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ARGOSY

JULY 14

WEEKLY

The Hated Man

A Mme. Storey Mystery by

Hulbert Footner

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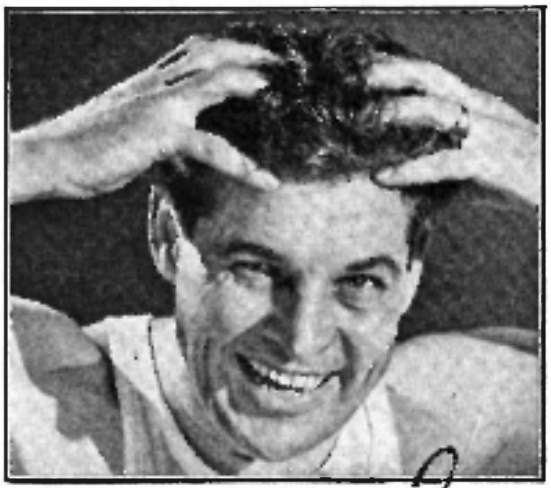

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Volume 248 — CONTENTS FOR JULY 14, 1934 — Number 3

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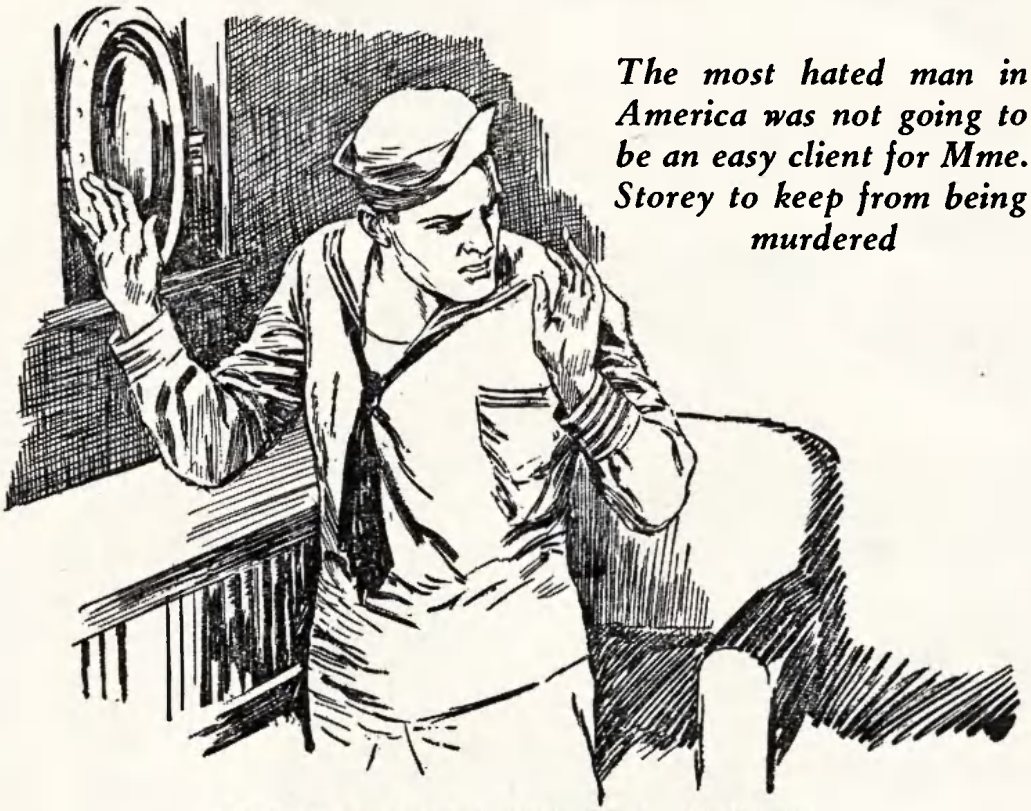
The Hated Man

By HULBERT FOOTNER

Author of "Pink-Eye," "The Kidnaping of Mme. Storey," etc.



The most hated man in America was not going to be an easy client for Mme. Storey to keep from being murdered

His hands went up fast enough when he saw the gun

CHAPTER I.

TELEPHONE THREAT.

WHEN hard times were at their hardest, it was customary for the newspapers to say that Horace Laghet had all the money in the country. His name was on every lip; the least of his doings and sayings constituted front page stuff.

He first came into prominence during the panic of 1929, when it transpired that he had sold short. Of course he made millions. And after that, when everybody else was desperately trying to revive confidence, Laghet continued to sell America short, and America, unfortunately, justified his disbelief. He raked in more and more millions.

He spent lavishly. At a time when the building trades were almost at a standstill he commenced the construction of a huge marble palace on upper Fifth Avenue and another at Newport. He ordered a yacht that was to exceed any yacht ever built. When these extravagances were criticised he retorted: "Well, I'm keeping the money in circulation, am I not?" And there was no comeback.

To do him justice I must say that he subscribed great sums to the unemployment funds, and to every form of relief. It did not do him any good.

People felt that he ought to have given more. In the gay old days millionaires used to be respected—or at least admired, but not now. People felt in a dim way that Laghet had profited out of the country's misfortunes and he was hated.

Lord! how he was hated. His name was never mentioned without a covert sneer. It was said that his life had been attempted several times, and that he never ventured out without an armed guard.

This being the situation, my excitement can be understood when one morning a crisp voice said over the phone: "This is Horace Laghet speaking. Is Madame Storey in her office?" he asked.

"I'll see," I said cautiously.

"Oh, don't give me that bunk!" he said. "I'm Horace Laghet. Connect me with her."

"If I were sure that it was Mr. Laghet speaking—" I began.

"Connect me! Connect me!" he shouted. "She can hang up if she's not satisfied, can't she?"

I thought it best to switch the call to my employer's desk. She was cool and offhand. He asked if he could see her. "I can give you half an hour at noon," she said. She politely declined an invitation to lunch.

He said. "Very well, I'll be there at twelve."

When she had hung up I went in. She was helping herself to a cigarette with an amused smile. "Well, Bella, business is picking up," she said.

"Search him, Bella," commanded Mme. Storey

"Fancy! Horace Laghet coming here!" I said, all agog.

"Well, there's no occasion to strew roses in his path," she said.

When he entered my office I got a shock. I suppose I had read that he was not old, but it was hard to believe that the man everybody was talking about could be so virile looking. A tall, stalwart figure at the top notch of a man's vigor, with a deeply tanned skin though the month was February. He had a dark, passionate face that could be brutal, I suspected, but at present was masked by a courteous smile; hair grayed at the temples, and a close-clipped mustache. He had the air of

assurance that great riches give to a man, but I discovered that he was easily upset.

I OPENED the door of Mme. Storey's office, and followed him in. He stopped short at the sight of her.

"I didn't think that you would be like this," he said. His black eyes fired up with admiration. He was a disturbing man to women.

Mme. Storey is used to this sort of thing. "That can be taken in two ways," she murmured.

"You know what I mean," he said. "Of course I have often seen your photograph and admired it. But the published photographs of prominent women are so touched up that you never believe in them."

She smiled ironically. "Sit down," she said. "Have a cigarette?"

He glanced at me deprecatingly. "I wished to see you alone."

"Miss Brickley is present at all interviews," said Mme. Storey. "It is a rule I have made."

He stood up, and his face flushed darkly. "I am not just an ordinary caller!" he said angrily. "This is important."

It was the wrong line to take with my employer. "It is my rule," she repeated, with deceptive mildness.

I thought he was going to walk right out of the door again, and my heart sank. The richest man in town walking out of the door! However, he thought better of it. He sat down again, and after a moment succeeded in smoothing his ruffled plumage. I went to my desk in the corner.

"I suppose you know who I am," he began.

"I read the newspapers," said Mme. Storey, smiling.

A spasm of anger crossed his face. "Yes, damn it!" he muttered, "and a nice sort of scoundrel they make me out to be! Have you noticed that I have had a yacht built, and am starting on a cruise with a party of guests tomorrow?"

"I had seen a later date mentioned."

"I know. But the President sent for me yesterday, and from what I learned from him I can see that there is still trouble ahead. He wanted me to help fight the way out of the depression. Well, I mean to be out of the way of it. They blame me for everything that happens. I'm going for a six month cruise to the West Indies and to South America."

"How pleasant," said Mme. Storey. "What can I do for you?"

"Two weeks ago," he went on, "I was called up at my office by a woman. She had a superior sort of voice, soft-spoken, educated. She warned me not to go on this voyage. When I pressed her for particulars she hung up. Well, I am frequently called up or addressed through the mail by all sorts of triflers. So I thought no more about it.

"But to-day she called up again. There was a ring of earnestness in her voice. You can't mistake that sort of thing. She was crying; she seemed scarcely able to speak for terror. All she said was that if I went on this voyage I should never come back alive. When I tried to get more out of her she hung up."

"How did she reach your private ear on both occasions?" asked Mme. Storey.

"I have a private phone on my desk that is connected directly with the exchange. She called up on that."

"She knew the private number?"

"Oh, well, many do. There's no clue in that."

"It is impossible to trace phone calls in these days of dial phones," said Mme. Storey.

"I don't want you to trace the call," he said. "I want you to come with me on the voyage . . . And your secretary, if you want her. Ostensibly you will be my guests, but in reality you will be working for me."

I was so astonished my jaw dropped as if the spring had broken. I expect I gaped at the man like a clown.

MME. STOREY was not at all put out. "If you think there is anything in this warning," she said, "my honest advice to you is to give up the voyage."

"Never!" he said, setting his jaw. "This yacht has cost me three millions. I'm going to sea in her."

"You don't want anybody like me," she said. "You need men who can guard you all the time."

"I'll have them if I need them. I want you to lay bare the plot, if there is a plot. Nobody can do that so well as you. What's more, you will be a delightful addition to the party. I wouldn't like to impose an ordinary detective on my guests."

"Thanks," said Mme. Storey dryly. "Frankly, it doesn't appeal to me."

"Why not?"

"Have you ever taken a long voyage in a yacht?"

"No."

"Well, I have. In such close quarters the guests get rather badly on each other's nerves." She looked at him in a dry way that suggested he himself was a bit too passionate and domineering to make the ideal fellow voyager.

He laughed it off. "You won't find the quarters on the Buccaneer too close."

"Buccaneer?" said Mme. Storey. "Well named!"

He was ready to get sore at that, but decided to laugh again. "Just a small party," he said. "The ladies include my fiancée, Celia Dale, and her mother and Mrs. Holder?"

"Who is Mrs. Holder?"

"Just a dear friend," he said carelessly.

"A widow?"

"No. She's got a perfectly good husband somewhere. He's in business and can't get away . . . The men will be my brother Adrian, young Emil Herbert, the celebrated pianist, and my secretary, Martin Coade. Martin is a host in himself. He's in Holland just now, but will join the ship when we touch at Curaçao."

"Such a ship must carry a big crew," suggested Mme. Storey.

"Yes, nearly a hundred men."

"Easy to plant an assassin amongst them," she murmured.

Laghet showed his teeth unpleasantly. "I assure you they have been handpicked," he said grimly.

Mme. Storey debated with herself.

"Five thousand dollars a week," said Laghet seductively.

"Good pay," she said.

"Will you take it?"

"Yes." But as his hand shot out she held hers up. "Under certain conditions."

"Name them, lady!"

"I cannot undertake any responsibility for your safety."

"That's understood."

"Second, I must be free to terminate the agreement and leave the ship at any time."

"Right! We'll make it so pleasant for you, you won't want to leave."

"Third, you must tell me the whole truth."

He stared. "Why on earth shouldn't I tell you the truth?"

"My dear man," she said, "you haven't reached your present position without—how can I put it inoffensively?—without being mixed up in things you don't want to talk about. When I come to you for necessary information you must tell me the whole truth or I can do nothing."

He appeared to like her frankness. "Agreed," he said, grinning.

"Lastly, anybody can see that you have a dominating personality and do not take kindly to direction. But you must understand that in such situations as may arise out of this investigation, if you do not act as I advise I will be useless to you."

"That's the hardest one," he said ruefully. "It will be a novelty to take orders from a woman. However, I agree."

THEY shook hands on it.

"Have you any idea who it is that may want to murder you?" asked Mme. Storey.

He shrugged. "It might be one of twenty men."

"And is probably none of them," she put in. "It is always the unexpected enemy who has murder in his heart."

"Will you be ready to go aboard at noon to-morrow?" he asked eagerly.

"It would be wiser to put off the sailing until I can make a preliminary investigation."

"Not an hour!" he said with a darkening face.

"Very well," she said. "In my business one has to be prepared for anything."

"You're a wonderful woman!" he cried. "I'm glad I came to you! I'll make out a check to bind the bargain." He did so then and there. When he got up to go he said: "Perhaps it's all a stall anyhow. In that case we'll have a swell time on the seven seas and forget the depression!"

Mme. Storey had half turned in her chair and was looking out of the window behind her. "It is not a stall," she said quietly.

Laghet's face sharpened. He showed his teeth. "What makes you so sure of that?" he demanded.

"Look out of the window," she said. "Do not come close enough to show yourself. That man standing against the park railings opposite. The one with a greenish fedora pulled over his eyes. Is he in your employ?"

"I never saw him before," said Laghet.

"Then he's a spy. He followed you here, and he will follow you when you leave."

"But I came in my car!"

"No doubt he has a car waiting too."

Laghet caught up his stick. "I'll soon settle his business!" he cried.

"What good will that do you?" said Mme. Storey. "He's only a paid spy. If you assault him you'll be arrested. You won't be able to prove anything. It will only delay your sailing."

"Damn it, I suppose you're right!" he said, groaning with balked rage. He jammed on his hat and strode out.

CHAPTER II.

FIRE.

I STAYED that night with Mme. Storey at her place on East Sixty-third Street. This had been arranged so that we could work late in clearing up all the odds and ends of business that demanded attention be-

fore she sailed. We had spent the afternoon in doing necessary shopping for the voyage. All our things were packed and ready.

I have had occasion before to describe my employer's original little establishment. She and her friend Mrs. Lysaght bought an old brownstone house and transformed it into two maisonnettes in the French style. Mme. Storey occupies the two lower floors. The kitchen faces the street with a barred window that is left open at night for ventilation, and the dining room opens on a tiny garden in the rear. Upstairs her bedroom is over the kitchen, and her delightful living room looks down on the garden.

As there is only one bedroom I had to share it with her. Her maid Grace made up a bed on the sofa. Grace and the cook sleep up on the top floor of the house with Mrs. Lysaght's maids. But the Lysaght establishment was closed at this time.

We had just gone to bed and were lying there talking about this and that. It was very late. The windows were open and the street was wrapped in stillness. Only a distant hum reminded us that we were a part of a great city. The thought of danger to ourselves was farthest from our minds. In fact for the moment we were occupied with the details of our own business, and had forgotten Horace Laghet.

I can remember hearing a clock strike two.

Suddenly we heard a hard object fall to the floor of the kitchen underneath us. We both jumped up and instinctively darted to a window. We were in time to see a man running away down the street towards Third Avenue. He ran awkwardly with hunched shoulders and a sideways movement.

I would have shouted to stop him, but Mme. Storey clapped a hand over my mouth. "Too late to catch him now," she said.

As she spoke there was an explosion, not very loud, in the room beneath us. And a moment afterwards that most awful sound of all at night: the rushing and snapping of fire. I stood in the middle of the bedroom half stupefied. Mme. Storey gave me a shake.

"Put on dressing gown and slippers and follow me!"

It brought me to myself. "Shall I telephone?" I asked.

"No!" she said, in a tone that surprised me.

STANDING in the corner of the stair landing was a copper fire extinguisher. Mme. Storey snatched it up and ran down. On the lower landing was another extinguisher that she mutely pointed out to me. We could hear the flames roaring like devils behind the kitchen door. The difficulty was to get the door open. Fortunately it opened towards us, and Mme. Storey was able to shield herself behind it. Flame leaped out of the kitchen like a red, ravening beast, shriveling us with its hot breath.

The whole room was blazing at once and little runnels of fire crept over the sill into the hall. It burned with that special speed and fury that only gasoline can induce. Mme. Storey, backing away out of reach of the flames into the dining room, turned her extinguisher upon them. The thin hissing stream was swallowed up and lost. The fire only roared louder. Suffocating black smoke billowed into our faces. Mme Storey was driven back foot by foot.

"We must get out of here!" I cried.

She paid no attention. After a mo-

ment she muttered: "Open the window at my back. The wind is on that side."

I obeyed, and a current of air was created that held the flames and smoke in check. On the other side of that wall of flame I could hear cries from the street. Mme. Storey began to regain the lost ground, driving the flames back with an unerring eye whenever they tried to flank her. I stood with the second extinguisher ready to hand to her when the first was exhausted.

We crossed the hall again. The two maids came running down the stairs. They stood on the bottom step, fascinated with horror but perfectly silent. They had confidence in their mistress's ability to handle anything. The fire was forced back snarling into the kitchen. We heard the fire trucks coming from afar.

Once the chemical mixture got the upper hand the fire soon gave up. All around the walls Mme. Storey drove it back towards the window. Suddenly it was out and the kitchen was just a black charred hole. Through the window I had a glimpse of the crowd hanging over the railings. The lights had not been burned out and I got them turned on. After all, not much had suffered but paint, varnish and plaster. But what an escape!

In the middle of the floor lay a telltale jagged piece of tin. We found another behind the stove. Meanwhile the trucks had drawn up outside and the firemen were banging on the ornamental iron gate that gave entrance to the house alongside the kitchen. I started to let them in, but my employer laid a hand on my arm.

"We don't want any investigation, Bella."

Opening the cellar door, she kicked the two pieces of tin downstairs.

The firemen swarmed in, nosed around as they always do, and asked the usual questions. Mme. Storey's explanation was ingenious.

"I came downstairs to heat some water on the gas stove, and went up again. I suppose the curtain at the window blew across the flame and caught fire. Unfortunately my maid had left a can of cleaning fluid on the window sill and that exploded."

"Very careless to leave an explosive so near the stove, madam," said the fire captain.

"You are absolutely right, chief," she replied with a perfectly straight face. "I shall scold the girl severely, and I can promise you it won't happen again."

She led them into the dining room for a little refreshment, and they presently departed with loud praise for her quickness and presence of mind. The trucks roared away and a great quiet descended on the street. Mme. Storey and I went back to bed, but not to sleep.

AT eleven o'clock next morning we were seated in the living room with Latham Rowe, Mme. Storey's attorney. A horrible stale smell of wet burnt stuff filled the house. Our baggage had been sent on ahead to the yacht landing, and we were all set to go.

Latham is a nice man, the chubby, sweet-tempered type that is predestined to be the friend of every woman and the husband of none. Mme. Storey was saying:

"I'll have to leave it to you to see that the insurance is collected and the repairs properly done."

"Sure!" he said. "But tell me, Rosika, on the level, what caused this fire. You can't expect me to believe that bunk about Grace's carelessness."

Mme. Storey smiled. "It cost me a new dress to square Grace for that lie," she said. "The truth is, somebody shoved an open can of gasoline between the bars of the kitchen window last night and threw a lighted match or something of that sort after it."

Latham's rosy face paled. "Good Lord! What a fiendish thing to do!" he cried. "And you're not going to say anything about it?"

"If there was an investigation it would prevent me from going on this voyage. And nothing would come of it. I prefer to deal with my enemies myself."

"Have you an idea who did it?" he asked.

"It was obviously somebody who didn't want me aboard the yacht."

"And you're still determined to go?"

She smiled at his simple earnestness. "I cannot take a dare, my dear. It is a weakness of my character. Yesterday I wasn't at all keen, but to-day I'm mad to go!"

He was terribly distressed. "But seriously, Rosika, I can't stand by and see you risk your life for—for—"

"Five thousand a week," she put in slyly.

"Be serious! This fellow Horace Laghet is a scoundrel! You should hear the stories they tell about him down town. If somebody wants to shoot him up, let them go to it and welcome, I say. What have you got to do with it?"

"I can see that Laghet is going to give me trouble," she admitted. "But a job is a job, and this is rather a fascinating one."

"What can you do?" he pleaded. "On land you know where you are, but on a ship anything may happen. The sea is always there to swallow a body and yield no trace. If there is a man aboard that yacht who is determined to get Laghet, how can you stop him? If you get in his way, you'll go overboard too."

She merely smiled.

"How can you save the man from being murdered when he makes an enemy of every man he meets?" he went on. "There's a feeling of hatred rolling up against Horace Laghet like a tidal wave. If you take his part it will overwhelm you along with him."

She patted his cheek affectionately. "You're a great dear, Latham, but you're on the wrong line. If you could persuade me that this was going to be a quiet cruise, with nothing to do but loll in a deck chair and put on pounds and pounds, I'd drop it this minute. But when you talk of *danger!* Ha! . . ." She flung her arms up. "It's useless, my dear. Ask Bella."

He spread out his hands helplessly.

CHAPTER III.

THE BUCCANEER.

WHEN we descended from the taxicab at the yacht landing, foot of East Twenty-sixth Street, the Buccaneer, lying out in midstream, burst on us in full glory. It was a cold bright day and the sparkling river made a fit setting for her. A great white ship with an insolent squat funnel and long strings of fluttering flags.

As she was the latest sensation of the marine world, a crowd had gathered on the pier to have a look at her. Ultra modern design, the yachtsmen were saying, with her high sides and oblique cut-water; ugly, but very smart.

Only second in interest for the crowd was the launch which was waiting for us, a dazzling affair of maho-

gany and brass. It was such a launch as might have been used to carry kings and queens. When we stepped aboard everybody gaped at us in awe and envy. Some of the rougher types muttered insolently.

In five minutes we were at the ship's ladder, which was not a ladder at all but a teakwood stairway carpeted with rope to keep your feet from slipping. A handsome young sailor handed us off, and a smart officer saluted on deck. There was a steward in a white coat to show us to our cabins.

All very grand, but it did not make us feel we were being welcomed on board. Sailor, officer, and steward all had cagey, expressionless faces. Not one of them looked us in the eye.

It appeared that we were the last arrivals. The launch was immediately hooked to the davits and drawn up. A boatswain's whistle blew, and I heard the clank of the anchor chain up forward. Fancy keeping all that waiting!

Below, our suite was more like that of a luxury hotel than anything afloat. A sitting room twenty feet long with a bedroom almost as big at either side; a marble bathroom for each of us, with gold-plated fittings. The whole was lighted with a row of big round portholes rimmed with brass, and it was all so beautifully furnished and decorated that nothing obtruded itself; it just received you.

The steward told us that cocktails were being served in the winter garden. When we had taken off our coats he led us up to the sun deck, where there was a green and white room with a glass roof and big windows all around. It was filled with tropical plants and orchids. Here the party was gathered.

When you are introduced to a lot of new people at the same time you only get your bearings by degrees. I found myself beside a lovely young girl with a modest, timid air that was almost unbelievable in this day and generation. She told me that she had lately graduated from a convent in France. This was Celia Dale, Horace Laghet's fiancée. It seemed rather a shame.

Her mother was a beautiful woman, still on the sunny side of forty. Everybody called her Sophie. Unlike her daughter, she was very much in the know. Her bright, touched-up eyes darted this way and that, full of calculation. I suppose she thought she had done very well by the girl.

The third woman was Mrs. Holder, or Adele. She was a beauty of what used to be called the Dresden china type, with that exquisite fragility that appeals so strongly to men, particularly of Horace Laghet's sort. It often goes with a hearty appetite.

Amongst the men I should have recognized Adrian Laghet anywhere as Horace's brother. He was tall and had the same cast of features, though an entirely different character was suggested. Adrian was soft. Already at thirty-two his waist measure was approaching that of his chest. He was the social light of the family.

Emil Herbert, the pianist, was an attractive young fellow, blond, quiet in manner, but with the fine resolute eye that bespeaks a master of his trade, which Emil was. Apart from music, however, he was nothing but a shy boy. I caught him glancing sideways at the girl beside me.

Under the influence of the masterly cocktails there was a lot of talk and laughter. Superficially it had the look of a good party, but it was not so really. I had not been amongst them two minutes before I could feel the strain. The eyes in those smiling faces

were guarded and uneasy. All those smart people seemed to be encased in glass armor.

Tall, slender, and casual, Mme. Storey, amongst the other women, looked like a cardinal bird amongst tame canaries. Her smile was perfectly good-humored and inscrutable. I felt enmity in the room, but among those glassy smiles I could not locate it.

HORACE LAGHET seemed to get his pleasure out of insulting everybody. That was his idea of humor. When he brought his brother up to introduce him to Mme. Storey he said: "This is little Adrian, who will kiss your hand, and do a little song and dance or paint a little picture or what you will!"

A loud laugh greeted this. Horace's cracks naturally were sure of a big hand. I could see by Adrian's eyes that it flicked him on the raw, but he swallowed it.

Horace, indifferent to what anybody might think, bore himself in a loverly fashion towards the beautiful Adele. This made me feel more than ever sorry for the girl he was supposed to be engaged to. Celia didn't seem to mind. Perhaps she was too inexperienced to realize what it meant. I wondered what her mother was about. Willing, I suppose, to overlook anything if she could only take the rich Horace into camp.

The yacht was under way and I went to one of the windows to watch the panorama of the city moving by. It was hard to believe that we had already cut loose from all we knew. The East Side waterfront is far from beautiful, but I felt a sudden love for the old town, and heartily wished myself ashore. Moment by moment I liked our situation less.

Adele joined me at the window. She said lightly: "I wonder if it will show any change when we come back?"

"Who can tell?" I said. And, to myself I added: "Will *we* show any change when we come back? And will we all come back?"

"Just the same, I'm glad to get away for awhile," Adele went on with her meaningless professional-beauty smile. "Life in New York is so wearing!"

She was very beautiful. I wondered if there was any real feeling under that perfect mask. I presently found out.

A sailor came walking along the deck outside. I saw him before Adele did. I was struck by his appearance, because he didn't look like a common sailor, but like a member of the younger country club set who had been hitting it up; a clean-cut young man who was getting a little blurry. He didn't know any one was watching him. There was a possessed look in his eyes such as you see in one who goes along the street muttering to himself.

When he saw me, he dropped his head and assumed the slouch of a common fellow. He went by us with his head down. I heard Adele gasp, and her slender fingers closed around my wrist like a vise.

"Please . . . please," she stammered, "come downstairs with me."

I followed her wonderingly through the door into the stair hall. She was careful to keep her back turned to the others in the room. Her knees were giving under her. Yet when Horace called out: "Where are you going, Adele?" she sang out gayly: "Back in a moment."

She went stumbling down the stairs. I heard her mumbling to herself: "Oh, my God! What am I going to do?" She clung to the post at the bottom, white-

faced and shaking. In a moment she opened her eyes and said, with a ghastly attempt to laugh it off:

"What must you think of me?"

"You are not well," I said.

"Yes . . . yes," she said eagerly. "It was so hot upstairs I thought I was going to faint."

I said nothing. Feeling perhaps that her excuse was rather lame, she went on: "I have a bad heart, you see, and naturally one doesn't want a man to know it. If you had not come with me Horace would have followed and . . . and his eyes are so sharp!" A terrible shudder went through her thin body.

"Come to my cabin and get a spot of brandy," I said.

When she had swallowed the brandy she began to chatter. "I feel all right now. It was nothing at all. Nothing."

She went to the mirror and rubbed a little rouge into her cheeks, then turned her head this way and that, gazing into her face with the most penetrating anxiety. I suppose that face meant everything in the world to her. It was all she had.

She reëntered the winter garden with a gay rattle of talk. "Horace, when are you going to show us over the vessel? I can't wait until I see the swimming pool! It's all perfectly marvelous! Like Aladdin's cave afloat!"

In my mind I could still hear that desperate voice murmuring: "Oh, my God! What am I going to do?"

CHAPTER IV.

THE EAVESDROPPER.

MME. STOREY'S first job was to acquaint herself with every part of the yacht, and to make friends with everybody on board. We wandered around, pretending innocent curiosity.

Captain Grober was an enigma. A fine-looking, sailorlike German of the bristly-haired type, he was most polite. But we could never get him to unbend; his gray-blue eyes held no more expression than those of a fish. One had to admit that his position on board was a difficult one. He had always commanded big liners, where his word was law at sea, but now he was under the shadow of the owner.

The under-officers, all young Germans, took their cue from the captain. Polite and wooden, it was impossible to make friends with them. On the other hand, the engine room staff was mostly Scotch. The chief, McLaren, was a grand old fellow whom I always delighted to talk to when I could catch him on deck.

It was not a happy ship. Horace was brutal and overbearing with the crew. American sailors would not stand for it. As Horace's guests we shared in his unpopularity. Once as we sat on deck he passed near by, looked down into the well deck over the rail and passed on. We heard a growling voice from below: "Huh! Thinks he's the Lord God Almighty! But he ain't immortal! He ain't immortal!" Mme. Storey arose and looked over the rail, but the speaker was gone.

Among the friends we made was Jim, a gnarly old fellow with white hair. His principal duty was to wipe down the white-painted walls on deck. Thus he was nearly always somewhere about our quarters, and we could talk to him when we pleased.

Another man we liked was Les Farman. We came upon him sitting on a bitt on the forward deck making a bag out of a piece of sailcloth. He was a magnificent physical specimen with

steady blue eyes and firm mouth. Mme. Storey stopped and looked at him in pleasure. He stood up in instinctive politeness, but he was not in the least afraid of her. Indeed there was a hint of fun in his eyes.

He knew his own worth. And that charmed her.

We talked for awhile. When she suggested that he seemed somewhat above his station he answered coolly that he had a master's papers. Having had trouble with his owners (he did not say of what nature) he had found it impossible to get another ship during such hard times, and had been glad to sign as a seaman on the Buccaneer.

Just because those two men were so square and decent, Mme. Storey would not attempt to use them as spies on the rest of the crew.

I was never able to point out the sailor whose appearance had so terrified Adele. Apparently he was keeping out of our way.

On our third day at sea Mme. Storey and I were pacing the deck after lunch. It was already warm as we steamed south, and all the doors and windows were open.

Every time we passed the door of the music room we could hear Emil Herbert softly playing Chopin. We could see little Celia Dale sitting in a big chair behind with tears in her eyes, and smiling at us through them. It was about the only moment of the day when the child could escape from her argus-eyed mother.

PRESENTLY we met Horace himself, black-browed and scowling, strolling with a cigar.

"Rosika," he said at once (all formality had been dropped by this time), "I want a talk with you."

His overbearing manner always brought a wicked smile to Mme. Storey's face.

"Well, I can spare you ten minutes," she said.

"Do you have to have this creature along?" he said with a hard glance in my direction. It was supposed to be a joke. I didn't care.

"Oh, why not?" said Mme. Storey.

He gave in sullenly, and led the way up to the sun deck, where he had a sort of den aft of the officers' quarters. It was a beautiful little room with red leather chairs, sporting prints on the walls and a real fireplace.

Horace mixed himself a whisky and soda. Mme. Storey and I declined. "What do you think of the situation?" he growled.

"I don't think anything of it," she said. "I lack information."

"How about the crew?" he asked. "I've seen you going about amongst them."

"What is the captain's history?"

"Surely you don't suspect him" said Horace, staring.

"I didn't say I did. He seems perfectly correct."

"He used to be captain of the Königin Louise."

"Oh, the big liner that burned in the stream at Bremerhaven."

"Not his fault," said Horace. "He wasn't even aboard at the time."

"There was an ugly story going around that she was burned for the insurance. She had never paid expenses, you see."

"Even so," said Horace, "certainly it wasn't the captain who got the insurance . . . I bank on him," he went on. "He's got twenty-five years of good seamanship behind him. I consider myself lucky to get him for a little vessel like this."

Mme. Storey said nothing.

"Apart from the yacht we don't touch anywhere." Horace went on, "What possible reason could he have for wanting me out of the way?"

"I don't know," she said mildly. "I'm not accusing him. Only asking for information. He brought his own officers aboard?"

"Yes, his navigating officers. Everybody else was hired in New York."

"By him?"

"Yes; but in consultation with my attorney. I may tell you that when I received my first warning two weeks ago, I fired the whole crew on a caprice, and hired another. The record of every man aboard has been investigated."

"I doubt if it is in the fo'c's'le that the source of danger is to be looked for," said Mme. Storey.

Horace stared angrily, but said nothing.

"MURDERS, roughly, divide themselves into five classes," she remarked. "First, there is the killing committed in a sudden passion. That is out, because this plot has been cooking for two weeks or more. Second, there is the murder induced by jealousy . . . Have you wronged any man by taking his girl from him, Horace?"

He suspected that she was making fun of him.

"No," he said shortly.

"Then that's out. Next, there is the motive of fear. Has any man got cause to fear you?"

"No," he said with a hard grin. "I've already done my worst to them. I'm out of the market now."

"Fourth, there is revenge," she went on. "But revenge is the motive of primitive natures only. Except among gangsters, murders for revenge are rare. That brings us to the last and most prolific cause of murders."

"What's that?"

"Murder for profit."

"Who on earth is there who would profit by my murder?" he said scornfully.

She did not answer directly. "When are you going to be married?" she asked.

"What's that got to do with it?" he said. "There's no hurry. I'll marry when I get around to it."

"Hm!" said Mme. Storey.

"Isn't she a little darling!" he said with a cynical smile. "So modest and gentle! The perfect wife! Almost unheard of nowadays."

"If you're not ready for marriage, why get engaged?"

"I want to make sure of her. She's unique. Sophie is taking care of her for me. Sophie won't let the bloom get rubbed off my peach."

"Sounds Turkish to me," murmured Mme. Storey.

"Hey?" he demanded.

"Nothing . . . Have you made a will?"

"Sure."

"Is Adele Holder mentioned in it?"

"Well, upon my word!" he said, darkening with anger.

"I told you I should have to ask all sorts of questions," said Mme. Storey calmly.

"Yes, she is," he said sullenly. "For fifty thousand only."

"Have you told her?"

"Yes. She has a lot more than that to gain from me living."

"Surely. Who is your heir?"

"My brother Adrian. Until such a time as I marry, of course."

"He knows you will marry," said Mme. Storey quietly. "There's a possible motive."

"What! Adrian!" he cried. He laughed harshly. "That poor fish! He has no reason for existence apart from me! He is nothing but what I have made him!"

"He could stand alone if he had your money," she said.

"Adrian? That's comic!" He laughed again.

"Weak men are the most dangerous," remarked Mme. Storey. "They strike in the dark . . . You treat him badly."

"He's a fool!" said Horace. "He asks for it."

"How much do you allow him?"

"Fifteen thousand a year."

"Not very much. Considering what your income is."

"More than he's worth," said Horace. "He does nothing."

. "Suppose this weak man is nursing a sense of resentment in his breast," said Mme. Storey. "A sort of poisonous mushroom growth that spreads and spreads until it crowds out everything but itself."

"I know every thought in his foolish head," said Horace.

"No man knows the secret thoughts of another."

"I've been with Adrian since infancy. He's always done what I've told him."

"He could hire tools stronger than himself. With such a tremendous stake in view he could afford to offer a big price."

"You will never convince me that Adrian is plotting against me," cried Horace. "He hasn't the initiative of a tadpole!"

"Well anyhow, there's more than one man concerned in it," said Mme. Storey. "I advise you not to go on deck alone at night."

"Let them try it, that's all," growled Horace, clenching his fist. "On my own ship, I'll be the master!"

MME. STOREY suddenly sat erect in her chair. "Lower your voice!" she said quietly. "There is somebody out on deck!"

With a single movement Horace was out of his chair, and through the door. We heard him cursing and ran out. He was struggling with a sailor. Horace had the man by the throat and was shaking him like a rat. It was the same man whose appearance had so frightened Adele two days before.

"Let the man speak!" said Mme. Storey sharply.

Horace let go and the sailor backed off, feeling of his throat and scowling from under his brows with venomous hatred. "What are you doing here?" demanded Horace.

"Just on my way aft to report to the quartermaster," muttered the sailor.

"Say 'sir' when you speak to me!"

"Sir!" repeated the man with an ugly sneer.

"You're a liar!" said Horace. "You were listening just beyond the window."

"I wasn't listening. I could hear that you were talking privately and I was afraid to show myself in front of the windows. I couldn't hear anything."

"What's your name?"

"Johnson, sir."

"Get on about your work!" barked Horace. "If I catch you listening at my windows again I'll know what to do."

The man picked up his hat, saluted, and slouched aft.

"He couldn't have heard anything," Horace muttered, rubbing his lip and glancing sideways at Mme. Storey.

"You won't get much out of a spy by strangling him," she said dryly. "Leave him to me and I'll try other measures."

CHAPTER V.

ILL-STARRED.

ONE afternoon Mme. Storey and I were in our sitting room decoding wireless messages that had been received, and coding the replies. It had been impossible to cut off the business in New York with one stroke. Latham Rowe had been left in charge of the office, and we were in communication with him every day. I helped Mme. Storey prepare many of the messages, but not all of them.

We were interrupted by a knock at the door. It was Celia Dale. She ran in, flung her arms around Mme. Storey and buried a hot face in her neck. The girl was as natural and spontaneous as a flower, and a great friendship had sprung up between her and my employer.

Mme. Storey held her off, trying to see into her face. "What's the matter?" she asked.

Celia obstinately kept her head down. The red and white chased each other through her delicate cheeks. "Emil kissed me," she murmured.

Mme. Storey folded her in her arms. We exchanged a glance over Celia's head. It was only too clear what a danger this created, yet the girl was such a darling we couldn't help smiling too.

"How did it happen?" asked Mme. Storey.

"It was up in the music room just now. Emil was playing something so wistful that it brought the tears to my eyes. I always cry when he plays, though I love it better than anything. Suddenly he stopped and looked around. He said—he said my eyes were like diamonds. He went down on his knees beside my chair and—and he kissed me."

"Did you like it?" asked Mme. Storey.

A very small voice issued from her neck: "Ye-es."

"Did you kiss him back again?"

"I'm afraid I did."

Mme. Storey held her close. "But you're engaged to marry another man."

"I clean forgot it!" cried Celia.

We laughed outright at that.

"What shall I do?" mourned Celia.

"Well, we must talk it over," said Mme. Storey.

"I think Emil is waiting out in the corridor," murmured Celia.

"Bring him in!"

Emil entered, very flustered and good looking, his blond hair all standing on end as if he had been wildly running his fingers through it. "I'm so sorry!" he burst out. "I wouldn't have had it happen for anything. I just lost myself!"

Celia raised her head and looked at him a little resentfully.

"Don't express too much regret," said Mme. Storey, smiling. "It might be misunderstood."

"I love her!" he cried with perfect inconsistency. "And I think she loves me back again. Anyhow, she would in time."

"Yes," said Celia.

"Nonsense!" said Mme. Storey as well as she could speak for laughing. "When did you two meet for the first time?"

"When we came aboard the yacht."

"Then you don't know your own minds yet, either of you. Give yourselves a chance."

"I shall never change," said Emil seriously.

"Nor I," said Celia.

"This is just dramatics," said Mme. Storey. "Now listen to me. The trouble with young people is they attach far too much importance to a kiss. They think because they have kissed once that they must go on kissing to the bitter end. There's nothing to it. A kiss is just an accident. It's like a drop of rain that might fall on anybody's head. You don't have to stay out in it until you're all wet!"

THEY both laughed at that. Celia left Mme. Storey and, going to Emil, slipped her hand inside his like a child. They looked at each other, completely lost.

It gave me a little stab of pain to see it, because if ever a love affair was ill-starred this was it.

"Emil, you know she's promised to another man," said Mme. Storey.

He dropped Celia and thrust his fingers through his hair. "Oh, it's damnable!" he cried. "An old man like that!"

"Celia," said Mme. Storey. "Are you in love with Horace?"

"Oh, no!" cried the girl in great surprise. "I respect him, of course, but how could I be in love with him?"

"Then you must tell your mother that."

"I have told her. She says love will come."

"Emil," said Mme. Storey, "you know that Horace is a violent man. He is terrible when his will is crossed. There will be the most awful trouble if this comes out."

Emil flushed. "I'm not afraid of him," he said quickly.

Mme. Storey saw that she was taking the wrong line, and quietly abandoned it. "What do you propose to do in this situation?"

Emil despaired again. "What can I do?" he moaned. "If we were ashore it would be easy. I could walk out of the man's house. But here I am, a guest on his yacht and I can't get away!"

"You can leave at Curaçao when we call there in a couple of days."

"Oh, no!" they both cried in terror. Their hands flew together again.

"How could I go away and leave her in that man's power?" cried Emil brokenly. "Her mother is completely dominated by him. It would be more than flesh and blood could stand!"

"All right," said Mme. Storey. "But there must be no more kissing until this matter is cleared up. Don't fool yourselves by thinking you can keep it secret. Nothing can be kept secret aboard a yacht. You must play the game."

"All right," said Emil doggedly. He glanced longingly at Celia. "It's not going to be easy now that I know she likes me."

Mme. Storey bit her lip. "And, Celia," she went on, "you must tell your mother about Emil."

The girl paled. "How can I!" she gasped. "Her heart is set on my marrying Horace. She thinks of nothing else. You don't know my mother!"

"Mme. Storey is right, Celia," urged Emil. "Your mother must be told. If you can't do it I will."

"Oh, no!" cried Celia in terror. "That would be worse. She doesn't like you."

"Sophie must be told!" said Mme. Storey firmly.

"All right," murmured the girl. "I'll manage it somehow." She looked imploringly at Mme. Storey. "But you'll stand by us, Rosika?"

"To the limit!" said Mme Storey. "If you play the game!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE CAT'S-PAW.

ON the surface that cruise was like any other cruise in a luxury yacht. High spirits was everybody's line. Adrian Laghet was the chief entertainer. He always had some new stunt to propose. Nobody had a good time really. It was like a lot of hysterical children jumping on the thin crust of a volcano. I waited for the explosion.

I used to wonder what was really going on behind Adrian's calflike brown eyes, which were too large and emotional for a man. He was a very good-looking fellow, if you like that sort of thing. He was supposed to be artistic, but there was no evidence that he ever worked at the arts.

Once when we happened to be the first ones to meet in the lounge for cocktails before dinner I asked: "Do you find it difficult to be Horace's brother?"

"Why should I?" he countered with a swift, hard stare. "Horace is one swell guy!"

"Why, of course," I said. "But he's such an overpowering somebody."

Adrian sounded his loud, empty laugh. "I think it's a swell job to be Horace's little brother!" he cried. He twirled around with his cocktail glass in one hand and a *canapé d'anchois* in the other. "Like the lilies of the field, I toil not, neither do I spin, yet Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these!"

Such was Adrian's style.

On the night before we arrived at the island of Curaçao everybody was up in the winter garden playing some absurd game that Adrian had started. The laughter sounded false and strained and I was fed up. Only Emil and Celia were really enjoying themselves, because the game gave them a chance to touch hands occasionally.

Adele had already slipped away on the pretext of a headache and at a moment when nobody was looking I beat it too. I intended to pick up a book in the music room and go to my cabin to read. The sea was as smooth as a pond.

It was dark in the music room, and as I put out my hand to turn the switch I happened to catch an oblique glimpse of Adele through a window. She was coming along the promenade deck outside, and there was something so furtive in her attitude that I instinctively drew back my hand and watched her.

Her head was continually over her shoulder watching to see if she was observed. Her face was white and strained. She passed my window going aft, and I crossed the hall and went on through the dark lounge, keeping her in view through the windows.

At the end of the lounge there were windows looking aft. Out on deck near the stern there was a little stairway leading down. It was used only by the sailors. Adele paused with her hand on the rail for a cautious look all around. Then she descended out of sight.

It was my duty to find out what was going on, and I followed without a qualm. I hastened back to the stairway. I looked down. I could see nothing. I took off my slippers and went down in stocking feet.

I was now on what they called A deck. Aft of all the cabins there was a little open deck from side to side with a solid screen shutting off a bit of

the stern. I think the machinery that turned the rudder was behind that screen. There was a door in it, and it was closed, but as the deck was open behind the screen I could hear the murmuring voices there.

I HAD come right in the middle of a tense scene. I heard Adele's voice broken with weeping:

"Oh, Harry, why did you come? Why did you come?"

Then a man growling: "Damn it all, you're my wife!"

I recognized the voice of the sailor that Horace had manhandled on deck for eavesdropping.

"But you knew all along what I was going to do. You agreed to it then."

"I got to thinking," muttered the man. "I couldn't stand it."

"What good does it do, your coming aboard?" she went on. "You will ruin me! And yourself too. He'll kill you if he finds out. He's a wild beast when he's aroused."

"He won't find out if you don't tell him."

"You know I won't do that. But, oh God, what torture! Every moment! Every moment! I've been sick ever since I learned you were on the vessel. Horace is already wondering what's the matter."

"Damn Horace!" said the man thickly. "Damn him to hell!"

"Oh, hush!" wailed Adele. "What good does that do?"

"Do you love this man?" he demanded savagely.

"Love him! I hate him! I hate him! You don't know what I have to go through!"

"Look!" he said eagerly. "We're going to call at one of the islands tomorrow. Come ashore with me. We'll make our way back to New York somehow."

"He has promised me the Emeritinsky diamond. It's worth a hundred thousand dollars."

"To hell with it! Do you want to drive me crazy?"

"I won't go."

"You've got to go!"

A thin hard note crept into Adele's voice. "I won't go. And you can't make me! . . . This is our one chance to make a stake. If I passed it up you would be the first one to blame me when we went broke again. We've got to have money. How are we going to live?"

There was a silence, then the man's voice, humbled, indicating that he had given in. "But you do care for me, don't you?"

"You know I do!"

"All right," he said. "If you'll just let me see you once in a while I'll keep quiet."

"How can I do that?" mourned Adele. "Think of the risk! Oh, this is awful!"

I stole back up the stairs. I could not tell how suddenly this scene might end. If the door opened there I was. Anyhow, I had learned the nature of the situation. That was enough for the moment.

I returned to the winter garden. The noisy game, or another game, was still in progress. I let Mme. Storey know that I wanted to speak to her privately. When she was able to get away we went down to the promenade deck. On the stairway we met Adele coming up. She had brightened up her complexion, and passed us with a sweet, insincere smile.

Out on deck as soon as I started to tell Mme. Storey what I had overheard, she said:

"Come on! Let's try to intercept him on the way back to his quarters."

Forward of the promenade deck and below it there was a space between the owner's part of the ship and the fo'c'sle that they called the well deck. There was a ladder leaning down from the promenade.

We descended it, and waited at the foot while I told the rest of my tale. There was nobody around.

A DOOR opened aft, and our sailor came out of it. He was passing us without paying any attention when Mme. Storey said softly:

"Holder!"

He jumped as if he had received a stab, and turned a terrified face. He tried to recover himself, but it was too late.

"Were you speaking to me?"

"No use trying to bluff it out," said Mme. Storey. "Your talk with your wife just now was overheard."

"Spying!" he snarled.

She ignored it. "You and I have got to have a little talk."

"You've got nothing to do with me!"

"If you act ugly," she said coolly, "I shall have to tell Horace Laghet that you are aboard this vessel. You can figure out what that will mean."

He said nothing. His chin went down.

I could hear him breathing fast.

"I don't want to be a party to a killing," she went on. "You'd better come to my suite, so we can talk things over."

"Not allowed in that part of the vessel," he growled.

"You have just come from there. If you are with me nobody will question it."

He shrugged and followed us. It was after midnight, and we met nobody in the corridor. At a sign from my employer I locked the door of our sitting room after we had passed in. She said:

"Put up your hands!"

He stared at her open-mouthed, and did not obey until he saw that she had taken a small automatic from the drawer of the table and was playing with it. Then his hands went up fast enough.

"Search him, Bella," Mme. Storey ordered.

I took a gun from his hip pocket. It was the only weapon he had on him. I handed it to Mme. Storey and she threw both guns in the drawer and closed it.

"You're better off without it," she said, smiling. "Sit down and relax. Smoke a cigarette. I am not your enemy. In fact, I'm sorry for you, though you appear to have got yourself into this mess. Well, we usually do."

He sat down, staring at her sullenly. He couldn't make her out at all. He lit a cigarette with trembling fingers. One could see the promising boy he had been with his nice eyes, and thick wavy hair brushed back.

He had probably been spoiled by his mother.

"You and Adele are not divorced," said Mme. Storey.

"No," he growled.

"Were you living together up to the time she sailed?"

"Off and on."

"When Adele told you she was going to make this cruise you didn't object?"

Holder was silent.

"Then why have you started to kick up a dust now?"

His muttered answer was the same

he had given Adele: "I got to thinking."

"What started you thinking?"

"Aah! What's the use of all these questions?" he blurted out.

"Somebody is using you as a tool," said Mme. Storey calmly, "and I want to find out who it is."

THIS was evidently a new thought to him. He stared at her with distended eyes, but said nothing.

"Somebody's been after you," she suggested. "Got you all stirred up."

He shook his head. "Nobody ever said anything."

"Then it was a letter; an anonymous letter. Signed Well-Wisher or something like that. Good old Well-Wisher!"

"Lord! How do you know that?" he said, staring.

"I am merely following out a process of deduction," she said with a shrug. This letter asked you as a man and an American if you were willing to stand for your wife going on a cruise in Horace Laghet's yacht. It told you what other men would think of you. It suggested that if you had a spark of manliness in you, you'd put a stop to it."

From the frightened look that appeared in his eyes it was evident that she had hit on the truth, or very close to it.

"Such letters always run true to form," she went on.

"It suggested that you ship aboard the yacht so you could see what went on—"

"That was the second letter," he muttered, forgetting himself.

"Oh, there were two," said Mme Storey. "Sort of follow-up system. I suppose the second letter told you just what to say, what name to give.

"Told you everything would be made easy for you, very likely. Told you you had friends who wouldn't see you wronged!"

His hang-dog look confessed that she was right.

"And you fell for it!"

"I was very much like a crazy man," he muttered. "I couldn't help myself."

"What happened after you got aboard?" she asked.

"Nothing. I was treated like anybody else."

"Who approached you? What proposition has been made?"

"Nobody. Nothing."

"Where did the gun you had come from?"

No answer from Holder.

Mme. Storey took the gun out of the drawer and examined it.

"You got this after you came aboard," she said.

"Well, I found it in my bunk," he muttered. "There was a box of shells with it."

"And you were glad to get it," she suggested. "You didn't trouble much where it came from."

No answer.

"Sooner or later you would have shot Horace Laghet?"

"Well, that's my business," he growled.

"You would certainly have shot him that first day when he attacked you if you had the gun then."

He scowled and twisted uncomfortably in his seat.

"And what would have happened? You would have gone to the chair, or at least to prison for life, and somebody would have reaped a golden harvest from Horace Laghet's sudden death."

Holder said nothing.

"What do you propose to do about it?" she asked.

Like a child he took refuge in his stubborn silence.

"Are you willing to put yourself in my hands?"

"What do you want to do?" he asked suspiciously.

"Arrange for your passage from Curaçao back to New York."

"And leave her with him?" he growled. "I'm only flesh and blood, after all!"

"You've got to face realities," said Mme Storey. "If you don't go ashore to-morrow, and stay ashore, I'll have to tell Horace Laghet who you are. That's my job."

There was no answer. The man seemed undecided.

"Adele isn't worth it," she said softly.

He hung his head.

"You know it," she murmured compassionately, "but you're in hell just the same."

A spasm of intolerable pain twisted his face. His endurance snapped. "Aah! What is it to you?" he snarled, jumping up. "You think you have me on the grill, don't you? Good sport to sit there and watch me squirm! I know women . . . Well, to hell with you! To hell with you! I won't leave this vessel without my wife, and that's flat!"

Mme. Storey shrugged and spread out her hands.

Holder's voice scaled up hysterically. "Go ahead and tell Laghet!" he cried. "Tell him! Tell him! I have plenty of friends aboard. The crew is with me. They're men, not dogs. And if Laghet lays a finger on me they'll mutiny. Do you know what that means? Mutiny! It will sweep you all overboard! If you know what's good for you, you'll be the one to go ashore to-morrow. I've warned you now! Go ashore and stay ashore, if you ever want to see New York again." Shaking and gasping, he turned and rattled the door.

"Let him out," said Mme. Storey quietly.

I unlocked the door and he ran down the corridor. I turned and faced my employer.

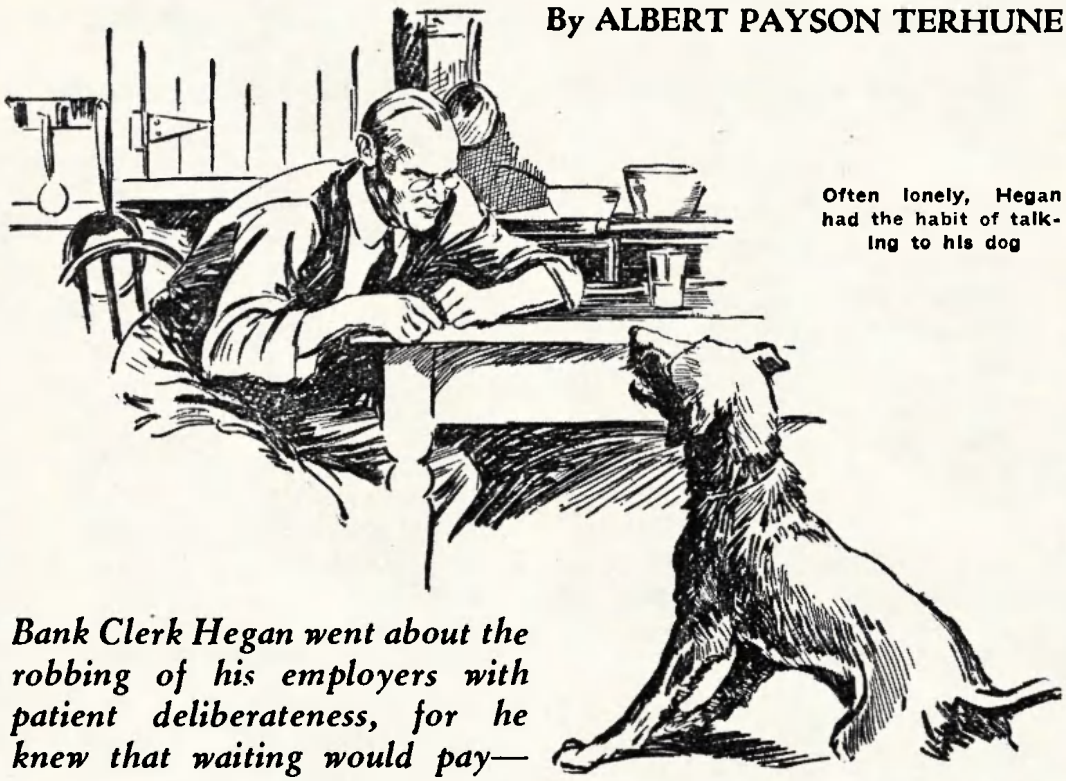
"You dare not tell Laghet," I said. "Holder has the whip-hand over us. What can you do?"

"It appears to be up to Adele," she said, smiling enigmatically. "I will go and talk to her."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

Time, Chance, and a Dog

By ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE



Often lonely, Hegan had the habit of talking to his dog

Bank Clerk Hegan went about the robbing of his employers with patient deliberateness, for he knew that waiting would pay—and pay big

WHEN Tertius Hegan decided to steal a fortune from the Wilbram National Bank, he knew well the chances for and against his success. He knew, too, the precise figures that would be scribbled on the price tag of Failure.

He weighed the matter shrewdly, deliberately. Day by day he weighed it, as he sat humped over his desk in the bank. Night after night he weighed it, as he tramped the woods and the country roads with his hulking dog, Grip, at his heels. Most keenly, most sanely, he weighed it in that minute or two of supreme clear-headedness which comes to so many of us in early morning, between waking and getting up. It was in such brief morning moments of vision that he not only weighed his plan but was able to build it to new strength and to gouge away its flaws.

As he dressed, in the mean bedroom of his mean track-side bungalow, and while he pottered over the preparing of his meager breakfast, he was reconstructing and testing each link in the scheme.

Like other lonely men, he had fallen into the habit of talking to his big dog, Grip, as to another human. The dog would lie dully in a corner of the kitchen, one glum eye on the cookstove and one on the breakfast table, while Hegan mumbled at him an occasional half coherent monologue the nature of which would have caused stark astonishment to his superiors at the Wilbram National. For example:

"Listen to me, Grip. Listen, and

stop staring that slobbery way at the breakfast. It isn't worth staring at. But some day it will be, Grip.—Some day!"

At sound of his own name, the dog would withdraw his sullen glance from the food. Then he would shift it back to the food, as Tertius Hegan maundered on:

"The two biggest things in this rotten world, Grip, are Time and Chance. They're a man's best friend—when he can make use of them—and they're his murderous enemy when he can't. That's right, Grip, you grouchy old glutton. I'll tell you what I mean.—Keep your silly eyes off that food!—Millions of fools have tapped tills or strongboxes. And they've gone to jail for it. Why? Because they didn't wait for the right chance, Grip, and because they didn't have sense enough to bide their time. They stole, and then they scrambled around, with neither time nor chance to save themselves. And they got nabbed.

"I'm not going to get nabbed, Grip, because I can afford to wait for Time and Chance to be my friends and my allies.—Not my enemies, Grip.—I've been waiting eighteen years. It's bound to come, soon or late. And then—"

This disjointed talk would go on until the speaker's mouth was stuffed with food. The monologue varied, but ever it dealt with the plan which had become Tertius Hegan's one aim in life.

SOME eighteen years earlier, Van Broeck, scrawny president of the Wilbram National Bank, had made a prosily smug speech to the pupils of Wilbram Borough's High School senior class. A speech for which Hegan still hated him, though far less bitterly than he hated him for a thousand later words and deeds. Van Broeck, in his speech, had explained the importance of banks to a community. He had painted glamorously the glories of a successful banker's life, and his value to the neighborhood and to world progress. Indirectly he used himself as the model of such a super-bank-magnate as he depicted.

He wound up by offering a position in the Wilbram National—a veritable First Step on the road to power and to untold wealth—to the member of the senior class who should be graduated with the highest honors. He left his credulous young hearers athrill with cravings to win the coveted prize. The class's term work, thenceforth, was a delight and an amazement to the school authorities. Some lads fell by the way, but a gratifying majority kept the hot pace, scourged onward by Van Broeck's offer.

In the end, Tertius Hegan won the dazzling award; and envied by every other boy in the village, he went to work at the Wilbram National. His pay at the start was $3.50 a week. His pay, eighteen years later, was $36 a week.

He had crowded those eighteen years with untiring labor and with a fierce zeal. He had made good, but he had not made good enough. Lesser men went past him, year after year. His superiors classified him as honest, industrious, loyal, and somewhat above the average in ability. But that was all. It was not sufficient to carry him forward as it carried workers of more marked talent and imagination. In brief, he was docketed as a Faithful Employee—a term hideous in its dearth of promise.

Gradually, Hegan had realized he never could hope to rise to the dizzy heights of success that Van Broeck had

outlined to the senior class. At first he was dazed, then he was hotly resentful. A cold and chronic hate obsessed him, and this crystallized with a resolve to snatch by force the golden prize which his superiors had not been square enough to give to him.

He lived a hermit life in the cheap bungalow which his parents had left him. His one comrade was Grip, the big mongrel that one day followed him home from work. Hegan spent barely half his puny salary; the rest, from lifelong habit, he saved. He was looked upon by the bank people as a miser who did not so much as dream of a good time.

Therein, the bank folk were even more mistaken than in their guess as to his character. For above all else in life, Hegan craved good times and luxury. And he had taken a blasphemously vehement oath to acquire them. With terrible patience he waited for his Time and his Chance.

They came—and he took them, as you shall see.

ONE sickeningly hot day in July, he got up before sunrise. This was to give Grip his morning run in the woods before the more unbearable heat of the day. When breakfast was eaten, Hegan locked his dog carefully in a stout wire kennel yard, and set forth for the bank.

Always it was needful to lock up Grip, for the dog followed his master everywhere. Indeed, upon two occasions he had dug his way out under the kennel yard—this before Tertius had extended its thick wires far underground—and had trailed Hegan to the sacred precincts of the bank itself, where Grip's presence on such hallowed ground earned for Tertius a vitriolic rebuke from old Van Broeck.

As Hegan started for the Wilbram National this morning, a little roadster drew in at the curb and its occupant hailed him.

Tertius forced back a scowl. He did not like the young fellow who was behind the steering wheel. The driver was Dirck Bleecker, nephew of the Wilbram National's president, and now serving as assistant cashier, a job which logically should have fallen to Tertius Hegan, when its seventy-year-old former incumbent had been pensioned. But Bleecker had landed the position, after only five years' service in the bank.

The other employees understood, or thought they understood, why the job had fallen to him, and why, presently, the cashiership would be his. Old Van Broeck was not only president of the Wilbram National, but he owned sixty-odd per cent of its stock; as had his father before him. Dirck Bleecker was his only living relative; and it was evident that the old man wanted to keep the bank in the family. That young Bleecker was brilliant, well trained, a hard worker and a natural born banker did not enter into these estimates made by his fellows.

THIS morning the youth had caught sight of grubby Tertius Hegan putting his dog into the run and then setting out heavily toward his day's toil. The poor plodder's air of bovine dullness touched the younger man. Wherefore Dirck halted his car and shouted:

"Morning, Hegan! Pile in and ride to the bank with me. No use wasting energy walking in this blistering heat. Hop in."

With what good grace he could muster, Tertius climbed awkwardly into the spare seat. He was not used

to getting into cars, though he meant one day to have a much better automobile than Dirck's.

"Thanks," he said civilly. "It's good of you."

"Glad to give you the lift," answered Bleecker. "Say, I saw you locking up your dog. Why do you do that? Does he run away?"

"No. He runs to wherever I am, if he can get out. Don't you remember how sore Mr. Van Broeck was when Grip caught my scent and followed me to the bank a couple of times? I don't want it to happen again, so I keep him locked up while I'm away."

"What breed is he?" queried Dirck. "I've often wondered, when I've driven past your bungalow and seen him."

"I don't know," responded Hegan. "No breed, I guess. Every breed, maybe. Streak of sleuth hound in him, somewhere. That makes him such a grand tracker.—I hope poor Whelton won't crumple with the heat to-day, the way he did that hot day last September. This weather is hard on fat men like him."

The roadster came to a halt at the entrance to the one-story bank. Tertius thanked Dirck for the lift, and scurried inside while Bleecker drove on to park his car. As Hegan slipped into his wire cage, he spoke affably to the obese man in the cage next to his.

"Morning, Whelton," he said. "A brute of a day, isn't it? By noon, it'll be sizzling. Pay day at all three mills, too. That means a lot of hustle for you in weather like this. Hard luck!"

Whelton, the receiving teller, turned a purpled face to him. The teller's eyes were glazed. He was breathing with some difficulty. Dazedly, he muttered some vague reply, then he went on with his work.

Tertius Hegan watched him with unobtrusive keenness. Thus the receiving teller had looked on that torrid September day, an hour or so before Hegan, hearing a bumping sound, looked through the grille to see the fat man lying in a dead swoon on the floor of his cage. Whelton was not geared, physically, to stand excessive heat.

A twinge of anticipation—like that felt by a hound when he strikes the scent—went through Hegan's spare body. This adipose teller was one of the two men who spelt for Hegan the blessings of Time and of Chance. The other man was Dirck Bleecker.

Long had Hegan waited. Long had he prepared to wait, if need be. But the combination of heat and pay day at the mills gave a hint that this might possibly be one of his two opportunities.

THE doors were opened. The Saturday morning rush poured in.

As the morning advanced, long lines began to string out before the two tellers' windows. But of the two, much the longer line was in front of the receiving teller's cage. For most of the mill workers were depositing more or less of their week's wages.

Mechanically Whelton went through his work, taking in cash, marking the amounts in passbooks or giving duplicate receipts. In the few rare intervals of breathing space, he sorted the ever mounting piles of large and small bills in the drawer racks.

Ever his wide face waxed more purple and his small eyes more and more vacantly glassy. Hegan, from his adjoining cage, went on with his own routine work, taking account of each stage of the receiving teller's malady. Hotter and hotter grew the day. The big room fairly shimmered with the breathless heat.

When the bank's front doors closed,

as usual on Saturday at twelve o'clock, every cage occupant and all other employees threw themselves into the final task of cleaning up their work for the week and getting away from the furnace-like place. All except Whelton. He had hung on as long as he could, by sheer will power. Now, very quietly indeed, he slumped to the floor of his cage.

Nobody noticed. Nobody but Tertius Hegan. Hegan had been watching, even as he had been watching Whelton every hot day for ten months. Unnoticed, Tertius stepped out into the aisle behind the cages. Passing Whelton's coop, he reached in and took from the drawer a bulky package of $21,000 in bills of various denominations, returning to his own cage.

Nobody had seen. Every one was busy cleaning up work in order to get away for the week-end, working feverishly or crankily.

Strolling on from his cage again, his hands full of documents, and the $21,000 bulking in his shirt beneath his loose alpaca coat, Tertius went to the cubbyhole file-room.

From the top of a dusty cabinet he lifted a metal box which contained a bunch of proxies. He took out the proxies, put them into a space which he had long since made for them in a cabinet drawer, and dropped the money into the box. Then he went back to his desk.

Several minutes later he heard the paying teller asking some question of Whelton. Getting no reply, the paying teller glanced into the receiving cage, and saw the inert figure on the floor.

SIX weeks passed before Whelton was out of the hospital. Then, and before then, he was worse than hazy as to anything which had happened during the hour or so of subconscious work before his collapse.

The bank accounted for the $21,000 deficit on the theory that the half-delirious man had made out grossly incorrect duplicate receipts that hot morning and had written incorrect figures in the passbooks. As all these errors had been in favor of the depositors, there was scant hope that the latter would call attention to them.

Old Van Broeck tore at his cherished silver toupee and all but wept. But the deficit was put down to profit and loss, and the bank footed the bill. Nobody was suspected. Least of all plodding Tertius Hegan—who, some weeks later, took home the loot in the big lunch bag which for years he had carried daily to and from the bank.

On the same night that he took home this money that was to be the basis of his plotted fortune, Tertius carried it far into the woods, to a cache beneath a rock which he had hollowed and lined with liquid cement long before. There he hid it, wrapped in waterproofing.

He did not take Grip along that night, as he usually did on his evening walks. Instead, he locked the dog in the run. He did not want him to follow and perhaps to become so inquisitive as to dig under the rock when he should smell there the scent of his master's fingers.

IT was six months before Time and Chance served Tertius Hegan once more. Then came his second and supreme opportunity. Wilbram was a small town of some seven thousand population, and it served as banking and shopping and financial center for the whole rural county. Thus its one bank was a place of vast local importance. Scores of depositors—some of them dairymen of considerable

means—had the old-fashioned rustic distrust of checks and of similar credit substitutes for money. They wanted hard cash in pay for the checks they took in; wanted and demanded it.

Thus, an unwontedly large supply of currency, for so small a bank, was always kept on hand. This reserve fund was stored in a separate safe; a safe to which only three persons had the combination—Van Broeck and the cashier and Dirck Bleecker, Van Broeck's nephew. Periodically, there were heavy drains on the fund. Then, at other times, it increased considerably. Tertius Hegan, during his years of waiting on Time and Chance, had studied out those periods of ebb and flow to a nicety.

Van Broeck and the cashier could have rattled off the figures of the combination in their sleep. But since Bleecker had once roused a rich farmer to ire, in his early days as assistant cashier, by making a blunder in opening the safe, his uncle had insisted that he keep the list of figures on a paper, for reference. He impressed it on Dirck that that paper must never leave the wallet in his inner pocket.

Perhaps two hundred times Hegan had seen Dirck reach into that wallet from inside his waistcoat for the combination which would open the safe. This verification also was a command of the silvery toupeed president. For the tale of the blunder had spread abroad, and farmers wanted to make certain that the youth was not going to be confused again as to the right series of turns.

ON a morning in the middle of the January thaw, Dirck Bleecker breezed into the bank wearing an English-made dove-colored gray tweed suit, a thing of spectacular beauty. Men turned to stare as he passed them, and an understanding grin went the rounds.

Always something of a dandy, Bleecker of late had blossomed forth into such splendor of raiment as adorns a wooing bird in springtime—and for like reason.

Dirck was in love; tremendously and all-encompassingly in love. More, he was engaged to the girl of his heart. They were to be married in June. Romance fairly crackled at every step he took.

To-day, Bleecker went into his cage and shed his Poole overcoat, hanging it up with care. Next he hurried to his high desk, for he was a bit late. An instant afterward his language floated through the busy pre-opening hush of the bank like a succession of bright blue skyrockets.

For as he struck against his desk in his haste to get to work before old Van Broeck had a chance to note his tardiness, the impact dislodged the old-fashioned half-pint inkwell that somebody had left carelessly off balance there. The ink cascaded over the dove-hued coat and waistcoat, spattering them liberally with blue-black fluid.

Ripping off the sullied garments, Bleecker strove in foolish panic to wipe them clean with his monogrammed handkerchief. Hegan bustled past, along the narrow aisle behind the cage. He had timed his advent well. Just as Bleecker made a dash for the washroom at the rear, to try the effects of hot water and a nail-brush on the ruined suit, Hegan glimpsed the waistcoat as it was turned upside down, in the swabbing process.

Obsequiously, he made room for the hastening Dirck. Indeed, Tertius made room so quickly that he dropped some balance sheets he was carrying.

He stooped to pick them up, and with them he picked up Bleecker's wallet, which had tumbled to the floor from the inside pocket of the inverted waistcoat.

Thence Hegan pottered off to his own cage.

There, under cover of the retrieved riffle of balance sheets, he was able to open the wallet and to find the combination slip in its inner compartment. He jotted down the figures almost with the speed of light. Thence, palming the wallet, he made his way to the washroom.

He found Bleecker scrubbing in futile fashion at the ruined coat. The waistcoat, still uncleansed, lay over a chair. Bleecker's back was toward it, as he scrubbed above the washbowl.

In a fraction less than a second Tertius had slipped the wallet into the gaping inside pocket of the waistcoat. Then, still obsequiously, he was asking Dirck what had happened, and if he could be of any service.

That afternoon Hegan stayed on at the bank, plugging away at his books, until the last employee but himself had left. As he did this same thing three afternoons out of five—he was a glutton for work, even if he was only a plodder—nobody gave heed to the poor dull fellow's delay.

An hour later Tertius carried home —and thence by night to his cache in the woods—no less than $83,000 in high denomination bills. As usual, he left Grip locked in the kennel run.

Well, his work was done. He had $104,000 in all, in the cache. It was enough to let him live in such luxury, for the rest of his life, as never he had known.

All he had to do was to go to some other region, invest the money in gilt-edged six per cent first mortgages—and have an income of more than $6,000 a year thereafter. Compared with his weekly $36—his annual $1,872—$6,000 was a fortune. Especially when it should be added to his lifetime savings. He had read that there were places in foreign lands where on $6,000 a year one might live as lavishly as on $20,000 a year in America.

Naturally, Hegan was not going to be fool enough to clear out, so soon. He had waited eighteen long years. He could afford to wait a little while longer. This thing must be one hundred per cent safe. He waited.

THE next week the bank examiner made his periodical and well-announced "surprise visit" to the Wilbram National, and the loss of the $83,000 was duly discovered.

Right luckily for himself, the ancient cashier had gone to Florida, a month earlier, to recover from an attack of pneumonia which had kept him from the bank a full month before that. And old Van Broeck, in person, had counted the sum in that separate hoard a bare fortnight before its loss was learned. This put the defalcation straight up to Dirck Bleecker, the only person except Van Broeck and the absent cashier who knew the combination.

There were riotous times at the hastily convened meeting of the directors. Nobody, of course, supposed that Dirck Bleecker had stolen the cash, but he alone had had the written combination to the safe. He was berated and abused, most roundly, and he was demoted to a sub-clerkship, pending further developments as to the loss. A telegram summoned the convalescing cashier back to work. Dirck was crushed, heartbroken.

Yes—yes," he explained to poor, plodding Tertius Hegan, to whom he had come for comfort in his black hour. " Yes, I know I'm not suspected of stealing the wretched stuff. But I'm accused of something worse—of letting the combination to the safe get out of my hands—which I can swear I didn't. Carelessness is worse than a crime, in a bank. Uncle's pull saved me from jail. But I'm smashed—unless that missing cash is found."

" But if you—?"

" Besides—and this is ten thousand times worse than all the rest of it put together—I can't afford to marry now—next June—on the lousy salary they have cut me down to," groaned Dirck. " Especially when I've no prospect of doing any better for another five years. I know my uncle; he doesn't do things by halves. He's disciplining me; and unless that cash is found he'll keep on disciplining me. I—say, Hegan, how can I face *her* with the story of this foul setback?"

Tertius gave such clumsy consolation as he could. His heart throbbed at having ruined this too-fortunate boy, who had usurped the job that should have been Hegan's. But he could not find the right words to ease Dirck's racking heart pain.

BY the middle of April things had blown over. It now seemed safe to Tertius to get out; to turn his back forever on the scene of his endless drudgery, and to enter into his life of delight. But it must be done in the right way, so that no suspicion might rest, ever so fleetingly, on him.—Then to grab his hoard and to leave the village and the State!

Long since, Hegan had planned his mode of procedure. He bought a half-pint of cheap whisky, and the next morning he gargled gaggingly a tablespoonful of it. He rubbed some on his scrubby mustache and spilled still more on his clothes. Painstakingly he had waited at home until he should be nearly an hour late at the bank. It was his first tardiness in eighteen years.

Without the wonted deferential knock, he banged open the door of old Van Broeck's private office and swaggered in. He reeled a bit in his walk, and the president looked up with incredulous horror. The horror increased as the reek of cheap booze filled the little office.

Dirck Bleecker, who had just been sent for by his uncle on some petty routine detail, stared with equal amaze if with less horror.

" Hegan!" gasped the president, in unbelieving fury. " You've been drinking!"

" You're blazing right I been—been drinking!" cheerily retorted Tertius, who had rehearsed his act carefully and often before the flawed mirror in his bedroom. " That's why I got the nerve to tell you what I've always wanted to tell you, you pompous wig-headed slob!"

" Hegan!" babbled Van Broeck, aghast and still incredulous.

Dirck Bleecker watched the scene with childish delight.

" Mr. Van Broeck," continued Tertius, " you're a mangy old he-baboon, and a whited sepulcher, and a fossilized string of tripe, and a frowsy old cuttlefish. You're dead and decayed, and you don't know it, you note-shaving back number seagoing walrus!—But that isn't the point. The point is, I want a raise.—I've got it coming to me—a big fat raise at that. And if I don't get it, you'll find some other dub to do ten dollars' worth of work for your lousy bank for seventy-five cents."

"Hegan!" babbled Van Broeck, still aghast.

"I've figured it all up, nights when I was tanking up at home," Tertius stormed on. "Drink was the only fun your slave pen had left me. It turned me from a mouse into a man, while it lasted. But mornings I was too sick and too scared to strike you for the raise I had coming to me. So to-day I took a few before I started out.—Do I get that raise? Speak up, you slab-faced old apology for a shriveled mummy! Do I?"

Van Broeck found his wits and his voice. He found them both at once, in a burst of righteous rage.

"Hegan!" he thundered. "You are discharged. Get out of here—*now!*"

"Sure I'll get out of here," assented Tertius, with a well-rehearsed hiccough. "And I'll get out of this one-horse burg too! A man of my brains can make good anywhere. I'm sick of all this dump.—But I'll take a souvenir as I go."

Speaking, he threw wide the door of the private office, and with his other hand he snatched off the president's silvery wig and flung it into the heart of the little crowd which his bellowed utterance had drawn to the doorway. Then, jamming his hat over his ears, he jostled a path through the clump of awed, staring people, and out of the bank.

HE spent the day finishing his packing. Late in the afternoon he sent to Van Broeck by messenger a maudlin note apologizing for his crazy antics of the morning. He admitted that he was a habitual secret drunkard, but he promised to reform if the bank would take him back.

As he expected, his messenger returned with an envelope containing his week's pay and a curt note from Van Broeck forbidding him to set foot in the bank again.

The whole thing was gloriously complete now. All that remained was for Hegan to wait for nightfall, then go secretly to the woods for his rich cache of wealth, come back to the bungalow for his light luggage, and thence to the Junction to take the ten o'clock train to New York.

The disposal of Grip had been a problem, until Tertius thought it out. The dog had lightened his master's loneliness for three years now, by giving him something to talk to; some form of comradeship. But henceforth his cash would bring him plenty of gayer companions.

So Grip would be in the way—and a useless impediment to traveling. He must be got rid of. If he were left to wander deserted about the streets, folk might wonder that his master had departed in such haste as to forget to take his dog with him. They might talk, and that was risky.

After the money had been safely transferred from the woods to the bungalow, that evening, there would be plenty of time to go for a mile walk with the dog, to the railroad bridge above the lake. There it would be simple to tie a stone-weighted rope around the throat of his canine chum and push him over into the water.

Yes, he could do that and still be in comfortable time for his train. As usual, Tertius worked out the whole problem, logically and efficiently. There had been no flaw thus far; there could be no flaw in the bright future.

DUSK fell late, in April. But by first darkness Hegan had fastened Grip in his kennel yard and had set forth eagerly on his quest.

Under his raincoat he carried a light spade and a capacious satchel. His flash light guided his steps in the darker spots of the familiar woods and to the rock with the cache beneath it. The night was full of rhythmic sounds—the tinkling of a myriad toads in the near-by lake, the squawking of wild ducks that had lighted there, the chirp of early insects, the bark of distant farm dogs.

Tertius made his slow way to the treasure rock. Then, pocketing his flash light and working more by sense than by sight, he plied with his spade around the edges of the flat rock. The frost and its departure had settled the stone more stubbornly into the ground than Hegan had anticipated; but at last a mighty heave uplifted the slab and sent it crashing to one side.

Out came the flash light again, and Hegan exhumed the two parcels of money, each inclosed in its waterproof wrapping.

He had crammed them into his satchel and was rising to his feet when a snapping of twigs and an eager whimpering made him turn in nervous fear and flash the beams of his electric torch in the direction of the sound.

The radius of white light revealed Grip, bounding gladly toward him through the new leafage of the bushes. Tertius drew a long breath of relief. Yes, Grip had either broken or dug himself free and was on his master's trail.

But what did it matter now? The ordeal was ended. In another hour or so he would be snugly on the train and—

Then he saw that Grip's plunging motions were more vertical than horizontal. The giant mongrel strove vehemently to get to his master, but something seemed to be holding him back. The "something" was a long rope, taut and with its far end hidden in the tangle of underbrush.

Tertius Hegan snatched up his spade as a dimly seen human figure emerged behind the straining dog. Forward he rushed, yelling a wordless battle shout as he recognized young Dirck Bleecker at the other end of the rope. Hegan swung the spade aloft, poising it for a smashing downward blow.

Then the white glare of Dirck's flash light smote him athwart the eyes, and as the spade swung blindly downward it encountered only air. Before Tertius could raise it anew, Bleecker's fist caught him expertly on the point of the jaw.

Unnumbered sparks crackled before Hegan's eyes. His knees turned to tallow.

Very quietly he fell asleep . . .

DAZEDLY he came to his senses, after what seemed an æon of time. He tried to get to his feet. But his wrists and ankles were neatly trussed by a belt and a length of clothesline. Dirck was standing above him, speaking slowly, indecisively.

The words pierced the fogs in Hegan's brain.

"It was a bad show, that booze party of yours," Bleecker was saying. "The more I got to thinking about it, afterward, the worse it seemed. I've seen a few drunks in my time.—Yes, a few dozen of them, if you like. When they're as far gone as you seemed to be in the bank to-day, they either turn the color of raw veal or else brick red. And they're likely to sweat. Their eyes go funny too.—That happens, first of all.

"Now, your color was the same sallow brown it always has been, ever

since I've known you. And in spite of your crazy talk, your eyes were steady and clear. That gave me the notion. When my uncle showed me that penitent note of yours, I saw that it was written in a hand that no recent drunk could have made half so steady.

"So I dropped around this evening to ask you one or two questions—why you had thrown away a career at the Wilbram National for such a fool reason, and how you'd been able to keep your drinking a secret for so many years, and so on. Any genuine drunkard would have been found out long ago."

Tertius blinked up at the square-shouldered silhouette above him and tried to speak—or at least to think consecutively. The quiet voice went on:

"You weren't at home. But this big lummox of a dog was, and there was luggage on your porch. The dog had been shut in his run, and he was whining and struggling to get out. Then I remembered what you said, last year, about his being able to trail you anywhere, if he was loose. So I hunted around for a length of clothesline, then I found a stone and broke the lock of the kennel run door. As the dog barged out I noosed him with the rope.

"He squirmed and he fought for a while. Then I calmed him down a bit, and he struck off, cross country, with his nose to the ground, yanking me after him—till I got here. He's one grand trailer! I like him, and I'm going to give him a good home till you're out of jail.—If he lives that long."

"Grip!" babbled Tertius Hegan dazedly.

"Yes," answered Bleecker. "Grip. And a grand dog—in his own way. I think he and I are going to be great friends. Now, suppose you get to your feet, Hegan—I'll help you—and shuffle along, ahead of me, to the police station. I'll phone my uncle from there. Something tells me that when he sees this satchel chock full of cash, he'll give me my old job back again—he and the directors.

"That will mean that She and I can get married in June, after all, Hegan.—We'll send you an invitation to the atrocities, if you like. But—but I'm afraid you'll have a long-term previous engagement that will keep you from accepting.—Shuffle along now!"

THE END

* * *

Two Cigarettes Away

THE man who would walk a mile for a cigarette reminds one of the custom in the country districts in the Philippine Islands where distance is measured by cigarettes. When one inquires of another how far it is to a certain place the reply will be something like this—"It's two cigarettes away," or "It's three cigarettes from here." That means that it will take you the time necessary to smoke two cigarettes or three cigarettes in order to arrive at the place. Makes it a little hard for the fellow who chews gum and doesn't smoke.

Russell Raymond Voorhees.

The Wild Ones

By FOSTER-HARRIS

Author of "The Field of Forgotten Men," "Laughing Weevil," etc.

Novelette—Complete

Never again, swore Buck Franklin, oil field bandit, would he go to prison—then three men were murdered

"You—with my boys' blood still on your hands!"

CHAPTER I.

VICTIM OF THE STORM.

THE drive of that sleet across the open was merciless, never ceasing. Head down, doggedly reluctant to leave the warm shelters behind, the shaggy pony moved grudgingly, straight into the face of the storm.

Rime ice was making whiter and more bushy the already grizzled eyebrows of the gaunt, muffled rider. He wiped it away with a mittened hand, pulling his sheepskin collar higher about his cheeks and ears.

Behind him the wind was spinning the white particles in mad, whirling fan dances around the black derricks, the close huddled batteries of tanks, the cluster of employees' residences, the pumphouses and lease buildings of the Capitol Ranch oil pool.

In front of him was flat, howling emptiness, the high Panhandle plains and the bellowing savagery of a Texas Panhandle blizzard. And already he had come a good piece, even before reaching this small, lonely, outlying oil field.

At the last company house he had passed he had glanced hopefully to-

ward the frost covered front windows and a small sleeve promptly had started scrubbing industriously, clearing a porthole. A small brown face had peered out, breaking into a delighted grin, but then, with sudden, vast solemnity, developing a small pair of hands to waggle at each ear.

With equal gravity, old Buck Franklin had lifted mittened hands to the sides of his head and had donkey wagged back.

There was no particular significance to this, except that it had somehow become the standard greeting between the two.

"You won't believe it," Franklin protested, "but I had nothin' to do with the holdup"

They were fast friends, although by no means old ones. Just how, on such short notice, they had managed to get so intimately acquainted perhaps neither of them clearly could have explained.

But Franklin did not even know the boy's last name. He did know his first name, Jack, and that he was "six, goin' on seven, though," as Jack gravely had explained. And Jack's father, he knew vaguely, must have something to do with the oil pool, must be a fairly important guy, since he lived in one of the biggest of the dozen or so residences.

The Capitol Ranch pool was a one company field. Amalgamated Oil Corporation, a giant, major company, owned everything, all the thirty or so wells, the tanks, the buildings, even the two stores.

Doubtless, in less dwarfing surroundings, the little field might have looked even imposing. But out here, lost in the featureless, illimitable flatnesses of the high plains, it was just a tiny speck, a mote in an infinite ocean of level land.

A few ranch houses closer. But no other town nearer than thirty-five miles.

Bending against the wind, fighting toward a pumphouse inside which great

engines pow-powed rhythmically, a couple of oil workers watched horse and rider vanish into the whirling whiteness of the north. One of them gestured quizzically as they stepped inside.

"You see that damn fool cowboy? Ridin' right out into the teeth of it—in this storm! If he don't freeze—"

His companion shrugged, grinning. "Not that old hellion, bozo. He was born to hang, or get shot. That's old Buck Franklin."

"Yeah? Who's he?"

"Lives up north of here on Skeleton Creek—lives somehow. Used to be an outlaw, a curly wolf right, they tell me. Got sent to the pen, away back. Let him out this summer, though, and he come right back out here, to his old stampin' grounds."

"Why?"

The other oil worker, a married man, grimaced sardonically.

"If you can tell me why anybody come out here that didn't have to—" he began, and broke suddenly off.

"Maybe he just likes it plenty free and lonesome and wild," he added thoughtfully. "I dunno."

Which was not a bad guess, at that. In the spinning, whirling blur to the north, old Buck Franklin was heading on, keeping straight to his path, with the unerring accuracy of the old wolf he was, treading old, familiar ground. Sleet peppered his leathery face and his faded eyes were slitted against it. But in them was grim enjoyment, pleasure.

He did like it. He was free. And it was home.

The bitter, endless years of prison, of walls and bars and guards, were behind him at last. He had paid his debt. He was free again and he did not intend, ever, to go behind bars again.

The shaggy pony flung up its head with a frightened snort, and tried to whirl. Buck checked it instantly, his right hand jerking instinctively up toward his mouth, so that his teeth might snatch off the cumbersome mitten, free his fingers to reach for the Colt that should have been under his left armpit.

Pure instinct, that motion, the reaction of the outlaw. For he was wearing no gun. Nevertheless, the next instant, as the pony shied again, he did jerk off that mitten. But then, with a quick, pitying hiss of breath across chilled lips, he stared.

FOR just an instant he had thought it a wolf. But he could see now that it was instead a dog, part shepherd or collie certainly, although part perhaps was wolf, for it looked it. A pitiful, bedraggled figure against the snow it pulled itself feebly on.

Sunk deep in one rear leg was a wolf trap, dragging a heavy stake at the end of a chain. In the snow behind, fast being covered by the spinning white, was a trail of red stains. It was a dog, all right. Far gone as it was, it sensed the man's presence and tried to lift its head. It did not bark, did not even whine. And yet in those brown eyes was such complete joy, such utter confidence that at last it had reached a friend, that Buck Franklin was out of his saddle in an instant.

Gripping the reins tightly that the pony might not break away, he knelt, making a soft, pitying noise deep in his throat, reaching a cautious hand toward the dog's shaggy head. Feebly the dog tried to lick his fingers.

With an oath he turned his attention to the trap, forcing down the spring, carefully working the savage teeth out of the mangled leg.

He hated traps. Hated them with the flaming, furious hatred of one who has known just how it feels to get caught, the sudden agony, the despairing, hopeless struggles, the maddening hours of waiting.

Hurling the thing far into the snow, he pulled the bandanna from his neck and made of it a crude bandage. Then, frowning, for a moment he hesitated.

The dog was exhausted. No telling how far he had dragged himself or how long he had struggled even before pulling that stake free. He had spent his strength, was nearly done and assuredly would not live to be carried the eight long, cold, jolting miles Buck still must ride before reaching his shack.

Of course there was the oil field close behind, with plenty of warm houses, plenty of men. But Franklin knew none of those men. Somehow, again with the instinctive reaction of the wild one, the veteran outlaw whose hand has been against all men and all men's hands against him, he felt that those oil workers were enemies.

Still, he knew he had no real reason for this feeling. They'd certainly be human enough to take in an injured, helpless dog. Jack, his small boy friend, certainly would do so, beyond all doubt. So, gathering the dog carefully into his arms, he headed back.

Young Jack himself flung open the door at his knock, staring with wide, startled eyes. But his cry was pitying, understanding.

"O-oh, he's hurt, isn't he, Buck? Poor ole fellow! Bring him in. Where did you find him?"

"Draggin' hisself this way—with a wolf trap on his leg." Buck stepped quickly in, closing the door, laying the dog on the floor. "Can you get some hot water and some rags, son? Quick."

Jack spun to obey. A door swung open and a startled, feminine voice began a question that ended in a scream.

"JACK, what in the world—o-oh, it's a wolf! A wolf! Get it out of here! Get it out of here quickly."

"It's a dog, ma'am," corrected Buck, lifting his head.

This pretty young woman, staring now with terrified eyes, he knew must be Jack's mother.

"He's pretty bad hurt—got caught in a wolf trap. I found him up north of here. Too far to take him home, so I brought him here. If you'll jest kindly get me some warm water—"

"Oh, no, no! That wolf! Get him out of here! Get him—"

"Why, mom!" The boy's outraged, indignant cry stopped her.

A surprised, indignant glitter in his old eyes, Buck Franklin, no diplomat and no ladies' man, spoke in a dry, level voice.

"He ain't a wolf, ma'am; he's a dog. And in this country decent folks gives help, even to hurt dogs."

A quick flood of warm, shamed color whipped across the woman's cheeks.

"Why, I—I didn't mean—" she stammered. "Here, I'll bring some water and cloths, surely. I'll bring them." She vanished hurriedly.

With grave, embarrassed eye, the boy, kneeling on the other side of the dog, looked at Franklin.

"Mamma's all right, Buck," he said loyally. "She's awful kind. She—she was just scared a little—you know—"

Franklin nodded. "Yeah, sure, I know," he agreed solemnly. "Just scared her a little, that's all. He does look a lot like a wolf, at that, don't he? You know whose dog he is?"

Jack shook his head. "He's got a collar on, though; see?" he announced. "Just an ole leather strap. Poor ole doggie; here, here."

His mother was back with a basin of water, a tattered blanket and first aid material. With little, pitying sounds she helped now while the two males, the very young one and the old one, worked over the dog. Finally, satisfied, Buck rocked back on his heels and looked up again into her flushed face.

"He'll git along now, I reckon," he said. "I'm sorry to be troublin' you all with him. Just as soon as this freeze lets up a little, I'll come and git him. Now, if you'll just show me where to put him so's he won't be too much in the way—"

"Oh, leave him right here on his pallet." The woman spoke quickly. "Poor fellow! I—didn't mean to seem so heartless, Mister—Mister—" She paused expectantly, and then, as Buck said nothing, went on, a bit lamely. "I —was just so startled, you see."

"Yes, ma'am." Buck got to his feet, dusting his knees. "I expect I better be going now."

Hat in hand, he started to open the door, stepped quickly back as a tall, square jawed man, followed by an older, gray mustached companion, came in. Surprised inquiry in his gray eyes, the first man stopped short, looking from the dog on the floor to Franklin.

"Dad, this is Buck Franklin," spoke up Jack excitedly. "He found this poor dog caught in a wolf trap out in this storm, and he brought him here, and I'm gonna take care of him, get him well."

"You don't say!" The tall man chuckled, pulling off a glove and extending a great hand toward Buck.

"Don't believe I've ever met you, have I? Dan Carter's my name. I've seen you riding through."

Buck grinned, a trifle embarrassedly, then glanced at the dog.

"I'm right sorry to bother you all with him," he apologized again. "But I knowed I couldn't git him home alive and—and—"

"Oh, don't worry about that. We'll take care of him." Dan Carter bent sympathetically over the pallet.

"He's a good dog, dad, and I'm gonna get him well," spoke Jack earnestly. "Look, he's trying to wag his tail!"

AFTER Buck had taken his departure Dan Carter helped his son move the dog to a more suitable place in the kitchen and then came back into the front room again, where his gray mustached companion was warming the seat of his trousers at the fire.

"Carter, you catch on to who that guy really was?" Gray Mustache spoke in a quiet, significant tone.

"Why, Franklin he said his name was, didn't he?" Carter answered carelessly. "Lives up north of here, somewhere, I guess. I've seen him riding through here once or twice. He—o-oh, Buck Franklin!"

"Uh-huh." Gray Mustache nodded meaningly. "The same hombre that used to ride with the old Shannon gang, the wild bunch out here. And I was just tellin' you, I passed Frank Shannon and the Tintype Kid, south of here, just yesterday. Right after the pay roll car passed."

They exchanged glances.

"That is—sorta funny," said Carter thoughtfully. "You reckon it means anything?"

"I don't know." Gray Mustache shook his head. "Mebbe not."

He broke off to open the stove door and spit accurately into the flame.

"But was I three old outlaws, just outa the pen and mebbe lookin' for some place to pick up some big money quick, why, I might look twice at that pay roll of yours. Way you bring it over here, all cash and generally with only one or two guards—"

He broke off again.

"Hombre, an old dog don't often learn new tricks, nor an old outlaw go straight," he added slowly. "Mebbe it don't mean nothin', them three showin' up out here. But then again, mebbe—"

CHAPTER II.

OLD FRIENDS.

OUT on the bank of Skeleton Creek, at his shack, which once had been a line camp for a new split-up and forgotten ranch, at dusk Buck Franklin opened the door of his cabin, then stopped short.

The inside of the cabin was warm, tobacco smoke wafted out against his face, smoke and then a somehow familiar voice.

"Well, come in, guy, come in. Shut that door. It's cold outside, don't you know it? Ain't you glad to see your old playmates?"

Staring incredulously, Buck obeyed. At the table, older, harder, more grizzled, was Frank Shannon. And lolling on the bunk—it couldn't be—it was, though, it was! Johnny Higgins, the Tintype Kid. Men who had ridden with him in the old Shannon gang before he had gone to one prison and they to another.

"Well, for the love of Mike!" Amazement half strangled his words. "I didn't see any—how in hell did you guys ever git out here? In all this snow—"

"Car, man, car." Frank Shannon waved a thick hand, grinning. "We're plumb up to date now. It's out back, covered up."

He got to his feet. "You don't seem very glad to see us."

"Why, sure I am." Buck stirred. "But it's been fifteen years and more since I saw yuh last. I thought you was ghosts—"

Abruptly he stiffened again, staring with narrowing eyes. On the table was a sub-machine gun. A forbidden, outlaw weapon whose very presence could have only one significance.

Seeing the direction of his stare, Shannon grinned crookedly.

"Told you we was plumb modernized, hombre," he said. "Yes, sir, we're figurin' now on goin' into the oil business. Got a little proposition we want you to sit in on with us. Quick money, boy!"

In a languid drawl the Tintype Kid spoke, for the first time.

"That's our new drillin' machine you're starin' at. May not be quite as big as some of these other oil field outfits, but, boy, you should see it drill holes, and git the money!"

Lips tightening, Buck Franklin stepped slowly toward the stove. In the old days Frank Shannon had once saved his life.

He was thinking of that now, but thinking also of endless, bitter years of walls and bars.

"I—am mighty glad to see yuh, boys," he said very slowly. "Mighty glad. But—if you're figurin' on me joinin' yuh in another play, why, don't. I've had my lesson. I'm travelin' the rest of my trail straight, and free."

Frank Shannon glanced at the Tintype Kid.

"We been hearin' about yuh, Buck," he said meaningly. "You, uh, mebbe, found a way to eat free, too, have yuh?"

BUT they left the cabin two days later with Buck Franklin still stubborn. Climbing into the battered car, Frank Shannon fired a parting shot.

"You think it over, kid. Plenty of time. We got a little graft over here in the big field that'll keep us all winter if we want it to. And we ain't set yet. We'll be back."

Buck Franklin did not reply.

It was bright sunshine that day, crisp, and the sleet coverlet was melting fast. He saddled up and rode in to the Capitol Ranch pool, to see how his friend Jack was getting along with the dog.

Jack and the dog were getting along splendidly. Already recovered enough to hobble about, the dog greeted him with a joyous whine. Quite plainly, he had not forgotten who had helped him out of an exceedingly bad fix and he was very grateful about it.

Stiffly embarrassed by the presence of Mrs. Carter, Buck squatted beside the boy, patting the dog's head approvingly.

"Looks like you're certainly takin' good care of him, kid," he grunted. "You find out whose dog he is?"

Jack shook his head.

"I don't think he's anybody's dog, Buck. He's a wild dog. But he's an awful good dog, awful smart and—and if you don't mind and if mamma'll let me, I want to keep him."

"O-oh, Jack, I—" began his mother quickly, and caught herself.

"You give him a name yet?" asked Buck.

"I been callin' him Wolf. He knows it, too—look. Here, Wolf, Wolf! Speak!"

Eyes brightening, the dog gave a little, eager bark.

"Well, yuh do look a lot like a wolf, at that, hound," said Franklin, and then glanced up at Mrs. Carter's troubled face.

"But there's a whole lot of collie in him, too, ma'am. Best kind of dog a boy could have."

"Oh, I—I don't know." Margaret Carter's lips twisted worriedly. "If—if only he didn't look so wild and savage."

For an instant, in the brown, contrite eyes of the dog and the faded brown eyes of the man she thought she caught the very same look.

"Yes'm. I'll take him if you don't want him. But the wild ones, ma'am, ain't always mean ones, too."

HE did not take the dog home with him that day, however. Seeing him riding off, Dan Carter, at his office window, frowned thoughtfully and made a mental note to be sure that a couple of extra guards in a covering car came over with the pay roll that week-end.

Hardly even a possibility that the visits of this ex-outlaw and the presence somewhere in the neighborhood of at least two of his former outlaw companions meant anything sinister. But no use taking even slight chances. As field superintendent of the Capitol Ranch pool, the safety of that pay roll was one of Carter's responsibilities. There being no bank short of forty miles, it was necessary to bring the money over in cash. And in the old days, before it had been broken up, the Shannon gang had made duck soup of many such a cash shipment.

Bank and train robbers, they had

been as bad as they came. It might possibly be that old dogs would not entirely have forgotten old tricks.

But nothing happened. The pay roll came in uneventfully, the weather continued bright, mild and crisp, warm enough to dig ditches and lay a few extra lines some of the wells needed. Jack and the dog, completely recovered now save for a still healing leg, had become the closest of buddies.

Jack's mother watched them dubiously. Wolf was entirely too appropriate a name, in her opinion. She was even more dubious when Buck Franklin came riding by, as he frequently did, to see how the two were getting along.

It was not exactly that she was afraid of the old ex-outlaw, afraid of what he might do. Intuitively she sensed that the shoe, rather, was on the other foot—that Buck was scared to death of her, perfectly harmless, for all his repute and appearance.

But—well, no mother could help but feel dubious about her son being close friend with an ex-convict, an ex-outlaw. And the Wolf, awkwardly ingratiating as he tried to make himself, still plucked the same uneasy chord in her heart.

There came a night, chill, clear, frosty, when the Wolf, sleeping in a box in the yard now, a doghouse Jack had made for him, worked his own banishment.

Moved undoubtedly by the primeval strain within him, he came out in the death watch after midnight, poked his lean muzzle up toward the great cold stars, and burst into sobbing wolf song.

Indescribably savage, wild, blood chilling, that long, broken howl. It lifted the hair on the back of your neck, made you go suddenly tense, cold, crawling with expectancy of—you did not know what. Instinctively you shuddered. Just as, tens of thousands of years ago, the ancestors of men, huddling in caves, hearing, must also have shuddered and reached for their comforting spears.

Margaret Carter of course had heard the yapping of prairie coyotes, out here an almost nightly disturbance. But never anything as fearsomely shuddering as this. In stark panic she gripped her husband's arm. He got up and threw a boot at the Wolf, finally getting him hushed.

But the next morning a tearful Jack had orders that Wolf must go, just as soon as Buck Franklin came by again to take him.

That afternoon Buck did happen by and, much abashed and apologetic, carried Wolf off, while a small boy, standing beside his mother, winked hard to keep back tears, finally gave up and made a mad dash for his room, that no one might see him giving away to such unmanly grief.

But the banishment hardly proved as effective as Margaret Carter had wished or Jack had feared.

THE next morning the Wolf was back, scratching at the door and whining, wriggling his whole body in vast delight when the equally delighted Jack came bursting out. Carried off once more by an apologetic Franklin that afternoon, the Wolf then caught on.

Thereafter he divided his time between both friends, sleeping, when he slept at either place, in Buck's cabin, but coming in to play with young Jack, whining and howling to get him out of the house and generally driving Mrs. Carter to complete despair.

A hobo and a wild one right, some-

times he would vanish utterly for a day or two, reverting without doubt straight to the heart of the wild. But he always came back, occasionally bearing evidences of having enjoyed what must have been a darned good fight. And his two friends, the very young one and the old one, understanding him, would call him names after their different fashions and then, if necessary, patch him up a little.

Still nothing untoward happened. Although Buck Franklin, perhaps, could have told how much the extra guards and precautions about the pay roll had to do with that. Finally, in an optimistic economy wave, the Amalgamated vice president in charge of all Texas operations ordered Carter to cut the guards back to the former two or three casual armed men in one car.

It had come a cold, blustery spring. Among its other far flung operations, Amalgamated Oil was drilling a wildcat, some eighteen miles northwest of the Capitol Ranch pool. This well being in his district and under his charge, regularly Dan Carter was driving out to superintend operations.

He had just returned from such a trip, was stacking little canvas sacks of rock formation samples on the table in his office, recalling absently that the pay roll car should be in shortly, when from the street there was a shout which brought him out on the run.

White lipped, wide eyed, he stared, with a slow gasp of horror. A battered, dusty sedan, canting drunkenly on two blown tires, was stopped in front of the office. It was the pay roll car.

Riddled with bullets, its inside was a sickening, bloody shambles.

The blood and dust smeared body of old Bill Andrews lay hanging half out one of the open rear doors, arms dragging in the dust and almost the whole top of his head shot off.

Sagged against the steering wheel was young Dick Blanton, his face so paper white that the bloody froth at his mouth, the blood soaked front of his shirt seemed fairly to scream in its horrible contrast.

A wildly excited oil worker was trying to lift him out. Others were coming from every direction, on the dead run.

With a game effort to straighten, Blanton looked at Carter.

"They—they got it, boss," he whispered chokingly. "Slammed us with a machine gun—without a word of warnin'. Killed Andrews. Killed Nash. They—thought I was dead, too. They—oh, God, don't—"

Barking orders, Carter hurled himself forward.

"Here, easy with him, Joe, easy! You, Mac, get the doc! Run like hell! Get in there on the phone and call the sheriff, you! Tell him to get here, burn the wind. All right, Dick, old son, take it easy now, easy, boy. We'll fix you up."

The twisting, agonized face tried to smile.

"They—they've already done that, I guess, boss. I—just aimed to hold on to come tell you. I hit one. I recognized 'em. Three men, masked—but they was—Frank Shannon—Tintype Kid—and—and—"

The whispering voice failed. For an instant, g a l l a n t l y, Dick Blanton fought to go on, and then, desperately, the glazing eyes tried to complete the message the lips could not finish.

"And Buck Franklin?" Grimly, hurriedly, Dan Carter bent close, holding Blanton in his arms. "Franklin?"

"He's sayin' Franklin, I think, boss," said the oil worker beside him

quickly. "His lips is movin'. Look—ah-aah!"

It was over. For an instant Dan Carter held the shattered body in his great arms. Then very gently he lowered it to the ground.

"Yeah, it was Franklin he was trying to say, I'm certain," he agreed in a voice that was deadly in its quiet. "Frank Shannon, the Tintype Kid—that third man couldn't have been anybody else."

He jerked to his feet, his square, bronzed face suddenly taut, cold.

Barking orders, he started back into the office.

"Drag out a couple of the cars, boys, pronto. You guys, go get your guns and get back here. Come on! Step!"

"What we gonna do, boss?" An excited giant, a gang pusher, was at his elbow. "Go after them without waitin' for the sheriff?"

Already jerking open a cabinet, handing out Winchesters and shotguns, Dan Carter nodded, his face a grim mask.

"Those were my men they murdered," he said. "I reckon that's authority enough."

CHAPTER III.

OUTLAW'S DEATH.

IN the first hour of darkness of a cloudy night, Buck Franklin was just washing up his simple supper dishes. Lying before the stove, belly full, the Wolf was dozing comfortably. Like a shot he came to his feet, hair lifting on his neck, lips curling away from white fangs in a deep throated snarl.

For an instant Buck stared at him, puzzled. Then he too heard it and again instinctively his right hand moved toward where his gun should have been, but wasn't. It was lying instead on his bunk. By the time he had stepped over there, the beat of horses' hooves was plainly audible.

They stopped. There was a confused noise, then something heavy, sodden, thumped against the door, with a slow, strangling, horrible sound. Tense in every muscle, the Wolf was crouching as though to spring, a whispering snarl vibrating in his throat.

"Buck?" said a sobbing voice. "Buck, oh, Gawd, if yo're here—"

Gun in hand, Buck started to unbar the door, leaped back as it flung inward, leaped forward again as quickly to catch the man who had been sagging against it, who otherwise would have fallen.

Wind flickered the flame in the smutty chimneyed lamp. The scent of blood thick in his nostrils, the Wolf snarled, deep throated, whispering.

Buck Franklin looked down into the gray, agonized face of Frank Shannon.

Dark blood had soaked the whole front of the veteran outlaw's flannel shirt, had soaked through his coat, had even run down to stain his breeches. As Buck laid him on the bunk he knew, even before the most cursory examination, that Frank Shannon had come to the Last Bend in a long, crooked trail.

A chill blast all but extinguished the guttering lamp. Quickly he swung to close the door, noting as he did so that there were several horses outside, all saddled, but riderless. Shannon's eyes were open, looking at him, as he turned back.

"There's—just me." In a slow, harsh whisper Shannon was answering his unasked question. "Them other—damn horses follered me after the boys

run off, left me. I—didn't know where else to go. Didn't have no friends but you . . ."

The eyes somehow were wistful, pleading. Buck knelt, opening the blood soaked coat and shirt.

"You're hit pretty bad, Frank," he said gruffly. "Pretty bad."

"I—I know. Take my boots off, will yuh?"

Silently, Buck obeyed. Asking no questions, he did what he could to plug the blue ugly hole in Shannon's left breast. It was hopeless, he knew. That Shannon had lived this long was a miracle.

A spasm of pain contorted the gray face. Holding Shannon's hand, silently, pityingly, Buck knew it would not be long.

A wild, bad one right, Frank Shannon had been. A bank robber, a gunman, a three time convict. Thoroughly male. Yet there had been a time when, under a withering hail of lead, he had come racing back to leap down, pull a badly wounded and helpless Buck Franklin from under a dead pony and somehow or other get him away to safety.

It had saved Buck Franklin's hide, that was all. Saved him from a perfectly certain and speedy lynching at the hands of an infuriated citizenry who didn't like bank bandits anyway, even when they hadn't just shot up the town. It had cost Shannon a bullet through the neck, a wound that missed only by a half inch being fatal.

On the pumping, scrawny throat, even now, Buck could see the white scar mark left by that long ago bullet. Shannon had saved him. He was remembering.

Shannon was looking at him again, whispering.

"It was—that Capitol Ranch oil field pay roll job we tried to ring you in on, Buck. They got careless again, give us a chance—and we got it. But one of 'em plugged me too.

"We had a git-away car hid out. Meant to ride to it and turn the horses loose. The boys was runnin' fast, scared maybe. I—fell off, but I helt onto the reins. Mebbe they thought I was dead. Anyway, when I—got back on and got there, they was gone in the car.

"So I—come over here. Oughtn't to, I know. But I—well, I reckon there won't be nobody follerin' me soon; them guards are all dead. And the Laws will suspicion you anyway, if they git a line somehow on who done it. They know you used to run with us. I—I got some of the dough. You might as well have it."

He struggled weakly to sit up, and failed. "In my—coat pocket, Buck. Git it. Mebbe it'll —pay a little for me troublin'."

FRANKLIN obeyed. With dark, narrowing eyes he looked down at the flat packets of bills, tens and twenties, the ones on top slightly blood flecked. There was perhaps a thousand dollars in all, certainly not more. He laid the money on the table.

Frank Shannon stirred slightly and his mind now seemed not quite clear. Beads of cold sweat were forming on his leathery forehead. His whispering voice was fainter, harsher.

"You—sure my boots are off? Sure? Thanks. Say, you remember that time we rode into Lincoln? The pretty Mex gal there at the *baile*—and you was so jealous—remember?"

Wind hissed in the stovepipe and the lamp flickered. The Wolf had crept over and was very close against Franklin's leg.

Holding the outlaw's cold hand, Buck nodded. "Yeah, Frank, I remember."

Shannon was smiling. "And was we the wild bunch then! Wild as they come! You remember that time in Laredo—"

In delirium, he raved on. Broken snatches of song, oaths, crackling commands, whispered confidences poured from his lips as, for a space, he lived his life over.

Grim eyed, tight lipped, Buck Franklin held his hand.

Perhaps it was three-quarters of an hour, perhaps longer. Suddenly, reliving a scene of thirty years ago, Shannon heaved himself up, his free hand darting out as though to pick up a filled glass.

"Bottoms up, hombres, bottoms up!" he cried. "You, Buck, Billy, all of yuh! Here's to the wild bunch, to us! Drink it!"

Hand at his mouth, he fell back.

And as Buck started to close his eyes the Wolf pointed his long muzzle upward and burst into a long, sobbing howl.

"Stop that, damn you!" Buck Franklin whirled furiously. "Stop it! Now keep still!"

He pulled the blanket over the dead face. A choking tightness in his throat, wiping his blood flecked hands on his trousers, he turned. The money on the table caught his eyes and his mouth set grimly.

He did not blame the dead outlaw. But Shannon had brought him trouble. If Shannon had done it all deliberately, maliciously, he hardly could have made it much worse.

Shannon lying there, dead of his wound. Part of the loot at least on the table. Spent horses outside. Their tracks leading from that robbery to Buck's cabin. Old Sheriff Bill Cochran admittedly the best tracker in Texas. And Buck had been alone at his cabin all day, no visitors, no alibi whatever, save his own word.

He could dispose of the money, of course. He could take care of those horses. Perhaps he could bury Shannon where the fresh mound would not be found, although that might be considerably more difficult than it would seem.

But he could not erase those tracks, no, nor his own damning past.

Shannon had said that the pay roll guards, the possible eye witnesses, were all dead. That made it all the worse. With a murder and robbery case, and suspicion wide open, one of the very first guys the officers undoubtedly would check up on would be an old ex-outlaw, ex-convict with dubious means of support, a fellow named Buck Franklin.

THE Wolf started to howl again and again Buck checked him. "They," Shannon had called his companions. So there had been more than just the Tintype Kid, perhaps one more, possibly two. But the Tintype Kid certainly had been in the gang, and the Kid, a cold blooded killer Buck always had disliked, almost surely would make a good, well covered get-away.

The Kid was an adept at such matters. Some time he probably would be caught and the truth sweated out of him, absolving Buck, if they believed what the Kid said. But, meanwhile...

Tight mouthed, still, Buck stared into space, checking the Wolf once more when the Wolf started anew to growl.

If he did not want to go to jail and from there probably to the pen, or even

the chair, he had better run and run fast, he knew that. Flight, of course, would damn him. But those tracks and his record would just about do that, anyway. They'd do it even though he did successfully dispose of all these other incriminating evidences, Shannon's body, the horses and saddles, the bloodstains on floor and bunk and so on.

And he knew only too well such a keen searcher as Bill Cochran would find something, then later everything.

It would mean jail, to stay. And he did not intend to go behind bars again, even for an hour or a minute. It was an obsession.

He had fought desperately to go straight this time, after getting out of prison. Preferring passionately to die rather than go back to that maddening encagement, he had gone straight. It had been hard enough.

Hard enough for an old man, an ex-convict, to find any way to live, honest or otherwise. His had been, still was, the most precarious kind of hand to mouth existence. Just the same, it had been honest.

But now circumstances and his past had trapped him again. He had no friends in high places, no money for bail or defense lawyers. Not even enough money for flight. Less than two dollars in his pocket.

Staring at the bills on the table, swift temptation swept him. Why not use that stolen money? He'd get the blame anyway; and Frank Shannon had given it to him.

With bills of such small denomination and experienced as he was with hot money, he knew he could pass them safely. The buying power of those notes might even, and very easily, prove the sole difference between continued liberty and prison, or even death. Certainly it could speed and smooth his flight. But still...

HAND on the Wolf's head as the dog again tried to growl, resolutely he put the temptation away from him. No, he would not use the stolen money. He had come out of prison determined to go straight. He had gone straight. Regardless, he would not veer from that straight path now.

Not only would he not use the stolen money. Somehow, some way, he would see that it got safely back to its rightful owners.

Smiling a faint, twisted smile, he patted the Wolf's uneasy head. His decision very likely would cost him much, he knew that.

The West was a different world now. Without friends or money, a fugitive's chances were pretty slim. Without friends or money, and passionately determined not to go back behind bars again, even for a single hour, he could hardly hope to avoid a showdown long.

The Lawmen would find him, somewhere. Since he didn't intend to surrender, they'd have to kill him. But a man has to die some time, anyway. And it's something even to die still honest and still free.

A queer, clean feeling in him, he reached for his cartridge belt and holster, putting them on, then donned his sheepskin and hat.

There were the incriminating horses, still waiting outside to be disposed of, and his own horse to be saddled. Then swift preparations for his flight. The officers, he somehow felt sure, hardly would come trailing to the cabin before morning, so he'd have to wait that long. But when they did come, as they surely would...

Distressedly, he tried to make up his mind just what to do about Shannon's body.

It would take long, precious time to dig a grave, put him away for his last sleep. It would be wasted effort as well. The surely coming posse just as surely must spot the fresh mound and suspiciously dig it right up again. Better not make any effort at concealment, just leave Shannon here for the posse to care for; as they would anyway.

Still, it troubled Buck; it somehow seemed indecent simply to ride away and leave his old mate lying here alone. Tight lipped, troubled, checking the Wolf again, he debated with himself, so distraught that he did not hear the faint noises in the wind, did not sense the significance of the Wolf's changed actions until suddenly the Wolf would be quieted no longer.

Whirling to face the window, then the door, hair bristling all along his back, the Wolf snarled, deep, quick and loud. Danger! Then Buck Franklin did snap out of his absorption, spinning about, one hand reaching for his gun, the other for the lamp. Too late. There was the tinkling crash of glass, the door flung fiercely open, a voice slashed out deadly command.

"Stick 'em up, damn you! Up! Ten of us got you covered. Stand—or we let you have it!"

Crouching, lips curled back in fighting snarls, Buck Franklin and the Wolf stood fast, side by side, in the center of the floor. Glaring into hate filled faces that glared back at them from window and door, and into the black, menacing muzzles of leveled weapons.

Caught and caught cold. Cursing himself, cursing his dumbness that had let him feel he had hours, Buck stepped back, one slow step. He did not intend to surrender, to put up his hands or even let them get close enough to try grabbing him. There might be one ghost of a chance if he could get close enough to knock over the lamp. If not, he meant to go for his gun anyway and die fighting.

CHAPTER IV.

CORNERED.

BLACK automatic leveled, a big man, Dan Carter, stepped slowly into the cabin, his followers bunching in the doorway, following. Wide eyed, they were staring, at the money still on the table, at Franklin, at the still figure on the bunk. One of them flicked the blanket off Shannon's dead face and breathed harshly.

"Well, Franklin?" Dan Carter's chill voice was scarcely louder than a whisper. "Anything to say?"

Grim faced, tense, Buck backed slowly, another step toward the table and the lamp.

He gestured tersely. "You won't believe it. But Frank rode in here alone, dyin'. I had nothin' whatever to do with the holdup."

"No?" Dan Carter came a step nearer, deadly wrath flickering in his eyes. Behind him his men were spreading out.

"No, of course you had nothing to do with it! Your lathered horses still outside. That damn murderer there, dead. The money on the table. And you—damn you—with my boys' blood still on your hands!"

For the first time Carter almost broke. The pay roll guards, all three of them, had been intimate friends. One of them at least, young Blanton, he loved almost like a younger brother.

His gray eyes were tortured, smoky pools of hell fire. Hate in his voice, a maddened sob as he went on.

"You dirty rat! As if Dick Blanton didn't live to tell me he recognized you, you hear! Tell me how you shot them in the back! Here, why don't you try to shoot me, why don't you?"

Wide eyed, gasping, Buck Franklin stepped back, another step, as Carter dropped the muzzle of his gun. "That's a lie," he said hoarsely. Beside him the Wolf was crouching to spring, the snarl in his throat giving fair warning.

"Go on, kill him anyway, boss!" an oil worker urged savagely. "Kill him. Or let's hang him, right here and now."

"I am going to see that you die for this, Franklin." Carter came a step closer. "I'll see that you die for this, if it's the last thing I do on earth. No, we'll not lynch you, if you don't want to end it here. But I will see the law sends you to the chair. The hot seat, you—"

Somebody screamed.

"The dog, boss! Th' dog! Look out! Look—"

The roaring blast of a pistol, thunderous in the small room, cut short the yell.

A bolt of brown lightning, tipped with white, clashing fangs, the Wolf had launched himself. Straight forward and upward he drove, straight at Carter's chest. But, though he landed fair and square, though those fangs easily could have ripped the oil man's throat, significantly they did not even touch him.

Whirling up his pistol, too late, Carter had pulled the trigger. The hurtling brown figure had hit him, driving him back. Simultaneously and at a speed second only to the Wolf's, Franklin had taken desperate advantage of the diversion.

Hurling himself back and sideways, heedless of a cold, stinging pain in his left knee, he sent his right hand stabbing for his gun, his left whirling in a blurring arc to smash the lamp. It hit the floor with a smash of breaking glass and went out. Blackness. The room turned into a screaming, roaring hell.

So many of them there and so close together, the oil men dared not shoot. They hindered rather than helped each other. Above their oaths, screams, shouts, the snarling, snapping clamor of the Wolf was a chilling, mad dog note. Fighting frenziedly, smashing with his gun, clawing, kicking, Buck was driving for the door.

Somebody tried blindly to close it, block it; screamed in pain and terror as savage teeth from the darkness slashed open his arm. A shoulder drove him aside. And then Buck was out, sprinting furiously toward the shadows of frightened, shying horses while from around the cabin corner more men poured, shouting, confused, uncertain whether to open fire or not.

HE just managed to catch the bridle rein of a scared pony as it started to whirl away. He leaped for the saddle, dimly skylining himself an instant, conscious for a second of a vague, racing blur, the Wolf, ahead of him. Then the men behind did open up.

The blaze and roar of their vindictive fire sent the pony rocketing away from there as he probably never had run before.

It was harmless enough shooting. No bullets even came close. And yet, pounding into the darkness, Buck was becoming speedily and increasingly

aware that one bullet at least, that first one fired by Carter, had reached him.

It had struck just below the left kneecap, cutting what seemed to his investigating fingers an almost trifling gash. It was hardly bleeding. But the dull, numb pain in that knee was mounting steadily, already made every jolt of the running horse an agony. He was across the creek, coming up out of the breaks, melting into the vast darkness of the high plains beyond by now. In the thick blackness of the night and with the rush of wind deadening the hoofbeats, already he knew he had made good his escape.

Until morning they might just as well try finding again a very little black fish in a Pacific Ocean of ink. Though with daylight, of course, it would be a different proposition.

The Wolf was running silently ahead of him. The tired pony, the stimulus of his fright wearing off now, slowed to a pounding gallop. Gritting his teeth at the jolting agony in his knee, Buck pulled to a halt, to examine his injury more closely.

The leg went absolutely useless under him and he all but fell when he rolled out of the saddle. He caught the stirrup, for a moment everything whirling in a sickened blur. Head clearing, he contrived to sit down.

To all appearances, the wound was little more than a scratch. It was a furrow across the side and front of the knee. The big slug, in passing, had not even buried itself entirely under the skin.

But the pain told him plainly the heavy bullet also had hit the kneecap, driving a lot of its brute, smashing force into that delicate maze of tendons and nerves, the joint.

Something wrong inside there, and it hurt hellishly.

The Wolf came silently back from the darkness to pause and whine.

Harshly, Buck Franklin tried to laugh.

" Looks like that Carter's sorta hobbled me, boy. Even though I did git away—thanks to you. Yeah, and the little promise he made me—"

He broke off. He was thinking of the smoky hate in Carter's eyes, the vengeance maddened, merciless sob in his voice, making that promise just before the Wolf had sprung.

" I'll see you die for this, Franklin. I'll see you die, if it's the last thing I do on earth."

His lips had tightened to a thin, hard line.

And one of the pay roll guards had lived long enough to tell Carter he had recognized Franklin as one of the bandits. A pure error, of course, if he had said it. He probably had; Carter hardly would lie about it. A mistake; but a dying man's statement, and so the last straw, the final touch. As though fate, making pitilessly sure of Buck Franklin's downfall, had omitted nothing.

Trying grimly to smile, he achieved a crude bandage, then caught the stirrup and, with a struggle, pulled himself up.

After all he had run out on that leg. By gritting his teeth and standing the pain he could still use it—he had to. But his face was wet with cold sweat, despite the chill wind, and he was sick and shaking when at last he rolled into his saddle.

The Wolf following, he melted into the black.

They'd be after him like hounds now, he knew that. Crippled as he was, it would be just that much easier for them to catch up. But catch up did not mean catch.

If or when they took him back to jail again, they'd take him feet first. Alive, Buck Franklin was done forever with such things as jails and bars.

IN the small hours a weary but still relentless Dan Carter, in the stillness of his office, told Sheriff Bill Cochran what had happened. A deceptively mild mannered old-timer, Cochran listened, tugging at his white, drooping, Texas style mustache.

"And he plumb denied it, huh?" he asked as Carter finished. "Hmm, evidence agin' him, of course. Enough to send him to the chair, mebbe. But still—"

He broke off, frowning, shaking his head perplexedly.

"Somehow, right now it jest don't all seem to make sense. There was three of 'em, you say Blanton told yuh, and we follered the tracks of three hosses from the road to where a car had been hid out, three, four miles northeast.

"That car went south. But the hosses turned and went north, headin', it's obvious now, for Franklin's shack. But why would jest one of them three bandits, the Tintype Kid, make his git-away in the car but the other two stay with the hosses and head for a place they'd know damn well would be jest about the first place we'd come lookin' for sign? Not only head for it; but go there and stay there, with all the evidence needed to damn 'em right in plain sight?"

"Shannon was dying," said Carter sharply. "Franklin probably figured he had plenty of time. All the guards dead, not able to tell who did it—"

"That still don't explain why he'd go home when he'd know he'd be the very first guy we'd check up on, jest on blind suspicion," interrupted Cochran stubbornly. "Did Blanton tell you positive he recognized all three of 'em? Franklin too?"

Dan Carter hesitated, then, honestly, shook his head. "N-no, he didn't, in so many words. He said he had recognized all three, and he named Shannon and the Kid. Before he could get out the third name he was dead. But, great Lord, sheriff, I knew he was trying to say Franklin! I know it! His lips seemed to be forming the name. Those three outlaws you know yourself were partners. Why, even if we hadn't found what we did out there, even if he hadn't acted as he did—"

The sheriff nodded, breaking in softly. "Yeah, yeah, I know. It means we jest got to catch him, that's all. Him and the Kid. We will, sooner or later."

He tugged at his mustache. "But, somehow, it jest looks too plumb obvious Buck Franklin was that third bandit and a damn fool, which last he ain't. Mebbe he was tellin' you the truth. And if he was—well, I'm afraid catchin' him, Dan, is gonna be jest like goin' out to catch you a calf killin' wolf. You find you a wolf, mebbe he ain't the guilty wolf at all; but jest the same he fights and he don't exactly help you take him alive."

About mid-afternoon Sheriff Cochran, patiently working the country north and west of Skeleton Creek, picked up a final scent at a ranch some dozen miles from Franklin's cabin. In early morning Buck had been there and had secured a supply of food.

"Offered to pay for it, but I just give it to him," explained the rancher dryly. "Me, I'm a peaceful man. Had his leg bandaged and his gun handy, so I knowed he was on the dodge agin'."

"He was wounded, you say? In the leg? Bad?"

"He could make out to walk on it. Yeah, and by the way, he had a dog along with him too. A wolf, ruther."

"Which way'd he go when he left?"

"North." The rancher gestured vaguely. "Across the big pasture yonder. But if you figurin' on trackin' him you'll have a time. Two hundred horses in that pasture."

Sheriff Cochran did not track his man across that pasture. Nor did he pick up the trail elsewhere, nor did the officers in surrounding towns and counties, all warned, find any sign. To all intents and purposes, Buck Franklin, after leaving that ranch house, had vanished into thin air. Like an old prairie wolf, in the middle of flat nothing, he was suddenly just plain gone.

CHAPTER V.

DISCOVERED.

MAN, horse and dog, Buck had disappeared. Nor was there any news of the Tintype Kid. Two days passed, three, with still no trace. Amalgamated Oil Corporation, spurred by Carter, put up a thousand dollar reward for either fugitive, dead or alive.

Still there were no results, although the rewards put new life in the search. Confident that both men were long gone from the Panhandle by this time, the man-hunters turned widely elsewhere.

Life dropped back into its old routine at the Capitol Ranch pool. Save that a shaggy dog came no more to play with a wistful, small boy, and Dan Carter's square jaw was somehow a bit harder, grimmer in its set, there seemed no change.

The wildcat well Amalgamated was drilling, northwest of the field, ran into some gas, a thin sand, not enough to mean a thing, but foul smelling, poisonous, hydrogen sulphide stuff. "Rotten gas," in oil field parlance. With it, and with a drilling crew who seemed to have about as much sense of responsibility as a bunch of prairie flowers, Carter began to have his troubles.

A week after the holdup, deciding he had best drive out to the wildcat again that afternoon, Carter, at breakfast, tried to cheer his son up by promising to take him along.

With small boy faith in the integrity of his friends, Jack absolutely had refused to believe that Buck had again gone wrong.

Perhaps he didn't understand all that had happened. But he did know Buck was accused of something terrible. Over that, and over the loss of his other boon companion, the Wolf, he was heartbroken.

About ten o'clock that morning something happened.

Carter was at one of the pumping power houses, critically listening to an ailing engine. The door lashed open and Joe McAbee, the big pumper who had tried to block Franklin's exit and whose arm the Wolf had slashed for it, came tearing in.

Snatching up a high speed .22 rifle, a gun he kept in the pumphouse to pot occasional rabbits, he spun to go out again.

"That damn dog's back, boss!" he cried. "That damn dog of Franklin's that bit me. If I don't put a slug in him—"

"Hey, wait! Hold on!" Too late, Carter leaped after him. The high, spiteful crack of the little weapon sounded as the big pumper, already past the corner of the building, fired his first shot.

Jumping right after him, Carter caught a glimpse of a shaggy figure, unmistakably the Wolf, perhaps a hundred yards away, snapping at his flank where the bullet had nipped, then realizing, whirling, going in a frantic burst of speed for the cover of near-by tanks.

Before McAbee could fire again, Carter had knocked the muzzle up.

"Hold it, Mac!" he commanded. "Hold it!"

"He bit me, didn't he?" cried Mac furiously. "He slashed me!"

Staring, for a moment Carter did not reply. The Wolf had flashed around the tanks. Covered by their bulk, he had raced to safety and now Carter could see him again, a tiny, running toy, vanishing into the brown of that limitless plain to the north.

Intuitively, he knew that the dog had been coming in to see Jack. Frowning, he turned slowly, looking at his pumper.

"Yeah, I know he did, Mac," he answered slowly. "But he could have made it your throat, maybe. Yes, and mine, certainly. He was fighting for his boss.

"I'm not blaming you. But I wish you hadn't scared him off. He might have led us to Franklin—if he's still anywhere around."

The wrath on Joe McAbee's red, honest face gave way to contrition.

"Aw, I'm sorry, Dan," he apologized. "That's right. I didn't think."

"Oh, forget it." Carter started to turn away. "He probably wouldn't have. Franklin's probably a thousand miles from here by now."

STILL, his thoughts were twisting, mixed with a little wonder, as he walked back toward the office. That dog, coming back— It probably was more indication that Franklin had gone, rather than that he still was hanging around. Fleeing, he'd almost surely have abandoned the dog.

But if the old outlaw was still hanging around, waiting vengefully, perhaps, for a crack at Dan Carter— Say, while he was driving out to that wildcat...

Dan Carter frowned. He wasn't in the least afraid of Franklin or what Franklin might do. Rather, grimly, he wished Buck would do something, would show up and try conclusions.

He was not too sure that Buck wouldn't. If Buck really was innocent—and the way Sheriff Cochran talked, Carter was becoming increasingly uncertain about his first snap judgment—then, by that episode in the cabin Carter probably had made himself a deadly enemy.

He wasn't afraid, for himself. But, at the same time, if there was even remote possibility of a gunfight, of danger, he certainly did not want to take his son into it.

Still, it seemed a rather remote danger. And he had promised Jack he'd take him. He knew that otherwise the boy would be badly disappointed. Oh, it was all right, he'd take him.

So, waving to his mother, young Jack rode off beside his dad, about one thirty. Carter casually had tucked his automatic into his pocket before driving by for him. But meantime two other little things had started to happen, appreciation of either of which might have changed Dan's decision.

One he couldn't have known about. It had been about one o'clock that Sheriff Cochran and a couple of deputies, patiently going over once more the possible hideouts on the high plains far northwest, saw the excited cowboy racing toward them.

"Bill, I've found that guy, Buck Franklin!" The cowhand blurted out his news. "Of all the luck, runnin' right into you guys, when I was ridin' like hell to phone you. It's him, all right."

Cochran's leathery face did not change a particle. But his eyes suddenly had gone tense.

"Yeah?" he drawled. "Where?"

"Over here on Little Creek. He was down in a draw, lyin' beside the bank. Looked like he was bad hit. He seen me, I'm afraid, and I hadn't no gun and he had—"

The sheriff interrupted.

"Lead us back over there, can you? How fur? So? Well, come on, then, boys, step!"

The excited cowboy was racing along beside him.

"Say, if one of you'll just loan me a gun," he pleaded. "I ain't got none."

"Loan him one, Chuck," the sheriff directed. "He had a hoss, you notice?"

"Yeah, he did. On a picket rope. But he can't have had time to go far, even if he did see me. And he's hit, I tell you, too."

The sheriff gestured toward the north.

"We'll git him, I reckon; if that holds off long enough," he said. "If it don't—"

"That," was the other little thing, the detail Dan Carter might have noticed had he not been too absorbed in his thoughts.

Flat against the horizon to the north was a blue band. As yet it was tiny and only subtly different from the rest of the sky. But there was a message in that difference, an ominous one.

Blue norther coming. On the high Panhandle plains, in winter, that can mean plenty. In twenty howling minutes, for one thing, it can plummet the temperature from around fifty to below zero.

FROM the edge of the cutbank Buck Franklin saw those faraway dots of horsemen coming toward him, knew then that that cowpoke had seen him, and slid painfully down toward his own horse.

There was a hole in that cutbank, a wolf den, hardly more. Yet in that hole Buck had lain for six days, the first three with a knee swollen to twice its natural size. Even lying still, to say nothing of crawling to care for his picketed horse, or to get himself water from the creek, it had cost him the agony of the damned.

It had been cold, below freezing every night. He had had no food, save that he had secured at the ranch house, no fire.

He had dropped off into that gully, knowing agonizedly that he could go no farther, thinking grimly it was as good a place as any to wait for them to find him, to make his stand.

But somehow they hadn't found him. Somehow, like the tough old wolf he was, he not only had contrived to live, but even to start getting better. The swelling was going down and he could walk on that leg now, a little. Even though it did necessitate clenched teeth.

Save for foraging expeditions, that other tough one, the Wolf proper, had stayed by him the whole time until last night. Repeatedly during the week he had brought in rabbits, whining worriedly when Buck, without fire to cook and far too sick even to think of trying rabbit raw, would have none of them.

But last night, sensing no doubt that

Buck was very much better, the Wolf had loped off somewhere and as yet had not returned.

He'd take care of himself. And as for Buck, it was high time anyway, even without those oncoming dots, to be traveling. Buck too had noted that blue in the north, knew he couldn't lie out, minus fire and unsheltered, in that.

Maybe that norther with its swirling dust clouds would help him lose this pursuit, speed him on his way. Maybe it would do just the reverse and destroy him. Fatalistic, Buck Franklin clambered painfully into his saddle to play out his string.

He took out along the creek, east, staying down off the flat, trying to gain as much distance as possible before being seen.

CHAPTER VI.

THE STORM BREAKS.

DAN CARTER was at the wildcat, thoroughly angry about what he had found there, before he noted that sure sign of a norther. As he had driven up, with deepening frown he had observed that no smoke whipped from the battered stack over the boiler, no activity was apparent about the boarded-in derrick or the stout bunk shack near by. The well appeared deserted, although the driller and tooldresser should have been hard at work.

It was deserted. With snapping, angry eyes, Carter found the empty whisky bottle on the table in the bunk shack, the plain signs that the crew, hours since, had capped a souse party by climbing into their car and lighting out, letting the well go hang.

Plenty mad, Carter stepped into the derrick. The heavy string of tools hung poised above the hole and the joyous crew hadn't even observed the routine precaution of putting a cover, a piece of sheet iron or the like, over the mouth of the casing, then lowering the tools to rest lightly upon it, thus making sure the cover stayed in place and nothing fell in the hole.

Even as small a thing as a temper screw ball, a wrench, or a big bolt may cause plenty of grief at the bottom of an oil well hole.

With a thoroughly irritated exclamation, Carter stooped to drag the sheet iron cover over the top of the casing. And as he did so, up from the black depths came a vagrant whiff of gas, no force to it, just a blue-gray wisp; but enough to send him reeling back, coughing, choking, his sight blurring dizzily.

With his face hardly three feet from the casing mouth, he'd gotten a dangerously strong dose. Still coughing, he stumbled hurriedly to the entrance into the derrick, gulping great mouthfuls of the crisp, fresh air, clearing his lungs and eyes.

His anger suddenly submerged, frowning, he shook his head. Pretty darn careless, letting himself get a shot of rotten gas this way. Too careless. And this was the second time within the week, too, that he had let himself get dosed by this well.

Bad business. For, though ordinary natural gas is poisonous in about the same way water is poisonous—to a man drowning in it, that is—hydrogen sulphide, "rotten" gas, is different.

It's like the true poison gases of war time. You get one diluted sniff of the foul smelling stuff, just enough. And suddenly it doesn't smell at all, you don't smell anything in fact, the lights are going out—and you're a darn sight

closer to Kingdom Come than you'll ever be again, save once. If this isn't the once.

Carter knew all that. Knew also the gas can painfully afflict a man's eyes, may even make him go suddenly though temporarily blind. Sobered, he started around the derrick toward his car, where his son was waiting for him.

Jack came running to meet him.

"Dad, we got a down tire," he announced. "I—oh, you choke yourself?"

"Just got a whiff of gas up my nose," explained Carter casually. "Tire down, you say? Well, come on, let's change it."

It was then that he first really noticed that widening band of blue in the north, the banner of the fast coming norther.

But, even noticing it, knowing it must strike within the next twenty or thirty minutes probably, he still was not at all worried. Changing the tire would be only a minor matter. The car, a closed coupé, had a good heater, heavy chains, was in perfect shape for winter driving. And the road, save for one little rough place where it crossed a creek about a mile away, was plenty easy.

The coming norther would nose-dive the temperature and bring lots of wind and dust. But it hardly would carry enough immediate sleet or snow to be troublesome. With only eighteen miles to go, they should be at home in well under an hour.

Deliberately, he would not have taken his boy out into a norther, because after all there might be some slight danger of exposure. But here they were, out in it. And Jack's mother would worry badly if their return was delayed.

Thinking more of that missing drilling crew than the norther, Carter changed the tire, cheerfully motioned to Jack to climb in, and started out. At about that time Buck Franklin, not so far west and slightly south, was hearing the first bullet thud into the dirt behind him, was glancing at the north and wondering if that norther ever was going to arrive.

His horse, picketed for a week on grass and perhaps not as good to begin with as the mounts behind him, was letting the pursuit close up. They were now within long rifle range. If that storm struck soon enough, with sufficient force of howling wind, blinding dust, why, perhaps he could double and lose them. If it didn't—

LOOKING back as he eased the car across the creek bottom, the one bad place on the road, Carter saw that the norther was almost upon them.

But he did not notice a shaggy brown figure, a wolflike shape which flashed out of the road to near-by cover, which crouched there as the car went by and which then turned, hesitated, finally started cautiously to follow. Nor did young Jack notice his missing friend, either.

On the smoothness of the flat again, Carter gave the car the gun. Almost simultaneously the norther struck.

The hazed, uneasy sunlight dissolved instantly in a sweeping rush of blue murk. With a howling rush, wind, bringing vast clouds of dust, caught up the speeding car.

The temperature started falling immediately.

Necessarily slowing a little until the first rush of blinding dust had passed, Carter turned to his son, grinning, all

but shouting to be heard above the roar.

"Good thing we wore our heavy coats. Boy, feel it hit the car!"

Not a mile farther, it happened. Buffeting the car, driving it like a scudding ship before a gale, the wind now, with its dust, was mixing a few tiny pellets of sleet.

Carter started to glance again at his son. And with the snap of an electric light being turned out, everything, for him, went black.

With a sobbing gasp, he tried to jam on the brakes, hold the car straight, stop it. Something seemed to catch the right front wheel in an unbreakable grasp. The speeding machine lashed savagely up and sideways, going clear over. With a stunning smash, Carter felt himself hurled against the door, which must have opened, then thrown free.

He could not have been stunned for more than a minute at most. Dazedly coming back, trying to sit up, conscious that something warm, blood, was trickling down his face, he knew that blindly he must have steered toward the side of the road and that something, a rut, a prairie dog hole, some little thing, had twisted the speeding auto over.

Then, with that iced wing raving against his face, clearing his brain, the true horror of his predicament began to come home.

He was blind. The rotten gas had done for him just what it had done for more than one other oil man. It had turned his lights out, capriciously, instantly, completely, and without warning.

In a few days of course, with proper care, he would see again, good as ever. But a few days to wait for sight! And Jack, his six-year-old son, lying there somewhere in the wrecked car!

He scrambled to his feet, arms outstretched, shouting.

"Jack! Jack, boy! Answer me! Where are you? Where—"

THERE was no reply save the roar of wind. No indication to which side of the car he had been thrown, or how far away. He was stone blind. Swaying, he fought to master the awful fear, the hideous panic welling up within him.

"Jack! Jack! Oh, my God, son, answer me! I can't see! I can't see where you are!"

The rush and howl of the storm mocked his cry. The gusts were so strong they all but knocked him off his feet. Dust and sleet, driven like shot, beat against his blind, bleeding face. He had to do something. He had to!

He fought frantically for calm. The wind against his face, vaguely, told him which was north. The road here ran south and he wasn't standing on it; there were thin tufts of grass beneath his feet. Judging, then, that he must have been thrown to the right of the road, the wrecked car should be somewhere to his right as he faced the wind.

But where? Shouting, he took a staggering step in that direction, another and another. His groping, outstretched hands found nothing. And still grass was under his feet; he hadn't even found the road.

He thought he heard a faint, anguished cry, again from his right, downwind.

"Daddy! Daddy!"

With a sobbing shout, "I'll get you out, son! I'll get you out!" he whirled, desperately plunging, stumbling in that direction, great arms sweeping blindly before him.

And again, nothing. No car, no road,

no further answer to his frantic shouts. The killing, wind driven cold was getting worse every minute.

In it, somewhere, was his boy. Injured, perhaps badly injured, pinned under the car. Perhaps already starting to freeze, with that ghastly rapidity with which the injured, or small children, succumb. And his father not helping him, although perhaps within arm's reach.

Or he might be fifty yards from the car by now, getting farther away every step. His sweeping fingers might have missed it a quarter inch. He knew there was hardly one chance in a thousand any one would be coming over this road for hours. In the field, until night at least, they'd suppose he was just staying at the wildcat, waiting for the norther to blow itself out.

Help, maybe, some time after dark. When in thirty minutes his son might be dead. It was then, for a space, that the black horror of it, his helplessness, must have driven him completely mad. Again and again, he thought he heard his boy calling, now from one side, now from the other. A will o' the wisp, that wrecked car wavered always just an inch beyond his fingers, just an inch.

Shouting, sobbing, listening, he stumbled this way and that, falling, getting up, falling again. Each step he took a separate, fiendish torture; for if he took it, it might be leading him directly away from his boy; if he did not take it, his boy might be dying a foot away, right where that one step would have brought his father to him. Each minute was a thousand years of purgatory. He knew now that he had about one chance in a million of stumbling into that car and his son. One chance. It drew him on, on.

Blindly he was trying to move in circles, to course back and forth. He was praying.

IN the whirling dust, the semi-darkness of it, Buck Franklin, breaking sharply south now to tangle his trail, smiled thinly. He had lost his pursuers, he was sure of that. Just before the storm struck they had been close enough to let him recognize the leader as old Sheriff Cochran himself. But even Bill Cochran wasn't good enough to track a man when the wind was blowing away the tracks as fast as they were made, when the flying sand and dust were so thick you could not see a hundred yards any direction.

With the temperature nose-diving the way it was, Cochran probably would give up the chase shortly and head for the nearest shelter. The warm bunkhouse of that wildcat well, undoubtedly. It was close. And it was the only shelter within ten or twelve miles.

Buck was thinking of his own cabin, on east, and of an abandoned sod shanty he knew about, still farther east. He meant to go as far as he could before holing up. But he knew that, at this rate, by night it was going to be super-cold. And neither he nor his pony were in any shape for a marathon in howling sub-zero.

Have to make just as much fast distance as he could before it got too cold to risk farther. He started to swing east again. Out of the dust clouds came a bounding, wind blown figure, the Wolf.

Incredulously, Buck started to swear; then instead, grinned. "Why, you ol' son of a gun!" he shouted. "Where'd you come from? Just can't lose you nohow, can I?"

The Wolf whirled in front of him,

breaking away east and south, coming back, barking, doing it again and again.

"This way!" he seemed to plead. "This way! Please!"

Wondering, and since it was more or less the direction he wished to go anyway, Buck followed.

IN his blind torture, through which he had stumbled now for eternity after eternity, his calling voice rasped away to a hoarse shred, the blood from his glass slashed cheeks frozen on his face, Dan Carter still moved. Still trying to find and help his boy; and he would keep on trying until he found him, or died.

The howling wind had slacked a little by now. But it was far colder and still dropping. Cold was knifing clear through him. It was harder, each time he fell, to get up. Wouldn't be long until . . .

Suddenly, faintly through the wind, he thought he heard the howl of a dog or wolf. Sobbing, his mind grasping pitifully at the faintest semblance of a chance for help, he whirled, shouting, then straining his ears.

It might be just a coyote or a lone dog, and so, no help. He might have imagined he heard it. But it might be a dog with somebody, help. Half hysterical, he waited.

He heard it again, a short, broken howl, ending in a bark, unmistakable and very close. A dog; no wolf barks.

Waving his arms, he tried again to shout, to scream, hoping against hope.

With a broken, sobbing cry he heard, through the rush of wind, the beat of a horse's hooves and then a human voice.

"Well, Carter?"

Incredulous exultation, hope, frantic anxiety churned quickening life back into his numbed brain as he spun with arms wide, trying blindly to face the speaker.

"Thank God, thank God! Somebody! Somebody at last! My boy, man, my son—he's around here somewhere! Help—"

With a stricken, gasping breath, he broke off.

Belatedly, his dazed mind had identified that unmistakable, drawling voice. It was Buck Franklin's.

CHAPTER VII.

A TRAP?

BUCK FRANKLIN, the man he had branded an outlaw, a murderer. The man he had done his vengeful best to kill. The man to whom he had made the grisly promise, "I'll see you die, if it's the last thing I do on earth."

Franklin, who, if guilty, was a cold blooded killer; if innocent, then, by Carter's own actions surely Carter's bitter enemy. And this was the man to whom he must now make his helpless plea.

Doubtless, for himself alone, even in his blinded desperation, Dan Carter would not have begged from this man. But for his boy he was willing to do anything. He lifted his great hands.

"You're — Buck Franklin, aren't you?" His voice was a hoarse shred, shaking.

"Can't you see?"

"No. I—I'm blind. Got a dose of rotten gas and it blinded me while I was driving home, with my boy. Turned the car over before I could stop. I—I couldn't find it again, to get my boy out—"

His hands came twisting up toward his agonized face.

"For God's sake, you—you'll find him, help him, won't you? He's just a baby and he was your friend. He may be dying, freezing—"

"I found him." Buck's voice, interrupting, was grimly dry.

"Wolf did, ruther, and led me to him. Yeah and to you, too. You're nearly a half mile from the car. So that's what's wrong with you, huh? Blind. I thought you'd got knocked crazy. Well, if you really can't see, I got Jack right here with me. He's stunned, cut and bruised some, but—"

With a hoarse, broken cry, Dan Carter swayed blindly forward. His hungry, groping hands touched a stirrup, a knee that winced under his grasp, then a small, booted foot that moved feebly.

"He'll be all right, I reckon, if I git him out of this storm quick enough," said Buck harshly. He hesitated and then, through the rush of wind, Carter heard his laugh, a short, hard sound that had in it no element of mirth.

"And you're his dad. That makes you worth troublin' with, too, I guess. If you can hold onto the stirrup and walk, I'll get you both back to the bunk shack at the well.

"This pony can't carry three of us. And you shot me in the leg, so I can't walk very well myself. All right, grab holt."

Hanging to the stirrup leather, stumbling as he was towed along, Carter was struggling for words that would not come. What could he say?

IN the saddle, Jack against his breast and his coat pulled around them both as far as it would go, Buck was smiling, a gray, twisted smile.

No use quarreling with the way fate dealt the cards. You had to play them anyway, as they came.

With the boy injured, dazed, suffering keenly already from shock and exposure, Buck knew that to keep him out in this driving storm any longer than absolutely necessary might be just the same as murder. Bad enough that he must be in it this long.

No other choice but to take him to the bunk house at that wildcat. There was no other possible shelter for miles.

But at that bunk house would be Sheriff Cochran and his posse. No other possible shelter near by for them to head for, either. After losing their quarry, they'd not have stayed out long in this, nor would they have essayed any eighteen or twenty mile ride, horseback, to town.

They'd be there. And here, after having got clean away from them, Buck must ride right back into their arms.

Regardless of why he came, they must try to arrest and hold him. That was their duty; and the fact that he had brought in a helpless man and injured boy, saved them both from death, would in no way change those warrants against him.

The sheriff and his men must do their best to capture him or be derelict in their oaths. And, since he did not intend to be captured, to submit to arrest even for a minute, their close range meeting probably could end only one way.

Gunplay. Showdown, one against four. Finale for Buck Franklin. Well, sooner or later it would have had to come anyway.

He held the boy closer against him, tucking him in.

Funny. Dan Carter here, stumbling along at his stirrup, had sworn to see him die and now Carter would be right there; but he wouldn't see it. He had

vowed to bring Franklin to the punishment of the law and now he was doing it; not by his power, but by his helplessness.

Still, there had been not the slightest hesitancy in Buck's mind about what he must do, when the Wolf had led him to young Jack. Nothing else to do but the best he could, for the boy. And, yes, that went for Jack's dad, too.

Blinded, helpless as he was, Buck would have helped Dan Carter, even had Jack not entered into the problem. Dan Carter had wronged him, injured him. Perhaps he ought to hate him. But he didn't, especially. Perhaps, he knew, in Dan Carter's shoes after that holdup he would have done exactly as had Dan Carter.

There might be some chance, of course, that he could win clear again, after seeing the two to safety. Perhaps this was too much to expect, since his luck already had strained itself to incredible limits in letting him get away from the cabin and again, just now, from the sheriff. But still he could try.

They were across the creek now. The dust and sand, scoured by the roaring wind from hundreds of miles of flat, sparsely grassed plains, the flying murk, still made it almost as dusky as deep twilight. Twisting his head, he lifted his voice.

"CARTER. Carter, hear me? We're not far from the well now. And I'm pretty sure the sheriff and a posse are there.

"They was chasin' me when this norther struck and I lost 'em in it. Ain't no other place near by they could hole up. I'll tote you and Jack in. But I'm not gonna let 'em take me in, too, leastways, not alive.

"When we git close enough, I'll let you hold Jack and I'll yell for 'em to come out and git you. I'll stick with you till I'm sure they're comin'. But then I'll have to try and fog it. You understand, now?"

Amaze, slow dawning, aghast realization mingled on the blind face the oil man turned upwards toward him.

"You—you mean you're taking us in—when you know you're riding right back into a gun fight?" Carter's voice was hoarse.

"Don't know anything else I can do with you, do you?" snapped Buck.

Carter did know. It showed on his wounded face. With a slow shudder, he fought for words.

"I—I'll not let them lay a hand on you, Franklin. Not if I can do anything. After you saving my boy and me this way, no matter what you've done or haven't done before—"

"Aw, shut up!" Buck's gaunt face had twisted into a snarl. "You can't do anything about the law. I wouldn't trust you to, if you could. I ain't doin' this just to bootlick you!"

He was silent a moment, then spoke again, in a somewhat milder tone.

"Not that I hold it agin' you, I reckon, what you done to me or threatened to do. I know it did look like you'd caught me red handed. Just the same, I wasn't in that holdup! I didn't even know it had been pulled till Frank rode up to my door, dyin'. I tried to do for him just what I'm tryin' to do for you.

"But I ain't expectin' you to believe that and neither am I lettin' Bill Cochran take me in and see if a judge and jury believes it. I come out of the pen swearin' to stay straight and never go back behind bars agin. I been straight—and alive I ain't goin' back, not even the first step!"

He breathed harshly and that fierce

glare again was in his voice when he went on.

"You—you don't know nothin' about what it's like to be caged up. Stayin' there, goin' crazy, eatin' your heart out, eternity after eternity—"

Carter lifted his free hand toward his sightless eyes.

"I think I do have some idea what you mean," he interrupted slowly, significantly. "I think I do—now."

Conserving his breath to struggle exhaustedly on, he said no more, nor did Franklin have anything else to offer until at last the old outlaw pulled the tired pony up short.

"Well, there she is," he said curtly. "Here, take the boy. I'll put up a yell—"

He broke off, his voice changing quickly.

"Wait. Funny, I don't see no smoke. They'd surely have a fire in the bunk house, wouldn't they?"

"The drilling crew's not there, Frankin," put in Carter hoarsely. "If —if the sheriff isn't either, then there's nobody. And I—can't see to walk in—"

Franklin was shouting, pausing to watch and listen, then shouting again. Abruptly he uttered an irritated exclamation.

"Here, nev' mind takin' him. I ain't gonna keep him out in this no longer. Grab holt of the stirrup. Mebbe it's a trap. But I'll chance it, take you both clear in."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE WOLF IS CORNERED.

THEY moved forward again. Carter tripped over something, a piece of pipe or other metal that clanked dully. Clinging to the stirrup as he would have fallen, he knew they must be passing the derrick.

A moment later they were in the icy bunk house. Hurriedly, Franklin was building a roaring fire in the big stove.

"There!" Carter heard his satisfied exclamation as he stepped back. "You comin' around, Jack, kid? Here, lemme put you close. Be plenty warm in a minute. How you feel?"

"I'm—all right, Buck." Carter heard his son's faint voice, gamely answering. "I'm—all right."

"Bunk right behind you, Carter," Buck informed the oil man curtly. "You can't be no help. Sit down."

Exhaustedly, Carter obeyed. Already he could feel the grateful warmth reaching him. Anxiously, he turned his blind face towards where the little sounds told him Buck must be caring for Jack.

"Git down, Wolf," Buck grunted. "He ain't dead. Hmn, you ain't so bad off at that, Jack, hombre. If you just don't catch pneumonia now, or somethin'. He'll be all right, Carter."

"Funny, the sheriff ain't here," he commented nervously, a moment later. Then, very dryly:

"Hope he ain't waitin' for me to come lead him in, too. 'Cause if he is—"

Struggling for words that were hard to find, embarrassedly Dan Carter cleared his throat.

"I—somehow I know I was wrong —you weren't in that holdup," he stammered. "A man who'd do for his worst enemy what you've just done for me—wouldn't turn a machine gun on unsuspecting men, murder them in cold blood—"

"Oh, no?" Franklin's interruption was harshly sardonic. "Me bringin' you in don't prove that. It don't prove nothin'. I'd of done as much for a dog.

No, and I ain't askin' you to be grateful and forgive a man you still think mebbe is a murderer and a hijacker, neither. Though mebbe if you did try and find out the real truth—"

He broke short, abruptly changing the subject.

"I do wisht there was somebody here, to take care of you two. Jack in the shape he's in and you blind, I'm afraid to leave you. But if I don't take out, I'm plumb liable to git myself shot."

Gesturing, Dan Carter leaned quickly forward.

"Why do you have to run, man? It's the worst thing you could do. Why, if you're innocent, you surely want this cleared up. You don't have to stay. Somebody will be out here looking for us by dark, I'm sure, and I can make out, I guess, until then. But if you will stay, I swear I'll do everything I can for you."

"Yeah? You been tryin' to already." Buck laughed harshly. "I wonder if it was you, too, who shot the Wolf? Somebody's tried to."

Dan Carter choked.

A moment later Franklin started to add something else, broke off instantly as the Wolf suddenly snarled warning and Carter heard him whirl toward the door. He jerked back and his dry voice now was crackling, deadly tense.

"Well, here comes your help. The sheriff. Comin' up-wind and dodgin' behind the derrick. That means he's seen my horse, I reckon, knows I'm here. Can't let 'em be shootin' into the buildin' with the kid lyin' there. So long."

"Wait! Wait!" Carter flung himself to his feet, frantically groping forward.

Too late. He felt the blast of icy air hit his face as the door was flung open, heard it slam shut. From outside, faint through the wind, he heard a bellowing shout.

"There he is! There! Stop, damn you! Stop—we'll shoot!"

There was the whiplash of a rifle shot, another and then, from close outside, a sudden, angry cry, Franklin's voice.

LEAPING for his pony, snatching the reins, his left foot already in the stirrup, Buck had felt that wounded knee suddenly collapse, utterly fail him as the lead slapped over and the frightened pony shied.

Though he still held the bridle rein, he all but fell flat. With a furious effort, he kept his balance on his one good leg. But now the pony was five feet away and it was too late to try again to mount and ride.

Afoot, running toward him from the corner of the derrick, six-gun ready, was Sheriff Cochran.

He was not fifty paces away. And at that distance, with a Colt, Buck knew Cochran could shoot the spots off a playing card.

Crouching, his own gun out and leveled, Buck set himself to make his stand. An old wolf, cornered at last, but still not captured, not intending to be, he snarled his challenge.

"Stop, Bill! Stop! I don't want to kill you. But I ain't goin' to let you take me. You come any closer, I'll let you have it."

Twenty paces away, Cochran did stop. Behind him, from around both sides of the derrick, his men had come into sight. Weapons leveled, they spread in a semicircle for room to shoot.

"Don't be a damn fool, Franklin." Sheriff Cochran's voice was even, cool, just high enough to carry through the

wind. Deliberately he came another step forward, another.

"We're four to one. You ain't got a chance on earth to fight. It's my duty to arrest you and I'm goin' to."

He took another step, another. Now he was almost abreast the door of the bunk house, with Buck some ten or fifteen feet beyond it, where his struggle to mount his horse had carried him.

"If you're innocent, like I understand you claim, Franklin, you'll surrender peaceable and help us clear up this crime. You'll git a square deal. Now drop that gun."

Infinitely deadly, Buck Franklin did not move.

"I ain't goin' to, Cochran. I ain't goin' to jail. You're not goin' to arrest me. I'm done with all that. Now, don't make me kill you. You come one step nearer—I'll have to!"

Pausing, watching the old outlaw's blazing eyes with hawklike gaze, his own every muscle and nerve set for lightning action, old Bill Cochran caught and understood the utter sincerity in that hoarse voice.

Buck Franklin didn't intend to surrender. At the next step he did intend to start shooting. Under four gun muzzles he would die and he knew that, but he was ready to; and probably he would take at least one of his opponents with him. Perhaps the sheriff.

Not afraid to die, yet still not exactly anxious to do so, and equally reluctant to kill a man he had felt all along was involved only casually, if at all, in the crime for which he was sought, Bill Cochran hesitated again, then set himself with tightening jaw.

That was his duty, to bring this man in. Cochran had walked up and snatched the guns out of outlaws' hands before. Perhaps he could do it this time. Perhaps he'd have to shoot, catch the flicker in Franklin's eye and beat him to it. He must try.

He started to take that next step. And there came a crackling interruption, a hoarse, deadly voice snarling command.

"All right, sheriff, you and your men! Stand still and reach for the sky! Damn quick! I got you all covered, cold. Reach!"

WHIPPING half around, the astounded sheriff saw the great figure in the doorway of the bunk house, the leveled automatic in its hand. His cry rang with incredulous amaze.

"Carter! You—you helpin' Buck Franklin! Agin' the Law!"

The automatic in Carter's hand whirled in a menacing arc.

"Yes, I'm helping him! I'm certain now he wasn't in that holdup and even if he was I can't let you kill him.

"He's just done my boy and me the greatest service a man can do. Brought us in here, saved both our lives, when he knew he was coming right back into your arms. Now, if he wants to go, he's going and you'll stand still and let him!"

Arms uplifted, staring with bulging eyes, one of the deputies behind Cochran swore, in a strangling, dazed gulp. The old sheriff had half turned, but otherwise he did not move, did not raise his hands, or even drop the muzzle of his pistol.

"I'm warning you now, boys, I mean it!" Passionate sincerity throbbed in Carter's hoarse voice. "Just one funny move and I fire. Buck Franklin, you can travel if you want to. But I'm asking you again to stay and face it. Will you?"

Out of his dumfounded amaze,

from somewhere Buck plucked words to answer.

"I ain't goin' to jail, Carter, and I ain't goin' to be arrested," he said stubbornly. "No, I'm travelin', if I can."

"All right, then. It's your choice. Grab a horse and go. Go on; I'll hold these guys till you're safe away."

Still dazedly incredulous, with a limping scramble Buck went into his saddle. Gathering the reins, for an instant he turned.

"Bill Cochran, don't you hurt him for this. He thinks he owes me. I oughtn't to let him do it, but you're four agin' my one, so I must. I told him the truth and I'm tellin' you. Though I can't prove it, before God I had nothin' to do with that holdup. But, innocent or not, I ain't never goin' alive behind bars agin. So, for both our sakes, I hope we don't meet agin till you've found out the truth. So long, Carter. And—much obliged."

He whirled and was gone, the beat of his horse's racing feet fading in the rushing howl of the wind.

"Stand still, boys. Stand still," warned Carter grimly, stepping out and closing the door. "Give him time to get gone."

Perhaps it was four minutes later that the sheriff spoke again, in a curiously dry, casual voice.

"Long enough, ain't it, Carter? He's clean outa sight, long since. And I'm gittin' cold."

With a mirthless laugh, Dan Carter dropped the muzzle of his gun.

"Boys, I'm sorry to have tricked you," he said hoarsely. "I had to do it. But you never was in much danger of me shooting you. Because I'm blind. Blind as a bat.

"'I got a dose of that damned rotten gas from the well there and it put my lights out while I was driving home. I was going fast; the car flipped clear over before I could stop, threw me clear. But—but my boy was caught under the wreck. I—couldn't see. Couldn't help him, couldn't get him to answer me, couldn't even find the car. I—I—"

For a moment, remembering, Dan Carter could not go on.

"Then—Buck Franklin and his dog came along, found us. And—and what he did—you see—"

The sheriff interrupted.

"Yeah, yeah, I kinda had a hunch that was it." He chuckled. "One thing, you told us right off he saved your lives by bringin' you both back here and why would he have to, if you wasn't blind or somethin'. You ain't disabled otherwise, obvious. Then, too, for the last three minutes anyways you been pointing that pistol at most everything exceptin' us."

With another chuckle, he turned toward the door.

"Well, let's git inside where it's warm. I was just as well pleased you did bust in on us, right when you did. 'Cause I do believe that old hellion was gonna shoot me, very next step."

ONE of the deputies started to open the door, pulling it quickly shut again as the Wolf tried to get out, turning to ask the sheriff a question, with a silent, significant gesture. Shaking his head, Cochran motioned to him to open the door and let the dog free.

Helping Carter back in, himself the last to enter, the old officer turned in the doorway, watching an instant while the Wolf cast about and then, at a swinging lope, vanished into the murk on the trail of the fugitive.

Closing the door, he moved grate-

fully toward the fire, then turned to stoop over young Jack. Five minutes later, again toasting himself at the stove, he grinned at Carter.

"I really oughta be awful mad about this, th'ow you in jail for aidin' and abettin' the escape of a fugitive, Carter," he said. "After all, his savin' you two don't prove nothin' about the holdup."

Dan Carter straightened.

"Franklin wasn't in that robbery, Bill," he answered passionately. "A man who would do what he did for us—and me his enemy—wouldn't turn a machine gun on men without warning. I tell you—"

"Shore changed your mind, for some reason, ain't yuh?" murmured the sheriff dryly. But then he added:

"No, I ain't never really figured he was, either. But when circumstances are so incriminatin', and a guy's as dang ornery as he is about submittin' to arrest peaceable, comin' in and helpin' clear up the case—"

The sheriff sighed.

"I suppose we can take the reward off him and sorta pass the word around not to kill him; we don't want him that bad. Sooner or later somebody'll be pickin' up the Tintype Kid, shorely. And what we sweat outa him will, mebbe, clear Buck. But if he'd only cooperate—"

Dan Carter smiled. "Did you ever hear of any old wolf, guilty or not, who would?"

Lifting himself on his bed, young Jack broke in, in a thin, anxious treble.

"Dad, they will come back to see me! Won't they?"

THE END

An Oriental Boom Town

SHORTLY over a hundred years ago Singapore was a dismal fishing village set on a jungle island at the southernmost point of Asia. It belonged to the Sultan of Jehore. He didn't want it, so leased it for a low price to Sir Stamford Raffles of the East India Company. Today it's called the Lion City, has half a million people and the brilliance of its barrooms is noted all over the East. It has a railroad line running to the mainland, is as strong a fortress as Gibraltar—considered, in fact, absolutely impregnable.

This Eastern Chicago draws wealth from the fabulously rich tin mines of the Malay Peninsula, which cling to mountains a mile and a half high, where rubber, coffee and even the modest tapioca plant thrive. All the sea routes pay tribute to Singapore, whose people annually lose about as much money at horse racing as those of Dublin do. It's quite a lot. Half the population are Chinese; the rest are the most bewildering mix-up of races and clash of tongues to be found anywhere in the world. And it's still growing.

J. W. Holden.

The Jungle Master

By RALPH R. PERRY

Author of "The Wrong Move," "Jib-Boom Charlie," etc.

Novelette—Complete

Like an ant heap the cannibals rolled apart

Bellow Bill Williams, South Seas pearler, enters the bush for a finish fight with a deadly master of jungle craft

CHAPTER I.

THE BLOODY HEAD.

NAKED black cannibals with brutish faces and enormous mops of frizzled, kinky hair waded from a schooner to the beach, each man bowed beneath the weight of a steel pipe to be used for hydraulic mining. The savages lived in a huge communal longhouse thatched with the sun-dried leaves of the sago palm. Their most precious possessions were human heads. They fought with stone axes, poisoned darts, and spears horribly barbed with hardened wood and bone. The pipe they carried was the most modern, up-to-date product of the draughting rooms and furnaces of Birmingham.

And that contrast was New Guinea.

Down the hillside to the beach pressed the jungle, matted, steaming in the heat, fecund; so thick that it seemed that it would crowd the narrow strip of sand back into the sea. Yet on the beach stood a slender, middle-aged little white man with a clear cut, intellectual face, and a girl whose hair was a warm brown, like oak leaves touched by the autumn frosts.

Similarity of feature marked the pair as father and daughter. Both wore patched and threadbare khaki;

yet despite the shabby clothing they carried themselves like a king and his princess. The pipe was theirs. With it they would rip gold from the jungle first, and in the end make jungle and cannibals leap ahead to civilization.

And that was New Guinea, too. Stanley Morrison and his daughter Peggy looked feeble in contrast with the savages. Easy to kill—but while they lived they would conquer. The look that marks the true pioneer was on each face.

Bellow Bill Williams, leaning on the rail of the schooner, knew that look. He was a pearling skipper and a sailor, mostly. He stood six feet three in bare feet, and weighed two hundred and forty pounds, all hard muscle. Tattooing covered him from wrist to shoulder and chin to waist. Outwardly he was not at all like the Morrisons. To see the savages grunt under lengths of pipe that couldn't weigh much over a hundred and fifty pounds amused him, but at the scanty heap of supplies piled on deck to be carried ashore he was not amused at all.

This man Morrison had spent the last of his dust on machinery. There wasn't even enough tea in the supplies to last a month, and there hadn't been enough gold dust left after he'd paid Bill the freight to color the palm of the pearler's huge hand. The lean little guy was gambling with the jungle to the last pinch of his resources, and the girl was backing him up.

Bellow Bill liked that. In the long run, what does grub amount to? A pioneer can pull a belt tight. For the machinery which conquers the jungle there is no substitute. This jungle would be licked — because a slender little man and a young girl dared to match what they knew against starvation and fever and loneliness. Why, they had eyes for nothing except their precious pipe! They were smiling at each other like happy kids!

Bill did not feel a stranger to the pair at that moment. He liked to see people like that; and because he was watching, not day dreaming, he was the first to see the other New Guinea cannibals who leaped out of the jungle.

THEY rushed without warning, eight or ten blacks, shoulder to shoulder, brandishing clubs of stone. The porters dropped the steel pipes and ran. Morrison had only time to step in front of his daughter. The savages broke over the little man like a wave. A pile of black bodies and swinging, jabbing clubs sprang up where he had stood. One black bounded on, caught the girl by the throat, and flung her heavily to the sand.

Bellow Bill roared. That booming, deep-throated war-cry awoke the jungle echoes a mile away. It was no more to be ignored than the roar of a charging lion. The savage bending over the girl looked up. His club was raised, but Bill had vaulted the rail, dashed through the shallows, and was sprinting along the beach with a speed amazing for so big a man. The huge tattooed hands swung empty — until at full stride Bill snatched a length of pipe from the sand and heaved it over his shoulder as though it weighed no more than a pole.

With a shrill howl the savage raised his club to parry. As well attempt to parry the swing of a derrick boom!

"Ha!" Bill roared. He scarcely felt the impact of the pipe on the woolly skull. The weight of his own blow spun him clear around, the pipe swinging in the air—but the savage was stretched flat, head cracked like an egg.

"Ha!" Bill thundered. Digging in

his heels, he swung ponderously at the heap of men who covered Morrison. Two savages had the misfortune to be on top of the pile. The pipe mashed the face of one, and sent the second sprawling with a broken neck.

Like an ant heap the pile rolled apart. One savage, in sheer panic, leaped at Bill. The pearler kicked him back with his knee, and whirled the pipe for a third blow—only to let it fly from his hands because none of the cannibals were still within its sweep. Even Bill's strength could not hurl such a missile far. It struck no one, but the thud of the weight on the sand lent wings to the flight of the savages. They dove into the jungle.

Three were left dead on the beach. One, whom Bill had kicked, lay writhing. The writhing annoyed Bill. With a stone war club he tapped the man over the head, just hard enough to stretch him senseless, and knelt beside the girl.

HER eyes were wide with horror and amazement, but she tried to smile and pointed to her chest. She would be all right when the breath knocked from her lungs returned. Morrison, however, was badly hurt. Both arms were broken, probably because he had thrown them over his head to protect himself from the clubs. The act had saved his life, but he had taken a terrible beating. There were bruises on the lean chest and body that made Bill look grave.

"Peggy?" Morrison gasped.

"She's all right. Lie still, old-timer," Bill rumbled. His speaking voice had the deep bass note of a far-off surf. "I'll carry you aboard the schooner. It'll be three days' sail to a doctor, but I can set your arms."

"No. Can't leave—yet!" whispered the little man. "My partner and his mate—Cogswell and Fitch—are back in the bush at the diggings. Can't leave—till I find out—about them."

"I get you," Bill rumbled. "Though you mean your partners, don't you?"

"Partner," Morrison insisted. He was gray with pain, but his eyes were steady. He knew what he was talking about. "Cogswell made the discovery. Fitch wasn't with him at that time, so Cogswell wouldn't give him a share, though they usually work together. I bought a half interest. With my last shilling . . . Peggy! Please go away a moment. I must talk to this sailor—alone!"

"You can talk right out, dad. I also noticed that the savages who attacked us were from the same tribe—the same men, in fact — who were working peaceably for us at the diggings this morning." She smiled at Bill. "Though I don't suppose the skipper here realizes what that implies."

"I do, though," Bill rumbled. "They attacked your partner and his buddy, and, being savages, decided to take your heads too. Or—"

"Or they took our partner's money. A few ax heads and a bolt or two of calico is a cheap price for Cogswell to pay for two murders that would give him a gold mine," Peggy finished quietly. "That's what you didn't want me to hear, wasn't it, dad?"

The injured man stirred.

"Partly," he admitted. "I'm not a fool. Cogswell's got my capital. I'm an engineer, and he's had the use of my brains. I've built the dam, and surveyed the pipe line. Any jungle prospector can bolt the pipe together. I'm not needed any more. And yet I can't accuse him until I go and see. If he did lose his temper and shoot a native or something I can't desert him!"

"Cogswell," said Peggy earnestly, knows the jungle. We're new chums compared to him, dad. He's mastered every trick. For fifteen years he claims he's been a prospector among cannibals. I believe him, too. He told me once he was going to get enough gold to live like a lord for the rest of his life. A lifelong spree—and he knows how much money that would take. Lose his temper? Not he!"

PEGGY paused. "But what can you do?" she demanded. "You may be injured internally. You can't wait long, even though the skipper here can set bones like a surgeon."

"Not far from it. I've had the practice in that sort of doctoring" Bill rumbled.

"I must wait!" said Morrison. He could not even raise himself on an elbow, but with his eyes alone he seized the center of the stage. "If I die, the Resident may do something for you, Peggy. Though damn, damn little! What can the law do in the jungle? I can't die, and I won't! Will you wait here, skipper, till my arms knit? I'll charter your schooner for a month! I've got to go into the bush and fight it out with Cogswell! I've got to *know* whether he's double crossing me or on the square!"

"Why?" Bill boomed.

"Because my last shilling is locked up in gold that's still in the dirt," said Morrison. His teeth were clenched, but his voice was even. "I won't go to a hospital and run up a big bill. I won't leave Peggy alone and broke in the South Seas, with that bill to pay as best she can!"

"I'm not afraid!"

"Women that aren't afraid are hurt worst of all," said the father briefly. The eyes were on Bill.

"You understand, skipper. Sooner or later I've got to go into that jungle and find Cogswell, or his head! The jungle is fighting for him, and knowing the bush like a book, as he damn well does, he damn well knows it! He can wait till I come to him. If I come back with police he can wait till they leave, and then shoot me in the back. He figures I'm afraid, and I'll damn well stay here in your schooner and prove to him I'm not, till I'm strong enough to prove it on his bearded face!"

"You'll never be strong enough," Bill rumbled. "Brave women ain't the only ones that get hurt worst." The eyes of the helpless man glared. The deep, rumbling voice softened. "Sometimes nerve is no good without heft," said Bill. "I'm granting you nerve, mister. I watched you step out to die not fifteen minutes back. No man could have moved more prompt. My point is that not even to save your life and the girl's here could you have picked up one of those pipes."

Bellow Bill reached to his left hip pocket and filled his cheek with fine-cut tobacco.

"You're plain damn right and you're plain too damn little!" he growled. "If your partner and his buddy are square, we've got to get to them; and if they ain't, we've got to find them double. So I'll put you on the schooner and doctor you up, and come dark, I'll hit the trail. If I ain't back by the next sunset you ought to be able to sail to port somehow. All you got to do is follow the coast."

Morrison stared upward, speechless. Peggy leaped to her feet.

"But you're a sailor! Cogswell knows the jungle!" she protested. "Don't you understand? Why, by killing these natives you've involved your-

self in a blood feud with the whole tribe! Any man of them will kill you on sight! It's—it's not your place to go!"

"You've mentioned that Cogswell was a master of the jungle till it's kind of gotten my goat," Bill boomed. "I ain't followed the sea all my days myself . . . Blood feuds? Why, sure, I know. You'll need to hire a different tribe of savages anyhow to get out that gold."

"But what do you want? What share?" snapped Morrison.

"I never reckon profit in advance," Bill rumbled. Slowly he grinned. Golden lights were beginning to dance in his eyes, but he spoke with embarrassment. "I guess I want to see fair play, mostly. You've got nerve, you two. I'd like to see you have the chance to use it in the kind of fight you're fitted for, and understand. Now tell me: what kind of hombre is this Cogswell, and what's the lay of the land? Who's Taipi? Is there one tribe of cannibals hereabouts, or several? Their clubs I've seen, but do they use bows and arrows, or poison darts?"

CHAPTER II.

THE BARB ON THE SPEAR.

AT midnight Bellow Bill hit the trail. That bushmen as expert as Cogswell and Fitch had been unable to reach the sea after so long a delay was evidence that they were either in league with the natives or had been killed. Bill's task was to discover which. He was also resolved to give the tribe which had assaulted Morrison such a lesson that in the future attacks on white men would be tabu.

While waiting for darkness, Bill made Morrison comfortable, put the schooner in such shape that Peggy could defend it, and learned all that he could about the locality and the white and black men in the jungle.

The gold diggings and the Papuan village of which Taipi was headman were in a bowl-shaped valley about a mile from the sea. A stream ran through it, dammed at the head of the valley to provide power for the hydraulic monitor. Off to the left, or west, was a much smaller Papuan village, of which Peggy knew nothing save that the name of the headman was Pahea, since Taipi had refused to share the profits of labor at the diggings with a rival tribe.

Both Cogswell and Fitch were tall, sinewy, fever-bitten men, but Cogswell was bearded, Fitch clean shaven.

"Cogswell," said Peggy evenly, "never looked at me as though I were so much flesh when he thought I was watching. Fitch never stripped me naked with his eyes at all. He's much nicer than Cogswell, really, but he's not a leader. Just the partner. The lieutenant. If double crossing was done, Cogswell did it, and Fitch merely backed the play, just as he'd agree to anything Cogswell proposed.

"Though after all that doesn't really tell you very much about them, does it?"

"More than you might think!" Bill rumbled. "And the Papuans use clubs, spears, and poisoned darts, eh? How often did Cogswell, or Fitch, clean his gun?"

"Why—never, that I can remember!"

"Then neither of them fancies himself as a shot," Bill rumbled. "I don't clean my firearms often either. I never could hit anything at long range anyhow, so what difference does a little

rust in the barrel make? You better use that sawed-off pump gun, if you have to use anything."

The pearler rose and went below to make his preparations.

To Peggy these were strange to see. Despite the sultry heat, Bellow Bill appeared most anxious to protect himself against cold!

When he came on deck at midnight he was wearing heavy trousers of blue serge, a thick woolen coat, and over all, like a cape, a dark blanket, one corner of which was sewn into a pointed hood.

On his back he strapped a five gallon can of gasoline. In his pocket he put a half stick of dynamite, capped and fused. For arms he took a foot-long deep sea diver's knife, a revolver —and a four-foot length of chain, with strips of cloth drawn through the links so that it would not clink when he walked.

"You'll melt carrying all that!" Peggy protested. "That is, if you don't die first of prickly heat. For heaven's sake, why the chain?"

"All your doing, gal," Bill grinned. "You've given Cogswell such a reputation I figure I'd better sweat water than blood. The chain? Why, the blow of a club can be parried. If I hit with a chain, though, the end curls over the edge of a shield and cracks the head behind it."

"And you're lugging all that paraphernalia for some definite reason like that?"

"Every piece of gear is the master notion of some uncommonly able scrapper that I've met and suffered from," he purred. "It's the fruit of fifteen years and more of South Sea trouble that I'm packing on my back. Anything less would be disrespectful, since I'm callin' on the headman of a big village and a master of the jungle."

WITH the utmost cheerfulness Bill swung himself over the rail of the schooner, carrying the heavy load like a feather. Peggy could see him while he waded to the beach, but once he crossed the sand he vanished, for the dark clothing merged with the night black foliage.

He avoided the beaten trail. Twisting through the trees, dark as a hole, and scarcely wider than his shoulders, the trail put him at the mercy of any savage who chanced to be squatting beside it, and also advertised his coming, for he would be unable to avoid brushing against the leaves.

Bill's road was the stream. Here there was more light, or rather a strip less dark overhead, for the jungle grew to the very bank, like a wall. At night the stream was a black canon some twenty feet wide. Bill could not be reached by a spear, and the tangle of vines which laced the trees together prevented a concerted rush such as had overwhelmed Morrison.

The vines were his allies. Any movement in the jungle below would be communicated to the tree-tops. He advanced slowly, head thrown back. Jungle flowers have no perfume, but on a sultry night the unwashed bodies of cannibals smell. In a jungle duel the fatal indiscretion is to walk, unwarned, within arm's length of your enemy.

For nearly a mile—which required an hour of slow advance—not a leaf stirred. The stream began to flow faster. The black walls of vine shrouded trees drew closer together. Bill decided he was close to the bowl-shaped valley and the village. Ahead, against the sky, a branch swayed suddenly and dipped toward the earth.

It was enough. Bill stopped, snuggled his head deeper into the hood, and drew the blanket closer around his shoulders. Step by step he retreated, angling toward the opposite side of the brook. He meant to squirm through a gap in the foliage, to count his enemies as they crossed the stream, and to scatter them if they dared to follow him up the bank.

He found a suitable gap in the vines. The opening was barred by half a dozen of the terribly barbed Papuan spears, the butts driven into the bank, the points slanting toward him.

For an instant the sweat which bathed Bill turned cold. A new chum might have been tempted to push those spears aside. Not he. The barbs were too likely to be smeared with poison. His path of retreat from the ambuscade which had been laid ahead had been blocked in advance—which was better tactics, much better, than Papuans usually displayed. They left him the choice of running the gantlet ahead or toddling back home.

He did neither. He strode to a bowlder near the center of the stream and squatted down beside it, wishing grimly that the water were deep enough to cover all of him but his nose. Beneath the blanket he gripped the revolver, and the length of chain. They would wonder what he was doing, squatting down like a frog in the middle of a brook. They would also have to chose among their weapons. Which?

Along both banks a quiver ran through the vines. Huddled beneath the blanket Bill felt a succession of impacts light as the touch of a moth's wings. He shivered, sunk his hooded head against his breast, and pressed his bare hands between his knees. Poisoned arrows! Blow gun darts, thorns tipped with fluff, dozens and dozens of them, burying smeared points in the thick wool.

Years ago he had escaped death in such a fusillade because he had happened to be wearing a coat. The blanket was better protection than a coat, but to wait, to crouch in the water while the darts struck, took all his nerve. Sweating, he counted seconds. The poison would act instantly. Eight . . . nine . . . ten . . .

THOUGH he had felt no thorn-prick, he kicked out spasmodically, cried out, and let himself slump flat in the stream with a hollow groan. That flight of darts would have killed any Papuan warrior. These savages would be expecting him to die. The bravest of them would come out to take his head.

One was already writhing through the vines into the stream. Another followed, and another. They had almost reached him when he hurled the blanket aside and leaped up at their feet. The chain and the knife each claimed a victim. The third warrior turned with a howl and sped upstream.

Bill charged after him. For the first ten yards he was careful not to overtake the man. Afterward his heavy clothing and the weight of the gasoline on his back let the warrior gain. At the point where he had seen the branch move a spear flashed by his head, but that was the only attempt at counter attack. In the rear the Papuans were yelling—to keep their own courage up. They were squirming through the vines into the stream, but they were not pursuing. They had shot poison into this huge enemy, and he had risen and slain their bravest. For a time they would be satisfied to yell—and stay where they were.

The pearler scrambled up a ridge of stone over which the stream tumbled. Right and left the jungle opened out. Close ahead were three small tents, farther off a dark mass toward which the warrior pursued by Bill fled, yelling at every jump. That must be Taipi's village.

A torch was kindled, throwing a red glare in the high arched entrance of the longhouse of the warriors. The savages were wakening, answering shout with shout. Bill sprinted toward the tents. A glance inside each was enough. Nothing had been looted, though to Taipi's savages a steel pickax or even the tin cans scattered about represented a fortune. There had been no fight at the diggings. Cogswell and Fitch were, in all probability, still alive.

Promptly Bill retreated, seeking the path that left the valley on the left. He no longer ran. In the darkness a faint foot-trail would be hard to find. Around the longhouse the yelling was gaining in volume, and in courage. The survivors of the ambuscade were joining their kinsmen, but though another torch had been kindled, neither light was moving out into the fields.

Bill skirted a patch of stunted sugar cane. The valley was small, scarcely two hundred yards in diameter, rimmed by cliffs, but he trusted to the concealment of darkness, forgetting the tin can on his back. The flash and bark of a rifle from the sugar cane and the whine of a bullet past his head revealed his error.

Bill emptied his revolver at the flash, backing toward the brush.

There was no answering shot. Bill crouched and reloaded his gun. Nothing moved in the sugar cane. In the longhouse the shouting ceased momentarily. Bill grinned. Inch by inch, on hands and knees, he continued to circle the valley until he found the path mentioned by Peggy.

Once he was in the jungle again, where the path began to climb toward the valley rim, he rose. It would be a brave man indeed, white or black, who dared to follow him down this tunnel twisting through the darkness. He hoped he had killed one of the prospectors. Preferably Cogswell.

CHAPTER III.

THE SURVIVOR.

AS he groped his way forward he also hoped that the rival Papuan villages were not at all friendly, and yet not so recently at war as to have man-traps dug in the path. There was no longer an alternative route, nor a practical retreat, for that matter.

Bill was gambling on the fact that Papuan villages are usually hostile, even when they are located close together. Very often they will speak languages that are mutually incomprehensible, using words of similar sound with meanings that are totally different. With Taipi's warriors Bill had a blood feud. In Pahea's village that fact, if it were known at all, would mean precisely nothing. Bellow Bill would merely be a strange white man.

From the jungle he emerged at last into a small clearing. A longhouse loomed beyond, dark as ink, but Bill did not deceive himself with the belief that all these warriors were asleep. Rather, as he crossed the open ground and halted fifty feet from the gaping entrance, he wished that he still had his blanket.

"*Sambio!*" he bellowed in his enormous voice. "*Sambio!* Peace!"

There was no answer. Bellow Bill

expected none. There was no flight of darts, either; no spear flung.

Only silence. Fifty feet away naked men were gripping weapons, wondering whether this stranger who hailed them was weak enough to be killed in safety, or whether, if he were strong, he did come in peace.

Bill unscrewed the cap of the can on his back and scattered gasoline in a ring. He flung down a lighted match, and stood the next instant in a circle of leaping flame. From the longhouse came a guttural exclamation.

"*Sambio! Dim-dim puri-puri!*" Bill rumbled, which meant that he came in peace, and was a white magician. "*Sambio—Pahea!*"

The name of the headman brought an answer.

"S-sambio!" came a voice out of the dark; nervous, but unwilling to confess fear. A torch, thrust into the embers of the longhouse fire, commenced to spark and flare. The instant there was light Bill vaulted onto the platform of poles which stretched like a porch in front of the arched doorway. Behind a screen of palm leaves crouched a score of Papuans. Spears were leveled. Had Bill hesitated the spears would have met in his body. He shouldered toward the headman. Big as Bill was, the can on his back made him seem larger. Not until Pahea recoiled a pace did he halt. Then he held out a fistful of the fine-cut chewing tobacco, and filled his own cheek. Hesitantly the cannibal accepted the gift. Face to face they stood, spitting in turn. The circle of warriors squirmed nearer.

"Me cross along Taipi!" Bill boomed. "Me make *dim-dim puri-puri* along him. *Puri-puri* make Taipi and fellow belong along Taipi run seven bells! You fellows come along me, spear Taipi, spear fellow belong Taipi when they run. You fellows get tobacco, get ax, get calico."

In the torchlight the warriors grinned. Bill was promising easy victory, loot, and riches, Pahea, however, looked doubtful.

"Taipi *kai kai* too many fellows belong me," he objected. "Me fright along him too much! Too many fellows belong Taipi for *puri-puri.*"

Gravely Bellow Bill spat. He could hardly blame the headman for doubting that any magic could make an entire village take to its heels. Yet allies he must have to mop up in case he won a victory.

"What name!" he scoffed. "You fellows walk about along me. Watch *puri-puri. Puri-puri* too much, spear Taipi. *Puri-puri* no good, you fellows run back here little bit!"

No risk, and an easy retreat. Significantly he shook the can on his shoulders. The gasoline sloshed. To Bill's delight a warrior in the circle spoke up, urging acceptance, by his tone. At once one of the interminable arguments which precede action by savages was in progress.

IGNORANT of the language though he was, Bill could follow the round. There were only a few ideas, repeated over and over by different individuals. He was undoubtedly a most potent magician. Yes, but was he potent enough? They wanted the trade goods, and to eat Taipi. Yes, but Taipi might eat them. No, for Taipi could not catch them.

Bill relaxed, and squatted on his heels. Though Pahea was still opposed to the expedition, some of the warriors would be sure to join him when they had talked themselves out.

Talk, talk, talk. The torch spluttered

and dripped sparks. A second was kindled. Talk, talk, talk.

"Ahoy there!" rang a voice out of the darkness—speaking English.

Bill leaped up, dominating the circle of savages.

"Who is it?" he roared before Pahea could reply.

"Cogswell!" came the answer. "For God's sake, mate, don't keep me out here!"

With Pahea watching him, Bill could not show either amazement or anxiety. He motioned for the torch to be moved to the edge of the platform.

"Walk into the light, then!" he boomed. "And move slow!"

It was Cogswell. A brown beard covered his face. He walked with bent knees, and long arms swinging from powerful shoulders, like a gorilla. His clothing was in rags. He was hatless, and—without a weapon. He swung himself onto the platform, a pipe gripped in his bearded lips, and started toward Bill, apparently oblivious of the spears, and of the fact that the pearler's hand was on the butt of a revolver.

"Sit down!" Bill rumbled. He motioned to the opposite side of the circle. "Where's Fitch?"

"You ought to know. You shot him," Cogswell muttered. "Thank God I got to you! That longhouse is howling hell. Taipi's taken Fitch's head, an' they're having a dance before they eat him. I skipped when they brought him in, before they could remember that two heads would look better than one."

"That so?" Bill rumbled.

Cogswell scowled and chewed on the empty pipe.

"I'm here, ain't I?" he said. "If you don't believe me you can go to hell, sailor! I guess I can make the beach. I've lived in the jungle since I was a kid, and I know a few back trails that ain't watched."

"Why didn't you use them?"

"Gor'bli'me!" snarled the prospector violently. "Are you getting the wind up? Because I know what happened down on the beach this afternoon, that's why! When the war party came back—them that could move—Fitch told me. Over a gun. We was working on the claim and he held me up. He had no share in the mine, and he figured he was going to get one."

"Why didn't you give him one at the start?" Bill rumbled. "There was enough gold."

"The hell there was! There's never enough!" Cogswell snarled. He leaned forward in the torchlight, the pipe hanging from his teeth. "I've prospected the jungle fifteen years. I've cleaned out plenty of pockets in my time. I've figured I was a millionaire, and wot happened, eh? The vein pinches out, or I wash the gravel to bed rock! I live like a lord a few months, and with the taste of real living in my mouth I come back to the bush again! Gold enough, hell! There's enough while it's in the ground, and when it's out how can I know it'll be enough? I want all I can get! I found this claim. Fitch didn't. Why should I give him a cut?"

"I get you," Bill boomed.

"Well, did you think I was a preacher?" Cogswell snarled. "Morrison's nothing but a toff! If Fitch had scragged him he could have had his share. He didn't, and he's long pig now. Fineesh. Wot I want to know is, 'oo's share did Morrison give you for coming in here? Mine, I'll lay!"

"We didn't decide," Bill rumbled.

"Gor'bli'me, you'd have decided damn soon if I'd hit the back trails

alone!" Cogswell growled. "I'm no fool! Fitch and me was mates. Naturally anybody'd figure we was working together. It's my gold I'm thinking about. I got to do something to prove this was Fitch's show, and I figure guiding you back is it." He paused, the pipe working in the heavy, bearded jaws.

"'Ow you got through I can't see. Fitch wasn't a new chum. Don't know that I've ever seen a cove like you, anyhow. That can, now. Wot's the lay?"

"Why, come along and see," Bill invited. "Either you're telling the truth or you've got nerve, mister. I don't know which, or greatly care. Back trails and gold claims don't matter to-night. Neither you nor Morrison is going to work that valley now that Taipi's topped off a blood feud with long pig."

"A squad of police an' a little dynamite will fix that!" Cogswell scoffed.

"A black with a spear along a trail you pick will fix me," Bill rumbled. "Dynamite and a rush at dawn might fix a girl, too. I'm playing too chancy a game to be sensible, mate. I'm right obliged that you joined me. You'll help me a lot by coming along with me—with your hands tied."

"You've got a gun," Cogswell scowled. "Gor'bli'me, I never did meet a cove like you! Think you can get these blacks to back you and wipe Taipi out, wot?"

"Sure. It's no great trick to lead savages to war and loot once you get them talking," Bill rumbled.

Cogswell shrugged, leaned forward, and drew a deep breath. Of acquiescence, Bellow Bill believed, confident in his arms and his vastly superior physical strength.

Sharply Cogswell blew through the pipestem. A cloud of red pepper flew into Bill's eyes.

BLINDLY Bill hurled himself at the spot where Cogswell had been sitting. As he leaped he collided violently with the prospector, and realized that the latter sprang as instantly to attack him. They fell together, but Cogswell squirmed out of Bill's grip. The stuff in Bill's eyes burned like acid. He was sneezing in paroxysms. Blindly he flailed his arms, not daring to use knife or chain in that crowd of sneering natives.

One wild swing struck Cogswell—in the shoulder, but it knocked him sprawling.

"Spear one dim-dim fella!" Bill thundered.

One of the savages must have tried, for there was a curse, a thud of feet as Cogswell leaped from the platform to the ground, and a few seconds later the crack of a rifle shot and a cry from a native.

Bill threw himself flat, and pawed grimly at his eyes. The one shot—or that fact that Bill had dropped out of sight—seemed to satisfy Cogswell. At least the yelling of the savages ceased. A warrior scrambled up onto the platform, saying something.

"One fellow dim-dim got away?" Bill rumbled, guessing the truth from the bitter tone. He was handed a wet rag, which was all he could expect, for there is little water kept in a longhouse. He swabbed his eyes, and blinked painfully.

The wounded savage gripped a bleeding arm. Three or four men were wiping their eyes, but the rest—among them Pahea—were staring at Bill. With a shaking forefinger the headman pointed at Bill's shoulder.

"Got *puri-puri* too much!" he

gasped. "Hit fellow when no see fellow! He hit along you! You hit along him too much!"

"Hell, I didn't land on him!" Bill growled disgustedly. "He sure had his nerve with him! He—"

The booming growl died to a gasp. Into the padding at the shoulder of Bill's coat was thrust a three-inch sliver of bamboo, with a bit of gum on the end, so that it might be held in a clenched fist. The poison on the silver gleamed in the torchlight like molasses.

Not a muscle in Bill's face quivered. He withdrew the sliver and snapped it away into the darkness, but inwardly he thanked his stars that he had taken the aggressive instinctively and instantly. Had he stopped to paw at his eyes first Cogswell would have driven that sliver into his face, or his throat. He would be a dead man now—and with a shock he realized that he had let slip the fact that Peggy was the sole defender of the schooner. Why hadn't he been quick-witted enough to lie, to claim that there was a crew aboard?

Cogswell was gold-mad and jungle poison. That the man was brave Bill conceded—but with what a cold, snake-like courage!

"We fellows walk about along you. Watch *puri-puri*. *Kai-kai* Taipi!" Pahea was saying.

"You'd better!" Bill rumbled with heartfelt earnestness. "If you don't that guy will swallow us all!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE KAPIRAVI.

FROM the size of the longhouse in the cuplike valley, Bellow Bill estimated that Cogswell could rely upon the aid of at least fifty warriors. He himself advanced to the attack with less than thirty, knowing exceedingly well that he could not rely upon them if his prestige and their belief in his invincibility were shaken.

Bill had the advantage of the initiative, and that was all. As he led the way down the cliffs he was grimly amused to hear a palaver in progress in Taipi's longhouse. Even Cogswell could not force savages to act without a preliminary council.

Yet as the pearler halted at the fringe of the jungle and instructed Pahea to place his warriors in ambush around the clearing, Bill felt too much alone. Too much depended on his strength and experience, for while he had been advancing to the attack Cogswell had not been idle.

The tents at the diggings had been set afire, and still glowed in three patches of embers. What was worse, a ring of torches had been thrust in the earth all around Taipi's longhouse, about thirty feet from the thatched walls. Light flickered across the clearing, and beat up into the arched, overhanging entrance forty feet high, twenty feet wide, blackened at the bottom by a low screen of palm branches, and with bundles of leaves swinging in the gap above to frighten evil spirits.

The flickering light made the longhouse a fort. To charge across the open ground was to be a target for blow-gun darts.

"*Puri-puri* belong your work quick?" Pahea whispered doubtfully.

"Yep!" Bill growled. He couldn't wait. His allies, spread in a thin ring, would lose faith and withdraw. Tomorrow Cogswell would have the initiative.

Bill slipped the can of gasoline from his shoulders and tied the rope with which it had been bound to his back to the handle. He had about ten feet of

rope, and he hoped most earnestly that that would be enough. If he made too plain a target of himself, Cogswell would shoot him. He could advance to the edge of the torchlight, which was sixty or seventy feet from the gaping entrance. That was too far; but if he failed he could retreat to the sea and get Peggy away.

With a handkerchief he bound the half stick of dynamite to the can, lit the fuse, and ran forward.

At once a rifle cracked. The target was the spluttering end of the fuse, but the bullet was close. Bill reached the spot he had selected, and stopped. The second bullet was almost close enough to part his hair. Grimly he set his heels in the earth and started to swing the can around his head by the rope. All his attention was centered on the high arch of the entrance to the longhouse.

The spark of the burning fuse traced circles in the air, higher and higher from the ground, moving faster and faster. Bill no longer heard the rifle shots. He whirled the heavy can till the sinews of his enormous arms began to crack, whirled thrice, and with a sob torn from his vast chest by the prodigious effort, let go.

Flat on his face he dropped, gasping. A tiny spark arched through the air. There was a clang of tin—on the floor of the longhouse. He had done it! Breathless, he waited for the explosion.

THE crash of the dynamite was not loud. Within the longhouse a white man shouted, half with surprise, half with relief that the bomb was so feeble. The thatched walls of the longhouse were not even broken. The bundles of leaves in the arch, hung to keep out evil spirits, merely swayed in the blast, and hung still.

On hands and knees Bellow Bill crept back.

"*Puri-puri* only little bit!" Pahea whispered dismally.

"Wait!" Bill boomed.

For all the light which flickered on the gaping entrance no longer came from the torches. Blazing drops of gasoline, scattered far and wide by that seemingly feeble explosion, were eating into the thatch at a thousand points—setting the thatch afire on the inside, where it was dry despite the incessant rains of New Guinea. Little red eyes began to glow in the dark arch of the entrance. The start of a thousand fires, spreading high overhead, hard to reach with buckets of water, too numerous to smother with wet rags. A spark dropped to the floor—the first drop in what would be a rain of red-hot embers falling on naked skins.

"They'll be out" Bill boomed. "*I* came out, when that stunt was pulled on me!" He raised his voice. "Thanks for the torches, Cogswell!" he roared. "Come on out, mother-naked and with your fingers spread so you can't hide another sliver, and I'll try to call off my gang!"

"Ho, yuss?" came the answer. "Ter 'ell with yer and yer blyze! There's 'otter fires, and ye'll feel 'em!"

Bellow Bill grunted. That wasn't Cogswell's voice, nor manner. Fitch was not only alive, but belligerent!

In a longhouse which was filling rapidly with smoke, and under a shower of embers which increased every moment, only a strong hope of victory could be restraining Taipi's savages from panic-stricken flight. As Bill wondered what this might be, the thing appeared—and a gasp of awe

from Pahea testified to its efficacy on the mind of a savage.

Over the edge of the platform in front of the entrance to the longhouse, clear in the light of the smouldering thatch, slid the crude effigy of a crocodile, the vast open jaws of which could have swallowed a man. Made of wickerwork, in length perhaps a dozen feet, and in height six, it looked grotesque rather than formidable; but around the *kapiravi* center the most terrible superstitions of the New Guinea cannibal. In those huge wicker jaws, Bill knew, long pig was placed before the feast.

For a savage to look at a *kapiravi* except after elaborate ceremonies meant death, unless a heavy payment were made to the medicine man. That crude image was at once the most sacred and the most terrible possession in the village. In its wake Taipi's warriors would charge in a superstitious frenzy, and Pahea's men would scarcely dare to face the image alone.

It dropped to the ground, rolled over and advanced slowly across the field of stunted sugar cane toward Bill. A man was walking inside it, of course, his legs hidden by the body.

The pearler drew his revolver, and crawled to meet the *kapiravi,* conscious of a grim pity for the superstitious savage in the center of that frail basket. A single, well placed bullet would finish him.

BILL fired. Once, and twice; then shot after shot till the hammer clicked on an exploded cartridge. His bullets drilled the effigy—but the *kapiravi,* though it shook to the impact of the slugs, came on!

A quavering howl ran around the edge of the jungle. A fierce yell burst from the longhouse where Taipi's warriors clustered, black against the firelight. Bellow Bill whipped out his knife and leaped for the gaping mouth of the thing, cursing his bad marksmanship, and knowing, as he cursed, that he had never lined sights straighter in his life.

Out of the wide jaws a bundle the size of a football was flung at him. Just in time Bill saw the spark of a burning fuse, and flung himself to the ground as the bomb exploded with a crash and concussion that all but knocked him breathless.

"Wheeeeeeee!" whined scraps of iron and stone through the air. The wickerwork of the *kapiravi* was riven. Through the gaps protruded masses of white stuff, like pale, torn flesh—but it advanced!

Bill shook his head like a punch-drunk boxer, heaved himself onto his knees. A second bomb bounced out of the open mouth of the *kapiravi* and rolled toward him. The aim was poor. Bellow Bill might have dropped to the earth again — but what could he do with his diver's knife and empty revolver against this damned thing that had stood before the blast of the first bomb?

With the thought, he hurled himself forward recklessly, scooped up the spluttering bomb, and tossed it between the gaping wicker jaws. The explosion knocked Bill down. It tore the *kapiravi* into a mass of whitish stuff like cotton, in the midst of which a body slumped, gushing blood from an arm blown off at the elbow.

Knife in hand, Bill staggered toward the man. He did not hear the yell at the longhouse change to howls, nor see savage after savage leap to the ground —weaponless, in flight, racing in terror toward the spears and darts of exultant enemies. Taipi and his warriors were being most awfully punished for their

treachery to Morrison. A few would escape, but not many. Bellow Bill did not notice, did not care.

The wicker framework of the *kapiravi* had been stuffed loosely with kapok fiber, which stopped bullets and bomb fragments as effectively as a mattress. The dying man in the center was clean shaven! Fitch!

"Where's Cogsell?" Bill bellowed.

"'Arf!" Fitch muttered in delirium. "Hi never 'ad nothink, an' 'e promised me 'arf, so 'elp 'im! Wot do Hi care wot the sylor's got in 'is blinkin' oil can? Hi've never feared nothink yet, myte! Hi'll fight 'im for yer!"

"Did Cogswell run away? Damn him, did he head for the beach?" Bill thundered.

The voice, or the approach of death, roused Fitch. His eyelids fluttered, and he smiled.

"Wot-o, sylor! Hi give yer best," he muttered. "No 'ard feelin's, eh? Cogswell's my myte, an' Hi sticks to 'im, like Hi always 'as . . . 'e's not run far, not 'e! 'E plans the show, like always . . ."

The flames of the burning thatch were rising high. A pale, clear light filled the clearing. From the edge of the jungle a rifle cracked, and a bullet ripped through Bill's leg between thigh and knee.

"Bart!" cried Fitch. "I fyced 'im for yer! Now give 'im what-for!"

So died Fitch, faithful lieutenant to the end.

CHAPTER V.

THE BLAST.

GRIMLY and carefully Bill reloaded the revolver. The yells of Pahea's warriors, the screaming of their victims, the pale firelight made the valley a pit of hell. Bill knew that to shout for help would be a waste of breath. Not even the cautious and comparatively level-headed Pahea would have a thought except of vengeance and long pig until the last cowering fugitive was tracked down and speared. After the massacre and the feast Bellow Bill might dominate the savages again. In the meantime he was at bay.

Yet to get at him Cogswell must crawl into the open, and the light. Bill plugged his wound with kapok, thankful that the bullet had not touched the bone, and yet aware that in an hour or two the muscles would stiffen so much as to make walking difficult or impossible.

Coolly he stuffed his cheek with fine-cut and prepared for hours of tense watchfulness. At last time fought for him. Cogswell would be a master of brush craft indeed if he could creep close enough for a successful shot. Not only must he squirm up to the muzzle of Bill's revolver, but once in the open he would be a target for the darts and spear of every blood-mad, roving savage.

Bill lay just beneath the body of Fitch. He felt around, hoping to locate another bomb, and touched instead the uninjured arm of the dead prospector. The hand was bandaged, and from the shape of the bandage Bill guessed that earlier in the night Fitch had lost a couple of fingers. Cogswell had not lied entirely. Bill's bullets must have hit the rifle which Fitch had shot at him, and smashed his trigger finger. Hence in the final sally Fitch had used bombs rather than firearms. Apparently the second bomb had also been his last, for the pearler failed to locate a third. A brave man, Fitch. Simple and loyal; not treacherous, not calculating.

Beneath Bill the ground shook. The cuplike valley echoed to the boom of a heavy blast of dynamite—at least a quarter of a mile away, and higher up the course of the stream. For a moment Bill was puzzled. What was Cogswell up to?

Then through the hellish yells his ears caught the grinding thunder of oncoming water.

Cogswell had blown up Morrison's dam.

Bill had visualized the dam as a small structure. Small it might be, but from the sound of the flood the engineer had impounded a lake behind it. The first onrush was knee deep, rolling Bill over and over in the midst of a mass of kapok that covered Bill's head and hampered his movements. He pawed clear and leaped up in time to face the main wave.

But not to avoid it. Waist deep and steep as a breaker, the wave swept into the valley, loaded with the logs and broken branches torn loose in its passage through the jungle. Bellow Bill could only cover his head with his arms. He was knocked off his feet, pounded to the bottom, thrust along in a grinding mass of flotsam. A log struck him. He wrapped himself around it, clinging with arms and legs, holding his breath as only a pearler can; waiting, as the flood battered him, for the merciful shock that would bring unconsciousness.

THE crest of the flood left him behind. He was rolled to the surface. He snatched a lungful of air. Broken jungle vines tangled around his legs like thin cords. He was content to cling to the log, great shoulders hunched, while the flood washed him along and thrust him firmly against a barrier of driftwood that had jammed in the narrow cleft where the stream left the valley.

Driftwood, the bodies of the dead, the bodies of Pahea's warriors, overwhelmed by the flood in the midst of victory, crowded inexorably against him, packing more and more firmly in the grip of the current. The burning longhouse tilted drunkenly on its foundation piles. The valley was silent. Those men who had not been caught by the water were in gasping, panting flight for higher ground.

Desperately Bill struggled to free himself from the pressure of the drift, and the tangle of vines. Already the water was receding. He could have touched bottom if he had wished to force his legs down through the mass. Thirty feet away was the high water mark of the flood, solid ground, bushes that would conceal him, but to reach them he could neither wade nor swim.

He was forced to lie on his face, spreading his arms and legs as wide as possible, and squirm ahead inch by inch. The least haste, a single careless movement, and his hand or his knee might slip through the drift and become entangled beneath.

That would be the end of him. His revolver was gone. His knife had slipped from the sheath, and he knew that Cogswell would come back into the valley in the wake of the flood. For a little while the depth of the water would prevent the jungle prospector from reaching the clearing. But the water was draining away.

So despite desperate, frantic haste Bellow Bill crawled to the high water mark like a snail. The dynamiting of the dam had been a master stroke. Even though Bill was in the bush, and could conceal himself—how long could he keep hidden? And for what result? He could hide. And Cogswell, failing

to find him, could tramp to the beach, could lurk in ambush, could shoot down Peggy the first time she showed herself on deck.

No. Not that. Nor was Bill at all certain that he could get to the beach first. He could walk, though his leg was stiffening, but he would leave a trail of blood that no bushman would overlook, and the chances that Cogswell would overtake him on the trail were too strong.

Again, no. Cogswell must find him, here. In this valley, where each had won a victory, the struggle between them must be decided. Cogswell's rifle against a pair of mighty hands that could snap the neck of an enemy. Jungle craft against jungle craft, with the pale flare of the burning thatch to light the battle.

Bellow Bill was concealed in the bushes only for a moment. Only long enough to drag a long thin piece of vine from the litter which the flood had deposited at the high water mark. Despite desperate haste, the big tattooed hands arranged the vine carefully, skilfully among the bushes and the flood litter.

A FEW yards farther along the shore a big log had been washed up. Bellow Bill lay down behind it, his feet toward high water mark, his head and shoulders as far down into the drift as he could force them. With a few broken branches he covered himself—but not so carefully that a keen eye could fail to make him out. A bit of his trousers showed, and a bit of his arm. His posture was as much that of a drowned corpse entangled in the drift wood as he could manage.

Motionless he lay while the slow minutes passed. The water drained from beneath his shoulders. Cogswell must have reached the valley by now. He must have seen Bill, must be creeping along the edge of the bush at the high water mark, rifle at the ready.

Cogswell was the sort who would put a bullet into Bill before he touched him, even though satisfied that the pearler was drowned. But Cogswell was also the sort who would wish to plant that bullet in a vital spot. To do that he must walk past the log.

In the bush leaves rustled. The mud along high water mark squelched under Cogswell's feet. He had approached silently as a snake until careful scrutiny of Bill's attitude convinced him that he had nothing more to fear. What can the strongest man do whose feet point toward the shore, and whose head and shoulders are lower down, half buried in mud and broken litter?

The end of the vine which Bill held in his fist twitched as Cogswell walked into the broad noose that the pearler had arranged across high water mark, one side of the noose flat to the ground, the other side, where the vine was hidden by foliage, waist high.

Bill flattened against the log, and hauled in hand over hand. A bullet smacked into the wood. A second tore off a sliver of bark and burned across his forearm. But the noose of vine had tightened around — something. Bill gave a mighty heave.

Cogswell shouted. His body thudded to the wet earth as his feet were jerked from beneath him. Like a bear Bellow Bill rolled over the log, scrambled up on that one bit of firm footing, and dove headlong. Cogswell had been lucky enough to be thrown onto his back. He was swinging the rifle into line, but the barrel only struck Bill's head. Tattooed fingers closed on the

bearded throat. Bill rolled upon the rifle, grinding it into the mud.

For a minute Cogswell's heels churned the mud with spasmodic kicks. More and more weakly his fists beat against Bill's face and chest. Just as the blows were about to cease the pearler relaxed his grip. With one hand and a knee he held Cogswell in the mud while he took a hitch with the vine around the kicking feet.

Then at his leisure, he caught and bound the beating hands with Cogswell's belt.

"You blighter!" Cogswell choked through black lips. "Not—long pig! Damn you—they'll just—knock me on the head—with a stone ax—and eat me!"

Bellow Bill stared, incredulous.

"Blue hell, I'm saving you for a British judge, not Pahea!" he exploded. "So you'd have done that if you'd got me? Jungle style!"

Cogswell's eyes gleamed in the light of the burning thatch. He lay in the mud, gasping.

"To a judge and the law," Bill rumbled, very low, but with an inexorable purpose that made Cogswell shrink. "And do you know why? Oh, I'll show you to Pahea too, so that he'll know what the real white man magic is! The Morrisons will need labor to rebuild that dam, but it's to court you go in the end, so that other jungle prospectors like you can hear what happens to bush rats that try jungle tricks on people like the Morrisons!

"Jungle master? You? Why, you've got no heart! You let your partner face me, and he wounded, to save yourself trouble in getting a little gold out of the dirt. If you'd dynamited that dam before Fitch came at me, instead of after, I'd never have been able to snare two men. Not you. The jungle's in your blood till you're a part of it! Give nothing! Risk nothing. Grab it all."

"When I dug the foundations for the dam I found another gold pocket," Cogswell choked. "I covered it over. I thought Morrison would get discouraged, but he didn't. I had to get that gold—and with the dam washed away any new chum can pick nuggets up with his fingers!"

"So?" Bill rumbled. "And that's what hurts you, isn't it? I'll bet you didn't care much if Fitch did get killed. You were afraid he'd blackmail you into giving him a share of the claim for keeping his mouth shut. I know you planned the murder of the Morrisons—though you'd probably be sentenced for driving that poison splinter into my coat. Murderous assault is easier to prove. I wish," Bill rumbled, "that you could see what this jungle will be like in a few years, after the Morrisons let in the sun!

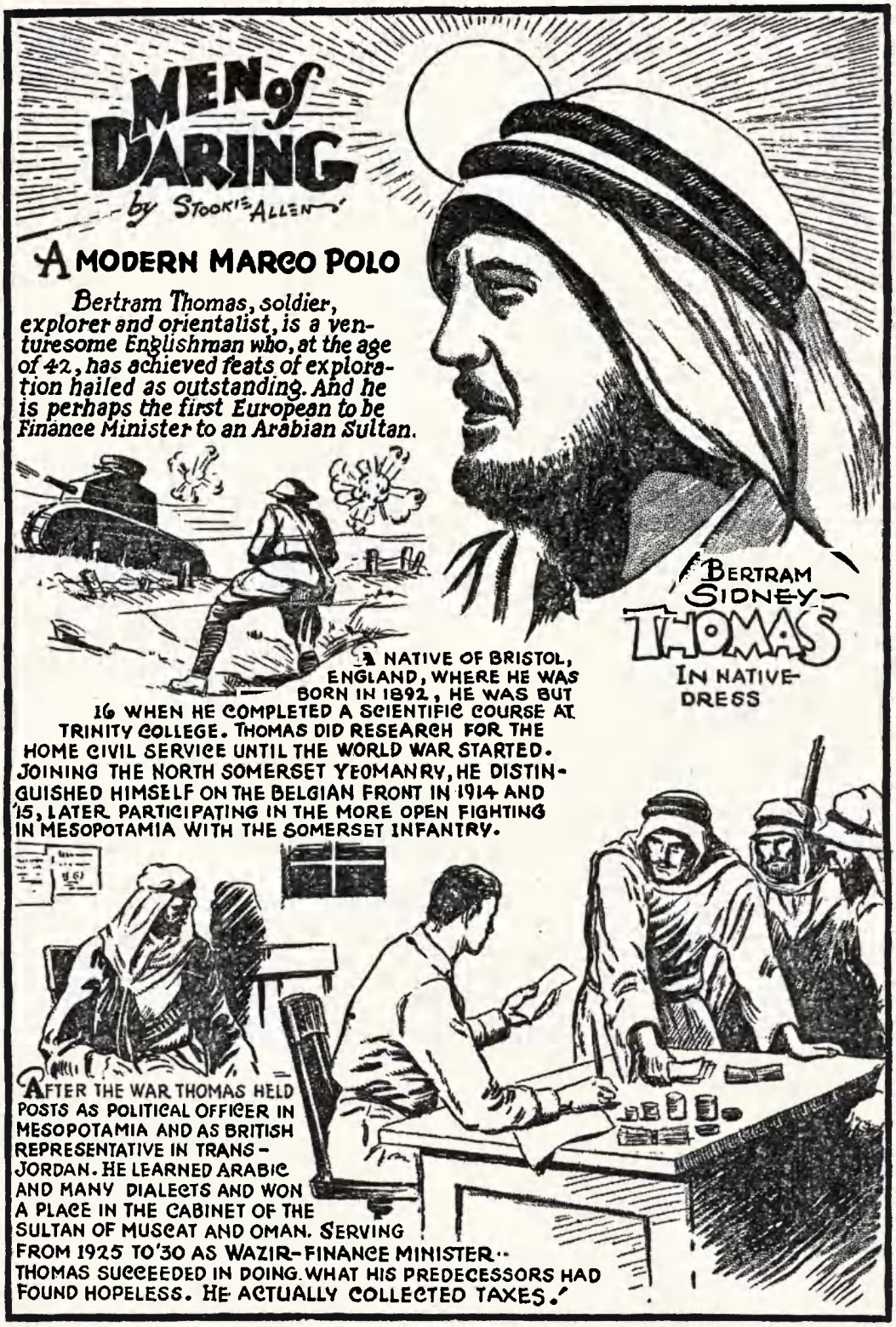
"They need that gold you've washed up for them."

The pearler raised his voice.

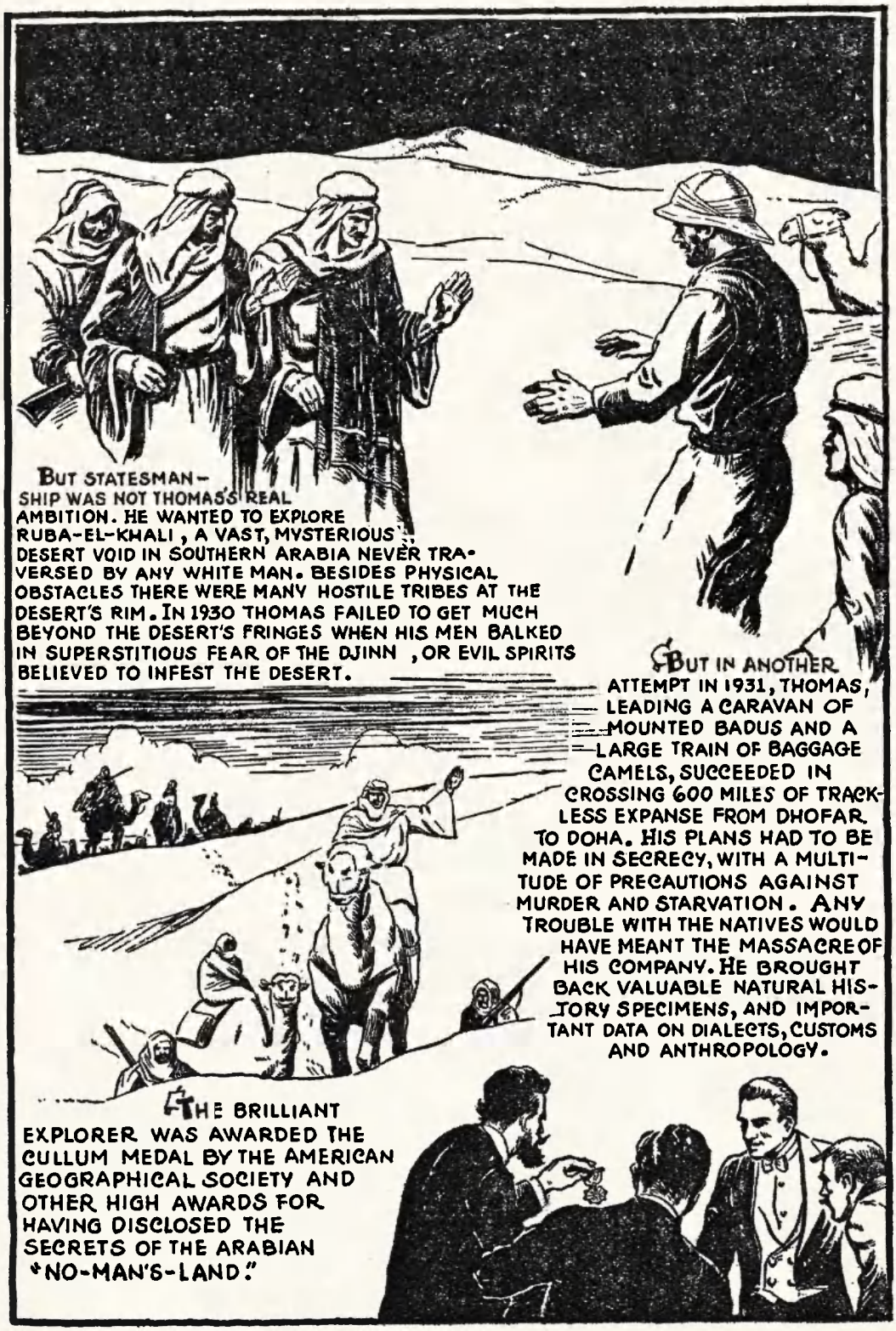
"Pahea!" he thundered. "*Sambio! Sambio!* Peace! Peace!"

The echoes rolled through the jungle, self assured, inspiring confidence, masterful.

THE END



A True Story in Pictures Every Week



Next Week: Sir Basil Zaharoff, Modern Midas

"Guard the man Cerra closely," Semi-Dual warned

The Ledger of Life

By J. U. GIESY and JUNIUS B. SMITH
Authors of "The Green Goddess," "The Woolly Dog," etc.

"That dead men tell no tales is a fallacy," said Semi-Dual, who read in the stars the secrets of ruthless criminals

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

MARGARET KENTON'S death in the night club known as the Silver Moon seemed at first to be a case of suicide, for she had been killed by her own gun. However, since several of her friends and acquaintances had motives of some sort, murder was suspected. Because of circumstantial evidence, Bob O'Niel, the dead woman's fiancé (and heir, as it later turned out), seemed to be the most logical suspect, and he was jailed. Others under suspicion were: Gladys Ingham, one time court reporter, and recently associated with the Kenton woman in a stenographic business, and herself in love with the dead woman's fiancé; Dick Torrance, a friend; a lawyer named Richfield, who had once employed Margaret Kenton; Joe Palloni, the gangster, who owned the Silver Moon; Giovanni Cerra (alias Jumping Jack), a dancer-gigolo at the Silver Moon; and Tommy Tovallo, Palloni's chief "chopper," or killer.

The attention of Detectives Jim Bryce and Gordon Glace, and their assistant, Danny Quinn, was first called to the case indirectly, when two blackmail victims brought to them letters evidently written by a woman. These two victims were Allison Martin, daughter of a wealthy family, and Jeff Hendricks, a broker.

This story began in the Argosy for June 30

The Martin girl, still in school, had been indiscreet enough to encourage the attentions of Joe Palloni. Both blackmail letters gave indications that the now dead Kenton woman had been responsible for them. And this proved to be the case, when Bryce and Glace began to work on the clues. The evidence indicated that the dancer-gigolo, Jumping Jack, had been " runner " or collector for Margaret Kenton; however, in the case of the money paid over to the blackmailer by Hendricks, Jack had not turned the money over to his superior, but had bought a diamond ring for his dancing partner, Violet de Lisle (Maud Slade). There were other strange and baffling aspects of the affair. For instance, Margaret Kenton had some vague connection with a racket seemingly operated by a dummy real estate company, under the direction of one Jonathan Dobbie, professional bail bondsman.

Even Detective Inspector Johnson of the police force was deeply puzzled by it all—especially when Allison Martin, one of the two blackmail victims, disappeared. Johnson had agreed with Bryce and Glace that that extraordinary astrologer and seer, the Persian mystic known as Semi-Dual, could probably help greatly in untangling the threads.

CHAPTER XI.

THREAT OF THE MOON.

MISS INGHAM'S explanation was simple when she faced us in the office that afternoon. Torrance had found that he must make a business trip to the neighboring hamlet, and he had asked her to drive along.

" But how did you know?" she questioned.

" Is your friend Johnson having us —shadowed, as I think they call it?" she added.

" Johnson's doin' what any good cop ought to," Jim returned.

" And"— a faint smile twisted Miss Ingham's lips—"beyond the fact that I went riding, has he discovered anything?"

" Nothing definite," I told her. " But we've picked up a few things."

" Such as the sort of cigarette Johnny Cerra smokes," she suggested. " Bob told me about that line of investigation. Where did you find it?"

" In an ash tray," Jim said. " In an ash tray in Marge Kenton's rooms."

" I see." Miss Ingham knit her brows. " But would that really make it appear that he might have killed her?"

" If it did, he'd be where your boy friend is now," Jim said in a grumpy tone.

" Bob's dreadfully worked up about it," Miss Ingham declared. " He still doesn't know what Marge was doing, of course. But it seems to me he's beginning to suspect that there was another side to her life. It's rather dreadful to watch—the death of faith. I don't know what he'll do when he knows.—Her death was like her life, wasn't it, Mr. Glace? I mean there was something sinister; something deep and hidden about it?"

" There was plenty hidden," Jim made his attack. " Part of it bein' the identity of the person who sent us five hundred dollars to use in O'Niel's behalf, from that town where you went with Torrance, last night."

The girl took it between the eyes and did not flinch. " And you were thinking I might have mailed it, were you? Did you think I'd tell you, if I had?"

" Well, I wanted to see how you'd act when we threw it at you," Jim replied. " How old are you, Miss Ingham?"

" Old enough to know better than that, Mr. Bryce." Miss Ingham smiled. " But to answer your question, I was

twenty-four on the sixteenth of last month. Does Johnson think I may have mailed the money? If he does, I won't hold it against him. I'm beginning to realize that he can't play favorites. But to have done such a thing after I had asked you to work for Bob strikes me as ridiculous. Does Mr. Richfield know about it?"

"Not yet," I said.

Save for her question I would have believed her wholly ignorant of the matter.

But in it she had touched at last on the most probable purpose behind the mailing of that curious, pasted-together communication — its effect on a jury in O'Niel's behalf.

Her next words only made matters worse.

"Don't you think he should be told?" she asked.

"Oh, I reckon he will be," Bryce said, gruffly.

The woman laughed in brittle fashion.

"Meaning I'll tell him? You don't trust me, do you, Mr. Bryce? Maybe that's my fault, in saying I'd do anything to help Bob. But I meant that. I'll do anything to keep him from suffering more than he already has, through Marge."

"An' I'm dead sure of that," Jim told her.

"I see." She crinkled her lids. "You're as blunt as a policeman, Mr. Bryce."

"Well, I was one once." Jim grinned. "But—we're backin' O'Niel ourselves."

"I know." Miss Ingham's expression softened. "And I think I'd better be going, unless there's something else."

"Nope." Jim shook his head.

"Then good afternoon—and good luck." The girl smiled again in a wistful fashion as she rose.

"SURPRISIN' her is like tryin' to make a cat fall any way but on its feet," Jim grumbled when she was gone. "An' she saw right away how Richfield could use that letter with a jury. Now, if Johnson gets the dope Dual wants on Cerra."

Johnson did; and once he was in the inner room of the tower, he laid the written information, together with the communication we had received, on Semi's desk.

Dual glanced at the latter. "No marks of identification?" he inquired.

"Nope." Johnson shook his head.

"The probable work of the murderer," Dual began his comment. "It is perhaps a gesture in self defense. And as such, it is quite in keeping with the atmosphere of secrecy and sinister scheming which has marked our problem from the first. Inasmuch as both individuals were seemingly actuated by wholly selfish motives, I cannot read into the transmittal of the money or the communication anything more than a deceptive effort, inspired by and in harmony with the character complex to which the sender is polarized.—Your patience for a time, now, if you please."

He turned to the desk and plunged into a series of calculations, while the three of us sat and watched.

A great clock ticked in a corner. Bryce smoked one of his deadly appearing cigars. Johnson sat frowning as though the spell of the moment weighed upon him. It was eerie, uncanny to watch the man at the desk, as he read once more a riddle of the stars.

Then he was speaking. "Gladys Ingham is Venus. We contact once more the element of love—but a love more natural and normal, as opposed

to the degraded love of Neptune. Furthermore, a love which I feel will exert itself unreservedly in O'Niel's behalf. As for Miss Martin, I see her as the Moon; but in the major instance her influence is not important save as a danger to yourselves."

"Danger?" Johnson echoed gruffly. "Through Palloni?"

"Let us consider that question in its order," Dual said after a pause. "Miss Kenton's connection with the Realty Investment Corporation is of interest. Saturn, which exercised an evil influence in her destiny, may quite consistently have inspired her dealings in real estate. Saturn is of the earth, and when evilly posited, may excite suspicion as to the legality of her operations. The man Dobbie is seemingly not above reproach."

"He's so crooked he'd cheat at solitaire!" said Bryce.

"That being the case," Dual went on, "I would advise that you examine the Recorder's books yourselves."

"Okay," Jim agreed. "We'll send Dan down in the mornin'.—Now, do you reckon my findin' that cigarette stub might mean that the gig cleaned out that drawer in her rooms?"

"Perchance he carried away a message from the gods," said Semi-Dual. "I regard him of importance, because of his similar influence in the lives of both Neptune and Mars."

"AND to what star do you hitch Palloni?" Johnson inquired.

"Saturn, inspector," Dual replied. "Permit me to compliment you on your attitude toward him this morning. It would appear to have embodied firmness with a well considered finesse. But do you consider it well to have let him know that you were in possession of evidence against any one high in the forces of law and order?"

"Why—" Johnson actually blushed before that blending of praise and caution, "I don't know as it was. But you see, what he said was true enough to hurt. An' I ain't afraid of that gorilla."

"Afraid, no." Dual smiled slightly. "But a cornered beast will fight. As you are aware, ever since I have known you I have kept the horoscopes of yourself and my friends Glace and Bryce. You escaped by a narrow margin last night, but you escaped. Which brings me to your question of a few moments ago. I find indications in all three charts of a further danger of which I feel it my duty to warn you."

"Through the Martin skirt?" Jim demanded.

"Through the Moon, and Saturn," Dual returned. "Palloni sees in you now a future as well as a present threat to the immunity he has so long enjoyed. He also sees a danger through Inspector Johnson to those from whom that immunity has been obtained. Should he accede to Johnson's demands, he might temporarily abate the situation, but with a loss of prestige. Still, if he could possibly destroy you, he might remove your menace to his future operations, and reëstablish the security of all involved."

"Yeah," Jim nodded in comprehension. "An' there's a way he could do it, easy. If instead of bringin' or sendin' that girl back, he was to—"

THE shrill of a telephone cut off his words. It tensed my every nerve, because Dual's number was not listed. It was known to only a few, among whom were Johnson and Bryce and myself.

I waited as Semi-Dual drew the instrument from a compartment in his desk and answered.

"He is here," he said, and held the instrument toward Johnson. "For you, inspector."

Johnson seized it, barked a response, waited while a distant voice snapped and crackled in the receiver.

"Okay," he said in decision at length. "Have a squad car ready when I get there."

"That was the station," he announced, and set the instrument on the desk. "I left your number with 'em, Mr. Dual. An' they just got a rumble on that Martin skirt. A call just come in from a pay station, to the effect that we could find her in an old house about five miles beyond the end of Park Drive Boulevard."

"And you intend going there, inspector?" Dual inquired.

"Why—sure," Johnson said, and paused. "I reckon you think we're up against the danger we were discussin'. But that's in my line of duty."

"Precisely," said Semi-Dual, and I saw his gray eyes light in appreciation of Johnson's attitude. "And a man's duty is a thing he may not shirk. However, forewarned is forearmed. The nature of your venture coincides with indications which I have found in your several astral charts. Therefore, do not walk blindly into some trap, in which this girl is made the bait. Besides the squad car you have already ordered, let me advise that you have a second car follow you, inspector, and that it carry armed and dependable men, known to yourself."

"That's good advice," Johnson declared. "I'll take it. Now, is there anything else?"

"Nothing essential," said Semi-Dual. "Until you return, I shall devote myself to the astral findings, as applying to the man Giovanni Cerra."

"Okay," Johnson nodded. "Come along, boys! Let's give that gorilla a surprise."

CHAPTER XII.

TRAP BAIT.

AT the station a squad car awaited. Johnson saw to the second car himself. To it he assigned four men, among them one by the name of Mulcahy, who had seen service in a machine gun company overseas.

The inspector gave his directions briefly.

"I know where this hideout is. There's a gas station four miles out, an' then a lane on the left, about one mile farther. The house is a half mile up it, back of a stand of trees. Give us three minutes an' then follow.—Okay. We're off."

We piled into the squad car and roared away into the night, Johnson with a machine rifle between his knees.

Bryce cleared his throat. "What I can't see is how Joe could think we'd fall for it," he grumbled.

"We are fallin' for it, ain't we?" Johnson rasped. "If it hadn't been for Dual—"

"Yeah," Jim chuckled. "He grabs a pencil, says we're runnin' into danger, an' then says he'll devote himself to the Jumpin' Jack's horrible horoscope till we get back. Comfortin' thought!"

"As indicating that we *will* get back?" I suggested.

"Sure," said Jim. "I'd hate not to. I'm anxious to see how this Kenton deal turns out. Joe's probably at the Moon, right now."

"Yeah. And he'll have a steel-ribbed alibi," Johnson growled.

We sped swiftly along the Park Drive Boulevard, with its flare of a multitude of lights and traffic. By swift degrees the cars dwindled in numbers as we reached the open country and raced along a night-shrouded road.

At last Johnson spoke to the chauffeur:

"Slow down, Andy. We turn left a mile from that last filling station."

"Then this must be the place."

The chauffeur brought the car to a stand opposite a narrow lane that angled off from the highway.

"You wanta go in there?"

"Yeah," Johnson assented. "An' we're apt to run into trouble.—Keep your eyes peeled."

"Okay."

The driver meshed his gears. The car bumped into the narrow track, crowned between bordering ditches, as I saw in the glow of the head lights, beyond which the shadowy bulk of bushes and trees pressed close.

"Lovely place for a murder!" the driver grumbled. "Just what, if anything, are we expectin'?"

"'Anything' about sums it up," said Johnson. "It's a cinch they know we're comin' an'— Hey! Look out!"

Beyond us the head lights picked up the shape of a dark car. But even as Johnson voiced his warning, I saw a flicker of flame stab from it in interrupted flashes, heard the coughing chatter of a machine gun, the patter of bullets striking metal, the tinkle of splintering glass. And I heard the driver groan as he sagged at the wheel and our car shot drunkenly into the ditch.

"Keep down!" I heard Johnson's voice again. He kicked the door open and slid through it with the machine gun in his grasp.

Bryce and I followed as best we could.

Once more, the machine flared from the car beyond us. Its missiles rattled above us as we crouched. Then, as it ceased, we managed to drag the driver's body out of the car and into the ditch.

He still breathed and moaned as we laid him down in a smother of dead weeds.

"Now—if they'll only do that once more," Johnson grated with a deadly note in his words.

And as though the words were a cue, again the machine gun rattled.

Johnson's rifle answered, from where he had crept a little farther along the ditch, to fire at the other weapon's flash.

I THOUGHT I heard a scream from a stricken throat, then the fire from the dark car ceased.

"Got him! Got him!" Johnson croaked. "Now if Mulcahy has done what I told him."

The roar of a speeding motor came to my ears. It came toward us, nearer and nearer. I turned my head back along the road. Twin lights were rushing toward us, swinging and rolling to the unevenness of the track.

They came nearer, nearer—slowed—came to a standstill.

"Inspector!" a brusk voice challenged.

"Okay, Mulcahy," Johnson called direction. "Burn down that car up the road."

"And how!"

The police weapon went into action.

For possibly twenty seconds it sprayed lead on the car beyond us.

"And there you are, inspector," Mulcahy shouted. "Anything in it is mincemeat."

"Bring your gang up here," Johnson said as he crawled out of the ditch, and in a moment the others joined us. "Come along," he said, and led the way to the other machine.

Bryce and I followed, to stand with the rest about a figure huddled on the ground.

"Make him?" Johnson questioned, as Mulcahy turned the body over.

"Yeah." Mulcahy nodded. "One of Palloni's baboons. An'—there's an other."

He directed the ray of a flash light upon the rear seat of a car, where a dead man's face, torn by gunfire, was revealed by its searching beam. "Well, where do we go from here?"

"Up the road. We gotta go through a house," Johnson told him. "Leave two of your men to look after Andy. They got him, first crack."

"An' paid for it. Good work, inspector," Mulcahy grated. "We heard the guns.—Where is he?"

We examined the driver and found his wounds to be less serious than we feared. Then we piled into the other machine and drove on up the road.

TWO minutes brought us to an unlighted house. Nor was there any sign of life about it, as we advanced with our weapons ready. We mounted a porch, but there was no answer as Johnson hammered on the door with a police weapon.

He kicked the door open and led the way into a hallway. There, by the ray of his torch, we found an uncarpeted stair.

"Stay here," he addressed Mulcahy. "Get anything that stirs.—The rest of you come up."

We mounted the stairs and at the top we paused.

"Miss Martin!" Johnson called.

"Yes—yes. I'm—in here," a feminine voice replied.

Johnson chuckled softly. "Plain enough," he growled. "They figured they'd get us, an' come back for her. Well, right now they're both in hell, I reckon."

He walked to a door and flung it open to show Allison Martin, clad in a pink corduroy robe, standing wide-eyed in the center of a room illuminated by the flicker of a candle.

"Well, well! What are you doing here?" he smiled.

"They—kidnaped me," Miss Martin faltered, and caught sight of Jim and me. "Oh, Mr. Glace — Mr. Bryce!"

"Present," Jim answered, grinning. "How do you like gangsters for playmates now, Miss Martin?"

"Oh—please!" Miss Martin begged. "Please don't. I was—so frightened when I heard that shooting! And that old woman took away my clothes. Won't you try to find them and get me away from here?"

"Well, pink's becomin' to a blonde," said Jim.

We found her clothing in a closet, but of the old woman she had mentioned there was no trace. In five minutes she was dressed. We got her into the car, drove back, and dragged our own machine out of the ditch. Then, with the wounded chauffeur and the bodies of the dead gangsters, we drove back to town.

At the station Allison Martin told her story.

"I never dreamed of such a thing. I got a telephone call and somebody said he was Billy Gregg. Billy's the brother of a girl who graduated last spring, and I don't know him awfully well. But he said he was in town and would I go some place and dance.

"Well, we'd done that before, a few times, and so I said all right. When a car drove up I ran out, and somebody grabbed me and dragged me in and held his hand over my mouth so I couldn't scream. I tried to fight, and he choked me and told me to 'cut it out!' Then, when I was nearly strangled, he said, 'If I ease up on your pipe will you be good?' I nodded, and he tied a cloth over my eyes. Then we got to a house, and they took me upstairs. An old woman took away my clothes and gave me that corduroy robe and a pair of felt slippers."

SHE laughed, but I caught a touch of hysteria in the sound.

"I don't believe I'll ever care for corduroy again! But I was glad of it, last night. I never went in for this nudist stuff. So I put the robe on, and the old woman gave me some cigarettes, a glass of milk and some magazines. Then she went out and locked the door.—I thought of everything.

"The door was locked; the windows were nailed down; and I knew if I broke the glass somebody in the house would probably hear it. I thought of setting fire to the house, but after I realized I'd have to start the blaze in that room, with me in nothing but a pink kimona, the idea didn't seem so hot. Anyway, after I'd thought it over I wasn't so badly scared. You see, I've been a good deal of a fool of late."

"I know you have," Johnson told her, grinning.

"Well, let it go, then." She flushed. "The more I thought about it, the surer I felt that my being kidnaped was just a play to get some money; and I felt sure I knew the party who had framed the whole thing up. Because he knew I had money of my own, and he also knew about Billy Gregg. That is, he'd seen me with Billy, and had asked me about him, once when he was in town before. And about their using his name—"

"You used your head," said Johnson admiringly.

"Sure. After not using it had run me into a pink kimona and a pair of bedroom slippers."

Miss Martin giggled.

"So I smoked and read a while and then I went to bed. In the morning I tried to see what I could from a window, but it wasn't much. The old woman brought me some breakfast, but nobody else came near me. I wondered why they didn't, and why they didn't ask me to write for money. Then I remembered a note I'd got a few days ago—"

"The one you showed Joe Palloni?" Johnson asked.

"Uh-huh." Miss Martin nodded. "He said something about the writer muscling in on his prowl, when I showed it to him; and then I began to see where I'd been his prowl, all right. Of course, after what I'd told him about myself he wouldn't need to write anything, because he knew enough to handle the whole transaction himself. Oh, sure—I figured it all out.

"Then, earlier this evening, I heard voices downstairs. And after a long time, what sounded like shooting. All at once I was scared cold, and I sat there praying. Then you called.—I'm terribly sorry. Was your driver badly hurt?"

"He'll get over it," Johnson assured her. "You couldn't identify the men who grabbed you, could you?"

"No-o." Miss Martin shook her head. "Ever try riding blindfolded? It was like a nightmare, sort of. There wasn't a thing but the sound of the engine, and now and then a bump.

Maybe I deserved it. But I think the note I showed Palloni was enough."

"Don't worry about that," Jim said, and explained his meaning.

"Then he—knew her?" Miss Martin cried. "Do you think he had her killed? Oh, dear! I feel as though I was responsible for things I never dreamed of; for her being shot, and your driver being wounded, and those two men being killed to-night. I—I've been worse than silly."

She lifted a hand and crushed the knuckles against her lips.

"Here, here! I'm going to send you home now." He lifted a telephone and ordered a car. "Come on now," he said and rose to lead her out.

QUITE unexpectedly, he was accompanied by another and wholly strange young woman, when he returned.

"Gettin' to be a ladies' man," he declared as he flopped back into his chair. "Miss Evelyn Gore, here, runs an elevator in the Willden. Sit down, Miss Gore, and tell us what it's all about."

"Why—" the girl said as she took a chair. "Remember the other night, how you got me out of bed and asked me if I'd seen anybody go up to Miss Kenton's room, late the night she was shot? Well, I've remembered. There was a man. Ordinarily she didn't have many callers. There was just Mr. O'Niel, who came a lot; and Mr. Richfield, the lawyer, once or twice; and this other man.

"But the last time he was there was the night before she was killed.—You know, Mr. Richfield's taken charge of her rooms, and he was talking to me to-night, and all at once I remembered. The man who had called on her was slender and dark, and light on his feet —like a dancer, I mean. He always called the number of her apartment, instead of her floor. That's how I knew he was calling on her. So I told the manager I knew something I thought I oughta tell you, and he let me off."

"The gig, by granny!" Bryce declared as Miss Gore paused.

"Gig?" She turned to face him. "Does that mean you know him?—Was he a gigolo really?"

Jim grinned. "The answer to both your questions is—yes."

"Just a gigolo," Miss Gore nodded. "Well, that would explain the way he walked. There ain't much I miss. But I gotta be gettin' back.—I hope they prove Mr. O'Niel ain't guilty. He's—nice."

"And that ties it," Bryce proclaimed, when she had left. "The Jack was there the night before, as well as on the night they rubbed her out. An' the last time, he left his cigarette."

"Yeah," Johnson nodded. "Funny, how things turn out! Danged if Dual ain't right. It's the little things that count, an' keep buildin' up. The way they're stackin' up now, it looks like your snipe hunt might amount to somethin' yet."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

"BUILDIN' up!" Jim said as we walked to where my car was parked. "The Addin' Machine of the Cosmos don't make mistakes. The Wheel goes round and—*click!* There's another item on what Semi calls the Ledger of Life. Buildin' up to what? A sort of balance in which nothin' is wrote off or missed. Makes you wonder, don't it?—Look. We didn't know the gig was in the habit of goin' to the Willden, an' then an elevator girl

remembers the way he walks." He chuckled. "Darned if the Addin' Machine don't even take account of a man's gait. You gotta watch your step!"

"In more ways than one," I agreed. "I imagine that Palloni is not as well pleased with the outcome of his plan as we are to-night."

"You win," said Bryce. "To-morrow I'm sendin' Dan to the Recorder's office an' see can he get us a few more straws."

Thanks to that expressed intention, we took the next step in untangling the twisted threads of Margaret Kenton's life—those dark and criminal threads in which, in the end, she became entangled, and which finally brought about her death.

Dan received his instructions and left, and Allison Martin was announced. She came to get her note, and was in a chastened mood.

"If you'll let me have your bill, I'd like to pay it," she said, "though I know that there are things one never can pay for—things such as you did for me last night; the sort of things you can only give thanks for on your knees."

"Not a bad kid," Bryce said when she had disappeared.

Noon came, and three o'clock, before Dan showed up.

"If there's anything funny about those land deals, I don't know what it is," he began his report. "But I don't know much about the sort of dirt you measure in feet an' rods. Nearly every one of the things was plastered with mortgages. I made a list, if you want to see it.—Here."

He handed some papers to Bryce before he went on:

"There was one thing, though, that I'll bet you wasn't expectin'. That Ingham dame musta worked in some office before she hooked up with the Kenton doll, because you know mortgages have to be sworn to, an' darned if her name wasn't on a lot of these!"

"As a notary?" Bryce said, sharply.

"Yeah." Danny grinned. "Some of 'em was signed by a fellow the clerk said worked for Dobbie, till he took pneumonia an' died. But findin' her moniker on 'em made me wonder.—And here's another thing. The Kenton dame hadn't run her steno service more'n two years; so if she was secretary of the Realty Corporation she musta been workin' for Richfield at the time."

Jim reacted to the information with a grunt. A baffled expression came into his eyes.

"Maybe we oughta see Richfield again. How about it, old son?" he said.

I AGREED, and rang the lawyer's office. I met a more cordial welcome than before.

"Come over, of course," he assented. "And by the way, O'Niel says Cerra smokes the brand of cigarette Bryce found in the ash tray, and that Miss Ingham likes 'em toasted."

"You gentlemen seem to be picking up all the threads," he said when we had told him what Dan had learned. "And I can readily see how your question applies. Miss Kenton acted as secretary of the Realty Investment Corporation, with my full knowledge and consent. Dobbie organized it, and I helped with the legal end. As a bondsman, he came in contact with a great many attractive pieces of real estate posted against his bonds. And he evolved the idea of turning his knowledge to a profit. He'd bid in parcels of ground and sell them, and I think he did fairly well for a time. You will re-

call that I told you that Miss Kenton made money through investments."

"Yes," said Bryce. "But you didn't say what kind."

"I referred to the company we are discussing, none the less," the lawyer explained. "I've handled a good deal of business for Dobbie. He had met Miss Kenton in his office, and he offered her the chance to come into it if she desired. I advised her to accept. I do a pretty good business in the settling of estates, and it frequently happens that bits of land are involved.

"Now and then circumstances make it advisable to convert such holdings into money at a justifiable price. And as I was handling Dobbie's other business, it was natural that I should submit such propositions to him when I deemed it best. A good proportion of such lands were mortgaged, and Dobbie's chance of profits hinged on his ability to buy them at prices low enough to insure them after the mortgage was written off."

"Then the company was really Dobbie?" I said as the attorney paused.

"The stock was largely in his name," he said. "Margaret, however, held a considerable block."

"Miss Ingham ever work for you?" Bryce asked.

"No." Richfield smiled. "She worked for Dobbie. His office is in this building.—Just what is your interest?"

Jim outlined the matter of the notarial signatures, and Richfield frowned.

"Would that mean that you hoped to find something questionable in the transaction, gentlemen?"

I laughed. "Hoped would just about fit, I'm afraid. Actually, we're getting nowhere in our investigations. We haven't so much as a tenable motive, unless Miss Kenton was killed by some one whom she had victimized or was attempting to victimize. Yet the murderer seems to know that we're working for O'Niel.—Has Miss Ingham communicated with you today?"

"No, Mr. Glace," he denied, and I told him of the oddly constructed note we had received.

"Five hundred dollars," he said, and frowned. "There's a *macabre* quality about the whole thing, Mr. Glace. It's a thing of shadows—a dance of black and white marionettes, rather than a drama of the flesh."

"Precisely," I agreed.

"But there's just a chance I could use that letter in O'Niel's favor," he went on. "I might even be able to free him with it. I've won a case or two on as narrow a margin in the past."

Jim surprised me. "About as narrow as the one that kept Palloni's gorillas from makin' collanders of us last night?" he countered.

SUDDENLY Richfield laughed in a manifest enjoyment of his thrust.

"Haw, haw, haw!—My congratulations on your escape. Needless to say, however, Joe did not follow my advice."

"That bein'?" Jim suggested gruffly.

"That he accede to Johnson's demands." Richfield sobered. "I would be sorry to feel that you thought it might have been anything else. Still—all's well that ends well."

"Yeah." Bryce scowled. "Any chance that Joe or that heat man of his, Tovallo, pulled the Kenton job?"

"No." Richfield's tone was sharp. "He could have carried out his designs with Miss Martin without anything like that."

"Unless he was paid for it," said Bryce.

"And furnished with her gun?" The lawyer smiled.

"Well—" Jim said. "There's always the Jumpin' Jack. He was in her rooms the night before she was knocked off. He could 'a' slipped her gat to Tovallo. That would be in keepin' with that word you just used. *Mac—*"

"*Macabre?*" Richfield smiled. "But I doubt if Cerra stole her gun."

"The point is," said Jim, "that whoever did it was countin' on the unexpected element in the job to keep him safe."

"Right." Richfield nodded. "But your clever criminal refrains from—shall we say—lost motion, Mr. Bryce. He makes the fewest possible moves. Personally, I feel that if Margaret's gun was actually stolen, the one who took it hoped that her death might be counted suicide. Now, however, the murderer's best strategy is to remain inactive and let O'Niel bear the brunt of suspicion until—as I sincerely hope—we have established his innocence."

"So he sends us five yards an' a crazy note," Jim made comment. "You find anything in her papers that might help?"

"No," Richfield said. "I've seen the will, and some private papers. If there really were any such records as you suggest, I'm afraid they were in some place which I have not discovered—or were actually removed. You're having Cerra watched?"

"Naturally." Jim rose. "Thanks for the time we've wasted."

As we left, Jim asked the elevator operator for Dobbie's office.

"What's the notion?" I asked as we moved down a corridor to where the bondsman's name was lettered on frosted glass.

"Keep your ears pinned back," he growled, and led the way into the office. There was a straining purposefulness in his face.

BUT it was gone when we faced Jonathan Dobbie, across the desk at which he sat.

"Only want a minute of your time, Mr. Dobbie," he said. "We know Margaret Kenton was secretary of the Realty Investment Corporation, of which you are president."

"What about it?"

Dobbie glanced at the card a stenographer had taken to him before we were sent in. He was a man with a pasty complexion, heavy set, with small dark eyes sunk in fatty lids.

"Why, I reckon her bein' killed was sort of—unhandy, wasn't it?" Jim said.

I began to see his drift. And so, apparently, did Dobbie. The latter eyed him for an appreciable time before he answered:

"Naturally. But it can't be helped."

"The idea is, that we was wonderin' if, as secretary, she kept the company books in your office or hers?" Bryce pointed out. "We'd like a chance to see 'em, if we could."

Dobbie's flabby body tensed. His dark eyes shifted.

"You're from the police?" he asked.

"Nope," Jim returned. "It's all on our card. But we're workin' for the lad who was pinched for her shootin'."

Dobbie appeared to be relieved, in so far as I could judge.

"Then—you're exceeding your authority, I'm afraid," he decided gruffly.

"Yeah." My partner nodded. "I was afraid you might see it that way. But the trouble is that some of Miss Kenton's records seem to have—er—

disappeared. We was wonderin' if your books might be among 'em."

Dobbie's voice took on a rasp. "I don't know what's behind all this, but if you know one-tenth of what you ought to, you know damned well they were not. Those books are in my safe. And if you want to see 'em—"

"Oh, well," Jim interrupted, "if that's so, I reckon we don't. But you see, she was workin' a blackmailin' racket."

"Blackmail!" For an instant Dobbie's face was a sickly mask. "Say, what the hell do you mean by that?"

"Why, nothin'." Jim's voice was soft. "Nothin' at all, if your books are —safe. Sorry to have troubled you. S' long, Dobbie."

"And they ain't," he declared the instant we were out of the office. "They ain't safe, old son. That bird's worried right now. That's why I wanted to see him. There's something phony about those land deals, and he's—worried."

I nodded. I understood. And that night, as we sat with Semi-Dual in his quarters, one of the things I told our host was that Jonathan Dobbie was afraid.

That night marked the real beginning of the end.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BALANCE MOUNTS.

DUAL had begun to add together the sum of cause and effect on the Ledger of Life, toward that final tragic balance by which the account of the debtor was closed.

Knowledge sat like a mantle upon him, hovering about him like an aura, in the room where the four of us sat. For Johnson was with us, admittedly baffled in the matter of the woman's death.

Dual had heard what we had to tell, when Johnson cleared his throat.

"Yes, inspector?" Dual's gray eyes turned to him.

Johnson grinned in his self-conscious way.

"I was just wondering if we ought to shake down that gig. He's been tailed, and it's got us nothing. But I can't help feelin' that he knows a lot we might use."

"Knowledge," said Semi-Dual, "is a two-edged sword.—I have set up the astral chart of Giovanni Cerra. Saturn threatens him, and Mars."

"By Saturn," Bryce exclaimed, "you mean Palloni?"

"Saturn, who is Palloni, in my estimation," Dual assented. "Hence, guard the man Cerra closely, until you have the knowledge you seek. When speaking with the man Dobbie, did you happen to mention Miss Ingham?"

"No." Jim frowned. "I never thought about her."

Dual put out a hand. "And may I see the list Quinn left with you this afternoon, concerning those real estate transactions?"

I handed it to him, and he ran through it while we waited. Once or twice I saw a furrow of consideration between his eyes. Then once more he was speaking.

"THERE is a possibility here. Danny's record is most complete. It therefore becomes apparent that in a rather large proportion of the real estate firm's transactions the mortgage affecting a specific parcel of land was recorded at a date considerably later than that of the actual document. This may or may not have been of deliberate intent; but if

so, might excite a suspicion as to the validity of the whole transaction. What I say must apply as a purely theoretical explanation. But let us assume that the Realty Investment Corporation's operations were not wholly legitimate. They bought lands under mortgage and sold them at a profit. That is, we are led to assume that a profit accrued. But if beyond a normal expectancy the face of the mortgage could be included in that profit—"

"Face of the mortgage?" Bryce broke in sharply. "You mean they might have been—forged?"

Silence followed his words. Their suggestion gripped us with its hint of covert double dealing.

Dual replied: "Strange things happen, during illnesses, or when a man lies dying—or even afterwards. That dead men tell no tales is a fallacy, my friends. At times they speak as surely as though alive. This company frequently dealt in lands that were parts of estates, lands originally owned by persons deceased, save through documents signed or apparently signed before their lips were sealed.

"From the dates of execution and recording in the list I hold, I am led to believe that many of the mortgages in question were only recorded *after* the hand which presumably signed them was cold."

"Holy cat!" Jim's excitement reached the exploding point. "An' if those mortgages were forged, it was just that much written off against the appraised valuation of the land in question. Anything the land brought above the court order was just so much additional velvet. Just a dirty steal!—But how could they get away with it?"

"Assuming that they desired to control a certain parcel of land," Dual resumed, "a copy of an authentic signature might be traced on a spurious document. In many offices to-day there are duplicating devices by which the tracings could be effected. Such a document could then be acknowledged and held in reserve."

"In reserve?" Johnson repeated. "They'd pick up some land they wanted, fake a mortgage on it to one of their gang, and later release it when the title was in their name. Or foreclose on it if they wanted—or maybe forge a deed and have it ready for recordin' as soon as whoever was thought to have signed it was dead. Danged if they wasn't just a bunch of buzzards, waitin' to pick the ribs of dead horses.

"But if they worked it that way, they could loot almost any property they liked. An' if he's been sittin' in that sort of game, no wonder Dobbie was nervous. Forgery ain't exactly child's play, yet. An' the Kenton dame must have known it.—Say! You don't think Dobbie—?"

"CAREFUL, inspector," Dual admonished. "All this is only assumption. Yet it will, I think, bear investigation. To that end, I shall ask for aid to-morrow morning. Have Quirm examine the records on file at your courthouse. They should show the names of the heirs to these several estates. Through them Dan may gain information to prove our suspicions true or false. There also appears to be a thread leading back to the problem of Miss Kenton's death."

"Ingham!" Johnson said. "Think she knew the papers were crooked?"

"As yet," said Semi-Dual, "we do not know it ourselves. Personally, I do not view Miss Ingham in a criminal light. You can reach her, I understand.

Suppose that to-morrow you instruct her to report to Glace. He will bring her to me.—And you, my friend"—his glance swung to Jim—"I will ask to see that Quinn comes to me early for instructions."

I smiled. Here was action—directed action at last. And more, the assurance that in his allocation of a duty to each of us Dual was taking active charge.

"Okay. I'll deliver the frill," Johnson promised.

"And I'll have Dan up here early," Jim added.

"Do so." Dual swept us with his calm gray glance. "The Wheel turns, my friends. Item by item, the balance on the Ledger mounts—and the debtor must meet his debt. Go now, but maintain contact with me until this sorry harvest is gathered, then report at once whatsoever of importance happens."

He paused; his words were a dismissal, but they were more. They were also a promise.

We went out to the garden on the roof. It was dark, and above us swung the star-jeweled Wheel of the Skies. Bryce drew an audible breath.

"Dobbie!" he said. "If he'd broke with Kenton an' she knew too much, and he managed to rub her out—"

"If a lot of stuff you pull was anything but a bowl of cherries—" Johnson growled.

"Pipe down," I said. "The only thing the lot of us are sure of is that Dual knows."

CHAPTER XV.

VENUS, DAUGHTER OF LIFE.

"YOUR friend the inspector says you wish to see me," Gladys Ingham said as she entered my private room, the next morning.

"Yes," I agreed. "Be seated, please. —Did you work for Jonathan Dobbie, before Miss Kenton employed you?"

"Yes, Mr. Glace," she replied.

"And did you hold a commission as a notary public?"

"And still do."

I saw a question in her eyes.

"And you signed papers for the Realty Investment Corporation?"

"Certainly, Mr. Glace."

"Marge Kenton was in that outfit, wasn't she?" Jim asked.

"Marge!" The girl's tone was startled. "What's happened, Mr. Bryce?"

"I reckon Dual will tell you," Jim returned.

"As a matter of fact," I interposed, "we asked you here this morning to take you somewhere else. I want you to see a man who will probably surprise you. But you will find him very wise."

"A wise man?" She eyed me and smiled. "I've read of them, but I never saw one."

"You will in a few minutes," I said and rose. "I'm taking you to him."

A few minutes later, I led her up the bronze and marble stairs to the garden on the roof.

At the top she paused with parted lips and eyes suddenly gone wide.

"What a beautiful penthouse and garden!" she exclaimed. "And what a lovely doorbell! Look at the cute little fountain and the sundial. Oh—this is —marvelous!"

"I told you you'd be surprised. The man who lives here is a truly wise man. I have known him for years, and not once have I had cause to impeach his wisdom. As a chemist deals with reagents, so Semi-Dual deals with the basic life values. Come, Miss Ingham," I said, and led her to that inner room where Semi sat.

Now that room was full of sun-

light. Through the great window the light of morning flung a golden aura about the head and shoulders of Dual, in his white and purple robes. Beside me I heard the woman catch her breath as he rose.

"Welcome, Daughter of Life," he intoned. "Thou art Venus—a bright Star in the destiny of him you love. To-day I appeal to you in his behalf.—Be seated. And thou, Gordon, my friend, return when I shall call you."

I understood. On the wall of my private office was a little black telephone box, which was the lower end of a line from Dual's quarters.

I threw Miss Ingham a smile and took myself off.

JUST short of twelve, the phone from the tower buzzed, and I answered and went back to the roof, to find Gladys Ingham changed.

The thing was hard to describe. Yet it was in her face, her voice, her eyes. I had left her a modern woman, independent, self-reliant, a trifle hardened as a result of her contacts with life. And I found her again as one who has gazed on some unimagined vista that stirred her deeply and would go with her through the years.

I was not surprised. Dual was apt to have some such effect on women, when he wished to win their confidence. Possibly, as he explained it, because women were a trifle closer to the Source, and hence more responsive than men to an expression of the truths of that Universal Force which men call Life.

"You were right, Mr. Glace," she said quietly. "Your friend is a very wise man, indeed."

I nodded. I felt the change the hours had wrought upon her. "You find him different?" I asked.

"Different?" She started to laugh, and caught herself. "I found a terrific intelligence turned on things which I have always thought of as superstitions—and coupled with the understanding of a priest."

"He's given us help in many a baffling case," I said.

"I know." She nodded and sighed. "He told me. I think he's converted me to his creed. He told me things of which I've never dreamed; told me I could help Bob."

That settled it, of course; and I was sure now that Dual, in his subtle fashion, had molded the girl into an instrument of Justice which in his own way he meant to use.

"Just how?" I prompted.

"Oh, dear!" Once more she sighed. "He told me not to say anything, and here I've done it already. It's just that I'm so thrilled to think that I can play even a little part in finding out who really did kill Marge. I can't tell you more than that."

"Then don't," I said. "Dual is a firm believer in the axiom that a closed mouth spills no porridge. However, let me wish you luck."

"Thank you."

She smiled as an elevator came up.

HOW well Dual knew life, I thought as I watched her hurry away on the main floor level. So well that he knew how to avail himself of the basic truth that the emotion back of all human action is—self. Some may challenge that statement. But take this girl, as she hastened to what she so plainly felt was the aid of the man she loved. She loved him; wanted him for herself. She might perhaps have resented a suggestion of self-interest, Yet what else was it that made her Dual's ally, in the problem we strove to solve?

I returned to the office, and at lunch Jim and I discussed the things uppermost in our minds. It was after four when Dan showed up.

"Had a day of it," he declared. "Dual sure picks 'em out of the air. I just turned in my report. I wouldn't wonder if Dobbie might have some explainin' to do. He might even need a bondsman himself."

"Then you got somethin'?" Jim demanded.

Danny grinned. "I got one or two people to askin' questions, at least. Mainly, Dual wanted me to hunt up the heirs of a few estates against which mortgages had been recorded. Naturally, you'd think they'd know something—why a mortgage had been put on, or where the money went to. An' a couple of 'em did. But some claimed they didn't know a thing till the estate was bein' settled; and they're the ones who may build a fire under Dobbie. Most of 'em seem to have figured they couldn't do a thing about it. But a couple of 'em sat up and began to take notice, when I pointed out that the mortgages had been recorded after whoever had signed 'em was dead.

"The maddest of the lot was a bird who says his uncle, the day before he croaked, told him only that he didn't owe a cent. Then when his heir started countin' his marbles, he discovered a plaster worth twenty-five grand on the best bit of real estate he'd inherited. He was stuck, of course. His uncle had died of cancer, and the mortgage had been recorded just ten days before he passed out. But I tell you, he was for makin' war medicine at once! I had to tell him we wasn't sure of anything yet, an' ask him to keep his shirt on till we was. You can bet that any time we want to start sweatin' Dobbie, that baby will coöperate. I gave his address and telephone number, along with one or two more, to Dual.

"He handed me a hot one before I left. Told me to tell you to stick close to Johnson, because unless Mercury delivered his message before one o'clock to-morrow mornin', he was going' to need protection—whatever he meant by that."

"One to-night, huh? At that rate, the show's all set up. Won't be long before something breaks," Bryce said.

"Mercury's the rat." A light of comprehension spread over Danny's face. "Say—I'm goin' down to the Moon to-night an' see what comes off."

"Go ahead," Jim told him. "I don't know where it'll start. But if you see anything suspicious, you might tip us off. We'll probably be at the station, if we're keepin' close to Johnson. Listen, young sleuth. I know how Dual works. Things are comin' to a head. An' no matter where the Jumpin' Jack stands in the killin' of Marge Kenton, that dancin' man is on the spot. That bein' the case, almost anything can happen. So you want to keep awake. Hook up with the tail Johnson's already got on the gig, an' we'll have Johnson put him wise. But if you see anything that strikes you funny, give us a buzz, no matter what Carrigan thinks. Okay?"

"Okay," Quinn assented. The word had a tense sound in his throat.

Then we telephoned the station and got in touch with Johnson.

CHAPTER XVI.

GORILLA CONCLAVE.

JOHNSON was grumpy, as we sat together in the detectives' room at the station. Actually he was on edge with the uncertainty of those final

hours, wondering what Semi-Dual was up to.

"What's he doing, anyway?" he grumbled. "Why's he stickin' us here on a peg? Why don't he let us grab the gig an' keep him safe? What in hell is the use of takin' chances, if the bird's important?"

"I don't reckon he thinks he's takin' chances," Jim said. "What he said was that Cerra would need protection, unless he delivered his message by one o'clock."

"What message?" Johnson scowled. "I'm damned tired of riddles!"

Jim grinned and lighted a cigar. "You know as much as we do," he said. "We was to report anything that happened."

"Nice!" Johnson growled. "Here we sit and twiddle our thumbs like so many dummies at bridge. If I didn't know him as well as I do—"

"You'd what?" Jim inquired. "Put the gig on ice? Think he'd bust into tears an' sob out his story? Maybe he has got a message to deliver, but that ain't a sign he'd blubber it into your ears. Here's how I figure it out. If what he's expectin' don't happen before one A.M., then the only other play will be to put the Jack where nobody can get at him. Because the Jack's got somethin' that's mighty important, an' he got it out of Marge Kenton's rooms. That's the message Dual is talkin' about. An' if he don't get it by one—"

"Well I'll be damned," Johnson cut him off. "Why ain't you said that before? If Semi can't snag it by the time he's set—"

"Then the gig will be in danger from whoever knows he's got it besides us," Jim resumed. "If Kenton had the goods on Dobbie, for instance, an' the gig had got hold of the evidence, why the thing would be open and shut."

"Only Dobbie wouldn't be fool enough to burn the man down till he had it," Johnson interrupted.

"Sure not, you poor sap!" Bryce assented, grinning. "It's a race between him an' Dual. Only Dobbie don't know it yet. Dual's letting him show his hand."

"Maybe." Johnson appeared to be impressed. "Yep, he might play it that way. It's like him to let a bird hang himself. He gets my goat.—Well, I reckon we follow orders."

WE did. We sat in that room given over to the strivings of men against crime, and all along we knew that beyond its walls that thing which Dual called the Balance—the sum of action and reaction, of cause and effect—was building its sinister structure. Beyond our observation or knowledge, forces were moving toward a climax.

Johnson was of the police; Bryce and I were at least affiliated with the forces of crime suppression. Yet we sat there passively expectant of results from the machination of one unseen. The effect was odd.

Ten o'clock came, and ten thirty. Now and then the telephone beside Johnson purred; and each time I held myself ready, only to relax again as he spoke on some routine matter.

Then at eleven—a few minutes after—the telephone buzzed again. Johnson grabbed it, jammed the receiver against his ear.

"Johnson speakin'," he growled. "What? Oh—Quinn. Sure, he's here."

He held the receiver toward Bryce. Jim had it in a single reaching stride, and was speaking.

"Hello, Dan.—You're sure they're Joe's gorillas?—Well, wait a minute." He picked us up with his glance.

" Joe's baboons have been filterin' into the Moon, the last half hour, an' Tovallo's bossin' the mob."

" Tovallo, huh?" Johnson's voice was grating. " Here—gimme that thing! This is Johnson. Shoot it."

After that he listened, till at length he spoke again.

" Good boy, Quinn! Go back an' stay on the job. Looks like they was aimin' to throw a scare into Cerra. How's he actin'?—Nervous? Well, maybe he's got a reason. Let us know if anything happens. Okay, son."

His hand slid the receiver back into its cradle. In his eyes there was the look of a hound with his quarry in sight.

" And there you are," he snarled. " Those gorillas are just sittin' there, like a lot of tomcats waitin' for a mouse. That's the way they work, when they're tryin' to break a guy's nerve. The Jack knows they're waitin' for him, an' Dan says he's actin' nervous. Well, he ought to be; he knows he's on a spot. Carrigan's watchin' a car, Dan says. Carrigan says Joe's driver is at the wheel, but it ain't Joe's bus. For two cents I'd send a prowl car to tail it, if the gig's in it when it moves."

" Yeah." Jim spoke with a peculiar rasp. " An' you might send a coupla motorcycles to sweep the street ahead of the procession, too. Accordin' to his brag about the department, Joe oughta rate a police escort at least."

" An' I hope to heaven he gets one to slow music, some day!" Johnson flared.

THE telephone whirred again, and once more he caught it up.

" Johnson speakin'!—What? Gimme the license number." He scribbled a row of figures. " Okay.—You come in."

Rage and a quickly forming purpose were in his voice.

" That was Carrigan," he rasped. " Tovallo an' a coupla his gorillas just led the Jumpin' Jack outa the Moon, shoved him into that car an' drove off. They beat us to it, damn 'em — but we'll get 'em! I'm puttin' a call through to all prowl cars."

He reached for an inside telephone, but Bryce laid a hand upon the instrument.

" You're puttin' through nothin' till we see what Dual says."

" Oh yeah?" Johnson glared.

But Jim was already calling Semi-Dual's number. We waited, and then at the sound of an answering voice Jim poured into the mouthpiece the information that Giovanni Cerra had been taken for a ride.

It was all a matter of seconds. I saw Jim's expression alter, saw his interest quicken, saw some of the lines of tension iron out of his face.

" Okay. Sure," he said. " I got it. Let 'em play out their hand, and wait."

He set the telephone aside. An odd grin was on his mouth. It was a thing of gloating satisfaction.

" Never mind that alarm of yours," he said. " Mercury ain't needin' help right now, because he delivered his message before he was grabbed, and that bunch of bums don't dare gun him until they've got it. And they'll get it when Hell is a skating resort.—'Cause why? Dual's got it! Ain't *that* a laugh!"

" Got what?" Johnson demanded.

" The message," said Bryce.

" Yeah. But talk sense, can't you?"

" Nope," Jim grinned again. " I'm tellin' you what he said. I don't know what it is, but it's what Palloni's mob was after. An' all they'll get from the gig is the info that it'll be turned over

to the police unless the gig comes back with a whole hide. Semi says to wait, because right now things couldn't be breakin' better."

"Ain't that grand!" Johnson sneered. "If the ride's a washout, all they can do is bring him back. Is that what Dual's expectin'?—If he's got what they want, how in hell did he get it?"

"How do I know?" Bryce grunted for the third time. "The point is, the Jumpin' Jack can't give 'em what Dual's got, and they can't risk bumpin' him off, for fear we'll get it. Of course they don't even know that Semi's alive. Can you beat the way he works?"

"Somethin' he got out of the Kenton frail's flop that night, do you reckon?" Johnson suggested at length, as though speaking his personal thoughts aloud.

"That's my guess," Jim assented, nodding. "An' I bet it will hang the Kenton murderer—"

He broke off as a rap fell on the door. It was opened to admit a police orderly and a girl in a manifest state of excitement. She was Maud Slade, otherwise known as Violet de Lisle, the slender, blond leader of the floor show at the Silver Moon.

"Listen, inspector," she began in a panting voice. "I'm in the floor show at the Moon, and Tommy Tovallo and a coupla Joe Palloni's mob jus' took my boy frien' for a ride!"

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK.

* * *

Human Tanks

STORIES of knights in armor riding on high-strung, prancing steeds are apt to be exaggerated. When knighthood was in flower the handsome suit of armor worn on the field was so heavy that the knight rode a draught horse similar to those which still haul brewery wagons. French armor weighed a little over fifty pounds; samples preserved in the Tower of London come nearer one hundred. In addition the horse wore heavier tinware for its own protection. A knight who could joust with the best of them and bring down clarions of applause from the gallery could not always get up if unluckily he fell off his horse.

Wearing of armor was a dangerous game at times. Canned knights have been killed more than once by falling from their steeds in such a way as to be crushed by the armor. When William the Conqueror marched his men to ships, according to an old painting, two men carried each tunic (body piece) by means of a pole poked through the armholes. Any way you figure it, they had to make two trips.

King James of Scotland, who was something of a wag, said he was all in favor of the use of armor by his knights. It not only prevented them from getting jabbed in tournaments, but from jabbing any one else.

Delos White.

STRANGER *than* FICTION

By JOHN S. STUART

OYSTER EGGS

OYSTERS have eggs—about one-five-hundredth of an inch in diameter. One wonders about oyster egg shells.

ALARM FAILED TO AROUSE 'EM

A TIRE shop was lately burglarized in Cashmere, Washington. The burglar alarm went off, but although a bank watchman and a baker heard it, they did not heed it. It was 6.30 A.M., and they thought it was merely an alarm clock!

THE VIRTUOUS JADE

TO the Chinese, jade is the prototype of all gems, and unites in itself the five cardinal virtues—charity, modesty, courage, justice and wisdom. When powdered and mixed with water, it is supposed to be a powerful remedy for all kinds of internal disorders; to strengthen the frame and prevent fatigue; to prolong life; and if taken in sufficient quantity just before death, even to prevent decomposition.

NO LANDLORD HERE

THE Hausas, of British West Africa, are never troubled by cruel landlords. When their old apartments become run down, they build themselves new houses. In two hours, two men can cut the grass, fix the framework and complete the house, which looks like a bee-hive. Though hastily erected, these grass mansions are sturdy. In the dry season, for when with windy, rainy weather, it is time to build a new one.

DIRTY DIET

A FORTY-YEAR-OLD Turk in Karatash, a suburb of Izmir, has suffered from severe internal pains all his life. He claims that the only thing that gives him relief is a diet of clay, sand, and stones. Occasionally he eats a little fish and bread. One day, when his wife found him in the garden, swallowing pebbles, she summoned the police; and after observation he was sent to an asylum. Deprived of his "normal" diet, the Turk suffered great pain, and nothing gave him any relief until he managed to chip pieces of stone from the walls of his cell and eat them. Eventually the doctors of the asylum decided to release him.

HE LOST HIS WRENCH

A FARMER in Australia lost his wrench, and kept searching for it as he ploughed the fields. One day he saw a piece of quartz glittering in the furrows. Picking it up he discovered it contained gold. Digging in the same spot he found a gold-bearing reef a foot below the surface which yielded over $2,000 worth of gold in two days. The farmer forgot about the wrench.

DUTCH BAPTISM

AMONG Holland's quaint farming customs is that of baptizing calves before they are sent out to the fields to graze. The idea is that the sprinkling them with water will keep the animals away from the ditches which surround the fields.

Lady Bessie regarded Willie reproachfully

Bigger and Better

By ELLIS PARKER BUTLER

Pete the Poocher and Whispering Willie carve out a career for themselves—cow kidnapers de luxe

IN the dingy room were two cots and a table and two chairs, the blankets on the two cots in unkempt heaps, and by the single electric bulb Pete the Poocher was reading a week-old newspaper. Suddenly his big frame lost its laxness, his dull eyes brightened and his thick fingers tore a piece from the newspaper page. He had found something that interested him.

As Pete the Poocher slipped the bit of newspaper into his pocket there came three raps on the door and Pete got up and let in Whispering Willie. The little man had a bottle of milk and packages of delicatessen food and he slid in through a space hardly wide enough to admit an eel, and Pete the Poocher promptly closed and locked the door. The little man was trembling.

"I seen a cop, Pete," he whispered, for he always whispered. He was afraid, and he was always afraid. Shadows frightened him. Noises frightened him. He was a coward and he knew it; he admitted it.

"Did the cop see you?" asked Pete the Poocher.

"No," whispered Willie.

"Then let's eat," said Pete the Poocher. "I got a hollow in me like a cave."

"I'm hungry too," whispered Willie.

"But I ain't got no appetite—I seen a cop."

"Ferget it!" said Pete the Poocher. "We got good times comin', old boy. We got a bigger and better racket. We're goin' where there ain't no New York cops. We don't pick up no more pups. We don't steal no more mutts. We're through with poochin'. Bigger and better, that's us."

He was ripping open paper bags, pulling the paper stopper out of the milk bottle. He pulled out his jackknife and began slicing sausage, putting a big chunk in his mouth, chewing it vigorously.

The two were in hiding and only once a day did Whispering Willie dare venture out, waiting till dark. The cops were looking for them, and two of New York's most important dog-stealers were in a bad hole.

They had been mighty blue for several days, for not only were they wanted, but the pooch racket was as good as dead.

The racket had been good while it lasted. Pete the Poocher owned the taxicab and Willie was a star dog-snatcher. He trailed the dogs, Pete drove alongside; in an instant the dog was in a bag and in the cab, and Pete, the taxi, Willie and the dog were speeding away.

Then a reward would be offered for the dog.

But six months before Whispering Willie and Pete the Poocher had made one bad mistake. They had picked up a Scottie owned by a man named La Verne, and now Mr. La Verne was mayor, elected on a reform ticket and out to end all rackets and—remembering the abduction of the Scottie—the first racket he ordered ended was picking up pooches.

The cops were all hotfooting and pooching was suddenly dangerous. Pooching was ended.

"What do you mean, bigger and better?" whispered Willie as he folded a piece of Swiss cheese to fit his mouth.

"We're off the small stuff. We're goin' to be bigger and better, like I say."

"We ain't no Capones, Pete," whispered Willie. "We ain't no big shots."

"And why ain't we? We ain't tried to be, that's all. No more pickin' up pooches. We got to lay off the pooches anyway, ain't we?"

"We could go to some other burg," whispered Willie. "This ain't the only burg."

"Yeah? And what then? Where would poochin' get us. Small stuff—ten bucks a day, maybe. Maybe twenty. There ain't no future to it, Willie. Kidnapin' bow-wows! Foof! All I ask you, Whisperer, is are you with me or ain't you? I don't kidnap no more mutts; I'm goin' in for bigger and better kidnapin'."

THE WHISPERER looked sick. His face was a pale green. He put up a hand to hide the trembling of his lower lip.

"I'm your pal, Pete," he whispered nervously. "I want to stick by you, but I don't like them new kidnap laws. They give you the chair for kidnapin' a man, Pete."

"Man? Who says man?"

"Well, a kid then," said the Whisperer.

"Who says kid?" demanded Pete the Poocher.

"Well, you says—"

"Bigger and better," repeated Pete. "And I mean it. Read that."

He dug into his pocket and drew out the scrap he had torn from the newspaper and pushed it into the Whis-

perer's hand, and the little man read it. It was to this effect:

> Lady Bessie, the famous $100,000 Jersey cow owned by Eldred J. Parmenter, Orfordville, N. Y., again won the milk and butterfat championship of America to-day. It is reported that Mr. Parmenter was offered $125,000 for Lady Bessie after the test to-day, but that he refused to sell this wonderful cow at any price.

"Cows?" whispered Willie. "We're goin' to kidnap cows, Pete?"

"Ain't I said 'bigger and better'? No more mutts, Whisperer. No more ten dollars and twenty dollars—twenty grand we get to fetch back this Lady Bessie cow, see? And no more dicks and cops on every corner. We work up in them big open spaces from now on, Whisperer."

"Gummy!" whispered Willie, gazing at the scrap of paper as if fascinated. "And I never knowed there was cows like that!"

"There's lots of 'em," said Pete. "Farmers has 'em. And, look, Whisperer—we get to travel, see? We see the country. We pick up this Lady Bessie cow and drag down twenty grand, and then maybe we shoot out to California and pick up a $90,000 cow, and next we're in Pennsylvania, or Iowa—wherever cows is."

"Accordin' to the weather," whispered Willie.

"Yes, sir," declared Pete the Poocher enthusiastically. "And it ain't nobody's racket but ours—we pick up the good cows before anybody else gets into the racket. Say we pick up a hundred cows, and say we average five grand a cow—that's five hundred grand."

"I'm with you, Pete," said the Whisperer, almost with awe in his voice. "It's good. It's great. Only I don't know nothin' about cows."

"You've seen them, ain't you?" Pete demanded.

"I've seen pictures of them," whispered Willie. "In the movies. I'd know one if I seen it. Do you know about cows, Pete?"

"Well, I don't know much," Pete the Poocher admitted. "I seen a live one once when I was a kid and went up to a Fresh Air farm. But that don't need to bother us. These ain't no wild cows like the cowboys chase; these is tame cows. They don't bite nobody. And look, Whisperer—"

"Yes?"

"This Orfordville where this Lady Bessie is," said Pete, "is where Charley the Dip went when he got to be a lunger last year. He's up there onto a farm to be cured up, and he'd know about cows. If we've got to find out about cows, we can ask Charley."

"Sure we can!" whispered Willie. "When do we go, Pete?"

They went the next day. Part of the way they got hitch-hikes and part of the way they legged it, and they found many others on the roads, mostly going southward, for the summer was over and cold weather not far off. The trees were turning red and yellow.

IN the hill country near Orfordville they studied the lay of the land, keeping hidden as much as possible. Squatted in some hollow, shielded by bushes, they pored over an oil-station map. They found the big handsome brick cow-barn of Eldred J. Parmenter and lay hidden to become acquainted with the comings and goings of Mr. Parmenter's men, and found that no watch was kept at night.

By the end of a week the bigger and better kidnapers had selected a hide-away in which to conceal the valuable Lady Bessie when they had got her into

their hands. There were plenty of deserted barns in the district, but Pete chose an abandoned house. The house stood well back from the road, some two miles from the Parmenter place. Its windows were boarded up, its porch fallen, and it was set among concealing trees.

"And look, Willie—" said Pete. "There ain't nobody goin' to look so close by when we use a truck to snake the cow away. They ain't goin' to look in a house because cows don't park in houses. They're goin' to look in barns, ain't they? And before they get to half the old barns around here we've got the ransom in our pockets and we ain't here no more."

They had already spotted a two-ton truck they could borrow—without its owner's permission—to use in the abduction of the cow. The truck, they planned, would leave its tire marks at the edge of the road by the Parmenter cow-barn, and it would be found abandoned twenty miles distant.

It was a dark night when Pete the Poocher and Whispering Willie parked the two-ton truck across the road from the Parmenter barn and placed three planks as a runway for Lady Bessie to ascend. The door of Eldred J. Parmenter's barn yielded easily to Pete's jimmy, and Pete and Willie were inside.

Pete flashed a beam of light. There were twenty cows in the barn, but it was easy to identify Lady Bessie. Her name was above her head on a handsome brass plate, and blue rosettes and ribbons were displayed by dozens, telling of her prowess as a milk and butterfat producer. Even among this score of beautiful cows Pete the Poocher and Whispering Willie might have recognized Lady Bessie as the queen of all cows. She was a superb cow. She was an aristocrat of cows. She was not large, but she had the calm demeanor of one who has always been a queen and who expects only kindness, caresses and the best that can be given her.

When Pete's flash shone on her she did not even turn her head. She continued to chew her cud placidly, her big and gentle eyes looking at nothing at all. She was America's greatest producer of milk and butterfat, and she ignored such trivial matters as men and flash lights.

Whispering Willie was the agitated individual.

"Look out for her, Pete," he whispered. "She's got horns; she's liable to rear up an' gore you." But Lady Bessie had no thought of using her highly manicured horns. Her head was held by a silver-plated rack, and when Pete released her and snapped a rope around her neck she followed him docilely out of the barn and across the road.

She may have thought she was being taken to some State Fair to win more blue ribbons, but even that did not interest her. She ambled up the planks into the truck and stood there, still chewing her cud. Whispering Willie followed with a pail on which her name was painted and a blanket similarly inscribed.

"Stick that ransom note onto the door," Pete said. "Put that blanket on her, Willie. Maybe she ain't used to night air; we don't want her to get sick and die on us."

Willie pinned the ransom note on the barn door. He got into the truck and blanketed Lady Bessie.

"How's she behavin'?" asked Pete as he shoved the planks into the truck.

"Sweet," whispered Willie. "Gentle like a kitten. It's a cinch, Pete—

from now on we don't take nothin' but cows."

AS willingly as she went into the truck, Lady Bessie came out again. She followed her captors into the kitchen of the tumbledown house as if they were old friends and not two bold bad men from New York. The kitchen sink made an excellent manger and there was hay in it, but Lady Bessie did not want hay now—she was still chewing her cud. Pete tied the halter rope to a faucet.

"Ain't she a daisy? Ain't she a lamb?" Whispering Willie asked. "Not a peep out of her, Pete; not a sound! You got a head on you; nothin' but cows for us from now on."

"Ain't I told you?" demanded Pete the Poocher. "And us wastin' our time on mutts all these years!"

He went out, looking first to see that the road was clear, and drove the truck out of the yard. Twenty miles distant where a rough cow-path led up the mountain he abandoned the truck and started back afoot. He kept off the road and under cover of bushes as much as possible. He made wide detours where the bare land made it necessary, but he went as rapidly as possible—twenty miles was a long distance to cover afoot.

In the abandoned house the Whisperer made himself comfortable. Lady Bessie presently lowered herself to the floor and slept, and Whispering Willie slept. Now and then Lady Bessie breathed a loud sigh of content, and Willie sat up, his automatic in his hand and his hand shaking, but he lay down again. It was a peaceful night.

When day came and Whispering Willie aroused himself, Lady Bessie was standing, placidly munching hay. But now she turned her head and looked at the Whisperer with her big gentle eyes.

"You want a drink, cow?" Willie asked. "Sure, you can have a drink. You can have anything we've got, cow. You're a good cow."

She drank, but she watched Willie as he put the pail out of the way.

"Moo!" she said softly, keeping her eyes on Willie.

"What's the matter, cow?" Willie asked. "You ain't scared of me, are you? I ain't goin' to hurt you. You and me is pals, cow. Good old pals, that's what we are. Only don't make no noise; we don't want nobody to know we is here, see?"

"Moo!" said Lady Bessie gently, as an aristocratic cow should speak, and the Whisperer stroked her nose. He talked to her as one friend to another, urging her not to be disturbed and begging her not to moo.

BUT as the morning lengthened toward noon Lady Bessie became more and more uneasy. She stood now with her head turned and would not take her eyes off Willie. Instead of an occasional moo she began to low in a sad, unhappy way.

"What's the matter of you?" Willie demanded. "Stop the noise, can't you? Look, now—are you homesick? You're goin' back home pretty soon, cow. You ain't goin' to be here long. You want some hay? You want some water? Then what in hell do you want?"

The answer was louder lowing. It was a veritable bawl—a "Bwaw!" that told of pain.

"Shut up, you!" ordered Willie, and he slapped the cow angrily. "What's the matter of you? Have you got the colic, or what? Now you shut up and keep shut up!"

"M-bwaw-aw-aw!" mourned Lady Bessie, and Whispering Willie made use of the only silencer he could spare. He took off his coat and took of his shirt. He tied the shirt tightly over Lady Bessie's mouth. It subdued her bawling quite well—the "M-bwaw-aw-aw" came but faintly through the shirt, but it came insistently. It did not stop. Time and again the shirt came loose. Then Willie offered Lady Bessie hay and water, but she was not interested. She wanted only to bawl, and she did bawl until Willie held her mouth shut and got the muffling shirt in place again.

Willie was desperate. There was a cellar under the house, but the steps were steep. He opened the cellar door and led Lady Bessie to it. She hesitated, but she yielded to the urging of the halter and went carefully down. Here, with the cellar door closed, there was less chance of her bawling being heard, but she did not stop. Willie sat on the cellar steps, his automatic in hand. He wished for the coming of Pete the Poocher as he had never wished for the coming of any man.

And Pete was coming. As the sun colored the eastern sky with red, Pete was crouched down beside the road not a hundred yards from Whispering Willie, hiding in the undergrowth from two men, a woman and a small boy who were in a handsome big car that had stopped there. One of the men was a chauffeur in uniform, the woman was Mrs. Tulliver Hoskins, the small boy was Breckenridge Hoskins, and the second man was Mr. Tulliver Hoskins himself.

"I think this would be a good place, Breckenridge," Mr. Hoskins was saying. "Stripes would like this place."

"But I want to keep him," whined the small boy. "I don't want to let him go. I want to take him home with me."

"But you can't, Brecky dear," said Mrs. Hoskins. "I've told you that it wouldn't do at all. Now, Brecky, you promised that you wouldn't make trouble when the time came to turn that animal loose. Do be a good boy, Brecky darling."

The object of the small boy's concern was a black and white striped animal. It was in a box across the top of which strips of wood had been loosely nailed to make a cage. The Hoskins family was returning to the city after a summer spent at their home in the hills, and the animal in the box was, to be quite frank, a skunk—a male skunk. Early in the season Mr. Hoskins's caretaker, Obed Doolittle, had caught the small striped animal and had shown it to little Breckenridge, who immediately wanted to keep it.

"Well, ma'am," Obed Doolittle had said to Mrs. Hoskins, "this is a he, and a he don't never give no offense, not in no way or manner. No, ma'am; I'll guarantee that. And there ain't no animal that is pleasanter dispositioned or makes a more affectionate pet than a he of this species."

"Aw, maw, let me keep it, can't I, please?" whined little Breckenridge. "Please, can't I, ma?"

"Well," said Mrs. Hoskins, who would grant almost anything to make little Breckenridge stop his whining, "you can keep it this summer, but you will have to get rid of it before we go back to town. I won't have it in town. And no whining, mind that!"

And now the time for dear Brecky and Stripes to part had come, whether darling Brecky whined or not. Mr. Hoskins was firm.

"Open the box, George, and let the animal out," he said. "This is a per-

fect place for Stripes—nice woods and a brook, and he will love it."

THE chauffeur ripped a couple of slats off the box and spilled Stripes out. The animal hesitated a moment and then ran swiftly into the underbrush, and the big car rolled on toward its distant destination. Pete the Poocher got to his feet and listened. He was sure he heard a cow bawling and he hurried to the back door of the tumbledown house.

There was no doubt now—Lady Bessie was bawling, she was bawling insistently. Pete pushed in and hurried down the cellar stairs. Whispering Willie was clasping the shirt that bound Lady Bessie's nose, using both hands and cursing softly.

"She won't shut up," Willie whispered as Pete the Poocher flashed his torch on the cow and Willie. "I don't know what ails her. I don't know has she gone crazy or what. I don't know has she got a colic or what. Listen to her bawl."

Pete did not have to listen; he could not help hearing.

He flashed the torch here and there on Lady Bessie.

"Christmas!" he exclaimed as an extra loud bawl of pain came from the cow. "We ain't milked her, that's what! Ain't that what Charley the Dip says when he was in New York that time? 'You got to milk 'em,' he says, 'or they holler.' We got to milk her or she'll bawl her head off."

"What you know!" whispered Willie. "And me never thinkin' of it! You milk her, Pete!"

"Sure, I'll milk her," said Pete, and he hurried up the cellar stairs and returned with Lady Bessie's pail. He squatted down and tried to milk Lady Bessie, but nothing happened. Milking cows was an art Pete the Poocher had never learned. No milk splashed into the pail.

"She won't give no milk for me, Willie," Pete said. "You try her."

Pete held the cow's head while Willie the Whisperer tried his hand at milking, but again nothing happened.

"'Tain't no use," he said. "We ain't got the knack of it. We won't get nowheres at it."

"We got to get Charley the Dip," said Pete. "You go get him. And get a hustle on you, Willie. Get him here quick. Tell him we'll split with him, see? Five grand for him. Beat it now or we'll have the whole county down on us."

A mile and a half was the distance Whispering Willie had to cover to where Charley the Dip was already busy with Henry Tuttle's cows, and it was a panting and perspiring Willie that found him in Tuttle's barn and poured out the story of Lady Bessie. The Dip's eyes brightened as he listened.

"Five grand!" he chortled. "Five grand for milkin' one cow! Will I? Watch me!"

He carried the milk to the spring house and slipped away to join Willie. They hurried toward the abandoned house and met no one. They turned in at the gate, the Dip leading the way. He was halfway to the house when he stopped short.

STRIPES, enjoying his new freedom, was investigating the neighborhood, possibly hunting for food, when he saw Charley the Dip and Whispering Willie. He was indeed an affectionate creature and he came toward the two men rapidly, but Charley the Dip had had one experience with a small black and white

striped animal and he did not want another.

"Skunk!" cried Charley the Dip, and in a moment he was climbing the nearest tree. Stripes meandered toward Whispering Willie, and Willie went up the tree, too.

"Move over," he whispered when he reached the first limb and the Dip crawled out on the limb. It was, it happened, a dead limb, and it fell crashing onto the roof of the rickety porch, taking the Dip with it. From the cellar came Pete the Poocher, peering cautiously, and as he saw Whispering Willie in the tree and Charley the Dip on the porch roof he heard the "put-put-put" of an approaching motorcycle. So did Willie.

"A cop!" whispered Willie, and regardless of Stripes he slid down the tree. From the cellar came a loud and long. "*Mbwaw-aw-aw*" but Willie was not waiting. He scuttled into the bushes and up the tree-clad hill behind the house and after him went Pete the Poocher. Charley the Dip picked up a chunk of fretwork that had fallen from the eaves and threw it at Stripes, and after one indignant look the offended animal hurried away, and the Dip dropped himself to the ground and hurried after Willie the Whisperer and Pete the Poocher.

It was thus that Billy Carver, State trooper, braked his motorcycle as he heard the pained lowing of a cow. In another minute he was in the house and down the cellar. He recognized Lady Bessie's trouble at a glance and was on his knees, and the milk splashed into the pail.

"The scuts!" he cried. "The miserable scuts, letting a cow like this suffer! I'd like to lay hands on them!"

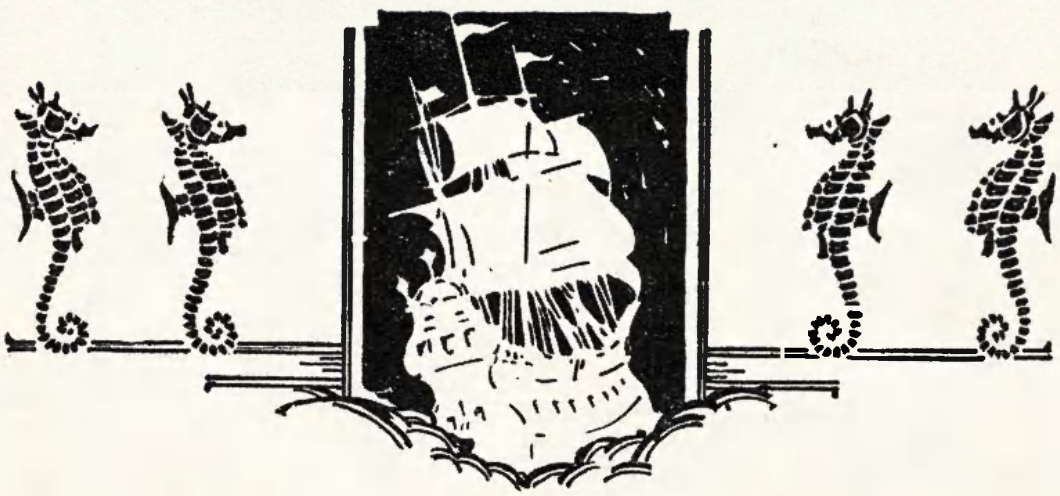
But he never did. Charley the Dip circled back to his job at the farm, and Pete the Poocher and Whispering Willie worked their way to where they could hop a freight for Chicago.

"And no more cows," whispered Willie. "We're off the bigger and better stuff, Pete, from now on."

"Lay off me!" growled Pete. "Quit your grousin'. We got away, didn't we?"

"No more cows," repeated Willie in his whisper. "Nor goats. Nor camels. Nor nothin' that gives milk. Not never again."

THE END



The Trail of Danger

By WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE

Author of "Luck," "King of the Bush," etc.

Dennis Gifford went west to prospect in California's new gold fields —and found himself fighting to establish law and order for a vigilante committee

"It's that vigilante cur, Gifford!" snarled one of the Californians

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

YOUNG Dennis Gifford was headed for the newly discovered California gold fields when he was shanghaied by the master of one of the ships belonging to Benjamin Shanks, of San Francisco. At Monterey, Dennis escaped, only to run into new dangers because of the bandit killer, Juan Castro. Castro, believing Dennis to be a new rival for the affections of the pretty *señorita*, Rosita Martinez, threatened the young American's life. But the Martinez family gave sanctuary to Dennis, and it was then that he learned of the financial hold which shipping-master Shanks had upon the vast ranches and herds belonging to old Don Ramon Martinez.

When Dennis returned to San Francisco, it was to find that the pioneer town had become a hell-hole of crookedness and iniquity. Benjamin Shanks and his lieutenant, Bruce Marshall, a ruthless bully and killer who soon developed a particular hatred for Dennis Gifford, controlled the town. Soon, however, Dennis was able to arouse in the town's better element, the leaders being men like Brannan and Ryckman and Ward and Captain Brown, a spirit of rebellion which led to the organization of a vigilante group. Benjamin Shanks's hired killers and crooks were driven out of town. Even Bruce Marshall disappeared.

It was about this time that Dennis encountered once more his old prospecting partners, Bronson and Peebles. He had

This story began in the Argosy for June 23.

become separated from them at the time he was shanghaied, and he now learned that they had struck it rich. They insisted on sharing their new wealth with him.

The vigilantes sent Dennis to Monterey to track down a wanted criminal named Whittaker. He was grateful, of course, for the opportunity to see Rosita again, and he stayed with the Martinez family. But while disguised as a Mexican, and hunting Whittaker in a low drinking establishment, he encountered both Whittaker and Marshall, as well as their confrères, Juan Castro and Felipe Pacheco.

CHAPTER XIX.

DENNIS FINDS HIS VOICE.

AS Felipe walked across the room to join the two strangers, his keen eyes picked up the other three men in the *tendejon*. For him, the price of life was unending vigilance. He nodded to Cutthroat Dave and to the bartender. Upon Dennis his gaze lingered for a fraction of a second, and no longer. The town was full of such happy-go-lucky vagrants, out of money and out at elbows, yet cheerful and carefree.

Felipe spoke pleasantly to the two at the table. He said:

"*Beberia con gusto.*"

The sailor replied in English, "The sun shines hot down here."

The outlaw removed his sombrero, bowed, and took a chair at the table with the strangers.

Dennis's eyes seemed to be admiring a crude painting of a Spanish dancing girl which hung on one wall of the dive, but his ears and brain were concentrated upon the meeting of these three birds of a feather. Felipe's remark that he could drink with pleasure, and the answer that it was hot, here in Monterey, seemed a curious opening to a conversation. Perhaps the words were a prearranged signal by which the men might know one another.

But although Dennis listened intently, he could make out no more of what was said, at least for a time. The heads of the three drew close, their voices fell to a whisper.

The ill-kempt young Mexican at the bar killed time, indolently. Like many of his race, he did not appear to have the American habit of hurry. Placidly he sipped at his drink.

Then Marshall's voice lifted to an unexpected oath. His fist struck the table.

"The cursed Stranglers ride over the law of the land!" he cried. "Courts and elected officers mean nothing to them; they are a pack of bandits!"

Felipe showed his white teeth in a sardonic smile. "Let's have law and order above everything, *señor!*"

The back door of The Seamen's Rest opened to let in two customers, both Californians. One of them Dennis did not recognize, but at sight of the other a breathless excitement stirred in the young American. The man was Pedro Soto, the giant with whom he had struggled the night of the attack on the Martinez gold convoy.

Pedro slouched to the bar, a heavy, muscle-bound roll to his gait. His satellite followed. They ordered grog.

Soto was standing close to Dennis, his heavy forearms on the counter. In his own tongue he invited Gifford to drink with him. Dennis shook his head as an equivalent of the usual "*No sabe.*" He touched his lips.

The big outlaw understood only that his offer had not been accepted. He reached forward and caught the other's throat between the thumb and forefinger of his huge hand, then dragged the boy toward him.

Gifford did not reach for his gun, though the tremendous pressure half strangled him. He waited for outside intervention.

It came, in a burst of explanation from the bartender.

Pedro flung his victim aside. "Why didn't he say he was deaf?" he demanded roughly, in Spanish.

Felipe grinned. "You're a rough little playfellow, Pedro," he said. "It will be a long time until that throat is as good as new."

"I hadn't even started on him," Pedro boasted.

"This is Pedro Soto, gentlemen," Felipe said in English. "He is the strongest man in California. I've seen him burst open a sack of oats by the pressure of his knees. He can twist a horseshoe into a knot with his fingers. Our young friend is lucky that he's not ready for a coffin."

Felipe tossed a silver dollar to Dennis, who was leaning against the counter, gasping for breath. The young man retrieved the dollar, and massaged gently his gullet until the acuteness of the pain had passed.

The Californian who had come into the room with Soto was a wry-faced little man with bright black gimlet eyes, set close together. He looked intently at Dennis.

"Deaf, but not dumb. Is that it?" he asked the bartender in his own language.

"Both, Roderigo."

"No," retorted Roderigo. "Not unless he has been struck dumb to-day. I saw him talking with Guillermo Martinez and his sister only this afternoon."

"Oho! Is that the game?" Felipe asked, rising from his seat.

The laughter had left his eyes, which narrowed upon Dennis, warily.

"Are you sure, Roderigo?" he asked, menace in his voice.

Roderigo burst into a spate of words, out of which Dennis caught one sentence, "*Madre de Dios!* I *saw* him—myself."

Felipe's revolver was out. He moved, catlike, between Dennis and the front door.

"What's the matter?" Marshall demanded. "What does this Roderigo say?"

"He says that this young man is not dumb at all. Therefore he is a spy." Felipe smiled, cruelly. "All is well—for us. Yet not so well for him!—Since he can talk, I await an explanation. But I do not wait long."

Marshall jumped to his feet, followed by the sailor. Both of them drew weapons, one a derringer, the other a six-shooter.

DENNIS wasted no words trying to explain.

His weapon, too, was in the open. Slowly he backed toward the rear door. He knew that the only way to get out of the room alive would be to fight his way out. He was facing a roomful of enemies, each one dangerous in himself. The chances were fifty to one against him.

"Keep your shirts on, gentlemen," he advised in a cool drawl. "Don't get excited and make mistakes. I came in for a drink. I've had it. Now—"

The man in broadcloth recognized the voice. "I'll be damned if it isn't that vigilante cur, Gifford!" he cried.

"Oho! Again, my friend King Geef-ford," Felipe called out. "And always in such a hurry to be gone!"

Marshall fired first, but before the sound died away there came the flash and roar of many guns. The rest occurred so quickly that a clock could not

have ticked ten before the battle was over. Dennis was flinging bullets as he ducked, behind a chair, behind an overturned table. Felipe was firing; so was the sailor. Marshall hung on to the back of a chair, swaying, then crashed to the floor.

Pedro gave a roar and rushed at Gifford. Before he had taken two steps, a wild shot shattered the lamp hanging from a rafter, and left the room in darkness, except for the stabbing lances of light from the guns.

Instantly Dennis changed his plan. They would be expecting him to make for the back door, so he would try for the front one. He followed the wall, groping with his left hand. Crashing into a chair, he went down, but was up again at once.

Smoke filled the room, and the roar of the weapons. He heard a furious "*Carramba!*"—a groan—an order to light a candle. A hideous, distorted face loomed up, vanished. There were shouts and oaths. Some one's arms closed on him. With the barrel of his gun he wiped the head of the man, and felt the grip loosen. Still following the wall, as his assailant's slack arms slid from his body, Gifford reached the corner and turned.

The noise of the guns died down. He came to the second corner. A match flickered and shakily lit the wick of a candle.

Dennis pushed aside a table that was in the way, and reached the front door. By the flicker of the candle he saw a room filled with smoke, some vague shifting figures, a man leaning across the bar and clinging to it.

A body plunged at the door and crashed into Dennis. The impact flung the young man into the street and threw him from his feet, but he was up again at once, shaken and breathless, the weapon still in his hand. The man did not even turn round to find out whom he had struck. He kept going, on a dead run. He had hurry-up business, anywhere but here.

So had Dennis. He legged it up the street, dodged around the custom house, and sprinted up Alvarado. His luck had stood up fine—if it was luck, and not Providence. With at least five men shooting at him, he had escaped unscratched. Such a result would have been impossible if it had not been for the dim light from one hanging lamp, and for the suddenness with which the crisis had leaped upon them and prevented coördination of action. His enemies had got in one another's way. Crowding forward, they had jostled against each other. And the lamp had crashed in time to save him.

He could heard voices behind him—shouts of excitement. But he knew that if he was being followed it was on a blind hunt. If he kept going, they would not catch him.

AFTER the lamp went out, Dennis had not fired a shot. Before that, he had hit Bruce Marshall. Of that he was sure, for he had seen the man's tall figure slumping to the ground. Another unlucky interferer had been wiped on the head by the barrel of his gun. Outside of those two, he had not injured anybody. He felt moderately sure of that, though the roar of the revolvers had been almost like a fusillade, while the battle lasted.

At least one other had been wounded, however; the man he had seen clinging to the bar as the candle flickered up. In the darkness, no doubt, the fellow had been hit by a bullet from some of his friends. There might be others hurt, caught in the intersecting

lanes of flame. For in that small room death had leaped hungrily.

A voice called to him, by name. Somebody—more than one—followed at his heels. That the pursuit had become organized so quickly surprised him.

He dodged into a side street. The voice overtook him.

"We are friends—Antonio—Guillermo."

It was Antonio calling. He was almost sure of that, and he answered cautiously, crouched against a wall, the revolver resting on his hip.

Out of the night the brothers appeared.

"Are you hurt?" Antonio asked.

"No. Where did you come from?"

"My father sent us," the older brother explained. "He was not satisfied to let you go alone, though you insisted. He sent us as what you call—reserves, is it not?"

"I never heard so many guns at once; it was like an army! Then you were catapulted out of the house, and ran like a rabbit. *Por Dios!* I do not see how you escaped, if they were all firing at you."

Antonio looked at his friend anxiously.

"The light went out," Dennis explained. "I kept close to the wall, and slipped past them. Nobody thought to hold the door. It was all so quick."

"I know," Guillermo said. "First, silence—then the guns."

"What shall I do now? Where shall I go?" asked Dennis. "I shot a man back there. It is sure they will hunt for me. Perhaps they will go to the law."

"*Quien sabe?*" Antonio shrugged. "We will go first to my father and ask him."

"That is good," agreed Gifford.

But he had already decided not to stay at the Martinez home, bringing upon it the vengeance of his enemies. That would not be fair.

CHAPTER XX.

NIGHT RIDERS.

RAMON MARTINEZ protested vigorously. "But that is absurd, *amigo mio!* You shall stay in my house as long as you are in Monterey. Are you not like one of my own boys? If it is necessary for you to leave on account of the law, that is another thing. But do you think I shall let riff-raff like these scoundrels tell me who shall and who shall not be my guests? *Madre de Dios,* no!"

"It does not do to despise the enemy, Don Ramon," insisted Dennis. "You have your family to consider. Through Felipe Pacheco, his chief, Juan Castro, comes into this. Already you are under a threat from that villain. If I stay here, he will regard that as defiance from you."

"So? That is good. Am I afraid of this murdering ruffian?—I, Ramon Martinez? A hundred men employed by me will fight if I snap my fingers. A coyote leaps upon an unprotected lamb, but it lets alone a four-year-old bull of the range."

"But a coyote sneaks up and watches its chance," Dennis said. "Your hundred men are not with you always. This afternoon Señorita Rosita rode with Guillermo alone. He is as brave as a lion; that I know. But if Castro and his gang were to swoop down on them—"

Don Ramon frowned.

"He dare not!" the *alcalde* cried. "For his life, he dare not. All the country within a day's ride would rise

against him. No, no! He is not a fool, this Castro."

"No, but his life is forfeit. He can be hanged or shot but once.—I am fixed in my mind, sir, though I am deeply in your debt for your courtesy. I cannot stay with you. That is final."

"Very well. You have a proverb, you Americans, about a wilful man. Since you will not stay here, and since you will not go to one of my *ranchos,* I will send you to the house of a good man who will talk only if I say so. His name is Porfirio Pico. His father worked for my father, and he worked for me. You may trust him."

During the night Dennis moved his belongings to the house of Pico, after an arrangement had been made by Martinez to that effect. The house was an adobe one of five rooms. It was not pretentious. Some of the furniture was homemade; the bedstead consisted of a bullock's hide stretched across a frame; stools served for chairs. But the place was scrupulously clean. Pico was a *vaquero* who had grown too old for service in the saddle. His wife, Ysela, was fat and smiling and motherly. She made her guest immediately at home.

For a long time Dennis did not sleep. During the fight at Cutthroat Dave's *tendejon* he had not been conscious of any fear or even any excitement, after he had been exposed by the little man with the black gimlet eyes. But the reaction was now on him. He lay in bed and shook as with an ague.

This was silly, he told himself; he was not afraid, yet he could not exorcise this strange quaking. That it was a natural physical revulsion due to intense repression he did not realize.

Gradually the chill subsided. He lay lax and spent; presently sank into deep sleep.

HE was awakened next morning by his host knocking on the door.

"Some one to see you, *senor,*" Pico called to him.

"Who?" asked Dennis.

"Vicente Martinez, with a letter from his father."

"I'll be out in five minutes," Dennis promised.

Little Vicente, the youngest of the brothers, was only fourteen. He stared at Dennis with awe while that young man read the note.

The story of the fight in the *tendejon,* it seemed, was all over town. This Americano had fought six or seven men, had killed two, and had wounded two more.

He had come out unharmed from this Homeric combat. It was unbelievable, yet the youthful Vicente, waiting there for Dennis to read the letter, did not doubt its truth. Had not the Americano, only a little while ago, defeated the gigantic Pedro Soto in personal combat? Had he not dared Felipe Pacheco and three of his men to come on and fight? Truly he was a hero!

Fortunately, Dennis did not know the thoughts running through the mind of the lad, and he was thereby saved some embarrassment. In his own mind, Dennis was no hero; he was only a boy who had been flung into desperate circumstance, and by the grace of God emerged alive.

The contents of the letter were disturbing. Bruce Marshall, it seemed, was dead. Gifford had killed a man—cut him off in the prime of life. That the man was an evil influence and had forced the battle upon him did not en-

tirely lift the weight from his heart. Dennis had fought Indians; it was even possible he had killed one. But that was different, for he had accepted the simple verdict of the trapper and the plainsman that all Indians were natural enemies, to be destroyed. He had helped deal out vigilante law to offenders, but here he had been sustained by mass opinion. If there was guilt in rubbing out Bruce Marshall, he would have to bear it alone.

For the other casualties in the *tendejon* he felt no responsibility. Roderigo, too, was dead, but Dennis was convinced that he had been slain by a chance bullet from one of his allies. Furthermore, a finger had been shot from the right hand of Felipe Pacheco—perhaps the revolver of Gifford had fired that shot, perhaps not—and fifteen stitches had been sewn in the scalp of Cutthroat Dave. Well, the latter man ought not to have got in his way.

The amazing thing was that Dennis had escaped alive and uninjured, after being the target of so many marksmen.

TO Ramon Martinez's letter there was a postscript. Word had come to him that another bunch of prime bullocks had been driven from the Rancho San Pablo. The *vaqueros* had followed the tracks for a distance, and found that the cattle were being driven toward the coast. A ship, believed to be one of the Shanks line, was standing off the northern point of the bay.

Ramon believed the cattle were now hidden in the sand dunes, and that an attempt would be made to transfer them to the ship that night. It was his intention to try to block this. Ramon's hope was to raid the raiders, to recapture his stock, and if possible to punish the rustlers. He did not mention that he would be glad to have Dennis join the party of night riders, but that young man decided at once that he would be a member of the posse.

In this resolution duty marched with inclination. Dennis had no doubt that the sailor he had seen at the *tendejon* was the man Whittaker, whom he had been commissioned to arrest. The appearance fitted; the man's voice was English. But it was certain that the fellow would not stay in Monterey, now that his suspicions were aroused. He might leave at once for Santa Barbara, Los Angeles, or San Diego. Or he might think it safer to join Castro's band of outlaws and take a chance with them until the hue and cry was spent. Dennis could think of no better way to make contact with the bandits, and perhaps with the man he wanted, than to ride with Martinez.

By Vicente he sent a message to the boy's father asking for a place in the party.

The lad returned an hour later. If Dennis would be just behind Father Serra's San Carlos Church at eight o'clock that evening, he would be provided with a mount for the expedition, Martinez sent word.

After dark Dennis slipped from the house, passed through a grove of pines to Fremont Street, and proceeded to the church. A man with a musket in his hands started up, ordering him in soft, liquid Spanish to halt. He did so at once, and gave the sentry his name, which was passed back to some one in authority. Presently, Guillermo came out of the darkness, identified Dennis, and led him to a group of mounted men, among whom was Ramon Martinez.

Antonio lifted a hand in greeting to the newcomer. The rest of the men, almost a dozen in number, were unknown to Gifford. He judged from their slouched hats, blanket coats and leather leggings that they were *vaqueros* in the service of Don Ramon. All of them carried rifles of one kind or another, although many of the weapons were of antique make. Guillermo handed to Dennis a long-barreled muzzle loader of the type which trappers had used twenty years earlier.

Martinez rode at the head of his posse, a tall, broad-shouldered *caballero* who carried himself with straight-backed dignity. He led the way across a field of mustard and through a tule swamp. The dunes lay beyond.

CHAPTER XXI.

TRAPPED.

A BUNCH of fat bullock guarded by eight or nine riders moved leisurely through the sand dunes along the line of least resistance. A full moon rode between two of the hill prongs to the right. From the left came the roar of breakers. The Pacific was sounding its eternal drumbeat upon the shingle.

Those in charge of the herd did not push the leaders. There was no hurry. The night was young, and it still lacked an hour of the time set for the transfer of the stock.

The raid upon the Rancho San Pablo had been entirely successful. The cattle had been rounded up and run off during the previous night, cached in a lonely cañon before daybreak, and after dark driven by unfrequented trails to the rendezvous.

Within a few hours the Mary Bligh would be nosing back along the coast toward San Francisco, with the fat steers of Ramon Martinez under her hatches.

One young man, coffee brown, in the fancy costume of a *vaquero* dressed for a holiday, sang melodiously a Spanish love lilt. Nobody reproved him. If he felt sentimental, that was his own affair. Except for the rustlers themselves, probably not a soul was within miles; in any case, the roar of the breakers would drown the song.

Two men rode side by side at the head of the cavalcade. They were both young, and of Spanish blood. Their slender bodies they carried with erect and easy grace. What conversation they had was in their native tongue, but it missed friendliness by a good deal.

"If I'd been there, it wouldn't have been that way," one of them said with an insulting laugh. "*Por Dios,* no! Six to one—and the *gringo* gets away without a scratch!"

The other looked at the speaker, a *caballero* dressed in the height of fashion, yet armed with a rifle, revolvers, and a long knife. Felipe Pacheco thought he had never seen a man more viciously handsome than Juan Castro. His black curling hair, his olive skin, his bold, predatory eyes, the catlike grace of his movements, had taken the fancy of many a girl. The impression they made on Felipe was very different. He had come to dislike intensely the soft, sleek good looks of his chief, the arrogance of his manner, the assumption of superiority. Felipe counted himself a better man than Juan, any day. He was educated, and Juan ignorant; Felipe was of good family, whereas Castro's father had been a peon. Pacheco, too, had a way with women. Moreover, he was convinced that his courage burned with a fiercer flame than that of the other outlaw.

Finally, he was a Californian, and Juan Castro a Chihuahuan.

"You would have rubbed the *gringo* out?" Felipe asked gently.

"Never would he have left the room alive."

"The great Juan Castro shoots better indoors than out, then?" the lieutenant inquired, a touch of derision in his voice. "Was it six times you shot at him, in the garden of Don Ramon Martinez?"

Angrily, Castro flushed. "It was dark, as you very well know."

"Did I not mention that it was as black as Egypt's midnight, within the *tendejon?*" Pacheco murmured.

"But light enough for the *gringo* to see to kill the Americano Marshall, and to do other damage," jeered Castro, with a glance at the other's bound hand.

"Long ago, I learned to shoot with my left hand as well as with my right," Felipe mentioned, so softly that the liquid Spanish vowels fell almost in a whisper.

His eyes rested steadily on those of his chief. If it was a challenge, Castro did not take it up, though his dark gaze met the other's look without flinching.

"Still I say, it was bad shooting," he insisted irritably.

"In the *tendejon,* or in the garden?" asked Felipe, insolently.

CASTRO slammed a fist down on the pommel of his saddle. He flung out an oath.

"*Carramba!* Is it that you wish to infuriate me—*me,* Juan Castro?"

Felipe's glittering eyes did not lift from the man. He was riding on the left side. That was good, if Juan decided to push the issue. They had been moving knee to knee, but he contrived to drop back a foot or two.

"Who am I, that I should annoy the great Castro, a scion of the famous Bandini family?" asked Felipe with mock deference.

The other bandit dragged his horse back and glared at this insubordinate. "*Sangre de Cristo!* You laugh at me —at me!"

No more wild and reckless young devil than Pacheco had ever flung a leg across a horse in California. He knew how dangerous his chief could be, what a cold-blooded, murderous villain he was, but he did not give a *peso* for his rage. To take chances was as necessary to Felipe as breath to his nostrils. The closeness of danger gave a delicious fillip to his blood.

"I laugh — when I please and at whom I please. Must I ask permission of Juan Castro?"

Felipe's white teeth flashed in a smile that taunted.

Castro had pulled up his mount so savagely that the Spanish bit was hurting the mouth of the animal. It danced to and fro so nervously that the rider could not give his free and undivided attention to the challenge which his lieutenant had so lightly flung out. Furiously, he jerked again at the bridle, and started the sorrel gelding to bucking. By the time he had the horse subdued, the moment for action was past. But in those few seconds Castro decided that at a fitting time he would get rid of Pacheco. The fellow was disputing his leadership, and that Juan would not have.

"I give you advice, Felipe," he said. "To anger me is not safe."

"*Gracias, amigo mio,*" Pacheco replied lightly, ironically. "Advice I never would take. Alas, my waywardness has brought me here."

Abruptly, both men forgot their quarrel. From behind a sand dune a

voice called a sharp order to them to throw up their hands.

Neither man obeyed. Both whirled their horses, intent on rejoining their men. That they had fallen into an ambush was clear. The first urgent need was to escape from it; the second to gather their forces for battle.

THE cattle had not been bunched; they were trailing loosely. The riders herding them were strung out for a distance of a hundred and fifty yards or more. As the leaders of the outlaws turned, a rattle of musketry stopped them. The flash of the guns showed that they were cut off from their followers.

Felipe swung his horse half round, dug in his spurs, and set the animal straight at the hill of sand which trapped them. The bronco took the climb like a cat, the muscles of the hind legs standing out as it fought for a footing in the loose rubble. The front hoofs pawed a way up, though once the cowpony went to its knees. Horse and rider reached the top. Pacheco flung a shot defiantly at the dunes where the ambushers lay, and vanished in a fusillade directed toward him.

Castro's mental reaction was a fraction of a second slower. His first impulse had been to follow the hollow; the next, to take the hill as his lieutenant had done. In a hail of bullets, he started up, but before he was half way to the top the sorrel stopped, quivered violently, and collapsed. The man and the gelding slid down the loose sand together.

Castro flung his left foot out of the stirrup and dragged the other from beneath the struggling horse. He staggered to his feet. The rifle had been flung out of his hands, but he reached for a revolver just as a man launched himself at him. The weapon jerked free from the holster, but at the same instant fingers closed on the wrist above the hand that held it.

Juan tried to break the hold by sheer force, then by flinging his body to one side. He was as active as a wildcat, and his smooth muscles were firm as steel. But his furious efforts did not break the grip. Another arm closed around his wiry body and drew it close. He fought, with savage energy, against a strength much greater than his own.

Realization came to him that he was beaten, unless he could counter the attack successfully. His hand snatched at the hilt of the knife in his belt, and at the same moment he was flung heavily into the sand, with another body pressing him down. The hand with the knife was underneath him, pinned so securely that he could not move it. Against his head a hard shoulder crushed, pushing mouth and nose into the sand in such a way as to prevent breathing. Except for a futile beating of his feet, he could not move an inch.

The voice of the man on top of him called to some one else. "I've got him, Guillermo. Come and get his guns."

Castro felt hands groping for the weapons and removing them.

"Look out for his knife!—It's in his hand, beneath him," the same voice warned.

The outlaw clung to the knife, even after his arm was dragged from beneath him. His wrist was twisted till he gave a yelp of pain, and the knife dropped.

"Better tie him up while we've got him down," his conqueror advised. "He's as tricky as a fox."

"Right you are, Dennis," Guillermo said in English.

He called to some one to bring him tie ropes. Within an incredibly short time Castro was tied hand and foot, but every moment he cursed and flung maledictions at his captors.

The weight lifted from him. He looked up, into the eyes of Dennis Gifford.

"We've made a real catch," the American said. "It's Castro himself."

Ramon Martinez came forward.

"Are you sure?"

"That's what he called himself, just before he potted at me in your garden."

The eyes of the outlaw were filled with baffled hate.

He spat into the face of his enemy.

CHAPTER XXII.

"A BIRD IN THE BUSH IS WORTH TWO IN THE HAND."

"HE acts like a trapped wolf," Dennis said. "Pity we can't treat him like one, and save the expense of a trial."

"We'll turn him over to the commandant, at the *Presidio*," Martinez said. "Along with the other scamp we captured."

"You caught another, did you?" Dennis asked.

"One killed, one captured, so far," Ramon replied. "All of my boys are not back yet.—There's a shot now! The outlaws scattered like a covey of quail and there was no holding back my lads. I hope none of them get into trouble."

Dennis had a word aside with Don Ramon. The adventure was not complete. He proposed to follow it through to a finish. Ramon listened doubtfully, but presently nodded his head.

"*Si*, my friend, that is a good idea. But it is dangerous. For once, you will stay here with me and let others run the risk. You have sailed in a Shanks vessel, and you might be recognized. That would make trouble and defeat our purpose. I shall send Antonio in charge of a party."

"I might go along and stay with those in the background," Dennis urged.

"No, you will return to Monterey with the prisoners and the cattle," Martinez decided.

He called Antonio and explained the plan.

"If we are right in our guess, my son—and I am sure we are—a ship must be lying at the pier in Los Pinos, waiting to load the cattle. You will take six men with you and ride fast. These you will leave in the pines, all ready to help you in case of need. To the captain you will say that you are a messenger from Castro, to tell him the bullocks will soon arrive. You are to find out, not by direct question, if this is a Shanks ship. If you can get from the captain an admission that Shanks has arranged for the delivery to-night of a bunch of my cattle, that will be very good.

"You will use your brains, and you will not stay there more than a very few minutes. For it is likely that Pacheco or some of the outlaws will hurry to the ship with the news. If you find that any of these have got there before you, turn your horse and gallop like wind back to your men.—There is to be no fighting—that you must understand."

"Yes, my father," Antonio answered.

He chose his men and led them into the darkness at a hand gallop.

Those who had been hunting in the

dunes presently returned. None of them had been injured. Ramon set them to rounding up the cattle. The noise of the shots had sent them on a mild stampede.

WITHIN half an hour the *ranchero's* party, his captives, and his cattle were moving back toward Monterey. The dead bandit they had buried in the sand.

Castro rode between Dennis and Guillermo, his hands tied behind his back. He had fallen into a sullen silence, after pouring out a volley of threats at Gifford.

To these Dennis had paid not the least attention. His hope was that they were taking the man in to be hanged.

"Too bad we didn't get Felipe Pacheco too," Guillermo said. "He must have been the one who went over the sand hill with three or four of us firing at him. He's a brave scoundrel, I'll say that. Pulled up to take a shot at us before he vanished."

Castro's vanity was touched. Felipe had escaped, and he had been taken. Praise of his lieutenant was more than he could stand without protest.

"Brave because he deserted me?" Juan snarled.

Dennis glanced at the man's venomous face, and it occurred to him that he might do worse than play upon this villain's thin-skinned conceit and jealousy. If these were stung sufficiently, he might be led to turn on Felipe, since apparently no love was lost between them.

"Pacheco will be chief now," Gifford said indifferently to Guillermo. "From what I know of him, he'll be a good one. He's as wise as a fox, and, as you say, he has courage. Yes, he will not make the mistake of falling into a trap."

Guillermo caught the point at once. "They say he is the brains of the gang, the real leader."

"That is a lie!" Castro burst out. "He is nothing—nothing. I, Juan Castro, am the chief. When I say go, he goes. My word, it is the law with those who follow me."

"*Was* the law," Dennis corrected, suavely. "Not now. Your day is done. Felipe Pacheco will say 'Go'; Soto and the other ruffians will cry '*Viva Pacheco.*' Benjamin Shanks will deal with him, when he wants the next bunch of cattle run off. Few will remember, after a time, that one Juan Castro ran his head into a trap and was hanged.—Well, every dog has his day."

"Felipe does not even know Shanks, who will ruin Ramon Martinez before winter come," Castro cried. "And as for you, poor fool, I tell you that the rope has never been woven that will hang Juan Castro! I make you a promise—you who have interfered with me not once but twice and three times—some day I will cut your heart out, with great pleasure! I swear it. Ah, *que dicha!*"

Once more he poured forth a stream of furious oaths.

Dennis did not let the thread of his purpose become entangled. He spoke, as though ruminating aloud:

"Pacheco has the manner of a gentleman, of course; not a boor. I think he will become better known than even Murietta. No doubt he will be glad to get rid of this man who is in his way. This is Pacheco's lucky day. Already he is laughing at Castro's plight. Have you ever heard him laugh, Guillermo? There is much mockery in the sound of it. He will laugh often to-night and to-morrow, and on the day of the hanging."

"You think he will laugh?" the outlaw flung out fiercely. "We shall see. *Dios mio!* If I say one little word, he will be caught in his hole. But I will not say it. Juan Castro is no traitor."

GIFFORD smiled, with incredulous disdain.

"No, better not say it, for it would do no good. Felipe is a fox with more than one den. He would never let himself be caught so, now that he is chief of his own gang of *banditti.*"

"He is not chief—as long as I am alive," raged Castro.

"But that will be so short a time—and a bird in the bush is worth two in the hand," Dennis suggested. "No, no. Felipe is now the great man. We shall see how long he can play hide and seek with the law."

"When I get you at the end of a gun—"

Dennis interrupted the violent outburst of the bandit.

"*If*, not when," he amended. "Soon you will dangle from a gallows, for you are nothing but a cowardly thief and murderer, at the end of his crooked trail."

The party traveled slowly, in order not to run the tallow from the bullocks. Don Ramon kept a sharp lookout, although he was convinced that the outlaws had probably been too thoroughly frightened to make a counter-attack so soon. Felipe Pacheco was audacious enough for anything, but it was very unlikely that he would gather his men before they dribbled in, one or two at a time, to the rendezvous where they holed up.

Before the cattle drive reached Monterey, Antonio and his men rejoined those of Ramon. The boy was flushed with success.

"We reached there before any of the rustlers," he reported. "I left the men in the grove as you ordered, my father, and went forward alone. The ship is the Mary Bligh. I talked with the captain. He said he hoped to get the bullocks aboard before the turn of the tide. Then I said I hoped Don Benjamin Shanks would be satisfied with our drive, for we had gathered all we could. When I told him how many we had, he said that was good, and that Shanks would be pleased because it was cattle of Ramon Martinez that he wanted. Since I was in a hurry, I made my apologies and said *adios*. I am sure he did not suspect me at all."

"That is well done, Antonio," his father complimented. "I am glad you found out what you did, and got back in safety."

Lieutenant Rogers received the prisoners with enthusiasm, though it was plain that he regretted not having been told of the expedition in time to take a part in it. He said to Gifford enviously:

"I am a soldier, and I sit in the *Presidio* and play cards while you go out and capture this villain. You must have been born under a lucky star, my friend."

"It was nothing," Dennis replied. "His horse was shot, and they rolled down a sand dune. I happened to be nearest, and I ran forward, before he had his gun out. Guillermo and I together were too many for him. A piece of luck, as you say."

"The reward for him is only five thousand dollars," the ex-West Pointer mentioned dryly.

"That can be divided amongst our party, in any way that seems best to our leader, Señor Martinez. I did no more than the rest, except that I was nearer than the others."

"You seem to have a knack of getting into the thick of things," Rogers answered. "For me, I am always either too late or too soon. If I had your good fortune I would be a general by the time I am forty."

As it chanced, Lieutenant Rogers became a brigadier general at the age of thirty-four. It was impossible for him to guess that a long and bloody civil war would within a decade, bring rapid and spectacular promotion to hundreds of young soldiers.

CHAPTER XXIII.

FELIPE TAKES AN EVENING STROLL.

AT the edge of the *Presidio,* where cypresses had grown like twisted gnomes in the rock crevices, a man lay hidden in the furze. It had been hours since he climbed the precipitous bluff on the seaward side of the military reservation, but haste was no factor in his purpose. What he had to do must be done without attracting attention.

He crept forward, slowly, toward the dark bulk of the buildings in front of him. The prison lay well to the left. Cautiously he worked toward it.

It was a night of stars, obscured at times by scudding clouds which swept in battalions across the sky. The man made the most of the darker intervals, flitting like a shadow from one point of cover to another.

A sentry trod his beat, and as he came to the end of it, every few minutes, the hidden watcher could see him beside the adobe guard house. An Indian could not have taken advantage of the lie of the ground; of the broken, intermittent darkness; more skillfully than the patient stalker moving slowly toward his goal.

While the sentry's back was toward him, he slid across a stretch of starlit mesa to a little ditch near enough to the jail to see the small, iron-barred windows. At one of these there was the face of a man.

The concealed intruder slipped along the ditch, drawing closer to his objective. When the soldier turned, he lay motionless in the bottom of the trench. Not until the picket had gone did he lift his head from the hollow.

His eyes swept the scene before he made a dash across the open to the window where he had seen the face of a prisoner. Ten feet to the left of the window there grew a pine. The keen black eyes of the running man made note of this. In the foliage of the evergreen he could conceal himself when the guard returned.

Below the window, he called in a low voice to the one within:

"Juan! It is I—Felipe."

The face reappeared at the window. Castro looked down. The sight of the scarred countenance of his lieutenant gave the heart of the imprisoned man a lift, but he did not let this show in his greeting.

"You've been long enough in coming!" he growled.

"But not so long as I would have waited for you," Pacheco retorted, with shrewd divination of the other's character. He knew that if their positions had been reversed Castro would not have made a move to free him.

"Be careful that you're not seen," Castro warned. "The sentry would shoot you down like a dog."

"Perhaps I'd better *vamos,* then," Felipe said, to torment the imprisoned Castro.

"No, no! What is the plan? When do you get me out of this hell-hole? Talk business; be swift!"

Pacheco drew from his pocket a file.

"Catch," he said, and tossed it to his chief. "To-morrow night I will have horses in the grove, near the custom house—at eleven o'clock.—*Pst!* He comes."

The man below the window ran to the pine tree and swiftly drew himself to the branches above. His heart lost a beat, for the guard drew close to the window and called to the prisoner.

"HO, Castro! Are you asleep, my dicky bird?—Wake up! Wake up!—After a week or so, you will have a hundred years to sleep soundly in a narrow bed. But while you are still alive, don't waste your hours. Let us talk."

"What do you want to talk about?" Castro asked, his face again at the window. "Shall I tell you that I would like to slit your throat from ear to ear, and that some day I may do it?"

"Too late! You will never cut another throat. To-day I heard the colonel give orders to a carpenter for a gallows. Think of that, you murdering dog!"

"I have not yet been tried."

"A mere formality!" the soldier said, shrugging his shoulders. "'Shall we hang this ruffian, gentlemen, and get to our game of whist?' the colonel said. And the votes, 'Aye,' 'Aye,' 'Aye.' Then, before you can say 'Jack Robinson,' it is all done."

"I do not know what you mean—Jack Robinson?—Nor do I care. Listen. I will yet sweep all you *Yanquis* into the sea. You are all alike—rascals and scamps, all of you. I spit on you!"

"It will be very interesting," the sentry replied cheerfully. "I have never seen one of you bandits hanged, but I hope this will be the first of many.—I must leave you for a time. Duty first, you know."

The soldier turned away, walked to the end of his beat, returned, and waved at hand at the window as he passed.

Presently Pacheco slid down from the tree.

"To nest in pine cones is a prickly pleasure," he complained with a sardonic grin. "That I do it at all is evidence of my devotion to my chief, the great Juan Castro, who is unfortunately just now behind a grated window for Yankees to laugh at as they pass."

"They will laugh, yes, but on the other side of the mouth, as they say," Castro boasted. "I told them they could not keep me prisoner. They shall see!"

Felipe's smile was ironic.

"Ah! The great Juan Castro!—Of course he will escape—all by himself. I need not have concerned myself.—Throw the file down to me and I will be gone."

"I did not say all by myself. But does it matter? Just so I escape? To-morrow night at eleven, I shall be in the grove beside the custom house. I, Juan Castro, tell you so. My men will have their leader once more. Tell them to be of good cheer."

"I shall tell them. And may I say that you will not let some Yankee boy sit on you again and then drag you off to the calaboose?"

"My horse was shot and my leg pinned down!—*Carramba!* You talk as a fool does," Castro exploded, though in a low voice.

"I *am* a fool," Felipe admitted with his sardonic grin. "If I were not, I would have left you here to be hanged. You have neither gratitude nor decency. My reward for saving you will only be to win your hatred; and if I

am not careful, some day you will shoot me in the back.—However, I will be very, very careful. I promise myself that."

THE sentry's footsteps could be heard. Felipe scuttled for the tree a second time and swarmed up it. Below the window the soldier stopped once more.

"Are you still there, my little dicky bird? You have not flown away through the window and left the cage, where you are so safe?" The sentinel jeered.

"I promise not to go without taking a peck at you," Castro replied. "Did you ever feel a knife in your back, between the shoulder blades? A man does not even have time to scream. He opens his mouth, but he only gasps. *Madre de Dios!* It is sudden."

The sentry spat tobacco juice against the adobe wall.

"Hanging is not like that. One's breath is cut off and he strangles, kicking the air with his feet. Ten minutes, they say, is the usual time.—A rope around the gullet cannot be pleasant!"

The man resumed his beat and passed once more on his way back.

To Felipe, back from roosting in the tree, Castro said savagely:

"Did you bring me a revolver?"

"No."

"Then give me yours."

"I think not," Felipe said coolly. "I might need it myself.—No. You are better off without one. They might search your cell."

"Then a knife.—*Dios mio!* I must have a knife!"

Felipe tossed him one. "Your business is to escape; not to enjoy the childish pleasure of killing this sentry. He has a gun; he might shoot you. Certainly he would call for help, and you would be retaken. We cannot rescue you twice; remember that. *Hasta luega.*"

Pacheco slipped away into the night.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE FIESTA AT THE RANCHO SAN PABLO.

SINCE Dennis was of the opinion that Whittaker had for the present taken to the hills with the *banditti,* he did not think it well to leave the vicinity of Monterey yet. His guess might be wrong. Therefore he sent letters of inquiry to Sheriff Hearne of Santa Barbara, and to the authorities at Los Angeles and San Diego.

Meanwhile, he accepted the invitation of Ramon Martinez to be a guest at the San Pablo Rancho barbecue, given once a year after the calf rodeo, for those who lived upon the *rancho* and for any others who might care to attend.

Accompanied by Guillermo and Antonio, the young man left Monterey for the *rancho* the evening before the day set for the beginning of the festivities. From the pine-clad hills they looked down upon the red-tiled adobes of the town and beyond them to the white-fringed bay which looked in the moonlight like a lake of silver.

By the time the three riders reached San Pablo it was late. But the *rancho* hummed with activity. Preparations were in evidence for the great day.

The trenches in which the food would be cooked had been dug, and huge piles of faggots were heaped along them. Three bullocks had been butchered and now hung suspended from the limbs of live oaks. Men and

women were busy getting ready dishes, spits, huge kettles, and food.

Many *vaqueros* had already arrived. Their horses were picketed out on the plain near the spot where they expected to sleep out in their blankets beneath the stars.

Just now the riders were watching with keen interest a cock fight. Recklessly they backed the prowess of the birds of their choice.

Three *vaqueros* had roped a grizzly bear in the hills and dragged the animal to the *rancho*. It was now in a corral, tied fast to a heavy post. Tomorrow a great bull would be driven into the corral, and the two animals would fight to the death. The battle would be held in the morning, before the arrival of Ramon Martinez and his family, because it was known that he did not approve of such fierce and bloody combats, though he had not specifically forbidden them.

Dennis was awakened next morning by the sound of voices shouting orders. He dressed and walked out to the picnic ground, a grove of fine pines. Hundreds of steaks were spitted, ready for the fires already glowing in the trenches. Near at hand were dozens of pails of *tamales* and *salsa,* a sauce composed of chilis, tomatoes, and onions.

He saw Antonio breakfasting, and joined his friend. A fat, good-natured Mexican woman offered him a steak, coffee and *tortillas*. After he had eaten he strolled with Antonio to where the bear was held captive.

To make the fight more even, the grizzly was fastened by its left hind leg to a post, its activities being thus somewhat hampered. The bull had just been turned into the arena. With its forefeet it pawed the ground, snorting defiance at the enemy, but making no move to attack. The rage of the longhorn was tempered by a well-founded fear of this formidable foe.

The bear lumbered forward, the gray hair along its spine a long brush of bristles. Down went the horns to meet the enemy. The bull charged. As the grizzly rose and plunged, regardless of the rope, it tripped and was flung heavily to the ground. At the same instant the sharp horns gored savagely into bruin's body.

With a roar of fury and pain, the grizzly scrambled to its feet, blood streaming from his wounds. Again the bull charged. But this time the bear was ready. Its great paw whirled round in one tremendous clout and caught the longhorn in the neck. Heels over head went the bull, driving into the dust with all the weight of its charge back of it. The bull lay still, except for a momentary quivering of its great bulk of flesh, and the fight was over. The grizzly had broken the neck of its antagonist.

"Brava! Brava!"

The excited cries of the *vaqueros* filled the air.

SINCE the grizzly had won its freedom, the great bear was dragged to a safe distance from the *hacienda* and turned loose to lumber back into the hills and lick its wounds.

Parties of guests from neighboring *ranchos* were already arriving and were being made welcome by Guillermo, Antonio, and Ygnacio, in the courteous and elaborate Spanish manner.

A large and well guarded cavalcade appeared on the Monterey road. One of the outriders reported to Guillermo, who rode to meet it, that his father, mother, and sisters were arriving. From a distance he could hear the squeaking of the California cart in

which Señora Martinez rode, though he himself had greased the axles with soap. Its wheels were a foot thick, and consisted only of round-sawed logs. The vehicle was drawn by oxen, the yoke lashed to their horns. Doña Maria had ridden most of the way, but had been picked up by the cart inside the *rancho,* in order that she might not become saddle sore. The rest of the family were all on horseback. The slender, black-haired daughters rode their fine mounts with the easy grace of long practice.

The arrival of the elder Martinez and his party was the signal for the sports of the day to begin. All of these were characteristic of the country. There was much horse racing, but never more than two ran at a time. Slim, erect riders who had cast aside sombrero and serape rode their thin-flanked steeds barebacked, while hundreds of voices urged them to victory.

Dennis had never been present at a scene like this. It was patriarchal, wholly typical of the California that was vanishing with the increasing tread of Anglo-Saxon feet. Here were a dozen *caballeros,* owners of vast estates which were slipping from their fingers, with large families of strong sons and charming daughters.

The vivid coloring gave as much life to the gathering as did the gay laughter of young women, the click of castanets and the twang of guitars. For after the racing there was always dancing in the open air, both for the lords of the *ranchos* and their dependents.

Among those present were scores of strangers, most of them *vaqueros* who had ridden from afar to be at the *fiesta.* The custom of the country was that any stranger was a welcome guest at such barbecues. Two of these attracted Antonio's attention. They were mounted on splendid horses, well groomed animals with great depth of girth, long and big-boned. The riders wore sombreros, pulled well down over their heads; and when young Martinez approached to bid them welcome he observed that their serapes covered the entire lower part of their faces. They were as dark-skinned as Indians. Moreover, they carried rifles.

Antonio took occasion to whisper in his father's ear a suspicion that these strangers were not honest men, since they remained in the background and did not expose their faces.

Ramon shrugged his shoulders.

"Our *rancho* belongs to the world to-day, my son," he said. "Any guest is welcome. We do not ask who he is, so only he comes in peace."

Antonio had no more to say. He left to prepare for the next event, in which he and his brother Guillermo were the actors.

A young bull was released from a corral, and after it dashed Antonio and Guillermo, one on each side of the animal. Guillermo rode close, at a headlong gallop. He seized the tail of the bull, and with a pressure of the knee turned his horse slightly outward.

Down went the longhorn in a cloud of dust, and down at the same instant Antonio flung himself from the saddle. In his hand was a long strip of rawhide known as the *pella.*

Before the bull could rise he closed with it. His hands moved with amazing rapidity. Then he stepped back, in a storm of cheers. The feet of the animal were securely tied.

ANTONIO stepped in again and deftly untied the *pella.* The bull scrambled to its feet and shook itself. A few yards distant Antonio

stood and waved a crimson handkerchief. The body of the young man swayed away, but his feet did not move. As the brute dashed past, its horns ripped at the waving flag.

Again it charged. Antonio laughed, and turned to run. At the same instant Guillermo's *reata* snaked out and caught the bull by one of the hind feet. Over and over it rolled.

Other remarkable exhibitions of skill and horsemanship were shown. Dennis had never seen such riding. He did not believe that anywhere else in the world there could be such riders. What fascinated him was not only the things they did, but the ease and grace with which they were done.

Though there had been intermittent dancing all day, it did not begin in earnest until the sports were finished in the late afternoon. Only one dancing floor was used, but it was an unwritten law that the employees of the *rancho* and visiting *vaqueros* should remain at the lower end of it, and the family with its guests at the other. There were formal variations of the rule, as when the majordomo danced with Doña Maria, and the housekeeper with Don Ramon; but the exceptions served only to emphasize the custom.

Dennis did not dance much, for the steps were not familiar to him. But he found much entertainment in watching the spectacle. The slight, elegant figures, both men and women, danced the native *jaraba* and *zorrita* with a grace and energy fascinating to watch. They spoke the pure Castilian, with soft voices and refined accents that were delightful to the ear. Young Gifford knew that he was observing a phase of life that within ten years would have completely vanished. The *rancheros* were too improvident and too kindly to endure.

Again and again, Dennis's eyes came back to Rosita. She was in every dance. The young *caballeros* vied with one another for the chance to take her upon the floor.

It was during one of the rare moments when she was at leisure that Dennis saw a man bowing before her to ask for the privilege. The cavalier was gay with silk, satin and gold, but because of his very dark complexion he looked like an Indian.

Gifford moved closer. He felt a vague apprehension, yet he did not know why. The figure seemed familiar, but his mind did not place it.

Dennis heard Doña Maria speaking, gravely, considerately, but with decision:

"*Señor,* I mean no offense. We are much pleased to have you with us. Our *rancho* is yours. But my daughter does not dance with strangers."

The man's hat came down to his eyes. He held his serape in such a way as to hide most of his face

When he spoke again, it was to Rosita; not to her mother.

"So I am a stranger now?" he murmured.

The eyes of the girl dilated. She gave a strangled little cry. At the same moment, Dennis recognized the man. He was Juan Castro, whom Dennis had supposed to be in a cell at the *Presidio,* waiting to be tried and hanged.

Castro's smile was a threat.

"But not for long, *niñita,* I swear it!"

Swiftly Dennis moved forward. He was unarmed, but that could not now be helped. His square shoulders pushed into the picture.

When Castro caught sight of him, the bandit's face was convulsed with demoniac rage. He snatched out a revolver and fired pointblank at Gifford,

then turned and ran for a grove where a man waited with horses.

CHAPTER XXV.

DENNIS LEAPS A BARRIER.

DENNIS staggered back against Dona Maria. He might have fallen if her arm had not slipped round his waist and supported him. Abruptly the music stopped. Among the dancers there was confusion. Few of them knew what had occurred, but the sinister crack of the revolver had startled them. All that most of them saw was a man with a smoking weapon in his hand flying for the grove.

A second man was waiting there on horseback, the bridle of a second mount in his hand. Without touching the stirrup the runner vaulted into the empty saddle, whirled the animal, and dashed toward the dancing floor at a gallop. He pulled up sharply and flung up a hand in derisive greeting.

"*Viva Castro!*" he cried jubilantly. "Soon he will come for his bride. *Adios,* my friends.—*Hasta luega!*"

He laughed, mockingly, spun his horse as on a coin, and was gone in a cloud of dust. As he turned, a bullet sang past his ear.

All the weapons of the guests and of the dependents of Martinez had been laid aside during the *fiesta.* It had not occurred to them that Castro would be so mad as to appear at a place where hundreds were gathered. Antonio was the sole exception. The sinister appearance of the two dark strangers had stirred in him a vague alarm. He had gone into the house for his revolver, and a bullet from it had answered the jeering challenge of the bandit.

Antonio ran to the nearest horse, pulled the slip knot, and flung himself into the saddle. He lifted his mount to a gallop, and was off instantly in pursuit of the outlaws. Others armed themselves and followed.

Dona Maria gave orders that a bedroom should be made ready for Dennis, and that he should be carried into the house. This last the young man himself vetoed. He was not badly hurt, he said, and could very well walk.

He did walk, supported by Don Ramon. An odd gayety bubbled up in him, as it is likely to do in one who has come through an ordeal safely. He was both light-headed and light-hearted.

"He only winged me," Dennis said. "I dodged, just as he fired."

"Yes, I saw you dodge," Ramon answered gravely. "What you did was to sweep Rosita away with your arm, so that she might be out of the line of fire. *Madre de Dios!* You are a man."

"I was getting away myself, at the same time," Dennis explained. "A little flesh wound in my arm; that is all the damage. He is a bold devil to come here. How did he get out of prison, I wonder?"

"That we shall find out. Do not tire yourself talking, *amiga mio.* Shall we not carry you up these steps?"

"No, no. It is nothing—nothing." The young man had seen the alarm in Rosita's tender eyes when her gaze had plunged into his. A dozen *señoritas* and their cavaliers were hovering about him with concern in their manner. He felt a little ashamed that so much fuss was being made over nothing.

AMONG the guests was a doctor, a Californian who had had much experience in the treatment of wounds. One or another of the *vaqueros* was always breaking a bone.

It was part of the price they paid for being the most expert horsemen in the world. Doctor de Rivas dressed Dennis's arm with skill, promising him that in a few days he would be as good as new.

Doña Maria was a famous nurse. Her patient was very apologetic for imposing upon her kindness. It distressed him that a *señora* of her class, a patrician so well poised in her tall grace, should devote all her time to him. Though she had grown sons and daughters, she was still a beautiful brunette.

At his protests she smiled. "Not more than two or three hours a day am I with you," she told him. "I look after my other guests, and I enjoy the *fiesta*. What will you? It is possible that you saved my daughter's life. We do not know. This Castro is a wolf; yet you did not hesitate to interfere, knowing how he felt toward you, and that he was armed and you were not.—Shall I turn you over to servants? Is it so that your mother would do to one of my sons, in like case?"

He knew that he had found favor in the eyes of this California lady, and his heart filled with warmth. It was golden luck that he had been near when Juan Castro had confronted Rosita and made his impudent proposal. What could be more fortunate than to get a trifling wound while championing the cause of the girl he loved? He was very happy. Rosita would be compelled to think of him a little, at least. Perhaps his dreams were not so hopeless as they seemed.

FOR two days he did not catch a glimpse of Rosita. Once he saw Luisa flitting along the hall, and twice little Natividad came into his room with messages for her mother.

Doña Maria was a busy woman. There were a hundred claims upon her time. It was on the third day, while she was getting water, soap, and a towel for Dennis to wash his face and hands, that Rosita knocked on the door and came in to say that some of the guests were leaving.

Doña Maria was a sensible woman who did not carry conventions to absurd extremes. Perhaps she wanted her daughter to have a chance to thank the young American in person. At any rate she said briskly, after a hesitation hardly perceptible, that she would leave Rosita to look after Dennis's wants until she returned.

Rosita was astonished. Embarrassment flamed in a dark red wave beneath the olive of her cheeks. When she brought the bowl and the towel her downcast eyes did not lift to those of the man sitting up in bed. Her hand trembled as she poured the warm water from the pitcher.

"It is not too hot?" she asked in a low soft voice.

"Just right," he told her. "I am a nuisance. It is too bad that you have to wait on me. I could get up, if Doña Maria would let me."

She flamed into sudden speech, a swift outpouring of Spanish vowels.

"When you say you are a nuisance you make little of me, since it was for me that you were hurt. You do right, since you know how bad a girl I am—how once I forgot my modesty to encourage this villain who had bewitched me. But I am still the daughter of my father and my mother. Even if they knew my folly, they would try to repay with kindness what you did for me."

Contrition swept through him. He had not thought of her taking his apology in that way. Trying to explain, he stumbled over words.

"But you are not! If I could tell you —if I knew how, *señorita*—to—say—"

His chagrin restored her composure. She lifted her deep dark eyes to his.

"To scold me properly, you mean?" she asked, demurely.

"To tell you what I think—how much—"

"Can I help you to begin, *señor?* I am a bold, bad girl who once played with fire, and did not know. I should have been whipped and sent to bed. Would you perhaps like to swing a switch across my back because—because—?"

He blurted out, driven by her wilful misunderstanding, "I think you are the loveliest and sweetest thing under heaven!"

The blush that swept her face was something beautiful to see. Her shy eyes, tender and a little fearful, clung to his while she stood an instant with suspended breath. She had asked for a compliment, but the deep earnestness with which he had cried out what was in his heart drove laughter from her face and set her pulses throbbing with emotion.

There was a touch of the coquette in Rosita, and flattery in the slightly stilted Californian manner would not have shaken her aplomb. But there was no smile in his eyes to suggest that what he had said was a little less than truth. Confusion flooded her. In her bosom was a kind of breathless excitement. An urgent impulse was in her to escape from this delicious agitation and regain the safety of the commonplace.

"The towel, *señor*—" she murmured. "Will you have it now?"

HE dared not look into her face. Had his blunt words, which had been so far from his intention to express, so wholly unpremeditated, given offense to her delicacy? The Spanish fashion of wooing was formal. He must speak to her father, and later to the mother. Their approval must be gained, first. Then he must meet the girl of his choice in the presence of her parents, and talk about the weather and the next *baile* and the state of the crops—about anything, in fact, except the thing in all their minds. All of this he had overleaped in one stride. Probably she thought he was merely a Yankee boor.

"If you please, *señorita,*" he answered.

When she turned to carry away the wash bowl, his eyes followed her supple, slender body. Music, it seemed to him, moved in her light-footed grace; in the spirited lift of her head; in the motion of her long, lovely limbs.

Rosita busied herself at the other end of the room, her back to him. She was disposing of the towel and the water in which he had washed.

After a long time she turned and spoke again, primly:

"Can I do anything else for you, *señor?*"

"Nothing, except—to forgive me," he said, once more leaping the barriers.

The tide of color was still warm in her cheeks. She did not look at him. All her attention was given to straightening a piece of lace work on a little table.

"There is—nothing—to forgive." Hurriedly, she pushed to safer ground. "I hope your wound does not pain you much. Doctor de Rivas says it is healing. We are glad." Even that communal pronoun gave her a touch of panic. "My father and my mother have been disturbed."

"It was nothing—a scratch."

There was something else she wanted to say—words which she had re-

hearsed at night, in the darkness of her room, while she lay curled up in bed. She spoke them now in a stilted little voice, as a child repeats a lesson learned by rote.

"I have wished to thank you, *senor,* for your kindness—your great kindness—in coming to my rescue.—I shall never forget."

He did not tell her, as he longed to do, that he was a thousand times in debt for the chance. He merely said, in a voice as formal as her own, that the pleasure had been his.

Each of them felt a chill of disappointment. For a moment they had been close, heart speaking to heart. But now there was a wall between them. Had that moment of emotional crisis really not existed in the other, each asked? Was it, after all, not real; only a figment of fancy?

CHAPTER XXVI.

IN THE SPIDER'S WEB.

THE trail of Juan Castro and his companion had led into the hills and vanished. None of their pursuers had come within firing distance. Antonio had swung to the back of the first horse he could reach, and the animal had neither the stamina nor the speed of the two ridden by the outlaws. Every stride left a greater distance between him and those he followed.

Presently he dropped out of the race. One or two of the other riders passed him, still going strong. But before night, all of the avengers returned to the *rancho.* Castro had made good his escape.

Word came to Ramon Martinez next day from the commandant at Monterey telling him that the bandit had cut his way through the window bars of his cell and escaped. Some one had smuggled in to the prisoner a file, and in the darkness of the night he had vanished. But before going he had thrust a knife into the heart of the sentry.

Dennis was up in a few days, sitting on the porch in the sunlight. His appetite was good, and already he was beginning to feel strong on his feet. Except for some soreness in the wounded arm, he was off the invalid list, though not yet quite ready for riding or vigorous exercise.

Ramon Martinez dropped into a seat beside him, one morning. In the Californian's hand was a letter.

"From Benjamin Shanks," he explained. "A little reminder. The claws behind the velvet pad at last. He hopes that I will be able to pay on the first of the month, when due, as it is not convenient for him to renew the loan."

Dennis looked at his friend, but for the moment Martinez apparently had no more to say. The young man felt obliged to ask a question.

"And—can you pay?" he said gently. Then he added quickly, "Please do not tell me, if you do not wish me to know."

Without seeing him, Martinez looked at one of his *vaqueros,* breaking a colt. A frown of worry furrowed his forehead.

"I do not see how I can, my herds are vast. They graze over hundreds of miles. But they are not easily turned into money."

"Does he say that he will foreclose, if immediate payment is not made?"

"Not in so many words. But he says quite plainly that he must have his money when due. The reason he gives is that he has large bills which must be met."

"If the question is fair, *senor*—how much do you owe him?"

The *ranchero* reflected. "I do not know. Our dealings have become somewhat involved. I have bought goods from him, and he has taken in exchange cattle and tallow. Then there have been more loans—and interest—and new notes signed. I fear I am not a careful business man, my friend."

That was quite apparent. He was no match for a shrewd, unscrupulous trader like Shanks. Dennis was young, but he had come of stock accustomed to cautious business habits.

"I do not want to intrude," the young man said, "but I can do accounts and I would be glad to assist with yours, if you would care to have me."

Martinez accepted the offer gladly. He was, he feared, too deep in this to escape; but it would do no harm to know as nearly as possible where he stood.

FOR a day and a half Gifford looked over bills, receipts, statements and haphazard data jotted down by his host from time to time. The Californian was paying interest—if the receipts from Shanks were all here—upon notes for fifty-two thousand dollars, secured by mortgages upon the San Pablo, the Carmelo, and the Soledad *ranchos,* and the cattle ranging on them. Don Ramon thought this was the total amount of the notes, but he was not sure whether the one for the last five thousand advanced by Shanks was included in this sum or not. He had borrowed money as he needed it, improvidently, expecting to repay at his leisure.

Dennis tried to find out how many cattle Don Ramon had on each *rancho.* Martinez did not know. He could guess, but his estimates were vague. No accurate tally had been kept of the calves branded at the last rodeos. Ramon's majordomo had put down the figures on a piece of paper, but the paper had been misplaced.

It was not surprising, Dennis thought, that even with a small empire at his disposal, the Californian was heading for bankruptcy as rapidly as possible. To his host he made suggestions.

"Don't you think you ought to go to San Francisco and see Shanks? It will do no harm to ask for an extension of time. By doing so, you'll find just where he stands. If he is stiff for payment, you can get from him a statement of the exact amount he claims, itemized."

Martinez assented, but with no enthusiasm.

"That would be good, no doubt, but—he is like a twisting eel. He does not say yes or no and stick to it; he has what the Indians call a forked tongue."

"But you can find out from the way he talks whether you can deal with him," Dennis urged. "Ask him a plain question—will he on reasonable terms extend the time? If he will not sign an extension, his purpose is clear—he means to get the *ranchos.* Ask him for a detailed statement of your debts. Insist upon it. He will not refuse. I speak with deference to you, *señor,* but I feel sure that I am right."

Ramon smiled, wryly. "Would it do me any good to know how much I owe this usurer, if I cannot pay it?"

That Don Ramon was a child in financial affairs Dennis realized. The young man explained patiently that no steps could be taken to straighten the tangle until it was known how much was due. Ramon asked what steps he had in mind.

"Why not have a roundup of all your beef cattle and sell the bullocks for what they would bring? After that,

it may be possible for you to shift the mortgage to another creditor?"

"To another Shylock? Would that help me any?"

"Perhaps not to a Shylock," Dennis demurred. "I have something in mind. It may come to nothing, or to a good deal. If it works out, it will be a pleasure to me to prove to you that all Americans are not cheats and scoundrels."

What Dennis was thinking of he did not go into more explicitly, because he was not sure that he could put it through. His idea was to take over the mortgage himself; or, in case he was not able to carry it, to get his partners, Peebles and Bronson, to go into it jointly with him. Invested so, their money would be safer than it would be in a San Francisco bank, provided the *ranchos* had a financial manager who would not permit the properties to be bled by improvident handling.

Dennis intended to be that manager himself, if he could get the consent of Ramon Martinez. His imagination leaper farther. As the son-in-law of the owner, it would be natural for him to look after the interests of his father-in-law, and to curb his improvidences. He believed that Ramon was sensible enough not to resent a more strict administration.

HIS plan was still in the air. The gold claims of Red Dog might have pinched out. Peebles and Bronson might already have invested their profits, and might not be able to put their hands on a sum sufficient to buy the mortgage. It might be impossible even to interest them in the idea. His own one-fifth share of the claims and the proceeds he could dispose of, but he was not sure this would be enough to swing the deal.

To his partners he wrote a long letter telling them of his adventures since leaving San Francisco. He asked one of them to join him at Monterey, since he had on hand an enterprise in which he felt they would wish to share. He mentioned danger as more than possible.

This was a bait that they would be sure to swallow, he felt sure. As an added incentive, he gave an entire paragraph to the beautiful daughters of Ramon Martinez. If that didn't fetch Frank Peebles, he did not know what would.

Smiling to himself, Dennis reread the letter. He had drawn an alluring picture of the carefree life on a *rancho*. He had let a hint appear of strumming guitars, dancing *señoritas*, and Spanish love lilts. His opinion was that Jim Bronson would also feel the urge to exchange the hard, sordid life of a mining camp for a week or two of play.

The only question was whether both his friends could leave the claims at the same time.

If they found it feasible he expected to see Jim as well as Frank within a few days.

Dennis sent the letter north with Martinez, to be mailed in San Francisco. From there it would reach Red Dog within twenty-four hours.

Meanwhile, Dennis lazed in the pleasant Californian sunshine. Doña Maria and her daughters had returned to Monterey, but Antonio was still at the *rancho*. His brother Guillermo had ridden to the Carmelo *hacienda*. Young Ramon to the Soledad. All hands were busy rounding up the beef stock for a forced sale.

There would be a heavy loss in throwing upon the market so many head of beef, but to save the land and

the "she stock," some holdings had to be sacrificed. Gifford hoped that before the herds were disposed of he might be able to raise enough to make the sale unnecessary, but he said nothing about this. There was no use in arousing hopes that might prove futile. Moreover, he knew that Ramon Martinez, like most of the *caballeros,* was one of those who snatch at rainbows. He did not believe in doing to-day what could be put off until to-morrow.

But while he sat on the porch studying a Spanish grammar, or wandered about the corrals watching the activities of the *rancho,* he always carried both a rifle and a revolver. Once he had been caught napping; but if he could help it, that would not happen again.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

Edison's "Trivial Toy"

THIS year marks the fortieth anniversary of the motion picture industry as public entertainment. The inception of Hollywood's great industry of today took place in a small store building at 1155 Broadway, New York City, on April 14th, 1894.

The first exhibitors were the Holland brothers and their outfit comprised ten kinetoscopes, or "peep shows." Historical data shows that the kinetoscope was to have made its debut at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago late in 1893, but Thomas A. Edison, inventor of the machine, was too busy on other things to hurry production on what he considered a trivial toy, and, as a result, could not deliver to the Holland brothers the ten machines they wanted until the following spring.

Those first moving picture machines were driven by a motor, operated from a storage battery. The film was run between an electric light and a rapidly revolving shutter which exposed the pictures in flashes to the viewing lens through which the spectator looked. The film was wound around over rollers in an endless loop and ran continuously.

The kinetoscope was limited to strips of film fifty feet in length, because the machine operated with a jerky, intermittent motion as it stepped the film past the lens. These jerks against the weight of the film had to overcome the inertia of the roll at each jerk, and if the film was longer, the jerk would break it.

Spectators passed down the line of ten machines and peered into the "peep holes" while an attendant switched on the machines, one after the other. Edison later supplied a nickel-in-the-slot attachment which eliminated the need of the attendant.

Among the fifty-foot films shown were those of Professor Vatty's trained animals; Annie Oakley, champion rifle shot; Colonel William Cody (Buffalo Bill); Mme. Bertholdi, a contortionist; Eugene Sandow, the strong man; a Sioux Indian dance; and Ruth St. Dennis, then known as Ruth Dennis, in a film called "Dance."

The kinetoscope, "Edison's trivial toy," was the forerunner of the motion picture industry.

Willy Walker.

Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

ARGOSY pays $1 for each letter printed. Send your letter to "Argonotes" Editor, ARGOSY, 280 Broadway, N. Y. C.

TRAY full of diamonds:

Alhambra, Calif.

I'm sick and tired of reading "I detest this writer," "Can't possibly stand stories by *so and so*," "Hope someone falls overboard." You know, I think some people would crab if they were handed a tray full of diamonds.

Let some of those crabs try some of the other magazines on the market, then see how quickly they jump back aboard the good ship ARGOSY, to find a nice snug bit of perfect satisfaction.

GERALD E. LEWIS.

THE first thing:

South Weymouth, Mass.

I can't sit idly by, while other readers pan "Men of Daring." It's the very first page I turn to when my husband brings home the latest ARGOSY. "Women of Daring" also is very interesting, and I hope to see it in future issues.

Have started reading "The Barbarian," and think it bids fair to be a corking good story. "Forbidden Mountain" keeps up the standard of your previous J. Allan Dunn stories—it's very exciting.

Where, oh, where is A. Merritt with a new fantastic or perhaps a sequel to "Dwellers in the Mirage"?

MRS. C. R. WICKERSON.

THE ten best:

New York City.

Everybody seems to be making up a list of the ten best this and the ten best that, so here is my list of the ten best stories ever published in the ARGOSY (including *Allstory*):

"The Promise," by James B. Hendryx; "The Mucker," by Edgar Rice Burroughs; "Ashes to Ashes," by Isabel Ostrander; "Longhorn Feud," by Max Brand; "The Moon Pool," by Merritt; "Misery Mansions," by Phillip Gibbs; "Too Much Efficiency," by E. J. Rath; "The Untamed," by Max Brand; "The Sin That Was His," by Frank L. Packard; "The Unholy Three," by Tod Robbins.

This covers a period of eighteen years or so and is my final selection after leaving out some others that I hated to overlook. Let's see some more lists of the ten best. I am sure that we all would be interested in them.

EDWARD F. WILKE.

FEELINGS were hurt:

Farmington, Mo.

I was very much interested in the statement of one man about the ability of some people to "feel" the presence of objects in the dark, although they can't see them, Well, that's nothing new to me. Many's the time I've felt the presence of a chair, rocker or a partly open door in a dark room.

SIDNEY O'BANNON.

THE humorous touch:

San Francisco, Calif.

Until about a year ago your splendid magazine was unknown to me. That is, I supposed it was not for women. It is full of adventure, mystery, delightful flights of the imagination and always the action so lacking in much of my other recreation reading. It may be that I shall tire of it, but I doubt it!

One thing that highly amuses me is the scoffing, indignation, resentment or whatever it is that an occasional one of your men-readers (or is it always the same man?) seems to hold against those two pages devoted to "Women of Daring." Such attitude certainly furnishes the humor, thus making the magazine complete!

MARGUERITE PRESTON.

THE BARBARIAN" and veneer:

Wilkes-Barre, Pa.

I am a new reader of ARGOSY but by my reaction right now it looks as if I'll be a steady one from now on.

The serial by F. V. W. Mason, "The Barbarian," is a crackerjack in all respects. I like

the way Mason brings out the fact that there is little fundamental difference between the so-called civilized races and the barbarians. On top there is a veneer but underneath people are much the same, no matter what their upbringing has been.

"John Solomon of Limehouse" is another that hits the bull's-eye. H. Bedford-Jones seems to have been writing since I can remember and I have been reading his stuff rather steadily, but his diversity in subjects and his command of the language makes every new one different and not just a rewriting of an old plot.

HOWARD W. DAVIS.

Looking Ahead!

The Spy at Charleville

Dropped by a plane behind the German lines at night, Captain Steele, American Intelligence officer with the French, embarks on one of the most dangerous missions of the War. A novelette.

By ARED WHITE

Sand Blast

Bob Zane fights men and desert for a gold lode. A novelette.

By ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

COMING TO YOU IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—JULY 21