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THE BLUE BOOK MAGAZINE

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7

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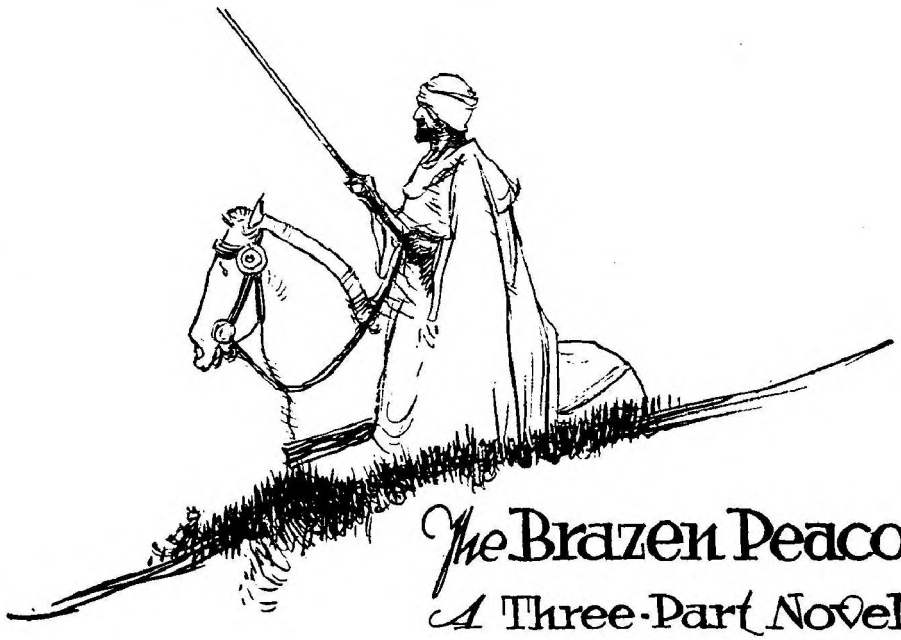


The Brazen Peacock

A Three-Part Novel

By H. Bedford Jones

CHAPTER I

To tell the whole history of one man requires a thousand and fourscore volumes; because no man's life is of himself alone, and no scribe may indite the entirety thereof.—Al Barani.

A SLEETY rain was increasing the dusk as the limousine drew up beneath the wide porte-cochère of a stately mansion in Central Park West. The chauffeur whipped open the door. Howard Z. Fraser left the limousine and the cold rain and entered into the luxurious loneliness which he called home.

"Come to the library," he said to Winkler when the latter took his coat and hat.

He passed on through the empty rooms; the massive furnishings and wondrous blends of color—for which he had paid the decorators their thousands—seemed not to appeal to him. He passed on to a room which no decorator had mishandled, the one room in this great mansion which Fraser could rightly call his own, the one room which he loved.

It was a bare room. On the floor was a Kurdish rug, much tattered, reeking of camels and nameless dirt; Fraser had fetched it from the Orient in other years. A battered old desk, an armchair which showed bulging springs, two or three photographs on the walls, a cheap bookcase that sagged beneath the weight of thumbed mining reports, fantastic works of fiction, popular magazines—most amazing surroundings to be chosen by this wizard of oil, mining and transportation! But Howard Z. Fraser had not chosen these things. He had begun with them, years ago, and now cherished them as old friends from the estate of poverty.

Fraser took a cigaret from the open tantalus, lighted it and sank into the armchair. He tried to smoke, but found no pleasure of the tobacco. While he sat gazing, Winkler brought in a cocktail, because it was the thing to do, though Fraser invariably ignored it.

Winkler was a tall, emaciated man of no apparent emotions. Twenty years as the Fraser's family butler had frozen Winkler into the perfectly proper, placid servant that he was. Yet upon occasion, when addressed as a human being, he could show just the interest one desires in a confidant—no more, no less. *Précis!* There were unplumbed deeps to Winkler, however.

"Winkler," said Fraser abruptly, as the other set down his tray, "do you know how old I am?"

"Yes sir. Forty-eight next December, sir."

"A man of forty-seven isn't good for much, is he?"

"If I may remark, sir, you are young for your age."

"A kindly but abominable lie, Winkler."

FRASER glanced again at the mirror. He saw but a faint reflection of the features of his lost son—the son whom he had goaded into fleeing afar. His own hair was prematurely gray. His face was a bit heavy, very aggressive, the mouth clenched and the eyes masterful, the hawk-nose thin and biting: the face of one who had worked hard, suffered much, learned to repress self.

One sensed here a man of indomitable force and action, a man of strong, heady impulse eased by the cooler reason of age, a man given not to ethics but to results—a materialist whose greatest sin was defeat, whose greatest crime was failure. Such indeed was Howard Z. Fraser, whose untold wealth and commercial interests extended everywhere, into every country, and whose only moral code was to live clean and to fight like hell.

"A lie, Winkler," he repeated. "I look nearly sixty. I wish to ask you something!"

"Yes sir."

"Do you remember a certain rainy night like this, over two years ago; and do you recall what transpired in this room then?"

The calm, undistinguished features of Winkler became momentarily ruffled, as a calm pool of water is ruffled by the leap of a fish.

"Yes sir."

"You were present during that interview, Winkler. It was the last time I saw Bob. Do you recall the conversation between Bob and me?"

"I do, sir."

Fraser seemed about to say something, then checked himself. He looked again at the mirror. His lips slowly clenched.

Like other men of affairs, he had gone to Washington at a dollar a year. Now he was home once more in New York; but he was not happy; work could not brighten the winter of his discontent. He was a bitterly hard man; he had built up large things, and he was without scruples. In his younger days he had spent some time in the Orient, laying there the foundations upon which had been erected his imposing edifice of wealth and power. The Orient, however, had not affected the harsh crudity of his nature. He was an extremist, and he had been a cynic; but during the past two years he had been whelmed under a tide of loneliness. Now, on trying to return to his own business, he had found it vain. So he had tried to find again the son who was lost; and he had failed.

It was evening in New York, but upon the other side of the world it was morning. Fraser felt a certain abominable reek penetrating to his thin nostrils; he glanced down at the tattered and dirty old Kurdish rug. He felt himself queerly drawn to that other side of the world where his son had vanished; he felt drawn by an attraction deeper than himself, an attraction which he could not resist. Perhaps there was something of mental telepathy in this attraction. Across the world, at this moment, another man had Fraser heavily in mind; destiny moves strangely in these matters.

SUDDENLY Fraser looked up at the motionless servant. His face hardened into iron.

"Winkler, if you recall that conversation, kindly repeat it word for word."

Again the calm countenance became ruffled. "If you please, sir—"

"Repeat it!" snapped Fraser, stirring uneasily. "Cut out the pose, and do as I say!"

Winkler drew a deep breath. "Well, sir, Mr. Robert had been drinking, and you had been working very hard indeed. You used harsh words, sir. Mr. Robert admitted that they were justified. You became angry, and mentioned your intention of cutting him adrift, and he—er—"

"Go on," said Fraser in a dead voice, as Winkler paused.

"He told you to go to hell with your money, sir, that he wanted none of it. And then, sir, you—you flared up and called him—"

Winkler's voice fell away, but Fraser repeated his curt command.

"Go on."

Obeying the order, Winkler repeated what Fraser had called his son. It was not a nice term. It was not what a gentleman would have said. It was what a rough man would call his own son only in the bitter heat of passion—not meaning the words, but deeming his son a wastrel and a drunken blackguard, useless and inefficient.

"Well?" prompted Fraser, his voice still cold and dead. "Then what?"

"Mr. Robert struck you, sir, and left the house."

"Struck me?" Fraser uttered a cackle of bitter laughter. "Knocked hell out of me, you mean! And right! If he hadn't done it, he'd have been worse than yellow. I suppose, Winkler, you slipped him some money before he left?"

The expressionless face of Winkler hardened into surprisingly icy lines.

"If I may say so, sir, that is none of your business."

"Ah!" Fraser glanced up at him suddenly, keenly, his blue eyes hard as stone. "Ah! Your impassivity has been pierced, eh? Good! Now, then, Winkler, speak up! You have theories; I haven't known you twenty years for nothing! Speak up and tell me exactly how this affair with Bob struck you; tell me just where I went astray with him."

Winkler met the flinty blue eyes with an even flintier gaze.

"I would rather, sir, that you did not insist."

"I do insist," said Fraser acidly. "I want your frank opinion—Heaven knows I should have asked for it long ago!"

Winkler permitted himself a shrug of resignation.

"Very well," he answered in a changed voice. "My opinion is that Mr. Robert did exactly the right thing when he knocked you across that desk. For years, ever since the death of Mrs. Fraser, Mr. Robert was allowed to do as he wished. You were always too busy to give him any attention except when he got into trouble and you were forced to remember his existence. You considered your duty done when you gave him money to spend.

"I am not a family man myself, sir, but I could tell that this state of things would end up in disaster. It was your own fault, sir—your fault entirely. Of course, in his words to you on that evening, one must admit that Mr. Robert spoke most injudiciously. That is all. I do not think that you can complain of my services, sir. If you will write me a brief character, I shall have my things packed immediately."

He turned to leave the room. Fraser's voice halted him.

"Wait! You mean that you are leaving me?"

"I hardly fancy that you would care to have me stay, sir, after—"

"Winkler, I'm an old fool; that's the truth." Fraser slumped down a little in his chair. "You sha'n't leave. In fact, I'll need you during the next few months, and Bob will need you also. I've not had a word from him since he left here. However, I presume he wrote you?"

"He did, sir."

"Then you may know that he joined the British army, was sent to Mesopotamia, has been there ever since, and has become an officer on the Intelligence staff."

"Yes sir." Winkler waited, imperturbable.

"I sent him a cable last week, Winkler—the first word I've addressed to him since that night in this room. I apologized for what had happened and requested him to come home at once. A reply came today—but not from Bob. It came from his former commanding officer!"

"Former?" Winkler licked his lips suddenly. "You—you don't mean—"

Fraser threw out his hands in a gesture of helplessness.

"No, not dead, thank God! But lost, Winkler—lost! He—"

"Where?" said Winkler thickly. "Where was this?"

"Bagdad. After the armistice he asked for discharge and got it. They don't know where he is—somewhere up in the hills exploring a ruin. There were two of them, Bob and some fool Englishman—an archaeologist. They went off together and vanished. Nobody has time to search, I suppose."

"Your agents in Palestine and Persia—"

"Everything is shot to pieces over there." Fraser shook his head. "I've got to start an entirely new organization—and handle it in person. There are big pick-

ings to be had in that country, and I mean to get in on them—"

"Damn!" said Winkler, blinking suddenly. "Damn your pickings! Have you no heart? Have you no idea except money—"

Fraser snarled, wolflike—bared his fangs, cursing.

"Don't you know me, you fool?" he finished. "I'm going after the boy."

"To that country? Yourself?"

"Think I'm too damned old and useless, do you? Think I'm worked out, eh? You've got another think coming. I'm going, and I intend to find my boy! If he's come to grief, Lord help the man that did it! I've got friends there still, maybe. If old Tahir Beg is still alive, he'll ride through all hell with me for friendship; twenty years ago we rode and did our killing together—I hope he's still living.

"I've made myself what I am. I don't claim to be any highfalutin' nobility or blueblood. I'm an American! I know I'm rough—I was made rough, and it was rough work put me where I am today. . . . . About Bob, now; I was wrong in the old days, wrong in trying to handle him roughly that night. He should have had enough sense to know that a man does not mean a cuss-word literally. Well, no matter! I'm going over there, and you're going with me."

Winkler stood aghast, then suddenly remembered his position.

"If I may say so, sir," he suggested with some agitation, "it's hardly feasible! For one thing, transportation—"

Fraser named his yacht. "The *Geraldine* is out of the Government service. She's making ready for the run now. We leave in three days—go direct to Bagdad."

"But, sir, the British government—"

"Has my credentials on the way from Washington. I've handled things by wire today." Fraser smiled grimly. "A little pep left in the old man, eh?"

"Yes sir. But among the heathen, sir—"

"Damn the heathen, and you too! Haven't I been there before, you blithering idiot? Didn't I spend two years in Persia and Kurdistan looking for oil—and finding it? Haven't I friends there among the heathen? I can pick up the language again in a few weeks—used to know it like a book. You go and pack up."

"Yes sir." Winkler hesitated. "Just the two of us, sir?"

"Yes. We leave the yacht at Bagdad, if we can get up the river, and go by rail to Samara, where we'll meet Bob's commander. We'll get full information there, then go after the boy. Want to back out, do you?"

"Not I, sir." Winkler discreetly closed the library door before allowing himself to grin widely.

Fraser rose to his feet when he was alone and took a book from the mantel. One observed now that his shoulders were remarkably square; the sense of his virility was much increased by this square width, and by the powerful set of his head. From the book he took a small photograph. One might have fancied that his hard blue eyes grew suspiciously moist as he gazed at the picture. It was the picture of a boy.

ON the evening these things happened in New York, it was morning upon the other side the world. Here, in a very different setting and atmosphere, another man was also talking of Bob Fraser—a man fully as remarkable in his own sphere as was Howard Z. Fraser in the sphere of commerce. This man was named Tahir Beg.

Tahir Beg, although he lived and held rule among the Hamavand Kurds, was by birth a scion of the proudest and wildest of all the tribes of the Persian borderland—the Aormani, who acknowledge the rule of no suzerain, and who claim descent from Rustam, the titular hero of Persia.

Except for his five cartridge-belts, his rifle and pistols, his gayly embroidered dress and silk turban, Tahir Beg might have posed for a Norse viking. No sign of gray had touched his yellow hair, although he had seen fifty winters. In his rocklike, ruggedly handsome features blazed eyes of an icy, piercing gray, now cruel with unrestrained passion, now tender beyond belief.

The long yellow mustache that hung six inches below his lips did not hide the steely mouth and massive chin, the long, powerful jaw. Tahir Beg stood six feet four in his boots, and in all his world there was but one person who could meet his anger without quailing. To this person he was now talking.

"Little jewel of the hills," he said gently, "word has come that an Englishman lies ill at Erbil. The name is the name of a friend of my youth, although there is faint chance that the two men are the same, for

Englishmen and Americans all have names that sound alike. Still, I am going to protect this dying man because of a certain ancient friendship. What shall I bring you from Erbil, little jewel?"

The girl before him smiled into his eyes. She answered him in Persian, not in Kurdish.

"Is it not true, my father, that the Englishmen have driven the Turks out of all the land? Then bring me this Englishman, if he is not dead. I want to see one of them!"

Tahir Beg laughed hugely at this. None the less in his piercing gray eyes sat a strange wonder and uneasiness, as though some inner thing troubled him after many years.

"By the lord of the faithful!" He swore, like a true Shi'a, by Ali. "An Englishman rather than silks or jewels? So be it. If this man, Agha Fraser, should by any chance be my ancient friend, then I shall bring him; Englishmen and Americans are the same breed. Mind you, he was the only man who could ever best me at fighting or wrestling! Aie, but he was wild in his rage!"

A swift merriment leaped to the girl's face.

"Oh!" she cried. "Then bring him, bring him, and let him fight you!"

Tahir Beg roared with laughter, and rightly. Many a man had courted this daughter of his; yet her heart had inclined to none; and among the Kurds, the people of freedom, there is great liberty as regards marriage. Also Tahir Beg had announced that no man might woo the daughter unless man enough to fight the father and beat him—a thing which no man yet had done. Thus, Tahir Beg preserved to himself the one thing he loved in the world. The remainder of his family were long since dead, destroyed by the Turks.

SO Tahir Bag departed northward toward Erbil, swinging up the valley on his fine horse, with another fine horse trailing behind. He rode alone, as he was ever wont to ride; Tahir Beg feared neither brigand nor feudist foe. He might be gone a week or a month, but he was never known to come home poorer than when he had departed. Behind him, in the valley nestling under the snowy mountains, she whom all men knew as the daughter of Tahir Beg held his house immaculate against his return, and bore herself with the proud freedom of the Kurdish woman. But this girl was not a woman of the Kurds; nor was she any daughter of Tahir Beg—although this was known only to Tahir Beg and one other.

To the south of the Hamavand country, and roughly dividing their territory from that ruled by the Jaf tribes, lay Sulaimanieh, a city ruled and ruined by a family of Shaiks or religious leaders. This was a family strong in crime, in ruthless and cruel power, in long and bloody association with the Turk. Young Shaik Nuri, newly come to rule, was even then departing for Samara in order to interview the British authorities and make arrangements that would sustain him in power under the new lords of the land.

Now, Samara lay in the Tigris valley, over the Kara Dagh mountains to the southwest; but Shaik Nuri rode to the north. He did this because he had business in Erbil, where lived his uncle Kadir. A wily old fox was Kadir, who had lived long among the Turks and who knew the outside world very well. Kadir had too many blood-feuds on his hands to venture south into Kurdish territory, for in his day Kadir had led many Turkish troops to massacre and rapine among the mountains. So the old fox stayed in Erbil.

Shaik Nuri desired to consult Kadir and learn of the fox's wisdom before seeing the British; he had been somewhat concerned in the Armenian massacres, and was not certain what lies to tell. Thus it happened that Shaik Nuri summoned his horsemen and rode north from the gasping city which the bloody misrule of his house had transformed from a great trading center into a ruined town shunned by all travelers.

Shaik Nuri had never heard of Tahir Beg, although the latter might have heard of him. He bore letters to the Hamavand chiefs, and was given safe-conduct through their country. Halting for a meal near the stead of Tahir Beg, he chanced to see the chieftain's daughter: and seeing her, he was amazed. His men dutifully made inquiries for him, and Shaik Nuri realized at once that here was a prize well worth the winning.

He said nothing, as was his fashion, and rode on toward Erbil with the image of Tahir Beg's daughter breeding maggots in his evil brain. Why not send his uncle Kadir down to Samara to parley with the

British? Then he himself could be free to cast his nets! And already Shaik Nuri had a shrewd suspicion as to what net he would cast for that girl.

Marry her he could not, for already he had the lawful number of wives, and the men of Sulaimanieh are famed for their rabid fanaticism in the law of Islam. However, these things did not worry Shaik Nuri. He was a young man, of unbridled passion, and he gave small heed to affairs of religion. Looking back at the riders who followed him, he saw among them more than one man wearing a shirt close-buttoned about his neck—which is not Kurdish fashion; and seeing them, Shaik Nuri laughed softly to himself. These men had come out of Persia to him, and they were worshipers of Satan; and Shaik Nuri had made alliance with their chief. So Shaik Nuri saw what manner of net he would use when he returned home, and smiled again.

Having woven thus the tangled skein of men's lives, the fates laid it aside for the deeds of men to finish.

CHAPTER II

None of us is allowed to utter his name, nor anything that resembles it.—The Black Book.

"POOR old Harrowgate!" muttered Bob Fraser. He stared about the bare, whitewashed little room with its barred window. "Poor old Harrowgate!"

An hour previously Harrowgate had been buried. Now Bob Fraser, sitting in the little room in the upper story of the Erbil caravanserai, considered his position and found it anything but pleasant.

Harrowgate, an archæologist of some eminence, had been in the intelligence section of the "Mespot" expeditionary force. With peace, the two friends had left the army, had come up north to Erbil. It was Harrowgate's dream, this coming to Erbil. Fraser had accompanied him out of friendship, curiosity, vivid interest.

Beneath the town of Erbil was a mountain, a monstrous mound rising from the valley. In that mound lay buried the temples of Ishtar, for a thousand years the greatest shrine of the ancient world—during two thousand years more, lost in ruins. Harrowgate dreamed of digging into that great mound. Then, at the very outset, fever smote the dreamer; and now he was dead and gone, buried in the desolate cemetery outside town. This place was the ancient Arbela, where Alexander had stepped to the world's throne. Bob Fraser reflected upon the fact with bitter irony, applying it to his own position.

The caravanserai was decent and comfortable. Fraser had a little money, a good knowledge of Kurdish and Persian, unlimited ambition and no prospects. As he sat there sucking at his pipe, he looked very unlike the dissipated young scamp who had left New York years previously. Sun and desert had bitten him to a blackish red, through which pierced the startling clearness of his blue eyes. His hair was sun-bleached to a tow-color. His face, perched above abnormally wide shoulders, was not handsome. It was marked by a large, thin-curved nose, a straight, hard mouth, and harshly bitter lines. It was the face of one who had worked hard, suffered much and learned self-repression. Bob Fraser had been forgetting how to smile. He looked like a man of thirty instead of twenty-four. Yet in his face was a wealth of character.

"Cursed if I know what to do!" he reflected gloomily, refilling his pipe. "I've money enough to get out of the country—if I want to go. But what then? Day labor? Not if I can help it. Day labor in the tropics is plain hell."

A LOUD and arrogant knocking at the door interrupted his cogitations. "Come in!" called Fraser in Kurdish. The door opened to admit Tahir Beg.

"Salamun 'alaikum!" proclaimed the chieftain sonorously, twirling his mustaches.

"'Alaikum as salam—and with you, peace!" Fraser rose. He wondered what this splendid ruffian wanted with him, and why the gray eyes devoured him with such fierce intensity. Some new attempt at graft or robbery, perhaps.

Tahir Beg swaggered into the room, slammed the door behind him with a fine disdain for its hinges, and kept his gaze fastened upon Fraser.

"Bi haqq i 'amiru'l mu'minin!" he ejaculated in Persian. "Know you the tongue of Shiraz? And from what part of Frangistan come you?"

Fraser answered in the same tongue, for he had become used to this direct curiosity

in his personal affairs, which was a custom of the land.

"I do not come from Frangistan, but from a farther land, from America."

"By the right of the lord of the faithful!" exclaimed Tahir Beg again, delight leaping into his eyes. "Sixteen years ago there was a man from America, a man named Fraser. I heard that one named Agha Farizur lay here dying, and I came to see. Now I find that the report carried the name amiss; it was another man who lay ill, and who is now dead. Yet you are here, and it is evident that you are your father's son! Your father was my friend."

"Ah!" Bob Fraser was startled, incredulous. "You knew my father?"

Although he was aware that during his own childhood his father had been in this land, he had not expected any such recognition as this. Indeed, his father had seldom spoken of the time spent in Persia. It was a subject on which the lips of Howard Z. Fraser seemed closed.

"Somewhat — somewhat!" The Kurd laughed fiercely. "I am Gholam Ali Tahir Beg Aorami. Your father was my friend and comrade, and we fought stirrup to stirrup; therefore you are my friend. If it please you to ride home with me, Allah will honor my house greatly."

Tahir Beg shook hands and seated himself. Fraser produced a samovar and provisions, and brewed tea; his guest gladly laid aside the Kurdish cigarets of powdered tobacco in favor of the English brand offered him, and fell to talking.

"Years ago," reflected Tahir Beg, covertly studying his host, "this was a proper land, with Turks and Persians and Russians fighting each other. Today the good old times are gone. The English rule in the valleys, or will rule shortly; there will be no more of the grand riding and fighting I had with your father! However," he added resignedly, "one can always ride into Persia if nothing else offers, and in the hills the name of Englishman is unknown. There is still mercy in Allah's dispensation —God, the Compassionate, the Indivisible! Swords are still sharp in the hills. We may slay those who worship Shaitan."

FRASER shook his head. He had poured tea, and he was now repaying the scrutiny of Tahir Beg with a scrutiny equally close and keen.

"I seek no fighting, Tahir Beg; I've had my fill of that, the past two years. So you are living among the Hamavands, eh? A fighting people, from what I hear; a few years ago their warriors defied the whole Turkish army."

"I had some hand in that myself." Tahir Beg complacently stroked his long yellow mustache. "The Turks are fools and cowards; I am glad that the English have taken over the rule! You people and the English are all one. I remember when your father rode into the hills with me, and we carried off the girls from Sufiz—ah, he was a fighter, your father! And something of a devil, eh? We were young in those days, and the world was good."

"You do not look so old," said Fraser.

"Old? By Allah, thirty is too old after one passes it! Still," added the chieftain, "I think there are few men who can stand before me. Your father was one of them. You, by your shoulders, might be another. We must try—"

A knock sounded at the door. Fraser called to enter; the door opened to admit a boy of the town, who thrust at Fraser a small brass object.

"The charge is two piasters, *agha,*" he mumbled in the villainous local dialect, compounded of Turkish and Kurdish.

Fraser angrily protested the charge. The boy whiningly argued the matter, being content in the end to depart with half the amount demanded. As the boy turned from the door, Fraser saw him exchange a word with a dark-faced Kurd lingering in the corridor. Fraser stepped into the doorway. The Kurd came up to him with an insolent swagger.

"Listen to me, infidel!" said the Kurd. "Do you understand my tongue?"

"Perfectly," said Fraser, holding the brass object in his hand. "What do you want?"

"That brazen peacock." The Kurd thrust forward his hand as if to snatch the thing, but Fraser quietly put the object into his pocket, whereat the man cursed. "Hear and obey, infidel dog! My master is Shaik Nuri, whose word is law in the hills! He saw this brazen bird as it was being fetched to you; it is one which was stolen from him last week on the road, and he bade me bring it to him again. So hand it here—"

Fraser caught the Kurd's shoulder, whirled the insolent one around, and kicked him down the corridor.

"You and your master lie—take back

this message," he said, and with a last kick sent the messenger rolling down the stairway.

He returned to the room, to find Tahir Beg standing at the door, laughing heartily.

"By the lord of the faithful, that was your father's way!" chuckled the chieftain, and closed the door again when Fraser had entered. "This dog from Sulaimanieh learned a good lesson—there is no devil in all the land like Shaik Nuri, young though he be in years! And what was it that he so desired, brother?"

"This." Fraser drew the brazen object from his pocket. "I picked it up in Samara, and it was so corroded that when we came here, I left it with a merchant in the street of the brass workers to have it cleaned and polished. What it is I know not—some relic of antiquity, eh?"

TAHIR BEG examined the thing with interest. It was a conventionalized bird shape, and had once been elegantly chased, but the lines were now nearly effaced. Beneath it was a threaded projection, denoting that it was a part of some ornament or larger object. Obviously it was of great age.

"It is strange to me," said Tahir Beg, frowning, "and yet it has the look of Persian work. Somewhere I have seen something like it, but so many years ago that the memory has gone from me. Well! Since Shaik Nuri wants the thing, it has some value; keep it! Will you ride home with me? If so, let us be gone from this accursed city. This crowded abode of men stifles my lungs, and these insolent folk tempt me to bloodshed each moment!"

Fraser had already made his decision.

"Gladly," he assented. "In ten minutes I shall be ready. This Shaik Nuri seems to have little knowledge of men, to send so insolent a message to me! You know him?"

"I know of him," said Tahir Beg, watching Fraser while the latter packed into his saddlebags what he wished to take. "And no man knows good of him. He and his family have devastated a rich city, know no law save their own will, and are allied with all the rogues and thieves in the land. In these days of upheaval the Shaiks—for so the family and tribe are called—may do as they like with impunity. They were greatly concerned in the massacres of the Armenian folk during the war; they brought home much booty, filled their harems with young girls and learned many evil things."

"You were not concerned in those massacres, then?" said Fraser, pausing.

"I?" Tahir Beg puffed out his cheeks, and his eyes began to blaze. "Am I a butcher of sheep or a free man of the hills? By the lord of the faithful! It is not our way to ally ourselves with those Turcoman Kurds of the north, who serve the Turks! Bah!"

Save for the incident with the insolent visitor, Fraser might not have bothered to carry the brazen bird with him, since its weight was no trifle; for many days he had forgotten its very possession. However, he decided to take his companion's advice and so thrust the brass into a corner of his bags. After all, it might have some tangible value.

"Ready!" he exclaimed. "Your horse is here?"

"Mine, and a spare one for you."

"I have two—my own and that of my dead friend."

"So much the better, by Allah! We may have need of spare mounts. Let us go!"

Tahir Beg led the way from the corridor to the stairway that passed into the central courtyard of the inn, and Fraser, carrying his saddle-bags, followed. He had that morning sent off Harrowgate's few effects to Samara, and there was nothing to detain him here.

Leaving Tahir Beg to get the horses, Fraser sought the innkeeper and settled his score, arranging to leave some of his effects until his return. The host, a scowling fellow of the local Baban breed, gave him a keen glance.

"Have a care what road you follow, *agha*," he muttered into his beard. "Within the last few minutes there has been swift and bitter talk concerning you."

"Eh?" Fraser eyed him in surprise. "What mean you?"

"If I knew more, I might tell more," and the other shrugged. "There are more strangers here today than devils in hell, and I know little. May God requite your generosity and lighten the pains of hell for the dead infidel who was your friend! He was a good man."

FROWNING a little, Fraser turned to the courtyard, which was filled with a motley throng of travelers, beggars, merchants and peddlers. As he made his way

toward Tahir Beg, he did not wonder that the warning of his host had been vague; the place was a babel of tongues and dialects. The warning itself might well have been some ruse to provoke generosity.

As Fraser thought thus, he felt a hand clutch at his elbow and turned swiftly. A young man, handsomely dressed, was saluting him; speaking in Persian, he said smilingly:

"I am Nuri al Hallaj, Shaik of Sulaimanieh. I wish to ask your pardon for the disgraceful conduct of my man, and to crave a moment's speech with you."

Fraser was no little astonished at this speech, for Shaik Nuri was clearly not the type to offer apologies freely. He was a young man, handsome in a wild and ferocious manner; sensuality and cruelty were stamped in his whole countenance.

About the two men had gathered others; these, from their weapons and costumes, were southern Kurds, followers of the young chief. Fraser gathered from their looks that the bad Persian spoken by their master was not intelligible to them, for among the southern Kurds the tongue is almost unknown.

"I accept your courtesy, Shaik Nuri," answered Fraser in the same tongue, "and thank you for it. As for speech, however, I am leaving here immediately in some haste. If you have anything to say, let it be said here."

The dark eyes of the Shaik flashed for an instant, as though lighted by some inner fury at this brusque response; but still the red and sensual lips maintained their friendly smile.

"Very well." Nuri dropped into Kurdish. "It is of no great importance, perhaps. I am traveling toward the south, and learning that you were of the army of Frangistan, I thought that you might travel in my company and tell me of that army."

"I am not going thither," said Fraser shortly. "I am leaving here with a friend, whose road goes south and east."

Once more he caught that wild flash in the eyes of the young chieftain.

"Allah alone disposeth the ways of men!" was the answer. "It may be that I shall send my uncle Kadir to Samara to see these chiefs of Frangistan and make covenant with them. Would such a thing offend them, or must I go myself?"

"If your uncle bears letters giving him authority to speak for you," said Fraser, "no more is necessary. In return, kindly tell me the value of that brass bird, and why your man was so eager to obtain it."

The dark features of the young Shaik flushed at this question. One or two of these standing around gave Fraser fierce looks.

"By the prophet, the fool misunderstood my words!" Nuri broke into a laugh. "I pray you, pardon the error. If you come to Sulaimanieh, I shall be honored to have you as my guest."

FRASER expressed his thanks and took his departure. As he joined Tahir Beg, he caught a disjointed fragment of speech from one of Shaik Nuri's men, in which occurred the Arabic words *"ma al kabir"* or "great water"—a somewhat roundabout term which Fraser had sometimes heard applied to the Tigris or Euphrates. He thought nothing of it at this moment, since many Arabic words were flying in the air around him.

Tahir Beg grunted some comment on Shaik Nuri, but devoted himself entirely to clearing a way out of the crowded courtyard. After some difficulty this was accomplished. The two men rode through town and descended the winding road which led into the valley below the great mound. Tahir Beg rode in silence, examining the outspread country below them with fierce eyes and pulling at his long mustaches.

Once clear of the town, Fraser recounted his passage with the young chief.

"He lied like a Syrian," he concluded bluntly, "and except for provoking trouble, I should have told him so. His apology was said in Persian that his men might not understand it, and the fact angered me."

Tahir Beg nodded frowningly, but for a moment made no answer. He seemed to be pondering some subject, and paid no heed when Fraser repeated the warning of the innkeeper. Of a sudden he uttered a sharp ejaculation and flung up his head.

"Ah! Those men knew of me, and they knew much! I heard them asking about me. Plainly, they passed through the Hamavand country on their way north. Well, let that go; Allah knows that I have no desire to mingle with them or have aught to do with them!

"Listen, my brother! Just as you joined me, after your speech with that dog, one

of his men spoke of the river—"

"I heard him," interjected Fraser. The chieftain turned upon him a look pregnant with unuttered things. The gray eyes were piercing and alight with inner fire.

"Ah! How would you or I speak of the river? What word would we use?"

"The most natural word," answered Fraser, "would be *shatt*."

"By Allah, yes!" cried Tahir Beg, slapping his thigh a resounding thwack. "And the speaker wore, under his cloak, a shirt that came close up around his neck! Know you what that means?"

Fraser shook his head. It was evident that some violent excitement had gripped his companion, and he was vaguely disturbed by the fact. He felt that in Tahir Beg resided a wildly boyish spirit—a madcap lust after trouble and peril.

"You have heard of the Yezidis?" demanded the Kurd. "The infidels who worship Shaitan?"

"Vaguely. Devil-worshipers—"

"Aye!" Tahir Beg nodded emphatically. "They not only worship him, but they greatly venerate his name. They will never use a word like *shatt* which even resembles it in sound. By the lord of the faithful! That speaker was one of them!"

"They were broken by the Turk; many of them inhabit the mountains south of Aoraman, and I have heard that they have a new chieftain called Uthman al Hudr, who has gathered them about him in the Penjivan district. By Allah, I believe that Shaik Nuri has allied himself with this Al Hudr! They worship the symbol of the devil, a brazen peacock; always they refer to Shaitan by the name of Melek Taus, or King Peacock—"

"What!" Fraser started. "You mean that the—"

"Aye, the brazen bird, brother!" Tahir Beg bellowed out the words exultantly, furiously, gayly. "By the right of the lord of the faithful, it is one of their lost gods,—lost twenty years ago when the Turk swept them,—one of the seven images they have worshiped since the days of King Solomon, who wrought them from brass. Seven there were, and five were stolen by the Turks; and this is one of the five! And now it is known that you have it! Shaik Nuri, may Ali curse him, wanted it because he is allied with these idolaters! Praise be to God, there will be some excitement to brighten our days!"

Fraser was not so thankful. It did not seem to him very probable that the brazen bird in his saddlebags would cause much stir. What abode most in his mind was that Shaik Nuri had been instrumental in the Armenian massacres. It was this, perhaps, which had raised within him a detestation for that young chieftain.

So the two men rode up the valley toward the brave hills of Kurdistan.

CHAPTER III

One Who Cures the Hurt of Scorpions

As the two rode down the wide valley, they were saluted with much respect by all upon the road. Not only was Bob Fraser's uniform greeted hereabouts with awe, but the rich garb of Tahir Beg marked him as a chieftain. Under his camel hair *abba* was visible a superb garment of crimson velvet adorned with gold frogs, and instead of the usual Kurdish cap he wore a fine cashmere shawl taken in some Persian raid. The trappings of his horses were equally handsome.

They rode steadily through the day, and in the afternoon passed the gates of Altun Keupri and through the city; instead of keeping to the stony highway, Tahir Beg now turned off abruptly into the hill roads. He had no fear of wandering Kurds, and wished to avoid the town of Kirkuk.

They were out of the plain now, and entering upon rolling hills. Far to the east rose billow after billow of mountains culminating in the high snow-peaks of the Zagros ranges, on Persian soil, now reddened by the descending sun. There lay Kurdistan outspread before them—the land of the southern Kurds, mountaineers, free folk through the ages, as are all men of the highlands. More than one Turkish army had come to sore grief in those hills: and those deep valleys sheltered a people that bowed the knee to no conqueror.

As Tahir Beg rode, as he drew out of the dreary hot plain toward the cool keenness of the mountains, he broke into wild bursts of song. He was singing, thus, when they rode down into a little valley where a brook wound between willow trees, and where beside a clump of darker fig-trees stood a small house. Tahir Beg drew rein and studied the place.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "The house should be empty, but there is a traveler ahead of us. Forward, brother!"

In the doorway of the house, as they rode up, they perceived an old man standing and watching them. His dress was Kurdish, but his headgear, by which the various Kurd tribes are known, was a mere skull-cap bound about with a white kerchief; it told nothing. His long beard was grizzled and matted with dirt, and in a much-scarred face there was set one living eye of a glowing topaz hue. The other eye was gone in a hideous red weal.

As the two dismounted, this old man uttered a tremulous *"Salam aleikum!"* and was obviously relieved when they replied in kind; he gave them the courtesy of a *"marhaba,"* dabbing at his forehead in the complimentary gesture of respect.

"Thanks be unto Allah that you are honest men!" he said in Kurdish. "I am a poor wanderer; yet I have fear of thieves. If you wish to spend the night in this place, it is as much yours as mine; and if I had one of your fine horses, I would travel on with you tomorrow."

"Allah loves charity," quoth Tahir Beg callously, "but charity may be stretched too far. If you have walked here, then continue—and may Allah be more gracious to you than I! Who are you?"

"I am Ra'sul Majid, and I am going home after ten years of wanderings."

"Whither go you, then?"

"B'il 'Ajam."

"To Persia!" broke in Fraser. "Then you speak Persian?"

"By the curse of the false caliphs!" cried the old man joyfully. "Truly is it said that a word of Persian in a strange land is better than a drink of water in the desert! Enter, my brethren! Enter and enjoy hospitality! *Wah!* To think that I should have heard Persian in the mouth of an Englishman, in the land of the Kurds! I have seen many wonders; yet this is greater than the rest."

DISPOSING the horses under the trees, they brought in the saddlebags and joined the old Ra'sul Majid. The deserted house boasted a single room, and the old man boasted little in the way of baggage except dirt. He had, however, a skin of *du,*—the commen Kurdish food, consisting of curds and whey watered to a minky thinness,—and this he opened gladly. Fraser added to it bread from their own store, Tahir Beg fetched figs from the trees near by, and the three settled down to a sumptuous repast.

Ra'sul Majid talked fluently. He had come, he said, from a valley in the Persian hills, and had wandered over all the world, even as far as Saloniki on the east and Samarkand on the west; his profession was that of a healer of scorpion-stings, and he sold an oil extracted from the black scorpion, which cured such hurts.

"Now, since you are an Englishman," he said, addressing Fraser particularly, "I do not mind saying that in these years I have put together some little money, and I am taking it home to Persian Kurdistan. Let us all three go together, since it is evident that you are men of distinction. You say, Agha Fraser, that you are no longer in the English army but have served your time. Then, in the name of Allah, let us join forces. In these days there are rich pickings to be had among the hills, and you be worthy brethren. I think that I can gather some few men, and what is more to the point, I had the luck to learn a great secret in Kabulistan—a secret that will make us all rich!"

"The secret of what?" said Tahir Beg with a laugh. "Of making gold from stones?"

The blazing yellow eye of Ra'sul Majid flashed redly in the light of their small fire. He regarded Tahir Beg for a moment, then drew back his lips.

"Nay," answered he, "but the secret of putting two drops of liquid into springs of water, so that all the camels drinking thereof will lie down and seem to die. When the caravan folks have gone, then I come and give those camels to drink—and lo, they live again and are mine!

"It is well known that Kurds and the Arab camel-men are great enemies; therefore we shall prosper hugely, for the Kurds will be our friends. You twain will gather certain of the Persians to us, and I will answer for certain others. Thus in a month's time we shall have no lack of men at our back, eh? By Allah—"

"By the right of the lord of the faithful!" swore Tahir Beg angrily, "I think that you are a rogue of rogues! And a liar to boot, and an infidel doomed unto hell!"

With a sudden, swift agility, the great Kurd arose. He had caught up a stick in his hand, and now as he rose, he circled that stick about the seated figure of Ra'sul Majid, so that upon the earthen floor of the hut was traced a circle.

Bob Fraser sat back astonished.

THE old man was motionless, yet his one eye flared with a mad fury, and for an instant his fingers fumbled at the knife in his belt. He seemed gripped by some impotent whirlwind of anger that brought froth to his lips, while Tahir Beg, placing his hands on his hips, glared down at him with an exultant grin.

"Ha!" cried the Kurd. "Come out of the circle if you can, accursed one! *Na'lat Shaitan!* Accursed be Satan, and all them that worship him! Were you not an old man, and had you not broken bread with me, I would put this knife into your throat for that you dared pretend to be one of the Muslim!"

Now Ra'sul Majid's unlovely countenance broke into a spasm of angry terror.

"Dog that you are!" he cried out. "Break the circle so that I may lie at rest for the night!"

Fraser leaned forward, amazed.

"Break it!" he repeated. "Why, what holds you? There—"

"Peace, brother!" commanded Tahir Beg with a roar of laughter. "Look at him, devil-worshiper that he is! Not one of them but is riddled with superstition—aye, brigands and thieves and worse though they may be, here is one way to encompass them! Now give me that brass bird of yours—"

Diving at the saddle-bags, Tahir Beg brought forth the brazen peacock and set it before the old man, from whom burst a stupefied cry at sight of it.

"Melek Taus! The sacred bearer of the seven candles—"

"Aye, King Peacock!" mocked Tahir Beg. "There is your god, devil-worshiper! There is your god, and here are we, and there are you—unutterable dog that you are, who would dare propose such devil-try to Tahir Beg the Aorami! Now sit there through the night and pray to Shaitan; and if you come into the Hamavand country, I swear by the holy Ali that I will seat you upon a pointed stake and make you tread air until the stake eats at your evil heart! Come, brother, out of this place of abomination! To think that we ate with this spawn of hell—faugh!"

Leaving the brazen peacock where it was, Tahir Beg caught up the saddle-bags and left the place. Fraser followed, to find him at the brook making the ablutions of his faith.

"Nay, he will be there in the morning, fear not!" said the chieftain scornfully. "These brethren of Satan fear to leave a circle drawn about them, until it be broken. Why? I know not and care not. It is so, and has always been so. It is part of their accursed faith. Let us bed ourselves under these trees, and sleep."

"He was a harmless old fellow," said Fraser, laughing none the less.

"Harmless?" Tahir Beg snorted in derision. "Had we slept with him, his scorpions might have laid us low ere morning, and then he would have gone his way with all we had, leaving us to recover or die as Allah willed. Harmless! Allah keep us from such harmless ones as he!"

Fraser shrugged and made no further protest, but spread out his blanket beside that of Tahir Beg, and presently was asleep beside the brook.

WHEN Fraser wakened in the morning he left the Kurd to gather figs for breakfast, and took his way toward the house, rather expecting that Ra'sul Majid had taken the brazen peacock and vanished. Entering the doorway, however, he was astonished to find that the old man still sat on his hunkers within the circle, gray head nodding in sleep. The brass bird was untouched.

Ra'sul Majid started, wakened, and seeing Fraser, broke into a whine.

"O blessed Englishman! Release me from this circle, and give me that sacred image—"

Fraser picked up the brazen peacock and pocketed it. The old man cried hastily at him.

"Listen! I will give you riches for it—three fine pearls which I got in Damascus, and which are now sewn into my hat; and twenty goldpieces of Turkish gold! And from Samara, whither I am now bound, I will send you other wealth—"

"I thought you were bound for Persia?" said Fraser—whereat the ancient looked confused and began to stammer. "Peace! I do not want your wealth. As for the circle, let him that drew it there release you from it."

He turned away and departed.

"May Melek Taus curse you, infidel Nazarene!" The anger-quavering voice shrieked after him. "May he follow you with destruction! May your wives dishonor you and—"

The voice died away in a whine of despondency.

When they had finished breakfast,

Fraser imparted the old man's offers to Tahir Beg, who listened and nodded complacently.

"I told you the thing had value; so keep it, brother!" he exclaimed. "There is power in it, and it may serve us well. This one-eyed ancient will tell his people that we have it, too, and perchance Al Hudr will try to raid the Hamavand country to get it. Hei! Then we shall have some fun!"

Fraser chuckled. "Little chance of that, I imagine. Go and let the poor devil out of his circle, and let's be on our way. I'll get the horses ready."

Tahir Beg strode off to the house. Before Fraser had half finished saddling up, the chieftain reappeared. Coming to Fraser, he displayed in his hand a cigar-case of tarnished silver, and he held it up with a harsh laugh.

"Now, brother, look you! Judge what our fate would have been had we slept with this *jinni* last night!"

With a quick movement he opened the box and cast it from him. Out of the falling box two large black scorpions fell quivering to the sand. Tahir Beg stamped upon them with his scarlet riding boots, ground them into the dirt; and from the house arose a long wail of curses that shrilled upon the sunrise air.

"Off, and away from the accursed spot!" growled the chieftain.

They cantered forward over the hill trail. Behind them the little valley, with its willows and its house, dropped into the background and was lost; lost, too, was the old rascal Ra'sul Majid—become a vagrant memory, as Bob Fraser carelessly thought.

THEY were in the hills, and the high mountains loomed ahead. The road was a steady climb, an unending ascent of small hills only to find larger hills awaiting beyond. The track they followed was a winding and difficult one that threaded the maze of mountains in a most meandering fashion. Tahir Beg, however, seemed to know it by heart.

Bob Fraser was not slow to see that it was this very thing which so marked the tall Kurd apart from others of his race. To most of the mountain men their entire world was bounded by narrow lines; they knew a half-dozen valleys, two or three of the nearer towns, and the few who had been to Mecca were acquainted with the pilgrimage routing. Their cosmos was for the greater part, however, extremely limited, circumscribed by the blinding mountains that shut away the outer world and held them in their forefathers' customs and places.

With Tahir Beg it was different. He was no great traveler; yet he had a cosmopolitan sense of the world; he had ridden much into Persia on lonely forays, had touched with the Russians in the north, had absorbed everywhere. Yet he had not made the pilgrimage.

"Years ago I got me a daughter," he said simply. "Each year I put off the holy duty of going to Mecca, and when the girl was still young, the rest of my family were cut off by a band of Turks. So with the girl I came into the Hamavand country, and stayed, watching her grow and providing for her. If Allah sends me to hell for loving that daughter more than the hot road to Mecca—well and good! But tell me of your father, my brother."

Bob Fraser told quite frankly, extenuating nothing and asking no sympathy. Tahir Beg listened to the recital of Bob's last interview with his father, and broke into roars of laughter; his somewhat Rabelaisan sense of humor saw only the broadest lights, and enjoyed them hugely.

"By the right of Ali!" he swore delightedly, clapping Fraser on the shoulder. "I would like to have seen that old comrade of mine bowled over by his own son! When I see him again, I shall throw that bone in his teeth, eh?"

"You're not likely to see him again," said Fraser dryly. "He's got too much money to look after, these days, to visit this country."

"So? Now listen," returned Tahir Beg, complacently stroking his long yellow mustaches, while his keen eyes kept sharp watch upon the hills: "We rode, your father and I and a dozen horsemen, into Persia. We went to Sulaimanieh, where your father took vengeance on certain enemies and we had hard work to get clear of the town. Then we went on to Sina in Persia, and we had great looting there, and we circled around to Sufiz and stole some girls—"

He checked himself a moment, chuckled, then pursued his subject.

"At Sufiz we met an old woman, from whom Allah had taken away all brain. She was also an infidel, one of those who worship fire; for this reason my men were about slaying her, when your father

stopped them. This old woman was given reason for a little space, and told your father that after many years he and I would come together once more and ride as we were then riding. I remember, however, she said that the errand would be a somewhat different one, and that the end of this riding would run bright red with blood of friend and foe. Now, whether that saying applies to you, I cannot say; but I think that the Dispenser will bring your father again to me."

Bob Fraser shrugged his shoulders. "What became of the old woman?" he questioned idly.

"She?" Tahir Beg waved a careless hand. "Oh, my men slew her when your father had turned away, for thereby they obtained grace in the sight of Allah. Now look you to the hill on the right! There are men waiting—they have seen us."

Fraser drove a look at the hill-flank, but could see nothing. A moment later he caught a spat of white smoke among the trees, and a bullet whistled overhead. Tahir Beg laughed, and signaled with his hand.

"Forward and halt not, brother!" he called gayly. "Those are Shuan Kurds, and they are likely to crucify us both if we linger here; so spur hard! Ai, Borak—leap! Over the rocks, Borak!"

His splendid coal-black stallion, Borak or "Lightning" by name, snorted and obeyed. After him spurred Fraser, and the spare horses clattered behind. Another musket banged on the hills, and a slug droned through the air.

"Your welcome to Kurdistan, brother!" shouted Tahir Beg in wild mirth. "Allah be good to us—forward!"

CHAPTER IV

In the beginning God created the White Pearl out of his most precious essence.—The Black Book.

AT Bagdad, which was only two hundred miles away in a straight line, Bob Fraser had fondly supposed that all the southern Kurds were alike. So in this, his first riding with Tahir Beg, he learned that tribe fought against tribe, and that among the Shuan there was no closed season on Hamavands.

Twice the two men rode hard for life, and once they met on the road three riders who immediately opened fire with their homemade Martini-pattern rifles—somewhat to their own sorrow. Tahir Beg added three good horses to his string that day, not to mention three rifles and other personal plunder.

None the less, when the two rode quietly into a Shuan village and demanded hospitality, they were not refused. Accustomed as he had been to the manners of the Arab folk of the great Bagdad plain, Fraser was astonished at the simple freedom of the Kurds—the unveiled and untrammeled women, the primitive simplicity of their home life, and the spotless cleanliness which seemed to be a passion among them.

Excited by the arrival of the Englishman, for Fraser could not make these folk comprehend that he was aught else, there was great telling of tales in the village that night, and feasting until a late hour. The village mosque was utilized for the occasion, after Fraser had evinced his respect by making the greater ablution and a short prayer; the smoky lights fell upon fierce, childishly curious faces, gayly broidered garments, high conical caps, savage weapons. There were tales of border raids, tales of fantastic adventures in imaginary lands, tales of women and war and magic. One man, a lame brigand who boasted that he had slain thirty Turks and had in his younger days journeyed to Shiraz and Tabriz, gained the floor with a story of an Englishman which he had gleaned in Persian fields.

"He was not a Nazarene, but had been converted to the true faith, and he was a great warrior. With him, they said, rode fifty *jinn,* whom by his talismanic art he had summoned from the depths of the earth, and before them could no warrior stand, and so fleet were their horses that within one parasang they could overtake and slay any who fled from them.

"Now, according to the Imam of Sufiz, who told me the tale, it chanced that a Nazarene *hakim* had opened a hospital at Sufiz and cured many folk. In those days many men preached against the *tib-i-jadid,* the new medicine that was dispensed from bottles and knives; and one day the Nazarene *hakim* and his hospital and his family were mobbed, for that the wife of a Muslim had died under his care.

"Behold now the evident wizardry of Englishmen! The tale is sworn to by the Imam of Sufiz, and sworn by the head of

Ali, remember! Even while this mobbing was taking place, the Englishman and his fifty *jinn* fell upon Sufiz, which is a small place, and sacked it utterly. Men were slain and the town was fired, and many girls were carried off; for it is well known that a *jinni* makes practice of carrying off girls and stowing them in underground caverns. And there was great slaughter in Sufiz, during which those who had slain the Nazarene *hakim* were put to the sword by the Englishman without mercy.

"The Imam told me that one of those *jinn*, he who was their master and chief, carried off the daughter of the Nazarene *hakim*, and that the Englishman furthered him in this. When they had finished sacking the town, they rode out and vanished in a great cloud of fire. So if Englishmen have such powers as these, it is not wonderful that they have conquered the Turks, all of whom are dog-brethren!"

THIS tale met with much applause. Later, however, when Tahir Beg and Fraser were alone in the guest-room that had been assigned them, the chieftain broke out in a long string of fluent curses.

"That lame warrior—you remember his tale, brother?"

"I could not well forget it!" And Fraser chuckled.

"Well, there was some truth in it." Tahir Beg pulled reflectively at his mustache. "Your father was that Englishman, and the *jinn* of whom that fool talked were Gholam Ali Tahir Beg and his fifty men, by Allah!"

"What!" Fraser stared at him. "You mean that?"

"I do, by the beard of Ali! As for that talk about the Nazarene *hakim*, I know nothing of it; but it is true that we sacked that town of Sufiz, your father and I, and the Persians are telling of it to this day! Now to bed, for tomorrow we come into the Hamavand valleys."

So, the tale thus carelessly dismissed, Bob Fraser thought little more of it—except to conclude that Howard Z. Fraser must have made the most of his adventurous opportunities in those early days! However, he was not concerned with the doings of his father, or so he considered.

Upon the following day they wound into the Hamavand country, as Tahir Beg declared it to be. Fraser could see no habitation; but that afternoon they had evidence of it when they encountered two miserable Arab traders. At first four camels only were visible, traveling in pairs; and between each pair two upturned feet. Upon closer approach it became apparent that each Arab was lying full length between his camels, on the joined saddle-bags, for better protection against stray bullets from the hillsides. The traders had incautiously ventured into the Hamavand country, had been stripped of all they had, and had been kicked out with their camels. They went their way, full of whining curses upon all Hamavands, and Tahir Beg chuckled blessings after them.

With the following morning, as they drew down into a long valley, there came a sudden onrush of men from all sides—horsemen who had lain hidden until the last moment, and who now came galloping around them with yells of greeting to Tahir Beg. Fraser was introduced and welcomed.

Hamavands, there, wildest and fiercest of the border folk, delighting in gayly caparisoned horses, in fluttering silks and the peculiar long cloaks of the southern Kurd; their weapons were Turkish rifles, backed by armaments of more savage scimitars and knives, and in their whole bearing a furious ecstasy of life. That the two comrades had ridden alone from Erbil was considered a great feat, and Fraser found himself guested with open hospitality on every hand.

From village to village they went on, and so came at last to the valley where Tahir Beg ruled as chief. Two miles wide and ten in length, abundantly watered, it lay in the heart of the Hamavand country—a valley celebrated in Kurdish song and story as unconquered. At the north was a narrow defile bordered by high spurs of rock, and at the south was a precipitous way, both openings being easily defended by a few men. All the valley was deep with trees and lush grass, where grazed herds of cattle and sheep.

TAHIR BEG'S men came riding to meet their chief—most of them Persian Kurds, like their chief of the Shi'a sect of Islam, and tolerated among the Sunni tribes because of their fighting qualities. They had intermarried, also, and many of them were pure Hamavands; for of late years the religious world of these mountains, like the political world, had been flung into a topsy-turvy confusion.

They were a fine lot of men, hard-riding

and hard-fighting mountaineers, and Fraser could well understand the unbounded pride with which Tahir Beg regarded them, They in turn evinced a very real affection and delight in their chief, who typified in his person all the highest attributes of a Kurdish warrior.

There was no permanent village in the valley. Many of the band were scattered through adjoining hills and vales, and the entire valley itself was strewn with low black tents or turf-roofed stone houses that blended inconspicuously into the landscape. One of these latter was the home of Tahir Beg, set so close against a precipitous wall of rock that Fraser would not have guessed their destination had not the White Pearl come forth to welcome them.

Sefid—or "White," as she was commonly termed—was upon Tahir Beg almost before he had dismounted, flinging herself bodily at him in an unashamed burst of affectionate greeting. Fraser was presented, but he could find no words. What little Tahir Beg had said about this daughter of his had not prepared Fraser for the meeting. He had seen many beautiful girls among the Kurds; yet he had seen none so beautiful as this fairy creature!

Dressed in plain white silk, cut in the Arab-fashion of the southern Kurds, Sefid wore none of the elaborate golden ornaments of most hill women. Fraser saw before him a girl unadorned, yet so dazzling in beauty as to leave him dumb and astounded. Her sole jewel was a ring containing a single large pearl—whence, he rightly guessed, her name.

Her bare head was a shimmering golden glory in the sunlight; and under this radiance were delicately chiseled features that reminded Fraser of the almost superhuman fineness of some ancient intaglio. The sun of the hills had not browned her skin, but had lent to it a transparent golden glow of rare health. The startling thing about her, however, was the pair of serious, deeply poised eyes that inspected Fraser with a frank eagerness; they were of a blue so deep as to be black, those eyes, and flecked with gold like the deep goldspecked *lazvard* gem of Khorassan.

"Here is your Englishman!" cried out Tahir Beg, laughing. "And tomorrow we shall see if he can fight with me, eh? Ho, see how the blood comes into her cheeks at that, my brother! She is eager to see Tahir Beg put to earth, eh?"

From the others roundabout, who perfectly understood the allusion, broke a roar of laughter; so that Sefid, confused, turned and ran into the house again to escape from their merriment. One of the nearest warriors clapped Fraser upon the back in good-humored mirth.

"Fight him, Akha Fraser—fight this old wolf and down him! By the lord Ali, we shall be here to cheer you on, those of us who are already married! It is high time this White Pearl of ours were mated, for she is a pearl in name only, and each year her lustre is increased instead of being diminished. Presently there will be bloodshed and wars because of this beauty of hers—and we are minded to let Tahir Beg fight his own wars!"

This gave Fraser some idea of the state of affairs. Seeing that all were watching him, and guessing that his response was being awaited with keen interest, he gazed at Tahir Beg and smiled.

"So that is why you fetched me here—thinking that I would fight you and marry this girl of yours!"

"No, by the right of the lord of the faithful!" swore Tahir Beg. "Yet—"

"Well, I decline!" struck in Fraser quickly. "I can find no lack of men to fight without seeking quarrels among my friends. As for marrying, I intend to choose my own wife. When love comes, I will marry despite father or devil; but until then I am my own master and intend to remain so!"

Fraser could have uttered no words more calculated to delight the independent hillmen, among whom there is little giving in marriage, but much taking.

"Allah upon thee—there spake a man!" shouted the nearest, amid the laughter that greeted Fraser's words. "Hold, Tahir Beg—saw you anything of the Sulaimanieh men in the north? They passed this way a day after your departure."

"I saw them," said Tahir Beg. "And Shaik Nuri has taken unto himself those infidels that worship Shaitan, and has allied himself with them."

These words brought silence, and men gazed one at another with lowered brows.

AMID the silence, Tahir Beg brought his guest into the house, where Sefid welcomed them. Now Fraser saw a startling change in her; the simplicity that had marked her attire was gone, and from top to toe she was Persian. She wore upon

her radiant hair a skull-cap covered with chains of gold coin and bound with a kerchief of Keshan silk; her garments, from open coat to baggy trousers, were of pale-hued silks; save for crimson slippers, her feet were bare and henna-stained; and about her throat was a necklace of the large golden fishes so fancied by the Kurds of Persia.

"You are welcome here," she said to Fraser, giving him the old-fashioned guesting of the country. "Your service is upon my eyes, and your health, please Allah, is good! You are at home."

Such was the home-coming of Bob Fraser. Nor was it such in empty name only, but in very fact, for from that moment he was as one of the family, and all that Tahir Beg owned was his without the asking.

There followed days of riding and visiting, although to Fraser the happiest times were those spent at home with Tahir Beg and Sefid. The Aorami insisted on taking his guest to meet the other chiefs of the Hamavands, which necessitated covering much ground.

Fraser was not accepted on the strength of his uniform, of his host's vouching, of anything except himself. In this land self-reliance was the all-important thing, and a number of opportunities were made for him to show what he could do in the way of work—even if it were searching for lost cattle on the mountains. Fraser went at it all cheerily.

While they were in the valley of Bazain, visiting with the head chief of the Hamavands, occurred an incident which at the moment Fraser put down to some such testing. From the moment of their arrival in the tent-village, a sulky, ill-conditioned youth by the name of Jafir made himself most objectionable. This attitude came to a head during some religious discussion, when Jafir leaped up and termed Fraser an infidel and worse, following it with a volley of abuse. Fraser calmly picked up a convenient stone and sent it home between the eyes of the youth, who dropped senseless. The hospitable Kurds were scandalized by this affront to a guest, and apologized for it by saying that Jafir was one who had been lately adopted into the tribe; also, it seemed that he had aspired to the hand of Sefid, which somewhat explained his hatred toward the stranger who was a guest in the home of Tahir Beg.

"Let it pass," said Fraser, impassive and undisturbed. "He has suffered more than I."

In the morning it was found that Jafir had disappeared, and with him Fraser's horse. The head chief at once sent out pursuers, but these found no trace of the youth, who had vanished completely.

Fraser thought no more of this incident, and quite forgot the ill-conditioned Jafir in his frank delight in the society of Sefid. Indeed, this girl both puzzled him and aroused in him a great wonder; for one day, as they were talking, she spoke a few words in French.

"Where did you learn those words?" asked the astonished Fraser in French. She stared at him, uncomprehending. When he had repeated the words in Persion, she lifted her brows and laughed.

"Where? I do not know—a thing of childhood, that is all." Yet in her eyes, those strangely deep eyes of lapis lazuli sprinkled with golden flecks, he perceived a troubled look. "Sometimes my tongue slips into it—a few words, or more."

Fraser asked Tahir Beg about this, on the same night. The chieftain listened to him without comment, then made a gesture of careless dismissal.

"Ah! No one hereabouts speaks the tongue of the Franks, brother. I believe it was your father who taught her a few words of it, when he was here in her childhood."

Now, Fraser knew that his father did not understand a word of French, and he realized that Tahir Beg was calmly lying to him. Therefore he held his peace.

Only two men living knew that Sefid was no daughter to Tahir Beg—and Bob Fraser was not one of the two.

CHAPTER V

It is my desire that all my followers unite in a bond of unity.—Revelation of Melek Taus.

THREE men came riding into the valley from the southland. They bore supposedly genuine letters from chiefs of the Jaf tribes, commending them to the hospitality of the Hamavands; therefore they were well received by Tahir Beg and his folk.

Two were huge black men. They had no tongues, and they were eunuchs, slaves of Uthman Fatteh, who proclaimed himself a Persian merchant. Always they fol-

lowed him about, standing or squatting impassively behind him, giving him stately salams and obeying his orders with a servile alacrity which made the hillmen stare at them in contempt.

Their presence, with the six spare horses of fine southern breed which they led, made it obvious that the Persian was wealthy and a man of honor. He bore out this conjecture in his appearance—a tall, swarthy, handsome man of forty, dressed magnificently, his sweeping eyes filled with efficiency and a cruel, arrogant energy. An excellent talker, Uthman Fatteh was gladly welcomed as guest by Tahir Beg, whose house was ample. There were tales of Persia and remote hill countries, and often the Persian questioned Fraser about the British, showing no lack of intelligence. Like others, he rejoiced that they ruled Mesopotamia.

"They will have work if they come into Persia," commented the visitor. "Have you heard of that Uthman called Al Hudr, or 'The Green?' They say he has established himself at Penjivan, a great hill place betwixt Sina and Kermanshah."

"I have heard of the place," answered Tahir Beg. He, with Sefid and Fraser, were sitting about the hearth, for the nights were cold. "It is a great mountain of the *jinn* and *div*, and about it live many of those who worship Shaitan. I know the country well, for I was a boy among those mountains; it is not far from Aoraman. And I have heard a little of this Al Hudr, also. Men say that he has collected the devil-worshipers—may their graves be desecrated!—and has wrought them into a strong tribe."

The visitor laughed. He looked at Tahir Beg with shrewd, arrogant eyes, in which seemed to lurk some hidden jest and deep mockery.

"You will hear more of him; men are already talking. It is said that he has sent to Mosul and beyond, bidding all the Yezidis flock to him and join his standard. Also I have heard that he is a great warrior, and they say he has made friendly alliances with many folk not of his accursed faith. There are fools in Islam who would join with him, of course."

"Then, by Allah, there will be riding and slaying in the land!" exclaimed Tahir Beg delightedly. "Although that region is far from here—"

"I believe," put in Fraser quietly, "it is with this man that our friend Shaik Nuri has made alliance. Is not that so, Tahir Beg?"

TAHIR BEG tugged frowningly at his long mustaches, and nodded. The Persian threw Fraser a sleepy look, such a look as one gets from a tawny caged cat, and then gestured in surprise.

"He of the Sulaimanieh Shaiks? Now, that is news! A bad combination for honest men, if true. This Al Hudr, they say, has ridden far—among the Russians in the north, and in Armenia and the Caucasus. He is spoken of as a second Rustam, a hero of heroes—not an ignorant man, but worthy in all ways."

"Perhaps I shall ride to meet him one of these days," Tahir Beg yawned. "If these sayings of yours be true, Persian, he were a right good man to measure swords with."

"Few have measured and lived to tell of it, they say." The eyes of Uthman Fatteh widened for an instant; then the man laughed and rose, bidding them good night.

Fraser sat up late with Tahir Beg, discussing this news. True, the Penjivan district was far in the Persian hills—another little world of its own, girded by mountains and wild tribes; yet if the Sulaimanieh rulers were to join this Al Hudr, here might be the nucleus of a powerful rule.

"By the lord of the faithful!" exclaimed Tahir Beg. "Were it not for the White Pearl, I might ride and join this Al Hudr, for there will be action where he rides! Yet for her sake have I settled down these many years, and until she be married to one of my liking, I shall stay where I am. What think you of my White Pearl, brother?"

"There is only one reply," said Fraser simply. "I have never seen a woman so beautiful—or so worthy of being beautiful. I only hope that she finds—"

The words failed him. The unuttered hope that she might find a husband worthy of her, smote sudden realization into him. To express the hope were a lie, and he knew it. The thought of Sefid married, even to the lordliest Kurd, oppressed him. Yet with what reason? There could be but one answer, and Fraser, suddenly fearful of the truth, shrank from it.

He could hear Sefid, somewhere making *du* for the morrow, singing a Kurdish folksong as she worked. The sound of her voice put fire in his veins; yet, he knew

well, he could not for the sake of a woman give his whole life to Kurdistan—not for the sake of the most wondrous woman of earth!

The alternative presented itself coldly. Sefid was of an Aryan stock that had endured through the ages undefiled, purer far than his own; yet she was a Kurdish woman, and back in New York a Kurdish woman would be classed with Armenian or Turk. How would Sefid take to civilization, she who had naught in her very blood to reconcile her to its ways? Would she not like a mountain eaglet be stifled by its chains? How could he take this woman to a world that might kill her? It was not fair.

TAHIR BEG sat and watched him with thoughtful gaze, and presently broke the silence that had fallen upon them.

"You are thinking, perhaps," he said slowly, "that among the women of America, clad in their strange garments, learning their ways, this White Pearl of mine would stand forth even as a queen among slaves in the marketplace?"

Fraser's lips relaxed in a queer smile. He did not lie to this man.

"No," he answered. "I was thinking, Tahir Beg, that in a strange land and among strange people and customs, the luster of this pearl might be quickly dimmed."

Tahir Beg considered this, and after a moment put out his hand and touched Fraser's knee.

"Listen!" he said gravely. "Among the Turks and Persians the Nazarene women are accursed and shameless creatures in name. Yet they come with their men, these women, and make hospitals and missions; and they are happy in strange lands, among alien peoples, because with them they bring love."

Fraser looked at his host, somewhat astonished by the man's depth, and by the very evident understanding that lay behind the words. But at this moment Sefid appeared, her eyes of gold-speckled lapis looking black in the firelight; she reminded her father that they needed flour, and bade them good night. When she was gone, Tahir Beg sighed.

"Ai, but her beauty smites into a man and looses the sinew of his soul! That flour—I had forgotten it. There is some awaiting me in the camp below the valley—a day's ride there and another day's ride back, and I put off the going because of this Persian guest."

"I'll go after it tomorrow," volunteered Fraser. "I'd be glad of the ride. This Persian is a queer fellow, Tahir Beg, a remarkable man in some ways."

The chieftain grunted. "Aye, and no more merchant than I am, if the truth were known. By the sword of Ali, either that man is a warrior or I am a fool! And his Persian was not smooth; it held an odd accent that was strange to me. Well, Allah made roads for men to use, so why worry? Go after the flour, brother, and take a pack-horse. Or stay! They will load a mule at the camp, so bother not with a led beast."

FRASER determined to improve on the two-day trip if possible, and with sunrise the following morning he was riding down the long valley. This, at the southern end, debouched into a larger but rather arid valley, little used by the Kurds except for running sheep on the hillsides; and beyond this again was the camp for which Fraser aimed. It was a permanent village of the Hamavands and boasted a small mill run by a mountain stream; upon it many of the nearer camps had come to depend for flour, although the cereal in this form was rather a luxury than otherwise.

He swung briskly along and before noon was past the precipitous way at the valley's south end, and into the farther and more arid valley beyond. Along this he pressed quickly, meeting not a soul yet conscious that from the hills roundabout Hamavand eyes had probably noted his passing.

Already the thought of coming home again was making his pulses leap, the vision of Sefid in the doorway was pulling hard at him; he did not want to be away from her so long. If he traveled all night, he could get home again more quickly—just to be there, just not to be away from there—that was all. She was there, and now he was riding in the wrong direction.

Fraser laughed harshly.

"Perhaps she looks upon me as a barbarian, an outlander; perhaps her heart has been already given to some young Hamavand! And after all, what do I care for the world, for my own people? Dad threw me out, and not without reason; but I've made good over here. I'd like to go back, of course; but how much? Which

would weigh the most—going back, or having Sefid for wife? And how badly do I want her? I don't know. Perhaps it's a passing fancy."

He lied to himself there, and deep inside knew the lie.

Shortly before sunset he reached the Hamavand village, where he was known, and a mule was at once prepared for his immediate return. Two Kurds made ready the flour in equal loads, and before he had finished his meal, the mule was waiting.

Long before sunset his homeward road was opening out before him; he had not bothered to obtain a fresh horse, for he was now held down to the speed of the mule. The twilight deepened into evening, and against the blue-black sky glowed and gleamed the sunlit stars; watching them as he rode, Fraser thought anew of Sefid's deeply beautiful eyes like lapis, gold-glinting, as though beneath the blue lay some great fund of radiant fire.

"What is it about her that's taken hold on me?" he wondered. "Not mere sex, surely—not the mere fact that she's a white woman. I've seen plenty others here in the hills. And not her beauty, for I suppose she's actually no more beautiful than others; it's largely in the eye of the beholder, and there's no standard of beauty after all. Gad! I wish Dad were here, so I could tell him I want to marry a Kurdish girl and hear what he'd have to say! I wonder if it's love, the love they tell about in books? Whatever it is, there's a pain at the soul. It's just as Tahir Beg said—"

AT midnight Fraser forced himself to pull in his jaded horse and dismount. He did not want to rest; there was a pull at him to go forward, to be back in the stone house, to be near Sefid. Nevertheless he dismounted, let the horse roam and spread out his blanket. The mule he tethered near by among the sparse trees of the arid valley, loaded, since he could not replace the animal's load if he removed it. He meant to rest no more than an hour.

Something went awry in his calculations. He had hoped to be home by sunrise; when he wakened, however, it was in the gray breaking of dawn. Even then he had not wakened of his own will, but had been aroused by a thudding of hooves, a drumbeat of galloping horses; as he sat up, startled, a great rush of shadowy shapes went past him, steadily thundering down the valley.

"Eight or ten of 'em," thought Fraser, rising and staring disgustedly at the eastern sky. "Hm! The false dawn's gone—day's nearly here, and I've been snoring away! Who the devil was galloping so hard?"

He pursued his hobbled horse, found the beast and removed the hobbles. He had just mounted when he paused. From up the valley came a new sound of hooves—a single horse this time, galloping hard as the others had galloped—harder, if anything. Fraser guided his steed into the trail, and glimpsed a vague rider sweeping toward him through the dawning.

Knowing his Kurds and their ways, Fraser shouted his name aloud. To his astonishment the rider did not halt; he merely swerved his horse. Then a rifle spat red, and Fraser caught the whine of a bullet that missed him by inches.

This was a costly error on the part of the other man. Before the rifle-echo had died from the high hillsides, Fraser's automatic gave its curt, ugly bark; and a second time. The American's horse plunged madly to the shots, but as he controlled the animal, Fraser saw the other rider come crashing out of the saddle and drag by one stirrup.

Spurring, he pursued the other beast, caught its bridle, stopped it. Then he leaped to earth and turned over the inert body hanging from the stirrup. He was amazed to find himself staring down at one of Uthman Fatteh's negroid slaves!

What had meant that mad rush of horsemen down the valley at dawn—with this slave pursuing them? Why had the negro shot at him? Fraser frowned in puzzled wonder. A look at the negro's horse showed the animal white with lather; evidently the beast had come full gallop for miles. A closer look showed him a hastily mended girth.

"Ah!" The exclamation burst from him. "This fellow was not pursuing them; he was riding with them—his girth broke and he halted to mend it, then was catching up. Why, something must have happened there at home! The Persian and his two men were in flight, headed back south with their spare horses—"

He stooped suddenly. Knotted about the waist of the slave was a bit of cloth, something heavy in it. Fraser ripped it open with his knife, and there before him lay his own brazen peacock, the symbol of Melek Taus!

A vague and startled comprehension spurred at him. He seized the image, thrust it into his pocket, leaped to his own saddle. Disregarding the slave's horse and the mule grazing amid the trees, he drove in his spurs and headed his mount northward at a gallop. Something had happened at home! Had the Persian looted Tahir Beg and fled? Had this brazen peacock been part of the loot? Had aught happened to Sefid?

FRASER spurred frantically, confident that he would soon encounter Hamavands in pursuit of the Persian—if indeed it had been the Persian! He met no one, however, until he had come to the precipitous defile that led into the valley of Tahir Beg. As he neared the north end of this, the clear day breaking, he saw men appear in the trail before and behind him, and drew rein at once. Tahir Beg was not here.

"What has happened?" he shouted, seeing the Kurds excited and armed to the teeth.

"We know not!" came the answer. "An hour before day we saw signal fires, and hastened to close the valley, but riders had already gone through."

Amid the rocks above, Fraser saw a Kurd uprise with a wild yell.

"Tahir Beg is at hand! Assembly smokes are rising along the valley. Send for food and the horses, brethren! There will be riding and fighting."

With a ringing of hooves, a medley of yells and shouts and curses, down the narrow path came Tahir Beg and a dozen of his riders. They drew rein at the group around Fraser. The latter saw Tahir Beg as never before—his face livid, a burning madness of fury lighting his gray eyes, words choking in his throat for very rage.

"Water!" croaked the chief, throwing himself from the saddle. "Food—spare horses—every man of you who can ride, come! I have summoned the tribe—they got through, brother?" This to Fraser. "They were not stopped?"

"No." The American displayed the brazen peacock and stuffed it into his saddlebags. "I met one of the negroes, and took this from him. The others passed me. What has happened, man?"

Tahir Beg jerked forth a great oath and drew a paper from his waistband.

"Read this!" he growled, while the men crowded around. "Read it. By the faith of the prophet, the honor of Ali, the beard of my father, I shall send that son of Shaitan into the bosom of his master!"

Fraser looked at the paper, and found a message written in Persian. The very mockery of that note, to say nothing of its contents, brought a surge of anger into his eyes:

> To Tahir Beg the Aorami, greeting! Thy friend's image of Melek Taus belongs to me, and I have taken it; for this, my thanks to him. Thy daughter is desired by Shaik Nuri, to whom I have taken her. As for thee, come and measure swords when thou wilt, braggart; I have a score to pay thee that has festered these sixteen years! A score against you and Agha Fraser, which I may yet settle against you and Agha Fraser's son. So bring the cub with you.
>
> UTHMAN AL HUDR, Lord of Penjivan.

Fraser glanced up. "Sefid! You do not mean that—"

"The dog-brother carried her away!" cried Tahir Beg hoarsely. "In half an hour we shall be after him. Get a fresh horse here, and be ready, for the road is long! Nor will we catch him this side Sulaimanieh."

"Not catch him?" repeated Fraser, aghast. "But then he'll be in safety, and Sefid—"

"Not in the seventh pit of hell will he reach safety from me!" roared Tahir Beg. And somehow the words seemed no boast—simply the literal truth.

The next big instalment of this spirited novel will appear in the forth coming, the September, issue of THE BLUE BOOK MAGAZINE.

The Adventure of the Three Terrorists

A NEW adventure of Monty Lashore, ace of the air, who finds occasions for thrilling adventure even in peace-times.

By Edwin Balmer

FOR the benefit of those great firms and individuals who hold such immense stakes in the continuance of an orderly state of society that they can well afford to pay for early warnings of danger, a certain Seligman maintains a most efficient and special and secret-service.

How he operates, and at what peril to himself and his agents, are affairs of his own; the fact suffices that he does operate; and if you are, for instance, Mr. Stanley Lashore, of the great Boston brokerage firm of Lashore and Stenway,—with an admitted income of seven taxable millions per year,—and you wish to know just precisely what is this morning's quotations on the chance of the I. W. W.'s, the Red Communists', the Uncompromisers' or the Impossibilists' getting you, if you don't watch out, you have simply to reach for a certain sealed envelope, specially delivered to your desk at a few minutes before the exchange opens, and you have in your hand a complete digest of the sayings and doings (corrected up to a late hour last night) of every Red meeting in the country.

Of course, Seligman—for he and his men are only human—occasionally slips up; an Uncompromiser perhaps suspects an agent and until an intact substitute can replace the late lamented, there may be a hole in the news from Paterson, New Jersey, or Hammond, Indiana, or Seattle. When such hole exists, it is Seligman's peculiar virtue that he confesses it after this manner:

"We are without present information of the whereabouts and activities of the group recently led by the Impossibilists, Calotti, Denton and Steinwitz. As it is well known, these men are perhaps the most sincere and idealistic, and therefore the most highly dangerous, apostles of direct action in this country. It is known that they are not among those groups gathered for deportation; nor are they among those recently arrested and still in custody.

"Unless they have been destroyed by some accident of the infernal machines which they are constantly concocting,—and such an accident is too much to hope, —they are about due to reappear from retirement with a threat to society more formidable than any they have made before.

"We have discovered today, in possession of a radical formerly associated with them, what appears to be a proof-sheet of a manifesto unsigned but bearing Calotti's characteristic expressions, calling upon the financial districts of America to reform within ten days or be blotted out. We do not advise entirely disregarding this incident; and without other comment, we refer it for what it may be worth."

MR. STANLEY LASHORE, having finished his reading, sent this sheet of flimsy into the adjoining room to his son Montagu, who, having successfully completed the war and Harvard, now was undergoing initiation in the brokerage business.

Monty's inspection of the sheet considerably brightened the few minutes before U. S. Steel began selling two points off and Anaconda irresponsibly bucked up five, thereby ruining several short customers who had sold too confidingly on Monty's advice.

So the day got going with quite a swing for a September session, not dulling down till noontime, when with a yawn Monty went over to the Touraine for lunch with a young lady from Back Bay whose maternal parent also was to be present.

As Mother prepared and read papers on such topics as "The Radical Menace in America," Monty took along the flimsy to turn the conversation when it took the expected direction of inquiries into what he "did" that time he disappeared for several days recently and during that more immediate interval which ended when he was picked up two hundred miles out at sea on the wreck of a seaplane which wasn't his own. But when the emergency came, Mother merely folded the flimsy for future quotation and proceeded with her re-direct examination.

"Well," said Monty at last when the most reliable of his fabrications had broken down in several spots, "I'm driven to descend to the truth. I don't know what I did. I'd give almost anything, myself, to find out. Fact is, I'm thinking of sicking Seligman onto myself to furnish me with a report."

"Are you," asked Mother, "insulting me? Please be serious."

"Never more so," Monty assured, "in all my life. I'm not only serious about this matter, but pretty sensitive too. That's why I've never told the truth about it before—and never to anyone else."

Mother and daughter both bent closer at this; so Monty lowered his voice and continued: "Remember that bullet I got through my head when I was flying in Cambrai sector, Mrs. Mellaile?"

"The one which was removed in that wonderful operation, Montagu?"

"Wonderful was the word," Montagu agreed. "Now I'll tell you the catch in it. They put all parts back and in place in my head just as they said they did. At least, I like to think so, too; but one jigger—some sort of cam-shaft bushing or connecting-rod bearing, or perhaps the timer-gear—was left just a bit loose. Anyway, all of a sudden something happens; and Montagu Lashore, long and—I hope—favorably known to the immediate friends and neighbors, is switched off; some one else is switched on. Who he is, I don't know; and I tell you I sure would like to. For, you understand, that he's used me, this,"—Monty tapped his chest,—"for all the time during the different days you've mentioned; and I don't know any more what he's been doing with me than you do. I might be an Impossibilist myself—a dynamite-maker for Calotti and Denton, for all I know, when I'm gone."

"MONTAGU!" Mrs. Mellaile exclaimed, smothering her daughter's less loud and more credulous simultaneous comment.

"Careful!" Monty warned, unsmilingly raising a hand. "They say a shock does the switching sometimes. Just now I am as usually known; the next minute I may kick over the table. The condition, Mrs. Mellaile, is scientifically described by the names of ambulatory, retrograde amnesia. *Ambulatory* means you're not laid up by the switch—you walk around and talk; you're all right. *Retrograde* means—"

"I have not, Montagu, forgotten the English language."

"*Amnesia*, if I may be permitted," said Monty, "is a bit medical; and it took me so long to discover my precise sort that I'd like to describe it to Faith, if I may be permitted—it means, old dear," he continued to the daughter, "not merely forgetfulness, but oblivion so complete that it amounts to a change of personality. That's what came on me first that day in June—a Wednesday, the 28th, I believe. I was walking down Boylston Street; and the next thing I knew I was getting on an eastbound train for New York City at a little town in Indiana. Also at that other time I was up in my 'ship' peacefully flying over Worcester; it was about noon; the next thing I knew, it was the next night; I was on a strange seaplane; and the sailors who were picking me up told me I was two hundred miles off Cape Cod. That's absolutely all I know—except what we all can infer and what I've read about myself in a book. Here it is—I cut it out,

from Janet's treatise on the subject. As you see, he was the professor of psychology at the College de France—the best in the world on his subject."

Monty dived into a pocket, and producing a book page, handed it over for mother and daughter to read a description of a condition similar to that which Monty claimed and which ended with this comment:

> You will remark that in this singular history, the oblivions and remembrances alternate in the same way very regularly. In the state called Number One the subject does not remember the state Number Two at all; in the state Number Two, he does not remember the state Number One at all. When he comes back to the state Number One, he remembers this state and nothing more. It is the same when he comes back to state Number Two.

Mrs. Mellaile folded this also for reference. "Extraordinary!" She admitted interest if not credulity.

"It certainly keeps one on edge," Monty agreed. "You see, now that I'm in personality Number One, I know you and everyone about our part of Brookline and Back Bay; whereas I have only the slightest cursory knowledge of other sections of Boston; whereas in personality Number Two, I wouldn't know my own father or you,—or even myself,—but may be en rapport with Chelsea and East Boston and—"

Mrs. Mellaile drew up a bit more stiffly.

"Mr. Montagu Lashore!" a call-boy paged, and proved to have a call upon the telephone.

MONTY made his apologies. "Anaconda evidently has bucked up a few additional points and the office has referred to me here—a few more shorts desiring personal expressions of gratitude," he said and departed to a booth.

"Hello!" said a clear, delightful girl's voice in the receiver which he picked up. "Hello, Nathan."

Monty apostrophized the apparent mistake regretfully to himself, while he said aloud in the phone, "I'm sorry. I seemed to have answered the wrong call."

"Oh," said the voice, "aren't you Monty Lashore?"

"Why, yes."

"I thought so; hello, Nathan."

Monty called his presence of mind to order. "Hello!" he hailed back expectantly. "Glad to hear from you!"

He was playing only a hunch, but—he thought—a pretty good one. He often had wondered whether the people with whom he consorted in state Number Two knew of his identity in state Number One; and if so, he realized that at any moment he might hear from one of them. This seemed to him to be such a moment. Nathan evidently was a name he took in state Number Two.

"So you know me!" said the alluring voice.

"Of course," he lied enthusiastically, and was grateful to the girl for sparing him the inanity of: "Then who am I?"

In place of this she got right down to business. "Nathan, are you feeling like action tomorrow morning?" she challenged.

"Action?" said Nathan more cautiously. "You're not giving me a tip on Anaconda?"

"*Action,* I mean!" the girl corrected with emphasis. "Something real that's up. You'll need a ship—your best and swiftest, and *equipped,* Nat, old dear. Give it all you've got, if you're game. Something actually big, I promise you. Do you feel like taking it on?"

"Certainly," said Monty. "But can't you tell me what?"

"Not over the phone."

"Can I come to see you, then?"

"I'm too far away; besides, I'm busy; and if you're on this, you ought to be getting busy too."

"Doing what?"

"Arranging your earthly affairs."

"To go where?"

"I'll send you the map, special delivery, this afternoon."

"When must I start?"

"About five in the morning. Are you on?"

"On," said Monty.

"Good," said the girl and rang off.

FOR a moment Monty sat in the telephone-booth pleasantly musing; then, making inquiry as to the source of the call just terminated, he learned it was a long distance from Providence, Rhode Island, and originated in a public pay-station.

"However, apparently we're to meet," he assured himself satisfyingly. If I've been playing about very hard with any girl in state Number Two, I like to think it's you. And he returned to his table.

"This peculiar condition of yours, Montagu," Mrs. Mellaile brought him back to his discussion which the call had interrupted,—"is it curable?"

Monty sat down, still under the spell of the voice. "Why," he inquired, "should anyone want it to be?"

"But, my dear boy, surely you realize the impossibility of your undertaking any serious responsibilities while at the mercy of such a capricious and uncontrollable fate as you've delineated. Surely you—" And she stopped, gazing at her daughter.

"Yes," Monty agreed, "I do; but—" And he stopped. "Check?" he said to the waiter.

He put the Mellailes into their car, looked into the office long enough to announce that he had called it a day and to send out home any special mail; then he drove out through Brookline to the field where were his hangar and his ships of the air, which of course were the craft the girl meant. Of the three which he now owned, a single seater, gnome-engined biplane of the wing-spread and camber of a combat Spad undoubtedly was his swiftest machine, having often pushed the old *pilôt* tube up to an indicated one hundred and fifty miles per hour. Being a speed-machine, it had the obvious disadvantage of small fuel-carrying capacity if long flights were required; and as it was a high-speed flyer with small wings, it landed at high velocity and consequently required a large clear space for taking to the ground. Yet for any venture in danger, she was the pet. Monty loved the handling of her at full flight in midair, eight to ten thousand feet up, for choice.

About equipment, that girl had been most definite but also most emphatic. If she had meant him to mount only ordinary equipment, she would not have mentioned it at all; so it was clear that she demanded unmentionables. Now unmentionable equipment in peace-time is armament; and the armament of an airplane is a machine-gun and bombs. Monty owned no bombs except fuse-drawn "duds" decking the souvenir cases in his room; but he had, also in that souvenir case, one perfectly good and well-oiled German machine-gun taken intact from the lost Fokker he had shot down, on the day before the armistice. With it went almost a full belt of cartridges—tracers, explosives and incendiary bullets in the order and proportions which the Imperial Flying Corps had found most effective. These had never been unloaded; so there they were, awaiting just such an emergency as had come.

MONTY returned home for the gun and obtained at the same time the promised map, relayed out from the office after having arrived from Providence by special delivery.

It was a large-scale chart covering the most mountainous and remote district of the Berkshires; and upon it, at a spot most distant from railroad and removed from village and hamlet, was a small clearing marked: *"Abandoned farm. Meet here."*

Monty possessed, of course, flight-maps of Massachusetts; so, after installing the German gun, he spread a Boston-to-Berkshires chart upon his map-board; and he put in fuel and tested stays and bracing-wires. At five the next morning he pushed his ship out into the clear, cool, autumn air, perfect for flying; and as he turned his ship's nose west toward the far-away mountains, atavistic thrills of the chances of combat pricked through him. It recalled those still, cool mornings in France when he took the air for the most enthralling of dangers to hunt and be hunted, in the sky. And while he flew, he wondered with himself whether those interludes of oblivions, into which he had been vanishing now and then, were entirely the result of some mechanical maladjustment in his brain, or whether his nervous system—having been supercharged with wild recklessness during the war—had not simply revolted against the suddenly imposed restraints of peace and plunged him into another personality for the relief of mad adventure.

For though he had had absolutely no recollection, upon coming to himself, in regard to what he had done in his secondary personality, he yet had inherited from that other self spent sensations of physical and nervous exhaustion which predicated exertions of an intensity forbidden Montagu Lashore in these days. He would like to know himself as Nathan; he meant to know what Nathan, and Nathan's lady friend, wanted with a machine-gun over the Berkshires this morning; and he meant to become acquainted with that girl who had spoken to him and knew him as Nathan.

How well did he know her? "From her

voice, Nathan, old top," he said to that secondary personality at present somewhere entirely concealed about himself, "I'd say go as far as you like. That is, I hope you have gone as far as you like."

Over Amherst, the Holyoke hills and Northampton, the air continued clear; but approaching Pittsfield, mist met him; and when at last he "flew into" the map sent him by mail and secured it upon his map-board over the general chart by which he had been piloting, he was forced to fly low over the mountains to identify landmarks. But after half an hour's circling over a district almost desolated of roads or clearings, at last he located the clearing of *"Meet here"* and came down in an old cornfield—and close to a standing airplane.

IT was a new biplane, a single-seater like his own, and also with a machine-gun mounted to fire forward above the propeller—about the most out-of-place looking object imaginable to be standing in the rank weeds beside the ancient, broken-down sheds and pens for the long-vanished cattle and sheep; but the next sight outdid it for incongruity. For as Monty looked up to the overgrown, racked and ruined doorway of the dilapidated house, a girl stepped out. Evidently she had been the pilot of the airplane, for her slender legs were incased in leather breeches and puttees; she wore a trim leather jacket and had worn a hood, but that now was tossed back; and her goggles hung about her neck on a cord. She had red hair, smooth and with alluring luster as the sun shone on her head; she had blue eyes and a pert, pretty, audacious little nose, and full, rounded lips and characterful chin; her skin was white and clear, but it flushed pinkly as Montagu Lashore stared at her while he approached.

Comparing his sensations now with those of yesterday, he realized that his previous eagerness to know this girl had been merely the mildest of curiosities. To think that, in his Nathan personality, he was a friend of this girl, and he had been sitting at a table at the Touraine trying to square himself with the Mellailes and knowing nothing about her!

"Mist give you much trouble?" she asked him casually as they shook hands.

"Some," he confessed.

"I could hear some one beating about overhead and hoped it was you, Nathan. Of course, it might have been Calotti."

"Of course," Monty said, holding her hand as long as he dared, meanwhile wondering where and what he had heard of Calotti. Evidently, in his Nathan personality, he knew; and evidently this girl, whoever she was, knew that he had a Nathan personality as well as a Monty Lashore one. But she seemed to look upon his Nathan-state as only a sort of alias which he used during adventures and not as a complete separation of identity. Certainly it did not dawn upon her that he did not know her at all, except as the possessor of the voice which had talked to him yesterday; and he was determined to prevent such dawning.

"So dear old Calotti's about!" he commented, blandly sparring for time while a phrase ran in his head—"the impossibilists Calotti, Denton and Steinwitz." Oh, yes, the Seligman report! The terrorist triumvirates had disappeared—the most idealistic dealers in dynamite at present at large; they had been disturbingly quiet for a time, and consequently were considered due to reappear with something particularly good. Now what were these dear nitroglycerin-gushing apostles of the direct in this girl's life? What were they in his, Nathan's own?

He had said to Mrs. Mellaile yesterday that for all he knew about his personality Number Two, he might be a munition-maker for the Reds. Had the thought sprung from guilty subconsciousness?

"RATHER we're about Calotti," the girl corrected. "Or I hope we are. You must have thought me rather—sudden yesterday, Nathan."

"Not at all."

"I know, in your position, you don't want to be bothered till there's an opportunity for you to break away—that's it, isn't it?" she asked.

He nodded; and she continued. "But this chance at Calotti was too good to pass up. You must know, from your business connections, that he and Denton and Steinwitz—the fact that they all disappeared and no one can get track of what they're up to—is the most serious situation in the radical threat today."

"I do know that," Monty said, grabbing at something he was actually aware of.

"Well, I was up beyond Pittsfield day before yesterday on another bill of business, Nathan, and was just loafing home at about five thousand feet when I saw

another ship sailing away to the west a little above me. Of course I don't poke about every wing I see, Nathan; but this was a neat bit of bipe, and I looped over to have a look; and when I saw him bank about to dodge me, I got on his tail for the fun of it; and he side-slipped—caught a bunch of bad air, too close to the mountains, I guess—and volped on down for a forced landing.

"It looked bad from above—I mean the field he had to pick out, not the way he handled himself; and of course I felt like the devil, Nathan; so I dropped down beside him to help him fix up, if necessary, or at least to apologize. He'd got out and was walking about; but when he saw me down, in he jumped again! I thought for a minute I'd convinced him I was crazy and was going to smash him; but I was on the ground then; so I taxied up to him, and just as he began to rise, I got a good look at his face—he'd dropped his goggles.

"I knew him—that is, I knew I ought to know him; and he didn't care about being known. So off he went, and I went after him. He started this way, then doubled; we dodged for over an hour, Nathan, each of us hoping the other'd run out of gas first; and he got me. I made a forced landing with tanks absolutely dry, over the Vermont line this side of Bennington, but not before I'd felt him out so I know his happy home's in the hills somewhere near here. So I got gas, cut for Providence and went to the *Journal* office to have a look at their picture-gallery. He was Calotti, Nathan; and it didn't consume many hours' thought to tell me that he hadn't taken up flying—and made himself one pilot too, I promise you—for his own health or the general good of the public. So, before giving it to the Secret Service, I sort of wondered whether you'd care to take it on with me. Sorry?"

"Dismayed!" said Monty, estimating her with new admiration. "I suppose, day before yesterday, you didn't have your ship heeled as it is today."

"Carelessly no," she admitted. "But anyway, not being sure it was Calotti, I couldn't have fired. Besides—it's funny, isn't it; I know that man is certainly guilty of a dozen assassinations—murders, most of them. And I know, if he lives, he'll kill more, men, women and children—as they were killed by that bomb in the Chicago postoffice, as they were killed through the mails and in their other ways. But if he wasn't equally armed, I couldn't have shot him. However—from what I saw of his face, I'm sure he realized his mistake and will not be met that way again."

"Good!" said Monty. "Then we shoot at sight, eh? Or—not to mess up the Administration's policy with the Reds—do we wait till we're sure we can hit him?"

"First we find him," she reminded. "Besides chasing him the day before yesterday, I made inquiries, of course. No one about here—there are people living a few miles in every direction—knows where that machine I chased goes, or where it comes from. But they hear it pass near here in the morning almost every day. So I picked this for our headquarters."

"Just you and me alone?"

"Do you want more?"

"Not I; but—"

"What?"

HE did not answer; a droning, far-away but approaching beat through the thinning mist—the noise of an airplane motor and propeller! She heard it too and sprang toward the machine.

He blocked her. "You're not to get into any fight!" he forbade. "That's what I was going to say."

"I? Why not? Let me to my ship!"

"Promise me you'll stay on the ground—or I'll have to stay and hold you."

"Silly! Nathan, what's got into you? Let me go! That's Calotti!"

"How do you know?" He stared as she was doing, into the misty sky; but no airplane yet was in sight.

"It's his engine—as I heard it after I was forced down."

"Then be good, and I'll get him!"

"No bother; *he's coming for us!*"

Not only had the motor-noise and the airscrew-thrash tremendously loudened, but suddenly there materialized in the mist above them a low-flying biplane which veered to right, as though searching and then to left as the pilot saw them and dropped a bomb; almost instantly another followed, now a third, forming a rough crescent a hundred yards apart.

Monty dragged down the girl, whom he clasped, and pressed her against the ground, placing his own body over hers. But instead of the detonation which he expected, each bomb in succession burst with a mild, ridiculous plop and strewed smoking bits about through the weeds.

"Gas!" the girl cried to him at the same instant that he was realizing it. "We've got to get out of here."

"Yes! Don't breathe. Get into your seat!" he commanded, half dragging her to her machine and lifting her into the seat-pit. He sprang to her propeller and turned it over.

"Yourself!" she appealed to him. "Quick!"

Holding breath pent in bursting lungs, he got his own engine going; and as she rose into the air, he opened his throttle and pulled back his elevators. She climbed and he followed, and they came out above the mist into the stark sunshine. The ground all was lost below a billowy, obscuring steam upon which the sunlight glistened; overhead the sky was azure clear and glaring, and all empty about the mighty bowl of the heavens except where, far away to the right, a peak pushed up, Mt. Greylock—and except for a dragon-fly form, circling a couple of thousand feet away, which undoubtedly was the airplane of the Terrorist Calotti.

THE girl also saw this other ship and instantly signaled the fact by making for it; whereat Monty swore at her in admiration. Did she have actual experience in target-practice from airplane, he wondered, or was hers the courage of ignorance of aërial combat? He could not know; but in any case it was courage; and responding automatically to trained reflexes of air battles learned over those trench-lines in France, he opened his throttle wider and climbed swiftly to gain guard-position above. For he knew that all he could do now was to protect her; he was powerless to force her from the fight if the Calotti accepted combat.

And the Terrorist was not merely accepting. He seemed to have been circling there simply to await them, conscious that if his gas had not killed them, it would force them up; and now he turned to them both and flew at them in open contempt.

He was choosing, for his target, the girl's ship, Monty saw; and Calotti so wholly ignored him that Monty, in preparing himself to dive down, found himself warned by memories of similar exhibitions of seeming contempt on the part of an adversary; so again he swept the upper sky with his eyes, and now he saw far up a winged speck flitting from the east—an ambush airplane which the minute before had been hiding in the sun but now was zooming down. Monty felt himself jerk and wholly gather for the battle; here was real combat, and to be waged without mercy or quarter. It was clear, of course, that the Terrorists had observed the arrival of the two strange airplanes that morning; and following the pursuit of the earlier day, they had recognized the threat to them and had prepared themselves adequately to deal with it.

Monty estimated the distance and guessed at the probable speed of the upper ship; then, for the ten seconds which he gave himself, he forgot it and dived for Calotti, driving him off from his charge at the girl just as the *pit-pit* of vapor before Calotti's propeller told that the Italian Terrorist had opened fire. Monty could not tell whether the girl was firing back; he had not time to look; he barely kept her placed in the edge of his vision while he put himself on Calotti's tail and gave him a burst of the German bullets, not hitting anything vital, but at least driving him to nose down and into a turn.

THIS left the girl unguarded above them, if the ambush pilot, diving down, decided to take her instead of Monty; and there were two ways to protect her. Either Monty could climb up in position again to guard her directly, or by fiercely pressing the attack upon Calotti, he might draw Calotti's companion directly down. That had the advantage of perhaps giving him time to deliver to Calotti the *coup de grâce;* but it had the fault of depending upon spirit between the Terrorists which might not exist. Notoriously they envied and hated one another, even when acting in coöperation. So the surprise-pilot might well decide to let Calotti look out for himself while he took care of the machine at his mercy.

This jumped through Monty's thoughts between releasing his machine-gun lanyard and jerking up his elevators. For a few seconds, in hopelessly inferior position to take the attack from the sky, he got a spray of bullets through his wings; they sang on wires and off the shield of his engine; but they missed him, they missed his propeller and fuel-tank and vital bracing wires. So, climbing and swerving, he got the enemy before him and only slightly above, and coming up behind, he gave him a run of bullets from that German gun; and as he saw the flames burst suddenly

in front of the other machine, Monty thanked God for the enduring efficiency of the German explosive incendiary bullets. He had plunged one through the fuel-tank, and the Terrorist was going down—a cloud of smoke trailed behind; and Monty put him out of mind to search again for Calotti—to see Calotti slipping off to the east and down toward the fog, and to see the girl close up behind the Italian.

Calotti's ship clearly was damaged; the engine going all right, but something had snapped or been shot away so that he couldn't—or at least didn't—maneuver; and the girl was following him so close that, if she fired with her eyes shut, she must hit him. Perhaps she had been firing and had emptied her magazine. But Monty thought not; he guessed she was merely holding her fire in mercy and Monty, zooming down to put an end to that sort of stuff, swore at her for her chivalry.

Calotti went into the mist; she followed. Monty, diving and with engine at full speed, lost them for a few seconds; then he came upon them, and as the girl turned and saw him, she raised her arm in signal for him not to fire. Monty understood. Calotti was making for home, and she was letting him go to lead her.

They all descended through the mist so that the ground came in sight a thousand feet below them; and Calotti led on and on willingly—too willingly. Monty signaled to the girl to drop back; when she would not, he cut in before her and forced her to circle. A bare field with a few buildings appeared in the valley below; Calotti made for the field, and before Monty things began plopping in the air. He dodged and climbed and dodged again; but they plopped about the girl's machine, and she lost control and dropped.

Like a fluttering leaf in a calm, her ship slipped sidewise, caught itself evenly and balanced—slipped and caught again, by its built-in stability—slipped and caught, then crashed, but not from great height or violently, upon the field where Calotti already was landed.

MONTY nosed down and dived, regardless of those plopping things; and he machine-gunned Calotti as the Red ran toward the wreck of the girl's ship. Monty got his wheels on the ground and ran, hopping across the field, his machine-gun bearing upon buildings before which men were appearing. He taxied toward them, and firing, drove them under cover and then riddled the buildings for good measure, spending thus the last of the German bullets.

For a few minutes rifles and revolvers fired back at him; but then, with his last volley through the largest building, suddenly wild panic spread among the men who had retreated under cover. They ran—ran shamelessly and as men run for their lives; they ran scattering, but all in the same direction—up wind!

Monty turned and swiftly taxied beside the wrecked machine. He left his engine going, his propeller slowly turning over as he leaped down; and dragged the girl from the pilot's pit, he lifted her upon the fuselage before his seat; then he leaped in, and opening wide, climbed through the fog, veering to avoid the visible edge of an emanation streaking the fog and about the riddled building.

"Gas!" he identified it to himself, as he climbed into the clear upper air. "Gas!" he repeated, diagnosing the deathlikeness which had come over the slender white form before him. "Gas," he repeated to himself, conscious of heaviness in his hands and stupor in his head. "Guess I got a little of it myself."

As he realized it, he drew the girl closer to him and brought her into the seat-pit beside him; meanwhile he fought with all his will for continuance of steadiness and strength. But he could not shake off his stupor; and strangely, he became aware that he knew the girl beside him. He had called her Marguerite; and her friend Hoggie—which was short and familiar for Hogarth—had called her Miss Malone. This Hogarth was a particular friend of himself—that is, of the himself known as Nathan Hale, who was a personality Number Two of Montagu Lashore.

Hogarth was a busy little man who lived in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, near Providence. He'd been an airplane-designer during the war, and afterward went on building airplanes for practical peace purposes. Hoggie believed that the airplane was not an implement for the future but for the present, and therefore had been gathering about him a few adventure-loving pilots for the purpose of exploiting the existing opportunities of the air. He, Montagu Lashore, had happened to meet this Marguerite one day on Boylston Street just after he had "forgotten" him-

self and didn't know who he was or where he was going. But she knew him for an ex-war-pilot; and she told him about Hoggie; and he, adopting the name of Nathan Hale, had gone with her to Pawtucket and flown some of Hoggie's machines—once to Chicago in an adventure which saved one John Clander from hanging; again in a seaplane far out into the ocean to fight two ex-commissars of Russia.

It was queer and decidedly interesting, his stupefied twilight of semi-consciousness, to know himself both as Nathan Hale and Montagu Lashore—to be able to remember alike the luncheon at the Touraine with Faith Mellaile and her mother, and the occasion when he last had kissed Marguerite.

He bent now and kissed her again; and for the first time since he had lifted her from the smash of her own machine, she stirred. The cool, clear rush of the upper air seemed to have restored her from the paralyzing effect of the gas she had breathed; and he too was recovering from his stupor.

But though his mind continued to clear, that consciousness of both states became only more definite; and he remembered that on another page of that book of Janet's which he had shown to Mrs. Mellaile, it said that the reconciliation of consciousness of both states continued after it once started.

Well, certainly it was well started; for he could realize now that what had most bothered him in his Nathan personality and in his relationship to Marguerite was that he was not sure that, in his other personality, he was not involved with some other girl. But now he knew all about himself as Montagu Lashore, and knew that he was free. And so he steered on, piloting his ship more cautiously and anxiously than ever he had before; thus he ran east and out of the region of the mountain mists into the valley east of the Holyoke hills, where he chose a smooth field outside a little town and descended.

PROMPTLY as usual, at a few minutes before the exchange opened for business the next Wednesday morning, a delivery-boy laid upon Mr. Stanley Lashore's desk the daily report of the Seligman service.

The outstanding development of the past twenty-four hours, is the discovery of the purposes and plot of the group of Terrorists led by Calotti, Denton and Steinwitz, previously reported to you as unlocatable. Following receipt of a tip from an individual who deserves the greatest gratitude of the nation,—and particularly of those groups associated with finance and who had been most directly threatened,—our operatives last night laid bare the details of the most formidable attempt to terrorize society.

Having located themselves in a remote region of the Berkshire Mountains,—yet within a couple of hours fast flight of Boston, New York and Philadelphia,—Steinwitz, the chemist of the group, set about the manufacture of a most deadly gas modeled after Lewisite, the well-known lethal preparation invented during the war but never used. Meanwhile Calotti and Denton obtained airplanes and perfected themselves in flight, the purpose of the group being to scatter gas in selected districts of American cities, provided the exact terms of the Terrorist manifesto were not met with.

There is no doubt whatever, in view of the preparations made and in consideration of the known character of this group, that they would have carried through their project, except for the sudden and fearless interference of two persons who, unsupported, attacked and shot down Denton, killing him in the air; shot Calotti also and destroyed the chemist Steinwitz by his own gas when his laboratory was riddled.

Mr. Stanley Lashore read no further, but rising with the sheet of flimsy in his hand, strode into the office of his son, in which the ticker was just beginning to register the morning's catastrophes to Montagu's customers.

"Monty, exactly where were you yesterday morning?" his father demanded.

"Off for a flight, I told you, Father."

"Over the Berkshires, for instance?"

"Hello—hello!" said Monty. "Anaconda's lost five points; and today I told everybody to buy."

"The Berkshires, Monty?" his father persisted.

"What makes you think that, Father?"

"This," said the father, studying son only an instant more before handing him the flimsy. "Well, who was with you? Look here, son; I don't go in much for stock on Terrorists; but now that this particular crowd is removed, I don't mind telling you that they had me impressed with their sincerity. Who's the other fellow; and I'll do what's right by you both."

"It's a girl, Father!"

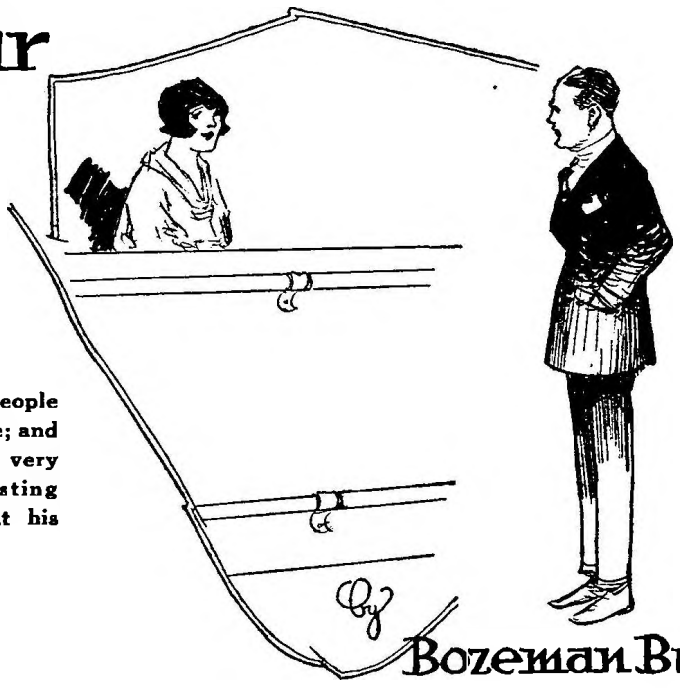
"What? by Gad!"

"In the Holyoke hospital—but all right, and merely resting for—"

"For what? Why don't you say it?"

"For tomorrow to be married to me."

The Bar



REAL folks, the people in this romance; and the situation is a very human and interesting one: Mr. Bulger at his best.

By Bozeman Bulger

IT was a great crowd of fellows who used to drop into Mike Kinsella's place on the way home. They drifted in from all quarters, and they always came with a good laugh or an argument. Either was relished by the gang. So often did we hover over that old bar, shaping the destinies of the nation, that we got to know ourselves as the Late for Dinner Club—an institution that you may understand was none too secure in the graces of our respective firesides.

Mike Kinsella, the bartender, took a keen personal interest in the daily visits of the Late for Dinner Club, frequently assisting us in the construction of alibis for home use. He was an entertaining fellow, this Mike. His horse sense and keen appreciation of humorous situations had much to do with our disregard of restraint, and consequent enjoyment. Mike also had a neat sense of proportion. He knew exactly when to be the servitor only and when to make observations on subjects under discussion. In his years of association with men of big and little minds Mike had heard and absorbed considerable philosophy. He knew people.

The incident which proved an opening wedge for a change in the lives of Mike Kinsella, of Avery Underhill, Jr., of Nora Kinsella,—of all of us, in fact,—occurred in an April, back in those days when prohibition was but a tiny speck on the horizon of what we were wont to call personal privilege and grow indignant about it. At that time of year, as those who remember saloons will recall, there was a custom of covering the great mirror back of the bar with a translucent frost, usually made by applying a solution of stale beer and epsom salts to the surface. The beer disappeared by evaporation, leaving the crystals showing. Originally the idea was to protect the mirror from insects. On this frosty surface it was a fad to have pictures drawn by rubbing off lines of the frost with the tip of the finger. Huge birds with Spencerian wings, elk-heads, landscapes, sea-scenes—anything that struck the fancy of the saloon artist —appeared in due season. Tramp painters did the best jobs, and there was always one of them hanging around.

The appearance of these artistic endeavors was contemporaneous with the first spring flow of bock beer, an advertising sign, showing a huge goat's head, indicating that the heavy dark brew was on sale. The goat sign was out this day, and the Late for Dinner Club had gathered to taste of the first tapping.

When I dropped in, Edgar Thorndike was viewing with a critical eye a landscape

drawn by a hobo on the frosted mirror. A twinkle in his glance alone betrayed a lack of deadly seriousness as he sipped his bock and discussed details of the masterpiece with Mike Kinsella.

"You know," said Kinsella, "I have a little daughter who could draw up them mirors something beautiful, if I would only let her come in a saloon. She's got real talent, Mr. Thorndike."

"I notice," observed a stranger, draped over the bar a little distance from the group, evidently feeling a neglect in service, "that you don't mind about other people's daughters coming in a saloon. Fill this glass up, and listen to that noise in the back room."

A dangerous look crossed Mike's face, but observing the man's condition, his tone moderated.

"I'm not responsible for other people's daughters," he said, glancing in the direction indicated. "I can't even give them advice. It's a free country, you know—too damn' free, I think sometimes. I can't even refuse to serve them."

THE man subsided, and Thorndike resumed his study of the mirror, making ultra-technical criticism for our benefit and amusement.

"On the level, Mr. Thorndike," Mike said at the first opportunity, "my little girl Nora has real artistic talent. Her teacher said so. Take this home and look it over, will you? Let me know what you think of it."

From a drawer Kinsella produced a large envelope containing a pen-and-ink drawing. He handed it to the celebrated artist and resumed his duties behind the bar.

Thorndike promised a sincere criticism and took the sketch home with him.

"I think there is really something in this," he remarked as we told each other good night. His opinion must have been confirmed when he reached his studio and regarded it seriously. For the next afternoon I found Thorndike discussing the drawing with Kinsella.

"Has your daughter ever tried anything but black and white?" he was asking.

"Oh, sure! She monkeys around with colors all the time—water-colors, I believe she calls 'em. Far's I can see, they're pretty good, too."

"Now, Mike," announced Thorndike as the father beamed, "the young lady has really got something that needs developing. She draws unusually well for an amateur. I will get her a real chance if you wish it. How old is she?"

"Nineteen, going on twenty, Mr. Thorndike. If you can really get her a chance, well, I'll—"

"That's all right, Mike. Now listen: I have here a note that I have written to Mr. Sedgwick, the director down at the art-school. Have your daughter present this sometime tomorrow. He'll take care of her, but I'll also telephone from my studio so there'll be no cinch. But don't let her start unless she intends to stick. They wont fool with students down there who aren't serious."

Appreciating the sincerity in Thorndike's tone, something inside of Kinsella bubbled up and made his hand tremble as he took the note. A feeling of partly achieved ambition had almost upset him.

"Wont you gentlemen have a bottle of wine?" he blurted. "We've got to celebrate this somehow. —Oh, Sam," he called, "open up a quart of that 1904, and have it cold. —Excuse me, gents, while I telephone."

I have never seen a more unsuccessful effort at suppressed excitement. Up to that time it was the one big moment in the life of the Kinsella family.

"She'll be there," announced Mike, returning from the telephone, "and she asks that I tell you how thankful she is, Mr. Thorndike. But I simply haven't got enough words to do it. . . . . Drink up, and let's have another. That's the best language I speak."

The judge gravely offered a toast to the new artist, with the added hope that she would some day put Thorndike himself on a back seat.

We left Kinsella with a smile that was not his regular saloon smile. The incident was forgotten, so far as I was concerned, my mind being seriously occupied for the next hour with explanations about being late for dinner. After Nora had been successfully installed, I think it must also have slipped Thorndike's mind. At any rate he did not mention it again for a long time.

JUT Thorndike was to have the satisfaction of knowing that his quick judgment on latent artistic talent had not been in error. Along in the fall he received a note from Mr. Sedgewick inviting him to

be present at a reception to be given Miss Nora Kinsella, the landscape genius of the school.

"Her work is so clever and carries such force in composition that we are going to exhibit several of her landscapes in water colors," the director worte. "Be sure and be here, as I want her to meet some of the established artists of the town. Miss Kinsella will be a sensation in a year or two, unless I miss my guess."

Thorndike had this in his pocket as we gathered at Kinsella's place that afternoon. He kept it quiet, though, waiting to see if Mike had heard. It was noticeable that the saloonkeeper was laboring under some suppressed feeling. His eagerness for a chance to speak to the artist privately was evident.

"Say, Mr. Thorndike, can I get your advice about a little matter?" he finally asked; and the two, one on each side of the bar, moved a few feet from the group, their heads together.

"They're going to give Nora a big blow-out down at the school," Mike told the artist, "and they've insisted that she bring her mother and father. I reck'n I've got to go, but I want to know—do I wear the soup and fish—long-tail coat and everything? Oh, I've got 'em, all right," he added as Thorndike looked at him.

"Do they know that you—"

"Sure they don't. If they tumble to the fact that Nora's father is a saloonkeeper—But I'll try and see they don't."

"Cetrainly," answered Thorndike, "give them all you've got, Mike. Be sure and go. Wear everything. I'll be there. I'm invited too."

Kinsella was relieved at this information. Thorndike then showed him the note, but insisted on calling us all in for the reading.

"Now, what do you know about that!" cried Mike. "You think they really mean that, or is he just trying to steam the little girl up to hard work."

"You can bet Sedgewick means it."

"Well, I'll say that's going some, for a barkeep's daughter. Oh, Sam," Mike shouted, "open up a cold quart of that old 1904. . . . . Oh, you've got to," Kinsella announced in answer to our remonstrance. "This is one big day, and you are all in on it."

Thorndike arranged it so that we could also go along, though not originally invited. Even the Judge promised to dress up in an inch of his life and help make it a big occasion. None of us had ever seen Miss Nora, but already we had assumed a decidedly proprietary interest.

THOUGH we got our first glance of Nora Kinsella that night at the art-school, an introduction was not necessary for indentification. As we gingerly edged our way into the big reception-room, the Judge, Somers and myself were very conscious of being out of place in this art world. But we saw and appreciated a picture which I am sure Thorndike himself could not have painted—a young girl the animated center of a group of old men, middle-aged ones, college boys and old maids. A magnet, she had drawn and was holding them, totally unconscious of her attraction. Some fifteen feet away stood Mike Kinsella in evening dress, talking as earnestly and learnedly as he knew with Sedgewick, and occasionally casting a proud fatherly glance at the group.

Our presence was noted eventually, and Thorndike took the members of the Late for Dinner Club in tow, assuming a protectorate over our movements, which at any moment threatened an embarrassing lack of technique in criticism and observation.

"Keep away from Mike for a while," he advised with a low chuckle. "He and the director are going good. Sedgewick never saw anybody like that before. He thinks Mike wonderful. Get Mike's set face, his attempt at dignified repression!"

We moved within earshot, unobserved by our daily host.

"It must give one a distinct feeling of pride—this unusual tribute to one's young daughter, Mr. Kinsella," Sedgewick was saying.

"I'll say it does!" exclaimed the forgetful Mike, slapping the director on the back. "If I only had the chance, I'd give you fellows a return date that would knock your eye out."

"Rather a drole way of putting it," Sedgewick laughed politely, "but we will get Thorndike some night and have a nice little chat—what do you say?"

"Fine business! Just come up to the—" Mike almost stepped over the brink, but caught himself. "All right, just let Mr. Thorndike know, and we'll get together. You've made me feel mighty proud, Mr. Sedgewick."

The director moved away to look after his other guests.

"Oh, say, Mr. Sedgewick," called Mike, "did you get that one about the two Irishmen—I think this is new—"

"Keep it until I get round again, Mr. Kinsella. I'm going to look forward to that when I return. Don't forget, now."

Sedgewick hurried away.

"No, don't forget that one about Mike and Pat," suggested the Judge as we closed in on the startled Mike. "Tell it to us."

"Well, how d'ye do?" he exclaimed, a blushing grimace showing that he was hacked. "I think that director will fall for some of those old ones, at that," he added, defensively. "Most anything goes good here. Great night, aint it? Fine of you folks to come to Nora's party. Come over and meet her."

NORA saw us approaching and broke up the group in running to greet us. A look at that young girl's frank, happy face, one touch of the genial, unsophisticated atmosphere encircling her, made us feel a little ashamed of our pretense at having helped her along. Nora needed no help—from us.

The girl's naturalness, complete lack of self-consciousness and her freshness were as pretty as her face, and that is saying a lot. Mike's daughter was not statuesque, but about her there was an air of thorough competence. Her large bluish-gray eyes had a kind of flash in them that gave one the feeling of long acqaintance. It was difficult for us to believe that we had not known Nora since she was a child in pinafores. In fact, Judge McCrew went around all night persistent in explaining the wonderful rise of *his* protégé. But for the restraining hand of Thorndike and the occasional competition of the young fellows, the Judge would have monopolized the girl's attention all evening.

It was a great night for Mike. His occasional lapses from assumed dignity into the slang of the saloon made a big hit with the artists and their patrons, many of whom know nothing of the Broadway type. For no better word he was labeled picturesque, and among artists, I find, that always makes one a lion. Not once did Mike actually betray his station in life, though he had some narow escapes. Those who knew him were just as guarded.

In a hall-like room leading from the main reception-chamber six of Nora's landscapes were on exhibition. I am not a judge of technique in art, but I know those pictures were corkers. Little groups of people who do know gathered about them during the evening, and not once did I hear anybody say, "Aren't they perfectly lovely!" or any of that kind of talk usually indulged in to make a hostess feel happy.

It was in front of one of these landscapes that I first noticed the handsome young fellow pointed out to me as Avery Underhill, Jr. He was with Nora at the time, and I observed that his interest in the picture was only exceeded by his interest in Nora. For one look at a picture he had three for the artist.

"That young fellow appears to be interested," I observed to Thorndike.

"Interested?" he repeated, laughing. "Worse than that! The kid's hit squarely between the eyes. That's been going on all evening. Do you know what that young fellow has done?"

We all turned inquiringly.

"Why," answered Thorndike, "he's spoken to Sedgewick and offered fifteen hundred dollars for the one water color, the one he is examining—or rather, pretending to examine. Sedgewick has just told Nora, and she is all aflutter. Ordinarily five hundred dollars would be a good price."

"Well, what's the answer to that?" asked the judge.

"Judge," laughed Thorndike, "I wouldn't think that much of a puzzle to you. Look, he is taking Nora over to meet his father and mother."

"Who are they?" I asked.

"You don't know old Avery Underhill, one of the richest property owners in New York—one of the Four Hundred?"

"Oh!" I grunted, but up to then I had not the slightest idea.

WHEN it became noised about that Underhill had bought the favorite of the six water colors, he became second in importance to Nora for the rest of the evening.

I am no expert on romance, and no chronicler of its progress, but as a layman observer, I think I know when a young fellow is hit hard. If that Underhill boy wasn't crazy about Nora within two hours of their first meeting, then my early training as to symptoms was all wrong. Yes, and Nora knew it too.

That night the little girl, and one could not blame her, forgot her social station,

that her father ran a saloon. I am sure that the young man, in his enthusiasm, would not have cared. In the first excitement of this budding affair neither of them gave a thought to old man Avery, to Mrs. Underhill and to the shutters that close in the exclusive of what we are pleased to call society.

Avery, Jr., was introduced to Mike Kinsella early in the evening and unreservedly pronounced Nora's dad a prince. In fact, he told Nora of his pleasure at meeting a man who talked plain United States, and "could handle his slang."

The Late for Dinner Club was standing in a group when Nora, followed by young Underhill, came to her father, unusually animated.

"Daddy," she announced, "Mr. Underhill, the gentleman who bought my picture, has his new car outside and has asked to take you, Mamma and myself home. The car's right outside."

A momentary look of hesitancy or confusion ran over Mike's face, but in a second it was gone. It was no easy job to rush Kinsella off his feet.

"Now, that's mighty nice, isn't it?" he said. "I'm sorry, Mr. Underhill, but I have ordered a car to be here at midnight. Thank you just the same—some other time, maybe."

Nora, an obedient girl, accepted the situation, but the keen disappointment in Underhill's face was evident.

Kinsella had not ordered a car, but to make good his statement he did so in a very few minutes. Not until the Kinsella family was inside the taxicab, rushing home with the memory of a bewildering night, did Nora speak of young Underhill.

"Daddy," she asked in all innocence, "why didn't you want Mr. Underhill to take us home? It was awfully nice of him to suggest it."

"Why, Nora, because—because—"

"Because," said Mrs. Kinsella coming to Mike's aid, "that young man is in society, dear, and he probably doesn't know that—that we are in the saloon business."

"Oh," Nora sank back in the cushion, swallowing hard. Her first shock had come rather suddenly.

The neighborhood buzzed the next day with the story of Nora Kinsella's fame. Often Mike had to confirm the report that she had sold one picture for fifteen hundred dollars. At no time, though, did he name the purchaser.

AVERY UNDERHILL, JR.'S, activities were checked but not to be defeated by the mere act of Mike Kinsella in declining his invitation for a ride. "Avie," as they called him at college, was not that kind of fellow. The young man knew that for some reason other than the one given Nora's father did not wish him to accompany them home. Unaccustomed to being curbed in anything, this rankled. Avie immediately set out to find where the Kinsellas lived, and naturally the first thing that occurred to him was to ascertain the nature of Mike's business. In that, though, he got little satisfaction. Sedgewick, the director, did not know, and Thorndike merely informed him that Mr. Kinsella was in some kind of merchandising business.

Young Underhill knew that Nora would still attend the art-school, and his brain began devising plausible excuses for visiting that institution. His first idea was to take up the study of art. After a rather guarded talk with Sedgewick, though, he discovered that he could not be in the same class-room with real artists like the girl. His interest in becoming a Michaelangelo or a Sargent promptly subsided. The next move was more to the point. Avie gravely directed his father's attention to the big advantage of buying another of the six pictures before rival collectors could raise the price by competitive offers. Under the eloquence of this plea the father gave his consent. There was an immediate consultation with Mr. Sedgewick. Young Underhill declined to buy the picture, however, unless he could see the artist in person. The director was made to see that such a procedure was of immense benefit in encouraging the pupil.

Thorndike, who heard of this, told us that young Underhill spent exactly one hour and a half going over the technique of the second composition with Nora before he went away with the water color under his arm, at a thousand dollars. On this occasion he again asked that Nora permit him to take her home in his car, and just as firmly as had been the decision of her father, she declined. Those words of her mother in the cab that night still served as a warning. Besides, the girl was intensely loyal to her parents. If society did not recognize the saloonkeeper as a member in good standing, no son of society could recognize the equality of a saloonkeeper's daughter.

Two weeks after Avery's purchase of the second picture he and Nora met on the sidewalk in front of the art-school building,—a chance meeting, he said,—and there was much to be recounted about the reception, pictures, and oh, a lot of things. Nora saw no reason why she could not go with the young man to a soda-water parlor for hot chocolate. They sat and talked longer than either realized until the girl discovered that she would have to get home in unusual haste, or be late. But Nora told her mother of the meeting, and the mother, that time, had not the heart to wound her again.

After that, Nora often marveled at the caprices of luck that brought young Underhill to the art-school at the exact moment when she was coming out. And it was just as joyous as marvelous. She was twenty now, and did not think it necessary to tell her mother of all the pleasant little chats in the soda-water parlor, but she did not try to conceal them.

"Do you know what we are doing up at the house today?" Avery remarked one afternoon to Nora. "The Governor is fitting up a wine-cellar and buying up a big stock—a regular cellar like those they have in France. He is certain that prohibition is going to creep up this way before we know it—the old man is taking no chances on being caught, you know."

"Prohibition?" she repeated. "Oh, yes. Daddy was talking about that the other night. It must be a terrible thing. He says it will ruin—" Nora thought of the words of her mother and caught herself. "It must be terrible," she concluded.

"My father is of the opinion that it will sooner or later close up every saloon in the country," Young Underhill went on.

"Would that mean that there would be no more people in the saloon business? That's just what Daddy—will the people vote on it?"

"Sure they will, and say,"—a sudden thought struck the boy,—"you women folks will have a chance to vote on it too. I guess, though, you can't vote yet."

"One more year, and I can," she answered frankly.

"Well, I guess you'll know how to vote on prohibition."

"Yes, yes—I hope so."

AS the two walked to the bus which took Nora home, the girl was thoughtful, unusually preoccupied it seemed to Avie. Into her mind there had come a suggestion that her father would have considered revolutionary.

"If prohibition will take everybody out of the saloon business," her brain was debating, "and Mother and I voted for it, together with enough other mothers and daughters, why, Daddy would no longer be in the saloon business."

The idea fixed itself so strongly in the girl's mind that she talked to her mother about it that night.

To Nora's surprise, the mother received the suggestion in a friendly spirit. She too would like to know that Mike was out of the saloon business, that her gifted daughter would not face the bar imposed by gentle society. She also had a vote.

"But dear, it would ruin your father's business," she said. "Besides, don't you dare let him hear you talk that way. He is badly worried now. How else could he make a living?"

"I could make the living, Mother. Don't you know that I already have made twenty-five hundred out of pictures?"

"But you may not always have a rich young man so anxious to buy," suggested Mrs. Kinsella, looking keenly at her daughter.

That her mother suspected a flirtation had never occurred to Nora. She took her work seriously and this intimated reflection on its value was disturbing.

"Why, Mother, don't you consider Mr. Underhill a judge of art? Do you think he would have paid fifteen hundred for a picture if he had not thought it worth that much. Do you think—"

"Oh, I was just trying to tease you," laughed her mother. You think Mr. Underhill a very nice young man, don't you?"

"Why, certainly, I do. I like him very much. He is just as nice as he can be. Even if he is a member of society, as you say, he is awfully pleasant and much more considerate than any other boys I have met. Mr. Underhill has given me more encouragement in my work than anybody, even Mr. Sedgewick."

THAT things other than art were discussed at these soda-water chats the mother well knew. As the days went by, Nora came home with much gossip of what was going on in town. An evening rarely passed that she did not repeat some wise saying of funny comment that Mr. Underhill had made.

One night at dinner Nora appeared wearing a beautiful gold fraternity pin set in pearls. This capped the climax of a growing uneasiness that had frequently disturbed Mrs. Kinsella.

"Nora," she said one morning as the girl was starting out, "you must come directly home from the art-school from now on. Don't stop at the soda fountain anymore—anyway, not for a while. I don't want to make you unhappy, but for the present I think it best.

"All right, Mother," the daughter replied with a decided show of reluctance; "but you and Daddy don't distrust me?"

"No, no, no, dear. But you don't understand these things like I do."

It was an unhappy day for Nora. Even her work suffered. She and Avie had, oh, so many things, left unsaid. She feared she could not make him understand, and under no circumstances would she offend him. In her mind there was no doubt but that he was a badly mistreated and misunderstood young man.

Young Underhill was on the corner as usual that afternoon. Nora's request to be excused he accepted as due to some unnecessary haste on her part, and he did not insist. In time, though, it dawned upon the young man that Nora's failure to go with him for a chat was according to a fixed program. He fumed and asked—then demanded—some explanation, but got none that was satisfactory. That it was not Nora's fault he knew. Just why anybody could object to his association with the only girl that he genuinely liked he could not understand. What kind of people were the Kinsellas that they should put a check on his growing fondness for the girl? The boy again resorted to strategy.

TWO days later Nora was invited to be present at an afternoon tea of a select art-club—members of the exclusive set on Fifth Avenue, a matter of great pride and agitation to Sedgewick. But she did not accept. Again and again such invitations came, but just as often Nora's parents directed that she decline. At these affairs Avery Underhill who arrived early, was very disconsolate.

Beaten at every turn, Underhill solaced himself by telling his troubles to his college pals. That he should thus be deprived of even seeing the finest, freshest and corkingest girl that he had ever known, he told them, was unfair and an outrage.

After three bold but unsuccessful attempts at seeing Nora at the art-school one afternoon he gathered his chums and took them for a night ride in his car.

"It's a shame, and I don't care what happens now," he announced to them. "I'm going to get drunk. Come on. Let's stop at the corner and have one."

The big car pulled up at the curb, and the young men lined up at the ornate bar on the other side of the wicker doors.

"Give us—" Avie was about to say, when his glance met that of the bartender. He was standing face to face with Mike Kinsella—Nora's father!

"Why, how do you, Mr. Underhill!"

"How do you do?" The young man held out his hand, but did not pronounce Mike's name.

But the saloonkeeper could think more rapidly than young Underhill. Instantly he had seen the embarrassing situation.

"Mr. Underhill," said Mike, "if you will take your friends to the table in the back room, I'll have you served there. It will be more comfortable."

Mike had made it unnecessary for Avery to make introductions or to explain.

The young fellow lost his desire to drink. He ordered gingerale. All the bottom had fallen out of his indignation and recklessness. Though he had racked his brain, at times, it had never dawned on him that Nora's father might be a saloonkeeper or something like that. He had not known that saloonkeepers' daughters were sent to the same schools as other people's daughters, and might have the same polish. The whole situation was clear to him in a second—even the girl's hesitancy to talk about prohibition.

"Good skate, that bartender friend of yours, Avie," one of his chums remarked, but Underhill glared at him.

"I only saw him once before," he said. "Nice fellow I reckon."

Avie took his friends out the rear door, Mike was not there to say good night.

The party visited no other places that evening. Young Underhill decided there was some work he had to do the next day, or something, and that he had better go home. He did not sleep well, though. The bar had risen between him and Nora, and he had wisdom enough to appreciate it. As the sleepless hours went by, he thought long and earnestly of prohibition. He wondered if Nora's hesitancy in agreeing to vote against it meant that she was in

favor of it. Did she see in it a means of getting her father out of the saloon business? Did she want to change her father's business on his account? At that the boy felt a great glow of satisfaction. All these things ran through his mind as he tossed. Then came a more constructive idea. Why couldn't he be a business man on his own account—get firmly established and then defy the conventions that pinned him down? Yes, why not?

THE period of shock was not over.

"Son," Underhill, Sr., said to him as they breakfasted together next morning, "you seem to be rather interested in this young lady artist of whom we've heard so much. Your mother believes you really serious about it."

"It is serious, Father. I think her the nicest girl I ever met. Besides, she has done something. None of my other friends have achieved as much as Miss Kinsella. You know it means something to have pictures put on exhibition."

"Tell me something about her, son. Who is she—her people, I mean?"

The boy stammered for a moment. He had never lied to his father.

"Father, I have just discovered that her father is a saloonkeeper."

"And you have formed an attachment like that: This will never do, my boy."

"I didn't know it until last night. But," —and the boy gulped—"knowing her as I have, I'm not the least ashamed of it. I was embarrassed at my discovery, yes. But it's not her fault.

"Well, son, this a rather unhappy predicament. It can not go on, though. I will have to ask that you discontinue your association. It will only make you both miserable."

"The Kinsellas seem to have already discontinued it," said the boy ruefully.

"There are lots of other girls, son."

"But none like her."

"You think that now," the father said kindly. "At any rate, you see the impossibility of even a friendly relationship between our family and that of a saloonkeeper. It's unfortunate, but you'll have to buck up under it."

Instead of obeying the spirit of his father's direction, though, Avery, Jr., went directly to his room and wrote Nora a letter, addressing it to the art-school. In that he told her much more than he had dared to say in conversation.

Letter-writing not being in the list of prohibitive acts, as she construed it, Nora promptly answered Avie's long missive.

A few days of this, and Young Underhill was pretty sure just where he stood in the girl's affections. Nora, with the instinct of woman, had known for some time the extent of her hold on the young man. She also discovered from his intimations that he at last knew why their association was frowned upon. Nora was now a violent prohibitionist, though secretly. In one of his letters Underhill had also expressed a definite intention of voting that ticket.

To the girl artist and the potential millionaire, in touch by mail only, prohibition had become the one great issue of the nation—of the world. It had not occurred to them that the man who was a saloonkeeper might occupy the same social status as a man who is a saloonkeeper.

Their minds were simply in accord that prohibition, and that alone was the great panacea.

IN Mike's place on the corner, though, prohibition was not considered as having the slightest symptoms of a panacea. The Late for Dinner Club had gathered there as usual one afternoon with but one topic possible—the lightninglike ratification of the eighteenth amendment—the death of John Barleycorn. And ahead of that was the imminence of wartime prohibition. In that atmosphere the barometer was falling.

Mike Kinsella was above all a law-abiding citizen.

"Gentlemen," he said to us, "there's one thing certain. When it does come, this place is going to observe the law. I've got to get out of this business, and it might not be a bad idea to beat the other fellows to it. Now, if I could only do something else."

"For instance?" some one interjected.

"Not an idea in the world. As it now stands, prohibition will ruin me."

"Say, Mike," suggested Thorndike, "did it ever occur to you that when people stop drinking,—or can't get it easy,—they are going to eat a lot of candy? You do yourself, when you go on the wagon, don't you?" He turned to us.

We all agreed that such was the case.

"My tip, then," went on the artist, "would be to get in the candy business. Yes, and how about flowers? Many a fellow will be squaring himself now with

bouquets, as long as he has no other way to spend a dollar or so on the way home."

"Candy and flowers is a business for a Greek—not me," said Mike. "Did you ever hear of an Irishman in that business."

Just the same, Thorndike's suggestion had planted a germ in Kinsella's brain, and the more he thought of it, the more the idea grew.

THE gang observed Kinsella nosing around various flower-shops during the next few days. In asking questions he discovered that none of these foreigners, as he called them, had any idea of what personality meant in drawing customers. There really was a field there.

As the time for stopping sale of intoxicants neared,—nobody else believed it would be rigidly enforced,—Mike had grown so firm in his convictions that it was foolish to take chances that he called on the real-estate agent from whom he had leased his corner for several years.

"What about another lease?" he asked. "Or rather, another kind of lease?"

"We are not going to raise you this time," the agent informed him with a smile. "Don't worry."

"I know you're not. But that isn't what I mean. How would you consider leasing me the place for another business? You know this prohibition is coming on, and I ought to get cheaper rent for another kind of business."

"Nothing doing," announced the agent flatly. "You don't take this prohibition thing seriously?"

"You can bet I do," Mike replied, "It's going to get us, sure."

"Well, there'll be no letting down in the rent, anyway. The owner of that property would laugh if I even suggested it."

"He might be more reasonable than you think. Suppose you let me see him. Maybe I can show him the handwriting on the wall, as the Judge says. Somebody's going to get stung, and stung bad."

"Oh, I guess it's all right about you seeing him. Wait a minute." The agent went to the telephone. Presently he returned with a card in his hand.

"Go ahead and see him," he told Mike. "Here is his card, and he can see you at ten tomorrow morning."

Mike toyed with the card as he walked out, and then glanced at the name: "Avery Underhill, Investments." The address was that of a big office building on Broadway.

"Underhill? Underhill?" Mike repeated. "No—yes, by George it is! That's the father of that boy who has taken such a fancy to Nora!"

Kinsella called on Mr. Underhill.

"Kinsella? Kinsella?" muttered the old gentleman. "Aren't you the gentleman I saw at the reception at the art-school? You are the father of Nora Kinsella, the landscape artist?"

"I'm the fellow," replied Mike. The two stared at each other, rather uncertain of a conversational start.

"I want to get out of the saloon business, Mr. Underhill," announced Mike as he took the proffered seat. "We've all got to get out soon."

"You think so?"

"Sure as the world. And it struck me that you might consider leasing the old corner for another business—at a cheaper rate."

"That would mean my leasing all the other places the same way," it occurred to Mr. Underhill. "The lessees of every saloon corner that I own would use your case to seek the same reduction."

"You own other saloon places?" asked the surprised Kinsella.

"About twenty of them, my list shows. Naturally, we don't lease them for other purposes, as saloon-rent is much higher."

"Well, I'll be damned," thought Mike. Then he said:

"Well, Mr. Underhill, think this over. I'd like to take a three-year lease on that corner store for a flower-and-candy shop I can't pay saloon-rent prices, but I'll pay well for an experiment."

Avery Underhill, the elder, was a wise old man. He did think over Kinsella's proposal. To be prepared for a slump in his property, he also would risk an experiment. He accepted Mike's proposition.

The Late for Dinner Club, as an organization, was doomed.

KINSELLA'S flower-and-candy shop really leaped into favor. In addition to having the jump on those who thought too late, it was the most artistically arranged store of its kind in New York. Nora's hand could be seen in this. They even served tea there in the afternoons without charge. There was an unseen hand also at work for Mike Kinsella long before he realized it. Much trade from the exclusive set was directed toward the novel place, Kinsella's became quite a name on

boxes of flowers that arrived ahead of callers. Kinsella candy was expensive but good. To make sure that he kept his Four Hundred business, as Mike called it, he bought the most expensive ingredients and made the price just a trifle higher than anybody else. It worked.

Young Underhill, though rather quiet in his plans, thought of nothing but a means of scaling the bar that still loomed between him and Nora.

One day the young man wandered into the Kinsella flower-store to see how it worked. The idea for which he was seeking must have hit him as he entered. After a brief survey of the shop and a talk with Nora's father, the young fellow turned and steered a straight course homeward. He had it.

"What is it, son?" inquired the elder Underhill, somewhat surprised at the businesslike earnestness in the boy's face as Avery, Jr., entered the library.

"It's this, Father: I'm going into business, and once I am started, I'm going to marry to suit myself."

The elder Underhill gasped.

"Into business? Get married? Sit down, son, and tell me about all this."

"Oh, you think I'm a child and don't know what I'm talking about. But I'll show you. You are a great business man, capitalist and all that, Father, but you are old fogey when it comes to organization."

"What's this I hear, my boy?" The old gentleman hesitated between indignation and amusement.

"As we say in football and baseball," continued the boy, "you don't keep your head up. Your income is falling off, and you've almost let a fortune slip out of your hands. . . . . Is it true, Father," he suddenly asked, "that you have twenty-four saloon sites and have been renting them all for that purpose?"

"I believe those figures are correct."

"I'm glad I didn't know it when you first got after me about associating with a saloonkeeper's daughter. I see no difference—" But the boy did not wish to offend his father, and he stopped. "That is not the question, though. This is business. I said you were old fogey and don't keep up with the times. I'm going to show you something."

Never having seen his son in this frame of mind, the elder Underhill sat back, encouraging Avie to proceed.

"It's all business, all business. Have you seen the success of Kinsella's flower-store, the place that you used to rent for a saloon?"

"No, I haven't seen it, but I understand it's a success. His rent is coming in regularly."

"But rents in your other places are falling off. You are going to have a dead loss on your hands there. The Kinsella place is going to be a gold mine, and I'm going to give you a share in it."

"Well, this *is* interesting!"

"There is no reason why we shouldn't organize the biggest floral business in America, and I've got it all worked out. All you have to do is say yes. Kinsella's got the start; you've got the property; and I've got the notion. You are to be president; Kinsella is to be vice-president and general manager; and I'm to be secretary and treasurer. All we need of you is your name and the empty saloons. I'll take most of the presidenting off your hands. You know this prohibition has come to stay. Think it over, Father. I'm a business man from now on."

The son, who had been standing during the delivery of this ultimatum, walked out, closing the door behind him. The elder Underhill leaned back and laughed. There was a kind of proud ring to that laugh, though. It was succeeded by some serious thought.

THREE months later a chain of flower-and-candy shops bloomed along Broadway where once swinging wicker doors had beckoned the wayfarer. General Manager Kinsella, knowing man's weakness for a place to talk on the way home, had installed tea-tables in every store. Here the Late for Dinner Club at last found a haven. They went home bearing flowers instead of alibis. The first month showed a promising profit.

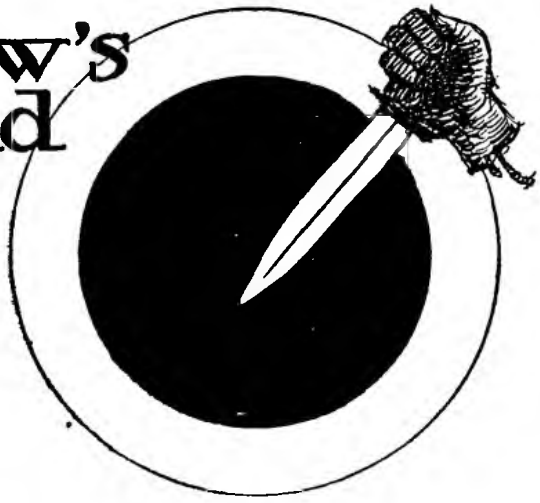
"Father," inquired Avery, Jr., placing the first business statement of Underhill, Kinsella & Underhill, Inc., on the library table, "what are the social relations of families when the men folks are in business together?"

A glance at the figures, and the old man arose and grasped the hand of his son. The look in his eye was an answer in itself.

That night the Kinsella family took a long delayed ride in Avie's big car.

The next time Mike and Mrs. Mike were not along. Avery, Jr., had seen to that by calling in a chummy runabout.

The Widow's Hand



By Edison Marshall

FOURTEEN of us were gathered about the billiard tables when Homer Gatlin came in. We heard some one shout—and there he stood, smiling, at the door of the club. Five months in the jungles had changed him very little.

Perhaps he was slightly more bronzed; and I could readily imagine that his eyes had that queer, sparkling nervousness that is an old trait in Gatlin when he first comes back from his jungles. It is the same look that is to be seen in the eyes of aviators returned from the wars, and is a habit learned in trying to watch all directions at once. Enemies are not confined to one plane in the jungle, any more than in the air. Certain great members of the leopard family wait in the tree-limbs, and in the grass are the poison-folk whose loose-hung fangs are death. But tonight we couldn't see Gatlin's eyes. He kept them behind huge smoked glasses. We grouped about him and shook his hands and welcomed him back to the Wanderer's Club.

In a moment more we were making him comfortable with a cigar and a great chair in the lounging-room. We thought we were going to hear stories. But it wasn't stories that we heard this night.

There are probably not more than one hundred men in the Great City who knew that the Wanderer's Club existed—and fifty of this hundred were members. We had two floors of a five-story building in the club district; and at first glance they looked more like the sections of a museum than a club. We had been drawn together by a mutual love of far places; and the whole world had yielded up its oddities to furnish the rooms. The men all seemed of one breed. They had the same bronze skins, the same bright, nervous eyes, the same cold nerves that are schooled by such things as the charge of a tiger or daily risk of life on slide-rock. It takes cold nerves to sit with ease among such things as adorned our lounging room; and we got so we rather liked it.

Some of the things were simply trophies; but no man-eater who had not killed at least six natives, and no moose that had died tamely, and none but the rarest breeds and specimens of such creatures as gazelle and buffalo, were permitted to lift their heads in the lounging-room. There was a jaguar that had cost Martin Hedley his life in the long ago. There was a beautiful little dwarf antelope of a new strange breed that Sir Howard Fells, but recently of London, had pursued for months in the most deadly sleeping-sickness jungles of Africa. Then there were curios—all with sinister and strange histories. There were weapons and talismen, and against the north wall the dark, withered mummy of a Pharaoh. We rather prided ourselves on the grisly air of our lounging-room. The few guests that came to the club used to wonder at it, and we found considerable delight in mystifying them.

WE had no particular reason to suspect that the night of Homer Gatlin's home-coming would be any different from one hundred others in the club. We thought we would hear him tell his experiences in his own cold-blooded way; and perhaps he would have things to show us. It was a very still, warm night in July. Of course, there was the usual night-life in the streets below, but few of its sounds stole up to us. We never knew just why; the explanation was probably some peculiarity in the construction of the building. We were always glad. And the old mummy was allowed to sleep in peace—in almost as quiet a place as his own pyramid.

"I've got something for the lounging room," Homer Gatlin told us. He held up a leathern package for us to see.

We grouped about the table, wondering what monstrosity was in the inoffensive-looking package. And then I noticed a change in Homer Gatlin.

It was just a little thing—one of those insignificant observations, backed by neither logic or good sense, that seem to fasten on one's mind and will not be driven out. I had seen him open packages before, and he had always *smiled*. He had always opened them with the air of rather extravagant triumph that was at once delightfully boyish and charming. You always thought of a small boy displaying some wonderful purchase to his friends. But tonight he did not smile at all. He had traveled so far and seen so much that he had learned to smile at the whole world, and everything above or under it; yet evidently he took the thing in the package as something serious past words.

Few men in the world have steadier nerves than Homer Gatlin. They tell stories of him that no one who does not know the man can possibly believe. Yet his hand fumbled a little when it worked the latch on the bag. And I heard Sir Howard Fells whisper one of his cheerful British curses behind me. Fells was an ancient enemy of Gatlin's,—over a dispute of long ago,—and we were simply delighted to see him so amiable. For his acquaintances know that he never curses at ill-luck or danger, but only as a caress.

"It isn't very nice—the thing in this bag," Homer told us. "Fact, it's rather rotten. But I fancy you chaps can stand it."

We thought we could. We didn't laugh and shout at him as would have been natural for us to do. I tried to think out why, and then tried to forget it. It was just that his seriousness and gravity had passed to us all. I cast my eyes about the circle of faces; and all fourteen of them were utterly without smiles. This lounging-room was a ghastly place, after all. The idea hit me all at once.

"It couldn't possibly beat that beautiful Egyptian king on the wall—that Hart brought last year," Fells replied gravely.

Gatlin looked up from his bag. "You don't know. It has a devilish ominous history. I got it in a village of the Burma hills—and if I'm stepping beyond the bounds of—good taste, and that sort of thing—by bringing it here, you'll have to forgive it. I couldn't resist the monster—although the old reptile that sold it to me told me enough yarns about it to freeze the blood in my veins. Warned me, the old villain—and told me it was on my own head."

HE snapped open the bag and took from it some odd-shaped thing wrapped in silk. I heard the soft whisper of many escaping breaths. We were rather prepared for something particularly horrible, and at the sight of this inner wrapping we all sighed softly. Then he began to undo the silk.

His hands were nervous and eager; and he seemed to have difficulty with it. And when he did get it open, he had it upside down. Something slipped out and clattered on the library table.

Waldo Hart, the president of the club, was leaning against the table, and he leaped back when the thing fell. Waldo Hart has nerves of iron. Some new and foreign influence had certainly come into the Wanderer's club.

We all crowded about to see the thing on the table. None of us reached to touch it. And it was the space of a half-dozen seconds before I could even tell what it was.

It was a short-bladed dagger, and the hilt had something fastened on it that at first I could not make out. Then I saw that it was the dry, withered mummy of a human hand. The fingers closed so tight about the hilt that I could not even see the metal beneath; the thumb was closed over the fingers. About four inches of the wrist remained—a brown stiff prong that looked

more like wood than flesh. It was dry and hard as leather, and thrusting through it I could see what looked like the end of a thong or tendon. I supposed that it might have been a man's hand and emaciated in the centuries; but it seemed to me more likely that it was the smaller hand of a woman or a child. The forefinger on the hand was banded by a plain broad ring of gold.

"Well?" I heard Gatlin ask.

"Not very pretty," Waldo Hart replied. "But I don't see why you should almost cut yourself trying to get it open. I've seen human hands before, and this one differs from the rest only in that it has a death-grip on the hilt of a dagger. You can't spoil my sleep with a thing like that."

But we hardly heard him. We simply looked at the grotesque object on the table. I don't know why it seemed so sinister, and even a little beyond the pale of nature.

He left it on the table, and we walked together toward the group of easy chairs about the fireplace. "Well?" Sir Howard Fells asked at last. "Tell us about the blighty thing."

"Not much to tell," Gatlin replied with his characteristic economy of words. He threw himself down in his chair. "I told you I got it in the Burma hills. The old bandit said it was five centuries old, which may or may not be so. Rather inclined to doubt it. A woman's hand—a little widow that wanted a man. That's the story—and I suppose you know the nice little custom in upper Burma of punishing such an offense by cutting off the hands. The little widow seized her dagger; but a sword-cut at her wrist amputated the hand before she had time to use it. And the fingers are still latched about the hilt."

He spoke very slowly, even painfully. We were very still as we listened. Then Waldo Hart got up and walked back to the table. In a moment he rejoined us.

"That's not all," he said. "Tell the rest."

THE rest is simply ridiculous—and I can still hear the whine of the old pirate who told me. He says of all the amulets of ill-fortune in all of India, it is the worst. It's death itself, he told me, and he reeled over a whole category of sudden deaths and disappearances for which it is responsible. If stolen from the body of the dead, it is a certain key to fortune—and the old priest that sold it to me said that he got it that way himself. If taken from the living, stolen or bought, it is simply the devil!

"That's about all there is to it. Simply rot, of course. I've had it two months now, and it hasn't done anything worse than stick a point through the bag one day and prick me. Of course they say that as long as it is kept covered by a silken bag, the blade can't free itself to strike."

"This is the first time you've had it out?" Sir Howard asked.

"Yes."

"That's considerate—to wait till you get among your friends. I suppose we can count on it performing tonight."

Gatlin looked up with sudden intensity. "Who knows?" he asked. His tone was oddly husky. "Perhaps we may—*tonight*."

Waldo Hart, who had been walking softly up and down the room, stopped in front of Gatlin's chair. "You seem damnably hectic about the matter," he observed. "Gatlin, you haven't let a strip of dried flesh and a naked blade get on your nerves, have you? Or have you jungle fever?"

Waldo Hart's humor is a strange thing; and for a moment we rather hoped that he was joking with Gatlin. But when we looked at his face we knew that he was in earnest.

Gatlin laughed—for the first time since he had come in. It was a rather nervous, entirely mirthless laugh that chopped off square in the middle. I knew perfectly that he saw nothing funny in Hart's remark. Hart's face grew graver.

"I'm all right," Gatlin reassured him stiffly. "Pulse normal, temperature normal. I don't know what jungle fever means. But I've been two months with that object—and if one of you chaps thinks that is nothing, kindly take it home to sleep with for two nights."

There was even a note of irritability in his voice. "You need a rest," Hart told him. "Take a whisky-and-soda, and forget it. I think it is a frightfully stupid thing, anyway, and not worth seeing."

Gatlin got up and walked back to the table. It seemed to me that his face was pale in the radiance from the lights. "Stupid, eh?" he repeated. "You might wait and see what it can do. The hand releases the blade sometimes, they say—in other words, strikes with it and does not take the trouble to withdraw. Then sometimes it has a way of disappearing—its

habits aren't regular at all. We'll see." And then his thin hand reached out and pressed the bell that rang in the butler's pantry.

"What do you mean to do?" Sir Howard asked softly after an instant's silence.

"This crowd is getting too supercilious," Gatlin replied. "You're getting all bound round with realism. I'm going to ask Wung Tu to turn out the lights at the main switch. We'll group around the table and see what happens."

Sir Howard's eyes brightened. "And what do you think will happen?"

"I don't think. That's one's beauty of it. No one ever knows what it is going to do next. The whining old priest was too old to know, himself—but he inferred it would do something. He was garrulous, and he went back to his opium-dream before I got the whole story. But we will see."

THE servant came in, and Gatlin gave him his orders. And his voice was almost his own when he turned again to us. "It's all rot, of course. I'm afraid I've been talking like a fool."

"You have," Hart told him cheerily.

"But I want to see, at least. I've had the strangest sensation of the presence of evil—of an assassin always with me, waiting for a chance—ever since I've had it; and now I'm protected by reinforcements I want to see what it will do. It works best in the dark, the priest said. Come stand around the table."

At that instant the dark dropped down. We heard Wung Tu come shuffling back to his pantry.

"You'd better have him stay near the switch—so he can turn it on if the need arises," some one said in the darkness.

No one answered him. We went up and grouped about the table. The switch extinguished every light, and the darkness that fell seemed almost to have mass and weight. We couldn't see the pallor of one another's faces. We bumped and collided and breathed hard as we tried to get about the table.

Then we all grew silent. I had never noticed before to what extent our club rooms were excluded from the sounds of the street. Deep jungles and wide deserts often have that deep, strained sort of silence, but rarely is it found in a busy city. It was as if each of us were alone in some far place.

None of us ever quite agreed on exactly what happened in that few moments of darkness. The human senses are not scrupulously accurate, in the first place; and in the second, the series of tiny incidents were not easy to follow. We stood quite still about the table. We could not even hear one another breathe. Homer Gatlin stood at one end—at least, he was standing there when the darkness fell. Waldo Hart was immediately behind me. I had lost track of Sir Howard in the darkness.

We waited a long time without hearing anything at all. Then something rustled on the table-top.

It was a dry, scratching sound, like the noise of mice in the wall, that all of us heard distinctly. We knew, in our hearts, that it could have been made by just one thing—the stir of those dead fingers on the polished board. They rustled ever so softly; but we heard it as surely as we heard our own breathing. All of us knew the world well enough to have learned the potency of imagination; and many of us had in past times filled the forests with imagined sounds. But by no possible wrench of thought could one of us even question the reality of this sound.

Waldo Hart, behind me, caught his breath. "Did you do that, Gatlin?" he asked. And the next thing we heard was a sound that none of us could name or place.

It could best be described as a long-drawn rustle of metal. It began with a sharp, distinct note which, if twenty times louder, might have been called a clang, and it died away with a slow ringing as of a tuning-fork in rapid vibration. It was bad enough in itself. We didn't understand it, and we hadn't been looking for it. But its echo was considerably worse.

While the sounds before had been inanimate,—the rustle of a dry, dead hand and the vibration of metal,—the sound that immediately followed was distinctly human. It was a long, shuddering gasp that seemed to fill all the room. One can tell these things. There are plenty of noises that sound like a human gasp—the whisper of the wings of certain water-fowl, the dying sound of certain wild creatures and even the stir of wind in deep jungles. They sound very much like it, until one hears the real thing; and then disillusionment comes quickly. This human sound came from the table end where Gatlin had been standing.

THAT was all there was to it—just a long, shuddering gasp. It might have been a gasp of fear, but it seemed to me more an expression of a vast amazement. All of us started then; and the sounds thereafter were obscured. I was dimly aware that some one at the table-end made a sudden convulsive motion, snatched at something on the table-top, and had grown instantly silent again. And the silence came down over the dark room, more strange and intense than ever before.

Perhaps there were soft sounds in it—soft movements on the rug and soft, sliding, settling sounds; but they were like the noises that one hears in the wilderness at night—so soft that they seem only to intensify the silence. For a long half-moment we all stood still.

A dread, unnamed apprehension had come over us all; and for a long thirty seconds we stood deep in our own strange thoughts. Perhaps it was not that long; none of us ever knew.

Sir Howard Fells found his voice first, unless you count the whispered oath of bewilderment from some one behind me. "What the devil is the matter?" he asked. His voice was clear and sharp in the darkness. "Where are you, Gatlin?"

We waited for him to answer. But the stillness endured.

"Gatlin!" Sir Howard called again. "We've had enough of this. Turn on the light."

We began to stir about. "Gatlin, is anything the matter?" the Englishman asked. And then we heard him fumbling for his pocket flash.

He got it at last. He flung it all about the table, and it sprang from face to face. They were white, strained faces. It lighted upon the table-top, and all of us saw that the hand-and-dagger had vanished. That was just a trifle here. But it seemed a long, long time before we could find Gatlin.

Then all at once the light-ray ended at the floor, where Gatlin had stood, and we all saw him very plainly. He was lying huddled quite curiously about the table-legs. The dark glasses were still over his eyes. The withered hand no longer held the hilt of the dagger. We could see the hilt quite plainly. It was protruding from Gatlin's breast.

IT seemed an endlessly long time before we finally got Wung Tu to turn the light-switch. We called him, and at first we could not make him understand. Then we heard him shuffling off in the darkness. The lights sprang up all at once and blinded us.

Above the startled, confused sound of our voices we heard Sir Howard speak. He was not the smiling, easy-going Briton we saw so often about the club. At once he was the same man that his hunting companions had learned to trust on the big-game trails.

"Silence!" he commanded. We grew still at once. "No man move from his place until he is told." He took his pistol from his pocket and laid it on the table-edge. "Waldo Hart? You are at least above suspicion. Go to the phone and call for an ambulance, and come back. Becke and Bromley—you are doctors—"

Becke and Bromley were already kneeling beside the huddled body on the floor, and they did not even look up. Dully we stood and watched them. Becke had been going to a case, and he had his kit. We saw him prick the bronze skin of the wrist with his hypodermic needle. Bromley had withdrawn the blade, and was busy at first aid.

"He's not dead," we heard him mutter. "He's got a chance—a slim one, but yet a chance. The blade missed his heart."

In a little while an ambulance gonged on the street below, and four men came up with a stretcher. It was Sir Howard who directed them. It was Sir Howard who helped them lift the unconscious form to the stretcher. And it was he who turned and faced us as they started out the door.

"There were fourteen men here, beside Wung Tu," he said. "It is for us to find out which the fourteen of us did this thing. No man leave the room, and no man move from his place."

Waldo Hart's voice was even and sure from the telephone-stand. "The police, Sir Howard? Shall we call them too?"

The man turned his glittering eyes. "Let's thrash this out ourselves. This is an old and stately club. I would rather have us learn the truth ourselves—and save trouble and disgrace and unwelcome publicity for the entire club. Do all of you feel the same?"

We nodded. And very quietly he closed and locked the great door of the lounging room. Then he strode to the hall where Wung Tu still stood with his hand on the light-switch. He brought Wung in, and locked the door behind him.

His eyes swept the circle of our faces. "We are not children," he said. "The first thing we must do is absolutely to thrust out of our minds the stories that Gatlin told us tonight—the sinister legend of his Indian curio."

"It is not easy to do," Hart replied.

"There were fourteen of us here," Sir Howard went on. "There are fourteen now, and it is obvious that the man who did it is with us still. Suicide, to one of Gatlin's optimism, is not to be suspected. I realize that I am as much to be suspected as any one of you—only some one has to take hold. Wung Tu—while my eyes are on you, move all the chairs so to make a half-circle about this table. Move them carefully and slowly."

If Wung Tu had done the deed,—which seemed less likely than any other possible supposition,—he had no chance to conceal evidence as he made the ring of chairs. Sir Howard's eyes were on him. Catching the spirit of the thing, we watched one another too.

"You can sit down now, gentlemen," Sir Howard said. "In fairness to us all, I ask that every man keep his hands in plain sight—on the arms of his chair. Wung Tu may stand with his back to the fireplace. All of us are hunters and explorers, and some of us have successfully sought a thing through a continent. It would be strange indeed if we could not locate a murderer among fourteen of us in one room. We'll talk this matter over and try to learn the truth."

WALDO HART leaned forward in his chair. "The first thing to do, it seems to me," he said, "is to find that ghastly thing that was on the table."

He spoke absolutely without feeling. And we all were rather breathless as we waited for Sir Howard's reply.

"Do you still believe that—that dried hand had anything to do with this murder?" he asked quietly.

"I don't believe anything—yet. I only know that as a coincidence, it isn't pleasant to think about at all. The blade was unquestionably the same that the hand held. The hand was gripped so tight on it—according to Gatlin's story—that it had held for several hundred years. Now we find the blade in the breast of its owner—and the hand loosed from the hilt."

Sir Howard's eyes seemed to light. "Do you mean, Hart, that the knife struck him down without—without human agency? You can't mean that."

"I wouldn't say such a thing. I couldn't, because I would sound like a fool even to my own ears. A man can't sit here and say things like that. But you know—what Gatlin said. 'It's death itself,' he said. I wish he hadn't—maybe I'd be able to think clearer on this problem. And you have traveled far enough, Howard, to know that the accumulated knowledge of peoples is not one tenth as great as knowledge yet unlearned. The blade and hand were from a strange race in a strange land. Then get away from the legends connected with its history if you can."

He reached and lifted the blade from the table-top. We had been unable to see the hilt when the withered hand had grasped it. Now we saw that it was simply a slender rod of steel, with plain steel guards, and rather short for a dagger-hilt. It looked little indeed like the daggers usually seen in India.

"Then how do you know the thing wont strike again?" Sir Howard asked.

The eyes of the two men met. "I don't know that it wont," he replied. And then he cursed himself for a fool.

THE long hours of the night began to drag away. We went over every detail of the case, step by step. All of us told the things that we had heard—and kept silent on the things we feared. We were cold-blooded, hard-headed Americans, and we held hard on our wandering thoughts. All of us showed where we were standing when the blow had been struck, and located, as near as we could, the positions of the others. We went over the entire room in search of the missing hand.

Gradually man after man was cleared. Usually we proved that each was too far away from Gatlin to have struck the blow. Wung Tu was cleared at once—in the first place from lack of motive, and the second because he was in his pantry, with the door between. My own testimony cleared Waldo Hart. He had stood squarely behind me all the time.

We had grown more tense, more breathless as the hours of talk went on. The circle of suspicion was ever narrowing down. As each man was freed, we would hear him gasp with unspeakable relief. But all the time a deeper, stranger dread was advancing over us. Who were we to say that the grim curio from India did not

deserve its sinister reputation? If all of us were proven innocent, the guilt could be placed but upon one thing—the withered hand of a Burma girl long passed from the face of the earth.

"But where could the thing have gone?" Sir Howard exclaimed at last. His tone grew irritable. "I wont believe that ghastly story."

All of us were leaning forward in our chairs. My eyes were on the gray face of Waldo Hart, the president of the club. It seemed to me that it changed before my eyes. The lines seemed to intensify and deepen.

"You wont believe that the withered hand turned against its owner?" he repeated slowly.

Sir Howard started slightly. Only those of us who have listened to the growing hush of the jungles at nightfall were familiar with the strange sense of deepening silence of which we all were aware as we waited for his reply. "Am I a hillman or a Kaffir?" he asked. "If I were, I might believe that story. Instead I am a native of England—with no imagination with which to believe what I can't see. I don't believe it, Hart."

"Do you remember when Gatlin opened the thing? Do you remember that his nerves seemed suddenly to have gone to pieces? Gatlin is neither a hillman nor an African."

It was true. And Gatlin's nerves had been a byword in the club.

"It's a beautiful little enigma," Sir Howard remarked evasively. He got up and began to walk back and forth.

HART stood up too. "I believe we agreed we would keep our seats until we were cleared," he said quietly. And around the ring of chairs you could hear the sound of many men catching their breaths. For all of us suddenly remembered something we would have most liked to forget.

"I beg your pardon," the Briton responded as he took his seat again.

"There are only two men of whom we do not know the positions when the blow was struck," Hart went on quietly. "There is no pleasure in telling this. That point is obviously clear. One of the two is Doctor Bromley, who did not meet Gatlin until tonight."

"You are right," Sir Howard answered. His head bowed slightly.

"The other is yourself."

We were a white-faced circle as we waited for the strange talk to go on. The first gray of the dawn was at the windows.

"That is true," the Briton agreed.

"You took a prominent part in the proceedings tonight, and no one has questioned you." The gray man turned to us. "Does any man know where Sir Howard stood when the blow was struck?"

All of us knew. We had heard his voice. It was just beside the table-end where Gatlin had stood.

We answered the question, one with another. Besides Bromley, he was the one remaining man that had been in striking-distance of Gatlin.

"Doctor Bromley would obviously have no motive," the quiet voice went on. "But you, Sir Howard, as every man knows who sits in this circle, have been for many years a bitter enemy of the man who was stricken down tonight."

Sir Howard nodded.

"The dispute is very old, but none of us have forgotten it. Howard, I do not believe that the withered hand struck Gatlin down without human assistance. You ask what became of the hand. You were standing just beside Gatlin, between him and the one window that was open in the lounging-room. If you had suddenly been overcome by a wave of your old hatred for Gatlin, let us see what you would have done. It was in the darkness. He had brought with him a curio of sinister reputation that would be a factor in drawing suspicion from any human being. Perhaps you would not have stopped to think at all; but seeing him in striking-range, you would have struck without thought of the consequences.

"Suppose the withered hand slipped off the hilt when you struck. If found on your person, it would have been evidence against you. So you simply hurled it out the window. You were the one man that stood near enough to strike the blow. You were the one man that stood close enough to the window to throw away the evidence."

The old man stood erect and pointed a trembling finger. "I accuse you of the murder of Homer Gatlin," he said. "I hope to God that he may live to let us know the truth; but in the meantime there is nothing to do but arrest you. Doctor Bromley, will you please phone for the police?"

THE scene while we waited for the police was indelibly branded on the consciousness of all of us. We still sat in the little circle, with the accused man in the center. His eyes were on the floor. We sat dejected and tired, and no man's eyes met another's. The night was almost done.

We were all listening for the feet of the policemen on the stairs. And at the same instant the fact burst on us all that Wung Tu had left his place and had vanished from the room.

At once we were on our feet, and the same thought was in the strange gray spaces of our minds. The dawn was breaking without. The eerie gray of early morning was in the rooms, and the lights looked queer and dull.

"My God!" some one muttered. "Is the withered hand going to take us one by one?"

And then we heard Wung Tu answer. The voice came from somewhere without the room; and in one motion we whirled and faced the window. As we looked, we saw his yellow face framed by the casement. He was standing on the landing of the fire-escape that hung just below the window—a little platform of iron that all of us had forgotten.

"I went out to find the hand," he said smilingly, "and I have found it."

IT was old Wung Tu, who knew the East as never Anglo-Saxon can hope to know it, who cleared up the mystery. He had heard Hart say that Sir Howard had thrown the hand out the window, and he had slipped out and hunted on the platform of the fire-escape.

Once we had the withered mummy in our hands, we conceived of an explanation that eliminated Hart's murder theory; and later testimony proved us right. "It is death," Gatlin had said of the curio; and truly it merited all the savage legends that had grown up around it. It was as diabolical a contrivance as ever evil genius and degenerate craft had developed—a spring-gun of the deadliest kind.

The dry hand was not empty, as we had expected. It still closed about a sort of an outer hilt of the dagger—nothing more or less than a cylinder containing an exceedingly powerful coil-spring. The steel hilt of the blade that had felled Gatlin had fitted snugly inside of it and compressed the spring. The spring was held at a tension by a little metal lug or stop, held in place by the gold ring on the dry fingers that incircled the cylinder. I had noticed the little thong or tendon that had extended through the wrist, and I saw its purpose now. It acted exactly like the tendon by which the muscles of the arm open and close the fingers. When the thong was pulled, the death-grip of the dry fingers relaxed enough to release the lug, freeing the spring and driving forth the blade with the speed of a bullet. Whether or not the hand was really dried human flesh, we were unable to agree.

It was a contrivance for murder such as is occasionally found in the more remote native bazaars of the far East. It was such a thing as only an Oriental mind, steeped in unholy mysticism, could possibly conceive. But there was a grisly consistency about the thing that quite offset its awkwardness; and unquestionably it had been used as an object of superstitious reverence in some far away Burman hills.

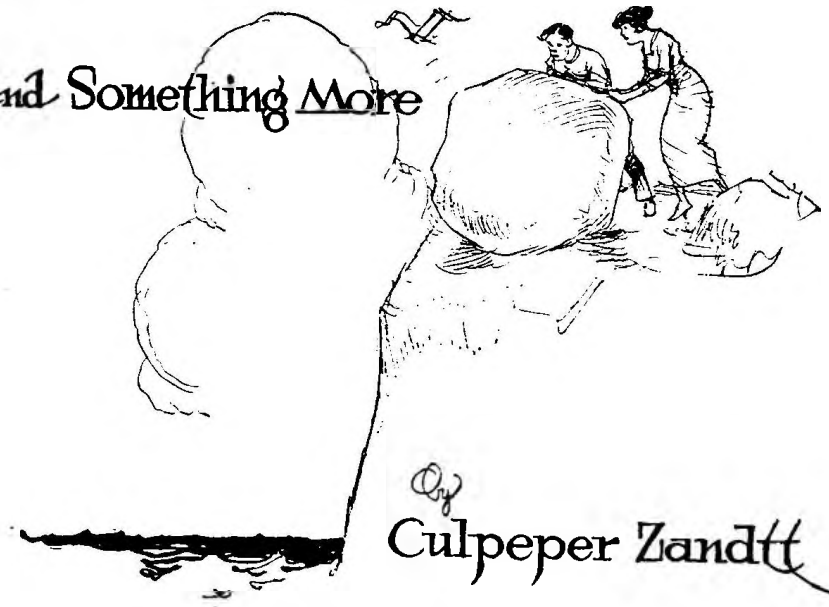
Gatlin had evidently bought the thing with no knowledge of its mechanical contrivance for launching the blade. Evidently the opium-smoking priest who sold it had been too sleepy to tell him. He had brought it home without learning the secret, never guessing the real reason for its sinister history. Possibly he had real belief in it, and possibly he was merely hoping to impress us.

It was part of the devilish ingenuity of the thing that to pull the thong in the withered wrist one naturally held the blade pointed toward his own breast. It was exceedingly awkward to operate in any other position. And no one knows what sort of a practical joke Gatlin intended to perpetrate with the thing in the moment of darkness in the club. But all he succeeded in doing was to pull the thong that released the vicelike grip of the dry fingers, freeing the spring and driving the blade into his own breast. Nor does anyone know in what depth of agony and fear and horror, just before he sank into unconsciousness, he hurled the mummied hand out the window.

But we will know in a few days. Homer Gatlin is not going to die after all. He is growing stronger every day. And the first thing that he sees when he arises will be the widow's hand hung in honor in the lounging-room, in even a higher place than the dwarf antelope of Sir Howard Fells, or Waldo Hart's Egyptian king.

Deep Water Men

Luck and Something More



By Culpeper Zandtt

WHEN a fifteen-hundred-ton ocean-going yacht in her summer paint drops anchor in Hongkong harbor, she occupies the center of the stage in a vast amphitheater. Owing to the abrupt rise of the hills from the very edges of the landlocked bay, there is scarcely a dwelling in the whole city of Victoria the windows of which do not overlook the magnificent panorama below, and though a good-sized yacht or two drops in through the Ly-ee-moon or the wider Canton River entrance every two or three weeks, there is always a deal of speculation from those who examine them through prism-binoculars as to which of the world's millionaires the owner may be, and whether he happened in on business or is just traveling.

The *Nissecola* was new to the port; so was her owner, Percival Winterbourne, though his New York house had dealt with some of the Hongkong firms for years and his signature was sufficiently well known in the local banking corporations to prevent any temporary financial embarrassment. Among various people of more or less prominence, introduced by the American consul and other acquaintances at Yokohama, Winterbourne and his daughter had met two Russians who had made themselves so agreeable, and appeared to hold such reputable positions in the Asiatic world of commerce, that their request to show the millionaire and his party many things of interest around Hongkong had been received favorably. In fact, the *Nissecola* hadn't been an hour at her anchorage when the same two agreeable Russians came off in a launch to greet them, and had tiffin on board.

AMONG the many who focused their glasses on the yacht as she came in were two men in cool white linen on the after-deck of a motor-ship, not much larger than the yacht, which lay over on the Kowloon side of the harbor, having been recently overhauled in one of the shipyards there. Captain James Medford and his mate, Sam Torrey, were by this time known throughout the Malay Archipelago as men who had defeated a number of German plots in Asiatic waters and had made large fortunes in salvage through various thrilling adventures. In fact, their friend and chief engineer Larry Stevens was at the moment a guest in Government House, convalescing from a wound received in their latest escapade, under the solicitous care of a handsome English girl who had unwittingly got them mixed up in it. After a second glance at the incoming yacht, Torrey put down his glass.

"I thought that craft was familiar! Winterbourne's *Nissecola,* with owner on

board, judging by her flags. While I was in the navy, I had temporary command of a small T. B., cruising out of Brest. Winterbourne had his reasons for not handing over his boat to the Administration unreservedly, and had pull enough to keep her from being commandeered. But he offered her as a dispatch-boat, under his own captain and crew, for the duration of the war. He and his daughter were aboard one month when I was sent around into the Mediterranean on her with sealed orders. Miss Frances was recuperating from Red Cross work."

"I got to know them both pretty well. Winterbourne, I sized up as one of the good-natured, unscrupulous Wall Street pirates who play the game for what there is in it. But Miss Frances was American girl all through. Simple, unspoiled by her money, efficient in whatever she tackled, a dead game sport, an ideal chum for any man! Darned near lost my head one moonlight night, after leaving Marseilles. Then I began to wonder how Percival would look at a senior-grade Navy lieutenant, who stood no chance for anything better than a 'three-striper's' pay in the next ten years, for a son-in-law. You see, a sudden roll of the yacht had pitched the girl into my arms when the question came streaking through my head, and she didn't seem overanxious to break away, either! I reckon, for months after that, I dreamed of having fortunes left me by uncles who didn't exist—or digging gold in Alaska—or looting a bank—just so's I could look Percival in his cold expressionless eyes and say: 'To hell with you and your money! I want the girl—and I can support her!' But now—"

"When you've got enough for any millionaire's daughter to start on, she's probably married to some rich young cub, and it's too late, eh?"

"I suppose so—though I've never seen any notice of her marriage. Do you know, Jim, just for the fun of it, I've a darned good mind to go aboard of Percival and pay him a social call. Just for the fun of looking him in the eye, as I said, and letting it percolate through him that I'm not in the doormat class any more!"

"Sort of a pious thought! But if the girl's married, I can't see that it gets you anywhere."

"Well, I sort of figured on asking him, point blank, whether she is or not. Want to go along?"

"Why, I've no particular interest in Wall Street millionaires or any other sort, merely as such. But I'd kind of like to see whether you've got as much old-fashioned American independence as you think you have. Will our launch do—or were you figuring on something more gaudy?"

"Far as I'm concerned, I'd just as soon go in a sampan, but I don't relish being ordered away from the ladder by a buck quartermaster! Perhaps we'd do better to borrow that mahogany power-boat from the Kowloon commandant—he's offered it to us often enough."

FOR reasons which were common talk from Vladivostok to Bombay, government officials in every port were looking for chances to extend any possible courtesy or service to Captain Medford and his two equally celebrated friends. So, in reply to their radio-inquiry, the commandant at the Kowloon station assured them that his beautifully equipped mahogany power-boat, with motorman and two coolies in uniform, would be at their service for as many days or weeks as they cared to use it, and would be alongside of them in half an hour. When they approached the *Nissecola,* with the American yacht-ensign astern, and the house-flag they had devised for their supposed scientific expedition on the *Bandarwallah* at the bow, the appearance of their outfit commanded a respect which was reflected in the manner of their reception at the starboard gangway, aft.

Although Winterbourne could see their faces from where he sat with guests, under the awning, it was his invariable policy to make the other man speak or move first—it gave him an advantage which had been tested upon countless occasions. Also it is possible that he did not connect the well-poised visitor in white linen and pith sun-helmet with the Navy lieutenant who had once made official use of the yacht for a month. But his daughter, after the first casual glimpse, started forward in her deck-chair for a better look—then sprang up and came to them with outstretched hands.

"Why, Lieutenant Torrey! Of all people in the world, you are the last one I expected to run across out here! Where's your ship? I haven't noticed any of our battle-wagons around the place!"

"Not a Navy man any more, Miss Frances. Kind of sorry in some ways, because they're a mighty fine crowd in the

service, but after the war was over, there was nothing to keep me there. Couldn't get anywhere. That's our ship, lying off Kowloon. Cap'n Medford, here, is good enough to call me one of his partners. We're a scientific expedition, among other things."

The girl cordially grasped Medford's hand, and seemed trying to recall something. "Surely—you can't be— Are you the man who captured and sunk those two German submarines? And was Lieutenant Torrey with you at the time?"

"He certainly was, Miss Winterbourne. We couldn't have found them without him! You see, I'd never studied navigation until we left San Diego on that trip."

THEY were now walking back to where the millionaire and his guests were seated, abaft the saloon skylights. Miss Frances introduced them while the deck-stewards were bringing extra chairs—coming last to the two Russians who had been lunching with them. Then Torrey smilingly interrupted her.

"Oh, we know M'sieur Kragorovitch quite well—have met him a number of times in various ports."

"Kragorovitch? But—I don't understand! You didn't catch the name, Lieutenant! This is Count Sergius Michaelovitch, of Petrograd, and his friend Colonel Steinarov!"

"Ah! We knew nothing of the Count's name and title out here. He has doubtless political reasons for calling himself M'sieur Paul Kragorovitch in all the ports of the China Sea and going by that name as junior partner in his Vladivostok house."

Kragorovitch had reasons of his own for wishing to avoid hostilities in Winterbourne's presence, and availed himself of the loophole so courteously extended by men whom he had tried to have assassinated upon five different occasions. "Mr. Torrey is quite right, Ma'em'selle—I assumed the name of Kragorovitch in order to get out of Russia alive, and have retained it among the commercial class out here to mislead any bolshevik emissaries who may be sent after me. You may be quite sure that's no joke, either!"

It was lazily, pleasantly said, with just the romantic hint of personal danger to enlist the sympathies of touring Americans who had no real conception of actual conditions in Russia or in Asiatic waters. Yet behind the sphynxlike mask of Percival Winterbourne's face there was subtle appreciation of the fact that a plausible explanation for the double names had been offered and accepted between men who, if his psychological intuition was not at fault, were anything but friendly. This impression was stowed away in his brain with thousands of others to be considered and used at some crucial moment. As for Torrey, the former lieutenant, ordinarily Winterbourne would have distastefully admitted that a Navy man was supposed to be welcome, socially, where men on his salary in civil life would not have the bad taste to intrude—and that on such a basis it was all right enough for him to come aboard a millionaire's yacht uninvited, merely as a matter of courtesy which would not be repeated too often. But, enough to his surprise for the impression to demand consideration, he sensed a change in the former lieutenant's bearing. The man was no longer in the Navy. Scientific expeditions, usually financed by one of the learned societies or some university, never paid salaries that were anything more than a joke. Yet this rather distinguished-looking young fellow probably somewhere over thirty, had the bearing of absolute sureness which comes only to men who command more or less money and power. The millionaire had tested men through too many hard-fought years to mistake this manner for anything else. Sometimes a born leader had it, without very much of the cash, but only when he believed in himself and had proved successful in whatever he undertook.

It occurred to Winterbourne, presently, that he was devoting more thought to this seeming discrepancy between Torrey's bearing and actual circumstances than the fellow was worth. Turning his back and starting a fragmentary discussion with one of his Wall Street cronies, he was prepared to ignore the ex-lieutenant until he went ashore, but again the younger man compelled his attention. Without raising his voice, Torrey asked the little circle of guests if they had seen any of the Hongkong papers, or heard of the occurrence by wireless. Then he went on to describe the stealing of a captured German submarine the night before, from an anchorage just outside of the Kowloon Dockyard, within range of enough heavy guns to have sunk a battle-fleet, in the very heart of a crowded harbor guarded at both exits by modern fortifications. From personal ex-

perience, he was able to give them an exact idea of the sub's interior fittings and the sensation of running along just over the ocean bottom in her at depths of a hundred feet or more.

IT was, of course, too soon to expect news of any depredations from the craft, for she couldn't have had any great supply of petrol in her tanks when stolen, but the whole Archipelago was immensely stirred up over the occurrence. Just when shipping circles were settling back to a belief in marine security after the first scare, the situation was found to be apparently quite as serious as it had been before, there being no doubt whatever as to the sinkings and disappearances which might be expected in a few weeks at the outside.

Torrey's account of the affair was a bombshell. The two Russians must have known all about it when they came aboard for tiffin—yet there had been no reference whatever to the subject in their talk. Everyone in the party thought of this, and began to wonder why. When the question was finally asked, Kragorovitch politely stated that they knew the occurrence would be disquieting to those aboard any sort of craft and had preferred not to spoil their first pleasant impression of Hongkong with it. This was a satisfactory and complimentary explanation. But it led Winterbourne to whirl about in his deck-chair and ask Torrey why he had upset them with it.

"Because you may be able, sir, to render valuable assistance in catching that pirate at some unexpected moment. Your boat runs very litle risk herself—in a fairly smooth sea she'll do close to thirty knots, and that sub barely gets away with eighteen on the surface. She couldn't hit you if you were moving along at even twenty-four or twenty-five. It's a simple matter to put a couple of five-inch guns aboard of you and a sling for depth-charges. There are more cruisers and T. B. D.'s out here now than there were before—and the U-boat will not have it all her own way by a good deal. In fact, I'm willing to bet five hundred dollars, gold, that she'll be caught or sunk within six months!"

Kragorovitch scowled, thoughtfully, and shook his head. "You're a man of science, sir,—and not in the shipping business, as the Colonel and I happen to be! My impression is that those fellows will be far more careful, this time—that they have a better and more secluded base to work from. Frankly, as a ship-owner, I'm more apprehensive than I was before. The submarine is no joke in the shipping-trade, I assure you! And nobody will lose that wager to you with more pleasure than I. Just book my acceptance."

"Sorry, Count, but the bet wasn't offered to you or the Colonel. By your own statement the bolshevists may get you before the wager is decided. I'd rather not win or lose with a dead man."

TORREY'S voice and manner were courteous in the extreme, and the excuse was reasonable enough, but there was something deadly under it which sent a shiver down the spines of the two Russians. Had these cursed Americans really charmed lives, that it seemed so impossible to kill them! Kragorovitch recalled the Graf von Sommerlich, O'Grady, Gorodunoff and others who had played the game, in their secret organization, contemptuously underestimating Medford and his companions. All were dead men now. He shivered again as the American went on: "The bet was offered to any of these other gentlemen—I'll place my check in Mr. Winterbourne's hands, and he can have it certified the first time he goes ashore in banking-hours."

Here the millionaire broke in, testily, "But confound it, if you make me stakeholder, that lets me out on the wager! I don't bother with piking bets as a rule, but it looked like a chance to pick up a little pin-money which I was going to hand my daughter—"

"Oh, if Miss Frances has a look-in on this, let's make it worth while! Suppose we say an even ten thousand dollars, gold—and ask his excellency the Governor to hold the stakes? Will that interest you, Mr. Winterbourne?"

"Hmph! You're on, young man! Guess I can find some bank here that'll recognize my signature—"

"I'll be pleased to identify you at the Hongkong & Shanghai Bank Corporation; they're probably your correspondents, out here."

"Hmph! Thanks! Needn't bother! Dare say I'll manage without assistance!"

Winterbourne knew that the ex-Navy man would not attempt any such bluff if he had not the money. Such a story would spread until it ruined him, socially. And

Torrey hadn't the manner of one who is wagering his last cent to "put up a front." The thought in the Wall Street man's head was: "Had a little money left to him, and he's blowing it, like any other fool cub!" But this didn't exactly account for Torrey's poise and manner, or the calm way in which he took Miss Frances up for'ard to renew his acquaintance with Captain Dunning.

Before hunting up the Captain, however, Torrey led the girl up on the fo'c'stle-head where he could show her points of interest about the harbor, and incidentally ask a few leading questions. He admitted that as his object, and she smilingly told him to go ahead with them.

"Well, first I reckon I'm safe in assuming you're not married? Eh? Good! Or engaged?" (She shook her head—still smiling, but with a touch of pink slowly rising from her throat.)

"Can't see that it's any of your business, in the least, but—I'm not."

"Or even interested a good deal in some man who wants to marry you?"

"Naturally, I'd be interested in any man of that sort—wouldn't I? And there are a few who say they can't live without me."

"All of them—rich?"

"Most of them—not!"

"M-hm! Remember that night in the Mediterranean? I darned near said the same thing then. But you didn't somehow fit with a lieutenant's pay, though you're a good enough sport to have bluffed it through if you'd really cared. Well, conditions change sometimes. I think the man who marries you will be luckier than most of us. Maybe my luck is still running, maybe not in this direction. But when you get to figuring up your degrees of interest in the men who want to run off with you, just consider me in a disinterested class by myself, wanting you more than any of them. Get that fixed in your mind so it will stick, no matter whether I'm around or not—and then I wont bother you with it for a while. Now let's get down to everyday matters. How long do you expect to be in port?"

"Why—the Count wants us to stay a couple of weeks at least, so he can show us all over Hongkong and Canton—"

"I hope you'll stay even longer; but you, personally, will not go about anywhere with either of those men!"

"Why, Mr. Torrey! You ought to know me better than to use any such tone as that, or presume upon our acquaintance—"

"Wait a minute, please! You're going up to Government House with me about five, for tea—chat with Sir Francis and Her Ladyship. Ask them both what they know about Kragorovitch and his gang! The man's a Berliner, not Russian. Don't take my word for it—though he and his secret organization have tried to have us assassinated five different times! Ask Lady M— and the Governor."

"But we're all going ashore with the Count at four—to meet and dine with some of his friends up there on the high ground!"

"All but you and one of the other girls, for chaperon. Did you ever catch me in a lie to you? Ever know me to take a mean advantage in any way? Then just humor me by taking tea with His Excellency as I suggest. You'll certainly accept what he say as the truth! Afterward, of course—it's up to you."

AS Torrey had expected, the Governor was inclined to wish that opportunity had been given him to book the bet, until he figured out the ten thousand Yankee dollars at the current rate of exchange and reflected on the whole it would make in a six-thousand-pound official salary if he should happen to lose. Not that he thought it likely he would have lost—it was inconceivable that any of the Americans should have the unprecedented luck to capture the submarine a second time. All the same, he couldn't help feeling inwardly that the former Navy man would not have risked so much of his money unless some vague plan for running down the pirate was in his mind. Within twenty-four hours this impression was shared by every Englishman and American in Hongkong—together with outspoken apprehension for the risk that Torrey had taken in making the bet. There was no question but that his death would be attempted—in some unforeseen way.

THIS cropped up in a chat between Winterbourne and the resident manager of a powerful banking corporation, to whom he'd had little difficulty in identifying himself.

"In a way, Mr. Winterbourne, this wager of Torrey's will be something of a relief to every commercial house in the Archipelago. Those three jolly Americans have done more to put a crimp in the se-

cret German organization which is buying, stealing and trading for ocean-bottoms all over the place—in order to bring out a whacking big merchant-marine as soon as they're allowed to trade under their own flag again—than the British an' French navies combined. Aye, an' they've made a good bit for themselves while at it, too! If that young chap has ten thousand dollars' worth of confidence in the sub bein' run down inside of six months, you may be jolly well sure that some idea is simmerin' in his mind an' Cap'n Medford's! But I fancy that most of us wish he'd not made the wager with you, d'ye see. They're exceedingly well liked out here, I assure you!"

"And you think the bet means a certain amount of personal risk to them—eh?"

"Not a doubt of it! It's not generally known, but His Excellency told me there have been several different attempts upon their lives within the past year. An' this wager is like a man sendin' his seconds to those of the other chap on the eve of a duel. I hear Kragorovitch was aboard your yacht at the time, an' would have taken the bet if Torrey hadn't refused? Gad! I rather wonder you didn't have a shootin' affair right on your after-deck at the moment.

"Hold on a second, Mr. Graeme! Let me get this straight. As far as any of my party know, there has been no such person as this Kragorovitch you mention aboard of us. Count Sergius Michaelovitch and Colonel Steinarov are Russian gentlemen who were presented to us in Tokio by people of the highest standing, who vouched for them absolutely. When Torrey and Medford came aboard, they started in calling the Count 'Kragorovitch,' and he admitted using some such name in order to escape with his life from Russia. Now, as I understand you the man is not what he claims to be. Eh?"

"Er—I'd rather you'd not quote me as puttin' it in just that way, sir. He may have borne some such title as Count Michaelovitch in Petrograd; it's by no means impossible, though I've sure information that he was born in Berlin of one of the *Junker families*. As Paul Kragorovitch he's junior partner in the house of Trepoff, Kamovitch an' Comp'ny, Vladivostok—Trepoff, Lustschagin an' Comp'ny in Singapore an' Batavia. A thoroughly respectable connection, on the surface. On the other hand, Cap'n Medford had him convicted in Singapore of piracy on the high seas. He only escaped a prison sentence, in consequ'nce, upon some legal technicality, I believe—an' produced evidence before the Admir'lty court showin' that six or eight men implicated in this German conspiracy were actually persons of the most unimpeachable reputation in all the ports out here."

"As a matter of fact, it's a most diffic'lt matter to secure the sort of evidence upon which they might be prosecuted. One can't arrest a person for buyin' an int'rest in shippin', here an' there, d'ye see, even if he does it in roundabout ways, under other flags. You may be certain of fraud in the transaction, even prove the fraud itself; but when it comes to fastenin' the intent upon this or that purchaser, you're treadin' on delicate ground."

"We all know what's afoot in these waters, thanks to Medford an' his friends. We're morally certain as to the identity of a dozen or more people in that secret organization, men an' women of the utmost respectability; but our barristers an' counsel have as yet discovered no way under British law by which we may curb their activities unless we catch 'em in some criminal act. That's why men of Medford's an' Torrey's class have been of such vast assistance to us in the past year. Where we are tied hand an' foot by our laws, they go out on the high seas an' take chances for which they'd be seriously actionable if they didn't pull 'em off successfully, d'ye see. Why, man dear—they fetched an eight-thousan'-ton cargo-boat out of Dutch territorial waters under the Nederlands flag in the very face of the Dutch Resident, an' brought her into Singapore under British colors as a case of salvage! A British boat which had been posted as missin' for six-an'-twenty months! Which gave our Admiralty courts the evidence they needed to demand twenty-nine other bottoms concealed in the same spot! Mind you, had they not fetched the first craft out to Singapore, we could not have touched the others, in Dutch waters, couldn't have got permission to go up that river for proof—an' Medford could have been convicted as a pirate if caught at the time. But he put one jolly big crimp in the German plans. What?"

"H-m-m—look here, Graeme! The Count has about persuaded me to take a

third interest in their Hongkong branch. Says that I can easily pick up, through agents, eight or ten good-sized bottoms in various ports he mentioned, for prices which happen to be dead low because of their being held to satisfy legal claims of one sort or another. He says that his house will take them off my hands at forty per cent above cost if I'll accept part payment in their stock. Says their shares have paid twenty per cent for the last three years. Any idea as to whether his proposition is really as good as that?"

"The Hongkong branch of Trepoff, Kamovitch an' Comp'ny is doing a business which pays very close to that in dividends—aye. As to the speculation in bottoms, you could scarcely go wrong on that if you got them at low prices under such conditions. Hundreds of houses would buy them from you at very attractive figures. Aye! But every one of the boats that house owns or charters will go under the German flag the moment a treaty is signed which permits Germany to build up another merchant-marine! An' it will put a fleet in these waters which must naturally cut our ocean freights—an' yours—to a point where there's no profit whatever, d'ye see!"

"That is, you assume that such will be the case, but have no actual proof of it?"

"My word! We've quite sufficient proof, Mr. Winterbourne!"

"All right. We'll say this Hongkong firm does exactly that. Is there anything illegal in it—under British law? There must come a time very soon when Germany will be permitted to build and operate steamers to any port in the world—and I know of nothing to prevent a shipping concern like this one putting their boats under any flag which offers them the greater amount of advantage in trading. Not very far out, am I?"

THE honest Scotchman looked at his caller rather curiously for a moment. "No sir—you're quite right as to that. I've already told you how diffic'lt it is to get after these Germans upon anything short of actual piracy or theft. But I fancy you do not quite grasp the situation of the shippin' trade to-day in every part of the world. Germany began this war of conquest in cold blood, without a shadow of right or excuse. She waged it in a way that was a disgrace to humanity —that will blacken her name for centuries. With her cursed U-boats she sent so many fine ships to the bottom that it'll be a matter of years to replace them. For these reasons, any peace terms must prohibit her from competition in ocean freights an' passage until some of these losses are made up. It's unlikely that we'll e'er see a dollar of indemnity from Germany—so we must consider our possession of her former colonies and control of maritime trade in the light of indemnity. Now, it is the intention of this secret organization in one way or another, to accumulate a big fleet of eighty to a hundred bottoms, of various tonnages, an' have them ready to send all over the world, particularly throughout the Orient an' the South American ports, the moment they're permitted to raise the German flag on them. Aye—an' undoubtedly under other flags before that! Germany comes out of the war uninjured, as far as her cities an' factories go. Her labor unions have agreed to work ten hours a day. If any such fleet as this is permitted her, she'll be able in fifteen or twenty years to attempt again precisely what she attempted this time. An' she'll do it, Mr. Winterbourne. That determination to rule the world has never left the German mind for one moment!"

"Oh, I see your point! Don't blame you at all for trying to beat the Germans at such a game! On the other hand, I don't in the least blame them for working any scheme they can to build up such a fleet! If this business proposition of the Count's to me were actually illegal, if his Hongkong house were doing anything really actionable, of course I would not touch it with a pole. But on your own admission, it is not. I rather think I shall accept it—partly for the margin of profit, partly just to see what comes of it. If what you suspect really develops in the course of time, I shall be interested in seeing what steps you take to counteract such a situation and congratulate you if successful. As far as I'm concerned, it's merely a business investment—I'll take my profit and sit watching the game."

"But—dammit, sir! Do ye no' see that ye're aidin' an' abettin' the most serious menace to the whole ceevilized warrld!"

"Oh, not quite so bad as that. Say that I may be taking sides, temporarily, against British mercantile trade? Well, what of it? Get busy and do something to counteract my influence! It's all in the game, man!"

Graeme's patience was exhausted. "Ah've heard, sir, aboot your sort of Americans. Much was said durin' the war concernin' your love of the dollar before every ither conseederation. But I fancy most o' us believed that merely spoofin'. Ye tell me to get busy an' do something to counteract ye're influence. Aye! Weel —Ah'll juist e'en do that—wi'oot apology or argum'nt. Ye'll tak' your account to some ither bankin' concern at once, sir—for we'll no' honor any draft of yours after this. Nor, I fancy, will many ither bankers in all Asia. So ye'll juist mak' whate'er arrangem'nts ye can! I'll bid ye good day, sir!"

THIS was a jolt which fairly stunned the financier. It had not occurred to him that his course might be considered offensive to any such extent. But it also roused his fighting blood—and he went out of the manager's office in much the same quiet rage as upon former occasions in Wall Street just before an unexpected cyclone struck the market. He'd show 'em! With an effort to control his temper which made his face and neck purple, he walked along the Queens Road arcades until he came to the next great banking concern with whom his firm had had dealings, and asked to see the manager. After several moments of waiting, that gentleman came out to where he was standing and said that his board would not care to handle Mr. Winterbourne's account, in Hongkong or any Asiatic city. Five other attempts proved equally unsuccessful—the telephone having been busy meanwhile. French, Spanish and Danish bankers proved to be also undesirous. The Russians he didn't care to do business with at that time. Finally one of the Dutch banks consented to accept his drafts after a series of most humiliating questions and cables to their New York branch—and he was forced to have Kragorovitch identify him.

All of this produced a certain amount of penetration of a thick Wall Street skin. He began to realize that he had defied public opinion in a section of the world where there are supposed to be no Ten Commandments, "where the best is like the worst"—yet, for that very reason, where such defiance ostracizes a man until he is tagged throughout the length and breadth of the Orient. So when Kragorovitch again broached the subject of their business deal, Winterbourne irritably said he'd have to think it over a little more, didn't care much about going into it anyhow.

Kragorovitch himself had been having an unpleasant four days of it. When introduced to Miss Frances in Tokio, she had produced a very strong impression upon him. The more he saw of her, the more he longed for possession of such a girl. Ordinarily this would not have been associated with the idea of marriage in his mind; but when they left Yokohama, he was figuring upon going through even that farce, as he considered it. The Winterbourne millions seemed worth marrying, if one had to put his head in the noose. Also—aside from his infatuation—he saw very soon that the financier himself could help immensely the German conspiracy.

Kragorovitch had reason to believe that he had made a very favorable impression upon the girl in Tokio and Yokohama. He was counting upon motoring all over Hongkong with her and arranging for many têtes-à-tête in picturesque spots. But from the time that Medford and Torrey had come aboard, the Russians had not been able to obtain another instant alone with Miss Winterbourne. The rest of the party accepted their invitations and unquestionably enjoyed them, but Miss Frances invariably had some previous engagement. With one or another of the younger women aboard, she was taken to some of the most exclusive bungalows in the Peak district, or upon long rikisha trips to lovely spots about the Island. So, balked with the girl by the cursed Americans, and seemingly about to lose the financier's coöperation in the larger game, he was in as murderous a mood as any unscrupulous man can be without betraying himself.

AFTER leaving Winterbourne, Kragorovitch and Colonel Steinarov, whose name had been Russianized for obvious purposes, went up to an unpretentious bungalow at the Peak in which a Madame Irma Vassilikoff was spending a few months with another woman generally understood to be an old friend of many years' standing. When the two men had joined them in a study overlooking the harbor, the supreme executives of the German conspiracy in Asia might have been said to be in conference. The Vassilikoff woman was for killing Medford, Torrey and Stevens by the first available means,

at the first opportune moment, but the others were decidedly against this—Kragorovitch giving the reasons:

"Thanks to this same damned three, the British and French governments now have the names of possibly twenty or thirty in our organization, although but with no definite proof against them. Now, if the bodies of these Americans are found, or if there are witnesses to any attack upon them, every one of us on that list of suspects becomes implicated, merely because we are supposed to have tried to kill them before and are the only ones who have a big object in killing them. As you very well know, Irma, the real strength of our position out here is the unquestionable respectability and solidity of our business and social connections. Do anything which takes that away and we might as well throw up the game—it would be a losing fight, with all the influence against us! Aside from that, I'm beginning to have an impression that those men are under the protection of some big *tong* out here, of such far-reaching influence that a dozen or more of us would be knifed, mysteriously, within forty-eight hours after we'd settled Medford and his friends. But there's something I think we can do with more or less safety—"

"Abduct them?"

"That's the general idea—but one at a time, beginning with Torrey, who is so cocksure of running down our sub within six months. As an embellishment to the scheme, I propose to abduct Miss Winterbourne also."

"Fool! For what possible reason?"

"After she has mysteriously disappeared for a few days, Winterbourne will be about crazy. He's very fond of the girl—though you might not suspect it. Only child. Wife died some years ago—the two boys killed in France. Very good! I represent to him that some of the Chinese societies are under obligations to us both here and in Singapore, that I mean to enlist their services in tracing the girl. Eventually girl is located in Batavia—having been stolen by the unscrupulous master of a small cargo-boat, for ransom. With the aid of our Batavia house, the master is arrested, his boat searched at Tanjong Priok, girl found, safely chaperoned by stewardess—and sent back here with one of our firm on a P. and O. boat. I think that will clinch Winterbourne about coming in with us as nothing else would; in fact, he could scarcely refuse after such a service. Eh?"

"H-m-m—that's a better scheme than it sounded when you began, Paul! At first I thought your head had been turned by a petticoat. No objection to your little amusements, of course—but not if it means complications for our *Gesellschaft*. We need that Wall Street shark, need his assistance and his money. He has no fool squeamishness about ethical considerations. When he goes into a game of any sort, he plays it to the limit. I met him in England, though he probably wouldn't remember me now, and was impressed by the man's cold-blooded efficiency. Where others might be swayed by considerations of friendship or idealism, Winterbourne, like so many wizards of finance in Wall Street, simply plays to win every time. It'll be worth a big effort to get him."

NOW, it must be admitted that neither Medford nor Torrey paid as much attention to many friendly warnings as they should have done, chiefly because they had reason to believe that the greatest of the Asiatic secret organizations was keeping so close a watch over their movements that it would be difficult for any hired thugs to attack them. This had been demonstrated upon several different occasions since their restoration to the Rajah of Trelak of his marvelous jewel collection. So they had gone about their daily affairs in Hongkong and Kowloon without taking unusual precautions in the way of protecting themselves.

For several days it had been their custom to wind up the evening upon the after-deck of the *Nissecola,* remaining until midnight and then running across the harbor to their own ship in the big mahogany power-boat which they kept alongside. It soon got so that Medford left first and sent the power-boat back for Torrey—who was more deliberate in his leave-taking with Miss Frances.

The eighth night of the *Nissecola's* stay in port settled into a light fog about six bells—so that the power-boat was out of sight within two lengths from the accommodation-ladder. Her coxswain, however, could have found his way about the harbor by sense of feel and smell, as he expressed it, and the staccato popping of their exhaust was sufficient warning to make other craft either hail them or get out of their way.

Half way across to Kowloon a sharp command came barking through the fog —dead ahead. "Stop your motor and lay-to! *Stop your motor, or we'll fire into you!*" In a few seconds the indistinct outline of a trim police-boat glided alongside of them, and a mackintoshed officer on the stern seat gave a sharp order: "Search the boat, men! You'll probably find the stuff under the bow and stern thwarts!"

In a moment four balls about the size of an Edam cheese were fished out of the mahogany locker in the bow—to the astonishment both of Torrey and his crew of three. The officer calmly lighted a cigarette, flashed his pocket torch over the opium and then over Torrey's face.

"Fancy that settles it, sir! We were told that you'd been smuggling the stuff aboard an American boat every night. Doesn't appear to be much argum'nt—eh?" Torrey was dumfounded—but amused. He knew that he had nothing to fear from officials in any Asiatic port.

"Does look pretty raw, I'll admit, old chap! But the joke of it is I'd not the slightest knowledge that stuff was aboard of me, and I'll bet my crew hadn't, either. You see, this boat belongs personally to the Commandant at Kowloon—merely loaned to me. I'm Torrey, mate of the *Bandarwallah* over there."

"Rather expected some such talk from you, Torrey, of course. You can try it on the inspector at the Harbor station an' see how it strikes him. We're by way of bein' a bit pessimistic, you know! Now, if you'll just climb over into my boat, we'll relieve you of any weapons you may have an' be on our way. Your crew may proceed with the power-boat wherever you direct them—it will be quite a simple matter for us to identify it anywhere about the harbor."

It was annoying—but Torrey counted upon less than half an hour's detention after he got hold of a telephone and identified himself. So he chatted pleasantly enough with the officer until it struck him that they must have been talking for nearly an hour—and the police-boat showed no signs of stopping.

"I say! Which harbor station are you connected with, Lieutenant? Have you lost your bearings in this fog?"

"I think not. Fact is, Torrey, we think you'd be more comfortable at sea in a more or less clean stateroom and with fairly decent chow. So we're putting you aboard one of our cargo-boats which is lying-to just off the Ladrones—she cleared for Buenos Aires, but that's a mere formality. I don't know, myself, where she's really bound. Anyhow, it'll remove you from these waters for several months, at least—and we'll be able to carry on our business with less friction. Of course, if you try to start anything, it's likely to be fatal."

KRAGOROVITCH had arranged a select poker-party up at the Peak, earlier in the evening—at which the Wall Street man was to be the guest of honor. He had anticipated rather a kindergarten sort of entertainment, but found to his surprise that there were both Dutch and Russians who could have made poker interesting for any American in San Antonio or Albuquerque. At two in the morning he had lost twenty-five thousand and won back twenty-seven. As he saw no evidence of its being anything but a perfectly straight gentlemen's game, this was much too inconclusive a point at which to drop out. The Germans knew that he was not aboard his yacht, and not likely to return that night.

Within ten minutes after Torrey's power-boat had left the *Nissecola's* gangway, a Navy launch ran alongside—and a young officer in the uniform worn by His Excellency's aides stepped on deck with a message for Miss Winterbourne. She came on deck immediately—and was told by the courteous officer that her father had been hurt and taken to Government House, where His Excellency's physician was in attendance. It was hoped that the injury was not serious—but the financier seemed apprehensive and had kept asking that his daughter be sent for.

The Navy launch, with its Jackies and the smartly uniformed officer were absolutely convincing. Not one person in a hundred thousand would have questioned them for a moment. Delaying just long enough to put some clothes in a suitcase, Miss Frances bundled herself in a raincoat and ran down the ladder to the launch. All sense of direction, of course, was lost immediately in the fog—and the first thrill of apprehension did not strike her until they were running out through the wide mouth of the Canton River, riding the long, easy roll of the open sea. The officer assured her that she would be treated with every consideration and that it was merely

a question of ransoming the daughter of a very rich man—but the serviceable "automatic" which Torrey had suggested her concealing somewhere in her clothes until she left Asiatic waters was considerably more reassuring than anything he said. Eventually she climbed the accommodation-ladder of a rusty cargo-boat—which presently started up her engines and disappeared—the launch returning to Hongkong.

IN describing his impressions, some time afterward, Torrey admitted that he did not expect to pull through alive. It seemed to him that he had merely been shipped off in the cargo-boat so that his body might be dropped overboard at sea where it would never be found. But he had been through too many adventures to give up until he was actually dead. So—as he described it:

"I turned in and got a fairly good sleep in the circumstances, but was on deck shortly after sunrise just to see how much liberty they proposed giving me. Apparently there were no restrictions whatever. I went all over the boat, even down in the engine-room, where I was surprised to find the machinery in excellent condition and the boat nothing like as old as I had supposed. The owners had saved money on her outside paint, but her plates were not very badly rusted, at that.

"When breakfast was served in the little mess-room, it was as good as the average Dutch meal—the coffee had been made by an artist who knew what coffee should be. Much to my surprise, there were two other passengers, a Mr. Julius Tijhof and his wife, evidently friends of Captain Ruysdael, who seemed to be a fairly honest shipmaster without imagination or overmuch intelligence. While I was trying to figure up the whole outfit and what it meant, I got one of the worst jolts of my life. Back of me, in the little gangway of the midship-house, I heard the steward rapping on a stateroom-door and telling somebody that breakfast was ready. The voice in that stateroom, though muffled, seemed astonishingly familiar. But when Miss Winterbourne came in and was given a seat opposite me, I simply felt sick all through. We looked at each other dumfounded for a moment—and I must have whispered to myself: 'Suffering cats! Did they get you too!' I don't think she caught the words—but the movement of my lips and the expression on my face convinced her beyond all question that I was in the same position she was, and had nothing whatever to do with her abduction. She admitted that was the first notion which had occurred to her."

WITH a quick glance of warning, a slight motion of the head toward the Captain and the Tijhofs, Torrey conveyed to her the suggestion that it might be their best policy to act as if there were nothing wrong and let events drift along until they got a clue as to the real situation. Captain Ruysdael, though phlegmatic, was pleasant enough. He asked if anything could be done to make them more comfortable. When he found that Torrey was a former Navy man, he asked him to come into the chart-room after breakfast, and with the charts before them, tell him what experience he'd had in going through the Magellan. It seemed that the Captain had never been through the Straits but had heard a good deal about dangerous navigation in them. When the American had spent an hour in the chart-room, he rejoined Miss Winterbourne on the little hurricane-deck and took her up forward to the bow, where nobody was likely to overhear them.

"Frankie—at first I couldn't make out this proposition at all! It didn't seem to match up anywhere. But I think I'm beginning to have a glimmering. As far as I can see, the boat herself, Cap'n Ruysdael and the Tijhofs, are entirely straight. He showed me his manifest and we talked a good bit about ocean freights, stowage-problems and the like. The boat is under time-charter to Kragorovitch's Hongkong branch, or the Vladivostok house, and assigned to Hongkong. She cleared for Buenos Aires. Ruysdael and the Tijhofs undoubtedly think they're going there. What sort of story the Cap'n was told about us two I can't imagine—but it must have been something plausible which would more or less cover anything we may say or do. Of course this boat isn't going to Buenos Aires, and you're not going to be set at liberty in any such place. You say they're holding you for ransom—but they're playing a deeper game than that. The way it's beginning to look to me is this: That German crowd haven't meddled with the Dutch ships at all, because a good many of the Dutch have been German sympathizers all along, and I suspect that some of them have been pretty well paid not to notice some things which might

have come under their observation. But this boat is under time-charter to a Russian house, just now to all intents their property. If anything happens to her, it's pretty strong implication that they have no connection either with the submarine pirates or the Germans—and in two of her ballast-tanks, she's carrying petrol in bulk! I believe, from this combination aboard, that that's about the way they're going to play it. The sub will appear at some unexpected moment—give Ruysdael an hour to get into his boat before they sink the ship. If it's night, it wont be noticed that some of his crew are not with him, or that you and I were left behind."

"You think they'll sink the ship with us on board, Sam?"

"They wont sink her at all! Merely fire a couple of guns when Ruysdael's boats are nearly out of sight, in order to make him think they've sunk her—as was done with the *Neathshire* five months ago. They'll take darned good care that you're not harmed in any case—because they mean to use you in some way or other. As for me—I haven't been able to figure why I wasn't put out of the way at once. But I'm beginning to have an idea. Killing me would cast suspicion upon too many people who are being watched by the Government; possibly they don't quite care to risk it."

"You think some of the crew are in Kragorovitch's pay, in the conspiracy?"

"I'm suspicious of the mate and assistant engineer and probably half a dozen stokers and deck-hands. But the party I'm dead sure of is the wireless operator, who seems to have no other duties aboard. I haven't heard the faintest indication of anything like a spark, so I assume that his instruments are installed in some unused officers'-room on the upper-deck, probably the one next to yours, and effectively sound-proofed. Saw him coming out of that room and very carefully locking the door after him. I can easily pick the lock sometime when there's nobody anywhere around that gangway—but I'll want to be sure that he isn't likely to come back for half an hour or so. Wonder if you'd care to strike up an acquaintance with him—keep him busy, occasionally?"

"And give you a chance to call for help? Well I just guess I can! But suppose he should break away and catch you in there?"

"It would be bad for one of us—but I'd have a little the advantage. Anyhow I mean to use those instruments—today!"

WORKING up an interest in Miss Winterbourne was an easy matter with the former lieutenant in the German Navy who was looking after the wireless aboard—because he considered himself a lady-killer and he very decidedly approved of the girl's appearance. It didn't occur to the Germans aboard that it was possible for anyone to figure out the situation as Torrey had. The boat was quite evidently bound for Argentina. Torrey and the girl were free to go about the ship as they pleased. In the phlegmatic German brain there was nothing to make them visualize what might happen, no reason why any precautions should be taken against them. So the girl was able to keep the wireless-man out under the awning a good two hours—while Torrey succeeded in getting into the room and sending out call after call for some ship or station to relay a message for him. In a few moments, he got the Pacific Mailer *Ecuador* within a fifty-mile radius—and sent a message to Medford in a code which they had worked out to seem like an ordinary radiogram. De-coded, it read:

> James Medford—*Bandarwallah*—Hongkong. Shanghaied aboard Nederlands steamer *Van Mittens*—chartered Kragorovitch. The lady also. Present position one hundred and fifty knots S.S.E. Ladrones—keeping that course. Anticipate sub within twenty-four hours—master and crew probably turned adrift in boats, but not us. May be taken their secret base. Have Navy follow us down if possible, keeping just below horizon—or follow in *Bandarwallah* and stay in sight. Suspect west coast Papua. Will communicate if possible.

Torrey didn't sign the message. After having the coded form repeated to prevent mistakes, he looked about the room to see that everything was exactly as he had found it, and then slipped out when the gangway was clear. In a subseqent talk with Miss Frances where they couldn't be overheard, he said:

"Jim wont lose four hours getting after us on the *Bandarwallah*, and Larry's nearly well enough to come with him—but within the next *two* hours, there will be two or three Navy boats heading to intercept our course, probably within a short radius."

Before daybreak next morning the submarine appeared—and the subsequent proceedings were about as Torrey had antici-

pated. An acting master and five men were put aboard of them after Captain Ruysdael had pulled out of sight in his boats and guns had been fired to convey the impression of a sinking. Then the course was altered to clear the north end of Luzon and take them into more unfrequented waters east of the Philippines. At the risk of being instantly shot if caught, Torrey managed to send another message—the Germans never dreaming that he would attempt such a thing—after the course was changed a second time, indicating pretty clearly the end of Papua as the steamer's objective. And it was acknowledged by a British destroyer—which relayed to the *Bandarwallah.*

Eventually a landlocked cove was reached on a strip of the Papuan coast never visited by any steamer—nor even by pearling schooners from Thursday Island. The entrance was so narrow and so perfectly concealed by a little jutting promontory that it was an ideal spot for a submarine base. Inside, the cove twisted around in a half-circle with deep water close up to a rapidly shelving beach, with space enough to shelter a large fleet.

JUST abreast of them, inside the cove, the promontory fell sheer in a rock precipice with over twenty fathoms of water lapping the foot of it; and when the submarine joined them next day, to get the oil from their ballast-tanks, her commander made fast to a couple of anchor-shanks which had been driven into the rock crevices. As Torrey noted the position chosen, his eyes traveled speculatively up to the top of the precipice—he had closely examined the seaward slope of the hill as they were running in. Presently he took Miss Frances up to the bow again for a look at the schools of rainbow fish in the crystal-clear water under them—and asked if she had kept track of the steward's movements after dinner.

"What I want to figure out, Frankie, is the possibility of our getting a week's supply of chow without being caught at it."

"Both the cooks and the steward usually spend the evening smoking on the fore-hatch in the well-deck—there's nobody in the pantry or upper storeroom. If I were caught I could say I was hungry—looking around for a little snack of something."

"That's plausible enough! It ought to work—though with those three men down on the hatch, there's nobody likely to see you. The way it stacks up to me is something like this: It looks as though they meant to keep me here indefinitely on this boat—probably wipe me out as soon as they think it safe—pick a row and shoot me. You—they may keep you here for months or send you to one of the ports on some other boat, any time. In either case you're none too safe—it's no position for a girl to be in! This place will be very likely cleaned out by the Navy boats within the next two or three days; on the other hand, they may not succeed in locating it for several weeks. If we get away, with enough chow to last awhile, we can set a signal on some high spot to bring the Navy boys after us. It'll be a rough experience, probably—but it seems to me that you'll run far less risk than staying here without me. I know you swim well enough to get ashore.

"I'm game, Sam! When shall we go?"

"About one in the morning, I think. That will give me time to do something I've been figuring out. We can drop over a couple of ring-buovs—they'll float your suit-case and whatever bundles we have. Luckily I managed to swipe two automatics this afternoon, and plenty cartridges. We wont be here when they're missed."

AT two bells in the middle watch Torrey lowered a doubled rope and two ring-buoys over the turtle-deck at the stern. Then he slid down into the water and gently caught Miss Winterbourne when she followed him—jerking the free end of the rope loose and letting it sink. Overhead there was clear tropic starlight, but in the shadows of the cove it was pitchy dark. They made no sound as they swam toward the sandy spit at the entrance, pushing the buoys before them. In half an hour their feet touched bottom. Miss Winterbourne's first impulse was dry clothing, which she obtained from her suitcase and put on while Torrey was scouting along the outer beach to see if any watchmen had been placed there.

Through the glass, coming in, he had made out what seemed to be a trail through the trees and undergrowth leading up to the top of the promontory, and had assumed it to be one used by watchmen stationed there during the day. Having taken bearings by a mass of driftwood on the beach, he had no trouble in locating it or in climbing to the top with the aid of an

electric torch taken from the steamer; the girl followed, with one hand grasping his belt. At the crest they cautiously pushed through the undergrowth until they came to the partly bare top of the rock-precipice, where he had noticed several good-sized boulders when looking up from the steamer's deck below. They could see the steamer's riding-lights distinctly—and directly under them a lantern which they had noticed at the U-boat's starboard gangway, for the guidance of any boats which might be coming to her.

From Torrey's intimate knowledge of the sister craft, *U-119,* he knew exactly where her torpedoes were stored, and the shells for the six-inch guns. As nearly as he could figure, looking down from the two hundred-foot elevation of the cliff-top, there were four torpedoes and two racks full of shells about thirty feet forward of the gangway lantern. Exerting their combined strength, they pushed and rolled a three-foot boulder over the rock until it was exactly above the spot, then cautiously eased it over the edge. In another second they heard a crash of splitting plates which reverberated up and down the cove, followed by a roaring concussion that shook the ground under them like an earthquake. Then they made their way rapidly down to the beach and walked over the hard sand four or five miles before stopping to make a rough camp under the palms. As Torrey threw himself down for a good refreshing sleep, after pulling a number of palm-fronds for her bed, he said:

"I made up my mind to squash that U-boat permanently this time, if it were humanly possible, and I reckon I got away with it! Nobody on board had a chance to get away and tell how it happened. Even when they miss us, there wont be a single thing to show that we had a hand in it. The watchman on the steamer, very likely, was blown off the fo'c'stle-head into the water by the concussion. And, on the side, I'll relieve your skeptical parent of just ten thousand dollars. Which you may have for a wedding present, my dear."

"But—I've never said I'd marry you, Sam! Not yet!"

"Say it now, Frankie, this seems a pretty good time—eh? And say something else that you know I want to hear!"

She snuggled against his shoulder and raised her lips in full surrender.

"I—I guess I do love you, Sammy. And—and I don't care much what happens to us—now."

IN the morning the graceful little *Bandarwallah* came steaming down the coast—saw them signaling on the beach with a big palm-frond—and took them off. At four in the afternoon, a destroyer came racing along with a third-class cruiser in answer to their radiogram of the exact position—and landing-parties in cutters, with machine-guns and four-pounders, dashed through the entrance up the cove. Around the bend, nine "missing" steamers were found with German watchmen aboard.

Replying to the English commanders as to why he had suspected the west coast of Papua before even the submarine appeared, Torrey said that he and Medford had figured over the unfrequented spots of the Archipelago very carefully several months before, and Papua had appeared to have a greater mileage of such coast than any other locality, so he had considered their destination almost a certainty. The Englishmen drank his health and sighed enviously.

"Gad, old top, if one but had your luck, there'd be no need of doin' anything but sit in the gorgeousest room of the manor-house on one's princely estate, an' touch the button! My word! Accordin' to Kragorovitch an' that crowd in Hongkong, you're a dead man! They had you an' the lady dead to rights—held all the cards. An' then they didn't know how to play 'em! What? You turn up prisoners in their hands—when the whole China Sea is ablaze with the news of your mysterious disappearance. Two big Governm'nts offerin' five thousan' sterling for either or both of you alive an' well—mind you!

"Then you've the consummate nerve to use their own wireless an' pull us along your trail! Not satisfied with that, you an' the lady sink the bally sub without assistance! Our diver went down twenty fathom' an' reported her blown to scrap-iron. You win your ten thou' from that money-lovin' Yankee who doesn't mind the comp'ny he keeps out here—an', as I understand it, one of the most stunnin' wives in Asiatic waters! Luck! Unbelievable luck! And yet—a good bit more than that, old top. We're drinkin' to you an' the lady—full glasses! With the thanks an' appreciation of the British Navy! What?"

High Voltage

An Adventure of Chester Fay

By Henry Leverage

THE guest of honor at dinner in Hope Hall, the home for ex-convicts managed by Minnie May, the Duchess, was Chester Fay, alias Edward Letchmere. Opposite Chester Fay sat little Emily O'Mara—daughter of Charley O'Mara who died making a get-away from prison.

Minnie May's other guests at the table had played many parts. She had with her that night Big Scar, a Chicago yegg; Sammie Green, a dip; Nolly Matches of choice police memory; and Ed Peterman, whose prowess with can-openers and nitroglycerin were second only to Fay's.

The dinner, bountifully served by an old Southern mammy, was half through when Chester Fay, rose, pushed back his chair, bunched his napkin and proposed:

"We'll drink a toast to Minnie May first, George Mott the reformer second, and—"

"Crime!"

Chester Fay gazed reprovingly toward the scowling face of Big Scar who had suggested the third toast.

"Go easy, Scar," said Fay. "We're all supposed to be reformed. Our meeting here tonight is for the purpose of furthering the cause of man inside and helping those who have been released from prison to take the right road."

Big Scar gulped a half-glass of water and leaned back in his chair. Fay's eyes swung over the guests.

"You're no one to be talkin' of reform an' the right road, Fay," suggested Ed Peterman. "There aint nobody here has the record like you. You've ripped open every jug from Eastport, Maine, to San Diego, California, an' a few in Mexico."

Fay smiled ingeniously. He was a well-dressed, prematurely gray-haired young man with a most engaging manner.

"The coppers have never proved it," he said. "I'll leave it to Minnie May if they have."

Minnie May bounced out of her chair like a good-natured bisque doll. She had enameled cheeks, ringlets of brown and gold, and a plump bosom.

"Go soft on that crime-stuff!" she exclaimed. "We're all doing the best we can. I've nicked plenty of kale in my day—and I have some of it planted where the coppers can't find it. I never trimmed anybody but a wise guy that turned out to be a sucker. Now I'm done!"

Little Emily, at the end of the table, said pensively:

"I wish somebody would pass me the olives."

FAY, Minnie May, Big Scar and Ed Peterman resumed eating. The air of the dining-room was somewhat tense. Suddenly Nollie Matches rubbed a bald spot on the top of his head with his slender wire-like fingers.

"Say, everybody," he said, "there's a letter came today for Weeping Willy Fink. It's addressed 'Hope Hall.' Wot's that rat got to do with us? The letter's on the hall-tree. He's got a crust, he has, gettin' mail sent to this place."

Minnie May nodded her brown and gold ringlets. It's a kite from stir," she said,

and then explained for the benefit of little Emily: "It's a letter from Manamensing, the big prison on the river."

Weeping Willy Fink did not move in the same underworld circles as Chester Fay, Big Scar, Ed. Peterman or even Nollie Matches and Sammie Green. Weeping Willy was known to the police as a prowler and second-story man. He had never accomplished much in either line, save to get arrested a score of times.

"This Willy Fink!" spat Big Scar. "This guy you mentioned,"—the yegg turned toward Nollie Matches,—"He was mixed up in the Celery King murder, wasn't he? He was the hook that helped torture the old celery man, and croak him. Aint they got Willy's pal Humpy Dixon in the death-house for the murder?"

"Sure!" said Nolly. "They're goin' to burn Humpy in a day or two. Willy wasn't caught. Some say Willy the Weeper did the croakin' job."

"The jury found Humpy Dixon guilty," said Minnie May. "He tried to peddle some of the Celery King's silverware. Two Dicks from Central Office picked him up, put him through the third degree, and maybe they framed him. Anyway, he's going to the electric chair for the murder of the Celery King."

Chester Fay remembered the details of the murder. They were amateurish and brutal. The work savored of Humpy Dixon or Weeping Willy.

"I'm glad to see justice done in that case," he said. "Any crook that has to commit a murder to get swag ought to burn."

Minnie May bobbed her head, helped little Emily to another olive and motioned for the colored mammy to remove the dishes.

"Justice," said she, "always works out. Retribution for a rough job comes sooner or later. I am not talking about the smooth work such as Chester does. I mean rough stuff—like murder."

"Some say," rumbled Big Scar, "that murder is the safest crime."

"Murder will out!" declared Minnie May —positively.

A BUZZER, one of those tiny affairs that make a noise like a fly in a bottle, sounded beneath the table. Minnie May sprang from her chair. She fluttered her penciled lashes in the direction of Chester Fay. Fay returned the stare. His expression was like a keen hound's—alert, expectant.

"Wot was that?" growled Big Scar.

"A bug," said Ed Peterman. "The lodge-keeper has piped someone on the road. It's the office to look out."

The diners rose from their chairs and stood facing the door that led to the hall and the front porch. Each face expressed the same emotion differently. Little Emily was girlishly interested. Nollie Matches and Sammy Green were wary. Fay, Big Scar and Ed Peterman had their right hands to their hips. Minnie May's baby-blue eyes hardened slightly.

Footsteps sounded on the graveled walk. The steps came on the porch. The front door was pushed open. A man slunk in, closed the door, tiptoed over the hall rugs and brushed aside the portières. He had the face of a gutter-rat—whiskered, beady eyes and disappearing chin. He recoiled. His eyes raised to the globes clustered in the overhead electric-fixture. His glance dropped to the floor.

"It's Willy the Weeper!" roared Big Scar.

"Damn if it aint," said Ed Peterman. "Hello, Willy!"

Weeping Willy Fink sniffed. He came forward, recoiled from Chester Fay and went to the Duchess, as Minnie May was sometimes called.

"Is there a stiff here for me?"

"There's a kite," said Minnie May. "It's in a prison envelope. It came this morning."

"Gimme it!"

The Duchess stepped to the door, went out for a fractional part of a minute and returned with a soiled envelope held between her pink and white fingers.

Weeping Willy tore the envelope open, read the contents, wiped his watery eyes and said, glancing at Minnie May:

"It's from me pal Humpy. They're goin' to fry him in the chair. He's in th' death-house—a-waitin' for me to send him a double-x cartridge, which he wants."

"What does he want a double-x cartridge for?" asked Fay.

"He wants to blow the lock off his cell door."

Fay leaned over the dining table. He pointed his finger toward Weeping Willy Fink.

"You and Humpy Dixon, both, ought to be executed for the murder of the Celery King. I have no sympathy for Humpy.

I wouldn't help him under any circumstances."

"He's a crook—the same as you," whined Willy Fink.

Fay flushed. His steel-gray eyes flashed.

"Say that again!" he snapped. "I don't class myself, or anybody else in this room, with Humpy or you."

"Same here!" growled Big Scar.

WILLY FINK drew his chinless jaw into his coat collar like a turtle hiding its head. "We hooks," he suggested, "ought to help one another. Humpy needs a little nitro to make a get-away from the death-house. He's goin' to fry this week. He says, in the stiff, what some trusty mailed, that all he needs is a double-x cartridge. He's got the rest of the get-away figured out."

Weeping Willy finished speaking and glanced around the room for sympathy. He saw no mercy written on the hard, straight jaws of the yeggs. He looked at Minnie May and Fay. They were openly disgusted. Little Emily O'Mara alone showed interest in the projected idea of supplying Humpy Dixon with a dynamite cartridge.

"It's this way, miss," said the rat-faced prowler. "Some dame has got to visit Humpy in the visitors room of the death-house an' slip him the cartridge."

Fay bunched his muscles, rounded the table, grasped the crook by the neck and hurled him toward the door.

"Get out of here!"

Weeping Willy reached toward his belt, thought better of the motion, rose to one knee and sobbed:

"You guys wont help me get a pal out of th' death-house! You're a hell o' a bunch! Aint we all fightin' the coppers an' the dicks an' the stir screws?"

"We're not torturing old men, burning the soles of their feet, twisting their hands and then shooting them down cold for a few pounds of silver!" Fay drove the accusation straight toward Weeping Willy.

"You bet we're not!" exclaimed Minnie May. "Friendship ceases when it comes to rough work."

Willy Fink closed his eyes slyly. Two emotions struggled within his narrow brain. He wanted to save his pal. He feared for his own liberty. The police were searching for him in connection with the Celery King murder.

"I aint done with you bunch," he said. "I'm goin' to tell you somethin'. I got a good reason for askin' you to help me get Humpy out of the death-house. It's a good reason, it is!"

The prowler had not reckoned without his hosts. His cunning brain, sharpened in the slipperiest city on the map, grasped the advantage he had gained.

"I came up from New York," he said, "to get Humpy's kite. I knew he sent it. There's a sort of wireless workin' out of Manamensing. Poor Humpy is going to be burned, an' says I, I aint done nothin' for him. So I thought of you people, what are always ready to help the men in prison."

Weeping Willy allowed a tear to roll down his pinched nose. He motioned for Minnie May to dismiss the Southern mammy, who was standing in the doorway leading to the kitchen.

Fay eyed the crook, saw that something was struggling in his brain and said to the colored woman: "Go into the pantry. Willy is about to tell us something."

"Throw the rat out!" rasped Big Scar.

"Wait," said Fay. "Go on, Willy."

THE prowler fumbled in his pocket, drew forth the envelope and note, creased it with his dirty fingers and whimpered:

"Me an' Humpy was pals. I aint going to see a pal get a thousand volts of high tension without makin' a play to save him."

"Seventeen hundred," corrected Fay.

"Whatever they use to burn a guy—it's enough."

"G'wan!" said Ed Peterman. "Quit your stallin'. Spit out what ye're goin' to say!"

"It's this way," Willy whispered. "Humpy is in dead-bang wrong. He didn't croak the Celery King. The coppers framed him. He had the silver, all right. That part of the job sent him to the electric chair."

"Who did kill the Celery King?" asked Fay.

Weeping Willy Fink looked over the table in the direction of the pantry door. He turned his head cautiously and studied each face in the room. He gulped:

"I did."

"What?" exclaimed Fay.

"G'wan!" rasped Ed Peterman.

Weeping Willy dropped his mean and pinched features into the hollow of his soiled hands. His shoulders shook.

Sobbingly he continued, rubbing his eyes:

"I croaked the Celery King. I let him have it with my gat. Humpy beat it away with the silver. The old guy came after me. Bluey—bluey! I let him have it!"

"Go easy," Fay said, glancing at little Emily.

"I aint no squealer," whined Weeping Willy. "I don't want to go to the coppers an' cough up. The governor wont believe me. You guys will. Humpy is as innocent as a baby. He didn't croak the old geezer."

Fay's expression grew reflective. Minnie May exclaimed:

"There! What did I tell you? Murder will out."

"Maybe this rat is stallin'," said Big Scar.

"I aint a-stallin'," went on Weeping Willy. "I croaked the Celery King. That's why I don't want to see Humpy burn in the chair."

Fay recalled some, but not all, of the details of the Celery King murder. The old man—Caleb Jackman of Jackman Corners—was found dead on his lawn, with two bullets in his stomach. He had been tortured by thieves, burned with a lamp and beaten until the hiding-place of his silver and a few gold-pieces was forced from his aged lips. The silverware, and a revolver with two empty cartridges, had been taken from the person of Humpy Dixon. The caliber of the revolver was the same as the bullets found in the body of Caleb Jackman. The jury readily convicted Humpy.

WEEPING WILLY jammed his fists in his eye-sockets and shook the room with his sobs.

"I aint no rat. I came an' got Humpy's stiff—'cause I want to see him sprung from stir. I wanta do what I can for an old-time pal. He stuck, he did—never squealed on me."

"That's white of Humpy!" said Ed Peterman. "It don't sound like—wot I know of him."

"It may be the truth," Fay mused. Willy has no object in telling us he killed the Celery King. He can confess to us—but he dare not say anything to the police. He knows his secret is safe here."

Minnie May and little Emily became sympathetic. They went to Weeping Willy and pulled his fists from his eyes.

"Don't whine," said the Duchess. "You're a good pal to Humpy, after all. We'll have to do something for an innocent man."

Little Emily brought the crook a glass of water. "Drink this," she said. "Poor boy, we want to help you."

The prowler opened his thin lips in a yellow-toothed smile. His crafty glance swung to Fay. "Wanta see Humpy's note?"

Fay took the note, read it, then pulled out his watch.

"It's too late tonight to do anything. Humpy wants a double-x cartridge. Can you get him one, Scar?"

The big yegg shelved forward his bushy brows.

"I can get a million double-x caps," he growled. "I know a place where there's boxes of them. But aint this rat-faced guy tryin' to put somethin' over on us?"

"I swear to God—" cried Weeping Willy.

"Can that weep stuff!" snarled Big Scar. "What d'ye mean by comin' to us an' tellin' us Humpy is a sticker—that he is going to the chair for you?"

"The coppers don't know where I'm planted. It wouldn't do Humpy no good to squeal. Anyway, the coppers say he's guilty, an' what they say goes! They want the credit. They don't care who burns in the chair, as long as it's somebody."

Weeping Willy put his case clearly enough. Fay and Minnie May saw the force of his argument. The police had fully satisfied the newspapers and the people of the State when they fastened the murder of the Celery King upon Humpy. It really didn't matter whether Humpy Dixon was guilty or not. Some one had to pay the extreme penalty.

"We'll be brief!" Fay exclaimed. "I see what to do. Humpy wants a cartridge. He'll get one! He says in his note that there's only one guard in the death-house at night. The guard hasn't a key to the cell doors, but he *has* a key to an outer door that leads to the prison yard."

"Well do I know that stir," said Big Scar. "There's no wall-guards on after the count at ten o'clock. Every con is locked up in the cell-house. Humpy can cross the yard, swim the river an' get away. There aint nothin' to prevent him—once he blows the lock from his door, saps the death-house screw, gets the keys an' lamisters across the stir yard."

"That ought to satisfy justice," beamed

Minnie May. "See," she added, "how things work out? Humpy is innocent. He'll escape. Willy is guilty. He'll keep on being a cheap crook until he falls with a crash and gets burnt for murder."

"I'm willin' to confess to the Celery King croakin'," Willy whined, "but the D. A. wouldn't believe me. So the thing to do is to spring me pal Humpy an' let him get away."

Fay had no more use for Weeping Willy than for a worm. He snapped out his arm, clutched the prowler by the shoulder, thrust him through the door, out onto the porch and halfway down the sloping lawn of Hope Hall.

"Go back to New York!" said he incisively. "Lie low in some scatter. I'll attend to springing Humpy Dixon."

The prowler seized Fay's hands.

"I know you would," he whined, and fell to his knees on the short-cropped grass.

Fay experienced a revulsion of feeling. He leaned over Weeping Willy. "Listen," he said: "if you are lying to me, I'll come wherever you are and kill you like a rat. Swear that you croaked the Celery King."

"I croaked him. Humpy didn't."

FAY watched Weeping Willy Fink sneak down the gravel walk, go through the lodge gate and turn in the direction of New York. Then the cracksman hurried to Minnie May and her ex-convict guests.

He wiped his hands expressively.

"Willy's gone," he said. "The thing for us to do is to frame up a relative for Humpy, drive to Manamensing, and get to him the cartridge."

Big Scar, Ed Peterman, Nolly Matches and Sammie Green all had plans for getting a visitor into the death-house. Fay motioned for Minnie May and little Emily to follow him out onto the porch. "Stay here, boys," he said, glancing back. "Finish your dinner. Minnie and I will take care of Humpy's get-away—if it can be done."

The porch at Hope Hall was wide. Fay drew up two chairs. Little Emily sat down; Minnie May remained standing. She fluttered her penciled lashes in the direction Weeping Willy had taken.

"I certainly believe in justice," she intonated. "See how it works out, Chester. Humpy is innocent. The guilty man caved at the eleventh hour. He couldn't confess to the coppers. He came to us, and we're going to right a wrong."

"We're going to try," said Fay. "We are, perhaps, the only ones on earth, outside of Willy Fink, who know Humpy is innocent. It's up to us."

"I'll help," little Emily said.

"Me too!" Minnie May plumped down on the chair and started rocking vigorously.

Fay was practical. He leaned between Minnie May and little Emily.

"We'll get the double-x cartridge," he whispered. "We'll drive in a taxi to the front office of Manamensing. You and Emily will go in and represent yourselves as the aunt and sister of the condemned man. I can phone his attorney of record and fix that part up. Emily will be searched. You will be searched, Minnie. How are you going to hide the cartridge from the prison matron?"

"Leave that to me." Minnie May bobbed her head emphatically.

"All right," said Fay. "The Haymarket anarchists got cartridges when they kissed their supposed relatives good-by. At least, one of them did."

"I'm not going to kiss Humpy Dixon!" said little Emily.

"Leave that to me!" repeated the Duchess.

FAY had confidence in Minnie May's ability to take care of a score of prison guards. She had a way with her, gained when she was considered the confidence queen of the world.

The details of the proposed trip to the prison were worked over. Fay woke early. He breakfasted alone and walked down the road to a sound-proof telephone-booth in a village drugstore.

The district attorney's office gave him the name of Humpy's lawyer. Fay called this man up. Humpy had relatives in the west—Pueblo, Colorado, the lawyer said. Perhaps he had a sister. Humpy had never been very communicative concerning his people.

The lawyer-of-record promised to phone the prison and arrange so that the condemned man's aunt and sister could visit him. "What's the game?" he asked Fay.

Fay told the attorney to keep quiet and watch for results. He intimated that the aunt might put up a few thousand dollars for an eleventh-hour appeal. . . . .

Big Scar and Ed Peterman, rose from their chairs on the sunny porch at Hope Hall, when Fay returned.

"Get busy, boys," said Fay. "I want

a taxi for a day. I want at least two double-x detonators. Make the fuses very short."

The yeggs stared at each other, pulled down their hats and started over the lawn in the general direction of the village. Big Scar knew a garage dealer who furnished fast black cars for shady work. The yegg could drive. He brought the taxi around by a circuitous route. Its license plates had been changed. It had no meter—"clock," the big yegg called it.

Minnie May, little Emily and Fay went through the shrubbery at the rear of the house. The Duchess was gowned in mourning. Her veil was thick. Little Emily wore a simple dress with a blue velvet sash. Her sherry-colored hair strayed around her slender shoulders. Her shoes were low-heeled and square-toed.

Fay put on a pair of yellow-tinted goggles. His straw hat was pulled well over his eyes.

"Find Ed," he told Big Scar. "Ed went after the cartridges."

The taxi plowed through the dust of a lane, swung on two wheels, and chugged in the direction of a railroad junction. Ed Peterman appeared from behind a box-car after Big Scar had sounded the taxi-horn.

"Here's the caps an' strings," said the yegg. "I cut the strings short. One of these will blow a door off its hinges."

Minnie May reached her gloved hand through the taxi window. She fingered the two cartridges. She raised her veil and hid the double-x detonators in her bodice.

"When I kiss Humpy good-by," she said, "he gets what he wants."

Fay nodded. Ed Peterman slouched back to the box-car and disappeared. Big Scar released the brake and started the taxi.

"Manamensing!" snapped Fay. "It's a long drive."

Minnie May rehearsed little Emily in the part she was to play when the great prison by the river was reached.

"Do the sob stuff, Emily. Bawl your eyes out. I'll back you right up. You can't talk—you're so overcome with grief. I'll do the talking for two of us. Never saw a man yet who could stand tears from a couple of pretty women."

Fay smiled. "We're on justice bent," he said to Emily. "Any ruse goes. Do just what Minnie says. She may want you to faint when the time comes to pass Humpy the cartridge. Faint like an actress. Stall the prison screws."

"I'll do th' stallin'!" said the Duchess.

THE taxi threaded the polished roads of the lower part of the State. Big Scar hunched up his shoulders, advanced the spark and gave the four-cylinder engine all the gas it could stand without choking. He detoured when the prison city was reached, came back by a wagon trail and put on the brakes in a long coast down a hill to the river where the gray walls of the penitentiary loomed—a social barricade dividing free men from felons.

Fay stepped out and assisted Minnie May and little Emily to alight when the taxi stopped before the front office and warden's residence.

The Duchess grasped little Emily's arm.

"Right this way," she said. "Now, don't cry darling. We're going to see your poor brother—"

Her voice trailed into a sob. Fay stepped into the taxi. He noticed that Big Scar had the engine running. He saw Minnie May and little Emily received by a rat-eyed trusty in a gray uniform. Brass-capped guards peered from the bars of the front office.

The wait for the return of the Duchess and little Emily was a long one. Big Scar turned the taxi, by running it over a railroad track where electric trains shuttled between New York and the suburbs. He brought the cab to a new position at the foot of a hill—which could be taken with considerable speed on first gear, in case of trouble.

Wall-guards paced the gray barricade. They carried rifles. Big Scar scowled at them. He had once been a prisoner at Manamensing. His make-up as a taxi chauffeur, with goggles and greasy coat, was effective enough to disarm suspicion.

"Maybe they got a rumble," growled the big yegg through the front window of the taxi. "They've been a long while in there. Weepin' Willy Fink might have tipped us off."

Fay glanced at his watch, adjusted his yellow-tinted glasses and eyed the front gate. Other visitors came to the prison. Some carried packages. A chimney smoked over the wall. The guards changed shifts.

"Where's the death-house?" asked Fay.

Big Scar jerked an oily thumb toward one corner of the prison. "Back of that," he said. "The chair is in a little room

with a green door that leads to the condemned cells."

Again Fay consulted his watch. Minnie May and little Emily had been gone fifty minutes. There were any number of chances for a slip-up. The attorney might not have phoned the warden that relatives of Humpy Dixon were coming. The cartridges might have been discovered on the ample person of the Duchess.

Fay twisted and squirmed on his seat. He loosened a flat automatic in his right hip pocket. He set the taxi's door to a crack—in case of a running fight with the prison guards.

THE gate opened finally. Minnie May, sobbing and leaning on little Emily's shoulder, came into view. The Duchess turned and thanked an old and vinegary-looking prison guard. She drew down her veil, swished her lace skirts, sobbed aloud with fetching tears streaming from her baby-blue eyes, and came tottering in the direction of the taxi.

"Aunty is terribly upset," said little Emily. "She fainted twice. Once on a guard's shoulder and another time on poor brother's neck."

"Sure I did," said Minnie May when the taxi started up. "And," she added with a chortle, "that last time I fainted Humpy got the cartridges. I dropped them down the neck-band of his prison suit."

"How did you get the cartridges past the guards?" Fay asked.

"It was a cinch. Such guards—old men who couldn't catch a cold. All I did was—"

Minnie May raised her hands and touched the top of the taxi.

"All I did," she continued, "was hide the caps in my glove when the matron was frisking my skirt. When she finished with my shoes and stockings, I put the cartridges in my waist and let her look at my gloves. Of course, I was almost fainting with grief, and that upset the matron."

"What does Humpy look like?" asked Fay.

"Sawed-off, barrel-chested, not worth it."

"If he is innocent, he is worth it, Minnie."

The Duchess looked at Fay.

"You're a great one for justice," she said. "So am I. We're in a position where the courts and the coppers are wrong and we are right. It isn't the first time, either."

Little Emily exclaimed: "Where are we going now?"

Fay glanced at the flying roadside. "We'll go to the first town north of New York and buy some clothes, hat and shoes for Humpy. Big Scar figures that Humpy will make the get-away tonight, about one A. M. It's the best time. He'll probably come around the south wall of the prison, cross the railroad tracks and climb the hill. We'll finish what we have started and help him make a good get-away. He'll need an auto, money and clothes."

"Maybe he wont make the get-away tonight," suggested Minnie May.

"He goes to the chair early Friday morning. This is Wednesday. It's his only chance."

Fay leaned through the front window of the cab. He ordered Big Scar to drive for Mount Vernon. "Stop in front of a clothing store," he said.

THE yegg broke all records. He brought the taxi, steaming at the radiator, before a store. Fay sprang out, went into the clothers, bought a cheap, dark suit, large shoes and a slouch hat. He tore the tags off after he climbed into the taxi.

His instructions, given to Big Scar, were to deposit Minnie May at the railroad station where she could take a train back to Hope Hall. "Little Emily and I will see the matter out," he told the Duchess when she alighted. "Humpy is sure to beat the death-house tonight. He has not only one but two cartridges. He can easily get by the death-house guard when he blows the door of his cell open."

"We aint no saints," beamed the Duchess through her veil. "But we're right this time, for a wonder, and Humpy Dixon deserves to get away. S'long, pals."

Fay leaned back in the taxi when it started away from the railroad station. He asked little Emily where she wanted to go. The girl looked at the suburban houses and said:

"I want to go for a long ride, Chester. Let's stop at a road-house and get dinner. Then we can go to the prison after dark."

Eleven o'clock, by Fay's watch, found Big Scar tunneling the night in the direction of Manamensing. The taxi was fitted with search-lights. The gas-tank was filled to the brim. The Big Scar had braced himself on coffee and a splendid dinner. He drove with one hand on the wheel and the other holding a fat cigar.

"A swell night for a get-away!" he shouted back to Fay and little Emily. "I wish Humpy luck. He's a bum hook, but if he didn't croak the Celery King, he oughta make it. Me for him, when it comes to burnin' an innocent guy."

Fay nodded. He guided Big Scar by signs. The taxi, with little Emily snugly wrapped in a robe, was left standing by a clump of silver maples. Fay and the yegg went over the brow of a hill and stood, sheltered from observation, in a position overlooking the great prison.

Above the gray walls ran a spaced row of electric arcs, silver-glowing through the river's mist. The guard-houses were empty. A yellow lamp showed in the front-office near the railroad tracks.

"The count's been taken," grunted the yegg. "The cons are all in their cells. The death-watch is being kept in the death-house."

Fay pulled at the yegg's sleeve. "You stay here," he said. "Keep your eyes on the track and this end of the prison."

"Where are you going, pal?"

"I'm going along the hill to the end of the wall. I'll plant there. One of us will see Humpy when he escapes. Stop him, tell him who you are and take him to the taxi. There'll be a big rumble when he blows the lock from his door. See that he's steered clear of gun-guards."

Fay glided through underbrush and took up a position at the south end of the wall. He could have thrown a stone across the railroad tracks to the corner guard-house. He crouched, drew out his watch and counted the minutes. They lengthened into an hour. Two hours passed. It was after one o'clock.

Fay dropped suddenly when an electric-locomotive shot by, followed by a line of shaded Pullmans. He rose. There had sounded within the roar of the train a lower note, like an echo. Silence ensued for a minute. Then came a hoarse bulling from over the wall. Lights flashed in the front office and the warden's residence. A shot was fired.

"He made it," said Fay. "He's in the prison yard."

The cracksman dodged behind a fringe of trees, ran south and brought up standing near the railroad track. Before him, over the shining metals, was the flowing river. Behind lay a small hill over the top of which was the waiting taxicab with little Emily seated inside.

A second shot was fired from the direction of the prison. Loud commands cleft the night air. The guards were searching the prison yard.

Fay saw, distinctly, the shadow of a man come around the south end of the wall. Dripping from an immersion in the river, Humpy was heading for the railroad tracks and the security of the wooded hill. He crawled on hands and knees. His face was twisted. His prison suit oozed slime. He reached the cinders of the roadbed. He lifted himself over a guard rail. He crossed the first two tracks, lay flat, and extended his muddy hand forward.

He touched—the third-rail!

THE escaped convict writhed, doubled up and curled like a scorched worm. One second he was alive. The next moment he lay with his tortured face turned upward and his legs twined under him.

Humpy Dixon, soaked to the skin with river water, had short-circuited seven hundred volts of electricity—the death planned for him by the State, had taken place beyond the State's jurisdiction.

Fay dashed across the tracks. He leaned over the convict's body. All life had left Humpy.

A shot, and a glancing bullet that struck a cross-tie, caused Fay to turn, glare at the guards running from the prison, then to dive swiftly for the shelter of the wooded hill. He climbed the slope, crawled through dry underbrush, found a lane, and worked by the stars in the direction of the taxi.

Big Scar loomed before him suddenly.

"Wot t'ell!" exclaimed the yegg.

"It's me," whispered Fay.

"Where's Humpy? I heard the shots, pal."

Fay led the yegg to the taxi.

"Humpy," he said, "beat the electric-chair—and was killed on the third-rail."

Big Scar and little Emily listened while Fay rapidly related what had happened to Humpy Dixon.

"Queer doin's," commented the yegg. "We better beat it while the goin' is good."

Fay bowed his head and climbed into the taxi. Big Scar cranked the engine, set the spark and started over the road that led away from the hill and the prison.

"What is the matter with you, Chester?" asked little Emily.

Fay jerked up his chin. "I can't understand," he said. "Humpy was innocent.

He escaped. He was almost safe, when fate or chance finished him." Fay hesitated, tapped on the front window and ordered Big Scar to drive the car to Dan the Dudes'—a thieves' den.

"What t'ell!" grumbled the yegg. He turned the taxi at a crossroad and started toward Mount Vernon and New York.

Fay leaned back in the seat. He watched the flying rows of trees. The taxi plunged through misty valleys. It roared in sleeping towns. The yellow arcs of New York were reached. Broadway was threaded. Big Scar, with a steaming radiator and the overworked engine smelling abominably of hot oil, stopped the taxi in front of Dan the Dude's—an all-night dive and stag hotel.

Springing out, Fay went in and made inquiry for a member of the Humpy Dixon gang who was serving as leader during the absence of Humpy.

He gained a slight clue as to the whereabouts of this lieutenant. He told Big Scar to drive to Sullivan Street and look for an Italian saloon in a basement.

"Weeping Willy Fink is hiding there, or near there, Scar."

THE yegg yawned and started up the engine. The taxi threaded the silent streets. Fay leaned from one window. Little Emily watched from the other. Suddenly she said:

"There's a saloon with a light burning in the back, Chester."

Fay left the cab and went through a side door of the dive. He found Humpy Dixon's successor playing stuss. He gave, after persuasion, an address near the Hudson River.

"Willy Fink may be in that scatter," he said. "Try it."

Fay and Big Scar continued the search. The stopped at three buildings near the river. One tenement resembled the "scatter" where Weeping Willy was supposed to be in hiding.

"Gringham, Jones, Murphy," Fay read on the unpolished mailboxes in a dark hallway. "Which will we try, Emily?"

"Let's try Murphy's flat," said the girl.

Murphy proved to be a sour-looking old man.

Fay touched him on the arm.

"Two friends to see Willy Fink," he said. "Tell him—two friends from Hope Hall."

A thud sounded through the door of the flat. A man sprang out of bed. Murphy scowled. He was pressed aside by Weeping Willy Fink, whose right hand trembled under the weight of a cheap nickel-plated revolver.

"It's all right," said Fay. "Come in, Emily."

Fay thrust Murphy out of the way, grasped Weeping Willy's wrist, twisted the revolver from his shaky fingers and pocketed it.

"Where's your room?"

Weeping Willy turned pale. He led the way down a gas-lighted hall. Fay was close after him. He stepped through the door, drew back his arm and drove the cringing prowler across a bed with a snap that sounded like a bone breaking.

"Oh, don't," said little Emily.

Fay leaned over Weeping Willy.

"Come clean, Fink! You lied to me. You played on my sympathy. Humpy Dixon is dead. He was killed in the getaway."

Weeping Willy rubbed his watery eyes with his fists. He attempted to rise from the bed. Fay pressed him down.

"Come clean! Why did you lie to me?"

"I didn't lie—"

Fay turned and glanced at little Emily. "Either this man is lying," he said, "or we all lose our faith in justice."

"You go out of the room, Chester, and let me talk to Willy.

A MINUTE, two minutes passed, with little Emily in the room alone with Willy Fink.

She came out and said:

"He told me the truth, Chester."

"Who killed the Celery King?"

"Humpy Dixon did."

Fay jerked the nickel-plated revolver from his pocket. He removed the cartridges and strode into Weeping Willy's room.

"Here, Fink!" he said.

Weeping Willy trembled when he reached for the gun.

"I didn't mean no harm, Chester," he whined, "I just wanted to see my pal sprang—that's why I made that phony confession."

Fay led little Emily down the gas-lighted stairs to the waiting taxi.

"There's a spark of good in everybody," he said. "And," he added, "Weeping Willy Fink meant all right. Only somebody knew better."

The Relay

A Story of the American Legion

By Frederick Tierney

HARDIN VIERICK, night operator at the Randolph relay, tested his plugs, reported in to the wire chief, then turned toward the chubby form of Fatty Bronson, the day operator.

"Anything doing?"

"Where? At the mills? Plenty."

"Going to strike, huh?" There was a gleam in Vierick's eyes which could not be concealed. "Hasn't the company come through with the raise?"

"Not yet. Something came over the wire about an hour ago to the effect that the directors are still meeting in Seattle. But nothing's been settled. The night shift goes out at ten o'clock unless the company comes through. That's all, so far."

Fatty reached for his coat and hat, then hesitated while he rolled a cigarette. Vierick, finishing taking a routine relay message, looked up.

"You belong to the Legion, don't you?"

"Yeh."

"What's the gang figuring on doing?"

"The Legion? How do you mean—if there's a strike? Nothing. That's one thing we don't mix into—unless some communism or I. W. W. stuff bobs up. Then we'll work and work fast."

"Play strike-breakers, huh?" There was a sneer in Vierick's voice. Fatty puffed a second at his cigarette, then grinned.

"As a prognosticator you're a wonderful blacksmith," came from him at last. "I just got through telling you that the American Legion doesn't butt into strikes. It's any man's privilege to quit work who wants to. But it isn't any snake's privilege to put a lot of anarchistic ideas into decent men's heads under the faked up camouflage that they're something else. If this strike at the mills is on the square, you wont find a Legion man within miles of there. But if it's a frame-up thing on the part of the I. W. W.'s and we find it out—well, the strike will go on just the same without interference from us, but the wobblies who put the thing over will have a chance to learn how many teeth there are in Washington's new criminal syndicalism law."

Vierick laughed, to cover a sneer.

"Looking for a fight, aren't you?"

"Me?" Fatty chuckled. "Not so's you could notice it. I got all that I wanted over on the other side. All I want is a piece of pie and a cup of coffee. S'long."

Out he went, while Vierick, alone in the office now, watched after him with narrowed eyes. Fatty Bronson was not Vierick's sort of man. And Vierick—.

FIFTY miles away, where the great sawdust-burners of a score of giant lumbermills cast their dull glow against the night, five thousand men were traveling blindly along a path marked out for them by Hardin Vierick. Not that they knew it, for Vierick's methods were those of shrewdness, of cunning and careful concealment. A trip every Sunday to the little town of Banning, under the pretext of visiting his mother, his wife and his little boy; a carefully arranged conference with the men

who were sworn to do his bidding; the quick interchange of ideas and the weekly quota of plans and commands—thus had Vierick made his every arrangement, sent forth his workers to foment dissatisfaction and to transform a well organized happy working community into a seething mass of discontent. More, Vierick had chosen his position deliberately and with foresight. It had cost six months of constant effort to get this job at the Randolph relay. He had worked into it with a grace and ease which left no suspicion behind him, but which placed before him the knowledge of every bit of confidential telegraphy which passed between the main offices at Seattle and the mills management in Banning. It gave him an insight into every plan, every report which traveled either way—for Banning was not on a main trunk line; each message must be copied at Randolph and forwarded from the operator there. What passed through in the daytime Vierick could read in the "flimsy" carbon during the long hours of night. What came over the wire in the lengthy night letters which were being sent constantly from Seattle went through his hands, giving him a knowledge of every move of the mills management and allowing him to arrange some plan to counteract it, that the employees might constantly be stirred with discontent, and the radical element—spotted about the mills at the direction of the "Brotherhood"—be the better armed for its campaign of sabotage, even death if necessary, to reach its goal of destruction.

It had been brainily planned, leading to a conclusion which must be handled as deftly. Within the next few hours a message would come over the wire from Seattle, to be relayed to Banning. If that message refused the demands of the workmen, well and good. If it granted them—Hardin Vierick, sabotage agent for the "Brotherhood" narrowed his eyes and ran his thin fingers through his long black hair. Well, if those demands were granted, brains must work again. One thing was certain. The strike must come, and that strike must lead to sabotage and terrorism. It was the order of the "Brotherhood." Vierick looked at the clock: two hours to go.

OUT of the streaming rattle of the instrument he caught the call of his office and hastily cut in. Then he sank back in his chair as his fingers traveled mechanically over the keys of his "mill." Only the routine messages of the night; a love-missive from sweetheart to sweetheart, a room-reservation at Banning's one commercial hotel, a death-notice. Then the wire was clear again, except for the incessant rattle of the night "send" to Portland.

An hour; fifteen minutes more, while Vierick sucked at a smoke-browned corncob. Then—"*Rp—rp—rp—rp—rprprp!*"

The instrument was slurring in its call for Randolph. Vierick reached for the key.

"O. K. *rp*," he signaled and waited. The answer came in staccato swiftness as the "bug" in the hands of the sender in Seattle clicked off the message:

> RUSH!
> J. B. Hollingsworth, General Manager, Consolidated Lumber Mills, Banning, Wash.
>
> Inform workmen no demands refused. Willing to do everything possible to protect interests of all.
>
> A. T. Austin, President.

Vierick smiled, a thin smile, cold and hard, as he copied the wire according to the dictates of his scheming nature and turned to his key to call Banning. The fault would not be his—it rested upon the heads of the Consolidated Mills for an obscure telegram easily bulled in transmission, and upon the fast, slurring operator at Seattle who had not asked for a service repeat. The sounder clattered; Banning had answered. Slowly, deliberately, Vierick, of the Brotherhood of Man, tapped out a message of disaster:

> Inform men demands refused. Do everything possible to protect interests.

Far different from the telegram which had streamed over the wire from Seattle. One had meant contentment and peace. This would mean—

Vierick leaned back in his chair and carefully read his copy before hanging it on the hook. By morning, perhaps within a few hours, as soon as the news of the strike reached Seattle, the truth must be allowed to go through to the mills and to the men. But in those few hours Vierick knew the desires of the Brotherhood would be accomplished.

That much was certain. Every agent had his orders; every line of action had been formulated carefully beforehand. The minute that the nightshift walked out from its place of employment would begin a

reign of destruction which would last until other news reached the main body of strikers. And if that time should be only a few hours—well, more than one mill had been known to burn in less time.

VIERICK smoked contentedly. A slight click came from the telegraphically corrected clock on the wall, and the plotter looked up with a new interest. The deadline had been reached—over there at Banning the night shift was walking out, and the agents of the "Brotherhood," his agents, primed by him, coached by him and placed by him, were beginning their work. Vierick knew every movement to come—inflammatory speeches just outside the confines of the mill, arguments, radical suggestions, the call for a leader—then action. And his orders were that this action come swiftly. No one must take chances with time.

Five minutes passed—fifteen. The sound of heavy steps on the worn stairs leading to the little telegraph room, then the face of Fatty Bronson appeared as the day operator came through the doorway, to loaf away an hour or so before bedtime.

"Anything happened yet?"

Vierick watched the smoke curl from his lips. Then he reached to the hook and brought forth the garbled message.

"This sounds like something, doesn't it?"

Fatty Bronson whistled softly as he read. Then he settled into a chair and returned the message to its file.

"I wasn't looking for that," he said at last. "I sort of had a hunch that the directors in Seattle would come through with the demands."

"All of which shows," Vierick answered caustically, "how much you know about capital."

"Guess that's true. But I sure never thought they'd refuse those demands. There's too much danger in it."

"How's that?" Vierick was suddenly alert. Fatty slanted his head.

"The wobblies. All they want is a strike—and there are plenty of them scattered through this territory up here. They're looking for an excuse to cause trouble, and here the Consolidated bunch plays straight into their hands. It's funny aint it, how foolish big men can be sometimes?"

"You said it."

"But then,"—and Fatty rolled a cigarette,—"you never can tell what's up their sleeves, either. Have you heard anything about armed guards imported into the mills?"

"Not a word." Vierick turned sharply. "Have you?"

"Just got it tonight. From what I heard, the Consolidated bunch was willing to go as far as it could, but it wasn't going to take any chances if any new demands that they couldn't meet bobbed up. Guess that's what must have happened."

"But how about the guards?"

"Nothing but a rumor. I just heard that they've been sneaking them into the mills for the last three or four weeks and that there are enough men with sawed off shotguns down there to stop any kind of a wobbly demonstration that may bob up. A lot of them are professional killers—so the story goes."

"They wont try that! They wont dare to."

Fatty chuckled.

"Don't try to get an argument out of me. I don't know anything about it. I'm only telling you what I've heard. I don't even known whether there are any wobblies down there or not—just guessing at it. There's your call—maybe it's some dope."

VIERICK had turned to the key and was answering. Fatty Bronson rose and ambled toward the door.

"Be back in a minute or two," he said. "Going down on the street to get some tobacco."

Vierick did not hear. His whole attention was centered on the telegraph-instrument and the news it might carry to him. Suddenly he stiffened. The code for "night press rate" had come over the wire—a newspaper dispatch. Things were happening. Vierick cut in again.

"Wait until I get my mill ready," he slurred. "Didn't know you had a news-dispatch."

Back came the clattering message.

"Fifteen hundred words so far. Running story. Don't know limit."

Vierick, nervous now with the excitement of it all, fumbled his carbons as he placed the paper in a log-cabin stack near by. Fifteen hundred words to a Seattle newspaper and more to come, meant trouble and plenty of it. His plan was working. His organizers, his agents, his sabotage experts, had leaped to the task before them with avidity and were accomplish-

ing their aims. Out went a thin hand to the telegraph-key.

"O. K." he tapped. The sounder slurred in answer.

Seattle *Times*, Seattle, Washington.
N. P. R. Collect. Special Correspondence.

Banning, Wash.: May 10: Finding their demands for higher pay and better working conditions refused, the night shift of the Consolidated Lumber Mills Company went on strike here at ten o'clock tonight. The walkout was the immediate signal for disorder and riots, which late tonight were speedily assuming grave proportions. Several attempts were made to burn the mills, one rush of the strikers, led, it is claimed, by radical organizers who have been working among the men for the last month, was driven off only at the point of shotguns in the hands of armed guards imported by the mills management.

A break in the sending, and Vierick fretted over his typewriter. So Fatty Bronson's rumor had been true! The instrument clattered again, and the story proceeded.

Immediately that the strike signal was given, the night shift walked out of the mills, to find some two thousand members of the day shift awaiting them. These, of course, joined the strike, and as if by magic speakers loomed up here and there in the throng, denouncing the mills management and urging violence. For a time it seemed that cooler judgment would win, the majority of the men being unwilling to take part in violence against the mills. However, so sweeping was the oratory, so vitriolic the speakers loomed up here and there in the to assume greater strength, leaping into flame as a number of the armed guards who had been gathered at the gates of the mill came forth and sought to disperse the crowd. This brought immediate action, and a rush was made against the mill. However, when the mob faced the sawed-off shotguns in the hands of the guards, it recoiled, although the agitators worked harder than ever, shouting in louder tones for violence. This led to—

Another break. Then:

BULLETIN.
Shots have been fired and number of strikers are supposed to be injured. Am going out to investigate.

SANDERS.

FOR a moment Vierick sat staring at the message which he had typed almost without knowing it. This had not been in accordance with his plans. This had not been in keeping with the well-laid arrangements for the rush on the mills, the touching of the firebrands and the destruction of the great lumber plant, even before the news of the untruth of the faked telegram could leak through. His campaign had called for violence against those mills, not violence against his own workers and the blind sheep who were following them now to—what? Vierick rubbed his damp, cold hands in nervous tensity. Then he whirled at a voice from behind him.

"Well, why don't you send that bulletin? That's a rush message!"

Dazedly, Vierick realized that Fatty Bronson had been standing behind him, how long he did not know. He half rose from his machine, then sank back again.

"I can't. Something else might start coming in."

"That's all right. I'll handle it. If this stuff is going to get into the *Times*, we'll have to rush it. You take the sending wire. I'll handle the receiving. Send that bulletin first, then come along with the general story. Hurry up and get out of that chair. There's the call again."

"But I want to—"

"Get on that sending wire!"

Fatty Bronson was the superior. Grudgingly Vierick went to the sender, the clatter of his own instrument drowning out the sound from the other key, where Bronson had resumed taking the story from Banning. The fingers of Vierick worked with nerve-heightened speed as he pressed the automatic sender and sought to rush through his message. Then he leaned forward sharply.

"All clear," he announced. "What's doing?"

"Nothing." The voice of Fatty Bronson was as calm as usual. "Just going ahead with the regular story. Here you are. It's the stuff about the mob trying to break into the mills and being run away by the guards. Nothing very hot."

VIERICK returned to his instrument, and to the sending of the long sheet of correspondence which Bronson had handed him. Hastily he scanned it for some of the details of the trouble. There were few—only a continuance of the routine story, dealing in generalities. Through line after line Vierick searched for names—names that might give him some inkling of where his men were working and what they were doing, names which might allow him to figure ahead and—

"Flash!" It was the voice of Bronson. "Tell 'em to get ready for a flash! I'll talk it as it comes over the wire, and you send it."

Vierick's hand shook as he grasped his "bug." The wire waited. Then the voice of Bronson in slow, measured words:

"Three men killed in Banning lumber-mills riots. Believed to be I. W. W. agents."

The sweat began to show on Vierick's forehead. He finished the message, then leaned excitedly toward his companion.

"No names yet?"

"What's that?" Bronson frowned the usual scowl of a telegraph-operator broken away from his key. "Names? No. I'd have given 'em to you if I'd gotten 'em. Tear into that stuff ahead of you there, or I'll be piling it up on you before you know it. Wonder what that guy was trying to say when you cut in on me?"

He reached to his key for a repeat, while Vierick returned to the sending of the main message. Long minutes dragged on, while the fat hand of the day operator handed him another sheet of generalities and while Hardin Vierick sought to conceal his excitement.

A quarter of an hour, and an interview, just as long, with Hollingsworth, the general manager. Then again the voice of Fatty Bronson:

"Clear for a flash. Here it comes. Killed in Banning riot are Edgard Voorhees, William Paslin, Martin Greer. I. W. W. literature found on each. Shot by guards while trying to throw fire-bomb in Mill Number 2."

Voorhees, Paslin and Greer! The three men with whom Vierick had planned it all, the three heads and three brains of all the agitators who had been flooded into the Consolidated mills for just this night. The room was beginning to grow hazy for Hardin Vierick. The telegraph instrument, as it clattered forth the news over the wire, seemed dim and far away. Then as he leaned dully toward the rest of that interminable interview, the voice of Fatty Bronson sounded once more.

"Here's a bulletin. Can you catch it with me running this mill, or had I better talk it?"

"Talk it—I—I—can't hear. That machine of yours—"

"All right. Ready to shoot?"

"Yes."

"Bulletin. Fighting is spreading throughout the town of Banning, following the shooting of Voorhees, Paslin and Greer. A large number of armed guards have been waylaid by the more radical among the mill-workers and have taken refuge in the deep ravine which runs just back of Blake Street in the residence district. So far no shots have been fired."

BLAKE Street! And on Blake Street was a little white house, with a garden, and two women and a boy! The muscles began to stand forth on the white, drawn face of Hardin Vierick. That house on Blake Street was his! Those women his mother and his wife, that boy his own.

"Any more?" he asked anxiously.

"No. The wire's dead. Can't get a rise out of the other end. Something must have happened."

Vierick turned back to his key—the last sentence of the bulletin had not yet been sent. But he needed no copy to guide him—the words were burned in his brain.

"So far, no shots have been fired!"

Through his mind, as he sent that last line, some vague, flitting thing that he could not recognize, leaped and jerked, something which tugged at his mentality and sought to jar it into action. But impossible—Vierick's mind was warped, warped in the dull realization that in Banning, his mother, his wife and his boy were within the zone of terror, within the possibility of tearing buckshot, and that they were there because he had so ordained it, because he had arranged it, and planned for it and worked for it!

He sought to pull himself back to the sending of that routine message—and failed. His hands were cold and cramped, his eyes set deep in his head, and the sweat streaming into them from his forehead. Again and again he tried to force himself to the work before him, while Fatty Bronson fretted and cursed at his key.

"Haven't you been able to get them yet?"

"No? Finished sending the rest of that stuff?"

"Not yet."

"Well, get busy on it. That isn't a weekly newspaper."

"Wait a minute, will you?" Vierick's voice was snappy and petulant. "My hand's tired. I haven't sent that much stuff in weeks, and my muscles wont hold up. Haven't you got a rise out of Banning yet?"

"I just told you that I hadn't. Fly to that other stuff—we're liable to get a stream of it in here in a minute."

AGAIN Vierick went to the sender and strove to put the routine dispatch on the wire. The words seemed to leap and jump before him; time after time the Seattle operator flared back at him for a repeat, or made him slowly spell out a sentence instead of coding it. Vierick was making mistakes. Minute after minute—hours in length, to him. Then the clatter of the other instrument. Connection had been restored. A moment, and Bronson called to him.

"Vierick, don't your folks live somewhere on Blake Street?"

The man started, raised half out of his chair, then sank back again.

"Yes," came weakly. "What's happened?"

"They've started shooting around there. That's all I got—then the wire went out again."

Out of his chair went the captain of the "Brotherhood," his eyes suddenly wild.

"You got something more than that!"

"I didn't!"

He grasped Bronson by the shoulders.

"You're not lying?"

Bronson hesitated. Vierick shook him.

"Tell me what you've gotten!"

"Nothing—only that some women and children were hurt. Here's the message!"

He passed it into the hands of Vierick who stood, a broken, trembling thing, his jaw sagging, his eyes bloodshot, trying to make out the words.

"There aren't any names here," he said dully. Then with a queer twinge in his voice: "There's the wire from Banning again—what's that? I can't hear good."

"They're coming with the names."

"I—I—can't catch 'em."

"Mrs. Albert Warren—Thomas Jones, fifteen years old—Sadie Warren, twelve year old daughter of Mrs. Warren—that's all."

"All! But they're still there—they're still fighting. Ask that operator"—the world was turning in great circles of red and black for Hardin Vierick now,—"ask that operator if he's got somebody there that he can send out quick—somebody who isn't afraid to go into the fighting zone with a message."

"But why don't you talk to him—you can tell him better what you want—"

"I can't send—look at me!" Hardin Vierick's fingers stretched and his hands went spazmodically over his head. "My God, man, can't you see the shape I'm in? Work that wire—got him yet? Got him—got him?"

"Yes. Wait until I ask him about that messenger."

A MOMENT of uncertainty, while the instrument clattered and while the long hair of Hardin Vierick hung frowsy and unnoticed over his eyes. Then a pause, and the staccato answer from Banning:

"Man here with motorcycle. Not afraid of anything. What is it?"

Silence, while Bronson waited. Vierick stood a palsied, broken thing before him, his hands clawing uncertainly, his lips struggling to hold back the confession that was upon them. But there in Banning, where men were fighting with sawed-off shotguns and where the casualty list was growing—there were his mother, his wife, and his little boy.

"Tell 'em," came a voice with a moan in it, "tell 'em that it's all been a lie. Tell 'em the message from Austin said that all demands would be granted—and that I faked it to read that they had been refused. And tell them quick! My mother and wife and baby are there!"

He sagged for a second, then straightened. Bronson had not made a move toward the key. The clawing hands of Hardin Vierick grasped and pushed him toward the instrument.

"You fool!" he shouted. "Don't sit there like that! Rush that message—put it on the wire!"

"But it's not the truth! We can't stop a strike with a lie!"

Vierick pulled his breath into his lungs with one great, jerky movement.

"I'm telling you to rush that message—the way I sent it. And I've told you the truth. The word came in straight from Seattle that all demands were granted. I bulled it—on purpose. Can't you see—I framed that strike! I'm a wobbly—I fixed everything. I couldn't let that message go through while there was a chance to get the mills! So I faked it and I'm willing to take the punishment—only put the word through and stop that fighting!"

But still Bronson did not turn to his instrument. He looked toward the door and whistled. It opened. Three men stood there.

"Hear that, fellows?" he asked quietly. Vierick turned and stared at them blankly.

"Yes."

"O. K." Bronson leaned back in his seat. But Vierick was on him again.

"Send that message!" he shouted. "I don't care how many witnesses you get—I'll tell the whole story over a hundred times—only send that message and stop those guns!"

But Bronson shook his head.

"No need, Vierick."

"No need?" The other man stared. "But—"

"For the simple reason that there isn't any fighting, and there isn't any strike, and there hasn't been any casualty list."

"You—you faked this!" Vierick of the wobblies started to the door. But the three men caught him and turned him back. Fatty Bronson rose and stretched.

"You'd better stay quiet, Vierick, until the police get here," he said. "These are just three men from the Legion that have been helping me for the last month or so."

"No strike—no strike—" A man with matted hair and long, thin hands had doubled in a chair, staring at the floor. "You faked it all—faked it!"

"Just about all," agreed Bronson. "Only that message was O. K. The only thing about the whole thing was that we knew what you'd do to it, and so we tipped the directors to phone the real message and send one over the wire that you could bull if you wanted to. You see, Vierick, I was on to you the first night you came on duty. You happened to drop a copy of the I. W. W. *Bulletin* out of your inside pocket when you hung up your coat—and I put it back, all doubled up and safe from observation, just like you had it, and without your noticing it. But it gave us a lot to work on—Jerry!" He turned to one of the three members of the American Legion at the door. "Watch this guy a minute, will you? I want to wire into Seattle to the *Times* man there that he needn't wait for any more of this fake stuff that he's been throwing into the wastebasket. Then I want to call Banning again and tell them they can go ahead and round up all those suspects. I had the names right, didn't I, Vierick, when I used them in the death-column?"

"You—," Vierick of the "Brotherhood" rose, started forward, then sank back in his chair. There had come a noise of steps on the stairs—the police.

The Profiteer
When Greek Meets

"THE man, I understand, is a veritable bank-note fiend," said the calm and debonair Cyprian Xystus airily.

"What exactly do you mean by that?" asked Boyd Muir, the musician.

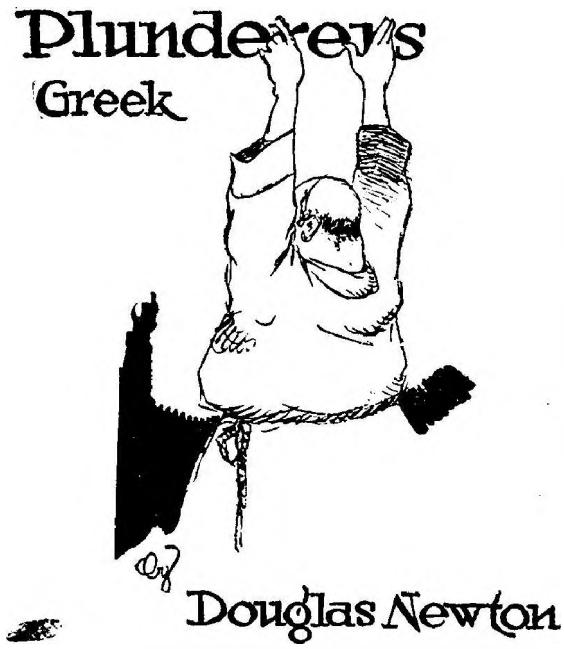
"He is a Greenback hoarder," said Cyprian's sister Thecla. "He collects them. He accumulates them in vast wads. He has an incredible number of them stored in his house."

"How do you know?"

"Well, this man Flyvyn has an intimate friend, who knows us but does not suspect us of being burglars. He assured me, by way of retailing a bit of intimate gossip, that one day when he was at Flyvyn's house he saw the fellow's collection of notes. Flyvyn was talking big, bragging of his cleverness, and he opened his safe—and notes gushed out. His friend said that was an actual fact. Whatever it was that held the notes had broken, and as the safe door was opened they came out with a rush and spread over the carpet like a fall of autumn leaves. The man who was telling me said it was the most extraordinary sight he had seen in his life."

"Is Flyvyn mad?" asked the musician.

"Merely cunning," said Xystus, taking up the thread of the story. "He is busy, has been for years, evading the excess-profits tax. By not putting his cash in a bank he can puzzle the collectors—you see there would be no accurate cash record



of what he earns. By wangling it in this way he has been saving himself thousands every year."

"What is he?"

"A ship-owner; he has been simply wallowing in high freights. He has profiteered to the tune of tens of thousands, and nearly all of it is in notes in his study."

"Surely he can't feel safe with all that money about?" said Boyd.

"That point occurred to me too," said Thecla. "I put the necessary question. The man said Flyvyn was confident that he had a method for defeating the burglar."

"And as a burglar of no small industry yourself, you asked with a look of those innocent eyes of yours, what that method was," said Boyd Muir with a chuckle.

Thecla smiled too, her exquisite face turned toward the musician.

"Rather—I showed a flapper sort of interest in that matter. And learned—nothing. This man knew nothing himself. He could say, merely, that Flyvyn had said with great confidence that he had a plan which he guaranteed would defeat even the most cunning housebreaker."

"HOW absolutely certain they are of themselves, before we get them," said Cyprian. "We seem to spend the whole of our careers proving that their brilliant schemes of defense are pretty piffling stuff after all. And Flyvyn is going to be the next victim."

"Oh, then we're going to remove from his keeping some of his excess profits?" asked Boyd Muir. "But—but this Flyvyn is a smart man; he has a reputation all over the country for his shrewdness. It wont be easy, this job."

"That's what makes it attractive," said Cyprian. "The mere garnering of money is beginning to pall, isn't it, my infant? Our successes have brought us in fat sums, and your success in the music world is now assuring you of a growing income. There is little reason for burgling now, except the excitement of it. We're getting to the end of our adventures: so let them be sporting ones, anyhow."

"All right, then," said Ward Muir, who, because he really was finding his feet in music, and was becoming rich and celebrated, felt a growing disinclination to risking his liberty in their dangerous calling. "And what is your plan for this raid on Flyvyn's note-hoard?"

"None," said Cyprian Xystus. "Flyvyn lives in a big old house in the country. His safe, with the accumulation of notes, is there. We go down by car, and get into the house—and trust to our wits. That's all."

SUN YAT, the Chinese servant, excelled even himself in the art of disguise that evening. The dashing and well-dressed Cyprian became under his clever fingers, and thanks to an application of grease-paint and wax, a sallow young man with a curly nose who might be a low-type music-hall comedian. Boyd Muir was a bulldoggy specimen of the same breed; and the lovely girl Thecla was a fit companion; she became a "lydy" of vivid hair, vivid cheeks, vivid lips and even vivid eyebrows. Not even the most intimate friends of the trio would have recognized them—or would have liked to.

A false canvas top was put on the swift little car, and they swung off through the night to Flyvyn Manor—a long run through a very lonely part of the country.

Flyvyn Manor was what Cyprian called one of that "so simple" sort of houses. They were wary for all manner of traps, but they discovered none. They slipped through the grounds, and entered through the great conservatory. Cyprian, with four swift strokes of a special tool, cut a great pane of glass from out the side of the conservatory. They held the big pane in place while they cut with special pneumatic

vacuum-cups, and when the cutting was done, they lifted the pane out and placed it carefully on one side.

Then, very quietly but in great comfort, they forced the door inside the conservatory that led into the house, and worked through a series of rooms and doors into the ship-owner's study. In half an hour their specially contrived gas plant had eaten through the great safe door. The strong-box was theirs to plunder.

And it was empty!

TO them it was an unexpected and quite dismaying thing. They had worked laboriously in that littered study. They had used all their wits and skill and had got the safe open. In the safe they had expected to find a mass of bank-notes, and they found nothing.

They explored the whole safe; even those corners which, in reason, could not be expected to conceal the great accumulation of notes Flyvyn was said to have, were not neglected. There were no notes. Books, papers, share-certificates and the rest there were, but not a single note.

They stood in the big untidy study staring at each other in the light of their torches, and their eyes were angry and bewildered. Boyd Muir voiced their feelings:

"Have we been led astray by a fairy tale?" he cried. "The story of that hoard of notes sounded thin to me. . . . . I don't believe there is one. Flyvyn, like any other sane man, keeps his money in the bank."

Even Thecla was taken aback, though she had heard the man tell the story.

"Perhaps he was romancing," she said. "He was only telling a bit of gossip, a tall story. The notes aren't here—"

Surprisingly Cyprian said:

"They are here, my children." And as they stared at him, he went on: "That fellow was telling the truth; you could see the truth in his face—his amazement at the spectacle of unlimited bank-notes he had seen. He might have made up that story, but he could not have made up that look on his face."

"But, the safe—" said Boyd Muir. "My dear man, the safe's empty. You can't argue about a fact like that."

"Who said the notes were in the safe?" demanded Cyprian. "Yes, I know the notes flooded out of the safe when this man saw 'em, but it doesn't say that Flyvyn keeps them there always. He may keep them there during the day when he is about and has his eye on the safe, but at night he may hide them in some other place."

"Do you know anything?" cried Thecla.

"My dear child, if I did, I wouldn't be standing here holding a debate. No, I don't know anything, but my brains tell me something. Flyvyn said that he had a plan which he thought would defeat charming people like ourselves."

"Oh, they all say that," said Boyd irritably. "And it means nothing, we've found. Why, there's been no sign of any trap. Everything has been dashed simple and easy-going."

"Yes," said Cyprian with a sharp smile, "that's what I mean. You're getting warmer, my child."

Boyd stared at the gay young man, wondering what he had meant.

"Well, I don't grasp your point," he said at last. "The whole thing's been child's play so far, nothing to trip us up. It's been too simple."

"What's Flyvyn's character?" asked Cyprian unexpectedly.

"Oh, he's one of the shrewdest and cleverest of men—but what on earth has that to do with it?"

"Oh, everything, my infant. He has brains, real brains, not mere smartness. The smart man sets man-traps or has watchmen, things that in themselves attract attention to his hidden wealth. It is the real brainy man who does better than that—he does nothing. It's the very simplicity of him that is baffling. Why, I knew of one genius who carried home his week's takings in a brown-paper parcel. The sneak-thieves knew he carried any amount of money between his shop and his home. The heavy leather dispatch-case he carried in his other hand was snatched several times—but nobody had brains to think of that innocent brown-paper parcel. Well, that's what we're up against with Flyvyn, I reckon. Every burglar will go straight for his safe, you see, and will overlook the innocent hiding-place."

AT that they all swung their torches over the untidy room, examined with their eyes the bewildering litter of books and newspapers, dispatch cases, files, bundles of papers in strings, card-indexes, and brown cardboard boxes of stationery, and as their eyes roved over this astounding mass, Boyd gasped out:

"But by heavens, it'll take us a month of Sundays to sort out this mass of muck. Where could we begin."

"Ah, my child, you are very warm now. That is friend Flyvyn's defense. The very multitude of hiding-places is the fact that defeats us. "Then," in his startling way, he added: "Let me see—the nearest village is three and a half miles away, and there are only two policemen in it."

"There are some big houses within a mile," said Thecla, who seemed able to follow her brother's queer process of thinking.

"It will take time to rouse them—time, too; for the roused people to dress."

"Are you going to ask them to come along and help you find the hoard of notes?" asked Boyd Muir, covering his perplexity with irony. Cyprian did not answer him, but looked at Thecla and nodded,

"I wont be long," he said. "Stay here both of you." He went out, pulling a set of tools from his pocket as he went.

He was away, it seemed, for an incredibly long and disturbing period, but it was for no more than twenty minutes. When he came back, he was smiling, but he had no information to offer. By torchlight he led Boyd and his sister to the heavy blue curtains that screened the shuttered window.

"Hide behind those," he said. "Don't stir at all, whatever happens." He looked at Thecla. "You'll know the exact moment for action. Got your pistols, Boyd? All right, don't be afraid to use them, only don't shoot to kill. Murder is a stupid business."

"What are you going to do?" demanded Boyd.

With a smile on his face the gay young man, walked back to where a siphon, glasses and a whisky decanter stood on a silver tray. With a sweeping gesture of his hand he tipped the lot off the table. All fell to the ground with an astonishing crash.

FLYVYN himself, a big revolver, three menservants with sticks, and a few guests with pokers arrived in the study within three minutes. The electric light shot up—and there was the thief with the curly nose, half rising from the open safe. Caught in the very act!

Boyd, watching the astonishing scene through the joint of the heavy curtains, saw the look of absolute amazement, joy and pride appear on the face of the ship-owner. Self-conceit for the moment absolutely swamped his cleverness; he was beside himself with admiration of his cunning. The obviously empty safe was the reason for this.

"Got you!" he snarled at the cringing figure of Cyprian. "Got you, you piece of dirt! Up with your hands, now."

Cyprian, true to his curly-nose character, but utterly unlike his dashing self, put up his hands, sidled away fearfully, and whined.

"Orl right, sir, don't shoot, sir. I knows it's a fair cop, sir. I aint took anyfing, sir."

"You bet you haven't," said Flyvyn, absolutely bristling with satisfaction. "That isn't your fault, though. *I* saw to that." He turned to one of the servants. "See if he's armed. . . . . No? Well, then, telephone for the police."

The servant came back in a minute. The telephone-wire was out of order—cut, the man thought. Boyd remembered that Cyprian had left the room, pulling his tools from his pocket. Cyprian had seen to that telephone-wire. The ship-owner turned on the burglar, but still without anger.

"Your brain carried you that far, hey?" he said with gusto. "You had wits enough to snip the wire, but you were up against something that needed rather more than your low wits."

"Don't be 'ard on me, sir," whined the burglar. "I aint took a single fing."

"I know you didn't," grinned Flyvyn, enjoying his triumph. "*I* saw to that." To the servants he cried: "Why are you standing about, hey? Hang it all, am I the only one with any brains? Get a move on. The cars! Take a car, confound it, and drive down for the police. Sharp, now."

"Go easy, sir," wailed the burglar in terror. "I've 'ad a 'ard time. Give me this chanst, sir. Don't be crool 'ard on a feller. I aint took ennyfing."

"Shut up," said Flyvyn. "You keep on saying that as if you had done something virtuous. It's no fault of yours, my man, that you haven't got away with my money. You were up against something that was too smart for you. You thought there was something in that safe, while all the time you hadn't the sense to see what you wanted under your very nose, under—"

BOYD'S heart jumped; so too did Thecla's. The man was going to give away the secret of the hiding-place of his hoard. They hung on his very word. But he stopped. His native caution checked his overwhelming feeling of triumph just in time. He swept a cunning glance round the circle of guests and servants, and his eyes rested on the burglar. He was poised on the very brink of telling. He wanted to tell; he wanted to show them all how clever he had been, but his caution held his tongue. And Cyprian whined again:

"I haven't taken a thing, sir, s'welp me. I aint taken a single fing from this 'ere safe. I swears I 'asn't, sir."

"I know you haven't," cried the bursting Flyvyn. "I saw to it that there wasn't anything in the safe to take. I knew people of your kidney would be so mesmerized by a thing like a safe that you wouldn't think of anything simple or commonplace. You went straight for the safe, while here, under your very hand—" He walked toward a bookcase. He stopped. He glanced round swiftly, hesitated. He couldn't bear to hide his cleverness, and yet before the servants and this thief, and his guests he felt he must be wary. But he was sure of the honesty of his guests. That decided him. He compromised. He said to the two menservants who remained: "Here, take this fellow out. Guard him in the hall. Watch him carefully; don't let him try any tricks. Tell me when the police come."

Then, when Cyprian and the servants had gone out (Boyd felt a touch of cold terror at that), the ship-owner shut the door carefully and turned to his guests—there were four of them—and smiled all over his face.

"Brains, after all, are better than chilled steel safes," he said triumphantly. "When there is a safe in a room, it never occurs to a burglar to look anywhere else for valuables. He goes for the safe, bursts it and finds it empty—and then he's lost. He doesn't know what to do. He looks about for other likely places—but never for the unlikely. It never occurs to him that any man would be fool enough to leave seventeen thousand pounds—yes that's the sum—lying about in such a way that all he has to do is to pick it up and walk out with it."

"You mean that seventeen thousand pounds is lying about in this room, loose, ready for anyone to pick up?"

"Yes, seventeen thousand pounds in notes," beamed the ship-owner. "You could pick it up, Dick, tuck it all under your arm and walk away with it."

"Good Lord, where is it?" said Dick, surveying the litter. "Among all this muck, I suppose. You're untidy with a purpose, eh?"

"Rather. All this muck, that's what baffles your burglars. I'll give you three shots to find it?"

Dick had three shots, turned over papers and things, and found nothing. He gave it up. With a grin of tremendous self-conceit Flyvyn walked over to a pile of stationery-boxes. They were plain brown cardboard boxes, stacked up in a corner. They were labeled 'Manilla Envelopes. Foolscap.' He lifted the top box, opened it.

"Well, only envelopes," said Dick.

"That's the top dressing, the camouflage," said Flyvyn. He lifted the second box, opened it.

"Good Lord," gasped Dick. "Notes, wads of 'em. Who the blazes would have thought of them being there."

"Nobody would have thought of them being there, in those ordinary boxes, in that commonplace stack," said the ship-owner, gurgling with satisfaction. "That's why they are entirely safe from burglars, who are of limited intelligence. There are several boxes full under there—I wont say how many—"

"You needn't," said a feminine voice close behind him. "We'll find that out for ourselves—with our limited intelligences." And as the five men swung round in amazement, they found Thecla and Boyd confronting them. And from the hands of this pair, four very capable pistols were leveled at their heads.

Before Flyvyn and his guests could even gasp, Boyd said grimly:

"Drop your weapons and put up your hands—jump to it, now. That's right. And the slightest whisper from you—well, we're too close to miss any of you. No, don't open your mouths to argue. We know very well you're surrounded by servants and all that. That'll make us light on the trigger-finger, see? Understan', we means wot we says; we don't mind fightin' or shootin'—you or yer servants; but you may find it not to your likin'. Got on that? Well, think 'ard on it, an' turn yer faces to the wall. You on the lef' ten paces to the left. The rest of you five paces

interval. 'Ands be'ind your backs. You *do* know 'ow to be wise. Lizzie, to it with the rope."

And while the amazed, frightened and speechless men faced the wall, Thecla took from under her skirt the coil of rope she always carried there, and very deftly she pinioned the rearward held arms at the elbows. Then she gagged the men, thrusting an ebony ruler into the mouth of one, two bone paper-knives into others and completing the business with books, all of these gags she lashed firmly with string taken from the ball on Flyvyn's desk. With a few dexterous turns she had also hobbled their feet. She knew her work; she did it amazingly well. In five minutes it was completed. No man had moved, conscious of the automatics in Boyd's hands, and no doubt certain that the police must even now be on the way to the house. What was the good of risking a bullet, when presently the police would be here, if not to catch the burglars then certainly, so close on their heels, that their capture must be assured? So they remained quiet under the outrage, and Boyd and Thecla went out into the hall.

THE servants who were standing over a very crestfallen burglar were wise. They were armed with nothing more lethal than sticks, and they saw the folly of defying automatic pistols. They surrendered, allowed themselves to be strung up with their master's twine.

The rest was easy. The trio walked into the study, collected every one of the envelope-boxes containing notes and walked out again—with the boxes under their arms. They made their way out of the house by the way they had come, reached their hidden car and drove off contentedly.

They went in such a leisurely way, and traveled along the main road into the bargain, that Boyd became anxious. He leaned across to Cyprian at the wheel.

"I say, old thing," he called, "oughtn't we hurry? You know they went down for the police in a car. The police will be on the spot any moment."

Cyprian smiled, drove on steadily and said nothing.

They passed a man in the road who hailed them: that made Boyd more nervous, although they ignored the man. He shouted his suggestion to the imperturbable Cyprian again.

Cyprian simply waved his hand to a car they were just then passing. It was a car standing at the side of the road; its chauffeur was fussing round it in a manner obviously suggesting it had broken down.

"That is the car that went for the police," Cyprian said. "It hasn't got to them, has it?" They went round a corner, and the gay young man at once opened out to a great speed.

"What luck," cried Boyd, "what luck that it broke down!"

"Not luck—generalship," grinned Cyprian. "Water in the petrol-tank, my infant. When will your youthful mind realize that I don't leave that sort of thing to luck or chance."

Boyd recalled that Cyprian had been absent from Flyvyn's study an interminable twenty minutes. Part of that time he must have been in the garage—doctoring the ship-owner's cars.

That is what he had done. And very soon after passing the doctored car, he stopped his own and did some tricks with it. The false canvas superstructure was eliminated, and other guiding signs that the chauffeur of the crooked car, as well as the servant who had hailed them, must have seen. It was a car entirely strange that carried the trio back to the Kensington house and safety.

"YOU must have felt, well just a qualm, as those servants too': you out into the hall," Boyd said to the calm young man as they sat over a meal that might have been supper had not the hour been nearer breakfast. "To thrust your head into the jailer's mouth like that wanted a nerve."

"It wanted a nerve for old Flyvyn to leave all those, or rather, these notes about where anybody could take 'em for the picking up," Cyprian retorted. "To meet that sort of nerve, one had to show nerve, my infant. I had to meet his cleverness with the same sort of cleverness, if I was to make him give away his secret."

"And if he hadn't given it away?"

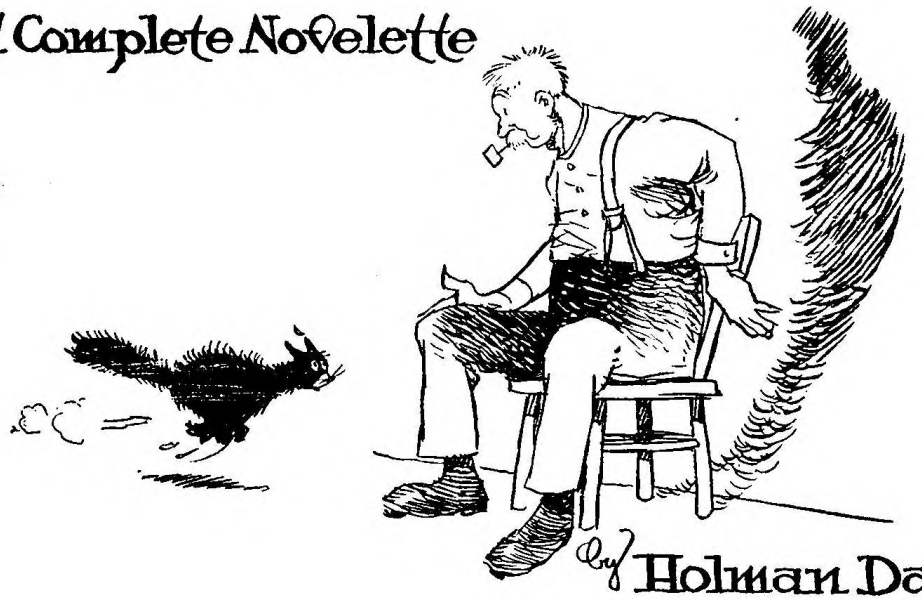
"That sort always does. Even cleverness has a limited intelligence, as he calls it, and his was limited by his self-satisfaction. He was bound to show off, give his secret away. He's built like that."

"I don't see how you could have banked on that?"

"But I did bank on it, my child, and I won."

Mr. Follansbee Fares Forth

A Complete Novelette



By Holman Day

AT half-past ten in the stilly night Mr. Bedford Follansbee, keeping vigil in the dark kitchen of the Meshic Flagg farmhouse, was anxiously awaiting the return of his six-toed cat.

He was not enjoying the session. He had worked hard in the field all that day since sun-up. His mind was not easy; though he had been in the Flagg family through reigns of father and son, for half a century, he knew that he had no business lurking around the kitchen at that hour, an unholy one in haying-time for a hired man who was supposed to be sound asleep in his sanctum in the shed chamber.

Mr. Follansbee was spurred by a determination to test out his latest invention. However, he had the feeling that denunciation growled in the diapason of Mr. Flagg's snoring; complaint was suggested in the shriller efforts of Mrs. Flagg.

Mr. Follansbee muttered a few complaints regarding the undependable nature of his feline, a cat that he had raised from kittenhood, pampered on milk-strainings, instructed in all the acquirements a well-trained cat ought to possess, and on whom he had bestowed the name of "Eureka Archimedes," after hunting all through the dictionary for a cognomen suitable for an inventor's cat: Mr. Follansbee was distinctly disappointed by the cat's apparent lightmindedness on this occasion. The cat was needed in the way of collaboration.

Mr. Follansbee again inspected a contrivance on the kitchen window; he felt quite sure that the technical details had been efficiently worked out. One of the lower panes of glass was hinged at the bottom and was attached to a piece of wood that formed a sill, beveled so that it would tip inward when pressure was put on it, the pressure first releasing a catch that held the pane locked. There were wires and spirals and doodacks of various sorts awaiting the test of actual performance.

"I must say it's all-fired *seldom*, where you've gone a-roaming to at a crickitul time like this, Eureky Atchimiddes," mumbled Inventor Follansbee. "I thought I'd got you educated up to the point where you reelized how much dependence I put on you!"

A MOMENT later, when Mr. Follansbee had resumed his vigil on a hard chair, there were outside demonstrations which indicated that Eureka had suddenly remembered responsibility as an inventor's aide.

He was coming! His first yowls were distant and faint. The rapidly increasing volume of sound signaled the celerity of

his approach. He was manifestly attending strictly to the business of coming, but Mr. Follansbee did not know whether he ought to feel flattered by this attention to a matter in hand or frightened by the baleful hint that there was something amiss. Furthermore, he heard the unmistakable thud of running feet, most emphatically non-catlike. A dark figure hurtled to the window ledge outside. The shriek of a shrill *"Yee-ouw!"* announced feline perturbation and called for sanctuary. The Flagg house-dog rushed from his resting-place beside the wood-box, barking furiously, and stood on his hind legs at the window; he put his paws on the beveled wood. There was a click! The pane opened inward. Through the aperture came thrusting a furry figure, its horrent hair and a tail that was distended to the size of a small balloon causing it to appear twice too big for the hole. It bounced to the floor, ran to Mr. Follansbee and clawed its frantic way up his leg to his knee.

When the dog came down on all fours, the window-pane snapped back into place.

"By gumminy!" ejaculated Mr. Follansbee. "That's what I call a perfick success."

He paid no attention to the thudding feet without; for that matter, the sound of them soon died away in the distance.

Mr. Follansbee caressed the cat and apostrophized the barking dog. "It's all right to give three cheers, seeing how it has worked, but this aint no time o' night for jollification, Hector. Ca'm down!"

A minute later Mr. Follansbee was advising Mr. Flagg to be calm. Mr. Flagg had arrived in the kitchen with a lighted lamp and without much clothing.

"There aint no massycree nor nothing of the sort," declared Mr. Follansbee, rising with his six-toed cat under his arm. "Me'n' Eureky Atchimiddes has been testing out our partunt, self-acting cat-identifier and silent introducer, and it's a perfick success."

MRS. FLAGG, concealing her dishabille in the shadows, was expressing her opinions shrilly. "In spite of all I've been able to say to him, Meshic, he has been up to some kind of tormented tinkering on that winder, and now we're getting the results of it. And them feet outside! I wonder what else he has stirred up!"

"I have told you time and again that I wouldn't have no more of this fool inventing business going on around my premises," said Mr. Flagg.

The flush of an inventor's success was in Mr. Follansbee. He flared out of his usual meekness in a way that astonished his employers. "I'll admit that there have been some ketches to other things that I have invented, but now that I have got up a perfick success, I'm going to stand behind it. What's a cat's nature, I ask?"

"Looks to be like yours, owling round all times o' night," retorted Mr. Flagg with asperity.

"It's a cat's nature to roam in the night and then come home and yowl to be let in. It's a dog's nature to go to the winder and stand up and peek out when he hears a cat. I have combined the two natures into a self-acting proposition, and if it's the home cat, it gets let in by my partunt identifier and silent—"

"Silent your A'nt Betsy!" Mrs. Flagg stridently commented.

"Well, Eureky was wowed up by something outside—and that wowed up your dog too! Because the case was special, that don't prove nothing against the main idee. Millions of families have cats and dogs, and traipsing barefoot to the door or winder to let in cats causes cussing and coughs and colds. I can show you—"

"Do you think I'm going to stand here and listen to a stump speech at this time of the night, right in the middle of the haying season and scant time for sleep, as it is?" Mr. Flagg, routed from sound slumber, was distincly infuriated. "You get to bed!"

"Because I have always humped up my back and took orders aint no sign I'm always going to do it. I warn ye!" shouted Mr. Follansbee.

Mr. Flagg held the lamp higher and stared. "Have you gone crazy?"

"I'm waking up enough to see that there are prospects ahead better'n being a hired man all the rest of my life. I've got to be handled careful from now on, or there aint no telling what I'll do."

Mr. Flagg couldn't have displayed more amazement if one of his steers had stood there in the kitchen and declared emancipation. He was groping for speech with which to express his emotions.

"What's the matter with your tongue, Meshic?" prodded Mrs. Flagg. "Where'll you be after this if you don't set him back where he belongs?"

IN that crisis Mr. Flagg was glad that there was further demonstration without. Racing hoofs came down the highway and halted.

"Hallo, Meshic! Have you seen 'em?"

"Seen who?" demanded the master of the household after he had set down the light and had opened the kitchen door.

"Robbers! They have blowed up the safe in the post office over to the Center."

"Thunder! Is that so!"

"Just as true as it is awful! Your light at this hour o' night made us think you must know something. Seen 'em?"

"Heard somebody running!"

"That's them! We'll ketch 'em!" A whip cracked, and the horse was off.

Mr. Follansbee broke in on Mr. Flagg's excited comments. "That explains it! That partunt is a perfick silent success when it aint complected up by a lot of cheap critters ravaging around town—"

"Are you gabbering about your infernal fool contraption in a time like this?"

"I'm backing up an invention that's going to make homes happier, and my talk is sensibler and more important than projicking about whuther them constabules is going to ketch them robbers."

"You—go—to—bed!" commanded Mr. Flagg slowly and ominously. "Go before I let loose. I hope you'll be better in the morning. Right now you're a candidate for an insane hosspittul."

"There was never a big inventor yet who didn't have all the fools yapping at him that he was crazy," returned Mr. Follansbee, displaying more of that inexplicable and astonishing independence.

"The only way you can prove to me that you haint lost your wits is by keeping your mouth shut from this time on," stated the irate employer. "I've given you fair warning!"

NEXT morning Mr. Follansbee's wooden face did not reveal whether that warning or his own deep resentment accounted for his taciturnity. He munched his doughnuts and "sooped" his coffee and took no part in the conversation regarding the stirring event at Carmel Center; nor did he show a bit of interest. He trudged off alone to his job in the lower field, where only a scythe would handle the grass between the rocks. Mr. Flagg was attending to the upper field with his mowing machine.

It was a particularly warm forenoon. When the sun was near the meridian Mr. Follansbee made one of his regular trips to a bubbling spring walled up with mossy stones. Under the alder bush that sheltered the spring he found a sort of grasshopper of a little man whom he had never seen before. The little man blinked his sharp eyes and remarked amiably that it was "a geehefferously hot day."

Mr. Follansbee agreed and reached down into the spring and pulled up a jug which he uncorked and "horsed" across his elbow; he drank long and gustfully from the nozzle, and then, as an afterthought, offered the jug to the stranger. The stranger declined.

"I haven't p'isened it," affirmed Mr. Follansbee testily.

"Oh, I don't object to drinking after you, Mister. But I never take anything strong!"

"D'ye think I'm a rummy? This is m'lasses and ginger and water."

Then the man drank and was grateful. "Being on the go all the time, and meeting all men, I know kindness when I see it." He did not seem to be at all discomposed by Mr. Follansbee's sour demeanor. "This looks to be a nice farm you own, Mister."

"Don't you go none too strong on looks. And I don't own this farm. And I wouldn't take it for a free gift, for nothing—no sir, considering the kind of a family that's had it from the year one."

The stranger's keen eyes revealed sudden depth of interest, but Mr. Follansbee was sitting on the sward, his elbows on his knees, and was staring gloomily down into the depths of the spring and did not perceive that he had produced an effect.

"Idea being that you aint satisfied here?"

"I'm waking up to the fact that it aint the right place for me to develop my nat'ral abilities."

"Been here for some time?"

"I come onto this farm for old Iral Flagg when I was sixteen, and I've been here more'n fifty years."

"Well, nobody can say that you haven't given the place a fair trial, Mister."

"That's the way I have tried to live my life—conducting myself so that there wouldn't be no chance for to criticize me. And now I'm getting it throwed into my face by them that ought to be most proud and grateful because I've got abilities."

"Going to leave?"

MR. FOLLANSBEE opened his mouth as if to make emphatic declaration of assent; he even waved his arm around his head with the reckless air of one who proposed to explore the universe. Then he checked the gesture and suppressed speech and gazed into the spring.

"Speaking for myself, as a roamer who knows what a gay life it is to see the world, I should think you'd be hankering to take a little swing around," prompted the other, looking up into the leafy ambush of the alder in order to hide from Mr. Follansbee any expression that might betray too much eagerness. "Up and away! Show 'em your heels! That's my advice."

"Well, I don't know's I want a fly-by-nighter that I never saw before advising me about gallivanting away from a home that has been mine as long as this one has been," returned Mr. Follansbee tartly. "I'm nat'rally suspicious of strangers, anyway. Who be ye?"

"My name is—is—Nickelberry," stammered the other with the air of a person who had endangered a proposition by precipitateness and was trying to claw back to safe ground. "I aint trying to advise you, but I relish roaming so much myself, that I'd like to have others get a taste of it. Excuse me!"

"You're excused," returned Mr. Follansbee in milder tone. "And you'll have to do some excusing in my case, too. I aint in no pleasant state of mind today. I aint saying but what, as a roamer who can give me some advice, you have come along at a right time in my life. Something inside o' me is different from what it ever was before. I'll say again that I'm making up. From where I'm setting I can see a trout finning round in this spring. I ketched him and put him in here. I have only finned round on this blasted old farm. I haint seen no more of life than that trout has. Do you notice that bullfrog over there? Well, that frog has had ten times what experience I've had, 'cording to! At any rate, he has done some hopping round outside that spring where he lives. And his time is his own! That's more'n I can say."

"Time must hang sort o' heavy."

"No, gen'ally speaking, time with me teams right along!" retorted the hired man conservatively.

"However, I aint going to advise," stated Mr. Nickelberry. He pulled a spool of silver wire from his pocket and began on one end of the wire with small pincers. "What's your name?" he inquired.

"Bedford Follansbee," replied that gentleman, not turning his eyes from contemplation of the traveled bullfrog. He felt like talking. The conservatism of the stranger, in Mr. Follansbee's new mood of general rebellion, was proving a more effective goad than persuasion that would have stirred more suspicion. Mr. Nickelberry bent his head low over his work and grinned when Mr. Follansbee went on. "Yes sir, there's such a thing as meeting the right man at the right time. I dreamt last night that I was roaming, and I came to a fork of the ro'd, and a guideboard that didn't have no lettering on it turned into a man and told me the right way to go." He turned his head to inspect the stranger. "He was a slat-ribbed critter, like you, and that's nat'ral enough, seeing 'twas a guideboard that had turned into a man. What you up to there?"

"It's the way I make my living whilst I'm roaming through the wide world. In a minute or so I'll show you." He deftly bent and twisted the wire with the little pincers; then he snipped with cutters close to the spool and handed over to Mr. Follansbee the latter's name wrought in wire.

"You're welcome to that, Mister. You kindly gave me a drink out of your jug—but above that and all, I've sort of took a shine to you. The reason for that is, I reckon, because your nature is so much different from mine; I'm a roamer, and you aint."

"Dad-whing it, I aint so sure that my nature is different! I'm waking up. I'm an inventor, and I've got a partunt that has just been tested out, and it will sell like a hotcake in every home in this country where's a cat and dog. Your way of making a living is right enough, but when I get a-going, well—I'll tell you what I have invented!"

BUT Mr. Nickelberry put up a palm and checked the enthusiasm. "Not but what I'd like to hear, Mr. Follansbee. And some day when I have been able to prove that I'm a real friend and fit to be trusted you can tell me. But right now somebody else may be knowing about that patent. It may be stolen if you haven't got it protected. But if I don't know anything about the patent, you can't suspect me, and a friendship that promises to be pleasant wont be broken."

"That's square talk, and I want to say that if there were more men like you in the world, things would be put onto a different plane." Mr. Follansbee exhibited a sudden flash of sentimentality. He rose and went over to Mr. Nickelberry and grasped that gentleman's hand. "I've had to jam down the feelings in me for a good many years, because I have lived with folks who haint got no more heart-sentiment or higher understanding in 'em than a mud turkle has got.

"I prob'ly don't look as if I had any heart sentiment in me. But I have." He hesitated and glanced in all directions to make sure that there were no listeners. "I don't know what has come over me all of a sudden," he told the attentive Mr. Nickelberry. "Perhaps it's because you're a gent who has showed some interest in me. On t'other hand, I never take no stock in strangers! More prob'ly it's because you're a fly-by-nighter who'll pass on and wont have no chance to gabble and tattle in this town. Things are swelling up in me. I've got to talk to somebody or I'll bust. What you have said about roaming has hit me in a tender spot. My whole life has been sp'iled because I didn't go a-roaming when I was begged and implored to do it by one—" He paused and shook his head.

"Go on! I'm listening!" prodded the stranger.

"By gumminy, I don't believe I can do it. It has been bottled up too long. And I don't know you from Adam, nor nothing about you!"

And then Mr. Follansbee checked speech for another reason.

A man who wore a nickel badge had stalked them, his feet making no sound on the turf. He pointed a finger at Mr. Nickelberry. "You come along with me. We're picking up all strangers in this town today."

BUT that was a day on which Mr. Follansbee's emotions had been prompting him to pick up a stranger too, and those emotions were subject to quick changes. This threat to grab away his listener, before Mr. Follansbee had made up his mind on the matter of imparting confidence, stirred his temper. "I'd like to see you go to arresting my own cousin," he grated.

"Look-a-here. I heard you saying to him that you didn't know him."

Mr. Follansbee turned his back on the constable and sniffed contemptuously. "As I was just saying to you, Nick, the feller says to me, 'I don't know you from Adam, nor nothing about you.' And I says to the feller, after he said that—"

"I haven't got time to listen to long-winded stories," broke in the constable. He scratched his ear and looked mixed up in his thoughts. "You tell me, do you, that this gent is your cousin?"

"If your hearing is so good as what you're claiming it to be, then I don't have to repeat over, do I?"

"You've heard what happened out to the Center last night, haven't you?"

"I've got something more important on my mind than worrying about how much money the 'Nited States Gov'ment is losing."

"Same here," confessed the constable. "But them critters gaffled four thousand dollars that was lodged overnight in the safe by the man that's down here to pay the strawb'ry raisers—and that's a matter this town is interested in. We trapped in two of the gang, but somebody has got away with the money."

"Well, the longer you stand around here on one foot, the less l'ible you are to ketch the critter," suggested Mr. Follansbee.

"You stand responsible, do you, when you claim that this is your cousin?"

"That's what I do," said Mr. Follansbee, determined to have his own way, now that he had made up his mind.

"I'll say this," vouchsafed the constable; "He'd better stay right here and make you a good long visit, whilst this excitement is on. The stranger who tries to get out of this town till that money is located will find out that buckshot doesn't agree with him as well as a mess of green peas would. We've got our eyes peeled night and day in this town from now on." The constable departed.

DID I understand him to say that there's been a robbery?" queried Mr. Nickelberry innocently.

"All I know is that some kind of tim-ratted stir-up last night almost sp'iled an important invention I was trying out. Now le's get back to something sensible. I have claimed you, and now I'm going ahead with what I started to say. You can see that my opening-up to you has been jammed onto me, so to speak."

"I'm a great believer in fate, myself," declared the listener.

"Exactly!" agreed Mr. Follansbee. "I had an option, as you might say, till that constable came along. I could talk to you or not talk! But there aint no ch'ice now, as it stands. I don't know just how it happened so that no ch'ice has been left to me!" He blinked slowly on Mr. Nickelberry, but he did not attempt to clarify thoughts that were apparently muddled. "I'll have to let it stand just as it is—and admit that I haint got no ch'ice except to tell you." He took a long breath and plunged on:

"I never kept comp'ny in all my life except with one girl. And now that I'm waking up, it all comes back to me what a fool I was to stand out and have my own way. She was for one thing—and I was for another. I allowed folks to make me believe that she was flighty because she gewgawed up in frills and furbelows and wanted to go roaming the wide world round. I see now, when it's too late, that she had my nat'ral talents and abilities sized up better'n what I did. I have stuck and hung in a place where I have never been appreciated and where I couldn't develop. By being penned up on this farm I have been behind the times. For instance, I've just got an antistagger shoe all invented up—had planned to have something to let out at saloons and huttels, like they let umbrellas. But now they have gone and shet off on licker. And another—"

Mr. Nickelberry did not seem to be interested in inventions. His little eyes bored the declaimer. "Being of a romantic turn, I'd like to hear more about that girl—if she is alive," he suggested.

"Oh, she went roaming and has done well at it, so I've heard sort of casual-like from time to time. Nothing much definite, but one thing and another. I wish I had it to try over again."

"It aint too late now, proving she should show up," said the consoling listener.

"No, it aint too late," heartily agreed Mr. Follansbee, squaring his elbows and twisting his grizzled mustache. "Now that I have woke up and seen my past mistake and would go ahead along the right road in the future, it aint too late, providing I could meet her again. But that can't never be, I'm afraid."

"What's her name?" inquired Mr. Nickelberry with solicitude.

"Trucella Frye," blurted Mr. Follansbee after he had taken another breath. "I say again, I don't know why it is I'm coming out with all this secret to you—but my feelings is too much for me."

"Your talking to me is perfectly natural," insisted the other with a warmth that caused the hired man to open wide his eyes. "I couldn't say what I'm going to say if you were an ordinary kind of person. But as an inventor, you're a thinker, I'm a thinker; we can meet on common ground; other folks wouldn't understand us."

"That's what I have been up against on this farm—I haint been understood."

"Exactly! Now, our being brought together, as we have been, in a way that couldn't be resisted, shows that your time has come for a great change. When I was in Injy,"—he paused in order to let that statement sink in,—"where all the great magicians and deep thinkers live, I got hold of this." He held up something which he had fished from his vest pocket. "I know it doesn't look like anything except a watch-charm. But I tell you, just between us, that it is a magic charm that works in a queer way. Take your dream of the forks of the road, and our agreeing that the time has come for a big change in your affairs—we do agree, don't we?"

"Yes sir!"

"Well, any big change can happen in a dozen different ways, because a man lets himself be pushed or pulled by this reason or that. Changes are happening all the time in lives of human beings and aint noticed very much because the changes don't bring what is really wanted. But when the change is about to happen and a man has this charm and knows how to use it, he can bring about just the special change and blessing that he is hankering for. You believe me in what I say, don't you?"

MR. FOLLANSBEE'S natural Yankee hard sense violently kicked his sentimental streak of the moment—and it hurt! "No!" he declared with emphasis.

"I was looking up to you as a thinker," lamented Mr. Nickelberry. "I'm afraid this back-country life has got an awful holt on your intellecks. But if that's the way you feel, no matter. I always go slow in advising."

However, after this outburst, the hard lines in Mr. Follansbee's face softened. He admitted to himself that it was a wide world, and he didn't know very much about

what was happening in it. "It wont do me no hurt to take a close look at it," he admitted, holding out his hand for the charm. "Injy, you say, was where you got it?"

"Just a moment!" begged Mr. Nickelberry. He closed his fingers over the charm and shut his eyes. "I see a nook in the woods. There is a big rock in that nook. There is a fallen tree. There's a little brook a-babbling." He opened his eyes and squinted at Mr. Follansbee. "Do you know any such place?"

"The woods is full of them kind of places! Woods is mostly made up of them kind of nooks," returned Mr. Follansbee scornfully.

The seer closed his eyes again. "And I see half an old coconut-shell hanging on a tree over the brook, and letters are carved in the shell."

"Do them letters happen to be 'B. F.'?" demanded the other with an eagerness that admitted only one reply.

"I was just going to say they are 'B. F.' You mustn't break in on a second-sighter too sudden."

"Well, by snum, if you see that shell, you must have been down into Libby's woods in the nook where I always set and watch for rabbits when I hanker for a meat pie."

"I never was in those woods. I'm a stranger here. It's my second sight that shows me that place. It's revealed to me that something grand will happen to you if you'll go there with this charm and call for what you want most." He held the thing toward Mr. Follansbee, but the latter flapped his hands, refusing it.

"Afraid to try a thing you say you don't believe in?" taunted the seer.

"It—it—might work," stammered Mr. Follansbee. "And I d'know's I'm primed and prepared for a big chance at this partic'lar time."

"And a minute or so ago you were bragging how you had woke up! Oh, you're like all the rest of these toadstool fellows who—"

"That used to be her word for me—said I was a toadstool," lamented the hired man. "But I aint—not now. I tell you I'm all stirred up in my mind." He waved his arms over his head. He declaimed in falsetto of excitement. He declared that he had come to the jumping-off place and proposed to see what was what in the world and was going to show the world what was what, too!

AT that moment an authoritative squall from a tin horn came winging down across the field, and he shut off in his declaration of independence so suddenly that he bit a word in two! He beheld Mrs. Meshic Flagg on the back porch. Again the horn sent forth its summons.

It was a New England dinner-horn, and it meant to Mr. Follansbee a command not to be denied or trifled with by delay. It meant that the hour was eleven-forty-five—allowing time for a trudge to the house, a wash-up—dinner dished hot onto the table exactly on the dot of twelve meridian. That was the kind of an uncompromising housekeeper Mrs. Flagg was! Mr. Follansbee lowered his crest and started.

But Mr. Nickelberry, a rover, did not seem to be grasping the significance of that summons in the case of a hired man, trained by half a century of obedience to the rigorous schedule of meal-time.

"What's the matter with you, Follansbee, stopping right in the crisis, like that? Come back here and sit down and let's tend to what's on your mind."

But Mr. Follansbee kept stubbing right along. His muscles were working without his volition, so to speak. The squawk of that horn had put habitude in command of his faculties. Mr. Nickelberry pursued on a trot, having failed to stop his man by adjuration. Mr. Follansbee shook off the hand that was laid on his arm.

When the seer failed to secure any attention to his appeals and protests, he pulled a bit of paper from his vest pocket, wrapped it around the charm and, still marching beside the summoned hired man, grabbed Follansbee's swinging hand and obliged him to close his fingers on the object. "When you come out of that trance, or whatever it is, read what's on that paper. It's in line with what you have been saying! Do you hear?"

"Yes," assented Mr. Follansbee, marching steadily.

"And go down in that nook and use that charm I'm lending to you. Go tonight. Sure! This is the night. Try that charm about sundown. That's the time. Do you hear?"

"Yes."

"If Gabriel ever wants to get quick action when he calls for the rubes up this way, he'll have to toot on a tin horn," grumbled Mr. Nickelberry, stopping and allowing Mr. Follansbee to go on. "I

reckon you're all talk and no do," he called after the hired man. "You haven't got any sand! Here's your chance, but you're going to miss it. You'll squat down and eat a mess o' vittles and be just the same as ever."

MR. FOLLANSBEE was almost in the yard of the farmhouse before that taunt produced reaction. He began to mutter. Right in the crisis of his emotions and with that stranger looking on, he had allowed a dinner-horn to make him go cringing like a slave! He plodded past the wash-dish and the roller towel in the back kitchen and went up into his sanctum in the shed chamber, gritting his teeth.

At twelve-five Mr. Flagg was sitting in front of a huge platter heaped with a New England boiled dinner, carving-knife and fork uncocked and waiting, gazing through clouds of steam at the kitchen-flushed face of Mrs. Flagg.

"I'm asking you again, where's 'Bed?'" demanded the stickler for schedule time.

"I don't have the least idee," confessed Mr. Flagg.

Tramping feet came down the stairs from the shed chamber. Mr. Follansbee appeared at the kitchen door.

Mr. Follansbee was in valedictory outfit—there was no mistaking that fact. He wore a hard hat that was pulled down with such a determination in decision of departure that his depressed ears served as props for the brim. A pink butterfly bow was slanted dizzily on its elastic at the gap of a celluloid collar. Both haste and absorption in resolution were shown by the reckless fashion in which Mr. Follansbee was wearing his false "white-bosom" shirtfront; it stuck out over his vest and revealed the flannel shirt beneath.

Over his shoulder was slung a bulging croker-sack, and out of the neck of the sack protruded the head of his big cat, whose distended eyes and prickling whiskers spoke of an upheaval of emotions in more eloquent manner than did the repressed expression on Mr. Follansbee's sullen face. In his right hand he carried a canvas "Kennebecker," a valise of the extension-case type, and the hurry of packing was shown by various bob-ends of garments which stuck out between the edges of the case.

Mrs. Flagg stared, her mouth open.

"Sunstruck or nussing your hold-over niff from last night?" she inquired with sarcasm that was whetted by her forenoon toil over a hot stove.

"Neither one nor t'other, marm."

"You set down here to your vittles before they get cold," commanded Mrs. Flagg,—"that is, if you haint gone plumb crazy."

"I sha'n't never eat another mouthful under this roof again," declared the new Mr. Follansbee defiantly.

DEPTH of resolve in different men must be plumbed by different methods. Mr. Follansbee, his spirit roused by a stranger's jeers, had resolved to put himself to a particularly severe test at the outset of his new career! Therefore, by flouting a boiled dinner in that crisis of his emotions, he was not swayed by mere childish whim. Controlled by Mrs. Flagg's daily schedule, he had had nothing to eat since five-thirty in the morning; he was as hungry as a coyote with the lockjaw; his special weakness was a boiled dinner; above all, his New England regularity in having meals on the dot was not merely a habit—it was an obsession.

Standing in the kitchen doorway he beheld what present-day restaurant niggardliness has made only a mockery and a memory! In the middle of the platter, four-square to all the savory steam that rose in scented whorls, a generous hunk of beef, home-corned, trimmed with fat and with fat striations of the hue of the flesh of a dead-ripe peach; ruby, roseate beets, most appetizingly conspicuous in the ranks of the flanking accessories; cabbage with whiteness mellowly stained, as the amber of honey stains the comb; disks of turnips as delicately saffron as the fair face of the harvest moon; carrots opening their hearts to display the piebald colors of strawberries and cream; parsnips, languidly pale but piquantly flavored. Over all hovered and wavered in the breeze from the July fields the moist cloud of incense from the heart of the feast, like an oblation to the God of Gusto.

The sight of it—the scent of it! But Mr. Follansbee hardened his face and his heart. He certainly knew a good boiled dinner when he saw it and sniffed it. But —he passed this one up!

Mrs. Flagg, as master-craftswoman in that line, knew the seductiveness of a boiled dinner too. When Mr. Follansbee shook his head in reply to her repeated commands and started for the door which

opened upon the world, her poignant sense of the seriousness of this occasion awoke.

"For mercy's sakes, whatever has come over you, Bed?"

"I've never been realizing till now, Mis' Flagg, how that nickname has been fitting me! Bed! That's right! I've been asleep. No matter about what has woke me up!"

"Was it what Meshic said last night? If it was, I'll set him where he belongs in this household," she declared, apparently choosing to forget her own overnight remarks on Mr. Follansbee's exploit in invention.

BUT Mr. Follansbee raised his left hand and slowly sliced the air in protest. "Let no condinkerousness about me come between man and wife. My mind is made up."

"I take back everything I might have said when I was hectored last night, Bed," faltered Mr. Flagg. Here was defection in the middle of the haying season!

"I'm glad of it, though it don't have no effect in changing my mind, Mr. Flagg. But seeing that this is the first time I have ever left a place, I like to leave with best feelings all round."

"Then set down and eat—set down and forget—"

"That's just why I wont set down. I'm trying to show you how desprit my feelings are right now. Can't you see?"

"But there's a shower coming up," cried Mrs. Flagg, rising and beginning to bang down windows. She was not attempting to argue the big problem with Mr. Follansbee: she dimly realized her inefficiency as a soothing analyst of the mental condition exhibited by the transmogrified hired man. But with woman's cautiousness she could urge the consideration of the shower. "You'll get sopping wet."

"Mebbe! But considering what I'm facing, I aint going to be afeard of a few drops of rain at the set-out." He started away; then he shuffled his feet and stopped. Suddenly, in spite of resolution, he was intimidated by projected adventure and was seeking an excuse for delay.

Mr. Flagg's keen gaze noted. "Now, quit being a fool!"

"You have called me by that name times enough for one day," remonstrated Mr. Follansbee, stiffening once more. He pointed to the contrivance on the window at which Mrs. Flagg was busy. "You're welcome to that partunt, self-acting, cat-identifier and introducer that I'm leaving. I'm taking along my cat, and you wont be needing the invention—but no matter. I want to be liberal and leave kind feelings behind." He shook himself and started off again.

Mr. Flagg barked so urgently behind the departing back that Mr. Follansbee faced about. "Well?" he demanded uncompromisingly.

"I'll admit that we've had words, and I've took 'em back. Now it don't stand to reason that you're jumping out on me all of a sudden like this without there's something else behind it."

"Mebbe there is," admitted Mr. Follansbee.

"If you're a fair man, you'll out with it."

"I say that much myself," supplemented Mrs. Flagg with some tartness.

MR. FOLLANSBEE set down the "Kennebecker." "I don't want to leave no chance to have it said behind my back that I wa'n't fair and didn't open up all reasons in so fur's I could." He fumbled in his coat pocket and brought out a small packet of folded papers. "Of course, somebody might say it was a reason; on the other hand, somebody might say it wa'n't," he proceeded in half soliloquy. "It depends a lot on how you take hints and how some things affect you." He was pawing at the packet. A thin slip of metal was dislodged and scaled to Mrs. Flagg's feet. She picked it up before Mr. Follansbee, hampered by the sack on his back, could get ahead of her. He showed great discomposure when she studied it. It was a tintype picture; it exhibited Mr. Follansbee as a young man, hair roached, hat in the crook of his elbow, foot well advanced, standing beside a pretty girl whose polonaise hovered close to his baggy trousers.

"Is that what has affected you?" inquired Mrs. Flagg, cocking one eyebrow significantly. "My good land o' Goshen," she informed her husband, "it's him and Trucel' Frye, took years ago!"

"I didn't realize that any such thing was amongst my private papers," lied the hired man with flustered demeanor.

"Then, if it don't belong there, p'raps I'd better drop it into the kitchen stove."

He showed panic and scooped it from her hand and stuck it back into his pocket.

His hand came out, holding the paper which Mr. Nickelberry had wrapped around the charm.

"What I was after was this," he hastened to say. "It came into my hands by a sort of magic, as you might say. He unfolded the scrap of paper and read aloud slowly:

"There was an old monk in Siberia,
Whose exist-unce grew wearier and wearier.
Till he bust from his cell with a hell of a yell,
And eloped with the Mother Superior."

Mr. Follansbee put back the paper and the packet.

"That's redicklous and scandalous sculch to be reading off in a decent house," protested Mrs. Flagg. "Where's your morals gone to, Bed Follansbee?"

"I don't know! I reckon I'm in a bad way because that busting-out sentiment just about expresses my feelings," confessed the elderly hired man. He marched out and slammed the door behind him.

There was a growl of thunder outside.

MRS. FLAGG turned her back on her husband, propped her open palms on her hips and gazed from the window. "The old tame garnder is a-follering him off!"

"He claims the garnder," faltered Mr. Flagg.

"Invention of his, hey?" It was sneer unmistakable—a sneer with anger in it.

Mr. Flagg was distinctly heartened. "And there's the whole trouble," he began in self-exculpation. "I aint to blame—"

She whirled on him. "Do you think I need any long oration from you about that bullheaded old tyke? No meal o' vittles o' mine was ever slurred as he just slurred it, but I aint saying anything about that, or about his keeping that shed chamber in an everlasting come-uppance with his fool invention litter. What I want to say is that it's a merciful providence we found out the kind of moral character that he has been hiding in his whited sepulcher, Meshic Flagg!"

She threw open the door and stepped out on the porch and hailed Mr. Follansbee, who was facing the house, flapping his arms in front of the gander.

"Yes marm!" he replied stiffly.

"Bedford Follansbee! Out of your own mouth you have showed yourself up as a depraved and immoral old rat. I thank the Lord I have found out before it's too late what I have been harboring."

She slammed the door.

He was obliged to retort against the closed portal. "I woke up first—I can tell you that!"

She opened the door. "I understand now why you're leaving. Have heard that your own kind is operating around here, have you? Going to join them that's tipping our town upside down—another bird to make a bigger flock of birds of a feather!"

He shook an admonishing fist at the gander and flapped protesting hand at Mrs. Flagg when she kept on. "I don't want to hear the ribble-rabble gossip of this one-hoss town," he declared. "My mind is set on higher things."

"You keep it set on marching your boots! If you ever touch a toe to these premises again, I'll lash you with a hoss-whip."

Mr. Follansbee was nursing a state of mind of his own! "If the only ch'ice that's left to me is between tophet and here, you wont be called on to set an extry plate for me, Mis' Flagg—never after this."

"If you get ketched in a tight place for grub, you can eat that garnder you're stealing." The emphasis of the door-slam that time sounded final; the following boom of thunder in the distance was like an exaggerated echo of the bang that had conveyed solemn portent.

Inside, Mrs. Flagg yanked the heaping platter from under Mr. Flagg's nose. "Any man that's pussylaminous enough to let his own wife protect herself against immoral sculch deserves to eat cold slabber; but I'm hotting this dinner up again because I've got a woman's pride in her own vittles." She slammed the oven door after she had inserted the platter; another thunder-echo followed, as if the elements were providing a Greek chorus to assist in the expression of her wrath.

OUTSIDE, Mr. Follansbee threw a club at the persistent gander and then turned his back on the Flagg mansion.

The noonday had become black and the stabbing lightning shafts were unpleasant. But Mr. Follansbee was not minding weather just then. He was tingling from top to toe with the sense of freedom. The world, for him, had long been limited by Uckitt Hill on one side and by the woods which skirted the Flagg farm. A nearer, wiggly lightning flash cracked down from the zenith. The startled cat yowled.

"Stiffen your upper lip," adjured Mr. Follansbee testily. "That aint no kind of sperit to show when we're starting to roam the wide world o'er."

He halted for a moment at the corner of the barn. All his natural hankerings urged him to step in there, after the custom of all the years, and dodge the shower. But he turned his back on the inviting door. He was sure that jealous eyes were surveying him from the windows of the Flagg farmhouse. If there was still any doubt in their minds, after his high stand in the matter of that boiled dinner, he would go on and show 'em that he meant business! Mrs. Flagg's twit that he was crazy was rankling in him.

"His pome was all right. It hits the case," he told himself. "But I draw the line at that charm business. If I was to show any faith in that kind of tim-noodle stuff, I'd be proving it out what she said about my state of mind. I'll hunt that feller up and give him back his jimcrack thing. He's most like gone along the road. I wouldn't no more go down to the nook in Libby's woods than I'd try to shin up one of them lightning flashes."

Therefore he gave the woods a cold shoulder and went on in the other direction, bowing his head when the sheets of rain came flooding into his face. The distressed cat laid its ears flat and shut its eyes.

When he abandoned the highway after a time Mr. Follansbee excused this divagation by telling himself that the road was muddy; when he found himself entering a stretch of woods, he informed the cat that it was easy to get lost in a storm and wander around in circles, especially when the rain did not allow one to keep a sharp lookout. "And I don't have the least idee where I be now," he lied fatuously. "All is, I'll be sure to keep away from that nook! I wont take no part in the kind of devilishness he was trying to put me up to! Furthermore there aint no sense in it!"

HE floundered on through dripping moose-wood after the rain had ceased. The trees added a spattering postscript to the past-and-gone shower when the breeze tiptilted their leaves. But Mr. Follansbee made no effort to seek the open where the sun was shining. "I guess I'll keep on and find a comf'table place where I can do a little meditating. After meditating, I'll be able to start out in better trim."

There was a log across the path ahead of him. He put one leg over it—but hired man's habit was strong; he sat down, obeying the impulse that had always caused him to rest on every fence.

He looked about him and then gazed into the eyes of the cat and professed extreme surprise. "Well, by swanny, Eureky Atchimiddes, this shows how the devil can lead your footsteps around when you aint minding your eye like you should. Do you see that brook? Do you see that coconut shell? We're right here in that nook that I've been trying to keep away from. Howsomever, seeing that we're here and considering all the hours that we've been moving around, we may as well take it easy for a while."

He lifted the cat out of the sack and set the animal on the log. The cat begun to scruff a six-toed paw over its features. "I reckoned you'd be wanting to bresh up your looks a little, Eureky. I like your sperit in that. We're going to face the world."

Mr. Follansbee showed that he was ready to follow an example that he commended in another. He took off his hard hat and scrubbed his forearm on it with as vigorous motions in refurbishing as the cat was employing in its toilet. When he set the hat back on again he cocked it on one side of his head, signifying a new attitude toward humanity in general.

He unbuttoned the butterfly bow, stretched its wilted wings upright and refastened it.

The false white bosom was in a sad state of sogginess, but he pushed it inside his vest and smoothed it flat as best he could. "What's a partunt front, one more or less, to a man that's starting out with four hundred and sixty-seven dollars in his pants pocket and don't have to worry what this costs or that costs? There's one thing that there aint no ketch about—and that's having money enough to last you through."

He took the packet of papers out of his pocket and began to tip down their corners thoughtfully. "I can afford to be independent about grabbing onto offers. But I'm willing to listen, and I'm ready to talk trade. Le's see what I'll put forward first if capital asks what I can show for idees."

He came upon the tintype and abstracted it from the papers. He muttered while he looked at the face of the girl. "I reckon I was to blame for it in this

case, and that's why I haint never got over it. Now that I'm awake, I can see that I was too much set in my ways and notions. She was all for roaming, and I was all for staying right where I was. Well, Eureky, it's another one of them things that's got to stay put behind. But it wouldn't be my ch'ice if I had it to choose over again, not now, when I'm woke up."

He tucked the picture between the papers, put them into his pocket, clasped his cocked-up knee between his laced, sunbrowned fingers and meditated.

THE cat finished licking down a drabbled white triangle of fur on its breast —copying some of Mr. Follansbee's solicitude in regard to the false shirt-bosom—and then curled its tail around the four six-toed feet and lifted gaze to its master and proceeded to survey him with that grave intentness which a mere human often finds so disconcerting in the case of a cat.

"Exactly!" declared Mr. Follansbee. "That's the way she looked at me when I vummed and vowed I wouldn't go a-roaming. I dropped right down in her estimation, and stayed down."

After a time he groped for the charm in one of his pockets and handled it very gingerly while he examined it. Then he read over and over the verse that was written on the crumpled paper. "Them is my feelings, modify the thing down somewhat," he mused. "Of course, I wouldn't elope like what it's stated there. But now I'd know just how to talk right to Trucella, if it was to do over again."

He gazed up into the empty branches of a tree that shaded him. "Trucella!" He barely whispered the name. He closed his fingers over the charm. "You understand, of course, that I aint testing this thing. It's a turrible pretty name, and I'm only trying out how it sounds. Le's see!" He spoke the name aloud. Then he glanced around him nervously. In the silence of the woods the sound rather alarmed him.

"Being an inventor, I've got a level head, Eureky Atchimiddes, and I propose to keep it level. I don't believe any such nonsunch as that feller tried to pump into me. It don't stand to reason." A long pause. "On t'other hand, there's critters in Injy, so I've read in a book, that'll toss up a rope and climb right out of sight into the blue sky. Them that haint roamed hadn't ought to be too sure when they say a thing can't be done. Guess I wont fool with something I don't know nothing about."

He put the charm back into his pocket and meditated some more. Then he took the thing out and called "Trucella" in louder tone. Again he called still more loudly and waited in trepidation.

He was conscious that a voice was calling, faint and far—a man's voice. Men's voices in the late afternoon, "ker-nacking" to sheep or summoning to the bars the cows with "Co-boss!" were common enough in the rural confines where Mr. Follansbee had spent his life. The sound of the distant voice suggested that other men were still slaves to chores while he was free. He crossed his legs and smiled.

The voice was nearer.

"Some old breachy critter has lost her poke and dodged the bell cow and has gone a-roaming," chuckled the complacent ex-chaser of rampageous cows. "Well, roaming seems to be in the air right now!"

But in a little while he cocked his ear, and his smile slowly faded while he listened. It seemed as if that voice called "Trucella!" over and over.

MR. FOLLANSBEE promptly jammed the charm down into his trousers pocket and left it there. "None of this messing into the devil's works for me!" he grumbled. "Furthermore, it only sounds to me like her name because my mind has just been all filled up with stuff that I hadn't got no right to go meditating on. And there aint no such thing as magicking back what's past and gone and done with! Darnation, o' course there haint!"

He was relieved in his mind when the unseen person gave over calling. There was a long period of silence.

Then, close by, a veritable yelp of "Trucella!" brought him up from the log with a leap that sent the cat scuttling.

A moment later a woman came thrusting into sight through the leaves of a thick copse. A garland of flowers was set upon her hair. Some kind of fancy drapery was twisted about her shoulders. Trucella Frye used to fix up in some such fashion when she spoke pieces in the lyceum meetings.

The woman set her palms edgewise to her forehead and peered. "Do I behold Bedford Follansbee?" she demanded in tragic tones.

On his own part, Mr. Follansbee was

posing as a statue that could be labelled "Interrogation;" his bulging eyes demanded, but his wide-open mouth was only a silent chasm.

"Don't you know Trucella Frye? Look at me!"

It was easy to obey that command. In his petrifaction Mr. Follansbee was unable to look anywhere else.

"Save me from that man!"

The voice called again, but from a greater distance; again it called, farther away. That was encouraging—the man was departing.

"He is an enemy, Bedford. I will tell you—but not now. The sight of you puts everything else out of my mind."

Mr. Follansbee, in his whirling thoughts, found a common ground in that declaration.

"The years have been so many—but of course you believe me when I say that I am Trucella—still Trucella Frye. You must believe me!"

One of Mr. Follansbee's tenets was, "Never argue with a woman," and he had been sorry for what he rapped back at Mrs. Flagg in his wild mood of departure. He now closed his mouth and swallowed hard. As if he feared lest this dumb show might not indicate sufficiently rapturous acceptance of the identity of his old sweetheart, he jerked his chin up and down; his wide eyes, however, still queried.

"What have you to say to me?"

While he had been meditating, he was fairly bursting with speeches. He had been sorrowing because he would never have the opportunity to express his thoughts, his desires, his hopes. And here was an opportunity to take the floor! He merely made a queer noise.

"I have been searching for you through all the world," she said, walking toward him. "Where have you been?"

THIS query knocked Mr. Follansbee more askew than ever! He had been sticking right in Carmel all of the time. But queer things did happen when folks were hunting and failed to look in the right direction! He did not dare to tackle the subject: he wagged his head and remained dumb.

"But you have been wondering to and fro also." She pointed to the "Kennebecker" beside the log.

Mr. Follansbee, prompted in that manner, felt that he could not afford to allow Trucella Frye to believe that he had been trotting around on a two-cent piece all of his life, considering her prejudices in regard to human toadstools. The masculine impulse to strut a bit before the female of the species had not been altogether killed in him.

"You went forth because it was Trucella's wish," she insisted. Disputing her meant argument with a woman!

Mr. Follansbee was not nimble as a liar; he had never had any occasion to do any lying.

"Yes'm," he croaked. "I've been a-roaming."

"Far and wide," she supplemented.

"Yes'm—all round Robin Hood's barn, as you might say."

She had come nearer, and he was goggling at her blankly.

"You recognized me at first sight, didn't you?" she prompted. "Tell me that and make me happy."

"I—I knowed your rig-out," he stammered. He wore the air of one who was striving to convince himself that something was so, and was having a hard time of it.

"But you were so slow in speaking!"

"My eyesight aint what it used to be. Now that I see you—" He halted and did not seem to be at all certain what to say, now that he *had* seen her.

"Have I changed so much?"

"Yes'm, speaking the truth, I've got to say that you have. But for the better—yes'm, for the better—prob'ly," he hastened to assure her.

"But I knew you the moment I saw you. Do you know why I am here?"

His hand was again in his trousers pocket, clutching the charm. He loosed it instantly. This thing was beyond all his calculations. He lacked both language and courage to enter upon any explanation of this mystery in which he had become involved. He shook his head.

"I came because something called me. I could not help coming. When I was in India—but it's too great and grand a subject to discuss now." He gasped when she mentioned India. "We will talk only about ourselves now, Bedford."

She walked to the log, pushed the cat carelessly to one side as if it did not belong to the party and sat down: Mr. Follansbee was not thinking clearly enough to perceive symbolism in this usurpation, even if he had been any sort of an analyst of moods and acts. He merely felt that Tru-

cella Frye was running things, and he was glad of it.

"But don't tell me that you are weary of wandering, Bedford. Please don't!"

"Oh, I aint a mite tuckered," he replied with hearty emphasis; he knew that he had not sounded at all convincing when he lied. "But I reckon you've been toosting it around so much that you're going to settle down."

"No, no!" she declared passionately. "The far corners of the earth still call to me."

HE sat down on the log at a little distance from her and crossed his legs. When the evicted cat came and tried to scratch its way up to his knee, he kicked the amazed ex-favorite away. In this new and delightful mental companionship that he was experiencing, he felt ability to lie more glibly. "It beats the Dutch how you do get wonted to a thing. I d'know what I ever come back to this town for, unless it was to get set for a new jump."

"What has taken you around the world so much, Bedford?"

His slow thoughts had not ventured to rise to the hope that he could win her at this late day. Therefore he did not consider the possibility that he would have to make good his boasts. He was living in a half dream, marking time, simply trying to make the best exhibit of himself that was possible under the circumstances. "It was thinking about you that started me off roaming. But then, of course, I had consid'able business to 'tend to on the way."

"What is your business, Bedford?"

"Inventing things."

"Oh, I'm so proud of you."

He folded his arms and looked as important as he could. "Of course, there are setbacks in inventing things. I've had my troubles—"

She put up a protesting hand and checked his self-depreciation.

She moved along on the log and sat near him. "You're an inventor! Now I shall no longer be troubled by planning out ways of spending my fortune. I shall back your grand ideas!"

He blinked at her. So far as he knew, the Fryes had never had any money; her father had been called "Fizzle Frye," an obvious nickname for general inefficiency. Had Trucella developed a sense of humor since he had seen her last, and was she amusing herself in a lying match? But her big eyes revealed to him only joy and pride. "The fortune was given to me by a noble widow lady in Peru when I was there. I saved her life, and then I read poetry to her till she died."

Mr. Follansbee had only chaotic ideas in regard to the lethal effect of too much poetry.

"I composed the poetry, and her heart was so much softened that she gave me all her money. But the fortune has been a terrible burden for me. Often I have wished that she hadn't been so kind." She clutched his arm and glanced about her nervously. "Did you hear that man calling my name?"

"Yes'm!" assented Mr. Follansbee, remembering a twinge of jealousy.

"He is one of a band of Peruvians who follow me everywhere, trying to force me to take that fortune back to Peru. That man is the captain of the band and he has begun to threaten me.

"Bedford, this isn't merely accident that has brought us together. The moment I saw it was you I wasn't much surprised. I knew that somebody who was wise and powerful would be raised up for me in my need. Fate sent you to meet me here. It isn't strange at all, is it?"

"Seems to be all planned out perfickly regular," agreed the gentleman who was called on to endorse Fate's program. Her touch thrilled him, and he felt like agreeing to anything.

"Overruling Providence always knows best. Where folks make mistakes is by setting up their own plans and insisting on them. I have no plans from now on. I depend wholly upon you. I shall never leave you again." She laid her head on his shoulder. He sat there, staring straight in front, with his little eyes widely propped, seeing only vacancy.

"Of course you have been to Peru, Bedford?"

"Yes'm," he gasped. In this crisis he was unable to turn a flip-flop back to veracity.

"Then you know how fierce and cruel the Peruvians can be when they get set on a thing. But I am putting everything in your hands. I shall not worry again. Tell me of yourself. What invention are you working on now?"

JUST then Mr. Follansbee's mind was wholly occupied with possible methods of dealing with unreasonable Peruvians.

While her head was on his shoulder, he was not allowing himself to doubt Trucella Frye's word.

"Where be ye stopping?" he faltered, hoping he might be able to divide this responsibility of having a woman on his hands for the first time in his life.

"Right here—with you, Bedford."

"But I thought—you must know folks in town—I reckoned you'd be—"

"I have come down from the skies, as you might say."

His eyes roved and found his "Kennebecker." It suggested that, as a wanderer, she must have possessions of her own. "Where's your baggage?"

"Oh, it may be here and it may be there! I don't want to think about it now," she cooed. "It's no matter! We'll wait here through the gloaming!"

Trucella Frye always had been impractical, he remembered; everlastingly as a girl she was mislaying this or forgetting that or losing the other. Her general carelessness had been another thing that had bothered him in the old days.

"I don't mean to be prying into your private business—"

"Oh, but I haven't any business of my own any more, Bedford. It's all yours. But don't ask questions now. Don't talk to me for a time, please. Put your arm around me. Let's sit here and dream—dream of the past and the future."

Well, orders from Trucella were orders! He set his arm gingerly about her waist and was silent.

Some such situation as this was what he had dreamed about many and many a lonesome hour when he had been fooling with his inventions in the shed chamber. He had never looked ahead to any actuality of the sort. And now that a dream had come to pass! He found his arm growing numb. The bark of the log was rough, but he did not dare to change his position. There was something about bark—that was it! Peruvian bark! According to the outlook, he was in for something especially rough in that line. He tried to grasp what this dream-come-true signified—and found that his ponderings kept slipping back to that passed-up boiled dinner. Now it was long past supper-time, and he was faint with hunger.

Eureka, foraging, had captured a field mouse and was eating in front of him with deep content and appreciative whisker-flicks; he envied the cat.

He carefully tipped his head aslant and peered down at Trucella from the corner of his eyes; she was asleep, he judged.

He looked upon the ground at his feet and saw a party of ants lugging home a dead beetle for supper; a rabbit hopped here and there and nibbled succulent leaves with wiggling nose. Every creature in sight seemed to be getting fed up except Mr. Follansbee. Moreover, though Mr. Follansbee had never had occasion to study the convenances, he knew as the twilight deepened that this would never do!

Her calm declaration that she was his from that time on made some sort of formalities necessary. He dismissed at once the notion of returning with Trucella to the Flagg home, seeking there shelter and chaperon. He could expect no haven there after the set-to in that dismissal. What would be left of his reputation as a roamer after Mrs. Flagg had talked a few moments, as woman will talk to woman?

Now that the dusk was deepening, blurring the outlines of the familiar nook in the woods, Mr. Follansbee was troubled by the uneasy feeling that this was all unreal. This hungry man who sat on a log in the woods, pried loose from home and habits, faced by he knew not what, saddled by responsibilities that were terrifying on account of their vagueness, was surely not Bedford Follansbee. Therefore this was not Trucella Frye, in spite of all his valiant efforts to convince himself that it was she! It must be another one of those dreams which had visited him in the shed chamber. He shook himself, hoping that he would awake.

The woman straightened up and hitched away from him. "Why are we lingering here?" she asked querulously.

"You said to linger, and so I done it," he retorted, unable to keep irritability out of his own voice.

"Oh, you are just as slow as you always were!"

This was more like Trucella Frye. There was not so much unreality in the situation. Her fault-finding whine helped him to steady his thoughts.

"I don't believe we're going to get along no better'n what we ever did. You're set in your ways, and I'm set in mine. So"—one of his habitual deep intakings of breath when he was fortifying his resolution—"mebbe we'd better not try to warm over cold pertaters." In suggesting that solution he displayed the only cheerfulness he

had shown till then in their interview. He even smacked his lips.

"Do you mean to say that you'd walk off and leave me, after we have been united by Providence?"

"Why, I aint saying that edzackly! But what you need, I'm afraid, is a romanticker kind of a feller than what I be. I'm nat'rally of a business mind, and there's a whole lot of things to be tended to before you and me—"

She broke in testily. "Is that all you can think about—business, at a time like this? You're figuring that I'll be a drag on you—cost you money!"

"I don't have to worry about money," declared Mr. Follansbee loftily. "I've got rising four hundred dollars right in my pocket and some in the bank. I aint never been anywhere to spend money foolish!"

Then the man who had previously stated that he was a world-rover was much disconcerted by the stare she gave him.

"What I mean is," he hedged desperately, "when I've traveled, I've kept away from all them places where a feller is apt to spend money foolish. I don't propose to be hornswoggled by no one."

"I'm glad to hear you say that. I can trust all my money to you."

"But aint it going to be best for each of us to pass on—"

"Where you go, I shall go, Bedford. It's fate. I know the wide world just as well as you know it—and you can't hide away from me. You must draw your money from the bank, and we'll go far, far away together. But I shall not allow you to spend any of your money, of course."

"But I don't need to have a woman fid up for me! I tell you—"

"But *I'm* telling *you!* A woman has the right to do the talking in a case like this. You listen to me! Here I am—alone in the world—yes, alone in these woods, in the night, threatened by my enemies. Have you got the spirit of a man in you? Would you desert me?"

That was goading Mr. Follansbee's pride most effectually. He declared that he would not desert her.

"Are you afraid?"

"Gush-hacker it, of course I aint."

"Are you willing to let me tell you what to do?"

Fifty years of hard service as a hired man, bossed by a farmer and ruled despotically by a woman with a dinner-horn, had made of Mr. Follansbee a tool instead of a free agent. Dimly he realized that it was Trucella's recent supine attitude in the matter of her affairs and his that had raised the deuce with his relish in their reunion. She had been too much like the Trucella Frye of the old days—"a languishing Lydia," they had called her. Now she was facing him with commanding mien. He felt his feelings give a flop of grateful relief. This was the kind of a woman who was worth having!

"Yes'm, I'll do just what you tell me to do—and be obleeged!"

"Now you are my own dear Bedford! I can trust you. I'm sure that you'll be my hero!"

"Yes'm, I reckon I can."

"Do you swear that you'll protect me through thick and thin?"

"Yes'm, if you'll give off your orders how to do it."

She stood up, leaned over him and kissed him on the cheek. "That's sign and seal of your promise to me. Now you will not fail me. Come!"

HE rose and pulled his hat down over his ears, as a knight would fix his casque before the fray. He picked up his "Kennebecker," and then he remembered a friend whom this new association had temporarily put out of his mind. He called "Kitty—kittee—kitte-e-e!"

"Hush your noise! Are you stopping to bother with an old cat in a crisis like this?" she demanded with temper.

"It's Eureky Atchimiddes that I've raised from a kitten, and he's—"

"I don't care what he is. This is no time for foolishness. You're under orders, remember, and I have something for you to attend to beside coddling a cat!"

Mr. Follansbee felt that he was then undergoing another test of his resolves—and this was not a self-imposed test. In order to make good in this new alliance he was commanded to trample underfoot an affection that represented nearly all his heart-interest in the narrow confines in which his sentimentality had been penned.

The cat had not answered his call. That fact helped him some at that moment. "I guess there aint no more dependence to be put on you," he muttered. "It aint my look-out if you aint round tending to business."

"Come along!" ordered the commander-in-chief. He followed her.

HER appearance of knowing just where she was going and what she was going to do when she got there gave Mr. Follansbee something that was akin to sanguine confidence in himself. Again he was tingling with the spirit of adventure—the same thrill that he had felt when he lingered at the corner of the Flagg barn. He had meant what he said when he told Trucella Frye that he would obey; he made a new pledge of his resolution while he marched on in the gloom.

She led him along a path which was partly "grown up to bushes:" when they arrived at a tumble-down shack, he recognized it as the old Libby sugar-camp. She produced a small flashlight and preceded him into the structure.

In one corner were a few crumpled newspapers, and when she swept these aside with her foot, she scattered bread-crusts and bits of meat, indicating that somebody had been occupying the camp; but she did not vouchsafe any information.

Mr. Follansbee, in spite of his vivid interest in all this, did not fail to explore the newspapers hurriedly in quest of all the crusts and meat fragments he could find. His stomach was clamoring as insistently as his curiosity, but the few crumbs had little effect in satisfying his hunger.

She directed him to pull up some boards. There was a good-sized canvas sack in a hollow under the floor.

"It's my fortune!" she whispered. "I expect you to guard it with your life."

She took it from his hands when he had lifted it; she pushed it down into the croker-sack on his back.

She faced him and turned the flashlight full into his blinking eyes. "Ever after this, Bedford, what is mine is yours. And what is yours is mine, isn't it?"

"Yes'm."

"That's the true spirit. There must be no divisions in purse or in any other interests. I don't need from you any pledge except your word, of course. But don't you think we'd feel—well, closer, if you put your money in with mine?"

There was a flash of caution in his little eyes.

"I have thousands in my fortune," she went on. "If we have our money all together in one sack, we shall feel more bound to each other, so to speak."

"Yes'm, but having all your eggs in one basket, it gives them Pee-ruvians a dingfired good chance to get a-holt of it all with one swipe."

"I know your true love for me is enough to give you the strength of a dozen men, if that money is threatened. I don't say that you would fight any harder to save your own. But it will be comforting to think that we are one in everything from now on."

"Yes'm, there's a lot of comfort in that," agreed Mr. Follansbee without showing any enthusiasm. "Furthermore, I d'know's it makes much difference whuther I lug my money in that sack or in my pants pockets," he added, putting his Yankee arrière pensée into words that helped to sooth his natural qualms.

He pulled out a roll of bills around which a leather thong was knotted. While he was gazing at the money, she was unfastening the neck of the sack. His reluctant fingers released the roll when she scooped it away; he eyed the sack disconsolately, his chin hooked around over his shoulder, while she stuffed in the money and retied the fastening.

"About how many of them Pee-ruvians should you say, for a guess, was following you?"

"Oh, we will not worry about them. Come along!"

He followed her for some minutes through the dark woods.

She seemed to have the eyes of a cat, he noted. She led the way surely until they emerged from the woods and arrived at a stone wall which bordered the highway. She sat down beside the barricade, hidden from the road, and he obeyed her gesture and crouched.

"You probably know some place along this road where you can borrow a horse and carriage," she whispered.

"I d'know about routing folks up at this time o' night," he protested.

"If we're going out to roam through the wide world, you don't expect me to foot it, do you?"

"They're pretty neighborly and obleeging in these parts," he returned in a tone as fretful as hers, "but I'd make a pretty figger going over yender there and asking Cale Jaquish, for instance, would he kindly lend me a hoss and wagon to start out and roam round the world with."

"Go and hire a team, then!"

"But what am I going to say about fetching it back again?"

"I don't care what you say. Haven't

you any wit of your own? Do you expect me to do your talking for you?"

"No, not if you can't show any more sense than you're showing now."

"How do you dare to snap back that way to a lone, helpless woman who has come to you after all the years and is depending on your love and manliness to protect her?"

"I'm trying hard not to be snappy, Trucella," he returned, memory of his pledge to her softening his tones. "But this whole comeboodlecome has been flammed onto me awful sudden, and my feelings are all stirred up. And the main idee is, I've missed two reg'lar meals today."

"You old fool—"

But she promptly controlled herself and patted his arm. "I'm so sorry, dear, dear Bedford," she cooed. "This is an awful trying time for both of us. We must be kind and loving. Of course we don't expect to roam all over the world in a wagon. But we must get into a town where there is a railroad station. You can surely hire a turn-out, and we'll leave it to be sent back. And look!" She directed his attention through a cranny in the stone wall. "There's a light moving about those buildings. Do go and hire a hitch. That's my good boy!"

"I have took it onto myself, and I'll go through with it," he said after a few moments devoted to rumination. "Howsomever, it aint my picking and choosing, the way it's turning out."

"But we must have a horse," she persisted.

"And when we've got a hoss and this nightmare hitched up together tandem, mebbe we can get to somewhere that's sensible." He shrugged his shoulders from the straps of the croker-sack, set the burden on the ground and climbed over the wall.

"Be sure to say to him that you're going alone—wherever you tell him you're going," she advised in cautious tones. "Make up a good little story, dear. I'll wait right here."

Mr. Follansbee trudged on with his hands in his trousers pockets, trying to clarify his thoughts. "It don't seem like I'm living or nat'ral or awake," he muttered. "Some sort of works of the devil is afoul o' me. I—"

The pockets were empty except for the magic charm which the grasshopper man had forced on him. Mr. Follansbee's hand came in contract with the object and he pulled it out. "Gets ye what ye want when you call for it, hey? Does, does it? Well, I haint going to take no chances having it 'round me when I call for a hoss. I'd prob'ly get an elefunt or a hipperotamus landed onto me to lug and tend on, jedging from how it worked before."

He flung away the charm with all the strength of his arm and emitted a grunt of relief.

FARMER JAQUISH, it appeared, had been on a trip to his barn with a lantern. He was coming out with the lantern when Mr. Follansbee arrived in the yard. Mr. Jaquish also carried a shotgun. His motions with the gun terrified Mr. Follansbee until the latter had identified himself by word of mouth and by showing himself in the lantern's beams.

"These is troublous times in this town right now, Bed, and you can't blame me for wanting to shoot first and then get names and other datty later. I thought some of those renegades was rummaging in my barn when a noise woke me. But it was only one of the steers that was cast. What ye doing, owling round this time o' night? Been sworn in as special constibble?"

In the general upheaval of emotions Mr. Follansbee, marching on to duty, had not framed his lie. This suggestion by Mr. Jaquish was distinctly helpful.

"That's just it—just the checker," he hastened to say.

"Well, they must be running blamed short of other material," blurted the disparaging Mr. Jaquish. "How did they ever happen to pick you out?"

"You see, it's this way: they says—yes, this was what they says to me: 'You're a single man, and there's nobody dependent on you, and them critters is desperate, and if you get shot in tending to duty you wont be so much of a loss.' "

"Well, that sounds reasonable—not that I mean to slur you any or to be hardhearted."

"And I want to hire a hoss and wagon from you to go after 'em with."

"No sir, you wont get no hitch from me to be made a target of."

"Is that all the public sperit you've got?"

"Yep!" declared the callous Mr. Jaquish, striding away toward house and bed.

But the desperate seeker could not afford to drop negotiations in that fashion with this man! Jaquish was awake and about—that was a big item. Mr. Follansbee shrank before the thought of routing up any more sleeping farmers in haying time. Mr. Jaquish had already been fed up on a fairly satisfactory lie; Mr. Follansbee had exhausted his resources in that line.

"Wont you sell me a hitch?" pleaded the caller, racing along at the farmer's heels. "I'm knowing to it that you've got seven hoss-kind, and you ought to be able to spare one of 'em with a hitch."

"I can," returned the laconic Mr. Jaquish. "The liver-colored mare, the sidebar buggy, brass-mounted harness—halter throwed in. All for four hundred dollars."

Mr. Follansbee choked. He had a running acquaintance with the horses in that section. He began to enumerate the failings of the liver-colored mare, but Mr. Jaquish broke in peremptorily, sure of his position, recognizing plaintive urgency in a buyer's tone after many years of dickering. "Come round on a rainy Sunday when I've got spare time to while away. But this being in the middle o' the night, in the haying season, it's few words and to the point: four hundred for the hitch, take it or leave it."

"But it's a hold-up for a mare that's—"

"This aint no time o' night to be running down the reppytation of a female." He stamped up the porch steps.

BUT Mr. Follansbee chased the farmer into the house. He pulled a bank-book from his packet of papers. There was no more spirit of protest left in him. Mr. Jaquish consented to accept an order on the bank, and called up his hired man to witness the document which Mr. Follansbee filled in on the book's regular blank.

The three men made a quick job of harnessing, and Mr. Follansbee drove out of the yard, fishing the reins along the slab sides of the liver-colored mare. The triumphant grin that Mr. Jaquish had given him at parting had been almost too much for his nerves. Jaquish was a blatant horse-trader who bragged about his jobs.

Hunger growled within the drafted Lochinvar; and rancor, of a general sort, had been gnawing before Jaquish had played the wolf with Mr. Follansbee's feelings. He no longer tried to argue with his resentment. He remembered how Trucella Frye used to eat a whole box of candy at one sitting. "Dadwhipper it," he growled, "that's the trouble about having women hitched onto you. They haint got no common sense in money matters. Toss it and sling it—that's their motto. She might have knowed I'd have to buy a hoss. But what did she care, so long's she had her own way?"

He pulled up at the place where she was hiding. She rose from behind the wall. "How grand! You have the horse!"

"You've got to stretch the truth consid'able to call this old dimpus, what has been plastered onto me, a hoss," he retorted sullenly. "Now don't stand there gabbing all night."

"Here are the sacks and your valise. And come and help me over the wall."

He crawled down between the wheels. "Once get a woman fastened onto you, and then it's everlasting boost and tuggerlug," he growled under his breath. He helped her into the carriage, stowed the valise and sack and climbed up. "If I don't get something to eat pretty quick—"

"Don't keep harping on that string at a time like this!" She exhibited impatience and agitation. "Now, listen to me! Can you make this horse speed like the wind if there's need of hurry?"

"Not unless I put her onto rollers and push with a scantling-board under each arm. What did you think I was going to get out of Cale Jaquish this time o' night?"

"How can you snap me up like that—after all the years?"

"Let the years keep their setting where they've been set; that's my idee right now. These is present times, and if I aint dreaming, then I'm in a mess where I don't see head nor tail. And I wish you'd take them flowers off'm your head and throw 'em away. I want to get down to something sensible, if there's any way of doing it in a time like this."

"I'll help you in getting down to something sensible," she declared in hard tones. "You drive along. If those Peruvians rush out in the dark and try to stop us, you must show up your face with this flashlight and say: 'I'm Bedford Follansbee and I'm going for a doctor.'"

He had started the mare along. He yanked on the reins and stopped her.

"How do you expect them critters to know me from Adam, or to care who I be?"

"You promised to obey my orders."

"That was when I was down in them woods, and was all flustered, and was dreaming, as you might say, and hadn't been woke up by being gouged out of four hundred dollars on a hoss-dicker. That's something enough to bring a man like me back to his senses."

"Can you think of petty business in a time like this?"

"Yes'm, I can. This mare aint wuth more'n—"

"She has four legs, at any rate." She jerked the whip from its socket. "I'll set 'em moving." The mare leaped forward under the lash. "And don't you pull up on those reins."

"Look-a-here, sech as this hoss is, I own it, and—"

She administered a vigorous slap on his cheek. "I'll show you which one of us is boss!"

THIS amazing attack cowed him. He allowed the mare to race along. But rage such as he had never felt before began to boil in him. Once in a while, as a teakettle cover is joggled by confined steam, his tongue was moved by that rage.

"Somebody is going to find out something before this is over and done with."

She did not retort, and he went on, with long pauses, as a person might test a tree-limb hitching out on it. "Mesh Flagg called me a fool. His wife done the same thing. Fly-by-night critter picked me up for one. So did Cale Jaquish—and he'll blart all over Carmel about it. Next thing there'll be a Pee-ruvian hopping out o' some bush and saying it to me. But no, he wont—I'm awake now! Paying four hundred dollars for this—but no matter. It woke me up, anyway. There aint no Pee-ruvians. There aint no sech thing as magicking with a charm. And there aint—you aint—" He halted as if apprehensive about how much the "limb" would stand.

"You don't dare to tell me that I'm not Trucella Frye, do you?"

"I've never been no hand to argy with a woman."

"Hold your hosses," shouted somebody in the darkness ahead.

The woman slashed the mare. With the other hand she turned her flashlight full upon Mr. Follansbee's face. Men leaped out of the road to escape what seemed to be a runaway.

The same somebody bawled a warning. "Don't shoot! It's Bed Follansbee!"

"Now will you say that I don't know my business?" gasped the woman, when they were well past the scene of the attempted hold-up. "I saved you and your money from that band."

Mr. Follansbee did not reply; he was wholly taken up with the management of the animal, which had been made frantic by the whip and by the figures which had dodged in the dark.

The woman shifted suddenly from scolding to blandishments after the mare had been dissuaded from running and was trotting. "I didn't mean to be impatient with you, Bedford. But I was worrying so!"

"Yes'm! Worry does rash up the feelings," agreed her knight with such bland meekness in the place of his recent fretful anger that she was moved to snap on her light in order to view his countenance. She found it as guileless as his tone.

"You have seen for yourself that enemies are pursuing me. When we are away from here, all calm and safe and happy together, I'll explain how it was they let you pass when they saw who it was."

"I reckon the reppytation I left behind me in Pee-ru had something to do with it. It aint safe to meddle with me when I get reckless."

"Are you trying to make fun of me?"

"I aint no hand for comic stuff. I'm serious-minded, and you can depend on what I say—that is, except when I'm all stirred up, like I was a little spell ago. I take all that back. You're a good deal like me in temper," he went on blandly. "You don't mean half what you say—when you're all worked up! Not half—no, nor quarter what you say," he prattled.

"We must be careful of our tongues after this, Bedford. No more unkind words, my dear." She patted his shoulder. "How far is it to a railroad station?"

"As fur ag'in, and then, mebbe, a little ways further. We're heading for it." The mare was walking. "Well, it's a nice, starry night for a ramble, as the pome says."

"But let's ramble faster than this!"

"I'll see what can be done, though I'd never put no great dependence on any hoss that come from Cale Jaquish." He gently took the whip from her. He ran his thumb over the butt and grunted with the air of having found something which he expected to find. "Cale Jaquish never owned

a whip that wasn't pervided out with one," he told himself. He turned to the woman. "I was just telling you that you could depend on what I say. Ex-actly! Well, I'm going to tell you the solemn truth. I've never been to Pee-ru. I've never been out of this town. I aint ever been so fur's a railroad depot. I never saw a train of cars in my whole life. I'll have to call up to a house and ask the way—though you ought to know about it, seeing how you used to live in these parts," he suggested.

"But I'm turned around!"

"It's kind of ditto with me. But we've got tongues."

THERE was a farmhouse near at hand. He slid the butt of the whip along one of the reins, the darkness shielding him. He prodded. The mare squealed and reared when he pulled hard on the reins.

"What's the matter?" she demanded, showing fright when the animal threshed about in the road.

"Any hoss that Cale Jaquish deals with has got all the outs and ailings from croup to blind staggers," he replied. "I guess this is the staggers."

He prodded again.

"Is it dangerous?"

"Yes'm! But I'll try to handle her till the fit is over."

After a few moments the mare stood still, snorting apprehensively.

"That's spasm the first," he informed his companion. "Whilst we're waiting for the next one to come along, what say if you hop out and ask the folks in that house the nearest way to the railroad depot?"

She hesitated.

"I hope the critter wont fall over back'ards onto us in spasm number two," he muttered.

The woman nimbly leaped out over the wheel.

"Go and rap on the door," he told her. "They'll be all genteel in the case of a lady."

When he heard her rapping, he whirled the mare in the road. "We'll see what that inch brad can do when it's a case o' straight away on the backtrack and I aint dragging on the reins. And I'll trust that woman how to lie to them folks in that house—she's a crackerjack at the job."

Mr. Follansbee pulled up after some time and laid the reins on the dashboard. He pulled the sack from under the seat and secured his own roll of money, after untying the cord that bound the receptacle. He jammed the bills down into his trousers pocket. His fumbling hand found packets of other bills in the sack, and he scratched a match and made hasty inspection. "An inventor's mind moves slower and carefuller than the minds of these whifflehead critters," he remarked, "but when it gets headed in a certain direction, it usually arrives at some gool, even if it aint a railroad depot. Here's something to be handed over, and it's just as well not to complect my private business up too much by handing that woman over too."

When he arrived near the Carmel town line, he began to announce himself. His hail was answered after a time. He had pulled the mare to a standstill, and men grouped about him. He held up the sack. "I reckon here's something what you're looking for, gents. I was past here a little spell ago, going after it. Being in a consid'able hurry, I couldn't stop for long stories."

Five minutes later Mr. Follansbee was assured by the worried-looking man who had grabbed the sack that, as paymaster of the strawberry-raisers, he could state that his money was again in his hands, correct to a dollar.

"But look here, Bed," urged the head constable, "what's the story that goes with this?"

"That's p'tickler business of my own," stated Mr. Follansbee with a lofty authoritativeness that surprised and impressed his townsman. "I saw that something had to be done, and I took a-holt and done it."

Two men came forward, dragging a familiar figure; it was the grasshopper stranger. "This critter tried to sneak past us a couple hours ago. If he's your cousin, like you told me, you'd better say a word for him," invited the constable.

"He aint my cousin, and he'll have to say for himself." He conveyed to the captive a great deal of significance when he turned his gaze on Mr. Nickelberry. "All I've got to say to you or about you is that I hope you didn't sprain your voice when you was magicking up your pardner this P. M."

"Where's my wife?" demanded the stranger.

"I saw her down the road a piece, knocking on doors. I cal'late she's out canvass-

ing for them wire names. Hope they'll let you trot along and ketch up with her, now that all worry about this money is over with in Carmel."

HE broke in promptly on the constable's remonstrances. "What I told you about him was only a part of my general plot to get this money back. I declared myself as a special constibble, and if you go and ask Cale Jaquish, he may be able to forget for a few minutes that he's a hoss-jockey and tell a part o' the truth about it. And that's all you'll get out of me."

"There's a reward coming to you," stated the strawberry man.

"I don't want no reward. It's pay enough for me to show what I can do when I'm put to it."

"I insist—"

Mr. Follansbee's face, lighted by the lanterns, revealed that a happy thought had occurred to him. "Look here, Mister; in my rush to follow clues and get back this money, I had to buy this hitch. You aint needing a good up-and-coming mare, guaranteed stiddy, stands without hitching, kind and gentle and—"

"I've got to have something to get around over town with when I pay off. I'll buy. How much!"

Mr. Follansbee hesitated. "Well, considering that I aint asking for no reward, I'll take—well, say—call it an even four hundred."

"Here's the cash," said the man gratefully. "You're a credit to any community."

Mr. Follansbee crawled down, took his "Kennebecker" in hand and started off.

Right at that moment he had not the least idea where he was going.

"Bed, there'll have to be questions asked," the constable cried after Carmel's new and amazing sleuth.

"You wont get no more out of me."

"But where will we find you?"

Mr. Follansbee stopped. It occurred to him that he was in a ticklish position. Vagueness in this crisis would stir suspicion. He could not give out to those matter-of-fact citizens "the wide world" as his next address.

Reaction had told on him. He was hungry and tired. He could see that old shed chamber where sweet slumber had enfolded him every night through all the years. If he could walk down into the kitchen, as usual, in the morning! He would be back on something in the way of solid footing, at any rate! He would have the courage to face even Mrs. Flagg, if he were able to march in on her from the familiar surroundings. He held his breath for a moment.

"Where in tunket do you expect to find me except right at home with the Flaggs?" he retorted pompously.

He trudged on.

THE early dawn of the July day was mottling the skies when he reached the Flagg farmhouse. Sometimes the ell door was left open. But he could not stir it when he tried carefully; the hasp was secure on the inside. Everything was locked.

Mr. Follansbee stood for a time in front of the house and listened to the duet which revealed that the Flaggs were not worrying about a recreant hired man.

He tiptoed along to the kitchen window, put his face close to the pane and yowled plaintively.

In the silence he heard the ticking of the hurrying dogs on the kitchen floor. Up came two paws, and the pane clicked and tipped forward.

"Be ca'm, Hector," warned Mr. Follansbee, and the dog greeted him in silence with tongue lolling amiably.

Mr. Follansbee stuck in his arm, reached up and released the window catch. He pulled out his arm, and the pane, propelled by a spring, snapped back. "When I invented a perfick success like that, I knowed what I was doing," he declared with enthusiasm. Then he lifted the sash cautiously and crawled into the kitchen. His big cat jumped down from a chair, spread its forepaws wide, hindquarters elevated, nose close to the floor, and stretched. "Much obleeged for your complimentary bow, Eureky Atchimiddes! I see that you have found that winder just as much of a perfick success as I have." He scooped the cat under one arm and started on tiptoe for the shed chamber.

He passed the buttery door resolutely. "Le's not sp'ile our appetites ahead of breakfast, Eureky. She's always pretty soople when she's been let alone to have her say out; and as for Mesh, the shower didn't leave nothing sensible to be done in the way of haying, and it's the first half a day I ever took off since I've been here. I was entitled to half a day—that's all I took. But by jimminy, it does seem like a thousand years!"

Free Lances in Diplomacy

The Old Game - and the Changing Players

By Clarence Herbert New

ON the beautiful old Norman Plantagenet estate now known as Trevor Hall, in South Devon, the trees were just bursting into full leaf and the Channel fog burned away, four days of the week, by clear spring sunshine which made the most of itself before mist and cloud and rain had their way again.

In the Hall the household Afghans and the scattering of English servants showed more smiling faces than for many a month past. There was the old normal feeling about the place—a spirit of contentment and satisfaction. True, young Lord Ivo and Lady Sybil had been in residence a good deal of the time, with enough of their personal friends to maintain a bustling activity and spirit of gayety; but the two people around whom the whole estate and surrounding neighborhood centered had been beyond the seas, and nothing ever replaced them in the hearts of their household folk and tenantry.

Now the spring morning was brighter for the lovely face and trim figure in the rose-garden below the terraces. And the tall man in black velvet coat and gray knickerbockers smoking his after-breakfast cigar over yonder at the cliff-brow high above the waters of the Channel drew glances of deep affection and respect from everyone who looked in that direction. It is nothing to the Afghans and the English retainers that their Earl and Countess are world-wide celebrities with colossal wealth and the most enviable social position—all that is taken for granted without a second thought; but the master and mistress, the man and woman who have sat through many a weary night by the bedside of such as were dangerously ill, who never seem to exact deference to their rank or dignity, because they themselves forget it—they have won an amount of personal devotion that probably is not shown to another couple in the British Empire.

While His Lordship was thoughtfully pacing along the cliff-brow in the first hours of anything approaching relaxation he had known through long heart-sick years, a rapidly moving car appeared in the road through the forest from the lodge gates a mile away. The man in the tonneau would have passed, by his clothes and appearance, for an Englishman who had spent a good deal of his time in the Orient—until one versed in ethnological differences looked a little more closely at the shape of his features and the peculiar bottomless softness of his dark eyes.

CATCHING a glimpse of the figure on the cliff, the newcomer swung easily from the step before the car reached the Hall itself and walked down the terraces to meet him. Their handclasp was a silently affectionate one, and no word being spoken until they were seated in a vine-covered house overlooking the Channel.

"Gad, Abdool! We've missed you a lot, over yon in the States!"

"And I you—O friends of my father's son! There were those who said you could not cross for months—all accommodation being spoken in advance, and our young Thakur Bahadur being in the Mediterranean with the yacht. Yet was there need of thy presence here, as thou knewest from my cable. And thou art of those who always find a way. Tell me how it was done?"

"Why, as you say, all the steamer accommodation was booked for two or three months in advance, and it just happened that there was nothing available for charter. Under the circumstances it seemed to me that His Majesty's Governm'nt owed me enough to bear a hand, and so I cabled the Admir'lty in code. They placed a thirty-five knot destroyer at our disposal in Quebec. We made Fishguard in a bit under four days—two of them fairly heavy weather. Now suppose you give me the story on this side?"

"Well, you are needed here, both of you—no lie about that, though the urgency may not be so evident until you've gone into it—for the reason that the old game is like to be played in a different way from anything we've known, and with many new players who do not even know the old rules, if there can be said to have been any. Primarily, however, it seemed to me and to Lammerford that you could not stay longer in the States without risking a loss of personal prestige that would react much more widely than with you individually. There is no discounting the almost impossible results you've obtained through your personal work and influence. But one may only go so far with that sort of thing in an alien country before one's motives are under suspicion and there is risk of losing everything which has been gained. The mass of the people in any country are fickle, more ready to believe bad than good concerning anyone; and you have stirred up the radicals to a point where not only your and the *chota Ranee's* lives were in constant danger, but to where they had started a campaign of lying propaganda devilishly calculated to ruin your reputations beyond mending. The socialist papers were already alluding to you as 'a man masquerading with a title, who was nothing but an industrial spy in the pay of the capitalists.' Of course, the decent newspapers have been trying to shout that down and show its utter absurdity, but the great wealth you still have in spite of ruinous taxation is against you—is being used against you in every conceivable way, though you have recently spent over ten million dollars in putting several plants on their feet and insuring better working conditions for the employees. In short, it seemed to Lammy and me as if you had reached the limit of your effectiveness over there—and might undo much of your marvelously good work by remaining longer."

LORD TREVOR nodded understanding. "Faith, Abdool—you're but tellin' me what Nan an' I had sensed durin' the last fortn't we were there. Though I was born in the States, I'm a British subject by inheritance an' title. My messin' in American political affairs was beginnin' to be misunderstood—though every thinkin' statesman over there will admit it was needed, an' a good bit more of the same from diff'rent sources. In fact, we'd not have stayed over a week longer even if you hadn't cabled. For a while at least, we mean to remain here on our own place—get acquainted with the young ones again, an' forget the whole bally topsy-turvy world, which may go hang if it likes! We're tired, Abdool—mentally an' physically! Unless we blot the whole beastly mess from our minds for a good bit, we'll be heart-sick an' soul-sick beyond recovery! We mean to potter about in our gardens, work out mechanical improvem'nts in our shops an' laboratories over yon in the forest—have a few interestin' people down to play bridge an' gossip through whole evenings about nothin' at all. If that doesn't prove enough of a nerve-tonic, we'll provision the *Ranee Sylvia* for a year's cruise and lose ourselves in the South Pacific."

"It's what I would give much to see you do—particularly if my old invitation and room on the *Ranee* are still available. But as to either of you staying out of the great game that long—I wonder!"

"Wonder what?"

"Well, suppose I outline a bit of what has come under my observation during the past month or so. Eh?"

"That's partly what I crossed the Western Ocean to hear. Quite sure to be interestin'—in a purely academic way, don't you know, as long as we're out of it."

"You heard about German troops in the Ruhr district, of course? A blind—to

cover the fact that a new and devilish machine-gun, together with a deadly long-range three-ninety, are being turned out at Essen in quantity production. That's *that!* Also, a rumor of seventeen thousand bombing-planes under construction. No comment necessary! I fancy that neither Foch nor our own Government will allow it to proceed too far, if true. I've been in many different localities—Prussia, Bavaria, Austria, Hungary. What I've seen is already filed at the Foreign Office. Recently I've been in Bucharest and Warsaw. Know anything about the men running Poland today?"

"Pilsudski—Bilinski—Wojciechowski?"

"Officially, in the limelight, yes. But were it not for old John Krostoki and three or four lineal descendants of former Polish kings or statesmen in the days before Napoleon, it is doubtful if the republic would hold together three months. Those five are the most farsighted men in the country—and immeasurably the most influential under the surface, because they and their families are known to have been uncompromising patriots for centuries, several of the connections having given their lives in defiance of Russia. In the first place the war made of the country a desert covered with rotting corpses for hundreds of square miles. The revenue for the nine months ending March 1920 was 1,078,000,000 Polish marks. The expenditure, 8,650,000,000, including the four and a half billion war-debt. They are keeping an army of half a million men in the field or under arms, fighting Lenine's reds, with a reserve of 400,000 more.

"The whole country is flooded with bolshevist propaganda; there is disaffection in many localities. Were it not for the tight rein, the real power of Krostoki and the other four, all semblance of civilized government would have disintegrated before this. But the Poles are one of the most persistent races in the world. Their intuitive knowledge that they are wisely led by such men in the background, with really capable men now in office, is performing a miracle which probably would be impossible in any other countries save Belgium or France. But they must have secret guarantees from countries able to back them up if the tide should turn."

"YES," commented Trevor. "And the Treaty of Versailles—"

"Is not worth the paper it is engrossed upon without secret treaties which preserve the balance of power—as you know, O friend of my father's son! It happens that—for some past and trifling service which he magnified greatly—John Krostoki seems to have much confidence both in my word and my judgment, which is the only possible explanation for his inviting me to a secret conference of the five I have mentioned. I went to his house in Warsaw at ten in the evening; at eleven he took me on foot to a house in a block of very old ones on the Krakowskie Przedmiescie, in the rear of which is a partly dismantled Polish castle on the bluff overlooking the river. Its former turrets and keep were razed down to the second floor a century or two ago, so that you wouldn't notice it from the Praga side; but the big Gothic hall and several extensive chambers are still in excellent state of preservation, and underneath the ground-floor there are three levels of cellars, vaults and crypts—some of them filled with wine laid down before the old kingdom was divided. Allah knows how it remained there during the war!"

"I can tell you that. The only passage down to those lowest vaults, from the castle itself, was bricked up before the end of 1914—the wall being covered with pitch and soot which fooled everyone who got down that far. Another passage goes under the Vistula deep enough to be kept dry with little pumping, and comes out in one of the detached Praga houses. Ignace Sibescie, who is undoubtedly one of the five you mentioned, hid Lammy an' me there for several days after the Russian army had retreated. I fancy that passage under the river isn't known to more than half a dozen men now living. But—go on with your story. There is a Gothic crypt, architecturally a marvel of beauty, at the river end of the second level below ground. Presumably that would be where your conference was held. Eh?"

"Precisely. And I doubt if more than eight or ten know of that place, either. An empty wine-tun backs up against the wall in which the narrow door was cut; a section of the planking swings outward upon concealed hinges, and one goes in through the tun itself. There has been a good deal of hell in Polish history—they protected themselves in many ingenious ways. But the conference—"

"Nobody present but those five and yourself?"

"THAT was all," continued Abdool. "Krostoki started by going rather minutely into the present condition of the country and what their army has been doing around Kiev. He said they were literally fighting with their backs against the wall—which is doubtless true. Poland has taken large slices of Germany, Austria and Russia—going back to a trifle more than her old boundaries. Czecho-Slovakia, on the south, has taken pretty much all of Bohemia. Roumania has crossed the Transylvanian Alps and taken all of eastern Hungary inhabited by her nationals. Jugo-Slavia covers Serbia, Bosnia, Dalmatia and Montenegro—the second most powerful state in the Balkans, if wisely governed and not permitted to become too aggressive.

"But of those four states, the only two that will materially assist in policing central Europe for some years to come are Poland and Roumania. Roumania has been giving Poland assistance in the way of arms and encouragement—but can't do much more. Both countries feel that if they are left to stand alone as buffer states, they must be conquered and absorbed, sooner or later, by a militant, Germany after it has developed and exploited Russia—as it is methodically starting in to do just now. Both countries feel the need of secret guarantees from England, France and Italy. There has been some traveling back and forth of envoys between them—but always under espionage from Germany and Russia, so that it is difficult to arrive at any definite understanding without betrayal, from some unexpected quarter."

"Ah! I begin to catch the drift! Krostoki and the others are trying to select some trustworthy and efficient man who might come to England in a roundabout way, upon other perfectly obvious business. Ferdinand of Roumania will be attempting the same thing. Both have managed, or think they have, to obtain the promise of certain Italian and French statesmen to be in London about the same time. Then by chance meetings in the houses of prominent English people who are not by way of bein' statesmen, they hope for secret conferences, quite by accident, in which the whole ground may be gone over and the interest of the Entente in maintaining their independence by force of arms if necess'ry demonstrated so clearly that a sort of gentlemen's agreem'nt between the diff'rent governm'nts will be reached before they leave England. Of course, the chances are a hundred to one that both the German Junta at Charlottenburg an' Lenine's council in Moscow will get at least some vague hint of it an' send some of the most unscrupulous agents they've got across the Channel about the same time! Krostoki recognized that possibility, I suppose?"

"Naturally—and suggested a way of covering it. Their first choice for the envoy was Xaver Scharvolski, the journalist—who would have a dozen excellent reasons connected with his work for coming to London at this time and has not been known in connection with the Government, though he secretly had much to do with organizing it on constitutional lines. He also is a descendant of a fine old Polish family, many of them titled, and he is absolutely trustworthy. But John Krostoki suggested having him proceed rather directly instead of trying to mask his destination—letting the emissaries from Moscow and Berlin shadow him if they obtain any hints. Scharvolski will let himself be seen here at the Polish legation and have frequent interviews with Prince Sapieha. When it came to the real envoy who is coming here under cover, the other men were rather at a loss to pick one out—and old John surprised us all by suggesting Count Josef Wodjeska."

"NOT so bad a choice, that," observed Trevor. "He is but thirty-one or so; yet he was in the Intelligence Departm'nt of the French Army durin' most of the war, spendin' week after week in the enemy's cities without bein' once suspected, bringin' back information that was simply invaluable. Then he went into the Aviation Corps and proved one of the coolest, nerviest aces they had. Severely wounded in his last fight, but got down without a smash—and was unconscious for a week afterward. Been recuperatin' along the Riviera since then. Entirely plausible if he comes to England for the summer as an after-cure an' for the social relaxation. He's done quite enough for Poland, anybody would say—has jolly well earned his rest. It would be better, of course, if he came here direct from the Mediterranean, but that would involve sendin' one of your five men down there to instruct him, which wouldn't do at all—give the whole show away!"

"It took Krostoki half an hour explain-

ing to the others just what you've said before they finally admitted that Count Josef was the proper choice. They discussed ways and means of getting him here, until I suggested leaving that to me; and John accepted the suggestion promptly, saying it would be much safer if even they were not seen with the Count in public and knew nothing of his plans. It just happens that one of our old French Indo-China friends is cruising in the Baltic on a small but seaworthy yacht. He will spend a week with the Count in Warsaw and then take him off for a cruise to Madeira—from where we'll smuggle him up to London on another boat of some sort."

"I suppose there's no way of findin' out who King Ferdinand will send?"

"Not definitely. Krostoki was under the impression that it would be either Major Rupescu or General Gaitoianu—both loyal men with a great deal of diplomatic ability."

"Ah! Rupescu, eh? Perhaps I can throw a bit of influence there, by wirin' him an invitation to come here as our guest for a fortn't or so. If he mentions that to the King, it will provide just the excuse they want to mask anything resemblin' a political mission. An' I fancy it might be manipulated in such a way that Scarpia will be sent from Italy. One thing we must learn is the probable identity of the men or women who might be sent by Moscow an' Berlin if they get a hint of all this."

"That may not prove as difficult as it looks. Possibly you haven't heard of the fact—but in a quiet way England has been gathering up all the reds who have been under espionage, and deporting them. At my suggestion they've not meddled at all with four people whom we found excellent bait to trap the others. Two are university professors with excellent reputations all through the war, and another two are women artists of the impressionist school in St. John's Wood. The Foreign Office wouldn't believe they were mixed up with the bolshevists at all until the Honorable Teddy Creighton and another F. O. man secreted themselves in the house of Professor Tesschanoff and overheard a scheme being outlined to rot the whole Labor Party in England with their ideas. After that, we shadowed everyone who came to the house and arrested many of them in other cities—none were meddled with near either of those two men or women. They've no reason to suppose themselves under suspicion. On general principles the chances are that anybody sent by the reds to London will call upon them at first opportunity, using their houses and studies more or less as rendezvous. As for Berlin, we've picked up the fact that a certain Swedish banking-house has on deposit in London a good many millions of German funds; if we keep a close watch upon everyone who draws money there after recently arriving in England, it should give us the key to the Berlin agents' identity. There is also a Dutch banking-house that will bear watching. What do you think about the possibility of putting through secret treaties with Poland and Roumania?"

"NOT much argum'nt upon that score, is there?" returned Trevor. "If those countries are conquered by Russia an' Germany, it's a fire-alarm to the whole civilized world, is it not? On the other hand—if they are properly backed up, nursed along to becomin' successful, well-armed nations, they form a vastly serviceable defense against future outbreaks among the Teutons or Slavs. We should help them by every means we can exert short of crippling ourselves. The racial hatred of the Jugo-Slavs for Austria-Hungary ought to make them a formidable state also. Czecho-Slovakia is in a bad position between Germany an' Austria—wouldn't last twenty-four hours against a surprise attack unless a strong Polish army were coöperatin' with them. . . . . How long before young Count Josef an' the others will be here?"

"The Roumanian envoy may arrive by the end of the week, and the Italian also. The Count is probably en route for Madeira now—should get back here by the middle of next week at the outside: he will be a guest of Lord and Lady Hillingford in Dorset,—Craddesly Towers, near Lyme Regis,—scarcely an hour's ride from here by motor. If you have Major Rupescu at Trevor Hall, with Scarpia, you could scarcely better the arrangement. But of course you'll be only taking an academic interest in the proceedings—in fact, you may be even on your way to the South Pacific on the *Ranee*. Eh?"

"I'm tempted to be. As I told you, we're both tired. If we stay here, there's no keepin' out of the game—whether we'd like to or not. Hmph! I fancy we'll stay, Abdool—as you jolly well know we will!"

AS they were strolling up to the Hall across the terraces, two sunburned young men in khaki overalls, carrying wrenches and a plumber's kit-bag, stopped to exchange a laughing word or two with the Dowager Duchess of Edelstone, who was sitting on a marble bench in the sun. Then they jumped into a very much battered work-car and raced down the wood-road toward the lodge gates. When the Earl and Sir Abdool came along, she was looking after the disappearing vehicle with a peculiar expression upon her fine old face.

"George! Did you notice the appearance of your son and Francis Stokely, Earl of Carnham, just now? When it wants but a few minutes to luncheon?"

"Er—not particularly. Fancy they must be goin' over to Mallow Hall—matter of settin' Lady Mallow's drains right for her. She's in a most uncomfortable mess—house full of guests, an' two or three of the lower rooms flooded. Telephoned every town within fifty miles for a plumber—two or three promised to come next week if nothin' interfered. Wasn't that it?"

"So I gathered from what they said. But my word! Fancy! A belted earl and a viscount doing unspeakable things with one's drains! What in the world are we coming to!"

"Just that, Your Grace! In my shops, back yon in the heart of the forest, I've started a trades school for members of the aristocracy. We're not allowin' a hint of it to get abroad, but we're gettin' more applications than we can handle, an' already have turned out over two hundred young chaps—aye, an' middle-aged ones as well—who are entirely competent to install a system of plumbing, drive a locomotive, run electric trams or build a house. When the workingmen refuse to stay on a job more than two or three days of each week, in spite of higher wages than they ever before received, they are issuing a challenge to the educated classes which is the stupidest, most shortsighted thing they have ever done yet! They're saying: 'Aw, let the nobs wait until we're good an' ready to do a job for 'em—then mebbe we'll do it, or mebbe we wont!' But it never occurs to them that the 'nobs' wont continue to accept that sort of thing. The work of each town or city or county must be done—if not by one, by some one else. It can't an' wont stop to await their pleasure, their laziness an' loafing. If the educated classes are once forced to do the work of manual an' mechanical laborers, they'll do it so much better, in so much shorter time, that the laborer may find himself without employment of any sort. The challenge from mere manual ability to brains is unspeakable folly at the very start! The work will be done—because most of it absolutely must be done! If the laborer wont do it, he is quite likely to do with less employment an' fewer meals, until he realizes his stupidity."

"Oh, you're quite right, of course! In my hospital, during the war, my hands got into messier things than I ever knew existed. Result—I qualified as undergraduate surgeon before the Armistice, and am perfectly competent to handle minor injuries for the rest of my life. But drains! An earl messing with drains—in time of peace! Seems so entirely out of keeping, don't you think?"

THE more Lord Trevor considered the coming of the envoys to London, the more it seemed to him that the men from Poland and Roumania were menaced by dangers not so apparent in the case of those from the more powerful countries. The understanding between England, France and Italy was already so far crystallized that it amounted to actual defensive alliance—as also with Japan and China. But the smaller states, struggling for their very existence, were far more exposed to every trick of diplomatic force which might weaken them. It seemed to him practically impossible that some hint would not reach Moscow and the Charlottenburg Junta of the proposed secret treaties—in which case no measures would be considered too drastic to counteract or prevent them. After thinking it over for twenty-four hours, he made a few changes in clothing and facial appearance—then called upon Professor Stefan Tesschanoff at his attractive little home in Mayfair.

Up to the time of the Russian revolution, the Earl of Dyvnaint had picked up passwords, secret recognition-signs, names and much other data used by the Russian secret police, Foreign Office and the Wilhelmstrasse in Berlin. In the chaos which succeeded the fall of the Romanoffs he picked up many of the slight changes used with the old codes. So, while his information was by no means up to date, and had to be used with every possible

caution, he was in position to make a tentative suggestion here, use a recognition-sign there, and obtain the data he needed to be accepted either as a red or a German agent. In the first moments alone with the Professor in his library he explained that he had just arrived from the United States, had been for some months out of direct touch with Moscow. He described the progress of the bolshevist propaganda in the States, and finally said that he had picked up a hint or two of something likely to happen in England before long. While talking, he tried several recognition-signs and words—to which the Professor made the proper responses. So he presently said, with the bearing of one a little higher in authority:

"Are you quite sure that you have never been suspected by these fools of English, Professor—that no evidence was obtained when so many of us were arrested and deported?"

"Deported! They would not dare! I knew that several had been arrested, but had not heard of the deportations—"

"It was done at night, very quietly. But the news-sheets got wind of it. You probably overlooked the account. You've not been questioned by the authorities?"

"Not once! My record has been perfectly clear, there is positively nothing upon which they could hang a suspicion!"

"Except—the visits from those who were afterward arrested?"

"No. That would mean suspecting every well-known Russian in England, practically. They visited most of us, you know."

"True—I hadn't thought of that. Have you any means of guarding the house while some of us are conferring—to prevent a surprise raid?"

"None. That question comes up every time one of you appears here. But consider: If Government agents found anyone about my house who looked like a guard or picket, they would at once have evidence that I feared intrusion by the authorities—suspicious in itself. If one of them happened to be concealed behind some bush in my grounds at the rear and had a view of this room through the window, he would see nothing but two gentlemen of quite respectable appearance discussing commercial affairs—or cricket. If there were ladies in the room, its appearance would be even more conventional. Admitting that some conference might be overheard, I am fairly well guarded by a system of wiring. If anyone steps upon a certain portion of the floor in the outer hall, upon the second and fifth step of the stairs to either second floor or basement, it drops an indicator upon this little clock-face on my desk—noiselessly. There are ten points about the house from which I would get a warning—all in places where a stranger would be likely to step, but which the people in my house avoid. The subject of any conversation, you know, may be changed in two seconds."

"EXCELLENT!" commented the supposed fellow-Red. "A system like that should be all the picketing you need—unless some guest happens to have a price upon his head. By the way, there are three others of us whom I should see if I am to be of much use while in England: Olga Tschaikaroff, an artist, somewhere in St. John's Wood; Sonia Fredova, another artist-illustrator; and Doctor Paul Sliniskow, who, I believe, is in the university here. Could you give me their addresses?"

"Of course! But would it not be safer to meet them here, first? It saves the necessity for your introducing yourself with a lot of recognition-signs, and if by any chance you happened to be followed by Government agents since your arrival, it prevents attention being drawn to those other houses. On the other hand, if either of them are being shadowed, it keeps you from being implicated. They can tell when you meet them whether it is quite safe to call at their studios or not."

"You're right! That would be much the better plan. How frequently do you think it will be safe for me to come here?"

"Whenever you please. You call yourself Professor Wladowitch? There are thousands of scientific subjects upon which two professors might be working together; I would say, of course, that you brought me the most unquestionable sort of introductory letters. In fact, we might block out a few between us in case a necessity should arise for showing them. Oh—by the way! There's a question I think I will ask you, though it is rather unlikely you could have heard any details in America. We are not exactly short of funds, here in England, but our balances in two banks are scarcely enough to meet any serious emergency. I've been assured from Moscow that there was a very large amount

of Russian money in England, and that advances would be made to us when needed. But it seems dangerous to wait too long. Had you heard of the sending of a very large sum here?"

"I've heard that practically all the gold and jewels found in the Petrograd bank-vaults were spirited out of the country on a small steamer—but supposed it was banked in Stockhom or Amsterdam."

"That's what we were given to understand; and the chances are it's true, because I happen to know that the Council has at least five or ten millions on deposit there. But last week a man came to me with a most amazing story. He claimed to have been a Russian sailor on a little twelve-hundred-ton cargo-steamer which was lying at Petrograd during the revolution. He said that for eight nights, between one and three in the morning, carts came down to the quay with small and very heavy oak cases which were put in the lower holds. The men who drove the carts didn't know what was in them—but said they were as heavy as lead, and thought they must be parts of some very valuable machinery. The boxes were not at all uniform in shape or size. On the eighth night the boat slipped out past Kronstadt before daylight, and a few nights later passed through the Cattegat—where he recognized the shore-line. Then she steered northwest, and he saw no land for more than four days—the last of which, they were steering due south.

"That night, they ran in close to the shore and anchored in what seemed to be an entirely deserted inlet with high cliffs on three sides of it. About two in the morning, he had the anchor-watch, alone—but just happened to have gone down aft to examine something when the engineer came running up from his machine-room, and with the mate and captain, lowered a boat in which they started pulling away from the steamer. In the fairly bright starlight he saw the captain shoot both the engineer and mate, roll their bodies over into the water and pull away for the shore alone. Then there was a rush of steam from below; the watchman noticed that the boat was much lower in the water, ran to the engine-room entrance, saw water halfway up the cylinders. Everyone else on board was asleep. He saw she was going down in two or three minutes, and he climbed to the roof of the deck-house and cut the fastenings of a life-raft, which he managed to shove overboard and then get down to. The suction almost pulled him under when the boat went down, but he presently floated out to sea on the raft with the ebb-tide. In the morning there was no land that he could see. On the third day he was raving with thirst when a steamer picked him up."

"DID they tell him what the nearest coast was?" inquired Professor Wladowitch.

"They were Spanish; he couldn't understand a word. But he afterward learned that they were bound from Bergen to New Orleans and were something over two days out from Bergen, the steamer going a little over twelve knots—which would make the place where his steamer was sunk an inlet in one of the Scotch islands or further south—provided, of course, the whole story was not pure moonshine—told to get a contribution out of me, eventually, as I suspect."

"Did he say how fast his little steamer was?"

"Said her speed was twelve knots, but thought she was running a little faster than that after leaving Kronstadt."

"What was his idea of the whole performance?"

"That there must have been gold or silver in those oak boxes, that the whole thing was carefully planned to provide a safe hiding-place for it, and that everyone but the captain had been deliberately drowned or killed, as he supposed, in order that none but he should know where the stuff is hidden or be able to take a diving-outfit and recover it at some future time."

"H-m-m! There were at least two hundred millions, sterling, taken from the bank-vaults in Petrograd—more than that, if anything. It is certain that we have used several millions for propaganda and other work in America—also that you've used a lot here. But I can think of no safer place to keep the great bulk of it for the present than on the ocean-bottom in some such locality. Still, there's no proof that there was gold in those boxes, and there are a hundred reasons why the thing is improbable—very much so. If anything happens to that captain, or he double-crosses the council, it loses the whole amount, because they'll never dare sound every inlet around the British Isles until they locate that steamer on bottom. The British Government would simply take

a hand in the search and confiscate whatever they found. No, if Lenine had a grain of common sense, he'd never trust any captain that far with any such overwhelming amount in gold. And I think your Russian seaman will try to sell you his story for fifty or a hundred pounds—as a tip to a fortune for yourself. Frankly, it will be as well for you to have the fellow killed at first opportunity—just to keep him from telling the story elsewhere when drunk."

"That's what occurred to me. Safer for all of us, if he is telling the truth—and preventing an epidemic of diving fortune-hunters along those coasts who might focus attention upon us when we are busy with important matters. The man is in a sailors' boarding-house down at Chatham—very simple matter to have him done away with in one of the water-side pubs in that vicinity. In regard to your being of assistance here in London, I'm under the impression that, from your experience in the States, you can do very effective work, one way or another. I'll have the two women here Thursday evening—come again at that time. Dine with us."

AFTER leaving the Professor's house, Earl Trevor hailed a taxi and was driven westward to his Jacobean mansion in Park Lane—from which, after a hasty meal, he motored down to Trevor Hall in Devon. In the first period of actual relaxation they had known for many years, the Earl and Countess had invited a few old and tried friends for an indefinite stay at the Hall. Besides these there were congenial neighbors from the county families dropping in almost every afternoon, including the young friends of Lord Ivo and Lady Sylsil. So the old Norman-Plantagenet building had a score or more of well-known people in its various rooms and galleries most of the time. Of course, the Earl and Countess themselves were not supposed to be much in evidence except during the dinner-hour and for a little while after it. But the presence of guests and the providing of entertainment for them requires a certain amount of concentration even in the most smoothly running household. Aside from this, were the multitudinous affairs connected with His Lordship's widely varied interests, enough to keep three secretaries and a business executive constantly busy. So his appointment to dine with the Russians in Mayfair on Thursday evening didn't once occur to him until noon of the same day. He reached London by motor a little before six and spent half an hour on his disguise in Park Lane before driving to the Professor's house. It is possible that in the confusion of hurrying up to town he may have omitted some detail of his slight make-up, or selected a suit not quite in keeping with the character he assumed. It could scarcely have been a really noticeable difference in his manner or appearance; yet after being introduced to Doctor Sliniskow and the two women artists, chatting entertainingly halfway through the meal, a vague something about him made Professor Tesschanoff uneasy—not precisely suspicious of the man, because he had tested him too thoroughly, as he thought, to have any doubts that the pseudo Professor Wladowitch was really a Moscow bolshevist of high standing, but politics in Russia were by no means harmonious, and Wladowitch might belong to a faction secretly antagonistic to his own.

It was this formless lack of entire confidence which led Tesschanoff to become a little more reserved in what he said, and the two women noticed it, took their cue from it. When, during the dinner, a telegram was brought in by his butler, he merely glanced at the sheet and stuffed it into one of his trousers pockets as if a matter of no consequence. Had he placed full confidence in the Earl, as upon the occasion of their first meeting, he would have passed the telegram across the table for him to read—and its contents would have been discussed at length. As it was, however, he waited until Trevor's departure before showing it to the others—and as a result the Polish journalist Xaver Scharvolski was nearly killed in a savage attempt upon his life which might have been forestalled.

APPARENTLY the supposed Professor Wladowitch paid not the slightest attention to the little incident of the telegram. Actually, however, he was instantly aware that he was not fully in the confidence of his host, that somewhere he must have made a slip through being hurried and tired out. When leaving the house, about eleven o'clock, he knew that unless he was able to think up some prompt remedy to counteract whatever suspicion they might have of him, his chances for obtaining any first-hand information as to

what the red secret agents might be doing were practically gone.

Upon reaching Park Lane, he located the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs at one of his clubs and asked him to come there immediately, and removed his disguise before the statesman arrived. Then, outlining the urgent necessity for knowing the plans of the reds, he described his visits to Tesschanoff and asked to have the Professor quietly arrested within the next two hours. The Secretary, an old friend of Trevor's, saw the point and chuckled over the details of the Earl's scheme. He gave orders at once over the telephone which resulted in the immediate arrest and confinement of the Russian professor.

Next morning the supposed Professor Wladowitch called at the studio of Sonia Fredova and insisted upon seeing her upon a matter of the greatest importance. He was evidently rather excited, though he had himself well in hand. He said that he had gone to his Swedish bankers as soon as their doors were opened, and that one of their bolshevist organization connected with the house had told him of Tesschanoff's arrest during the night. Wladowitch assured her that the British authorities could have no serious evidence against the Professor and that he must be cleared with them at once, or one of the safest bolshevist rendezvous in London would be destroyed. As a way of going about this, he told her that the Professor's appointment to the chair in the university had come, originally, through Lord Bentingdean—himself a scientist who had known Tesschanoff for many years—and suggested that Sonia go to His Lordship at the Royal Society, about noon, with the story of the Professor's arrest. Bentingdean happened to be a peer with much Government influence, and would doubtless be able to clear Tesschanoff with little trouble.

The suggestion worked out with perfect smoothness—Lord Bentingdean having been coached by the Earl an hour before. He motored around to Downing Street with Sonia, obtained an interview with the Foreign Secretary, explained his acquaintance with Tesschanoff through many years and the improbability of his being really implicated with any red organization whatever. The Secretary asked a number of questions as to the Professor's whereabouts on certain specified evenings—in several of which cases His Lordship was able to give a positive alibi—in others Sonia provided one. And they presently had the satisfaction of hearing an order for Tesschanoff's release sent over the telephone.

WHEN the Professor reached his house after a sleepless and uncomfortable night,—for in spite of his great mental capacity the man had no large amount of physical courage,—he found Sonia waiting for him and learned of the supposed Wladowitch's instrumentality in securing his release. Tesschanoff called himself all kinds of a fool for ever doubting him, and the next time the Earl dropped in, he was shown the telegram in reference to Xaver Scharvolski—de-coded. It was then too late to head off his attempted assassination, which had occurred the night before, but Wladowitch's expression of contempt was illuminating.

"It is most unfortunate that the Council in Moscow has not had the benefit of our experience in countries like America or England. They understand no conditions except those of Russia. If one of us had been ordered to handle Scharvolski, we'd have gone about it in a different way. The man is in a hospital now—may die! And none of you know whom he came here to see, what his real errand may have been, whether he was actually here upon anything except business connected with journalism. He should have been watched for at least two or three weeks—with the people he met. *They* should have been watched. No matter how dangerous a man is, he should never be killed until it is certain he can no longer be made use of. Abduct him? Yes, if there's anything to be gained. Keep him in confinement if necessary—but if he's a man with any brains, do not kill him until he has been squeezed dry.

AT the end of the week Major Rupesco of the Roumanian staff arrived in London from Bucharest, and took the first train down to Trevor Hall in South Devon, where he found the Cavalière Scarpia, from Rome, and two British Cabinet ministers. Sunday afternoon Lord Hillingford telephoned from Craddesly Towers, near Lyme Regis, that they had an old friend of the Earl and Countess among their guests, and asked if they might bring him down before dinner. As the Earl understood perfectly who the guest was, the arrangement having been made two weeks before, he said that he and the Countess would

motor up to Craddesly instead, at once.

They made the run to Craddesly Towers in just under the hour and found, as they had expected, that Count Josef Wodjeska of Warsaw was one of the party. He was just in from a yachting cruise to Madeira, as he explained, and was very much tempted to remain with the Hillingfords until his health was fully established. Among the other guests for the coming week was a very handsome brunette who was introduced to them as Madame Irma Racoczy, a Hungarian artist who was making her home in London until affairs in her own country settled down. Her face was oddly familiar. Without appearing to do so, the Earl studied it from time to time—and barely smothered an imprecation when her real identity flashed through his mind. The woman had made subtle but effective changes in her appearance, but there was no doubt whatever as to her being actually Madame Olga Tschaikaroff, the bolshevist artist of St. John's Wood!

The Earl's title and social position alone would have prevented her dreaming that he could be the same man who, with somewhat altered appearance and different clothes, had been introduced to her as Professor Wladowitch in Tesschanoff's house, and he was certain that she had no suspicion of him whatever. But Trevor was more apprehensive as to whether some other members of the house-party might not be confederates. A few confidential inquiries of His Lordship in a corner of the smoking-room, however, convinced him that the woman was playing a lone hand until she could be joined by others. Hillingford had rather emphatic doubts that she could have known of Count Josef's coming to them.

"We'd met her with other artists in a London house, mutual friends of long standin', an' invited her down to do bits of the Dorset coast hereabout. Came here Saturday. The Count didn't arrive until this morning. Nobody knew he was coming to us except the five men in the Polish Junta and Sir Abdool Mohammed Khan, who arranged the yachting end of it. If the woman is what you say, her bein' in the house at the same time is pure coincidence—though doubtless she'll try to make the most of it!"

"H-m-m! For the boy's own protection an' the success of his mission here, I fancy we'd best chaff you a bit about the superiority of our air along the South Devon cliffs, for invalids, an' then suggest borrowin' him from you for a week. Inside of forty-eight hours we should get through pretty much everything the Count came here to do. Then, if the emissaries from Moscow an' Berlin who are now in London establish themselves in the neighborhood, I can run him down to the Mediterranean on my yacht before they start picketin' any of the country roads near us. Where the leak has been is immaterial just now, but this Tschaikaroff woman intends doin' him personal harm, sooner or later, even though she may not be at all sure that his coming has any political object. An' she may be reinforced at any moment."

THE scheme of carrying the Count off with them to Trevor Hall that night was jokingly put through by the Earl and Countess—a hundred pounds being wagered that the young Polish nobleman would notice the difference in the air at once and be the better for it, the decision being left to him. And as he was to return in a few days at the outside, it is doubtful if Olga Tschaikaroff had any suspicion of the way she and the other bolshevists had been entirely outwitted. For the international conference was held at Trevor Hall next morning, in a room to which the Envoys were admitted through a secret passage.

The tentative agreements reached at that conference in regard to secret treaties between the various countries belong to future history. Even if the present chronicler of these events knew all the provisions in them or how definitely each government was willing to commit itself, this is not the place or the time to make them public. But another enterprise which follows as a more or less direct outcome of the conference may be touched upon. It started after the various celebrities had left Trevor Hall in a confidential talk between the Earl, Baron Lammerford and the Foreign Secretary—in the little vine-covered summer-house on the edge of the cliffs.

"What struck me forcibly durin' that conference was the urgent need of both Roumania an' Poland for heavy loans in cash. The million or so that Britain is able to advance just now is but a drop in the tank; they'll need far more than that! The prospect of gettin' it from the United States looked far better a few months ago than it does now. Do you know, you

chaps, that yarn of the Russian sailor to Professor Tesschanoff keeps stickin' in my mind! The more I mull it over, the more it seems just what a crafty, shortsighted dictator like Lenine would be likely to do. There are inlets among the Scotch islands and along the west coast of Ireland where that little steamer might lie for a hundred years without discovery. An' who would dream from her size an' general look that she had millions aboard of her in gold?"

"There's no proof that she had! Besides, if she were in diving-depth, wouldn't her topmasts show above water at low tide?"

"The man said that both masts an' funnel were very short. The little tub was forty years old, you know. As for the gold—what else could it be, shipped at night, with so much secrecy?"

"Well, assuming the whole story and theory to be true, about where would you place her—as a navigator?"

"Faith, I've done a bit of figurin' over that. The man said it was just over four days from the time he saw land in the Cattegat to the night they anchored in that inlet. Assumin' that the craft was averagin' between twelve an' thirteen knots, that would make something under twelve hundred miles. Now, if she turned north, that would put the inlet above Trondhjem on the Norway coast. But he said she was steerin' south for at least a day, which would put it somewhere along the west coast of Ireland, an', knowin' just how a Russian master would steer to pass below the Orkneys, I'm quite certain I'd be able to come within fifteen or twenty miles of the spot. That part of the Irish coast is a mass of high cliffs an' deep inlets, very sparsely populated even by smugglers—I'd some experience with Achill Island at the time of the *Lusitania* sinkin'."

"Were you thinkin' of goin' after the stuff yourself?"

"Aye—if the Admir'lty would consider a quiet hint to keep its paws off an' not watch the movem'nts of the *Ranee* too closely. I would arm my crew, of course, just on the chance of serious opposition from smugglers, or quite possibly some of Lenine's agents along there—an' if we get into any mix-up, I'll blaze right into the brown of 'em. There's nobody on that coast who would have any legal right to interfere with me!"

THE Earl's ability as a navigator was proved a week later when the *Ranee Sylvia* poked her nose into one inlet after another on the west coast of Ireland. In the third of them—long and narrow, with precipitous cliffs on either side—there was no trace of human habitation, or even of any caves large enough to be used by smugglers. If there was a path by which the top of the cliffs might be reached from the shelving beach at their foot, a careful search with powerful glasses failed to reveal it.

Sending a launch out to the entrance of the inlet to warn them of other craft approaching from either direction, the Earl sent down a couple of his divers to examine the bottom. In fifteen minutes they signaled to he hauled up—and said the yacht was almost directly over a steamer of about a thousand tons, with short masts and funnel.

Inside the next two hours, great rents had been blown in her side-plating of the sunken steamer which gave access to both holds, and a number of oak cases were hauled up to the yacht. By the middle of the following afternoon everything of that description had been recovered from the wreck, and the *Ranee* was racing around into the English Channel.

Running up the Thames to Tower Dock, Trevor asked for an armed guard to convey a consignment of treasure to the Bank of England, where he deposited a hundred millions, sterling, to the credit of the Roumanian Government, and an equal amount to the treasurer of the Polish Republic. Some fifteen odd millions he banked to his own account for his trouble—an offset to some of his staggering war-taxes. That evening the Foreign Secretary, Sir Abdool and Baron Lammerford dined with him in Park Lane, scarcely able to believe the stupendous amount which he had salvaged until they saw the Bank of England receipts.

"I don't mind admittin' to you chaps that I'm feelin' unusually pleased over the outcome of this affair. A hundred millions, will do a lot for Poland an' Roumania just now—but the cream of the joke is on those bounders in Moscow! Eh? What? One fancies hearin' them curse in five languages if they ever learn what became of the money! What?"

Another of Mr. New's remarkable stories of international intrigue will appear in the next, the September, issue.

The Diving Venus

By C. S. Montanye

IN order to run a amusement-park," old man Cushing says to me, one mornin' last week, "you must give the public somethin' to keep their minds off of the money they is spendin'. You gotta supply 'em with somethin' to make 'em forget the heat, the mosquitoes and the long trip back to town. Now, I don't mind tellin' you, Joe," he goes on to say, grabbin' a cigar and bitin' off the end of it, "that this here Seaside Amusement Park of which I has took over the lease, has been a awful failure, financially speakin', for the last coupla seasons. Anyone, includin' even a dummy, can figure out the park hasn't been a money-maker on account o' there bein' no free attractions. Even *I* can dope that out."

Cushing bein' the owner of the park and me bein' nothin' more or less than his general manager, didn't give me no right to tell him that in my opinion the park was a worse place to put money than a sock with a hole in it. Bein' located as it is on the north shore of Long Island, that part which is the headquarters of the mosquito trust, it is placed just far enough away from the city to make it out of the way. Not only this, but the place was a thousand years old in looks and they wasn't an attraction in it that hadn't been tried out in the days when Washington first went to Valley Forge.

They was a coupla merry-go-rounds, but both was all crippled up with somethin' resemblin' rheumatism, and the organs what rendered the music was minus several notes in both cases; and the latest song what they could tear off was "In the Good Old Summertime!" Then they was a scenic railway what shivered every time a car went up onto it, like it had a chill, and a helter-skelter nobody would take a chance on on account o' the splinters. They was also a ferris-wheel, but it needed more oil than Rockefeller controls to make it work right; and a little trick device what went under the name of the Fly-o-plane. This same was no less than a revolvin' wheel from which hung small cars on steel ropes. The cars was labeled with the names of gals, bein' called "Susie," "Myrtle," "Anna" and the like. When the thing got goin', which was hardly ever, these here cars would rush madly aroun' at a speed of at least a mile an hour, givin' them what had paid a dime to get on, both a chance to scream and get sick.

The best thing what the park had was a bathin' beach and a shoot-the-chutes what en-

THE author of "It Couldn't Be Done" is at his best in this joyous tale of an amusement-park turned upside down by its most beautiful attraction.

tered into it. Nature was responsible for the bathin' end of it, which made it so good that, if I do say so myself, they wasn't a beach aroun' that could touch it 'n any way.

The whole park was about three square city blocks long in size, and it rented out various concessions for the season. They was places for candy-stands, rollin' balls, shootin'-galleries, hot-dog counters and all the rest of the nickel-grabbers what can be found in any park from Boston to Los Angeles. They was a chance to clean up a nice piece of change in the leasin' of these places, but the trouble was to find the people to hire them. The bandits what operated the same, ate, slept and dreamed nothin' but Coney Island, and if you said "Seaside Park" anywheres within hearin' distance, you was sure of gettin' two things—a sneer and a laugh!

"I has already made arrangements with a bookin'-agent," Cushing says, buttin' in on my thoughts, "to supply us with enough talent to stage a big free show in the middle of the park. Although we open for business next week, we wont run this show I is speakin' of till a month later. And we is gonna use it for a big advertisin' feature. Keep your eyes open, Joe, and if you sees anythin' what looks like a novelty in this line, grab it quick. Novelties is more scarce than food in Russia."

TWO weeks later I has moved into my office at the park, over which some paint has been spread, and is settin' in front of a brand-new second-hand desk, when the door of the room opens and in comes the office-boy Cushing has wished off on me. The lad is carryin' a card in his hand like he was afraid it was gonna bite him. He fox-trots to the desk and lies down the pasteboard, which I promptly picks up and reads. It says: "Miss Virginia Lee."

"Well," I yawns, "what's the answer?"

The kid grins. "She says she wants to see you."

I looks the card over again. "Is she luggin' aroun' any books, or has she got a paper in her hand on which she is writin' subscriptions for the Orphan Childrens in Borneo? Or is she a bill-collector, or a person what don't like the park and wants her nickel back? Find out. If she wants to see me on business, shoot her in; otherwise say I left for China yesterday and expect to be gone a year."

The boy nods his head and one-steps out. A coupla minutes pass, and then the door opens again, and lookin' aroun', I sees standin' before me the prettiest gal I ever laid an eye on. She is about five feet six inches tall; has the same kind of a face you sees on magazine-covers but no place else; hair what is a cross between gold and red, with the gold gettin' the decision on points; and a figure—oh, boy! Just to look at it woulda made a certain gentleman named Ziegfeld happy for life!

For the rest, she is wearin' a blue silk dress what fits her better'n the skin of an orange; a straw sailor hat, with a veil pinned onto the roof of it; sensible flat-heeled shoes; and a bag made out o' beads. She is carryin' a green umbrella which hooks over one arm by a ivory ring.

WHILE I is starin' at her, she lets me see the sunshine of her smile and then begins speakin'.

"Is this Mr. Callahan?" she says in a voice what can't be told from the notes comin' out o' a silver flute.

I informs her she is right, dusts off a chair with my pocket-handkerchief and waves her into it. She sets down, shows me silk stockin's is still bein' worn and draws a breath.

"Mr. Callahan," she continues, "I am lookin' for employment, and learnin' you are to have a show here next month, I came to see if you could possibly use my services."

This was a surprise. Lookin' for work was about the last thing I had thought of.

"Are you from burlesque?" I wants to know.

She shakes her head. "No. From Trenton, New Jersey."

Her face is straight as a yard of string, so I knows she aint kiddin'.

"What kinda work is you seekin'?" I asks, curious to know.

She purses up a pair of red lips like she was expectin' a kiss, and opens her eyes wider, so I can admire them.

"I'm a diver," she says, "a fancy diver; and I thought, as you are located right on the water, you might be interested in givin' me a try-out. I have some stunts in my repertory what is never seen outside of the circus; and although I am only a amateur, all I asks is a trial."

This was a knockout blow. A diver! She looked about as much like a diver as I look like the Emperor of Japan. But

still she keeps her face straight and I gets an idea she *is* on the level. The first thing I remembers is what the boss has said to me about grabbin' ahold of any novelty I comes across. I figures out that if a diver aint a novelty, a frankfurter don't look like a sausage. I pictures myself gettin' solid with Cushing if she can show anythin' like a flash, and the more I thinks about it, the better I likes it.

All the time my head is full o' thoughts, Miss Lee keeps tryin' to hypnotize me with her eyes, and finally I has to go to the window for some fresh air.

"LISTEN," I says, comin' back to her. "I shall be glad to give you a trial at any time you want. If I thinks I can use you, I'll take you on right away. How does that listen?"

She gets up onto her feet. "Better'n Sousa's Band!" she says, smilin' again. "Show me where I can climb into my bathin'-suit, and I'll show you what tricks I know in the line of high and fancy divin'!"

We goes outside and she picks up a suitcase she has brung with her. I gets ahold of Eddy Matthews, same bein' the press-agent of the park, and introduces them both, tellin' Eddy he should see Miss Lee gets a bathhouse. Eddy, once he takes a slant at her, is ready and willin' to do anythin' asked, and he leads her away, holdin' her suitcase and chattin' like he was a old friend of the family.

In about five minutes he returns and begins shakin' hands with me. "Aint she a bear!" he hollers. "Where did she blow in from, and why does she wanna go in bathin' so early in the season? Don't they have no tubs in the house where she lives at, or what?"

I tells him as much as I knows, and Eddy whistles. "Joe," he says earnestly, "I have a feelin' we should immediately hire this dame! Believe me, queens like her aint runnin' aroun' loose. Her face alone should be worth about fifty bucks a week. Sign her quick before she can escape!"

I has to laugh. "Well," I admits, "her face *is* a novelty, but the boss, when he told me to keep open my eyes, didn't mean I should hire the first ringer for Lillian Russell what come along."

Eddy helps hisself to a cigarette, forgettin' to pass the box, and looks in the direction where Miss Lee has went. "A diver, hey?" he says. "I wonder where she gets that stuff? If she's a diver I'm a rear-admiral in the Roumanian navy! Believe me, Joe, she's escaped from the Follies. But why she has come to this moth-eaten, rundown, imitation amusement-park is more than I can grab an angle on. Somethin' funny behind it—wait and see if I aint right!"

Just at this moment, out from the bathhouses comes the one we is discussin'. She is wearin' a long cape which reaches almost to the knees, and has her hair twisted up. Below the cape is a pair of pins musical comedy woulda gone insane over. Whilst I is starin', Eddy waltzes up to her.

"Miss Lee," he chirps, "aint the water too cold for you today?"

She begins to smile, showin' a set o' teeth what can't be told from pearls. "Oh, I don't mind the cold in the least," she answers. "You see, last winter I was a Polar Bear, and—"

Eddy turns to me. "Didn't I tell you she was a bear?" he whispers.

"And," she goes on, "the Polar Bear Swimming Club didn't think nothin' o' goin' in water what had chunks o' ice floatin' about in it." She smiles some more, continuin': "Come on. Let's go to the beach. I want Mr. Callahan should see my work."

The three of us trails down to the water. I is glad it is mornin' and that they aint many people in the park to get an eyeful. Had it been the afternoon they woulda been a crowd aroun' us of at least six or seven people.

WE gets to the beach, and after lookin' the land over, Miss Lee decides she will pull off her exhibition by divin' from off the top o' the shoot-the-chutes.

No sooner does Eddy hear this, he begins to get pale an' nervous.

"Er—now, aint that pretty high up?" he asks her; and then, to excuse his sudden interest, adds: "We don't want no damage-suits brung against us, you know."

She presents him with a smile, what makes him more nervous than he is, and laughs like she had just been told the joke about the blacksmith's mother-in-law.

"That can't be more than fifty feet high," she says, "and fifty feet is nothin' to me. If I am employed, Mr. Callahan will have to build me a platform a coupla hundred feet higher at least."

I and Eddy looks at one another as Miss Lee, leavin' us, goes to a ladder what runs up the side of the structure. Here, without even stoppin' to test it, she goes up it like a fireman on his way to rescue a helpless millionaire. Comin' to the very top, she pulls herself up onto the shoot-the-chutes, stands up, admirin' the view,—which we is sharin' with her from the ground,—and then pulls a red rubber bathin'-cap from her pocket and sticks it over her hair.

"I—I don't like this," Eddy groans, almost strainin' his neck as he looks up at her. "Good-lookin' dolls like her should be kept on the ground. They is plenty o' ugly ones that is all right to take chances."

After givin' all the scenery in sight the double-O, Miss Lee waves her hand down to us and removes the cape. Eddy strains his neck worse. She is now wearin' a one-piece black silk bathin'-suit, and they is more curves to her, we observe, than they is to a ball flung by a big-league pitcher.

Then, before the both of us is finished gazin', she takes a step backwards, gives a little run and a spring, and shoots out into the air, where she turns two complete somersaults and slips into the water as clean as an arrow!

"*DID you see that?*" Eddy screams, as the red bathin'-cap bobs up onto the surface o' the water. "Did you see that?" He almost climbs up my neck in his excitement.

"Sure I seen it!" I replies, brushin' him off. "Do you think I'm blind!" I has to admit, however, my own eyes is protrudin', as the sayin' goes, for the thing is done so nice it makes me feel like yellin' and clappin'. A fancy diver is right—with the accent on the *fancy!*

I can see Eddy is hopin' she is comin' in to the shore, but such is not the case. Up the ladder she goes again, and without waitin' to take a rest, or anythin' like that, she clasps her knees in her hands, reels to the edge of the structure and falls into space. It looks like it was accidental, but the minute she hits the air she leaves go her knees, straightens out and flingin' her heels over her head, does a spiral twist, disappearin' into the water.

For about thirty minutes runnin' I and Eddy stares like a coupla rubes from the country lookin' at the tall buildin's; like a pair o' Chinks havin' a hop-dream, we stands and watches Miss Lee perform. It's just one dive after another, and if they was any dive she didn't do, it hasn't yet been written. On the level, we never seen anythin' like 'em! They was more tricks to her than they is to horse-racin', and what she didn't know about divin' coulda been written on the wing of a flea. She was more familiar with the water than a fish, could dive better'n a submarine, and shaped up, as a park attraction, better'n Al Jolson and Charlie Chaplin put together! That's how good *she* was!

When finally she is all through, she puts on the cape, climbs down the ladder and comes over to us, smilin' like what she done was no harder than drinkin' a pint o' water.

"THE surf is lovely," she says, removin' the red cap and wringin' it out. "It's as warm as toast!"

Eddy coughs, like he had a cold.

"What I wanna know," he says, "is where you has been hidin' all these years? How comes it vaudeville and the movies aint got you under their wing?"

He adds a lot o' compliments to what he has to say, and bein' a woman, Miss Lee eats 'em all up, blushin' a little to show she is pleased.

"Oh, I'm only a amateur!" she murmurs. "There is lots and lots better'n me."

"I has yet to see one of 'em," Eddy butts in, as we starts in the direction of the bathhouses.

"And what do you think, Mr. Callahan?" she wants to know, lookin' over his shoulder at me.

"I think that as soon as you get dressed again, you will be doin' both yourself and me a favor by comin' into my office ready to talk business," I answers.

She slips away, and Eddy follows me inside and perches hisself on my desk. "Joe," he says, "do me a favor and don't skin the little girl. Anyone with half an eye can see she don't know nothin' about business. Give her a square deal, Joe, and I'll be much obliged."

I finds the cigar I left off smokin' when Miss Lee first came in sight, and scratches a match for it. "I see you has taken an instant dislike to her!" I says. "Don't worry none about square deals, Eddy. Before I would cheat her out of a penny I would cut off my right arm!"

He grins. "Somebody else hates her

too!" he laughs, gettin' down off o' the desk. "Well, I mustn't let my wishin' to protect helpless females interfere with the stuff I is bein' paid to dream out. I go, but I will return! Never fear!"

With this he departs, and about five minutes or so later, in comes Miss Virginia Lee lookin' as fresh as a rose from her bath.

"Now," I begins, when she is seated, "first off, how much salary was you thinkin' of gettin'?"

SHE wrinkles up her forehead again, takin' liberties with her lips. "Well," she says, "in the first place I only wants a thirty-day contract. And I thinks for a salary five hundred a week would be about right."

I grabs the desk to keep from fallin', and looks at her the same as a bird looks at his wife when she has helped herself to the contents of his pay-envelope. "Aint that kind o' steep?" I is finally able to say. "Remember, we has to figure a lot on the weather. They is rainy days sure to come and crab things."

She moves her shoulders. "I don't mind the wet!" she says. "Personally, Mr. Callahan, I believe I is worth every penny of what I asks. Of course if you is unable to pay it, why—"

I raises a hand and does more thinkin' in one minute than I has ever done before in a year. Seein' her get away is like watchin' a dollar bill blow into a sewer. I has an idea that five hundred bucks a week puts me eligible to gettin' fired without notice, but I decided to risk it. Divers like Miss Lee aint stumbled on every day.

I tells her she can consider herself engaged, and before another hour has gone by I has framed up a contract on which she has wrote her name. This contract is to begin the followin' week, the date of which is June the first, and is to last thirty days with the privilege of renewal. I wants to make the engagement longer, but Miss Lee shakes her pretty head an' wont hear of it for a minute.

After thankin' me a million times, showerin' me with smiles and shakin' my hand, she says good-by and departs, promisin' to show up on the first of the month ready to work. I sees her from the window, swingin' along the path what leads to the entrance, and I also sees that Eddy, instead o' goin' to his office, is at the gates of the park, lookin' at 'em like he'd never seen 'em before.

The next day Cushing comes to the park, bringin' with him the actors and actresses engaged for the free show to be gave. These same consist of a man and wife, known to the trade as Morton and Florence. They is jugglers. Then they is an Eyetalian cyclist callin' hisself Pietro. This wop aint such a bad-lookin' guy, havin' curly black hair and a skin the color of weak coffee. He informs me he can do more on a bike placed on a slack wire, than a carpenter can do with a set of tools. Included also is six dancin'-gals, known to the world as "The Six French Daisies." Each one of them is nearer to sixty than they is to sixteen, and after lookin' 'em over I decides the closest they ever come to bein' in France was roamin' about the Bronx. The other act the boss had dug up is a Chink magician. This is a fat, good-natured-lookin' laundry-man who is loaded down with luggage. He has got a collection o' white mice in his pocket, and his name turns out to be Wun Lung. After hearin' him talk, I sees he knows more about the English language than most Americans.

CUSHING, after I give the crew of 'em the north and south, leads them all away to the buildin' at the rear of the park, which is to be their headquarters. Here he leaves them, tellin' each to make themselves comfortable—which, under the circumstances, is as sensible as expectin' to get a umbrella back after it is loaned. Comin' back with me to the office, he helps hisself to a chair and mops off his face.

"Some trip comin' down!" he croaks. "Outside o' the white rats escapin' from the Chink and scarin' the six dancers stiff, and apart from the matrimonial battle indulged in by Morton and wife, everythin' was as sweet as McCormack's voice! Never again! The next time I ship a bunch like this, they goes by fast freight!"

When he gets through, I decides to spring the news on him all at once and hope for the best of it. I crosses my fingers and begins.

"Well," I says, in a offhanded manner, "I come across a novelty yesterday and signed it—a diver. A high and fancy diver—sex, female."

The boss looks interested. "Glad to hear it. I suppose you got her cheap, Joe?"

"Well, yes," I admits. "We is to pay her

five hundred per the each and every week; but she's worth a thousand easy if she's worth a nickel!"

I thought the boss would turn a handspring. He jumps up, looks at me like I had suddenly got rid of all my senses, and then after a moment begins laughin'.

"Honest," he barks, "for a moment I thought you meant it!"

I is about to give him another chance to become excited when the door opens, and Eddy busts a merry way in.

"Boss," he hollers, "you is the luckiest man alive! We has captured Venus herself, and if you will now give me a lend of your ears, I will recite some of the stuff I sat up half the night composin'!"

Cushing looks at me. "So it is no joke!" he snarls. "This is on the level!"

I tries hard to smile. "Sure. And if you don't think I has got you a bargain, all you has to do is to tell me not to slam the door on my way out. She is comin' on the first of the month to begin workin' for us, and all I ask is for you to wait and see her. That's fair, aint it?"

He swallows nothin' a coupla times and finally nods. "Yes," he agrees, "that's fair. I'll wait; *but*—"

THE waitin' covers a week of warm weather, durin' which the park begins to do a little business—about enough to pay the salary of the ticket-sellers. At last comes the mornin' of the first day of the month, and with it comes Miss Lee in a taxicab what holds more baggage than they is lunatics in Russia. She is lookin' as pretty as ever, only more so, and once she gets into my office, Eddy makes his appearance and chews the rag until I gives him a wink and tells him to bring in the boss.

"I'm glad to get here," Miss Lee remarks, settlin' back in her chair. "I'm just crazy to get into the water—and to earn some real money. You don't know what this engagement means to me, Mr. Callahan!"

She makes such a fetchin' picture in the green silk gown she is wearin', and the black beauty-patch she has pasted under the corner of her mouth, that I feel myself gettin' ready to become foolish by the minute.

"Excuse me for askin'," I says, "but didn't you never work before?"

She shakes her head. "No, never. And that's what makes it so excitin'!"

I draws a breath. "Well," I says, "do me a favor and take care o' yourself whilst indulgin' in them high dives."

She throws back her head, half shuts up her eyes and purses up her lips, a habit bad enough to kidnap anybody's goat. "It's awful sweet o' you to say that!" she says in a dreamy voice. "I *shall* be careful."

They is a kick in her look worse than they is in champagne. I is just about to enjoy it when the door busts open and in comes Cushing and Eddy. The owner of the Seaside Amusement Park is all ready for a scrap—but the same is never pulled off. He stops, takes one look at the diver and then begins arrangin' his tie and brushin' back the few hairs he has on his head.

I introduces him, and Eddy in the background begins lunchin' on his fingernails.

"How do you do?" says Cushing to Miss Lee. "I is pleased to meet you. I has heard so much about you from my employees that I feels like we is already good friends. Er-um—have you had lunch yet?"

Miss Lee proves she is not over the age of twenty-two by giggling. "Lunch!" she cries. "So early in the mornin'! Why, I only finished breakfast an hour ago!"

I and Eddy laughs whilst Cushing gets red.

"I forgot," he stammers. Then he picks up one of her numerous valises and tells the office-boy to bring as many as he can. "Come, Miss Lee," he says, recoverin' his dignity, "allow me to pilot you to the hotel I has opened for the benefit and convenience of my actors and actresses. Knowin' you was comin'," he lies, "I has reserved the best room for *you!*" She gives Eddy and myself a smile to divide and trips out with the boss, leavin' my press-agent gnashin' his teeth.

"GEE, how I hate that man!" he snarls. "He makes my blood boil! I don't care if he is the boss—*I* seen her first!"

"No you didn't!" I butts in. "It was me that first laid an eye on her!"

"Oh, I'm not worryin' none about *you!*" Eddy laughs. "The skirt what tumbled for you would have to be out o' her mind or somethin'. By the way,"—he drags out his watch and looks it over,—"the hams Cushing brought down is about to give a rehearsal of their free show. Come on, Joe, let's I and you look it over. They is

to open it up tonight. I wanna see if the people what look it over is gonna be stung or not!"

We wends a way across the park and arrives at a large wooden platform in the exact center of it, with benches placed about it on all sides. Here we discovers Morton and Florence arguin' about somethin'. The Six French Daisies is hookin' each other up the back. They has on costumes what might have been new when Napoleon was at the top of his form. Wun Lung the magician is amusin' hisself, over in one corner, by feedin' cheese to his mice, now and then causin' a couple to disappear by simply wavin' his hands across 'em.

AS we helps ourselves to a seat in the first row, the orchestra, what has been makin' a collection of funny noises, busts into somethin' what can't be told from music. Then Morton and Florence proves they is really married by appearin' loaded up with plates and dishes, what they chuck at each other. Pietro the wop, all dolled up in spangles, sees us, and comin' down, flops into a seat alongside o' us.

Whilst Eddy is decidin' whether or not to bust him one, the trick bicycle-rider turns his head and looks over our shoulders. "Holy Mack'!" he gasps, almost fallin' out o' his seat. "Joosta look what's acome!"

We turns also and sees Cushing, wearin' Miss Lee on one arm, comin' down the walk.

"The big tramp!" Eddy hisses. "Who does he think he is—Douglas Fairbanks or some one?"

When they reaches us, Pietro, without warnin', leaps up, and grabbin' the hands of the diver, covers them with kisses. When the boss comes to, he gets the color of a kitchen tablecloth and asks Miss Lee if she is insulted, and does she want the Eyetalian fired immediately.

Her answer is a laugh. "Oh, dear no!" she says. "This is merely foreign politeness. We must remember his countrymen were our Allies in the late war!"

"I'd like to 'Ally' him one in the eye!" Eddy snarls in my ear. "Men has gone to jail for doin' half o' what he done!"

We all resumes our seats, Pietro lookin' the same like he had gone to heaven, where he was listenin' to an angel jazz-band. They is a imitation battle to see who will set next to Miss Lee, but the boss fools us all by placing her on the end and droppin' down alongside o' her. In this position he keeps her until the rehearsal is all over. Then he allows her to be introduced to Morton and Florence, the first mentioned immediately forgettin' he is married and the argument him and his wife is havin'. The Six French Daisies, bein' women and jealous of anythin' in skirts, turns up their noses at Miss Lee, but Wun Lung, after he mitts her, likes her better'n chop suey, and starts foolin' with his pig-tail, at the same time showin' off how well he speaks the language of the land.

The outside o' the entire park is nothin' but a collection of lithographs and posters, advertisin' the free show. Also Eddy has journeyed to the near-by towns, distributin' handbills and "throwaway's." They is a lot of play about the Divin' Venus we has got, and they is pictures of her standin' on a springboard, ready for the water. These pictures arouse the curiosity of the rubes—the only thing what can make 'em part with money. The result is that when the park opens that night, they is a pretty fair crowd on hand, which with them what has trolleyed down from the city, makes almost a respectable showin'. After lookin' them over, I figures they is more than five dollars in the box-office if they is a penny.

WELL, everythin' is as smooth as cream. The free show is enjoyed by all, and when it is over the crowd trails down to the beach to see Miss Lee in action. Here they is electric lights spread over everythin'; two searchlights to exercise themselves on the new platform Cushing has had built for the diver, and which makes it bright as the daytime. For the occasion our star wears white silk tights, and when she makes her appearance and drops her cape, the "Ah's" what go up sound like a glee-club is practisin' their high notes. And when the last dive is dove by her, the applause what goes up must o' been heard in Mexico.

"The best attraction I ever seen!" Cushing says as the crowd makes a way to the gates. "Believe me, Joe, I'm mighty glad I found this little gal—she's a wonder!"

He leaves me; and Eddy, who has been lurkin' near by, starts laughin'. "Did you get that?" he sneers. "*He's* glad *he* found her! Gee, how I hate that man!"

Two weeks slip past; and the park, by this time, is enjoyin' a severe epidemic of a disease known as love. Eddy is so

far gone it would take a coupla years to bring him back. He spends the most of the day wanderin' after Miss Lee, and all the night writin' poetry about her what the Board of Health woulda done right to investigate. Pietro the wop can't do nothin' but talk Eyetalian and kiss her hands every now and then; and as for Cushing, he has his pants pressed every mornin', and has laid in a supply of neckties, one of which he wears constantly. Even Morton the juggler has got it, and Wun Lung too; I oversees him pickin' daisies and pullin' 'em apart, at the same time singin' somethin' in laundry language. As for myself—well, for the first time I is takin' a interest in the house-furnishin' ads what is in the back o' magazines!

Another week goes by, and then somethin' happens to disturb the quiet and peace lurkin' over the park. It comes in the form of my office-boy waltzin' in one mornin' and salutin' me. "They is a guy callin' hisself Spencer what wants to split some conversation with you," the kid chirps. "Shall I send him in?"

I don't recall ever hearin' the name before, but is willin' to meet anybody once.

"Search him for concealed weapons," I says, "and then let him enter!"

I is prepared to see a roughneck stricken with the disease infestin' the park, and willin' to pay real money to get introduced to our Venus—which has been the case several times; but instead they enters a cleancut young feller wearin' a tan automobile-duster, a neat gray suit under it, and carries a cap in his hands. He is the owner of a coat o' sunburn, and a smile what makes you feel friendly with him the minute you gets a glimpse of it.

"ARE you the manager of the park?" he asks, lookin' me over. I admits the accusation and he continues: "Such bein' the case, I'll appreciate any information you may care to give me concernin' this divin'-gal you is boastin' about in print!"

I chuckles. "You don't look like a detective!" I says, stallin' for time and wonderin' what is gonna happen.

He grins. "Thanks for the compliment. I aint. My business is nobody's business. However, I aint here to pick a quarrel. What I wanna know is the name of this here Divin' Venus and where she is at. I would like a word with her in private."

I draws a breath. "Oh—is that all you wants? Nothin' more than that?"

He loses his grin. "Do I see her or not?"

I nods. "Not!"

He gets up, fumblin' with his cap. "I thought as much from the look in your eye! Well, no matter. I see you has a nice little beach here, and I think I'll stick aroun' and also have a swim. Is they anythin' to prevent me from doin' that?"

I shakes my head. "Nothin' except the absence of a quarter for a bathhouse and a half-dollar for the hire of a suit. But," I says, "don't start nothin' you can't finish!"

He laughs and departs, leavin' me wonderin' what he has got up his sleeve besides his arm. The thing is beyond me, and after a minute I catches up my straw hat and beats it to that part of the park where Miss Lee can always be found at in the mornin'. She is there, settin' on the veranda, knittin', and the minute she sees me, she gives me the same old smile what always makes me dizzy.

"GOOD MORNIN'!" I says. "I hope I will always have the pleasure of sayin' that to you."

She lies down her needles and whatever is attached to them. "Why?" she murmurs, keepin' the smile on. "What do you mean?"

I helps myself to a piece of the veranda railin'. "Nothin', only no less than five minutes ago I was put through a third degree by some guy what wants to know all about you. Gettin' no satisfaction out o' me, this same individual is now disportin' hisself in a bathin'-suit and has gone in for a swim."

As I speak, she loses the smile and frowns. "Did he give any name?" she wants to know.

I nods. "He did. Spencer!"

At this she gasps. "Oh!" she says. "Oh!"

"Know him?" I inquires.

Her answer is nothin'. "I—I have *heard* of him," she admits, when I repeats the question again.

I gets down off o' the railin'. "Say the word," I informs her cheerfully, "and I will go down to the beach and either drown him or knock his block off—just as you want."

She laughs and lies a white hand on my arm. "You are a true cavalier. But I have a feelin' things will turn out right soon; so don't trouble."

For the first time in my life I has a choked-up feelin', and for at least a minute has nothin' to say. Then—

"Listen," I murmurs, lyin' a hand over hers, "I—you—that is—I—er—" I stops, grabs some air and lets her have it all at once. "Miss Lee, I'm crazy mad about you! Say the word, and everythin' I has is yours, includin' a three-carat diamond-ring in pawn!"

She stops smilin', and removes her hand slowly from mine. "Oh, I am so sorry, Mr. Callahan!" she cries. "I had no idea you felt like this. I am so sorry, because—"

She hesitates, and it is my turn. "Don't stop!" I begs. "I can stand anythin' except chicken hash!"

Without notice she beats it to the door of the buildin', her shoulders movin' like she was weepin', and exits. I aint sure, but I imagines I hears somethin' not unlike laughter. But I figures I is mistaken.

Then I slowly totters away, tryin' to decide if my heart is broke or not. I crawls across the park and runs into Eddy, who is wanderin' aroun' with his hands in his pockets. His eyes is open, but otherwise he is sound asleep. It takes him a coupla minutes to get wise to the fact I is talkin' to him, and when he sees me finally, he tries hard to smile but makes a failure of it.

"Joe," he moans, "nothin' makes no difference now. I proposed to Miss Lee an hour ago, askin' for her hand in matrimony, but they was nothin' doin'!"

No sooner I hears this; I feels cheered up. "Well," I says, "how could you expect her to fall for a guy what spends his life dreamin' out bunk to advertise a second-hand amusement-park? If she had taken you I woulda lost all respect for her!"

He pulls hisself together. "You don't un'erstan'. This here proposal makes my seventh! I always thought seven was my lucky number!"

WE gets down to the water and I spies the guy callin' hisself Spencer on a float what is halfway out. He is lyin' on his back, has his hands under his head and appears to be takin' both a sunbath and a nap at the same time.

I and Eddy finds a half yard of shade alongside a sand-dune, and proceeds to let the beach hold us up. I tells him about the bird on the float, and once I gets through with the spiel he looks as wise as a boiled owl.

"Didn't I tell you they is somethin' phony about Miss Lee?" he barks. "Sure, I knew it from the first! Dolls like her aint takin' jobs like this for the fun of it!"

"Yeah," I butts in. "But how about the five-hundred-buck salary?"

Eddy shakes his head. "No—money cuts no ice in this deal. They is somethin' back of it."

He pulls a Rip Van Wrinkle and I can almost hear the thoughts buzzin' aroun' under his straw lid. I looks out at the raft again. Spencer is still imitatin' a statue and they is nothin' to disturb the silence except the waves comin' up on the beach and then retirin' back to the ocean—like they had got a glimpse of Eddy. I tries to dope out a scenario of what is in the air besides the smell of salt, but the longer I think the less I can make out o' it.

SUDDENLY Eddy lies a hand on my arm. "Look who's comin'!" he says.

I twists aroun' and sees our Divin' Venus approachin'. She is dressed for the water, but wears a ordinary bathin'-suit what has a skirt an' everythin'. She gets a peek at us, waves a hand and climbs up the ladder to her platform on the top of the shoot-the-chutes. Whilst she is travelin' upwards, I sees Spencer is settin' up, and with a hand shadin' his eyes, is starin' like she was somethin' similar to a dream comin' true.

"Look at the way that bird is starin' at her!" Eddy snarls. "I only wish they was some rocks handy!"

Arrivin' at the very top of the structure, Miss Lee does her usual stargazin' before leapin' off and executin' the spiral-twist dive. No sooner she is in the air, the guy on the float jumps to his feet and stands like he was ready to catch her. They is the pause of a second and Miss Lee darts off her platform into the water, kickin' up a little spray.

As she appears on the surface, comin' up within a coupla feet of the float, what does the one standin' on it do but lean over, grab her by the shoulders and lift her onto the raft!

And here he does two things—whilst the eyes of I and Eddy hang out on our cheeks. He puts his arms aroun' her and kisses her on the face!

"Did you see that, Joe!" Eddy shrieks, grabbin' my necktie in his excitement and almost chokin' me to death. "Did you see that! The big stiff! If he thinks he

can get away with this stuff because he is wearin' a bathin'-suit, he has got a coupla more guesses comin'! Wait till he comes in—that's all—*wait!*"

The two of 'em on the raft begins chewin' the rag. The conversation is sprinkled with kisses, each one of which is good for a groan from Eddy.

"I don't care who he is!" the press-agent raves. "When I get a crack at him, the Battle of the Marne will look like a pillow-fight in a gals' boardin'-school! *Wait*, that's all!"

Without warnin' the two we is lookin' at, decidin' to can the chatter, jumps in from off the float and has a race with each other to the shore.

"Come on, Joe!" Eddy bawls. "The pair of us oughta be able to handle this bird! You take him on first—bein' the oldest—and if you can't put him away, I will!"

We reaches the water's edge just as Miss Lee and this guy Spencer wades in, hand in hand. Eddy pushes me forward, and whilst I is thinkin' up somethin' to say, the Divin' Venus leads what is with her up to me.

"Mr. Callahan," she chirps, smilin' like she never smiled before, "let me introduce you to Bob Spencer—in addition to bein' a lawyer, he is my husband!"

I HEARS a noise behind me like steam escapin' from a boiler. Then I feels my hand gettin' wrung, but I is in so much of a daze all I can do is to swallow nothin' and breathe like a fish just placed on ice.

"I owe you an explanation," says Miss Lee—or Mrs. Spencer, to give her her right name. "You see, I and Bob had a quarrel regardin' money-matters, and just to show him I was not dependent on his money to buy hats and the like, I ran away and came here."

"Yeah!" butts in Friend Husband, "and you couldn't 'a' hid yourself better! It took me two weeks to know where you was and one more to find the place!"

"But now," says Miss Lee, squeezin' his hand, "we has made up again and has promised never to quarrel no more!"

Havin' said this, she gives both I and Eddy a little friendly nod and walks away with the guy Spencer, who is studyin' her eyes like he never seen 'em before.

We watched them until they disappears in the vicinity of the bathhouses. Then Eddy, who has turned as pale as a blonde minus her makeup, sticks out his chest.

"Gee, I hate that guy!" he yelps. "Husband or no husband, if she hadn't been aroun' I'd have knocked his block off!"

We starts dejectedly in the direction of the office. As we reaches it, we spies Cushing comin' through the gates of the park. We sees the boss has evidently been up to town and that he has bought hisself three things—a shave, a bamboo cane and a flower for his buttonhole.

"Well, boys," he says, comin' up to us, "I have somethin' to show you both. Take a look at this!" He digs a hand into his pocket and produces a small box. This he opens and we gets a flash of a diamond ring nestlin' amongst satin.

"A ring!" hollers Eddy.

Cushing smirks, replacin' the box in his pocket.

"Yeah, a ring," he chuckles; "a *engagement* ring, to be exact! Just made to fit the finger of a certain little gal who makes divin' a specialty. Guess who? And now, as they is no time like the present, I'll just let her take a slant at it. Save up your congratulations, boys; you're gonna have need of 'em when you see me again!"

He twirls his cane, fixes the flower in his buttonhole and disappears across the park.

Eddy comes out o' his trance first.

"Joe," he yells, "go get that bottle o' booze you is hidin' in the bottom drawer of your desk! Somebody is gonna have need of it in a coupla minutes—or less!"

Behind the Closed Door

(What Has Already Happened:)

THE banker, J. B. Matlack, had a number of callers on the day of the tragedy, and his private secretary admitted them in turn: Clyde Walters, a dissipated young man who had a small interest in the firm; Norma's scapegrace brother John, who was employed as bond-clerk; Professor Worthington, a spiritualist; a woman in black who refused to give her name, but was admitted, and who emerged from the presence with an air of triumph; and Richard Gibbons, a young lawyer, attorney for a woman who was suing the firm, claiming she had been victimized, through her purchase through Matlack and Company, of some worthless oil-stocks.

Gibbons was Matlack's last visitor. For soon after he entered in response to a buzzer signal, Miss Bright and the others outside his private office heard a crash and a cry of horror. Rushing in, they found Matlack dying from a pistol-bullet, with Gibbons standing over him. "He—did—it!" gasped Matlack with his last conscious breath.

Gibbons was finally convicted of the murder, and only the circumstantiality of the evidence against him changed his sentence from hanging to imprisonment. Two people at least, however, remained convinced of his innocence—Norma Bright and a young reporter and friend named Curley. So when Gibbons escaped from the penitentiary,—and disappeared under circumstances which indicated he had been drowned,—and sought asylum with Curley, the young reporter sheltered him. Aided by the police's assumption that he had been drowned, Gibbons proposed to devote himself to the establishment of his innocence by locating the real criminal.

But it proved a difficult business, for Gibbons had to do his detective work under cover, and clue after clue proved valueless. Finally he and Curley determined to break into Matlack's now unoccupied house and search for evidence—in particular to search through his collection of rare Bibles to locate a paper they had reason to believe hidden in one of them.

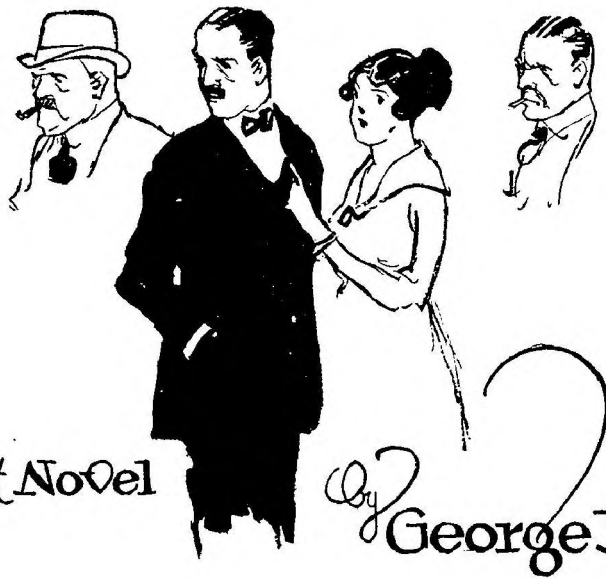
(The Story Follows in Detail:)

CHAPTER XVIII

Mystery of the Raincoat

THE home of the late J. B. Matlack was like himself—substantial and unostentatious. It occupied a large space on two streets on a corner of the older part of the city. The rear of the house came out upon an alleyway which was rarely used.

It was nearly midnight of the day when Curley and Gibbons had their talk in the hotel that the two men appeared in the little roadway back of the house. They were muffled in topcoats, and wore felt slouch hats pulled down over their eyes.



A Three-Part Novel

By George Barton

"Thank heaven, the light's out," murmured Gibbons, glancing at the lamp on top of the iron post which had been neglected by the faithless lamplighter.

"Luck's with us," grunted Curley, "and if we can only climb that fence without starting any stray dogs, I'll be a happy man."

They succeeded in that performance, although, as the journalist slid down to the inside of the yard, a malicious nail tore a square out of his newly-tailored coat, and the peculiar sound of ripping cloth broke the silence of the night.

"Damnation!" he muttered, "and that suit cost me seventy solid silver cartwheels."

"Serves you right," grinned Gibbons, "I told you to wear your working clothes. We're not going to an afternoon tea."

"Never mind," was the blithe rejoinder, "I'll put it in my expense account. If you don't come to time, I'll make the *Chronicle* pay the bill."

They stood in the yard for some moments surveying the rear of the house. A grape-arbor reached as high as the second story. A few feet away a great bay window bulged its way in the direction of the trellis work of the arbor. If it had been built to order, it could not have suited their purposes better. Gibbons swung himself lightly on the first round of the arbor and moved cautiously upward.

There was a ledge around the bottom of the bay window, and by stretching to the limit, Gibbons was able to get one foot on the wooden shelf. Then he drew himself entirely across and was able to keep his balance by clinging to the framework of the window. After that he pulled a jimmy from his pocket and inserted it under the woodwork. The catch of the window snapped; he raised the sash and crawled into the room.

"Come on up," he called down to Curley; "the coast is clear."

IN a few minutes the journalist had successfully made the ascent and stood by the side of his fellow-adventurer. The sash was gently closed, and the men were in the dusty and darkened room.

After a time he spoke in a whisper:

"I've got my bearings now. This is the living-room. The library is in the front of the house. We have to go through that hallway yonder. Get out your electric torch, but keep it close to the ground so we wont attract attention from the outside."

Curley gave an exclamation of dismay.

"I've forgotten all about the torch—I'm afraid I left it home."

"Well, I'll be hanged!" ejaculated Gibbons. "You're a fine burglar, you are."

The newspaper man could not repress a laugh.

"You're right, old man, but remember this is my first job."

"If you don't quit your noise, it will be your last."

Cautiously they proceeded to the hallway and then in the direction of the front of the house. They had gone about half the distance when they were startled by an unexpected sound and sight—the striking of a match, followed by the appearance of a dull yellow light.

THE two adventurers stood in the hallway as though they had been petrified. A faint square of light shone through the parted curtains at the door of the library. They could not tell how long they stood in the hallway, but presently they were aroused by the sound of something dull and heavy falling on the carpeted floor of the library. It was a muffled noise, and it was repeated at intervals.

"Dick," whispered Curley, "I can't stand this any longer. I've got to see what is going on in there."

Silently they tiptoed toward the curtained doorway. They peeped simultaneously, and the sight they beheld filled them with amazement.

A man was half kneeling on the library floor, feverishly turning the leaves of a large book. His back was turned to them, and it was impossible to see his face. He wore a yellow rain-coat, and a felt hat was pulled down over his head. The doors of a large book-case were thrown open, and it was evident that the shelves were nearly depleted. Books were scattered about the floor—dozens of them. The watchers were intent upon the queer scene, and then it dawned upon them at the same time that the books were copies of the Bible. Some of them were thrown face downward, and all were in disorder. J. B. Matlack had treasured these books, treasured them more, probably, than anything else in his lonely life, and the treatment they were receiving now was enough to make the old man turn in his grave.

Suddenly the meaning of the scene flashed upon the watchers behind the curtains. The man was upon the same errand that had brought them to the house—he was searching for the answer to the card that had been found in the office of J. B. Matlack.

Who was he? What interest did he have in solving the puzzle? While these questions went through their minds, the unknown man in the room continued to turn the pages of the volume. Presently he tossed it aside with a snort of disgust. Then he turned and pulled out the last two volumes. He seemed nervous and ill at ease. He thumbed the pages hastily and then dropped both of them upon the floor with a gesture of annoyance. Whatever his purpose, he had failed in his quest.

He arose slowly and painfully from his cramped position on the floor, but he did not turn around at once. In that moment Curley and Gibbons realized that their time had come. They felt no fear, for it was a case of two against one. They did not stop to consider the ethics of the situation. They had no legal right in the house, but this man also was surely an intruder. Besides, they were filled with an overwhelming desire to see his face. Quickly and, as they thought, noiselessly they entered the room. But a creaking board beneath the carpet betrayed their presence. Instantly the unknown one knew that he was not alone. But he did not turn. Instead he moved toward the candle and extinguished it with a heavy movement of his foot.

The three of them were alone in the dark.

IT was a critical situation. In the rush into the room Curley and Gibbons had become separated. All three stood stock still, and the only thing that could be heard amid the tense silence was their half-suppressed breathing. A false move might mean death, for it was inconceivable that the man had entered the house in the dead of the night unarmed.

"There's no use fooling," cried Curley, when the silence had become almost unendurable; "we're going to get you."

If he expected an answer he was disappointed.

Presently the newspaper man sensed a movement near him. He threw out both arms and embraced a moving form.

"Now I've got you!" he gasped.

"Let go, Bob," cried Gibbons. "You're holding me."

Something like a sardonic laugh floated across the room. Curley and Gibbons were furious. The fellow was having fun at their expense. Curley pulled out a box of safety matches and struck one of them on the side of the case. The tiny flame had scarcely started when there was a flash from the other side of the room, a report —and the match was shot from the fingers of the impulsive newspaper man.

"Do that again," came a voice that was plainly disguised, "and I'll kill you!"

Neither of the two men were cowards, but neither of them doubted the sincerity of that remark. Some more moments passed in silence, and then to make an actual test, Gibbons whispered something in the ear of Curley. He assented, and then, in pursuance of the agreement, cried:

"Now, out of the door."

They made a pattering noise as if they were headed for the entrance. The experiment was a complete success. Two shots rang out in quick succession, and if the young men had been in the doorway, this veracious narrative would have ended at this point. But they remained where they were, and the other man recognized the ruse at once. While they were thinking what to do under the circumstances, they heard a soft movement on the carpet and realized that the unknown person had reached the doorway and was passing down the front stairs.

CURLEY threw caution to the winds. It would be better to be shot than to permit such an opportunity to be lost. He ran in hot pursuit. The electric light in front of the house sent its rays through the uncovered fan of the big transom, and he could plainly see the back of the man in the raincoat as he hurried to the doorway. Would he get out? Curley went down the steps two at a time, with Gibbons closely following. The stranger reached the front door, turned the latch and opened it. He moved sidewise, but his black felt hat was still pulled down so far that neither of the men could get a glimpse of his face.

Furious at being so near and yet so far, Curley made a flying leap and grasped him by the shoulders. Curley felt the glow of victory in his veins; and then—he found himself falling backward with the raincoat in his hands. The man had slipped out of the garment. The next moment Gibbons, coming down the stairs, stumbled into Curley. In the same instant they heard the front door slam.

Curley ran to the door and opened it, but no one was in sight. As he stood there, he noticed a policeman strolling down from the next block. He closed the door quickly and put his fingers to his lips with a gesture of caution. They stood in silence, listening to the heavy footsteps of the guardian of the peace. They gradually came nearer and then passed without a moment's hesitation.

It was Gibbons who put the question that was in both their minds.

"Well, old man, we've got to decide. Shall we quit now or go on with the job?"

Curley did not hesitate.

"Go on with the job, by all means," he cried.

CHAPTER XIX

Pages of Holy Writ

"WE'VE got to hurry up," said Curley as the footsteps died away. "I haven't the faintest notion of the identity of the man in the raincoat, but unless I am mistaken, he'll give the alarm to the police."

The two men hastened up the stairway and into the library. They stumbled over the pile of books on the floor, and that reminded Curley that it was necessary to make a light. He struck a match, but the narrow circle of light which it produced was hardly sufficient for their purpose. Fortunately a candle was discovered on the mantelpiece, and this was quickly lighted. Then they started an investigation of the volumes that lay before them. There must have been fifty or sixty copies of the Bible, of all sizes and shades of binding. One after another was hurriedly examined, but when they had concluded, they had only their labor for their pains. Curley sat on the floor with a look of disappointment on his florid countenance.

"We have gone through the whole crop," he said, "and it looks as if we had failed—just the same as the man in the raincoat failed."

The bookcase in front had been emptied. It was evident that these shelves had been devoted exclusively to Biblical literature. Gibbons arose and made one or two turns around the room. Presently his eye alighted on another bookcase in the corner of the apartment.

"Let's see what's there," he suggested.

Even while he spoke, they had gone over to the other bookcase and were feverishly examining its contents. There were sets of Dickens, Thackeray and Irving, together with collections of the poets, in fine leather bindings. The top shelf was devoted to the works of reference, and in a far corner they noticed one particularly large book bound in blue cloth. In large letters on the back of the book was inscribed "The Holy Bible."

Gibbons seized it. It was an unusual copy of the scriptures—an exceedingly rare copy of the most read book in the world. The young lawyer gave a sudden exclamation:

"The Murderer's Bible!"

Curley shivered at the ghostly suggestiveness of the title.

"What's the idea? Trying to give me the creeps?"

"No," continued the other excitedly, "I'm not fooling. This is one of the rarest books in creation. I didn't think there was a copy of it on this side of the ocean. But I might have known that Matlack would have it in his collection."

"But why the 'Murderer's Bible'—isn't it everybody's Bible?"

Gibbons laughed.

"The name is more gruesome than the book. It all comes from the fact that the word *murmurers* has been rendered *murderers*. That gave it the title—just a simple misprint; otherwise, it is the same as most of the other copies of that edition of the Scriptures."

"That's queer," commented the journalist.

"Not at all! I'm surprised that you've never heard of it. There are a lot of queer Bibles. For instance, the Breeches Bible, the Bug Bible, the Treacle Bible and the Vinegar Bible. All of 'em got their names from printers' mistakes, and they are looked upon as curiosities of literature."

WHILE Gibbons was talking, he had been turning the pages of the book until he came to the New Testament. He kept at that until he reached the portion devoted to the Second Epistle to the Corinthians, which contains the words: "God loveth a cheerful giver." He gave a shout of exultation.

"Eureka!" he cried. "Here's the very thing we came to find!"

Inside this page of the Bible he found a sealed envelope and a single page of writing. Both were in the chirography of Matlack. The envelope was inscribed "Last Will and Testament of J. B. Matlack, to be opened by my brother Henry Matlack. Duplicate in the possession of my lawyer."

The single sheet of paper was addressed to an oil-speculator located in a small town in Texas. As Gibbons raised it to the light in order to read it, a sudden gust of wind extinguished the candle. There was something uncanny about the performance, and the two young men felt a creeping sensation. Curley struck a match and relighted the candle.

"Take a look about you before we go any farther," whispered Gibbons.

The newspaper man moved about the room cautiously, but could see no one. They were evidently alone. He noticed that the blinds of the front windows were drawn. It was hardly likely that they had been seen from the street. But what if the man in the raincoat had given the alarm? That was quite possible, and it suggested the importance of hastening their operations.

"Well," cried Gibbons in a stage whisper from the other side of the room, "have you found anything?"

"Not a blessed thing," replied Curley, going over to his friend.

The words were hardly out of his month before he gave a sudden laugh. He had discovered the cause of the extinguished candle. A window on the side of the room was open, and through it came a gust of wind that fairly raised the dust from the floor.

"It's all right," he said as he explained the phenomenon to his friend. "We can go ahead without the fear of being interrupted by ghosts."

Both of them bent over the sheet of paper which had been laboriously written in the cramped hand of Matlack. It was undated and unsigned. This is what it said:

> Please rush a letter to the firm at once and see that it is made as alluring as possible. The old man is getting skeptical about the oil well, and it is necessary to brace him up. If need be, send some certificates testifying that the wells are likely to prove gushers. You know how to get them. Also it would be well to declare another dividend at once. This is highly important, because it will help to sell the stock, and at the same time quiet the scruples of the old man.
>
> Things have been going along very smoothly until the last few days. Then we had a few squealers, and some of their complaints have fallen into the hands of the old man. He has queer notions, and there is no telling what he may do unless you promptly comply with my request. If we can only quiet him, it will be a cinch. It's as easy to get buyers for this stuff as it is to fall off a log. You know the old story "There's a new one born every minute." We must harvest them right now. This promises to be the richest thing I ever struck, and if you do your part we will be able to make a barrel of money. Of

course, it can't last forever, but when the end comes, we can simply say that the wells have gone dry; they wont be the first ones that have evaporated. But you must give immediate attention to this matter. Act at once.

After Curley and Gibbons had finished this curious epistle, they stood looking at one another in amazement. There was no signature to the communication; apparently it stamped J. B. Matlack a swindler. Gibbons touched on this phase of the business at once.

"Curley," he said, "if we accept this letter at its face value, we shall have to look on old man Matlack as a common thief. Can you do that?"

"Not in a thousand years," was the explosive retort. "The old man had his faults, but I'd stake my life on his integrity. I don't think he would intentionally wrong any man in the world."

"Neither do I; but what are we to make of this? What do you think about it?"

The journalist scratched his head as if to stimulate thought. Suddenly his face brightened.

"My boy," he said, "I am beginning to see daylight. This thing is in the handwriting of J. B. Matlack, but he never composed the communication. It's a copy of a letter which originated in the mind of some professional swindler. Just why Matlack copied it is a little too deep for me at this moment. Why he hid it in this book is also something more than my feeble mind can fathom, but it is perfectly certain to me that he did copy it from the original and that he placed it in this book."

Gibbons' face was radiant with delight.

"You've struck the nail on the head," he cried, "and the thing begins to look very clear to me. The old man hid that letter in this 'Murderer's Bible' for safekeeping. He had a reason for doing it. He must have wanted to keep it for evidence of some kind. And the memorandum on the card was for the purpose of reminding him of the whereabouts of the letter. As you know, he had a habit of making these memoranda, and of hiding things in all kinds of queer and unlikely places."

Curley gave his companion a slap on the shoulder.

"Right as usual; but if we want to get out of this place safely, we'll have to start right now."

Gibbons nodded assent, and replacing the sealed copy of the will in the Bible, he pushed the volume back in its place on the bookcase. The copy of the letter he put in a wallet in his coat pocket. Then he turned to his companion:

"Have you got that raincoat? It wont do to leave it here. It may be very important before we get through with this adventure."

Curley agreed with a smile, and stooping down, rolled up the garment and put it under his arm. Then the two young men, with the two additional and very tangible clues in their possession, made their way down the stairway to the front door. They paused a moment before going into the street. Not a sound was to be heard. It must have been almost one o'clock in the morning, and the neighborhood seemingly was deserted. Having reassured themselves, they quietly opened the front door and stepped out into the night.

CHAPTER XX

The Face in the Window

CURLEY and Gibbons were in high spirits, and they hastened along the street with the air of men who had done a good night's work. Above all, they were pleased with the thought of having escaped from the house so much more easily than they had entered. They walked several blocks without encountering anyone, and were debating the desirability of engaging a taxicab when they were cheered by the light from a sign in front of an all-night garage. They walked into the building and looked around for the person in charge. But the place seemed deserted. In the far corner of the garage was a small wooden structure evidently used as an office. A light was burning there, and the two men walked into the room. The moment they did so, the door was violently closed, and they found themselves confronted by two rough-looking characters. One of these, a man with a red face and a broken nose, exclaimed:

"Caught with the goods, eh? We've got you at last, and we've got you good and hard."

The first impulse of the adventurers was to fight, but the sight of the shining muzzle of a revolver in the hand of the second tough caused them to hesitate. Curley, in an attempt to spar for time, was the first to speak:

"What do you mean? How have you got us? What have we done?"

The man with the broken nose gave a shrill laugh, and turned to his pal with a look of mock merriment:

"Well, Pete, what do you think of that for cast-iron nerve. Can you beat it?"

Evidently the other could not see any way of beating it, for he looked at the broken-nosed one in dull silence. The speaker turned to Curley with pretended seriousness:

"You know blamed well what I mean. We've had yeggs robbing this place for the last two weeks, and tonight we set a watch, and we've caught you. Now get busy and haul out the loot."

GIBBONS turned to Curley with a glance of consternation. They were being charged with robbery. For the moment he wondered if the rough-looking person could be in earnest.

"I assure you," he cried with some heat. "that you are mistaken. My friend and myself came in here to engage a taxicab, and we just naturally walked into the office."

"Ah, tell that to the marines," leered the homely one. "You've got to be searched. Get busy now and hold up your hands."

Suddenly Gibbons understood. These men had been hired to get the letter taken from the Murderer's Bible. Mentally he upbraided himself for the overconfidence which had permitted him to walk into the garage. Outwardly he was calm enough; but as Pete came toward him to begin the search, he shot out his right fist and caught the fellow under the chin. Ordinarily this would have been an effective blow. It certainly had been while he was a boxer in college. But in this instance it was useless. He might as well have aimed a blow at a stone wall. It did not make the slightest physical impression upon the burly scoundrel. But it did arouse his temper, for he gave Gibbons a punch in the jaw, that laid him flat; then stretching out his foot, threw the young lawyer flat on his back on the floor. It was all so sudden that the victim could scarcely realize what had happened, and he lay there with a sheepish grin on his face.

"Tie him to the chair, Pete," ordered the puncher.

The fellow carried out the instructions, while the broken-nosed scoundrel kept his revolver leveled at Curley. The newspaper man carefully considered the possibility of kicking the revolver from his hands, and then decided that it couldn't be done. He felt perfectly helpless, but even in that moment of perplexity he wondered how it was possible for these two rowdies to use the garage for their criminal purposes. Was the owner in league with them? By this time Gibbons had been fastened to the chair, and the broken-nosed tough was ready to proceed. He nodded to his pal.

"Go ahead; go through him and see what he's pinched."

Pete went about his work with the facility of a professional pickpocket. Pete's first act was to pull a wallet from the hip pocket of the lawyer. He opened it and found a number of bank-notes.

"Yellow-backs!" he cried, looking at his pal with glistening eyes. "Everyone of 'em a yellow-back!"

"Take 'em," grunted the other, "he's probably pinched 'em from some poor person."

"Right," grunted Pete.

FOR the moment Gibbons felt a sense of relief. If these two men were simply crooks bent on robbing them, all would be well. But his elation was short-lived. The fellow continued his search, and presently he pulled out a second wallet from the inside coat pocket of the young man.

"Gee," he exclaimed, "this guy's a regular walkin' national bank. He's got money and wallets all over him."

He went through the second pocketbook, and seemed disappointed to find that it contained no money. He thumbed it clumsily and finally brought forth the letter. He tried to read it, but without success. After a moment he moved in the direction of his confederate.

"What about this?" he inquired, "do you want it?"

"Sure," was the cheerful retort; "that's what we're after."

Thus admonished, Pete stuck the missive in the pocket of the short coat he was wearing. He was not quite through with Gibbons, however. He deftly plucked a stick-pin from the tie of the unfortunate lawyer and then relieved him of his watch. He turned to his pal with a broad grin on his ugly countenance:

"Well, boss," he cried, "I think this chicken's pretty well picked."

"Good work," rejoined the broken-nosed

crook. "Now see what you can do with the other guy."

Pete, who was in his element now, turned his attention to Curley. That young man was fairly boiling with rage, but he was helpless and he knew it. Pete must have divined his thoughts, because he kept up a running comment while he was going through his pockets.

"I know you don't like it, son," he said, "but it's a cruel necessity. If you have any sense, you'll take it as a lesson. Stay home at night like a good boy and don't try to rob innocent people."

Pete finished his job, and was gloating over the money and jewelry he had taken from Curley. The two of them turned to depart. Pete opened the door, and his pal, moving sidewise, kept his revolver pointed at the newspaper man. They were at the very edge of the entrance when Curley made a sudden and unexpected move. He took a flying leap, and thrusting out his right arm, knocked the pistol from the hand of the broken-nosed tough.

Nobody knew exactly what happened during the next few moments. But Gibbons, who had been squirming about in his chair, managed to get free of his bonds, and joined in the mêlée, and the only thing that could be distinguished was a confused mass of legs and arms churning around. Pete and his homely pal had the brute strength, but Curley and Gibbons had the science and the capacity to think while in action, and as a consequence the fight was a draw for some moments. Chairs were overturned, a desk-lamp upset, and chaos reigned in the garage office. Presently Gibbons threw Pete flat on his back, and reaching into the pocket of his coat recovered the precious letter. He gave a shout of triumph, but his jubilation was short-lived, for the broken-nosed crook let go his hold on Curley, and reaching over, caught the lawyer by the throat. It was a breath-taking grip, and Gibbons involuntarily sank to the floor.

"Now, you smart guy," grunted his assailant, "give up that bit of paper, and if you know what is good for you, skip out of here while the skipping is good."

The tough tightened his hold on the windpipe of his victim. The lawyer was beginning to look blue around the mouth. He was all but ready to surrender when Pete gave an exclamation of dismay.

"Better hurry, Sam," he cried warningly. "That guy's back again!"

But Sam could not expedite his work enough to accomplish his purpose. The door of the office was suddenly darkened by a bulky form, and the newcomer, quickly realizing the situation, picked up the revolver from the floor and pointed it at the ruffian who was choking Gibbons.

"Quit that," he cried, "or I'll blow your head off."

The broken-nosed one released his victim, and at the same instant Curley and Pete ceased struggling and faced the man with the revolver.

"Just call police headquarters," he said.

The lawyer promptly complied, and while they awaited the arrival of the patrol wagon, he explained the situation to the man.

"I thought so," he commented. "I was called away in a hurry, and left the boy in charge. We've had a lot of trouble around here lately, but this is the first time the crooks have had the nerve to try and beat up our customers."

There was further conversation, but Pete and his broken-nosed pal did not enter into it. They sat in a corner scowling and cursing their luck until the patrol wagon came and they were bundled into it without ceremony. One of the taxicabs belonging to the garage came in a few minutes later, and Curley and Gibbons promptly engaged it and started in the direction of the newspaper man's lodgings. Just as the vehicle swung out of the door of the building, Gibbons happened to look behind him, and caught a passing glimpse of a face in the window behind the office of the garage. Some one had evidently been hiding behind there during their tussle with the two crooks. There was something strangely familiar about the countenance. It is true that the lawyer only saw the eyes and the upper part of the face, but it kept haunting his memory. In a few minutes it came to him like a flash. He was sure he could not be mistaken.

It was the face of Clyde Walters!

CHAPTER XXI

The Gusher Oil Company

NEXT day Curley called at the office of J. B. Matlack's lawyer. He was received by an assistant and informed that Mr. Harrington was abroad, but was expected to return shortly.

"You see," the young man explained in

answer to Curley's questions, "the executors of the will are one of the trust companies, and Mr. Henry Matlack, brother of the deceased, it happens, has been living in France for many years. Between the war and other obstacles, it has been impossible for him to get here. But he is expected over on the same boat with Mr. Harrington, and so the whole business may be straightened out in a few days."

"I believe that it is a remarkable will," hinted Curley in an effort to draw out the young man.

"The whole business has been remarkable," was the sage reply. "But I'll say that the will is just as remarkable as the incidents surrounding its execution. It's going to cause some talk. By the way," he added suddenly, "whom do you represent in this matter?"

"Oh, I'm on the staff of the *Chronicle*."

This statement caused the young man to become very much agitated.

"Why didn't you say that in the first place? If I had known that, I wouldn't have said anything to you. I have no right to talk about Mr. Harrington's business, and I wouldn't dream of discussing this Matlack affair. Goodness knows there's been enough about it in the newspapers already. Please do not quote me. It will get me into a lot of trouble with Mr. Harrington. Wont you, as a favor, promise to say nothing about what I've told you?"

Curley smiled blandly.

"Really, you haven't told me anything, but if it will relieve your mind, I'll promise not to quote you in any way at all. I'll go farther. I'll promise not to print a word about the matter until Mr. Harrington returns, and then we'll leave the matter of publicity to his judgment."

The young assistant grabbed the journalist by the hand and wrung it fervently.

"You don't know how grateful I feel," he cried, "and some day when you are looking for news, I'll try to get you a good story."

"Thank you," said Curley, dryly; "when that time comes I'll come to see you again."

THE Harrington offices were on the floor above the suite formerly occupied by J. B. Matlack, and something prompted Curley to walk down the flight of stairs. He found himself in front of the door leading to the offices of J. B. Matlack and Company. Mechanically he turned the knob of the door. It was locked and did not respond. There was an air of desolation about the place; an echo of the tragedy appeared to linger in the very air. Curley walked around the corridor and found himself in front of the vacated offices that had once been occupied by the Gusher Oil Company—one of those fly-by-night concerns through which credulous men and women are robbed of their money.

Presently Curley became aware of the fact that he was not alone. He turned around and faced a quaint-looking man standing on a ladder, who was cleaning the windows of the office on the opposite side of the corridor. He was one of those good-natured, sociable characters who like to indulge in conversation. He accepted Curley's glance as an invitation, and grinned in the friendliest manner.

"You can't get in there, brother," he said. "I'm afraid they're gone for good. I hope they haven't got any of your cash?"

"No," was the cheerful rejoinder, "they didn't get any of my money. But what do you know about them?"

"I only know one thing, and that is that they had the rent paid way in advance. What do you know about that?"

"That is remarkable," admitted the journalist; "but how do you know?"

The other grinned again in his amiable way.

"Well, even a window-cleaner knows some things. I ast about cleanin' up the last time I was on this corridor, and the superintendent told me not to mind 'cause the lease hadn't expired, though they had skipped out in the middle of the night. Strange thing about it was that was the very day old man Matlack was killed. That sort of fixed it in my mind."

"That was a coincidence," remarked Curley, becoming interested. "So you were here on that day?"

"I sure was, and in this very spot and on this very ladder; and there was another man here—just like you are, except that he came out of that office.

"On the day of the murder?"

The fellow laughed in silly fashion.

"The very minute of the murder, it must have been—for the fur began to fly right after that."

CURLEY could scarcely restrain his eagerness. He reached up and fairly dragged the man from the ladder.

"See here, what's your name?"

"My name," blinked the other astonished at the impetuosity of the newspaper man, "why, my name's Ed Smith."

"Well, Ed," cried Curley with jovial familiarity, "are you aware that you are telling me something that is very important?"

"Stop joshin' me," begged the window-cleaner.

"I'm in dead earnest. Are you perfectly sure this man came out of the office of the Gushing Oil Company?"

"Just as sure as you're standin' there!"

"What did he look like?"

"Now ye got me, boss. I'm not worth a copper when it comes to makin' pictures of people. All I know is that he was kind of thin, an' looked as if he'd seen a ghost. Maybe he met some of the people that was swindled by the Gushing Oil Company."

"But the office had been vacated by the company? That was my impression."

"You're right about that. They'd been out of there for weeks. How this chap got in is more'n I can say. Maybe he was one of the company that went in to see if anything had been left of the wreck."

"Maybe," said Curley, reflectively.

The man was shouldering his ladder by this time, preparatory to moving to another set of windows.

"Hold on, Smith," commanded Curley.

The man halted, laid down his ladder and raised his hand in mock salute.

"Do you think you would recognize the man that came out of that room if you should ever meet him again?"

"Know him? I'd know him out of a thousand. There's mighty few men you meet that look as if they'd seen a ghost."

"Good!" ejaculated Curley, and the next moment he produced a sheet of copy-paper and was writing therein the address of the window-cleaner.

"What's all this about?" asked Smith suspiciously.

Curley ignored the question and asked one of his own:

"Can you be found at any time you're wanted?"

"Sure," replied the other; "but what's the game, anyhow?"

Curley's response took a practical turn. He placed a new bank-note in Smith's willing hand.

"There's another just like that waiting for you if you will be good enough to come when I send for you."

Smith kissed the money humorously before thrusting it in his pocket.

"In these days of the high cost of high livin'," he cried, "I'd go anywhere for the sake of gettin' the green goods. Send for me any time of the day or night, boss, an' I'll respond quicker'n a fire-company."

SCARCELY had the window-cleaner gone about his business before Curley hastened to the office of the superintendent of the Masterson Building.

"I'd like to take a look at the room recently occupied by the Gushing Oil Company—that is, if it hasn't been leased already?"

"No, it's for rent," replied the superintendent; "in fact, the old lease only expired a day or so ago."

"Has anyone asked for the key since the old tenant left?"

The man laughed ironically.

"To tell the truth, they left in the middle of the night, and they didn't have the politeness to return the keys. But the rent was paid in advance, and so we just waited for the lease to expire."

"May I have the key for a few minutes—I suppose you have another key?"

The superintendent hesitated.

"What's your business," he asked finally. "You see we've got to be a little particular. It hurts the reputation of a building to have tenants like the Gusher Oil Company. Not that I'm reflecting on you, young man. I—"

"You're perfectly right," interrupted Curley, "but first I'll take a look at the room, and then if it's satisfactory, I'll come and talk business with you."

Armed with the key, Curley hurried back to the fifth floor, and let himself into the empty and dust-covered room, that had been occupied by the oil company. There was a musty odor about the place. Almost instinctively he hurried to the window and threw up the sash. That seemingly simple act caused his heart to jump violently, and he stared through the window as if he too had seen a ghost: the opening faced the private office of J. B. Matlack, and looking across the air-well, he could see the very desk behind which the banker had been shot. Could the banker have been shot by some one standing in the office of the Gusher Oil Company?

That was puzzling, but he dismissed it from his mind for the time being and began to make a careful examination of

the room. It was sparsely furnished with a couple of desks and four or five chairs. On the wall was the picture of an oil-well spurting up a great column of petroleum. Circulars and leaflets on the floor advertised the enormous possibilities of the company—and on the floor near the window, Curley glimpsed a small silver match-safe. He brushed the dust from the little article and rubbed it vigorously on his coat sleeve. His efforts were rewarded, for on the front of the matchsafe was the letter *W*. His heart was beating like a triphammer. He looked no further, but left the room, locked the door and hastened to the office of the superintendent.

"Well," said the official, looking up lazily from the newspaper he was reading, "what do you think of it?"

"Great," ejaculated Curley, "—that is to say, I'm not quite certain yet. I'll have to consult my partner. But can you tell me something about the last tenant?"

The man shook his head wearily.

"Don't talk about 'em. I'm sorry to say we didn't look into them at all. But you can bet we'll know who rents it the next time."

"Sure, sure," assented Curley. "But you know the name of the man who got the lease?"

"I did—but I forgot it now," was the grumpy reply.

"But surely your records will show that." Wont you satisfy my pardonable curiosity?"

Few men could resist the Curley smile, and it won on this occasion. The superintendent went to the safe and pulled out a package of leases. Finally he found the one he wanted. It was made out to the Gusher Oil Company, and was signed "R. M. Smickerson, President."

"That doesn't tell much, does it?" smiled the superintendent.

"No, it doesn't," admitted Curley; "but I'm obliged to you just the same. You may hear from me in a day or so."

CHAPTER XXII

The Missing Thirty Minutes

IT was a jubilant Curley who met Gibbons at the midday meal, and he kept his companion keyed up to the highest point while he repeated his talk with the man on the ladder. In a secluded corner of the restaurant the two men went over the entire case, and brought to mind the various links in the chain of evidence which was being formed with such painstaking care.

"And now," exclaimed Curley as their conversation drew to a close, "everything is going to hinge upon the solution of the missing thirty minutes."

"What do you mean by the missing thirty minutes?" asked Gibbons in perplexity.

"Never you mind," was the reply. "We are going to get to work, and before the clock strikes twelve tonight, it will be clear to you."

"I'm sure I don't know what you are talking about."

"You don't have to know," was the cheerful response, "—only from this time forward you are going to be in this thing up to your neck. We're going to stake everything on one last move. Understand?"

Leaving the restaurant, the two men proceeded to the central part of the city. Presently they came in sight of the Masterson Building.

"I'm under orders," smiled Gibbons; "but it seems to me that if I wanted to be arrested, I couldn't go about it in a better way."

"It's part of the game," retorted Curley; "but we're not going to linger around here very long. I want to see that cab-starter who usually hangs out in this neighborhood."

He found his man very quickly, a broad-faced, good-natured Irishman, full of native wit, and accustomed to the give-and-take of life in a great city. "Hello, Mulhearn," he called out with characteristic cordiality, "you're looking as fine as a morning in May."

"Bless my heart," exclaimed the cab-starter, "and if it isn't my broth of a boy Curley. Where in the world have you been keeping yourself all these weeks?"

"Been awfully busy," replied the other, "and I'm still busy. But tell me: do you remember a little sedan car—painted brown, you know—that used to park around this building? Usually here in the mornings and then for a while in the afternoons?"

"Sure, and it would be hard to forget it. That little car has a distinction of its own. The kind of a machine that you'd think would belong to the aristocracy." The way Mulhearn pronounced *aristocracy*

would have been as good as a tonic to a sick man.

"But it didn't belong to a king or a duke or a member of the royal family, did it?"

"Sure, and it did not. If I'm not mistaken, it belonged to one of them stock-broking fellows. I disremember his name, but he had an office in the building here."

"Right you are," declared Curley approvingly. "But what I want to know particularly was whether you were on duty here on the day the murder was committed up on the fifth floor?"

Mulhearn gave an imitation of a man shuddering.

"Sure, and what are you trying to do—keep me awake at night? An' me trying to forget that!"

"Did you see the little sedan that day?" persisted Curley.

"I did that, but it didn't stay long. I remember it because a big truck turning the corner nearly upset the little thing. I was going to tell the owner about it, but I got busy just about that time, and when I thought of it, some one was in the car driving away in a hurry."

"Good for you!" cried Curley with a shout of triumph. "You're certainly a friend of mine." He gave the cab-starter a resounding slap on the back and stuck a cigar in his mouth.

"And now," he said, "I want you to get me the fastest automobile in this blamed old town.

"Hang on," agreed Mulhearn, "I'll get you what you want, and I'll get you a good driver into the bargain."

FIVE minutes later an automobile drew up the curb in front of the Masterson Building, and Curley and Gibbons entered. The fugitive had remained discreetly in the background while Curley was having his colloquy with Mulhearn, but he had overheard part of the conversation, and the reference to the sedan had sent a flash of light through his mind. He knew the owner of that automobile, and the meaning of Curley's questions cleared away a mass of cobwebs in his brain. While he was thus meditating, he heard Curley give the order to the driver of the machine:

"To Walnut Hills—and don't spare the juice."

The automobile started off swiftly, and the skillful manner in which the driver threaded his way through the congested traffic in the heart of the city proved that he was an expert of no mean order. There were two or three heartbreaking halts that caused Curley to groan with despair, but in a little while the machine got down to business, and there came the prospect of a record-breaking run. The moment they left the curb of the Masterson Building Curley pulled out his open-faced watch and held it on his knee.

"It's just half-past three. Can we make it by four o'clock? If we don't, my darned old theory will go to smash."

"What are you talking about?" asked Gibbons, with a trace of irritation.

"Why, the missing thirty minutes, you ivory-domed member of the bar! You heard me tell the driver where to go. Doesn't that suggest anything to your lawyerlike mind?"

Gibbons, whose temper had been entirely restored, nodded smilingly.

"Certainly it does. Walnut Hills is the residence of William Walters and Clyde Walters. Naturally, I imagine that you are going to see them, and that your evidence connects them with the murder."

"Well, we are not exactly going to call on that precious pair. We are on the trail of the missing thirty minutes. If you will take your mind back to the day of the murder, you will recall that William Walters was not in the office. You will also remember that he was eventually called up on the telephone, and that he was found at his home at Walnut Hills. Now, if he had been suspected or accused, that would have furnished him with a complete alibi. In fact I'm sure that Hylan and the police would have regarded it as a perfect alibi. For how could a man, who was at Walnut Hills, be guilty of murdering a man in the Masterson Building? I do not know the precise distance between the two points, but I should say that it was something like eight or ten miles. Do you follow me?"

"Yes," said Gibbons.

"Well, I've made a careful investigation, and I find that the telephone call was not sent to Walters as soon as the tragedy became known. On the contrary, there was more or less confusion and excitement in the office, and it was a half-hour afterward when Walters was notified, and when he responded on the telephone. I have verified this through Norma Bright. She knows, because she was aware of the time that you went into the private office, and she also recalls the hour that the message was sent to Walnut Hills. Do you get me?"

"I get you," smiled Gibbons. "And there is only one flaw that I can see in your argument."

"What is that?"

"Why, I have been out to Walnut Hills, and it takes the best part of an hour to get there."

"How did you go—by automobile?"

"No," replied Gibbons. "I don't think I ever went in a machine."

Curley stared at him triumphantly.

"That's the very point at issue. That's why we are making this experiment. I know that little sedan, and so do you. It's the very devil for speed. We have a pretty good car now, but it's a safe bet that it can't make better time than the little sedan. The whole business hinges on the result of this trip. If it takes the best part of an hour, as you say it does, then William Walters is as innocent as an unborn babe; if it takes only a few minutes over half an hour, I'm willing to say that his alibi will hold water. But if it takes thirty minutes or anything less than thirty minutes, then I'm willing to swear on a stack of Bibles that William Walters killed J. B. Matlack!"

BY this time they had made their way out of the crowded section of the city and were in the outlying district. Curley pulled out his watch again. It pointed to twenty minutes to four.

"One-third of our time has passed," he said, "but I don't believe we've gone a third of the distance."

That was not reassuring, but the road was comparatively clear, and it was possible to put on speed. At least, the journalist thought so, because he leaned over in the direction of the driver:

"Brother," he said cheerily, "I'm afraid you are too stingy with the juice. Let her go for all she's worth."

The man grinned and let out another notch. They came to the suburbs; this gave him a still clearer roadway. Twice they struck ruts, and the jolt sent the passengers bounding from their seats. The driver turned around to apologize, but Curley cut him short.

"Don't mind us; don't mind the machine; don't mind anything. If you get to Walnut Hills by four o'clock, I've got a ten-spot for you."

It was incentive enough for anyone, much less a man who loved to break speed records and traffic rules. The wind swept in the faces of the passengers, but it gave them a sense of exhilaration. They were going so fast that it was impossible to distinguish details very clearly, but Gibbons had a comforting sensation of sun-swept fields, red barns and fluttering fowls. Curley cupped his hands and shouted in the ear of his companion:

"We're going a mile a minute."

Presently the automobile came to the foot of a steep hill, and all realized that they had reached the last lap of their sensational trip. The machine took the hill bravely and never wavered for a moment, although the speed was necessarily lessened. Halfway up, they caught sight of a gabled roof, and Gibbons knew that this was the home of William Walters. He looked at the watch in Curley's hand. Two minutes to spare, and about a half mile to go. The automobile took a fresh plunge, increased its speed, and a half a minute stood in the roadway outside of the handsome grounds surrounding the home of Walters.

They had ninety seconds to spare. The experiment had demonstrated what they had set out to prove: the alibi, if William Walters pretended to put up an alibi, had been completely smashed.

CHAPTER XXIII.

The Trap.

THE first thing Curley did after the arrival at Walnut Hills was to congratulate the driver of the automobile, and the second was to present him with a crisp ten-dollar bill. Gibbons looked at Curley inquiringly, and then the two of them glanced in the direction of the house. What they saw caused Curley to make an instant change in his plans. William Walters and Clyde Walters were on the porch of the dwelling, staring at the automobile.

"It was my intention to beard the lion in his den," said Curley, contemplatively, "but on second thought I think I shall try to coax the rat into my trap."

"Your metaphors seem to be pretty badly mixed," laughed Gibbons, "but I'm sure that whatever you propose is best."

Two blocks back they had passed a roadhouse, and in a fleeting glimpse the newspaper man noticed the blue sign of the telephone company. He directed the driver to take them to the hostelry. Once there, he went into the booth and asked for a

certain city connection. He obtained it and talked for many minutes. When he emerged, he was smiling broadly.

"I got my party," he announced, "but I'll bet a hundred dollars that you can't guess who it was?"

"I'll give up at once," cheerfully grinned his companion. "Tell me and get me out of my suspense."

"It was Norma Bright, and I've asked her to hurry to my apartments and to bring with her the window cleaner and your devoted friend Hylan."

Gibbons knitted his brows in perplexity.

"It's too deep for me," he admitted. "But aside from that, how can she reach the window-cleaner?"

"Easy! I have an understanding with Ed Smith, and he has promised to respond to my call at any hour of the day or night. I'm sure he'll not fail me; I'll give him thirty minutes to reach my rooms."

"But what about Hylan? We are not through yet. Wont it upset our game if he gets into it prematurely?"

Curley gave his friend an affectionate slap on the back.

"Don't you worry, old man. I'm the manager of this business, and if you'll leave it to me, I'll guarantee success."

"All right. What's the next move?"

"The next move is to take this automobile where it will be seen by Walters."

THESE maneuvers were more than Gibbons could understand. But everything had succeeded so far, and there was no reason for believing that they would fail in the end. The fugitive was beginning to see that behind the seeming recklessness of the irresponsible Curley there was a wealth of shrewdness and wisdom. In a few minutes they had returned to their former station at Walnut Hills. Walters and his nephew were still on the porch of the house. Curley opened the door of the car, and gave his friend a kindly push.

"Now get out and show yourself," he cried.

"What's the big idea?" asked Gibbons, looking at the newspaper man with a trace of anxiety in his manner.

"The big idea is that I want Walters to get a good look at you. I want him to recognize you. Pick buttercups, if you can find any, but don't sit there looking at me as if you were in a trance."

Gibbons alighted from the machine and walked slowly around the edge of the grounds. Once or twice he glanced up at the sky as if he were in doubt about the weather. Even a nearsighted man could have recognized him fifty yards away, and Walters and his nephew were by no means that distance from the road. The effect was precisely what Curley had anticipated. They stared, and their manner betrayed agitation. They talked to each other, and the young man pointed to the lone figure in the road.

"Come in now," called Curley. "They've taken the bait. They've swallowed it hook, line and sinker."

Very slowly Gibbons made his way back to the machine and resumed his seat. The driver got out and pretended to be having trouble with his starter. At the same moment the two men came down the lawn in the direction of the road.

"Now," said Curley to the chauffeur, "let her go, but don't run too fast. Just enough to keep away from these two gentlemen."

When Walters and his nephew saw the car was moving, they rushed for their garage. In a few minutes the familiar sedan came out of the enclosure and started for the road. By that time the big automobile was about a half-mile away. Curley looked out of the rear of the machine and saw the sedan in pursuit of them. He rubbed his hands gleefully:

"It's working like greased lightning," he declared. "If old man Walters had tried to please me, he couldn't have done it better than he is doing. I can almost tell what he is thinking at this moment. He has no intention of letting us get out of his sight. He is determined that we shall not escape him, and I am determined that we shall not escape him."

"But you are running away from him."

"Yes," grinned Curley; "but you'll notice we're not hysterical about it. We're not breaking any speed-laws."

The fugitive peered behind him.

"Walters seems to be taking it easy too. Every time we slow up, he does the same. This is the queerest race I've ever seen."

"Exactly. Walters doesn't want to catch us yet. In a personal encounter he might easily be worsted. What he intends to do is to trail us to our lair. Get the point, my boy? Once there, he will pounce on us, probably with the assistance of an officer."

They passed the country stage of their journey and reached the suburbs. The rate

of speed was slightly increased here, and finally they came to the built-up section of the city. As they ran along block by block, the congestion became greater. The traffic required careful steering of the rival machines. It was evident that the driver of the big automobile was the more expert of the two. Finally they reached the last lap of the journey. Curley leaned over to his driver.

"Now, if you like, you may make a little spurt. You know the address. See if it's possible for you to get there a trifle ahead of the sedan."

WALTERS and his nephew were struggling with the traffic three blocks away when Curley and Gibbons leaped out of the automobile and hurried up the stairway of the apartment-house. Reaching his rooms, the young man walked in without knocking, followed by his friend. Hylan, coming from the rear of the apartment, was the first to recognize Gibbons. His surprise and satisfaction found expression in two words:

"At last!"

Norma Bright shyly greeted the fugitive, who gave her a look of endearment that brought the roses to her cheeks. Mr. Smith, the window-cleaning specialist, watched the scene with pale, puzzled eyes. While they were debating what to say, Jim Hylan took the center of the floor.

"Son," he said, looking sagely at Richard Gibbons, "you can't beat the law, and I'm glad you've found it out. We'd a got you sooner or later. I'm glad you had gumption enough to find it out. I'm not saying I wouldn't have sooner caught you, but your surrender may help you when you go back to prison."

"My surrender?" echoed Gibbons with a twinkle in his eyes.

"You heard what I said," declared Hylan.

"Oh, yes, I heard you all right, but I haven't any intention of surrendering."

Hylan's beady eyes glittered ominously. When he spoke, it was between clenched teeth.

"You got away from me twice, but I'm damned if I let you do it a third time!"

Curley saved the situation.

"One minute, Hylan," he said. "Don't go half-cocked. I give you my word of honor that Gibbons will not leave this room until you say the word. Meanwhile, I think we're going to prove that this is no reason why he should try to escape. We are going to prove that he is innocent of the murder of J. B. Matlack. We are going to prove—"

He was interrupted by a commotion near the door, and the next moment William Walters rushed into the room, followed by his nephew and a policeman. He looked around excitedly until his eye rested upon Richard Gibbons. The ghost of a smile played about his bloodless lips. He pointed a long, skinny finger at the young man.

"There he is, officer!" he cried. "Take him in charge!"

THE policeman advanced toward Gibbons, but Curley interposed.

"Just a minute, please, just a minute. Close that door, and we'll try and straighten this tangle."

The policeman, who had seen and recognized Jim Hylan, caught the look of assent in the detective's eye, shut the door and awaited developments. Meanwhile William Walters spoke angrily:

"Officer, that man is Richard Gibbons; he's an escaped convict, and it's your duty to lock him up!"

The policeman stood undecided. Hylan shook his head, and the patrolman walked back a pace or two and guarded the door. Smith, the window-cleaner from the Masterson Building, looked and listened with the greedy interest of a gallery god. Curley arranged certain articles on a center table like a conjuror preparing his bag of tricks.

"Walters," he said suddenly to the older man, "I want to ask you a few questions."

The member of the late banking firm of J. B. Matlack & Company blinked at him nervously. Curley produced the letter he had found in the Murderer's Bible and held it in front of the man.

"Did you ever see this before?" he asked.

The other man screwed up his eyes and peered at the paper.

"No, you haven't," continued Curley, answering his own question, "but I'll tell you what it is. It's a copy of the letter you sent to your swindling associate in Texas. It's in the handwriting of J. B. Matlack—evidence from the dead that convicts you of being a fraud and a cheat."

Walters moved as though to strike Curley. He was trembling violently, and his face was ashen. Without appearing to notice the menacing movement, the newspaper man continued:

"I have here a raincoat. You may recognize it, because it's your property. You wore it the night you invaded Matlack's house and tried to steal the letter. In your hurry you left the coat in the hands of Mr. Gibbons."

"What is this?" spluttered the accused. There are hundreds of coats like this."

"True," smiled Curley, "but this one belongs to you."

"It's a lie!" was the furious retort. "And I'll stand for no more of this nonsense!"

But the newspaper man was holding up the silver match-safe.

"I have here a little souvenir of the tragedy in the Masterson Building. It also belongs to you, sir, as you will see by the initial *W* on the front of the article. You dropped it in the office of the Gusher Oil Company on the day J. B. Matlack was killed."

"What do you mean?" asked Walters, his thin lips twitching horribly.

Curley could not resist the temptation to strike an actorlike pose—the temptations that seizes many men in times of stress. He pointed his finger at the tortured man.

"It means that your crime has found you out, William Walters. I accuse you of the murder of J. B. Matlack!"

For a moment the man was dazed. When he spoke, it was in a hoarse voice:

"You're crazy," he said. "I wasn't in that room—you can't prove it."

"Mr. Smith," called Curley in a judicial voice, "please take the stand."

The window-cleaner moved from his place in the rear of the room.

"Take a good look at that man," commanded the journalist.

Everybody stared at Smith as he glued his eyes on the trembling Walters. They hung on the dialogue breathlessly.

"Did you," continued Curley, ever see him before?"

Smith felt his importance. He glanced at the company before replying. Then he said slowly and with great deliberation:

"Sure, I seen him before. He came out of the Gusher Oil Company room a minute after Mr. Matlack was killed."

A HUSH fell over the company. William Waters made a final effort. He moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue and smiled feebly.

"How do you make that out, when I was at Walnut Hills?"

Curley's retort came like the crack of a whip.

"You were not at Walnut Hills—until thirty minutes after the murder. And I can prove it!"

It was the last straw, and William Walters gave way beneath its weight. He swayed to and fro uncertainly, and would have fallen if he had not clutched the back of a chair. Then, by a great effort of the will, he regained his composure. He stiffened perceptibly and looked around him defiantly. Even the policeman by the door had come over and joined the group. The window-cleaner, with mouth wide open, was listening with the fascinated interest of a man at a play. In all of that circle of eager countenances there was not one friendly face.

"Well," said Curley finally, "what are you going to do about it?"

Walters did not reply. The power of speech seemed to have deserted him. But in the twinkling of an eye the newspaper man received an answer to his question. It came, not in words, but in action. The murderer raised his fist, and the next instant Smith, who stood between him and liberty, received a blow that sent him to the floor. Brushing the others aside, Walters reached the door, opened it and shot out of the room. It all happened so quickly that the little group was numbed with astonishment.

The policeman was the first to recover. He made a dash for the door and hurried down the stairs after the fleeing man. Hylan was at his heels, and the others followed. To add to the confusion, the detective blew a shrill whistle. He was filled with the desperation born of despair.

"Don't let him get away!" he shrieked. "Don't let him get away!"

Walters reached the first floor and was headed for the street. He gained on the policeman, and just when the pursuers thought he was going to escape, there was a sharp report, and the murderer staggered and fell on the pavement.

"Had to do it," muttered the policeman, replacing his revolver in his hip pocket.

The others hurried forward to the prostrate man. He was bleeding from a wound in the back. Hylan, grim-faced, went about his work with automatic precision. He summoned the ambulance, telephoned a brief report to his superior at the Central Station, and told Gibbons to make preparations for obtaining an ante-mortem

statement. The crowd was kept back with difficulty. Finally the gong of an ambulance was heard, and in a few minutes Walters was lifted on a stretcher and placed in the wagon. He was pale but conscious. He caught a glimpse of Curley as the ambulance moved away.

"You've won out," he murmured faintly, "but they're not going to get me, after all!"

CHAPTER XXIV

Sowing and Reaping

WILLIAM WALTERS lay on a cot in the Jefferson Hospital, his face almost as white as the sheet that covered him. He was conscious, however, and able to talk. The surgeons had probed for the bullet without success, and he read his fate in the faces of his attendants. Presently he spoke to Curley in a low voice, and with the specter of a smile hovering about the corners of his thin lips:

"They say confession's good for the soul. I think I'll try it. I know I'm all in, and I'm going to amuse you by telling the truth."

The ghastly attempt at humor failed to amuse the group gathered about the couch. But Curley became conscious of a remarkable change in the man. He had thrown off his sanctimonious manner, as one discards an unnecessary garment, and he appeared to them for the first time in his real personality. The absence of the cant was refreshing.

"I'm not going to preach," he began, "but I think I have the right to remind you that what a man sows he surely reaps. I think my troubles all came about because I was reared in a get-rich-quick atmosphere. The thought of working in a legitimate way never occurred to me in my youth, and as I grew older, it became a habit to get all I could in the easiest way regardless of the consequences. I had a checkered career. One day I was rich, and the next day I was down and out. Finally I came to this city, where I was not so well known, and prospered. But the love of easy money was in the blood and I could not stick to straight methods. Eventually I attracted the attention of Matlack, who was getting on in years and wanted a partner to relieve him of the cares of the business. It seems strange that I should get into a firm famous for its integrity, but stranger things happen every day in life. My reputation for looseness had not reached this city, and Matlack thought I was all right. I did have business ability, even though I say it myself, and I had enough money to take a small interest in the firm. For a while everything went smoothly, and I might have made a satisfactory living along strictly legitimate lines. But it was not long before I was living beyond my means. I bought that place at Walnut Hills. I needed the money and still more, and I just naturally drifted back to my old practices. I was responsible for the Gusher Oil Company that opened in the Masterson Building. We made some money out of that, but it did not take long for the public to see that it was a swindle, and we had to close it out suddenly. The man who worked it for me went to Texas, and I communicated with him from time to time. It was then that I conceived the idea of using the name of Matlack and Company as a cover for another oil scheme. I had a hard time inducing Matlack to handle the stock, but I finally convinced him that this was a legitimate operation. The shares sold like hot cakes. My confederate on the Texas end of the line furnished us with glowing reports of the oil-wells, and had the company incorporated in that State. For a time it looked as if there might be millions in it. But by and by some of the shareholders became suspicious. I quieted them, but the biggest job of all was in pacifying the old man. I might even have succeeded in that if it hadn't been for this man Gibbons."

THE narrator paused for a moment and pointed a skinny finger in the direction of the lawyer.

"Yes," continued Walters, "he was the beginning of my troubles. He attacked the company in the newspapers and threatened to prosecute the firm. That touched J. B. on his tenderest spot. My arguments were of no avail. Some of the poor stockholders who had been swindled out of their money came to him personally and told their story, and then I knew that I was on the edge of ruin. Some of them threatened me, and it was that which induced me to go armed. The afternoon before the—the last day I had written a letter to the old man. Just as I finished it, I was suddenly called away from the office. I put it in my desk, intending to sign and mail

it on my return. Through a bit of cursed luck, Matlack came into the office, and hunting for some papers, came across that incriminating letter. He made a copy of it in his own handwriting, and that night hid it in one of his Bibles for safe-keeping, making that memorandum as a reminder of where he had placed it. The original he left in my desk, and I signed and mailed it as I intended. You see, he wanted to let me go far enough to hang myself."

"All this," suggested Curley, "was the afternoon and night before the murder? What happened the following day?"

"I'm coming to that. I did not know that Matlack had discovered my letter, but I did learn that he was preparing to bring matters to a head. I felt sure he had the evidence against me, and knowing the character of the man, I felt satisfied he would go to the limit. Anyhow, I went downtown that day to learn what he proposed to do. Clyde was with me, and when we reached the door of the office, it suddenly occurred to me that I was running a big risk. It would be just like the old man to have me arrested on the spot. So, instead of going in myself, I sent Clyde into the office to get the lay of the land. Meanwhile, having a key to the room of the Gusher Oil Company, I slipped into that office to wait for my nephew. I had to wait for a long while, but when Clyde came to me and told me of his interview with Matlack, I was frightened. He told the boy he had found my letter addressed to the man in Texas, and he had other evidence and was going to send for the district attorney, and would put me in jail if it were the last act of his life. He was bitter about it and said there would be enough indictments against me to keep me in the penitentiary twenty years. I was desperate. I felt like a rat in a trap."

"Did you have your revolver with you at the time?" asked Curley.

"Yes," said Walters, with a forlorn smile, "unfortunately I did, and the thought of it came to my mind while I was talking to Clyde. The boy did not know what I was thinking about. Please remember that. I hardly know how to describe my feelings. I had something like brainstorm, but through it all I was planning to save myself. The old man in his private office had it in his power to send me to jail for life. He had threatened it. Should I let him deprive me of my liberty? I knew him well enough to know that it would be useless to appeal to him for mercy, and as I walked up and down that room, I remembered that the window of the Gusher Oil Company faced his private office. I lifted the sash and looked across. His window was open, and he was standing by his desk in the attitude of a man who was thinking. No one was with him. In that second I succumbed to the temptation. I—"

THE stricken man paused for the first time, overcome by weakness and emotion. He closed his eyes and breathed heavily for a few moments. Presently he resumed with an effort:

"I sent Clyde out of the room—told him to wait in the hall for me. As the door closed, I hurried to the window, took aim and fired. I missed. I fired a second shot, and this—got him. Matlack was almost facing me at the time, but I saw him stagger, and then try to steady himself by clutching the edge of the desk. The next instant he fell into his chair and his face went down on his desk in front of him."

"Mr. Walters," questioned the newspaper man in a low voice, "how do you account for the fact that the shots were not heard in the outer offices?"

"Because I used a silencer on my revolver. I had practiced with that silencer on a target at Walnut Hills. But it was out of curiosity. My crime was not premediated. When I say that, I mean that it had not occurred to me until five minutes before the deed was committed. You believe that, don't you?" he said eagerly as he looked around the little group which surrounded his cot.

No one replied, and the speaker, disregarding the silence, went ahead with his story:

"To my surprise, my brain was working clearly. I remembered all that Clyde had told me of his interview with Matlack, and I recalled that he said no one was to be admitted until he pushed the buzzer. I assumed that Matlack had not given the signal. An inspiration came to me. I went out into the hall where Clyde was waiting, first taking the precaution to pull down the sash in the room of the Oil Company. I told him to wait for a few minutes, and then to slip quietly into the outer offices of the Matlack Company and press the buzzer on the nearest desk. That would create the impression that Matlack had

done so, and would throw the cloak of mystery about his death. Immediately afterward I hurried downstairs, got into the sedan in front of the Masterson Building and ran it out to Walnut Hills in record time. I had barely gotten in when the telephone-call came, telling me of the death of Matlack. I was able to talk over the phone, and felt sure that I had thus established a perfect alibi."

HYLAN, who had been listening intently to the narrative, pointed a stubby finger in the direction of Curley.

"But this fellow filled your alibi full of holes."

"Yes," admitted Walters, "he smashed my alibi, and he did a lot of other things—"

A sudden weakness made him stop, but in a few seconds he recovered and continued his narrative:

"Most of you are familiar with the rest of the story. Gibbons was accused and convicted on circumstantial evidence. Maybe he would still have been under suspicion if it hadn't been for two things. One was that woman Sarah Wingate. Years ago I married her and deserted her. It was before a justice of the peace in Florida, and she was never able to prove that the marriage was legal. I told her it wasn't, and she hadn't any proof of the ceremony. I was able to evade her until a short time before the murder, when she discovered that I was connected with Matlack and Company. On the day she went to see the old man, it was to tell him of what I had done. It increased his bitterness against me. She had expected no help from him, but to her surprise he even gave her money. When I heard of this, I sent word to her that if she said a word, I would have her arrested for attempted blackmail, and that she would be involved in the murder of Matlack. It scared her stiff, and that's why you failed to get her to tell her story. Her past was not flawless, and she was afraid of coming in contact with the police."

"What was the other things that helped to upset your plans?" asked the newspaper man.

"It was curious," replied Walters with a reminiscent smile, "but it was a bit of weakness on my part—a feeling of pity for Gibbons. I was satisfied that my alibi was air-tight, and I didn't want him to suffer too much. What do you suppose I did? I retained W. H. Brewster, the famous criminal lawyer, to defend him. I did this anonymously, and sent the money to him in such a way that he could not refuse the case. Anyhow, he did the best he could. Although Gibbons was convicted, the governor commuted his sentence to life imprisonment. That was all I wanted. Everything went along swimmingly until Gibbons escaped from jail, and then my troubles began. I believed the fellow was dead, and was sure that he had been drowned in that automobile accident until Curley got Clyde to go to that spiritualistic seance. When he came home and told me he had heard the voice of Gibbons I knew Gibbons was alive.

"From that moment, all sentiment regarding Gibbons left me. It was a case of self-preservation. I resolved to try and recapture him and send him back to prison. I began to think about the card that was found in Matlack's office, you know, the one with the quotation from the Bible—and I knew enough about his habits to realize that it was one of his reminders. That was what caused me to go to his house and to ransack his library. I failed. I didn't get what I went after—and I left my raincoat there. The rest you know—how we set the two toughs on you in the garage in order to get the letter and how we failed. But it wouldn't have saved me. I—"

He fell back exhausted from the effort of his long talk. Hylan, who never forgot his business, obtained pen and ink and wrote a brief confession. He went to the cot, and spoke to Walters:

"Suppose you sign this while you're able."

Walters raised himself upon one elbow, and grasping the fountain pen that was tendered him, scrawled his signature at the bottom of the document. Then he fell back again, his eyes closed, his breathing heavy, and his face a waxlike palor. Hylan passed the pen to Curley and Norma Bright, and they signed as witnesses.

"I guess that'll be about all," remarked the detective, placing the document in his pocket.

There was the hum of conversation as the group discussed the remarkable revelation. Hylan had reached the door of the room by this time, and the others were preparing to follow him, when Norma noticed a convulsive movement of the man on the cot. She turned in his direction, and the others paused. The stricken man

partly raised himself and then fell back suddenly. William Walters was dead.

CHAPTER XXV

The Governor Smiles

CURLEY had brought joy to the *Chronicle* office by giving that newspaper the exclusive story of the solution of the Matlack mystery. It appeared that morning with headlines which stretched across the top of the first page. The author of this scoop was, as he phrased it, as happy as a clam at high tide. Curley, Norma and Gibbons had arranged to meet Hylan at the office of the Governor, and when they arrived they found the bulldog of the law awaiting them with a grim smile up his usually stolid countenance.

Governor Wayne entered the room just as the others were preparing to seat themselves in anticipation of a long wait. He had been on a speech-making tour, had traveled all night and breakfasted on the train; and not having seen a copy of the *Chronicle,* he was in ignorance of the sensational climax of the Matlack case. As he tossed his overcoat and hat aside, he recognized Curley, who came forward with outstretched hand.

"I don't know whether I should shake hands with a man who has helped to outwit the law."

"Why, Governor," exclaimed the astonished Curley, "what do you mean?"

"Don't play the innocent with me," retorted Wayne. "The last time you were in this room, you made a razzle-dazzle proposition for the reprieve of a convicted murderer. The next thing I hear is that he has escaped and is reported drowned. Then he suddenly comes to life again and—"

The Governor stopped short and stared at the others, who were standing in the background. He recognized Hylan, and from him his glance wandered to Richard Gibbons—the man whose photograph had been plastered all over the State during the last few days.

"Well, well," he exclaimed, "so the hundred thousand dollar convict is here—and in charge of Hylan!"

"Yes, Governor," retorted Gibbons, "he's here according to promise, even though you refused to parole him."

John Wayne was puzzled. "It seems to me," he said, "that I am entitled to an explanation."

"You are," conceded Curley, "and I'm going to ask Hylan to give you a little scrap of paper which he has in his possession."

THE detective advanced with an air of importance and, pulling out his wallet, handed the Governor the confession which had been signed by William Walters. Amazement flooded the Governor's countenance as he finished the reading. Before he had time to make any comments, Curley thrust a copy of the *Chronicle* into his hand.

"If you will please read this story," he said, "it may furnish you with further enlightenment."

The Governor sat down in his red-plush chair with the coat-of-arms of the State embellishing the back, and read the newspaper story from beginning to end. When he had concluded, he arose and grasped the newspaper man by the hand.

"Curley," he exclaimed, "I want to congratulate you. You've done a great piece of work."

After that he took Gibbons' hand and told him how glad he was to know that he had been vindicated. Then, noticing the blushing Norma, he said significantly:

"And if I'm not mistaken, this young woman is as much interested as anyone."

"Yes," interjected Gibbons, with a quivering voice, "if it had not been for her faith in me, I would have given up hope at the outset."

The sight of Hylan staring at him with his beady eyes awakened the Governor to the immediate business before him. He looked at Gibbons kindly.

"All this is very interesting, young man," he said, "but I suppose you are aware that technically you are still an escaped prisoner?"

Gibbons nodded gravely. "I understand that perfectly."

John Wayne pressed a button, and a messenger answered. The Governor spoke to him in an undertone, and the man retired.

"Well, sir," he said to Gibbons, "I'm going to do the only thing possible under the circumstances. I'm going to give you a full pardon. I wish I could do more to atone for the injustice you've suffered. But justice is blind, as you know, and sometimes the bandaged lady makes mistakes."

The messenger returned with a sheet of parchment, and the Governor sat down at

his desk to fill out the legal form. While he was waiting, the others retired to the far end of the room. Curley turned to Norma and Gibbons:

"I've got another bit of news for you. The will of J. B. Matlack was filed for probate last night, and I've managed to get a copy of it. He provides that all of his debts be paid, and that everyone who invested in the bogus oil stock be reimbursed. Moreover, Dick, he directs that you are to seek out the victims and to pay them back every cent they lost."

"I am to do this?" murmured Gibbons.

"Exactly—it's characteristic of the old man. Honest to the backbone! So you see, instead of blaming you for your denunciation of the swindle, he endorses all you said and makes you the agent of restitution."

"Splendid!" exclaimed the young lawyer. "What a shame that he was killed!"

After a moment of silence Curley said:

"But that's not all. The best is yet to come. After these matters have been adjusted, he directs that the remainder of his estate be divided equally between his brother Henry, yourself and Norma Bright."

THE scratching of the gubernatorial pen could be heard upon the sheet of parchment. Richard Gibbons was deeply moved; unshed tears filled the eyes of Norma Bright. Presently the Governor arose and with old-fashioned courtesy presented the signed pardon to Norma.

"My dear young lady," he said, "I want you to accept this with the assurance of my heartiest esteem."

A troublesome lump rose in the girl's throat, and she came perilously near tears. She walked to the bay-window overlooking the grounds, and Gibbons followed her quickly.

"Norma," he cried, taking both her hands in his and unconsciously crumpling the paper, "this is the happiest moment of my life."

"And mine too," she gulped. "Oh, Dick, I'm afraid I'm going to cry."

There was a brief interval; then he said:

"The best part of it is that you are made independent for life now."

This statement did not seem to impress the girl. There was a brief pause, and then she glanced at him with a mischievous twinkle in her tear-dimmed eyes.

"It—it seems to me, Dick, that you have enough money to support a wife."

He looked at her wildly for a moment, and then, utterly disregarding the presence of the others, threw his arms about her and gave her a bear-like hug.

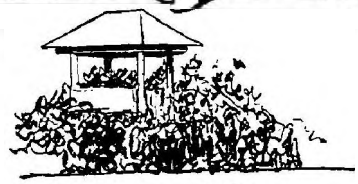
"Oh, Norma, you darling!" he exclaimed, "I'd sooner have you than all the pardons in the world!"

Curley looked at Hylan and winked. "Come on, Hylan," he cried, "this is no place for us."

And Governor Wayne, seated in the high-backed chair of state, smiled in a fatherly and blissful manner upon Curley of the *Chronicle*.

THE END.

The Fifty-Mile National Championship



A THRILLING story of one of the most exciting sports in the world—motorcycle racing.

Frank Richardson Pierce

IN the experimental room of the Sioux Motorcycle Company the general manager, the designing engineer and his assistants and several riders had gathered about a motorcycle. It was of the same general construction as other motorcycles. Its displacement was sixty-one cubic inches, bringing it within the "strictly stock" class, which would thus permit it to enter into track competition with the leading makes of motorcycles. The engineer was speaking.

"There she is!" he said. "It is the best I can do, and I stand or fall with it. Our road riders have smashed over several thousand miles of the worst road, and both motor and frame stood the gaff. We've tried it out under every practical condition as well as impractical conditions and it stood the test nobly. We put her over a two-mile speedway at ninety-five miles an hour for three hours and stopped only for gas, oil and tires. It is my honest opinion, gentlemen, that she can hold her own with any pocket valve motor made, of similar displacement. She is a stock motor that is strictly stock. This factory can turn out five thousand exactly like her this year, and if we can only convince the boys that it is a real motor, we'll be on our financial feet at the end of the year.

"Personally I would like to send out a team of four or five of the best riders we can pick up, and enter all the big races during 1920. We would compete against the old established machines with their crack racing teams and if we won a few races it would make us. If we lost, then the public would say, 'Well what can you expect of a machine the first year?' But I know the treasury wont stand much of that sort of thing so I'll be satisfied to enter a single machine in some of the championship events of 1920."

"It has been an uphill fight," responded the manager, "but we have a real motor at last. It has cost a barrel of money to put out the few machines we have completed. We had to junk several promising ideas and with the junk went thousands of dollars. Frankly, we are running along the ragged edge financially; but even so we can't dispose of our output without first convincing the public we have an article worth selling.

"Under the guidance of the Motorcycle and Allied Trades Association motorcycle racing has been made reasonably safe. As a sport it is sweeping the country. We haven't had much of it in the East because of weather conditions, but out in Los Angeles, this winter, at Ascot Park, the people are wild over it. Motorcycle sports are no longer limited to discussion in trade journals, but have earned a place on the sporting page along with baseball and boxing. If you could have seen Shrimp Burns win the twenty-five mile National Championship at Ascot in eighteen minutes and thirty-two seconds on a

mile paved track, skidding around the turns on asphalft as I did, you would think the sport is popular. I saw boys riding elbow to elbow at ninety miles an hour. It is going to be the same all over America this year. Because this factory has as much sporting blood in it as the others, even if it hasn't as much money back of it, I am going to enter a rider in all championship events from now on. If we can win the first championship there are five thousand people in the United States who will be riding Sioux motorcycles before the year is out. It'll convince them that we have a real machine as we know we have."

He paused, then laughed a bit ruefully. "Our lone machine, with its lone rider attempting to win against the crack teams of other factories with several riders to a team is a bit pathetic when you think about it, but," and his face became determined, "we have a sporting chance, and I'm taking it. From this day on we'll devote our energies to production and leave the racing end of the game to Leonard here. He knows it from A to Z and will get results if anybody can. How about it Leonard?"

"I'll do my best sir," replied Leonard who in his day, which was the day of Motordromes, had won many a race.

"That'll suit us, for we know the problem you are up against, with the big factories paying the best riders in the land good salaries in addition to the prize money they win."

"I am not worrying about a rider as I have one lined up already."

"Who?" they demanded as one.

"Little Jimmy Davis!"

Disappointment flashed over the face of every man in the group except the cheerful Leonard.

"Alibi Davis, eh?" growled the manager, "the boy who never won a big race in his life, but always had a wonderful excuse for not winning. 'She wasn't turning over fast enough!' or 'She wasn't hitting right!' or—well, we all know his usual excuses."

"I knew how you would feel about it," replied Leonard firmly, "but if I am to have a free hand as you say, that wont make any difference with me. Why? Because I happen to know that Davis is one of the best riders today, and his failure to come out of his different races as a winner is no fault of his. His alibi was always the truth because he has never ridden a real machine in his life. He was always feeling sorry for some new factory that had just started up and was trying to make good. He'd help them to the limit because he was taking a sporting chance himself and hoped at the same time he would be doing them a good turn. He didn't care for a sure thing. It was the element of doubt that made a hit with him. You never heard him handing an alibi to the public, it was always to the factory he was riding for, and he told them the truth.

"Go to some of the well-known stars today and offer them twice what they are getting to ride the Sioux and they'll give you the laugh with few exceptions. Davis isn't that sort. He said he'd ride for us if we wanted him to. He tried our machine out on a mile dirt track and after a twenty-five mile go was the happiest man in America. 'I've got a real machine at last!' he said, and the way he said it got under my skin. I told him if it was left to me and you sent a man out, he would be the man."

"We are still leaving it to you," smiled the manager, "but really, Leonard, you know he is regarded as more or less of a joke."

"Yes, by those who don't know him," said Leonard.

WITHIN a few weeks the sporting world knew that a new motorcycle would make its appearance at the next championship race meet. It also learned that none other than Alibi Davis would be astride the latest contender for championship honors. Thereupon the sporting world indulged in a quiet laugh and no longer regarded the Sioux motorcycle as worthy of consideration, either as a racing machine or as a means of going about one's business.

Faint echoes of this laughter reached the ears of Leonard and even Davis himself, but both smiled and said, "Wait!" More than echoes reached the factory heads. Interested, and well meaning individuals, dropped a hint to the effect that if they were going to enter a machine it would be wise to select a real rider or remain out altogether. The factory did not say, "Wait!" but that was exactly what it was doing.

Two weeks before the meet took place Leonard, Davis and the Sioux arrived. One of the rival factory teams was already on the grounds, while the other two were expected within a few days. The crashing

and roaring of motors turning over at a ninety-mile-an-hour speed greeted Leonard's ears as he arrived at the one-mile paved speedway. The usual crowd of rail-birds were roosting along the rail at the turns, or else hanging about the pits getting in the way. The truck backed up, and deposited the Sioux on the ground along with various spare parts, gasoline and oil cans, tool kits and the many adjuncts to ninety-miles-an-hour racing.

A group of pleasant, keen-looking young fellows gathered about and studied the lines of the new mount with the eyes of experts.

"So this is the new bus?" said one.

"Yup!" grunted Leonard.

"Looks good! What can she do!"

"Oh, 'round a hundred when she's hitting right."

They laughed good-naturedly.

"Does she ever hit just right?"

"About ninety-five per cent right most of the time!" answered Leonard with a grin.

They shot glances from the machine to each other. Plainly they were impressed.

"Think you can hold her down on the turns, Alibi?" inquired one.

"Well, if I can't the worst I can do is to unload and take the turn on the back of my neck!" replied Davis, "and it wouldn't be the first time I had tried to straighten out a curve and finished neck and neck with the machine."

To the veteran a spill at ninety miles an hour is nothing so long as he has clear sliding and is dressed encased in leather from head to foot with a heavy padding of loose fitting clothing underneath.

Davis glanced at Walker's leather helmet. It was different from any he had seen before. "I'm stuck on that helmet, Otto, where did you get it?"

"That," said Walker proudly, "was made in Germany."

"Huh!" grunted Davis who had put in two years dispatch riding with the A. E. F. "That's nothing to boast about!"

"Go on, tell him about it, Otto!" one of his teammates suggested.

"Naw, let him think about it awhile, it'll keep his mind off those turns he's going to take at a hundred miles an hour on this new boat."

"It is like this, Alibi," suggested one, "Otto is a modest cuss, so we'll tell you about that helmet. Otto was riding the shell holes one day, coming back from carrying a dispatch. A shell, or a machine gun, or something had blown off his helmet. Maybe it was only the wind, anyway he was bareheaded; so while riding along at the usual D. R. speed of fifty miles an hour he noticed an Allied plane taking a dive at a Hun balloon. The sausage caught fire and out hopped a couple of officers, each dangling at the end of a parachute. Otto dashed over that way, and met 'em about the time they hit the ground. The first thing he spots was that Made-in-Germany helmet. 'Gimme that lid!' chirps Otto, 'I lost mine, and you wont need yours any more!' And with that Otto grabs the helmet, kicks over his motor and is off before the Prussian knew what was happening."

"And believe me or not," added Walker, "this old lid has brought me a lot of good luck ever since I lifted it. Well, come on boys, old Alibi is dying to try out the track with his new boat."

THEY strolled away, followed the track along the right turn, mounted the rail and waited. They had received a number of interesting tips about the new Sioux and the ambitious company behind it and they were eager to see what it could do. Nor were they disappointed. Five minutes later Davis was towed down the stretch and was off. He circled the speedway at a fair rate of speed several times, then just to give them something to talk about opened her up for an instant on the back stretch.

"Some get-away!" exclaimed one in admiration, "but then she probably wont hang together at that speed for a full race —they never do, these new motors. I've watched a number of them come and go in my time."

They gathered about the machine when Davis rolled up to Leonard, dragging his feet on the track in lieu of a brake. Racing motorcycles are not equipped with a brake for the simple reason that to use a brake at high speed is almost sure to lock the rear wheel and send the rider to the ground with a crash; in any event a brake could not successfully check the speed of the machine should some unexpected obstacle appear on the track.

"Nice speedway they have here," announced Davis. "It is my first time on her. What did I do the mile in, I noticed you fellows had the stop-watch on me?"

"Forty-seven once and forty-eight seconds on two other laps. Why didn't you open her up for a lap or two?"

"Afraid to!" replied Davis candidly. "I haven't got the hang of those turns yet. They could stand a little more banking for the speed our machines have."

"Well, take it easy, old scout; we don't want to have you out of the race before the starter fires the shot, because, Davis, we are out to win not only the twenty-five mile championship, but we are expecting to take the fifty mile right after it." They were smiling pleasantly, but Davis knew they realized he had a real machine at last, and were throwing a challenge to him.

"If you win the fifty mile I'll have no alibi to offer this time, except that I was outridden; but before you spend that prize money, don't forget there are two other teams besides the Sioux's one-man team and the whole crowd of us are just as hard after the prize money as you are."

THE other teams arrived the following day and immediately began tuning up. Every man was out to win, and if he could not win, he intended to do his best to keep the rival teams from winning, one, two, three. The one-man entry put his whole soul into perfecting his riding so that in spite of the wonderful team work and equally wonderful machines of his opponents, the Sioux would cross the finish in the lead.

To that end Davis studied the track day after day, learning gradually to increase his speed on the turns until he felt sure he could hold his own with the others. In the early morning, before the others were out was the time that he did his real riding. Here it was that Leonard mounted the rail, stop-watch in hand and watched the veteran rider on the new machine gradually chop off the seconds required for each lap until he could easily reel off ten miles at nearly eighty miles an hour.

"I am getting it down and the machine is staying with me," he told Leonard one morning. "Now, tomorrow, I am going to do the mile in record time."

"All right," replied Leonard, "you take the turns as pretty as any fellow on the track and that is saying a lot, considering the stars of the racing game are all here."

BOTH men were at the track early the following morning. "Well, here goes," said Davis, "I notice our two friends are on the fence as usual. Expect they'll see some real speed I guess." The two idlers he referred to had been present the past few mornings watching him try out. They, too, held stop-watches.

Five laps to warm up his motor—then like a thunderbolt he roared down the home stretch, the crack of his motor echoing and re-echoing among the empty seats of the grandstand. He roared into the turn, skidded, came out of it and was into the back-stretch almost before Leonard realized it. He took the left turn perfectly and shot by the home stretch again.

At the completion of the mile three men looked at stop watches.

"He's equaled the world's record for a mile!" yelled Leonard to the emptiness about him. "Oh, man, oh, man! I've a mind to wire the factory. No, I'll wait and wire them the real news—after the race. There he comes again!" Davis was riding as hard as ever apparently, while the two on the fence were talking excitedly.

"Bill, we're up against it! You know what that fellow's doing the mile in. Well, you know what that means; if he wins that fifty-mile National Championship that I lose a cool thousand plunks, while you're nicked for eight hundred. We gotta do something, because we figured the big fight would be between the two teams that have been scrapping it out so far this year and we figured we knew who would win because of those new motors they were using. We— Look at that bus roll, he can never make that turn at that rate! He—"

AS Davis came into the first turn, the rear wheel skidded partially, held, then headed him for the fence. By heroic work he almost brought it out before he went down. The crash could be heard all over the track, the runaway motor, racing madly, man and machine whirled over the track dizzily for several revolutions, then parted, the rider bouncing like some huge leather doll. The machine turned over several times more, then came to a standstill nearly two hundred yards from where it had first fallen, the motor still spitting in protest. With a groan of fear, Leonard rushed for the spot only to see Davis hop to his feet. He was scratched in places, and several holes torn in his leather clothing, but he was grinning. "I sure sacked that time!" he shouted, "ruined my leather pants, but I hope the old bus isn't hurt any."

"Don't worry about the pants, we'll get another pair," replied Leonard relieved to find him unhurt.

The two spectators still remained on the fence. "If that spill didn't ruin that motor, Bill, we'll have to ruin it for him, eh?"

"I don't want to ruin it exactly, Joe; you see I have the dope on new motors. They're good for a flash, then they'll peter out. I figured this Sioux would come in one, two or three the first race, so I bet according. Now it looks as if it would clean up both the twenty-five mile and the fifty. If there was only some way of slowing it down a bit so it would almost hold its own, but land in, say, third money first race and lose out in the second it would be jake."

"Well, don't let that worry you—there is a way. Suppose a different sprocket was slipped in the night before the race. That would slow up his speed a bit wouldn't it? The longer the race, the less chance he would have of placing. I figure that bird is due to come in third in the twenty-five mile and bring up the rear of the fifty. And not until it is all over and he begins to pull down his motor will he find the alibi this time."

Both laughed, dropped down off the fence and disappeared. They knew exactly where Davis kept his precious motor and because he knew that none of the factory teams would stoop to such dirty work the two rightly reasoned their task would be easy, particularly as both had examined the Sioux close up, and were fairly good mechanics.

The damage to the machine contracted in Davis' spill consisted only of a slight dent in the tank and a pair of bent handlebars.

"The motor is exactly right!" commented Davis on the way back to town, "and I'm not going to touch her. Straighten out the bars, put on new tires and I am ready for the starter's gun. If the Sioux doesn't own the twenty-five mile or fifty-mile championship when the meet is over I'm going to be the most disappointed man in these United States. I've got to win, Leonard. Just think of the generosity of the factory to give me the big chance when so much depends on it. Me, a bird who has lost so many races that everybody calls me Alibi. Leonard I tell you I'm going to win that race."

IT was shortly after midnight when Bill and Joe, like burglars, slipped softly from the room wherein was stored the hopes of the Sioux Motorcycle Company. Although they carried nothing from the place except a sprocket, they had stolen the race.

"It was easier than I thought," commented Jim when they were safely away. "I had to stick a half link in that chain to make it as tight as it was before, but they'll never notice that tomorrow—too much excitement.

The night swallowed the precious pair; although the satisfied voices of the men could be heard after they had disappeared. In the distance the gleam of two bright headlights, followed by soft purring of a motor, marked the arrival of another of the many motorcyclists who had journeyed hundreds of miles to witness the big race on the morrow. Then silence.

But it was silence for a short time only. With the coming of daylight, the early birds, and they were legion, motored out to the track, to mount the fence and watch ther favorite warm up their motors. Mechanics cocked critical ears as their men roared by, only to flag them down and occasionally make a minute adjustment, for all knew it would be a race where seconds would count.

An hour before the start the grandstand was half filled, while the parking space within the field was rapidly taken up with motorcycles and sidecars. Bright, highly polished machines with every thing in the way of equipment that money could buy, rolled alongside of a belt-driven motorcycle built many years ago, and now only in working order because its happy owner had managed to raise twenty-five dollars to reclaim it from the junk heap, and had mechanical brains enough to "keep her shooting." But all met on a common ground—love of the sport that is taking the place of the sport of kings.

ON every hand could be heard comments on the new Sioux motorcycle. All had heard of it, but few had seen it. It was to be the coming-out-party of the new machine, and they were interested. What chance would it have against the veteran machines and their veteran riders? "None!" said the wise man. "There is always a chance!" replied the red-blooded fellow who was willing to take a chance himself. Alibi Davis was greeted on every hand by old friends and pointed out to the riders who had but recently taken up the sport. Dubious predictions invariably fol-

lowed mention of his name. Even some of his friends were skeptical.

When he rolled his mount onto the track and was towed down the stretch to a start, the hum of conversation quieted somewhat, while thousands of eyes followed the speeding figure around the track. If they had hoped for sensational speed, they were disappointed. Davis was content to merely warm up his motor and assure himself for the hundredth time she was right."

"Got an awful pick-up today!" he commented as he rolled into his pits. The enthusiastic remark reached the ears of Bill and Joe. "I'll say she has!" whispered Joe, "she's got a lower gear than when he rode her last."

THE band suddenly ceased its playing with a final crash. A man stepped forward. He was dressed in white, and a flowing badge proclaimed him the referee. Other important individuals were labeled "Starter," "Announcer" or "Judge."

The megaphone man approached the first rider, "Shrimp Burns!" he announced. A storm of cheers went up. "Red Parkhurst!" More cheers. "Joe Wolters!" The crowd seemed as enthusiastic as ever. And so, rider after rider was introduced. "Alibi Davis on the new Sioux. Mr. Davis is here to come back strong and is well known to the old timers." The official was trying to be fair, but Davis felt as if some one was gently prodding him. He appreciated the applause from the old timers, and from the new timers whose sporting blood naturally began pulling for the man with the least chance of winning.

Every rider felt relieved when he found himself being towed down the field. The crack and pop of many motors began at the turn, then one by one the towing machines dropped out. The racers swept along almost abreast on the back stretch, each attempting to keep even with his fellow. They took the turn at forty miles an hour, then wheel to wheel flashed by the grandstand at sixty miles an hour to a flying start. Breathlessly the crowd watched the starter's flag descend. A crash of motors and they were off, desperately fighting for the lead. Like a flash the Sioux moved away from the speeding group, and with it came a murmur of excitement from thousands of voices.

Hardly believing his eyes, Leonard followed the figure into the back stretch, saw the field sweep down upon it, engulf it, saw it fighting like mad to hold its own on the left turn, only to drop back slightly as the teams shot past the stands completing the first lap.

"Shot her wad! The first lap!" groaned some one in disgust. "Can you beat it. Looked like a winner for all of a half mile, then lost the combination. Bet Davis is thinking up an alibi right now."

Davis was thinking, but not about alibis. He was taking everything wide open; the motor was hitting perfectly, but the speed of the previous days was not there. Grimly fighting for every foot, he did not give up until he was flagged down and then it was to roll into the pits sadly shaking his head.

Those nearby waited for the alibi, but it never came.

"What's the matter, old man?" said Leonard quietly. He knew the sting of defeat was deeper than it had ever been before.

"I don't know," he said honestly.

NOT far away Bill was paying off a bet. His work had been so well done that the Sioux had not come in anywhere near one, two, or three, but Bill was not badly worried. The Sioux did not have a chance in the fifty mile. He doubted if they would enter it. Plainly Davis and Leonard were hard hit, and if they recovered their nerve sufficiently to enter the next event the same old sprocket would be working. And so he paid cheerfully knowing it would flow back to him again within an hour. Already pitmen were preparing the machines for the next event.

"The best we can do, is to die game!" Davis was saying. "Fill her up and I'll climb aboard. We'll show 'em we have a motor that'll keep hitting steadily even if she hasn't got the speed, but she has the speed, Leonard, I know she has, now."

He stopped short as his eye fell on the chain, and a dull glow of anger suffused his face. "There's a half link in that chain and you know as well as I do they are liable to break. A fellow who'd slip a half link in is likely to—"

"Now just what do you mean?" said Leonard in a quiet but dangerous voice.

"I didn't put a half link in and you know it."

"I know nothing of the sort! It is there! See for yourself!"

Leonard examined the chain. "I saw a man lose a race once because he had been

too lazy to fix up a few extra chains and had made them long enough with a half link. I never put that chain on!"

For an instant they studied each other, then each half-murmured an apology, as the realization came both were telling the truth. Leonard bent quickly to the sprocket. Twice he counted the teeth, and when he stood up his face was blazing. "Somebody has put something over on us. You are not geared as high as you should be. The sprocket has been changed."

"And no time to change another before the race starts," groaned Davis. "I'd go out and ask him for time, but," and he became bitter, "I'm only a joke, and they'd think it was an alibi."

"They will never keep the crowd waiting long enough to make the change that's sure!" For the first time in his life Leonard felt helpless, then his face lighted up. "Davis!" he barked, "you get busy and change that sprocket. Work as you never worked before, and I'll hold up this race and make 'em like it."

Davis did not stop to ask questions, but commenced work. He had barely started when he heard the announcer's voice bellowing:

"Ladies and Gentlemen! Mr. Leonard of the Sioux factory will give a demonstration with the side-car while the riders are preparing for the fifty-mile championship."

"Him, give a demo with a side-car. That's good!" grinned Davis, "but the boy is getting the time we need I'll say that for him."

Leonard's demonstration consisted of his riding back and forth in front of the grandstand with the side-car wheel in the air and himself in the side-car. He continued this as long as he dared, acknowledged the applause and hurried over to Davis.

"Just as I figured," he laughed, "there was a local pride who is something of a side-car artist himself, and he didn't propose to have any out-of-town fellows showing him up. He demanded the privilege of showing the home folks what he can do and it was granted. Fair enough."

They had just completed adjusting the chain when a storm of applause broke from the crowd. Both men glanced toward the track. A young rider was coming down the stretch at a fair rate of speed, and had evidently perfected a trick used by Wells Bennett in a motion picture comedy. The rider was occupying the side-car and driving as Leonard had done a short time before, but what sent the crowd wild was his clever work in removing the side-car wheel while under way. The wheel now occupied the car. Presently the driver returned the wheel, righted the outfit and pulled into a pit.

"The boy saved our lives!" exclaimed Leonard, "and he is really clever!" And Leonard was off to congratulate the fellow while the starters were lining up the machines for the fifty mile championship.

IF the Sioux had lost the combination of the first race, the crowd realized that the machine had found it again. Davis did not shoot to the lead, only to fall back as in the previous race. Instead he was fighting it out with the leaders, hemmed in by an insurmountable wall that moved always ahead of him at from eighty to ninety miles an hour. One factory team had the lead and intended to keep it. Directly behind came a second watching a chance to sweep ahead, a chance that must be taken and consummated in seconds. Between the two came the lone rider of the Sioux.

His chance came in the twenty-second lap. For the space of a few seconds, the steady roar of one of the leading machines was broken. It dropped back a few yards, only to have the trouble disappear, but not before the team behind shot forward in an effort to break through the speeding row of machines in the lead. But as quickly as the second team moved, Davis was quicker. He wormed his way through machines, with but inches to spare.

He found himself with a roaring demon on either side. Be-leathered and be-goggled humans who knew not the meaning of fear and who coolly calculated chances and took them. On padded tanks they lay, a part of the machine, whether it skidded at a dangerous angle or turned with front wheels bending beneath the strain, or forged ahead with throttle wide open on straightaways. The thrill that comes to the man who is winning and knows it, surged through Davis. The throttle was wide open now, and the test would come on the next turn. Could he hold his own with those on either side?

THE man at his side nearly side-swiped him as he skidded, but came out again safely. The rider on the outer side took

up the entire track in an effort to maintain the speed. Again, came the thrill! Davis was not only holding his own with the best, but at that turn at least, he had set the pace. Out of the turn he crawled ahead by feet, the roar of his motor merging with the greater roar of a crowd seeking thrills and finding them. He held his lead at the next turn, increased it on the back stretch and with a clear track before him took the turn in two long skids, trusting in luck and good tires to stand the strain. Nor did he pause to wonder where the others were? He knew they were thundering behind him, and that an instant's pause, a few misses of the motor, and they would engulf him in a mad whirl of cracking motors and grimly determined men; only to leave him behind. Lap after lap he took chances that gave the crowd its money's worth several fold; he had swept it off its feet even as he himself had swept ahead of all opposition.

From the corner of his eye he beheld a wild man, holding a blackboard on which was scrawled "Hands Down—38." He recognized the wild man as Leonard and the message to indicate he was winning hands down and had completed the thirty-eighth lap. He swerved slightly to avoid a round object in the track ahead of him and indulged in a grin as he recognized it as the Made in Germany helmet. So Walker had lost his headgear in the mad pace. Not until he had overhauled several tail-enders and the crowd was shrieking instructions for him to lap the field did he cease worrying, but even then he never slackened his pace an instant. Back in his mind were the words of Leonard: "A race is never won until the winner gets the flag!"

Strung out just ahead of him, from a few yards to an eighth of a mile were the riders who hoped to come in second, third, and fourth, with a number of others hanging grimly to them with hopes of overcoming the lead. They thundered by the grandstand at the completion of their forty-eighth lap, a few seconds before Davis completed his forty-ninth.

SUDDENLY a tire flew off the rim of a machine ahead. For an instant the rider fought madly to hold his mount, then he crashed, flew clear of the machine and shot along the track on his back like a sled skimming over the ice, while beside him rolled a tangled mass of spitting motor and flying wheels. With a final crash the machine hit a banked turn rail, skidded back into the center of the track and burst into flames. Those directly ahead of Davis missed it by inches, and were clear before the wall of flame shot upward from the track. At such times, the veteran rider thinks quickly.

For all he knew, somewhere beyond the flaming mass, a fellow rider lay helpless. Without a moment's hesitation, Davis shut off the motor, let go of the bars and hurled himself clear. For a space of fifty feet the riderless machine balanced, shooting towards the outer rail, only to hit, glance away and disappear beyond the flames.

Davis, as he had hoped to do, landed on his back and carried by the momentum of his own body, was hurled straight into the mass. For aught he knew, either his machine or himself would crash into what lay beyond, but in any event it would be at lessened speed and less disasterous to all concerned. Unknowingly he was holding his breath, and before he realized what had happened he had shot into the roaring mass.

Instinctively he leaped to his feet and rushed to drag his mount clear of the riders he knew would soon be entering the final lap. His helmet and goggles were gone, and in places his leather clothing was torn to shreds. Several stinging places about his body told him that more than leather had worn through. Even as he leaped to his feet, he could see the fallen rider dragging the blazing machine clear, shielding his face with one gloved hand while the other nearly smoked from the heat.

No sooner had the erstwhile rival of Davis dragged his own machine clear than he rushed over the Sioux. Already, Davis was tugging at the bent handle bars in an effort to straighten them.

"Quick!" gasped the fellow. "If you hadn't deliberately thrown yourself in an effort to save me you would have won the race by this time. You're not going to lose it this late day even if I can help it. Pile onto that crate of yours and do it quick!"

Davis understood and tossed a leg over the battered saddle. The other was pushing him vigorously down the track, the motor working jerkily against the compression. Twice she barked hopefully, then, as if realizing she had been given a new lease on life, the Sioux grunted down the

track on one lung, the rider working the controls desperately in an effort to induce the other cylinder to function. Not far behind he could hear the nearest motor approaching, and across the field came the cheers of the frantic crowd, now on its feet, mentally striving to pull the balky machine the last half mile by sheer will power. The crowd wanted to see the winner win.

THE cheerful, explosive crack of the slacker cylinder joined in the sturdy bark of the other, then the two merged into a steady roar. The battered Sioux began to leap ahead, gaining in speed every instant, while the eager machines in the rear strived to overtake it. Davis had a speed of fifty miles an hour when he came out of the left turn and into the home stretch. The others were coming at eighty miles an hour, crawling up on him almost two to one. Ahead loomed up the energetic figure of the man Davis had wanted to see these many years—the man who flags the winner.

The thunder of the oncoming machines had increased until Davis momentarily expected to see them flash past. A scant fifty yards separated him from the finish, through his goggles he saw the tense crowd, silent for the instant, impatiently waiting the thrilling finish.

Two machines shot across the line almost as one, a third had its front wheel even with the rear wheel of the winner. Davis and his rival rode together at thirty miles an hour around the track, each wondering which had won. From the vast throng in the grandstand there came only an occasional shout. Three judges conferred together a moment. Other officials were consulted, then the announcer stepped into the center of the track.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the fifty-mile championship was won by Alibi Davis on a Sioux!" The storm of approval drowned out the names of those coming in second, third and fourth.

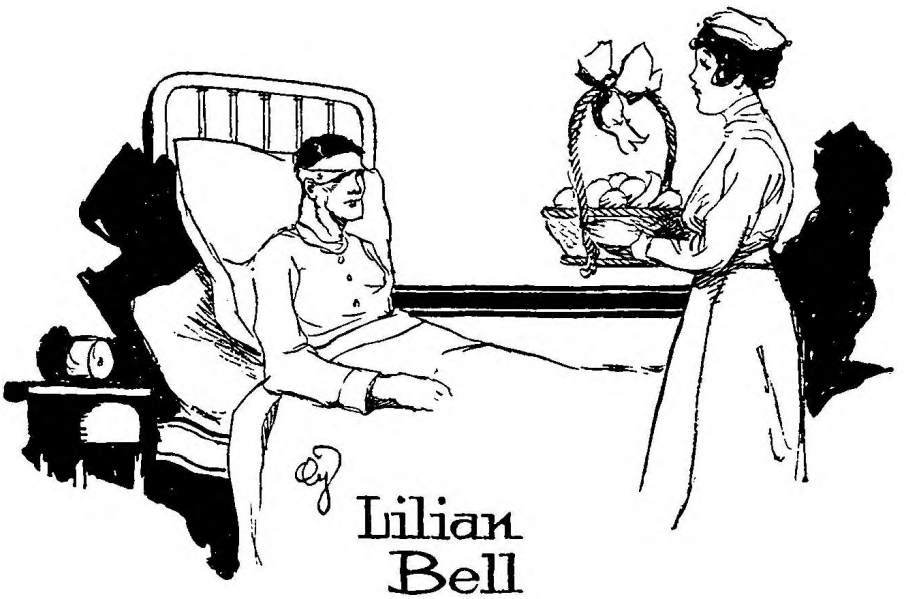
Walker turned to his teammates with a grin. "I got the alibi this time, fellows—I lost my helmet and with it went my luck. What I want to know is, how is the Sioux team going to honor the winner by carrying him around on its shoulders? Tell me that!"

"It can't be done!" replied another. "Unless he carries himself around."

"Then we'll do it for him!"

And without a moment's hesitation, they rushed the happy Davis, hoisted him upon their shoulders and paraded him back and forth in front of the delighted crowd, then they carried him over and held him, while a dozen motion-picture-machine operators vigorously cranked a few feet of the winner of the Fifty-Mile National Championship, Mr. James (Alibi) Davis.

His Place *in the* Sun



By Lilian Bell

WITH an eagerness which made the paper tremble in his hand, Harlan Coleman read Sidney Hammond's letter for the sixth time. The hope it held out seemed too good to be true. After a year of indecision, in which he felt sure she was honestly trying to make up her mind in fairness to both of them, she had practically decided to marry him. Tonight he was to see her, to take her in his arms, to have her first kiss and to give to her the ring in its white velvet box—the ring he had been eyeing wistfully for months.

In order to secure the necessary speed in engraving, he had motored to Newark, and had stayed on the job until the initials and date were cut into the metal. He pocketed the precious thing, and was now driving dizzily up Fifth Avenue, risking arrest to be in the presence of the only girl ten minutes sooner than sanity cautioned.

Who that knew him, steel-nerved in a business crisis or deliberate in a panic, would have recognized him now as, with flushed face and the trembling of a bashful boy, he stood in the Hammond library waiting for Sidney to appear?

It seemed hours before she came through the doorway.

"Sidney!" he said hoarsely. He stood motionless, holding out his arms so beseechingly that she moved toward him involuntarily. But she came slowly, almost reluctantly it seemed to his jealous and tortured consciousness.

"Sidney, darling!" he said again.

He took a step toward her and seized her arm which hung limply at her side. He placed it around his neck and drew her into an embrace which crushed and enveloped her. She struggled ineffectually. He tilted her face up to his and found her lips. He felt her shrink from his passion, and in response to her little moan of protest, he released her.

"Forgive me!" he said thickly, drawing the back of his hand across his burning eyes. "I should have waited. I was precipitate, but if you knew how for years I have longed for this moment, you would be lenient. Sidney, let me hear you say that you love me!"

"I—I—" she stammered.

He gazed imploringly at her.

"I wanted you to wait longer," she said, "but you wouldn't. I said I wanted to talk to you, and that after I had explained, if you still wanted to marry me, I would. I—I didn't say—"

"No; you didn't say that you loved me, but knowing you as I do, the kind of a girl you are, I knew that you never would marry me without love. So I hoped enough to bring you this. Look at it and tell me if you will wear it! I don't care how much you explain! After you have told me everything that is in your heart, I

shall ask you to marry me. I shall put this ring on your finger, and shall know that I hold in my arms—my wife!"

Sidney's fascinated eyes clung to his but her flesh shrank from the touch of his hot fingers; her soul resented his boldness—the boldness of the lover who is accepted on sufferance.

"After I have told you all that is in my heart," she whispered, "I think you will not want me!"

He threw back his head and laughed. He did not observe that, after one glance at the ring, she kept her hands clenched; yet it was the most beautiful ring she had ever seen.

ON each side of the open fire were deep oaken settees piled high with cushions. He drew her down to one, flung his arm across the back of it and pulled her usually pliant figure, now rigid with resistance, into the hollow of his arm.

She drew away from him, gently but firmly. "I want to face you while I talk," she said in response to his reproachful glance. "You—you take so much for granted, Harlan!"

He took both her locked hands from her lap and covered them with kisses. "I love you, love you!" he cried. "And you—you don't even accept it. You ward it off—and me!"

She stirred impatiently. "It's just that!" she complained. "It's your assurance, your completeness that holds me off. You are so well, so strong, so self-contained, such a law unto yourself, that I feel you do not need me! I would simply be an ornament in your home, like a white Angora kitten, or a buhl clock, or a jade idol—valuable, no doubt, to my owner, but of not the slightest use—I mean life necessity!"

He squared around at her. "No use! No life necessity!" he exclaimed. "Not more than the air I breathe! I couldn't live without air; I can't live without you!"

She smiled sadly. "Listen, Harlan. You talk so excitedly. You know this war has done queer things to all of us. I am not the same girl I was two years ago. You are not the same man. I've watched you working your head off in Liberty Loan drives, on Red Cross committees, giving your money with both hands, helping us women to earn huge sums, managing our bazaars—"

The man covered his face with his hands and gave a groan. "Don't!" he said. "Don't sit there rehearsing the piffling service I have been to my country as a useless stay-at-home, when every friend I have was across except me! I wanted to go. I would have given one of my eyes to have gone, but I was an infernal necessity to the Government here, and they turned me down every time I tried to get in. They wouldn't let me go. Other men could offer their bodies; I could only offer my experienced brains and my eager soul! These they took and wrecked. I am not a soldier. I am not even, in my own estimate, a man; I am only a machine!"

He got up and stood before her. "A troop-ship came in this morning with twelve thousand doughboys on it—happy, yelling their heads off to be home again. Six hundred more were wounded. I saw them being taken off—stretcher cases, in wheel-chairs, on crutches, in splints, casts; blinded, gassed, shell shocked; some with their eyes bandaged, led by nurses! But all grinning at the thought of home! And well they might, for they've all done a man's part. They offered and they paid. What wouldn't I give to have paid like those men!"

The girl on the settee clasped her hands and lifted her face. "That's just what I mean," she said. "That is what war has done to all of us. We want to be of some real use. You want to be of some hard, rough, painful, stern use to your country. I want to be needed in the same way by my husband. If the old pioneer days were here again, I could follow my man into the wilderness and help him hew down the trees for our home. You don't need me at all, in that way. If you had gone over and you had come back a basket-man, you'd have got me—all of me. I never could have given you enough. To be hands and feet to you, and you helpless, would have been a terrible, an awful joy.

"You know, Harlan, there was a man in my life—and this is what I felt I must tell you: this is what I meant in my letter. Before he went away, I was almost in love with him—with John Aldis!"

"John Aldis!" repeated Harlan. "He was reported missing in action."

TEARS rushed to the girl's eyes. She caught her lip between her teeth and twisted her hands together nervously.

"Yes; missing in action. For months I held to the hope that he was in some German prison-camp or perhaps shell-shocked, his identity lost in some way. I waited. Then a little while ago the official list came in. You saw it, didn't you? They found his grave, his identification-tag. He had been killed."

Harlan Coleman was silent. "Did you love him?" he muttered at length.

Sidney shook her head. "No; for the same reason I do not love you. I was fond of him. When he was alive, I nearly loved him. He was so big, so complete, so splendid, he swept me off my feet with the glorious beauty of him! But he didn't need me, either. I thought, after he was reported missing, perhaps—"

The man interrupted her — shocked. "You hoped he would be wounded so that he would need you, and you could love him?"

"No!" flashed the girl, with a spurt of anger. "I never thought of such a thing. I didn't analyze; people didn't then. But now we know that war has turned the thought of the world toward motherhood. To be a mother now, one does not need to bear a child. Every woman who stands in a crowd watching the long lines of soldiers and sailors swing by, is a mother to all of them. It is no longer 'my boy,' it is 'our boys!' I have seen that mother-look in the eyes of gray-haired saints and the same look in the eyes of little shop-girls—yes; even in the eyes of the painted women we guarded girls are taught to shun. Do you know what I mean?"

The man nodded dumbly.

"Wise men tell us that war brings the vital statistics up to the limit of human endurance, that Nature must repeople the earth. It isn't that! It is that the yearn of motherhood is in the hearts of men as well as women. You have it when you talk of offering your body. You are no longer satisfied to play the part of the provider—the money-maker, the Government father. You want to be hurt. You crave the suffering that goes with motherhood. It makes you unhappy; it leaves you incomplete because you find yourself strong, rich and well cared for, when those blinded boys are being led down the gang-plank, grinning under their white bandages. Oh, Harlan—war has upset many theories, but the one most upset is that there is sex in qualities of the heart. Every true man and woman is now father and mother in one. The wisdom and ability to protect, which once we thought masculine, have proved to be owned by women of the war the world over; while the tenderness, gentleness and love once called feminine, are manifested by our soldiers every day, not only in their love for their buddies and their consideration for the wounded, but in their attitude toward the whole world. So now—"

She broke off, twisting her hands and gazing down at the rug, unable to meet his troubled gaze.

"I think I see," he said slowly. "You mean that we are both obsessed by a passion for self-sacrifice, that—"

She looked up at him with softly glowing face. "You do see, Harlan!" she cried.

"But if we both devoted our lives, dedicated them to humanity, doing all we could, giving from our full lives—" he paused hopefully.

"I don't know," she said wistfully. "I don't want to hurt you, but this talk tonight has shown me one thing—that you do understand me. I didn't think you would, Harlan. I didn't think you were so sensitive, so fine, if you will let me say it without offense. I thought of you as a splendid, generous materialist. But tonight you have let me see into the very best of you, and—"

"Wont you try to love me?" he asked. It rather went to her heart to hear the humility and wistfulness of his voice, usually so strong and self-confident.

"Yes, I will try, Harlan. Only—you will be very patient with me? And if I fail, you will not blame me nor hold me as a light-o'-love? For sometimes the man I hold dead seems very near and dear to me, and the menace is possibly more real than you believe."

He smiled confidently. "I will take my chance with anything you have told me tonight," he said. "But you make me ashamed of myself when you talk as you do. I have been so selfish in my pursuit of you, and all the while you have been seeking a tragic outlet for your own sublime selflessness. That is woman for you!"

SHE let him kiss her lips and place the ring on her finger, and she kissed him shyly, but on his cheek.

The kiss he gave her at parting was very different from those he had rained on her unwilling lips when he came. But

that was inevitable, since she had bared her soul to him. He turned at the door and looked at her with a new expression in his eyes.

"I hope, now that this is settled and we know how we stand, that you will look happier, look as happy as I feel!"

"Don't I look happy, Harlan?"

He shook his head. "Not as I remember you two years ago. It's the strain of the war, I think, and the work you have been doing as Reconstruction Aid. You used to have more color; and you smiled oftener, and your eyes blazed with enthusiasm when you talked. They don't now. You look sad, and your eyes are what a woman would call wistful—as if you hadn't got what you wanted. And that hurts me. For I have got what I want—I've got you! Do you think that you—" He paused with a little half-smile of inquiry.

"I'll do my best," she promised with a twinkling smile. She felt that her lack of enthusiasm had hurt his vanity. He took her in his arms, gently this time. "You are happy? You think I can make you happy?" he questioned.

"I'll let my face show how happy I am," she answered, with a comforting tone in her voice which caused him to sigh with relief.

She watched him as he retrieved his business-like air that the waiting butler might not suspect him of the emotion he felt. But he sent a glance of understanding at her, a trifle too brightly had he only been less obsessed. Then the door closed behind him; and Sidney went slowly up the broad stairs looking at her ring.

THE musical chimes of the great clock on the landing were striking ten.

"It was kind of him to go so early," she thought. "But if he had stayed another hour—"

She paused, not completing her sentence, even in thought.

On reaching her room she crossed to her dressing-table and took up a photograph framed in heavy silver. The evening paper, still unread, fell to the floor, accidentally dislodged by her abrupt movement. A face of unusual beauty and character looked at her with smiling eyes and the well-known, well-loved grin he always wore when he won what he had gone after. His lips were parted showing his teeth. It was a very large picture, full length, taken in his uniform. He had brought the proofs to her to make her selection. Unhesitatingly she had chosen this one. She flushed as she remembered that he told her he had ordered only one from this negative and that he had never shown the proof to anyone else, not even to his mother.

"Why?" she had asked shyly.

And he had frowned as he replied: "That's your choice. That must mean me to you—the me that you like best. Nobody else is ever going to get a shot at it."

Sidney put her hand on his hair in the picture as if, through the glass, she could feel its crisp curling, and laid her tear-wet cheek against the picture of "her man." Then she stood the picture on the table in front of the mirror and cupped her chin in her two hands, looking into the eyes of her hero.

Only two months after he sailed, he was reported missing in action; and later, killed in action!

Killed! Her Jack! That bonnie, blithe, indestructible-appearing man! It seemed impossible to think of those sunny eyes closed forever; those smiling lips frozen in death; that active, athletic body quiet in a narrow grave—somewhere in France!

As soon as they would let her, she meant to go over and find that grave and—

The flash of her ring in the mirror recalled her to herself. Such thoughts and longings now were nothing short of disloyalty. Then, too, a sense of shame stole over her. She had never told John Aldis she loved him. She had no real right to be loving him as she knew she had ever since she read those frightful words, "missing in action."

But thoughts of a German prison-camp, of possible wounds purposely neglected and of a thousand unknown horrors he might be suffering, had caused to blaze up in her heart a love which she now knew had been there all the time, its strength and power unsuspected.

Horrid stories of legs and arms needlessly amputated by German surgeons had tortured her. Her imagination scourged her on every side. Then she threw herself madly into war-work, into reconstruction preparation in order to cope with the very things she so poignantly feared. She exhausted herself every day in order to come home too tired to think.

But with the official announcement of his death had come a change. With a new ideal of unselfishness, born of her secret pride in her heroism, she could not take comfort in grieving for one who had paid the price, who had made the supreme sacrifice so promptly and so splendidly. It was as if, at the first call to risk death for his country, John Aldis had stepped forward, smiling, unafraid, and had said: "Here I am. Take me!"

So, in sheer, royal pride, she had held her head high, sure of his love for her and sure that, if he could, he would have told her to carry on—to do the best she could everywhere and for everyone, and above all, never to grieve for him nor his comrades who had given as he had given.

THERE were moments when she almost felt his presence with her. At such times she felt serenely confident he knew that she loved him. Tonight, with his photograph before her, she felt again that exalted knowledge of life. She could not belive him dead. There was no death!

In despair at her clamoring thoughts, she stooped and picked up the evening paper and tried to read it through tear-blinded eyes. On the front page was a group of soldiers and officers who had landed that morning. Standing in the front row was a figure, poised exactly like the figure in the silver frame!

Dashing her hand across her eyes, she looked again. Everything was the same —the lift of the head, the forward thrust of the jaw, the smile showing the teeth; only—a white bandage covered the smiling eyes!

Frantically she read the names. He was Number 2 in the front row. "Front row, left to right. Private Kasper Hoffman, Lieutenant John Smith."

Lieutenant John—Smith!

It was a lie. That man was no other than John Aldis—her John Aldis!

With hands trembling with excitement, she reached for the telephone. An hour she sat with the instrument in her hands, calling hospital after hospital, from Greenhut's to Brooklyn and Long Island. She was about to give it up, when another voice came over the wire across the Sound.

"If you are asking about the man whose photograph is in this evening's paper, I can tell you this much: his name is not John Smith, but I am not allowed to tell you what it is, as he does not want his family to know. He is blind, and did not realize that he was being photographed until the reporter asked for his name. Then he gave the name of John Smith, thinking that his bandaged eyes were a sufficient disguise."

"I do not belong to his family. I am only a friend. I—I am Sidney Hammond, Doctor. Possibly—"

"Why, of course, Miss Hammond."

A pause. She knew he was placing her. When she enlisted in the United States Army as a Reconstruction Aid, she was one of the first to do so, and her position in society caused the fact to be featured in the rotogravure section of the Sunday papers until she was sick of the sight of her own lovely face.

The voice came over the wire again. "This is Col. Antrim speaking. What can I do for you?"

"Is it too late to come over to the hospital tonight?"

"You mean, to come over to see this man, Miss Hammond?"

"Yes! I know it is unusual, but—"

"Not only unusual, but absolutely impossible! Why, my dear young lady, I wouldn't allow his own sweetheart or wife to—"

"I am none of those," came in a faint voice. "I only thought—"

"You may see him at nine o'clock in the morning, Miss Hammond. If you will come to my office, I will take you to him myself. But you must assure me that he will—"

"Be glad to see me, you mean?"

"Not only that, but you must promise me not to tell his family. He insists upon that."

"I promise, Colonel."

"Very well. You may see him just as soon as he has had his breakfast."

"Colonel Antrim, just one thing more. You know I am in the United States Army, a Reconstruction Aid in General Hospital No. 98. Wont you please let me come at eight and give him his breakfast? I'll be in uniform. He will not know the difference, and I want a chance to see him a little before he knows I am there. He is—blind, Colonel, and I want to get—used—to—"

Resolutely she steadied a voice perilously near the breaking-point.

Cheerfully came the Colonel's voice: "Right-o! Be here at eight-thirty, in my office."

"I'll be on your door-mat at eight-fifteen!" she cried happily.

FRANTIC with joy, she steadfastly refused to think of the ordeal before her. She did not remove her ring. She never thought of it again.

She sat thinking rapturously of him—going over every point of their friendship, planning how she could be transferred to his hospital or get him transferred to hers. It could be managed somehow.

Now, however, in the blindness of John Aldis, the man she loved, she confronted a fact so appalling in its immovability that she felt smothered. Of course, she could be transferred by the wave of a magic wand. But afterward? What power of wealth, influence, backing or pull could restore the lost sight to his eyes, whose beauty thrilled her every time she met them, as if a kiss had been laid upon her lips by the man she loved?

It was two o'clock when she aroused herself from her dream and looked at her wrist-watch. Entirely too late to go to bed, she decided. If ever she should, and fall asleep, she might not waken in time. At the awful thought she sprang up and began to pace the floor. Then she mentally took herself in both hands.

"Steady there!" she admonished her glowing image in the glass. "I must drive with a tighter rein!"

She managed to put in the time until five. A hamper of fresh eggs, hothouse fruits and vegetables from their farm had arrived the afternoon before. The moment she saw its contents, Sidney swooped down upon a basket and packed it with the best she could lay her hands on. Strawberries of a sort impossible to buy in the market, tomatoes, iceberg lettuce —Sidney wondered how long it had been since John Aldis had tasted the things her swift fingers were packing.

At six o'clock she slipped out to the garage and rang for the chauffeur. "Come down and let me in, Jensen," she called in a muffled voice. "Just unlock the door. You needn't drive me; I'll drive myself. A hurry call has come from the hospital and I must be there early."

She sprang into the machine like an eager child, drew on her gloves and took the wheel. Jensen looked after her in amazement, as her car fairly jumped the drive, turned and fled down the avenue as if pursued by Huns.

Trusting in her blue uniform of Reconstruction Aid not to be challenged even at a strange hospital, Sidney assumed a preoccupied air and walked straight by the guard at the door. Her uniform even exempted her basket from the usual request to know its contents.

She was so much ahead of time, however, that Colonel Antrim had not arrived. Waiting for him in the corridor outside his office was a long line of convalescent soldiers, with the hang-dog air. Sidney's friendly appearance brought a tinge of brightness to the sullen brows of those nearest her.

"What's the trouble, boys?" she asked, smiling engagingly. "A. W. O. L.?"

They nodded in squads.

A quick step caused them all to stand at attention as Colonel Antrim strode down the corridor.

Sidney saluted with the others. The Colonel stopped and shook hands with her cordially.

"Just let me put these things down and I'll be right with you," he said, ignoring the waiting line of culprits as if non-existent. "Leave your basket here too!"

Albeit familiar with army discipline, this absolute wiping out of existence of the enlisted man by officers intent on other business always hurt Sidney Hammond. Under her skin she was more the Judy O'Grady, in these days of returning soldiers, than she was the Colonel's lady. Nevertheless, without a word she followed the Colonel.

CURIOUS glances from orderlies, nurses and aids followed the sight of Colonel Antrim personally conducting an aid to her post, as they supposed. That function was generally relegated to the Head Aid.

"Wait!" gasped Sidney, as he paused before a closed door. "Is this his room?"

The Colonel consulted a card in his hand and nodded. The girl put out her hand, her eyes clinging to the compassionate eyes of the officer. She took the card from him and read the name.

"Captain John Aldis."

She had expected to see it, of course. Nevertheless the sight of it drew such a gasp from her throat that the Colonel reached for her.

"I'm all right! I've got to be! I'm going to wait on him and he must not know who I am. So you see, Colonel, you can trust me!"

The medical officer took her wrist between his practiced fingers. Then he nodded. "You'll do!" he said.

She gave him a glance from eyes drenched with gratitude too deep for the telling. "You know how I appreciate this," she whispered.

"Surely I do!" he said heartily. "I'll tell Miss Fergus, the Head, that you are to have her consideration! That will be sufficient, rest assured. Good luck to you, Miss Hammond!"

An inch at a time, Sidney opened the door. A bare floor. Bare white walls. A small white table. A narrow white bed. A man's long form outlined under white bedclothes. A strong brown hand clenched. A white bandage bisecting a lean, brown face. A mop of curly hair against a white pillow. These were the things etched in dry point on Sidney Hammond's brain in that first hurried glance.

She crept forward, her eyes clinging to that terrible white bandage. He turned his head as sharply as at a military command.

"Who's there?"

"Just the Aid," answered Sidney in a low voice.

"Aid? Aid?"

"Reconstruction Aid."

His head snapped away from her. She realized the tactlessness of that word to a blind man.

"Have you had your breakfast?" she asked.

He seemed to listen.

"What's your name, Aid?"

Sidney caught her lower lip between her teeth.

"Miss Jones!" she said. "May I ask your name?"

A SMILE flickered over his face, but was gone almost before it registered.

"My name is John Aldis. But I don't want it to get out. I don't want my people to know. I particularly don't want one girl to know. I confide in you because I have learned that the best way to keep a secret is to confide it to competent hands. You see I trust your voice, Aid Jones!"

"Thank you. Is it Lieutenant or Captain Aldis?"

"Captain," he said. Sidney thrilled at the unconscious pride which would creep into his voice; she knew by that, that promotion must have come recently.

"I am not to be here long, they tell me," he went on. "I am to be transferred in a day or two. They halted me on account of my leg. It got bad on the transport, and I've got to get that fixed up before I can obey the policeman's order to 'move on!'"

"Will 'they' tell you to?" asked Sidney.

This time the smile flashed, showing his teeth for the first time. Sidney's hand flew to her throat to strangle a sob.

"You've read 'The Brushwood Boy!'" he asserted.

"Hasn't everybody?" she countered.

She saw a frown over the white bandage. "No. Only born lovers read 'The Brushwood Boy' and remember it and quote from it," he answered.

"Then I must be a born lover!" smiled Sidney. By her voice he knew she was smiling. "Are you?"

The brown hand went up and touched the white bandage.

"Ever since this came to live with me, I've done nothing else but love the One Girl!" he said solemnly.

This time Sidney's sob reached him. "It isn't worth—that, dear Aid!" he said, smiling. "But thank you just the same. It—sort of gets people, I know—blindness does. But it conduces to thought. Once I had other things. The sun, you know, lets you have other things in your life. I once had my place in the sun. That's gone forever now. The sun lets you move about. I loved to move about. That was about all life meant to me—to move about and to move fast. At college we could move fast. That was one reason I volunteered. It was the Great Adventure. I wonder why I am talking. I generally don't talk!"

He closed his lips resolutely. "Perhaps you are talking because you feel instinctively that I am—vitally interested," she said gently.

He turned to her so impulsively that she hurried on.

"I brought some rather wonderful things for your breakfast, from the farm of some people I know."

"From an honest-to-goodness farm?" he said again with that heart-breaking smile from beneath the bandage. "It sounds as if it might be fresh eggs!"

"Worse than that," she countered. "Hothouse strawberries, with cream yellow as cheese. Will you have them first or as dessert?"

"As dessert. But I don't want cream on them. Why insult a perfectly good strawberry?"

"These have fine, long stems. Shall I arrange them on their green leaves so you can see them with your fingers? Will you have sugar on the side?"

His boyish laugh startled her. "Aid Jones, I hope they will let you spend all your time with me. I feel better just from your being here. Perhaps they will let you reconstruct me. Tell me what you look like, Miss Aid Jones!"

"Well, I am five feet five, sir. I weigh a hundred and fifteen pounds net! My eyes are brownish. My hair is brownish. My complexion is light tan. My intentions are good, but my temper is uncertain. My chief accomplishment is cooking, for which I wear the diamond belt! And right here is where I beat it for the diet-kitchen to get your breakfast. Shall we say—oatmeal? And three or four poached eggs on toast?"

"Cut out the glue," he said gaily, "and make your second act contain your big scene, in which you enter bearing fried eggs with a couple of pounds of bacon on the side, a pot of coffee holding four cups, in which we will drown your friend, the cream—the once-scorned accomplice of the strawberries. Please hurry, for as I talk, I starve!"

IN Colonel Antrim's office the last of the A. W. O. L.'s had been disposed of. Apparently respectful, with snappy salutes, they had gone out, all under arrest and one or two slated for court-martial.

Sidney Hammond appeared at the door. "Colonel!" she said breathlessly as she entered. She was staring at her wrist-watch.

"What's on your mind, Miss Hammond? Let me present Lieutenant Mitchell, Miss Sidney Hammond."

She bowed without looking at the young man. "Colonel, I forgot to get a pass from my hospital, and I'm A. W. O. L.! What shall I do?"

The girl never understood why the Colonel laughed so immoderately into the telephone transmitter, nor why Lieutenant Mitchell's face went so fiery red as he acknowledged the introduction.

"Your Colonel is not in his office, his orderly informs me," said Colonel Antrim, hanging up the receiver, "but I'll fix it for you."

"Colonel, could you get me transferred?" asked the girl. "Captain Aldis tells me he is only to be here a few days. I'd like to be near him as much as I can."

"I'll requisition you," smiled the Colonel, looking indulgently at the appealing figure of the pretty girl in her blue uniform and smart white cap. "Leave it to me! I'll see that the sentence imposed on you is that you are obliged to report to me every morning at eight-thirty sharp!"

When Sidney Hammond smiled, and the color rushed to her cheeks and a strand of her curly red-brown hair drooped from beneath her cap, both men stared at her in frank admiration.

"Will he be transferred soon?" she whispered, braiding her hands together. "He hasn't recognized me yet, but—just my being there has improved his morale, Colonel. I know I can do him good."

"No doubt of it. You've done Lieutenant Mitchell good—improved his morale in the last five minutes. And look at me! I feel ten years younger just from looking at you. Of course you'll do Aldis good. That is the chief mission of a beautiful woman—to do men good. I'm told by Miss O'Connor that his leg is quite bad, so I fear he will be detained here longer than he thinks. Don't tell him that. Keep it to yourself!"

"Oh, Colonel Antrim, you are an angel!" cried Sidney Hammond.

"Tut, tut, young woman, I'm your superior officer. How dare you call your colonel an angel! Do you suppose I would stand such epithets from Mitchell here? If I let you get away with it, he may break over! He acquires bad habits easily; in fact it's the best little thing he does!"

Sidney laughed and clasped her hands, palm outward. Her head was on one side and her cap had slipped a little more.

"I am going to bring you both some strawberries from our hothouses," she twinkled. "They are delicious!"

Before they could answer, she turned and ran. Both men looked after her.

"Who is this lucky dog she is tending?" demanded Lieutenant Mitchell jealously.

"Captain John Aldis of the —— Machine Gun Brigade. Cited three times for gallantry. Winner of no end of medals. Has a wound in the leg, but he'll get over that—only a flesh wound. But, man, he's blind! And that girl loves him!"

The Colonel again drew the telephone toward him and called Sidney's hospital.

"A. W. O. L.!" jeered the younger man. "And shielding the culprit, instead of—"

The Colonel shook his head. "Pretty women in the Army certainly do play hell!" he growled.

"Hell must be a mighty interesting place sometimes!" sighed Lieutenant Mitchell, gazing reminiscently out of the door through which Sidney Hammond had disappeared.

TRENCHER in hand, but preceded by the engaging odor of fresh coffee and broiled bacon, Sidney entered Room 334 just as Nurse O'Connor was putting finishing touches to the room.

"I must hurry," she said, "I've a patient in 367 that worries me. I wish you could get time to look him up, Miss Jones. He isn't trying to get well."

"I'll come," replied Sidney.

Their patient's strong brown hands were clutching at the white spread. Red spots burned on his cheek bones. He waited until the sound of Miss O'Connor's disappearance. Then he spoke. "Please hurry, Aid Jones!"

"Coming, sir!" said Sidney in her best waiter-like manner.

Placing the tray on the table she seated herself beside the bed and arranged the dishes.

"I hope you have brought a lot," continued her patient. "The perfume overcomes me!" He sniffed the air like a hungry hound.

"More where this came from. But don't overeat, please, because I have a lovely surprise for an eleven-o'clock lunch. Open your mouth wide now, and taste this!"

They laughed like children as she fed him. And he exclaimed over the flavor of everything and told her that nothing like it had ever passed his lips. He declared his utter inability to raise his head for his coffee, and made her get behind him and raise his head for him. She called him a faker and laughed, but obeyed him with reddened cheeks and fluttering hands.

Holding his head on her arm, for one awful moment she was tempted to stoop and kiss him full on his laughing mouth and tell him who she was. But she caught herself in time.

Three cups of coffee he drank. The size of the pot denied him more. Then came the strawberries. Sidney had not overestimated them.

Sidney noticed that the spot of color in his cheeks deepened; that his lips were redder; that his breath came faster; that his hands seemed to grope for hers. Her own emotion was such that she feared to observe his too closely. Finally he took her hand.

"Have you had your breakfast?" he demanded.

"Hours ago," she assured him. "I was up at five and got it myself. It was too early to disturb the — to disturb anybody—"

"Let me feed you now," he said mischievously, still holding her right hand. "Bring your face over where this will reach your mouth. I'd hate to get sugar in your hair!—There. Did you eat it? You did. I can hear you!"

"Heaven send you will never feed me soup, if you demand noise as a proof that I am obedient!" laughed Sidney. "Or celery, or toast. I have been educated on those points. There, that was the last; and I can truthfully say I never enjoyed anything more than your feeding."

SHE set the plate on the tray and smoothed the coverlet on his bed, bending over him. Suddenly he seized her left arm, slid his hand down to her hand and fumbled with her fingers, until he touched the ring.

As she realized his purpose, she jerked away from him.

"God! I might have known it, Sidney!"

With a cry she knelt beside him and flung her arm across his chest. "You knew me, Jack! You knew me all the time?"

"Not at first. I asked the nurse what you looked like, and she described you: 'The gold of God in her eyes and her heart and the sun in the brown of her hair,' was what she said. Then I knew. For only one girl is like that. Then, too, your voice betrayed you. You forgot and spoke naturally sometimes. But oh, my girl!"

"What is it, boy of mine?"

"That ring. I felt it. Whose ring is it on the third finger of your left hand?"

For reply Sidney tore off the ring and handed it to him.

"Throw it in any direction as far as you can. Over there is the open window."

He seized it and drew back his arm as for a vigorous aim. A moment he hesitated, with his muscles flexed. Then he sighed and handed the ring back to her.

"This isn't fair to—whomever he is. He trusts us. You give it back to him, if—"

"If what?" demanded the girl with soft violence.

"If—you want to!" he said, again with that smile which went to her heart.

"Supposing I do. What then?" she pressed him.

She felt him go rigid under her arm. His mighty chest rose and fell, and drops of agony stood out on lips and brow.

"Forgive me; I forgot!" he murmured. "No; don't give it back to him. Keep it! Wear it! And make him happy. Neither you nor any other woman can ever be anything to me. You don't seem to realize it, dear girl, but my blindness is permanent. There is no hope. My eyes are gone!"

STIFLING a great sob she crept closer to him, thrusting her arm under his body and wrapping him in her embrace. Then she bent her head and kissed him, as a woman kisses the man she loves—her mate. Full on his mouth she kissed him and moaned over him as a passionate mother moans over and comforts a wounded, hurt child of her body. She ignored his statement of renunciation, knowing its fallacy. Her ears took in only the sound of suffering in his voice.

"Was the pain very bad, boy dear? When it was at its worst, did it hurt you terribly, my darling?"

"They had to strap me down," he said simply.

She screamed, stifling the sound in the bedclothes. His hand trembled on her hair; his voice tried to soothe her.

"Listen, Siddie. Let me tell you about it now—once for all. Then we'll never mention it again, if it hurts you so, heart of gold. Bits of high explosive cut through my eyes and embedded themselves in the bone. It was all over from the first. There was never a chance for sight. The optic nerve was completely severed. Of course it made a half-man of me. That's the worst. I'll get over the wound in my leg. I sha'n't even limp. I'll be as tall and strong and alive as I ever was, feeling the pull of life and love and never able to reach out and take them with both hands—as I shall want to. That's the hell of it. To be fully fit—and blind! Don't cry so, Siddie! It was in a good cause. My name was called, and I answered. It's nothing to cry about, girl dear!"

"But the pain!" sobbed Sidney. "To have it hurt so they had to strap you down. My big boy! Mine! I feel just as if you were—my baby, born of my body—carried under—my heart. When you talk about how it hurt you, it is hurting me, now, just as frightfully as ever it hurt you!"

"Siddie, you mustn't talk that way. It maddens me. It makes me think things that can never be—that you love me, that you belong to me and I to you. And you are much too sensible a girl to imagine such a thing as that, or to want me to. I want to be your—"

"You are my man!" declared the girl in a sudden fierce whisper. "Bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh; well and strong, or sick and helpless—always like this, if need be! Always with me to wait on you and fetch things and do for you as I would for a sick child. Always and forever my man! Do you hear me? I am going to marry you. I am going to be your wife—"

"Sidney, your ring! The other man!" he gasped.

She clung more closely to him, wrapping him in a fierce embrace, which left him wondering at her strength, she was so slender.

"Your wife!" she repeated. "Yours! I didn't know it until last night. I didn't go to bed at all. I never closed my eyes. I didn't touch my bed. I held your picture—the one you had taken for me—in my arms all night. I put it in a silver frame and it has stood on my dressing-table ever since you went away. Every day I have taken it in my arms and put my hand on your hair, like this. But I didn't know until last night."

"What happened last night?" he whispered, faint with the strength of her passion.

"I promised to marry Harlan Coleman. He has loved me for years, but I never considered him until you were reported dead—"

"Dead?" cried the man.

"Killed in action, they said. You were reported missing for months. Then one day, in the official list, your name! Something—the best in me—died that day. I tried to kill myself with work. But I was

too strong, too well built, too well nurtured. I lived on. Then it came to me to live my life for you, as I thought you would have had me live it if you could speak. I lived not for myself at all. I seldom did as I wished. I lived according to the wishes of others. I simply went out of my body and left that to do the bidding of others. My heart, my soul were with you!"

HE reached for her and kissed her on the lips. And they clung together as if they would never let each other go.

Then her soft voice went rushing on, carrying him with her against his will, for his soul was tense with the determination of renunciation.

"I lived for my father and mother. They wanted me in war-work. Naturally I took up reconstruction work. I had dabbled in it before the war. I had a fancy I might go abroad and work in the hospitals there. Then we got in, and I took it up in earnest."

"But last night?" urged the man, and she felt happiness to realize his man's jealousy of her yielding to the urge of another.

"Yes; last night I let Harlan Coleman come and I told him about you!"

"You told him about me? Did you tell him you—"

"I told him there had been another man in my life, but that if he could take me as I was, after that confession—"

She lost her breath at the sudden, jealous clutch of his arms around her body.

"Did he kiss you?" he demanded, his hot breath on her cheek.

Once she would have soothed him and denied, but now, as a lioness might fight for her wounded mate, Sidney Hammond craftily played up his man's jealousy.

"Yes, he kissed me over and over, until I choked!"

"God in heaven!" the blind man cried in a sweat of agony. "To think I can't fight him for possession of you! Go, Sidney! Please, go! I can't stand it! I—"

"I wont go one step nor stir from this spot nor take my arms away from you, nor my lips from yours, until you promise to marry me—to let me be the mother of your children, man of mine!"

He tore at her arms and struggled away from her. She clung with all her strength; but he finally used brute force and flung her from him.

"Call the nurse!" he cried out hoarsely.

And broken in heart, in spirit and in pride, she obeyed him.

ORDINARILY a thoughtful and considerate daughter to the most generous of parents, for once Sidney had utterly failed them, resulting in a day of anxiety to them and of apprehension to the verge of insanity to Harlan Coleman.

The moment Sidney's car drove in sight of her home, the entire enormity of her negligence flashed across her mental vision. Anxious servants grouped about the door, took charge of her car, let her in and notified her parents.

Never had Sidney seen her dignified father so near a state of collapse. His haggard appearance frightened her, while her drawn face, tired eyes and drooping figure equally frightened her mother.

"Where in the world, daughter—" began Mr. Hammond.

"Oh, Sidney, Sidney!" wailed her mother.

Without a word of preliminaries, the girl crept into her father's arms and whispered: "Oh, Daddy, I've found John Aldis, and he is blind!"

And then with a shriek that cut the air like a knife, her overwrought nerves gave way and she went into violent hysteria. Her father carried her to a couch and knelt beside her. One wise word from him halted the attack.

"If you let yourself go, my darling, you will be in no condition to go to the hospital and see him."

Her piteous wide eyes clung to his, swimming in tears of sympathy. Yet with a violent effort she steadied her shattered nerves, clenched her chattering teeth, stilled her frantic trembling.

She struggled up. "I wont frighten you. I will be good," she said humbly.

Her maid, red-eyed, appeared with tea. "Just a little, Miss Sidney, dear. You don't look as if you had taken a bite this day."

"Thank you, Norah," Sidney answered with a wan smile. "I got my own breakfast in the kitchen this morning at five o'clock. But after that—I forgot to eat!" Even while swallowing the hot tea, unbidden tears crept silently down her pale cheeks.

The butler appeared, vainly attempting to announce some name. But before he could get it out, he felt himself pushed

aside, and a distraught man shorn of his usual calm, rushed into the room.

It was Harlan Coleman.

"Have you found her? Is she hurt? Where is she?" he demanded.

They made way for him. Sidney tried to rise, but her mother gently forced her back.

"Rest!" she said.

"Forgive me, Harlan," murmured Sidney. "My thoughtlessness has cost you all dear. If it had been anything less than what it was, I should never be able to forgive myself."

"But what was it? Where were you?"

"Oh, Harlan! I have found John Aldis. He is alive!"

The man staggered as if from the impact of a blow; his face turned chalky white.

"Alive? John Aldis?" he repeated hoarsely.

"But blind, Harlan! Stone blind! Oh, my man!" she cried breaking into great sobs which racked her slender frame.

"Blind? That strong — that superman?" repeated Harlan Coleman. "Oh, Sidney! My poor child!"

At the tender note of pity in his kind voice, she held out her arms to him like a tired child.

Her father cleared his throat and motioned to his wife.

"Better come out to dinner—both of you," he said. "Sidney, you need food."

"Let us have our dinner in here, Daddy. I want to talk to Harlan. I want to be alone with him."

"Very well, daughter. Your mother will send you something. Come, Margaret, you look as if you needed something hot. It has been an anxious day for all of us."

"I know, Daddy, and I am so sorry! You'll have to forgive a selfish, selfish girl, because she is suffering so."

Her father turned hastily away, polishing his glasses vigorously with his white silk handkerchief.

AS soon as they were alone Sidney motioned Harlan to come nearer. She gave him her hand, and he held it tenderly. But he made no effort to kiss her; instead the dreadful pallor, the blue shadows under her eyes and her tear-wet face shook his composure as it never had been shaken before.

"Harlan dear, let me tell you about it."

As the maid entered with a tray, Sidney said: "Norah, please go up into my dressing-room. In the drawer of my dressing-table you will find yesterday's evening paper. Bring that and the picture of a soldier in a silver frame to me here."

Sidney ate to please Harlan, but when her maid brought the newspaper and photograph, without a word she laid them both before him.

He looked at them intently for a moment. Then he said quietly: "That is an excellent likeness of John. I never saw this photograph before."

"I am afraid I am going to hurt you awfully, Harlan dear, but I must tell you the truth. This is the only photograph from the negative he had taken for me. This picture has stood on my dressing-table ever since he went away. It has received my last look at night and my first in the morning until it has almost become a part of me. I could not help loving him, Harlan, after he was reported to have given his life. The supreme sacrifice, they call it. No one seeing him now could doubt that, even though living, he has made it. But I am broken-hearted. I told John today that I was engaged to you, but that I loved him and he—he told me to keep faith with you, because he, because of his blindness, would never marry."

"Is there no hope for him?"

Sidney shook her head. "The optic nerves were severed by high explosive. He will never see again!"

"Tell me, dear. How did you find him? His name is not in this group."

"Oh, can't you see? It is the same pose. Everything except that cruel bandage is just the same. I knew it instantly."

"Love has sharp eyes," was his only comment.

Seeing that she was ready to talk, that it relieved her tension, very gently he led her on, a quiet question now and then, guiding the eager flow of her words. So plainly she showed the absorbing quality of her love for John Aldis, every sentence stabbed to the heart the man who loved her and sat listening.

"I don't know why I am telling you this. I know it hurts you," she kept repeating, and he, looking at the feverish glitter of her eyes, the scarlet of her lips and her restless hands, realized that she was using his receptive tenderness as a safety-valve for a nervousness which might prove infinitely harmful to her if checked.

As he listened, it came to him how differently men can suffer. In the great white hospital across the Sound a man lay suffering from the loss of sight and an aching wound from shrapnel in his leg. Here in a softly lighted library, unbandaged and far from the sound of high explosives, another man was being slowly wounded to what seemed like death, feeling the blood recede from his heart, feeling his hands grow cold and his eyes dim with looking into a future void of her love.

"I told him, Harlan. I told him I loved him. I seemed to lose all pride. I begged him to marry me, but he wouldn't. He said he wouldn't. And I shall die, I tell you, if he doesn't. I must take care of him! I must give something, when he has given so much!"

Sidney closed her eyes, but the tears still came. She was whispering now: "I thought I loved Jack a year ago, when I thought him dead. I thought I suffered as I never dreamed I could suffer. But when I saw him lying there—I knew that my heart could bear no more without breaking. And I tell you, Harlan, if he will not let me marry him, I shall die."

Unable to bear any more, Harlan Coleman rose to his feet. He stooped over and patted her hands, clasped so tightly together that the knuckles showed white.

"YOU need rest and sleep. Try to get both, and see if tomorrow does not bring you happiness. I want to tell you this: you are as free as air so far as I am concerned. You can tell him you gave the ring back and that there is no longer that bond between us. See what effect that has upon him!"

Sidney shook her head. "It is good of you, dear Harlan, to free me. But I have a feeling here," she said, laying her hand on her heart, "which tells me that while he meant our engagement was a barrier, it was not the insuperable one: That is his blindness. He will not let any woman into what he calls the bondage of blindness. He doesn't realize what a terrible joy it would be to me to share it; he doesn't know or understand me as you do. He wont believe me when I tell him I love him more tenderly because of it, that it brings out the very best of me—the mother side of me. He wont believe it, Harlan."

"Wait, dear; perhaps he will. Remember you have seen him only once, and his first impulse was to shut the world out and bear his cross alone. Give him time. Let him think it over. Be brave; be the same kind of a soldier that he is—and trust!"

"Oh, Harlan, you give me hope. Yes, it is too soon to despair. I will be brave! I will show him that there is courage of another sort. And oh, Harlan, I will pray to God for him."

AFTER a sleepless night Harlan Coleman made his decision.

He called Mrs. Hammond on the telephone and learned that Sidney had reported to her old hospital. Amazed at the intuitive wisdom of women, he dispatched his business with scant attention, ordered his car and drove to the receiving hospital where John Aldis was a patient.

Following his guide down the corridor, he experienced a sense of faintness; he wondered savagely if he were going to make a fool of himself.

The nurse, Miss O'Connor, was sitting by the bed as he entered the room slowly, his nerves distraught.

A sense of anguish, such as Sidney described, gripped him at the sight of Aldis, turning his bandaged eyes at the sound of the opening door. His eager expression told all too plainly that he was hoping for a certain visitor.

Coleman spoke quickly, in order to end his friend's suspense.

"Well, John Aldis! This is Harlan Coleman," he said in a voice hoarse with feeling for all his attempted cheerfulness.

"Harlan Coleman!" exclaimed Aldis.

Harlan seized the groping hand in both of his and held it fast. For a moment Aldis, in his pleasure at hearing a friend's voice, forgot that this man was Sidney Hammond's lover. When he did think of it, involuntarily he tried to withdraw his hand, but the strong grasp of Coleman only tightened.

"No, you don't!" he said cheerfully. "I am so glad to see you alive and well, after all you have gone through, I feel as if I would never let you go."

With his old glad smile Aldis placed his other hand over Coleman's—and by that one impulsive gesture, Coleman began to understand his lovableness and his attraction for such a girl as Sidney.

"I'm glad to be home, you bet," said Aldis. "How does the old town look?"

"Same as ever—only a little worse. Since making over the subway has ceased to occupy all our attention, we are return-

ing to normal. Time was when we had to use a scaling-ladder to cross the streets."

"What have they done to the subway?" asked Aldis.

"Nobody knows," answered Coleman. "Once it was as simple as a map of America, now it is as confusing as a map of Europe; and it takes all the arguments necessary to a Peace Conference to find out how to get anywhere. The subway is New York's best imitation of No Man's Land."

Aldis listened with an ever-widening smile. "Blindness, then, would be no handicap there!" he laughed.

Shocked at his caring to joke about it, Coleman instantly followed suit. "It would be a positive advantage. It would save the usual confusion caused by trying to read all the signs at once."

MISS O'CONNOR rose to go out and Aldis introduced them.

"Before you go, Miss O'Connor, wont you please put these roses in water?" asked Coleman.

Her rapturous exclamation as she opened the box as well as the fragrance which immediately filled the air, carried the necessary intelligence to her patient.

"Lord, old man, why bring American Beauties to me? You make me feel like a sick kitten. Gee, how wonderful their perfume is! Different from any other on earth. Hold them over here, please, nurse, and let me touch them. Thanks. They are glorious. I suppose the stems are a yard long?"

"They are," said Miss O'Connor. "The only thing in the hospital that will hold them is the umbrella stand in the Head Nurse's room. I'll go requisition it. —May I bribe her with a rose?"

"Sure, take two! Take damn near all of them!" said Aldis, laughing. "And here, take some to your patient in 367. Tell him I said to cheer up because the worst is yet to come!"

They talked carelessly of other things until the roses had been arranged to the satisfaction of Miss O'Connor. Then she went out and shut the door. Although his forehead was beaded with perspiration in his effort to appear casual, Coleman resolutely introduced the subject of Sidney.

"I came to talk to you about Sidney Hammond, Jack," he said suddenly.

A deep flush spread from brow to chin of the blind man. "Where is she?" he begged. "I have not heard from her since five o'clock yesterday. I thought she would come back today. I have been expecting her every moment. I even thought it was she when you came. She is not ill?"

Coleman hesitated. "I haven't seen her since last night," he confessed. "She was all in then. She was wildly hysterical. It seemed awful to me to hear her scream when she is usually so self-contained."

"Sidney scream? I can't imagine it!" muttered Aldis. He turned away, setting his jaw and clenching his hands.

"What did you say to that girl, John Aldis, to put her into such a state?" demanded Coleman purposely fierce.

There was a moment's silence. Then very gently came the answer: "I said nothing to her that I would not be perfectly willing for you to hear, Harlan. Please believe that!"

Coleman grunted. "From her story, I should say not!" he said.

"Did she tell you about our—talk?"

"I think, Jack, old man, that she told me everything. She's so square, she would, you know. It hurt, I wont deny that. But it was the right—the only thing to do."

Aldis moved restlessly on the bed. "It seems to me that most of the things happening nowadays do hurt. I wonder if it has always been so and it's only because I have been caught in the machinery and torn that I have begun to think of the other fellow—the fellow who has always suffered, and I didn't know, didn't think about it at all!"

"I rather fancy that you've got the whole thing right there. War and its upheavals have made us all think. And to think is to suffer."

Aldis smothered a groan. "Then I've a lifetime of suffering ahead of me," he muttered, "for there will never be anything on earth for me to do but think!"

"NONSENSE, man," said Coleman cheerfully. "You don't know what you are talking about. You and Sidney together will be as a beacon light, showing all others who come after you how a brave man bears his burden of sacrifice. Why, man, you have the chance of your life. Think how Sidney has unconsciously been preparing herself for this very emergency and of how much love she will bring to bear upon her work of rehabilitating you. Gad, I'd be blind to have your chance with her!"

"Never!" growled Aldis. "You don't realize. I'm a derelict!"

"You know, old chap," said Coleman, "it sounds almost queer to me to hear you complain even that much—about your condition."

"Why?"

"Because I would willingly bear blindness all the rest of my natural life if I had done what you have!"

"You would? Do you care as much as that?"

"Those of you who went will never know the hell of those of us who wanted to go but were forced to stay!"

He said it quietly, but it carried conviction. Then he added: "Sidney didn't tell me how you got yours."

"She doesn't know. I didn't tell her."

"Tell me."

"There's nothing to tell."

"But I know there is!"

"All I did was my simple duty. Any other man would have done as much. Thousands did more."

"Give me a chance to judge!"

"Well, I was a lieutenant, and my captain, the finest man I knew, took a platoon and went to clean out a machine-gun nest. We waited, but only one man crawled back, badly wounded. The Huns had got them all. The platoon was wiped out. Snipers were everywhere; in fact, the regiment was cut to pieces. We were expecting replacement men every hour. I was crazy over my captain. I went out alone—had to crawl mostly. It had been raining all day. When I found them, it made me sick. They lay so close together, you could see how they had rushed into that hell of fire. Facing forward, they were, every one. Just in front of them were the breastworks they had charged—a pile of dead Germans. Piled on purpose, you understand, as we would use bricks, they had used their dead. I went through them, and I'm telling you that if I'd found one alive, he wouldn't have been taken prisoner. I know now how our boys felt, for I went through it myself. If you could have seen our boys! Some had rolled over and were smiling up into that rainy sky, smiling just as if they were asleep. I cried like a baby as I took their identification-tags. In one fellow's hand was the picture of a girl with a baby in her arms. It was almost pulp from the rain, but I got it and put it in my pocket, and I am going to try to find her and tell her how I found it. I had about given up hope of finding anyone alive, when suddenly I found two whose hearts were beating very faintly. One was a private, with both legs mangled. The other was my captain. I got them both in. To this day I don't know how. But as bad luck would have it, just as I got within hailing distance of our lines, a shell exploded near us; missed both wounded, but got me in the leg and both eyes. They had to come out and get all three of us, so I didn't really get my men in after all, though they will tell you that I did. You know I didn't. My man died within an hour. But my captain got off with the loss of an arm. He's still over there at Toul. He—"

"That's enough! Don't try to sidetrack me," growled Coleman. "What a record! What a memory to keep you company in your blindness! God, how I envy you!"

The old, quick smile illumined the wounded man's fine features. "Gee, how you can jolly a fellow!" he said. "I hadn't thought of it in that way."

"Weren't you cited or decorated?"

"Oh, yes; Croix de guerre and D. S. M., but—"

"SEE here, Aldis, I came here to do some plain speaking. I may as well admit I felt I was doing a big, fine thing and that I deserved a medal or something. But since hearing what you've just told, I've had a change of heart. Now I feel as if I am privileged to do my duty as simply as you did yours, and that it's the least I can do for the like of you and the like of her—soldiers both! I guess you can stand it after all you've gone through and lived. Will you listen?"

"To anything!"

"All right. You know I am engaged to Sidney and that I gave her a ring."

The brown face on the pillow paled perceptibly. "Yes, I know that."

"Well, she told me before she accepted me even tentatively,—for she was too honest and sincere to mislead me or even allow me to mislead myself,—she told me that you had been in her life, that she had loved you unconsciously before you went away but consciously since you were reported missing. She made me see a wonderful thing: she showed me how a mother feels over the most helpless of her children; she made me understand how it is that there are Father Damiens and Florence Nightingales and Clara Bartons in the

world. And this is the reason she gave for not being able to love me as she should. She said I was too complete—that I did not need her. Do you follow me?"

Aldis nodded. His color was creeping back.

"She berated herself because she was that way, but as I look back, I can remember, even as a child, she was so—always flamingly the champion of the helpless—of those who needed her strength and tenderness."

As he paused, Aldis spoke. "You have known her long?"

"ALWAYS," answered Harlan Coleman. "I've always loved her, and looked forward to the time when she would care enough for me to let her eyes droop before mine. But that time never came. She still gives me that straight, unconscious-of-love, friendly gaze from those golden-brown eyes of hers. And since last night I have given up. I know now that she loves you in that one and only way I hoped she would love me. I am beaten, Jack, and by you. She cares for you, and you are to have her, because she wants you and not me. That's what I came to tell you!"

The blind man reached out a groping hand. "You're a man, Harlan Coleman!" he said in a voice hoarse with feeling. "But glorious and tempting as the prospect is, I can't take you up. I wouldn't marry any woman, let alone such a fresh young creature as Sidney Hammond. I wouldn't accept such a sacrifice. Think of her, being tied to a clod like me, all of her natural life. Man, you are crazy to suggest it!"

"That, John Aldis, is sheer pride and selfishness on your part."

"I CAN'T see your face, Harlan, but I trust you. If I took you and her at your generous, selfless word, if I let this unthinkable sunlight into my darkened life, do you believe she would not repent? Would she never tire of her sacrifice? If she did, there would be just the answer of a bullet in my heart."

"She would never repent. In her life of sacrifice she would just go from glory to glory. She has been doing it for years. It has become a habit to her. She was ill last night when I saw her and she told me you would not marry her—ill in body and soul. I think if you should persist in refusing her love that it would kill her—she loves you that much, John Aldis.

"Now I'm going. I've tired you all out, I'm afraid, but I thought I ought to come at once."

On a table in the corridor stood a telephone. He sat down and called Sidney's hospital. Miss O'Connor passed by on her way to see John Aldis, and smiled at him.

"What's the matter with your friend?" she asked the Captain. "If ever I saw a man about to faint, it was that one. I watched him without his knowing it. Atmosphere of the hospital, I suppose. It affects some people that way, especially the well and strong."

"How's your patient in 367, nurse?"

Miss O'Connor hesitated. "Gone west," she said softly. "A man like that gives his life for his country just as if he had been on the field of battle, although he was only a detachment man."

"You are right. Miss O'Connor, he is the second man in this hospital who has this day made what is called the supreme sacrifice."

"The other was—your friend?"

John Aldis nodded. "He gave more than his life."

"I wonder why soldiers say their dead have 'gone west.' Do you know, Captain Aldis?" She spoke softly.

"It's because they see life in the sun. Going west means going into the sunset. Those who live and can—see, have their place in the sun. The rest of us—"

He broke off without finishing his sentence. Miss O'Connor saw that he was lying with his face toward the door, listening. She slipped out.

An hour later he heard a step in the corridor. The door opened softly, and with a little rush Sidney was kneeling by his bed and gathering him in her arms.

"Oh, Jack! My Jack!" she whispered. "My man for all time!"

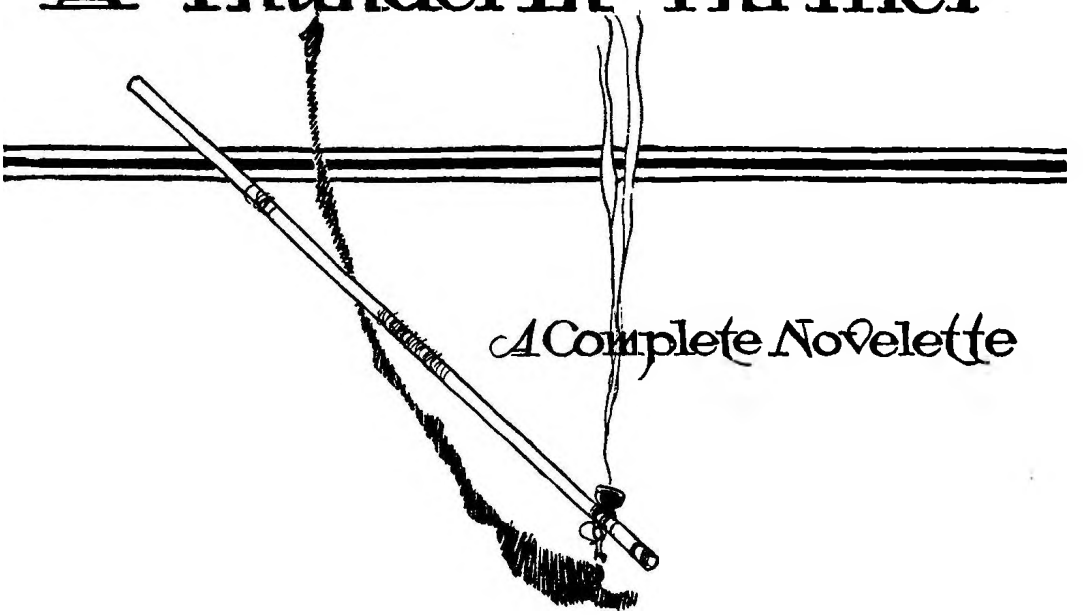
He breathed a long sigh like a tired child. His tense resistance laxed.

"You will let me love you, wont you, dear sweetheart mine? You will let me be eyes for you, and hands and feet for you, my dearest? And you will let me make your life a full and happy one so that you will never miss—anything? You will do this for me, John Aldis, my man?"

The sightless eyes of the wounded soldier filled with helpless tears.

"Oh, best beloved," he said, his voice breaking, "I don't deserve you nor your splendid generosity, but such a love as yours gives me back my place in the sun!"

A Thunderin' Thriller



A Complete Novelette

CHAPTER I

Smugglers and Slaves

THE opium-pipe of Hom Hing Ho, pirate, smuggler and dealer in slave-girls, was a beautiful creation. The two-foot stem of softly gleaming bamboo had been stained to a rich brown. Twining around the stem were two serpents of carved ivory, their tails near the mouthpiece and their gaping jaws appearing to support the bowl. The stem extended for perhaps four inches beyond the bowl, and this "dead end" was capped with soft Chinese gold carved with mystic symbols.

Martin, Chief Inspector of the State Board of Pharmacy, removed the bowl from the stem, struck a match and held the flame to the socket. The pipe was a very old one, and the socket was richly incrusted with the *yen shee* of many smokes; from this sediment the heat of the flame caused a faint white vapor to curl and writhe like the ghost of long-forgotten drug-dreams.

The Inspector addressed the man who faced him across the flat-top desk:

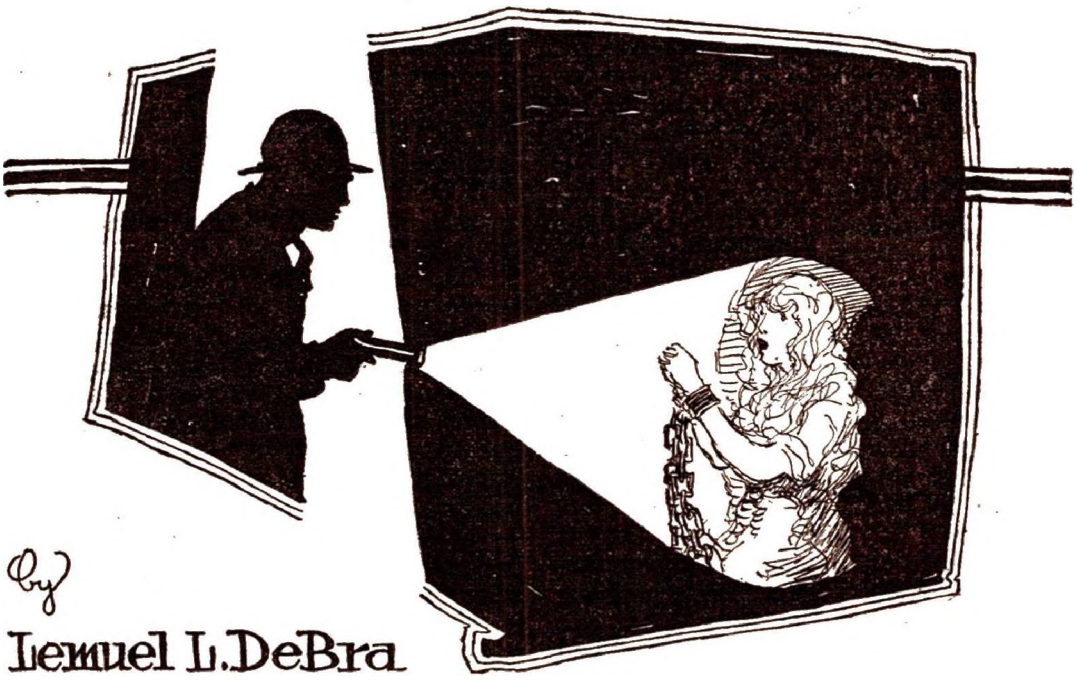
"Jim, in your latest story, 'The Peril of the Purple Pipe,' you had me fall headlong through a trapdoor into an opium den; and you made me 'gasp hoarsely when the *pungent* fumes of many opium-pipes' assailed my nostrils. That was dramatic stuff, all right; but it was not true. Opium-smoke is not pungent. It is sweet—sweet and smooth, I'd call it. Eh?"

Jim Jathrop (on the contents-page of the magazines his name appeared as James Montmorency Jathrop) took the pipe in his long white fingers and sniffed gingerly at the warm opium. He turned a pair of keen blue eyes to the Inspector:

"You're right," he admitted. "It is sweet—seductively sweet." Again he smelled the warm opium lingeringly. "There's something about it that one likes but can't define. It seems to lure. It's fascinating, sinister, terrible."

George Martin (in Jathrop's stories he was known as "Sherman Sharpe, of the Secret Service") smiled understandingly.

"Now, don't take this as a criticism," he begged. "I like your confounded stories even if they do keep me up long after I should be abed; and I want to help you get your stuff right. Your greatest mistake is that you make your novels too sensational. Such stunts as you make your hero pull off nowadays do not happen in real life. During that dinner at the Press Club the other night you said you intended to write more stories about my work; and you recall that I told you there was very little romance in it. It is tame and sordid. Take an opium-raid, for instance: you write a story about such a thing that holds us breathless to the last page. In



by
Lemuel L. DeBra

real life we get a tip, kick in the joint, grab the mud, throw the Chinks in the hoosgaw, and—"

"Wait—wait a minute!" exclaimed Jathrop. "What are you talking about, anyway?"

"I was saying that when we receive information that opium is being smoked at a certain place, we break into the house, seize the opium and put the smokers in jail."

"Ever have gun-fights?"

The Inspector trailed a blunt finger across a livid scar on his left temple.

"Oh, yes, of course," he replied depreciatingly. "We seldom have a raid of any size without the 'banging of revolvers and the flash of long knives' as you would put it. But shucks, what's that? All in a day's work."

"Mighty interesting, I should say. Now, that scar on your temple: did you get that in a fight? And this odd-looking opium-pipe: maybe there's a story right here, and you haven't imagination enough to see it."

MARTIN took back the pipe Jathrop handed him. "As it happens, I got this scar the same night we got this pipe," he said reminiscently. "It was in a den up the river, run by Hom Hing Ho, pirate, smuggler and dealer in slave-girls. In the den we found four white girls, three of whom were smoking opium. My partner died from knife-wounds received during the fight; but I got a little revenge by shooting two of the Chinks. Hom Hing Ho got ten years. This was his pipe."

"Good heavens, man!" gasped James Montmorency Jathrop. "You call that tame?"

Martin shrugged. "Old stuff to me."

"That's because you have about as much imagination as a bag of cement. And say, tell me: you said three of those girls were smoking opium; what was the other girl doing in that den?"

It was late of a Saturday afternoon, and Martin was the only one of his force in the office. Outside, in the main office, there was no sound save the occasional faint ringing of the telephone, and the muffled answer of Berman, the clerk.

Inspector Martin arose, closed the door of the vault where he kept the seized pipes, opium and other narcotic drugs—relics of many raids—and twirled the combination. It was a warm evening for San Francisco, and the office was none too comfortable. The Inspector walked to the window, laid the opium pipe of Hom Hing Ho on a chair and threw up the sash. He stood there a moment, looking down through the black iron-work of the fire-escape to the deserted alley one story below. Presently he came back to his desk, switched on the lights and sat down.

Martin was a young man, although his hair was graying about the temples. He was slender, alert, and gave one the impression of reserved strength and tireless energy. From a drawer he got out a box of cigars. The two men smoked a moment in silence.

"The fourth girl?" prompted Jathrop.

THE Inspector blew a funnel of blue smoke ceilingward. "Well, to begin at the beginning, we had been wanting Hom Hing Ho for a long time," he said. "In those days—that was ten years ago, mind you—Hom Hing Ho was a power in San Francisco's Chinatown. I think he had more blood on his hands, and a bigger price on his head, than any Chink that ever shoved a slipper across Dupont Street. He dealt in smuggled opium and slave-girls, ran several big gambling houses, was mixed up in plots to smuggle Chinese across the Mexican border, and had grown immensely rich from his evil earnings.

"There was a story they told up and down the ways about Hom Hing Ho that I always thought was a lot of rot; but you might work it in some way. They said that in China he was a river pirate, and that one day he and his bloodthirsty gang beached their junk near the gardens of Jan Luk Chan, one of the richest men in China. They murdered the whole household, including the old Chinaman himself. They carried down to their junk all the wealth they could rifle from the house; but the ducks set up such an unearthly racket that before the pirates could get away, the sons of Jan Luk Chan, and their harvesters, came in from the millet-fields and fell upon the pirates with harvesting knives. The sons of Jan fought so well that the pirates had to drop their loot and flee. Some of them never got back to their junk but were stabbed to death and thrown to the hogs.

"They say that Hom Hing Ho knew that this rich man had a certain ancient ruby that was almost priceless. And Hom Hing Ho, with this priceless ruby in mind, had taken the chance of attacking the house of Jan Luk Chan. As the story goes, he got the ruby, but so hotly did the sons of Jan pursue the pirates that some of the band were captured, and the rest deserted Hom Hing Ho. After many hardships, Hom, alone, made his way to America. They say he brought the great ruby with him, that he never dared try to dispose of it, and that up to the very day the prison doors closed on him, he was followed by the sons of Jan Luk Chan, who had taken a terrible Chinese oath to get back the ruby and to punish the slayer of their father."

"Did anyone ever claim to have seen the ruby?"

"Oh, yes; you could hear all sorts of stories about it. I never took any stock in them—just a crazy pipe-dream. But to go on with my story: There was a Chinaman named Joe Sing for whom I had done favors, and who in return used to give me tips occasionally as to what was going on in underground Chinatown. He told me one day that a lot of mud—I mean opium—was hidden in an old tea-chest in the back room of a small place in Fish Alley. Within a half-hour we kicked in the joint, found the chest and opened it. In the chest we found only the dead body of Joe Sing. His throat had been cut, and a long knife was still buried to the hilt in his abdomen. We—"

"Great Scott, man, there's a peach of a story right there!" exclaimed Jathrop. "Chinaman informs on smugglers; smugglers get wise, remove opium, kill the informer and put his body where the opium was. Great stuff!"

MARTIN snorted. "You writers," he said in disgust, "are plumb nuts! That was a simple, everyday murder. But let me finish my story:

"On the floor by the chest we found a folded piece of rice-paper bearing Chinese characters. We got a *chut fan* to translate it for us, and learned that Hom Hing Ho was running a big opium-den in an out-of-the-way spot in the island country of the San Joaquin River.

"We got our mob together, hired a couple of launches and armed with rifles, surrounded the opium-den of Hom Hing Ho about dawn of the following morning. Even at that time they had a guard out, and he gave the alarm. They knew a force of men wouldn't come there to make them presents of tea and rice-cakes, and so they let go at us with shotguns. To teach them a lesson, we fired back. All forenoon we lay in the asparagus-beds dodging bullets and banging away at every yellow head that showed. When they quieted down, we got the fool idea that they were out of ammunition; and we rushed the place.

"We were out of the asparagus beds, and where we couldn't hide behind anything, when the Chinks let go a volley that sounded like the Presidio forts firing a salute to the President. Two of the deputy marshals fell, but the rest of us made the house. We broke down the doors and windows and had a pitched battle. I never could remember much of that fight. It was hell for a while. There was no chance to reload, so we began laying out the Chinks with our pistol-butts. The Chinks went at us with those long, crooked, two-edged knives they get from South China and Malay, and which I think they call a *kris*. At any rate, when I came face to face with Hom Hing Ho, he lunged at me with one and put that crease in my temple you asked about. I got a flash of a satin jacket, of gold and jade rings, and then blood filled my eyes.

"Luckily one of the boys saw my fix and laid out Hom Hing Ho with a heavy opium-pipe. Then, suddenly, it was all over. We found the two Chinks I had shot were stone dead. We handcuffed the others together, and took stock. All of us were rather badly mussed up with knife-wounds and buckshot, and one deputy was missing. It was my partner, poor old Bill Andrews. He had been in the service many years, and was the squarest fellow I ever met. I loved him like a brother—used to borrow money from him every month.

"For a while we were mystified, for there seemed no place where Bill could be hidden from us. The shack appeared to have only four rooms: a kitchen, and three sleeping-rooms fitted up for smoking opium. However, we started a search; and just then we discovered that the kitchen and part of the roof was on fire.

"In the wind that blew up the river from the Gate, the flames wrapped the old shack in their arms almost before we could rush out of the place. I was no sooner out than a horrible thought came into my mind. Bill must be in that house some place. He was badly hurt, or he would have called to me. I could not desert him. Back into the opium den I ran.

"The rooms were filled with smoke. I groped across the floor of the main room, calling at the top of my voice: 'Bill! Bill! For God's sake, where are you?' And just then I ran into some one.

"I was near one of the windows, and a gust of wind carried away the blinding smoke. Jim, I couldn't believe my eyes. It seemed like a nightmare. I had run into a woman; and it was a white woman!

"She wore a dress of some flimsy material full of colors, and she had on a lot of gold and Chinese jade ornaments. Her big brown eyes were wonderful, simply wonderful; but when I got a closer look at them, I saw she was under the influence of opium and—"

"Good Lord!" ejaculated Jathrop.

Martin nodded. "Before I could find my voice, the girl spoke: 'He's down there!' And—and he's dead!'

"I flung her aside, toward the door, and went on. I knew she meant there was a cellar, although we had seen no evidence of it. I soon found it. In fact I found it too soon. The girl had left the trap-door open, and I fell into it, and landed on my head in the soft, damp earth. I was up in an instant, and got out my flash. Except for the faint glow from several opium-lamps, the cellar was dark. And at once the circle of light from my flash fell full on the upturned face of my friend Bill Andrews.

"For a moment I stared at him, horrified. Then the crackle of flames brought back my senses. I picked him up, and began climbing up the ladder I had missed on my way down. He was a heavy man, and it wasn't easy. But I made it. I had barely gained the upper room when, from down in that underground den there came a terrible cry: 'For the love of God, get me out of here!'

"It was the voice of a girl!

"I handed Bill to the men who had come back to the door to get me, and I stumbled back into the underground den. The other officers had turned a hose onto the flames and were delaying their progress; but the little shack couldn't hold up long. I knew I didn't have much time to get out.

"Again I threw my flash around, and almost at once I found another white girl. She was almost as pretty as the one I had met on the upper floor. She was lying on an opium bunk by a layout. Her eyes were open, and her hands were pawing at the air as though she scented danger but was too stupid with dope to help herself. I caught her in my arms and gained the ladder and the upper room. Then, again, from that dungeon, came that terrible cry: 'For the love of God, help me!'

"And it was the same voice I had heard before!

"Two of my men had groped their way into the room, and I tossed the girl into their arms, and dived back into the cellar. Without any trouble I found another girl. She too was stupefied with opium. She was pretty, like the others, and had big, dreamy brown eyes. She was not much of a burden, but with the loss of blood, and the choking smoke, the strain was beginning to tell on me. I staggered, missed a step and fell. Above me I heard the rush of flames, and the shouts of my men. Desperately I scrambled afoot, and somehow got up the ladder. I turned for the door, and again my blood was brought to a sudden stop by that cry from the underground den: 'For the love of God, get me out of here!'

"It was a pitiful cry. It was a terrible cry. Many a night afterward I found myself sitting up in bed, clutching the bedclothes, that terrible cry ringing in my ears."

CHAPTER II

The Secret of the Cellar

MARTIN paused and flung a quick glance at the open window and at the opium-pipe of Hom Hing Ho lying on the chair. He began fumbling for a match to relight his cigar.

"Go on," demanded Jathrop. "What did you find in the cellar?"

Martin shuddered. He stared absentmindedly at his dead cigar. He seemed to have forgotten all about the match.

"By that time the flames were insufferably hot," he said at length, his voice charged with emotion, "but I couldn't let any poor girl perish. I gave the one I had to the men at the door, and turned back for the cellar. My men tried to hold me, but I cursed them and tore from their grasp. Somehow, I got down the ladder. Here I was away from the stifling smoke and blistering heat; but I dared not remain too long. In fact, I was afraid that it was already too late to get out again.

"I swept the underground den with my flash. I saw the two bunks where I had found those two girls, and a third one; but they were empty. 'Where are you?' I cried as loud as I could. And a voice answered from the farthest corner.

"Guided by my flash, I stumbled across the cellar; and there I saw a sight I hope to heaven never to look upon again.

"Kneeling on a miserable pallet of canvas and straw, was another white girl. Unlike the others, she was fair, the fairest creature I have ever seen. Her complexion was like milk; and her eyes were as blue as stars. Her golden hair was loose, and lay in a tangled mass on her shoulders, which were almost bare, for her clothing had been badly torn. She saw me, and gave me a look I can never forget, and a cry that was a strange mixture of anguish and relief. She showed not a sign of being under the influence of any drug; and I wondered. But as I got to her side and made to take her in my arms, I saw—God in heaven, I can see it yet! It flashed in the ray of light from my pocket-lamp! It rattled as she stretched her arms out to me! Jathrop, that girl was *chained to the wall!*"

Jathrop caught his breath in a hissing intake, his wide eyes fixed on Martin's face.

"I never knew how I got out of that den. With my pistol I managed to pry the chains loose. The girl helped herself quite a bit. As we staggered out into the fresh air, the walls fell behind us. We had got out not a moment too soon."

THE INSPECTOR paused and drew out his watch. It was nearly eight o'clock. He glanced at the open window; then in his nervous, alert manner, he relighted his dead cigar.

Jathrop, his hands none too steady, reached for the burning match.

"Well, that's about all," Martin concluded. "We managed to convict Hom Hing Ho for the murder of Joe Sing, and he got eight years for that. He got two years for having smuggled opium in his possession. That made ten years in all, for the sentences were not to run concurrently."

"But those girls?" demanded Jathrop. "What became of them?"

"Them? Oh, well, you see, we couldn't very well hold them on any charge except visiting an opium-den, and we dropped that. They disappeared again. I suppose Chinatown swallowed them."

"But I don't understand. Why were three of them free, and one chained?"

Inspector Martin made slow reply:

"The three had learned to smoke opium. It was therefore no longer necessary to chain them."

"Horrible!" breathed James Montmor-

ency Jathrop. "Simply horrible!" He frowned at his notes a moment. "Here is something else that puzzled me at the time," he said at length. "How did Bill Andrews happen to be in that underground den?"

"I wondered about that at the time myself. I figured that when we rushed the house, some of the Chinks came up from the underground smoking-room and left the trapdoor open. Bill fell through the open door, and it dropped shut after him."

"That's about it," agreed the maker of plots and thrills. "And now, when you searched Hom Hing Ho, did you find that ruby?"

"No, we didn't. But we never gave the ruby a thought. Before the fire drove the boys out, they managed to collect a few pipes and cans of opium—the five-tael cans, you know. Among the pipes was that one over there on the chair by the window. Hom Hing Ho kept looking at the pipe, so I figured it was his. It is a very valuable pipe. Several times I have been offered large sums for it; and once a Chinaman tried to steal it. You see, the gold is worth quite a bit, aside from the wonderful workmanship. Moreover the pipe is very old; and like a tobacco-pipe, the older and more seasoned an opium pipe is, the more highly prized."

Jathrop jabbed a few holes in his frayed blotter and studied the notes he had made. "Say," he spoke up suddenly, "if this happened ten years ago, and Hom Hing Ho got ten years, then it is about time for him to be out again, isn't it?"

"By the gods, Jim, you're right! I hadn't thought about it."

"There's mighty good story-material here," went on the writer. "Can you give me a description of Hom Hing Ho. I think I could use it."

"That's easy; for I shall never forget the murderous look that old pirate gave me the day they took him to San Quentin. He has high cheek-bones, evil black eyes, a flat nose and two gold-capped teeth that flash like yellow fangs when he talks. He invariably wore a jacket of black satin with long sleeves; and on his left hand—his hands were long and bony—he wore a big seal ring of soft Chinese gold bearing strange inscriptions."

"Fine!" exclaimed Jathrop, scribbling more notes on his blotter. "Martin, in what you have told me is wonderful material for a story! Wonderful material!"

"Bunk and balderdash!" snorted the Chief Inspector. "A little sensational, perhaps; but I don't see anything romantic or dramatic about it. And that reminds me, Jim, of another thing in 'The Peril of the Purple Pipe' that I wanted to speak about. In that story you have me say to one of my men: 'Search that Chinaman's pockets thoroughly for concealed weapons!' Great Scott, man, I would never take time to make a speech like that! I'd say: 'Frisk him!' That's all. And I'll show you how it's done."

Martin arose and walked around the desk. Jathrop stood up to be searched.

"Weapons are bulky and can easily be felt without thrusting your hands into a man's pockets," explained the Inspector. "See?" And he rapidly ran a practised hand over Jathrop's clothes, touching every spot where a weapon could be carried. "I see you are not armed," he concluded. "However, in the excitement of a raid, I wouldn't put it that way. I'd say: 'You're clean!'"

"Good stuff!" Jathrop was immensely pleased. "I'll get some of those phrases in my next story. They give a yarn verisimilitude. And, Martin, the story is already taking shape in my mind. You've started a devilish good plot working. You have no idea where that ruby is, do you? Well, now, listen: Supposing old Hom Hing Ho had had that big seal ring made with a secret space large enough to hold that priceless ruby? Do you get the plot? Eh? I'll call it 'The Riddle of the Ring.' No, hang it, that's been used a dozen times. 'The Ruby and the Ring' wouldn't be half bad. Better yet: 'The Sinister Signet,' or 'The Secret of the Seal.' Or supposing,"—and Jathrop grasped Martin's arm in enthusiasm,—"just supposing Hom Hing Ho had—"

James Montmorency Jathrop, writer of sensational scenes that were purely imaginary, broke off with a startled gasp. Over the Chief Inspector's shoulder he saw something; and the shock of what he saw seemed to drag his words back down his throat.

In the window at Martin's back there was framed a yellow face with high cheek-bones and evil eyes; and through the drawn lips two gold-capped teeth flashed like yellow fangs.

The Chinaman's crafty eyes seemed to take in the whole room at a single glance; then his gaze came to rest on the opium-

pipe of Hom Hing Ho that lay on the chair by the window. Swiftly a long yellow hand darted from the sleeve of a black satin blouse and snatched up the pipe. On a finger of that hand was a big seal ring of Chinese gold.

With a warning cry, Jathrop, who still clutched Martin's arm, swung the Inspector around just as the Oriental and the opium-pipe of Hom Hing Ho disappeared.

CHAPTER III

The Ruby of Jan Luk Chan

INSPECTOR MARTIN turned just in time to catch a glimpse of the yellow face before it dropped out of sight. In a flash he understood.

"It's Hom Hing Ho!" he cried. "That devil of a pirate has come back! And he has stolen his pipe!"

Martin snatched a revolver from a drawer of his desk, and in two jumps he gained the window. Jathrop was close behind him. He leaned out the window and looked down. The Chinaman, a shadowy figure on the black iron-work of the fire-escape, had tucked the opium-pipe beneath his tunic and was hastily scrambling down the ladder. Just as he paused before taking the final eight-foot drop to the ground, Martin aimed his revolver and pulled the trigger.

Click—click!

"What's the matter with this gun!" growled Martin. "I always keep it loaded."

Again and again he pulled the trigger; but the hammer only clicked mockingly. The Inspector flung the worthless gun down and growled out an angry, dismayed exclamation.

"Jim, take that phone and call Berman. Be quick. I'll try to keep an eye on Hom. He's skulking down the alley."

Jathrop lost not a second in getting to the phone. He took down the receiver; but instead of the clerk's nonchalant "Hello!" there came over the wire a frightened, choking cry: "Help! Help! Chinaman are—"

Then a crash, and the phone went dead.

Jathrop shouted something to Martin while he bounded for the door. He turned the knob, but the door did not yield. Impatiently he jerked at the door with his full strength. Astounded, he examined the latch.

"Martin! Martin! Come here!" Jathrop cried. "There's something wrong out in the main office. Your clerk called for help. Then I heard a crash. And—and we are locked in!"

The Chief Inspector seemed to weigh this a moment in silence. Hom Hing Ho had escaped. Berman was in trouble. And the door had been locked on the outside.

"Jim, can you climb through that transom?" Martin asked, now appearing to be entirely calm. "You're slighter than I."

Without replying, Jathrop grabbed a chair, got on it and put a foot on Martin's shoulder. The transom was not used often, and it did not yield at once.

Martin had the foresight to punch the black button that put the room in darkness. Jathrop raised his head to look through the open transom, but at that instant the lights in the main office went out. Shielded by the gloom, Jathrop began wriggling through the transom.

"Be quiet!" cautioned Martin.

Jathrop got through and dropped silently to the floor of the main office. As he fumbled in the dark for the lock, he heard the sound of retreating footsteps outside in the hallway. He found the key, which had been left on the outside, turned it, and softly turned the knob. He could not see Martin, but felt the Inspector's hand on his arm. Martin stepped outside, and Jathrop sensed that he was feeling along the wall for the switch. Suddenly the room was flooded with light.

Jathrop blinked, and looked around, half expecting to see armed Chinese facing him. But the room seemed to be deserted. The clerk was lying face down on the floor by his desk.

THE two men got quickly to the clerk's side and turned him over. He had been gagged with a large yellow silk handkerchief, and was securely trussed up with cords of Chinese silk. He did not seem to be injured.

"Jim, you stay here and attend to Berman!" ordered Martin. "I'm going after those devils!"

He bounded away, and Jathrop heard the outside hall door slam.

It was but the work of a moment to remove the gag from Berman's mouth and cut the silk cords. Berman got to his feet and rubbed his cramped limbs.

"What's happened, Mr. Jathrop?" he asked rather huskily.

Jathrop told him all he knew.

"I don't know much about it myself," Berman said. He seemed rather dazed. I was sitting here reading your story 'The Peril of the Purple Pipe,' when suddenly I saw two yellow, bony hands in front of my eyes. Before I could cry out, they had me by the throat. As I twisted around, I got a glimpse of two evil-looking Chinese. One of them grabbed my wrists; and the other one then released my throat and tried to shove a handkerchief into my mouth. It was then that I managed to knock off the receiver with my elbow, and give that call for help. They choked me off, though, and tied me up. Then they made for the door of Mr. Martin's office. I couldn't see what they did after that; but in a moment the lights went out. I heard Mr. Martin say he was going after those Chinamen. We'd better go too."

"By all means," agreed Jathrop. And with Berman at his heels, Jathrop made for the hall door. But before they reached it, Inspector Martin rushed in.

"They're gone!" he exclaimed in disgust. "Not a sign of them! Now what do you think of this? What did those Chinamen want? They wanted something mighty badly or they wouldn't have taken such chances."

"Hom Hing Ho seemed to be satisfied when he got his pipe," suggested Jathrop. It was his business to dream plots and then untangle them.

Martin shook his head. "It couldn't be just that. There were at least three of them in the gang. I figure that they came here to steal the smoking-opium and other narcotics we have in the vault. It would be worth seven or eight thousand dollars on the street. Ordinarily we wouldn't be here at this hour on a Saturday. Finding us in my office, Hom Hing Ho decided the best thing he could do was to beat it while the going was good. He'd probably forgotten all about his old pipe; but seeing it on the chair right under his nose, he figured he might as well take it along. Mighty careless of me."

Jathrop, however, was not satisfied. His brows were knit in puzzled thought. "There's some mystery here, Martin," he pursued. "If these two fellows who tied up Berman were with Hom Hing Ho, then why did they lock the very door they expected Hom Hing Ho to come through? Why did Hom Hing Ho come in one way and these two another?"

"You never can tell what a Chinaman will do," said Martin with an air of finality. "Besides, don't be so confounded romantic. This is a plain case of attempted burglary. The two fellows who tied Berman heard us and locked the door as the easiest means of keeping us out of their way. The only thing that mystifies me is who drew the cartridges in my gun. I always keep it loaded. I am positive it was loaded when I put it in that drawer this morning. And no one ever touches that drawer but me. Looks like—"

ABRUPTLY the hall door was flung open, and a dark young man in a soft black hat hurried in. It was Tom Hayes, of the Chinatown Squad of the San Francisco Police Department. Martin, of course, knew him well; and Jathrop had met him several times. At the Press Club dinner, a few evenings previous, Jathrop had talked with the detective and had found him a veritable mine of valuable information about things Chinese.

"Martin, I've been trying to get you on the phone, and couldn't," said the detective. "I have important news for you. Maybe it's all a pipe-dream; but you never can tell about them Chinks, and it's best to play safe. Hom Hing Ho is out of prison and on his way to your office. You know we've had him in mind for some time because he's a bad one, and it would be a good thing if he had been sent up for life. We were positive that he was planning some deviltry even before he served his last day; so we planted a snitch in his cell, a young Chink we could trust, and we got the whole thing. You remember that old rumor about the ruby of Jan Luk Chan that Hom Hing Ho is supposed to have stolen when he was a pirate in China?

"Well, the two sons of Jan have been dickering with Hom Hing Ho to learn the whereabouts of the ruby. Finally, when they offered him ten thousand dollars cold cash, he made a squawk. Told them all about where the ruby was hidden. Then he began to realize that if they were willing to pay that much for the stone, it must be worth more than that; and when his sentence was shortened for good behavior, he saw a chance to get the ruby before they did. I learned just a half-hour ago where the ruby is hidden. It is concealed beneath the gold cap on the dead-end of Hom Hing Ho's opium-pipe—the one you

took in that raid ten years ago, the one with the carved snakes of ivory. And Hom Hing Ho is running a race with the sons of Jan Luk Chan to see who can get to your office first and steal the pipe. They may be here any moment, and we—Say, why the devil are you fellows staring at me so?"

"Tom, you're just too late," Martin told him. "Hom Hing Ho has been here and gone, and he took his pipe with him. He beat the sons of Jan by a few minutes."

THE detective stared. "You—you mean —Good heavens, man, can it really be true that the ruby of Jan Luk Chan was hidden in that old pipe?"

"It must be. I've never taken any stock in that ruby story myself; but now we've got to believe something. Why, I've had that confounded thing in my office for ten years. I understand now why old Hom Hing Ho was so concerned over that pipe. Well, I don't see where we enter into the affair. The ruby belongs to the sons of Jan Luk Chan; the pipe belongs to Hom Hing Ho. He's served his time. Let the Chinks fight it out."

"But that ruby!" sighed the detective regretfully. "I'd like to have an interest in that stone. Wouldn't you, Jathrop?"

"I'll say I would!" Jathrop's eyes were bright. Here were plots and thrills made to order, and counterplots that made even a James Montmorency Jathrop envious. "I wish we could get Hom Hing Ho," he went on. "He has no right to that ruby. If we could get it away from him, we could then deal with the sons of Jan What's-his-name ourselves—not for money, of course, but for the sensation of the thing."

"Bunk and balderdash!" snorted Martin with unconcealed disgust. But before he could say more, a faint splatter of the phone attracted their attention. They saw, now, that the receiver was hanging from the hook. Berman walked to the phone, picked up the receiver, and with his pencil jammed one of the wires back into place. Instantly the phone jingled long and hard.

Berman answered: "Hello! Yes. Who? Yes; he just came in." He nodded to Detective Hayes. "Some one wants you, Mr. Hayes."

"Me? Who the deuce—" Hayes took the phone. As the very first sentence came over the wire, the detective straightened and threw Martin an astonished glance. "Hom Hing? Yes, I know. Go on. . . . . No; he's been here. Got the pipe and left. We just missed him. . . . . What? Oh, is that right? Eh? . . . . Thanks, Bob, thanks. Mighty glad you called me."

Hayes hung up the receiver and gave Martin an odd, triumphant look. "Martin, here's some more interesting news. The office just phoned me that our snitch has learned that Hom Hing Ho has gathered a few of his old gang together and has opened a smoke-house out on the beach. It's at the old La Vere place. You remember it?"

"Is that the place where the old man was murdered by some mysterious Oriental poison?"

"That's the place. And his daughter Llasta was abducted and never found. The old house has been unoccupied since. Now I say we should beat it out there at once and grab Hom Hing Ho and his gang."

"If he really is running an opium-den, I certainly intend to pay him a visit," said Martin thoughtfully. "But listen, Tom: I haven't had any dinner yet. Neither has Jathrop. Let's wait until later."

"Dinner be hanged!" exploded Jathrop. "Let's go now. I can always eat; but I can't always get mixed up in a thing like this. Let's go get Hom Hing Ho and his pipe and the ruby of What's-his-name!"

"Martin, even if we don't get any hop, I can hold Hom Hing Ho for burglarizing your office," argued the detective.

The Inspector tossed his hands. "All right; we'll go. Berman, phone for a machine." Martin turned away and entered his private office.

"Jathrop, have you a rod?"

"Eh?"

"A gat! A cannon! A gun! Don't you savvy English?"

Jathrop flushed. "You mean, do I carry a weapon? Well, Hayes, since it is against the law to carry concealed weapons, I'll ask you if that question of yours is official or personal?"

"A personal question, of course."

"Then it's none of your business."

MARTIN came out of his office at that juncture. He was shoving cartridges into the magazine of his revolver. "Jathrop, I'm sorry, but I haven't another rod in the office. You stay in the background, anyway. If there's any shooting, which there probably will be, you keep low.

We're paid for this. Berman, what about the machine?"

"Line's busy, Mr. Martin."

"Then for the love of Mike try another," cut in Hayes. "We can't stay here all night and—" He broke off with a low exclamation of annoyance. No one had heard the hall door open; yet, standing with his back to the door was a man in a gray suit and gray golf-cap. He was stoop-shouldered, and wore thick glasses. A cigar was clenched between his strong jaws. "Confound that reporter!" muttered Hayes in a whisper. "Not a word about this to him. Mind, now!"

"Ha, *ha*, gentlemen! I'm glad I caught you!" Brooks, of the *Chronicle*, chuckled. "Hello, Mr. Martin! Jathrop, glad to see you here. From what I learn you may get some real dope for stories tonight. Tom, I was at headquarters when Bob phoned you about Hom Hing Ho and his opium-pipe and the old La Vere place. I knew you'd be shooting right out there, so I grabbed a jit, had him take down his sign and ran around here to catch you. If you fellows are going to get Hom Hing Ho tonight, you'd better jump into my car and we'll be on our way."

Hayes glared at the reporter for a moment; then he gave Martin an inquiring look.

"Since Brooks knows so much about it already, we may as well let him take us," said Martin.

"Then let's beat it," snapped the detective. "Come on!"

THE five men left the office. Martin threw the catch on the hall door while Hayes rang insistently for the elevator. A moment later they stood by the car Brooks had hired.

"Where's the driver?" demanded Hayes.

"Say, Tom, give me credit for a little sense, anyway," grinned the reporter. "These jit drivers can never be trusted. I sent him on his way, and I'll run the car myself. Jump in."

Something in the reporter's tone struck Jathrop as not ringing true, but Hayes seemed not to notice it, and so Jathrop said nothing. He knew Brooks slightly, and had always rather liked him. Jathrop, Martin and Berman climbed into the rear seat; Hayes got in front with Brooks. They were soon on Kearney Street; and here the Saturday night crowd made slow going. As soon as Brooks turned the car off Kearney into Bush, he opened up, and the big car took the Bush Street hill with a roar.

"How did you get wise to Hom Hing's hang-out?" asked Brooks, slowing down as the car dived into Golden Gate Park.

Hayes answered gruffly: "I received information to that effect."

The reporter chuckled nastily.

"What I want to know," went on the detective, "is how the devil did you happen to be at the station just when Bob was phoning me? That's not your beat at this time. How did *you* happen to know about Hom Hing Ho?"

There was steel in Brooks' cool reply: "I received information to that effect."

The detective was silent a moment.

"Why didn't you go out Lincoln Way?" he demanded suddenly. "You would have saved time."

"By George, you're right, Tom!" exclaimed the reporter apologetically. "I never thought of it. I'm so accustomed to joy-riding through the park that I never realize that Lincoln Way exists. But I can turn into it yet."

Presently, Brooks swung the machine into a road that led off to their left; and a moment later they left the dark shadows of the park behind them and turned into Lincoln Way, glistening in the moonlight. Soon Jathrop, looking ahead, saw the shimmer of the Pacific beneath the moon. A cool, brisk breeze was in their faces, and the tang of salt was in the air. Brooks slowed down as they reached the great highway, which runs parallel with the beach; and here he turned to the right.

"Hey! Where are you going?" demanded Hayes and Martin in unison.

"Why, to the old La Vere place," replied Brooks without slowing down.

"Well, it isn't that way, you fool!" exclaimed the detective. "It's down the beach. You're going to the Cliff House."

"You're wrong, Tom," argued the reporter. "I know that La Vere place well."

Jathrop heard the detective mutter a curse; then something flashed in Hayes' hand. The muzzle of a revolver rested against the back of the reporter's head. The machine was now going at a speed that on the great highway on a Saturday night was perilous.

"Brooks, you turn back at once or it'll be the last time you ever run a car," said the detective.

The machine ground to a sudden stop.

"What do you mean?" demanded the reporter.

"I mean just what I say. I've always suspected you. You have always been too friendly with this Chinese gang. I know more about you than you think I do. For instance, I know that you were out to the La Vere's the night old man La Vere was murdered by some strange Oriental poison. I know that you are the last one who was seen with Llasta La Vere the night she disappeared. I know—"

A sudden backing of the machine jolted the words from the detective's mouth. Savagely, Brooks ran the car to the side of the road, swung around, and started back down the great highway.

"All right, Hayes!" he gritted. "I've played my little game, and lost—for the present. I'll take you to the La Vere place, d—— you; but I wont be responsible for what happens when you get there. Hear that?"

CHAPTER IV

The Hand at the Curtain

JAMES MONTMORENCY JATHROP had an eye trained to note striking scenes, and he did not overlook the one that now unfolded before his eyes. On their right the Pacific, gleaming in the moonlight, rolled in in long, deep, purple swells and broke in glistening silver against the dark beach. The sky was cloudless; but seaward a bank of night-fog was fast blowing in. On the left the beach resorts were gay with lights, music and laughter of the Saturday night crowd; the boulevard was black with automobiles.

Presently, Brooks swung the machine sharply to the left and bumped over a gravel road that led down into the sand dunes. The sudden change was startling. In a moment they were out of sight and sound of a single habitation. Around them were nothing but the dreary sand dunes tossed up ages ago by the restless waves, and buffeted forever by the tireless winds. The utter loneliness of the spot seemed emphasized by the pale moonlight. Jathrop felt that this was indeed just such a place as he would expect Hom Hing Ho and his gang to seek.

Hayes ordered Brooks to stop. "The old La Vere place is just beyond that ridge," he said. "We'll leave the machine here. Eh, Martin?"

"Good idea," assented Martin, getting out. "We'd better spread out and surround the place. And say, put the cuffs on Brooks and run the chain through the wheel so we know he'll sit tight until we get back."

Hayes did as suggested. The reporter slumped down in his seat and made no comment.

Together the four men turned off the road and walked through the sand up the side of a long ridgelike dune. Here, at a low word from Martin, they got to their knees and crept cautiously to the top of the dune. Now Jathrop looked down into a swale, and in the center, by a clump of willows, he saw a frame house—a dark hulk against the moonlit sand; and then the fog suddenly shut out the moon and threw a ghostly shadow over the scene.

"That's good!" ejaculated Martin. "Now, Hayes, I'll take the front door. You take the rear. Berman, work around to the other side of the house and watch the windows. Jathrop, work your way to that window on this side. Don't let anyone out the window when Hayes and I rush the doors. Careful now, everybody!"

Before Jathrop could find his speech, his companions ran silently through the sand and disappeared behind the dunes; and he was alone. A feeling of great uneasiness took possession of him. Here was a situation he had not counted upon. That black hulk of a house was the nest of a band of desperate smugglers—men who did not hesitate to use a gun or the silent knife; and he, James Montmorency Jathrop, unarmed, untrained in the tricks of fighting, was expected to take an important part in the raid.

Some indefinable sensation prompted Jathrop to turn suddenly and look around. Back on the road, only a few rods distant, stood the machine with Brooks chained to the wheel. Brooks was watching him. Jathrop could not make out the reporter's face, but he could *feel* his eyes on him.

Brooks had proved to be a traitor. And Brooks had made a sinister, veiled threat as to what was to happen at that house!

This train of thought brought Jathrop to the realization of how important it was that he play the part given him; and bending low, he began working down the ridge toward that window. Great things might hang in the balance: and it was Jathrop's nature to do his duty and do it well.

THE sand made no noise beneath his feet; yet in the unearthly stillness it seemed to him one could have heard the crunch of the sand a mile away. The distant boom of the surf, the occasional faint honk of an automobile on the great highway, seemed only to emphasize the ghostly quiet. The night, and the things of the night seemed to be hushed as though waiting.

It was a weird light that filtered through the driving fog, and Jathrop soon realized that it afforded him little concealment. He was oppressed with the feeling that some one was watching, that some one was preparing to launch a long knife at his back. The perspiration stood out on his forehead in great drops when he gained the window.

The curtain was down, but Jathrop believed that he could see into the room through the tiny crevices between the window and the curtain. Slowly, quietly, he stood up; and on the instant that he raised his head, some one in the room raised the curtain. Jathrop started to drop out of sight; but he felt his eyes glued to the hand at the curtain. It was a beautiful hand, pink-tipped, and shapely, the hand of a white girl!

The girl adjusted the curtain a few inches from the bottom, then turned and crossed the room with a graceful, sinuous walk. She wore a gown of some gauzy, clinging material; and about her waist hung a girdle, defining, modestly, her attractive figure. She seated herself on a stool of teakwood, and turned so that Jathrop saw the profile of her face: and he caught his breath in amazement. Her hair hung loose over her shoulders, save for a single band of gold. On her arms were bracelets of gold and jade. But what amazed Jathrop was the fact that such a girl would be in such a place. She seemed unreal, like a figure from an opium-vision.

The girl thrust out a bare arm and from a small tray picked up something that resembled a darning needle save that it was flat on one end. Jathrop afterwards learned that it was a *yen hok*. She dipped the *yen hok* into a tiny horn jar, and a small quantity of some black, gummy substance adhered to it. Jathrop instantly recognized it as opium. Then the girl moved her stool slightly, and the man at the window saw an opium-lamp on the other end of the tray. While he looked, something beyond the lamp stirred; and Jathrop got another thrill. On a bunk by the girl, dim and shadowy, was a Chinaman. As he moved, his face came into the faint rays of the opium lamp, and Jathrop saw again that dark visage, the evil eyes and the two gold-capped teeth flashing like yellow fangs.

"It's Hom Hing Ho!" breathed Jathrop. "It's that devil, Hom Hing Ho! And that girl!"

OF a sudden the stillness was torn by a raucous screeching. Jathrop ducked beneath the window, his heart at a standstill. Then he understood. How stupid they had been not to think of it. Brooks was sounding a warning with his automobile horn!

Cautiously, Jathrop raised his head and looked in the window. Yes, they had heard! Hom Hing Ho, a revolver gleaming in his hand, stood in the middle of the room, crouching, listening. The girl was at his side, clutching his arm. She turned her blue eyes toward the window; and Jathrop felt that she looked into his. He saw her red lips part and her brows lift. He dropped to his knees and crawled quickly to the corner of the house.

There was the muffled sound of running feet, and Jathrop saw a dark form leap at the front door. It went in with him. There was a wild cry in a heathen tongue, a girl's screams, the sound of a struggle.

In a bound Jathrop gained the door; but it was all over. Hom Hing Ho's revolver lay on the floor at his feet; and Martin had him covered. Hayes was getting out his handcuffs. The girl seemed too dazed to know what to do.

"Jathrop, get hold of that girl!" snapped Martin. "Then blow out that light! We'd be fine marks if Hom's men took a shot at us from those back rooms!"

Obediently, Jathrop reached for the girl's wrist; but as his hand touched hers, a strange thrill swept through him. He hated this task! It was not right that such a girl should be subjected to such treatment. He was glad that it was not Hayes who was to take charge of her.

The girl did not shrink from him. She looked up into his eyes; and they seemed to plead with him—to plead for sympathy, understanding.

In the center of the room was a table covered with a gold-embroidered cloth; and on the table stood a reading-lamp, its garish shade throwing a lurid light on the

scene. Jathrop bent over and extinguished the light.

"Now, Hayes," said Martin, "out with your flash! Take a look-see around those back rooms. Wonder where Berman is?"

"I haven't seen him," replied the detective, leaving for the rear of the house.

Jathrop was about to make a similar reply when something occurred that stopped the words on his lips. He felt the girl's hair brush his cheek, and caught the scent of a faint, elusive perfume that seemed to speak of the Orient. A tiny hand slipped into his outside coat-pocket and left something there. A low, musical voice whispered in his ear:

"Master, for the love of Allah, do not betray me! Guard with your life that which I have placed in your charge. Sometime you will know all. But not now. *Tsau kom lok.*"

"The birds have flown!" said Detective Hayes, returning suddenly, and turning his flash toward Jathrop and the girl. "No one back there but another girl; and she's full of hop. Not a Chink in sight."

"That's all right," said Martin. "We got the big guy. Light the lamp, Tom, and we'll make a search for hop. Did you see anything of Berman?"

"Not a thing. Maybe he's chasing one of the Chinks over the dunes."

"Maybe so," concluded Martin; and Jathrop thought he caught a worried note in the tone.

Hayes struck a match and lighted the lamp.

"Martin, the hop wont get away," he said. "Before we start searching for mud, let's take a look at that opium-pipe. Eh?"

"You mean to look for the ruby? All right. Let's get it over with."

HAYES snatched up the opium-pipe of Hom Hing Ho from the layout where the owner had tossed it when Brooks sounded that warning; and, as though instinctively, captives and captors gathered around the table. Hayes held the opium-pipe close to the light. It was the same one Jathrop had seen in Martin's office—the one with the twining serpents of ivory, and the carved gold cap.

And now, standing nearer the table, Jathrop saw something else. Lying on the gilt cloth beneath his eyes was a long wavy-bladed dagger. The handle was incased in gilt cord, and the guard was carved with strange inscriptions. It was a weird-looking weapon, and Jathrop unconsciously stepped back and turned to look at the girl, whom he still held by one wrist. She too was looking down at the knife; but her pretty blue eyes were now narrow with cunning and determination.

"I know those caps unscrew," said the Inspector, "but I never thought of taking that one off."

"We'll see in a minute what there is to that story of the ruby of Jan Luk Chan," said Hayes, twisting at the cap.

A hissing intake of breath made Jathrop look up. It was Hom Hing Ho. For only an instant his eyes glittered snakily, and those gold caps flashed like yellow fangs. Then his face became masklike, immobile. What thoughts were going on behind those green, glittering eyes, Jathrop would have given much to know.

"Hurry!" urged Martin.

Through his hold on the girl's wrist, Jathrop sensed that she had suddenly tensed, as though startled. He looked around at her; and was himself startled by the look on her face. For she was not looking at the opium-pipe of Hom Hing Ho in the detective's hands. She was staring over the detective's shoulder. Before Jathrop could follow her gaze, she freed her wrist from his gentle grasp, flung up a warning arm, and cried:

"A-i-h! Look behind you! The sons of Jan! The sons of Jan Luk Chan!"

Martin and Hayes sprang away from the table; and between them, Martin saw two Chinese standing in the doorway. They were well-dressed, intelligent-appearing young men; and each held in his right hand a blued-steel revolver.

"Make not a sound!" said one in perfect English. "Mr. Hayes, put down that pipe! Up with your hands, gentlemen!"

Astounded, Jathrop fell back a step. And then, in the act of raising his hands, his eyes swept across the table to the space at his side. A gasp of surprise escaped his lips.

The girl—and the Malay dagger—were gone!

CHAPTER V

The Fate of a Slave-girl

THE sons of Jan Luk Chan were apparently too intent on the object of their visit to pay any attention to the girl. One of them handed his re-

volver to his companion, then stepped to the table and picked up the opium-pipe of Hom Hing Ho. He spoke rapidly in guttural Cantonese:

"Watch with wide eyes and a steady hand, Ah Su, while I recover the priceless ruby of our honorable father. Hom Hing Ho still has the heart of a river pirate. In about the time it takes to drink a bowl of tea we would have been too late."

"I shall watch well, Ah Ching," said the other. "What about the *mei jen?*"

"Take no heed of her for the moment. She cannot escape."

Ah Ching's slender hands were dextrous, and it took him but an instant to remove the gold cap. He dropped the cap onto the table, and holding the pipe closer to the light, looked into the hollow end.

Jathrop, watching Ah Ching closely, saw the Oriental's face slowly take on a bewildered, dismayed expression. The opium-pipe slipped from his fingers to the floor. He swung on Hom Hing Ho, his face black with fury, crying in a high-pitched, grating voice:

"*Aih-yah!* You are a lying thief! May your wicked tongue be pierced with dull needles! The ruby of Jan Luk Chan is gone!"

Every eye was turned to Hom Hing Ho, for this was as much a surprise to the white men as to the sons of Jan. A smile slowly dawned on the gaunt yellow face of the old pirate, a smile in which there was no mirth; and his green, lizard-like eyes remained as expressionless as the eyes of the dead.

"Perhaps the foreign devils have it, younger brother," suggested Ah Su.

"That cannot be, Ah Su," objected the other, "for were they not about to open the pipe? No, this pirate who has the face of a devil and the heart of a snake, he has the ruby of Jan Luk Chan. I shall search him."

A half-formed thought that had been stirring in the back of Jathrop's head now took sudden shape. What was it the girl had slipped into his pocket and asked him to keep for her? What else but the ruby of Jan Luk Chan?

JATHROP would have given almost anything just then for a chance to put a hand into his coat pocket and make sure that the object was shaped like a cut stone and not merely a folded piece of rice-paper. And with that thought in mind he cautiously edged back a step from the table.

"Stand where you are!" cried Ah Su, emphasizing the command with a menacing move of his two revolvers.

Jathrop stood!

Ah Ching was moving around the table toward Hom Hing Ho. The old pirate, his long eyes narrowed to evil slits, and his fingers twining and intertwining serpent-like, eyed the sons of Jan like an animal at bay. In the stillness Jathrop became suddenly conscious of a faint whisper. It seemed to come from his left, and he turned his head slightly to look.

There was a door in this wall which Jathrop had not noticed, for it was covered with a hanging of Cantonese embroidery. This drapery had been drawn back, and in the doorway stood the girl who had but a moment before escaped from Jathrop. She held a finger to her lips, and with her other hand she was beckoning to him.

Jathrop flung a quick glance in Ah Su's direction; and it so happened that at that instant Ah Ching, on his way to search Hom Hing Ho, passed between Jathrop and Ah Su.

Here was the very chance Jathrop had sought. Bending low, he stepped quickly and silently to the curtained door. The girl took his outstretched hand, drew him into the dark hallway and let the Cantonese drapery fall behind him. Pressing his hand to enjoin silence, she led him down the narrow, carpeted passageway.

Ahead, through an open doorway, Jathrop saw the dim, irregular skyline of the sand-dunes; and between him and this outside door a faint light from an adjoining room fell across the hallway. By the door of this room the girl paused. Looking within, Jathrop felt a sudden chill of horror. On a silk-covered divan lay a young white girl. One arm was flung above her head, and the other hung over the edge of the couch, an opium-pipe slipping from the opium-lamp fell across her face, heightening her rich, dark beauty. Her eyes were closed.

"How fortunate that I trusted you!" the girl at Jathrop's side was whispering softly. "Give me the ruby, quickly."

For the moment, Jathrop had forgotten. Now he thrust a hand into his coat pocket, and his groping fingers found what seemed to be a wadded paper, but in the paper was something hard and of irregular shape

In the act of taking the wadded paper from his pocket, Jathrop hesitated. He looked steadily into the girl's blue eyes. Under any other circumstances, he would have found those eyes very disconcerting.

"Does—does this ruby belong to you?" he whispered. "Doesn't it really belong to those young Chinese back there—the sons of Jan What's-his-name?"

EVIDENTLY the girl had not expected this. A shadow of annoyance came over her face. She spoke impatiently:

"What does that matter, sir? It is my duty to guard the ruby with my life—to save it for my master Hom Hing Ho."

"Your—your master?"

The girl nodded.

Jathrop stared at her, thunderstruck. Then, abruptly, he grasped her by the arm and swiftly but gently forced her through the outside doorway into the shadows.

"Who—who in heaven's name are you?" he whispered hoarsely. "What are you doing here in this opium-den with these Chinese? You are not—that kind. Anybody can see that in your face. Tell me—who are you?"

For an instant the girl appeared startled; then a strange look came into her eyes. She bowed her head. Jathrop felt her tremble.

"Why—why, I live here," she replied in a softly musical voice. "This is—is my old home."

Suddenly Jathrop comprehended, and the realization left him aghast. This was the girl Martin had told him about, the girl whose sad history was so full of shadows. Now he understood why her presence here seemed so incongruous. Now he knew why her loveliness, her innocence, stood out so sharply against this background of yellow deviltry.

"Ah! Now I understand!" he whispered kindly. "You—you are Llasta La Vere! Your father was murdered by Chinese, and you were abducted. Great heavens, I see it now! Hom Hing Ho, that beast, is behind all this. And now he has come back here to run this den. But why in heaven's name do you remain here? You are not in—in chains now."

With the toe of one embroidered slipper the girl was thoughtfully tracing lines in the sand. After a silence she slowly raised her eyes.

"Why do I stay?" she echoed wistfully. "Why should I go? And where, pray tell me, could I go—and escape? While I am with Hom Hing Ho, I am safe from the importunings of the sons of Jan. Yes, I—I was Llasta La Vere. But that was a long, long time ago, was it not? Now—now, I am the slave of Hom Hing Ho. By the pledge of the pipe I am his forever. Even when prison bars kept him from me, he would come to me in my opium-dreams and walk with me through rose-mists of fantasy. Once I did not want to stay; now I do not want to go. The spirit of the poppy-bloom enthralls me, enslaves me, holds me in bonds stronger than chains. Yes, I am the slave of Hom Hing Ho. *Tsau kom lok!*"

A shudder of horror ran through Jathrop's veins. What the girl had said, and the tone of utter hopelessness with which she spoke, appalled him. This girl the slave of that villainous Chinaman through the opium-habit fostered by him! And that other girl back there in the other room, with the opium-pipe slipping from her nerveless fingers! It seemed like an Oriental nightmare.

"This can't be!" cried Jathrop. "It must be. You must leave this place. In your own world, among your own kind, you can be happy. You have youth, health, culture. You are beautiful. You could have every wish fulfilled."

She looked at him strangely. "Can I?" she said in an odd tone. "I wonder?"

JATHROP thought he caught a note of hope in the girl's voice, and it aroused hope in his own breast. This girl must be saved; she must be saved even against her own will. He took her hands in his, held them firmly and looked into her eyes. He began pleading with her. The earnestness, the vehemence of his words surprised even himself. By the very force of his sincerity he touched her heart, broke down her barrier of abandon. She turned her face away, bowed her head, and her shoulders trembled.

"Come with me!" begged Jathrop. "We will run to the machine that is waiting for the officers. We will drive to the beach. I will place you in good hands; and I'll return with the police. You will be free from Hom Hing Ho. You must be. This cannot, must not go on. It is too horrible. Come!" And he began drawing her away.

Then, of a sudden, she seemed to stifle a sobbing cry, drew close to Jathrop, and whispered: "Stop! You—you have torn

the scales from my eyes. I feel that I—that I can trust you. No man has ever talked to me as you have. Yes, I will go; for you lift up my heart with a new hope—the hope of a new life. Yes, I will go; but—" She hesitated, and looked back at the dark hallway.

"But what?"

"The ruby of Jan Luk Chan. You have it in your pocket. There is a curse on it. It will bring you and me misfortune. Give it to me quickly. We will leave it lying here on the doorstep; and when the sons of Jan see it, they will not follow."

"Gladly!" cried Jathrop. His heart was pounding wildly. Now that the girl was going to leave with him, he realized that unless they went at once, there was grave danger of being taken prisoners again. He drew out the wadded paper and thrust it into the girl's hand. She sprang inside to the better light. Jathrop watched her eager fingers tear off the paper, saw her remove the object and hold it up to the light.

It was a common beach pebble!

The girl stood as though petrified, and every vestige of color seemed to drain from her face. Then in a flood, anger, dismay, fury, swept into her face. She whirled on Jathrop, her eyes flashing a cold fire. She flung the worthless pebble to the floor at his feet. "You—you—" She choked with rage. "I was about to trust myself with you—a thief. And you have betrayed me just as other men have done. Oh, you hypocrite! *You* appeal to *my* better nature! Why, I wouldn't clean my feet on you—you scoundrel! Ha! A curse on you and your kind! A curse on you! You have stolen the ruby of Jan Luk Chan!"

"*Hai-e!* What good fortune!" said a cool voice in English at Jathrop's elbow. Jathrop turned and looked into the face of Ah Ching. "It is the ruby I seek," went on Ah Ching, menacing Jathrop with his revolver. "Come! Give it to me!"

DAZED by this swift turn of events, Jathrop stood motionless, looking first at the girl, then at Ah Ching. And before anyone could speak, there came from down the hall a sudden cry, a weird, uncanny cry. It rose to a scream, an animal-like scream that resembled nothing human, and that sent a chill down Jathrop's spine. Then it sank to a guttural voice that Jathrop recognized as that of Hom Hing Ho.

"Ah Ching! Ah Ching! *A-i-h-Y-a-h!*"

Ah Ching flung a swift look over his shoulder. He seemed undecided.

"Ah Ching! Come quickly!" Again Hom Hing Ho raised his high-pitched, grating voice.

"Go before me down the hall!" commanded Ah Ching. By a motion with his revolver he indicated Jathrop. "Raise your hands!"

JATHROP did as ordered. He seemed suddenly to have lost the power to think. It seemed like he was in a nightmare.

He stepped through the curtained doorway he had quitted but a moment before, and looked around in surprise and dismay. Hayes was gone. Martin was gone. Ah Su was gone. There remained only Hom Hing Ho, still handcuffed as Hayes had left him, and now bound to a chair.

Behind him, he heard the girl utter a cry. He turned and saw her grasp Ah Ching's arm: "What have you done?" she demanded in a husky voice. "Oh, son of Jan, what in heaven's name have you done?"

Out of half-shut eyes the Oriental gave the girl a side-long, venomous glance. He spoke softly, with a serpent-like hissing:

"The sands have many secrets, little slave. They keep them well."

"Oh, you demon!" cried the girl. "Oh, you arch-murderer—"

Roughly, and in great agitation, Hom Hing Ho broke in: "Ah Ching, hear me! When you left, I made a bargain with your younger brother. I saw the fate of the white men who had tried to thwart the vengeance of the sons of Jan; and it made my heart relent toward you and your ancestors whom I have wronged. *Hi-low,* I have done you a great wrong; but I tried to make amends. I offered Ah Su the ruby of Jan Luk Chan for my freedom.

"Oh, yes, I had it," he went on. "I took the ruby from the pipe and hid it in the toe of my right slipper. Ah Su promised, by solemn oath, that if I would put the ruby of Jan Luk Chan in his hand, he would free me at once. But when he saw the stone in his hand, he acted like one possessed with evil spirits. He stared it with the bulging eyes of a river toad. Then, without even looking at me, he fled out the door into the darkness. Aih-yah! He speaks lying words; and may boiling oil be poured down his wicked throat!"

AH CHING'S face was a mask. Only his slant eyes, now pools of sullen flame, betrayed his great emotion. There was a moment of painful silence; then, slowly, and with the air of one who is carrying out a well-laid plan, Ah Ching walked behind Jathrop, and none too gently, took him by the shoulder and forced him backward into a heavy armchair. With the muzzle of his revolver at the white man's head, he drew the prisoner's hands behind the back of the chair. Jathrop felt his wrists encircled with cold steel; there was a metallic click, and he found himself helpless. He could not rise.

That done, the yellow man swiftly and silently imprisoned the girl in another chair, tying her hands with a silken cord he drew from his blouse.

Ah Ching stepped behind Jathrop: "Shall I gag you? Or will you promise to make no outcry?"

"I prom—" Something slipped between Jathrop's lips and settled firmly between his jaws. He was securely gagged.

"And you?" The yellow man addressed the girl.

"I promise," she said in a low voice.

"You may as well keep your promise, for you know as well as I that no one could hear you."

He walked to Hom Hing Ho, removed the handcuffs and the silk cords that bound him to the chair, and ordered him to rise. Hom Hing Ho obeyed, his crafty eyes on the revolver that Ah Ching held ready.

Ah Ching stepped back a few paces. His slender body, stately yet sinister, quivered with emotion as he spoke:

"On that evil day when Ah Su and I came running from our father's milletfields to find that our home had been ransacked, the ruby of Jan Luk Chan stolen and our honorable father murdered by the hand of Hom Hing Ho, the pirate, we swore by the Oath of the Bloody Wine that we would cross the Four Seas to the ends of the earth, spend our last tael of silver, and our last breath, if necessary, to recover the ruby, and to avenge the murder of our father. Tonight, with success within our grasp, I find my heart bowed in shame because of my brother's treachery. But it also hardens me in my vow of vengeance. Now all benevolence has gone from my liver, for my brother has been false to me. But another night will come. This night I deal with the murderer of my honorable father, that hereafter my father's bones may rest in peace and tranquillity. This night is the night of the vengeance of the son of Jan."

With magic swiftness Ah Ching tossed the revolver from his right hand to his left, plucked a long knife from beneath his tunic, sprang upon Hom Hing Ho and bore him to the floor. Again and again the knife flashed. Hom Hing Ho uttered a single cry that ended in a rattling gasp; then his arms went limp, and his hands fell away from Ah Ching's throat. When Ah Ching rose to his feet, Hom Hing Ho did not move.

James Montmorency Jathrop, in his thrillers, had spilled much blood on good white paper, and had staged many such scenes as he had just witnessed; but instead of breaking his bonds, as the hero always does at the right moment, Jathrop found himself utterly helpless. He seemed inert, useless. He could neither think nor act.

Ah Ching, with his back to Jathrop and the slave girl of Hom Hing Ho, was calmly wiping his knife on the rug where his victim lay. As he made to rise, there was a sudden swish of silken garments; the slave girl leaped between Ah Ching and the prostrate figure of Hom Hing Ho. In some way she had managed to cut or break her bonds, for the silk cord still dangled from one of her wrists. Without so much as a look at Ah Ching, she fell on her knees by Hom Hing Ho.

"Oh tih lao pan! Ai yah, hoh lien!" she cried. "My master! Oh, how piteous! Speak to me, master! It is I, Llasta, your White Lily, your slave!"

But Hom Hing Ho did not stir.

Slowly, dumbly, the slave of Hom Hing Ho rose to her feet. She turned to Ah Ching.

"K'u kwo shan lok," she said coldly. "He is dead."

"Yes," said the son of Jan softly. "Hom Hing Ho, the pirate, is dead. You are free now, White Lily. You are free now to come to me. Have I not waited long—long and patiently?"

The girl looked at him but did not appear to see him. Then, at length, she spoke, slowly, and without emotion:

"I am the slave of Hom Hing Ho. Through the pledge of the pipe, I am his forever. As it was in life, so shall it be in death. . . . . Spirit of my master—I come! *Tsau kom lok.*" With a swift movement she took from the folds of her

skirt that long Malay dagger, pressed the point to her breast, turned and with a low, sobbing cry, fell on her face at the feet of Hom Hing Ho.

CHAPTER VI

And in the Meantime

THE silence that followed was one that not even the facile pen of a James Montmorency Jathrop could have described. He realized, suddenly, that his face was streaming with perspiration, and his muscles were straining to the point of bursting. It seemed hideously unreal, this thing he had witnessed; it seemed like the grim phantom of some drug-dream.

And then, behind Jathrop, there was the sudden clapping of hands. Jathrop twisted around and stared, dumfounded. By the open doorway, elbow to elbow as friends, and their faces lighted with admiration, stood Inspector Martin; Brooks, the reporter; Detective Hayes; Ah Su, the son of Jan; and Berman. They were looking past Jathrop to where lay the girl and Hom Hing Ho. Turning again, and following their gaze, Jathrop rubbed his eyes in utter amazement. Hom Hing Ho and Ah Ching, grinning like schoolboys, were assisting "the slave of Hom Hing Ho" to her feet.

"Good work, Llasta!" cried Brooks.

"Good work, Hom Hing and Ah Ching!" cried Martin.

Detective Hayes got quickly to Jathrop's side, removed the gag and freed him. He helped the astonished writer to arise.

Over the detective's shoulder Jathrop saw the girl wave her hand and laughing, disappear behind the Cantonese hanging that draped the doorway.

"Wha—what does this mean?" demanded Jathrop. "Is this a—a joke?"

Inspector Martin laughed. "Jim, it's just as I told you. All this sensational stuff is bunk and balderdash. You've acted your part in a little melodrama we planned especially for your benefit."

"Thanks," said Jathrop dryly. He looked around the room. It was as hard now to believe all this was unreal as it had been a few minutes previous to believe that it was real. "Let—let me sit down again," he said, making an effort to smile. He dropped back into the chair where he had been handcuffed. "All a joke," he echoed. "But I don't understand. Llasta La Vere—the slave of opium and of Hom Hing Ho—"

"Llasta is my sister," said Brooks proudly. "She is a student at the University, specializing in Oriental languages. She has played often in amateur theatricals, and in that way she made the acquaintance of Ah Su and Ah Ching, who are in her class at college. Fine chaps, too."

"And you—you are not in league with the Chinese smugglers?" muttered Jathrop, more to himself than to Brooks.

"Brooks is the squarest fellow that ever wrote lies for rotten newspapers," put in Martin. "Eh, Hayes?"

"I'll say he is!" affirmed the detective.

This place is one a bunch of us fellows use during the summer as a clubhouse," explained Brooks. "We're away from everybody here, and it was just ideal for our little play. I wanted to put on a stage fire and have you carry Sis out the way Martin carried out those three girls up the river one time. But she objected to that."

Jathrop was sincerely sorry that Brooks' idea had been left out, but he made no comment.

"Who's Hom Hing Ho?" he asked. "What is the secret of that seal ring? What about that river-raid you described so dramatically? What about those slave-girls, and the ruby of Jan—Jan What's-his-name?"

"The river raid and the fire happened very much as I told it," said Martin; "but the rest is all bunk and balderdash. "This boy Lee Hing was never a pirate in China. He's a stool-pigeon for us; and he is as honest as they make 'em—wouldn't steal a brass button. There was an old villain named Hom Hing Ho whom we caught in that raid, and this was his pipe; but he died with the measles while in jail waiting trial."

"Well, I'll be hanged!" exploded Jathrop. "And I swallowed the bait, hook, line, pole, and climbed on the bank for more."

"I was a little afraid of that robbery stunt we pulled off at my office," went on Martin. "I was afraid we might be going too far. So I had one of my men stationed in the alley to guard against interruption by the police. And when I showed you how I would search a prisoner, I was really making sure you were not armed. Everything went along smoothly except that you delayed the game by springing

something we hadn't planned on. It never occurred to us that you would try to get Miss Brooks to elope with you. Oh, yes, we were standing where we could hear every word you said, Jim. You're some actor yourself, old man."

MISS BROOKS and the girl whom Jathrop had seen in the back room came in at that juncture. The Oriental costume had given way to a more fitting gown. Brooks introduced them. The other girl proved to be Llasta's cousin.

"Miss Brooks, I'm glad to meet you," said Jathrop warmly, taking the hand Llasta gave him. "I'm mighty thankful you're not a slave of Hom Hing Ho, and that you don't hit the pipe, and that you didn't kill yourself with that ugly knife. But just the same, I'm sorry you didn't run away with me."

"Tsau kom lok!" said Llasta.

"I'm hungry," spoke up Inspector Martin. "And Jim, to put you in good humor again, we've ordered the very best dinner in San Francisco—which is going some. It's waiting for us. Is everyone ready?"

Before anyone could reply, heavy steps sounded in the doorway, and a mounted policeman strode in. He walked up to Lee Hing, who a few moments previously had been Hom Hing Ho, the pirate. He grabbed Lee by the wrists and snapped handcuffs on him. "All right, boys!" he called out.

Two other officers stepped into the room.

Martin found his voice. "Here, what does this mean, Officer? You know me, and—"

"Yes, and I'm mighty glad to see you, Martin," cut in the officer. "We could have phoned you, but we were afraid this Chink would get wise and beat it. A bunch of Chinks blew up your safe about an hour ago and cleaned it out. They knifed the watchman, but he'll pull through. He shot one of the gang—a fellow named Bo Lim. Before Bo Lim kicked off, he made a squawk. Said Lee Hing was the leader of the gang and had planned the whole thing. Said he got the idea while you were rehearsing him for a little play you were putting on."

Martin was too astounded for words. His mouth agape, he stared at the officer. Then, slowly, he turned to Lee Hing. "Lee, what—what about this?"

"I don't know anything about it," declared Lee; but his face gave the lie to his words.

"The office learned from Mrs. Martin that you and Lee Hing were here," went on the mounted policeman. "Two of Lee's gang are still at large, and I want to get this bird down to the Chief's office and ask him a few questions." He started for the door with his prisoner. "Better phone your office, Martin."

INSPECTOR MARTIN spent a few very unpleasant minutes at the phone. Jathrop was at his elbow when he hung up.

"Is this another joke?" asked the writer.

"Joke, the devil!" blurted Martin. "It's all true. While I've been out here playing monkeyshines, our watchman has been stabbed, perhaps killed, and our vault blown up and robbed of six or seven thousand dollars' worth of opium, pipes and other things."

"I don't believe it!" cried Jathrop gleefully. "All bunk and balderdash!"

"Jim, for heaven's sake, don't rub it in," pleaded Martin. "Of course, I wouldn't have been at the office even if I hadn't been here; but I'm afraid it *was* those confounded rehearsals that gave Lee Hing the idea of robbing our safe."

"I don't believe it!" reiterated Jathrop, his blue eyes dancing. "It's too sensational. Lee Hing wouldn't steal brass buttons. Robbers wouldn't knife your watchman and rob your safe. Such things don't happen in real life."

"Aw, go to thunder!" snorted Martin. "Come on, everybody, let's get out of here. You folks go on to the dinner we have planned. I'll go to the office and show up later. Remember, the feed is on me."

"Not on your life!" cried Jathrop. "I buy this dinner. Why, this night has been a fortune to me. You've acted out a corking good story-plot, characters, setting, all ready for me to dictate."

Martin caught Jathrop by the arm.

"Jim Jathrop," said Inspector Martin, "do you really mean that you can write a story about this fool joke we played on you, and—and what happened in the meantime?"

"I'll say I can!' cried James Montmorency Jathrop. "This bunk and balderdash of yours ought to make a thunderin' thriller and it'll just be the simple truth at that."

THE END

15

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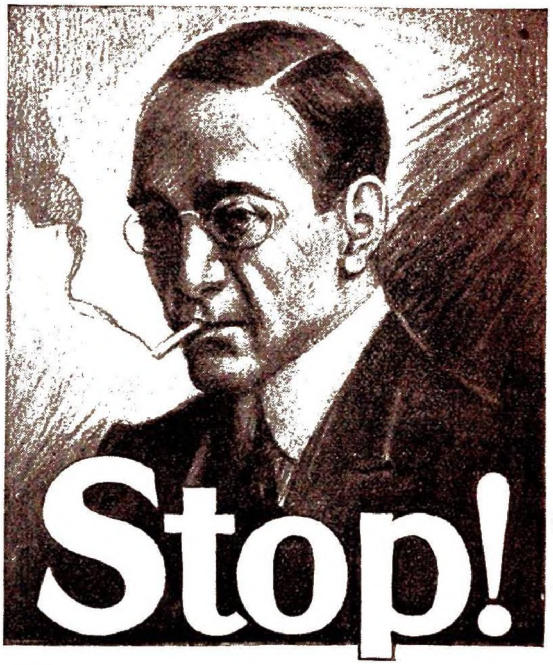

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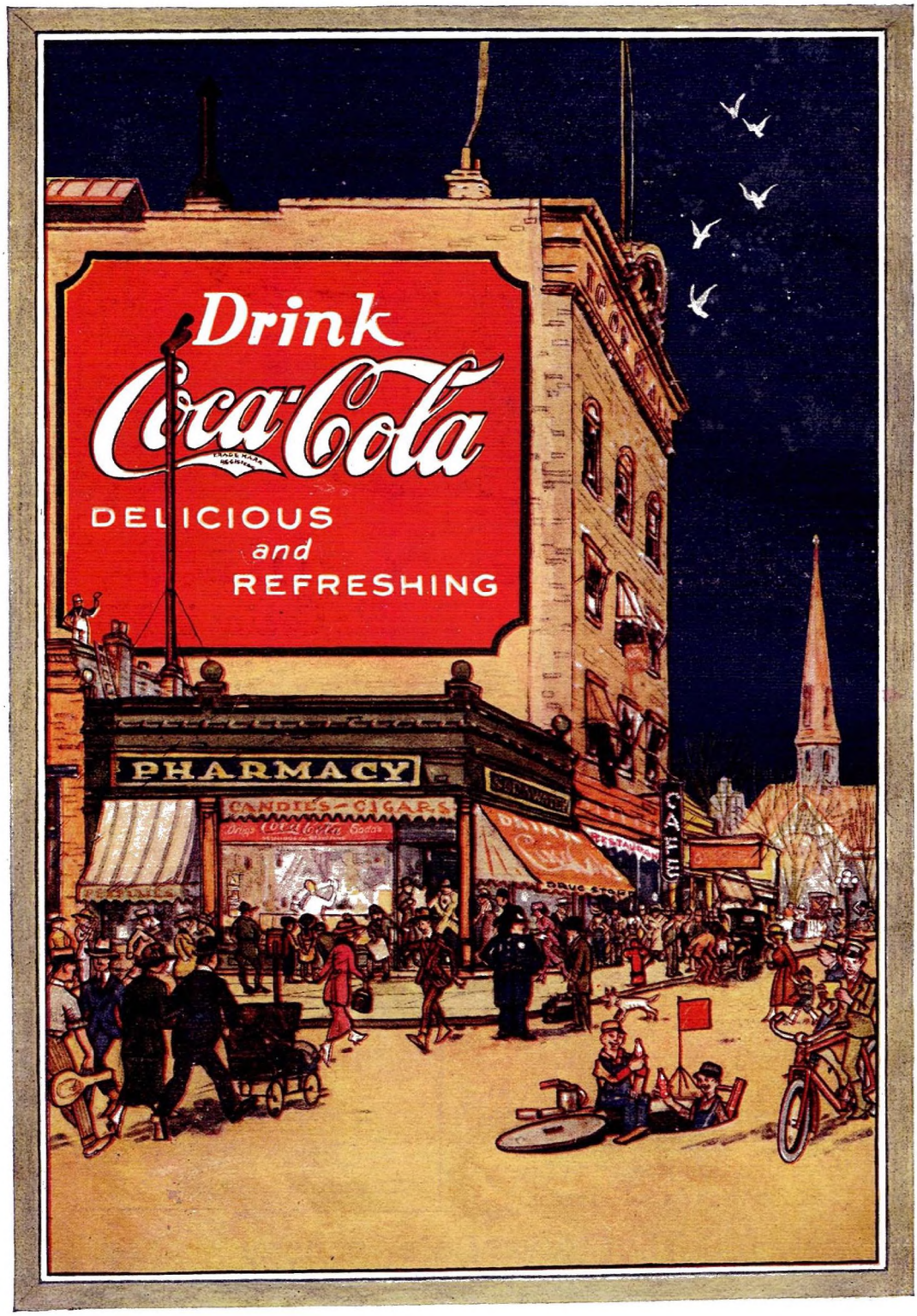
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