Oh, well, Columbus took a chance and died in jail, so what's the diff?" he eventually asked himself as he rapped on the door.

"Come in!" growled a voice from within.

McDowell's heart throbbed. He took his cap in his hands and timidly entered the office, finding the squinted eyes of old C. D. glaring savagely at him over the glasses the president wore while at work.

Recognizing Jerry McDowell, one of his shipping clerks, old C. D. scowled, dropping the letter he had been reading.

"What do you want in here at this hour of the day?" the president demanded. "Don't you know I'm not to be disturbed at this hour—my busiest time!"

McDowell fumbled nervously at his twisted cap. "I—Mr. Conery—it'll only take a moment. We've—some of the boys in your plant have formed a basketball team. We've entered the Merchant's League, and——"

Old C. D. waved for silence as he got to his feet. "So you haven't got enough work to keep you busy back there? Anna, bring me the pay-roll sheets! My overhead is too great as it is. Glance through that list of names in the shipping department and check them up. Let me know who the last two men were we employed. I'll discharge them. That will do away with some of this foolishness!" he blazed, as his secretary-stenographer stepped briskly toward a large filing cabinet.

Old C. D., his face flushed from excitement, then gazed fiercely at Jerry McDowell.

"So it's basketball, is it? Humph! Boy's game! Kids play it in school! Why, Jerry——" Old C. D. paused, shaking his head sadly as he looked at the embarrassed visitor before him. "I'm shocked at—you!"

Jerry McDowell tried to weather the storm, but he felt himself gradually slipping. From outside of the door he thought he could hear hoarse laughs, coming from those who had elected him captain, who had convinced him that he was the one who should approach old C. D.

"But, Mr. Conery," he managed to say, "it's at nights, when we are through work, that the games are played. It won't interfere with our work, here at the plant. And look at the advertising! We've named the club the Hillyards—that'll advertise your flour! The papers will be printing the name every day—it'll be advertising you could not buy, Mr. Conery." McDowell took special pains to place emphasis upon the advertising old C. D. could not buy; and at once C. D.'s attitude shifted, and the entire complexion of the situation changed accordingly.

Old C. D. began to see light. Free advertising! Would not cost a cent! Papers would print the name every day! Old C. D., who was barely forty-two, but who was called old because he was an old grouch and penny crazy, sank into his swivel chair. He turned toward his secretary-stenographer. "Oh, Anna! Never mind those names—just now," he said, barely above a whisper.

Then he addressed McDowell. "Have a seat there," said the president. "Let me understand this. You have formed a basketball team. You have named it the Hillyards. You will play in the Merchant's League. The newspapers will publish the league standings, you say. In other words, Hillyards will appear in print—free?"

McDowell nodded. "Yes, sir. And all we ask you to do, Mr. Conery, is to furnish us with the equipment and suits."

The words caused as great an explosion as if a stick fo dynamite had been touched off. Old C. D. threw up his hands in horror.

"I knew there was a catch in it some place!" he roared. "Back to your work, Jerry, and don't bother me with that foolishness again! It's kid's play, and you're a grown man with a wife and baby to support."

McDowell knew further arguing would be useless. He knew old C. D. In fact,

he was surprised that he had held the president's attention as long as he had. Disappointed by the failure, after success had seemed almost certain, he left the private office of the old tightwad.

"I—— Any luck, Jerry?" asked Andy Borland impatiently, anxious to know what decision had been reached.

Jerry McDowell grunted in disgust. "You're a fine bunch of hamstrings," he muttered, "to send me in to see that old grouch! Why, he was goin' to can two of you monkeys before I had been in there twenty seconds. Said basketball was a boy's game, to be played in school; yelled like a lion with the toothache when I braced him for the suits, and"—Jerry waved his arms hopelessly—"it's all off as far as C. D. is concerned. We'll have to buy our own layout and all chip in to meet the forfeit demand."

The decision of old C. D. came as no surprise. It had been anticipated before Jerry McDowell had entered the president's office to explain the situation. Mumbling and grumbling among themselves, the members of the five at last made up the amount of the forfeit and drew up plans for purchasing their own equipment and suits.

II.

DAYS passed. For two months C. D. Conery had been suffering from a strange malady. First, his appetite had begun to shrink. Then followed sleepless nights, nights when he would roll and toss after going to bed, nights that gradually began to be torture.

Old C. D. was worried. He was so wrapped up in his business, however, that he ignored the warnings that he was working far too strenuously, using up his reserve supply of physical and mental energy, beginning to break under the heavy strain of toil.

Indigestion paid him a series of visits. Old C. D. felt dizzy when he got up from his office chair and walked about, while pondering some problem that had to be solved. His sleepless nights continued, grew worse. The time came when fear bothered him. Always, always there lurked in his brain a fear; he was afraid he would go bankrupt; he was fearful he would die; he worried because he thought his friends were turning against him; jealous, perhaps, over the success he was enjoying.

In time, dark circles formed beneath his eyes; a dull, dead aching was in his head; a drawing sensation that made him believe some invisible monster of horror was pulling a piece of wire down through his brain left old C. D. in a pitiful condition.

His wife told him he had been talking in his sleep and begged with him to visit a physician and be examined.

Old C. D. ignored the suggestion. He worked harder, trying to keep his business moving, increasing, expanding.

After a time, lassitude fell upon him. He began to lose interest in life, in his work, his home. He did not care to talk to his wife. His two little boys grew to be afraid of him.

"What you need is a complete rest, Carl," Mrs. Conery said almost every morning as her husband would try to eat his breakfast, only to find his appetite missing. "You're working too hard. You're racing against time, and you will have a complete nervous breakdown, if you do not watch yourself."

Old C. D. would merely grumble as he would leave the table and dash to his office, there to try to forget his weariness by forcing himself to work. Quite by accident, one day, he met a friend while on his way to luncheon, Doctor W. L. Tilt, with whom he had attended college.

"Carl, what's the matter with you?" asked the physician in surprise, catching sight of the eyes, the pale complexion, and sunken cheeks of his friend.

C. D. tried to smile. "Little under the weather is all, Walt," he replied feebly. "Where you going?"

"To the club for lunch; come on and eat with me," invited the physician. "Why, it's been nearly six months since I've seen you. Business must take a lot of your time!"

Grudgingly, old C. D. went to lunch with the doctor. He wished he had taken another street, for he had now reached the stage where he wanted to be alone, away from everybody. Tilt ordered a large meal; C. D. merely a few things.

"No appetite," the business man explained as he wrote out his simple order. "Stomach on the bum; can't eat much."

Tilt nodded. "Yes; and you don't sleep much either, do you?" he asked accusingly. "You have no interest in life; you're run down; your nervous system is starved, and you are all upset. You are afraid, and your fear makes it impossible for you to concentrate as you should and as you have in the past. I know your case, Carl—neurasthenia; and it'll get you, if you don't check up and slow down."

At first, old C. D. was pleased to hear the diagnosis of his case. He was glad to have his emotions and thoughts and actions understood so well. The last words of his friend caused him to wince, however, and a fresh fear clutched at his brain.

As they ate, Tilt eyed his friend closely, but without arousing suspicion.

"How's the wife—and kids?" he asked, after a time.

Old C. D. grumbled an indistinct reply.

Over their coffee, Tilt pointed an accusing finger across the table. "What you need is something to get your mind off your business, Carl," he said. "You aren't getting enough exercise. You ought to give your body a treat, do something that will tire you physically. You'd better leave business alone for a while and get straightened up. No 'ifs' and 'ands' about it—you won't go broke even if you don't go into your office for a month."

Old C. D. tried to protest, but his objections were quickly smashed.

As they were about to part, Tilt handed his friend a prescription. "Get those pills, and take them until you rattle like a can full of marbles—and get some exercise. You're a goner, if you don't."

Just why he did it, old C. D. hardly knew, but he got the pills and grudgingly took them according to the directions on the box.

III.

A WEEK later, C. D. Conery sat at his desk, the morning newspaper in his hands, turned back at the sport page. As he stared at the print, he grumbled disgustingly. His Hillyards had lost their second straight basketball game.

"Free advertising!" he growled. "Humph! Team in last place; so far down in the standing nobody could see it without using a spyglass! Don't even write anything about its games; gives all the space to the winners! Humph! Free advertising—blah!"

Old C. D. hurled the crumpled paper into the wastebasket at his side, snorting angrily.

"Got to be a winner to get free advertising; got to be right up there, heading the list," he mumbled later, still pondering over the problem. "It's the winner that people take interest in. They look to see who's winning; they don't care nothing for a loser—and my Hillyards in last place! Why, it's a disgrace!"

Yet, as he sat there, old C. D. felt a queer emotion fluttering in his mind. A curious gleam sparkled in his eyes. He got to his feet and bounded out of his private office.

Anna Heffington, his secretary-stenographer, gazed after him wonderingly. She shook her head sadly. "He used to be easy to work for, but he's a terror now," she said with a sigh.

Out into the shipping rooms went old C. D., watching the work of the truckers and clerks for the first time in months. The men looked up, surprised to find the president wandering around.

"What's ailin' the old grouch, anyway?" whispered Andy Borland, nudging Pete Vaden and pointing to old C. D.

Vaden laughed. "Lookin' over his wonderful basketball stars, I guess," he replied.

Andy Borland flushed. "You win!" he said with a chuckle.

Presently old C. D. stepped up beside Jerry McDowell. The captain of the basketball team blinked in astonishment, unable to believe his eyes. Old C. D. in the shipping rooms! It seemed impossible.

"Fine basketball team you got, Jerry," barked the president.

McDowell shuffled his feet uncomfortably. "I—— We lost two tough games, sir," he said. "A free throw beat us in one, and we lost the other in the last minute of play."

Old C. D. snorted. "Don't alibi, Jerry." He laughed chidingly. "What you need

is another good basketball player. Now I—I won my letter as a forward in high school, young man. Of course, that was years ago; but—but I can come back. When do you work-out again?"

Jerry McDowell's eyes glared in amazement at old C. D. Was the old grouch going insane? "Why—at the Y. M. C. A. to-night, sir," he answered. "At eight-fifteen, until nine o'clock."

"I'll be there," said the president. He whirled and walked away from the dazed captain of the Hillyards.

If old C. D. had looked back or if he had reëntered the shipping rooms five minutes later, he would have thought his clerks and truckers were holding a convention, deciding whether or not to go out on strike. There they all were, gathered around McDowell, asking questions, trying to find out what had taken place, endeavoring to learn what had happened to old C. D.

IV.

OF course, he isn't what he might once have been," Jerry McDowell was saying, as his Hillyard players neared the dressing room with him on the night of their game against the Woodbines, a few days later. "But he's been working like the dickens, and he's beginnin' to take an interest in us, so let's—well, stick him in for a few minutes to-night. What say?"

"Fine!" exclaimed Andy Borland. "Let him take my place. It'll tickle the old boy to death!"

McDowell motioned for silence as they entered the dressing room, there to find old C. D. attired in a Hillyard basketball suit, fat about the waist to be sure, but ready to play just the same.

He greeted all the players joyously. "More fun than I've had in my life!" he declared, throwing his sweater around his shoulders. Say, Mr. Captain, do I get into any of these games or am I merely a sub?"

Jerry McDowell held back a smile at the question. "You're getting in there to-night," was what he replied.

The Woodbines, tied with the Hillyards for last place, each club having lost three games without winning a single contest, proved not to be dangerous. After the first ten minutes of play, Captain McDowell motioned Andy Borland to the bench and old C. D. into the game at right forward.

Andy Borland was smiling as he gladly left the court. The fans assembled to witness the game shrieked in delight when old C. D. trotted across to his position. Employees of his firm, huddled together behind the Hillyard bench, cheered him long and loud.

Old C. D. felt like a growing boy again! Chills of enthusiasm darted up his spinal column. The feel of the game was racing through his veins. His heart was pumping madly. His eyes gleamed brilliantly, and he began to feel like the C. D. of yore.

Play started. Within five minutes the Woodbines had picked old C. D. as the weak link of the Hillyard defense. They concentrated their attack against his position. He fought gamely, but gradually felt himself being shoved aside, weakening under the attack.

The Woodbines registered several baskets and, throwing a free goal, ran their score up to sixteen. The Hillyards, through brilliant work of Captain McDowell, at left forward, and "Chuck" Rollins, at guard, had registered five baskets for ten points.

The first half ended with that score.

"I—maybe you'd better put Andy back in," panted old C. D. between halves. "I —well, I'm not as good as I used to be."

Captain McDowell pointed a finger at the president of the Conery Wholesale Grocery Co. "You stick right in there and fight, get me? Fight and fight hard. Don't ever think of quitting! We can trim this bunch. Can't we, gang?"

The yells in reply caused old C. D. to determine to do his part.

With a whirlwind rush the Hillyards bunched three baskets in a row to start the second half, drawing up within striking distance of their opponents, who were but one point ahead, having made a free toss.

Old C. D. was a new man now. What had once seemed hopeless now stood forth glaringly easy to accomplish. The desire for victory rushed through him. Before he knew it, he was shouting and yelling at his players, giving encouragement at every turn.

The Woodbines struggled determinedly, going on the defensive as the Hillyards attacked furiously. In the last two minutes of play, with one point needed to tie or two points needed to win, the Hillyards fought hard. Once, after superlative work, Eddie Ingersoll, at guard, obtained the ball.

Seeing old C. D. near his basket, he hurled the ball perfectly at him. Old C. D. whirled and shot at the basket. The ball bounded off the backboards and into the hands of the enemy, missing the rim by inches.

"Oughta had it, old sport!" yelled McDowell, across the court. "That woulda been the game!"

Time was called, with less than a minute to go. Captain McDowell raced up to his center, whispering something in his ear. Roy Comstock nodded, a mysterious twinkle showing in his eyes. Play was resumed.

"Be ready now, C. D.," said Jerry McDowell. "Here's where we cop this game and get our first win of the season."

Hardly had he spoken the words when Roy Comstock leaped high into the air, expertly pushing the ball back to Captain McDowell, who stood waiting, ready to make a bluff pass. Seeing him draw back his hands to toss the ball, the Woodbine guard sprinted away. McDowell dribbled the ball twice, looked up. Seeing old C. D. standing there in front of the basket, he passed the ball to his employer and raced up beside Roy Comstock. McDowell and his center stooped down and locked hands in front of the amazed C. D.

"Step up here—and make it sure!" advised McDowell.

Old C. D., seeing what was going on, leaped into action, just as a guard endeavored to intercept him. One step put him upon the human elevated platform and within a fraction of a second he reached forward from his balanced position and dropped the ball.

A moan arose from the Hillyard followers, for the ball had not dropped cleanly through the basket. It struck the side of the rim, rolled around twice, wavering at times, as though undecided whether to fall into the net or bounce down upon the court again.

The referee put his whistle to his mouth, waiting to see what the ball did, before ending the game.

Old C. D. choked hard. "Go in—go in—go in!" he kept yelling, nervously.

The ball dropped into the basket, falling down through the net for the points that gave the Hillyards their first win of the season.

Within a minute old C. D. was surrounded by enthusiastic admirers. As he grasped hand after hand, he grabbed one that clung tightly. He looked up into the face of Tilt, the doctor.

"That's the stuff, Carl!" The physician laughed. "Get in here with the boys—and enjoy life! Nice work."

V.

WHEN he reached home that evening, old C. D. Conery was bubbling with enthusiasm. As he entered the house, he was whistling a snappy little tune. His wife looked up curiously. For the first time in months, he met her gaze with a smile. She beamed happily, for, to her, Carl Conery was the Carl Conery of old—no longer the grouch.

C. D. threw himself down on the carpet beside her chair. She laid her magazine aside wonderingly.

"You should have seen it, Tiddle!" he exclaimed. "Wait until you see the newspapers in the morning. My, but it was great! We won our first game of the season to-night, dear; and—and the boys fixed it so that I was able to throw the winning basket!

"Here, let me have your hands." He reached up, grabbing his left wrist with his right hand. "Now you take hold of my wrist the same way. There—that's it. See the step it makes, when you're stooped down? Well, they fixed that for me, right under the basket, dear—and all I had to do was step up and drop the ball through! Wait until you see the papers; I bet they mention it!"

It was late that night when C. D. went to bed. His head touched the pillow, and the next thing he knew it was morning. He looked in the newspaper the first thing and read the account of the basketball game with a smile that lasted for a long time.

Tale of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police

Frozen Magic

By Albert M. Treynor

WHILE trailing a murderer, Corporal David Dexter, of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, came upon an isolated cabin in the wilderness, where he found two men. He arrested them, secured them so they could not escape, then went to look after his horse. On his return, he found the cabin door fastened and heard a woman's voice. Seemingly she was speaking to some one at a distance, then two shots were fired.

Dexter broke into the cabin, found the two prisoners had been shot and killed, but that the woman had vanished, leaving no trace. No means of communication could be found. A telephone instrument, without wires, not connected anywhere, added to the mystery.

Puzzled by the disappearance of the woman, Dexter searched for evidence of her departure, but found none. Thirty feet from the cabin, however, he discovered small footprints in the snow. He followed them; they led him in a circle, back to the cabin, which was in flames. The two prisoners were burned in the fire.

Dexter at last captured a girl, bringing her to Colonel Devreaux, an officer of the R. C. M. P. who was out after criminals. The girl, who said her name was Alison Rayne, denied having killed Dexter's prisoners, but refused to answer questions. Devreaux started with her for the nearest police post.

By following the girl's back trail, Dexter came to another cabin, which contained a man who said his name was "Tom Brown" whose arm was hurt. During the night, Dexter heard Brown talking to some one who was seemingly at a distance, telling the other person to go to Saddle Notch. Brown finished his end of the conversation with the words: "Good-by, Alison."

After trying in vain to discover how Brown had communicated with the other person, Dexter decided to go to Saddle Notch. When some distance away from the mountains, he saw a figure upon the rim of a precipice. Through his binoculars, the corporal recognized Alison Rayne.

CHAPTER XIX.

PATHS OF PERIL.

OVERCOME by astonishment, for he was sure that Devreaux had started with the girl for Fort Dauntless, Dexter stood motionless and breathless, peering at the far-off figure with swimming senses, exerting all his will force to keep the binoculars from wabbling in his tightly gripped hands. He had come there looking for Alison Rayne—on a fool's chase, he had persuaded himself a moment before—and now, when he actually saw her, he found himself staring across space with the awed wonderment of a man who beholds a miraculous apparition.

So the young man in the cabin yonder had reached her with his message of warning. Speaking in low-pitched, half-muttered accents, under pretense of talking in his sleep, his voice must have been carried by some strange sorcery through the leagues of forest, to be heard by listening ears. Brown had called to Alison, and the girl had answered. He advised her to flee to Saddle Mountain, and she had come to the appointed place. All of which seemed to establish positive proof that the two were in communication during that dark morning hour when Dexter had been aroused at the sound of the voice in the cabin bunk.

The incredible, staggering facts defied all reason. Without radio equipment or the strung wires of a telephone line, there was no imaginable way in which two

people might hold long-distance conversations. Yet it was manifest that these two had done something of the sort. By what hidden medium the word had passed, Dexter was utterly unable to guess.

He did not know what to think. He only knew that young Brown had tried to deceive him. Not only was it certain now that the youth knew Alison Rayne, but it was apparent that there was some secret, sympathetic understanding between them. And by inference it must also seem that both were implicated in the affairs at the other cabin, where a woman's voice had been transmitted in the same mysterious way.

With his features set in a scowl, Dexter surveyed the distant heights. As far as he could make out, the girl was alone. So it was evident that in some manner she had outwitted the vigilant Devreaux; she must have escaped some time during the previous night. If the colonel were alive and able to travel, he would be following her. It was the logical supposition that he was on her trail now, following, probably, not far behind.

The fact that she was taking a short cut to the lower valley, over the brink of a dangerous cliff, would indicate desperate haste. No pursuer was visible at that moment, but from his position the corporal was unable to see what might be happening behind the brow of the high terrace. It was quite possible that a second moving speck would soon heave into sight.

Meanwhile, Dexter turned his glasses back toward the girl, and his lips twisted at the corners into a grim, inexorable smile. Thanks to the hunter's instinct, he had traveled to this place on blind impulse, disregarding logic and reason; and now he held the strategic ground, waiting to cut off the girl's escape.

At the distance the cliff had the appearance of a smooth-faced, perpendicular wall. Presumably, however, the surface was not as steep as the observer first imagined, or else there were cracks and projecting points to afford a foothold. At any rate, the tiny figure seemed to cling securely to the dizzy patch, as a swift hangs against the side of a chimney; and slowly, by almost imperceptible degrees, it crept downward from the brink.

As Dexter watched with bated breath, he could not help but marvel at the resolution and cool-headed nerve that dared try to make such a hazardous descent. To gain the valley by a safer path, however, would mean a four-or-five-mile tramp by way of the cañonlike notch that broke into the northern shoulder of the mountain. In all probability the fugitive was closely pursued, and as Dexter had found out by previous experience, Alison Rayne was not the sort to weigh difficulties and dangers when freedom was at stake.

Apparently she had reason to accept a life-or-death chance at the threat of recapture. Not knowing Devreaux as the men of his command knew him, she might too readily assume that the bulky, middle-aged policeman would think twice before clambering after her over a precipice.

Dexter looked on fearfully, with his tongue between his teeth. Even through his binoculars, the form on the cliff was limned in miniature, like an animated toy. The small figure crept downward with agonizing slowness, feeling cautiously for each new foothold, groping with clinging fingers, counting the distance gained by inches. Realizing the danger of startling the girl by showing himself at such a moment, the corporal restrained his anxieties and held his position, waiting.

He was peering tensely through the glasses, scarcely breathing, when all at once his heart gave a spasmodic jump. The climbing shape seemed to lose contact with the wall—slipping; and as he stared with horrified eyes, the little figure swayed sidewise, flung up vainly reaching arms, and suddenly dropped from view.

Dexter felt a sharp, muscular shrinking in his body, and for an instant his senses swirled with a queer physical sickness. Instinctively his eyes shut, dreading the anguish of seeing. In a moment, however, he shook off the first feeling of giddiness and, by a strong mental effort, forced himself to look again. Breathing audibly through tight-clenched teeth, he steadied himself and held the glasses firm.

Gradually he lowered the lenses, and then suddenly a great gasping sigh heaved up from the depths of his chest, and his sagging shoulders lifted, as though relieved of a crushing weight. At a point midway down the cliff, he once more had caught sight of the small, clinging figure.

His eyes aglow with thanksgiving, he stared intently and at once understood what had happened. The girl must have lost her footing somehow, falling down the face of the cliff. Instead of plunging to her death among the rocks at the bottom, however, she landed providentially upon some sort of shelf or ledge, only a few feet below, and with quick wit had caught a handgrip and anchored herself to the projecting stone.

For the time being she had saved herself, but as Dexter gazed toward the far-off heights, fresh misgivings smote him. The girl was huddled against the flat wall, resting partly on one knee, her hands spread out before her. Dexter watched dubiously for a space, and she did not try to move. He could not make out her face, nor was he able to see how she managed to hold on; but there was a drooping limpness in the posture of the tiny figure, and he realized that she was in distress.

Either she was hurt, or else she had lost confidence and was afraid to stir from an insecure resting place. In either case, she needed help. Dexter promptly left the shelter of the trees and started forward, running quickly across the snowy meadow.

The ground underfoot was broken by pits and furrows, but he plunged on recklessly, measuring his stride by instinct, keeping his anxious glances for the heights above. Before he had traversed half the distance, the girl discovered his approach. He saw her look over her shoulder, and then raise herself abruptly, as though actuated by some rash purpose.

Alarmed, he waved his arm, motioning her furiously to hold her position. She gazed upward at the towering rocks above, but after an interval she sank down motionless once more, hugging the cliff in seeming helplessness, apparently unable or unwilling to risk the return trip.

Fast as he ran, it took Dexter several minutes to cross the strip of open ground. At length he neared the foot of the acclivity and could appraise the difficulties that confronted him. The cliff, rising with vertical face to a height of a hundred feet or more, was formed of stratified rock—great slabs, lying one upon another, like a pile of unevenly stacked books.

Edges of stone jutted out at frequent intervals to make narrow ledges. There were interstices between the slabs that would enable a climber to mount from one broad resting place to the next, all the way to the top.

During occasional hunts for mountain sheep and goats, Dexter had clambered up more dangerous steeps than this. It was as though steps had been chiseled here in readiness for his use. His only fear was of rotting rock. Stratification is caused by weathering and the crumbling away of stone in scales and veins; and in the process of erosion the projecting rocks are gradually pitted and undermined and hence are likely to break off at the lightest pressure.

A great heap of these fallen fragments was banked against the foot of the precipice, but the corporal scrambled up over the pile and presently stood under the shelf where the girl was crouching. He could see her white face peering over a ledge, seventy feet above.

"What's the matter?" he shouted.

"A step gave way and let me drop," she called down in a shaken voice. "I caught on here—just barely—and now, I can't get up or down."

"Stay quiet, then," Dexter commanded sharply. "I'll be with you in a minute."

"You—you can't," she faltered. "Nobody could get here. If you had a rope—from above——"

"I have no rope, and I'm not above," he cut in shortly. He unstrapped his heavy pack and dropped it at his feet. His carbine he buckled tightly across his back by its carrying sling. He had remembered that the girl expected to meet a companion somewhere in this vicinity. While no third person had put in an appearance as yet, Dexter had no way of knowing whom he might encounter on the other side of the terrace, and he had no intention of going anywhere unarmed.

CHAPTER XX.

DANGER ABOVE AND BELOW.

AS Dexter stood silent for a moment, studying the precipitous slope above him, he heard a splintering sound, and a detached fragment of stone bounced down from the cliff and struck the ground behind him. Craning his neck backward, he saw that the girl had shifted her position and was gazing over the brink, as though her glance were held in dreadful fascination by the ugly rocks below.

"Don't move, and don't look down!" he shouted angrily. Then he tried to reassure her. "I'll get you off somehow. Don't worry, and hang on tight!"

"I can't—much longer," she informed him in a small, frightened voice.

"You can until I get there!" Dexter asserted gruffly, and picking a first toehold, he started to ascend the cliff.

For the first thirty or forty feet, the cliff sloped slightly back, and he mounted swiftly and almost as easily as though he were stepping up the rungs of a ladder. As he climbed higher, however, the pitch became steeper. Presently he found himself hanging on a sheer wall, depending for support on the muscular grip of toes and fingers. The way seemed feasible, however, and after a hasty inspection of the frowning elevation, he continued to pull himself upward.

From now on he moved slowly, with infinite caution. The least miscalculation would mean a sickening fall, probably death. The crannies between the layers of rock ran in horizontal lines, at frequent, almost regular, intervals, like mortar cracks in a crumbling stone building. By alternating with hands and feet, he was able to hoist himself without great effort.

Unfortunately, however, snow had drifted into the crevices, and it was not always possible to judge the condition of the rock underneath. Nevertheless, he inched his way upward, digging in firmly to keep from slipping, and testing each new stepping place before he trusted his full weight to settle. By degrees he lifted himself toward the ledge where Alison Rayne was crouching, and at length he gained a narrow niche directly beneath her.

Wedging himself in a position of brief security, he glanced overhead, and at once understood why the girl had not dared the rest of the descent. She was lodged on a sloping rock, not more than six feet above him; but between them the cliffside bulged out in an overhanging cornice, smooth as glass and utterly unscalable. By leaning outward, Dexter could see her face as she gazed over the edge.

She shuddered as her eyes encountered his anxious glance. "You can't come any farther!" she gasped. "And I—I'll be here until I have to—let—go."

"You'll stick till I come!" he told her sharply. "No nonsense!"

Abandoning the hope of reaching her from below, Dexter turned hurriedly to scan the cliffside to the right and left. In an instant the practiced mountaineer's eye had devised a path where no path existed. The fissure in which he stood slanted off at an acute angle, away from the girl's ledge, but from a higher point an open crack sloped back across the face of the precipice and crossed over the cornice rock directly above her. He calculated the chances and nodded with sudden confidence.

"Can do!" he said coolly. "How's the footing up there?"

"Narrow," she answered faintly. "I've got to hold on, and my fingers are getting cold."

"Be with you in two minutes," he promised.

The fissure was like an open chute gouged down the side of the cliff and just wide enough to admit his body. To crawl up that narrow draw with a carbine strapped to his back, however, was out of the question. His teeth clicked suddenly together. He had forgotten about the rifle. It was an impossible encumbrance if he expected to reach the girl. The only way to get rid of the weapon was to unfasten the sling and let it drop; that was a sacrifice almost suicidal to a man on winter police patrol. As he hesitated, he caught a momentary glimpse of the soft blue eyes that gazed beseechingly toward him. He drew a sharp breath.

This was no time to count personal cost. With a decisive movement, his hand reached toward the shoulder strap;

but as he touched the buckle, some vaguely stirring sense of alarm checked him and drew his glance toward the height above.

Dexter looked upward, and his jaw fell, and he stared in wide-eyed astonishment. From the brink of the cliff, not thirty feet overhead, a man was peering down at him.

It was an unwholesome-looking countenance, pinkish in color, evil, smirking, with loose, flabby jowls, flat, broad nostrils, and a pair of elongated slits for eyes. Dexter remembered the rogue's gallery photograph buttoned in his jacket pocket, but he did not need any print to identify the physiognomy he saw now in the flesh. That leering face was unforgetable. The man on the cliff could be none other than the fugitive murderer, "Pink" Crill, the outlaw that Colonel Devreaux had been trying to catch.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE BRINK OF DEATH.

IN the shocking moment of discovery, Dexter found no time to wonder what malignant fate had brought the crook here at this unwelcome juncture. He merely grasped the fact that Pink Crill was kneeling on the cliff above, looking down at him. Instinctively he crowded himself into his niche, shrinking inwardly. It was a seventy-foot drop to the rocks below, and he knew at sight that this Crill was a man without scruple or mercy. The crevice offered some protection, but after crouching motionless for tense seconds, the corporal craned his head back and ventured another glance upward. The face had disappeared.

Dexter was positive that he had been seen and was not misled by false hope. Crill had withdrawn, but he certainly would come back. Probably he was only hunting boulders to roll over the cliff. Meanwhile, however, the victim had a slender chance of saving himself. It would be the part of sanity to scramble down with all haste from his unsafe roosting place. Dexter might possibly reach the bottom before the murderer returned.

In the fractional second of his indecision, Dexter's thoughts were sharply recalled by a sob of distress, low and piteous, that came from the girl. Casting a glance in her direction, he looked into Alison Rayne's horror-stricken eyes. She was staring full at Dexter and apparently was unaware of the ominous presence above.

"I'm slipping!" she whispered chokingly. "If you're coming—please—help me——"

"Coming!" he said, curt and incisive. "Hold on, I tell you!"

His hand went up again and found the carbine sling. The buckle came open with a snap; the strap jerked apart and slipped over his shoulder. The next second, as he jammed his body into the crevice and started to work his way upward, he heard the crash of his rifle striking on broken stones far below.

If by unforeseen good luck he ever reached the clifftop—he still would have his pistol. At present, however, the holstered weapon was a useless appendage, much in the way. With an impatient yank and a twist, he drew his belt around so the pistol might bump against the small of his back and not interfere with his movements. Then, with thighs and shoulders braced against the sides of the fissure, clinging mostly by force of adhesion, he wriggled and hitched himself up the slanting chute, as a chimney sweep goes up a flue.

In a moment Dexter had gained an elevation level with the shelf where Alison Rayne still held on with the clutch of despair. Six feet more of the elbow-bruising ascent, and he was able to reach the lateral crack that led back across the sheer face of the precipice to the girl's ledge.

To his joy he found that the underlip of the crack sloped inward, affording a slight ridge for his fingers to grip. Fortune granted him no other concession, however. Beyond him stretched a bare rock wall, a smooth, ten-foot reach, without any cranny or projecting point that his toe might touch.

He paused only to measure his distance, and then securing his hold in the crack, he swung out against the cliff. For a moment he hung swaying, dangling over space, supporting his weight by his hands and upstretched arms. The brim of his Stetson pushed against the cliff,

and he tossed his head with a movement of annoyance, and the hat sailed away behind him.

"With you right away!" he assured the girl between clenched teeth, and started to work out across the wall.

Still he had heard nothing from Crill. The lines of acute anxiety were deep drawn at the corners of Dexter's eyes and lips, however. At any instant he might hear the direful sound of a rock toppling from the brink overhead, and every nerve and fiber of his body seemed to flinch before the imminence of the moment. He dared not look up; he could only look at the wall before him. Every seam and chink of that remorseless surface of rock was etched in detail, to be seared upon his memory forever.

With toes scraping and thumping, he edged his way along the crack, inch by inch, hand against hand. He had only a short distance to go, but it seemed to his overstrained faculties that he must have traversed half the width of the mountainside, when at last he put down his foot and found solid rock beneath him. For the first time he ventured to look aside, and he saw that he had reached the girl's shelf.

Breathing quickly, he let his weight down and relaxed his aching arms. His resting place was the top of an outcropping rock, about two feet wide, that tilted with a decided downward cant. He dug with his hobnail boots into the rotted stone, but for further safety his hand still clung to the crack in the wall.

It was no wonder that the girl had feared she would lose her precarious hold. She wore smooth-soled boots; and the slim fingers, still grasping the ledge, were blue with the cold and stained with crimson at the tips. Dexter reached toward her, passed his hand beneath her armpit, and drew her against his supporting shoulder.

She swayed closer, trembling, her face hidden in the curve of his arm. "Oh, thanks—thanks!" she whispered in broken, breathless accents. "You're here!"

"Steady!" he said, his voice low and soothing. "Take it easy, Alison. All right now." He slid his arm about her waist, and managed to get hold of both of her icy hands. "Why, they must be numb!" he exclaimed. "Here—let's get 'em warm. We've got to start circulation."

"I don't know how I lasted," she said with a shudder, clinging tighter to him. "I was afraid—I never thought——"

"Don't think about it," he advised. "It's over with."

He leaned outward as he spoke, to gaze nervously toward the clifftop. It struck him that there was something ominous in the silence overhead. Crill had not yet returned, and the corporal could not imagine what stealthy game he was playing. Dexter dreaded seeing the man again; but the prolonged absence was disquieting.

"If by any chance the chap up there's a friend of yours," Dexter said suddenly, a note of harshness striking through his voice, "I'd advise you to have him call a truce—at least until I can get you safely out of this."

"Chap up there?" she echoed wonderingly. "My friend?"

"Pudgy, pink-faced man," he informed her. "His name is Crill."

She lifted her head with trepidation to gaze toward the top of the palisade. "I don't know any such person," she asserted, after a slight pause.

He scrutinized her searchingly for a moment. "All right," he declared. "If he's not your friend, we'd better get out of this quick. Unluckily the trip down's impossible. We've got to go on up."

As he spoke, he leaned backward to scan the cliff face above; and in a second his plan was formed. On the left of the girl, and only a couple of feet above her head, a broad-topped, solid-looking rock jutted out from the precipice wall.

Thence, for the rest of the distance upward, the masses of stratified stone sloped slightly back and offered secure stepping places that reached by easy stages all the way to the top. If they could gain the first shelf, the remaining ascent should not prove difficult.

"Feel equal to staying here alone—just for a minute?" Dexter inquired, his warm hand pressing the girl's fingers.

He felt her shoulders grow tense as she tried to steady herself. "Why, I—if I must—yes," she replied with faint assurance.

"Good girl!" he commended briskly, before she could change her mind. "Here! We'll plant you like an anchor." He showed her a tiny indentation where she could brace her foot and then helped her fix her fingers in the chink that served him for support.

Without further ado he leaned outward, crowded his body around her cowering figure, and a second later had flattened himself against the cliff at her left side. He stretched his arm overhead and touched the ledge above.

Groping, he found a small weather-gouged groove that afforded him a gripping surface. He caught his hold with both hands and drew his weight up bodily, as a gymnast chins himself. With a quick, violent effort he hooked one knee over the rim and the next moment had hoisted himself onto a wide, level shelf of stone.

As soon as he was settled in security, Dexter bent down over the edge, intending to reach the girl's hands. He realized at once, however, that he would be in danger of overbalancing if he tried to lift her in that manner. For an instant he hesitated; and then he unfastened his heavy belt, laid the pistol on the rock beside him, and let down the buckle end of the strap.

"You'll have to take it," he asserted.

"Oh, no!" she faltered, as she understood his purpose. "I—I haven't the strength left."

He regarded her fixedly for a moment, and when he spoke his tone was cold and cutting. "I somehow hadn't thought you were a coward," he said.

She threw up her head with a gasp, and a tinge of crimson suddenly showed in her cheeks. As Dexter peered down at her, he saw a gleam of recklessness flaunting in her eyes. With swift decision she released her hold on the rocks, and her hands grasped the end of the dangling belt. "Go ahead!" she cried. "I'll hang on if I can."

Dexter braced his feet firmly, leaned forward as far as he dared, exerted all the strength of his shoulders and arms, and raised her from the rock beneath and drew her up toward him. Almost before she could have realized what had happened, she was clinging on the brink. The corporal caught her about the waist and lifted her to solid footing beside him.

She turned unsteadily, her lips quivering. "I—anybody's likely to be a coward—sometimes," she whispered.

The corporal faced her with a grin. "You didn't honestly think I meant that, did you?" He slowly shook his head. "That's one thing, at least, that I'll never accuse you——"

He caught himself with a start, breaking off in the midst of speech. From somewhere overhead, he heard a quick, crunching sound, like heavy feet running in the snow. As Dexter stiffened into alertness, staring upward, a man's voice was raised suddenly in a hoarse, angry shout. Then, almost simultaneously it seemed, the clifftop reverberated with the heavy report of a pistol shot.

CHAPTER XXII.

ENEMIES UNSEEN.

THE amazing uproar lasted only for seconds, and then intense silence once more settled over the palisade. There was no one in sight, and Dexter could not imagine what calamitous events were taking place on the other side of the cliff. As his glance swept back and forth along the brink of the precipice, however, the momentary quiet was suddenly shattered by a second shot.

In a flash he stooped to grasp his pistol. "I'm going up," he told the girl, and hurriedly belted his holster about his waist. "You stay here, Alison, and I'll come back for you when I can."

Without waiting for her reply, he set his foot in the nearest cranny and started to clamber onward. The remaining distance was not far, and he went up in a rush and scrambled over the last escarpment. He reached the top and crouched warily on the brink of the cliff to survey the open ground beyond.

The plateau dipped back for a mile or more to the base of the ringing mountain peaks, and on the snow-sheeted meadow were outlined the figures of two men. One was a couple of hundred yards away, running as fast as legs would fly, heading for a distant cedar thicket and the notch that gave exit toward the northern end of the valley below.

Nearer the clifftop, another man was standing with a pistol in his hand. The second intruder, short and stocky in build, was clad in the tunic of the Mounted Police. Dexter laughed aloud.

"Hello, colonel!" he called.

The thick-set figure swung around to stare dumbly at the man on the crest behind him. "Dexter!" Devreaux blurted out in astonishment.

"By the way the other fellow keeps on going, I should judge that you're not shooting as well as you used to," remarked the corporal blandly.

"I just pitched a couple across his bows, as they say, hoping he'd halt," explained Devreaux. "Rather take him back alive if I can. If I know a pink complexion, that man's Crill."

"Unquestionably," agreed the corporal, his glance following the fleeing outlaw. The man was out of pistol range, still plowing up the snow as he sprinted for the shelter of the timber. "A person with a double chin should know better than to overexert himself," Dexter went on calmly. "He'll drop in his tracks by the time he reaches the notch."

"Sure he will!" assented Devreaux. "No sense winding ourselves in hundred-yard dashes. We can trail comfortably behind; we're sure to land him before night." He nodded with satisfaction. "Bit of luck—what? Funny thing how I walked into him like this, after all these days of futile hunting. I was coming up the draw from the south, and as I stepped into the open, there was Crill staggering toward the cliff with a big rock in his arms. When he saw me, he dropped it and ran——"

"The rock was to be bounced off my head," interrupted Dexter. "You appeared at exactly the right second!"

"Eh?" exclaimed the colonel.

"We've taken Crill's measure," observed Dexter. "Runs from a man in the open, but is willing to do casual, cold-blooded murder when his victim is unable to defend himself. I was climbing up the cliffside, you know."

"It'll be a pleasure to lay hands on him," grunted the superintendent. "Luckily, we've got him."

"Unless his friends cut in ahead of us." The corporal gazed across the plateau and saw the fugitive dart into the cover of a distant patch of trees. "I have a strong suspicion that he's not traveling alone."

Devreaux thrust his pistol back in the holster and turned abruptly upon the departing trail. "Let's go," he said. He started to move forward, but with his first step he halted and whirled to look behind him.

An avalanche of stones rattled down the slope of the cliff, and as Devreaux faced the direction of the sound, a small, white-clad figure came suddenly into view above the brink of the precipice. His mouth dropped open, and he stood motionless with peering, blinking eyes, his face ludicrous with amazement. "Alison!" he cried. "Where did you come from?"

The girl did not answer. She lifted herself to her feet, crossed the top of the cliff, and stopped in front of Dexter. "Whatever may happen later," she said in a tremulous voice, "at least I owe my life to you."

"Miss Rayne and I happened to meet down below here," the corporal explained uncomfortably, turning to Devreaux. Then, as he observed the superintendent's expression of bewilderment, he found his lips twitching at the corners. "She seemed to be lost from you, colonel."

"Lost!" muttered the officer. "Yes! We were crossing a steep slope down by the lower pass, and I stepped on a slide of glacier ice that was hidden by the snow. Went down on the glare and rolled and coasted about a half mile to the bottom. Smashed my carbine so it wasn't even worth salvage and nearly cracked my neck in the bargain.

"And when I had gathered myself up and labored back to the top," he went on, "this girl was gone. It happened last evening, mind you, and I was all night and most of the day working back the trail. I'll say this much for the young woman: When she's in a hurry, she can cruise with the best of us."

Devreaux turned to glower at the girl. "And I warn you now," he said with asperity, "I'm going to forget to be polite and use the wrist irons if you get 'lost' this way another time."

She flushed darkly and averted her head, as though to hide the glint of tears upon her lashes. "What would be the

use?" she asked in a tired, hopeless voice. "You're men—hard and ruthless—and I —I haven't a chance. You can order me to come and go as you please and threaten me with handcuffs, and I have nobody—there's nothing I can do about it—nothing."

"Exactly!" asserted the colonel. "And now we must go." He turned on his heel and set off across the meadow; and Alison Rayne sighed despondently and followed him in mute resignation.

Dexter looked after her for a moment with a pensive frown, and then, gloomily shaking his head, he hastened forward and caught step with her. "How did you get the message that brought you to this place?" he asked suddenly, watching her face with keen curiosity.

"What message?" interrupted Devreaux.

The corporal gave a hurried account of his adventures in the cabin on the farther side of the valley, telling of the youth he had found there and of the voice that aroused him from sleep. "Reminded me of the queer business at the other cabin," Dexter continued. "Sounded like telephone talk—only there was no telephone."

He faced the girl with searching gaze. "The young man informed me that he didn't know you and pretended to be asleep and dreaming; but he said 'Alison' as distinctly as I say your name now. And he advised you to make your way to this mountain, where a friend would be waiting."

"What have you to say about that, Alison?" demanded Devreaux.

The girl cast a fleeting glance toward Dexter, and he fancied for a second that he saw a sardonic gleam in her eyes. "I should say that Corporal Dexter is a little mixed up about who was dreaming," she observed in a quiet tone.

"Whoever was dreaming," returned the policeman, "it came true. You were advised not to return to the cabin, but to strike across country for Saddle Notch. And here you are."

Devreaux swung around abruptly, his weather-seamed countenance grown stern and forbidding. "You're going beyond the limits of patience," he told Alison. "I want to know how you people communicate with each other."

She met his formidable stare without the slightest show of alarm. "We people?" She was perfectly calm. "Really, Colonel Devreaux, I don't see what reason you have for trying to make out that I belong to a gang or something." She sighed and shook her head and smiled forlornly as she encountered the officer's scowling stare. "But I admit," she added, "that there are times when I almost wish I did. It's discouraging not to have anybody."

"I insist on knowing how that message was relayed to you!" the superintendent exclaimed, unmoved by the gentle appeal of her half-veiled eyes.

"You followed my tracks all the way up the valley to this place," she reminded him. "Wherever I went, you must have gone also. So if I had met any one, or stopped anywhere to telephone, or held any conversation of any sort with anybody, why, you couldn't have helped knowing about it, could you?"

The colonel regarded her tensely, with anger and something like reluctant admiration mingling in his baffled glance. "You say you came to this particular place only by accident?" he asked, after an interval.

"I don't want to make a long trip to Fort Dauntless," she coolly replied, "and as you seem so determined to take me there, why, I—naturally I wandered as far as I could—anywhere to get away."

"Hump!" grunted Devreaux. "That's frank enough, anyhow. Just wanted to escape from the clutches of the police? Weren't expecting to meet a friend here?"

"You keep forcing me to repeat that I have no friends," she complained. "I——" She stopped with a startled gasp and gazed blankly overhead.

Suddenly, without warning, the stillness of the misty afternoon was punctured by a shrill whining sound—the crackling hum of a bullet in flight.

CHAPTER XXIII.

WHINING BULLETS.

AT once, Dexter and Devreaux halted to scan the heights, towering shadowy above them. The girl paused also. They stood in the middle of the broad plateau, with the horseshoe curve of the

mountains hemming them in like the rising tiers of a vast amphitheater.

The lower slopes were circled by a belt of dense-growing evergreens, but the open, snow-covered level stretched between, and the nearest sheltering thicket was at least a quarter of a mile distant. Any object moving against the white background of the snow field must present a conspicuous target.

When Devreaux broke the momentary silence, however, he spoke without concern, and seemed in no haste to make for cover. "Crill?" he inquired. "He had a rifle."

Dexter observed the line of long, narrow footprints that marked the direction of the outlaw's flight and casually shook his head. "No. I don't think so. The shot came from higher up, I should say, and from the western slope——"

The spiteful *pi-n-g* of a second bullet whipped the air behind him, and he nodded. "Right!" he remarked. "From the timber, somewhere on our left. That wouldn't be Crill. There are others about."

The colonel quizzed Alison Rayne with his chilly glance. "If they're friends of yours," he remarked, "they haven't much regard for you. At such a distance, they can only pitch 'em in for general results, and they're as apt to get you as they are a policeman."

The girl's delicate brows were bent in an expression that betokened curiosity rather than alarm. "We're really being shot at?" she asked. "I didn't hear any report."

"High-power rifle and six hundred yards range at least," said the corporal. "Too far off to hear the crack." He lifted his head interestedly as another steel-jacketed missile shrieked across the meadow. "They aren't allowing enough windage," he added, in expert criticism of another man's marksmanship. "And long shots from an elevation are always likely to overcarry."

"I don't agree with you," remarked the colonel. "Not if you don't forget your table of trajectories." He wrinkled his forehead reminiscently as he warmed to a cherished hobby. "I remember last year when I got me an old ram. Conditions similar to this. Five hundred yards if an inch, and I was shooting down off a ridge. I fixed my leaf sight at five hundred and held plumb in the vital circle. The point I'm making——"

"You're in danger of having your point proved for you, if we stick around here," Dexter respectfully submitted. He saw the girl looking from one to the other with anxious eyes. "If you don't mind," he finished, "Alison and I think we'd better be striking for cover."

"Come on," agreed the superintendent, and set forward once more toward the nearest strip of timber. He moved at his usual brisk stride, but without undue haste; a calm and dignified man who refused to be pestered by small annoyances.

As they pushed onward across the plateau, a freezing gust of wind swept down suddenly through the mountain notch, bringing a flutter of snowflakes.

"At last!" Devreaux flung back over his shoulder. "The storm will spoil good shooting, but also it'll bury footprints. We'll have to get Crill quickly, before the slate's wiped clean."

"And before he takes on reënforcements," added Dexter.

The snow flurry lasted for seconds, and then there followed a brief lull, while the skin of their faces seemed to draw tighter with the tension of heavy barometric pressures. The lower atmosphere had grown very still, but higher up Dexter could see the rush and scud of dark clouds breaking around the mountain peaks.

His glance traveled aimlessly from one outstanding pinnacle to another, then wandered down toward the edge of the timber line, and reached the top of a knife-edged ridge stretching away to the left. He blinked his eyes, gazed again, and made out a grouping of elongated objects, like little fingers, poked against the sky line.

There was no discernible movement of the objects. He counted—one—two—three—but at the distance was unable to decide whether the small dots were rocks, or beasts of some sort, or men.

Reaching behind him, he was fumbling at his binocular case when his ears caught the far-off hum of another bullet. The sound broke through the air in wailing crescendo, reached its highest pitch,

and then stopped short with a tearing thump.

Dexter saw Colonel Devreaux halt in mid-stride and look waveringly about him, like a man who had suddenly changed his mind about the direction he wanted to go. For a moment the square-built figure held erect, motionless, and then the sturdy legs bowed weakly, and without a word the old man pitched forward and fell upon his face.

Simultaneously, the storm came howling down upon them. Dexter felt the lash of the fiercely driving wind, and as he bowed his head to the blast, the world about him was blotted out in swirling snow.

He plunged forward and dropped upon his knees beside his officer. Devreaux lay on his side, with head and face almost buried in the white drift. The corporal passed his arm under the fallen body, and he found that his fingers were stained red.

The stricken man tried to sit up as his comrade raised his head from the ground; but the effort was too much for him, and he sank back limply in the corporal's arms.

"Back and lungs!" Devreaux choked with a sound of leaking breath. His white mustache lifted, and he showed his teeth for an instant in a dauntless smile. "Like that old bighorn ram, David. He weathered a lot of hard years—but somebody got him at last—— Fine, clean shot—at five hundred——" He broke off in a painful coughing fit, and the light of consciousness faded from his steely eyes. He slumped forward, a limp, insensate weight in Dexter's arms.

The corporal hastily examined the sagging body. A bullet, he found, had drilled its course through the dorsal muscles, had broken a rib, and plowed deeper into the cavity of the lungs. As Dexter pillowed the grizzled head against his shoulder, he heard a soft crunching step beside him and was aware that Alison Rayne was bending above them.

"Is it bad?" she asked.

He nodded, without speaking.

"I'm very sorry," she said.

Dexter crouched silent for a moment, gazing vacantly toward the invisible heights, his face beaten by the driving snow. For the present, nothing further was to be feared from the distant sharpshooter. The rush of snow filled the air, blinding the vision. It was impossible to see a dozen feet beyond him.

The dry, hissing flakes battered Dexter's eyes and obliterated the landscape. An army might have marched past him unobserved. He sighed thankfully, scarcely feeling the sting of the blizzard. At least he was vouchsafed the privilege of caring for his fallen comrade.

What was he to do with Devreaux? Where could he go? Dexter had to make his decision instantly. The wounded man could not be left exposed in the open. Prompt, surgical attention was needed, but even more pressing was the need of shelter—a place to hide, to huddle protected from the white death that rode with the storm. The corporal's questing glance wandered off toward his right, where, he recalled, the nearest stretch of timber grew. It would be in that direction somewhere that he must search for his nook of safety.

He was bending down to gather the wounded body in his arms, when Alison Rayne spoke in a quick voice behind him.

"If I could do anything to help, I'd stay," she said. "But I'd only add to your responsibilities now, and so—good-by!"

"One moment!" he commanded sharply. "I hadn't heard any one tell you to go."

"It's an ugly thing to do—taking advantage of your misfortune," she returned. "But you leave me no choice. You and Colonel Devreaux intended to drag me to the fort with you, to accuse me of I don't know what, to put me through your legal tortures, as though I were some criminal. You had no mercy. And now I—— The tables have turned, through no act of mine. You think I'm going to wait until you're ready to force me to answer your questions?" Her eyes gleamed, and she shook her head rebelliously. "I'd kill myself before I'd—— I'd rather die!"

"You will die if you go blundering off in this blizzard," Dexter assured her.

"So be it then!" She took a step away, but the next instant turned back impulsively to face him. "I know what

you think," she declared with a shudder. "You think I shot those two men in that cabin back there. I didn't—I swear I had nothing to do with that horror! But I can't prove that I didn't do it, and you —you want to prove that I did." She measured him with a tragic glance. "You won't leave Colonel Devreaux to try to hold me. You'll save your officer if you can."

"Stop!" he thundered, as she started to turn away into the storm.

She looked back and saw that he was supporting Devreaux with his left arm, while his right hand had dropped to touch the butt of his pistol. "Yes!" she cried. "You'll have to shoot me to stop me. Rather that, than go to the fort with you." She gave a short, mirthless laugh. "But I've heard that the men of the Mounted never fire first."

His hand left his holster, and he fixed her with a stony gaze. "You're right," he said. "We're not like your people up there, who crawl and slink and pot their victims from behind. Go! Go find your friends." He smiled contemptuously, and his words fell with the sharpness of whip strokes. "Tell 'em Corporal Dexter's still alive and that there's no truce. I'm more than ever set on getting them—and you, too, Alison." He pointed toward the mountain slope, hidden behind the welter of snow. "Meanwhile, there's nothing to keep you. Why don't you go?"

A dull flush suffused her cheeks and temples. As he spoke, her lips fell tremulously apart, and her open hand moved toward him in a faint gesture of appeal. "I——" she began, and stopped.

She drew a harsh breath that was almost a sob, and her lashes drooped for an instant to touch her snow-wet cheeks. "Good-by!" she cried suddenly, in a breaking voice. Then she walked away and the next moment had vanished in the white swirl of the storm.

CHAPTER XXIV.

FURY OF A BEAST.

THE roar of the gale drowned all sound of the girl's departing footsteps. Two seconds after she had bade him farewell, Dexter had lost sight and knowledge of her. He did not call after her, or try to stay her flight. His first concern was for Devreaux. With a muscular strength surprising in a man of his slender frame, Dexter lifted the wounded officer's weighty bulk in his arms and trudged forward in search of shelter.

With his head bowed before the freezing blast, his shoulders stooped under the burden he carried, the corporal labored across the open ground and eventually found himself at the edge of the standing timber. The snow swept about him in flying vortices, pelting his face like bird shot, blinding his eyes, and robbing him of breath.

The trees on the mountain slope swayed and writhed like living things before the fury of the blizzard, and he could hear the splinter and crash of rotted limbs wrested from their trunks. Heedless of the danger of falling boughs, he stumbled, panting, into the dense timber and started to climb the gullied slope, seeking with storm-blurred sight for any barricaded nook that could serve as a temporary haven of refuge.

At the best, Dexter hoped for no more than the lee side of a windfall, or else a fissure among the rocks that could be roofed over with a thatching of branches. He did not dream that the fates might deal more kindly with him. As he struggled up the steep slope through a thick fir coppice, however, he chanced to notice a peculiar, smooth-sided hole in the snow crust above him.

It was a small opening, scarcely large enough to admit a man's hand, but with his first glance he halted and stared incredulously for an instant. Then, with a grim tightening of his lips, he lowered Devreaux's body to the ground and climbed on upward to investigate.

Pressing his face to the aperture, the corporal was conscious of a musty warmth on his cheek and at the same time caught a rank, furry scent that a bear hunter could never fail to identify. He laughed softly under his breath. For once, fortune had dealt munificently with him. Chance had led him to the winter den of a hibernating bear. In his desperate extremity, Dexter was ready to contest possession with the owner.

The popular belief that bears lie torpid in winter is a fallacy, as Dexter knew

only too well. A grizzly will hole-up with the first frosts, living on his own fat during the famine time of cold, dozing and sleeping through the short days and long freezing nights. If left undisturbed in his chosen nook, he will nap in sluggish contentment until spring comes around; but there is nothing trancelike about his sleep.

His nose and ears are always cocked toward the entrance of his snug retreat. At the sound or scent of intrusion, he will arouse instantly, with every savage instinct alert and primed for battle. A man who intrudes on a hibernating silver-tip takes his life in his hands.

The corporal was aware of the penalty he might have to pay for rashness, but the thought of holding back now did not occur to him. He must get Devreaux under cover. For the sake of a stricken comrade, Dexter would not scruple to fight for a den with a grizzly bear.

From a fallen tree near by, the corporal broke off a pitch knot to use as a torch. Then, without giving himself time for reflection, he climbed the embankment again and started deliberately to enlarge the breathing hole that had been thawed through the snow.

As quietly as possible, he broke out chunks of the frozen crust. In a couple of minutes he had uncovered a low, tunneled opening that ran back in darkness, somewhere among the rocks. Before him was a cavern of some sort that time and weather had hollowed under the pitch of the mountainside. How far it extended, Dexter could not guess, but the entrance would admit his body if he stooped low. He knew that where a grizzly had gone, a man could follow.

He knelt silent for a space, listening, and fancied that he felt the rhythm of slow, heavy breathing in the gloom beyond. With a hand steadied by enforced calmness, he struck a match and ignited his torch. The resinous wood took fire almost at once, burning with a sputtering, smoky flame. Dexter whipped the brand about his head to assure himself that it was not likely to flicker out and then drew his heavy service pistol and started forward into the tunnel.

Crouching, he advanced in the cramped passageway. He had taken no more than three steps when he was aware of a sudden heaving movement in front of him. The next instant the silence was broken by a loud, snorting *whoof!* As the officer peered into the warm, rancid darkness, he caught sight of two greenish sparks—lambent points of flame—that he knew were a pair of glaring eyes.

His first shot might be his last, and he leveled his pistol point-blank at one of the glittering marks, aiming with great care and pulling the trigger with a slow, even pressure.

With the battering explosion in his ears, Dexter was conscious of a shadowy bulk heaving up before him. Then the walls of the cave seemed to tremble before a terrible, hot-breathed roar that reverberated in his brain like a thunderclap. The corporal felt a surging movement in the darkness and jerked his head back just in time to save his face from the mangling stroke of a steel-hooked paw that batted the air with a ton-weight of fury behind it.

Through the reek of smoke, Dexter still saw the blazing eyes, and he poked forward the pistol at the full stretch of his arm and once more fired. Again and again the red streak of flame lashed out from the muzzle of his weapon. The rapid concussions hammered back and forth in his head, buffeting his senses as a swimmer is beaten by a pounding surf.

The noise and confusion, the suffocating powder fumes in nostrils and lungs began after a moment to overcloud his faculties, leaving him only the subconscious will and determination to keep on shooting. His finger was working automatically on the trigger, sending bullet after bullet into the looming bulk before him.

CHAPTER XXV.

AN ASTONISHING FIND.

AFTER wild and tumultuous moments, Dexter's mind suddenly awakened to the knowledge of a great stillness that had fallen about him. All at once he realized that he was snapping the hammer vainly, on an empty magazine. The pistol dropped from his nerveless fingers, and he peered into the obscurity, expecting each instant to feel the lightning shock of death.

He waited for a second in benumbed resignation, but nothing happened. As he blinked his eyes, trying to see, he heard a moaning sound, like an uncanny human voice. Then his ears caught a faint trickle and gurgle that might have come from a hidden rivulet of water.

An unaccountable fit of trembling seized him, and for seconds the corporal found it difficult to keep the torch in his hand. At last he managed to swing forward his smoldering light. In the dim illumination, he made out a huge, shapeless mass of fur, sprawled on the red-stained rocks.

With extreme caution, Dexter crept forward and looked down upon the matted head of an enormous silvertip bear. The lips of the beast were drawn back in a snarl over the ugly yellow teeth, but the eyes had both disappeared, and a stream of crimson ran out from the pig-like snout. Dexter thrust the end of his torch against the wet muzzle, and not a tremor of life passed through the tumbled carcass.

For seconds the man crouched motionless, staring at the grotesque heap before him. With his feeling of relief there came also a certain sense of regret and shame. The bear had found the den first, and by every law of right and justice he was entitled to sleep there unmolested. For the intruders, however, life had been stripped to primitive necessity. It was no time to think of fairness or sportsmanship. To live meant to kill.

The corporal held his torch aloft and saw that the cavern opened farther back into the mountain, forming a roomy and sheltered retreat. If need be, a man might safely spend the winter there. He nodded in grim satisfaction. By killing the bear he had obtained at a stroke the very essentials of existence—meat, blankets, a lodging place.

Dexter stripped off his jacket and fanned the powder smoke out of the cabin entrance. As soon as the air was fit to breathe, he went outside for Devreaux.

He picked up the wounded man, lugged him into the cave, and pillowed his head on the warm, shaggy body of the dead bear. Then he made his preparations for a dreaded undertaking.

Building a fire in the cavern entrance, Dexter set snow to melt in the colonel's camp kettle. From his own emergency case, he brought forth a tourniquet, forceps, and a small, whetted knife. He boiled the instruments in a strong bichloride solution, scrubbed his hands and forearms in the same steaming fluid, pared his nails to the quick. Then he stripped off the wounded man's jacket and undergarments, and went silently to work.

Men who dwell in the wilderness are forced to do all things for themselves, without expert help or advice. The troopers of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police are expected to acquire a rough-and-ready knowledge of surgery, but Dexter was not at all confident that his skill was equal to the present emergency. His comrade, however, did not have a chance of surviving with a bullet in his lungs, and so the corporal steeled himself to the ordeal and went ahead with a task that had to be done.

For nearly a half hour, Dexter worked over the stricken man under the ghastly flicker of a pitch torch, stuck in a crack of the cave wall. Devreaux regained consciousness and fainted and revived again; but never once during those dreadful moments did he move or flinch, and not one cry was wrung from his ashen, stern-set lips.

Dexter was cool and self-contained when he began his work; when he at last finished, his features were contracted in drawn and haggard lines, his forehead was dank and wet, and every nerve was aquiver. He stood up, however, with a red bullet clutched in his fingers, persuaded that Devreaux at least had a fighting chance for life.

The wounded man mercifully had fallen into a stupor. Dexter looked sadly for a moment at the twisted, pain-wracked body on the rock floor; then he unstrapped a blanket roll and placed a covering over the unconscious figure. The colonel's discarded tunic was lying near by, and the corporal picked it up as an afterthought to spread over the blanket. By accident he held the garment upside down, and a bundle of loose papers fell from one of the pockets and scattered over the ground.

As soon as he had placed the tunic over

the sleeping man's shoulders, Dexter stooped to gather up the papers. They were official reports, he noticed, with a few stray newspaper cuttings among them. He was shuffling the bundle together when his attention was caught by a half-tone newspaper photograph that accompanied the printed matter of one of the clippings.

The photograph was of a young man, a pleasant-faced, dreamy-eyed youth of eighteen or nineteen years. As the corporal examined the likeness under the flaring torch, his lips puckered suddenly in a soundless whistle of astonishment. There was no mistaking the features: It was the face of the youth he had left that morning in the lonely cabin on the farther side of the valley.

As Dexter stared at the print, the headlines that went with the photograph seemed to leap forward to meet his startled gaze. Inked across the top of the clipping in remorseless black type, the caption read:

BROTHER AND SISTER WANTED FOR MURDER OF WEALTHY UNCLE.

With brows bent in almost painful concentration, Dexter perused the appended account. As he read, his lips pressed hard against his teeth, and a look of sadness and weariness crept into his somber eyes. The story told of a rich, retired merchant of Detroit, Michigan, Oscar Preston, who adopted and brought up a nephew and niece as his own children. In a recent slight illness, the uncle had unaccountably died. On investigation it was discovered that a slow poison had been administered in the medicines he had taken.

The physician in attendance had filed charges of a capital crime against the nephew, claiming to have proof that the young man had deliberately killed his uncle for the sake of the inheritance. When the police showed up with a warrant of arrest, however, the nephew had vanished, and his pretty twenty-year-old sister apparently had fled with him. The boy's name was Archibald Brown Preston; the girl's, Anne Alison Rayne Preston.

Dexter sighed deeply as he finished reading the story. For a space he stood motionless, his brow darkened in brooding thought, his listless fingers folding and refolding the edge of the clipped newspaper. Alison! He need wonder no longer over the incongruous circumstances of fate that had forced this attractive, delicately nurtured girl to rove as a forest vagabond in the terrible Northland.

The boy in the cabin yonder, who denied knowing her, was her brother. Like Pink Crill, they were hunted fugitives, wanted by the law for a capital offense.

Dexter found it hard indeed to think evil of the clear blue eyes that had met his, a while before, with such seeming honesty and frankness. He could not question, however, the fact that Alison must be the girl referred to in the newspaper, as likewise he could not deny or explain away her presence at the cabin of murder in the lower valley.

The news story did not actually accuse her of complicity in her brother's crime, but to the reasoning mind of the policeman, her flight under such conditions amounted virtually to a confession of guilt. Knowing what he now knew, his remorseless duty imposed upon him a double obligation to find her again and force her to answer the law's solemn accounting.

As he listened to the shrieking of the wind outside, there came to him a mental vision of her, struggling and fighting her way against the storm. The thought occurred to him that perhaps it might be for the best if the clean, white death of the snows should overtake her—better for her and for him.

To stumble on the little, huddled figure, frozen in the drift, would be a tragic finding. Then, however, he would not be called upon to go through with a business that it would take all of his resolution to face.

Dexter folded the newspaper clipping and, without realizing what he was doing, thrust it into the pocket of his own tunic. Then, with heavy steps, he moved back to the mouth of the cave to look out into the gathering twilight.

The temperature was falling rapidly, and the wind had risen to a gale. Driving gusts of snow obscured the landscape. He gazed through a seething haze toward

the mountain slopes above and shivered as though with a sudden chill. Somewhere off there were Alison, Crill, and the men who had shot Devreaux, wandering through the storm in search of shelter. Their situation was unenviable; but as he bowed his head before an icy gust that swept the mouth of the cave, the corporal reminded himself that his own lot was not much better.

The new-fallen snow was beginning to bank up in great drifts. A few more hours would see the passes blocked, and all communication would be shut off from the outside world. He was trapped for the winter—snow-bound in a lonely valley of the mountains with a band of criminals whom he was hunting and who in turn had taken to hunting him. His rifle and pack were lost; he lacked supplies and adequate clothing; his comrade was wounded, probably dying. And Dexter knew that if his enemies survived the blizzard, they would seek out his hiding place, to finish him, too, if they could.

CHAPTER XXVI.

TOO STUBBORN TO QUIT.

WHILE the storm raged over the mountains, Dexter was confined in his cave for three days and nights, watching over a man who slumbered on the shadowy border line of death. He performed the herculean task of skinning and dismembering his bear and hanging out great haunches of meat to refrigerate in the below-zero cold.

Also the corporal contrived to gather enough wood to keep a small fire going in the entrance of the cavern. Otherwise he could do nothing but sit in brooding loneliness, listening to the faint, irregular breathing of his companion, waiting for the blizzard to abate.

On the morning of the fourth day, Dexter tunneled out through the drift that choked the front passage, to find the sun shining down on a frozen world of dazzling whiteness. The wind had died during the night, and a silence of utter desolation had fallen upon the earth.

The trees of the forest stood motionless, with drooping, overweighted branches. A vast blanket of white smoothed and soothed the rugged landscape. He listened and gazed about him, and nowhere was there sound or stir of life. Yesterday's slate had been wiped clean; all trails were buried deep under the winter's snow.

Dexter stared off across the dreary wastes, blinking owlishly under the scintillating sun, feeling an awed sense of lonesomeness and littleness, such as the last survivor of the world's final cataclysm may some day feel. What had become of the men who had crossed in that direction he did not know. He could not guess where Alison was. Perhaps all had perished in the storm. He shook his head in gentle melancholy. At present there was no way of finding out what had happened, and it was futile to speculate.

As far as he himself was concerned, Dexter tried to think that he ought to be grateful. He was alive and in health, and his own trail had been erased by the storm. He was housed for the winter. So long as he did not wander far abroad, nobody could track him to his place of concealment.

If his enemies were still alive, they, too, were imprisoned in the mountain-walled valley, and there would be no escape for any one before the spring thaws set in. Outnumbered and outgunned as he was, he still was determined that the criminals should be made to answer for their crimes.

He would have to take them one by one, and in cool self-assurance he believed somehow that he might manage to do so. There was no hurry, however. He would not know what to do with prisoners now, if he caught them; and he could not leave Devreaux. The corporal decided to keep out of sight for the present, biding his time, waiting for spring and the opening of the trails.

Meanwhile Dexter faced months of appalling hardship. The ordinary backwoods settler, owning his cabin and tools and provision store, nevertheless must toil and struggle heroically to exist through the cruel Northland winters. The most destitute of settlers had an easy job compared to the labors that Dexter was called upon to undertake. Knowing that two lives were dependent upon his efforts, however, he went about his work with cheerful energy.

First of all, wood had to be cut—enormous stacks of it—to meet the hungry demands of a fire that must not be allowed to go out. While the weather hardened and the new snows piled up, he went into the near-by timber, day after day and week after week, chopping great logs with an absurd little pocket ax. He chopped for hours at a stretch, until somehow he would get to thinking of the ax handle as just another numb, half-frozen member of his body.

Between his wood-gathering forays, Dexter found time somehow to make and set traps and snares for hare, ptarmigan, lynx, and a gluttonous wolverine that raided his larder nights. He managed to cure pelts and manufacture moccasins and clothing and blankets and snowshoes. Then he had to cook and sweep, to render bear fat for lard and candles and leach lye for soap; to bathe and shave and keep up at any cost the pretext that he was still a respectable member of society. And Devreaux needed constant care.

For more than three weeks, the wounded man lay in a coma of darkness, an inert, senseless human bulk, whom death had claimed and who did not die. Day and night the corporal kept his untiring vigil and fought the powers of fate for his comrade's life.

The days grew shorter and shorter. November's cold gripped the earth tighter and tighter, like locking fetters of steel. Still the spark smoldered in the stricken man's body. There came a night at last when Dexter, stooping to force a spoonful of broth between his patient's teeth, was suddenly aware that the sunken eyes had opened to look at him with a feeble light of intelligence.

"Hello, colonel!" he ejaculated.

"Not yet, David!" A whimsical smile flickered upon Devreaux's lips. "Tough on you. Old ram too stubborn to quit. How long now?"

"About a month."

"You looking after me all that time? Thanks!" Devreaux surveyed his companion with misty gaze. "You all right?"

"Fine."

"Pull me through if you can," said the colonel with failing breath. "I'd like to last now to—to meet the man who—shot——" His voice faltered, faded away. His eyelids closed. He slipped back gently into oblivion. This time, however, his unconsciousness was not like a stupor. He was asleep.

November passed. December came in with snow and more snow, with a frigid breath that froze the surface crust as hard and solid as stone. Devreaux slumbered on with only brief and fitful awakenings, day after day and night after night; his body and spirit wearied to utter exhaustion, needing the recuperative balm of sleep. While he slept, the beat of his pulse slowly strengthened, and his breathing gradually lost its wheezing sound.

He had weathered the crisis, and by almost imperceptible degrees the throb of life was renewing. Dexter hovered over him constantly, watching and hoping, with the awed feeling of a man who has been permitted to help work a miracle.

The colonel was on the road to convalescence, but otherwise life was not pleasant for the tenants of the bear den under Saddle Mountain. The fearful storms of the holiday season swept down upon them in howling fury. Dexter had kept track of the days, with charcoal marks on the cavern wall. Christmas was only a week away. His gaunt, frost-bitten features twisted into a grin as he thought of Christmas.

Their salt, pepper, baking powder, and tea had been used up weeks before. The flour was out long since, likewise the bacon and sugar. His stock of matches was running low. Hares were becoming scarce and wary, and there hadn't been a ptarmigan around that direction in a month. As for bear meat, the corporal felt certain that the next rich, black, savory bear steak he tried to eat would surely choke him.

Thanks to a habit of absent-mindedness, Dexter still had plenty of tobacco. Usually when it occurred to him that it was time to smoke, he would find his pipe bowl filled with the tobacco that he had forgotten to light the last time; and when he started to reach for an ember from the fire, as likely as not he would get to thinking about something else and shove the pipe heedlessly back into his pocket.

It was a satisfaction to know that his pouch still held a winter's supply of to-

bacco; but his craving for a change from bear diet was becoming an obsession that gave him no rest. One day, he left Devreaux asleep and snowshoed several miles farther up the valley, looking for anything he could find, except grizzlies. To his intense joy, he stumbled upon a winter deer yard.

There are only two varieties of meat that the human digestion can tolerate for breakfast, dinner, and supper, day after day and week after week; these two are beef and venison. Dexter trimmed the branches from a springy sapling, devised a rude block and tackle to bend the tough stem to the ground, whittled a trigger, and made a hangman's noose of rawhide.

He baited his contraption with lily bulbs, chopped with great labor from under the ice of a near-by pond. Next morning he owned the strangled carcass of a mule deer buck, which he skinned and quartered and lugged to the cave.

CHAPTER XXVII.

ECHO OF THE PAST.

THAT night there was something like contentment in the stuffy hole where two members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police dwelt. The unusual odors from the cooking fire aroused the colonel to one of his short spells of wakefulness, and he watched the supper preparations with famishing eyes.

"Any sign of our neighbors?" he asked, as Dexter filled him a plate of steaming venison soup.

The corporal shook his head. "Since that afternoon I have not seen or heard of —of anybody."

"I seem to remember your telling me that the girl—Alison, wasn't it?—she walked out on you."

"To bring you here—I had to let her go."

"You don't know where she went?"

"She—perhaps she didn't get through that night." Dexter had found a seat on a log, and as he spoke he settled his chin in the palm of his hand and stared vacantly into the fire. "I've been wondering—a lot—lately."

Devreaux eyed him for a moment with a curious, sidewise glance. "She reminds me of a girl I once knew," he remarked, after a pause of constraint.

"Yes?" said the corporal in a dreamy voice.

"I was a constable in those days," went on the superintendent, "a swaggering youngster in a proud uniform. The girl was so pretty you felt breathless just from looking at her. I can see her even now, without half trying, as she used to sit near me at camp fires that have been cold for forty years.

"Her father was wanted for a border robbery," the colonel resumed, as Dexter sat silent watching the flames, "and she was supposed to have helped him. My inspector sent me after them, and I rounded them up in northern Ontario.

"During the weeks of the back trip," Devreaux pursued, "that girl worked on me with those innocent eyes of hers, and I soon found myself trying to think that we had made a dreadful mistake. And because I wanted to, I soon was thinking so. I got so I would have staked my life on that girl. She told me she was guiltless and begged me to let her go." The old officer's jaw muscles hardened as he smiled his granite smile. "Now, you're the only man besides myself who knows how near a certain police constable once came to betraying his trust.

"Do you know what saved me, corporal? My uniform coat was too tight in the back." Devreaux nodded soberly. "Nothing but that! I couldn't move or breathe without remembering the tunic I wore. In my moments of weakening, that tunic somehow would tug at my back. I believed in that girl, but also I passionately believed in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. So I escorted my prisoners to the fort, and my heart was breaking when the inspector returned my salute and told me that some day I might make a good policeman.

"As it turned out," Devreaux added, and deliberately refrained from looking at his companion, "the girl was all wrong —thoroughly no account—not worth wasting a thought on. Yet I think about her sometimes, because it was through her that I lost a lot of fine, boyish illusions. And there was another thing I almost lost, but didn't quite—the thing that generations of us have clung to and upheld and that future generations of us will go on to the last man and the last

breath fighting for—the honor of the service!" A deep silence settled in the cavern as the superintendent broke off his low monotones of speech.

Dexter sat quietly, his spare body hunched over the fire, gazing into vacancy. At length he stirred on his log and abruptly turned and squarely met his officer's eyes. "You didn't need to tell me this," he said.

"The one romance of my life," remarked the colonel, his voice tinged with something akin to embarrassment. "I just happened to be reminded of it."

"A homily for young policemen!" Dexter laughed harshly and then suddenly stood up, and from his pocket he produced a dog-eared newspaper clipping. "This fell from among your papers," he said. "Have you ever read it?"

"I have a scrap book at the fort in which I file away items of general police interest," replied Devreaux. "I must have clipped this before I left the fort and lacked the time to paste it up."

While Dexter held a candle near, he ran his glance through the paragraph of type.

"Alison Rayne," said the corporal, as Devreaux finished reading.

"H'm!" mused the superintendent, handing back the clipping. "I thought I remembered that name from somewhere, but didn't quite place it." He suddenly shrugged his shoulders. "Well! There we are!" His gnarled fingers strayed forward to rest lightly for an instant on his companion's sleeve. "You never can tell about 'em, David."

Dexter started to reply, but checked himself before speaking. He turned and with precise care arranged a couple of logs on the fire. Then, without a word, he stepped outside of the cave, to stand bareheaded in the night, watching the play of auroral lights upon the frigid reaches of the northern horizon.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A GUESS AND A FIND.

THROUGH January and February the temperature fell lower and lower, and winter, like a white, constricting monster, bound the forest country in tighter embrace. The gray specter of famine walked through the wilderness, reaching here and there and everywhere with a blighting touch of death, threatening at the last to take off the surviving creatures of the coverts and runways that still tried so hard to live.

March came with high winds, with clear sunny days, and with nights that crackled under the frosty stars. The two policemen continued to live in their cave, and while Dexter grew thin and gaunt with the privations of the passing months, the convalescent Devreaux, astonishingly, began to pick up gradually in weight and strength.

The sun swung gradually northward, and the silvery pale rays changed to gold; for a few minutes at noonday, a faint warmth might be felt, and water dripped from the snow-laden trees. In a short while the thick ground crust would drop in; after that, release from the frozen bonds of winter would come swiftly.

It was the season of avalanches. The snow piled on the higher mountain peaks was beginning to soften and settle. Sometimes the overweighted masses would slip loose and start for the lower valleys, picking up more snow and ice chunks and boulders, gaining in momentum and size until great trees were snapped off like match sticks. All of this was carried to the bottom in a rush of sound that shook the mountainsides. Dexter was often awakened nights by the dreaded thunder of a timber wreck and knew that somewhere a forested slope had been suddenly razored as bare as his own clean-shaven jaw.

By every sign and sound, the inmates of the Saddle Mountain cave knew that spring was at hand.

"The travelways will be open in a few more weeks," Devreaux remarked one morning, as he peered out from the cavern mouth. "If our fellow sojourners are still alive, they'll soon be hitting for the outlet—north."

"I've been puzzling over the singular events of last fall," said Dexter, "and I can think of but one explanation. There are at least three fugitives from the country below—as far as we know there may be more—separate groups who suddenly bobbed up in a far-off valley of the wilderness. It isn't likely that they all just

happened to drop in like that; it's too much like deliberate planning.

"I shouldn't be at all surprised," he went on, "to discover that we've stumbled upon a sort of 'underground railroad'—a chain of settlers and trappers reaching clear through the woods, banded together in a scheme to help people who, for one reason or another, must flee from the States."

"Passing 'em on from hand to hand," Devreaux agreed with quickening interest. "Run 'em across country to one of the lonely fiords along the northwest coast, where a yacht or tramp steamer could put in undetected, pick 'em up, and cruise off for the Orient, say, with a passenger list of folks who have said ta-ta to the police back home." He nodded with growing conviction. "It wouldn't astonish me if that is exactly what is being done."

"Profitable scheme for a man who organized the business properly," observed Dexter. "All he would have to do would be to establish his chain of way stations—cabins and shacks of so-called trappers. Agents in the States to dicker with people who needed such help and were willing to pay. And they'd pay heavy!

"Take Crill, for instance. He probably couldn't find his way two miles through the forest without a guide. He'll be hanged in the Cook County jail, if he's caught. You can imagine what he'd give to an organization that promised to escort him to safety; ten, fifty thousand dollars—any sum he could scrape together!"

"Assuming that you have guessed the truth," mused the superintendent, "we accidentally derailed the train. To settle with us they were delayed a few precious days, and the snows came and hung 'em up here for the winter."

"If I have anything to say about it," said Dexter with outthrust jaw, "the train's going into another ditch this spring."

The colonel glanced sharply at his companion. "What are you planning to do?"

"Going after them."

"They're too many for you, corporal, and you haven't even a rifle." Devreaux studied the fire for a moment with a scowl on his face. "I'll tell you!" he said at length. "There's only one thing you can do. It'll be hot weather before this lung of mine is equal to heavy breathing. You'll have to work alone, I'm afraid. If I were you, the minute mountain travel is possible, I'd make for the north pass and hide in the neighborhood.

"When the gang comes along, as they undoubtedly will," he continued, "pick up the trail, but don't show yourself. Our men from the fort are bound to come to hunt for me as soon as they can get through the mountains. I'll make my way by easy stages to the lower pass and meet them. Meanwhile, you blaze your path behind you, and it shouldn't be long before you have a squad of Mounties trailing by forced marches to your help."

Dexter considered for a moment and nodded a tentative agreement. "We'll put it over somehow—when the time comes," he said.

By the middle of March, the colonel was able to shed his bearskin robes and sit up by the fire, and he even essayed a few tottering steps about the cave. He could attend to the fire now, or defend himself in case of an unexpected attack.

One morning Dexter decided that he might safely leave his patient alone for a day or two. He planned to make a trip to the lower valley to recover the packs of provisions that Devreaux and Constable Graves had cached there the previous fall.

The colonel, who had grown very weary of a diet of meat straight, readily assented to the plan. So the corporal lashed on his snowshoes and set forth on a long and difficult journey.

The surface crust had fallen through on the exposed hillsides. Wet, sticky snow clogged the racket webs, making each footstep a dragging effort. The corporal broke out a toilsome trail down the length of the valley, however, and by nightfall had sighted the landmarks that led him to the place where the packs were buried.

He tied up a bundle of the priceless luxuries he found—evaporated fruits, tea, coffee, sugar, flour—as much as he could carry on his back. That night he fed himself to repletion, and bivouacked until morning in the lee of a thicket that hid the glow of his tiny camp fire. Be-

fore daylight he was on his feet again, tramping northward in the frosty dawn.

His course led him up along the banks of a small icebound brook that twisted through gulley and gorge, in the shadow of towering mountains. He swung along with a steady crunching of snowshoes, feeling a tingle of spring in the crisp air, breathing deeply, almost with elation, his keen gray eyes, taking in the signs of life awakening. Wherever he looked, he saw the tracks of feet; and birds were darting among the thickets.

All the forest creatures that had weathered the winter were out that morning, looking for a meal. As Dexter strode onward, curiously watching the runways, he came to the mouth of a dry gully that sloped up the steep mountainside. In the snow underfoot, he saw a mark that halted him abruptly. It was the print of a man's boot.

The track was freshly made. It was a peculiarly shaped pattern of sole—long and narrow—and as the corporal stooped, staring, he recalled the afternoon on the Saddle Mountain plateau, when Devreaux had been shot. The trail Dexter failed to follow that day! Those old prints were identical in outline with this mark, newly tramped in the snow. The corporal knew that the man who had just passed this place could be none other than Pink Crill.

The succeeding chapters of this novel will appear in the next issue of TOP-NOTCH, dated and out February 1st. It began in the December 15th issue. Back numbers may be obtained from news dealers or the publishers.

Doing It Thoroughly

THE enthusiastic girl was thrilled when she was introduced to the famous author at a dinner party. She lost no time in starting a conversation and letting him know that she was one of the keenest admirers of his latest book.

"You have no idea how very helpful I have found it, Mr. Brain!" she gushed.

"Indeed," remarked the author. "In what way, may I ask?"

"Oh, it has taught me to concentrate."

"To concentrate? That's very nice. Now tell me what are you concentrating on at the present time?" asked the author.

"Oh," replied the girl, "lots and lots of things!"

Still Going!

A DRAFT of vicious mules had just arrived at the camp, and a new soldier made the common but sad mistake of approaching too near to the business end of one of them. His comrades caught him on the rebound, placed him on a stretcher, and started off for the hospital.

On the way the new soldier regained consciousness, gazed at the blue sky overhead, experienced the swaying motion as he was being carried along, and shakily lowered his hands over the sides, only to feel space.

"Oh, gosh!" he groaned. "I ain't hit the ground yet!"

Forgotten, For a Time

THE great musician had been entertaining his guests, and as he rose from the piano, a gushing youth approached him.

"What a wonderful piece of music!" he exclaimed. "Will you tell me the name of it, please?"

"It was an improvisation," replied the musician.

"Ah, of course!" said the youth. "An old favorite of mine, but for the moment I had forgotten its name."

Not a Fat Part

A GIRL, winner of a beauty contest in which the first prize was a part in a big film play, left her native town the envy and admiration of all her friends.

Weeks passed without news. Then one day she returned and resumed her former occupation.

"But what about acting for the pictures?" she was asked. "Didn't they give you a part?"

"Yes; they gave me a part," she answered bitterly. "They told me I could be the hand that held the bottle marked 'Poison' in the villain's nightmare!"

TOP-NOTCH TALK

News and Views by the Editor and Readers.

JANUARY 15, 1925.

Fact Follows Fiction

AN author without imagination can never amount to much. No matter how truly he may write about life, the characters whom he places on the fiction stage must be lightened by a touch of fancy or they will be drab and uninteresting. Likewise, the drama in which he puts his brain-children must be something out of the commonplace, if he is to hold the continued attention of his readers.

As any one who has read this magazine for some time is aware, TOP-NOTCH authors are not lacking in the imaginative gift. They seem to be able to conjure up situations that are novel, to plan events that, so far as they know, are different from anything that has ever actually taken place, only to find later on that the things which their imagination created have become facts. We have drawn attention to instances of this in the past, and now we have another remarkable case where the facts of real life follow closely on the lines of a story which we published a little while ago in this magazine.

You will recall reading the football novelette, "Bookworms Will Turn," by Freeman Harrison, in which the coach of Old Nassau preferred brains to brawn and built up the varsity team largely with honor men. The idea was an imaginary one, but it seemed logical that, other things being fairly equal, the man who used his head to advantage in his class work should be able also to put his brains to work on the gridiron. Now we have the statement of *The Princeton Alumni Weekly*—coming from the very college which Mr. Harrison thinly disguised as Old Nassau—that "the scholastic standing of the Princeton undergraduates who have earned the privilege of wearing the varsity letter is considerably higher than the average scholastic standing of the undergraduate body as a whole." And later in the same editorial, the *Alumni Weekly* refers to the members of the varsity team as "candidates for Phi Beta Kappa who so conclusively demonstrated that they can play quite as successfully as they can study."

This appears fully to justify Mr. Harrison's novel idea, but further confirmation comes from Dartmouth College. One of our readers sent us a paper containing a picture of the Dartmouth varsity line-up, regulars or first-string substitutes, and this team almost owns a Phi Beta Kappa key. The paper states that this team is not allowed to feel any great mental superiority over the rest of the squad, as the scholastic average of the first three teams is noticeably better than the average of the entire college.

Here again we have proof that the men who are candidates for the highest scholastic honors can best maintain the prestige of their colleges on the football field.

In the Next Number

WE are glad to be able to announce that the complete novel in the issue that you will get on February 1st will be by Burt L. Standish. That is always welcome news to our readers, and in "The Thirteenth Man" you will find Mr. Standish at his best. It is a ranch story, and the curious individual for whom the novel is named will excite your interest and keep you guessing as to what he is likely to do next.

The novelette, by Erle Stanley Gardner, is one of the most remarkable pieces of fiction we have given you in a long time. It is called "The Case of the Misplaced Thumbs," a striking title for a striking story. This is a tale of a Human Fly, who walked up and down skyscrapers for a living until he was hired by an unknown man. Then he was put through an extraordinary course of detective training and started on a job where his fly-walking ability served him in good stead. Mr. Gardner's last story proved very

popular, and we are sure that you will enjoy this one, too.

The sport features will be an ice-hockey tale by C. S. Montanyè, which he calls "Strategy at the Puck;" and a basketball story by E. V. Storm, a newcomer to TOP-NOTCH, entitled "Ears of the Air."

Other short stories will be: "A Big Man with Boots On," by Hapsburg Liebe; "The Gold-Plated Yes-Man," by Jack Bechdolt; "Oil's All Right," by Chester Porter Bissell; and "That Jumping Buckskin," by Harold de Polo.

There will be the next installments of the serial novels, "Wizard of the Desert," by E. Whitman Chambers, and "Frozen Magic," by Albert M. Treynor. These are both splendid stories, and we hope you will not miss them.

The poetical offerings will be: "Honest Abe," by James Edward Hungerford; "Come Through!" by Thomas J. Murray; "In Fancy Roaming," by Arthur Boffo; and "The Wine of the Printed Page," by Neola Tracy Lane.

What a New Reader Thinks

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: After reading the story entitled "Law Unafraid," written by James F. Dorrance, in the TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE for August 15th, I noticed that the editor wished for the readers' opinions of the aforesaid story.

To begin with I can readily state that the story referred to is one of the best stories I have read in a long time.

I also received a big kick from the story entitled "Cuckoo as a Clock," by C. S. Montanye. I am crazy about all sport stories, as I am a lover of all sports—anything pertaining to the outdoor world.

This is the first time I have ever read the TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE, and I can willingly state that it can't be beaten for its wonderful peppy stories.

Knowing that, I shall continue to read this said magazine from now on.

I am wishing you worlds of luck, that you may publish more thrilling stories as the one you published in "Law Unafraid," as it held me in its grip from the start to finish.

Thanking you again, I am,

AL. B. DEMING.

Company C, Thirtieth Infantry, Presidio of San Francisco, Calif.

Since Barefoot Days

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR EDITOR: I have always wanted to write you a few lines to let you know what I think of TOP-NOTCH. I guess I am one of the real old-timers. How long I have been reading your magazine it would be hard to say, but I remember when just a barefoot kid I used to hide them from my brother, so that I would not miss them.

Now I am married and have three children, one of them is almost old enough to read and, believe me, when she is, I will give her TOP-NOTCH, as the stories are very interesting to everybody. So I guess that I am one of the real old-time readers.

Sincerely yours, T. CALLAHAN.

New Haven, Conn.

A Request Granted

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: Have just finished reading the last issue of TOP-NOTCH, and must say something about it; in fact, we have read TOP-NOTCH for several years, and cannot find any magazine to beat it.

We have never seen anything in TOP-NOTCH from Farmington, or Flora Vista, New Mexico, so would like to see this in print.

Here's for TOP-NOTCH every time.

(MISS) RUTH IRVIN.

Farmington, N. Mex.,

and (MISS) NAOMI SEVER,

Flora Vista, N. Mex.

Without Fibbing

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: Have been reading your TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE for about three years, and I can say, without the least bit of "fibbing," that it is the best magazine I have had the pleasure of reading. It is always filled with good, clean stories; of course some of them are better than others. When I say better, I mean they appeal to me more. Of course all of them are interesting stories and appeal to some one; in fact, I enjoy them all.

I like the stories of Burt L. Standish and C. S. Montanye best, but I can enjoy any sport story, or *any* story that is in TOP-NOTCH. "Anything to Oblige" in the October 1st issue was fine. "Wreckers Mysterious" was good also. It was a little impossible, I thought, but nevertheless it made a good story.

Wishing TOP-NOTCH all success possible, I am, yours truly,

SAMUEL H. SOWARD.

Albion, Wash.

"I guarantee that the new method which penetrates to the starved root cells will produce a new, healthy growth of hair in 30 days or your money will be immediately refunded. And furthermore, I want you as the user to be the sole judge. My special free book, now ready, explains the method in detail and tells you precisely why I am able to make this unusual free proof guarantee."

ALOIS MERKE

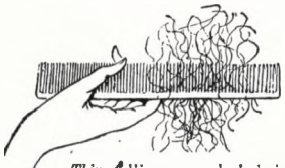
New Hair in 30 Days -or Costs You Nothing!

Alois Merke discovers a new, simple method guaranteed to grow thick, beautiful, luxuriant hair, or money instantly refunded. Gives new life and health to hair that is thin, falling, lifeless.

At the famous Merke Institute, Fifth Avenue, New York, letters are pouring in from all over the country requesting information concerning this new method for growing hair. So successful is it that it has been guaranteed to grow new hair in 30 days **or cost nothing!**

To women this method is particularly interesting as it often transforms thin, falling hair into rich, luxuriant beauty in an unbelievably short time. It is unlike anything ever known in this country. It penetrates to the starved root cells, revitalizes and nourishes them—and the hair grows thick, lustrous, beautiful.

There is no massaging, no singeing, no unnecessary fuss or bother of any kind connected with this new method. It is simple, pleasant. Already hundreds of women who had thin, falling hair, hundreds of men who were "thin on top," have acquired new luxuriant growths of hair. Often the results are almost unbelievable.



Thin, falling, scraggly hair is a sign of starved root cells. But now a method has been perfected which penetrates to these cells and stimlates them into new activity.

Thin, Falling Hair Given Glorious, New Health

Is your hair thin, lifeless? Does it fall out, break? Is it dull and without lustre?

All these conditions are nature's signs of starved or atrophied hair roots. Ordinary methods cannot revitalize the roots, cannot reach them—no more than rubbing "growing fluid" on the bark of a tree can make the tree grow. You must get right at the roots and stimulate them. This remarkable new method provides at last an efficient way of invigorating the roots themselves. The hair becomes brighter, fluffier. New growths make their appearance within 30 days—if they don't there is no cost to you.

Some of the Amazing Results

The proof-guarantee is made possible only through splendid results that have already been achieved—as these few excerpts from letters testify. The letters are on file at the Merke Institutes and anyone may see them by coming to the office.

"I have been bothered with dandruff for 20 years and had lost nearly all of my hair. I have used your treatment 30 days now and have a good growth of hair coming in.

"Am glad to say I can see such great change in my hair. It is growing longer and my head is full of young hair that has made its way through since I have been using Merke Treatment."

"I must frankly state I was skeptical as to your claim, but a faithful use of Merke Treatment for a month has removed all doubt and three of us are obtaining unbelievable results both in looks and growth.

Free Booklet Explains the Method

We have prepared a special free booklet called "New Way to Make Hair Grow" which tells you everything you want to know about the remarkable new method for growing hair. This booklet explains the method in detail, gives you many interesting facts and proofs concerning this new method. We know you would like a copy, and we will be glad to send it to you absolutely without obligation.

Among other things, this free booklet will tell you how this method penetrates to the hair roots—without any massaging, rubbing or other tiresome methods. And it tells how the dormant root cells beneath the skin's surface are awakened, giving new life, new strength.

Mail this coupon for your copy of the special free book today. Remember there is no obligation whatever. The Allied Merke Institutes, Inc., Dept. 425, 512 Fifth Avenue, New York City.

The Allied Merke Institutes, Inc., Dept. 425
512 Fifth Avenue, New York City

Please send me, without cost or obligation on my part, a copy of the new special booklet "New Way to Make Hair Grow," explaining in detail the remarkable method for growing glorious healthy hair.

Name.....
(State whether Mr., Miss or Mrs.)

Address.....

City.....State.....

4 CONGOLEUM GOLD SEAL Rugs for Less than Price of One

This Offer is for a Short Time Only

One big rug—full 9 ft. x 12 ft. size. Genuine Gold Seal Congoleum—no seconds. Three small rugs to match, identical in every way. One dollar with the coupon brings all four rugs, immediately, to anyone, anywhere. 30 days' free trial. Money back, if desired. Instead of one rug, get **four rugs** for less than the **regular** advertised **cash** price of **one.** Pay almost as you please—taking about a year's time. Ours is the only house in America that can make you such an offer.

To get the **three rugs free**—four rugs for **less** than the price of one—you must use the coupon at once. This special offer does not appear **even in our own catalog.** A dollar with the coupon is enough—**then take a year to pay.**

Don't Scrub Your Life Away

There's no meaner or harder work than scrubbing floors. Congoleum ends this sort of drudgery. This beautiful pattern will brighten any room. A damp mop keeps it clean and fresh looking.

Guaranteed Wear The Gold Seal protects you against dissatisfaction and gives you an unconditional Money Back Guarantee. You will never be allowed to be dissatisfied.

Water Proof Nothing in its material or manufacture that can rot. The surface is hard, smooth, and wear resisting. Does not stain. Not marred or hurt by spilling of hot liquids.

Lies Flat from the very first moment, without fastening. Never curls up at edges or corners. No need to tack or fasten down. Dirt cannot accumulate underneath.

No Seams Made all in one piece. No fitting or piecing together. No bother or trouble of any kind. All four rugs come in one neat package, ready to put down in a jiffy.

Less Work Dirt, ashes, grit, dust or mud cannot grind into these beautiful rugs. The lovely colorings easily kept bright, clean, and beautiful.

No Expense No laborious beating, no sending to cleaners. Absolutely sanitary. The trail of muddy boots and tracked in dirt disappears like magic with least possible effort.

[REGULAR ADVERTISED PRICE OF THESE FOUR RUGS EVERYWHERE IS $19.80. SAVE $1.80—AND PAY LITTLE BY LITTLE.]

Oriental Design—Taupe Ground—Congoleum Pattern No. 548

It is a true Oriental design. The background is a dark taupe—the most popular color in floor coverings today. This taupe ground is brought out in a watersilk effect. The border has a blue ground. The figures of the center pattern and border harmonize perfectly. The blending of the various shades of dark brown, blue, ecru and taupe, is indescribably lovely.

$1.00 now—then $1.50 monthly.

No. H4C-548. One 9 x 12 ft. Rug with three 18 x 36 inch rugs, price for all four - - - $17.95

Our FREE Catalog of 10,000 other furniture bargains is now ready. We sell everything on credit. You're welcome to a free copy of this big book. Ask for it early. A postal card brings it to you **free.** Or simply put a cross in the square printed on the coupon below.

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Spiegel, May, Stern Co., 1304 W. 35th St., Chicago, Ill.

I enclose **$1** for the **4 Gold Seal Congoleum Art Rugs**—exactly as described—pattern No. 548 on 30 days' free trial. If I return them, you are to refund my $1, also all transportation costs. Otherwise I will pay **$1.50** monthly, until special bargain price of **$17.95** is paid.

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