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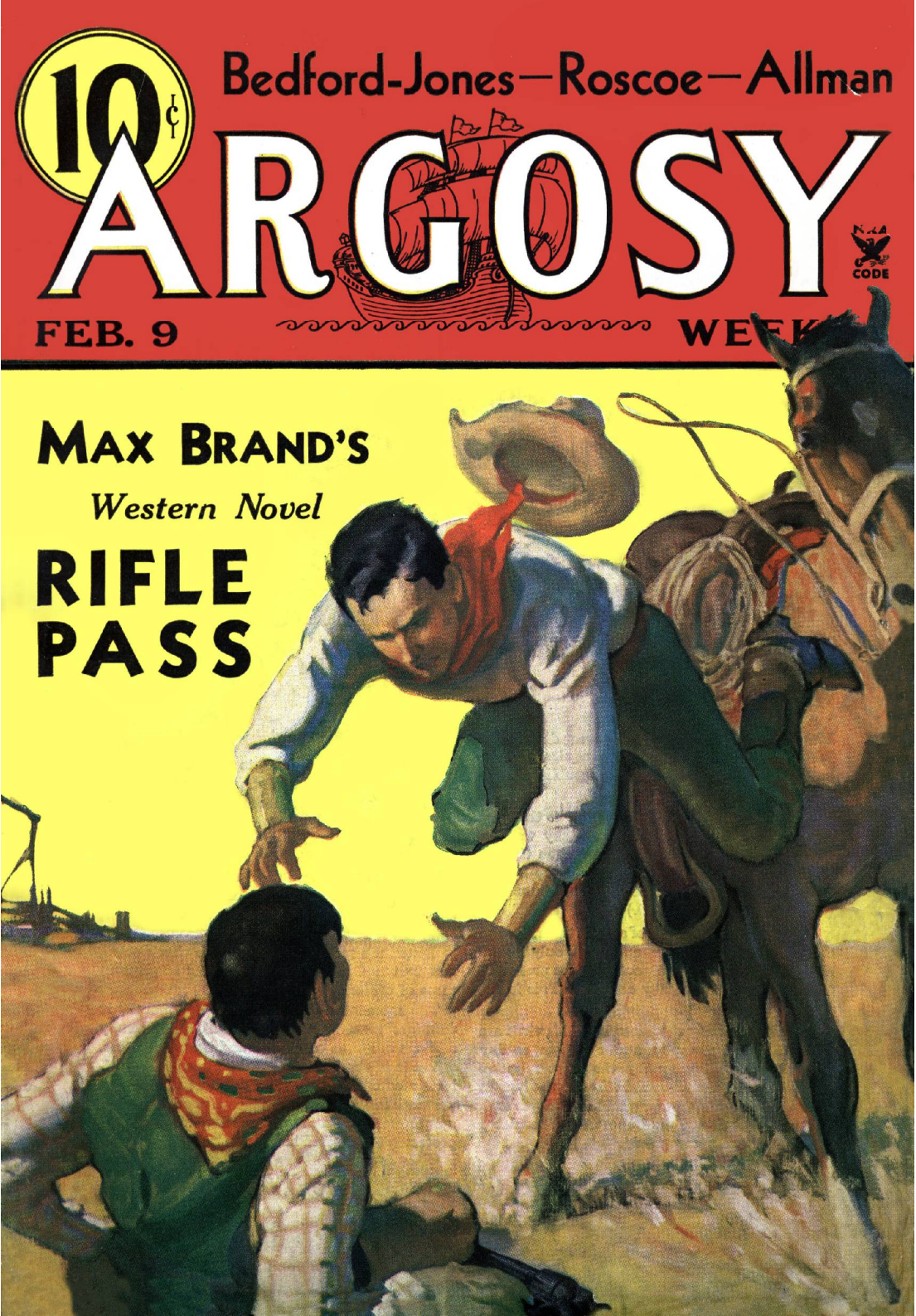

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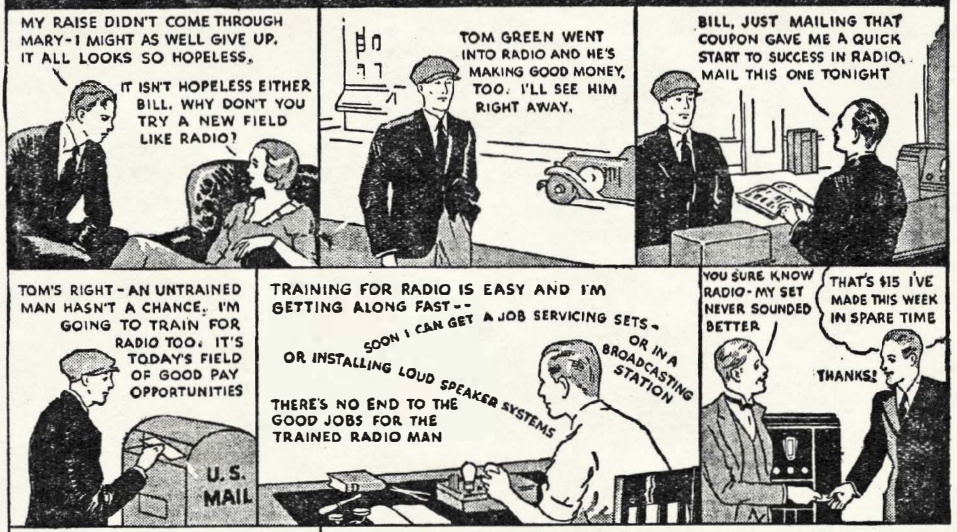

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Action Stories of Every Variety

Volume 253 CONTENTS FOR FEBRUARY 9, 1935 Number 3

NOVEL, NOVELETTES AND SHORT STORIES

SERIALS

OTHER FEATURES

This magazine is on sale every Wednesday

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Rifle Pass

Complete Novel

By MAX BRAND
Author of "Scourge of the Rio Grande," "Brother of the Cheyennes," etc.

"My God, I wish he'd been born dead. He'll pour shame over ten generations of honest men"—declared Sheriff Weller of his desperado son

CHAPTER I.

UNLOCKED HANDCUFFS.

THE sheriff said: "There was a Weller at sea when the Constitution sunk the Guerriere. There was a Weller at the taking of Mexico City. There was a Weller under Sheridan and another under Mosby. There was a Weller that died with Custer. And I've been sheriff of this country for twenty years. Not that I rank with the rest of the family. But I've kept on riding, and I've never turned my back. And now the Wellers come down to you—to you—and there's not another man in the family. You're the last. And you spend your time playing cards, thrumming on a damned guitar, making love to girls, and lazying

Dick was fleeing at full speed, with the rescued prisoner behind him

around the ranch smoking cigarettes."

He pulled a long, sleek Colt forty-five with an eight-inch barrel from the holster. "Take this!" he directed.

Young Dick Weller took the revolver without rising from his position of perfect leisure in the veranda hammock. He had the long, sleek, easy lines of a mountain lion and a smile which was the most good natured and disarming that a man could wear. He used that smile on his father now, but it had no effect on the iron-gray sheriff. Thomas Weller had become a sheriff, devil, had appeared on the horizon, and since that day the rustling of cattle had increased, to say nothing of stage and even train holdups. Ranches were raided constantly. In the three big towns there had been three big bank robberies. And the people who had looked up to Sheriff Tom Weller for twenty years were beginning to murmur against him more than a little.

"This gun," said the idle son who was to inherit all the wealth of the family—and the family's unstained name—dandled the long Colt for a

The deputy sheriff opened up a fusillade

twenty years before, in order to carry on the bold tradition of public service in the Weller family and also because his huge holdings of land and cattle made it necessary for him to keep a close eye upon law and order. For twenty years he had struggled, and after all his ten wounds and his many battles he could only say that he had succeeded in part. Five years before, Papa Lermond, that prematurely bald young son of a lightning flash and the moment and then said: "Has a good feel. Nice balance to this gun, dad."

"Look yonder," said the sheriff. "You see that pair of crows on the fence, there? Knock them off it. Sit up and try your luck!"

"I'll try my luck lying down," said Dick Weller, and swaying the gun to the side he flicked the hammer twice with his thumb. One crow disappeared from the top of its post, leaving a puff of black feathers hanging in the air.

The other shining bird left some feathers behind it, also, but rose with a startled squawking, then dipped towards the ground to gather more speed, quickly.

It kept on dipping, however. The revolver spoke the third time from the leisurely hand of Dick Weller, and the black crow skidded along the ground, turning over and over. It lay still. Only the wind fluttered the red-stained feathers.

"Shoots high and to the right," said young Dick Weller. "I wouldn't have it for a gift."

The sheriff narrowed his eyes. He was still staring at the two dead birds, but he seemed to be seeing his own thoughts, farther away than the dim horizon.

"Get your own guns, then," he said. "Saddle your own horse, the best you've got, and go get Harry Sanford for me. I appoint you deputy sheriff for this job."

"All right," said the son. "But who's Harry Sanford?"

"He's the right-hand man of Papa Lermond."

"Why go after Lermond's right hand? Why not go after Lermond himself?" asked the son.

"Why not go after the blue in the sky?" demanded the sheriff. "What I been doing for five years except trying to get Lermond? Do what I tell you, and do it fast!"

"Yeah. But tell me where this Sanford hangs out, and what sort of a looking hombre he is," answered Dick Weller.

"He's big. Dark as a Mexican. Last seen down near San Jacinto on the river."

"What's he done, recently?"

"Raised hell all over the map. Some crooks run off the cattle from his ranch and now he seems to think that the world owes him a livin'."

"Dad," said Dick Weller, "you know where he is and what he looks like. Why don't you give this job to Hughie Jacobs or Walt Miller, or one of the other deputies that's all set to make himself a big reputation?"

"You—" said the sheriff, "you don't need any reputation, eh?"

"I'd rather take it easy till there's some excitement around," answered Dick Weller.

"You know what you're going to be?" said the sheriff. "You're going to be a disgrace to the family name. There's plenty of people right now that say you haven't the *nerve* to be a man!"

"People will always be talking," said Dick Weller.

"Get up and out of that hammock and go get your horse and guns!" shouted the older Weller. "I don't want to see you back under my roof till you've put young Sanford in jail! Understand?"

"Well," answered Dick Weller, "that sounds pretty serious, I must say."

He sat up, slowly, in the hammock.

"I don't come back till I'm carrying the bear-meat. Is that it? I come back with blood on my hands or I don't come at all?"

"Say it any way you please," said the sheriff. "I'd rather see you dead than talked about the way people do now."

"All right," said Dick Weller. "I'd better go and make a reputation for myself."

SAN JACINTO was a mere junk heap of a town—mud walls with whitewash daubed over the dobe bricks. The white rubbed off near the ground and the occasional rains washed

away small portions of the walls. The streets were deep in dust, which made them comfortable resting places for the pigs, dusting baths for the chickens and playgrounds for the children. The back yards of the little houses contained grave vines; the front yards contained hitching racks. San Jacinto produced, every evening, a certain number of tortillas and frijoles, a certain amount of wretchedly empty bellies, and a certain amount of song.

Dick Weller, riding down the street with his guitar, thrummed the instrument and made a contribution to the song. People came to the doorways and gave him their Mexican smiles, which are the most brilliant in the world—more white and less pink than the smile of the Negro.

He waited until he saw a girl in one of those doorways, the young body silhouetted slenderly against the lampshine from inside the hut. Then he stopped his horse, lifted his sombrero, swept it through a liberal arc in the greatness of his courtesy.

"*Señorita,*" he said, "I am looking for a *compadre* of mine, Harry Sanford. Where shall I find him?"

The gruff voice of a man growled: "Maria, be still!"

But she answered: "What harm could come from such a *caballero? Señor,* you will find him in the cabin there on that side, in the house at the far end of the street, against the river."

"And where shall I find you, my lady?" asked he. "In the heart of what song, lovely Maria?"

Dick Weller rode on, while the girl in fact sent her pretty laughter after him, and he heard a man growling: "That music is smooth enough; I could sharpen a knife on it!"

Down to the end of the village passed Dick Weller before he dismounted and went on foot to the little house at the edge of the river.

The sunset lay like bright, flowing oils on the slack of the river; and the damp coolness passed gratefully into the air. Climbing vines shrouded the small house, to distinguish it from all the rest in the adjoining town; one light shone through a window, but the man of the place still sat outside to enjoy the evening, his chair tipped back against the wall as tall Dick Weller stepped around the corner of the house.

"Mr. Harry Sanford, I presume?" said Dick Weller, a gun in his hand.

But the gun was held low, hardly higher than the hip, and perhaps it was this casual position of the revolver that made Harry Sanford try his luck in a desperate chance. He leaned slightly to the left and snatched a sawed-off shotgun which stood against the wall beside him.

The thumb of Weller caressed the hammer of his gun without actually firing the shot. Instead, he stepped a little closer and with a whip-snap movement of his left arm drove the hard fist against the chin of Sanford. The other spilled loosely back against the wall. He would have fallen from the chair if Weller had not clicked a pair of handcuffs over his wrists and held him up by the chain which linked them.

Sanford, recovering himself, groaned heavily. Flying footfalls and the whishing of skirts brought a dark beauty of a girl into the doorway, exclaiming: "Harry? Anything wrong?"

Then the sight of the gun and the handcuffs stopped her, staggered her against the side of the door.

"Wife?" said Weller.

"Sister," said Sanford. "What are you?"

"Hm!" murmured Weller. "Sister? Get up and go inside."

Sanford rose.

"You could have drilled me clean!" he commented. "Who are you?"

"Dick Weller. Come along, Harry."

They passed into the shack. There were only two rooms. A mist and hissing of cookery came from the kitchen door, and by the table, on which plates were laid out and knives and forks, stood the girl. Her face was sun-darkened with fear.

"Listen, sister," said Dick Weller, "why not lay the table for three?" And he took from his pocket the key that unlocked the handcuffs.

CHAPTER II.

COVERT SIGNAL.

BACK in the little moldy hotel of San Jacinto, that night, Dick Weller wrote what was for him a long, carefully written letter:

DEAR DAD:

BAD LUCK! HARRY SANFORD GOT AWAY. THE PAIR OF HANDCUFFS I HAVE WITH ME ARE STILL EMPTY. ALL I CAN GIVE YOU IS A DESCRIPTION OF THE SISTER OF THE CRIMINAL.

NAME: MURIEL. HEIGHT: ABOUT FIVE FEET SIX. WEIGHT: ABOUT RIGHT. EYES: BLUE. HAIR: BLACK AS A CROW'S WING. N.B. WITH THE SAME SHINE IN IT. FOREHEAD: BROAD. NOSE: STRAIGHT AND SMALL. MOUTH: DELIGHTFUL. CHEEKS: DIMPLED. CHIN: PERFECT. THROAT: DIVINE. VOICE: LIKE A SONG. SHOULD SHE BE ARRESTED FOR COMPLICITY, MALICE AFORETHOUGHT, OR ANYTHING LIKE THAT?

I WAIT HERE IN SAN JACINTO FOR YOUR ORDERS RESPECTING HER.

YOUR OBEDIENT SON,

RICHARD.

As Dick Weller was finishing this careful report in his room at the hotel he heard the trampling of many hoofs down the street, the sounds muffled by the deep, soft dust; he heard the jingle of spurs and went to the window in the hope of beholding an array of bright Mexican *caballeros,* always a sight to fill any eyes. But what he saw, instead, was a procession of four riders who guarded a handcuffed prisoner with naked guns. The leader of the procession was that human bloodhound, Hugh Jacobs. The sight of his starved face—for famine seemed to live in the heart of the man—sent a shudder through Dick Weller. There was only one reason why Hugh Jacobs served the law. It was because he liked to shoot at bigger game than bear and deer.

The same ray of broad, soft, yellow lamplight that had struck on the face of Hugh Jacobs drifted, in turn, over the features of the prisoner, and Weller saw the dark, handsome fellow he had met that evening at sunset—Harry Sanford!

The trail that Hugh Jacobs followed with his prisoner and the escort led up from the river bottom through a rough trail which was thickly bordered, here and there, by growths of tall brush. The horses went rather slowly because they had covered a good deal of ground on this day, and because the night was still and hot. When they reached the height of the trail among the hills, a movement of air was sure to make breathing more easy. In the meantime, the unseen dust rose in clouds and turned their throats dry.

Harry Sanford was saying: "The sheriff's been after me for a long time. He'll be proud of you, Jacobs. What sort of a fellow is the sheriff?"

"He's all right," said Jacobs.

"He has a son. What about Dick Weller?"

"No good," said the blunt Jacobs.

"I've heard he's quite a man," answered the prisoner.

"You've heard wrong. Shut up now. I've done enough talkin' to last me."

They toiled up another bend of the trail, the formidable Hugh Jacobs always in the lead with a rifle balanced across his saddle-bow, and then two men riding side by side with the prisoner. The fourth member of the group formed the rearguard. They were urging their horses a little more rapidly, now, in the hope of coming suddenly on the better air; and they had a thin sickle of a moon to give them light.

It painted black shadows under the rocks, but that light did not penetrate a thick copse at the right of the trail. Hugh Jacobs was just beside this thicket when a rider burst out from it with his horse on the spur, as suddenly as a bird from a cloud. The length of revolver-barrel clanged on the hard side of the head of Jacobs; but as he pitched from the saddle he yelled: "Dick Weller—turned crook—"

HUGH JACOBS, landing half stunned, picked up his fallen rifle and was about to use it when he saw that the rider who had dropped on them so suddenly had tumbled all three of his chosen men aside and was now fleeing at full speed, with the rescued prisoner beside him.

The deputy sheriff, waiting until he had a chance to shoot without endangering one of his own men, opened up a fusillade. But his hand was just a trifle unsteady and the moonlight was more than a trifle obscure. The result was that he was pumping lead into thin air, and very well knew it. His three men, following the example of their leader, did not pursue the fugitives. They merely sat still in their saddles and emptied their rifles.

And then the pair had disappeared among the big rocks of the lower valley and only the heat and ring of distant hoofs floated vaguely back to the ears of Hugh Jacobs.

Pursuit was not a useful thing. The horses of his own men were tired out; those of the fugitives were comparatively fresh and of a good quality, also. Rage burned the heart of Jacobs till his whole soul was dry.

"Did I hear you sing out that that crook was the sheriff's son?" asked one of the men.

"You heard right," said Jacobs.

"He wore a black mask, Hughie," said another.

"The jump of his hoss moved the mask up; I see him fair and square as he come bustin' at me out of the trees. It was the son of Weller, right enough. And—by God, I hope he hangs for it! I hope I have the pleasure of pullin' on the rope that chokes him!"

"But wait a minute, Hughie. Why would a gent like that want to spoil his old man's work?"

"Because he's a damned worthless, useless good-for-nothing, and that kind, they always take more pleasure out of doin' one wrong than out of doin' ten rights."

It was on the next day that the sheriff sat in his office glowering at a letter which informed him that Muriel Sanford, sister of the criminal, was five feet six, her weight about right, her eyes blue, hair black and shining as a crow's wing, mouth delightful, cheeks dimpled, throat divine, and voice like a song. He had just said "Bah!" two or three times and crumpled the paper to hurl it into the waste basket beside his spur-scarred desk when his leading deputy, the formidable Hugh Jacobs, burst into the room with a purple lump on his forehead.

"Where's Sanford?" demanded the sheriff.

"I had him, and he's gone," said Jacobs. "Your fine, high-priced son that got all the book education, he jumped us on the trail and set Sanford loose!"

"Hold on—" gasped the sheriff. "Jumped you on the trail—but there were four of you, Jacobs!"

Hugh Jacobs swallowed. He took a long breath and blew it out again with an audible wheeze before he was able to say:

"Was I gunna shoot your own son, Weller?"

"You'd shoot the two of us, or the two of anybody, if you had a safe chance," said the sheriff truthfully. "What happened?"

"I been to the paper and told them all about it. I reckon that you'll be able to read it this evenin'," said Jacobs.

He raised a long, bony forefinger.

"I'm gunna foller him till I have it out with him!" he said.

"You won't have far to go," said the sheriff. And he spoke with a white and hard-set face. "It's the first disgrace to the Weller name, and it's going to be the last one. Find Sanford's sister; Dick won't be far away."

"If I go hunting him, I go with guns," said the deputy savagely.

"Yes," said the sheriff, whiter than ever, but his eyes burning. "There's only one law in this country and it goes for everybody in the land. My God, I wish he'd been born dead. He'll pour shame over ten generations of honest men that wore the name before him!"

THE papers did the thing justice, if not honor, by devoting big headlines to the tale. The three leading papers of the three leading towns in the county had not handled news as hot as this for a long time and they spread themselves.

Some of the space was taken up at the expense of Deputy Sheriff Jacobs, who was very well known and cordially hated. And the outstanding fact was that Jacobs and three of his picked men had been swept aside so that the prisoner could be free.

Instantly, young Weller became "the notorious desperado, Dick Weller."

Motives had to be found for this delivery, and of course the deep editorial brains surmised that there must have been a long connection between the two men.

"Dick Weller was probably desperate. A hidden career of crime was about to be exposed. He dared not wait for the moment when Sanford was compelled to answer the questioning of a district attorney. The result was the onslaught which overpowered Deputy Sheriff Jacobs and three picked men."

There was the usual dripping verbiage on the editorial pages: "Dishonorable son of an honest father—an old and esteemed name smudged forever."

But Dick Weller, as he rode down a mountain trail thrumming his guitar, lifted his head and sang with a cheerfulness that set the valley ringing. He had read those newspapers and laughed at them because he could not help feeling that a man's act is no worse than the purpose that inspired it, and if it was evil to love such a girl as Muriel Sanford, this was too strange a world for his understanding. As for the depth of trouble to which he had committed himself, it never entered his mind. That was why he sang so loudly and so long as he descended the mountain trail.

The cabin, when he saw it, was to him like a smiling face, and the bright flash of the stream that curved about it, whitening with speed along the mountainside, made him laugh aloud, interrupting his singing.

For Muriel Sanford was in that cabin, he was sure. He sent his mustang ahead at a strong gallop, with never a glance behind him; but even if he had paused to scan every boulder, every

HUGHIE JACOBS

shrub, he hardly could have spotted the cadaverous face of Deputy Sheriff Hugh Jacobs or the dozen men who received his covert signal to close in on the little house.

CHAPTER III.

"CLOSE IN, BOYS!"

WHEN Dick Weller came closer to the cabin he began to sing a song about the foolish world which built roads to Rome, whereas for him all roads led to Muriel. The girl came laughing into the doorway to greet him. The wind gave the old blue calico dress line and grace about her.

Dick Weller dismounted, stripped bridle and saddle from the mustang, and picked from the saddle the limp bodies of four long-legged jackrabbits.

"But you had no rifle!" exclaimed the girl, taking that solid weight of fresh meat.

"No rifle?" exclaimed a big man, who loomed inside the shack. "Shootin' rabbits with a Colt?"

He came glaring at Weller as though at a liar.

"This is Martin Tully," said the girl. "He knows that you're Dick Weller."

"How are you, Martin?" said Weller, shaking hands. "I've heard a lot about you."

"Have you?" said Martin Tully, still staring from the dead rabbits to the hunter who carried no rifle.

"Oh, I've heard quite a lot," went on Weller. "You're Papa Lermond's right-hand man, aren't you?"

"Pa Lermond and I get along pretty good," growled Tully. "What else you heard about me?"

He stood leering with vanity. The girl had gone towards the stove and with swift hands began to cut up the rabbits.

"I've heard about the killing of Porky Morgan, and the cutting up of the Donald brothers, and the stealing of the Crispin horse, and the murder of those two fellows in the Second National the other day at Buffalo Crossing—"

"Murder?" said Martin Tully.

The girl started and whirled half around. Dick Weller continued to smile.

"What else would you call it?" he asked.

He hung his hat on a nail, poured some water into a basin, and began to wash his face and hands thoroughly. But he still wore his guns.

"Murder you call it, eh?" said Martin Tully. "What would you do if a fool stood up and sassed you back? You with no time on your hands? But—how'd you get to these rabbits? You never hit four jackrabbits in one morning with a Colt!"

"I tell you how I do it," said Dick Weller. "I sing them a song first, and when they hear me sing they have to stick their ears up and listen, and while they're listening I just walk up and shoot them through the head."

"The head?" growled Martin.

"Otherwise, a forty-five caliber slug wastes too much meat," said Weller.

Martin Tully, staring at the rabbits, saw that in fact each of them was shot through the head, the big slugs making frightful wounds.

"You sing to 'em, do you?" he murmured.

"I always sing before I shoot," said Dick Weller. "It makes things die happy."

"Men, for instance?" growled Tully.

"Why not?" asked Weller, with his bright smile. "Look at little Tommy Tucker, who sang for his supper!"

"What?" exclaimed Tully, suspiciously.

"Dick," ordered the girl, "you be good."

"And bring in a pail of water? I shall," said he.

He took the pail and held it over the wash basin which he had just emptied. and said:

"There's enough water here to wash one side of your face, Tully. You want it, don't you?"

"Hey, what you mean by that?" asked Tully, making a stride forward.

"I mean that Muriel will lend you the soap. She's a big-hearted girl!"

HE emptied the water into the basin and went singing through the doorway. Down to the spring he went, unknowing of six rifles which levelled at him from convenient range. But the range was not close enough to suit Deputy Sheriff Hugh Jacobs, who already had the smack and taste of sweet death against his palate. He held fire, and the others did not dare to shoot first. Hugh Jacobs was waiting hungrily for the day when he would be able to walk into the office of Sheriff Weller and say: "I put in a good week's work. I've just killed your son." He could say that safely and gloat in silence.

That moment, he felt, would feed in him the malice of a lifetime.

So Hugh Jacobs held his fire and Dick Weller returned safely to the cabin. As he neared it he heard the growling voice of Martin Tully saying: "I dunno that I'll stand it."

Weller went in.

"Here's enough water for both sides of your face and half your neck, Martin. Help yourself. I love to carry water in a good cause."

Martin Tully had a face which was almost exactly square. A slit of a mouth divided it almost exactly in half, because the chin of Martin was very large and his forehead was very low. This slit widened to the ears in a grin of rage.

"Are you maybe kidding me?" he demanded. "And what was that about murder, a while back? Murder was the word you used, kid!"

"It's a term that means, for instance, walking up behind a man, leveling a gun, and shooting him through the back. You've done that, Mr. Murderer Martin."

"Martin! Dick!" exclaimed the frightened girl.

But Dick, standing cheerfully erect near the door, began to sing, very softly:

A crop-eared mule
And a one-legged stool;
An unpainted shack,
A chimney up the back . . .

Martin Tully, leaning his wide shoulders forward, stood in a perfect attitude to charge with his fists, or to snatch out a gun. But the song seemed to charm him. His face, which had altered in color a trifle, relaxed some of its fierceness. He ran the red tip of his tongue across his dry lips and then straightened.

"You're one of these funny kind of birds, eh?" said he. "Well, I guess you're all right. And I'm bringin' word to you from the chief—from Pa Lermond. He thinks that maybe he could use you, and he's willin' to see you."

"Tell Lermond," said Dick Weller, "that when I see him it will be with a gun in my hand. I hope he lasts till I get my own bullets in him."

"Tell him what?" gaped Martin Tully.

"Tell him I hope to sing the last song he'll ever hear."

"I *will* tell him that, by God, and I'll start for him now!" exclaimed Tully in a rage. "You may be drunk and you may be crazy, but Lermond is gunna hear the words exactly the way you spoke them!"

"Thanks," said Weller, and watched the big fellow catch up a sombrero and stamp out of the shack.

"Wait—Dick, you can't send a message like that to Lermond!" exclaimed the girl. "I'll call him back!"

"Don't do it," commanded Weller. "I've seen all that I can stand of him. I may be living outside the law, but I'm not rubbing elbows with murder."

The pounding of the hoofs of a horse began near the cabin and rushed away from it.

The girl, from the doorway, looked anxiously after the rider. Neither she nor big Tully could realize how many trigger fingers were itching to shoot at the fugitive, waiting in vain for the deputy sheriff to commence the firing. But Hugh Jacobs was not wasting ammunition.

There was only one target at which he cared to shoot, on this day, and his gun was consecrated to that high purpose alone.

INSIDE the shack the girl turned back to her cookery. She was very worried.

"Suppose that Lermond gets this news," she said. "He'll never rest until he has you at some advantage, Dick."

He merely answered: "If I thought that Lermond didn't hate me I'd hate myself. Where's Harry?"

"He rode over to Crystal Creek."

"For what?"

She drew a great breath.

"I don't know," she said.

"You're doing a lot of fast guessing, though," said Weller. "Has he gone because we're broke again?"

"I don't dare to think, Dick," answered the girl.

"If we have to have more money," said Dick Weller, "it's time for me to contribute my share."

"You *must* not!" she exclaimed. "You've never broken the law, yet. You can't begin. If you do a single wrong thing it will break my heart, Dick!"

"I've done enough to make them want me—wearing guns while they come!" he told her.

"That was for the sake of poor Harry!" said the girl. "When I think what we've drawn you down to—"

"Hush," said Weller. "I did it for myself. And I'm proud of it, not ashamed. I'm not worrying about Dick Weller. I'm worrying about you. What's becoming of your life, out here in calico and cooking jackrabbit and canned tomatoes for a pair of tramps like Harry and me?

"You ought to be trying on engagement rings and refusing them because the diamonds are too small."

"Sit down here, Dick," said the girl, smiling up at him. "While you're eating you can't say so many foolish things."

"There's one foolish thing that I've been planning to say to you," said Weller, as he pulled back a chair and sat down.

He leaned forward eagerly. "Know what it is, Muriel?" he asked.

"I know what it is," she answered. She shook her head at him. "I'm the hundredth girl, I suppose."

"Hundredth? What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean that. Why, Dick, you're famous for loving girls and leaving them. I *do* love you, but not that way. You're the straightest and the cleanest fellow I've ever known, but—"

He had jumped up to protest, and as he moved a rifle clanged close to the house.

Deputy Sheriff Hugh Jacobs had drawn a sure bead on a man seated quietly in a chair.

He could not believe the trigger finger and the sure eye that told him the target suddenly had jumped away from his shot; and now he raised his voice with a great shout: "Close in! Close in!"

Answering voices ringed the cabin around on every side.

CHAPTER IV.

LONE RIDER.

LISTENING to those shouts, tall Dick Weller said: "That's old sawdust Jacobs come for me. So long, Muriel. I'm going out to have a talk with him."

She used both hands to catch one of his.

"If you move a step from the door I'll go with you! Listen, Dick—if they hurt you they've hurt you for my sake and Harry's. Wait till he comes back. He'll be here by the evening!"

"There are a dozen of them, at least," answered Weller, calmly. "Harry couldn't raise this siege."

"Hey! Weller!" sang out a long-drawn, nasal voice.

"Hello, Hughie," answered Dick Weller. "I've been missing you, old sawdust! How's the place where your marrow ought to be, old buzzard?"

He stood close to the door, smiling as he talked. And the girl, throwing herself into a chair, buried her face in her arms.

"I hear you, Weller!" called Hugh Jacobs. "Are you gunna come out and surrender?"

"I could surrender to anybody but you, Hughie. I couldn't knuckle under to a carrion-eater like you."

A brief, wild yell of rage answered this taunt, but a dim sound of laughter came from other places near the shack.

"If you don't surrender, send the gal out of that shack," shouted Jacobs.

"You hear that, beautiful?" asked Weller. "You've got to leave the shack."

"I won't stir from it. They can't

drag me away from you," she answered.

"She says that she won't go, Hughie. Will you send in a man to take her away by force? I'll promise not to salt him down with lead while he's doing the job."

"You think that I'd trust the word of a thing like you?" asked the deputy sheriff. "If she won't come out, and come quick, I'm gonna have the boys open up, and we'll comb that shack high and low, Weller."

"You hear me, Hughie? Are you half the man that people think you are, or do you really prefer, as most of us know, to shoot your game from behind?"

"Who says that I shoot from behind?" yelled the deputy.

"We all know about the case of Tim Hoolihan in El Paso," said Weller.

"You lie!" shouted Jacobs. "He turned to run. I couldn't help shootin' as he turned to run!"

"Is that so? What about Jake Marberry, down on the Little Big Horn?"

"I never shot him from behind!"

"That's what you say. The rest of us know the truth."

"You lie, and lie, and lie!" yelled the deputy.

"There was Stan Wilder, too; and Vince Gresham. All shot in the back, you murdering crow!"

"I tell you—by God!" cried the deputy, choked with wrath and with virtue, "I shot them all fair and square, fightin'. Nobody can say—"

"You old sawdust liar," said Dick Weller. "You know that you were never in your life in a fair fight."

"Are you gone clean crazy?" shouted the deputy. "Didn't a hundred men see me face Jack Western?"

"After you got the bartender to put dope in his beer," said Dick Weller.

"If you stand out here, fair and square, I'll prove what I can do on *you!*" screamed the maddened deputy.

"You wouldn't dare. The moment that I stepped out you'd tip the wink and have one of your own men shoot me from behind. That's all you understand—murder! Murder!"

But, turning towards the girl, Dick Weller laughed a little, silently. And the girl stared at him with eyes which were empty of everything but wonder.

"I swear to God A'mighty!" raved the deputy, "that if you step out of that door I'll meet you fair and square and we'll shoot when somebody hollers a signal. Dick Weller, if you got half the makin's of a man in you you'll come out here and take your chance with me!"

"I'm coming now!" called Weller.

And before the girl could cry out he had issued boldly from the doorway.

In fact, she tried to follow, but utter terror made her knees fail under her.

DICK WELLER was walking calmly from the house, smiling, his hat well on the back of his head.

"Where are you, sawdust?" he asked. "Where are you, old August heat? Where's Cactus Hughie? Where's the king snake? Where's Mr. Shot-in-the-back Jacobs?"

The deputy sheriff appeared suddenly from beside a great rock near the well. He had jammed his sombrero far down over his head, and he stood like a blue crane, his shoulders bunched and his head thrusting forward at the end of his long neck.

"All right, Hughie," said Weller, walking steadily towards him. "What sort of a trick is there in this job? How many of your men have been tipped to sink lead in me?"

"Not one — you r o t t e n liar!" screamed Hughie Jacobs. "There ain't a man of them that don't know, if he shoots on his own account, he's gunna have it out with me afterwards."

"And what would that mean to any of them?" asked Weller. "They all laugh at you, Hughie, just as I laugh."

He began to sing, actually laughing through the words:

Here is the beanstalk and castle, alack!
Where shall I find my bonny boy, Jack?

"Take this to hell with you!" yelled Jacobs, and snatched out his gun.

Weller leaped sidewise like a frightened cat and fired at the flash of the steel in the sunlight. His own draw was so lightning fast that the advantage of the first move was quite stolen from the deputy sheriff. And the bullet, striking true by something far more than chance, knocked the heavy Colt out of the hand of Jacobs and flung it back against his body.

The deputy stared for an instant at his numbed, empty fingers, then snatched up the fallen weapon with his left hand.

He should have been dead long before he leaned for the gun, and he knew it. He was expecting the shock of a forty-five caliber slug through flesh and bones, tearing its way, every split second of this time of expectation. But the bullet did not come; the gun did not speak. Instead, a shadow flashed past him, skidding rapidly over the ground, and as he half straightened, the gun in his hand, he saw tall Dick Weller, racing like a deer, dodging from sight among the great boulders down the gulley.

The whole of the posse was up now, and firing at the fugitive, shouting with excitement. But the deputy cried: "The hosses! He'll get to the hosses! Run, for God's sake! And shoot straight—straight—"

He himself set the example. But it was not because he had any hope of overtaking the flying feet of the fugitive; it was merely that he hoped, running to this side and then to that, that he might get a clean chance at Weller.

Twice and again he had a glimpse and used it for a shot, but each time

DICK WELLER

he knew, with the instinct of the perfect marksman, that he had missed his target by a scant inch or two.

THERE was another hope—that Chuck Thomas, w o r t h y and proven fighter who had been left behind the shoulder of the hill in charge of the horses a mile away, might hear the rattling of the guns and come out to meet the runner, rifle in hand. Chuck was not a fellow to miss his shot. He was not a fellow to give up a chance at a fight for money or for fun.

In fact, Chuck did finally hear that distant uproar, and, coming up from behind the tree where he held the long line of the horses, their reins all tied together, he got on top of a low rock and shaded his eyes with his hands to stare.

He could make out figures swarming down the gulley; he could see the quick flashing of the sun on naked weapons; but he failed to look much nearer at hand, where a man ducked in behind some screening boulders and slipped swiftly down upon him. All that Chuck knew was, at last, a leaping shadow behind him, and as he whirled he received a crushing blow that sent him staggering.

He was not actually put down, but he discovered, as his senses cleared, that his rifle had been caught from the ground, his revolver had been snatched from its holster.

He, with empty hands, while the rest of his comrades came up beside him, heard the slow drumming of hoofs, increasing rapidly in cadence. And then, sweeping rapidly up the slope beyond, he saw the whole line of the posse's horses being led away at full gallop by a single rider.

CHAPTER V.

GAME OLD DEVIL.

ON the whole, we can stand anything but laughter; and Hugh Jacobs could endure mirth less than any other man. When he saw, in the little four-page newspapers of those country towns, the full details of the escape of "Desperado Dick Weller," when he discovered that the entire countryside was laughing heartily, even editorially, at the discomfiture of the celebrated man-hunter, Hugh Jacobs, the heart of the deputy was consumed by fire.

He was pursued by only one dream —the lovely vision of tall Dick Weller staggering while the bullets of Jacobs smashed into that young body.

Some of his posse had pointed out that it was strange that Weller had taken such a chance as to run by the deputy instead of shooting him down and making the break through the cordon sure. As it was, Weller had played tag with death—and had almost been caught!

Jacobs would answer to this: "Weller is a cool kind of a rat; but that day he was rattled. He didn't do no thinkin'. He just started to run for his life when he seen me reach for my gun, because he knew that I was as good with the left hand as with the right, pretty nigh. That's the reason of it."

But, in his soul, he knew that this was not true. It had been on the part of Weller the magnanimity of the truly chivalrous spirit which will not strike at a disarmed and helpless figure.

And this thought, instead of easing the burning pain of the sheriff, made his heart ache all the more and made him yearn more than ever to cast his coils about the fugitive.

And even terrible Papa Lermond no longer received the attention that followed this new and startling outlaw. People spoke of him everywhere, and when they spoke they laughed. They always laughed! And why not?

The stories came in by the score. Here he had stopped for breakfast and scrupulously paid down fifty cents for ham and eggs. There he had appeared and courteously begged of an old rancher for a look at the last newspaper. Yonder he showed his head again at a school picnic high in the hills and played leapfrog with the youngsters. A harmless man, it seemed, except when he encountered Barney Ginnis.

Barney was a celebrity in his own right, and had built up as black a reputation as any two men would need

to get them through life. Behind him were clustered strange tales of dead men and the plunder of mines; to him were attributed half a dozen holdups of stages, and on his list were a dozen dead men. But there was never the actual damning proof which the law demands.

Then the story came in that Barney Ginnis, badly wounded, had been brought to the door of a doctor's house in a small village and left in the doctor's hands by a tall man who answered the description of Dick Weller, and who borrowed the doctor's guitar and sang to his own accompaniment before he left. Men said that this surely had been Dick Weller, but Barney Ginnis lay on his back, slowly recovering his life and strength and would not speak a word to explain his "accident."

What actually had happened was as follows:

Barney Ginnis sat in front of his shack smoking a pipe and content with the world because he had in his pantry a saddle of venison, in his locker plenty of guns and ammunition, and in his heart the consciousness that he would never have to lift a hand again in labor so long as he lived. He looked upon the world with a grim amusement when he thought of how he had plundered it and yet the clumsy hand of the law had allowed him to slip from its vengeance time after time.

The brain of Barney Ginnis was as swift, direct, unhesitating as the forepaw of a wildcat. He could not appreciate subtleties which led to the loss of advantages.

DOWN the trail just above him came a rider who thrummed a guitar and whose gay voice proclaimed in song that kings have their thrones and misers their gold, the sky has its sun and rivers their sunlight, but he scorned them all because his lady filled his heart.

The tall rider with smiling eyes and a sun-browned face halted near Ginnis and said, cheerfully: "How are things, Barney?"

Barney looked at the stranger and said nothing. He was not unpleased by the young stranger, but he was so in the habit of being a churl that he could not change on the spur of the moment. He merely pulled on his pipe and looked away from the stranger towards a broad, flat-topped rock which lay near the spring that bubbled from the ground not far from the cabin.

"No news is always good news," said the stranger, cheerfully. "And as long as things are like this with you, I'd as soon tell you why I came. I want to borrow five or ten thousand dollars from you, Barney."

Even the rock-like calm of Barney was shaken by this remark. First he fingered the sawed-off shotgun, best of friends, which stood beside him; but then his wonder burst forth in the words: "Hey, whaddya mean?"

"Why," said the stranger, "you know how it is."

And then he sang in his pleasant voice:

Sharper than the tiger's eye
In the tooth of poverty;
Poverty is colder thrice
Than the winter's face of ice.

Barney Ginnis said nothing.

The man was not mad, he decided. But speech was not Barney's habit.

"That's why," explained the rider, "I've come to ask you for a loan."

"What sort of security?" asked Barney, finally. Not because he expected to have any faith in the answer, but because he wanted to prolong this

queer conversation, the queerest in which he had ever been a partner.

The stranger answered, thrumming his guitar and singing:

Craven hearts are never loath
To give lying words and oath;
Singing birds are in the hedge
And their music is my pledge.

"Take your blather down the trail," said Barney. "I've had enough of it."

"If I can't sing money out of you," said the other, "I'll have to shoot it out."

And he slung the guitar behind his saddle.

"Well, I'll be damned," said Barney, frankly.

He caught, not at the shotgun, but at the revolver which was to him as important as life and soul. But the hand of the rider flashed sudden steel and a heavy bullet smashed into the body of Barney. The impact knocked him backwards against the wall of the shack. Still there was fight in him, but instead of shooting into the sprawling body, the stranger leaped from his horse like a cat, kicked the gun out of the hand with which Barney was trying to lift it, and then stood back, thoughtfully.

"Sorry, Barney," he said. "I sang for my supper and you should have been generous."

"What's your name?" asked Barney.

"Dick Weller."

"Ah? You're him?" said Barney.

And he was comforted. He had dreamed, for a moment, that he was dying at the hand of a nameless man.

"Now, Barney," said Weller, "we can make a bargain."

"Yeah? Can we?" answered Barney Ginnis.

"I can leave you here to bleed to death," said Weller, calmly, "and bleeding to death is an easy way for *you* to die. And while you're dying I can hunt for your hidden money. Or else you can tell me where the money is, and then I'll pack you to the town and leave you on the doctor's front porch. How does that sound to you?"

BARNEY looked down to the blood that pulsed from his body. He was not afraid of death, and neither did he wish to throw away life.

"How would I be able to trust you?" he said.

"Look twice at me and you'll know that I do what I say."

"You'll find the money under the bread box inside," said Barney.

"Thanks," said the other, and stepped into the shack.

Everything was very neat, for no old maid is as precise as an old sourdough.

There was a tin box to keep bread fresh and moist. Under it Weller found a thin sheaf of greenbacks—a hundred or more dollars. He put this in his pocket and came outside again.

"That's a starter," he said. "Where's the rest?"

"There ain't any more," said Barney.

"All right," remarked Weller, and sat down to roll and light a cigarette. "There's no great hurry, except that you're bleeding to death."

Barney Ginnis looked again at the blood that pulsed out of his breast.

"Lift the flat stone by the spring."

So Weller went to the spring and heaved until he had raised up the big, flat stone. Under it he found a small hollow, filled by a package which was wrapped in tarpaulin. He took the tarpaulin by the edge and as he lifted the package unrolled and spilled on the ground—four thick sheaves of paper money in brown wrappers.

"Good boy, Barney," said Dick Weller. "I knew that you and I would get on together."

He sang:

One blink of your bonny blue een,
One sound of the lark in your voice;
Of all that I ever had seen,
There was Barney alone for my choice.

"I hope you rot half a grain a day in hellfire," said Barney Ginnis, and coughed red.

"We'll have to look into this," said Weller. "If doctors can save you, they're going to have their chance."

He got cloth from the house, made a packing of powder-dry dust to stop the bleeding, and bandaged the breast of Barney.

"How do you feel, old son?" asked Weller when he had lifted Barney to the saddle of his horse.

"Shut your mug, and get on," gasped Barney.

They went on, slowly, towards the village. Even when the lights of it gleamed in the distance, Barney was sure that the life would all have run out of him before ever he came to the town. And still he kept his grip on the pommel of the saddle and set his teeth hard against the black poison of despair.

And so he was surprised when, actually, Dick Weller helped him from the saddle and then, with astonishing strength, carried the bulk of Ginnis up the path to the porch of the doctor's house and knocked at the door.

Footfalls came at once, and Weller, leaning over the wounded man, said: "There they come, old-timer. They'll fix you up. You're a pretty game old devil, and when I ride past your shack again, I'm going to put back half of what I've taken under the big flat stone by the spring."

Perhaps that was why Barney, when they found him lying bleeding and silent, nevertheless wore a faint ghost of a grin on his iron face.

CHAPTER VI.

WATCHFUL WAITING.

DICK WELLER knew where to find Harry and Muriel Sanford, but the way to them was not easy. Outraged authorities had put a price on his head by this time, not because of things he had done, but because of crimes which could not be traced to malefactors and which were, therefore, shifted in blame to the head of that singing, careless, laughing desperado.

Besides, Dick Weller was in no great rush. It was true that he wanted to get Muriel and Harry out of the country and that he now had over forty thousand dollars in his pocket to foot the bill, even after restoring half the loot to the tarpaulin under the big flat rock; but since he had no means of accomplishing his purpose it was pleasant to loiter along the way.

Also, to gain the reward in cash and the greater reward of having put down such a famous man, posses had started out from all sorts of towns and were combing the range for him. No less than three times he almost ran into the toils.

And that gave the indefatigable deputy sheriff, Hugh Jacobs, the time necessary to prepare to strike again. It was not for Weller that he struck, directly, but, as he confided to the gray-faced sheriff: "I've spotted Harry Sanford and his sister again, I think; and if I can grab them I'll have Dick dead before long!"

The sheriff said nothing, because there was nothing for him to say. If

some people were a little sorry for the terrible plight in which he found himself with a wifeless and a childless life stretching ahead of him, there were always others to say, with the poisonous cruelty of the casual man: "It must be Weller's own son. A man gets out of his family what he puts into it. If you put nothing but cash into the raising of your son you'll reap nothing but trouble in the long run."

And so Hugh Jacobs went across country with his dozen picked men, all of them fellows who had been made fools of in that first great attempt to capture Dick Weller, three of them men who had twice before been baffled by the outlaw. For Hugh Jacobs knew perfectly well that there is only one way to use a beaten man, and that is to give him a chance to take his revenge. The result was that his dozen followers were ready to lay down their lives, if they could have a chance to strike one hard blow at famous Dick Weller.

The hint which had reached the ears of the deputy sheriff was that Harry Sanford and his sister, who so devotedly refused to leave the outlaw, were somewhere on the bank of the Tulomay River. So he went up the river as cautiously as a hunting cat and there, sure enough, he found Sanford and Muriel. They had the two covered with a dozen rifles in no time, while Sanford was busily cutting up a fat stag which he had just brought into camp. With the red unwashed from his hands he was tied against a tree and gagged. Muriel Sanford was tied also.

Deputy Sheriff Jacobs, licking his dry lips with savory satisfaction, said: "They've seen Dick Weller hither, and they've seen him yon, but we'll sure find him dodgin' into this here camp before long. So set tight and don't you make no noise."

However, as the hours of that afternoon wore on, and the evening came, Sanford was ungagged for a time, allowed to eat, and then fastened once more in his place.

The deputy said to him: "When he comes nigh the camp is he likely to holler out to make sure that everything's all right?"

But the other said nothing.

"He's sure likely to send in a holler," said the deputy. "And if you'll sing out that everything is all right I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll turn you and your sister loose. The point is, Sanford, that the law wants you pretty bad, but not the way it aches to lay hold of that rat of a Dick Weller."

Sanford laughed in his face; and the deputy, in a fury, struck Sanford a back-handed blow across the mouth that brought a stream of blood.

It was too bad that the deputy had drawn that blood. It was a thing which he would live to think about in other days.

HOWEVER, before he had the man gagged again he said to him: "You oughta see that your partner can't last it out. It ain't only the law that's agin him, but it's your own people. You know how I got the tip that I might find you here? Right through the men of Papa Lermond. Know that? They figgered that they didn't want to hurt you, but they sure wanted to get rid of that Dick Weller. There ain't but few that wouldn't be happy if that varmint was dead!"

However, since the prisoner would not make conversation even on this point, Jacobs gloomily gave him up as a bad cause and had him well gagged again.

He could trust to fear to keep the

mouth of the girl closed, he felt. He had said to her: "If a sound comes and you yell out, I'm gunna bash your face in with the heel of my gun. Understand? I'm gunna spoil the pretty face for you!"

This was enough, thought the deputy, to close the throat of any girl with a handsome face.

And now the camp grew very still, for with the sunset, instead of turning

SHERIFF WELLER

in, the thirteen watchers sharpened their eyes and prayed for the moonlight to brighten. And the moon was in fact not far above the tops of the trees when, from the black bluff on the farther side of the little river, a singing voice and the thrumming of a guitar floated down to the hushed camp.

The boulevards are pretty gay
But I prefer the homeward way;
The city lights are sort of pale,
But stars are on the old mule trail.

The tree tops thickly fenced away the view of the top of the bluff, but to every mind that listened to the song came the picture of the tall, familiar figure, with the guitar held in the cradle of one arm.

And then the needle-sharp voice of the girl screamed: "Dick, keep—"

The leather-hard palm of the deputy sheriff was clapped over her mouth so hard that her head was struck violently back against the tree on which her shoulders rested. She turned limp.

"I gotta mind"—said the whisper of Hughie Jacobs—"I gotta mind to wring your damn little neck for you—I gotta mind to—"

There was a soft rustling of the brush and Hal Perkins loomed, panting: "I seen him clear, right up agin the moonlight in the sky. I seen him as clear as a lamp. I might of brung him down with one shot, but moonlight makes mean shootin'."

"The question is: has the gal scared him away?" asked the deputy sheriff. "Damn her, has she scared him off?"

"No, after she sung out he waited there a minute and then rode up the bluff. He didn't ride back into the back-lands; he didn't start away fast."

"He's comin' down to investigate," said the deputy sheriff. "Where can a hoss cross this here man's river?"

"Fifty yards up is the ford," said Perkins.

"Hal, you gunna be worth your weight in gold to all of us. There ain't no other ford?"

"Not a one."

"I mean to say, you sure they ain't no place where a hoss could get across inside of a coupla miles of here?"

"Listen, chief," said Hal Perkins, "I been raised around here, and I know. The old Tulomay, she runs like a flight of arrows all the way, inside of steep banks, like there is down here. But up there fifty yards she pools out, like you seen her. She's four times as broad and as shallow there, and she don't run her current so fast. There ain't no other place where a hoss can

cross her. No, not inside of *ten* miles!"

"Good!" said the deputy sheriff. "Then he's comin' down the far bluff, and he's sure gonna cross at that ford. Now, I ask you, how could that hombre get away from the thirteen of us, when he comes across that there ford in the full moonlight, him ridin' slow on a hoss and our rifles ready? I ask you, how?"

"THERE ain't no way," agreed several thoughtful voices.

"Hal, you done fine," said the sheriff. "Now, you stay on here and see that this couple don't get the gags out of their mouths. I put a mean one inside the jaws of that girl; I half hope that it'll choke her, and maybe it will. Mind that the hosses don't start to neighin', neither. If they start up a chorus he'll sure know that there's a crowd on hand waitin' for him."

Hal Perkins was so eager to be in on the keener "fun" of ambushing the lone rider that it required a stiff word or two from Hughie Jacobs to quiet him, and then the party of a dozen men went up the bank of the stream.

Before them the ford stretched wide, the water fairly quiet except for the shadowy current that swept through the center of it. And overhead the moon showered a deadly brightness, throwing out the black images of the trees only a little distance on the silver of the Tulomay.

Deputy Sheriff Jacobs, putting each man securely inside covert, rubbed his hands as he sank into his own chosen place. He had, at last, set a trap from which there could be no escaping. And now, clearly in view for an instant, a rider appeared against the skyline at the top of the opposite bluff.

He was only in view for a single instant, since the horse pitched at once down the steep slope and against the darkness of that background was practically invisible.

They heard, also, the thrumming of the guitar, and then the voice of the singer as he raised his song even on the steepness of that slope.

"He don't suspect nothin'," murmured the sheriff to his nearest companion.

"He didn't understand nothin'," said the other. "There wasn't enough words for him to find out. That's all there was to it."

"Ay, that's all there was to it," said the deputy. "My hand it sure worked fast on that mouth of hers; and it sure worked hard, too. Doggone her, I wished I'd broke her neck."

After a time the deputy muttered: "But seems to me like we'd oughta see him comin' out through the trees before this."

"Likely, he's got down and tightened up his cinches before he takes his hoss into the ford. A lot of hosses get kind of tricky in cold water, like this here."

"Ay," said Hugh Jacobs. "Ay, and that's likely. But still—by this time it looks to me like there was time for him to of come through the brush and cinch up his saddle, too."

"Time always seems slow when you're watchin' something," answered his companion.

High above them an owl checked its stoop and shot up into the sky again.

CHAPTER VII.

OUTSIDE THE LAW.

ON the farther shore, a little back from the bank, Dick Weller stood in the stirrups and looked through a gap in the brush.

The outcry he had heard from the girl had not gone unheeded. It had startled him like a knife thrust—that broken cry and then the silence. He had to get back to the camp quickly, because there was a riot of fear in his thoughts. And there seemed only one way of going. That was why he had ridden straight over the bluff and down towards the ford. If men were watching for him they would look in that direction. If they saw him once against the sky they would certainly wait a long time before they grew suspicious.

As he stared across the dazzling white of the stream towards the mysterious darkness of the trees on the farther bank, he saw an owl stoop, then veer up suddenly, swing to the side, and finally slide away on hurrying wings across the tree tops.

It had seen something which interrupted the entire course of its intended hunting. And that was enough for the hair-trigger wits of Dick Weller. He smiled a little, and instantly tethered his mustang and left it.

The guitar was what he hated to desert. He touched it with a caressing hand before he laid it away in the branches of a tall bush. Then he took off his boots, tied them and his revolver around his neck, and slid instantly into the current.

A horse could not ford that darting stream with a man's weight on its back. And even Dick Weller, swimming like a fish, found himself unable to make headway in the middle of the stream. He had to abandon gun and boots before he could bite into the shadowy rough middle of the Tulomay. But once past that icy center of danger, he was quickly on the farther side, and waded up the bank.

He paused to wring or slick the water out of his clothes. Then, in bare feet which served him as well as eyes could serve another man, he made his way soundlessly up the bank. There was no camp fire to greet him with its yellow eye glancing through the brush, and that was strange, also, because certainly his song from the edge of the bluff had been heard.

Like a cat he went testing the ground with his bare toes before he entrusted his weight to it. And so, brushing gently through the trees, he came upon that long-remembered scene of two figures tightly bound against trees, their mouths stuffed with gags, while a tall fellow slouched back and forth with a rifle over his arm, and spurs jangling faintly on his heels.

Now and again Hal Perkins stopped and erected his head a trifle. He had turned, his back to the place where Dick Weller waited, when he repeated this attitude of intent listening; but his ears were not good enough to tell him of the leap of the barefooted man. The crook of Weller's right arm clamped around the throat of Perkins and jerked him flat on his back. By the time he staggered to his feet again the muzzle of his own rifle was against his breast. And before him there was a dripping figure with very bright eyes and a smile.

Gradually he realized that it was Dick Weller.

"Cut the two of them loose," said Dick Weller. "I'll watch you, partner, while you do the work."

And Hal Jenkins, in a trance of fear, obeyed. Afterwards he sat obediently while a rope was wound about him and he was gagged and bound in the place of Harry Sanford.

Still, enchanted by fear as he was, he was able to remember, afterwards, certain valuable details.

For one thing, he remembered that

the girl, when she was free from her bonds, began to cry a little and then stamped her foot and gripped her hands to make herself stop.

He remembered that Dick Weller leaned as though to kiss her and that she said: "No, Dick!" after which he straightened again without a word.

He remembered that Dick Weller said to Sanford: "How did that blood come on your face?"

"Hughie Jacobs whacked me," said Sanford.

And Weller said, quietly: "I thought that I'd have to kill Jacobs. I know it, now. I swear to God—"

"Stop it, Dick!" broke in the girl. "And quickly, quickly, before they come back—"

They got the horses together.

Then, after they had mounted—counting the extras there were nearly twenty horses in that long line!—Weller said: "I've had to give up another banjo, and I'm damned mad about that. Muriel, help me with that song about the sorrel horse and the old grey mare, will you?"

The girl laughed a little, softly.

But, when the song was raised, she carried a part of it, still laughing, and a pretty picture she made with her laughter and her singing in the moonlight.

It was this song that came like a disaster to the ears of Hughie Jacobs and his men.

I'm gunna leave my home;
I'm goin' to love to roam;
I'm goin' away-ay-ay;
I've found my day-ay-ay!

TWO blows are better than ten—two that land on the same spot.

And Hughie Jacobs had been hit twice on the same spot—hard. He had gone out by himself alone, many a time, and brought back his man. Now he had gone out twice with numbers and failed. And his lean face was convulsed with agony when he read the comments in the county newspapers.

AMUSEMENT OR HABIT?
DEPUTY SHERIFF MISSES MAN
LOSES ALL HORSES AGAIN.

The account that followed had its stinging moments, also. It said, in one portion: "When Desperado Dick Weller is out of horseflesh and doesn't feel like paying good money for new mounts, he never worries a great deal. He simply waits for Deputy Sheriff Hugh Jacobs and a strong posse to overtake him. Then he laughs at the deputy sheriff, takes possession of the horses, and rides happily on his way.

"When asked about this, Mr. Jacobs could say nothing. We agree with him that there is hardly anything to say."

So ran the newspapers.

But Sheriff Tom Weller had something else to say. He announced it in print.

"Various attempts have been made to apprehend the well-known criminal, Richard Weller. I have made up my mind to go out and take him or never to return."

When people read that comment, they looked at one another. Then Charlie Street, one of the most prosperous ranchers of the county, stopped the sheriff on the street and said: "Tom, are you gunna light out after your own son?"

"I've swore an oath to uphold the law," said the pale sheriff.

"God A'mighty won't encourage you none," said Charlie Street, and went on his way.

In fact, most men felt that there were frightful calamities in the air

when blood was ready to fight against itself. But the grim sheriff rode out with six chosen men and struck for the trail of his son.

That was the time when Papa Lermond came down on the Western Limited, stopped the train, overturned the first two coaches, caused the death of eleven passengers, and escaped with a quarter of a million. Other posses quickly started on that trail; but the sheriff remained quietly at work on the task in hand.

He set a trap at Bison City and it barely failed to close on Dick Weller. He prepared his meshes on the trail between Haley and Four Rivers, but was eluded again. He rode at night into the cow-camp of Steve Marshal only to find that the man he wanted had ridden away half an hour before.

Commenting on these failures, the county newspapers said: "Sheriff Tom Weller has failed again in his pursuit of his son, while Papa Lermond runs loose and free. Sheriff Weller only misses his son by a few minutes each time. But he keeps on missing. This is very strange. Perhaps the voters of this county will notice the strangeness of it at the next election."

This was the talk which was in the air far and wide, as well as in the newspapers, when Dick Weller sat over his portion of a saddle of venison which had been roasted in a Dutch oven and said to Muriel Sanford: "You know, Muriel, that I've been riding this trail for quite a while, but now my father is on it. What about cutting all of this and going away with me? What about marriage?"

BUT the girl said: "Dick, you're the best I've ever known. You're so good that you even can persuade yourself that you want me."

"You mean that I don't mean it?" asked Dick Weller.

She smiled at him curiously, sadly.

"You know you don't," she said. "But you've saved the Sanfords so many times that you begin to think that they must be *worth* saving."

"Wait a minute," said Dick Weller. "Does that mean you really are not interested? Does that mean I'm barking up the wrong tree?"

She nodded.

"I'll never marry a man outside the law," she said.

"I'm glad to know it," said Weller, soberly, and said no more on the subject.

"Muriel, you're talking through your hat," said dark, handsome Harry Sanford. "Do you realize what you're saying? This is Dick that's talking to you."

"I realize everything," she said.

She realized it so well that she was awake, late that night, when she heard a little crackling of twigs, as though underfoot, and instantly roused herself. Then, far off against the dimness of the moonlit sky, she saw the faint outline of a rider who sat singularly straight in the saddle.

The moment she saw that figure, she recognized it, and started running in pursuit, crying out: "Dick! Dick!" But the rider went on, far beyond earshot.

When she came back within the range of the ghostly light of the red embers of the campfire, she saw a tag of paper pinned under a splinter of a log by the place, and when she took the paper she read:

Dear Muriel,

If I can't interest you outside the law, I'm going back inside.

Dick.

Under the note, pinned by the same

strong splinter, there was a thick stack of greenbacks.

And on that same night, just as the light of the dawn was beginning, the man who mounted watch at the mountain camp of Sheriff Tom Weller saw a rider come vaguely out of the horizon and head towards the camp.

"Who goes there?" he challenged.

"What's this? Part of the United States Army?" came the answer.

To which the sheriff's man very properly answered: "A damned sight better than the best part of that army. Who are you, hombre?"

"Looking for Sheriff Weller."

"Who's been stealin' your cows?" asked the sentinel.

Then he saw, by firelight more than the radiance of dawn, the face of the rider who was approaching him. He jerked his rifle to his shoulder.

But Dick Weller merely said: "Don't be a damn fool," and rode on in to the fire. There he dismounted, threw the reins of his horse, and kicked together the embers of the fire.

"Got any chuck around here?" he asked. "I'm hungry. By the way," he added, "do something more for me, will you?"

"What's that?" asked the sentinel, staring hard at the fugitive, but still looking down the sights of his rifle.

"You might wake the sheriff up and tell him that he's captured that desperado—you know the one that I mean—that desperado, Dick Weller."

CHAPTER VIII.

RIFLE PASS.

THE sheriff travelled for three days, slowly, carefully, through the mountains, with handcuffs on the wrists of his son. And for three days the sheriff's chief deputy, Hughie Jacobs, never took his eyes from the prisoner, never left his side by day or by night. Hughie Jacobs was perfectly silent most of the time, because he was receiving more through the eyes than his ears could ever tell him. He was seeing, daily, hourly, momently, the perfect vision of his greatest enemy, the man who had disgraced him, locked inside handcuffs, helpless. He had been present at the surrender of Dick Weller; that was enough to wipe out the blots on his record. There was only one ghost to spoil his happiness and that was the question: Why had Dick Weller surrendered?

The question grew always more and more important.

Now when the sheriff found his son in his hands, he could remember old formulas according to which he had handled other cases of captured criminals in the past, and according to these formulas he tried to handle the case of Dick.

For instance, when he sat down beside his son and said: "Now, Dick, whatever you say is likely to be used against you, but I'd like to ask you a few questions."

"Blaze away!" said the son.

And he turned his bright, thoughtful eyes on his father.

"On the eleventh of August, were you in Tucson?"

"Yes," answered Dick.

"Were you in Tucson, and present at the death of Doc Manly and Joe Price?"

"Oh, sure," said Dick Weller.

The sheriff closed his eyes for an instant.

Then he said: "Is it true that on that day and date, seeing the two men, you walked up behind them and fired a bullet into the back of each, because

of which wounds they died instantly?"

"Why should I have killed a pair of fellows I never saw before?" asked the prisoner.

"I ask you the question."

"All right. Write down that I killed them."

The sheriff closed his eyes again for a moment. Then he nodded and wrote down the answer which meant that his son would hang.

He consulted a list and asked: "Did you meet Stewart Liscomb on the trail between Pine Wood and Red Stone and shoot him dead?"

"Stewart Liscomb? What did he look like?"

"I don't know," said the sheriff.

"Neither do I. But I suppose I may have killed him."

"Did you, on August nineteenth," said the sheriff, "feloniously and with purpose to kill, attack Jim Stevens in the Bar One Saloon in Little Bank?"

"I suppose so," said the son.

The sheriff jerked up his head.

"How did you get from Pine Wood to Little Bank inside of two days," he asked, "without a bird big enough to carry you?" asked the older Weller.

"I don't know," said the son.

"Are you telling me the truth or are you lying?" asked the sheriff.

"I'm making things easier for the law," said Dick Weller. "I never killed a man in my life."

At this, the sheriff shut up his notebook with a slam and growled: "Why don't you say so, then?"

"Why should I say so?" said Dick. "Nothing I say will be believed unless I 'confess.' You and the rest have made up your minds that I'm no good."

"I never made up my mind to that," said the sheriff.

"You've thought so for years," said Dick Weller. "You tried me at cowpunching and fence building and mining and timbering, before you washed your hands of me."

"I never washed my hands of you."

"That's not true. From the day I came back from school, you were ready to suspect me of everything. I'd looked inside a few books, and you knew that they must have ruined me—so you said!"

"Dick, you can say what you please and I'm not able to contradict you."

"The truth is always hard to contradict. Let me tell you another thing. The reason that I never wanted to lift a hand was because you kept the doubt in your eyes whenever you looked at me."

"You are the last of the Wellers," said the sheriff.

"Damn the Wellers," said the son. "I'm sick of hearing about them. Because you're proud of the family you would have sent me to hell. I was too lazy to suit you. The only reason you wanted me on earth was because you didn't want the straight line of the old blood to die out!"

"Nonsense," said the sheriff.

"Be honest. I'm telling the truth."

"You've shown *your* blood," said the sheriff, slowly. "You showed it the moment that you got off by yourself. I sent you to arrest a criminal. You preferred to rescue him from the hands of honest men."

"Honest like Hughie Jacobs, you mean?"

"I mean that."

"I haven't any regrets," said the son.

"I know that," said the father, bitterly. "I can see the happiness in your face, Dick. Danger for its own sake or for the sake of the money you can get out of it. And that's why it's better

to put you in jail. Better to keep you behind the bars for life than to have you endanger the lives of other people with your freedom."

"I'm not asking for your pity," said Dick Weller.

The sheriff turned away and his heart was ashes in him. He had no other children, no other relatives. He could see his estate dissolving among the hands of many men and the name of the Wellers clouded and lost in a final disgrace.

THEY entered Rifle Pass, which, straight as the barrel of a gun, cleaves through the mountains, a chasm so long and so narrow that from one end the gap at the farther side appears hardly larger than the spot of brilliancy seen through the sights of a rifle. The rocks seemed as hard as metal. They have a steel sheen, and the cliffs rise to such a height that one feels a nervous sense of being shut away from the sky, a half-buried feeling. The bottom of this gorge is somewhat furrowed by the action of the water which cut the entire gap, working at leisure for a few million years. But that soft chiseling has ended. There is no water at all in Rifle Pass except the few pools which remain standing for a time after melting snow has trickled down into the gorge. And on this hot day the rocks glowed as though they had been through a furnace and there was not a sign of a drop of water anywhere.

However, Rifle Pass was a convenience because in its short length it carried one through the mountains without having to spend weary leagues of effort among the rough lands above timberline, and the hoofs of the horses, as though they wanted to escape quickly from this sleek piece of hellfire and hot rock, began to jangle the echoes with redoubled speed as they pushed on down the gap. They were well past the center of the gorge when something spatted and hissed on the polished face of a rock near Dick Weller.

He saw, or thought he saw, a thin streak of light appear on the stone. Then the long, distant ringing of a rifle report came swinging down, dim in the thinness of the mountain air.

A sudden fusillade followed. The air was alive with bullets. A swift knife-cut, a slash with a red-hot knife slithered across the ribs of Dick Weller beside his heart. But he was the only one hit as the party made for the only shelter. That was a single cluster of great boulders which lay in a heaped circle of confusion near the center of Rifle Pass. Looking up, one could see a great section bitten out of the south wall of the pass; and here the monstrous fragment has loosened and fallen into the gorge. The cliff was so high that the niche in it did not appear very huge, but in fact the individual boulders were tons of weight. And the sheriff's party quickly scattered here and flung themselves out of the saddle.

The place was intolerable, instantly. That heat which was bad enough in the open was now frightful. The boulders, offering more surface to the sun, had soaked up its heat and now were giving it back into the frightful strength of the noonday. The air quivered with the hot radiations. Instantly, sweat sprang out on the bodies of the tough mustangs and thirst struck the roof of every man's throat.

And from the edge of the lip-rock, down the valley, a thin sound of cheering reached them. It was echoed from the west end of Rifle Pass, a certain proof that both ends of the gorge were

blocked. And there the posse would have to stick like so many fish in an oven.

There had been no water on the upgrade leading to the pass. Canteens were nearly all empty—except that of lean Hugh Jacobs.

And the heat sucked moisture with terrible suddenness out of the bodies of the men.

The great red blotch that stained the side of Dick Weller seemed a trifling thing. The pain from the wound was nothing compared to the torment which he suffered instantly from the oven in which they were placed. It was the concentrated essence of a Death Valley. The men began to fumble at their throats at once and look wildly at one another.

And even the wise sheriff could give them no comfort.

They knew and he knew what had happened. He had hunted men for twenty years, and now men were hunting him and they had him cornered. He was as good as dead, and the rest would go down with him. This, in silence, stared out of the eyes of them all.

THE sheriff went to Dick Weller and bent to examine the wound, but Dick said, coldly: "It's a scratch. The bleeding won't be bad. And we'll all be cooked brown before I die of the bullet, father."

It seemed true enough.

And after sunset the light of a high moon would gild that valley with silver and expose the fugitives to rifle fire, if they attempted to escape. They were as thoroughly caught in the trap as though chains held them.

They could live through this day. On the morrow they would begin to go insane with thirst.

Dick Weller sang, softly:

Oh, were you ever in Lonesome Town,
Where the men are red and the gals are brown,
And sow-belly's all that they will cook,
And every day has a Sunday look?

"Quit your damn noise," said Deputy Hugh Jacobs.

"All right," said Dick Weller, "but I'll tell you what, old son. I'm the only man who can show you fellows the one way out of this corner."

CHAPTER IX.

PA LERMOND.

THE sheriff, rebuffed by his son, had stepped back and looked at Dick with a singular sadness. But now he said: "You have a brain, Dick. What's your scheme?"

"Take the handcuffs off me," said Dick Weller.

"Yeah, I thought that would be the first part of the idea," sneered Hughie Jacobs, thrusting out his head on his long crane's neck.

"Then put me on my horse," said Dick Weller, "and let me cut loose out of this. I'll go down the valley like a rocket and the rest of you filling the air with bullets as though you didn't want me to escape."

"I wouldn't be wasting bullets on the *air*," said Hugh Jacobs.

"Be still!" commanded the sheriff. "Let him talk out his idea. What next, Dick?"

"Why, the crooks down there, whoever they are, will be glad to see another crook who's managed to slip away from the sheriff. They'll see the blood on my side to prove that you fellows really were shooting to kill. Isn't that easy?"

"Yeah, easy for you," said the deputy sheriff. "But what does it do for us?"

"When I get my chance I start a ruction down there among them. I get into a fight with somebody, say. And while that fight lasts there won't be much attention put on the rest of you, here. Understand? Then you can make a straight charge to get out of the valley. Isn't that clear?"

"You'd start a fight with a whole gang like that? Even *you* ain't that kind of a fool," declared the deputy.

"All right," said Dick Weller. "Vote on it, you hombres. You're all dead men, anyway. I know I'm offering you a damned thin chance, but isn't it better than nothing at all?"

Hugh Jacobs said: "Sheriff, you ain't gonna let this kind of a crooked deal go through, are you?"

"I'm going to ask for votes," said the sheriff. "Speak up, men."

There was perfectly equal division. Hugh Jacobs expressed the opinion of the dissenters when he said: "It would sure eat the heart out of me to think of this here crook gettin' off free while the rest of us stay here and stew in the hell-broth that he led us into!"

With that equal vote announced, the sheriff had the decision in his own hands. He sat on one of those burning rocks with the sweat pouring down his reddened face and thought making his eyes dim. At last he said: "Dick, there's one chance in a hundred that you're a real Weller down in your heart. There's one chance in a thousand that you might do what you promise. There's one chance in ten thousand that we might be able to use you, and get away. Well—even a small chance like that ought not to be thrown away. I'm going to set you free."

A howl came from the deputy sheriff, at this, but the other men agreed that it was probably the best thing to do. So the handcuffs were unlocked and the sheriff stood beside the horse on which his son was sitting.

"Dick," he said, "I'm beaten. I can't understand you or the things you've done, but it's not likely that we'll see each other again, after this. Will you shake hands?"

Dick Weller, looking down into that grim face, burst into a sudden rage. "Not till there's been more blood," he said. "Not until there's been enough blood spilled to wash our hands clean. So long, everybody. Remember to raise a yell and start shooting."

Hugh Jacobs began to shout: "It's against the law. It's against everything. It's a damned outrage and—"

But Dick, with a wave of his hand, suddenly spurred the dripping mustang out of that ovenlike enclosure and sent it darting down the floor of the pass.

Two or three rifles crackled, instantly from the eastern end of Rifle Pass. But this shooting ceased as a yell went up from the rock heap and the guns of the posse commenced their clangor.

THE noise of the shooting was real enough, but none of the bullets at first came anywhere near Dick Weller. It was only after a moment, the horse running at full speed, that he heard and almost felt the whiff of a bullet past his head. Another bullet almost brushed his right shoulder. Then the hat was twitched at lightly, and he knew that a slug had clicked through the crown.

He understood. Hughie Jacobs, in an agony as the man he hated began to escape, could not help shooting near the mark, snuffing the candle, as it were. It was beautiful and delicate shooting that he did, and if perhaps his rifle

actually hit the bull's-eye—well, it would just be one of those accidents!

But the sprinting horse swept Dick Weller rapidly out of easy range; and he made the mustang dash up the steep slope towards that low, outjutting shoulder of rock which commanded the length of Rifle Pass. Here were the men who had bottled up the sheriff.

Weller, rounding the top of the shoulder and bursting through the broken rocks of the ledge, saw, on the narrow plateau, a dozen men who were waving their hands and shouting for him. But among them he spotted two at the first glance that chilled his blood. One was the wide, evil face of Martin Tully. One was the sleek bald head of a fellow who had prematurely lost his hair.

He had fallen into the midst of brigands, indeed, for he had come upon the band of the coldest-blooded slayer of them all—Papa Lermond and his crew of evil-doers. He saw all of this at the first glance, and one single note of hope and of happiness—that was big Harry Sanford, who came running to him, shouting with joy.

They were still yelling down there in the nest of rocks as Dick Weller dismounted. He shook hands with Harry Sanford heartily and heard Sanford murmur: "It's Lermond. Look out. He's poison. But I had to get him on this job. There was nobody else to turn the trick for us!"

Sanford, then, was the man who had brought so many of the law-abiding into terrible danger? And for the sake of Dick Weller, who had freely given himself up?

There was no time to ponder the thing in detail. Martin Tully and the great Papa Lermond were both coming up to him.

"You're Dick Weller, eh?" said the outlaw. "Nicked bad in the side, there?"

"Scratch," said Weller.

The other made no offer to shake hands. But the rest of the crowd gathered around with great interest to stare at the newcomer. They were men of all kinds, and their clothes were as various as their faces. There was even a pale-faced fellow with a derby hat on his head and the tip of his nose fried crimson by that Western sun. And the rest of his outfit, horribly grease-stained and soiled, was a blue suit that had once appeared natty enough, no doubt. He must have been a new recruit. He was not more than eighteen and in profile looked like a stub-nosed, smiling, cheerful boy. Only in the full-face was the danger seen in him, a callous cruelty glittering out of his eyes.

He was merely an outstanding element in that group of the followers of Papa Lermond. For all were dangerous, and all were a little strange, down to the short, bow-legged man who walked with a limp and carried on his hip not a revolver, but a rifle with the barrel sawed off until it was little longer than the barrel of a revolver. A terrible rifle that was, a repeater which hurled a forty-four caliber bullet, a thing to smash in the forehead of an elephant.

THESE were the men who blocked the end of the valley.

And what hope could the man with the sheriff have against such enemies as these? No hope whatever, to be sure! No hope, because one of these scoundrels was equal to any two men in the posse, except the sheriff and that dried-up buzzard of a fighting man, Hugh Jacobs. But one thing made the little blockaded group in Rifle Pass a

danger, and that was the reputation of the sheriff for twenty years of success and because he wore that invincible name of Weller.

Papa Lermond said: "Your old man is going to catch hell, it looks like."

"He's already *in* hell," answered the son.

"Yeah, and maybe he is," grinned Lermond. "Now I wanta tie myself to some facts about you, kid. I've been hearing things from a lot of people about you, and the things I hear from Sanford are fine, and the things I hear from big Tully, here, ain't no good. Which can I believe?"

"How can anything but a lot of noise come out of a mug like Tully's?" asked Dick Weller.

He laughed as he spoke, and all the while he watched the right hand of Tully, which shuddered to get at a gun, but which did not quite dare to make the final gesture.

"What's the matter?" asked Lermond of Tully. "Has this kid got you bluffed, Tully?"

"I could swaller ten like him," declared Tully.

"Yeah? I guess you're afraid that he'd stick in your throat," remarked the great Lermond.

He smiled on Dick Weller. He had the strangest face that Weller had ever seen. It was like the face of a Negro, with a white skin drawn over it. The features were gross as the African; the nose was blunted and rounded over; the pull of the lips was very wide when he smiled. He had a sallow complexion and there were a million small holes, like needle scars, stuck into his face.

Yet he was not as repulsive as an accurate addition of all his features might indicate. There was a strange sort of good nature about his expression, and he seemed always smiling or about to smile. Only a knowledge of the things he had done could finish the picture, and Dick Weller knew enough to turn even his flesh cold.

"The main thing that I want to know," said Lermond, "is what my friend here, my old friend Tully, tells me—that you said you'd rather be damned than join up with Papa Lermond. Is that the straight of it?"

Weller took in a good breath. He had the lie ready on his lips, and the smile to go with it. To fight Tully—oh, that was one thing, but to fight Papa Lermond, that was quite another. He would have to get out of this crisis unless he wished to die, because no man of all those who had faced Lermond in combat ever had succeeded in putting him down with a bullet.

It was a lie, therefore, that was forming on the lips of Dick Weller, but before it could be uttered a great spirit of detestation and scorn rushed over him and forced from his lips: "I'd rather be tied to a mangy dog than tied to you, Lermond!"

CHAPTER X.

ONLY A WELLER'S DUTY.

THE mere sense that those words had been spoken worked like lightning in the brain of Weller, dazzling his eyes. He noted that the smile of Lermond had not faltered, and then he was aware that it was not a smile at all, but simply a savage grin like that of a hunting cat. There was no more than a cat's mercy in it.

He shifted his glance a little from the face of the great outlaw, and as his eye roved down the valley he was amazed to see a small and compact body of riders going up Rifle Pass—at a walk!

He could not believe what he saw—and then he understood.

The wise sheriff, hoping that the arrival of his son might absorb all the attention of the outlaws for a time, had chosen the moment of that arrival to lead his men out from the rocks and advance—without noise, in the hope that thus he might be able to come within charging distance.

Well, that was because he did not know that Papa Lermond was up here. Papa Lermond and all the rest of these hand-picked murderers! And yet a grim admiration for the rancher and sheriff came over his mind, and with that admiration there was a sudden, fierce warming of all his blood with pride. That man, yonder, was his father. Their blood was identical. And only a few moments before he had refused, savagely, to shake the hand of Sheriff Weller—

Lermond was saying: "All right, kid. You have to get it in the eye, eh?"

"I get it!" exclaimed Dick Weller, in a transport of the enthusiasm which had just come over him. "I get it! Lermond, I'm going to blot you out if you ever lift a hand at me!"

The boy in the derby hat laughed aloud.

"Listen to him!" he said. "Buck up, chief, and let me have him. I want him. I *need* him!"

He began to curse Dick Weller with a soft persuasiveness of voice, inviting him to go to any number of strange regions. And the chief cut suddenly through this tirade.

"Shut up, Banjo," he said.

The boy was instantly still, but the green devil remained in his eyes.

"I'm glad it's this way," said Lermond. "I want to get the taste of the Wellers right deep down in my throat. I wouldn't make a meal of the two of them in one bite. I'd rather have them in two swallers."

He raised his left hand. The enchanted circle of his men stood in a frozen attitude of suspense. And then Dick Weller took stock of the things around him.

There was poor Sanford, first of all.

Harry Sanford was a good fellow. He was white with the agony of the moment, but would he have the courage to come to the help of his friend in such a crisis? To expect that was to expect the superhuman. No. Sanford's hand would be held by terrible fear.

And what other escape was there?

A mere jumble of small rock lay scattered, here single stones and there ragged heaps of them which had rolled down from the higher section of the cliff and, in fact, were overlooked by that height. But if Dick Weller could get to one of those heaps he might be able to keep up the battle until his father and his men came charging to the sound of the guns and, so, manage to turn the tide of the fighting—

Well, it was not a real summing up of chances. It was merely the last ghost of a chance.

Lermond was saying: "This ain't gunna be any murder. Ready, kid?"

"Ready," said Dick Weller.

"When you want to, just say 'Shoot,' Lin, will you?"

"Sure," said big, hairy-faced Lin.

So Weller faced the great man and waited. He knew, instantly, that the signal would not be given at once. No, Lin and the rest would want to see him reacting under the acid test.

The silence dragged out. And those seconds were priceless to the group of men who, now out of the sight of Dick, were still pressing on towards the east end of the valley.

It seemed to Weller that the knowledge of their coming was a sort of inward strength. And if he died—well, he would be dying in a cause which was not yet quite lost.

He looked steadily at the great Lermond.

THERE was nothing extraordinary about the fellow's appearance except that negroid face—and the hands. Such hands Dick had never seen, the fingers long and thin as the claws of a bird. They were flexing and extending slowly now.

And the sight of them, for some reason, convinced Weller that he had not a mortal chance. In those lean fingers there was lodged an inhuman speed which he was certain he could not rival. The battle was lost before it began, unless he could think of some counter measure.

What counter measure could there be? What could conquer speed in such a battle as this?

Surety! That was the only way. To whip out his gun fast enough but not with any attempt at a lightning draw which might enable the fast performer to throw in the first shot but generally prevented him from striking a vital place. He, Weller, must take no chance of sending his bullet wrong. He must shoot straight into that body.

And that meant that, first, he must stand fire. It was a horrible prospect. The heavy forty-five caliber slug of lead, fired point blank, was capable of knocking a man flat if it struck his body a solid blow. But he, Weller, must not be knocked flat. He must endure, and *then* shoot.

"Shoot!" shouted the sudden voice of Lin.

The hand of Lermond convulsed. It disappeared with the speed of the draw. There was only the flash of the appearing Colt, like a glint of sunshine on water.

And then a roaring explosion and a sledge hammer stroke through the left shoulder of Weller, jerking him around.

It pulled him sidewise, but it did not even stagger his prepared and stiffened body. His own gun, held just above the height of his hip, spat fire. Lermond, still pouring bullets from his weapon, but pouring them blindly, pitched sidewise to the ground, and in the stunned instant of paralysis that followed among the gang, Weller turned and leaped for the rocks.

One figure moved after him, swift as thought. In his haste he tripped and rolled on a loose stone, pitching forward. But powerful hands seized him and jerked him ahead into the shelter of the nearest heap of rocks.

The first bullets came flying at the same instant, a humming shower, spattering on the faces of the stones; and then Weller was aware that it was Harry Sanford who crouched beside him, not idle, but lifting weighty rocks and piling them to increase the strength of their breastwork. And behind the bullets there arose a storm of wild, savage yelling.

"Are you done in, Dick?" asked Sanford, as he worked.

The left arm of Weller lay helplessly beneath him. The numbness of the shock had prevented pain, for the moment, but that agony was commencing, now. And yet he could have laughed at the pain. Dying was the simplest thing in the world, when there was a proved friend at his side, a greater friend than ever his expectations had hoped. Dying was simple, also, if a man were a Weller, fighting on the right side of the law.

"Harry!" he exclaimed. "I feel good enough to dance."

Then he heard the voice of the great Lermond yelling out orders.

"Lin and Tom, get over there to the left and flank 'em. Josh—Parkin—Danny—crawl down that hollow and blast hell out of 'em from behind."

THERE was a steady fire maintained, all this while. Two big slugs, hitting the last stone which Sanford was putting in place, knocked it right out of his hands and dropped it on the ground. The gang yelled with delight and redoubled their fire.

Would any of them take the trouble to turn and look into Rifle Pass, while all of this was going on?

Weller, edging to the side, wriggling like a snake because he could put the weight of his body on his knees and right elbow only, gained the side of the little breastwork which Sanford was piling. Behind the rocks that lay just ahead, as he peered through a chink, he saw just the humped back of a man running with head down from cover to cover.

Weller put a bullet neatly through the hump and saw the man straighten suddenly, flinging out both arms.

That was Lin. He would never give a signal for another gun fight. He would never have a chance to clean that hairy face of his with a razor. Standing there like that, other men of the gang yelled to him to get down, but Lin, silent, his arms still extended, swayed slowly back, then snapped, it seemed, like an overweighted bough of a fruit tree and fell over the edge of the boulder, where he lay motionless. His back had been broken by the bullet, perhaps.

Lermond was crying: "They've got Lin. They're going to sweat in hell for that. Here—carry me up that rock so that I can get a shot or two in. Buff and Charlie, carry me up there!"

Sanford, ceasing his building work which was raising a rude protection all around them, suddenly began to fire, rapidly. A wild, howling screech came out of the valley beneath them in answer, a terrible and endless cry of agony.

"Where?" said Weller.

"Through the belly," said Sanford.

"My God—the poor devil!" said Weller.

"Ay," said Sanford. "I wish that I'd put the slug through his heart instead. Look out!"

For a bullet cut through a small gap in the wall and slashed Sanford's shirt sleeve open, just drawing one pinpoint of blood from the flesh.

Another shot crunched through a barely visible crack and whirred past the face of Weller.

"That's Lermond," said Sanford. "Nobody on God's earth but Lermond could shoot like that! And God help us now!"

Peering through the crevices between the rocks, Weller made out a spitting revolver that played from between two boulders up the slope, from such an angle that the weapon raked down over the breastwork of Sanford. The next shot knocked the heel off the boot of Weller's right foot.

Sanford began to fire towards the hollow again. "Missed! Missed! Missed!" he kept grunting with every shot. And then: "Winged him that time."

From the left more guns opened suddenly. It was the weakest part of the breastwork, and the bullets were sure to find a mark sooner or later, but still Weller gave no heed to the marksmen in that direction. Instead, he con-

centrated on those two boulders up the hills and the gun that flashed from behind them now and then. It did not appear in the same place each time. The wounded man was lifting his weapon now to the right and now to the left, showing never any more than his hand and wrists, and these only for the barest instant.

AND Weller, waiting, holding his fire, trained his revolver patiently on the spot to the right where the gun of Lermond had appeared before.

Small black spots began to dance before the eyes of Weller. There was a hollow nausea of agony filling his body. But he told himself that he could not miss because he dared not miss.

Distinctly, beside him, he heard the heavy thud of a bullet smashing into the flesh of Sanford; he heard the crunch of the slug against a bone. But he would not relax his fixed vigil.

There—it winked again, the quick gun of Lermond, and Weller tried that delicate target instantly.

The answer was amazing. Up from behind the rock sprang Lermond with crimson from his body wound plainly visible all over his breast. His right arm dangled, scattering blood. But in his left hand he carried a revolver and with it he charged straight down the slope towards the breastwork!

Another very strange thing happened then. From behind the boulders leaped the half comical figure of Banjo, with the derby hat atilt on his head, and rushed after his chief, shouting out to Lermond to come back—to drop to the ground—

And Lermond dropped, with a bullet from Weller's gun straight between his eyes.

Once, twice, and again, with his second gun Weller fired and emptied the weapon. He knew that all those bullets must have driven into the body of Banjo in vital places; but still he came on.

And now, his revolver emptied, Weller groaned to Sanford, "Pass me a gun—or stop that devil—"

And then he saw that Sanford lay flat on his face, still, and his gun must have fallen under his body.

There was no help from that true partner; there was no time to roll the inert body of Sanford over and try to get at a weapon, for now the insanely contorted face of Banjo was close to the breastwork.

He was leaping over it. He was screeching out insults, as he aimed his gun down at Weller.

Once and again he fired—and neither of the shots reached home. For Banjo was staggering. The lips were still stretched for screaming, but no sound came from them. His head fell over on his shoulder and he sank gradually to the ground.

He must have been dead before he reached it, his whole body slumping suddenly forward at the end; and now he lay crumpled and small and still. He had died as he had lived, half beast and half hero.

From all sides the firing had stopped, for the moment. There was a wild shouting of despair and rage as the crew of the great Lermond realized that their chief was dead at last.

Bullets would follow again, before long. And Weller, picking up the fallen gun of Banjo, gritted his teeth as he saw that it was empty.

This was the end.

He shook Sanford by the shoulder.

"Wake up—Harry!" he called.

The wounded man lifted a wild face from the ground.

"Coming, coming, Dick!" he whispered.

"Wake up," said Dick Weller. "We've lived together and now it's time for us to die together. We're done for. Stand up with me, and we'll take it like men instead of being chewed up piecemeal while we lie here."

He had barely said that when he heard a sudden ringing of hoofs and over the edge of the slope he saw sombreroed heads and shoulders, and then horses and armed riders sweeping over the crest. They looked gigantically large to Weller as he watched that charge, with the gallant sheriff in the forefront. No, not actually in the lead. For a long, lean, dry figure, bent far forward over the saddle, holding the reins in his teeth and a gun in either hand, was pushing his mustang past that of the older sheriff.

That was strange Hugh Jacobs. And when he saw that wild figure Weller closed his eyes. "It's going to be all right, Harry," he said, and let his tormented body and brain sink into unconsciousness.

IT was, in fact, very much all right. Lermond's men had lost their leader and the cream of their fighting force. And now a rush of equal numbers charging in on their flank with all the advantage of the ground was too much for them. They got up and tried to run for their horses; and that was how they were shot down until the remnant fell on their knees and howled for mercy.

Dick Weller knew all of this later, a great deal later.

He did not recall anything of the trip back to town, when he was carried on a stretcher between two horses. He remembered nothing of the jolts and the jars along the way. He knew nothing at all until, a number of days later, he found himself looking up at the high, white, cool ceiling of a room and turned his head, bewildered, to find that he was at home.

When he looked again he saw the rigid profile of Harry Sanford in an adjoining bed, his eyes closed, but the folded sheet lifted above his breast by a regular breathing, and between the beds sat Muriel Sanford with her weary head fallen upon one shoulder, asleep also, but smiling in her sleep. One of her hands lay on the bed of Dick, palm up.

She seemed to Dick more beautiful than an angel from heaven, and more merciful.

She was not the only watcher by the beds of the wounded. On the other side sat a man with a gray, stern face and relentless eyes. It was Hugh Jacobs.

When Dick looked up at him, Jacobs attempted to smile, and his face seemed to crack to pieces. He leaned far forward.

"Know me, kid?" he whispered.

"Yes," murmured Dick Weller. "I remember you sailing into the Lermond gang as though they had only paper bullets in their guns."

"You remember that?" said Jacobs. "Well, kid, I remember you lyin' like dead with the dead men in front of you. I remember that I was a fool of a man-killin' crook that—"

"Hush!" said Dick Weller, smiling. "You'll wake up Muriel."

"Ay," grinned Jacobs, "and I wouldn't do that. It's her that pulled you through. No man could of done it. No man could of picked up what was left of your life; there was so damn little of it! But she found it and kept it and made it grow. Wait a minute—here's the sheriff!"

He rose and slipped softly from the

room, with only a faint, faint jingling of his spurs like the chiming of very distant bells, and the sheriff came in and sat down by the bed. He looked at the girl; then he stared into the open eyes of his son and saw the recognition in them.

"I've been down town," said the sheriff, "talking to a lot of men who want to put up a statue or something to you. I told them that they were a pack of fools. I told them that you only had done your duty. Because no Weller," he added, "can do more than that."

The son, still staring fixedly into the eyes of his father, suddenly smiled.

"Thanks," he said.

"You understand?" whispered the sheriff, leaning closer.

"Ay," said Dick Weller. "I understand, at last."

There was a moment of pause. And after that Dick put out his hand.

It was not a good hand to look at, for sickness had blanched it; and the lack of blood showed in the blueness about the tips of the fingers, but the sheriff took that hand with a gentle reverence and held it for a long time. They did not need to talk. In their silence the souls of the two were being welded together at last.

THE END

A Thieves' Paradise

ALTHOUGH book thieves in the United States are punished with prison sentences the same as meted out to any ordinary criminals, persons who steal books in Korea are actually encouraged by the Korean government, which looks upon a crime of this sort as a sign of intellectual ambition on the part of the culprit.

Recently a young Korean stole a number of valuable medical books from the library of a prominent physician in order to continue his study of medicine. When the man was apprehended and accused in court, the judge not only refused to prosecute him, but allowed him to retain the books he had taken in order that he might advance himself in medical science.

A poor young chemist who stole some text books on chemistry was likewise exonerated of his theft. Korean law refuses to regard such "borrowing" as common thievery.

—*Gerald FitzGerald.*

Anywhere But Here

By EUSTACE L. ADAMS

Author of "Blood on the Moon," "The Terror," etc.

CHAPTER I.

CONQUERING HEROES.

I SLAMMED the receiver down and looked at Bat. He was lying on the bed, listening to traffic noises and trying hard to get drunk. But when you are used to white-eye and native rum it is hard to make this civilized stuff take hold.

"Who was it?" he asked. "A girl?"

"Yeah, but it didn't mean anything," I said, going to the window and looking down into Broadway. Advertising signs flashed on and off, spelling things out in plain English. The traffic cops were white men. There was not a bare-foot soldier nor a blue denim uniform in sight and that, from where I stood, was just fine and dandy.

Aviators Bat Gillespie and Al Burke answer the call of far-off adventure—and land on top of a Central American powder keg

Ten years is too long to hell around in the hot countries. It takes something out of you and forgets to put it back.

"Tell her to go jump into the river!" Bat said. He was feeling his own pulse to learn whether it was malaria or liquor that was beginning to work on him. "The faintest thought of a job gives me the wah-wahs. We've got money enough to hang around four or five months. It's nice here. The room service is good. Okay with you?"

With me? I could have stood in that window for years, never getting tired of looking out at all those people who could walk in security, without guns, without fear of the men who walked behind them, without—oh, hell, it was what I had been wanting to do for longer than I wanted to remember. Now I was doing it and I never wanted to do anything else.

The telephone rang again. I thought it might be Mickey. Most of the newspapers had carried stories about our coming in the day before. But it was not my kid sister. It was the same insistent voice that had just called us. She was secretary to P. Wallis Armitage who was, among many other things, president of the Inter-American Airways, Ltd. She still wanted us to come down.

I began to have a feeling about it. This P. Wallis Armitage managed to get things done. We knew a lot about him down in San Lorenzo, two thousand-odd miles from his Wall Street office. If he put his mind to getting us down there, sooner or later we would find ourselves on our way. So, after a little argument, I told her that we were drunk, and hoped to get drunker, but if we sobered up in the morning we might come down, if we

The little man squalled and the knife dropped

remembered it and were all out of liquor. She sounded a trifle pouty as she hung up.

Both Bat and I were much cheered. We made another pitcher of "Tailspins," which is composed of all the liquors you have, poured together and drunk standing, sitting, or lying, usually in exactly that order. It was swell, being in New York after all these years.

Four newspaper reporters followed the bellboy in when he came up with fresh ice. They wanted to know all about the romance of the tropics, and how it felt to be famous soldiers of fortune, and how we came to quit when we were sitting so pretty in San Lorenzo.

After Bat had told them that most of the beautiful *señoritas* were fat and did not wash often enough, and that the nights down there were cool enough, but you could not sleep on account of having to scratch, and that he was not invulnerable but would die as quickly as a pet kitten if a bullet ever hit him in the right place, I finally asked them if they ever heard of my kid sister, Mickey Burke.

"Have we heard of Santa Claus?" one of them jeered. "No, nor Roosevelt, nor Lindbergh, nor—listen, is Mickey Burke really your sister?"

TWO or three of them knew her well. After interviewing her, they told me, they went back to their offices counting their fingers and talking quietly to themselves, she was that good to look at. And as a flyer, she was a natural. When she did a stunt hop, they said, a lot of sea gulls, eagles and such-like would come around to see her and would then go sadly away to commit suicide because they really did not know how to fly at all. She was demonstrating for the United Oil Company now, and was at this moment at the National Air Races in Miami, showing the boys how it should be done.

"Is she really reckless?" I asked, anxiously.

They could see it was tossing me for a fall, so they just winked meaningly at Bat and let it go at that.

"I see," says Bat, slowly. "That explains lots of things. It must run in the family, Al. It took me two years of work with llama grease and pomade and everything to make my hair lie down again after the first time I saw you fly.

"If she takes after you, I'm not having any."

"I'm going to make her cut it out," I said. "There's no sense in stunting and—"

"Listen, you guys," Bat was saying to the reporters, "we're never going back. *Jamás!* I'm thirty-five and, believe it or not, I feel like an old man. I'm too old to be a fighting flyer any more. And according to this fighting fool, Al Burke, here, he's through, too, although I have a private doubt or two. But he thinks he is, anyway, and that suits me. From now on, peace at any price, see?"

One of the reporters blew him a razzberry. "That's good, coming from you," he jeered. "Weren't you the feller who killed that bandit general, Cortez?"

"Yeah. What about it?"

A couple of the reporters began to write things on old envelopes.

"Tell us about it," someone asked. "Was it a duel?"

You see? They would have told you that they had been reporters long enough to have lost their illusions. But that was the bunk. They still thought

fighting—in the tropics—was romantic.

"No," Bat said. "He was too drunk to aim straight, so I gave it to him."

"Oh!" the reporters said.

This was a disappointment. You could see their admiration for him had dropped several degrees.

I got up. "You birds give me a pain in the neck!" I said. "This mug, Cortez, had needed a first-class killing for years. He had kept the whole country standing on its ear. Until he was dead San Lorenzo couldn't settle down. So after soldiers had been playing squat-tag with him long enough, Bat up and killed him.

"That's all. Now get the hell out before I get sore."

A big guy looked up, sneering. He was remembering that he was six feet two and had been a boxer, or something, at college.

"And suppose," he drawled, "you did get sore. What would happen? Are you tough?"

Bat looked at him. "He's tough, youngster. But if you want to stick your neck out, go to it."

"Listen, egg," I told him, "go on out. I wouldn't want to hurt you."

The others, who still cherished the idea that boxing and fighting were the same thing, laughed. The big guy got up, set himself and took a healthy swing at me. The next morning his paper said I had hit him with brass knuckles. That was not true. I never had a pair of knucks in my life. I just pushed him a little and it happened to break his nose. That took the play out of all of them and they decided it was time to go home to mother and the girls.

"Just good, clean fun!" Bat chuckled. "But what's this you've been telling me the last two or three years about not really liking fisticuffs and allied sports?"

"I don't. Didn't you see him wave at me?"

THERE was a knock on the door. Thinking it was the bellboy with another bottle, I yelled "Come in!" But it was not the bellboy. It was Mickey. I would never have believed that the Burkes could have turned out a girl like that. Two or three times since she had started to fly I had picked up dog-eared roto sections in the American Club and seen her picture. But none of them had done her justice. Bat took one look at her and rolled out of bed, moving faster than I had seen him since Cuesta tried to carve the living heart out of him.

"My God, kid, you're pretty!" I said, squeezing her and trying to remember not to break her back.

"I'm delirious!" Bat said.

"No, you're drunk," she said, coolly.

I tried to kick some of the empties under the bed. I had forgotten, you see, that nice girls drank. Neither Bat nor I had had much experience with nice girls lately.

"Don't bother," she said in that husky contralto of hers. "I won't count them. As long as you have it handy you might mix me one. I've flown up from Miami today just to see you."

"Am I something fat and nasty that has crawled into the room and died?" Bat asked. "Or would you introduce me to your sister?"

"This, Mickey," I said, "is Bat Gillespie. If you've ever read one of my letters, or the newspapers, you know who he is. And he's even more than that. He's my friend."

She was looking at Bat and Bat was looking at her. Her gaze was first

to fall. She dug out a compact and went to work on a face that could not possibly be improved, even if it did belong to a sister of mine. She had my mother's blue Irish eyes and my mother's mouth, which I have always known to be the most beautiful in the world. She glanced into the mirror of her compact and fluffed out her short, wavy hair. It was the exact shade of well-polished cordovan puttees. Mine was red, but hers was the kind of red that women try to get at the beauty shop, and don't. She looked over the lid of her compact at Bat, who was trying to pull his tie back into place.

"So you're the great Bat Gillespie?" she said. "From Al's pæans of praise in his letters, I had expected to see you wearing wings and plucking at a golden harp."

"The description does me justice," he said. "But my wings are retractible and the harp is really a bottle." He handed her the drink I had mixed. She sipped it.

"Next time," she said, wrinkling her up-tilted nose, "give me a little warning when you blow home, will you? I could have won a thousand dollar prize or two if I had stuck around Miami a few days longer. But the papers didn't say how long you were going to stay in the States and I thought I'd better hop up to see what you both looked like."

"I must apologize," Bat said, gravely, "for the thoughts I've had about you in these two years since Al told me you were learning to fly. I regretted it bitterly. I regret all women flyers. My mental picture of them is not complimentary.

"Most of them wear pants and look as if they had mustaches. I like girls to be girls."

"And the place for women," she said, mockingly, "is in the kitchen?"

Bat had the grace to look embarrassed. To save his face, he turned away and poured himself another drink.

MICKEY laughed at him. "I'm glad to see you, Bat," she said. "I've always been curious about you. Ever since I was knee high to an oleo strut Al's been following you around the tropics. At school I'd get a letter from him. It would be from a place with a name I couldn't find on the map. It would tell me he was coming home to see how I was getting on at school. Then I'd get a cable saying you had dug up another war somewhere and he was going with you. Why?"

Bat held the bottle suspended over the tall glass. His gray eyes swung up to mine. Then he finished pouring his drink.

"I wouldn't know, exactly," he said. "I guess it was because we were the only ones left of a pretty good outfit, so we sort of stuck together out of loneliness. That's as good an answer as any."

"Why didn't you come home?" Mickey asked.

"We were always going to," I said. "For five years we were always going to. And then something would come up and we never quite caught the boat."

"And now you are home," Mickey said, "what are you going to do?"

"Stay right here in this room until our money is gone," I said.

"And then what? Want jobs as transport pilots? You could get them, easily."

A quick restlessness flashed across Bat's face.

"From Newark to Cleveland and back again, and back again, and back again! Tonight, tomorrow night and evermore, amen!"

"Let's eat," I said. "I could chew a boiled Mexican hairless without turning a hair."

I gave Mickey the high sign. She caught it.

"Good idea," she said. "Where'll we go?"

"A little toast first," Bat said. He raised his glass. By the look in his eye I knew what the toast would be. "The old war-cry, Al, 'Anywhere but here!'"

"Nothing doing. I'll drink to happy landings, but not to that one. This suits me fine. Let's eat."

"I know a nice little Spanish place on 32nd Street," he said, not meeting my eyes.

One night off the boat and he wanted to go to a spik joint! There you had it; when he was in the tropics he was homesick for the States, and when he was in New York he wanted to be back in the hot countries. Well, they're all like that. You find them, hard-bitten, far-wandering men, sitting at fly-specked tables. After the second drink they start talking about home. But it doesn't mean anything. Take them home and within a week they'll be studying sailing lists and overhauling their gear.

In the end we went to the Spanish place. Now, remembering things as they happened, I realize that it would have all been very, very different had we gone to Childs for butter cakes, as I wanted. I might now be living in a white farmhouse in Connecticut, the father of several red-headed children. Gomez would not have died in a dingy room, folded over an up-ended table. Carmencita, the loveliest dancing girl of the Coq d'Or, would— But I'm getting ahead of my story.

CHAPTER II.

NIGHT SCENE.

I GUESS we all had too many rum cocktails. I went brotherly on Mickey and tried to shut hers off after the second, forgetting that she

AL BURKE

was as Irish and as red-headed as I. Maybe it was my not wanting to go to this Alhambra place that started me off in one of my truculent moods. After the third cocktail Bat was feeling fine, and Mickey, sore because I had tried to crack down on her, was playing right up to him. When I saw them holding hands under the table my drinks died on me. I had been thinking of Mickey as a kid for so long and—and—well, Bat was thirty-five and there was not much of life that he had not seen, heard or felt.

"Watch him, Mickey," I said. "He plays marbles for keeps."

"Do you?" Mickey asked, cutting her reckless young eyes at him.

Bat's jaw line tightened and his gray eyes became almost black as he stared across the table at me. Then he downed his cocktail at one gulp.

"Sure I do," he said. "And if there's anything else you want to know about me, ask Big Brother Al. He'll tip you off."

"I'll say I will!" I snapped. I knew all the while that I was getting in deeper and deeper, but I could not seem to turn back. "Ask him about Carmencita."

She took one of his cigarettes. His fingers, lighting it, touched hers.

"What would Carmencita be like, Bat?" she asked.

"Ask Al," Bat said. "He seems to be in a telling mood."

I got up and went into the bar. I had two or three quick ones. They were strong enough to bounce the fillings out of my teeth, but they didn't do me any good. I couldn't replace the glow I had had a couple of hours before. I had spoiled something, or Bat had. My mind was not clear enough to figure it out. All I knew was that here they were, Mickey and Bat, the only two people in the world who meant a thing to me. I had been so dumb I just hadn't considered the possibility of their falling in love. And that just must not happen. There wasn't a grander mug on two feet than Bat, but he just wasn't the man for Mickey to love. Sooner or later he would break her heart.

I knew if I had one more drink I could collect a fighting jag and start throwing the joint across the street. So I went back into the restaurant, where a dozen pimply half-breeds from somewhere were trying to pretend they were a marimba band from Guatemala. They were hammering away on deep-toned blocks of wood with padded mallets, playing a song that I remembered. The last time I had heard it, Bat and I were having a farewell dinner at the Coq d'Or, in Puerto Lucia, capital of San Lorenzo. Carmencita was there, of course. Have you ever seen a blond — naturally blond — Spanish girl? Some of them are very beautiful. Carmencita was. All during the dinner and the drinking which followed it, she had been deciding whether she should kill Bat or commit suicide. In the end she did neither. I had been watching her. As soon as she reached for the thin knife in her stocking, I slapped her dizzy.

And now Mickey and Bat were dancing to the same song. Mickey, just before leaving the hotel, had stopped at her room and had changed to something soft and green. Looking at her from the doorway, I could not help knowing that she had ceased being a child. She was a woman, lovely, headstrong, and with the wild restlessness of the Burkes pulsing through her at every warm heartbeat.

TURNING in that slow, nostalgic rhythm, Mickey's half-closed eyes came full upon me, but her expression did not change. I realized that she had looked at me and not seen me. Bat's hard, bronzed profile came into view. One glance at his face and I knew that it was time for me to move in. I just could not let it happen.

I walked across the floor. A couple bumped into me. The man began to get ugly, but I gave him the eye and he changed his mind.

"Let's go home," I said to Mickey.

Home? I could not have said it in Spanish had I wanted to, because there is no word meaning home in that language. Oh, there's house, and dwelling, and the like, but no home. But I

had no home, either, nor had Bat. Nor, as I realized with a sudden ache, had Mickey. And if she fell for Bat she never would have.

"Oh, not yet, Al!" she protested.

They had stopped dancing. That is, they had stopped moving, but her proud, slim shoulder was still pressed against his chest and his arm was holding her tight.

"Right now," I insisted.

Bat looked at me. "What's the matter, Al?" he asked, quietly. "Are you crocked?"

"No. But we're going home."

"Al!" Mickey said, sharply. "Don't make a scene here. Come on over to the table."

They walked ahead of me. I followed, placing my feet with great care because the floor was weaving gently, like the deck of a ship in a ground swell. They sat down. I stood, holding tightly to the edge of the table.

"Are you coming," I demanded, "or not?"

Mickey lifted her bright head and said, "Al, you've stepped off on the wrong foot. You're a swell brother, and if it hadn't been for you, I'd have grown up in an orphans' home. But you mustn't ah-ah me!"

I made a very serious mistake. I took her by the elbow. My hand was stronger than I had realized. She winced and jerked her arm away. A flaming anger came into her eyes.

"Go on, wet blanket!" she said. "Go on back to the hotel and sleep it off."

"Let's go, Mickey," Bat said. "I can't have Al feeling this way. Drunk or sober, I don't want him to—"

"We're staying right here," Mickey said.

"That tears it!" Bat said, shrugging. He hissed for the waiter. "Will you have another shot, Al?"

I knew right then that if I took him back to the hotel it would have to be in my arms, unconscious. If it had been any other man in the world I'd have knocked his head clear out the front door. But I could not hit Bat. I wanted to, but I could not. My fists were clenched, and he was just sitting there, watching me. I could not even raise my arm to swing at him. So there was nothing for me to do but to get the hell out of there.

At the door a man would not get out of the way. I pushed him through the revolving glass. The uniformed starter wanted to get tough. I took a crack at him and he went down. The taxi-driver was going to say something. He looked at me and then became very polite.

In our room I sent for a couple of bottles and lay down on my bed to wait for Bat. The next thing I knew he was shaking me, and it was ten in the morning, and both bottles were empty. I wanted to ask him what time he and Mickey had rolled in, but somehow I did not quite dare.

CHAPTER III.

THE NIGHT PLANE.

IT was eleven-thirty when we were shown into the office of P. Wallis Armitage. We had to walk across a mile of ankle-deep carpet to get to his desk. Out of his windows we could see most of New York Harbor. One of those little Dutch boats was steaming down the East River.

"So you," Mr. Armitage said, looking at me, "are the famous soldier of fortune, Major Gillespie?"

"That's Gillespie," I said. "I'm Al Burke."

Seeing this Armitage, you knew

right away how he had managed to make half a dozen millions out of the hot countries without leaving his polished desk. Oddly enough, he was a little like Bat, only older, of course, and not thinned down by heat and fever. He had the same sharp, quick focus to his eyes and the same way of thinning his lips while he was cataloging you in the orderly files of his mind. I could see that he was surprised at Bat. Most people were, especially if they had read about him in the papers. They expected, I suppose, to see a big, swashbuckling plug-ugly instead of a little feller whose smile was so mild that it made you feel you ought to look out for him before somebody took away his bag of candy.

"I know something about you, Major," Armitage said. "When I read that you had landed the day before yesterday I had somebody look up your record."

"Why?" Bat asked.

But Armitage went straight on. Apparently that was his way. It was Bat's way, too.

"You've been making something of a name for yourself in the tropics," he said, not even glancing at a slip of paper in his hands. "How close does this hit it? You were fired from West Point three days before graduation. It was for hitting your math instructor, wasn't it?"

"It was. He had been hazing me for four years."

"You learned to fly in the Argentine. You were a lieutenant, then a captain, in the Peruvian Air Force. You were shot down in that Uruguayan affair and you bet on the wrong horse in Nicaragua. You built up a squadron of American and European flyers in 1922 and took them around with you, selling your services to anyone who wanted them. You organized the air force in San Lorenzo and did a good bit in the revolution of 1931 that put Muñoz in the Presidential Palace. When he disbanded the army air force and most of the army a few months ago you resigned, although he wanted you to stay. You are a trustworthy officer, never changing sides during a fight. You drink too much. You can't save money. Am I right so far?"

"Near enough," Bat drawled. "So what?"

"Do you want to go back to the tropics?"

Bat's eyes glinted. "What tropics?"

"To San Lorenzo."

I HELD my breath. San Lorenzo is a little hunk of land in which God took great pride in making as beautiful as He could. But He dropped the country in the wrong place and put a lot of the wrong people in it. You can stand in the Plaza at Puerto Lucia any night when the band is playing, and the people are promenading, and you can look almost straight up at the great black mountains of the Cordilleras, and your heart sort of comes up in your throat and chokes you. And then you think of Gomez, and of Cuesta, who wanted to be president, and who was just about to pull the living heart from between Bat's ribs, and you realize that it is not the place for a white man.

"No," Bat said, at last, and the light went out of his eyes. "We've been seven or eight years trying to get home. Now we're here, we aim to stay long enough to get all cooled off."

"Forever!" I said, and meant it.

Mr. Armitage went off on a tangent. "Are you familiar with politics down there?"

"I was, but I'm trying to forget."

"Is Muñoz secure in office?"

Bat hesitated. "He would have been if he had not let most of his army go back to their farms. No honest president can last long if he doesn't have an army to keep the crooked *politicos* from getting in."

"He's honest, then."

"Utterly."

"Do you know anything about the operations of my company, the Inter-American Airways, Ltd., down there?"

"A little."

"What do you think of them?"

"Lousy," Bat said, succinctly.

"Why?"

"You've let the French and German operators gang up on you. Some morning you'll wake up to find that you'll have to hop all the way across San Lorenzo, as you do in Martinique. You won't have any mail contracts, subsidies, or air terminals. But I suppose you know that."

"What else?"

"Nothing that's any of my business."

"Do you know any of my men down there?"

"Some of them. You've got a good, clean bunch of pilots."

"Know our resident manager, Mr. Woolf?"

Bat's eyes narrowed. "Yes. He's a good poker player. He can make a pair of deuces stand up longer than any white man I ever saw."

"Is that all?" Mr. Armitage asked flatly.

Bat sat forward in his chair. "Listen, Mr. Armitage, is this the way you run your business? Calling strangers in and asking them to tell tales on your employees? If it is, I'm damned good and glad I don't work for you!"

"I have my own sources of information," Mr. Armitage snapped back. "Company sources. But I have a purpose in asking you. I want you to go down there as my personal representative to iron out whatever troubles you may find in San Lorenzo. We can't afford to lose our concessions there. The country is too important, geographically. I know there is trouble there, but I can't find out exactly what it is. What do you say?"

I TURNED my back on them and looked down at the harbor. The little Dutch ship was pushing her rusty bows past the Statue of Liberty. Last time I had been aboard her the main saloon had been furnished in the same horrible red velvet as when six of us—just kids, then—had sailed for the tropics to find the famous Bat Gillespie and to join his outfit. We had been full of great ideas on that morning ten years ago, thinking how romantic it was to follow in the steps of those other great soldiers of fortune, Lee Christmas, Guy Maloney, Sam Dreben and all the rest. Now, of all that gallant company of eager-eyed youngsters, only Bat and I were alive.

Bat and I! For ten years we had fought and played and starved together. We had saved one another's lives so often that we had long since lost count. We had taken the breaks as they came, and managed to laugh at them all. Until last night. And now—what? Things could not go on like this. Carmencita, with her blond hair and her black eyes, had not come between us, but Mickey had—instantly. She had driven the sharp, vital wedge of her personality deep into the solid foundation of our friendship. It was not that Bat could not be trusted. I would have trusted him with my life anywhere. But I would not trust him

with Mickey. He was not a chaser. He had had his share of women, of course. And that was all right. But he was not a chaser. Yet the moment that Mickey had walked into our room something had happened to them both.

I knew a sudden aching nostalgia for things as they had once been. Bat and I, together in a boundless, unquestioning friendship. I did not even mind going back to the tropics, to the old life of restless wandering, if that could be restored—and if Mickey could be saved from heartbreak. With difficulty I jerked my mind back to the conversation.

"—and you have about thirty managers," Bat was saying, "and a couple of hundred pilots scattered up and down the coasts of Central and South America. Why don't you promote one of them to this job. Why do you want us?"

"I didn't say 'us,'" Armitage pointed out. "I said 'you.'"

"If your secretary had looked up Captain Burke when she examined the newspaper files on me," Bat said, "you would know why he goes if I go. When he flies into a town peons lock their doors and bring their chickens in until he leaves."

ARMITAGE smiled thinly and looked at me with new interest.

"So he knows flying—and is hard-boiled, eh?"

"Cable any of your pilots in the hot countries and ask them."

"It's funny I never heard of him."

"He happens to be modest. Whatever he does, the outfit gets credit for it. And no romantic newspaper man has ever managed to dig out his story."

"Do I understand," Armitage said slowly, "that you won't consider a proposition unless he goes with you?"

"Exactly."

"You both know the ways of the country and you aren't afraid to take steps?"

"With our feet, or with guns?"

"I should expect you," Armitage said, dryly, "to use your heads as much as possible. After that you may use your own judgment. I do not want to lose my concession."

Bat grinned understandingly. He

BAT GILLESPIE

looked up at me and his grin faded. I knew what he was thinking about. He was thinking about Mickey.

"Well, what do you say, Al?" he asked me.

"Let's go," I said, promptly.

"Yesterday," he said, still studying my face, "you wanted me to promise that I wouldn't sign up for any job in the tropics."

"That was yesterday."

Now, of course, it seems strange that it never occurred to me to tell him to go on alone. I did not want to go back to the tropics. The hunch had been riding me ever since we left Puerto Lucia that if we ever went back we would stay there, dead or alive. But to go wandering on and on alone,

without Bat, was unthinkable. He had become as much a part of my life as my gun hand. Nobody, not even Mickey, would quite take his place.

Bat shrugged and turned back to Armitage.

"If I should go into this deal, I would want a letter from you which will back me up, in advance, in anything I may want to do. I can hire or fire. I can draw upon you, sight draft or by cable, for any reasonable amounts, and no questions asked. How about it?"

"When I decided to retain you," Armitage said calmly, "I expected to go the whole hog."

"And now our salaries," Bat said, "are open for negotiation."

Mr. Armitage named a figure which was twice what I thought Bat might ask. So I knew there would be plenty of shenannigans. In my experience any job that paid too well did not pay well enough, considering bullet wounds and everything.

"When," the millionaire asked, "can you start?"

I spoke out of turn. "When we button our coats, our trunks are packed. We can take the night plane tonight. Oke, Bat?"

Bat took a long breath. Once again I knew what he was thinking. But he nodded.

"Sure. The night plane it is, tonight."

CHAPTER IV.

ADIOS.

WE were at the Newark Airport, waiting for the night sleeper to take off for Miami. Mickey, still breathless from trying to keep up with us all afternoon, was there to see us off. And there was a slick-looking mug from Mr. Armitage's office to arrange our tickets, and to give Bat a roll the size of an air-cooled cylinder, and to get under our feet every time we turned around.

I was low in my mind, then feeling good, then low again, and I could not stand still long enough to talk to Mickey. She did not seem to want to talk much, anyway. She just stood there, her vivid eyes unreadable, glancing from me to Bat and back again. There were so many things that I wanted to ask her, and to tell her, but I could not break down the uncomfortable constraint that had existed between us all afternoon.

Presently I turned away and barged through the wicket. I wanted to see the plane. The ticket-taker put out his hand to stop me, but I went right past. The tarmac was an unreal white and black halftone, with the floodlights on and a huge Condor breathing flame from her long exhaust pipes. I listened to her motors. They sounded all right. The pilot was standing by, dragging at his cigarette before the bell rang.

"How many hours have you had?" I demanded.

"Three thousand and something," he said. And then, because he did not like my tone, "Would that be enough?"

"It's nothing to write home about," I said, glad of something to argue about. "But I like to know who we're flying with, especially at night."

He looked me up and down. In any other mood I would have liked him. He was a clean-cut youngster who had steady eyes and a good hard mouth.

"Yeah?" he said, flicking away his cigarette. "You and who else? Hitler?"

The co-pilot hurried over. He was a

kid, trying to grow a spiked mustache and a hard-boiled expression.

"What's the matter, Cliff?" he asked. "Trouble?"

"Not yet. But you never can tell."

I waited a minute. No use taking my uneasiness out on these boys. I would not have wanted to lay hands on either of them. Sometimes I get rougher than I realize.

"Listen, fellers," I said, peaceably, "Bat Gillespie and I are riding south with you. We've never gone to bed before in a plane and I've flown long enough not to care much for the idea, that's all."

The pilot's face cracked into a smile. He pushed out his hand. "You'll be Captain Burke, then," he said. "I'm glad I didn't stick my neck out. I'm reasonably fond of my dear little head. I've heard all about you and the Major. I'm tickled bright blue to be carrying you."

The co-pilot's eyes stuck out so far you could have knocked them off with a club.

"Captain Burke?" he echoed. "Not Mickey Burke's brother? We heard she was in the waiting room. Is she, really?"

THIS was a new reason for fame, or notoriety. It was taking time to make me realize that Mickey had something besides looks and a slim young body that fitted too well into a green dress.

"She's my sister," I said, "and she is inside. Do you know her?"

"Sweet Susie! I don't, but I'd sure like to. I saw her stunting at the races the other day. I've seen 'em all, Freddy Lund, Al Williams, the Army and Navy teams—all of 'em. But she had my tongue hanging out so far I fell over it when I started to walk away. The roof of my mouth's peeling yet, it got so sunburned!"

"Don't get him started," the older pilot laughed. Then, in a confidential tone, "You and the Major going to get into the trouble in San Lorenzo?"

"What trouble? I haven't had much time to read the papers."

"Don't kid me, big boy. Any time you and Bat Gillespie start for somewhere, trouble isn't far behind you. Besides, the pilots on that run have been talking."

"What do they say?"

"Well, something to the effect that when old Muñoz reduced his army and let you and the Major go it was like handing the 'outs' the keys to the capital."

"Take it from me, buddy, it's the bunk. The Old Man won't let anybody rock the boat."

"Yet you and Bat are starting south. Do you see fire engines roaring down Fifth Avenue just for the ride?"

I left him. In spite of his talk about trouble in San Lorenzo I was feeling a lot better. In a few minutes Bat and I would be taking off, heading toward a world whose uneasy values we understood. As the miles slid under the fat wheels of the Condor we would leave behind us the sudden, heartbreaking chasm which had opened between us. We would be buddies again, with our friendship too deep-rooted for anybody — anybody but Mickey — to kill. And Mickey herself?

I hated to leave her, especially since she had taken up this stunting business, but it was obvious to me that she was quite capable of managing her own affairs.

They were still standing there in the waiting room. They did not seem to be talking much. When I joined them she slipped her strong, slender fingers

into mine. It was nice to have them there.

"IF it weren't for you," she told Bat, "Al would be staying right here at home, getting a good transport job and maybe working up to be president of the line."

"Sure," Bat grinned, "if the passengers didn't mind his looping the ship now and then just for the sheer joy of being alive."

"What's all this," she asked me, "about your not wanting me to stunt?"

"Oh, hell, Bat's just fooling," I said, shuffling my feet.

"Two of a kind," Bat said. "I believe every Burke was born with an extra supply of luck. Al has, I know it."

"For two cents," Mickey said, "I'd go down and see this Armitage man and tell him things about you both that would spoil your nice new jobs. He'd have you thrown off the plane at Baltimore."

"If you do," I threatened, squeezing her hand, "I'll cut off your allowance."

"What allowance?" she asked.

"Well," I said, uncomfortably, "I know you wrote me to cut it off when you got your job with the oil company, but you were a terrible bookkeeper, and I thought you might overdraw, or lose your job, or—"

"Do you mean to say you've been sending it to the bank all this time?" she demanded, incredulously.

Bat chuckled. "He wrote to the bank not to send you the duplicate deposit slips," he said. "That was so you wouldn't know."

"You big dumb Mick!" she said, slipping her arm around me. "How would you think I'd use it if I didn't know the money was there?"

"I thought you'd overdraw, sooner or later, or lose your check stubs, or something."

"I'm going to find out how much is there and give it back to you. I'm getting good money, and—"

"Buy yourself one of those turtle-shaped automobiles, or a diamond-studded toothbrush," I said. "If you gave it back to me, I'd just lose it at poker, or drink it up."

"I might," she said, speculatively, "use it to finance a trip down to this San Lorenzo place to see you."

"That's out!" I snapped. "You come down there and I'll slap you out from under your hat."

But she was not looking at me. She was looking at Bat, and something in those reckless Irish eyes scared me.

"Do you hear me?" I snarled.

The slick-haired bird from the office came to tell us that they could not hold the plane any longer. Mickey kissed me. Then she kissed Bat. There was a difference in those two kisses.

"Come on," I said. "Break! Let's go!"

Bat took his arms from around her.

"Had enough?" I asked him, coldly.

"No."

I walked away from them before I said any more.

"I'll be seeing you!" Mickey called.

I waved, but did not look back. I felt better as soon as the plane started. A danger point had been safely passed. And Bat and I were going places.

CHAPTER V.

"WELCOME HOME!"

THERE was a three-quarters moon the night we landed in Puerto Lucia. The red-coated band was playing in the Plaza and men

and women were walking around and around the square, the men in one direction and the women in the other, as is their custom. The smell of coffee, and of perfume, and of lush growing things was in the air and it was all pretty nice. It wasn't too hot. The wind was coming down from the mountains and you forgot how hot it would be in the morning when the wind shifted and came from the steaming jungles to the eastward.

"I suppose I'm a damned fool, Bat," I said as we climbed out of the *volante,* "but it's kind of good to be back. It sort of gets into your blood."

Bat looked at me, his mouth a little twisted.

"Ten years ago, I warned you, Al," he said. "And now it's too late. It's in your blood, all right."

The proprietor of El Gran Hotel Americano had heard somehow that we were coming back. So we unpacked and bathed in our old suite of two rooms. We sent the boy down for a bottle of native rum, whose strength would make the Statue of Liberty do a fan dance. We primed ourselves well. Then, wanting to catch up on the news, we went to the Coq d'Or.

It is quite a place, the Coq d'Or. You have been there if you have ever made the complete Caribbean Cruise. You probably remember it as a big garish café with two bands; a tepica band from the Argentine and a full marimba band from Guatemala. It was the place where you saw all the *señores* and *señoritas,* and the deeply-bronzed men whose sunburn ended just above their eyebrows. You probably left in a hurry when some muddy-booted oil driller, who had been getting grimly, noisily drunk all evening, was tapped on the head with a bottle.

But to the old-timers, the Coq d'Or was something else. Oh, there were the girls, all right. None of them were quite as lovely as Carmencita, but they were all easy on the eyes. Even more important was this; if you sat there long enough, and kept your mouth closed, and did not get into any fights, you would learn all the news of the hot countries. You might learn, for instance, that the English *filibusteros* were running Vickers guns into Nicaragua. And that Johnny Bassett, another old-timer like yourself, had cracked up in the Andes and had not yet been found. President Gonzales, south of the Canal, was feathering his nest in a Paris bank and had made reservations, quietly, on the Orduña for her next northbound sailing. And that the Companie Generale des Avions Sud-Amerique was betting five to four, in francs, that within a month the Inter-American Airways, Ltd., would drop Puerto Lucia, and all of San Lorenzo, from its time tables. And so on and on, if your ears were attuned to the quick pulse-beats of the tropics.

AS usual, I walked in behind Bat. I could see over his head and, being bigger than he was, my body protected him from the rear. The usual crowd was there. It seemed as if we had just left the place the night before. People turned and looked at Bat, and we walked through a narrow swath of silence. But we had become used to that.

Sanchez escorted us to our old table in the far corner, where we could see the front door on one side and the whole room on the other. There was a small service door, seldom used, just three steps away. Once this had saved our lives, and there was no telling when it might again be useful. Another thing; anybody who wanted to

come to us had to come from the front, not from behind. We had learned many years ago that it is dangerous to possess a back in the tropics.

We eased our legs under the table and ordered rum. I opened my white linen coat and shrugged my shoulder holster into a comfortable—and convenient—position. It seemed queer, now, to think that only a few days ago we had walked the streets of New York without a single weapon more effective than a penknife. Here I would as soon go without my pants as without my gun.

I spotted Carmencita's honey-colored head instantly. Bat saw her, too, and his eyes widened in surprise. It was not that she was sitting with men. That was her job. But she was sitting with Gomez and Cuesta, who hated any bit of ground our shadows had ever passed across, and that was not so good. There was a third man at the table. His back was toward us. It was not until he turned to speak to Carmencita that I recognized his long, saturnine face. He was Bogardus J. Woolf, San Lorenzan manager for Armitage's Inter-American Airways, Ltd. Both Carmencita and Woolf were getting too democratic to suit my taste. And from the look on Bat's face, he thought so too.

"Want me to go over and get her?" I asked Bat.

"No. What do you want to start a fight so early for? She'll come over in her own good time. Sit still and stop fidgeting. You give me the itch."

"Force of habit. You always itch down here. It comes free with the climate."

Gomez and Cuesta, and probably the other two at their table, had seen us come in. Woolf and Carmencita made no sign, but Gomez and Cuesta were staring point-blank at us. They saw us looking at them and they smiled at us in a way that sent cold chills of premonition running up and down my spine.

At another table two Germans were drinking with young Paul Dupont, resident manager for the Companie Generale des Avions Sud-Amerique. That was important. I remembered what Bat had told Armitage about the Frogs and the Dutchmen getting together to gang the Inter-American outfit. I remember, too, that I had heard some such talk when we had been disbanding the squadron, but what with one thing and another I had not paid much attention. There is always skulduggery in the tropics. If you listen to all of it you begin cutting out paper dolls and confiding to people that you are Napoleon or Queen of the May.

THAT other table, though, worried me. What, I wondered, was Woolf doing with two of the crookedest, most ambitious, *politicos* in all Latin America? Gomez had been Governor of Lucia Province under the previous administration and, like every man in the country who could read and write, considered himself the logical choice for president when the government toppled. He had never forgiven Bat for his part in putting Muñoz in the Presidential Palace. Cuesta had been chief of police under President García, and believed that his natural place in the sun was as governor general, if not as dictator. Together they were a bad combination. The only thing that had held them back, I thought, was their own mutual jealousy. When Bat and I had first come to Puerto Lucia to work for the then revolutionary party, Cuesta had picked us up and had nearly put an

end, forever, to our earthly activities.

"Woolf is pretty brazen," Bat said, presently, "to be hanging out with those two. He must have a reason for it. If I owned any stock in Inter-American Airways, I'd sell out, *muy pronto.*"

"How could he better himself if Muñoz were out?" I asked. "It was the Old Man who gave the line its concessions here. How does he know that a different president wouldn't favor the French and the German operators?"

Bat shrugged. "Do you notice," he said, "that there isn't an Inter-American pilot in the room, unless Woolf is a pilot? There's probably something we should know about that. They used to hang out here all the time. Remember when we saved Phelps from being knifed?"

CARMENCITA

I remembered. He was one of the hard-fisted, level-eyed boys who flew the big transports. Youngsters, most of them.

Youngsters? As a matter of fact, many of them were older than I. They just seemed young to us, who had had too many bouts with malaria, too many narrow escapes, too many years in the hot countries.

"Yeah, and it seems funny, too, not seeing any of our old outfit hanging around. Remember when we first came? Vance Rogers and Merry Ohstrom and Luis Delabarre and Ivan Poporoff? Queer to think they all kicked off, one at a time."

Wordlessly we drank a toast to them. Oh, it was all right, their dying. They had to go sometime and a crash is as clean a way as any—if there's no fire. No, we did not feel sorry for them, but for ourselves, who missed their gay reckless company.

Presently Woolf looked around. He bowed as if he had noticed us for the first time. With a word of apology to his companions he rose and made his way to our table. His long, horsey face was wrinkled into what he probably conceived to be a smile, but his eyes were two green punctures in his long dark face. Knowing him, we did not ask him to sit down. But that made no difference. He sat down anyway.

"I saw that you two fellows were on the down-plane this afternoon," he said in a voice that was surprisingly high for a man of his size. "I wanted to meet you, but couldn't."

I observed that he carried a gun on his hip. It made a bulge in the crisp white linen of his coat. I wondered about that gun. For a while we used to play poker at the American Club. When he sat in, he would shed his coat and he did not carry a gun then.

"SINCE when," Bat asked him, idly, "do Inter-American managers get palsy-walsy with anti-administration birds like Gomez and Cuesta? If they ever get in they'll help the French and Germans take the line for a cleaning."

"That," Woolf said, easily, "is why I am spending money on them. I'm trying to make them see the light. In these days of political unrest it isn't a bad idea to copper your bets." His cold green eyes swivelled to me. "What's the matter, Burke? You don't seem very friendly."

"I'd be a heap friendlier if I could see your hands above the table."

In some haste he jerked them up. They were empty, all right. He smiled at me, but his pupils contracted like those of a cat coming out of a cellar into broad daylight. I could have laughed in his face. Bat and I cleaned him night after night at stud until he got wise and stopped playing. Whenever he had them back to back his pupils acted like that. He could control his hands and his face but his eyes did him dirt. I wondered, seeing them change now, what his hole card was and what he was figuring on doing with it.

"You don't think I'd get rough with you two, do you?" he protested.

"Not unless you've gone nuts with the heat," I said.

"Shut up, Al!" Bat said.

"Still hard-boiled, eh?" Woolf said.

"Plenty," Bat told him. "You've been down here long enough to know just how hard-boiled he can be."

Carefully Woolf arranged his face in another smile. Over his shoulder I could see Gomez and Cuesta watching us. Carmencita's dark, brooding gaze brushed past us. Her expression did not change, but she waggled her half-closed fingers in a greeting.

"WHEN we learned you were coming back so soon," Woolf was saying, "some of us at the American Club wondered what had happened."

"It was the poker they played in the north," Bat told him, gravely. "They're playing deuces wild, and one-eyed Jacks and Lord knows what. So we hurried back to sit into an honest game."

"I see," Woolf said. "Don't hurry away before we have one last game together."

"I'm figuring on staying quite a while," said Bat, placidly.

"I wouldn't, Bat." Woolf leaned far across the table in his earnestness. "Listen, try the climate, the poker, in Guatemala, or Nicaragua, or somewhere. You were a big shot here once, but things have changed. And you can't do a thing about it. I'd be mighty sorry to see you go back to the States all iced up in a box."

"Thanks," Bat said. "Got anything special in mind?"

"No. But one hears things. If, for instance, the government changed, you'd be in a thin way."

"Think it will change?" Bat asked, carelessly.

"I wouldn't know. But there's unrest everywhere. All over the world. And we all know—you better than most of us—that the Old Man has grown too sure of himself. He should have taken your advice about building up the air force instead of demobbing it. But listen, Bat, you've been pretty tough in your day and these people don't forget. If you happen to be on the wrong side of the fence politically—"

"I'm not, Woolf," Bat drawled. "I'm not on any side at all. I'm not a *politico*. I'm not even a soldier any more. I'm just here on a little business matter. You might tell that to anyone who asks you."

"Do you expect me to believe that?" Bat looked at him. "I expect you

to believe anything I tell you, Woolf."

"Oh, all right, all right," Woolf said, hastily. "But you always were a hog for trouble. I just wanted to remind you that there was such a thing as asking for it. Never say I didn't warn you. So long."

He got up, smiling unconvincingly.

"Give my love and kisses to your buddies, Cuesta and Gomez," Bat said, lazily.

In the act of turning away, Woolf paused. I slid my feet under my chair in case I had to get up in a hurry.

"Shall I send them over to your table?" Woolf asked, with a cutting edge to his thin voice.

"Sorry," Bat said, "but I'm not quite that democratic. If you want to, though, you can tell Carmencita that everything is all right now. Al and I are back."

Woolf's eyes expanded. His nostrils widened and his hand began to inch toward his hip. His glance flicked toward me, but my hand wasn't crawling anywhere. It was already there.

"Run along, Woolf," I said.

I COULD hear the hiss of exhaled breath through his lips. He saw where my hand was. He relaxed and turned back to Bat.

"I had forgotten," he said, unctuously, "that she used to be your girl, more or less. But that sort forgets easily and—"

"What sort?" I cut in.

He smiled nastily. "Need I explain—to you?"

"Yes," I said.

Now he hedged, as I had expected he would. "Well, these dancing girls, if you know what I mean."

"I know exactly what you mean," Bat said, shaking a warning finger at me. "And for what you mean, rather than what you say, I'll tell you that you're a cock-eyed liar. She is a dancing girl, but nothing more than that, and you know it as well as I do."

"He called you a liar, Woolf," I said, getting my feet under the table. "Aren't you going to do anything about it?"

I was just itching to have him move in, but he did not have the nerve.

"Do anything about it?" he echoed, thoughtfully. "No, not just now."

He swung away. Even his ears were red. And the sound of my parting chuckle did not help any.

"That answers that," Bat said.

"What answers what?"

"He's afraid of us. He may know about Armitage. I'll find out about that later. Why else would he be afraid of us?"

"Because, teacher, he's been doing something naughty."

Bat was in no mood for persiflage. He was really worried—or as worried as he ever got, which was not very much.

"We've got to dust around and get some dope," he said, presently. "Woolf was pretty cocky, and his being out in public with Gomez and Cuesta indicates something, I don't know quite what."

"I used to hear talk that they had gotten hold of some German and French money," I said.

"Exactly."

I sat there, watching Carmencita, who was drinking grenadine, or something. She did not enter into the conversation of the three men at all. Her silver slipper was tapping restlessly on the floor. Pretty soon she would be over.

The music of the tepica band died away in a nostalgic grace-note and the marimba band went to work at the

other side of the room. Every nerve reflex in me suddenly snapped to attention. What was it that had called to me? Then I knew. They were playing the same song, the Song of the Aventureros, that had been played that night at the Alhambra, in New York, when Bat and Mickey and I had come so close to a smash-up. I glanced at Bat, wondering if he would remember. The thudding notes pulsed through the big, crowded room, booming through the drunken noises and shrill laughter. The padded mallets seemed to be hammering on my heart, too, and I was suddenly desperately l o n e l y for Mickey, whom I had just learned to know.

I hissed for the waiter, got a new drink and raised my glass. Slowly Bat's eyes came into focus.

"Anywhere but here!" I said.

He shrugged, but drank. "What difference does it make?" he asked, wearily. "Might as well be here as anywhere. In the long run all towns are alike."

"When you say that, Bat, and believe it, you *are* getting old! Snap out of it!"

"I *am* old, Al," he said, tiredly. "Old at thirty-five! Isn't that a wheeze? It's the fever, I guess, and—oh, I don't know, but—the hell with it! I've had my fun. They can't take that away from me!"

"Well, why don't you marry Carmencita and settle down somewhere?"

He looked sharply at me, but he didn't say anything.

"You know if she goes on doing what she's doing now somebody'll get wise and she'll get the works. One side or the other'll give it to her. They always do. Why don't you get her out of the country?"

Bat studied the color of his drink. I watched him. After a while he raised his eyes and they were cloudy with trouble.

"Let's get drunk," he said.

"Suits me," I told him.

CHAPTER VI.

TROUBLE AHEAD.

AFTER a while Bat sat up straight and his eyes came alive. Cuesta, Gomez and Woolf were leaving. Woolf was trying to sweet-talk Carmencita, but she was not having any. He flushed darkly and turned away after the others.

To reach the door, they had to pass our table. I slipped my hand inside my coat and watched them. Mostly I watched Cuesta, who had once threatened to make Bat eat his own heart, salted and peppered. As it happened, I had come in just then and I had slapped Cuesta on the side of the head. Now, as he passed our table, I stared pointedly at his right ear. It was beautifully cauliflowered. His face got red when he saw me staring. For one big moment I thought he was going to say something.

"Easy, Al," Bat said, quietly.

I sat back and the three men went by. But from the expression on Cuesta's face I knew he would try to take me the first chance he got. A Spik looked funny with a cauliflower ear and he knew it. I watched them until they had collected their hats and canes at the door. Then I took my hand off the friendly, corrugated butt of my automatic and sat back to see what would happen next.

I wished Carmencita would hurry. It was only thirty-odd feet to the table where she had been. She could walk fast enough when she wanted to.

Then, after what seemed a very, very long time, she was standing at our table, smiling down at us with her slow, quiet smile. Awkwardly I rose, and my chair tumbled behind me.

"Ah, *querida,*" Bat said.

"With your permission, *caballeros,*" she said with that odd formality of hers.

"You have it, *niña,*" Bat said, and I dragged out the chair for her to sit in.

She was wearing the same perfume. I could smell it as her smooth yellow hair sank past my face. I would have recognized that perfume anywhere. On the other side of the world it would have made me think of Carmencita.

Her face was lovely. It was oval and delicate, not hawk-nosed, like most of the *Latinas.* Her body was slender and strong and hard, and her dancing dress was designed to hide none of its allure. There were other dancing girls here who were beautiful, but there was only one Carmencita.

"What," Bat asked her, "has been happening since we have been gone?"

For a long time she did not answer. Then, "For many reasons, Don Bat," she said, oddly, "it would been better for you not to have come back."

"Why?" Bat asked her.

Her somber dark eyes were puzzling. In the two years I had known her I had never seen exactly that expression in them before.

"You're the second one who has told me that tonight," Bat said when she did not answer. "And you have just come from Woolf's table. Would there be a connection there that I do not understand?"

SHE reached into her stocking. I set myself to let her have it in case her hand came out with a knife. I didn't know what Bat had said that could cause her sudden temper to blaze, but with Carmencita it was always well to be prepared for anything, just so long as it was unexpected. But she had not gone in after her knife. She drew out a crumpled American yellowback, a real gold certificate for a hundred dollars. Thoughtfully she straightened it out on the tablecloth while Bat regarded it silently.

"If you are not going to leave," she said, slowly, "I think I do not care for this."

Carelessly she tore the note half-way across. Bat's hand leaped out, saved the bill from total destruction. Now, thinking back, I know Bat must have known exactly what she was trying to tell him. But I did not.

She shrugged and flipped the torn bill across the table. There was this about Carmencita, as explosive as a quart tin of nitroglycerin, as unstable as a pursuit plane: whatever she did was sure to be unexpected. She was not a native San Lorenzan. Her father had been a Nicaraguan, a wealthy *haciendado,* a landowner. Three years back he and Carmencita's mother had been murdered by bandits, and their house and plantation burned to the ground. And when the affairs of the estate had been settled, Carmencita, then seventeen and an only child, discovered that she was penniless. A year later she turned up at the Coq d'Or, an extraordinarily beautiful dancing girl who resented instantly, and with her knife when necessary, undue familiarity on the part of the patrons who paid to dance with her. Bat discovered, some six months later, that she was a secret agent for the Muñoz government, planted at the Coq d'Or because, as I have said, all the news of the hot countries flowed through the café sooner or later.

I think she fell in love with Bat that first night he danced with her, a few days after she had come to Puerto Lucia. And Bat—well, he liked her, I guess, better than any girl he had ever known. Perhaps he loved her. I was never quite sure, but it was the sort of thing you don't ask about. Not being much of a hand with women, I just drifted along with them. It worked out all right, I suppose. I only know that I had not cared about finding myself a girl to make up a foursome.

Now Bat was looking down at the torn yellowback. He looked up at Carmencita, who was watching him.

"It would be fitting," he said, grinning thinly, "if those *gallegos,* Woolf, Cuesta and Gomez, bought us our party. A hundred dollars' worth."

Carmencita's s m o o t h shoulders lifted. Bat hissed for the waiter and ordered champagne.

"Let's dance, *querido,*" she said.

"No can do, *chica,*" Bat said. "That old wound in my knee bothers me tonight. Dance with Al. He shakes a slippery hip."

THERE was an odd expression on her face as I took her in my arms. She was, I now knew, definitely unhappy. That was astonishing. Before, when we had left Puerto Lucia for a few weeks, her delight in our—no, in Bat's—return was ecstatic. But now she was in my arms and I was not worrying about anything. Not anything except the fact that the dance could not last forever.

"My Bat," she said, abruptly, "is changed. He is in love with some other girl. Where is she and what does she look like?"

I almost stopped dancing, but her strong young arms kept me going.

"If he has," I said, "he's held out on me."

"*Mande?*"

"Except for one evening when he danced with my sister, he has not spoken with another girl since he saw you last."

"Then," she said with conviction, "it is your sister. Is she beautiful?"

"I just twisted my ankle," I said. "Let's go back to the table."

Leaving her with Bat, I went out to the bar. An oil driller was there. He was getting pretty drunk. I had clipped him once when he had tried to take Carmencita away from Bat. I was a little disappointed when he greeted me pleasantly. A good fight would have made me feel better.

"*Ola,* Captain Burke," the bartender greeted me.

Without my telling him, he mixed me up a heavy one. I downed it, but there was no bounce to it. He started to shake up another.

"Sorry to see you back, Captain," the driller said.

I put the drink down carefully. "Why?"

"No offense," he said, hastily. "But I was just hoping this revolution stuff was all the sump oil. Now you're back I know it isn't. Well, we had four years of peace and quiet, anyway. I suppose that's all an *hombre* could ask down here."

I was working on the fourth one when Bat came in. I could tell right away there was something wrong. I put the drink down and looked over his shoulder. But nobody was following him. He dragged me to the far end of the bar.

"Listen, Al," he said, pitching his voice so it exactly reached my ears. "Something pretty funny is going on. I don't know just what. Carmencita's

holding back on me. She insists we've got to get out of here in the morning."

"Well," I said, ordering another drink, "buy me a ticket for wherever we're going."

"She did tell me this, though: The managers of the three air lines are holding a meeting tonight with Cuesta and Gomez. We'd better attend. They might be talking about us, among other things. What do you say?"

"Oke by me," I said shrugging.

"Carmencita doesn't want us to go. She's sure we'll get into trouble and—"

"Where's the meeting?"

"In a house with yellow shutters on the Avenida de la Independencia. Two doors east of the Cathedral."

"I'll go and have a look," I said. "Then I'll come back and—"

"We go together," Bat said. "Come on."

THERE was about eighty-five dollars of Woolf's money—or perhaps it had belonged to Cuesta or Gomez—left on the table. Carefully Bat counted it and put it in his pocket. Then he peeled the exact amount from his own roll and dropped it into her hand. Carmencita, her lovely face inscrutable, slipped the substituted bills into her stocking. She said nothing, asked no questions. Her mental processes were devious and unpredictable, but somehow she managed to understand with startling clarity. Perhaps, I thought, that was why President Muñoz had told us she was worth a regiment of soldiers to the administration.

"We'll be back pretty soon," Bat said.

"*Vaya con Dios,*" she said, with more emphasis than the conventional phrase required.

We were just getting our hats when a youngster stopped us. It was Andy Phelps, a level-eyed, freckled kid whose shoulders bulged heavily under his tropic linen coat.

He was, I remembered, a pilot of the Inter-American, and was the bird we had yanked out of a nasty-looking fight here a few months ago when a Spik was about to split his kidneys with a knife.

"How do you do, Major?" he said, very respectfully. "How do you do, Captain? I just brought the Panama Mail in this afternoon and I heard you two were back. Is there any place we could talk a minute? I've got something pretty important I'd like to tell you."

"Twist the stick, kid," I growled. "We're in a hurry."

I was perfectly willing to push along, but Bat's quick attention focused upon him.

"Why, sure, Phelps," he said. "Let's hear it. Things not going so well at the Air Terminal?"

Phelps glanced quickly around. I could see that he did not want to talk here, being too green, or too honest, to realize that the best screen for stealthy voices is the hubbub made by others.

"Couldn't we go somewhere a little more private?" he begged.

"Come into the bar," Bat said.

WE lined up at the far end and ordered copitas. A swarthy bird with polished hair sidled close to us, but I gave him the eye and he moved away.

"Listen, Major," Phelps said, "a bunch of us were at the Alcazar a little while ago—"

"Is that where you all hang out now?" I asked. "What's wrong with this—"

"Let him tell it his own way, Al."

"We don't like it here any more, that's all," the pilot said, guardedly. "Well, at this Alcazar we heard things. And knowing you had just come in, I figured I'd better tell you. It might do a little toward thanking you for pulling that native off my back a while—"

"Forget it, kid," Bat said, gruffly. "What did you hear?"

"Well, the trouble here is a lot closer than most people think. And from the talk we hear, it has something to do with the air concessions. You know our company is competing with the French and German lines all up and down the coast. They used to be big rivals before we came in and copped off some of the good contracts and began running a service more efficient than theirs. But when they saw what we were accomplishing they got together and started fighting us and helping one another."

"I know, kid," Bat said. "But how should that worry Al and me?"

"Wait just another minute and I'll tell you," the boy said, very earnestly. "Since you went north a month ago, things have happened you may not know. The French and German lines have been figuring on making San Lorenzo the focal point of the Central and South American lines. The crossroads of the Americas, is the way they put it. For some reason, President Muñoz is blocking the deal."

"If the deal means cancelling the Inter-American concessions," Bat said, "the reason is simple. Muñoz granted the concessions. He knows the Inter-American is an honest outfit and he happens to be an honest man. That's why." He turned and looked squarely at Phelps. "How does Woolf stand in all this?"

The kid's firm lips clamped together. He did not want to be disloyal to his superior. Well, loyalty is a fine thing if you know where it ends and damn foolishness begins.

"When word came over our private radio system," Phelps said, trying to change the subject, "that you two were on your way back to San Lorenzo, it seems that a lot of people got all excited."

"What did Woolf do? Did he telephone to a lot of his buddies, or did he jump in his car and hurry away?"

Phelps' blue eyes clouded with trouble. "I don't know, sir. I wasn't there. But from the gossip we picked up at the Alcazar there are some people down here who are figuring on giving you the business."

"Why?"

"Because they think you may use your drag with *El Presidente* to cause trouble. He's slipping, you know, and they think you may buck him up and reorganize the air force, or something."

"Flatterers!" Bat said dryly. Then, slowly, "So the Old Man is slipping, is he?"

"So they say."

"If that bird with the slick hair doesn't move away," I said, loudly, "I'm going to feed him his own ears with mustard on them."

THE mug who had again been inching along the bar grabbed his glass and went out of the room as if he were chasing a fire engine.

"Listen, Major," said young Phelps, his freckled face blushing beet red, "if you are going to organize a squadron would you let me join you? If I resigned from the line, I mean?"

"I'm not going to organize anything, son," Bat said, gently. "I've

quit soldiering. I'm getting kind of old for fighting all the time and—"

"Major," the boy begged, "you don't have to tell me any of your plans. Don't tell me a thing. But when you get ready to start, just let me know, will you? And then, if you move along somewhere, let me go with you."

"You see?" I said to Bat. "He wants to be a 'soldier of fortune.' He wants to be a Lee Christmas, or something. And he'll end up dead in a gutter somewhere south of the Canal, or running a second-rate hotel in some seaport town."

"Pipe down, Al," Bat said. "Son, stay with the line and keep your seniority. We're not fighting men any more, Al and I. There was nothing in it for anybody—except, maybe, the ones who hired us. Our luck held out long enough for us to quit, see. Now we're here on business. When that's done, we're going back to the States, and we're never coming down here any more—never!"

Phelps' face plainly showed his disbelief. "Major," he said, "I've been hearing about you and Captain Burke ever since I came to the tropics. I've always wanted to do the sort of things you've done and—"

"If I had any sense, and the opportunity," Bat said, smiling, "I'd swap places with you at this very minute. Take my advice, kid. The first time you ever hear a gun fired in anger, light out and keep going in the opposite direction, and don't come back until the schemozzle's over."

"When the revolution starts," Phelps said, stubbornly, "I'm going to ask you again."

"Fine, son. Let it go at that."

The pilot turned to me. "I suppose you'll be at the Air Terminal in the morning, Captain?"

"I'll be with Bat, wherever he goes."

"I mean, to meet your sister."

The bar spun like a propeller.

"What?" I snarled.

"Hadn't you heard? She left Roosevelt Field this afternoon on a non-stop flight. We got it over our radio network. I thought Mr. Woolf told you."

"Listen, son," Bat said, "do you know Carmencita?"

"I know her when I see her, Major. She's the one Cuesta and Gomez have been rushing, isn't she?"

There was a queer expression on Bat's face, but for a long moment he did not say anything.

Then, "Come back to the door and show me the girl they've been rushing, will you?"

It was Carmencita, all right. Bat stood there, looking at her across the heads of the patrons.

"That's right, son," he said at last. "Go over and tell her, please, that I'm sorry not to—to keep the date we had for later on. Tell her this meeting we're going to will take longer than I had figured."

"Sure," said young Phelps, grinning as if Bat had conferred an accolade upon his proud head. It was queer, I thought, how Bat's personality reached out and pulled you.

CHAPTER VII.

THE QUARREL.

FROM sheer force of habit I pushed past Bat and went through the street door first, my hand very close to my armpit holster. I did not see anything. As a matter of fact, there might have been a purple elephant standing in the middle of the

Plaza and I would not have noticed it.

We walked along the Avenida de Simón Bolivar toward the Cathedral. Bat was waiting for me to say something. But I did not want to speak just then. I knew I would say too much. It is not easy to split with a man you've thought a lot of, and looked up to, and flown with, and gone hungry with, for nearly ten years. I had an all-gone feeling in my stomach.

But if there is something to be said, there is no use in stalling along. We were just passing the Liberator's statue when I grabbed Bat's arm and pulled him to a stop.

"Did you have anything to do with Mickey's coming?" I demanded.

"You know I didn't, Al," he said, quietly.

"How the hell would I know it?"

"I'm telling you."

"She's been flying two years, but she never took it in her head to come down here before!"

"If she had asked my advice, I'd have told her not to come—right now."

"Listen, Bat," I said, coldly. "You're a good guy. We've had a lot of fun together. But don't get any ideas about Mickey, see?"

"Why?" he asked, softly.

"Because all you'd ever give her would be a broken heart, that's all. You're a bum, a tropic bum, and so am I. That's all right for us. We can go around fighting and getting drunk and raising as much hell as we want, and we've done it so long now we'll probably never do anything else. But don't let Mickey fall in love with you, see? That's one thing I won't take from you. Is that perfectly clear?"

Bat's face was white under the arc light and his eyes were black, dead black.

"Take your hand off my arm, Al."

"Knock it off!" I challenged him.

But he did not knock it off. He did not even move.

"I believe you're drunk, Al," he said, quietly.

"Maybe I am," I stormed, "but I'm not too drunk to be telling you. You've got one girl so she'd give her last chance of salvation to marry you. So see to it Mickey doesn't get that way."

His voice sharpened. "All right, Al, you've had your say, so I'll have mine. If Mickey has flown all the way down here from New York, I'm not going to hide from her. So what are you going to do about that?"

His left hand slapped mine from his arm. I glared down at him through a pink fog of rage. I lifted my right fist to give it to him, but it wasn't any use. I couldn't hit Bat Gillespie. So I left him. I went back to the Coq d'Or to find Carmencita.

SHE was still sitting at the table. Phelps was not with her. A Spik was sitting beside her.

"Is this your *chulo,* Carmencita?" I asked her.

Her dark eyes lifted beneath their heavy lashes. A quick stab of anger leaped out of them. It was all right, then. The Spik was small and he stank of pomade.

"With your permission, *señorita,*" I said.

I got a grip on the collar of his coat and lifted him out of the chair. He had courage, after his own fashion. He yanked a knife out of somewhere, but I grabbed his wrist and squeezed until I could feel the bones grate together. He squalled and the knife dropped under the table. I kicked it and it skittered brightly away. He went ashen, thinking, of course, that I was going to kill him.

"Your pardon, *caballero,*" I said, politely, "but it is never safe to trespass."

He went away. Two or three spectators looked as if they wanted to start something, but after a moment or two they sat down. I took the chair the Spik had been sitting in.

"Where," Carmencita asked, "is Don Bat?"

"At the house with the yellow shutters on the Avenida de la Independencia. And he can go to hell with his back broke for all I care!"

"It is," she said, obliquely, "the affair of the sister."

Her air of mental detachment was maddening. She knew I had left Bat to step into something. Yet if I had not seen her, with him, a veritable hurricane of wild emotions, I would have thought her a cold-blooded Northerner. Why didn't she rage at me for double-crossing my pal—the crime unpardonable among real men? Why didn't she remind me right away that I was letting him walk into a place that might be little short of a death trap? She did none of these things. Circuitously, in the manner of a *Latina,* she examined the fact of my returning to her in the light of her past experiences, and appraising its exact meaning and effect upon her life. She rolled a dark Mexican cigarette and smoked it half through. A fight started in a far corner. We did not look around.

"You've lost Bat," I told her flatly. "But you haven't lost me. I've loved you since that first night when you danced a dozen times with Bat. You know that, of course. But I never said anything because — well, hell, I couldn't! Now all bets are off."

She just sat there, smoking, and looking at me from under her incredibly heavy lashes.

"Why don't you say something?" I snapped.

She shrugged. I wished I might know what was behind her dark, unreadable eyes. I remembered the night of the farewell dinner when she had reached for her knife and I had slapped her nearly out from under her hair. I had expected, of course, that she would do her best—and her best was pretty good—to cut my throat. Instead, she had straightened up and massaged the pinkly-etched outline of my hand on her cheek.

Then, to my astonishment, she had smiled and said, "If I had never met Don Bat, I could love you very much."

Well, she had met Bat, and she was Bat's girl, and that had been all there was to it. We had not been to New York, then, and Bat had not met Mickey. Now, to hell with him. To hell with everything.

"IF Bat is killed tonight," she said, at last, "I should hate you."

"All right," I snarled. "I'll go after him, and I'll bring him back here by the scruff of his neck, and when he's here, I'll tell him that you aren't his girl any more."

A smile twitched at the corners of her brightly-penciled mouth. She rose.

"I'll go with you," she said.

"What for?" I demanded.

She shrugged again and walked ahead of me to the dressing room. Waiting, I tried to light a cigarette, but the matches kept breaking, so after a while I crumpled the cigarette and threw it away.

It was a queer feeling, standing there and waiting for the girl I was going to take away from Bat, even if I had to kill him to do it. A week ago I would have killed any man who took her away from Bat, and now I was

going to do it myself. Strange, that. But the Mickey business had changed everything. He wasn't going to have Mickey, and he wasn't going to have Carmencita, either. I felt feverish and wondered if the malaria were hitting me again. What a night to be knocked loose by the fever! I was knocked loose anyway. The old orderly moorings of my life had been swept away. So long had Bat and I cruised together that nothing seemed the same now. There was a dull ache in my heart and, at the same time, a wild ecstasy at the knowledge that now, after two years of waiting, I had come out in the clear to Carmencita.

She came out of the dressing room. Have I said how beautiful she was? I took her by the arm. I knew I was hurting her with the strength of my grasp, but she did not seem to mind. Once again, for the second time that night, I went out first and looked around. A squadron of cavalry clattered across the Avenida at the next corner. In any other mood I would have wondered why mounted patrols should be out at this time of night, but two years had been too long to wait. I spun Carmencita around, dragged her to me and kissed her. She did not resist. My throat went dry and my pulses were hammering in my wrists and temples. After a while she worked her arms between us and shoved me away.

"You are strong, *chico*," she said, breathlessly.

"Dost thou want a weakling, *querida*?" I asked, shakily. "Come, let's go."

Silently she fell into step with me. We walked on past Bolivar's statue and toward the Cathedral. Carmencita did not say anything.

"I've got to see what's happening to him," I said. "I don't give a damn. I'm curious, that's all."

She did not seem to think that funny. But I did. Walking down the half-lighted street I laughed and laughed until she stopped short and grabbed me by the lapels of my coat. She shook me until the gun nearly bounced out of my armpit holster. After quite a long time I stopped laughing. Then it was worse. I walked along beside her, hating Bat, hating myself, hating everybody except Carmencita. She was a grand girl, and I could not hate her at any time.

WE stopped at the house with the yellow shutters. I hammered on the door. A man's voice answered guardedly.

"*Qué se ofrece?*"

"I, Señor Al Burke. I wish to see Major Gillespie. Open!"

From the other side of the panel I heard the man's voice, muffled, now.

"*El aventurero Yanqui!*" he called to someone within.

So it was the right house. I was tired of waiting. When the handle turned, I put my shoulder against the door. A fat native was standing inside.

I grabbed him by the throat and slammed him against the wall.

"Where is he?" I snarled. "Tell me, fool, before I pull thy windpipe loose!"

He could not speak, but he jerked his thumb toward a door. It was not locked, so I opened it and walked right in.

They were all in there, sitting around a table under a gaudy lamp with purple tassels. They were all looking at me. It was like a single frame clipped out of a strip of motion picture film. Cuesta's gun was on the table, and his

hand was suspended over its black, corrugated butt. Gomez was tilted back against the wall, trying frantically to get his chair down on all four legs. Woolf was sitting bolt upright and I could not see his right hand. Mueller, resident manager of the German air line, was sitting quietly beside young Pierre Dupont, of the Compagnie Generale des Avions Sud-Amerique. Bat, calmly smoking a Mexican cigarette, was sitting at the lower end of the table, looking as mild as any deacon of the church.

The tension in that room twanged on my nerves like careless fingers ripping across the strings of a harp. I had to speak first, and quickly.

"*Buenas noches, caballeros,*" I said, very politely. "Nice little party. When does the show commence? Mind if I sit in?"

It was a toss-up. I saw Bat lean forward in his chair, his sensitive lips tightening. I balanced on the balls of my feet, wondering who to get in the split-second before a dozen slugs tore through me. Remembering Carmencita, I chose Woolf. I looked at him. He whitened and licked his lips. I guess he knew right then that he was going to get it if anybody moved out of turn. It was funny, the way the blood drained out of his thick lower lip. You could hardly see his mouth at all except for the yellowish fangs that showed through the pink slit in his face.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

World's Youngest Lion Tamer

MANUEL KING, eleven-year-old son of W. A. King, Brownsville, Texas, wild animal trainer, is probably the world's youngest lion tamer. Born September 5, 1923, on his father's wild animal farm, the boy has had lions and various other jungle beasts for pets since he was a baby. Recently four litters of African lions were born to new arrivals at the farm. As is the custom, they were immediately turned over to Manuel, whose job it is to teach and train them until they reach maturity.

Manuel is a perfectly normal Texas lad. Not quite four feet tall, he weighs 65 pounds and the semi-tropical sun of the Rio Grande Valley has bronzed his ruddy face. He plays baseball, football and other games with his schoolmates and is an inveterate reader. —*Joseph Creamer.*

The Case of the Deathly Barque

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

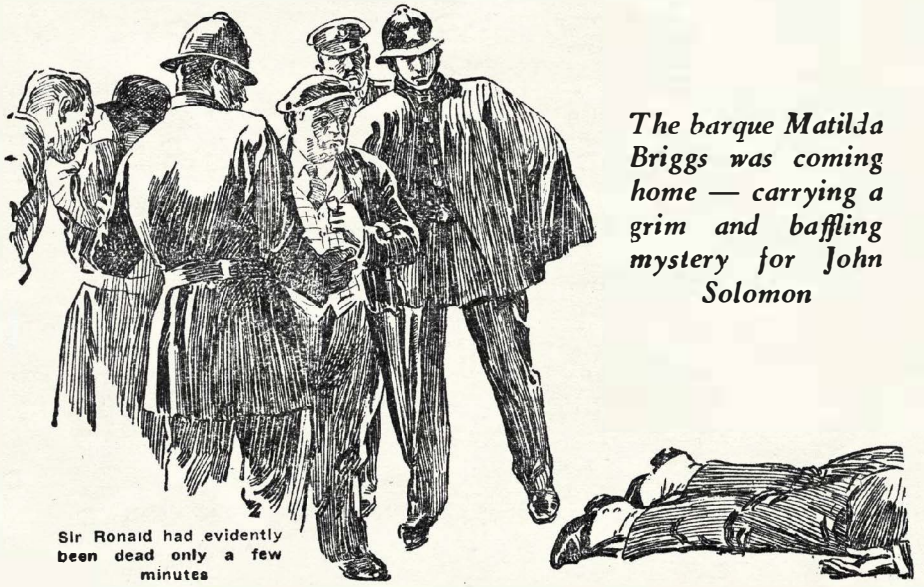
STATEMENT by Mr. John X. Carson:—

During the period of his retirement at Limehouse, John Solomon was approached by all manner of people, and I acted as his buffer, his contact man. Many of the affairs in which we were engaged together, such as the one herein described, were referred to Solomon by Scotland Yard, and I suppose might be termed detective work.

In certain incidents, notably the horrible episode of the Atkinson brothers, real crimes were involved; or, as in the frightful matter of the Sleeper, crimes beyond the realm of criminology. John Solomon was no student of crime; he detested it. His remarkable fund of specialized knowledge, his singular mental processes, his uncanny way of grasping at the essential heart of a mystery, form the most interesting part of all these cases. In the present instance, for example, despite repeated murders there was no crime involved—as I think he, and he alone, sensed almost from the start.

IT was, I remember, a drizzling, blustery afternoon in March, and I was busily dictating letters in Solomon's private office, when the telephone rang. I responded.

"Hello, Mr. Carson? Inspector David speaking. I'm on a job that might interest Mr. Solomon—the in-



Sir Ronald had evidently been dead only a few minutes

The barque Matilda Briggs was coming home — carrying a grim and baffling mystery for John Solomon

vestigation of the barque Matilda Briggs, due at Greenhithe tomorrow from Brest. Do you suppose I might step around and see him?"

I did not hesitate, for David was one of the Yard's best men and on more than one occasion had worked intimately with Solomon.

"By all means," I replied. "He's been feeling a bit down in the mouth today and talks of going back to Egypt and Port Said. A sure sign his liver's out of whack. Drop in and haul him out of the depression, if you can."

"In half an hour," said David, and rang off.

I passed on through the blind office into the shop, to apprise Solomon. To my disgust he gave me one blank look and then ignored me utterly. He was selling an old ship's lantern to a tourist lady from Ohio, and was absorbed in the deal.

Solomon took this ship chandlery business seriously, oddly enough. He had made his start as a ship's chandler in Port Said, and now, despite his unlimited resources, he had settled in Limehouse in the same line. This shop, with its heaped-up mixture of rope, canvas, ship's stores, chronometers and heaven only knows what else, was the dingiest place in the dingiest section of London.

Yet Solomon's keenest pleasure lay in tending shop. I watched him as he argued and chaffered with the lady from Ohio, who doubtless took him to be a regular Limehouse character, and wondered at the man. He wore baggy, slipshod old garments and carpet slippers that were out at the toes. His gray hair stuck out at odd angles. His pudgy but perfectly expressionless features, his mild blue eyes, the old clay pipe in his mouth, gave not the slightest hint of his actual abilities. He was absorbed in selling that ship's lantern.

And finally he sold it. Half a crown, I think, was the price. He wrapped it up and the lady, giving me an uneasy glance, departed. She was probably shaking in her boots all the time, having heard no end of stories about the desperate characters and dangerous dives of Limehouse. Then Solomon turned to me, with a twinkle in his eye.

"Well, Mr. Carson? Werry sorry I am to keep you waiting."

"David just called," I said, and told him of the message. He nodded placidly, but his eye lit up all the same.

"Werry good, sir. I'll just call Mahmud to mind the shop."

The shop safely in the hands of the intelligent young Arab who usually served there, we repaired to the private office, and in due time Inspector David arrived. He was a brisk, capable man who was surprised at nothing Solomon did or said, as a rule. This time, however, was an exception.

"Make yourself at 'ome, Inspector," Solomon said cheerfully. "Since the murderer must be aboard that 'ere ship, it beats me why you'd want 'elp, but werry glad I am to see you."

"What?" exclaimed David, staring. "Then you know all about it?"

"No, sir," and Solomon chuckled, as he whittled black tobacco from his plug into his palm. "You said as 'ow the ship was a-coming from Brest, and you're inwestigating. That means the French police 'as called in Scotland Yard. Why? Nothing less'n murder, I says. It's all werry simple, sir."

INSPECTOR DAVID relaxed, laughing, and swept a glance about the room. Anyone just in out of the blustery rain must have found this

office remarkably comfortable, with its cosy fire and air of luxury. David was not astonished by the wonderful old Ispahan rug on the floor, the amazing collection of tapestries and arms and bric-a-brac around the walls — he had seen it often enough. But he nodded gratefully at the drink I mixed and set before him.

"Simple enough, yes," he observed. "At the same time, Mr. Solomon, the affair of this sailing vessel is just a trifle too obvious; it's a nasty piece of work, and has me worried. It's clearly a question of a homicidal maniac, always an unpleasant business. The barque will arrive tomorrow afternoon at the Greenhithe docks of the owners."

"I thought sailing vessels were rare these days?" I put in. Inspector David assented.

"They are. The Matilda Briggs, Mr. Carson, is an old keel owned by the firm these forty years and kept going largely from sentiment, since she barely pays her costs. She is returning from a run to Mediterranean ports with mixed cargo. Her master, Captain Fleming, is by all accounts a most reliable man. She left Greenhithe early in December last and went direct to Malta, where we first heard of anything amiss. To be exact," and David consulted his notebook, "it was on December 30th, the day she left Malta for Marseilles."

John Solomon carefully stuffed his old clay pipe, which smelt most vilely. His placid blue eyes surveyed the inspector for a moment.

"And was it murder, sir?" he asked, with a wheezy sigh.

"It was. A native boatman was found dead close to the ship. No details have been ascertained, except that the nature of his death paralleled that of the other victims. The barque loaded cargo at Marseilles, taking on a consignment for Barcelona. She cleared on January 19th and sailed with the tide early next morning. After her departure, a woman of the port was found dead on the wharf to which the vessel had made fast. The woman had been murdered during the night. Her throat was horribly mangled."

"You mean as 'ow it was cut," interjected Solomon, scratching a match.

"Not at all; that's the frightful part of it. Not cut but torn, mangled, the flesh ripped away and even missing entirely!"

Solomon, holding the match to his pipe, lifted slightly startled eyes.

"Dang it," he ejaculated mildly, "was there animals aboard the barque, then?"

"No animals of any kind," Inspector David returned. "Not even a cat. The Marseilles police did not connect this murder with the ship. At Barcelona, nothing happened. A shipment for Brest was taken aboard. After passing the Straits, the barque ran into nasty weather. She was badly knocked about and made a very slow passage. In the course of this run, the junior mate, a Mr. Haskins, was one morning found dead in his bed."

David paused, nodded at a sharply inquiring glance from Solomon.

"The same way, sir. His throat mangled, and not a thing to show who had done it. This, you must understand, was the first known of the murders to those aboard. Three days later one of the apprentices, a lad named Sotherby, was killed in the same ghastly fashion. He had entered the after hold with a lantern, to inspect certain repairs below decks. When he did not return, they searched and found him

dead. These two murders were reported upon reaching Brest, but I know no details.

"On the very night the ship left Brest, the night watchman was found on the wharf there and the French police got in touch with us. Apparently the case is simple, despite its horrible phase."

"Too simple," Solomon said gloomily, puffing at his pipe. "The simplest things is the 'ardest to come at, as the old gent said when 'e kissed the 'ousekeeper."

THE inspector shrugged. "The facts are patent. The murders were identical. In each case the throat was badly mangled, but no other injury seems to have been inflicted. Plainly, one of the barque's crew is possessed by a maniacal frenzy. Granting the French police average intelligence, it seems certain that the murderer is at this moment aboard the ship; they would know if anyone had gone ashore at Brest and remained."

"No, sir," said Solomon positively. He swung his desk chair a trifle, cocked his feet up on another chair, and his mild blue eyes rested steadily on the police officer. "It wasn't no maniac. It was a stowaway, I says. Just like that."

David shook his head. "A stowaway could not live for months aboard a sailing vessel, unseen and unsuspected."

"Maybe. But it all depends on them 'ere two murders aboard ship," said Solomon. "Then we'll know for sure, when we 'ave the details. It's a stowaway. There ain't no other way out of it."

"If you mean that for a pun," I said, "it's a poor one. So is your theory, John. The inspector is dead right. A stowaway might exist unfound for a week or so, no more. Such a notion isn't logical."

David, I could see, was astonished and irritated by the positive statements of Solomon. So was I. His position was absurd.

"We'll see about that tomorrow," he said, with a wheezy chuckle.

"Then you'll run down to Greenhithe, sir?" asked the inspector. "Excellent! We might make the trip in a police launch, if you like."

Solomon nodded. "I 'ave an old friend as lives in Greenhithe," he observed. "Might be as 'ow you've 'eard of him, though I ain't seen 'im for a matter o' five years. Colport, the name is. Sir Ronald Colport."

"Oh, of course!" exclaimed the inspector quickly. "The great brain specialist, eh? I believe he's been retired for a number of years. The greatest brain man in Europe, they used to call him. Wasn't there some talk about his being inclined to radical ideas and rather singular experiments?"

Solomon sucked at his pipe.

"A great man can afford to be talked about, I says. You might 'ave 'im in if so be as you find there 'ere maniac you talk about, Inspector. Let Colport examine 'im. It's a 'ard job to tell when anyone's crazy, as the old gent said when 'e took 'is third."

"Not a half bad idea, sir," assented Inspector David, and after arranging about meeting us on the morrow, took his leave.

In no uncertain terms, I took Solomon to task for his nonsensical insistence that a stowaway was responsible for the murders. Although he heard me out with a twinkle in his blue eyes, I could see that my words put him in a stubborn humor. Presently he laid aside his pipe and shook his head.

"Just the same, Mr. Carson, you slip a pistol in your pocket tomorrow afore we start. Mind that!"

ON the following afternoon we met Inspector David and with him went aboard a fast police launch. It was still drizzling, but with a promise of letting up.

The Matilda Briggs, we learned, would be at her owners' wharf under heavy police guard by the time we reached Greenhithe. I was not looking forward to the trip with any keen delight. Being an American and blind to what the English call the beauties of their beloved river, the Thames on a rainy day made no appeal to me. None the less, the mystery of it exerted a certain fascination.

"Mr. Solomon," said the Inspector, who treated John with a great deal of respect, "I've been thinking over your stowaway idea. A dozen men are awaiting us on board, and I'd like to send the entire crew below and make a thorough search of the vessel, first thing. Then, later, we may interview the crew. Needless to say, no one goes ashore before we arrive."

"We shall 'ave to 'ave lights," said Solomon.

"All prepared," the inspector said cheerfully. "I've neglected nothing."

Darkness was indeed closing down when we passed the training ships and drew in upon Greenhithe. David pointed out the barque to us; she was just being made fast at her owners' docks, at the far end of the town. Close to them, reaching up the hillside and along the water, were villas and a number of rather pretentious residences.

"I see that my men are ready," the inspector said. "Any suggestions, Mr. Solomon?"

"No, sir. Only," Solomon added apologetically, "I'd like to be askin' of the master one or two questions. It don't never 'urt to ask the question, as the old gent said when 'e kissed the 'ousemaid."

We landed. As I was afterward to recall, the barque lay a few feet from the edge of the wharf, held off by buffers and made fast by heavy lines. A gangway had been run across to her deck. The crew, after knocking the battens from the hatches and removing the tarpaulin coverings, made no protest upon being sent below to their quarters. The inspector posted his men, and Captain Fleming was introduced. He was a bluff, hearty man of fifty.

He joined Inspector David and the police about the forward hatch. Two police remained on the wharf to guard the gangway, and the search was got under way. Solomon, who seemed to take no interest in it, moved along the deck with me into the lee of the deck house, well aft, for shelter from the drizzle.

"That's 'is 'ouse," and Solomon pointed with his pipe to a large villa surrounded by a wall.

"Whose house?" I demanded.

"Sir Ronald Colport's, o' course," said Solomon.

"A warm fire and a drink wouldn't be a bad notion," I commented. "We'll wait to see if your stowaway turns up, of course. If not—"

Solomon nodded assent. Presently he moved off to talk with the two constables on the wharf, and I lost track of him.

AFTER a bit, Inspector David and his forces moved aft, having found absolutely no one hidden below. There was a bit of joking

among the men, a couple of whom had been whitened from head to foot by a burst flour-cask while moving the upper tier of cargo.

I heard Solomon's voice calling me, from somewhere forward, and following it I found him just emerging from the forward hatchway, which was still open. He had flour about his boots, and in his hand the headboard of a cask. He was looking intently at the deck.

"Look at 'em!" he exclaimed. "Quick, Mr. Carson, afore the rain washes 'em off!"

The note of excitement in his voice impelled me. I saw a number of white flour-patches on the deck, rapidly vanishing under the fine drizzle. Solomon had brought a flash light and threw it on them.

"The men's boots left 'em," I said. He shook his head.

"Not much. They ain't packed down 'ard, sir. And if I ain't mistook, whoever made 'em 'eaded for the rail. Quick! Ask them constables on the dock—"

I got his idea, and going to the rail, called to the two men there. No one had left the ship anywhere along the rail, they assured me. Their flare covered the whole length of the wharf-side.

"No luck," I said, rejoining Solomon. "You thought your stowaway might have left those patches, eh? Well, he didn't, unless he slipped into the water—and he'd have to jump, not slip. He'd have been seen."

"Dang it!" said Solomon, and examined the headboard of the cask in his hand. Upon it I saw numerous heavy gashes, as though made with an adze. Then, hearing Inspector David call us from the after deck, Solomon went to the rail and gave the circular board to one of the police on the wharf, telling him to take good care of it.

We found that the police search had drawn a blank. There was no stowaway aboard; there were no signs or indication of any stowaway. Captain Fleming placed himself entirely at our command, and led us down to one of the after cabins. Here Inspector David questioned him briefly in regard to the two men who had been murdered aboard ship.

"The murdered mate, I believe, slept aft."

"In the next cabin," rejoined the old captain. "That's where he was killed."

"And the apprentice? He was killed in the after hold?"

"No, sir. The lad had gone down for'ard. We had sprung a bad leak under the bow and he went down to see if the repairs were holding."

"Then the for'ard 'atch was off," said Solomon, sucking at his empty clay pipe. "And when the mate was killed, was the 'atches off likewise?"

"The for'ard hatch, yes. That was when we were making the repairs I just mentioned."

"And at Marseilles?" went on Solomon. "And at Brest? Was the 'atches off then?"

"Yes indeed," said Captain Fleming. "They are battened down the very last thing. When you come to interview the men—"

"We ain't a-going to," Solomon observed placidly. "It ain't no manner of use. Cause why, there ain't no murderer aboard this 'ere ship."

At this flat statement, Inspector David swallowed hard and regarded Solomon with an air of stupefaction. Before he could speak, however, one of his constables knocked and entered, beckoning him aside. The inspector

joined him at the door, listened to what he said, then turned to us with a startled word.

"Good heavens! Mr. Solomon, I've just been sent for. Will you come with me, please? What you just said was correct, remarkable as it seems. Sir Ronald Colport has just been found in his own garden, yonder. Murdered, sir! Murdered in the same terrible fashion!"

WITHIN a few moments we had reached the scene, to admire the precision with which the police had already worked. A terrified servant, aware of the police at the wharf close by, had summoned them. The inspector's men had roped off the body and were searching the grounds.

Sir Ronald, an elderly but by no means enfeebled man, had apparently been dead only a few moments. His body lay face down near the side entrance of the house. He must have died instantly, for his throat had been torn out in a very horrible fashion. The rain had quite ceased by this time, and after one look at the scene, I was content to join Solomon in the open portico of the house, where the dead man's old butler stood also, gray-faced, horrified.

Presently Inspector David joined us, sent the butler into the house to get us a bite to eat, then spoke softly.

"My. Solomon, this is positively incredible. There's not a mark, not a footprint; and after three days of rain the soil is soft. Sir Ronald had stepped out for a short walk. His own footprints are plain to see. There are no others."

"Ain't 'is shirt wet?" asked Solomon suddenly. Giving him a startled look, the inspector nodded.

"Yes. I dare say you'd like to think your stowaway swam ashore and grappled with him, and murdered him? Impossible, Mr. Solomon. Not a footprint, I tell you. And what earthly reason would bring even a maniac to such a deed? No, no; there's something mysterious and horrible about this affair, sir."

"There's something werry mysterious and 'orrible about a maniac, too," observed John Solomon. The inspector shook his head.

"Perhaps my men will turn something up. The local police will soon be at work outside. The bushes here in the garden certainly cannot hide a man."

This was obvious. The walled enclosure was of some size, but contained no garage, no other building than the old house itself. This was a large central structure with two wings; one of which held the servants' quarters and kitchen. Except for the cook and gardener, Sir Ronald had lived here alone with his butler, Osgood. Two old men nearly of an age who had been together for many years past.

At Solomon's suggestion, I turned into the house with him, and Osgood conducted us to the library. This butler was gray, with deeply lined, powerful features. Before we had more than glanced around, Inspector David joined us.

The interior of this ancient English mansion conveyed to us all, I think, the same impression of mystery, of tragedy. It was one of those places that seem inhabited, but not lived in. The library, with its solemn racks of books, its severely oak-paneled walls, its insufficient lights, was typical of English discomfort and was extremely depressing.

Osgood could throw absolutely no light upon the murder. He himself oc-

cupied a room in the east wing, adjoining that of his master. Sir Ronald depended on him for minor services and desired to have him close at hand.

"There are only the two rooms in the east wing, then?"

"That's all, sir."

"Suppose you give us a look at them. Here, use my flash light."

THERE were only lamps and candles in the house—neither gas nor electricity. Personally, I have never been able to understand why so many Englishmen positively shut out the comforts and benefits of civilization; but then, I am an American.

Osgood led us to the east wing; except in the central portion the house had no upper floors. The two large bedrooms here had a connecting door. In Sir Ronald's room showed a second and farther door which the inspector tried without avail. He turned to Osgood with a question.

"The door has been closed up, sir," the butler replied. "It formerly opened on the garden, but Sir Ronald disliked an outside door from his bedroom and had it closed.'

David nodded. "Well, suppose you lay a fire in the library and see if cook has a snack ready for us. You might serve it in the library, too."

"Very good, sir."

Osgood conducted us back to the library, then disappeared. Solomon went out for a turn in the garden by himself; he was thoughtful and preoccupied. A handsomely bound little volume lay on the table, and I picked it up. It proved to be an address which Sir Ronald Colport had delivered before the Royal Society some years previously, and fell open of itself, as a much-used book will do, at a certain page which bore copious marginal notes in pencil.

A cheerful fire was lighted, a table was brought in, and Osgood laid it. Solomon came back into the room, with word that the men outside were still searching vainly. I showed the book I had found to the others, and the annotated pages.

"Talk about your radical theories," I said. "He was evidently working on this one for a long time. He predicted that wheat and other foods, impregnated and radiated, would prove a tremendous stimulus to the brain, forcing it as one forces plants. A chemical reaction bringing the brain cells to abnormal proportions, combined with certain vitamins—"

"Let's 'ave a look at that 'ere book," exclaimed Solomon, and taking it from me, he pored over it.

When Solomon laid down the little volume, he took out a pencil, jotted down a few notes on the back of an old envelope, and passed the paper to Inspector David. His blue eyes were sparkling—the only sign of emotion in his pudgy, expressionless face. David read the jottings, looked startled, then gave Solomon a long regard, and nodded.

"Right, sir. Osgood!"

"Yes, sir?" The butler paused in his work and looked up.

"Bring in the meal whenever it's ready, and leave it. I want these gentlemen to go across the gardens with me and talk over an idea that's just occurred to me—we'll be back in a few minutes. Don't bother to show us out. Come along, Mr. Carson."

While a bit mystified, I gathered that the Inspector was obeying a suggestion that Solomon had made in his notes, and rose. We all went out of the library and Solomon took my arm. At

the house entrance, the inspector turned back. Solomon led me outside and slammed the door heavily.

"Quick, Mr. Carson!" he exclaimed. "This way—"

A moment later we stood at one of the uncurtained windows of the library. Osgood was not in sight. The room was empty.

"What the devil's all this?" I said in a low voice.

"That 'ere east wing, sir, is a good eighteen foot longer'n them two rooms inside," Solomon said. "The door 'e showed us ain't walled up at all. Lied to us, that's what 'e did! Now watch. If I ain't mistook—there 'e comes! And 'e thinks we're out of the way, so to speak. That 'ere book you found, give me the 'ole blessed thing—watch 'im!"

I WAS bewildered. That the staid old butler could be suspected of the murder was arrant nonsense. Before our eyes, he came across the library with a swift stride, glanced around, then stepped to the fireplace. The hand of Solomon tightened on my arm.

Moving rapidly, Osgood pressed a spring that released a panel of the oak wall. Behind it appeared the door of a small safe, which the butler opened. He took out a large sheaf of papers, closed the safe and the panel, and stepped with the papers to the nearby fireplace. He was in the act of throwing them into the fire when Inspector David halted him.

The wretched man shrank back, terror in his features.

"Come on, sir," and Solomon chuckled. "Fell into the trap, 'e did, like a good 'un! Now we're a-getting somewheres."

We returned hastily to the library, where the inspector had placed the sheaf of papers on the table. I glanced at them; they were nothing but notes on experiments, it seemed.

"Well, my man, you have some explaining to do," said the inspector curtly. "You lied to us about that room beyond the two bedrooms. You've attempted to destroy these papers—"

"I had to do it!" cried out the butler frantically. "I promised him I would destroy his notes—I knew everything, I had helped him. God forgive me! If anything happened, he made me promise—"

"Very well," intervened the inspector. "You've kept your promises. Now do your duty, my man. And no lies this time."

The unhappy, deeply agitated butler led us into the hall and then on through the bedrooms—first his own, then that of Sir Ronald. Both Solomon and the inspector held their flash lights, and as we followed the other two, Solomon jogged my arm.

"Best 'ave your pistol ready, sir," he murmured. "I ain't noways sure, but—"

I assented. Osgood came to a halt before the farther door which he had said was closed up. He produced a key, with shaking fingers, then turned imploringly to Inspector David.

"It—it may be dangerous," he said in broken accents. "One of them must have escaped. That is what killed him. I cannot understand it! He put new locks on the cages only last week; he meant to use padlocks in future, but had not obtained them yet. He said they would learn to work the bolts—"

"Open up," intervened the inspector coldly.

I must confess that to me it seemed we were dealing with a madman, for Osgood whimpered and babbled as he

undid the top and bottom locks of the door. Then it swung open. The four of us stepped into a large room, and I heard Solomon murmur something about having paced off the length of the wing outside.

A distinct animal odor assailed us. About the walls, in cages ticketed with notes, were rats, mice, guinea-pigs. At the far end of the room were two cages of extraordinary size and strength.

"Animal experiments, eh?" said the Inspector. "Come, come! Nothing illegal about all this—good heavens!" He had swung his light on the two large cages. "Osgood, what are those creatures?"

"Sumatran rats, sir," the butler replied. "They're the ones—"

WE approached the two cages, and a sort of horrified astonishment fell upon all three of us. One cage held an enormous female rat with a number of young, all of such abnormal size that incredulity gripped me as I regarded them. The mother must have been well over two feet in length, whereas an ordinary rat seldom attains eleven inches. In the other cage, staring at us, was a male rat of even larger size—so large as to be perfectly astounding.

"Dang it!" I heard Solomon murmur. "Look at them 'ere eyes!"

I am not easily disconcerted, but I admit that the eyes of this male rat sent a chill of horror through me. They were filled with a singular expression of hatred; it was an actual intelligence like that in the eyes of a man. I drew back. Those eyes followed me. Then a sudden wild cry burst from Osgood.

"Get away, get away! He was afraid of it—they've learned how to open—"

The sentence remained unfinished. What now took place occupied but the fraction of a moment.

Those cages were fastened by formidable bolts. As we looked, the male rat reached forward. I saw his paw creep between the bars and fasten upon the bolt of the cage door. Even when he moved it, swung it back, I scarcely realized the truth. The female rat, as though at some signal, was performing a like action. In their steadily glaring eyes was a horrible malevolence.

"For God's sake, look out!" cried Inspector David.

All in perhaps ten seconds. The male rat darted out of his cage and leaped. He rose in the air, rose straight at my throat. The shining glitter of those eyes against the light, the bared, hideous teeth, sickened me, even as I fired.

Luckily, I kept my head. The nauseous thing crashed down upon the floor; I fired again and again, in a mad instinct of destruction. Barely in time, too. Inspector David was fighting off the huge female in frantic horror as my bullets took effect.

I scarcely remember how we got out of that horrible place. The inspector hastened outside to reassure his men, who had heard the shots and were shouting at us. By the time we had regained the library, David rejoined us.

HIS features contorted, his voice broken, Osgood sank into a chair and made a clean breast of everything.

"I knew what he was doing, of course. If—if anything went wrong, I promised to seal up the door and destroy his notes. That would let them all starve to death. But, gentlemen, what did happen to him? They were

both in the cages, you saw them! They could not get out or in by the ventilator! If one of them had killed him—no, no! We had stopped up the ventilator, after the first one escaped three months ago—"

"What's that?" broke out Solomon. "One of them 'ere rats escaped?"

"Yes, sir, early last December. It was never found. It was the first one Sir Ronald experimented upon—"

"Good Lord!" I exclaimed. "Then that explains everything, Solomon! The creature went aboard that ship at the docks and was carried away. It remained hidden. It emerged only when the hatches were off—your stowaway, John! You were right after all!"

"Yes, sir," assented Solomon. "And what's more, it come back 'ere wi' the ship, and swam ashore, and them 'ere police never seen it."

"Go to your room, Osgood," said the inspector quietly, touching the broken old man on the shoulder. "No blame attaches to you."

The butler stumbled out of the room. I seized upon the sheaf of papers taken from the wall safe. Inspector David joined me at the table. We began to examine them, and found them to be voluminous notes concerned with Colport's experiments upon the giant rats of Sumatra. As we glanced through the sheets, the frightful truth was brought home to us. At length I shoved away the papers and looked up.

"This is beyond belief, Solomon! The vitamin feeding to increase size, the use of pituitary extracts, the forced growth of the brain cells, the grafting of human brain tissue upon the rat's brain—good heavens! This is not science—it's a menace to civilization!"

"It's 'orrible," said Solomon in a wheezy voice. Inspector David leaned back, wiping his brow. "It's a crime against the 'uman race, that's what I says."

And leaning forward, he caught up the sheaf of papers. The inspector started up.

"Here! What are you doing?"

"Destroying these 'ere notes," said Solomon.

"You can't! I can't allow it—that's evidence, sir—"

"Evidence be damned," and Solomon dropped the papers into the fireplace and swung around, his blue eyes alight and blazing at us. "I ain't a-going to be no party to letting loose that sort o' knowledge on the world! If Scotland Yard don't like it, then let 'em take up the matter wi' me, just like that."

Inspector David subsided, still mopping his brow. A timid knock sounded, and Osgood came into the library. He advanced to the table and took matches from a tray there.

"Excuse me, gentlemen, but I must have matches. My room is dark."

"You'd better close your windows," said Solomon grimly. "That 'ere rat that escaped is the one that killed Sir Ronald. Come back in that 'ere ship, 'e did."

"Thank you, sir." Osgood's shoulders sagged, and a drawn pallor stole into his cheeks. "Please ring if you lack anything, gentlemen. Good night."

He left the room. The inspector swung around on us.

"Mr. Solomon, you must have guessed some of this aboard the barque. Your statement that the murderer was not aboard—"

Solomon, whittling tobacco from his plug, nodded and placidly explained. That trail of flour to the rail, the cask head he had found scored either by an

adze or by enormous teeth, had suggested something of the truth to him. Later, the absence of footprints near the body of Sir Ronald confirmed the theory of some animal. The monograph written by Sir Donald, the deliberate lie of Osgood about the existence of another room—all this had formed a chain leading to the discovery of the truth.

"Then," cried out Inspector David, "do you realize what it means? The creature which committed these murders, which killed Sir Ronald—is still at liberty!"

"Yes, sir," assented Solomon calmly. "If I was you, Inspector, I'd 'ave a search made for that 'ere rat, and werry sharp about it too—"

SOLOMON'S voice was checked. I leaped from my chair. Through the whole house rang a most appalling scream, a scream that chilled my blood and made me whip out my reloaded pistol. The inspector dashed for the doorway, his flashlight ready.

"Come along!" he cried, and I ran after him. As the door of the butler's room swung open, his electric beam picked up the body of Osgood on the floor; then it picked up something else. At the closed window of the room beat and fluttered an enormous shape frantically seeking to escape as it must have entered. A thing, now turning its head and its bloody slavering jaws, staring at us with half human eyes—

Once again my pistol spoke, this time deliberately. A moment later, the creature was stretched out dead, beside the body of its final victim.

Later, John Solomon sat with me before the library fire, stuffing tobacco into his clay pipe. At one side of the hearth was a crinkly swirl of gray ash. Solomon leaned forward and stirred it with the tongs, then picked up a coal for his pipe.

"There goes the last of them 'ere notes," he said, "and a werry good job, I calls it. It don't never pay to put things down in writing, as the old gent said when 'e took 'is third."

"Has it occurred to you, John," I asked slowly, "that this creature, created by these two men, came back here by a sort of implacable destiny to cause their death? Even your effort to warn Osgood only made his death more certain. If you had not told him to shut his window, if he had not gone directly to do that, ignorant that the rat had already stolen into his room—"

Solomon gave me one look that checked my words. Then he lifted the coal to his pipe, and puffed steadily; but I saw that his fingers were shaking.

THE END

IN A FUTURE ISSUE—

A Story of Modern Espionage

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

Wonders of the World

IT was during 1889 that a Colorado cowboy hunting near the San Juan river basin for stray cattle gazed across the edge of a mighty cañon and saw perched dizzily on the side of a precipice the ruins of the largest cliff dwelling ever known. There he discovered hewn out of rock a round tower, pits, and innumerable cell-apartments, the latter accommodating approximately 700 people. Though situated on a precipice, the Cliff Palace was protected from attack above by a huge overhanging cliff, and its inhabitants could easily send a shower of stone arrows on any enemy below them.

Whoever these people were, whatever their origin, they left suddenly from this extraordinary community, leaving many of their possessions behind. Almost nothing by way of historical fact is known about them, but there is no doubt that their civilization was superior to any other aboriginal people in what is now the United States.

CLIFF PALACE,

Mesa Verde Nat'l. Park, Colorado.

A Village that Thrived 1,200 Years Ago.

He Floats Through the Air

In falling, Vol kicked his feet like a man pumping a bicycle

By

THEODORE ROSCOE

Author of "The Ears of Donkey Daudette," "A Grave Must Be Deep,"etc.

Novelette Complete

It's natural enough for a circus aërialist to get sick of his partner, but when the rivalry of these brothers turned to bitter hate—

"AND now, Ladeez and Gen-tulmen —you are about to witness— that daring, sensational and remarkable performance— A triple somersault wan hundred feet above ground with no net below—by those internation-ully famous brothers you now see before you—Vol and Rudy— The Flying Patkouls—!"

Blaaaar! Sousa crashed from the bright bandstand to spare Foghorn Kelly laryngitis. With the megaphoneman's insistence for the last word, he put in a final touch of ballyhoo about the most dangerous act in the worllllld —an act the audience would *never* forget!—then his voice was smothered in an outblast of cornets and drums.

But Vol Patkoul caught that last phrase, and his thoughts were like the band music afterwards. Snare drums and horns. For a moment he was terrified lest someone hear the furies in his mind. For a moment his palms were watered with sweat. Then the packed first-night audience, the confetti faces of the grandstand swam backwards in the din, and a single figure stood stark against the blur.

Rudy. Rudy Patkoul. A canary yellow silhouette of silk-encased muscles, focussed across the flare-lit distance of the tent. A big healthy figure, red head topping his vast shoulders like a polished apple, bowing exuberance as his fingers tightened the leather strong-man's strap on his Samsonish wrist. A confident happy grin as he

wheeled and started up the steep rigging ladder to the platform eagle-nest high above.

Vol's smile was as forced as a chuckle in a dentist's chair. Crimson clouded before his eyes. His bow was mechanical. His hand struggled to contact the ladder-rungs behind him; he spun automatically and began the slow climb, his pink-stockinged legs keeping pace with the yellow across the big ring. Upward the two acrobats mounted, each slow step timed by a cymbal's Chinese clang. Clang! Clang! Clang!

And at each succeeding and heavenward step. Vol Patkoul's fingers closed more savagely on the rung above. At each successive clang an invisible torniquet tightened around his brain, so that his eyes were hot bright marbles in his head and his thoughts were squeezed like matter through his teeth.

"Grin!" he was gutturaling, whispering. "You over there—Rudy—you go ahead and grin. But Foghorn Kelly was right—this *will* be an act the audience ain't never going to forget. Because I'm going to fix that wonderful grin of yours once and for all. Me—little Vol. I'm going to get you, Rudy Patkoul, if it's the last thing I live to ever do. *I'm going to get you tonight*—"

There are smiles that make you happy, and there are smiles that make you blue. Rudy's smile of superior, tolerant, self-confidence made Vol Patkoul black in the face every time he saw it, and he had been seeing it as far back as he could remember. It seemed to Vol that Rudy's beaming mouth had been there to curdle all the day dreams and night dreams of his life. He woke to see it spoiling his breakfast egg. He dreamed of digging it from the bigger man's face with his fingernails, only to find it sticking to the palms of his hands. Where sunshine might blossom flowers, Rudy's Sunny Jim grin had nourished only a thistle in Vol's soul. A thistle as tall as Jack's beanstalk with its roots as down deep in the past.

They were not, aside from the Biblical admonition applying to all men, brothers. And by no means were they related in that brotherly sense. From boyhood they'd been opposite as sun and moon.

Vol was the moon. Darkly imaginative. Brooding. At the same time agile as wire, and fast-witted; fingers quick as magic; bony face that had learned to hide emotion behind pokerish rigidity; eyes as sunless as the cold Esthonian marshes from which he had sprung.

Rudy was the sun. Copper-haired and freckled. Born with the bones and muscles of a prehistoric being, with Mongolian cheeks and a face as open as a peony; blond eyelashes reflecting the blue shine off the snows of Muscovy, ingenuous as the laughter of droshky bells.

Vol was afraid of things. Of ghosts and sprained ankles, of being late and getting whipped. Rudy, smiling Billikin, seemed to fear nothing with a body too self-reliant for fear. Where Vol would steal what he wanted with delicate connivance and craft, Rudy snatched what he desired with a punch in the jaw for its owner; with the result that (for example a bag of sweetmeats in a candy butcher's basket) by the time Vol had plotted a trick to filch the bag, Rudy had already knocked the vendor kicking and vanished around the corner with the prize.

AT the forge of Fate, then, Vol was turned out as the rapier; Rudy the heavy-handled sledge. And anyone knows that a sledgehammer can smash a rapier—unless a rapier gets there first.

It took Father Patkoul to play the blacksmith who welded them so disastrously together.

There is no police record to tell where or how that Bolshy-whiskered circus tumbler, Patkoul the Father, acquired the two boys. Children were as cheap in the Russia of those days as they are in the Soviet of today, and that was about two *kopeks* each. So long ago as neither Vol nor Rudy could recall, old Father Patkoul had taken each squirming youngster by the scruff, hung them together on a trapeze, cracked a whip and told them, by God! that from this day forward they were destined to be acrobats. Not ordinary acrobats, either. But the world's best, the world's most sensational acrobats! Or, by the Czarina's bones, he would kill them both in the making.

He achieved his first promise, and came close to keeping the latter. "Try it again," he would roar. "Up on that slack wire, Rudy. Bring those stomach muscles into play. Faster on that somersault. More balance! You Vol! Stop sniveling and climb to that topmost trapeze. When you let go for the one-and-a-half you must relax. Relax, or by the soul of St. Mitrophane, I'll give you a whipping for relaxation. Now the next one who misses gets fifty-five stripes!"

Throw a baby in the ocean, say the Melanesians, and he learns to swim. Throw a little boy skyward, said Father Patkoul, and he learns to catch the trapeze.

And spare the rod and spoil the child. Also, practice makes perfect. And finally, united you stand, divided you fall—apart.

Patkoul the Father, being Russian, had a thousand axioms. He did not spare the rod. Little French boys and little German boys and other little European boys who ran away from home to join circuses after watching the little Patkoul boys in the Great Winter Circus, would not have done so had they known about Father Patkoul's snakewhip.

"I will teach your youthful muscles until they learn to work by instinct. I

will teach you to click on the second. I will time you like watches from Switzerland, and you will tick-tock together like clocks."

Synchronization. In the argot of the show lot, Vol was the "leaper" Rudy the "catcher." It was Vol, fast and light and dexterous, who launched himself from the trapeze to go corkscrewing into breathless space. It was Rudy, shoulder-powered, iron-handed, who hung by his ankles from the bar across the tent-top to grab Vol's wrist at the last, hair-split second above Eternity.

They practised like Bruce's spider. Their muscles were the students, Papa's whip-lash the Professor; a bowl of soup the reward, and (with the safety not finally removed) a broken neck the punishment. First year, one somersault. Second year, two. Third year, three; and because that was not enough, big Rudy must hang by one ankle. Pretty good for small boys—with bare ground and a broken neck far below.

How Vol had panted with terror, looking down. But Rudy, looking down, had only grinned.

He was grinning now; grinning as he climbed the tall mast across the tent; comfortable, happy and secure; his each slow step timed by the cymbal's Chinese clang. But at each successive step fresh drops of perspiration sprouted on Vol's tawny forehead, until quarter way up he knew his brows were glittering like a diadem. Ha! Rudy paused and looked down. Vol could not look down.

"Grin," he was husking in a throat as dry as a herringbone, "go ahead and grin. It's your last chance, ape-face, and you better make it good, because I'm going to get you tonight if it's the last thing I live to do. I'm going to get you, Rudy. *I'm going to get you tonight—*"

BEFORE they were out of knee-pants, the forging was done. Where was a team of "flyers" as marvelously skilled? Where was another aërialist who could duplicate Vol's triple somersault through space; another "catcher" so strong and accurate as Rudy?

Nested on a tiny platform suspended in ether, roosting on slender handholds, tumbling about on supports as unsubstantial as piano wires, the air was their adopted element. Their muscles became as mercury. Their hands were prehensile. They dangled and flew. They soared and dived. Under the big top, planing, spinning, twisting from trapeze to trapeze and back to trapeze again, they flowed together like quicksilver, and it was hand in glove.

But on *terra firma,* behind the scenes and concealed from Papa's telescopic (if vodka-juiced) eye, it was something else again.

"Listen, Rudy, you pulled a tendon in my arm tonight!"

"Can I help it if your timing was wrong and you jumped too far? All I could do to reach you, you kangaroo, and now I suppose you'll tell Papa, you miserable tattler, and he will give me another beating."

"It is I who take most of the beatings, you red headed numbskull. I—who risk my neck night after night in that triple somersault, the most dangerous part of the act—"

"Dangerous, bah! I would like to see you hang by one ankle and catch somebody jumping out of the sky and like as not coming too fast and too low! Without me there to save you from your mistakes you would not dare to jump at all."

"You swine, I know you dropped me on purpose into the rehearsal net yesterday so Papa would give me a thrashing."

"Species of cockroach, I could not have caught you with a thousand hands!"

"Liar!"

"Bungler!"

"Ape!"

"Mouse!"

It was a ritual as unvaried as the source of their argument. As surely as they quarreled over whose fault was the flaw in last night's performance, the discussion would turn on odious comparisons of skill and relative importance; and terminate in those four epithets. Liar, bungler, ape, mouse. *Mouse!* That was the word to skewer Vol's soul, to stand him passion-white and panting, eyes screwed, teeth in lower lip, the blade of his being unsheathed, as it were, and quivering to stab.

And then it would happen. Mouth going up at the corners, cheeks bulging, blue eyes twinkling with amusement and vast tolerance, Rudy would grin. And grinning, he would shrug; and shrugging, he would deliberately turn his back on Vol and saunter away. Saying as plainly as words, "I haven't got time to quarrel with Vol, the poor little shrimp, and it would be a pity to poke the little fellow in the nose."

PITY! That's a sour pickle for anyone to swallow. Vol would stand there gulping. That Billikin grin disarmed him. It was as if the acid of his anger ate the strength from his bones and held him stymied. While his calculating mind observed the fact that Rudy was head taller than he, with the shoulders of a Volga bull. Twice daily he felt the strength of Rudy's unerring grip. He knew the iron in those freckled, blunt hands. He thought it over, and by the time he was geared for the conflict, big Rudy would have gone. Leaving his grin imprinted like a bruise on Vol's mind.

Boys, like elephants, remember. Vol never forgot that day when they were fourteen and they stood without tears at Father Patkoul's newly dug grave in the cold Slavic snow, watching the last muddy shovelful patted over Papa's vodka-pickled remains. A common enemy could be a bond, and for the moment they were almost comrades. Yet hardly had the Russian mujik finished his dolorous requiem when the Brothers Patkoul discovered themselves without any bond whatsoever, and openly declared hostilities.

"Now," Vol delivered the ultimatum, "since I am the star of the act, it is my name comes first on the programme."

"Star!" Rudy snorted. "If the star's name comes first then who can deny that that should be the name of Rudy?"

He did not wait for the ritual, but was grinning already. Vol could contain himself no longer. Their scandalized manager, trying to intervene, won a kick in the shins for his offices. Vol's iced boot kept on going and buried itself in Rudy's breadbasket. The grin exploded from Rudy's features, and his fist was a cannonball at Vol's thin nose. Vol retaliated with unsuspected violence, writing letters of fire with his fingernails on Rudy's astonished caveman jaw.

There was no immediate decision. Forth and back the boys battled across the snowy mound, livening the cemetery with howls that had nothing to do with grief. Vol was speedy, flickering in and out with boot, tooth, and nail.

Rudy was deliberate, a wall of solid fists. With quick springs and limber back-somersaults, Vol dodged most of Rudy's haymakers and clawed his good-natured freckles to angry strawberries. But then some urchin humor hit Rudy on the funnybone, and he began to laugh. He patted at Vol with weak hands, and started to roar. He hooted and yaw-hawed. His mouth touched his ears. Papa would turn over in his grave if he could see us.

So Goliath might have considered a fistfight with David; but Vol Patkoul was not David. The Lord was on David's side, and nobody was on Vol's. With that laughter in his ears and that grin taking him in the face like a sunrise, he became intoxicated with fury. Spinning sidewise, he snatched the smoking brass censer from the mittens of the horrified Russian priest, then leapt at Rudy, twirling the sanctified vessel by its length of chain so that it made a wheel of yellow light in the air. Rudy watched this phenomenon in the sky against a background of onion-shaped Moscow spires with an uncomprehending, albeit sturdy, smile, until the lightning came down on his head. *Whang!* The holy object crumpled like cardboard. Coals and incense showered through Rudy's hair. His features never altered an iota. Smiling like a slice of watermelon, Rudy bent down to uproot the headstone from the foot of the grave with an effortless yank. His eyes were cheerful. One coatsleeve split open at the muscle. Calmly and truly he lithographed a "Rest In Peace" on Vol's forehead.

BOTH were flat in the snow when police, an ambulance, a peanut vendor, two Nihilists, a crowd and a Cossack arrived. But that was the last thing Vol remembered. Rudy's oncoming grin, colossal under the headstone. The selfsame grin he was wearing now, as he climbed the rigging ladder across the tent, his each slow step recorded by a cymbal's Chinese clang. Clang. Clang. Clang. Would they never get to the top?

The sweat was like tallow on Vol's temples. His teeth were dry, and his tongue felt leaden in his mouth. Never had this climb been so tedious, so interminably long. Time is an uncertain business. It seemed like yesterday, that grin of Rudy's in the graveyard. But climbing up the ladder tonight, it was lasting a year. Only half way up the tent-mast, and Vol Patkoul could scarcely breathe.

"Grin," he breathed, "but you'll come out of the rigging with another expression, Rudy my lad. Your face will look a whole lot different the next time you're on the ground. If it's the last thing I live to do," his fingers were shivering on the rungs, "*I'm going to get you tonight—*"

Generally speaking, it takes an adult, and a civilized one at that, to cook up a real, one hundred percent, done-to-a-turn hate, sizzling with the A-1 sauce of frustration and garnished with smoking plans for revenge. With boys it is bickering. Older youths fight. Hate comes with age.

Rudy, the grinner, was not civilized. Sunshine and showers for Rudy; sudden outbursts of rage that were liable to cool off in a loud guffaw to be forgotten five minutes later in a bucket of beer. Vol was a damned infernal nuisance, but he could beat him up any time he felt like it, and what was the use of putting your partner out of business and then being out of work yourself, like that time back in Russia when they'd had to lay off a whole week. If

you wanted to fight you could go up to the casino where there were a lot of swell girls and you could knock out somebody your size.

Vol, at eighteen, was civilized. Spending his money for books instead of beer. Not very good books—the Confessions of Countess So-and-so, the Affairs of Duke This-and-that, the Murders of De Medici—that sort of book. He was a Russian. He liked to get off in a corner and think. At the casino he played poker, having learned to control his face.

That was the summer they were showing before the crowned heads of Spain in Madrid and the war came along. The Czar called for volunteers, but an American circus scout called with a contract just in time to save them from the scouts of General Paul von Hindenburg. It was reported, however, that Vol and Rudy brought the war with them to America. The Battle of Tannenberg was a snowball fight compared to the Battle of Who-Should-Rate-The-Royal-Suit.

"That stateroom!" the sweating agent told the circus owner. "Ever see a lion and a tiger in the same cage? Stand there glarin' at each other, they would, and then Vol would start in cursin'. Not red in the face but kind of white, and his voice comin' low and sort of like wood. The big fella don't say a word. Not a word. He just grins. Now look at 'em up there in the rigging!"

UP there in the rigging Vol had just posed on the edge of the high platform, clapped his hands twice, hurled himself skinning-the-cat through shadowy emptiness. Pink-clad body in a ball, shooting through the upper air. Rudy, in canary-yellow, hanging head down. Body in an X, left ankle secured on the trapeze bar with gym shoe twisted around the rope, hands dangling. Alley-oop! On the last trigger instant the pink body jackknifed. Smack! the echo of hands joining hands. Heave! The yellow figure jerking the pink rocket out of the wind. Ho! Yellow arms throwing Vol clear to the safety platform. A gymnastic antic to sit the yellow figure upright on the bar; a swing and a jump, and the two were bowing together in the crow's nest, side by side.

It's a great act, Mr. Agent, it's a great act!

"But you oughta seen those guys on the ship comin' over. I'd hate to insure *them* boys!"

In the esoteric world of the circus, that back alley behind the canvas where laundry blows for everyone to note the holes in the ringmaster's underwear and see the frillies on Madam Zaza's scanties (*she* must have a new boy-friend) the story got around. It's the smallest town in the world, Circus Alley.

"They don't *like* each other, them flyers."

"You hear 'em arguin' last night in the dressin' tent?"

"He won't even go in the mess tent when his big partner's eating."

"And pullin' a routine like theirs! Can you imagine!"

Leave it to the show folk to imagine. In two seasons the feud was legend, the common gossip of every mud opera from Augusta to Oregon. "You hear about those Patkoul boys? Ain't it terrible? Well, they was sore at each other when they come to America, like enough, but *now*—well, it's natural enough for a performer to get sick of his partner, you know how it is, day after day and all—but this is *different!*"

"Did you hear about that rumpus they had up in Ohio—"

"Cold? Say, that dressin' tent with both them guys in it was an ice box. It was just the way they looked at each other. Give you chills up and down your spine."

"It's been goin' on between them for years, they say. And then to see them go up there in the rigging together! It's the little feller's *eyes.* Crocodile! But that big catcher don't say a word. Not a word. He just grins."

"You know where you stand with the guy who scowls; but where are you with one who just smiles all the time?"

"Ha ha. There ain't many places for an aërialist to stand."

"Plenty of places for an aërialist to *fall!*"

Circus Alley shook its head. Raised its eyebrows. Shrugged. *Some* day—

"But why," a newspaper man asked Foghorn Kelly, "don't they separate?"

Foghorn Kelly had to laugh. "Separate? And throw over five hundred a week? Those birds *can't* separate. They tried it one winter on the West Coast and like to starved. Vol couldn't find a catcher who could take his triple somersault, and Rudy couldn't get a leaper who can do Vol's stuff. This aërial stuff is all timing and after you've worked with a partner for years it's like one man. That routine has got 'em tied together tighter than the Siamese Twins—"

Siamese Twins! Vol knew the talk. He knew the hints, the whispers, the head-shakings. It grew on his nerves; bothered him the more in that it didn't bother Rudy a whit. There was a night when he'd had one vodka too many, after a week of mud, and Rudy had to walk in whistling and accidentally upset the make-up box.

"Clumsy lout!"

"Talking to yourself, Vol, my boy?"

"Ape!"

"Mouse!" Rudy's mouth beamed geniality all over his face.

Vol turned slowly on the camp chair, hands clenched blue-knuckled on his knees, eyes like seeds. "Watch out, you Rudy. Watch out, I say."

"Aw *golobushka!* I got a date tonight, little fellow. I ain't got time to watch out for you."

It seemed to Vol his windpipe would plug up with poison. For once he had to spit it clear. "Some day I'll kill you!"

SURPRISE made a monkey of Rudy's face. A moment his blue eyes were saucers, amazed. As if he didn't know that Vol had considered such a thing before. As if he'd never guessed that Vol might *want* to.

"You?" His coppery hair stood up like petals on a sunflower. "You—kill me?"

Vol's face was old. The poison had strangled him. He had to sit and stare at Rudy; watch Rudy's fingers spread open at his sides, Rudy's cheeks pouch like apples, his mouth split into joy, his lips go up to the ears, his eyes begin to twinkle like Christmas candles—Rudy was amused!

"*You*—" his voice was a chuckle, "kill *me!*"

Then he threw back his head, saw the ceiling, and roared. Vol saw it, too. Saw himself, night after night, throwing his body through the misty upper air with nothing at all to save him from that topsy-turvy glimpse of ground far below but Rudy's hands. That freezing instant when Rudy's downhung head flashed into view. That dreadful billionth-second of suspense.

Then those freckled hands smacking over his—a yank—a throw—those hands pegging him night after night to safety.

"*You*—kill *me!*" And grinning, Rudy shrugged; and shrugging, Rudy turned his back on Vol and walked from the dressing tent. "Aw, I ain't got time to argue with you; I got a date."

He had a date tonight, too, and he was probably thinking about it as he grinned his way up the rigging ladder across the tent, each heavenward step keeping time with a cymbal's Chinese clang. Vol thought about it himself. And thinking about Rudy's date brought a film of hot water to Vol's eyes; made his heart a pounding engine under his pink-clad ribs. It seemed to Vol the thunder under his ribs would echo above the brass tumult from the band. The din would shake him from the ladder. Three-quarters up. It was miles. His fingers were claws; he could not look down.

"Grin," he panted, "but you won't keep that date tonight, Rudy. Not tonight, you won't. You kept a lot of others, but here's one you're not going to keep. *I'm going to get you tonight—*"

THAT a woman should have entered the story was inevitable as circus-day rain. Where is war without women? Who says no?

Europe had long since quit fighting that its mothers might raise a fresh crop of cannon meat; the Charleston, Prohibition, the Republicans had come and gone; the Flying Patkouls still flew.

You can see our heroes reaching that state of siege familiar to castaways and married couples where, both growing a little gray with it all, one side yawns and the other shuts up. Metaphorically speaking, Rudy yawned. Vol shut up. And a Russian who keeps his mouth shut is not a healthy Russian. There was Vol shutting himself up, and there was Rudy sporting out nights with straw hat slanted, flower in buttonhole, tomcat grin. Smile and the world smiles with you (how these Russians love maxims!); kick and you kick alone.

Vol had ways. Devious, half-Oriental, cunning ways. For instance, the day Rudy developed hay fever, Vol would spend the morning gathering goldenrod to fill his half of the dressing tent with pollen. Rudy showed preference for yellow; Vol scouted the haberdashers to adorn himself in shades of pink. Overhearing Rudy tell the Garden of Allah barker how he shuddered at the sound of a fiddle, Vol must buy a cheap violin and practice scales. Occupied with these Cagliostro-like machinations—the less satisfying in that Rudy ignored them as a mastiff might ignore the peckings of a flea—Vol had little talent for the gentler capers of existence.

So when Vol called with an armful of orchids on Barbara, the Bareback Queen, it was only to find her sitting in Rudy's lap. So Vol asked Suzette (she hangs by her teeth, folks!) out for dinner, and discovered her roasting a chicken for a dinner with Rudy. So Vol lugged a diamond ring to the tent of dainty Fatima, who came straight from the Sultan's palace of Egypt (New York), and saw Rudy's grin in a silver frame on her dressing table. So it isn't to be expected that these Don Juan conquests of Rudy's were as balm to Brother Vol, for such was not the fact.

Watching down the years through green-tinted eyes, Vol saw his team-

mate, his Siamese Twin, his Sword of Damocles, go gayly swinging from one primrose affair to the next with that lumbering grace which characterized his work on the flying trapeze, while he, Vol, sat home on his, Vol's, thumbs. And you know about sore thumbs.

Show folk are not celebrated for tact.

"What's the matter, Sourpuss?" they asked of Vol. "Why ain't you a bear with the dames like your brother?"

"That clown is no brother of mine."

"Ain't jealous of him, maybe?"

"Would a man be envious of the loves of a monkey?"

"They say there ain't a woman he can't get."

"Show me the woman worth getting, and we'll see who gets her."

HER name was Pocahontas. She was no more an Indian than anyone else born Sadie Green from West Buffalo, but they put a feather in her flaxen hair, billed her a direct descendant of Powhatan, stood an apple on her head, and told her to pose in front of a backboard and play William Tell to Chief Thunder Mug. This she did for fifteen a week, while the ughing Chief proceeded to outline her not inconspicuous figure with red arrows before splitting the pippin on her permanent. Playing human target to a Redskin, letting arrows skim up and down your shapely legs, was not the best job in the world. Especially if the marksman was addicted to firewater and asked you to marry him three times a day. But where can you get a job in a chorus this year?

Thunder Mug himself was a full-blooded, that is to say eighty per cent, Iroquois off a Finger Lakes reservation. He had the face of an old cavalry saddle, a coal-scuttle nose, the eyes of a blackbird, a bulbous stomach, and short bow legs. Unlike most of his tribe, he was expert with the bow and arrow. Throughout countless medicine shows he had never missed the apple on his partner's head. But he was not an ex-chorus girl's dream, and for a number of seasons Pocahontas (Sadie Green) had been praying the Sun God to send her a boy-friend capable of love words more enticing than "ugh."

Vol Patkoul said, "*Ogurtchek!*" which is Russian for something like "lovable cucumber."

THEY met in Mrs. Sleeper's boarding house, which is just the place where a thrifty acrobat would meet a Polish Pocahontas during the winter lay-off. You know those towns where small shows anchor for the winter. You know Mrs. Sleeper's. Jugglers on one floor, Australian whip-crackers on the next, trained seals in the attic, and three-legged girls under the stairs. All barking, rehearsing, practicing, gossiping through a hibernation period. Wating for spring and opening day to come along.

Stars of higher candlepower roomed uptown at the local hotel. Vol lived on the first floor, and Rudy lived on the sixth But Rudy enjoyed the hotel dining room, which left Vol to dine at Mrs. Sleeper's.

"*Ogurtchek!*" he murmured at Pocahontas. "And what are you doing tonight?"

"Nothing."

"Movie?"

"Why not?"

Could it be the breeze that filled the trees? Vol Patkoul never saw that movie. He never heard a word of that

talkie. Some women are so beautiful they make you deaf to sounds. Vol saw a golden head, delicious ringlets curled on an ivory neck. Pointed eyes as brown and warm as fur. Cheeks tinged with the faintest shade of olive. Madonna lips, red caramel. In the wide cheek bones, the delicate curve of the nose, there was the merest hint of far-away middle Europe—

"*Bozhe moy!*" he whispered thickly. "Where have *you* been all my life?"

It hadn't taken him long to acquire the American idiom.

When the lights shadowed down their faces floated together in a kiss. Vol had been kissed before. But those had been sneering, painted grimaces compared to this. The lips of Sadie Pocahontas Green were as gentle as the touch of a naiad in a Volga fairy story; her hand on his arm was as soft as the hand of a mother. Mother! Vol Patkoul had never known mothering in his life. His forehead puckered as if he wanted to cry. Something happened to his eyes. Something happened to Vol Patkoul.

It was as if the dusty attic of his mind, cluttered for years with thoughts of malice, gnawing rats of brotherly hate, complex schemes of revenge, had suddenly and in one gesture undergone spring housecleaning. As if the thistle in his soul had abruptly sprouted trumpet flowers. He stared at Pocahontas as a hermit might stare at the forgotten happiness of fellowship. Only to a Russian, only to one locked up for years in a hate-fixation, could this mystery have happened. He blinked at the girl's warm eyes like a man coming up to sunshine from the bottom of a coal mine.

"I love you," he told her in the battered hallway of Mrs. Sleeper's. "You must dine with me tomorrow night. I love you."

"You're a funny man. You've hardly known me three hours—"

"I love you, little cabbage. I'll never let you go—"

It was so much nicer than the monosyllabic grunting of the bow-legged Thunder Mug. Pocahontas sent a fleeting glance up the hallway. It was snoring like a Pullman car. Rebellion welled in her sideward scrutiny of the Chief's door. How she hated this medicine show existence.

"Tomorrow," she pressed Vol's hand. "I'll see you tomorrow." She did not tell him there was an Indian in the woodpile.

Walking back to his hotel that night, Vol's head was as giddy as if he'd hung by his heels for fifteen hours. *Guzenski!* His heart was thrumming like a balalaika band. The polar breeze was wine. Wind sang in his ears. Look at those stars. That moon. He whistled "Dark Eyes" and his heels were feathers. He slapped the astonished doorman a blow on the back. His progress across the lobby was a march. He caught sight of Rudy in the grill room, the big catcher's red head like a rose center-piece in a bouquet of girls.

"'Allo, Rudy!" he called.

Rudy's jump of surprise spilled two girls and a bottle of Dubonnet out of his lap. Other showmen spun from the bar to stare.

"What's happened to Sourpuss?"

"Th' leaper's gone screwy."

"You hear him call Rudy 'comrade'? He's turned Communist."

THAT was a dizzy winter for Vol Patkoul. Love is a pretty strong liquor, and he had swallowed the bottle on an empty stomach.

Eight nights a week he staggered home from Mrs. Sleeper's, so to speak, drunker than before. He showered Pocahontas with such gifts as would have turned the head of Madam Du Barry. Little gold ikons and little silver samovars.

He whirled her through dinners, miles of Hollywood film, miles of highway romantically frosted under the winter moon. The world that had been a mustard pickle to Vol Patkoul became an oyster, and Pocahontas, ensconced in its center, was the pearl.

Vol never spoke of Rudy—the mastadonic catcher had gone out of his thoughts. In the hotel, on the street, at occasional rehearsal to limber up the routine, he saw his red-headed partner as some one remembered from a dream. Toward Rudy his attitude was one of fraternal decorum. "Greetings, comrade." Every one was comrade! If Rudy's eyes rounded like china dishes and the other professionals ogled open-jawed, Vol laughed at his secret and with Slavic thrift kept it to himself.

Hints got loose, of course. In a glass house the likes of Mrs. Sleeper's, tenanted with such sharp-eyed gentry as showfolk, a secret was no safer than a Socialist's derby hat in Berlin. Apparently everybody knew a flyer was sparking Chief Thunder Mug's girl, save the one man in the world who might have been expected to know. That it never got home to the Chief might be accounted to his unassailable ego (*he* could never have a rival, ugh!) plus the fact that his winter lay-off was a hibernation in truth—five stewy months during which he spent last season's profits in barley juice, snugly confined to his den at Mrs. Sleeper's. If Thunder Mug knew how romance had come to his princess, he made no sign. The winter wore into January, February, March. The spring equinox brought Vol's courtship to a whirlwind tempo.

Pocahontas had to tell him, finally. "You see, Volly, this here fella I work for—well, we was sort of engaged—I hadda keep my job, didn't I?—but I never loved him, don't get me wrong there, only he thinks I'm his or something, he thinks I'm going to marry him, I'm afraid—"

Vol's features were suddenly dark. "You mean that Indian—"

"He *did* give me the job," she pouted worriedly. "We're supposed to start on the road this coming Monday, and if I wanta keep my—"

He caught her; shook her roughly. "You think I'd let you go back to that arrow-shooting act? You think I, Vol Patkoul, star of the Flying Patkouls, who does the triple somersault as no other man in the world can do—you think I let this medicine show Indian stand in my way? Do I care if you were engaged? Listen to me! I won't let you go. Now you are Vol Patkoul's!"

"Gee, Volly, you know I'm that way about you. But Thunder Mug—his act—"

"The devil and his curse take Thunder Mug!" Panic came over him. He might have known the girl would have other admirers. The very chance of such rivalry put a pang-stab in his heart.

"*Ogurtchek!* You love Vol?"

"Ain't I gone out with you almost every night since we met?"

"*Bozhesthveno!* I will marry you!" Why hadn't he thought of it before? He seized her hands, jigging with excitement. "Saturday my circus takes the road. That is day after tomorrow. We give a gala performance in this

town, then strike at midnight for the season. Ho! You and I, we will be married an hour before that opening performance, eh? Just time I will have to take train for New York where I can buy you a diamond fit for the wife of Vol Patkoul! You will wait and be ready for me, yes? I will leave at once. The hours I am gone will seem like years. You—you will marry me?"

SHE melted in his arms and printed the "yes" on his lips. Vol groaned in his happiness. Nobody could take her from him now—nobody.

"Nobody! Nobody! Nobody!" He gnashed the words through his teeth as he scaled the final rungs of the rigging ladder, his each step timed by the cymbal's Chinese clang. Dimly seen across the shadowy canopy of sky under the big top, Rudy was chinning himself, limber as a piece of yellow elastic up to the safety platform. He looked over at Vol and grinned and waved a hand. A taste of corrosion filled Vol's mouth. His tongue was brass. Every tendon and sinew in his body was throbbing as he swung himself to an upright stand on his own little platform and looked down on the mass of upturned faces seething far below.

The strip of bare ground under his perch looked no bigger than a carpet. A clown capering in front of the grand stand was the size of a toy. Elephants waiting a finale in the menagerie runway were dwindled to rats. That was a long way down. The trapeze cables and the rigging which spanned that cavernous drop weren't much more than spider webs under the tent roof. Vol jerked his gaze off that little mat of ground, and the breath came chugging out of his lungs like wind from a tire pump. He waved at the distant yellow figure.

"That grin will be on the other side of your face the next time *you're* on the ground," he promised in a whisper. "So help me God, Rudy, I'm seeing it for the last time. *I'm going to get you tonight—*"

WHEN a man turns a back somersault in his mind the way Vol did, jumping from hate to love in one dizzy leap, he doesn't stop at half measures.

In New York he combed the stores for the biggest diamond outside of Kimberly. Extravagance took him like a fever. He ordered an ermine wrap and rhinestone heels and bushels of silk stockings. Nothing would be too good for the wife of Vol Patkoul. In a last minute dash to the insurance office, he changed his policy from accident to life and made it out to Sadie Green. The train rushing him back to the town where the circus was packing up to go chattered a song. Vol would have just enough minutes to race for Mrs. Sleeper's, bestow the ring, hunt a justice of peace, and speed with his bride for the opening performance. He'd show the world an act that night. Leap? He could do a hundred aërial somersaults. A thousand!

It was one of those early spring days of gipsy sunshine and the breath of violets. First buds on trees. Birds and things. Evening dusk like a rainbow over the roofs. Vol was out of the train before it stopped; through the station; into a cab. Beyond a row of Main Street chimneys the big top was spread against the sky, new banners fluttering. There were wagons bright with fresh paint, and the gaudy flatcars waited their first haul on the railway siding. In the cab Vol cursed the

traffic lights, roared a Muscovite song, expanded his chest, flailed his arms.

He told the cab to wait, and took Mrs. Sleeper's front steps in an acrobatic bound. He never remembered kicking open the door of Pocahontas's hall bedroom, and he never knew how that little boarding-house crowd in carpet slippers and shirt sleeves gathered like sober wraiths in the gas-lit gloom at his back. But then he was standing on the threshold of that room with the gift boxes like tons in his arms and the cry "Poca—" paralyzed in his mouth.

Sadie Pocahontas Green was not there. She was not behind the rented-room furniture or the hat rack or the chandelier that swooped down from the ceiling like a skeleton's arm and held a sickly gas-flicker to the scene. The sole occupant of her room was a squat, dumpish figure sitting the center of the carpet in a rocking chair, moccasins hooked under the rockers, arms folded, headdress of eagle feathers askew on his brow, an image in brick. The right eye of this brick image had been smeared a dismal black. The left eye stared at nothing with the unblinking stare of a cataleptic.

Vol's voice was as low as the guttering of a drain pipe.

"Where is Pocahontas?"

"Gone." If there was tragedy in this departure, the Chief spoke of it with all the emotion of one of his twins in front of a cigar store.

"Where?" Vol panted. "Where did she go?"

The firebrick face of Chief Thunder Mug did not alter a muscle. "I come downstair' for have talk with my girl, one hour mebbe two hour ago. I talk with her plenty. Door fly open and heap big fella jump in. This fella he sock'm me eye plenty punch. Grab up him girl in arms and go out door like'm wind. Pocahontas tell me she run off with him to get married."

"Who was it?" Vol screamed. "Who was the fellow she run off with to get married?"

THE rockers creaked a crickety sound of despair that turned the blood to ice water in Vol's arteries. "Him one of these circus flyers, heap big acrobat man. I'm know she been goin' out with flyer plenty times; no think she leave me for to marry."

"But what did he look like?" Vol squalled. The room was reeling before his face and he wondered if he was going to faint. It reeled a lot faster when the words droned out of that red brick face.

"Red hair and spotted like a leopard. Heap strong. Grin. All the time grin—"

"Rudy!" The cry came out of his throat as if torn from the tissue of his heart. He got out of there. The dusk had turned grass-color and the sky was winter. He dismissed the cab with a curse. He walked. He was running. Mist swirled crimson before his eyes. On the show-grounds he kicked urchins out of his way. He stumbled over tent pegs. A band was blaring Sousa. Walking blindly, he located the dressing tents. A wardrobe boy in a green and gold parade coat caught his arm.

"Better sober up and hurry it, Mr. Patkoul. They been lookin' for you. Your trunks come over from the hotel. Rudy's already gone out front."

"Did—was there a woman with Rudy when he come on the lot?"

"Yes sir. He told her to go over to his compartment at th' circus train and wait till after th' show."

A blood vessel might have popped at the base of Vol's skull. The light of a carbide flare was poison on his lips, his eyelids plum-color. "Listen to me, boy! I—I—I been robbed!" Grabbing into his pockets, he snatched out a handful of damp bills; stuffed them into the boy's fingers. "You wait one minute for Vol! I go to write letter. You will take it to local Chief of Police for me, yes? Without fail to the Chief of Police!"

IT was queer. It seemed to him that letter had been tucked in one of the folds of his brain, hidden away in a deep crevice, written, signed and sealed, waiting delivery for many years. For the whole scheme hatched and was born perfect without a moment's incubating. He scrawled without hesitation, his only difficulty controlling his fingers on the pen. At last the rapier was out of its sheath. No hammer could win against this cunning. This was a masterpiece.

"To Be Opened In Case of My Death—" Vol addressed the envelope. Then: *For years I have been in fear for my life. My partner he is jealous of me, Vol Patkoul, because I am leaper and star of our act. Circus people know how things are between us. Also I am afraid maybe my partner would want my girl because she has my life insurance. I write this only in case something should happen to me and police will know it is not accident—"*

That was the note Vol sent to the Chief of Police. Then he walked out to die.

Silence. The cymbal had stopped. Brasses and snare drums mute. No sound from the concentrated stare of five thousand upturned eyes. Foghorn Kelly was a hoarse lilliputian bawling through a tiny megaphone. "Wan hundred feeeet—" his voice came up from below, diminished, like the metallic talking of a distant telephone. "Wan hundred—you counted 'em—wan hundred feet above ground. A triple somersault, ladeez and gen-tul-men, with no net below—"

Five thousand upturned faces drew a simultaneous breath, a sound like a tremendous sob. Vol shuddered convulsively; jerked himself back from the platform's dizzy edge. His fingers were like ice. Numbly he pulled the handkerchief from his pink waist-sash, and scrubbed his hands. This was a signal to Rudy. The big catcher grinned, bowed, caught the trapeze bar over his head, released it from its hook and came swinging in a wide arc off his platform. Swish. Hanging by both hands. Hanging by one hand. Chinning himself, skinning the cat in mid-air, gaudy as a butterfly.

The tent was empty of sound. Cavernous silence under acres of canvas. A yellow figure swinging under the vast dome. The man, Vol thought savagely, had no nerves. Now he was pumping the swing. Wide, looping arcs. A spotlight picked him out, the blue-white circle of light following the pendulum swing of the trapeze, like a searchlight on a plane. It was miles in the sky. Miles. Those heads below no bigger than apples on a fruit stand. The yellow figure knotted itself under the bar. Heels up. Head down. Zoop! The yellow figure fell away, losing its hand-hold. A windy gasp from the bated audience below. Zip! Rudy was hanging head down, arms dangling, left leg kicking free, right leg taut with the ankle twisted securely around the swing-rope, toes hooked over the bar. Rudy hanging by an ankle—

Sweat gushed on Vol's forehead. he could see that upside down grin. He shut it from his eyes. Too bad Pocahontas wasn't here to see it, too. Waiting to meet Rudy at the train. Pocahontas. Curse her; the thought of her swelled the cords on his white throat. His nails dug in his palms. All the dammed-up hate of his life coursed through his hot veins. Thank God he hadn't met Rudy in the dressing tent.

This way was better. Got the pair of them. Rudy and the girl. He had a mental picture of the Chief of Police with that letter. A phone would ring. Just been an accident at the circus grounds. People shoving and pulling on that little plot of earth down there. Ambulance sirens. Surgeons. A pink figure sprawled like an ant. It wouldn't hurt. Every bone would break at once. Pouf! Like blowing out a light. Over in a second. Rudy would be white, climbing down from the rigging. "It was an accident, an accident—"

Slowly, carefully Vol felt his way with his feet to the edge of his platform. God! That void before him was enormous as the sky. Blood throbbed on his eardrums. A snare-drum had started to roll. Rudy was waiting. It wouldn't hurt. Over in a minute. Steady, now. No losing this time. He clapped his hands, grabbed the trapeze, unhooked, soared into emptiness with steely fingers knotted on the bar. Four swings, getting up speed. That was the routine. Four swings and the jump. Timed to clockwork. Rudy watching hawk-eyed, waiting.

ONE—wind tore at his hair as the ground swooped and fell away under him. A moment the trapeze hovered, poised under the canvas ceiling. Swoosh! He was over his own platform again.

Two—vivid words, fragmentary bits of memory rushed through his thoughts. Relax. Relax. Keep your eye on that grin. Aaaah, he would fix it this time. Remember that fight in the graveyard? All those years of shutting up? Rudy shrugging, turning away—"Mouse! Mouse, eh?"

Three— That double-crossing girl. Waiting for Rudy at the train. She'd get hers, too. She and Rudy with his infernal grin. Grin on the other side of his face when he heard the word murder. Over in a second. Wouldn't hurt. Pink body crumpled like an ant on that little patch of gray down.

Four— High, now. Higher! Speed! Would the cursed trapeze never hit the ceiling? Now it started the swing down. Down, down. Massed heads streaming under his feet, miles below. That bit of bare ground. Rudy's grin swooping forward out of the haze. Two freckled hands outstretched, sure of the catch. Grinning. Grinning. Don't look! *Now!*

"I can't!" In that sickening moment of letting go, Vol knew he couldn't do it. The scream came out of him as his fingers released the bar. The will to die broke as he shot out into thin air. Instinct gauged the distance, unable to disobey. Muscles too long trained, too long timed against death, overcame mind. Every fibre of his being fought to take him true to those waiting hands. His leap was faultless, accurate as a groove.

Only then, as he tumbled into space, did he seventh-sense a flaw in the atmosphere. An eye-wink glimpse of midget figures running below. Tiny hands waving. Picayune voices squealing. A terrible fear that he *had* missed the jump came over him. No, he

wasn't there yet. Coiled in the air, his every muscle and nerve pulled for the finish. Tick, tick, tick, body electrical, clocking billionth-seconds to the atom. Unerringly he was making it. Snap! Arms whipping up, hands open. A fraction of an instant when he whizzed at Rudy's downturned face, into the reach of those saving arms—*Rudy was not grinning!*

Vol's thrill of terror almost stopped him in mid air. Shocked muscles almost threw him upward from the clutch of gravity. *Smack!* His hands paddycaked into Rudy's palms. In a flash he knew he had never made a more perfect leap in his life, and in the same flash he knew he was gone. No iron fingers trapped his. No powerful jerk caught him out of mid flight. The hands that met his were grease. One horrible instant his fingers clawed for a hold on the flabby hands of his partner—he was lost!

In falling, Vol kicked his feet like a man pumping a bicycle. Nobody there to hear it would ever forget his agonized shriek. Half way down, and dropping like a plummet, he rolled over. In that last flash of his life he saw his partner far above him, yellow frame hanging by one ankle, arms limp. In that last shocking instant, his vision clear as glass, Vol saw an Indian arrow sticking from Rudy's back.

Then the tent and the crowd and the roar and the night swallowed Vol. Smash! He had been right. There was no pain.

Canvasmen worked fast to lower Rudy from the rigging. Pullies and women screamed alike as they let down the catcher's trapeze. People shoved and pulled across the little plot of earth. Ambulance sirens. Surgeons. Police. The pink figure was sprawled like an ant.

There was no grin on big Rudy's face, either. His prehistoric strength had ebbed, but the ankle fastened in the ropes had held.

He roared like a lion when the surgeons yanked out the arrow.

"Lucky for you," one said. "Buried itself in those muscles. Another inch from the shoulder blade he'd of got you in the spine."

The big catcher writhed on the stretcher. "It hits me—just when Vol jumped. He couldn't see it in my back. Feel like I was kicked by a horse. I'm stunned—like dead—I couldn't even yell—" His thick throat gulped a sob.

"We got the Indian," a blue-coat snarled. "He was hidin' back of th' bandstand. Foghorn Kelly seen him shoot the arrow—"

"Let me up!" Rudy bawled. "*Poschal!* I will kill that one. This afternoon—I got by Mrs. Sleeper's boarding house. I cannot find Vol and I want to talk with him about our act tonight. At the hotel they say maybe I find Vol there. I walk in the house. Behind the door sobs a girl's voice. There is this red face skunk with feathers on his head—beating up the girl. I hear him strike her once, twice. She tells him she is going to marry a flyer. Then I knew she is the girl Vol has been going with, and I break in and hit that skunk with feathers in the eye. The girl I take away with me and tell her to hide and meet Vol after the show. And now—now Vol—"

There's a Scotch proverb for this. "The best laid plans o' mice and men gang aft agley."

THE END

In the next issue—Roscoe's "King for a Day"

The Great Betrayal

By GEORGE CHALLIS

Tizzo—smiling—was always ready for an encounter

Tizzo, young firebrand and adventurer, finding himself caught in the meshes of intrigue, fights his way out with sword and fire

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

WHEN young Tizzo, daring adventurer and master swordsman, rode through the streets of old Perugia to keep a rendezvous with his beautiful lady, Beatrice Baglioni, after having been warned that he was heading straight for danger, little did he realize that his secret visit to the house of the powerful Baglioni would end the way it did. He learned that his attention to Beatrice had incurred the enmity of her brother, Giovanpaolo, and that a price had been set on his head. Learning that Beatrice had been taken to the Convent of Poor Clares, Tizzo made his way to her brother's room, and after a fierce struggle, vanquishes him in a duel. Giovanpaolo pledges eternal friendship with him, and asks Tizzo to help the House of Baglioni rid itself of its insidious enemies---particularly the treacherous Jeronimo della Penna.

Tizzo agrees to undertake the mission, realizing that if he is successful he will have the hand of his beloved Beatrice who means so much to him.

Elia Bigi, Tizzo's faithful minion; Luigi

This story began in the Argosy for February 2

Falcone, Tizzo's foster-father, and his old friend, Henry, Baron of Melrose, all help him toward the accomplishment of his task.

CHAPTER V (*Continued*).

WINE OF FRIENDSHIP.

TIZZO, striding anxiously up and down in the reception room, looked again and again towards the shimmering bars of iron which set off the room from the little cell in which the sisters of the order might appear to converse with their friends. He had waited, he was sure, for hours, before hinges moved with a dull, grating sound, and then a candle was carried into the cell by a veiled girl with a beautiful face.

Tizzo leaped to the bars and grasped them.

"Beatrice!" he said.

"Hello!" exclaimed Giovanpaolo. "Can you see her face through that veil, Tizzo?"

The girl tossed back the hood and came to the bars.

"This is a strange summer house for our meeting, Tizzo," she said without emotion.

He took one of her cool, slender hands and stared, entranced, into her brown eyes.

She was above all a Baglioni in the immensity of calm with which she faced every crisis.

And now, looking past Tizzo, she exclaimed, "Is that the traitor? Is that Giovanpaolo? O that I ever thought I loved you!"

"Beatrice," said Giovanpaolo, "Tizzo is now my sworn brother. He has forgiven my sins; will you do the same?"

"How did you buy him, Giovanpaolo?" asked the girl.

"With my love," said the warrior.

"It is something that turns as quickly as a page," said the girl.

"With my faith," said Giovanpaolo.

"I could blow away a thousand faiths like yours on one breath," she declared.

"With my right hand," said Giovanpaolo.

"Has he given you his hand?" she asked suddenly of Tizzo.

"And have given him mine," said Tizzo.

Her face softened suddenly.

She said to Giovanpaolo: "You are as dangerous as a poisoned knife, or treachery by night; but I can still love you a little for the sake of Tizzo. Tell me what it means, though, when you bring Tizzo to see me here? Am I to suspect anything?"

"It means that when Messer Guido gives his consent, you two will be married, if you still love this red-headed fellow.

"But mind you, Beatrice—his brain is really on fire."

"I know it," said the girl. She looked earnestly at Tizzo "Do I love you, my dear?" she asked.

"Somewhere in your wicked heart there is something that cares for this worthless self of mine," said Tizzo.

"Yes," she answered. "But last night when I walked into the trap for your sake—when I went down over the lawns trembling like a silly fool and whispering your name—I hated you for the thing that I found! Yes, how I hated you!"

"Did you hate me, Beatrice? I came to the place honestly, as I told you I would, and before the time. And there I was!"

"Do you know what I found there?" she asked.

"Marozzo?"

"Yes. My wretched maid had sold my secrets to him; and Giovanpaolo let him use what he had learned."

"I was to blame," said Giovanpaolo.

"Some day," she said fiercely, "I shall pay you home for that, my handsome cousin!"

"Hush!" said Tizzo. "I have put my mark on Marozzo."

"Have you?" she asked, eagerly.

"With the point of my dagger I have drawn a cross on his forehead, that will make him a crusader the rest of his life. No doctor will ever rub that mark away."

"Tizzo, I love you!" said the girl.

She threw out her arms to him through the bars, but he only took her hands and kissed them.

"Why not my lips, Tizzo?" she cried.

"Never," he answered, "till I am sure that you love me—not for the shame I have done to Marozzo but for myself."

"Do you see?" said the girl to Giovanpaolo. "He makes bargains and draws up definitions. This comes from his study of Greek. God forgive me if I ever marry a scholar. Tizzo, when will you be sure that I love you for yourself?"

"Only," he answered, "when you and I have faced the devil together and plucked a few hairs from his iron beard."

CHAPTER VI.

WASPS BEGIN TO HUM.

THE mulberry, orange and lemon trees flavored the airs that blew over the house of Luigi Falcone, and through the lawns of his garden great-headed plane trees gave shade and spear-headed cypresses marked the walks and circled the fountains. There was an artificial lake expensively produced by diverting the water from a creek among the hills and leading it here to fill an excavated hollow in the midst of the garden. The soil of the excavation had been used to create raised, flowering banks around the pool, and in the center of the lake there was a little island on which stood a summer house. Its form was that of a little Greek temple with graceful Ionic columns that threw a white glimmering reflection across the water, and the principal use of the water was that it acted as a barrier across which the world could not step in order to invade the privacy of Luigi Falcone when he chose to sit here alone with his thoughts. A Venetian gondola with a gondolier lolling under its canopy, waited on the convenience of the master.

This fellow now started up, for his name was called.

"Olimpio! Fat-witted, lazy Olimpio!"

"Mother of heaven!" said Olimpio. "It is my master!"

And he leaped up to the deck and to the handle of his oar. As soon as he saw the flaming head of Tizzo under the shadows of the trees that crowned the bank, Olimpio began to lean his weight on the long oar and drive the little bark furiously forward.

"Wait here," said Tizzo to Elia Bigi. Before he left the town of Perugia he had said to the one-eyed servant: "Elia, I am about to leave Perugia as a proscribed man with a price on my head. You can sit here and keep my rooms, or you can ride with me and risk your neck." And the grotesque answered: "Well, if I stay here I shall lose my appetite and the only eye that's left to me will grow dull as an unused

knife. But if I go with you, every day will have a salt and savor of its own." So he had ridden with Tizzo, each with a shirt of the finest Spanish mail, and a steel-lined bonnet, and the pair of them got hastily from the town.

The gondolier, bringing his boat swiftly and gracefully along the side of the little pier at the edge of the lake, held out both hands with a shout, but Tizzo leaped from the pier exactly into the center of the gondola.

"Tizzo!" cried Olimpio. "Ah, two-footed cat. You could drop from a tree-top and never break the leaves that you landed on. Welcome home! Welcome, welcome! You have been dancing with the devil in Perugia and still he has not turned your hair gray!"

Tizzo shook the greeting hands warmly and laughed: "The best day is the day of the returning. Is your master on the island?"

"He is there with a Greek manuscript, and I hear him chanting the words and striking the lyre," said Olimpio. "He will make it a fiesta when he knows you have come!"

In fact, as the long, narrow gondola went swaying across the smooth water of the lake, Tizzo heard strings of music sound from the little temple, and when he stepped ashore, he recognized a chorus of Aristophanes, sung with a fine gusto to that improvised accompaniment.

A great cry greeted this singing, and from the columns of the temple, as the gondola touched the shore, there ran out a tall, bald-headed man who threw up his hands with a shout when he saw Tizzo.

FOR a moment it seemed to Tizzo that he was again the nameless waif of the village streets, standing agape as the "lord of the castle" went past him. And then, like the blurred flicker of many pictures, his memory touched the years when he had entered this house as the humblest of pages and grown at last to the position of foster son and heir.

Now he had fallen into the arms of Luigi Falcone. Now he was being swept into the little summer house where the harp stood aslant against a chair and, on a table, were scattered the yellow parchments of old manuscripts.

"What have you been doing with your Greek, Tizzo?" demanded Falcone.

"I've been using it to sharpen my sword," said Tizzo.

"I've heard that you and Giovanpaolo Baglioni are like two brothers together; and a man must have a sharp sword to be a brother to Giovanpaolo. But Perugia is a city of murder."

"I'm a proscribed man with a price on my head," said Tizzo. "Haven't you heard that?"

"Proscribed? By the Baglioni? Tizzo, what are you doing lingering here so close to Perugia? Wait! I'll call for horses! We'll send you as fast as hoofs can gallop—"

"I've fled all this distance from Perugia and I'm tired of flight," said Tizzo. "I'm going to stay here."

"They'll come in a drove and slaughter you, lad!"

"Perhaps they will. But the fact is that a man has to die some time, and it's better to be struck down from in front than shot through the back. I'll run no farther. It's as easy to die young as it is to die old."

"Of course it is," said Falcone. "But are you really resolved to run no more from the Baglioni?"

"Not another step—today," said Tizzo, and laughed.

Falcone laughed in turn. "The same blue devil is in your eyes and the same red devil is in your hair," he said with a smile.

"We'll go into the villa. I have some French wine for you. You shall tell me everything; and I'll give orders that every man on my place shall take weapons and be prepared to fight for you!"

"Not a stroke! Not a stroke!" said Tizzo. "I've made my own fortune and whatever is in the cup I'll be ready to drink it, alone."

They went back in the gondola, and as he left the boat Tizzo gave some golden florins to Olimpio. "Turn them into silver," he said, "and scatter them among all the servants. Tell them that the Baglioni want my life and that if it is known that I am here in the Villa Falcone, I'm not better than a dead man."

"Ah, *signore,*" said Olimpio, his eyes still startled by the sight of the gold, "we all are ready to die for you; not a whisper will come from one of us."

But as they went on towards the large house, Falcone said: "Tizzo, that is the act of a child, really! You tell them that the Baglioni are hunting you, and you ask the servants to say not a word. But how can they cease from talking? They have heard no gossip like this for many years! You have come back from Perugia with the atmosphere of a hundred duels about you.

"So how can they keep from talking about you?"

"Let them talk, then," said Tizzo. "Even mute swans have to sing when they die. Let them talk."

"In fact," said Falcone, suddenly stopping, "it is a part of your plan to have them talk?"

"Perhaps it is," agreed Tizzo. "But don't ask me what the plan may be."

"I SHALL ask nothing," said Falcone. "Even when the wasps begin to hum, I'll try to brush them away and merely go on rejoicing myself in you, Tizzo. Tell me everything! What have you learned in new sword-play? Are you content in Perugia? Why don't you decide to travel across the world? There are great new things to see, in these days. But you hear everything in Perugia, because it is on a main road to Rome. Tell me all the news of the world, Tizzo! I hunger to learn it!"

They sat in an open loggia near the top of the large house, looking over the green rolling of the Umbrian hills; the sun-flare shimmered over all. They drank white wine of Bordeaux, cooled with packings of snow.

"I strike out at random and tell you whatever I've heard," said Tizzo. "The traitor Warbeck has been executed in England."

"I knew that," said Falcone.

"The Emperor rages because the Swiss are at last free from him. But at Dornach they beat him so thoroughly that they have a right to rule their own lives. In Spain, the great Ferdinand has broken his promise and begins to burn the Moriscoes like firewood. A certain great sailor of Portugal, one Vasco da Gama, has returned after finding a way around Africa to the Indies. The Venetians groan because the Turks beat them last year at Sapienza; they swear to have their revenge soon. But Kemal-Reis is a fighting demon by sea. The Spanish princess, Catherine of Aragon, is betrothed to Prince Arthur, of England, the son of that sour-faced money-changer, Henry Tudor. Louis XII is annexing

Milan and bargaining with the Spaniards. That's an unhappy day for Italy! The Diet of Augsburg is stealing some of the Emperor's powers from him, they say. Pedro Cabral has touched the shore of a great land in the Western ocean; he has called the thing Brazil. It is south of the islands which Columbus discovered for Spain, and people begin to say that it is not the Indies which Columbus discovered. It is new land, with a new, red-skinned people living on it. There, my father, I have burst open all the latest news in one packet. I suppose you've heard most of it before."

"Not as I hear it now," said Falcone. "The world is wakening, Tizzo, and great things will come to pass. The new printing press with its moveable types will multiply books throughout the world. Gun-powder knocks down castle walls. A common man with a harquebus may stand at ease and kill with a single shot the knight in complete armor. God alone can tell where the world is tending. But you—Tizzo—how have you ever tended except to mischief?"

So they sat talking and laughing together while the day ran on towards the evening. The dusk was descending blue and soft after the hot summer day when a whistle sounded from the trees near the villa and Tizzo bounded to his feet.

"Is it danger? Wait for me, Tizzo?" exclaimed Falcone. "I catch up my sword and follow you instantly—"

But Tizzo was g o n e, flashing through the bright, painted rooms, leaping down the stairways and then out the door into the garden.

There he found a big, gray-headed man whose eyes shone e v e n through the dimness of the twilight. He wore heavy riding boots; his doublet w a s wide open at the base of his great throat. A small round hat, plumed at one side, sat jauntily on his head, and at his side a heavy sword made a light shivering sound of steel against the scabbard as he moved to greet Tizzo. Even Luigi Falcone, even Giovanpaolo Baglioni were no greater in the eyes of Tizzo than this man who had made him the gift of one consummate trick of sword-play.

CHAPTER VII.

A STAR OF FIVE POINTS.

THEY greeted each other as men who have owed their lives to one another. Then, as Baron Melrose pushed himself back to arm's length, he surveyed the younger man with care.

"You are no bigger in the bones than when I last saw you," he said. "But neither is the wasp as big as an eagle, and yet it can trouble a man more. Still, I could wish that there were twenty English pounds of extra beef on you. Then you could spend more muscle and less spirit in your wars."

"My lord," said Tizzo, "I am what I am—a starved thing compared with you, but ready to guard your back in any battle. Tell me, how do you dare to show yourself so near to Perugia? Are the Oddi rising to try to re-take the town? How did you know so quickly that I was at the Villa Falcone? Where have you been since I last saw you?"

"If I had four tongues and four separate sets of brains, I would begin to answer all those questions at once," said the big Englishman, laughing. "But as the matter stands, I have to speak them one by one. As for the Oddi, their secrets are their own. I am

no nearer Perugia than I have been for a month. And I knew you were here because a whisper ran through the kills and came to my ears. Now for one question in my turn: Have you broken with Giovanpaolo, Astorre, and all the Baglioni?"

"I've crossed swords with Giovanpaolo," said Tizzo. "I've had my life attempted in the garden of Messer Astorre. And a price has been put on my head."

"Have all of these things happened?" asked Henry of Melrose. "You can pick up trouble faster than a pigeon can pick up wheat. But if the Baglioni have closed one door in your face, another opens of its own weight behind you. Tizzo, Jeronimo della Penna wishes to speak to you."

"About what?"

"He will open the subject to you himself."

"Tizzo!" called the anxious voice of Falcone.

"Say farewell to Falcone," said Melrose, "and meet me again here. That is, if you wish to face della Penna tonight."

There was nothing that Tizzo wished to see less than the long, dark face of Jeronimo della Penna, but it was for the very purpose of sounding the depths and the intentions of this man that Giovanpaolo had schemed with him. Therefore: "I return in one moment!" said Tizzo, and hurried to meet Falcone.

"I'm called away," said Tizzo.

"Into what?" demanded Falcone. "Tizzo, you shall stay this night, at least, in my house."

"I have to go. I am compelled," said Tizzo. "As surely as a swallow ever followed summer, so I have to follow the whistle that sounded for me tonight."

"It's a thing that I don't like," said Falcone. "But the devil befriends young men. Good-by again. Wait—here is a purse you may need—no, take it. God bless you; come to me again when you can!"

And Tizzo was away again to the side of Melrose.

They walked on through the gardens until they heard the ringing strokes of an axe in a hollow, followed by the

ELIA BIGI

crashing of a great tree. The fall of the heavy trunk seemed to shake the ground under them.

"There are friends of mine, yonder, working by lanternlight," said Tizzo. "And I must speak a word with them. Wait here—or at least keep out of their sight."

Tizzo, hurrying on, came on three foresters who worked by a dim, shaking light which had been hung from the branch of a small sapling. Unshaven of face, ragged in their clothes, the three were preparing to attack another huge pine tree with axes.

"My friends!" called Tizzo, stepping into the faint circle of the light. "Taddeo—Riccardo—Adolfo—we'll met again!"

The three turned slowly towards him. Old Taddeo began to nod his bearded head.

"Here comes the Firebrand again. What forests have you been burning down, Tizzo? Is it true that the Baglioni are leaning their weight and ready to fall on your head?"

Tizzo grasped their hands. "I've had my hands filled with something besides axe shafts," he admitted. "But I'm happy enough to see you all again."

"Your hand has turned soft," said Taddeo.

"It is harder than my head, however," laughed Tizzo. "Why are you working so late?"

"Because the overseer drives us like dogs."

"I'll speak to my father. You shall not be enslaved like this!"

"NO man is a slave who has mastered an art," said Taddeo. He waved his great axe with one hand. "And we are masters of ours!" he added. "But have you touched the haft of an axe since we last saw you?"

"An axe has helped me more than a sword," said Tizzo. "Give me a mark and let me show you that my eye is still clear."

Old Taddeo struck the trunk of the tree a slashing blow and left a broad, white face, large as the disk of the moon and shining brightly.

"There is the target. Make a mark for him, my sons," said Taddeo.

Big Riccardo, chuckling half in malice, drew out a knife, picked up a straight stick to make a ruler, and calmly drew a five-pointed star with the sharp steel edge. Where the knife cut the white of the pine wood it left a thin, glistening streak, hardly perceptible except to a very fine eye.

Old Taddeo ran the tips of his hard fingers over the design and laughed loudly.

"Let me see it done, then!" he said. "It has never been managed before even by the oldest woodsman in the forest. Strike at that target freely, Tizzo. There are ten strokes to make and with the tenth the star should leap out from the tree. And then see that every one of your strokes has hit exactly the ruled line. Ten strokes without a single failure—here is my own axe to use, and if you succeed—why, the axe is yours!"

Tizzo accepted the axe and looked down on it with attention. Of old, from his boyhood, he had heard about that axe, and he had seen it swung, more than once, in the hands of Taddeo. The steel had a curious look. It was blue, with a strangely intermingling pattern of lines of gray. And the story was that once a fine Damascus blade had been brought back from the Orient, and being broken it had been re-welded by the father of Taddeo, not into a new sword, but into an axe-head. That matchless steel, supple as thought, hard as crystal, had been transformed into a common woodsman's axe. The blue shining of it seemed to be reflected, at that moment, in the flame-blue of the eyes of Tizzo as he swayed the cunningly poised weight of the axe.

For two life times that axe had been in use, the handle altered, refined, reshaped, so as to give it a gently sweeping curve. The balance was perfect. It grew to the hand like an extension of the body.

Tizzo threw down on the ground the purse which he had just received from Falcone.

"I take the challenge, and if I fail, that purse is yours, my friends.

Watch me now, Taddeo. Watch, Riccardo, Adolfo! There are ten enemies; if I miss one of them, the gold in that purse is your gold, and you will all be rich for ten years!"

So, measuring his distance, swinging the axe lightly once or twice to free his muscles, he suddenly attacked the dim target with no calm deliberation, but with a shower of strokes, as though he stood foot to foot with fighting antagonists. With each stroke the axe bit in deeply; and with the tenth a block of solid wood leaped out from the blazed surface of the tree and fell upon the ground—a perfect star with five points!

And in the wood of the tree, softly etched by shadow, there was another star incised.

The three foresters raised a single deep-throated shout and actually fell on their knees to examine the work that had been done. But neither on the fallen star nor on the edges of the blazed surface appeared a single one of the lines which Riccardo had drawn with his knife. True to a hair's breadth, the axe had sunk into the wood.

Old Taddeo, standing up, pulled the cap from his head and scratched the scalp in meditation.

"Wise men should teach only the wise," he stated. "I have wasted my time teaching these two louts. But when I taught you the art of the axe, I taught two hands *and* a brain. Take my axe, Tizzo. Take my blue axe, and God give you grace with it. If it will not shear through the heaviest helmet as though it were leather and not hard armorer's steel, call me a fool and a liar! Keep the edge keen; let it bite; and the battle will always be yours."

Tizzo picked up the purse and tossed it to the old man.

"A gift is always better than a bargain," he said. "Turn this money into happiness, and remember Tizzo when you drink wine."

So he was gone, quickly, and found Henry of Melrose chuckling in the woods not far away.

"I followed closely enough to see what you did," said the Englishman. "You understand one of the great secrets; coin is made round so that it may keep rolling. And the best of buying is a giving away!"

CHAPTER VIII.

"BEWARE OF ME TOMORROW."

JERONIMO DELLA PENNA had a dark, yellow skin, and a mouth which the earnest gloom of his speculations pulled down at the corners. He had large properties, but he was both penurious and absent-minded. His hose was threadbare over the knees, on this evening, but his brocaded cloak was fit for a king.

He kept striding up and down, and when he greeted Tizzo it was with a stare that strove to penetrate to his soul.

"Do you vouch for this man, my lord of Melrose?" he asked.

"I vouch for nothing," said Melrose, "except for the state of my appetite and the cleanness of my sword. Here is the man I told you about. I found him willing to come. I know he has been driven out of Perugia. Perhaps that makes him fit for your purposes. For my part, I withdraw and leave you to find out about him as much as you please. Come to me later, Tizzo. I have a room in the south tower. We can have a glass of wine together, before you sleep."

He went away in this abrupt fash-

ion, leaving della Penna still at a gaze.

He said: "My friend, it is said that there is a price on your head?"

"That is true," said Tizzo.

"It is said that you have been wronged by Giovanpaolo. But he has a way of winding himself into the hearts of men so that they serve him more for love than for money. If he has dropped you today, can he pick you up tomorrow?"

"Perhaps," said Tizzo.

Della Penna started. "Do you think that he *can* take you again when he chooses?"

"How can I tell?" asked Tizzo, calmly. "I am not a man who knows the mind he will have tomorrow. The days as they come one by one are hard enough for me to decipher. Every morning, I hope to find a pot of gold before night; and how can I tell what will be in the pot? The hate of Giovanpaolo, or his friendship? It is all one to me."

"And yet Melrose brought you to me!" pondered Jeronimo della Penna. "Tell me, Tizzo — because I have heard some rare tales of your courage and strength and wild heart—are you a man to pocket an insult?"

"I am not," said Tizzo.

"Are you a man to return wrong for wrong?"

"I am," said Tizzo.

"Are you a man I could trust?" pursued della Penna.

"I've never betrayed a friend," said Tizzo.

"Ah! You won't answer me outright?" exclaimed della Penna.

"*Signore,* you are a stranger to me," said Tizzo. "Why should I boast about my faith and truth? You must do as I do—take you as I find you. If you can use me for things I wish to do, I hope to shine with a very good opinion. If you try to ride me up hill against my wishes, you can be sure you'll be sooner weary of spurring than I of following the road."

Della Penna scowled.

"You are one of these fellows," he said, "who have been praised for speaking your mind right out, like an honest man."

"Sir," said Tizzo. "I think that only a fool trusts the man who is out of his sight."

"Do you know why I have sent for you?"

"I guess that you plan something against Giovanpaolo or some others of your own family who have the control of Perugia."

"If that were the case, what do I know of you?"

"Nothing except that you think I have a grievance against the same people. I make no promises; I ask none from you. If there is mischief abroad, perhaps each of us will make his own profit."

Della Penna smiled, faintly. He had found something in the last speech that appealed to him very much. Now he said: "There is one man in the world who can tell me the truth about you. But before he is through searching you, you may wish that you had let your soul be roasted on a spit in hell. Come with me, Mr. Honest Man."

THEY went down a corridor which communicated with winding stairs and came up these to an open tower from which Tizzo could look across the dark heads of the hills to a little group of lights which, he knew, shone from the village of Falcone. On this top story of the tower there was a fat old white-headed man with a red nose and a very cheerful smile, who greeted della Penna warm-

ly, turning from an iron kettle in which he was stewing some sort of a brew over a little corner hearth.

Tizzo was about to step forward to acknowledge the greeting when della Penna caught his arm with a hand of iron and checked him. Looking down, he saw that he had been about to put his foot inside a circle which was chalked upon the floor and which was filled with strange signs.

A chill of horror passed like a night wind through the blood of Tizzo. He remembered strange tales in the village, years before, of the wizard who lived in the tower of the della Penna castle. When a blight fell on the grapes, when oxen fell dead at the plough or weevils got into the stored grain, the peasants were apt to look up with a curse towards the distant della Penna tower.

"Messer Baldassare," said della Penna, "I have brought—"

"A good sharp blade that will be useful unless it cuts the hand which tries to use it."

Della Penna was so struck by the saying that he turned sharply about towards Tizzo, but Tizzo was too busy staring into the white circle to pay the least attention. It seemed to him that that great white sign upon the floor was as dangerous as the entrance into hell itself. It was a pit of damnation on the verge of which he stood and, covertly, he crossed himself.

"How do you know," asked della Penna, "that I wish to use this man? You have cast no horoscope for him nor even consulted your herbs on his behalf or on mine. Explain what you mean?"

This sharply inquiring tone did not upset the magician in the least, and he turned his red, jovial smile on della Penna as he answered.

"I have served your father and you for so long that when great good or evil come towards you my invisible agents are apt to whisper something in the air, indistinct words. I was about to make those words become clearer. I was about to force the spirits to speak to me in real language. I had drawn the circle on the floor and heated the broth, as you can see for yourself, when you appeared with the very man about whom I heard the whisper."

"How do you know it is the very man?" asked della Penna.

"Look!" said the magician.

He extended his hand above the steaming pot. In an instant the steam had turned crimson, and the hand of Messer Baldassare was gilded red, also.

Tizzo uttered a faint, choked exclamation. His knees grew weak. He was terribly certain that now he was beholding the handiwork of the devil.

"When I saw the red light strike my hand," said the magician, "I knew that you were near—on the very stairs about to open my door. I had barely time to put my hat on my head before you came into the tower."

He was wearing a square, yellow, high hat with certain cabalistic signs worked in black upon it; Tizzo remembered the saying that it is not safe for common men to look upon an enchanter when he is serving the devil with his arts.

"Look into this man, Baldassare," said della Penna. "Shall I have good or evil fortune from him?"

"Better than for me to speak, I can force him to speak for himself and to utter the truth."

"Force him, Baldassare?" demanded the patron.

"Give me three drops of your blood, young man," said the enchanter. "Come, and let me put them into the

pot. Come without fear. In the circle, there is no harm for you!"

But Tizzo nevertheless chose to edge cautiously around the circle and so come to the caldron.

"Give me your hand!" said Messer Baldassare in a sudden, loud, and terrible voice.

HE caught the right hand of Tizzo and stared straight into his eyes. The very soul of Tizzo was shaken, but he looked back and thought

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that the face of the enchanter had turned into the face of a frowning lion. The eyes were sparks of fire.

"Now," said Baldassare. And drawing the hand of Tizzo until it extended over the pot, Baldassare plucked out a bodkin and pricked a finger until the blood ran. The running of the blood he watched carefully and suddenly threw the hand from him.

Then, stepping to the circle in haste, Baldassare drew certain signs with a rapid piece of chalk. Tizzo, frozen in his place with horror, felt the hair prickle and rise on his scalp.

Baldassare, dropping on one knee, held out both hands, palm down, close to the floor. It was the gesture, Tizzo knew, of one who prayed to the infernal powers.

What would be revealed, now? In what manner would the enchanter learn of the plot which Tizzo had made with Giovanpaolo to come at the truth of any machinations which this same scoundrelly della Penna was practicing against him?

It was time to prepare for an escape with foot and hand and sword; but Tizzo found that he could not move. The spell of the enchantment—was it already working upon him?

Then out of silence in which there was only the faint bubbling of the caldron, a voice issued, faint and far away, half stifled, but seeming to proceed from the steam of the pot itself. In obscure doggerel the voice said—and it was like the voice of Tizzo himself:

I have found no greater lord
Than the brightness of a sword;
I have found no lady's grace
Sweeter than high danger's face;
I shall serve no higher power
Than the stealthy midnight hour;
Trust me in the hour of sorrow
But beware of me tomorrow . . .

Here the voice ended. The enchanter, faintly groaning, rose to his feet and then sank wearily into a chair where he remained with his head bowed, as though exhausted by the labor of his spirit.

"Trust you in the hour of sorrow? That is my answer!" said della Penna, triumphantly. "If I can trust you in the hour of sorrow, let the devil carry you off wherever he pleases on the adventure of tomorrow. Messer Baldassare, here is something for your hand. I am very well pleased with you and

the spirit that sang from the steam. Come, Signor Tizzo; there is much that I must say to you!"

CHAPTER IX.

DRUNK WITH PRIDE.

TIZZO, his body and his face darkened by the almost indelible stain of walnut juice, a sleek, black wig on his head, and his face aged at least ten years by the introduction of certain dark shadows in the natural lines of his features, finished dressing, looked at himself in a mirror, and turned with a laugh to Henry of Melrose and della Penna.

"If I had a mother, she would never know me," he said. "If I had a father, he would deny me."

"No," said the baron. "He would see the same blue devil looking out of your eyes."

"It would take more than a father," said della Penna, critically, "to look into that face and see the blue of the eyes. He is safe, my lord. He can enter Perugia now, and walk straight through all the halls of the Baglioni, if he wishes, without drawing a second glance. This handiwork of Messer Baldassare, who is there that can see through it?"

They all agreed to this.

"There are horses ready," said della Penna. "Ride as fast as you can to the town of Camerino. Go to the lord of Camerino and show to him this signet ring of mine. He will know it well. Ask of him this question: How many? And when you have heard his answer, return to the city of Perugia as fast as you may. Go to the tavern of the Sign of the Golden Stag. There, wait until you see in one of the public rooms a man with a red band drawn around his head. When you see him, go to him privately and say: 'Camerino.' That will be enough to win his ear and he will instantly ask what news you bring. Repeat to him then the number which the lord of Camerino has given to you. And leave him at once. When this has been done, remain at the Sign of the Golden Stag until you receive word from me, directly. As for your means of entering the town of Perugia, show at any gate the same signet ring which I have given to you, and you will be admitted without question. I am not without power in that city, and before long my power shall be greater. The time may come before many days when they will have a cause to think of me—the fat rats, the citizens of Perugia!"

Here the Englishman remarked: "I shall wait for you at the Sign of the Golden Stag, my young friend. Lok for me there."

"No, Henry," protested della Penna. "You are too well known. You run too great a risk if you enter that town. They would rather see you dead than have all the Oddi stretched lifeless at their feet. For, without you, they know that the Oddi would be powerless."

"I have ways of going into the city and coming from it safely enough," said the Baron Melrose. "Remember, Tizzo. I shall see you at the inn."

"Now hurry," exclaimed della Penna. "Your servant is already waiting at the head of your horse. I have fetched him from the house of Falcone. Be swift, be faithful, and your fortune is made as well as your revenge."

That was how Tizzo found himself mounted and on the road in another minute.

The one-eyed warrior, thief, and

servant, Elia Bigi, merely said to him: "What am I to know, master?"

"To know nothing is to be wiser than I am," said Tizzo, frankly.

He could see that he was only faintly trusted by della Penna. The obscure warnings of the magician had not been enough to make the treacherous Baglioni give up his project of using that brilliant young swordsman in the striking of some blow. But he had not opened his mind in the least to Tizzo, who was to ask a question which could be answered in one word; and the word was then to be repeated to a chosen agent in the tavern at Perugia. This was his sole duty so far as he knew it at the present moment.

"People, when we come to Perugia," said Tizzo, "will ask you what has become of your former master. You will tell them that he left while owing you money, that you have taken new service, and only wish for a chance to bury a knife in my back. You understand?"

Elia Bigi laughed.

"Where is the pleasure of stabbing a man in the back?" he asked.

"Why not?" said his master, smiling.

"Because you cannot see his face as the steel slides home," said Elia, making a slight grimace.

They rode constantly through the night. And still there were relays of horses waiting for them at appointed places along the road, strong horses which beat the summer roads to dust as they galloped steadily on. It was a weary pair of riders who, at last, climbed into the mountain town of Camerino, dignified by the presence in it of the old university. And chance brought them straight on a procession of riders who had come back from hawking with some short-winged hawks on the wrist, and, above all, a beautiful pair of peregrine falcons.

ONE of these was on the wrist of a middle-aged man who rode with a downward smile of crafty thought on his fat face.

"That," whispered Elia Bigi, "is the lord of Camerino."

So Tizzo, hurrying his horse to meet the aristocrat, held out his hand in greeting, having turned the signet face of della Penna's ring around to the inside of his finger. He made sure that those crafty, downward eyes were fixed on the signet as he spoke.

Instantly the eyes of the lord of Camerino lifted to the face of Tizzo.

"What news of my friends?" he asked, quietly.

"How many?" questioned Tizzo, with a smile.

There was half a second of pause before the other answered: "Two hundred and fifty. If time is given."

And Tizzo fell back at once from the group of riders and let them go on with their tired, sweating horses.

Camerino was half a mile high in the mountains; Tizzo and Elia Bigi dropped by looping roads through the valleys and climbed again towards Perugia. It was night when they came before the dark height of the gate of Marzia. The lights of the guard showed vaguely, the three Etruscan busts above the gateway and the heads of the two proud horses which flanked the group. To the captain of the gate, Tizzo showed the signet ring. There was no asking of questions. The gate was opened to them at once, and they entered into that narrow, winding way, so capable of defense, so sure to check the onrush of attackers, and so advanced into the narrows of Baglioni Street.

It was well-named; because to either side the lofty tops of the palaces of the Baglioni lifted towards the stars, fencing a narrow, crooked way through heaven.

Elia Bigi said at the ear of his master: "Here are the seats of the mighty, and the mighty are asleep. They are so rich, these Baglioni, that poison is beside every bed; a knife is sharpened for every throat. And yet they can sleep."

"Not all of them," answered Tizzo.

For, as he spoke, a number of retainers bearing lights rounded a bend of the narrow street with several horsemen behind them. The fellows who were on foot in advance kept calling out: "Room for the noble Semonetto! Room for his highness!"

At these calls, the crowd in the street shrank back at once into entrances.

This Semonetto, as Tizzo knew, was of all the Baglioni the fiercest blade, the greatest warrior with the single exception of Giovanpaolo and, perhaps, the great Astorre, for whose wedding the city of Perugia was now in a tumult. He was still in the middle twenties and the expectation of the time was that he would go on to a greatness even surpassing that of the older members of the family, for already he showed the brain for war as well as the courage of a true lion.

He was now seen with two young companions on horseback behind the group of his forerunners, who kept the crowd back from his nobility. They were laughing with one another.

"Back!" said Elia Bigi, at the ear of his master. "Quickly, *signore*. This is the great young Semonetto himself, the wildest and strongest blade in Perugia, unless Giovanpaolo himself be counted. Give him free passage. His temper is fiercer than any fire!"

"It should have something to feed on, then," said Tizzo, laughing. "A fire that is starved of wood soon dies."

And he kept his horse fairly in the middle of the street.

THE forerunners of the Baglioni were instantly about him. Two or three of them sang out for him to keep from the path; one man laid his hand on the bridle of Tizzo's tired horse.

"Keep your hand back, brother," said Tizzo. "Even if there is a helmet on your head, I have a hand heavy enough to knock a dent in it."

The man-at-arms, hearing this threat, instantly sprang into a posture of defense and snatched out his long and heavy sword.

"What's the matter there?" cried a loud voice. And young Semonetto rode up to the van on a great white horse. Of all the men Tizzo had seen, this was the most magnificent. Such shoulders, such a head and such a bearing were beyond comparison.

"Here is a fool of a stranger," said one of the servants, "who refuses to make way for your highness."

"What do you mean, fellow?" asked Semonetto. "I am Semonetto of the Baglioni. What will you have?"

"My share of the street, even if you were the lord of the sun and the moon," said Tizzo. And he looked fixedly at the other, as a hunting hound might have looked at the throat of a lion, wondering if just there a touch of the teeth might not give an ending to the battle.

"Are you drunk?" demanded Semonetto.

"Only with a little wine," said Tizzo. "But you are drunk with pride, Semonetto. You have too much blood in your body. You are swollen."

"Master, master!" groaned Elia Bigi, in terror.

"If I have too much blood, are you prepared to let some of it?" demanded Semonetto.

"My friend, I'll gladly be your doctor," said Tizzo, fingering the handle of old Taddeo's axe which hung beside his saddle.

"Have at you, then!" shouted Semonetto, in a sudden and uncontrol-

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lable rage, and he spurred his big white horse straight down the street towards Tizzo, A sword had come into Semonetto's hand as he spoke. His height, the bigness of his horse, the sharp down-slope of the street made him loom like a giant above Tizzo. And the long sword darted like a silver snake at the breast of Tizzo.

The axe of Taddeo was swiftly in the hand of Tizzo. It feathered as true and as light in his grasp as though it had been made of painted wood.

He had little time. In a flashing semi-circle the head of the axe went up and met the deadly lunge which was aimed at his heart. As he parried, Tizzo laughed, and as he laughed the axe head struck the sword away. The violence of the parry knocked the long blade high up; and then Tizzo struck in turn, with one hand, a lightning fast circling of the axe.

Semonetto might well have been cloven to the chin by that blow, but his was the instinct of the true fencer, and he turned his sword into a parry to guard his head.

THE descending weight of the axe met the long steel and snapped it. But the shock turned the blade of the axe so that it glanced flatling from the head of Semonetto. The shock hurled him prostrate across the bows of his saddle.

And at this, a wild yell of despair and rage and anguish came from all the followers and companions of the young noble. They drove in a flock, straight at Tizzo.

The axe, which was perfect for the dealing of a single stroke, was less valuable in such a mêlée as this. Tizzo, hooking the heavy weapon beside his saddle, instantly caught out his sword, which was blade and shield at once in his perfect hand. And here Elia Bigi proved the goodness of his fighting heart by pressing in beside his master in this hopeless quarrel against overmastering numbers.

They put aside a dozen strokes. The clashing of steel began to resound through the street when the voice of Semonetto called out, loudly: "Swords up! Hold every hand."

His order was obeyed. And Semonetto, riding weaponless through the crowd of his friends, came up to Tizzo and held out his hand.

Semonetto was pale. A thin streak of blood coursed down one side of his face, but he was smiling as he said: "My lord of the moon and sun, that was a good, swift trick of the axe. And

I see that you are the master of a sword, also. My friend, come to see me tomorrow. I yearn with all my heart to cross blades with you again. In any case, I wish to call you a friend, whether living or dead. You know my name. Find your way to my house and a welcome. Now, my friends," he added to those around him, "beware of lifting a hand against this dark-faced stranger. He is my companion from this moment. He is my confederate and friend."

He added, in a voice that was probably louder than he intended to make it: "Get me home, some of you. My head is broken, and I am half sick from that blow! Fool that I am to venture out with no steel to guard this thin pate of mine!"

CHAPTER X.

"FLIRT AND ANGEL."

THE press was gone instantly from the street and Tizzo, riding on unhampered and unfollowed, at the side of Elia Bigi, said: "That was very well done, Elia. When the fellow with the halberd took that swing at my head I was sure that it was my last moment. I saw the flash of the steel from the corner of my eye, but never in time to make a parry. You were the hand that saved me then. I thank you from my heart."

"What am I to say, then," remarked Bigi, "about the man in the green and red hose who ran in with his target and sword and would have cut my throat if you had not knocked his blade aside from the true thrust which he was making with it?"

"Say nothing," said Tizzo, "except to thank God, with me, that we are both men, and true to one another."

"That's a very handsome thing to say," declared Elia, rubbing his big hands together and chuckling, "but your way of searching for trouble is something more than manly. It is more like an angel's; and an angel you are apt to become, one of these days, if you continue always as you have begun. If you keep on sowing the teeth of dragons every day of your life one of them will stick you in the heel and poison your life."

Tizzo laughed in turn. They had come now within the sight of the Sign of the Golden Stag, and now rode through the entrance into a courtyard which Tizzo could remember very well. When he had first entered Perugia, unknown, in peril of his life, he had come to that same hostelry. Now he was back again with his skin stained dark, with a black wig on his head. But, on the other hand, no matter how good his disguise might be, there were men and women of this town who knew his voice as well as they might know the faces of others. All his brawling, his battling, had not been in vain, and an intimate follower of the great Giovanpaolo, now with a price on his head, was a man so deeply marked that the mere changing of his complexion was not a sure safeguard against detection.

It seemed to Tizzo that the very man who showed him to a room looked closely and covertly at him. But, as Elia said afterwards this was a mere trick of his imagination.

"The hunted rabbit sees a wolf in every strange hare," said Elia. "Now we are as safe as any other man in Perugia to drink wine at our ease until the devil and your own weariness with life cause you to get us into more trouble."

"You shall have your wine," said Tizzo, "but now I give you the

smallest part of an hour to go out and find exactly where the Lady Beatrice is now lodged. Go quickly, and return to me."

"A woman again?" groaned Elia. "There never was a day in heaven that one woman could not turn into a hell. They rob us of our sleep first and of our money afterwards. On account of women we go early to the grave and fail to rise to any reward afterwards. When the Last Judgment comes, it is women who will draw the best men downwards; because the loveliest of them will all be bound for the nether regions."

He went out still growling these words while Tizzo looked about his room and examined the windows which opened on the one side upon the paved court and upon the other, just beneath the eaves, overlooked the outer street. There was no country in the world, at that time, which offered so many conveniences to travelers as the inns of Italy.

And Tizzo, after he had tried the softness of the bed with a back-stroke of his axe, and tasted the pitcher of red Umbrian wine which was brought to him, decided that he would have a few hours of happiness, no matter what would follow.

It was at about this time that Elia Bigi reëntered the room.

"I've been stopped by a hard-faced captain of infantry," he said, "who remembers that I was once employed by a certain Tizzo, the Firebrand."

"What did you say to him? Tell me honestly," said Tizzo.

"I told him," said Elia Bigi, grinning sourly, "that although I was a male cat I had already spent eight of my lives and that I did not wish to pay down the ninth of them for the sake of a flame-headed, wild-brained fellow with an eye crazier than that of a war-horse. So I now had service with a quiet young man who did not fight with swords or axes above once a day, except on the Sabbath, when he might blood himself twice; and who never played at dice for more than five hours at a sitting, or drank more than two gallons of wine before rising from the table. The lieutenant said that I was wise to find such a quiet master and that he would pay his respects to you tomorrow.

"He asked me if I knew that there was a price of two thousand florins on the head of that same Tizzo. I swallowed twice before I was able to repeat the words after him."

"TELL me now, Elia," said Tizzo, "why you did not bargain with him at once for half the reward? I know about that cross-eyed Flemish girl you wish to marry. You could have set up with her in the sort of an inn you have always promised yourself as the better end of life."

"The face of a woman," said Elia, "should not be like the pretty sign of a popular tavern. The sternest dragon makes the truest wife. That was why I chose a woman with crossed eyes. As for not betraying you, my only reason is a certain queer devil of curiosity which continually eats me. I know that you are to die soon, but I cannot help wishing to see the manner of it."

Tizzo laughed. "But why did you come back to me without news of the Lady Beatrice? However, of course you would not have word of her at a common tavern."

"Would I not?" asked the servant. "The poor people are always the ones to talk about kings and lords and ladies. The Lady Beatrice cannot so much as crook the little finger of her

left hand without the report of it going the rounds of Perugia. There is a certain French lord who swears that if he could have enjoyed the privilege of killing you he might have taken your place in her favor."

"Enough of that," said Tizzo. "But tell me the name of the frog-eater, the forked carrot, the damned *parlez-vous* who dared to handle my name and that of the lovely lady in the same breath?"

"If I told you that you would have him dead and yourself hanged before morning," said Elia. "However, it is true that the Lady Beatrice now sleeps in the house of her cousin, the rich Grifone. Her room, since she left the convent and you left Perugia, is the third room on the south side—the room with the three little columns of white marble, banded with blue, in front of each window."

"Have you found her nest?" cried Tizzo. "Elia, by God when I look at you I understand that your one eye sees more than the ten eyes of a harem. My noble Elia, my heart of gold, I shall reward you!"

"With giving me work that will turn me bald ten years before my time," answered Elia, dryly.

"Wait till I have written a letter," said Tizzo.

And instantly he was drinking wine with his left hand and scribbling with his right:

Adored and most beautiful, queen of the world and of Tizzo, spit-fire and nightingale, flirt and angel, most exquisite Beatrice of whom waking I dream, and for whom sleeping I wake, hear me and forgive me:

I am at the Sign of the Golden Stag, come to see the wedding of my lord Astorre, and would to God that it were yours and mine.

I love you past thought. I shall see you before I leave Perugia or die attempting it.

Farewell for a moment, which to me is an age, loveliest, maddest, sweetest of women.

Thy servant that will one day be thy master by the help of God, two spurs, and a good right arm.

Tizzo.

This letter he sealed, kissed, and presented to Elia.

"Tie a pebble to it and throw it in at one of those same columned windows of which you spoke," said Tizzo. "Remember that if you are seen making the throw, your throat will be cut. If the letter falls into any hands but hers, *my* throat will be cut. But if you wish to make a tidy fortune of two thousand florins, you have only to take this letter to that same lieutenant of infantry and the money will be yours."

Elia looked at the letter fixedly.

"Spit-fire and nightingale, flirt and angel!" he quoted, dreamily.

"Did you dare to look over my shoulder?" exclaimed Tizzo.

"You ought to be more surprised that I'm able to read," said Elia. "But I am gaining from you more than my pay, if I learn how to talk to women, particularly to those that are cross-eyed. Adios!"

With this, he was gone quickly from the room and left his master walking up and down in an agony of impatience.

It was still the greater part of an hour before Elia returned and gave his master a letter from which a light and delicate fragrance came to the enchanted senses of Tizzo, but when he

opened the letter he found written, merely:

I had forgotten that you were living; your letter reminds me that you will soon be dead if you linger in Perugia.

Farewell.

There was no signature. Over the brutal words Tizzo pored for a long time but could not extract from them any semblance of a tender meaning.

CHAPTER XI.

FESTIVITY IN PERUGIA.

THE sleep that tumbled at last over the excited brain of Tizzo was a storm of nightmares. When he wakened, it was with sun in the window, a fanfare of trumpets ringing through the street outside, and a joyous voice of citizens crying through the air.

And far and near through the city there were high sounds of music.

"Hai, Elia!" cried Tizzo. "Is it the end of the world and are we all going to heaven?"

And running to the window he looked out on the most splendid sight that had ever graced his eyes, for directly beneath him he saw twenty knights riding up the street in gilded armor that shone like fire, while trumpeters paced before them, blowing their blasts in great, strident harmonies. And after the knights walked girls each as gay as a wind of spring that dances at once all the wild flowers in the field, so bright were their costumes. In between the out-roaring of the trumpets, the girls were dancing, and from their filled aprons scattering roses, roses, nothing but roses white and yellow and crimson on the pavement. Behind them, in turn, came eight horses as white as snow, each led not by a mere page or groom, but by a man of noble birth.

The eight horses drew a great carriage canopied loftily with flowing velvets fringed with gold and silver, and under that canopy sat Messer Astorre Baglioni and his bride.

It seemed to Tizzo, at that moment, that Astorre Baglioni was the most glorious man he had ever seen or dreamed of, because he was dressed from head to foot in blazing gold, and with a great golden collar oversprinkled with jewels, the gift of My Lords of Venice, whom the famous warrior had served in their time of need.

In fact, the eyes of the world were fixed, for this day, upon Perugia and on this almost royal wedding.

As for the bride, Tizzo could hardly tell whether she was beautiful or no. At least she bore the great name of the Orsini, dazzling to the mind that knew its famous history, and the pearls that covered her sleeves and her hair dazzled the eye of Tizzo.

Behind that chariot of fame rode, in advance of all the rear escort, a single figure on a great black horse, armed in chased steel completely except for the stern young head. That was Semonetto. As he went by, there was almost as great an outcry in his honor as in that of the bridegroom and the bride. For all of Perugia had been beautified by the great undertakings of this youth in honor of the marriage.

In the great Piazza and in his own ward of San Pietro he had brought in big trees and brush at a prodigious labor and expense; from the ward of San Pietro, he had removed all the tradesmen's booths.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK.

Perils Loose on Memamloose

By H. H. MATTESON

"I'm marooning you for the safety of society!"

"The devil has come to Memamloose!" the frightened Aleuts reported—but it was a man-made devil

EXCEPT for walking under ladders, and looking at the new moon left handed, I hain't no ways superstitious. Neither is Go-bang Gibbons. So when this Aleut, Agarak, came stampeding into the office, and told us excited how the devil was loose on Memamloose, we just laughed.

This Memamloose Island is a spooky place, I'll admit that. It's just a great stretch of cliff and piled boulders, with a couple of little larch thickets, and a spring of water. It hain't occupied. No white man goes ashore onto it once in five years. The Aleuts always paddle by hurried. No native has set his *mucklucks* down onto its shores in a hundred, maybe a thousand years. Memamloose is *musatchie,* bewitched, wicked. But between Memamloose and the shore of Hell Bend Island is a half mile of the best fishing grounds in the whole Aleutian archipelago. A grass widder woman, Tshik Benner, controls them waters, fishing 'em with a trap, and with purse seines. It's Ma Benner that sends this Agarak to fetch I and Go-bang Gibbons to subdue down, and eradicate this devil who's just made camp on Memamloose.

It's downright easy to see why Ma Benner is so pestered by the devil getting loose on Memamloose. She uses native hands exclusive to fish all her gear, the trap and the purse seines. The instant them Aleuts gets aware the peril threatens, they quit Ma

cold, go paddling ashore frantic, letting hundreds of dollars' worth of gear float out to sea. They hain't a doubt Satan is costing Ma Benner five hundred dollars a day.

This fish business is our concern. Go-bang Gibbons is the fixer, the trouble adjuster for the big Tyee Salmon Cannery Company. I'm Go-bang's boatman, running the gas boat, or paddling him around in a *bidarka.* The Tyee Company is just about as anxious Ma should be getting the fish as she is.

So we take Agarak's skin boat in tow of our tender, and away we go for Hell Bend. Here in the Aleutians, we don't have no twilight. It's day, and then, sudden, it's the dark of night.

WE'RE just nosing into the channel between Hell Bend and Memamloose when daylight snuffs out like you blow a candle. And in that very instant, through the open window of the pilot house where I and Go-bang and Agarak is setting, comes that bellering, spooky wail, caterwauling from the rocky heights of Memamloose.

For a instant, that *cly wauwau,* which it wasn't a scream, it wasn't a roar, but was both of 'em, knocked me beam end. Even Go-bang, and he's got the *tumtum* of a polar bear, and that reckless at times he hain't got a lick of sense, set there just wopper jawed. As for Agarak, he lets kind of a gurky squawk out of him, and fell onto the floor like a wet sack.

And there it come again, that terrible devil howl from Memamloose. It wasn't the roar of a sea lion. It wasn't the shrill bark of foxes. It wasn't nothing animal. Nor nothing human. Fact is, it was my idea exact of what the devil's beller would sound like did he ever turn hisself loose.

When we nose the gas boat in in front of Ma Brenner's *barabara,* she's waiting for us with a bug, a candle lighted in a lard pail held sideways. We go ashore in our work boat, and Agarak paddles in in his kiak, and beaches it, and just then comes another blast from Memamloose. Agarak he just moans, and capsizes over into the sand, and Ma Benner she hauls off and gives him a kick in the ribs with her *muckluck.* Agarak got up, and just tore off in the dark toward the shacks where the natives lived.

" If ever a fool paid for his folly," says Ma Benner, bitter, " why I have. And am. Come on in, Go-bang, and you too, Kapsu Corkings," addressing at me, " and I'll explode out regarding the devil being loose on Memamloose."

We foller on into the room where a lamp is on the table, and a stove in the corner, and Ma Benner sets on the coffee pot. I observe close at that wolf-trap jaw of Ma's and them flickery green eyes, and them knobby, hard hands, big and strong as any man's, and then at the terrible purty girl setting reading a magazine. It just don't seem possible, but it is, the girl is Talis Benner, Ma's daughter.

" While that pannikin of coffee approaches to a b'ile," says Ma Benner, " I got to reveal out what a fool I been. Oh, I hain't the woman to hide behind no man's pants. What I done, I done. I admit it free. Such devils as is loose on Memamloose, why I turned 'em loose."

At this, Talis, the terrible purty daughter of Mrs. Benner, looks sick and sorry, and gets up, and goes into her own room adjoining, and shuts the door after her.

" Girls turned sentimental always is eediotic," says Ma Benner, stabbing her thumb after Talis. " But getting to this devil business—"

MA sets down where she can watch the coffee pot and begins: " The fish run opens very good, and I'm terrible in need of a brail hand for the trap, and providential, as I thinks then, in comes a big, grinning young feller, big as you be, Go-bang, and he comes capering up from where he left his dory on the beach.

" I yell out at him to come on in, and I and Talis is eating, and I ask him to draw up for his *muckamuck,* and he done it, and his first knife load of grub, he just holds it suspended, his jaws widespread to take cargo, and he sets and stares imbecile at Talis and her at him.

" Yes, sir, instant, him, which he says his title is Kwan Gowdy, and my Talis is so took with each other they don't know a thing on earth. I does manage, final, to get him to know I'm conversing at him, and to show he don't know what is going on yet, he hires out to me to hand brail my trap, for his grub, and a blanket space and forty dollars a month, which is sixty under the scale.

" Well, he worked a shift, and I will say he can sling a brail with any hand I ever had, and never bruise a fish. Further, he'll load a scow in half the time it takes the average. You know, Go-bang, you stand on the brim of a spiller, and dip into a trap with a ten foot brail, with a five foot spread of web, picking up four-five Tyee salmon every dip that weigh forty pound apiece, and you got to be *skookum*. This Kwan Gowdy has got wrists thick as a towing hawser, and arms like a spanker boom.

" In the evening he come in, and I lets him roll his blankets in the attic, and he eats, and then he packs down a little black box he'd fetched in with him, and he opens it up. I'd figgered he was too good to be true. Right away I seen the bug in the butter. This Kwan outcast was a cornet horn addict, and they hain't no vice that's lower.

" ' Hold on, there,' I says, as he snakes this brass horn out of the box. ' Can you play that implement good?'

" ' No,' he says. He's just a beginner.

" ' Then you can't torture it none around here,' I says.

" ' But I can play it with a mute,' he says, ' and then it can't disturb no one, special if I play it on the beach.'

" With that he pops a round thing into the bell of the horn, and puts the implement up to his lips and blows a to-re-loo, and then embarks into a attempt at a tune.

" Gents, it was then I blows my clews. This mute softened the racket down amazing, but it revealed out similar how he couldn't play a tune through correct to save his pelt. But the tune he was attempting at, and which he mangled beyond all resemblance, was a tune that touches spots in me still tender and raw. He was trying to play, ' When I and you was young, Maggie.'

" To make all clear, Go-bang, and you, Kapsu, I got to snake a leaf out of the *ahnkuttie*, the long ago, painful though it may be. You-all know, Go-bang, that ten years ago, my man, Hank Benner, left me. Rather, it was ten years ago that I run him off the place and I hain't never saw him since. No. And what broke I and Hank up was this here same low habit of attempting to play one of them cornet horns, and special this identical tune of ' When I and you was young, Maggie.'

" My man Hank would set and set, when they was work plenty to do, and torture away at that horn, hour after hour, never getting out whole and unblemished but four or five notes, when they'd split, and crack, and screech, and mewley frantic; just to drive a party crazy.

" We quarreled bitter, I and Hank. I took and slung his blankets out the door, and his horn similar, and he kisses Talis good-by, and to this day, her being nine years old then, she holds it against me bitter, and he cargoes his horn and blankets into a dory, and I've never saw him since.

"SO, the instant I hears this Kwan Gowdy blatting away so discordant on that same identical tune, I forbids it entire. No horn playing on my premises. And two-three days later, discovering how him and Talis is lollygagging along the beach all times of night, him playing that horn surreptitious with the mute into it, I declares myself.

" ' Kwan Gowdy,' I says, ' them cornet horns careened and capsized this family once, and they hain't never going to do it again. If you think you're ever going to marry my girl, Talis, you're barking at a knot. From now, you brail fish exclusive, and you blow no more horns, and you keep away from Talis.'

"Saying this where Talis could hear, which I aimed she should, she bust out bawling and run in the house, and slung herself on her bed, and Kwan plenty de-

jected he squandered on in and up to his attic like he was to be shot at the stake.

"But sure as they is a tide, it wasn't but two-three nights later I discovers, by snooping, him and Talis was going onto the beach, like prior, and he was playing the implement for her, with the mute in tight. It's then I makes resolves.

"Yes, sir, I'm that mad, I evolves a plan that will learn both this Kwan Gowdy and my girl they can't twist this mule's tail none. Oh, I admit my mad got the better of judgment, like frequent. If ever a party set herself down onto a kag of powder, and then lighted the fuse personal, it was me.

"All unbeknownst to Kwan, or Talis either, sneaking my chances, I took and carried Kwan's blankets to the beach, and his clothes, and that dratted cornet horn, and a coffee pot, and plenty *muckamuck,* and I stows them in the dory.

"In the evening, before this Kwan can climb to the attic, I says how I want a word with him, that I got something I wants him to see. He follers me like a fish into a spiller, and he gets into the dory, it being dark and he don't observe how I got cargo stowed in the stern, and he rows us acrost to Memamloose.

"When we land on Memamloose, which he don't know is *musatchie,* and you can't get a Aleut to go anear it for a million dollars, and no white goes near it either once in ten years, why he gets out, and I relates a cock and bull how I seen something mysterious going on in the larch thicket, and will he caper in and see what is it.

"When he comes plowing back final, saying how they hain't nothing, I'd hove all his blankets and *muckamuck* ashore, and the cornet horn similar, and I'm into the dory, and backed off thirty foot, him having revealed out how he can't swim a lick to save his soul.

"'Kwan Gowdy,' I says to him from the offing, 'I'm marooning you here for the safety of society, which you'll stay here permanent till you can get Maggie past the hill in that song without splitting her ears and fraying out every nerve she's got. *Klahowa,* Kwan,' I says derisive, and rows back home.

"What a mud head I was. I'd clean forgot how Memamloose is *musatchie,* and how the Aleuts is plumb crazy afraid of it even when they hain't nothing goin' on.

"In the morning I kind of evaded around, and lied to Talis, but she got suspicious, and tore into the attic, and come down bawling and screeching. Very cold I disdains to tell her the fate of this Kwan Gowdy, but prances out personal, and goes to brailing fish.

"It's maybe about four bells, and I'm relenting I hain't got Kwan Gowdy aholt of that salmon brail, when, of a sudden, from amongst the highest rocks on Memamloose, there comes whoop-howling and screaming the terriblest *cly wauwau,* ever to assail a human ear.

"The Aleut hands on the trap with me they just stand putrified and aghast, staring acrost at Memanloose. Out in the bay, maneuvering, is my purse seiner, and they're making a set, and the native on the after deck cuts the net loose frantic, lets her go derelict, and turns the gas boat shore away and drives her nose high and dry into the mud.

"The Aleut working trap, handling the down-hauls, he utters out a squawk, falls into the spiller, out of the which I rescues him with the brail. But I hain't got a hand left, not a one but Simiak, who's got one lick of sense, and while he's nervous, staring bung eyed at Memamloose every time the devil blares out one of them brazen screeches, he does stay with me till I too stagger along the lead and go ashore.

"It's natural I labors with them Aleuts to return back to work. I seen I'd been a fool, marooning Gowdy on the island. Oh yes, if ever a woman set herself down onto a kag of powder, and lit the fuse personal, I done it. But I couldn't budge them Aleuts. They just knowed Deaub, the devil, was mad at something, and had camped down on Memamloose and was prancing around and roarin', and organizing hisself to take out his mad on someone.

"I tells them Aleuts how the devil was Kwan Gowdy, and how I'd located him there myself, and they just snorted, and

replied back that the devil had me bewitched, and that I was lying to 'em free-er than usual.

" I'd got two-three of the Aleuts half way talked into going back to work when drat if here didn't come floating through my channel about a scow load of dead Tyee salmon, riding belly up. Of course I knowed that some one had had a scow of fish too long, and had jettisoned same, and they'd drifted in on the tide.

" ' *Klosche nanitch,*' bellers them crazy Aleuts. ' Look good! Dead fish!'

" All bets was off again, gents. Them barbarians believe that when the devil gets het up mad, he breathes out, and the fish die and the foxes get hydrophoby.

" But that wasn't all. In about a hour after my one half way faithful hand, this Simiak, had went home, his girl, Toketie, about Talis' age, is took sick sudden and violent with the *pil waum sik,* measles."

PAUSING here to get breath, and kind of compose herself down, Ma Benner twists on the seat, and points at a *sukwalal,* a old style six shooter of the siege gun type, hanging handy on a nail by the back door.

" Gent's," she says, " that weepon hain't hanging there for no ornamental purpose. No. Give a heed while I continue on this soul rendering narrative."

" But, Ma," Go-bang breaks in, " why in the world didn't you go stampeding over to Memamloose and fetch this Kwan Gowdy back? Him blowing that cornet horn right on the beach here where the Aleuts could see him, and hear him, would a mollified 'em down in no time."

" You think I'm a fool, Go-bang Gibbons? I did go over to Memamloose. Why, Go-bang, I've et sufficient humble crow to sicken a sea lion. I did go. I beseeches him pitiful to come back.

" ' Can I marry Talis?" he demands.

" ' No,' I just howls, fetching away mad, ' you can't.'

" He just laughs irritating, and capers off into the bresh. Again I go back. I calls and he comes out from amongst the rocks. I labors with him. I tell him how my Aleuts has deserted, and I'm losing five hundred dollars a day.

" ' Yes,' he says. He seen it all, from the top of the pinnacle, and liked to have died laughing when that Aleut fell into the spiller. ' Can I get myself married to Talis?' he demands again.

" ' Yes,' I says, weakening and desperate, ' you can. Come on and load you blankets into the skin boat.'

" ' No,' he says bull-headed. ' I don't trust you none, Ma Benner. Which I'll believe you when you fetch Talis here personal to Memamloose, and along with her the boat preacher, all organized to give us a legal tar splice. I don't trust you none."

" ' Well then, Kwan,' I pleads, ' won't you desist in torturing that horn?'

" ' No, no,' he says. ' I never did have such a chance to practice without being hectored and interrupted. In no time now, Ma, if you listen clost, you'll hear me rendering " When I and you was young, Maggie," and playing it perfect. I'm enjoying myself here complete.'

" With that he laughs very hateful, and skips back up amongst the rocks. Well, plenty dejected, I returns back home. And it's then I gets a shock. A rap comes to the back door, and I go, and there stands the Shaman, the priest of this heathen Aleut religion, and he's wearing one of them diabolical ugly fear masks on his face, and five old men of the council is with him, and the Shaman he says seeing how Simiak Kee, my one half-way faithful Aleut, loiters on the trap with me, the devil gets displeased, and visits Simiak's family prompt by giving Toketie Kee the measles.

" I kind of bar the door and don't let them savages in none, and I says how I'm sorry.

" ' That won't do,' says the Shaman. ' Seeing how it was white folks fetches this sick disease to Toketie, it has got to be white folks that removes off the evil spell. Your girl, Talis,' says the Shaman, ' has got to come with us. Talis is to rub noses with Toketie, and I will say a strong medicine spell, and the devil will move the disease

from Toketie's body into the body of Talis. That will be fair. Bring out your girl, Talis.'

"I hurls the door shut, and in a jump I'm into my bedroom, and I've returned back, and I'm organized with my old *Sukwalal.* She's a weapon, that ancient arm is, and slings a slug the size of a thick thumb.

"I yanks open the door, and I menaces at the Shaman with the gun, and I informs him cold how if he don't scatter out plumb sudden, I'll spatter the boulder right behind him with fragments of his liver.

"He done it. But they're back in the hills, them Aleuts is, Go-bang Gibbons, and they're making medicine."

"Yes," says Go-bang, serious, "something has got to be done. I know the Aleuts too, Ma Benner, when they get wild, and sling their war bonnets on the ground. What you figure I and Kapsu, here, to do?"

"Why, you go romping over to Memamloose, and fetch off this Kwan Gowdy with that hell horn of hissen."

"What if he won't come?"

"He will, does he know Talis is in danger; he'll come all winged out. If he don't came willing— They do say, Go-bang Gibbons, they hain't a *skookumer* man in all the North than you be. If this Kwan outcast is anyway reluctant to come, why you sling him beam-end, and snub him fore and aft, and fetch him as cargo, him and his horn."

WELL, we land on Memamloose and it's terrible dark and, by then, getting on to midnight. We start up kind of a natural trail amongst the rocks, and we haven't went far when Go-bang slips on a stone and down he goes, smashing the only flashlight we had.

We're still feeling about when from the shore of Hell Bend behind us bangs out two shots: *Boom! Boom!*

Ma Benner had tore loose with the old *sukwalal.* No mistaking the hoarse voice of that antique arm.

I and Go-bang fall into the work boat, and row back frantic, just pausing sufficient by our gas boat to snatch a rifle.

When we land front of Ma's *barabara,* we don't see no sign of hostile Aleuts, but we do see Ma with her bug running around and around the house frantic, leaning over now and then to study something in the sand.

"My God," she says, hoarse, when we come up where she is. "Talis is gone. They's foot marks under her window that had been pried open. She's gone. Them Aleuts has got her for torture. They hain't a doubt. Where's Kwan Gowdy?"

We relate how we couldn't locate him, and broke our flash and so forth. "Well you just got to go right back and fetch him. He is the only party that can save Talis. Get him quick, before them Aleuts go to torturing her."

Ma, saying how she'd fired the shots to fetch us back, leads us to where Talis' window stands open. They is foot prints under the window all right, but Ma had been tromping around so frantic we can't tell which way they lead off.

"Blow yourself to a ca'm, Ma," says Go-bang. "They's no use of us returning back to Memamloose until day breaks. Further, you know the Aleut system. They won't begin a torturing of Talis to drive that sick disease out of Toketie Kee until they've danced themselves delirious. Hark! You hear it?"

We all cock a ear, and sure enough, from the hills far to the south we hear the thud of a *tintin,* one of them hand hammered copper gongs the natives belt when they sing and dance ceremonious. It's as Go-bang says. Talis hain't in no immediate danger until they've danced a while.

THE rest of the night, which hain't long, Ma Benner puts in abusing I and Go-bang for not finding and fetching Kwan Gowdy in.

"See," Ma yells, as she points to the first sun rays in the east. "Hurry! Fetch him in! It can't be, Go-bang, you're afraid of this Kwan Gowdy. Oh, if ever I get my Talis back intact, I'll never cross her again. Hurry, you two beach rats. Go fetch him."

"We'll fetch him do we find him," says

Go-bang, cold. " So stow your *cly wauwau.*"

We go on over, and walk up that rock trail, and in the edge of the larch bresh we see a big, skookum party that comes toward us grinning.

" Be you Kwan Gowdy?" asks Go-bang.

" Whatever," says the big young party.

" Come on back to Hell Bend with us, and fetch your horns," orders Go-bang.

" I'm plumb comfortable where I be," he says. " I hain't honing none to leave this here peaceful retreat."

" But Talis is in danger. The Aleuts has got her. They aim to torture her. You come on with us, and fetch the horn, so them savages can see who the devil of Memamloose is."

" No, no," says this Kwan stubborn. " I don't believe none in that native hocus-pocus. They won't harm Talis none. I got to stay here and practice onto my horn."

Go-band he advances up a step, and him and Kwan stand face to face, and they're of a height exact, and two *skookumer* hands I never see.

" Come on," says Go-bang, authoritative, tucking a hand in under Kwan's elbow. " Come on with us," and he gives Kwan a yank.

In just the flick of a herring tail, then, this Kwan has shucked off that silly grin of hissen, and he slings loose a belt at Go-bang, and them two begin to mingle ardent all over the trail. Away they go smashing and banging at each other, and careening off the rocks, and falling over bresh when they fight back to where this horn tooter has made his camp, and they're down, and they're up, and such is the fury of this here conflict you can't tell who is winning.

And they fought their way out of tangles, and belt each other, and go down in a group, and kick and claw, and they're up again and at it. I've seen Go-bang in plenty fights. Usually always he wins 'em prompt. But not this here *pukpuk,* he didn't. Gowdy turns loose a belt, and he knocks Go-bang back twenty foot. Go-bang, who's springy as ary cougar just bounces up, and he's back at Kwan, and he swings, and he douses this Kwan Gowdy side of the head, near shucking a ear loose for him, and when Gowdy kind of spins and twists under that *chukkin,* Go-bang lams in two-three more, and Kwan capsizes over, and Go-bang is astraddle, and the horn tooter of Memamloose is Go-bang's meat.

" You'll go back peaceable, you and your horn?" asks Go-bang.

Kwan, who hain't got wind sufficient left in his bellows to say, just nods, yes.

WE land on Hell Bend, and Go-bang marches proud up to the *barabara,* kicks open the door, and shoves his prisoner on in with his horn.

" This here is the Peril of Memamloose," says Go-bang, derisive. " Summons them natives prompt, and we'll have this party blow the horn, and demonstrate how he's the devil and none else."

Ma Benner, glaring plenty obnoxious at Kwan, says how she'll go.

" No," says Go-bang, " you-all having had words with the Shaman, it's likely I better go myself. They hain't none of 'em mad at me as yet."

So this Go-bang, who's got the *tumtum* of a bear, he prances out of the door and into the trail leading to where the Aleuts is dancing, and wailing, and making medicine. That there, gents, was a dangerous mission, and no doubt.

But he comes along after a while, Go-bang does, and he's got two dozen Aleuts with him. " Come careening out here, Orpheus," he yells mocking at Kwan Gowdy, " and fetch that instrument."

Kind of silly like, Kwan he goes out onto the beach front of the *barabara,* and he stands there with his cornet horn, and the Aleuts gather around suspicious, and hostile, and Ma yanks Go-bang's sleeve and asks where is Talis.

" They claim they don't know," says Go-bang. " Likely they lied like usual. When we've pulled this here demonstration, we'll find out where she is."

With that Go-bang, who speaks the lingo very good, begins haranging at the Aleuts, telling 'em how plumb eediotic they been, and that they hain't no devil loose on Me-

mamloose, but only this felon of a Kwan Gowdy marooned there for horn practice.

Go-bang he signals to Kwan, and Kwan he lifts up the horn, and puffs his chest, and bellies out his cheeks like a jib in a blow, and he tears a shattered, wailing note out of that horn that would blister paint, and six-seven of the Aleuts jump frantic, but ride back to a even keel, while Kwan blows some more, discordanter than the first.

The Aleuts begin to grin amiable. They see now how they been shying at a shadow. They hain't been no devil actual on Memamloose. No, no. Everything is lovely. They'll all go back to work prompt. But they still swear earnest they don't know nothing about where Talis is.

Them Aleuts is started to go back, and tell the others how everything is fine, and they hain't no devil on Memamloose, when from the rock pinnacle of that island comes tearing, and shattering the still air, the rippingest, shrillest and terriblest *ely wauwau.* that has happened yet.

IN a wink them Aleuts is a howling mess, milling around us, and crowding in, striking at Ma Benner, and screaming how we're all liars, that the devil is loose on Memamloose, and how Kwan Gowdy gives a feeble imitation to delude 'em.

Go-bang he knocks down two-three, and Kwan he belts a couple of 'em cold, and I do similar best I could, but they're fighting crazy, them Aleuts is, and it's all we can do to keep 'em from getting at Ma Benner and murdering her right there. And they is so many of 'em, and they're fighting so frantic, they would a wore us down but for the scream Ma utters of a sudden.

"Listen! Quit fighting! Hear that!"

Ma yells so loud them Aleuts does let up a second. I stands there just cold. The shivers begin to run down my spine. In all my days I never heered a tune more sweeter. From Memamloose comes them dulcet sounds, high, clear, perfect, "I wandered to-day by the hill, Maggie."

Ma Benner, she just broke down and bawled. "There, gents, is music," she sobs. "The very choir of Heaven can't give no sweeter."

Ma Benner dabs her eyes a time or two, and then, instant, she's a wolf again. She snatches up a ten foot brail that's leaning against the house, and she just tears with it to the beach, and she jumps in a skin boat, slings the brail into the bottom, grabs up a paddle.

She just goes foaming across the channel, lands on Memamloose, and from afar we see her tear up into the trail with her brail.

It's likely a hour later when she returns back. They's a little man with her, and he's got a bump on his head where Ma whacked down onto him with the brail when she made him prisoner, but he's grinning at that, and alongside of him sets Talis, and her hand is rove tight into his.

"Gents," says Ma Benner, kind of proud at that, "this here is Hank Benner, my man. I was plumb suspicious of them foot marks under the window at that. They was heel marks, like of a party that had just come from the States. It was him abducted Talis off. My man Hank, here," says Ma, throwing her chest, "has been leader of the silver cornet band back in I-ow-a for eight years. Sure."

Well we all go in, us white folks, and the Aleuts go away mollified, and we set up and eat, and Hank paws around in a locker and fishes out a old tarpaulin coat of his, and says how he's going to work.

"Which you'll do nothing of the kind, Hank Benner," says Ma emphatic. "You'll set and visit with me a spell. Kwan Gowdy there is going back to work on the trap. Hank, you being a master of the cornet horn now, tell me this; is it within human powers to learn this Kwan Gowdy to blow that horn so he won't drive all the sea gulls out of Bering Ocean?"

"Sure," says Hank. "I can learn him."

"All right, then," says Ma, nodding vigorous at Kwan and then at Talis. "We'll have the boat preacher in tomorrow, and we'll pull a potlatch that my great grandchildren will brag about."

THE END

After that kick it was a different Red Arnold who went into action

High Rigger

Novelette—Complete

By JACK ALLMAN

Author of "Frozen Gold," "The Curse of the Khans," etc.

The most dangerous game in the world—topping 200-foot forest giants—is the background for a Northwest feud

CHAPTER I.

THE BLOWHARD.

RED ARNOLD was only one of something over a hundred men who rode the Madsen logging train out of the small tidewater mill town, but he was perhaps the happiest.

As they chugged up through one of the finest stands of fir in the State of Washington, Red drew deep breaths of the fresh, balsam scented air and told himself he was lucky. The Northwest woods were coming back to life.

Boats were waiting in Puget Sound for cargoes of big "Jap squares" to be carried to foreign lands where they would be cut up. The country itself, shaking loose from the shackles of depression, was building again, and long idle mills were crying for logs.

It was great to have a job after being idle so long. What if the employment agent had taken his last three dollars? Being broke didn't mean anything when a fellow had a promise of steady work. And fallers' wages were nothing to be sneezed at, either.

"Yep," one of the men was saying, "the woods are due for a comeback. You know yourselves, though, that there are still plenty of idle men waiting around. Why, there must be two-three thousand on Seattle's Skid Road alone. You guys were lucky getting your jobs right off the bat." He reached over and patted a pair of tree hooks strapped to the side of his bed roll . . . trade-mark of a high climber.

"Me," he continued. "Hell, I was a cinch. Us guys can always get work if there's anything doin' at all. High riggers are a scarce article. Good fellow to work for, too, Madsen. Great guy. Yep, I worked for Big Bill up on the White. Now there was loggin', what I mean." He rattled off a yarn about how he had saved the outfit a lot of money.

"And was Big Bill grateful? Ask me. Why, he threw his arm across my shoulder and says: 'Good work, my boy. I guess they ain't but one Sky Sloane in the Northwest woods.'

"It was him that gave me the nickname of Sky. Spar trees don't come too high for me."

Red Arnold took an instant dislike to Sloane, the cocky air he had about him. He was honest enough to ask himself if perhaps it wasn't from a little touch of envy.

Sky Sloane was certainly a good-looking fellow with a clear skin, even white teeth, and wavy jet hair.

And, because there are so few with the nerve to do his work, the high rigger gets wages that make him a sort of king among lesser timber beasts. From swamper to foreman, an entire logging crew takes its hat off to the high rigger.

AS the big triangle in front of the cook shack rang out, Red walked up to the new bunkhouse with Tom Green and others with whom he had worked before the closing of the mills had shut down practically every camp in the Sound region.

He threw his bed roll onto an empty bunk that had just been finished by the carpenters, who had arrived on the job earlier. A hurried wash and they were ready for a feed.

When Red came back from eating he found his bed roll on the floor and another in its place. It was a desirable bunk, close to the door where the air would be fresher, and it had been empty when he had claimed it upon arrival.

When he picked up the other roll he saw that it was Sky Sloane's, but that didn't make any difference to Red. In fact, he even felt a thrill of satisfaction at the discovery. He tossed it to the floor and replaced his own. Then he waited for the trouble he knew was bound to come.

When the rigger came in he demanded to know who had thrown his stuff on the floor. He stepped up with a show of belligerence when Arnold quietly informed him that he had.

"Well, pick it up again. Put it back where you found it. Pick it up, I say. And brush it off. Hear me?"

"Pick it up yourself," said Red. "And park it some place else. This bunk happens to be mine."

Sloane set his fists on his hips and teetered back on his heels. "So-o-o! Smart guy, eh? Well, listen, you. I'm high rigger on this outfit. Get that through your dumb head. No one touches my stuff. *Now pick it up!*"

His arm shot out and his fingers closed on Red's shirt front. The sudden yank threw Arnold to his knees beside the bed roll. He grasped the other's arm and felt Sloane's sleeve tear away. The next instant a hard fist landed full on his cheek bone.

RED staggered back against the deacon seat in front of the bunks and shook his head to clear it. Then he bored in. The men coming back from mess crowded up and Arnold heard his friends rooting for him. Sky Sloane also had boosters among the men.

For a few minutes it looked like the rigger's victory. Red had his shoulders back against the upper tier of bunks, but was soon able to break out onto the center of

the floor where he could handle himself. By this time he had a split lip and one eyebrow cut open.

It was an even enough fight for a while. They were both under thirty, and each in the neighborhood of a hundred and ninety pounds. They stood toe to toe and exchanged pile driver slugs; anger hardened fists smacking solidly into muscled flesh.

Then Sloane started backing away as Red's blows came raining the faster. His rooters fell silent while Arnold's friends whooped it up. There was no doubt now about the final outcome. Then Sloane kicked.

The heavy boot caught Red just below the belt buckle and doubled him like a jack-knife. Dimly, as if from a great distance, heh eard men booing the dirty trick, and he took a shower of blows about the head and face before he could straighten up.

When he did, it was a different Red Arnold that went into action. His blue eyes snapped fire and his face was pale so that the freckles and splashed blood from his bashed nose stood out darkly against it.

Viciously, he battered the other's guard down and drove home blow after blow. Sloane started backing again, and this time he folded his arms across his face. He backed against a carpenter's horse and almost fell. Red waited for him to regain his balance before finishing the job.

Suddenly the crowding men fell away and Arnold heard a booming voice demand what the hell was going on. It was his first glimpse of his new boss as Big Bill Madsen came striding into the bunkhouse. His foreman was with him.

Sloane had dropped his arms, and now he had forced a smile to his bruised face. "Hello, Mr. Madsen," he grinned. "Just a little argument. You remember me, don't you? I worked for you up on White River. Sky Sloane. High rigger. 'Member?"

If the owner of the outfit did remember he made no mention of the fact. "Come on, now," he said. "All you new men get up to the office shack and turn your names in to the timekeeper. This is a logging camp, not a boxing gymnasium. There's work to be done. Lots of it."

And that was all Big Bill Madsen had to say about the fight. He couldn't be bothered—had seen too many in his years in the woods, years that weighed lightly on his big spare frame.

MADSEN was something over fifty, yet he could hold his own with many younger men. He had worked hard and lived simply all his life. From bull-whacker in the old oxen days he had climbed till be had his own outfit. He knew logging in all its branches, and he was progressive. He was responsible for many changes in the methods of handling big sticks.

It was Madsen who had first developed the "high lead" on one of his own jobs, and, because there were no high climbers at that time, he had trimmed his own spar tree and rigged the thousand pound pully block a hundred feet above the ground himself.

Others had been quick to see the advantage of an upward lift on long cable hauls and many men had fallen to their death trying to duplicate his job. Now, years later, spar trees were cut up to two hundred feet, and there were a few men who specialized in the dangerous work. Big Bill had a soft spot in his heart for them all, for he more or less considered himself the father of high riggers.

He was well liked by everyone who worked for him, and the boys all voted him a regular fellow.

But if Big Bill Madsen was a man to be admired by lumberjacks, his daughter had no such limitations. Martha Madsen would command admiration in any company where she chose to display her fresh beauty.

She was in the timekeeper's office, her blond head bent over a big ledger, when the men trooped in. It was like Madsen to see that she had something to occupy her mind after finishing school in Seattle.

Maybe it was the sparkle in her deep

blue eyes as she met their level gaze, or perhaps it was the musical quality of her voice, but whatever it was the men certainly stuttered and stammered over their own names as she picked up a pencil and helped the timekeeper.

Sky Sloane, Red noticed, hung back and was the last one to turn in his slip from the employment agent. And that evening he saw them talking before the small bungalow where Martha lived with her widowed father and an old housekeeper.

Red knew it was envy this time. It isn't often that a lumberjack got a chance to meet a girl like Martha Madsen, and he would have given anything to be in Sloane's shoes right then.

There was little time to think of the boss's daughter during the day. A lot of work had to be done before the first logs would be hauled in, and Madsen was in a hurry. There was no high rigging to be done until everything was set and Sky worked on the same crew with Red. They were mounting the boiler and the big double drum yarding engine on huge skids that were anchored behind a low cut, six foot stump.

Every once in a while Sloane shot off his face to Arnold, but he was careful not to use any fighting words. Madsen came along just in time to stop one argument, and then he showed his leaning towards " men who have the guts to rig 'em high," as he put it. He sat down on one of the big skids and talked high leads with Sky for almost half an hour. After that Sloane was impossible.

He lorded it over everyone working with him, and strutted around as if he owned the outfit.

IT was a couple of evenings later that Red started for the job to get a jumper he had forgotten. He passed Sky on the way up to the bungalow. The rigger's black eye was dabbed with talcum powder, and his face scrubbed pink. His black hair was parted just so, and new khaki replaced his pitch covered overalls. He had on a new shirt just out of the commissary.

Red continued on, trying to fight down the black hatred he had in his heart for Sloane.

He was almost beside the boiler where he had left his jumper when a splash of color stopped him in his tracks. Martha Madsen was sitting on the front drum of the yarding engine looking over the preparations for a modern layout that was the pride of her father.

" Oh, hello," she called, cheerily. " Want to explain some of the things dad's doing here? They're over my head."

Red finally managed to find his voice. " Surely," he said. He whipped off his old felt with all the diamond shaped holes in the crown and sat down on the end of the skid.

They struck it off marvelously right from the start. Martha had a way of making a man forget that she was a girl. She asked sensible questions and seemed to grasp quickly what Red told her. They talked till the deep velvet shadows of dusk closed down over the woods. Then they walked back together.

They were just passing the commissary when Sloane came out, angrily tearing open a package of cigarettes. " Oh, hello there, Miss Madsen." He stepped up, completely ignoring Arnold. " I've been wondering where you were."

" Mr. Arnold has been telling me all about logging. It's marvelous."

" He couldn't tell you about the most marvelous part of the whole game, though," said Sky. He gave Red a patronizing look. " He don't know what it's like to cling to the top of a tree that's higher than a fifteen-story building. I mean high riggin'. *That's something.*" He paused dramatically while he held a match to his smoke.

" Must be thrilling," said Martha. " Well, I must be skipping along. Thanks, Mr. Arnold. Good night, Mr. Sloane."

Sky glanced after her, then, with a yelp he tossed the burning match away and put his fingers to his lips. He gave Red a look that would melt the grease off a skid, grunted, and stepped back into the com-

missary. Arnold whistled loud and jubilantly as he headed for the bunkhouse.

CHAPTER II.

THE CHALLENGE.

RED and Sky were putting an eye-splice in the end of the haul-back cable when Madsen came along and told the foreman that he had decided to rig two trees instead of one. He would put up a trolley for quick loading.

"That'll mean some delay, Mr. Madsen," said the foreman. "Should have another rigger for a job like that."

"Send in and get another." The words were hardly out of the owner's mouth when Red stood before him.

"I couldn't help but hear what you said, sir," explained Arnold. "I'd like very much to have that other high rigging job."

For the first time since Red had been on the job, Madsen seemed to notice him. His eyes ran over the lean width of Red's shoulders, dropped to gaze for a second at his big, capable hands and then came back to his eager face.

"O. K., if you think you can handle it. That trolley goes up at two hundred feet."

Red thanked him and turned back toward the splicing work. Sloane had stepped up and now he grasped Arnold by the sleeve. "You didn't tell me you was a high rigger," he said, with a touch of surprise. "You better be good if you're going to help me. I don't want no dubs gummin' up my work."

A little touch of something that might have been impatience flicked across Madsen's face. The gaze he turned on Sloane suggested his disgust at the unnecessary crack.

"It won't be necessary for either of you to act as boss rigger," he said, decisively. "The job won't be long enough for that. The trolley should be up in a week and then I'll need only one man for the odd high jobs." He glanced off toward the two tall, straight Douglas firs he had chosen for spars. When he turned back to the two men there was a twinkle in his gray eyes.

Big Bill Madsen, to whom high rigging was the very life of modern logging, had just thought of a way in which he could decide upon which high climber he would keep—and at the same time afford himself and the crew a bit of pleasure.

"There are the two sticks," he said. "Alike as two 'Tommy Moore' blocks. Each man takes one. The first to limb and top it ready for the guys gets the steady riggin' job. The other goes back to something else as soon as we're set for logging. Fair enough?" His eyes whipped from one to the other.

Red nodded.

"Jake with me," said Sloane with a confident grin. After Madsen and the foreman had left, he said to Red: "I'll make a monkey outta you, sap. Where'd you ever rig? I ain't never heard of you."

"No?" Red smiled. "Ever been in the California redwoods? These firs are toothpicks compared with some of those babies."

Sky looked at him through half closed lids and Arnold's face colored. He was afraid Sloane might ask questions, and Red had never been in California in his life. He could tell, though, that his reference to redwoods had the other worried.

WORD of the contest spread rapidly through the camp. Red was honing an ax to razor keenness when Tom Green came up to him.

"Hello, Tom," said Arnold. "I was just going to look you up. I want to borrow a five spot. That should buy a pair of second-hand tree hooks."

"What's all this about you racing Sky Sloane on a high riggin' job?" asked Tom. He unfastened the safety pin that closed his shirt pocket. "You're a faller, Red. Leastwise you was when I worked with you. And that's what you hired out for on this job."

Arnold ran his tongue along the edge of one bitt and looked up at Green with a

grin. "Don't forget, Tom, I've been down in Oregon for a couple of years. They high rig down there, too. Thanks. You get it back payday."

Tom was dubious. "This bird Sky Sloane's been a rigger for years. They say he's good."

"I guess he is," said Red. "We'll see just how good."

That evening he caught a ride down to the mill town at the tidewater end of the road. He picked up a pair of old Klein climbers from a saloon keeper who had taken them in payment for a beer bill. They were just like those used by telephone and electric linemen, except that the skag stuck out at more of an angle and was much longer so as to insure a safe bite into the soft bark.

Just as he was leaving town he saw Sky Sloane walking down the street with one of his cronies. He returned to camp and rolled in—to dream of swaying tree tops, of safety ropes breaking, and of spurs tearing out chunks of bark.

In the morning Tom told him that many bets had been placed on the outcome of the race. This worried Red. He wasn't at all certain he could top his spar before Sky, but he was certainly determined to try.

When they arrived on the job a coin was tossed to see who got first choice of trees. Sky won, but that didn't mean much. The two tall firs were almost identical—not a break in the tapering trunks for eighty or ninety feet, and about equally limbed from there on up. While Sloane was taking his pick Red visualized the completed job.

The first thing would be to take the limbs off up to the two hundred foot mark where the trees would still be in the neighborhood of two feet in diameter. Then they would be topped off and each stick guyed with heavy cables anchored to solid stumps.

Between the tops the big trolley cable would be stretched taut, and on it would ride the "bicycle"—a multi-sheaved, moving block through which the line from the yarding engine would be run. By this method it would be possible to lift the big logs clear of the ground and load them onto the trucks of the logging train almost without the aid of expensive man power.

SKY SLOANE made his choice and after strapping on their irons each went over his gear. There was a light line that would have to be coiled so it wouldn't tangle. One end tied to the waist so it could be used for hauling up tools. Then there was the safety rope which went around the tree and body.

Each man stuck his skags into the bark and hitched his rope up with a peculiar upward flip that gained a few inches each time. Handling the twenty odd feet of rope that it took to circle the big churn butts was a trick in itself and it was soon apparent that Sky was the handiest with his safety line.

Sloane reached his first limb a few minutes ahead of Red, and from that moment on there was little work done on the Madsen job . . . except by the two men dangling there in the air. Necks craned to watch the two at their dangerous work as they pulled up their axes and tore into the heavy branches.

More bets were placed, and here and there men could be heard to say that they'd take theirs on the ground. Big wages were pretty sweet on payday, but what good is money to a dead man?

Every man on the job was there and the spirit was such as one might find at a Fourth of July birling contest at any fair sized mill town.

Madsen, his hands folded behind his back and a sparkle of anticipation in his eye, turned to Martha. "Just wait till they top 'em and those limber green sticks start whipping back and forth. That's the real test of a high rigger. I remember my first one. Took all the guts I had to climb her the second time."

The foreman, who had seen many spar trees rigged, nodded understandingly. Men had been known to walk away from the job after topping their first tree, refusing to return to the top after the terrifying experience.

Hanging up there by rope and spur, Red put what power he could into his ax blows. Sky's first limb crashed down before he was half way through.

It was hard work to hang there and cut through a branch the thickness of a man's waist, and sweat soon started to run down into Arnold's eyes. He stopped often to wipe it away. This was no place for blurred vision. The keen ax bitt was falling within scant inches of his safety rope. And the slight breeze that swayed the tree didn't help a man's aim.

AT last the big limb fell. Then it was a case of move up and go through the same nerve trying maneuver again. Limb and climb. Limb and climb. The tree was getting smaller and they both had to stop once in a while to take in the slack that accumulated in their safety ropes.

Red, with his back to the other tree, heard every blow of Sloane's ax. Sky was laying them in fast and heavy. He turned for a quick glance and saw the reason. Sky was cutting them off a full two feet from the trunk. He was using these stubs to stand on, making it possible to swing much harder than while leaning back into a safety rope.

For a moment Red contemplated doing the same. He had often worked on a "springboard" while falling a tree above a gnarled and twisted butt and he knew the advantage of having something to stand on.

At last he decided against it. He would do a neat job. The stubs sticking out wouldn't actually hurt the spar any, but they might cause trouble when it came to hauling up the guy cables and trolley.

He continued cutting them off close up against the trunk, putting everything he had into every blow. His shoulder muscles showing through the large arm holes of his scivvy shirt whipped like steel cables.

He worked at top speed and soon saw that he was gaining; still he had no false hopes about winning in a walk. There wasn't any doubt but what Sky Sloane knew his stuff, even if he was willing to sharp-shoot on the limbing. Topping off was a big job in itself.

At noon they were about even and interest was at fever pitch, with Big Bill Madsen the most excited man on the job. This was a contest to warm the heart of any timber beast. Practically all the money in camp was in the hands of the foreman, who acted as stake holder. The men were even betting commissary slips and clothing.

Red was too tired to eat much and was first out of the mess shack. He didn't want to load himself down and get loggy, either. He'd have to be on the job every second if he was to have a chance against Sloane. The lips into which he stuck a cigarette were drawn into a tight, straight line as the cocky laughter of Sky Sloane rose above the babel of voices inside.

Red was lighting up when, from around the corner of the mess hall, he heard Martha talking to her father. There was no mistaking the full throated contralto and Big Bill's booming bass.

"Your wages?" Madsen was asking. "What you mean, honey?"

"Just what I said," came the girl's clear voice. "Wages. I'm not accepting an allowance any more, and I want my salary up to date."

Another of Sloane's laughs kept Red from hearing what was said between father and daughter for the next moment or so. All he caught was Martha's voice as the two moved on. She was saying: "I guess I can bet on him if I want to, can't I, dad? After all, I earned the money."

Red would have given anything to know on whom she was placing her wager.

RED ARNOLD looked across at the other tree as a gasp came to him from the crowd on the ground. A six or eight foot length of rope was falling away from where Sloane was working. For a full second Red held his breath, expecting to see the other rigger fall.

Then he heard Sky laugh and saw him wave his arm to those below. Heard him shout a cocky reassurance that all was

well, and noticed that Sloane's voice quavered a little.

That had been a close shave. A slightly misplaced blow from Sky's ax had clipped through the loose end of the safety rope where it had been taken in on account of the diminishing size of the tree.

A sudden gust of wind catching the top might have caused it. Or the slipping of a skag through a piece of uncertain bark.

But if the bitt had fallen on the loop. . .!

Red closed his eyes for an instant, and on the inside of the lids appeared the picture of a limp mass at the base of the tree—every bone broken. A couple of inches! Maybe only one! By such small margins does the high rigger gamble with his life.

The next time he slanted an eye over at Sky he saw that the other rigger was again gaining. He gripped the handle of his double bitted ax tighter and made the chips fly. His insteps ached from supporting his weight on the narrow climbing irons. His hands were cramped and the small of his back chafed from leaning and rubbing against the safety rope.

A shout came up from the crowd and he saw that the end of Sky's light line was just clear of the ground. Sloane had limbed his two hundred feet. Red still had a few to lop off. They were smaller, though, up there and he made fast time. As he hacked at them he saw Sloane lower his ax and pull up a partially filled sack.

When he saw the other rigger tie the bag to a limb over his head and toss both ends of the light line free he suddenly realized what was going on.

Sky was going to shoot the top off.

CHAPTER III.

TRAPPED.

THAT was it. He was going to blow it off with dynamite, otherwise he would have held onto his light line. Now Red knew why Sloane had been into town. It was to get powder, caps and fuse.

Blowing the top off a tree wouldn't make as neat a job, but it would be just as serviceable, and all Madsen had said was that the tree had to be ready for rigging.

And another thing. Sky would be on the ground when the charge went off and the big top came crashing down. He wouldn't have to hang up there, tied to the swaying, vibrating stick; praying that everything held and that the whip wouldn't tear him out of the rope.

A big, sickening knot tied up in the pit of Red's stomach as he lowered his ax and pulled up the saw. He was licked now. Not a chance of getting his tree topped off first. It took time to saw through two feet while hanging on a rope, and there probably wasn't another stick of dynamite closer than tidewater.

Licked! And how could he face all the boys who had placed their money on him? He couldn't. It would be impossible to stick there and work with them day in and day out. And a job was a job nowadays. He even let his mind dwell for a few moments on how the turn of events had ruined any chance he might have with Martha Madsen. That was the bitterest pill of all, but he refused to let it stop him from working.

He placed himself so that he could watch the other tree and started his cut on the windward side. He could also look down into the sea of white faces below, and off near one edge of the crowd he saw a small figure in light blue. The teeth of his one-man cross cut saw ate angrily into the wood and a handful of sawdust came out with each drag. Still, it would be impossible.

He watched Sky tie the sticks of dynamite in a complete circle around the trunk, and his only consolation was that his would be a more workmanlike job. But that wouldn't make any difference. Madsen had said " topped off," and there had been a lot of money bet.

Through the sweat that streamed down into his eyes—he didn't bother to wipe it away now—he saw Sloane uncoil the length

of fuse, fit the cap, set it, and then start down.

When Sky came to where the end of the fuse dangled in the breeze he lit it, then he shouted and waved his hand at Arnold. "So long, sap," he shouted. "See you in church!" The slow burning fuse spluttered above his head as he hurried on down.

A number of those in the crowd below sent up a rousing cheer. The others were glumly silent. Before tears of helpless anger mixed with the sweat and almost blinded him, Red saw a small figure in blue climb down from the top of a big stump where she had been standing with about twenty others.

WITH his eyes closed, Arnold continued his sawing. Rip-rip! Rip-rip! There wasn't a chance, but he'd finish the job anyway. And when it was done it would be work he could be proud of. Madsen, logger that he was, would admit that.

A shout from below opened his eyes and he saw that Sky was having trouble getting his rope over one of the limb stubs he had left sticking out from the smooth trunk.

Red continued to saw as he watched the other rigger make a number of trials.

At last the loop reached out to the very tip, hung there for a second, then dropped over. It took the full length of Sky's arms to make it.

A cheer came drifting up, and a few minutes later it was a groan. Sloane was stuck at the very next stub below—one that was still a little longer. The length of rope that he had accidentally chopped off made his line too short to circle the tree and clear the end of the spike.

The spar at that point was perhaps four feet in diameter. It was like trying to stick on the side of a house; impossible to untie the safety line and whip it around below. Sky looked up at the spluttering fuse and Red knew exactly what was in his mind.

Sure enough, Sloane started to climb again with the intention of cutting free the fire that was crawling at the rate of a foot per minute toward the charge of dynamite. It was his only chance, for he had dropped his light line and there was no way to get a longer safety rope.

Again he was stopped. He had barely managed to get his rope over the stub above as he came down, but going up was different. A loop can be made to fall by gravity. Throwing a shortened line up over it was something else again. Trial after trial failed. Sky Sloane was trapped. He couldn't get up to cut the fuse, and he couldn't get down to escape the certain death that was his if the big top came crashing around his ears.

He tried the lower stub again and then gave up. His voice was a panic-stricken shriek as he shouted down into the tense faces below. Half the words were unintelligible, but Red heard: "It's burning! It's burning! For God's sake do something!"

There was nothing anyone could do. On the big stump top the foreman winced as Madsen's fingers closed around his arm. The hard-boiled logging camp owner saw what he had considered a thrilling contest turning quickly into stark tragedy; the black Angel of Death taking a hand in what was supposed to be just a little fun.

Someone shouted to Red, but he had already taken in the full import of the situation. He had untied his two hundred foot line from his waist and made it fast to a limb. As he unloosed his safety belt a row of figures marched rapidly through his brain.

Dynamite fuse burned at the rate of a foot a minute, and Sky had used what looked to be in the neighborhood of a thirty foot length. Perhaps it was even less than that, and many of those minutes had already been wasted. Manila rope a quarter inch in diameter was tested to something like five hundred pounds—plenty strong enough, and plenty small to try and grip.

RED wrapped his legs into the line and started down, checking his speed every few feet. He hit the ground with a thump and ran awkwardly in his heavy climbers for the other tree.

"Here! Here's a line," cried Madsen. "Full length. Get it up to him in a hurry." He thrust a tight coil toward Arnold, and then gasped as he saw that the palms of Red's hands had been burned raw by the friction against the new quarter-inch line.

"Oh, God," he cried, "you can't do it. Hey, there, you fellows," he shouted at the crowd. "Anyone among you that can climb. Take his irons. He's crippled." There were big beads of moisture glistening on his troubled face.

"Give me that line. I can make it." Red yanked the coil from Madsen's grip and slung it over his shoulder. He whipped his own safety belt around the tree and flipped it up as high as it would reach. He dug his skags in deep and every step was as high as he could make it.

Silently, the crowd watched as pretty a performance of fast climbing as any one of them had ever seen. Above him Sky pleaded hysterically with him to hurry.

When Arnold reached Sloane he handed him the line. "Get it around you," he said. "Let's get down out of this."

Sky tried twice to curl his rope around the trunk, but was too nervous to make it. He couldn't keep his eyes on what he was doing; they kept whipping up to where the fuse spluttered.

"I can't do it! I can't do it," he cried. "It's too late. Cut the fuse! It's our only chance! *Cut the fuse!*" Sky Sloane wasn't thinking of the contest now. He was thinking only of his life; and, because the minutes as a prisoner there must have seemed like ages, he expected to lose it any moment.

Red saw stark fear in the other's eyes. He wasn't exactly as cool as a cucumber himself, but he wasn't letting Sky see it. He whipped his rope up over the other rigger and started to climb.

"Cut it is, then," he grinned. "You're the doctor."

Their eyes were on a level, less than two feet apart. A flash of angry courage returned to Sky's face. His lips parted as though to speak and Red quickly pulled himself up another step. He could make it to the fuse, and he didn't want the other to change his mind.

ARNOLD forgot his flesh-torn palms. He forgot his aching insteps and the burn of the rope on his chafed back. He walked right up the side of that big stick and at every jab of his skags he cursed the stubs that Sloane had left.

Never once did he stop, not even to take in the slack as the tree got smaller. He doubled the surplus back against the line and gripped it with his right hand. When he made his first grab at the swinging fuse a gust of wind carried it just out of reach. The doubled line in his hand slipped and he fell.

The jumble of voices from below came up to him as he lay there hanging in the slack rope, almost straight out from the tree. The jolt had hurt his back and it was a full minute before he pulled himself in again. The voices rose to a cheer that echoed over the tops of the tall trees as he cut the fuse less than five feet from the charge.

Sky was on the ground busily explaining what it was all about when Red got down. "I'll blow the top off that baby yet," he said. "Where's that sack? There's some more fuse in it."

It didn't surprise Red that the other was going to try it again. Sky Sloane must have courage somewhere in his make-up. If he hadn't he'd never have become a high rigger.

The men had swarmed around and Red shouldered his way through them in the direction of his own tree. He came face to face with Tom Green, and he noticed that the safety pin dangled loose on the flap of his shirt pocket.

Not only Tom, but many of the others had their money on him.

"Let me use your gloves." He whipped a pair of pitch covered mule-hides from his friend's pocket, then clumped on to his tree.

"Hey, there!" It was Madsen's voice that boomed out above the babel of the

crowd. "You can't go up that spar again. Look at your hands."

Red turned, and past Big Bill's shoulder he saw a small, tense face watching him through startled eyes. Only the blond head and a blue collar were showing above the drum of the big yarding engine. For a second their gazes met, then Red faced Madsen.

"Who said I can't go up? The job isn't finished yet." Red didn't mean to be disrespectful, but his nerves were on edge. The surprised, but somewhat pleased look on Madsen's face, and the quick brightness that came to the eyes looking at him over the engine drum, assured him that no one had taken offense.

AFTER the fright he had had, Sky used plenty of fuse off the hundred foot roll when he next climbed his tree. He was safe on the ground for a long time before the fire came anywhere near the fulminate of mercury cap that would set off the ring of dynamite.

Two hundred feet up on the other tree, Red Arnold drove the five foot saw back and forth, back and forth. He was hardly aware of the fact that his gloves were full of blood. His feet and legs were dead but quivering—reaction from the fast climbing on the other spar.

He was still holding his head, though. At the first pop of the straining wood he tightened up on his safety belt, strapped himself close and solidly to the trunk. A few more strokes of the saw and the heavily limbed top started to lean. As it tipped over at right angles the tall stick bent back against the pressure.

JUST at that moment there was a deafening explosion. The concussion through the air slapped Red's face and the stick whipped a full twenty feet as his top fell away. Back it came again and the strain of the rope on his back almost cut him in two. Snap! Snap! Snap!

At last the vibrations ceased and Red clung, half dazed, fifteen stories above the ground on a more beautiful spire than man ever built. Beside the graceful tapering of the proud fir the Washington Monument would have looked squat and thick, even though it was higher. It was a neat job.

When Red finally lifted his head on a neck that felt like it had been used for a whipcracker, he first saw a fifty foot white streak where the bare wood showed at the top of the other tree. Sky's shot had split the trunk. Ruined it for use as a spar.

Red felt a little thrill of elation, but he was too tired, too bruised, and too sore in every muscle to fully realize what winning meant. He slacked off his safety rope and started down.

At the bottom everyone wanted to shake his hand or pat him on the back—even those who had lost money. Red grinned and said he was glad he had won. He was grateful to Tom, who cleared the men away as Madsen came up.

"Fine job. Fine job, my boy." He started to grasp Red's hand, then took him by the wrist and shook his arm. "As nice a piece of toppin' as I've ever seen. Where'd you learn your high climbing?"

"I guess I have a confession to make, Mr. Madsen. I . . . I . . . well, I've worked in the woods all my life, but that's the first time I ever topped a spar tree."

"No-o-o! Well, I'll be damned." Madsen's surprise was real. "You mean to say that without experience you took that job just for the extra wages in it?"

Just then Martha Madsen lifted one of Red's hands gently in both her own. "Congratulations, Mr. Arnold," she said, softly. "You were wonderful . . . and I won a month's wages on you."

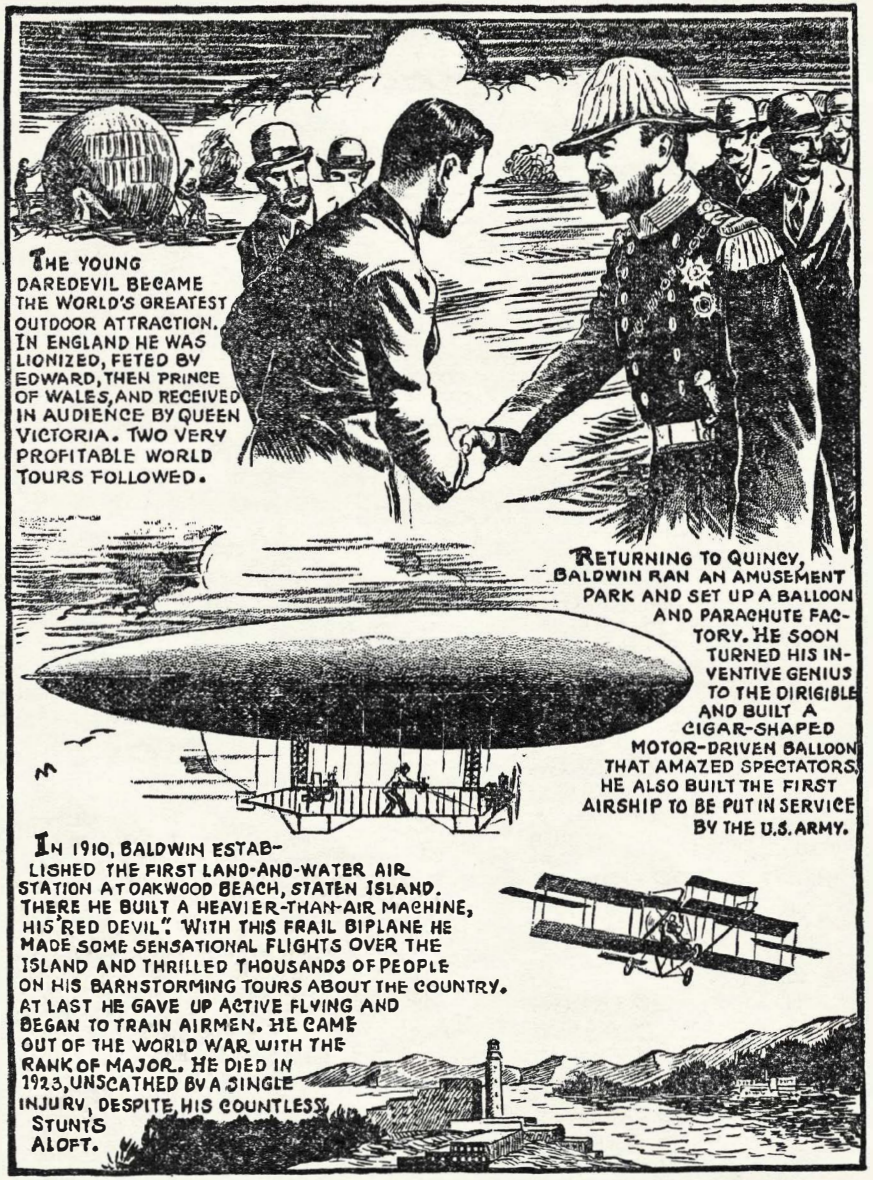
Red's flush grew deeper. Without looking at the camp owner he answered his question. "Well," he said, "the wages was only one of the reasons."

One of Big Bill Madsen's eyes closed in a sly wink.

"I understand," he said. "I understand." And then as he chuckled and turned away: "You'll do, son. Real high riggers don't show up on a job every day."

THE END

A True Story in Pictures Every Week



Next Week: Gen. Tsai Ting-kai, Hero of Shanghai

Argonotes.

The Readers' Viewpoint

FURTHER sand hog evidence:

Glendale, L. I., N. Y.

Answering Ramsey's letter of the Dec. 8th issue pertaining to the "Chief's" report that he recalled only one man who ever went through the tunnel heading and came up through the river, I remarked about the incident to one of the old sand hogs who worked on that job as an all-around tunnel man. This man, Pete, was on the shift previous, Harry Fletcher's gang. He had just got up in the hog house in time to see the blow. He saw Marshie Maybie come up. The other two, Driver and McCarthy, came up ahead of Maybie; and one of these (he forgets which) was killed when he hit the bottom of a scow. The body of the other was recovered later.

Also, on the first East River job Dick Creardon came through, and at last report was still alive. Making two alive and two dead. Pete says he does not remember Borden Chase, unless he worked under a different name; but he says the author sure knows his tunnel work.—Pete also remembers Joe Cavanagh, who wrote a letter in the Dec. 22nd issue, and says he hopes to meet him on the 38th St. job.

I hope this clears up the discrepancy in the "Chief's" story.

Just another reason why I have been a reader of ARGOSY for over twenty years; its true-to-life stories.

E. S. FITZGIBBONS.

New York City.

Mr. Ramsey's letter, in your Dec. 8th issue, about Borden Chase's "East River" was especially interesting to me, for my father also worked under the East River during the construction of the subway tunnels some twenty-five years ago. I have often heard him tell of a fellow worker having been blown right up through the river bed, as a result of a break. When this discussion in "Argonotes" came up, I asked him if he recalled the man's name. He said it was Creardon —and, as he is not an ARGOSY reader, his memory had not been refreshed nor furnished by the story. In reply to my question, "Are you sure that was his name?" Father said he ought to be, as Creardon once extinguished a fire that had caught onto his (my father's) clothes. As far as he knew, Creardon was little the worse for his unusual experience in bobbing up to the surface of the river, and was back on the job in a day or so.

HOWARD G. BERGMAN.

ARGOSY establishes new style in octopods:

New York City.

I have no desire to knock the ARGOSY or its writers. I read the magazine regularly, and I think it is the best in the market. Also, the stories are generally excellent.

WHAT is *your* idea of the best story (of any length, from short story to serial) published in ARGOSY during the year 1934? For the twelve post cards or letters from readers which, in the opinion of the editors, give the best reasons why this or that story stood out above all others, the magazine will reward the letter-writers with twelve full, yearly subscriptions. We don't want mere praise; we are interested in finding out exactly what stories you most liked, so that in future we may give you more fiction of the same kind.

It isn't necessary for you to have read every story in every one of the fifty-two issues published during 1934. If there was some story which struck your fancy enough so that it stands out in your memory above all others, even though you read but five or ten out of the whole fifty-two copies of the magazine, write us and tell us why you liked that story. You will have just as good a chance to win one of those twelve subscriptions as someone who read all the issues from cover to cover. But we must know *why* you liked the story.

Letters selected by the editors will be published from week to week, *but not all letters published will receive subscriptions.*

Make your letter as long or as brief as you want to, and still give all your reasons. Then address it to The EDITOR, The ARGOSY, 280 Broadway, New York City, so that it will reach us not later than March 9th, 1935.

I suppose it is because I know something about diving that Gordon MacCreagh's tale, "Diver's Chances," annoyed me. The point might not annoy others, but I was surprised to learn that an octopus has a neck—and that it could be snipped off. Also that an octopus can dart out its head to see what is going on.

An octopus has about as much head as an elephant. His simple innards are covered with a mantle which spreads a bit, so that the eight arms seem webbed close to the body. The eyes are above the main tentacles, or arms, the mouth below. It has no head at all. It uses its arms as legs when walking on the sea bottom. The mouth is a beak, a pair of mandibles. And not all the deepsea octopods have inkbags.

I think MacCreagh should stick to writing of things he knows about. Somebody has been stuffing him about that pair of shears and the rod-like neck.

Also the artist has got all the suckers on the wrong sides of the arms.

They should be underneath. And the eyes are projecting.

I have seen many of the big specimens. There is one in the Bishop Museum, Honolulu, with a twenty-two foot spread. It is suspended from the ceiling of one of the rooms.—And they go bigger than that!

DON PATERSON.

LOOKING AHEAD!

GRENADES FOR THE COLONEL

An exciting novelette of the Foreign Legion battling against sedition and the worst enemy of all—dissension in the ranks. By a man well-known for his stories of the Legion—

By J. D. NEWSOM

THE MOON PLOT

A fantastic story of the space revolt in 2535 A.D., when the entire Interplanetary system was in an upheaval.

By RAY CUMMINGS

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By RICHARD HOWELLS WATKINS

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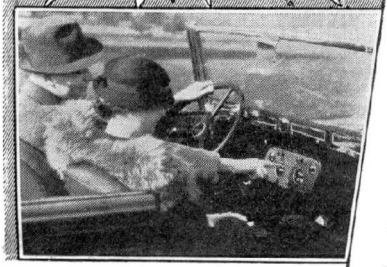

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I am writing this letter unsolicited on account of the satisfaction I have had since this installation.

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