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AFRICA tastes excitement when Scotch fighting blood is aroused. "The McIntosh," a complete novelette by Charles Beadle, in our next issue.

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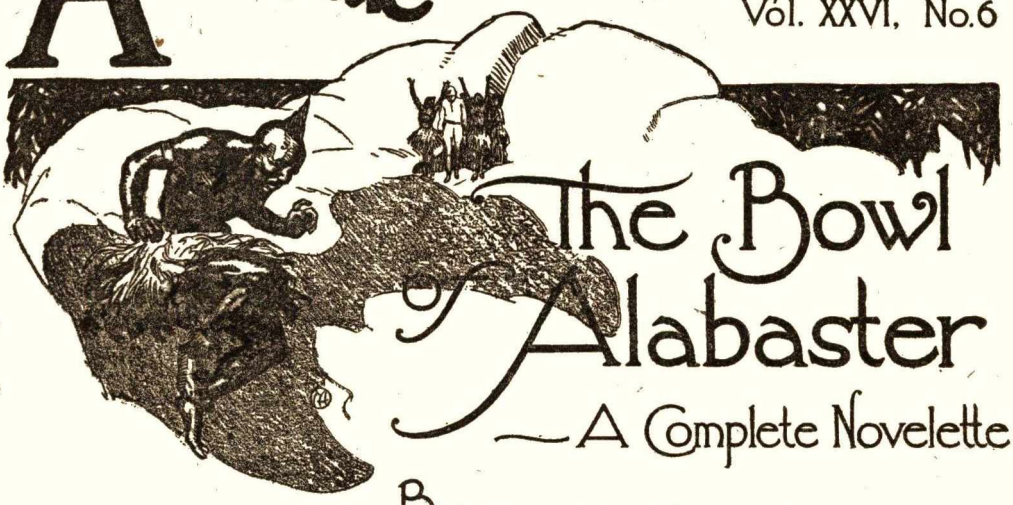


The Bowl of Alabaster

—A Complete Novelette

By Charles Beadle

Author of "The Christman," "The Alabaster Goddess," etc.

IN THE shade of an enormous Mubula-tree were three white men lounging upon a water-proof sheet eating a lunch suited to the climate of East Africa—boned chicken—and drinking tea. The grassy dell was circled by the blue darkness of the forest, above which loomed the seventeen thousand feet peaks of the Gamballagalla Mountains shrouded in mist.

At a little distance away beyond a bunch of Borassus palms was a crowd of Wunyoro porters, ebony fellows with squat noses, inclined to stockiness. They contrasted with the slenderness, the lighter color and the thin features of the Wahima belonging to the collector of the district, a sallow-faced man, gaunt, with the rather melancholy, bored expression of the up-country British official.

"Well, I think it's darned rotten luck and that's all there is to it," commented a tall, broad-shouldered man with a pointed blond beard and mustaches. "All the same I think it's worth another tramp this afternoon."

"Yes," drawled a shorter man with a black beard and blue eyes. "Mebbe we'll put up a bird or something!"

"Sure," assented the other, pulling a cigar from the breast pocket of his shirt. "I'd like to get a specimen of the mountain hawk anyway."

"I'm awfully sorry I've got to get back to the station," commented Dunlop, the collector, "but if you fellows want there's no reason why you can't follow up. What do you say, Dodd?"

"Oh, don't bother, thanks," returned Dodd, the American explorer. "I'm too old a hand not to know the luck of sport. Why, Lordy, up in the Lado Enclave I couldn't find a living thing larger than a wart-hog, and then for days you couldn't see the scenery for elephants. Anyway I guess I'm through here. Although," he added, casting eyes toward the wreathed summits of the mountains, "I'd like to do a climb, I would!"

"Well, why not?" suggested the other Britisher, Dr. Charles O'Droun.

"I'll arrange matters with these Wunyoro people if you want to go," said the collector; "at any rate as far as the Bakonjo country; and send along some of my people to fix matters there for you for porters."

"H'm," mumbled Thaddeus Dodd regretfully. "I guess not—much as I'd like it. Thanks a heap all the same. Better push on to Buddu. If I fool around here I'll strike the wet season for the Kivu country. Still I would dearly love to know what's on the other side. Is it just a plain drop to the Semliki?"

"As far as we know," said Dunlop. "The Abruzzi party scaled the northern peaks and the British Museum people skirted the southern end right around on to the Semliki and into the Congo. As a matter of fact they brought back a yarn about some tribe in the mountains who

were bewitched—that is, according to native report. But we've never heard anything about it, and the Wahima deny all knowledge of the story."

"Is that so?" demanded Dodd, gathering his long legs into a squatting posture. "You've never mentioned it before. Ali," he added to his English-speaking interpreter, a big Sudanese ex-soldier, "bring some more tea."

"Oh, well," said the Britisher phlegmatically, "one hears so many wild yarns, you know. Still these hills do have a queer sort of attraction. Want to go and see. Next furlough I think I will. 'Something lost behind the ranges; go and find it!' sort of bally thing, what?"

"H'm. Say, do you really think there's anything in the yarn?"

"No, frankly I don't."

"What do you think, doc?"

"Me?" queried the doctor. "Oh, I don't think. Doesn't lead anywhere. I dream."

"Well, what the mishief d'you dream anyway?"

"Oh, about cabbages an' kings an'—an' lost explorers," he added whimsically; "an' strange black deaths."

"Cheerful brute," commented the collector.

"Oh, I'm not scared," laughed Dodd. "But this time I think—or I dream if you like—that there are stranger deaths 'way down in the Kivu country; and anyway I'm booked there for next month."

"Have you got your Baedeker?" inquired the doctor. "Sounds like a tourist doing Europe—or a conscientious turkey reckoning up the days to Christmas."

"Don't be morbid," commented the collector solemnly.

"Not in the least," protested Dr. O'Droun. "Merely professional. Poet or doctor, they're the same except that one carves up humanity to find out how he goes and the other carves up ideas to find out how God works.

"Come along; I'm going to have a snooze and then go out and look for the miraculous hawk Dodd wants. Maybe I'll come back with a bird or a poem. The quick and the dead, what? Maliko!" to his head boy.

AT THAT moment a sudden wild cry set the key for an uproar of yells. Turning toward the commotion, the party merely saw a fan-like formation of black forms darting through the grass, and then from behind the clump of palms appeared a swiftly moving gray shape.

"Rhino!" yelled Dodd, and sprang toward the bole of the great tree against which his Winchester was leaning.

"Run!" shouted the collector as the little doctor stood still right in the path of the charging leviathan.

Then as the armored head and horn was seemingly within a few feet of him the doctor darted at an oblique angle to the right. The small piggy eyes glinted as the brute swerved slightly in his onrush in an attempt to catch the flying figure. The next instant the horn was buried six inches in the bole of the tree.

"Now, Dodd! Now you've got him!" yelled the doctor wildly waving his arms.

As the maddened and scared beast wrenched violently to free his head Dodd rapidly placed two bullets in the soft shoulder-spot between the armored plates. As the rhinoceros sank to his knees struggling and grunting prodigiously Dodd stood ready within a few yards.

"There," commented the doctor quietly as the great brute succeeded in freeing the horn and collapsed. "That's the only safe and scientific manner in which to trap the rhinoceros."

"Trap!" exclaimed Dodd. "Why, man, he'd have been up and at you if I hadn't been ready for him."

"Quite," assented the doctor. "But on the other hand had I not so disturbed his course that he kindly consented to probe the tree he would have been beyond you before you could possibly have secured a shot at a vulnerable part."

"That's perfectly true," assented the collector, walking from around the bole of the tree. "The bally rhino seldom ever returns. He'll charge any ol' thing. Smell—even his own dung if he gets it down wind—and a couple of hundred yards away the ol' dear'll go on feedin'!"

"Well, you certainly were mighty cool, I must admit," remarked Dodd, kicking the beast in the ribs to see whether he was really dead. "Say, I'd like to have you as a partner, doc."

"I'm game," assented the doctor.

"What! You mean that?" demanded Dodd as the porters came running up whooping with joy to begin bloody operations on the carcass. "But won't it upset your professional life?"

"Ain't got none," stated the doctor cheerfully.

"That's right. Doc has a farm somewhere down-country," put in Dunlop, "but he's never on it. He's usually ivory-chasing or somethin'. Queer bird, ain't you, doc?"

For answer the doctor made a sudden leap for his Mauser sporting-rifle, and, taking rapid aim apparently at the top of the mountain, fired.

"What the—" began Dodd.

"Yi—ih!" yelled the doctor triumphantly. "Got him, by ——! Here's your bally miraculous mountain hawk, Dodd, or I'm a Dutchman! The blighter had spotted this fellow here and I spotted him. Eh, Wangi!" he called to some of the men and gave them instructions to hunt up the fallen bird some quarter of a mile away.

"My Lordy, that was some shot," acknowledged Dodd. "I thought I could shoot, but ——!"

"Oh," said the doctor modestly, "I've practised it, you know."

However, it was an hour or more before the "boys," none to eager to be away from the larger game, succeeded in locating the bird, which had fallen in the topmost branches of a big forest tree.

"I was right," asserted the doctor as he took the bird from a native. "It is some kind of a mountain hawk."

"Mighty. big," commented Dodd. "Almost as big as an eagle."

"I think it's some kind of a falcon, by Jove," Dunlop was remarking when the doctor ejaculated—

"Good Heavens, what's this!"

He held up the right leg of the hawk, around which sparkled in the sunlight some object which looked like a metal legging.

"Why, it's a piece of silver bound with copper trade wire!"

"Look where the bally insect's been trying to peck it off!" exclaimed Dunlop.

"The devil!"

The doctor drew a combination hunting-knife from his pocket and succeeded in untwisting the wire. The "legging," proved to be a cylinder made from a slender plate used upon the butt of a gun, the legibility of which had been nearly destroyed by the bird's frantic attempt to rid himself of the strange object, and within were two pages torn from a loose-leaf pocketbook covered with a small handwriting.

"By Heavens, this is a message from some one!" exclaimed the doctor after glancing at the first few sentences written in indelible pencil. Leaving the bird in the hands of a man, they went back to the Mubula tree to read it.

October 26, 191—
Village of Omyatwani.

To all whom it may concern:

I am taking this chance, and a poor one, as the only hope of communicating with the outside world. I found this bird outside the village overgorged and seemingly half-asphyxiated.

I am Frank Jennings Lowden of High Stoughton, Berkshire, England, cousin of Porter Jennings Stratton the explorer, who disappeared two years ago. We last had a letter from him through Masindi saying that he in company with an American, Bob Verdon, was going into the Central Gamballagalla Mountains in search of a lost tribe who were supposed to be ruled by a white queen. Since then we have never heard of either man.

With my friend, John Stroude, I followed his trail as far as the Semliki, where our "boys" deserted us. The following day Stroude was killed by lightning and I lost everything except a revolver.

The Wuamba captured me and took me into the interior for some days. Without compass and in the gloom of the forest I was unable to keep any track of direction. Later, as they were evidently preparing to eat me, I shot a few and contrived to escape.

I came out of the forest into open country sparsely inhabited on the borders of the forest, but very densely farther on. I found the inhabitants very much like the Waganda, and they speak a similar dialect.

They were very courteous and took me to the capital, this village. Here I found traces of other whites and have since found out that this is the tribe my cousin was seeking. I have seen his gun and that of his American friend and am sure that both are dead, although I can not get any information from these people at all.

As far as I can make out all strangers have to go through some ordeal in a sacred valley of elephants and that none ever return alive. What it is I do not know. I shall have to go through this ordeal as well, and I suspect that if they do not actually kill me directly they will do so indirectly according to the rites of some superstition.

They are a very peculiar tribe. I seem to be under tabu, for although I am free apparently to wander where I like no one will speak to me.

I have heard something about a white woman and that the witch doctors talk with white people, but what it all means I can not guess.

I have seen the chief—the-One-up-on-the-Hill, they call him. He is very old and is apparently dumb or else not allowed to speak.

He has an English rifle by Harvey marked with the name of Wilkinson, Geo. Redden, 1864, whose name seems familiar, but which I can not place. Perhaps he was a missionary? Anyway he has died here, I am certain. No stranger ever survives, they tell me.

As previously explained I do not know where I am. Apparently this place is a valley between two ranges of the Gamballagalla, for I can see snow-clad mountains on both sides. The country is very rich in bananas, cattle and ivory, and some of the chiefs wear bracelets of soft gold. This village is on the edge of the foot-hills of the Eastern mountains.

I am treated very well and politely, but escape is out of the question. Am wondering whether they are anthropophagi, but they seem much more highly developed than the Wuamba.

They do not seem to understand the use of a gun, guarding my cousin's and his companion's as sacred objects. I have still my own revolver and cartridges, so if the worst should threaten——

I am writing this by moonlight and they are having some kind of dance on the hill. I will fix this on the claw of the bird, which seems to be recovering, and will put him on the roof.

Please forward this message to my father, Sir John Lowden, High Stoughton, Berkshire. If it ever reaches his eye he will know that, if I too never return, I was a Lowden My mother will know what I would wish to say. The dawn is coming.

FRANK JENNINGS LOWDEN.

"Good Lord," exclaimed Dunlop the collector. "I wonder if that's *pukka?*"

"Obviously is genuine," decided the doctor. "What's the date? October? Well, that's just four months ago."

"Too late to rescue him," put in Dodd. "But

it's a mighty interesting story he suggests."

"Wait a minute, you fellows," added Dunlop slowly. "I think I can prove that the story is probably true. Let me see. He says two years ago Porter Stratton went after this alleged undiscovered tribe, what?

"Well, that's true, for Stratton passed through Mbarrara within a month of that date. Little chap, frightfully keen sport and all that and yes—" reading the note— "I recollect that he is a relation of Sir John Lowden."

"What happened to him?"

"He disappeared as this chap says. Natives brought back a report to Masindi and Fort Toro that he had been drowned trying to pass up the Semliki Canon to the Albert Edward Nyanza, and the American Johnny too had been trading up in the Balagga hills."

"What territory is this place in?" demanded Dodd.

"—— if I know, old chap. You see the bally boundery isn't settled yet. The line is supposed to run somewhere over the top of the Gamballagalla."

"Look here, Dodd," said the doctor, wheeling upon the American, "you'll have to let me off my promise to come south with you now. I'm going to find this chap."

"So am I, you bet," cried Dodd.

"Certainly. We go halves?"

"Sure. Now let's strike camp and get back to prepare."

"And I've got to stop and stew on my bally station," muttered Dunlop. "Lucky blighters!"

II

FOUR days later they were back at Mbarrara busily preparing for the expedition. There was little to do as naturally Dodd and the doctor had a full equipment for *safari*.

The only special articles needed, as they proposed going straight over the mountains, were warm clothing and Alpine gear. Alpenstocks, boots and ropes were fortunately supplied from the stores left behind by the Duke of the Abruzzi's party, so that within three days they were on the road making for the southern end of the Gamballagalla mountains.

Upon Dunlop's advice they had contracted with the same Wunyoro porters to carry their goods—not many, for they were traveling as light as possible—as far as the foot-hills. There they could strike a bargain with the Bakonjo, a mountain people who Dunlop reckoned would be far more efficient in climbing and hardier in the cold than the men of the plains. And anyway the Wunyoro, who in times past had always been at war with the hillmen, would not agree to go far beyond their own territory.

Marching through the forest and rolling plains of Ankole was easy going. As they approached nearer the range the ground became rougher and wilder, having small crater-lakes scattered about. The temperature of the swiftly rushing water felt in crossing the small rivers suggested the origin to be snow.

On the seventh day they arrived in the country of the Bakonjo. So timid are these people that as the white men approached a certain small village perched upon a bare hillside they one and all scuttled away up and down the hill out of sight, taking refuge in deep ravines and clumps of stunted bush.

However, after a considerable parley the elders returned reluctantly, and presently the young men and then the women and the children. The usual presents having been made, a preliminary *shauri* for permission to camp was completed. Here according to the rangement the Wunyoro porters were to leave them to be paid off by the official at Mbarrara, with whom Dodd and the doctor had left the necessary trade goods.

The Bakonja are very small in stature and quite like monkeys, particularly in the stoop induced by scrambling up and down their scanty fields of native beans that cling almost at an angle of forty-five degrees. The huts of this tribe were very poor, merely shelters of grass about four feet high. And their tribal organization was extremely primitive, for they had no principal chief, each village running its own affairs by means of a council of elders.

Next morning the mob of Wunyoro porters presented themselves and demanded the white chief's permission to depart, grumbling bitterly; for although these foot-hills are only a couple of thousand feet above the Ankole plain, which is six thousand feet, nevertheless the nights were uncomfortably cold for these nearly nude folk of the swamp and forest. Dodd suggested that they be persuaded or be made to wait until the other porters were arranged for, but to waiting they would not listen.

"Well, we'll just have to make 'em listen to reason," pronounced Dodd when the result of the jabbering had been interpreted by Maliko, the doctor's head boy, a big Munyamwezi.

"Can't possibly," asserted the doctor, who had been twenty years in Africa and had never learned to like officials—at any rate as a class. "Remember they made a contract under the protection of the government."

"Oh, nonsense," protested the American. "Suppose these little fellows here won't come along, how are we going to get back and restart?

"That won't worry Dunlop. He's a decent chap an' all that, but the dear boy muddles up the I. P. C.—Indian Penal Code, you know—with the Bible."

"Can't we bribe 'em?"

"We'll try, but we can't afford to part with much of the little we brought."

Another prolonged *shauri* resulted in some

half-dozen volunteering to wait if the white men would lend them extra blankets. The others remained obstinate, talking much of the *Bwana Mkubwa*—Dunlop—and refusing to accept the same terms as their comrades.

Now to settle such serious matter as the hiring of a couple of dozen porters is not accomplished in a single meeting, for much has to be decided; and as there were not more than ten able men in the village messengers had to be sent to collect the others, each party demanding a separate and prolonged debate; magic had to be made before setting out on any expedition. Native life is more complicated than that of the white men.

THE recalcitrant Wunyoro porters departed chanting highly jubilant at having successfully resisted the white men and at returning to their homes; for unlike the Wunyamwezi from the east coast they are not lovers of travel. Another long *shauri* was held with the three elders squatting outside the tent.

Although the doctor spoke Luganda and several other East African dialects as well as a native these little people had a patois of their own. Even the chief understood but little Luganda, so that much difficulty was experienced in overcoming the suspicions as to why the insane white men should desire to climb up the side of mountains, the tops of which as everybody knew were inhabited by most malignant spirits.

But twenty years of dealing with natives enabled the doctor to avoid most of the pitfalls into which an inexperienced man would have fallen, with the result that at length several of the young men were dispatched to neighboring villages to round up sufficient carriers.

That evening, seated before the brushwood fire, the doctor, under the influence of a pipe, recounted some experience in lower East Africa of the pioneer days and then fell back upon the subject nearest to their interest, the possibilities in the story of the white queen. The doctor was frankly skeptical, remarking that "white" in the "white" rhinoceros and "white" elephant really meant a gray.

"If there's anything at all in it she'll probably turn out to be an albino," he added.

"Oh, you're blasé," snorted Dodd. "At any rate I want to find out, and I won't believe that until I see. How d'you account for that fellow's story of the gold bangles?"

"That doesn't prove anything. Maybe there is an alluvial field there, and maybe they've been influenced by ancient Arab traders, and maybe again he saw ordinary brass or copper trade rings in the sun."

"Depressing person," retorted Dodd. "The African sun seems to have burnt all the romance out of you."

"It has not," asserted the doctor, smiling. "Only one with a highly developed sense of romance can afford to face scientific probabilities. It's your fake poet who, confronting an ugly fact, stumbles and becomes sentimental. The essence of poesy is an original angle to life in combination with a more or less ordinary faculty. A true adventurer is a poet in action."

"That's an awful thought," commented Dodd, "to think that I might have been a free-verse poet if I hadn't had a mania for exploring countries."

"Well, don't get sentimental about it," retorted the doctor. "There are uglier facts in life than that. Here, Ali,"—to Dodd's interpreter—"give me a whisky, and —— the expense. I'll prescribe one for you, Dodd."

"I wonder if these little fellows know anything about this mysterious tribe," remarked Dodd.

"Possibly; possibly not. Anyway don't ask 'em."

"Why?"

"Didn't you notice that in the letter that Lowden chap recorded that all his porters had bolted at the Semliki, and that Dunlop related that they heard from Porter Stratton's men that he and the American had been drowned when, as we now know, they lived to reached this tribe of theirs at any rate?"

"Well?"

"Well, it's quite feasible with the native mind that, if this tribe has some mysterious method of putting out strangers, it is tabu to all the other tribes on the principle that if you mention a person you are apt to bring him or his ghost about your ears."

"Homeopathic magic, eh?"

"Exactly."

"H'm. I had thought of telling Ali to find out."

"Glad you didn't."

The doctor sat up abruptly.

"Ali!" He called the man to the table.

"Have you asked these people whether they know anything about a tribe with a white queen the other side of the mountain here?"

"Yes, sah. I no speak them myself because I no speak their tongue, but I tell head man Wunyoro porterman who ask him."

"*Thtt!*" clicked the doctor. "When?"

"When you gennelman finish *shauri* with them. I come to tell Mr. Dodd when you finish dinner, sah."

"What did they say?"

"They no know nothing, sah."

"All right; you may go. That's awkward, Dodd," the doctor continued when the man was out of earshot. "We'll probably find that all the men of the other villages are occupied with their harvest or something."

"You mean we won't get men now because of that tabu?"

"Shouldn't be surprized if the village is deserted already."

Dodd smoked for a moment in silence.

"I'm sorry," he said at length, "that my man has made such a fool break, but——"

"Oh, that's all right. Probably would have happened anyhow. That's the worst of having English-speaking servants around. I ought to have warned you not to speak about the matter in front of him. You know they always listen to everything we say and chat about it afterward. It's more my fault than yours. Wait. Listen. Can you hear anything of the men except our own fellows?"

Near the tiny village still glowed the fires of the Wunyoro who had volunteered to remain, but there was no sound of the usual chatter. The doctor rose.

"Come along; we'll go and see."

They walked across a ground-nut field to find the temporary huts of the porters uninhabited. The village was empty too save for an odd lean dog or two who yapped at them and, as they found the next morning, several hags and young children.

"I'm beginning to have faith in this mysterious white queen," commented the doctor as they returned to their own camp where remained only Maliko and Ali.

III

TO REPRIMAND Ali for his indiscretion was of little use. The trouble was made. As the doctor admitted he should have taken precautions against reactions which Dodd could not be expected to have foreseen. One point however was that the incident had certainly spurred them on to keener efforts by the inference that there must be a considerable amount of truth behind the bald story of Frank Lowden.

A council of war was held that night. The situation was that they were to all intents and purposes stranded in this hilly Bakonjo country with their goods and two personal servants.

Any hope of persuading the Bakonjo to return and be sweetly reasonable was, as the doctor knew only too well, futile. Once this idea had got in their small woolly pates nothing short of force would be able to effect a round-up, and then they would desert at the slightest opportunity.

Sifting the matter down, several possibilities remained. They might send Maliko back to Fort Mbarrara with an appeal to Dunlop to get them carriers. But in that course the doctor had no faith whatsoever. Dunlop's official mind would never rise to the occasion. The best that he might possibly do would be to send them some Wahima or Wunyoro porters who would inevitably hear of the purpose of their trip and desert as the others had done, for a native tabu is far stronger than any governmental regulation.

Were one of them to go personally to Mbarrara while the other stopped to guard their property—for should they leave it alone or with one of the two boys the Bakonjo, as yet scarcely under control of the British Administration, would most certainly loot—the position would remain about the same, now that this specter of the tabu was abroad among the natives.

Another alternative was to abandon this expedition and restart from the northern Kivu district to the south of the chain of mountains. This would entail much loss of time.

But neither Dodd nor the doctor was made of the material to give in so easily. Unanimously they decided to continue somehow.

"I'm pretty certain," said the doctor, "that Maliko will volunteer to come along. He's been with me since he was a kid. Maybe your Sudanese will. As an ex-soldier he may have some of the fear of tabu knocked out of his system. Ask him."

Dodd did so and the man after expressing his contempt for these *shenzie* (savages) stolidly accepted, expressing himself as willing to go wherever the master wished.

"Good boy!" commented the doctor. "At any rate we've got two men who will stick it out. Now we'll have to work out the supplies, which won't be much."

"Think there's any kind of mountain goat or kind of sambur in these upper regions?" suggested Dodd. "That would save our larder some."

"Don't know. But don't think so. Don't recollect the Abruzzi people remarked any, and they would certainly have been keen on any kind of sport. Anyway we'll have to chance it.

"Ammunition, blankets and a little food will be about our limit. 'Fraid we'll have to give up the peak climb though."

"H'm," said Dodd obstinately. "We'll see!"

"Stiff-necked race!" commented the doctor.

"*Et tu, Brute!*" retorted Dodd, grinning.

Another point to be decided was what to do with their goods which they were forced to leave behind. To cache them would entail waste of time and labor, for the Bakonjo would undoubtedly follow the trail and find them.

On the doctor's suggestion they carried the loads into the chief's miserable hut and attempted to inform a wizened old woman in the village exactly what might be expected to happen to the chief if the goods were not there upon their return. But whether the hag really understood or not was extremely doubtful.

Then after a hurried meal they loaded up, each carrying two blankets and water-proof sheet, rifle and bandoleer, revolver, rope, a pair of mountain boots and some food, and the doctor his medicine-case.

Both Maliko and Ali the Sudanese sportingly

consented—for usually a native servant will not on any account take on the arduous task of porterage—to carry two loads of food and extra ammunition on their heads.

Below them under the glare of the rising sun stretched the undulating forest and farther away were the rolling plains of Ankole; about them the mountainside was cut by wild ravines; beyond the summit of the foot-hill upon which they were towered the height of the Gamballagalla wreathed in morning mist. As, so burdened, they left the tiny village, striking along a native path which promised to lead in the general direction on which they had decided, they were aware of a scuttling and running of the small black forms upon a distant hillside.

"Think they may attack?" queried Dodd. "Might send a shot over their heads as a warning, eh?"

"No, don't waste it," advised the doctor. "They won't attack. For one reason they'll know very well that we're leaving all that stuff behind. As soon as we've disappeared and they're sure that it isn't a trap there'll be a general race to have first choice."

Although they were six thousand feet up and mounting the heat began early to tell and the packs grew heavy, for in Africa white men are not accustomed to carry anything at all, usually having even a gun-bearer. Presently the path, such as it was, swerved to the left, evidently making for another village whose cleared ground they could see.

They decided to strike across-country directly for the summit, which they did, only to find between them and their objective an enormous ravine beautiful in the bright sun, clothed in tree lobelias in flower and wild bananas. After a short rest they plowed on again. Half-way down the hillside they came suddenly upon an open sward of vivid green.

The doctor, in the lead, stopped; but Dodd, to whom the ways of Africa were less known then, thinking that the sight of game had arrested his companion, walked around him. The next instant he slid up to his waist in soft bog.

"Keep still," shouted the doctor as Dodd began to struggle. "Wait."

SWIFTLY unwinding the rope they carried, the doctor formed a loop and threw it over the head of his friend, who was already visibly sinking. Dodd thrust his arms through, and the doctor with Maliko and the Sudanese dragged him out of the treacherous slime.

"Darned dangerous stuff," remarked Dodd, squatting on the hard ground and looking at the velvety green sward.

"Quite. Once you're in that stuff you'd never get out without help."

"Queer," commented Dodd, gazing about. "Suppose there must be a cup in the rock formation underneath which holds this stagnant water."

"That's right," assented the doctor. "Common in granite countries, but here it's possibly a small crater—blow-out, y'know. Awkward though. Maybe we'll have to go miles around."

"Wait a minute," said Dodd. "Let me clean up this gun a little. She's choked."

"Sun'll dry it to powder and you can shake it out. Come on."

Again they took to the trail which was no trail. Dodd was covered to his middle in a suit of evil-smelling green slime. About four miles farther along the great ravine they discovered a shelf of rock or firm ground.

Testing it with their alpenstocks at every pace, they were led through thick bush upon a foaming mountain stream. A few yards farther on it was swallowed by the earth, causing this vast bog from which apparently it seeped away down the valley.

They halted for a rest, remarking the coldness of the water. As far as they could see through the bush the country ran flatly toward the distant steep hillside, which was covered with green foliage like tree-moss, in the midst of which they could distinguish a white streak.

"Better make for the waterfall there," suggested the doctor. "I wonder if that's the main mountain or another confounded foothill."

They did so, but half a mile farther on came upon another bog. After discussion they decided to hunt up the valley again for a crossing.

The sun had disappeared into the clouds upon the heights about four o'clock and now the misty light, almost prolonged as a northern twilight in the depth of this ravine, began to thicken appreciably. They retraced their steps a short way and made camp, experiencing much difficulty in getting the green wood soaked with mountain mist to burn at all.

AT THE hour of the monkey—only there were no monkeys in this chilly region—they were awake and drinking coffee, watching the snow-clad peaks of the Gamballagalla put on fire by the hidden rays of the coming sun. By the time that the first real earth-ray had struck the opposite hillside the summits were shrouded coyly in mist. The dew had been heavy and with the chill their joints were stiff.

The two boys complained bitterly, but proved sportsmanlike in making no suggestion of returning. With the warming sun behind them they made better progress, and, rounding the morass to the south, succeeded in finding a hazardous passage across on to the harder slopes beneath the waterfall, the crevasse of which after investigation they decided to follow.

Long and arduous was the climb up the slippery rocks covered with foot-deep moss and lichen. At noon they had reached the first floor as it were of the mountain, where the stream emerged from a dense forest of bamboo. They rested a while glad—for a change in tropical Africa—to sit in the sun.

The first attempts to penetrate the thickets of bamboo resulted in such slow progress that they tried wading up the stream, crawling and squirming beneath the interlaced canes. However, half an hour of constant semisubmersion in the icy mountain water made both of them really thankful for the excuse when the two natives, shivering, with their black skins a dirty green, sank on to the nearest patch of the bank and refused to continue, saying that the river was eating up their bones.

"My Lordy," agreed Dodd, diligently chafing his ankles. "I'm with them! But oh why in Hades didn't we bring a machete!"

"Pity we didn't bring an elephant as well," commented O'Droun rather tartly. "He could have carried this confounded load of mine anyway. Lord, I've never had such sympathy for a porter before!"

Dodd looked across at the Britisher.

"Pretty easy to guess you don't come from the West. You're too darned lazy, you English."

"I quite agree with you," assented the little doctor, grinning. "Geographical as usual, old boy. We British always choose our colonies where we can get somebody else to work for us. And then they say we're slow! Come on," he added, scrambling to his feet; "this is no place for chatter, Maliko."

They hunted around, but no one place seemed any less dense than another. They literally dived into the jungle, striking out with the hands like a swimmer to part canes and hauling their bodies through. The chief difficulty was the legs, for each new shoot was as sharp as a gigantic needle, for which reason the natives, less protected than the whites, followed in the rear.

The energy expended in this way was enormous. Even the powerful American, who because of his build and weight took upon himself to break the trail, was glad to rest every twenty minutes or half an hour. They made roughly for the gloom of the mountainside looming through the feathery fronds of the bamboo. As early as three o'clock the sun disappeared.

AT FIVE they were not out of the forest. The darkness amid the canes was deep, although they could see away to the east the bright glow of day. The boys were almost dead beat and the whites too were by no means loath to camp. They cut a circle with their knives, lighted a fire, had food and, stretching out, dropped straight to sleep.

To the two whites it seemed about five minutes when they were awakened by a blood-curdling screech. They clutched their revolvers and sat up. The appalling yell continued and was added to by an excited jabbering from Ali, to whom appeals to know what was the matter were unavailing.

The doctor kicked the embers of the fire. In the resulting blaze he caught the gleam of small eyes in the darkness. Maliko with a whimper seemed to be catapulated into the circle of light, as at the same moment Dodd's revolver banged.

"What on earth——"

"Wolves!" snapped Dodd.

"Nonsense," said O'Droun. "There aren't any in Africa."

Dodd swore.

"Well, tigers—anyway some darned animals. I saw them, man!"

"What was it?" demanded the doctor to Ali, who had ceased to jabber but whose eyes in the dim glow still rolled.

"Nonsense!" said he as the man replied. "The fool says demons attacked him."

He rose and went to Maliko, who was crouching over the fire nursing his left arm and moaning dismally. The frightened man whimpered a reply, at which the doctor drew his arm from under the other and began to examine it.

"Look here, Dodd," said he, "they couldn't have been wolves, of course. Looks like a hyena's trick to try to drag a man out of bed, but the bites are too small. Ali, give me the water-flask and my medicine-case. All right, Ali, I'll fix this.

"It wasn't a demon," he added in Kiswahili to Maliko, "so it won't harm you. You know my medicine is good."

"Darned nasty bite," commented Dodd. "Determined brute too, hanging on with all that hullaballoo going on! What was it, doc?"

"Can't imagine yet. We'll find the spoor in the morning."

"Could a boar make his way through this stuff, d'you think?"

"Oh, yes; but they don't bite. They rip. And seldom attack unless pounded or chased. We'd better keep a guard going for the rest of the night. I'll take first watch. What time is it?"

"Oh, Lordy; only ten after eight."

Ali, grumbling vaguely about ghosts, and Maliko, only half-convinced and inclined to make a fuss about his aching wound—which had it been received in what he would have considered fair fight with man or beast he would have thought nothing of at all—curled up rather sulkily, pessimistic about their masters' magic, close together for warmth and comfort in their common blanket.

Dodd, stretching out, was soon asleep with the callous indifference of the accustomed

adventurer. O'Droun, throwing on more bamboo canes, economically lighted the dregs of his pipe and squatted down with his rifle across his knee to watch.

Through the fringe of the fingered leaves of the bamboo the stars burned enticingly like hot electric lights, so irritating the little doctor that when he was on the heated plain he used to curse them for the same quality. From all around came a gentle murmur of the myriad insects. A long way off some kind of owl was hooting dismally. . . .

Moments or hours passed, he did not know which, when suddenly a noise awoke him from his day-dreams. Cautiously without a visible start, as a frontier man will, he became tense of ear and sight.

He peered around in the violet wall of darkness. At first he thought they were fireflies, so quick they moved. Then he recognized them as the eyes of the same animal he had seen before. Swiftly he touched Dodd upon the shoulder and whispered—

"Get up!"

"What's the matter?" demanded Dodd, sitting up.

"Your blooming wolves," returned the doctor.

Dodd freed his revolver from his blanket and blinked about. The fireflies moved, neared. A cross between a squeak and a grunt sounded.

"They're all around, whatever they are," whispered the doctor. "Let them get closer. I want a specimen."

"I'm not a darned bug-hunter," commented Dodd. "They nearly got your man as it is. Come on."

AS HE spoke there was the distinct rustle of feet and the eyes grew nearer. Dodd's gun shattered the insect murmur. The answer was a yowling scream. As the doctor's gun spoke the rustle increased to a torrent as of water falling. The brutes were charging.

"Hey!" The doctor kicked up the fire.

Dodd kicked Ali in the ribs. "Get your guns!"

Ali and Maliko, startled, leaped out of their blankets. As the doctor's and Dodd's guns flamed agile forms, whiskered of mouth and white of teeth, leaped into the flicker of the fire.

Whether Ali was still convinced on the matter of demons was never known, but both he and Maliko lost no time in seizing their rifles—Maliko with one hand—and began slogging with all their might at the onrush of the beasts. For some five seconds or five minutes the grunts of men striking and oaths in English and native mingled with squawks, harsh squeals and the rustle of indifferent bamboo.

Then as suddenly as it had come the attack ceased. Several more revolver-shots crashed into the darkness, eliciting one more squawk.

"Phew!" commented Dodd. "This don't seem healthy."

"I think they've gone for good," said the doctor. "Let's see what they were."

Lying by the side of the fire, whose embers had been scattered somewhat in the melée, was a dark body about the size of a small goat. The doctor kicked it first to see whether it was still alive and then turned it over with his foot.

"My ——," he exclaimed, "it's a rodent!"

"A rat! But——"

"It *is!* A giant rat! Look at the whiskers, the incisors!"

"Impossible!"

"My dear man," said the doctor with a grin, "there's more in the Gamballagalla than was ever thought of in American natural history!"

IV

HOWEVER there were no more "alarums and excursions," as Shakespeare has it, that night. The rodents appeared to have had enough. When in the east appeared the longed-for glow they were awake and drank their coffee. Maliko's wound although painful was not serious and the blood color of the doctor's medicine—permanganate of potash—seemed to have convinced him of the efficacy against the demons which—seven of them—lay around the camp-site. Both Dodd and the doctor agreed to the delay of about an hour necessary to skin a couple for preservation. Rats they were, of a size never yet recorded.

About nine o'clock they were thankful to break out of the bamboo forest on to a sloping hillside covered with tree-moss and boulders lichen-covered, where the going was comparatively as easy as a race-track. Before them at some two miles' distance frowned the broken teeth of a rocky precipice.

At the base they halted for food. On examination the cliff-wall appeared to be no more than about five hundred feet high and streaked with water gulleys. What was above, from their position close beneath the base, they could not see.

The noon and afternoon were spent in the usual laborious hauling and climbing common to any mountaineer. By following the water-worn crevasses they arrived upon a small plateau as the early dark overtook them.

That night they were not disturbed by any enemies, animal or human. In fact in the silence and the cold, of which they were uncomfortably aware, no life of any sort appeared to be existent.

From their position on the edge of the rocky slab the first flush of dawn on the eastern horizon was easily visible. In the solitary quiet they were startled by the faint but clear crow

of a cock rising in the still air from the valley beneath them.

They considered the trail for the day. In front of them was a rising country covered with bracken and brambles sweeping up against an abrupt rise of tumbled boulders above which, hinting at a gap between, was a glistening glacier as pink and inviting as strawberry ice-cream. Higher again through golden snow of the upper rays jagged carmine peaks struck upward.

The morning's walk was like a country stroll in Autumn with blackberries for the picking. Even the boulders—of lava formation—required little negotiation. Beyond where they fed was the top of a steep ravine covered in bracken and stunted trees; and across on the other side, dazzling in the sunshine, was the snowline.

By agreement they slept that night for warmth in the bottom of the gully, through which passed a trickling brook of snow-water that was possibly the source of the stream they had waded. Although they lighted a big fire and kept it going the boys complained bitterly of the cold, such cold as in all their tropical lives they had never imagined possible.

"We'll have to get through as quickly as possibly," Dodd said that night, "or else these fellows will throw in."

"And small blame to 'em," commented the doctor, squatting near the fire. "I don't like it myself. Suppose I've been too long in Africa. Blood too thin and that sort of thing.

"Ugh!" he added, glancing up at the sheen of the snow in the starlight. "I always said I'd never make an arctic explorer."

"Queer," commented Dodd, following the glance, "but the look of it seems good to me. Sort of homelike."

The sun found a team of two whites and two blacks toiling upward through the crimson snow, linked together by a rope in Alpine style, the American in the lead sounding the way with his alpenstock. Strange it felt to the doctor after so many years to feel the crisp snow crunching beneath his feet; and at first Maliko and Ali were so interested in the novelty that they were forever halting the procession by snatching up handfuls of snow to smell and taste. Once at a rest Ali, thrusting his hand well beneath the snow, clucked astonishment, demanding to know why it was that the snow felt quite warm beneath instead of "biting his fingers," as he called it.

In the noon sunshine the air was like champagne, dry and bubbling with life. Away beneath them to the east stretched the whole of the Ankole country, the purple of the forests smudged across the yellow of the prairie land, which was streaked with the silver of rivers and spotted with the mirrors of crater-lakes. But above them towered snow and sepia crags.

"MY LORD, look!" exclaimed the doctor, pointing toward a black boulder sticking out of the snow and streaked with Alpine moss. "See that! I believe it's *edelweiss!*"

He freed himself of the rope and went over to investigate.

"It is," he announced, trudging back with a small flower, velvety, like a star. "It is a kind of edelweiss. Queer how nearly all species of vegetation and animals depend upon the altitude."

"H'm," grunted Dodd satirically; "I suppose you expect to find an Englishman sitting on the topmost peak?"

"Not at all. An American—Dr. Cook without doubt."

As they tied up again preparatory to starting Dodd glanced uneasily at the servants.

"Look mighty sick already," he said. "If we can't get over to-day I'm scared we'll lose 'em. Wish we had more brandy. That might keep them going through the night."

And indeed both Ali and Maliko, although they were unusually clad in suits of white man's clothes and sweaters, had the complexion of muddy green with violet under the eyes which betokens exhaustion or fright in the negro. Nevertheless they struggled on gamely.

About noon they entered the belt of the mist. The going was now heavy and becoming dangerous, particularly as neither man was an expert mountain-climber. Several times Maliko or Ali lost his footing and fell into a chasm. The mist added to their troubles of direction, giving no chance to select a possible route ahead. Once Dodd, deceived by the accident of his alpenstock striking a hidden spur of rock, fell into a hole. The two natives, feeling the rope tauten, instead of pulling back began to give to it, supposing doubtless that they were about to run down-hill. Although the doctor threw himself back with all his weight only the chance that Dodd managed to clutch the spur of rock as he slid saved the party from being entombed.

When he had been aided back on to the firm snow and had investigated they found that a chasm of unknown depth stretched right across their path. They had been trying to work around the lower slopes of the mountain seeking the chance of a pass through, but now on the principle that the chasm would surely widen as it went down they were forced to follow up the slope.

After about an hour of arduous scrambling through the mist, testing every step, they came against an abrupt cliff of dark rock which was itself cleft by the gully. Again they were forced along to the left, hunting for some hope of scaling the wall. Eventually they found a "chimney."

With much labor they clambered onto

another plateau, snow-laden, upon which was the beginning of a real glacier. Here they halted for food.

"How d'you feel, Ali?" inquired Dodd, handing him a tot of precious brandy.

"No feel good, sar," responded the man. "This not my country.

Then he added as if after reflection—

"Your country all same this, sar?"

"In parts," responded Dodd, "but not where we live."

"Maliko he say this place full devils. I think so. Devil he make this." And he pointed to the snow.

Even to the doctor after the twittering, teeming life of the tropics the utter silence seemed sinister, crushing.

Maliko, who seemed too scared to eat and sat with chattering teeth, appeared in the worse condition. Once more they struggled on, making a little better progress over the glacier, working around again to the right. Neither Dodd nor the doctor spoke much, each one praying for the mist to clear that they might have a chance to find a pass or get their bearings.

Hour after hour they plowed on, turning anxious eyes upward toward where the sun should have been. Fortunately the twilight did not arrive at this altitude so early as it did beneath in the shadow of the mountains. But at five o'clock they were still plunging along in a world of white and gray.

At six the sun on the equator sets. At this altitude perhaps they might have half an hour more daylight. And night in the mists would be dense in spite of a half-moon.

They had nearly all the afternoon been edging around the lip of the glacier without ever seeming to reach the other side of the mountain. Lacking an altimeter, they could only guess at the altitude. Presently they saw looming through the mist a dark bulk of rock, which proved to be the base of another cliff.

"We'll have to camp here," commented O'Droun.

"Yes," agreed Dodd. "But we mustn't let these fellows go to sleep, or——"

AS THERE was no wind at the moment there seemed no more reason to camp at the base of this bare cliff than in the open, but somehow it appeared more comforting; and as Dodd knew a storm in these regions might rise at any moment. They untied themselves and told the boys—to keep them busy—to hunt beneath the snow around the cliff for moss.

Ali began reluctantly to obey, but Maliko squatted huddled upon his haunches, staring. The doctor sharply reproved him and threatened to thrash him. The man looked at him with the half-glazed eyes of a dying brute.

"Come on," snapped the doctor, advancing toward him.

Maliko got up and went to where Ali was fumbling about and sat down in the snow.

"Get up," shouted the doctor.

Again the man obeyed with the mechanical movements of a sleep-walker. The snow-light was rapidly fading. At that moment came a long, low moan like that of some vast animal in pain. The doctor stopped. Maliko suddenly straightened up.

"It's the wind, or a glacier moving," said Dodd.

Again came the dismal, mysterious noise. Maliko, screaming to Ali something about spirits, suddenly turned and plunged forward into the snow. Dodd and the doctor shouted and began to follow him. But the crazed boy struggled on frantically. Then just as the sound ceased his figure disappeared.

"He's gone!" shouted Dodd.

As they both stopped they heard a gasping which sounded in the strange silence like the exhaust of an engine. Ali, floundering ridiculously, was following Maliko. The doctor, who was nearest, sprang after him and grabbed him by the arm. Ali wriggled. The doctor dropped him with a blow on the jaw.

"They've gone crazy," said Dodd as the doctor came back, dragging the form of his friend's servant.

Again came the low moaning, and the fading light seemed doused as if some one had blown out a lamp. All they could do was stand up against the cliff while the moan grew into a roar as the storm swept up the valley. Fortunately for them the cliff did provide some shelter.

Crushing flat against the rock with Ali between, they tried to shout and punch him into reason and fight. Although he at length answered rationally and promised to do what his master told him as soon as they released him he sank upon his haunches.

Sleep, of course, was out of the question. The only chance for the two whites was to keep awake and active, stamping their feet and flogging their arms. Light surface snow swirled about them, but the main force of the storm was fortunately diverted.

Beneath the howl and squeal of the gale came occasionally weird rumblings as if either a glacier was crunching another to pieces or some form of earthquake was in progress. Dim lights glimmered on points of snow or ice as the density of the clouds varied until suddenly the whole racing fog was ripped away, leaving the hard stars set like jewels around the platinum crescent of the moon in the West. Around them vaguely they could make out the towering summits of the mountains and below them appeared a vast cavity, but on which side of the mountain they could not know.

Several times they yanked Ali to his feet, pummeled him and gave him a toothful of brandy. Once he grumbled faintly that he had no hands and Dodd, pulling off both the native's gloves, snatched snow and tried to rub back the circulation. But as with so many natives, once he had got the idea of death into his head it acted as a hypnotic thought, lowering any natural power of resistance.

The next time they spoke to him he did not reply, and when they attempted to drag him to his feet he was stiff. Before dawn at length came they were busy snow-rubbing each other's noses and ears.

Slowly like a film in a plate, the contours of wild foot-hills developed beneath them and beyond, a vast valley appeared, streaked with crater-lakes, and a river against another distant line of snow-clad mountains, clear as their own of mist in the sunrise.

"The promised land!" exclaimed the doctor. "Look! That's the valley ringed by snow-clad mountains of which Lowden wrote. Somewhere below there's the sacred valley of elephants."

V

THEY left Ali as he had died, squatted on his haunches at the base of the cliff, to stare with frozen eyes perhaps for centuries to come over the tomb of his mate through the swirling mist and across the unknown valley.

They had started immediately, seizing every chance that the few hours of clear weather would give them. They were more heavily laden now, having divided the essentials of the dead men's pack between them, but going down-hill with the inviting panorama of warmth and fertility before them eased their steps considerably.

Yet the path was not easy. Endless crevasses had to be avoided, cliff and peaks to be negotiated in the mist; for within an hour of sunrise the broiling heat of the sun below had sent the daily shroud about the peaks.

By sundown they had reached the edge of the snow-line, where lichen and tree-moss began, and slept heavily before a smoldering fire wrapped in their blankets and within a bed of heather and moss.

It was broad daylight when they awakened, the warmth of the genial sun upon their faces. The valley of promise had disappeared behind a ragged range of bamboo-clad foot-hills. They decided to make for the southern side, working along every convenient valley.

The day's march was divided between rolling patches of moorlike land strewn with blackberries and tree lobelias and washouts and patches of bamboo. Sweet it was that night to camp before a real fire, although, with the memory of the giant rats in their mind, they had to take turns at watch. But nothing disturbed them.

The next day was spent in a laborious fight with bamboo, but by the evening they had gained the beginning of the slope which ran sheer down into the valley and could see against the glow of the setting sun the smoke of a village.

"Now what I want to know," remarked Dodd as he took the boiling billy and coffee off the morning fire, "is how the —— we're going to find this sacred village?"

"If this is the country we'll find that easy enough," said the doctor cheerfully. "They'll take good care that we do if I'm not mistaken—or Lowden was not, rather."

They delayed some half-hour in order to clean and oil their rifles and revolvers for action. Conscious of the returning heat of the sun, they discarded their mountain clothes and boots, which they draped upon a tree like a couple of scarecrows; for as the doctor opined whatever way they returned it would not be by the mountain route. In a keen breeze and a brisk atmosphere of sun they started for the green expanse of the forest, the outskirting brush of which they struck about noon.

"Queer," remarked Dodd as they rested beneath a large thorn-tree, "that we don't see any sign of villages. That fellow said these people were quite civilized for Africans—had roads and bridges."

"Oh," said the doctor, munching *biltong* and biscuit, the last of their provisions, "we're probably in the Bronx Park."

"Lordy, man, but I could sure appreciate a mint julep in the Waldorf," sighed Dodd. "This heat don't seem at all good to me after the Adirondacks up there."

"Me, I'm a plainsman," laughed the doctor contentedly. "I don't like cold; gets into my bones. Heat seems more natural. I'm skinny anyway, so probably I don't feel it as much as you do. I'm dying to hear a parrot squawk. It would seem like a poem to me."

"That's one thing I don't like about your Africa," returned Dodd. "Never a bird have I heard that has a song."

"No, nor a flower with a smell; nor, as they say, a river with water; nor a woman with virtue. That's Africa; but I like her all the same."

They tramped on, and at about three o'clock came upon the forest edge.

"Darned queer we haven't seen any signs of life," Dodd had just commented when the doctor, who was leading, stopped abruptly and pointed to a track which ran across a soggy patch between the trees.

"Get your gun ready and move quietly. We're close to a village, I think. See what I have found here."

THE doctor had found a native path, which they now began to follow. Fifty yards farther along he sidestepped into the grass and undergrowth and pointed again. Across the track, woven into the undergrowth, Dodd saw the points of arrows.

"Wuamba," whispered O'Droun. "The pigmies don't use bamboo arrows."

Investigating the path carefully—although these arrows would have been harmless to a booted white man—they approached with caution. The density of the trees diminished. They stopped on the edge of a clearing in which were a half-dozen huts or more, frail things of grass slung upon a low framework. They shrank behind a large tree to consider.

"This is not Lowden's tribe," the doctor decided. "More probably Wuamba or some allied tribe. We'll have to try to approach them for the sake of the food. Anyway they'll have fowls although there's no sign of cultivation. Maybe the fields are beyond."

"D'you think they've ever seen a white before?"

"Probably not—here. Wish the deuce we had Ali. I don't suppose they know a word of Kiswahili or Luganda. They're reputed to be cannibals, but——"

A mangy-looking dog with the prick ears of the jackal dashed out of the village yelping shrilly.

"Come on!"

Marching forward revolvers in hand, they walked across the open straight for the village. They heard muffled squeaks of women and the gutturals of men amid the yelping of curs.

In the center of the seven huts they stopped. Not a soul was to be seen. The doctor called aloud the conventional Swahili greeting of a friend. There was no reply.

Then suddenly there was a slither of grass being moved. Dodd wheeled about abruptly, followed by the doctor. Peeping around the edges of each hut at their backs were natives, nude save for grass around their loins. Each was armed with a bow and arrow with the string taut to shoot.

Again the doctor cried the greeting. A voice replied in a language the doctor did not understand. Once more he called out, and, grinning wide to show his teeth, advanced toward a group holding out his left hand as if in greeting, although he was careful to keep the revolver ready. From behind him a single arrow whirred past his shoulder.

"Don't shoot," he called to Dodd, "or we'll start 'em."

The bowstrings remained taut, but as no one else fired the doctor continued to advance. When within a couple of yards of the group, which contained a man whose advanced age was evidenced by his gray woolly tuft, he grinned more fiercely than ever, and, sticking the revolver in his belt, held out both hands, talking rapidly in Kiswahili. The elder replied and although he did not understand O'Droun repeated cheerfully—

"*Indio, indio* (yes, yes)."

Whether the man understood the gesture or by chance had picked up a few words of Kiswahili they did not know; but at any rate he gave some order to the young men, who immediately loosened their bowstrings and stood up. Dodd stood where the doctor had left him, covering O'Droun with his gun as the old native advanced to meet the white man timidly.

As the doctor grinned and wagged his head energetically the chief stopped and held out his open palm. The doctor advanced to clasp it, but the man, exhibiting symptoms of fear, retreated, yet continued to hold the hand open.

Puzzled, the doctor paused. Then experience of native ways suggested a custom known among other tribes. Very solemnly he spat into the old native's extended palm. This sign of friendship was greeted with a grunt of approval from the surrounding warriors. The old man, evidently pleased, gravely rubbed the spittle upon his forehead. The doctor, whose hand was still extended, beckoned, intimating that the native should do likewise; but the old man gazed inquiringly as if he did not understand and looked toward the American standing with his gun ready.

"Come on, Dodd," called O'Droun. "Come along and pay your respects; only for the Lord's sake don't laugh."

Putting up his gun, Dodd came over and as the chief duly extended his hand spat into it good and hard.

"No! No!" urged the doctor as Dodd held back. "Put out your hand, man!"

Grimacing, Dodd obeyed, but again the old man merely stared bewilderedly.

"Now what's the move?"

POINTING to himself and his friend, the doctor spoke rapidly in Luganda, and to help out beckoned to his mouth, imitating chewing. The chief understood and called out, evidently to some women still hiding in the huts. Immediately the ceremony was over the warriors, carrying their bows in their hands, had crowded around the whites, jabbering excitedly but in friendly fashion, touching various parts of their visitors' equipment as if discussing among themselves their uses. One tall, skinny, hungry-looking fellow poked Dodd in the ribs, and, pinching his arm, began to chatter more excitedly than the others.

"What's the idea?" demanded Dodd.

"Curiosity, I suppose," said the doctor, "but for Heaven's sake don't take any notice. We've got 'em friendly now. Come on, the chief's going to give us a hut, I think."

As they followed him, trailed by the talkative bunch, Dodd stopped and pointed to a skin pegged out beside a hut in the sun.

"What the ——'s that? Hairless?"

The doctor took one glance and then grinned.

"Human skin. They must be the Wuamba, who are reported to be cannibals."

"The —— they are!" exclaimed Dodd, grimacing. "Is that why that skinny-looking guy was feeling my ribs?"

"Quite possible," assented the doctor, grinning.

And, turning to the chief, he pointed to some scraggy fowls dozing in the shadow of a hut and to his mouth.

"Anyway we're going to get something to eat, although don't be surprized if it's boiled baby."

"Oh, my Lord!" said Dodd. "I've tried monkey, but that's too human for me."

As the doctor had surmised a hut was given to them—a shelter rather, for that was all that it was, so low that Dodd could not stand upright. The interior, dark and smelly, had some grass bunched in a corner, and a few blackened calabashes and a pile of wire arrows scattered about. An old woman with pendulous breasts scuttled out of the hut as they approached.

They squatted on the bed of grass, undid their packs, placed their rifles across their knees and waited. The commotion was still going on without.

The doctor unpacked some of the little trade gear they had taken from the corpse of Ali. Presently the chief appeared and squatted in the door of the hut with four diminutive fowls in his hands. He pointed at them and then at the white men.

"He wants to trade," explained the doctor, and laid one length of brass wire on the ground.

The chief signified his extreme disapproval. The doctor shook his head and replaced the wire. The man put the chickens behind him.

"Oh, for Heaven's sake give the brute two wires, doc," advised Dodd. "I'm dying of hunger."

"Not yet. If I try that he'll want a dozen."

Once more he placed the one brass length on the ground. The chief rose and went away to chatter with a group a few yards from the hut.

"He'll come back in a minute. Our stock is deuced small, remember."

"True," assented Dodd; "but if these fellows are really cannibals we must be possible dishes, and if that's so he's a mighty cheap skate who won't feed his own Thanksgiving turkey."

They had to bargain for nearly an hour, but at last they got the chickens for two lengths of brass wire. They made a fire and plucked and grilled two of the birds. While they were eating and discussing their plans the natives took turns in squatting in the door to watch them, volubly remarking to their fellows without.

"If these are the Wuamba," the doctor commented, "we'd better make a break to get away as soon as possible, for they're noted for treachery even by the surrounding tribes."

"But if they've never seen a white man before I should have thought they would take him for a god or something like it."

"Not necessarily except in books. They evidently don't know what a gun is, else the chief would have wanted one; and if that's so you can't expect 'em to have respect for one."

"Maybe we'll have to teach them. Think it's safe to wander round after we're through with food?"

"No, I shouldn't. Might start trouble, and we don't want it yet.

"But the point is one which you probably haven't noticed. I think they mean trouble because at the expectorating ceremony you noticed the old man pretended that he didn't know what I meant when I wanted him to spit in my hand? Well, that's not natural.

"All natives believe in witchcraft, and the idea is that if you can obtain the hair or spittle of any enemy any witch doctor can perform magic and kill the owner on the homeopathic principle. I'm certain that he knows that better than I do. He played to get us into his hands, but not to deliver any power over him to us. Follow?"

"Quite."

"Well, that's why I think they mean trouble. They've probably been discussing us from a gastronomic point of view."

"Well, we'd better quit right away. Give 'em a gun-show and get; eh?"

"No. If we do that we bag a few of them and the rest will follow us, and in the forest we won't have a show."

"That's right. Well, what then?"

"That's what I'm trying to work out. One thing; we've got enough food for two days with care. These two fowls we must carry alive."

WHEN they had finished their primitive meal of one chicken each—not much between two hungry men—Dodd sprawled on his back trying to work up a plan. Suddenly he sat up.

"When's the best time to make the getaway, doc?"

"Dawn, I should say. I don't think we could navigate the forest by moonlight. I don't suppose they'll attack tonight. If they do intend mischief they'll start a singsong by moonlight to get up their courage."

"Well, I've got an idea."

He explained the plan to the doctor, who laughed delightedly.

"You're certainly an inventive people, you Americans," he acknowledged. "Ought to go splendidly."

They spent the rest of the afternoon talking, with a keen eye and ear for doings without. At

nightfall the chief reappeared with a mess of manioc and the leg of a goat, and to their surprize did not demand any payment.

"That settles it!" commented the doctor as he gave the old man one brass length. "They think they're going to get us, so that they'll have both a banquet and our goods as well."

"I see. Presents don't seem to agree with his constitution. Well, all the better for us."

They ate another chicken and stowed the goat-leg away. As the doctor had prophesied, there began shortly after dark the throb of a drum, and from the hut they could see the red glow of fires in the silver moonlight.

Presently everybody, save for a group of six who were evidently a guard, disappeared and soon a low crooning chant began, growing in intensity as the night wore on. While one white kept guard the other slept. The air after that of the mountains seemed oppressively hot and sticky.

The moon sank about four o'clock. The chanting continued. They noticed that when the guards were changed the relief were evidently in a hilarious state although they kept to their posts, danced and crooned.

At the break of dawn Dodd, who was on watch, awoke O'Droun and they buckled on their packs and waited. The dance was still in progress, and from the increase in the volume of noise the savages had evidently extracted much courage from the magic incantations. Dodd suggested that it would be time to go, but the doctor vetoed the proposal.

"Better wait until they can view the show thoroughly. The magic of it will impress more than killing half a dozen. They'll probably be ripe for an attack with the rise of the sun."

Just as the first rays of the sun were seeking vivid greens among the violet shadows of the forest edge the chanting became louder and the throb of the drum quickened. Dodd, slinging his rifle over his shoulder beside the pack, handed his revolver to the doctor. The latter, going to the rear of the hut, tore holes through the side and peered without.

Came an uproar of yells, and the drum-beat became more furious. Another outburst was followed by an answering shout from the hilarious sentries, who, the doctor observed, were flourishing their bows and knives.

"They're coming. Now!"

Dodd stood erect, lifting with him the framework of the roof from the cross-pole which held it, and began to walk forward, carrying the hut bodily. He was guided by the doctor, who kept pace, peering through the rent in the thatch into which he had thrust the two revolvers. As the yelling, dancing cannibals around the fires whooped and began a rush toward their dinner, letting fly a joyous shower of arrows at the hut, this forerunner of the tank began to move.

The first to notice anything enchanted were the sentries, who, being nearest, had evidently thought that they would have first blood. But as they charged, knives in hand, came a couple of shots. Two of the number dropped. One was howling but the other was silent.

Then the other four observed that the hut was moving down upon them. They gave one squawk and bolted headlong. The remainder, although started by the explosions from the revolvers, came on screaming wildly. The hut advanced rapidly, vomiting bullets. Four or five fell.

Then the awful fact of the white man's magic dawned upon them. Screeching, they fled in all directions.

"Right! Right!" yelled the doctor to the man-engine as he refilled his guns.

Swerving to the right, the hut made for the forest edge. On the brink it halted. The doctor withdrew from his manhole and peeped out of the door. The village was deserted.

"Better give 'em something to help 'em along," suggested Dodd, and accordingly the doctor emptied his revolvers into the air.

Then the hut marched majestically into the moist shadows of the forest and disappeared from the sight of the trembling natives.

VI

THEY camped at night at a respectable distance from the forest in the open brush country and over the leg of goat reconsidered their plans. The doctor was of the opinion that they had struck the valley too far to the north; for in the letter Lowden had said that the country was rich in cattle and bananas and had not even implied that it was forested, whereas this country was dense forest and the cannibal people obviously poor.

They put out the fire as soon as they had made some tea, in case any of their late friends had got over their scare of the white man's magic and still hungered for their flesh.

Next day they retired as far back as the foothills and from there began to work to the south. From the top of one hill which they ascended to reconnoiter they noticed that the forest they had entered seemed to lie in a cup of the valley. To the south they could tell by the general conformation as well as by the lack of the jungle blue that there was open rolling country, and in the far distance to the southwest was more dense forest coloring.

"It seems to me," commented Dodd, "that that must be the fertile country of which Lowden wrote, and it seems to be entirely surrounded by forest to the north and the south and by the mountains to the east and west. Possibly they are a more or less isolated tribe."

"Possibly," assented the doctor. "Probably between the forest which is on both sides are the pigmies and even here between the Wuamba

—if they are Wuamba—and the more cultivated people. No plainsman likes the pigmies for they haven't a chance against them in the dense jungle. They roost in the trees, you know, and are as bad to fight as armed apes."

"Ever seen any?"

"No; never been in this country before nor in the Congo. I suppose the imaginary Congo-Uganda border must run somewhere through this valley."

"Have they never had a boundary commission?"

"No. Talk as usual. That's all. I wonder where Lowden came into the country? He doesn't speak of climbing any mountains, so I suppose he must have come in from the south there through the forest. Recollect he said he came up the Semliki, where his boys deserted him."

"Perhaps that forest away to the south connects up with the Semliki. We might be able to work out that way."

"Possibly. Come on and let's find out the next trouble awaiting us."

As they advanced the country became more and more broken and volcanic. Crater-lakes were numerous and the vegetation was less as the soil grew more rocky. They debated as to whether they should descend toward the valley, but as they were more easily able to keep track of their direction on the uplands, and moreover as Lowden had implied that the village was close under the eastern mountains, they continued straight along the edge of the foot-hills.

Once a long way to the west they marked the smoke of a fire, but of human beings or of game they saw none at all. Even the slight difference in the altitude they had reached by going back from the forest was recorded at night, in the air, which although not cold was distinctly fresh. They killed the chicken that night and grilled ate it.

Next day the daylight had not come until nearly seven o'clock; for the mountains were now between them and the morning sun, the heat of which they did not receive until a little after nine, when it broke through the upper mist about the peaks. So wild and difficult grew the going that morning that they several times reconsidered their plan.

Ragged gorges and ravines, many with a rushing stream of icy water at the bottom, had to be negotiated. Some were as steep as a washaway in soft soil, and once they were saved having to descend to the forest in search of a passage only by the use of the rope, which fortunately they had retained.

After the passage of one ravine which had required much energy and time they climbed to the top of the nearest rocky hill to reconnoiter again. Here they could see that the type of country below had changed. Instead of the shadows of the forest was open, rolling country with scattered clumps of trees, and here and there in the distance dark patches of trees which seemed to mark the course of a river. Not far away they could see the smoke of a fire.

In front of them was another hill, covered with cinder-like rocks and as bare as a slag-heap, which obstructed their immediate view. As they were discussing what course they should pursue the doctor caught Dodd's arm.

"Listen. Can you hear anything?"

Very faintly, more like vibration than sound, came the throb of drums.

"By ——, there's a village behind there! Perhaps the one in which Lowden was imprisoned. Look here," he added, "I'll climb up that and see if I can get a glimpse."

BEHIND them was a pinnacle of rock like a rugged table about ten feet high to which the doctor referred. By climbing on to the American's shoulders he crawled easily on to the summit.

"Can't see any sign of a village," he reported, "nor much over the top of that blessed hill; but it looks——"

He dropped suddenly on to his knees.

"Two men running like the —— over to the left there. No, lower down, among that jumble of rocks. I believe they saw me. Come on, let's get away. I'm certain this is the vicinity described by Lowden."

They descended the hill eagerly and after investigation decided to follow a small gorge on to the south. They had to use the rope to get down.

The going was arduous, over slag-like rocks. Sometimes the stream broadened out, following the walls of the gorge, which grew higher as they descended. Once the lips almost met overhead and the stream became a racing torrent not three feet wide.

"Looks to me as if it was going to close up altogether," commented Dodd. "Become a subterranean river or passage. We'll have to go back if it does."

The walls were now about forty feet high, and although the strip of sky was brazen with heat there was little light in the bottom. Presently the stream took a tumble down slippery rock. With the rope around his waist the doctor as the lighter man began to slide down to investigate.

"I think it's all right," he called back when the rope was taut. "I'm taking a chance."

He untied the rope and disappeared.

"All right," came his voice. "The walls are widening."

Dodd followed, having to slide down some fifteen feet, getting soused with icy water in the process. He found the doctor waiting, straddling the stream upon two rocks.

"We seem to be going through the middle of

that hill or near it," he remarked as they began to clamber along.

"Probably an earthquake split," suggested Dodd.

Overhead the gorge widened a little, but below it began to close in. Narrower and narrower it became until both men were reduced to walking crab-fashion. At last the doctor halted.

"I'm afraid we're done," he remarked. "I don't think I can get through."

He advanced about six feet and stopped.

"No go," he reported. "But wait a minute, I'll try without my pack."

He rapidly unfastened his load and gave it and his rifle to Dodd. On the second attempt, edging sidewise, he managed to make way and disappeared around a curve. Dodd heard him call out:

"All right. Widens a little. Sort of a cave. I'll see what's ahead."

As Dodd waited he heard the little man moving on and caught an exclamation as if he had slipped on the rock. The water gurgled on for some five minutes. Just as he was wondering what was happening he heard a distant voice cry—

"Dodd!"

The cry was followed by a revolver-shot which reverberated in the tunnel of the cañon. He shouted back and listened intently for a few seconds.

Then, tearing off his own load, he dumped both on a rock in the stream and tried to follow the doctor. When less than half-way through he stuck fast.

He paused for a moment to listen. There was no sound save the gurgle of the stream. He tried to wrench his way through, but struggle as furiously as he might, the breadth of his chest prevented his passing where the slender Englishman had slipped through.

He shouted again and again but received no answer. After another desperate attempt he wedged his body so tightly that he could not move and spent some time in getting back, tearing his clothes to pieces in the process.

Once as he paused to reflect rapidly he thought that he heard a distant call, but he could not be sure. He shouted, but there was no answer. That the doctor must have encountered somebody or some beast was evident, unless he had fired a shot as a signal that he had fallen into a pot-hole or otherwise injured himself.

However, speculation was of no use. He must find out and go to his partner's assistance. He glanced anew at the narrow passage, estimating the width and began stripping his clothes, or what was left of them, to the waist. Then tying them, the two packs and the rifles—the latter in such a manner that they would not swing broad way on—he began a fresh attempt.

This time, at the cost of scoring his chest and back pretty badly, he managed to squeeze through and dragged the goods after him. Leaving them there for the moment as he could not carry the double load, he went forward revolver in hand to investigate.

He found that, as the doctor had intimated, the walls bellied out into a kind of cave with a narrow vent of blue sky above. Twenty yards or more farther along came a swift turn in the cañon. He hurried around, to find himself in another long, narrow corridor with a path of the icy stream.

He shouted again and again, but the only answer was the echo which mocked him. He followed at a half-run for some quarter of a mile, and then after an abrupt turn found himself blinking in a blaze of sunlight.

Before him stretched a wide, fairly wide ravine like the dry bed of a river, in which the stream diminished to a shallow trickle. On one side—the north by the sun, for he could see again the distant mountains of the western Gamballagalla—rose an almost inaccessible cliff of volcanic lava; to the south was a jumble of boulders and lava mixed, rising into scored slag foothills. Nowhere was any sign of human or animal or vegetable existence.

"Darned queer," he muttered, standing staring futilely at this cindered waste. "Where the —— can the man have gotten to? Haven't seen a hole big enough to hide a coyote."

As he listened intently he again caught the faint throb of drums.

"Now where the Henry Lucifer can they be?" he inquired of the hot silence.

He glanced up at the brassy sky as if vaguely wondering if an aeroplane had carried off his partner. Away high like a floating moat in a sunbeam was a vulture or an eagle.

"Can't be you, friend," he added, addressing the bird, "but I'll eat what's left of my clothes if I can figure this out."

ONCE more he searched with his eyes the gray wall of the cliffside, on which was not even a wisp of grass. He went back and sat in the shade, trying to imagine some solution to the mystery.

"Maybe there's a hole or cave in the corridor which I didn't notice," he concluded at last. "Better go look and get the pack at any rate."

On the way back, although he went slowly and examined every foot, he did not discover any sign of a cave entrance or any hole whatsoever that might have sheltered a dog. On his return he had determined to leave the packs just inside the mouth of the cañon and go out to scout around.

Armed with the revolver and his own rifle, he started off down the ravine. As he walked he kept a keen lookout on the both sides for any signs of natives watching or trying to stalk him.

It was late afternoon and the sun was right in his eyes, so that not until he was almost upon them did he suddenly become aware of what appeared to be dancing ghosts of spectrum colors. Startled, he whipped out his revolver. But, shading his eyes, he saw that it was some escape of steam which against the westering sun looked like cavorting rainbows.

"Hot springs," he muttered and advanced.

Beyond this one at some fifty yards were several more.

"Interesting," he remarked; "but they can't explain where O'Droun's got to."

A little to the left he noticed the mound of a crater blowout. He walked over to the lip. As he peered within he exclaimed:

"My ——, the sacred valley of elephants! But what the —— made 'em white?"

In the cavity, which was some twenty yards across, were lying at haphazard as they had fallen the carcasses of animals—elephants, mountain leopard, buck—each and every one as of carved snow.

Interested by this curious phenomenon, he began to slide down—for the sides were steep—to investigate. Just as his feet touched the floor something invisible seemed to grab him by the throat.

He choked, inhaled partially, and then with a frantic effort sprang and scrambled up the bank again. He fell on the rim gasping, pawed at his throat and toppled over unconscious.

VII

ON THE other side of that precipitous hill which had barred the immediate view of the explorers was a village set amid banana plantations. And on the veranda of a fairly large hut thatched in the Uganda fashion sat O'Droun, staring at the sunset through the palms in the compound.

Near him on the other side of the veranda squatted gravenly a tall native, of a bronze color rather than black, clad in a kind of skirt of bark-cloth—material made from the bark of a tree. The doctor was not injured, nor had he had his revolver taken away from him.

Passing the cavern-like portion of the cañon, he had hastened down the narrow corridor and as unexpectedly as Dodd had found himself in the open sunlight. About him were grouped seven natives armed with long-bladed spears.

To his astonishment the leader, taller than the rest, lighter of color, and with finer features like the Bahima or the Somali, had addressed him in archaic words of Luganda which the doctor was able to comprehend. But when he answered, telling them that he had a partner, apparently they did not understand.

He pointed back to the gap in the rock. This seemed to alarm them for at once they set their spears in a circle about him menacingly. Then he had shouted and to be sure had fired in the air. Instantly they had thrown themselves upon him and at a word from the leader had carried him off.

About a quarter of a mile farther down, they came to another cañon in the cliff-wall, a replica of the first, which seemed to be a split between two strata of rocks. They forced him within and at the point of their spears drove him before them.

Unbound as he was, and with the revolver still in his hand, he could easily have killed. Several considerations held his finger. One was that any bellicose act would be fatal to any chance of finding his partner or Lowden if the latter were still alive. Secondly, Dodd was not in any danger, and O'Droun was certain that he would be able to persuade them to search for the American.

As they drove him through a labyrinth of passages O'Droun reflected that the men he had seen from the top of the hill must have given the alarm, and they, possibly knowing that there was only one way of approach, had waited for him to emerge, expecting only one man as they had seen only one.

Presently the ribbon of light overhead went out and he found that he had to crawl into a tunnel. He was encouraged by half-understood directions from the men behind, who queerly enough seemed to address him most respectfully and politely. The tunnel ended abruptly in what was evidently a large pot-hole.

Here one of his captors, apparently having no fear whatsoever of the white man's revolver, went ahead of him and actually helped to haul him up some crude steps that were extremely difficult for a boot to get a purchase on. Some twenty feet or more, and he found himself in a large, conical hut, where squatted a silent native over a small fire by the door.

As he stood, wondering what on earth was going to happen, the leader spoke to him softly and beckoned to him to follow. Outside, the doctor discovered a huge mahindu-tree whose giant boughs had descended to the ground and taken root, forming as it were a series of flying buttresses.

Beyond the tree and encircling all was a high grass fence guarded, the doctor observed as he passed out, by a stockade of tusks set with their fangs pointing outward. Beyond he noted a long open structure full of natives clad in bark-cloth.

"Absolutely Waganda," he muttered, remarking the drums and lyres lying around.

Outside of this, on the crest of the hillock containing the whole, they plunged into a plantation of bananas, from which they emerged into a straggling, broad street of houses, each enclosed within a fenced compound. To the hail of the leader a tall man emerged from one and cried out softly as if indeed he were expecting the

stranger. On the threshold the captors stopped and the man invited him to enter.

Puzzled, the doctor complied, and found that the interior was astonishingly clean. Upon a floor of beaten ant-heap and cow-dung were broad reed mats, and in one corner the raised dais of the native bed.

A point which struck the doctor was that there seemed to be no particular excitement in the village, the inhabitants of which acted much as if the arrival of a white captive were an every-day occurrence. He began to question the host or guardian, but received only polite answers.

PRESENTLY came young girls of a much darker complexion, bearing calabashes of cooked bananas, sweet potatoes, fish and milk.

The doctor grinned his thanks and had no hesitation in setting to. As soon as he had finished a wizened old man with a gray tuft of wool on his chin entered.

As he saluted and squatted O'Droun noticed that he wore several ivory bracelets. Thinking that at last he was going to get some information, in his best broken Luganda the doctor began anew to tell that he had a brother white man whom they had left behind in the canon. The old fellow agreed quietly that that was so, and that soon the other would join O'Droun. Puzzled by this answer, the doctor asked when.

"When the will of the One-up-on-the-Hill be known," replied the old man, and the doctor recalled the phrase of Lowden in his letter.

Next O'Droun asked as diplomatically as he could whether there was another white man in the country.

"The doctors and wise men always consult the white being," was the answer.

"Now what does that mean?" pondered the doctor. "Is it a reference to the white queen Lowden mentioned, or to Lowden himself? They made a fetish of him perhaps. That's possible. Yet—I wish I could persuade this idiot to go and search for Dodd."

He continued to pose questions, but received as far as he could make out nothing but the same kind of mystic answer.

"Just the same as Lowden intimated," mused the doctor after the man had gone. "I'm under a kind of tabu. Yet what puzzles me is the gun business. They don't seem to have any idea of it as a lethal weapon, else why didn't they take it from me? Again what Lowden said. H'm! Wish Dodd was here."

As the sun set he tried to sum up events in significant order. Evidently this was the lost tribe. There was no doubt of that.

What had happened to Lowden? How was he to find out when evidently secrecy was part of the system?

What did the old man mean that he should soon go to join his white brother? The statement might be read like any witch-doctor saying—in several ways. Perhaps he meant he would share the fate of Lowden.

Why were they so uninterested in his appeals to hunt for Dodd? Possibly, he reflected, those scouts or shepherds or whatever they had been who had seen him on top of the rock had reported only one white, and consequently they could not get it into their native heads that there could be two of them, this conclusion being possibly influenced by the fact that Lowden had arrived alone.

Again, what would Dodd do? Apparently from their actions there was only one way to reach the village from the foot-hills unless by some big detour.

Dodd had no food, but plenty of ammunition and water. The country—certainly that through which they had passed—was without game. But one thing O'Droun thought was certain: Should they capture Dodd they would assuredly bring him to this same place, which was evidently a guest or prison house.

The possibility started another thought in O'Droun's mind. If that were so then probably Lowden and the others had been housed here. Perhaps this was the house from which he had dispatched the message by the bird.

Had he left no trace at all behind him? Not even scrawled his name or initials? The doctor looked for the guardian, who was squatting, as immobile as ever, on the far veranda. O'Droun went into the house and set on the low bed.

"Now where," he asked himself, "would a man hide a message in such circumstances?"

The thatch was the most obvious place. But then the thatch might be renewed or destroyed at any time. The walls were of plaited reed and earth. Same possibility there.

He wandered round the hut investigating the walls and came back to the bed and began pulling about the mats to examine the floor. Then, struck with an idea, he pulled the mats off the bed. There, right under the place where normally a pillow should go, were carved the words:

DIG. F. J. L.

Following directions, the doctor unearthed a thin canvas-bound book wrapped in the skin of a goat or small buck. One glance showed him that it was Lowden's diary right up to the moment when he had gone out to meet his fate.

VIII

O'DROUN tried to read the journal by the light of the moon. The first part was written in ink; then evidently ink had given out or else Lowden had lost his fountain pen, for the remainder, and most interesting part, was in indelible pencil as the original message had been.

With the first ray of the sun the doctor was out on the veranda perusing the document. After a hurried glance at the last few paragraphs he went back to the capture of Lowden by these people. Copious details were given of the natives' life and the little information Lowden had succeeded in wresting from their secrecy regarding a few of their customs. Evidently he had had plenty of leisure to write.

Apparently Lowden had been just three weeks in the hands of the tribe.

"Why three weeks?" pondered the doctor, and then found the answer toward the end, where the diary stated that the mysterious ordeal was practised only at the full moon.

The doctor paused and began to calculate.

"Not much time for me then," he reflected. "Full moon the day after tomorrow."

According to the entries Lowden had caught and dispatched the bird some four days before the end. He recorded that he had no hope that the appeal could bring help in time or even that it would ever be found by a white.

As the doctor was reading came again a small procession of young girls bearing food. As he had noticed before, they were darker than most of the men and were, he had learned from the diary, slaves. He continued eating and reading at the same time. But little information O'Droun discovered, for in spite of the fact that he spoke Luganda fairly well Lowden had failed to persuade any of the people to talk, as he had intimated in the letter.

"Poor chap," murmured the doctor as he finished on the brief entry dated October 30, 8 P.M.:

Light of full moon flooding the mountain-tops. The tall young chief with the gold bangle has come to summon me.

"I wonder what happened to the other two, Stratton and his American friend?" mused the doctor. "Seems pretty fatal, this ordeal or whatever it is. And not a word did he get about the white queen or goddess or whatever it is. Wonder if he ever found out before the end."

The doctor stood up and regarded his guardian, who was squatting as silently as ever.

"Anyway," O'Droun reflected, "from what he says I'm free to wander about pretty nigh anywhere. I'll try and see what happens. Perhaps I can find some sign of Dodd."

He greeted the guardian politely and informed him that he was about to take a stroll. The man murmured courteously and stood up, evidently prepared to accompany him.

Walking through the open compound gate, he found himself in the broad, straggling street, which to the right led up through the plantation to the hillock on which was the great mahindu-tree and the conical hut. He decided to go down the street.

At this hour there were few people about in the village. Evidently the slaves were away working in the fields and the wealthy were dozing in their huts.

The doctor was surprized at the extent of the village, which contained some thousand huts or more, he calculated, each one having its own compound. Regular, broad streets ran at right angles at irregular intervals.

Although he could not have the slightest idea from which direction he had come when he had emerged from the pot-hole in the conical hut he hoped to get a general idea by the contour of the country outside the village. He selected a cross street which ran to the south and marched on, hoping to gain some hill in the open from which he could get his bearings.

On the way he passed odd groups of men and a few women, evidently of the upper classes. Both sexes, he noted, greeted him softly but with averted eyes, and aside from a few who stopped to stare with mild interest after he had passed, none evinced what might be termed normal native curiosity.

"No one allowed to talk to me under threat of terrible results from my evil eye," reflected the doctor. "Probably my friend here and the old man are specially charmed to resist me."

He walked on, noting with interest the formation of the houses and various utensils to be seen lying about in the compounds. The tribe appeared to be more advanced than the Waganda whom they resembled, and had evidently sprung from the same stock.

But beyond the village the doctor found himself in what appeared to be a plantation of vast size, from which, curtained by fronds, he could see nothing save the distant mountains rising to the east. Every time he stopped the guardian, who was unarmed, stopped also; but once, turning suddenly, he caught a glint of long-bladed spears in the green of the bananas.

The doctor swung along, determined to get a glimpse of the country outside the plantation. After about an hour's smart going he saw by the growing glare through the fronds that he was approaching the open, but scarcely had he advanced another twenty yards than there appeared running the hidden guards, who formed a half-circle in front of him, barring his way. He expostulated with the tall guardian who confirmed the warriors' action by a solemn.—

"Nedal Nedal" ("No. No.")

THE doctor was puzzled what to do. Escape seemed, as Lowden had found out, impossible. He did not know what had happened to Dodd; also he did want very badly to solve the mystery.

Of one thing he was certain: That if Dodd was not dead he would certainly not go far without his partner. On the chance that Dodd was hiding somewhere within hearing distance O'Droun

decided to give a signal which would inform the American that he was still alive. He drew his revolver and slowly fired the six shots in the air.

As he was listening intently for any reply he noticed that the solemn guard showed not the slightest fear of the gun, the lethal nature of which, as he had suspected, they obviously did not understand. He waited for some five minutes and then, grinning amiably at the guard, turned and walked back to the village.

At the gate of his compound O'Droun found the wizened old man with the white tuft on his chin who had called upon him the previous evening. The old man came up, and, motioning to the hut, said—

"That which is not yet clean may not walk among men."

From his knowledge of native ways the doctor deduced the meaning in the speech. Many tribes compel a stranger, before he may enter their country, to be disenchanted from the evil spirits which are supposed to accompany him, so apparently O'Droun had to be similarly disinfected.

He smiled affably, and, answering that the old fellow spoke truth, went on into his hut. The old man followed him, and, squatting on the threshold, appeared in the native way to doze. O'Droun began to fidget, walking restlessly up and down the hut.

"I wish," he thought, "that I could get in touch with Dodd. Apparently it's useless to ask anything of this old scamp. Yet I still think that if they'd taken him they would bring him here. And he'll probably be thinking that I'm already in the pot by now."

Once more he told the old man that he had a white brother whom they had left in the canon, but again came the mystic answer about "going to join him soon."

"Confound the man!" snorted the doctor with unusual impatience. "He won't belive what I say for some crooked reason."

Contemplating matters, it seemed to him that his position was as likely to be as fatal as had been Lowden's and that of the other two men. The only hope was to solve the problem of the white queen and the reputed ordeal from which no stranger survived.

The only idea that his knowledge of native life could suggest to him was the poison test, in which the victim was forced to drink a certain vegetable poison. Should the victim recover he was deemed innocent; otherwise, guilty.

Now in most cases the doctor knew that these alleged trials were usually faked by the witch doctors. If the prisoner was wealthy and would pay enough, or more than the accusers, the doctor would administer a fake poison or give the man an antidote in the form of a powerful emetic.

He decided that that seemed the most likely solution. Unfortunately his medicine-case was with Dodd, but he could at any rate produce vomiting by sticking his finger down his throat.

"Anyway," he reflected, "if I don't come back Dodd may get away; or if not they're sure to send a well-armed expedition to explore this country sooner or later. If I'm going the same way as the other fellows have, at least I may as well leave a record of it as Lowden did. Some time or other this mystery is bound to be solved."

WHILE he was busy writing in Lowden's diary there entered a tall man in the prime of life with a goatee of black wool that, for a native, was quite large. His head was partially tonsured, leaving in the center of the cranium a mass of wool mixed with some sticky pomade-like subtsance which caused it to stand on end like a fool's cap. This individual, squatting down solemnly, began to kindle a fire with claw-like hands which were daubed with red ocher.

"Undoubtedly my respected colleague," commented the doctor and greeted him.

But the witch-doctor took not the slightest notice as he drew some herbs from a wallet carried at his waist beneath the bark-cloth robes and threw them upon the fire, making a dense, acrid smoke. As the white doctor began to sneeze the black one mumbled rapid incantations.

When at length the ceremony was finished the witch-doctor gravely saluted O'Droun and passed out. Presently came the old man, who remarked that now the stranger was clean to visit the One-up-on-the-hill and bade him to follow.

Before going out for the stroll in the course of which he had made the futile attempt to signal to Dodd the doctor, not knowing exactly when the summons might come, had taken the precaution to hide Lowden's dairy. The old man, without any show of force in the form of the guard who had followed O'Droun before, led him up the hill through the banana plantation and into the inner compound beyond the great ivory stockade. There in the shadow of a buttress of the great mahindu-tree was seated upon a wooden stool a withered old man whose skinny limbs were covered with ivory bangles. This personage the doctor had no difficulty in recognizing as the ancient chief of whom Lowden had written.

Before him was squatted the wizard who had performed the disinfecting ceremony, together with two others wearing the same fool's cap of plastered wool. Obeying the invitation to be seated, O'Droun sat upon a mat before the old chief. As in the customary native manner he waited for the old chief to begin the seance he noted that sticking out of the bark-cloth robes was the muzzle of a modern rifle.

"That's not the Harvey gun of which Lowden wrote," mused the doctor. "More likely to be Lowden's own gun. The old chap must be very

old—senile in fact. Possibly is dumb as Lowden suggested—or probably had his tongue torn out when he took office. That's often a qualification for kingship.

"Some of our kings could do with that, by——," he added grimly. "These colleagues of mine appear to be the most intelligent I have seen. Muscular devils too. Well, well, so much the better for the faculty if we could say as much."

AT LENGTH according to etiquette the doctor made the correct greeting for the supreme chief. But the old chief appeared not to have heard or seen him, and it was his own practitioner who replied.

After preliminaries the man posed a series of questions regarding the ways of the white man's country, to which the doctor gravely replied in the manner he thought fit, aware of the significant fact that never once did they exhibit the mildest curiosity as to what purpose he had in coming or whether he proposed to go; and when later he attempted to return the compliment his questions were solemnly ignored.

In reply to a direct repetition of the fact that he had left a brother white in the canon where they had found him, came the irritating response that he would "soon join his white brother."

The doctor then tried another direct question regarding the legendary white queen, but neither by the faintest ripple of their faces nor by word of mouth did they condescend to show that they had heard or understood the question. The doctor, aided by his knowledge of African secret societies, comprehended why Lowden had failed to gather any information and realized how utterly hopeless it was for him too.

To a stranger unacquainted with the native mind the visit seemed futile, but the doctor knew that probably it was a part of a rite in which the sacred chief, dumb and probably blind and senile, had to look for magic reasons upon the proposed victim. As O'Droun descended the hill his usual good spirits were somewhat damped.

That night at quarter to nine o'clock he observed with mixed feelings the moon rise above the eastern mountains. He reflected grimly that Lowden's dairy said the full moon rose at eight P.M. Allowing for difference in the visibility of the moonrise over the mountains, that would mean the full moon tomorrow night.

"Well, well," he reflected, "then I shall know—what I shall know, as a good witch-doctor would say."

IX

THE sacred valley of elephants, lying between the wall of the precipitous hill and the sheer slopes of the lava mounds rising abruptly into the foot-hills of the mountain, was mistily illuminated by the full moon filtering through the vast veil upon the peaks of the Gamballagalla. In the lava bed of the wild ravine rose points of steam, swaying like pallid ghosts in a fantastic dance toward a mound. Around this mound, which looked like the end of an enormous egg half-buried in sand with the top sliced off, squatted human figures, whose robes and actions resembled those of mad dervishes fishing in a magic pool.

The floor of this extinct crater sloped gently down for some twenty feet and was luminously white with tiny crystals which gleamed like a woman's flesh. It was covered with a profusion of scattered alabaster images—the great bulks of elephants, buck, mountain leopard and men; some were crouching as if praying upon their knees, others with limbs thrown wide.

Upon the southern side, against a mass of lava which appeared to have rolled down the declivity in some late upheaval, reclined the nude form of a young woman, her rounded limbs decked with bangles of gold and her breasts shielded by golden plaques. Although her skin was as white as green ivory in the light her features were semitically Egyptian and her hair was dressed in the manner of the Pharaohs.

Almost in the middle of the dead arena, by the side of an elephant which looked as if it had been turned to salt like Lot's wife, was the white figure of a European with his head resting upon his arm. Not far from him, sprawling forward like a kneeling Mohammedan in the act of prayer, was another European whose hunting-clothes against the whiteness of the floor looked luminously green. Right near the edge of the northern end were two more—a big, powerful man lying with his arm, as if protectingly, around the waist of a small, slender man.

Above a faint hissing, which sounded like the breathing of some mythical god, rose the rhythmic throb of drums.

At a sudden break of the drums the heads of the silent watchers turned toward the face of the hill, from a fissure in which emerged six other men. After the fifth appeared the form of the doctor, who, surrounded by the natives, advanced toward the crater.

When they were come to the lip three of the company began to scream in unison with the drums. At the end of each stanza came a bass grunt like the response of some wild liturgy.

By their side stood the doctor, staring down at the strange scene. Once he sniffed and muttered:

"Sulfureted hydrogen! Now what can this trick be?"

The savage chant and the drums ceased with startling abruptness. One man with the cone of hair upon his head shrieked madly and danced down the incline. The eyes of the white man watched him quizzically.

Between and around the ghastly objects

upon the crystaline floor the wizard capered, leaping now and again high in the air as if trying to imitate a flying-fish pursued by dolphins. Straight he made toward the lava block where lay the ivory figure staring through the centuries; and, mounting the rock, he emitted a long quavering wail which was answered by the circle of figures on the rim.

In exactly the same manner he returned. Panting, he stood beside the doctor. In the silence the other wizards pointed toward the rock, which looked in the distance like an altar. Just as O'Droun turned as if to comply with the injunction there came the sharp report of a revolver.

As all heads turned five more red flashes pricked the misty moonlight and as many explosions were echoed down the empty ravine. A voice boomed across the arena:

"Stop where you are, for ——'s sake! Shoot, but don't move!"

Startled but grasping the significance of the command, the doctor obeyed as above the line of the crater against the blue lava rock of the far hillside the tall figure of Dodd appeared and vanished into the arena. More swiftly than the wizard he bounded across the white mausoleum springing high every few yards, firing his reloaded revolver in the air as he came.

He was watched by the wizards beside the doctor who remained as motionless as the corpses in the crater, staring as if all the demons of their own superstitions had appeared in one vast army.

EPILOGUE

"CARBONIC-ACID gas," agreed Dodd, seated on the veranda of the guest-house. "I found that out in that smaller crater away up the valley. Animals there too, preserved by that heavy calcareous deposit. Well, after that I sweated around and found the fissure in the rock wall and the big crater. Of course I recognized poor Lowden there by the edge—and the other fellows, his cousin and the American; big chap. By the way, we must give 'em a decent burial when——"

"Impossible. They'll drop to dust—except Lowden maybe."

"Well, to go on. I tested the depth of the gas pond and calculated that with my height I could wade through; and I did as far as the girl by the rock.

"But I didn't quite get how the wizards would work it. They're so much shorter than I that I never dreamed that they would actually go in themselves. Of course that's where they get their prestige with the other fellows.

"However, I figured on the whole show except for that stunt, more or less. Lowden, you'll recall, implied that the ordeal was about full moon. As they hadn't hurt him right up to the show I reckoned they wouldn't harm you.

"I explored up that narrow canon a bit, but couldn't get through as they'd blocked the passage, but I guessed that it was the only approach to the village from this ravine. Finally I decided to take a chance on the full moon and scouted down about seven miles—hotter'n Hades on that lava.

"The ravine broadens and curves to the south and then switches to the east again, where a tongue of the forest begins. I bagged a couple of monkeys—don't like 'em but couldn't find anything else except a few parrots.

"Then I came back and camped up the first canon where the water is until last night, when the drums out here warned me that I had guessed right. Believe me, old boy, I felt good.

"Then I stalked on my belly in the dark before the moon had gotten over the peaks. I had just reached within a few yards of the crater our wizard friends——"

"They're not wizards but chiefs of the tribe," interrupted the doctor, "who come to be impressed and that sort of thing."

"Well, all right; chiefs then. Well, they didn't spot me. Too interested in the show, I suppose. The rest you know. But now I can't make out why they didn't come after me."

"Neither could I," said O'Droun, lowering a calabash of milk from his beard. "I kept on—like a fool—telling 'em, but they wouldn't listen, for as I gathered later from a remark they were sure that there was only the one white that their scout—a shepherd—had seen, and thought that I was trying some dodge to escape. Hullo, here comes the chief of staff."

Entered with much dignity the witch-doctor with the ornamental head-dress who had performed upon O'Droun and had been master of ceremonies. Behind him filed some seven girl slaves bearing wicker baskets with conical lids which, kneeling, they placed at the white men's feet. When, after murmuring some polite salutations they had gone the chief wizard greeted Dodd and spoke gravely.

"He addressed you as brother," O'Droun informed Dodd. "And in effect he wants to know whether we wish to join the ancient order of his craft."

"I suppose the point is that they're scared to death lest we give 'em away to the crowd?"

"That's about it. And that's why he allowed you to save me the trouble of diving through the pool. He was so scared that he daren't refuse anything you suggested. To save their faces they've probably told the people and chiefs that you're the emperor—don't laugh—of white wizards with embellishments. The greater you are supposed to be the less their humiliation."

"That's right."

"Well, we'll accept—reluctantly, what? Then I suppose we'll have to play up to the part by submitting to some *shauri* of magic where we'll be initiated into the order as regular members and all that sort of thing.

"But anyway we've solved the problem, and that's the only way we'll get a grip on 'em. Later we can send a messenger and get some of our own people here."

The doctor solemnly announced their august decision and the wizard departed after begging the acceptance of some small and mean presents which he had caused to be brought.

"I guess this is your professional fee, doc," said Dodd lifting a conical lid. "Holy smoke!"

In each of the conical-lidded baskets were a jumble of iron rings, ivory bracelets, iron knives, platters and bowls fashioned in gold after the form of a calabash.

"Good Lordy!" commented Dodd, testing it with his nail. "They must be nearly pure gold!"

"Poor Lowden remarked in his diary that there was a rich alluvial field near the village," observed the doctor. "And they haven't the faintest idea of the intrinsic value," he added, examining an iron ring.

"Look at this one. Made after the model of the bangles that girl was wearing in the pool. She's of Egyptian-Semitic origin and the hair and ornaments are undoubtedly Egyptian. Wonder what brought her here?"

"That we'll never know. Probably the tribe found her there just as she is now when first they came. The death of every one who entered the pool would be attributed to witchcraft.

"Some wizard—probably by accident—found out a method of crossing in safety. He made her a goddess. Of such accidents are religions and priestcrafts made!

"Perhaps she was a princess of Egypt visiting a provincial city of gold and ivory and was caught and embalmed in a volcanic unheaval. Who knows what Pompeii lies buried beneath us? What blood and love——"

"Who cares?" commented Dodd. "The point is——"

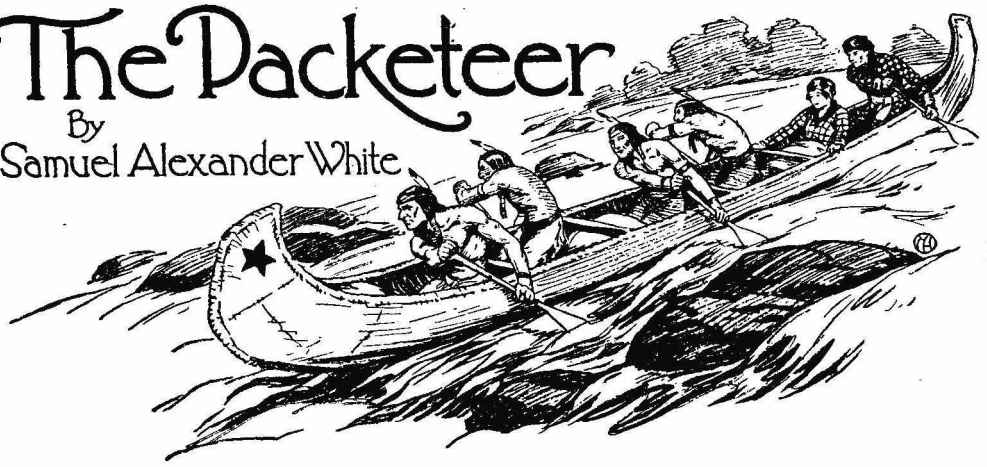
"The point is, my friend, that I have an idea for a new poem."

"Which you'll never write."

"Exactly," agreed the doctor. "For that is adventure."

The Packeteer

By Samuel Alexander White



Author of "The Long Traverse," "The Void Spaces," etc.

ALL WAS turmoil and excitement in both Hudson's Bay Company and North West Fur Company posts at the mouth of the Kaministiquia River. For the Hudson's Bay Company adherents it was the eve of the arrival of the Albany River packet, routing the yearly mail up the Albany River from James Bay, through Lakes Nipigon and Superior, and on by the Kaministiquia River into the West. For the North Westers it was the eve of the departure of their western brigades traveling back to the *Pays d'en Haut*, the high country, from which they had freighted down their loads of furs.

Both the rival companies were making feverish preparations yet these preparations differed materially. In the Hudson's Bay Company post all was joyous abandon, since they were getting ready for the dance that always celebrated the arrival of the packet, while in the house of the North Westers they wrestled acrimoniously with the vital problem of transportation. Fortune that had favored the Montreal merchants so well in the past now seemed about to turn against them. Their Grande Portage route from Lake Superior into the West via

the Pigeon River, a route that they had closed in the faces of so many competitors, was now closed in their own faces.

The Treaty of Versailles of 1783 definitely fixed the Canadian-American boundary. The winding nine-mile foot-path of Grande Portage now ran through Minnesota, and upon all Canadian goods that passed over it the American Government was collecting a duty varying from twenty to twenty-five per cent. It was a bitter blow to the North Westers, a blow to pride and pocket, a stroke of circumstance that threatened their very existence. To still route their supplies for their numerous western posts over Grande Portage meant ruin. The imposition of a duty of twenty-five per cent. would wipe out a margin of profit which the competition of the Hudson's Bay Company had already cut very close, and the seeking of an alternative route had not proved any happier proposition.

North West couriers ranging out on the quest had found a way from the North West post on Lake Nipigon to Portage de L'Isle on the Winnipeg River, but it was a tedious, an inconvenient and therefore a costly route. To freight in by the Nipigon-Portage de L'Isle path was as bad as by Grande Portage, and the question that vexed the North Westers so severely this eve of their departure was the question of another gateway to the West.

The only possible water route remaining was the Kaministiquia route, up the Kaministiquia River, over the Height of Land and down the other slope of the watershed to Rainy Lake, but among the North West ranks the secret of the trail was lost. Of old some of their voyageurs had gone that way, but the knowledge of the passage had died with these in the sudden deaths of the wilderness, and now none rejoiced in the secret of the Kaministiquia path but the couriers of the Hudson's Bay Company. They could thread its mazes over the Height of Land. Their packeteers traversed it every Spring but they guarded the secret of their going for their company as jealously as they guarded the company's mail.

North Westers who had tried to trail the Hudson's Bay Company couriers and learn the secret were given the slip always in the labyrinth of waters. North West bribes dangled temptingly before the couriers' eyes were spurned always with threat or blow.

So the North West counsel that prevailed this night at the Kaministiquia was the counsel of force and the counsellor who voiced it loudest was Alec McPherson of Portage de L'Isle who was responsible for the traverse of his own section of the route from Lake Superior to his home post on the Winnipeg River. A man of force himself, as huge and broad as a door, red-haired, red-bearded, with fighting eyes of savage green and raw, ponderous hands that smote home the wordy thrusts of his pile-like tongue, he was the incarnation and disciple of might, and the North Westers who backed his opinions were little less mighty than he.

They were all foregathered at the Kaministiquia, the lords of the *Pays d'en Haut*, meeting in annual assembly as they had met of old at Grande Portage. Brigade after brigade of North West Fur Company canoes yellowed the banks of the river below the new North West headquarters, the canoes from English River, Lake Winnipeg, Fort des Prairies, Athabasca, Rainy lake, the Swamp Country, the fur bales that had laden them to the gunwales exchanged for the supplies and trade goods brought to this point by the Rabiscaw canoes with their Iroquois crews from Montreal. McGillivray, Todd, McLeod, McKay, Sager, Grant, McGill and all the rest of the slave-driving North Westers hung upon McPherson's fiery words as they waited impatiently for the signal to route back their brigades whence they had come.

"I am a fighter!" boomed McPherson, his ponderous hands driving a thunderous tattoo on the table round which the North Westers were gathered, his rasping voice shaking the rafters of the hall that enclosed them. "And I have never seen the day when I was beaten. I am not beaten now, gentlemen, nor is the North West Company beaten if you will stick with me in what I propose."

"Aye, we'll stick with you, Alec," promised Sager. "Have no fear of that. I for one never wanted to spend an effort on the route from Nipigon to Portage de L'Isle. Far better if we had spent the time in ferretting out the Kaministiquia path."

"Yes," nodded McPherson, "for we all admit that Grande Portage is gone from us. We can't fight treaties and boundaries and the governments that make them, so we'll talk no more of that. As for business at Lake Nipigon, it is altogether out of the question. Sager, there, knows. I myself know. Anybody who knows the country will tell you that the North West Company might as well sell out to the Hudson's Bay Company at once as try to go on and use the Nipigon-Portage de L'Isle route. So what is left but the Kaministiquia that is our natural pathway, ours by right, by first claim of North West voyageurs who went over it?"

"Ha! Yes, the Kaministiquia," echoed half a dozen of his North West partners.

"The Kaministiquia let it be, then!" cried McKay. "Why should we go half-way round the Northern world to get to the Winnipeg? If the authorities of Beaver Hall had listened to Alec, the thing would have been attempted long ago."

"Aye, but how open the Kaministiquia?" asked the conservative Todd. "That's the

point. Alec McPherson, will you undertake to find us a way through?"

"I will," McPherson swiftly accepted the challenge.

"And how will you do it? Remember, only the Hudson's Bay Company knows the secret."

"Yes, just now," growled McPherson, "but it will not be long till we share it. The Hudson's Bay Company refuses to tell, but by the stars I will choke it out of them. Their Albany River packet arrives from James Bay tonight and goes on at dawn according to their usual routine. I am going to seize it on the river and force the packeteer to pilot us through under penalty of his life. Are you with me in the venture, gentlemen?"

The roar of assent was unanimous.

"Never fear, we are with you, Alec!" was the cry. "But we had better know with whom we are dealing. Who is their Albany River packeteer?"

"David Curtis," McPherson informed them. "He had arrived at the Hudson's Bay Company post on Lake Nipigon when I was there. He comes on tonight unless there is some change in the packeteers. I don't suppose there will be but we can find out. As you say, it is best to work with our eyes open. So we can watch for the packet's coming and see if he is still in charge."

"Then you'll have to hurry, Alec," called McGill who had opened the door at a sudden tumult outside. "Here it comes fresh off Lake Superior now. See our post people gathering in the yard to stare? That's the Hudson's Bay Company packet all right."

THERE was a rush from the hall at McGill's announcement. Out into the yard poured the North West lords, all the post inhabitants, men and women, crowding at their backs. The eyes of all were fixed on the waters at the mouth of the Kaministiquia where a vivid yellow canoe sped shoreward like a flying arrow of gold. Long and low in its lines, it skimmed with ease, its bow and stern high-scrolled, the crimson star of the Hudson's Bay Company burning on the bow scroll with the blood-red flag of the company flying above. Six paddlers propelled it, its Cree bowsman, two pairs of Cree middlemen and the white packeteer himself in the steersman's seat.

A huge man, the packeteer loomed in the craft, apparently a huger man than Alec McPherson himself, but his build was more pleasing to the eye, his face far handsomer than that of the uncouth North Wester. His frame was great yet at the same time lithe, like the stout young forest tree that swings so easily in the wind. He turned his alert face towards the North West post as he passed, and from under the waves of dark curly hair that tumbled over his forehead his brown eyes flashed out like a pair of amber jewels.

"It's David Curtis," identified Grant while the North West crowd stared hard at the packeteer.

"David Curtis, indeed," nodded McGillivray. "By Jove, Alec, you'll have your hands full when you seize him."

"Well, are they not proper hands to fill?" demanded McPherson grinning.

He opened and closed his red, ponderous hands suggestively and whirled suddenly at a stifled exclamation of dissent he had caught in the crowd behind him. It was a woman's voice and McPherson's infallible ear and eye searched out the owner in a second.

"So it is Florence Lewis that dissents," he laughed mockingly. "And good reason for your dissent eh, my pretty Florence? You would not wish to see David Curtis roughly handled. Isn't that it?"

The girl, a tall, graceful North West maid with wave upon wave of nut-brown hair and wonderful, haunting eyes as brilliant as black diamonds, showed little confusion at the rude unbaring of her sentiments. Daughter of Donald Lewis of English River and magnet of attraction for a dozen North Westers besides Alec McPherson, as well as for many a man of the Hudson's Bay Company, she had a pride of her own, and she met the green accusing eyes of her North West admirer without a falter. Yet a flush ran up her creamy cheek, and her thin nostrils, molded as delicately as fragile china, dilated as if in scorn.

"Do you need to interpret my wishes in any matter, Alec McPherson?" she demanded tartly.

"No, only I'll see that there is no chance for you to carry out any wishes you may have," McPherson countered swiftly.

Florence Lewis stamped her moccasined foot with an indignation that quivered through every curve of her beautiful figure.

"Dare you call me disloyal, Alec?" she cried vehemently.

McPherson's green eyes, savage as they were, fell before her piercing black ones.

"I would not call you anything that was not precious, Florence," McPherson evaded with an ironic laugh. "Nor would I lay any but a caressing finger on you. Still for all that if any warning should reach Curtis so that our plans should miscarry, remember that we North Westers will call your father to account for it at English River. Don't think I am talking vaguely. I know more than you think, perhaps. It was not to visit your Nipigon relatives alone that you went over from English River to our Nipigon Post. Do you take my meaning or shall I speak out before them all?"

The girl's breast was heaving, but she met his dare.

"What meaning?" she demanded.

"You had meetings with David Curtis on the Nipigon," he accused. "I know that for a fact."

"You spy!" blazed Florence Lewis. "You employer of spies! Who gave you leave to dog me?"

"That you forgot our interests, the interests of the company to which you owe allegiance, I do not say," declared McPherson, waving her accusations aside with his great hands. "I simply tell you what I have found out in order to emphasize my warning. Again I state that if anything untoward happens and we trace it to you we will call your father to account at English River."

"And he will be there to answer, and I with him," she flashed.

With another piercing glance that held the essence of contempt, Florence turned and made her way off through the crowd to get a closer view of Hudson's Bay Company packet. McPherson too turned away with a grim laugh to follow David Curtis' canoe with his savage green eyes.

The Hudson's Bay Company post had marked the gliding into sight of the packet almost as swiftly as the North Westers had done. Their post yard was filled instantly with a clamoring crowd which overflowed on to the river bank and landing farther down the shore.

"The Albany River packet! The Albany River packet!" they thundered. "Welcome, comrades; welcome to the Kaministiquia."

David Curtis and his five Crees raised paddle-blades in silent salute. Then at Curtis' command the blades bit the river again, hurling the craft straight for the black crowd on the landing and back-watering spectacularly to a halt on its very rim. Vociferous cries broke forth afresh, lauding the splendid canoemanship.

The five Crees had hardly stepped from the canoe-bottom to the landing before eager hands overwhelmed the canoe. Some whipped the long craft from the river. Others seized the packet of mail from Curtis and laughing and singing bore it on their heads into the post. While still others shouldered the packeteer himself in spite of his good-humored protestations and, the blood-red flag under which he had traveled flying over him, carried him with a rush after his packet. Nor were the Hudson's Bay Company adherents who had waited inside less ready then those who had rushed forth so volatilely.

The magic northern twilight of the Spring evening that had endured so long was dying abruptly in velvet gloom after the fashion of the wilderness, and through the open doorway of the main building of the Hudson's Bay Company Post the North Westers could catch from afar the gleam of candles on arrays of flowers and festoons of ribbons; could catch also the music of the violins as the fiddlers tuned up their instruments to commence the celebration. Then the door swinging in the balmy night wind blocked the view, shut off the gleam, and Alec McPherson beckoned his partners back into their own hall to complete their plans.

"Very fine for David Curtis tonight," he growled half-enviously to the partners as they reassembled, "but tomorrow it will not be so fine."

The door of the assembly hall closed upon their secret preparations for the next day and the crowd of North Westers dispersed about their business, some to their post tasks which they had left unfinished, some to put the last loading touches on the canoes at the landing, some who had discharged all their duties already to idle the warm evening dusk away along the Kaministiquia's shores. With these latter ones stole Florence Lewis, still full of indignation at McPherson, walking faster and faster till she dropped the carefree laughing groups of North West men and maids behind her and found herself alone at last among the Kaministiquia's green spruce thickets half-way between the Hudson's Bay Company and North West Fur Company posts. She was angered that McPherson had discovered and published her meetings with David Curtis at the Nipigon post, and she wished to be alone for a little to let herself calm down. Yet she was not long alone for hardly had she disappeared from the rest into the gloomy spruce thickets than the green swayed beside her and a hand was laid on her elbow.

She gave a low, startled cry that changed suddenly to an exclamation of pleasure as she recognized, even in the dusk, the big form towering over her. It was David Curtis' hand on her elbow, his arm slipping about her shoulders, his fingers fastening a domino over her face.

"Don't be frightened, Florence," he laughed exultingly. "I watched for you leaving your post and followed till I found you here. We're short of partners for our masquerade dance, so I thought I would come and find one of my own. Come with me."

The daring of his invitation took her breath away.

"My gracious, David!" she whispered trembling. "What if they should miss me at the post? It is the night our *Pays d'en Haut* brigades go west, you must remember, and I travel to English River with them. It can not be long now before they start."

"Yes, but I will have you back before they do start," Curtis promised, bearing her exuberantly along the fringe of the thickets toward the open gateway of the Hudson's Bay Company post. "One dance, Florence, if you can't spare me any more."

Even if she had desired to resist she would have found it almost impossible, for the impulsive strength of him carried her as it were by storm, yet in her secret heart she did not desire to resist. The instinct of caution held her back in the face of McPherson's recent warning but its hold was not strong enough to stay the flitting of her feet. She was whisked on through the Hudson's Bay Company's gateway and into the main building all a-glow with its candles and decorations and full of masquerading dancers clad in a bewildering array of costumes, their faces masked with varicolored dominoes.

"Goodness, David! Now you've done it," she breathed tensely as they found themselves in the dense throng.

"Yes. What I've always wanted to do," Curtis laughed in her ear. "Put you among my people of the Hudson's Bay Company. It's an omen, Florence. Some day before long you'll stand there for good and all."

"Will—will any of them know me?" she faltered.

"Not from half a hundred others like yourself," he assured her gaily. "Let us dance."

Indeed it would have been hard for any Hudson's Bay Company adherent to recognize her. Her domino was securely in place. Her dress was the many-hued wool dress of North West maids that several of the Hudson's Bay Company women had used as a costume for the evening. There was no means of telling the real from the false, nothing to differentiate her from the other masqueraders, and in an instant she was circling round and round the hall in Curtis' arms to the thrilling music of the violins.

As in a dream she swung through the gay maze that filled the Hudson's Bay Company hall, in the house of the enemy, in the enemy's arms, a sweet dream withal yet full of conflicting emotions. For her heart was in a tumult, torn between loyalty to her own company and anxiety over Curtis' safety. Across yonder in the North West Fur Company post Alec McPherson secretly planned his capture. Here in this luring hall all she had to do was whisper a warning to him as they floated on the wings of the music.

A dozen times the whisper was on the end of her tongue. She deceived herself into thinking she could make the warning vague, and again and again she all but spoke. But always the inherent loyalty to the North West cause stayed her. Perhaps David Curtis would demand to know too much. Perhaps he would sway her unawares and wrest the full truth from her in that mighty impulsive way he had. She hesitated and procrastinated. There would be another dance after this, no doubt. She would not speak just yet.

THEN as the dance ended with a sonorous quivering of strings another sound thundered on the warm night air, a volley of shots from the North West post.

"Heavens!" breathed the girl. "The brigades are going. It is the signal for the start."

"Yes, confound them," brooded Curtis as he led her through the out-rush from the hall to the fresh air. "Alec McPherson might have spared me one more dance. But stolen sweets never last long, do they? Remember I shall find you again at English River."

"Please God, yes, at English River," whispered Florence.

They were slipping swiftly through the green spruce thickets back to the North West Fur Company post where all was noise and hurry at the sudden thunderous volley announcing the hour of departure. Some one had put a torch to a bonfire of brushwood on the Kaministiquia's shore just near the landing, its glare shooting twenty feet in the air to summon the laggards and light the maneuvring of the brigades.

Where the crimson flare struck the water David Curtis could see the massed canoes all pointing lakeward as if to skirt Lake Superior's north shore and pass up to Lake Nipigon on the long Nipigon-Portage de L'Isle route. Florence Lewis saw them too and she knew their being massed thus was a ruse, a blind set for any Hudson's Bay eyes that might look on. The North West fleets might swing lakeward, but once out of sight of the Hudson's Bay Company post she understood that they would turn and glide unseen up the Kaministiquia River itself.

Again the yearning to warn Curtis swept over her. She was nearer to speaking than she had been in the dance at the Hudson's Bay Company hall, but the loud shouting of McPherson right at hand deterred her. He was calling the last canoemen to their places, censuring some of the North Westers who, idling about the Kaministiquia's banks, rushed back late.

"Are we all here?" McPherson was demanding. "No, where is Lewis' girl? Florence, Florence Lewis, where are you now?"

McPherson had leaped from the canoes at the landing to the bank. Florence and Curtis could hear him crashing about the thickets not fifty feet from them.

"She was not about the post," they could hear him roaring angrily. "She must be somewhere outside. It is just like her independent way to make all the North West brigades wait upon her. Florence Lewis, can you not hear a volley of gunshots or see a blazing beacon on a dark night. Where are you, girl?"

"Good-by, David, good-by," murmured Florence in trepidation. "He will discover you in another moment."

She darted from him, swishing the green trees aside on the edge of the fire-reddened water.

"Here I am ready to start, Alec McPherson," she cried in a bold enough voice though her heart was beating wildly. "And no later than a dozen others who do not draw your tongue."

"There was some one with you!" bellowed McPherson. "I heard some one in the thicket. Aye, and there's a bush swaying with something weightier than wind."

McPherson launched his huge bulk sheer through a spruce clump immediately behind the girl, and the next instant the waiting brigades saw two great figures wrestling in the gloom just where the uncertain rim of the firelight relieved it. Stamping up and down the bank they went, McPherson trying to draw the unknown lurker into the glare the better to identify him, the gigantic unknown wrenching McPherson this way and that in an equally determined endeavor to keep in the dark.

"Who is it, Alec?" yelled half a dozen of his partners leaping up from their seats to go to McPherson's aid. "Hold hard till we come."

But before McPherson's companions could reach him, David Curtis put out all his strength, broke the grip of Alec's ponderous hands and sprang free. As he sprang he smote swift and hard with the weight of his tremendous shoulders in the blow. His fist caught McPherson fairly between the eyes and, half-dazed, Alec was hurled back staggering into the arms of his oncoming partners. Then like a wraith in spite of his huge frame Curtis was gone, taking care this time to sway no bush as he threaded his way through the spruce and ran across a low swale to the gates of the Hudson's Bay Company post.

The moment Curtis vanished Florence Lewis darted to the landing and boarded the fleet, taking her appointed place in the English River brigade. She knew McPherson's wrath was coming and she preferred to face it afloat rather than ashore. McPherson's brigade from Portage de L'Isle was ranged next the English River brigade and he came aboard with his partners, raving to the stars.

"You're sure, Alec?" his partners questioned him. "You're sure it was David Curtis, the Hudson's Bay Company packeteer?"

"Sure as sin!" declaimed McPherson. "What did I tell you about her Nipigon meetings with him?"

"Yet you might have been mistaken," some of them argued. "Remember his blow put you in a daze for a moment."

"True, it was a wicked blow," snarled McPherson. "Tomorrow I'll give it back if our plans go through. But it's just a chance if Florence Lewis hasn't warned him."

His savage green eyes burned in the firelight like pieces of jade as he scrutinized her settled amidships on a soft blanket couch in the first English River canoe.

"It was David Curtis, right enough," he shouted triumphantly as his searching eyes made out the smudge of scarlet on her arm. "Look at her mask. She has been masquerading at the Hudson's Bay Company dance with him."

With a startled exclamation Florence Lewis clapped her palm over the little scarlet domino that, slipping from her face in the rush through the thickets and catching by its string upon the crook of her elbow, had been entirely forgotten. It had clung there, sticking like a burr to the roughened wool of her dress, to betray her to Alec McPherson and tell him what the darkness had not told. Chagrined she plucked it away and cast it into the waters of the Kaministiquia.

"Yes, sink the proof," sneered McPherson. "You can not deny that you were dancing in the Hudson's Bay Company post with their packeteer."

"I will not answer you," the girl told him stubbornly. "Though I will say that I go where I please."

"Did you betray our purpose, girl?"

"There is no use in me making declarations of loyalty," she flashed. "You would doubt me anyway. Wait till tomorrow. Then you will know the truth."

"Yes, let us wait till tomorrow and let us be out of here at once, Alec," cut in the impatient McKay. "There is no gain in baitting Florence. If we fail in our purpose it is better to do our talking to Lewis himself at English River."

"Yes, yes," agreed the other partners. "It is time we were away."

McPherson gave a surly signal of assent. The blades of the canoemen churned white swirls in the fire-painted river and, keeping their formation, the brigades shot into the darkness of Lake Superior. Yet once well away from the posts they did not keep on that course which would have taken them along the north shore to the outlet of Lake Nipigon. Instead, at a quietly spoken word from McPherson, they turned and, sweeping a wide circle, cut back to the mouth of the Kaministiquia.

Their own post lay in gloom as they stole up the river close to the opposite shore, but the lights still blazed from the house of the Hudson's Bay Company and the music of the dance still filled the night. The echoes of it rang in Florence Lewis' ears as the fleets passed on up the river, and not even the harsh voice of Alec McPherson giving commands as he routed the brigades along could drive it out.

"Push hard—push hard," was McPherson's persistent admonition. "We must reach the Height of Land before tomorrow night and make ready for this cursed packeteer."

And push hard the crews of Northmen did, driving without mishap up the Kaministiquia, through Lake Shebandowan and Lake Kashaboyes at the Height of Land.

IT WAS late afternoon of the next day when the North West brigades crossed Lake Kashaboyes, and here ended the trail as far as they knew it. Over the crest of the watershed was some secret portage that led to some secret route on the other slope, a route by which the Hudson's Bay Company couriers passed down through Lac de Mille Isles and the Seine River to Rainy Lake. The route ran wholly through Canadian territory. There would be no duty on North West goods if McPherson could wrest the secret from David Curtis, and he swore by all the wilderness gods that he would do it if he had to roast the packeteer over the red-hot coals of a campfire.

"Make your bivouac out of sight of the lake shore," he ordered his brigades as they beached at the farther end of Lake Kashaboyes. "Curtis must see no sign that we have passed this way ahead of him. And you, Warwick," detailing one of the most skilled of the North West Fur Company scouts, "keep watch from the treetops for his coming. With an early morning start and traveling light he should reach Lake Kashaboyes by sundown."

Yet either McPherson had miscalculated the river miles or else the celebration at the Hudson's Bay Company's Kaministiquia post had slowed up David Curtis' paddlers. In the golden blaze of the sunset his long craft did not appear on Lake Kashaboyes that night. Warwick was on his keen watch till the last sun shaft faded in the deep purple of the lake swells and the moon rose up to transform the whole sheet of water into a plain of quicksilver, yet his eyes failed to catch the crimson flash of a flag or the yellow glow of a birch-bark canoe.

Hidden in the forest growth some distance up the slope of the divide the North West camp was all uneasiness. Much was staked on McPherson's venture. If they did not succeed in intercepting the Hudson's Bay Company's packeteer all that was left for them to do was to descend the Kaministiquia again and after this delay and waste of effect freight their goods to the West by the Nipigon-Portage de L'Isle route. They might do it this season and perhaps the next, but they knew it was a bleeding process that spelled a lingering death to their company.

Florence Lewis understood the issue as well as McPherson or any of his partners. So sure was she that Curtis would come on his usual path that the fact that he had not arrived brought a certain feeling of disappointment. There was a sadness in the knell of the North West Fur Company's hopes that no liege of theirs, fur lord or fur lady, could help but feel. She was sad yet at the same time she rejoiced. Some turn of circumstance had intervened. Perhaps intuition, the wonderful sixth sense of the forest, had warned Curtis where her uncertain heart had failed to carry its message.

McPherson on his part was positive now that the girl had carried a warning, and he stamped the North West camp ground all that night getting report after futile report from his sentinel Warwick who still kept vigil over the moon-lit lake, swearing vengeance on Florence through her father when the North West brigades should at last come to English River.

"She went masquerading to the Hudson's Bay Company dance to warn him," he stormed. "What is plainer than that? Else the packet would have been beaching here before this."

"Maybe, Alec," pondered Todd of Fort des Prairies who knew Donald Lewis well and knew that the girl was the stern, loyal breed of her father, "and maybe not. There are always mischances and river delays with the best of canoemen. We ourselves have been lucky all the way from the Kaministiquia post up here. Wait till the dawn smokes over Kashaboyes. You may shout a different tale."

Grudgingly McPherson waited, and Todd of Fort des Prairies grinned in shrewd triumph as the fog writhed off the lake and a hail sounded from the sentinel Warwick swaying in the top of a giant spruce that grew on the ridge.

"The packet!" Warwick announced. "The Hudson's Bay Company packet is coming. Get ready, *camarades*."

AT THE risk of being seen the North Westers crowded the crest of the divide to stare. Down on Lake Kashaboyes, two or three miles away, all bathed in the molten sunrise, they glimpsed the packet they had fumed about so long. The sun smote its sleek sides like an ocher brush. Over it floated the Hudson's Bay Company flag flapping like some huge cardinal bird in the morning breeze. In their accustomed places David Curtis and his five Cree canoemen drove the long craft straight for the beach below the hidden North West camp.

"Down, men, down," cautioned McPherson, dropping behind the screen of the bushes. "The girl didn't warn him after all."

He whirled exultingly upon Florence who had crept up with the rest to look. In that circumstance there seemed some hope for him. He searched her face eagerly and a sudden tenderness tempered the savagery of his eyes.

"You didn't speak, Florence—after all," he marveled.

"No, I gave no warning though it was in my heart to do it," she confessed. "Not you but the North West Company prevented.

Companies are greater than our hearts. The issue is between you two men. And I pray God you lose."

"Eh?" demanded McPherson, astounded. "You what?"

"I pray God you do your worst and lose," Florence breathed passionately. "Now go!"

Her strong hand shoved him through the trees with his crowding partners as crouching low, the North Westers made their way toward Lake Kashaboyes' waterline.

"Hola! Hola!" shouted Curtis to his Crees as the packet struck the lather of foam on the sand beach not fifty yards from McPherson and his ambush.

As one man the Crees shipped paddles and leaped from their places over the gunwales, landing knee-deep in the surf. Their deft hands lifted the long craft as it still glided with its own momentum and kept it from grating on the gravel. Curtis was equally as swift as they. He caught the Hudson's Bay Company mail packet in his own hands and sprang ashore with his paddlers. His back was to the hedging spruce, but a guttural cry in Cree warned him of something unforeseen. He whirled, poised to spring back into the craft, but the cry of the Cree had come too late. He saw a whole crowd of North Westers, Alec McPherson in the forefront, leaping down upon him.

McPherson's arms flashed about his body.

"Ha! Ha! David Curtis," he roared. "You'll find me a better wrestler by daylight than by dark."

Curtis dropped the mail packet at his feet and closed with him, trying to hurl him clear. Stamping in the soft sand, splashing in the shallows they fought, while McPherson's partners overwhelmed the five Cree canoemen who were attempting to launch the canoe again.

The craft was summarily jerked ashore, the Crees pinned helplessly on the beach, and then the North West crowd rushed like an avalanche upon the struggling pair. Half a dozen times Curtis' vast strength had hurled McPherson a pace from him, but he could not make his escape and sacrifice the precious packet. Each time he stooped for it the savage Alec was upon him and the fight went on afresh. But now, smothered under a score of men, Curtis went down. He was hammered, choked into submission by sheer weight of numbers, and when a dozen hands pulled him roughly to his feet McPherson too arose from the scramble with the mail packet in his arms.

"Now I've got you, David," McPherson gloated, "got you and your packet. You may have it back at Rainy Lake when you take us through."

"Through?" echoed Curtis defiantly. "You think I'll sell the Hudson's Bay Company's secret and guide you through?"

"Yes, at the price of the packet," nodded McPherson confidently. "Else you will never see this bundle of mail again. And you know what the packet means to the Hudson's Bay Company. Do you understand where I've got you now, David Curtis?"

A grim spasm of intense feeling crossed Curtis' bronzed face. Only too well he knew what the packet meant to his company. As deeply rooted as any of the Hudson's Bay Company traditions was the understanding, the unwritten law, that a packeteer must never lose his packet. Even in mischance the packet must never go beyond recovery. Temporarily lost perhaps but never abandoned, the packet was as the company's cause and the packeteer would as soon deny the blood-red flag under which he traveled as sacrifice the mail.

Curtis understood, and he understood also with whom he was dealing. Alec McPherson was not a man to be trifled with. In the event of his refusal he knew McPherson would put off with the packet and destroy it without compunction.

"Choose, David," laughed McPherson, trying to fathom the packeteer's amber eyes. "Go with it or without it."

"I go with it," chose Curtis with swift decision.

"Good!" McPherson exulted. "And waste no time about it. Lead on to the portage. Our camp is right above."

Immediately the hands that held Curtis released him and his five Cree canoemen were allowed to resume their feet.

"Lead off with your crew," McPherson directed again. "I'll be right in your wake."

At a word from Curtis the five Crees shouldered the long Hudson's Bay Company craft and started up the slope of the divide.

"Leave our true path at the top," he whispered to them in Cree as he climbed with them. "Turn to the left and portage across to the headwaters of the Keewaydin River. You know the Keewaydin Rapids that are never run? Well, within an hour we are going through. See to your craft and your paddles."

It was all the warning he had any chance to give them, for the next moment they were swinging by the North West camp. The North Westers were breaking their bivouac and backpacking their goods to follow him over the divide.

Amid the shift of faces Curtis caught sight of the white set face of Florence Lewis, and he wondered a little bitterly if she had known the North West Fur Company plans at the Kaministiquia. Yet he had not time to put the question that troubled him, for McPherson was right at his back calling the brigades over the invisible trail.

There was nothing underfoot among the moss patches and rock outcrops to show the path. Only, breast-high in the line the Cree canoemen traveled, ran the faint evidence of a cylindrical tunnel boring through the forest

greenery. Here, it might have been a season or so ago, some Indian or fur courier had passed, hewing the saplings with a few ax-strokes to give passage for the craft upon his shoulders.

For a mile Curtis and his Crees traveled thus, threading so impenetrable a tangle of spruce that McPherson began to suspect that the packeteer might be leading him astray, but just where the growth grew thickest Curtis swept the branches aside and revealed a quiet bend of stream.

"Ha! Water at last, eh?" observed McPherson, wiping the sweat from his eyes. "What river is it?"

"The Keewaydin," David told him. "It lets us down to Lac de Mille Isles."

"Good," grunted Alec, "launch off. I'll ride with you."

McPherson seated himself amidships in the big Hudson's Bay Company craft, the packet of mail upon his knees.

"Remember, David," he cautioned, "one false move from you and overboard goes the packet. And just as a further safeguard to prevent you running us down a waterfall or something we'll take on another passenger. Florence Lewis," calling to the girl as she came across the trail with the rest of the North Westers, "come and ride in the foremost canoe."

Curtis drew breath with a sharp exclamation as he turned on McPherson. He could face death with his Crees for his company's sake, but he had not bargained to carry Florence Lewis with him.

"She can ride in one of the other canoes, McPherson," he told the North Wester. "I am guiding and I do not want to be bothered with women passengers."

"You went to a lot of bother for her company the other night at the Kaministiquia," grinned McPherson. "Why don't you like it now? She rides in this canoe or else I do not and no North West craft will leave this spot to follow you alone."

The eyes of the two men battled, and Florence Lewis, coming up at the call, looked from one to the other. What was the trouble? Was Curtis so bitter against her now that she had failed to warn him of McPherson's trap? Or had he some plan of escape that involved extreme hazard? If he had, she resolved on the instant that he must work it out even at peril to herself. She would rather sacrifice herself than have him fail.

"Yes, yes, David, let me ride as he says," she pleaded, her hand on his arm so that her touch softened him.

THE girl slipped into the appointed place before Curtis could harden himself to protest, and there shone a new gleam in his amber eyes as he sat down in the steersman's seat. He was not only going to gamble with death. By the red flag that waved in his bow he swore he would beat death, and with a great sweep of his paddle he threw the long canoe out to midstream. After them launched the North West brigades speeding in their wake, gathering momentum every minute with the quickening of the river flow.

The headwaters were sluggish enough, but a mile or two below the end of the portage over the divide the Keewaydin dropped wickedly with the abrupt slant of the watershed. Swirling round the bends it swept, surging irresistibly in the straight reaches, foaming down the boulder-studded chasms. Its voice grew louder booming hoarsely below a snarling loop of a dozen black-rock islets, and Alec McPherson raised his eyes at the ominous roar that told of rapids ahead.

"Don't go too fast, Curtis," he cautioned. "You're sure the Crees know these channels?"

"Sure," nodded Curtis putting greater vigor into his stroke. "We must go fast. It's swift water remember. We have to stay ahead of the current to keep control."

He called in dialect to the Crees. Their blades bit into the snarling foam with a tremendous heave. The Hudson's Bay Company craft leaped round the last of the islands to the very rim of a vast gorge. It was more than a rapid yet less than waterfall.

The green-gray walls of a fifty-foot chasm crowded the river like a closed-in stairway and down the steep chute the Keewaydin shot in a milk-white smother. Here and there brown boulders split its course, sending opalescent fountains of spray fifteen feet in the air. They were on its rim all in an instant, the view obscured by the screening islet, and like a flash McPherson was on his feet in the lurching canoe.

"You've tricked us, Curtis!" he bellowed. "Look out behind, you canoemen. By the stars——"

The sweep of Curtis' paddle-blade on his head cut short his words. McPherson had the mail packet in his arms, whether to cast it overboard or to leap for safety himself with it Curtis did not know, but the packeteer's paddle was too quick for him.

Alec staggered and collapsed in the bottom of the canoe, and Curtis with a swift shifting of his position reached forward and seized the packet himself. He thrust it behind him in the steersman's place and dipped his paddle again as the craft leaped down the chute.

Florence Lewis gave a cry of dismay, clutching the gunwale with both hands, for the birch-bark trembled and swerved under a strain that threatened to tear it to pieces. Foam sucked sheer over the scrolled bows into their set faces; spray went up astern like a greenish geyser.

Down like a rocket they swished, darting this way and that as the straining paddles of

the Crees threw the craft away from rocks lurking under the creamy shallows. They were through the drop of the gorge, riding the mane of the river where the narrowing of the side walls of rock threw it high in a center ridge. Plunging to the gunwales they went, shipping great billows that threatened to swamp them bodily yet always rising by some miracle of salvation and speeding down.

To Curtis in that moment it was not his skill or the skill of the Crees, supermen though they were, that carried them clear, rearing on the white-water and cutting the eddying whirlpool at the bottom till they struck the quieter swells. It was something that went with them on the wings of the wind, on the flight of the spray, some magic might of love, whether of company's cause or woman's heart or both he could not define. Yet he felt it in a thrilling glow and his face burned with the ecstasy of it as he bade the Crees draw in to the shoreline and turned his eyes up-stream.

Hardly in time had McPherson cried his warning to the North West brigades behind. So close were the foremost to the Keewaydin rapids that their canoes were already in the current. Weighted down to the gunwales with the heavy cargoes of trade goods and supplies, their momentum was great. The sudden twist of paddles could not jerk them from the jaws of the river, and, realizing that they were doomed if they stayed with the canoes, the crews had leaped from them at the top of the gorge, some on the shores of the tiny islets, some on protruding boulders, some on the sidewalls of the chasm itself. They had leaped and clung, and the crafts they abandoned to save themselves plunged riderless to destruction.

Like fragile bombshells the birch-barks struck the brown rock fangs midway and the foaming white river filled from bank to bank with a chaotic surge of North West goods.

Some few of the rearmost canoes profited by the misfortune of the foremost. They had time to stop, and by feverish paddling force themselves out of the grip of the current. David Curtis could see them ferrying stranded comrades to safety and throwing ropes to those whom the canoes could not approach.

"They'll be down in an hour," he nodded, turning to Florence Lewis with an exultant laugh. "I'll leave Alec McPherson here for them to find."

He raised McPherson, still unconscious from the paddle blow, out of the canoe-bottom and laid him on the bank.

"And you, Florence?" he demanded, his questioning eyes fathoming those of the girl. "Will you wait by him here and tell them that Keewaydin River does not flow to Lac de Mille Isles, that the Hudson's Bay Company packet leaves it somewhere below and goes back on its true course?"

Florence Lewis did not move from her place.

"I shall stay to tell them nothing," vowed the girl quickly, her great, haunting eyes, as brilliant as black diamonds, dimmed with a moisture that was more than spray.

"By the blood-red flag, girl," burst out Curtis with an eloquent gesture toward the foam-flecked banner that still floated triumphantly in his canoe bow, "you travel with me under that symbol? You know the allegiance it demands."

"Yes, David, I know," she whispered, "and I am going on to English River."

"Then by all the wilderness gods I forgive you what you did not tell me at the Kaministiquia post," Curtis breathed tensely.

He sprang to his steersman's seat and cried a sharp command to his Cree canoemen.

They straightened in their places, bowsman, two pairs of middlemen, their backs straightened, their elbows poised for the stroke. If there was a swift caress behind them their black, surface-lighted eyes staring far ahead did not see. They awaited the word to start. It came in dialect.

Instantly the Crees dipped their swift blades and, the crimson star still burning brightly on its bow scroll, the blood-red flag still streaming proudly from the staff above the scroll, the Hudson's Bay Company packet darted on down the Keewaydin River.

Houn's, Hosses an' Home

By Romaine H. Lowdermilk

Author of "Thees ees The Hombre," "Mud," etc.

"SNAKES" TURNER smelled wet dog. Now a dog, whether big dog, little dog, bulldog or bloodhound, if wet, smells like a wet dog. The only other scent approaching it is a wet chicken, and it has to be a mighty wet chicken at that. Just now Snakes Turner smelled wet dog. The number, breed or size he could not determine, but, he did know he smelled dog—wet dawg!

In a lone, one-room adobe with rain beating in torrents upon the corrugated iron roof, the surroundings absolutely smothered in gross darkness punctuated by blinding flashes of blue-white light followed by shattering peals of thunder that threatened to shake each sodden adobe brick from its shuddering fellow, Snakes Turner, once sighing lover, now outlaw, under the moldering bunk 'way back in the darkmost corner suddenly scented those saturated canines.

Now, for a young gentleman in Snakes' predicament to crowd back into a strange shelter and then find that there were other dogs in there was disconcerting. Snakes didn't want any company. He wanted to be alone.

Men, determined men, had been after Snakes Turner with dogs—bloodhounds! That is, they had been after him when he last heard anything about them. That was about four hours ago and just before one of the sudden torrential rains, for which the arid portions of the Southwest are occasionally noted, had burst upon them all.

It is said it raineth upon the just and the unjust alike. Well, in this case Snakes Turner was deeply gratified. Unjust as he surely was, within a half-hour from the time the downpour commenced he had successfully eluded his pursuers and made a complete effacement of his person among the choppy hills. On he fled in the gathering gloom and growing floods until finally, almost enhausted, he had staggered upon the little 'dobe, felt along the dripping exterior until he came to the half-open door and plunged into the comparative dry of the interior. Flinging himself into the darkest corner, he rolled under the bunk until he hit the wall and—smelled those miserable soaked puppy-feathers.

Snakes Turner was rather a fearless young outlaw, resourceful in a way, so he rested his clean-cut though mud-scattered length on the floor while he debated whether to abandon his present shelter and resume his slogging with the elements or to have it out with those dogs then and there. Snakes had a determined chin. Despite his light hair, light skin, and light-blue, rather wistful eyes and his decidedly light weight of one hundred and fifteen pounds, that chin favored immediate investigation as to whether or not the other occupants of that rain-beaten cabin were hostile.

Snakes threw up his head with determination. It bumped resoundingly against the lower portion of the bunk. He dragged himself into the open room.

"Pwst, pw-w-s-st," he chirruped coaxingly, a short length of flooring gripped as a club. "Come, doggie. Nice puppy."

He snapped his fingers and whistled alluringly.

The answer was immediate. A floppy scramble came from across the cabin, soft feet padded eagerly across the rough pine floor and friendly tongues were thrust in his eyes and hair. Dogs embraced and trampled him from all sides.

Turner, unable to ascertain the number of dogs, calculated there must be about a hundred—all pups half-grown and still full of puppy-love for a fellow human being. Anyway Snakes, half-afraid of starting a row should he use force, laid aside his board and coaxed them to quit even more anxiously than he had coaxed them to come. In his pawing to keep

them out of his eyes and face his hand encountered a long, soft ear connected to a head of startlingly huge proportions having slavering jaws enfolded in collops of flexible muscle.

Snakes dropped his hand in horror—this was a bloodhound! A bloodhound. Yow! Bloodhounds had been wallowing on his trail but a few short hours ago, making the desert air ring with their—to him—blood-curdling baying. Behind them had charged a couple of sheriffs, numerous deputies and a posse of determined citizenry.

Alone young Turner had fled, uttering fervent thanks for the opportune downpour that had so instantaneously saturated the landscape. Now here he was in a crumbling, storm-shaken cabin with a tin roof and the dogs— bloodhoun' dawgs—all over him.

There had been three of the hounds in the chase; apparently they had stopped somewhere and taken on ninety-seven more before seeking sanctuary in this lone adobe.

Turner bowed his head under his body and humped his back to their affections. Gradually they ceased their whole-hearted welcome, and one by one plumped down on the hard plank, snuggling against him with sundry grunts and puffings to commence their cleaning-up processes—licking, licking, licking.

Gently Snakes let himself down among them, turned on his side and rested in peace, revolving in his mind the events that had led up to his becoming an outcast, a pariah, obliged to consort with wet dogs in a tumble-down, ratty, centipedy, scorpiony and gosh knows what-all ancient 'dobe.

TO BEGIN with, Snakes Turner had been disappointed—deeply disappointed in love. Belle Simons had enacted the principal role. That was a week ago. Belle Simons was as healthy and beautiful a girl as ever roped a calf or rode steers with the boys in the whole Bull Creek range. Belle Simons, clear of skin, rounded of contour, all curves and rosiness, with full red lips, tip-tilted nose, wide-set blue eyes and a halo of the softest hair that just matched the flashy sorrel horse she rode. Belle Simons was the lithest cowgirl; the young Queen of the Bull Creek range.

Young Turner and Belle had grown up together. They had ridden the same bronks, steers and broomsticks. They had hunted together, ridden together and fought together.

Belle at eighteen years of age and weighing—you wouldn't know it to look at her—one hundred and eighty and Snakes, two years her senior with his one-fifteen, were an ideal pair. That kind hit it off together quite frequently—there's an affinity between those sizes just as a number twelve shoe and a number five hat always fit a gambler.

Belle and Snakes got along just fine until a week ago, when young Turner decided it was time for them to settle down in a home of their own. Belle thought differently about it. She even intimated that when she, Belle Simons, wed it would be to some solid citizen, some real grown-up man and not some little boy like certain parties she knowed.

Belle was quite superior about it, and Belle Simons was not to be argued with. She was old man Simons' pet. She was his only child and the recipient of his every lavish kindness from a phonograph and a runabout to the richest saddle and the widest chaps in the district.

Old man Simons gave her everything she needed or wanted, and besides being the most popular girl on the Bull Creek range she was gifted with a will and determination. Snakes soon saw it was useless to argue a point with Belle.

Snakes Turner conned these things logically. He knew all about Belle Simons in that he too had been raised, educated and just about finished off within the confines of the Bull Creek ranges. The Turner family owned a small cattle outfit in that country, succeeding from year to year in turning off enough steers to keep the family going.

Unlike Belle, Snakes was far from being an only child. He had lots of help in utilizing the family funds. Outside the two smallest he endured two sisters and two brothers, one of each being younger and a corresponding pair older.

So when Belle turned him down so finally and positively Snakes just thrust forth that determined chin and marched his one-fifteen back to the home ranch with a firm determination to go out into the world and seek his fortune. With but little difficulty he had succeeded in eluding the eyes of the family and rode away on his justly famous Little Blue, winner in many a Bull Creek cow-horse race.

Snakes was absolutely sure of but one thing—he was done with cow ranching forever. No more would he chase the ubiquitous bovine through the chaparral of the Bull Creek range. No more would his wild yell startle the yearlings out of the mesquite thickets along the Bull Creek bottoms. Never again would his face be seen on the Bull Creek range or his active figure fork any more Bull Creek bronks.

Indeed, the promising young Snakes Turner eschewed all things pertaining to cattle and cattle-ranching forever. Positively! He would not return until he could swoop down out of the skies in his own speedy airplane—or in a super-eight at least. Without a doubt he had shaken the dust of the range from his boots. More than that, he had removed them and shaken out what little had accumulated on the inside.

Cow ranching was a mighty slow way of getting rich anyhow. And the lure of the city sat hard upon Snakes Turner. Moreover he and Belle Simons couldn't live in the same neighborhood no longer! No sir, not no longer. He was done, absolutely done with Belle Simons and with a life on the range.

Straight for Monarch City, astride his wonderful cow-horse, went young Snakes Turner. He had been at Monarch twice in company with other Bull Creekers on the occasion of the Annual Frontier Day Celebration.

He had contemplated bringing Little Blue along next year to compete in the cow-horse races inasmuch as Blue had demonstrated his ability to throw dust in the faces of all the ponies over at Bull Creek. Now, he was to enter him in match races at once, and make a lot of money right quickly. Consequently his first step toward affluence in Monarch City was to propose a horse-race.

A horse-race is about as easy to get in Monarch City as a plate of beans in the Saddle-rock Restaurant, provided you can make satisfactory arrangements. Young Turner held the opinion that Monarch was about the largest and most important city on earth; in like manner he considered Little Blue about the fastest thing moving on four feet. So when he drifted into Monarch two days later he chose the first opportunity to suggest that he'd like to get into a high-class horse-race for money, marbles or chalk.

If there was one thing Monarch prided herself on more than the bigness of her poker-games it was the running of cow-horses for money, marbles or chalk. All any one—especially a stranger—had to do to get action on a cow-horse race was to prove that he had a cow-horse to race.

That is, he had to demonstrate that his alleged racing-horse could rope cattle and rein by pressure of the lines and not by pulling at the bit. The race-horses of Monarch were cow-horses to that extent—they could rope and rein. It was pretty well known though that most of them saw mighty little of the round-up and range. So when the youth Snakes Turner timidly mentioned he'd like to exercise his steed in company with others in a contest of speed the response was immediate and of the sort he desired.

"Shore, kid, shore."

Several crafty-eyed individuals crowded to welcome his proposal.

"That yore hoss yuh got tied to th' rail out thar?"

"That's him," replied Snakes, rather proudly eying the sleek-muscled contour of his short-coupled "top" horse.

"Jus' right," grinned a Monarchite. "Nifty looker. Looks like a shore 'nough speed fiend. When'ju wanna run, an' f'r how much?"

"Oh, I'll run yuh for a ten-spot," replied Snakes carelessly.

The loud guffaw that greeted this capitalistic remark rather mystified Snakes for a moment, but the remark of the first speaker cleared it.

"Ten-spot! Haw, whad'ju think our time's wuth, kid? We kain't buy hoss-shoes fer a ten-spot. Raise yore ante, kid. Raise."

Snakes was taken aback. Now ten dollars was a considerable sum to lay on the outcome of a horse-race out Bull Creek way. Apparently ten dollars didn't amount to so much here in the great city. Burning with abasement, Snakes determined he'd show 'em.

"I'll make 'er twenty-five then," he challenged.

He had twenty-five dollars. Rather anxiously he fingered the little wad shoved deep in the pocket of his worn chaparejos.

Again the loud laughter shamed him. A circle of spectators drew around him much like a crowd of boys teasing a caterpillar. Snakes desired to back out in a dignified manner but couldn't see any place to back out at. The interested crowd was all about him.

He cast an anxious look between edging shoulders to see if his horse was all right. Little Blue was standing quietly at the rail. Strangely reassured, Snakes turned to try to strike a bargain with a twenty-five-dollar stake or get out gracefully without having to admit that twenty-five dollars was all he possessed except his appetite and the knowledge that he owed a dollar at the local livery.

A TALL man, more shrewd and crafty in appearance than any of the others—if such a thing be possible—yet carrying an air of wholesomeness and good nature that somehow to young Turner marked him as one apart and more cleanly than the average Monarch horseman, shoved out of the circle and stepped across to Snakes' side and plucked at his sleeve.

"Say, son, come on out with me a minute," he smiled kindly. "Mebby I kin fix y'u up."

Without waiting for reply he shouldered the way out of the lounging circle in an authoritative manner, piloting Snakes along by a firm grip on his elbow.

"Son," he began kindly, leaning his muscular figure against the rail where Little Blue was tied, "I been here a week tryin' to git a race outa these fellers an' I'm gittin wise to 'em fast. They got so many schemes of gettin' ahead of a stranger that he's got about as much chance as a ripe watermelon ag'in' half a dozen pickaninnies.

"My hoss is a miler an they won't think of runnin' a race of more'n a half. Now your pony here looks like he's best at three-hundred yards, an' y'u can count on these birds refusin' to run anything less than a quarter-mile.

"I got a girl rider for my hoss, so these fellers declare I must put up a cowboy rider who can qualify the hoss to both rope an' rein. "Now, my little gal isn't no cowboy—not yit. She can rope a calf an' she can rein a cow-hoss—but not this race-hoss of mine.

"I can't trust any of these Monarch riders to give me a square deal or I'd get one of them to ride. Now if you're anxious to git in a race mebby you 'n' me can come to terms."

"Sure."

Snakes jumped at the chance.

"Sure, I'll ride for yuh."

"Well," replied the other rather dubiously, "drop around to our camp this evenin' 'bout four an' we'll see. We're camped down 'long the river thataway."

Snakes had little desire now to be alone in the strange city of men with such peculiar ideas about horse-racing.

"Well, now," he bargained, "now maybe I couldn't just locate your camp by myself. I—I ain't got nothin' special on hands right now, so 'sposin' I trail along with yuh an' we'll size up your gallopin' dog now.

Nonchalantly Snakes used the slang word he'd heard the sophisticated use when referring to a racing-horse.

"Sure, sure. Come right along," agreed the tall man heartily. "Glad to have y'u only I didn't want to appear rushin' y'u too much. Thought mebby you'd want to spend most of your time in town. Most of these young bucks do, y'u know."

"I—I don't keer much about towns," confessed Snakes as he untied Blue and accompanied the stranger along the cottonwood-lined street. "Don't b'lieve I think much of 'em."

A few minutes later they were moving through a band of hobbled ponies grazing the wide Bermuda-grass flats along the river in charge of a gaudily outfitted lad of about eleven who greeted them noisily, commanding them to halt and stand still until they'd given the password, which proved to be a bag of "kid candy" and licorice from the tall man's pocket.

They passed on to the two canvas-covered wagons at the camp. Snakes was surprized to note that the wagons were in excellent condition and quite new. Itinerant horse-traders usually had wagons consisting mainly of baling-wire and faith. Very apparently this was a different sort of a horse-trading outfit, and if further confirmation had been needed the sight of a powerful automobile backed up in the shade of a giant willow settled it conclusively.

Following Snakes' amazed stare the tall man explained: "Yes, that's our car. The women folks go along in that. Me an' the boy travel too slow to suit them when we're on the road, so they go on ahead and have supper cooked and ready by the time we pull into camp of an evenin'.

"We're from Oklahoma," he explained. "Gittin' too much settled up back thur, so we're sort of lookin' this country over fer a stock-range."

Then, lifting his voice, he addressed some one at the wagons.

"Say, Della," he called, "wisht you'd get ready to show off ol' Arrow a little. Got a feller here that'll mebby ride 'im fer us agin these Monarch ponies."

Beneath the shade of a wide canvas stretched between the wagons a girl left off helping the woman to set out an extensive meal and went off obediently to the new little tent pitched beside the car. The woman strangely reminded Snakes of his own mother. She was a plump, motherly woman, perhaps a little graying but with a humorous lift to the corners of her wholesome mouth. Snakes felt suddenly at ease.

"This here's 'Maw'—Missus Greathouse, my wife," explained the tall man. "Our name's Greathouse. I'm Zach Greathouse an' that noisy kid comin' thar——"

He indicated the rapidly approaching figure of the lad who had been minding the horses and who was now coming into camp swung low over the horn of his saddle and urging his mount to top speed.

"Yeh, that youngster's our boy, Danny. An'—an' what might your name be, son?"

"Snakes Turner," replied Snakes vainly. "Name's really Sam Turner, but ever'body over round the Bull Crick calls me Snakes 'cause I like to ride all the snaky bronks. I ride 'em a-goin' and a-comin'. The snakier they are the better I like 'em."

Young Turner, not usually given to boasting, enlarged somewhat upon his ability, partly to overshadow any rememberance of the humiliating rôle from which Zach Greathouse had rescued him that morning and partly because he was young and longed for admiration and friendship. He was a wee bit homesick, too.

"Sure," he continued, "I ride all them bronks over there. 'Spect some day I'll ride in the Frontier Day contest here in Monarch an' win it. I done rode the wild-hawse race here twicet, an' I been in the steer-ridin' an' boy's pony-express race, but ain't hardly had experience to go in the bronk-ridin'—might get nervous er somethin'."

"So now; isn't that fine!" commented Maw Greathouse admiringly. "My, my! And you're hardly more than a boy. Our own boy thinks he can ride—" Maw's eyes twinkled mischievously—"too," she added. "You just must be careful."

"Shucks, ma'am. I'm twenty an' ain't never got hurt yet."

"Yah, an' when I'm twenty I'll be ridin' 'em, too. Won't I, Pop?"

Danny, having jerked his saddle from the pony and splashed his head and hands in the clear stream, looked up from the towel at his father, demanding confirmation.

"Well, you never can tell," his father replied. I'm just hopin' y'u won't want to. But just now supposin' y'u take Mr. Snakes' hoss an' tie him in the shade over yonder. Take the saddle off an' grain 'im while I help Maw git this dinner on."

Danny went about it masterfully. But Snakes went along keeping careful watch. Snakes wasn't going to let any horse-traders, no matter how congenial and well-mannered, pull off any crooked stunts with his horse or himself.

So he openly watched Danny's every movement until Little Blue was safely unsaddled and fed. Danny proved companionable and in no way resented Snakes' surveillance.

As they returned to the wagons Snakes saw something that caused him to forget all about Little Blue, horse-racing, future career, Belle Simons and dinner—almost.

ADVANCING from the little new tent by the big car came a girl. A girl! All the magazine covers, the post-card pictures and motion-picture beauties Snakes had ever gazed upon if resolved into one ravishing girl wouldn't have made a more beautiful creature—in Snakes Turner's way of thinking—than the little queen advancing upon the velvet Bermuda grass.

She wore a brown leather skirt of the richest shade of brown, fringed and daintily beaded. Her boots were of the tiniest, highest-heeled sort Snakes had ever viewed. Moreover they were polished in the exact shade of brown of the skirt, and even the richly carved spur-leathers were polished and brown.

Her hair, which showed in a great curl, caught together by a silk ribbon of the same exquisite brown, was brown, too. Her wide sombrero was brown, and as they neared the wagons Snakes could see her eyes too were brown—the same bewitching brown as her boots, her skirt and her sombrero. Only the jeweled hatpin thrust into the big hat relieved the severe usefulness of the girl's riding-costume.

"This is my daughter, Della," Snakes heard Zach Greathouse saying.

"I'm—I'm mighty pleased to meetchu, ma'am" Snakes managed to reply while he executed the "bow" correct in Bull Creek circles.

His heart jumped suddenly at the sound of her cheery yet modulated voice.

"Thank you, Mr. Turner.

"Holy gosh! Mister Turner!" roared Danny. "Where'd you get that kind of stuff, Dell?"

Throughout the enjoyable dinner Snakes wallowed in bashfulness. Continuously he endeavored to look at Miss Greathouse all he wanted to without appearing to be doing nothing else.

It seemed to him that the one thing that would satisfy him would be simply to sit off at one side where he could get a good view of Della Greathouse and just sit and look and look until he'd seen her all he wanted to. He just simply couldn't get enough looking done while pretending to eat.

Whenever she spoke he took that opportunity to stare at her as long as he felt the conventions of this society permitted. His sisters wore leather skirts; so did Belle—but what a difference! Snakes couldn't exactly figure out just what the difference was, but there sure was a difference.

And the boots and spur-leathers. Now his sisters and Belle Simons wore boots and spur-leathers, but instead of appearing a harmonious whole as did Della Greathouse's theirs were merely boots in a more or less used condition with spurs attached thereto by spur-leathers. That was all there was to it. They'd never seemed to think of the ravishing effect to be attained by a trim boot and a spur-leather when all polished to a distinctly same and attractive hue. Besides, there was a difference in the way they handled them.

Then again, the girls he'd known walked. That is, when they moved about from place to place on foot they walked! But since he'd seen Miss Greathouse walk he'd never forget how she walked. In fact she didn't walk—she sort of floated. Her feet moved along in a fetching, close-clipped little way that amazed Snakes. He'd no idea anybody could walk in such a fascinatingly jerky little manner.

Then her face. Now there was a problem. Snakes had seen pictures of beautiful girls, but none possessed the rounded and altogether entrancing contour of Della Greathouse's face.

Too, she didn't have any freckles. Snakes had never seen a girl's face without freckles, and this wonderful face harbored no freckles. Snakes was speechless with admiration.

"And do you live around here?" Maw Greathouse was asking him.

"Naw—no; that is, not right around here," stammered Snakes. "I live over thataway round Bull Crick."

"Oh, I see," continued Maw, graciously observing Snakes' elaborate cowboy equipment. "And is that a farming community?"

"No; great gosh, no," protested Snakes. "No, ma'am. That's a cow-country. Best anywheres around, I guess."

"Then you live on a really truly cow-ranch?" Della interrupted eagerly.

"Yes'm. Cow-ranch," replied Snakes, gulping.

Never before had he thought of the Turner

collection of heterogeneous bovines and the sprawl of corrals and outbuildings as a cow-ranch. But now with Della Greathouse present and apparently thinking a cow-ranch a thing to be desired Snakes expanded happily.

"Sure, cow-ranch. There's us an' ol' man Simons, an' the Ritters an' the Danes—all in the cow business round in there."

"I just love a real cow-ranch. We all do," Della beamed.

"So do I," agreed Snakes. "We got a reg'lar cow-ranch. Ours is the T Bar T. Paw's one of the fust settlers, an' we got the best kind of range."

Suddenly it occured to him that that same cow-ranch was a very desirable sort of a place when compared with one's making one's own way in the great city. Big cities didn't look nearly so promising as they had seemed the day he left home in search of his fortune.

After dinner while Zach Greathouse was out bringing up his racer, Arrow, Della cleared the table and washed and dried the dishes and numerous smoke-blackened pots with a deft dispatch that amazed Snakes. He hadn't thought about her being able to do such things and be pretty too.

There was another surprize in store for Snakes Turner. The racing cow-horse, Arrow, proved to be not merely a fleet cow-pony but a great, powerfully muscled, vicious beast that was saddled only after being eared down by Zach Greathouse while Della, on tiptoes, threw her carved, nut-brown cow-saddle on his tense back and cinched it by means of placing a trimly booted foot against his twitching side and pulling the latigo home.

Finally, saddled and bridled, Arrow stood, as amazing a specimen of a cow-horse as Snakes had ever seen. A great, warm-blooded bay he was, deep of chest and smoothly coupled. Alert, his neck arching and eyes wide with intelligent interest, he poised on small round hoofs like a thoroughbred at the starting-line.

"That a cow-hoss!" gasped Snakes, glancing from Arrow to Little Blue. "Do they call that kind of a thing a cow-hoss around here?"

Compared with this splendid animal Blue looked very small and very meek and crude.

"That's a cow-hawse," stated Greathouse positively. "At least that's the kind of a hawse these Monarch residenters are going to run as cow-hawses. They might bar 'em from Frontier Day cowboy races but they go in matches. You can rope a calf off him an' he'll rein. That's the test in this burg.

"I'll let you try Arrow in a minute. We'll ride up the flat an' rope a calf or two."

Della went up to Arrow and with her father at his head mounted nimbly. When Greathouse loosed his hold Arrow bounded away with an amazingly light step interspersed with little springy deer-jumps. Della, her gauntleted hand playing the rein as easily and firmly as a supple spring, brought the big brute to a prancing walk. She sat her saddle unconcernedly.

The afternoon's tryout included a race between Arrow and Little Blue, in which the latter was hopelessly outdistanced after pluckily holding the lead for fifty yards, and a brief exhibition of roping in which Snakes demonstrated his skill on Arrow.

Greathouse complimented him on his ability.

"Huh," growled Snakes depreciatingly, "that's nothin'. I can rope anything off of anything anyhow. Jus' leave ol' Arrow to me; I'll qualify him as a cow-hoss for any man's race."

"I'm sure mighty glad to hear thet, son," replied Greathouse relievedly. "I reckon you'll do to train. I sure am countin' on givin' these Monarch City boys one interestin' race.

"Now you folks go back to the wagons. I'll go in town an' see when they'll run.

"Give me your word you'll stick, son. Promise to let me show you how to ride Arrow ag'in' these Monarch hawsses an I'll make it wuth your time, if you will."

"Sure, I'll stick," agreed Snakes positively. "Gosh, yes," he added with a sidewise glance at Della that he just couldn't help.

"All right, son. Y'u kin turn your hawse in with our bunch an' bunk with Danny if you will. I'll be back 'fore supper."

THE race was set for the following Saturday. Five horses were entered, and the purse was made up of the five entry-fees at one hundred dollars apiece. Zach Greathouse considered that since all the horses but Arrow were Monarch-owned he was running against the combined wit and craftiness of the other four and their riders.

There was one, a great sorrel with a splash of white across his nose, that was the prime favorite. Monarch had never seen the horse that could outrun the Velone sorrel, and Monarch was willing to risk its money that it never would see a horse outrun the Velone sorrel. The race might as well have been between the two horses, Arrow and the Velone sorrel, for all the attention given the other entrants. Even money was all the the Monarch sports had to offer. Zach Greathouse had loudly insisted that since it was so apparent there were four Monarch horses entered against him he should be given odds since no one but himself was supporting Arrow to win. But the Monarchites were obdurate. Even money or none was their verdict. Finally Greathouse gave in and met each offering and covered it, playing Arrow to beat the Velone sorrel.

Daily Snakes handled Arrow. Arrow was already a trained starter and was off at the shot—the gunshot being the accepted start at Monarch.

There was one point Snakes was obliged to practise a great deal, and that was owing to the peculiar method of awarding the purse. The Monarch plan was to bind the purse-money in a buckskin bag and suspend it from the finish wire so the winner might easily reach out and get it as he passed under the wire. In order that it might be absolutely in reach of the winner no matter on which side of the track he happened to finish a cord was attached to the bag so it might be drawn along the wire and dangled directly in front of the finishing winner.

The idea was that since these races were to be ridden strictly by cow-boys on cow-horses with cow-saddles and stiff bits it would be but fair that the winner display his horsemanship by accomplishing this rather difficult feat. The penalty attached to the winner's failure to carry off the bag was that any other rider taking it down, though he be the last man across the line, should be awarded one-half the purse, the remainder, of course, going to the actual winner. In this way every entrant had a chance at the purse even though but one prize was offered.

Monarch riders were skilled at the trick. Snakes, though expert at many cowboy tricks, could not be sure of catching the suspended bag despite his assiduous practise. Sometimes, even with a fair chance, it eluded him. He worked diligently at the trick both from Arrow and the other horses, for to miss the bag meant to lose two hundred and fifty dollars, and Zach Greathouse made it plain that Snakes' share would depend somewhat upon his success in connecting with the money-sack when he won the race on the following Saturday. Greathouse was confident on one point—Arrow would win the race.

During the four days of training Snakes found ample time to become acquainted with Della. The girl reciprocated his interest, and they found many mutually agreeable topics.

Snakes never ceased to view Della with a sort of wondering awe at her graceful strength and sweet capability. On the other hand Della admired Snakes for much the same reasons. Altogether they were companionably agreeable. Snakes had even got so far as to forgive Belle Simons for her refusal of his tender intentions less than one week ago. It seemed a year.

When they arrived at the race-course with Arrow on the day of the race Snakes was perceptibly nervous. Zach Greathouse, thinking it best to throw him on his own resources at the start, sent him up to the line with a brief:

"Well, son, git along up there now. We'll all be waiting down here at the finish to see y'u come in ahead. Remember now, every rider looks out fer hisself, an' y'u bet y'u haven't any friends in thet bunch. There's cold blood in every one of them other hawsses though, so there's only one outcome to this meeting. Arrow's a thoroughbred. Arrow'll win."

THE course was a straightaway one-half mile in length laid off on the level mesa-land at the edge of town. As Snakes rode Arrow up the wide strip to the starting-point it seemed to him that the entire population of the world lined the course.

Arrow paid little attention to the crowd; rather he behaved himself far better than on his practise exercisings; for unhurriedly, with long springy stride, Arrow walked to the head of the course where the other racers already moved about.

The starter with apparent courtesy offered Snakes the first chance at the numbered slips for position which he had placed in his hat. When all had drawn and they turned to the mark Snakes found himself between two deep-chested Monarch horses fully as large and splendid as Arrow himself while to his extreme right was a long, slim black mare with the trim head and feet of a thoroughbred.

Snakes wondered whether Greathouse had known what he was up against when he said Arrow was the only thoroughbred in the field. Across at his extreme left Snakes could see the flashing shoulders of the Velone sorrel as it chafed and reared for the start.

Snakes was therefore in the center of the line-up, and he opined that this had been done by manipulation of the numbered slips. As he stood, there was every chance of his being shouldered out of the race almost at the start. Snakes had hoped to draw an outside position.

"Take it easy, boys," droned the starter as the horses began to wheel and fret for the start. "Take it easy. Get 'em standin' quiet. This here's a cowboy race and we won't have no jockeyin'."

This latter thrust was especially for Snakes, who intent upon getting Arrow out in the lead, had nudged the great beast a trifle and was now crouched in the saddle, having all he could do to keep the bounding Arrow on the ground. Snakes, small as he was and with the stirrups of Della's light cow-saddle shortened to the last notch, humped over the horn with a hand gripping the rein at each side of Arrow's arching neck in true jockey fashion as he had been trained by Zach Greathouse.

He appeared to the Monarchites to be a regular race rider and they, ever ready to suspect trickery, were not sparing in their remarks of what they thought of a jocky rider in a cowboy race. Had not Snakes settled beyond all doubt his ability to handle Arrow in roping and reining in the trials the day previously they would have demanded another rider up, on the grounds that Snakes was a jockey and not a cowboy. But Snakes had shown them all too plainly that he was an even

better cow-hand than any of the other riders in this race.

"Now get 'em in line there," chided the starter. "This's gonna be a standin' start. D'you hear? Hold 'em down if you expect me to let you go today."

The starter, his eyes bent to the line, stood ready with his starting-pistol, his finger tense against the trigger for the first semblance of a line-up.

"Make 'em stand, I say," he bellowed. "Here, you little race-horse cowboy, pull that jumpin-jack down on to the ground a second, won't you? Don't let 'im paw the air all day."

As Snakes struggled to make Arrow obey the starter continued—

"Now I ain't goin' to pull this trigger until you're all stopped and headed the same way—Go!"

Bang! The starter gave the word and followed it instantly by the shot. At the word the Monarch horses left the line and at the shot Arrow leaped among them.

On both sides quirts were being plied without stint. Instantly the air was filled with the shouts of the spectators. The roar was terrific and the unexpected lashing of quirts astonished Snakes, for he had been directed not to hit Arrow at all unless for the final dash. But Monarch riders rode differently. Plying their quirts across the shoulders of their plunging mounts they tore down the course.

Arrow, between and slightly behind the two at each side, surged into his stride. Already the Velone sorrel had nosed slightly ahead; Snakes could see the distended nostrils reaching out in front of the beast to his left.

On each side the riders commenced to crowd in on Arrow, attempting to secure enough of a lead to close in before him. Seeing this, Snakes lurched forward over Arrow's flying mane and gave him a bit of slack. Like a smoothly running passenger-train pulling out of a union station at the side of a slowly moving freight, Arrow slid out from the rabble that was hedging him and took to the stretch with the Velone sorrel but a nose ahead.

Arrow, being a track-trained horse, instinctively slewed toward the left as he had been used to doing on the circular track. Snakes had been warned of this and instructed not to attempt to hold Arrow to the straight course but to let him take the pole if he desired to, rather than disconcert him by trying to hold him to position.

Snakes could feel by the powerful regularity of Arrow's stride that the horse had a vast reserve to give the sorrel a hard run. Sarney Velone, the sorrel's rider, a swarthy, hatless man, humped low over his saddle, and, lashing the already streaked shoulders of his mount, interspersed an occasional backward stroke that took the sorrel along the flank, causing it to jerk its tail in what under circumstances of less haste would have been a regular switch of protest.

Snakes, his face in Arrow's flying mane, was watching every movement of the sorrel and its rider plunging at his side. Nudging Arrow slightly with his heel, he thrilled at the noble response.

Arrow lengthened his smooth stride a trifle and drew up on the sorrel until Snakes' knee stood even with the knee of the sorrel's rider. A moment more and Snake's knee was at the Sorrel's muscled shoulder.

"Yah-h-h," Snakes yelled, grinning back at Sarney Velone while Arrow's mane whipped his face at every stride. "Yah-h-h!"

Above the thunder of thudding hoofs his rasping jeer ripped out to the tensed spectators, who saw in it a personal challenge, an individual insult to each and every supporter of their hitherto unbeaten Velone sorrel. Despairingly they roared anathemas at the smoothly flying Arrow and his thistle-light rider. But to Della, Danny and Zach Greathouse, astride their horses at this finish line, Snakes' yell carried assurance of victory.

"Come on, Snakes! Come on, Snakes!" howled Danny, while Della rose in her stirrups and waved her wide sombrero. "Come o-o-on!"

"An' ain't he comin' though!" ejaculated Zach Greathouse. "Jus' look at that kid ride, will yuh!"

Straight for the money came Arrow, the sorrel sweeping along but a nose behind. True to his trust, the judge in charge of the purse-string pulled the purse along the wire until it hung immediately in front and between the oncoming riders. It was either man's money now.

As they swept beneath the wire both riders lurched upward and caught at the bag. Snakes, his hand but a foot in front of the sorrel's rider, unerringly grasped the buckskin and tore it from its moorings. His persistent practise stood him in good stead.

AN EXCITABLE citizen, wrought up to a pitch that only Monarch whisky and a close finish can produce, dragged out an ancient six-shooter and punctuated the roar of conversation about him with a crisp shot. Before any one could remonstrate he had whooped her up a few more times and emptied into the atmosphere from the rusting chambers of his weapon four or five more antique slugs.

Now a high-tempered race-horse capable of going the full mile and having just completed an easy half-mile jaunt isn't going even to attempt to be calm under the circumstances. So at the sound of the shots old Arrow stretched forth his faithful nozzle and kicked up the dust in a renewed start good for another half-mile.

Snakes, grasping the situation and the saddle-horn, contented himself with holding Arrow as much as possible, thinking to pull him up when well out of the maddening crowds.

Zach Greathouse, not feeling exactly sure, owing to his short acquaintance with the boy, just what Snakes intended to do, moved his own horse out into the open and started after the rapidly disappearing Snakes with the intent of at least keeping him in sight. A Monarch horseman, noting the puzzled look on Zach Greathouse's face, divined that Arrow was running away and yelled after the distant Snakes—

"Stop him!"

The crowd, many of whom had been unable to see the exact position of the finishing horses, thinking perhaps Snakes had not been the winner after all but was running away with the purse, also yelled—

"Stop him!"

The populace took up the cry. Horses were quickly mounted; shots were fired; rumor instantly ran riot. The purse should have gone to the sorrel. The rider of the big bay was making away with the purse.

Vainly Greathouse attempted to explain it was not the purse he wanted but the horse. The cry was taken up—

"Horse-thief, horse-thief!"

The sheriff of Avapai and the sheriff of Mariposa—both cognizant of their authority and in doubt as to which county the crime had been committed in—for the course was on the county line—organized posses on the run. As they passed the court-house the sheriff of Mariposa loosed the bloodhounds without rime or reason other than to see if the dogs were as good as had been represented.

The dogs took the lead along the white road, baying without a single idea other than that the road was full of scent and the running easy. The dogs bent to their task eagerly; the populace afoot and horseback followed in hot pursuit.

Snakes, struggling to stop the determined Arrow, was surprized at this sudden turn of affairs. Snakes couldn't quite understand just why everybody had so strangely deserted the race-course and taken after him, but he hardly thought it prudent to stop lest he be not given opportunity to explain or receive explanation.

He thought he knew something of the temper of the Monarch citizens toward strangers, especially toward strangers who beat their favorite Velone sorrel in a horse-race, so he pulled Arrow down to a rather speedy gallop and let it go at that.

Each time he topped a rise he could see his pursuers and they could see him. Such occasions called forth a burst of speed from both sides.

The dogs, forging to the front, happened on to the fresh scent left by Arrow and his rider, and, deciding that this was the real thing, settled into regular running and regular baying. Far ahead of the mob they raced, and far ahead of them raced old Arrow.

Three miles farther—five from Monarch—it occurred to Snakes that he oughtn't to be taking Arrow along with him, for on the face of things it looked as if he was going to be gone some time and possibly not coming back to Monarch very soon. He still had the buck-skin bag containing the five hundred dollars clutched in his left hand. This he thrust into his bosom, and, renewing his battle with the reins, dragged the now willing Arrow to a halt and tied him to a mesquite at the roadside. Then Snakes fled.

AS HE fled he took across the gulches and sand-washes—in the direction of Bull Creek, and home. There was nothing small about Snakes Turner; he knew when he was licked; and under the circumstances nothing seemed nicer to him than to get just as far away from Monarch and just as close to Bull Creek as he could in the shortest space of time.

High-heeled riding-boots and cow-puncher's legs aren't made for speed, but Snakes contrived to rattle over the scattered stones and whip through the chaparral with a vim that made up for his lack of speed.

It was late in the afternoon now, and white thunder-heads reflected the heat of the lowering sun in a terrific manner. As Snakes blindly plunged and floundered along his course the clouds condensed, thunder pealed and the first drops of a thunder-storm, peculiar to the arid portions of the Southwest, pattered down.

Dogs bayed close behind. Snakes liked the sound; it reminded him of the coon-hunts the boys used to carry on over around Bull Creek. At such times he had been footsore and weary just as he was now, and the eager baying of the hounds as they treed their quarry had put new life into his thews and new purpose into his lagging limbs.

So now the baying cheered him on, and as the cooling drops fell faster and thicker Snakes glanced behind and saw—saw what kind of dogs were doing that friendly baying. That too put new life into his thews and new purpose into his lagging limbs.

Yes, indeed; the sight of those three earnest bloodhounds, their huge heads low on his trail, followed and abetted by a dark blob of moving men on horseback surging over the rolling hills in his wake, urged him on considerably.

It was growing rapidly darker. The thunder, preceded by blinding flashes of lightning, pealed continuously.

Snakes remembered something about its being dangerous to be out in a Summer thunder-storm when hot and sweaty. But he did not

stop. On the contrary he threw her into high and speeded up a bit.

By this time the ground was softening; water ran in rivulets on every slope and muddy torrents were beginning to roll down the ancient watercourses. Snakes' clothing was soaked, his boots full of water and sodden.

On he ran in the gathering gloom and growing floods until at least after three hour's slogging around ankle deep in territory, he staggered against an adobe wall and felt along the dripping interior until he came to the half-open door, where he plunged through into the comparative dry of the interior and staggered across the uneven floor to safety under the bunk.

IT WAS then he first smelled dog—wet dog. Now the actual discovery that these dogs were bloodhounds, and superloving bloodhounds at that didn't offer any cheer to Snakes Turner. Glumly he lay, trying to think, amid the roar of the downpour on the corrugated roof and the contented snuffing and licking of his new-found friends.

One thing was clear—he could not safely return to Monarch City. Just why he didn't know; but it is apparent men don't chase fellows out of town with bloodhounds and armed posses unless they've got some sort of a crow to pick. Therefore Snakes determined to cut Monarch off his visiting-list.

But about the horse-trader, Greathouse, there was room for conjecture. Just what that gentleman would think of Snakes' manner of leaving with the five-hundred-dollar purse was more than Snakes could fathom. He had a hunch the trader wouldn't like it, and he doubted if he'd have a chance to explain. There was Little Blue, his saddle and his chaps, not to mention Della and his heart—all these still at the trader's camp by the river's edge.

Snakes wondered if the rising floods hadn't forced the trader to pull up stakes and move to higher ground. Thus pondering, he laid his weary head among his odorous fellows and fell asleep.

At sunup he awoke. The sky, atmosphere and landscape were clear. Too, it was clear he and the dogs were missing something—breakfast for instance.

There was no sign of a posse or pursuit. Snakes could not know that with the finding of Arrow and the mutual explanations that were at that very moment being made in Monarch between the townsmen and the horse-trader the circumstances surrounding his alleged outlawry were being cleared up.

In fact the only exciting hangover of the events of the previous day consisted in an earnest desire on the part of Greathouse to arrange another horse-race between Arrow and the Velone sorrel and a longing on the part of the sheriff of Mariposa for his wandering bloodhounds.

Snakes, not knowing these things and in fact not knowing much of anything but that he was hungry and scared and hiding out while everything he owned and loved were at the horse-trader's none-too-permanent camp somewhere around Monarch, resolved to sneak into town that night and see if he could find something to eat, or else see Della Greathouse.

He tried to send the dogs away, but they stuck closer than any of his brothers ever had. He gave it up, and together they wandered around to the sunny side of the 'dobe to dry their outer garments and await evening.

That night a forlorn figure, accompanied by three large bloodhounds, could have been seen walking disconsolately about the place where the Greathouse family had been encamped. Water had overflowed the place the night previously. Hopelessly the boy examined and the dogs sniffed the surroundings, searching for the tracks that were not there.

At one place where the freshly cut stump of a willow protruded from the silt-mingled Bermuda grass the boy stood with bowed head as at a tomb. Here was where he and Della had hewed down a willow to make a bower of the branches. Zach Greathouse had used the trunk to make brake-blocks for the wagons. Now the chips, even the bower itself, had been washed downstream.

Snakes felt a great loss, and suddenly felt a greater longing than ever for his home that sprawled amid the corrals and ranges of the Bull Creek country. Turning, he made his way toward town and stopped at a Mexican restaurant situated in the lower reaches of the Mexican quarter.

Here he was waited upon by a surprizingly fat and agile *señora* who placed before him highly seasoned yet wonderfully palatable foods without even so much as an inquiring glance at his strange companions. Furtively he separated a silver dollar from his original wad of twenty-five, which, minus only his initial livery bill, was intact. He indicated that he desired also food for his dogs, which by this time was fairly ready to push him from his place at the table and devour his meal.

The *señora* took the dollar, and, graciously calling to the dogs, took the great kettle of stew from the stove, and, setting it on the floor, flipped off the cover and gave the contents a coaxing stir. Gathering around, wary of the slight steam issuing from the appetizing pot, the dogs reached in one by one and yanked forth a chunk on to the floor, whence presently there came forth their gustatory chompfings and the gentle flap of the meat and thump of the knuckle-bone.

Finally Snakes, having completed his meal, arose and walked to the door. The *señora*,

dozing beside her range, arose also, kicked the dogs aside, rescued the pot and the remaining stew, returned it to its place on the stove and replaced the lid. Snakes, followed by the dogs, passed out.

The screen slammed behind him and the woman resumed her chair. Flies settled comfortably over the dishes and the general surroundings.

Pathetically Snakes searched out the corrals and stables of the town, furtively scouting along alleyways and side streets, endeavoring to find the trader's wagons and horses. Vaguely alarmed at the companionship of the hounds he resolved to take them to a place near the court-house, hoping that they would take the hint and return to their former quarters.

He managed to make his way through the unlighted streets to the plaza. Apparently boys and dogs were old stories to the residents of Monarch, for the few persons about in the darkness seemed not to notice him.

The dogs, showing no inclination to leave, stuck close to Snakes, so he ventured up to the very door of the court-house. Dark and still was the deep entrance. Pausing a moment, Snakes accustomed his eyes to the darkness. A hand-printed poster tacked to one of the great doors caught his eye; the word REWARD was printed in two-inch letters. Snakes spelled out the sprawled words—

Fifty dollars reward for the return of three bloodhounds belonging to Mariposa County and one hundred dollars for the return of the jockey that stole the money-bag.

Beneath which some disgruntled Monarchite had scrawled in pencil—

Ded er live!

Stealthily Snakes pulled open the great door. A breath of cigarlåden dusty air spun out from the hall. Whisperingly Snakes coaxed the dogs within; then, stepping hastily outside, he closed the door.

"Well, there's fifty dollars I don't want," he sighed, painfully aware that he still had a pouch containing five hundred that he didn't really care to be found carrying. "I want to go home," he concluded. "I'm goin' home!"

Snakes made his way out of town, scanning the empty streets for a sign of Greathouse's outfit. To return home without Little Blue, minus his chaps, footsore and with five hundred dollars hid in his bosom that he daren't mention, was a dull enough prospect.

Throughout the remainder of the night he toiled back over the long trail he had so blithely ridden a week previously. Once he halted at a trickle and removed his boots. He was still carrying them when the sun topped the purple range to the east. Far up the trail ahead wavered the grove of walnut-trees where he had stopped at the spring the day he rode into Monarch.

"Twenty miles from Monarch," he mused. "Twenty miles; fifty more to go."

His eyes glimpsed something white in the clump of trees. Sure enough there was the unmistakable gleam of sunlight on white canvas. A minute's more walking and he could make out the bunch of horses grazing near by the grove. Later he could see Little Blue, grazing democratically near the flashing shoulders of Arrow.

HE CAME upon them at breakfast. He wasn't left to wonder what welcome Zach Greathouse would give him. For that long individual leaped to his feet and grasped his hand affectionately.

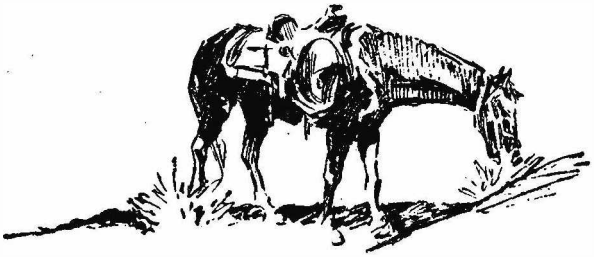
"Well, ef here ain't our snake-eater!" Greathouse exclaimed. "By Judas, son, we looked all over the world for y'u t'other night an' yesterday. Maw 'n' Della stayed in town till nigh five o'clock yesterday lookin' f'r y'u. We 'lowed you'd hit fer home. Set down an' eat, son."

"Th-thanks," stammered Snakes. "An' here's your money. I—I didn't get a chance to give it to yuh after the race. I——"

"Ho, shucks, son. That's yourn. That's your pay fer makin' the ride. I got mine off'n the Monarch sports who thought that sorrel could run. Come on an' eat; we're goin' out your way, so y'u might's well join us. We figger on goin' over around Bull Crick some place an' buy up a bunch of cattle an' settle down."

"Me too!" assented Snakes suddenly. "Me too! That's just what I been wantin' to do—go over round Bull Crick, buy up a bunch of cattle an' settle down."

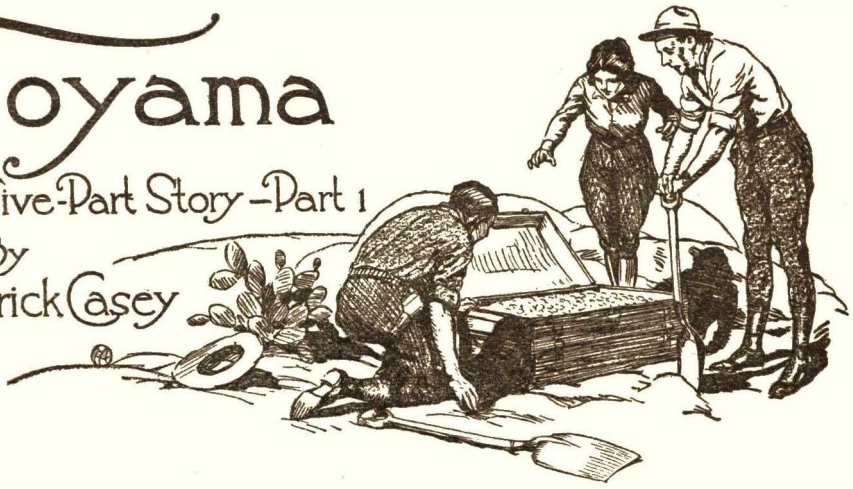
He was looking at Della Greathouse, who returned his gaze and smiled frankly.



Toyama

A Five-Part Story—Part 1

By Patrick Casey



Author of "According to His Caste," "The Phony Man," etc.

CHAPTER I

GOLDEN HIDALGOS AND MEDIO HIDALGOS

WE STOOD over the treasure chest, Morley, his wife and I. We had just cast away our shovels and lifted the regulation twenty-eight-inch army trunk out of its burial plot in the sand. With the key that Señor Serafin Dicenta had given Morley along with the map, we had unlocked the hasp and thrown back the cover. That trunk was filled with freshly minted yellow coins like a trough with water.

We looked about warily, fearful lest we be observed. But there was small need of such precaution. We were in the midst of a desolation that was parched and stifling and dead. Billows of sand stretched away interminably, and gleamed and ached on the eyeballs. The air, windless and shimmering, burned the lungs. Nothing stirred in the torpidity, save waves of heat that caused the misshaped cacti to leap and sway, and wave thorny arms in grotesque dances.

We stood, under the insufferable sun, in a haloid depression—a sink of salt crystals, brilliant as diamonds, bogged over here and there with wind-blown sand, and striated by pale, dazzling pink where gypsum veined the sides.

Far off to the east, above the aching white void with its stunted gray mottlings, copper-hued sierras pulsed through the crystalline flicker like distant flames. From the west and nearer, from beyond the sage-brush-coated ridge thrown up by the Trades off the Pacific, came the faint rumble of the surf on the headlands of Magdalena. It was the only sound.

The treasure chest magnetized our eyes. It was filled with the gold mintage of Mexico, hidalgos and medio hidalgos. Coins of Mexico are not worth so much today in the marts of the world, but gold is gold everywhere. That trunk was filled to overflowing with gold coins, even as Dicenta had sworn.

Hastily, fearful to look longer lest we get drunk with victory and avarice, we slammed shut the lid. It was terrible to have so much wealth in one's possession.

Again we looked about as if indeed we expected to see arise near at hand, like some wraith from the white sand, the woman Mariquita, she who was as beautiful as sin, against whom so fervently Dicenta had warned us.

I looked up into the eyes of Morley's wife. She was a little person whose commonplace appearance was hardly enhanced by the army shirt, open at the brown neck, the military cord breeches and leather puttees which she wore like a man.

Her eyes were a pale blue wash with only enough pupil perceptible to give them point. They were bent on me with a certain appraisement, a cunning calculation. In a flash, I realized then why it was I had objected so strenuously to taking a woman along on such an expedition.

It was not because of fear that a woman could not suffer the trials and privations of such a hunt as ours. The truth was we had anticipated few ordeals and, luckily enough, had met with none. It was something deeper than that, something almost instinctive. There is no one more ruthlessly greedy than a woman for her mate. I had seen it work out through years of experience. I saw it now, working and yeasting in Morley's wife in a flicker of time.

"You go back to the ship, Chet," she said to me. "Tell Skipper Jim we have found the

chest and that it's heavy with gold. It's too heavy for you and Kit to carry, I reckon; so bring back a couple of men of the crew to help you-all tote it to the beach. Kit and I shall remain here on guard. There's no telling when that Mexican woman may show up."

I nodded like a dummy and started up the depression over the sage-brush-tufted ridge, an overwhelming certitude in the back of my head that Mrs. Morley was planning some scheme whereby to grab for herself and Morley the whole treasure.

What could I do? Had it been a man, Kit Morley alone, I could have accused him openly and fought it out with him then and there. But a woman—God forfend!

As I plodded over the glistening sand dunes, the sun, east of meridian, upon my flaming back, I recapitulated all that had led up to this treasure chase.

Señor Serafin Dicenta, a young Mexican of the *primera clase*, had been arrested in San Francisco two months before on the charge that he had absconded with over one hundred thousand dollars of newly minted gold from the military coffers of Carranza. Suspicion first had been directed to him when he had attempted to deposit, to his credit in a bank, several thousand dollars in recently dated hidalgos and half hidalgos.

The dodgers of private detective agencies, bearing a stark photograph and description, had been sent broadcast through the mails. From these, after a fashion, he had been identified as the embezzling paymaster of the Constitutional army, Lieutenant Adolfo Ramerez de Valencia.

KIT MORLEY had been a newspaper reporter in San Francisco. One would think that after two years on the police beat Morley should have become soured and cynical as any patrolman. But chubby-faced and soft-natured, hardly more than a boy himself, he was an odd police reporter. He was forever finding proteges among the riffraff behind the iron grating on the fifth floor of the Hall of Justice.

It was no wonder, therefore, that he should have scraped acquaintance with the *señor teniente*, Adolfo Ramerez de Valencia, alias Serafin Dicenta. The man was of a different sort.

Not alone was he a Federal prisoner, enjoying dubious hospitality at the hands of the civic government; he was educated, a fluent speaker of English, having been graduated by a secular college of Baton Rouge, Louisiana; and, quietly but tastefully dressed, he was evidently refined, palpably a member of the highest Mexican social class.

Myself, I never met the fellow; but from what Morley told me I pictured him as that supposed rarity, a blond Mexican, slight and dapper, whose greatest ordeal in life had hitherto been to raise the blond waxed mustache on his otherwise beardless face.

While awaiting depositions from Mexico and planning to fight extradition, the man was in search of some one to secure his temporary release by standing his bond of five thousand dollars on a writ of *habeas corpus*.

He confessed to the sympathetic Morley that he was really the victim of circumstances. He had not absconded with the military funds. He was no more the missing paymaster, Valencia, than he was a lieutenant in Carranza's army. He was merely a Mexican citizen, Serafin Dicenta by name, who had been made the butt of pure hard luck.

He sought to show that his appearance, with the tin dispatch-box full of new gold coins, at the very moment of the stir over the vanishing of so much money from the Mexican mint, had unhappily combined to put him in wrong.

He had owned, he said, an immense tract of land, the Hacienda del Cazadero, in southern Chihuahua. On account of the continued instability of government, with no evidence of a strong, subduing hand in sight, he had been forced to sell the *estancia* to a wealthy Japanese merchant, who had claimed influence both with Carranza and the rebels. It was thus he had obtained the freshly minted gold which had caused suspicion to be pointed toward him.

The coins he had produced in San Francisco, he admitted, had truly borne the tiny index which showed they had been minted at the El Dorado Mine, recently opened by Carranza in Chihuahua. But, as he had said before, the Japanese *comerciante* who had purchased the *rancheria* was mysteriously well up in the graces of the president and had paid for the estate in the new mintage of the Constitutionalists.

While this might seem, however, one circumstance against his case, there was another as potently in his favor. He pointed out that the private detective agencies' dodgers stated specifically that Adolfo Ramerez de Valencia, while almost identical with him in height and weight, was of an entirely different order of pigmentation. Valencia's hair was given as black; his was blond, and, despite all the cynical aspersions of the police, it was not a peroxide blond.

Morley believed this last assertion because the Mexican's hair lacked the dead brittleness which usually afflicts each fiber of dyed hair. Dicenta's poll was silkily yellow with vitality.

From that, Morley had vaulted to an enveloping belief in the man's entire story. Dicenta said that, because he himself had been a large landholder, he had objected to the division of estates as proposed years before by Francisco Madero, and had therefore joined

hands, at the time, with the Colorados of Orozco in the disastrous revolution against the agrarian dreamer.

That was the only occasion he had suffered himself to side actively one way or the other. He had thought then with the newness of things, that the revolutions would be shortly over and he might aid, by thus taking up arms, in speeding the desideratum.

But when the years stumbled by with never a sign of relief, when indeed each year only served to produce more rebels and bandits, greater unrest, misery and bolder depredations, he had judged it high time at last to sell out all his holdings if ever he could find a purchaser. He had had the rare good fortune to conclude negotiations to this end with the Japanese merchant.

He had been mighty thankful to receive gold for his *estancia* instead of the paper currency, constantly depreciating in value. The Japanese *comerciante* had seemed a man of strange and ramifying influence and it was because of the protection given by that influence, Dicenta thought, that the Asiatic had had the temerity to buy and attempt to work the hacienda.

The regulation army trunk which he had bought while at college in Louisiana and used when on the staff of Orozco, Dicenta had filled with the purchase money, over one hundred thousand dollars in freshly minted yellow hidalgos and medio hidalgos.

He had smuggled the heavy brass-bound chest across the Durazno Range of southwestern Chihuahua and down to Topolobampo on the Gulf of California. From there he had taken ship to Lower California and, hiring mules at a fisher village, had made a portage to the Pacific shore.

Realizing the awkwardness of his situation, marooned there on the lonely western strand of Baja California and dependent upon the benevolence of some passing vessel to stop and grant him passage to San Francisco, he had feared to add to the gossip, which naturally would be excited, by carting aboard the small but suspiciously weighty army trunk.

He had filled with gold coins, therefore, a tin dispatch-box he carried, to defray the expenses of the trip and aid in the outfitting of a return expedition. Then he had cached the trunk in a saline depression inland from Magdalena Bay.

He had made a map of the treasure site, which showed the burial plot in the geometrical center of the bog and stated the exact number of steps it lay from each cardinal-point of the circling gypsum-veined sides. The map also gave the number of feet the salt sink bore, due east, from a certain easily defined white spit of sand that enclosed a bight of Magdalena Bay.

He offered Morley the map and the right to unearth the treasure, if he would raise the amount of the bond. It was understood between them, which I did not surmise until later, that he should jump that bond. He feared a drumhead court-martial, should he be returned, on the strength of the depositions, to Mexico.

Although the charge against him was untrue, himself being in no way affiliated with the army, yet his money would go to swell the military funds, should the authorities learn of its existence and he be killed. In all probability, therefore, he would be summarily shot.

MORLEY came to me, knowing I had a couple of thousand dollars in cold cash not working. Kit and I had been second louies and bunkies in the Army during the European fracas. He explained about the treasure and the map.

Although he had his old job back at a better wage, Morley claimed he was badly strapped, as he had been no sooner released from the service than he had married. So firmly did he believe in Dicenta, however, that to show his faith he would raise two thousand dollars toward the bond on the security of his life insurance policy.

He gave me to understand that, should I put up the remaining three thousand, we were to recover the treasure, pay out of it what might be needed to retain attorneys and otherwise defend Dicenta, and then pocket the remainder on a fifty-fifty basis. It was the mere question, according to Morley, of a two weeks' trip to gain over forty thousand dollars apiece and in the clear.

Just as once before in my life I had dropped money down a hole in the ground that was said to be a gold mine, so now, fired by Morley's apparent faith, I took the chance. I was ignorant of the Mexican's prearranged plan to jump the bond, until after it had been done and widely published. Then the whole scheme looked, on a sudden, dubious and sad; my money seemed gone as utterly as in the affair of the gold mine.

A myriad misgivings fluttered my brain to undermine insidiously the story of Dicenta. Why should any sane person risk burying a hundred thousand dollars in the sand of Magdalena? No fear of suspicion would justify a man to take such a chance, unless there was strong and compelling ground for suspicion.

No; Dicenta's story was all wrong, the money never the result of the sale of any hacienda. One thing was certain. Never had the gold, however obtained, been suffered to lie in the burning strand of Lower California.

Kit Morley, I judged, had arranged with Dicenta that he should jump his bond. Why? What other irons did friend Morley have heating in the fire? Why had Dicenta so quickly made his getaway? It struck me as odd that I never had met the Mexican. Was that also prearranged? Was Dicenta, after all, the missing

paymaster, Valencia, his hair dyed blond, the misappropriated gold lying hidden and close at hand within the very limits of San Francisco?

That Morley was all in a twitter now to head south seemed only a ruse to me to shunt my suspicions from him and effectively cover up his double dealings.

But I was in so deeply I could not draw back; I must gamble to the end. The ethics of recovering embezzled gold bothered my conscience not a whit, I'll tell you. I was fretted by doubts and misgivings to determine, once and for all, whether there ever had been any trasure buried in the sand of Magdalena.

I had been a classmate of Jim Hathaway at Stanford before the European War put a peremptory stop to our academic activities and chuted me into the Army and Jim into the Navy. Hathaway had entered the first line of defense as a gob and, always the student, had returned, after the war, as a gold-chevroned ensign. Having become enthralled by things nautical, Jim had purchased, as a pleasure craft, a tiny submarine-chaser that had stove in her nose in a collision with the mother-ship. The government could find, in peace times, little use for the packet and faced only unproductive expense in repairing the damage.

Therefore the wireless equipment was dismantled and the Colt automatics, six-inch and "Y" guns dismounted; and hull and engines were knocked down to Jim, at public auction, for a song, for almost the shamefully low price of the steel in bulkheads, strakes and longitudinals. Jim had made the necessary repairs himself in his own dock off Alameda in San Francisco Bay.

The *Seventy-three* was a dainty, one-hundred-ten-foot, triple-screw motor ship. As she did not attempt to plow through or buffet a sea, but rode atop the waves like a cork, she could weather almost any degree of storm. By counting in Hathaway as a third partner, we had been thus enabled to charter the *Seventy-three* for the expedition. Jim furnished the expensive gasoline to drive the engines and paid the wages of the rather large crew of eight. By throwing some more good money after bad, I had outfitted the larder for a month's cruise.

Morley brought his wife aboard the evening before we sailed. It was an unexpected and disturbing surprize. But down in the cabin that night, after Mrs. Morley had turned in, he explained that he had been squeamish about leaving her where she knew no one.

She was from some little town near Louisville, he said, where he had trained for officership in the army ere I met him at the great depot of Tours, overseas. He had been married only three months. We let it pass, reserving comment, although I knew Jim Hathaway resented as much as I this feminine intrusion into our man's expedition.

Until we put the Farralones in our wake and green water no longer broke over the bow, Mrs. Morley kept to her bunk in the glory-hole aft. The sea smoothed out into long oily swells and then she appeared on deck in a garb that, for military mannishness, rivaled that of her husband or mine—slouch campaign hat, brown shirt, corded riding breeches, cowhide field shoes and polished leather puttees.

Come of our effects to counteract, with spread legs and swaying trunks, the lift and toss of the craft, forever the toy of playful seas, it had quickly struck both Kit and me how awkward it was to wear puttees. They stiffened and cramped like splints, and hopelessly hindered one from ever gaining his sea-legs—that unconscious poise to every rise and roll. Morley and I discarded the leggings absolutely, going round with the uppers of woolens socks covering our shanks between cowhide boots and trousers, buttoned below the knee.

But persistently Mrs. Morley wore her puttees. Even the withering heat of the desert about Magdalena failed to induce her to take them off. It was almost inexplicable, the dislike I took for her; sometimes I felt like a cad, but perhaps after all, the constant and freakish wearing of the leathers was good cause.

Certainly, she was no Kentucky beauty. She struck me uncomfortably as being somehow masculine. I thought of her as a woman who did not know how to drape garments upon herself in becoming feminine fashion and therefore delighted in affecting pseudo-male attire. For instance, she seemed unable to dress her dark hair with any female knack, or even a degree of taste. She wore it in big enveloping rolls over the ears, as if it were a marcelled wig.

WE RAN on our three engines. We were in haste to reach Magdalena lest Dicenta, free now, should precede us to the treasure, if indeed there was any such treasure. But with all our haste we had plenty of time to act out the proverb and repent at leisure.

We were a sorry and disgruntled crew, I'll tell you, save only Skipper Jim who, rejoicing over the opportunity of trying out the former subchaser on a long run, was forever going about, sextant in hand, taking sights morning, noon and in the afternoon, and even at night, watching the transit of the stars.

Jim's enthusiasm in navigating the *Seventy-three*, his occult talk of dead reckoning, meridian altitudes and constants, Summer lines, latitude by Polaris, and so forth, communicated to me an interest in the mystery of it all. I was none too friendly with Morley on account of the skipping of Dicenta, which I surmised had been prearranged, and now, topping that, was this unannounced and undesired appearance of his wife.

Once the sky-line of the Coast Range faded with distance, time hung heavy on my hands and I thought to study navigation, and thus fill in the fretful vacuity admirably.

I pulled down the books in Jim's cabin—Bowditch, Aquino's "Altitude and Azimuth Tables," "Elements of Trigonometry," the "Hydrographic Office Edition of Azimuths of the Sun," books on Nautical Astronomy, Sumner's "Line of Position" and the Marcq Saint Hilaire Method. They proved all Greek to me, confusing and stupefying. Even Jim's scribbling on the fly-sheets looked like the excited tracings of some ink-dripping book-mite. But on the strength of it and, perhaps, to encourage me, Hathaway appointed me his assistant—first mate of the *Seventy-three.*

At that, I did get interested in the preface to the study of Nautical Astronomy, a readable resumé of the science from the age-dusted days when it was a black art called astrology. But even while my interest was intrigued by the perusal and my imagination fired, I was aware, through it all, of an irritant question constantly bothering me. Why in the world, I thought, had not Dicenta taken the small army trunk with him instead of leaving it, through fear, behind in the sand of Magdalena.

Finally I sought out Morley and put the question to him flatly. He explained most fully in an attempt to ingratiate himself once more into my favor. Like most Mexican officers, Dicenta, at the time he had served with Orozco, had had as a camp-follower, a woman named Mariquita. Through the intervening years he had been unable to get rid of her.

She was a veritable virago, according to what Dicenta had said; an Amazon, part Spanish, part German and somewhere far back, part Indian. Beautiful as sin, Dicenta had lavishly described her, with the face of a Madonna, the form of a voluptuous Greek statue, a skin not brown but white as translucent alabaster, and the black soul of a Lucretia Borgia.

She had fled with Dicenta and the trunk of money from Topolobampo in Sinaloa, across the Gulf of California, to that desolate spit of land known as Baja California. There, at the fisher village, they had obtained mules and crossed the sierras and burning llanos to the Pacific side. They had purposed hailing a passing ship and being transported, together with their weighty chest, to the States.

But something more than any dread of exciting undue suspicion had caused Dicenta to cache the brass-bound trunk in the sand. He did not want to take the Amazon with him and so, as a ruse, he had buried the gold and cajoled her into staying behind on guard.

He had taken the map of the treasure-site and the tin dispatch-box filled with coin, promising Mariquita he would charter a ship, once he reached Alta California, and return for her and the money. But he had confessed to Morley that he desired only to be rid of her. He had seemed, according to Morley, greatly to fear the woman.

It all sounded very heartless and cruel. The chances were that Dicenta had hoped that the terrors of the desert, heat and shriveling thirst, would drive the girl away, if not indeed to her death. Surely he would not dare return for a while.

We purposed in that while to recover the gold. Thus far we had seen naught of the woman.

CHAPTER II

THROUGH THE BINOCULARS

THE sand of the dunes glistened like glass under the sun and, underfoot, scorched hot as molten glass. I sought those great scars athwart the desert—the arroyos, whose sandy floors and walls were dotted with low thorny mesquite and Spanish bayonet. Sometimes, here, there were patches of greasewood and ashy hued soap-weed, and dun groves of cacti of bewildering form—barrel-shaped cacti, columnar cacti fully sixty feet high, armless cacti and cacti with so many arms they were like the pipes of an organ.

Once, from beneath a gray tapestry of moss bearding such a grove, a bevy of brown-coated quail whirred up in a hot flurry. I remembered then that, when first we had trekked across the desert in search of the salt-sink with its pink gypsum veins, Jim Hathaway had pointed out the gray moss as the orchilla lichen from which veget ble dye of many properties was obtained. He had said that a score of years prior the gathering of orchilla here had been the exclusive and disastrous industry of a large American syndicate.

I did not wonder they had failed. I was not two miles from the beach, yet all about was loneliness, an aching desolate loneliness. I crossed a pedregal, or lava field, where the stones, chuted down in the midst of the white crucible, seemed to vibrate under the merciless flogging of the sun. I disturbed only a blunt-tailed green snake.

The day before we had uncovered a water-hole in the trough of two sand dunes not far remote from the beach. We had known there was water in the vicinity, as the mesquite shot up fully a score of feet. When mesquite attains the height of a tree, water is usually not far below the surface. By a persistency of digging, we had finally unearthed the precious fluid.

I paused for a long drink and then trudged on up the seaward dune. Stumbling through the grayish sage-brush atop, I could look down

upon the Bay of Magdalena. It was like a monster blue stone in a fantastic white setting of platinum. There was no flutter of wind, not a ripple. It was like a sheet of metallic blue under a glass case. Everything was quiescent, immobile, torpid with heat.

Our trim little motor ship under her lone stark pole was like some painted toy craft. She was anchored in the lee of a shaft of beach that protruded like a white flaw out into the azurite blue. The sun, high in his meridian, cast no shade; yet something like a shadow of the ship lay, on the mirror water, a curve of deeper blue. It was the dark green-blue of seaweed—the wrack of seashores, the fecund growth of warm fertile waters—barnacling the sides of the *Seventy-three* and spreading out in a viscous mat. Almost it could be fancied that, from his beard of kelp, the bay received its rich pigment.

Aboard the *Seventy-three* the silken ensign drooped despairingly from the flagstaff aft. On the bridge above the pilot-house, a lookout stalked back and forth, the one thing alert. He was to warn of the approach of any ship. Hourly we expected the coming of Dicenta.

Miles across the unfurrowed blue, the long barren strip of Santa Margarita Island lifted, through the flicker of heat, like a gigantic loaf of bread. Rugged volcanic headlands jutted down from the north and sharpened into surf-fringed Punta Entrada at the entrance to the bay.

All about the landlocked cerulean sheet were protruding fingers of sand, enclosing lagoons, bordered by low shrubs and banked by endless dazzling waves of sand. Small wonder Magdalena had once been the haven of buccaneers and smugglers. There was here a majesty of desolation.

Coming down the beach that was as white as a girl's knees, I hailed the *Seventy-three*. A small dingey put off from the side, rowed by Boatswain Kennally who had been ship-mates with Jim Hathaway in the service. We broke through the clinging mess of seaweed. I could clamber, thereupon, from the stern-sheets of the dingey up on the deck-rail of the *Seventy-three*, as she had only about five feet of free-board above the water. The topmost wire-rope of the life-rail was uncoupled and I stepped over on deck and up into the pilot-house. It was down by a hatchway, then, from the pilot-house into the cabin.

Everything was built on a miniature scale. The cabin, flanked by two fore-and-aft bunks, was low ceiled and had only about ten feet of floor space athwartship. There was a deck-clock fastened on one bulkhead, the hands of which we had doped up with phosphorescent paint so that we could note the time in the dark without need to switch on the lights and chance awakening each other.

Two green portières draped the lockers containing our clothing. A shelf of nautical books, a rosewood case enclosing the chronometer, another holding the sextant, a phonograph and a couple of chairs practically completed the furnishings.

Jim Hathaway was below at a desk, the leaf of which dropped out from the transverse bulkhead. His white-topped, gold-braided navy cap was far back on his scanty blond hair and, in deference to the noontide heat, he had doffed his tight, gold-striped, blue coat and was in his shirt sleeves. With the awkwardness of an Abraham Lincoln, his lanky legs were telescoped under the dropped desk-leaf and he was scanning, through monstrous horn-rimmed glasses, a small orange-colored pamphlet.

Since my dumb failure to solve the mysteries of navigation, Jim was in the habit nowadays of taking on fine, but good-natured airs over his own newly acquired and none too certain knowledge. I really was surprized to find him below. He was more likely to be anywhere else—flat on his back on the bridge shooting the sun, or out on the bowsprit heaving the armed lead to determine the depth of water and nature of the bottom.

"Ah, navigator," I greeted banteringly.

"Hello, Chet," he returned, lowering the pamphlet to squint up at me, one long finger still marking the place. "I heard you come aboard like a ton of bricks. But what brought you back so soon? You're just in time for lunch."

I dropped off the ladder upon the cabin deck.

"We've found it, Jim."

"Good! That's fine!"

He unwound his legs and got afoot and as upright as the low ceiling would allow.

"So it really was there? I had a hunch it would be when we found that salt-sink, yesterday, just as described. Why, this is great, Chet! Once we get that chest aboard, there'll be nothing holding us in this God-forsaken spot.

"I had the crew refill the water-breakers this A.M. from the supply we dug up among those mesquites. They've knocked off now for chow, but I was just looking up the tide tables to learn when we might expect the ebb. I figured on running the nose of the *Seventy-three* in on the beach, cleaning off her befouled bottom when the water's low, and thus be all shipshape for the return passage."

"Count me in on that job, Jim," I said, as I made to close the hatch over the ladder. "I've heard of sharks in these waters, but it's me to get in right up to my neck, if it'll only give me some relief from this heat——"

"What the ——!" from Hathaway. "Talking of heat and closing the scuttle at the same time! Has it got your head, Chet boy? What's the idea?"

I banged shut the hatch.

"Merely, Jim Hathaway," I said, turning round, "that I don't want any one, who happens to enter the pilot-house, to hear what I'm going to say." And thereupon I explained what was perturbing me. "Morley and his wife are going to do us, Jim," I ended. "Especially the wife. How I can't tell, but she has some scheme up her sleeve."

"What!" Jim voiced his scorn. "That drab little trick trying to get to windward of us! Why, I can hardly believe it, Chet, for all my cordial dislike of her. But after chow I'll detail a coupla men to carry the chest and come along myself armed, to make sure."

He reached over and took down the navy .38, with its black cartridge belt, which was always hanging over his bunk.

"What are you carting, Chet?" he asked.

I showed him the square butt of the automatic protruding from my hip pocket.

"Well," he added significantly, "Mrs. Morley's a snappy little devil for her draft, but I don't think she's foolhardy enough to run foul of us."

As we went through the pilot-house, Skipper Jim strapped over his coatless shoulders a case of binoculars. We made aft to the galley. As we grabbed a snack of lunch, we perfected arrangements. It was decided to postpone for the day the barbering of the ship's bottom.

We left a man of the deck force on watch on the bridge and another to relieve him, or act as messenger to us, should a ship heave in sight. The cook and his assistant also remained on board to prepare dinner. Taking the three men, who constituted the black gang, and Bosun Keneally, who alone remained of the deck force, we started over the burning dunes. It was then one o'clock.

WE PAUSED for a drink at the waterhole among the mesquites. Hathaway having drunk, retraced his steps up the seaward dune for a final sweep of the binoculars over the bay and ocean behind. I joined him, after a minute.

"Nothing in sight, Chet, not even a feather of smoke."

Jim swung the glasses round, as he spoke, until he was looking over the white nakedness of sand and sage. All at once the binoculars stopped semicircling, steadied, and Jim's fingers quickly focused the lenses.

"What have you picked up, Jim boy? You can't possibly see Morley and his wife from here, as they're down in that sink of salt."

"It's she!" said Jim.

"Who? The Mex woman—Mariquita!"

He nodded, passed me the glasses and pointed almost directly ahead.

I swung the binoculars about until I picked up an opaqueness on the lense that was neither an odd-formed cactus nor dusty shrub. Focusing the glass to the power of my eyes, I made out that it was a woman, standing atop a white pillar of dune, one hand on the mane of a handsome black horse whose forehead blazed with a white star and whose saddle and bridle flashed in the sun as with silver trappings.

I should judge she was more than two miles away; yet, standing sharp-edged against the glistening void of sand in an atmosphere that was clear as crystal, she could be made out, through the binoculars, in fair fashion.

She was a tall woman, almost as tall as myself, I should say, and statuesquely proportioned. She was garbed in riding-trousers, a short khaki jacket with leather fringings, and a broad sombrero. Her left hand was shading her eyes, beneath the wide brim of sombrero, as if she were striving arduously to peer through the heat glare toward us.

Hathaway, waxing impatient at my seemingly long survey, reached for the glasses. But I held fast. I saw the woman turn sharply, leap athletically into the saddle, swing the horse about on its hind legs and dart, in a hot swirl of sand, up and over the top of the dune. She reappeared, the next breath, a ball of dust rolling up the white acclivities. She was headed to all appearances for the copper-hued mountains flaming against the sky.

I handed the binoculars back to Hathaway.

"It's Mariquita at last, Jim," I said. "She's gone back into the hills. But I'll wager she saw you and me, or else Morley and his wife below there in the salt-sink."

"She wasn't so far from the salt-sink," returned Skipper Jim. "I'm afraid she saw Kit. We're too distant for the naked eye and, besides, these tall mesquites conceal us a bit."

We hastily rejoined the men at the waterhole below and started off again at a sweating pace, toward where, in the haloid depression behind the wind-blown ridge, Morley and his wife had been left on guard over the army trunk. Arrived there, over an hour later, we found everything as it had been, with the exception that the hole in the ground from whence we had lifted the chest had been refilled with sand and salt crystals.

That Morley and his wife should lend themselves, under that broiling sun, to this needless work, struck my suspicious mind as perversely wrong, boding no good. I noticed a gleam in the mineral dust, not white like that of a saline diamond, but yellow and glinting as from a stray gold coin. Perhaps Hathaway saw it also.

"Let's look in the trunk, Kit," he requested as we crunched down the slope.

Almost automatically Morley bent over the lock, then hesitated. His eyes fluttered helplessly to his wife.

"Come heah, Jim," she said, moving quickly aside. "And you too, Chet and Kit."

She lowered her voice as we clustered about her.

"We cain't allow the crew to see what's in that trunk, Jim," she began boldly. "They are eight all told to our foah and they might try mutiny or wu'se, if they learn we have so much loose wealth aboard. Chet will tell you, I reckon, Jim, that he saw the chest filled with Mexican gold coins. Isn't that so, Chet Overman?" she shot almost defiantly at me.

I nodded dumbly. I wanted to say I wasn't sure it was so filled with gold coins now; but I couldn't speak my thoughts with that woman's pale eyes upon me.

"And here's a fistful of them," added Kit, drawing a hand from his trousers pocket, a hand that was crowded with yellow pieces.

His wife looked at him sharply, a little furrow of vexation and disquietude appearing between her negative eyes. I knew then, for a surety, that the gleam I had noted in the sand near the trunk had been indeed that of a stray coin.

Morley and his wife had been delving into the treasure and, no doubt, every pocket on their persons was heavily laden with coins. No doubt, also, they had buried the rest of the gold in the refilled plot. That army trunk so formidable with glinting brass bands was only a shell now, I felt sure; a husk, robbed of its golden fruitage and stuffed with saline sand.

"Well," said Jim, as we made back toward the men, "we saw her, that Mex woman."

"Who? Mariquita?" ejaculated Morley and his wife in one voice, halting dead and looking from one to the other of us.

I nodded vehemently and, no longer cowlike with muteness, found an unholy delight in reciting the details. Mrs. Morley, I could see, had gone livid to the throat.

"Yes, Mariquita," I said. "She was standing up on a sand dune about a furlong beyond here. She must have spotted you two, down in this salt bog. We watched her through the binoculars for about a minute, and she was peering this way through the sun glare with one hand shading her eyes. All at once she swung up on her horse and——"

"Horse?" chorused Morley and his wife in added consternation.

Mrs. Morley gulped dryly.

"Why, Kit," she exclaimed, "I thought Dicenta done told you they only had burros!"

Morley looked at her with eyes bovine and blank as if deadened by a blow. He seemed unable to speak.

"Well, this was no long-eared mule," I said maliciously. "It was a fine looking black horse with a white star on its forehead and silver ornaments on saddle and bridle."

Twin spots of red flamed in the lead cheeks of Mrs. Morley.

"It's an Indian horse, I reckon," she jerked out. "Come to think of it, Dicenta said something, to Kit heah, about Guiacura Indians back in the sierras and the pow'ful horses and cattle they bred. Don't you remember, Kit?"

"Yes, I—I think so. He told me," Morley went on, getting a grip upon his stupefaction, "Dicenta told me he tried to buy a horse or two from the Guiacuras, as the mules were too slow."

"Well, this means but one thing," concluded Mrs. Morley through pursed lips. "That woman is living back in the hills with those red Indians. She probably broke that horse to her own use, if we can judge of her by all we've heard."

Jim Hathaway interposed then to say almost his first word in the conversation. There was a steely glitter to the eyes behind the horn rims, and I felt certain what he had to say would show cogently why he so easily had capitulated in the matter of opening the chest.

"It means one thing more, Mrs. Morley," he said. "It means Mariquita has gone back to summon those Indians to aid her recapture the treasure!"

CHAPTER III

YELLOW MEN AND WOMEN

THAT army trunk, despite its short length, weighed easily several hundred pounds. We were in fearful haste to get it aboard ship and make ready for sea, but we were forced to pause often to give the men breath and rest. Each time Captain Jim would take the binoculars from the leather case, glue them to his eyes, and sweep the corrugated dazzling prospect behind. At the last time, when we paused by the water-hole among the mesquite, he darted swiftly ahead up the seaward bank to look down up on Magdalena Bay and see that all was well with the *Seventy-three*.

I followed close at his heels. When I came up behind him through the sage-brush atop, he still fidgeting with the binoculars which, with the sweat from his hands, had become stuck in the leather case. He was swearing softly and looking out across the bay, his eyes squinted behind the horn-rimmed spectacles.

"Do you see anything white out there, Chet, near the point?" he asked sharply.

His eyes were more accustomed than mine to picking up objects at sea. I could raise nothing, not even the sharp ruggedness of Punta Entrada. I was gazing full into the smoky glare of the descending sun. It was about five-thirty o'clock.

"No use getting excited, Jim, old boy," I counseled him. "Perhaps it's only the surf breaking white about the Point, or a shoal of sporting porpoises."

He had the binoculars, all at once, to his eyes.

"It's the tops'ls of a ship!" he exclaimed. "Now I've got it. It's a two-masted schooner, full rigged. There's a flock of big-hatted men crowding the foredeck like a bunch of toadstools."

I swore in turn.

"It's Dicenta," I said.

Captain Jim was off down the sandy hummocks for the white spit of beach, his long legs lurching out swiftly but awkwardly, the binoculars still in hand and the leather case flying behind.

"I'll break out a hoist and find out who they are—what's their business," he shouted back. "Get that trunk aboard before they come up, if you possibly can."

I waved the rest of the party, below at the water-hole, to hurry and join me. The while they trudged toilsomely up with their heavy burden, I glanced back over the drear landscape for glimpse of Mariquita and her pursuing Indians. There was naught in sight save billows of sand and shrub, and dots of fantastic cacti.

The schooner broke through the smoke glare into wavering outline. Aboard the *Seventy-three* under the shifted ensign of the United States, three colorful flags were trailing dead in the stirless air from the lone mast.

"That's a three-flag alphabetical hoist in the International Flag Code," explained Bosun Keneally as he came to a panting halt beside me. "Captain Hathaway is asking what ship that is." He squinted out to sea. "—— that glare! I can make out all the sails of that schooner, but I'm darned if I can see any flags."

We were half-way down to the beach when Keneally suddenly shouted:

"There they go now—on the gaff of the fores'l. A four-flag hoist with a square flag atop. It's the name of a merchantman. Gee, I wish I had the code book; I could read it fine! What's that on the forepeak? The blazing sun of Japan. It's a Jap schooner!"

The dingey was beached in the sand to take aboard the treasure chest and as many of us as could crowd between the gunwales without risking swamping. On board the *Seventy-three* the national ensign had been shifted once more to the flagstaff aft, and code flags were being shot up to the masthead and quickly doused. Jim Hathaway was doing the flag-raising with the aid of the sailor on watch, an open code book in one hand. He greeted us with beaming countenance.

"It's not Dicenta's ship at all," he cried as we broke through the seaweed and scraped the paint of the side. "I've got all the dope. That's the Japanese schooner *Taisei Maru*, Captain T. Yasuhara commanding. He has aboard one hundred or so Japanese men and women consigned, like so many cattle, to the army of Pancho Villa as sappers and cooks. They are forty days out from Honolulu. I told him we were abalone fishers."

THE schooner tacked slowly up the bay in order to take advantage of any air that stirred through the narrow entrance. She moved to ripples, the white spread of canvas faintly bellying. Half a cable's length from us she let go her mud-hooks with a great splash. We saw lithe, pigmy yellow men, garbed only in breech-clouts and large straw sun-hats, running up and down the ratlines, belaying and clewing down the sheets and swinging out on the yards of the square topsails like monkeys. A commingled odor of punk and sulfur assailed our nostrils.

"That ship must be filthy," surmised Skipper Jim. "Smell the sulfur and punk they've been burning in order to fumigate? I wonder where they stowed all those yellow people for the last forty days."

The entire lee rail of the schooner was lined with Japanese in flowing garish kimonos, the robes of the men shorter than those of the women and the bright colors of all denoting that they came of a low caste. The hair of the women, coarse and heavy with virility, piled high on their heads, shone in the waning sunlight with the polish of lacquer, and there was a flash here and there of large shell combs.

The men wore sun-hats like inverted bowls. Despite their Cossack-like skirts, there was nothing effeminate about those Japanese. Their yellow necks were thick, their arms escaped from the wide sleeves like dun saplings. They were short of stature, broad of girth. In the colorful sash about the hips more than one had stuck a vicious-looking knife.

A jabber of queer vocables rippled through the overheated air. The breech-clouted seamen were clearing a space in the swarm amidship. A dory was lifted and swung overside from a nest of such boats, on the deck, one inside the other; a Jacob's ladder was rigged from the rail, and two coiling-muscled sailors went, hand under hand, down, a line into the dory and stood by the oars. They seemed waiting for some one.

With inordinate curiosity and not a little fear, we watched what was to us an outlandish pantomime. Was the master of the schooner about to pay his respects to us? Were we to be involved in some Oriental intrigue? Did that precious pack on deck think of boarding us? Perhaps they had seen us conveying out to the *Seventy-three* that suspiciously heavy trunk. For all the talk of the flags, they could prove to be pirates as easily as we had assumed the role of abalone fishers.

The jabber gurgled up again and a passageway gave in the crowd. There was a broad gangway cleared from the Jacob's ladder to the cabin amidships, superimposed above the deck between the fore and main mast. The door of the cabin opened and a short, stocky Japanese in trousers and white shirt appeared. On his

head was the visored, white-topped cap of a ship's officer the world over. He was undoubtedly the captain. He bore in folds over his right arm the blazing flag of Japan.

He came over the bulwark and down the ladder into the dory. He spread the sun-flag like a drapery in the stern-sheets. Then nimbly he went up again and into the cabin.

A bell rang somewhere, the ship's bell. But it did not strike to denote the hour. It was after six o'clock. That bell sounded once.

The door of the cabin opened. Across the cleared sweep of deck and plainly in our sight came a tall Japanese, with the twin black tufts of Chinese mustaches sprouting over the corners of his mouth and hanging down like tails. He moved with a slow stateliness between the yellow coolies huddled back to either side.

He was unusually tall for a Japanese and, as if to add to his stature, there was on his head a high-crowned, black, wide-brimmed hat like the national head-gear of Korea. He wore a long robe of some rich dark blue, covered with embroidery representing mice—black mice, dun mice, gray mice and golden. There was a short curved sword in the gold-woven cord about his middle. It was palpable that he was a person of some importance. The somberness of his robe showed rank.

He seated himself in the flag-draped stern-sheets of the dory and, crossing his arms before him, the long yellow fingers buried in the spacious sleeves, he spoke an alien word. The yellow naked seamen bent over the oars. We were almost convinced that the Oriental potentate meant to come aboard us, but instead the dory headed straight for the tip of the white point of beach. We could hear the grate as the keel grounded in the sand.

The two sailors, their backs glistening with sweat like polished cedar, got out and stood barefoot in the hot sand on either side the bow, their heads bent in profound salaam. The Mouse-Man, as we had come to call the tall Japanese, got afoot, gathered up the sun-flag and, carefully folding it into a small compass, stuck it into some recess of the voluminous blue robe.

He lifted the robe daintily as he stepped over the thwarts and put sandaled foot ashore. He strode a few paces up the beach and then, while the pigmy seamen rowed lustily back to the schooner, stood with folded arms, fingers buried within the wide sleeves, facing inland—a lone, gloomily colorful figure on the white sand—waiting it seemed, but never once looking round.

A COMMOTION was stirring along the deck of the schooner. Four other dories were broken out of the nest and launched overside. The uncouth vocables clipped through the air with a staccato sharpness that denoted, unmistakably, commands.

The scantily clad little sailors were bustling the swarm overside into the dories. But not into the dory which had conveyed the Mouse-Man to the shore. That particular small boat was lifted out of the blue water and swung inboard. It was as if, now that the Mouse-Man had used it, it would be a desecration and a pollution for any of the rabble to set foot therein.

The boldest among the yellow men swung little weighty bags of rattan-weave upon their shoulders, leaped up on the bulwark, and dropped recklessly, feet first, down into the mosquito fleet. One slant-eyed fellow missed his footing and went overside to the accompaniment of guttural exclamations from the men and many treble giggles from the women. He was gathered in, drenched and jabbering, at the end of a boat hook.

All seemed anxious enough to leave the malodorous schooner. As some of the heavy-haired women clambered down the lines, they showed often, beneath a caught kimono, a smooth glossy leg. Continually they yelped and giggled as if for our especial benefit.

I noticed, then, something about the women I had not noticed before. The younger girls had little silk purses, straight tiny-bowled pipes and tobacco pouches attached to the sash or flat square *obi* behind their backs. Behind the backs of most of the older women, strapped in the *obi*, were almond-eyed black-haired urchins.

Sight of the children, so startlingly reminiscent of Indian papooses, further aided to reassure us. It looked as if the flags had really spoke truth and the party were indeed headed for the mainland of Mexico. We watched the small boats cleave to the white beach, discharge the human freight and then return to the side of the schooner for more.

As the yellow folk crowded up on the spit of sand, the tall Japanese, who first had landed, walked on a way, as if to put some qualifying distance between himself and the rabble. The coolies squatted on their hams and waited with Oriental passivity for the final boat-load.

It was a barbaric picture. I could hardly believe that only a thousand miles away from this glassy blue bay and the motley crew upon the white sand San Francisco thrummed with street cars, mufti-clad men, newspapers, automobiles and all the turbulent business of civilization.

One of the younger girls, tiring of waiting and thinking, no doubt, to take advantage of the water after the inconveniences of the long, cramped journey across the sea, came down to the edge of the sand-spit with those queer little toed-in steps of the Japanese woman. She kicked off her fiber sandals and the short white socks with the special hood for the great toe, and dabbled her tiny yellow feet in the

water. I could see the sunlight gleaming in her eyes and on the smooth amber turn of her neck and from that, and her many little trilly giggles, I knew she was looking up toward us and enjoying hugely the shock she felt her actions must be giving us.

She made a strikingly pretty picture standing there, her tiny feet in the water, her kimono held up in two hands that were plump and soft and absurdly small as a babe's. Her round chubby face was tilted back as if with the weight of the glistening high chignon of hair and she looked like some little fluffy kitten.

In all that array of wondrous shades of kimonos, her robe was a delicacy of silk. Rose colored it was, the milky rose of fine porcelain, deepening here to the tender hue of the lotus cup, shading off there to the hint of pale tulips. Over all was scattered a blue shower of wisteria blossoms.

She turned round and, with those funny quick toed-in steps, ran up the beach to dry, with the hot friction, her feet. I noticed, thereupon, that she carried in the *obi* at her back, not a tiny-bowled long stemmed pipe, but a stringed musical instrument something like a ukulele. It was a Japanese *samisen*, the little box of a base visible on one side, the thin neck with the ivory pegs of the four strings, protruding beyond the opposite edge of the square sash.

At last all the people had been set ashore, fully a hundred yellow men and women, exclusive of the *obi*-borne children. The tall Japanese in the Korean skyscraper and blue mouse-embroidered robe swung round, thereat, with a glinting of the sun on sword and golden girdle. He grunted an uncouth word and, as if in answer, the whole garish mob rose up and started along the prong of sand after him like a straggling Oriental parade.

Skipper Jim put overside in the dingey, thereupon, wearing his white-topped gold-braided cap and the single-breasted blue coat with the slim gold stripe about the sleeves and tiny silver anchors on the collar. It was the old regulation naval officer's uniform which, since the European War, has been relegated and made obsolescent.

Evidently Jim was going to pay his respects to the master of the schooner. But really he was set on finding out more about the Mouse-Man and his outlandish party. Also, we were mighty anxious to determine when the schooner intended to up anchor and away. A night in the same berth as that mystery ship was something we dreaded as much as a night in the sand. Undoubtedly there were red savages snaking across that sand toward us; there might easily prove to be savages of an Oriental species lurking aboard that schooner. You know what I mean.

Now that we had the little weighty army chest aboard and our mission apparently accomplished, Morley and his wife were for putting out forthwith. But Jim and I were in no such haste; we desired a respite in which we might secretly make sure what was weighing that army trunk. Jim had pointed out to Kit and Mrs. Morley, therefore, that lying a little off the beach, as we were, there was small chance of a surprize attack.

Anyway, he had added, it was better to risk Mariquita and her Indians than chance a slow journey home with the possibility of an engine breakdown. There was fully a ton of seaweed and marine mess clinging to our planks. By remaining over till the next morning, we might hastily clean off, at low tide, the befouled bottom of the *Seventy-three* and be consequently assured of a speedy passage and a perceptible saving of gas.

Forward on the forecastle head I awaited Hathaway's return, leaning idly against the jack-staff. Behind me, the deck force of the crew, under command of Boatswain Keneally, were busy emptying one of the drums of gasoline into the tank which fed from forward directly to the engines. Ashore, the long colorful line of Japanese had straggled over the top of the nearest ridge of dunes and dipped out of sight; but still gazing out toward the corrugated sand floor was Morley's wife, her elbows on the lee rail amidship, her chin cupped in her hands as with pensive thoughtfulness. Perhaps she was wondering what sort of reception those Japanese would meet at the hands of Mariquita and her oncoming Indians.

CHAPTER IV

NIDZOUMI SAN

DINNER aboard the *Seventy-three* started off that night in an awkward silence. I had tired of waiting for Jim and had sat down to the table with Morley and his wife opposite me. When Hathaway finally appeared, I wanted to ask him what he had learned; but deemed it wiser, in that subtly hostile atmosphere, to allow him to speak first. However he merely remarked that as he was far behind us, he would pass up soup and salad in order to join us on the abalone steak.

That displeased me, but intensely flattered Jim Clee, our rufous-faced, sparkling and tiny-eyed Celtic cook. Abalone steak was his *chef-d'œuvre*. Since we had entered Magdalena Bay he had been promising us the rare treat. Early that morning he had wandered along the shore, dislodging the huge shell-fish from the rocks in the outer lagoons; all afternoon he had been tremendously busy, pounding, seasoning and frying the mollusca.

I spoke a well-merited word of praise that was cordially echoed round the table. Then—I couldn't help it—I fell into a disgruntled

silence again. Finally the stillness, broken only by the occasional sound of a fork tingling or the scrape of a knife, got me.

"Oh, come, Jim," I burst out. "Loosen up. What did you hear aboard the schooner? How long is she going to lie here? Overnight?"

I had put down knife and fork and was looking squarely at the startled Hathaway; but I could sense the eager lift of head on the part of Morley and his wife. Jim bolted the bite of steak.

"Why," he stammered, "why yes; the schooner's going to lie in this anchorage overnight. She's got to fill her water-casks, too. They've been rationing out water for the last week and yesterday evening went altogether dry. You see, they should have made the run from Honolulu in about thirty days, but they met with several calms and a strong sou'wester that blew them off their course. Captain Yasuhara wanted to know if there was a spring or creek of some kind round here. I told him of our water-hole.

"I had a long confab with the captain," Jim went on. "He speaks English surprizingly well; I've got a hunch he was educated in the States. He told me he had gathered that motley bunch on the beach from among the Japanese of Hawaii who were tired of working for paltry sums on the sugar plantations and in the pineapple canneries.

"You'd be thunderstruck, he said, to learn how those Japanese immigrants long to get to the State of California. They have all heard about George Shima, the Nipponese potato king of the San Joaquin, and various other wealthy Japanese of California and that State has become to them, indeed, some El Dorado, some distant Land of Gold. But they have wearied of waiting for the immigration bars to be lifted so that they might leave Hawaii for the States. I really believe that Captain Yasuhara enticed them aboard by speaking of Lower California as if it were part and parcel of the State of California."

"You mean, Jim," I said, "that these Japs could live in Hawaii, yet could not come on to Alta, California? I can't understand that. Hawaii and California are both part of the United States. It's like saying a man can't travel around his own country."

Jim made as if to speak, but Kit Morley interposed from across the table:

"I think I can explain that, Chet. You know, I once lived in Hawaii. I was on the staff of the *Subscriber* at the time, the only morning paper printed in English in Honolulu. I lived out in Nuuanu Valley. One of the houseboys had been a captain in the Japanese army during the Russo-Japanese War and, before the Gentleman's Agreement had been written into our immigration laws, had come over to Hawaii.

"He wanted to go on to California. He was always talking of California as if it were, as Jim says, some El Dorado. But the immigration bars had been shut down rigidly in the meantime and, while he could stay on in Hawaii, he could not jump across the Pacific to the States.

"You see, he was engaged in manual and menial work and the Gentleman's Pact allows only accredited students and gentlemen of wealth and family to reach the States. He might have scraped under the bar as a student, having been a captain in the Japanese army and hence being fairly well educated; but the trouble was, once he arrived in the States, he would have to make his living as before. There's the nub of the whole thing. That's just why the law was framed and adopted—as a protection for the American working man against the cheap wage and living standard of the Oriental."

"But are you certain, Captain Jim," asked Morley's wife, "that those Japs have no other pu'pose down here than to get across to the mainland of Mexico and serve in Villa's army?"

"Well, I'm fairly sure," returned Hathaway, adding in qualification, "unless, of course, Captain Yasuhara was stringing me after the good old Oriental fashion of telling everything but the main point of the story. He said that Villa offered them good money to join his army as laborers and cooks and promised further, as a tantalizing bait, that, should he finally win out and thus be enabled to put through his boasted agrarian reforms, he would parcel land to every Japanese in his army—so many acres to each family.

"The Jap, you know, Mrs. Morley, is a born farmer, especially from early training in his own overcrowded isles, an intensive farmer. It was a bait these people could not resist. They propose, now, trekking across the sand and llanos and sierras to the Gulf of California——"

"Which is all of a coupla hundred miles from here. How are they going to live, Jim?" I questioned, seeking a flaw in the story. "I didn't notice any water-bottles and crates of food among that bunch. And besides there is Mariquita and her Indians. Do you think those marauding savages will let such a gay-looking party through without coveting their bright kimonos?"

"That's true enough about the Guiacuras, but Dicenta got by with a chestful of gold and why can't these slick Orientals? I imagine, if the worst came to the worst, they could distribute some of their beads and tiny-bowled pipes and shell combs as peace offerings."

"But food, water. What——"

"Every man carried a little rattan-woven bag over his shoulder, didn't he? Well, there's rice in those bags, Chet, enough rice for himself and a woman and child for several days. You know an Oriental can live on little or

nothing—a bowl of rice and water twice a day for three hundred and sixty-five days out of the year. They also carry earthenware gourds, Captain Yasuhara told me, laced over with rattan strands and attached under the kimonos to their breech-clouts. And, besides, there are great cattle ranches up on the llanos and, back in the valleys of the hills, the date palms, sugar canes, oranges, wild honey, figs and olives of the vanished Padres. How do you suppose Teniente Dicenta ever made the traverse if there was nothing to eat and drink along the way?"

"But when they get to the Gulf of California," pressed Morley's wife, "what then, Skipper Jim?"

"Well, there in a cove behind San Josef Island, the captain said. Villa is supposed to have a ship hidden and waiting to convey them to the coast of Sonora and the constantly shifting headquarters of his army."

"But do you really believe all that, Jim boy?" I persisted in my suspicions. "Don't you think that these Japs may be planning on settling back there in the fertile valleys where the old Spanish missions used to be? Or, because of their compelling desire to get into Upper California, that they may intend to run the border? You can't believe— Say—" and I sat up sharply—"who was that Japanese in the blue mouse-decorated robe and skyscraper hat, the tall shogun who seemed to be leading them?"

"Precisely," echoed Morley's wife through pursed lips. "That Chinese-mustached fellow. He doesn't seem to jibe in one bit with this tale of thrifty Japanese with their slant eyes bent solely on farm and fireside."

"He's like a figure out of old Japan," added Morley. "He seems like some *samurai* sent out here to establish, in the Western world, a little colony or satrapy of Japan after the old tried German fashion."

There was a roguish twinkle behind the horn-rimmed glasses of Jim Hathaway.

"Well, if we're all to mouth what we think, I'd say that he was from his oddly decorated and somber robe, a *bonze*, a Buddhist priest intent on finding some new path to Nirvana, some new creature to hold sacred as a transmigrated soul, or some new manner properly to worship deceased and honorable ancestors. You know, in Japan, Buddhism, Brahmanism and Shintoism are all grafted on the same stem and jumbled in the one pot.

"But all kidding aside," he added seriously, "I asked Captain Yasuhara who was this Mouse-Man. He looked at me oddly a moment, did the captain; then said that in Japan the fellow was called Nidzoumi San."

"Nidzoumi San!" ejaculated Morley. "Why that's merely Japanese for Mister Mice or, in other words, the Mouse-Man. He was just repeating in Nipponese your pithy American title for the fellow and probably giving, at the same time, the air that he was imparting valuable information. I know these Orientals!"

"And so do I," added Hathaway hastily, anxious to show, as the slang has it, that he had not been boobed by the captain of the schooner. "I got the pun right off, Kit. I haven't lived for no purpose in San Francisco with its large yellow population. I told Yasuhara as much. But that's all the information he would give. When I taxed him, he just grimaced like a monkey, sucked in saliva between his teeth to show excessive politeness, and brazenly switched the conversation."

"Then we know little more than we did before," I concluded, quite chagrined. "The mystery of the Mouse-Man still persists."

Jim Hathaway smiled, but it was a bitter rather than a happy smile.

"It's like a page out of fiction, isn't it?" he said with a sarcasm veiled but directed I knew at the other two about the table. "Here we are, with a treasure chest aboard, lying in the same anchorage as a stinking Jap schooner and wondering about a mysterious high-caste Nipponese who is leading for dubious reasons a band of coolies across the sand."

"It's like Frank Norris," I agreed, falling in with his mood—"like Frank Norris with his back-scratching whales and hunks of ambergris and Chinese pirates."

"Oh, anything can happen in Magdalena, Chet, the old-time haven of galleons from the Philippines, buccaneers from Albion and the Lowlands, filibusters and whalers from America. Here, in the finest harbor between Frisco and Panama, romance has always flowered.

"Wasn't it here," Jim pursued, "that Francisco de Ulloa came in ships of Cortez to find the fabulous island of Ciguatan where beauteous Amazons were supposed to live like Circes, all pearl-bedecked? In those hot sands ashore are said to lie buried innumerable chests of gold ingots and Filipino silks from the wreck of Spanish galleons, Isthmus-bound from Manila and set upon by high-pooped awkward Dutch and English privateers.

"Here, once, smugglers ran the nose of their long boats into the sand and traded for furs and pearls with the Mission Indians who were not supposed to barter because Spain, with arms and embargoes, was at war in another world with Napoleon. Here, after the Californian grays, came New England whalers, and guano gatherers after the deposits of the sea birds on the outer rocks. Here, back in the Fifties, William Walker the filibuster anchored his bark, the *Caroline*, ere passing on to Sonora and Nicaragua.

"To bring the extravagant history up to date, there was that American syndicate who purchased from General Juarez, back in the Sixties, a section of this desert and the table-lands behind, at a time when the Liberator was hard

pressed for cash to pursue his work of ridding Mexico forever of Maximilian and his foreign hirelings.

"The New Yorkers prospected for gold, next gathered the orchilla lichen for dyeing purposes, then sought oil, and finally, oppressed by sun and sand, subdivided the high llanos into cattle ranches and forsook in despair the thirst-ridden desert.

"And now here are we. Yes, we with our buried treasure from the army coffers of Carranza; our Amazon, Mariquita, back there in the hills with the Guiacura Indians that have back-slided from the faith of the Frailes; our submarine chaser evolved through a World War; and our Japanese schooner with its naked yellow seamen, saliva-sucking captain, and its colorful party ashore bent, supposedly, on farm and fireside through the agency of a modern bandit."

"And Mister Mouse-Man—don't forget him, Jim," I added half-facetiously. "The tall Japanese with the high hat, Chinese mustaches, curved sword, golden girdle and blue robe all flowered with black mice, dun mice, gray mice and golden."

Hathaway laughed shortly and arose from the table. Up we went then to the deck.

"Nor Morley and his wife," he added to me in an undertone. "The soft-natured plob and his be-trousered, persimmon-wry wife, Southern and sour. Let's go forward, Chet, and take a look at Dicenta's trunk."

CHAPTER V

ON BOARD THE *TAISEI MARU*

WHEN we had brought the treasure chest aboard, Morley and his wife had advised that it be placed in the glory-hole, forward of the galley, which had been reserved as their apartment. But Hathaway would not hear of it. He had insisted that it be placed in the magazine which immediately adjoined the cabin and where, in war time, all ammunition had been stored. It was used now as a lazarette for canned goods. There, he had pointed out, the chest would be constantly under the eyes either of himself or of his acting first mate who was none other than myself.

We had left Morley and his wife below, sipping coffee. We went forward along the lee side to the pilot-house, flinging a final glance toward shore for sight of the Amazon and her Guiacuras. I had grown unconsciously accustomed to the dazzling lonely prospect, for I found it surprized me now to see it lying somber and softly dark in the twilight, as if the white sand had been wetted to a dun mud. There was the gleam of phosphorescence in the darkening water.

Once down in the tiny cabin, with the hatch to the pilot-house closed overhead, I followed Jim round by the bathroom to the magazine. Neither Jim nor I had a key to the chest; Morley had invested himself with that trust; but by aid of a hammer we quickly shattered the lock.

We did not care what Morley and his wife should think of our depredation. A strong suspicion was cankering the soul of each of us. When we threw back the lid, what was our surprize to find that suspicion unwarranted, absolutely refuted. The trunk was filled with yellow coins like a trough with water!

Hathaway looked at me under the electric light and whistled softly. What to say or do, I did not know. I was positively dumfounded. I could have sworn, ere we flung back the cover, that we should find that chest filled with sand. Perhaps it *was* filled with sand and, with the deception of a street-huckster's wares, the best of the lot on top, had only a concealing layer of gold coins on the surface.

I plunged my hands to the elbow in the metallic litter. My finger-tips scraped bottom, the nails catching in the smooth and beveled edges of coins. There was no fraud, no trick about it all. That trunk was filled, wide and deep, with yellow gold. I rose up and looked at him.

"This sure shows us up, Jim," I said. "We're just a coupla cads. Don't speak. I'm blaming myself more than you because I got the first hunch and inoculated you with the poison. The finding of all that money went to my head with the dastardly effect I thought only possible in Morley's wife. Oh, I see it all, Jim. Instead of her growing greedy and sneaky, it was I. I'm just a measly cad."

"What worries me, Chet——"

"Looket here, Jim; you just hear me out!" I drowned him angrily. "Just because we don't like Mrs. Morley, we've been questioning everything she does. And why don't we like her? Because she doesn't live up to our ideal of feminine beauty," I scorned. "Because she isn't the clinging-vine variety, but knows her own mind and says it. Jim Hathaway, you and I should admire Morley's wife for her independence and strength, for the fact that she wears trousers and is able to rough it as well as either of us. I tell you," I ended pointedly, "a man hates to learn that a woman is as good in the open as he is."

Hathaway nodded emphatic agreement.

"What worries me, Chet," he repeated calmly, "is how shall we explain that broken lock, without showing all the smallness of our suspicious souls. I'll admit we were cads, but that won't help to sweeten things on board. The only way out, so far as I can see, is to go to Morley and his wife and apologize."

"That's it, Jim. Make a clean breast of it; that's what we'll do. Tell how the gleam of

that stray coin in the sand caused us to think the treasure had been tampered with and that, to verify or down altogether the suspicion, we broke into the trunk. If Mrs. Morley lives up to my new opinion of her, I believe she will appreciate our penitence and be glad that at last we have awakened to her true worth."

We clattered at once up on deck. A piece of moon, like a bellying sail, was cruising up the sky and casting long beams over the glassy blackish water, burnishing it to a lacquer. The schooner bulked motionless and black on our weather side, save for a few circles of light showing through the ports of the cabin amidships. On shore, an opalescent sheen waved over the billows of sand and sage. There was just the faintest pulse of wind, vagrant and vanished ere it could be felt. So still it all was that one could hear the sharp grating stridulation of the cicadæ back among the dunes and the splash, now and then, of some clumsy turtle breaking through the seaweed or some shark leaping for mullet. The rattle of the dishes in the galley aft sounded loud and discordant.

We made aft at once to seek out Morley and his wife and apologize. But neither of the two was below in the glory-hole. Clee and his assistant, cleaning up the galley, told us they had gone above a few moments before. We went forward to see if they might be down in the forecastle playing cards with the crew. But they were not below in the forecastle, Boatswain Keneally answered up the hatch to our hail.

In the light flung up through the forecastle hatchway Jim and I looked at each other. Were we such cads after all? From the ashes of our old suspicion was rising, now, a new distrust. Morley and his wife were not aboard the ship. Where could they have gone?

"Maybe they took a stroll up the sand, Jim," I tried to pass it off easily. "It's cooler there than out over the water. Besides, they may have heard us hammering at that lock and rowed ashore to give us every opportunity to show how small we could be."

But Hathaway pooh-poohed the half-hearted effort to fight against my real suspicion.

"Ashore!" he scorned. "On this night with that parade of knife-armed Japanese somewhere out in the sand, and Mariquita and her savages due any time!"

"You think, Jim——"

He reached out and shoved me back from the lighted hatch and slap against the deck-pump. It was disconcertingly sudden. "What the ——!" I began when he clamped a hand over my mouth.

"Ssh! Listen!" he breathed.

I listened. There was no sound save a rumble of voices up the hatchway from the crew below in the forecastle. A dark shadow came forward out of the lee of the pilot-house and dived, feet first, down the forecastle ladder. It was Clee, the cook, having finished his dishes.

He did not see us backed against the deck-pump in the shadow of the pilot-house. He was greeted, as the ship's comedian, by a storm of good-natured jeers. I heard some one shout:

"Here's the abalone kink! Dinner terday: abalone steak, b'iled pertaters, fried onions, what'll yuh have—soup?"

The last ended in a cracking falsetto in imitation of Clee's method of hollering the menu. There was more boisterous laughter. Alongside me Hathaway swore under his breath.

"Darn those big kids and their horse-play! You can't hear a thing."

"But what was it you heard, Jim?"

"Ssh! There it goes now."

There had ensued a moment of silence in the forecastle. Probably, in lowered voice, Clee was regaling the crew with one of his countless number of spicy stories. In that moment, from the water between the Jap schooner and us, I caught the sound. It was the creak of rowlocks, the soft dip and drip of oars.

"It's Morley and his wife, Jim!"

He nodded.

"They've copped the dingey and are going aboard the schooner."

My eyes searched the intervening moon-lacquered water.

"But I can't see a sign of the small boat, Jim."

"They're probably close up, in the shadow of the schooner's hull or counter," he returned.

There came a burst of laughter up the forecastle hatchway but even above the sound, so strained were our ears, we caught a sharp grating noise as if ashore some cricket had chirped once or a boat on our weather side had scraped the paint of the schooner.

"They're alongside," said Jim. "See, there they go up that sea-ladder which was slung out for the tall Jap today and never rigged in. See them—those two dark shadows? There they go over the rail."

"I gotcha, Jim. But I can't tell one from the other, Morley from his wife, as they're both in trousers. Who's leading?"

"I can't tell, either. But let's go aft, Chet, where the noise of the forecastle won't distract us. We can watch from there what goes forward on the *Taisei Maru*."

We were making aft along the weather side when a shaft of yellow light shot out from the schooner amidships and lay across the black, oily looking water like a tapering Oriental finger or a moonbeam. It reached out from the cabin of the *Taisei*. A door had been flung open in the side of the cabin and we could look across the few fathoms of separation into the interior of it, lighted by an oil-lamp swung in gimbals from the ceiling.

A form bulked into silhouette against the light. It was Kit Morley entering the cabin. His wife followed and then the short stocky figure of the Japanese captain. The door banged shut and all was dark once more, save for the small circles of light through the cabin port holes.

We had reached the coaming about the engine-room which, lighted by a single incandescent, lay silent and ghostly with steel parts below. We sat down on the grating. For an appreciable length of time we said nothing, but kept looking out toward that band of silver dollars—the lighted ports in the cabin of the schooner. At last, under the strain, Hathaway drew out his calabash pipe.

"Don't smoke, Jim," I warned him. "You forget you're right over the engines and gas."

"Oh, this would make anybody forget," he snapped irritably.

"I know, Jim, but don't say anything till you hear me out, please," I added anxiously. "I'm trying to figure a fair break for Morley and his wife on this stunt. I'm trying to look on the best side."

"Best side?" he scoffed. "There's no such thing!"

"Oh, I know it looks bad, Jim, but just suppose Kit and his wife have gone aboard that schooner to seek the aid of the captain and his yellow crew against possible attack from the Indians. I tell you, Jim, you don't realize how Mrs. Morley fears Mariquita and her Guiacuras. She went positively livid when we told her we had seen the Amazon and, until the sun set this afternoon, she was watching across the sand."

"She's taking an awful lot on her shoulders, I must say. I'm captain of this sloop, Chet, and if there's need of any one's protection, it's up to me and me only to ask for it."

"That's true enough, Jim, but you know what a panicky woman can do to stampede a man. Now, Kit——"

"Oh, you're all wrong, Chet. If Morley and his wife were so fearful, why didn't they show sign of it at the dinner table? Why sneak off like this and paddle so stealthily we could barely hear them? And Mrs. Morley panicky? Well, I have got to see her get that way.

"No, Chet, you're all wrong. You're trying to give Morley and his wife a fair break when they aren't entitled to it. You're afraid of proving yourself a cad again. But I tell you, cad or no cad, there's only one thing to make of this. Morley and his wife have turned traitor!"

"You mean, Jim——"

"That they're going to get that captain to board us with his yellow crew and swipe the treasure. I have a feeling that saliva-hissing captain will do anything for money. They'll offer him part of the treasure, no doubt, just as they did us."

There was an electric silence. The pulse of wind off the Pacific was freshening. It was perceptibly colder than the surrounding air and seemed dank with moisture.

"I'm afraid you're right, Jim," I had to admit at last. "But why didn't Morley and his wife save themselves all this trouble by filling that trunk with sand, burying the gold and coming back for it later on? They must have intended to do that, or I should never have got the suspicion so strongly."

"How should I know?" irritably. "Perhaps after he filled all his pockets with coins, Morley lost his goat and reneged. Maybe they caught sight of Mariquita before ever we told them and were afraid to move the gold lest the metallic flash should prove as telltale as a heliograph. It doesn't matter anyhow."

"No, Jim," I agreed soberly, "what matters now is how do we stack up with these Japs. There are only ten of us, counting every man aboard at present; from what I could see of those naked yellow monkeys on the rigging today there must be thirty or more manning that schooner. We're outnumbered, Jim, three to one. Gee, I could almost wish Dicenta *would* show up in some kind of craft, or Mariquita would spoil their plans by starting fireworks along the beach."

"I'm just figuring how many guns we've got on board," said Hathaway quietly. "You have an automat, Chet, and I've my old navy .38. The only other man armed is Keneally with another navy .38. I haven't any weapons to issue, so the men will have to depend on their own fists and maybe a stanchion or jack-knife or two. At that, I believe the captain of the *Taisei* is the only one aboard carting a gun. He would never trust those little yellow fellows with firearms. They never do on Oriental ships. They have only knives, but they can wield them like butchers, I'll tell you!"

"Morley and his wife each carry a revolver."

"Yes; but I don't think they'll join in the fracas. If they come back here tonight, they'll probably lie low during the boarding operations until everything quiets down and either we or the Japs win. Then they'll trim their sails accordingly."

"Then you think they'll return aboard tonight?"

"Yes; if only to camouflage their treachery. That's why I'm waiting here. Perhaps that saliva-hissing Jap will turn them down. I want to read success or failure on their faces."

"Well, I can't agree with you, Jim."

"You don't think the captain will turn them down? Well, neither do I. That fellow will do anything for money, I'll swear, Chet."

"It's not that, Jim. I mean I doubt that Morley and his wife will return. They probably heard us hammering at the lock of the trunk before they put overside. They know

we're suspicious and that we'll note their absence.

"They've been gone a good half-hour already. I'll tell you what, Jim Hathaway. I'll bet Morley and his wife don't step aboard here till they come over that rail with a swarm of yellow-bellies behind them!"

That was a statement to challenge the imagination. I could picture it. Morley's wife in army shirt and trousers, her rolls of hair in disarray, her negative eyes sharpened with gold-greed and blood-lust, leaping over the rail, gun in hand, a swarm of yellow vermin, breech-clouted and oily, following behind her!

CHAPTER VI.

IN THE FOG

I FOUND, when the mental picture fled my eyes, that I was studying the lighted ports of the schooner's cabin and that they seemed not nearly so bright as hitherto. Dancing in the air like shimmering threads of silk were a myriad of tiny molecules of mist. The cold air sweeping in from the Pacific had met with the heat-quiver off the sand and condensed into wispy moisture. It was a night fog settling over bay and strand, gray and aqueous.

"Jim," I said, struck with a sudden idea by the fog, "when do you think that captain and his naked crew will start operations?"

"Well, we leave tomorrow morning just as soon as we barber the bottom," he answered significantly.

"Then the attack must come tonight."

"Exactly."

"And there's only ten of us against their thirty or more. We're outnumbered, Jim, three to one. What's the use of being foolhardy? Why wait for 'em?"

"What would you have me do, Chet? Board them first?"

"No; but there's a night fog blowing in. A half-hour and it'll be so thick they won't know whether we're here or not. What's to stop us then from picking up anchor and putting out? We can drag that mess of kelp easily enough. Jim, let's go, tonight, in a half hour!"

Hathaway looked at me in surprize.

"Well, I'll be darned! I never thought of that. But why not? Why wait to find out what those Japs intend to do? We've got the treasure and there's really nothing holding us here. It's not as if we were deserting Morley and his wife; they tried to play a deep game and we're merely beating them to it. They've gone over to the Japanese and given us every evidence of turning despicable traitors. And now, with this fog blanketing us, as you say—Great, Chet; it's the prime idea. We'll do it!"

He scrambled afoot and started swiftly up the dewing deck, myself but a step behind. The single incandescent burning under a green shade in the pilot-house looked dim and blurred. The square ports, or rather, windows of the deck-house were frosted over with gray moisture. I could see a dark shadow within.

"Who's on watch, Jim?" I asked as we went by.

"Brownie, I think; Clee's assistant. He usually gets the early watch as he has to put in some sleep. He's the first up in the morning, starting the fires and awakening Clee."

As we made past the deck-pump I glanced across the moist, glistening wire rail at the schooner. It was rapidly becoming a black blur in the gray opacity, the lighted ports of the cabin twinkling faintly like remote stars, the two masts no longer distinct, but wavy and knobbed like bamboo sticks.

The hatch had been fastened ajar over the coaming about the forecastle companionway, and a hood of tarpaulin flung over that to keep out the damp. The lighted opening looked, in the dancing mist, like the air vent of a yellow-bright furnace. Come of navy training, Hathaway very seldom invaded the forecastle. He held that it was strictly the men's home and, as such, sacred against intrusion even from himself, excepting only for an occasional inspection as to cleanliness and general sanitary condition. Tonight, however, he squirmed feet foremost under the angle of hatch and tarpaulin and dropped down without touching foot to the ladder.

A quiet game of poker was going forward on one flap of the sand-whitened mess-table. Come of navy training also, the men, who were mostly ex-service, made a hasty scramble to rake out of sight the money in the pot. Jim smiled wanly. I paused half-way on the ladder. By leaning down, I could look up forward to where, against the bulkhead separating forecastle from chain locker, Keneally had let down his bunk and was propped up, reading.

"I'm sorry to have to disturb you, fellows," said Jim, "but keep quiet till I explain. Keneally, you'd better hop out. We're going to pull up the hook and beat it out of here in a half-hour. Pipe down, men; no cheering! I realize you're sailors enough to want to be on the go all the time; but you've got to know that we're leaving here tonight, without waiting to clean off our planks, because we're afraid of treachery from that Jap schooner alongside!"

A rumble could not be restrained from the throats of the men. It was odd to note the pugnacious aspect that quickly crept into the posture of their bodies and cast of their faces. I heard a distinct snap, in the portentous silence which ensued, as wordlessly but meaningly Keneally buckled over his trousers a black-belted navy .38.

"It's this way, boys," continued Hathaway rapidly. "Morley and his wife turned traitor

on us this evening and boarded that Japanese schooner. They're out there now. We believe they're trying to cook up a deal to come over our rail in the night with that yellow crew, and take possession of the *Seventy-three* and the trunk we brought on board today. You might as well know, if you haven't already guessed it, that there's gold in that trunk. I feel I can trust you fellows implicitly and I know if it came to a showdown we could beat off those Japanese, even though they outnumber us by more than three to one.

"But here's the idea. A thick gray fog is blowing in from the Pacific. In a few minutes, it'll wrap us up as neat as a bug in a rug. We'll douse all lights, as if we've turned in; they won't know whether we're here or not; and, meanwhile, we'll run out under cover of the fog.

"You understand. It's no use plunging into a fight, with the odds heavy against us, if we can get off scot-free. There's nothing holding us here but the fact that our planks are barnacled with kelp and we meant to do a little barbering in the morning. We'll take our chances on dragging the mess along and losing a day or two by the slow passage.

"Now it's up to you men to work, and work quietly. Reynolds, get the black gang below right away and start the engines, all three. You, Keneally, take a coupla men and fish up the anchor. It's all hands, men, and silence."

The light was snapped out in the forecastle ere I slid out from under the hatch on to the wet, faintly gleaming and slippery deck. Outside the fog had settled thick and gray. The piece of moon in the sky was blotted out. I could make out the schooner only by its blacker bulk against the grayness. The mass of rigging was indiscernible; I only knew it was there. The lights of the cabin port-holes blinked feebly on and off like will-o'-the-wisps. I could not see objects on deck more than five feet away.

WE MADE aft cautiously. Jim and I returned to the pilot-house, relieving Clee's assistant and sending him forward to lend a hand at the anchor winch. Jim went below to buckle on his .38. My automatic was still in the hip pocket where I had been carting it all day. I doused the green-shaded incandescent and lighted a ship's dark lantern. When Jim came above, I took the wheel and he stood by the polished brass engine-counters.

There was a quiver and then a dull thrumming through the bowels of the ship. The engines were turning over.

"Do you think they'll hear that, Jim?" I asked anxiously.

In the beam of light from the dark lantern, I saw Jim's hand shove down the brass handle on the center counter, then quickly return it to the first position. There was a ringing tinkle. It was a signal to the engine-room.

"Hardly," he answered cheerfully to my question. "That schooner's half a cable's length away, over three hundred feet. The fog will kill the rumble before it gets to them."

Came another ringing tinkle. The arrow-headed brass indicator had performed the same evolution as the handle, swinging finally back into its first position. It was an answering signal from the engine-room that the machinery was in readiness for use.

Hathaway switched on the electric bulbs that softly illuminated from within the dials of the counters. The door of the pilot-house noiselessly opened and Keneally, aft on the little raised mid-ship deck, inserted his head to report—

"Anchor aweigh, sir."

"Very well, Ken. Make her fast and secure for sea."

Hathaway swung the brass handle of the port counter to the lighted oval, labeled 'Half Speed Astern.' He intended to back the stern of the *Seventy-three* to port, swinging her bow to starboard, and run out to sea across the bows of the schooner. There was a distinct quiver through the timbers of the ship as the engine was put into gear, then a sharp grinding jar that sent the dark lantern clattering to the deck and lurched me against the wheel.

Jim grabbed the annunciator, blew sharply on the whistle and called down excitedly to the engine room—

"What's the matter?"

"The propeller shaft is stuck fast, sir," I heard Reynolds' voice clip up through the speaking-tube. "I think something's jamming the blades of the screw."

Jim swung the brass director to "Stop." He looked at me oddly as I straightened up from rescuing the flickering lantern.

"What do you think of this, Chet?"

"I don't know. But it may be only that port propeller. We're not stalled yet. Try your others."

"I'll try the center screw. I can't chance damaging either of those wing screws, but if the center one goes out, it won't matter much."

"Look out you don't break the shaft," I warned him.

From the center engine came the gearing quiver and then immediately on the heels of it that sharp grinding jar. Swiftly Jim swung the director back to "Stop." There was a breathing silence while, below, the engines thrummed idly out of gear.

"Jim," I questioned anxiously, "do you think Morley or his wife could have done anything to the machinery? Tangled a manila hawser in the blades of the screw, or plugged fast the propeller shaft in their babbitts?"

Hathaway shook his head in abstracted negation. He was pondering the trouble worriedly. Keneally, the bosun, appeared in the doorway just as a snap fired Hathaway's eyes behind the horn-rimmed glasses.

"That's what happened!" Jim ejaculated. "I see now. It's that lush blue-green seaweed all about here. It's caught in the blades and jammed them. I'll bet in the last few days it's grown thickly in the hollow twists of the screw. We'll have to clear it out, if it isn't jammed too tightly. Something, Keneally?"

"The anchor's secured, sir. And I've put my two seamen on watch forward and Clee and Brownie aft on either side. They're on the lookout for any dirty work as we clear that schooner. And if you want a man to go overside to clear those blades of the kelp, I'll take the dingey and make short work of it."

"But Morley and his wife swiped the dingey," I instantly remembered. "It's tied up alongside the *Taisei*."

"Well, I'll strip then and go down in a bosun's chair."

"All right Ken, but there may be sharks in these waters," warned Hathaway. "I've heard of expeditions coming in here for shark-liver oil, a substitute for cod-liver, and for shark fins to sell to the Frisco Chinese for cooking purposes."

"And it'll be hard seeing anything through this fog, Keneally," I added. "The only thing is there's phosphorescence in the water and it should show out any moving dorsal fin or thrashing tail-lobe."

"I'll take the chance," returned Keneally stoutly. "Somebody's got to do it, if we're to clear out tonight. We can rig up a line alongside me, like I was a diver, and when I jerk madly, you'll know something's wrong and h'ist, *pronto*."

We had turned to follow the bosun out of the pilot-house when I heard a drumming, as of frantic fingers, on one of the windows behind. Swinging about, I saw a white face pressed against the misted pane. It was Spunn, one of the sailors, standing on the deck-pump and gesticulating wildly. I flung the pane inward and open. Gray wisps of fog and the man's excited voice swept in:

"Keneally! Mr. Hathaway! There's something doin' on that schooner! I can't make out a light er a thing in the fog, but I heard a creakin' like they was h'istin' a boat overside."

"Shut off your engines, Jim," I shouted in a contagion of excitement. "Then we might hear."

HATHAWAY signaled on the counters and the dull thrumming through the ship ebbed away. An uncanny stillness rushed in for all the world like the damp silky grayness sweeping through the open window. Spunn got down from the deck-pump and I was leaning out the window, straining ears and eyes through the opacity, when again the door opened aft and Clee appeared, his gimlet-small eyes bright with inward agitation.

"They're overside, sir, the Japs! I hearn the creak of the rowlocks 'nd splash of oars! They're rowin' fer us, Jim, 'nd mighty close. Yuh kin hear them plain!"

"That's the creaking Spunn heard," exclaimed Hathaway. "The Japs must have caught the thrum of our engines. Back to your stations, men!"

Keneally leaped through the doorway, fairly bowling Clee over.

"Man your weather rail, men!" Jim called through the fog after him.

He swiftly lowered his voice to a whisper.

"Get the black gang up out of the engine room. Show no lights. Wait for 'em. Get each man a stanchion, stake, piece of hose, anything. Jack-knives, fists! You've got a gun. Fire when you smell the yellow of 'em. Kill the first monkey that puts foot ab——"

Two lurching jars, one after the other, shook through the little craft, clipping short Jim's orders. It was as if several heavily-laden small boats had banged against our side almost simultaneously. The in-swung window was jarred down upon my craning neck.

Ere I could lift the sash and withdraw my pain-split head, I heard outside, despite the ringing in my ears, a muffled shout from forward, then a squashy thud as if a bag of sand had flopped to the deck. Everything was gray without, a gray opacity. But we could hear the soft padding of many bare feet as if a gang of rats were running along the deck.

"They're aboard us!" exclaimed Jim.

CHAPTER VII

ALL HANDS TO REPEL BOARDERS

THERE was the salty hot taste of blood in my mouth from where I had bit my lip in the jar of the window slamming down upon my neck. I threw up the sash and withdrew my ringing head in time to see Hathaway leap for the wheel. He reached over the brassy bright master spoke and pressed the button of the klaxon that, in war times, was the signal for general alarm. I could hear the horns blaring through the bowels of the ship, forward in the forecastle and aft in the engine-room, and above the eery vibration Jim's voice shouting bitterly:

"It's their only warning. The black gang! They haven't a chance. They're caught like horses in a burning barn!"

Fumbling for my automatic, I leaped for the door. I collided with Jim, brushing past me in the darkness, overwrought with anxiety for

the safety of his men and intent only on getting aft to the hatchway of the engine-room. I was none too steady at the time and the brusque shouldering aside, come of Jim's distracted excitement, served to knock me reeling against the flag locker. Jim sprang past me through the doorway and then out of the gray vapors I saw leap up at him something dark and agile.

The imminence of Hathaway's peril shocked me into a plane of clear-headedness that surprized me, later, when I came to look back on it. I found myself hurtling through the doorway, out upon the mist-shrouded raised deck, and crying—

"Jim! Watch out! At him, boy! Shoot, shoot!"

There was a guttural exclamation in an alien tongue, the momentary faint gleam of a knife, the report of a pistol and then I was thunderstruck to see Jim go down with a queer gasping gurgle. I heard another report, muffled, from up forward—Keneally's revolver, no doubt. I was leaping over Jim's fallen body, on the instant, for the mist-vague dark figure.

I can't explain why I did not shoot then or earlier. My brain seemed clear and sensitive, in a surprizing degree, to every sound and sight within range of ear and eye. You know how you'll snap a photograph of a person and then be surprized, when the film is printed, to be struck by some aspect in the picture, some posture of the person or figuration of the landscape behind, which you had never before noted but which had not escaped the microscopic lens of the camera? Well, my brain was like that, as microscopically hypersensitive as a camera lens.

I saw the little naked Japanese crouched before me, a tattoo mark on his chest, the black strands of hair matted into his slant eyes, his mouth open with panting breath that smoked the grayness and a knife barely gleaming in his upraised hand. His naked body did not look as yellow as dark and I remember I wondered in an indivisible point of time whether it were mist or beads of sweat that glistened like oil on his body. I marked the black bulge over one shoulder of our life-raft behind him that was slung amidships under the boom from our single mast. Yet today I couldn't tell you the shape of that tattoo mark on his heaving chest. It did not 'take' as you might say about a photograph.

I remember too that while these impressions were engraving themselves, lightning-swift and ineradicably in my mind, I was aware of muffled sounds slipping through the fog from all about—the whack of wood on bare skin, shouts, a high weird jabbering, a constant creaking as if the stanchions of the life-rail were loosening from the deck under the weight of straining bodies, shrieked curses, the thudding of blows on soft flesh and a squashier thudding like falling sacks of sand, a continual groaning from Jim on the boards behind me, and always that stealthy rapid padding as if a gang of rats were running back and forth along the deck.

My brain was a multiplex electrified apparatus, alive to every sound, vivid with impressions, thinking at incredible speed. I was in that exalted state of grim extremity when the swiftness of the mind is all that protects body and life. The automatic was clenched in my right hand. I was shouting madly—

"At them, boys! Shoot, shoot!"

Yet I myself did not shoot. No impulse leaped from pounding brain along my nerves to tighten, ever so little, that finger on the trigger. Simply I did not think to shoot. It is almost inexplicable. But just as with the tattoo mark, just so with that function to shoot; it failed to "take."

Perhaps, at that, it came of the crouched attitude of the naked savage. His head was huddled low, inches below my chest. All I know is that I raised the clenched automatic and brought the finger-wrapped steel butt down upon his head with a crackling thud. He collapsed like a punctured wind-bag and I tripped over him with the momentum of my forward rush, my forefinger and little digit crushed in the blow between butt and bone and leaping with pain as if the blood would burst from their tips. You may well say I was not holding the automatic properly.

I stumbled, with the forward impetus, slap against the low boom of the mast, reeled back, fell off the break of the little raised deck in the fog and sprawled on all fours down on the main deck against the rail. I clutched with aching fingers the automatic. As I went down, amid a myriad of other photographic impressions I had glimpsed two dark forms springing for me over the life-raft.

They were upon me as I struggled afoot. My free left hand slipped on oily skins, automatically clenched and pounded oily skins; my right jerked the trigger of the automatic. I felt a jump along my arm ere the din of the report smote my ears. Another jump and another; I could smell the burnt powder strong as rotten eggs; and I saw one of the Japanese pitch down.

There were other naked figures hurdling over the life-raft, swinging off the break of the midship deck, sweeping up from either mist-curtained side. There were as many as a troop of monkeys, attracted and guided to me no doubt by my pistol reports.

I was far out-numbered, but I continued to fire and to strike out with my free fist. I felt, all at once, something icy, then suddenly warm against the crotch of my right knee. I kicked out frantically. One of the Japs I had downed, was jabbing me with his knife behind the knee,

attempting to tear through flesh and sinew and hamstring me! I felt a hot spurt of blood as the knee straightened out in the kick.

My boot hit against some solid obstruction like the bone of the fellow's head. The calves of my legs were clutched by that fellow, frantically, as with the frenzy of one drowning or swooning. I struck out madly with feet and hands and empty gun. My legs were shot from under me. I was hurtled backward by the overpowering weight of numbers. I toppled over the wire rail.

IT WAS here, near the break of the little mid-ship platform to the pilot-house, that we usually came aboard. The topmost wire rope was uncoupled and down, accordingly, so that one could step easily over and upon deck. I felt myself going back, back. It seemed an eternity of toppling, of tensing for something to break the fall.

The second wire rope slapped against my thighs, too low to stop the backward rush, only aiding further to upset me. I caught the gleam of an upraised knife in the hand of one of the Japs, cried out, went heels above head over the rope, down like a plummet through the fog, and splash into the tepid, tropic water and tangled seaweed.

I came to the surface with the fungi wrapped about my clinging trousers, slipping off my ears and the shoulders of my shirt. I remember a momentary gladness that I wore no coat or puttees; but my shoes were water-filled and heavy as lead. I had held paralytically to the automatic, despite the backward parabola and abrupt immersion; but now, with the instinctive muscular action of cupping my hands and striking out, I dropped the gun.

There was a blue-white flickering all about with the sinking of the weapon and movement of my arms and legs. It was the phosphorescence in the water. There came a twinge of pain from the cut in the crotch of my right knee; a sudden sense of being stiff from the knees down by reason of toes and ankles being confined in the water-soaked shoes; then, on a sudden, the scissors-clip of my legs was stopped, the spread of arms bluntly halted by the entanglement of seaweed.

That algal mess was everywhere about me, fathoms deep, floating, sprouting lushly in the tropic water, barnacled for yards to the side of our recently anchored ship, interlaced and wattled like some uncanny marine jungle. It stubbed my sweeping fingers, felt slimy under the nails, caught in the bend of elbow and knee, the hooks of my already encumbering shoes. It clogged and thwarted all movement.

As I struggled in the viscous wrack, tiny globules of phosphorescence spouted like bubbles of flame on the disturbed water. All at once, as if from directly above me, clipped through the fog a voice. I could sense the hull of the *Seventy-three* black alongside me but I could not make out any person or thing for the cloaking grayness. I paused in my labors to listen. On the sudden, then, it was borne sharply in upon me that every sound of struggle—of pistol reports, whack of stakes, thud of falling bodies and shouts—had died away. Only remained the soft padding of many bare feet as if that gang of rats still were running along the deck.

I pulled at the water-plants, reached out and got hold of the fungi-slippery side of the motor ship. I put up one hand where the plates were wet with mist but free of slimy growths, and clung on more by the tension on my fingers than any handhold. While I hearkened, I reached down with my free arm and tore at the laces of my waterlogged shoes. I could hear a voice distinctly, the sharp tight-lipped voice of Morley's wife.

"Let's see if we got them all. Captain Yasuhara, will you have your sailors carry forward those who are out? Put them in front of the pilot-house here. Get over there, Keneally; no muttering from you-all; those ropes aren't so tight you can't hop over. Where's Hathaway and Chet Overman?"

Came shuffling sounds.

"Captain," the voice of Morley's wife sharpened, "have you seen anything of a tall fellow with glasses in a gold-striped uniform and white-topped cap like yours? Another, a red-headed fellow in brown shirt and corduroys? It's important, captain. Have your men make a search right away, please. They may be lying wounded somewhere, but we can't take a chance on either of them getting away."

I was sure then. The fight was over and we had lost. Jim Hathaway was wounded, perhaps fatally, and lying athwart the sill of the pilot-house doorway. The *Seventy-three*, with the chest of gold, was in possession of Morley's wife and her yellow swarm. It would be of no avail for me to return aboard, even if I could clamber up somehow and win to the deck. I was unarmed and they were as many as a gang of rats. It would be foolhardy.

I heard, as I kicked off the right shoe, the Japanese skipper jabbering with basso volume. There was a slapping of bare feet on the deck. Then another voice, a new voice rippling shrilly, as with excitement, over the queer vocables.

"What's that! What's the man saying, captain?" clipped vexedly the voice of Morley's wife as I kicked off the other shoe. The sock followed in a jiffy, ere indeed the voice of the captain could reach me. I wriggled my toes in glad freedom.

"He says a man fell overside just aft of the pilot-house on the lee side. Yes, one of your men, probably one of the two we lack."

"Just a moment, captain; here come some of your sailors. It's Jim Hathaway they're

carrying; I can tell by the gold stripe on his dangling arm. It must be Overman, Chet Overman, who tumbled over!" she added, her voice seeming to shake. "Put a man or two on guard along the rail, captain, to watch against Overman coming on board and surprizing us. But I suppose—" with a little chilly laugh—"I suppose the sharks have got him by now!"

I shivered then with the first cowardly fear I had felt that night. It was that unnerving, unmanning fear one has for a snake or anything that glides in a veil of its own slime to snatch and crunch in bristling maw. The sudden immersion coming on the heels of the fight, the enmeshing seaweed and snatches of conversation, had kept from mind all thought of the selachians that infest these tropic waters.

I SHOVED myself off from the side of the ship and thrashed out madly through the entangling weeds. A filament of fungus, seeming irritably thick, caught in the space between great and little toe of one foot. I kicked it off savagely. I was all at once distracted, frantic. As the bluish-white sparkles leaped and danced on the troubled water, I could not help but imagine that they radiated from the streaking dorsal fin and beating upper tail-lobe of a shark.

I heard a shout from behind me as if, aboard the *Seventy-three*, the Japanese had caught sound of my struggling. I did not pause nor turn my head to peer back. I found myself, wholly unexpectedly, in a space of tepid water clear of seaweed. In my wild efforts I must have covered a goodly distance, thus to have won from all that mess barnacled about the ship. I filled the reservoir of my lungs and, dripping bluish streaks from arms and legs, struck out powerfully in the direction I thought the beach to lie, the while I strained eyes through the fog for a vision of viscous eyes, pointed snout, fluttering gill-slits and gaping, tooth-bristling, slimy mouth.

My knees bumped and scraped sharply along the shelving sand ere I realized the beach was there. I could hardly believe I was safe inshore. Those sharks must have been sated that night with mullet. I shoved down my feet, with a resultant twinge at the new position from the stabbed crotch of my knee, and waded ashore.

Trousers and shirt clinging wet and dripping, I turned round, brushed the water from my eyes and looked toward where the *Seventy-three* should be. There was a feeble light glimmering through the grayness of fog and seemingly moving aft along the rail.

I jerked out my watch from the little trousers pocket under the belt. The radium-treated hands glowed at eight-fourteen o'clock. The watch was guaranteed water-tight, but unable to believe that all that had happened had been crowded into the last three-quarters of an hour, I thought to test it at one ear. It had stopped. I must have plunged into the bay on the minute of time when that watch disproved its guarantee.

A long ripple licked up about my bare feet and then slipped back into the bay. Something had caused that ripple to shake through the placid water—some movement of a shark, perhaps, just scenting the human taint of my body in the water. I hearkened instinctively. All at once I caught, slipping through the fog, the dip and drip of oars, the creak of rowlocks and a low monotone of voices!

The Japanese were coming ashore, a boatload of them, to see if I had won by the sentinel sharks, to trace and pursue me. Dropping the faithless watch, I started running along the spit of sand for the fog-hidden dunes and the back country.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CRY IN THE NIGHT

ONCE I had put a ridge of dunes between myself and the landing-party, I no longer felt so keenly the dangers of pursuit. The fog, gray-curtaining the night, was a most providential cloak. Of course when the sun opened his barrage upon the land matters would take a decided change for the worse.

Then, like an object at sea, the shore party would be able to discern my dark form against the white sandy billows, though a mile or more separate us. I pressed on in the hope that, until the dawning, the landing force would be frustrated by the fog from pursuit, by which time I trusted to be many miles inland.

Ahead, I knew, was the motley parade of Japanese led by that mysterious bandmaster, the tall Nipponese of the high Korean hat and blue mouse-decorated robe. They were all race brother to my pursuers, but I entertained little fear of them. Doubtless by this time they were many miles over the sand and plodding on, with Oriental persistency, through the night.

There was no way by which the pirate crew of the schooner could communicate with them to cause them to head me off, excepting by fast runner. I did not think my escape was of such importance as to warrant that.

I had stronger reason to fear the Mexican girl, Mariquita. If our conclusions of that day were correct, she and her Guiacuras should be swooping down any moment now upon the bight of beach. But so much had happened since we had glimpsed her that afternoon through the binoculars that this fear did not strike home to me. It was just a fact realized, but impersonal, far away.

What worried me more than anything else was how I should get across that desert without

water. What I purposed doing was pressing on through the night and the following day, through the sand and sage and cacti, to the hot table-lands of Magdalena some twenty miles northeast. There were great cattle ranches on those high llanos. In the talk I had had with Jim, he had mentioned the fact that a number of those ranches were and had been managed and worked by Americans for years.

The history of the ranches dated back to that grant of General Juarez when, in order to raise money to pursue his War of Liberation, he had deeded a generous slice of this Magdalena country to an American syndicate. Many times since then had the district changed hands. Some *Nort Americanos* had thought to find gold here, others had gathered the orchilla lichen, more had sought oil and finally, in despair, it had been subdivided into several immense cattle ranges. These ranges were still owned and operated by Americans.

I hoped, therefore, to get to some ranch-house, there recite my tale of treachery and Oriental piracy and, as a fellow coutryman in distress, enlist the ranchers' aid to the extent of returning on horseback at the head of an avenging column of American and mestizo cowboys. Then we could sweep down upon the beach, recapture the *Seventy-three* and the gold chest forward in her magazine, scuttle the Orientals for their piracy and pay off in fitting style for their perfidy Morley and his hated wife. It was a splendid ambition!

My mind awoke from picturing it to note with surprize that the sand, under my bare feet, was distinctly cold. The land had rapidly exuded its heat. The gray low-hanging blanket of fog seemed warm in comparison, although I could sense that it, too, was cooling fast. I knew that ere dawn the desert would be sharply chill.

I paused at the water-hole back among the dunes. There was the steady drip-drip of wet fog from the tall mesquite and the muffled sleepy cheep of cicadæ. I drank long and deeply, not knowing when I should be able again to get water in that waste of sand and sage. I searched futilely my trousers pockets for some receptacle in which I might carry on with me some of the precious fluid. I noticed, in the hard, damp sand of the rim, the prints of many hands and sandals and one or two bare feet where the Japanese must have halted here that evening.

I unbuttoned and pulled up my right trousers-leg and, examining the cut in the crotch of my knee, found it only a flesh wound. I realized the uselessness of attempting to bandage the wound. With the constant swing of walking, no bandage would hold very well about kneecap and crotch. I believed that the immersion in the salt water would prove potently healing and that the long tramp I contemplated would keep the joint from stiffening.

I sank to all fours then to fortify myself with a final drink. I was facing the seaward dunes, still squeamish of pursuit. Well, from an unexpected direction, from behind me, came all at once a rapid crunching in the sand. Swinging round on hands and knees, I beheld, bursting out of the fog under the mesquite and not six feet away, a vague form like that of an ape.

For a trice I thought it was one of the naked breech-clouted pigmies from the schooner. Then the dark flapping garment about the crunching legs caused me to think it a woman. I saw on the sudden that it was a pigmy Japanese, hatless, garbed in kimono, a short vicious-looking dirk in hand.

"Gov'mint agent!" he cried out in a singsong. "Gov'mint agent, gov'mint agent!"

I stuck my left hand under me and leaning over on that side, made to spring to my feet. But he clashed against me, ere I could get afoot, knocking me flat on my back. It was all that saved me. His upflung knife cleaved down through the air with a rushing sound I could hear. It would have impaled me between the shoulder-blades had I been crouched on all fours in the position of an instant before. As it was, he went sprawling over my supine body, his head hitting the hard wet sand with a resounding thwack, the knife digging up to the hilt.

In that ace of time in which he lay stunned across my legs, all breath struck out of him, I swung myself up from the hips and got him by the nape of the yellow neck. I squirmed out from under him and, lifting his head, smote his face again and again into the sand.

It impinged through my excitement, finally, that I was meeting with a surprizing and total lack of resistance. I rolled the fellow over. There was a thin irregular black trickle from the left temple down the high-cheeked glossy face; the black eyes were slantingly open but glassy as polished shoe buttons; the spread mouth and right-angled nostrils were clogged with sand. He was no longer breathing. I really believe that he went out when, stumbling over my body, his head had grounded into the hard flinty sand with that resounding thwack.

I PICKED up the fellow's dirk from where it still was buried to the hilt in the sand. I noticed the carved outline of a dormant mouse, head between forefeet, long bald tail curled underneath, traced in the white ivory handle. The rattan-laced water gourd was showing under one open flap of his kimono. I cut, with the dagger, the rattan strings attaching it to the white breech-clout about his waist, emptied it of the water it contained and replenished it at the hole.

Then, with knife and earthenware gourd

slung to my belt, I left the fellow lying there under the trickling mesquite and started on over the dark dunes. A few yards away, where it had fallen in his rush, I kicked aside his huge straw sun-hat.

To put it mildly, I was worried. I kept peering ahead through the gray fog, yet just what I expected to see, I could not say. The appearance and attack of that kimonoed Japanese had altogether upset my calculation. Had he been one of the naked yellow sailors, I could have figured it. But from the kimono and gourd, there was no mistaking the fact that he was one of the motley parade of Japanese that had landed at sunset from the schooner.

What had he been doing there at the water-hole? Had he rushed at me from down the seaward ridge of dunes, I should have said that he had been attempting to keep an eye through the fog on what was going forward in the bight of bay. It would have looked, then, as if there were some sort of collusion, some waiting understanding, between the Japanese ashore and those on the schooner.

But he had come from inland of the water-hole. The chances were that he had been on guard over that water-hole. But why? Were the Japanese, instead of pushing on through the night, encamped in some fog-enveloped trough of the dunes not far away? Had they been fearful of losing their way in the night and fog and laid over in some arroyo near by, and set this fellow on guard over their water supply?

I peered ahead, to either side, and even behind me. I thought perhaps I might have left by now their encampment in my rear. But there was no sound of gathered men drifting through the fog, there was no fire twinkling mistily like some feeble nebula. I only noticed that the gray opacity, as I proceeded inland, was gradually dissipating.

The cold breath off the ocean, that had hit the hot seashore ridges and condensed there in fog, was warming as it fluttered mistily inland and lifting into the higher reaches and slowly thinning out. Now I could make out before me the weird, gray-bearded cacti ere I bumped blindly into them.

One big mysterious circumstance was bothering me, subconsciously, all the while. Resolutely I strove to keep it in the back of my mind. I knew, should I seek an explanation of it, I would only flounder about like a man in a fog. It was that singsong of the kimonoed Japanese.

What had he meant by calling me a government agent? An agent of what government—the recognized Mexican government of Carranza, the Government of the United States, or the outlaw government of Villa? And why, because he thought me the agent of some unknown government, should he seek to stab and kill me with that mouse-carved knife?

CHAPTER IX

SHAPES ON THE SAND

THE gray fog was gone. Visible once more in the sky was that piece of moon like a bellying sail. The sky itself was a Maxfield Parrish sky, one deep wash of rich dark blue. The arch of it, concaving majestically over the sand, seemed ever more vast than it had looked over the water; it was illimitable with sublime distances. Hung in the fathomless blue of its void was a perfect dust of stars.

The cold sand glowed under foot now with a luster like that of selenite, a pale saffron gleam that waved over the sandy billows like the dance of sun-motes on shivering grass. Troughs and arroyos swallowed the beams in their black mouths. The malformed cacti and rare clutterings of stone took on fantastic shape and shadow. Greasewood and soap-weed lay in patches, black as your shoes, about arborescent mesquite and white-belled Adam's needles. On the ruffling breaths of wind came the low-throated break and rumble of the distant sea.

I was on the lookout for the pink-striated salt sink in which, that noon, we had unearthed the treasure chest. Suddenly, a goodly distance ahead, I caught the flicker of a light. I though, right off, it was the camp-fire of the Japanese. It might just as well have been that of Mariquita and her Indians. I immediately swerved away from it, toward my left, in the direction I thought was northeast.

When I topped the next ridge of dunes, though I moved about into several different postures, I could get no sight of the bright flicker. I judged thereupon that whoever it was, was camped in some trough between the dunes. More by chance than anything else, I had stumbled into a direct line with that trough and sighted the fire.

On the sudden, as I emerged from the shadows of the hollow at the base of the ridge and made to climb the lustrous acclivity beyond, I heard a shout from above me.

"Gov'mint agent, gov'mint agent!"

Looking up I saw a dwarfish, flapping-hatted Japanese leaping along the top of the ridge, penciled against the sky, his kimono stiff as a board behind him from the waist, his short legs flinging out like those of a scrambling goat.

I raced up the dune in time to see him, in the wash of moonlight, darting and shouting up the hummock just ahead. His inverted bowl of hat gave him the appearance of some black-shelled beetle leaping up the glowing sand. Had I been in possession of my old automatic I could have picked him off easily.

He was swerving to the right in the direction, I judged, of the camp-fire I had glimpsed. I did not try to pursue him. I was armed only with the knife I had obtained from the first

Japanese guard. He was bent, to all appearances, on arousing those men camped in the distant arroyo, undoubtedly his own countrymen, Japanese. He must have known, when he saw me so far inland, that I had won by the first Japanese. He realized probably that I had overcome that Japanese and feared I might do the same to him.

I turned even more toward my left hand and the north. Once I looked back, as the cries of the man sounded to me on a vagrant puff of wind. I could see naught of him. It struck me then what an admirable place for ambush were all these low hillocks and shadowy dingles rolling one into the other.

Why, I asked myself as I pressed on more warily—why should all these Japanese be standing guard out in the sand far from their camp? Could it be that something untoward and evil was going forward in that encampment? Was it an Oriental intrigue, something internationally illegal, that they should so dread the interposition of agents of some government. Why else should they call me a government agent and go screaming away in the night?

IT WAS some time later. As I topped a dune, I saw, topping another dune not a hundred feet away and coming toward me at right-angle, a tall grotesque figure. The high-crowned, wide-brimmed hat and flowing dark robe were silhouetted against the sky for a trice; there was the shiver of moonbeams on steely sword and golden girdle. It was the Mouse-Man, Nidzoumi-San!

I judged he would climb up the dune that intervened between us. Instead of going right on over its back and meeting up with him somewhere near the top, therefore, I turned even more to the left and sought the shadows about its base. I had almost completed the semicircle of the trough when, ahead, I caught a faint snake-like hissing and, as if he had been squatting in the shadows awaiting me, the man rose up in his tall Korean hat and dark mouse-decorated robe.

I made a grab for the knife in my belt. But his hands were crossed before him in characteristic pose, the fingers in either wide sleeve; he was sucking in saliva between his teeth with that hissing sound, and bowing low. There was no move toward the short curved sword in his golden girdle.

"'Scuse, please," he said in fair English, showing small white teeth under the black drooping tails of mustaches, his yellow face grimacing like a wrinkled parchment. "But you mus' go back. I knew you would come along. The low-born, I leave over there about the fire between the dunes——"

There was a glassy tinkle as he slipped the right hand out of the sleeve and waved it toward the south in the vague direction of the invisible camp. As he brought the hand back once more into the sleeve, I noticed the sparkle of glass prayer-beads wrapped around the long yellow fingers.

I noticed something more. It was a dim white figure amid the decorations of tawny and gray mice on the flowing sleeve of the right arm. In Japan a woman of noble descent will wear the family crest embroidered on a white plaque on her kimono in the middle of the back, and a man of blood will flaunt his coat of arms on a similar white plaque upon his right sleeve. It is custom.

But there was no tiny design, such as a tender veined lotus or sprig of plum blossoms, embroidered upon the white plaque on Nidzoumi's right sleeve. In the shadows of the trough the plaque looked smoothly white. It was outlined and shaped like a white mouse, dormant, head between forefeet, long bald tail curled underneath—just like the mouse carved on the ivory handle of the knife in my belt. It was the only white mouse flowering that dark robe of black mice, dun mice, gray mice and golden. Of course, there in the shadows of the trough, it was all very dim.

"Two mile," continued the *samurai*, grimacing and sucking in saliva between his teeth—"two mile, all the way one-piecee sand, I come. I seek the still places to count my beads and say my *orimas*. Buddha, the Enlightened One, has said that truth is reached by solitary contemplation and knowledge can be sent from heart to heart without the use of words. So it came to me in my vigil, like the echo of a great *kane*, a great brass, hung in the canopy of the skies, that you would come all this way tonight. I have waited long to tell you that you mus' go back."

There was glaring discrepancies in the *daimyo's* story. He had made no mention of the Japanese who had fled screaming toward the camp in the hollow. He said that he was out here praying when, in a kind of telepathy, upon his meditative and susceptible mind had impinged the knowledge of my coming. He did not seem to realize that ere he rose up before me out of the shadows I had seen him silhouetted against the sky, coming from the direction of the camp, cutting at right-angles across my path and obviously making for me.

There were other inconsistencies. The occasional use of Japanese words and pidgin-English sounded forced in his speech. I could tell, from the vocabulary he already had exhibited, that, had he a mind to, he could speak perfect English. The blunderings sounded unreal but intentional; like an attempt for a theatric and most alien effect.

He must have misunderstood my wordless cogitation.

"Silence is at the door of consent," he hissed. "You will go back? I think um it is good."

"You don't understand, sir," I returned politely, albeit my hand still nursed the ivory handle of the knife in my belt. "I'm not following you or your party."

"But you belong along that government ship. You mus' go back."

"Government ship!" I repeated excitedly. "Say, is that why your men have been leaping out of the night calling me a government agent? Why, that submarine chaser doesn't belong to the government any more! It was sold by the United States Navy to Jim Hathaway, the skipper. It's a private craft."

"This Zim Hat'way, he is *komodachi taksan takai*—'scuse, please; how should I say—? ah, the very tall friend!"

"Yes, yes," I nodded, beginning to see the light; "he is rather tall, about as tall as you."

"And he wears the uniform with the *kogane* stripe on the sleeve and the *mon* at the neck? Is not that the uniform of the United States Navvee?"

I shook my head with a broad grin. So Jim Hathaway's submarine chaser, with its trim man-o'-war lines, and his obsolescent single-breasted uniform, with the gold braid on the sleeves and silver anchors at the collar, had caused, that night, all the mysterious incidents of the sand.

"That used to be the uniform of the Navy," I explained, "when during the great war Jim Hathaway was an officer of the line. But Jim Hathaway is no longer in the Navy and the regulation uniform has been decidedly changed. Jim's clothes are a Navy uniform no more. But tell me," I added hastily, "is that the reason for your men mistaking me for a government agent? Why should they try to stab me? What have they to fear from the Government of the United States?"

His black buttons of eyes were on me hypnotically. They were peculiar Oriental eyes. The osseous ridges at the thin black brows were so faintly defined, the eyes so slightly inset, that the yellow forehead and upper lids seemed to form one continuous unbroken line. The lids slanted up toward the outer corners and there were double folds of flesh, in the inner corners, overlapping the rims of the upper lids and concealing all sign of lashes. Beneath those beady unblinking hairless eyes the cheek-bones were not prominent, but smoothly yellow, as is usual among high-caste Nipponese.

"It is the immigration laws," he answered with a frankness that seemed altogether too glib. "It is not you, honorable sir, but the immigration laws of your countree that they fear. They doubt that Captain Yasuhara had the right to land them here. From what they speak along me, when we started across the sand, Captain Yasuhara told them that this California was part of the great United States.

"I talked lots, but sight of your little ship of war and the man in *kogane* uniform had convinced them the captain spoke truth. You sabe? Nothing would do but that I string men behind so that you would not follow us. They plenty much afraid now you will send them out of the countree."

The bead dulled in his eyes, as he looked at me, and the lids slipped down like yellow curtains. There came a faint silky rustle as if he were trembling.

"It's in the air," he said, a purring faraway note creeping into his voice. "Vibrations that shake me through and through, vibrations of trouble. I catch um voices on the wind, voices of fear, trembling voices, and big voices, mad and desperate. I can see all those low-born taking council round their fire, now that you have come."

The lids rolled up and the beady, unblinking, hairless eyes were on me once again.

"Honorable, I do not threaten you with what the low-born may do. But I think um plenty. You say you mean no harm. To show that, you mus' go back."

WHAT was all this talk of vibrations and wind voices and second sight? It was of a kinship with the Mouse Man's opening explanation of his telepathic knowledge of my coming. I felt he meant it more deeply than the mere figurative language of the East.

Was he trying to make me believe that he was gifted with some occult powers, some chairvoyant gift, some cap of Fortunatus that would allow his mind to see and sense what was going forward in that camp, at least a good mile away, while his physical body remained in the shadowy trough?

It struck me forcibly that he was seeking to frighten me into submission to his wishes, not so much by threats, as more by pertaining to a lofty plane of obscure Oriental black magic. The setting was with him.

There were the lustrous slopes of sand on every side, the shadows of the trough, the fathomless starry blue arch above and himself with tall Korean hat, mouse-decorated robe and faint snake-like hissings. Even the threatrical way of speaking, his use of Japanese words and pidgin-English, were a subtle addition to the cunning weirdness.

I felt a hot revulsion for all this Oriental deceit and abracadabra. This Japanese Cagliostro was altogether too oily, suave and wily. I'd show him he couldn't frighten me into obedience with all his fee-faw-fum business.

"Go back?" I repeated as if surprized. "I can't go back. I have work to do on the uplands beyond this desert. I give you my word, I am not pursuing you or your party. What

more do you want?" I waxed sarcastic. "Must I get a passport from you to cross this sand? I tell you," I ended with decision, "I won't go back!"

I put hand on the ivory handle of the knife in my belt. But the *samurai* made no move of offense. He screwed up his yellow face, showed the small white teeth, sucked in saliva with that snake-like hissing, and bowed low before me, removing his hands from the wide sleeves and spreading them out, palms up.

I heard a faint clicking as if he were no longer hissing to show pleasure but, now that his bowed head was shadowed by the Korean hat, were snapping his teeth together in poorly suppressed anger. And then I saw, in the dimness, an odd and uncanny thing.

In turning the wrists to spread his hands, palms up, he had flung out of sight that embroidered white mouse. Well, now I saw, creeping up his right sleeve, that white mouse! It was alive. The flick of the wrist had disturbed it. I could see the tiny red eyes of the rodent, the smoothly white crawling body, the peculiarly bald red tail. The clicking sound came from its sharp claws, as they caught in the rich cloth of the sleeve.

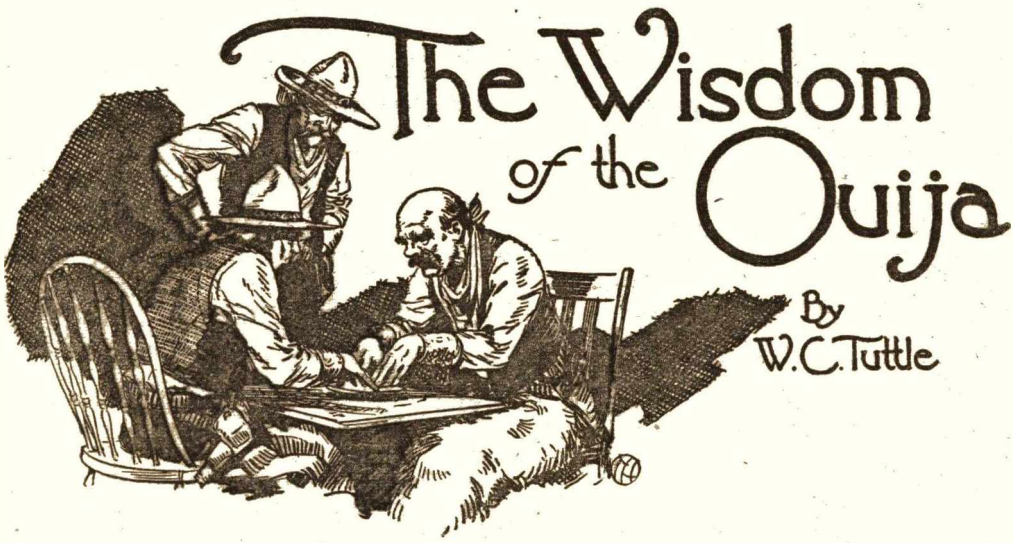
The hair tightened over my scalp with much the same squeamishness I had experienced that night, at dread of attack from the slimy sharks. Only this was more unnerving, more subtly uncouth and offensive.

The white mouse reached the bent shoulder and vanished, as if behind the man's neck. I expected to see it reappear on the other shoulder and go creeping, perhaps down the opposite sleeve. Instead and all at once, the tall Korean hat tilted over a trifle, as the ratty creature crawled underneath and inside.

I stood fascinated, unbreathing. And then the Japanese lifted upright and a pair of beady unblinking hairless eyes—the outer corners pulled up, the inner corners, double-folded like a snake's—were looking into mine, and a soft hissing voice was insisting:

" 'Scuse, please, but you mus' go back!"

TO BE CONTINUED



Author of "Precedents in Piperock," "Another Ace for Ananias," etc.

ME AND "Dirty Shirt" Jones stops there in the trail and watches "Scenery" Sims gallop up to us, wild-eyed and weary. He almost falls over one of our burros, and stands there blowing and heaving, looking back up the trail like he was scared plumb to death.

Scenery is one of them squeaky little half-baked hunks of humanity who everybody feels so sorry for that they won't kill. Right now he's the sheriff of Yaller Rock County, and from the looks of him he ain't figuring his official title as much protection.

Then cometh a larger figure of a man, galloping down the trail towards us. He's hitting heavy on his left foot like he'd come quite a ways, and when he skids up to us we recognize "Wick" Smith, our general merchandiser of the city of Piperock. Wick is about seven-eighths out of wind. He grabs a mouthful of mountain air and chaws it plentiful while he glares at poor little Scenery.

"Kuk-keep off'n mum-me," pants Scenery, waving his arms.

"You-you bub-buster of huh-huh-homes!" weeps Wick, the tears running into his whiskers. "You—you——"

"I ain't," wails Scenery. "I ain't none such, Wick."

"Spirits don't lie, —— yuh," howls Wick. "They can't lie, I tell yuh."

"That one did," wheezes Scenery. "I'd tell it to its face, too."

"Look out," warns Wick. "You can't monkey with the dead, Scenery."

"Aw, —— you and your living ghosts," howls Scenery, and then the race starts all over again.

Scenery ducks between two of our burros and starts back towards town, and Wick lets out a whoop and starts after him.

Wick had plenty of time to go around them burros, but I reckon he figured he could go where Scenery did. Wick was wrong. That Lodestone burro must 'a' felt sorry for Scenery, or maybe he wasn't set, but he sure was primed when Wick tried to pass his south end. We propped Wick up against a rock and felt him over for busted bones, but found none.

"Shall we pack him to town?" I asks, but Dirty Shirt shakes his head.

"Let him rest in peace, Ike. We don't know what this is all about, so we'd better keep neutral as much as possible."

We stirred up them burros and topped the hill, when we meets Scenery Sims once more. Scenery is shy one sleeve of his shirt and seems to be running regardless. I have my doubts if he even seen us this time.

We stops and watched him fade off down the trail, towards where we left Wick, and then we turn to meet Mrs. Wick Smith. Mrs. Smith is too fat to run, but she can hurry. Dirty Shirt flagged her with his hat, and she shuffled to a stop. She's got Scenery's sleeve in her hand, and she mops her forehead plentiful with it and wheezes wofully.

"Tryin' to reduce?" asks Dirty Shirt, respectful-like.

"Huh-huh-huh-huh—" she pants.

"Warm today, Mrs. Smith," says I.

"Whu-whu-where's—huh-huh-huh—Wicksie" she whistles. Dirty points down the trail.

"Dud-dead?"

"Not dead, but sleepin'," says Dirty.

"Did-did he catch Sus-Scenery?"

"Not the first time," says I, "but Scenery seems to have gone back to give him another chance. What in —— is it all about?"

But Mrs. Smith shoved them burros to one side and waddled off down the trail, waving that shirt sleeve and puffing like a compound engine.

Me and Dirty looks foolish at each other and then pokes on up the trail towards Piperock.

If you don't know where Piperock is—be happy in your ignorance. It's a town where ignorance is bliss and where it's disastrous to have your gun stick. Old "Half-Mile" Smith says that Piperock is one place where nobody has ever been hanged by mistake—they all deserve it.

One thing you can say for Piperock: She never does anything half-way. When that town starts to pull off something—it's pulled. It may cost suffering and regrets, but she's there to the bitter end, like a dose of quinin.

Me and Dirty Shirt had been hunting for placer up around the head Whisperin' Creek and are just getting back home. As usual we didn't find nothing but indications of hard work.

Why Scenery Sims, Wick Smith and Mrs. Smith are seeking each other's gore is beyond us, but we don't marvel much, being as anything is apt to happen in Piperock.

We drifts into the main street, where we meets "Mighty" Jones.

Mighty don't welcome us as he should, so we chides him about it.

"I ain't got no cheer in my carcass," says Mighty sad-like. "I've just had a message from my wife."

"Your wife?" grunts Dirty Shirt. "You ain't got no wife, have yuh?"

"I dunno."

Mighty scratches his head and squints at us. "I dunno, Dirty. I ain't never been married as I knows about, but you can't get messages from somethin' yuh never had, can yuh?"

"From your wife?" I asks.

I've knowed Mighty for ten years, and he's never had any wife during that time.

"That's what the message said, Ike."

"What did she say to yuh, Mighty?" asks Dirty.

"She said, 'Go to ——; this place is full.'"

"Must 'a' been your wife," admits Dirty, "or somebody what knows yuh well."

WE LEFT Mighty standing there in the street, feeling bad about his message, and pokes up to my cabin—mine and "Magpie's." Magpie Simpkins, my pardner, is another misfit of humanity, being as he's so tall that he has to sew an addition to the ends of his pant legs to enable said pant legs to enter the tops of his boots.

He's thirty inches around the waist, wears hair on his upper lip, and the top of his head is a vast storehouse of ideas with parts missing.

Me and Dirty prods the burros up to the open front door and looks inside. There sits Magpie and "Buck" Masterson the saloonkeeper, facing each other.

On their laps is a flat board. On top of that is a smaller board with three spindling legs. Magpie and Buck have got their finger-tips on this little board, and are both setting straight and stiff, peering at the ceiling.

Sort of setting between them and on the far side is Judge Steele. The judge has got a pencil and paper, and he watches the game real close, putting something down on the paper every little while. Pretty soon he says:

"'Hard-Pan' Hawkins is talking. Dirty Shirt Jones stole calves——"

"Just a minute," interrupts Dirty Shirt. "Who is passing out all this information, judge?"

The three of them turn around and looks at us. Dirty Shirt is sort of toying with a .45 Colt and acts like he is wishful to be answered.

"Howdy, boys," says Magpie sad-like.

"Howdy ——!" snaps Dirty Shirt. "Who says I stole calves?"

"Hard-Pan Hawkins," replies the judge.

"Lay it on to a dead man," grunts Dirty. "What's the matter with you snake-hunters?"

"You must 'a' stole calves, Dirty," says Buck accusing-like. "The dead don't lie."

"They don't need to," explains Magpie.

"Hard-Pan Hawkins never needed any cause to lie," says Dirty. "He's a —— liar—alive or dead."

"Just a moment," interrupts the judge. "We can prove things, can't we? We'll have Hard-Pan answer Dirty's accusations."

Magpie and Buck put their fingers on that contraption again, and Judge Steele says—

"Hard-Pan, did Dirty Shirt steal calves?"

The judge watches the thing and puts down the letters. Then he reads—

"Dirty Shirt also stole cows."

Bang!

I seen Magpie and Buck yank backwards, and Judge Steele fell backwards under the bunk. I seen pieces of board splinter against the wall, and when Magpie stood up a lot of splinters fell off his knees. He glares at Dirty and then howls—

"What did you do that for?"

"——!" yelps Dirty, waving his gun. "What did yuh think I was going to do? Now, you danged liars, stand up on your hind legs and talk fluently. What is that dingus?"

"That thing you busted was a method of communication between us and the spirit world," says Magpie. "It brought us in touch with them what ain't visible, but you busted —— out of it, and there's only one more in Yaller Rock County."

"Who's got that other one?" I asks.

"'Hassayampa' Harris and 'Tombstone' Todd."

"Where did yuh get 'em?" asks Dirty.

"Fortune-teller sold 'em to Scenery Sims, and he sold 'em to us for fifty dollars per each. Dang you, Dirty, what did yuh want to shoot it up thataway for? That was a awful thing to do."

"I hope Hard-Pan heard the shot," says Dirty. "I hate a dead horse-thief what can't keep his danged mouth shut."

"You're going to get in bad with the hereafter, Dirty," proclaims the judge, poking his head out from under the bed. "I won't be surprized if Hard-Pan haunts you, being as you cut —— out of his conversation."

"How does the danged thing work?" I asks.

"It ain't no 'danged' thing, Ike," says Magpie. "That was a wee-gee board, the same of which puts us in touch with them what is beyond the veil. Honest to gosh! Mighty Jones had a message from his wife."

"I reckon Wick Smith has had one from his wife by this time," says Dirty Shirt.

"Is she dead?" gasps the judge.

"Not unless she runs herself to death after Scenery Sims."

Just then a shadow darkens the door, and we looks around to see Hassayampa and Tombstone. They acts sort of awed-like, and then Tombstone says—

"We made the thing work, Magpie, and it said that Hard-Pan Hawkins had a message for you."

"Hard-Pan Hawkins?" gasps Magpie, and the two nods.

"You ought to go to him, Magpie," says Dirty Shirt.

"Why, he's dead," says Magpie.

"Sure," says Dirty, "and you ought to be."

"Wait just a minute," says the judge. "This is interesting. Where's your wee-gee, Tombstone?"

"Me and Hassayampa put it in the bank, judge."

"Keep it there. I've got a scheme. Does Curlew or Paradise know anything about spirits?"

"Spirits frumenti," says Buck. "Educated above the average."

"The scheme," says the judge solemn-like, "interests Magpie, Buck, Hassayampa, Tombstone and myself. The rest of you are *e pluribus unum*."

"Where is your board?" asks Hassayampa.

"Dirty Shirt split it with a bullet," says Buck. "Busted it all to ——"

"My ——!" gasps Tombstone. "Busted it? I'd sure hate to have that deed upon my soul."

"No danged hunk of lumber can accuse me of stealin' cows," complains Dirty Shirt. "You and your messages from the dead can go——"

But they shut the door by main strength, and me and Dirty Shirt sets down on the steps.

JUST then cometh Scenery Sims. Poor Scenery looks like he had been too close to an accident when it happened. He sets down and wipes the tears off the end of his little blue nose. He looks behind him like he was plumb scared of his life, and then he whines:

"I've been hounded too danged much—you

know it? What in —— does Hard-Pan Hawkins know about the condition of my heart? No —— rustler ghost can slip over anything like that on yours truly, Lindhardt Cadwallader Sims, E-squire."

"Rustler?" asks Dirty. "Why for rustler ghost, Scenery?"

"That—squeegee thing," squeaks Scenery. "Know what I mean? Either Hard-Pan is a —— liar or don't know what he's talkin' about."

"You might tell us about it," says I.

"Hassayampa and Tombstone was doin' the herdin'," says Scenery, like he was giving us a page out of his wicked past. "Me and Wick Smith was lookin' on. *Sabe?* Ricky Henderson was taking down the message from the dead. Well, it hasn't much to talk about until it said that Hard-Pan had a message for Wick Smith. That —— horse-thief said—

"'Your wife is in love with somebody else.'"

"Wick pulled his gun and leaned over the board and says—

"'What's his name?'"

Scenery licks his lips and takes a deep breath.

"What name did it give?" I asks.

Scenery squints at me and rubs his nose.

"What in —— do you reckon I've been doin' all this runnin' for?"

"Are Wick and his wife reconciled?" I asks.

Scenery seems to let the question soak in, and then says:

"I dunno what you mean, Ike, but they're anything you want to call 'em. Hard-Pan is plumb loco if he thinks for a minute that I covets Mrs. Smith."

"Ike," says Dirty Shirt, "it appears to me that Piperock has been stung with the ghost bug. They're monkeying with the dead too much to suit me. Let's me and you go over to my cabin and hole up until they gets through takin' advice from them what has passed on."

We did. Dirty's cabin is far from the maddening strife, but we gets echoes from the dim and distant past even out there. "Sad" Samuels drifts in from Curlew and eats with us. Sad appears very despondent, and we asks why.

"Revelations," says Sad. "Why don't they let sleepin' dogs lie? Tomorrow night is Revelation Night in Piperock. Ain't yuh heard about it? Yeah, that's what they call it. Them bills says:

"This is the Night when the Souls of the Departed Comes Back to Answer all Questions. Nothin' is Concealed from Them Beyond the Veil. Get a Front Seat and Hear Strange Truths. Admission One Dollar and Four Bits. Come One. Come All. Music by Thatcher's Orchester. Singing."

"Who starts all the revelation stuff, Sad?" asks Dirty.

"Magpie, Buck, Hassayampa, Tombstone and Judge Steele."

"That was the scheme Judge Steele had," says Dirty. "Dog-goned law-shark saw a chance to make money out of the dead."

"Why are you despondent, Sad?" I asks.

"Whyfor? 'Cause it ain't nobody's business to listen to dead ones. I'm ag'in' this here message stuff—me. Yuh can't go gunnin' for no lying corpse, can yuh? Ain't no way to make 'em admit they lied."

"Suppose they don't lie?" says Dirty, and Sad nods.

"That's the —— of it. You fellers better get tickets if yuh want a chance to set down."

Then cometh Magpie. Deep in my heart I can see disaster coming my way. Any old time that *hombre* comes looking for me I can hear the grass growing over me, and know that Ike Harper's future is in the sere and yaller leaf.

This time I steeled my nerves and shook my gun loose. He leaned against the side of the door and contemplates us more in sorrow than in anger. His eyes fills with emotion as he gazes upon my face, and I turn away—to see if my gun is loaded.

"How's the dead ones coming along, Magpie?" asks Dirty Shirt.

"All right," says Magpie; "but I'd be more respectful if I was you."

"Respectful for who? Hard-Pan Hawkins?"

"You ought to respect the dead."

"Not when they accuse me of rustlin'," says Dirty Shirt. "If you gets any more messages from Hard-Pan you tell him for me that he's a liar, and that I'll bet he's stealin' ghost cows every chance he gets."

"There are no cow-thieves in the hereafter, Dirty," says Magpie solemn-like.

"Then that wasn't Hard-Pan, that's a cinch."

"How and when did Hard-Pan demise out?" I asks.

"I dunno. Slim Hawkins, who is his cousin, said that Hard-Pan went to Canada and outwitted the Mounted Police by dying before they caught him."

"There ain't nothin' concealed from the dead," pronounced Magpie. "They can look right through anything. *Sabe?*"

"It was danged hard to conceal anything from Hard-Pan when he was alive," says Dirty, "and I'll bet that *hombre* works overtime where he is now."

The three of us sets there and sort of thinks it over. Then Magpie says—

"Ike, have you heard about Revelation Night?"

"Seems to me Sad Samuels was weepin' about something like that."

"It's going to be a wonderful revelation," says Magpie soft-like. "It is going to——"

"All right!" says I. "Let her revelate, Magpie. Me and Dirty——"

"You mean you're not interested in this

chance to hear something that you never heard before? Ain't you got nobody what has gone hence that you would like to ask a question of some kind?"

"Nope. I know too danged much now, Magpie."

"I was sent over here by the committee," says Magpie slow-like, "to ask you to assist us, Ike. There has been rumors that me and Hassayampa, Tombstone, Buck and the judge is liable to sort of cold-deck folks on the result of said messages, and we figure that your reputation for square dealin', upright methods, et cettery, might allay their suspicions. Curlew and Paradise are coming in bunches. We want you to take down and read them messages as they occur. I reserved a front seat for Dirty Shirt."

"I read them messages from the dear departed and announce to whom and from which they emanates, eh?" I asks, and Magpie nods.

"That's the idea, Ike. It will be interesting and instructive, and the same of which is new, novel and interesting to all mankind and women adults."

"What assurance has I got that I won't be scalped by some cowboy who ain't respecting the dead?"

"Shucks, this is too solemn a occasion for such levity, Ike. Can't yuh just set and wonder what spirit hands is guiding them messages? Uncanny but wonderful in the extreme. I longs for tomorrow night to come. Will ye act as messenger between the dead and the livin', Ike?

"There will be music and singing, and speeches too numerous to mention. Piperock is leadin' the country in entertainment, and this will put us so far in the lead that none of 'em can even trail our dust."

"Nobody ever helped themselves much by monkeying with the dead," states Dirty Shirt. "My idea is to let 'em alone, but if yuh won't—I'll take that front seat, Magpie, and help stir up a few skillingtons myself."

"What in —— is a skillington?" asks Magpie.

"The dried framework of a human being, also animiles," says Dirty.

"My gosh, you ought to study astronomy before you monkey with spirits."

"Astronomy means stars," says Magpie disgusted-like. "There ain't going to be no stars. *Sabe?*"

"I dunno," says I. "I never monkeyed with a Piperock entertainment without seeing a few, Magpie."

"This is too pious for arguments, Ike. There won't be no hurrah stuff. The hall will be darkened, and everything will be still as possible."

"How did Scenery and Wick Smith come out?"

"Scenery ain't come out yet, Ike. He's inside the jail, and Wick waits on the steps for him. It don't pay to monkey with affections, you betcha."

THEN cometh Revelation Night. Yaller Rock County surprized me. I never knowed there was so many people in the county what was interested in messages from the dead.

"Hair-Oil" Heppner and "Liniment" Lucas pilgrims plumb from Granite to be in on the deal, and I figures it's something of interest to pull a couple of rawhides like them.

Bill Thatcher brings his orchestra, which holes up near the old town of Yaller Rock. Curlew and Paradise percolates into town, and by dark the hamlet of Piperock has more folks on the street then ever before. Buck does a thriving business, being as Yaller Rock folks believe in internal spirits a heap.

"Old Testament" Tilton holds forth in discourse, but don't get much of a audience, being as he's antagonistic to spiritual things thataway.

"You know danged well that no one ever hears from the dead," says he.

"I heard from my wife," says Mighty Jones. "I sure did, Testament."

"You never had a wife," declares Testament.

"Which makes it more wonderful than ever," whoops Mighty. "Proves that it's able to do more than the directions says it can. Dawgone it, I expects to have a family before I gets through."

They've got a sheet across the front of the stage in the Mint Hall, and behind the sheet they've got a few chairs for the main ingredients of the show to set upon. Magpie and Buck are to handle the contraption, while me and Judge Steele reads her off as she writes.

Then I'm to announce the results. Hassayampa Harris sets on one side of the stage and Tombstone Todd on the other. In front of the stage sets the orchestra, and from there on to the back of the room is Yaller Rock humanity.

The room is sort of twilight, and everything is so silent and solemn that I'm almost ready to believe that she's going to pass into the history as the one time that Piperock got past without casualties. I say "almost."

We're just about to pull back the curtain when I hears Hair-Oil Heppner's hooch-husky voice drawl out:

"Whew! I didn't know you was going to bring 'em here to speak for themselves."

"What's the matter?" asks somebody.

"Matter? Smell, you danged fool! The dear departed are among us."

Tombstone pulls back the curtain, and we looks into that gloomy audience.

"Say," says Hair-Oil, standing up, "I paid one dollar and four bits to get in here and set down, but if you don't make 'Pole-Cat' Perkins

keep his boots on I wants my money back. *Sabe?*"

"I've got a bunion," complains Polecat. "Feet dang near kill me."

"Dang near ——!" grunts Hair Oil. "I'd tell a man that you've been dead for over a week."

Old Judge Steele stand up and walks to the edge of the stage.

"Feller mortals, this is a solemn occasion and should be respected. Let all earthly things drift for a while and silently help us peer behind the veil from which nobody ever returneth back.

"Up here on the stage we have the means of getting word from dear departed souls which are locked in the bosom of eternity. Everything is an open book to the spirits. Now has anybody any departed soul which they'd like to talk with?"

"Ask Polecat Perkins why he didn't die with his boots on," says Hair-Oil.

"Haw! Haw! Haw!" roars Pete Gonyer. When Pete haws it shakes the whole hall.

"Lay off that 'haw-haw' stuff!" yelps Tombstone. "Ain't yuh got no respect for the dead?"

"Could I get another message from my wife?" asks Mighty Jones.

Magpie and Buck puts their fingers on that little three-legged table, and Judge Steele says—

"Wee-gee, is there any message from Mrs. Mighty Jones?"

The little table moves around sort of foolish like and points to—

"YES."

"Who is talkin'," asks the Judge, and it spells out—

"H-A-R-D-P-A-N H-A-W-K-I-N-S."

"Hard-Pan Hawkins talkin'," announces the judge.

"Just a moment," says Dirty Shirt. "Ghost or no ghost, I want to say right now that Hard-Pan Hawkins is a —— liar."

"Hard-Pan Hawkins might 'a' lied when alive, but the dead don't lie," states the judge. "Hard-Pan was a rustler, and very friendly with certain folks in Yaller Rock County, therefore able to disclose a heap about Mighty Jones. Now, Mighty, what does you want to ask Hard-Pan about your wife?"

There ain't no answer. Pretty soon some feller from down near Paradise says—

"If you mean the feller who asked about his wife—he went out."

"Anybody wishful to ask Hard-Pan a question?" asks the judge.

"Ask him who helped him steal them Triangle cows," says Johnny Meyers, who owns the Triangle outfit.

"Just a moment," says "Doughgod" Smith, standing up in the twilight.

"'Pears to me that we paid our money for entertainment."

"Which is correct and proper," agrees "Swede" Johnson. "I don't like to pay good money under false pretense."

"I'm all through if this keeps up," says Art Wheeler. "This ain't even instructive. Come on, boys."

Then Doughgod, Swede and Art single-filed out of the place.

"Could you get in touch with Hard-Pan again?" asks Wick Smith.

"You let that —— liar of a horse-thief alone!" squeaks Scenery Sims. "I never coveted your wife, Wick Smith, and I never will. By grab, any old time I want to get married I'll pick something besides a waddlin', duck-footed—uh——"

Crash!

"Ow-w-w-w-w-w! Leggo! Leg—ug—ug——"

COMES the sound of something falling down-stairs, and then Wick's voice—

"The —— fool might 'a' paid some attention to who was behind him."

"'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned,'" quotes the judge.

"Especially when they're husky like Mrs. Smith, judge. Me and her ain't speakin' until we has further communication with Hard-Pan. I hope she didn't hop on him after he lit at the bottom of the stairs."

"Does you mean to tell me that you can ask that contraption a question and have it answered by the dead man?" asks "Jay Bird" Whittaker, standing up to ask his question.

Jay Bird owns the Cross J outfit and a couple of banks, and a grouch against humanity.

"She is the medium through which we speaks with them what has gone before, J. B." says Magpie. "Ask and she shall be told to you. Any special ghost yuh wants to wau-wau with?"

"What ones yuh got, Magpie?"

Magpie and Buck gets into position again, and the judge asks the board who's going to talk. It jiggles around and spells out—

"H-A-R-D-P-A-N H-A-W-K-I-N-S."

I announces such.

"That windy son of a gun again!" wails Dirty. "Tell him to get off the wire and give an honest ghost a chance."

"What does you wish to ask, J. B.?" inquires the judge.

"Ask him," says J. B., "whether he stuck up the Paradise bank last Summer or if not, who did?"

"Wait a minute," says "Half-Mile" Smith from the back of the room. "Natcherally he'd lie about it if he done it, and anyway it's all done with and forgotten long ago. I don't see why you *hombres* can't ask up-to-date questions."

"I'm up-to-date myself," opines "Cactus" Calkins, "and such questions make me mad.

Might as well ask Hard-Pan who built the Spinks of Egypt. Shucks, this here entertainment makes me tired."

The door opens and Half-Mile and Cactus went outside.

"Has anybody got a up-to-date question to ask?" queries the judge.

Bill Thatcher stands up and clears his throat.

"Last Spring I rode a pinto bronc into Piperock, and some son of a gun stole my saddle. I rose up and howled loud-like against such proceedings, and then went on the hunt for the saddle, which I didn't find. When I came back the bronc was gone. Maybe Hard-Pan knows something about it; eh?"

"Haw! Haw! Haw!" whoops Pete Gonyer. "That's Bill's idea of a up-to-date question. Haw! Haw! Haw! I'm tired of such fool questions; ain't you 'Ricky'?"

"Bored plumb to death," admits Ricky Henderson, and the two of 'em crawls back through the crowd and went outside.

"Never mind the question, judge," says Bill. "I'm beginnin' to be a mind-reader."

Biff! Swat!

Comes the commotion about half-way to the back, and then Hair-Oil's husky voice—

"I've stood all I can—bunions or no bunions!"

"Did you ask a question?" asks Buck, who is a little hard of hearing.

"You might ask Hard-Pan if he has met Polecat yet," says Hair-Oil, and goes outside.

"This here meetin' don't seem to come out right," states the judge. "We're failin' to entertain because folks don't ask the questions right. Is there anybody what wishes a word or two with dear departed to be sent through the medium of Hard-Pan Hawkins' ghost?"

Old Sam Holt stands up and clears his throat.

"Yuh might ask my wife what she'd advise me to do."

"What about?" asks Magpie.

"She'd know what I got on my mind. I ain't got no faith in that ghost stuff, but I'll take a chance."

Man, that little three-legged jigger sure spelled out that message fast. I stood up and read her aloud.

"Mind your own —— business."

"That's Emmeline!" gasps old Sam. "By—— that's her all right!"

"I'd sure hate to have my wife pussyfootin' around with a ghost like Hard-Pan Hawkins," observes Bill McFee.

"Easy there, Bill," warns old Sam. "Your wife is dead, remember."

"My wife is in heaven," pronounces Bill.

Bang!

I sees the flash of that six-shooter, and immediate and soon makes a little prayer for the soul of Bill McFee, but I was a little previous. I reckon old Sam was too mad to hit Bill, or somebody jiggled his arm, 'cause I seen "Hoot" Gillis rise up from among the orchestra. Hoot is tall and willowy, and has arms about five feet long, and he swung that squeeze organ from the floor and crowned old Sam with it.

Comes the swish of the organ, a jumble of notes mixed with the crash, and old Sam Holt forgot his insult.

"He drilled my accor-deen from end to end!" wailed Hoot. "Gosh hang him! It won't never play another note!"

"Yuh might get Hard-Pan to send yuh a few notes," opines "Telescope" Tolliver. "I reckon a dead accordion has as good a chance for the happy huntin'-ground as a horse-thief."

"Speakin' of hoss-thieves," observes Zeb Abernathy, "reminds me that maybe this here Hard-Pan can tell me something about them eight horses what was stole from my corral over on the Picket Rope about a month ago."

"He wouldn't know," says "Chuck" Warner, "'cause he left here a year ago."

"Yuh can't expect a dead horse-thief to know everything, can yuh?" asks Telescope.

"Nobody'd believe him anyway 'cause it would be guesswork," wheezes "Muley" Bowles, who weighs too much to ride and is too fat to walk.

"Aw, shucks, let's go home," yawns Henry Peck. "It's bad enough to have to talk with live horse-thieves, let alone talkin' with a dead one."

And four of them get up and files out of the hall.

"I had certain suspicions," says Zeb, and then sets down.

"As long as questions is being asked," remarks Hank Padden, owner of the Seven A outfit, "I might rise to ask if the departed but unlamented Hard-Pan can give me a list of the men in Yaller Rock who ride with runnin'irons or extra cinch-rings on their saddles."

"That's a —— of a question to ask!" snorts "Weinie" Lopp, and he walked out of the door in the lead of about twenty upright citizens.

"That wasn't hardly a fair question, Hank," says Magpie.

"It sure as —— got a direct reply," grinned Hank Padden. "I takes off my hat to the name of Hard-Pan Hawkins."

"Feller citizens," says the judge, "so far the spiritual end of this here entertainment is null and void. We ain't had no chance to demonstrate the ability of the spirits to talk to us. Give us a question.

"How many calves will my outfit brand next year?" asks Padden.

Judge Steele puts the question to the board, and I reads the answer—

"Depends on who is looking."

"Take off your hat to Hard-Pan Hawkins," says Tombstone. "He sure is one enlightened *hombre*."

"Ask him how many of my calves Hank got last year," says Meyers.

"Never mind, never mind!" howls Hank. "Johnny Meyers lifted my——"

"Easy, easy," advises Magpie. "Set down—both of yuh!"

"Bein' wishful to *sabe* some things, I'd ask Hard-Pan to tell me why my cows all comes in calfless last year while Triangle and Seven A cows all has twins," states Zeb Abernathy. "If I've got calfless cows, all well and good, but if I've got to handcuff my calves to their maws I want to know it. *Sabe?*"

"Same here," states Jay Bird Whittaker. "I got three calves last year, and I had about seven hundred cows.

"You was —— lucky, at that," says Zeb. "Lucky to get your cows back."

"Who hit me?" wails a voice back in the room. "Say, who hit me? Where's my boots?"

"Ask Hard-Pan Hawkins," says Liniment Lucas's voice.

There is silence for a moment, and then Pole-Cat's voice—

"Zasso?"

Swish!

THAT'S the worst of working in the twilight—you don't see all the little details. Pole-Cat must 'a' had his sights raised for about five hundred yards, 'cause he couldn't 'a' come anywhere near Liniment Lucas.

I seen Judge Steele drop flat. The boot sailed over him and hits Tombstone right at the root of his nose. Tombstone sort of shivers like he was chilly, and sets up straight in his chair.

"Yuh might give Hard-Pan a rest and get some answers from Tombstone Todd," states Liniment.

Tombstone sort of chuckles, and pats himself on the knees. Then he gets up, and before anybody can stop him he steps right off the stage and falls into Bill Thatcher.

Comes a crash of brittle wood, the snap of strings, and I knows we're going to be spared the agony of "Sweet Marie" on the bull fiddle. Bill Thatcher limps out of the mess with the wreck of that fiddle in his hand and glared up at us. Then he holds out the remains.

"Magpie Simpkins, you lied to me!" he wails. "You said there wasn't goin' to be no rough stuff. You said—aw——this ghost show!"

Bill must 'a' been peeved over that busted fiddle. Bill is slow to anger, but a artist like Bill is tempermental. Bill done just what I'd 'a' done, only I'd 'a' shot straight and hit Magpie with that remnant of busted chords instead of hitting a innocent bystander—which was me.

It hit me in the Adam's apple, and I felt the seeds go one way and the core the other, but I kept my balance. I unhooked one string off my right ear, took the thing in both hands and throwed it as hard as I could. I didn't care who I hit—just so I hit somebody.

You've heard of killing two birds with one stone, ain't yuh? Well, I danged near killed two cow-men with one bull-fiddle neck. Zeb Abernathy and Jay Bird Whittaker must 'a' been going to leave, and I got 'em both, but I didn't know much about it until afterwards 'cause Judge Steele tripped me and I fell over the edge and lit on top of "Frenchy" Deschamps, the jew's-harp virtuoso.

They tell me that Zeb, when he felt that bull-fiddle neck caress his anatomy, picked up a vacant chair and hung it around Hank Padden's neck, and just then some trouble seems to start.

Frenchy is also tempermental, I reckon, being a soloist on one of them things what sounds like a Digger Injun with congested lungs trying to sing his swan song. Also, Frenchy is large enough to know better, but I reckon I sort of took him by surprize when I lit all over him.

Anyway he got me by the ankle and the cartridge-belt and seemed to sort of pitch me high and handsome. The going up wasn't so bad, and the coming down was tol'able, but I lit among four disgruntled cow-men who were settling their differences out of court, and the landing was what you'd describe as "kay-o-tick."

I lit with my legs around Hank Padden's neck, but before I had time to spur a cinch I hears Jay Bird yelp—

"Here's a message from the livin'!"

And I gets a flash of a beautiful light and something seems to rattle down along my nervous system. I retained enough of my natural senses to enable me to withdraw from the conflict, and I finds myself crawling down a crooked aisle of twisted seats with a chair around my neck and interfering with my progress.

I finally decides that I'd better get rid of that toggle if I ever expects to get anywhere in this life; so I sets up and yanks at the chair. Just then a voice very close to me says—

"By ——, I'm goin' to hang on to one end of this'n until I makes a hit."

I rolls my eyes upward, and there is Pole-Cat Perkins kneeling on a chair beside me, and he's got his other boot in both hands. He's got the most wonderful pair of purple eyes I ever seen. He looks down at me and raises up that boot, but stops. He lays down the boot, hitches a little further forward, and then spits on his hands.

"I may be all wrong," says he soft-like, "but I know I've only got stren'th for one wallop, and I'll make that a good one."

He picks up that boot, sort of takes a few hitches to relax his muscles, and then lifts the

boot, heel down. I know how a fool sparrow feels when a diamond-back gets it hypnotized.

I knowed that Polecat was going to bounce that boot right off my alabaster brow. I knowed he was going to plant that heavy heel, spur and all, upon my lily-white forehead, and I wondered what —— lie he'd figure out to tell the jury. I wondered if they'd ever get any messages from me with their danged wee-gee board, and I mentally boycotted 'em right then.

No messages would they ever get from me; and what was more, I intended to frame up with Hard-Pan to incriminate every danged one of 'em from Scenery Sims to Magpie Simpkins. Ain't it funny what a feller will think of when he's about to be booted off this mortal coil?

I figured that Polecat's face would be the last one I'd ever look upon in this life; so I looked up at him. It's —— to have to shuffle out knowing that your mortal eyes has got to finish their duties by gazing upon a face like that, but—well, I looked.

Polecat wasn't looking at me! I dragged myself half out of that busted chair and stared up at Polecat, who is froze solid in one position—with the boot raised over his head, and looking straight toward the back of the room.

I tries to look too, but a leg of the chair got into my ear and handicaps me. I glances up at Polecat again. His mouth drops open like somebody had cut the draw-string out of his lower jaw, and he gasps—almost a prayer, "My——!" and lets fly with that boot.

Then he hops off that chair and lit right on my neck with his heel, and squashed all the sensenibilities out of me for a second.

Somebody stumbled and fell over me and then got up and staggered ahead.

"Keep away from me!" yelps Hank Padden's voice, and then comes a rattle and a crash, and four or five men wiped their feet on me in passing.

I grabbed the last boot to hit me, and its owner sat down on my face. I twisted out from under him, and looked into the face of Dirty Shirt Jones.

Dirty ain't looking at me a-tall. No sir, Dirty Shirt ain't with us, except materially.

"What's the matter?" I asks, and I finds that my voice is weak as shoestring soup.

Dirty looks at me and licks his lips. He tries to say something, but the words don't seem to come. Comes a sound of folks moving, and I turns my head to see Magpie and Buck and the judge walking toward the door. They don't seem to mind the seats which impede them.

I sees Magpie stumble over some chairs, but Buck helps him up, and they goes out the door without saying a word. Everything looks sort of spooky in that weak light.

I turns and looks at Dirty Shirt. His eyes are closed, like he was praying, but pretty soon he shakes his head and looks at me.

"It ain't no use," he mutters; "I can't think of a darned word that fits my case."

"What do you want—cuss words?" I asks.

"Sh-h-h-h!" hisses Dirty. "Don't be sacrilegious, you —— fool!"

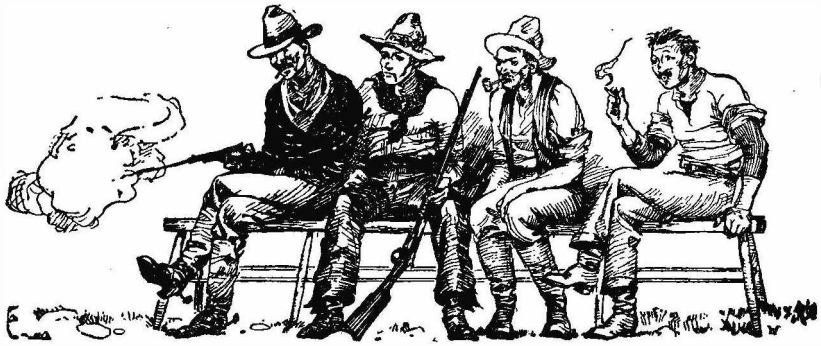
Then he unhooks from me, crawls slow-like to his feet and weaves out of the door.

I rubs my sore head and gets to my feet. The figure of a man turns from up by the stage and walks down to me. His back is to the light, and I can't see his face. He stops, sort of weaves on his feet, and says:

"What in —— is the matter around here, Ike? Is this the way to treat a feller when he comes back to his own home town? My gosh, is everybody loco? I tried to shake hands with Magpie, and look what he gave me."

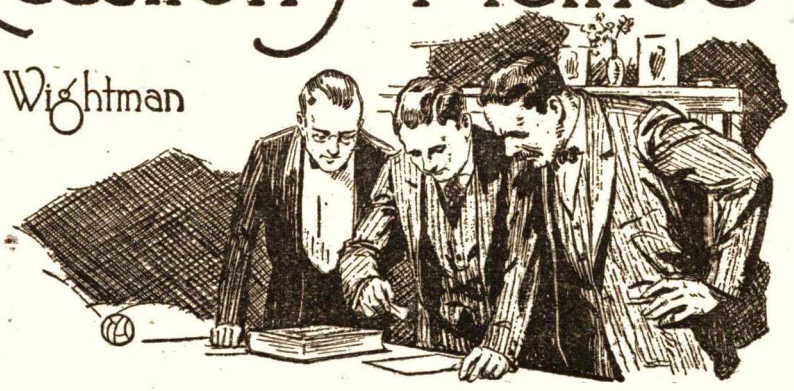
He holds it out to me, and I took it. Uh-huh, I took it in both hands. I ain't no hand to monkey with the unknown, but I knowed right then that I wasn't monkeying with no ghost, 'cause that hardwood wee-gee splintered all to —— on the head of Hard-Pan Hawkins.

Magpie Simpkins says there is lots of things beyond the veil that we don't know a danged thing about, and all that may be true, but it's a cinch that Yaller Rock County ain't never going to take a chance on getting any more message from departed horse-thieves—they might be dead.



A Question of Method

By M. S. Wightman



LEBAU was standing on the rug before the fire in our living-room at the Albany, a half-smoked cigaret between his fingers, a look of abstraction in his light-blue eyes. I wondered whether he was thinking of the coincidence that Bryant Kennedy's daughter had come to him about the loss of the bonds a moment after he had called my attention to a guardedly worded advertisement to Kennedy & Gage's former depositors in the morning's *Herald*.

He had made no comment since Miss Kennedy's departure. The vague hint of violets which she had brought in with her still lingered in the room.

I glanced at him as he stood there, as immobile as some paunchy little Chinese idol, the same bland, guileless look on his face. How many a man to his undoing had taken that look to be the reflection of a simple, innocent mind!

The top of the low book-shelves, which lined the wall opposite the entrance to the room, was covered with mementoes of LeBau's past exploits—a knife with a dark stain blurring its blade rubbed elbows with a big automatic, which recalled the Eighth Street affair, the photograph of a celebrated diva, whose name, thanks to his quickness of action, the breath of scandal had passed by harmlessly, looked haughtily in front of her, ignoring the crouching prize-fighter on her right as completely as the most daring financier of the Wall Street group on her left. Who would have guessed that the small, inconspicuous silver vase, into which Mrs. Tenant had thrust a handful of sweet peas, had caused the resignation of a cabinet member and almost precipitated an international crisis?

The sweet peas had been a gift of welcome from the housekeeper, and I wondered whether she noticed the new interest which the rooms LeBau and I had shared for so many years seemed to have taken on with his return the night before.

"You haven't changed at all, sir," had been Mrs. Tenant's greeting, as if she had expected that nearly two years as a major in the Intelligence Service in France would work some subtle transformation.

Mrs. Tenant had set down her tray of empty breakfast dishes to answer the ring half an hour before; and I noticed that the stiffness of her manner had melted as she caught the look of trouble in the girl's violet eyes. Troubled, even hunted, looks not infrequently characterized the visitors to that big, cheerful room on the ground floor of the Albany.

But whatever the look in her eyes Miss Kennedy's manner had been natural and straightforward as she sat in that big chair, her long, slender hands unconsciously turned toward the fire as she told what had happened. She had slipped off her brown outing coat, leaving it as a background in the chair for her green tweed suit and white silk waist.

One would have guessed that she had been raised in luxury, even before she said that Bryant Kennedy was her father. He would also have known that the banker's failure and semi-disgrace had neither broken her spirit nor diminished her pride.

Her story was simple. Fifty thousand dollars in Liberty Bonds had been stolen from her appartment in apparently inexplicable circumstances—inexplicable, that is, unless one conceded that her father had stolen the bonds to help pay what he considered debts of honor; but from Miss Kennedy's manner it was obvious that he would be a courageous man who hazarded that suggestion.

The bonds belonged to her aunt, who expected to return from her Red Cross work in Paris the following month. She had asked

Miss Kennedy to buy the bonds and put them in her safe-deposit box, to which she had sent her niece the key.

Naturally Miss Kennedy had entrusted the purchase to a firm of brokers—Bertram & Company on Pine Street—and asked them to deliver the bonds by messenger to her at her office. This they had done: but the messenger had not arrived until after banking hours on Saturday. She had been compelled to carry the bonds home with her, expecting on Monday to take them down with her and put them in her aunt's box when she went to lunch.

She had no safe in her apartment: and after wondering where to keep the bonds until Monday she determined to hide them in one of the books in their book-case. No one except her father knew she had the bonds in the apartment; and if a burglar happened to break in he would never think of going through the books in search of valuables. She chose for the purpose a copy of "Pepys' Diary," one of the larger volumes on the bottom shelf.

Unfortunately she had forgotten about the bonds until this morning four days later and when she had gone to get them the envelope which had contained the bonds was still in the book, but it was empty. The bonds had disappeared. It was then that Miss Kennedy showed a flash of the spirit and self-control which one would have expected of Bryant Kennedy's daughter.

EVEN New York has not entirely forgotten the arrogance with which after the failure of his banking house three years before Kennedy dared his depositors to prove that he had misused his funds. That they had taken his dare and after a long, spectacular trial dismally failed is also remembered, as is his somewhat dramatic promise immediately after the trial that he would eventually settle every unpaid account in full.

But shortly afterward Kennedy had dropped out of sight. I had heard that he was living in splendor on one of the islands in the Caribbean; I had heard that he and his daughter had taken refuge at Nice; but until LeBau had called my attention to the advertisement that morning I had written off the few hundreds I had lost, and charged Kennedy with having at last failed to make good on a promise.

Now we learned that following the trial he had been stricken with a long illness which had left him a semi-invalid; and that, known only to a few intimate friends, he and his daughter had been living in obscurity in a small apartment on West Eighty-fifth Street.

He had been unwell the past few days, Miss Kennedy had said, and unable to leave the apartment for his usual daily walk in the Park. Not wishing to worry him, she had repressed her first instinct to cry out, carefully replaced the books in the case and sat down to think who could have taken the bonds.

They had only one servant, Anna, a colored maid, who came in each afternoon to clean the apartment and get dinner. But Anna had not yet come when Miss Kennedy hid the bonds and she had not found them by chance in her cleaning, for the books had been dusty on Saturday and the dust was still on them.

In the intervening days they had had no visitors except Charlie Bolster, the millionaire oil man, who had an apartment below theirs. He had dropped in for an hour the evening before.

In answer to a question from LeBau Miss Kennedy said she knew the bonds were in the envelope when she hid it, for on Saturday Bertram's salesman had called her apartment to ask whether the messenger had found her, and she remembered looking into the envelope and seeing the bonds while talking to him.

"I couldn't think what to do," she had concluded. "But on the way down on the elevated it flashed over me that I had seen you were back, and Mr. Bolster has spoken so often of the wonderful way in which you found his stolen Rembrandt that I decided to come to see you."

"It is a terrible situation. I must get those bonds back before Aunt Betty arrives. She has been bitter against my father. I believe she would even dare to accuse him of taking them."

LeBau had, somewhat rashly I thought in going over the facts, assured Miss Kennedy that there would be no difficulty in tracing the bonds. He promised to come up for a cup of tea at four o'clock, if she would be at home; and as she was leaving had asked—

"Is yours a private telephone, Miss Kennedy?"

"No," she said; "we are connected with the switchboard in the building. But as a matter of fact I answered the call down-stairs. It came just as I entered."

He had accompanied her to the door; then taken his position on the hearth-rug and sank into himself.

I finished my cigar and quietly slipped on my coat and hat.

"If you want me I shall be at the club writing all morning," I said, my hand on the knob of the door.

He roused himself.

"All right, Peel," he said, and, stepping across the room, dropped into a chair behind a low table, on which a set of chess men faced each other across the black and white squares.

It was six o'clock when I returned to the Albany. In the hall outside our door I met Mrs. Tenant.

"There's a gentleman in there, sir, a domineering sort of man; and he is that nervous he near gives me the fidgets."

"Who is he?" I asked.

"He didn't give his name, sir. Came in at half-past five, bawled out so's the street could have heard him that he'd come to have dinner with Mr. LeBau, and has been storming around in there ever since.

"I told him plainly dinner wasn't till seven. Mr. LeBau's hours may be irregular in a professional way, sir, but I am sure he don't look like a man who eats his dinner at half-past five."

I smoothed Mrs. Tennant's ruffled feelings and opened the door. No student of the pictorial supplements of our Sunday papers or illustrated financial magazines would have needed an introduction to the huge, red-faced man with the shock of reddish-brown hair and boring gray eyes who, supporting himself by his hands on the arms of his chair, looked as if he were about to spring upon me. It was Charlie Bolster, the oil operator, whose exploits are the table-talk of two continents.

"For ——'s sake!" he groaned as he sank back into the chair. "I thought you were that little fish, Morton LeBau. Doesn't he ever come home?"

I INTRODUCED myself, wincing from a bear-like handshake as I divested myself of my coat and hat. And as I had a closer view of the oil man I no longer wondered at the stories which were told of Charles Bolster's force. He gave you the same feeling of power that the sight of a big Mogul locomotive does.

"Mrs. Tenant tells me you are to be with us at dinner," I said, taking the chair opposite him and extending my cigaret-case.

"Dinner?" he bellowed, waving aside the case. "It's LeBau I want to see."

Then as if getting control of himself he lowered his voice.

"Thank you. I'll change my mind about the cigaret."

In three deep inhalations he finished it and tossed the end into the fire.

"Tell me, Mr. Peel," he asked, "has anything happened to Miss Kennedy?"

"No," I said, on my guard until I had found out what he had to do with this case. "She was all right when I saw her this morning. Why?"

"Well, about eleven o'clock today my secretary told me that LeBau was outside. Of course Morton LeBau has the right of way of them all, and I was devilishly glad to know he was back. So I cleared my private office and sent for him.

"He cucumbered in in that cool way of his, and we talked for an hour. He wouldn't stay for lunch but invited me up to dinner.

"I ought to have suspected he was up to something; but it's those eyes of his. —— it, they would fool a baby; and a man who can fool a baby needn't fear William Burns and the rest of that bunch.

"But somehow I wasn't easy after he had gone. Morton is not the man to fool around offices paying social calls; and this afternoon in a directors' meeting his real purpose came to me. During his visit he had pumped me dry about the Kennedys. Well, anything that touched the Kennedys——"

He coughed, cleared his throat, stopped.

"I'll take another of those cigarets if you please."

His voice was curiously changed, all the bluster gone.

"Miss Kennedy is a friend of mine, Mr. Peel, and I wondered whether anything had happened to her. I went out and had my secretary call her office. She wasn't there.

"Then I called up Jimmie, the elevator boy at her apartment building—I have an apartment there also. He said she was at home, having tea with a man whom I recognized as LeBau.

"Now, Mr. Peel, having tea with ladies wasn't one of Morton's tricks before he went to the other side, and I don't believe he learned it pumping German prisoners. Naturally I take it something is wrong. What is it?"

He shot out the question unexpectedly and accompanied it with a glare from under his shaggy brows that almost lifted me from my chair.

"Why don't you call her and ask?" I parried.

My question was a chance one, but it punctured his manner like a pin a balloon. Dropping his hands he sank back into his chair.

"I didn't like to bother her," he muttered, and at that moment the door opened and LeBau entered.

Under his arm he carried a rectangular package wrapped in brown paper, which, crossing the room, he placed on the book-shelves, pushing aside to make room, a small box containing the glass particles which came from the stomach of Adolph Jensen and led Mrs. Jensen to hard labor for life.

Bolster, who had been watching LeBau since he had entered, now sprang forward and towered over the smaller man.

"Look here, Morton," he bawled, "what's all this mystery? Something's going on up in my building and I mean to know what it is. Come, out with it!"

LeBau unhurriedly divested himself of his hat and coat.

"Everything in order, Charlie," he said in his cool, incisive voice, "and just now the order is to eat the very excellent dinner which I see Mrs. Tenant bringing in."

For a full minute they stood facing each other—the small man with the blue, guileless eyes and the big operator with the dominant gray ones. And it was Bolster who moved first.

LeBau can talk when he wants to; and seldom have I heard him more brilliant than at dinner that night. Rostand's place in French letters, the weapons of the Malay peninsula, the Barrymore brothers in "The Jest," the situation in Constantinople—everything he touched on his mind made clear and laid sparkling before you like a lapidary cutting his diamond from the rough.

But the talk had little interest for Bolster. He ate his dinner sullenly with only an occasional monosyllabic comment. And between copious drafts of Scotch and soda his eyes sought the ebony clock on the mantelpiece. At last when Mrs. Tenant had cleared the table of its drapery, set out coffee on a small stand and finally departed, he swung round in front of the fire.

"Now, Morton," he said determinedly as he trimmed the end off a long Carolina, "let's hear what this is all about."

In short, simple sentences LeBau retold Miss Kennedy's story while Bolster, his cigar in his mouth, leaned back and watched him.

"And now," he concluded, "this is the case against Bryant Kennedy. He was in the apartment alone with the bonds. He had debts to pay—voluntarily assumed, of course, but the more binding for that reason. He had failed to pay them. You realize how galling to a man of his pride that must have been."

There flashed into my mind the picture of Bryant Kennedy as I had seen him last, jaunty, debonair, almost arrogant in his manner toward the twelve prosaic, drab men in the jury-box who held in their hands his freedom. He had been known as the best dressed man in Wall Street, he had built himself a show-place on Long Island, and he had gone down in a spectacular crash which shook the Street.

But the shrewdest lawyers in New York had failed to pin on him one dishonest action, and without leaving their places the twelve jurymen had acquitted him. Would such a man descend to a petty theft from his daughter? It seemed incredible.

"Two days after the bonds could have been stolen," went on LeBau, "a curiously worded advertisement addressed to Kennedy & Gage's depositors appears in the *Herald*. Did Bryant Kennedy yield to the temptation to make good his promise, at least in part, take the bonds, turn them into cash and advertise for his creditors under the name of K. E. Williams?"

Bolster dropped his cigar and cleared his throat. But LeBau without heeding him crossed the room and picked up the package on the book-shelves.

"FORTUNATELY," he said, "we can settle that question at once by the method which has become the commonplace of police practise. You remember, Peel, Miss Kennedy noticed that the books were dusty. Whoever took the bonds must have handled at least the volume which contained them. Here—" he broke the string, unfolded the wrapping-paper and picked up an envelope which lay on top of a large green book whose back bore in gold lettering the words SAMUEL PEPYS, ADMINISTRATOR, OBSERVER, GOSSIP—"here is an envelope which contains a piece of gummed paper that Bryant Kennedy handled this afternoon without suspecting that I was getting his finger-prints."

He drew on a pair of rubber gloves, laid the paper gummed side up on the table, shook some powder over it and, bending down, blew carefully across its surface. When he straightened up there were visible a number of smudges of sharply defined, curving lines which any schoolboy would have spotted as finger-prints.

"Now," continued LeBau, repeating the process but more carefully with the book, "here in the dust along the edges, and here more thickly on the covers are a number of imprints, evidently most of them made by Miss Kennedy, for she handled the book twice.

"But you will notice that mingled with them, here and there standing out more boldly alone, are others. Let us compare them with the paper. Are they the same?"

We bent over the evidence as it lay spread out on the table; but it needed only a glance to tell that the hands which had handled the paper were not those which had handled the book.

"Not in a thousand years!" shouted Bolster. "But," he added in a less excited voice, "it didn't require all this paraphernalia to prove that Bryant Kennedy was not a thief. I could have told you that in the beginning. He was never that sort."

"No doubt," said LeBau, "you refer to Bryant Kennedy as he was before his illness. One of the most interesting studies of this case is the psychological effect his breakdown and consequent failure to make good his promise have had on Bryant Kennedy. His body is a mere shell; the mind and will have gone, while his old spirit only breaks out in occasional flashes. He is the banker in appearance, but a child in his mental processes. And now that Kennedy is eliminated, suppose we try again."

He drew from his envelope another piece of paper, on which a scrawling hand had written the words MR. CHARLES BOLSTER, 14 WALL ST. CITY.

"What's that, and where in the —— did you get it?" asked the oil man, staring down at the strip of paper.

"All in due order, Charlie," returned LeBau, turning the paper over and lifting his powder-can.

But although his manner was calm and his movements unhurried, there was a glint in his blue eyes.

Bolster and I shouted together as LeBau blew the powder and straightened up. The imprints were those of the book. Each curving line was identical, and on each thumb-mark there was a blur at the center, evidently caused by an old scar.

"Whose marks are they, Morton?" I asked.

"The finger-prints of the only other person who knew that Miss Kennedy had the bonds," said LeBau as he walked to the mantelpiece and lighted a cigaret.

Bolster, who had been staring at the paper, turned it over and bent down with a concentrated frown.

"That writing looks like some I have seen somewhere, but for the life of me I can't place it. Whose is it—the messenger?"

LeBau shook his head.

"No, not the messenger nor Dickinson, Bertram's salesman. Neither knew that she had brought the bonds home with her, though Dickinson might have guessed it. Had the messenger wished to steal the bonds he would probably have done so before he delivered them.

"But Miss Kennedy herself told us there was some one else who knew she had them."

"The devil she did!" muttered Bolster while I tried in vain to recall any such statement.

"Let us follow Miss Kennedy's movements on Saturday afternoon," continued LeBau, flicking the ashes from his cigaret. "The bonds were delivered to her just as she was leaving the office. For securities brokers use special envelopes, generally of a reddish-brown color.

"No doubt she opened the envelope and counted the bonds before she signed the receipt. Then, as she was leaving, what more natural than that she should slip them back into it?

"She carried the envelope in her hand, both because women have no pockets to accommodate such packages and because she would no doubt feel more secure carrying them.

"As she entered her apartment building a telephone call came for her, and she said she answered it on the ground floor. This struck me at once as significant, and I particularly noticed the telephone arrangement when I went up this afternoon. There is an extension on a small table with a chair beside it, near the switchboard in front of the elevator. A person sitting at the table is in plain view of the operator.

"She put the envelope with the bonds and whatever else she was carrying on the table and picked up the receiver. It is not remarkable that the operator, who was listening in to her conversation, should have assumed that the bonds which she stated she had just received were in the official-looking envelope which lay beneath her hand."

"Hess, by ——!" shouted Bolster. "I knew I had seen that handwriting before."

"Acutely judged, my dear Charlie," said LeBau, waving his cigaret. "I came to the same conclusion when I learned that the superintendent, Hess, relieved Jimmie, the day operator, between the hours of one and two. So I asked Miss Kennedy to call him up to the apartment on the pretext that I wanted your down-town address. I also learned from her that he comes in each morning, takes the ice off the dumb-waiter and puts it in the ice-box."

"But K. E. Williams, the man in the advertisement; where does he come in on the bonds?"

Le Bau glanced at the clock and then at the telephone.

"He doesn't come in at all," he said. "The advertisement was merely a coincidence. But you might ask K. E. Williams himself just what he has been up to."

With his cigaret he pointed to Bolster, who who had sunk back into his chair and was glowering at the fire.

"I tried to tell you some time ago that you were barking up the wrong tree, but I should have guessed you knew it already. In a manner of speaking I am K. E. Williams—at least he is the creation of that catfish-faced member of the New York Bar, with more reputation than brains, whom I hired to do the job for me. I might have known he would mess it. But tell me, how did you find it out?"

"A simple matter of reasoning, Charlie. I went to see you this morning to learn what I could about the Kennedys—she had mentioned you twice—and when I first spoke of her I saw from your manner that yours was more that a casual interest.

"When I learned that you were living in one of the cheaper apartment-houses instead of at the Ritz, because the Kennedys had an apartment there, I concluded that you wanted to marry and wished to be near her. The fact that you still have the apartment makes me believe that you still hope eventually to do so.

"Now a man of your wealth can well afford a wife, and Miss Kennedy is of marriageable age. What, I asked myself, was keeping you apart? You answered my question when you said she was endeavoring to pay her father's debts.

"When the man I had set to watch Box 203 reported this afternoon that the mail was taken to Gatemill & Gatemill's, whom I knew to be your lawyers, I concluded that you had decided to expedite matters by paying the debts yourself. It was merely a chance that the advertisement had appeared at the time the bonds were lost."

"Oh, the ads. have been running for a couple of weeks," said Bolster, "and I have been afraid Miss Kennedy might see them. That was why your visit upset me. You spoke of Kennedy's pride; she has more in a minute than he ever had in a month. And it's a hundred-to-one shot I'll not be thanked when she finds I have butted in."

He lit a fresh cigar and smoked slowly, a frown furrowing his forehead, his eyes on the fire.

"But what's happened to Hess?" he asked presently.

LeBau threw his cigaret into the fire and again glanced at the clock. Whoever he was expecting must be overdue.

"Hess is no doubt as usual sitting in glum silence in his quarters, or else abusing his wife. The evidence ——"

BUT he was interrupted by the sharp ring of the telephone, and as LeBau answered it Bolster got up and with long strides began to pace the floor.

I sat looking into the fire, my mind busy piecing together the various threads LeBau had unraveled. What a girl Miss Kennedy must be to have tamed a man like Bolster! At the mention of her name his hardness, his bluster disappeared.

And Hess—how simple it was to understand the theft, once it had been explained! How had I happened to overlook the significance of the telephone call when Miss Kennedy had mentioned it?

Simple? Was it explained? Was there not something?

Suddenly the question which was lurking in my mind flashed into clear view. How had Hess discovered where the bonds were hidden? He could not have hunted the apartment through without leaving some trace of his search nor could he have searched while Mr. Kennedy was in. And yet Miss Kennedy had said her father had been too unwell to go out as usual. Did those finger-prints exculpate the former banker? Or was he a meaner villain than we had suspected—in league with Hess to rob his daughter?

LeBau's sharp voice cut in on my thoughts.

"The *Rotterdam*—some time next week—yes. Good night, Mrs. Mulvehey. No, nothing more at present. Yes, I shall let you know."

"A lucky shot, Peel," he cried, hanging up the receiver and coming back to the fire. "It occurred to me on my way down to stop at West Eighteenth Street and see whether Mrs. Mulvehey was still in her old lodgings. She was, and at home.

"This evening she called on Mrs. Hess in the guise of a laundress looking for work. Luckily he had gone to the drug-store. She learned that they have tickets on the *Rotterdam*, sailing next week. They are going back to Germany. She left when Hess came in, and she left him beating Mrs. Hess for gossiping with strangers."

Bolster, who had not ceased his pacing, turned to the closet in which Mrs. Tenant had hung his coat and hat, yanked the door open and, reaching inside, took out and put on his heavy ulster with a big fur collar. Then he clamped on his hat, and with a brusk "Good night" turned to the front door.

"Where are you off to, Charlie?" asked LeBau, not stirring from the hearth-rug.

"I am going up to do a little beating myself. I am going to choke those bonds out of Hess," he answered over his shoulder. "And you needn't try to stop me," he added.

"Only long enough to ask one question," returned LeBau. "Have you ever had to deal with a man like Hess? Place him—small, black, rat-like eyes, a sallow, mottled face, and a big, beefy neck, the line of which runs straight without a curve to the top of his head. It is the true Prussian type. You might as well try to intimidate an ox. He will simply shut up, and when you have worn yourself out he will destroy the bonds."

Bolster hesitated, his hand on the door-knob.

"But we've got the goods on him."

"Not enough to convict him of the theft," said LeBau. "Besides, if I correctly understood Miss Kennedy she wants to get back her bonds."

The oil man dropped his hand and strode back into the room.

"I give up," he said. "What's the answer? Only for Heaven's sake let me have something to do."

LeBau, who stood with his hands in the side pockets of his coat, made room for the oil man beside him.

"Have you a boy you can trust to do a delicate, clean piece of work?"

Bolster nodded.

"I have—Tommy Ross. I'd trust him to take a cheese through —— without toasting it."

"Give him three thousand dollars in Liberty bonds, of whose numbers you have made a record. Put the bonds in one of Bertram's envelopes and have Ross take them to Miss Kennedy's apartment while Hess is on duty between one and two. He is to be certain to see Hess. If he isn't there Ross must wait until he comes but without being noticed.

"He is to ask for Miss Kennedy. She, of course, will be at her office. He will say he has been instructed to deliver the bonds to her personally, get her business address and actually take her the bonds. That is all. Can he do it?"

"Absolutely," said Bolster. "But what's the idea?"

"I'll tell you when I come up to have dinner with you tomorrow night. And I shall probably bring Peel with me."

"You think Hess hasn't disposed of the bonds?" I asked when Bolster had gone.

"I am certain he hasn't," said LeBau, "but the police are going through the form of checking up the small Liberty Bond dealers in his section of the city. Hess is shrewd, my dear Peel. He had already made his plans to go to Germany. These bonds are only an added windfall.

"If he learns that Miss Kennedy has discovered their loss, he will probably take them with him and endeavor to dispose of them on the other side. If he thinks she has not, he will sell them piecemeal to several small dealers just before he sails. Either way he expects to play it safe."

He took a cigaret from the box on the mantelpiece and, lighting it, stood looking meditatively into the fire.

"One thing puzzles me," I said. "How did Hess find the bonds when he got into the apartment?"

Without answering, the little man finished his cigaret, tossed the end into the blaze and turned to the chess-table.

"When Miss Kennedy and I went back into the living-room this afternoon after talking with Hess in the hall, we found Mr. Kennedy asleep in his chair. Does that suggest anything to your mind, Peel?" he asked as he began to move the men.

BOLSTER picked me up at the club the next afternoon, and in his limousine we drove up-town to his apartment. LeBau I had not seen since breakfast; and then he had cut me short when I tried to talk of the Kennedy case.

"The certain way to become stale on a subject, Peel, is to keep thinking it over after you have thought it through and planned a course of action. I see that Mrs. Tenant has done as I requested and mixed chicory with her coffee; but instead of one to fifteen she has made her mixture one to twenty."

And he had proceeded to an illuminating discussion of the colors of the various blends of coffee.

As we turned into Forty-fifth Street, Bolster handed me a check. It was signed by Gatenill & Gatemill, and called for eight hundred and sixty-three dollars and twelve cents, the balance, with interest, of my former deposit with Kennedy & Gage.

"You can sign the receipt in full here," he said, pushing into my hand a slip of paper and a fountain pen which he had taken from his vest pocket.

"Don't be a fool," he barked as I made some show of hesitation. "I want to get the last of them cleaned up."

I did as he wished and slipped the check into my pocketbook, and we finished the drive in silence.

Hess, whom I recognized from LeBau's description, was loitering in the hallway as we entered. He bowed and touched his hat with an ingratiating smile to Bolster; but the oil man, without making the faintest sign of recognition, strode by him to the elevator.

"By ——, if I ever lay my hands on him!" he muttered as we entered the apartment.

To my surprize we found LeBau installed in a comfortable chair in the living-room, a volume of Montaigne in front of his nose.

"I came up early and have been making myself at home, Charlie," he said, dropping the book and pointing to a tall glass of amber-colored liquid which stood on a reading-stand at his elbow.

Bolster nodded.

"Get some real drinks, Kit," he called to a moon-faced Chinaman who had paddled into the room on his flat, paper-soled slippers.

"Hess should be loitering about below waiting to see whether Miss Kennedy has the red-dish-brown envelope with her when she comes in. Did you notice him?" LeBau asked, and when I nodded continued, "Leave the outer door on crack, Peel."

Half an hour later there was the sound of the elevator stopping at the floor above. Followed a clear, spirited laugh, a "thank you; good night, Jimmie," and the rattle of a key. Miss Kennedy had come in.

The evening was a long one. After dinner LeBau stretched out on a deep sofa, and five minutes later I knew from the rise and fall of his hands, folded across his paunchy stomach, that he was asleep. Bolster, who during dinner had seemed as fidgety as a girl the evening before she is to interview her first employer, settled down to a formidable mass of papers on his big mahogany desk, and I gathered from his occasional savage ejaculations that his temper was still raw.

At eleven the Chinaman came in with a tray, placed it on a small table and awakened LeBau. It contained a full breakfast—grape-fruit, porridge, eggs, rolls and coffee. LeBau moved to the table, sat down and unfolded the napkin.

"An excellent servant you have, Charlie. The Chinaman lacks the suavity but he is more dependable than the Jap. Your man has omitted nothing. Mrs. Tenant could not more perfectly have timed these eggs."

Bolster, who had half-turned in his chair and since the Chinaman's entrance been staring over his shoulder, now found his voice.

"I let people do as they please in my place," he said, "but this is the first time anybody has

pulled this stunt—breakfast at midnight. What's the idea anyway?"

LeBau finished the grape-fruit and replaced it with the porridge.

"In a few minutes I am going up to station myself in the closet in Miss Kennedy's living-room which corresponds to the one you have there. You will notice that from it one commands an excellent view of the room, and since hers is curtained there will be no difficulty in seeing. If events happen as I anticipate I shall leave it between nine-thirty and ten in the morning. I must enter while her father is asleep; and if I wait until later she herself may doze off and be difficult to awaken without noise.

"Your work and Peel's will begin in the morning. If Hess attempts to steal the second lot of bonds which he saw Miss Kennedy take to her apartment, he will do so when he goes up to remove the ice. The ice-man reaches this building on his rounds shortly after nine. Miss Kennedy will, of course, have left.

"You and Peel must wait in your hallway there until you hear Hess leave the Kennedys' apartment. He will have the bonds on him. I want you to stop him until the police, who will be outside and to whom I shall signal from the window, arrive.

"That is your part. Will you carry it out?"

Bolster lifted himself out of his chair, and for the first time that night the scowl left his face. Now he smiled and drew in a breath which filled his chest like a bellows.

"By Heavens, Morton," he rumbled in an effort to soften his voice, "for the first time you are giving me a part I like. Stop him? Yes, I guess so. I am glad to put Mr. Peel up for the night but I don't need his assistance. Your friend Hess will be here when the police arrive—don't worry."

LeBau finished his coffee, then, bareheaded, he slipped into the hall and by the stairway ascended to the floor above. Listening intently, Bolster and I could hear a faint scratching, followed by the cautious opening and closing of a door, and then—silence.

Bolster, I think, did not sleep at all that night. I went to bed after LeBau had gone; but twice when I awoke there were sounds of movement and the rattle of papers in the living-room.

Over his bacon and eggs the next morning he was morosely silent; and in the set of his jaw and the hardness of his eyes there was such a feeling of savage force that I almost feared what might happen if the police should be late in arriving.

After breakfast we stationed ourselves in the hall, our ears close to the door. We dared not crack it until Hess had passed. Shortly before nine a door on the floor above opened, and there followed the ring of the elevator bell. A minute later we heard Miss Kennedy chatting with Jimmie as she descended.

Bolster's whole expression changed as he broke into a smile. At that moment I believe he would gladly have traded his millions for Jimmie's blue coat with its tarnished gold braid.

The wait which followed seemed interminable. At last it was broken by the shrill whistle of the speaking-tube in Bolster's kitchen and by the Chinaman's voice as he shouted down the shaft. We heard the dumb-waiter rumbling up, and at the same time the sound of heavy footsteps mounting the iron stairway which led from floor to floor. They passed just outside the door behind which we stood and continued their climb.

It was Hess on his way to the Kennedys' apartment; and when we heard him enter and close the door we set our own ajar. Bolster was not smiling now; at my elbow I could feel the tenseness of his muscles.

How long Hess was in the Kennedys' apartment I do not know. Checking up afterward, I found it must have been about twenty minutes; and during those twenty minutes my mind was filled with lurid images. I saw him murdering defenseless Mr. Kennedy; I saw him with his fingers fastened around the throat of LeBau, who struggled in vain to call to us.

Why had LeBau not taken a revolver? The glimpse I had of Hess the afternoon before had shown him to be a powerful man. Suppose in his search for the bonds he stepped into the closet? I stirred—but at that moment we heard him leave the apartment above and start down the stairs.

BOLSTER waisted until Hess had almost reached our floor. Then he threw the door open and stepped outside. Over his shoulder I saw Hess. He had halted, one foot on the bottom step and one on the floor, his left hand rested on the railing of the stairway; his startled face was level with that of the oil man, on whom his small, black, rat-like eyes were fixed.

"Come in here a minute, Hess. Something is the matter with one of the bathroom pipes."

Hess broke into a smile of relief, and his foot finished its descent. He was wearing a blue overall coat, and his right hand slipped up along its front, feeling the buttons. The third from the top, which was unfastened, he buttoned.

"All right, Mr. Bolster. I must go downstairs a minute. I'll be right back."

He took a step forward; then something in Bolster's face must have warned him, for suddenly he wheeled and broke into a run.

With two bounds Bolster was on him, and his hands shot forward, seizing the superintendent by the shoulders. For a moment they

swayed; then the oil man swung his opponent clear of the floor; there was the flash of a foot; and Hess shot headlong through the air, striking the opposite wall with an impact which it seemed would drive him through it.

"My ——, sir! I believe you've killed him."

It was a red-faced policemen who had come running up from below and now stood leaning against the railing while he caught his breath.

Bolster threw out his arms with a great sigh which told of the relief of his pent-up feelings.

"If I haven't I am sorry," he laughed. "But look at that."

Hess, who had been lying in a huddled heap where he had fallen, was now slowly working himself up to his knees.

"I have orders to arrest him and take him to the station, sir. Would you like to go along?"

"I would," said Bolster. "Perhaps your chief and I can make him do some talking."

It was not until they had descended in the elevator, Hess manacled and still dazed, supported by the policeman, that I thought of LeBau. I had not seen him since he left Bolster's the night before.

Why had he not appeared when he heard the noise of the fight? Could anything have happened to him?

I darted up the stairs and pushed the button at the Kennedys' door. LeBau opened it. His finger was raised to his lips in warning. He quietly tiptoed down the hall, glanced into the living-room and then, rejoining me outside, closed the door.

"Mr. Kennedy is asleep," he said. "I think he will do all right. And now for my hat, Peel. Curious the feeling of undress a man has in the halls of an apartment building without his hat."

And when, once more wearing the conventional head-covering of civilization, we stood waiting for the elevator outside of Bolster's apartment, he added—

"There is only one thing left to do, Peel."

"Notify Miss Kennedy?" I hazarded.

"No," he said, pushing the button a second time. "I have already telephoned her, and she is on her way up. We must find the bonds which Hess stole the other day."

"To the basement," he said as we stepped into the elevator. "And when a detective inquires for Mr. LeBau, bring him down."

"Yes, sir," replied Jimmie.

And his manner could not have been more deferential had the President been his passenger.

"Naturally I don't expect assistance from Quigley," said LeBau as we stepped out into the cellar, "but I thought it better to have a police official with us when we found the bonds. So I telephoned him.

"These, I take it, are the superintendent's quarters, and on the right here the laundry. Come, let us see whether we can learn anything from Mrs. Hess."

He knocked on the door at his left. An angular woman of medium height and nondescript appearance opened it. She wore a shawl pulled tightly over her shoulders; and her face, rising out of it, was white with terror.

"Mrs. Hess?" asked LeBau.

"*Ja*—Yes," she stammered, opening the door for us to enter.

But it was evident after five minutes' questioning that she knew nothing of the theft. Hess was not the type of man to make a confidante of his wife.

We were in the kitchen, a small, badly lighted room, when there came a sharp rap on the outer door. Before the woman could reach it the knock was repeated. We heard the door open, and a high-pitched, authoritative voice:

"Mrs. Hess, eh? I'm Detective Quigley, of Police Headquarters. I must ask you a few questions which I want you to answer frankly."

But Mrs. Hess showed more diplomacy than I had credited her with.

"The gentlemen are in there, sir," she murmured as we emerged.

"Ah, LeBau!" exclaimed Quigley, rushing forward and seizing LeBau's hand. "I am glad to see you back again. We missed you, but as you see we managed to get along while you were on the other side. It is my theory that no man is indispensable, although in speaking of the Epstein case the other day the commissioner said that I was the wrong man to try to prove such a theory. A pretty case, Epstein; you would have enjoyed it. And you are back at work, I see.

"But the matter is settled, LeBau. I only dropped in to tell you I had found the bonds. The man Hess had them in the pocket of the vest he was wearing under his overalls."

"Yes," said LeBau dryly; "I knew he had. I saw him put them there. So you stopped at the station and saw the prisoner?"

"Exactly. Captain Martin and Mr. Bolster were trying to make him talk. Extraordinary man, Mr. Bolster. Such force, such power! I have followed his course with admiration. But they were not meeting with much success. The fellow refused to talk, and frankly I doubt whether they will make him."

"They won't," said LeBau, leading the way outside. "But the bonds Hess had are not the ones we are looking for. We planted those for him to steal; those we now want he stole before."

For an instant Quigley looked blank; then with a cough he recovered himself.

"Exactly; the first bonds—I was getting around to that. The woman?"

With his thumb he pointed to the room we had just left.

"She knows nothing; I have questioned her."

Quigley smiled as he stroked his pointed chin.

"Ah, LeBau, you laboratory scientists, to use my phrase, in dealing with problems—yes, you laboratory men have your usefulness; but in dealing with people, we active men of affairs—May I? I'll rejoin you in a few minutes."

"And yet, Peel, he is a fair investigator," said LeBau as we moved down the hall.

THE basement was large, dusty and poorly lighted. Opposite the superintendent's quarters was the laundry, a big dreary room with rows of stationary wash-tubs along its wall, into which the water dripped from an occasional leaky faucet. The furnaces and boilers were in the center, beyond the elevator-shaft.

Across the hall was a large room used for storing the surplus baggage of the occupants of the apartments above. It was crowded with bags and boxes and trunks, some worn and travel-stained, some evidently newly purchased, but all dust-covered and giving one that impression of abandonment common to unused baggage. To the right of the boilers the coal-bins extended to the rear wall.

LeBau made a cursory examination of the basement, here peering into a corner, now tapping with his knuckles on a wall or moving an occasional ash-can which lined the hall between the trunk-room and the coal-pile. Then, halting in front of the furnace, he lighted a cigaret, slipped his hands into the pockets of his coat and smoked in silence. Here Quigley joined him.

The detective's face was red, and he nervously wiped his forehead with his handkerchief.

"It is as I suspected," he said. "She knows nothing."

LeBau finished his cigaret before he turned to Quigley. His face still wore its guileless look, but his blue eyes were bright, and in them I caught a glitter which I had learned to know. He had made up his mind.

"And now, Quigley," he asked blandly, "what shall we do next?"

"Exactly," said Quigley. "What shall we do next? Obviously, LeBau, we must search the premises."

"How long do you think that will take?"

Quigley looked about him and his face fell slightly.

"With a good force of men we ought to do it in a couple of days. We will close the place up until we have finished."

"And have every tenant in the building telephoning the police and health departments."

The detective shifted his weight on his feet.

"The public convenience must give way to the work of the police," he said doggedly.

Then he glanced up at LeBau with a smile.

"But you, LeBau—you have gone somewhat more deeply into the case. Perhaps something has occurred to you. What is your idea?"

"My idea," returned LeBau, "would be clearly to set myself Hess's problem and then determine how a man like him would answer it."

"Exactly; my method to the letter. And what do you take his problem to be?"

LeBau drew toward him an empty packing-case and seated himself on its edge.

"Hess has," he began, "a bundle of bonds which he has stolen from an apartment in the building. He is sailing on the *Rotterdam* some time next week, and hopes to turn them into cash before he goes. I say some time because, as you know, the labor and coal situations are such at present that agents can not fix definite sailing dates long in advance. Passengers must be ready to go aboard on short notice.

"He must hide the bonds where he can get them quickly at any hour. Also he knows there is always a chance that he may be suspected and the basement searched.

"He has made up his mind that he will take no chances. If he scents danger he has decided to destroy the bonds. For this purpose also they must be instantly available.

"Now Hess is a man with more intelligence than the ordinary superintendent; in fact he has both shrewdness and cunning. That, I think, is a fair statement of Hess's problem. Where does he decide to hide the bonds?"

Quigley, whose fingers had been nervously playing with the elk's tooth which hung at the end of his watch-fob, pushed his derby hat up from his forehead. His brows were drawn together in a frown.

"Exactly," he said. "Where would he hide them?"

A moment later, there being no answer to his question, he turned and walked slowly to the front of the building, tapping the walls as he went. He opened the door to Mrs. Hess's room, looked in, crossed to the laundry, and then returned studying the concrete floor.

He stooped to examine more minutely a broken place in the concrete, muttered to himself and moved down the hall until he reached the door of the trunk-room. He slipped the lock with the keys hanging in it out of the staple—LeBau had replaced it as he found it—pushed the door open and stood looking in at the pile of baggage.

"Here we are," he said after a moment. "No doubt we will find the bonds in here. It is the very place Hess was looking for. He could get the bonds on a moment's notice; and if he wished to destroy them, what would be simpler than to throw them into the furnace? Certainly we will find them here—probably in that very box of old paper which you can see behind the trunks in that corner."

He pointed with his stick and began somewhat excitedly to climb over the trunks.

But LeBau made no move to follow.

"You overlook one thing, sergeant. The keys were in the door. If Hess had hidden the bonds in that room he would have the keys in his pocket."

Quigley halted.

"He may have forgotten them this morning."

LeBau shook his head.

"That is the one thing Hess would never have done."

QUIGLEY sat down on the trunk.

"Thoroughness; exactly. Well, eliminate the trunk-room for the moment. What is your idea, LeBau?"

"Let's do it as he did it," said LeBau. "He had plenty of time; no doubt he took the cellar and studied it room by room. His own quarters he eliminated. Mrs. Hess has the Teutonic quality of cleanliness. No matter where he hid the bonds, there was always the chance that in cleaning she would find them.

"The laundry he passed over for the same reason. Too many people used it. The trunk-room offers better possibilities; but the keys are evidence that he did not choose it.

"What is left? The space around us here and the open part where the coal is stored."

Quigley rose and came over to LeBau.

"I suppose," he said with a laugh, "Hess hid the bonds in that pile of coal."

"He must have," said LeBau, also rising and approaching the bin, piled high with the Winter's stock of coal. "And a most excellent choice. It adjoins the furnace, into which, as you acutely reasoned, he intended to throw the bonds in case he was suspected. He could do so by shoveling them in with the coal, even though he were being watched. And the coal-pile is really the most permanent thing on the premises. Once in, the coal remains until it has been fed bit by bit into the furnace, and only the superintendent handles it."

Quigley lit a cigaret.

"But suppose, LeBau, that Mrs. Hess should some time decide to stoke the furnace while her husband was out. A fine chance that Hess would risk her throwing them in!"

LeBau tapped the pile with his foot.

"Here is the shovel, and you will notice that all the fuel is fed from this side next to the furnace. Come, Peel, do you mind bringing the shovel?"

We passed in single file in front of the coal-bin, LeBau bending down and intently studying the floor, Quigley bringing up the rear, a smile of amused tolerance indicating what he thought of LeBau's theory. Two-thirds of the way down the pile the daylight merged into semi-obscurity.

"The light there, if you please, Quigley," said LeBau, dropping to his hands and knees and making his way more slowly.

He turned a corner of the pile, advanced a little, halted and bent lower.

"Have you a match, Peel?" he asked, and as the flame, cupped by my hand, threw a circle of light on the floor he exclaimed:

"Some one has been working here recently. See, the dust has not yet had time to resettle on this spot. There is where the shovel was drawn across the floor, scraping up the loose coal which had fallen— Hello, what have we here?"

He picked up the end of a piece of dirty, heavy twine which barely protruded from under the coal. He pulled on it gently; the twine gave until half a foot was exposed and then grew taut.

"Quick, the shovel, Peel!"

For ten minutes I worked furrowing a narrow path into the pile, while the perspiration gathered on my forehead and I felt my hands grow raw.

"Here, let me!"

Quigley who had caught something of our excitement, shouldered me aside and seized the shovel. The lane was about five feet long when the cord on which LeBau had all the while been pulling began slowly to move. He gave a sudden jerk; there was the grating sound of a heavy object sliding over the concrete, and with a cry LeBau leaned over and picked up—an ordinary flat-iron. The string was tied to its handle. For a moment he studied it incredulously; then there was a clatter as the iron dropped to the floor.

Quigley laughed.

"No doubt, LeBau, Mrs. Hess will thank you for recovering her iron, which must have been buried when the coal was put in."

LeBau was crestfallen. In all of my experience I have never seen him more completely taken aback. For a minute he stood staring down at the iron; then, lighting a cigaret, he started to walk away.

He had reached the light and lifted his hand to turn it off, when suddenly with a muttered "of course" he darted back to the pile, seized the shovel and set furiously to work. Two minutes later he bent over and pulled something out of the coal. As he emerged, blowing the coal-dust off what he carried in his hand, I saw that it was apparently an old and somewhat rumpled newspaper, which had been carelessly folded across the middle.

Under the light he opened the paper, and took from it a package of clean one-thousand-dollar Liberty Bonds.

"If you will let me make a note of their numbers, Quigley," he said, handing them to the detective, "I will turn these bonds over to you. They belong to Miss Kennedy."

"Tell me," I said, when five minutes later we were in a taxi speeding to the Albany, "how did Hess learn where Miss Kennedy had hidden the bonds?"

"I need food and sleep now, Peel," said LeBau, sinking back into a corner. "I will explain whatever you wish to know at dinner."

IT TURNED out, however, that we were not to dine at the Albany that night. Late in the afternoon the bell rang, and Mrs. Tenant admitted Miss Kennedy, followed by Bolster. She crossed the room to where LeBau was standing, seized both his hands and smiled at him radiantly.

"I can't thank you," she said, "but I do believe you are the cleverest man in the world. To think what would have been if I hadn't come to you!"

LeBau smiled and withdrew his hands.

"I am glad you came. There were one or two features about the case which interested me, and Peel and I had been speaking of bond-thefts when you came in.

"Ah, I see," he continued as he studied her cheek more intently, "you have decided to marry Bolster."

What he had seen before was nothing to the red which flamed into her cheeks at his remark. For a moment she peered at him; then, framing his face with her hands, she bent forward and kissed him quickly.

"You adorable little simpleton!" she laughed.

Bolster roared.

"Come on!" he shouted. "You are scheduled to be best man at a wedding in ten minutes, Le Bau. Mr. Kennedy is waiting for us at the church, and dinner is ordered at the Ritz."

A head-line in the paper lying on the table in front of the fire caught my eye as we entered our rooms that night:

ANOTHER BOND THIEF TAKEN

Detective Quigley Recovers Bonds Stolen from Bryant Kennedy's Daughter

"*Sic transit gloria*," laughed LeBau; "but it was worth it to see Quigley's face when I handed him those bonds this morning."

He hung his overcoat in the closet and, crossing to the fire, took a cigaret from the mantelpiece.

"A simple case, Peel," he said, "as soon as the pertinent facts have been picked out and arranged in order. As soon as I saw Hess yesterday I recognized him as one of the five interned officers who escaped from Fort Scholly in August, 1917. You remember their photographs were published. He had shaved his beard and dyed his eyebrows, but there was no way to disguise that flat back head of the true Prussian type.

"You remember that Bryant Kennedy has lost his old aggressiveness and power of will. His mind has become childlike and obsessed with a single ruling idea—that of paying off what he considered debts of honor. Such a mind is singularly easy to dominate.

"My first thought was that Hess had merely intimidated him; but when Miss Kennedy and I returned to the living-room yesterday and found her father in a heavy sleep I suspected the real method by which Hess had learned where the bonds were hidden. He had put Mr. Kennedy into a hypnotic sleep, and while he had him under his control learned the secret.

"From the completeness of the control it is evident that he had for some time been practising his power over the former banker—not, I presume, with the idea of turning it to his advantage, but merely to gratify his unconquerable lust for dominating others. I had heard that the Germans frequently practised this method in obtaining military secrets from their prisoners, though I had never before seen an actual case.

"But I had underestimated Hess's brilliance. The string as a quick guide to the bonds was obvious, but to attach it to another object evidenced a training in minutiæ of the highest order."

"Well," I said, rising to go to my room, "you have unmasked a thief and made two people happy. Quite a tidy day's work, I should say."

LeBau moved to the book-shelves and drew out a much worn volume of Montaigne.

"Happiness, my dear Peel," he said, as he blew the dust from its edges, "is the more difficult after you have obtained that which you have been striving for. But I have no doubts of Miss Kennedy. She has a most unusual gift in a woman—a logical mind. I think she is a mate for Bolster."

Kings of the Missouri

—Conclusion

By Hugh Pendexter

Author of "Red Belts," "Gentlemen of the North," etc.

CHAPTER XI

THE DESCHAMPS CLAN

AFTER supper Bridger walked about and inspected the fort and admired its arrangement, and visited McKenzie's home and expressed a proper amount of appreciation. McKenzie was determined to overwhelm him with the comforts and resources of the place, and all the time Bridger was burning with impatience to be off up-river to the *chantier*. If one of the boats was what he wanted he intended to get it down to the mouth of the Yellowstone and a few miles up that stream, and hide it until Papa Clair came along with the packs.

To get the rich prize out of the country he knew the loading and start must be worked without a hitch. Not only might Phinny arrive at any moment, having learned the truth of the beaver-packs from the Crows, but Berger was hourly expected, and he would be sure to know. But there was no suggestion of impatience or worry in Bridger's genial bearing.

McKenzie excused himself to attend to some routine matter and Bridger lounged up to Lander and without looking at him muttered:

"Sound the clerks about the boats at the *chantier*—number and condition. He says there are three there. We can have our pick. At first I thought he was going to refuse—suddenly gave in—signs look bad. Wait for me if you have to keep awake all night. I've got to set up with him and a bottle."

Until deep into the night Bridger listened to McKenzie's invitations to join the A. F. C. and his boastings of the company's remarkable success. If ever a man was licensed to feel proud from a trader's view-point of his success in the fur trade, it was Kenneth McKenzie.

How far he would have gone without the backing of the all-powerful company is another question. He was preeminently a trading-post man. It is doubtful if he could have plunged into the heart of an unknown country and attained the success that Bridger repeatedly scored.

Of the two men Bridger's life and efforts have been of vastly more value to posterity. McKenzie was a superlative trader. Bridger was an excellent trader, a great explorer and a born topographer. As a hunter, trapper and guide he had few equals. In the last capacity Fate was drilling him for a most important task with Johnston's army in '57 and the Indian campaign of '65-66.

McKenzie built exclusively for the advancement of the American Fur Company. Bridger built for the mighty hosts of humanity about to break loose across the plains and through the Rockies.

The mountain man listened gravely, never once mentioning the keelboat. McKenzie further to influence him quoted at length from his records of the huge number of fox, white hare, badger, white wolf, swanskins and dressed cowskins, in addition to the staple beaver and robes, the post handled every year.

"Mr. Bridger," he solemnly declared as he finished his display of records, "I'll promise you that you shall be made the head of a new department—bourgeois of the Rocky Mountain outfit of the A. F. C. with headquarters on Green River—at a salary of five thousand a year and a suitable percentage of the profits. There, sir! That is a proposition that I couldn't make with headquarters' consent to any other man in the mountains."

"It's a good offer," mused Bridger, "providing the percentage is all right. Not that there ain't a dozen men who can handle the work just as well as me. As I've said it all depends on the percentage, when you come to figuring its real value. Beaver won't always last. Big fortunes is to be made in it now, and I know beaver. But I'm much obliged for the offer. I'll chew it over on my way down-river."

"Think about it tonight," urged McKenzie. "And remember I never lie when I want a man—I tell him the blunt truth."

"Of course—makes a feller mad to find out some one has been lying to him. No sense in it. Now I'll turn in."

He proceeded to the room set apart for them and found Lander fully dressed and sound asleep. It was obvious he had tried to keep awake to make his report. Bridger shook him out of his slumber and softly asked—

"What do the clerks say about the boats at the *chantier?*"

Lander blinked owlishly at the door and surprized his friend by stealing to it and glancing out into the hall. Stumbling back to Bridger he whispered:

"It's derned queer. Overheard it by chance when two of the clerks got to cussing their luck. When McKenzie left you it was to tell the clerks to take men and ride up to the *chantier* and bring down two keelboats and leave them on the north bank of the river, five miles above here. They started at once.

"From another clerk I found out there were three boats there just as he said, but one's so smashed up it's beyond repair. It's the smashed-up one we'll find."

"Which is darned poor listening," growled Bridger. "We must start early in the morning. He told me to take my pick of the boats up there. I'll do it! An' he said he never lied to a man when he wanted him.

"One thing's sartain; if we don't git a keelboat we'll trust to luck with the bull-boats. If we have to do that I'll be mighty sorry we didn't make for the Platte an' its shallow water. But I did want to go this way so's I could turn the packs over to Prevost an' git back to the mountains. Wal, wal—mebbe our medicine will work for us. Who knows?"

ONLY the horse-herders were astir when Bridger aroused Lander from his unfinished slumbers. Lander sleepily repaired to the square and found his horse saddled and waiting. Bridger whistled and his own animal was brought from the shed.

"We'll start at once and eat a bite as we ride," said Bridger, swinging into the saddle. "I've raided the cook and have a saddle-bag filled with provender. Don't try to talk until we get clear of the fort." And he glanced up at the bastions as if expecting to behold McKenzie on the balcony.

The river-bank was shrouded in the early morning mists and at a distance of a few hundred yards the fort became half-lost to view, the stockade entirely blotted out.

"McKenzie thinks there is some game being played," tersely broke out Bridger. "He wants to be mighty nice for he wants to git me into the A. F. C. But the keelboat sticks in his crop. He ain't made up his mind just what he'll do.

"To git time to think he sends men on the sly to fetch away any boat that'll hold water an' leave the busted one. This makes it safe for him to tell me I can have my pick of boats up there.

"I'll come back with a talk that the boat ain't no good. He'll be surprized an' talk to the clerk. All of this will take time. An' it'll give him room to do some thinking. He ain't satisfied about me coming here.

"When we git back from the *chantier* it's most likely he'll take a whirl at asking you questions. You won't know nothing, of course. Our danger is that Phinny or Jake Berger will come along before we quit wasting time—or worse still, that Papa Clair may come down the Yallerstone in his bull-boats an' be seen by some of the *engagés*. Lordy, that would be a mess!"

"Phinny may be quitting the Crow village just as Papa Clair comes along," suggested Lander.

"If you was a Injun you'd stick pine splinters into a prisoner an' light 'em before burning him at the stake," grinned Bridger. "Now keep shet while I look at the trail."

The sun was burning away the mists, and the trail they were following was broad and ancient. From immemorial times the buffalo had followed it; the Indians had followed it. It offered no information to Lander—no more than would a pavement of rock. To Bridger it babbled with many voices. The best plainsmen of his day said never an Indian nor a single horse could cross his path without his detecting the fact and determining how old was the bisecting trail.

The trail was hard packed by countless moccasins and hoofs, yet Bridger dismounted and dropped on his knees and became deeply interested in searching the brown earth. On the outskirts of the path the signs of recent travel were fresher. For twenty minutes the mountain man worked from the center of the trail to the edge and then back again, and as his investigation advanced Lander noted he confined all his attention to the north side.

Finally he rose and mounted his horse and announced—

"According to the number of horses some three hundred warriors are in Gauche's party."

"McKenzie said he had passed this way after being licked by the Aricaras," reminded Lander, beginning to think the time was lost.

"I wasn't pawing round to find out if McKenzie was speaking the truth, or was a liar. A blind man could read that part of the story without gitting off his horse," ironically retorted Bridger.

"What McKenzie didn't say, an' probably didn't know, was that Gauche, or Left Hand as some call him, has got a sick man on a travois? The band was moving very slow at this point. We'll have to dodge their camp within the next few miles. He might want us to stay an' visit him.

"The trail is twenty-four hours old, but one man on a lame horse has come along here within the last hour. He stops every little way. He's either studying the Assiniboin trail, or waiting for us. All of which means we must ride with our eyes open."

TWO miles were passed without any attempt at conversation. Bridger had kept his gaze focused on the winding road. Suddenly he exclaimed under his breath and dismounted and dropped on his hands and knees. He crawled slowly from the trail for a distance of fifty feet. When he returned his face was grave.

"Eight men on foot swung into the trail where your nag stands. They stood an' talked with the man on horseback; then the nine of them quit the trail an' struck into the bush. The men on foot wasn't Assiniboins. Each had a gun as you can tell by the faint marks where they rested the butts while chinning the mounted man. They toe in an' their moccasins are heavier an' stronger than them worn by the Assiniboins, showing they go much afoot. They must be breeds that hang round the fort.

"They've l'arned that Gauche is in camp with a sick man. Sick man must be a big medicine man or a chief, else Gauche wouldn't hold up his march for him. The breeds probably figger to sneak in after dark an' run off the horses. The camp must be within a mile or two an' the breeds are drawing well back from the trail to wait until night."

They rode for a bit when Bridger led off from the trail and explained:

"I want to give Gauche a wide berth. He's sure to be ugly as a bear with a sore head along of the whipping he got down-river. We'll beat back a few miles an' then strike straight for the *chantier*."

The traveling became much slower after they left the trail. Bridger watched for signs of men afoot but found none, and this convinced him that his deductions were correct. The nine men had simply withdrawn to one side to wait until dark. With the quickness of the forest bred he slipped from his horse and leveled his rifle across the saddle before Lander could imagine what was the matter.

Then among the bushes he made out the figure of an Indian woman. Her hair was gray and as she stared at them she tore at it. With a little laugh at his alarm Bridger swung back into the saddle and the woman eagerly advanced and began talking shrilly and rapidly.

"She's speaking Assiniboin," said Bridger as he watched and listened. "I git it all right."

The woman ceased talking and made signs. Bridger nodded and said—

"One of your young men is hurt?"

"Hurt very bad," she replied. "Come and make him medicine."

Bridger possessed the mountain man's knowledge of emergency surgery. Also was he imbued with the superstitions of the Indians. He believed in his medicine. His kind heart urged him to follow the woman. His commercial instinct warned that he had no time to lose if he would visit the *chantier* and return to the fort before Phinny or Jake Berger arrived to inform McKenzie about the forty packs. He explained the situation to Lander.

The woman was laboring under great mental distress. There was none of the Indian stoicism Lander had heard so much about. Lander's sympathy was aroused.

Bridger asked how far she had come. She held the thumb and forefinger of her hands together as if holding a thread, then pulled them apart a few inches, then raised a hand with finger erect and moved it from side to side and forward.

"Says we can git there in a short time an' in a few steps," translated Bridger. "Reckon we'd best go with her. My medicine feels strong this morning. Some worthless breed; but if he's hurt, he's hurt."

The woman seemed overwhelmed with joy as he motioned her to lead the way. She ran ahead and repeatedly looked back to make sure they were following her. In this fashion she led them nearly a mile through the bush-grown area.

Bridger finally reined in and beckoned her to come back. She shook her head and pointed, and gestured for him to come on, and to convince him he had all but arrived she raised her voice and called out.

Bridger set his horse in motion, his eyes on the woman, and although his quick ear caught the rustling of bushes he was surrounded and his gun snatched from his hand before he could turn his head. A side glance revealed Lander likewise disarmed and dazed by the quickness of it all.

The woman ahead danced and flung her arms above her head and cackled hideously. Directly ahead of Bridger stood old Deschamps, and his gun covered Bridger's chest. To Lander, Bridger called out:

"Take it easy. Don't show any fight—yet. That old hag led us into a ambush. These are thieving breeds. What the devil's the matter with that medicine of mine!"

Then to Deschamps—

"Why do you hold me up like this?"

"We want to have a talk with you," Deschamps explained in Assiniboin.

"Talk Crow or English, you thieving devil," commanded Bridger.

"Get down and come into our hut," ordered Deschamps, backing away a few steps and speaking in the Crow tongue.

"That skunk Phinny is in there waiting for us?"

"No. I left him at the Crow village on the Yellowstone. He is to marry my girl—make her his wife like white men marry white women. But I do not trust him yet," chuckled Deschamps.

As he finished a young woman, comely of feature and graceful of form, came bounding through the growth and stared wide-eyed at the white men. Lander caught her fancy for a moment, and she drew close to him and peered up into his hot face.

She showed her white blood in her complexion and light-gray eyes, but there was frank animalism in her steady stare that made Lander nervous and caused her to laugh scornfully. Darting to Bridger she placed a small foot in the stirrup and lifted herself erect and maintained her balance by seizing his shaggy brown hair.

BRIDGER'S gaze was as cold as hers was volcanic. Her insolence changed to something akin to admiration and she tugged his hair playfully.

"Phinny's squaw!" exclaimed Bridger, seizing her two wrists and forcing her to release her grasp.

She fought like a fury, trying to reach his face with her fingers. With a grunt of disgust he picked her up in his arms and tossed her over his horse's head and into her father's arms.

With a scream of rage she pulled a dirk and came at him, her teeth bare, her eyes blazing. He made no move until her arm went back for the blow; then he caught her wrist and gave it a wrench that brought a howl of pain to her red lips. Turning toward Deschamps he sternly ordered—

"Take this hell-cat away."

Deschamps shrugged his shoulders, showing no inclination to interfere. But another of the family, François, the oldest son, dropped his gun and pinioned the girl's hands to her sides and carried her into the bush. When he came back the girl did not attempt to follow him.

"Good Lord! What a woman!" gasped Lander. He stood in greater fear of the pretty vixen than he did of the entire Deschamps gang.

"If Phinny marries her he will be paying the price for all his deviltry."

"Get down," ordered Deschamps.

There was an ominous steadying of guns and Bridger quietly slid from the saddle and motioned for Lander to do likewise.

"You and your gang plan to steal Gauche's horses while he camps to cure a sick man," Bridger accused.

Deschamps was startled. The white man's medicine was very wise to read his plans. His villainous old face hardened. When the white man showed he knew so much he dug his own grave. After he had answered certain important questions he and his young friend would disappear. Bridger swung his bold gaze over the circle of sullen faces and remarked:

"My medicine is whispering to me that your friend François will be killed very soon—I see Jack Rem and his three sons. They hunt with the Deschamps now but my medicine says the time is just ahead when the two families will fight and kill each other off. Wait—my medicine is whispering."

He paused and tilted his head and smiled grimly—then announced:

"My medicine says that Baptiste Gardepied is coming after you with a big war-party of Blackfeet. Better git yourself killed before he gets you."

"You lie!" hissed Deschamps. "Gardepied knows I will kill him and has left the country."

"He is with the Blackfeet and has turned them against you. He almost caught you when you betrayed my young man into the hands of the Blackfeet. He set the young man free. He will kill you."

"No more, or I will kill you," yelled Deschamps, now beside himself with rage.

François feared his father's anger would break up their plans, so he now assumed command and gave an order.

The men closed in about Bridger and Lander and poked them with their guns and drove them toward the old woman who had acted as the decoy. She fell back as the prisoners were made to advance, and within a few minutes halted before a long log cabin roofed with bark.

The whites were pushed through the low door, the breeds following and remaining between them and the only exit. On each side of the room was a small opening, high up and too small for a man to escape through. These answered for windows and admitted light.

In the middle of the room was a short section of a cottonwood log, standing on end to serve as a stool. Bridger appropriated the stool and Lander dropped on the hard-packed earth at his side and clasped his hands over his knees—the knife in his right boot being ready for his hand.

LAGUCHE stepped ahead of his gang to act as inquisitor, but before he could begin, his daughter squirmed her way through the group and darted like a fury toward Bridger and raised a long-barreled pistol. The intrusion was so quickly completed that not a man moved, and as she stood crouching before her victim, the pistol leveled, the occupants of the room became paralyzed and glared blankly and waited for the tragedy to arouse them to action.

Bridger, on the stool, remained calm of countenance, his gray eyes meeting and holding the eyes of the woman. Her bosom rose and fell with the lust to kill. Still the gray eyes held her gaze captive, and as she stared she found herself discovering strange depths in the dilated pupils.

No one about the door dared move, for fear of precipitating the homicide. Lander was frozen with horror of the situation and looked straight ahead, waiting for the pistol to speak. For a slow count of ten the tableau endured, then with a shriek the girl dropped the pistol, threw up both hands and staggered blindly for the door.

The men gave way and in silence watched her depart. The white man's medicine was very powerful when it could tame a wildcat like the Deschamps girl. Bridger picked up the pistol and examined it and then laid it between his feet.

Deschamps was the first to recover from the general stupor and he ordered—

"Give up that pistol."

"The young woman gave it to me. I will keep it here," quietly replied Bridger.

"Give it up or I fire!" commanded Deschamps, aiming his gun.

"That would spoil your plans. You brought us here for something," reminded Bridger, placing a moccasin on the pistol.

"Let him keep it. We have many guns," spoke up François.

"But we will shoot if his hand touches it again," added Jack Rem.

Deschamps changed his attitude and called out for the old woman to see that the girl did not enter the cabin again. Then turning to Bridger he asked—

"Where are the packs of beaver you took from the Blackfoot medicine-lodge?"

"Oh, ho! So that was the cat in the bag, eh?" chuckled Bridger. "Did Phinny think I was carrying 'em with me? You might look in my saddle-bags; or perhaps my young man has 'em in his belt."

"Phinny doesn't know about them," sullenly replied Deschamps. He added:

"I was told about them at the Crow village a day's march below the mouth of the Yellowstone. Black Arrow told his warriors to say nothing about the packs to us, but one man was my friend and told me. Phinny does not understand the Crow tongue. He knows nothing. Ferguson may find out about it, but he had not when I left the village."

Bridger eyed him in admiration. Deschamps' reputation for blood-thirsty deviltry was known to most mountain men, but few would have credited him with scheming to steal forty thousand dollars' worth of beaver, unless he found the packs cached and unguarded. His larceny was especially daring since it involved the deception of an A. F. C. man.

"Pretty smart for a Injun. What did the Crows tell you?" asked Bridger.

"How you and the boy got the packs. You two came through the valley alone. Your coming to Union tells me the packs will come down the Yellowstone. You are not such a fool as to have them brought to the fort where Phinny and McKenzie would see them. Phinny hired Ferguson away from you. He will handle the Crow trade for the A. F. C. this Winter."

"Phinny will be coming to the fort soon," mused Bridger.

"He started as soon as he found I had gone," growled Deschamps. "But he better be careful. He wanted my girl for his squaw. Now he doesn't seem to want her so much. But he can't make a fool of her. She's got white blood in her. He'll take her, or I'll cut his throat."

"She'll cut his throat if he takes her," grunted the younger Deschamps with a hideous leer.

"I don't like him. I'm going to kill him anyway," growled François.

"Keep still!" snarled Deschamps. To Bridger: "I'm waiting to know when the packs will come through, and how. Tell me and you won't be hurt."

"They're to come by pack-mules. How do I know when a string of mules will git into Fort Union, you fool? Phinny may hold them up for all I know. Perhaps he has them now."

Deschamps gnawed his lips and eyed Bridger evilly. Jack Rem spoke up and declared:

"Your white medicine is strong, you say. It better tell you where the packs are. My woman was at the fort when you asked about a keelboat. You want it for the packs."

Deschamps stamped his feet and cried:

"Good for you, Jack Rem. Your woman shall have much red cloth. She has sharp ears.

"So you'd fool the old fox, would you, Bridger? Keep him covered, boys. I'll give him until I fill my pipe to tell when the packs will come down the Yellowstone."

Bridger bowed his head and pondered deeply. There were nine of them, all armed and not a bit averse to murder. His and Lander's rifles stood in the corner. He had a short skinning-knife in his belt and Lander had his long blade in his boot. His moccasin rested on the long-barreled pistol. One life—if it could be discharged. But should either he or Lander make

a move both would be riddled. Were it in his power to turn over the packs on the spot he knew the gang would not permit him and Lander to leave the hut alive could they help it. His only hope was to play for time until a moment came when the gang was off guard.

"Deschamps," he earnestly insisted, "I do not know when the packs will come. Mebbe in three days. Mebbe not for twice as long. Mebbe not at all. I came ahead and traveled fast. That is the best I can tell you."

"You will do better than that or never leave this hut," coolly retorted Deschamps, still rolling the tobacco between his palms. "I've killed better men than you. Tell the truth and you'll be kept here till we get the packs. Then you'll be free to go."

Bridger smothered a smile, still fighting for a little chance to turn up on which he could pivot an offensive. Lifting his head he gravely said:

"My medicine knows everything. If it will tell me I will tell you. I do not want to die. I can get more beaver. A life lost stays lost. I will talk to my medicine."

Deschamps brightened and nodded for him to proceed. Bridger warned—

"Let no one move or speak, or I shall learn nothing."

Then very deliberately to show he intended no tricks he gently pushed the pistol to one side, bent between his knees and rested a finger on the earthen floor near Lander. He tapped on the floor in front of the log which served him for a stool, as if to attract his medicine, and succeeded in putting Lander on the *qui vive*. Then he tilted his head as if listening, and was able to keep an eye on the gang.

The breeds stood breathless and waited. None of them had any doubts as to the virtue and intelligence of Bridger's medicine. It was celebrated for efficacy throughout the mountains. Nor was there one who failed to understand how whimsical a man's medicine can be at times, and must be catered to and indulged and have feasts made for it.

BRIDGER'S eyes widened and he began working his finger in the dirt. Lander with a sidewise gaze saw letters forming in the dirt. With much business of listening to the mysterious voice and taking care not to move his lips and give any alarm Bridger slowly completed his message. Lander read—

Fall flat when they fire then at em I shall thro the log

Lander, staring blankly, patted his boot-leg to show he understood. Bridger rocked his head back and forth and began to groan; then he bowed forward, his hands working convulsively between his legs and against the log. He was like a medicine man having convulsions.

"My medicine is here!" he gasped, his eyes protruding wildly and his two hands resting on the sides of the log, his legs straddling gradually apart.

"What does it say?" whispered Deschamps.

"This!" roared Bridger, surging forward while his hands fetched the log between his legs and with a violent toss hurled it into the group. And as he made the cast he threw himself flat and pulled Lander with him, and reached for the pistol.

As the two went down four of the men fired—their lead plumping into the rear wall. Deschamps was scrambling for his rifle and four of the men were writhing on the floor—knocked over by the weight of the heavy missile.

"At 'em!" yelled Bridger, coming to his feet and rushing toward the door.

He snapped the pistol at Deschamps and it failed to explode. He hurled it and struck a man in the chest. Lander was at his side, his knife drawn. One of Rem's sons-in-law jumped to get the prisoners' rifles, but Lander threw his knife and pinned the man's arm to the wall.

The men knocked out by the log began crawling to their feet. Deschamps shrieked to the others to use their knives. Before they could draw their knives, however, Bridger was among them, trying to bore a hole to the door.

He instantly became the hub of a revolving wheel of fiercely fighting men. He caught old Deschamps by the scruff of the neck and flung him about as a shield while his free hand delivered smashing blows. The younger Deschamps boy tried to dirk the mountain man but drove his steel into his father's arm and was rewarded with a string of horrible curses.

Bridger looked for Lander to help him and was dismayed to see him on the floor with blood flowing from a cut on the head. A war-ax lay at his side with blood on the handle. The exulting face of the Deschamps girl in the doorway and the direction of her gaze told him it was she who had hurled the ax, and only by chance had the handle instead of the blade struck the blow.

The sight of the young man maddened Bridger. Pivoting on his heel he swept Deschamps around in a circle, and maintained his balance with his outstretched right fist—two spokes in a terrible wheel. He felt Deschamps go limp and knew his senses had been battered out of him.

Four men were down and showed no inclination to rise. Three men still opposed him as the fellow pinned to the wall made no effort to release himself, and Deschamps was unconscious. Ceasing his gyrations he lifted Deschamps above his head and hurled him against François, and evil father and son went down together. Leaping over the prostrate bodies with two men after him armed with knives, he reached the man pinned against the wall and

wrenched loose Lander's knife and wheeled and slashed one of his assailants across the face. Something fanned his cheek and a knife stuck and vibrated in a log. Again the girl at the door. Ignoring her and the chances of further attentions on her part he drove the remaining combatant back and secured the two rifles.

Lander was now rolling his head and groaning. Holding both guns in one hand, Bridger tossed the long knife at Lander's side and cried:

"There's your medicine. Wake up an' pick it up! We've licked 'em!"

Lander's fingers closed on the haft and he crawled to his feet, glared wildly about, then sensed the meaning of it all and lurched toward his friend mumbling:

"You've licked them you mean. Lord, what a fight you put up!"

"Reckon even Jim Baker would have to knuckle down a little to this scrimmage," Bridger proudly admitted as he swept his gaze over the prostrate forms.

"Them two bears he fit an' killed weren't full grown of course. But baby grizzlies are mighty bad poison. Now we'll quit this place. Have your knife ready an' look out for that hell cat. Some of these in here may be playing 'possum. I'll back out an' keep 'em cooped up till you can find an' fetch the horses. Go ahead."

Lander leaped through the doorway and endeavored to cry a warning to his patron. Bridger followed and was instantly seized and hurled to the ground.

CHAPTER XII

MEDICINE FOR THE LANCE

FLAT on his back Bridger looked up into a circle of savage faces. Lander stood helpless between two warriors, a red hand over his mouth. The men holding Bridger down stepped back and permitted him to rise. Both his rifle and knife had been taken from him when he was first seized.

In addition to the circle about him there was another and a stronger line a few rods back. He made no move to escape, but when he observed the Deschamps and Rem breeds sneaking through the door and disappearing into the bush he called on his captors to stop them.

"Let the dogs go. We know where to find them when we are drunk and want to dance a mangy scalp," spoke up a deep voice.

Bridger twisted about and beheld a short, powerfully built Indian with much gray in his hair advancing through the inner circle. Waiting until the man stood before him Bridger greeted—

"My friend Gauche comes after I have won my fight."

Lander caught the one word Gauche, and knew he was in the presence of perhaps the most cruel and crafty Indian the Northwest had produced in many years.

Gauche stared coldly at Bridger. He still smarted from the drubbing inflicted by the Aricaras. He knew Bridger was a mighty warrior, but he owed him no trade allegiance. There was a smoldering rage in his black heart which could be eased only by torture or ransom.

Bridger and his young man were not connected with Fort Union, and there was no A. F. C. reprisal to fear. But Bridger was a big man in the mountains, and at the head of a pioneer fur company. He was worth a fat ransom.

"Why don't you say something, Gauche? Your men hear fighting and seize me and my brother and let those mixed bloods go. They came to steal your horses. Why are hands placed on me? Don't you know it is bad business for you to treat a white man this way? Or do you want trouble with white men?"

Gauche smiled inscrutably, and replied:

"I have said it. The Deschamps hair is mangy. My medicine will not feed on such. When I want them I will send some of my squaws to cut off their heads. They have nothing I want.

"Now about yourself. What do I care for your words? Have the white men ever made Gauche, the Left-Handed, run? When he calls himself Wakontonga, the Great Medicine, does he go and hide? When on the war-path he is known as Mina-Yougha, the Knife-Holder, is he ever afraid?

"Has not Death many times sent to him saying, 'He invites you,' and has not Gauche always answered with a laugh and returned to living out his time? Speak soft, white man; do not leave a trail of words that will make me angry."

"Squaw's talk," sneered Bridger. "Draw off all but a handful of your men and give me a knife or an ax, and you'll find the kind of a trail I will leave for you."

Gauche lifted his ax as if to strike with the flat of it, encountered Bridger's blazing eyes and knew if he struck he must kill. As that did not meet with his purpose he put the ax aside and briefly said:

"I open a new trade. I need you."

"Go on," said Bridger, now sensing what was coming.

"You live among white folks, many sleeps down the long river. You have big lodges filled with goods. You will go with me to my camp, where I shall make a big feast for my war-medicine. Then you will send a talking-paper down the river by the young man. You will send for a fire-canoe to come up here with many presents for the Assiniboins."

"Your medicine must be foolish to make you

talk like this," sneered Bridger. "I am on my way to the place-of-building-boats. I am McKenzie's friend. He made me a big feast at the fort last night. We sat up till the moon grew tired, drinking from big bottles.

"McKenzie and his men are following after me. Now I have lived in his lodge and eaten his meat and drunk from his bottle. Let the Assiniboins watch their steps carefully, or they will step on a snake that bites and poisons."

Gauche concealed his concern at this bold speech. Of all things he must not incur the displeasure of McKenzie. It was from Fort Union that he obtained the all-necessary guns and powder and ball and the dearly loved liquor. Adhering to his original purpose of holding the mountain man for a big ransom, he changed his bearing to one of friendliness. He said:

"There are bad men about here. If you are a friend of the Great Chief at the fort you are a friend of the Assiniboins. You shall go to the place-of-building-boats. Our camp is near there. We will go with you to see no bad breeds hurt you."

"Nine men tried to hurt me in the cabin. Those who have not crawled out are too sick to move. To some, perhaps Death has sent word, 'Come, he invites you.' They were not cunning like Gauche. They went. I do not need your help, Gauche, but you will need mine. Therefore we will travel together."

Gauche was puzzled by these words and studied Bridger suspiciously.

"We will ride to the place-of-building-boats together like two brothers," he sullenly assented.

"Good. Give us our guns and bring our horses. My young man and I are in no hurry but you must ride fast or your sick man will die."

Gauche felt himself trembling. He retreated a few steps and moved about to conceal his sudden fear.

"Why speak of a sick man? Where is he?" he demanded.

"In your camp. You pitch your lodges to wait until he gets well or dies. Your medicine is weak. It let the Aricaras whip you. It can not make your friend well."

The chief prided himself on being a magician with the greatest of power. He had a nation of credulous believers and few skeptics. As fast as he found a skeptic he fed him poison. Having devoted so much of his time and thoughts to sorcery and magic, it was natural that he should be ensnared in his own black webs, and he began to wish he had never seen this strange white man, who mocked him before his warriors.

"The white man has a strong medicine?" he muttered.

"Very strong. My young man here has a very strong knife-medicine. Black Arrow of the Crows offered him many ponies for it. But my medicine takes his by the hand and leads it about as you would lead a child."

"Then he shall lead my friend back to strength. He is La Lance, one of my chiefs. There are crooked tongues that will say my magic killed him if he dies.

"There were cords through his bones and wolf-hairs under his skin and bird-claws in his flesh. With my medicine I took them all out and showed them to him. But there is an evil spirit in him my medicine can not reach. My warriors stand about the lodge to shoot it when it comes out, but my medicine can not drive it out."

Bridger turned and nodded lightly to Lander, rapidly explaining:

"Chief has a sick Injun on his hands. Afraid he's going to die an' that his reputation as a poisoner will make other bands in the tribe think he was murdered. That shows it ain't a cut or a gunshot." Then to Gauche:

"Bring our horses and guns, and lead the way. We are in no hurry. We will stop long enough to look at the sick man. I am full up to my neck with this talk."

THE horses and weapons were brought up; and, equipped once more and mounted, the white men rode side by side with the Assiniboins in front and bringing up the rear. Lander anxiously murmured—

"But you can't cure the sick man."

"White medicine is stronger'n red any time," replied Bridger. "If it's something very simple I'll use some doctor's stuff in my saddle-bag. I've toted it to the mountains an' back every trip. My medicine would work all right on anything, but I never bother it for something that don't 'mount to much. An' it ain't awful keen to work on an Injun, anyway. I've worked it on Crows, as they're friends of mine, but I always was afraid an Injun would make it grow weak. Jim Baker's got crazy idees 'bout medicine—still, it's all right not to take chances.

"A feast of b'iled berries mayn't do it any good, but I reckon they wouldn't do it any harm. Jim won't take no chances when it comes to his medicine. I've know'd him to travel four hundred miles just to git something he allowed his medicine would relish. Between my medicine an' the doctor's stuff I'll pull the Lance through or kill him."

Gauche's camp consisted of some three hundred warriors. Bridger shrewdly surmised that the Aricaras must have had help from the Sioux tribes to defeat so big a band. When the chief and his prisoners rode into camp there rose a great commotion, and from the snatches of gibes hurled at them Bridger managed to patch out the truth.

Gauche had learned of Bridger's presence at the fort and had determined to capture him

and hold him for a big ransom. In this way he would in part make up for the spoils he had planned to take from the Aricaras. The men in the camp on seeing the two whites boldly taunted them with being held for ransom, and Gauche heard it with stolid face and glittering eyes.

Bridger halted in the middle of the camp and said to Gauche:

"Tell your men we are here to cure a sick man of a devil, and that afterward we are to be free to go our way. Tell them that is the only ransom we will pay. If the man dies his friends will say you poisoned him. Then two, three bands will join together against you. Perhaps your own people will turn against you. If La Lance dies it will cost you your life."

"If he dies you will be the cause, and you will die," hissed Gauche. "But I will say what you wish."

And lifting his powerful voice for quiet he told his people how he had made a bargain with the white men. If they cured La Lance they were to go free. If they failed, his people could kill them or hold them for ransom.

This did not please the bulk of the warriors. They cared nothing for La Lance, who came from another band. He had not carried himself so conspicuously as to win their admiration during the Aricara campaign. He had not been wounded. Either his fear had made him sick, or old Gauche was slowly poisoning him to death. They rather approved of the latter fate. To keep secret from his captives the mutinous inclination of some of his men Gauche dismissed all but six of his companions and then led the way to a tent at one side of the camp.

As they rode toward this Bridger opened a saddle-bag and extracted a medicine-case and tucked it under his shirt. As they dismounted from their horses in front of the tent four warriors standing guard there discharged their guns at the ground and one ran about clubbing his gun as if striking at something.

Then one of the guards loudly and proudly called out that the approach of the great master had frightened the evil spirit from the sick man and that they had shot and clubbed it to death as it ran from under the tent. One said it was the size of a river-rat.

Gauche received the compliment in silence and seemed a bit loath to enter the tent. Bridger crowded by him and stood looking down on La Lance, who had three years to live before being dissected and eaten by the Big Bellies. Bridger diagnosed his sickness as malarial fever and felt much relieved.

Gauche now entered and displayed some cords of rawhide, some strands of coarse hair, such as the Indians plucked from between the buffalo's horns for the making of horse-hobbles, and three withered bird-claws.

"These were taken from the sick man's body by my medicine," he modestly reminded.

Bridger gravely bowed his head and declared:

"Your magic is big. Your medicine is very strong, for it drove out a devil. But it was only a little devil and the big devil remains. My medicine let me see the little devil when it ran from under the tent. Will you try again, or shall I use my medicine?"

La Lance began groaning. His eyes were closed and he did not sense the presence of the three men. Gauche hastily decided—

"My white brother shall try his medicine."

Bridger fumbled at his medicine-case and bowed his head as if in deep thought. He tilted his head as if listening to ghost voices; but in his sidelong glance Lander beheld a twinkle in the gray eyes and a twitching at the corners of the firm mouth that told of hidden laughter.

Staring intently at Gauche, the mountain man motioned for silence. Gauche and Lander stood rigid. Only the moaning of the sick man and the murmur of angry warriors outside the tent intruded on the silence. With an abruptness that caused the chief to step back nervously Bridger hissed:

"My medicine tells me the sick man is troubled by the Water Spirit. Your medicine is strong, but it can not drive out the Water Spirit. Wait—my medicine brings another talk to me."

He cocked his head and listened and nodded; then triumphantly announced:

"Now I have it. Send warriors along the river-bank toward Fort Union. Before they come in sight of the fort they will find two keelboats tied to the bank. The boats probably will be hidden in the bull-berry bushes. They must look very sharp. They must untie one of these boats and take it up-river to the place-of-building-boats. There they will find a broken boat.

"The Water Spirit says there is big medicine in the broken boat but that it can not work until the sick boat has the strong boat fastened close beside it. When the strong boat is fastened to the sick boat, then will my medicine work and drive out the Water Spirit from the Lance."

GAUCHE never dreamed of doubting this diagnosis and cure. His savage mind fed on the things it had created. It appealed to him as being extremely logical that the Water Spirit should grieve over the wounded boat and should torment some Assiniboin warrior until an undamaged boat was brought to keep company with the broken one. He left the tent to send men after the hidden craft, and the moment the camp beheld him shouts were raised.

"What do they say?" asked Lander.

Bridger produced a bottle of fever medicine

and forced several swallows down the sick man's throat.

"That will give him a jolt, I reckon," he grimly mused. "What are they saying? Oh, not much of anything. Some say the Lance is sick because he is a coward. Others say the tribe's medicine is against his being with Gauche's band and that the Aricaras would have been whipped if he hadn't been along. The most of 'em don't give a —— for the Lance—Ah."

"What?"

Bridger frowned.

"One of the head men is asking Gauche if we are to be let go without paying a big price. He says we do not belong to the fort; that the Assiniboins would be fools if they didn't make a profit out of us. Now Gauche is talking but I can not hear him well— Buf'ler 'n' beaver! Hear 'em now! That means he's made 'em mad—that he's told 'em we're to go without paying any ransom. He's the boss an' his word is law—let 'em howl all they want to. There's just one thing that'll make him change his mind an' treat us like dirt."

"If we fail to cure this man," said Lander.

"Not by a dern sight. If his warriors don't find that keelboat. Talk to your medicine, boy, an' git it to working. They just got to find that boat."

He lifted a finger and turned to the sick man. Gauche glided in, his dark face scowling.

"Some of my men talk like fools," he growled. "Some of them will go hunting their uncles among the spirits. They forget I am the Left Hand, that I am Mina-Yougha the Knife-Holder and Wakontonga the Great Medicine. It comes of taking them to the white man's fort.

"The man McKenzie thinks to make my trade by treating my warriors as if they were chiefs. They forget I can make black medicine."

"Do they go to find the boat?" asked Bridger anxiously.

"They go. My white brother's medicine must have eyes like the eagle to see so far. He shall give me the medicine that drives out the Water Spirit and I will not ask for gifts from the canoe-that-walks-on-the-water. When does the big spirit leave the Lance?"

Bridger glanced at the flushed face of the sufferer and recalled cases he had treated among his trappers. His answer must be a gamble at the best, as he did not know how long it would require for the men to find the boat and work it up to the *chantier*. But Gauche was waiting, his small eyes demanding an immediate answer.

"When your young men come back and say the boat is in its place the spirit will leave him," Bridger calmly assured.

"Wait here. I will see a tent is made ready for you," said the chief.

This time he was gone but a few minutes. They followed him to a tent pitched within twoscore feet of the sick man's. Motioning them to enter, he left them.

Inside was a kettle of water and some dried buffalo-meat. Before the entrance was fuel and two crotched sticks on which to hang the kettle. Bridger measured out some medicine into a wooden dish and diluted it with water and placed it near the door. Then he lighted a fire and hung the kettle.

"Going to try and cook that stuff?" asked Lander in huge disgust, pointing to the dried meat.

"No, no. That's good just as it is," said Bridger, catching up a strip and working his strong, white teeth through it. "Doesn't smell very bad, either."

"Ugh! Then why the hot water?"

"That sick cuss has fever an' chills. I've got to bust it up during the night. I give him a mighty strong dose—full strength. 'Nough to make a horse sweat. Now I must git to him again in 'bout two hours. I need lots of hot water. See those devils scowl at us."

The last, as a band of warriors paraded by the tent at a respectful distance and lowered blackly at the white men.

"Never a Injun had more power over so many men in this valley as Gauche has had over his band," ruminated Bridger. "But the old cuss has it right when he says he may lose his grip because of the men getting to the fort.

"The A. F. C. makes a heap of 'em when they bring in a good trade. They always start their liquor trade at dark an' keep it up all night. Old Gauche has a tin dipper which he never lets go of, an' he rushes in an' out an' gits beastly drunk an' keeps so.

"When he's drunk his authority slips a trifle. His men, being drunk, say an' do things they wouldn't dast do before him when sober, an' they ain't made to suffer. This has been going on ever since the A. F. C. got active up here a few years ago.

"Gauche's men are beginning to wonder if he's much better'n they be. He's always held 'em in check by his reputation as a medicine man, poisoner and worker in magic. But the first time he led his band to Fort Union an' stopped outside to vermilion an' dress up an' hear the cannon shot off in his honor he was losing a bit of his power.

"Three years ago there wasn't a man in his band that would 'a' dared to give him any lip. Now he's kept everlastingly at it to think up games where he can run off some Blackfeet horses an' lift some Sioux hair so's they'll stick to him as a big chief.

"His trip down-river give his standing an awful jolt. They blame his medicine for the licking. He thought to make 'em forgit by corralling us an' gitting a big ransom, but the

Lance blocks that game. If the Lance dies the Lance's band will blame him, an' say he poisoned the cuss. He's just got to cure the Lance or have trouble. With his own men gitting sassy he can't afford to let that happen."

"If the Lance gets well he'll probably hold us for ransom just the same," observed Lander.

"He'll have to be crowded awful hard before he'd do that. First place, he'd be afraid of my medicine. Second place, he knows he can't go only 'bout so far before McKenzie would have to call a halt. But if McKenzie l'arns 'bout the beaver-packs he won't call a halt till he's got his paws on 'em. I'm going to git out of this camp tomorrer if I have to take old Gauche in front of me on my saddle."

Lander worried down some of the tough meat while Bridger ate heartily. Groups of warriors kept passing the tent and eying it malevolently. Bridger ignored them but Lander shifted his knife from boot to belt and would have felt more at ease had Gauche been with them. The chief, however, had disappeared.

As the darkness settled over the camp Bridger commented on Gauche's absence and explained it by saying:

"He's gone off alone somewheres to make new medicine. No good comes of shifting your medicines the way he does. Git a good one and stick to it. It may git lame when it meets a stronger medicine; but if it averages up well that's all you can ask.

"Jim Baker swapped his medicine for a spotted Cheyenne pony once. Pony busted a leg next day an' the Injun who'd took the medicine sneaked in an' stole Jim's rifle. Just plumb foolishness."

"But if he don't come back his men will get rough," said Lander.

"Sure to. But listen to me; no matter what they try, you keep calm an' act like you didn't know they was round. Time enough to make a fight when you see me letting out."

BY DEGREES the camp quieted down and Lander believed they were to have a quiet night despite the chief's absence, when a long howl down by the river-bank caused him to start nervously. They were sitting before their tent. As the outcry continued Bridger rose and entered the tent and called Lander after him. Then he fixed the flap in place.

"It's hot and stuffy," complained Lander, feeling about and locating a buffalo-robe and sitting down.

"Just remember my orders. Don't show fight till I give the word," quietly replied Bridger.

Now the noise by the river increased in volume. Bridger informed—

"Some of the bucks have fetched liquor from Fort Union."

The two sat and waited while the bedlam drew nearer. Lander was puzzled in following the course of the hideous chorus. It would sweep toward them, then lessen in intensity, only to pass to one side with renewed volume. Bridger lighted his pipe and explained:

"They're feasting from lodge to lodge, giving rum to each tent and asking the people to join 'em. They'll be here by 'n' by."

"And shall we wait?"

"Best thing to do. Fetch in some of the dry wood. I'll make a fire an' open the smoke-hole. Leave the flap back. We'll give 'em a chance to see."

All this was bewildering to Lander, but if Jim Bridger did not know how to handle the situation no man in the mountains or in the Missouri Valley did. So he obeyed and Bridger soon had a small blaze burning inside the tent which brightly illuminated the interior. The flap was fastened wide open. Bridger then seated himself near the opening and motioned for Lander to sit by his side.

"Here they come," he warned. "Full of A. F. C. liquor an' natural cussedness. Don't pay any attention to 'em."

With a rush and an inferno of yells the dusky band swept around the tent and howled ferociously. Bridger smoked on placidly and between puffs talked to Lander, who sat with bowed head as if listening intently.

Several bucks ran up and thrust their heads through the opening but neither of the white men seemed to see them. One of the intruders reached in with his knife and slashed it within a few inches of Bridger's head but the veteran gave no heed to the threat. From the corner of his eye Lander beheld a knife-blade slice through the rear of the tent and nudged Bridger.

"Never mind little things like that," drawled Bridger. "They've got quite a few things they'll try. They don't just dare to kill us, but if they can make us show fight they'll dare anything."

Fascinated and with his heart galloping furiously, Lander watched the knife. Now it was reenforced by other knives and amid horrible yelling the back of the tent was slit to ribbons. Ferocious faces appeared in the openings and fairly spat at them. One man, in a delirium of rage, contented himself with thrusting his body half-way into the tent and stabbing and hacking the ground with his knife, all the time emitting the most devilish shrieks.

"Trying to scare us into stampeding," lazily informed Bridger. "Now sit tight an' don't budge a muscle. They won't shoot at us."

The warning was timely, else Lander would have leaped to his feet to sell his life dearly. Several bucks thrust their guns through the tent and discharged them into the fire, blowing coals and ashes all about.

"That's why I made a blaze," Bridger cheerfully explained. "If it had been dark they'd 'a' hit us."

As if acting on a prearranged signal the band now rushed close to the front of the tent and ripped off a hide in order to expose more fully the prisoners. With knives brandishing and guns pointing they crouched low and howled in the faces of the white men. Never by so much as a quiver of an eyelash did Bridger give evidence of knowing they were there.

Lander, by keeping his gaze lowered while he traced patterns with his finger on the ground, also managed to simulate entire indifference. There came one more volley into the coals of the fire, a final surging forward, a last crescendo of inarticulate cries, then as one the visitors fled back to the river-bank and their cache of rum.

"That's over," mused Bridger with a sigh of relief, and now the sweat began dotting his forehead.

"Pawnees tried it on me a few years ago but they didn't have any rum, just pure ugly, an' they didn't go as far as these fellows did. Fine for the sick man! Reckon I'll slip in an' give him a hot dose."

Not relishing to remain alone, Lander went with him. With coals from their fire they ignited a handful of dry twigs and by the light of these Bridger held up the patient's head and forced him to drink a dish of hot water, reenforced with medicine from the medicine-case.

The Lance showed no improvement that Lander could detect but Bridger nodded in approval, saying:

"He's quit groaning. Ain't begun to sweat yet but we'll fetch him before morning."

During the night Bridger visited his patient several times to dose him with hot drinks. The Lance continued to rest easy although his skin remained hot and dry.

Near morning Gauche came to the white men's tent badly spent. He said he had been far from the river making medicine.

"I made two medicines," he explained, watching Bridger furtively. "One was for a war-party against the Blackfeet. I know where and when forty lodges with the white man Berger will pass down the river on the way to Fort Union. I shall send a talk to McKenzie to keep inside his fort. We do not want to hurt any of his people by mistake.

"My medicine tells me that if I wait until the Blackfeet have commenced drinking we can kill them all and run off all their horses. Then will the Assiniboins know my medicine is not sick like an old man."

"Your other medicine?" demanded Bridger suspiciously.

"I made that to make the Lance strong again."

"Then that is why my medicine did not cure him last night," sternly cried Bridger. "Burn or throw away that last medicine, or I will let the man die. Take the war-path and get a new name by killing Blackfeet, but stop opening your medicine-bag toward the Lance, or I will tell the Indians of your nation that you killed the Lance."

"My medicine wanted to help," muttered Gauche. "If it will not work with your medicine I will burn it."

He rose and, bending over the fire, secretly opened a skin pouch and reluctantly allowed the contents to drop into the flames. The whites caught the odor of burning feathers. Rising, Gauche asked—

"Now, when will the Water Spirit leave him?"

"Very soon. Some time before the sun goes down," assured Bridger.

CHAPTER XIII

PHINNY COMES AND GOES

THE inactivity was most distressing to Lander. He pictured Papa Clair arriving with the packs. He saw men from the fort discovering them and reporting the news to McKenzie. By this time Lander's friendship for Bridger was so partizan he would feel defeat as keenly as would his patron.

"Why not give that Indian more medicine and have it over with?" he asked of Bridger, who was lounging outside their ruined tent, smoking and watching the Assiniboins recovering from the night's debauch.

"There's one big reason," Bridger simply replied. "I've told Gauche that the Water Spirit would quit the Lance when the keelboat was back at the *chantier*. I've been shaving down on the hot drinks till I could know the bucks have had time to find the boat an' take it up-river. I want to hold back the cure till the boat's been returned.

"I've got to ding it into Gauche's Injun head that it was my medicine what did the work. If he gits the notion he had a hand in it he might think his medicine was so strong he could hold us for ransom. He's tricky as a snake. Bad Injun.

"This waiting business would fret me all up if I let it, but I believe in my luck. This band done its worst when it fooled round our tent last night. They won't try to stop our going 'less Gauche tells 'em to. They're sick from the rum an' have lost lots of interest in lots of things. Funny that McKenzie's liquor should help us out of this scrape."

One of the leading warriors approached and stared at the ruined tent and said—

"The white men had trouble in the night."

"No trouble," said Bridger. "Some boys made a noise. That is all."

The man retired and passed the word that the white men were very stout of heart. Bridger visited the sick man. The Lance had his eyes

open and his gaze was normal. Bridger placed a hand on his head and felt the perspiration starting at the roots of the coarse, thick hair.

The Lance eyed him wonderingly when he lifted him up and gave him a drink of water. To be ministered to by a white man was a new experience.

"Where is the Left Hand?" he faintly asked.

"He makes war-medicine against the Blackfeet."

"He was making medicine against the sickness in me when I went into the black sleep."

"His medicine was weak. He had to have the white man's medicine to make you well. Before sunset my medicine will drive the evil spirit from you if you do as I say."

"It is good."

"You are not to speak nor open your eyes if Gauche enters this tent. When I tell you that you are well, then you can talk."

"It is good."

Bridger returned to Lander and found him trying to make a midday meal out of corn and beans. The mountain man ate heartily of the dried meat. Gauche was busy circulating among his warriors in an effort to arouse their enthusiasm for a raid against the Blackfeet. He kept repeating to them:

"I made medicine against the Blackfeet. I dreamed last night and saw much blood on the Blackfeet. There was no blood on the Assiniboins. I saw many signs of Blackfoot horses, and all the trails led to the camp of the Left Hand. Be ready with many arrows and your bows. Let those who have guns save their powder."

It was not until late afternoon that he came to Bridger. There was a peculiar glitter in his wicked little eyes, and for a moment Bridger feared he had found some rum and was commencing a drunk that might lead him into the vilest treachery. It was excitement, however, rather than liquor that had fired the chief.

Before speaking he passed into the sick man's tent and for nearly a minute stared down on the closed eyes of the Lance. So far as appearances went the man might be dead. Coming back to Bridger he said:

"The Lance lies very quiet. I could not see that he breathed. My young men have come back to say the boat is in its place up the river. I have told my warriors to come here and see the white man's medicine drive the Water Spirit from the Lance. I hope the white man's medicine is ready to work. The Lance looks like a dead man."

Bridger put his pipe in the hanger about his neck, stretched his arms and drawled:

"The medicine is ready. But it must hear the young men speak about the boat. It can not hear you say it. Send for them."

As he had expected Gauche acted as his own messenger, there being none of his men at hand. The moment he disappeared Bridger was galvanized into action. He prepared more fever medicine in hot water and took it to the Lance and had him drink it. Then he covered him with extra buffalo-robes. Hurrying back to Lander, who was nervously awaiting the climax, he coolly informed—

"I'll have the taller oozing out of him inside of ten minutes."

"The chief thought he was dead."

"Playing 'possum. See that the rifles are ready. Then try to smoke."

A confusion of voices ran through the tents. Men began to appear in small bands and make for the sick man's tent. Gauche had passed the word that the Lance was dead and that the white men proposed bringing him back to life.

Bridger stood with his back to the excited warriors. One of the headmen started to enter the tent, but Bridger caught him by the arm and hurled him back. The man's hand went to his ax, but fell limp as Gauche called out—

"Be afraid of the man who brings the dead back to life!"

Then the chief harangued his men. He reminded them of how the white man's medicine had discovered the Water Spirit in the Lance, and he repeated Bridger's promise that the sick should be strong once the white medicine heard from the lips of the young men that the boat had been returned to the place-of-building-boats. And for good measure he recalled the numerous instances of Assiniboin braves who had dared set up opposition to their chief, dying of mysterious sicknesses.

There was a deep silence after the speech, finally broken by the appearance of two bucks, who pushed their way through the crowd bruskly. These were the spokesmen, and they had delayed their arrival in order to extract the full dramatic value from the scene. Halting before Bridger, they haughtily announced the completion of their errand.

Bridger turned his head and as if addressing some invisible agency in the tent rapidly repeated their words in English, then paused as if listening. Drawing himself erect, he loudly called out:

"The Water Spirit is now leaving the Lance. Stay where you are and watch."

HE lifted the flap behind him and entered the oven-like atmosphere and kneeled beside the Lance. The man was panting painfully and in a reeking sweat from the fever medicine and heavy robes. He gasped for water and Bridger allowed him to drink his fill from a kettle.

"You are well," informed Bridger, throwing aside the robes. "Stand up and show the Assiniboins how the white man's medicine works."

Assisted by the mountain man the Lance managed to gain his feet. With a hand under

his elbow to steady him he was guided to the opening, Bridger directing in a low voice.

"You will tell them the fires no longer burn inside you. You will tell them you are strong, but very sleepy. Then you will return to your robes and drink some soup and rest for a day. Tomorrow you will be strong and go and come a man."

The Lance forgot he was weak and famished. Thoroughly believing a powerful medicine had effected the cure, he felt himself a figure of much importance. His shoulders squared and his eyes grew steady as he flung back the flap of skin and confronted the mass of warriors. Nor did his voice fail him, but rang out in its usual volume as he proclaimed:

"The Lance has been dead. He is alive. He was weak. Now he is strong. There are no fires in his body. The white man's medicine put them out. I go back to eat and sleep. Then I will be ready to take the path again against the enemies of the Assiniboins."

The Indians clapped their hands to their mouths, their gesture to express amazement, as they looked on one who, Gauche had said, was dead. The Lance retreated, and as the flap fell, shutting him in from the view of the warriors, he fell into Bridger's arms. The mountain man placed him on his robes and gave him more water. Opening the top of the tent to create a draft, he drew back the flap over the opening and hurried to his tent.

The Assiniboins eyed him with much awe, their hands clapping to their mouths. Verily his medicine was mighty. If he would come and live with the Assiniboins the nation would drive the Blackfeet beyond the mountains. They had seen him take a man burned and parched like a fragment of sun-scorched hide and overnight turn him out moist with sweat, ready to eat and sleep, and eager to fight.

Addressing Gauche, who had followed him, and speaking loudly for the benefit of all, Bridger said:

"Now we have cured your sick we will go. Last night my medicine told me that you had made a new medicine, one that was very strong and would bring you many horses and Blackfeet scalps. Now we want our horses at once."

"If the white men will rest one sleep—" Gauche began.

"Then the Lance would fall sick again. My medicine says it must go," cut in Bridger. "Bring our horses."

Gauche gave an order and the two animals were produced. Taking their rifles, the white men led their horses through the camp, nor did they hear any voice demanding they be held for ransom. Not until they were well beyond the tents did they mount. Bridger rode rapidly for the river and would have turned up-stream had not the sound of music caused him to rein in and stare down the river-road in amazement.

"That ain't no Injun music!" he exclaimed to Lander.

"Drums, bells, violin and a clarionet," checked off Lander, his eyes lighting.

"White men from the fort," muttered Bridger, riding toward the music.

Soon they sighted them—a band of white men, mounted and playing their instruments as they rode. The music was most sweet in the ears of the trappers, and for a moment Bridger forgot to wonder at its coming.

"Look who rides behind!" softly cried out Lander.

"I see 'em," murmured Bridger, watching the figures of McKenzie and Phinny. "Remember—not a sign or a word to Phinny that you suspect him," warned Bridger. "The music ain't for us. Must be for the Injuns."

In this surmise he was correct, for on sighting him McKenzie showed surprize, then spurred ahead, and jovially explained:

"A little treat for the Assiniboins. It tickles old Gauche's fancy. We don't lose anything by humoring him. When we get him we get all his people."

"Mighty good notion," admitted Bridger.

Then with a little smile he reminded: "An' the A. F. C. never goes after the Injuns. Just let's 'em come to the fort or stay away."

McKenzie scowled but instantly retorted:

"This display isn't to fetch trade to Fort Union. It's to keep peace. I got word that Gauche plans to attack a party of Blackfeet that's coming in with Jacob Berger. I must stop it. I've worked too hard to get the Blackfeet to come to me to have it spoiled by that old reprobate's actions."

"Why if here isn't Phinny!" exclaimed Bridger as Phinny now rode up.

"Howdy, Phinny."

"We meet again, Malcom," called out Lander cordially.

Phinny who had been watching them through half-closed lids, now wreathed his dark face with smiles.

"Lord, Lander! But wasn't I glad when Black Arrow's band arrived at the Crow village and said you had escaped from the Blackfeet and was on your way to Fort Union. I'm awfully glad to see you.

"And, Mr. Bridger, no hard feelings I hope because I've hired Ferguson to work for us with the Crows. He wanted the place. He felt it was more steady than working for a company that goes after beaver only."

"That's all right," assured Bridger. "I've got plenty of men who'll go and make opposition to him. The Crows think a heap of me. Don't make much difference what man I send there. I let Ferguson have it as he was begging for a job. But as you say H. B. men are better fitted for the A. F. C. post-trade than for going after beaver for my company."

McKENZIE ordered the musicians to go on to the camp and hold the Indians from filling the river-trail. Then he anxiously asked:

"What became of you two? You started to get the boat yesterday morning. We've been worried about you."

"The Deschamps gang and some of the Rems corralled us yesterday morning and held us for ransom. Old woman decoyed us to their cabin by saying one of the men was sick an' needed help. They're a bad mess."

McKenzie cursed in genuine rage.

"They've got to be wiped out," he fiercely declared. "I've stood lots from the Deschamps and Rem families. I've winked at quite a few things as they were handy as interpreters. But I'm through. I'm sorry Gardepied didn't make good his threat and kill old Deschamps. My men at the fort won't stand any more nonsense from that crowd. Where are you going now?"

"We stopped here last night to cure La Lance of a fever. We're now going up to select the boat you said you'd sell us."

"I see," mused McKenzie, his eyes twinkling.

And Phinny stared at the river as if greatly interested in its muddy current.

"I did agree to sell you the best boat at the *chantier*, didn't I?" McKenzie continued. "Well, I'll keep my word, although it may cramp my plans. Hard to choose between friendship and business, Mr. Bridger. Lucky I didn't promise some of those down the river. Since you went away I'm called on to use all I have."

"I don't want to hold you to a promise that really fusses you," gravely said Bridger. "If you want to be let off——"

"No, no," hastily broke in McKenzie. "No one shall say Kenneth McKenzie went back on his word. I told you that you could buy any boat up there. I'll even go with you. Some of my men might be there and not understand. They'd forbid your taking it. One boat was the bargain.

"Phinny, ride after the men and see that they start for the fort after they've tickled up the chief. Tell that old villain to take his men and camp nearer the fort and that I'll fire the cannon as a salute to his greatness. —— villain! If I can get him into the fort and drunk I'll stand some show of getting word to Berger to hold the Blackfeet away until I can send men to make the trade."

Lander did not dare glance at Bridger for fear McKenzie would read the question burning in his eyes. Had Phinny learned about the packs? Was McKenzie's great need of boats due in part to their getting hold of the forty packs? Bridger was putting the same queries to himself, although his eyes revealed nothing.

"It's mighty good of you to go with us," declared Bridger. "Only wish Phinny could come along."

Phinny flashed his teeth in a smile, darted a glance at his chief and regretted:

"Business comes first. See you soon at the fort. I've got lots of St. Louis news to talk over with you, Lander. Express brought up some letters while I was at the Crow village."

There was a taunt in this although Phinny's demeanor seemed to breathe good fellowship only. Lander forced a smile and nodded. Bridger understood his young friend's feelings and, as if it were an afterthought, called to Phinny:

"I forgot to warn you, young man, that old Deschamps seems to think you're tied up to that wildcat girl of his. Look out for a knife when you meet 'em."

The smile left Phinny's face. "—— Deschamps!" he muttered.

"With all my heart," agreed Bridger.

In putting the man on his guard Bridger had punished him for plotting misery against Lander. It was simple enough to imagine the nature of the St. Louis gossip Phinny was to retail. Included in it would be the favoritism of Hurry-Up Parker for him, and the intimation that he was to marry Miss Susette.

The moment he had spoken, however, Bridger knew he had scored a second point. Phinny would keep clear of the breeds. If he did not already know about the beaver-packs it was a most excellent move to discourage his intimacy with the Deschamps. The breed, having failed to secure the packs for himself, would be inclined to sell his secret to Phinny or McKenzie.

Even now Papa Clair might be coming down the Yellowstone. Could Phinny and the mixed-bloods be kept apart for a few days—so much the better for the Rocky Mountain Fur Company's chances. Always provided, of course, that Phinny had not learned the truth while at the Crow village.

McKENZIE was most affable as the three of them galloped up the trail to the *chantier*. He talked on a wide range of subjects, but always edged back to Bridger's intended use of the keelboat. The mountain man stuck to his original explanation of wishing to have an extra boat at Fort Pierre.

Evidently this did not satisfy McKenzie. While a most business-like arrangement, it did not account for Bridger's haste in securing the boat. It would have been more natural for Prevost to send word down to St. Louis for another boat to be towed up by the packet.

But here was Bridger making a long journey from the Sweetwater to the Missouri for the sole purpose ostensibly of buying a keelboat. McKenzie refused to swallow it. On the other hand, although he cudgeled his brain, he could not see what use Bridger would have for the boat above Fort Pierre.

Had he brought pack-animals the answer

would have been simple. But Phinny—only Bridger could not be sure of this yet—had heard nothing while among the Crows which would tend to solve the problem.

In fact he had been amazed on reaching the fort to learn the two men were there ahead of him. Bridger was shrewd enough to detect the suspicions revolving back of McKenzie's sharp eyes, and he was pleased to believe his secret was not known.

"The boat-yard is right ahead," said McKenzie as they came in view of cleared ground along the river-bank.

He pulled his horse down to a walk and smiled in a peculiar fashion at the mountain man. Bridger winked gravely at Lander, who was seized with a desire to laugh. McKenzie continued:

"I'm sorry I made that promise, but I always keep my word. Look them over and take your pick. You must be satisfied with what is here, as even hospitality and my warm desire to please you will not permit me to go an inch farther in the matter. Loyalty to my employers draws the line rather than my natural inclination."

This well-rounded sentiment was given with much unction and McKenzie's long upper lip was drawn down in sanctimonious regret that it must be so.

A fringe of willows concealed the river-shore until one had entered the clearing. Leaving McKenzie and Lander, Bridger eagerly pressed ahead and leaped from his horse.

"I had no business to allow my admiration for Mr. Bridger to wring any promise from me," McKenzie said to Lander. "But he has a way of getting what he wants. Phinny tells me you were employed in the A. F. C. store in St. Louis. You should have remained. Your merit would have been rewarded."

"I was pitched out, neck and crop," Lander informed him.

"So, so? But there is a chance of your returning—yes, I believe I am warranted in saying it, even if it would sound better coming from one of my superiors, either Mr. Pierre Chouteau, or some of the others; I have some influence in the St. Louis office.

"Or if you wish you can stay on here with me. A clerk, say, at three hundred, to stay three years. Next year I could give you a hundred more. Another hundred the third year. We want young men who work with the idea of becoming partners in the company, who feel they are a part of the organization."

"I'm following Mr. Bridger now," said Lander. "If he joins the A. F. C. I should be pleased to come in with him. He's been mighty good to me."

"Well, well. Every man must decide on which side his bread is buttered. Mr. Bridger seems perplexed over the boats."

"He's probably trying to make a choice," Lander innocently suggested, his lips twitching.

"I hope he is not disappointed," mused McKenzie, his face gravely sympathetic.

To relieve his fears Bridger now called out:

"All right, Mr. McKenzie. I'll take this one. Fact, there ain't only one choice. T'other one seems to be busted."

"The other one—" began McKenzie. "To be sure; the other one is damaged. Now I had forgotten that. And you find one that—that suits?"

"It's all right," cheerily cried Bridger. "Come down and look it over. I can't see anything wrong 'bout it."

Much puzzled and deeply disturbed at the unexpected presence of two boats, McKenzie cantered into the clearing and rode his horse down to the shelving bank. To his dismay he beheld one of his best keelboats. It was one of the two he had ordered his men surreptitiously to remove down-river. But here it was—tied fast beside the broken boat.

"Yes, it seems to be all right," he mumbled, mopping his forehead with a gay silk handkerchief. "Seems to be all right."

And in his heart he cursed the blunderers. "I'll send some of my men up to fetch it down for you," he added.

"I'd never forgive myself if I took any more advantage of your neighborly kindness," earnestly declared Bridger. "Lander 'n' me will work it down. I'll give you the order at the fort."

"Come, come, Mr. Bridger. Never do work you don't need to. It's a bad example for the *engagés* and Indians," McKenzie protested with some asperity. "And you have your horses to take care of."

"Here comes one of your musicians, riding like the ——!" exclaimed Lander recognizing the drummer.

The horseman came up at a gallop, and, yanking his blown mount to its haunches, excitedly cried out:

"Th' Deschamps gang has murdered Mr. Phinny. One of Gauche's men found him stabbed to death half a mile from th' Assiniboin camp. Th' Injun read th' trail an' says he found tracks of a Injun woman's moccasins."

While McKenzie remained speechless with horror at the news Bridger yelped out—

"What sort of a knife was used?"

"Dirk."

"Then th' squaw done it—old Deschamps' wildcat girl. She tried to stick a dirk into me. The old man said Phinny had promised to keep her as his woman. She probably thought he was going back on his bargain."

"This is terrible!" groaned McKenzie. "I must ride back at once."

As he reined his horse into the trail Bridger ran up to the messenger and said:

"Your nag's blowed. Ride one of our horses to the fort, leadin' t'other two."

"Yes, bring the animals along," wearily mumbled McKenzie as he rode down the trail.

Bridger piled into the keelboat and beckoned Lander to follow him. Then he warned:

"Now, young feller, you're going to see some real boating. It's twenty-five miles, an' keelboats ain't s'posed to run at night except when there's a good moon. But we're going through —— bent for breakfast. It'll be darker'n the inside of a beaver. We're going to pass the fort in the dark an' make the Yallerstone without being spotted. Now grab one of them poles an' hump yourself."

CHAPTER XIV

BEAVER! BEAVER!

THE boat was fifty feet long and twelve feet wide, an awkward craft for two men to navigate even in daylight. With night blotting out the banks and concealing snags and bars it seemed to Lander to be an impossible task. Yet by the time McKenzie was galloping down the river-road to investigate the murder of Phinny the mountain man and his young assistant had pushed the boat into mid-stream. Motioning Lander to take a position on the starboard runway—*passe avant*—of cleats, Bridger gave him a long, knobbed pole, and standing opposite him commanded in mimicry of Étienne Prevost—

"*A bas les perches!*"

Down went the poles and the two men began pushing the boat from under their feet; Bridger holding his efforts down to a level with those of his inexperienced companion. So long as they exerted an identical pressure the boat held a true course. With experienced river men at the poles there was no need of a man at the tiller. Strive as he would, however, the mountain man outpushed his employee, and the first time down the *passe avant* he was compelled to seize the long tiller to avoid running ashore.

"Three hours of some sort of light," he mused as they straightened out once more. "We ought to make the bulk of the distance in that time, barring accidents. I don't want to reach the fort till it's good and dark. Now let's see if I can't keep even with you."

A little practise on the part of both, one striving to increase his motive power, the other holding himself in check, soon enabled them to keep to mid-channel. Time was lost at the bends as Bridger was compelled to take the tiller and leave the current to do the work.

Twice they ran on to bars, but as the boat was empty they were soon afloat. Almost all the snags were well inshore on either hand—carried and hung up there by high water. As the night shut in and the banks became blurred it was difficult to determine where the shadows ended and the willow and cottonwood growths began.

"It's mostly luck from now on," murmured Bridger as the outstretched claw of a snag rasped against the boat. "You keep in the bow to push us off. We'll let the current do the work."

The hour was now close to midnight and they would be passing the fort very soon.

Lander completely lost all sense of direction. He was adrift on a limitless sea. There was no longer any such things as shores. Only the subdued call of a voice on the left bank dispelled this illusion of infinite space.

Bridger at the tiller softly signaled for him to remain quiet. Lander crawled back and found his patron lying on top of the cargo-box.

"See or hear anything?" came the voice, sounding very close.

"Too —— foggy. They must have hung up till mornin'. Ye done gone an' let th' fire go out. Yer fire, much as it is mine. Stop yappin' an' help git it started ag'in."

Bridger chuckled and whispered:

"McKenzie has men out to watch for us. He's thought up some game to take the boat back. That dark smooch up there is Union."

Lander rubbed his eyes but was unable to locate the "smooch." No lights were burning in or near the fort, and only a mountain man's vision could make out the parallelogram of stockade and buildings.

"Then we've got by," Lander exulted under his breath.

"By the fort," dryly agreed Bridger, "but we ain't by Kenneth McKenzie yet. We've got to round the Point before we can hit the Yallerstone. We'll be there mighty soon now. That's the danger place."

The Point was the narrow and thumb-shaped stretch of land formed by the river's eccentric course in running south to receive the Yellowstone and then doubling back to the north and east. As they neared the Point the channel narrowed; and, as Bridger had expected, guards were stationed there. Obviously McKenzie was determined to get the boat back.

"Git a light," growled a voice. "Why'n sin don't ye git that fire started?"

"Wal, gimme time," was the snarling rejoinder.

Bridger closed a hand on Lander's wrist and softly whispered—

"We must git by before they start their fire."

The boat glided on. The men on the bank seemed to be within jumping distance. One of them tested his memory by repeating—

" 'Mr. McKenzie's mighty sorry but he must have th' boat to take Mr. Phinny's dead body down-river.' "

"'All t'other boats bein' needed for comp'ny work!" sullenly completed the second voice.

"Then we're to say that if he ain't in too much of a hurry he can have a boat arter th' rush is over. Mebbe in a week or ten days. There, —— it, I reckon I can tote that talk to th' Three Forks o' th' Missouri an' fetch it back an' never lose a word."

"Shet yer trap an' open yer peepers. We'll soon be able to see things."

This as a tiny spiral of flame ran up a mass of sun-dried debris.

Lander held his breath. He could make out the forms of two men armed with rifles, as they passed between him and the growing fire. The blaze as yet was scarcely under way. Bridger sighed in deep content and murmured:

"They'll be looking up-stream. By the time the fire gits to burning at a good lick they can look up or down an' be cussed, so far as we care. 'Nother three minutes an' we'll be nosing into the Yallerstone."

As if suddenly desirous of serving Kenneth McKenzie the fire flared up and burned a broad path across the river. Lander believed they would be discovered and crouched low to escape a bullet. But although the radius of the light zone rapidly increased it did not catch up with the receding boat; and then again the watchers were staring up-stream. The keelboat was again in darkness although the fire was visible—a red hole through a black blanket.

"We must do some poling," said Bridger. "Here's the Yallerstone."

"Where?" blankly asked Lander, unable to see anything once he removed his gaze from the fire.

"Can't you feel the current pushing us to the left? Work gently. Sound carries like sin on the water."

Lander worked with great caution, but with no intelligence. He did what his patron commanded, but he did it blindly. If not for occasional backward glances at the fire he would have believed the boat was going about in circles. Then something snatched the fire from sight, and Bridger was announcing:

"We've done it. We're in the Yallerstone now. Timber on this south bank hides the fire from us. A little ahead is a bend. After we make that we'll hide up an' camp, an', as Étienne says, '*fumer la pipe*.'"

Now the work was more strenuous as they were fighting against the current. Again the task became purposeless so far as Lander could observe. It consisted of nosing ashore and backing out of blundering on to bars and snags and working clear.

At last he was driven to ask—

"Do you know where you want to go and how near you are to arriving, Mr. Bridger?"

"We're already there," assured Bridger. "Work her dead ahead."

Lander stood in the stern and pushed with all his strength. He heard the rustling of branches in the bow and finally felt a limb worrying his head.

"Now it's *fumer la pipe*," said Bridger.

Lander reached out with his pole and found it rested on the river-bank.

"I reckon I could jump ashore," he said.

"Reckon so, if you didn't fall in. Better stretch out on the cargo-box an' git a few feet of sleep."

BOTH were asleep when the sun came up, but were soon awake and on the bank. The river was empty. They were above the bend and snugly concealed under a rank spread of willow boughs. For a considerable distance the course of the river could be traced due south, and nowhere along its lonely reaches was there any sign of the bull-boats.

Lander grew worried. Bridger was grave but lost none of his composure. He dozed, stood watch, and ate dried meat and never betrayed any impatience. Yet when in the early afternoon he detected a moving dot far up the river his gray eyes flashed and he put up his pipe.

"Some Indian from the Crow village coming to visit Fort Union," suggested Lander in a low whisper, as if the newcomer were well within hearing.

"White man," muttered Bridger. "Tell by the way he paddles. Not very good at the paddle, but must have been some time. Probably he's old an' has been away from it."

"Papa Clair?" exclaimed Lander, unable to make out anything except a tiny shape moving toward them with the current.

Bridger made no reply for half a minute, then slowly informed the other:

"Yes, it's Clair. He's taking it easy, thank the Lord! Packs must be safe, or he wouldn't be so perky an' yet so delib'rate."

Fascinated, Lander waited and the dot became a canoe; then almost before he knew it the canoe leaped from the middle distance into the foreground, and there was Papa Clair, white hair and white mustaches and his knife in his belt.

"Good day, Papa Clair," softly called out Bridger from behind the willow screen.

"*Bonjour, m'sieu*," quietly returned Papa Clair, sending his canoe toward the hiding-place and picking up a rifle.

"Bound to have a fight with me," saluted Bridger, poking his head into view. "Where are the bull-boats hid up?"

"M'sieu Bridger! It is good to see you. Where is my young friend? Ah—now I see you, my friend. Then all is well with you. But name of a pipe! Such a bother, the boats

of the bull! They are safe. Let that be your satisfy. But when we have done with them I will rip them to the devil for being blind pigs and the sons of pigs."

He passed under the drooping branches and held his canoe against the boat and exchanged handshakes. His trip down the Big Horn and Yellowstone with the packs had been uneventful except for the vicissitudes of snags and bars and the awkwardness of his craft. He had passed the Crow village in the night and had seen no Indians.

Five trappers had accompanied him. They had arrived and gone into hiding early in the morning of this very day. Bridger in turn gave a synopsis of his and Lander's adventures, and rapidly explained the necessity of shifting the cargo and making down the Missouri that night.

"We must be well down-stream by tomorrow morning," he concluded. "We will stay here till dusk, then pole up to the packs. You go back an' fetch a couple men to help pole. It must be done in a rush. An' fetch along some grub. Lander seems to have a delicate stomach."

"I go. The men are impatient to hunt along the shore. One of them swore he would go and I had to show him my pet knife to hold his interests to our little camp. God is good!"

With another handshake, especially warm to Lander, he pushed from under the willows and paddled up-stream. Bridger yawned and went to sleep. Lander kept awake, nervously anticipating the night's work and feverishly crossing many bridges of risks and disappointments.

Success meant seeing Susette. He pictured Kenneth McKenzie as the great obstacle between him and the home-going. He could not imagine that gentleman remaining inactive. The failure of the keelboat to arrive at the fort was sure to cause all sorts of suspicions. The Indians would be sent to scout the country for it.

The conversation of the men on guard at the Point revealed that McKenzie was determined to take the boat back and would urge an absurd excuse in order to succeed. The distance between Lander and the girl in St. Louis lengthened and stretched out during the afternoon until it seemed as if the whole world were between them.

LANDER succeeded in dozing off only to be aroused by the arrival of Papa Clair and two trappers. They brought a huge piece of cooked cow-meat and a bag of salt. Bridger joined Lander in a ravenous attack on the food. As they ate Papa Clair signaled for silence. He pointed down-stream, and Bridger crept to his side and beheld a canoe following the opposite bank. In it were two men, one white, the other an Indian.

"McKenzie's clerk an' a Assiniboin," muttered Bridger. "Sent to search the river, but they seem to be half-hearted."

"Behold! They grow weary. They turn back!"

"Saves us catching an' holding 'em till we can git away," said Bridger. "After they make the bend we'll start for the bull-boats. No more scouts will come up here now; they're going back to report."

The canoe dropped down-stream and quickly disappeared around the bend. After waiting ten or fifteen minutes Papa Clair's canoe was fastened to the keelboat and the men quickly poled it up-stream and into an eddy.

Bridger held council and selected two to make the trip as far as Fort Pierre. The others were directed to return to the Greene as soon as they had worked the keelboat out of the Yellowstone and into the Missouri.

"I'm going back to the fort to give a order for the boat an' sell the two horses," he explained. "Papa Clair will be boss here. When it gits dark you'll run down into the Missouri for 'bout a mile an' a half where the big island is. Lay up there till I come. I'm going there now in the canoe, an' I shall hide the canoe on the bank. Papa Clair, if I'm not there by midnight you're to strike for Pierre, keeping all the men with you."

With a nod to Lander he stepped into the canoe and with sturdy strokes sped down the river. Striking into the Missouri, he crossed to the north shore and held on until he came to the island, abreast of which Fort William was to stand two years later in brief opposition to Fort Union.

The channel between the island and the river-bank was narrow, and a few strokes of the paddle sent the canoe ashore. Fort Union was a little less than three miles away. Striking north, Bridger made a wide detour until he was above the fort and on the river.

It was now at the edge of dusk, and he knew the keelboat would be descending the Yellowstone within an hour. He hoped his presence at the fort would concentrate and hold McKenzie's attention to him and that the search for the keelboat would slow up. Almost as soon as he came up the bank from the river and entered the river-road he was quickly spied by one of the clerks. The young man was astonished at seeing him, and gasped:

"Mr. Bridger! Why, we've been— Why, Mr. Bridger! That is, Mr. McKenzie was hoping you'd show up. Where's the boat?"

"Ashore," sternly replied Bridger. "I've come afoot to see your boss."

He walked on, exhibiting no desire for the clerk's company; and the latter, glad to be free, ran ahead to give the news to his irate employer. When Bridger passed through the gate he walked with a slight limp, as if lame from travel.

McKenzie, on the southwest bastion balcony, saw him approaching and hastened out to greet him. His shrewd gaze took account of the limp and the downcast expression on Bridger's face.

"The boat got ashore, the clerk tells me," said McKenzie in a soothing voice. "Too bad. Too bad. I wanted you to let my men fetch it down, you know. Too much for two men to do alone and in the night. Must have grounded quite a ways up-stream."

He frowned slightly, unable to understand how his men had failed to find the boat after scouring both sides of the river almost to the boat-yard.

"You couldn't have more'n got started from the *chantier*."

"Quite a ways," sighed Bridger, lifting a leg and tenderly feeling of his ankle. "But I'm here to give you an order on the Rocky Mountain Fur Company for the boat an' to sell you the two horses."

"Come inside," invited McKenzie, turning to the bastion. "I want to talk with you. Do you mind coming up to the balcony? I've been watching for Jacob Berger. He and the Blackfeet should be getting along before now. I'm afraid of old Gauche. He wouldn't move his camp down here. Promised he would, but he hasn't showed up. I promised him twenty new guns and ten kegs of liquor if he wouldn't have any trouble with the Blackfeet until after they'd fetched me their trade. —— old rascal!

"But about the boat. I hate like the devil to back out of a bargain, but I need that boat to take Malcom Phinny's body down-river. He stands high in St. Louis with the A. F. C. and with the people of the city——"

"Bah!" broke in Bridger in huge disgust. "You just stick that young devil up in a tree to dry same's you would a Injun an' send his carcass down-river when your steamer comes along. He betrayed my man Lander into the hands of the Blackfeet; he killed my man Porker. He an' old Deschamps planned to murder Lander the minute they l'arned he was at the rendezvous."

"I don't believe it!"

"Careful, Mr. McKenzie. Me, Jim Bridger, says it. An' I don't accuse any man till I know. Phinny was worse'n a Injun. The A. F. C. don't owe him any partic'lar attention."

"It's hard for me to believe it," corrected McKenzie, his face flushing.

In truth he never had had the slightest suspicion that Phinny was carrying on any campaign of hate against Lander.

"Of course it's hard for you to believe it until I say it's a fact, but it's true. Even if he didn't take naturally to murdering, why such a hurry to git his dead body down-river when you've already told headquarters the steamboat will let you keep live men up here an' pay 'em off in goods at the reg'lar Injun-trade profit?

"Mr. McKenzie, I'm keeping the boat. The bargain's made an' you'll stick to it."

"I'll stick to it when I know what you want that boat for," retorted McKenzie. "I'm something more than a trader up here. I'm called the King of the Missouri, perhaps you'll remember. I'm not only responsible to the A. F. C. for what goes on up here, but I'm also responsible to the United States government."

"Was you responsible to the United States government when you set up your distillery?" asked Bridger with a grin.

"That was to conduct scientific experiments with our natural fruits and berries," McKenzie haughtily replied. "The government is perfectly satisfied, and that matter is ended."

"An' the still is busted up," added Bridger. "Why, every one knows how Pierre Chouteau, Jr., worked his head off in getting Senator Benton to fix it so the A. F. C. wouldn't lose its license. It took every ounce of power an' influence that Old Bullion had at that to straighten it out.

"Now you've 'lowed by your words that I'm doing something I hadn't oughter. I'm waiting for you to take them words back."

McKENZIE bit his lips, then smiled graciously and declared:

"Jim Bridger, I never accused you of any wrong-doing. You're going to be one of us some time. But as King of the Missouri I must keep an eye on things."

"A King of the Missouri. I'm a King of the Missouri too," said Bridger. "So is Jim Baker an' Étienne Prevost an' Papa Clair an' a whole herd of others. Now we'll make out an order for that boat an' I'll sell you the two horses."

"I refuse to sell the boat," stiffly decided McKenzie. "Wherever I find it I shall seize it; and I do not care to buy your horses."

"I don't give a —— 'bout the horses; but the boat's mine. If you won't take an order on the Rocky Mountain Fur Company then I'll credit it against what the A. F. C. owes me for the robes I traded to Phinny. I'll trade my horses to old Gauche. He thinks I'm prime medicine. Reckon I'll put a Winter man with him. He'd do well."

"If you'll agree not to put a Winter man in with Gauche you can have the boat for four hundred dollars and I'll take the horses," growled McKenzie.

"You ain't losing a penny on that boat," solemnly declared Bridger. "Boat prices have gone up mighty smart. So's the price on horses. We'll call the horses two hundred apiece. That squares off the boat an' saves bookkeeping. Got Deschamps yet?"

"No. My men are after Deschamps now. If they'd been at hand you might have decided

you didn't want the boat. If Baptiste Gardepied is with the Blackfeet I'll send him after Deschamps."

"Here comes some one in a hurry. Probably bringing word that they've found Deschamps," said Bridger, pointing to a man riding furiously toward the stockade gate from the river-road.

McKenzie quit the balcony and ran down the stairs with Bridger close behind him. The newcomer rode into the stockade as McKenzie ran from the bastion. One glance and Bridger dodged behind a group of clerks and edged toward the gate.

"Kenneth McKenzie!" cried the horseman, leaping from his animal and glaring wildly about.

"Yes, yes, Berger! Here I am. Mr. Bridger and I were on the balcony and saw you coming."

"Bridger?" gasped Berger. "So he knew enough to fetch the forty packs of beaver he got from the Blackfeet to you 'stead of tryin' to git 'em down to St. Louis. It's a fine trade even if ye do have to give some presents to the Blackfeet—to them what's left, anyway."

"Forty packs of beaver! ——! That's the answer to the keelboat!" yelled McKenzie. "Where's Bridger? He was here a second ago. Find him, you idiots! Don't let him get away in that A. F. C. keelboat!"

But by this time Bridger was through the gate and running along the western stockade to make the woods at the north.

"Forty packs of beaver, and the A. F. C. kindly letting him have a boat to take them down-river!" moaned McKenzie.

"There's something else to worry 'bout, Mr. McKenzie," panted Berger, staggering to him and clutching his arm.! "I'm wounded an' can't talk a —— of a lot. That cussed old p'isoner of a Gauche had his men fire into th' Blackfoot lodges two hours ago. Killed a heap of warriors an' got away with three hundred ponies. It ain't no time to talk 'bout Bridger's beaver-packs unless ye wanter lose th' Blackfoot trade."

While McKenzie was confronting this new problem Bridger was making the best of the dusk and the confusion in the fort to reach a point where it would be safe to turn his course toward the island. He assumed that all the hubbub inside the stockade had resulted from McKenzie's discovery of his plans. So he spared himself none in racing to the concealed canoe. He believed the search for him would be up the river, as he had arrived from that direction.

An hour later he was hiding on the up-stream tip of the island and answering a low signal out on the water. Ten minutes passed and Papa Clair was softly announcing:

"We arrive, M'sieu Bridger. Holy blue, but your medicine was strong to let you go to the fort and return."

"All the men except two take this canoe an' hustle back up the Yallerstone," cried Bridger. "Berger's come with his Blackfeet an' they may strike for home through the Crow country, an' it's best for you men to have a big start of 'em. An' keep humping. Now we'll travel."

CHAPTER XV

SUSETTE IN THE GARDEN

IT WAS Lander's second visit to the American Fur Company's office within two hours. He had arrived that morning and had lost no time in presenting the order, only to find Parker was not down yet. He walked to the levee and watched Étienne Prevost superintend the removal of the beaver-packs to the Washington Avenue store.

"Mr. Parker isn't here, and won't be here today," the clerk informed him on this second call. "He's sick. Say, Mr. Lander, the whole town's talking about your beaver. Prevost said you was to get ten thousand for yourself. Mr. Bridger must be a mighty nice feller to work for."

"He's the best there ever was," fervently declared Lander, thrilled to have even a clerk "mister" him.

Incidentally the town's gossip about his ten-thousand-dollar bonus was correct, although Bridger could have claimed all for the Rocky Mountain Fur Company after paying the Hudson Bay Company its ten per cent., or four thousand dollars.

"He told me back in the mountains he would do right by me. He's done better than that. After saving me from Indian torture he didn't need to make me any present. If Mr. Bridger wants me to skin a skunk I'm ready for the job. I'll call tomorrow about the order——"

"Hold on!" cried the clerk, grinning sheepishly. "I got excited over your good luck—just a plain fool, I am. I sent a boy to Mr. Parker after your first visit. He sent back word for you to bring the order to him. If it's all right he'll O. K. it and you can put it in the bank."

"Why the —— didn't you say so?" snapped Lander, darting from the office and hurrying to the Pine Street house.

His heart threatened to choke him as he entered the yard and mounted the porch and rang. His eyes were blurred and he felt faint as the door slowly opened. He expected to behold Susette. Instead it was a maid.

Without a word she motioned him to enter and go into a room off the hall. Again his heart played him tricks, but on entering the room he found only Parker. He was reclining in a chair and was scowling villainously.

"Show me that order," Parker growled. "Don't stand there like an idiot. Have you an order on the A. F. C., or haven't you?"

Without a word Lander presented it. Parker frowned over it, grunted several times, then endorsed it and handed it back and demanded:

"Why didn't you bring it here at once when you heard I was laid up? Loafing round town and enjoying your reputation for being a mountain man, eh? Pushing your smug face round for people to admire while your boss' business was sliding to the dogs."

"You forget I wasn't to come here till I was asked," Lander answered, his face dismal with disappointment. All the down-river day-dreams were dead. His medicine was weak and foolish.

"What about your getting a big batch of beaver?" sneered Parker.

"Jim Bridger pulled me and forty packs out of a Blackfoot camp. I take no credit for that," he wearily replied.

Then with a sudden flash of spirit:

"But I did help Mr. Bridger bring them from Fort Union in a keelboat we got from Mr. McKenzie. I am a little bit proud of that. Your whole —— Upper Missouri outfit tried to stop us and couldn't. Now I'll be going along."

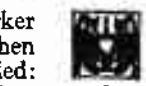
"Stop, you idiot!" thundered Parker, and Lander wheeled expecting to be attacked. "You and your twopenny reputation! Want to get back down-town and have folks point you out, eh? You a mountain man! Why, you young pup——"

"That's enough," choked Lander. "I may never be a mountain man, but I'm done standing your abuse, sir."

"Then what'n the devil you hanging round here for? Huh? Eh? Get out, you impudent cub. Hi! Not that way. Out the back way, same's the servants do."

Pale with passion, yet compelling himself to remember it was a sick man and Susette's father, Lander persisted in making for the front door. Again Parker's voice called profanely after him and added:

"The other way! She's in the garden."



AN HOUR passed before they began their return to earth.

"Your father was so queer. I don't understand it," said Lander. "I'm sure he sent me here. He said you were here. But he talked to me something— Well, never mind."

"I've been rather disagreeable to father since you went away," she cooed, snuggling closer. "I wouldn't eat anything—when he was around. Then that funny Étienne Prevost was up here this morning and talked with him. Their swearing was something terrible at first.

"Then father calmed down and let Prevost deliver a message Mr. Bridger sent by him. The message was all about you, and father must have listened with both ears. He thinks Mr. Bridger is awfully smart——

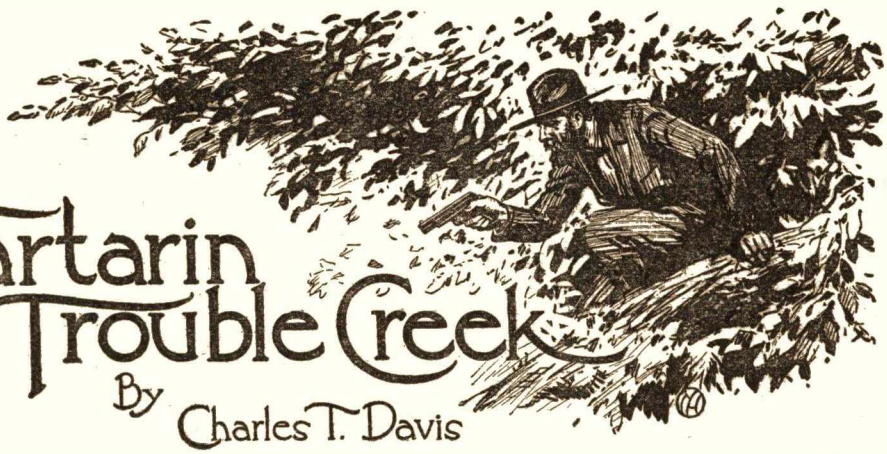
"But they were such horrible things about you I couldn't believe a word, of course. Killing people with knives! As if my darling would ever do that! But it was just the kind of stuff to please father. My maid listened at the keyhole like a little cat, and came and told me. Probably she made most of it up. But such awful stories, dearest! Still they pleased father, for I heard him chuckling after Mr. Prevost had gone.

"When he saw you coming he told me to come out here. I told him I was his daughter but that I must and would see you, and he said it would look better if you did the chasing. He hurt my pride terribly. But I knew he would send you to me and I felt better. And you are really and truly my King of the Missouri!"

"No, no," cried Lander. "I'm hardly fit to rank as common soldier of the Missouri."

"A Prince of the Missouri, anyway—I'm partial to princes. And I like the way you wear your hair over your shoulders. Naughty! Hold still. It's my ribbon, you know. A prince should feel very proud to wear his lady's ribbon. Now you must come and let father see you in the new ribbon. . . . Now I know you don't love me!"

THE END



Tartarin of Trouble Creek

By Charles T. Davis

JUNE'S mid-afternoon lay upon Mount Airy like an anesthetic. Even the bees' hum had died away from the locust trees along Main Street, and no breath of wind raised the errant dust devils in the roadway. Apparently, with the two exceptions of Uncle Billy Spurlock and myself, Mount Airy slept; and the wakefulness of Uncle Billy and me was but a little way from the border of somnolence.

With my back to a post, I sat flat upon Uncle Billy's "sto'-porch," a wooden platform structure raised some three feet above street-level before the temple of commerce in which Uncle Billy carried on a "gen'l merchandisin'" business. Uncle Billy had dragged his favorite cowhide-bottomed chair into the doorway.

Presently Jim John Tulliver, the mail-carrier, would drive in with his rickety buckboard from Mansfield, and then the town would awake. Uncle Billy would retire to the post-office in the corner of his store and for a season the grave business of assorting and distributing the United States mail as represented by certain home-and-farm journals, mail-order catalogs and advertising circulars would engage his attention. Lawyer Lance Holderness who had once served a term in the State legislature would saunter across from his combination law, real estate and insurance office and swamp me with momentous converse on the state of the nation. The women and children would emerge from the homes up the hillside back of Main Street and the rush of supper trading would begin. But now Mount Airy and the high hills that girt her round about slumbered and were at peace. Comfort sat upon me, and Uncle Billy's voice droned pleasantly on in one of his interminable but always pithy tales.

"Hello!" Uncle Billy was squinting off up the road. "Somebody comin'."

I was facing the other way, down the road; considering Main Street where it ceased to be Main Street and dwindled into the county road winding down through Haywood's Cove and along Four Forks creek and up and over the shoulder of Big Ball Mountain, and so on down into the flat, effete country the mountain folk term "down yander." Uncle Billy's comment was of little moment but I paid it lazy tribute.

"Who's coming?" I asked.

"Kain't quite make him out yit fer th' dust, but hit looks like hit mout be Tate Limbird. Yep," after a moment of scrutiny. "That's who it be."

"Who's Tate Limbird?"

"Why, you'd orter know the Limbirds up on Trouble Creek. Tate, he's a deppity high sheriff, but I reckin he got his appintement senst you was up thar. Cu'rus kind o' feller. I'll haf ter tell ye about him some o' these times."

I DID remember the Limbirds, a colorless enough mountain family who had extended their hospitality one night several years before when I was benighted while fishing the headwaters of Trouble Creek. But Tate had failed to impress my memory.

The thud of hoofs in the dust now became audible, and a horseman drew up almost at my elbow.

"Howdy, Tate. 'Light an' look at yo' saddle," Uncle Billy's hail rose heartily.

I looked over my shoulder and into the eyes of the rider. They were large eyes, full, black and slightly protuberant. Below them the broad face was covered with a dense tangle of heavy black beard. But for an irrepressible quality of good nature it might have been a dangerous face. As it was, however, it impressed me principally with a sense of indecision. Plainly an expression of deadliness was sought, but this effort was frustrated by an air of native geniality.

The eyes bored steadily into mine.

"Who's this here feller?"

Limbird had ignored Uncle Billy's greeting, and then I noticed that he was armed to the

teeth. Two cartridge belts crossed at his waist and from each hung a heavy Colt's revolver. Beneath his leg, on the side nearest me, a Winchester carbine nestled in a saddle scabbard. A tremendous deputy's star, half hidden by his open vest, was pinned to his hickory shirt.

"Who's this here feller," he again demanded.

"Why, I made shore you fellers knowed each other," Uncle Billy responded. "Mr. Blackburn, lemme make you 'quainted with Tate Limbird, deppity high sheriff from up on Trouble Creek. Mr. Blackburn here is a honest fisherman, Tate; er ruther a harmless one. Comes up to Mount Airy ever' year er so to go a-fishin' with me. Yore folks knows him, Tate. They taken him in one night up on Trouble, but I reckin that 'uz whilst you was still in Texas. Git down an' visit a spell, won't ye? Whut's on yore mind?"

Tate and I made our manners briefly, but he remained astride his horse and his voice continued serious.

"Has airy one o' ye saw a stranger in town," he asked. "A big, kinder oldish feller like, with red grizzly hair an' a finger gone off'n his lef' hand? Mout be the' was another feller with him, an' ef so this here other feller's got red hair too an' is consider'ble younger an' a leetle mite taller but not ez big?"

"Naw, Tate," Uncle Billy replied, and I fancied I saw a lightning-like wink directed toward myself. "Hain't been a stranger in town senst Mr. Blackburn come, an' he ain't rightly no stranger. Friends o' yore'n ye're lookin' fer?"

"Friends nothin'!"

Tate's scorn was vast. He relaxed his vigilance and swung a leg over the saddle horn.

"I reckin they hain't friends. The ole feller's 'Red Bill' Harbin, an' ef they's another feller with him that'd be his boy, Little Red. I had a run-in with the whole Harbin tribe when I 'uz in Texas, an' jest today I got word that Ole Red had took the war path after me, an' mebby Little Red. I had to shoot 'em up oncet down on the San Pecos." He dragged a revolver from the scabbard and indicated two notches on its butt. "I filed this here'n in fer Jim Harbin," he explained, "an' tother'n's fer his cousin Bob. They was hard fellers, rustlers an' killers an' sich-like, an' they might' nigh run that San Pecos country till the high sheriff sicked me on to 'em. So I up an' run 'em out'n thar. Kilt two an' landed three more in the penitench'y. Ole Red an' Little Red got away, though, an' now I hear tell they're a lookin' fer me. I rid down today on the chancet they mout 'a' arriv' in town. I aim to give 'em a fair deal, an' that's why I hain't a wearin' my star on th' outside. This here is more of a kinder personal proposition."

Somehow all this did not ring true. I am fairly well acquainted with the genus mountain sheriff, and the genus Texas sheriff for that matter, and their deputies as well. It has been my experience that they are men of few words and swift and silent action. Braggadocio is distinctly not a characteristic of their kind, yet this tall mountaineer sat his horse and fought his battles o'er publicly and unblushingly.

"Hain't no mail ner nothin' fer the folks up our way air they, Uncle Billy?" Tate inquired in the silence which followed the recital of his epic.

"Why, yes, they air, Tate. A passel o' some sort come fer ye yistiddy. Jest a minnit an' I fetch hit."

Uncle Billy emerged presently with the package.

"Some sort o' gun she seems to be," he said, extending the package toward its addressee.

"Yeah," Tate answered. "She's a .35 ottomatic Winchister. I bought'n her fer a b'ar gun to go a huntin' with this Fall, but with them Harbins a pirootin' aroun' in the hills she'll shore come in handy fer self-defense."

His fingers had been busy with the wrappings, and now he drew forth the weapon with boyish eagerness. Short, stubby, powerful, the gun had little of grace to recommend it, but his eyes caressed it as a child's a new toy. Drawing a clean bandanna from his pocket he rubbed it free of cosmoline, examined it minutely and finally handed it over to me. His eyes were alight.

"Hain't she a beauty!" he exclaimed.

I recognized the kinship, the cult of the true gun-lover.

"She is," I said. "I've got one just like it at home."

"Shore, now." His delight was boyish. "I reckin you know all about these ottomatics. I hain't never owned one befo'. Jest kinder took to the notion of 'em from readin' about 'em in the catalogs. I got me a couple o' Savages, a .303 an' a Featherweight, four or five Winchisters an' a couple er three shotguns an' some pistols an' one thing an' another, but this here's my first ottomatic rifle gun."

He took the rifle back and tried one or two aiming sights at the scenery. Then he turned to me.

"Say, less you an' me drap down the road a piece-ways an' see how she works. Oh, Uncle Billy," he called into the store. "Wahn't they no cartridges come fer me?"

Uncle Billy emerged again, this time with a small express package, and presently Tate and I were out of town and half a mile down the road. Ignorant as he was of the weapon's mechanism, he was a natural shot. Across Haywood's Cove, four hundred yards on an air line, a dead oak stands at the foot of a limestone cliff. Clusters of the mistletoe which probably have killed the tree grow in its barren branches. These we selected as targets. I fired twice without result, and at the third shot clipped out a bunch of mistletoe.

"She shoots flat that far," I said, handing the gun over to Tate.

He flung it to his shoulder and without apparent aim discharged the remaining three shots. Three clumps of mistletoe fluttered from the tree across the cove. It was a splendid exhibition with an untried gun, and I told him so.

"Jest so she holds true," he boasted, "I kin shoot any of 'em."

And slipping in a fresh clip he made good his boast. The gun was emptied as rapidly as he could pull the trigger, and every shot was a fair hit.

He had his whole armamant with him, or rather that portion of it he had brought to town —the two .45 Colt's and the .30-30 Winchester carbine, and he gave me a practical demonstration of guncraft. And then he proceeded to nip in the bud a rapidly forming friendship by his almost insufferable boasting.

Most of his stories were cast in what he vaguely called the "San Pecos country." All of them were sanguine to an extreme; all of them dealt with his own personal prowess. In many of them I recognized old tales still told in Texas of Wild Bill Hickock and Billy the Kid and others, and though he told them with a wealth of minutiæ and the most plausible air in the world I found it in me to believe few of them —none in fact in which he figured in the rôle of killer. The ineradicable quality of good nature pervading his entire countenance too patently gave him the lie.

I SAT with Uncle Billy that night on the gallery before his little cabin up the mountainside, and while the plaint of the whippoorwills and Spring frogs drifted in on the laurel-laden air, we watched the stars fill the league-long gap between Crowley's Ridge and Bear Mountain and talked of Tate Limbird.

"Th' boy's harmless," was Uncle Billy's verdict, "but I reckin he's got so'st he achully believes them lies o' his'n. Less see now. He went to Texas about fo' year ago, an' all told he must 'a' dwelt thar not more'n eight months. How many men was hit he kilt out thar, accordin' to his say so?"

"I forget," I answered. "I lost count toward the last, but it must have been twenty or twenty-five."

"Thar, now," said Uncle Billy. "Ef he'd a knowed you an' me was a-goin' to add up on him like this, chances is he'd a left off about two dozen o' them killin's. Whole trouble with Tate is he's a gun-lover. He collects up weepins jest like a pet crow does bright rocks an' sech-like. He tuck four or five guns to Texas with him an' brought back a dozen, an' they hain't been a month, sca'cely, senst he got back that they ain't been a new one fer him in the mail. Some months two.

"We got a purty peaceful country now that all the feud fightin' an' laywayin' an' revenoo raidin's been stopped, an' don't nobody much but the officers tote weepins no more. That's jest edzactly why Tate got hisself made a deppity. All his deppity work is jest a little ridin' 'round a servin' jury summonses an' s'peenics fer witnesses, but hit gives him a chancet to wear his guns an' he shore wears 'em. Y'see, a-lovin guns that away, Tate buys 'em; an' havin' bought 'em he feels duty bound to jestify 'em. That's the reason fer that deppity's star, an' that's the reason fer all this hoorah like he was a tellin' us today. Ole Red Harbin an' Little Red Harbin." Uncle Billy spat contemptuously. "Both of 'em made up out'n his mind, but they hain't a time Tate ever come to town without some wild story of a bad man er men a campin' on his trail. Them guns o' hisn's jest nachully made a liar out'n him.

"Still, hit's the same way with ever'thing else. Take Ole Ned Turner over thar on Crowley's Ridge. Ned's jest a buyin' hisself into the pore-house on sheep. Spends ever' cent he kin rake an' scrape on 'em, an' has fer the past six year. In all that time he hain't turned a cent on 'em, but ever' time ye see him he's a-gittin' rich. Why, I know a feller," Uncle Billy chuckled, "that's got all the fishin' tackle in the world. I hain't ever saw him ketch more'n a mejum size mess o' fish, but to hear him tell it the strings he ketches—an' th'oes back—would fill the Fo' Fawks frum bank to bank."

Uncle Billy chuckled again and I blushed in the darkness.

IT WAS my good fortune months afterward to be in Mount Airy when Tate Limbird justified his gun hobby and his deputyship, but that part of the story needs scene shifting and stage setting.

The Trouble Creek country where Tate held under-suzerainty as deputy high sheriff owes its rather sinister appellation to geographical, rather than to sociological, conditions. Trouble Creek has a habit of flooding its banks at every heavy shower, and on these occasions, inasmuch as it crosses the road about seventeen times between its headwaters and Mount Airy, all traffic is suspended and the country is isolated until the waters run out. It is a brawling little stream, but the riparian owners along its littoral are of God's own anointed mountain folk, hospitable, open-handed, generous. The road overseers have troubles a-plenty on Trouble Creek, but the sheriffs never. Uncle Billy spoke truly when he limited Tate Limbird's official duties to the serving of jury summons and the subpenaing of witnesses, and it may be added that the witnesses were required almost exclusively in civil suits.

The terrain seems to acquire character from both the creek and its inhabitants. Nowhere in

the world is there more wildly beautiful country than that which immediately borders the creek—gorges, pine groves and rhododendron thickets, narrow in extent but rich in scenic value. Back from the creek, on either side, the country levels off in fertile, rolling upland, and here are the prosperous farms of the Trouble Creekers, where they lived in peace and neighborly kindliness and trust until the coming of the Starrs.

Old Reb Starr acquired the Boyer place, a hundred and twenty acres north of Trouble Creek, when Uncle Peter Boyer died and his widow sold out and moved over among her own folk on Bear Mountain. The sale included an amplitude of household effects, so Old Reb and his two gangling sons, John and Homer, took immediate possession and began housekeeping after a fashion. They gave out vaguely that they came from "yan side the mountain," but they mentioned neither names nor specific places. From the first they showed no inclination to neighbor with the Trouble Creek folk. Tate Limbird's place adjoined them on the East, and to Tate was first made manifest their general surliness.

This happened only a few days after their arrival. Tate was riding down to Mount Airy on official business, and to bring back a new gun, when he became aware that his badge of office was missing. He was wearing his full complement of arms, and, unwilling to parade his guns into town except under the egis of his official insignia, he turned back in search of the star which in some manner had jolted lose from his vest. As he rode along with his eyes upon the ground, the three Starrs filed out into the road ahead of him.

"Lost a criminal er somethin', deppity?" John hailed him with the undernote of contempt they habitually employed toward their neighbors.

Tate blushed and admitted that he had lost his badge.

Homer pointed up the road some seventy-five feet ahead to where a small bright object dangled from a rhododendron.

"Thar she is," he said.

The hands of the three Starrs flashed under their coats; three heavy revolvers leaped out. There was a single detonation, and the badge vanished.

"Er ruther, ye mout say," drawled Old Reb, "thar she was."

Later Tate found the badge. It had been hit in three places.

Tate was not the only sufferer from Starr uncongeniality. As Bill Tulliver one night was riding across the Starr "upper forty" on a short cut which Uncle Peter Boyer's generous permission over many years had made a common-law right of way, a rifle bullet whistled past his head and John Starr, stepping from a laurel clump, warned the rider off the land, profanely adding that the right of way was closed. Later Matt Eldridge, hunting his cattle through Starr woods on the mountainside, was caught by the Starrs, father and son, and given an unwarranted tongue-lashing as a "low-down spyin' dawg."

THE cattle question speedily became one of considerable acuteness. As is mountain custom, the Trouble Creekers put under fence only such lands as were in cultivation. On open lands, woods, etc., a neighbor's cattle were as free to graze as were the owner's. All Trouble Creekers owned cattle, but because each man's herds were small, it was easy for each to identify his own when need arose. Brands were not necessary.

If Bill Tulliver, for instance, found an advantageous buyer for his "bal' face black ye'rlin' heifer," he simply rode over his own lands and Eldridge's and Limbird's and others until he found his heifer, and thence he drove her back to his own property or delivered her to the buyer upon the spot. There was no dishonesty, no disputes. This was the situation which had obtained before the Starrs came. Then cattle began to disappear. As like as not, Bill Tulliver, scouring the countryside for his "bal' face black ye'rlin' heifer" would fail to find that interesting animal.

On their own say-so, the Starrs also were losing heavily. They were abusive to the entire neighborhood when their big red bull disappeared. Some time afterward the bull's hide was discovered in Pete Gonyer's general store in Mansfield, but this information, when imparted to the Starrs, only pulled down fresh profanity on the head of the imparter. The Starrs made frequent trips to Mansfield, but, as was noted later, no one ever saw anything in their wagon but an all-enveloping wagon sheet.

It was at the height of the disappearing cattle mystery that Tate Limbird, riding along Trouble Creek one morning in search of a target to try a new automatic pistol on, heard a calf bawl. Tate recognized the strident plaint as the voice of a six-month-old maverick belonging to himself. The calf had lost its mother a few weeks before and since had made dawn hideous around Tate's bachelor domicile. Thinking that the animal might have injured itself, Tate dismounted and went in search of it. He kept the pistol in his hand with a vague view to putting the calf out of misery should its injuries prove serious; and he rather hoped they would.

Tate proceeded to the creek and thrust himself through the dense growth rimming the high bank. The bawling had ceased, but directly beneath him lay the calf. It was spread-eagled upon a broad, flat rock. Its throat had been cut, and on the body Old Reb Starr and

his son John were wielding expert skinning-knives. Near them sat Homer Starr in the attitude of overseer.

This much Tate saw, and then the treacherous laurel supporting him gave way. With a yell he dropped twelve feet straight down, plump upon the stooped shoulders of Old Reb Starr. His grasp tightened spasmodically upon his pistol as he struck, and a bullet ripped through John's shoulder just as that worthy reached for his own gun. Homer had his hand upon the revolver he had laid upon a convenient rock when the wildly waving automatic exploded again and Homer's gun, and two of Homer's fingers, hopped into the creek.

And then Tate recovered his breath, and the drop upon the Starrs.

I WAS on Uncle Billy Spurlock's store porch when Tate rode past with his three captives roped in single file, before him. I followed the cavalcade on over to Sheriff Pickens' office.

"Lookin' fer me er a doctor, Tate?" Pickens asked as Tate lined up the trio, blood from John's and Homer's wounds still dripping upon the floor.

The deputy's eyes were serious and steady, albeit his voice was a trifle wavery.

"These here fellers I got, sheriff," he said, "I been a-trailin' fer the pas' three months. Cattle stealin's all I got on 'em now, but ef ye'll gimme time I reckin they's plenty more charges could be dug up."

"Who do ye think ye got, son?" the sheriff asked.

"Why, Ole Man Starr an' his two boys from up on Trouble, an' I got a eye-witness case ag'in 'em."

Pickens flipped through a stack of the innumerable "men wanted" advertisements which cumber every sheriff's office. He selected three and spread them out while Tate, the Starrs and I craned at the full-face and profile photographs displayed and the attached reading-matter.

"Naw, son," Pickens declared. "You ain't got no Starrs. But ye do seem to 'a' captured the wust o' the Cassidy gang. The old 'un thar's Timothy Cassidy, wanted in Georgy an' Nawth an South Ca'liny fer murder an' moonshinin' an' a few other things; an' the one with the fingers missin' is his son Joe, wanted in same places on same charges. Tother'n's Bill an' I got hold notices fer him from blame nigh ever'wheres fer blame nigh ever' kind o' devilment they air. Rewards on 'em total aroun' fo' thousan' dollars. How'd ye happen to git 'em?"

Tate's story in the telling lost nothing of advantage to Tate, although it was loudly and profanely disclaimed by his captives. Even during the rough first-aid operations of Doc Tennant, the interruptions of the injured victims were frequent, ribald and detailed. But the principal facts stood: they were the Cassidys, Tate had captured them single-handed, and four thousand dollars' reward was due on them.

As Tate and I crossed the street again to Uncle Billy's, Tate drew forth his automatic pistol.

"Looky here," he said. "Ain't they somethin' wrong with this gun?"

There was. It had jammed on the second fire, and an exploded cartridge hung crosswise in the bolt-slide. Tate had brought the desperate Cassidys into camp with a weapon as harmless as a crooked stick.

Uncle Billy hailed us from his door.

"Got two passels fer ye this time, Tate."

"That's m' new box-magazine Winchister an m' .45 officers' model Colt's," Tate said to me; and then to Uncle Billy:

"Hit's a blame good thing ye have, Uncle Billy. I hain't got a decent gun with me. Had to go hold up a gang o' desperadoes an' bring 'em all the way down here with a busted pistol."

Like Daudet's incomparable buffoon, Tate Limbird had justified himself.

The Masterpiece of Death

A Complete Novelette

By Harold Lamb

Author of "The Lion Cub," "The Bride of Jagannath," etc.

In the dust of the crossroads are marks of many feet. Some have come from the desert to the well; some have passed through the jungle—and they are weary. Some there are that have passed under the spur of fear—and others follow after these.

He who is keen of eye will read the tale that is written in the dust of the crossroad. He who is dull and heavy with sleep—he sees the mark of a snake in the sand and thinks it a trailing rope.

But a snake has crossed the road.

Beside the road, in the jungle, a grave is dug for the one who is blind of eye, and dull.

This is the tale of the crossroad, and it is true.

JHOND, the money-carrier, walked slowly, aiding his tired feet with his staff. Behind him plodded a mule weighted with heavy saddle-bags. The shadows were lengthening across the shimmering heat of the highway. And the mule lagged on its halter, sensing the approach of evening and a halt under the cypress trees that lined a near-by water-course.

This was on the road that entered the Ghar Pass, at the headwaters of the Jumna River in Pawundur province. In the accounts of the great *vizir*, master of the treasury of Jahangir, Mogul of Hindustan, the Pawundur province was written down as the most northeastern of Hindustan proper, and was noted as lawless. All this being in the year of our Lord 1609.

Obedient perhaps to the mute urging of his mule, Jhond turned into the cypress *nullah*, followed by his dog, a nondescript of brown skin and visible bones, a by-product of the Delhi bazaar and a beneficiary of the kindliness of aged Jhond who was scarcely less beggarly or less sharp and furtive of eye.

Those who were walking beside the money-carrier guided him down the *nullah* away from the road to a cleared space. They were chance wayfarers, not guards, for the men of Jhond's profession traveled alone. Their pride of caste rendered large sums safe in their keeping and their poor garb made them safe from ordinary thieves.

Jhond was tired for he had made a long stage on an important mission. He was glad that the Moslem merchants—they were four—who had caught up with him at the entrance of the Ghar knew the way. One who had gone ahead awaited their coming in the glade beside a ditch wherein two coolies sat.

Two of the merchants led him to a brook. He was thirsty. The fourth had lingered behind to see that no thieves had marked their passage from the main road. The dog whined.

"Drink," said one. "Here is the place."

"Aye," said Jhond and knelt.

A strip of cloth passed over his eyes and tightened around his neck. One of the men at his side gripped both his arms. While Jhond was held thus, the noose closed until he could no longer breathe. The dog ran about in little circles, whining and barking at the men.

When there was no longer any life in Jhond, his body was mutilated by kicks in the vital parts and cast into the ditch. The two filled in the ditch with fresh earth. This done, a fire was lighted on the grave so that the upturned earth should be concealed.

Not until then did the watch return from the highroad with the word that they had not been seen. The six men went to the mule and ransacked the heavy leather sacks. They had, before this, searched the grimy clothing of the money-carrier and found nothing.

Nor was there gold or silver in the sacks; nothing but meal and a few pieces of cloth. Jhond, the money-carrier, had not had anything of value about him; nothing except the mule. This was strange.

But fate also was strange. And the men who had slain him were accustomed to the vagaries

of fate. Besides, they had the mule. And they would have slain for less.

An owl hooted in the gathering darkness. Whereupon the men chattered anxiously together. Again came the cry of the owl. This time they took up their belongings, loaded them upon the animal and departed. They were heedful of omens.

But before they went they killed the dog by a blow on the skull with a stick. Otherwise the mourning beast might have dug into the grave or attracted other men to the spot.

So when they had gone there was nothing upon the spot where Jhond had planned to camp for the night; nothing, that is, except the dead dog and the embers of the fire which soon went out.

Which was—all of it—as the six men dressed as merchants had planned.

"AND after Jhond," explained the elegant Nazir u'din Mustafa Mirza, "was sent one named Chutter."

Mustafa Mirza—a tall man with narrow eyes and a thin beard, surnamed the Moghuli—leaned back upon the carpet which was spread on the balcony, half-way down into the well. The well was in the outer court of the Pawundur palace and it provided a grateful shade for those who wished to escape the heat that beat into the sun-dried clay of the courtyard.

"Chutter," he said, "was a trusted servant of my master. Alas! Few may be trusted in this land of dust and wind and thorns and tangled ferns. But my master, the Ameer, trusted Chutter."

He inserted a portion of betel nut in his crimson-stained mouth and yawned, expelling thereafter the wind from his stomach after the manner of a beast. For Mustafa Mirza was sure of the interest of his two listeners. He had a rare tale to tell and it concerned them.

Idly he fingered the turquois chain at his scrawny throat and gazed attentively into the tiny mirror upon a ring which ornamented a none-too-clean thumb. He was weaponless, yet his tunic was rich with spoil, taken after the manner of the conquering Moslems from the Hindu merchants and their women.

"It was perhaps two moons ago during the festival of Miriam that Chutter was sent to the pass of Ghar, to the tower of Ghar," he resumed. "And no trace—not so much as a sandal or the skin of his mule—had we found of the money-carrier Jhond. It was said that the half-eaten body of his dog was seen in a *nullah* where an owl feasted. Ho! Yet where the dog was Jhond was not. He may have camped there. Some ashes were seen. I know not."

"What of Chutter?" asked one of the listeners.

"Aye, Chutter. A slave. A dog of many fathers. He was mounted on a good horse. A pity, that; for the horse also was lost. He rode from here toward Ghar. An armed trooper followed him. That was at my bidding. Although my master, the Ameer—may his shadow be long on the land of Pawundur—trusted Chutter, yet I trust not the child of a Gentu (Hindu)."

He chewed at the betel and spat, after picking his teeth.

"Nevertheless it availed not. After sunset one day the trooper thought he heard a scream, choked off in the middle—thus." Mustafa Mirza snarled shrilly, then coughed gutturally. "The rider put spurs to his horse, for Chutter, the Gentu dog, was a bare double bowshot ahead. He saw lying upon the road a man clothed like a merchant of Samarkand. The man was writhing in a fit and foam was on his lips. So the trooper dismounted.

"The sick man, however, was not Chutter. And when the trooper reined forward again there was nought to be seen on the road save many footprints in the dirt. There was a deep pool near at hand. The man saw some shadows moving in the brush near by and stayed not to look twice. He had a fear—a heavy fear."

The two listeners looked at each other and the Moghuli eyed them with satisfaction. His tale was worth hearing.

"The trooper swore," he went on, "that it was the voice of Chutter that cried out. He asked that the bottom of the pool be dragged and the body of Chutter found, to bear out his tale. But why should the Ameer pay coolies to search for the body of a slave such as Chutter? Doubtless, he had died—after the manner described by the trooper. The man who lay in the road in a fit had been a trick. After the soul of Chutter had gone to join his fathers, whoever they be, it was hard to get a rider to seek Ghar on the mission. All said that death lay in wait under the cypress trees of the pass."

"Why did not you go, Mustafa Mirza?" asked one of his companions.

"I?" The Moslem stared and shrugged his shoulders. "Allah! This is a good land, full of jewels and slim women. I prefer them to the houris of paradise. Besides, my master, the liberal and gracious Ameer, asked it not. Instead he purchased with gold *mohars* the services of one Jhat Singh, a Sikh who was fresh come from Peshawar, a cousin by marriage of Chutter. The Sikh, who bore himself like a warrior, said that he had no fear. He swore that no evil demons or wayside thieves would keep him from gaining Ghar Tower on the mission.

"Jhat Singh traveled by night only. During the day he slept. He thus went far up the Ghar pass, along the river Jumna. For a time we thought that he had reached the tower, and my master and I were glad. Yet his fate was

otherwise. We learned if from a fisherman of the upper Jumna.

"This man was lying in his boat, having spread his nets. The sun was very hot and he was half-asleep when he saw Jhat Singh—he described the clothing and weapons of the Sikh and we knew it was the truth—he saw Jhat Singh pass along the trail by the river where the men walk who pull the ropes of the boats, going up-stream. With the warrior were about a dozen other men who the fisherman said were boatmen. Yet they had no boat."

Mustafa Mirza nodded, pleased with his own acumen.

"The Sikh was a fool, or overbold—perchance both. At this place, so said the man, the trail entered a thicket. He saw Jhat Singh and the others go into the thicket. One remained behind, looking at the fisherman who rowed over, hoping to sell some of his catch. The man on the bank bought some fish.

" 'Perhaps,' said the fisher, 'if I go into the thicket after the others, they also will buy.'

"He was eager because a good price had been paid. The other man smiled. 'If they buy,' he said, 'another than you will spend the money.' Whereupon the fisherman rowed away after he had looked attentively upon the watcher. When he glanced back over his shoulder the man had gone."

"Why," asked one of the men who sat beside the Mirza, "did this fellow row away?"

Mustafa Mirza smiled, baring his red teeth.

"*Ai*—he was wise. He recognized the watcher as one of a band of slayers. As he had thought, the party emerged from the farther side of the thicket, but Jhat Singh was not with them. The fisherman waited until near twilight. Then he crept into the thicket. He searched some time before he came upon the body of the Sikh. There was no mark or wound upon it. But it had been stripped of its weapons. Then the fisherman ran away hastily for that was an evil place."

"He was a coward!" said the questioner gruffly.

"Nay," objected Mustafa Mirza, "he was wise. He had fished long in the waters of the Jumna and knew that there were those who slay men for spoil, so skilled that none ever see the manner of the slaying. He named them by some strange word, such as *'tag.'* I remember not. But the breath of Jhat Singh was no longer in his body, and a new man was needed for the mission of my master."

YAWNING, the officer of the Ameer lay back on the cushions and surveyed his two companions. There was curiosity in the glance of his quick, dark eyes—curiosity and cold appraisal.

"Thus, as I have said," he concluded, "the three who were sent on the mission to the tower of Ghar died. The generous Ameer has offered you much gold to follow after them." Mustafa Mirza corrected himself hastily. "To go into Ghar Pass, I mean. For we desire not your death. Rather must the mission succeed. For it is time my master should have that which is in Ghar."

He offered his betel to the others, who refused.

"They died," nodded the Mirza. "It was their fate—dogs of Gentus. But you, Abdul Dost, are a follower of the Prophet and a noted swordsman. And you, Khlit, surnamed the Curved Saber, are one who has grown gray in the path of battles."

Leaning forward, he placed a hand on the knee of each. Khlit, wise in the ways of men, had no doubt of his earnestness.

"I have a thought," said Mustafa Mirza. "You twain may win to Ghar. For Khlit is a *ferang*, and the slayers of the pass seldom lift hand against a *ferang* (European)."

Khlit looked up from under shaggy brows. He did not like others to touch him.

"The Ameer pays well," he grunted. "What manner of men are these slayers?"

"Who knows?" Mustafa Mirza stretched forth both hands, palms up. "My master and I have heard but a word here, a whisper there. Bands of the slayers go throughout Pawundur province; aye, and Hindustan. By no mark are they known. Often they have the appearance of merchants. It is not well to ask too closely. They are powerful."

"You have a fear of them in your heart," grumbled Khlit. "Does the governor of Pawundur, this Ameer, allow murderers to walk the roads of his province?"

The other shook his head helplessly.

"By the beard of my grandsire! How can we do otherwise? The Mogul asks only that the tribute gleaned from Pawundur be given promptly to his *vizir*. And the slayers have harmed none of our household. Yet they have girded Ghar about like waiting snakes. Perhaps they have a smell of what is within the tower."

Abdul Dost swore impatiently.

"*Bismillah!* Give us spare horses and we will ride through the nest of scorpions like wind through the jungle!"

"Horses!" The Mirza sighed, then assented eagerly. "Aye, you shall have two—the best. Think you, then, you will go to Ghar?"

Khlit made a warning sign to Abdul Dost who was ever impatient of precautions. Not so the Cossack. He had lived too long and seen too many men die at his side to be reckless of safeguards.

"Is there not another way to Ghar?" he asked thoughtfully.

"Nay—from here. The tower is at the summit of the pass. Hills, and below them blind forest mesh and swamps, make the Jumna

trail the only road. It would be the ride of a month to gain the other side—the east. And there the paths are ill. You must go and return within the month. Has not my master promised as much gold as you can hold in two hands?"

"Aye," said Khlit dryly. "Have you seen these slayers?"

"Not I. It is said they live in the villages, like the usual Gentu farmers and drivers of bullock carts. Only when they wander in bands do they slay. Perhaps they are magicians, for they are never seen to slay nor is blood-guilt ever fastened upon them. It is said they have a strange god. I know not. I have spoken thus fully, for it is my wish that you return unharmed. Will you accept the mission?"

"We will talk together," said Khlit, "and in the morning we will come to the Ameer with our answer."

"So be it," assented Mustafa Mirza. "Perchance, if your decision is as I expect, my master, who is the soul of generosity, will give the two good horses in addition to the gold."

With that Khlit and Abdul Dost rose and left the shadow of the well. They went to their tent, pitched in a corner of the village caravanserai—an open space within a tumble-down wall by the highroad, littered with dust and the droppings of beasts who had been there with former caravans. While Khlit boiled rice over his fire in silence and set out the melons and grapes they had purchased with their last silver in the bazaar, Abdul Dost talked.

"What are these slayers," he questioned idly, "but some bands of coolies? *Ai*—would they attack two riders such as you and I? We who have earned a name for our swords in Kukushetra?"

The two wanderers had aided the young Rawul of Thaneswar, near by, and the fame of their exploit had preceded them—reaching, probably, the ears of the Ameer, and arousing his interest in them as warriors useful for his own ends.

"The Ameer promises reward to the value of a half-dozen fine horses, and you and I have not a *dinar* in our girdles to buy a new saddle or a bracelet."

"Promises cost little to the speaker."

"Aye, but the need of the Ameer is great."

This was true, as Khlit knew. Within a month the *vizir* would come from the court at Delhi for the annual payment of the tax of Rawundur—of the *jaghir* sold to Ameer Taleb Khan.

IT WAS customary in the empire for the Mogul to lease the various provinces to his officials, who would pay him a settled price for the privilege of squeezing all possible tribute from the people of the district—the Hindu farmers, priests and landholders.

The Ameer had already begged off his first year's payment, on plea that Rawundur was rebellious. He had actually been engaged in putting down the gathering of certain hill clans. During his efforts he had deposited the accumulation of his treasury in a safe spot.

This had been the tower of Ghar where a watchman had been posted. Khlit wondered why one man should be entrusted with so much wealth—pearls, diamonds, Venetian ducats, with various assortments of gold and silver trinkets.

The treasure, explained the Ameer, was safe for two reasons. No one outside Mustafa Mirza and the watchman knew of its location in the tower. And the watchman was well able to protect his charge. Taleb Khan had smiled across the whole of his broad, good-natured face when he said this.

But now the disaffection was put down and the *vizir* was coming. Taleb Khan had no valid excuse to refuse payment of his two years' tax this time. He had gleaned much wealth by crushing the district. He must pay the tax or satisfy the *vizir*. So he dispatched three trusted men to Ghar Tower, bearing missives written by him and signed with his signet. All three had been slain.

This was unfortunate. Although he did not admit as much, Khlit gathered that the Ameer was afraid to go himself, and the Mirza likewise.

He dared not send a party of soldiers, so great was the wealth of the treasury. He had, he said, heard of Khlit and Abdul Dost. Sufficiently he trusted them to send them on the mission. They would be rewarded well.

The slayers, he thought, would not molest a *ferang*. Nor did they ever rob where they did not first slay their victim.

Somewhat Khlit wondered at this. Who were these bands that went unarmed? How was it they had killed unmolested? How had Jhond, the carrier of money, been spirited off the face of the earth? Or Jhat Singh slain without leaving a trace upon his body? Khlit had reason to know that the Sikhs were excellent fighters and well able to take care of themselves.

"Why," he observed to Abdul Dost, "will this Ameer entrust us with the carrying of his treasure?"

The Moslem was partaking of the rice and bread cakes. He had a ready answer, although it came from a full mouth.

"Why does a dog trust a man with his bone—when the dog is chained? Our worthy Ameer has no other staff to lean upon. The chains that bind him are fear—of the slaying bands and the coming of the *vizir*. He has no other riders to send save you and I."

He swallowed the rice and muttered a brief phrase of thanksgiving to Allah. Abdul Dost was a devout man, of the finer type of Moslem.

"Likewise," he reasoned shrewdly, "the Ameer knows to a grain the sum of his treasure. He will satisfy himself that we render it in full. If we chanced to flee—and I would not scorn to take his wealth from yonder stout official—his outposts in the district would catch up with us."

Khlit looked up curiously. The speech of Abdul Dost had struck deeper than the Afghan knew.

"Why barter further?" grumbled Abdul Dost. "The Ameer needs his gold, and we also have need of the reward. Have you a fear of the thieves?"

Khlit grunted. The Moslem was well aware of the Cossack's bravery. But Khlit was in the habit of pondering a venture well. He, contrary to Abdul Dost, was in a strange country. His sagacity had kept him alive and had served his companion well.

"What think you, *mansabdar?*" he asked, wiping his hands on his sheepskin coat. Khlit would not abandon his heavy attire for the lighter garb of the country.

"With two good horses, and a remount each, you and I will ride to Ghar. Eh—if the low-born thieves come against us on the way, we will swing our scimitars and their blood will moisten the dust. But Taleb Khan must pay us the price of ten Kabul stallions for this deed."

Khlit did not answer at once. He was wondering what the tower of Ghar would be like. Why had the wealthy Amir selected it as a treasure house? He rose and went into the tent, stretching his tall bulk on the cotton cloths that the cleanly Abdul Dost provided for their sleeping.

"Tomorrow we will seek this Ameer," he said.

THE broad face of Taleb Khan lighted at sight of the two warriors. He was relieved that they had come. They were hardy men, he thought, and hardier riders. If any could win through to Ghar, these two could. Had they not withstood many times their number of foes, fighting without reward, when they had been guests at Thaneswar?

Amir Taleb reasoned that they would serve him as faithfully since he was paying a reward. He reckoned the value of men in *mohars*. He had calculated to a nicety the sum of gold that could be drained from the province. He knew to an ounce of silver the treasure now lying in Ghar. Aye, the two warriors would fetch back the gold and silver and jewels. And after they had left the dangerous pass of Ghar——

Smilingly Taleb Khan bent his head, although neither Khlit nor Abdul Dost had made the customary *salaam*. He wanted to show them he was in a gracious mood. He had dire need of their services. But this he did not care to reveal to them.

His small, womanish features puckered pleasantly. An olive hand stroked the gold chain at his throat. He lifted his face to feel the refreshing draft from the peacock fan that a woman slave moved over his head. She was a fair woman. Taleb Khan had an eye for such. He had sought out among the villages the comeliest maidens who were not yet given in marriage. In this Mustafa Mirza had been no mean agent.

For his good offices the Ameer had allowed his favorite official to keep certain of the women for himself. True, the villagers murmured. But what were they save low-born? The Hindu nobles had become restive. Yet what availed their frowns and hard words when the power of the Mogul rested like a drawn scimitar behind the plump, silk-turbaned head of the Ameer?

Still, unless the money was forthcoming to be given into the hand of the approaching *vizir*, displeasure of the Mogul would fall like a blight upon Taleb Khan.

The Ameer sighed. He liked well the feel of gold coins and the luxury of Chinese silk, of perfume of attar, of the delight of opium and *bhang*, the light of great diamonds, the solace of boat festivals upon the lakes of Pawundur.

But greater than his lust for treasure was his fear of his imperial master. Somehow, the *vizir* must be appeased.

"You will undertake the mission?" he asked, not quite concealing his anxiety, as Abdul Dost noted.

An Afghan, whether warrior or merchant, is a born barterer. Not so Khlit.

"Three men have died upon the journey," parried Abdul Dost. "We ask a price of five fine horses each—of Kabul stallions, flawless, of straight breeding."

The plump lips of Taleb Khan drew down. He motioned to the slave to dry the perspiration on his cheeks with a cloth scented with musk.

"It is too high a price," he objected. "All that I have I must render to the Mogul. Would you rob the lord of lords?"

"Liar!" thought Abdul Dost. Aloud he said: "The slaying thieves beset the forests of Ghar. I am *mansabdar*, not a common soldier to be bought and sold. Ten horses or their price——"

"Agreed," said the Ameer hastily. "But the treasure must be intact."

Abdul Dost frowned.

"Am I a bazaar thief, O man of the Mogul? The treasure will be given to your hands."

"I meant but that none should be taken from you. Is the thing then agreed?"

"Aye," said Khlit impatiently. "Give to us

the order for the money and an extra pony apiece. We shall ride hard."

"Verily," assented the Ameer, smiling again. "You are brave men."

He drew a rolled sheet of parchment from the breast of his tunic and glanced at the seal which had been affixed with his ring.

Abdul Dost started. The letter, if it was such, was blank. Seeing his surprize Taleb Khan nodded reassuringly.

"My watchman is not a scholar. He can not read. But the seal and the message—that Taleb Khan waits at Pawundur for the wealth that is his—will be sufficient. Eh, if a letter were stolen from you, and the thieves could read, would they not then proceed to Ghar and despoil the tower?"

He spoke idly and Khlit wondered how much of truth was in the words. Evidently the Ameer had little fear that his treasure would be wrested by other hands from its abiding place.

"These thieves," he asked gruffly, "the dogs know of the treasure. Or they would not have slain the other messengers."

"They suspect," admitted Taleb Khan. "But they know not. Likewise they have a fear of the watchman of Ghar. But you will be safe."

There was unmistakable earnestness now in his modulated noice.

"Ride swiftly, as you plan," he added. "Mingle not with others, no matter who."

Abdul Dost nodded, taking the missive and securing it in his girdle.

"Take the trail by the Jumna on the return journey. It is best, if you can, to hire a boat on the river. But make sure that no others are on the boat. Going up the valley you must ride; but when you turn your faces hither the current of the river will bear your boat."

When they had gone he leaned back upon the cushions, frowning in thought. Once he made as if to call them back; then he changed his mind, snuggling his plump shoulders among the cushions after the manner of a cat. But clearly Taleb Khan was not altogether at ease.

"All the others have died," he muttered. "Yet these two be tall men and masters of the scimitar."

He repeated that phrase as if to satisfy himself.

"If it is the will of Allah, they will come back in the boat."

Suddenly he threw back his head and laughed shrilly. He motioned to the slave.

"*Bhang!*" he commanded. "It is my wish to eat *bhang*. I would be eased of the heat of your demon-ridden land!"

ABDUL DOST and Khlit had mounted after selecting with discernment two of the best ponies of the Ameer's stables. These they led by the halters. In their saddle-bags they had placed rice, oatmeal cakes and, in Khlit's case, dried meat sufficient for a journey of eight or nine days.

As they had promised, they rode at a good pace, and on the evening of the second day reached the caravanserai at the crossroads some miles from the entrance to the pass. All the other three had journeyed safely past this point.

Now at the crossroads was a group of tents. A seller of garments had taken up his station here, also a vendor of Ganges water and rotting fruit. Within the wall of the caravanserai was located a more elaborate tent of reddish color before which was stretched a carpet.

As Khlit and the Afghan rode their tired horses into the enclosure and looked about for a clean space—no easy matter to find—where the Moslem could say his sunset prayer and the Cossack cook supper, an ancient beldame emerged from this tent and laid hand upon their reins.

"*Aie*—you are men from the north," she greeted them. "Your throats are dry and you are stiff from the irking of the saddle. This is verily a goodly spot for you to alight."

She pointed with a wizened arm, covered with cheap bangles, to the carpet.

"Therein is Daria Kurn," she explained, "one of the most beautiful of the nautch-women of Lahore. Verily she is a favorite of the wealthy nobles of Lahore. She will play upon the *vina* and your ears will be charmed with music as fine as the rustle of silk; perhaps, if she is minded, she will dance the dance of the ascent of the stars and your spirits will be comforted."

The aged woman rambled on. Abdul Dost, peering at the tent entrance, saw a girl seated on the carpet within. A pair of dark eyes sought his and he saw a *kohl*-stained face, shaped as he thought like the interior of a pink shell.

Abdul Dost shrugged his shoulders and would have dismounted but Khlit checked him with a gesture.

The nautch-girl was walking toward them, swaying on her slippered feet after the manner of slaves. Her silver anklets clinked gently. In the soft light of that hour the brocade of her bodice gleamed and the silk of her trousers, worn after the Persian fashion, glimmered.

Her dark hair was confined under a cloth-of-silver cap, the lower part of her round face concealed by the *yashmaq*. In one hand she bore a tambourine which she jingled idly as she scrutinized the two men. Although her dress was that of a Persian Moslem, she resembled more a Hindu type.

"Come, my diamond-sheen," crooned the beldame, "my pretty dove, my precious pearl. Lower your veil and show the noble lords the light of your sun-adorning fairness. We will dance for the exalted Ameers and their souls will sink in an ocean of delight. Oh—" to the

men—"Daria Kurn is verily a moon of resplendent beauty. Her henna toes spurn the silk carpet as lightly as wind kisses silk——"

"I will not dance!" said the girl abruptly.

She spoke carelessly but decisively. The faded eyes of the old woman gleamed harshly.

"Unutterable filth!" she cried. "Scum of the back alleys of the bazaar! Parrot-tongue—disobedient wanton! Eh—will you starve your friends with your whims? Will you——"

Abdul Dost had quietly dismounted and washed in the well at one corner. He had spread the prayer carpet that he always carried upon the ground by the well. Now his sonorous voice, as he faced toward the *kaaba*, cut into the shrill harangue of the woman.

"*L'a illoha ill Allah*," he repeated devoutly. "There is no god but Allah. *Allah, ill karim—Allah ill hakim*——"

He continued the course of his sunset devotions. Daria Kurn eyed him curiously, jingling her tambourine. Once an owl hooted and she turned her head on one side, much after the manner of the parrot that her protectress had just proclaimed her.

Khlit saw the two women speak together in low tones. Presently Abdul Dost rose, folded up his carpet and mounted with a leap. He urged his tired horse after the Cossack as Khlit left the caravanserai.

As long as they were visible in the dull golden afterglow of twilight, Daria Kurn watched them silently as they trotted down the highway, raising a cloud of dust that swirled upward in the breeze.

Abdul Dost had something to grumble about.

"No thieves were there," he muttered. "It is customary for the singing and dancing girls to frequent places on the main roads. Have they bewitched you?"

"Better a dozen thieves," said Khlit dryly, "than two women. We will sleep in the forest."

In this manner did the two enter the pass of Ghar.

II

THAT same evening dusk brought out the lights of a near-by village. The bullocks had been stabled, the few sheep were penned, an array of smoke columns moved up from the thatched hamlets. Torches were visible, crossing from hut to hut. Somewhere a woman was singing softly, perhaps to a child. Boyish laughter shrilled from the vicinity of the water-tank. It was followed by the deep cough of a beast close by in the bush.

Whereupon silence fell briefly on the village.

For the most part the men—farmers, hunters and merchants—squatted on their mats, chewing or drinking slowly and absorbing the cool of evening into their tired bodies. But one went quietly from house to house and talked with the owners.

He was Dhurum Khan, one of the chiefs of the village.

Those to whom he spoke girded their waistcloths, yawned, stretched and went out into the darkness, bearing bundles. One or two led forth a laden mule. Few spoke to their wives who watched intently.

Said one:

"The trading caravan goes to Lahore. It will be absent long, perhaps one month, perhaps two, perhaps three."

"I will bring back ten lengths of cloth—you will have a new garment. Peace be with you!" said another.

Yet all who assembled were not merchants. Several were weavers, some tillers of the soil, one a money-changer—he was a Moslem of the north—another a water-carrier of lower caste than the rest.

They formed into an irregular line, led by Dhurum who walked for some distance before he halted. Then he faced the dim figures, for the group carried no lights, and laid his hand on the shoulder of a youth.

"My son comes upon this journey, men of Pawundur," he announced slowly. "He will become a *bhurtote*."

A murmur of assent, even of mild admiration, went through the crowd which numbered perhaps a score and a half.

"Aye, Dhurum Khan, *Jemadar*," they said.

Whereupon the leader ran his eye along the line of dim faces, calling softly a roster of names. Each man responded promptly. They spoke softly, understanding each other readily, yet their words were neither Turki, Hindustani, Mogholi or Persian, nor any of the Punjab dialects. It was an argot of comparatively few phrases, but one with which they were very fluent.

"Come!" concluded Dhurum Khan. "It is the time ordained by the earth-mother, the season sacred to Kali, to Bhawani, the All-Destroyer. A sixth of our goods have we already given to her priests who are well content. Is this not so?"

"Aye, it is truth."

"Aforetimes did one of us see Kali in human form, feeding upon a body that the servant had slain. Since then has Kali grown great with our worship. Her shrine has its allotted gifts. Blood, sunk into the earth, is as pleasing to her divinity as water falling upon the roots of a dry plant. Come, we will perform the offices of Kali."

"It is time," assented a voice.

"It is time to trade," added another with satisfaction.

"Jaim Ali," responded Dhurum Khan, "my son, will share our trading venture. For the first time, he will buy goods—as one of us. But he will no longer bury them underground. He must be taught. Bhawani Bukta, the

Hindu, will teach him. He will be the *gurru* of my son."

Dhurum Khan turned in his tracks and resumed his progress.

"The *Kassi* awaits," he said.

Now as they went a strange thing occurred. Bhawani Bukta, the bent carrier of water, still lugging his goatskin, stepped to the front like an assured leader. A weaver and a scavenger—the last of the lowest caste in the village—began to assume the guardianship of others who had been highly regarded merchants of illustrious ancestors—in the village. Methodically the caste of all in the group underwent a silent change and those who had been ignoble straightened and expanded before the tacit reverence of their comrades.

They walked on silently, eyes and ears keen. Was it not the time for the omens to be observed?

They went silently, leaning slightly forward, their bare legs invisible in the dark, their turbaned heads turning alertly this way and that. The warm spell of evening faded into the clamorous night of the bush. Heavy dew moistened their arms and shoulders. Dhurum Khan halted beside a field where one of them had been wont to nurse growing grain.

As quietly as before they followed him into the field. A dark form, slender as a woman, stepped to the front of the group and pointed out a spot where a tuft of lush weeds showed in the grain.

"Herein is the *Kassi*," he whispered, and straightway the *jemadar* and the water-carrier began to dig with their hands.

When they uprose they held an object between them. It was a short pickax. Carefully Dhurum Khan wiped the dirt from it with the corner of his girdle. Again his soft voice came to their attentive ears. An undistinguishable murmur went through the gathering, an instinctive almost feline voicing of satisfaction. It resembled the purr of a cat.

"The *Kassi*," said Dhurum Khan pleasantly, "has been tempered according to the ritual of our fathers at the forge of a high-caste smith. It has been washed first in water, then in water mixed with the sacred *gur*. Then in milk and in wine. It is marked with the seven spots."

"Aye, I have seen it." Young Jaim Ali tried hard to make his voice sound unexcited.

"It was been burned with cloves, sandalwood and *gur*," repeated the *jemadar*. "Yet the fire injured it not. Is it not verily the tool of Kali? On this journey we will carry it for the first time."

"May it be auspicious!"

"Heed then the omens!" Dhurum Khan's deep voice became stern. "We are not masters of our acts. We serve another. The omens are the talk of the other. Make sure that your ears are keen. Tell me what you observe. The voice of Kali speaks from the top of the temples. Yet our eyes can not see all of her temples. Oftentimes does she call from a tree-top or the rock of a ravine."

"We will hear."

Along the road passed the silent group, some walking well in advance, others behind. Except for their characteristic watchfulness they betrayed no unusual interest in their progress.

In this manner did the *thags*, sometimes called thugs, march from a village of Pawundur.

"A lizard chirped," called one eagerly.

"Good!" echoed Dhurum. "An auspicious omen, although not of the highest order. In the direction of the sound we will go. Is there a trail?"

"A bow-shot beyond is a trail," growled Bhawani Bukta. "It leads to the Ghar Pass."

The night passed swiftly without further omen and the band went ahead with more assurance. The first streaks of dawn were gleaming in their faces when the foremost scouts sighted the glimmer of a fire. Three persons, Punjabi traders, they reported were encamped by the fire and were already stirring to resume their journey.

DHURUM KHAN gave orders with the skill of long experience. Several of the band, including those bearing the sacred pickaxes, plunged into the jungle, skirting the fire of the traders toward a point farther ahead on the road.

Two *thags*, dressed as coolies, plodded past the fire down the road without heeding the salutation of the traders. They were to form the advance lookout. If any strangers came toward them, the two were to delay them in talk, or if need be pretend sudden sickness—even a fit!

A similar outpost was sent back along the way they had come. The bulk of the gang who wore the garb of merchants then proceeded slowly forward, leading the mules.

They talked as they went, and laughed. The good omen was bearing swift fruit. Bhawani Bukta, hidden in the group beside the anxious Jaim Ali, untwisted the folds of his turban—a yellowish cloth. This he doused with water and tied one end in a firm knot.

"So your hand will not slip back along the cloth," he whispered in the *thaggi* jargon.

He bound the free end into a dexterous slip-noose, sliding it back and forth to make sure it was clear.

"Twist not the *rumal* into too small a cord," he advised sagely, "or it will leave a mark on the man's throat. Nor leave it too wide or it will catch on his chin."

Jaim Ali nodded, understanding. He had ridden with the band twice. The first time, two years ago, he had been a child of eleven and they had only permitted him to linger near

the murders and to share the spoil. The second time he had witnessed first a burial then a strangling. Now he was ready to become a full-fledged *bhurtote*—a slayer.

No knight, watching beside his arms in a church, was more intent on performing the ordeal in a fitting manner; no warrior-father more anxious than Dhurum Khan that the deed should go well and the auspices be good for his son's advancement.

So as they went they chanted softly the hymn to Kali that few outside the ranks of *thaggi* have heard. Breaking off sharply near the traders' fire, they fell to chattering and laughing. Dawn was outlining the tree-tops.

The Punjabis had adjusted the packs on their mules and were stamping the stiffness from their limbs after sleeping the night. Then Dhurum Khan gave a low exclamation of dismay. The Punjabis were in the road ahead of them, but one, revealed in the clearer light, proved to be a woman mounted on a mule.

"An ill fate!" he cried. "They are not our prey. We may not slay a woman."

It was not chivalry that restrained the *thags* from the killing of women, only the belief that the female form was molded after that of Kali, their goddess. Even so, they often strangled women, especially when the victims were in the company of other men and the spoil was good.

For the laws of *thaggi*—rigid as the doctrines of the Buddhist faith—prescribed that no victims should be robbed without being first slain; also that none in a party should be permitted to escape. True, very young children were sometimes taken and adopted; but only if they showed no overmastering grief for the slain parents.

In northern Rajputana the *thags* thus slew women often. And in the Punjab, where the *thags* were powerful, it was done by the Mohammedans who were most numerous in these gangs. But even so it was considered an unfortunate thing, and penance was generally offered—gifts to the Brahmans or days of prayer—when a woman was strangled.

"Jaim Ali must not become a *bhurtote* if a woman's blood sinks into the earth," said Dhurum Khan, but hesitantly, for the omen had been good.

Bhawani Bukta slipped to his side.

"Nay, it is true," assented the *gurru*, or teacher of the boy. "Yet another may slay the woman."

"But the deed will be the same."

Bhawani Bukta shook his head slowly.

"The deed must come to pass. These are the victims we have sighted. It was ordained by fate. Already is their grave being dug."

"Then let my son not try his hand at this time."

Again the water-carrier, who was experienced in the lore of the cult, demurred.

"We have said the prayer to Kali for the creation of a new strangler. It must be. Likewise it would be unpardonable to ignore the omen of the lizard."

Dhurum Khan hesitated anxiously. A wave of uncertainty swept through the throng. A vital issue was at decision. They awaited the word of their elders in the cult, as they walked forward, apparently carelessly, toward the three who were awaiting their arrival, glad to have the company of merchants of their own class on the dangerous road.

Then from the right came the wailing cry of a single jackal. As one man the throng sighed in relief.

"It is *one* jackal," cried the water-carrier softly.

"An omen of the highest order," assented Dhurum Khan not quite assuredly.

"Kali has spoken," put in another.

"Jaim Ali is marked as fortunate—if he slays swiftly and well."

The *thags* pressed forward cheerily. The dark clouds of doubt had vanished, even as the sun flooded in on them through the trees. They waved happily at the waiting merchants and the woman—a slip of a girl perched on the mule, regarding them gravely from dark eyes under a hood.

Likewise the Punjabis caught the contagion of their mood. Dhurum Khan's mild, benevolent face dispelled any doubt they might have felt that these were thieves. They had all the seeming of wealthy and reputable merchants.

Besides, the Punjabis were strangers in the district. They fell into step beside the *thags*. Quietly the latter shifted their positions until two men were on either side the girl, one with the *rumal* hidden under his cloak being a Mohammedan who had been hastily allotted the venturous fate of slaying the woman.

Bhawani Bukta and Jaim Ali stepped near one of the men. Dhurum Khan fell to the rear. He had explained to the strangers that his group were merchants of the upper Jumna, bound for Simla with rare Portuguese cloths laden upon the mules. The Punjabis expressed a desire to see the cloths.

Willingly Dhurum Khan halted the animals when his keen eye told him he was abreast the spot where certain men were digging in the thicket.

The Punjabis bent over the unrolled lengths of cheap muslin. Bhawani Bukta cleared his throat.

"*Ae ho to ghiri chulo*," he said to the girl. "If you come to join us, pray descend."

It was the signal. One of the Punjabis, recognizing the jargon or taking fright too late, cried out and sprang away.

"Death!" he shouted and began to run wildly down the road.

But his comrade groaned and staggered.

Jaim Ali's cloth was about his throat. The knot was drawn tight.

The girl gave a startled gasp, and was pulled from her mule by strong hands. A *rumal* passed over her slender throat, and the Moslem strangler watched until her frail, twisted features had frozen into quietude. The *thags* gave no heed to the escaped Punjabi.

But presently Dhurum Khan, who was watching, saw two of his comrades slip from the shadows at the side of the road and bury their knives in the body of the fugitive.

This done the slayers stepped aside and burial *thags* took their places. The three bodies were carried quickly to the newly dug grave. There they were stabbed under the armpits to make certain of their death. Skilfully the earth was piled over them.

Some coolies, passing by the spot presently, saw a group of jovial merchants seated about a fire, some asleep, others sorting out the contents of the packs of the mules with them. The coolies went on, not suspecting that the bodies of the three Punjabis were under the ashes of the fire.

When they had gone the throng came to Jaim Ali and bent before him. He stood proudly beside Bhawani Bukta.

"He is a slayer!" they cried. "He has done well."

Unstinted admiration was in the words. Dhurum Khan smiled.

"We will eat *gur*," he proclaimed, "in honor of my son."

They partook solemnly of the rich and heady sugar which is doctored highly by the *thags*. It was in one a food, a sweet and a stimulant. But the brow of the *jemadar* was not altogether clear. He was gratified by his son's success, no less than by the omens. But he still doubted because of the forbidden slaying of the woman. Perhaps he should have kept her to be the wife of his son.

"A shadow lies over us," he announced gravely.

"Perchance," admitted Bhawani Bukta, "for no other good omens have appeared since to indicate the approval of Kali."

"It is an evil thing," said Dhurum Khan.

A heavy silence fell upon the group who looked at their two leaders. The *jemadar* lifted his head in decision.

"My share of the spoil," he announced, "I will give to the Brahmans. But more we must do to avert the shadow. Else must we return to the village, and that is not wonted."

They waited expectantly. They had committed the murders with the dreadful skill of which they were masters. They considered that they had but done what was fated, that the gods were pleased.

"Six days will we pray," said Dhurum Khan, "and the place we will pray will be the presence of one who is high in our faith. We will go just beyond the mouth of the Ghar and rest there. Thus we will pray and lighten the shadow. For my doubt is heavy."

Thus it happened that Khlit and Abdul Dost, riding fast along Ghar Pass, found the way free of slayers, nor did they set eyes upon a thief, because the slaying of the woman had led the gang back toward Pawundur.

III

The shrine of Naga is covered with weeds. It is hidden in the forest. The passers-by see it not. Other shrines have they built and worshiped.

Many have cried, "Naga is dead!"

Does a god die? Nay. For the passer-by, parting the leaves of the forest, will see the stones of the shrine and one who watches thereon.

THE WIND of the foot-hills of the Siwaliks whistled up the Ghar Pass, stirring the ferns that clung to the giant oaks and sounding a strange tune as it pierced the tall, fragile bamboos.

Quivering, the delicate stems of the bamboos bent and nodded to the wind. The sound grew to a melodious, multitudinous whistle. For many hands had made holes in the bamboo stalks cunningly, leaving round apertures for the passage of the wind. Its coming was heralded up the Pass as it bore the heavy scent of decaying lush grass and the odor of dying dahlias and jasmine.

Vividly the sun etched the shadows of the bamboo leaves and touched the moss on the piles of stone about the tower foot. A man, squatting against a stone, lifted his face to the sun and sighed.

His form was like that of a bamboo, lean so that the bones of his shoulders, ribs and arms showed through his gleaming brown skin. A turban of immaculate white muslin bound his head tightly. His beard grew low on his naked chest. His dark face was stamped with weariness.

"Little Kehru," he chanted gravely, "I hear you. You are coming through the *sirki* grass, walking like a panther upon your four limbs. You are holding your breath, and just now you gave the hiss of a contented cobra."

The man's eyes were closed but he pointed directly at a clump of grass, tall as an elephant's back, which was waving strangely in the wind.

"Little Kehru," he said mildly, "our friends, the sweet bamboo stalks which we cook and eat, you and I, they also are making a hiss. But the sound of a snake is not like to the rustle of the grass. And the sound of your coming is like the trot of a fat pig. I hear you."

The clump of grass was still a moment, then a child burst from it, laughing. He was naked except for a clean breech-clout. In a basket

slung to his back he carried some mangoes.

"You were awaiting me, Ram Gholab," he accused. "Soon I will deceive you, O grandsire, and I will pounce upon you like a falcon that has marked a sparrow in the thicket. O, I am clever. I am wise. *Grrh-uughl* I will pounce upon you some day and then you will laugh. Now you never laugh."

The lad reached his grandfather's knee and laid down the fruit. Ram Gholab reached forward and felt of it approvingly. Kehru might have been ten years of age. Probably he had no reckoning of the years. In his estimation he was already growing to the stature of a warrior. Was he not sole master, with of course Ram Gholab, of the upper Ghar?

"What saw you, O Kehru?"

"I saw that the kites have left the thicket far, far down where they flew to feast during the last moon—the thicket by the Jumna bank. I saw no fishermen in the upper river. There were no feet-marks in the upper trail, save those of sleek *agni*."

"No horses have passed upward?"

"Nay. Only, I saw the white crane of Saravasti and harkened to the talk of the *bandur*."

"Were the *bandur* clamorous or slothful?"

"*Ai*—they called to me lazily, as if their bellies were full. All is well, they said, though not in words. They would have liked me to climb the trees, but I was running."

Kehru stretched himself proudly.

"How well I run!" he said reflectively. "Soon I will keep pace with the antelope of the plain. But I would rather ride a horse. Why have not you a pony, Ram Gholab?"

"I have no silver. How could I have silver, O one-of-small-reason?"

"There is plenty in the inner cavern where——"

"That is forbidden." A stern note crept into the mild voice of the old man. "It is kept for our master."

"The fat Ameer?"

Curiosity was mirrored in the boy's changing face. He was fathoming new depths. Ram Gholab talked little.

"Nay. Who is the Moslem but a slave of a slave? The master I named is lord of lords. He also is a Moslem by prayer, yet his mother was a Hindu and we of Pawundur serve him because [illegible]his."

"I have no mother. I am a free man." Thus Kehru soliloquized while Ram Gholab listened gravely. "The lord of lords is the Mogul. That is true. I know. He never goes forth except upon a picked elephant; and when he sets foot to ground the earth quakes. He has warriors as many as the ants in the sand-heaps. I have seen some riding through the villages when I climbed the trees of the lower forest. They had plumes on their turbans and the sun shone on their mail. Why have not you a bright simitar, grandsire?"

"It is not lawful. My caste bears not weapons."

"But I do not want to play upon a pipe. I would like a horse between my legs and a good sword to cut off the heads of my enemies."

Ram Gholab's eyes puckered. He had not once opened them. The sadness deepened in his face.

"It is in the blood," he murmured. "Yet how may I who am blind teach the use of sword?" He took up a reed-like instrument and set it to his lips. "Eat, Kehru," he said. "I have brought grapes."

While the boy munched the fruit, Ram Gholab played upon his pipe. One at a time from various crevices in the stones issued cobras. They moved slowly toward the two, their beautiful brown and purple-green forms twisting lazily.

"Is the milk set for their eating?" questioned the master of the snakes.

"Aye," responded the child from a full mouth.

A hooded cobra had crept across his foot. Kehru lifted it partially between his toes with a slow, caressing motion and set it down farther away. The shrill, sweet notes of the pipe went on.

Suddenly Ram Gholab ceased, and at the same instant Kehru lifted his shaggy head. The ears of each were equally keen, but the hearing of the elder was more significant, from the experience of years. Some of the snakes moved away.

"Horses—several," mused Ram Gholab. "Two by their gait bear riders."

The boy had wriggled away, carefully stepping over the snakes, and darted to the clump of grass from which he had recently emerged. This point gave on the half-overgrown trail to Ghar Tower.

"Two strange warriors," he called softly, "and two led horses."

The snake-charmer nodded.

"Perhaps, Kehru," he assented, "they have come—whom we awaited. Hide until I am certain of this thing. Are they armed?"

"Both. They have swords as big as my leg."

[illegible] KEHRU hid himself instantly in the grass. A crashing of bamboo stems, a quick *thud-thud* of tired horses spurring up a slope, and Khlit and Abdul Dost drew rein before the watchman of Ghar.

"Ho!" cried the Moslem, wiping the sweat from his eyes. "This is an evil place to find. We were not told that Ghar was a ruin and veiled in the forest."

He was about to swing down from his horse, but hesitated.

"By the face of the Prophet! Never have I seen so many snakes!"

"Soon they will go," said Ram Gholab calmly. "But speak your names and your mission in Ghar."

Abdul Dost did so in broken Hindustani, eyeing the snakes alertly. Khlit glanced curiously over the tumble-down tower and the stone heaps.

"The Ameer," grumbled Abdul Dost, "warned of certain slayers in the forest. *Bismillah!* We have slept in our saddles and crossed the river thrice to escape pursuit, but not a thief has shown his evil face!"

"It is well you did so. They are afoot. Throw me the letter."

Abdul Dost did so. Ram Gholab felt toward the sound of the paper striking the earth and picked it up. He felt of the seal.

"He is blind," observed Khlit.

"A strange watchman!"

Ram Gholab smiled under his beard.

"I have other eyes," he said. "Kehru! Come, light a fire before me."

The boy emerged from his nook, staring round-eyed at the tall warriors. He fetched dried sticks, leaves and a flint-stone. This he struck skilfully until the spark caught in the leaves.

When a small flame was flickering brightly, Ram Gholab extended the blank letter Abdul Dost had given him over the fire. He waited until it had become alight. It burned slowly in his fingers, and the two horsemen smelled a strong odor, strange to them, that resembled musk.

Then the Hindu withdrew carefully from a knot in his own girdle a similar sheet of white parchment. He burned this also, sniffing at the odor. Apparently he was content.

"It is well," he said. "You have come from the fat slave of the Mogul."

Khlit mused upon the unusual method of identification and realized its advantages. As the Ameer had said, no one seizing upon the missive would know for what it was intended. And certainly, despite his blindness, Ram Gholab was not easily to be deceived. He did not know, however, that a further precaution had been adopted.

"Dismount," instructed the snake-charmer, "and tether your horses in the grove at the rear of the tower. There they will be less likely to step upon the snakes."

"The snakes!" cried Abdul Dost. "You mean the horses will be safer there."

"Nay. What I have said is the truth. Here the cobras are worshipers at the shrine within the tower. It is the shrine of Nagi. Molest them not. And likewise beware of them for your own sake."

He picked up a great, mottled cobra and showed its poison fangs intact.

"By Allah!" muttered Abdul Dost to himself. "If one moves toward me Nagi will lack a worshiper."

He was beginning to understand why the tower of Ghar was safe from intruders.

"Come, O watchman of the snakes, our bellies yearn and we are weary of dried meal cakes. Give us food."

Ram Gholab rose and moved back to the tower in the manner of one who well knew his way. Khlit and his comrade followed, after seeing to the comfort of their horses.

THE tower itself, although in ruinous condition, was of more recent building than the shrine it surmounted. Khlit scrambled over the stone heaps—not without a wary eye for the cobras despite the stout, yak-hide boots he wore—into the rear postern gate. Here he found Kehru busied in preparation of porridge, milk, curried rice and mangoes.

Wide-eyed, the boy gazed on the tall warrior, noting Khlit's broad leather belt and smooth, leather boots, his black sheepskin hat, and the gold chasing on his scabbard. He marked the swagger of the Cossack—the walk of a man better accustomed to a saddle than the earth. And he drew in his breath with a hiss of admiration.

Khlit gazed at the framework of the tower. A broad aperture opened into the older shrine of Nagi. The shrine was of stained marble, without window or light of any kind. A rough flight of granite steps led up to the second story of the tower where Abdul Dost, doubtless mindful of the worshipers of Nagi, had persuaded Ram Gholab that the two warriors would prefer to spread their saddle-cloths for sleep.

Having satisfied himself that the place contained no other inmates, the Cossack yawned, stretched and seated himself upon a wooden bench by the fire. He produced his black Cossack pipe and a small sack of what passed in China for tobacco. Kehru blinked and stared.

Khlit filled his pipe with tobacco, a rare delicacy that he husbanded with care in this land where the merits of the weed were as yet unknown. He picked a burning stick from the fire and lit the pipe, drawing into his lungs a mixture of smoking hemp, opium and noxious weeds that would have instantly nauseated a man of less hardened constitution.

"*Ai!*" cried Kehru, sitting back on the stone floor abruptly.

"*Chota hazeri!*" grumbled Khlit, nodding at the food.

He knew but a word or two of Hindustani, picked up from Abdul Dost, but his gesture was significant. Kehru resumed the stirring of the pot and twining together of plantain leaves which were his only plates. His eyes shone. Verily, here was a man of authority who took

his ease right royally and indulged in a noteworthy solace, such as a man should!

He grinned and shook the trailing hair back from his eyes. He extended a mess of curry to Khlit who immediately fell-to with his fingers. Kehru was astonished as well as delighted. This tall warrior with the scarred face and swaggering feet had not only the bearing but the appetite of a war-like god.

Kehru hastily added more rice to the pot. He had measured the hunger of the two riders by the slender needs of himself and old Ram Gholab. A thought came to him. Khlit had appeared ill content with the frugal fare.

"Wait but the space that water boils," he chattered, "and the thrice-born chieftain may taste what is more fitting to his manlike gullet."

Assuring himself by a crafty glance that Ram Gholab was not within hearing, Kehru flitted from the tower. He ran to a thicket and dug with his hands into a hollow covered with cypress branches. He disclosed the body of a small antelope. An arrow had transfixed the beautiful beast behind the forelegs.

Kehru had gratified his ambition toward prowess by fashioning a slight bow with which he had become wonderfully skilled. An arrow was silent, and Ram Gholab, whose caste prohibited the taking of animal life, could not see its flight. But, alone, the boy had not dared to cook his prey. Also he would not eat meat. But the tall warrior quite evidently had stronger tastes.

Somewhat doubtfully he showed the dead antelope to the Cossack who sniffed it appraisingly and took it readily.

"Ha!" he muttered, well pleased, and Kehru smiled joyfully.

In a trice Khlit had cut off a hind quarter which he skinned with his dagger swiftly and tossed into the pot. Then impatiently he swept the whole of the boy's stock of wood upon the fire until it roared hotly and the water boiled.

This done, he nodded in friendly fashion to Kehru and stretched himself beyond the heat of the blaze, his sword near his right hand, and was asleep in a moment. Kehru harkened to his snores and crept nearer to gaze upon the splendidly engraved curved scabbard. He touched the weapon fleetingly in admiration.

At once Khlit was awake, his eyes hard, and the hilt of the sword close-gripped in a ready hand. Seeing only the startled boy, his tense figure relaxed and Kehru breathed again, well understanding that he had been close to death.

When Abdul Dost climbed down to the fire, attracted by the smell of meat, he found Khlit heartily engaged upon the antelope quarter, half-cooked.

"Ho!" remarked the Moslem. "The smell is good. How was the beast slain?"

Khlit was well acquainted with the Mohammedan scruples as to food.

"In fitting fashion," he remarked dryly. "Eat."

Abdul Dost sniffed and sat down. He tried some of the fruit and curry, eying the rapidly vanishing meat enviously.

"Ram Gholab says that peril awaits us on our return," he observed.

"Then will you need more strength, Abdul Dost. Eat, therefore."

The Moslem needed no further urging. When the food had vanished and the fire was cooling into ashes he lay back on his cloak contentedly.

"You and I are marked by the slayers, Khlit," he said, "as a hare is marked by a goshawk. So says Ram Gholab. The slayers have doubtless seen us as we came hither. They have knowledge of the treasure—eh," he broke off, "then why have they not attacked the tower, O watcher of the snakes?"

The Hindu pointed into the dark shrine.

"Nag guards what is there. The *thag* fears the cobras. Likewise, it is their custom to slay only upon a journey. If they marched against a dwelling they would fear the anger of Kali."

"A strange folk," meditated the Moslem, "low-born Hindus doubtless."

"Nay," Ram Gholab spoke sharply, "they are followers of the Prophet for the most part. Their ancestors were laborers behind bullocks and such dishonorable pursuits."

"That is surely a lie." Abdul Dost's religious pride was aroused. "For it is forbidden in the law to slay murderously."

"The *thags* believe that they keep the law. They say that their victims are marked for death by fate. Thus the *thags* do naught but carry out what is already ordained. If they did not slay—and it is a sin in their evil minds if they do not—the victims would die otherwise."

"Still the guilt of blood is on their souls."

"Are not you also a slayer?"

"In battle. Arm to arm and eye to eye, in a just quarrel. Never have I slain save in open fight."

"Death is death." Ram Gholab closed his blind eyes. "Thus I heard the father of this boy say—for he was once a scout-*thag*, but repented swiftly."

He ceased abruptly, fearing that Kehru had heard. Abdul Dost looked at him sharply.

"So—the *thag*-slayers believe that I and the Curved Saber are fated to die?"

"Assuredly."

"Hm. They will watch for our coming with the gold."

"But," pointed out Ram Gholab, "Taleb Khan has devised a means of leaving the tower. A *panshway*—a river boat—lies near by on the Jumna bank below the tower. This will bear you back to the Ameer."

"A boat!" grumbled Khlit when this was told to him. "Nay, rather will we ride where we may choose our going."

A SHADOW crossed the thin face of the Hindu. He had had his instructions. Ram Gholab was a faithful man and worthy of trust. Moreover he had the single-mindedness of the aged, whose sole task had been the care of a trust.

The treasure of Ghar Tower had been the somber delight of his lonely life. His pride was at stake—for the safety of the gold. His hand trembled slightly as he answered:

"Ameer Taleb Khan spoke with me and said that thus should the gold be taken from the tower—and in no other manner. There is a roof over the deck of the *panshway* and under it you may lie hid, with horses. The current will bear you down-stream. The long end of the rudder can be handled, so said the Ameer, from within."

"It is well said," mused Abdul Dost who liked to take the other side of an argument from the taciturn Khlit. "But if the *thags* see us enter the boat——"

"Tomorrow night you must embark. They will not see for they have not eyes of an owl. Aye, the boat is best. For the *thags* have spies, so I have heard, along the Ghar Pass. They will see you ride down the trail."

"We bear swords," grunted Khlit who had no love of a ship of any sort. "Our horses are swift——"

"But not so swift as an arrow," pointed out Abdul Dost, yawning. "Nor can we ride for three days and nights without watering the horses. The slayers will be watching the trail. They will not look for us within the boat."

Khlit was silent.

"Where lies this gold?" he asked presently.

When Abdul Dost had translated his request, Ram Gholab rose. Kehru lighted a torch from the embers of the fire. But the master of the snakes needed no light to find his way into the shrine.

It was a bare chamber of stone, perhaps ten feet square, great fissures showing between the slabs. Khlit, peering keenly at the walls and floor, saw no sign of an opening which might serve as a hiding-place. The only object in the shrine was a square block of jade, placed against the wall, wherein was carved the image of Vishnu with the hood of the seven snakes above the figure of the god.

Ram Gholab squatted on the floor.

"Be silent," he whispered, "and move not. The servants of Nag are quick to strike, and their touch is death."

Abdul Dost, guessing vaguely what was to come, glanced back at the doorway uncertainly; but as Khlit stood his ground so did the Moslem. Ram Gholab's pipe began its soft note. His turbaned head moved slightly, almost in the fashion of the hood of one of his snakes. Kehru was like a brown figure turned to stone.

The voice of the pipe rose shriller. The flickering light from the torch faded then grew greater. Ram Gholab nodded his head and Kehru stepped toward the jade slab. Abdul Dost glanced from side to side uneasily. He was not at all comfortable. His religious scruples did not favor his presence in a Hindu shrine, especially that of Nag—even though deserted. Besides he felt a distinct sense of danger.

Kehru thrust the unburned end of his torch into the crack of the stone directly over the jade. He pried vigorously and the slab turned as if revolving on a hidden axis. When an opening about a foot in width had been made the boy stepped back alertly.

The hooded head and tiny eyes of a giant cobra were visible in the black hole. Khlit heard a sound like that of steam passing through a narrow hole. The snake darted its head forward and the glistening coils followed.

It was a magnificent specimen, the spectacle mark clear and shining, the long, beautiful body nearly the length of a man. A second cobra followed the first.

"Come, beloved of the god, guardian of Doorga—master of Ghar. Come. We are calling—thus. Do not harm us. We also are servants of Nag."

So chanted Ram Gholab, removing the pipe from his lips. The cobras which had turned aside, running their heads along the wall, moved toward him, their hoods lifted.

Abdul Dost felt his brow strangely warm. He had heard no sound, but Khlit had drawn his sword and held it poised in his hand. Meanwhile the boy slipped to the opening in the wall. He drew out an ebony box of some size.

The snakes seemed to pay no heed to him. Kehru gently walked from the shrine, bearing the box and his torch. For a moment the place was in half darkness. The pipe of Ram Gholab continued its soothing note.

Then Kehru returned, and light flooded the chamber.

"*B'illah!*"

It was a full-voiced oath, torn from the throat of Abdul Dost. One of the snakes of the shrine had moved its coils toward him with dreadful grace and silence, and the torch showed that its coils were passing over his foot. Its head waved not a yard from his hand.

And at his voice the coils of the snake on the floor contracted instantly. A cobra does not draw back its head to strike, such is the strength of its lean body. But this one struck simultaneously as it moved.

Khlit's action was involuntary. He had seen vicious tensity leap into the snake. He had not waited for the head to strike.

Even so, his blade moved with deadly swiftness. The snake had darted its fangs at Abdul Dost, but midway the sword met it and the splendid hood fell to the stone floor, cleanly severed from the writhing trunk.

Kehru gave a cry of dismay and dropped the torch. The chamber dwindled into gloom. Abdul Dost and the Cossack both ran from the shrine into the tower at the same second.

They paused by the fire with drawn weapons. The Moslem's teeth were chattering as if from a chill. But he mastered his emotion quickly.

"Well did you serve me!" he cried. "I was near to death."

Kehru stood beside them, staring affrightedly at the shrine. Khlit took a step forward and hesitated. Ram Gholab must be in peril. But it would be vain to return to the stone chamber without a light. Then an angry voice came from the darkness.

"Death! It is near to you now. O fool! O blunderer! O accursed of the gods! An evil deed."

The old Hindu advanced into the light, his blind eyes rolling fruitlessly. And Khlit swore. The second cobra was held on the arm of the snake-charmer, its coils about his waist and leg.

Although the giant snake was plainly agitated, its hood erect and venomously swelled, it made no effort to strike its friend. Both warriors recoiled hastily.

"Well for you," said Ram Gholab bitterly, "that I seized upon the second servant of Nag. O well for you that I am blind and my senses are keen in the dark. If I had not seized him, he would have struck once—twice—as you fled. Fools, to think that your clumsy feet could outstrip the dart of the cobra. Half am I minded to release him upon you."

His teeth glimmered through his beard. The blue veins stood out in his forehead. His voice was like the angry breath of the serpent he held. Then his head drooped.

"Nay," he murmured. "You are but the dull slaves of a master who is also my master. You shall go free. But the shrine of Nag is profaned. Take the gold of the Mogul. I shall abide in the shrine. Kehru, build up the fire. The servant of Nag must be burned upon the pyre or evil will descend upon your head and you—aye, though a child—will be accursed."

Throwing back his head he laughed. The giant snake twisted in his arm.

"Verily," he cried, "have you said that the slayers have marked you. Now will you not escape uncaught from Ghar. Now it is assured. The shadow of death will close upon you. No sword will guard you this time. *Ohe*—my work is done, but your fate you may not escape."

Abdul Dost felt a cold pulse stir in his back. Khlit stared curiously at the Hindu, wondering why the life of a snake should be so valued. To Abdul Dost, however, the words rang with an ominous portent. The Moslem, as well as Ram Gholab, was a believer in fate.

The form of Ram Gholab slipped back into the darkness of the shrine, bearing the snake, and the glimmer of his white turban was lost in the shadow. Whereupon the boy raised the lid of the ebony box.

Within gleamed the soft luster of gray pearls, the rainbow glitter of diamonds, the wine-hued sparkle of rubies. Beneath the gems were sacks of gold.

Abdul Dost fingered a diamond curiously, turning it in his lean hand so as best to catch the light.

"A rich nest," he grunted, "with rare eggs therein. I have a thought, Khlit, that our path back to Pawundur will be set with the thorns of trouble."

"Close the casket," advised the Cossack, "and bear it with you to your couch above. We must sleep, but first I will see to the horses."

At a sign from him Kehru produced a fresh torch and lighted it, following Khlit's tall figure to the thicket behind the tower where the four horses were picketed. It was a mild night and the trees sheltered the beasts from the heavy dews.

Having satisfied himself that the horses were fed and secured, Khlit undid the saddle-girths and laid the furniture on the ground. Then he paused to watch the boy.

KEHRU had stuck his torch in the earth and approached one of the Cossack's shaggy Turkoman ponies. Caressingly his hand went behind the horse's ears, and he crooned softly. He fetched dried ferns and spread them for a bed under the animal.

Whereupon the pony nuzzled Kehru, lipping his hand and sniffing, well content. The boy of Ghar was at home with animals. They were, indeed, the only friends of his life except the blind guardian.

Wistfully his dark eyes dwelt on the pony. Khlit grunted.

"Oho, little warrior! Did not Abdul Dost say when he was well fed that you desired a horse and had none? Aye, the pony will not be too large for your small legs."

Kehru looked at him inquiringly. On an impulse Khlit placed the halter of the beast in the boy's hand, resting the other hand on the pony's neck.

"Scarce will there be space for four horses in the boat," he mused. He nodded. "Yours," explained in broken Hindustani.

Kehru started with surprize and excitement. His white teeth shone from his brown face in a wide grin. He had understood, but hardly credited his good fortune. Khlit nodded again and walked away carelessly.

Straightway his hand was seized in a warm

clasp. Kehru knelt before him and pressed the scarred hand of the warrior to his brow. Then he bent his dark head to the ground and touched Khlit's boots reverently.

Impatiently the Cossack drew away and swaggered off to his sleep. He knew it not, but his generosity had stirred a tumult in the boy's mind. Long after Khlit was asleep the boy lingered proudly by his new possession. In his soul was arising a great doubt.

While he felt the back of the horse for saddle-sores and examined teeth and legs in the dark, he was debating a most important matter. For the first time in his life he must decide upon the conduct of a warrior.

He glanced at the dark shrine where muffled sounds indicated that Ram Gholab still labored. Then he undid the halter from the tree-trunk and sprang upon the pony's back. Swiftly he guided his mount from the tower, using only the halter-cord and his bare heels.

Beyond the tower he struck into the Ghar trail and quickened to a gallop.

All was silent now about Ghar Tower, save for the grieving prayers of Ram Gholab, who squatted above a fresh mound in the earth between the stones, and the nightly tumult of insects—the strident hum where the dwellings of men are few and the forest is moist.

IV

ON THE broad plain by the Jumna, just below the Ghar Pass, the camp of the Pawundur *thags* spread, like a brown ant-hill resting upon green sward. The six days of prayer had passed without further ill omen, and Dhurum Khan, the *jemadar*, was easier in spirit although he still felt vague misgivings at the death of the woman.

He was walking restlessly along the high-road near the encampment, accompanied by the *gurru*, Bhawani Bukta, whose bent figure was alert with new eagerness now that the time was drawing near for the band to march again.

"According to the custom of *thaggi*," he told Dhurum Khan, "we have waited at the cross-roads, lifting hand against none, while the six days have dawned and ceased. Rather, we have aided and given comfort to passing traders, as well as entertainment in the tents, owing to the advice of the one to whom we came in our trouble."

"Well did the one counsel," admitted the leader, "for by our quietude none suspect that we be slayers. Nay, not the riders of the Ameer himself who have stopped in our tents."

"Blind slaves!" The water-carrier grimaced. "Our time is come and we will act. Look!"

Where the roads crossed were strange marks in the sand, as if men had turned to the right, toward the river, dragging their feet and leaving small piles of dirt at intervals. This was a well-known signal.

"The scouts bid us hasten," interpreted Dhurum Khan, "to the Jumna."

They quickened their pace, plying their staffs vigorously, looking to those who might chance to watch like wandering tradesmen. Presently they emerged upon the sand flat through which the tranquil Jumna threaded, its sacred waters a deepest blue in color. For the Jumna, although taking its source from the snow ravines, retains its clear color, unlike the Ganges.

At the *ghat*, the river landing-place, a small skiff was tied to a pole in the sand. In the skiff were two men.

"O *jemadar*," reported one, "as you commanded we have rowed until our backs are blistered with the sun and sore with a great soreness. We have made our eyes like to the eyes of vultures and we have seen *them* enter a *panshway*—even as our spies among the fisher folk foretold. Behold, protector of the poor, our poverty is like to a ragged garment."

"Two lengths of cloth you shall have."

"Our hands are raw."

"An ounce of silver each."

"O generous master!" The scout-*thag* bent his head. "Another word have I. When we rowed hither a raven called twice. Is not the omen good?"

Both Dhurum Khan and the *gurru* gave an exclamation of pleasure. Bhawani Bukta stroked the outlines of his noosed cord under his dirty tunic.

"Are you assured it is they?" demanded the *jemadar*. "We have waited long for news of their coming to the river."

"Their faces were hid," responded the man in the skiff. "And they loosened the boat at night. But we followed, where we were not seen, and harkened to their talk. We are not mistaken. Within a day, or perhaps two, they plan to land near this spot."

Dhurum Khan nodded, reflecting. He glanced along the *ghat* and saw one or two river craft tied up near by, their crew asleep under the awnings that kept off the hot sun. He lowered his voice earnestly.

"Harken," he whispered. "This day the band will move. We will leave the one who counseled us wisely. The omens are good. But the skiff is too little for a crew. Do you, Bhawani Bukta, and these two, assume the manner of weavers who are seeking cloth to buy. In one of the vessels in the bight there are sellers of cloth—so they told us when they rested in our tents and refreshed their spirits with the magic of a song. O, the one is wise!"

"Aye," responded the three, "it is the truth."

"Then," continued Dhurum Khan, "will I retrace my steps and give the order for one-half the band to break camp. Some boys under my

son Jaim Ali will I send hither in advance of the rest. The boys will drive mules without burdens and pretend that the mules have broken loose."

"Aye," they nodded expectantly.

"When the boys and the mules come, you will be upon yonder *panshway*, bartering with the owners. Ask permission to cook your rice at their fire under the roof of the boat."

"We will slay those who sit about the fire," hazarded Bhawani Bukta.

"Aye, thus you will do. Bhawani Bukta will give the *jhirni*—the signal for murder—which is three raps upon the deck, on a boat. He will watch and see that no men on the other craft take alarm."

"But what of the men sleeping on the upper deck?" asked the *gurru*. "Shall I stab them quietly as they sleep?"

"Unworthy!" Dhurum Khan frowned, for he had grown careful since the murder of the woman. "Kick them awake and say that one of their comrades by the fire has been taken with a fit of vomiting."

"Nay," broke in the quick-witted water-carrier, "I will say that he writhes with torment of worms in his body and barks like a dog. Thus they will have a fear lest he become mad, and go hastily."

"So that these two clever *thags* may strangle them. Then, when all of the five men on the *panshway* have become offerings to Kali, make a hole in the side of the boat away from the other craft and let the bodies fall into the water."

Bhawani Bukta bent his gray head in assent smilingly.

"You spoke of boys and mules, *Jemadar*. What is their mission?"

"To make a loud noise and outcry upon shore, to drown a cry if one of the men on the boat struggles against the noose. Thus will the crews of the other vessels have eyes and ears only for the mules and the running boys."

The dark eyes of the three glistened.

"O wise leader," they whispered. "It is verily a plan of plans."

The dark eyes of Dhurum Khan were alight with purpose. For six days he had pondered this scheme. His spies had brought news of a treasure being carried on a *panshway*. And he—with the counselor at the crossroads whom they all held in reverence—had planned a great theft, a masterpiece of death.

"Take heed," he cautioned. "If the men in the other craft should ask what has become of the dead men—for they will not suspect they are dead—say that your victims have gone to the camp at the crossroads to hear another song. Should strangers come along, say that the crew have sold the *panshway* to you."

"Verily," assented the *thags*.

To one not understanding the great skill of these men in their profession, the murder of five boatmen on a public landing-place, and the disposal of their bodies in broad daylight, would appear a difficult if not disastrous feat. Yet by following these instructions of Dhurum Khan the thing was done. And the *thags* who had come to the *ghat* were in possession of a serviceable river craft as well as the few goods of the dead boatmen.

The boys and the mules returned to the roadside camp with Dhurum Khan, while Bhawani Bukta was appointed *manji*, or captain of the boat.

He ordered the fastenings loosened as soon as the stains and disorder of the murder upon the lower deck had been cleared away, and the patched calico sail was raised to the breeze. The squat little vessel veered away from the land while bystanders on shore waved at it.

Invisible under the river surface rested the five bodies, well weighted with stones taken from the ballast of the boat. The hole in the side was filled up hastily and the vessel stemmed the current of the river on its mission of death, its blunt bow headed up-stream toward Ghar.

UNTIL that afternoon Khlit and his companion had had the upper reaches of the Jumna to themselves, except for some flocks of fishing skiffs. They remained carefully under the overhang of the half-cabin beside the horses, guiding their *panshway* by the long oar which passed through the stern.

It was hot under the dome-shaped wooden shelter; the lower deck of the vessel was musty and the timbers water-logged. There was no place to stand on the upper portion except at the bow—for the mast penetrated the curving wooden screen—or on the steerage platform. These points they shunned and concealed themselves furthermore by placing the horses in the open pit between the overhang and the stern.

By situating the three beasts here, they made certain that no casual eye would wonder whether their craft was masterless. They did not try to raise the sail, knowing nothing of how it should be done. They were content to drift down the rapid current and steer clear of the shore by clumsy use of the oar.

"It is like to a pot floating in a trough," muttered Abdul Dost, "and it is well that we are near to the end of the trough, for a sickness comes upon me."

Khlit did not remind the Moslem that the boat was his choice. The Cossack leaned back against the bare beams of the side where he could watch the river through a crack in the opposite timbers. His silence irritated Abdul Dost, who was thoroughly weary of the *panshway*.

"We are like sheep in a pen," he grumbled. "Better had we risked the arrows in the forest than this thing of evil."

"Now that we are here," pointed out Khlit, "it would be the folly of a woman to depart from the boat. For we would easily be seen and our place of landing would be marked by many eyes."

He squinted thoughtfully ahead, where a sail was visible.

"Did you see aught of Kehru during the second day at Ghar?" he asked.

"Nay, the boy had vanished with one of your ponies. Only Ram Gholab was there, at the grave of his snake. He said in parting that our graves, also, were being dug beside the Jumna."

"Likewise," mused Khlit, piecing together certain thoughts in his mind, "did Ram Gholab say, unthinking, that the father of Kehru was a *thag* for a space. But this, I think, the boy knew not."

"He has a desire to be a warrior of the Mogul."

"Yet is he gone from Ghar. And hereabouts the *thags* seem the only warriors."

Abdul Dost glanced at his companion and shrugged his shoulders. He pointed to a pile of skins under which the corner of the ebony box protruded.

"Eh," he grumbled, "you have claimed the care of the Mogul's treasure. But that is an ill place. If the boat should gallop the box might overturn and the diamonds would strew the deck."

"The chest," said Khlit complacently, "is my care—as the boat is yours."

"Aye," muttered Abdul Dost, "you have spent more time in counting over the bags of gold than in watching what is before the muzzle of the boat."

"Nevertheless I am watching a sail that is trotting up the highway of the river toward us."

ABDUL DOST swore and peered through the ramshackle deck. The approaching *panshway* was nearing them rapidly, its sail bellying in the wind. He could see a brown figure on the steering platform. But no others.

"I wonder," Khlit stroked his beard, "why Kehru left the tower."

"He did but steal the pony."

"The pony was given him." The Cossack pointed aft grimly. "The thought came to me that he might have ridden from the tower bearing a message—because another sail is behind us. It crosses from one side to the other like a shying horse."

"By the face of the Prophet!" Abdul Dost stood up and knocked his head soundly against the overhang of the deck. *"B'illah!* This is an evil place. It was ill done to give the boy a horse. He may have betrayed——"

"He had honest eyes." Khlit thought briefly that Kehru had appeared uneasy when he had last seen him. "Besides, if he had wished evil he could have lifted the horse."

Abdul Dost marked the course of the first *panshway* with care.

"It will pass us by, far to the flank," he decided; and so it proved.

"But the other gains," observed Khlit. "And our pot wallows like a full-fed turtle. Abdul Dost, you lifted your voice in favor of the boat. Tell me then how to put spurs to it."

The Moslem gazed at the bare deck, the pile of the sail and the rotting timbers, and shook his head. He had never been afloat before, having crossed rivers after the manner of his kind by swimming his horse.

"I see no spurs," he responded moodily. "I think the boat that follows in our tracks gains on us because it wears a sail. But how can we place a sail upon this turtle? Nay, perhaps it were best to swim our horses ashore."

Khlit measured the distance to the bank and shook his head. Before they could gain land the following vessel would cut them off. He had noticed that it moved more quickly when tacking.

"If it is our fate to be taken in this pot," ruminated Abdul Dost, "it will come to pass. What is written is written."

"Look," said Khlit.

The *panshway* that had passed them by had come about in the wake of the second boat and now both were heading down-stream. Their brown sails fluttered as they were hauled by the crews. Behind them the green slopes of the Ghar rose to the blue sky. The broad bosom of the Jumna was spreading wider as the gorge opened out. They were nearly at their destination. But the pursuing vessel was within arrow-shot.

Khlit drew his Turkish pistols from his belt and saw to the priming carefully. He rose and adjusted the saddle-bags on his horse, despite the danger of being seen. Then he called to Abdul Dost.

"The riders of the nearest boat are running about the deck in confusion. They are crying out as if in fear."

What Khlit said was true. To a man accustomed to sailing craft it would have been evident before now that the crew were endeavoring to make all possible haste, nursing the boat along against the wind, under the loud orders of the steersman. The crew were glancing back at the third vessel which was following steadily some distance in the rear.

"They have a fear!" cried Abdul Dost.

The fleeing vessel was now abreast of them. Two men, dressed in the manner of merchants, gestured at them wildly from the after deck.

"Thags!" they cried. "Fools! Lift your sail and flee. Do you not see that the boat behind is a craft of the slayers. They follow, waiting for their prey."

Khlit and Abdul Dost glanced at the swelling

brown sail in their wake. The Moslem smiled ruefully.

"Verily, that is wisdom!" he cried. "But we know not how to bridle this boat for speed."

"Fools!" said the merchant again. "It is death to linger."

They cried shrilly at the crew who were fumbling with the sail. The two vessels had drifted almost together, for the other *panshway* had lost the wind.

"A handful of gold," offered Abdul Dost, "to one of your men who will come to our boat and rein it for flight."

Even in the danger of capture by the pursuing craft, he was not willing to venture on the merchant's ship with the tell-tale chest. Inwardly he cursed Khlit's obstinacy in leaving the treasure in the chest.

The coolies stared at him and glanced at each other. The two boats were now rail to rail. One of the crew leaped to Abdul Dost's side.

He was a half-naked Mussulman coolie, his eyes rolling in excitement. He glanced sharply down into the lower deck, noting the tangled sail, the pile of skins and the watching Khlit.

"I will aid you!" he cried. "It is time!"

Silently a half-dozen turbans appeared over the rail of the larger boat. Brown forms sprang down upon Abdul Dost, their naked feet bearing him to the deck, with the breath knocked from his broad chest. No chance had the Afghan to draw weapon or even shout a warning to Khlit.

But the Cossack had seen. Instinctively—for he was never startled by sudden danger—he had grasped the halter of his pony, the beast being already weighted with his saddle-bags, and freed it. He stepped back, drawing the horse with him to the boat-rail opposite the point of attack.

The thought flashed upon him that Ram Gholab had said the *thags* never attacked without slaying. Abdul Dost was already under their feet and seemed doomed, for he lay passive, struggling with his breath. By a leap over the rail Khlit and his pony might perhaps have escaped into the water and reached the shore before the sailing craft could be brought about after them.

But the Cossack would not leave his friend. With an angry shout he drew his weapon and leaped forward. He had seen the treachery in a flash, too late. The panic on the other *panshway* was assumed. They had been cleverly surprized.

As he sprang, swinging his blade overhead, there was a hiss in the air. Something settled about his shoulders and drew taut. Striving vainly to strike at it with his sword, he was jerked to one side and thrown heavily.

A fleeting glimpse he had of the merchant—a slim, bearded fellow whose face was vaguely familiar. The man was pulling at the cord, the noose of which had closed over Khlit.

Savage hands struck at the Cossack. Others gripped his sword-arm. Several naked bodies pressed upon him. Struggling, he was cast face-down and held firmly. The horses reared in fright.

KHLIT expected momentarily the bite of a knife against his ribs or the tension of a cord about his throat. He struggled in grim silence, only to feel other ropes wound about his legs and around his body.

Then he was picked up bodily and thrown heavily into the other *panshway*. A *thud*, and Abdul Dost lay beside him, likewise bound and breathing in great gasps.

"The horses!" cried the merchant's voice. "They are valuable."

"Master, we can not fetch them," a coolie's voice made answer. "Their fear is too great."

"Dogs! Then do two of you man the boat that has them. Sail it to shore. Your death if the horses are not landed safely."

With that the merchant scrambled down beside Khlit. In his arms was the ebony chest. He shouted an order and the square sail was hastily dressed. The boat swayed and lunged forward as it caught the wind. Several of the coolies had leaped back after the merchant. Khlit had a glimpse of the sail running up on the *panshway* he and Abdul Dost had occupied.

Khlit wondered why they had not been slain. Surely they were helpless. He had strained fruitlessly at his cords and now lay passive. Abdul Dost was glaring at their captors.

The merchant had set down the box and was regarding them complacently.

"Well done!" said a smooth, familiar voice.

Khlit rolled over upon his other side to peer at the speaker. Under the overhang of the cabin sat a stout man, wearing the cloak and long, gray tunic of a Mussulman trader. A broad face beamed upon the surprised Cossack and a pair of pig eyes puckered in a smile.

In spite of the tradesman garb, Khlit recognized Ameer Taleb Khan.

His first impression was relief that they had not fallen into the hands of a *thag* band. His second was a swift foreboding that all was not well. But he lay silent, thinking. Why was the Ameer so costumed? Why had he and Abdul Dost been attacked? The Moslem who had also seen their captor found his voice readily.

"Is this the manner that you greet your riders, Taleb Khan?" he snarled. "By Allah and the ninety-nine holy names! It was ill done. My ribs are cracked. Unloose us!"

Taleb Khan's smile broadened. He sat on his heels upon a comfortable rug, a water jar and dish of sweets at his side. Now he lifted a sugared date carefully and placed it in his

mouth. He seemed well pleased with the situation. The merchant sat down beside him, and Khlit knew him to be Mustafa Mirza, also disguised after a clumsy fashion.

"Peace!" ejaculated the servant of the Ameer. "Make your tongue gentle in addressing your master."

Abdul Dost worked to a sitting position, stifling a grunt of pain. He had been roughly used.

"Is this a jest? Do not those dirty garments offend your nicety, Mustafa?"

The mirza scowled.

"Nay, it is no jest. We have taken two thieves in the act."

"Thieves!" Abdul Dost grappled with this new thought. "The thieves are behind you in the pursuing boat. You named them *thags*."

"It is the truth—most like. They had evil faces and they stared at us as they passed. But then my men were below deck. Now the *thags* have seen our number and weapons and they have headed about, up the river, being wise—as you are not."

A glance showed Abdul Dost that this was so. The third boat was but a diminishing square of sail, already rounding a bend of the Jumna near the shore. His own boat followed close behind that of the Ameer.

"Wherefore have you done this thing, Taleb Khan?" The Afghan was still bewildered. "There was no need to set upon us. Here is the gold and the jewels in the chest."

"Aye, the chest." Taleb Khan stroked its black surface fondly and eyed the bronze clasp. "Well do I know my treasure chest." He shook his head moodily. "Aye, a pity. I deemed you worthy of trust. Yet is the treasure of my box gone."

"Gone?" Abdul Dost gaped, but Khlit's eyes grew hard under the shaggy brows.

"Aye—vanished. Stolen!"

"Nay!" cried the Afghan roundly. "Look within and you shall see the jewels and gold *mohars*. Even so. Did I not see them with my eyes?"

"I doubt it not. You coveted the wealth with your eyes. And you took it. It is written that the fate of a stealer of the goods of another man shall be like to the reward of a jackal."

"But look within the chest and see the truth."

The Ameer glanced tentatively at the watching coolies and shook his head.

"No need," he observed, "to verify your guilt. You have stolen the treasure entrusted to your care. I—watchful in the affairs of the Mogul—have caught the thieves. But the treasure is gone. A pity. The *vizir* will grow great with wrath. Already he rides hither, not an hour from Pawundur. He will deal with you as you deserve, being a faithless servant."

Khlit sat up, biting his mustache.

"Harken, O Ameer," he said bitterly. "In all things we have done as you bade us. We are not thieves. We journeyed in the path back to Pawundur by the boat as you ordered."

"I?" The official's brows went up. "Did I mention a boat? I think not—Mustafa!"

"Nay," amended that person promptly, "you bade these low-born ride back by the trail. I heard it."

"A lie!" cried Abdul Dost.

Taleb Khan and Mustafa laughed; they rocked on their heels with mirth; they looked at Khlit and Abdul Dost and the skin of their smooth faces grew wrinkled with mirth.

"Nay, O harken to the low-born snatchers of goods—the faithless messengers!" they said in concert. "Did not you steal the *panshway* from the landing-place of the shrine? Did you not slay the thrice-blessed snake of the shrine? Nay, for you stole down the river, thinking to outwit us and escape from Pawundur. Verily, but we were watchful."

While Abdul Dost stared, the truth began to glimmer into the shrewd brain of the Cossack. He spat vigorously.

"So—we have been tricked, *mansabdar*," he growled, shaking his head like an angry dog. "Doubtless Ram Gholab helped in the trick. And Kehru——"

"The boy rode to us," explained the mirza, taking pleasure in the discomfiture of his prisoners and wishing to while away the hour before they should land. "Thus he had been ordered. He rode swiftly by the by-ways that he treads like an antelope. A good half-day he came before your slow boat. *Ai*, we knew that you were no sailors."

AT THIS Abdul Dost subsided into silence, for he understood now the trap that had been set. Taleb Khan had sent them to Ghar meaning to give them over to the agent of the Mogul as stealers of the gold. The Ameer had sent others on the mission but they had been slain by the unexpected activity of the *thag* bands that were rife in the valley.

He saw now why Taleb Khan had not wished to go himself or to send a body of soldiery for the gold. The covetous official had desired to keep the wealth that should be paid to his master. He had devised this stratagem to provide men to accuse of the theft. Khlit and Abdul Dost had no friends in Pawundur. Their case would be decided long before they could get word to the Rawul of Thaneswar. The Mogul's justice was swift, and the Afghan had no proof here among the lesser agents of the throne that he had once served Jahangir, lord of lords.

Khlit was reasoning along similar lines; but unlike his friend he did not sulk in silence. He was curious concerning the manner of their betrayal; also he fancied he saw certain weak

spots in the scheme of Taleb Khan which might be useful.

"Thus," he said slowly, gaining time to think, "Ram Gholab was ordered to send us into your hands?"

He spoke almost admiringly, as if he could relish the superior cunning that had trapped him. Taleb Khan stared, then leaned back upon the ebony chest with a smile. Verily this aged wanderer was providing excellent sport for his enjoyment.

"Not so, O wise owl. Ram Gholab is a fool of fools—a dotard who is bemired in his own magic of the snake. He believes that he truly serves the Mogul!" The Ameer broke off cautiously. "That is, he is no agent of mine. He was ordered to send the message of your departure, believing that I would safeguard your journey. *Ai*, it was well thought upon. Also he was ordered to send you by the ship."

Taleb Khan, relishing his words, had lowered his voice to a whisper so that the coolies might not hear. A faithless man himself, he did not trust others.

"And Kehru likewise. He came to my tent like a fledgling warrior upon a mission of state. Naught he knows of your—theft."

"Then," mused Khlit, "this tale of the slayers is but a tale. We saw them not."

"Oh, there is some truth in it, most wise old owl. Aye, there be bands of *thags* hereabouts. But two swift riders, strangers like yourself, could have passed through them unmolested. They seek lesser prey. Yet Ram Gholab has heard much of their doings and his solitary musing has made them great, like huge shadows cast by a small fire at night."

Whereupon Taleb Khan wearied of his sport and rose to give heed to the landing of the boat at the *ghat*. Khlit also had food for thought. He was silent while the vessel was worked to the shore and the sail dropped.

It was midafternoon and the heat was great when he and Abdul Dost were led over the sands to the Pawundur road. Behind them the coolies brought their horses. Taleb Khan mounted one, for he was bulky and the heat irked him. Mustafa led the way.

At the crossroads were the tents of some merchants, likewise a stained crimson canopy at one corner of the caravanserai. The Ameer's round tent had been pitched in the enclosure, and under the open fly slaves had set meat and drink for the refreshment of their master.

When Taleb Khan was partaking of the food, seated upon his carpet, Khlit nudged Abdul Dost. They were seated, still bound, near their captors, but at one side of the tent opening in the full glare of the sun.

"Take heed," he whispered, "and watch. There is something that the Ameer does not yet know."

"What matter?" asked the Afghan moodily. "Ram Gholab spoke truly concerning our fate. We know the treachery of the Ameer. Will he let us live? Nay. Already he has planned the manner of our death and but awaits the coming of the *vizir* who is near by, so the coolies said."

But Khlit caught the wandering eye of Taleb Khan. The Ameer was refreshed by food—while Khlit and Abdul Dost were suffering the first pains of a long fast—and he was restless because of the excitement of his attempt to defraud the Mogul. He was restless, looking for diversion, and his eye strayed to the rug under which the box had been placed for concealment. Perhaps he meant to open it, but the Cossack's words arrested him.

"If a bridge is built with a hole in the middle is it safe to walk upon, Taleb Khan?"

The Ameer was surprized. He did not quite know what to make of the graybeard who sat bound by his tent, but who faced him as one chieftain to another.

"Not so," he responded, motioning the slave behind him to stir the air with his fan of peacock plumes.

"Then is your plan like to a bridge, Taleb Khan. You will fall through the hole and perhaps die. The Mogul deals swiftly with a faithless servant."

"Aye. You and your comrade will be slain on this spot by the *vizir* and your heads will be put in a cage. The cage will be hung outside the walls of Delhi by the caravan gate."

"And what of you, Taleb Khan?" Khlit's voice was stern. "Think you the *vizir* will not see the hole in your scheme? He will ask why you sent two riders for the revenue at Ghar instead of going yourself. What will you answer?"

The Ameer lay back luxuriously upon the rug. His eyes twinkled. He hesitated, then spoke, for the pleasure of his stratagem was still strong upon him.

"With words I will not answer, O unfortunate one. You know not the officials of the Mogul."

"*One* we know," observed Abdul Dost grimly. "It is sufficient."

Taleb Khan waved his hand airily. The Afghan's dark face flushed and the veins stood out in his forehead.

"By the tomb of Mohammed!" he cried softly, for he was a proud man. "There be chieftains at court who count the name of Abdul Dost, *mansabdar*, warrior of Akbar—may he rest in peace—among their friends."

"Akbar rests in peace. Likewise, who will know the blackened skin of a severed head for that of Abdul Dost? We will permit the ravens to pick at your eyes and the carrion birds to tear your lips—a little. Thus your friends will not know you. Have you a name?" He looked around for Mustafa and saw him not. "Nay, we know not your name."

Khlit pressed his arm warningly upon the Afghan's knee. Threats were useless against the Ameer..

"You have not said," he remarked, "how you will cross the hole in the bridge."

The ragged turban—for the Ameer had not desired to exert himself sufficiently to change his garb—of Taleb Khan nodded affably.

"I like your wit, graybeard. It is delightful as the pretty trick of a wantom woman. I shall cross the hole with a gold plank. Ten ounces of gold will I put into the hand of the *vizir*. He has his price. Who has not? A jewel—a blood ruby—for the head treasurer over the *vizir*, and my tale will not be doubted. As for the Mogul: if he asks, there will be the two heads—yours—of the thieves to show."

"Will that content him?"

"Why not? He knows Pawundur is restless."

Taleb Khan smiled, pleased with his own shrewdness.

"Many will tell," he added, "if need be, of the theft of the *panshway* and how you sought to escape. Death of the Prophet! Shall I not keep the gold I labored to wring from this heathen land? The villages are like barren curs, so wretched are they. Only by seizing the wives and virgins of the head men did I obtain the full quota of wheat and grain."

Khlit looked at him inquiringly.

"Aye, it was cleverly done. Mustafa saw to it. And when we had the quota, the women were returned, although, of course, some were no longer virgins. My men must have some sport for they are weary with this cursed land."

"And the tax of the merchants?"

"I sold them the grain at double price. Those that bought not were hung for traitors. Few were hung."

It was a pleasant day for the Ameer. He felt the full tide of success reward his efforts. And to crown his delight came Mustafa to the tent, pulling after him the slim form of Daria Kurn, veiled.

"A nautch-woman have I found, Lord," explained the mirza, "within the soiled tent. Oh, a fair woman with soft eyes."

"Bare her face!"

Mustafa jerked the veil from the cheeks of the dancing girl. The cheeks were *khol* stained. The beautiful eyes glanced swiftly, sidewise, at Taleb Khan. The Ameer crowed joyously and straightway forgot Khlit and Abdul Dost.

"A prize, Mustafa, a prize! Come, my precious jade, my splendid dove! Dance and let your feet be light. I am weary."

Daria Kurn looked slowly about the tent at the watchers who had crowded into the shade at the coming of Mustafa.

"I will not dance," she said sullenly.

"Sing then, my bracelet of delight, my pretty trinket of love. Sing!"

"Lick your palm!"

Taleb Khan scowled at this abrupt refusal of his request. He was accustomed to having his commands obeyed. Mustafa struck the nautch-woman on the cheek. Straightway she fastened her slender fingers in his beard, screaming with anger, one side of her sharp face crimson.

The *mirza* bellowed with rage and felt for his sword. Daria Kurn scratched his hand. Many coolies and followers of the merchants came running from their sleep at the outcry and formed a staring ring about the two struggling figures. Taleb Khan lay back on his rug, the better to laugh, for he was stout.

"Master," came a stifled voice from behind Khlit, "I have your curved sword and the simitar of the Moslem warrior."

Schooled by bitter experience, the Cossack did not turn his head. He recognized the voice of Kehru. Abdul Dost sat up abruptly.

"I took the weapons from the low-born slaves who tended the horses. They know it not." The whisper of the boy trembled with eagerness. "I hid them in an antelope skin and I crawled hither. For I heard them talk of how you were to be slain. I know not why you are bound. But you gave to me a round-bellied pony without flaw, and I am your man. Aye—your warrior."

MUSTAFA had freed himself from the angry woman and drawn his dagger. In his rage he would have slashed the painted face of Daria Kurn, but Taleb Khan cried him halt.

"Would you spoil me this gem, Mustafa—this oasis in the sands of Hindustan? Nay, touch her not. I have not laughed so much in a fortnight!"

Khlit glanced sidewise at the throng. Intent on the spectacle of the woman, the bystanders had no eyes for him. He sat with Abdul Dost slightly back from the group, near to the side of the tent. Legs bandaged and naked rose about him. Slowly he rose to a kneeling position until his feet and bound limbs were behind him and concealed from view of those within the tent.

"Bid the boy look to see if any watch from the caravanserai," he whispered to Abdul Dost who had quickly assumed a similar position.

"No one watches," informed Kehru. "Those who have not come hither sleep."

Hope was arising like the rush of fresh water in the parched body of Abdul Dost. He lifted his dark head for the first time in many hours and felt the burning of the sun across the back of his neck.

"Allah is good," he said.

Khlit glanced at him warningly. They were in a throng of full thirty men. Others rested in the near-by tents. Around all ran the stone wall of the caravanserai. Guards were at the

entrance. Their position, despite the unexpected aid of the boy, was little short of deadly. Both he and Abdul Dost seized upon the thought at the same instant.

"Sever our accursed cords silently, from beneath," whispered the Afghan from still lips. "But let them rest as they are, once they are loosened. Then leave our swords in the skin. Seek the horses——"

"Pick out our mounts," added Khlit, "and the pony. Bring them to the rear of the tent swiftly."

He thought of the *vizir*, riding toward the caravanserai with his followers, and leaned forward slightly to glance into the tent. Daria Kurn was tossing fragments of beard disdainfully into Mustafa's purple face. She swayed mockingly before him, poising bird-like on her toes.

Taleb Khan sat up and stroked his mustache.

"Sing!" he cried. "By the footstool of God! So fair a form must have a voice like to that of the nightingale."

"Am I a bazaar scavenger," stormed the woman, "to lift my voice before coolies?"

"But——"

"The sun is hot."

"I will pay a gold *mohar*."

"I will sit by your knee, in the shade of the tent, my lord."

With a smirk Taleb Khan piled high the cushions at his side. Daria Kurn tripped forward swaying and seated herself daintily. He clapped his hands.

"Wine!" he ordered. "Snow cooled—the best of Shiraz!"

"Aye, wine!" cried the girl. "Wine for the pleasure of my lord."

She stroked his cheek and he lay back against the cushions well content. The discomfiture of Mustafa had only made Daria Kurn more desirable in his eyes. Was not a woman of spirit more fitting to attend him than a whimpering maiden of the people?

Khlit felt a light tug at his hands and the cords loosened. His feet likewise were free. A glance assured him that Abdul Dost also had only the severed throngs upon his wrists and that the antelope skin was upon the sand behind them within arm's reach, and something bulky under it.

Kehru had vanished silently, leaving only the prints of his naked feet.

Then Mustafa, smarting under his ordeal, saw fit to wreak his ill humor upon the captives.

"Aye, bring wine," he growled, "and let it be poured upon the beards of these thieves. Thirst shall teach them the first lesson of their crime."

He knew that neither of the warriors had tasted drink for the space of many hours during which they had lain in the sun.

Catching a goblet from a slave, he strode over to the two, his eyes gleaming wickedly. Khlit measured him silently, cursing the ill luck that had drawn Mustafa's attention upon them. The men in the crowd laughed carelessly.

"Guard well that wine, Mustafa," cried the Cossack quickly. "For I will truly drink of it and my thirst shall be eased—by your hand."

"Wherefore?" grunted the mirza, hesitating. Khlit had spoken as if by authority.

Taleb Khan paid no heed. He was staring greedily at Daria Kurn, who knelt above him, her dark eyes straying about the throng, her lips humming softly the words of a song. The subdued light in the tent glimmered on her bare arms and waist. The fat hand of the Ameer wandered among the strands of her brown hair. It pleased his vanity to play with this woman before his followers.

Khlit threw back his head and laughed, laughed with a ring of real merriment.

"Wherefore? Why, Taleb Khan has been robbed!"

The Ameer ceased his gallant efforts and glared at the Cossack. Khlit sat back upon the loose cords of his feet. The woman glanced at him once with the cold anger of a startled snake.

"Robbed!" Taleb Khan was uneasy; those who covet gold are ever quick to fear theft. "How? When? The man is mad!"

"Not long since. I have watched the woman," growled Khlit. "Ho! It is a good jest. The thief has had his gains lifted from him."

"Verily," said Daria Kurn musically, "the sun has made him mad."

She smiled upon the bewildered Ameer and loosened the girdle about her waist. It was a thin, silk girdle, redolent of musk. Her hand strayed artlessly to the Ameer's stout fist, and Taleb Khan's frown lightened. Not so Mustafa.

"No madness is it," he grumbled, "to beware of the craft of such a she-jackal. Speak, graybeard—what have you seen?"

Khlit, listening for sound of horses' hoofs moving behind the tent, made answer boldly.

"I have seen what the Ameer will pay well to hear. I have seen the gold taken from the ebony chest. I have seen Taleb Khan robbed of his treasure. If he would know where the gold has gone, he must bargain with me."

MUSTAFA uttered a round oath. The faded eyes of Taleb Khan widened slowly and his mouth opened. He glanced uneasily at the outline of the chest on the farther side of Daria Kurn. He grunted and extended a tentative hand to the rug, across the knees of the nautch-girl. Then he hesitated.

He glanced at those who watched. It would not be well to bare the treasure to the sight of these merchants and their servants, if it were

actually in the chest, for some would go to the *vizir* with the tale.

Then Taleb Khan would be obliged to pay a heavier bribe for the *vizir's* silence—heavier, that is, than if the official really thought that the Ameer had been robbed of the revenue. For the *vizir* would be forced to pay the merchant for the information.

But, he thought hastily, what if Khlit's words were true? He flushed and stared narrowly at the woman. She took his hand in hers and kissed it.

"You have lied!" he muttered to the Cossack.

But his tone was far from assured. Suppose the gold was actually gone? The woman was artful.

"I have not lied," Khlit's mustache twitched in a smile. "The bags of gold are gone. What I have seen, I have seen."

With a cry Taleb Khan snatched the rug from the ebony box. His avarice had overcome his caution. He fumbled with the bronze lock. The men pressed nearer.

Khlit saw a noose descend over the head of Taleb Khan and close about his throat.

DARIA KURN had sprung erect. In both hands she held the girdle that she had slipped around the Ameer's neck. It had been knotted cleverly. She tugged with all the strength of her slender frame, placing a slippered foot against the back of the man. Taleb Khan's round face changed from red to purple. The cry that had started in his throat choked to a gurgle.

At the same instant, Khlit's hand darted behind him. He had felt the touch of muslin against his cheek. He flung himself backward.

"Your sword, Abdul Dost!" he shouted, and his words were tense with peril.

For simultaneously with the strangling of the Ameer he had seen nooses appear magically from nowhere and drape about the throats of Mustafa and the followers of the Ameer. He had acted without waiting for more.

The man who had sought to strangle Khlit had been, perhaps, a trifle slower than his companion *thags*, believing that his victim was bound. He held an empty noose. He had not long to dwell upon his mistake.

Khlit's sword flashed up as the Cossack lay on the ground and the man's legs were cut from under him. He sank down groaning, but Khlit was no longer under him. A second stroke cut through the *thag's* waist to his back-bone.

The strangler who had stood beside Abdul Dost had thrown his noose over the Moslem's head and drawn it tight. Yet the Afghan was hardly slower to act than Khlit. He caught the cord firmly in one hand and grasped his sword from under the antelope skin with the other.

The *thag* yelled in alarm and plucked his knife from his girdle. He lifted it to spring on Abdul Dost. He struck at the Afghan, but only the bloodied stump of an arm reached the chest of the *mansabdar*. The hand and the knife fell to earth.

Abdul Dost was one of the most expert swordsmen in Hindustan. Although slow to think, he, like many men of great physical activity, was alert to move. Having rendered their assailants harmless, he and Khlit glanced hastily about the tent.

They saw a strange sight. Mustafa's lean form was writhing helplessly on the sand. Taleb Khan leered at them like a hideous toad, his fat arms waving weakly and more weakly to catch the perfumed girdle of Daria Kurn which was draining his breath. The dozen followers were suffering a like fate.

"*Gurkha men dina!*" screamed an angry voice. "Strangle!"

Dhurum Khan pointed at Khlit and Abdul Dost in a frenzy. Except for the unexpected resistance of the two supposedly bound men, all had gone well with the *thags*.

In their guise of merchants they had assembled unsuspected at the caravanserai during the absence of Taleb Khan and his followers upon the river.

They had waited by the mirza's empty tents, knowing that the men must return to their camp. Quietly they had joined the throng about Daria Kurn when all eyes were upon the woman. They had awaited their opportunity, each strangler standing beside his victim with their habitual calmness.

Only two men had survived the massacre. These faced the *thags*, sword in hand.

"Attack!" cried Daria Kurn. "Fools! Bunglers! They are but two."

Several half-naked *thags* leaped forward with drawn knives at Khlit and Abdul Dost. The *mansabdar* stepped to meet them. He was smiling and his eyes were alight.

The first slayer dropped to the sand with his skull split under the folds of his turban. The second had his throat nearly cut through by a swift half-stroke. The rest hung back, fearing the tall Moslem who seemed to joy in a conflict.

Khlit gazed about the scene of battle curiously. He wondered at the swift action of the *thags*. A moment since Taleb Khan and his men had been alive. Now they were in the last death throes, kicking and gasping on the sand.

The thought came to him that Taleb Khan had paid dearly for his disguise. Probably the slayers had thought him an ordinary merchant.

"Back to back!" he growled to Abdul Dost.

The two placed themselves in readiness. They knew better than to flee. By now figures were running from the near-by tents. Dhurum Khan had planned his masterpiece of death. All the unfortunates who slumbered in the tents had awakened from their dreams only to slip struggling into a deeper sleep.

His guards posted at the gate in the wall would have cut down any who escaped the stranglers. But none ran from the tents except the *thags*.

"Oh, cowards!" The shrill voice of Daria Kurn reviled her companions. "Will you let two stand unhurt? Give me a sword!"

Khlit swept the crowd with an appraising glance. He was glad that no bows were to be seen—not knowing that the *thags* always worked with noose and steel, which were silent and left no traces. But momentarily the number around them grew, as the stranglers left their other victims to hasten to complete the killing.

In the unwritten law of *thaggi*, the ritual of Kali, it was unheard of to permit any of the destined victims to escape. If one died all must die.

Jaim Ali caught the arm of Daria Kurn as she was rushing upon the two warriors with streaming hair.

"Let me strike!" she wailed. "Mine—and Dhurum Khan's—was the plan. They are marked for my sword."

"True it is," the boy cried, "that you are the one whose counsel we sought. We are your servants, O Daria Kurn, beloved of Kali."

He swung a long noose in the air, stepping toward the waiting two. But the woman would not be denied. She darted forward, and seeing this the *thags* under Dhurum surged after her.

"We must complete the work," they whispered to each other. "If not, we are doomed. The evil omen of the slain woman is bearing fruit."

"Aye, the evil omen," chanted Dhurum Khan, hearing.

"Ho!" laughed Abdul Dost. "The slayers come—faithless followers of the Prophet. The low-born cooks taste of the feast they have prepared!"

Knives and short swords were ill weapons against the two finest sword-arms in Hindustan. At each sentence the Afghan, now thoroughly warmed to his work, struck aside a leaping *thag*. When he struck men crumpled to earth.

Jaim Ali's noose closed over Khlit's blade and arm, but Abdul Dost cut the cord and sent the youth reeling with the same blow. Daria Kurn sprang at him, and her knife caught in his cloak, biting into his chest.

Khlit had never slain a woman. He turned his blade as he cut at the mistress of the *thags* and she was knocked senseless. But Dhurum Khan, thinking to take advantage of the opening, was slain swiftly.

The *thags* hesitated at sight of the bodies on the earth. They gave a wailing cry of grief. It was drowned in the quick tumult of rushing horses.

"Mount, master!" cried the voice of Kehru. "The horses come behind you!"

The trained ears of the two warriors located the horses without obliging them to turn their heads. The slayers looked up, startled at sight of the three mounts trotting from behind the tent. Kehru, unnoticed by the *thags* because he had been hidden among the animals during the massacre, had acted swiftly and well.

Khlit and Abdul Dost leaped back as one man and grasped the manes of the passing horses. Neither warrior needed aid of the stirrups to mount. The Cossack in fact landed standing on the saddle, a favorite trick, and gave a yell of triumph. It was good to be mounted again.

His wide coat-skirts flapped out and his gray hair swayed behind him as he headed straight for the caravanserai gate, his horse at a round gallop.

Kehru chortled joyously and dug his bare heels into the flanks of his pony. The guards at the gate were without bows. One ran forward uncertainly, but dodged back at the sweep of the Afghan's blade.

They were through the gate and the broad road to Pawundur stretched before them. Within a few moments—so swiftly they went—they met the cavalcade of the *vizir* with his servants and soldiers.

STRAIGHTWAY, at the tidings they brought, the cavalcade broke into a gallop and gained the crossroads just as the sun reached the level horizon of Pawundur plain. At the gate they halted—Khlit and Abdul Dost and the *vizir*, who rode a mule and was attended by two slaves who had held a sunshade over him during the heat of the day.

"Allah!" said the *vizir*.

It was a strange sight. Tents, animals, ropes, bales of goods, and men were gone as if swept away in the brief interval by a magic hand. The level gleam of the setting sun shone redly on the stretch of sand.

Upon the sand in grotesque and grim attitudes lay Taleb Khan, Mustafa and their men, coolies and officials alike. No wounds were to be seen on their bodies—save for a certain redness about the throat and bulge of the staring eyes. Their weapons were taken from them, but their common garments, assumed as a disguise, remained. The *vizir* went from one to the other and paused at the round body of Taleb Khan.

"By the thrice-blessed name of God!" he said, and was silent. "It is written that those who don the garb of trickery shall drink the cup of deceit. Where is the revenue of Pawundur?"

Khlit dismounted and showed him the ebony box in the sand by the dead Ameer.

"Herein *was* the revenue of Pawundur," he said.

Abdul Dost had already related the tale of

the *thag* attack, saying nothing however of the treachery of Taleb Khan. A righteous man, the *mansabdar* was loath to speak ill of the slain.

IN THE chest were numerous rocks, and nothing more. Again the *vizir* looked about the caravanserai and stretched out his arms in resignation. The tale of the crossroads—and he read it with his own eyes—was complete. He ordered his followers to make camp and bury the bodies. But Khlit would not linger in the caravanserai. He sought out Kehru and led him to the *vizir*.

"Here is a stripling, O man of the Mogul," he said, "who will make a brave warrior. Take him into the service of the Mogul and it shall one day profit you."

Whereupon he mounted and lifted a hand in farewell. At the gate he turned in his saddle.

"Perhaps," he called, "you may find the revenue of Pawunder—in the villages from here to the border. But seek it not after the manner of Taleb Khan."

The *vizir* had a tender skin. He knew of the *thags*. He did not care to seek the revenues of Pawundur. Nevertheless in time strange tales came to him, and he wondered.

After this fashion the tales came to be told in the bazaars and the highways of Pawundur. Abdul Dost had been thinking as he rode beside Khlit away from the caravanserai and turned his horse's head into the road that led to the north.

"*Eh*," he pondered, "it was a clever thought—your thought to cry 'robbery' to Taleb Khan. Did Daria Kurn verily take from the chest that which was within?"

Khlit shook his head.

"Then it was a lie. It was a good lie, full-tongued. It was fated to save our lives."

"It was not a lie."

For a dozen paces the Afghan considered this. He was puzzled. Either the *thags* had taken the gold and gems from the chest, or they had not. This was as clear to him as his horse's ears before his eyes. He told this to Khlit.

The Cossack leaned forward and silently drew a handful of gold from one of his saddle-bags—the bags that had rested at his saddle-peak since their departure from the boat. From the other sack he pulled out a jewel or two mixed with grain and oaten cakes.

"The treasure of Taleb Khan!" said Abdul Dost, staring.

"Aye," responded Khlit. "Taleb Khan. On the boat I had a thought that the wealth would be safer in these bags. So I took it—when you looked the other way—from the chest. I would have rendered it truly to Taleb Khan, but he seized upon us."

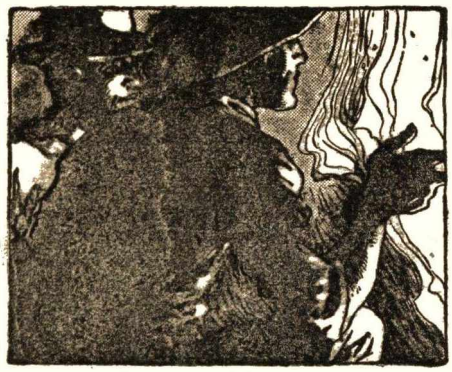
Abdul Dost drew rein for his sunset prayer.

"Verily," he mused, "the fate of the Ameer was a strange fate. What is written, is written. Not otherwise."

Thereafter, at each village they passed, the inhabitants gathered around them while a tall *ferang*, dressed much like a wild wolf, scattered handfuls of gold among them, laughing the while, and spurred away before they could prostrate themselves in gratitude or rob the two warriors.

And at the final village of Pawundur province, the dark-faced Afghan who rode with the *ferang* showed a double-handful of fine gems, red rubies of Badakshan and blue diamonds of Persia. He replaced the jewels in his girdle.

"Say to the *vizir*," he cried, "that this is the price of the guilt of one who was named Taleb Khan."



The Camp-Fire

A Meeting-place for Readers, Writers and Adventurers

OUIJA-BOARDS and Piperock and W. C. Tuttle and Tut's own experiences with a ouija-board:

Hollywood, California.

Did you ever monkey with one of those ouija-boards? I did. I have an old friend, who is a helpless invalid, and he owns a ouija-board. Of course he doesn't believe in it any more than I do, but we used to work it for amusement.

THE first message it gave me was this: "Go to ——!" We set the date for the end of the war, the disposition of the kaiser, the price of beans and where we would go on the Fourth of July. We asked it for an opinion of the League of Nations, and it told us to go to ——.

We absolutely proved that we could—without forcibly moving the thing—make it spell what we wished, just by thinking of the answer. We would ask a question that neither of us could answer or even guess at, and the thing was unable to spell anything except a jumble of letters. We made one good test. We asked the board to tell us the color of the sweater my wife was knitting. My wife thought "blue" while I concentrated on "green." That board spelled out BGLRUEEEN, after hard labor. The color of that sweater was gray. Then the board got sore and refused to talk any more. Said we were a lot of —— fools, with no respect for the dead. This statement was mentally spoken by our invalid friend.

Anyway, I thought Piperock might fall for it—and they did.

Best regards to everybody and good luck.—W. C. TUTTLE.

THE following letter was written more than a year ago and I think Mr. Brockway is no longer in Cuba, but dope about lost mines is always interesting though very seldom are the lost mines found.

Marianao, Cuba.

It was my good fortune to be one of the pioneers in the construction of the old Atlantic and Pacific Railway nearly all the way from the Rio Grande to the Needles, Calif. We put in the original waterworks at Peach Springs and went into the Grand Canon of the Colorado through Diamond Wash. Have been in the Canon at two other points farther north. This was in '81-2. We had an old time photographer with us, Ben Wittick, who took several fine views in the Canon. He used the old wet plate process and I can tell you it was some job to pack his outfit across the river and up side canons.

IN '81 I was in charge of a large rock quarry at Quirino Canon near Honcks Tank, and near the Arizona-New Mexico State line. We found at this place any quantity of small garnets—in ant-hills, brought up by the ants. I have always thought that we missed a big thing as I believe good sized stones can be found there by sluicing; the ants could handle only the small ones. I have seen 2- and 3-carat size stones brought in by the Indians, found in the washes, during the rainy season. I sent some of these large stones to St. Louis and had them cut and polished—and they were fine as any ruby. Here is something worth investigating, but I do not suppose will interest any one, as we all seem to be eternally looking for adventure and treasure in some far-off inaccessible country and overlook good things right under our noses.

MY MINING partner, a Mr. James N. Taylor, and myself with Navajo John made a trip in the Fall of '82 from Honcks Tank to Navajo Mountain—going by way of Kearns Canon and the Moynoi town, and to the very summit of Navajo Mountain. The view of the canon country from this mountain summit is unsurpassed. You can see the entire Marble Canon, the junction of the San Juan and Colorado Rivers at the base of the mountain—you can see away up in the Green River country in the misty distance, and the whole range of the Rockies in the State of Colorado unfolds itself in a magnificent panorama. We saw and visited several cliff-dwellings at the approaches and side canons of this mountain. Of course we were looking for a lost mine; and I want to give you a little history of this lost mine, as I often wonder if it has ever been found, or if any of the old outfits that went into this same country—one from Prescott, Arizona, and another from Pueblo, Colorado—are still among the living.

We had pretty good evidence that such a mine existed, as previously I had prospected and camped out with an old-timer, Lorenzo Lawrence, who was one of the Prescott party, on Mount Taylor in New Mexico; also the story told us by Navajo John, who, by the way, could talk his own language, also perfect Spanish and English—he had been stolen when a boy by the Rio Grande Mexicans, raised by them and when a young man got over into Texas

and worked several years for American cattlemen. Therefore as a guide his services were very valuable.

THE lost mine story is as follows. An old renegade American by the name of Austin had lived among the Navajos and Pi-Utes in the Navajo Mountain country, and used to make a trip yearly to Durango, Colorado, always taking out a few loads of rich silver ore which he sold in Durango. This fact was well known by the old settlers. Austin (am not so sure of the name) struck up a friendship in Durango, with a man by the name of McLain who on one occasion was taken to the mine by a roundabout way and over hidden trails.

The ferry at the crossing of the San Juan River was kept by an old man by the name of Smith who had a grown-up son. McLain conceived the idea of going back into that country and jumping the old man's mine—while Austin was in Durango. Austin got wind of what was going on and lit out, taking the young son of Smith with him as a witness to the legal location of the mine. By this time the Indians got incensed at Austin's bringing of white men into the country, and on their way out both were killed, at the Black Butte. We were shown their graves by Navajo John. Their animals escaped and went to Kearns Canon. Tom Kearn told us himself that he followed their trail back and found and buried the bodies at the base of the Black Butte. McLain had reached this place about that time on his way to the mine and got scared out and made his way back to Durango.

HE AFTERWARDS organized an outfit in Prescott and went in there to find the mine, but the Indians were too bad to do anything and the outfit broke up and scattered.

He also organized an outfit in Pueblo, Colorado—if I remember rightly—which consisted of 52 men, well armed and equipped. They got to Navajo Mountain by the only accessible trail, which leads up to a beautiful mesa several miles across, and one of the most beautiful landscapes I have ever seen. The Indians had their return cut off and they forgot their way back across the mesa. We saw several places where they had built up defensive breastworks. They finally reached the rim of the mesa on the north side and blasted a trail so they could get down off the mesa on the San Juan side, in the Pi-Ute country, and in this way escaped the Indians and got out of the country. And the mine was still a lost mine.

If any of these old-timers who were on these raids are still alive, we would like to hear them tell the story of these expeditions.—WM. BROCKWAY.

FROM Romaine H. Lowdermilk a few words about one of the characters in his story in this issue. Also a word as to whether we still have real cowboys.

Wickenburg, Arizona.

Does anybody around the Camp-Fire this evening believe that cowgirls (or cowboys) are getting to be a rather scarce article? Well, I don't want to take up a lot of time trying to prove they're thick, but I'd like to assure you that if you get out in the Cow Country of Western United States you'd be amazed to learn how plentiful they are. In support of these statements I'll suggest that doubters attend some of the numerous annual "Stampedes," or Frontier Day Celebrations, held at many different towns in the Cow Country. Here, barring professional movie and Contest hands, you'll see hundreds of real rangemen who make their living riding horses and "punching" cattle. As long as cattle run on the Western ranges we'll have cowboys and cowgirls and these cow chasers of to-day are just as slick with the rope and as handy with the broncs as they were fifty years ago, and they're breaking old records every year.

But to get back to cowgirls. *Della Greathouse* is taken from real life—something I seldom do. But this real *Della* is such a fine example of all the brave, womanly, wholesome girls of the West, who, being ranch-raised, still love the life of the open places thought they are as at home in the cities as many of their metropolitan sisters. This original *Della*, besides being a wonderful horsewoman, puts on a nurse's costume and holds her own in any man's hospital; She puts on a cook apron and looks (and acts and produces) like a real cook; she puts on an evening gown and—Oh, Boy! Nor has she ever seen the front end of a movie camera.—ROMAINE H. LOWDERMILK.

DON'T FORGET our annual vote by readers on the ten best stories published by our magazine during 1920. Voting is an easy matter. Here are the particulars:

ALL you need to do is write the titles and authors' names of the ten stories you consider best, given in order of preference, and mail us the sheet of paper to reach us not later than December thirty-first. If you like, add as many as ten more for honorable mention. As in the past years, short stories, novelettes, novels and serials are included, poems, "Camp-Fire and the other departments are barred out. The issues covered are those dated January 3, 1919, to December 18, 1919, inclusive. Serials only parts of which are contained in these issues are included.

We very sincerely want your cooperation and help in getting for *Adventure* the kinds of story and the authors that a majority of our readers like best. If you know of a better way of furthering this cooperation than is the annual vote by readers, name it, for we are ready to try any legitimate plan that will help register your wishes in the making of the magazine. It's not only common sense to strive for this but it's a lot happier and more comfortable all around if people work together in friendly fashion.

WHILE the departments are excluded from the vote, we'll be more than glad to get suggestions for improving them. Or adding to them, but don't forget that "Letter-Friends" and "Wanted" have already been tried, and, though succesful and popular, had to be given up because two or three readers abused them.

And if you have any suggestions concerning the magazine in general or any part of it, by all means send them in. I mean constructive suggestions that will definitely point out ways for improvement. Wherever we can meet your ideas we will, but remember that it is the majority whom we must please and that, while a given plan may please a minority and perhaps us here in the office, if it fails to please the majority it is not warranted.

But the only way to find out what the majority want is for the readers themselves to tell us. And you are one of the readers.

ONE of you asked for the full text of a poem some of whose lines had stuck tight in his mind. Doubtless others of you also will remember it, for it is that kind of poem. It was published by *McClure's Magazine* of January, 1899, and by the courtesy of that magazine and its late editor, Charles Hanson Towne, we reprint it here in full.

The Regular Fighting Man

by James Barnes

THERE'S always a cheer for the volunteer,
  There's ever a welcoming host,
The wide land stretches a greeting hand—
  Glad hail from the hill to the coast!
There's none but will vaunt the deeds he's done—
  Let us praise him and pledge him high!

But the fighting man who serves for pay,
  The public passes by.

Who rushed the lines on San Juan hill?
  Who at Caney fought alone?
The enlisted regular fighting man—
  The soldier-bred to the bone!
Who bore the big brunt of the battle front?
  Should we speak it below a breath?
The enlisted regular fighting man,
  Who cheered as he charged to death!

Who he was, the public seldom knows—
  Who he is, it does not care—
Just Private Blank of the ——-ty-third,
  Recruited from God knows where!
Just "a man—" (Built up on a soldierly plan
  For a place that he's shaped to fit.)
Just a name put down on a muster-roll;
Yes, numbered and stenciled from shirt to soul—
  And he doesn't object a bit!

No; he takes it all as it all may come,
  And it's more of work than play—
From the goose-step into the awkward squad—
  Then into a trench some day.
He answers "Sir" to his officer,
  He watches his sergeant well,
And if things they happen to rub him wrong,
  He can not run home and tell!

For "The Army" spells his name for Home,
  And "The Post" proves his abode;
And he's taught his company manners there,
  Up to: "Numbers! Ready! Load!"
Oh, he gets his fill of the family drill,
  And they train his hand and eye!
Till he stands or moves and questions not—
  Let his captain know the "why."

For the service adopts the enlisted man,
  And he's treated as a child!
And he's cautioned how to mind his health
  In tones not overmild.
Oh, he's bound to go and do just so;
  But when things are at the worst,
He learns that the men with the shoulder-straps
  Are thinking of him first!

From the colonel down to the officer lad,
  They share his fare and lot,
And they train his trigger finger right
  And his feet to falter not;
For war's a trade for which tools are made
  Out of names on a muster-roll;
And the soldier's a bound-to-obey machine,
  With a human heart and soul!

He asks for no praise as a patriot,
  He lays claim to no laurel wreath,
Tho' he's proud of his nation and regiment
  And the flag that he fights beneath!
He "serves for pay," they were wont to say.
  But before an advance began:
"A trench or a height to be taken?
  Where's the regular fighting man!"

God keep in the breast of the Nation's sons
  The soul of the volunteer;
Let there always be men when the country calls
  To join in the great "We're here!"
And to God be thanks that we've men in the ranks
  Let the lines be black or white—
The men at arms who stand on guard
  To keep the flag in sight!

(By Courtesy of *McClure's Magazine*)

CONCERNING those interesting professional murderers of whom we've all heard, and in connection with his novelette in this issue, Harold Lamb gives us some facts that are doubtless new to most of us:

New York City.

Most of us have had experience with thugs of various kinds. And we are still alive and kicking. Not many of us know about the *thags* of India.

THEY were not dacoits—as the British Government supposed until Seringapatam and 1799—nor were they organized gangs of robbers and murderers. Rather, they were murderers and robbers, the one thing always coming before the other. They were professional men, law-abiding and harmless except in this one respect, and they took immense pride in their profession.

This pride was not religious pride; and the thags were not essentially Kali-worshippers, I think. In fact nearly half were Mohammedans. Kali was a kind of tutelary deity and a certain percentage of spoil gained from the murders by *thaggi* was set aside as a propitiary offering to the goddess.

Regarding these Mohammedans Captain Sleeman—who devoted a lifetime to stamping out *thaggi* in India in the nineteenth century and failed of complete success—says a curious thing. He asked some condemned *thags* whether the taking of life was not proscribed by the law of the prophet. The answer was that the victims of the *thags* were without doubt pre-destined to die. In slaying them the Mohammedan *thags* only aided destiny and hence were guiltless of bloodshed.

ANOTHER general misbelief among us is that the *thags* murdered Europeans. They very rarely did so, unless necessary. When one member of a band of travelers had been killed by these hereditary students of death, it was a law of their cult that all

members of the party must meet a like fate. Nor did they kill women, not from any reverence for woman as a sex but because it was generally considered unlucky. They went entirely by omens. Many a traveler on the highway was saved when in company with *thags* by a snake crossing the road from the wrong side.

It was a curious profession, this, and very skillfully conducted. Estimates of the known deaths by thags run as high as fifteen hundred a year in Central India alone. And the actual deaths were many more, for the simple reason that the *phansigars*—stranglers—rarely left any evidence of their work. Those who were condemned to death attended to the matter themselves, knotting the halter rope under their right ear, and jumping off into oblivion—perhaps actuated by the rigid caste of the profession and also by firm conviction that to be hanged by the hand of a *chumar* was unendurable.

AND it is one of the curiosities of human life that these devotees of human death never held themselves to be criminals. The son followed the trade of the father. Wives sometimes never knew their husbands were *phansigars*. The young lads who were—as they termed it—"hard-breasted" enough to be given a *rumal*, or strangling noose, were as proud as an English youth of the same age upon whom knighthood had been conferred.

During *Khlit's* time the *thags* were powerful and usually unmolested. They were rich, and an established part of the community. In the "Masterpiece of Death" Khlit, who was a warrior by profession and a believer in the merits of a fair fight with bare weapons when a fight was necessary, meets some members of this cult.

Sleeman archives. What I meant was this: "The peculiar customs of *thaggi* appearing in the tale have the confessions of the stranglers themselves and testimony before Captain Sleeman for authority."

THIS comrade says he "sure is an admirer of Camp-Fire." It's just his kind that make our Camp-Fire worth while. And yet I'll bet it never occurred to him that he was really admiring himself. Some of us talk and some of us don't, but it isn't the talking alone that makes Camp-Fire.

Let's all get together and wish him out of that bed and back on his two feet, as husky as ever.

Lima, Ohio.

—but have never written before, as I handle a rope or six-gun much better than a pen. Have drifted over about all of the Border from the Big Bend to the Pacific and have tried my hand at about everything, from busting bad ones to picking canteloupes in Imperial Valley and hunting our knife-wielding brothers for Uncle Sam.

Have just returned from a ten months' visit to the land of Vins Rouge and Blanc. Was in the little arguments at the Argonne, St. Mihiel and Meuse-Argonne. But it looks as if I am due to occupy a bed in place of a saddle for some time as a result of disabilities received.

Would say a word about guns. The new .45 caliber D. A. Colts, adopted by Uncle Sam, that handles the .45 automatic cartridge, is sure some gun. With best wishes to *Adventure* and Camp-Fire.—FRANK PORTER, 785 St. Johns Ave., Lima, Ohio.

NO, I didn't quote the Britannica to that effect, as the following letter addressed to me states, but some one did at Camp-Fire, and this comrade offers a theory as to divining-rods that sounds solid enough for the encyclopedia:

Capon Springs, West Virginia.

You quote Encyclopædia Britannica as saying that the discovery of underground water courses by divinging rods "can not be explained."

The explanation is simple:

Damp earth is a conductor. Dry earth is not. The soil above underground streams is damp. Magnetic currents follow this damp earth and "water witches" are peculiarly susceptible to magnetic influences; are often men mentally unbalanced because of this susceptibility. Q. E. D.—WILL ATKINSON.

FROM Patrick Casey an interesting talk in connection with his serial beginning in this issue. What can other Camp-Fire members tell us as to whether there is a real Japanese secret society called Toyama?

San Francisco.

"Toyama" was built practically out of a sentence. That sentence was the opening one. For years it had been running through my mind. It struck me as quite novel. To begin a story with it, particularly an adventure-mystery story, would be to begin where most stories of this type end—with the finding of the treasure. In "Toyama" the finding of the treasure is accomplished in the first sentence and whatever of adventure and mystery may be in the story hinges on the reason for that treasure and its eventual disposition.

IN CONVEYING the party of Americans south on board a former submarine-chaser, I but used a type of craft with which I became familiar during two years' naval service in the recent war. Even the transformation of the war-craft into more or less of a pleasure ship was living within the law of probabilities. To-day you may buy one of them for something like twenty-thousand dollars.

When I read such intelligence in the newspapers, I can not help but recall that time, following Armistice Day and the anticipated release from active service of my skipper, when the *S. C. 73* was about to be given into my entire keeping and I was told, by high authority and with much grim injunction for caution, that I was to be responsible for nothing less than one hundred and fifty thousand dollars of Government property. And to-day the same craft, dismantled of her guns, will sell for twenty-thousand dollars! It is my opinion that the gasoline engines aboard, three in number and capable of generating over six hundred horsepower, are alone worth that price in any market. Add to that the steel frame and bulkheads which rib this type of craft and have caused her staunch weathering qualities to be everywhere acknowledged, and you may have food for thought.

MARIQUITA'S story is an attempt to visualize the havoc wrought by the unrest in Mexico. The idea of the army trunk containing the missing military funds was suggested by the arrest in this city of a former Mexican paymaster on the charge of absconding with over sixty-thousand dollars from

the coffers of Carranza. The truth is that the paymaster was detected and identified through the peculiar color of his eyes; they were a distinct green in hue. It might have been realistic to have given *Dicenta* those green eyes, but I feared the truth in this case would sound too much like fiction for my readers to swallow.

The intrusion of the party of Japanese into "Toyama" utterly upset all plans. Here was color, mystery, high romance! I was carried away. Thereafter, to a large extent, the story wrote itself.

THERE was that incident of the little Japanese girl, once she had landed from the foul schooner, removing her sandals and short white socks, and dabbling her feet in the tepid water. Her actions then—her giggles, the play of sunlight on cheeks and throat, the very picture of her silken kimono and glossy hair—were such as I had observed, years before, at a swimming-pool back of my rooms in Nuuanu Avenue of Honolulu.

I'll tell you about it. It was a Sunday, moistly hot, nothing to do but run out, perhaps, to Waikiki or the Pali. A fellow guest of the hotel, a civil engineer from Boston, suggested that the two of us walk through the unkempt field behind the building to where, he said, he had discovered a swimming-hole of the natives.

We found it after a little journeying. A tiny stream rippled down from the hills and dropped, in a miniature waterfall, over a great rock. In the course of many years the constant falling of the water had worn away the rock below into a perfect basin, a dozen yards in diameter and brimming with cold clear water.

THERE were all sorts in and around the basin—full-blooded Kanakas, hapa-haoles, squat Portuguese women in native Mother Hubbards, and boys, Japanese and Hawaiian, who looked like wriggling tadpoles in the water. I saw one Hawaiian man approach the pool on crutches. One of his legs was lamed, not permanently but as if it had been injured slightly in the course of his daily toil. At the brink of the pool he cast aside the crutches, lowered himself into the water, and swam.

It was a shock. He was more fish than man. But truly the water was more his element than the land, not entirely from environment, but also from that birthright handed down to him from his seafaring ancestors—those Polynesians who, in the remote past, set out in their great war-canoes from the islands south of the Line, from New Zealand and Samoa, and discovered in turn the Society Group, the Marquesas and Hawaii.

While we sat there, watching the swimmers, three Japanese women, scrupulously clean and dainty in their Sunday kimonos and obis, approached from up the canon. They paused behind us, with many trebly giggles, to dabble their feet in the stream. The two older women had only to remove their straw sandals, but the youngest one was bothered further by short white socks with a separate hood for the great toe.

I can see her now, standing atop a black slippery rock and dabbling gingerly one yellow foot after the other in the chilly water. She was dressed with unusual richness, her sandals of felt, not straw, and her kimono a beautiful shimmer of silk. She never looked toward us, but her incessant giggles showed plainly that she was aware of our presence. It is that Japanese flirt I have attempted to describe in the person of *O Haru San*.

THE basis for the secret society "Toyama" was furnished by the evidence gathered by the police of Washington, D. C., when they investigated, some time ago, the murder of three Chinese Educational Commissioners to this Government. The theory, adduced from the evidence, was that word had been flashed from the Far East that a particular Chinese mission was a menace to the successful conclusion of certain peace terms, then being made in Paris, and that the agents of a powerful Oriental secret society, called "Toyama," had been sent to Washington to shadow and kill the members of that mission.

When the society's agents reached Washington, however, they made a fatal blunder. There were three Chinese missions in the capital at that time. One had charge of the administration of Chinese Government funds voted for the use of her students in this country. The second was in control of the funds returned by the United States from the indemnity paid by China on account of the Boxer outrages, and also used for educational purposes.

The third mission was the one marked for extinction. It was political in character, being engaged in issuing propaganda that was designed to impress upon the people of the United States the charge that Japan was striving, in the then pending peace settlements, not alone to gain control of all the former German islands of the Pacific but also to secure an ineluctable grasp upon China.

BY STRANGE coincidence, the chairmen of the two latter missions bore the same surname. The Boxer Indemnity Commission, known as the Tsing Wau Mission, was headed by Dr. T. T. Wong, while another Wong, Dr. C. T. Wong directed the energies of the political commission.

The agents of "Toyama" made a fatal mistake. They wiped out the wrong mission. The chances are they had naught to guide them in their killing but the name of the chairman of the marked commission. They killed the three members of the innocent and educational Boxer Indemnity Commission in the stead of the members of the damaging political mission. And the political mission went merrily on issuing its propaganda.

I quote from a newspaper account of the affair:

"In the mysterious 'Toyama,' Japan is believed to have a hideous agency which never hesitates to wreak vengeance upon those who oppose or obstruct her imperialistic doctrines. It is said that the society is composed of a group of powerful business interests which use terrorism to force the policy of the island empire along the line they believe best."—PATRICK CASEY.

BY THE time you read this, Harry E. Wade, who has become good friends with so many of you during the more than six years he has been one of Adventure's editors, will no longer be a member of our staff. I am glad to say that he goes to a position so good that it more than justifies him in leaving us, but his loss will be felt here none the less on that account. I'm glad to say, too, though I suppose it is unnecessary, that in leaving the office he does not

leave our Camp-Fire nor end his interest in the magazine. Or the friendships he has formed during these half-dozen years.

I know that your good wishes will follow him into his new work and that you, too, will miss him in your intercourse with the magazine.

"Ask Adventure," which is one of the things that has been particularly in his charge, will now be in Mr. Noyes' hands, as will most of Mr. Wade's other work, and we are lucky in that Mr. Noyes is almost as thoroughly identified with *Adventure's* career. Indeed, he was with our magazine before Mr. Wade, leaving to our regret, to accept an opportunity that could not be passed by, and, when Mr. Wade was in the Army, came back to us to fill his place. For some time past both have been working side by side here in the office.—A. S. H.

LOOKING AHEAD FOR DEMOCRACY

CONSIDER our electoral system and our political parties. At this writing the Republican convention is about to go into action in Chicago. A president of the United States is supposed to be the choice of the people. Of course a president can be (as has happened) elected by a minority of the voters against the wishes of the majority, but that is only one of the humorous and undemocratic phases of the system.

The convention, composed mostly of politicians made delegates largely by local political machinery, is going to do the real choosing of a party candidate. It will be the same in any party convention. Are these noble patriots trying eagerly to learn and carry out the wishes of the people? No, most of them are trying to further party interests and their own. It is called a "bossless convention," but that means merely that this time the convention isn't controlled by a single boss or a few bosses. This time there are so many bosses that the clanking of the steam-roller isn't so skilfully muffled as usual.

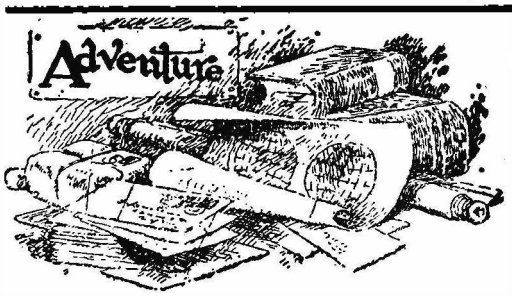
No, they're not trying to learn and carry out the people's choice. They're trying to pick a candidate who will be sufficiently party-ridden, docile and reactionary to satisfy the "Old Guard" and yet be able to get sufficient popular following to prevent any other party's candidate from beating him at the polls. The "Old Guard" are beginning to realize that the people do not want any of their hand-picked, wholly-owned candidates. On the other hand, if the "Old Guard" allow any other kind of candidate to be nominated they are likely to lose a good many of the plums, privileges and profits on which they are accustomed to fatten. It would be a sad blow to the "Grand Old Party," which isn't any grander than any of the others or any less rotten.

What do they care about who is the best man for the country? The choice of a candidate for President of the United States might almost as well be left to a free-for-all fight by a gang of pickpockets, except that the pickpockets might try to grab too much at once instead of playing the game carefully so that the picking will last through the years to come.

IF THE situation weren't tragic and disgusting it would be funny. The worst of it is that the conventions of other parties promise to be no least whit better, to be just as ridiculously undemocratic and unpatriotic as conventions have been for years past.

A direct vote by the voters themselves would be a better means of choosing presidential candidates, even with our present lack of real civic consciousness, political morals and understanding of actual democracy. Nor would it be necessary for the people to divide themselves into parties for this purpose. Also, even with the present convention system, if there were now some means of organizing and expressing public opinion, party conventions could be held to their real purpose of choosing a candidate the people want, instead of one who will be of most use or least harm to our precious party system and to the political prostitutes who almost invariably place party interests above the interests of the country and the people.

Such an organized expression of the people's will is entirely possible. All that is necessary is for us to organize and to express. Organize into local groups, those groups into larger groups, those into still larger, and so on. Entirely simple and entirely democratic. So simple and democratic that we haven't done it.—A. S. H.



VARIOUS PRACTICAL SERVICES FREE TO ANY READER

THESE services of *Adventure* are free to *any one.* They involve much time, work and expense on our part, but we offer them gladly and ask in return only that you *read and observe the simple rules,* thus saving needless delay and trouble for you and us. The whole spirit of this magazine is one of friendliness. No formality between editors and readers. Whenever we *can* help you we're ready and willing to try.

Identification Cards

Free to any reader. Just send us (1) your name and address (2) name and address of party to be notified, (3) a stamped and self-addressed return envelope.

Each card bears this inscription each, printed in English, French, Spanish, German, Portuguese, Dutch, Italian, Arabic, Chinese, Russian and Japanese:

"In case of death or serious emergency to bearer, address serial number of this card, care of *Adventure,* New York, stating full particulars, and friends will be notified."

In our office, under each serial number, will be registered the name of bearer and of one or two friends, with permanent address of each. No name appears on the card. Letters will be forwarded to friend, unopened by us. Names and addresses treated as confidential. We assume no other obligations. Cards not for business identification. Cards furnished free *provided stamped and addressed envelope accompanies application.* We reserve the right to use our own discretion in all matters pertaining to these cards.

Metal Cards—For twenty-five cents we will send you, *post-paid,* the same card in aluminum composition, perforated at each end. Enclose a self-addressed return envelope, but no postage. Twenty-five cents covers everything. Give same data as for pasteboard cards. Holders of pasteboard cards can be registered under both pasteboard and metal cards if desired, but old numbers can not be duplicated on metal cards. If you no longer wish your old card, destroy it carefully and notify us, to avoid confusion and possible false alarms to your friends registered under that card.

A moment's thought will show the value of this system of card-identification for any one, whether in civilization or out of it. Remember to furnish stamped and addressed envelope and to *give in full the names and addresses of self and friend or friends when applying.*

If check or money order is sent, please make it out to the Ridgway Company, *not* to any individual.

Missing Friends or Relatives

Our free service department "Lost Trails" in the pages following, though frequently used in cases where detective agencies, newspapers, and all other methods have failed, or for finding people long since dead, has located a very high percentage of those inquired for. Except in case of relatives, inquiries from one sex to the other are barred.

Back Issues of *Adventure*

The Boston Magazine Exchange, 109 *Mountfort St., Boston, Mass., can supply* Adventure *back through* 1918, *and occasional copies before that.*

WILL SELL: Feb., 1915, First Nov. 1917, First June 1918, First Oct., 1918, First and Mid-Dec., 1918, Mid-July, 1919 to First April 1920 inclusive, 24 issues in all for 20 cents each or $5.25 postpaid for the lot. In perfect condition.—WALTER M. EVANS, 69 Gilmour St., Ottawa, Ont., Canada.

WILL BUY: August 1915 issue.—Address R. A. SPENCER, Highmore, N. D.

Expeditions and Employment

While we should like to be of aid in these matters, experience has shown that it is not practicable.

Manuscripts

Glad to look at any manuscript. We have no "regular staff" of writers. A welcome for new writers. *It is not necessary to write asking to submit your work.*

When submitting a manuscript, if you write a letter concerning it, enclose it *with* the manuscript; do *not* send it under separate cover. Enclose stamped and addressed envelope for return. All manuscripts should be typewritten double-spaced, with wide margins, not rolled, name and address on first page. We assume no risk for manuscripts or illustrations submitted, but use all due care while they are in our hands. Payment on acceptance.

We want only clean stories. Sex, morbid, "problem," psychological and supernatural stories barred. Use almost no fact-articles. Can not furnish or suggest collaborators. Use fiction of almost any length; under 3000 welcomed.

Mail Address and Forwarding Service

This office, assuming no responsibility, will be glad to act as a forwarding adress for its readers or to hold mail till called for, provided necessary postage is supplied. Unclaimed mail which we have held for a long period is listed on the last page of this issue.

Camp-Fire Buttons

To be worn on lapel of coat by members of Camp-Fire—any one belongs who wishes to. Enameled in dark colors representing earth, sea and sky, and bears the numeral 71—the sum of the letters of the word Camp-Fire valued according to position in the alphabet. Very small and inconspicuous. Designed to indicate the common interest which is the only requisite for membership in Camp-Fire and to enable members to recognize each other when they meet in far places or at home. Twenty-five cents, post-paid, anywhere.

When sending for the button enclose a strong, self-addressed, *unstamped* envelope.

If check or money order is sent, please make it out to the Ridgway Company, *not* to any individual.

General Questions from Readers

In addition to our free service department "Ask Adventure" on the pages following, *Adventure* can sometimes answer other questions within our general field. When it can, it will. Expeditions and employment excepted.

Addresses

Order of the Restless—Organizing to unite for fellowship all who feel the wanderlust. First suggested in this magazine, though having no connection with it aside from our friendly interest. Address WAYNE EBERLY, 519 Citizens Bldg., Cleveland, Ohio.

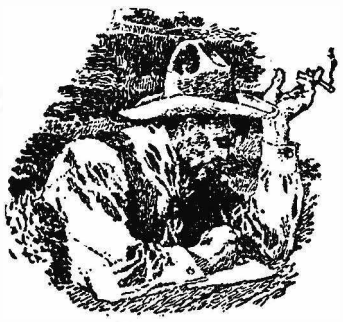
Camp-Fire—Any one belongs who wishes to.

Rifle Clubs—Address Nat. Rifle Ass'n of America, 1108 Woodward Bldg., Washington, D. C.

(*See also under "Standing Information" in "Ask Adventure."*)

Remember: Magazines are made up ahead of time. Allow for two or three months between sending and publication.

Ask Adventure — A Free Question and Answer Service Bureau of Information on Outdoor Life and Activities Everywhere and Upon the Various Commodities Required Therein. Conducted for *Adventure* Magazine by Our Staff of Experts.



QUESTIONS should be sent, not to this office, but direct to the expert in charge of the department in whose field it falls. So that service may be as prompt as possible, he will answer you by mail direct. But he will also send to us a copy of each question and answer, and from these we shall select those of most general interest and publish them each issue in this department, thus making it itself an exceedingly valuable standing source of practical information. Unless otherwise requested inquirer's name and town are printed with question; street numbers not given.

When you ask for *general* information on a given district or subject the expert will probably give you some valuable general pointers and refer you to books or to local or special sources of information.

Our experts will in all cases answer to the best of their ability, using their own discretion in all matters pertaining to their departments subject only to our general rules for "Ask Adventure," but neither they nor the magazine assumes any responsibility beyond the moral one of trying to do the best that is possible. These experts have been chosen by us not only for their knowledge and experience but for their integrity and reliability. We have emphatically assured each of them that his advice or information is not to be affected in any way by whether a given commodity is or is not advertised in this magazine.

1. **Service free to anybody, provided stamped and addressed envelope is enclosed. Correspondents writing to or from foreign countries will please enclose International Reply Coupons, purchasable at any post-office, and exchangeable for stamps of any country in the International Postal Union.**
2. **Send each question direct to the expert in charge of the particular department whose field covers it. He will reply by mail. Do NOT send questions to this magazine.**
3. **No reply will be made to requests for partners, for financial backing, or for chances to join expeditions. "Ask Adventure" covers business and work opportunities, but only if they are outdoor activities, and only in the way of general data and advice. It is in no sense an employment bureau.**
4. **Make your questions definite and specific. State exactly your wants, qualifications and intentions. Explain your case sufficiently to guide the expert you question.**
5. **Send no question until you have read very carefully the exact ground covered by the particular expert in whose department it seems to belong.**

1. ★ Islands and Coasts
CAPTAIN A. E. DINGLE, Hamilton, Bermuda. Islands of Indian and Atlantic oceans; the Mediterranean; Cape Horn and Magellan Straits. Ports, trade, peoples, travel. (*Postage 5 cents.*)

2. The Sea Part 1
BERIAH BROWN, Seattle Press Club, 1309 Fifth Ave., N. E., Seattle, Wash. Covering ships, seamen and shipping; nautical history, seamanship, navigation, yachting; commercial fisheries of North America; marine bibliography of U. S.; seafaring on fishing-vessels of the North Atlantic and Pacific banks, small-boat sailing, and old-time shipping and seafaring.

3. ★ The Sea Part 2
CAPTAIN A. E. DINGLE, Hamilton, Bermuda. Such questions as pertain to the sea, ships and men local to the Bristish Empire should be sent to Captain Dingle, not Mr. Brown. (*Postage 5 cents.*)

4. Eastern U. S. Part 1
RAYMOND S. SPEARS, Little Falls, N. Y. Covering Mississippi, Ohio, Tennessee, Michigan and Hudson valleys; Great Lakes, Adirondacks, Chesapeake Bay; river, lake and road travel, game, fish and woodcraft; furs, freshwater pearls, herbs; and their markets.

5. Eastern U. S. Part 2
HAPSBURG LIEBE, 6 W. Concord Ave., Orlando, Florida. Covering Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, and N. and S. Carolina, Florida and Georgia except Tennessee River and Atlantic seaboard. Hunting, fishing, camping; logging, lumbering, sawmilling, saws.

6. Eastern U. S. Part 3
DR. O. E. HATHORNE, 44 Central Street, Bangor, Maine Covering Maine; fishing, hunting, canoeing, guides, outfits, supplies.

7. Middle Western U. S. Part 1
JOSEPH MILLS HANSON (lately Capt. A. E. F.), care *Adventure*. Covering the Dakotas, Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas, Hunting, fishing, travel, *Especially* early history of Missouri Valley.

8. Middle Western U. S. Part 2
JOHN B. THOMPSON, 906 Pontiac Bldg., Chicago, Ill. Covering Missouri, Arkansas and the Missouri Valley up to Sioux City, Iowa. Wilder countries of the Ozarks, and swamps; hunting, fishing, trapping, farming, mining and range lands; big timber sections.

9. Middle Western U. S. Part 3
LARRY ST. JOHN, 1101 Kimball B'ld'g, Chicago, Ill. Covering Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Lake Michigan. Fishing, hunting, trapping, lumbering, canoeing, camping, guides, outfits, motoring, agriculture, minerals, natural history, clamming, early history, legends.

10. Western U. S. Part 1
E. E. HARRIMAN, 2303 W. 23rd St., Los Angeles, Calif. Covering California, Oregon, Washington, Utah, Nevada, Arizona. Game, fur, fish; camp, cabin; mines, minerals; mountains.

11. Western U. S. Part 2 and Mexico Part 1 Northern
J. W. WHITAKER, 1505 W. 10 St., Austin, Texas. Covering Texas, Oklahoma, and the border states of old Mexico: Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo Leon and Tamaulipas. Minerals, lumbering, agriculture, travel, customs, topography, climate, natives, hunting, history, industries.

12. Mexico Part 2 Southern
EDGAR YOUNG, care *Adventure* Magazine, Spring and Macdougal Sts., New York, N. Y. Covering that part of Mexico lying south of a line drawn from Tampico to Mazatlan. Mining, agriculture, topography, travel, hunting, lumbering, history, natives, commerce.

? ★(*Enclose addressed envelope with 5 cents in stamps NOT attached*)
Return postage not required from U. S. or Canadian soldiers, sailors or marines in service outside the U. S., its possessions, or Canada

13. ★ North American Snow Countries Part 1
S. E. SANGSTER ("Canuck"), L. B. 393, Ottawa, Canada. Covering Height of land and northern parts of Quebec and Ontario (except strip between Minn. and C. P. R'y); southeastern parts of Ungava and Keewatin. Trips for sport, canoe routes, big game, fish, fur; equipment; Summer, Autumn and Winter outfits; Indian life and habits; Hudson's Bay Co. posts; minerals, timber; customs regulations. No questions answered on trapping for profit.

14. North American Snow Countries Part 2
HARRY M. MOORE, Deseronto, Ont., covering southeastern Ontario and the lower Ottawa Valley. Fishing, hunting, canoeing, mining, lumbering, agriculture, topography, travel, camping.

15. ★ North American Snow Countries Part 3
GEORGE L. CATTON, Gravenhurst, Muskoka, Ont., Canada. Covering Southern Ontario and Georgian Bay. Fishing, hunting, trapping, canoeing.

16. North American Snow Countries Part 4
ED. L. CARSON, Burlington, Wash. Covering Yukon, British Columbia and Alberta including Peace River district; to Great Slave Lake. Outfits and equipment, guides, big game, minerals, forest, prairie; travel; customs regulations.

17. North American Snow Countries Part 5
THEODORE S. SOLOMONS, 2837 Fulton St., Berkeley, Calif. Covering Alaska. Arctic life and travel; boats, packing, back-packing, traction, transport, routes; equipment, clothing, food; physics, hygiene; mountain work.

18. North American Snow Countries. Part 6
H. S. BELCHER, The Hudson's Bay Company, Pt. Alexander, Manitoba, Canada. Covering Manitoba, Saskatchewan, MacKenzie and Northern Keewatin. Homesteading, mining, hunting, trapping, lumbering and travel.

19. North American Snow Countries Part 7
JAS. F. B. BELFORD, Richmond, Quebec. Covering New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and southeastern Quebec. Hunting, fishing, lumbering, camping, trapping, auto and canoe trips, history, topography, farming, homesteading, mining, paper and wood-pulp industries, land grants, water-power.

20. Hawaiian Islands and China
F. J. HALTON, 632 S. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill. Covering customs, travel, natural history, resources, agriculture, fishing, hunting.

21. Central America
EDGAR YOUNG, care *Adventure Magazine*, Spring and Macdougal Sts., New York, N. Y. Covering Canal Zone, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, British Honduras, Salvador, Guatemala. Travel, customs, language, game, local conditions, minerals, trading.

22. South America. Part 1
EDGAR YOUNG, care *Adventure Magazine*, Spring and Macdougal Sts., New York, N. Y. Covering Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia and Chile; geography, inhabitants, history, industries, topography, minerals, game, languages, customs.

23. South America. Part 2
P. H. GOLDSMITH, *Inter-American Magazine*, 407 West 117th St., New York, N. Y. Covering Venezuela. The Guianas, Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay and Argentine Republic. Travel, history, customs, industries, topography, natives, languages, hunting and fishing.

24. Asia, Southern
GORDON MCCREAGH, 21 East 14th St., New York City. Covering Red Sea, Persian Gulf, India, Tibet, Burma, Western China, Siam, Andamans, Malay States, Borneo, the Treaty Ports; hunting, trading, traveling.

25. Philippine Islands
BUCK CONNOR, Box 807A., University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, N. M. Covering history, natives, topography, customs, travel, hunting, fishing, minerals, agriculture, exports and imports, manufacturing.

26. Japan
GRACE P. T. KNUDSON, Castine, Maine. Covering Japan: Commerce, politics, people, customs, history, geography, travel, agriculture, art, curios.

27. Russia and Eastern Siberia
MAJOR A. M. LOCHWITZKY (Formerly Lieut.-Col. I. R. A., Ret.), Austin, Texas. Covering Petrograd and its province; Finland, Northern Caucasus; Primorsk District, Island of Sakhalien; travel, hunting, fishing; explorations among native tribes; markets, trade, curios.

28. Africa Part 1
THOMAS S. MILLER, Carmel, Monterey Co., Calif. Covering the Gold, Ivory and Fever Coasts of West Africa, the Niger River from the delta to Jebba, Northern Nigeria. Canoeing, labor, trails, trade, expenses, outfitting, flora; tribal histories, witchcraft, savagery.

29. Africa Part 2
GEORGE E. HOLT, Frederick, Md. Covering Morocco; travel, tribes, customs, history, topography, trade.

30. ★ Africa Part 3 Portuguese East Africa
R. W. WARING, Corunna, Ontario, Canada. Covering trade, produce, climate, opportunities, game, wild life, travel, expenses, outfits, health, etc.

31. ★ New Zealand and the South Sea Islands
TOM L. MILLS, *The Feilding Star*, Feilding, New Zealand. Covering New Zealand, Cook Islands and Samoa. Travel, history, customs; opportunities for adventurers, explorers and sportsmen. (*Postage 5 cents.*)

32. ★ Australia and Tasmania
ALBERT GOLDIE, Hotel Sydney, Sydney, Australia. Covering customs, resources, travel, hunting, sports, politics, history. (*Postage 5 cents.*)

FIREARMS, PAST AND PRESENT

Rifles, shot-guns, pistols, revolvers and ammunition. (Any questions on the arms adapted to a particular locality should *not* be sent to this department but to the "Ask Adventure" editor covering the district in question.)

A.—All Shotguns (including foreign and American makes). J. B. THOMPSON, 906 Pontiac Bldg., Chicago, Ill.

B.—All Rifles, Pistols and Revolvers (including foreign and American makes). D. WIGGINS, Salem, Ore.

FISHING IN NORTH AMERICA

Salt and Fresh Water Fishing

J. B. THOMPSON, 906 Pontiac Bldg., Chicago, Ill. Covering fishing-tackle and equipment; fly and bait casting; live bait; camping outfits; fishing trips.

STANDING INFORMATION

For general information on U. S. and its possessions, write Sup't of Public Documents, Wash., D. C., for catalog of all Government publications.

For the Philippines and Porto Rico, the Bureau of Insular Affairs, War Dep't, Wash., D. C.

For Alaska, the Alaska Bureau, Chamber of Commerce, Central Bldg., Seattle, Wash.

For Hawaii, Hawaii Promotion Committee, Chamber of Commerce, Honolulu, T. H. Also, Dep't of the Interior, Wash., D. C.

For Cuba, Bureau of Information, Dep't of Agri., Com., and Labor, Havana, Cuba.

For Central and South America, John Barrett, Dir., Gen. Pan-American Union, Wash., D. C.

For R. N. W. M. P., Commissioner Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Ottawa, Can. Only unmarried British subjects, age 18 to 40, above 5 ft. 8 in. and under 175 lbs., accepted.

For Canal Zone, the Panama Canal Commission, Wash., D. C.

For U. S. its possessions and most foreign countries, the Dep't of Com., Wash., D. C.

★(*Enclose addressed envelope with 5 cents in stamps NOT attached*)

Sheep in the Andes, Llamas in the Rockies

YOU MAY not believe this heading, for one thinks in exactly opposite terms. But here's something new under our sun, perhaps a great industry in the making. What Mr. Young suggests is worth serious thought if you contemplate stock raising on a large scale:

Question: "I am interested in sheep raising in Mexico and turn to you for advice.

First, please give me some idea of wool and mutton prices and the yield per head. What are herders paid? Can range be leased?

Would one have to feed hay at any season? What is the duty on wool from Mexico to the U. S.?

Can you recommend any particular section?

Now as to law and order. Can one believe the news, or are things becoming more settled?

I have several thousand dollars to invest and will appreciate any tips you care to give me. I am interested in farming and perhaps some other line than stock raising would appeal."—F. A. STRONSHINE, Liberty Bond, Wash.

Answer, by Mr. Young:—Before the revolution in Mexico sheep raising was a great industry down there, as well as goat raising. I have seen thousands of head of both on the ranges; and near Torreon and Chihuahua I saw piles of wool after the shearings that were as large as a dozen hay-stacks placed together. The principal seat of this industry was in the northern desert portions, extending from the U. S. line down seven or eight hundred miles into the republic. This particular part of Mexico is covered for Ask Adventure by Mr. J. W. Whiteaker. My portion begins on a line drawn across from Tampico to Mazatlan and extends south. While many flocks were to be found in the high plateau down through the central part of what is now my territory the bulk of this business was mainly north. This country corresponds to Arizona and Texas, and sheep raising down there is about the counterpart of what it is in these two States. Doubtless you know that thousands of head of sheep are herded in the Arizona desert at the present time. Mexican men and women and Indian women are used as herders.

Due to the long-continued revolution which lasted for some nine or ten years and the prevalence of disorder sheep were killed and stolen by local robbers and rustlers and driven across the American line by dishonest herders and sold, so that Mexico at the present time has few large flocks of sheep. Recently they have been importing sheep from this country and are making further calls for breedng ewes and making liberal offers to men bringing in good stock. Prices down there are slightly higher than they are here at present due to lack of supply.

Write Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, Washington, D. C., for duties on wool and mutton from Mexico and prevailing invoice prices of same.

The health of the high plateau, so-called Valley of Mexico, running down through interior, is the best in the world. In reading the other day in the Encyclopedia Britannica regarding tuberculosis I noted that this district was freer from tuberculosis than any other of the whole world. It is similar to Arizona and New Mexico as regards health conditions. Taking the country from the U. S. line it runs from pure waste desert gradually to less and less desert until the country is very fertile.

A good deal of what you read in the papers up here is propaganda for ulterior purposes. I was in Mexico during the revolution and was not molested. Most of the Americans who were killed were mixed up in the fighting, some of them holding commissions in one or the other army. Too bad they got killed but that's the fortunes of war.

Leave rubber alone. To raise coconuts you have to go into low tropical country. Tropical agriculture is a line of its own and requires special knowledge.

As to the other queries. If I were in your shoes and knew all about sheep raising and had the amount of money you have I would go to South America and make a pile of money, a great big pile of it. Here's the idea:

Down in the Andes Mountains of Peru, Bolivia, and northern Chili there are three giant, wild, sheep-like animals natural to the country, the llama or domesticated guanaco, the wild guanaco, and the vicugna. Great herds of llamas are raised by the local people for their flesh and wool. They stand about four feet high at the shoulders and are covered by a heavy growth of wool, similar to sheep's wool but much coarser. This wool is woven by the natives in rough blankets and cloth; the skins are tanned with the wool on and used for robes. The flesh is very similar to mutton. These animals are also used for packing through the Andes, packing a hundred pounds.

The wild guanacos run in herds and bear the same relation to the llama as our wild sheep in this country bear to the tame ones. The vicugna is about the size of the guanaco but much more wiry and covered with fine orange-red wool. The meat of both the guanaco and vicugna is eaten, but it is lacking in fat. These animals run in herds, having special places to camp where huge piles of dung may be observed, and also have special places where they go to die, thousands of bones being found in high deserted places.

The alpaca is another sheep-like animal being found both wild and domesticated in the Andes. All of these animals are of the sheep family, or camel family, to which our own sheep belong. They are the natural animals of the country.

Now, in places where such animals are found naturally it was thought by some that American sheep would do well. Duncan Fox & Co. of New York, and some of the other big commercial houses, brought down a few head and tried them. It was found that they did exceedingly well. The last time I was in Peru, Duncan Fox & Co. had many thousand head on the ranges of Peru and were putting others there.

There are thousands and thousands of square miles in Peru and Bolivia which are remarkably well fitted for sheep and nothing on it but herds of wild guanacos and vicugnas and alpacas. These wild animals do not thrive below eight thousand feet and are found from there on up to fourteen thousand feet.

I have thought of two things. Bolivia is offering land in parcels of 40,000 acres for 10 cents per acre to Americans who wish to come there and raise sheep, cattle, horses, or farm and fruit raise. The range laws are liberal. I would either go down there and raise sheep and llamas and alpacas or I

would get me some land in the highest parts of Colorado in the Rockies and import some of the giant sheep or llamas and start a herd of them. By getting in rough country, the rougher the better, and starting at about 8,000 feet there is no doubt they would do well. The wool is coarse but it could be sold here for making sweaters and I believe if the manufacturers had a sample of it they could handle it for cloth. The natives down there make a very poor job of trying to weave it with a hand loom but I saw some very nice skirts and blankets that had been made of it.

These animals will live on less than a sheep and grow into big round-bellied animals weighing from five to eight hundred pounds. They have been brought to sea level by bringing down the lambs when they were young and getting them used to the low country and the heat. I saw them in Lima and in Argentina in the parks. Also I saw tame herds having thousands in them throughout the Andes of Peru, Chili, and Bolivia. I think they have several head in Bronx Park in this city and may have several head in other places. It seems to me that some one would make a lot of money in the Rockies raising these giant sheep.

Send 5 cents (coin) to Pan-American Union, Washington, D. C., for following booklets: Mexico and Bolivia and Peru. The booklet on Bolivia gives data concerning land in that country. See Encyclopedia Britannica for data covering guanacos, llamas, vicugnas, and alpacas.

An Illinois Canoe Trip

FOR CHICAGO sportsmen who want a fine, near-by canoe trip, Mr. St. John outlines one that ought to appeal. It offers both good scenery and fishing, and seems excellent for vacationists whose time is limited:

Question: "I would like to take a canoe trip this Summer, starting at Des Plaines River and North Avenue, to Lake Marie, a small lake near Antioch, Illinois.

What kind of canoe would you suggest for three people, maximum $60? What rate of speed could, or should, we make? What supplies will be needed?

I shall appreciate any advice you care to give."—CHARLES BROWN, Chicago, Ill.

Answer, by Mr. St. John:—If you will get a Rand-McNally map of Lake and Du Page Counties, costs 25 cents, you will see that the Des Plaines does not run anywhere near Lake Marie. The only way you could reach it by water would be up the Fox River, and then you would have to work up-stream. You could paddle up the Des Plaines as far as Libertyville but it would not be much of a trip.

For a nice near-by canoe trip, why not ship your canoe and duffle to Fox Lake, then come down Fox and Pistakee Lakes into the Fox River and go down stream as far as you like—to Elgin or Yorkville, and then ship home from there? It is a nice trip with nice scenery and fair fishing.

As you live in Chicago, I would advise you to shop around for a canoe and watch the want ads in the daily papers, as they are sometimes offered second-hand. Sixty dollars is not much money for a canoe nowadays. Any 16 or 18 foot canoe will do. For any near-by river trips you need take but little provisions, as they can be bought en route. You would want some kind of a tent, a cook kit and sleeping-bags or blankets. Don't forget some mosquito netting if you go in the Summer.

Australian Railroads

WE ARE indebted to an Australian business man for the following definite information on railroads in his commonwealth. If some of you inferred from a recent answer in Ask Adventure that both the North-South and East-West lines were completed and of standard gauge, this up-to-the-minute news will set you right on the points in question:

"In a recent issue an answer given to questions on Northeastern Australia is slightly misleading inasmuch as one might infer that a transcontinental railway from Adelaide to Port Darwin—generally spoken of as the North-South Railway—was an accomplished fact. This, however, is not the case, as there is a gap of 1,000 miles still to be completed, and the same is not only not yet under construction but has not been authorized by the Commonwealth Parliament. But the railroad has been proposed and doubtless will be built in time.

The Trans-Australian Railway that exists (and to distinguish it from the North-South line it is sometimes called the East-West line) runs from Adelaide to Fremantle, and one can now travel from Busham, Queensland, to Perth, W. A., along this line, but with several changes owing to different gauges in several states. Though the Commonwealth Government has adopted the 4 ft. 8½ in. gauge as standard, and it will no doubt in time be generally used, this is not yet the case."—R. F. M., Northam, W. A.

The Lasting Quality of Powder

JUST because powder has been soaked in water a month is no reason for throwing it aside. Neither are shells necessarily worthless if twenty-five years old. Read the strange case of the brass cannon, loaded in 1781, sunk in the Hoogly River, taken to London, and fired by the original charge:

Question: "In a recent issue I noticed your remarks about powder for use in revolvers and rifles. My experience has been more with shotgun powder, its life and strength, and I want to say that powder seems to me about the main factor in successful shooting.

As to how long powder will keep—it depends on how well it is protected from moisture. At St. Augustine, Fla., some years ago I procured shells loaded with black powder. The dealer said he thought them worthless, for they were 15 years old. Imagine my surprise when they gave splendid results. The reason was the shells had been kept perfectly dry.

Bulk smokeless, of which there are several varieties, I have found resists moisture better than common black powder. But for all conditions,

heat, cold, and moisture, the dense powders are superior. I wonder if your experience agrees with this statement.

I experimented with one of the dense powders a few years ago, soaking it in a bottle of water for 30 days, then loading it into shells. The result was the powder was still good and my shooting unaffected. This was with "Ballistite." Also there is "Infallible," which is splendid; but the former gives greater penetration and a more even pattern. Please tell me what you can about rifle and shotgun powder deterioration."—R. S. WETMORE, New York, N. Y.

Answer, by Mr. Wiggins:—The deterioration of rifle and revolver powder appears to be what I have heard called "concentration" by powdermen, meaning the concentration of the acids into minute drops, caused by long storage. Damp does not appear to have the effect on any smokeless of the dense variety that it has on black or bulk smokeless powder.

For instance: I purchased some five years since a can of DuPont No. 2 smokeless, that being a revolver powder, and from the marks on the can I think it had been on the dealer's shelf for some years. I used it in a .44 Smith & Wesson, Russian model, revolver. This cartridge is, to my notion, the best revolver cartridge we have today for use with smokeless powder, due to its combination of small powder space and large caliber. With this powder I was not always sure that the bullet had passed out the barrel, due to the deterioration of the powder. With other cans I have had excellent results; now I use the new No. 3 pistol powder with the finests results I have ever enjoyed.

I have had old smokeless cartridges, factory-loaded, perform miserably, but think the lubricant had melted into the powder. Cartridges like the .30 Krag, Government loaded, I have used sixteen years after they were packed, with excellent results as regards accuracy and penetration, but there was no sign of lubrication on them. I think this is characteristic of all ammunition loaded with metal-cased bullets.

In regard to dense smokeless in shotgun shells: some years since a doctor had a hunting-shack on Snake River, near Robinnette, Oregon. Once high water washed away the cabin, in which was a case of shells loaded with ballistite, I was informed, and if I recall correctly the cartridges were the Peters Premier or Ideal. Anyway, the case was found on a sand-bar, a few months afterward, and the shells were given to a rancher's boy who wanted the shot to use in a muzzle-loader. On opening some shells to get the shot, he was so struck with the appearance of the powder that he tried the shells in a shotgun and found that they were apparently as fine as ever after the long immersion and the stay on the sand-bar.

You have doubtless seen the advertisement in current magazines that shows a pattern made with Infallible that was under water twenty years.

But we often run across queer things black powder does. A man in this city told me some years since of an occurrence in his uncle's office in London about fifty years ago. This man was an official of the British East India Company, and in the office as an ornament was a brass cannon that had been removed from the wreck of an Indiaman cast away at the mouth of the Hoogly in 1781. At the time I mentioned, there was a fire in the office, and this cannon was discharged by heat, sending the ball a tremendous distance. Think of the lasting qualities of that old black powder.

Florida Truck Farming

THERE is such widespread, genuine interest in Southern farm land that we give you another answer by Mr. Liebe on the chances a Northerner takes, and has, if he makes his home in Florida. After all, a great deal depends on the individual. But common sense tells one that he will reduce the possibility of failure if he has capital sufficient to buy good land near his market:

Question: "I expect to locate in the South for the purpose of raising early garden truck and poultry, and have in mind Florida or Georgia. But I have been advised against these States on account of the very hot climate in Summer.

Please tell me about climatic conditions in Florida, the price of good farm land, market and labor conditions, and give me your opinion as to the best location for my purposes.

I expect to enter this enterprise with $1,000 and imagine 25 acres will be sufficient to provide a good income if properly managed. I have heard considerable about the Orlando, Florida, district; also the Florida Keys have been mentioned for such farming."—H. BELLERT, Flint, Mich.

Answer, by Mr. Liebe:—In my opinion, Florida has Georgia beaten for a year-around climate. It seems to me that Georgia is much the warmer in the Summer. Florida has a great many lakes, and it is almost surrounded by salt water, and this tempers the Summer climate. Last year the thermometer here got to 98 only twice; the average Summer temperature here is about 82. But Florida Summers are very long, lasting from some time in April to October, usually, and this is apt to get a little monotonous to Northerners.

I think the best location, as concerns climate, is central Florida.

Marketing conditions are pretty good. Labor is like it is anywhere else—high and more or less scarce.

The price of land runs from almost nothing for sand-hill stuff to $1,500 per acre for celery land with flowing wells. Much depends on the kind of land and the location. Trucking land is found in spots. Around Sanford they grow lettuce and celery by carloads. Hastings is famous for its potatoes. Bartow is noted for the cabbages grown in that section. The country around Plant City is fine for strawberries. Farther south tomatoes are grown extensively.

Central Florida is, to my way of thinking, the best part of the State. When it comes to water for drinking purposes, I know central Florida leads. Florida water is usually surface water, hard water, or sulphurous water.

Frankly, $1,000 is not enough money to bring with you unless you are pretty resourceful. It would buy you enough trucking land for one man, but it wouldn't buy livestock, implements, or build

a house and buy the land too. Much, of course, depends on the man. Some can come down here with a tin can and a dime and get rich; others can bring a million with them and die in the poorhouse.

Poultry is raised almost anywhere in the State, Leghorns being a general favorite on account of their splendid laying qualities. Handled right, poultry should make one a living here. By the way, I heard one truck farmer say he sold $1,500 worth of vegetables to a big hotel in three months this Winter. This was at Eustis.

LOST TRAILS

NOTE—We offer this department of the "Camp-Fire" free of charge to those of our readers who wish to get in touch again with old friends or acquaintances from whom the years have separated them. For the benefit of the friend you seek, *give your own name if possible.* All inquiries along this line, unless containing contrary instructions, will be considered as intended for publication in full with inquirer's name, in this department, at our discretion. We reserve the right in case inquirer refuses his name, to substitute any numbers or other names, to reject any item that seems to us unsuitable, and to use our discretion in all matters pertaining to this department. Give also your own full address. We will, however, forward mail through this office, assuming no responsibility therefor. We have arranged with the Montreal *Star* to give additional publication in their "Missing Relative Column," weekly and daily editions, to any of our inquiries for persons last heard of in Canada. Except in case of relatives, inquiries from one sex to the other are barred.

MASSBY, SAMUEL SETTLE, JR. Son of John Settle Massby of Manchester, England. Came to this country thirty-five years ago. He may be either in Virginia, North Carolina or Tennessee. Any one knowing his whereabouts please write to his sister.—Address HARRIET BANKS, 67 Oak St., New Bedford, Mass.

Please notify us at once when you have found your man.

WINNIE, LEON LOWDEN, brother. Short, red hair, one eye defective, tatooed on one arm. He is nearly fifty years of age. Formerly a miner in Nome, Alaska. Last heard of in Seward, Alaska, March 19, 1918. Was working on the Government Railroad. Supposed to have gone by boat to Cordova, clam fishing. Any information as to his whereabouts will be appreciated.—Address LULA M. WINNIE, 61 East 1st North St., Salt Lake City, Utah.

THAYER, MRS. BLANCHE V. Wife. Left Boston for Syracuse, N. Y. Last August. She would probably obtain employment in a hotel, as she worked on the newsstand and as a checker in the Brewster while in Boston. Any information concerning her whereabouts will be appreciated.—Address CARL J. THAYER, 112 Huntington Ave., Boston, Mass.

Inquiries will be printed three times, then taken out. In the first February issue all unfound names asked for during the past two years will be reprinted alphabetically.

BLACK, DONALD, (Frenchy). Last heard of at Ekuk cannery on the Nushagak River, Alaska. Left Nushagak in the Fall of 1918 for the Good News District gold fields. Any information will be appreciated.—Address G. E. PETERSON, Box 596, Ft. Bragg, Cal.

A. W. B. May find C. J. B. at Maryland Hotel, Apt. 412, Minneapolis, Minn.

PERRAS, CLEMENT. Last heard of Christmas, 1917. Then in Iowa. Twenty-eight years of age, fair, blue eyes. Usually railroading. His mother is anxious for news.—Address MRS. A. PERRAS, 69 Regent St., Port Arthur, Ont., Canada.

Please notify us at once when you have found your man.

GRASME, ERWIN. Seventeen years of age June 4, 1920. Please come home, or write to your mother and sister Elsa.—Address MRS. M. GRASME, 1003 Bloomfield St., Hoboken, N. J.

THRIFT, ALEXANDER. Son of late Hamilton Thrift, M. D. Last heard of in Dallas, Texas, 1884. Was about twenty-two years old at that time. Any information will be appreciated by his brother.—Address JAS. W. THRIFT, Taft, Cal.

ANDERSON, CHARLES W. Last heard of in San Antonio, Texas. Left there for Walsenburg, Colo. Is five feet two inches, light hair, brown eyes. Any one knowing his whereabouts please write.—Address CHAS. F. SNYDER, 1212 No. Jefferson St., Peoria, Ill.

Please notify us at once when you have found your man.

SMITH, GEO. W., Father. Owner of Fish & Commercial Wharf, Portland, Maine, about 1903. Son, Harold, was adopted by Jerry W. Loveitt and wife about twenty years ago. Please communicate with me. I was wounded in France and want to find my own people.—Address HAROLD GEORGE LOVEITT, 146 So. Lucas St., Los Angeles, Cal.

MUNN, JOHN CLANCY. Born at Atchison, Kansas, May 31, 1868. Please communicate with your brother Henry.—Address HENRY M. MUNN, 39 E. Colorado St., Pasadena, Cal.

OORKWART, CLAN, (SPELT URQUART). When in doubt or trouble come over to longitude and latitude of Marion County, Texas. Glad to hear from any of you.—Address L. T. 406, care *Adventure.*

Please notify us at once when you have found your man.

WOODRUFF, EMMETT. Formerly lived at Miltonvale, Kansas. Left home in April, 1900, and about two weeks after he left wrote his family from Salina, Kansas, which was the last word ever heard from him. Has three children living in the County. Wife got a divorce from him some time after he left. Since his departure his father has died leaving an estate of which there is now due the said Emmett Woodruff the sum of $5600, which is with the clerk of the District Court of this County, and will be paid to him if he returns for it.—Address M. V. B. VAN DE MARK, First Nat'l Bank Bldg., Concordia, Kansas.

Please notify us at once when you have found your man.

HARTNETT, JACK. Write me at Kingfisher. Have important news for you. Be sure to make your report. J. HARTNETT, SR., Kingfisher, Okla.

THE following have been inquired for in full in either the Mid-August or First September issues of Adventure. They can get the name of the inquirer from this magazine:

ANDERSON, NELSON MILES; Arnstein, Joseph; Bateman, Luke; Bickford, P.; Bosworth, Emma L.; Buchanan, Charles; Brackett, Everett W.; Brandle, Paul; Brownell, Herman A.; Campbell, M. V.; Coffman, E. E.; Cole, Mr. and Mrs.; Dempsey, Howard; Dooley; Vincent De Paul; Downey, Harry Evans; Elder, Alvin Wm.; Fishman, Mrs. Rose, Elizabeth; Fannie; Flounders, Lillie; Hoey, Pat.; Jones, Stanley M.; Keith, William; Kellam, H. S. and Charlie; Kennedy, James T.; Klemerman, Max; Klubertanz, Capt. Ferdinand A.; Lawlen, Wm. J.; Linn, Ayrus H.; Longaere, Miss Florence; Magee, Rupert; Maloney, Jane; Maret, John T.; Masters, Owen, Joel; McBride, Robt. E.; McNealy, Edgar; McNealy, Louise; Moore, Frank Kenny K.; Myers, Jack; Perla, Carl; Powers, Jim; Richardson, Jesse; Shaw, Corp. A. W.; Sholler, Mrs. C.; Simpson, Miles; Stevenson, Alex; Thomas, "Red"; Toledo, Slim; Walker, Rupert; Webb, John; Willis, Amos Bradley; Yiskis, Johnnie.

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MISCELLANEOUS—Co. A. 26th Inf.: Penrod, Byrd W.; McGill, Wm. Radswapper; Dryer, Harry; Pamplum, Dusk; Mahan, Date Chris; Bainbridge, Reger J.; Co. D. 7th Inf.: Hillswork Hal; Anderson, Curly; Moore, Howard: Moore, Overall; Lt. Reb. P. P. C. L. I. "Paddy" Diamond U. S. 2nd Batt. 27th or 28th Regt. Inf.: U. S. S. *John Collins*, Crew of.

Please notify us at once when you have found your man.

MANUSCRIPTS UNCLAIMED

HASTLAR GAL BREATH: Ruth Gilfillan; Jack P. Robinson; Ray Ozmer; Miss Jimmie Banks; O. B. Franklin; Byron Chisholm; Wm. S. Hilles; A. B. Paradis; G. E. Hungerford; E. E. S. Atkins; A. Gaylord; E. J. Moran; F. S. Emerson; E. Murphy, J. Higmon; L. E. Patten; J. E. Warner, Sinn, Cardie, T. T. Bennett, C. E. Wilson.

UNCLAIMED mail is held by Adventure for the following persons, who may obtain it by sending us present address and proof of identity.

BEATON, SGT. MAJOR G. M.; Benson, Edwin Worth; Bertsch, Elizabeth; Bonner, Major J. S.; Mrs. Brownell; Carpenter, Capt. Robert S.; "Chink"; Coles; Bobby; Cook, Elliot D.; Cook, William N.; Cosby, Arthur F.; Crashley, Wm. T.; Eager, Paul Roman; Erwin, Phil; Fairfax, Boyd; Fisher, Edward E.; Fisher, Sgt. R.; Garson, Ed.; Gerdon, W. A.; Green, Billy; Green, W.; Hale, Robert E.; Harris, Walter J.; Hart, Jack.; Harwood, J.; Heffman, J. M.; Hughes, Frank E.; Hunt, Daniel O'Connell; Jackson, Robert R.; Kohlhammer, Jack; Kuckaby, William Francis; Kuhn, Edward; Kutcher, Sgt. Harry; Lafler, Mrs. Harry; Lancaster, C. E.; Larisey, Jack; Lauger, Harry; Lee, Dr. C.; Lee, Capt. Harry, A. R. C.; Lee, Dr. William R.; Lewis, Warburton; "Lonely Jack"; Lovett, Harold S.; McAdams, W. B.; MacDonald, Tony; Madsen, Sgt. E. E.; Martel, Leon H.; Nelson, Frank Lovell; O'Hara, Jack; Parker, G. A.; Parker, Dr. M.; Parrott, Pvt. D. C.; Phipps, Corbett C.; Rich, Wagener Bob; Rinkenbach, Frank; Rundle, Merrill G.; Schmidt, G.; Scott, Pvt. James F.; Swan, George L.; Tripp, Edward N.; Van Tyler, Chester; Von Gelucke, Byron; Ward, Frank B.; Wheeler, S. H.; Williams, W. P.; C. H.; L. T. 348; S. 177284; 439; WS-XV.

PLEASE send us your present address. Letters forwarded to you at address given us do not reach you.—Address L. B. BARRETTO, care of *Adventure*.