ARGOSY ALL-STORY WEEKLY

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Revolutionary plan to save money

for every motorist in America

YOU can now buy a genuine Prest-O-Lite Battery for your car at an actual saving of 25%. This sweeping reduction is a real victory over costly customs of distribution. Prest-O-Lite has definitely proved that extra profits in selling high-quality storage batteries can be eliminated.

Instead of distributing batteries from our factories — first to jobbers—then jobbers to distributors—then distributors to dealers — and finally dealers to you, *we are now selling Prest-O-Lite Batteries through retailers directly to you.* The price is based on only one step between the factory and the car owner.

Battery production costs are no lower. This saving is effected without the slightest reduction in quality or without affecting, in any way, the guarantee or service that is back of every Prest-O-Lite Battery.

This means that you can buy today one of our most popular types for $15.50. *This is a reduction of* 25%, *as this very same standard Prest-O-Lite Battery under the old plan cost* $20.50. *Other types can be purchased at similar reductions.*

Prest-O-Lite now gives everyone the opportunity to have the best battery and service at a remarkably low price.

There is a Prest-O-Lite Service Station near you. Take advantage of its "Friendly Service," no matter what make of battery you may have. And when you do need a new battery, save at least 25% and get real quality, long life and service by buying a Prest-O-Lite.

Save 25%

THE PREST-O-LITE CO., Inc.
INDIANAPOLIS, IND.
New York San Francisco
In Canada: Prest-O-Lite Co. of Canada, Ltd., Toronto, Ontario

Prest-O-Lite

"OUR EIGHT-YEAR-OLD GIRL would lose weeks of school work, besides being incapacitated while she was in school from attacks of stomach trouble. I decided to give Fleischmann's Yeast a trial. I began with half a cake mixed with peanut butter on bread, and then I served it in many different ways. My child has never had another attack of stomach trouble since I gave her yeast. Yeast is just as good for children as for grown-ups." MRS. G. A. VIELE, Costa Mesa, Cal.

"AFTER I GAVE BIRTH to my child, I felt very much 'run down.' I had constant trouble with my stomach, and what troubled me most—I suffered from terrible sties. Finally an eye specialist prescribed Fleischmann's Yeast. In two months there wasn't a trace left of the sties. My complexion improved wonderfully. I no longer have an aversion for food. And I manage to keep and look young with the help of Fleischmann's Yeast." MRS. SARAH STEINHARDT New York City.

What Everybody Knows

The danger of clogged intestines
The evils of digestive troubles
and disfiguring skin eruptions
The tragedy of lowered vitality

NOT a "cure-all," not a medicine in any sense—Fleischmann's Yeast is simply a remarkable fresh food.

The millions of tiny active yeast plants in every cake invigorate the whole system. They aid digestion—clear the skin—banish the poisons of constipation. Where cathartics give only temporary relief, yeast strengthens the intestinal muscles and makes them healthy and active. And day by day it releases new stores of energy.

All grocers have Fleischmann's Yeast. Start eating it today! Buy several cakes at a time—they will keep fresh in a cool dry place for two or three days. And let us send you a free copy of our latest booklet on Yeast for Health. Health Research Dept. Z-18, The Fleischmann Company, 701 Washington Street, New York City.

(LEFT)

"INVALIDED from Royal Navy with chronic constipation. Went to India. . . . Advised to try Canada. Was just able to get into army, but after 2½ years in trenches, returned to Canada totally unfit and pensioned. In 1919 I gave Fleischmann's Yeast a fair trial, thank God. Six months afterward I passed for life insurance and my pension stopped. I am now absolutely fit and never need a laxative; and this after over 20 years of suffering." HERBERT J. PARROTT, Calgary, Alta.

EAT 2 OR 3 CAKES regularly every day before meals: on crackers—in fruit juices or milk—or just plain. *For constipation especially, dissolve one cake in hot water (not scalding) night and morning.*

ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

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THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY, 280 BROADWAY, NEW YORK, N. Y., and HOPEFIELD HOUSE, HANWELL, W. 7, LONDON, ENGLAND

FRANK A. MUNSEY, President RICHARD H. TITHERINGTON, Secretary CHRISTOPHER H. POPE, Treasurer

Single copies, 10 cents. By the year, $4.00 in United States, its dependencies, Mexico and Cuba; $6.00 to Canada, and $7.00 to Foreign Countries. Remittances should be made by check, express money order or postal money order. Currency should not be sent unless registered

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Entered as second-class matter July 15, 1920, at the Post-Office at New York, under the Act of March 3, 1879

4 out of 5 *now lose*

The law of averages is immutable. Dental statistics prove that four out of every five over 40—and thousands younger, too—are marred by Pyorrhea. Do you want to escape?

It takes healthy gums to keep healthy teeth

Bleeding gums are Nature's first warning. Then the gums begin to recede, lose that rich, healthy pink color. Disease breeding poisons collect in pus pockets and often drain through the entire system.

If used in time and used consistently, Forhan's will prevent Pyorrhea, or check its progress. It contains just the right proportion of Forhan's Astringent (as used by the dental profession in the treatment of Pyorrhea). It is safe, efficient and pleasant-tasting. Even if you don't care to discontinue your favorite dentifrice, at least start using Forhan's once a day. All druggists, 35c and 60c.

Formula of R. J. Forhan, D.D.S.
Forhan Company, New York

Forhan's
FOR THE GUMS
More than a tooth paste—it checks Pyorrhea

1,000 Men Wanted
these new comforts in a Shaving Cream
. . . now please accept a 10-day tube Free

GENTLEMEN:

In Palmolive Shaving Cream there is a unique story.

Some years ago we set out to create the ideal Shaving Cream.

First we asked 1,000 average men to tell us what they most desired.

Then, step by step—by making and testing 130 separate formulas—we met these desires to the utmost.

The result is a new attainment, better in at least 5 ways than any shaving cream you know.

Men have welcomed it—millions have changed from old-type shaving creams. . . . So will you when you know.

The results men wanted

Abundant lather. Palmolive Shaving Cream multiplies itself in lather 250 times.

Quick action. It softens the beard in one minute.

Lasting lather. It maintains its creamy fullness for ten minutes on the face.

A clean shave. The extra strong bubbles hold the hairs erect for cutting, so they don't lie down.

No irritation. The palm and olive oil content leaves the face in fine condition.

Let this test prove that we have secured these wanted effects. Do this in fairness to yourself and us. Clip coupon now.

To add the final touch to shaving luxury, we have created Palmolive After Shaving Talc—especially for men. Doesn't show. Leaves the skin smooth and fresh, and gives that well-groomed look. Try the sample we are sending free with the tube of Shaving Cream. There are new delights here for every man who shaves. Please let us prove them to you.

THE PALMOLIVE COMPANY (Del. Corp.), Chicago, Ill.

PALMOLIVE SHAVING CREAM

2863

10 SHAVES FREE and a can of Palmolive After Shaving Talc

Simply insert your name and address and mail to Dept. S-1031, The Palmolive Company (Del. Corp.), 3702 Iron Street, Chicago, Ill.

Residents of Wisconsin should address The Palmolive Company (Wis. Corp.), Milwaukee, Wis.

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Classified Advertising

The Purpose of this Department is to put the reader in touch immediately with the newest needfuls for the home, office, farm, or person; to offer, or seek, an unusual business opportunity, or to suggest a service that may be performed satisfactorily through correspondence. It will pay a housewife or business man equally well to read these advertisements carefully.

Classified Advertising Rates in The Munsey Magazines:

	LINE RATE	
Munsey's Magazine	$1.60	Combination line rate $4.00 less 2 per cent cash discount.
Argosy Comb. Comprising Argosy-Allstory and Flynn's	2.50	

Minimum space four lines.

August 8th Argosy-Allstory Forms Close July 11th.

AGENTS & SALESMEN WANTED

AGENTS—SALESMEN—YOU CAN MAKE $5 AN HOUR IN YOUR SPARE TIME OR $75 TO $100 A WEEK FULL TIME SELLING OUR BIG ATTRACTIVE LINE OF **ADVERTISING PENCILS**, PENCILS WITH SNAPPY COLORS, NOVELTY STYLES, CLEVER IDEAS, CATCH THE EYE OF EVERY MERCHANT OR BUSINESS HOUSE. EASY SALES—QUICK PROFITS. A MONEY-MAKING SIDE LINE FOR SALESMEN. WRITE FOR FREE SAMPLES AND TERMS. OAK SPECIALTY CO., 5709 LAKE STREET, CHICAGO.

LIGHTNING strange battery compound. Charges discharged batteries instantly. Eliminates old method entirely. Gallon free to agents. LIGHTNING CO., St. Paul, Minn.

AGENTS—$35 CASH WEEKLY AND A FREE SUIT TO EACH AGENT FOR TAKING ORDERS FOR OUR HIGH-CLASS MADE-TO-ORDER TAILORING—SUITS FROM $14.95 TO $39.50. NO EXPERIENCE NEEDED. WRITE FOR OUR **BIG FREE SAMPLE OUTFIT.** PROGRESS TAILORING COMPANY, DEPT. G-109, CHICAGO.

$10 EVERY DAY distributing food products, etc., to steady users. Liberal credit extended. Use our capital to make money. Splendid sample outfit furnished Free. Harvest Home Products Company, Dept. C-126, 816 W. North Ave., Chicago.

GET OUR FREE SAMPLE CASE—Toilet articles, perfumes and specialties. Wonderfully profitable. LA DERMA CO., Dept. D, St. Louis, Mo.

BIG MONEY AND FAST SALES—Every owner buys gold initials for his auto. You charge $1.50, make $1.44 profit. 10 orders daily easy. Samples and information free. WORLD MONOGRAM CO., Dept. 9, Newark, N. J.

LET US MAIL YOU A FREE BOTTLE OF OUR LIFE TONIC ELIXIR, Face Powder, Vegetable Oil Soap and Terms to Agents. All Big Repeaters. LACASSIAN CO., Dept. 45, St. Louis, Mo.

AUTHORS—MANUSCRIPTS

STORIES, POEMS, PLAYS, ETC., are wanted for publication. Good ideas bring big money. Submit MSS., or write LITERARY BUREAU, 110, Hannibal, Mo.

MICHIGAN FARM LANDS FOR SALE

HERE'S YOUR LAND! $10 DOWN AND $10 A MONTH BUYS TWENTY ACRES OF MY BEST LAND IN CENTRAL MICHIGAN FOR $400, OR TEN ACRES FOR $250. WRITE AT ONCE FOR FREE 48-PAGE PICTURE BOOK. G. W. SWIGART, Y1245 First Natl. Bank Bldg., Chicago.

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RAILROAD POSTAL CLERKS start $155 month, railroad pass. Send stamps for questions. COLUMBUS INSTITUTE, A-6, Columbus, Ohio.

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PATENTS—Write for FREE Guide Books and "Record of Invention Blank" before disclosing inventions. Send model or sketch and description of invention for Inspection & Instructions free. Terms Reasonable. Prompt Attention. Highest References. VICTOR J. EVANS & CO., 762 Ninth, Washington, D. C.

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AGENTS & SALESMEN WANTED

AGENTS—$11.80 daily in advance (send for sworn proof) introducing New Insured Hosiery. 57 styles, 40 colors, guaranteed seven months. No capital or experience required. You simply take orders. We deliver and collect (or you can deliver, suit yourself). Credit given. PAY YOU DAILY, monthly bonus besides. We furnish samples. Spare time will do. MACOCHEE TEXTILE COMPANY, Station 27014, Cincinnati, Ohio.

WE START YOU in business, furnishing everything. Men and women, $30.00 to $100.00 weekly operating our "New System Specialty Candy Factories" anywhere. Opportunity lifetime; booklet free. W. Hillyer Ragsdale, Drawer 93, East Orange, N. J.

AT LAST A LIFETIME JOB. OUR AGENTS MAKING $50.00 to $150.00 WEEK selling our "Factory-to-Family" HOUSE AND STREET DRESSES. No samples to carry. We deliver, collect and you get your commission at once. PEGGY ANN DRESS CO., Dept. 502, 414 E. 8th St., Cincin., O.

SALESMEN—Opening now for a $5,000 to $10,000 year man. Established wholesale house selling retail merchants; staple line. Permanent position with real contract to producer. A. F. Gibson, Mgr., Dept. A, 1922 Euclid Ave., Cleveland, Ohio.

AGENTS WANTED TO ADVERTISE OUR GOODS AND DISTRIBUTE FREE SAMPLES TO CONSUMERS: 90c an hour; write for full particulars. AMERICAN PRODUCTS CO., 2426 American Bldg., Cincinnati, O.

AGENTS: FIVE TO FIFTEEN DOLLARS DAILY IN ADVANCE. Twenty Dollar Sample Outfit FREE to workers; no delivering. B. & G. RUBBER MFG. CO., Dept. 792, Pittsburgh, Penn'a.

AGENTS—WRITE FOR FREE SAMPLES. SELL MADISON "BETTER-MADE" SHIRTS FOR LARGE MANUFACTURER DIRECT TO WEARER. NO CAPITAL OR EXPERIENCE REQUIRED. MANY EARN $100 WEEKLY AND BONUS. MADISON MFGRS., 503 Broadway, New York.

HELP WANTED

MEN AND WOMEN WANTED EVERYWHERE to weave rugs, carpet, etc., at home; no previous experience needed. You can equal these earnings: Mrs. Morse $100, Mr. Rozsa $242 monthly. Rush Postal today for FREE LOOM BOOK, telling all about weaving and how to make money with our $9.90 and other wonderful looms. UNION LOOM WORKS, 486 Factory Street, BOONVILLE, N. Y.

ESTABLISH YOURSELF—AT HOME—AS A PHOTOGRAPHIC EXPERT. Make $75 a week while learning. Write at once for temporary offer. INTERNATIONAL STUDIOS, Dept. 1455, 3601 Michigan Ave., Chicago.

HELP WANTED—MALE

MEN—EXPERIENCE UNNECESSARY; travel; make secret investigations; reports; salaries; expenses. Write AMERICAN FOREIGN DETECTIVE AGENCY, 320, St. Louis, Mo.

ALL MEN, WOMEN, BOYS, GIRLS, 17 to 65, willing to accept government positions, $117-$250 (traveling or stationary), write MR. OZMENT, 198, St. Louis, Mo., immediately.

EARN $110 TO $250 MONTHLY, EXPENSES PAID AS RAILWAY TRAFFIC INSPECTOR. POSITION GUARANTEED AFTER COMPLETION OF 3 MONTHS' HOME STUDY COURSE or money refunded. **Excellent Opportunities.** Write for Free Booklet CM-30. STAND. BUSINESS TRAINING INST., Buffalo, N. Y.

FIREMEN, BRAKEMEN, BAGGAGEMEN, SLEEPING CAR, TRAIN PORTERS (COLORED) $140—$200. Experience unnecessary. 836 RAILWAY BUREAU, East St. Louis, Ill.

MEN EVERYWHERE—Operate your own profitable business. No competition. No capital. Just few weeks training by mail. CROSSKEY, Dept. 1995F, Richmond, Calif.

MEN WANTING FOREST RANGER, RAILWAY MAIL CLERK and other government positions, write for free particulars of exams. MOKANE, Dept. B-12, Denver, Colo.

LEARN BRICKLAYING in School run by 600 building contractors. No apprenticeship or age limit. Good demand for our graduates. Qualifies you to work anywhere. Associated Building Employers, 402 A.B.E. Building, Grand Rapids, Mich.

Relief in 1 Minute

CORNS Bunions Callouses

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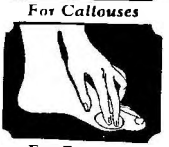
In one minute—or less—the pain is gone. The soothing medication in Dr. Scholl's Zino-pads produces this magic result, and at the same time starts to heal the deeper tissues. This thin, antiseptic pad, made in three sizes, removes the cause of Corns, Bunions, Callouses, and Tender Spots—by preventing the shoe rubbing and irritating the sore part.

The *very idea* is scientific. Simple to apply—unfailing in action—cost but a trifle. Get them at your druggist or shoe dealer. For free sample, address The Scholl Mfg. Co., 213 West Schiller Street, Chicago.

For Callouses



For Bunions

Dr Scholl's Zino-pads

Put one on—the pain is gone

66 Miles on 1 Gallon

Wonderful Vapor Humidifier

For All Make Autos. Spare or Full Time Agencies Wanted Everywhere

1 FREE TO INTRODUCE

BIG PROFITS TO ANY MAN WITH CAR

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The Greatest Detective Story Weekly!

IT IS NOW ON SALE ON EVERY NEWS-STAND IN THE COUNTRY

Here is what one of the enthusiastic readers of FLYNN'S has to say: "I read a great many magazines, but never have been addicted to writing to them to tell how much better they were than any other publication, but as to FLYNN'S I think it is different. I like detective stories, but have found too much sameness.

"You have succeeded in breaking loose from the old formula. Please continue to do so. What I like in your magazine as much as anything is the actual experience of yourself and other real detective and secret service men.

"I suppose it is hard to get good stories. It must be when Conan Doyle has to dig up poor old Sherlock Holmes whom he caused to be murdered some twenty years ago and cast down a mountain, but that is Conan's line anyway."

The Red Star News Company

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$2 Brings This Genuine DIAMOND RING

SIMPLY send $2.00 for the *most sensational, price-smashing diamond ring offer ever made.* A perfectly cut, guaranteed, blue white, fiery diamond is set in an 18 Karat white gold cup; ¾ Karat size. Latest design, hand engraved mounting.

10 DAYS' FREE TRIAL.

We take all chances—if you are not satisfied at the end of ten days for any reason whatsoever, return the diamond ring to us and your deposit will be refunded to you. *Send only $2.00,* and receive this genuine steel blue white diamond ring exactly as illustrated; in a handsome gift box charges paid. A legal guarantee bond as to quality and value accompanies each ring. After ten days' trial pay balance $6.46 a month for twelve months. **Price only $78.50.**

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Order Now! *This offer is limited. It may never appear again. Don't delay. Just send $2.00 as a deposit.* If you wish to return the diamond ring after trial, your deposit will be refunded.

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A full year to pay on everything you order from our TWO MILLION DOLLAR STOCK.

Address Dept. 1370. *Est. 1895*

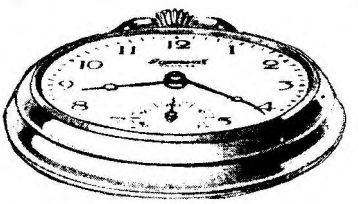
ROYAL DIAMOND & WATCH CO.
35 Maiden Lane - New York

In answering any advertisement on this page it is desirable that you mention this magazine.

For Vacation

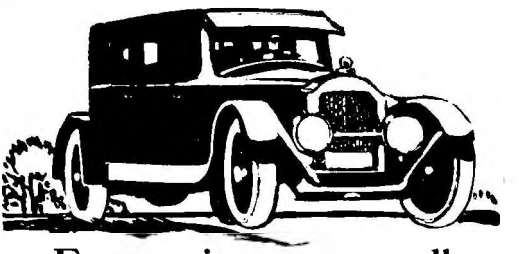
and All-around Summer Use an

Ingersoll



AN Ingersoll costs little and keeps dependable time. Why risk your expensive watch?

$1.75 to $11.00



Every time you pull the emergency brake, think of

There is a really interesting book on brakes called "Braking Safe." It's free. Write for it.

Department AF-7
MULTIBESTOS COMPANY, Walpole, Mass., U. S. A.

Get This!

A Profitable Business of Your Own!

Be independent. Make and sell this **new candy novelty.** Goes like hot cakes. Everybody wants it. **Big quick profits!** Many make $100 a day. (Letters prove this. Our files are full of amazing testimonials.) **Nothing like it.** Sells everywhere. Small investment. No help needed. **Work dignified, easy and clean.** Get all information. Send name, address to **A. T. DIETZ, 71 Sayso Bldg., Toledo, O.**

FREE
CANDY SUCCESS

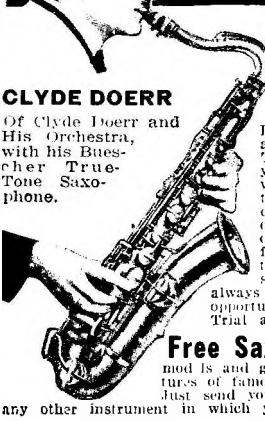
AUTO RUNS 57 MILES ON GAL. of "GAS"

A new automatic and self-regulating device has been invented by John A. Stransky, 534 Fourth St., Pukwana, South Dakota, with which automobiles have made from 35 to 57 miles on a gallon of gasoline. It removes carbon and reduces spark plug trouble and overheating. It can be installed by any one in five minutes. Mr. Stransky wants distributors and is willing to send a sample at his own risk. Write him today.

Easy to Play
Easy to Pay

BUESCHER
TRUE-TONE
SAXOPHONE

CLYDE DOERR
Of Clyde Doerr and His Orchestra, with his Buescher True-Tone Saxophone.



Easiest of all instruments to play and one of the most beautiful. Three first lessons sent free give you a quick easy start—in a few weeks you can be playing popular tunes. No teacher necessary. You can take your place in a band or orchestra in ninety days, if you so desire. Most popular instrument for dance orchestras, home entertainments, church, lodge and school. A Saxophone player is always popular socially and has many opportunities to earn money. Six Days' Trial and easy payments arranged.

Free Saxophone Book Shows all Buescher models and gives first lesson chart; also pictures of famous professionals and orchestras. Just send your name for a copy. Mention any other instrument in which you may be interested.

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Everything in Band and Orchestra Instruments
858 BUESCHER BLOCK, - - - ELKHART, INDIANA

Buescher Band Instrument Co.
858 Buescher Block, Elkhart, Ind.

Gentlemen: I am interested in the instrument checked below:
Saxophone .....Cornet .....Trombone .....Trumpet .....
(Mention any other instrument interested in.)
Name .....
Street Address .....
Town .....State .....

If you want the truth, go to a child

JEPSON had a spectacular record as a salesman. They used to call him "Crash-'em-down" Jepson. And the bigger they were, the harder they fell.

Lately, though, Jepson felt himself slipping. He couldn't seem to land the big orders; and he was too proud to go after the little ones. He was discouraged and mystified. Finally, one evening, he got the real truth from his little boy. You can always depend on a child to be outspoken on subjects that older people avoid.

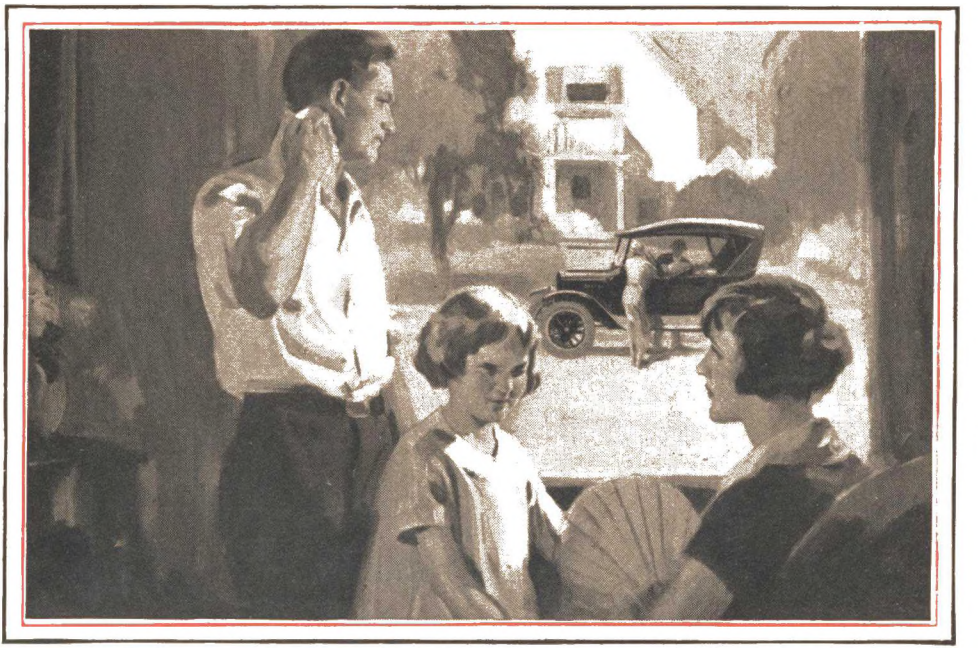
* * *

You, yourself, rarely know when you have halitosis (unpleasant breath). That's the insidious thing about it. And even your closest friends won't tell you. Maybe not even your wife.

But usually—and fortunately—halitosis is only a local condition that yields to the regular use of Listerine as a mouth wash and gargle. For Listerine halts food fermentation in the mouth and leaves the breath sweet, fresh and clean.

By using this really remarkable, safe antiseptic systematically, you know your breath is right and that you are on the safe and polite side.

Your druggist sells Listerine in the original brown package only—four sizes: 14 ounce, 7 ounce, 3 ounce and 1¼ ounce. Buy the large size for economy.—*Lambert Pharmacal Company, Saint Louis, U. S. A.*



"How did he ever get the money to buy a car"

Perhaps he *doesn't* make as much as you do—but he took advantage of this quick, easy, sure way to own an automobile

Ford Weekly Purchase Plan

More than 165,000 families — in all walks of life—have taken advantage of "The Ford Plan" to own an automobile. Let us tell you about it.

Every family—with even the most modest income, can now afford a car of their own. This Ford Plan makes it possible.

You accomplish something when you own an automobile—give yourself more earning power—economize your time—travel more, see more, do more, enjoy more—get more out of life for yourself and family—bring pleasure to others.

Buying a Ford means making a sound investment. An investment that yields increased earnings and pleasures, broadens your vision—moves you just that much farther on the road to success.

Our new book "The Ford Plan" tells you exactly what you want to know—"How to own an automobile—how to make your income do more for you—how to enjoy life more."

Every family should have their own car. Why be pushed and jammed in crowded conveyances when you can easily and economically go and come in your own automobile? Why stay home on pleasant afternoons when you and the family should be enjoying nature's beauty outdoors? You live but once and the years roll by quickly. Why wait for tomorrow for things that you rightfully should enjoy today? Get our book NOW. Don't wish for a car any longer. We'll show you how easy it is to own your own car. ***Mail the Coupon Today. This book will be sent by return mail.***

Ford Motor Company
Detroit

IT IS EASY TO OWN A CAR BY USING THIS PLAN

C O U P O N

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Dept. F-2., Detroit, Michigan

Please send me your book, "The Ford Plan" which fully explains your easy plan for owning an automobile.

Name _____

R. F. D. Box or St. & No. _____

Town _____ *State* _____

Thin..crispy..sugar shells *"stuft"* with pure..luscious fruit-jams.. ..nuts *and* Marmalades!.....

THESE are the original "Stuft" confections. Crispy, tempting Diana "Stuft" Confections have gained millions of admirers and an imitator or two. Each sugar shell is stuffed full of our own fruit-jams, marmalades and imported nuts. For almost 50 years we have made the 1200 Bunte candies according to the Bunte Golden Quality Creed—always remembering that they are something to eat.

The better stores everywhere carry Diana "Stuft." Be sure. Look for the Bunte trademark name on the 2½-, 4-, 9- and 16-ounce purity jar, or the tidy tin holding 2, 3 or 5 pounds. Each package contains twenty-one varieties of candy. Keep some on hand at home. The packages are air-tight. The candy remains fresh indefinitely.

BUNTE BROTHERS, Est. 1876, *World-Famous Candies*, Chicago

DIANA "STUFT" Confections

Bunte
Golden Quality
CANDIES

ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

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Lure of the Wild

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A NOVELETTE—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

THE north country had proved disappointing to the passengers on Canada's prize transcontinental train. They found it dreary, monotonous, a succession of spruce swamps and muskeg, of low-shored, gray lakes beneath a dull sky.

The color they had expected, both imaginary and real, was lacking. The water was empty of yellow birch canoes, the shores of wigwams and of Indian women cooking over smoldering fires.

In the club car only two people retained an interest in the flowing picture of lakes and swamps. The girl was reading, but she often looked up with what seemed uncanny prescience. Once it was to see a moose wallowing out of a lily pad pond, again for a fleeting glimpse of a waterfall, white and mist-crowned against the dark forest.

Ahead of her, his chair turned to face the window, the young man watched the endless spruce and spreading lakes, the countless bays, points and islands, and though these had repeated themselves endlessly he remained absorbed.

It was this absorption, or perhaps the quality of it, that first attracted the girl. It had seemed boyish, but she saw that his expectant, eager expression was punctuated by flashes of concentration and periods of calculation. Sometimes he would throw himself back in his chair and stare at the ceiling of the car as if fixing something in his memory.

Her thoughts did not carry her to an analysis of his interest in the landscape, but turned, as women's thoughts do, to his personality. This seemed so clearly conveyed, tense, vivid and glowing, gave such unmistakable evidences of comradeship, she found herself wishing he would turn from the window and talk to her.

The wish remained only a wish. Luncheon was announced and as she was to leave the train in two hours she arose and went forward to the diner. Later, when she had returned to the Pullman, the young man came in and sat down across the aisle and one section ahead. She could see only the top of his head, knew that again he was absorbed in the landscape, and she resumed her book.

It was only a few minutes later that the boredom of the passengers was shattered. A girl entered the car from the day coaches ahead. For a moment she hesitated as if dismayed by her surroundings, then came on with a certain air of resolution.

The girl who was reading failed to drop her book, but the young man across the aisle and all the other passengers caught that premonitory message which comes so mysteriously to crowds and herds. They looked up to be held athrill, for here, after a day of disillusionment, a bit of the north of their dreams had appeared.

No one doubted but that the newcomer was an Indian. The skin, the hair and, most of all, the eyes, proclaimed it. But there ended any resemblance to the occasional squaw they had seen at the rare train stops.

Another race, another factor than the silent forest, another influence than that of the native people of the north, could be seen in the clearness of what seemed nothing more than a deep, even tan, in a step and carriage unimpaired by toil or heavy pack, in a tilt of her little head and a glint in her dark eyes.

She was more than pretty. Her costume was quiet, worn with something of an air, and yet there was about her that which suggested beads and buckskin, savage color and the dark green background of the forest. She was startling, even beautiful.

For a few yards she braved the stares and then her eyes fell and her step became uncertain. At that moment the girl looked up from her book. In an instant she was on her feet and in the aisle.

"Minette!" she cried as she rushed forward with outstretched arms.

The Indian girl stared in wonder and then with a little gasp of delight she flung herself into the other's embrace. They kissed, drew apart, clasped hands, embraced again.

"It's so good to see you!" the white girl exclaimed. "How long have you been on the train?"

"I got on at Port Arthur," Minette answered.

"And we will go out to Lake Kabetogama together. Minette, you're prettier than ever!"

"But you, Nell! You—you're different!"

Minette stood in frank admiration and both girls remained unconscious of the stares and now the sympathetic smiles of the passengers. They were also unaware of the contrast they presented. Each was beautiful in such antithesis, the one small and dark and vivid, like a partly tamed creature of the forest, the other taller and so fair, animated and radiant, but with the assurance and stability of her race.

It was Nell, the white girl, who broke the tableau. She led Minette to her seat and placed her next the window. There, hidden by the high back from all but two or three of their fellow passengers, they faced each other.

"It's three years since I've seen you." Nell began.

"I haven't been home since," Minette explained, and there was a touch of pain in her voice.

"You poor dear! Was it so bad at the convent?"

"They were good to me, only—"

"I know."

"You, too!" Minette exclaimed. "Did you feel like—like you were caught in a trap?"

"No, not in college. I loved it! It's now, going back, that I feel—"

Sudden emotion stopped her for a moment, then she rushed on impulsively:

"Oh, Minette, if I could only feel about the bush as you do! It would be so much easier for me when I think of dad up there alone."

"You mean you haven't been lonely for the lakes and the spruce?" and Minette's tone was incredulous. "When I've thought of all the things, all the times—"

The Indian girl's voice told so much of her loneliness a flood of warm sympathy swept Nell's own thoughts into the background.

"And the hunters coming to the post and canoes turned over on the shore," the white girl added. "And the fires in front of the wigwams."

"That's it!" Minette cried passionately. "Smoke! The smell of it! Once last fall the gardener was burning some brush. It was terrible. That night I crawled over the wall."

"Minette!"

"They didn't catch me for three days. I had no money and I started to walk."

"But what did they do then?"

"The mother superior could read people's minds. She said she knew how it was with girls from the bush. And she told the gardener to burn the brush elsewhere."

"But it's over now," and Nell squeezed the Indian girl's hand.

"Yes, I'm going home."

Minette was like a child, switching instantly from sorrow to joy. She had not entirely escaped from the effects of the loneliness and crushing nostalgia of wilderness people confined in a city, but at the thought of returning to the things she loved she became ecstatic.

"We'll have such good times this summer!" she exclaimed. "Like we used to. Only," and she searched Nell's face shrewdly, "you are not so happy to go back to Kabetogama."

"Of course I am," Nell protested. "Dad has been so lonesome, I know, living there alone."

"But you would rather live in a city. I don't understand that."

"It wasn't like the convent," Nell explained. "I wasn't shut off from my own people and I could go and come as I pleased. And there were so many things I enjoyed, so many things I didn't have time for, that I wanted—"

She stopped, suddenly confronted with an inability to explain longings and emotions she had never tried to make clear in words. There were some definite things, music, access to libraries, theaters, the gayety of college dances, but back of all this was an urge for life itself, a yearning for the full expression of it, a revulsion at the thought of the stark loneliness and ghastly emptiness of existence in an isolated fur trading post.

Minette, watching her, was only lost in childish wonder.

"Then you will stay at Kabetogama just this summer?" she asked.

Nell did not answer. In the Indian girl's perplexity she saw her father's attitude. He would be like that, uncomprehending, hurt, without even that understanding which would permit sympathy. And she knew she could never tell him, never go away again, without leaving him enraged by what he would consider her heartlessness.

She felt Minette squirm in her seat.

"Why do men look at me?" the girl demanded in a whisper.

Nell glanced across the aisle. The young man she had seen in the club car had taken the forward seat of his section and was staring intently at Minette.

As when Nell had first seen him, he was absorbed. Now he was facing her and she could see his eyes. They reminded her of a child's, so rapt and denoting such complete unconsciousness of his surroundings, and yet they were not blank. His interest and admiration were unmistakable.

Nell's first reaction was a twinge of resentment. Not once had he looked at her like that, but more than ever Nell was aware of a warm, vivid personality, of a vague stirring within herself, a responsive vibration. Then Minette again broke in on her thoughts.

" Where are the beds?" she asked. " That is why I came in here. I never saw a sleeping car."

Nell explained, then looked at her watch.

" We will be there in ten minutes," she said. " You had better see to your luggage."

Obediently Minette went forward to the day coach and Nell turned to her own preparations for leaving the train. It was not until she sat down that she saw the man across the aisle was not in his seat. In a moment he came hurriedly from the day coach, thrust some things into a bag and beckoned to the porter. When Nell alighted from the train he followed her to the platform and his luggage was set beside hers.

Brule River consisted of a small station, section and pump houses and a water tank. There was no store, no inhabitants except the half dozen railroad employees. The cleared right of way had been widened just enough for a siding and the buildings. Otherwise the forest remained untouched, crowding close, a little awesome when the train drew away and left the place in sudden hush.

As Nell looked down the short platform she became aware that the man from across the aisle was coming nearer. She turned quickly toward Minette, who had alighted near the station building.

" There is Mis-tay-os-sin!" Minette cried excitedly as she pointed to an Indian leaning against a pile of ties.

They hurried to him and were greeted with broad smiles and hearty handshakes. Mis-tay-os-sin, who had worked for Nell's father since she could remember, did not try to hide his joy in seeing her again. His remarks were partly humorous, but there was an affectionate note in his voice and a touch of sadness when he said that she was no longer a little girl.

But he had little opportunity to speak. Minette smothered him in a swift flow of questions. She did not wait for answers, seemed to revel in her first opportunity in three years to speak Ojibwa, and she stopped only when Mis-tay-os-sin pretended to hold his ears.

" Jim Ramsay has sent me for Nellie," he then explained in Ojibwa, " and Michael de la Foret has sent Mah-ne-gi-zhik for little Nah-no-kas here. We came together in the same canoe and are ready to take you back."

" Who is Mah-ne-gi-zhik?" Minette demanded. " Is he so old that he is called ' Lots of days?' "

" His father hoped that he would live long," Mis-tay-os-sin explained with a grin. " He is a young man who came to Kabetogama from the Mattawa country. He is waiting at the river."

Mis-tay-os-sin went on to get the girl's luggage and they turned to a trail that led from behind the water tank to a stream two hundred yards away. Minette laughed from sheer delight as she skipped over the soft earth and springy moss. Nell, following more slowly, turned at the edge of the forest and looked back.

The young man of the Pullman was on the platform, but, though he was talking to the telegraph operator in his peculiarly intent and absorbed manner, he was for her no longer the vivid personality she had glimpsed in the club car but rather a symbol of the world she was leaving. His posture, his gesture and, she imagined, a crisp, direct manner of speaking, set him definitely apart from any one she would see in the wilderness.

A few yards farther she found Minette waiting for her. The Indian girl was ecstatic. She skipped on again, then halted.

" Oh, look, Nell! *Wah-bos!* It is the first I have seen."

She crouched that she might better watch a rabbit which, absurdly confident that its brown summer coat rendered it invisible despite its white feet and large, black eyes, sat motionless beneath a spruce sapling.

Minette addressed it softly, her mood making music of the Ojibwa language. There was mingled in her tone the heart-

ache of those inconsolable years in the convent and the fierce joy of a wild thing that has regained freedom. Nell, understanding, wholly sympathetic, waited until the girl rose to her feet and skipped gayly on along the trail.

At the river they found a young Indian sitting beside a large canoe. He looked at them with the undisguised curiosity of the native whose life has been spent far back in the bush and whose contact with white people has been confined to a yearly visit to a trading post.

"*Wah!*" Minette cried with an affected growl. "We'll bite you," and she laughed so gayly a broad grin spread across his face.

In the two and a half days that followed in the hundred-mile journey to Kabetogama there was no abatement in Minette's high spirits. Impulsive, bubbling with questions and delighted comments, under the stimulus of her joy in the return to familiar surroundings, in the rush of the canoe through rapids, in winding, beckoning portages, she became again the happy-hearted child of the fur post.

Nell, watching, rejoiced with Minette, but her own problem only became the more dismaying. For as they went farther from the railroad and the great wilderness closed around them her revolting spirit began its unceasing fight against those most despotic of all bonds, the feeling of obligation to those we love.

Her years at school had been a brief but entrancing period that had displayed an inviting glimpse of the world outside. The experience with which her father had hoped to satisfy what was to him an incomprehensible desire to know something other than fur land had only whetted her appetite for more.

Now, although she strove to focus on the picture of her father waiting, lonely and disconsolate, until she should return, and to see in his summary decision only the love and desolation which lay behind it, her own sharply urgent desires cried out in protest.

Some of this feeling clouded her joy at sight of him as he came down to the canoe landing to meet her.

"Lord, girl!" he shouted as his arms went around her. "It's good to see you! Getting a daughter educated is a mighty lonesome business. But it's behind us."

They walked up to the post together, their arms entwined, and as she entered the living room and saw the preparations he had made, flowers in vases, her own little table with her books and sewing beneath the lamp, she flushed in self-denunciation.

"You've made a regular party of it!" she exclaimed.

"Ought to. Second time in my life my home has welcomed a woman."

At the unwonted emotion in his voice she stole a quick glance toward him and for the first time saw the hair above the temples was grayer and his movements slower than she remembered them to have been at her last visit. And even while this discovery seemed to be forging her chains more surely, it induced a tenderness which made her resolve afresh not to spoil the beauty of her home-coming by any reference to the world outside.

So it was only of the affairs of Lake Kabetogama that she spoke the first evening and finally of Minette and her ecstasy in all the little things of the wilderness. When Nell looked up from telling how the girl had laid bare her loneliness and longing to a rabbit she saw a twinkle in Jim Ramsay's eyes.

"But it is a terrible thing to do to a child," she protested. "And so useless. Whatever she learned in the convent was left there, like her uniforms."

"She'll have to get over that," her father said. "Michel is going to make a real lady out of her."

"He might have done so if he had started twenty years ago!" Nell exclaimed indignantly. "He can't change her now."

"Oh, yes he can. He planned it all last summer. The nitchie blood is going to be cleared out of the De la Forets. Minette is going to marry a white man to start things."

"Who?"

"Michel doesn't know. He has only decided on how he will do it. Sure-fire scheme, all right."

Again Nell saw the twinkle in his eyes, and because she knew he derived only

amusement from Michel de la Foret's actions no matter what they were her dread held her silent.

"Funny you didn't hear about it at Brule River," Jim Ramsay continued. "The whole bush has been talking about it."

"About what?"

"You know how the noble blood has been coming to the top in Michel the last few years. Can't guess what started it to frothing. He seemed happy being an ordinary half-breed who didn't have to work. When the old count was alive Michel wasn't impressed much by his father having a title and being hooked up direct with the nobility in France."

"Nobility!" Nell exclaimed indignantly. "There's no doubt about old Constant having the title of count and being born in a chateau, but he was just a squaw man."

"But they say blood will tell in the end and I'm beginning to think it's true. Michel's got it figured out that the white blood in him, being noble, is twice as good as any other white blood, which makes him all white, and Minette, too. So she's got to marry a white man, of course."

"Stop joking!" Nell commanded. "What is this scheme of his?"

"You've got to hand it to Michel. He's careful. Making it dead certain."

"Jimramsay!" Nell cried, using her childhood's name, that by which the Indians always addressed him. "What is it?"

"Simple, too. He's just going to make a present of ten thousand dollars to the white man that marries Minette. Ten thousand in cash. No joker in it, either. Michel hands it to the priest before the wedding and when the knot's tied the priest hands it to the lucky man. Didn't think Michel was so clever, did you?"

Nell stared at her father in horror.

"What a terrible, terrible thing!" she exclaimed at last. "There's only one kind —the remittance man who's gone piggy— that horrible Swede down on No Island lake. He wouldn't turn her over to one of them!"

"Michel's being fair and broad minded," her father said. "There's no strings to his offer. The only condition he's made is that the man must be white."

"I won't listen to you!" Nell cried as she arose from her chair. "It's too horrible. And poor little Minette! To come back after those three years of loneliness to such a thing."

"But she's got to marry some one."

"At least she should decide who."

"Minette'll have enough to pick from," Jim Ramsay grinned. "They'll start coming to-morrow from two hundred miles around. It's not going to be a dull summer."

II.

JIM RAMSAY was right. Call it simply the "moccasin telegraph" or resort to some theory of telepathic communication, the fact remains that news travels through the bush with mysterious swiftness, and the day after Minette de la Foret's arrival Swede Olaf beached his canoe in front of Jim Ramsay's trading post and walked up to the store.

The man was too repulsive to be grotesque. An inch or two more than five feet in height, he had the body and arms of a giant. His legs were astonishingly short and unbelievably thick, yet an animal-like movement thwarted the expected awkwardness.

The man's body was forgotten, however, after the first glimpse of his face. The head was round and narrow-domed and in the rear it dropped straight to a great, deep crease in an enormous layer of fat that lay across a neck which could remind one of nothing but the back of a hog.

Beneath the low, narrow forehead were creases from which stared expressionless eyes that held so little blue pigment they seemed almost white in some lights. The nose was broad and flat, the mouth wide and the lips full, the cheeks flared far out and then dropped in what seemed one sweep to his shoulders.

Nell turned quickly away to hide her loathing when the man entered the store. Jim Ramsay greeted him with a casual "*Bo' jou'*" and reached for the plug of smoking tobacco Swede Olaf demanded in a growling tone. The fellow took it and went outside, where he sat down on a bench.

Jim Ramsay turned to his daughter and grinned at this early fulfillment of his prophecy, but Nell, overcome with horror at the thought of this man wooing Minette, ran out through the rear door.

An hour later her father joined her in the living room and beckoned her to a front window. She looked out to see Herbert Blackthorne, the Englishman, paddling past on his way to De la Foret's trading post.

"The pack's gathering," he laughed. "Funny how some folks can smell money so far off."

"Dad, isn't there any way to stop this?" Nell burst forth desperately. "It's —it's too horrible!"

"Michel's been getting ripe for something foolish for several years now. Ever since some one read him that old book the count left, telling all about the family in France, he's been swelling up until he just had to let loose with something. But it's a poor welcome for Minette."

"And she was so unprepared. She hadn't even dreamed of such a thing when she came in."

"She'll hear it soon enough. Trust those Indian women to tell her. The whole band's been snickering. Why, I heard about it down in Winnipeg last winter. Shouldn't wonder but what our white population will increase quite a bit this month."

"Please don't joke about it," Nell pleaded. "Minette's so helpless."

"Then she'll be the first Ojibwa woman who couldn't take care of herself, and I've been watching 'em for thirty years. But you're taking this too hard. There's fun in it if you let yourself see it."

Nell understood her father's attitude. For him there had never been anything but humor in the De la Foret family, from the piggy count, who had sunk so unresistingly into the squalor of an inter-racial marriage, to the indolent, bombastic son. Even Michel's attempt to buy fur in opposition to the long established Ramsay post had been only funny. Ramsay cleverly shifted to him the few lazy, dishonest hunters and let De la Foret stand a loss which would otherwise have been his.

Nell even admitted that there was something farcical in the situation, but her intense nature and warm sympathies ruled, and because little Minette, exultant in her freedom, had returned only to encounter the appalling consequences of a weak parent basking ridiculously in the false and empty glory of tarnished and tattered lineage, Nell wished to go to her and advise flight, defiance, trickery, anything to escape Swede Olaf or his kind.

In this she knew she would have to work alone and secretly. While her father was able to derive amusement from De la Foret's pretensions he would never permit her to embroil herself in the half-breed's family troubles. It was not that he lacked courage. Where his sympathies or sense of justice were aroused he was jealous of his power as ruler in the little district. It was simply that he could not see in it, as she did, a situation demanding action from outsiders.

That afternoon when Swede Olaf and Blackthorne entered the store together Nell in fresh revulsion left the house and walked along a trail that led down the lake.

The path had been familiar since her childhood. On it she had carried dolls, books, joys and cares and because no one else had cause to use it the trail and the rugged shore it threaded had become something of a sanctuary. She walked swiftly along it now, distressed and increasingly determined, until she came to a rocky point on which every bowlder, crevice and stunted spruce was familiar. The very intimacy of the spot served to calm her and as she sat down she began to attack the problem in a more orderly manner.

But colder consideration was only dismaying. Despite her zealous interest in Minette, Nell Ramsay had a thorough understanding of the bush and its people. All the characteristics of the Ojibwa Indians, all the effects of the mingling of red blood and white, and now the introduction of false vanity in a name, of a weak man's futile striving for the unattainable, these were too clearly known for her to hope they offered a loophole.

As she sat there, chin in hand, secure in the thought of privacy and engrossed in deliberation, a canoe slipped around the

point. In it was the man who had sat across the aisle from her in the Pullman, who had left the train so hurriedly at Brule River.

They were only thirty feet apart and both started and stared. The man was the first to recover.

"Hello!" he said. "Can you tell me how far it is to De la Foret's trading post?"

"About a mile," Nell answered.

"Thanks. Along this shore?"

"In the second bay around the point."

"Thank you. And De la Foret's daughter, Minette? She is home, of course?"

Nell started. Difficult as it had been to harbor the suspicion, she had felt from the first that Minette was the cause of the man's appearance, but he seemed, even in the face of this evidence, too fine, too clean for this virtual admission of the pursuit of the Indian girl.

"Yes," she answered shortly, staring at him in amazement.

"I saw you with her on the train," the stranger continued. "Most unusual, and striking. I never suspected such a girl existed."

He hesitated a moment, then swung the canoe shoreward, bringing it to a stop almost at Nell's feet.

"What we imagine Minnehaha must have been like," he said with a sudden burst of enthusiasm. "I wonder if you can't tell me something about her. Is it true that her grandfather was a French count?"

"He was."

"But her grandmother, of course, was—"

"A full-blooded Ojibwa."

"And the girl herself is half—"

"Three-quarters Indian," Nell interrupted, and for the first time in her life she found joy in the fact.

But her statement did not seem to quench the man's enthusiasm.

"It's very interesting," he went on impulsively. "Of course, I knew the moment I saw her she was not all Indian, that there was other blood, most probably Latin, or Celt. But the combination—it's astonishing how it has worked out. That oval face, the warm color of her skin, the light in her eyes that is anything but Indian! And her manner! There is a quickness, a real grace. And such a marvelous, undreamed-of combination of the qualities of the two ancestral lines. One could see it, the old world temperament breaking loose from the bonds of Indian stolidity with the resulting lights and shadows."

Bewilderment kept Nell silent. She had known on the train that the man was interested in Minette. His sudden appearance at Brule River had even prepared her for his hundred-mile journey into the wilderness, but she was completely astounded by this frank and impassioned outburst.

Covertly she studied him. He carried evidences of strength and cleanliness of character. Despite his impulsive tribute to a half-breed girl, she felt she had not been mistaken in him when she had experienced that instinctive attraction on the train.

His features were rugged, unusually so for his age, which she guessed to be less than thirty. And there was a tenseness and absorption about his eyes which revealed obstinacy or determination, but certainly failed to betray weakness. He turned suddenly to Nell.

"A startling thing, isn't it, this merging of old world aristocracy with savagery, linking Paris with the wilderness? There's romance for you. And what a story it must have been, the Indian girl winning the count, making him forget his own people, weaning him from the boulevards. I understand he never went back to France."

"Romance!" Nell retorted angrily. "Why do you people from the outside always think there's romance in a white man marrying an Indian woman? Constant De la Foret was a count beyond any doubt, but when he married an Ojibwa he wasn't a bit different from any other squaw man. And he didn't go back to France because of his wife, but because he was too lazy and too piggy. As for this romance you expect, he never learned to talk Ojibwa and his wife never learned French. He didn't care whether he could talk to her or not. He even had to have an interpreter to talk to his own children."

Nell's vehemence had increased. Wilderness-reared, she had no illusions about interracial marriages and now she found a strange pleasure in shattering the man's romantic illusions.

But he looked up at her with that same steady, absorbed stare, wholly unabashed, and then after a moment he smiled.

"Indignation is not becoming to you." he said. "And that's another reason you shouldn't be a realist. An idealist has much less to become angry about. I'll grant the world's often a wretched sort of place, something that only makes me stick to the imaginative. Really, you know, by ignoring things, or daubing them over with bright colors, one can be a lot happier."

"You mean you could ignore the dirtiness and laziness and general pigginess of an old Frenchman and see him only in romantic hues?" Nell demanded scornfully.

"If I knew him as well as you seem to have, perhaps not," the stranger admitted readily. "But never having seen him, and especially after having seen his granddaughter, I can construct a very beautiful and romantic picture. Besides, nothing you have said detracts in the least from Minette's peculiar charm. Perhaps there was no beauty in that union, but it has borne a beautiful flower."

Nell did not comment. She was too angry. The stranger looked up at her and saw the expression in her dark blue eyes.

"You and I are like flint and steel," he said, and for the first time the absorbed expression was gone and the intent lines of his face had recast themselves in a companionable grin. "But I don't believe you are altogether a realist. We'll have to argue that out. Meanwhile," and he shoved the canoe away, "I must seek the lovely Minette. I hope to find her in beads and buckskin."

Nell watched him go. He left her with an angry, bewildered sense of loss which was inexplicable. She had seen him only twice, talked with him once. She tried to tell herself that neither he nor his infatuation for Minette should mean anything to her, but she carried a strange irritability to the supper table.

"Heard the latest?" her father asked as he came in from the store. "News of Michel's offer's reached clear down to the States. The first candidate arrived today."

"You mean the man in the canoe?"

"Where did you see him?"

"He got off at Brule River."

"Did, eh? That's quick work. Money must have meant a lot to him to take a chance on any Indian."

"It wasn't that at all!" Nell burst forth. "I don't think he even intended to stop at Brule River until Minette was getting off. I saw him watching her on the train."

"Then he'll find the ten thousand an extra prize," her father grinned. "Well, have it your way. It ought to make you feel if it wasn't just the money. The Swede and Blackthorne, now, they've never noticed Minette before."

"But it's worse!" Nell exclaimed. "He doesn't understand what it means to fall in love with an Indian woman."

"I wouldn't worry about him," her father scoffed. "Any white man who'll chase an Indian girl a hundred miles into the bush isn't worth much."

"But you don't understand how he feels about it. He's painted everything in bright colors and sees only some great romance in this marriage of Count de la Foret and an Ojibwa woman."

"How do you happen to know all this?" Jim Ramsay demanded with quick suspicion.

"I talked to him this afternoon. I was down the shore when he passed. He remembered seeing me on the train."

"Huh! Must be sort of bushy."

"But he's not! And—"

Nell paused for an instant, startled by her own defense of the stranger.

"That's the queer part of it. You'd never think to look at him—and he talks like—like a man who's been places, known people."

Ramsay, too, had caught the defensive note.

"You mean he's better than folks up here?" he demanded.

"Not better, but different. Perhaps the word culture—"

"Different!" her father snorted. "I

should hope so. If that's the sort of thing you mean by culture, I'd say you've had enough of it. Feeling sorry for a man who's going to turn Indian for ten thousand dollars."

"But he doesn't know what he's doing!" Nell protested. "He doesn't realize what it will mean in five years when Minette is fat and has lost her prettiness and the romance is—"

"I guess he's smarter than you think. It didn't take him long to put the Swede and Blackthorne out of the running."

"How do you know?"

"I went over to Michel's soon's I saw him paddle past, of course. Didn't know but what it might be something about fur. Found him talking to Michel. He wasn't wasting any time, either. When I got there he was speaking about the old count and how sorry he was that he'd never known him. Spoke of his being a picturesque and romantic figure. Was funny to watch Michel. You could see him swelling up. Asked the fellow to stay with him."

"Then he's to live at the De la Forets'?" Nell demanded.

"Guess so. But don't waste any time worrying about him. I didn't pay any more attention to him after I heard his name."

"Why?"

"Jerome Roland!" Jim Ramsay pronounced the words with an inflection of disgust. "Any one'd expect just about what you said from a fellow with a name like that. When I left he was raving on about the beauties of Paris. He had Michel purring."

"But he's not to blame for his name," Nell protested so vehemently her father stared searchingly.

"No, but his folks are," he retorted, "and they're probably to blame for him, too. You never saw any one in the bush named Jerome. George and John and Frank are good enough for a regular man."

He shoved back his chair and struck the table with his fist.

"Michel's a fool, of course!" he exclaimed. "He's not expected to know better. But I'd like to see anybody by the name of Jerome, or any one spouting about Paris, hanging around here. I know the kind and I know what to do with them."

He rose from the table. Nell had listened in silence, but there was something in her face and manner which drove him on.

"Listen, girl," and there was a gruff attempt at tenderness in his tone. "You got me all stirred up, your feeling sorry for a man like that. I know you went off to school and learned about a lot of things I never heard of. But you want to remember you're bush raised and you want to stick to the things you learned here and the sort of men you've known in the bush. Maybe they don't seem so exciting, but at least they're safe."

"You mean—"

"I don't mean a thing," and her father turned at the door. "It's only advice I'm giving you, and I've lived a lot longer than you have. And I'd feel better about this business if you'd forget about Minette. She'll manage like any other Indian woman. Besides, Michel de la Foret can be ten times as mean as an Indian if he gets started. You're smoking a pipe in a powder house when you mess in that."

III.

It is the way of youth to scorn advice. The next morning Nell, arguing that she could no longer postpone her visit to the De la Foret post, started immediately after breakfast. On the trail across the wooded point separating the two establishments she met Minette and knew instantly the gay spirit had been crushed.

There were no tears, only the dumb pain of the savage, the expressionless features and the eyes that told of resignation. All the brightness and joy and childlike appeal were gone.

"You've heard about my father," Minette began at once in a flat voice.

Nell's distress was so great she could only nod as she sat down on the windfall beside her friend.

"He's chosen this stranger, the man we saw on the train. He just told me."

"What!" Nell exclaimed, aghast at the rapidity of events.

" It means I must live some other place, perhaps in a city."

The fatalism of the primitive and the blank misery of a child were expressed in the dull voice. Nell forgot all caution.

" Why do you do it?" she cried. " Run away! Refuse! Anything!"

" He would kill me," Minette said simply. " I didn't know my father. He has this new notion we are all white. He doesn't talk of anything else."

" But you're of age," Nell protested. " You don't have to marry any one unless you wish to."

" You haven't talked to him," the Indian girl answered. " He won't let me wear moccasins or any dress but this. He speaks to me in English. He won't answer if I talk in Ojibwa."

" What does your mother say?"

" She doesn't know about this man. My father just told me."

" I'll tell her!" Nell declared. " Don't worry. She'll find a way to stop it. Wait until I come back."

She walked quickly along the trail to the De la Foret clearing and went directly to the kitchen where Maggie, Michel's wife, would most probably be found.

Maggie had never been affected, except in purely surface things, by the De la Forets. She was an Ojibwa woman, knowing only the wilderness, when she married Michel, and an Ojibwa woman she had remained. She had adapted herself to a stove, a dining table and a spring bed, to a sewing machine, a phonograph and a clothes wringer. But the fact that her father-in-law was a count, that more money than she had ever dreamed of mysteriously appeared at regular intervals from France, thereby enabling Michel to conduct a trading post at a loss and still provide for the family, none of these things ever touched her in any way.

She had always been fond of Nell Ramsay. A golden haired child wins a quick way to an Ojibwa woman's heart, and after Nell's mother died Maggie adopted something of a maternal attitude toward her. This increased in the long years when Nell and Minette grew up together, and there was developed in Nell a genuine affection for the Indian woman.

Because of this the first fifteen minutes were consumed in a somewhat disconnected series of exclamations of delight, partly answered questions and bits of comment and gossip. It was not until Maggie had whittled a pipeful of tobacco and applied a match to the bowl that Nell could open the subject that had brought her to the De la Foret kitchen.

She plunged into it with a direct question as to whether Maggie had heard of Michel's offer for a white husband for Minette. Though the woman only nodded, Nell saw the flash of revolt. But when Nell asked if Maggie knew Michel had selected the stranger who had appeared the previous day she found herself looking into a face suddenly distorted by the fierce passion of a primitive mother.

And there the conversation suddenly ended. Maggie withdrew into a savage silence. In vain Nell made suggestions and offered aid. At last, realizing that whatever the Indian woman did would be done by her alone, and a little awed by the emotions she had aroused, Nell left the kitchen and visited the store.

Only the change she found in him permitted her to hide her resentment toward Michel de la Foret. She had always known him as an indolent, good natured half-breed fond of teasing her, but even her father's humorous accounts had failed to prepare her for the astounding conceit of the man.

It was ridiculous and yet there was that about it which brought fear to the girl, for she knew such vanity, combined with the instability of a naturally indolent nature and the ruthlessness of a savage, could easily flame into cruelty and violence.

Nell evaded the subject she most dreaded by playing up to Michel's new rôle. Since her childhood there had been certain stock jokes between them that never failed to cause the half-breed's fat sides to shake with laughter, but Nell felt instinctively that the new Michel would frown upon them. So she talked sedately of commonplaces for a few minutes and then took quick advantage of the entrance of an Indian whose weighty shopping needs embraced only a plug of smoking tobacco.

Once outside, Nell turned toward the trail where she had left Minette. As she walked quickly around the corner of one of the dilapidated log buildings scattered haphazard about the De la Foret clearing she almost stumbled over the stranger to whom Michel had decided to present ten thousand dollars and his daughter.

"I beg your pardon," he grinned as he rose quickly. "There is so much empty wilderness up here I never dreamed I'd be in any one's way lying in the shade of an old log shack."

Nell did not answer, so bitter was her resentment toward this man whose coming had brought Minette to the verge of tragedy, but he did not seem to notice.

"The white man has ruined this country," he continued with sudden fervor. "I've been watching those Indian children for half an hour and it's almost impossible to see them as they might have been, as Indian children once were. Aren't they hideous in those horribly fitting clothes their mothers have made in an attempt to conform to white standards?"

"I thought you found something so charming in Minette's mixture of French and Ojibwa," Nell retorted scornfully. "That's a result of the white man's coming."

He whirled toward her with sudden irritation, but again he was oblivious of her attitude toward him, so intent was he on his own thoughts.

"There's something I don't understand!" he exclaimed. "On the train she was more than charming. She was fascinating, set one's imagination aflame. In her home that is all gone. All the light and color have vanished. Her face is impassive. Her eyes are blank. Do you suppose that in returning to her people she has taken on their nature, their stolidity?"

Nell was astounded and her eyes blazed angrily, but the man did not see. As when she had talked with him down the lake, he was gazing away from her with that peculiar, absorbed expression.

"I've got to get it back!" he continued passionately. "I've tried, but I can't get any response. You know her. You ought to be able to help me."

"Oh!" Nell cried in a voice choked by helpless rage. "How can you ask such a thing?"

He turned to her in frank amazement, but she had rushed past him toward the trail across the point.

"Look here!" he exclaimed, and started after her.

Nell did not stop or look around. She ran down to a level, brush covered bench beside a small creek and burst through a fringe of alder into a small clearing. Half way across this she stopped, suddenly aware of Swede Olaf and Herbert Blackthorne sitting on a log at one side.

Both men started. They had been talking, with heads close together. Blackthorne rose as if to speak to her and then the crashing of brush told that Roland was coming. She leaped across the creek and climbed the steep bank on the other side.

A few steps more would have taken her to the trail, but as she was about to plunge through the spruce thicket she stopped and looked around as she thought that back there, for the first time, the three men who sought Michel de la Foret's ten thousand dollars were to meet.

The idea thrilled her. Olaf she knew to be a brute, Blackthorne a cringing, contemptible thing, each a product of that freedom of the wilderness which so often is construed as license. And the third, product of civilization, of a type—

Roland burst into the opening, paused when he did not see her, then started on.

"Just a moment," she heard Blackthorne say.

The Swede had moved forward and barred the way.

Roland, wholly preoccupied, started past, and again the Swede leaped in front of him and lifted one hand threateningly.

"Get out!" Roland exclaimed angrily.

"But we have something very important to discuss with you," Blackthorne said as he came closer.

Roland whirled and looked at the Englishman. The fellow was slight, dirty, unshaven and with worn and filthy clothes. His eyes were quick and unsteady. The only redeeming thing about him was his voice, and he chose his words with care.

"What is it?" Roland demanded.

"The question of the desirability of an increase in the white population at Lake Kabetogama. It is one that affects each of us very deeply."

"What are you driving at?"

Roland's tone was belligerent and Blackthorne glanced quickly at Swede Olaf. He seemed to find complete support in the brutish face.

"It is very simple," he continued. "A majority of the white citizens of Kabetogama have held a meeting and they have decided that the time is not ripe for an increased number of citizens of the Caucasian race."

"So that's it!" Roland exclaimed. "In plain English, you don't want me here. All right. Thanks for letting me know."

"I was sure you would appreciate the situation."

"That's just it. I don't. Whom am I contaminating?"

"Your presence is proving most embarrassing to local endeavor," Blackthorne said with a smirk. "Competition is sufficiently keen without the introduction of foreign goods."

"So that's it! Good Heaven! You don't mean that one of you fellows expects to marry Minette?"

"One of us will," the Englishman answered with his first show of insolence.

"What are you going to do? Draw lots?"

"That is a matter between us, and it has been decided."

"Sounds interesting. Guess I'll stick around and see how it comes out."

Roland's laugh brought a snarl to Blackthorne's lips.

"Don't make any mistake!" he exclaimed. "You get out! To-day!"

Again Roland laughed, looking from one to the other.

"Two travesties!" he cried. "Poor little Minette! A mangy fox and a gorilla hunting in pairs. Get out of here before I lose my temper."

"Take him, Olaf!" Blackthorne cried in a shrill tone.

The Swede lunged forward, his huge arms outspread. Roland leaped backward and Blackthorne darted around to cut off his retreat.

"You want it, eh?" the young man laughed as he whirled, ready to strike.

But Blackthorne scurried away. Roland thrust out a foot and the Englishman's right ankle struck squarely behind his left with a resultant dive over the bank and into the creek.

Swede Olaf stared stupidly, continued to stare when Blackthorne failed to rise from the water, but lay face down in a pool with only his shoulders and back exposed.

Roland did not see this. He had expected the Swede to continue his rush and after tripping the remittance man he spun about.

His change from defense to offense was instantaneous. When he saw the barrel-like body motionless, the ape's arms hanging, he sprang forward, ripped in two crashing blows to the broad, brutish face, and leaped back.

The Swede's head barely rocked. He looked at Roland, then to the creek. Again the fists crashed home, "one, two," but without apparent result.

"Good Lord!" Roland gasped.

The Swede turned toward him.

"By golly," he said dispassionately. "I get you."

He started forward deliberately, reaching out his long arms. Roland turned as if to run, but instead he whirled entirely around and with the full force of the spinning motion his right hand caught Olaf squarely in the center of his broad face.

There was power enough in the blow to stop the Swede, but only for a moment. His short, thick legs began to move, his arms again reached out, and Roland danced away.

Twice he stopped, feinted, darted in, but nothing seemed to disturb Olaf. Imperturbably he continued to advance, never changing his pace, but now swinging his great arms in unison with his steps. Roland quickly took advantage of this and slipped in between two flail-like motions to touch up Olaf's nose, which had begun to bleed freely.

Again the Swede halted and stared stupidly, as if in amazement that one of

his own swinging fists had not laid the other on his back.

"Now I get you," he said in the same stolid tone.

He stooped and grasped the broken end of a wigwam pole. It was of birch, about three feet long, a heavy club, and it whistled as he whirled it about his head and rushed toward Roland.

The young man darted away, looking about for a weapon. The small opening did not permit much maneuvering, now that the Swede's long reach was even greater, and it was only out of the corner of his eye that he saw Nell Ramsay across the creek, dragging Blackthorne out of the water. Just then he caught sight of a broken paddle and, evading a swing of Olaf's club, he picked it up.

"Broadswords!" he cried. "That's my game, fellow."

It was the shaft of a factory made paddle, of maple. It had been broken off at the blade and, while lighter, it was as long and as strong as the Swede's piece of birch.

Roland fell at once into the position of a fencer and held his ground as Olaf advanced. The birch whistled toward his head, was parried, and in almost the same instant the paddle shaft cracked against the Swede's head. Before Olaf could again raise his club he had received a lightning thrust at his belt which sent the wind whistling from between his thick lips with an explosive sound.

But nothing seemed to affect his stubborn advance. Unweakened and resistless, he kept pressing in. Roland no longer darted away as when they had fought with bare fists. He was fighting with assurance now, thrusting, parrying, chopping. His movements were bewilderingly swift, his paddle shaft rattled on the Swede's head and shoulders, and yet always Olaf kept pressing in.

His club, despite the force behind it, seemed to swing slowly. There was no strategy in his attack, no effort at defense. Methodically and deliberately he would raise his weapon, bringing it crashing down at Roland, take two steps forward and repeat.

Welts appeared on his head and neck. One eye was partly closed. The knuckles of his right hand were bleeding where the paddle shaft had rapped them, blood ran down from his nose and was sprayed upon his broad chest by his gasping breath. And yet he seemed as resistless as ever.

Roland retreated, rested his weapon on the ground and studied his adversary as he came doggedly on. The young man had time for a glance across the creek and saw that Blackthorne was sitting up. Nell Ramsay stood beside him, watching. Behind her, perched on the edge of the bank, was a row of Indian children, motionless but eyes alight with savage joy. Then he sprang to meet the Swede.

The man was fairly smothered in a shower of blows and yet he kept steadily on. Roland had thought that a fierce counter attack would bewilder and halt this adversary, but before he realized it his back was against the thick brush and the Swede was upon him with his sweeping blows. One of these scraped Roland's head.

"You've got to have it," the young man muttered as he swayed to one side. "Take it!"

The paddle shaft flashed, the birch club fell to the ground and Olaf stared stupidly at the limp fingers of his right hand. Then he stooped, picked up the club with his left and returned to the attack.

"Good Lord!" Roland gasped.

He darted to one side, struck in mid-leap and Olaf crumpled to the earth. Roland looked at him a moment, then turned and walked down to the creek.

"Come over here and get your partner," he called to Blackthorne, who had risen to his feet.

The remittance man turned in flight, but Roland leaped across the creek and stopped him.

"Go take care of him," he commanded. "This was your doing anyhow. The fellow hasn't wits enough to think out that scheme."

He rapped Blackthorne across the shoulders with the paddle shaft and when the remittance man had crossed the creek he turned to Nell.

"Is he dead?" she asked. "He hasn't moved."

"Dead!" Roland laughed. "Nothing could kill him. It was like having a bout with an animated bowlder."

He looked across to where Blackthorne was bending over Swede Olaf.

"I hated to do it, but there was no other way," he continued.

"You mean that last blow?"

"No, before that, when I broke his wrist. It was that or have him get me on the head before very long."

"Broke it!"

"I wish it had been the little rat's. It was all his doing. Set the ape on me. But listen. We were talking about Minette. I want you to help me."

"Oh!" Nell cried in disgust. "You are as bad as they are."

Roland looked at her in amazement.

"Besides," the girl rushed on, "you don't need help now. You have the field to yourself."

His astonished expression faded before a delighted grin, which in turn grew into the laughter of pure mirth.

"Look here, Nell Ramsay!" he exclaimed. "I don't want to marry Minette. I want to paint her."

"Paint her!" the girl repeated.

"Of course. That's what yanked me off the train, brought me out here. I've got to paint her, catch her as I first saw her."

To Nell's further bewilderment the eager, intent face before her became blurred and her lashes were wet when she winked furiously. Even then she was unaware of all her reactions to the swift, startling events of the morning, that though she had just expressed her loathing for this man, she had watched Swede Olaf's attack in unaccountable terror, and that with an equally inexplicable and savage joy had witnessed Roland's amazing victory.

"You ought to be willing to help me," he said when she did not speak. "Not only am I no longer a suitor, but I've cleared the field."

"Her father thinks you are," Nell answered with an unsteady laugh. "He told her this morning he had selected you."

"Me! I heard something about that ten thousand offer at Brule River, but I never thought of it when I got here yesterday."

"You managed to win Michel very quickly."

"Of course. I wanted to make myself as solid as possible because I've just got to paint Minette."

Nell laughed, a little hysterically. Life was incomprehensibly gay and care-free.

"And now you're more solid than ever. Those Indian kids—in an hour all Kabetogama will know you whipped Swede Olaf. He's been the ogre of the bush for so long. Every one was afraid of him."

"Poor devil. I think it was all on the surface. His appearance scared folks."

"But he's had fights, nearly killed men. And you haven't a scratch. I don't see how—"

"It was just luck," Roland interrupted. "I couldn't hurt him with my fists. And when he picked up a club he chose my game. Fenced a lot in Paris. Crazy about it once. Especially the broadsword. But I never thought it was going to help me bring smiles to a downcast model."

"Michel's offer still stands," Nell reminded him.

"That isn't so very terrifying without applicants. I might arrange to stay and take on all comers. Knightly service. Only you'll have to promise that you'll help me. I've watched you two together and she expands like a flower when you're with her. That's why I tried to talk with you about her. And you thought I was trying to emulate the example of the count."

Nell found herself joining in his delighted chuckles. There was an engaging quality about him, a quick buoyancy of spirit to which she responded.

"Then we are friends—and fellow conspirators?" he asked eagerly.

"We are." She never knew which was the first to extend a hand in sealing the pact, for life was suddenly gay, colorful and promising.

She did know that he held her fingers with a firm pressure and that he was looking at her with frank admiration.

"I was wrong yesterday," he said. "There's no flint and steel about us. But you must have thought I was a rotter all right."

"No," she answered hesitantly. "I only

thought you were an idealist—to an extreme."

"An idealist after a cash prize," he laughed. "But we understand each other now. We must because I'm very much in your debt. That fellow might have drowned in the creek."

IV.

JIM RAMSAY had employed half a dozen Indians to cut firewood and this, with the many other activities of a fur post in June, had kept him away from home all forenoon. Nell did not see him again until he appeared for dinner.

"Michel's ten-thousand-dollar offer has started things," he said with a chuckle as he sat down at the table. "This Jerome Roland is going after it hard."

"But he isn't after it," Nell protested.

"Isn't?" the fur trader laughed. "You should have seen Swede Olaf. He doesn't know yet what happened. But that was the only way he could be licked. Some one jump him from behind with a club."

"From behind!" Nell repeated in astonishment.

"How else could that young squirt do it? Blackthorne and Olaf were sitting beside the creek when he lit into them without a word. He clubbed the Swede insensible—his head is covered with welts—and when Blackthorne tried to interfere this Roland kicked him in the stomach and rolled him into the creek, where he nearly drowned."

"That's the way Blackthorne would tell it!" Nell exclaimed scornfully.

"Blackthorne says he doesn't understand it, either," her father continued. "They were sitting there peaceful and as far as Minette is concerned, they hadn't even thought about her or the money."

"It isn't true. They attacked him, ordered him to leave the country. And he whipped them both in a fair fight."

"What?" the trader demanded. "That fellow lick Swede Olaf! It can't be done except the way Blackthorne tells it."

"But I saw them! Heard them! They ordered him out of the country. It was Blackthorne's work. He did the talking and when Mr. Roland refused to go he set the Swede on him. Mr. Roland fought with his fists until Olaf picked up a club. Even then he didn't want to break the man's wrist, but he had to. And as for Blackthorne, he was running away. Mr. Roland tripped him and he fell into the creek. And you would believe their story!"

Nell had rushed on heedlessly, passionately, and Jim Ramsay stared at her in amazement.

"And he isn't going to marry Minette!" she added with a note of exultation. "He had never thought of such a thing."

The fur trader's first attitude of slightly contemptuous amusement in Swede Olaf's defeat was gone now.

"You seem to know a lot about it," he said. "Looks like this fellow had hired you for his lawyer."

The remark shocked Nell into a complete realization of how vehemently she had rushed to a vindication of the stranger. She flushed, but she went on courageously.

"It isn't right that Blackthorne should start such a story when there is no truth in it," she said.

"Not much choice between them."

"But I told you I saw it, dad. I know the truth."

"Look here, Nellie," Jim Ramsay said. "You keep away from Michel's until this blows over. I don't like to see you mixed up in such a thing. How'd you ever happen to be around when that scum got to fighting?"

He was affectionately concerned, and Nell explained freely.

"I was coming home," she said, "and saw Mr. Roland back of Michel's old Indian house. He wanted to talk to me about Minette, but I wouldn't listen to him and hurried right on."

"That's the way!" Ramsay interrupted delightedly. "Don't have anything to do with them."

"He followed me," Nell continued, "and there in the little opening beside the creek were Blackthorne and Olaf. They stopped him, ordered him to get out of the country. And, dad!" she cried in sudden excitement, "you should have heard how he talked to them because they wanted to marry Minette for the money. He called Blackthorne

a mangy fox and Olaf a gorilla. Said they were hunting in pairs."

The thought crossed the fur trader's mind that he had never seen his daughter so attractive. Flushed and eager, her eyes bright, she was leaning toward him across the table. It was the first time she had been so animated since her home-coming and that instinctive distrust of outside things forced him to suspect the stranger's influence.

"Anybody can call names," he said gruffly.

"But he didn't stop there. When Blackthorne told the Swede to attack him Mr. Roland didn't wait. He backed up what he said, dad. He went right after them and he whipped them both."

There was no mistaking the fact that she shared in that sense of triumph. Jim Ramsay stirred uneasily. Unaccountably he felt the need of defense, was moved by unreasoning anger.

"You mean to tell me that fellow licked Swede Olaf?" he demanded harshly. "He couldn't do it with an ax, let alone a club."

"But he did! With the shaft of a broken paddle. The Swede had the club."

"A broken paddle! Sure it wasn't some Indian kid's arrow?"

There was an ugly note in his laugh that startled Nell. Her father was looking at her with rising suspicion, almost with distrust.

"But, listen, dad," she pleaded. "Half a dozen Indian boys were there. They'll tell you."

"I don't want to hear any more about it!" he declared peremptorily. "And you keep away from that mess, for mess it's going to be. Michel told me to-day this fellow's to get the girl and the ten thousand and Michel's a crazy enough half-breed to do 'most anything if he's crossed."

"But Mr. Roland isn't after Minette or the money," Nell protested. "He never thought of such a thing. He only wants to paint her portrait."

"What?" Ramsay demanded. "So that's his story. Paint her picture, eh? Jerome Roland!" and he pronounced the name with deep disgust. "I might have known he was a painter. He'll paint Minette all right, and marry her, and then take the money and skip. It 'd be just like a painter."

Again Nell found herself rising to the same inexplicable defense of the stranger, but she did not retort. She knew her father was very angry and she resented the unfairness of his wrath, for when she recalled that handclasp on the banks of the creek, the intent, vivid personality of the man who had turned from whipping Swede Olaf to a compassionate consideration of Minette's problem, she felt again the compelling quality of his charm, shared the gayety and buoyancy of his spirit.

"You are not fair, dad," she said quietly. "You are making a mistake."

"What's the difference if I am mistaken?" he demanded scornfully. "It doesn't do any harm. This is none of our affair."

The dishes clattered when he struck the table with his clenched fist.

"Good Lord, girl!" he shouted. "What do we care about the crazy doings of the De la Forets? Or of scum like Blackthorne and the Swede? And this painter! From Paris! Talking like a pea soup! Acting like one. We're bush people, girl, you and me. It's the bush we know and the bush we understand, and it's the people of the bush we tie to. What's the difference whether this Jerome Roland wants to marry Minette or only paint her picture? He's not our kind or the kind we want anything to do with."

White and still, Nell listened without interruption or comment, for in a flash the true situation had been revealed to her. The mysterious undercurrents of emotion that had swept them both, that had aroused her defense of Roland and had caused her father's scorn of him, were made clear.

It was the world outside against the wilderness, the world she longed for against the only world he knew, the urge for life and a complete living of life against the jealous possessiveness of a parent who could not comprehend youth's instinctive aspirations.

It was a struggle she had vaguely foreseen, and had dreaded, and now that she found herself facing the very crisis of it she was torn between love and compassion for her father and that strange, compelling

impulse which drives each individual out into uncharted waters on a voyage to unmapped shores.

The irrepressible qualities of buoyant youth were thrusting from behind; the granite ideas and insistent monopoly of age barred the way. Nell was caught in the endless conflict of the generations.

But as is always the case, she recognized only the personal elements of the situation. To her it was an isolated case and in her father's attitude she saw unfairness and blind prejudice, an unreasoning resentment. In her thoughts she even likened him to Michel de la Foret. After all, each was ruthlessly working out an idea, and the thought of Minette's tragedy stirred Nell to rebellion.

This evidenced itself first in a determination to fulfill her agreement with Roland and immediately after the noon meal she went to the De la Foret post.

On the trail an Indian boy overtook her.

"Is a *windigo* after you?" she laughed as he darted past.

"No," he said seriously as he stopped and turned. "The white man who nearly killed the Swede is painting a picture and I want to watch him."

"Where is he?"

"Where we have put up the wigwams. He has been there ever since the fight," and the boy turned and ran on.

Nell found Minette in the kitchen with her mother. The Indian girl acquiesced impassively when it was suggested that they go for a walk and followed her friend outside.

Maggie smoked her pipe and watched them depart with utter indifference, but the moment the door closed she rushed to a window. At the rear of the store she saw Mah-ne-gi-zhik, Michel's Indian employee who had helped bring the girls from Brule River. He turned slowly when he heard Maggie's low hiss and at her signal walked over to the kitchen.

Nell and Minette were halfway across the clearing, walking down the shore.

"I could hardly wait to tell you the good news!" Nell exclaimed as soon as they were out of hearing. "Mr. Roland says he hasn't had any thought of marrying you, and Olaf and Blackthorne are out of it now."

"Some one else will come," Minette answered dully.

"Wait until it happens. We'll find some way to meet it."

They had reached the edge of the clearing and the Indian girl suddenly ran ahead and threw herself on the ground beneath some small jackpines. There she lay, sobbing inconsolably, when Nell knelt beside her.

"Minette! Minette!" she cried, her own eyes wet. "You mustn't feel like this!"

"You haven't heard my father talk," came between the sobs. "He says I am white, French. I'm not! I'm an Indian!"

She sat up suddenly, her dark eyes smoldering.

"He is crazy!" she cried. "My mother is an Indian. His mother was an Indian. How can I be anything but Indian?"

"Of course," Nell soothed.

"And he wants me to sit in the house and do nothing," Minette rushed on. "He wouldn't let me paddle a canoe. He was angry when I talked to my mother in Ojibwa, the only language she can understand. And last night he had me read to him from a book he has, all about De la Forets in France and how they fought with swords.

"'It is the grand way,' he told me this noon. 'The way the counts fought for their women.' He said it was the way only nobles could fight and that the stranger, who has lived in Paris, must be a noble because fighting with a stick like a sword he nearly killed Swede Olaf and wasn't hurt himself."

Minette sat up, suddenly tense with passion.

"I hate that book!" she cried. "It gave him all these strange ideas about swords and counts and Paris and my being a white girl. And I hate this stranger."

"But you mustn't!" Nell protested. "He wants to help you. He saw you on the train and he thinks you are very beautiful and wants to paint your picture."

Minette was unimpressed.

"He has made my father worse with his talk of Paris," she said bitterly. "I wish I were dead."

The Indian girl was dry-eyed now. After

her tears and her passion she had relapsed into an impassive mood. Outwardly there was only the stolidity of her people, but Nell was too familiar with the Ojibwas to be deceived by it. She knew it to be only a mask, a shelter for the sensitive spirit of a child, and that behind it might be hidden joys and sorrows as well as suspicion and hate.

But as she watched Minette she saw the mask begin to slip. The dull eyes lighted and the face became softer. Nell was startled and perplexed until she heard a sound behind her and turned to see Mah-ne-gi-zhik paddling past in a birch canoe.

At sight of the girls he had trailed his paddle. Nell noticed that he seemed confused, undecided. There was, too, something furtive about him. He glanced back toward the De la Foret post, then shot his canoe behind a little point.

Minette was sitting up now, smiling.

"Where are you going?" she called softly in Ojibwa.

"To look for a place to camp," Mah-ne-gi-zhik answered.

"But you work for my father and sleep at the post."

"I am going back to my own country."

"Your own country!" Minette repeated, and Nell caught the longing in the girl's voice. "Where there is much fur and so many Indians gather at the post in the summer?"

"Yes, and my father and mother and brothers are there," the Indian said. "It is very pleasant."

There was longing in his voice, too, and Minette uttered the soft Ojibwa sound, half click, half hiss, of sympathy. Then she asked why he did not come ashore and tell more of his people.

Mah-ne-gi-zhik had related the minute details of their lives in the long journey from Brule River, but Minette's delight in them was by no means impaired. She listened intently, suggesting, commenting. Her eyes were bright, she leaned forward eagerly, seemed to have forgotten Nell was there.

Nell remained silent. The conversation was so simple, long descriptions of trivial things, it in itself held no interest for her. But its effect upon Minette was magical.

Starved for three years, it was a breath of life itself to the girl, this talk of fur and canoes and journeys to trading posts and the happy time of barter and gayety in the short summer. She responded to it as she had to the old familiar things of the wilderness after leaving the train. Nell found herself wishing Jerome Roland were there to see.

She acted at once and rose from the ground, but when she made some slight excuse Minette did not reply or look up.

Nell found Roland among a group of birchbark wigwams in a wide clearing where the hunters and their families camped when they came to Kabetogama. Thirty men, women and children were gathered about him and a dark, deeply wrinkled old man who sat motionless and stern, gazing across the lake.

But painter and subject alone were impassive. The women particularly found humor in this art of which they had scarcely heard except in the legends of their own people's crude efforts to depict familiar scenes on rock walls. Jests and derisive comments were uttered in low voices and laughter frequently swept the group.

The old man remained immobile and apparently unconscious of his surroundings. There was in his bearing and distant gaze the lordly scorn and hauteur of an eagle. There were savage lines, cruel lines, in the time and stress-carved face, lines cut by the hardship and exhausting toil the wilderness demands, by the slow, sure process of the ceaseless battle the north constrains, but all overlaid by the impervious tranquillity of age and accomplishment and wisdom.

Yet occasionally his lips would move and there would issue some ribald jest or sardonic remark that would fill the clearing with shrieks of mirth. He had the "look of eagles" and was concerned most with maintaining his position as jester of the band.

Through it all Jerome Roland remained oblivious of everything except his work. The absorption which Nell had discovered to be characteristic of him entrenched his easel. Even when she stopped beside it he only glanced at her absently, muttered something and forgot she had come.

It was the first time Nell had ever watched the building of a portrait. At first she was aware of the comments of the Indians, and she thought them apt. It was a crude thing, blocked out roughly, almost a caricature, and then as the minutes passed and the brushes moved swiftly a miracle began to happen.

Even the tittering Indians were silenced. There were little guttural clucks of awe, and Nell suddenly realized that it was not a likeness, but a soul that was being so magically transmitted by the little daubs and lines, by the mellowing effects of colors that had appeared harsh—not the obscene wag she knew the sitter to be, deceitful, lazy, fawning about the two posts, not as any Indian she had ever seen, but the embodiment of the spirit of a race.

There was savagery there, but a savagery tempered by dignity. There was wisdom and serenity, but through them flashed the wild, fierce flame of the first man's first pride in himself and his kind.

To Nell it was magic. She had thought of a picture as a reproduction, a portrait as a likeness. Here she saw the lines and features of the old man, his face, his posture; through them shone something noble and fine, something untamed and untamable, something completely expressive of the spirit of a whole people.

Abruptly the swift fingers of the painter became still. He sat there for a few moments, staring intently at the old Indian, then turned to Nell.

"Tell him I'm through," he said in a tired, flat voice.

He began to put away his things. At Nell's call the sitter slowly rose to his feet and came toward the easel. His quick, dark eyes swept the silent group questioningly. There had been no response to his last jest.

When he saw the canvas he stood for a long time, silent, expressionless. At last he turned and looked across the lake with the unseeing eyes of the aged.

Perhaps there were uncounted hosts in the gray sky there above the low swamps, hosts of his people who had roamed those forests before the coming of the whites. Or perhaps he saw only the tattered, vanishing shreds of a race unheedful of the past glories of a superb freedom.

At last he walked away without comment and went into his wigwam, pulling the blanket flap across the door behind him.

"I think it is very wonderful, what you have done there!" Nell said in a low voice.

"You saw it?" he asked dully.

For an instant she was angry and then she realized that he was very tired, burned out.

"I could not escape it," she answered. "How long have you been working here?"

"Since I saw you last. Most unusual sitter. Perfect."

"But you didn't—" Nell began impulsively, only to hesitate in confusion. "You didn't paint just a picture of him. There is something else there, something he never had, that no Indian ever had. Didn't you notice? Even those people who were watching—they quit laughing. They saw it. It awed them."

"Of course," Jerome retorted a little curtly. "Otherwise, why paint? Why not use a camera?"

He whirled toward her on his stool, suddenly intent and absorbed again.

"What was it you saw?" he demanded. "What did they see that awed them? You say there was something there no Indian ever had. What was it?"

Nell found herself at a loss to describe her sensations and impressions.

"I've read stories of Indians like that," she said at last. "And poems."

"That's it!" he cried. "Perhaps not the Indian of your dreams. You've seen too much of him. But of other people's dreams. The Indian of romance, of the popular conception."

"It must be more than that," Nell said slowly. "These people—they have no such ideas. And yet there was something there that stopped their jokes."

"Why shouldn't they have the same ideals of themselves? They have chiefs. This is the picture of a great chief, of what they believe a chief should be."

"You don't know the Indians," she smiled.

"Thank God I don't. If I did—" and he shrugged his shoulders.

"But these people," Nell persisted. "I've known them all my life. They couldn't—I think you have done something very—"

She stopped, suddenly aware of what she had been about to say. She did not know how she had been moved by the portrait and its making. It was her first contact with creative effort and creative achievement, but she had felt instinctively what he was trying to do.

Her questions had served to clarify impressions rather than to bring enlightenment and now she knew that this man had exceeded his own endeavors, that in those burning hours, which had left him so limp, something had carried him up and beyond, that some force, some quality, genius perhaps, had conveyed itself to the canvas through those mobile fingers.

More than when she had seen the idealization of a people emerge from the crude blocking of the portrait, awe came to Nell Ramsay. This man had something precious, some gift, some ability, and in the light of it, and of those hours of effort without cessation, she understood the man himself, understood why he had leaped from the train and followed Minette through a hundred miles of wilderness.

The thought of Minette filled her with a quick passion for his plan to paint her portrait.

"Oh!" she cried in dismay. "I had come to find you. Minette is back on the trail, smiling, just as you first saw her."

"What happened?" Roland demanded eagerly. "Did you tell her what I wanted?"

"Yes, only she blames you just the same. She thinks you have made her father worse by telling him about Paris and French people."

Roland frowned.

"What made her happy?" he asked.

"Just talking with an Indian about her own people, the things she likes."

"Do you think she will sit for me?"

Nell looked at the portrait of the old Indian. If Roland could do that, what could he not do with Minette? A passionate zeal swayed her. She found herself determined that he should have the opportunity.

"Minette must do it!" she exclaimed in a low tense voice as she whirled to face him.

Roland's weariness was gone. He was looking at her with that intent, absorbed gaze. She felt each feature subjected to a searching examination, a rigid appraisement. He had looked at Minette like that across the aisle in the Pullman.

"No!" she cried with a vehemence that surprised her. "You can't take me for a type, a subject."

"Nell Ramsay," he said slowly, "I wasn't looking at you as an artist."

She found herself unable to turn her eyes from his, even though her cheeks and neck burned with the warm blood that suffused the skin. There was no mistaking what he meant, what had happened. Nell did not try to evade it or to dissemble, yet she found the moment perfect. Another word, the slightest movement, would only mar it.

"We will go and find Minette," she said.

"Of course," he answered readily.

V.

Even while Jerome turned to the prosaic task of packing his kit and Nell was occupied with the naïve questions and comments of the Indian men and women, who were still gathered about them, the effect of that moment remained.

Nell was always beautiful. Her childhood years in moccasins had given her a matchless, almost primitive grace of carriage, her color was rich and responsive to moods, her eyes almost articulate in expression. Now in the first rapture of that most potent and pervasive of emotions, bearing and color and glance were transcendent.

Jerome, looking up to see her there among the Indians, was held motionless. He stared for a moment, then sprang to his feet.

"Hurry!" he said almost roughly, and then in a lower voice as they started away: "You don't belong there."

"Where?" she asked in amazement.

"Among those savages. Great Heavens, girl! Any background! There's none that would dim you."

There was no resentment now. She understood he was not speaking as an artist, knew he meant she belonged in the great world outside. For the first time since they had looked at the portrait, confusion came to her and she spoke quickly of something else.

"I hope Minette is still there."

"You're very lovely, Nell Ramsay," he said. "And I'll be glad to see Minette smiling again. Everybody ought to be smiling. Where did you leave her?"

"Back toward the post. Listen! That's her laugh."

They went forward cautiously and at last Nell pointed across an opening in the forest. The Indian girl and Mah-ne-gi-zhik still sat where she had left them.

"She's even better," Jerome whispered after watching for a moment. "What a crime! She's the wilderness itself, that child. And to marry her to the first white man that comes along. Ugh!"

"It's too horrible to think of."

"Then we won't think of it. We agreed, remember, that we wouldn't permit such a thing to happen. Come on and we'll talk to her."

But the moment Nell and Jerome appeared Minette's joy vanished. She looked at the painter with set, immobile features and her eyes expressed her hatred.

Mah-ne-gi-zhik saw it and turned to inspect Jerome. He had all the Ojibwa's suspicion and dislike for the whites, and because Jerome was not a trader there was no need to hide it.

"Look here, Minette," Jerome began. "I'm sorry if I've given your father a wrong impression. I never intended to. Now I'll do anything I can to help you."

"I only want you to go away," she retorted sullenly.

"We both want to help you," Nell protested.

"Nothing can change my father."

There was such despondency in the girl's voice neither Jerome nor Nell spoke. They stood there, Minette and Mah-ne-gi-zhik remaining seated, and in the silence they heard footsteps on the trail. All four looked up to see Michel de la Foret coming toward them.

"Hello," he called genially, though his dark eyes searched the faces of Nell and Mah-ne-gi-zhik. "Having a good time, eh? What you call a picnic."

He did not wait for a reply or comment but addressed himself to Jerome.

"They tell me you have been painting a picture of that old Bom-ee-quay-gi-zhik. Mrs. de la Foret she say you never come to lunch. What you want to make a picture of a homely old man like that for when you got a pretty girl to paint right at home?" He winked and smirked and looked from Jerome to Minette.

Jerome frowned, was about to speak, when Nell flashed a warning. She did not want Michel to be suspicious until they had made plans.

But the half-breed saw her glance and his eyes snapped back to Jerome.

"Don't you want to paint a picture of Minette?" he demanded.

"Of course he does," Nell hastened to say. "He saw her on the train, wanted to paint her. He followed her to Kabetogama so that he could."

"Certainly," Jerome added quickly, following Nell's lead. "I came to Canada to spend the summer painting Indians, old men, old women, children. There is one thing I have wanted particularly to do," and his face lighted with a sudden inspiration, "and that is to paint a beautiful girl like Minette with a good looking young Indian like this man."

Nell could barely restrain a gasp of dismay. She understood what Jerome meant but she also foresaw Michel's reaction.

"My daughter she no Indian!" the half-breed exclaimed furiously. "She just the same as French woman, noble French woman. Her grandfather he Count Constant de la Foret. In Paris she got cousins right now. Maybe you see them when you there."

He had faltered under Jerome's level gaze. Caution had suddenly told him that he must not antagonize this young man, but his rage was not diminished and he whirled upon Mah-ne-gi-zhik.

"What do you do here?" he shouted. "You think you get your picture painted with white people. You go back to the

store and get to work. Think I pay you to talk to white people?"

He had spoken in English and Mah-ne-gi-zhik could understand only his anger. But this did not awe the Indian. He started back impassively.

"He says you are to go back to the store and go to work," Minette translated.

"You be still!" her father roared. "Talk English. She learn that playing around the store when she little girl," he explained indignantly to Jerome. "We always talk English in our house. My father he talk French but I never learn that. You," and he broke into Ojibwa and addressed Mah-ne-gi-zhik, "go back to the store."

The Indian did not move.

"You keep away from the store!" Michel stormed. "Me pay you to-night. No want you any more. You no good."

He turned pompously to Jerome.

"Those Indians they not worth damn," he said contemptuously. "They lazy. You tell 'em do something they talk half a day first. Look at him now," and he pointed toward Mah-ne-gi-zhik, who had got into his canoe and was shoving out from shore. "He big, strong, but he take all day to do two hour work. These Indians around here they drive me crazy."

Michel's indignation was most evidently only a pretense now. While he stormed about the Indians he was watching the three young people closely. Minette's sullen, impassive mood had not escaped him and after intercepting the glance between Nell and Jerome his dark eyes seldom turned from them.

But most of all he had sensed a change in the artist. Like children, Indians are quick to catch subtle reactions in others, and Michel, despite all his pretenses, was wholly Indian. Yet while he felt something had happened to Jerome he had no idea what it might be and he turned to flattery.

"That Swede Olaf and Blackthorne they go away little while ago," he chuckled. "You fix 'em quick all right. You know, you the only one ever lick Swede Olaf. He pretty near kill man sometimes. Just with his hands. All the Indians they afraid like he is a *windigo*."

"Poor devil," Jerome said. "The little rat got him into it."

"Oh, he fix Blackthorne!" Michel exclaimed. "He tell me that. Now he make Blackthorne paddle him to Brule River so he can go to doctor and then when he come back he going to tear Blackthorne all into little pieces. Just take off a handful at a time like you skin a rabbit."

Michel chuckled over the prospect and slapped Jerome on the back.

"By golly!" he cried. "I give whole lot to see that fight. Those Indian boys they tell me all about it. They say you just take a broken paddle and hit Swede Olaf twenty times while he wink his eye. I guess those two not want any ten thousand dollars now, eh?"

The painter flushed and started angrily. Michel evidently believed he had recalled the fighting spirit that had overwhelmed the Swede and he gave Jerome a jovial poke in the ribs.

"Just like they used to do in France, eh?" he said. "Two strong men see a pretty lady and they fight. That good scheme, Minette. The lady she always get the best man. And now," he winked at Jerome, "the man get the lady and the ten thousand dollars, too."

The painter was past control, but before he could speak or act he was startled by a low cry from Minette. The girl still sat on the ground, but she was no longer impassive. She was glaring at her father and the snarl that had burst from her lips was of pure fury. Her face was twisted by the passion of a savage and her eyes were like those of an animal.

The words that followed, hot, heedless, vibrant with rage, were in Ojibwa, and they hissed and cracked as they tumbled forth. Michel started back as if he had been struck in the face. Jerome understood only the girl's fury. Nell was appalled not only by what Minette said but that she should speak at all.

But Michel was not stunned for long. In Ojibwa, as fierce and molten as his daughter's, he denounced and vilified her, and at last, when she glared back with undiminished rage he raised a fist and started toward her.

"Here!" Jerome shouted as he sprang between them.

"But she should be beaten!" Michel cried. "For what she has said about me and you, too."

"I don't know what she said," Jerome retorted coldly. "But when you stick a prize on her and invite all the riffraff of the country to come and try for it she's justified in calling you anything she wishes."

Michel did not quite understand. His knowledge of English was limited to the vocabulary used in the simplest intercourse. But he did believe that he comprehended Jerome's defense of Minette. No man likes a bride marred by her father's fists.

"Sure," he smirked. "I forget she grown up woman. She been away three years now. Me always think of her like little girl. Don't you worry, though. She get over this all right. They all do. You no beat a woman she do something to make you because she like to be beat once in while."

Jerome had controlled his anger, but this latest insinuation was more than he could stand. He was about to burst forth with a fresh denunciation of Michel and a declaration that he had no interest in Minette or the ten thousand dollars when again he received a warning flash from Nell.

Michel was certain of it this time and he stared suspiciously at the white girl. Again Jerome started to speak and there was no mistaking the appeal in Nell's eyes. And because Jerome drew back the half-breed divined at once that there was something between these two.

It made him forget Minette and her outburst, for instantly all the fear and jealousy and suspicion which lie at the bottom of the Ojibwas' hatred of white men had become active. This stranger was a prize dropped unexpectedly into the wilderness and what, Michel thought, would be more natural than that Nell should enter the lists against Minette? Despite the ten thousand dollar dot, that lurking sense of the superiority of the white race told the half-breed that here was a real danger to his plan.

As always when the Indian encounters opposition in one of the superior race, Michel slipped behind the stolid mask of his kind. Even his eyes failed to tell more than that the mask was in place. He relapsed from the talkative, pompous half-breed playing at being white into the suspicious, taciturn Indian, and he stood there furtively watching Nell and Jerome.

Nell alone understood exactly what had happened. She dreaded the effect of Jerome being aroused again by Michel's boorish assumption or, what would be worse, by a sudden demand that the artist make a definite declaration. The girl was perturbed almost to the point of panic and sought to lessen the tension in any way she could.

"You should see the picture of Bom-ee-quay-gi-zhik, Michel!" she exclaimed with a quick glance at Jerome. "Won't you show it to him?"

Jerome hesitated until he saw the agitation in her manner and then drew the canvas from the case and set it against a tree. Michel stared without comment or change of expression. Minette rose and stood beside Nell. For a moment she, too, was unresponsive, and then both Nell and Jerome became aware of a change.

The artist, watching her intently, saw the sullen anger fade. But neither wonder nor delight nor admiration replaced it. The girl was absorbed, not in the portrait itself but in what it expressed. The very thing which had silenced the snickering men and women gathered about the easel, which had sent Bom-ee-quay-gi-zhik in silence to his wigwam, had been revealed to the girl.

Both Nell and Jerome felt that it was not the individual she saw there, not the old man whose seamed features had been familiar since childhood, but the wild, free soul of a race, of her race.

The effect was marvelous. Minette seemed to find hope, courage, perhaps a decision. Her sullen dejection and that crazed defiance of a cornered animal were gone. She was more than calm. She was elated as she turned abruptly and walked toward home.

Only Michel did not see it. He was too intent watching Nell and Jerome.

To Nell the incident had been astounding. Until that day art to her had been a matter of prettiness, of ornamentation or of faith-

ful reproduction, and now in the discovery of its terrific though subtle power she was conscious only of something little short of admiration for the man who could wield it.

Nell was too engrossed to hide her sensations. As Jerome turned to place the portrait in its case she became aware of Michel. He was staring at her with the naked hatred of a savage. Then he turned to Jerome.

"That pretty good picture, all right," he said amiably. "Anybody know that old Bom-ee just as soon as he look at it. You just make it to-day, eh? Tell you what. I give you ten dollars for that picture. I put it in the store."

Unwittingly he had broken the tension. Jerome laughed.

"Sorry," he said, "but it's not for sale now. I'm going to do a lot this summer and next winter I'm pretty sure of an exhibit in New York. Everything will be saved for that."

"But ten dollars," Michel insisted. "You work just few hours. Anyway, nobody in New York know old Bom-ee."

"Sorry," Jerome repeated.. His eyes twinkled and he added: "There's days of work on that canvas yet. Besides, if things go as I am hoping, it will easily bring five hundred."

"Five hundred dollars?" Michel demanded incredulously, and then he laughed. "I guess you have little joke, eh? Somebody pay five hundred dollars for picture of a dirty old Indian they never see."

Jerome picked up his things and, with Nell, started toward the De la Foret post. Michel, still chuckling, walked with them. He seemed to be very much amused, but Nell saw that all the time he watched her and Jerome. When they reached the clearing he was again silent and sullen.

Nell said good-by and went on toward her own home. She had gone only a little way when she heard her name called and turned to see Jerome running after her.

"I can't stand for that fellow any longer," he announced when he reached her side. "I'm going to set up my tent down the shore somewhere to-night. And after supper—I've got to eat with them now—are you going to let me come and see you?"

"Yes," Nell replied hesitantly.

"Don't say it that way because I'm coming to see you pretty often," he laughed as he turned away.

VI.

THERE had been little rain, the ground was dry, and Nell was wearing moccasins. There is something almost psychic in the effect of these light, pliable skin shoes upon soft earth after the weight and stiffness of hard soles and the shock and rigidity of pavements and floors. The feet seem hardly to touch the ground, the step quickens and lengthens and the accompanying sense of lightness and freedom imparts an irrepressible animation to the spirit.

But moccasins alone could not be responsible for Nell's mood. It was too exalted to be the result of a mere physical sensation.

As she walked along the trail to her home she was not conscious of walking, nor of the rocks and spruce, the log across the creek, the matted cedar thicket. She was only aware that the realities of life were far more glorious than anything encompassed in her youthful anticipations, that somehow, out of Minette's tragedy, out of the brutal onslaught of Swede Olaf, out of the absurd vanity of Michel de la Foret, out of the loneliness and emptiness of the wilderness, enchantment had emerged.

Jim Ramsay could not remain unaware of her mood when he came in to supper that evening, nor could he escape its effect upon her. He had always known she was beautiful, but as she sat across the table from him he discovered a new quality in her appearance. It was not animation alone, or eagerness or happiness. He could not analyze it, but he sensed a completeness, a fullness.

His impressions were vague, but because of their talk that noon he was instantly suspicious of the reasons back of the change. Her defense of Jerome Roland had been as inexplicable to him as it had been to her and now it aroused him again.

There was no fear in the fur trader's mind that his daughter was particularly interested in the painter. He would have affirmed with certainty that no child of his,

bush reared and with bush training, could possibly see anything in a dauber of oils who babbled of Paris to a half-breed.

To Jim Ramsay, Jerome Roland was only a symbol of the great outside world, a disorganizing influence, a contamination in the free air of the wilderness. Instinctively and blindly he felt only contempt for the man without once realizing that his reactions sprang from fear, the fear that Nell would be weaned away from him and her life there at Kabetogama.

And it was this fear that prompted his first remark. For a few minutes he had eaten in silence and then he was no longer able to refrain from introducing the subject that troubled him.

"A hunter told me that fellow painted a picture of old Bom-ee-quay-gi-zhik today," he said.

"You should see it!" Nell exclaimed eagerly. "It was wonderful, the effect it had on the Indians."

Her enthusiasm startled him and prompted the contempt in his tone when he said:

"I've been looking at old Bom-ee for thirty years and a picture wouldn't make me see him any different."

But Nell's spirits were too high to be affected.

"You're as bad as Michel," she laughed. "He offered Mr. Roland ten dollars for it. Wanted to hang it in the store."

Jim Ramsay understood the humor of that clearly enough, but perversely he chose to ignore it.

"Michel's a fool with his money," he growled. "What did the painter say?"

"He told Michel it wasn't for sale, that he wanted it for an exhibition in New York this winter. You should have seen Michel's face when Mr. Roland told him he expected to get five hundred dollars for it."

"Having fun with Michel, eh?"

"But he wasn't. Pictures often bring thousands."

"Nothing that fellow 'll paint."

"But you don't know, dad. You haven't seen what he can do."

"I've seen him."

It was like the lash of a dog whip. The color left Nell's face. Her father looked at her and grinned.

"But he needn't worry. There's one picture he'll get ten thousand for."

Nell knew he was taunting her and she was too appalled by his cruelty to be angry. But she was driven to a defense of Jerome.

"I've told you he hasn't—"

"Oh, I know," he interrupted scornfully. "He may tell you he didn't come to marry her, but I've read about painters. I wouldn't trust one from here to there."

Suddenly he straightened in his chair and when he continued his tone was peremptory.

"And another thing, he doesn't paint any pictures around here, ten-dollar ones or ten-thousand-dollar ones."

"What do you mean by that?" Nell demanded in a low, strained voice.

"What I said. But I'm not worrying. Ten thousand is ten thousand. Besides, Michel is as suspicious as an old woman and he'll see that things run straight."

Nell had never seen her father quite like this and she stared at him in amazement. She felt that he was not only unjust and cruel, but that he was contemptuous even of her.

"I don't understand you; why you should talk like this?" she said quietly.

"You're taking sides with this stranger against me, aren't you?"

"Why, dad! I never thought of such a thing. I've only tried to tell what I know to be true."

"What you know?" he demanded suspiciously. "I see. You've known this fellow before and—"

"I've told you the truth about that. I never talked to him until last night."

"Didn't? Then what you getting so excited about? You don't know any more about him than I do. My guess ought to be as good as yours. And being a lot older, and a man, I ought to guess better."

He returned to his food with the air of one who had finished a subject in triumph. Nell, angry, hurt, did not pursue the discussion. She not only knew she was helpless, but she was dazed, too, by the realization that she had known Jerome Roland only twenty-four hours. She felt she had known him always, that she understood all that she need understand of his character,

and yet there was nothing of this she could tell her father.

After supper the trader returned to his work. From a window Nell saw Mah-ne-gi-zhik paddle around the point, beach his canoe and walk up to the store. A few minutes later Jerome came across the clearing and she went out on the veranda to meet him.

"This thing has gone far enough," he began at once. "I can't go on letting that mad De la Foret believe I'm after his money."

"I know," Nell answered. "That's why I stopped you this afternoon when you became so angry with him. I was afraid to have you tell him the truth."

"You mean he is dangerous?"

"He might be, very much so."

"Oh, well," Jerome laughed. "I guess I can squirm out of it. But I don't want him to take it out on Minette. Why can't she run away?"

"That's what I've been thinking."

"Is there any one about the posts she wants to marry?"

"There's Mah-ne-gi-zhik," Nell said. "The young Indian who was with her this afternoon."

"De la Foret kicked him out before supper. Paid him off. I don't know. I'd hate to see a vivid little thing like Minette marry him."

"Why not?" Nell demanded. "Didn't you see her face while he was talking to her of his country?"

"That ought to be the answer," Jerome laughed. "If Michel hadn't fired Mah-ne-gi-zhik and she could have seen more of him we could have had hopes there."

"We might now if it were suggested, and they both knew they had friends to help them."

Nell and Jerome looked at each other, at first seriously, then with smiling eyes. There was no need to voice their agreement.

"Couple of Cupids, aren't we?" he grinned. "Or do the Ojibwas have a love god of their own?"

Both laughed. Nell felt a wonderful exhilaration and enjoyment in this plotting together.

"I'll have a talk with Mah-ne-gi-zhik," she said eagerly. "Minette—she can understand you, but—"

"I know she dislikes me. However, with something definite—we've got to act at once, though."

"Mah-ne-gi-zhik is in the store now. Probably buying supplies for his trip back to Mattawa. When he is—"

She stopped when she saw her father coming across from the store. She knew from his swift steps, from the way he held his head, that he was disturbed. As he approached he had only a nod and a curt greeting for Jerome.

"You were over at Michel's this afternoon," he began at once, addressing his daughter. "What's been happening?"

"You mean Mah-ne-gi-zhik?" she asked.

"Yes."

"De la Foret fired him, paid him off before supper," Jerome answered.

Ramsay scowled at the painter for a moment, then chuckled.

"I see," he said. "Michel doesn't want any taint of Indian blood in his family. I guessed that much when Mah-ne-gi-zhik came to me to buy grub for a trip to Mattawa. And paying cash, too."

He started back to the store, then turned toward Nell.

"You haven't messed in this, have you?"

"Michel was angry because he found Mah-ne-gi-zhik and Minette talking together," she said. "There was absolutely no reason for it. Mr. Roland and I were there."

The fur trader considered this for a moment, looking from his daughter to the painter.

"Look here!" he blurted out at last, addressing Jerome. "I don't want to get drawn into this or see Nell tangled up. Understand?"

"Just what do you mean?" Jerome asked quietly.

"That I want you to keep away from here."

"Father!" Nell cried.

Jerome had been about to retort, but Nell's tone stopped him. Jim Ramsay strode back to the store.

There were tears in Nell's eyes when

Jerome looked at her. Ashamed, humiliated, she turned toward the house. For a few steps he walked at her side in silence.

"I'm sorry," he said at last, "but I had no idea he—"

"I've told him you didn't want to marry Minette!" she burst forth. "I've told him you only want to paint her portrait. But he won't believe me."

"But he knows nothing about me. There is no reason—I think I'll go back and have a talk with your father."

He turned, but Nell caught his arm.

"No, no! It won't do any good. It would only make things worse."

"But this can't go on."

"Not now! Not now! Wait!"

He followed her in silence as she hurried back to the house. But she did not stop there.

"Where are you going, Nell?" he asked gently. "Let's talk this over."

He took her hand and led her back to the veranda, on the side away from the store. The house faced the short stretch of clearing and the wooded point between the Ramsay and De la Foret posts.

Still hurt and humiliated, Nell did not look at him, and he lifted her chin with a gentle pressure.

As when they had looked at each other that afternoon in the Indian encampment, she understood. Her father's brutal statement, her mortification and revolt, all vanished. They had been alone in the midst of those thirty Ojibwa men and women gathered about the portrait of Bom-ee-quay-gi-zhik. Now they were isolated from the past, from the future, from every other thought and consideration except themselves.

"Nell Ramsay," Jerome whispered, "you are very lovely."

He came a step closer. She felt that she was trembling, but she felt, too, that her courage must equal his and her eyes did not waver.

"They say such things are ordained," he continued. "Predetermined, inevitable. Horrible words! They smell of prisons and chains."

He laughed exultantly, joyously, and reached out and took one of her hands.

"Do you feel shackled?" he asked.

Nell shook her head.

"Of course not!" he declared. "What a lot of nonsense there is about such things. All the old flubdub, the conventions and the 'safeguards' and silly evasions and pretenses. And the new stuff! Lord, what drivel I've heard in Paris studios and in New York! It's as bad as their ideas on art. Words, words, myths and mirages! But we! Oh, Nell Ramsay! I love you!"

Nell found herself choking, blinking back tears, holding his hand with a fierce pressure. She strove desperately to speak, for more than before she felt that courage was required of her.

"You don't have to say anything," he whispered. "Back there in the midst of those Indians this afternoon—you said it then. That's the wonderful part of it. We understood. At the same time."

"That is why we don't have to know anything about each other," Nell said. "Nothing matters."

"Nothing."

He drew her to him. It was not a fierce embrace. Slowly and gently he took her in his arms and softly and with upturned face she slipped her arms around his neck. Biology and realism to the contrary notwithstanding, the physical did not enter into the situation. There was only wonder and peace, ecstasy of the spirit, a realization of matehood that transcended the essence of it.

Nell could not recognize this, but Jerome suddenly became aware of its significance.

"Don't ever forget this moment," he whispered. "Some day you'll understand all that it implies."

"What do you mean?" she asked a little fearfully.

"That I'm right in life as well as in art. There must be idealism, romance, a strata above all else. Applied to us, it means that there is something else than a primary attraction, that bottled up in each of us was something that could be loosened only by the other, that there is a glory in this moment that will live longer than youth and the mating instinct. Oh, Nell Ramsay! What a life there is before us!"

Nell smiled. She felt rather than understood that his speech was a mixture of rail-

lery and truth, of fancy and fact, in which he strove to express and yet to hide the emotion that swayed him.

"I do know you!" she exclaimed. "All about you! It's been only twenty-four hours—and yet—"

She found she could not express what she had in mind, the diverse circumstances under which she had seen him, his reactions to contrasting situations. She only knew there had been nothing to impair this strange, entrancing emotion and everything to assure her. And yet she knew, too, that the emotion alone was sufficient.

"Of course!" he laughed exultantly, and then he suddenly released her and stepped back. "But the point is, your father knows nothing about me and, what is worse, appears to have some false conceptions. What are we going to do about that?"

"He can't be changed," she answered. "There's more back of it than just you."

"You mean the wilderness against the city? The usual suspicion of a man who crooks a thumb in a palette?"

Nell nodded gratefully at his understanding.

"He has always fought against my going to college," she said. "The final struggles would have come this summer. He expected me to stay here, settle down, keep house for him."

"You have beautiful eyes," Jerome said. "I don't mean the color or shape alone. They promise so much, tell so much. But I think we can win over your dad. At least, we can try."

"I know him pretty well. I've struggled with him enough. He won't change."

Jerome looked at her steadily a moment, then said quietly:

"Then there is only one thing left to do."

It was part question, part statement, and the significance of it left them breathless. At last Nell nodded.

"God bless you!" he exclaimed. "You're piling a lot of responsibility on my shoulders, but—"

He suddenly burst into a laugh.

"That is just what we were planning for Minette," he said. "I know now why all the world loves a lover, only we aren't even sure Minette has one. How are you going to see this Indian Lochinvar, or is Mattawa west of here?"

"It's north," she laughed. "And the horse is a birchbark. I'll go down and sit near his canoe and talk to him when he comes out of the store. You can go back and talk to Minette."

"But neither of us can promise anything."

"We can find out and make some half promises," Nell laughed.

She looked around the corner of the house and saw a group of Indians enter the store.

"I'll have to go," she whispered. "He'll be coming out now."

"I'll see Minette and then I'm going to pitch my camp down the shore. I couldn't possibly stay in that house to-night."

Jerome found Minette in the kitchen with her mother. He knew Maggie could not understand English and, though Minette did not even look at him, he began at once to speak to her.

He explained that he felt responsible for the sudden crisis in her affairs and that he wished to atone so far as possible. He told her he felt her father was wholly in the wrong and that he stood willing to help in any way he could. Through it all the girl remained impassable while Maggie smoked her pipe and watched the painter with undisguised suspicion.

Jerome then introduced the subject of Mah-ne-gi-zhik, but still without results. Minette ignored him and then, in answer to a question from her mother, began to interpret with low, swift Ojibwa. At last Minette turned to him.

"I wish you would go away," she said. "You have made enough trouble."

"But Nell Ramsay and I only want to help you," he protested.

"I wish you would go away," she repeated, and turned her back on him.

There was something dismaying about the entire situation and Jerome went out. As the door closed Minette's eyes met her mother's. There was a barely perceptible flash and then both stared at the floor.

Nell had less difficulty in seeing Mah-ne-gi-zhik than she had expected. As soon as the other Indians entered the store he came to the door and she beckoned to him.

"You like Minette," she began at once. "She is unhappy because her father says she must marry a white man. She is afraid of him. Her one chance is to run away. Why don't you take her back to Mattawa with you?"

The Indian only stared at her and though she searched them she could read nothing in his eyes. Nell knew Ojibwas too well to be dismayed, however. She argued, extolled Minette's charms, told of her loneliness at the convent and how happy she would be among her own people.

Through it all Mah-ne-gi-zhik remained silent and apparently unimpressed.

"Don't you want to take her with you?" Nell demanded at last in an effort to break through his impassiveness.

"I am going back to my own people," he answered stolidly.

And with that Nell had to be content. Chagrined and yet amused, she watched him gather his purchases, carry them down to the lake and paddle around the point.

VII.

EARLY the next morning Nell was awakened by some one pounding on the front door. As she sat up in the bed she heard her father in the hall below and with the snap of the lock there came the angry, excited babble of Michel de la Foret. Nell crept to a window and listened.

"What you driving at?" she heard her father ask. "What's the matter with you?"

"You know!" the half-breed shouted. "You helped them. You sold him flour and pork and goods for her dress. You and that Nellie. You did it between you because she wanted the painter."

"Quit pawing the air and tell me what's eating you," Jim Ramsay commanded.

"You know!" Michel repeated in a voice now shrill with rage. "You can't fool me. That Nellie she fix it up and you help her."

"You're crazy as a loon. I ain't helped anybody do anything."

"You lie! I see it all hiding in the brush over there. After supper last night. Mah-ne-gi-zhik he go to your store. Then the painter he go see Nellie. Pretty soon you come out and talk to them. Then you go back and sell Mah-ne-gi-zhik the rations and the goods and Nellie and the painter they go around the side of the house and hug and kiss. Then she go talk to—"

"What!" Jim Ramsay roared. "You dirty half-breed! If I hear you telling a thing like that I'll kill you."

"I see it! Me and Frank Porlair we lie over there in the brush and watch them. And then Nellie she go and talk to Mah-ne-gi-zhik and the painter he go and talk to Minette. And this morning Minette she gone."

Ramsay had been about to fling his night-shirted body forward in attack, but the last statement halted him.

"Minette gone!" he repeated. "Where?"

"Where!" Michel shrieked. "You ask where when you help her. Now she married to that Indian, that Mah-ne-gi-zhik. He leave a sack of flour against the door for a present to me."

Jim Ramsay understood the significance of that, the pagan Ojibwa's method of marriage, a simple verbal understanding between a man and a woman and a present to her parents. He could not repress a smile at this working out of Michel's ambitious plans, and he understood how that sack of flour, purely Indian in its symbolism, must have maddened him.

But the smile had a startling effect upon Michel. It was as if the man's passion had suddenly chilled into something hard and sinister, as if his heedless turbulence had been compressed into concentrated rage. The controlled hate of the Indian had ousted the bombastic enmity of the half-breed.

"Look here," Jim Ramsay said. "I didn't have anything to do with Minette running away, and I told Nell to keep out of it. And as for that other—what you say you saw—you were lying."

Michel did not reply. His features expressed nothing whatever as he stared at the white man. Then he turned abruptly and walked away.

Jim Ramsay watched him a moment, then slammed the door. Nell heard his bare feet crossing to the stairs.

"Nell!"

"Yes," she answered from her bedroom door.

"You heard De la Foret?"

"Yes."

"Come down here."

But her father could not wait until she appeared.

"I warned you!" he shouted angrily. "I told you to keep out of this and leave those Indians alone."

Nell paused at the head of the stairs. She had been about to go down and placate him as best she could, explain that she knew nothing of Minette's elopement, and then she recognized that this was a minor matter, that the real conflict between them would come from the other thing Michel had told, a conflict in which she must hold true.

"That is not what is troubling you," she said, and she was surprised at her coolness. "It's what he said about me."

The counter attack had no effect on Jim Ramsay.

"Oh, that!" and his tone revealed how little thought he had given to the matter. "He was lying."

"Michel told the truth."

The fur trader's open mouth and rigid form gave scant indication of the terrific impact. He was incapable even of anger.

Despite his jealous, possessive attitude toward his daughter there had been a tremendous faith and pride. Fear of the outside world and its call had driven him to petty things, to scorn and disparagement of the painter, but beneath all that was complete confidence in Nell's good sense and stability of character.

Even now that faith persisted, brought incredulity. Such a thing could not be. And then Nell, driven heedlessly by courage and enshrouded by the glory of that scene on the veranda the previous evening, spoke again.

"And I am going to marry Jerome Roland."

"Marry him!" Jim Ramsay repeated.

There was something concrete in that. The other had been intangible, an infatuation, a perverse following of strange gods, a momentary departure from the steadfast, simple ways of the wilderness. Now there was something he could take hold of.

"We'll see whether you will!" he roared. "Get some clothes on and come down here. This thing has got to be settled."

"We'll settle it now," Nell answered. "It *is* settled. I've told you what I'm going to do."

She had remained cool and determined and Jim Ramsay recognized that not only his own rage but his position placed him at a disadvantage. He suddenly felt even ridiculous, standing there with bare legs and gazing upward.

"You dress and come down here," he commanded, and he strode to his own room and closed the door.

Ten minutes later Nell came downstairs and found her father pacing the living room.

"Now," he began at once, "about this painter. I'll have a talk with him to-day and he won't be bothering around here any more."

"Dad," she pleaded, "won't you listen to—"

"You can talk your head off when he's gone," he interrupted scornfully. "After I've made the bush too hot for him."

Nell turned away to a window. She had come downstairs determined to do everything in her power to save the relationship between her father and herself, but the impregnability of his unreasoning rage appalled her.

"God in Heaven, girl!" he cried. "You're mad! Crazy mad! Taking up this way with a stranger. You never did such a thing in your life before. You've always showed good sense. You've been a bush girl, with a head on your shoulders. And now—what sort of notions *did* you get in that silly school?"

Something of despair and incredulity, of wounded faith, had crept into the last sentence and it prompted Nell to make another effort.

"Dad," she began quietly, "what is your objection to Jerome?"

"Everything! His name is enough. And his trade is worse. And I've seen him. Objections, eh? What is there in his favor?"

"You would find a great deal if you gave him a chance."

"Chance, eh? And I suppose you know all about him after knowing him a day."

For the first time Nell was aroused. There was only nagging and petty vituperation about something which, to her, was sacred and beautiful.

"I won't talk to you like this!" she cried. "You are as blind and as hard as Michel de la Foret."

She started from the room, but her father blocked the way.

"I'm like Michel, am I?" he demanded. "Maybe, in a way, but I'm no fool. Minette may have given him the slip, but she's the only one that gets away from Kabetogama."

Something more than anger moved him. Nell was certain she detected fear, and tenderness drove her to another effort.

"Listen, dad!" she implored. "Don't you see you are only driving me out, that you will lose—"

"That's enough!" he interrupted harshly. "I'm going to fix it so you can't go."

He turned and rushed through the hall, and a moment later she saw him striding across the clearing toward the south. It was down there, beyond the first point, that Jerome had set up his tent the previous evening.

Nell had no fear of that meeting. She had complete faith in Jerome's ability to handle it, dreaded only the increased bitterness and the inevitable scars.

But what happened she did not learn. After she had eaten breakfast her father returned. He sat down at the table in silence, but when he had finished he came into the living room, where Nell waited.

"You're not to see that fellow again," he began at once. "Understand? You stay in the house."

Nell looked at him for a moment before she spoke. She believed she understood. In issuing a command, trying to forestall argument, he betrayed to her the fact that his interview with Jerome had not been satisfactory.

"That is the way Michel treated Minette," she said. "Can't you see that—"

"Don't compare me to De la Foret again!" he shouted.

"Dad!" Nell implored. "Listen to me. I'm all you have in the world. I don't want to hurt you. I don't want to make your life bitter. And there's a way out. Won't you do it for me?"

"What?" he asked with frank suspicion.

"Jerome wants to spend the summer painting Indians. He came for that."

"He won't paint 'em around here."

"Please listen! I'm sure you will like Jerome when you know him, and I'll agree, for a whole month, not to see him except here at the house, with you. Then, if you—"

"No!" Ramsay interrupted. "I won't have him around."

"Be fair," Nell pleaded desperately. "I am being fair. I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't. I'll see to that."

He rose and started toward the door.

"Remember," he said. "You're not to leave this house. I've got to go to the store, but I'll be watching. And by to-night I won't be worrying."

Nell knew that if he went out like that the last hope was gone. Blind, jealous, bitter, he was rushing headlong on a course that would take her out of his life, for no matter whether she ever saw Jerome Roland again, no matter if she spent the remainder of her existence at Kabetogama, there could be no bond between them.

"Wait!" she called in a low voice. "Do you know what you are doing? Do you want me to hate you?"

"You're going to thank me for this some day," he retorted.

For a long time Nell stood as he had left her. When a child she had recognized the jealous, possessive quality of her father's love for her, had even found it a tie between them in those long years when they alone constituted the white population of Lake Kabetogama. They had represented the white race, they two, had been very closely drawn together by their isolation and what, in Jim Ramsay, was a sense of racial responsibility.

Now that quality in their relationship had suddenly become a chasm and they stood on opposite brinks. He could not span it. She could only by renouncing youth, cutting herself off from life itself.

Because she understood her father she

still loved him. Sober reflection told her that it would have been impossible for him to react otherwise to such a situation.

Loneliness, isolation from his kind, the power a successful fur trader wields, grief over the death of her mother, whom Nell had never seen, and the subsequent concentration of affection and pride in his daughter, these, through long years, had made him what he was.

But youth and life called as insistently. There was no escaping the memory of those moments on the veranda the previous evening. A whirl of emotions engulfed her and she started toward her room.

But the physical process of packing a bag brought the first complete realization of what she was doing. She was going, but where? She was giving up all known and certain things, and for what? She was abandoning her father, and for whom?

Minette knew. The Indian girl had fled to her own people, to the things she understood and loved. There had been no complete severance of ties, nothing of the unguessed and unknown. Minette had even been aided and encouraged by her mother, for now Nell understood the part Maggie must have played in her daughter's escape.

For the first time Nell considered her utter lack of knowledge of Jerome Roland. She did not know where he lived, whether he was rich or poor. She did not know whether he had sisters or brothers, mother and father.

If she left the house and joined him down the lake shore she would place herself wholly in his keeping, commit herself utterly to unknown phases of his character. It would be as if she were to walk blindfolded out into life.

Yet this realization of the situation brought only a tender smile. She was unable to shake her own faith. After that moment on the veranda nothing mattered.

She knew all that was necessary. The things she had considered, they were mere details, trivial. The one matter of importance was dazzlingly clear.

The force of her emotions carried her to new heights. She even considered walking out openly, past the store. She had the courage, but she dreaded the revival of her father's bitterness. It would be easier even for him if she went quietly.

Her bedroom faced away from the store, toward the wooded point that stretched between the two trading posts. She tore the muslin screen from the casing, threw her bag to the ground and dropped lightly from the sill of the low second story window.

She walked quickly away, keeping the house between her and the store, crossed the hundred yards of clearing and disappeared in the thick growth. Once out of sight, she turned at right angles to circle the post and thus make her way to Jerome's camp.

Jim Ramsay discovered her absence upon his return from the store a few minutes later. When he did not find her downstairs he went to her room and saw the torn screen. The Indian housekeeper told him that she had heard Nell go upstairs only a little while before.

His command that she remain in the house had been more an outburst of anger. In reality it had not entered his mind that she would run away. Nothing that had happened had shaken his essential pride and faith in her and even now he saw her as the victim of an erratic moment, of a whim, of the machinations of this stranger.

"She'll not make a fool of herself," he muttered.

He picked up a rifle from a corner of the living room and strode from the house. Outside he started on a run toward Jerome's camp.

The painter had just finished washing his breakfast dishes and, his pipe filled, had sat down in the sun to consider anew the amazing visit Jim Ramsay had paid him early that morning, and its possible consequences. The first cloud of blue smoke had not drifted off when he heard a crashing of brush and turned to see the fur trader, rifle in hand, break into the little opening.

There was no mistaking the man's anger and subsequent surprise as he looked around the clearing and peeked into the little tent and Jerome needed only the sudden expression of relief to understand quite fully what had happened.

But he did not speak nor did his face betray his surmise. He stretched out comfortably against a windfall and waited.

Ramsay came forward and confronted him.

"I gave you until noon to get out of the country," he said. "I've changed my mind. You go now."

"You gave me until noon to think it over," Jerome corrected. "And I have. I am going to stay."

"You'll think again," Ramsay sneered. "Get your stuff packed and clear out."

Jerome did not move. He looked up at the fur trader with a steady gaze. Ramsay was white with rage, but the artist displayed neither emotion nor reaction to the other's fury. He did not even seem to be speculating on what the other might do next. If anything, there was a touch of compassion.

Jim Ramsay's anger was nearly beyond control and his thumb crooked over the hammer of the rifle. But as he stood there staring down at the calm young man reclining against the windfall it was forced upon him that Jerome's coolness was not assumed, nor was his attitude intended as a bluff. The painter was not only calm, but he was unafraid.

"Anyhow," he burst forth contemptuously, "there's nothing more to hang around for. Your chance of the ten thousand's gone. Minette skipped out last night with an Indian."

"She did?" Jerome cried, and he sat up with a jerk. "Bully for Minette! Was it that young fellow who worked for her father?"

His elation was not to be doubted and Jim Ramsay discovered, to his further irritation, that he alone had been shaken.

"Yes, Mah-ne-gi-zhik!" he retorted. "And you've made a pretty mess of it, interfering in something that wasn't your affair. Guess you won't sit there like a lump on a log when Michel gets after you."

"After me!" Jerome repeated.

"Yes, you! He was over at my place this morning raging like a wild man. He's sure you were mixed up in it and he blames Nell and me, too."

Ramsay stopped and laughed.

"I'll take care of myself and Nell," he went on. "But you! You'll move, all right."

Jerome did not comment, or could the trader see that he was disturbed. He continued to smoke until the pipe had burned out. Then he rose briskly and went to his tent.

Ramsay watched him suspiciously, but Jerome did nothing more than bring out his easel and set it up. On it he placed the portrait of Bom-ee-quay-gi-zhik and began to work.

"I can play that game, too," Ramsay snorted.

He found a seat with his back against a bowlder and, his rifle across his knees, settled himself comfortably.

His position had not been taken by chance. He could see Jerome and watch the trail from the post, while he himself was well hidden from any one who might approach the little opening in which the tent was pitched.

But Jim Ramsay found the time dragging slowly. He strained constantly to catch the first sound of Nell's approach. An hour passed and Jerome remained absorbed in his work. Not once did he glance at the silent figure of the trader. At the end of the second hour he rose from his stool, studied the portrait for a moment, then filled his pipe.

"You know," he said, and after the long silence his voice was so unexpected that Jim Ramsay started, "if you've calmed down I'd like to talk to you."

"There's just one thing you can say to me and that is you're going," the trader retorted.

Jerome did not reply. As if nothing had been said, he picked up his brushes and palette and resumed work.

Another hour passed. Ramsay found his seat against the bowlder uncomfortable and he was weary from the suspense. Nell should have appeared long before and doubts assailed him.

He wondered if he had jumped to rash conclusions, if she really had run away. He hadn't believed her capable of such an act, and yet he dared not go back to the house to see if she were there. He began to realize that he had taken hold of something of which he could not let go.

But, more than anything else, the composure and assurance of the painter proved

disturbing. They had been irritating at first, but now they brought uneasiness. Ramsay would not admit it to himself and yet he could not escape the fact that he had been bested in the encounter. He had failed to drive Jerome away, had failed to make any impression on him.

He tried to study the matter, but found he was only working himself to fresh anger. He had never felt so futile. Yet there was no recession. Blindly and stubbornly he remained there, waiting.

A soft step brought exultation, yet when he whirled it was not Nell he saw but Mis-tay-os-sin, his old Indian employee.

"What do you want?" he demanded in Ojibwa.

Jerome laid aside his brushes as the man began to speak and sat there, watchful and intent, for he could not understand a word that was said.

He soon saw, however, that he was not the subject of the Indian's visit. The old man was plainly distressed and excited. For a moment Ramsay was scornful and then he began asking questions rapidly. A wild, hunted expression appeared in his eyes and the rifle shook in his trembling hands.

Jerome came forward quickly.

"What's happened?" he asked.

"Nell's gone," Ramsay whispered hoarsely.

"Gone! Where?"

The question maddened the trader.

"Where?" he roared. "She'd be safe in the house if you'd kept your meddlin' fingers out of this. It's you and your sneaking around here that's stirred up the trouble, and if De la Foret harms one hair of hers I'll kill you."

"De la Foret!" Jerome repeated in horror, and then he whirled from the crazed parent to Mis-tay-os-sin.

"What do you know about this?" he demanded.

"Old Indian he go back in the bush to get some cedar roots for making canoe," was the reply. "He see Michel and Frank Porlair, his man, and Nellie going to lake over there," and Mis-tay-os-sin swept his arm back from the shore. "He think that kind of funny and after while he come and tell me."

It was Jerome's turn to be stunned. He turned helplessly toward Jim Ramsay.

"She jumped out of her window to come down here," the trader explained. "Michel must have been watching, he and Porlair. She'd go around through the bush to keep out of sight. They grabbed her and—"

He stopped, overcome at the thought. Jerome, too, was white faced as they stared at each other, but he was the first to recover.

"We'll find her," he said.

"Find her!" Ramsay roared. "If it hadn't been for you, stirring Michel up, getting Nell to—"

"Get hold of yourself!" Jerome cut in. "That can wait. Everything can wait. We've got a job cut out for us. Let's get at it."

"It's no job for a painter. That crazy half-breed is liable to do anything. Come, Mis-tay-os-sin."

Ramsay started toward the post, but Jerome leaped in front of him.

"You can't keep me out of this!" he cried. "That Indian is too old. Can't you see that it is our job, yours and mine? Why—why, damn you, I'd do more for Nell than you would."

Jim Ramsay stared at him a moment. There was no doubting Jerome's insistence. Perhaps their common anguish had its effect.

"Come along," the trader said gruffly. "Let's get started."

VIII.

It was a truce that Jim Ramsay agreed to, but only a truce. He reserved the right to his contempt for the painter and to his own counsel, and he strode forward to the post in silence. After fifty yards Jerome dropped back with Mis-tay-os-sin and began to question him.

The old canoe maker, Jerome learned, had finished his task before returning to the camp and then going to the store to report what he had seen. Even then Mis-tay-os-sin, rather than raise a false alarm, had gone to the little lake half a mile back in the forest and examined the shore. There he had satisfied himself that Porlair and

Nell had embarked in a canoe and that Michel had remained on shore.

Jerome learned that the only way out of the small lake was by a stream running into Lake Kabetogama three miles north of the post. Beyond that, Mis-tay-os-sin pointed out, an infinite number of waterways lay open to Porlair. A search would require days, weeks, perhaps months.

It was this last thought that Jerome carried into the canoe when at last he and Jim Ramsay departed from the post. It was torturing, unbearable.

He remembered Frank Porlair, a shifty-eyed half-breed employed by De la Foret. He knew the man had four hours' start and the advantage of changing his course at any moment, and as Jerome glanced across the lake a great, sprawling, many-armed body of water cut up by loing points and cluttered with islands, the search became appalling.

"If you'll steady down you'll not burn up in an hour," Jim Ramsay commented dryly.

The remark jolted the younger man. He settled his knees against the side of the canoe and applied himself to a strong, measured stroke that just failed to tap his reserve strength. When they passed the Indian encampment the canoe was leaping forward with sure, steady movement.

Around the point ahead of them came a birch canoe, its gunwales close to the water because of the load it carried.

"Wait," Ramsay commanded as they approached, and he began to talk to the occupants of the canoe in Ojibwa.

Jerome turned and watched the trader. It was maddening, the slow replies and repeated discussions of the Indian and his wife, and then he saw Ramsay start, turn pale.

"What is it?" Jerome demanded.

"They passed Porlair," the trader anwered, "ten miles up the lake. But he was alone."

"Alone! Nell was with him when he left the little lake."

"So Mis-tay-os-sin said. But Michel must have followed with another canoe and taken her. Good God! Where can we start to hunt now?"

Ramsay was completely unnerved. The Indians were staring at him in wonder as he knelt there in the stern, his head bowed, his shoulders sagging.

"Wait!" Jerome exclaimed. "She must be with him. Ask them how far away he was when he passed.

Ramsay put the question in Ojibwa and there was a long discussion between the Indian and his wife.

"From here to that island," Ramsay finally interpreted their decision. "Quarter of a mile."

"Don't you see?" Jerome cried. "He had her tied, in the bottom of the canoe. They couldn't see her."

The Indians began to talk again. Ramsay listened eagerly.

"They say he kept out from shore," he explained at last, "though any one traveling north or south there would keep close in."

"Come on!" Jerome cried, and he dug in his paddle.

For a long time there was only the recurring swish of water under the rising and falling bow, the churning of paddles and the click of their shafts against the gunwales as the canoe went northward along the broken shore of Kabetogama. At last Jerome spoke.

"Porlair has a birch canoe. We ought to make twice the time with this Peterborough and two paddling.

"Michel has three or four Peterboroughs," Ramsay said. "Hardly likely he'd use a slow canoe."

"But I asked Mis-tay-os-sin and he saw the mark of a birch bow on the shore of the little lake."

Ramsay, did not comment, and for an hour they paddled in silence.

"We must be getting close to the place where the Indians passed Porlair," Jerome finally commented.

"It's that point about a mile ahead. They met him on the other side of it."

"Then we'd better begin thinking. Haven't most of the hunters come in with their fur?"

"We can start thinking when we get to the portage at the north end of the lake and find out if he crossed it," Ramsay replied.

"But listen here. If the hunters are at

the post he wouldn't have expected to meet anyone, or be seen. But he did meet those Indians and would know they would tell of passing him."

"You mean you believe he turned off here?" Ramsay asked.

"Wouldn't you if you were in his place? Isn't there another portage out of this lake except at the north end?"

"There's one farther up on the east side," Ramsay admitted.

"Then that's the way he went," Jerome said confidently.

Ramsay hesitated. For a moment his contempt for Jerome had blinded him to the logic of the young man's argument. Then he remembered the painter's deductions when they had talked to the Indian and his wife and when Jerome pulled the bow of the canoe eastward and began to paddle he gave in.

It was three miles across the lake and when they landed at the portage there was not a sign of any one having been there since the last rain. Ramsay examined the shore carefully and when he failed to find anything he turned angrily to Jerome.

But Jerome was not in sight. The fur trader whistled and called, but there was no answer. Five minutes went by and then Jerome came running down the portage trail.

"Come on!" he shouted. "They crossed here."

He dragged the canoe out of the water and turned it over.

"Must have landed down the shore and cut through to the portage," he explained as he lifted the craft. "We'll get them now."

He carried the canoe, and Ramsay the packs and rifle. When they reached the next lake the trader examined the tracks.

"It's them!" he cried. "There's Nell's footmarks. And he's got a birch, too."

Jerome was looking across the lake.

"Where are the portages out of this?" he asked.

"There's just one. In the north arm."

"Any other lake near they could carry to?"

Ramsay looked toward the south.

"Two Island Lake can't be far from that end," he said. "But there's no portage and it's the wrong direction."

"We ought to go down there and have a look at it."

"You're crazy!" the trader protested.

"Maybe, but Porlair is trying his best to shake off any pursuit. The direction means nothing to him, and if there's only one portage out of this lake he'd expect us to go to it."

"The south end's a lot closer than the north," Ramsay admitted.

But it was farther than he had thought and it was mid afternoon by the time they reached it.

"That narrow strip should be about here," the trader growled. "How we going to tell where they crossed?"

They went ashore and Jerome began at once to climb a low ridge. From the top he could see water through the trees not more than two hundred yards away and he plunged down the slope and through a swamp.

The lake proved to be little more than a muskeg pond and it was impossible to get out to the water through the soft, bottomless mud. But from where Jerome emerged on the shore he could see a point of rock running out into the lake a quarter of a mile to the north. He hurried to it along a moose runway and out near the end of the rock he found where a piece of wet moss had slipped beneath a moccasined foot.

There was no other sign on the bare granite near the water, but this one was so fresh he glanced across the lake as if expecting to see the fleeing canoe.

"How long you lived in the bush?" Jim Ramsay demanded when they had carried the Peterborough across and were afloat in Two Island Lake.

"I spent a couple of summers in northern Minnesota when I was a kid," Jerome answered.

"That don't explain how we're following 'em so close."

"Living in the bush didn't help me there. I've talked to Frank Porlair and he's nobody's fool."

"He'd have given me the slip long ago," the fur trader admitted.

"I've been trying to keep one think

ahead of him, that's all," Jerome said. "Now what's coming?"

"A river. I wouldn't want to guess where he's headed for now."

"The chances are he feels pretty safe by this time. And we must be getting close. Where does the river go?"

"Through a chain of lakes to the east end of Kabetogama."

They went on into the stream. Twice falls forced them to portage and at each carry they found fresh traces of some one having crossed.

"There's very little travel through here," Jerome commented. "The portages are overgrown with brush."

"That's because there's a taboo country off to the east. The Indians don't use this route any more."

"What's a taboo country?"

"It's Kahshahpiwi Lake and all its shores," Ramsay explained. "Something happened there. Might have been most anything, but the Indians think an evil spirit lives in the lake and they won't go near it. Fine hunting district, too."

"How do you get to it?" Jerome asked.

"There's a portage out of the second lake ahead."

"That's where he's making for!" Jerome exclaimed.

"But it's right close to Kabetogama," Ramsay protested.

"All the better. Not a chance of his being seen there. The safest place he could find and where no one would ever think to look."

Jerome turned in the canoe and laughed.

"I wasn't so smart after all," he said. "He must have meant to come here all the time."

"You were smart enough to keep right on his trail," Ramsay answered, "and that's all that counts."

They went on downstream, but when they crossed the next small lake and were without the helping current Jerome felt the Peterborough lag. The thrusts from the stern were not so quick or powerful.

Jerome himself was growing tired. His shoulders and neck ached from the terrific strain and his knees were numb. But when they got out at the next portage he saw Jim Ramsay stagger slightly as he stepped ashore. The trader's face was white and he trembled, and there was a smear of blood around his right thumb where the paddle shaft had worn through the skin.

"Better let me make two trips here," Jerome suggested.

"No," Ramsay snarled. "We got to hurry."

But when they embarked below the falls he made no objection as Jerome took the stern. They went on downstream and into a large lake. Ramsay's paddle strokes were becoming weaker and there was a fitful, uneven swing of his shoulders as he drove himself to his task.

"Ain't paddled for ten years," he muttered. "Soft as a baby."

"Take it easy," Jerome suggested.

"Easy!" Ramsay retorted in sudden frenzy. "When Nellie's—"

He bowed his head and the canoe trembled with his sobs. After a moment he straightened and dipped his blade.

"We'll find her," Jerome encouraged. "They can't be far ahead."

They reached the portage into the taboo lake, but there was no sign of any one having passed that way. Jerome ran across to the other end and searched, but nowhere was there a footprint or the mark of a canoe on the shore. He returned to where Ramsay sat beside the Peterborough.

"They didn't come this way," the younger man said dully.

Ramsay glanced up quickly at the tone.

"Well, it's the first time you've gone wrong, lad," he said. "And we know they came into the lake here. We'll have to pick up a fresh trail."

They got into the canoe and shoved off. This time it was Ramsay who furnished the greater share of the motive power.

"You take it easy for a while," he said. "I got back my wind waiting for you."

They went on slowly close to shore.

"There's one thing about it," Ramsay commented. "We must have just about caught up with them here and Porlair would be feeling pretty safe, and tired, too."

"If we're so close to Kabetogama," Jerome said, "he must have planned all the time to come here. No one would ever

think to hunt for him here, no Indians would see him and he'd be near to De la Foret."

"I've been wondering where Michel went."

"Mis-tay-os-sin said he went as far as the canoe with Nell and Porlair, but didn't get into it," Jerome said.

"Michel's probably crossed over to Kah-shahpiwi and he's waiting—"

"Quick!" Jerome whispered as he dug in his paddle and shot the canoe past a little point. "Porlair's coming."

They tumbled ashore, dragged their craft into the brush and then crept forward to look over the lake.

"Where?" Ramsay demanded eagerly.

"Back there. He's coming right on. Didn't see us against this shore."

"Straight for the portage, too. We must have passed him on the river."

"There's Nell!" Jerome cried. "Sitting up in the bow. Come on! We want to be at the portage when he lands."

He took the rifle and they hurried along the shore toward the portage. There they could see the approaching canoe little more than half a mile away.

"Here's a good place," Ramsay said as he crept behind a thick clump of spruce saplings. We can jump out as soon as he steps ashore."

They sat down, watching through the brush. The canoe came steadily on. They were sure it was Nell now. She sat in the bow while the half-breed drove the birch-bark.

"Lad!" Ramsay whispered huskily. "We're here. In time."

He reached out impulsively and squeezed Jerome's arm and grinned exultantly when their eyes met.

Both turned back to the lake, intent on the figure in the bow of the canoe. Then both stiffened as they heard a soft chuckle behind them.

"I guess I get here just in time," came a voice.

They whirled to find Michel de la Foret standing in the portage trail, grinning along a rifle barrel.

"What you going to do now?" he asked.

Jerome did not speak or move. He crouched there as he had turned, his hands on the sandy gravel, his legs drawn up beneath him. Ramsay had spun around and sat flat on the ground. His surprise lasted only a moment and he burst into threats and abuse.

"That the way you feel?" Michel asked with mock solicitude. "Then you know how me feel when Minette she marry an Indian. But don't you worry. Frank he give you a present like that sack of flour Mah-ne-gi-zhik give me."

Ramsay started to rise and instantly the smile disappeared from Michel's face.

"Just one little move," he warned, "and I pull the trigger. I guess you better lie down with your face in your hat. Then you can't see or get up so quick."

Ramsay only swore.

"Lie down," Michel commanded fiercely, and he aimed at Ramsay's head.

The fur trader glared back for a moment, then did as he was told.

Jerome had not changed his crouching position, but now he was no longer watching Michel. He was looking past him with an expression of elation.

"Hit him, Harry!" he cried.

Michel did not start or turn his head.

"There no Harry or any other man behind me," he chuckled. "Me no fool."

Jerome looked away, crestfallen, despondent. Michel, grinning over his cleverness, lowered the rifle and took a step forward.

Instantly two handfuls of sand and gravel were hurled into his face. He staggered backward, blinded, and before he could wipe his pain-shot eyes Jerome had leaped. His second blow caught Michel fairly on the side of the chin and the man dropped unconscious.

"That's the way, lad!" Ramsay cried as he scrambled to his feet. "You knew where to hit him, all right. And fool him! You fooled me with that trick."

He continued to chuckle as they bound Michel's hands and feet and then, to prevent his calling a warning to Porlair if he regained consciousness, they placed a gag in his mouth.

Ramsay was jubilant as they crept back to their place behind the screen of brush.

"Porlair's expecting Michel here, all right," he said. "Going to be surprised, isn't he, when we step out? Nell, too."

But as they crouched there, watching the approaching canoe, his mood changed.

"If we hadn't got here!" he whispered hoarsely. "It gives me the shivers."

"But we're here and it's all right now," Jerome said.

There were tears in his eyes. Ramsay stared at him a moment, then looked out over the lake.

It was a simple matter, when Porlair brought the birchbark sideways to the beach, to step out and cover him with the rifles.

Nell, sitting in the bow, was even more astonished than the gaping half-breed.

"Dad! Jerome!" she cried at last.

She scrambled out, threw her arms around her father's neck and kissed him; then turned and threw herself into Jerome's arms.

Porlair took advantage of their confusion and started to run, but Ramsay stepped in his way with a leveled rifle.

"Don't hurt him!" Nell cried. "I've promised—"

"Promised!" her father interrupted. "I've promised myself something for him."

"Let's tie him up and talk afterward," Jerome suggested. "At least he can't disturb us then."

Porlair was securely bound with his own belt, and then Michel, who had regained consciousness, was dragged out onto the beach beside him.

"Now we'll take the grub in this canoe and cook us a meal," Jim Ramsay said as he lifted a pack from the birchbark. "I'm starved."

"But, dad!" Nell cried when they had gone a little way down the shore. "How did you ever find me?"

"I didn't," her father replied without hesitation. "He did it," and he nodded toward Jerome. "He was just reading Frank's mind all the time."

"But it was luck," Jerome protested. "We can see now that he intended to come here all the while, to meet Michel."

"You guessed even that, but whatever Porlair was planning it was you that got us here," and the fur trader began to pick up wood for a fire.

Nell stared at him a moment in wonder and then whirled toward Jerome. Her face was flushed, her eyes bright, her body tense with delight. Jerome started toward her but she turned quickly to her father.

"I didn't ever expect to be so happy," she whispered as she kissed him.

He patted her awkwardly on the shoulder.

"Help rustle the grub," he grumbled.

They jumped to help him, both talking at once, sketching the events of the day. It seemed as if some terrific pressure had been released. Ramsay, too, was excited.

Countless questions were asked and few answered as they got in each other's way around the smoking fire.

When the meal was finished the fur trader turned to his daughter.

"How'd we come to pass you?" he asked.

"We turned up a creek from the river this afternoon and stopped for lunch," Nell explained.

"And what's this you say you promised Porlair?"

"I told him he wouldn't be punished for what he'd done."

"We'll see about that."

"But he mustn't be, dad. With all those turns we made, dodging portages, turning back south, I didn't think there was a chance you and Jerome could follow us. So I knew I had to do something, and this afternoon Frank was pretty badly scared for what he had done. I know how to scare an Indian."

"And he was bringing you right here to Michel all the time!" Ramsay snorted. "I'd like to line 'em both up and shoot 'em, but a few years in prison is the best I can hope for."

"Is it your idea to turn them over to the police?" Jerome asked.

"There's nothing else."

"Why not let them go?"

"Let 'em go!" Ramsay repeated in amazement.

"If you turn them over to the police," Jerome said, "we must all go to court to prosecute them. And that means a rotten

mess. Newspapers will make a lot of it and all sorts of impressions will be spread, most of them far from the truth."

Jim Ramsay did not comment. He sat there staring into the fire, his eyes hard, his lips compressed.

"Besides," Jerome added, "Michel is a weak sister. And he went off his head this morning when he learned Minette was gone."

"Michel's a fool!" Ramsay growled. "All fathers are fools, I guess. But what are we going to do with them?"

"Turn them loose and tell them to get out of the country. They'll do it."

"Long as you hang around they will," and the trader laughed. "Swede Olaf and then De la Foret. I'll just tell Michel you'll get after him with a paddle handle if he shows up again. An Indian is more afraid of getting hit than anything else."

Jerome started to pick up the dishes.

"Let 'em alone," Ramsay said. "Those two'll get 'em if they want 'em. We got to hustle home."

The long northern June day had ended before they landed in front of the store and stumbled stiffly up the bank in the darkness.

"We can stand another meal," the fur trader said. "Leave things in the canoe and come right up to the house."

Once inside his own house Jim Ramsay became the hospitable feudal baron of the north.

"Sit down, lad!" he exclaimed genially. "You got nothing more to worry about tonight. I'll send Mis-tay-os-sin down for your stuff. We've got lots of room here."

He turned to his daughter and threw his arms around her. She snuggled close, kissed him repeatedly, then ran out to the kitchen to find the Indian housekeeper.

"One thing I want to get off my mind right now," Jim Ramsay said. "I made a big mistake about you and I'm sorry."

"I've forgotten all about that," Jerome answered quickly. "And if I had a daughter like Nell I'm sure I'd want to build a wall around her, too."

"I guess fathers are the biggest fools living," Ramsay said as he extended his hand. "Michel and me," and he laughed.

While they ate supper the trader explained to Jerome that he didn't like to have the Indians hanging around the post during the summer, as they ran into debt.

"But if you'll just pick out the ones you want to paint," he said, "I'll find a few odd jobs for them. You look 'em over tomorrow."

Nell's eyes were wet as she looked across the table at her father, who began immediately to talk of the necessity of getting his fur baled the first thing in the morning. After supper he smoked one pipe and then started to bed.

"I'll never touch another paddle as long as I live," he growled. "I won't be able to wiggle a finger to-morrow."

A few minutes later when his lamp was out Nell went into his room and knelt beside his bed.

"The thing that makes me happiest," she said, "is the fact that I haven't lost you."

He held her tightly for a moment.

"Nellie," he said huskily, "that young lad of yours, he's a moose. I'll stick him up against anything I ever saw in the bush, in any way."

"Why, dad!" she exclaimed in mock surprise. "How can you tell? You've known him only a few hours."

"Go to the devil!" he retorted. "And get out. I want to sleep."

THE END

On Jeweled Altars

By HENRY HOLT

EVER since he went into long trousers Peter Bruce had been drawn to the theater in a way which he could not precisely have defined. Just as some people get a thrill at sight of a race track, the sea, or a wonderful painting, so Peter Bruce was stirred by the stage; and perhaps somebody blundered when he was set to work at the age of sixteen as a clerk in a cereal broker's office.

Lots of people will tell you it isn't any too healthy for a lad of sixteen to be crazy about theaters, and they are probably quite right. It was considered that solid work would give Peter mental balance and help to get the other nonsense out of his mind. But as a matter of fact all it did was to bring him in contact with Janette, who, because she was built for him, saw further beneath the surface of Peter Bruce than any one else.

Long before they were married, indeed before he had the vaguest notion of getting married, Janette knew that Peter needed her. If she had been sure that some other woman would make him happier she would have let the other woman take him, because Janette's love was of that quality. But when Peter, at twenty, looked into the eyes of Janette and saw his mate, he knew there never could be any other woman for him in the afterward. And so Peter married the one girl the world had evolved for him, and Janette took a husband who, to her, was without fault.

He wasn't exactly ugly—in the judgment of other women—because of his eyes. Big thoughtful eyes they were, in the brown depths of which lay something that Janette worshiped. He was a plodder, rather slow of speech, even a little reticent, with a quiet sense of humor. Mr. Polson, his employer, who was intelligent, once summed Peter up quite inaccurately.

" He's a cog with no more brains than a million other cogs that grind faithfully for a wage. He'll probably stay here all his life without climbing more than halfway up the ladder, because he has no initiative. But he's dependable. When they're like that I'm glad they get married. It makes for permanency."

And only Janette, who, when they could afford a Saturday night treat, went with him to the theater, sensed that the theater meant something to Peter which nobody but Peter could quite understand. But because she was wholly his, more sympathetic even as a wife than before their marriage, she grew to understand a great deal, especially after he had tried to explain.

"I believe you ought to have been an actor," she once said dubiously.

Peter shook his head.

"No, no, it isn't that a bit. I guess I'd rather have been an actor than a clerk in a broker's office, but it's only because there's something in the stage atmosphere that is always pulling me. *Look* at me! Who do you suppose would ever pay me money to go on the stage? For that job you must have the right figure and the right voice and a presence."

He stopped to kiss away the look of indignation that was growing on her face.

"That's only your delusion, sweetness," he went on, "but it's great to feel that one's wife's love is so blind. No, I haven't any craving to act. It's the drama about it that gets hold of me. They're not stage puppets when I'm watching them, until they themselves, with their own faults, shatter the illusion. They're *real*. And when they do their work badly, when they become just stage puppets, it hurts me more than I could ever make you understand. It's like a bad discord causing a musician to grind his teeth."

Janette regarded him wonderingly, admiringly.

"Why, dear, perhaps, then, you ought to have been a what-do-you-call it? A stage director or producer—you know."

Peter stroked her cheek.

"Perhaps nobody gets more than one big thing that he wants very much. And I got you, Janette. That's the main thing. After all, the rest doesn't really count. Think how many men there are who haven't got a wife like you. Millions of 'em."

Her husband's ambitions were Janette's ambitions. A crinkle came to her eyebrows.

"I'm not so sure," she said slowly, "that the rest doesn't count. I've watched you, Peter, perhaps more closely than you think. Women do, sometimes, I believe, when they feel—when they feel as I do toward you. I don't think even you know how changed you are by a really good play. You seem to live in another world for the time. And often—I never told you this, Pete, but it's true—often it brings a sort of yearning look into your face until I want to cry. It's as if you felt you were being kept out of some special sort of paradise. I suppose—I suppose there is no way you could do anything, is there, dear? You know I'd help you in any way I could. That sounds silly, maybe, because I'm not clever, but I'd work my fingers to the bone if it would make for your happiness."

Perhaps Janette only in part realized how deeply this dug down into the dreams of her man—this patient, good-natured plodder who sat on a high stool each day adding up figures which meant nothing to him, while the soul of him starved for one particular expression of beauty.

The old hunger of which she had spoken was there in his eyes now, and for a space, forgetful of herself, she hoped that her words might in some way bear fruit. But of a sudden the Peter she loved best of all—the intensely human Peter—came back. He took her in his arms tenderly and looked into her eyes until she knew his mind was centered on the miracle that was to be.

"Don't you know we've got enough to think about for the present, my sweet?" he asked. "Both of us, I mean. Perhaps, afterwards. We'll have something to fight for then, bigger than ever, shan't we?"

And so, doggedly, Peter stuck to his high stool throughout the winter, dismissing as far as possible all thought of personal wishes and ambition. In the spring little Marion came.

It was a very wonderful thing to have happened—a thing, also, that changed the course of their simple lives astonishingly. This brown-eyed scrap of humanity suddenly had become the pivot upon which everything swung, especially after the doctor expressed the opinion that she wasn't very strong.

"You don't mean that we're likely to lose her, doctor, do you?" the mother asked anxiously.

The man of medicine smiled reassurance.

"No, but she'll need care at first. For a year or two, at least. Some of them are like little cart horses and live through anything; some, more finely bred, are like race horses. But she'll be all right, because you'll look after her well."

Peter, meanwhile, took a fresh grip of himself at the broker's office. It had now become the sheet anchor upon which the safety of his home and everything therein depended. Life was perhaps a little dull, a little colorless, during the long hours each day while he remained imprisoned in the office, but there was always the going home to anticipate, the marvelous development since yesterday of the wonder child, the reunion of the only three human beings in the universe that really were vital to one another. Theaters were the rarest of luxuries these days, for, small though that brown-eyed infant was, one way and another she absorbed a surprisingly large proportion of the modest sum which her father brought home.

"But she's growing, and I'm sure she's stronger," was Janette's consolation when Peter looked worried over the old, old problem of trying to stretch his pay.

Once, when a colleague had taken the plunge, thrown the dust of the office from his feet, and risen buoyantly to a better position elsewhere, Peter was fired with a similar desire. Life, he felt sure, held finer things for Janette and Marion than those he could get by working for Mr. Polson. So he cast about him painstakingly, patiently, as he did everything, until he found some one who was willing to pay him five dollars a week more.

Somehow Peter didn't like the notion of leaving the old office without putting his ideas squarely before Mr. Polson. According to his code it would have savored of desertion.

Mr. Polson listened and looked blank.

"You know your own business best, Bruce," he said. "Don't let me stand in your way if you think you'll be better off in the long run. I don't want to lose you, but I can't increase anybody's pay just now. Remember, though, it's a great thing to be sure of your job year in and year out, particularly when you're a married man with a family."

But Peter Bruce had imagination and for once gave it a free rein. Within a month he was installed on another high stool and his scale of living leaped to the extent of five more dollars a week: five dollars which just made all the difference.

It was as though a millstone had been removed from his neck—for six weeks. Then his new employers went bankrupt and Peter found himself out on the sidewalk. The next week was a nightmare, especially when he discovered that there were a hundred hungry men waiting for every vacant job. Moreover he realized that the field in which he was trained to earn a living was really rather limited.

At last, on Janette's suggestion, he went to see if Mr. Polson would take him back. Mr. Polson shrugged his shoulders.

"The man who took your place isn't much good. All right, Bruce, you can come back this once. But no more fool tricks, understand!"

After which experience the imagination of Peter Bruce was kept well within bounds. Some day, somehow, something would turn up, he was convinced, but for the present he was taking no more chances.

That year little Marion had her first serious illness. It kept Peter and Janette in an agony of suspense for weeks, and by the time the corner was turned Peter's watch and overcoat were pawned. The following year Peter gave up smoking, though it wasn't easy, because the money was useful at home. And ten years later Peter was still giving up one thing and another while he and Janette watched their child develop.

She was now strong—even sturdy—but it was an unending struggle to keep pace with the bills, for down town Peter was still priced as a cog. Very occasionally he took his wife to the theater and dreamed his dreams, but the slave of Lower Broadway knew that the years were stealing away from him youth and opportunity. If ever he allowed his mind to dwell upon the things that might have been it was for an hour or two only, and then he walked back dutifully to high stool and ledger.

When Marion was sixteen her father and

mother, apart from parental delusions, realized that this was no ordinary child that had been given to them. True, they had fashioned a rod for their own backs by spoiling her a little, but obviously she was destined to wed no struggling small fry.

Poise came to her curiously early. She had her father's eyes, and through them looked at the world as if it were a large plum cake to be cut up especially for her benefit, so that the largest plums were her natural right. When she was seventeen it was admitted that Marion played the violin with such remarkable promise that it would be almost a crime not to give her every possible advantage.

In her eighteenth year she went to Milan, there to study under the great Rossinetti, who saw illimitable possibilities stretching before her. How Peter managed to scrape together the money for this was never clear even to himself, but he knew that by taking in a couple of boarders Janette helped considerably.

"I guess I'm costing you a terrible lot, dad," Marion said before leaving for Italy, "but perhaps I may be able to pay you back some day."

Peter looked at her—the fruit of his life's work—and smiled. She was something very splendid to have achieved, and he knew it.

"Don't talk like that, Marion. What we've done for you was our duty and our pleasure. Parents have to give their children a start in life, you know."

And because she was passionately fond of music, for three years she worked; so that when she was twenty New York awoke one morning to discover that a new violinist named Marion Bruce had leaped into fame at her first big concert. For a mere girl, the critics said, her technique, though by no means flawless, had a spirituality, a warmth and an intuition that would carry her above the strata of mere practical work to the realm of genius. She had the true musical feeling: in a few years she would rank with the great violinists of her day.

"It hasn't been easy, Pete," Janette told her husband, "but it was worth it, wasn't it, dearest? We can see that now."

"Easy? Why, yes, of course it has been. Dead easy!" He smiled, not even deceiving himself. "And look at the reward we have now. She gets her brains from you. She's just like you, Janette—" he broke off lamely—"except—"

"Except what, Pete?"

Each of them had seen it in crude truth these later years, but neither, so far, had actually put it into concrete words.

"I don't know," he fenced, loath, especially in her hour of golden triumph, to belittle that which to them had for so long been a demigoddess. "What I mean is this, you can't altogether judge Marion by ordinary standards. If she were meek and didn't look after her own interests she would be a hypocrite and foolish. She's one girl in ten thousand and—"

He stopped, for Janette was shaking her head sagely.

"Pete, my dearest," she said, "you and I have faced facts squarely and honestly ever since we married. Don't let us begin now to try to deceive ourselves. Marion is exactly what we have made of her. We have—"

"Well, don't let's say it, Janette."

"But we will say it, Pete. She was all we had and we've spoiled her. She has climbed—is still climbing—much higher than we ever had any thought of years ago, but she's a spoiled child."

II.

WITHIN three days of Marion's successful dèbut she met Robert Dane. It came about casually enough in a restaurant at luncheon—an introduction, the quick flickering of a new interest for her and for him, and half an hour's bewilderment for both. That thirty minutes changed the entire course of their lives. Three weeks later Marion was engaged to Dane—the gray-eyed, quiet Robert Dane who in various parts of the world had achieved the almost impossible as an engineer.

From that first moment Marion and he stepped into a world that was strange and beautiful. There was no passionate pleading for him, no doubt or hesitation on her part. They were drawn together by a

force as old and as implacable as the granite hills.

Through a magic winter Marion drifted, inspired by love to reach up to the pinnacles of her art. In May they were married and for a month she traveled with him through the fairylands of Europe, leaving her stringed god locked up in its case in New York. There were moments when her fingers ached to touch that violin once more, moments when she longed to thrill again in the warm glow of that adulation of the multitude which to the true artist brings curious satisfaction. And because Robert Dane loved her he understood. To him she was something unbelievably fine, a woman without fault.

In the months that followed, when the world of music enveloped her, when Marion was his, but her interests were necessarily divided between him and her artistry, he ignored the division, and she remained in his eyes a woman without fault until they had been married eighteen months.

If it had ever occurred to him that he was far more interested in her career than she was in his, a ready explanation came with the thought: engineering lacked the glamour of her music. After trying once or twice to show her the romance of engineering on the scale he dealt with, and finding it a subject which had no appeal whatever for her, he ceased, with a touch of real regret, to try to interest her in the things that had always been vital for him.

His work became virtually a sealed book to Marion. She knew, of course, that he was recognized as one of the greatest consulting engineers of the day, and she was proud of the knowledge that his name was linked with vast engineering schemes. Once she penetrated as far as that office to which he went every day, there to make money with miraculous ease; and she was a little awed but no wiser. Engineering was to her a singularly useful thing in so far as it provided a path of roses, but it was a world apart from her music which to Marion was a passion rather than a profession.

And then at dinner one evening Robert dropped a bombshell. He did so very gently, but it nevertheless remained a bombshell.

"Marion, dearest," he said, "how would you like to go to Australia with me?"

"Australia?"

For a moment her eyes shone, for she was not yet jaded by travel. Then her face clouded. A trip to Australia was very different from a trip to France or Venice. It would take months; and there were her engagements in New York. Instinctively, also, she felt that Robert was thinking of going on something more than a pleasure trip.

"I should hate to be away so long," she declared.

"I'm sorry, dear, but men must attend to their work, you know." It was rather a statement of fact than a rebuke. There was, however, that in his manner which left her puzzled and uneasy. She put down her knife and fork and regarded her husband curiously.

"What do you mean, Robert, about Australia? What do you *really* mean?"

"Why, it wouldn't be easy to make you quite understand, Marion, because you're not an engineer and it seems difficult for you to sympathize with a man's ambitions and career. But I have been offered the opportunity to take charge of an irrigation scheme in New South Wales which is bigger than anything that has ever been undertaken. I didn't really dare hope until to-day that I should be chosen, but I was. It will mean five years in Australia, but from the engineering point of view it will be the most fascinating—"

"*Five years in Australia!* Robert, are you crazy? You're not seriously suggesting that I should go and bury myself alive in some appalling wilderness at the other end of the world from now until I'm nearly middle aged!" She had gone white with anger at the thought.

"Not a wilderness exactly, dear," said Robert quietly. "I shall make my headquarters in Melbourne, which is really a fine city. I don't think you realize, Marion, what a tremendous honor it is for me to be offered such a chance."

"I certainly don't," retorted Marion. "And when we married there was no suggestion that we should have to go to the ends of the earth, thousands of miles from

civilization as we know it, and stay there. It's a perfectly heathenish idea, Robert."

For a few moments Robert was silent. Then:

"Marion, dear, I guess I didn't make the position quite clear. It is the dream of every living engineer of note to be allowed to carry out this work. The chance has come to me—your husband. In my world no greater distinction could be offered. You wouldn't have me cast it aside, would you?"

Marion rose from the table.

"You must do as you wish about that," she said coldly. "You may as well understand clearly now, however, if you go to Australia I shall remain in America."

"But if I refused the chance at this stage it would be taken everywhere as a confession of failure. It would do me irreparable harm for years."

It was the first time her egotism had encountered serious opposition since they were married. Her eyes blazed with indignation; then with a shrug of the white shoulders came definite decision.

"That is for you to settle, Robert," she answered icily. "But if you go, you go alone." And she swept toward the door.

"Marion!"

Frowning, she paused.

"Yes, Robert."

"Come back, dear. Do try to be reasonable. Can't you see one of us must give way or else it will bring us close to—to wreckage. It has been very beautiful, Marion, since we married, and things could never be quite the same afterward if we lived apart during the next few years.

"Then why go, Robert?"

"You mean that if I go we *shall* be parted?"

"I mean that I see no reason why I should sacrifice my musical career just because you manage things so badly that you have to live in a wilderness for five years."

Robert made a pretense of finishing dinner alone, then wandered to his study, buried in thought. An hour later he went to Marion's room.

The frock she had worn that evening lay on the bed. She had changed again. And gone out, evidently; the grip without which she never went away was not in its usual place. Robert Dane walked moodily back to his study and smoked steadily until midnight, convinced that Marion had for the moment taken the bit between her teeth.

III.

A SLOW fire was burning in the depths of Marion's brown eyes as she approached the little house which to her had always been home until Robert lifted her into the purple splendor. She was a rebel: a woman whose feelings had been outraged by the threat of banishment in the very sweetest moments of musical triumph.

She had not yet had time to form plans for her immediate future, but she had incontinently fled from under Robert's roof with the conviction that she would stifle within another hour there. Each time her mind turned to her husband Marion thrust the thought aside. There must be no looking backward, no confusion of the main issue. He was willing to wreck her career; to look backward was to risk disaster.

Her lips were tightly compressed as she pushed open the door of the commonplace little house. Here, at least, she was certain of finding balm for those sorely wounded feelings.

"Why, Marion!"

There was a look of exaltation in the face of her mother which was entirely strange to Marion. And intuitively the girl sensed instantly that her own unexpected return was not responsible for it.

She glanced at her father. At least a dozen years seemed to have rolled from his shoulders since she last saw him a week ago. Some spirit within the man was aflame. His eyes were sparkling, a measure of youth had come back; the shoulders, usually slightly stooped by years of bending over a ledger, were straighter.

Marion's lips relaxed as she looked from one to the other, puzzled. In all her knowledge of them she had never encountered anything quite like this. She didn't have to be told that something very remarkable had happened—that was obvious. But there her imagination halted.

"What is it, mother? You've had good news of some sort. And yet—and yet—you both look as though you were living in a new sort of heaven."

"I think we are, dear," replied her mother quietly. "Tell her, Bruce."

Bruce walked over to his daughter, touched her cheek with his lips, then turned to his wife.

"Why—why, I don't know where to begin," he said. "It isn't just the one thing, you see, Janette. After twenty years of it—well, you'd better tell her. I can't, somehow. I don't seem to have come back to earth yet."

"Mother, tell me, dear."

This atmosphere was beginning to stir Marion oddly. In a curious way she almost felt as though she were a little girl again, an integral part of the home.

Marion had as yet spoken no word concerning the newly risen tumult within her own heart. The mother stroked her daughter's hand gently. Her mind seemed to be drifting back through the years.

"Your father has written a play, dear, and Mr. Kennith Lawrence, the big producer, is going to put it on Broadway."

"Daddy!" Marion ran to the man and hugged him. "Is it really true? Do you mean to say you're going to be famous?"

"I don't know about famous, Marion, but the rest is true. It's called 'The Prisoner,' and they've asked me to begin work on another play at once. I'm—I'm leaving the old job immediately, anyway. When Mr. Lawrence asked me to start work on another play, I told him it would take me a long time to do it, as I worked down town and I'd spent nearly a year writing and rewriting the one he's accepted, because I wouldn't put out work that wasn't the best I was capable of. Then he told me 'The Prisoner' would surely have a good run. I hope he's right, but he said it was one of the finest things of its kind that he had ever come across. He asked me what I was earning now, and when I told him he immediately wrote me out a check for a thousand dollars on account of royalties in advance, and said I should be insane not to leave the old job without delay and settle down to real work."

"But, daddy, you've been tinkering about writing plays ever since I can remember."

"Tinkering about. That's just it, Marion. I haven't been able to put my mind on it properly until—well, until this last year or so. But this is different."

A perplexed look came to Marion.

"I'm tremendously glad, daddy," she said. "But still I don't quite understand. Why should it be different now?"

"Why, dear," said Janette, "he was carrying a heavy burden all those years when you were growing up, and when you were studying music. When you were a baby your father had two great ambitions. I don't mean that he just *wanted* two things. They were burning desires. Apart from them there wasn't anything that counted much in his life. One was to do the utmost in his power for you and me. The other—well, he had to let that take second place. It was all he could do to keep us going.

"In those days it was a hard struggle, Marion. You never will know exactly what I mean by that. For years it was often touch and go whether we should have to sell our furniture to make ends meet.

"He couldn't take any chances—*not any chances,* you see, Marion. During the last ten years before you were married he put in three hours' bookkeeping every night for another concern to raise a little extra money, and there were times when I was afraid he was going to break down altogether. And yet in odd moments he kept on trying to write plays; but he was doing it when his brain was overburdened. They weren't good enough then."

The girl had been sitting motionless, listening. Slowly the color ebbed from her cheeks as a new thought began to jangle. "Mother, do you mean that if dad hadn't had me to look after he'd have been able to do things like this before?"

"Marion, don't talk that way," broke in Peter Bruce. "We've only done our duty, nothing more."

"Mother"—Marion's voice was curiously level—"won't you answer me? I have a right to know. Do you mean that daddy could have written plays that would have

made him famous years ago if—if he hadn't been handicapped?"

Janette, who knew the truth, appealed to her husband with a glance.

"It's very hard to say, dear," he told the girl. "You see—"

"You mean it's very hard to tell me truthfully, don't you, daddy? It's hard to tell your own flesh and blood that for twenty years you've been sacrificing yourself and your highest ideals. Daddy, I want to know, and I must know. I've a reason for wanting to know. If you love me, you'll tell me the truth. Was it because of me that you sacrificed yourself?"

"You don't understand, Marion," said Janette. "We had no alternative. There was nothing else for us to do. To begin with, it was our plain duty, but duty is a word that doesn't altogether cover the ground. We always loved you very dearly, and when you love you must sometimes make very big sacrifices. Only if your love is big enough, it isn't really a sacrifice at all, but a thing given freely, gladly."

The brown eyes of Marion were fixed as she stared out far beyond those four walls of that simple little room.

"If your love is big enough, it isn't really a sacrifice at all," she repeated slowly; and then the room became blurred. Great tears welled into her eyes, trickled slowly down her cheeks, splashed on the table over which she was leaning intently. A veil was being torn from her. In this hour she was learning for the first time one of the inner truths of life, was seeing for the first time the majesty of patient sacrifice. And by degrees the color stole back to her cheeks, came warmer, hotter, until they burned, and a new Marion sat there, awed and ashamed.

"Tell me about the play, daddy, please," she begged. "Tell me every little thing—about it and you. I'm hungry to hear every detail. But I can't stay long. About an hour, perhaps, while I hear all the wonderful news. But it's late and—and I'm longing to get back to Robert."

IV.

It was after midnight. Marion let herself in with a latchkey. Softly her feet fell on the thick carpet. She had seen a light in his study window. Her eyes were starry and her breathing came quickly as she touched the handle of the door.

Her man—the man she loved more than anything else in the world—was sitting at a writing desk, head propped up in his hands. She drifted nearer. He remained motionless. He must have heard, yet she did not speak but came nearer still.

Behind him she put out both hands—it was an old trick of hers—and, fingers stealing forward round the graying temples, she closed them over his eyes. But she didn't say, as usual, "A kiss if you can guess." She couldn't force a word. Somehow her throat was hurting. Her fingers were trembling now; she lowered her lips until they touched his hair.

Then a moment later her eyes fell on a letter at which he had been staring. Three lines only, three clear lines of his characteristic writing, in which he had made supreme sacrifice for her, canceling his Australian appointment.

"Robert!" broke from her with a sob. "Robert, my darling!" One slender white hand went to the sheet of paper and almost reverently she tore it across, then again.

The pieces fluttered to the floor.

"No, my sweet, it isn't worth it," he said, turning swiftly and drawing her to him. "I've been thinking things over, and really it means very little, almost nothing, to give it up—for you."

Her lips clung to his for a space. Then: "Listen, dearest," she whispered, "you're going to Australia and I'm going with you. I think I want it for you more than I ever wanted anything in my life."

THE END

Captain

By BEATRICE ASHTON VANDEGRIFT

Author of "Suspense," etc.

A NOVELETTE—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

CHAPTER I.

WHERE'S JUSTICE?

JUSTICE! Now that's an odd word with as many separate kinks of meaning to it as a flapper's permanent wave. Justice is the thing we bitterly ask is there any of it left in the world, when other folks are getting what they want and we ain't getting what we want.

But Justice, like Jehovah, moves in a mysterious way, so that sometimes when we think we're getting a mean deal, up 'll pop a concealed ace and the game 'll start our way.

Misconstrued, miscarried and mislaid are the little adjectives that stroll hand in hand with that word "justice." Yet some day, while we're cursing the world and fate and our luck, down the sunny lane 'll come the little lady. And we'll find that her blindfold eyes which have seemed to see nothing of the way she was going have been bound all along only with gossamer, and that the path has been clear before her, and that if she *has* circled a bit in coming to us, after all, the longest way round was the shortest way home.

That wasn't the way I felt about it, though, six months ago, hunched on a bench in City Hall Park with the little lady I been talking about standing cool and disdainful atop the Municipal Building.

Justice? It would of took a telescope to of found her that day. The world was as bitter to me as calomel, though the spring sunshine wrapped me close in warm, yellow flannel. The rumble of Chambers Street

traffic sounded on my dull ears like the hollow mocking of a laugh. Little kids that romped around the fountain seemed to stage their fun just to spite me. But it was a phantom world and only the dark thing that skulked and crept and whispered in my brain seemed real.

That Dark Thing!

It come sneaking up behind me at first like a playful friend that prisons your eyes with his palms and asks you to "guess who." I did guess—and was ashamed.

He wasn't the kind of a fellow you'd like to be seen with, the kind you'd be taking home to Sunday night supper with ma and the folks. But he was interesting—and devilish alluring—so I let him hang around and talk.

What things he said! They run up and down my spine like Paderewski on a row of piano keys, finally lodging in the dark corners of my brain where they commenced to sprout like mushrooms in a cellar. Only they wasn't mushrooms, but toadstools—poisonous, insidious toadstools, though I didn't know it then.

And them toadstools was thoughts—One Thought. And that one thought was—*I gotta get Travers.*

It tickled me at first to think of myself as a murderer. I played with the idea, amused, like a kitten with a piece of yarn. A murderer!

It would of been easier to picture myself the ex-Kaiser or Jackie Coogan. Of course, I was well acquainted with the more important elements of crime, having imbibed detective stories since the kid days when tales of Dead Dog Dan and Stick 'Em Again Ike, perused by pocket flash light under the back stairs, would send my poor mother up to my attic room in the middle of the night with hot water and mustard plaster. "I *told* you that strawberry soda on top of cabbage would be giving you bad dreams!" she'd wail.

Strawberry soda? Stained stilettoes!

Cabbage? Crime!

But, while I trembled at the tale of the death duel in Blind Tiger Tom's saloon or shivered at the story of how Pot-Hook Pete revenged his buddy, I never pictured myself in the rôle of one of them old boys.

I was too healthy for that. Swims in the creek from April to October, hikes in the hills with the rest of the gang, five hours of school, then chopping wood in the twilight, with three big meals a day, is apt to keep a kid pretty steady in body and mind.

Then how come, at the age of twenty-three, a young business man in the city of New York, I was contemplating the worst deed in the curriculum of crime—murder?

As I have showed, I had led a safe and sane life up till then, and the only evidence of brutality I had demonstrated was in the subway, where every crime is committed. I have burned—with indignation. I have robbed—weak women of their seats. I have killed—my fellows with a look. But I have paid. I have hanged for it—hanged from every strap in the Interborough service.

Why do I banter so? Is it because I can almost laugh now at that Dark Thing that dominated me last spring when all the world should of been as gay as a circus?

I remember sitting on that bench in City Hall Park that April day, somber and gray as a ghost, with the one idea—I gotta get Travers.

But I had to wait six long, weary weeks before he breezed back from abroad. Abroad! Let him play, then, at Paris, romp at Rome, carnival at Monte Carlo. He'd pay—pay for that sad little grave without even a headstone to mark it. But *I* knew where it was. I could find it. Loving feet don't never need sign posts to follow.

But she oughtn't to of been out there—so cold—so lonely. And she wouldn't of been—if it hadn't been for Travers.

Maybe I ought to tell you more about it, not as an alibi for the deed I determined doing, but as a background. Everything needs a background, and mine was that little mound of myrtle out Woodlawn way—Gingie!

I'll try to describe her—Gingie. But, gosh, maybe you got a kid sister yourself. *You* know, half imp and half angel. And Gingie grew more like an angel, the sicker she got. Pale hair, she had, like corn tassels and a peaked little face like a goblin. So white it was that it made even the pillow look yellow.

But spunk? Say, that kid had spunk! Not a whimper outta her. Just laid there all day on the sofa, waiting for Big Brother Davy. Sometimes she'd get up and try to do a little dusting and fixing while I was gone.

Poor little tike! Thirteen she'd of been her next birthday.

And I'd come home from the office, dead tired, but happy in knowing she'd be there. Then we'd dope out our supper over the sterno, Gingie laughing so gay when it boiled over. And sometimes I'd make it, just on purpose to hear her chuckle so merry—because it seemed then that God and all his angels couldn't take her away.

But, after a while she'd grow quieter and just lay back on the cushions, holding my homely paw, and listen to the doings of the day down to the office. And I'd try to make my husky voice soothing to lull her like her mom used to, so she'd drop off to sleep. Then I'd watch her, so still, so white, with a pain gripping my tonsils—because then she seemed more Heaven's than mine.

Yet we never give up hope. Every day we'd talk about the some day soon when I'd be taking her to a place higher up where the sunshine was. Where Gingie could watch all the sky there was from dawn until dusk—with no strange things lurking in the corners to scare her.

And I would of taken her, too, up to that high place of sunshine. I was expecting a raise the 1st of April. They said it was coming to me. I'd been working there five years, ever since I was eighteen. It was my first job outta school and I was so proud that I'd kept it. I'd gone up steady, little by little, and now was to come the big boost.

I got it. But it was a boost *out*.

CHAPTER II.

THE DRAGON.

I WENT in to see Travers. He was sitting at his big mahogany desk, smoking. Smoking! That dragon could of *swallowed* his cigar and he wouldn't of knowed it! He was lined with corrugated iron.

I asked him why I'd been fired.

He took a couple careful puffs on his high-priced soft coal burner and told me it had been "expedient."

"What's the kick?" I wanted to know. "Have I done something, Mr. Travers?"

He made a cautious survey of his cigar and informed me, pleasant, "Not at all, Smith. In fact, you've been quite satisfactory. It's merely that, on consolidating our various—ah—interests it has enabled us to cut down on—ah—overhead—"

"*Underfoot,* you mean!" I blazed, impetuous. "Ever since I come here I been that—underfoot. Now I want what's coming to me, a raise. Why, you can't fire me, Mr. Travers," I whimpered, all the old pep collapsing. "I—I've tried to do my best. I been honest, hard working—"

"I know," cut in Travers, steely. "Nevertheless, we find it necessary to let you go."

"You mustn't," I stammered, desperate. "I got a sister, just a kid, sick. And you know I can't spend no time looking for another job. You know summer's coming and they're hard to get. You know that, Mr. Travers. And I got to keep *this* job. I—I was aiming to take her to a better place and see if—if she'd get well. My kid s-sis—"

I broke down a minute, stalling like a cheap car in front of a steep grade. Then I drew myself together and took the climb steady.

"Mr. Travers," I said, quiet but firm, "you—ain't—gonna—fire me."

He was still studying his cigar, interested in the wrappings.

"Your sister?" he said, genial. "Ill? Bad—too bad." He turned in his swivel chair and faced me, crushing his butt mercilessly against the bronze ash tray. "But I am not running a charitable organization, Smith."

I stood, stunned. A stenographer was waiting at the door with a pad in her hand.

"Come in, Miss Drake," he invited, arranging a pile of papers on his desk. "That 'll be all, Smith," he concluded. "Mr. Henderson will see to your back pay."

I left the room and stumbled out of the

place, scorning my pay. Would I touch a cent more of his dirty money? Then I remembered Gingie and went back to get it.

I struggled on for a week without landing no job, and on Saturday I wandered around till late in the evening looking for a little white cot in the free ward of a hospital—a cot where maybe the morning sun would shine on my Gingie. For last night she had asked me for the first thing she had ever asked for. Would I *please* take her tomorrow "higher up where the sunshine was?" And I promised her, holding her close and patting the skinny little back under the damp nightie, that I would—so help me, Hannah.

At last I found it. Then I went home.

Gingie had gone. I guess she just couldn't wait no longer.

Three days later I was hunched on that park bench with four dollars in my pocket, vowing to get Travers.

Are you laughing at me? Maybe this sounds funny. I ain't much good on the sob stuff. I'm only telling you why I was going to get Travers. After that, what?

I couldn't imagine. The hardest thing you could of asked me to do then would be to dope out a treatise on "Revenge—Then What?" Anyhow, it didn't make no difference. There was only one thing in life worth doing, thinking about, living for.

And as I sat there with that Dark Thing wheeling in my head like a bat, it seemed all my boyhood and kidhood, the swims in the creek, the hikes in the hills, the curly bacon and corn pone my mother used to feed me, the lessons in school that funny old Miss Pindlewaite taught me, *everything* evolved into one terrible use. It prepared me for the getting of Travers.

And the stronger my mind became, the weaker was my body. I hadn't et hardly nothing for three days, hadn't took no more exercise than a lame dog on a three-foot rope. And if you should ask me what makes a criminal, I would say—first a knockout blow from life, then idleness and an empty stomach. Can you imagine a guy committing murder after a snappy eighteen holes and a steak dinner?

Times has changed. One thousand years ago it was the strong man that was dangerous to society. Now it's the weak one.

These are my conclusions after six months, not the kind of clammy thoughts that buzzed in my bean that bright April day.

I had closed my eyes. I didn't want to see how gay the spring was. I didn't want the brightness of a red feather or a girl's smile to lighten the gloom of my local atmosphere. I didn't want a single ray of cheer and goodness to come between me and the Dark Thing that burned my bosom.

It was then that something cold and quivering and alive inserted itself in my hands, laying loose-clasped in my lap. I jumped. The last living, cold and quivering thing that had touched me was Gingie's poor little hand. And I wanted it to *be* the last.

I opened my eyes, squinting in the sunshine, and seen that the cold thing was the nose of a dog. I glared at him, mad because he bust up the singleness of my thoughts.

He was a collie, graceful as a Follies girl, aristocratic as a duke, well groomed as a movie idol. His coat was shaggy but neat, a mixture of butterscotch yellow and white and black, just enough black to be dignified.

As for his eyes, they was that unplumbable brown, so earnest they fair leaped at you. They was looking at me now, steady with friendly interest, then they closed, content, and he laid his long, cool muzzle in my palms.

"Get! Go on!" I snapped, peeved, boxing my knuckles against his mouth.

Them eyes opened again, hurt as a kid's that tries to cuddle its mother in a party dress. He examined my map again, intent, seeming satisfied, however, with the survey, for he yawned with a curl of his pink tongue inside his black-fringed gums and laid his head against my knee.

"Get out!" I hissed again, feigning a jab at his jaw.

He backed off at that and squatted, his tail sweeping the sidewalks of New York like a feather duster. Then he cocked his head and looked at me, most intriguing.

"Sic 'em!" I growled, ferocious.

He sprung to his front feet and commenced a series of crazy maneuvers that would make a daily dozen look sensible—crouching until his belly scraped the ground, then leaping forward unexpected with a battery of short, sharp barks. And all the time his earnest brown eyes never lost mine, but waited as if for orders.

Great Heavens! The animal thought I wanted to play with him.

Play!

I picked up a stick, laying in the grass near my bench, and heaved it as far as I could. The dog bounded after it, graceful as a gazelle, snapped it up neat in his mouth and come "galumphing home in frabjous joy," as the jabberwock jingle puts it. Then he dropped it at my feet and looked up in pleased expectancy of a pat on the pate and a "Well done, my beamish boy!"

I scowled, annoyed. I hadn't thought he'd be back.

I tossed the stick again with all the strength in my weak arms, and while the playful mutt raced after it I beat it down the pike, trying to lose myself in the noon crowds that meandered up Broadway.

The pestiferous pup! Let him find me now! It would be like looking for a needle in the modern girl's kit.

Come the swift scurry of padded paws and a panting at my heels. Then a butterscotch beast flashed a couple paces in front of me and dropped the stick, his mouth a slit of pink, joyous laughter.

"You damned nuisance!" I muttered, ignoring his persistent maneuvers for attention.

He picked up the piece of wood and dropped it nearer to me. I overlooked it and him. So he give the disdained stick a couple regretful licks, then come to my side and strolled on with me, waving his plumy tail and looking up every so often into my face that would make a rock look like a sponge.

Let him tag me then. He'd get tired of it and romp back to his own folks. For I knew that he wasn't just nobody's pup. He had a master and a good one at that, from the glossy gleam of his coat and the neat-trimmed white fur ruffles on his front legs. Nope, he must of simply slipped his collar and tramped out on a frolic—and when he had his full he'd go back.

If he didn't I'd choke him.

CHAPTER III.

THE PESTIFEROUS PUP PURSUES.

WE dawdled on down Broadway—down that high, hazy cañon that ends in the blue of the bay. And the sea was in the warm spring breezes that fluttered across my face like the gentle fingers of Gingie. Sometimes the pestiferous pup would stop to raise his head to the sun and sniff the salty tang in the air. It was a bright day, a gay day, just the kind of a day to silhouette the blackness of my thoughts.

Down we strolled, past tall, gray buildings—pencils that made handwritings on the sky. But all I could read was: "I gotta get Travers."

We passed one building with a high iron door, like the door to a tomb, and here I paused and looked back. It was the place where I had give up five good years of my life to a concern that, in a minute, had tossed me aside like a tin can, after gouging out all that was best in it. It was the place I'd be entering again, when six long weeks had slunk by like ghosts, and whether I walked out of it again or not didn't make no difference. There'd be *one* who wouldn't.

The dog cavorted around me as I stood, glowering. He'd run ahead a little ways then race back to nip at my heels, anxious to be moving again.

"All right, Captain," I obeyed, sardonic. "You lead, I follow."

After that he became insufferable, strolling ahead, then turning to wait for me with polite attention. And in his eyes came that look of proud proprietorship and humble love that dogs have for their masters.

Great Heavens—the brute worshiped me!

I tried fifty ways to get rid of him, dashing through double lines of hooting, tooting traffic. But he'd always meet me on the other side, worming skillful through a maze of motors, dodging fenders with quick, agonized twists of his long, lean body, then bounding once more to my side, tired but triumphant.

Can you match that?

I was amused at first, like any Czar is amused at a humble subject he can twist to his whims like dough. Then I got bored and resentful.

Who was I to be winning the love of a dog? Who was I to command devotion, respect? Did I ask anything of Fate? Hadn't she give me all that was coming to me by taking all that I had? Then how could she dare to substitute the only loving I knew with the idiotic worship of a dumb brute?

All afternoon Captain paraded me, leading me up and down and around while I seethed at his interference. I wanted to be left alone, that's all. I didn't ask nothing of nobody. Just leave me be.

Then I found myself following Captain down the curved stone walks of old Battery Park, lined with rows of dark-skinned, banana-eating bohunks on benches.

And I almost laughed to myself to watch Captain pass them, head in the air like a regular aristocrat, looking neither right nor left and ignoring their good natured whistles with calm disdain. In and out he skirted, dodging all foreign entanglements. Some of their dirty, drooling little kids, though, came under his serene favor. For no matter how high born a dog is he can't be indifferent to children.

And so we strolled on down to the heaving blue bay—man and dog together, with the man more a brute than the dog. And I couldn't get it noways. How could that high-toned beast who scorned the tramps that lined the walk be so loving and proudful of me—the worst tramp of them all?

I was unshaved, unshined, unsoaped—and yet he worshiped me.

I give him not so much as a kindly word—and yet he forsook all others for me.

Is there any understanding a dog?

Then, through the One Dark Thing that had been blotting out everything else from my mind, come a queer feeling. Was I going to walk in the company of a cur and let the cur be the gentleman? It galled me until, irritated, I dropped in at a barber's and pried loose one of them precious four dollars on a shave, a shine and a hair cut.

Did you ever try living up to a dog? Don't laugh. It ain't so easy as you think!

I exited from the tonsorial tournament, a long whiff of bay rum flaunting out after me like a banner of moral victory, and flopped on a park bench, facing the water, focusing my eyes on the far faint blue of the horizon till it swam and blurred. And Captain squatted respectful, a little ways from me, his head on his paws, one eye open in a watchful dog nap. And though he always watched me, alert, loving, anxious, he never once come to my hand again for the caressing I had first denied him. He was too much of a thoroughbred for that.

After a while evening come pouring into the sky till it and the bay blurred together. And still I watched. It was good to lose myself in it. The sea! Steady, relentless, terrible as my purpose.

I stumbled to my feet, weak and sick, yet eager to be up and doing. Captain got up, too, yawning comfortably, then shaking himself with a quick little snap of his body that seemed to ask, "What now?"

His interference rasped on me with the keen, sudden irritation of a nutmeg grater. The darned dog! I'd been fooling with him long enough. I'd tossed him sticks, strolled with him, humored him, shaved and shined for him. And now—it was the end. I had something else to do in life besides pampering somebody else's pet. Why didn't he go back to his master, the man who fed him?

The rows of tramps on benches had scattered with the dark. Evening had wrapped everything in a soft blanket, with the blackness of the sea beyond so creeping with mystery it made you afraid. And behind us piled the great, jeweled mound of lights that was New York.

Captain stood beside me at attention.

"Get!" was my order.

His eyes only grew more brown, more steadfast.

"*Get!*" I thundered, rage gripping me like the folding, holding arms of a giant octopus.

Still he stood as though he hadn't heard my stern command.

Then I boiled over.

In a flash the toe of my boot caught him under the chin with a sharp, hollow sound, blended with a startled yelp. He rose high in the air, then fell to cave at my feet, his trembling body pressing close to the cold sidewalk as though there'd be comfort there. And in his throat was a low, bubbling whine that seemed to grow from the depths of his being.

I was ashamed of myself, but too proud to apologize. He'd brung it on himself anyhow with his damned insistent devotion.

Then in the dark I deciphered the round dome of a subway igloo, lighted by the flare of a newsboy's torch. With sudden inspiration I meandered to the stand and tapped the guy on the back. Captain had followed me, still cringing.

"See that dog, sonny?" I commenced, intriguing.

"Yeh," answered the boy, dubious.

"Well, I want you to hold him for me a minute."

He eyed Captain, uncompromising.

"That dorg ain't got no collar," he complained.

I fitted a quarter to his palm.

"That's all right," I reassured him. "Just grab him by the scruff of the neck."

"Yeh, and have him chaw my hook off!" hooted the kid, nevertheless getting a gingerly hold on Captain's furry crest.

"That's right, sonny, now hold it," I called, confident, and beat it for another subway entrance across the street, while Captain looked after me, pained and puzzled.

In a minute I had nickeled my way through the turnstile and stood waiting on the platform, tickled with my strategy. Let the blamed brute follow me now!

Down the long, damp tube glimmered two little yellow lights like horns on an underworld dragon, and a faint, dull rumble expanded as the sigh of a giant. Folks standing on the platform tucked their papers under their arms, picked up their bags, jammed pennies into the machine slot in a hasty grab for a last minute chew and all prepared to board the Broadway local.

The rushing of it had almost filled the tunnel when I spotted a racing, tearing ball of butterscotch on the opposite platform—*on the opposite platform!* Up and down he tore, pausing in desperation on the edge, his paws gripping the concrete in a frantic attempt to find a way to get to me.

Captain!

The two yellow lights loomed very near and the long dark cavern was filled with the roaring of a hundred waterfalls as he made a wild jump onto the tracks.

Rows of shining, wicked rails he leaped, then come to a stop beneath me—one swift look of unutterable pleading in them brown eyes.

I bent and drew him up—the heftiest load I had ever hoisted, but something gave me the strength.

The Broadway local slipped neat into the long groove of the platform and rumbled to rest.

And into them eyes come a dumb thanksgiving, as Captain pressed safe at my side.

CHAPTER IV.

WINNING HIS RIGHT.

A CROWD packed around us, a crowd that beat upon us as ineffective as the summer sea on a rockbound coast, and a surly voice growled, "Hey, what's the idea, young feller? What do yuh think this is anyhow—a kennel? Now tote that brute out of here pronto or you'll be getting yourself a ticket and it won't be to no dog show at the Waldorf either."

I turned, stumbled and led Captain out, a long laugh echoing behind us.

In the upper air we paused to take stock.

"Well?" Captain's eyes seemed to inquire.

I thought, long and contemplative. Then—

"Captain," I began, "for some strange, unaccountable reason that ain't for mere human intellect to fathom you seem to hanker after tagging me around. It annoys and bores me, but you evidently insist on it. And I guess, boy, you've won the right—after that."

Captain commenced a series of crazy convolutions around me that would of made an African snake dancer look like a hitching post.

" Now, don't get excited," I calmed him. " I ain't welcoming you to my bosom or anything like that. In fact, I don't like you. You're a nuisance. But as long as you don't expect no food, favoring or fondling it 'll be all right. At least until we locate your master or—"

I broke off. I couldn't tell even a dog of the Dark Thing that would be putting an end to my intercourse with both man and beast.

But Captain, poor brute, had earned the right to whatever part and portion of my company give him happiness, and as long as he didn't try to become " captain of my soul " there wasn't no harm in his escorting me around the great and cruel city as long as he felt like it.

The city! Humph, there's a thought. The city wasn't no place for a dog at all. Canines are about as popular there as kiddies, and there don't seem to be no room for 'em outside the marble mausoleums rich dames devote to their pet silkies. Nope, the Burrow of Manhattan wouldn't do for Captain. We'd have to tramp somewhere else.

Accordingly, when the deep, black Hudson lay like a rich mantle at the feet of night, with only the lights of slow-moving barges and twinkling electric ads embroidering the border, me and the dog took a ferry for Jersey, ready for anything. Which is the correct state of mind to be in when you're heading for the place where men get tight and guns get loose.

Not that I felt humorous that black evening, leaning over the front rail of that crablike ferry and wanting to jump into the calm mirror that reflected Heaven—if there was a Heaven. I hadn't ever thought so until Gingie left our earth. But I guess, if there wasn't one before, they'd be making it especial for her.

And if it hadn't been for the job I had slated I would of dropped, just easy-like, into them cool waters that imitated so well the soft blackness of the skies. Felt like I would almost be going to Gingie, because when you go *down* in water it seems you are going *up*.

But I didn't drop, and soon a creaking chain let down the bridge that invited us safe to the other shore.

That night, after a cup of coffee for me and an old bone for Captain, we slept behind a gravel box on a State road laid up for repairs. And in the morning we faced west and went on.

It was evening again when we hit the stone pike of Shelter Hollow, while over the little town Old Mother Night slowly pulled in the day's wash—streamers of violet and orange, banners of yellow and rose. And as me and the mutt meandered down Main Street, she jerked in her last red petticoat from the skyline and the day was done.

In the windows of white houses, tucked away behind rows of maples that drooped in the night breeze like tired sentries leaning on their muskets, popped welcoming lights. And on the dark front porches tall, homecoming figures was met with little soft sounds from other figures that stood framed like pictures in the doorways.

Evidently there was still folks in the world that could be happy!

We walked on, Captain promenading ahead of me with a dignity that would make a king look like a kangaroo, while I brung up in the rear like a flunkey. But, of a sudden, that same dignity was deflated as though it had been a toy balloon.

My calm canine companion had lamped a cat.

She was sitting serene atop a hitching post on the curb, manicuring her fingernails, when Captain ferociously led the charge. With a stiffening that would make a porcupine look like a new groomed seal, the critter dropped its nail file, scissors and buffer and arched like Brooklyn Bridge.

Captain, crazy, cut a few magic circles around the post for luck, then commenced the attack. He stormed the fort, front feet first, while the cat crowded compact as she could on the highest peak, about as secure as a guy on a life preserver is from sharks.

Finally, deciding the place put forth too limited opportunities for protection, the frenzied feline catapulted from her pedestal and flattened herself out down the pike, Captain clipping after, while I, like an ambitious camera man at the Belmont Beefsteaks, moved desperately on, attempting to keep the race in focus.

After three blocks to the right, four to the left, two to the rear and five straight ahead, I puttered up panting just in time to witness Captain corner his stiff-toed foe in the angle of a board fence, and the two was saying things to each other that would make a truck driver's tiff sound like a child's player—Captain, in short, snappy barks, hinting at matters beyond human comprehension, and the cat, being a lady, answering 'em under her breath.

However, the argument didn't seem in no immediate likelihood of coming to an agreeable settlement—who could end in ten minutes the feud that has followed the centuries?—so I decided it was high time to rescue the damsel in distress.

Accordingly, I reprimanded my ungentlemanly friend with a smart cuff on the ear and soothingly picked up that scratching, biting, hissing ball of temper untrammeled who, like many a lady before her what has been chivalrously spared unwelcome masculine attentions, returned my kindness with a biff on the blower.

Simultaneous a following footstep dogged the catastrophe, as we moved on up the block, and a soft female voice said, "Oh, you've found her!"

I wheeled, startled, and a couple white hands removed the storm center outta my immediate locality, calming down that ruff of roughness with the kind of words that mothers spill to their only children.

Then the attention spotlighted me.

"Oh," exclaimed the girl, grateful as an Injun for green bottle glass, "how did you ever find her? I've been so worried. She hasn't been home for three days and we didn't know what could have become of her."

"Just the modern girl beginning to step out," I remarked.

She laughed, then sobered.

"I can never, never thank you enough," she breathed, fervent.

"Don't thank me, thank the mutt," I muttered, designating Captain, who stood beside us, not knowing whether to be proud of himself or ashamed. "He brung her home."

The girl shifted the prodigal daughter to the other arm and bent down to pat Captain on the pate. His eyes closed, satisfied, under her hand and he pressed his head hard against her palm, teasing for more.

It was the first time he had let anybody touch him since I had shoved him aside that day in the park—and he had never come to me again.

But she pet him, knowing the tender spots as only a woman can. Then she looked at me with eyes so brown they was like Gingie's and asked, wondering, "But how did you know it was *my* cat? I've never seen you in town before. Aren't you a stranger here?"

"Yeh," I answered, bitter. "A stranger here—and everywhere."

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said, sympathetic. "It must be awful to have—nobody." Her eyes grew more and more like Gingie's so it hurt to look at them. "But," she went on, bright, "now that you've come to our town I'm sure you'll meet lots of nice people. Are you staying at the hotel?"

"No," I answered, grumpy.

"I don't blame you for not liking the hotel," she smiled. "We hear terrible things about it—that they get you up at five in the morning to borrow your sheets for the breakfast linen."

I seen she expected me to burst into blasts of hilarious laughter at the old gag, so I didn't. Talking with a girl who could see fun in everything doesn't have no attraction for a guy to whom the world is curds and whey.

CHAPTER V.

BREAKING INTO SOCIETY.

"WELL," said I, short, "I gotta be moving."

"Oh, please," she pleaded. "Just a minute. I—I feel I ought to give that dear dog a little something as—as a reward for bringing Mitzi home. Don't you think he'd like a bone? He looks sort of hungry."

"He ain't hungry. I'll be feeding him myself pretty soon," I lied.

"But I'd *like* to do something," she insisted, holding the cat comfy against the little warm place in her throat while Cap-

tain eyed the two of 'em, anticipating further trouble. " Mitzi and your dog seem such friends, too."

" Yeh," snickered I. " Friends like that are pleasant to behold in this cold world of ours. Ain't it cute, the way they gaze so fondly into each other's eyes?"

" Darling!" she agreed, opening wide the white gate. " Now, won't you come in a minute and wait while I inveigle mother into donating a bone to a worthy cause? Yes, please come in, Mr.—er—" She paused, but I give her no encouragement. " Just wait here on the porch," she ended, gracious.

Captain and I was left alone, Captain dropping his eyes ashamed, and I glaring resentful.

" A nice mess you've mingled us into!" I growled. " What do you think you're doing anyways—inaugurating a political tour, making friends on every front porch you come to? Well, mutt, I'm informing you now and here you ain't running for governor, mayor or assistant cat catcher, and if you keep this up you'll be running for dear life. Comprenay?"

Captain gulped and fixed his gaze on me, chastened, humbled, but pleading.

" All right," I give in, " I'll let your lovely new friends feed you this once. God knows I can't."

I leaned against the porch pillar, impatient and sullen while Captain watched me till he thought I wasn't looking, then turned round twice and settled and commenced to doze right to home on the " Welcome " doormat.

Inside come the twitter of feminine voices like pigeons in their roost.

" And he found Mitzi and brought her home," said the voice of the girl, excited. " And he's so young and has such a nice face, mother. And he's all alone here except for that dear old dog of his. He's hungry, mom. They're both hungry. I can see that. Couldn't we invite him to supper?"

" We don't know who he is," complained an older voice, with tones that was sweet, however. " He might be a tramp or thief or murderer—"

I winced at that.

" His dog likes him," put in the girl, calm. " That's enough for me."

" Then ask him in," consented the lady, laughing soft like. " Goodness knows, *I* wouldn't want to be the one to turn away a hungry stranger from my gates—especially when he's so young and has such a nice face," she added, teasing.

I blushed, hot. I wasn't going to let no two dames make a fool out of me.

The girl appeared at the door, her cheeks a little rosier than when she went in.

" Mother says your dog may have the beef bone," she informed me, pleasant. " But that it wouldn't be fair not to invite *you* to supper, too. Won't you come in?" she urged.

" I gotta be moving," I muttered, sullen, then continued, malicious: " *You* don't know me. Maybe I'm a tramp, a thief, a—"

Her face went white.

" You heard!" she murmured, miserable. " Oh, I'm sorry! I'm so sorry. Mother didn't mean that, I know. Oh, please, you must let us try to show you now that we didn't mean it. We really didn't."

She choked.

" Many a true word is said in gestures," I observed, bitter. " But if the mutt wants to stay I'll let him—and wait out here."

" Why, aren't *you* coming in?"

" Thanks. I'll wait out here."

She said nothing more to me, but laid her hand on Captain's head and he rose like a gentleman and followed her in with a backward glance at me what I completely ignored.

The damned aristocrat couldn't lead *me* into no high society.

I set on the steps, watching the wind rumple the green hair of the maples like Gingie used to do mine. And the hurt of love in my heart mingled with the burn of hate in my brain till my cheeks was scorched with something like fever. Forty-one days till Travers trotted back! Forty-one days to wait—and plan.

It was going to be a neat job, no fox paws pulled at all. I'd get a gun somehow, the efficient kind that lays dainty and deadly in your coat pocket—the kind that a baby can handle. You can arouse them for a wink and a whistle in Jersey.

Then I'd ferry into New York some sunny morning and breeze nonchalant into that grim, gray office. Up the elevator. Damn it, why does it have to stop at every floor? Then down the hall to push open that glazed door that invites you to walk in, so innocent and unsuspecting.

The crowd would be there—Nat, the grinning office boy, and Red and Mac and the other fellows, and the stenos, mauling their machines—everything snappy and gay as a May morning, till I walked in.

"Well, if it ain't Davy boy!" they'd say. "What 're you doing, tooting back to the fold? Returning to home, sweet home? Well, well, so Travers couldn't get along without you, huh?"

And I'd smile and say nothing, but wait outside that intervening oak fence till Nat give me the high sign to enter. Then I'd open the door marked "Private" and stalk in like a general. *He'd* be lolling at his desk, belching out his soft coal smoke like a tin-lined monster. Then he'd look up, leering, and I'd erase that leer—

Come a scream from the screen door and an alarmed series of barks and catcalls.

I went in.

Captain and the cat was making a merry-go-round look stationary, and the girl was doing her best to get near the cyclone center and save the pieces. I grabbed the mutt by a bunch of loose fur on the back and finally, between whirls, ducks and dodges, I managed to transplant my hold to the two ears whereby I backed him off in a corner while the girl corraled the kitten.

"I just can't understand Mitzi," she apologized to me, chastising the spitting ball of spitfire with gentle slaps. "She's always been so sweet-tempered and good until now. Why, I can't understand it. I was making the gravy when I heard the most awful hiss and turned around to see that bad cat hit poor Captain right on his nose. You can see what a scratch there is. And he didn't do a thing, either."

"The causes of war is hard to understand," observed I, almost grinning.

"Well, thank you for bringing reënforcements to save the day," she smiled bright. "And now, if you'd do only one more kindness for us and carry that dish of baked apples to the table. Yes, right in there."

I annexed the tray, sheepish. The mother was sitting in her place at the head of the table as I tiptoed in, cleverly keeping an apple from rolling off the dish by tipping it tight against my shirt front.

"What a rumpus that was!" she exclaimed, as I balanced my load and slipped it off neat on the cloth. "What was going on in there? A circus? Now, look, Mr.—er—just sit there. Yes, that's your place."

"I don't *want*—" I commenced, but she silenced me with one of them gentle, womanish smiles that don't leave no room for masculine protestings.

I eased myself down, sullen and sour, and in a minute the girl breezed in with the lamb stew, and we inaugurated supper with a few queer words about thanking the Lord for what we were about to receive.

And the gayer supper got, the bitterer I become.

The room was so bright and merry; plain, homey brown but splashed with lots of orange and yellow cushions that looked as if the girl had made 'em. And there was nasturtiums in the windows and a yellow lamp that made the worn rug look new, and books and things was scattered around, careless but convenient.

CHAPTER VI.

CAPTAIN WANTS TO STAY.

THEN after supper, while the girl did the dishes, her mother plumped me down in a big easy chair that she said used to be her husband's before the pneumonia poofed him off. And she talked on and on, real cheerful, sewing the while on something that looked like a blue apron—with the light from the yellow lamp making her gray hair seem gold.

The girl come, too, with Captain and the cat behind her, no more enmity between 'em now than the lion and the lamb in the picture—though there wasn't no love languishing amongst 'em either.

Then the jane stowed away new washed stacks of blue plates in the potbellied china

closet and brushed the crumbs off the table and moved around the room doing lots of comfortable things, plopping pillows and watering the nasturtiums and such.

And as I watched her I thought of Gingie.

She'd of liked a little place like this to putter around in. She'd of just fitted in this house like a gold canary in a bird cage. So happy she'd of been—so happy!

I looked at that girl, sitting down comfy near her mother to stitch on another blue apron, and as I looked I hated her—for being where Gingie ought to of been.

So I got up, and through the mists that blurred my eyes like Bridal Veil Falls, I commenced to excavate in the old red plush chair for my hat.

" Well, I guess I gotta be moving," I announced.

They glanced up, smiling, whilst continuing their work.

" It's early yet," they observed, undisturbed.

I hesitated, aggravating a worn spot in the carpet with my toe.

" I gotta be hunting up some kind of a dump to be parking for the night," I explained, grumpy.

The lady laid down her sewing.

" Are you going to be in town long?" she inquired, interested.

" Maybe—ma'am."

All this time the girl had been bending close over her sewing, pulling a long blue thread out with every stitch, and it wasn't till it run short that she looked up.

" The hotel's terrible," she stated, swapping meaningful looks with her mother.

" If you're looking for a room somewhere—" begun the woman.

" All you have to do is to go out on the front porch and take the ' For Rent ' sign down," butted in the girl, making merry lights with her eyes.

I gulped.

" Thanks, but I'd fit in here with you ladies about as neat as a hedgehog in a box of rabbits," I protested.

" Hedgehogs are all right," commented the jane, laughing some, " when they don't bristle."

I eyed her, keen, suspecting kidding somewhere, though I just couldn't fix my finger on it.

" Yeh," come back I, short, " and *this* one 'd make a wire hairbrush look like a soft sponge; for I'm simply informing you folks I'd be about as popular here as a bull in a china hop joint. Nope, I'll be ambling on, thanking you ladies just the same. Now, where's the mutt?"

The girl laid aside her sewing, careful, and got up.

" I saw him a minute ago," she murmured, indistinct, " out in the kitchen."

I strolled after her and reached to turn on the high gas jet while she fired the match. And as the green light flared up, something moved uneasy in the corner behind the door and some eyes blinked at us like an owl's.

It was Captain, curled comfy on an old cushion, and beside him the cat peacefully toyed with the stuffing.

" Come on, Cap," I ordered, brisk.

He yawned, stretching his paws luxurious.

" Move, you mutt!"

His head lifted, then sunk again serene on the soft pillow, while his eyes held mine, pleading.

I shrugged my shoulders and give in.

" What 're your rates, single room and that cushion, by the week?" I inquired of the girl, businesslike.

" S-seven dollars, I guess," she stammered, surprised. " And the cushion—why, I couldn't say about that. It's Mitzi's, and—" Here she recovered her poise and went on brightly. " And if she wants to entertain company, it's none of our business, is it?"

I almost laughed.

" Well, I'll take the room," I decided, short. " Pay in advance?"

" Oh, no! At the end of the week 'll be all right. Mother," she called, something in her voice I couldn't fathom noways, " Mr. —Mr. Watchamaycallhim's going to stay! If you don't tell me your name," she added, shy, in lower accents, " I'll have to call you Smith."

" Well, you've received my consent," I mumbled, mad. " That happens to be it."

She blushed.

"Oh, I'm sorry again!" she said.

"I ain't," I contradicted, stubborn. "It's a good enough name for the likes of me. Now, if you'll tote me up to my bed and bureau—"

"Certainly," she smiled, kinda confused. "Just wait till I get you a lamp."

She disappeared, her starched gingham skirts crackling like dry leaves as she went.

I turned on Captain.

"Darn you, you high-toned hound!" I muttered, menacing. "Seven dollars a week! Why didn't you pick the Waldorf-Ask More of You, or the Bills More, while you was at it? Seven simoleons per! Do they bud on bushes? Do they flutter down into the outstretched palm like soap flake ads from an airplaine? Do they mysteriously materialize in the mitt like gnats on an old cantaloupe? Seven of 'em! And where am I gonna get 'em, huh?"

Captain blinked, but didn't say nothing. He was as devoid of ideas as to whence come corned beef bones, cushions and new collars as a baby doll wife is concerning the source of her sables, diamonds, and dinner gowns—and cared less.

And it wasn't till morning, as I tossed on my trundle with the summer wind in the maples blending with somebody's light breathing down the hall, that I realized where them seven sunshine scatterers was coming from.

There's only one place where they grow 'em upright and honest, and that is—in a pay envelope.

CHAPTER VII.

JERKING DOWN A JOB.

MONDAY A.M. I commenced work down at the local drug store as chief soda siphonater, having received elementary instruction along them lines whilst on a vacation from high school some years back.

The job was handed to me neat and snappy, with no questions asked and none answered. Seemed everybody in town knew by Monday morning there was a stranger in their midst, and they was bound to shake me, each and all, by the hand and see to it that I become immediately established as a citizen of the very first soda water. So they personally escorted me around to see old man Doolittle, the town druggist, and inside ten minutes the old mud turtle had signed me up as chief tapper of his newly installed soda fountain.

Some place it was, that dusty, dry drug store that *was* a drug store, not like them city hangouts where a guy can get his lunch, his liquor, his lemonade—everything but his liver pills. Nope, sal hepatica and senna was still the best sellers down to Doolittle's, and taking the joint as barometer of the village's Volsteadiness, Shelter Hollow was decidedly no hic town.

So I stayed on, fingering fizzes from nine to seven, then lumbering home weary at evening to the little white gate where Captain would always meet me, lifting his head hungry for the pat he never got. I seen to it he received his beef bones per schedule. Then, leaving him to romp with Mary, the girl, I'd slink up to my garret grotto to con the calendar till night drove me to bed.

What nights!

It's better not to talk about 'em. Sometimes I used to think I'd gone balmy. Only a crazy man could of mixed such dreams of sweetness gone by with such nightmares of bitterness to come. Gingie and Travers, Travers and Gingie, was all that moved through my mind. And the gentler the remembrance of the one became, the sterner was the remembrance of the other.

Them nights!

No, I ain't going to talk about 'em no more. This ain't a résumé of Dante's Inferno. Yet, terrible though they was, I lived through the day, hurrying my work, hating whatever come between me and my thoughts—just kinda suspending time till I could crawl up them attic stairs and let them awful, delicious things creep through my brain like Gingie's little white fingers used to creep through my hair.

Can you imagine them six weeks?

At half past seven I had to tear myself from my haven of horror and, putting up a decent front, mosey downstairs to consume the bacon and baked apples Mary cooked me, trying not to get entangled in her silly, cheerful conversation about how

the lima beans had growed overnight, or whether I had noticed Jem Rankin's new flivver; trying not to be intrigued by Captain's crazy cut-ups of joy around me every morning as I sat in the sunshiny dining room with the colored-paned windows making a crazy quilt on the floor; trying to dodge every kind word that was said to me as though it was a strong hand leading me away from the One Thing.

The whole world was conspiring to make me forget it.

Funny old Doolittle did with his, " Good morning, Davy. Nice day, ain't it? Sure it is, and I'm tickled to hear you say so. You're a good boy, Davy, and a smart one. That's what I tells everybody. ' He's a fine, bright lad, that Davy. And I'm getting older every day. If only he sticks with Absalom Doolittle,' I says, ' he won't be sorry. No, siree, not he!' "

The high school kids that breezed into the store every afternoon for their sodas and fudge sundaes tried to make me forget it, stopping to give me a complete recital of the latest goings on, from the marshmallow roast down to Pirates' Cove to the latest sophomore hop that lasted to one o'clock because old Meeks, the principal, forgot to wind his watch.

Mary and her mother tried to make me forget it, always inviting me to church and sociables and lectures, and when I wouldn't go, contenting themselves with ironing out my ties on the sly or mending my socks, the darn women!

" Won't you sit out on the porch with us a minute, David?" they'd say. " And watch the sky. Mary and I have been looking at it ever since that one big rosy cloud there was high above the tree tops and now see where it is. Evenings comes slower these days, don't they? Oh, won't you stay, David? It's so hot up in your room."

That's the way it was every night when I come home tired from work and wanting only to sneak up to my dump and think.

And Captain tried to make me forget it—Captain most of all. He couldn't gab at me like the rest, poor dumb brute, but his eyes spoke Wells of love, they was, silent, hopeless love with more pity in 'em than reproach. How they followed me!

They watched me at supper, as he sat at my elbow. With every bite I bolted I felt them eyes on me, worried, anxious as an old hen with a brood of chicks. And if I shooed him off to his corner with a mean little cuff, they only got more deep and full of pity.

And in them was another expression—an expression that stole into my dreams at night and made me afraid. Captain *knew* —about it—that Thing. And he was trying to stop me! Trying to enlist the whole world into one big army and then, as its captain, march on me and stop me.

Well, he couldn't do it!

I'd barricade myself in the stronghold of my thoughts. Now, let the world besiege me! Let it hurl against me shafts of smiles, cannon balls of kindness, arrows of love! There'd never a one pierce that fortress.

Sometimes I starved during that siege, I don't know what for, but I starved, and would of give in—only that little lost smile of Gingie's wouldn't let me.

One evening especial, the last week, I almost hoisted the white flag.

It was nine when I come ambling up the gravel walk to the porch where Mary sat, watching the sinking sun, while from inside come the soft, low singing of her mother and the slow moving of feet in the kitchen.

Captain was at my side. He had met me down the block and trotted home with me, silent, straight-staring, stern, like a military escort.

He mounted the steps, dignified, and rested his head against Mary's knee, where fluttered the little white ruffles of her dress. And her hand come down to him and stroked him gentle under the chin, the while she watched me, leaning silent on the railing.

" Won't you sit down, Dave?" she asked, her face faint in the soft darkness that was spilling into the atmosphere. The street lights had twinked on, making queer patterns of maple leaves on her white dress.

" Gotta go on up," I muttered.

" But I would like to talk to you a minute—please," she begged, quiet but firm.

I eased myself down on the railing and picked at the honeysuckle vine, impatient.

"It's about Captain," she went on, her voice breathing in the dark like a June wind. "I'd like to buy him, Dave."

"Huh!"

"I said I'd like to have him for my very own dog."

I didn't say nothing. Queer feelings itched my heart. I looked, open-eyed for the first time, at the two of 'em—the girl petting Captain proprietary and abstract like she already owned him, and Captain gazing up into her eyes with almost the kind of worship he poured into mine.

And it galled me.

I had been letting things slide. Folks in this world was already beginning to count me out of it. I had no more say than an ex-Congressman at a House meeting.

Something stung me.

"Captain!" I called, impulsive.

He discarded her hand like an old glove and come bounding to my side.

"Captain," I ordered, triumphant, "up, boy, up!"

He jumped on my knees, crazy with joy, and licked frantic at my face.

And over me swept a tide of pride and power so that I had to tighten every muscle to keep from crushing that butterscotch beast with my two arms. Yet I didn't touch him. I was still too strong for that.

But I had proved something. I was still master. That jane was nothing to him. I had only to call and he would forsake all others for me. Something like a laugh bubbled up in my throat and I flung it to the girl.

She trembled and her two white hands fluttered on her breast. She kept silent.

"You *see!*" I taunted, triumphant. "I guess *he* ain't anxious to be changing masters. Down, mutt, down!"

Captain released his paws from my shirt front and stood at attention.

"Now, lie down!"

He lay down.

"You see!" I taunted again.

"I see," she said, slow. "I—I guess he does love you—the best."

"Looks so," I agreed with malicious satisfaction.

"I never saw such—such love as he shows you," she went on, her voice vaporous like the thin curling of mists on the lowlands. "And you so indifferent to it. But I—can understand—that."

"Indifferent?" echoed I, savage. "Well, that's the way to be. Folks who love in this weary world only get robbed of what they love. It don't pay to make no connections. It don't pay to lay your heart open. You only get wounded. I found that out. Nope, let the rest of 'em kid themselves along that they're getting something out of life. *I* know. Fate takes you a little way down the sunny lane till you come to a dark spot and then she stabs you in the back and leaves you. But never again. I got a system. I wrap myself up in a fort, the Fortress of Myself, and nobody can hurt me because I never go out where I can *get* hurt. I just park in my little garrison and watch the world go by."

"It must be lovely there," she murmured, soft. "Oh, I think it's a wonderful idea, to have a Fortress of Yourself that you can go to when you're hurt and tired! But not to stay there all the time," she added, gentle. "I—I *want* to walk out in the world and get my share of wounds. And then—come back to my fort and rest—for the next battle."

"Do you have battles, too?" I marveled.

She rose, and her pale face come swimming into the lamplight.

For a minute she stood, looking at me with eyes as big and steady as Captain's after I'd cuffed him. Then she spoke and her voice was sad but calm.

"I think—I'll retreat—to my fort—now," she said, quiet, and left me.

CHAPTER VIII.

VENGEANCE IS MINE.

EVERY day, that last, long week, I waited impatient at the station for the evening train to bring the New York papers. And when I grabbed them, savage, outta the hands of the wondering newsboy, the headlines might of read: "End of the World Due To-Night" for all I cared. I would rip the sheets to the shipping news,

and on Wednesday I found what I was looking for.

> Among the notables due to arrive on the Aquitania Monday are Louis R. Travers, well known New York importer, and Mrs. Travers, who have been touring southern Europe for the last six weeks.

Monday at two! That meant I'd have to wait till Tuesday.

On Sunday I went to church with Mary and her mother for the first time. I was willing to be dragged anywhere. Two more days!

I looked aloof at the sober hats of women and slumbering heads of men above the high-backed pews with calm disdain. The sunshine, flooding through the rosy windows and warming the cold floors, couldn't touch me. I even held the hymn book with Mary, her hand sometimes against mine, without a quiver.

And I smiled as I listened to the monotonous babble of the parson.

"'Vengeance is mine!' saith the Lord," was the text of his sonorous sermon.

"Vengeance is *mine!*" echoed I, fierce.

I slunk down into the pew, indifferent to the rest of his gabble, till he struck a note in his ramblings that grated on me.

"We should commit all settlement of wrong to God," he said. "It is not for us to judge the crime or mete the punishment. Can mere human intellect weigh unerringly right against wrong? Can we be sure of the justice of our indictments? May they not be hasty, unfair? It is for God to punish, mortals to forgive. 'If a man smiteth thee on one cheek, turn to him the other also—'"

"A hell of a creed!" seethed I to myself. "If a man insulteth thy sister, give to him to insult thy mother also! If a man killeth the one thing thou lovest, pat him on the back and regret thou didst not have more loved ones for him to destroy. 'Give to him the other cheek also!' That's not the creed of a red-blooded man and never will be. Vengeance is *mine*—right here and now. I ain't gonna wait for no judgment day to amble around. In a hundred thousand years *any* crime'd look tame to St. Peter. Vengeance is *mine*—and I'm gonna take i !"

I must of muttered something out loud in my bitterness, because Mary looked at me, startled.

"What did you say, David?" she asked, bending close to whisper it.

"'If a man smiteth thee on one cheek,' he says, 'turn to him the other also.' But what're you gonna do if he swats you on the nose?"

She smiled, gentle and puzzled, and turned to find the closing hymn.

I consented to sit out on the porch with them that Sunday after dinner. I was strong —strong enough to leave my fort for a little while and walk in the world, full protected with the armor of my purpose. I was even gay, splitting wise cracks and causing Mary and her mother to laugh.

Captain hung around me constant, hopeful at seeing me so merry, but I ignored him like the fly that buzzed in the sunshine, not even bothering to shove away the head that rested so intriguing on my knee.

I couldn't touch him. I felt it would be like surrendering. Of the whole great army that was trying to break down the grimness of my fort I was afraid of nobody but its captain.

So I talked on and on in the June sunshine, watching yellow bees tuck themselves cozy into the nasturtiums that swung in the mossy hanging baskets. And it seemed like a play and me the chief actor.

Sunday in Shelter Hollow!

And Mary was happier than I had ever seen her, laughing gay at everything I said, while her pale cheeks painted themselves with roses.

Then she talked about the bazaar, the church bazaar for starving Laplanders that they was having the next Tuesday.

"You're coming, aren't you, Dave?" she inquired, eager. "We're having cake sales and rummage sales, lemonade and soda pop, and in the evening Reverend Thomas is going to let us dance on the parish lawn. I have to take charge of the candlestick booth, so it ought to be real pretty in the evening. So won't you come and—and maybe bring a—contribution for my booth?" she added, shy.

"I got to run up to the city to-morrow," I told her, my gayety graying.

"But you'll be back the next day anyhow, won't you?" she wanted to know. "And oh, maybe you can bring a pair of brass candlesticks from New York. They don't have them here. Gracious, some one ought to buy them for enough to keep at least sixteen starving Laplanders for a year! You know the kind I mean—tall and twisty. Oh, it would be wonderful if you could bring them! But anyhow, it'll be all right if you just bring—yourself, Dave."

"Don't count on me," I finally said, slow.

"But you'll surely be back by evening," she declared, her chin quivering some. "It'll be so pretty with the lights and—"

"Don't count on me," I repeated, grim.

CHAPTER IX

BACK AGAIN.

I STARTED at dawn the next morning, remembering the old saw of the early bird getting the worm. Well, I was going to "get" a worm.

Mary cooked me breakfast and come to the door to see me off, Captain standing beside her, watching me wistful.

"Be sure and come back as soon as you can!" she called as I swung open the gate. "And if you *do* get candlesticks, remember to get them tall and twisty!"

I smiled to myself and shut the gate, turning to look back at Captain.

Well, he had a good home now, and he'd be all right even if his first master never come for him. At least, you couldn't say I hadn't done my duty by the dog. And now I was clear of him. No more hanging around me, angling for petting, and watching me—always watching me—with them brown eyes that seemed to know everything.

He was looking at me now, with that steady, brave look of a woman who sees the man she loves go out to danger, while she has to stay home.

My heart went curiously empty all of a sudden.

There was going to be a war—with no Captain at the front! He'd gone through everything with me, all the minor battles and skirmishes, and now that the zero hour had come I was leaving him back of the lines.

Somehow it didn't seem fair, and fair was the one thing I wanted to be in this world that didn't know the meaning of them two simple syllables "justice."

"Captain!" I called, clear and ringing.

He pricked his ears at the name, but stood rigid.

"*Captain!*" I summoned him again.

He give Mary one swift look, love mingled with sorrow, gratitude mixed in with apology, then spurted from her side down the gravel walk to hurdle the gate like a greyhound.

I turned and waved to the one we had left. It was the least I could do.

So we faced east and marched on, me and Captain, over the way we had come, across the river that had seemed so black that dark night in April, until we reached the city once more. And in my pocket snuggled a thing that was dainty but deadly.

It was early morning of the next day when we entered that high cañon of commerce, and only the peaks of them grim, gray buildings caught the light from the skies. I plumped again on that bench in the park and watched dawn paint in the remote figure of Lady Justice. And I eyed her, bitter but triumphant.

"Take off them blinders, lady!" I exulted. "And you'll see something. You'll see one lone man settle the score they say only you and Heaven can settle. But Heaven is far off, fair jane, and you're only a weak woman that holds her pretty skirts high above us mortals, not even caring to see what's going on. They put you in the clouds up there, lady, and then say there's justice in the world. Come down to earth. That's where we need you. You won't come? Stay there, then, you fair figurehead, and watch a man carve his own fate!"

So I viewed the dawn, alone and resolute, while Captain slept at the foot of my bench. And along Broadway there grew a hum that strengthened with the morning, till at last the whole street was alive with weary mortals, ready to slave for another day to keep body and soul together for yet

another day to slave in. And they call it life!

It must of been ten when I got up and whistled to Captain.

"Ready, Cap?" I asked, grim. "All right, march it is!"

So we went along that high, hazy cañon that ends in the blue of the sea, and turned at that high, hazy building that would end in—how could I know?

It hadn't changed much in six weeks. The same elevator starter jammed us into the same elevator, delivering Captain a dubious look, and we shot up that cold, gray spine. Outside the glazed door that invites you to walk in, so innocent and unsuspecting, I paused.

"Captain," I said, sober, "you're a good sport and a good loser. For some reason I don't savvy how you elected yourself savior of my soul some six weeks ago, and, finding the job too hard for you, went and enlisted the whole world in one great, glorious army to move against and stop me—from this very thing. Oh, yes, don't look so innocent! You know that I knew you knew, Cap. But you couldn't do nothing, could you? You drafted Doolittle and Mary and her mother and the hole blamed town. All against me, they was, with you leading 'em on. But you couldn't stop me, old boy, could you? You've lost the war, Cap, and you might as well be in at the finish to hand over your sword in style. Here's Waterloo, Nappy. Step in!"

I pushed open the door, and a battery of typewriters barked like artillery fire. It was just as I imagined. I couldn't of planned it better if I had been in full charge of scenic effects myself.

Mac and Red and the fellows splurged around me hilarious to use my shoulder blades for sounding boards.

"Back again!" they hailed me. "Just on a visit, Dave?"

"Yep," I answered, short. "Don't expect to be here long. Just dropped in a minute to see Travers. Will you tell him I'm here, Nat?"

"Already did," grinned Nat. "Old Walrus said he'd see you when he got through a dictate. Ought to be done in a couple hundred years. Sit down, Mr. Smith?"

"Thanks, kid. I feel better standing. Anything new, Mac?"

"Same old grind, Dave. Few girls got fired on account of bobbing the bangs. Travers thinks it's 'short on hair, short on brains.' At that rate Baldy over there don't have no chance whatsoever. Oh, Jenkins went and got tied up! You knew Jenk? Sure, thought you did. Seems to run steadier in double harness, though, poor chap. Well, well," he broke off, as Captain pushed himself into the picture, "if it ain't old Doug. Here, Doug, good boy!"

Captain raised his head, alert.

"You know that dog?" I asked, surprised.

"Sure. Used to see him a lot when I had to bring papers over to Travers's place week ends—"

"Travers's dog!"

"Sure. Didn't you know that? Travers lost him just before he sailed. Slipped his collar and got away from Mrs. Travers in the car while she was parked outside waiting to take the old man to the boat. Been scouring this neighborhood ever since they got back. Put ads in all the papers—"

Travers's dog!

The typewriters pounded on my brain till I thought it would bust. The rows of green shaded lamps chased each other like grasshoppers, and the whole room was a squirrel cage. The dog I had found, fed and followed belonged to *him!*

Fate sure has a queer sense of humor.

I had been nourishing in my bosom a snake—a snake that had crawled away from its nest of pestilent poison to pose as an innocent earthworm. And now I had traced it to its lair. Well, that made two scores to settle.

My hand felt its way in my pocket and found something cold there.

What do people do with snakes?

Only one thing. The mutt's eyes were on me. They was a deeper brown than I had ever seen them, so deep with patient sorrow and sad love they drew you into them until you lost yourself. Resigned they was, too, though I knew that he knew what was coming.

"All right," them eyes seemed to say. "Go ahead. I'm ready."

Something in me bust.

Six weeks rushed back on me, clear and free from the mists that had blurred them, and I looked at myself in the mirror of understanding.

Who put that new coat on my shoulders, the color in my cheeks? Who won me friends and affection? Who crusaded with a whole town at his back to save a poor sinner that nobody else would of thought worth a pint portion of pity? Who led me, so brave, so gallant, so sturdy, on the way that goes to the right?

If Travers had downed me, who raised me?

Travers's dog!

And they say there ain't no justice in the world!

A grinning map inserted itself into my thoughts.

"O. K., Mr. Smith," announced Nat, with a wink. "The old boy 'll see you now."

A door was pushed open before me, and as my dim eyes pierced the smoke fog that eddied under the electric globe, I beheld Travers—the man I was going to get.

"Good morning, Smith!" he greeted me, pleasant. "Did you want to see me? Oh, there's the dog!" he broke off, surprised. "You found him and brought him to me? That's damn decent of you, Smith."

"Don't you *expect* decency in this world?" I asked him, quiet.

He puffed at his soft coal burner, nervous.

"You're rubbing it in, Smith," he said, "and it hurts. But I'm going to own up. I *was* a bit hasty with you, letting you go as I did. I shouldn't have done it, with your sister in such a precarious condition. But I didn't realize. I had matters on my mind that day. And soon after I tried to locate you. You'd gone. I was sorry, Smith. If there's anything I can do now—"

"There's nothing," I answered, short.

Silence weighed.

"Damn decent of you, just the same, to bother with the dog. By the way, there's the matter of a little reward—"

"Thanks," I curtailed him, laconic, "but I'll wait to get mine in heaven."

He chewed his cigar, disgruntled.

"If there's anything I can do—" he repeated.

"Call your dog."

"Eh?"

"Call your dog."

He turned in his swivel chair and faced Captain, standing between us.

"Here, Doug!" he whistled. "Here Douglas!"

The mutt stiffened his ears. Into my heart crept a warm tide of hope and fear.

"Here, Douglas!" he called again.

The dog was a statue. Travers shrugged his shoulders.

Then I stooped low upon the carpet, my hands on my knees.

"Captain!" I whispered soft. "*Captain!*"

In a flash he was on me, wriggling in my arms, ecstatic, his cold nose quivering against my cheek. And the sea that had battered so long and so vain against the stone walls of my heart broke them away with a rush and flooded me full.

I was crying. I ain't ashamed to say it—I was crying.

Then I looked up, over a butterscotch shoulder, at Travers, hiding his twitching mouth in a cloud of smoke.

"Take him, Smith," he ordered, gruff. "Take the darn dog out of here."

I hesitated.

"Go on," he ordered. "It's all right. Mrs. Travers has just picked up a poodle in Paris. Our home is complete. Take him, I say."

"Thanks, Mr. Travers," said I, rising.

We went out, into that high cañon of hope, Captain leading the victorious march. But every once in a while he would come back to feel the hand of the vanquished.

So we set once again on that bench in the gay June sunshine, watching the little lady atop the Municipal Building. And I tipped my hat in apology.

"Lady," I said, "I'm sorry. I didn't give you credit for no sense whatsoever. For I guess, after all, you know pretty well what you're doing. And you can't fool me, either, about them blindfold eyes of yours. You been peeking, lady, you been peeking!"

Then we ambled on down a funny little

side street, and, remembering something, I ducked into a dingy shop that bore the sign of the Three Gold Globules.

" Uncle," I began to the bearded old boy that snoozed on the counter, " I am about to wish on you something that 'll be better off in your hands than mine. Behold this cunning toy of true steel!"

He opened his pig eyes, yawned, and fingered the plaything.

" Want it?" I inquired, brisk.

He mused.

" Ve-ell, I'll take a chance," he declared, none too enthusiastic. " But I can't gif you ober two dollars cash."

I surveyed the joint.

" Them candlesticks over there," I observed, " would you term them ' tall and twisty,' uncle?"

" Sure. Very fine. Very goot brass. Tall, twisty, you bet. Vat ve use in temple."

" Just the thing!" I exclaimed. " All right, uncle, will you swap?"

" Ve-ell—"

" Done!"

We left the shop, me and the mutt, and bust forth into the gay summer sunshine—a sunshine that gauzed the blue skies with gold dust.

" All right, Captain, you lead—I follow," said I, calm and content.

And Captain faced west.

THE END

THE FOURTH OF JULY

TO-MORROW'S the Fourth
And gee, say, I think it's just too bad:
No firecrackers, no torpedoes, no gun,
Not a thing so'st a feller can have a little fun:
Jiminy, but ain't it enough to make you mad
On the Fourth of July?

To-morrow's the Fourth
An' I guess they've got a picnic planned;
But who wants to go with that grown-up crowd?
Prob'ly they'd be scared if us fellers hollered out loud:
Why, we want to make a racket to beat the band
On the Fourth of July.

To-morrow's the Fourth
'N I wish't I's Pres'dent for just one day:
I'd send a message with this little word,
And it would be the best news us fellers ever heard,
That we could celebrate in the old-fashioned way
On the Fourth of July.

To-morrow's the Fourth
'Nif things has got to be safe and sane,
And we can't have no firecrackers and such,
Why, I dunno as you could blame us so very much,
If us fellers 'ud be glad if 'twould up and rain
On the Fourth of July.

May Clark McClellan.

The Call of Shining Steel

By DON WATERS

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PART I

ZEB WHITE wearies of his labors on a rocky farm. Unknown to his shiftless father, he slips away to try for a job on the railroad. He helps the crew of the local train and gets a ride into the nearest division town on the engine. The faulty equipment causes the locomotive to part from the tender, and Zeb's presence of mind saves Jim Brown, the fireman, from death. Jim uses his influence to get him a job firing. On his first trip Zeb has a chance to talk with a former schoolmate, a girl called "Itchy Witchy" as a substitute for her original Welsh name. Through the girl he learns that his father has gone to manufacturing "mountain dew" and is in danger of arrest. Zeb sends money to his mother through the girl, to whose hand he aspires some day. He takes Jim's place while Jim is sleeping off the effects of liquor, and the train is wrecked. Before the horrified eyes of Itchy Witchy, Zeb is barely saved from drowning in the river where he had jumped from the cab, and the wrecking derrick lifts the tender so that his leg—caught between the tender and the engine—may be freed. It is feared that the limb may have to be amputated, but Zeb, dreaming of a railroad career, insists that another surgeon be called in to try to save it.

CHAPTER IX.

DR. MILLER'S VERDICT.

ZEB was only dimly conscious of the trip back. He lay on a seat cushion, dazed and suffering. The pain of his fractured limb throbbed, a dull ache that rose and fell in unison with every heart beat. Yet he suffered more pain when he overheard the conductor's words: "Not a chance. It has to come off at the knee."

The picture of himself a cripple, stumping around on a peg leg like Pink Case, unable to run up the hills or tramp free

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for June 27.

across the clearings, his life circumscribed by a mutilated body, filled him with a dread of the future. And the wish repeated itself over and over—better dead, better dead.

Much as the bitter thought that he was through railroading almost before he had started pounded in his fevered brain, another thought far more bitter raced along with it. Itchy-Witchy in the bloom of health and strength, what would she think of a cripple?

He felt himself lifted on to a stretcher. He peered out through half closed eyes and saw he was being carried through a close packed line of curious people who formed a walled path from the depot to a waiting ambulance. The purr of the motor—a clanging gong—bumps—the swaying of the machine rounding curves and the sudden stop before a hospital impressed on his senses, detached and impersonal as though he were watching and hearing these things as they occurred to some other person.

He was gently taken from the ambulance —carried through a long corridor that smelled heavy and strange of drugs, and he heard the clang of the elevator doors, barely noticed the upward movement, and only began to perceive his surroundings after he had lain quiet for a few minutes on a clean white bed in a shaded room.

He never had been in a hospital before, and a cold, clammy dread of the unknown horrors that he associated with such places ran chill and torturing through him.

If only Jim were here! But Jim was probably wild eyed drunk again by now. If only his mother or sisters, if only Itchy-Witchy were here to say one cheering word to him, it might be all right. But this strange place, those white-gowned nurses with their impassive, detached manner, filled him with a blood-stilling fear.

A face bent over him, fingers searched, probed, pressed against his aching body.

" Oh!" he ejaculated at each sharp pain flash that stabbed through him.

" Hum, a couple of fractured ribs, body bruises, shock, submersion," he heard the words, machinelike and professional.

He felt a sharper twinge of pain when those diabolical, cunning fingers that searched out each aching spot, grasped his leg. He looked up. A doctor stood watching him, a calculating expression in his eyes.

" What's your name?" he questioned.

" Zeb White," was the feeble answer.

" How long you been in the service?"

" I ain't been but a couple of days," Zeb murmured.

" A—huh—new man, eh? Well, it's too bad you've barely got started at the game. Still at that, you are lucky. You might have been killed. You're still alive," said the doctor in an effort to cheer Zeb up. " Yet there's nothing for it but to amputate," was the verdict.

The doctor turned to the waiting nurses and in a brusque tone asked, " Operating room in use?"

" No, doctor."

" Prepare it," the order snapped out. " Half an hour, I'll be ready."

A nurse propped Zeb up. He felt a glass rim against his lips. Mechanically he swallowed a cool liquid, then fell back on to the pillow into a sleep peopled with rushing cars and clanging bells. He saw himself in the center of a curious, apathetic sea of faces and staring eyes, while a big figure, diabolical looking, sharpened a long shining knife and slowly, step by step, crept nearer and nearer to him.

Just as the knife was descending he awoke with a cry. Gentle hands were lifting him on to a white enameled table that stood on four rubber tired wheels. He was moving through the door. Smoothly as though he stood still while door after door slid by, the procession passed down the hall towards the operating room. The walls alongside stopped moving and began to turn as the nurses headed their burden towards the open door. Another minute, and Zeb knew the bright shining knife would descend. He'd lose a leg and even though pain-racked, with his nerves in a frayed tatter, the thought that this meant the end of all his hopes and ambitions, his high plans and his chances for the future hurt him worse, filled him with a greater dread than the fear of the actual operation.

Suddenly echoing through the building a yell sounded. " Hey! Whattenhell's going on here?"

Zeb jumped as he recognized Jim's voice.

The motion stopped. Zeb turned and stared down the hall. Jim, hatless, coatless, his shirt open at the throat, raced towards him in long springing jumps that echoed loudly in that quiet place. He saw the doctor put out his hand to stop Jim. There was a flash of a swinging arm. The doctor staggered back, struck the wall and sat down suddenly on the tile floor.

Jim grabbed Zeb's limp hand.

" Kid, I just heard the news. Busted up here. What's the big idea? Hurt bad?"

" I don't know," was Zeb's low spoken answer.

Then he gave way.

With a wild cry, " Oh, Jim, Jim, don't let them do hit! You stop 'em, Jim! They aim to cut off my laig!" Wildly imploring, he begged. " Jim, you-all stop 'em!"

" Take it quiet, kid, till we find out more about this. Don't worry."

The doctor had arisen. Indignantly he expostulated. " This is terrible, terrible. Never in all my professional career have I had such an indignity thrust upon me. I'm not accustomed to dealing with wild men. Call another doctor. I'm through."

" Take him back to his room," Jim demanded.

Zeb raised himself up on one elbow. " Yes, you-all take me back. I'm powerful glad you-all came, Jim."

As the nurses wheeled the table back up the hall Jim fancied he heard a snigger behind. He glanced back and saw one of the nurses grinning broadly.

" You bluffed him good," she whispered.

" Sister, I wasn't bluffing. I sure aimed to wallop him if he acted nasty," bragged Jim proudly.

Once safely back in the room, Zeb stretched out on the bed in contentment, his mind at ease. Jim was there. He wouldn't let them mutilate him.

" Jim, that thar doctor feller sure aimed to do me up quick."

" Well, kid, don't you worry. I'll see to it that you keep both your trotters as long as there's the slightest chance."

The head nurse entered the room. She was a matronly looking woman, middle aged and with kindly smiling eyes.

" The doctor informs me you have delayed an operation on this man," she said glancing at Jim.

" Sister, you got it all wrong. Delay is absolutely incorrect. I've plumb give it the big hole. That operation came to an emergency stop with every wheel sliding."

" What authority have you to interfere?" she questioned.

" Why," said Jim, " I'm this guy's official guardian, and, listen, he took an awful chanst to save me from going under the wheels and I'd be a hell of a guy if I let him be cut up without any palaver. Why that kid is like my own brother."

The nurse let her glance wander from Jim standing defiant, belligerent before her, to Zeb lying pale and white, passive on the bed.

She walked over, turned the sheet back and carefully examined the leg, still in the crude splints that the train crew had bound on while they brought him in.

For half a minute she leaned over it, then spoke to Jim in a whisper. " Send for Dr. Miller. It is probable that the leg may be healed."

Placing her finger to her lips as though in caution she said in low tones, " Yes, I'd suggest you call up Dr. Miller."

Jim grabbed her hand. " Listen, lady," he blurted out. " I'm wise. You're a square guy."

A huskiness stole into his voice. There was a suspicion of tears in his eyes and he almost choked on the words. " I'm fer you, right or wrong, till hell freezes over and then if you hear a noise behind you it'ull be me skating around after you on the ice."

She smiled and slipped out of the room.

The voice of Zeb came to her ears as she closed the door. " Jim, she's sure a right clever woman."

With a word of caution to Zeb, " If anyone bothers you, kid, while I'm at the phone split the ozone wide open, screech like a six hundred blowing fer hand brakes, and I'll come a running." Jim left.

He overtook the head nurse before she had got halfway down the hall. There were tears in his eyes as he said, " Lady, look out for that boy. He's the only guy I

ever fell for, and if anything happens to him it will kick the props clear from under me. I'm not much, I know, but he—he is a regular guy. Don't drink nor nothing, and I've took to him. Oh—oh. You know what I mean!"

She looked at Jim for a minute and there was understanding in her words when she answered, "Yes, I know what you mean. I understand, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Jim Brown."

"Mr. Brown, I'll see he gets the best nurse and the best attention possible."

Jim reached out, crushed her hand in his and with blurted thanks, "I'm fer you, too," hurried toward the office telephone.

Zeb listened and heard his steps returning as he trotted up the hall. Good old Jim. He would look out and see that everything was all right.

"I got him, kid. He'll be here in nothing flat. Rest your mind. It's all hunky-dory now."

For twenty minutes the two waited patiently. A nurse entered the room, set up a screen, bathed Zeb while Jim, unheeding her hints that his company was not as welcome as his presence, sat on a chair whistling "Casey Jones," softly through pursed lips to keep up his courage. It would never do to let Zeb see that he was worried.

A rapid step down the hall, the door opened, and Dr. Miller entered.

The nurse said: "How do you do, doctor? You know about this case?"

"Yes. I stopped in the office downstairs. It's perfectly all right."

"Lo, doc," Jim greeted. "There he is," pointing to Zeb as the nurse folded up the screen and set it against the wall. "Hop to it."

"Well, boy, I didn't think I'd see you so soon again."

Zeb smiled faintly, a feeling of perfect confidence pervading him as the doctor stripped off the binding and removed the crude splints.

Gently, easily, he felt the fracture, straightened up and said: "It's a bad break—very bad—but then—" With a smile, he concluded, "We'll fix you up."

Jim interrupted. "It don't have to come off, does it, doc?"

"Oh, no, no. It will be very slow to mend. Probably need weights, but I think finally, it will be as strong as ever. And those ribs will mend nicely too if he does not move around too much."

A full hour the doctor worked, deftly and carefully and finally finished.

To the nurse he said: "He's had a severe shock. Rest, quiet, and time will be his best medicine."

He spoke to Jim. "Come on, now. Let him go to sleep. You can come tomorrow to visit."

With a "Good luck, old head," Jim went out followed by the doctor.

Zeb lay still, a great peace enveloped him. The quietness of the hospital seemed unreal, almost oppressive. That morning he had fought a fire, shovel by shovel and won a battle, only to be wounded before night. It seemed impossible that so many events, such an abundance of action, could take place in so short a time.

He glanced at the watch. It was not yet five o'clock. Scarce twelve hours had passed since the call boy had hurried him off on his first trip that morning. Why, he thought to himself in astonishment, he had done more, seen more, lived more in the last day than he had in any month in his life before.

Yet, injured as he was, he knew that he would not trade off to-day for any day he had ever lived before. The excitement of motion, the struggle to conquer, the thrill of the ever present danger in railroading, had gripped him. And even as he fell asleep another thought struck home to him. He had two friends now who would stay by him. Jim was a man in a thousand and—his mind leaped phantomlike, Itchy-Witchy was a woman in ten thousand.

Again he saw her, eyes tear dimmed, big crystal drops sliding down her face when she stood on the creek bank above him. He was convinced that she was held there, terror stricken by his plight, not through a morbid curiosity like the scores of others. And that cry—it could only be wrung from one who felt a terrible hurt, who knew a terrible concern.

Zeb fell to sleep, his mind at perfect rest in the assurance that Itchy-Witchy's feel-

ings towards him ran far deeper than those of a casual friendship.

The twilight faded, night softly and quietly descended, a nurse tiptoed into the room, felt his pulse with a firm finger on his lax wrist, and as silently went out. Zeb slept on, a faint smile curling the corners of his mouth.

CHAPTER X.

THOSE RAILROAD BOOKS.

NEXT morning Jim's voice when he entered the room woke Zeb.

"Heyho, old sockdologer. How you feeling?" Jim greeted him as he opened his eyes. "I just made a big sneak in around by the side door. Against the rules to visit before ten o'clock—damn little I care about their rules."

He unwrapped a newspaper bundle. "Here, I brought you something. Ring did it himself, a nice roasted spring chicken. You know," he explained. "They gotta lot of dizzy notions here, half starve you, diet and such junk. My idea is if a guy feels well, he'll get well. I was laid up here once for three weeks, like to have starved to death. I aim to see you get a feed once in a while."

Zeb smiled. "Jim, I'm sure obliged to you-all for being so kind to me."

The door opened and Zeb's private nurse who had been assigned to the case by Dr. Miller entered. She was a young woman, bright eyed, healthy looking, not a month out of her training. The work and worry of a hospital life had not yet marked her. She stopped, a forbidding look on her face when she noticed the package and opened her mouth to speak.

Jim, with an engaging smile, stopped her.

"Sister, I know what you're gonna say, but—have a heart. Have a heart. This guy has been brought up on chicken. He has 'em breakfast, dinner and supper, craves 'em mournful. He'd just wither up and die, couldn't make it at all if he didn't get his chicken. He's like me, a chicken fancier," he concluded with a broad grin, looking straight into her eyes. "I like 'em young, and—just about your height."

The nurse turned red, flounced out of the room with the word "Freshie!"

Yet, walking down the hall, there was a smile on her face as though she were not wholly displeased. Few women were ever displeased when Jim paid them attention. For that devil-may-care glint in his eyes, that reckless swing of his broad shoulders, that laughing voice, that carefree manner, had an appeal which almost every woman liked.

Jim turned to Zeb. "She's all right. Get me her name. I sure like her looks. You needn't worry about her. You can kid her to the limit. Well, old head, I can't stay but a minute. I gotta date with the 'old man' this morning."

"What's the trouble?" asked Zeb in wonder.

"Oh, nothing much. I went into the Greek's fruit store yesterday. I had a couple of stiff ones, you know he peddles it, and I'll be flipped if I had a cent with me to square for them. The Greek gets nasty, you know he's a real tough guy, wrestler in the old country and all that stuff. Well, he comes at me finally, when I tells him if he is so scrappy why don't he go back home and wallop a few Turks. I pasted him a dandy right on the jaw. He turned a flipflop, landed on top of his bean, turned over the fruit rack. He gets up and I socked him another. Bluey! He goes through the big plate glass window. The 'old man' looks across the street from his office in the depot and sees the finish of the racket. Then the call boys frame up on me for not going out when I was called, and oh, la, la! There's to be an investigation this morning."

"Jim," said Zeb in concern, "ain't ye skeered you-all might get run off fer the drinkin' and fighting and all sech like?"

"Oh, never fear, old head," was Jim's rejoinder, "I'll get by somehow. Is there anything you want? I'll be up again this afternoon."

Zeb considered. "Oh, yes, Jim. Will you-all bring me those thar big books in your room?"

"Where?" Jim was puzzled.

Zeb explained. "Them thar ones with the pictures of engines."

" Oh, sure, I'll do that, but what do you want to read those dry things for?"

" Well, when I gits out of here, I am to know all about railroadin' and those books 'ull tell hit."

" All right, kid. I'll do it. See you later. So long," and Jim hurried from the room. He neglected to tell Zeb that the drinking and fighting of the day before were purely to work off the worry he had felt over Zeb's accident. That was Jim's way.

Zeb lay quiet for an hour after Jim's visit, thinking. The nurse entered, took his temperature and felt his pulse. " Who's that man who was in here just now?" she asked with a note of interest in her voice.

" Oh, that's my friend Jim."

" What does he do?" she questioned.

" He's a fireman. He's lookin' out fer me. I like him a heap."

" I can't blame you for that," she said carefully reading the thermometer. " He's certainly a big, fine looking man. An awful jollier, though," she concluded.

Zeb raised himself up. " Lady, what's your—your name?"

The nurse smiled at Zeb's earnest face. " So he wanted my name, did he?" She laughed. " Well, Zeb, tell Jim that I'm Annie, Annie Laurie. That will do for him all right." She stopped short as the doctor came in, glanced at the chart on the table and examined Zeb. A brief five minute visit that ended with the cheerful words, " Well, Zeb, you're doing fine. No sign of any complications."

Then again came the lonesome silence, broken only by the hard sound of footsteps in the hallway and the twitterings of the sparrows on the roof outside the window. The slow hours dragged past, no one came, Zeb wondered if any of his folks would come in on the noon train. He heard a beat of footsteps down the hall, listened as they drew nearer. Would they pass his door? No, they were stopping, the knob turned, the nurse entered, followed by his father. A second later his mother and two sisters shambled in, a strained expression on their faces.

Silence, no one spoke till the nurse turned and left the room with the words, " Visitors, Zeb."

Zeb surveyed the little group, halted ill at ease in the center of the room.

" Howdy, maw," he broke the awkward pause.

" Oh, Zebbe, Zebbe, air ye bad hurt?" his mother began while his two sisters stood, fingering their dresses and rolling their eyes from one side to the other nervously.

" No, maw, I'm all right. Jest a busted laig. The doctor says it'ull be all well agin soon."

" Do they treat ye well yere in this place, Zeb?" his mother asked. " Mebbe ye'd better come on home with us'uns whar I kin tend to ye proper."

Zeb laughed. " Don't be a frettin', maw. They're right clever folk yere and I'll be back afirin' in no time."

" But, Zeb," his father broke in. " I wasn't aimin' fer ye to go firin' no more. I don't keer much fur these yere public works. Ye'd be a heap sight better off at home. Pink Case was jest a tellin' me that thar ain't nuthin' in this yere railroadin' 'cept hard labor and that they runs ye off ef ye gits hurted."

Zeb's mother spoke up defiantly almost. " Pink Case don't know everything. He warn't nuthin' but a section hand and he never would heve a got his laig busted 'cept he was corned up that thar night he was knocked down by that thar train. My Zeb's got a heap more sense then Pink 'ull ever heve caise he ain't never going to tech no likker, air ye, Zebbe?" she questioned.

" No, maw, I don't aim to take on no corn likker caise I don't keer fur hit."

But his father persisted. " Ye won't git nuthin' but a pack big notions yere in town, Zeb. When ye gits out, come on home."

He added: " Thar's a heap o' work to be done—and I needs yer help."

Zeb looked at his father, tall, ungainly, dressed in a shabby store suit, shining at baggy knees and worn thin at the elbows; his mother in a cheap calico dress, home-made, with her heavy brogans still stained with red clay around the heels; his sisters, awkward, shy, their dresses made from the same bolt of cloth as their mother's, their hair pulled back tight over their heads, their shoes scarred and scuffled where sharp rocks had chafed off the finish. And un-

consciously, he compared them to the other women he had seen in the last two days—the nurse, with her air of assurance; Side-wheeler, with her blazing manners, and Itchy-Witchy, with her cool, yet friendly manner, her poise, her self-respect.

It flashed through his head, the difference between these women of his and the other women could be summed up in the one word—knowledge. And with a start he again remembered that as they differed, so did he. And in the same way, his father differed from the folks of the town, from the "furriners" at Ecclefechan. Education, that was what he lacked. Ignorance, that was what clothed his people in a garment more noticeable than their homespun and calico. Knowledge was the thing; that was the magic key which put soft clothes on men and women, set good speech on their lips, fed and warmed them and forever raised them from the grinding pinch of poverty, ever present in the humble cabin of the mountaineer.

For an hour and a half Zeb's family stayed, speaking little when no one else was in the room, sitting silent and uncomfortable during the periods when the nurse came in. Zeb began to wish they would go, and feeling ashamed of the wish, only desired it the more the longer they stayed. Their sentences became shorter and shorter, died out and unspeaking, for the last fifteen minutes, the four just sat and stared.

Finally his father rose and cleared his throat. "Wall, we'uns air goin' back on the evenin' train. Hit leaves at three o'clock. I reckon as how we'uns better be a shiftin'."

They arose. Zeb's mother moved to the bedside and placed her hard hand on his forehead. "We'uns cain't jest say when we-all 'ull be back yere to see ye agin, Zebbe. Hit costs a powerful lot of money to ride in on the kairs, and we jist hain't got hit as ye well know."

Zeb's eyes filled with tears, more at the tone of his mother's voice than at her words.

"I know, maw, but ye jist wait and we'uns 'ull heve as much money as any one—when I gits to be an engineer."

His sisters bent over and kissed him. His elder sister, as she did so, pushed a crumpled paper into his hand and whispered so low that none but Zeb could hear her: "Itchy-Witchy done sent ye this."

Zeb could hardly wait for them to file out before he opened the paper, smoothed it out over his knee and read:

FRIEND ZEB:

I feel terribly about you; hope your injuries are not bad. I heard after they took you to town it was a broken leg and meant an operation. This morning we heard that you were not as badly hurt as we thought and were very much relieved. Please drop me a line as soon as you feel able and let me know if there is anything I can do to help.

I am coming into school next week, and hope that I may be allowed to visit you. Am sending this by your sister—in a hurry, so cannot say all I want to.

Best wishes and hope you feel all right, from your friend,

ITCHY-WITCHY.

Zeb read and reread the note a half dozen times. The sound of the nurse's footsteps approaching made him quickly shove it under his pillow. He looked up when she entered, colored, and asked her in a hesitant manner: "Miss Annie, please kin I have a paper and some writin' things?"

"Oh, I guess I can fix you up," she answered. Smiling, she said playfully: "Want to write to your girl, do you?"

Zeb hesitated and truthfully answered: "I want to write to a girl—yes—I jest wish she ware my girl."

Something in Zeb's face, in his earnest manner, wiped away her smile. "Why, you poor boy! Is she coming to see you?"

"Yes."

"Well, when she does, I'll put a good word in for you and we'll see if that girl won't sure enough be your girl."

Zeb wanted to thank her, to say something to show his appreciation, yet the words would not come. She went out and returned in a few minutes with pen and paper.

"My own paper," she explained. "You wouldn't want to write to a girl on hospital stationery."

Zeb, with a sheet of the tinted, lightly scented paper on the chair, started his note:

"Dear Itchy-Witchy," he began, then stopped.

Of all the dozen of thoughts that raced through his head, not one could be fixed, not a line could he write.

The nurse had been making a pretense of cleaning up the room, but covertly was watching his struggles to express himself.

" Can I be of any help," she asked.

Zeb thoughtfully considered. Way down inside of him, the feeling that it was too personal, too vital, this friendship of Itchy-Witchy's to be bared to an outsider, struggled with the desire for his first letter to her to be beyond criticism.

He looked up at the nurse.

" Miss Annie, I hain't got much book larnin' and I don't jest know how to start. If you will holp me, I'll shore be powerful obliged."

" Certainly."

Together they wrote, the nurse composing while Zeb set down the halting words:

> Thanks very much for your kindness in offering to visit me when you come into school. Visitors are a welcome relief from the monotony, and you are doubly welcome.
>
> I am not hurt as bad as you thought and will be up and around again soon.

He paused and chewed on the penholder.

" Anything else, Zeb, you want to tell her?"

" Oh, yes; ef she has any old books, I'd like it a heap ef she 'll brung them yere with her."

The nurse dictated, spelling out every big word while Zeb slowly wrote:

> I would be delighted if, when you come, you would bring a few of the most interesting books you have.

Zeb interrupted: " And let's tell her not to be frettin' over me, 'caise I'm all right."

The nurse smiled. " Well, we'll put it a little different, Zeb. Write it this way. I think it will be better."

> Tell my mother if you see her that I am not very badly injured and when I get out, I will be as good as ever—that there is absolutely nothing for her to worry about.

He asked: " What shall I say now?"

" That's enough, Zeb, now, for the first time, don't you think?"

Zeb nodded, then wrote, following her words:

> Awaiting your visit, I remain,
> Your friend,
> ZEB.

The envelope was addressed, sealed and the nurse asked: " Shall I drop it in the mail box?"

" No," said Zeb, rather ashamed. " Ye see, miss, Itchy-Witchy, that 'tain't her name. Her name is different, and I cain't, I jest cain't spell hit. I'll heve Jim send it out to her to-morrow, then I know for shore she'll git hit."

The nurse had scarcely left the room when Jim came in, a bulky bundle wrapped with newspapers in his hand.

" Hello, Zeb, old cripple! How goes it?"

" Oh, I'm doing fine, Jim. What did the superintendent do about you-all this mawnin'?"

" Oh, the ' old man '? I got by easy. You see, I went down and saw the Greek, told him I was sorry I pasted him so hard, but if I had it to do over, I'd do the same thing. The Greek's a pretty good sport. He says: ' You hit da like da sledgehammer. Stronga da arm. Gooda da crack. You maka da fine wrestler.' So we had a drink together.

" I squared up, paid for the glass, and when the special agent, the railroad detectives, came over to get the Greek's statement, he tells them: ' Just da fun, I pusha da Jim, Jim pusha da me, I•falla through da glass.' He won't give them anything to hang on me, so they can't report a blamed thing to the old man."

" But the call boys, Jim? How about them?"

" Oh, hell!" said Jim. " I got it on the chief caller four ways for Christmas. He's dizzy over Sidewheeler. If he puts a bump in on me upstairs, he's afraid I'll jerk a spoke out of his wheel, so he reports me sick, says I wasn't able to go and he had to run you instead, not another man available. I got out of it a flying, but the old man sorter strokes his whiskers and says: ' Jim, you beat the letter of the rules, but I know you've flaunted the spirit of them. Look out, for you're going to come up here some day and for the last time. And,

Jim,' he says, 'I'd hate to be the one to give you the bounce.' He turns to the caller. 'Mark him up for the local to-morrow.' I'm going out on the run. Fat lot I care," Jim concluded. "I can go bootlegging. There's more in it any day than there is in firin' a jack."

He placed the bundle on the table with the words: "Here's your books. When you get through with 'em, sling 'em out the window. I don't want 'em any more."

Jim stayed for over an hour, talking, laughing, and Zeb, impatient for him to leave, lay still, answering but few of his remarks. For much as he liked Jim, as his eyes glanced over those thick volumes, he knew that inside those red covers were things that meant far more to him than ever his friend could.

Jim arose to leave. "Say, what's the pretty jane's name who's nursing you?"

"Oh," Zeb replied. "Annie Laurie!"

"Oh, that's good! Annie Laurie is it?"

Zeb reached under his pillow and handed him the letter. "To-morrow when you get out thar," pointing to the address, "see that she gits hit, will ye?"

"Surest thing you know. Well, so long, kid. Be in to-morrow night," and with a "Be careful if you can't be good," he left, humming softly: "Ah, 'twas there that Annie Laurie gaed me her promise true!"

Jim's retreating footsteps were still sounding in the hallway, his voice had scarce ceased echoing, when Zeb had a book across his lap, eagerly searching for the place he had left off reading. Ah, here it was. He buried himself in the pages, unnoticing and unmindful of the passing hours, lost in the printed words.

The nurse brought in his meager supper.

"Jim was here to-day?" she questioned.

"Yes, he was," answered Zeb. "How did you know?"

"Oh, I heard the jollier singing 'Annie Laurie' as he left." She shook her finger playfully at Zeb. "Boy, I see if I want to keep any secrets from your friend I'd better not tell them to you. Well, I'll be careful after this," and she started out.

At the door she stopped. "When is he coming again?" she asked, a slight blush diffusing itself across her face.

"To-morrow at eight o'clock, if he gits in on time," Zeb answered. "I hope he does."

The nurse closed the door before Zeb had a chance to hear her whispered words: "So do I."

Zeb ate his supper quickly. He begrudged the time spent in the eating and again began to read. Seven o'clock came, then dusk. It rapidly became too dark to see. He snapped on the light at the head of the bed and page after page, his eyes went over, took in the contents and turned on to still another page.

He stopped and rubbed his hands across his forehead. His head felt dizzy. A clock outside struck slowly. Solemnly, the big bell boomed. Zeb listened. One stroke. He had read over eight hours. He turned off the light and fell asleep, the open book lying beside him.

CHAPTER XI.

MORE VISITORS.

NEXT day, the day following and other days passed. Zeb's life became fixed, ordered, a well defined routine. The nurse cleaned up in the morning, took his temperature and brought in his breakfast. The doctor called soon afterward and each day expressed his satisfaction at Zeb's progress.

Time dragged along and Zeb immersed himself in studying the course in railroading. The mechanics of a locomotive slowly evolved itself to him. Down to the very minute intricate details, Zeb burrowed his inquiring way. His mind was fertile, like a field that had lain barren for years and the new ideas he assimilated found a ready reception.

There were other books beside the ones on railroading. At his request, Jim took out a card from the public library, and Zeb had him stop by two or three times a week returning and drawing out volumes.

There was a fellow across the hall, a young student, convalescing from an automobile smash-up, who amused himself with Zeb's unlettered yearning. He would drop in and spend an hour or so every day.

From him, Zeb learned of Darwin and Huxley, of Tyndall and Spencer, of Nietzsche and Kant and Schopenhauer. And he read these philosophers.

At first he read merely because their words were in the beloved books. Later as a faint glimmer of the meaning came to him, he studied them with interest and finally after many arguments with the man across the hall, Zeb saw light through the deep and ponderous theories. The plan of the universe dimly unfolded itself to him. Link by link, he followed the chain that began back in the times before written history, thought by thought he built up the edifice that men have wrought into a civilization. And every time he remembered his broken leg when a twinge of pain shot up from it, he was thankful, for he knew that it was the means of bringing to him the knowledge he craved.

There was an occasional visitor in the afternoons, a railroad man, engineer or fireman, who would come up and spend an uncomfortable half hour. Zeb soon realized why they felt so out of place. The hospital represented to them but the acme of hard luck. It was a boring, tiresome place of pain and suffering where they were forced to stay till wounds were healed and out again they went to carry on their railroading. While to him, the hospital was a wonderful place of quiet and leisure, where a man could study and read to his heart's content.

He was learning fast, not only from the books, but from each and every one who visited him. The doctor, the nurses, the fellow in the room across the hall—he was acquiring new ideas from them all. As the days went by, his " yeres and " thars," his " cain'ts " and " holps," occurred less frequently. He was strongly influenced by the nurse and her precise speech became his model. Almost every night Jim visited him, brought up fruit, once a cake, ice cream, anything he thought would please Zeb.

One night he came in, holding a hand behind his back. " Heigho, old crip! Gotta surprise for you. Three guesses, what is it?"

Zeb wrinkled up his forehead in thought. " Let me think." Then his heart jumped in a wild flutter. A long pause and—" A letter."

" Why, you're getting too good. You'll be striking for more money soon. How did you guess so quick? Who's it from?"

Again Zeb gave him a quick, searching glance. " Itchy-Witchy."

Jim slapped his knees with both hands. " Right, right! She gave it to me to-day. Say, boy, I envy you! Believe your Uncle Dudley, that girl's some queen!" he exclaimed, handing Zeb the letter.

" Jim, you won't mind if I read it now? She might want an answer," Zeb excused himself.

" Go to it," Jim replied as he pulled the evening paper from his pocket and, unfolding it, casually began to read.

A glance at the envelope and Zeb slit it open with impatient fingers. He eagerly unfolded the sheet of paper and read:

FRIEND ZEB:

I was indeed pleased to get your note and more pleased to learn that you are not as badly injured as we feared. I am coming in tomorrow and will find time to pay you a visit, although it may be but a brief one, as I have so many things to do. It's a busy time for me, this beginning school.

Excuse the brevity of this note, as it was written in a hurry while the local waited here. I have heard of your progress each day from the fireman who seems to be such a good friend of yours.

With best wishes,

ITCHY-WITCHY.

Zeb looked up. Jim was covertly watching him over his paper, a grin on his face.

" Zeb, old head, if it was any one but you, I'd give 'em a race for that girl. Boy, it knocks your eye out just to gaze at her for a half a minute. Is she coming in to see you?"

" Yes, to-morrow," answered Zeb. " She's going to school here."

" That's fine. Maybe she'll come in often. Keep the good work up, old dusty, and if you ever decide to pass her up, let me know, for she's made an awful hit with me."

Zeb shook his head. " Jim, she's the first girl I ever knowed outside my sisters and—if you wait for me to pass her up, as you say, you got a long wait ahead."

A low knock on the door and the nurse came in.

"Leaving time," she informed Jim.

Jim arose. "Well, I'll be going, kid. Don't do anything I wouldn't," and with a glance at the nurse and humming softly, "Oh, it breaks my heart to part from thee—" he approached the door.

With "So long, Zeb," and, "Oh, for bonnie Annie Laurie, I'd lay me doon and dee," he went out.

Laughing and remarking, "That friend of yours is a card," the nurse tucked the covers around Zeb, turned out the light and quietly went out.

He lay back on his soft bed. A beam of light from a street lamp slowly moved back and forth across the opposite wall. The faint swish of the automobiles running on the road below filtered up, footsteps muffled and sounding far off as they passed and repassed in the hallway outside his door, a bell on the church tolled the hour and still Zeb lay wide awake, thinking.

On a chair beside him lay the books. A half formed notion to turn on the light and read, died in the forming. His mind was filled with one thought—to-morrow, another day—then Itchy-Witchy would come.

He dozed fitfully through the long night, heard the clock strike almost every hour till the blackness of the room began gradually to take on the steel gray of dawn. Then he fell into a fitful sleep that was broken for breakfast.

He dozed through the long morning, heard the doctor say, "A slight temperature," give low-spoken orders to the nurse and dozed off again.

When he awoke, the blare of factory whistles was announcing noon. His dinner lay on a tray on the chair beside him. He ate it perfunctorily, nervously glancing at the watch that hung by its leather thong from the bar across the head of his bed. Twelve ten. Five minutes more and the noon train would pull in.

In his fancy he saw it now taking the switch on to the main line, passing the yard post and the crossover. Now it's moving over the grade crossing where Depot Street intersects the right of way at a long angle. He could see the lowered gates, the automobiles that one by one, ran up, stopped, a lengthening string stretching out on either side of the closed gates like ants stopped, forming in a line, nervous and fidgety when their nest is blocked by a pebble.

Another glance at the watch. The train is pulling into the umbrella shed now, that hipped roof before the depot extending from track to track, open in the center. Zeb could see the crowd waiting behind the spiked-top iron railing, hear the clang of the opening gates, and see the string of people file through out to the waiting street cars.

Thirty minutes was the running time of the street cars from the depot to the hospital. Never in all his life had Zeb known such a long half hour. He untied his timepiece, held it in his hand and watched the moving second hand inch around its tiny circle. Snail-like, methodically, it angled through its arc in little regular beats.

A long half hour, he counted each minute that dragged by. At last he heard the bell of a street car clang on the street beneath. Breathlessly he waited. Five more interminable minutes passed. Footsteps in the hallway drew nearer, reached the door—and passed by.

He sank back on his pillow in a flood of disappointment. What had happened? Perhaps she hadn't come into town at all to-day. Perhaps she couldn't find the time to see him. He lay back, unhearing. Perhaps she—

There was a creaking of hinges. He turned. Itchy-Witchy stood framed in the doorway. Zeb gasped. She fair took his breath away. The impression raced through his head—Lord, but she was pretty! She was dressed in a soft blue colored suit that glistened and rippled in the sunlight. Her golden hair floated out from under a little blue hat. Her cheeks were red as a ripe apple, her lips as a wild strawberry.

She advanced toward him and held out her hand, a package and some flowers in the other.

"Why, Zeb, I'm glad to see you!"

"And Itchy-Witchy, I'm glad to see you, too," he answered. "Pull that chair over and sit down."

She lay the package of books on the table

and, with little pats and turnings, arranged the flowers in a glass on the table. Their sweet odor filled the room.

She looked at Zeb shyly. " Pretty, aren't they? The flowers? I just love them."

Zeb, with a great gulp of determination, blurted out his first compliment. " They're not near as purty as you and—" He could not finish the sentence.

The soft pink color flooded her face, ran over her cheeks and tinged her forehead to the roots of her hair. His words had been so unexpected.

Zeb's embarrassment at his own speech was swept away by the expression that swiftly followed.

She was not displeased. Rather, he fancied she was pleased at the compliment. Yet he was glad he had not finished the sentence. Jim might have, but he was different from light-hearted Jim.

With a sudden little spurt of talk, she changed the subject.

" Would you like me to read to you for a few minutes, Zeb?"

Without knowing it, Zeb dropped into the speech of the mountaineer—that soft slurring speech, the language for lovemaking.

" Bud," he said softly, " I reckon no matter what you'd do, I'd like it a heap."

At the words she looked up at him quickly, a light danced across her eyes, a swift flash of understanding passed between them, and she opened one of the books. Her voice, soft and low, filled the room.

Zeb lay back, eyes half closed, and her words swept through him like the distant sound of a church organ. For the first time in his life a feeling overpowered him—a feeling he could not understand nor circumscribe. She read on, then suddenly her voice stopped.

" Why, Zeb White!" she exclaimed. " You're not hearing a word I say. You're not paying a bit of attention to this story."

He turned, facing her.

" Bud, I'm sorry, but—but how do you hope for me to listen to a story when all I can hear is your voice? How do you hope for me to pay any mind when I'm all jumpy inside? You—you, well, Bud, you are a heap more to me than any story on those thar printed pages. You are far prettier than any picture I've ever seen!"

He stopped, aghast. He had never meant to say what his lips had just uttered. Panic-stricken, he looked at her. And the wonder of what he saw in her face made his heart thump fast and furious. For unmistakably written on her face was not annoyance, not displeasure, but a radiant glow that was beyond words, the tender look of sympathy.

The nurse opened the door, gave a quick glance at the two flushed faces which turned to her, and immediately went out. A faint smile wrinkled the corners of her eyes, for she too had a liking for Zeb.

Itchy-Witchy arose, embarrassed. " Oh, I forgot, I have a dozen and one things to do to-day in preparation for starting school. Room to get straightened out, my roommate to be, haven't seen her yet, have to get acquainted with her, must buy some new clothes. Oh, I'm all in a whirl. Now that's enough about my little affairs; tell me about yourself."

" There's not much to tell," said Zeb. " I'm just here, and that's all. I don't know how much longer it 'll be, the time when I'll git out. I'm sure glad you came up to see me. Hit gits powerful lonesome sometimes in yere—I mean, in here," he corrected.

She turned to leave.

" Well, good-by, Zeb. We've Wednesday and Saturday afternoons uptown, and I'll drop in to see you occasionally. Is there anything you want? Anything I can do?"

" Well, Itchy-Witchy, if you'll come up here and visit me when you-all can, I'll be shore pleased. Thank you for the books and flowers."

She stood over him for a minute. Her lips parted in a smile. " Now, take good care of yourself, Zeb, till I see you again."

And with a " Good-by " the door closed and she was gone.

He lay back on his pillow listening to her retreating footsteps that dwindled fainter and fainter as she went up the hallway. He smiled a bit through the pain that throbbed in his aching leg, smiled with the thought that hard as the suffering was, yet it was well worth the while, for it had

brought her to visit him as he knew nothing else would have done. And she had promised to see him again. That, too, was worth all it cost.

Neither had mentioned the wreck, although it was graven deep on both their minds. The wreck was incidental to Zeb. It had merely been an episode that had led to other things.

As he lay thinking, he heard some one approaching. His sharp ears, made sharper still, unassailed by the medley of sounds that impinge and carom, whisper and reverberate from the everyday world, sharpened still more by the quietness of the hospital, had grown so acute that he knew the identity of an approaching person long before they passed his doorway—his nurse, soft-footed, methodical, each step even and regular; the doctor, three or four rapid beats, then a couple of slower ones as though his mind processes moving rapidly overtaking an idea, caught up with it and paused to meditate, was proclaimed by his footsteps. The young man across the hall with his slow shuffle of slippered feet, Zeb could tell him above all the others immediately. And her footsteps that had ceased sounding, her soft tread, there was a springiness, a firmness, about it, even paced, neither fast nor slow, the vitality of youth expressed in every footbeat.

He heard the clang of the elevator door. Some one had come up, he idly speculated; it was visiting hour. Casually he listened to the sounds of a person drawing nearer. A woman, he reasoned, the hard yet light little clicks of small heels rapping the floor sharply resounded. A nervous, impatient footstep, one sound treading fast on another as if the one who made them was impatient of the slow means of progress called walking. They slowed down, speeded up.

Zeb mentally pictured a visitor glancing at the door numbers, breaking step while at each room she made out the gold figure on the panel. They quickened when they neared his room, stopped for a brief second, a hasty knock and the knob turned, the door swung inward, and—Sidewheeler entered.

She was dressed in a red coat suit, a flaming tam cocked roguishly on her head, her short skirt scarce covering her knees, red stockings and high-heeled slippers. In a glance Zeb had taken her in.

"Well, old kid, it got you quick," she began as she reached out her hand to him. At the question in his face, she laughed a little hard note that had a metallic ring in it like the vibration of struck metal.

"Don't follow me, kid? Well, I mean the railroad. It gets 'em all sooner or later, one way or the other. I've seen a lot of guys start in. Full of pep, big ideas, strong, husky kids that ain't afraid of Old Nick himself. In a few years it's got 'em.

"Some get careful, canny, lose all their pep, and it just wears 'em down to crabbed, stingy old wrecks always goin' to quit and never quittin' till they're fired or bumped off. Others it rolls under, busts 'em up, does a quick, neat job. Oh, you can't buck it, kid. Take it from one who knows. You're young yet, it ain't got a hold of you. Don't go back. If you work it right, you can get a neat bit of change out of this. Start up for yourself and forget the railroad."

Zeb stopped her. "Why, I don't know nothing but railroading."

"Kid, you don't know nothing about it. I'm a handin' you the real dope now. You are a good kid. Jim tells me you don't hit the booze or nothing. Well, if you stick to the road, you either get cut up soon or beat down later. Take my advice and hold 'em up for a nice chunk of change and kiss 'em sweetly good-by."

Zeb studied her with an anxious face. She stopped and laughed.

"Why, you poor kid. Here you are lying flat on your back suffering, and I start that gloomy croaking. I'm a nice one to cheer the sick and afflicted, ain't I? Let's talk about something cheerful. Saw your girl just now as I came in."

Zeb started. "How did you know her?" he questioned quickly.

"Oh, Jim described her to me. He raves around about her every once in a while. I'll hand it to him this time. Generally his ideas of a classy-lookin' wren is all kabosh, but he told the straight on her. She's all he says and then some."

Zeb stiffened. It hurt him to hear Itchy-Witchy discussed, hurt him to hear her

name on Sidewheeler's painted lips, and a dull surge of anger welled up in him. His lips framed for a rejoinder that would silence Sidewheeler when the nurse entered. The two women exchanged glances. The nurse bowed a stiff little nod, while Sidewheeler with a jaunty toss of her head turned and began an animated conversation with Zeb. He heard her words rattle along, yet of the import of them he was ignorant. The door closed behind the nurse.

Sidewheeler sniffed. " Stuck up thing. Wonder who she is! Jim's taking a great fancy to her too," Sidewheeler added, a tinge of jealousy in her voice.

Zeb was forming words in his mind in defense of the nurse when Sidewheeler spoke again.

" Kid, you got it on them. You got the swellest chance to make a clean-up ever was."

" What do you mean?"

" Why, let me tell you, kid. You're green, but the company's to blame, and of course they'll pay you for lost time, but I'm going to wise you up. They're trying to make a settlement with Johnny Deering's widow, and if you, too, start a suit against them, being an eyewitness, they'll have to pay her all she asks for."

" But," Zeb questioned, " is it right for me to take money from them? They give me the job and everything. They couldn't help it if the local was wrecked."

" Be yourself, kid—be yourself! Don't get any big notions about the company. Get all you can. Everybody does. Why shouldn't you? Work it right and you're good for at least a grand."

" A what?" asked Zeb.

" A grand, a thousand berries, ten hundred dollar-bills," Sidewheeler explained.

Zeb sat bolt upright in astonishment. " Do you mean to tell me they-all will pay me for gittin' hurt?"

" Pay you, kid? I'll say they'll pay you. You work it right and they'll be glad to."

Sidewheeler came closer and looked at the watch above Zeb's head. " Whew, I must move along! Got a date to take in a show this afternoon." She quickly leaned down, kissed him, and with a " By-by, kiddo," she left the room.

Zeb slowly let himself down on the bed. Sidewheeler's kiss still felt hot and pressing on his lips. Her words rung in his ears, a thousand dollars!

The afternoon passed, his mind a jumble —Itchy-Witchy, Sidewheeler, and what the money would mean, all mixed up in hopeless confusion, and above all his other feelings the steady dull pain from his fractured leg throbbed insistently. It was mending fast now.

Yet even as his other thoughts ran through his mind, the feeling that it was unfair to the railroad to take their money in payment for his injury persisted.

CHAPTER XII.

A MATTER OF DAMAGES.

FOR three weeks Jim had been out of town on a work train, and except for Itchy-Witchy's occasional calls Zeb had few visitors at the hospital. A day came when the nurse carefully helped him into a wheel chair and rolled him out on to the broad veranda. He sat all morning entranced by the flow of life, the scurrying automobiles, the noisy street cars, the pedestrians who moved like automatons along the sidewalks below. For the first time since he had entered the hospital, he became impatient to get out.

He wondered if he had forgotten how to fire, wondered how soon he would stand a-spraddle on the steel shovel sheet and pitch a loaded scoop neatly through the fire door. He longed for the feel of the swaying cab, for the hiss of escaping steam, for the thrill of motion. Zeb was convalescing.

His book had rested in his lap all morning unopened, a great restlessness overcame him as he gazed far across the roof tops from his vantage on the third floor and made out the dim outline of the distant mountains, hazy through the smoky warm sunshine of an early Indian summer. Occasionally through a rift in the hills he could see a smudge that told of a train crawling through a gap.

The nurse brought lunch out to him on a tray. He ate without relish. Wonder what

his folks were doing; wonder if his father was still helping Pink Case at his moonshining?

A street car stopped below. Three women got off. He started. Even distorted as their figures appeared to his eyes from the elevation of the veranda, there was no mistaking those curious hats, the big checkered calico of their dresses, their hesitant, half-scared manner.

They were his mother and two sisters. He watched them coming up the cement walk toward the hospital, leaned far over the railing to look when they climbed the steps to the big entrance. He waited, watching the door that led on to the veranda. Five minutes passed and the nurse stepped out, followed by the three.

To Zeb, who really was glad to see them, a poignant stab struck through him at the sight of them awkwardly approaching along the veranda, the nurse leading, his mother and the two girls following single file. He was a little ashamed of them.

He could not help feeling sorry. Their serious faces, unbroken by the faintest trace of smile or laughter, told a story plainer than words—a story of life, uncompromising, hard, unfeeling, that mountain women know from childhood to the grave. Yet they were his own people and he loved them in spite of the fact that they compared unfavorably with the folk of the town.

" Howdy, Zeb," his mother greeted him. " How air ye a comin'?"

" Oh, I'm getting along fine, maw. How are you?"

" Tol'able, Zeb, jest sorter."

From her tone Zeb recognized that something was wrong. He studied her closely. There was suffering written deep on her face and on her forehead was a raw red welt, the mark of a blow.

" What's wrong?" Zeb questioned.

She glanced around before answering. The nurse was just leaving and the four were alone.

" Oh, Zebbe," she burst out crying, " yer pap is a froggin' about, a drinkin' and a fightin' the hull time now. Since you left he 'lows as how hit's too much fer him to do the fodder and gather all that corn wi' jest we-uns to holp him. So he's takin' to stayin' at Pink Case's still the hull time, only comin' home wunst or twicet a week for the corn we'uns are gatherin'. Yisterday, come evenin', he comes a-gruntin' in, fire in his eye, and caise we'uns hain't got but two pokes of shelled corn a waitin', he busts out and jousts me about cruel. I heve a plenty bruises on me, Zeb," she concluded. " And we'uns askeered o' him, likkered up as he stays the now. Oh, Zebbe, ef ye were but thar I wouldn't keer so bad, but seems as ef me and the gals were plumb holpless ag'in' him."

Zeb knitted his brow in anger, was silent for a long time before answering. " Have ye any money with ye, maw?"

" Yes," she replied. " We heve four dollars I got by the store for some hens, 'sides our money fer our ticket home on the kairs."

She reached down into her bosom, pulled out a handkerchief, and showed him the little hard knotted lump of money tied in one corner.

" Well, now, maw, ye needn't fret. You-all stay down at the railroad boardin' house jist above the depot to-night. Ye can eat at Ring's, and 't'won't cost but a dollar and a half fer a room. Jim's coming up to-morrow night—to-morrow's pay day. I'll fix things up fer you-all so as ye needn't go back 'cept you'uns jest pine to."

He gave them directions, explained everything and was rather relieved when they left and he safely saw them get on a street car below.

He stayed on the veranda all the long warm afternoon, his mind working over the problems that had been thrust on him so suddenly. He was conscious of a feeling of shame through it all, shame for his shabbily dressed womenfolk, for his father and his shiftless, drunken ways, for the poor barren home he had left up on the hillside above Ecclefechan. And Itchy-Witchy, the thought of Ecclefechan and her flashed before him, wonder if she too was ashamed of his folks?

A burning ambition filled Zeb, a determination to get them out of their misery and privation.

" I'll take care of them!" he muttered.

But how? He was helpless, unable to make any money. He studied deeply. Then like a flash it hit him. He would make the company pay. He rather felt that it was disloyal to the railroad, yet there was no other way. His women folk were on his hands and must be cared for. A great doubt seized him. Perhaps Sidewheeler's story was mere hearsay. What if the company never offered him any money? How would he make out then?

Worried and perplexed, he passed a troubled afternoon and night, milling over the responsibility of keeping his mother and sisters. But the things that loom large and menacing in the future often dwindle and become easily managed in the present, for Sidewheeler's words proved true.

Next morning, scarcely had he finished breakfast and Dr. Miller called, when there came a brisk and unfamiliar step down the hallway followed by a knock on his door.

Zeb called out, " Come in," and curiously examined his visitor.

" How are you, White? I'm the company attorney. Hear you are getting along and will soon be out."

" Can't get out any too soon to suit me," was Zeb's laughing rejoinder.

Then he studied his visitor questioningly.

" I suppose you know what I came up to see you about, White," the other began. " You have heard, of course, that you will have to sign a release before you can go back to work, and I have one with me. Your case is rather peculiar. You never were regularly signed up. You really are not an employee, and yet you were injured in the performance of duty. Of course the company will stand all the expenses of physician, hospital and nurse, but—but—" He stroked his chin thoughtfully and waited for Zeb to speak.

" Listen," Zeb said. " I'm really not wanting any money; seems like as though it isn't a square thing for me to make the company pay; yet—yet—"

As the lawyer watched, Zeb's eyes filled with tears, and in a choking voice he explained: " There's maw and the girls. I cain't let them go back."

" Maw and the girls!" the other exclaimed. " I don't understand what bearing they have on the situation. Tell me about it."

In rapid sentences Zeb blurted out the story, finishing up with the words: " Stranger though you are, I feel you will do what is right."

The lawyer sat looking at Zeb, a peculiar half smile on his face. For a full minute he studied him before answering. Then he said:

" Boy, I'm known as a hard man to deal with. I've a reputation for saving the company's money to the last cent. There are several times I can remember that I'm a little ashamed of; but you've gotten under my hide. I'll do what I can to get you fixed up right. Will wire to headquarters to-night and be around again to-morrow. You are the first injured employee I've talked to in many a long day who had no idea of holding up the company, and I'll see you get all that I'm able to collect for you. Good day." And he left the room.

Zeb lay quietly thinking for a long time after he left. Wonder if Sidewheeler was right? Wonder if the company lawyers were as hard and heartless as she said? Wonder what they would pay him? God, but he needed money! He couldn't let his mother go back to the hills, to the poverty of the mountains again, and yet he had no way of keeping her from it unless he got some money from his injury.

Jim! The thought flashed through his mind only to be dismissed at once. Jim had no money. Happy-go-lucky, generous Jim! A week after pay day, and he was broke and running on credit. " Chalk it up " was his slogan, " Settle pay day " his watchword. Every one knew Jim, every one liked him, for through his many faults ran a strong straight line of virtues. Jim's word was good. If he told a man he'd settle on pay day, he'd do it. If he sent word he'd beat up another on their next meeting, he'd do that too, and like as not, when he had performed his promise to his own satisfaction, he'd lay off a couple of days so that the battered one could go out on his run and make a couple of trips.

No, he'd not worry Jim with his money troubles. He'd fight his fight alone. He'd settle with the company on a fair and just

basis. Jim had done enough for him. He'd not impose on their friendship by taking his money.

Zeb dozed off, awakened to see his supper on a tray beside him, looked at the food and turned over again to sleep fitfully. He had no appetite; there was too much on his mind.

A night of broken sleep passed, morning came, the hours dragged by. A step sounded down the hall. Zeb strained his ears listening. No—yes, it was the lawyer coming. That brisk step could be no one else.

The door opened and the lawyer entered with a cheery "Good morning, White." He stopped, smiled at the expression on Zeb's face. "Oh, don't look so serious. It's all right." He reached into his inside coat pocket, pulled out a telegram, handed it towards Zeb's eager outstretched hand. "Red this and cheer up."

Zeb read:

> In accordance with your suggestion pay Z. White one-half claim, five hundred dollars ($500) now, balance five hundred dollars ($500) when he reports for duty.

Zeb read the message again to make sure he had read aright. Then he looked up. He could scarcely speak. The words, "Thanks, mister, you-all sure have made a friend of Zeb White."

The lawyer shook his head disparagingly. "That's all right, boy. If I didn't think it was due you I'd have never recommended it. When I think of the acrimonious arguments I've had with lots of the trainmen it has been a pleasure to deal with you. Here's the release. Sign here, or wait!"

He reached over and pushed the call button that dangled from the head of the bed. In a minute the door opened and the nurse entered, looking from one to the other.

"Miss, Miss—" the caller began.

"Annie," whispered Zeb.

"Miss Annie, I wish you to please witness this man's signature, if you will."

The nurse flashed a glance from one to the other, a calculating expression crossed her face as she took the paper and began to read it carefully. The lawyer watched her as she stood perusing the document.

Then he laughed. "Oh, there's no joker there. I think as much of your friend as you do."

Miss Annie colored. "I wanted to make sure."

He handed her a small pink slip of paper with the words, "No, there's no joker unless this certified check for five hundred is one."

"Oh, Zeb, I'm so glad!" the nurse spoke as she signed and handed the paper back.

The lawyer folded it up, put it back in his pocket, shook hands with Zeb, saying that as soon as the doctor released him he would make the final settlement.

Zeb sat propped up in bed, thinking joyfully as he read and reread the figures on the check. Five hundred dollars, half of the damage money! Now he could take care of his people! Even his father, he'd send him some.

But he dismissed the idea, for he knew that a gift of money to his father would only cause trouble. He felt that no one could help his father. He might be able to do something for the women, but his father's shiftlessness was too deeply ingrained in him to ever be changed.

He forgot the nurse, who was still standing looking at him. Her words brought him back.

"Now you've got the money, what do you intend to do when you get out?"

"Well, Miss Annie," Zeb replied. "Now and right away, I aim to fix up maw and the girls. Then when I get out I'm a going back to firing as soon as I can—for—for I want to be an engineer because—"

"Oh, oh, Zeb," she laughed. "I'll wager a blond-haired, blue-eyed girl has a lot to do with that ambition."

As she went out the door she called back, "Not mentioning any names, but the first letters of hers are Itchy-Witchy!"

CHAPTER XIII.

BACK ON THE RAILS.

ZEB'S hospital days were over. He was glad to be out in the open once more, yet there was a sense of disappointment in it, too, for it meant that Itchy-Witchy and himself would no longer have

their quiet little talks which had meant so much to him. It seemed so queer, everything on the outside did now. His crutches, he thought abstractly, they were not a part of him. This fellow whose reflection he saw in the passing store windows going down Depot Street in a slow awkward series of swings, that thump-thump as the rubber tips hit the sidewalk, those pitying side glances from passersby, they were not directed at Zeb White. No, Zeb White was far away up in the mountains, barefooted, a straw hat on his head and he was another person.

For his association with the people of the hospital, the nurses, old Dr. Miller, with Itchy-Witchy, had changed him. He was no longer a mountaineer, he spoke another language, the language of the many books he had read. He looked different, his dark eyes had the deepness of pain experienced, the bronzed tan had left his face, and the life of the town was no longer new and strange since he was a part of it.

For three weeks he hobbled around on his crutches, talking and sightseeing. Several times he went out to the school to see Itchy-Witchy. He was proud of her, proud of the fact that she was going to school, but he was a little bit jealous of the education which was absorbing her time. He wanted her presence, wanted to talk to her—wanted her to be with him always. But the time was not yet for that. There were four years of schooling for her before she finished. There were a good many years before him till he was an engineer. He curbed his impatience with the promise, the day he was promoted, that day he would tell her the things he could not afford to say now.

A few cramped and hampered weeks, hobbling around on crutches, then his first few steps, a half block, finally an hour or two, Zeb tentatively tried his steps. He was anxious to return to work. As the time passed he grew steadily stronger and the day arrived when he felt as though he must get back to the shovel again. The money he had received in settlement was almost spent for the payment on a house overlooking the depot, furniture and running expenses. The steady demand for money began to tell on Zeb. Living in town was not like out in the mountains. Everything here had a price. There was no such thing as going out in the garden and picking a meal fresh grown. It was expensive, but to Zeb's mind worth all the cost.

One morning he walked up the track to the call shanty and left the word, " Mark me up," and asked the question, " What do I stand for?"

" Local, ditcher or work train," was the snappy reply. " Better take the ditcher. An old lady could keep her hot."

Next morning before daybreak Zeb was called for the ditcher. It was an easy job and no effort for him to keep the engine " riding the pop." The ditching-machine was hauled back and forth through a cut, clearing out the ditches along the tracks that the rains had filled with mud. They would work a few minutes or an hour at most. The work crew would haul in their mechanism and the ditching-train make a run to the nearest side track to clear the rails for a freight or passenger. It was a good job for a fireman not yet strong enough to handle scoop and slice-bar on a regular freight.

For two months Zeb fired the ditcher, two months in which all the railroading theories he had read in the books were in actual operation before him. To book knowledge he added experience, and before he left the ditcher for a heavier, better-paying run, he knew his engine well.

As the engineer remarked to a group in Ring's one night, " Zeb White, my fire boy, has it all over a bunch who think they know about railroadin'. Why, that kid knows more about an engine than I do, and I been a running one for ten years. He's good, I tell you. Mark my words, he's a going to climb. You couldn't keep him down if you tied a grate-bar to his coat tails. He's got the stuff in him."

But it takes more than knowledge to advance on a railroad. Luck plays a good part, luck in keeping out of trouble, but the thing that makes for sure advancement is " age." Zeb realized that he must acquire " age " in order to become an engineer, and " age " is not to be had through anything

but slow patient work while the months and years slip by.

Zeb faithfully and conscientiously stuck to his shovel and "bucked the extra board." Through the heat of summer, through the rains of fall, through cold, nasty winter weather, he was always ready to go when called. Pay day or the middle of the month, circus day or Sunday, he never grumbled or complained. He soon became known as the most reliable and best fireman on the division, and he was seldom idle. The call boys in a frantic rush when the wrecker went out needing a fireman, knew if Zeb was in he could be found in a minute. Whenever he went uptown, he always notified the call office, whenever he came in he gave them a ring on the telephone and checked the time when his eight hours' rest expired.

Regularly each pay day half of his pay went into the bank. He saved money not for the saving, but because his income exceeded his expenses. But he counted each day and week far more carefully than he did the money, for they made up his "age."

He watched the list, that long line of names, each with its number before it, that told the enginemen's standing. The "oldest" men got the best runs, the "youngest" the undesirable ones.

Month after month the list posted on the board before the call office changed. New names, scores of them, appeared at the bottom, old names by ones and twos disappeared from the top. A wreck, a short notice in the local paper—"Fireman killed in smashup," and up one number Zeb's name would go next posting of the "age" list. The new ones came and went more rapidly. A month, two months, and most of them were gone.

Railroading is a hard game, and the fireman has the most laborious job of all the men who operate the trains. Of the hundreds who start firing but a select few ever become engineers. Of the few who pull a throttle but a mere corporal's guard ever pull a first class passenger train. If nothing else, the very thing that moves them over to the right hand side of the cab, their "age," that thing itself is their severest enemy. Time slows their step down, dims their eyes, time thins them down from the top of the list, while below a steady push of the younger and stronger surge remorselessly upward with youth in their favor. Probably nowhere is the inexorableness of the survival of the fittest worked out more dispassionately than on the railroad.

Zeb had an example of how easily a man could lose his age. The ditcher was working on the main line and had been clearing the waterways beside the long "three mile cut" for a month. The passing track lay below the cut a scant half mile and the engineer soon got into the habit of going up the hill above the passing track to a little cabin every time they took the siding, leaving Zeb alone on the engine.

Zeb knew that his engineer had no right to leave his engine, yet he could say nothing, even when each time he returned the stench of raw moonshine whisky was strong on his breath.

The engineer's visits to the cabin lengthened. The minute they took the siding he made his way swiftly up the hill, not returning till the train they waited for had passed, and several times Zeb had to insistently toot the whistle before he emerged from the door plainly visible from the passing track.

One day they had worked for a couple of hours when the engineer, who had been nervous and fidgety for some time, broke out, "Zeb, watch out for me. I'm going up hill," pointing down towards the passing track. "Be back in a minute."

Zeb nodded assent. He was troubled since he knew the engineer was jeopardizing his job. An hour passed, an hour and a half. The conductor gave the high sign. Zeb pulled the throttle and ran the train down to the siding. Once safely in, he glanced back to see what he had moved for. A gasoline speeder with four men on it putted down the main line, slowed up, and stopped beside the engine. Zeb gasped, panic stricken when he saw the superintendent and master mechanic get off and come towards the engine.

"Where's the engineer?" a voice called.

Zeb hesitated, then, "He'll be back in a minute."

A pause, the superintendent climbed up

the gangway into the cab, glanced around inquiringly and then up the hill. The door opened in the house above and the engineer stepped out. His cap was cocked over one eye. He walked with a rollicking gait down the hill, singing loudly " Come all ye rounders if ye want to hear."

Down the path he came nearer and nearer. Not until he was half way up the gangway did he see the " old man," who stood in the middle of the cab, a steely glint in his eyes.

The engineer straightened up, gulped hard, and with a forced smile greeted, " 'Lo, colonel. Whattcha doing here?"

The smell of whisky was unmistakable.

The superintendent snapped: " Report at my office in the morning."

Turning to Zeb he asked, " Have you been hitting it, too?"

He drew closer, his hard gray eyes seeming to bore a hole clear through Zeb.

Shaking his head slowly, Zeb replied, " Colonel, I never touch it, never have."

The superintendent studied him for a minute. His face cleared. " Boy, I forgot. I know you don't."

Next morning a new man went out on the ditcher. Next time the age list was posted Zeb's number was reduced by one. He was far from the bottom now. And the engineer, another pathetic figure, joined the loafing gang which hung around the depot or slumped idly in the armchairs that lined the wall of the pool room. They were a pitiful bunch, those castoffs, without an object in life except to " get back " on the road. They knew nothing but railroading, and that was barred to them. Yet some who had been held off for years still spoke hopefully of the time when the " old man " would relent and put them on again—as new men to start at the bottom of the extra list. Zeb always felt a great pity for them, and every time he saw those " chair birds " he renewed his resolve never to break the rules and be forced to join them.

Things went along smoothly and evenly for a year. One night as he came out on Depot Street after leaving the engine at the ash pits he met a fireman he knew.

" Howdy," he greeted him, intending to pass by and hurry home to clean up.

" Say, Zeb," the other stopped him. " Sorry about your old man."

" Whatta mean? My old man?"

" Oh," the fireman continued, " ain't you heard? Pink Case's still was raided last night. They caught old ' Peg-leg Case ' a-running it off for all he was worth and your father was there helping. The revenue officers brought the two of them in. They're up town now."

Zeb hurried along, not hearing the rest of the story. At last the expected had happened—his father was caught.

Arriving home the first words his mother greeted him with were " Oh, Zebbe, Zebbe, yore pore pap's kotched. The revenoors done got him and Pink."

In the sing-song plaintive voice of a mountain woman in grief she told him all she had heard.

Zeb quickly changed his clothes, caught a car and went up town. Once at the jail he gained admission and was escorted down the stone corridor to a cell. Inside on the narrow iron cot sat his father. Zeb expected to see him crestfallen, overcome by his arrest.

Instead he looked up, saw Zeb and growled, " Wal, yere I be."

" Oh, pap, I'm so sorry."

" Wall, ye needn't be," was the surprising answer. " I'm kotched, but I'll not be in ferever, and when I gits out some tattler's a-goin' to feel a shaft sink feather-deep in his innards."

Zeb was rather taken aback at this defiant speech. " Cain't I do something for you, pap?"

" Wal, ye might git one of these yere lawyer fellers fer me so as I kin git out on bail, then I'm agoin' to fix old Miller Jim Ward so as he'll never tell the revenoors whare no more stills air aworkin'."

They were allowed to talk but a few minutes and Zeb left, promising to do what he could to help his father.

That night was a trying one for Zeb. His mother wailed and cried till almost morning, his sisters joining in. He finally promised that if they would go to sleep he would get a lawyer next day and use what money he had in the bank to secure his father's release on bail.

He marked off for the day, his first layoff since he had gone back to work after the accident. He had made up his mind to help his father if he possibly could, and his first thought was of the company lawyer. He waited in the fruit store across from the depot watching each street car that stopped. It was well after nine o'clock before he saw him alight and hurry upstairs. Zeb quickly followed and the lawyer greeted him just as he opened his door.

"Hello, White." Then noticing the worried look on Zeb's face, he asked: "What's wrong?"

"My father's in jail now for moonshining."

"Oh, oh! So that's the White I read about in this morning's paper. Well, I'm sorry, but if the facts are as they say, he's in for it."

"Can't you do anything? Can't you help him?"

The lawyer stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Whew!" he whistled. "I don't know. There is but one loophole and that a mighty small one. Seems as though this Case fellow owns the still and your father was there with him at the time of the raid. Perhaps there's a chance there."

"Can you defend him?" Zeb asked.

"No, I can't. Company rules. Won't allow me to take on outside cases, but let me see. I'll try."

He reached for the telephone, called a number. Zeb listened.

"Hello, George. Oh, yes, I'm all right. Say, George, a young friend of mine, White, a fireman here on the road, wants some help. No, not himself. His father's up for stilling. Yes, I know the judge is soaking 'em, but I really would appreciate it if you would make a try. Sure. Thanks. I'll send him up to see you. Good-by."

He clicked the receiver on to the hook, scribbled a note, addressed it and turned to Zeb.

"Here, White, take this uptown, talk it over and perhaps things won't turn out as bad as you imagine them now."

Zeb thanked him and hurried down to the street cars, rode uptown and in a few minutes sat talking to a sharp-eyed, keen-looking young lawyer. Fifteen minutes later he came out, but a little encouraged, for he had learned that all he need hope for his father, was a light sentence.

Worried and perplexed, Zeb wondered why these things had to be. Why was his father shiftless, a lawbreaker? What did men see in whisky to make them take the chances they did to make it, to procure it, to drink it? The more the subject presented itself to him, the greater became his disgust.

He stopped—Jim drank—and Jim was his friend. He wished, though, that Jim would leave it alone. If Jim but had some object in life, some desire, Zeb thought, he might quit the booze. If Jim could ever be induced to promise to quit, Zeb knew he'd stick to his word. For of all the traits that men and women admired in Jim Brown, the one outstanding trait was that his word once given was final and absolute.

As Zeb walked back toward the depot, he spoke aloud to himself: "God, Jim, I wish you'd quit before something happens to you!"

He little knew that sooner than he expected would come the crisis in his friend's life when he would make the choice between John Barleycorn and something far more worth while.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SENTENCE.

THE "Moonshiners' Court," as the Federal court on the top floor of the post office was called, was in session at the time of Bill White's arrest. Neither Zeb nor Jim could raise the large amount of money necessary to secure his release on bail. So Bill White spent a couple of weeks in jail waiting for his case to be called.

Zeb would rather have had it so after he had reasoned with his father. All the older man could think of was his determination for revenge on the man who had informed the revenue officers.

"Jest ye wait till I gits out and that air lowdown, blabbing Miller Jim 'ull git hisn," were the words he started and ended all his conversations with.

Zeb would have dropped the whole affair and have nothing to do with his father but for his mother and sisters. Their attitude puzzled him. They had left the rickety cabin, the hard work, the poor fare that his father provided. Zeb had placed them in a neat little house. Through his work he furnished food and clothes, not the shabby calico, but as they aptly put it themselves, " purty town clothes."

Yet they were dissatisfied. Ill-concealed grumbles and open contempt for the things of the town formed the most of their conversations. They would not learn to use the telephone. They were afraid of the gas stove. They filled a big galvanized pail with water and used it up sparingly, dipper by dipper during the day when water was to be had copiously at a turn of the faucet.

They talked of times past in the mountains as though they were something far better. They wore their good clothes shabbily, spoke the jargon they had always spoken, and " corn bread and fatback," " sorghum 'lasses," and " sweet taters," were on the table till Zeb was disgusted at the sight of them. Repeatedly at night when he came in from a hard run, he would take one look at the food on the table, make an excuse, wash and dress and go uptown to a restaurant to supper.

His altruistic notions of helping them had proved very unsatisfactory before. Now, since the arrest of his father, conditions at his home became worse. Every night when he came in, dirty with coal dust and smeared with oil, he had to light the stove himself to prepare hot water for washing. The house was untidy, a pile of dirty dishes littering the sink while his mother sat hunched over in a chair, moaning and crying.

" Oh, Zebbe, yore pore pap. He's a goin' to jail. Cain't ye git him out? Cain't ye git him out?"

His sisters, apathetic, sniffled about, scarce speaking. He was sore harried, for he saw all his fine plans for them would never amount to anything. They would not adapt themselves to life in town.

The day when his father's case was to be called his mother dressed in her street clothes, the two girls trailing after her and the three went uptown. Zeb called up and marked off for the day, then rode up to the courthouse. Seating himself in an obscure corner in the back of the room he listened as moonshining case after case was called, witnesses sworn in, evidence heard, the jury filed out, returning after a few minutes with the selfsame verdict—guilty.

Then the sentence, a year, two years. One case where there had been a stubborn fight around the still and several deputies wounded, took a little longer, but the inevitable verdict was handed down, five years.

He heard his father's name called and saw the revenue agent take the stand. He was a young, smart looking man. Zeb could not help but like him, although he felt he should hate him. At the thought he smiled grimly to himself, for it was a part of his heritage as a mountain man to hate the revenuers. Yet as he heard his testimony, clearly stated, truthful sounding, he knew he was but fulfilling his duty.

Then his father took the stand. Zeb was astonished at the absurd and untruthful tale he told. He knew that his father lied, every one in the court room did. His slinking, hangdog expression, his furtive eyes shifting around, never holding steady for a minute coupled to the thin tale he told, condemned him.

" Me and Pink war a huntin' our hogs. Run acrost a still. Fire in hit, but we jest stopped to look at hit when a whole passel o' folks came a tearin' down on we'uns."

Abashed at his father's conduct—why didn't he take what's coming to him like a man?—Zeb arose and slipped out of the court room, the last words he heard, " I hain't never made no likker, jedge."

He walked along the street unseeing where he went. He was perplexed, not at his father, for, he reflected, a year in jail might be the best thing that could happen to him. He'd have to work there and perhaps the work habit would stay with him after his release. But he could not understand why his people would not adapt themselves to changing conditions. He realized that the old days in the mountains were fast passing. Civilization, modern ways and laws, had climbed up into the hills. The railroad was changing the customs of the backwoods and the people who lived there were slow to follow the newer, better ways.

He walked for an hour, aimlessly, with no set objective in view, his eyes on the sidewalk before him. A babble of many voices attracted his attention. He glanced up. He was passing by a group of large buildings that he recognized as the school where he had been to visit Itchy-Witchy. He pulled out his watch. Eleven o'clock. Perhaps she was outside to-day, for he suddenly remembered it was Saturday. Perhaps she had not gone home over this week-end.

Turning off on to a gravel path, he continued his way between the school buildings. Group after group of laughing young women passed him and turned their heads to gaze after him. Zeb made a good figure, tall, broad-shouldered and agile as he swung along with his easy stride. He glanced at each face as he passed, searching for her. Hundreds of girls in ones and twos, in groups and bunches, were walking around the campus, but the one he sought was not in sight.

Unconsciously, he branched off on a little path leading to the tennis courts. A half dozen players were racketing the white balls across the tightly stretched nets. He saw her on the furthest court behind the inclosing wire netting. He took a seat and watched her playing. Lithe and agile, she was in her short skirt and white tennis shoes. Gracefully she served the ball, tossing it high over her head and banging it swiftly across the net with a wide swinging, full-arm stroke.

So engrossed she was in the game that she did not notice him. He was content just to sit and watch her. The easy play of her body, the sure judgment, the unerring skill with which she drove the ball first to one corner, then to the other, fascinated him.

He forgot the sordid scene he had witnessed uptown in the court room, the commonness of his home life, the struggle to advance on the road, all were swept out of his mind and, sitting there on the bench, Zeb lost himself in the game they played.

He heard the words: " Forty love!"

Then as her opponent missed a serve: " Game and set!"

He wondered at the terms they used. The game was over. She picked up a cover from the ground beside the side line, slipped her racket into it, turned and saw him.

" Why, hello, Zeb! How long you've been there?" she called, walking quickly toward him.

" Just a little while, in time to see you finish your game. How are you?" he answered, standing up and viewing her face, rosy from the excitement and effort, her hair blowing, her eyes sparkling.

" Fine. Had a dandy game just now. I certainly am pleased to see you."

She introduced the girl beside her. Zeb bowed gravely, shook the proffered hand, then between the two, he walked back toward the buildings, an object of interest to every girl in sight.

He was keenly aware of the stir he made. Covertly he observed Itchy-Witchy to see how she was accepting the situation. And the wonder of what he saw in her face made his heart thump fast and furious. For, unmistakably, she was proud of him. There was a glint in her eyes, a sense of ownership in her manner that could not be misunderstood.

The other girl took a halting leave and they were alone.

" Well," began Zeb, " I just had to see some one, to see you, and I feel a lot better now. I must run along." He started to leave.

She stopped him, her hand on his arm. " Look at me, Zeb."

He turned and she studied him for a second, then questioned in a tone of concern: " What's wrong? I can see you're worried. Come on. Tell me about it. Perhaps I can help."

" Itchy-Witchy, I don't want to unload any of my troubles on you, but seems as if I have to tell them to some one or they'll get too heavy to carry."

In a swift rush of low spoken words, he poured out his story, of his father, of his mother and sisters. She listened with sympathy.

If Zeb had been wise in the ways of women he would have known that there is no surer way to a woman's affections than to arouse her motherly instincts. Her eyes deepened compassionately. Concern and soft, soothing tones that drive deep into the

heart of a man, vibrated in her voice when he had finished.

She answered gently. "Zeb, you can't understand them because you've raised yourself far out of their lives. You live in another world, a world that they will never know. You can't bring them to that world for they haven't the desire. And your father, you can't help his ways, either."

"What can I do, then?" he asked. "He'll get a year in jail anyway, and maw and the girls will make life miserable for me till he gets out. Then they'll go back to the mountains with him. They are not happy here, neither am I. I'm really not ever happy—unless it's when I'm with you."

She glanced up quickly at him and abruptly changed the subject. They walked toward the dormitory, saying little.

As she parted from him at the door, she turned and, looking him full in the face, her lips curved in that curious little smile that was characteristic of her and she spoke in a low voice: "Zeb, perhaps some day you'll be happy, sure enough."

Before he caught the import of her words, she was gone.

On the way back home, her words repeated themselves over and over, "Some day you'll be happy, sure enough."

He tried to realize just how much she had intended by that one sentence, for the expression in her face, the tone of her voice, told more than the words themselves.

This was the first time she had really given him any encouragement. Before now, it had been a friendly interest, a good fellowship. Now it was something deeper. Zeb knew that his happiness was bound up in her. She was the one person to make him happy, and she had halfway given her promise.

The depressing scene when he came into the room where his women folk sobbed out the news: "Yore pap has done gone to jail fer a whule yare and so has Pink. The both of 'em is locked up," did not affect him much, for he was treading on air.

Itchy-Witchy had not deserted him. She hadn't scorned him because of his father.

He surveyed the women calmly.

"Well, what of it?" he answered. "It was coming to him, wasn't it?"

His mother, through her sobs, jerked out the thoughts on her mind.

"Hit warn't yore pap's fault. 'Twas Pink Case as led him to hit. Pink Case, and, Zeb, ye air to blame sommat, too."

"Me?" gasped Zeb in astonishment. "Me—how? What do you mean?"

"Wal, ye tolled we'uns off yere to town and none was ter home ter see ter yere pap and, of course, he was bound to git into some devilment. Oh, Zeb, let's us'uns go back home! This air town ain't fittin' fur us. Ye come on back, too! That thar railroad 'ull git the better of you-all."

Zeb looked at the miserable trio. Then he knew that Itchy-Witchy's words were indeed true. He couldn't do a thing for them. They were mountaineers and mountaineers they would be till they died. His sisters seemed to have no will of their own, no original thoughts. They depended on their mother to do their thinking for them. His eyes wandered from them, stolid and unimaginative, to his mother. She was the guiding spirit of the family. She was the pivot around which they revolved. The heritage she had carried up from the valley when she married Bill White would just go so far. The long, hard years of trouble and privation had molded her, she was a mountain woman now, Bill White's woman, and such she would remain.

"Well, maw, if you feel that way, all right. You needn't stay here. You can go back."

She looked up, a surge of relief across her face. "And ye'll come, too?"

He shook his head. "No, I'll send you money to live on, but I'll not go. There's nothing there for me."

He left the house to go down to the call office and mark up for a run again. When he returned an hour later the crying and sobbing were over. The three women sat waiting for him, their belongings already tied up. It surprised him how quickly they had taken him at his word, surprised, yet relieved him. And he felt more relieved when he saw them off on the afternoon train. Well, that was one problem settled.

The little house seemed strangely silent and lonesome when Zeb returned and began to straighten things out. His women had

been shabby housekeepers, yet even so, they were women. As he washed and dried the dishes standing before the sink, he looked out of the back window to where a half dozen other back yards faced his. A woman in one yard beat on a carpet, another sat holding a child, in another a young woman scarce more than a girl, hung out clothes on a line to dry; small clothes, the dress of a baby.

Zeb watched them as they performed their duties. Reflectively he pondered. Yes, that was the way. The man to make the living, the woman to make the home. Two and two, pair by pair, they played the game of life, each one performing the tasks they were best fitted for. He was preparing himself for his end; every day that passed saw him one day nearer the big pay days, when he would pull down the three-figure checks of an engineer. And—he hesitated almost to think of it—Itchy-Witchy, too, each day, was preparing herself for the business of life.

She was no longer the slim, little, shy girl who had carried his message that day now three years gone. Full-bosomed, steady-eyed, calm, and yet bubbling over with the sheer exuberence of youth, she had blossomed into a woman. Thinking of her, he knew that there never would be any other woman for him.

And yet as Zeb looked around his small home, a feeling that Itchy-Witchy would not fit in there, grew stronger the more he thought of it. She was not fashioned for a railroad man's wife. She was a part of the open country, the sunshine and the free winds blowing across green fields.

He swept the rooms out carefully, moving each piece of furniture, cleaning out an accumulation of lint and dust long undisturbed. In his mind he tried to evolve a solution to the problem. Yet, try as he would, he could see no way. He was of the railroad, it had made him just as surely as the open country and the life on a farm had made her. The two could not assimilate. He knew that as long as he was in the company's employ, he must live at the terminal within reach of the call boys, within sound of the yards. He knew the environment of the depot district would soon pall on her even as it had palled on his folks.

He laughed as the ridiculous side of his ruminations presented itself. Here he was building air castles, fitting her into place, settling her for life on the thin hope her short sentence had raised. Time would settle the question far better than he could. The future would work things out somehow, some way. He cooked and ate supper, then settled himself into a chair and read, forgetting all the worries that had nagged at him.

But relieved as he was at his folks leaving, their going left him in a quandary. It was more than he could do to keep his house in order, make his own meals and hold his job down, too. He tried for a month faithfully, then got into the habit of dropping into Ring's for a meal as he came in from his run. Soon he was going to the restaurant oftener, and before the second month passed, he had given up entirely his home cooking.

He was pulled off his regular run on the freight. An "older" fireman took the job and the list shifted and he found the best thing he stood for was a "chain gang" freight run, "first in, first out," on the West End. His regular time was broken up, he was called at all hours of the day and night and he began to go up to the railroad boarding house for his rest. Here things were convenient. There was hot water at a turn in the bathtub, bed already made up and nothing to prepare. His house was locked up and only occasionally he went over and inspected it.

At this time a young fellow at the shops, a "nut splitter," as the roundhouse machinists were called, just out of his apprenticeship and drawing mechanic's full wages for the first time, had married on his increased earnings. One night when Zeb got off the engine at the sand house, he hailed him.

"Oh, White, I hear you've got a house you're not using. Want to rent or sell it?"

Zeb studied him reflectively for a short while before answering.

"No, kid, I don't want to rent. Might sell, though. How you fixed?"

"Well, I've got a bit of money saved,

enough for a good payment and a B. and L. membership. That 'll take care of the rest."

" Good, kid. Come on over to the house to-night. Bring the better half and we'll talk it over."

He went home, opened the door and stepped into his house for the first time in weeks. He took in the pictures on the wall, the furniture standing stiff and impersonal around the rooms and the air of strangeness and aloofness of the furnishings. He realized anew that what these things needed to be alive, what this house lacked in being a home was a woman's presence.

In an hour, a knock on the door aroused him from his chair, where he had slumped down to dream and speculate. He opened the door and they entered. Gravely he bowed and acknowledged the introduction to the young woman. He looked at her, dark-haired, little and vivacious, and saw another woman, blue-eyed, golden-haired and laughing.

This woman was enthusiastic about the house. She would have been about any house that she could have for her own. He showed them around and listened, unhearing the most of their comments. At first he had contemplated adding a profit to his investment. Property in the neighborhood had increased in value since he bought the house. The prosperity of the railroad was spreading out and showed itself in a hundred new cottages built by the men of frugal habits who worked for the company. Zeb remembered also how he had spent his spare time painting and papering, scraping and varnishing, and the house was worth far more than he had paid for it.

But as they sat down at the table to talk terms, he hadn't the heart to charge them what he should. He sold it " lock, stock and barrel, as is, and where is," as he worded his offer, for exactly what it had cost him, and took his profit in the satisfaction he got from their joyful words of thanks. But it was regretfully he signed the receipt for the initial payment and gave up the keys to the pair just starting out on the business of life together. For that home had meant a lot to Zeb, and the sight of those two, their words of endearment, their looks of consideration and mutual delight, had awakened instincts that he had but dimly felt before. He was essentially a home lover, and now all his thoughts centered around the time when he would again have his own roof above him and settled and secure beneath his own roof tree, beside his own fireplace.

CHAPTER XV.

FOR A FRIEND.

ZEB had been firing for three years when one night he was called after twelve for a live stock run. He got out of bed, dressed in the cold room, listening to the patter of the falling rain on the window and the dismal sighing gusts of wind that whipped about the corners of the house. A nasty night, was his reflection as he laced his shoes, but he had worked many a nasty night before. He had grown accustomed to the irregular hours now and merely considered all the inconveniences of his job as part of it.

Head bent down to protect his face from the cold stinging rain, his black raincoat shining glossy in the light of his lantern, he crossed the yards toward the roundhouse. Fifteen minutes later he stopped in at the warm sand-drying shanty with its blazing fires, and, seeing the night foreman inside drying himself before the sand drums, he entered.

" Say, Blackwood, what's on the ' So Boss ' to-night?"

The foreman turned.

" Oh, hello, White! Well, the 666 is chalked up for it."

" Who's the hoghead?" was Zeb's next question.

The foreman shook his head.

" Jim Brown and Zeb," he continued. " I hate to see Jim pull her out to-night."

" What's eating you?" questioned Zeb in surprise. " Jim can haul 'em as long as the wheels stay under 'em."

" Oh, I know that, but you haven't seen Jim to-night. He's—well, he's been arguing with a couple of guys and he's pretty well done up."

" A couple of guys? Who were they?"

" Haig and Haig," was the foreman's answer as he ran out when the air whistle on the shop office shrilled his call.

The sand-shanty man informed Zeb that the 666 was up on the yard track, and Zeb hurried out into the rain toward it. When he neared it, the roaring pops guided him, for its safeties were both open, shooting plumes of steam high into the air. His first thought was—she sure is hot. Then as he drew nearer to the noise of the escaping steam, roaring up into the wet night, he saw that the blower was wide open, forcing the draft in a streak of sparks that cascaded up like fireworks from the stack.

He cleared the last fifty feet in a run, swarmed up into the cab, and twisted the blower valve shut. He jerked open the fire door and looked in. The fire bed was a livid white hot writhing furnace.

Zeb yelled at Jim: " What's the matter, Jim? You're burning it up!"

Jim sat on his seat box, a foolish grin on his face.

" Tha's sho. Burn it up. We don't give a damn. Cold night, wet, wanted to get warm."

Zeb held his lantern to the water glass. The glass was empty.

" Great God, Jim," he shouted, " get off! Get off! She's liable to let loose any second!"

Grabbing the unresisting Jim by his shoulders, Zeb dragged him down from the engine. With a yell he woke the turntable boy, who was asleep in his shanty.

" Get Jim in the clear! Warn everybody to stay away!"

" What's the matter?" was the sleepy question as he caught hold of Jim's limp form.

" Matter! This jack's liable to go up any minute," Zeb threw back the warning as he climbed back into the engine.

Without wasting another second he grabbed the slice bar and began to draw the fire. Frantically he worked, tumbling the glowing coal out on to the deck and rocking the grates. The bar grew hot in his hands, blistering them through his thick leather firing gloves. The hot embers charred his shoes. Once he stopped to beat out the fire on his trouser legs. The perspiration streamed down his face and each minute he expected to feel the lift and surge, the tearing crash of the boiler exploding. Like the glissando of a gale sweeping through the trees, the roaring of the steam through the pops reverberated, drowning out all other sounds.

For ten minutes Zeb worked, wondering why no one came to help. He was too engrossed to look out and see the timid circle of lanterns that peered around from behind engines and the brick pillars of the roundhouse. Single-handed he fought the fire, lump by lump, to the crashing clang of his slice bar that blended, unheard in the deafening noise of the boiler blowing off live steam, strained to the bursting point.

Zeb was taking a chance, a long chance, and yet as he struggled his one thought was for Jim. If he could save the engine, no one would be any the wiser. If the engine went, Jim's job went with it.

Bitterly he thought: " That chicken livered crowd of a shop force, why don't some one of them come to help?"

His feet were burned now. He was standing on a pile of live coals and would not stop long enough to shovel the deck clear. At last, in mortal agony when he thought that he must collapse, he gave a great sigh of relief. The pops closed with a slap. Quietness, almost oppressive, fell after that bedlam. He leaped to the seat box and stripped off his scorched shoes, flapped the crisped gloves from his hands and fell back against the cab, exhausted. His eyebrows and the hair that stuck out from under his cap were burned off. His hands throbbed feverishly; his feet pained abominably. He was burned in a dozen places.

There came a clatter of many excited voices and a half dozen men swarmed into the cab. The hot, stifling coal was shoveled onto the ground from the steel deck.

A chorus of: " God, I wouldn't have done that stunt for a million dollars!"

" Bully, boy!"

" Gamest stunt I ever saw!"

A boilermaker stuck his torch into the fire box, craned his head through the door for a minute, then straightened up.

He turned to the shop foreman. " Blackwood, you'll never run this engine to-night,

The crown sheet is buckled like an accordion, burnt to a crisp. The flue sheet is cracked in a dozen places and every flue needs rolling. This job needs a month in the boiler shop."

Zeb heard the words, and he knew what they meant. There is one inflexible rule on the railroad. There is one unpardonable sin for the men who drive the trains: Whoever burns a boiler is surely fired.

"Age" or pull avails not. A burned boiler, and there is no excuse for the man who lets it happen.

The 666 did not pull the live stock freight that night. A new engine and crew were called and after three hours' delay it started on its run. Zeb was scarcely able to walk, so badly burned were his feet. A hostler ran him over to the depot on an engine; a couple of shop men helped him to his room. Jim had disappeared. It was the best thing he could do. It was bad enough as it was, without having any more witnesses to his condition. Yet, Zeb felt as though Jim had deserted him, and into his mind there crept the idea—hadn't he better drop Jim before he got him into trouble? He was ashamed of the thought almost as soon as he conceived it. No, Jim was his friend. He'd stick to him, right or wrong, trouble or not.

Suffering severely from his raw and blistered hands, he finally went to sleep. About ten o'clock he awoke next day when a call boy came into his room. He knew what he was wanted for before the boy told him.

"'Old man' sent for you at once."

It was an agony to dress. His feet had swollen and he couldn't put on his shoes, so he went across the street and up to the superintendent's office in his carpet slippers.

The night foreman was there. The "drum head," as the boilermaker was called, was speaking when Zeb entered.

"Ruined flue sheet, crown sheet, and side sheets. Needs a new fire box and half a set of grates. She's in terrible shape."

As he listened to the boilermaker's report, Zeb thought of Jim, who had been his friend, who had gotten him his job and had helped him for three years. In the flash of a second he made up his mind.

He stepped painfully to the desk behind which the superintendent sat.

"Colonel, I burned that engine. I'm responsible. I forgot to fill her up when I came on her last night."

White faced with the lines of pain etching out from the corners of his eyes, Zeb White spoke the words that he expected would mean his job and all that it meant to him.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

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THE MOTHER-LODE

MANY a grubstake miner has found where the color showed—
Always the grubstake miner goes seeking the "mother-lode."
Yonder somewhere in the mountains; some place above in the hills
Hides the great source of the pay dirt gilding the sand in the rills.

Precious the dust that he garners; precious each rocker-found grain—
Cashing it quick o'er the counter, he's off to the trail again;
Satisfied never with driblets, hitting the same hard road,
Hoping for one thing only—to come at the "mother-lode."

We who are seeking kindness in hearts of our fellow men
Find it in every stratum—find it again and again.
Known to us, though, the storehouse whence of this wealth has flowed
Into life's sandbars and ledges—Love is the "mother-lode!"

Strickland Gillilan.

Hopalong Cassidy's Pal

By CLARENCE E. MULFORD

Author of "The Coming of Cassidy," "Hopalong Cassidy Returns," etc.

X—THE GIFT OF THE DARK

FOUR horsemen pushed up a steeply sloping dry-wash leading from a ravine and stopped, looking at a distant line of darker and fresher greenery which curved across the pale, dusty, sage-green of the tumbled range and returned to the horizon whence it came. It was like a great bow, bent to the snapping point, and it marked the course of the Black Jack, the western fork of Jones's Luck River. A little to their left towered the Hog Back, a solitary and enormous butte, and at its base was a short cañon, where the river had worried a way through the rock.

The riders were nearing their home country and were now on its outer edge. Three of them wore quiet smiles because of a long ride nearly finished and a steady responsibility almost at an end. The fourth man wore no smile.

On his drawn face was an apathetic frown, his roving gaze was listless, and he had a trick of rubbing his wrists, where faint red lines ran around them. For seven nights his crossed wrists had been bound behind his back, making his sleep fitful and restless; and during his periods of wakefulness he could make out three lariats leading

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from himself to the three sleeping captors. For him time was drawing to a close; one more day of riding and he would face a confinement which probably would end in death.

The leader glanced at him, his hand on the lariat leading to the prisoner's horse, and then past him to the smiling pair behind.

"Well, here we are. Who's goin' to take Eades to th' ranch?"

Lanky Smith grinned and his companion growled, both regarding the prisoner accusingly.

"Well," sighed Lanky regretfully, "I reckon it's got to be me, seein' as how I captured him."

Red Connors snorted and exchanged looks with Lanky's scowling companion.

"*You* captured him?" he said ironically. "You mean you let him dive through th' window for th' Kid to capture. If it wasn't for Mesquite bein' outside that window he would 'a' got plumb away."

This renewal of a well-chewed bone of contention somehow found Lanky slyly taking another side. He did not defend his laurels as he had all the way from Broken Wheel. If Eades was his prisoner then he would have to leave his companions and take him to the ranch and the sheriff; and, knowing that there was plenty of excitement in store for those who rode on, he was not anxious to go to the ranch.

Mesquite Jenkins now took part in the conversation.

"I captured him, but I couldn't 'a' done it so quick if Lanky hadn't dug him out an' chased him into me. Reckon you two hombres better toss up for th' job of takin' him in."

"*Us* two?" snapped Red indignantly. "How th' hell are you gettin' *me* into this here job?"

"*Us* two?" snorted Lanky, also indignantly. "Why not us *three?*"

"Because it's my job to round up th' gang, an' there's three more of 'em still to get," answered Mesquite, his jaw squaring a little.

"That so?" inquired Red in a rising voice. "You know damn well that me an' Lanky had to sneak off to get in on this here hunt, an' that if we go back to th' ranch we'll be roped, an' watched so cussed close we won't be able to get away agin."

Mesquite grinned impudently.

"Mebby that's what I'm figgerin' on," he said. "You two hombres plumb invited yoreselves to horn in on *my* game. If either one of you reckon that I'm goin' to drop th' chase now yo're shore reckonin' plumb wrong. I'm stickin' with it till th' last of th' twelve are either killed or captured. You fellers better toss up for it."

The two self-invited members of a long and exciting man hunt looked at each other jealously.

"Who you starin' at, you carrot-headed coyote?" demanded Lanky with his well known politeness.

"I'm starin' at you, you runty, cross-eyed tumble-bug!" replied Red, not to be outdone in courtesy. "Who th' hell did you think I was starin' at?"

"You shore got yore regulation load of gall, figgerin' on tossin' up with *me!*" retorted Lanky. "Yo're th' one man present that didn't have nothin' a-tall to do with capturin' this coyote. Looks to me like you was th' one to take him in, an' do somethin' useful. You shore ain't done nothin' useful so far. An' don't you call me no runty tumble-bug, or I'll take you apart an' find out what's loose in you!"

"You couldn't take nothin' apart nohow," rejoined Red, whose indignation at this rubbing of an already well rubbed wound had turned his face a deeper color than his faded red hair; but before he could continue in what he considered to be the proper language, Mesquite cut into the argument.

"I'll take him in," offered the youth; "but I'll do it on just one condition. You fellers wait for me som'ers, an' not go huntin' before I join you."

Unselfishness often aroused in Lanky a latent suspicion, and such a totally unexpected offer started him probing for the reason for it.

"Huh!" he snorted. "I reckon you'll tell 'em that *you* took him prisoner."

"Look here, you damn fool!" snapped Red, glaring at his old-time friend. "Th' Kid's lettin' us out of it. You naturally don't know enough to recognize a decent act

when you see one, bein' a total stranger to everythin' of that kind; but when you start palaverin' about this prisoner bein' yourn, I'm puttin' on my spurs to ride you to a frazzle! What th' hell did you ever capture, except mebby a gray-back? You do much more of yore yappin' an' *I'll* take this feller in, even if I have to go with you every step of th' way!"

"You an' what else?" snapped Lanky. "You an' th' U. S. Army? Huh; you better get 'em all behind you before you try to make me take him in. *You* ride me to a frazzle! You ain't got no idear how funny you are when you ain't."

"You should oughtta quit smokin' *marihuana*," rejoined Red. "First thing you know you'll know a hull lot less than you do now, though I shore can't see how it's possible."

"Toss me that rope, Red," said Mesquite, indicating the lead rope to the prisoner's horse. "You two can fight it out after I get started. Where you figgerin' to wait for me?"

Red scratched his head and stirred up an inspiration. He had to name a place which Mesquite could recognize, since the youth was a stranger to all that country.

"We'll foller th' Black Jack toward Big Moose, keepin' on this side of it, till we come to a little basin-shaped cañon where th' river turns straight west. There's a nester's cabin in this end of it, th' nester hisself havin' long since lit out for parts unknown, an' if you ride straight north from th' ranch house, headin' for two sharp peaks that make a perfect V, you'll stumble onto us. We'll be keepin' a lookout for you."

"You'll wait for me, both of you?" demanded Mesquite, looking them in the eyes.

"*I* will," grunted Red.

"So'll *I*," said Lanky. As an afterthought he added, "How long'll we wait?"

"Till I get there!" snapped Mesquite, taking the rope from Red.

Lanky winked at his red-haired bosom friend and appeared to be a little anxious.

"You reckon you can get that feller there safe, Kid?" he asked. "Be too bad if he got away now. Mebby me an' Red oughtta go most of th' way with you."

Mesquite's eyes glinted and he checked the fingers that were making the lariat fast to the pommel of his own saddle. Coiling the rope, he fastened it to the saddle of the prisoner, drew his rifle far enough out of its sheath to assure himself that a cartridge lay in the chamber, and then glanced from the prisoner to the grave-faced doubter.

"For a week, now, you an' Red have taken turns tyin' that lariat to yore saddle horns," he said, smiling coldly. "You reminded me of two old wimmin. You've both let this skunk know you was scared he might get away, an' set him to figgerin' steady on *how* he might get away. I'm givin' him th' rope. His cayuse is as good as mine. He's got near forty miles an' a swimmin' river between him an' th' ranch. We ain't got enough proof to hang him, or to keep him in jail; but we all know damn well that he was one of them dogs that tried to kill Hopalong. You both was scared he'd try to get away. I'm hopin' he does try." He turned again to the captive. "Lead off, Eades; *pronto*. Any time you think you see a chance to get away, you take it."

Lanky laughed in quiet delight.

"That's th' time I got a rise outa you, Kid!"

"Mebby; but you didn't get nowhere near th' rise outa me that this murderin' coyote'll get if he makes a break. Go ahead, Eades; an' foller yore own inclinations."

For seven days Eades had spent most of his waking hours planning how to escape; now that he was face to face with the old Mexican law of the fugitive he began to plan how to indicate that escape was the very last thing he had in mind. A .45-70 makes an awful mess of a man sometimes.

They pounded down the slope, Eades five lengths in the lead, heading for the river near the Hog Back. At mid-forenoon they crossed the stream, finding it low enough to be comfortably forded, and pounded on again.

The shadows were growing long when they rounded the big corral of the Double-Y and stopped before the ranch house door. As they swung from the saddle the foreman-sheriff stopped in the kitchen doorway and looked at them. Mesquite's quick glance was inquiring and hopeful.

"How's Hoppy?" he asked tensely.

"Go 'round th' corner of th' house an' see for yoreself," answered Buck Peters, smiling. Then the smile faded and turned to a frown as he eyed the prisoner.

"Hoppy said he figgered you was one of 'em, Eades," he said, stepping forward, a hand resting on the gun at his hip as he saw that the prisoner was not bound. The foreman's other hand came out from under his coat and dangled a pair of handcuffs. "Stick 'em out, Eades; an' remember that I'm only wantin' an excuse."

Mesquite had run around the corner of the building and paused anxiously as he looked at the man seated in a comfortable chair in the full rays of the western sun. The wan face made him blink rapidly, and then spring forward.

"Hoppy, you old son-of-a-gun!"

Hopalong turned slowly, looked into the eager, friendly face, and grinned.

"Been thinkin' about you, Kid," he said, "an' wishin' I could be with you. It was a fool thing to do, sendin' you on th' trail alone after so many of them fellers, and in a strange country. When Buck told me Red an' Lanky had gone after you I felt a lot easier. I see you come through all right."

Mesquite shook his head and his grin became a little apologetic.

"But I only got eight of 'em, Hoppy," he admitted. "Th' rain wiped out all tracks. We figger on gettin' th' other three som'ers up around Big Moose. I just brought in Eades an' turned him over to Buck. He was th' only one, so far, that I could take alive. I wanted to bring back more of 'em, Hoppy, but they made me shoot. If it wasn't for Lanky I wouldn't 'a' got Eades." He paused a moment. "Lanky an' Red were a lot of help, an' Lanky went right into a crowded saloon, killed Hendricks, an' chased Eades through a window, plumb into my arms. He's a good man; *both* of 'em are good men."

"They are," replied Hopalong. "There ain't none better, Kid."

He was studying the youth, reading the eagerness, anxiety and warmth on the face which usually was so cold and reserved; and he warmed to the knowledge that this cold, born killer had striven to take captives, against his nature, and was sorry that he had taken only one. Beyond the edge of the youth's vest showed one point of a deputy's badge. Hopalong looked directly at it, and nodded.

"There's worse things than wearin' a star, Kid," he said. "Takes a big man to live up to it, an' not disgrace it. How many of them fellers got away?"

"Three," answered Mesquite. "We'll get 'em. One of 'em is Shanghai." He grinned and frankly gave the devil his due. "He's a wonder. Fooled me time after time; but his rope's gettin' shorter, an' we'll bring him in."

Hopalong laughed.

"Old fox, Shanghai is. Wish I could go after him myself. What you say to lettin' up for a while, an' then me an' you go after them three?"

Mesquite's eyes shone, but he shook his head.

"Red an' Lanky are waitin' for me now, up north," he replied. He smiled thinly. "I'm glad I rode in to see for myself; I've been grouchy from worryin' about you. Pretty near th' hardest thing I ever did was to bring Eades in. I gave him all kinds of chances for near forty miles to make a break for it; but he rode plumb careful."

"I shouldn't wonder at that," grunted Hopalong.

He pulled his coat around him, glanced at the sun and then stood up. It was September now, and the faint wind blowing from the northwest had an edge to it at that hour and altitude. Mesquite held out an arm, but the older man ignored it and moved slowly toward the corner.

As they were about to make the turn they found the foreman waiting for them. Behind him, seated on the ground with his back against the wall of the house, was Eades with his handcuffed hands fastened to his manacled ankles.

"Where's Red an' Lanky?" demanded the foreman of Mesquite.

Mesquite's arm described a half circle which began in the west and ended in the east, taking in three points of the compass.

"Up there," he answered.

Buck grunted and pulled thoughtfully at

his mustache. His face was stern, but a twinkle momentarily lighted his eyes.

"Much obliged for th' information," he growled. "You tell 'em to come back here an' go to work. Th' cattle are scatterin' hell-to-gone off th' range."

"But it don't matter very much where they scatter to *now*, does it?" inquired Mesquite. "I never was much of a hand to carry messages; my mem'ry's awful poor. I ain't aimin' to strain it. You better tell 'em when you see 'em."

"What I'll tell 'em when I see 'em won't take no mem'ry a-tall to remember," growled the foreman. He glanced at Hopalong and they exchanged the twitch of an eyelid. "Suppose you can remember anythin' a-tall about what you been doin' th' last month?" Buck asked the youth. "How many of them thieves you caught? How you come to catch 'em, an' anythin' else that might be interestin'?"

Mesquite shook his head.

"Ain't got time to try to remember," he answered. "I got to get three more: Tom Short, Foxy Joe, an' Shanghai." On the last name his tongue seemed to linger with a relish, as though reluctant to have done with it.

"Oh, Shanghai, huh?" remarked Buck, a grin flickering across his face. "Well, well, Kid. If yo're goin' trailin' him I reckon mebby that you'll have a-plenty time to rec'lect most all th' de-tails of yore whole life before you bring him in for me to snap th' cuffs on. If I was a gamblin' man," he added, loudly, glancing around to see if this declaration of uprightness had enriched the ears of his wife, "I'd risk a couple pesos, Mex., that you won't get within gunshot of him."

"Far be it from me to tempt you to gamble, Buck," spoke up Hopalong, his hand going over his mouth to hide his grin, "or to coax you from th' straight an' narrer, *an'* thorny; *but*," he looked around to see if Rose Peters was in sight, "I'll bet you a cool hundred U. S. that the Kid not only gets in gunshot of that ol' coyote, but brings him in alive."

Buck chuckled, touched his chest with the tip of his extended right thumb, the back of his hand outward and to the left; then he pushed both hands out in front of him, moved them in a gesture which suggested the building of small heaps, and brought them back to his body, fingers extended, in a scooping motion. Then, to make assurance doubly sure, he nodded briskly.

Hopalong laughed softly and nudged the youth, instinctively making the sign for "good."

"I'm backin' you, Kid, an' not worryin' about it," he said, moving slowly along the wall toward Mesquite's horse.

"I can't reach them two to-night," said the youth, climbing in the saddle, "but I can get some supplies, cover a lot of miles, an' roll up in my blanket some'rs."

He rested his hand lightly on Hopalong's shoulder, nodded to the foreman, and whirled his mount to ride to the bunkhouse and its kitchen. The little cloud of dust swirled around Hopalong and he stepped back to get out of it, his hand going up in a parting salute.

"Take good care of Red an' Lanky, Kid," he called after the departing horseman, his face a network of humorous wrinkles.

Buck snorted.

"'Take good care of Red an' Lanky!'" he repeated in heavy sarcasm. "*Huh!*" Then he turned to look down at the prisoner seated against the house. "I'll take you to town in th' mornin'."

Eades sneered.

"Don't give a damn where or when you take me," he retorted. "You can't pin a thing on me; not a thing."

Buck scratched his head thoughtfully.

"Mebby so; mebby so," he grunted. "An' then agin, mebby not. Some of yore friends have been right talkative, Eades; right talkative." He paused a moment and pulled at his mustache. "When I take you to town I'm countin' on takin' all th' boys along. There's been quite a lot of loose talk goin' on, an' in a cow country most folks carry ropes at their pommels. To some folks ambushes are like lightnin'; nobody knows where they're goin' to strike next; an' you'd be surprised at how many friends Hoppy has. That was one thing that was worryin' me when I told Mesquite to send back Red an' Lanky. If Hoppy was

well enough to ride, I'd shore feel a lot better. Mebby we oughtta keep you right here for a while."

Eades's face was pale and his defiance was gone. He looked pleadingly from Buck to Hopalong, and let his gaze rest on the man he had tried to kill from ambush.

The sunken eyes of the convalescent blazed for an instant and then became calm and reassuring.

"I can't ride," he said; "but I shore can lay on a bench an' shoot through a window. We better keep him up here, Buck, where it's safer," and the speaker slowly made his way to the door, through it and into the house.

"There goes th' man you tried to murder!" snapped Buck, fumbling in his pocket for a small key. "Tell you one thing: if th' jury lets you off you want to get outa this country as fast as you can, an' not come back. If I wasn't sheriff I'd—" he finished in a rumble low down in his throat and helped the prisoner to his feet, to start toward the bunkhouse.

As they covered the first few yards they saw Mesquite Jenkins bolt from the open door, throw a heavy sack across the saddle, mount and ride off.

"There goes a kid that ain't got th' habit of wearin' a deputy's badge," growled the foreman. "I'm surprised he took you alive. Yessir, Eades; if you get off free, I'd bust all records for distant parts if I was you."

Eades said nothing, but he was doing a lot of thinking.

II.

APPARENTLY Red and Lanky needed no one to look after them, if the tempting odor of the camp fire meant anything. They were just pouring the coffee when Red glanced behind him, stood erect, and swung his sombrero over his head. He stepped to the duffle roll and took up a third tin cup.

Down at the lower end of the valley a horseman, waving in reply, turned slightly from his course and came on at a lope. In a few minutes he dismounted near the fire, sniffing eagerly.

"How's Hoppy?" asked Red, trying to speak casually.

Lanky was rigid from suspense as he waited for the answer.

"Comin' along fine!" exulted Mesquite. He stripped off his saddle, briskly rubbed the horse's back, and then hung the saddle blanket on a bush where the heat of the fire would dry it. "Buck was askin' for you fellers," he said with a grin.

"I betcha," grunted Lanky. He looked up, wiping tears from his eyes, and drew his head out of the smoke of the frizzling bacon. "Get there all right with Eades?" he asked with elaborate carelessness.

Mesquite's face hardened at this veiled insinuation, and then softened a little; but he was looking at the questioner in a way which many men might have found disturbing.

"Yes, *both* of us, if that's what you mean," he retorted.

Lanky sighed and turned the bacon over, punching it carefully to remove the arches and to force it to lay flat.

"Hoped he might 'a' gambled with you," he said. "Here, hold yore tin over; think I'm goin' to get up an' tote it to you?"

Red knocked an inquisitive spider from the brim of his sombrero and appeared to be in a rare good humor. He glanced at the stiff figure standing over Lanky, and chuckled.

"Betcha Buck said th' cows was gettin' scattered an' lost, an' that he was plumb short of help," he suggested, his eyes twinkling. "Hold on, Kid!" he interjected hurriedly as Mesquite was about to speak. "'Tain't a-tall necessary to repeat what he said. We know it by heart. An', also, we're goin' back to th' ranch; but we're goin' sorta roundabout."

"Yeah," grunted Lanky. "Sorta roundabout. D'ja bring any sugar, Kid?"

Before mid-forenoon they were riding on again, discussing what they had to do, and planning their campaign.

Both Red and Lanky were fairly well familiar with the country around Big Moose, one of the home ranges of old Shanghai; and because their youthful companion knew nothing at all about it, and because it was easier to post him about the town, they suggested that they take to the open country and leave the town to him. They also suggested that since communica-

tion would be impossible it would be wise to operate independently of each other.

To both of these suggestions Mesquite assented, particularly the latter, and he drew rein to let his companions ride on after they had told him what they could about the town. Watching them for a moment he turned up a little valley, heading for a clump of trees and brush, there to kill time and to wait for evening, when he would pay the town a visit.

At one time Big Moose had been a relay station for a stage-coach mail service, and a point of supply for many freighting outfits. In its best days it had been hectic, a turbulent meeting place for teamsters, soldiers, buffalo hunters, scouts, gamblers, and worse. The second piano to be freighted into that section of the country had been unloaded here, and with the arrival of a billiard table Big Moose had become boastful.

A grass-grown trail, scored deeply by wide iron tires, led ramblingly down from the northeast, following the line of least resistance from the banks of the upper Missouri to a one-time string of army posts. There had been times during the periods of low water when the steamboats could ascend no higher, and had been forced to tie up to the south bank and to intrust their freight to wagons.

Life had flared high in Big Moose, and the town had not been silent either day or night; but now it was a relic, stubbornly refusing to die. It also was a rallying place for certain undesirables, who felt thoroughly at home when under its few remaining roofs, and who knew that every man in town was in sympathy with them and might be expected to give what aid he could.

To this decrepit marker of grass-grown roads came Tom Short and Foxy Joe one dark night. A door had opened and shut again, and the curious inmates of the lighted room had grinned knowingly, and silently made them welcome; but the welcome was tinged with reserve.

Tom and Joe, well known to all, were welcome enough; but in this instance they might have had the consideration to postpone their visit. An uncomfortable feeling was astir; what might be following along their trail?

The careless and rambling conversations in the room had become stilled at the entry of the fugitive pair, as though marking time and waiting for information to check up on the rumors which had trickled into town during the last few weeks.

It was known in Big Moose that the carefully planned raids on the herds of the Double-Y had misfired; that Lefty Trotter and Slim Porter had been killed, and that a dozen friends of both these men had been rounded up in Twin River by a youth hardly out of his teens and had been thrown into jail. It was known that another dozen, the best men in Porter's gang, had fled from the country after making a bungling attempt to kill Hopalong Cassidy from ambush, and that the same beardless youth had gone in hot pursuit of them. Later rumors claimed that Red Connors and Lanky Smith had left the ranch and had ridden to join him, and that the Double-Y range was being patrolled by mounted riflemen. It was also known that the action had flowed swiftly eastward, away from country near to Big Moose, much to the quiet satisfaction of the town.

Day had followed day and lulled the threat of danger; but now, with these two fugitives coming in the night and seeking aid and sanctuary, the threat was growing.

The habitués of Big Moose were lending anxious ears to what these two men might have to say, and generously buying them drinks to serve as props for their wavering courage. They had been tortured by going a fortnight without liquor, and now they gulped the raw whisky so bounteously provided, their burning thirst making them careless to the reasons for the generosity.

While they drank and expanded under the warmth of the spirits, their companions and hosts had drawn chairs closer to them until the circle was tight and complete, waiting for the liquor to unlock the doors of secretiveness and let out the garrulous truth. The wait was not in vain, for slowly the newcomers had lost their air of fear and distrust; they grew genial and a little boastful, and began to hint darkly against Shanghai, accusing him of treachery.

Steadily the indictments against this absent person grew, steadily they were becoming facts through the sheer impetus of repetition; and the few lukewarm adherents of the old man, who had taken his part earlier in the discussion, now fell away from him and added their voices against him.

Neither of the fugitives could tell much of what had happened over in the Broken Wheel country after the moment when their gang had separated and each man had struck out for himself; but there had been certain meetings agreed upon, and their friends had not kept them; but of one thing they spoke with emphasis: Mesquite Jenkins and his two companions might have come up straight from hell, for if they were not three devils, they at least had had the devil's aid; and the former had no more mercy in his heart than might be found in the heart of a mad wolf.

For a few days and nights Tom Short and Foxy Joe had kept under cover, emerging only after dark. To men keyed up to face a deadly pursuing danger this harmless interlude brought relief, and a growing sense of security.

Both the fugitives had dwelt with warm self-congratulation upon the smashing rain storm which had raged in the Broken Wheel country and had turned each dry-wash and arroyo into spouting torrents; they had described in glee how they had ridden, sometimes for miles, in rushing water often over the fetlocks of their animals; how they had picked the shallower streams and kept to the rain-scoured slopes of the divides. This they actually had done with cunning foresight, and they knew that so far as trailing was concerned they had nothing to fear.

Gradually they became less furtive, and it was not long before they began to move about in daylight. Some difference arose between them, perhaps in the manner of dealing a hand at poker, and they separated, each choosing a different crowd for his companions.

The fifth night had settled down upon the town when Shanghai rode in for provisions and a taste of liquor, and tied his horse with a jerk knot to a post behind a deserted shack, and made his way on foot and with caution to a grimy window of the main saloon. He had no faith in the security of Big Moose, not trusting any of its inhabitants, and he did not intend to tarry long. He would have passed around it but for the fact that he needed flour and beans and bacon before riding on to hole up in his haven in the hills.

He, too, had ridden for miles in that rain storm; he, too, had been careful to leave no trail, and he feared no trailing; but Shanghai had a vivid imagination and hard common sense, and he knew that no Double-Y rider need give any thought to trails to be tempted to pay a visit to Big Moose. Gaining the side of the shack he found its drawn curtains baffling sight, but the walls were far from being sound-proof, and it was not long before his ears told him that it was safe to enter.

The door opened and shut, and Shanghai stood inside, blinking a little in the light. His entry was marked by silence, and then here and there a reserved voice sourly acknowledged his greetings. In one corner of the room Foxy Joe sat, scowling at him, a half filled glass in his hand; in another, Tom Short stopped dealing for a moment while he looked at the newcomer, and then went on again, the cards falling slowly before the players.

Shanghai sensed hostility and determined to get his drink and to clear out before matters came to a crisis. He would hasten on to the general store, lay in his supplies, and leave town as soon as possible.

Lifting the whisky glass on a level with his eyes, he admired the color of the liquid and then tossed it down. As he put the glass on the bar he started and stiffened at the epithet hurled at him. Turning slowly he saw Tom Short standing erect, hand on gun, and glowering at him.

"Git out of town, an' stay out, you—"

Shanghai shook his head, indicating sorrow.

"That ain't no way fer a friend ter talk, Tom," he said. "We're companions in mis-ry an' danger, an' we come through a tight place. We oughter stand by each other, an' not go ter callin' names. Bein' friendly ter ye, I'm advisin' ye ter do th' same as me: ride away from Big Moose, an' ride sudden."

"Stand by each other!" sneered Tom, his eyes glinting. "Where's them that trusted you?"

"Why, they all rode south together," lied Shanghai, knowing that no man present knew of the death of Arizona Frank or the others. "They started fer Jackson's Hole, roundabout, to lay low till next spring. There was Bill Hoskins, Arizony Frank, Chick Cole, an' Hub Hendricks," he said, gravely calling the roll of the dead. "I told 'em ter head fer Brown's Hole, over on Green River, but they held out fer Jackson's. I'm on my way ter Brown's right now."

He was lying with the facility of long practice, and putting the ring of truth into every word. With this show of hostility on the part of Tom Short and the others he was not giving them any information about his plans that might make him trouble. "You an' Joe better pull stakes: there ain't no tellin' who'll come up this way, a lookin' fer all of us."

At the calm naming of the four fugitives supposed to be riding toward the safety of Jackson's Hole, Tom Short found the props knocked from under his budding pugnacity; but he tried again, on an accusation he knew something about.

"What happened to you an' Bill Hoskins when you was supposed to lay a trail for them bloodhounds into our ambush?" he demanded, his fingers curling around the handle of his gun.

Shanghai weighed the words and read the eyes of the man who spoke them, and he knew that he stood face to face with death at the hands of a man whose rage was fed with liquor. He controlled his expression and appeared to be surprised by his friend's ignorance.

"Why, don't you know what happened?" he asked incredulously. "Don't you know that them three Double-Y hounds got between us an' you boys, an' chased us fer three days before we could throw 'em off? There warn't a minute of all that time that me an' Bill wasn't wishin' we could lead 'em inter an ambush. They kept us hoppin' lively, only a couple of jumps ahead of 'em."

"I reckon yo're lyin', you—" he growled at Tom in distressing indecision; but he let loose of the gun. "If I knowed you was I'd blow you all over this here room; an' not bein' shore that you ain't lyin', I'm tellin' you to git out, hot foot, an' stay out! Savvy?"

"I never suspicioned you'd treat me this way," mourned Shanghai, seething with helpless rage and the desire for vengeance, but hiding his feelings under an unctuous exterior. He shook his head sorrowfully and slowly started toward the door.

"Well, I ain't holdin' no hard feelin's," he lied. "Good luck, boys," and the closing door put him into the night.

As the door shut behind him the old man swiftly changed. The feeling of danger which had almost suffocated him in the smoke-filled room still shivered along his spine. His reaction was not of relief, but of revenge, and he hurried to the store to obtain the needed supplies and get out of this unexpected danger zone.

In a few minutes he had made his purchases, tied them securely in a gunny sack, grabbed it by the middle and shook it until half of its contents lay in each end. Throwing the sack across the saddle, he made it fast to the pommel and rode off into the night, turning once in his seat to shake a vengeful fist at the pale yellow lights of the saloon.

Then he pulled up suddenly to listen. The sounds of a horse walking over rock came faintly down the trail, and the old man rode into a clump of bush to see who was coming. Dismounting, he quickly picketed the horse to a stump and then slipped back to the edge of the road.

The unknown horseman passed close by in the dark, his identity hidden from the peering eyes of the old watcher. Going on until within a few hundred yards of the peaceful town, and closely followed by Shanghai on foot, the stranger dismounted, fastened his horse and slipped forward on foot.

Passing between a lighted window and Shanghai, the stranger revealed himself to the old man as crouching and facing the buildings; and in a flash Shanghai knew him. It was Mesquite Jenkins, the most deadly of the persistent three.

For an instant the old man's rifle pressed against his shoulder, and then lowered. The target was too vague to offer a safe shot; and with this reluctant admission, the old man had an inspiration. In that saloon were enemies of them both; why not let both sides fight it out while he got away?

Mesquite moved steadily forward, in each hand a gun, careful not to step on twigs or chips, and keeping as close to the few intervening buildings as he could. Time was of no importance. He wanted only to give the inmates of that saloon no warning of his presence until he could open the door and get them all under his guns.

The sounds coming from the building reassured him, for above the ordinary noises of such convivial gatherings there boomed loud and boisterous laughter.

He came to the end of the last intervening house, and started to cross the open on a run, not knowing that a swiftly moving shape had passed around him in the dark and had gained the rear of the saloon. But he was soon to learn that something was wrong.

He had taken but a few steps across the open when there sounded the sudden noise of stampeding horses, several quick shots, the tinkle of a cracked window pane driven inward by a bullet, and an instant answering turmoil inside the building.

He did not know that Shanghai had done this and was escaping back the way he had come, to get to his horse and ride toward his hangout in the hills while the town surged with action; he did not know that, but he did know that the lights went out suddenly and that flashing rapiers of fire spurted from the saloon. The black night was full of screams and whines around him, and once his sombrero tugged sharply at his head.

To turn back was as dangerous as to go forward, and more distasteful; he dashed at an angle for a flanking building, gained the shelter of its wall and threw himself down against it. Getting his breath and trying to solve this puzzle, he lay there for a moment; and then wondered at the rush of pounding feet and the shouts of rage in the rear of the abandoned saloon, where its panicky inmates, fearful of an attack in force from the Double-Y outfit, streamed out to find their horses and to escape in the dark.

The horses were gone, only cleanly cut halter ropes and straps telling that they had been there. The sounds of running died swiftly as the horseless fugitives scurried into the dark, and silence hung over the town. Mesquite waited, hoping that time would reassure the habitués of the saloon and tempt them back to light the lamps and laugh at their panic.

An hour passed, and then footsteps sounded faintly, coming up the street. They were cautious steps, and slow. Close to him in the dark there passed a moving blot, hardly discernible. A door opened slowly and after a few minutes there came the faint glow of a match.

"Shanghai, shore as hell!" growled the bartender, placing the lamp chimney over the flame.

He, being guiltless of rustling cattle, could show himself like an honest man. He lit the other two lamps and then looked around the room, chuckling at the overturned chairs and tables, where his genial companions had leaped into galvanic action. Grinning ironically, he glanced from one open door to the other, and stepped toward the rear entrance.

"Hey!" he shouted into the night, all his lung power in the word. "Hey! Come out! Come out, you damn fools! It was only Shanghai, gettin' square; an' I'm admittin' he done it."

Here and there sounded slight rustlings, gentle creakings, and after a moment was heard a snicker of amusement or a snort of rage. Stragglers appeared from numerous hiding places, and loafed carelessly back toward the cheer of the lighted saloon.

By ones and twos they entered its open doors, humorously jeering each other, and wholeheartedly cursing the old reprobate who had caused it all and driven off their horses. Tom Short loomed up in the faint path of light streaming from the rear door and swaggered through the opening, cursing steadily, his words a stream of threats.

Half an hour passed in careless hilarity and the bar did a rushing business before

Foxy Joe was missed, then a shout went up that shook the roof.

"Joe's still scared!" shouted a drunken cow-skinner. He reeled to the door and sent his voice booming through the night, profanely inviting Foxy Joe to come and join them.

Tom Short stepped to his side and added his jeers to those of the cow-skinner, then turned with half drunken assurance and explained Joe's absence.

"He's layin' low in Smithers's shack," he laughed. "What you say me an' you go an' dig him out, an' make him buy a round of drinks to square hisself?"

"I'm with ye, Tom," bellowed the cow-skinner, who was always in hearty favor of some one else buying the booze. He resoundingly slapped his companion on the shoulder. "Lead th' way, an' we'll go git him."

Hilarious indorsement from the others sent them off in high glee, straight for Smithers's shack, and after them, silent as a stalking wolf, crept Mesquite Jenkins from his place at the base of the wall, vainly trying to determine which of the pair was the man he wanted.

They separated when near the shack named, and took it by assault from front and rear. A hasty search showed them that it was empty of all human beings except themselves, and they argued this fact with drunken solemnity.

"Hell!" snorted Tom Short. "Joe's near as scary as ol' Shanghai, damn his eyes! He's streakin' it inter th' hills afoot an' won't come back till hunger makes him. I should 'a' knowed that, for I've been his partner for more'n a dozen years. Let's go back; I want another drink."

The cow-skinner was in hectic need of the same thing, and they locked arms and went through the low doorway, singing inharmoniously.

As they stepped from the building something leaped from behind the nearest corner. There was a flurry of action, the swift thudding of heavy blows, and the two thirsty pilgrims lay side by side on the ground, blissfully unconscious of current events.

A match flared, shielded by closely cupped hands, and cast a brief glow on each stupid face, and then winked out. There came sounds of dragging, which grew fainter beyond the end wall of the shack. Then silence.

After a few minutes the cow-skinner stirred, rolled over and groped about. His senses slowly returning to their previous state of partial befuddlement, he arose on his knees, then to his feet, and reeled and stumbled back to the saloon, both hands holding his aching jaw; and as the effects of the blow wore off he began to curse the recreant treachery of Tom Short, who had knocked him down and fled precipitately.

Tom Short was not fleeing; he was being carried, as yet unconscious of the growing lump on his head where the butt of a heavy Colt had caressed him. When he came to his senses he found himself lying on the ground, tied hand and foot; and as he stirred and struggled a crisp, low voice told him things.

"Get yoreself together," came the order out of the darkness. "If you don't get so you can ride double, an' right soon, I'll leave you lyin' up here for th' carrion crows to feast on."

Bits of information from the unseen captor, added to his own returning knowledge, gradually made things clear to the captive, and he chose the lesser of two evils. When dawn sifted down over the land it found two men riding on one horse and heading straight for the ranch houses of the Double-Y, not many miles distant. When the low buildings came in sight over a ridge, the smiling wearer of a deputy sheriff's badge stated an obvious fact.

"Hoppy an' Buck shore will be glad to see you, you coyote."

The fact was so obvious that the sullen and aching captive squirmed in his bonds, but made no reply.

THE END OF No. 10

NEXT WEEK: "THE CONVALESCENT."

Flight to the Hills

By CHARLES NEVILLE BUCK

Author of " The Battle Cry," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PREVIOUS PARTS

WADE MURRELL, a Kentucky mountain clan leader in his later twenties, comes into Asheville, North Carolina, to collect thirty thousand dollars for a timber holding. Driving homeward, he finds a girl semiconscious in the road. She is Cynthia Meade, a New York actress with a small part in a motion picture being filmed in the Asheville setting. The girl, only witness to the slaying from ambush of Jock Harrison, a New York man about town, fears a murder charge; Harrison had been pursuing her. Cynthia appeals to the mountaineer to aid her flight, and he agrees after she declares she is a good woman. Lesher Skidmore, leader of a rival clan, spreads a poison-tongue report about Cynthia, who has assumed the name of Stokes. Murrell's mother, known as Aunt Lake Erie, welcomes the girl. Loutish, overgrown schoolboys stone Cynthia for a lowland wanton, and Murrell severely beats the ringleader and the schoolmaster. His leadership is jeopardized because of championing the girl, and a shot is fired at him in the night. Cynthia goes to a dance of the clan, and Wade is tortured with longing for her.

CHAPTER XVI.

PRONOUNCING THE DECREES.

TEN minutes later Wade walked quietly back to the house with a face that was expressionless. At the door he halted. There, in the main room, they were forming for a new square dance, and the fiddles were tuning for " Weevily Wheat."

But what caught his eye was that the principal fiddler, Murrell Coates's old father, who was close to ninety, was no longer sitting with the musicians on their improvised " platform." He stood out there ready to lead the dance, and his hand held that of Cynthy Stokes.

The girl, keyed to the spirit of one on whom the spot-light falls, was poised light as a bird at his side, smiling up into his snowily bearded face. Murrell thought it was as though the vivid, colorful spirit of spring in blossom time had joined hands with the white crowned snow king of winter.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for June 13.

On the threshold of the door Wade halted and braced himself. An emotion which he must never express had swelled into flood and was engulfing him.

This girl stood slim and graceful—but also she stood with the charm of young diffidence—a diffidence at which a little while ago she would have laughed—and before the fiddles swung into their measure the old man at her side raised his unengaged hand.

"Listen, folks," he shouted. "I've got a word ter say."

The fiddlers stayed their bows and the crowd fell silent. The elder went on in a voice that carried steady, despite an occasional quaver.

"I aims ter lead one dance more afore I lays my old bones down an' dies," declared the man whose memory ran back to days when the nation was young. "An' ther gal thet leads hit with me, she's as young an' as comely as I'm old an' threadbare."

The quiet held. Into the minds of these people crept the realization that this was something more than casual pleasantry; that it was something worth hearing.

"Look at this gal, folks," shouted the speaker, and the girl, flushing pink with embarrassment, stood none the less straight and level-eyed, giving them back glance for glance. "Ye've done heered her slurred. Now give her a sight an' a see fer yore own selves. My old eyes hev done seed a master heap of life an' death. Aye, an' goodness an' sin. They sees naught in her ter cavil at—an' much ter pleasure in."

He paused, then his voice came again like that of an old bugle worn thin with service, but still strong in its martial blast. "Thar's naught ther Lord God's done created so comely ter look upon as a decent gal at ther rise of her bloom, save only ther blossoms thet colors up with ther peep of spring, or ther fust light thet comes a smilin' in ther sky at ther crack of day."

Once more he paused, then again his voice arose, and Wade Murrell realized that here some one was giving fluent expression to things that were inarticulate in his own heart.

"Because Wade Murrell an' Aunt Erie tuck this gal in, some sought ter cast aside all Wade Murrell ever done—an' what he's done hes been ter bring peace ter a land thet was rent an' bloodied. Hit ain't this gal thet stands out callin' fer trial afore mankind—hit's ther folks thet's done brought down shame an' disgrace on Leetle Flinty. Because of them mischief-makers, we stands disgusted afore all ther decent world. We've done wallered like hogs in a mud-mire—an' hit right sensibly behoves us ter wash ourselves clean."

The voice had taken on a throbbing earnestness. Now, it resumed a matter-of-fact level—and the sudden drop pointed the effect of climax.

"But this hain't no speechifyin' affair. Hit's a frolic," said the old man. "Strike up them fiddles.

"Step light, ladies, on ther ballroom flo',
Don't mind yore legs ef yore garters don't show!"

There was a burst of sound from fiddle and dulcimore strings, and between lanes of blue jeans, hodden gray and turkey red, came the old mountaineer and his youthful partner. Her eyes were glistening, but there were tears back of their brightness. She, who had danced in stage choruses, trod feather light on the puncheons. In her heart there was a wild commotion. In New York she had been a lost atom—here, people were her friends or her enemies—here she had an individual existence—here she had a little part in the world. She swung and curtsied—she smiled, and she heard hands clapping.

At the door stood Wade Murrell. Through him ran a swelling of pride.

"She kin dance, thet gal," he said to himself, but those words were only symbols for much more that was unspoken.

Jock Harrison was not dead. A long delay in discovering him after he had fallen had cost the loss of much blood, and the chance between life and death had fluctuated and wavered while he remained an inert and insensible factor in the fight that was being waged over him.

Other guests had known little of the excitement that seethed behind the discreet self-possession in the hotel office when the

thing became known there. A breathless negro bell boy—his black skin ashen with terror—had brought in the news that he had seen the door of number forty-one ajar, and going to close it had discovered a dead gentleman. That semblance to death had remained deceptive until hurriedly summoned physicians and police arrived on the scene.

Even on the operating table death seemed determined to make the appearance real. The surgeons and nurses could only stand and fight, and this they did. Causes and responsibilities were outside their sphere; speculation as to the identity or motive of the culprit was beyond their jurisdiction.

But the police faced a more complicated problem. Here was a crime permeated with mystery and difficulty, and for such puzzles they were expected to find reasonable answers. Here was a hotel deeply solicitous that the unfortunate affair should not be advertised with injurious publicity. Its management protested its anxiety to assist in every possible way, yet blankly admitted that of this man, beyond the name he had inscribed on the register, it knew nothing.

And such things as came to hand in the pockets and possessions of the victim shed little light on the question of who or what he had been. The police were at sea while valuable time slipped away. The few addresses and business memoranda which were brought to light gave little straw for their brick making, and until the man recovered consciousness—if he did—they were forced to mark time. It seemed that from his tongue only could come any beginnings of help.

There was no weapon at hand—no powder burns. The ready theory of attempted suicide had to be abandoned as quickly as it was formulated.

The first of all this that Harrison knew was when, exceedingly weak and dazed and more than a little nauseated, he opened his eyes and found himself looking up at the white ceiling of a hospital ward.

A nurse nodded to him and smiled.

"Don't try to talk just yet," she commanded. "You're doing fine."

Slowly the man's mind began to grope through the misty chaos of his awakening in a baffled effort to reconstruct the broken train of memory.

Cynthia Meade—cocktails—a quarrel—a few kisses—then a sudden sense of shock and an abyss.

He lay staring at the ceiling, and inchoate thoughts began to shape into a pattern of bewildered indignation for his plight. Behind a screen near by he heard low moanings and tortured gaspings that seemed to come out of purgatory, and farther down the aisle he saw a pale face propped disconsolately against a raised pillow.

At last a physician with a kindly face arrived at his bedside and looked down at Harrison.

"What happened to me, doctor?" demanded the man weakly, and the physician smiled.

"You had a close call," he gave brisk information. "Gunshot wound. The police are anxiously waiting to have you tell them how it came about—when you're able." He was letting his fingers rest lightly on the pulse of the bedridden man as he talked, then again he nodded. "I must let them get at you as soon as you can stand it," he added. "They are champing at the bit and you seem to be doing nicely. It was a narrow squeak, though."

"What do they say—the police?"

"They can't say much of anything—until you give them a start. It's all mystery so far—you were found in your room—shot. No one else was there. They're very anxious to talk to you and get started."

"No arrests? No one suspected?"

"Not yet. That all waits on you—and what information you can give."

The doctor remained only a few minutes, and went away leaving the wounded man to his thoughts—and those thoughts were not pleasant. So the police knew nothing yet—but it was strange that he had been found alone in his room. He had not been alone there when he fell. Cynthia Meade had been with him—yes, that was decidedly strange.

Apparently, there had been no Cynthia Meade here to inquire about him at the hospital. True, she had been in a passion at the moment, but her passionate outbreaks were usually as brief as they were

violent—and such a disaster should submerge the rancors of a petty quarrel. Yet now, she was not there at his bedside—presumably, she had not been there at all. Presumably, for the matter of that, the doctors and police knew nothing of Cynthia Meade. She had faded from the picture.

"Good God!" exclaimed the man, mentally, as cold beads of sweat came out on his forehead. "Good God—did the little rotter leave me lying there—shot and bleeding to death? Did she just leave me cold and beat it? A contemptible little coward!"

There was shock in that thought; a shock that called for a readjustment of all his notions, but, severe as it was, it led to another that was more stunning.

If she was capable of deserting a man like that—of leaving him unaided to drip away his life in a gunshot hemorrhage—then perhaps, she was capable of more. Perhaps it had been Cynthia herself who had fired the shot? Perhaps a temper that had only reached before to breaking china and violent tirades had this time run its full course to attempted murder?

"If that is true," he told himself, "there isn't any place in this world that can hide her from me—and when I find her, damn her yellow little soul—she'll pay. She didn't even have the backbone I gave her credit for."

Yet he had been facing Cynthia only a moment before the shot was fired. Her hands had been empty, and her bag had been lying out of reach when he turned his back. To have drawn and fired a weapon from it in that time seemed an impossibility. To have drawn it from some concealment about her clothes and fired with such swiftness would have been a feat of most accomplished legerdemain. Besides, he hadn't credited her with that sort of nerve. She was too vacillating—too wanting in the granite of daring.

Yet how else could the thing have come about? Unreasonable as her guilt appeared, no alternative presented itself which did not seem even more unreasonable.

When the police arrived, the man's mind was made up. There was nothing he could tell them except a suspicion that, just now, he had no intention of sharing with them. He knew a way that was worth two of theirs if it came to a matter of reprisal and punishment. He received his questioners courteously, under the watchful eye of the doctor, and after the talk had run hither and thither a few minutes, arriving nowhere, the chief interrogator's face darkened with chagrin and disappointment."

"Do you mean to have us believe, Mr. Harrison," he demanded, the courtesy with which he had commenced the interview lapsing into an almost threatening irritation, "that you don't know anything more about who shot you than you've told us?"

Harrison nodded and smiled ironically.

"I'm afraid that's the sum of the situation. Permit me to remind you that I'm not your accused prisoner," he suggested. "I'm the unfortunate victim—I look to you to solve the mystery of who shot me down—and punish the offender. I'm a stranger who had been in your town less than twenty-four hours—I was in my room in the hotel—with the window open."

"Then you refuse to help us?"

"By no means. I am merely unable to supply information that I don't possess."

The plain-clothes man leaned forward and his lower jaw stiffened.

"Sometimes people have to be made to tell what they know," he suggested.

The doctor intervened. "That's enough for the present," he announced with crisp authority. "The patient isn't up to long conversations yet. He'll be here in the hospital for a while. Further questioning must wait."

That same afternoon Jacob Wolf, the motion picture producer, came bustling excitedly into the hospital. Under his quick and aggressive assumption of command Harrison was moved to the greater comfort of a private room, and there, with the door closed, the visitor stood above the bed, his heavy face lined with perplexity.

"Who done it?" he demanded. "I went out on location ahead of the company and I didn't hear about this business until this morning. What was all the shooting about, anyhow?"

"That's what everybody wants me to tell—as if I'd arranged the whole matter myself," said Jock Harrison shortly. "What

I want is for somebody to tell me something. By the way, is Cynthia Meade out on location with your people to-day?"

Wolf's jaw dropped, and a light of understanding broke in his shrewd eye.

"No, by God, she didn't show up. She ran out on us. So that's how the land lays, is it? Did she get wise that I wanted to cast her for a fatter part—and you wouldn't let me? She was a good type for an ingénue vamp."

Harrison smiled. "I've got to tell the police whom I know in this town," he said slowly. "I've got to give them your name and they'll find out for themselves that my money is back of your business. They'll question you in all likelihood. Don't mention the name of Cynthia Meade to them—or to any one else. No one but you knows about her—also, if the point of a cocktail shaker and some glasses should arise, I want you to remember that you had a drink with me in my room—earlier in the afternoon."

"I get you on both points. I suppose you used the shaker and glasses again later—but that's none of my business." The visitor paused and sagely shook his head. "Do you figure that the baby-doll tried to croak you? You aren't going to let her get away with a dirty deal like that, are you?"

Once more Harrison smiled, but not amiably.

"I know she was in the room with me when the shot was fired. I know she left me lying there without calling help—and that doesn't look nice. She made a quick get-away and hasn't shown up since—that doesn't look nice either."

"I'll say it don't. It looks to me like you know almost enough. If it was me, I'd stick her in the pen."

"You'd have to find her first," remarked Harrison dryly. "And besides—"

"Besides what?" You aren't going to pull any sentimental hokum about forgiving her, are you? You gotta punish people like that to protect society in general."

"I'm not going to pull any sentimental hokum, Jake. Ease your mind on that score, and when I find her she'll either go to the penitentiary as you so helpfully suggest—or she'll stay out because she will be more useful to me out than in. Her future will rest entirely in my hands, once I find out where she's hiding, and I'm not disposed to settle without a good bargain."

The man in the bed spoke quietly, but his eyes held a hardness that his companion understood. If Jock Harrison dedicated himself to reprisal he would follow the trail with the relentless and patient determination of a bloodhound, and when eventually he ran his quarry down there would be no weakening or vacillation. Weakness was a quality Jacob Wolf had never encountered in this acquaintance, who had been a lawyer, a broker, a man of substantial means experimenting with life, and who incidentally had been his silent partner in a profitable moving picture enterprise.

"Don't experience ever teach you nothing, Harrison?" he now demanded hotly. "Put this girl in jail or leave her alone, one or the other. You've had trouble enough with her up to date. As for me, I'd be afraid to have her around me. She'll get away with it next time she tries to croak you."

Harrison lay back on his pillow and gazed thoughtfully at the ceiling.

"I've a mighty strong fancy for the girl," he said slowly. "I don't know why, but I have. There's a sort of gypsy lure about her that gets at my imagination. It's insidious."

He paused, then laughed quietly.

"There's no reason why I shouldn't talk candidly with you, Wolf. You've a strong stomach for facts—and you already know so much that you might as well know the rest."

"That's all right. Talk it out—and then maybe you'll be ready to act like a sensible man again."

"Thank you. That's excellent advice. Well, to start with, I'm not a casual pursuer of women—but I am something of an experimenter with life. Open mindedness carries its penalty, of course. In my freedom from moral squeamishness, I may lay myself liable to the charge of dissoluteness—in the judgment of those whose thinking is straitlaced."

"I'm not finding fault with you because you're broad-minded, Jock—"

"No, I acquit you of that charge, Jake. I'm merely trying to make my attitude plain. When I first met this girl, I was willing to help her along toward a theatrical career. I soon saw that she was morally inert—that she would use me to the limit and then quit me cold—I saw that if I put her on the way to success too soon she couldn't avail herself of it except in butterfly fashion. Just as she was too frail to make her own way against handicaps, so she would be too frail to stand up under the strain of a great success. You say I vetoed good parts for her and saw to her getting small ones. That's true. She wasn't ready for the intoxications of sudden fame. They would have turned her head and ruined her."

"She'd probably have made a popular success," interrupted Wolf, his mind's eye on the main chance and admirably impersonal.

"Well, I'm inclined to believe that, too, but a circumstance that the moralists overlook occurred to me. The thing that would be a step down toward the abyss for some women might be a step up for others. This girl was ripe for disaster. She was rudderless, and on my own discreet terms, I was willing to take her in tow. I saw that she would wreck any man who took her seriously. I didn't."

"Looks like you gotta take her serious."

"Quite the contrary. Less so than ever before. I'm convinced now that I didn't misjudge her—that I wasn't doing an injustice to a well meaning child. A woman who would leave a man bleeding to death and sound no alarm doesn't recommend herself to chivalric protection. As I said, I wanted her—on my own terms—and she was free to take me or leave me. Singularly enough, perhaps, I still want her. Now, also, she may take me or leave me—but leaving me now entails the single alternative of some years in state's prison. I think her mind will be receptive in future."

Once more Harrison paused. He had forced himself to talk with a deliberation that should not too greatly tax his strength, but even so, it had been a long speech for a weakened gunshot victim, and he paused before he went ironically on.

"When I find the girl now, I think she will carefully weigh the odds between a comfortable life under my benevolent direction—good clothes—good food—the chance to get on—and the limited existence of an institution that clothes its inmates with severe simplicity, and pays slender attention to their vanities. I shall make only one stipulation. She must realize she's my property."

"As you said," Wolf reminded him, "you gotta find her first."

"Just so. I don't think she took to the woods. I hardly seem to visualize her daring the wilderness. I want you to start the wheels turning in New York. Get in touch with some reliable investigation bureau—and here in Asheville I want to talk to a discreet lawyer. Can you suggest one?"

"Sure, I can suggest one," agreed the picture man. "In this business I'm in, I can't digest a square meal without a lawyer. When I strike a new town I hunt up a lawyer even before I begin looking for a bootlegger."

"And you have one here?"

"I've got a peach. He's a good guy and a sharp lad. His name is Chilton. Do you want me to give him a ring and have him come around to see you?"

Harrison nodded.

"I find," he said, "that when a man is shot and almost killed it becomes a highly personal matter. I find that a man prefers handling it for himself rather than through the clumsy channels of the law—but I also find that a lawyer may be useful in suggesting safe methods. Certainly a lawyer who is, as you describe this Mr. Chilton, 'a good guy and a sharp lad,' ought to fill the bill. Send him in to see me, that's a good fellow."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE TEST.

THE laurel bloom and rhododendron flower had gone by, and the summer was forfeiting its early freshness for the robuster and rustier fullness of its maturity. Creeks that had boomed along, fed by the sluicing downpours of June, were

dwindling in July to trickling threads, and dust lay heavy along roadside hedges. The waterfall at the back of Wade's house sang a diminished song.

Young Daws Small, so folks norated, had tired of the dull life of the hills and had gone to Oklahoma to work with an oil drilling concern. Jake Carmichael, too, had moved away. Folks 'lowed his moving was a simple matter. " He didn't hev no master matters ter sottle up afore he went," they said. " All he had need ter do was ter put out ther fire an' call ther dawg."

Another teacher would preside at the rickety blackboard when that school opened again, and meantime, it was to be used for a gathering that might mean much to the community.

A council was to be held there, attended with a " treat " of food and drink and of general " gamboling," to discuss the possibility of establishing a school at the mouth of Big Flinty like the one which was already prospering at Doe Run.

That was the avowed purpose of the meeting and the true one—but, also, it had incidental features and unannounced implications. In a land that lies desperately isolated, every occasion that brings men and women together takes on an augmented importance of broken routine.

Lasher Skidmore would be there, and with him would be men who were his lieutenants in holding the reins of control over the clan with which the Murrells had been at war. Under one roof and under the shade trees about it, men would " meet and make their manners," beneath whose outward civility lurked smoldering fires of unforgotten hate. They would smoke and drink together casually enough, but not for a moment would they forget hateful, festering things out of the past.

Here in this neighborhood conference, ostensibly non-partisan and pacific, sundry strengths and weaknesses would measure themselves like sword blades drawn in pretended sport, yet kept keen for eventual use of a grimmer sort. Here, after a period of indecisive silence, it must show, once and for all, whether Wade Murrell could still hold his grip on Murrell command, or whether he had forfeited his power. Here people would look to see whether Wade was a Samson with girt loins—or a Samson shorn.

At that gathering Cynthy Stokes was to sing. The idea of having her do that had been Wade's, and like all his strategy of leadership, it savored of audacity. If under the cloak of quiet, which had settled over Murrell dwelling houses along these creeks and coves, there rankled such a deep-seated spirit of revolt against him as should weaken or destroy his leadership, he wanted to know it.

If his leadership fell, it would be because of resentment for his determination to stand stanchly at this girl's back in defiance of wagging tongues. To have Cynthia make something of a public appearance would bring the issue into the open—but unless the young woman herself could face the situation with an unfaltering temerity, and at the same time with the serene-eyed and disarming simplicity of girlhood, the failure would be complete—the result of the experiment, a catastrophe.

Wade's belief in his protégé was strong. He was accustomed to weigh and appraise this commodity of human courage, and he was ready to bank on hers. He was banking on it now, at the turning point of his life, and the quiet resolution in her eyes when he had asked her whether she could go through with the enterprise had confirmed him in his confidence of faith.

He saw that she was frightened, but he saw, too, that her fright would not conquer her. When the moment of issue came, she would face the crowd with complete steadiness in that same schoolhouse to which he had once carried her battered and fainting.

As he had seen her high-keyed in anger and danger, so he had seen her more lately in winning and demure simplicity. Upon this simplicity he was relying now to dissipate prejudice as sunlight burns away fog. He meant to offer her in evidence as Exhibit A and rest his case. He was trusting that her clear young voice would speak to their hearts as speeches of defense had no power to speak—and the enmity to her would die. With it would go into limbo the revolt against himself.

That was what would happen if things went well. If they went wrong it would be otherwise. If they went wrong, anything might happen. He might find himself a repudiated and discredited man. Lesher Skidmore might go away knowing that the solidarity of the Murrells was shattered and that Wade could be murdered without fear of clan reprisal.

Even the meeting itself might end in a chaos of loosened hates—and Wade told the girl that in stark candor. He explained the whole situation and asked bluntly: "Will ye undertake hit? Ef so be we succeed hit 'll denote peace an' safety—an' them thet benefits they'll be beholden ter *you*."

"I don't see how I could refuse," Cynthy Stokes replied quietly. "You say it's a chance for peace—and all the trouble started with me. Yes, it's up to me to try. I'll sing the best I can, but I'm no grand opera star."

Cynthia had never sickened with stage fright until now. Her arrant egotism and pert boldness had always safeguarded her before. Now, these armaments were in the scrap heap and she felt a desperate sinking at her heart. She had a horrible premonition that when she stood on that platform and tried to sing, a formless, bleating gasp and nothing more would come from her throat.

"I've got to come through," she kept telling herself, unthinking that, in the very reiteration with which she sought to steel her courage, she was falling back on the vernacular of the city. "I've got to come through. There can't be any fall down. I've simply *got* to come through!"

As she walked to the building, at last, with the eyes of many loiterers fixed disconcertingly on her, she edged closer to the stalking majesty of Aunt Erie as if she had been a timid child. Close behind her came Wade Murrell, and it was at the door of the building that they encountered Lesher Skidmore standing with two of his stalwarts in close attendance.

Skidmore was shaven now, and more carefully dressed. He was, in a rude and hardy fashion, a handsome figure of a man, and his face wore that bland smile which would have beguiled any stranger into a specious trust.

This, reflected Cynthia, was the man who had poisoned the wells of public opinion against her so insidiously and thoroughly that, because of it, the Murrell clan stood threatened with disruption. Just as it had happened before at the empty cabin in the notch, her impulse was to fly into a senseless rage and denounce him for a liar, a bully and a hypocrite. But now, less than ever could she do that. Now, she had come to turn aside public wrath by exhibiting an angel face and a gentle bearing. She must not get out of character.

But the big, lying bum! It was hard not to tear into him and bawl him out!

"I'm right glad ter see ye, ma'am," Lesher was declaring with the effrontery of a loud heartiness, and the girl's quick intuition read the purpose of his overstressed cordiality. Nothing could be more telling in setting the necks of insurgent Murrells to obduracy than to see the object of their wrath complimented by the head of the Skidmores.

"I'm right glad ter see ye," he repeated, smilingly, "because I was one of ther fust persons ter meet ye an' welcome ye hyar in these mountings. Hit pleasures me master ter realize thet no Skidmore hain't nuver been wantin' in charity ter ye."

At first it was that word charity which made the girl see red. She knew by now, but she had momentarily forgotten, that in the hills the word means courtesy and not alms-giving. But to see this man, who was responsible for every brutal lie that had been spoken, insolently proclaiming his friendship—that mendacity almost swept her off her feet.

She looked at Wade Murrell and bit her tongue.

To Murrell, as clearly as to herself, or more clearly, this lie was transparent—its object obvious—its effect dangerous.

Over Wade's face had swept a sudden flush, followed by a quick pallor of fury, then both alike had passed. He stood silent in the attitude of one who had no part in the conversation.

Cynthia had promised to take her cues from him.

" Thank you, Mr. Skidmore," she said with demurely drooping lashes, and went into the building. There already the crude benches were almost filled, and on the rough floor there was a restless scraping of feet.

As she walked down the aisle, the girl felt almost as if she were being stoned a second time, though now the missiles came from hostile eyes instead of violent hands. The situation seemed suddenly hopeless.

Under poke bonnets looked out the eyes of many women, and in silence they semed to say: " Mebby ye kin beguile ther men folks, ye shameless hussy—but ye kain't fool us."

There was a chair for her by the teacher's desk, and from another, Murrell Coates, who had called this meeting together, arose slowly to his feet. Outside, the school bell was ringing to summon in the idlers.

" Men an' women," she heard the speaker saying, as she stepped up to the platform with knees that threatened to collapse, " we've done come hyar ter-day ter seek ter git us a school whar our young uns 'll hev a chanst ter grow straight an' lay holt on knowledge—"

He paused, and his eyes took on an almost desperate earnestness.

" But we kain't hope ter compass that," he added, " without we enjoys sure peace an' without we stands solid behind them men thet kin be trusted ter guide us—we comes hyar es Murrells an' Skidmores alike—an' we comes with pledges of help from Wade Murrell an' Lesher Skidmore alike." Once more there was a pause and a tense silence. In naming those two as acknowledged leaders, he had put the whole parlous question in issue, and he knew it.

" Thar's done been some wild, loose talk," he went doggedly forward, " ter ther amount thet us Murrells wasn't standin' solid tergither, an' thet pledges giv' by Wade mout not surely, undoubtedly bind us all. Ther Skidmores hes need ter know beyond peradventure they kin deal with us all when one man speaks fer us—an' we've all got ter pull tergither ter hev sure peace an' git ther new school."

Again the freighted pause and the heavy silence, then the voice from the platform again:

" Fer God's sake, men, don't let no sorry folly bedivil ye! Afore we starts in ter talk, we're goin' ter listen at some song ballets sung by Cynthy Stokes—an' whilst she sings we wants a pledge giv' us by every man thet craves betterment. We knows whar ther Skidmores stand. They're all behind Lesher.

" We wants every Murrell, thet's likewise stanch behind Wade, ter rise up from wharever he sets whilst ther gal's singin' an' ter walk over thar ter whar Wade stands —an' then go back ter his seat ergin. We wants ter give ther outright lie ter these gossip rumors thet we don't hang clost tergither. Thar hain't no rush—an' all men kin go quietlike so thet we kin still listen at ther song ballets—but don't nowise fail ter go—an' when thet's all over, we kin set down like good neighbors tergither an' talk erbout ther school."

At the end there was deadly silence, tense, ominous, but as Coates turned toward Cynthia, the quiet broke into a restive grating of feet and an uneasy clearing of throats, as though a part of that audience were expressing its repudiation and enmity. It was a formless sound, and yet to the girl's ears, it was much like the shout of the little mob that had stoned her: " Rock ther strumpet!" Then she saw Murrell Coates nodding toward her and heard him say in a low voice: " Rise up, gal—an' sing."

She arose and looked out over the well-filled schoolroom. Its door was a mass of clustering onlookers, and even its windows framed the faces of others perched outside. But standing with crossed arms near the platform, she saw Wade Murrell, his shoulder almost brushing the shoulder of Lesher Skidmore. Wade stood stolid and expressionless. She knew that before this meeting ended he might be marked down for death, might be shorn of command; yet now, he seemed an ambitionless Bonaparte on the verge of decisive battle, an indifferent general at the first bugle call of the advance.

Then she saw that the scar on his face was dead white, and realized how little that seeming of indifference was worth. That white gash over the temple testified in

silence to the alert tenseness and the high-keyed agitation back of the assumed unconcern—and every time he breathed, in that close crowding, his arm brushed the arm of the man who would some day kill him—or whom he must some day kill.

Cynthia turned her gaze away and let it settle on a woman in one of the front benches. This woman was the mother of the exiled schoolteacher, Jake Carmichael, and her eyes were like the eyes of a cat watching a mouse hole. Her husband sat sullenly beside her. She was an unclean slattern of a woman, hardened by drudgery and ignorance; a spirit of unforgiveness and taut intolerance. Those eyes were raking the girl with silent denunciation, and Cynthia picked her out as a human barometer.

"I've got to make her smile—or cry," she told herself with a passionate sense of need. If I can get her going, I've got the audience with me. She'll be the last to come across."

Cynthia Stokes stood, pliant and slight, on the platform. If her spirit was in a turmoil that seemed to be killing her, no one out there saw it. A thing had happened which her training had made possible. She was on a stage, and all that did not belong to the part had been left behind in the wings.

Here, she was standing erect and convincingly simple. In her gray-green eyes was the soft light of an innocent serenity. Already, those less obdurately dedicated to their conviction of her wrongfulness were won. It was as hard to look at her and think of evil as to look at a young apple tree in full blossom-foam and think of poison.

Then—unaccompanied—with the clear simplicity of a voice that had natural color and expression, she gave them their own familiar "song-ballets."

But they had always heard those "song-ballets" before whined to high falsettos, wailed to a weird melancholy. Now, they were hearing them differently sung, clear and pure as the lilt of a bird, and faces began turning to other faces. Brows began to lift. Cynthia Stokes was selling herself to Little Flinty and Big Flinty.

Out in front a silent procession was in motion. With the noiselessness of natural woodsmen men were rising, making their way over toward the spot where Wade stood, nodding silently in salute to his leadership and returning to their seats. But so far, these were the men whose loyalty needed no such attesting.

The insurgents and the doubtful malcontents had not yet risen or moved in any response to the appeal. One could only guess whether they would. Some, at least, would not rise unless they saw old man Carmichael do so, and old man Carmichael, so far, seemed rooted to his bench in a spirit of surly aloofness.

Cynthia's own eyes dwelt on the face of Carmichel's wife—and that face had not yet thawed from inflexible condemnation. In it winter held and unforgiveness survived. She had forgotten now that Jake had left his father's house estranged and had lived by himself before his exile.

"I've got to get her," the girl kept telling herself. "I've got to get her or the act flops. Wade said that we had to win them over, or the jig was up."

She swung into the old simple numbers that she had known from childhood, "Annie Laurie," "Mother Machree," "My Old Kentucky Home." She threw herself into her songs with a passionate feeling, and all the while her eyes smiled. The procession had slowed down. Stubborn objectors held their seats and she saw, or imagined, a quiet triumph on the face of Lesher Skidmore.

"I've got to get them," she told herself desperately. "I've got to do it!"

She went on singing—and now there was no scraping of feet. At least she had them on the edges of their seats. But she couldn't go on forever. They would call time.

She was fighting now, and fighting hard; fighting for peace, and she was an actress. They looked at her and they saw the slim figure of youth, fresh innocence, the starry eyes of ingenuous maidenhood. They heard her, too, and her voice had some quality that went to the heart.

At last the hard features of the woman she was watching relaxed to softness, as tight nerves relax under an anæsthetic. Cynthia saw her dab at moistening eyes with a calloused hand.

Jake Carmichael's mother touched her husband's elbow. She whispered something. The man arose awkwardly and shambled over toward Wade, and as if a deadlock had been broken, others followed him.

If the inarticulate reaction of that group feeling had found utterance it would have said: " We're disgustin' Wade on account of ther gal—an' ther gal's all right. We're all Murrells—an' ter hell with bickerin's."

Cynthia bowed to her audience and turned again to her chair. Her own heart was leaping. She knew that the victory was won—that the guns would not pop.

" It was grand bunk," she told herself, " but it went big!"

Suddenly she knew that she must get away and cry. She went down into the aisle and heard hands clapping.

" I registered one hundred per cent purity and innocence," she said mockingly to herself, but the cynicism of the thought was belied by unshed tears that choked her.

That afternoon, when the crowd had gone its way, a strong impulse lured her back to the schoolhouse.

She knew that Wade Murrell had held his clan together; that for the present the danger had passed. She knew that Skidmore, despite his smiles, had gone away chewing sorely on defeat.

She had done that much, at least. She had done it by playing the ingénue, and she wanted to be alone again in that shambling little " blab-school " to think things out. That building had been the scene of her stoning as a crooked woman. Now it had been the scene of the biggest victory she had ever won, and, after all, here in the wilderness of the Cumberlands, she had won it by her talent in impressing an audience. She could go there now with something like triumph in her heart.

At the door of the place she met a young man who had been one of her auditors today.

She had noticed him because his dress and bearing had been a shade less crude than that of most of his fellows. He was something of a dandy in his store clothes, and he was handsome in a cheap, daredevil fashion —with a proclamation of sublime self-conceit in his eyes.

Cynthia confronted him suddenly, because he came out of the schoolhouse door just as she set her foot on the narrow porch.

" Oh!" she exclaimed. " I thought everybody had gone."

" Everybody has, save me," he assured her easily. " I'm the new teacher, and I stayed behind ter kinderly straighten things up. I goes by the name of Cas Harley."

He paused a moment, then made generous acknowledgment.

" You done mighty well terday. I reckon these hill billies hain't never heard such song-singin' as that before—most of 'em."

" Thank you," she answered. " You have, though, haven't you?"

" Me?" he laughed quietly. " Well, I've been away to school an' I don't aim ter settle down an' grow inter ther ground here. I've tuck—I mean taken—my first class teacher's certificate, and of course I saw some life when they had me in the army. I reckon I'm tol'ably safe in sayin' that I'll be the next member from this district in the Legislature."

" Fine," commended the girl heartily. " That's the proper spirit. " You're a go-getter, aren't you?"

The young man looked at her in momentary doubt. Was she expressing a sincere appreciation of his worldly attributes—or was she quietly ridiculing him?

She caught his change of expression and understood it. She knew, too, that it would not take much to reassure a man so plainly inclined to expect admiration.

" I think it's fine and dandy for a man to have ambition anywhere," she went on in a tone of entire sincerity. " But particularly here where there aren't any too many business opportunities. I'll bet you'll improve this school, and I'll tell the world it will stand some improvement. I have reason to know."

The young man flushed with pleasure.

" I'm right glad to have a chanst to talk to you," he said, and his speech was a queer mongrelization of lowland English and highland dialect. " There hain't—I mean aren't—many people hereabouts with nairy thoughts that go more than a whoop and a holler away from the place where they were borned at."

The girl nodded helpfully. "You say you've got better than an even chance of going to the Legislature? That's great."

"Yes, ma'am, I've got a mighty gay chanst," he assured her. "I'll be the Honorable Caswell Harley afore I'm a year older—but I don't aim to stop there. I aims to make thet jest a kinderly steppin' stone." His words, as they quickened with interest, lapsed more and more into the vernacular.

"I'm studyin' ter be a lawyer, too, an' atter ther Legislater thar hain't no rightful reason why I shouldn't go on ter be a Congressman. Thar hain't no Skidmore thet could git enough votes an' I reckon I'm jest erbout ther one single Murrell thet Lesher would be willin' ter see go ter Washin'ton."

He was standing by the frame of the schoolhouse door and his face had lighted up with the animation of his aspiring. He was talking to a girl who listened attentively, and to his eyes, hungering for the wider aspects of life, she presented just the sort of allurement that seemed rich with worldly promise. She stood before him as a spirit of adventurous beckoning, of pulsating appeal.

It was as if he were talking, off-stage, to a celebrated beauty of the theater. Her slender body fell into postures of grace. Her delicate face, with its green eyes, and her bobbed hair flinging back a coppery glow to the slanting sunbeams, intoxicated his imagination.

The eyes of young Cas Harley glowed with an avid awakening.

Cynthia was wondering why Lesher Skidmore should look with favor on any Murrell, unless he were a Murrell of faint loyalty, but she asked artlessly, as her lids dropped under his steady scrutiny: "Do Lesher Skidmore and Wade Murrell agree on candidates for the Legislature—and Congress?"

The quick change of expression in the young man's face showed that she had touched on a tender spot in his thoughts.

"Wade, he hain't got no cause ter block my road," he told her. "I'm as good a Murrell es what he is. I reckon ef I'd been a few years older when his pap died, like es not, hit would of been me, an' not him, thet was picked out ter head ther Murrells. Thar's right smart people thet thinks he'll be done anyhow come snow flyin'."

"What do you mean—be done?" The girl wondered whether she had not let too challenging a sharpness snap into her tone, and hastily she added on a softer note: "Of course, I'm ignorant about things here."

But Harley, too, answered with a wary guardedness.

"No man don't suit everybody, I reckon. Like es not thet's all thar is ter hit—but some folks frets mighty tetchious erginst Wade. Me, I hain't one of 'em—I wants ter see him holt things tergither hyar an' leave me foot-loose ter go ter Frankfort an' Washin'ton."

Cynthia Meade was standing lance-straight by the wall of the schoolhouse. Her eyes had never been more guileless, or the youthfulness of her beauty more artless, but in her heart she was saying with the serpent-sharp wisdom of intuition: "This lad's trying to fox Wade Murrell—and yet it won't take a great deal of coaxing to make him tell all he knows to mother. Maybe I'll coax him, but I must go slow. Perhaps I can do a little sleuthing that won't come in amiss."

She raised her head slowly, and as her eyes met those of her chance companion, they dropped quickly as if in shy but not displeased recognition of the glowing admiration they encountered in his face.

"I'm glad you liked my singing," she said simply. "I must get back to the house now. Perhaps we'll meet again."

"Ef we don't," he answered too eagerly, "hit won't be no fault of mine. We've kinderly got a bond betwixt us, anyhow. I reckon thar's right apt ter be times when ye sort of hurts fer folks thet hain't p'int-blank ignoramuses, an' es fer me, I'd love ter hev speech with ye erbout ther world of down below."

She turned and walked away, but she felt a little sick.

"That's a sweet scented geranium," she told herself disdainfully. "He hates his own people—except for what he can get

out of them. He'd gyp his grandmother and he wants to flirt with me. I'd trust him just as far as I would a man-eating shark." After a little she stopped dead still. "I'll bet a year's salary," she exclaimed with sudden conviction, addressing herself to a squirrel that chattered from a fence rail, "this lad is Lesher Skidmore's pet spy among the Murrells."

CHAPTER XVIII.

FROM THE GRAVE.

INTO the hospital room of Jock Harrison one warm morning came Shelby Chilton, attorney at law. It was not his first visit there, and now an excellent understanding existed between the lawyer and his client. Harrison, with his pagan partiality for a stripped-to-the-waist candor, spoke his mind to this other man with the freedom of the confessional—except that there was not, as in the case of the confessional, any burdensome sense of guilt.

Now, Chilton was dressed for the golf course and he did not mean to tarry long, but his eyes glowed with something like excitement.

"I'm off to the links," he said when the nurse had gone out and closed the door. "I just popped in for a moment because I have some news for you."

"Fine!" exclaimed the man who would not yet be free to leave his bed for some time, but whose feet were safely set on the road to convalescence. "Let's have it."

"Officially," smiled Chilton, "I know nothing of why you want to find this young woman I've been trying to trace—except that there was an attachment. Still, she left you abruptly—and under ugly circumstances. Even if you knew where she was at this moment I would strongly advise you either to leave her there or to turn your information over to the police."

Harrison lighted a cigarette.

"It is precisely because I want to keep this affair out of court," he said, "that you were called in. But if you can tell me where this girl is I can do the rest for myself—and by God I will!"

"Still," persisted Chilton, "I admit to some curiosity. Is it revenge you're after, or are you still hankering for the girl herself?"

"It's both," came the reply sharply edged with decisiveness. "This girl has played fast and loose with me. She has done worse than that. I don't care to drop the matter where it stands. I don't like unfinished stories, and I don't mean to let her get away with it."

"And suppose you could come face to face with her? What then?"

"In that event I wouldn't need a lawyer. This young woman played hob with me. She has her choice between accepting my terms or debating the matter with the sovereign State of North Carolina. In short, I foreclose—the one way or the other. From now on I'm her accepted lover or her Nemesis."

"As a lawyer," observed Chilton soberly, "I should say that she would be apt to get thumbs down in the debate with the commonwealth provided you went after her. You could convict her almost beyond a doubt. No eye-witnesses except yourself—and all the circumstances corroborating your charge against her."

"Except on my terms I shall certainly go after her."

Chilton shook his head.

"It didn't take you long in the mountains to get infected with the feud spirit of personal reprisal, did it?"

"Perhaps not, but I believe you said you had something to tell me."

"Yes. It may mean a good deal or it may mean nothing. You can take it for what it's worth. The day on which you were shot I turned thirty thousand dollars in cash over to a mountaineer who lives on Little Flinty Creek in the Kentucky Ridges. It came from the sale of a timber tract in this county."

"So far, I don't get the connection."

"You will. This man was one Wade Murrell. He was starting home in a covered wagon as far as the Tennessee border. From there he was to continue mule-back. He was alone. He told me quite definitely that he expected to return home—as he had come away—alone."

"Yes—and didn't he?"

"Since he insisted in carrying thirty thousand dollars on his person, though I warned him against possible robbery, I was anxious to know whether or not he made the trip safely. To-day a man came to my office from a point he passed through. This man was also a mountaineer with a timber tract for sale."

"Yes, yes. Go on."

"Wade Murrell stopped at this man's house at Cowbell Mountain. He was no longer alone. A woman was with him—a young woman—who was obviously a stranger in the mountains. Does that mean anything to you?"

"Before God!" exclaimed Harrison, "I believe you've turned the trick. What did this woman look like? What was her name?"

"Her name was given as Stokes, but that might not mean much if she was running away. She was slight, had green-gray eyes and red bobbed hair. Quillon said, with some disgust, that her face was all painted up like a new red wagon."

"God!" exclaimed Harrison tensely. "She must have had a black conscience to have doubled back there into the hills. She thought any place west of the Hudson was unfit to live in."

"Do you want me to put out feelers over in the Kentucky Ridges?"

Harrison raised himself suddenly on his elbow.

"I do not," he announced with almost savage vehemence. "I don't want the covey flushed until the guns are up! What I want to do is to get myself out of this damned bed and fit to travel. I can use a phony name, too. I can have timber business over there—coal business—any old business. I don't want that little wench to have the slightest suspicion that I'm after her until my fingers are ready to close on her. I even hope that she doesn't know I'm alive. Maybe she doesn't, if she went there."

The speaker paused and his face hardened like that of an executioner.

"I imagine news filters slowly through the backwoods. It's quite possible that she tore out thinking I was a dead man, and that she still thinks so." Harrison's eyes were burning with a determined vengefulness as the idea developed itself in his imagination. "It might even be that when she sees me—if I dramatize my approach properly—I may seem to rise out of the grave to confront her!" He broke off with a grim catch of laughter. "Well," he added, "if I had come back from the grave I wouldn't bring a more inflexible determination with me."

"You don't seem to be taking into account another probability," Chilton reminded him. "She may have moved on. She isn't likely to have settled down there."

"If she went there at all," Harrison argued with conviction, "she went because she was scared almost to death. It was the last place she'd pick—and if she's as scared as that she'll stay scared awhile." He paused and added with an implacable hardness:

"Moreover, a strange woman can't move through such a country without leaving a trail. If she's moved on, I'll follow. A bloodhound doesn't ask to have its quarry brought to it. All it demands is a warm scent. When I find her—!" he broke off and left the sentence incompleted.

Not once or twice, but several times in the weeks that followed as Cynthy Stokes had wandered about the neighborhood close to the house, she had met young Cas Harley. Warily she had held him at arm's length in these tête-à-têtes. Yet, with a growing conviction that here was a traitor in the Murrell camp who was willing to make her his confidante, she had been cautious not to discourage him. She meant to learn just what he stood for along Little Flinty.

With demurely downcast eyes, under his eagerly flashing gaze, and with modest smiles at his ready gallantries, the girl from Broadway awaited, with a strange mingling of curiosity and dread, the moment which she knew must come; the moment when it would no longer be possible to hold him at arm's length.

On a hot morning, when the bees were droning in the clover and when a heat shimmer played over the brown-burned levels, the moment came. Cynthia was

sitting at the foot of a white-splotched sycamore by a creek pool where mountain trout hung vaguely suspended and shimmering in the shadows.

She was sitting dead still so as not to frighten those shy and slender ghost-shapes, when a new shadow fell on the pool, and she looked up, startled, to see Cas Harley standing near her.

" You've frightened the trout," she reproached him, and he answered with a laugh. " From ther fashion ye jumped, seems like ye mout be a trout yore own self."

" When I saw who it was," she told him coyly, " I recovered from my terror."

" Yes, ye hain't got no call ter be affrighted at me."

Although she laughed pleasantly enough, she arose and faced him standing. She felt more mobilized on her feet.

With the heavy slyness of the crude gallant, Harley stood smiling down into her face. Then he announced abruptly: " Ye don't skeercely have ther seemin' of sich a desp'rit woman thet folks hev got ter worrit theirselves erbout havin' ye dwell amongst 'em."

" Are folks still worried?" she inquired with a fine assumption of indifference. " I hoped that was all over."

" Hill billies," he answered, " air slow ter give over notions once they takes 'em up. But who keers erbout hill billies, anyhow?"

" I do," she told him. " I care a great deal about some of them. Wade Murrell and Aunt Erie, for instance, have been mighty good to me."

He nodded his head, but his eyes had again glinted with that hard brightness which the name of Wade always seemed to bring into them. He appeared pondering whether he dared be wholly confidential with this young woman, and the young woman, reading his thought, let her lids droop as she added: " And you're a hillsman yourself. You've been friendly to me, too."

The hard gleam altered instantly into a greedy blaze of desire.

" I feels right friendly ter ye," he declared, " an' I reckon I kin talk straight out ter ye. I reckon ye kin hold yore counsel."

" I've never had any trouble keeping my mouth shut," she assured him.

Again he nodded, and his eagerness of spirit carried him a step forward and nearer.

" Wade an' me air cousins by blood," he began, " an' thar hain't no better folks nowhar's than what ther Murrells be—but yit on every tree thar's some siv'ral dead branches—an' in ther best timber thar's apt ter be some dry rot."

" You mean Wade Murrell—" She was careful this time to put the question in a tone free of defensive indignation. In it sounded instead an interested curiosity.

" Oh, I hain't faultin' Wade so risin' much," he announced, shrugging his shoulders. " Save only that I've seed something beyond this little patch of woods an' rocks—an' I know that Wade bears a repute that's bigger than the man hisself."

" I see," answered Cynthia thoughtfully. She knew now that the moment of this man's unbosoming was at hand and that she must encourage it. " You mean that Wade Murrell hasn't had the chance to broaden out by any wide experience?"

Cas Harley jerked his head eagerly.

" You're real nimble witted," he approved. " Well, just give hit a thought fer yoreself. Ye comes from New York City. Try ter picture Wade up thar amongst them folks. Wouldn't he make a right sorry showin' in a place like that?"

The astounding conceit of this creature came with a shock of disgust to the girl, but with a sustained effort she kept her eyes grave, even complacent, and slowly nodded her head.

" And you," she innocently urged him on, feeding his vanity, " have had more experience in the world."

" Well," he spoke deprecatingly, " I don't aim ter say I know it all—but I ain't plumb benighted neither. A year from now I'll be settin' in ther Legislater—an' hit won't be no coon's age afore I'll be in Congress—"

His eyes were bright with the fire of his self-exploitation.

" Ambition ain't no sin, I reckon. Abe Lincoln come from ther same sort of blood I've got in my veins right now—an' Abe Lincoln got ter be President."

" No, ambition isn't any sin," she agreed.

" If it is, I'm an awful sinner myself. I'd like to be famous, too."

Harley took another one of those single, eager steps toward her. His face had paled a little and there was an ugly greed in his expression.

" I likes ye, Cynthy," he announced with a voice that was suddenly shaken. " I'm gittin' ter be a plumb fool erbout ye."

" Thank you," she murmured, and her eyes dropped again.

" I reckon, as I told ye afore, I kin talk straight out with ye. I've got ambition an' I aims ter go a long ways ahead. I'm ther best blood in Kaintuck—even ef I says hit myself—not jest a dry-rotted branch on a good tree—but a live branch."

The girl recognized at whom the comparison was aimed. Her blood boiled, but her voice was almost a whisper. " Yes?" she questioned promptingly.

" A man thet's got a hopeful future layin' afore him, he's got ter walk heedful," he rushed on with a mounting passion. " He's got ter tarry and study es ter what folks 'll say, every time he makes a move. He b'longs ter ther public—but yit he's bound ter git lonesome amongst a passel of benighted, ign'rant fools—he's got ter hev "—he paused and gulped, groping for the words he required, then floundered on—" he's got ter hev some woman in his life thet kin keep pace with him. He kain't content hisself ter settle down wedded ter no bigfooted mountain heifer of a gal. He's got ter hev companionship thet's on ther level of his own brains."

" Is this hick proposing to me?" Cynthia demanded of herself. Aloud, she assented quietly: " Yes—I suppose so. That sounds fair enough."

" But yit ergin," he assured her vehemently, " a man like me kain't skeercely afford ter marry no outsider in a land whar folks is so damned clannish as what they is hyar. Thet would dish his wheel quicker then a cat kin jump sidewise."

This time her voice was cool, almost icy.

" Were you thinking of marrying an outsider?" she inquired.

Again he gulped and swallowed, and now the fire in his eyes was a consuming greed.

" Ye knows, Cynthy," he rushed on, " folks, they talks scand-lous erbout ye. I reckon, save fer Wade Murrell, most men thet sots store by th'ar repute, they wouldn't skeercely dast ter come sweetheartin' ye—not but what ye're mighty fine gal, but jest because they'd be skeered of back-bitin'."

The girl had straightened now to a greater rigidity, but her face was still sphinxlike. She could read signs like that, but she had not yet learned from this human rat what she had undertaken to find out.

" And yet," she suggested softly, " you've just said that you must be particularly careful."

" Me. I'm independent an' I thinks right fer myself," he boastfully assured her. " Hyar, I am hurtin' fer a woman thet kin appreciate what I aims ter be—an' hyar ye air in a kinderly exile—away from them thet speaks yore own language—don't ye see?" He paused, as though his loathsome self-esteem actually expected her to grasp at the honor he was tacitly offering and to stretch out a hand to help him over the difficulty of expressing himself.

The girl, with a white blaze of fury running through her arteries, met his burning eyes with a gaze of her own, completely masked.

" Yes?" she questioned again, even more softly than before.

" Hit hain't affrightin' me none what people says erbout ye—" he persisted. " I knows when they says thet you an' Wade air a livin' tergither in sin, hit's a lie—because I don't 'low an ign'rant feller like Wade could rouse up no love in ye. I don't keer master thet a lot of granny women names ye a wench an' a strumpet—so long as you an' me hes kindred minds. So long es we're heedful an' quietlike, nobody save jest ther two of us needn't know, nohow. Hit hain't none of thar business."

He stretched out his arms as if to gather her into his hungry embrace, and the girl's heart clamored to spring on him like a wild cat, but yet for a moment she restrained herself.

" Just a minute," she cautioned. " You are talking straight out—and I want to understand you clearly. I want to get you right. A woman has got to be pretty care-

ful as well as a man—even an ambitious man. As I understand you, the idea is that we shall—play around together—because we're congenial souls—but that because of your political future—other people mustn't know it. Is that what you mean?"

He nodded emphatically. "I knowed ye'd understand hit an' see reason," he exclaimed triumphantly.

"But," she demurred, still waving him back, "Wade Murrell has been pretty decent to me, you know. Enemies have attacked him because of these stories about me. Suppose the truth got out? It would hurt him, wouldn't it?"

"Damn Wade Murrell!" shouted the man huskily, his spirit now in a seething ferment of passion that cast caution aside. "Wade Murrell hain't goin' ter last noways. Don't hang on ter a sinkin' canoe, gal. Wade, he's a false alarm—" He broke off again, and suddenly resumed with a sneer that bared his teeth. "Wade accounts hisself a fightin' man. S'pose ye asks him some time whether he fit fer his country when they had ther balance of us in ther war."

"All right," said Cynthia quietly, "I'll ask him, and I'll tell him you said to ask."

Abruptly, Harley's face went white. It was as though an unwarned and utterly unexpected bolt had stricken him to the soul with amazement, consternation, terror. This woman had gone along with him step by step, seeming to drop into his succession of ideas as he had developed them. She had appeared to see eye to eye with him and now—

"Holt on!" he almost screamed. "Don't ye tell him! Don't ye dast ter tell him nuthin'!"

"Why not?" her inflection was bitingly icy now. "He's a false alarm. He didn't fight in the war. You did. You're not a false alarm. What are you afraid of?"

The man drew back a step, for just a moment paralyzed by surprise, and as he retreated, the girl followed him. Into her had come a sudden blazing of transformation. From the ingénue part she had been so carefully and successfully acting she was converted at the instant to the ferocity of an aroused tigress.

"You say you come from good people," she shot out at him. "You don't look it. You don't act it. You look like the damned trash you are. Do you hear me—damned trash!"

He stood staring blankly at her, dumfounded and wordless, as she swept on:

"Go give yourself the onceover in a glass some day. Your ears are small and stingy—your eyes are too close together and they're little and mean—like a weasel's. They shift and dart like a sneaking jailbird's—and you can't look anybody that's honest straight in the face. The very swing and swagger of your shoulders belongs to just one breed of human cur in the world—the damned bully that turns coward and cringes at danger. You sneer at Wade Murrell, but you shake all over at the thought of his hearing what you say. If your blood's the best around here, God help the rest!"

Her own cheeks were livid with rage now, and her eyes were green craters in eruption. Her slender body trembled furiously, and out of her had gone every vestige of her gentle assumptions. She was a virago incarnate, a fury on fire, and her small hands were clenched.

But the man had recovered a little from his first shock of surprise and his face blackened ominously.

"Ye're a right fierce little hell cat, atter all, hain't ye?" he snarled. "I reckon ye'd better be less biggety an' more heedful, seein' es ye hain't naught better then a strumpet yoreself."

He approached her threateningly, but she did not yield an inch, and under the warning fire of her eyes he halted.

"If I were all that," she told him savagely, "I'd still be a damn sight too good for you! I've had wise cracks made at me—by expert wise-crackers before now—and I've been able to take care of myself. I'm still able to take care of myself with poor saps like you. I've heard some right rough things said about Congress—but if you ever get there, you'll take the leather medal—you human skunk!"

Cas Harley's fists doubled, and corded veins stood out on his forehead, but under this blast of gutter philippic, words seemed to desert him.

He was confronting a new type of savage.

"Afore God," he found himself stammering, "ye're ther pizenest little copperhead I ever seed in my life. A feller mout a'most be skeered some day ye'd take a bust at him!"

"Not some day, damn you, but right now!" she shrieked out at him. "Get the hell out of here, and get quick!" To his complete amazement, she leaped for him and drove her clenched fists, one after the other, straight to his mouth, with amazing strength behind them. His lips were bleeding as she drew back panting—to stand glaring with green fire in her eyes.

Cas Harley had taken a step forward, maddened with rage, but she flung up her head and laughed wildly in his face.

"Hit me, you big bum, I dare you!" she defied. "I guess you want to follow Jake Carmichael and Daws Small out of the mountains, and run for the Legislature somewhere else, don't you?"

The man straightened up slowly and wiped his hand across the lips that his own teeth had cut. He stood blinking bewilderedly at the blood that came away on his knuckles. Things had been happening almost too speedily and unexpectedly for his mind to assimilate, and the effort to rally his pride was a dismal failure.

"Seein' as how ye're a woman—albeit a crooked one—" he began, but again she lurched forward and shrieked: "Get the hell out of here!"

He turned and shambled away.

For perhaps two minutes, the little fury stood like a blazing torch of passion burning hotly where he had left her. Then slowly the flame of wrath and temper dwindled, guttered and went out into stale ashes of remorse. She threw herself down full length in the high, grown grass and clutched at her face. She shook with sobs and raked at her hair with her fingers, then with a tear-streaked face she sat up, and her eyes were those of one who has sold his birthright.

"I'd been getting away with it," she moaned. "I'd been as sweet and simple as dew on the honeysuckle—and then I had to go and spill the beans again! I had to queer it all."

Self-contempt and wretchedness had left her wan and faded. "I almost thought," she told herself bitterly, "that it was getting to be real. That I might not just be acting it—but growing into it—and then, first crack out of the box, I turn into a roughneck!"

After an hour she came falteringly to her feet and washed her face in the pool where the trout had lurked. The ravages of fury and tears had passed away except that her cheeks were still pale when she walked slowly back to the house.

As she reached the dog run and looked through the open door, she saw Aunt Erie sitting at her spinning wheel with her back turned—and from a nearer chair rose a man in dusty riding breeches and pigskin puttees.

Aunt Erie had not seen her, and the girl did not speak, but at sight of that apparition, she wilted against the door frame and clutched at the logs with fingers that clawed at the wood as if struggling to bite into its age-weathered hardness.

The color ebbed out of her face and her eyes widened into circles of terror as if they were gazing at a ghost. Her lips stirred and could make no sound.

But Jock Harrison bowed with a self-assured, quietly malicious smile.

"This is Miss Stokes, I take it," he said politely, and added pointedly: "Since we have never met before—let me introduce myself. My name is Stacy Carroll—and like yourself—I'm a guest here."

The girl, leaning limply against the wall, brought herself up to straightness as the victim of the firing squad may straighten when the first volley has wounded, but failed to kill. So he was alive! The voice was not a ghost's and he chose that they should meet as strangers.

That was as much as her mind was capable of taking in just then—those things and an eager grasping at the reprieve which came with his momentary forbearance in pretending that they were strangers. It offered her at least a breathing spell. But there was something in Harrison's eyes that she had never seen in them before. It was something that chilled and froze the impulse of relief at knowing he was alive. It was a proclamation of war to the death.

"This hyar man," said Aunt Erie, rising and turning, "he's done come in acrost ther mounting—an' Wade's done bid him welcome. But, land's sake, gal, what ails ye? Ye looks like ye'd done seed a h'aunt."

"I'm—I'm a little tired—that's all," said the girl feebly. "Mr.—Mr. Carroll, I'm pleased to meet you."

CHAPTER XIX.

BEAUTY'S FALSE AIDS.

CYNTHIA had said she was a little tired, and Aunt Erie nodded as she favored the new guest with a few words of explanation.

"Hit wouldn't skeercely be no marvel ef ther gal got ther all-overs now an' then. She come hyar a plumb stranger an' she ran spang inter a bunch of ructions. Endurin' of ther whole while things hes been in a mommick. Folks didn't know how ter take a city lady at fust an' this gal hes done underwent rock-flingin's an' back-bitin's thet was enough ter send a body inter a plumb down-go of health."

The hostess turned to Cynthy, who wished she had been less communicative.

"Why don't ye lay down a spell, gal, an' git ye some beauty sleep? This stranger, he wouldn't guess ter look at ye right now, all tuckered out ther fashion ye be, what a comely gal ye is."

Cynthia wanted to flee to her own room yet something held her, and the something was that sardonic, smiling mockery in Jock Harrison's eyes. In learning that she had been through certain persecutions, he appeared to find an element of amusement. Now, although the girl had mastered that first staring-eyed agitation which had brought her to the edge of collapse, although she had straightened and forced her face back to a more protective impassiveness, she felt that until she knew a little more she dare not leave this room.

Harrison's bow was perfunctorily polite as he brought a chair forward and set it down before her.

"At least be seated—if you are tired, Miss Stokes," he urged, and when his changed position brought him momentarily between the girl and the older woman, there flashed into the expression, which she alone saw, a hard glitter of undisguised animosity. That glance was a declaration and a warning, and so Cynthia understood it. It was a declaration that, in seeming to return from death to life, he came not as a rescuer, but as a pursuer—and that, in pursuit, he meant to be pitiless. It was a warning that she must respect the incognito he had chosen to assume; that a failure of obedience in that particular would bring upon her instant retribution. His words were an emphasis of that glance, for although she had repeated his assumed name he now said again with quiet stressing of syllables:

"Permit me to introduce myself again. My name is Stacy Carroll."

The girl answered with just a shade of defiance.

"Yes, so you said. Thank you," and she forced herself to take the chair, even to pick feebly at the thread of conversation. "It's a warm day, isn't it?"

"Is it?" he replied. "I thought it pleasant."

Cynthia Meade, *alias* Stokes, was schooling her features as she sat there eying Jock Harrison, *alias* Stacy Carroll. There had never, until this hour, been a doubt in her mind of his death. Now he stood regarding her with a gravely cynical face, ten feet away—but whenever that glance met hers, unseen of Aunt Erie, it leaped out and fell on her with the stinging punishment of a whip-lash.

The bewilderment of one fighting in the dark assailed her and scattered all sequential elements of logic from her thoughts. Her whole miserable predicament of flight and danger had been due to the single suppositious fact of his death. A friendly word from him, she had reiterated and reiterated in her thoughts, would have cut away all her seeming of guilt—and set her free. It was only because death had sealed his lips, as she believed, that she had despaired of that word being spoken.

It had never occurred to her that a living Jock Harrison would have withheld his exoneration. Anne Purviance had suggested something of the sort. She had intimated

that, if the man were alive and hostile, he would hold her fate in the hollow of his hand—but that had been a stray and academic aside made in general talk, and it had meant nothing in the face of Cynthia's conviction that he was dead.

Now Harrison was here and alive, but something in his whole bearing made unequivocal declaration of war upon her.

When he had first confronted her there in the room everything else had been merged in the shock of seeing the dead come back to life. The amazing apparition had stricken her like a terrific blow in the pit of the stomach and left her weak and giddy. There had been a horrible flash of fear that her mind had crumbled, in a breath, to stark lunacy. Then before the reaction of intense relief had time to assert itself, she had realized from his manner, his glance and his incognito that somehow he had brought with him a threat greater than that which she had faced before.

She wanted to tell him how the certainty of his death in her own mind had tortured her; how panic had driven her, but his hard-eyed animosity forbade such advance. That he himself suspected her of having tried to murder him had not even remotely dawned in her thoughts.

Even now that inference did not suggest itself as she sought for an adequate explanation of his new attitude.

She was groping in befogging shadows of bewilderment, but monitors of instinct pointed the way in a fashion, and in a fashion she obeyed their guidance.

One thing she understood clearly enough. This meeting was no miracle of coincidence. Jock Harrison had not been brought by any fortuitous circumstance to this log house in the mountains. He had planned it deliberately and successfully. His whole manner had proven that—his insistence on the incognito, the quiet but pitiless irony with which he had looked on as she reeled and almost crumpled at the sight of him. There had been a satanic coldness and triumph in the way he had played out that scene—and whatever he meant to do, he held all the cards—perhaps he had even stacked them.

He had foreseen with certainty that in the first shock of that meeting she would be unprepared, while he would be master of the show, dramatizing the situation to his own advantage. She, a refugee, would grasp eagerly at his pretense of being a stranger, and having done so, even for a moment, she could not recede from that attitude without a confession of dishonesty that would cut the ground out from under her feet.

In one respect Harrison had erred.

Just as it had never occurred to the girl that the man believed her guilty of his wounding, so it had not occurred to him that she was free from this appalling sense of guilt. Her flight and subsequent conduct all seemed to prove a black conscience. At first he had doubted, but his belief had grown and rooted itself until he had forgotten his doubts.

Now she sat there in the cabin room sick with terror and seeing, in the figure before her, a man armed with hatred where, had she looked for any living emotion, she would have expected a friendship of sorts. She felt as if she had been afloat on a raft in heavy seas, and as if a supposed rescuer had come alongside only to threw her back into the water; only to deprive her of the precarious support to which she had been clinging.

"Miss Stokes," she heard a deferential voice saying, "while I've been sitting here Mrs. Murrell has told me a most interesting story—of how a few devoted men have been struggling to establish a school in this neighborhood. She has explained how a meeting was held in which enemies met as friends—and all put their shoulders to the wheel."

"Wade Murrell did most of the shouldering," the girl responded dully. "The rest of them trailed along."

Aunt Erie laughed.

"Thet wasn't all of hit, though," she amended. "This gal right hyar, she riz up on ther platform an' sung fer them folks—a'n a passel of men that was settin' round snarlin' an' bristlin', they smoothed out like feisty dogs sometimes smooths out when ye makes much of 'em an' gentles 'em. Stid of growlin' an' bitin', they commenced ter wag thar tails. I reckon thar hain't nuver been no singin' like thet

on this creek afore now. Hit war p'intedly like some human mockin'-bird."

"Splendid!" exclaimed Carroll, but his eye, as it caught Cynthia's, glinted with a veiled mockery. "I wonder if you'll sing for me some time, Miss Stokes—when you are entirely rested. I have a savage breast that needs soothing.

"Is your breast savage, Mr. Carroll?" The girl put her question demurely, and the man who had taken a brier pipe out of his pocket nodded as he began loading it. He spoke with a lightness of tone which gave to his words the quality of jest, but he stood with his face half turned away from his hostess and his eyes belied the shallow levity.

"I am totally dedicated to savagery," he announced. "I doubt if there has been a man since Edmond Dantes who has lived with a more single purpose than I do—the dedication of all my efforts to reprisal and punishment."

"Then you don't want your breast soothed, do you?" She was fencing desperately now, but her voice was cool.

Carroll laughed. "I want it soothed in my own fashion," he assured her. "I want to hear you sing, but I want to select the tune."

"That's all right," put in Aunt Erie equably. "I reckon thar haint skeercely no song-ballet ye kin name but what thet gal kin sing hit fer ye."

The new guest turned toward Aunt Erie and smiled.

"As I was riding over here," he said, "I heard a boy singing in his corn patch. The words I caught were something about:

> "Little Curt Jett is paying his debt,
> In the prison in Frankfort town!"

"I reckon everybody knows thet song-ballet," Aunt Erie assured him.

"Really?" The man was obviously interested. "I'm not sure, but it seems to me I heard another verse that ran something about—

> "A person named Meade—will pay for that deed—
> In prison in Raleigh town."

"I hain't nuver heered them words," Aunt Erie informed him, "but La! Thar's a lavish of 'em I don't know." As she moved across the room she missed the fact that Cynthia flinched as if she had been struck and that Harrison's smile took on a momentary meaning.

So he did suspect her of that damnable guilt! The realization came to Cynthia with the dazzling suddenness of black darkness flooded by the white brilliance of lightning. Her senses reeled under the impact of a discovery for which she was totally unprepared. But at once she repudiated the possibility that he could genuinely think such evil of her.

He was only pretending to suspect her in order to give strength to his arm in fighting foul. Still, if that were true, it was as bad—or worse. He could use a pretended belief of guilt as powerfully as a genuine conviction. Assuredly, he held and dealt the deck.

"I guess," Carroll went on, puffing comfortably at his pipe, "I didn't catch the words rightly. After all, it's the tune rather than the words that make a song—the spirit rather than the rime—don't you think so, Miss Stokes?"

She ignored the question, and through all her terrified confusion of spirit an echo awoke of the fight she had waged against this man since first acquaintance. Perhaps it expressed itself feebly now, for through the lurid smokiness of her groping she saw the answer to the riddle, and the strength seemed to go out of her. He did not mean to speak the word that should free her. He meant to use the ugly seeming of that circumstantial affair in Asheville as a means of grinding her into submissiveness. He had at his disposal a set of appearances with which he could destroy her, and unless she crawled abjectly at his feet he meant to destroy her. She could not see what could stop him.

"I don't know that song," she said bluntly, "and I won't sing it."

She was very sick of spirit, and the possibilities of this new chapter were unfolding forebodingly to her mind. He had trailed and followed her here where her concealment seemed secure, and it was as manifest as though he had said so that he meant to take her back with him. By his

hard and brittle code she had forfeited all rights to consideration. He was the mail carrier and she was the parcel. He would deliver her life into his own keeping, on his own terms, or he would deliver her, in the end, at the door of the State prison.

She saw the mistake she had made. She should have refused to be beguiled into pretending she had never seen him before. She should have forced him to admit that he came lying and in disguise, and then at least he would have been turned out. But, after all, that would have only spelled delay, and now in any event it was too late to worry about that. They had met as strangers. At all costs they must continue to treat each other as strangers.

Harrison, *alias* Carroll, bowed.

"I shall be disappointed if you don't sing that song for me," he declared quietly, "but I shall still hope to persuade you."

Aunt Erie was moving deliberately about. The sunlight was slanting through the door and window. The place was tranquil. Cynthia sat in her chair with her whole being jumping and edgy. She relived the scene where she had faced the greatest ordeal and won the greatest triumph she had ever known—there in the schoolhouse, where she had made good.

This afternoon she had been through excitement, battle and the purgatorial misery of remorse—when she had fought with Cas Harley and flared into guttersnipe vituperation. Later still, she had seen a ghost and discovered that her flight had failed to hide her.

Now, under the same roof with her had been accepted as a guest the resurrected lover who entered the play as a determined and powerful persecutor. She wished to God that either she or he had died.

"Anything ye persuades her ter sing, stranger," said a quiet voice from the door, "hit'll be wuth yore while."

Cynthia wondered why such a sense of solace and relief came to her with the sound of Wade Murrell's quiet voice. As usual he had reached the threshold and joined the little group without sound, and even Harrison started a little at the uncanny noiselessness with which he had been materialized out of absence into presence.

Cynthia told herself despondently this was one situation in which Wade's strength would not avail her. Harrison was too shrewd to show his cloven hoof and risk being turned out. She herself dared not denounce him—whom she was not supposed to have seen before. And even if she chose that course, Harrison, from a safe distance, could invoke ubiquitous agencies of the law that would eventually smoke her out of hiding and carry her, an extradited prisoner, across the border.

Yet the sound of Wade's voice reminded her that she had strong friends here, and in that thought was comfort.

"Your mother," suggested the newcomer innocently, "was just remarking on the fact that Miss Stokes seemed unusually exhausted. I believe her words were that she looked as if she had seen a h'ant."

Wade Murrell walked over and stood by the hearth. A tilting shaft from the setting sun fell on his face. It was a shaft of light in which the dust moths danced, and it caught in the hillsman's eye a light that seemed to glow from within. The bronzed face was sober, and it was the face of one whose memory was upon grave things.

Through that earnestness showed a sort of suppressed ferocity, a destructive strength carefully held in check and control. The aftermath of the test his strength had undergone to-day was still with him.

"Mr. Carroll," he said in a low voice, "hit would be kinderly quare ef thet gal wasn't nerved up. I reckon ye don't know ther hist'ry of ther Kaintuck Ridges none too well. Hit's a hist'ry of plain, poverty-beset folks—but sometimes hit's been bloody. At sun-up one mornin' I misdoubted ef hit moutn't be bloody ergin afore nightfall. Thar was clouds risin' up along ther sky thet denoted storm—an' at thet meetin' we held at ther schoolhouse them clouds was grumblin' with thunder-noises. Thar was threats acrost ther sky, Mr. Carroll, thet a man didn't need ter be craven ter be affrighted at. Ef they didn't break loose in lightnin'-stobs — wa'll, hit was because a gal thet knowed ther full peril of ther matter stood up thar straight an' slim like a young poplar tree—an' quieted down thet wrath. She quieted hit

with a voice thet would of bruck down—ef ther gal hedn't been uncommon brave." He paused, then added with a note of embarrassment.

"I hain't no master man fer words an' gin'rally, usually I don't gabble on—but hit's this gal's rightful due ter say thet she's done fotched peace whar war threatened, an' I reckon she's got a license ter be wearied. Aye, even ter look like es ef sh'd done seed a ha'nt."

Stacy Carroll bowed gravely. His eye even lighted to a specious enthusiasm, and he looked toward the girl whose cheeks had turned painfully pink under eulogy.

"Miss Stokes," declared the lowlander heartily, "I feel that I am honored beyond my deserts. All unknowingly I chance to come to a strange house in a strange land where the fire of heroism burns; where a Joan of Arc has appeared. A man doesn't often brush elbows with such opportunity."

His manner changed and he spoke with a more staid seriousness.

"I'm glad," he said, "I'm mighty glad to be able to pay tribute to such a thing as you have done—because, though I take no pride in the statement, I haven't always been so fortunate in encountering a woman's courage or loyalty. I'm not a woman-hater, quite the reverse, but possibly I've been ill-starred. The picture that has been most prominent in my personal experience is the other kind—a less lovely picture. I have seen a woman's utter failure to look life in the eye. I have been forced to admit her abject cowardice and desertion under fire—her infamous treachery—her greed and cheapness and crime. The contrast is great."

"You've been out of luck, haven't you?" inquired Cynthia Stokes with a cool insolence, but her pulses pounded with fright.

"I've been so deplorably out of luck," answered Carroll, "that I've a long way to go to get even—but I mean to go the full distance. However, why should a man rehash his private troubles—to three entire strangers? What called it forth was the contrast in the portraits of two women."

"Not that I aims ter fault ye none," suggested Wade soberly, "but don't ye reckon mebby ye've got a right ter censure yoreself some, too? Don't a man thet consorts with sich-like a woman es ye describes hev a license ter look fer false dealin's an' craven doin's?"

"Quite so," exclaimed Carroll emphatically. "After all that's the whole truth. A man who picks his woman unwisely suffers the consequence. Only he doesn't always know her at the start—and then there's nothing left but punishment."

"And then, too," suggested Cynthia quietly, "don't you think, Mr. Carroll, that the same woman might be different to different men? One man might bring out one thing in her and another man might bring out something else?"

Carroll smiled. "I don't think either man would bring out something that wasn't there," he replied, "but I do think she might have a different seeming to different eyes. Most women are good actresses. That is to say, off the stage."

"I reckon," ruled Aunt Erie, "thar hain't no master differ betwixt men-folks an' women-folks so fur es thet's consarned. Thar's decent ones an' pizen mean ones both ways. Thar's bold folk an' craven folk—both male an' she-male."

Carroll nodded his head in sober acknowledgment, and Cynthia arose from her chair.

"Aunt Erie," she said, "I believe I'll take a nap. I *am* tired."

The visitor moved casually toward her. Their eyes met, and again something passed between them that was not meant for other observers. It was an ironical and entirely self-confident light that showed in his face, and it seemed to say to the girl: "Very clever—but not quite clever enough. The game is young."

Aloud, he said politely: "Pleasant and peaceful dreams, Miss Stokes."

Cynthia did not sleep. It would have been as easy for her to fly out of the window and soar away above the timbered crests of the hills as to have quieted her jangled nerves to tranquillity.

She sat with tautly clenched hands and staring eyes, and now and then she heard Jock Harrison's voice rising in casual bits of disjointed conversation or in careless laughter. It carried to her the note of invincible self-assurance.

The sunset was fading to twilight when she heard a low rap on her window shutter and cautiously she went over. She imagined it was Harrison and it was in her mind to slam the heavy blind in his face. But when she looked out she saw Wade Murrell standing there with eyes clouded by embarrassment.

"I don't know much erbout ther ways of ther world down below, Cynthy," he began, "but when I seed ye fust ye wore a manner of clothes thet a body don't see hyar in these mountings—an' ye hed paint on yore face an' mouth."

"You threatened to scrub it off, and you haven't seen it since," she reminded him. "You said it wasn't becoming to a decent woman, and that Jezebels wore such things to set men's heads in a swirl."

He nodded soberly. "We faulted one another," he said. "I 'lowed ye acted indecent an' you called me an ape. But now ye've done seed fer yoreself, Cynthy, thet backwoods folk, they censures sich things es that, an' deems 'em ungodly, an' yit—"

He paused there at a loss for words.

"Yet what, Wade?" she prompted him.

"An' yit I reckon this hyar stranger knows ther fashion of life ye knowed yoreself afore ye come hyar. I reckon ye've got a license ter hev him see ye lookin' like ye b'longs ter ther same world he does. Ye've got a license ter beautify yoreself fer eyes thet hain't countrified—ef ye craves ter do hit."

"What do you mean, Wade?"

"I means ye hain't hed nobody ter consort with hyarabouts of yore own kind afore now, an' I reckons ye've been hurtin' with lonesomeness. Now, mebby ye wants ter look yore purtiest—when thar's somebody thet knows things ter see ye."

"But I promised you to lay off the make-up, didn't I? I told you that was all over, didn't I?"

He nodded.

"I wouldn't skeercely love ter hev each an' every one see ye painted an' gauded up. Hit would undo a heap of good thet's done been compassed, but still ef ye wants ter dress up in silks an' high heels fer ther stranger—aye, an' paint up, too—I'll stand guard by ther door twell bedtime ternight—an' nobody else shant come in."

Cynthia felt a sudden catch in her throat.

"Wait a minute, Wade," she commanded unsteadily, then going over to another part of the room she rummaged hurriedly among her few belongings and came back carrying a promiscuous little collection of things with her.

"There, Wade," she declared with an almost passionate vehemence. "There's the outfit that we had our first fight about. There's the lipstick and the eyebrow pencil and the hip-flask—still half full. There's all of it. Take them out and fling them in the creek. I'm done with them. Take them away, and welcome— If I'm good enough for the Murrells—why, the—the Carrolls and all the balance of them will have to make the best of me."

The man took from her the odds and ends that she had borne with her in full flight. He stood for a moment contemplating this and that device of a flapper's scheme of things. His face worked strangely in the twilight, but when he spoke his words were short.

"All right," he said. "Ye don't need none of them contraptions nohow. God A'mighty, He done his best when He fashioned ye. I reckon no human kain't handily better His work."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

The Seventh Quail

By ARTHUR PRESTON HANKINS

WHEN Hutchinson Brand was elected district attorney it was said that for the first time in the history of California the office was filled by a great lawyer and a great detective in one. To be sure, most of Brand's reputation as a detective belonged to the earlier days when he was a resident of San Francisco; and the county which had elected him consisted, aside from its one or two large towns, mostly of wild mountain country. But he was nevertheless a striking figure, with whom the newspapers were busy for quite a while after his election recalled him to the public mind, to which he had once been so familiar.

Brand, in fact, deprecated the publicity he was receiving. He had studied and practiced law, and entered politics, still at heart a detective, and yet he was embarrassed by the constant allusions to his exploits of the past. Finally he evaded the annoyance by retiring to the most secluded of the mountainous districts in the neighborhood, where, after the strain of the campaign, he proposed to spend a week or two hunting or resting before court should open and his official duties begin.

But only a few days later his presence and his fame betrayed him.

About ten o'clock one morning a woman came galloping to the door of his little log cabin. She swung herself from her big California saddle with the ease of a veteran cowman.

"I want Mr. Brand!" she cried breathlessly as the hewn door flew open. "Oh, you are Mr. Brand, I know! You must help me. Our nearest neighbor has been killed. My husband is accused of murdering him. As God is my judge, he is innocent! Oh, won't you help us, Mr. Brand? They won't wait for the courts to prove him guilty or innocent. They'll— Oh, you don't know these mountaineers!"

Brand's kindly eyes coasted from her

pretty, tanned, distracted face to her dusty riding garb, ending at the high-heeled boots and silver spurs.

Then he said gently: "I'll help you if I can. I'll get my saddler and ride back with you at once."

He hurried to the stable, and in fifteen minutes after the girl's arrival the two were galloping in a cloud of dust through the forest of pines which stretched illimitable on every side.

Her name, Brand learned on the journey, was Winifred Bird; that of her husband, Jackson Bird. They were homesteading in the Forest Reserve in the hope that the rugged outdoor life would repair the husband's health, impaired by his years as an expert accountant in San Francisco.

There were twelve more families settled on claims near them, and the advent of this little colony of homeseekers had fanned to life the flames of that old-time grudge of the cattlemen.

Every acre taken from the Forest Reserve for tillage decreased the best of the cattlemen's summer grazing grounds. While up to the present there had been no violence, there existed a stealthy warfare between the two factions which bade fair to break into open hostilities at any moment.

Mrs. Bird believed that the cattlemen, once fully roused, would stop at nothing to drive the homesteaders from what they considered their ancient heritage. And to further their own cause, they would make the most of convicting one homesteader of the murder of another.

Perhaps a half mile from the cabin of the Birds stood the cabin of their dead neighbor, Martin Alloway, who had occupied the homestead adjoining theirs. The structures were in plain view of each other.

Martin Alloway had lived alone, and had said that he was originally from New York City. The neighbors, mostly Westerners, had considered him "queer." He used the argot of the professional tramp. He was quarrelsome in the extreme.

Once when Jackson Bird had gone with him to a little mining town for supplies, Alloway had drunk to excess and become entangled in a barroom brawl. He had floored his antagonist with a pair of brass knuckles, which appeared miraculously on his hand—a strange weapon for a man to have concealed on his person in a land where "hip guns" settled all the more serious misunderstandings.

Alloway had seemed to the Birds to be always on the point of seeking a quarrel, and they had studiously avoided subjects upon which they knew him to be touchy. They had shunned him as much as possible.

Up until a few days before the tragedy Alloway's standing quarrel had been with Owen Gilchrist, a wealthy cattleman whose land adjoined the dead homesteader's on the west. Gilchrist had a filing on the water of a stream which ran through his and Alloway's places. The cattleman had repeatedly refused Alloway the right to use this water for irrigation, and words between them had been sharp and bitter.

Then property lines had brought on a dispute between the Birds and this quarrelsome New Yorker, which had grown until it included the ownership of a line of fence, an unjust bill for labor performed by Alloway, and finally the claim by him that the cabin of the Birds was on his land. But this Alloway could not prove until an official survey had been made. So while waiting for the surveyor both Alloway and the peaceful Bird had packed guns on their hips.

The day before the tragedy the surveyors had arrived, at Alloway's request, and definitely proved that the Bird cabin was in reality on Alloway's land. Alloway had promptly presented himself before Bird and demanded that he move out bag and baggage within five days, leaving the cabin where it stood as his—Alloway's—property. Bird had refused to do this; and Alloway had gone away, threatening to put the matter in the hands of an attorney.

The next morning—the morning of the day that Mrs. Bird had come to Brand—a third homesteader, named Abner Yeatman, had knocked on Alloway's door about seven o'clock. Receiving no response, he had entered.

He found Alloway face down on the floor of his cabin, stone dead, with a bullet hole near his heart.

In the window facing the Birds' cabin was a round, smooth hole, with only a slight lateral break in the glass—just such a hole as a bullet might make which had been fired from a distance. Those who had examined the bullet hole in the dead man's side all were of the opinion that the caliber was .30-30.

Jackson Bird's rifle was a .30-30.

Abner Yeatman had alarmed the neighborhood; and the mountaineers had at once seized Bird and taken him to Alloway's cabin. There they were at this moment holding an informal inquest and court proceedings combined and threatening to lynch Jackson Bird.

"At last I made them promise they would at least let me try to find you—the only officer of the law within reach," Mrs. Bird falteringly concluded her story. "You alone can save Jackson!"

"If your husband is not guilty, Mrs. Bird," said the district attorney firmly, "I shall prove his innocence."

"He *is* innocent!" she cried. "He was at home with me all night. This morning he had not left the cabin before they came for him. He could have fired the shot only from the window of our cabin, for he had not left the house. And I know he didn't do that. But they won't believe my evidence, of course."

"They examined his rifle?"

"Yes. And here again circumstances are against him. Yesterday afternoon, after Alloway came to order us out of the cabin, Jackson went out to try for a deer. He shot at one, but missed. He was tired when he returned home, and failed to clean his rifle before going to bed. They found it dirty this morning, and with one cartridge short in the magazine."

"M'm-m!" muttered Brand. "That complicates matters. And this cattleman, Owen Gilchrist, who also was at outs with Alloway—what sort of a man is he?"

"A big, strapping Westerner," she replied. "Wealthy and domineering."

II.

It was indeed a strange scene which met the two as Mrs. Bird preceded Brand into the cabin of the dead homesteader. Seated on stools, coal-oil cans, and boxes about the four walls of the single room were a dozen men—homesteaders, cowmen, and miners—serious of mien, silent, their eyes bent on the thirteenth man, seated in the center of the floor. To Brand's utter astonishment, this man, a grizzled old mountaineer, known as Increase Stebbins, held in his lap a home-made ouija board, his big, calloused fingers resting lightly on the planchette!

The planchette was moving briskly over the crude letters on the board. The breathing of the watchers was hushed. Then: "The third time, gents," said the old character—"the third time Wiji has spelled B-i-r-d when I've asked it who killed Martin Alloway."

Mrs. Bird gazed at the board in horror. Even the eyes of the district attorney dilated an instant before a sly, amused expression crept into them.

"Pardon me," he said, addressing the operator. "Are you trying to find the murderer of Martin Alloway by questioning that toy?"

The grizzled veteran looked up, his childish blue eyes alight with superstitious enthusiasm.

"Toy or not, mister," he drawled, "Wiji says B-i-r-d when I ask who killed Martin Alloway."

Disdain, quickly suppressed, flashed in Brand's eyes. Then he smiled indulgently. "It is true," he said soberly, "that there exist phenomena beyond the ability of common mortals to interpret. But I propose to investigate this matter from a different angle. May I go ahead?"

"You're Mr. Brand?" asked the mountain patriarch. "Yes, go ahead. We've heard of you. And we ain't touched nothin'. Go ahead and have your say; but Wiji says B-i-r-d."

A general nodding of heads gave evidence that the members of that solemn conclave were, to a man, possessed with a dangerous belief in the occult. Brand's eyes were troubled as he stepped to the center of the room to begin his examination.

Seated on a coal-oil box was a good-

looking, tanned young man whose hands were bound. To his side had stepped Winifred Bird, and now her hand lay encouragingly on his shoulder.

Several of the cowmen wore chaps and carried guns. From their number it was easy to pick Owen Gilchrist—a lean, bronzed man of forty-five, with a strong, domineering face, shrewd gray eyes, and an air of authority.

Brand stood silently surveying the room for several minutes. Then he took out his long-stemmed corncob pipe, borrowed a match with his whimsical smile, and went over to the silent, prone figure on the floor.

"Find a tape measure," he commanded, looking down at the dead face upturned to his.

The dead man lay directly in front of the window, perhaps ten feet away from it. Beside him lay a double-barrelled shotgun and a bunch of dead quail—six in number. A seventh quail lay on the floor about four feet from the rest and nearer to the window.

When the tape measure had been handed to Brand he stooped and measured from the wound in the dead man's side to the soles of the feet. Then he stepped briskly to the window and measured from the floor to the center of the circular hole in the glass.

"We've already done that, mister," piped up the owner of the ouija board. "What do *you* say?"

"It would appear from the measurements," Brand replied, "that the bullet which pierced Alloway's side made this hole. However, the hole, though round and of the nature of a bullet hole in glass, seems surprisingly large."

He measured its diameter.

"It is nearly four inches across," he announced. "It is my experience that a bullet fired through a window pane makes a true, round hole the barest fraction of an inch larger than itself."

"That depends on the distance," said a serious-faced vaquero known as Jean Tracy. "You shoot a hole in glass a little way off, and she'll be small and clean. But shoot from half a mile away, and the force of the bullet will be less when it strikes the glass. It may knock out a big chunk, even, like as if you'd thrown a rock. Anyway, it 'll be a heap bigger than if you fired from close."

"I believe what you say to be true," said Brand. "And how far is the Birds' cabin from this.

He looked through the window across a cleared stretch to the house in question.

"'Bout half a mile," was the reply.

"And these quail—and the shotgun at Alloway's side?" Brand suddenly looked down at them.

Owen Gilchrist cleared his throat. "I saw Alloway early this morning hunting quail back in the sage close to my place," he offered. "I heard him shoot several times, and he carried a bunch of birds when I saw him. We believe that he had just arrived home with his game and passed before the window facing Bird's cabin. That instant Bird, who had seen him enter but wanted to get him standing, fired through the window and potted him."

"No!" exclaimed Mrs. Bird involuntarily.

Jackson Bird shuddered, but not a word had he uttered. His blue eyes were fixed despairingly on Brand's every movement.

"Would it be possible for Bird to see Alloway through this window at a distance of half a mile?" Brand shot back.

"We've calculated on that," put in the old man, Increase Stebbins. "It was pretty early, and th' sun would jest about be shinin' clear on that windy. If Bird got only a glimpse of Alloway's shadow back o' th' glass, he could 'a' fired at th' windy and potted 'im, ten to one."

"Quite true," agreed the district attorney. "Now, these six quail were probably in Alloway's hand when he fell, mortally wounded. They are not tied together, yet six of them fell almost in a pile. You claim that nothing has been touched, except that the dead man was turned over by the person who discovered the body. So why do we find the seventh quail lying four feet from the other six?"

"It bounced over there when he dropped 'em," said Increase Stebbins.

"Quite likely," conceded Brand. "But,

as I have pointed out, the remaining six fell almost in a pile. Is it not strange that the seventh quail alone shot from the bunch and fell four feet away?"

The old man snorted. "All that's foolishness," he said, "and aside from the p'int. The p'int is that Wiji says B-i-r-d, and that all th' evidence is ag'in' Bird from start to finish."

Brand turned suddenly to Owen Gilchrist. "What do *you* think of Wiji?" he snapped.

The cowman once more cleared his throat. "I don't know, I confess," he answered. "It does some remarkable things. Since Increase introduced it up here the people have been impressed by its disclosures. It's, uncanny, to say the least."

"Does it never vary from the truth?" The district attorney had wheeled again on Increase Stebbins.

"Not in th' main, mister—not in th' main," croaked the old man. "Sometimes ye won't understand jest what it means, but if ye're keerful to try and learn what it's tryin' to say ye'll get th' truth. F'rinstance, I ast it once was there gold in a certain section o' these here mountains. And Wiji spelled F-r-e-e, then run kinder caterwompus and wouldn't go no furder. I says to myself: 'There's free gold hereabouts.'

"So I panned for a month and hardly got a color. Then I got sore at Wiji and says: 'Ye told me wrong, Wiji, and cost me a heap o' work.' Then I thought that maybe Wiji had meant Freeman Cañon, but couldn't quite spell it. So I says: 'Now tell me th' truth, Wiji—is there gold hereabouts?' And right away Wiji spelled Freeman Cañon."

"I see," said Brand with a smile. "And you found gold in Freeman Cañon?"

"Well—er—not yit," confessed the mountaineer. "But I've had a passel o' work this fall, and ain't tried overly much."

With one of his characteristically swift movements Brand turned back to Owen Gilchrist.

"I see fresh red mud on the dead man's shoes," he remarked. "There has been no rain recently—the land is dry. The soil about this cabin is a gray loam. Where could Alloway have picked up this red mud?"

All eyes were focused on Gilchrist, who once more cleared his throat.

"That's a kind of 'dobe," he told Brand. "It's down by the creek."

"Was Alloway by the creek when you saw him this morning?"

Gilchrist hesitated. "Yes, he was," he said finally.

"What was he doing there?"

Gilchrist shuffled his feet. A long pause, then:

"I'm not trying to make out there was no trouble between Alloway and myself," he said. "I'd ordered him not to use my water, but he persisted in doing so. This morning I saw him sinking a tappoon to divert the water onto his alfalfa."

"Yes?"

"Well, I—I rode down to where he was and ordered him off."

"Yes?"

"Well, he—he went, after a long argument between us. Then I jerked out the tappoon and turned the water back into its course."

"I see. You have a rifle, Mr. Gilchrist?"

"Certainly."

"What caliber, please?"

"A .30-30. But that's nothing. Almost everybody up here uses a .30-30. You seem to be trying to fasten this murder on me."

Brand's eyes grew steely. "Not necessarily," he said coolly. "But I'm investigating the evidence from every angle."

"Wiji says B-i-r-d," muttered Increase Stebbins, gumming a chew of tobacco from a monster plug.

"Who else saw Alloway alive this morning?" asked Brand.

"I did," was the response of a wiry little homesteader who had hitherto remained a rapt listener.

"Your name, please?"

"Jake Lorman."

"Where and how did you see him?"

"Well, I was gettin' a load o' wood off government land. Alloway was comin' down th' creek with his gun and a bunch o' quail. and we talked. He—"

" Do you know how many quail he carried?"

" Said he'd shot six?"

" But there are seven here in the cabin."

" I heard a shot after he left me," added the man. " There's plenty o' quail all about here. I reckon he got th' other one that shot."

" But you don't know—you didn't see?"

" No."

" You're sure you heard a shotgun fired? It couldn't have been a .30-30?"

" Well, a big caliber rifle, like a .30-30, makes about th' same noise as a shotgun; and in th' woods, especially in th' mornin', a report will ring and echo till it would be hard to tell th' difference. But I'm sure it was a shotgun."

" Why? You have just intimated that you are far from sure. Has Wiji told you it was a shotgun?"

" No, I ain't exactly fell for Wiji yet, but I'm willin' to admit there's things beyond my knowledge. The seventh quail proves it, don't it?"

" By no means," said Brand.

" But I know Alloway had six. He leaves me. I hear him shoot again. Here's seven quail."

The district attorney smiled. " Seems like logic, doesn't it?" he said. " Did you see Alloway and Gilchrist together?"

" No; that was a mile above me, with forest between."

" Now, who else saw Alloway alive this morning?" asked Brand.

The man who had just been speaking made answer again: " One o' th' Japanese help from th' resort must 'a' seen him. I saw this Jap going along th' creek jest after Alloway left me. Alloway was walkin' slow, expectin' quail to flush from th' sage at th' creek side. Th' Jap was hurryin' as best he could. He must 'a' caught up with Alloway and seen him."

" What was a Japanese from the resort doing up here at that time of the morning?"

" Huntin', I suppose. He carried a gun."

" But he walked fast, you say. Did he carry any game?"

" I couldn't see. It was too far."

" A shotgun?"

" Too far to see that, too."

" Then how on earth could you tell that this man was a Jap?" Brand demanded.

" Only from th' way he walked. They hobble, you know, on those shoes, or sandals, that are raised a few inches off th' ground with two pieces of wood under them. Kinda wet weather sandals, I reckon."

" You don't mean to tell me that a Jap was wearing his cumbersome native shoes while hunting through brush and over uneven land for quail?"

" He must 'a' been. I've seen th' Jap waiters wearin' 'em down at th' resort. These Japs are not long in this country, I've been told, and they still wear their own clothes a lot."

" M'm-m! Was the remainder of his costume Japanese?"

" Oh, no—he had on American clothes. But th' way he hobbled told me he was wearin' those funny shoes o' theirs."

" It was after seeing this Jap that you heard the shot?"

" Yes, a little after both of 'em had gone out o' sight."

Brand stood stock still, his head bent, one finger at his lips. Then he roused himself.

" Since Alloway's shoes are muddy, there must be tracks down by the creek," he said. " Leave everything as it is until I have found and studied these tracks."

Three men remained with the prisoner, his wife, and the dead man. The rest accompanied Brand outside.

Gilchrist had remained behind. As the rest started out Brand leaned through the door and said:

" Please go with us, Mr. Gilchrist. I want you to show me where the argument between you and Alloway took place."

With a shrug, Gilchrist joined them, and another man took his place inside.

They cut through the forest to the creek, Gilchrist, at Brand's request, ahead. Over a mile from the cabin they came upon a ditch which they followed to the creek, a small, rushing stream at this point. The tappoon lay on the ground, where Gilchrist evidently had let it drop after removing it from across the stream.

" Our quarrel took place right here," said the cattleman.

Brand bent over and studied several systems of tracks in the moist ground. There were those of horses and cows, and here and there the prints of human feet. He made no comment, but progressed on down the swift little stream, which was gradually growing wider as it flowed through land more nearly level.

Some time later he stopped and waited for all to catch up.

" Lorman," he said, " was it here that you talked with Alloway and saw his quail?"

" Yes."

" You were cutting wood—where?"

" Back there in th' trees." Lorman pointed. " I called to Alloway, then walked down here, and we talked a little. He showed me his six quail, then went on down th' creek toward home. I went back to my job. A little later I saw the Jap come from th' woods, on th' other side o' th' stream. When both of 'em had been out o' sight a little, I heard th' shot that killed th' seventh quail."

Brand started again down the stream on the dead man's trail. " Lorman," he called back, " let me know when I have reached the spot near where you saw the Jap coming from the woods."

In a few minutes Lorman shouted: " Just about there!"

Brand was in the creek bottom, bending over the tracks, as the rest hurried to him. From the higher and dryer ground on which they stood, they could plainly see the imprints of a large pair of shoes.

These made the trail the district attorney had been following—they were the prints of the dead man's feet. All about were the hoof prints of horses and cattle; but, search as he would, Brand could find the tracks of no other human being.

" You're sure the Jap entered the bottom at this point?" He had straightened and was addressing the homesteader.

" Absolutely. But he was hobblin', you know. Those funny sandals would make only two little marks, where the cleats touched the ground."

" There are no such marks," said Brand.

He walked on down the stream, till finally the tracks of the dead man led away from the water at right angles, and followed a path straight toward the cabin. Here and there in the dust he came upon these same footprints, but the footprints of no other man appeared. There were, however, the prints of a horse's hoofs, and occasionally they were on top of Alloway's tracks.

" Is your saddle horse shod, Mr. Gilchrist?" Brand suddenly asked.

" Yes," the cattleman replied.

A little farther Brand stopped abruptly. " Here's blood on a bush," he said. And still a little farther: " Blood in the path."

" From the quail," suggested some one.

" M'm-m!" was the only answer.

Presently they came to another creek. Brand waded into the shallow water, shoes and all, and studied both banks. Then he took out the tape and measured the creek from bank to bank.

Asking some one to hold one end of the tape at a pair of hoof marks on his side of the stream, he crossed over and held the other end at hoof prints on the other side. Now, darting this way and that, he took measurements along the ground. Then he rose and pocketed the tape line.

" Gentlemen," he said, " Jackson Bird is not the murderer of Martin Alloway. Martin Alloway was shot on this path, between the two creeks, by a man following him. The shot which Lorman thought brought down the seventh quail was fired from a thirty-thirty here in the woods, and ended Alloway's life. Give me twenty-four hours, and I will name the murderer."

There was a hush. All eyes were bent on Owen Gilchrist, who cast his eyes on the ground. Then came from the tremulous lips of old Increase Stebbins:

" But th' bullet hole in th' windy? And, besides, Wiji says, ' B-i-r-d.' "

A low-voiced discussion took place among the mountaineers. At last Abner Yeatman, as spokesman, told Brand that they would give him his chance and abide by the law.

" Then preserve the seven quail," commanded the district attorney. " Tie the six of them in a bunch, and keep the seventh separate from the rest."

After these odd instructions they all hurried to the cabin, where Brand spoke a few reassuring words to Jackson Bird and his wife, then vaulted into his saddle.

Back at the resort, he hired an automobile and sent the driver to the county seat with a note to Detective Ridgeway, chief of the town's regular force.

At three o'clock next afternoon the same solemn assemblage was forgathered in Alloway's cabin, from which the body had been removed. As before, Winifred Bird stood dry-eyed and apprehensive at her bound husband's side. Brand paced slowly back and forth. Increase Stebbins lovingly fingered his ouija board, and cast the dreamy gaze of age across the clearing.

Brand came to an abrupt halt as a machine drove up and stopped before the door.

From it alighted Detective Ridgeway, another plainclothes man, and a thin, sour-faced man with surly, darting eyes. The last was handcuffed to the second detective.

The district attorney led the new prisoner to the center of the room.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I will introduce you to Ratty Macdoel, New York gunman —the murderer of Martin Alloway."

The assemblage stared at the shifty-eyed little man, silently, incredulously. Only Increase Stebbins mumbled, as he shook his patriarchal head: "Wiji says B-i-r-d."

"Can you prove this, Mr. Brand?" asked Owen Gilchrist.

"Speak up, Ratty," ordered Ridgeway.

"Yes, I croaked um," drawled the prisoner defiantly. "What t' hell!"

Gilchrist and others stepped toward Jackson Bird to untie the rope that bound him. With a scream of relief and joy, Winifred Bird threw herself upon her husband and showered his face with kisses.

When Bird had been freed the district attorney spoke.

"With all deference to the judgment and fairness of you people," he said, "I would advise that in the future you leave the detection of criminals to professionals.

"It is almost impossible, in dealing with a clever crook such as Ratty here, for those inexperienced in the detection of crime to reach the truth. Only one who has studied crime and criminals should attempt it.

"When I heard that Martin Alloway was from New York, spoke the argot of tramps and yeggmen and used brass knuckles in a fight, I at once took into consideration the possibility that he was in hiding here in the mountains, and that some ghost of his past might have arisen and demanded that he pay the penalty for some bygone act.

"The seventh quail convinced me that Alloway had not been shot through the window—that the crime had not been committed in the cabin. So, seeing the mud on the dead man's shoes, I got on his trail.

"I will admit that up until I measured the second stream, things did not look well for Mr. Gilchrist. But those measurements convinced me that the man Lorman had described as a Jap committed the crime, out there in the woods. Then I found blood along the trail, and this only beyond where the supposed Japanese had followed Alloway. If the dead quail had dripped blood, it would have appeared in the creek bottom and elsewhere. I knew the blood to have come from Alloway's death wound.

"The hobbling of the supposed Jap, who was none other than Ratty Macdoel here, was not caused by Japanese shoes. On his feet Ratty wore horse's hoofs, strapped there over his instep. This caused him to hobble, of course.

"It was obvious that, as no human tracks showed following Alloway's, the prints of the horse's hoofs were to be considered. My suspicion of Gilchrist grew fast. But the measurements at the second creek settled the point, and cleared him.

"Ratty Macdoel knows well how to use horse's hoofs on his feet and make a perfect representation of tracks made by a horse. But when he crossed the creek, after shooting Alloway, he made the fatal error.

"Up to this point he had accurately gauged the distance between the two sets of hoof prints. But while crossing the creek, where the prints would not show in the water, he thought this unnecessary. On one bank, in the mud, were two prints. On the opposite bank were two more. The water is not deep enough nor swift enough to cause a horse to change his stride in

crossing. And the measurement between these two sets of hoof prints, one on each side of the stream, proved conclusively that the prints on the farther side were misplaced. They were at the water's edge. According to the measurement of the horse's stride, they should have been twenty-two inches from the water.

" Several years ago Ratty Macdoel killed a well known man at his country home in Westchester County, New York. He and others were hired to commit this murder by a gang of political grafters. The ground all about the house had recently been plowed, and no one could approach the house without leaving tell-tale tracks. It was then that Ratty evolved his diabolical scheme of making horse's tracks in the accomplishment of his gruesome task.

" As loose horses were roaming the neighborhood at the time, the New York detectives were baffled until one of Ratty's confederates, having been arrested on suspicion, turned State's evidence and told of the subterfuge. Was Martin Alloway the man whose testimony sent you up for life, Ratty?"

The crook nodded. " We called um de Scorpion," he said. " He was a no good bum! I knowed he was in Cal—see—and w'en I makes me get-away from stir I trails um up. I got um, too, believe me! I was gonta use de hoof racket to sneak up on dis shack, but I see um in de woods, and t'o't I'd get de job over wid—see? But I didn't croak um right away—see? He staggered to de house. I knew I'd got um—I wasn't worryin'."

" *I* knew," continued Brand, " that Ratty had escaped from Sing Sing. I knew, too, that, so long as he was in California, he would be hiding in San Francisco. So a note to Detective Ridgeway, telling him to communicate at once with the San Francisco police, started the dragnet, with the result that it landed Ratty. It was simple. The solution all hangs on my knowledge of criminals and their methods."

One by one the mountaineers silently shook the hands of Brand and Bird. Only Increase Stebbins remained aloof.

" But how 'bout th' bullet hole in th' windy?" he argued. " Wiji spells B-i-r-d."

The district attorney chuckled. " I wouldn't doubt Wiji for the world," he said. " But you yourself confessed that sometimes Wiji's information is misleading. So now ask Wiji this: ' What made the hole in the window of Alloway's cabin?' "

The old man's eyes lightened as he squared himself before the mystic board and placed his fingers lightly on the planchette. Not a sound came, as everybody watched closely, with bated breath.

" Wiji," came the old man's childish tones, " they doubt you. Tell 'em th' truth. Wiji, what made th' hole in th' windy?"

A breathless wait, then the uncanny proceedings began. The planchette moved slowly, hesitatingly, then darted to B. Increasing in speed, it settled on I. Then on R. It stopped dead on D.

" B-i-r-d!" Stebbins's voice rang triumphantly.

" Exactly," chuckled Brand. " Bring out the seven quail."

They were produced—six in a bunch, one separate.

" Skin the six and find the shot," Brand ordered.

In no time six pairs of hands had denuded the six quail. All showed shot wounds.

" Skin the seventh," demanded the district attorney.

The seventh quail, when skinned, showed not a shot mark. But its breast was bruised and its head crushed.

" Gentlemen," said Brand, " the seventh quail was not shot by Alloway. It flew at the tremendous speed which a quail can attain straight through that pane of glass, and fell dead on the floor of the cabin. Doubtless Alloway's disturbance of the covey had separated the quail. They were panic stricken. This one was, at any rate. Witness the force with which it struck the pane of glass in its flight for safety."

" But can a quail fly at such a terrific speed?" cried Gilchrist.

Whereupon Ridgeway handed Brand a scrapbook which he had been carrying.

The district attorney turned the leaves, and finally passed the book around for a general inspection. There was a photograph of a window with just such a hole in

it as had been made by the seventh quail. There followed an explanation, and data on the relative speed of various birds. The item had been clipped from a magazine.

"The fact that the hole made by a quail in this picture so nearly resembles a bullet hole, caused me to preserve the article, and I asked Ridgeway to bring along the book," explained Brand. "I have retained it several years, thinking that some day it might be of service in my investigations."

Old Increase Stebbins shook his grizzled head, and bit off an enormous chew.

"But even when I asked Wiji what made the hole in Alloway's windy it said B-i-r-d," he grumbled.

"And isn't a quail a bird?" laughed Brand.

"By gosh!" gasped Increase. "Wiji, you never fail me, do ye? A quail's a bird, sure as shootin'. By gosh! I didn't understand. 'Scuse me, Wiji!"

THE END

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THE OLD JOCKEY TURNS COOK

NO more to roam—I stay to home,
An' when my heart is itchin'
For sport an' race an' for th' chase,
I find it in th' kitchen.

'Tis sport to bake a choc'late cake
An' lather it with icin',
Then set it still upon th' sill,
So luscious an' enticin'.

An' races? Say, I race each day
I start to get th' dinner:
I give th' steak an even break
With peas—an' name th' winner.

I feel th' thrill that used to fill
My soul, when 'round th' horses.
It takes *some* brains to hold th' reins
Of seven diff'rent courses!

Th' foaming flank of round steak, plank,
Th' steamin' from th' kettle
Reminds me oft of froth out-coughed
From Greyleg, on his mettle.

An' in th' noise that merry cloys
That kettle, bright an' tinny,
I think I hear th' welcome cheer
Of good old Hero's whinny.

Ah, me! I thought, when homeward brought,
My sportin' days was over.
But here 'mid pans an' pots an' cans,
I find myself in clover!

Beatrice Ashton Vandegrift.

Charlie Chong and the Perfect Way

By JAMES PERLEY HUGHES

OUR community is graced with the scholarly presence of Lo Tak Fu, of Canton, who is the house guest of Tze Mong, the publisher. The distinguished Lo is visiting America with the hope of bringing our countrymen back to the ways of their fathers—the perfect way.

Charlie Chong, the bespectacled young editor, advertising manager and general galvanic battery of the *Chung Mei Bo* or *Chinese American News,* laid aside his brush to appraise the still wet characters. The paragraph had been prepared at the request of Tze Mong, the pudgy owner of the *News,* and it had to be done just right.

Charlie had laid aside his carefully prepared table on the rise and fall of the peanut market to give the matter his attention after Bong Lee, his editorial assistant and former schoolmaster, had bungled it—bungled it from Charlie's point of view so that it would never do.

Complications there were that Bong Lee's half-blinded eyes did not see. The fact that the distinguished Lo Tak Fu was a house guest of Tze Mong stirred no pulsations of fear in the schoolmaster's slow beating heart. The mere coincidence that Lo Tak Fu would be thrown into the company of Tze Chan, the lovely daughter of the publisher, meant nothing in his nearly spent life. Bong regaled himself during his lighter hours by playing with his grandchildren—a pastime that epitomizes his heart interest flawlessly.

But Charlie Chong? His eyes visioned the creamy loveliness of Chan as the page he held blurred before him. He took off his purely professional spectacles that he might behold more clearly the mirage of her presence. Then his slender legs unwound themselves from his chair and he dashed into the office of his employer.

"Lo Tak Fu is the son of my best friend in Canton," said the owner of the *Chung Mei Bo* when he had approved the paragraph. "Personally I think he might as well try to restore the Manchus as revive the ancient learning, but the son of an old friend is ever welcome."

"Does your estimable daughter, Tze Chan—does this stranger find favor in her eyes?" Charlie Chong felt himself coloring despite his racial self control.

The publisher's heavily lidded eyes looked up with a swift appraising glance.

"Why?"

"Oh—I just wondered. Tze Chan is such a devout modernist."

"Modernist, verily," croaked the father. "Only recently she has decided to take an American name and is calling herself Miss Ruth Tze. She is always, always changing. I wonder what she will do next."

Charlie Chong likewise wondered as he returned to his desk. Among the younger generation almond-eyed Chan was the flower of Chinatown flapperdom. The first to bob her hair, the star of the basketball team, and when it came to jazz there was none whose toes twinkled so daintily.

"If Lo Tak Fu is booster for ancient ways I need have no fear," the young man muttered, again turning his attention to the fluctuations of the peanut market as limned in the graphic chart he was preparing for his market page.

For months, yes, even years—two, at least—Charlie Chong had been casting longing eyes at the publisher's daughter and wondering when he would have sufficient money to ask his employer to post the red placards of marriage upon his door.

The peanut market failed to intrigue and he pushed the chart aside to take up the telephone.

"Let me talk to Tze Mong's home," he told the girl who answered.

No one ever calls numbers in Chinatown. They simply ask to speak to Li Chuk Sing or Kwang Ho Sang and the operators do the rest. As a result of this system, the switchboard girls knew all the gossip of the community, and Charlie Chong often wondered how the native language newspapers managed to circulate with these swivel-tongued maids talking at top speed during their leisure hours.

"Miss Tze has gone to the temple with Lo Tak Fu," he was informed before his thoughts had chance to wander further.

A quick intaking of the editorial breath. He had gained much useful information from these operators when he was a reporter, but that his own private affairs were the property of these loquacious girls astounded him.

"How do you know?" he demanded.

"I heard her tell Miss Hong that she could not attend tea this afternoon," was the prompt reply.

Charlie Chong returned his receiver to the hook and gazed long and earnestly at nothing. Wild thoughts churned within his brain as he regarded the future with worried eyes, eyes that seemed to see his castles in Cathay wrecked by the mere presence of Lo Tak Fu, the advocate of the perfect way.

He tried to focus his attention on the sheet of quotations before him, but the smiling eyes of Tze Chan kept appearing in the place of variations in the peanut market and he finally quit in disgust.

A week scurried by, a week in which Charlie Chong tried vainly to get the lily-like Tze Chan to accompany him to a number of festal gatherings, but upon each occasion he learned that previous engagements barred her acceptance.

Then came a blow that rocked the son of Chong and likewise stirred Chinatown to its depths. The chic figure of Tze Chan was a familiar sight upon Grant Avenue, the principal thoroughfare of the Oriental settlement, and the cognoscenti of that happy vale always knew what next season's styles would be when they beheld the daughter of the publisher.

It was a blithesome, sunny day, a day in spring when birds twitter love notes in the poplar trees above Robert Louis Stevenson's monument in Portsmouth Square, the one green spot in Chinatown. Down the sunny street came a maiden who brought the shopkeepers to their doors with almond eyes opened until they lost their ancestral slant. Mouths, noted for their close-lipped firmness, gaped frankly.

Chinatown rubbed its eyes in wonder.

It was Tze Chan who walked with gaze fixed straight ahead, studiously unconscious of the furor her appearance created. No noted beauty could have been more cognizant of the tremendous impression she was creating and at the same time more oblivious of the gaping crowds.

Gone was the smartly cut skirt that barely had reached her knees, a skirt that a few days ago presaged the styles for smartly dressed young women. Gone were the creamy stockings, stockings as creamy as her skin, Charlie Chong once had told himself.

The striking ensemble creation had disappeared and in its place was a costume that the women of far off Cathay had worn since first the sun came up out of the eastern sea to smile upon the rice fields of Kwantung. Silken trousers, heavy with embroidery, came down half way to her shoes, and in the place of those magnetic stockings prim black incased her shapely ankles.

A jacket, frog-held in the olden way, had replaced the smart wrap of newer days. The chic hats that Tze Chan had always worn so bewitchingly were banned with this return to the ancient mode, and her hair, once curled into clustering ringlets, was pomaded in the manner of the belles of the Sung dynasty.

If Chinatown rubbed its eyes at this iconoclastic picture, fancy the feelings of Charlie Chong as he coursed down the street seeking further information on the peanut market as a side line to advertising soliciting.

His first glance merely placed her as a young woman recently arrived from China, a young woman who had not yet had time to acquire the habiliments of her new surroundings. His second look identified her as Tze Chan, the Tze Chan who had been the most modern of flappers.

A half-raised foot remained in air as the young man's eyes were glued upon this colorful figure. It was as though his body had turned to bronze in one swift instant, giving that appearance of arrested motion so dearly prized by sculptors. His mouth opened, not so much to gape as to suck in refreshing air as the world whirled giddily.

Sensation returned to his numbed brain and he crossed the street to meet her. With modish hat in hand, he voiced the greetings of the day. Then paralysis struck again.

Tze Chan, with glance neither to right nor left, continued her way down the street, turning her steps into the ornately carved doorway of the temple in which Ho Si Bing, the venerable necromancer, was likewise high priest and acolyte.

" Girls in the days of China's glory never spoke to young men before they were married," were the words that seemed to drift back as Charlie Chong stood spellbound.

" Gee whiz!" he muttered, relapsing into English as he sometimes did when deeply moved. " Gee whiz! Gosh! What do you know about that?"

The picture that he had conjured of the red placards of marriage in which his name was yoked with that of the lovely Chan now faded and in its place black clouds of despair rolled mightily. He yielded to temptation and returned to the office to learn if his employer had seen his daughter since her transformation. He found the pudgy Tze with his feet upon his desk, glaring wrathfully at the gray ashes of his cigarette.

" Women are strange beings," the publisher began as though his remark were the announcement of some startling discovery. " Strange, strange beings. You think you know their foibles. You think you know their minds, but you don't, for the very simple reason that they don't know themselves. Take my Tze Chan for instance—"

" Yes," said Charlie Chong breathlessly.

" She has had a violent relapse."

Under other circumstances the young man would have been frightened at the gloomy tone that fitted these pessimistic words.

" Yes," he repeated.

" Yesterday she prided herself upon being the most modern young woman in our community."

Again the young man voiced an affirmative.

" To-day she mourns because she was not born four thousand years ago," the father went on, a hunted look stealing into

his eyes, a look that might have been that of some benign, home loving old elephant that had been pursued all day for his tusks.

"She has taken up necromancy," Tze continued. "She seeks to consult sorcerers."

"I saw her this morning," the young man said, "going to the temple of Ho Si Bing."

"How was she dressed?"

"A vision of loveliness," quoth Charlie Chong.

"A vision of loveliness gone mad," rasped the father. "She has thrown away some thousand dollars' worth of stylish apparel and announces that she is going to lead the girls of Tai Fong back to the ways of their mothers. She seeks the perfect way, but like any other romantic girl of her age—she is impossible."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that."

"No—*you* wouldn't," Tze Mong's remark was so poignant that Charlie felt the urge of business elsewhere.

"It's that Lo Tak Fu," the young man told himself when he retired to his own office to focus what was left of his reasoning power upon the problem before him. "This Lo is gifted with an oily tongue and has convinced her that the perfect way lies along the path trodden by our ancestors. I must meet his arguments."

It was not until evening that Charlie Chong was able to visit Ho Si Bing, the keeper of the temple. A friend of years' standing was the venerable Ho, and many were the problems that the hoary ancient had helped him solve.

"You have come to see me about the return of Tze Chan to the ways of our fathers," the old man began before his visitor could even start the circumlocutory remarks that must ever encumber the opening of a Chinese conversation.

A flush mounted the young man's face.

A smile of understanding from Ho Si Bing, a smile that frankly bared his single yellowed fang and lighted his drab countenance with a saffron scintillation intended to be pleasing. To Charlie Chong it appeared as if some hoary old beaver had beamed upon him in a moment of high pleasure.

"The way of our fathers is the perfect way," Ho went on. "She has learned a great truth, and I can only encourage her in her noble resolution."

"But I intend to marry her," the young man broke in. "I shall marry her even if she will not speak to me now that she has taken up old customs."

"You intend to marry her?" Ho Si Bing focused his near-sighted eyes through his great horn-rimmed glasses, not the facial horrors worn by Americans to-day, but the grandfather of that type of spectacles. "You intend to marry her?"

A nod of affirmation.

"Then why not try the old method—the way of our fathers?" suggested the sage. "If she is to be an ancient in one way, she should be in another. Besides, the old is the perfect way."

"The perfect way," Charlie Chong grinned to himself as he turned his steps homeward. "I hardly have money enough to be married according to the Western rite, but the old custom calls for ready cash."

The two thousand dollars he had saved from commissions and salary were deposited in the Canton Bank against the day when he should be able to wed. Several times of late he had been tempted to use his wealth to speculate in the wildly fluctuating peanut market that kept the brokers' offices on California Street in a state of constant turmoil.

"Peanuts are going up—'way up," he had been told by Mock Lu, a merchant from whom he obtained much information for the recently instituted market page of the *Chung Mei Bo;* but he had repressed his racial desire to gamble.

But now things were different—much different—and early the next day he went to the Canton Bank, and drew out his savings, leaving only the single dollar that had marked the birth of the account. Then he hurried to the office of Mock Lu.

"I want to buy peanuts—lots of peanuts. Two thousand dollars' worth," he announced.

"You are wise, young man," was the importer's reply. "I am buying five hundred tons of shelled nuts in Shanghai by

cable to-day. I can place an order for you at the same time, but of course I shall have to charge a small commission, even if you are the son of my friend Chong Wu Dong."

"I expect no favors," the young man replied modestly.

"It is a favor when I place your order with mine," Mock Lu reminded him; "but that is neither here nor there. This is a business arrangement. You should profit greatly, but if there is a decline it is your loss."

"My loss," echoed Charlie Chong.

Only he knew how great the loss would be.

The slender legs that were Charlie Chong's trembled, his bony knees rattling like castanets as he approached the office of his employer. Entering the editorial domain on the second floor, he passed a tall, slender man attired in the native Chinese costume, so seldom seen in America. The stranger was coming from Tze Mong's office, bowing formally and muttering many "*ching chings.*"

"Lo Tak Fu, the scholar," was Charlie's mental ejaculation, but he greeted the visitor with the musical "*Ho la ma*" of the Cantonese dialect and passed on, bidding his chattering knee joints to be silent during the portentous interview to follow.

Tze Mong was chewing viciously on his writing brush when the young man entered, and the glare he gave only added to the feverish knocking of ill-padded knees.

"Your daughter, the beautiful Tze Chan," the son of Chong began in response to the father's gruff inquiry. "She has said that she wishes to return to the ancient mode of life—the perfect way."

"That's not news." Tze Mong turned jaundiced eyes toward the speaker. "I thought you were a newspaper man. Have you been taking my money under false pretenses?"

"If she wishes to observe some of the ancient customs, she should follow them all," the young man continued.

"So said Lo Tak Fu, who has just honored me with his presence."

Charlie Chong adjusted his spectacles that he might glare through them with stoical indifference.

"This being true," he went on, "I wish to announce that I seek the hand of Tze Chan in marriage."

"According to the ancient mode?" the girl's sire questioned, a glint of humor lighting his eyes. "The perfect way?"

"According to the ancient mode," was the echoing answer.

Tze Mong lighted a fresh cigarette with tantalizing deliberation and then looked long and appraisingly at his fidgeting employee, who was standing first on one leg and then the other.

"In the olden times young men bought their brides, paying the girl's father hard silver for her soft hand," Tze Mong continued after a moment's reflection. "Thus did I answer the scholarly Lo Tak Fu, who was here but a few minutes ago on the same errand."

"And you told him?" The words burst from Charlie Chong before his racial stoicism could assume command.

"I told him that if he insisted upon reviving old customs, her father, as usual, would deny her nothing." And then, with a penetrating glance at the young man: "I took the liberty of telling him—you see, I rather anticipated this visit—I took the liberty of telling him that you were likewise interested and were entitled to an—er—option, as it were. The price mentioned was ten thousand dollars."

"Ten thousand dollars!" echoed a voice so sepulchral that it sounded as though it had come from the tomb itself.

"Yes—ten thousand dollars," Tze affirmed. "Lo Tak Fu has agreed. He has written to his father in Canton for the money."

"But I want to marry Tze Chan," the young man protested.

"I can only make the same terms," the father replied soberly.

"How much time have I?" The question was asked in hollow tone, as though hope already were a stricken thing, borne down to dust by the weight of ten thousand silver dollars.

"Thirty days," was the estimate. "He has written, but asked his father to cable a credit to the Canton Bank."

"Thirty days," muttered Charlie Chong

as he departed from the presence of his employer. " Thirty days in which to win ten thousand dollars and the beauteous Tze Chan. Thirty days in which to win a goddess or woo the dragon—the dragon of death."

Swift computation disclosed that even with the most phenomenal rise in the price of peanuts, he could not gain the ten thousand dollars demanded by Tze Mong. Prices would have to ascend to dizzy heights before that sum could be realized. Eagerly he scanned the quotations in the next morning's *Chronicle* to note a barren gain of one-eighth of a cent.

" There is but one thing to do," he told himself. " I must buy more peanuts on margin."

Another visit to the establishment of Mock Lu, the importer. Ensued a lengthy conference in which Charlie Chong drenched himself inwardly with many bowls of tea; but in the end he had purchased upon a margin of two cents a pound five hundred tons of peanuts now consigned to Mock Lu from Shanghai.

" Let us understand ourselves clearly," the merchant said in conclusion. " If the price of peanuts drops two cents, your two thousand dollars will be wiped out and I shall have the cargo. If it advances, you shall have the five hundred tons at the original price, all profit accruing to you. Such is our covenant."

" Such is our covenant," echoed Charlie Chong.

Followed hectic days upon California Street, when brokers, both white and Chinese, dashed from office to office, bargaining for the much sought goober. Makers of succulent peanut butter bought against a rising market, hundreds of tons at a time, and prices soared in response.

" Chinese peanuts, twenty-two to twenty-four "—the figures showing the number of shelled kernels to the ounce—became one of the most sought for staples upon the San Francisco market. Behind the frantic speculation was the agitation in Washington for an increase in the duty upon nuts grown in the Orient. Planters from Virginia, Georgia and Texas were besieging the President to add three cents a pound impost under the flexible tariff act. Gossip from the national capital swayed California Street until it became a maelstrom of frantic brokers.

" Peanuts up three-quarters," Mock Lu told the young man the third day after their bargain. " You will make good profit if things go on."

Charlie's slender fingers played over the beads of the importer's abacus, but the result fell far short of ten thousand dollars. He scourged his brain to think of ways that could be used to stimulate the market, but the result was a symmetrical zero.

Ten days dragged by, and quotations in the realm of peanuts showed a net gain of two cents. Word from Washington announced the date at which the President would give the native nut growers a hearing. This added new strength to the market.

The steamer bearing Charlie Chong's cargo had left Shanghai and was wallowing slowly toward the Golden Gate.

" You will make big profit," prophesied Mock Lu. " I was a fool—but a bargain is ever a bargain."

Efforts to get in touch with the dainty Tze Chan were fruitless. She had mewed herself up, going out only when accompanied by her mother or one of the family servants.

To make good her boast of living according to the ancient mode, Lo Tak Fu had been banished to a native hotel and was no longer the house guest of Tze Mong, the publisher. This followed the day when the girl had wormed from her father the admission that both Lo and Charlie Chong had sought her hand in marriage.

The fact that fiscal arrangements had been made was screened by the wily parent, who held to the theory that money was for men to earn and women to spend and that any bargains he might drive were entirely his own business.

In the meantime the peanut market grew more turbid, prices advancing on the day the President conferred with the American growers, but receding sharply when it was announced that the question was taken under advisement. Three weeks had flown,

and Charlie Chong and his ten thousand dollars were ununited.

The slow freight steamer with its cargo of nuts had passed the Hawaiian Islands.

"Lo Tak Fu has heard from his father," Tze Mong announced one morning a few days later. "He has cabled a credit to the Canton Bank. Lo Tak Fu is ready to pay, cash in hand—are you?"

"No—not yet. In a few days." Charlie Chong felt the firm earth crumbling beneath his feet.

The publisher assumed a serious expression as he studied the young man.

"You have been a faithful employee, son of Chong," he said soberly. "The time is not many years hence when I can no longer wield my brush, and I would like to see the *Chung Mei Bo* fall into friendly hands. I have pledged my word to the son of an old friend, and my word is—my word. If you are unable to raise ten thousand dollars within a week, I shall have to hand my Tze Chan to Lo Tak Fu. I lied grievously when I told him that you had an—er—option, but unless you can—"

"But I can," broke in Charlie Chong, although his brave words sounded hollow in his own ears. "I can and I will. A week, you say? It shall be done."

He dashed down to the office of Mock Lu to learn that peanuts were again in the ascendancy, and that the steamer bearing his cargo was already within the wireless zone and her progress toward San Francisco was being radioed to the local stations.

The next morning the young man's distended eyes read a small item in the last edition of the San Francisco *Chronicle*. Of little importance it had been in the eyes of the American editor, but to the young Chinese it was colossal.

The President had acceded to the importunities of the American peanut growers, and under the provisions of the flexible tariff act he had increased the duty on shelled nuts of foreign origin three cents a pound. The new impost was to take effect within one week, said the notice.

"One week!" Charlie Chong started to Mock Lu's office on a high lope. "One week! Gosh!"

"The radio says that your cargo will arrive in five days," the importer informed him in response to a breathless inquiry. "The gods have been kind to you. Shelled peanuts for delivery one week hence have already advanced three cents a pound. If your cargo arrives before the new tariff goes into effect, you will gain more than fifteen thousand dollars."

"But you said that it would pass in the Golden Gate within five days."

"*Ai*—so says the radio reports."

"Then there is nothing to worry about. I shall order my wedding suit immediately," the young man jubilated, and he turned swift steps to the office of the *Chung Mei Bo* to inform his employer that within a week he would be able to pay ten thousand silver dollars for the soft hand of Tze Chan.

One day. The steamer carrying Charlie Chong's cargo was delayed by high winds, making slow progress through heavy seas. The young man spent several precious dollars in radio messages to be informed that the ship would make port with a day to spare.

The second day. The skipper's message in response to fresh inquiry told of fair skies and increased speed.

More storms on the third day, and frantic words through the air promised a bonus of a thousand dollars if the cargo was landed in time to enter under the old tariff.

Another heart-breaking delay. Engine trouble had developed, the captain wirelessed, but promised that the Gate would be made by Thursday.

"But the tariff goes into effect on Friday," gasped Charlie Chong as he showed the message to the grim Mock Lu.

"An hour is as good as a year," returned the importer, and then with a shrewd glance at the young man: "If you have no brass in your inwards, quit the bargain, and I will give you your two thousand dollars."

"A bargain is a bargain," answered the son of Chong.

If he were to lose Tze Chan, what comfort would he find in two thousand wretched dollars? He must either win—win in the grand manner and pay her father the marriage price or—"

He brushed aside the thought.

Thursday noon saw him mount Telegraph Hill, field glasses in hand, to watch for the coming of the Kosmos, the vessel that was bringing his cargo to the Golden Gate.

One o'clock; then two. Ship after ship came into port, but the Kosmos was not sighted. He took a street car to Lincoln Park that looms over the entrance to the narrow strait to watch more closely, to gaze farther and more fearfully out to sea.

Four o'clock. Far out beyond the Farallone Islands he glimpsed a ship through his powerful glasses that answered to the description of the Kosmos with green sides and red striped stack. His heart thundered. By steady steaming the vessel would be able to make quarantine before sundown and her cargo admitted to customs under the old tariff.

And as his eyes strained to behold her progress, striving mightily to read the name upon her bow, the scene of the rolling ship was blotted from his sight as a gray pall lowered between him and the vision that held his anxious gaze. It was as if a curtain had been lowered in a theater at the play's end.

Fog, heavy and dank, descended. Fog, such as had led many a master mariner astray and allowed his good ship to pile upon the rocks that mark the Golden Gate.

And as he strove more desperately to penetrate the thickening vapor, the view of the ever toiling ocean faded into nothingness as the mist swept in, obliterating everything. The waning hours of day were darkened by this pall, and the sun, lowering swiftly in its downward flight, was lost in the gray blanket that came down from the north.

An hour he waited, desperation clutching him.

Two hours.

The haze only thickened. No steamer would dare poke her nose into the narrow channel without the most experienced pilot aboard, and the Kosmos had not picked up a pilot.

Darkness had descended when Charlie Chong turned leaden feet toward Chinatown. Sirens at the lighthouses were bellowing raucously and the bay resounded with the shrieks of ferries, each screaming a warning through the fog-laden air.

Ruin, ruin utter and stark, was the only picture that the wretched eyes of Charlie Chong could envision. No need to see Mock Lu. A bargain is ever a bargain.

He purchased one of the late editions of the afternoon papers to turn to that small space that told of the day's activities of the peanut market. So heavy had been the importations of the day, said the brief review, that prices had slumped. Every one on California Street had been importing peanuts, and quotations fell rather than advanced in spite of the new imposts. There would be no salvage, he muttered, as he gauged the situation.

His money had been obliterated.

He lurched off a California Street cable car and turned down the street leading to his home. He would not go to the *Chung Mei Bo* that evening. The aged Bong Lee, his aid, could look after what remained of the day's work. His soul demanded solitude.

Slowly he dragged his feet through the fog, nearing the house in which Tze Mong, his employer, made his residence.

Through the haze he could see a knot of men under the gaslight that stood almost before the door. In front of them was a strange object that looked like a large doll's house in that uncertain light.

Curiosity speeded his steps and he crossed the street.

His eyes distended with stunned surprise.

His heart stopped beating.

The strange object he had glimpsed was a sedan chair—a red sedan chair. He had not seen one in Chinatown since he was a small boy. The red sedan chair had been among the first of the ancient Chinese customs to pass into oblivion with the assumption of American ways by the San Francisco Orientals.

It was the red chair of marriage, celebrated in song and story among the people of his race in the Old World. Lo Tak Fu had found one, a swift thought told Charlie Chong and—

He had not realized until that stunning moment that the week of grace given by Tze Mong had ended with the sunset.

Misery, thicker, darker, danker than the fog, enwrapped Charlie Chong. The beauteous Tze Chan was being given in marriage. He was but a penniless gambler who had diced with life and love—only to lose. He turned his steps onward, bowed down with wretchedness.

A sound caused him to whirl. The door of the house had been opened and the lights glimmered through the fog.

Voices rang through the night—voices high and angry—not the merry banter or the laughter of a wedding feast. And then the cry of a girl.

Swiftly Charlie Chong raced up the street.

Upon the doorstep he found Tze Chan, dressed in her most modern raiment, bitterly denouncing her father.

" So you would sell me—sell me as you would a beast!" shrilled the girl.

" But—but—" spoke Tze Mong.

" Marry—marry—that foreigner." Tze Chan's slim arm pointed to Lo Tak Fu, attired in the chromatic splendor of a Chinese bridegroom. " Never—never in a million years."

" But you said you wanted to return to the ways—the ways of our fathers," the publisher protested; but even the agitated Charlie Chong could see a smile held in leash in his mouth corners.

" I was just kidding," the daughter spoke in English. " Didn't you know that?"

Lo Tak Fu strode out the door, looking neither to right nor left. A grunted command and the red chair of marriage was borne away.

" I thought it would turn out something like this." Tze Mong did not speak until the chair and its owner had disappeared in the fog. " I knew it would—otherwise I would not have taken a chance. I knew that I could depend upon my daughter to be consistently inconsistent."

He strode into the house, closing the door, to leave the two facing each other.

" Tze Chan," Charlie Chong began. " I have wanted to tell you—"

His voice failed him, but he held wide his arms.

" Call me Ruth," whispered the girl a few moments later as she snuggled closer in his arms; and then with a sigh: " Besides, after all this is the—is the—"

" Perfect way," said Charlie Chong, as he kissed her again.

THE END

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THE PATHOS OF OLD FINERIES

A FADED little lady sat
  Beside us at the play last night,
A wistful little lady that
  Had dressed as for some courtly rite.

To her 'twas clearly an event,
  This sitting snugly at a play;
No whit self-conscious, and content
  In braveries of a bygone day.

The rusty gown, the mended lace,
  The pale aigrette once brightly blue;
The fan shorn of its pristine grace—
  Each fitted in a tale of rue.

Indeed, as on our homeward way
  I said to Gwen—and Gwen agrees—
There was no pathos in the play
  Like that in those old fineries!

Edward W. Barnard.

Rags

By E. K. MEANS

SKEETER BUTTS sat in front of his place of business called the Henscratch, engaged in aimless conversation with Vinegar Atts. Dust devils danced in the middle of the road, and in the center of the meadow across the way they could see the writhing heat, fantastic in its agony. But these two children of the sun sat toothsomely grinning, humming a talk of toneless monosyllables, waiting in patient expectation for something to happen.

Down the dusty road came a scarecrow negro whose clothes appeared to consist largely of threads and ravelings. Something had torn off a sleeve of his shirt and one bare black arm swung from one side while a white-shirted arm maintained his equilibrium on the other. One leg of his pantaloons was missing from his knee down, exposing a sockless leg and a foot in a ragged shoe from which most of the sole had been worn off. His head was well ventilated and glowing with the heat, for a large portion of his hat crown was missing.

"Look at Rags, Vinegar," Skeeter chuckled. "I bet dat nigger axes me fer a job."

"He don't look like he ever had did much fer a livin'," Vinegar commented. "Dem clothes ain't no sign of a successful business man."

"Naw, suh. But dat's de kind of black boy dat always wants to wuck fer me fer wages."

When the strange negro drew nearer the two observers were at once attracted by a kind, good-natured face, marked and branded with the lines of trouble and sorrow as with a hot iron. He could be any age from forty to seventy, for the face was so marred by suffering that its wrinkles did not indicate the flight of years and his eyes might have been dimmed by unshed tears, not age. In spite of all, he was a pleasing, magnetic personality and his wide, easy-smiling mouth proclaimed a love of friends and fun.

"I's done arrived, brudders," he said as

he sat down on the steps beside them. " I's hongry an' I's thirsty an' I ain't got nothin' left to soak—I's broke, dead broke."

" Yo' travelin' suit don't indicate dat you is in funds," Skeeter muttered in a friendly tone. " I figger you needs a job."

" I kin mix up mo' fancy, striped, sody-water, ginger-pop drinks dan any nigger in town," the stranger replied.

" I reckin you kin lap up mo' dan any nigger in town," Skeeter retorted.

" I never touches it," was the answer. " I jes' nachelly hybominates all sody-water slops whutsomever. Dey taste like somepin you oughter drench a mule wid fer de bots."

" You is hired," Skeeter replied promptly. " It'll be a new stunt to hab one sody-jerker whut don't mop up mo' drinks dan he sells."

" When does I begin to sling it?" the man asked eagerly.

" Now, right now," Skeeter responded. " I'm got to go to de orfice of de sheriff. Me an' Marse John Flournoy is cleaning' up an' clearin' out de mess of fawty years."

" I bet dat's a dusty job," Vinegar remarked.

" 'Tain't dat so much as de writin' on paper," Skeeter said in a tone of wonderment. " It 'pears like a white man cain't do nothin' onless he scribbles a lot of words on a docamint fer de sheriff to put a rubber band aroun' an' keep ferever mo'."

" I don't like to start my job by eatin' out of de store, brudder. But ef you feeds me a little at de off-startin' I won't be so li'ble to steal."

" I guess I better perteck myself," Skeeter laughed. " Mo' especial as I aims to leave you here in charge by yo' lonely self. Eat anything you craves an' as much as you likes—by de way whut mought yo' name be?"

" Dey calls me Pack Egger," he was informed.

" I jes' axed dat question so I would know whut name to put on de pay-roll," Skeeter grinned. " I ain't axin' you whut yo' real name is, although I figger ef you had stayed whar you come from an' stood yo' trial you'd 'a' come clear!"

" I thought mebbe you mought wanter know whut man to hunt fer, ef I runned off," Pack smiled.

" 'Twouldn't be much loss ef you tuck eve'ything," Skeeter said disgustedly. " But I leaves you in charge while me an' de sheriff holds a session in court."

II.

In the sheriff's office in the Tickfall courthouse, Mr. John Flournoy was looking over the accumulated papers and documents of thirty consecutive years of service as the servant of the people.

All the papers pertaining to his work that required to be filed away and preserved were not being examined or touched. But the sheriff had kept many other documents with the bare precautionary possibility of their future need. Now as he glanced over them, they stirred the memories of past years and revived many anecdotes of his earlier experiences.

Skeeter brought forth packages of letters, carefully labeled and bound with twine, and smoked cigarettes while the sheriff glanced at them one by one and consigned them to a large trash basket at his side. Now and then Skeeter got a real punch from some audible comment of this officer of the law.

" Huh!" Flournoy grunted, as he glanced at the contents of a letter. " This was from his mother. She tried mighty hard to get him a pardon but he was bad. He had to go!"

Curiosity burned in Skeeter's mind at this point and he wanted to ask questions. What had the fellow done? What did they do to him? But Flournoy dropped the letter on the pile of trash and went on to other things.

Meantime Skeeter busied himself, sweeping, dusting, rearranging the contents of certain shelves, and tying up again those papers and documents which Flournoy decided to keep a little longer.

Finally, Flournoy straightened up in his chair, relighted his cigar, spread a paper before him and began to talk. The last of the accumulation had been inspected, the trash basket was full of rejected material, and the tiresome task was done. Flournoy would now seek relaxation by chatting with Skeeter, whom he often described as his " favorite insect."

"This paper before me is a writ of divorcement, Skeeter," the sheriff began. "It was issued twenty-four years ago by the judge of court and it recalls a mystery I have never been able to solve."

"Yes, suh."

"It grants an absolute divorce to a negro named Funch Furlo and it gives him the custody of the child."

"Yes, suh, dat is frequently done," Skeeter remarked by way of encouragement and to show interest.

"I had not been long in the office as sheriff," Flournoy continued. "This Funch Furlo was a young darky who owned a cabin and a little land and his business was digging wells. I never saw him that he did not have a short-handled pick and shovel and a few sticks of dynamite. The other negroes used to be afraid to jostle him because the dynamite might go off. On the day I assumed my duties as sheriff Funch came to me and wanted me to secure what he called 'a pair of wedding licenses.' I got the license and attended Funch's wedding."

"You's got plenty licenses an' been to plenty nigger weddin's since dat time, Marse John," Skeeter chuckled.

"I have indeed," Flournoy agreed. "But this was the first and it abides in memory, while a great many more important things are forgotten. Funch married a nice looking negro girl and they seemed to get along well together. I remember when their baby was born I stopped at the cabin and took a look at the pickaninny and gave him a bright silver dollar."

"Mebbe dat wus de fust dollar you bestowed on newbawn niggers, but 'twarn't the last," Skeeter asserted.

"I watched that little black baby grow up to be about five years old. I remember one day we were branding cattle down in the swamp and the little boy fell and his knee rested upon a hot branding-iron. My brand in those days was a circle F and the little knee was marked with the most perfect 'F' you ever saw."

"I bet you heard de loudest bawlin' you ever heard, too," Skeeter snickered.

"You're right," Flournoy smiled. "Then one day Funch Furlo came to my office in great trouble and wanted me to help him get a divorce. He hung around town for a week, waiting for the very paper I have before me and at last I handed it to him, a writ giving him an absolute divorce and the custody of the child."

"How'd you git dat paper back, Marse John?" Skeeter asked, impatient for the rest of the story.

"I'm going to tell you now," Flournoy said. "When Funch Furlo got this paper he went out to his cabin and found that his wife had run off with the man in the case and had taken the child with her. Funch hunted everywhere for his baby and could find no trace of them anywhere. Then one day he put a heavy charge of dynamite under his cabin and blew it into toothpicks and kindling wood. I went out there and found a hole in the ground large enough to contain the cabin which had been destroyed and all the rest was a splintered mass of wreckage. Not a trace of Funch Furlo was ever found. I think he blew himself up in his own cabin."

"My Lawd!" Skeeter exclaimed.

"On a tree some distance from the cabin I found this writ of divorce securely attached to the tree trunk by having a framework of wood nailed around it. I brought it home with me and have kept it for twenty-four years."

He laid the document on the trash-heap with the rest.

"Take it all out behind the courthouse and burn it, Skeeter," he commanded.

Skeeter lifted the pile and started out. In the rear of the courthouse he lifted the writ of divorce off the top of the heap, folded it carefully and slipped it into his pocket.

"I aims to frame dis paper an' hang it up in de Hen-scratch," he announced to himself. "It'll gib all us niggers somepin to talk about."

III.

PACK EGGER begged clothes from house to house until in two days he found himself with a completely new outfit of misfit attire. His most ridiculous acquisition was a child-size derby hat which he wore upon the highest peak of his coconut-shaped head.

"A nigger's head fits any size hat," he

remarked to Skeeter Butts. " Some fits high an' some fits low, but dey all fits. I found dis derby in a barrel in a store and dey gimme de hat an' fo' collars. De collars is mighty nigh big enough to go 'round my stomick."

Skeeter found his new clerk addicted to a habit which all the patrons of his business seemed likewise to enjoy. At every moment of leisure he brought forth from his pocket a beautiful pocket knife. It had a long blade of the finest steel and was whetted to the kneenness of a razor's edge. Its handle was of shell with a running deer carved upon each side.

The knife was unique and expensive, and attracted a great amount of comment among the negroes, all of whom believed that Rags had stolen it. With this knife Pack would carve on the pine table tops Indian heads, faces of children, horses and dogs.

He would rise from his table to serve a customer and return to his task as wood-carver. Sometimes he took his knife with him, but often he left it lying open upon the table where he was working.

" Some nigger's gwine steal dat knife, Pack," Skeeter warned him.

" I ain't skeart I'll lose it," Pack replied. " Dis here knife is too well knowed an' a nigger don't steal nothin' he's gotter keep hid all de time an' cain't use."

One day the door opened and Sheriff Flournoy entered. Pack glanced up causally, but when he saw who it was his knife slipped for the first time and spoiled his artistic delineation, making it necessary for him to change the head of a horse to the head of a dog. He bent his head low over the task to conceal his face and did not glance up again during Flournoy's call although the sheriff walked over and cast a curious glance upon the work he was doing.

" Skeeter," Flournoy said, " somebody is stealing hogs in the Gaitskill hog camp."

" How you found dat out, Marse John?" Skeeter asked.

" Buzzards," Flournoy answered. " Just ride along the edge of the swamp and go to the spot over which the big black birds are sailing and you will find a fulfillment of Holy Writ—' where the carcass is, there the eagles are gathered together.' "

" I ketch on, Marse John," Skeeter laughed. " Dey is shore onwise to clean dem hawgs in de swamp an' leave the remainders behind. But whar is dey sellin' dem pigs? I ain't smelt no fresh pork fryin' in Tickfall."

" The thief takes it across Dorfoche Lake in a skiff and sells the fresh meat to that wop gang who are buiiding the railroad spur. Of course, the wops know the meat is stolen, but I cain't get anything from them."

" Who you think is doin' it?" Skeeter asked.

" That's what I want you to help me find out," the sheriff replied. " The man may come from this town or he may spend his money here. Tip me off if you find a negro who seems to have plenty of money and no visible means of support."

Skeeter had worked in harmony with the sheriff for many years. He had lived most of his life in a house on Flournoy's premises. As he would have expressed it, he was " the sheriff's white nigger."

" I's jes' de man to he'p, Marse John," he replied. " Since pro'bition come in style an' I got to runnin' dis durn sody-pop-ginger-slop mess of a soft-drink stan', de nigger whut comes in here to git a drink is flush an' is huntin' somepin wuthless to spend his money on."

The sheriff had not been gone ten minutes when a negro entered the place whose face was a picture of distress. Pack Egger looked up from his wood-carving, half rose to his feet, and then slumped back into his chair, his head bent over the top of the table again and his shoulders acquiring a more pronounced droop as he proceeded with his idle work.

The new arrival was a man named Lee Rock and lived in a little cabin on a little farm where the Coolie bayou poured into the Little Moccasin swamp and merged its waters in that great sink of mud and vegetation.

" I needs he'p, Skeeter," he said in a miserable whine. " My maw's been sick all summer. She's got de cornsumption an' I been waitin' on her all summer an' ain't been able to do no wuck. I done spent all de money I got an' now I needs mo' money.

Kin you lend me de loant of twenty dollars?"

"I ain't got twenty dollars, Lee," Skeeter replied earnestly. "No nigger in the worl' ain't got dat much money."

"I guess I got to git me a paper an' mosey aroun' beggin' amongst de whites," Lee whined. "I kin git two bits from one man an' fo' bits from de yuther wid plenty cussin' throwed in. But it'll take me a long time to colleck all de money I needs an' I oughter git back home. My maw needs me."

At that moment Pack Egger looked up from the table. Thrusting his hand into his pocket he brought out a small leather case. He came to where Lee was standing and brought forth three twenty dollar bills. Handing one to the needy man, he said:

"I lends you dis here money because yo' maw is sick."

No conceivable events could have produced a greater sensation in the minds of the two men who witnessed this. Lee Rock found himself accepting a twenty dollar loan from a man he had never seen before and whose name he had never heard, accepting it gratefully and muttering inarticulate thanks, wondering what it was all about and how this perfectly miraculous thing had come to pass.

Skeeter stood in pop-eyed, open-mouthed consternation. Where did this ragged tramp get so much money? If he brought it with him, why was he so nearly starved upon his arrival in town? If he had acquired it since his arrival, how?

Up to that time Skeeter had paid him no wages. Surely here was a man with plenty of money and no visible means of support which would enable him to accumulate such a sum in a short time.

Then Skeeter got another jolt; he remembered how when the sheriff unexpectedly entered the wood-carver's knife had slipped and spoiled his design!

Surely, Skeeter thought, there never had been before such a stupid negro as Pack. He had heard all that the sheriff had said, and yet, a few minutes later, he was lending money like a bank and displaying funds whose acquisition was mysterious and open to suspicion.

Pack Egger roughly thrust aside the clumsy efforts of Lee Rock to thank him and turned and walked out of the Hen-scratch. Lee seemed to be overcome with emotion, both gratitude and surprise. He tossed his hat upon the table where Pack had been working and sat down in the chair which Pack had vacated, mopping his perspiring face upon his ragged shirt-sleeve.

Then just as Pack entered the room again, Lee picked up his hat by the crown and walked out, holding his hat in his hand until he was out of doors. Pack busied himself behind the counter, a twisted grin upon his good-natured face. Now and then he glanced toward the door through which Lee had made his exit and shook his head as if in perplexity.

Half an hour later he walked over to the table to resume his unfinished task. He thrust his hand into his pocket for his knife and could not find it. He searched the room and made inquiries of Skeeter. In a corner of the pocket in which he was accustomed to carry his knife he found a tiny hole. It seemed to him that the hole was too small for the knife to go through. Then he started on a back trail over the places he had visited when he left the Hen-scratch. But he could not find it.

While he was gone, Vinegar Atts, the negro preacher, entered, and Skeeter greeted him in great excitement.

"I's jes' made a new discovery, Revun!" Skeeter exclaimed. "Somebody's stealin' hawgs an' de sheriff tole me to look out fer de nigger whut had too much money fer his job. An' dis here Pack Egger jes' flashed three new twenty dollar bills an' loant one to a nigger he never seed befo' jes' because dat nigger needed de loan fer his sick maw."

"Dis looks like cullud sawsiety is gwine hab somepin to talk about," Vinegar said with satisfaction. "Us ain't had no scandal in dis town for a long time an' now all us niggers is fixin' to go to the cotehouse an' watch a lawsuit."

"It looks kinder soupspicious to me," Skeeter remarked. "Pack is shore usin' dat knife fer some yuther puppus dan to cut up all my tables."

"Le's keep our eyes on dat nigger,"

Vinegar exclaimed. "You watch him in here an' I'll watch him outside."

"He's up to some new trick now," Skeeter said. "He pertends like he done lost dat fancy knife of his'n. He calls hisse'f huntin' fer dat knife now."

"He'll find it," Vinegar declared. "He needs dat knife in his butcher business."

"A nigger whut'll steal hawgs will steal anything," Skeeter said in a perplexed tone. "But I knows he is honest in dis place of bizziness."

"Ain't nothin' in here wuth stealin'," Vinegar snorted.

"Oh, I don't know," Skeeter snapped. "I ain't got nothin' to gib away."

"Excusin' dat, look at dis fack," Vinegar said. "Is you ever knowed a fox to hunt an' kill close to its own den? Naw! Dat's how come Pack is honest wid you. We'll watch him. Dat's our word—watch him!"

IV.

Two days later the sheriff stopped his automobile at the Hen-scratch and said to Skeeter Butts:

"I want you to go out to the swamp with me."

In a brief time they were standing under a large oak tree where two hogs had been butchered.

"Do you see any clew, Skeeter?" the sheriff smiled. "You've been fooling with detective jobs all your life—if you are a good detective you may find something really important."

Skeeter studied the ground, hunted footprints, and found nothing but the ordinary and disgusting details of the butchery. Then the sheriff indicated where the thoughtless criminal had left his mark and a sure sign of identification.

It was Pack Egger's hunting knife.

"Dat ain't a clew, Marse John," Skeeter exclaimed. "Dat's a dead giveaway. Dat knife belongs to a nigger whut wucks in de Hen-scratch wid me."

Then Skeeter told what he knew. When he had finished the sheriff slowly shook his head.

"Those hogs were butchered last night," the sheriff said, pointing to the blood freshly congealed upon the blade. "The man stuck the point of the blade in the bark of this tree while he wiped his hands or while he was carrying the carcasses down to the skiff in the bayou. In any case, he forgot the knife."

He pulled the blade from the bark of the tree and handed the knife to Skeeter.

"Take this knife back to Pack Egger," Flournoy said.

"Ain't you gwine take him up?" Skeeter inquired in a surprised tone.

"No. Just tell him I said to be more careful with his knife after this," the sheriff answered.

This astounding action left Skeeter completely mystified. This was not like the sheriff at all.

"You mean you wants me to find out who am stealin' dem hawgs?" Skeeter inquired.

"You've guessed it."

"Why, Marse John, it's puffeckly plain, Pack done it."

"No. He did not. But if you will show Pack the knife, he will tell you who did."

The two walked back to where they had parked the automobile and rode back to town, the sheriff smiling as he watched Skeeter holding the bloody knife between his thumb and forefinger all the way, at intervals shaking his head and mumbling to himself.

Skeeter hurried to the Shoo-fly church and told Vinegar Atts what had happened. Vinegar opened his eyes wide at the news, but answered just as the sheriff had spoken:

"Pack didn't kill dem hawgs."

"So Marse John say, but I b'lieves dis knife clew. It's like havin' a lock of de hair of the dawg dat bit you—dis is somepin to identify him by."

"I moves dat we advance by twos an' face Pack wid dis knife an' see whut he got to say," Vinegar proposed.

"I'll do de talkin' an' ef Pack starts to fight, I'll resign in yo' favor," Skeeter announced as the two walked together down the hill to the Hen-scratch.

Pack sat at a table sorrowfully inspecting some of his artistic handiwork of an earlier day before his knife was lost. Skeeter walked over to the table and with

a dramatic gesture laid the blood-stained knife on the table top beside Pack's hand.

With an easy, unconcerned movement Pack picked up the knife and with a good-natured smile he asked:

"Did Lee Rock gib it back to you?"

"I didn't know dat Lee Rock had it!" Skeeter exclaimed in surprise.

"It took me some time to think up whut become of it," Pack smiled. "But I remembered dat when I loant Lee dat twenty dollars an' went out of de house fer a minute I lef' my knife on de table like I always done. Lee sot down in my chair fer a minute an' laid his hat on de table over de knife. When he rambled out, he toted dis knife wid him under his hat."

"Lawd!" Skeeter sighed. "Dat's so—jes' like you narrates it."

And then the door opened and Lee Rock came in. Pack Egger hastily closed the blade of his knife and slipped it into his pocket.

Lee's garments were covered with mud, they hung in shreds and patches to his drooping form, and when he dropped down wearily upon a chair the legs of his pantaloons were split from the ankle up and both knees were exposed, making a ridiculous picture of trampish poverty and raggedness.

"My maw's dead," he said wearily, and a sigh hissed like hot steam from his parched and fever-smitten lips. "Now I got to git some money to put her in de groun'."

"When did de ole gal knock off?" Pack Egger asked in a tone of unfeeling indifference which shocked his auditors.

"Dis mawnin' soon."

"How much money does you need?" Pack inquired.

"It'll take about fawty dollars," Lee replied mournfully. "I guess I kin beg it from de white folks. Dey he'ps lib'ral sometimes to git a cullud pusson put under the groun'."

"In dis case, I'll bestow a few dollars to dat effeck myse'f," Pack assured him.

He opened his purse. It contained only two twenty dollar bills. Spreading them out upon the table, he pushed them across the half-carved face of a horse which had to be changed to a dog because the knife slipped. Then he rose and walked away without a word.

Lee Rock opened his mouth to speak, but no words were forthcoming. He swallowed three times, producing a rasping sound in his throat, and then in great embarrassment, mingling a sense of mystery, perplexity and gratitude, he began to rub his bare right knee with the crown of his wool hat.

Skeeter Butts was suddenly overcome by this ridiculous sight. His chair, tipped on its hind legs, lost its equilibrium and came near precipitating him on his back on the floor. He struggled to save himself, strangled, coughed, spluttered, and at last achieved a standing position and announced:

"Lawd, I come mighty nigh swallerin' my lighted cigarette!"

V.

As Lee Rock came away from the little negro cemetery beside the Shoo-fly church after the interment of his mother, he was met in front of the courthouse by Sheriff Flournoy, arrested and conducted to jail.

"Dat's all right, Mr. Sheriff," Lee said quietly as he was locked in his cell. "I don't mind dis little bit of bad luck. I moughter felt wuss about it ef maw wus livin' yit. I jes' sold a little hawg-meat to git her some ice an' med'cine. I use ter come to dis town an' buy a little dabb of half-melted ice an' wrop it up in a cotton sack an' trot all de way home so she could git a couple drinks ice water to cool her fever. Yes, suh, it's all right now. Dis bad luck fer me don't count."

"Why did you steal Pack Egger's knife?" Flournoy asked.

"I didn't steal it, Marse John," Lee said earnestly. "I jes' tuck it fer a little while to butcher dem hawgs wid. I knowed maw warn't fer long an' I aimed to hand it back."

"Didn't you stick that knife up in the bark of the tree and leave it there to convey the impression and create the suspicion that Pack was the hog thief?" Flournoy snapped.

"Impress—soupspicion? Naw, suh. I warn't plannin' to accuse or slanderize nobody. I was jes' wuckin' aroun' wid trouble on my mind an' I lose dat knife. I ain't know whut become of it till yit."

"I found it stuck in a tree."

"Yes, suh. Den I'm glad dat Pack kin git it back agin. He sot a powerful lot of store by dat knife an' he's a noble nigger man, kinder free wid his money—an' he don't deserve to lose it."

It is almost impossible to convey with printed words the impression made by this humble negro, accused of theft, freely admitting it, and yet so apparently free from the consciousness of guilt and wrongdoing. The pity and the pathos of the situation Flournoy had felt many other times in his career. And now this ragged, mud-caked, poverty-stricken, grief-oppressed negro explaining his conduct in a sweet minor voice which throbbed with pain, looking into the sheriff's face with the mild, apologetic eyes of a hound—the little sun-baked jail seemed to sound with a low moan, and the sheriff felt real compassion for the pitiful man who clumsily tried to cover his bare knees from the white man's eyes with the crown of his battered wool hat.

"When you goes, Mr. Sheriff, I hopes you will send Skeeter Butts an' Pack Egger down to the jailhouse to see me. I craves to speak a few words to 'em befo' I gits toted away."

When Flournoy went back to his office he found Pack Egger waiting for him, sitting alone beside his desk.

"Evenin', Marse John," he said quietly. "Do you happen to rickoleck who I might be?"

"I knew you the first time I ever saw you since your return," the sheriff smiled. "Twenty-four years have not made so much difference in your appearance. Your name is Funch Furlo and you blew up your cabin with dynamite and lit out."

"You got me right, Marse John," Furlo chuckled. "I remember you bought my weddin' licenses an' stood up at my weddin' an' gimme a dollar when my baby was bawned."

"That's right," Flournoy said. "And now what can I do for you?"

"Gawd knows, Marse John," Funch Farlo said miserably. "I come to dis town wid only sixty dollars—sold eve'ything I had, even my good clothes to git it, an' I traveled in rags an' went hongry to git here wid dem dollars—an' now I done spent it all."

"What went with it?" Flournoy asked.

"Eve'y dime went to dat sick woman whut died of cornsumption an' wus buried in de graveyard to-day," Funch said simply.

"Why did you give it to her?"

"Because—because," Funch swallowed with difficulty and spoke in a voice which strangled in his throat. "Because dat woman was my wife—de one dat you he'ped me marry, and when de big blow-off come you got me a deevorce. I heard tell dat she wus livin' here an' sick an' I got my little money together an' come here to be close to her an' sonny."

"Then this nigger who calls himself Lee Rock is your—good gosh!" Flournoy broke off.

"Suttinly," Furlo nodded, when he saw that the sheriff was struck by surprise. "De man whut is locked in jail for hawg-stealin' is my little boy."

Flournoy jerked his handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the sweat from his face.

"Don't that beat the devil!" he exclaimed.

"It's shore devilish hard, Marse John," the colored man said sadly.

At this juncture a small negro boy named Little Bit stuck his head within the door of the office and said:

"Marse John, Skeeter Butts is at de jail an' axes you, please, suh, come over dar right away."

"You come with me," Flournoy commanded, and the two men walked side by side across the courthouse lawn.

They found Skeeter prancing up and down the corridor beside the cells in a St. Vitus' dance of excitement.

"Marse John," he howled. "Does you know dat dese two cullud men is kinnery?"

"Yes. They are father and son," Flournoy replied.

"Ef anybody or anything b'longs to you,

you kin do whut you pleases wid it, cain't you, Marse John?" Skeeter demanded.

"I suppose so, under certain restrictions."

"Well, suh, dis here nigger hawg-thief belongs to you, Marse John," Skeeter exclaimed in great excitement. "Look! He's branded jes' like a yearlin' calf!"

He jerked the wool hat off of Lee Rock's bare knee and there on a dark background of Ethiopian skin was a white letter, perfectly formed—the letter F.

"Dis here nigger is your'n, Marse John," Skeeter laughed, and the laughter floated upon tears of excitement and pity. "Cain't you turn yo' own nigger loose?"

"No!" Flournoy answered. "He cannot be legally released from custody merely because he fell down on my branding iron twenty years ago and burned his knee!"

"Custody! Custody!" Skeeter exclaimed.

Then Skeeter turned around three times and staggered like one who was about to fall in a fit. He thrust his brown hand into the inside pocket of his coat and brought forth a folded paper. Courteously but with the easy familiarity of one who had spent his life in Flournoy's home and was sure of causing no offense, he said:

"Mr Sheriff, I serves dis here paper on you now—in the name of de law!"

"What the devil is that?" Flournoy demanded in gruff tones which carried a note of amusement.

"It's a writ of deevorcement, Marse John," Skeeter said, as he handed him the paper. "It gives a absolute deevorce to Funch Furlo an' de *custody of de child.*"

A hundred tiny wrinkles formed around the eyes of the fun-loving, big-hearted sheriff. A soft glow formed in those eyes as they rested upon Skeeter, a glance that is duplicated nowhere else on earth except in the eyes of a Southern white man when he gazes upon that "brother in black" whom he has cared for, protected, helped, and in whose company he has derived happiness through the years. Skeeter knew he had made a hit with his white friend.

The sheriff slipped a key in the lock of the cell door and swung the door open. Motioning the prisoner to come out with the hand which still held the paper that had been served upon him, he led the father and son to the outer door of the jail and opened that. Then, handing the paper to Funch Furlo, he touched the prisoner upon the shoulder and said:

"I now give you the custody of the child."

Both men dropped down upon the steps of the jail and began sobbing loud enough to be heard for two blocks. The sheriff thrust his hand into his pocket and brought forth a dollar for each of them.

"Get out!" he bawled, trying to be heard above the racket they were making. "It's against the law to howl like that! If you don't go now I'll arrest you for disturbing the peace!"

Then he stood in the door of the empty jail and watched the father and son move down the dusty highway toward the cabin on the Coolie bayou.

A turn in the road—both disappeared from sight as if swallowed up in the glory of the setting sun.

THE END

THE LITTLE BIRD

A BIRDIE built a tiny nest
In our old apple tree,
I wonder if he is the one
Tells mother tales of me.

Margaret G. Hays.
10 A

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