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The Popular Magazine

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BY

DANE
COOLIDGE

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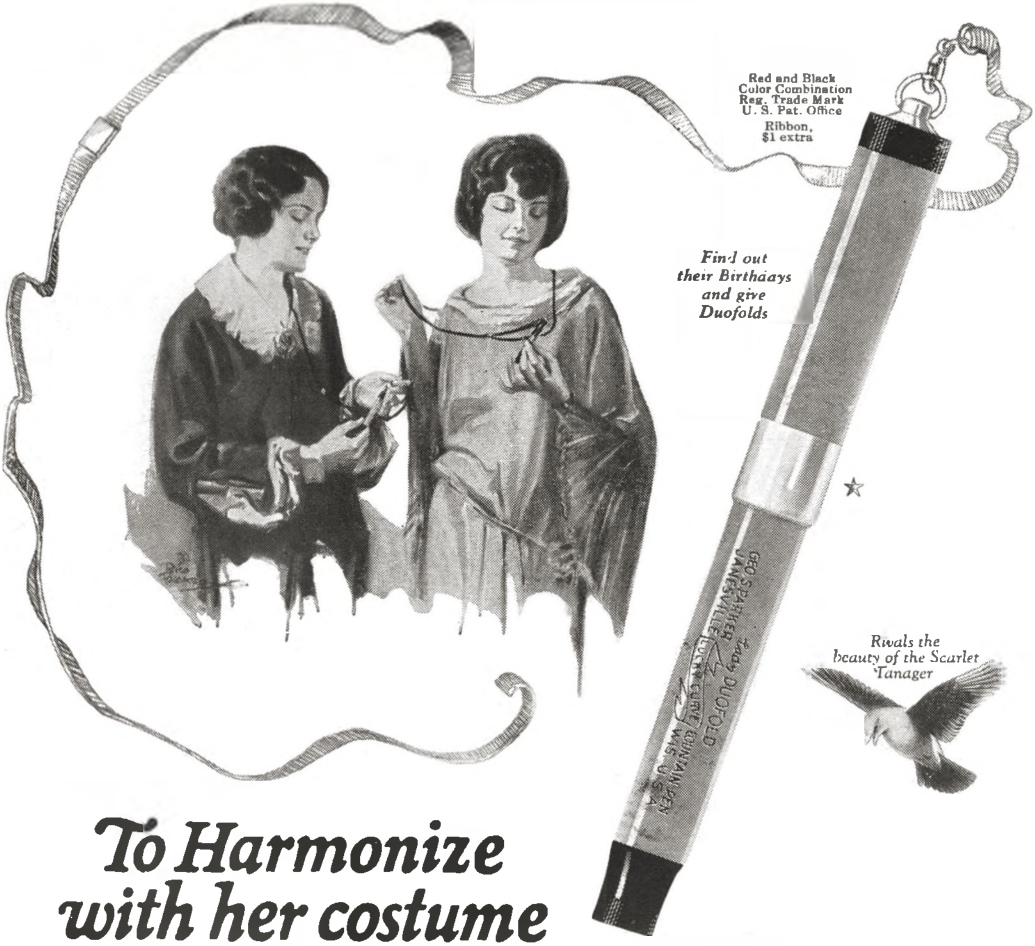
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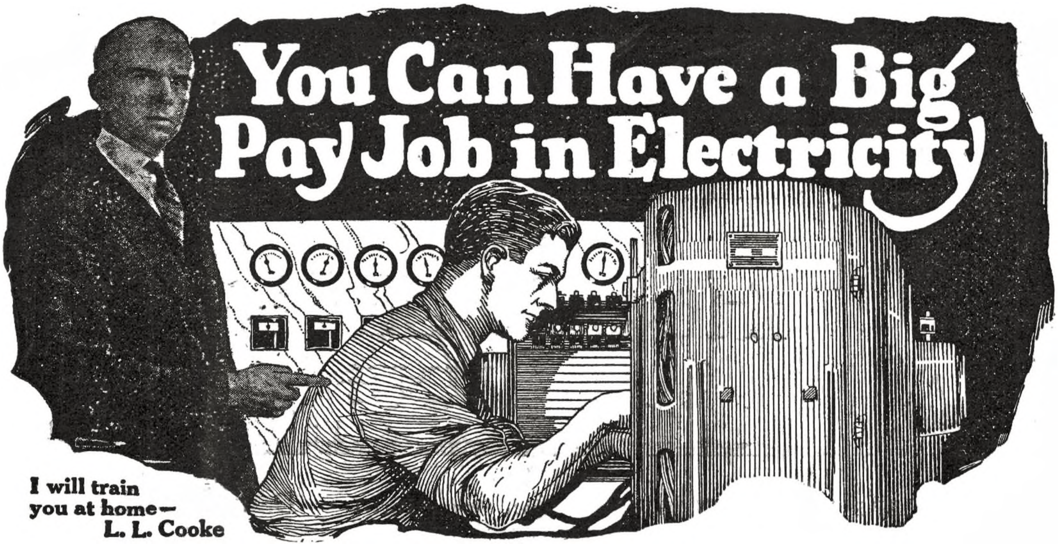
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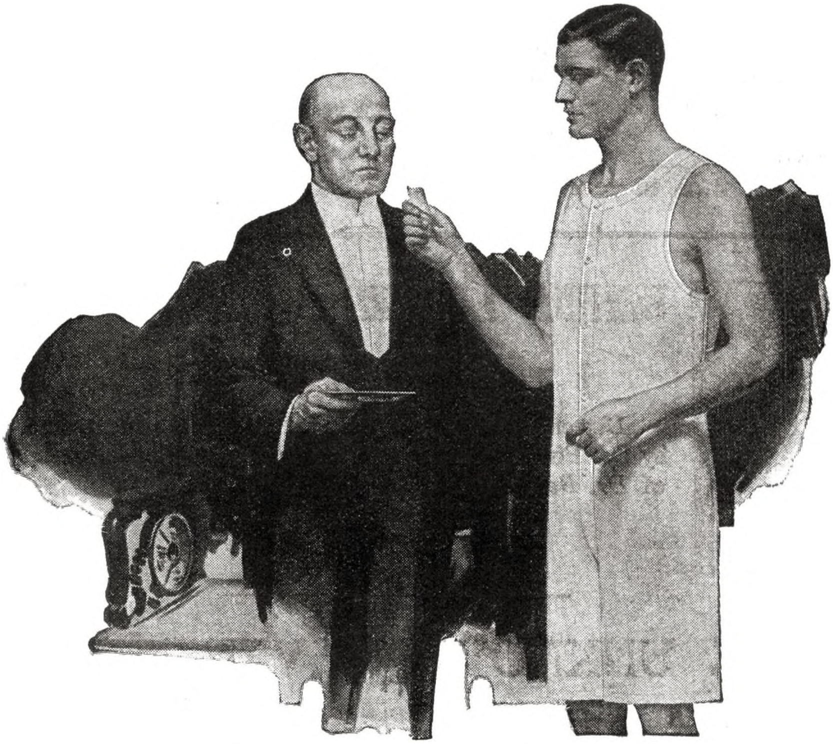

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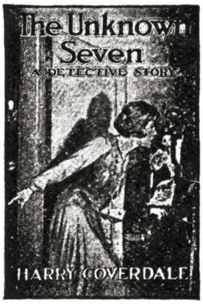
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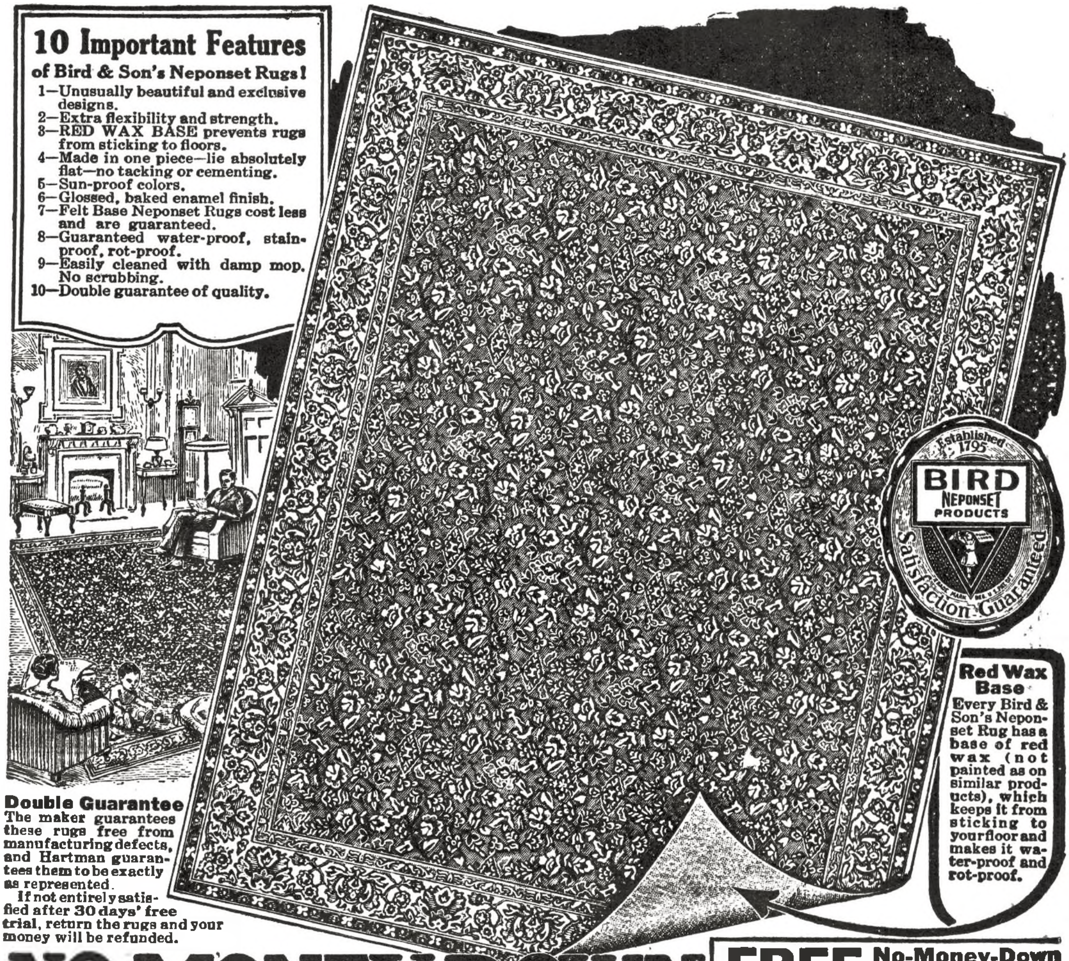

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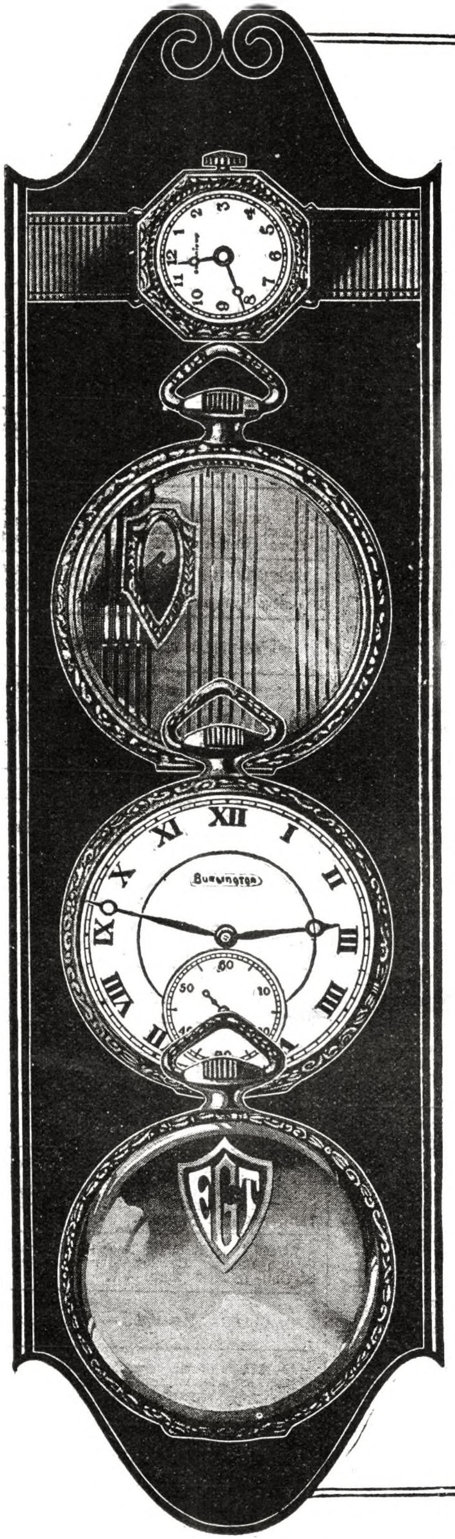

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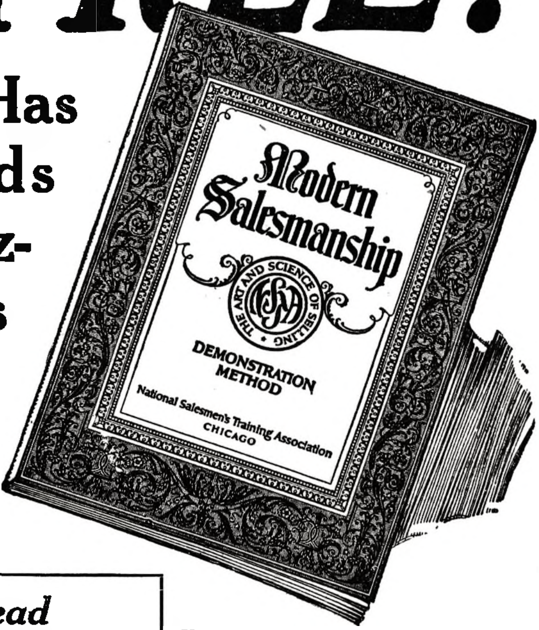
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Charles Berry, of Winterset, Iowa, stepped from $18 a week as a clerk to a position making him $1,000 the very first month. J. P. Overstreet, of Denison, Texas, read this book, left a job on the Capitol Police Force, and in six weeks earned $1,800. F. Wynn, Portland, Oregon, an ex-service man, earned $554.37 in one week. Geo. W. Kearns, of Oklahoma City, found in this book a way to jump his earnings from $60 a month to $524.00 in two weeks, and C. W. Campbell learned from it how he could quit a clerking job on the railroad to earn $1,632 in thirty days.

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We are not making any extravagant claims about what we will do for you. We don't have to. The records of the real successes for which we are responsible are so overwhelming a testimonial of the fact that any man of average intelligence can become a Master Salesman that we are willing to leave the decision entirely up to you. All of this proof and many important features about Salesmanship are contained in "Modern Salesmanship." It is yours—FREE. Send the coupon for it today. It will show you how you can quickly become a Master Salesman—a big money maker. It will tell you about the National Salesmen's Training Association system of Salesmanship Training that has meant prosperity to so many thousands of men—about the National Demonstration Method that gives you actual experience while studying—and all about the fine opportunities that await you in the selling field. Failure to act may mean that you lose the one big chance of your life to leave forever behind you the low pay of a routine job.

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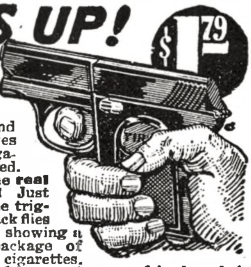

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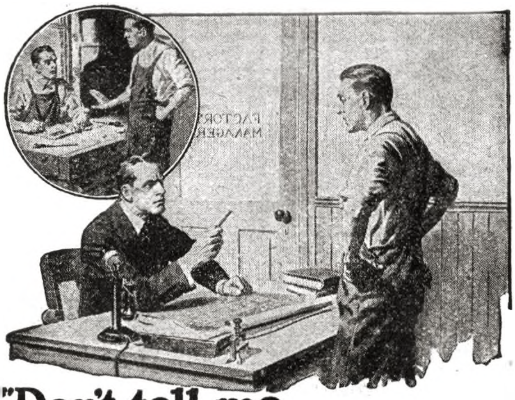

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ALOIS MERKE.

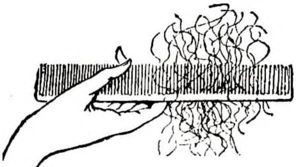
New Hair in 30 Days —or Costs You Nothing!

Alois Merke discovers a new, simple method guaranteed to grow thick, beautiful, luxuriant hair, or money instantly refunded. Gives new life and health to hair that is thin, falling, lifeless.

At the famous Merke Institute, Fifth Avenue, New York, letters are pouring in from all over the country requesting information concerning this new method for growing hair. So successful is it that it has been guaranteed to grow new hair in 30 days **or cost nothing!**

To women this method is particularly interesting as it often transforms thin, falling hair into rich, luxuriant beauty in an unbelievably short time. It is unlike anything ever known in this country. It penetrates to the starved root cells, revitalizes and nourishes them—and the hair grows thick, lustrous, beautiful.

There is no massaging, no singeing, no unnecessary fuss or bother of any kind connected with this new method. It is simple, pleasant. Already hundreds of women who had thin, falling hair, hundreds of men who were "thin on top," have acquired new luxuriant growths of hair. Often the results are almost unbelievable.



Thin, falling, scraggly hair is a sign of starved root cells. But now a method has been perfected which penetrates to these cells and stimlates them into new activity.

Thin, Falling Hair Given Glorious, New Health

Is your hair thin, lifeless? Does it fall out, break? Is it dull and without lustre?

All these conditions are nature's signs of starved or atrophied hair roots. Ordinary methods cannot revitalize the roots, cannot reach them—no more than rubbing "growing fluid" on the bark of a tree can make the tree grow. You must get right at the roots and stimulate them. This remarkable new method provides at last an efficient way of invigorating the roots themselves. The hair becomes brighter, fluffier. New growths make their appearance within 30 days—if they don't there is no cost to you.

Some of the Amazing Results

The proof-guarantee is made possible only through splendid results that have already been achieved—as these few excerpts from letters testify. The letters are on file at the Merke Institutes and anyone may see them by coming to the office.

"I have been bothered with dandruff for 20 years and had lost nearly all of my hair. I have used your treatment 30 days now and have a good growth of hair coming in.

"Am glad to say I can see such great change in my hair. It is growing longer and my head is full of young hair that has made its way through since I have been using Merke Treatment."

"I must frankly state I was skeptical as to your claim, but a faithful use of Merke Treatment for a month has removed all doubt and three of us are obtaining unbelievable results both in looks and growth.

Free Booklet Explains the Method

We have prepared a special free booklet called "New Way to Make Hair Grow" which tells you everything you want to know about the remarkable new method for growing hair. This booklet explains the method in detail, gives you many interesting facts and proofs concerning this new method. We know you would like a copy, and we will be glad to send it to you absolutely without obligation.

Among other things, this free booklet will tell you how this method penetrates to the hair roots—without any massaging, rubbing or other tiresome methods. And it tells how the dormant root cells beneath the skin's surface are awakened, giving new life, new strength.

Mail this coupon for your copy of the special free book today. Remember there is no obligation whatever. The Allied Merke Institutes, Inc., Dept. 425, 512 Fifth Avenue, New York City.

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Please send me, without cost or obligation on my part, a copy of the new special booklet "New Way to Make Hair Grow," explaining in detail the remarkable method for growing glorious healthy hair.

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Popular Announces the Winners of the February 7th

Advertising Prize Contest

First Prize:	$15.00.	A. O. ELDEN, 12 Monument Square, Portland, Me. *For letter submitted on American Sole and Belting Leather Tanners.*
Second Prize:	5.00.	MRS. A. P. AVERILL, 2723 Copper St., El Paso, Texas. *For letter submitted on Ivory Soap.*
Third Prize:	3.00.	ARTHUR McCONNELL, 897 East 176th St., New York City. *For letter submitted on American Tobacco Co.*
Fourth Prize:	2.00.	REV. J. H. CHESLEY, [illegible]9 14th Ave. E., Cordele, Ga. *For letter submitted on American Sole and Belting Leather Tanners.*

We want to thank our readers for the many letters we have received. Our readers were quick to respond to our invitation to write us and help us prove to the advertiser that readers of fiction magazines read the advertising pages. The many letters received prove that our contention has been correct—that readers of fiction magazines *do* read the advertisements and the advertising department is glad to say that more advertisers are being convinced of this each month. Renewed thanks to our kind readers who have helped and are helping us.

Winners for the March 7th issue will be announced in June 7th issue

See regular contest page for May contest

The Enchanted Breakfast!

Here is lightness and brightness food enchanted—in the form of a breakfast dish.

Grains of rice steam exploded to 8 times their normal size, crisp and flaky, more enticing than you ever dreamed a food could be.

All the nourishment of whole grains and the minerals. Quickly digested, assimilated—turned to strength and vigor in a few minutes.

Serve with sugar and cream. Or in bowls of milk. And for a special treat, a morning's adventure, try with fresh or cooked fruit.

Don't deny yourself this delight. Go today, ask your grocer for Quaker Puffed Rice—the supreme grain food.

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Quaker Puffed Wheat—steam exploded like rice. Whole wheat in its most digestible form, containing the important body-building elements. Supplies the minerals and bran everybody needs. The milk, the vitamines.

Professor Anderson's Invention

Quaker Puffed Wheat and Puffed Rice are the famed inventions of Professor Anderson—food shot from guns—grain foods thoroughly cooked.

Quaker Puffed Rice

PUFFED RICE

Quaker Puffed Wheat

Sometimes brides must compromise in the difficult matter of choosing bridesmaids. But Elsie's choice of our charming Sally was a vote for *both* friendship and beauty. And now what has Sally done but catch the bouquet!

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This fact becomes clear the moment you realize that the function of soap for the skin is to *cleanse,* not to cure or to transform. The highest authorities agree on this point, and the proof of its soundness is recorded on the faces of millions of women who use Ivory exclusively for their complexions.

To satisfy the request of many women for a cake of Ivory to fit the soap holder on their washstands, we have recently provided Guest Ivory, a dainty, graceful cake with all of Ivory's traditional mildness and purity. We offer you Guest Ivory under the guarantee that if we charged you a dollar a cake we could give you no finer soap!

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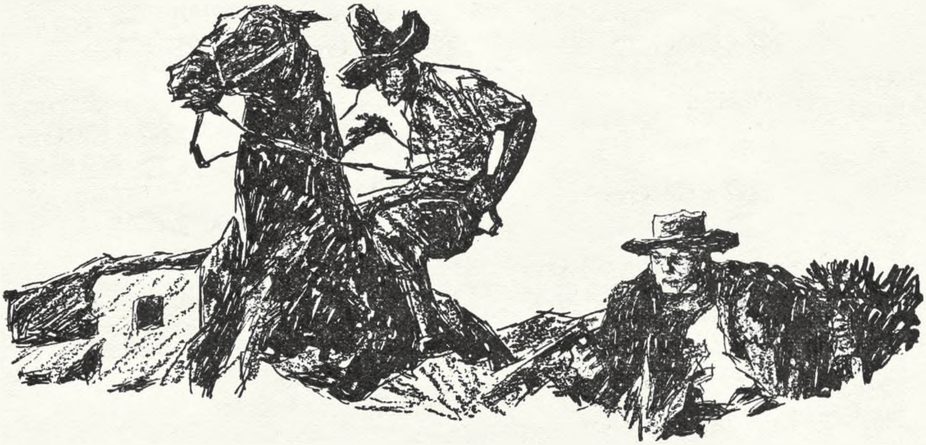
THE POPULAR MAGAZINE

VOL. LXXII. MAY 7, 1924. No. 2



The Riders from Texas

By Dane Coolidge

Author of "The Scalp Lock," "From Bitter Creek," etc.

This is a tale of the American Southwest in those spacious days before barbed wire came to fence out romance. Of those times Dane Coolidge writes not only as a teller of tales but as chronicler of historic fact. His work rings true because it is built on truth, even down to minute detail. "The Riders from Texas" takes for its background the conquest of New Mexico by the hard-bitten men and the long-horned herds of the Lone Star State. It is a broad panorama of literature that has in its steady, compelling sweep, something of the wide-rolling spirit of the Western plains. And through it is woven the love story of a Texas wrangler and a daughter of the blood of old Castille. Here is sturdy, splendid material admirably molded into the structure of an imposing literary edifice.—THE EDITOR

(A Four-Part Story—Part I.)

CHAPTER I.

SU CASA.

THERE was a trailing cloud of dust on the old stage road that led in across the plains to Indian Lake, a cloud yellow and high; and the rough east wind brought the ceaseless bawling of cows. Many clouds of yellow dust had swept down that road since Lorenzo de Vega had built Su Casa—war parties of Apaches and Navajos and Utes, and Comanches from across the Rio Grande—but Don Lorenzo had withstood them all. With his band of fighting New Mexicans he had broken the pride of Manuelito, and of crafty Geronimo and his warriors; but now a mightier army was invading his domain, thousands of long-horned Texas cattle, pushed on by reckless riders. Already, like a reek on the wind, the tales of their wild doings had preceded them—tales of barroom brawls, pell-mell crossings of quicksand rivers, and ruthless appropriation of Mexican cattle—but when the first Texan rode up to his door "Lorenzo Magnifico" welcomed him.

Tall and courtly and quite unarmed, except for the knife in his boot, he stepped out of his loopholed fortress and greeted the stranger with a bow.

"My house is yours," he said; and the Texan eyed him dubiously.

The Texan was a man of giant size, with legs bowed like a bear's; his face, coated deep with the dust of the herd, was set in a battle-scarred mask.

"How's that?" he inquired. "No savvy Español." And Don Lorenzo repeated it in English.

"Much obliged," returned the cattleman, glancing up at the adobe walls; and his mask broke in a slow, grim smile. "Do you own this lake out here, too?" he asked.

"Yes, my friend," answered De Vega, "this poor place is mine. But come in—you are very welcome."

"I ain't so sure about that," observed the Texan with a shrug; "better wait till I tell you my business."

"Whatever it is, you are welcome," replied Don Lorenzo. "Every man who comes here is my guest. This is your house, my friend, as long as you are in it, and all that I have is yours. Will you not have a cup of coffee and some tortillas and beans—or at least some cakes and sweet wine? The wine was made in Albuquerque by an old friend of mine, and the cakes my wife made herself. Timoteo!"

He clapped his hands and a swarthy Mexican in the doorway darted out and stood hat in hand.

"Take this horse to the corral," directed De Vega in staccato Spanish, "and give him an armful of hay!"

"Here! Hold on!" protested the Texan. "That horse don't eat hay. Well, all right, but I'm going to pay for it."

"Please don't mention it!" begged De Vega. "I have lived here for twenty years and no one has paid me yet. That is, with one exception—and he is the only man that I ever turned away from my door. It is the custom of my people and all are welcome to Su Casa, which is the name I give my poor home. It means in Spanish, 'Your house.'"

He pointed to the name on a huge beam above the doorway and the Texan held out his hand.

"My name is Monk," he said, "Ike Monk—from Texas. Mighty clevah of you to ask me in."

"I am very glad to meet you, Mr. Monk," replied Don Lorenzo, and led the way through the portals of Su Casa.

These were doors of hewn pine logs, hauled down from the near-by mountains and strapped together with broad bands of iron. Enormous hinges, set in oak, upheld them from the sides, and the outside was studded with spikes; while on the inside two stout timbers hung ready at hand to bar the huge *puerta* against assault. Monk glimpsed guns and men in the guardroom as he passed through and out into the courtyard.

Here within the unpierced walls which shut them off from the outside world the women lived a secluded life of their own. Dark faces peered out curiously from the doors of cell-like rooms that lined the four sides of the patio and by the well in the center an Indian woman stood straight and slim with an olla of water on her head. Pigs and goats wandered about, chickens darted to and fro, watching the doorways for something to eat; and under the arcade that shaded the western wall Navajo squaws were weaving blankets at their looms. There was a smell of washed wool, of stored corn and panocha sugar, and the fragrance of roasting coffee, and then they stepped into the long cool dining room.

"Pancha!" called De Vega and from the kitchen far beyond a woman's voice gave answer. *"Café!"* he ordered. *"Tortillas y frijoles!* Will you wash your hands, my friend?"

He led the Texan into a chamber, its dirt floor newly swept and sprinkled to keep down the dust, and as Monk glanced about he saw a bed all in white and an image of the Virgin above it.

"Pretty nice room," he observed as he washed away the grime and combed out his grizzled beard, and De Vega nodded, well pleased.

"It is your room," he said, "as long as you are here. All my house is at your service. And if you happen to be short of change, here is guest money on the table. You are welcome to take what you need."

"Much obliged," rumbled Monk; "don't need none, jest at present. How long have you been doing like this?"

"All my life," returned De Vega, "and my father before me. It is the custom among my people."

"First I ever heard of it," observed Monk and after a second look at the money he grunted and went back to the dining room.

An old woman, her head decorously covered with a rebozo, brought the coffee and placed it before them; then, hobbling back to the kitchen, she brought out beans in a porous olla, and a stack of fresh-made tortillas. But each time, as she came and went, her beady black eyes scanned the rugged face of the Texano. It was a face broad and massive, with a high nose and craggy brows and an expression almost benevolent in repose; but Pancha had heard of the Texans since her youth and when he looked up she crossed herself quickly.

"She is afraid," laughed De Vega, "but you must not notice that, my friend. This is the first time she has ever seen a Texan."

"Oh, that's all right," said Monk. As he was drinking his coffee a shadow fell across the sunlit doorway. A Mexican, big and burly and with a saturnine, pock-marked face paced by and looked in at the visitor; then, as if standing guard, he took his place outside the door and the Texan glanced at his host.

"That is Porfirio, my man at arms," explained De Vega reassuringly. "He is a good man, but *muy matador*. What I mean is, he kills too much; but I keep him to carry my arms."

He pointed to a long rifle and an ancient curved cutlass which the Mexican had slung over his arm and Monk nodded and went on with his meal; but his steady gray eyes returned often to the doorway, though he seemed to be listening to the story.

"This man," went on De Vega, "has been in sixty or eighty battles, in many of which he was wounded. That eye which he has lost was shot out by an arrow when we were besieged by over two thousand Navajos, and when he was only eleven years old he killed three Apache warriors that had crept inside the gate."

"What—here?" exclaimed Monk incredulously.

"Oh, no; in San Lazaro, where we lived when we were boys. My father was in command of the garrison at that place. But when the Navajos were conquered we moved to Indian Lake—the Apaches were very bad then. Counting all together I have lost over a hundred relatives in these fights and raids back and forth. For two hundred years my people have fought the Indians until only a few De Vegas are left. I have lost five uncles and three brothers, besides my mother"—he crossed himself—"but now perhaps there will be peace. Geronimo and the Apaches are gone."

"Yes—a good thing!" spoke up the Texan, suddenly finding his tongue. "It will open up the country for settlers. I noticed your cattle look fine."

"Yes, my cattle look fine—now," returned De Vega. And he sat back in somber silence.

"Well, I've got to be going," said Monk, rising ponderously, and De Vega sprang to his feet.

"You have forgot the wine, my friend!" he cried. "Pancha! *Andale! El vino!* Just sit down—I will get it myself!"

He hurried to a sideboard and came back with two glasses which he filled with a sweet red wine.

"Here's to your health, my friend!" he said, and held his glass in the air.

"Here's how!" returned the Texan and smacked his lips as he tasted it. "That's good," he pronounced; "that's fine!"

"Is it not, now?" beamed De Vega, pouring out two more glasses. "Is it not a true wine? I have an old friend in Albuquerque—Don Cipriano Armijo—who makes it especially for me. Your health, my good friend. *Salud!*"

He tossed off the second glass and promptly poured out a third but Monk held up his hand.

"That's coming too fast for me," he grinned. "Well, just this one and I'll have to go."

"I will order your horse," said De Vega as they stepped out the gate and stood in the blinding sun. "But while you are waiting I must show you my store, where I trade back and forth with the Indians."

He led the way across the road to where a group of bold-faced Navajos were gathered about the door of a squat adobe, and a few paces behind them Porfirio followed, bearing the rifle and sword of his master. Monk glanced up the road, where his trail herd was now in sight, and reluctantly followed his host. Behind counters, built breast high to ward off thieving hands and a possible hostile rush, two clerks were busily engaged spreading out bolts of rich cloth and measuring out coffee and sugar. Navajo men in gorgeous tunics of velvet and velours, white *pantalones* and buckskin leggings and moccasins, stood about in statuesque poses while they purchased still more bright-hued finery. Ponderous necklaces of beaten silver were suspended from their necks, along with strings of polished turquoise and coral; bandoliers, studded with conchas, hung over their shoulders; and belts and bracelets revealed such a wealth of precious metal that the myth of the "Gran Quivira" seemed real.

As De Vega entered they stood immobile, scarcely shifting their eyes, but when the time which their etiquette demanded had elapsed they approached and gravely shook hands. He spoke to them in Navajo, with a word for every man and gay smiles for the round-eyed children, and then the other Navajos from the outside strode in and added their salutations to the rest. Some men asked him favors, which he granted or refused without the least change of countenance; and the Indians in their turn accepted his decisions unmoved, after the stoic custom of their race. Indian women looked on shyly, their new-woven blankets at their feet, and as Monk passed by he spied one blanket in a pile that made him stop and stare. Broad bars of black and white extended its full length; and across the wide center, as the emblem of a chief, there was a diamond in red and blue. And the finespun wool had a soft, silky luster that comes only from long years of use.

"By George, that's a fine blanket!" he exclaimed. "I wonder how much she wants for it."

De Vega turned to the woman and spoke rapidly in Navajo, then picked up the blanket and handed it to him.

"This is a present from me," he said.

"Oh, no, no!" protested Monk. "I don't want you to give it to me! Just ask her what it is and I'll pay for it."

"She had sold it to the store," explained Don Lorenzo magnificently. "I am glad, my friend, that you like it."

"It certainly is wonderful," stuttered Monk. "But say, I can't let you pay for it. That's an awful expensive blanket if I'm any judge of Navajos, and I've seen quite a few back in Texas——"

"Tie it on the gentleman's saddle!" said De Vega to a boy, and Monk followed him with muttered apologies.

"Please don't mention it, my friend," broke in Don Lorenzo with a smile. "It is a custom of the country, with us. I am very glad you were able to find something which pleased you in this poor place of mine."

"Well, it's sure mighty clevah of you," mumbled the Texan contritely, and turned once more to look for his herd.

It was moving faster now as the steers, smelling water, broke into a lumbering trot; and almost in a panic Monk remembered the business which had sent him ahead of his cattle.

"Mr. De Vega," he began as they stood beside his horse, "I came up here to ask you a favor. I know it don't look good, all these cattle coming in, but I don't aim to do you any damage. That's my herd of cows that's coming down the road—any objections if we water at your lake?"

"None at all!" bowed Don Lorenzo; "the water is free for all. But of course, Mr. Monk, you will tell your men to be careful and not mix your cattle with mine."

"That's something I always do," responded the Texan soberly, "and I thank you a thousand times for your favors. Anything I can do for you, don't hesitate to mention it. I'll go a long ways for my friends."

He held out his hand and De Vega took it cordially.

"I hope we can be friends," he said.

"We will be," nodded Monk, stepping up on his horse and laying a caressing hand on the blanket. "I wasn't looking for such treatment, I swear. We've had a hard drag—all the way from Indian Territory, and right in the dead of winter. Got ordered out in ninety days by the president's proclamation and lost the bulk of my stuff in a blizzard. Four thousand head of cattle is all I've got left from twenty-two thousand and better. We was leasing, you know, from the Cheyennes and Arapahoes; but we wouldn't grease the paws of a bunch of squaw-men politicians and in ninety days we were broke. Well, I've got to start all over again so, hearing this country was open, I gathered up my cows and started west. I suppose you own the water, hereabouts?"

"Yes, the water is mine," returned De Vega, "both this lake and Punta de Agua, where the stream runs down from Dark Cañon. When the government surveyors came through, the Apaches were still dangerous, so I sent out my best men to guard them; and in return for that favor the chief drew up my papers and had them recorded.

Having lived here so long, I was given squatter's rights to a quarter section of land and this lake. All the rest of this big plain is public land, but of course there is no water."

"No, that's it," grumbled the Texan. "Lots of grass, but no water. What's the country like over west and south?"

"On the south there is water along the Tularosa River, but that is all taken by my people. When the surveyors came through they were living along the stream and the chief gave them the title to the land. To the west it is very dry, no water at all except from some very small springs; but in the White Mountains farther west, maybe a hundred miles from here, there is plenty of water and grass."

"This grass is good enough, right here," went on Monk, squinting his eyes and gazing off across the plains. "Never seen it better anywhere; but the country is bone dry—what's it like up north, along those hills?"

"That is a very good country," replied De Vega noncommittally, "but the water is all controlled by Montemayor, the sheep king, so you could not settle there."

"Oh, Montemayor!" exclaimed Monk. "Sure, I met him at Socorro, when we were waiting to ford the river. Seemed to be a nice fellow; told us all about this country. But I didn't know he owned any land. He was the man that sent us down here—but I'll swear, he certainly gave us a bum steer!"

"Bum steer—what you mean?" burst out De Vega with an oath, suddenly forgetting his precise and proper English. "You mean he tell you to come here?"

"Yes, and three other herds that were trailing along behind us. Said there wasn't any water farther north."

"He lied!" spat back De Vega. "There are the White Lakes, right on the trail, and only twenty-five miles from Magdalena. But here, on this road, it is forty miles to water; and beyond there is nothing—nothing!" He struck his fist into his hand and glared off across the plain, where the forefront of the herd was drawing near. "Ah, that Montemayor!" he cried; "that *cochino*—that son of a goat! For forty years he has not dared to enter this land, for fear the Indians would kill him. I have protected his poor herders a thousand times and now he plays me this trick. Just to save his own land he sends you off down here—and he calls himself my friend!"

He turned to Porfirio and the crowd of armed retainers who had gathered in the doorway to look on, and for a while the rattle of Spanish sounded like pistol shots in Monk's ears as he told them of Montemayor's treachery.

"Carai!" exclaimed Porfirio, spitting contemptuously in the dirt, and De Vega turned to the Texan.

"Who are these men," he asked, "that follow behind you? Did Montemayor send them too?"

"Every one of them!" declared Monk. "They're bringing ten thousand steers, besides my little bunch. It's been the worst dry drive since we crossed the Staked Plains; so you want to look out, when they come."

"You bet your boots I'll look out!" answered De Vega vindictively. "I have heard of these Texans, before. There are three brothers, no? And their name is Battles? What you think they try to do when they come through here?"

"Well, they might take a few of your cows if they got into the herd—I've had trouble with 'em that way myself. Or they might make up their minds to turn 'em loose and settle down here—if not them, then somebody else." The Texan paused and regarded him intently. "You're sure to have *some* neighbors," he went on hopefully; "mebby you'd like to talk business with me?"

"No, my friend," replied De Vega, a pent-up anger in his deep voice, "I don't want neighbors at all. This is my place, you understand; I took it away from the Indians and I put my cows in here first. If you Texans want to stop you will have to go on west. This water and this land are mine."

"Well, all right," agreed Monk; "I jest thought I'd mention it, because you and me could git along fine. These Battles boys are hostile and they've got a lot more cows—and there's a hundred thousand more behind them."

"What?" shrieked De Vega and, turning to his men, he burst into a torrent of Spanish.

"Que caramba!" exclaimed Porfirio, and spat again.

"What you come for?" demanded De Vega, glaring accusingly at the Texan. "Ain't they plenty of land in your country? What you want to come out here for and make my people so much trouble? We never *seen* a Texan before! We don't want to see any!"

"You'll see lots of 'em, right soon," responded Monk grimly, "because Texas is getting too small. And in the last few years there's barbed-wire fences everywhere—that's why they had to move. I was *forced* to come out here, but Si Battles and his crowd have been on the trail all their lives. Now the north trail is closed on account of the quarantine and, hearing about this country, the whole bunch has tuk up and moved."

"I don't like this at all," stated De Vega, and Monk leaned down and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Listen," he said, "I haven't got much money, but I've still got a herd of cows. I'll give you five hundred head for the right to water at your lake—or I'll move to this other place you spoke of."

"Punta de Agua? Dark Cañon? No, that is too close. I don't want no neighbors, at all. This is my range—understand? And another thing, my friend, this is not a good country for cows."

De Vega's voice lowered now and, his gust of anger having passed, he became suddenly friendly and confidential.

"Only because of this lake can I raise cattle," he said. "The climate is very dry. Sometimes it doesn't rain for two or three years—more than maybe to start a little grass. No, this country is for sheep which do not need to drink, perhaps for one month at a time; and then only a little drink, when the bushes they eat are bitter. But cattle must drink all the time. I know what I say because my people have lived here for more than two hundred years. We have an old saying which I have heard many times, and I know for myself it is true. A cow is like a buffalo, and cattle can only live where the buffalo lived before; but sheep are like the antelope which you see everywhere on this great plain—it is their nature to live where it is dry."

"Mebby so," grumbled the Texan, "but I've got to be going. That's my wagon, pulling in to the lake." He reined away reluctantly, for the country looked good to him, and then suddenly De Vega spoke up.

"Is that your race horse?" he asked as the remuda of saddle horses came trotting in, led by a white stallion that held every eye; and Monk nodded with an admiring grin.

"Yes. What do you think of him?" he asked. "We call him Golden Bridle."

"He seems a very good horse," responded De Vega politely, and the Texan glanced at him pityingly.

"That's the best horse in New Mexico," he said, and De Vega raised his eyebrows.

"You mean he can run?" he asked.

"Hell's bells! He can beat any horse in the country!" boasted Monk, and De Vega translated for the rest.

"Andale—vamos!" exclaimed Porfirio, with a gesture of contempt, and a rumble of laughter went up.

"What's the matter?" barked Monk; "don't they think he can run? Well you tell them hombres to bring out something better before they make any cracks."

"El Campeador!" shouted the Mexicans, as if divining his challenge, and a curly haired boy who had been standing by De Vega went off toward the corral on the run. Then as the Texan sat staring the boy came riding back on a *palomillo,* a horse even more beautiful than his own. Its body was cream colored, faintly dappled with deeper gold, its mane and tail silvery white, while its eyes glowed like amber in the sun. Never before in his life had Monk seen such slender legs nor a gait more indicative of speed but without a word he hauled out his pocketbook and slapped it against his leg.

"I'll bet you my last dollar Golden Bridle can beat him," he said, and De Vega looked up at him quickly.

"Mr. Monk," he said, "that is the best horse in New Mexico. He was raised by me and I have had to kill many Indians that have come and tried to steal him. Every man in this country knows my horse, El Campeador, which means 'the conqueror of conquerors——' "

"No difference!" broke in Monk, his deep-set eyes agleam, "I'm a poor man, right now, but I'll bet my last cent——"

"How much money have you got?" demanded De Vega.

"Well—not much," admitted the Texan, "but I'll tell you what I'll do—I'll bet a hundred steers against a hundred of yours he can beat him a quarter of a mile."

"I will take that bet," nodded De Vega; and, as his men set up a yell, the Texan turned on them defiantly.

"You want to bet?" he challenged, shaking his wallet at the dour Porfirio, but the man at arms shrugged his shoulders.

"*No tengo dinero,*" he said.

"Yes! Here!" clamored a voice and the curly haired, blue-eyed boy drew a couple of bills from his pocket.

"All right?" inquired Monk, glancing over at De Vega, and Don Lorenzo nodded his head.

"This is my son, Jaime," he said. "You may bet all you please with him and I will make up the balance. But, since you are my guest, I wish to warn you once more that——"

"Oh, ho!" laughed the Texan, his huge body shaking with mirth, "you don't know my horse, that's all. Why, that horse, Golden Bridle——"

"I'll bet you a thousand steers, instead of a hundred!" rapped out De Vega. "Or if you like, I'll match your whole herd."

"Oh, you will, eh?" returned Monk. "Well, I wouldn't go quite that far, because my horse has had a hard trip; but I'll tell you what I *will* do—I'll bet five hundred steers against the right to water at your lake—and if I don't win the race I move on."

Just for a moment De Vega hesitated, then he held out his hand and the Texan took it grimly.

"You're going to have a neighbor," he said.

CHAPTER II.

THE CONQUEROR OF CONQUERORS.

THE fort house of De Vega stood on a low bench close to the lake, a huge square of solid adobe with loopholed towers at the corners and a mud corral stuck to its side. Not two hundred feet below a great spring rose from the ground and the water from this, cupped in a valley between two hills, made a lake as round and precious as a pearl. From the mouth of a dark cañon in the mountains beyond the green tongue of Punta de Agua lapped down, but on the Journey of Death that led east across the plains there was no water for forty miles.

While the bets were being made in front of Su Casa, Monk's remuda came pelting in, spreading out like a fan as the horses rushed down to drink.

"Hey! Jason!" yelled Monk, jumping his horse out into the open and waving his hat at the wrangler, "don't let Golden Bridle drink—I've matched a race!"

"All right, sir!" answered the boy and, spurring into the remuda he cut the racing horse out. Then as Golden Bridle circled back he shook out a loop and snapped his rope over the horse's head.

"Good boy!" shouted the Texan and, as he rode away and left them, De Vega clapped his hands for his horse. A *mozo* fetched him instantly, saddled and bridled and ready to go, and with Jaime beside him on the curvetting Campeador, Don Lorenzo rode down to the lake. The INM chuck wagon, drawn by four lathered horses, came thundering in and pulled up near the spring; and as the long-haired, greasy cook came down over the wheel the New Mexicans stared at it curiously. It was a huge, cumbrous affair with water barrels on each side and a tall grub box set in behind; and the body of the wagon was loaded high with canvas bundles, the beds of the absent cowboys. Studiously ignoring his audience the cook unhooked his horses and tied them to the off wheels of the wagon. Then, throwing out some inch ropes and a bundle of iron rods, he proceeded skillfully to build a rope corral.

Snatching the ax from its straps against the side of the wagon he drove the rods into the ground in the form of a circle, beginning and ending at the wagon wheels. He threaded the heavy ropes through eyeholes in the stakes and tied them to the spokes of the wheels.

"Come on, kid!" he yelled and, as the Mexicans stood agape, the horse wrangler brought up the herd. Standing at the entrance of the corral with a loose rope for a wing the cook headed off the leaders, while the wrangler, still leading his race horse, drove them pell-mell into the pen. Then the loose end was brought across and fastened to a stake and the cook cocked his head and grinned.

"Don't reckon these hombres ever seen thet done," he said, but Golden Bridle now held every eye.

He was deep chested and tall, with a smoothly rounded rump and legs both sturdy and long; and except for his dark eyes and his great, flaring nostrils he was a beautiful, silky white.

"How's your leg, son?" asked Monk, drawing the horse wrangler to one side and looking him over anxiously. "D'ye think you'll be able to ride?"

"Surest thing!" laughed the boy. "Is this the caballo you've got him matched against?" And the Texan nodded solemnly.

"What you think of him?" he said at last.

"Looks like he could run," returned the wrangler.

"Listen, kid," began the cowman, whispering hoarsely in his ear. "I want you to win this, savvy? I've bet my last dollar and five hundred head of steers against the right to water at this lake. Never mind the steers—what I want is this water, before the rest of them rascals come up. What say? D'ye think you can do it?"

"I can try like hell!" answered the boy. "How far will we run—a quarter?"

"Quarter of a mile," nodded Monk, with a knowing grin. "Trust me, when I'm backing a 'Steel-dust.'"

"Yep, they're all quarter horses," observed the wrangler sagely. "Well, in that case, I reckon we'll win."

He turned with a sprightly air to inspect Campeador, and Jaime stuck out his chin.

"How much—you bet?" he demanded in broken English and the wrangler returned his leer.

"All I've got!" he said. "You want to bet, hombre? Well, put up or shut up—that's me!"

"How much you got?" asked De Vega. "My boy don't speak English but he'll cover your money, you bet."

"Ain't got no money," declared the horse wrangler recklessly. "But I'll bet my saddle and gun. Yes, and my bridle and spurs—they's nothing small about me. How much does he want on that hat?"

He gazed with frank approval at the high-peaked Mexican sombrero which Jaime had jammed down over his curls, and Jaime pointed laughingly at his. It was a flat-topped, broad-brimmed Stetson, with a dog collar around the band, and the wrangler snatched it off.

"I'll bet you even!" he challenged and De Vega smiled indulgently.

"Very well—he says 'Yes,'" he said. Then turning to Monk and leaving the boys to talk by signs, he asked: "Is this your son?"

"Hell, no!" exclaimed Monk, "I've never been married. No, he's jest a kid I picked up down on the Pecos, where they'd left him with a broken leg. It ain't knitted good yet, but I don't reckon he'll hurt it. Only there's one thing I'm going to ask—don't let 'em shoot any guns off at the start, because my horse is plumb gun-shy and might throw him."

"Oh, is he your jockey?" inquired De Vega, looking the boy over with new interest. "My son will ride Campeador."

"Yes, he's my rider," assented Monk, "and he's a good one, too. But he's honest—he won't play no tricks. I'm on the level myself and I expect others to be the same. What time will we have this race?"

"Well, your horse is tired now," began De Vega politely, "and he hasn't had water for some time——"

"Oh, yes, he has," broke in Monk, "you don't know that kid at all—he's been watering him out of them barrels. So as soon as we have some grub and my trail herd gits in I'm game to run you, any time."

"Very well," responded De Vega. "I suppose your cowboys would like to bet?"

"Every man of 'em!" stated the Texan grimly.

"Your horse must be very good, then; but El Campeador has never been beat——"

"Neither has mine, Mr. De Vega, and he won't be."

"Yet you must admit," smiled De Vega, "that one horse has got to lose—and why should it not be yours?"

"Well, there's no use talking," said Monk with a grin. "All I'll say is my boys will bet every rag they've got, and we'll sure be afoot if we lose. Have you ever seen a chuck wagon like this one before? Well, come over and watch the cook work."

He led the way to the wagon where the cook, after unloading, was hopping about like a jumping jack. From a rawhide swung under the wagon he dragged out some dry cedar sticks, picked up before they entered the plains, and with furious blows of the ax he soon had one broken up and a fire strung out against a log. Then, as he waited for coals to form, he laid his Dutch ovens against the blaze and mixed up the dough for his bread. He reached back into the grub box and brought out a can of lard which he poured into the bottom of a broad oven, and as the grease began to hiss he cut steaks from a quarter of beef and dropped them deftly in. The huge coffeepot was filled up and set over the fire to boil and, just as the biscuits went into the oven, the leaders of the herd trotted down to the lake and drank.

Others followed close behind them, low-ing and fighting with their long horns as they prodded their way out to drink; and soon in a long line they spread out along the shore, wading deeper to escape the pressure from behind. After their long drive across the plains, on the Journey of Death which was soon to be strewn with dry bones, they crowded out into the lake and stood almost submerged, soaking the water up through their hides. Then as their thirst was slaked and the cowboys moved them off they spread out over the plain to graze.

One by one the hard-faced punchers rode over to the wagon, throwing off their saddles by the rope corral and putting their jaded mounts inside. They walked stiffly, in high-heeled boots and broad, apronlike chaps, and as they came to the fire they glanced once at their guests and filled up their plates from the ovens. Then, sinking down cross-legged, they sipped their scalding coffee and ate in wolfish silence. Don Lorenzo looked them over and never in his life had he seen men more hardy and grim. Every one wore a pistol in his belt or chaps, and there was a gun slung on every saddle; but what he noticed most was the ironlike cast of countenance, the deep-set eyes and stubbly beards.

"Well, set up!" invited Monk, taking some tin plates from a box and offering them to his guests and, still marveling at their ways, Don Lorenzo and Jaime sat down on the ground with the rest.

"Your biscuits are good," said De Vega with the courtesy of his race and Monk nodded as he poured out some coffee; but the cook, after staring at him a minute, muttered an oath and turned to a friend.

"Don't reckon they've ever seen riz' biscuits before," he said, and the Texans glanced sidewise at De Vega.

"He's got a good hawse," observed one of them at last and a rumble passed through the crowd.

"Jest good enough to lose," spoke up another. "How's old Golden Bridle, kid—feelin' all right?"

"Fine as silk," responded the wrangler who was vigorously rubbing him down while he doled out water and grain. "You boys want to bet on this race?"

"By grab—yes!" chorused the cowboys and De Vega turned to Monk.

"I will cover all their bets," he said.

"All right, boys," spoke up Monk, "but being as accidents will happen, I don't reckon you'd better stake your guns. The fact is," he went on, "I done put up all my money, so there's nothing to buy 'em back with, if we lose. Same way with your saddles and rigging, but use your own judgment—I don't want to stand in your way."

"I put mine up," boasted the wrangler and the cook cackled shrilly.

"Never did have no sense," he railed.

"I will not bet, except for cash," interrupted De Vega hastily. "It might cause bad feeling—when you lose."

"Hear 'im talk," jeered the cook, suddenly taking the other side; and reaching down into his overalls he fetched out a long purse which he emptied into his hand. Others followed his example but their stock of money was small and, grumbling sulkily, they rode out to the herd. Now that the cattle had all drunk their fill at the lake they were thrown off the water and turned out to graze while preparations for the race went on.

First the distance was paced off on the smooth road past the house, which they now saw was a well-laid-out race course; then, as the Navajos gathered about, the Texans mixed among them, betting their saddles and guns on their running horse. By signs and reckoning fingers the value of each article was established, every finger flashed up meaning a dollar in trade; and soon along the track the cowboys and Navajos stood in pairs with their pile of plunder between them. Against the saddles and chaps of the reckless Texans the Indians put up blankets and silver, stripping off necklaces and richly mounted belts without a qualm; but the faith of Monk's cowboys remained unshaken through it all and they greeted their champion with a yell of enthusiasm.

Stripped down to his riding tights and with a light pad on Golden Bridle, the horse wrangler, grinning confidently, rode up and down the course to acquaint his mount with the track. At times he shouted to the Texans to remove sticks and tiny rocks; but on account of his broken leg, which was still in splints, he rode with both feet out of the stirrups. And now Jaime came out, stripped down to a G string and with his knees thrust under a surcingle.

"Santiago!" he shouted and at that war cry of the Spaniards El Campeador was off like a shot.

"By grab—he *can* run!" complained

Monk and the Mexicans whooped with delight.

They had been kept inside the gate by the order of their *jefe* but the flat roofs and towers were swarming with men while the balcony along the front of the second floor revealed the half-hidden faces of the ladies. For, though he welcomed every stranger, the wife and daughters of De Vega were carefully secluded behind the lattice of their portico. It was the Spanish custom that had descended from his ancestors.

"Viva El Campeador!" cried a shrill voice from the balcony and Jaime looked up and smiled. The two riders came together and rode up toward the scratch where the starters were waiting impatiently, and as they passed the iron-barred gallery an eager hand was thrust out and the wrangler impudently waved back.

"Not for you!" laughed Jaime, giving him a playful push. "Tha's my seester—she say, 'Good luck'—to me!"

"Ump-um!" grinned the wrangler and turning on his horse he bowed and touched his heart.

"A-ah, don't git so smart!" sneered a harsh voice from the crowd and the wrangler whirled like a flash. Among the grinning Texans who stood along the track there was only one face with a hostile glare—a face crude and bearded, with high cheek bones and slanting eyes—and a nose as flat and broad as an ape's. It was the face of "Cub" Battles, who had ridden up during the excitement, and the wrangler glared back defiantly.

"Go chase yourself!" he cried and as he trotted up the track Battles rode vindictively after him.

"Who's the boss here?" he demanded, spurring up to the start where De Vega and Monk were conferring. "I want to warn you, Mr. Mex, they're ringing a race hawse in on you, so you'd better look out how you bet."

"That is all right, my friend," bowed De Vega.

"Oh, you think you can win, hey?" mocked Battles; "well, that's what makes hawse races, they say. A difference of opinion—but at the same time, mister, you want to look out for that jock'. He's crooked and I know it—used to work for me, but I fired him—and you watch him or he'll shore do you dirt."

"Many thanks—I will watch him," returned De Vega. "And now shall we begin?" he asked Monk.

"Suits me," answered Monk, "but who's going to judge the finish? We don't want to have any dispute."

"We will both go," suggested De Vega, "and let the boys start themselves. They can wheel at the drop of a hat."

"No, make it a pistol shot—I'll start 'em," volunteered Battles and Monk started toward him with an oath.

"You keep out of this!" he warned and Battles bristled.

"This is a free country, ain't it?" he asked.

"You'll soon find out," answered Monk, "if you don't mind your own business. And no shooting goes—understand?"

"I'll snap a cap at you if you give me any more lip," threatened Battles with a savage snarl but as the Texan met his eyes he backed off. "Well, go ahead and rob 'em," he said.

"I am satisfied," announced De Vega in the precise English he habitually spoke and Monk grunted and rode off down the course.

Now as they saw the track before them and the expectant crowd on every side, El Campeador and Golden Bridle began to fight their heads and rear, trying vainly to break into a run; but the jockeys reined them back and as they rode down to the scratch the horse wrangler hooked his feet into the stirrups. His face set as he approached the mark and turned his horse on the line; and Jaime, holding a switch, rode evenly beside him, the two horses turning like one. Then, just as they faced back, the hat dropped to the ground and they whirled in their tracks and were off. But at the first mighty bound El Campeador took the lead and the Mexicans set up a shout.

They went thundering down the track with Campeador still in the lead by the length of that first agile jump and, with his switch out behind playing a tattoo, Jaime leaned forward and went flashing past the house.

"Santiago!" he cried and the Mexicans echoed the ancient battle cry to which the Spaniards drove the Moors from Spain. But as the race was almost run the crouching Texan raised his whip and smote his horse once across the hip. In an instant he was up in front, fighting neck and neck with the Conqueror of Conquerors; and at the second blow of the whip he leaped a length

ahead and held it till he crossed the line. Then, fighting against the bit, he went bounding down the road while the Texans set up a cheer. El Campeador followed behind him, struggling desperately to take the lead, but Jaime jerked him back in a pet and the Mexicans on the housetops were still. The Conqueror of Conquerors was vanquished at last and the Texans were collecting their bets.

CHAPTER III.

A FREE COUNTRY.

AS he rose in his stirrups to see the finish of the race Lorenzo de Vega had his head thrown far back and his fighting nose upraised like a beak. It was one nose among a thousand, curved in the lines of an ellipse like the crescent of the moon, and as he gazed past its hook there was a battle light in his black eyes and the rage of despair in his heart. For he had bet more than he had; and wagered that which, if he gave it, would make him less than master of Su Casa. He had staked his right to Indian Lake, and lost it; and worst of all, to a Texan! He sank back in his saddle and for the moment all went black, for El Campeador had lost.

"Well—we win, eh?" observed a voice at his side and De Vega turned savagely on Monk. Once more the fighting nose was raised like an eagle's beak but at sight of the mild smile on the Texan's broad countenance he checked himself and said nothing. After all, Monk's horse had won.

"Hard luck," went on Monk, "but as you said a while ago, one horse jest naturally had to lose. You don't need to mind about the money."

"What money?" demanded De Vega arrogantly.

"Well, the money that your boy put up against my pocketbook. All I wanted was the water right—and I got it."

"Yes—you got it," answered De Vega, after a silence.

"Jest make me out a paper——" began Monk; and for a third time the fighting beak went up.

"I give you my word, as a gentleman," De Vega said. "But I don't sign no papers —no, sir!"

"Oh, that's all right," soothed Monk, "I hope you're satisfied about the race. It was run fair and square, and all that?"

"Yes, it was run fair and square!" burst out De Vega angrily. *"Por el diablo!* I'm going to kill that horse!"

He reached for his knife as El Campeador came galloping back, champing his bit and almost out of control, but the calm voice of the Texan halted him.

"Better not. I'll buy him," he said.

"Well, what'd I tell ye?" grated another voice in Lorenzo's ear, and he turned to see Cub Battles grinning at him. "Didn't I tell you they was ringing in a race horse on you?" he demanded. "How much did you have up on it, anyhow?"

"I bet him five hundred steers against the right to water at his lake," answered Monk as De Vega only glared. "And there was a little side money, to boot."

"Five hundred steers!" yelled Battles. "What? For watering at that lake? By grab, I'll git it for nothing!"

"I mean permanently," corrected Monk, and Battles stared.

"Well, so do I," he said. "Why not?"

"Because he holds the land all around the lake with a regular, U. S. patent. He could fence it and keep us all out."

"Not me!" bellowed Battles shaking his head like a charging bull; "I've come here to water, and I'll water. This is a free country, ain't it? I ask permission of nobody, let alone a dad-burned greaser!"

He faced the Spaniard defiantly, for De Vega, at the epithet, had clutched his knife; but after an instant De Vega withdrew his hand—for the Texan was waiting to kill him.

"That is all right," he said at last, his narrowed eyes burning wickedly, "the water is free for all. I welcome all men, no matter how vicious and ignorant, but after you have watered and rested your cattle I shall expect you to drive them on."

"Go ahead and expect," jeered Battles and turned to follow the crowd.

With one accord they were returning to the house in the wake of the two prancing horses, Monk's cowboys grinning with triumph and loaded down with Navajo trophies, from necklaces to silver-mounted bridles. In the lead rode Jaime on the unruly Campeador, who seemed to smart under his unaccustomed defeat; and close behind him followed the horse wrangler, his injured leg free of the stirrup again, but riding his spirited mount like a centaur. On his head he wore two hats, the first fruit of his victory, the gorgeous sombrero of Jaime, and his own on top of it, and he was grinning from ear to ear.

"Here, amigo!" he said, reining in beside Jaime and clapping his Texan hat over his curls, "take that and don't look so sorry." He slapped him on the back and after a moment of angry silence Jaime relented and allowed the hat to remain.

"Aw—here!" burst out the wrangler, passing over the Mexican sombrero, "take your danged old hat—I don't want it. Take 'em both, dog-gone it, if it'll make you feel any better——"

"No, no!" exclaimed Jaime indignantly. Then, bursting into a laugh, he put the Texas hat on his own head and passed back the high-topped sombrero.

"Muchas gracias," he said, "me Texano, now—no?"

"Sure, and I'm a Mexican!" grinned the wrangler. *"Buenas tardes, señorita,"* he bowed, taking off his sombrero to the latticed balcony, and at that moment Cub Battles rode up.

"At it again, eh, you danged smart Aleck?" he snarled and, whipping out his pistol, he fired it off under Golden Bridle's belly. For a desperate moment the wrangler clung to his reins as his horse reared and leaped aside and then, dropping his plunder, he straightened himself in mid-air and dropped like a plummet to the ground. But when he landed there was a crack, and as his bandaged leg doubled under him he toppled and fell flat in the dust. Golden Bridle bolted like a shot and rushed off across the plain, pursued by a dozen riders; and as the crowd surged in the horse wrangler sat up, holding his leg and cursing Cub Battles.

He was a slow-moving man and, seeing the mischief he had done, he sat dumfounded on his horse; but when he heard the curses that were being heaped upon him he was stung to a new vindictiveness.

"Shet yore mouth," he yapped back, "or I'll git down and do it for you. I jest broke yore leg this time, but if you keep on giving off haid I'll jump down and break yore danged neck."

"You wait till I get my leg fixed and I'll kill you!" cried the wrangler; "you don't dare pick on a man!"

"Here, you git away from here!" ordered Monk, riding grimly in on Battles. "Git away and keep a-going—understand? You've got no business picking on this boy the way you have. You heard what I said—now git!"

He made at him so threateningly that the burly Texan slunk away and Monk turned to the boy on the ground.

"Break your leg again, kid?" he asked, dropping down and stripping the splints off. "I wouldn't have had this happen for anything. What the devil has come over that pot-licking hound? What's made him so ringy, all at once?"

"Oh, he's sore about that water right you just won off of this outfit and he's taking it out on me. Don't dare to fight a man or anybody his own size——"

"There, there, kid," soothed the cowman, "don't cuss so."

"Yes, but the ornery whelp went and broke my leg before," wailed the boy as he tried to get up. "And now," he burst out, "I can't go on with you—there ain't any room on the wagon."

"Well, we'll make room," promised Monk but as they were picking the boy up De Vega stepped in and stopped them. His fit of anger was over and he was his old, courteous self—the owner of Su Casa still.

"Leave the boy with me," he said, "and he shall have the best of care. I have an old nurse who can set his leg just right—but we must hurry before it swells."

"Oh, I wouldn't want to trouble you," began Monk half heartedly, but without more demur he helped carry the boy inside where he was laid on a clean, white bed. Women and servants rushed in and out, bringing towels and hot water, and soon with an agonizing yank the bones were snapped back and held in place by splints made from yucca. Then as old Tia, the nurse, beckoned them all to go away, De Vega and Monk went out together.

"It's an old grudge," explained the Texan as they stepped out the door and stood in the busy patio. "This kid comes from good people but these Battles boys got hold of him and tried to make him a regular tough. They broke his leg for him, down on the Pecos, by tailing his horse or something, and went off and left him, dead broke; but when I came along and picked him up for a wrangler, seems like they wanted him back. But he won't work for nobody, for a spell."

"Have no fear," said De Vega, "I will take the best of care of him—but now let us go up on the roof."

He led the way up an outside stairway to the flat roof of the house, which was protected by a loopholed wall; and, climbing up into the square tower that stood at the corner, he looked out over the plain.

"There are three herds of cattle," he said, half to himself, "all coming to drink at my lake—or shall we say 'our lake,' my friend?"

"No, your lake," corrected Monk. "I don't ask for no title—jest the right to water my stock."

"And these men—what of them?" inquired De Vega.

"They're a hard outfit," admitted Monk, "but old Si ain't so bad. It's this coyote, Cub, and Lee, the youngest boy—we're due to have trouble, I expect."

"What kind of trouble, Mr. Monk?"

"Well, trouble over the water. They're a hard bunch to turn and I don't look for them to move at all."

"I will move them," returned De Vega confidently.

"If you need any help——" began Monk, but De Vega held up his hand.

"I know just how to handle that kind of men," he said. "I will need no assistance whatever."

"There's one thing about them," cautioned Monk, "they're mean, but they stick together. If you whip Cub, you've got to whip Si and Lee—and they're dead-hard games, every one of them."

"I will remember what you say," promised De Vega. Then, his voice suddenly breaking, he thrust his nose in Monk's face and his eyes were like a maniac's.

"Did you hear what he called me?" he demanded.

"No—what?" answered Monk, taken aback.

"He called me a greaser!" hissed De Vega. "Me—a Spanish gentleman—a De Vega! My ancestors were knighted on the battlefields of Spain, they came here and conquered this country. Do you think I will let a dog of a Texan come by here and call me a greaser?"

"Well, no," responded Monk pacifically.

"But they shall water," went on De Vega, pacing restlessly to and fro. "They shall water and be welcomed in my house. That is the custom of my people, and all strangers are welcome—but we know how to deal with our enemies. My men are trained to fight, and they are ready to begin, but first we will let the cattle drink."

He muttered to himself as he gazed off across the flats to where the first herd was moving toward the lake.

"Gregorio!" he shouted and from the guardroom below a deep voice made reply; then a young man, big and active, with the fighting De Vega nose, came bounding up the stairs and saluted.

"That is my son," observed De Vega, after he had given him his orders. "Now you will see if we New Mexicans are vaqueros."

As he spoke there was a rush of armed men past the house and into the adobe corral, and with a deftness truly marvelous they caught and saddled their half-wild steeds and went galloping off toward the lake. Spreading out in a long line, the point of which still bored ahead, they gathered up their grazing cattle and, swinging back toward the south, pushed them up toward the mouth of Dark Cañon. Within the space of half an hour the plains were swept bare, except for Monk's close-held herd, and as the first of the Battles' cattle rushed pell-mell into the lake the vaqueros came dashing back. Every man came on the run, setting his horse up with a jerk as he wheeled and entered the corral gate, but the master of them all was the young Gregorio, who was mounted on a superb black horse.

"Your son is a good rider," observed Monk at last and De Vega nodded proudly.

"Yes, he is *muy jinete;* and I have five other sons as good. They were raised in the saddle and even Jaime, my youngest, has ridden on the trail of the Apaches. Then besides them I have two sons-in-law who live over on the Tularosa and all the men of my range. They live up in these mountains, on little ranches by the streams; and when I send the word they come. Many times in years past they have sent to me for aid, when the Indians were running off their stock; and with my fighting men behind me I have whipped the Apaches off—that is something they will never forget. So I ask you, my friend, why should I fear the Texans? Are these Battles boys better men than my sons?"

"No, I don't suppose they are," conceded Monk.

"Then why should I fear them?" demanded De Vega.

"Well, you don't," the Texan answered bluntly and De Vega laughed and nodded.

With the thunder of bellowing bulls and

the high mooing of cows a second herd of cattle came rushing in across the plains and hurled themselves into the lake. Packed ten deep along the shore and fighting savagely to horn their way through, the cattle pushed out until, barred from making a return, they took water and swam across. Reckless riders spurred in among them, cutting off bunches from the flanks and spreading them further along the shore, until as the third herd came in Su Casa itself was surrounded by a mass of milling steers. They were wild, gaunt creatures, long of leg and broad of horns; and conspicuous among the rest were the enormous white-faced bulls that had been brought along to breed up the herd. From his station in the watch tower De Vega looked down upon their backs and the first chill of fear entered his heart. Here was an enemy more dangerous than the Texans themselves, for they would feed off the grass for miles. If he allowed them to remain—and their owners had turned them loose—Indian Lake would no longer be his.

The three chuck wagons of the Battles boys had parked close beside the spring, almost within a stone's throw of Su Casa, and as evening came on and the cattle spread out to feed, the cooks served supper for all hands. There was drinking and loud laughter and at last with a whoop two Texans rode up to the house. They were young and smooth faced and better dressed than the rest; and the smaller one wore a huge hat, ornamented with the lone star of Texas, pulled down almost over his ears. De Vega glanced at them suspiciously as he stepped out the gate but the rule of his house was inexorable.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he bowed, "my poor house is at your service. Will you come in and have some refreshments?"

"Got anything to drink?" demanded the tall cowboy eagerly and when De Vega mentioned the wine he grinned.

"Come on, kid," he said, vaulting lightly to the ground and throwing his split reins in the dirt; and after a high-voiced giggling protest, his companion stepped off, revealing a flashy pair of small-sized boots.

"I am Lorenzo Bernal de Vega," announced their host after a formal pause, and the tall cowboy responded reluctantly.

"I'm Lee Battles," he said, "and this is my pardner." But he did not even offer his hand.

"Oh, I see," observed De Vega, "you are traveling together. Will you be pleased to enter my poor house?"

"Sure thing," answered Battles, "if you've got any wine. Them boys done drunk up all my whisky."

A shrill titter from his partner made De Vega start and stare again but he stepped back and bowed them in. Then, leading the way to the crowded dining room, he seated them near the head of the table, where his wife was pouring the coffee.

"Mi señora," he said, with a short nod toward his wife, *"el Señor Battles y compañero."* Then, glad indeed that his guests merely stared, he called for the cakes and sweet wine. All up and down the table the swarthy faces of the Mexicans were turned to observe these strange guests and, somewhat abashed, Lee Battles removed his hat.

"Take off your hat, kid," he nudged as the wine and cakes appeared, but his companion shook his head and giggled nervously. "Take off your hat!" repeated Battles, a broad grin on his face, and suddenly the Señora de Vega rose up.

"Go to your rooms," she said to her daughters in Spanish and fixed her angry eyes on her husband. There was a rapid interchange of Spanish, and as Battles tossed off his wine De Vega strode over and confronted him.

"Who is this person?" he demanded and, without waiting for an answer, he reached over and snatched off the hat. A mass of blond hair, which had been coiled up inside it, left no doubt that the person was a woman.

"Your wife?" inquired De Vega as she rose up and burst out laughing, and Battles scratched his head.

"Not quite," he said with a shameless smirk and the woman gave him a slap.

"You shut up," she said, "and git me back that hat. I didn't come in here to be insulted."

"Here is your hat," spoke up De Vega, "and please never come back. You have insulted my wife and daughters."

"Who has?" demanded Battles brazenly.

"You, sir!" cried De Vega, "by bringing in this shameless woman. Leave my house, before I forget myself."

"I'll go when I git good and ready," replied Battles, and swaggered out the gate with his woman.

"Cierra la puerta!" shouted De Vega in

a fury and the *portero*, sensing his rage, slammed the huge gates behind them and dropped the heavy bars into place.

"Dog of a Texan!" cursed De Vega and with his man at arms behind him he rushed up the stairway to the roof.

The two Texans were just mounting when he leaned over and glared down upon them, while the men around the wagons were looking on.

"There he is!" exclaimed Battles, "let's kick down his door for him!" And the woman backed up her horse. As his rump touched the gate she pricked him viciously with the spurs and, as if trained for such work, he let fly with both heels, hitting the gate a resounding whack.

"Yeee—hooo!" cheered the Texans, running to catch up their mounts; and as blow after blow awoke the echoes of Su Casa they rode up to join in the merriment.

"Give 'em hell, kid!" they bantered, halting their horses in a row and cheering on the spurring woman; but as Lorenzo de Vega posted his men along the roof Si Battles, the oldest brother, rode up.

"That'll do, boys," he said. "They might misunderstand you and think you was trying to act rough. Lee, you dad-burned limb, quit that laughing and git her out of that! What d'ye think you're trying to do—start a war?"

"They done insulted me!" proclaimed Lee. "Slammed the door in my face, the low-down, ornery greasers!"

"Well, you go back to the wagon," ordered Si, "before I take down my rope and tan your hide. Git out of hyer, now, every one of you!"

He shook out a loop from the throw rope on his saddle and rode in, half laughing as he flourished it, and, with a playful whoop, Lee caught the woman's rein and spurred away at a gallop.

"They don't mean nothing," grinned Si, waving a negligent hand at De Vega who was standing with his men on the roof. "I'll be up and see you in the morning."

"You leave here!" commanded De Vega. "I don't want to see you! Water your cows and leave—in the morning!"

"I'll leave when I git good and ready," retorted Battles. "Or I might change my mind and stay a while."

"Then you will change your mind again," answered De Vega but the Texan rode off laughing.

CHAPTER IV.

CONCERNING THE NATURE OF TEXANS

It was daylight the next morning when Lorenzo de Vega strode out on his flat roof and looked down. By their wagons just below him the Texans were still sleeping, each man in his canvas-covered bed; but the cooks were up and busy and out across the flat the night herders were bringing in the horses.

"Hijos del diablo!" he muttered between his teeth and Porfirio joined in the curse. He was standing behind his master, a heavy buffalo gun across his arm, the ancient cutlass of the De Vegas slung below it; and about his own belt there was a pair of huge horse pistols, with a long throwing knife in his boot. Nor was De Vega stripped down as on the day before when he had gone out to welcome his guests. He too wore two pistols and in the hollow of his arm he bore an old-fashioned Sharps repeating rifle.

"They are late," observed De Vega at last.

"This will wake them," suggested Porfirio, tapping his gun.

"No! No killing," reproved De Vega. "I have talked with my father and he has informed me concerning the nature of the Texans. Most gringos think of money but the Texans think of cows—they value them more than their lives. Many years ago my father went to fight the Comanches in the country where these Texans come from, and he found them living in wagons, which were drawn by oxen, and killing all the buffalo for their hides. But when he went again he found them living in houses, and in place of the buffaloes they had cows. Now the grass is all gone and they have come to take our country, but we still have an arrow to our bow."

"We might kill the three brothers," hinted Porfirio; "then the others would become frightened and go."

"No! No killing!" repeated De Vega. "These are not Indians, hombre, they are the first of many gringos who will come crowding in upon us. We did not think, *amigo mio,* when we joined with the soldiers and chased the last Apaches into Mexico; we did not stop to consider that, when this country was made safe, the gringos would come in and take it. These men we see here are the first of many thousands who will come with their cows to our plains.

But when the sun is an hour high you will see these men, at least, all in flight and driving their cattle before them."

"Quién sabe," shrugged Porfirio, grinning doubtfully. "You say we will not kill a man?"

"Not a man!" warned De Vega, "or they will stay here and fight us, for I tell you they think nothing of their lives. But I talked with my old father and he told me for a certainty they value nothing in the world like their cows."

"Que barbaros!" muttered Porfirio scornfully, and looked out over the level plain. For miles, far and near, the cattle were coming in, strung out along the cow trails to the lake. But the herd of Monk was close held against the hills to the west, and their own cattle were pushed up Dark Cañon.

"We will let them all drink," said De Vega.

The sun was an hour high when, with Porfirio behind him, he showed himself in the watch tower; and now in contented groups the cattle stood all about, chewing their cud before they plodded back to feed. By their wagons the gaunt Texans were sprawled in slothful ease, resting up after the long drive across the plains; and when they saw De Vega with the cutlass on his hip they cocked their heads inquiringly.

"Camastamos!" hailed Si Battles in bastard Spanish.

"Good morning, sir!" returned De Vega. "I see your cattle have all watered, so now I must ask you to go. I have cattle of my own and they cannot use this lake until your own herds have gone."

"No-o hurry," drawled the Texan insolently.

"Very well, sir," replied De Vega, "I have given you fair warning. Gregorio!" he shouted down behind.

"Que manda?" his son responded promptly.

"Bring the horses from the corral and put them into the patio—then close the gates and stand ready."

"Al momento!" replied Gregorio and with his young men behind him he trotted out into the corral. Instantly the air was full of ropes as each caught his favorite mount and led him out to be bridled and when the last was ready they leaped into the saddle and rushed into the patio.

"Cierra la puerta!" ordered Gregorio and as the great gates slammed shut De Vega stepped out and raised his gun. Then as the Texans sat staring the heavy rifle spoke out and a huge bull sank to his knees. It was one of the broad-backed Herefords that they had brought to breed up their herds and as they leaped up the rifle spoke again. Another bull went down and, seeing their cattle being slaughtered, the Texans rushed for their guns. But when they looked up the roof was lined with armed men, crouching down behind the loopholed wall. It was Gregorio and his retainers waiting to shoot.

"Hyer! Wait a minute! Wait!" shouted Si Battles in a frenzy as he beheld his blooded bulls going down; but like the beat of a slow drum the old buffalo gun went on and on and at every shot a bull lurched and fell. And Lorenzo de Vega had now knelt behind a loophole, leaving nothing at which to shoot.

"Jest wait!" pleaded Battles, riding halfway to the house and holding up his hand for peace; but as fast as he could fire and Porfirio could load, De Vega shot into the herd. The cattle were running now, stampeded by the slaughter and the smell of flowing blood; and with a despairing curse Si Battles raced back and ordered his cowboys out.

"Git 'em out of hyer! Git!" he yelled to his startled men and though the bullets were flying past them they mounted and spurred away, driving the stampeded cattle out of range.

"Don't shoot!" screamed Battles, riding back for a last appeal; but the big gun still kept on like the drums of doom and each shot brought down a bull.

"I'll kill that damned greaser!" Battles wailed again and again; but when the last of his herd was out of range he kept on across the plains to the north. At the wagons by the lake the cooks and wranglers sprang into action, throwing the harness onto the work horses and heaving in pots and kettles before they hooked up and fled. In a few minutes the plain was empty, except for the huge carcasses of what had once been the pride of the herd.

"You see?" said De Vega, turning triumphantly to Porfirio. "The sun is an hour high and the Texanos have all gone. And besides that we have plenty of beef."

He shouted down into the patio and men and women streamed out the gate; and when Monk, after a long wait, finally rode up to the house they were swarming like ants about the kill. Even the Navajos, who during the shooting had disappeared into the hills, had returned for their share of the beef, and around every carcass Monk could see the flash of knives as they cut off the flesh in long strips. Already the lariats were strung along the roof to receive the slices of jerked beef and on a bull hide inside the gate the women were salting down and rubbing in pepper and herbs. Ancient carretas, resurrected from the old corral, squeaked and groaned with the weight of more meat; and the vaqueros were pegging out the biggest of the bull skins to cut into strings for reatas. It was like an Indian village, when the buffalo still roamed the plains and the warriors had made their kill; but when Monk beheld the hides of the imported Hereford bulls he shook his head and sighed.

"Good morning, my friend!" shouted De Vega from the watch tower, and the Texan glanced up at him grimly.

"Who killed all those bulls?" he asked in a shocked voice.

"I did," answered De Vega, smiling.

"Yes, but my God, man!" protested Monk, "those are thoroughbred Herefords—worth five hundred dollars apiece, back in Texas!"

"They should keep them back in Texas, then," suggested De Vega, "instead of trying to steal my land."

"Yes, sure," agreed Monk, "but them bulls were worth money—how many do you reckon you killed?"

"I don't know, my friend, but I killed all I could. Wouldn't you like to have some beef?"

"Hell—no!" grumbled Monk. "Wouldn't set right on my stomach. Well, I reckon I've lost my welcome—but what about that boy of mine you've got?"

"He is being well cared for," replied De Vega, "but his bones will not knit for a month."

"That's it," complained Monk, "I don't like to go off and leave him, and at the same time——"

"You are welcome to stay, sir," broke in De Vega.

"What, and water at your lake?" cried Monk.

"Certainly, yes!" responded De Vega. "Didn't I give you my word yesterday? You can stay as long as you like. But these Battles boys became insolent and insulted my family; so I drove them away, as you see."

He pointed to the dust, rising up in long banners as the huge herd plodded on to the north, and Ike Monk scratched his head.

"Well, I didn't know," he mumbled; "thought maybe you'd changed your mind and called a feud on the whole State of Texas."

"No, my friend," answered De Vega, leaning down from the tower with his most engaging smile, "my house is still Su Casa. You are welcome to come in as often as you wish, and all your friends are welcome; but these other Texanos have had to have a lesson, because this lake and this water are mine."

"That's all right, then," returned Monk; "hope we don't have no trouble; but by grab, Mr. de Vega, it don't seem quite right, killing off them fine Hereford bulls!"

De Vega laughed silently and, running down the stairway, stepped out in front of his house.

"Come in, sir," he said, "and I will send back a vaquero to tell your men to bring up the cows. This lake is half yours, but I won't sign no papers, because that's something I don't understand. But come in and have some cakes and sweet wine."

He dispatched a boy to the distant herd and, seating his guest in the dining hall, called for Pancha to bring in the coffee. Then with the greatest good humor he sat down across the table and poured out two glasses of wine.

"Salud!" he said. And holding up his glass, the Texan responded to the toast.

"Here's how!" he rumbled, "and I hope, Mr. de Vega, you won't judge all Texans by *them!* They're good cowmen, none better, but jest a little too rough and ranicky to make what you'd call first-class neighbors. I didn't want 'em here, nohow, and I'm shore glad you run 'em off. But you'll hear from them later—about them bulls. They're fighting men, savvy? And of course you being a Mexican——"

"I am a Spaniard," corrected De Vega sharply.

"Yes, I know," nodded Monk, "but knowing the Battles as I do, I jest want to warn you to look out. They've had trouble all the way west, fighting and gambling and wrecking saloons; and back on the Pecos where they wintered their cattle they stood off the officers of the law. This woman of

Lee's backed her horse into a saloon and kicked the whole bar into kindling wood—seems like her horse has been trained to kick when you spur him—and they left that barroom a wreck. But when they tried to arrest Lee, old Si and Cub pulled their guns and stood the officers off. Then they've had a lot of trouble with the Mexicans along the trail, throwing their cows into the herd and such. So all together they're a pretty hard outfit—that's why I'm sorry you killed them bulls."

"It is lucky," responded De Vega, "that our trouble went no farther. For if I had had my pistol I should certainly have killed that man when he called me a greaser yesterday. That is a term of contempt and no true Mexican will endure it, much less a pure-blooded Castilian. My ancestors have been warriors for hundreds of years, being knighted for their services against the Moors; and when Mexico was discovered Lorenzo Bernal de Vega came over on the viceroy's ship. You might have noticed the cutlass which my man at arms bears—that was worn by my great-grandfather, on my mother's side, who was a captain in the Spanish navy; and the Esquipulo de Vega grant was given to another ancestor for his part in the Pueblo Rebellion.

"That was an uprising of the Indians against the first Spaniards who conquered them; but after a long and bloody war the Pueblos were subdued, my ancestor being second in command. Then my father, this old man that you have seen about my house, was given a Mexican grant at San Lazaro, farther north. All his life he fought the Navajos and Utes until now his body is covered with wounds. I was born at San Lazaro, where I went out against the Apaches when less than eleven years old. So you can see, my friend, that war is no new thing to me; nor is it to my *gente,* my people.

"We are not like those Mexicans that you meet along the river—they are cowardly and depend on us to protect them. They send out their sheep in the care of poor peons, who handle the herds on shares; but these rich men like Montemayor, who have made a fortune with sheep, they never risk their own lives. They always send out poor men who have been imprisoned for debt and have no choice but to do their master's will; and when they were attacked these herders fled to me and I protected them and brought back the sheep. That has been my work for years and this Rico Montemayor has made maybe a million dollars in his business. But if I had not been here his herds would have been destroyed or driven away by the Navajos. Yet now I am still poor, for while I am away my cattle do not get the proper care; while that big bag of wind, that huge tub of fat, he hides at Socorro and prospers.

"And now, Mr. Monk, you see how he rewards me—it was he who sent you down here! Yes, you and these other Texans, these bad, fighting Battles boys who would have taken my lake and my land. But you shall see how I repay him—I have had enough of words, and already my revenge is at hand. That is why, my friend, I am so happy this morning; for those three great herds are heading north across the plains and they will settle on Montemayor's water. Then you will see him coming here, with his tail between his legs, to beg me to save him from the Texans; but I will only laugh, because I know he sent you down here to save his own water and land."

De Vega stopped and laughed, pouring out a glass of wine and filling Monk's up to the brim.

"I will teach him," he went on, "which of us is the better man, for Montemayor is a coward! But me, I fear nothing—my father would kill me if I turned back from a hundred armed men. When I was a boy I went out to fight a Navajo who had dared any man to give him battle, and this is what my father said:

" 'Bring me back his hair,' he said, 'or I will kill you with this pistol.' And that was when I was eleven years old. Since then I have fought the Indians for nearly forty years until now my own sons are grown up. Do you think we are afraid of these Battles boys—these Texans? I could have killed them all, this morning. You know my man at arms is *muy matador* and when we came out on the roof this morning and saw them camped below us Porfirio wanted to kill them. They are not men trained to war or they would never camp so near my house, which you can see is also a fort. So I killed their bulls instead and now, as you see, they are heading for the trail to the north.

"That is the best trail, after all, for it leads on to Arizona where there is plenty of grass and water. Only a hundred miles to the west are the Sierra Blanca Mountains, which are covered with snow all summer, and in the valleys that lead down from them there is water at all times. But this country, as you see, is very dry. It is a country adapted to sheep, which can live on bitter brush; but a cow must always have grass. So I say it is for the best—and it would be better for you, too—but if you wish to remain I will make you an offer, which is to leave here and go up to Dark Cañon.

"That is the big cañon, very deep, which you see to the south, where I drove all my cattle yesterday; and if you like the place I will trade you the right to it in exchange for what you won yesterday. Will you go up and see it, my friend?"

He leaned across the table and Monk read in his eyes a menace as well as a pleading.

"Sure thing," he said. "Right now."

"Very well," responded De Vega. "I could not believe your horse would win or I would not have bet my water right for anything. But I thought—well, you know—I was sure my horse would win, so I did not care what I bet. That is my weakness, Mr. Monk, I will gamble on horse races. Many times my wife she scolds me; but if I can get back my lake I will be happy again—and your cattle can drink here, anyhow. But up in Dark Cañon there is plenty of water—you can see where it runs out at the mouth—and in all my life it has never gone dry, so I am not trying to cheat you, my friend. It may be I am foolish, trading a live horse for a dead one, because the Texans may take my lake, anyhow; yet this is my house, if I do call it Su Casa, and I want to have the lake to myself."

"I'll make the trade right now—if you'll give me a deed," proposed Monk, but De Vega shook his head stubbornly.

"No—no papers," he declared. "That is another great weakness of mine, and one time it cost me a fortune. I will give you my word, as a gentleman."

"Your word is good with me, but with these Texans it is different. I've got to prove title to my land—otherwise they will take it away from me."

"What—you mean they will drive you away?"

"Either that or there'll be a killing. I am a peaceable man, myself, and God knows I've had enough trouble."

"Oh, you mean with those Indians, when they took your land away and drove you out into the blizzard?"

"No, no!" exclaimed Monk with a weary smile, "you don't git the idee, at all. The Indians were my friends, but there were some squaw-men politicians that tried to make me grease their paws. When I refused, the President of the United States ordered me out in ninety days. That's why I want this deed."

"'Deed?'" repeated De Vega with a puzzled frown; "what kind of a paper is a deed? I never seen one, myself, but all the papers that they sent me I put away in a corn sack."

"You'd better get them recorded," warned Monk. "But a deed is just a paper saying you give this land to me—I mean what you've got in Dark Cañon."

"You know how to make one?" queried De Vega.

"Well—no," admitted Monk, "not in the regular form. But if you've got the papers that the land office sent you I reckon a quitclaim will do."

"And what is a quitclaim?" inquired De Vega.

"It's a piece of paper giving a description of the property and saying you have sold it to me—or at least that you don't claim it any more. You can write it out yourself, if you want to."

"Oh, is that all?" said De Vega. "Well, I think I can do that. Don't you take it to a lawyer at all? Because I'll tell you, Mr. Monk, I have had lots of trouble and I don't sign no more lawyer's papers! I don't trust lawyers."

"Nope, jest write it out yourself and get your wife and son to sign it, and give me that deed from the land office. I'll have it recorded next time I go to Socorro and I'd advise you to do the same with yours."

"Oh, 'recorded,'" burst out De Vega with a radiant smile; "I remember, that surveyor had it recorded. He was a good friend of mine and he fixed up all my papers, so I guess it will be all right. No?"

"Good enough," agreed Monk and when the papers had been made out he heaved a great sigh and rose up. "Well, Mr. de Vega," he said, "I've got to be going now; but I hope this is satisfactory to you. If it ain't, jest let me know and we'll talk it over again, because I always aim to do what's right. And if you'll take my advice you'll put a fence around that lake, before the next trail herds come in."

"No, my friend," smiled De Vega, "I thank you for your advice, but the water is free to all. That is the custom of my people—we make every one welcome—and I do not wish to change."

"All right," grumbled Monk, "it's your lake—suit yourself." And he went out with the deed in his fist.

CHAPTER V.

THE DOVE SONG.

ALL the morning the Mexicans swarmed in and out the gate, bringing in hides full of tallow, and beef to be dried on the ropes that now hung everywhere; and as they worked the blood-smeared men cut off dainty morsels of meat and ate them without going to the fire. On the mud stoves in the kitchen where the grease pots were all seething there were *chicharrones*, cracklings, for all; the dogs and long-nosed hogs, after numberless returns, now snuffed disdainfully at the leavings. There was laughter and gay singing, with a long *canción* reciting the defeat of the Texans; and after the work was done the courtyard was watered and swept clean, for that night there would be a grand baile. Then as midday came on they retired for their siesta, since the dance would keep them up all night.

The drone of women's voices in the kitchen grew fainter and a brooding quiet pervaded the patio. A pair of doves in separate cages set up a honey-sweet, incessant cooing and a mocking bird trilled from the balcony. Then, down the stairway that led from the rooms above, there came the patter of light feet and the horse wrangler looked out through the bars. All the morning he had lain by the guest-chamber window, gazing out from the cool darkness into the sun-struck patio and watching the Mexicans at their work; but now the busy courtyard was deserted and the footsteps on the stairway echoed loudly.

"Angelita!" called a voice from the doorway behind and for the first time Jason Coles beheld "Little Angel." She was a young girl, hardly grown, with a mass of curly black hair and a pleased smile wreathing her lips. At the call from above she answered:

"Sí, mamá!" and sped away across the empty court. The golden bobs in her ears seemed to dance in the sunlight, there was a twinkle to her dainty feet, running fast; and as the voice from above became insistent, she turned and glanced back impatiently. There was mischief in her eyes and the naughty smile had not vanished; but as she came to a lone rosebush, carefully fenced off in the corner, she answered sweetly:

"Sí, mamá!" Then, reaching far over, she plucked a single yellow rose and hid it behind her skirt as she danced back.

"Angelita!" scolded the voice and Jason saw the señora, gazing down from a cobalt-blue doorway. She was a big, commanding woman, dressed in silk and with a black mantilla which accentuated the nunlike whiteness of her face; and she, like her daughter, had curly black hair, held in place by a high Spanish comb.

"What?" pouted the girl, stopping dead in her tracks; and her mother burst forth in rapid Spanish.

"No!" cried Angelita but as her mother stamped her foot she laughed and started running toward the stairs. The señora smiled back and disappeared into the room and as she did so Angelita swerved aside and came to a halt just outside the barred guest-room window. For an instant she peered in, then her hand slipped through the bars and Jason caught the fragrance of a rose. Their eyes met in a swift challenge and as the rose fell on the coverlet he remembered who she was and smiled. Those were the two mischievous eyes which had looked down at him from the balcony when he had ridden forth to the horse race on Golden Bridle, and that was the slim hand that had waved through the lattice when he had ridden beside her brother, Jaime. It was to those eyes and that hand that he had raised his big sombrero when Cub Battles had caught him off his guard; and the next moment he had been down, crushed and crumpled in the dirt, with his leg twisted under him, broken. She was smiling and he smiled back, gayly. Then with a whirl she was gone and from the upstairs doorway a voice was calling: "Angelita!"

"Sí, mamita!" she answered breathlessly and with a bound went flying up the stairs.

The boy picked up the rose and gazed at it curiously, for the roses in his life had been few. The time before, when he had broken his leg down on the Pecos, he had convalesced in the back room of a saloon. He remembered a song, "The Yellow Rose of

Texas," but this was a yellow rose from Spain; and as he lay there in the silence he smiled at the thought of the darting, eager child who had brought it. She was a De Vega too, for though she had her mother's hair, her small, determined nose possessed the same crescentlike curve as her father's. And she held her head high, but more like a dancer than the daughter of a fighting don. Every move that she made had the darting quickness of a humming bird and the swift, radiant charm of a child. But she was not a child, or if so a very naughty one, for her mother guarded her closely. For an hour he lay watching, his eyes upon the stairway, until at last old Tia came shuffling through the doorway and threw up her hands in despair.

"Cuidado, señor—be careful!" she pleaded, drawing him back and straightening out his leg; and while she still muttered and examined the swollen limb an old man came and looked on, grinning. He was thin and bowed over, with a sparse white beard and hair that stood up straight and wiry; and as the nurse went out he stood by the bedside and gazed at the Texan fixedly. Then sitting down in a chair, he drew up his trousers leg and exposed a shrunken shank.

"Aqui!" he said, pointing to a scar across the shin, and made the motions of snapping off a bone. *"Y aqui!"* he went on, pointing to yet another scar and making a motion like a blow from a club. *"Muy malo!"* he warned, tapping the wrangler's bandaged leg, and made signs for him to lie still in bed. *"Mira!"* he exclaimed, stripping up his other leg and exposing the mark of another injury; and as the boy gazed in wonder he showed a body so laced with scars that it seemed a victim of some torture; but with each fresh wound he made the sign for arrow or bullet and murmured: *"Los Apaches! Los Indios!"*

"Muy bravo, usted!" ventured the wrangler in halting Spanish and the old man beamed and nodded.

"Si, si!" he said. *"Muy bravo—muy valiente!"* And his eyes took on a sudden glow of pride.

"Me—Esquipulo!" he proclaimed. *"Papá de Don Lorenzo. Mucho combates*—heap fight—kill Injuns!"

He struck a valiant posture and, talking half in the sign language and half in broken English and Spanish, began a detailed account of his battles; and as the horse wrangler listened, trying to get the gist of it, young Jaime came clanking through the doorway. He was sweaty and grimed from riding after the cattle, which had been driven back from Dark Cañon, and his spurs clanked and jingled on the floor; but his blue eyes were smiling and as he came to the bedside he nodded and held out his hand.

"How you feel?" he asked in English.

"No good!" answered Jason in Spanish.

"Your leg hurt?" inquired Jaime, still in English.

"Seguro que si!" responded Jason and the old man and Jaime laughed.

"You Espanish—eh?" bantered Jaime.

"Si, señor!" replied the wrangler and Jaime sat down on the bed while he took off his wide Texan hat.

"Me—Texano!" he explained and while they were laughing a shadow slipped in behind him. It was Angelita, listening.

"What your name?" demanded Jaime jovially. "How you say it—Yasone Col-es? My name Hy-may! This man, my gran'-father—Don Es-qwee-poo-lo!"

"My name—Ahn-hay-lee-tah!" added Angelita promptly, draping her arms about Jaime from behind, and the wrangler nodded gravely.

"Ahn-hay-lee-tah," he repeated; "Little Angel."

"No—no angel—her!" burst out Jaime, half angrily. "She ron away—all time!"

"Angelita!" cried the voice of the señora from the balcony, and Angelita stamped her foot. Then with the swiftness of a lizard she darted out through the back door and emerged from the entrance to the kitchen.

"Señora!" she answered and Jaime laughed indulgently.

"Muy viva," he said; "foxy—no?" But the wrangler only smiled. They did not know about the rose.

He kept it hid beneath his pillow and that evening he saw her again—at the baile.

First the servants came out and sprinkled the hard-trampled patio and swept it with bundles of switches. Then the music arrived, two guitars and a violin, a small harp and a big bass viol; and as the players mounted a small platform and began "La Golondrina" the women came out, bringing chairs. But not the slatternly women that, in lank skirts and towels for rebozos had assisted in jerking the bull meat! All the young ones were now in white, with bright-colored skirts of China silk, while the black-robed *dueñas,* though their dancing days were past, ventured the coquetry of scarfs and lace mantillas. Seated all in a row along one side of the patio they tapped their satin slippers and waited; and soon in twos and threes the men came strolling in, after a glass or two of wine with their host.

But these were not the grim-faced fighters who, in faded-blue shirts and trousers, had awaited the assault of the Texans. Now each face was gay and smiling beneath the shadows of huge sombreros, and slashed trousers and buckskin jackets were everywhere. The guns and pistols were gone but in their place were fringed serapes and huge spurs that clanked as they walked; and jackets and trousers alike were weighted down with silver—silver buckles, silver buttons, silver braid. In their high-heeled boots the swarthy paisanos sauntered forth with a swagger all their own; and behind them the *gente fina,* the blue bloods of the country, strode out in fine linen and silk. Every head was held high and white teeth were all agleam, for had they not vanquished the Texans?

As the host of Su Casa, Don Lorenzo was everywhere, shaking hands and embracing his dear friends; but the dance had begun before Jason's little angel came down with her mother and sisters. These last were both married and, as befitted their station, were more sedately dressed; but Angelita, as if bent on wholesale conquest, was gowned like a fairy princess. Jewels gleamed from her back comb and trembled from her ears, her skirt was of vermilion, silver flecked, the dainty whiteness of her bodice was embroidered with dark flowers that brought out the glory of her hair. And, outshining all her jewels, her black eyes flashed with mischief as they swept the ranks of the men.

Hardly had she taken her place at the side of her mother than the youths of the *gente fina* gathered about her, and while they paid their devoirs the señora eyed them sternly, which added fresh ardor to the wooing. But at last there came a man, no better looking than the rest but attired in a gorgeous *charro* suit, and it was into his arms that the scheming señora delivered her daughter as the music for the baile began. They set out together in a long, romping step, swinging about in sudden circles as they waltzed, and at the end Angelita knelt almost to the ground while he covered her with his gay serape.

"Give me a kiss!" shouted the swains, but from his couch by the window Jason Coles did not witness the kissing. The dancers whirled past him beneath the light of pine flares and the glow of rows of candles, and all he saw was the forms of men with flirtatious damsels in their arms. Sometimes to stately music they went through old, formal dances, handed down from the courts of Spain; but mostly they waltzed, sometimes fast, sometimes slow, and Angelita glanced toward him as she passed. Never before had he seemed so unfortunate and stricken, tied to his bed by a broken leg, and he fixed the heavy face of the young Spaniard in his mind, for she danced with no one but him. Who he was he could only guess—some young ranchman from the country who had ridden in to join the baile—but he seemed to Coles to have a low-browed, dullard look, though his costume was one to be admired.

Dark-blue trousers, buttoned tightly from the ankle to the hip, were clocked the whole length with silver braid; up the seam in double rows were silver buttons, and bells that tinkled to more bells on his hat. A buckskin jacket, cut short and spangled with gold braid, gave him a dashing, bullfighter look, and through it all he wore spurs with huge, five-inch rowels that slapped against the ground when he stamped. He was the most dashing of all the men, as Angelita was queen of the women, and at the shout from the crowd the patio was cleared and they stepped forth to dance the *jarabe tapatio.*

But first came the *danza,* to the music of "La Paloma," the dove song upon which it is based, and to the clacking of castanets and the tapping of many feet they paced out and faced each other, smiling. Then, while her partner held her hands and seemed to guide her through the measures, Angelita began the intricate dance. The music grew louder, more compelling and voluptuous, and swinging off by herself Angelita impersonated the dove. Pouting and strutting before her partner she seemed to dare him to catch her; while he, beating time, laughed and held out his hands as if seeking to entice her to his arms. But she evaded him and, as if flying, raised her scarf above her head, swaying gracefully as she leaped higher and higher; until at last, with a saucy flirt she fluttered back to earth, circling closer until she sank into his arms.

He laughed and held her close while the crowd clapped and cheered and then, as the orchestra struck up the stirring music of the *jarabe,* each dancer seized his partner and joined the rout. Standing face to face they beat time to the music, and the ladies led off the dance. Holding her rebozo now above her and now before her like a veil, each girl danced and swayed before her partner until, as a tribute to her charms, he succumbed and threw down his hat. Then, pacing about its broad brim with dainty feet, the girl simulated the coquetries of a dove; putting off the time when she must snatch it up from the ground and put it on her partner's head. One after the other the weary doves surrendered, placing the hat on the laughing owner's head; and at last in its shadows, as the music came to an end, they yielded their lips to be kissed. Angelita held off, but when she yielded to the *charro,* Jason Coles turned his face to the wall.

CHAPTER VI.

MONTEMAYOR.

THE dawn came, paling the candles and sending the dancers to their rest, but before he retired Don Lorenzo climbed to his watch tower and gazed out across the plains to the east. There was a mirage among the hills, purple peaks piled upon peaks, and the yellow grassland seemed sunk beneath a lake; but far to the east and north a haze of dust was in the air and De Vega threw back his head. Squinting past his hooked nose he discovered the source of the dust—a herd of cattle creeping forth from the pass that led in from the Rio Grande.

"Sons of the devil!" he cursed as he gnashed his teeth, and shouted over his shoulder for his spyglass. Porfirio brought it, his pock-marked face inflamed with drinking and his eyes almost sealed with sleep; but when he saw the wisp of dust against the portals of the dawn he shook himself together and muttered an oath.

"Caräi!" he complained, "will they never make an end? The Texanos are coming again."

"Yes, *amigo,"* smiled De Vega, "but this time they turn west—I can see them on the trail to White Lakes."

"Hola!" exulted Porfirio, "they have heard how we served those brothers who thought they could come here and rob us. Now let Rico Montemayor say his prayers to all the saints, for the Texans can no longer be fooled."

"Montemayor will pay," muttered Don Lorenzo vindictively and he laughed as he squinted through the glass.

All that day the line of dust bored on into the west until it halted on the shores of White Lakes, and the next day a second herd came out of the pass as the first moved on into the hills. A week passed, and two, and still the dust billowed up; but the grim watchers at Indian Lake saw no more of the Texans, for their trail took them far to the north. Passing the night at White Lakes the great herds plodded on until they disappeared in the western pass; and beyond that the way led through the range of Montemayor, where for years he had summer herded his sheep. There by lakes and hidden springs and along the lush bottom lands of mountain streams his sheep had always grazed after the lambing, but now the range was empty for his herds were still at the shearing in the lowlands along the Rio Grande. Not for a month would the herders come out to the cool uplands, and the Texans would not wait a day.

Pacing up and down the roof, De Vega scanned the north horizon, as in times past he had searched it for Apaches; and at last he lowered his glass and uttered a savage oath, for Rico Montemayor was coming. First he saw the top of his coach, an old army ambulance which he had covered with a gaudy canopy, and then the four mules, running fast; until with the cracking of whips and the shouting of outriders, the coach and four wheeled to a stop before the gate.

"You drive fast," observed De Vega as he stepped out to meet his enemy, and Montemayor choked with rage. He was a huge man, with broad shoulders and a tremendous paunch; and all his features, except his mouth, were half buried in rolls of fat, though his eyes were keen and flaming. He sat in the seat alone, overtowering the driver who plied his long whip astride a wheeler; and even the armed outriders, though they tried to carry it off, were obviously in terror of their master.

"Sons of goats!" he bellowed, glaring at them and the driver, "is that the best road you could find? Must I be shaken to a jelly because you take me across these plains as if the Apaches were upon us? *Malditos!* I should have you well whipped!"

"And are there no Apaches?" inquired De Vega.

"No, ni uno!" exclaimed Montemayor, "but these devils from Texas have come in and taken all my range! They have settled down at Quemado and taken my camp at Trincheros and so on from Punta de Malpais to Alamosa! They have turned loose a hundred thousand cattle to wander where they will, from Datil Pass north to the railroad; and not only that but they have seized all my watering places and claim that I have no right to them. Have not the Montemayors summered their sheep there for a lifetime, losing thousands and hundreds of thousands to the Indians? And now that we are free of the accursed Apaches must we lose all to these barbarous Texans? No, the time has come when all true New Mexicans must unite and hurl back the thieving gringos; because already, on their way home to bring out more cattle from Texas, they have stolen all our steers along the river. So I have come to you, Don Lorenzo de Vega, knowing full well your valor as a warrior. My neighbors and myself beg and entreat you, for the love of God, to call together your people and pursue them."

"That can wait," answered De Vega, "until they steal some of my steers; for if I followed after them now you might in my absence direct some more of these same Texans to my lake. Then I would return from my long chase to find my own water jumped, and Rico Montemayor waiting to laugh at me. No, fight your own battles and save your own steers, for I am tired of raking out your chestnuts. But lest you do not understand me I will say, straight from the teeth, that I know you are not my friend. When the first Texans came, in order to save your own range, you sent them off down here to my lake. I drove them away and remain none the worse for it, though I find no cause to thank *you.*"

"What do you mean—raking out my chestnuts?" demanded Montemayor in a fury. "Have I not loaned you good money a hundred times? Have I not seen you flinging it away like a drunken spendthrift, feeding every man that comes to your door? And it was you and none other that caused me this misfortune, for you directed the three Battles brothers to my range. They are the men who have jumped my stations and laid claim to all my water—and look what you have done with this Monk! You are a traitor to our people, for you have taken in a Texan and given him a half of your lake!"

"Nay, he won it," corrected De Vega, "in a horse race, fairly run, when I had thought to gain five hundred big steers. Is that not a stake worth risking half a lake for? But his horse was the better—so he won. Still I have found this Señor Monk very honorable in all his dealings, which is much to his credit, being a Texan, and since I must have some neighbors I have traded him Dark Cañon in order to get back my lake. So now here I stand, ready to defend it against all comers; and if you had done as I did—taken out papers from the land office—you could get back your water by law."

"You poor, ignorant fool, you had nothing to do with it!" burst out Montemayor intolerantly. "It was the gringo surveyor that you protected from the Indians who made out your papers for the lake. But for him, and that accident, you would be in a worse case than I am—you poor numskull, without a book in your house! How can you claim the credit when in truth you can scarcely read, having spent all your life chasing Indians?"

"I humbly accept your correction," replied De Vega with mock humility, "and only ask to make one amendment. If you had learned to fight as I have, by chasing Indians all your life, you would know how to stand up for your rights. But now you come running like a child who has lost his toys, and beg me to get back your steers. Go get them yourself, you big lump of tallow! And take your insults with you. Because I am no peon and if you give me any abuse I will take it upon myself to chastise you!"

"You chastise me!" roared Montemayor, now beside himself with anger; "take care that I do not chastise you! Where is that money you owe me—and the interest for one year—and how can you hope to repay it? The Texans are coming to eat out the country, they are swarming like grasshoppers from the east, while you in your ignorance sit down here by your lake and wait for them to come and devour you. The day will dawn when you will pay through the nose for taking in these lawless gringos. But I am talking to a fool—drive on!"

He waved his arm at the driver who, jerking off the brake with a rope, rose in his stirrups and lashed at the mules; and in a shower of dirt they were off like a whirlwind, while the *gente* stared after them, stunned.

"Capital!" laughed De Vega with a snap of the fingers and went up on the roof to watch them.

As long as their dust showed he looked after the flying Mexicans—and the Mexican to whom they were enslaved; for Montemayor was no Spaniard but a Mexican, and every man who served him was peoned to work out some debt. If they could once get free they would flee him like a devil, for the sheep king was a heartless taskmaster; but little chance they had while he kept the books and they, poor men, could not read. No, the Montemayors were not of the *gente fina,* though from politeness they were received among the best; and Don Lorenzo knew the reason for this indulgence, for he had borrowed from Rico himself. It was to him they all went when, on some pressing occasion—a wedding, a saint's day or a fiesta—they felt the need of a little cash. But poof! He drove them hard, exacting usury like a miser and social recognition to boot. And in the end, after it all, he demanded both principal and interest, earning their curses until the next time. But there was always a next time and Don Lorenzo had been to the usurer too often. Two daughters had been married, five of his six sons had taken wives, and all with a dowry or a gift; and besides that, there had been the fiestas, to celebrate each marriage, and little presents to his family and friends. And then of course there was the expense of maintaining Su Casa, though he always put that out of his mind. A hundred times his major-domo had come to him and pleaded that the outlay might cease. A thousand good dollars would hardly pay for one month of his free-handed hospitality; but it was the custom of the country and of his fathers before him, and why should he cut down on that? Now all his daughters, except one, were married; and all his sons, except Jaime, given a start. That had been the big expense and, with losses from the Indians, his cattle had not paid as they should. They had thriven and grown fat—yes, and multiplied by the thousands—but until the railroad had come there had been no market for them except in the neighboring towns. And with the railroad had come also the gringos, who had never troubled them before—and now the rough, lawless Texans. Always something, to defer the long-expected moment when he could repay Montemayor, and laugh!

De Vega paced his roof again, running over in his mind the things that Montemayor had said to him, and it all came back to the Texans. The times had changed and where before they had warred with Indians they now had the Americanos to contend with. All his life he had known Americans—the courteous officers from the forts, who went out under his guidance against the Apaches; the prospectors, who would dare the devil himself if you showed them a piece of gold; the traders and Jewish merchants along the river—but none of them were like the Texans. They were a race by themselves, Americans but not Americans, and they too had been bred to war.

They alone had defeated the Mexicans under the dictator, Santa Anna, and set up a republic of their own; and at the Alamo at San Antonio a hundred and fifty Texans had fought until the last one was killed.

Because the Texans were brave, Esquipulo had opposed him when he had thought of making a fight. His father had been right and, by killing their bulls, he had accomplished a notable victory. The Battles brothers were gone and only Monk remained—Monk and Jason Coles, his horse wrangler, whom at first he had taken for his son—and both of them were good men. Nevertheless they were Texans, men of a fierce and lawless breed, and it would not be amiss to watch them. Perhaps by artful questions he might learn more of their nature, and of the manners and customs of their people.

With a signal to stout Porfirio, who never was far behind him, Don Lorenzo walked softly down the stairs, but as he approached his guest room he heard laughter from within and held up his hand for a halt. Then, tiptoeing along the wall, he paused outside the window, peering in through the iron bars. The wrangler was lying in bed, propped up by several pillows and smoking a corn-husk *cigarrito,* and in a half circle before him like children at a show were Esquipulo, Jaime and Angelita.

"Carái!" murmured De Vega, and waited.

Perhaps his aged father had had the same thought that had come to him, for he was questioning the young Texan about his people; and he, not understanding, was replying at cross-purposes, which occasioned the outbursts of laughter.

"Listen!" began Jaime, tapping the Texan on the knee, "do you understand *'pantalones'*—pants?"

"Why not?—of course!" responded Jason.

"And do all the Texans wear *pantalones?"* inquired Jaime.

"Sí, señor," answered the wrangler promptly.

"You were right," laughed Jaime, turning to the blushing Angelita; but Esquipulo objected.

"No!" he cried, "I have seen women in Texas and they wore long skirts, like yours."

"But this woman," protested Angelita, "who came in with the Texans and was driven out by my father—she wore trousers and boots, like the rest!"

"Listen!" began Jaime, addressing the wrangler again in Spanish, "the women of your country—wear they trousers?"

"No! Of course not!" denied Jason.

"But you said," chuckled Jaime, "that all Texans wear pants. And surely this woman that came here with young Battles——"

"Silencio!" roared De Vega, whipping into the room and confronting his startled children. And even Don Esquipulo fell silent.

"Go to your mother!" commanded Don Lorenzo, turning wrathfully on Angelita; and as she slipped away he unloosed such a torrent of Spanish that Jaime slunk away, ashamed.

"No! No!" went on De Vega, as his father, cackling with merriment, endeavored to intercede for the rest; and when Esquipulo had gone he bent his brows on Jason and spoke in his precise but slow English.

"My young friend," he said, "you are very welcome in my house, but please do not talk about that woman, and especially while my daughter is present. Perhaps you do not know the etiquette in the best Spanish families, which is very strict about women. We believe that all young girls should be kept with their mothers until they are engaged to be married, and then they cannot talk with the gentleman of their choice except in the presence of a *dueña*. I am sure you will be glad to know this, which is why I take the liberty of telling you. And another thing, my friend, please do not mention pantaloons——"

"I didn't mention them!" declared the wrangler angrily. "They asked me about them, themselves! And if you don't like my style, just ketch me up a horse and I'll——"

"No, no!" interposed Don Lorenzo, "your bones have not knit—you must stay here at least a month. But it is the custom of my people not to refer to *pantalones,* and especially in the presence of young ladies. It is no fault of yours and I do not mean to scold you, because I know that you meant nothing wrong; but since that woman was here, dressed up in men's clothes, my daughter has been very naughty. She has told her mother that all our ways are old-fashioned and has asked to wear men's clothes herself. Of course we know very well the bad taste of that woman, but how can we convince her—you see?"

"Sure!" nodded the wrangler, "but say, I want my clothes back, because my leg is as good as well and——"

"No, no!" broke in De Vega, "I know all about that, because I have had both my legs broke, myself. And if you break it again, when it has been broken a second time, you are sure to be lame all your life. So be patient, my friend, and I wish you more success in trying to speak in Spanish. It is the language of this country and of course, if you intend to stay here——"

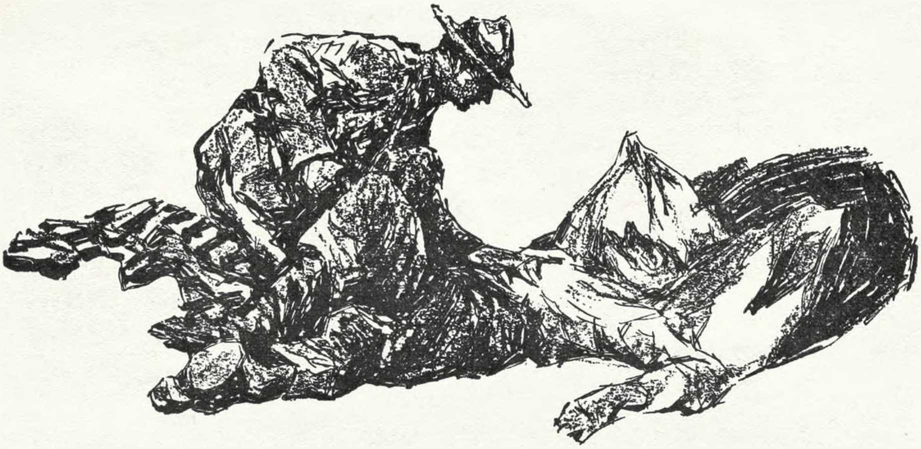
"No!" spoke up the wrangler, "I'm going back to Texas! All I have in this country is hard luck!"

"Well, perhaps that will be best," answered De Vega thoughtfully, and followed after his erring daughter.

There was the sound of loud scoldings, impassioned pleadings and stern denials from the rooms where the De Vega family lived and that evening just at dusk Jason saw the form of Angelita creeping softly down the stairs. She looked about fearfully, then scudded across the courtyard and returned to where he watched through the bars. But when he leaned forward she hissed *"Gringo!"* in his ears and hurled a chicken foot down on his bed.

"Muchas gracias!" he mocked as she sped back up the stairway, and he thought he heard a laugh from the darkness.

To be continued in the next issue of THE POPULAR, *May 20th.*



Loony Comes Back

By Harwood Steele

Author of "Rufus, the Outlaw," and other stories.

A dramatic episode with a surprising climax in the life of a Northwest Mounted Policeman.

FOR the past hour Sergeant Wendover had been absolutely confident that, in the rough parlance of the corps to which he had the honor to belong, he was about to "get his man." Now, as he looked at the little lost cabin in the forest at the end of the trail he had followed during that time from the west shore of the giant MacKenzie River, he knew not only that he was *about* to get him, but that he actually had got him.

It cannot be said that he felt any particular elation. He should have done so, no doubt, for the chase had been a long one, full of desperate work and frightful hardship. It had begun three months back, at Edmonton, where Fane, the criminal whom Wendover was after, had robbed the bank and murdered one of the clerks. It had led northward to Peace River Crossing, by pack trail—there was no railway to Peace River then and no telegraph—thence down the MacKenzie, through the vast subarctic, as far as Fort Wrigley, a few miles from the spot where Wendover now stood. It had involved back-breaking portages and the running of terrible rapids, in the maddening perpetual daylight of midsummer in that region. It had meant semistarvation, frequent exhaustion. Fane had played his hand with the skill of the gambler who knows that his life may hang on the fall of a single card. He doubled, hid, laid false trails. Often he was nearly caught. More often he all but got away for good. Toward the end the pursuit had become a crazy nightmare, a zigzagging back and forth of puny midgets in a death dance through those vastnesses of silence and of solitude.

Decidedly, under the circumstances, Wendover should have felt elation. But, for one thing, he had never dreamed of failure. For another, he was too tired to feel any emotion. Every bone in his body ached. The pitch pine, spruce and poplar of the forest, through which he had tracked Fane from his landing place at the water's edge, to his throbbing eyes seemed to sway like seaweed.

There is something primitively fearful about a silent, lonely cabin hidden away from the sight of the world in a forest, and especially in a forest which is only a small part of an immense, almost uninhabited wilderness. The folklore of all races, which has its roots in the days when mankind was very young and much more closely in touch with the spirit plane than it is now, abounds in tales of lost little houses in deep and haunted woods, the homes of witches, elves, enchanted princesses. Mystery clings to such places.

But Wendover, being dog tired and being also an unimaginative man, tasted nothing of this fascination. He thought only of one fact—and that was that Fane must be hidden in this cabin.

Yet he should have been thrilled. For here, he was certain, was the lurking place, not only of Fane, but of that curious fellow, "Loony."

It was Boyle, the Hudson's Bay trader at Wrigley, who had told Wendover about Loony and, incidentally, had suggested that he look for Fane there. Loony, it appeared, was a poor, half-crazy old man, known, at least by repute, to all who traveled up and down the MacKenzie. He was a hermit, a recluse who, shunning his fellow men, had built himself a cabin in the woods, where he lived with his half-breed daughter and, some said—untruthfully—a harem of squaws. From this place he emerged only at very long intervals—so long, indeed, that at times, had it not been for occasional visits of the half-breed girl to Wrigley, to buy supplies, everybody would have thought him dead.

No one knew anything of Loony's early history. None could say how long he had been there or name the country whence he hailed. Factors, traders, explorers, Northwest Mounted Policemen, might come and go, but Loony remained and had been there as long as any man could remember. A strange fellow, a Rip van Winkle of the North, eternal, it seemed, as the MacKenzie itself.

And this was his cabin! Wendover should have shuddered with pleasant anticipation at finding himself almost on the threshold of the warlock's secret lair. Instead, he wasted only one second in reflecting that, inside another hour, he would rejoin Constable Held at the river bank, with Fane, and turn his face southward on the long journey back to civilization and the seats of justice.

He loosed his revolver in his holster. Then, with half a dozen quick, noiseless strides, he crossed the little clearing and flung open the door.

The figure of Loony first met his eyes, the most extraordinary figure he had ever seen in all the subarctic.

There was a rough-hewn table in the cabin, which, as the shadows of the trees darkened the windows, was lighted by two candles. The glow of these candles fell full upon the hermit, who stood frozen by the table, staring at Wendover. The old chap might have posed for a painting of Father Time or of the Prophet Elijah, seeing visions. His long white hair fell almost to his waist, his white beard nearly to his knees. In his eyes was the fire of madness. His daughter had dressed him in skins, fringed and slashed like the old buckskin costumes of the plains. Even Wendover was startled, though he had expected something like this.

Behind the old man, the half-breed girl, an animated bag tied in the middle, had stopped stock-still, stupefied with surprise and terror, in the act of placing a steaming bowl of stew upon the table.

Wendover, in that tremendous moment of climax, when the toil of months was about to reap its reward, had no attention for either the hermit or the girl. His eyes were fixed on Fane, who had risen slowly to his feet and was gazing at the sergeant as if he saw in him the figure of Death—as, indeed, he did. Drawn, desperate looking, with a beard of three weeks' growth, and black hollows, accentuated by the candlelight, in his cheeks, the wretched man was almost worthy of pity. He had fancied that he had covered his tracks so well, that the Mounted Police would never find him in this lost place!

Wendover walked over to Fane and said to him, very quietly:

"Well, Fane, I've got you. Hands up, please!"

Fane was unarmed—his rifle and revolver he had laid aside in a corner—and therefore it would have been madness for him to disobey. But he might have done so had he not felt, just then, that to attempt to escape now would be only to postpone the day of judgment. Up went his hands without a moment's hesitation.

Wendover rapidly searched the murderer's person for concealed arms. He found nothing.

"We'll be going back to the river," he told the prisoner. "Pack your duds!"

At that moment Loony spoke. His voice was the kindly voice of a rational man:

"Look here, hadn't you better stop a while? You've got the poor devil. You both look hungry. Let him have his meal, sergeant. And, look here, join us!"

Wendover thought as quickly as his tired brain would allow. He *was* hungry, by the Lord! Only now did he realize to the full how hungry he was—and how tired. The stew smelled extraordinarily good. He had nothing to fear from Fane, once he had cornered the man's revolver and rifle. And he certainly had nothing to fear from the old hermit and his daughter.

"Come along now, do!"

Loony said the words so nicely and laid his hand on the sergeant's arm with so much feeling that Wendover could resist the temptation no longer. He smiled with a trace of cynical amusement—it was funny to have an invitation from such a man, under such circumstances. It would be something to amuse Held when he rejoined him.

"All right," he said. "Thanks, I *will* take something."

"Splendid!" cackled Loony triumphantly. "Quick, Susie, get dinner on the table for the gentlemen."

Wendover wondered why Loony had such a reputation for aloofness, when he was as hospitable as this. Then the thought struck him that this might be only a freak of the madman. And something warned him to be on his guard against treachery.

He went over to the corner where Fane's weapons stood and placed them on the floor beside the chair which faced the door.

"I'll have to ask you to sit the way I want you to," he explained to Loony. "I'm going to take this chair, with these guns beside me. I want Fane here on my left and you yourself on my right. The girl can take the place opposite me."

"Certainly, my dear fellow, certainly," said the extraordinary old hermit affably. "Anything you say, of course. Good! Susie has everything ready. Won't you sit down, sir?"

They sat down, each in the place Wendover had assigned. It was quite a little feast which Susie had provided. There was that enormous bowl of stew. There were pork and beans, from the can, tomatoes, also from the can, bannocks of Susie's baking and excellent coffee. Wendover had not had such a meal for months. Neither had Fane, as was painfully evident. They ate ravenously, watching each other like wolves.

That quartet was perhaps the strangest that had ever been seen in that part of the country. None could have been more incongruous—the Mounted Policeman, the murderer, the hermit madman and the half-breed girl; Wendover, bronzed and lean and stern, his face and hands scratched and torn by thorns and branches, his eyes bloodshot, his revolver on the table beside him, his clothing—but for his patrol jacket, specially donned for the arrest—in rags; Fane, shaky and gray and scared, his clothing even more ragged than that of the sergeant, so much so that he was half naked—Wendover had been able to approach the Hudson's Bay posts for new clothes; Fane had dared not; Loony, majestic with his snowy locks, and beaming on Wendover with extreme benevolence; Susie, bewilderment in her black eyes, wondering what it was all about; over them the flickering candlelight; around them, silence.

But *they* were not silent. At least, Loony and Wendover were not. Loony it was who began the crazy conversation with:

"Tell me, sergeant, are you fond of Shakespeare?"

"Can't say's I am," answered Wendover, one eye always on Fane, and trying most desperately not to give way to his fatigue.

"What, not fond of Shakespeare?" Loony was astonished. "Oh, come now! 'Hamlet,' eh, 'Richard the Third,' eh—for a man of action like you, eh? I'm sure you must like Shakespeare, sergeant! 'To be or not to be, that is the question——' 'I am thy father's ghost——' 'Alas, poor Yorick, I knew him well——' "

The old man launched into the Bard of Avon's rolling speeches, declaiming them with great effectiveness and many gestures—a stranger, wilder figure than ever, in that lonely place so far from any spot of which Shakespeare had ever dreamed. " 'A horse, a horse, my kingdom——' 'Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer by this sun of York!——' 'Is that a dagger I see before me, the handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee!——' 'Out damned spot!——' 'All hail, Macbeth, thou shalt be king hereafter!' "

In spite of himself, Wendover felt a chill of horror pass through him, so unearthly did the hermit look, so sepulchrally did his voice boom through the cabin. He was beginning to think the long strain had turned his brain, that he was seeing and hearing things that did not exist. But all at once Loony switched to a new tack.

"Tell me, sir"—gone was the drama; he was the solicitous host once more—"tell me, what is the last word from Piccadilly? It's some time since I was there, y'know. Who's in power now, Gladstone, or is it Dizzi? Is Kitchener still in Egypt? And was the dear queen at Ascot with Edward, Prince of Wales?"

Wendover did not have a first-class knowledge of English affairs but he knew that Gladstone and Dizzi had both been dead for years and had not yet forgotten the regret that swept through Canada when Queen Victoria went to her last rest. Loony was talking about things which had happened ages and ages ago. Again, the sergeant felt a sense of the fantastic horror of this business. Incidentally, he knew now that the boys at Wrigley and elsewhere had not christened Loony without cause.

And Loony was rambling on.

"I want you to be kind to that poor devil," said he, indicating Fane. "He's quite a nice boy, quite a nice boy, I assure you. Hasn't meant any real harm, you know. Remember what the great poet wrote, sergeant: 'The quality of mercy is not strained. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven. It blesseth him that gives and him——' Be a Christian, old chap. Be a deuced good fellow, for my sake," and he made the motion of raising a monocle and screwing it into his eye as he gazed at Wendover.

Wendover found himself distracted from Fane and his curiosity thoroughly roused by this mysterious ancient, hidden away in the Canadian wilds, who quoted Shakespeare and talked in a cultured voice of Piccadilly and must, once, have worn an eyeglass. The queer business irritated him.

"Who the hell are you, anyway?" he demanded, his irritation finding voice.

But Loony would not say. Not he! He assumed a look of the most unfathomable cunning as he shook his finger at Wendover and laughed coyly. "No, you don't! No, you don't! I'm too old a bird to be caught with chaff, my boy!"

So Wendover let it slide, his sudden anger gone in a moment, as sudden anger will go when a man is too exhausted to care. And presently, always watching Fane, always thinking of the value the business would have in bucking up Held when he told him about it later, he actually found himself talking away, between mouthfuls, to the poor old hermit as if they were the greatest friends.

It must have been this talking which put him off his guard, either by accident or design. Lulled by Loony's voice, he may have fallen asleep from sheer weariness. In fact, it seems positive that he must have dozed, if only for one instant. For, suddenly, "stabbed broad awake," he felt something hard and round jabbed into his floating ribs and heard a voice say: "Hands up, yourself!"

Wendover's brain worked at lightning speed. He perforce put his hands up. As he did so he glanced over his shoulder and saw that Loony held an enormous service revolver of an old pattern. He certainly had been a first-class bonehead, he reflected.

But no sooner was he trapped than, with the ready resource of his tribe, he began to scheme a way out. That he was in a dangerous position was self-evident. Either Fane or the old man might take it into their heads to rid themselves of him without more ado. Or that damned gun might go off. Loony was handling it with absolutely no care at all. At the same time, it never even occurred to Wendover that he could not, in some manner, find a way out.

Meanwhile things were happening. Fane had snatched up Wendover's revolver and, urged on by Loony, was packing his few rags of kit at great speed, while Loony's daughter rapidly got together a sackful of grub for the departing guest.

"Get up!" commanded Loony and backed Wendover against the wall.

Suddenly Wendover had an inspiration. Loony himself could not see the door. Fane and Susie were too occupied with packing to look. And so Wendover seized his opportunity.

Raising his eyes, and in the most natural voice in the world, he addressed an unseen—and entirely absent—comrade:

"Cover him, Held. But don't shoot!"

Loony, taken off his guard for an instant of time, looked back, expecting to see a policeman at the door. And in that instant Wendover felled the old man with a straight left from the shoulder.

Came battle most furious and bloody, and murder and sudden death. Fane fired and missed. Wendover hurled himself upon him before he could fire again and knocked the revolver flying. Then they were locked in a primitive conflict, kicking, clawing, biting, hitting, tearing faces, clothes and hair. And around them circled the gigantic Susie, Fane's rifle, clubbed in her hands, ready to brain Wendover at the least opportunity.

Loony was dazed and the sergeant knew that it was up to him to overpower Fane before the old man could recover sufficiently to join in. He hit Fane unmercifully, once, twice, thrice in the face, feeling teeth break beneath the blows. Fane, with the snarl of one mad with pain, kicked him below the belt. The agony of it turned Wendover sick, but he clung with the tenacity of an octopus to Fane until he recovered. Then he got his fingers into Fane's hair and pulled until the murderer shrieked aloud.

Came the climax, moving to its termination at bewildering speed. Wendover was dimly conscious that Loony, coming to, had struggled to his feet and was tearing at him from behind. He knew that he had got Fane by the throat, and, if he could only hang on long enough, he could either choke him into insensibility or get back his revolver and wing him. He saw, with a quick rush of despair, that Susie had the clubbed rifle just above him and was about to strike. He felt Loony's arms around his neck. By a desperate twist he avoided Susie's blow and heard it crash sickeningly down on Loony's skull. The ancient dropped, Susie fell, screaming, on her knees beside him, and Wendover, relieved of the weight, smashed Fane in the face again, shook him to the ground and had the handcuffs on him.

Then he turned to Loony, for the most unbelievable words were creeping from the dying man's lips. At once Wendover realized that in those words lay the secret of the old man's extraordinary life. He had nothing to fear from Susie, who was moaning and shuddering by Loony's side. So he dropped beside the hermit and, with bated breath, striving meanwhile to stanch the lifeblood pouring from that wild gray head, listened to the strangest thing that ever man can hear—the cry of a spirit by insanity long imprisoned and by a blow set free, struggling back from the days of long ago.

Loony came back. And Wendover, tying together the broken threads with things he already knew, helped him with questions:

"I'm sorry I interfered, sergeant." Faintly the wan voice spoke. "I've been mad, I expect. I'm a policeman myself—Constable Nissen, Regimental No. 797, sergeant. I chased Greer for two years up and down the length and breadth of this cursed country, alone, and I must have gone off my rocker! God, it was enough to send any man off his rocker! I'm not a deserter. Has the commissioner got me down as a deserter? Yes, I want you to clear my name. Desert? Not on your tintype, old boy. Yes, I was in the force from the beginning, and middle-aged when I joined. Gentleman ranker, if you please, and no good at home. But I was a good policeman and I want to clear my name—I want to clear——

"No wonder I went off my base. An Indian woman found me and nursed me back to health and I married her. Proofs? All in the box in the corner, sergeant. Clear me. Nissen's my name. The Riders of the Plains. God save the queen!"

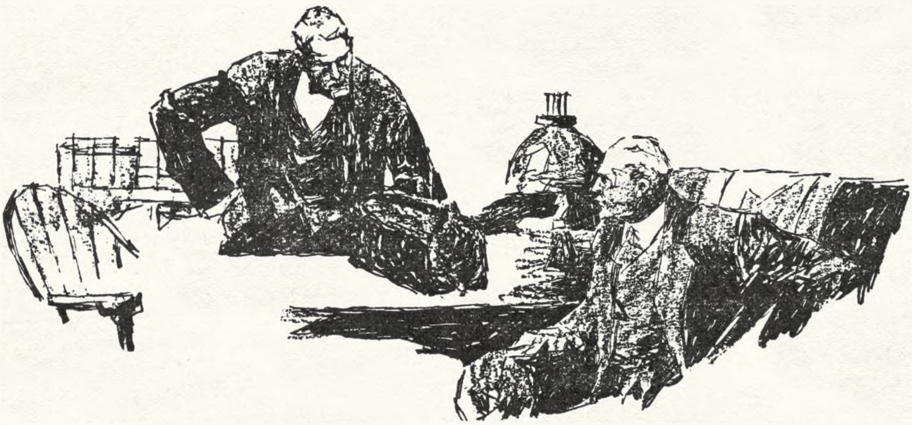
In "the box in the corner" Wendover found the proofs he sought. He clearly remembered the story of the mysterious disappearance of "Old Nissen" who had been sent north after a murderer, just like himself, but long ago, before his time. It was no wonder the old chap had "gone off his rocker." He had nearly done so himself, he reflected, in one eighth the time, under the same conditions. Certainly there were proofs enough to remove the stigma of desertion from Old Nissen's record, to say nothing of proofs enough that he *was* Old Nissen—tattered remnants of a scarlet tunic, worm-eaten instructions from the commissioner, a Northwest Mounted Police manual.

His story for Held would be even more extraordinary than he thought.

Susie and Fane dug the grave. And they left Constable Nissen asleep under the trees outside his lonely little cabin, there in the vast subarctic, with a roughly inscribed board to tell the tale to any one who may pass that way.

No one will ever pass that way.

* * *



Unwritten Law

By J. Frank Davis

Author of "A Postgraduate Snick," "Vagrom Men," Etc.

The prisoner was everything a good man should be—and he had saved his captor's life. But that wasn't enough.

INTO a sunset already tinged with the ultraviolet light that makes coastwise distances along the Labrador so glamorously deceptive in the long summer twilights, the little passenger steamship *Corinthian,* high bowed and broad beamed to wrestle with the impetuous gales and suddenly rising seas of the north Atlantic, swung her prow toward the towering escarpment of Hurricane Head. The heavy-set, high-shouldered, gray Englishman whose name had been signed on the passenger list at St. John's as Bartholomew Foster of London stood on the forward deck below the bridge, striving curiously to make out the point of opening in the grim precipitous cliff that he knew would break, presently, to give them access to Good Resolve Tickle and the village of Thankful Harbor, and wondering if he would find, in this little remote fishing hamlet and trading post, that which he had been sent more than three thousand miles to seek.

Each night, as they had slowly worked their way northward on the first of the two monthly trips that the fleeting summer allows, they had spent in harbor, for passenger vessels do not stay out in an iceberg-dotted sea after dark off the Labrador. At daybreak to-morrow, as heretofore, the *Corinthian* would steam out of this one in continuance of her voyage, but the gray Englishman would not be aboard. Thankful Harbor, for success or failure, was the end of his quest.

A mate came to stand at his elbow, his eyes, too, on the looming coast line ahead.

"You'll be leaving us at Thankful, I hear, sir," he said. "The cap'n was saying you'll bide here till we comes back."

"Yes," replied the Englishman. "Do you know Thankful Harbor very well?"

"Better than many, without being wishful to boast, sir. My wife was born here, and I myself come from Break o' Day Cove, which is a scant thirty miles to no'th'ard. You'll be taking hospitality from the factor, and a wonderful fine man you'll find un. Did you say you haves a matter o' business specially at Thankful that's brought you so long and far? I was minding that they 'lowed you was just an excursioner."

The Englishman took no offense at the friendly inquisitiveness.

"I wanted to spend a few days ashore—longer than I'd have if I went to the end of the trip," he said. "I was told the factor here—Mr. Rood—wouldn't be too much inconvenienced if I stopped over with him."

"That he won't, sir," the mate said heartily. "He'll welcome you and be glad to, indeed. And in that house of his—I've seed the inside of it more than once, sir—you'll get comfort rare for the Labrador."

He amplified this with a note of pride almost personal.

"There's many as hesitate to believe it when told, sir, but the books alone that cover the shelves in what he calls his lib'ry must number no less than three or four hundred, and as for periodicals and newspapers from the outside—I have no doubt that in the post we are now bringing to un there are many dozens, to say nothing of the box of new records for his phonygraft. Well knowledged ever on what goes on out in the world is Mr. Henry Rood, and yet, as perhaps you've heard, in all the nineteen years he've been factor here he've left the Labrador but just twice—and each o' them times went no farther away than St. John's, and then, so they tell me, seemed fair glad to get back and be home again."

"A recluse?"

"If that word means a hermit or such, not so, sir. Every day in summer—in the winter, of course, whiskers help against the cold—every day in summer he shaves his face as clean as though it were the eve of the Sabbath. And once a month he haves his hair cut by Peter Quarles, who once as a young man went to live at Sidney and was a barber there. And you'll see for yourself—I do not ask you to believe me unsupported by your own eyes—that at this warm season o' the year he wears boots that were made in the States. And clothes that come cut and sewn to his measure from St. John's; and Martha Sheeve, who is the old widow woman who cooks and cares for his house, keeps them in order with the hot iron—you'll see for yourself, sir, when he meets this boat, that there are creases in them, as though he were walking up King Street."

"After nineteen years!" the Englishman said thoughtfully.

"Yet do not think I am saying that he haves sinful pride, or that he feels himself better than common folk. 'Tis but his way. If you were to speak a word of reproach to any man or woman here in Thankful about the manner in which he dresses or lives, you would not find it taken kindly. The folk here and for many miles along this coast will hear to naught against Mr. Rood—and rightly. Oh, but he's wonderful good to the poor."

"Something of a doctor, I think Captain Davitt said.

"As many a poor sick or hurt man knows, though he is not a regular doctor and never claimed so to be. But often, after some sore winter accident when it has been needful to patch the poor fellow and get un to the Grenfell as soon as ice and weather would allow, the doctors there have said that but for the factor's skill their mending would ha' come too late. And no storm is so bitter as to keep un in his warm lib'ry against a call o' need. He's a wonderful learned man, sir—and wonderful kind."

"Unusual," the passenger commented idly, "that a man of so much learning and such ways of the outside world should have come to this post."

"Well, not as strange as you might think, sir. I'm told—and by men whose truth I've no cause to doubt—that many Englishmen of his sort are to be found in far and wild places. Younger sons, some of un, and some of un men who found naught but unhappiness in the cruel crowds of cities. At the first Mr. Rood did not say why he had come here, and in the passing years we folk hasn't asked nor cared. We credit it, sir, to the mercy o' God, who works His wonders in strange ways."

The cliff wall had opened, now, to show between the craggy guarding headlands a half-mile-wide passage that narrowed into Good Resolve Tickle, and beyond a jutting shoulder, on the hill that came down abruptly to the tickle—the deep and narrow inlet that in Norway would be called a fjord—appeared the white buildings of the tiny settlement.

On the water's edge a dock, a fish house with its adjacent acre-wide flake, a sail-and-twine loft. Back of these, irregularly spaced to nestle in slight hollows that might afford some shelter from winter blizzards, a score of plain, small-windowed dwellings. A bit of a church, like a square box topped on one corner by a rudimentary steeple. Dominating all, the trading "room," a stout-built, two-storied structure, and not far from it, also of two stories, a substantial building with a fenced yard.

"There is the factor's house, just beyond the room," the mate told the Englishman. "And even if you were here in the bitter winter you'd find it a fair comfortable place. I can make out Mr. Rood standing there at the landing. You cannot see faces, of course, at this distance, but are not his clothes just as I told you?"

Captain Davitt, from the bridge, spoke commandingly to the mate, who hurried about his landing duties. The gray Englishman's eyes, as the boat slowed, stopped, backed water and nosed cautiously up to the dock, were all for the erect, ruddy, clean-shaven man of fifty-two or three, with close-trimmed white hair beneath a not unfashionable fedora hat, who stood out almost startlingly against his background of steel-booted, rough-sweatered fishermen and trappers, sturdy men and honest, no doubt, but all plain and many of them uncouth.

The arrival of a passenger boat was an event to bring to the dock all the male population not otherwise engaged, but they stood back stolidly for the most part, embarrassed by the gaze of the tourists at the rail, and replied diffidently to the hailed greetings of acquaintances among the crew.

The factor, at the dock's edge, waved his hand when the ribbon of water between ship and wharf had narrowed to fifty feet, and called:

"Good day, Captain Davitt. We're glad to see you again."

His accent, after nearly twenty years on the Labrador, was purest Oxford. The gray Englishman on the forward deck, looking and listening, showed no expression either of elation or disappointment on his seamed face, but drew a long breath and imperceptibly nodded.

The captain, a few moments later, was introducing them and explaining, with a note in his voice that implied no normal man could account for the whims of coast-voyaging summer tourists, that Mr. Foster wished to spend a few days ashore and had been advised he would find comfort at Thankful Harbor if the factor could find it convenient to accommodate him. Then, after a bit, they were climbing the hill toward the factor's house, the visitor declining his host's offer to relieve him of his heavy bag with its black initials and its accumulation of hotel and steamship labels.

"If you'll excuse me a moment," the factor said when they stood in his library, "I'll tell my housekeeper to lay an extra place for supper," and disappeared to the rear as seemingly unruffled as though this were not an almost unprecedented break in the monotony of his life. How many of this imperturbable sort of English gentleman the visitor had seen and how he admired them! He frowned uncomfortably as he surveyed the cozy room. Then the factor came back, bearing with him a bottle, glasses, ice, and water.

"I'm afraid I can't furnish a siphon," he apologized as he set the tray down, "but I can recommend this Scotch."

The time had come when his guest must speak.

"Before I accept your hospitality," he said, "there is something I have to say, because I can't break bread or drink with you until I have said it. You've been away from England a long time. How many years?"

The factor seemed to brace himself. He stood very straight and looked the gray Englishman in the eye.

"I'm glad you feel like having it over at once," he said. "I recognized you the moment Captain Davitt called to you—although you have grown twenty-six years older, as I have—but I could not recall your name at first. It came to me on the way up. Mr. Felton, is it not? Mr. Bruce Felton. Are you still with Scotland Yard?"

"Yes. And I'm sorry to have to do it, but—you are in custody, Victor Trefry, in the name of the king! And it is my duty to warn you that whatever you say may be used against you."

This official formula concluded, he stepped nearer the factor and said, almost apologetically:

"I have to make certain you are not armed."

"I am not," the factor said, but spread his arms from his body to allow the search that Felton made with swift tappings. "And if I had firearms at hand, I'd like to assure you I shouldn't use them on one who only does his duty—and I remember you were very courteous to me, considering the circumstances, there at Ivycrest."

"It's not altogether that I fear your using them on me," the Scotland Yard man said, "but sometimes, under circumstances like these——"

"Could you blame me?" Trefry asked, anticipating the finish of the sentence. "After all, wouldn't that be the simplest solution?"

Felton shook his head.

"We have got to live here together six days, until the *Corinthian* comes back," he said, "and then after that for a long time before we get to England. If you would give me your parole—otherwise I must see to it that there are no opportunities. And I think perhaps you would rather leave here ostensibly for a short trip to St. John's, without your friends in Thankful Harbor knowing until long afterward——"

The factor's teeth caught over his lower lip and he caught his breath.

"They must not know," he said. "What are the terms of the parole?"

"That you will neither attempt to escape, nor to—to be the victim of an accident. You agree to leave here with me, to attempt no harm to yourself, and to remain with me until we reach home."

"Home!" Trefry repeated harshly.

"Until we reach London," the detective amended. "Promise this, and you may go to and fro as you please until we leave here, and on the boat to St. John's. On your word of honor as an English gentleman."

"The alternative, I fancy, is restraint."

"How else could I protect myself against having to report, perhaps, that I had not properly guarded a——" He hesitated, searching for a more euphonious word, and the factor finished the phrase grimly:

"A prisoner. I may as well get used to the term; it promises to stay by me for a long time. I suppose I could insist on technicalities, such as this being Newfoundland territory and the power of a Scotland Yard man, without a local officer——"

"I have all necessary papers, to present at St. John's or to the nearest Labrador official, if you insist, but I thought you might like it as well if gossip did not run the length of the coast."

"And very thoughtful. I appreciate it," Trefry broke in. "I was about to say that I shall not insist upon any such technical rights. Very well. I give you my word of honor, Mr. Felton."

He essayed an unsuccessful smile.

"And now, if you don't object, we'll have that postponed peg. I assure you I haven't drugged it—that is a contretemps you might have to guard against in some cases, is it not? I understand that the parole I have given includes an agreement not to try to injure you."

With a hand that trembled only slightly he pushed forward the Scotch and, following Felton's example, poured moderately. The Scotland Yard man raised his glass.

"This duty I've had to perform is not to my taste," he said, "and I hope the outcome for you will not be as serious as it might be. I give you this sentiment with all sincerity: To your lordship's health and good fortune!"

"Oh, not 'your lordship!'" the factor protested.

"I am told you keep well informed on what goes on in England. You know that your father is no longer living?"

"Yes. Two years ago, not long after Grenville's death. But young Grenville has the estates and titles; I saw a picture of him and a bit of an account when he took them over."

"He has them, yes; but only because you are supposed to be dead. You are the seventeenth Earl of Waxton."

"Of course," Trefry agreed. "But can't it be arranged, some way, so that we can get along to the end of things without putting the family to shame again? If I merely plead guilty and take my medicine can't something be done to hush it?"

Shuffling footsteps sounded, there was a respectful tap on the door, and Trefry had regained quite his usual poise in the second before it opened to admit a withered woman, who announced: "Supper is on the table, sir."

"This is Mrs. Sheeves, Mr.—er—Foster," the factor said. "For several years she has done for me better than your servants in England."

"Mr. Rood haves to say kind things, sir," the woman, beaming with pleasure, told Felton. "I know nothing of servants in England, but they would be rare ungrateful if they did not do their best for masters like he."

"Every one I meet has a good word for Mr. Rood," Felton said.

"And why not, sir? I and my boy are not the only ones he's cared for and——"

"I know you'll find having a visitor a great chance to talk, Martha," the factor interrupted good-naturedly, "but we'll have supper now."

They were back in the library and a closing door at the rear had signaled the woman's departure for her own house before the men spoke again of the only subject that had been in their thoughts while they talked at the table of other things.

The factor had let slip, as soon as they were alone, the pose of cheerfulness that he had been forced to maintain under the housekeeper's eye, and his face was set and strained. They smoked in a silence which Felton found it impossible to break. Then Trefry said, after a little:

"I had told myself that it might come, of course, but I did not think it really would, after so many years. For a long time I was prepared to face it, in a way, but of late—— How did you find me?"

"There was a Londoner who came through here on the August boat, last year, who saw you at the landing and made inquiries. One David MacCool."

The factor nodded somberly.

"I remember him," he murmured. "He talked to me a bit, and gossip said he was very curious. But I couldn't seem to recall him."

"He knew you only by sight. When he arrived back in England he made it his business to get an interview with your sister-in-law and tell her what he suspected. He had no personal reason; it was merely that he is one of the conscientious sort."

"And Alicia sent you?"

"She doesn't know that I have come. No. MacCool's story disturbed her, as it naturally would. If you are still alive, her son is not the earl. She came to the Yard to see if it could be possible. What they said to her was noncommittal—rather reassuring, I think. But after she had gone—the old warrant was still in our file of unfinished cases, together with your free and complete confession—and the Yard is very jealous of its reputation for having a long arm and a long memory, especially as regards homicide. There was an errand which called for sending a man to Montreal, with nothing to do when he had finished it but return home, which made it not too great a task to look into this report, and I was sent because I am the only man now on the force who knew you. I was the first officer sent to Ivycrest by the Yard when the local constable called for assistance, the morning after Overstead's death, when it was still supposed he had been shot by a burglar."

"I remember; you questioned us all," Trefry said. "And it was you who arrested Grenville."

The Scotland Yard man, recalling the occurrence out of a memory in which it was but one of many incidents that had been all in the day's work, said:

"I rather hated to do that. Not that I was greatly interested in your younger brother, but your father took it so hard. He was proud as Lucifer, and he tried his best not to show any feeling before me, but he seemed to age and, somehow, shrivel. And his lordship wasn't at all an old man, then, although he seemed so to us comparatively young ones."

"His heart was centered on Grenville," Trefry said. "He cared nothing for me—and I can't blame him. I was a bad egg. He'd been getting me out of one scrape after another for years. Too much of a drinker—too hard a gambler—a rotten crew of associates—it had cost him a small fortune to hush up the scandals I kept being responsible for. Grenville had never given him trouble. If Grenville had come to trial and been convicted I think it would have killed him."

"Is that why you confessed to it?" Felton asked sharply, and, as Trefry looked up, thrown off his guard by the suddenness of the question, surprised in his eyes the answer that he expected.

"What do you mean?" the factor demanded. "I—I shot Overstead."

Slowly the detective blew a cloud of smoke and watched it float toward the lamp and whirl in the heated air toward the ceiling before he said:

"With all the failings you have just mentioned—and I'll agree that you were a wild youth—your reputation for veracity was good, and when you told me, that next day, that you had been in bed and asleep and had not heard the shot that killed him, you didn't tell it convincingly. I believed then that you knew who did it; afterward I felt sure. No, you were not a convincing liar then, and you haven't improved with years."

"I beg your pardon!" Trefry exclaimed, stiffly.

The detective ignored his tone.

"You confessed that you killed Overstead because of a quarrel over a gambling debt," he said, "but you didn't. Grenville killed him—over a quite different matter. But I couldn't prove it then and I can't prove it now. Your confession stands. Be assured that unless you tell the real story it will convict you."

Suddenly he hurled another question:

"Why don't you? Tell the real story, I mean. With Grenville dead——"

"His wife is living," the factor retorted, and bit his lip. "I didn't mean that as it might sound. You are mistaken in——"

"I warned you," Felton interrupted, "that anything you said might be used against you. But that doesn't necessitate my disclosing anything you might be willing to tell me that is not against you. If you'd like, just between ourselves, as man to man——"

He seemed almost to shift the subject, while he let Trefry's mind play with that thought.

"We are not as young as we were then by a good many years. And I'm ten years older than you—older than your father was when all this happened. I can appreciate how he felt; I've got a son, and when I thought I had lost him—— This is my last case for the Yard. I am retiring when I get home; going to live out the rest of my life with my boy. He seems like a boy to me, but he's older than you were when you disappeared, with your brother's trial two weeks away, and left that confession to be made public after you'd had a good chance to get clear. He was a little wild before the war, that son of mine, but he's married now and settled. The war sobered him. He nearly didn't come through it."

The factor's mind was only half on what Felton was saying; it was wrestling with the temptation to confide the secret that he had guarded for a generation, and to give him time the detective went reminiscently on:

"He was in France—a lieutenant. Machine-gun fire got him, one night, out beyond the barbed wire. A soldier—a Canadian, by the way—went out and brought him in. It was a year before he was well. I've always wished I knew who that Canadian was—he was terribly hurt, too, bringing him in, they said—but it was one of those confused nights, when commands had got all mixed together, and we could never learn even the name of his regiment. Well, that's of no interest to you; it came to me because I can understand how your father felt about your brother. If you'd like to tell me what really happened, that night at Ivycrest——"

"And if I should convince you that justice wouldn't be served by taking me back——" the factor asked, unable to mask his eagerness. Felton shook his head slowly.

"No," he said. "Let us not have any misunderstanding. We Scotland Yard men do not try cases; that is the business of the courts. There is in my hands a warrant for your arrest on a charge of murder. My duty is only to serve it. I believe you did not commit the murder—but my orders were to arrest you if I could find you. What you do to clear yourself must be done back in England. To be sincere with you, it is vanity, I think, that makes me willing to agree that if you tell me what happened I shall make no use of it that you do not consent to; I want to know if the truth is what I believed it was when I took Grenville in charge. I cannot promise that it will do any good, except, perhaps, relieve your mind, but I will accept it in confidence."

"On your honor?" the factor demanded. "Because I'm not going to tell anything in England that doesn't agree with what I wrote before I left. That confession has to stand."

"I give you my word," Felton promised gravely.

Trefry sat back and closed his eyes for a moment, and the detective waited. When he opened them, they remained narrowed, and their gaze went through the opposite wall into space. His voice was low.

"I was a bad egg," he said, "but there were limits. Distinct limits. There were no limits at all to Overstead's rottenness. And he was a dashing chap. Tremendously fascinating to women."

Felton nodded. "Too many women," he said.

"Yes. And Alicia, who had been married to Grenville two years, was young—and very foolish. And Overstead—Grenville's friend—was at our house party. How far the affair would have gone if it hadn't been stopped I don't know—pretty far, I fancy—but Grenville found them in the billiard room, that night; a rendezvous. I think she had never cared much for Grenville; it was more or less an arranged marriage, to unite the families."

"I always believed you witnessed it."

"Almost. I was outside the room and rushed in at the shot. I had been observing what was going on, as Grenville had—Alicia was a silly fool, who couldn't keep an affair covered—and for the good name of the family I was watching, that night. But Grenville was ahead of me. No one else in the house had heard it, and we unfastened a window, so it would seem that thieves might have entered, and got to our rooms. And for a time it seemed that everything was running smoothly, with no harm to any one but Overstead, who well deserved what he got—and then, out of a clear sky, you arrested Grenville. I never knew what evidence you had. Did you finally identify the pistol as his?"

"Yes."

"I couldn't see how we could prevent the whole nasty mess coming out at the trial; somebody was bound to break down on cross-examination. And my father was certain Grenville couldn't have done it, and that Grenville's wife was all that Grenville's wife ought to be. After all, I owed it to him. He cared nothing at all for me—but that was my fault, not his. There was but one thing to do. With the way I had been going on, I'd have had to get out of the country sooner or later, I fancy. So I came to Canada, and in due time buried myself here."

He spread his hands, as though to say, "And there you are." He let them drop heavily on his knees and added:

"'Buried' isn't exactly the right word. I've been very contented here. And of some use. I wasn't of any use back there in England, and there was no indication that I ever would have been."

There was a long silence, which Felton broke.

"But now," he said, "all you need to do, I think, is to tell that story. I don't believe there is any judge or jury that wouldn't believe you."

"And crash all that old scandal, that the public never knew, around the heads of Alicia and her sons? I've kept pretty well up on the news from England. Alicia learned her lesson. Grenville forgave her. And those sons! Young Grenville's picture makes him a fine-looking youngster. He is twenty-three now."

For the first time Trefry's voice rose resentfully.

"You don't do all things in England as well as in newer countries," he said. "In the States—in many of them, at least—Grenville could have admitted killing a man of Overstead's reputation without being obliged to tell one half the things that led up to it. He could have said that Overstead insulted his wife. And a jury would not have convicted him. Perhaps a State's attorney would not even have prosecuted him; that often happens. They call it the unwritten law."

"No," said Felton positively. "That is not better than our way. If it was, the States wouldn't have more than thirty times the number of murders, in proportion, that we do. Our laws provide what excuses or provocations justify homicide. Written laws. And no officer has the right to go behind those written provisions because of disagreement with them or sympathy with those who disobey them. I am a very minor officer of the British government. I believe the story you have just told. But I would be unfaithful if I let that hinder me doing the thing the law says I must do."

"I suppose so," Trefry assented wearily. "You have been on one side of such things all your life. I can understand your viewpoint, even though I think justice to all concerned would be better served if you thought differently. Shall we go to bed? I have to be up before the *Corinthian* leaves in the morning."

Thankful Harbor buzzed, those following days, with talk of the factor's departure for St. John's when the boat came south, to return on the August trip. No one connected Foster, the idling tourist, with this; Trefry allowed it to be understood that the journey was necessitated by some letter that had come in the post.

In full accordance with their agreement, the Scotland Yard man left the factor at perfect liberty to go and come as he pleased, and himself kept away from the trading-post headquarters far more than he would have if the reason for his visit to the hamlet had been only what it purported to be.

Evenings, after the violet twilight had faded, they sat together in the factor's library and talked with desultory starts and stops, but spoke little of the all important. Daytimes they were seldom together except at meals. The factor was busy getting his books and papers ready for the successor whose appointment would come as such a shock to the simple people of the coast. Felton wandered aimlessly about the settlement, climbed the steep hill back of it, and at the shore watched the landing of fishermen, the weighing of their catches, and the labors of those who turned the drying cod on the flake.

It was on the fifth day, with the *Corinthian* due to arrive during the forenoon of the morrow, that he stumbled over a loose board at the end of the dock, slipped on a wet plank, and with the gasping shock of ice-cold immersion found himself in the tickle.

After his first strangling sputter as he came to the surface, he was not alarmed. The workers at the fish flake had all gone to dinner and there was no one on the dock or near it, but he was a strong swimmer. Even encumbered by clothing and shoes, he felt no apprehension over the task of covering the few feet between him and safety.

But when he had struck out a dozen times with ever-increasing strength, it suddenly came to him that the few feet had increased to a score and that the gap, for all his efforts, was widening. The offshore current in the tickle was like a mill race. And though the air was July warm, the water was January cold; its numbing fingers gripped at his lungs and heart. He began to fight not only current, but panic. He cried for help, with full despairing knowledge that his voice could not carry far enough, and even as his first shout faded heard pounding feet on the dock.

The factor had snatched a coil of rope as he ran. It whirled out skillfully to fall across Fenton's shoulder.

"I saw you fall from the door of the room," Trefry said as Felton, breathless and shivering, came up the side of the dock with the aid of his hand. "No one could buck that ebb tide. Better hurry up to the house and into dry clothes, and take a stiff peg. I'll go along with you and see that there is a fire."

Halfway to the house the Scotland Yard man spoke through chattering teeth.

"I'd have g-gone under if you hadn't come. I—I want you to know I realize it."

"What any one would have done," Trefry replied shortly. And then, as though he read the detective's thoughts:

"I don't expect it to influence you."

"That's f-fine of you," said Felton. "I'm glad you see it c-couldn't."

The detective was dried before a fire and his teeth had ceased their clatter before he spoke again. Then he said, quite as though there had been no interval:

"But it makes it harder. Many men would have let things take their course."

"On the Labrador, where most men spend half their lives just avoiding death, one rescues his worst enemy," Trefry said. "And I do not regard you as my enemy—personally."

"I am not," Felton replied. "Far from it. I wish they could have sent some one else."

They did not speak of the accident again, either that afternoon or during their evening together in the library. Indeed, at night they spoke hardly at all. They sat, smoking, each in the company of his own thoughts, and Trefry's, if his face were a reflection of them, were bitter. It was as they were coming to their feet to go to their rooms that the factor first referred to the inevitable.

"The last night—after nearly twenty years!" he said. "This is a harsh coast, but it is home. And I'm leaving it to——" He choked.

There was emotion in the other's voice, too, as he replied:

"It's hard, sir. I wish, as God is my judge, that it didn't have to be!"

"I know," Trefry said. "You're a stubborn man, Felton, but an honest one."

The *Corinthian* was at the dock, as the next day bore on toward noon, and the factor, beside Captain Davitt there, was giving superintendence to the post's shipment. Felton left them and went to the house to get his bag.

Into the library from the kitchen came the wrinkled and ever-talkative Widow Sheeve, smiling.

"I'm fair sorry to see you go, sir," she said. "Take care o' Mr. Rood, so far as you journey together, won't you? He need some one to watch over un, Mr. Rood do, specially if the weather blows colder and he need to change to thicker clothes. Send un back to us safe and sound, sir. Thankful'll be counting the days till he comes home."

Felton was uncomfortable and his reply was perfunctory and muttered, but the housekeeper did not notice it. She rambled on:

"I'm a fond, aging woman, sir, but I'm only one o' many that'll miss un sore while he be away. Life on the coast is a sad burden to them as is alone and poor, as I would ha' been—and here am I, in my age, one o' the richest women on the Labrador, and all because of he."

"Rich?" Felton repeated vaguely. Trefry would be there soon, to get his luggage, and then they would depart together. He wished the factor would hurry; there was no good excuse to stop the woman's loquacity, yet he disliked the subject of it.

"Aye," Mrs. Sheeve said with unction. "In the bank at St. John's, and with interest that'll be sufficient for my every need when I gets too old to work for Mr. Rood

—which the Lord postpone a far day, sir. I lost my boy, but he went well and bravely, and that is all us mothers o' fishermen can expect at best. And Mr. Rood kept his word, as none ever doubted he would."

She leaned comfortably against the door jamb.

"It'll be new to you, sir, because I know Mr. Rood himself would never tell you, and your face gives word that nobody else has. Joshua—that was my boy—was fair possessed to go to the war, when the cruel Germans were gaining and the Canadians were raising their companies, but he could not, for his father was long dead—in a sudden black squall off Crown Point, sixteen years last Easter week—and he my only support.

"But the factor was terrible anxious about the war, talking ever, when word came in here about it, of his sadness that he was too old to go, and he made a promise, and sent word of it up and down the coast. He promised, sir, if any young men from here and hereabouts had spirit and wished to go, that he would support their families till they came safe home. And if they did not come home, he pledged a pension of five hundred dollars to their wives or mothers—and five hundred dollars is a wonderful fortune, sir."

Violent endings to courageous lives are no unusual story to the Labrador, and sufficient time had elapsed so that the Widow Sheeve could talk of it even cheerfully.

"Four boys went from hereabouts," she said, "and three of un come back. All but Joshua. But he died very bravely, sir, and I been rare proud of un. I 'low no mother on the Labrador ever had right to be prouder. I haves a cross they sent. The Victoria Cross, sir. It says on it, 'For Valour.' He went out one night, beyond the trenches that they had there, and brought in a sore-wounded English officer. It was just as he got the other to safety that he come by the hurts that he died of the next day. Aye, I been rare proud of un. I would his father could ha' lived to be proud of un, too."

Felton was staring.

"The officer's name?" he demanded. "The name of the officer he saved? Or the name of his regiment?"

"I never heard un, sir," she said, simply. "It seems he was senseless and they did not learn. But what I was telling you was that Mr. Rood, keeping his word as he always have done, made me one of the richest folk——"

"I'm afraid that will have to do for the gossip," the factor said from the doorway, into which he had come unobserved. His face was lined, but he succeeded in keeping his voice as usual. "We must be going to the boat, now. Keep things shipshape till—till I get back."

"Indeed I will, sir." She fluttered to get his bag, on the other side of the room. "A safe v'y'ge and quick return."

"Thank you, Martha. Good-by. Is something burning on your stove? You'd better go and see."

As she shuffled hastily kitchenward, Trefry, silent, took slow appraisal of all the well-loved room. Felton had crossed to a window and stood there motionless, his eyes on the harbor at the foot of the hill.

The factor sighed. His shoulders slumped. He said, brokenly, "Come, Felton."

The face that turned toward him was as twisted with feeling as his own.

"You're coming back," the detective said hoarsely. "Back on the next boat. You're Henry Rood—forever—and Grenville Trefry is Earl of Waxton. Knowing you were innocent couldn't do it. Seeing how much you mean to these people here couldn't do it. Your saving my stubborn old life couldn't do it. But—oh, I know it isn't one chance in ten thousand—but that English officer that you sent that old woman's son to save *might* have been my boy."

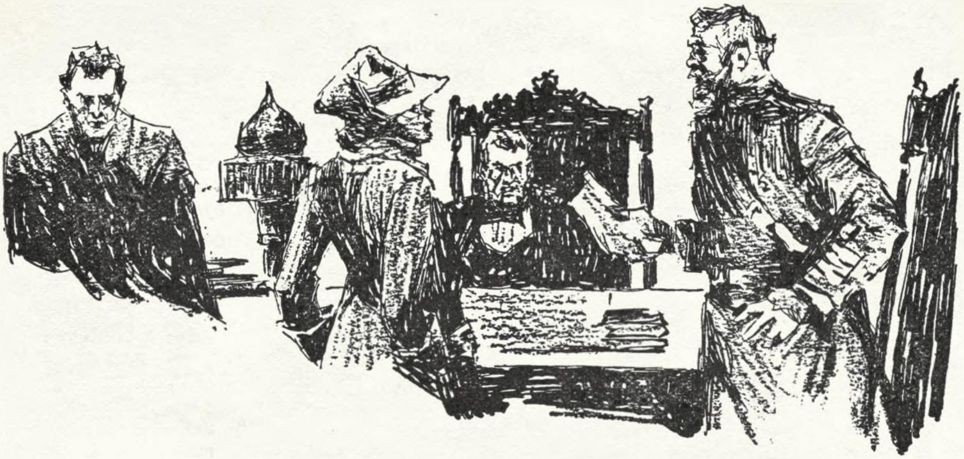
More stories by J. Frank Davis in future issues.

◆

AGAINST ANY ODDS!

IN one of the several establishments supported by the government in the neighborhood of Washington, where old men are among the inmates, a fight was recently staged by a couple, one of whom was seventy-five, the other eighty years old. The seventy-five-year warrior won, and later was announcing his victory to all and sundry.

"I licked him good and proper!" he exulted. "He said I couldn't, but gosh darn him, I could have licked him if he had been a hundred years old!"



Seward's Folly

By Edison Marshall

Author of "Lord of the Barren Lands," "The Call of the Blood," Etc.

For a long time we have been promising you another great epic of the North by Edison Marshall. Here it is, a profoundly moving tale of America's beginnings in Alaska. Most of us take Alaska for granted and think complacently of the treasures undeveloped that lie locked in her soil waiting the day of our country's need. We do not often remember that but for the wisdom and foresight of a few of the nation's leaders, two full generations ago, when our fathers' fathers were still young, that mighty sweep of territory under the arctic circle might not have been our heritage and the heritage of our children's children. Mr. Marshall has delved back into those days before Alaska was ours and told the story of her acquisition in this great romance of intrigue, adventure and love. Of certain historical phases of the work he writes: "The mysterious lapse of the Treaty of 1839 between the great Russian and English companies is obscured in the shadows of the past. No historical evidence exists that Secretary of State Seward was instrumental in blocking the treaty, and parts of the narrative dealing therewith must be regarded as purely fictitious. Otherwise Mr. Seward is presented according to my most sincere interpretation of this profound and lucid genius of the civil-war period. The prickly international situations of the time, 1867-Sitka, and the various characters are as nearly true as can be seen through the misty lens of sixty years."—THE EDITOR.

(A Complete Novel)

CHAPTER I.

A LETTER FROM WASHINGTON.

THERE was but one letter for Jeff Sharp to-day; and the village postmaster himself put it in his hand. It had not been this way always. Only recently it was that white-haired Pompey, the oldest and most respected of Jeff's colored boys, always served up the daily mail along with his master's breakfast. Jeff had never believed that the emancipation proclamation could come between him and Pompey's adoring service; but this had been an idle fancy like many other things. The old Sharp mansion had gone with the rest. A man who had once been Jeff's foreman owned it now.

The year or more since Lee, tremendous even in defeat, had shaken hands with him in farewell had not seemed to heal the grievous wounds of bitterness and sorrow. He was called from his reflections now more by the postmaster's look of resentment rather than by any interest in the white envelope in his hand.

The postmaster was a veteran too, as was practically every white man under fifty in the town. He also had known better days. Now he stood watching Jeff, a curious, strained, and somewhat sullen expression on his youthful face. He looked rather grim, Jeff thought—a look he had seen so many times in men's faces these past two years. He evidently was waiting for Jeff to read the printing on the upper left corner of the envelope.

Jeff glanced at it, and his tall figure stiffened ever so slightly as he read the words:

From William H. Seward, Secretary of State, Washington, D. C.

Jeff's full lip curled, his bold nostrils expanded, and his eye roved to the wastebasket. He could not, however, throw the great statesman's letter away. Really, he had no personal animosity toward his mother's old friend—her sweetheart, in fact, in happier days before the war. Seward's genius had gone far toward crushing the Confederacy, but such had been his idea of duty. Jeff had admired him once and still conceded him immeasurable superiority over the rabble—so Jeff was fond of speaking of the Yankees—that he helped to govern. It was the thing he stood for that Jeff hated—the North, the Union, the Stars and Stripes.

"If I were you I wouldn't do him the honor of reading it," he heard the postmaster say. "He was next to Lincoln! I put him in the same class with Sherman."

"He was an old friend of the family, Roger," Jeff explained. "He is our enemy, but he was rather an honorable enemy, as Yankees go. I always considered him a gentleman."

Jeff was not aware that he pronounced the last word with a singular inflection. It was evident that he set great store by the term, that it had tremendous meaning to him. Of course his homeland had always been a stronghold of aristocracy, but now, when so much was gone and so little was left to cling to, pride of birth had become very close indeed to a religion to such men as he.

"There is no such thing—as a Yankee gentleman," Roger persisted. "You've always said that."

"I have always said that the North was a nation of peasants—of backwoodsmen and of slovenly, mule-driving women—and that our war was a war between gentlemen and trash. Don't believe for a minute, Roger, that I take any stock in this stuff that some of the older men are trying to tell us—that there was fault on both sides, that we should forgive and forget, and that it will only be a matter of a few years until real friendly relations are resumed between the North and the South. I am a rebel now, and I'll be a rebel when I die, and the Union is as hateful to me as when, in defeat, we took down the Stars and Bars from the courthouse. Just the same, I have to be fair to Seward. He was an enemy, and he's an enemy still, but just the same I can't throw away his letter."

"It's your letter," Roger said doggedly. "Go ahead and read it."

So Jeff read it; and he read as follows:

July 25, 1866.

MY DEAR LITTLE JEFF: I suppose it is absurd to call you Little Jeff any more, when you are long as a giraffe. Apart from those long legs you have acquired a stature of achievement that withering old age can never cheat you out of. It was hard for me to believe that the gallant Major Sharp of whom our boys told me so much was the little boy with curls and an insatiable appetite for New York apples! It makes me feel a veritable Methuselah myself.

Come down and see me, Jeff, at once. I have a fine opening for a young fellow like you. Don't linger, but start to-day. I want to revive our old friendship now that the clouds are lifting; not that mine for you has ever flagged. But I know young blood, the blood of a twenty-five-year-old gentleman from North Carolina; and I am anxious to prove to you that these black years of war have not changed me from the man you used to call UNCLE WILL.

Jeff Sharp experienced a mixture of emotions as he finished the letter. Try hard as he might to repel it, a warm glow of an old friendship overswept him; and a spark was struck on the flint of his heart. He kept remembering a slight, soft-voiced old friend who brought him New York pippins—a gallant gentleman whose one-time courtship of his mother had always been considered an honor to the family. Of course he would not accept the invitation, much less an appointment. Jeff knew perfectly well the kind of openings Seward had for young men: official jobs in the pay of Uncle Sam. Indeed, what did Seward mean by daring to offer such a post to him, Jeff Sharp? Did he for a moment dream that the conquered rebel would turn about, two years after Lee's surrender, and serve in any capacity the enemy government? He must think that Jeff was humbled indeed, or he would not ask the conquered soldier so to swallow his pride as to accept a daily wage from the Union.

Yet presently he was brought face to face with an ugly fact which for months past he had been trying to disregard: the swift ebb of his own fortunes. The war had ruined Jefferson Sharp. The estate that otherwise would have sustained him according to the Sharp tradition had been spent and lost during the black years; the half million in Confederate currency that remained would not buy a loaf of bread. He knew perfectly and exactly how many American dollars he had left. These would last only a few more days; then he must seek some means of livelihood. It might be that Seward knew of some business or professional opening, rather than a government position, in which Jeff might have a chance.

"It is an offer of a position," Jeff explained to Roger, the postmaster. "He doesn't say just what."

The other veteran stiffened. "He certainly is presumptuous in offering such a thing. I hope you are sufficiently frank in your letter of refusal?"

"How do you know I'm going to write any letter of refusal?" The pleasant way in which Jeff's full lip drew into his brown cheek was faintly suggestive of a smile.

"Because it is a government position——"

Jeff's grin escaped him completely now, and made a big crescent in his handsome face. "The beam in your own eye first, brother!" he observed. "Speaking of government positions—isn't this a United States post office?"

Rightly thinking that this would hold Roger for a while, Jeff turned homeward.

CHAPTER II.

SEWARD.

ALL the way to Washington there were sights and scenes to remind Jeff of the Lost Cause. He had fought through this country. He almost choked with resentment when he saw the flag of the Union flying where once the Stars and Bars had so proudly waved. The capital itself was gay with banners. It seemed to Jeff that they had been flaunted for his benefit, to celebrate the ruin of his hopes.

He walked with disdain through the crowds of Pennsylvania Avenue, his head high, shoulders straight, his bearing that of conscious superiority. Here was the rabble who by sheer force of numbers had trod the Southern flag into the dust! He was scornful at the thought that these humble men crowding the sidewalk were voters and freemen, citizens of the Union; by the terms of the code he had come to hate, his own equals! Why, their very garb showed what they were. Even the men of the better class were not dressed in the unobtrusive elegance which he knew to be the thing; their broadcloth suits lacked the perfect tailoring of his English-made garments; they used cotton in place of linen and silk; they wore their clothes like countrymen. For himself, he cut a fine figure, and he was proud of it. More than one pair of eyes turned to him as he strode proudly down the street, wondering who this distinguished, scornful youth might be; but he did not condescend to return the glances. Mostly he walked with somber eyes looking straight ahead.

He was sorry, now, that he had come. Now that he had beheld his conquerors his bitterness was whetted and rekindled; and he was determined to answer Seward's offer with fitting scorn. Poverty was lowering upon him; but surely he could not be induced to accept wages from the foe! He was annoyed when a doorkeeper made him send in his name for permission to enter the secretarial offices; and he was actually hot with resentment that Seward should keep him waiting while he talked with other visitors, particularly in that they were humble men who later viewed him askance in the passage. Now, as he walked into the statesman's inner chamber, a bright red spot glowed in each of his cheeks; and he could hardly keep from trembling.

Yet nothing at all was as Jeff thought it would be. Somehow or other, his spleen seemed to wither within him and for the moment disappear. He suddenly forgot his sullen anger. He could only see Seward, standing up to greet him.

Seward had been a great man before ever the storm of war burst over the land. He was a greater man now. Such trials as he had undergone either destroy men, or make them giants. Jeff was humbled in spite of himself, his arrogance dispelled, his resentment giving way to wonder. This man had been close to Lincoln, which was enough to mark him. Jeff glimpsed again the dauntless purpose, the idealism, the constructive genius of this greatest statesman of the period.

He was a small man, physically—scarcely coming to Jeff's shoulder—and his voice was subdued and soft. His enemies, however, had learned not to take hope from either of these things. Jeff saw with amazement that his hair had turned perfectly snow white since their last meeting; and he saw, also, the undying scars left from that black and tragic night of April 14th, the year before. Seward was smiling, kindly and apparently in perfect understanding.

"Well, well, Jeff," he began, "coming in like a lion to beard the old man in his den!"

"And going out like a lamb, I suppose, after listening to you a while," Jeff replied, smiling for the first time since he had arrived in Washington. "An ordinary man has no chance with you, Mr. Seward."

"I remember a curly haired chap who used to call me Uncle Will. I'd hate to have him stop, even if he has grown like Jack's bean stalk!"

Jeff took a chair, and for a few minutes both men talked of familiar things—Greenbay, the old Sharp mansion where so often Seward had been a welcome guest, Jeff's departed parents, and the old, dear, never-to-be-recalled prebellum days. Very soon, however, Seward took up the real object of the summons.

"As I told you in my letter, Jeff, I have an opening for you," he began. "I have been thinking of you ever since the war—especially since I heard of your financial losses—and have been watching for an appointment for you. I did not want to give you something that would bore you. I know your active disposition—Jeff, I know your real tastes, better than you know them yourself. A young man like you is likely to go off at a tangent, so to speak, because of various mistaken ideas; and sometimes he needs an old friend to put him right."

His eyes looked straight into Jeff's; and the latter felt that the old statesman knew his every thought.

"It is easy enough for the victor to tell the vanquished what he should think—what ideas he should have," Jeff replied with a trace of bitterness. He straightened proudly in his chair.

"Let's forget about victor and vanquished right now. Jeff, I have work for you. Work of real importance."

"A government job?"

"Yes."

"I can't take it."

Jeff's tone was determined, even curt; but although he watched carefully he could not see the slightest sign of resentment or anger in the statesman's face. Evidently his greatness could not suffer such emotions. Indeed he smiled, quietly and dimly. "You do not know what it is, yet," he said. "Please don't refuse it till I tell you about it."

"I am afraid you've told me the important thing already, Mr. Seward. You said it was a government job. I, a rebel, can't give my services to the enemy who conquered me, nor can I take his pay. Mr. Seward, I'd sooner starve."

"Let's leave your personal equation out of it for a moment," Seward went on patiently. "I am not offering this wholly to keep you from starvation. My viewpoint is that of the United States of America. I want certain work done, and I believe you can do it. Jeff, you are not a rebel now. You are a citizen of the United States, whether you like it or not."

"If I am, I won't be for long. I intend to go abroad—probably to England. Mr. Seward, the South is crushed, as you say, but though you can break the Southern heart, you can't break the Southern spirit. You ask me to go to work for the United States. I don't believe in the United States. I couldn't be loyal to the United States even if I did go to work for it. I'll admit I need a job, but the least vestige of honor must make me tell you these things. If you offer me a job afterward, you do it at your own risk."

"Then at my own risk let it be! I offer you a job—a real one; one in which you can do service to this government which you despise. Jeff, there must be a new ideal of service come into this land. Perhaps I should say a new ideal *has* come, only you are not yet aware of it. This is your country, whether you like all of it or not—whether or not you have forgiven it for making you stay in the Union against your will. This is America. Our flag is your flag. You tried to cast down that flag for reasons that you thought were right, but you did not succeed, and now you must make the best of it. Jeff, you pride yourself on being a gentleman."

"The good Lord knows I hope I am!"

"I think you are. You should be—with what is behind you. Do you know the first obligation of a gentleman?"

"Loyalty! I am loyal to the South!"

"Jeff, the South doesn't exist any more, as an entity. It is all in the Union. It is all United States. That point was proved on the terrible battlefields of this war. Now that it has been proven that the Union still endures, you must work for it, and serve it, and try to sustain it. The sooner both sides recognize this fact, the sooner we can begin to build again.

"The only possible standard of aristocracy, Jeff, is *service*—the struggle to make this dark world a better place to live in for all men, high and low. Since the Union must stand, your obligation is now to that Union—to make this country the best possible country.

"I am going to offer you the post. I do not believe that you will fail to give it your best effort. I think I know you better than you know yourself. The government of the people has many enemies. There are plenty of people in foreign countries—men in high places—who would like to see this great democratic experiment of ours come to a dismal and hopeless failure; but I don't believe that you are of their faith. I have always regarded your welfare, my boy, and I want you to conquer your bitterness against the United States, and to find your happiness in serving it and building it up the best you know how. Lincoln said to treat you as if you had never been away. I want you, and your people, to get that same noble idea—to act as if you had never been away. That way lies greatness for you as well as for us.

"This nation must grow in size and power, so that its enemies may never overthrow it. This is the cause for which I would like to have you dedicate your life—the betterment of this republic. You could not find a higher cause."

He paused, and the after image of his low, soft voice remained in Jeff's ears for some seconds. The old man's quiet eyes fastened on his face.

"I can't work for something I don't believe in," was the reply at last. "Uncle Will, you are asking more than flesh and blood can give."

"I am going to continue to ask it. It is when we do more than it seems possible for flesh and blood to do that real happiness and real vision come to us.

"I am about to offer you a real commission. It is a great chance for real service to this nation of ours—these re-United States.

CHAPTER III.

A MISSION.

ONE of Seward's great gifts was simplicity—in spite of a wonderfully complex mental make-up—and sitting in his quiet office, he related very simply the international situation which gave Jeff his great opportunity.

"Jeff, do you know anything about Russian America—Alaska, as it is beginning to be called?" he asked.

"Nothing at all—except that I wouldn't want to live there. I have heard that it's one big iceberg."

"That's the general impression—that it is simply an ice sheet, worth nothing at all to any one. Fortunately, nothing could be farther from the truth. Lately a few of us have obtained the real facts about Alaska; but unfortunately we are not the sole possessors of those facts. If we were, the problem would be greatly simplified—and I would have no post to offer you.

"Perhaps you know that several American surveyors have recently returned from Alaska, where they were at work in connection with the laying of the proposed cable between Siberia and Alaska. The project is now abandoned, but while in the North these men obtained much valuable information concerning the country. I have here in my desk their reports, verifying what I have always believed to be the case about that vast northern territory.

"Jeff, did you know that the territory of Alaska is over half a million square miles, an area much greater than that of the original thirteen States? Do you know that it has untold wealth in timber and minerals, fisheries and fur? Its wealth hasn't been scratched. While it is true that a great part of the land is unfit for agriculture, yet without doubt it will support a population well over a million—a point not to be overlooked in these days of teeming races.

"It is true that much of the interior has merciless winters, but thousands of square miles on the coast side of the mountains have winters as mild as that of Maryland. Its fur alone, not to be compared in importance with its fisheries and lumbering that will be developed in the next few decades, makes it the most important international prize in the world to-day. And there it lies—almost at our doors—ready to be taken!"

"I thought Russia owned Alaska," Jeff remarked.

"Russia does own Alaska—by right of exploration. Just the same, Russia will not own Alaska always; or very much longer, for that matter. And this brings us to a very delicate international situation.

"In these days of fleets and armies, Jeff, a country must not own possessions which it cannot defend. In a war with any great power Russia cannot defend Alaska. It is too far from the base of supplies. Up until now none of her enemy nations have thought it worth while to take Alaska from her; but now, in these days of expansion, more than one nation is beginning to look northward. And there is one power in particular that feels a special need of Alaska—to round out her already tremendous American possessions. Do you know which of the great powers I mean?"

"I suppose—England. The friend of the South."

"Don't flatter yourself, Jeff. Perhaps in years to come, when England has a more popular government than now, she will be a real friend of the South and the North too; but not now. Her ruling classes are suspicious of republics. They want to see us fail. This is not a statesman's conjecture, Jeff—unhappily it is a fact. England is jealous of our growing power; and her attitude during the late war could not be mistaken. The fact that her prosperity largely depends on cotton influenced her business people in the South's favor, it is true; but her pro-Southern attitude was mostly due to the fact that she hates and fears us. And that attitude, on my part at least, can never be forgotten or forgiven.

"She wants to see us broken into many little nations on whom she can impose her will. She wants to be all-powerful in the New World as well as the Old. She needs Alaska to round out her American possessions—to give her a full sweep on the Pacific. But I don't want England to have Alaska. I don't want to see any great foreign power increase its holdings in America. Russia is an absolute monarchy, and except for Alexander himself and a few of the more liberal nobles, her ruling classes have no friendship for us, yet I would rather she should keep it than that England should have it. At least she was friendly toward the Union during the war. Russia, however, cannot keep Alaska, simply because she cannot defend it. Sooner or later some rival will see an opportunity to seize it, on one excuse or another. And the nation which should have it—that nation for whom I dream the greatest power in all the world of nations—is——"

"The United States!"

"Yes. We must have Alaska. If we do not get it now we never will get it. We need it—perhaps not so much now as we will later—and, particularly, we don't want England to acquire it. And Russia, realizing her inability to defend it, has proposed that we buy it from her—for seven millions of dollars. There never was such a bargain in land values in recent times.

"Why don't we snap it up, you ask? Because already England is trying to get it.

"This is the situation, Jeff. Perhaps you know that the czar has leased all of Alaska to a certain Russian corporation, known as the Russian-American Company. It is semi-imperial, and is an absolute monopoly. These people have been running Alaska to suit themselves, until lately. They have had their capital at Sitka, and by enslaving the Aleuts, they have until recently reaped a tremendous profit in furs. Lately, however, the czar put certain restrictions on them that interfered with their profits, but they hoped that when their charter was renewed some of these restrictions would be done away with. Their old charter has expired; and they have requested that it be renewed.

"For several reasons the czar did not wish to renew it. The principal one was that he wants to sell Alaska to us, to avoid having it taken away from him later. A second reason is, perhaps, that he is dissatisfied with the way the company has been operating the territory. He is a liberal monarch, and he does not approve of enslaving the native population; and besides, he seems to be suspicious of his agents in general. Perhaps he thinks they may be playing into the hands of his enemies. However, pressure was brought to bear upon him and he did offer to renew the monopoly's contract, but his terms included not only those restrictions that had lately cut down the company's profits, but many others. Indeed, he purposely made the terms so unfavorable that the company could not ordinarily afford to accept them.

"It didn't quite work out as he thought, however. The company did not want to lose their gold mine. So they planned a little deal with England.

"You see, Jeff, the Russian-American Company had subleased, by the treaty of 1839, certain parts of Alaska to the Hudson's Bay Company, the great English semi-imperial corporation. Practically all of the mainland of the Panhandle is already in English hands. Now the Russian-American Company's officials conceived of an even closer union with the English company, the terms of which would be so favorable that they could well afford to renew their charter with the czar. In other words, their acceptance of the czar's charter was contingent upon their ability to negotiate the right kind of treaty with England as to the exploitation and operation of the territory.

"Right now, Jeff, the Hudson's Bay Company and the Russian-American Company are trying to get together. If they do get together, the latter will accept the czar's terms as to the renewal of the charter, and the United States will not get Alaska. It is easy to see who will get Alaska, however. The English Hudson's Bay Company will spread throughout the territory, English people will colonize it; and it will soon be one of England's colonial possessions in title as well as in fact.

"Jeff, I want to fool them. I don't want England to have Alaska. I want it to be United States territory. And if that deal between the two great monopolies does not go through before February 1st of next year, we *will* have Alaska.

"On February 1st the Russian ambassador to America will leave St. Petersburg with authorization to accept our terms of seven millions of dollars. The czar is giving the Russian-American Company until that date to accept the new charter. Meanwhile, both this company and the English officials are taking their time about the matter; they don't realize that there is another finger actively in the pie. They have only contempt for us. They don't know of our offer or of the czar's attitude toward us; and they must not know. Otherwise they would close their deal and accept the contract at all costs.

"The rumor of it, however, may leak out. And now, Jeff, I have reached the point where we can talk business.

"We want a man to represent America in this matter. Of course we have representatives in St. Petersburg; but we want to send a secret agent, with secret orders, to Sitka —the capital of Alaska and the seat of the monopoly. We want a young man, a soldier—one who will take chances.

"In thinking about whom to send, you came to my mind. You have a tough frame for all your pampering by your mother; steady hands and eyes; active muscles. You can fit in any company. You are a handsome devil, in case you have to worm any secrets out of the ladies. You inherited the makings of a diplomat from your distinguished father—one of the ablest representatives America ever had—and your people have always gone in for the consular service and foreign appointments. Most of all, if you are the same boy you used to be, nothing pleases you quite so much as an adventure or a fight.

"Jeff, I want you to block that deal between England and Russia. That is your main instruction. Of course you can report to me from time to time how things are going, and any news that has a bearing on the question; but your main work is—to stop that deal!"

"But how in the world can I stop it, if they want to make it?" Jeff demanded.

Seward smiled dimly. "How did British-built privateers stop our merchantmen? Jeff, you will have to decide that for yourself. Living at the Alaskan capital you will see how things are going, and by watching your chance, you can occasionally throw a monkey wrench into the Russo-British machinery.

"You don't have to be afraid of hurting England's feelings. She is no friend of yours or mine. I don't want you to get us into war—only the worst of blunderers does that. However, there is not much else that you can't do, if necessary, according to the secret-service code that Great Britain understands perfectly well."

Seward shut his teeth with a click. "The main thing is, Jeff, we want Alaska. Get it for us by stopping that Russian-American-Hudson's Bay Company treaty. Operations will be carried on in Sitka; and you ought to see a chance to break up their poker game!"

"You mean for me to use force?" Jeff demanded, incredulously.

"By Heaven, of course use force—in small quantities when it is absolutely necessary. It is all in the secret-service game. Remember, however, that guile is better than force any day. I said to you to block that deal, and I don't care how you block it, as long as you don't get us into an international dispute. Of course if you get caught it is at your own risk, because we will have to punish you to satisfy England and to save our face. That is the risk a gentleman takes—the risk of the international spy."

"What will I give as my apparent mission to Alaska?"

"You are to be, outwardly, a special correspondent to one of our great publications. This is an old joke, of course, but they will think they see through you if you show a great interest in the proposed cable and in our halibut rights in Alaskan waters. I will give you a batch of instructions for you to look over on your way to Sitka, but, my friend, your real business concerns a bigger fish than halibut! By Heaven, we'll teach England to build privateers to sink our ships! We'll show her that the despised Yankee nation—always looked down upon, always snubbed by the governing class with well-bred English insolence—can play this international game as well as any other power. And if you win"—and Seward's soft voice dropped a tone—"America will be your debtor beyond any hope of payment."

"If I lose?"

"You must not lose. America must never lose. The world's future is in our keeping."

"And aren't you afraid to offer this post to me, a rebel?" Jeff asked soberly.

"Of course I am not. I'm not a fool, either. Do you accept the commission?" His tone was casual, unexcited, seemingly almost indifferent.

For a long moment Jeff sat dreaming. Once more his eyes were dark with inner visions, even beyond Seward's far-seeing eyes to follow. Dead men came to life; voices long stilled rang in his ears. Jeff was reliving again the four black years just gone.

As Seward sat waiting, Jeff's expression changed. This was no time for dreams now; this was his moment of opportunity. His eyes were now hard and bright, scarcely revealing the warm and gallant heart that Seward had always understood so well. The secretary of state was a man of far-reaching vision; but could he have read the black and bitter thoughts behind those glittering eyes he would have withdrawn his offer in an instant. He thought he knew this youth, and now, through failing to know him, he had risked a great cause.

His thoughts on Americanism had fallen on deaf ears. He had acted on what he supposed was actual inspiration; and it was beyond his conception now that he might be playing into the hands of the enemy. To Jeff this seemed his moment of tremendous opportunity; but not that for service to America, or yet for building up his own depleted fortunes. Suddenly he knew that it was in his power to deal the hated Union a stinging blow, and at the same time repay England for her friendship to his homeland. Seward had blundered, he thought; and why should he not take advantage of that blunder? He could atone, in some slight degree, perhaps, for Southern wrongs.

The great statesman had been prepared to forsake all scruples in dealing with a nation which he considered an enemy—as was the code—and now he might find that a conquered enemy could play the same game. It had been Jeff's intention to renounce his United States citizenship, disavowing forever a people's government, and take up his residence in some foreign land. Here was a chance to let flow the poisoned flood of bitterness and hatred that filled his heart.

"I'll take the offer," he replied, looking Seward in the eyes. "I am only too glad to get it."

This was true. He was white with exaltation.

Seward smiled happily. "I thought you would, my boy. I usually don't make many mistakes in human nature. There can't be any North or South, East or West from now on, Jeff—there can only be America. We must all believe that, and look to it. There alone lies greatness."

"I am to start at once?"

"At once—as soon as I can fit you out with credentials and an order from the treasury. You are to go overland, by stage and railroad, as far as San Francisco; then take ship from there. I have arranged by telegraph for you to sail on the *Ethan Allen,* with Captain Skinner."

"Any further instructions?"

"None—only this. Just remember all the time, Jeff, that you are an American. Not a North Carolinian—just an American. I want you to know the full meaning of the word."

CHAPTER IV.

MOLLY.

IN the long, tedious journey between Washington and San Francisco, Jeff had various sidelights on America never before glimpsed; and he did not always know what to make of them. His own South was already old and tame, possessing as high a state of civilization as the most of Europe, but this West was wild as the buffalo herds that roamed it, and brand, glittering, glaring new. He saw the march of the colonists seeing visions in the clouds of dust that all but hid the lumbering wagons; he saw ugly towns rising up on blizzard-swept prairies; he saw Indian villages and mining camps.

He arrived in San Francisco about the middle of August, not more than three weeks after he had left home. As Seward had promised, the *Ethan Allen* was waiting to take him to Alaska.

She proved to be a rather small but quite comfortable steam schooner, built during the war and having the mechanical improvements that the war developed and improved, including a screw propeller in place of a paddle wheel. Jeff did not, however, feel any increased enthusiasm for the journey. She was merely a trading vessel of an ordinary sort, possessing none of the luxuries such as he used to know on the Mississippi packets; and evidently he was the only passenger on board.

He had hoped to enjoy the captain's company, at least; but now he gave over the idea. Some of the captains in command of the Confederate men-of-war had been officers and gentlemen of the most gallant sort, but evidently the commanders of small traders came of another school. At first he could hardly believe that the short, heavily built old fellow giving commands from the bridge was actually the captain of the ship. He wore no coat, his only insignia of rank was a dingy cap of blue, he bawled like a steer when he gave his orders; and his manner was decidedly not that of a gentleman. Jeff noticed one or two significant things concerning him, however. One of them was that his sailors looked at him with a certain look of trust and confidence. Another was that he seemed to get things done.

On closer inspection Jeff saw that he was a man about sixty years of age, with knotty hands, a chest like a barrel, and a round, good-natured face that was lighted frequently with a remarkably pleasant smile. He had bright blue eyes, twinkling at times; and was evidently gifted with considerable humor of an obvious kind.

"So you are the important passenger we were told to wait two weeks for," the captain began cordially. "It's hotter'n a horned toad, ain't it? Why don't you have off your coat?"

Jeff protested that he did not feel the heat.

"You needn't keep your comp'ny manners with us," Captain Skinner informed him. "We're just plain folks. Say, you're not English, are you?"

"No. I am from North Carolina."

"Good! I'm glad you are an American. You keepin' your coat on sort of reminded me of them. They're stiff devils."

Jeff had started to turn away when suddenly the skipper began to bawl, loud and more loudly until it seemed that the ships beyond the Golden Gate would hear him and come in. He seemed to be calling a name, but what it was Jeff could not tell for sure. It sounded like Moll—as much as anything else. And now he had his answer.

"Here I am," some one said from the door of the pilot house. "Uncle Dave, you will call out the fire department with such a voice!"

Jeff looked up, startled by the tone, and saw what he had hardly expected to see on an Alaska-bound trading vessel—a young and undeniably pretty girl. She was not, Jeff felt, his own kind of girl, yet to deny that she was pretty would be simply to talk through his tall, silk, fashionable hat! He had an uncomfortable feeling that she was almost beautiful, possessing deep, blue, radiant, and certainly lovely eyes, lively color, pleasantly curving lips and a magnificent crown of corn-colored hair. She spoke rather boldly, Jeff thought; yet he was a just man, and he had to admit that the voice affected him cheerily.

For all these points in her favor, Jeff most certainly and surely disapproved of the girl who now stood at the captain's side. In the first place, he was shocked at her garb. She wore a midshipman's uniform—trousers and all—and though the suit was becoming, Jeff was sure he didn't like the effect. It wasn't modest, hang it! Girls he knew did not go around in men's pants! But she was as much as he could expect of Captain Skinner's niece.

And now Captain Skinner was introducing him to her. "My dear, this is the young man who is going to sail with us—Mr. Jefferson Sharp."

"You are an American, Mr. Sharp?" asked the girl.

"By conquest only," Jeff said, bowing slightly. "My home was in North Carolina."

The girl's expression changed; there was something almost like compassion in her bright eyes. "It will be a little hard, at first, to readjust yourself to new conditions. I can well understand that. It may be hard to consider yourself an American again, to feel like you used to feel, before the war. I'm sure you'll accomplish it in time."

"I never can, I'm afraid, Miss——"

"Miss Forest. Try anyway, Mr. Sharp. It is worth while, I assure you. A republic makes many mistakes, but it's worth clinging to in the end. Try to forget your grief."

She smiled rather tenderly; and Jeff felt grateful in spite of himself. She had struck a responsive chord. He had always been easily moved, tender-hearted as a child. Union men who had been taken prisoner by his battalion had cause to know this fact. He looked at her with shining eyes.

Now, as they waited, the ship moved from the dock. Captain Skinner bawled orders; a handful of people on the dock waved in farewell. The little waves moved between the ship and the shore.

"We're off," Jeff said quietly.

"Yes. We are saying farewell to America for some weeks, at least." She was still deep in the thoughtful mood of a moment ago, as she watched the shore recede. "Farewell to the land of friendly faces!"

"And I guess it is farewell to civilization, too."

"Yes, we are leaving civilization behind us—the kind of civilization that Lincoln believed in—the kind that America stands for." She looked at him mysteriously. "Alaska will be different from what you think, though. It may be exactly to your liking."

So they stood and watched the little ship leaping into the waves, and their youthful dreams no man could know.

CHAPTER V.

THE CITY OF THE WILDERNESS.

MOLLY and Jeff made friends quickly as the *Ethan Allen* sailed northward. While the girl did not conform to Jeff's idea of a lady, at least she was agreeable company, quick-witted and bright and highly appreciative of his faultless courtesy and constant though somewhat patronizing attentions. Her business in the North was simply to keep her uncle company, she said; she would return from Sitka on this same ship.

Jeff saw no reason to question further.

As the days passed and the North Star neared, Jeff began to experience a growing interest in the land by which the ship passed. Here was certainly the wilderness; a country inconceivably vast, unknown, almost unpeopled, dark with unbroken leagues of forest. Together they saw deep bays in which a ship had never come to rest, far mountain ranges white with snows that had never held a white man's footprint, wonderful sylvan scenes that filled them with delight only to fade at once in the haze. Jeff was stirred with the wild beauty of the land, and at the same time he found himself curiously mystified and thoughtful.

There were nights of startling beauty that wakened strange fancies and unfamiliar moods in the two travelers who sat on the moonlit deck. There was a vastness here that Jeff had never thought of before. Indeed, the sea and the land and the sky were created on a scale that filled him with silent awe. He felt little and futile in comparison, and the things that he lived by seemed of no great moment after all—but he soon fought away such vagrant thoughts as these. In such wondrous nights the two sat for long hours with hardly a word, stirred by the magic of the sea in the moonlight, listening to its eternal, moaning voice.

"Do you suppose any one will ever live up here?" he asked Molly one night, pointing to the darkened shore. "Can any one exist in such a place?"

"People live up here now," was the girl's reply. "Hardy trappers and miners, not to mention the natives, gain their living from this wilderness."

"How can anybody bear to do it! It just means throwing their lives away."

The girl sat with her chin resting in her pink palm, and her gaze was a thousand miles away. "I don't think they would agree with you. I know that I don't agree with you. Mr. Sharp, in the happy years before the war did you consider that you were throwing your life away?"

"Of course not. No one could have lived a more perfect, idyllic life than I did. Why, I didn't have a worry. Nothing but pleasant things to do from morning till night and——"

"That is the way I thought it was. But if one of those hardy, hairy frontiersmen I speak of had been in your place, he would have thought that his time was worse than wasted."

"Oh, I suppose one man's meat is another's poison. But you must remember that those men are a different breed from me. They haven't the same traditions, the same precedents, nothing of the same tastes. They are practically barbarians, knowing nothing of refinement, culture—anything that matters. I don't suppose they could be happy in a gentleman's station, simply because they would feel out of place."

"What is culture—refinement—compared to achievement, Mr. Sharp? Where would culture and refinement be except for the achievement that has made them possible? I'll tell you why those men I speak of couldn't be contented in your old sphere. Those men must have work to do, or they waste away. They must have trial and stress, adventure, battle. They know their keen eyes will dull if they don't have the light and shadow of the forest to keep them trained; their trigger finger will grow lax, their muscles soften. They must have a patch of woodland to clear for sowing; they must build a trail through the woods. It isn't such luxury as you had, Mr. Sharp, that makes America great. It is these trail breakers in the forest. And I don't know what will happen to us when the last of the land is tamed, and no trails are left to blaze.

"Yours was a beautiful life, lovely as a dream, I suppose, but I don't know what common good could come of it," she went on, warming to her subject. "Those men in the woods yonder are building for the future—they are making an America that will be mankind's hope in years to come. Because of the efforts of such men as those—such men as are now peopling the West—we will have a country where the common man has some kind of a chance, where the mass of people will be better fed and better clothed and happier than any race of people has ever been since the world began. When a man builds in this country he does not build for a king, or a noble—he isn't making something that a king's hired army is going to come along and take away from him. He builds for all the people.

"Only the bravest and the toughest can live out there in the woods. Only the brave and the hardy have ever dared come to America; that is why this continent is now peopled with a brood of eagles. And they can't stay still, those eagle children. They must ever fly farther into the wilderness. They are essentially home makers, not just spoilers, and future generations will reap the reward of their courage and strength. They may not be gentlemen and ladies in the sense you use the word, but you must never say that they have thrown away their lives."

Jeff looked at the girl with widening eyes. He had not dreamed that she could be so fervent.

He was glad to have gained an appreciation of her; for it seemed that their time of parting was near. The ship was rapidly approaching its destination. One afternoon they came in sight of Baronof Island, the seat of the capital city of the czar's American possessions; and as night lowered they steamed into the harbor.

The last of August is almost always lovely in southeastern Alaska; but this night turned out to be perfect beyond his imagination. It was as if Nature were outdoing herself for his special benefit. The stars were out in countless legions and were imaged in the harbor depths; and the wilderness at the edge of the sea became an incredible fairyland of mystery and loveliness as the moon rolled up around the curve of the earth. Always susceptible to beauty, a strange, lonely, poetic mood overcame him; and he found himself regretting that the journey was over.

Surely such regrets were foolish and inconsistent in one of his standards and ideas. What was there about those two commonplace people, Captain Skinner and his niece, that he should regret leaving them? Perhaps the real explanation lay in the uncertainty of the future, the unhappy prospect of many weeks spent in an inhospitable, bleak, and dismal trading post in the north Pacific. He felt that he knew all too well what Sitka would be like.

Partly because he was so enthralled with the beauty of the night, and partly because he took little interest in the small Russian city that marked the journey's end, he made no attempt to watch for the first light of the port. As a result, the city burst upon his view like a place of enchantment, up out of the empty air. There were lights everywhere—stretching far along the harbor like a string of gleaming jewels, climbing the hills, illuminating what seemed to be fair-sized buildings. Sitka looked considerably larger than he had supposed it would be. Perhaps it was only his long absence from the centers of civilization that made it seem so imposing; yet surely it promised more than he had hoped for at first.

"It seems to be quite a place," he observed to Molly, who stood beside him. "I suppose it is the effect of the lights."

"It is quite a place," the girl answered. "You don't understand. This is the capital of a Russian province. The majesty of the czar carries even here. Besides, it is the center of everything in Alaska. It is one of the fur-trading centers of the world. Almost every skin taken over all this vast province goes through Sitka before it is shipped. Transpacific boats stop here for ice. Look at the ships!"

Jeff's eyes opened wide as he saw there were a half dozen large vessels of various nations and kinds lying at anchor. And now he was aware of an even more amazing thing.

He heard music. It came stealing over the water, hallowed by distance, sublimely sweet in the hushed darkness. It was thin and nebulous as moonlight itself; it did not seem like sound, but only an incredible fragrance of the night. This was not the music of a savage people; a native dance to a pagan god. There was no bloodcurdling beat of a tom-tom in accompaniment. Such music as this was the heritage of old civilizations, the voice of ancient cities in far lands. This was not America, new and raw, that spoke across the water. It was the music, the articulate soul of far-off, unhappy kingdoms spread beyond the restless interminable seas.

"It comes from Baronof Castle—the governor's house on the hill," the girl whispered at his side.

But Jeff did not answer or turn his head. He had utterly forgotten the girl's very existence.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MASKED BALL.

PRINCE MAKSOUTOF, charged with the governing of all Muscovite possessions beyond the Pacific, and his aid, the young Count Yanovisk, were themselves down at the quay to greet the young special correspondent from America. Word of his coming had come by telegraph to San Francisco, and from thence had been carried by a ship that had sailed for Sitka a few days before the *Ethan Allen*. Both men bowed with courteous grace.

"Welcome to Russian America," Yanovisk addressed him in perfect English. "The journey, I hope, was not too tedious."

Jeff glowed with pleasure. These men were much nearer to him than his own countrymen whom he had met aboard ship. Count Yanovisk was a distinguished-looking youth, clean shaven except for a small, carefully waxed mustache; and until he heard the amazing explanation Jeff was considerably puzzled by his garb. Not entirely concealed by a beautifully tailored military cape was gay-hued raiment that seemed to belong more to the Celestial Kingdom than to dark and wintry Russia. Surely this was not the accepted fashion in Alaska. Prince Maksoutof had no such attire; he was garbed in the conventional evening dress of European courts, broadcloth evening suit, buckled knee trousers and silk stockings.

Evidently Count Yanovisk guessed his thought. "You wonder at my dress, yes?" he asked, smiling. "No wonder, sir! To-night the governor entertains with a masked ball in honor of Countess Vasilkov, wife of the commander of one of his majesty's ships of war at present in the harbor. Will you come?"

"You honor me," Jeff replied. "I confess I expected no such treat."

"We have such affairs frequently here. One must pass the time."

The governor spoke now, and his aid quickly translated. "His grace repeats the invitation. If you have no costume come as you are: the host himself is not in costume, as you see. The ladies and some of the younger men have tried to put on something suitable to the occasion."

"I am only too delighted to come." Jeff's voice showed plainly enough his sincerity. "You must give me a moment or two——"

"Plenty of time. There is always plenty of time in Russia. The governor must return to the castle, but I will wait for you, if I may."

"You are too good, Count Yanovisk. I will keep you only a moment."

The governor spoke again, soft and purring Russian the tone of which conveyed a welcome almost as plain as Yanovisk's translation; and then turned back to the castle. Jeff and the count climbed up the gangplank to the deck of the *Ethan Allen,* and the former went to his quarters to dress.

He was in a happy mood. Surely he was among his own people again. Here were the things that made life worth living; the gayety, the titles, the atmosphere and tradition of European courts. He fancied that his own South might have picked up something of this same dignity and grandeur if the war had been won rather than lost. Here was the best of Europe, transported to these far, lost, northern shores.

Only for one second was he in doubt what to wear. He too would dress for the ball! An idea of considerable daring had come to him; once and for all he would show the distinguished company who he was and where he stood. He went to a certain portmanteau of which all through the journey he had taken the most detailed care, and from tissue wrappings took out a suit of gray clothes.

It was his own uniform, bearing the insignia of a major in the army of the Confederacy. In this he would make his first public appearance at the governor's court. No one could possibly misunderstand. By this one act he would renounce the government that sponsored him.

He realized the full import of his act; it was no small insult to the government he represented. He knew that when Seward heard that he had presented himself in the governor's home in the gray uniform, the garb that typified enmity to the Union, he would be instantly recalled, even though he were Seward's own son. The fact that he was not an official envoy and that he was wearing the uniform to a fancy-dress ball could not cloud the issue in the least. However, before Seward ever heard of his act he would have sailed for England, there to make his home.

His was a distinguished figure when he had donned the clothes. Jeff was a handsome youth to start with, and now it appeared that the dress uniform of a Confederate major had been designed solely to set off his good looks. Regardless of his opinion of Americans in general, Yanovisk was profoundly impressed by this young Southerner who now joined him on the deck.

"You will be—what you say?—the sensation!" Yanovisk told him with enthusiasm. "All will wonder who is this most distinguished officer. I may assume, then, that you bore arms on the Southern side in the great war?"

"Yes, count. I hope it will not prejudice you against me."

"On the contrary, you have risen in my esteem. My friend, it is true that his majesty the czar showed no face of friendship to the South during your trial. It is not disloyal to him, however, to assure you that most of us—not the peasantry, but the landed people and the governing classes—were praying for you to win. I may say that the noble class in every land was with you. We believe you stood for the old standards—the inherent right of gentlemen to rule; and, besides—but perhaps such a thought is better left unspoken to a citizen of the United States."

Jeff guessed what that thought was—the antipathy of all aristocracies to the new republican experiment in America—and he smiled in complete understanding. "Your sympathy is appreciated—even though the Union still endures."

"And surely your publications are showing wisdom in selecting gentlemen to represent them in foreign lands—even though they have to go to Southern States to find them. But the governor expects us."

The men turned to go, and the count gave Jeff a small black-silk mask to wear when he entered the ballroom. "You are unknown, anyway, so you really do not need it, but it adds to the sport," Yanovisk explained. "We will make the ladies guess!"

It did not occur to Jeff, as he walked with the Russian count across the dock, that he had forgotten anything in particular. He had done so, however—he had forgotten to say good-by to Molly. He simply did not think of her, otherwise he would have kept the governor himself waiting. Sharp might occasionally suffer from wrong standards, but his courtesy was as natural as his breath; and even toward those whom he considered his social inferiors it never flagged. He simply failed to think of her—uninvited to the ball, probably standing on the deck, wistfully listening to the faint strains of distant music. His intense delight with Russian America and all this situation in which he found himself had absorbed him to the exclusion of all other interests.

The two men made their way over the quay, then climbed the hill toward an immense log structure with radiant windows. This was Baronof Castle, named in honor of one of the early governors of the province. A moment later Jeff stood at the door of the ballroom, looking upon a strange and significant scene.

He saw a long room, ablaze with light, and a bare floor of some beautiful rare wood which, polished to glasslike smoothness with infinite hand labor, reflected the mellow gleam of countless candles. The walls were hung with portraits of great adventurers who had made Alaskan history, of powerful princes who had once left their far-distant courts to govern this vast, wild province beyond the sea, of lovely ladies, wives and daughters of past governors whose grace was now a legend and whose beauty was dust—treasures the value of which even Jeff, not wholly unfamiliar with fine art, could not guess. Between the paintings were trophies of the chase; white sheep from the high ranges of the mainland, huge moose, caribou with treelike antlers. There were fresh flowers in profusion from the governor's hothouses on the island; the curtains and draperies, exquisite things in raw silk, had been brought in from China in trade for a king's ransom in glossy fur. A regimental band played strange, alien music at the end of the long room.

The Alaskan aristocracy had gathered. To the soft rhythm of an unfamiliar waltz—a haunting, plaintive, dreamy thing in the minor—the flower of the North was dancing. At first Jeff could not distinguish the details of the picture; his senses were drugged by the sheer beauty of the pageant, the jubilee of color; the music blurred his vision like wine. Now, looking closer, he began to notice individuals—Russian women in the garb of every land, all wearing masks that could not conceal a dark and luring beauty; dark-eyed girls, doubtless the daughters of high officials of the company; and now and then an Oriental-looking maiden whose high cheek bones suggested that she might be what the Russians knew as creoles—the offspring of crossed races. Dancing with these ladies were the men who governed and garrisoned this empire at the edge of the world. There were officers from the post; and although military tradition did not permit them to don fancy dress, their loose full-dress uniforms contributed to the color of the scene; there were officials of all kinds, some in masquerade clothes, some in their regular uniform of the ministry of finance; there were adventurers, remittance men, scapegrace black sheep who had been sent out to the far province to save a noble family's name. His reverence, the bishop of the cathedral, danced with the wife of the governor; the learned doctor who headed the Sitka school—ranked as a seminary throughout Russia—entertained a tall, queenly woman in whose honor the ball was given, the wife of a Russian naval officer.

As Jeff watched he was overcome with admiration and carried away as if by a dream. This was the thing he believed in! Only in monarchies, he thought—where noble birth received its due and men recognized a firmly established aristocracy—could such glory be achieved. These people were like gods, far above and careless of the common run of men. In his romantic imagination, in the eyes of embittered youth, the girls were all princesses, the men nobles of high degree.

Yanovisk took him into the ballroom, and in a short time he had met a number of the leading figures of the colony, particularly a group of the governor's immediate friends who had come to the ball unmasked. He shook hands with Semanof, in command of the Sitka barracks and who, as a cadet, had seen service in the Crimean war; with Spaskii, the czar's commissioner, and with Templeton, an Englishman with no business in particular, whom Jeff guessed to be a secret agent of some kind. The latter was a powerful, active man of about forty years of age, square-jawed, cold-eyed, evidently a man of resolute purpose and domineering ways. He was not, Jeff thought, a typical English aristocrat—sensitive, amiable, and usually likable. This was the kind of man that nations chose for their more or less questionable missions—a man somewhat ruthless and not overscrupulous. He was undoubtedly a gentleman, however, aristocratic in his views; and for no other reason than a long-nurtured bias in favor of England Jeff was prepared to like him. Besides, his opening remark made Jeff glow with pleasure. "You honor us by wearing that uniform," he said. "I am glad to see you were on the decent side."

Jeff was not so sure about the young adventurer, Ivan Staritsa, a nobleman who for no apparent reason had left Moscow for an indefinite visit beyond the Pacific. The word had got around that he had left at night, and had crossed Siberia with somewhat surprising haste. He looked like a hot-tempered individual—his eyes magnetic and almost red, his black brows lowering, his mouth savage and sensual—and Jeff found little to admire in his thin, deeply lined, but withal aristocratic face.

His manner on introduction was not at all gratifying to the young Southerner. "So I am having the great pleasure to meet an American, yes?" he remarked somewhat unpleasantly. Staritsa had been to school in England, but his Russ accent carried through his attempts at English. "What has America to do up here? Perhaps we are to have a republic—with a rail-splitting Aleut for president!"

"Only the Aleuts have no rails!" one of his companions laughed. "They are expert at building barabaras, however, of mud and alder boughs. That should qualify them, is it not, for the presidency of this Alaska! Perhaps you, Mr. Sharp, will be teaching them how to vote!"

Jeff found that he took their gibes at the martyred Lincoln in astonishingly bad part. It was true that Lincoln was not yet considered, except by a few of the older and more thoughtful Southerners, a friend of Dixie as well as of the North, and it might be that, in respect to his uniform, the two Russians had spoken thus purely to please him; yet the young man felt his collar tighten about his neck and he found it difficult to join in their laughter.

Of all the men he met, Baron Karl Pavlof, Staritsa's companion, was the most forcible and in many ways the most interesting. He was as tall as Jeff himself, agile as a cat, and would have been strikingly handsome except for a long dark bullet scar at his cheek. He was a man in the prime of life —between thirty-five and forty-five—with a cold, clear eye and a thin, steady hand almost black with hair. He was clean shaven, but the hair of his round head was glossy black as commercial seal fur.

Baron Karl had drunk deep to-night of the fluid fire that is vodka, but the only outward sign of his semidrunkenness was a slight loosening of his fine lips and a certain rather unpleasant imperiousness of manner. Jeff was not surprised to learn that he was one of the principal holders of the Russian-American Company stock—in fact, he acted as if he owned the place—but it was disconcerting in the extreme to see Sergius Spaskii, the royal commissioner, and Colonel Semanof of the garrison, openly toadying to him. He was further perturbed when he learned that Baron Karl was not born to high office at all, but had risen to power and a title through various transactions that were not altogether savory. Of course in the meantime he had acquired imperialistic views that would have amazed the czar himself. The man's power, however, could not be doubted; and Jeff guessed at once he would play a large part in the internal negotiations to come.

Jeff wanted to dance. It was not just a vague instinct with him, a mere suggestion conveyed by the dreamy music, but the firmest kind of a conviction. Looking out with impersonal interest on to the dance floor he suddenly saw some one whom he fancied for a partner.

The young lady who took his eye wore a rather bold costume, considering the standards of the queen who reigned in England, but since she was evidently a Russian princess of high degree she could wear it in a way that was only charming. It seemed to be the garb of a harem queen—silken pantaloons, dainty feet showing in sandals, and veils through which the eye traced a slim, girlish form. The candles made her white shoulders seem like silk with a faint rosy shade glowing through; and Jeff's arm longed to encircle them.

Shades of Jefferson Davis, how she could dance! Now Jeff found delightful confirmation of his favorite philosophy; only one of the old monarchies blessed with a high-born ruling class, devotees of art and beauty, could give birth to a girl like this! Many generations of nobles were needed to bring forth such fruit! How the young Russians swarmed around her, jealous for her smiles; how she carried off the rôle of a harem girl—just shy enough to be appealing, sensational without being vulgar, wholly adorable and charming!

"The girl with the yellow hair—she's the one I want to meet," Jeff confided to his sponsor, Yanovisk. "I want to ask her for a dance."

"The yellow hair—yes? By Saint Michael, my friend, I cannot recognize her in the mask! Most of the girls I know, but that angel—she must be one with whom I have not great acquaintance, yes? Surely, we will try for you——"

It turned out that they made a remarkably successful try. The girl in the harem dress not only granted Jeff's plea for a place on her program, but with provoking and conscienceless audacity, gave him the next dance, that had been reserved for some one else. As he glided forth with her, he made the startling discovery who this some one was.

The handsome nobleman who came striding across the ballroom to claim the dance and at first could not credit his own senses was no other than Baron Karl Pavlof, the power to whom the royal governor himself bowed down. Jeff caught one glance at his angry countenance, identifying him surely by the bullet scar that now, in his rage, was like a livid brand across his white cheek; and the young man knew that his Alaskan adventures had definitely commenced. In a moment, however, he forgot Baron Karl completely.

CHAPTER VII.

BARON KARL.

JEFF felt an inordinate desire to exchange confidences with the girl who danced so lightly in his arms, but he did not know quite how to go about it. She evidently did not understand English, a tongue known to a surprising number of well-bred Muscovites; and she shook her head at his query. Jeff, of course, spoke no Russian. It was a difficult situation until he made the happy discovery that the girl spoke French.

Jeff's own French was extremely bad, but through the medium of that tongue he was now able to convey a few primitive thoughts. It was even more difficult to understand her French, and whether because it was worse than his, which seemed impossible, or better he could not tell. Certainly there was a divergence somewhere. When he saw the smile that lingered about her lips he concluded that his command over the tongue of courts was even worse than he thought; but since there was no scorn in her smile—only girlish amusement—it did not hurt his feelings a particle.

He talked on bravely, yet he found that he had a thousand thoughts the French words for which he could not remember. Perhaps it was the music, perhaps because he was becoming senile, that he had to combat an almost irresistible desire to tell her all about his boyhood, his mother, his battle experiences, and his views—everything that was particularly dear to him. He wanted to find out all about her—a feat which to accomplish politely would have been difficult enough had she talked his language, and which was wholly impossible in French. The regimental band, though playing heavenly music, was an unsatisfactory outfit. It purposely cut the dances short.

"And may I see you again soon?" he asked as soon as he dared. He awaited her answer with a ridiculous amount of ill-concealed suspense.

"It would please me immensely," she replied.

He gulped and gasped. "When?"

"To-night."

"Eh?" he echoed stupidly. "Did you say to-night?"

"Yes, if you like. You may escort me home in a little while. I am almost tired with dancing. Say in an hour?"

"Sooner, if you like. It can't be too soon for me."

"You are very kind. I will run out—into the garden—at half past twelve. You may be ready then."

He felt an insane desire to hasten this already auspicious acquaintance, and he blundered on in execrable French. "You know, I believe I have met you somewhere before. There is something about your face—what I can see of it—that suggests some one I know."

"Yes? It is not very flattering—that you should meet me—and then forget me."

"But we have met, haven't we? Believe me, I will never forget you again. Perhaps I just saw you on the street. Perhaps you have been South?"

"Not very far South. Have you ever been to Alaska before?"

"No."

"Then it doesn't seem very likely, does it? Now the music has stopped. I must ask Baron Karl's forgiveness. You Americans are so masterful!"

Was she laughing at him? By Jove, the Americans *were* masterful. He'd like to see any other people who excelled them in this quality! In thinking about this he forgot, for the moment, that he had mentally renounced America for England, and was planning soon to disavow his American citizenship.

"I wish you would not—beg any one's forgiveness," he told her earnestly. "You have the right to dance with whom you please. He may own the place, but you do not have to coddle him. I will be back soon for another dance."

He did come back, as soon as he dared, but he was not successful in getting another dance. There was too much foreign competition. Shortly after twelve he lost track of her altogether.

He immediately slipped from the ballroom in search of the gardens. The time set for the meeting was not yet at hand; but he did not care to risk keeping her waiting and perhaps missing her altogether. He walked around the great structure of the castle, and in a moment found himself in the glory of the gardens.

The beauty of this late August night still endured; and now Jeff was in a mood to appreciate it. The moon was hung in the topmost arch of the sky, and its light cast a strange and unearthly spell over the man and the place. Shadows were dark and mysterious, the low shrubs were weird, black shapes, the sight of the sleeping flowers quickened into life a dear and true philosophy that blessed him for a moment and then passed into darkness.

Southeastern Alaska was always blessed by a glory of flowers. Having only a few short weeks of abundant sunlight, they seem to pour out their hearts in their one brief season; and the air was laden with their fragrance. Jeff was a tender-hearted youth, susceptible to the fragile loveliness of blossoms; and seeing them, he did not at first remember why he was here. It did not occur to him that there might be cause for haste. As he was somewhat ahead of time, he supposed that the girl was somewhere in the mansion and that he had the gardens to himself.

Such was not the case. Presently he heard her call in the farther shadows.

It was an odd and somewhat disconcerting sound, faintly heard above the music from the open windows and coming so unexpectedly in his moment of deep peace. It was not a loud sound; yet he was not at all inclined to disregard it. In his fancy it had an anguished, repressed quality, as if it either had been an involuntary utterance of one who was trying to conceal a great trouble, or else it had slipped out between a man's strong fingers.

Jeff did the only possible thing that his training permitted. He ran to investigate the sound. This was a new land to him; the game was new too and he had no idea how the cards lay. And presently, in a little open place between the shrubs, he came upon a curious scene.

It was revealed but dimly in the moonlight; yet its significance was not lost on him. There were but two actors: the girl in the Turkish costume whom he had come to meet, and a tall man in evening clothes. As the latter turned, resenting Jeff's intrusion, the moon showed his face but vaguely; but because it was all ghostly and white except for one dark mark on his cheek, the Southerner recognized him at once. The man's arm encircled the girl, pinning her arms to her sides, and she did not seem to be struggling. This latter point might have had a world of meaning for Jeff had he not known surely that the steel-wire strength of that arm made struggle impossible. With his free hand he was just reaching to remove her mask.

The Russian could not help but see Jeff's approach, and he straightway favored him with the supreme insult of seeming indifference. It was not until the Southerner spoke that he deigned him a glance.

"It's not done," Jeff told him casually.

"Yes?" The Russian grinned at him in unmistakable contempt. "Oh, it is the young American who favors us—one of the brave and the free. Their freedom marks them in any company."

His accent was distinctly foreign, but Jeff did not misunderstand. Meanwhile, Baron Karl made no motion to release the girl.

Because he was a boy and proud, because he wished to play this game in a way that became him, Jeff took time to light a cigarette. It can be said for him that his hand shook hardly at all, and that he touched the match flare to the end of the cigarette the first time he tried. "If no one objects," he observed with a palpable coolness.

"Baron Karl, the young lady doesn't seem to appreciate you," he went on. "It isn't the fashion, in America, to entertain young ladies against their will. Will you let her go freely, or must I"—and Jeff made a little gesture—"choke you until you do."

In his amazement at these words Baron Karl's vigilance relaxed, for a single second, and the girl took the opportunity to slip out of his arms. It was at this point that Jeff realized the affair was somehow getting beyond him. It had aspects now that he did not fully understand. Heretofore it had seemed a mere detached adventure into which he had stumbled: a half-drunken man making himself obnoxious to a lady. Now the episode seemed to be weaving itself into the fabric of his own life. The surprising thing that wakened these realizations was that instead of running away the girl remained on the scene. She was free now of Karl's arms, but she did not flee into the castle. Instead, she took a place shortly to one side of and between the two men, and stood as if waiting.

For what she was waiting Jeff could not guess. He only knew that she kept her eyes firmly fixed not on her rescuer, but on the Russian. So intently she watched that even through the slits of her mask Jeff saw her eyes glitter.

She seemed to him to be standing on guard.

"I can't tell you what a satisfaction it would be to have you attempt to lay your hands on me," the Russian told him. "I think you have made yourself as objectionable as even an American would care to, for one night, Sharp. You have interfered in a matter of which you know nothing. This is not United States—this is Russian America. You were not called upon to defend a lady. I know every one who was invited by the governor, and this girl was not on the list. She is probably a half-breed from the village. You should learn to respect the customs of the land you visit—for instance, when one gentleman is trying to amuse himself with a girl of this class, another does not interfere with him."

"No matter what he does, I suppose. Well, thank Heaven the customs of the United States of America are not those of Russian America." His voice did not hold so steady now: it had lost the cold and careless quality that still marked the Russian's. He was a younger man, not so tried; and the Russian leered as he sensed his growing advantage.

"I ask you to retract what you said about her, too," Jeff went on as steadily as he could. "While it does not affect the fact that I would save her, if I could, from your insults—just the same, imputations of mixed blood do not go in my country. The girl is not a native."

"No." The girl spoke clearly in the English tongue. "I am an American."

She lifted her mask. Dim though the light was, Jeff knew her instantly. She was Molly Forest, his companion on the *Ethan Allen.*

CHAPTER VIII.

"I TALK—AMERICAN."

At any other time Jeff might have felt himself the victim of a colossal joke. This was the girl whose charm an hour before had carried him off his feet, whom he had danced with and flattered and talked to in wretched French. His Russian princess had turned out the tomboy niece of Captain Skinner; and if time had permitted, he might have remembered with acute embarrassment some of the grandiose thoughts he had had regarding her. Fortunately for his peace of mind, the situation left room for no such reflections. The drama of the moment carried him far above them.

It might have been that he knew one second of overwhelming surprise, but any intense regret that his ideals had been so shattered was for the moment spared him. His mind was still rather busy with the Muscovite.

"What a pleasant surprise!" he was saying. "Two Americans! Certainly I must leave you two alone together. I trust I may see you again, Mr. Sharp?"

Jeff was trembling now, but with really great effort he made his voice sound cool and clear. "Any time you like. I am always at your service, Baron Karl."

"Indeed. Perhaps we can arrange a meeting that will be really diverting to both of us."

No one present misunderstood him, and although Jeff's face was white it was with boyish anger rather than fear. Jeff had seen too much service to be terrorized by the nobleman's unspoken threat. "Yes," he agreed. "We can settle everything to the complete satisfaction of both of us."

With a final, scornful smile the Russian turned and instantly vanished in the shadow. Jeff, who had held up very creditably his end of the conversation with the Russian nobleman, could think of nothing whatever to say to Molly. He simply stood and looked at her, seemingly unable to articulate. But Molly was not in the least aware of his growing embarrassment. She was seeing visions, and what they were could be guessed only by the curious widening of her eyes and the startling paleness of her cheeks.

"Oh, how I hate him!" she exclaimed at last. "Jeff, you won't duel with him, will you?"

The young Southerner blessed her for bringing up the subject. It had saved a situation that was beginning to be ghastly. "I'll have to duel him, Molly, if he challenges. I won't challenge him, if that's what you mean—though Heaven knows he deserves it!"

"Oh, he will challenge you. I know his type! But Jeff, I want you to promise me you won't fight him."

"You wouldn't have me show the white feather, Molly?" He smiled into her wide eyes, somehow pleased with himself. "You are too good a friend of mine to want me to be disgraced. Of course I will have to keep to the code."

"What is the code to me?" she demanded indignantly. "What do I care what he thinks? Jeff, I know about that man. He is an international character. One of the men I danced with told me it's his regular practice to challenge and kill those who get in his way. He is a dead shot and always kills his man."

"Don't worry about it now, anyway. Men like that usually bark worse than they bite. I have an engagement, you remember, to take you home. Hadn't we better be starting?"

"Yes—but I won't sleep any, considering the trouble I got you into and the threats of that wicked man." She led the way along a gravel path out of the gardens. "I shouldn't have come, Jeff. I never will learn. I might have known trouble would come of it. But I just couldn't resist coming."

Jeff smiled rather grimly. "Well, you had a good time, didn't you? It seemed to me there was quite a rush for your favors. Yanovisk was so taken with my Confederate uniform that he predicted I would be the sensation of the evening. It didn't turn out to be the case."

"Just the same, I heard many a girl ask about you—you were ever so handsome, even though your costume is out of date. I suppose you can't ever forgive me."

"Forgive you for what?"

"For deceiving you. For hiding behind a mask that quickened your imagination until you thought I was a Russian princess—or some one else grand and beautiful, instead of just Molly! I know how you feel, Jeff. You feel you've been cheated. I wish I hadn't done it. It was fun, for the minute, but it hurts now."

"I don't think you have anything to be ashamed of. You beat those aristocratic ladies at their own game."

"Just the same you are disappointed. It's quite wonderful to have Cinderella turn out a princess, but it's only aggravating to have the princess turn out Cinderella." It was only a little way back to the ship and already they were mounting the plank. He halted at last at the door of her stateroom, and paused and looked into her brimming eyes. "Thank you for letting me escort you home," he told her gravely.

"I appreciated your asking." Her hand rested an instant in his.

"Molly, I'm kind of a fool, I guess. I don't know just how, but maybe I will, in time. I didn't tell you good-by when I left for the dance and I'm sorry now—sorrier than you are about fooling me. It will take many courteous deeds to make up for that discourtesy—and considering that you will soon be leaving Sitka, I'm afraid I'll never have a chance to do them."

"I wouldn't want your farewell, unless there was something besides courtesy behind it. But I am not leaving Sitka very soon, Jeff."

He did not know that his face brightened; but she knew it, and the fact made up for many things. "You don't mean it!" he exclaimed.

"Yes. Uncle Dave has to have a lot of repair work done on the ship, he says. He will be here an indefinite time. You can continue to live on the boat, if you like."

"That's just splendid. And don't worry about that mess with Baron Karl. He has no real reason for wanting to put me out of the way, and he won't take the chance of a duel—even though he is an old hand at it—until he has a reason."

She agreed with him in this. Everything had turned out all right. She had never seen a night of such perfect beauty. It seemed to her she could still smell the flowers of the garden; and the dance music floated across the water in fairy filaments of melody. Jeff was contented too, quite pleased with his future.

"You've forgiven me for deceiving you?" she asked. Of course it was a perfectly foolish thing to ask, but who wants to be always wise?

"Of course, Molly. Anyway, you didn't do anything. We were all supposed to be masked and it was my own fault if I didn't know you. You evaded the point whether we had met before. You only told me one real fib."

"What was that?"

"You shook your head when I asked you if you talked English."

Her eyes twinkled; and Jeff felt, as men often secretly feel, that the girl knew more than he. "Maybe it wasn't a complete fib," she told him mysteriously.

"How is that? You do speak English."

"No. Put your ear right close and I'll explain the mystery."

He obeyed, pleased to do so, and he felt the touch of her warm lips as she leaned too close. "I don't speak English, so much," she whispered.

"What then?"

"I speak—American!"

CHAPTER IX.

LOOT OF AN EMPIRE.

JEFF wakened with the Alaskan sun shining genially through the window of his stateroom. He dressed, breakfasted, and went out for a daylight view of the city.

No wonder Sitkan life was gay! This was the golden age of the town; and the fur trade had made it a real metropolis. There were office buildings, shops and stores, workshops of all kinds, such as laundries, bakeries, joineries, and foundries; there was a sawmill, and at the edge of the town a flour mill run by water power. The seminary would have done credit to a European city; and the cathedral brought a vision of the Old World to the benighted Aleut who knelt in its chapel.

To the west of the hill stood the carefully guarded fur warehouse, and through Yanovisk's kindness a guide was appointed to take him through it. Thereafter it was not hard to explain Sitkan prosperity, or to understand why the eyes of all nations were now turned to the North. No wonder Seward had dreamed of the northern march of his flag. Alaska was the last great prize for which the great powers played desperate poker, and now Jeff knew why.

Heaped in glossy piles was the treasure that had brought the Russians across the seas. For this they had enslaved an entire people, all but annihilated a great tribe, built forts in the wilderness. The Muscovite was never a home maker. He came to America to plunder, and here was his spoil.

There were bales of beaver, rich brown pelts almost circular in shape, and covered with a shining guard hair that had once been jeweled with water drops. Wherever trees grew and water ran men had gone to procure them; and when the story of America is finally written it must be on parchment made of beaver leather.

There were land otter, glossy brown and rich; full of lights as he moved them in his hands. The inland waters had yielded these: wild, little streams, unnamed, racing forever through lost and hidden valleys; great rivers, wide and blue, on which the trapper's birch-bark craft was but a black spot, hardly seen; roaring cataracts that humbled men to see; serene lakes imaging the shadow of a lone cormorant; still, dark, and mysterious sloughs where the deer drink, in the deep and silent woods.

There were martens—sables the Russians called them—lovely to touch, dusky as shadows in autumn woods. These came from the timbered country, and no Oriental weaver could dream of their beauty. There were fishers, to Jeff merely beautiful furs, but veritable hoodoos to the old workman, once a trapper in the interior, who was guiding him through the warehouse. This man remembered many a day when a fisher had beat him along his trap line, robbing bait and leaving worthless scraps of fur in place of his precious trophies.

There were glossy mink, golden brown, once the terror of bird and rodent; there were ermines, snow white and softer to the touch than any silk; there were muskrats from the bleak, frozen muskegs of the interior; there were spotted lynx whose mournful whine so often wakes the sleeping woodsman in his lonely camp: the fierce hunter with eyes that glow and go out and glow again in the deep gloom about the supper fire.

There were long-haired foxes, popular among the nobles of China and Russia but not well known in America—magnificent silvers, full of imprisoned moonbeams; blue foxes from the bleak, storm-swept Alaskan peninsula far to the west; deep, rich, lustrous blacks. There were red foxes by the thousand, and bale after bale of white foxes, immaculate as the wastes of snow through which they hunted. These came from the most northerly posts of the company, pursued and trapped in the long, mysterious dusk of the arctic night.

There was bale after bale of seals, sent from the Pribilofs, far to the westward. Up the rocky shores of those wintry islands came the sea herds, a roaring band whose numbers were almost beyond reckoning. No man knew what summons brought them, or how they had found the way; their great seasonal migration was no less a mystery to the unlettered Aleut who flayed them than to the wisest naturalist who came to study the cycle of their secret lives. On the windy beach they fought, mated, and played, and some of them returned to the sea. These huge bales represented a small part of those which did not return.

When Jeff had seen all these, and all the lesser furs such as wolverine, skunk, and bear, there still remained the fur that had made Alaskan history. In a separate room in the warehouse, under the care of a special guard, Jeff was shown a bale of long, lustrous pelts, like living things in the dusk of the rooms. Jeff had never dreamed of furs like these. When he chose one from the pile and held it up it shimmered and gleamed with a hundred mysterious lights, and it rippled and twitched in indescribable beauty as he dropped it on the pile. Some of the skins were a deep, rich walnut color, some almost black with silver tips.

"Sea otter," the guide told him. "Any one of 'em is the price of murder."

He told how in the beginning Russian adventurers had sailed across an unknown sea purely in the pursuit of these magnificent skins, even then worth more than their weight in gold in Chinese markets. Aleut villages had been wiped out for a bale of them; and the great Russian-American Company had been organized principally to deal in them. No sea was too broad to cross if there was the rumor of a sea-otter rookery beyond; no island was too unknown and far for the hunters to seek them; no reef so perilous but that it would be braved.

"They're worth four hundred dollars a skin, now, and the market's going up all the time as the catch of skins decreases," the old workman told him. "There's quite a pile of money in that bale!"

"Marvelous, isn't it?" Jeff agreed. "What a marvelous system behind it all!"

"It's certainly a wonderful system—for the lords and ladies who own the company."

Jeff's mind was still on the furs; and he did not notice the odd, meaningful tone with which the workman spoke. "I suppose the company paid tremendous dividends until the czar began putting on too many restrictions. But they deserved to—no one can belittle what they have done out here. Think of reaping such a harvest of gold out of this empty wilderness, these stormy seas! You must be proud to be a member of such an organization."

"I ain't a member of it. I am just a workman."

"Just the same you contribute to it. I don't think many other countries could have done what Russia has done—the building of this gay city out here at the edge of the world; the development of such a profitable organization. I don't believe even England could do it—at least they couldn't make so much out of it. America's attempt would be simply pitiful."

"No. America couldn't do it. I know America."

"You do?"

"Yes. I ain't a noble, to learn to talk English from a tutor. I spent five years in California—1849-1854. If America should happen to get hold of Alaska, Sitka might almost die out, and it might be a long time before it would come back again. At least, it would be just an Alaskan trading post instead of a European city. There wouldn't be such a harvest of gold sent back for dividends. Just the same, I wish America owned it!"

"You do!" Jeff stared incredulously, but the old man was certainly in earnest. His dimmed eyes gleamed in his weather-beaten face.

"Oh, don't I! If America did own it, Alaska wouldn't be just a fur farm for a bunch of ladies and gentlemen back in Moscow and St. Petersburg. It would be a land of opportunity, not for lords and ladies who dance in fancy-dress costumes to the music of a military band, but for common men like me. What does the company care for the country or the people? They've built this city not for colonization purposes, but just as a post to handle the furs that the driven people bring in. They haven't tried to build an Alaskan city; they've made it just as near like a Russian city as they could, to pass the time pleasantly in, until they can enrich themselves, and then go back to Russia."

"There is such a thing as loyalty, sir!" Jeff told him gravely.

"I am loyal to the czar—God bless him! —as long as I'm a Russian. It isn't him that causes the trouble; it's the rule of the nobles. I give this company my best work; but if you think I have anything like the opportunities, the decent treatment, or the chance for advancement that I'd have if this was an American company you're badly mistaken. It was organized to take gold out of Alaska, and that's what it is doing. Look at us white workers—we're kept constantly in debt to the company, and have as much chance of getting out as if we was in jail. We're under the strictest kind of a military discipline. Not long ago Chief Big Eagle, a native who can mutter a little English and talk Russian pretty good—an intelligent man as these natives go—tried to get word out to the czar about some evils that had been done to his tribe. The czar is a good czar, God bless him!—liberal and fair to the people more than any czar that has ever sat on the Russian throne—and Big Eagle thought he would take the native's side against the company, as he might have done if the message had ever got through. It was intercepted—and now you wait and see what happens to Big Eagle. I'd like to warn him, if I dared—tell him his message was intercepted so he could clear out—but I know what would happen to me if I got caught doing it. Mark my words—one of these days Big Eagle will show up missing. His family will be informed that his bidarka was wrecked while he was hunting sea otter for the company. They'll never see him again, and they'll wonder, but they won't dare ask questions. Big Eagle will be gone—likely assassinated, perhaps quietly shipped off—west!"

"Do you mean—Siberia!" Jeff's voice showed incredulity. He had heard of the Siberian prisons, but he thoroughly disbelieved the stories told of them.

"Sure. He'll be given a number, and that's the last anybody will ever hear of him. The prison officials themselves won't know his name. No one will ever inquire for him, and if they did he couldn't be found. That's part of the system—a mighty successful system, too—one that these fellows who go in for systems ought to admire. He'll work over there, and after a while he'll die when he's worked out, and that will be the end of the story."

"Do you mean—that sort of thing happens frequently?"

"It happens often enough to keep the system running. I shouldn't be telling you these things. You could make me a lot of trouble if you wanted to—trouble such as you'd never dreamed of. I wouldn't dare tell you, except——"

"Except why?"

Jeff was considerably stirred by now, and his face showed it. His black eyes seemed to shoot sparks, and rich color glowed high in his cheeks. He felt that the man's answer would have deep meaning for him.

"Except that you are an American."

The little disks of color deepened and spread in Jeff's cheeks. "And does that make a great deal of difference to you?"

"I want to tell you it does." The old man's voice wavered as he tried to hide his fervor. "I know what America stands for —equality of opportunity and a square deal for the common man!"

At this point in the talk Yanovisk came up, bearing an invitation for lunch at the Executive Mansion. As the two young men walked away together the count conversed in a courtly manner; but Jeff failed to observe the fine points of his manner and in fact had difficulty in giving him strict attention. It seemed that he had so many other things on his mind.

CHAPTER X.

THE GOVERNOR'S LUNCHEON.

IN the long, beautiful dining room of the castle a table for six had been prepared; and six silent, Oriental-looking natives, dressed like house servants of old Russia, were in attendance. The table and buffet had been wrought by cabinetmaker in an age when men put their souls into the work of their hands, fashioned with a skill that now had died from the face of the earth. This young Southerner was no backwoods boor, and he had known a great deal of what was beautiful and fine, but he opened his eyes at these things, and at the crystal and plate that gleamed on their polished surfaces. The governor had seen fit to honor him with his best.

There were three guests besides himself and Yanovisk: Templeton, the Englishman, young Lord Staritsa, and—to Jeff's immediate embarrassment—a tall, distinguished-looking Russian with the scar of a bullet wound in his cheek. Templeton was the same courteous, self-confident gentleman that had complimented Jeff upon his uniform the preceding evening. The adventurer Staritsa, the general effect of whom had been so unpleasant the night before and whose address had stopped just short of actual insult, wore his company manners today; and Jeff thought he had never met a more engaging young nobleman. His wit was keen, his manner cordial, his whole demeanor flattering in the extreme. And what might have proved a most awkward situation became, through Karl's seeming magnanimity and good breeding, an exceedingly pleasant and convivial occasion. The power behind the monopoly acted as if he had completely forgotten the unfortunate incident of the preceding night.

Indeed, the entire company put itself out to be nice to the "special correspondent" from America. He returned the compliment with the most cordial appreciation. His spirits rose to an unprecedented height; and certain troubling little doubts that had lately clouded his happiness faded and disappeared. These were his kind of people, he told himself. It was with such as these that he wanted to cast his fortune and live his life. Their ideals were the only ideals worth fighting for; their code the right code. He would go over to their side. He would not fight against them; rather he would tell them, in a few days more, his real mission in Alaska—and thus perform a duty he owed to the South and to Southern friends.

The governor was an imposing figure as he rose to offer the first toast of obligation. Jeff eyed him with youthful enthusiasm. Though the man spoke no English, the young Southerner understood the meaning of the toast before Templeton echoed it in his own tongue.

"To the czar!"

Jeff thrilled as every man present stood up, raised his glass and drank.

In the silence that followed Baron Karl's pleasant voice rolled into the room. "This glass must be drunk in honor of our distinguished guest—from America. Is it not so, my friends? Shall it be—to the President of the United States?"

"Perhaps that toast, though likely drunk with avidity, wouldn't please our guest as well as some other," Templeton remarked easily. "Perhaps you didn't notice the uniform that Mr. Sharp wore last night, Karl. It is true that he wore it for a masquerade, yet it permits us to guess some of our friend's past history. How would you like it, Mr. Sharp, if we made this next toast not to the president—but to Dixie?"

Jeff raised his head, and every man at the table—including the distinguished Russian governor who spoke no English—knew that this shot had gone home. His eyes flashed and his bold nostrils expanded as he sprang to his feet. He towered above every man in the room except Karl himself as he made his proud answer.

"That is *my* first toast of obligation, Baron Karl! To the South, and the things that the South stood for!"

After the clamor had died down Templeton leaned thoughtfully over the table. "Baron Karl is of a nation who officially took the side of the North during the war, Sharp," said he, "and he of course does not understand the situation the way we English do; but you can be sure that personally he wanted the South to win. Almost every man of the noble class in the whole world felt the same, and none of us can quite forgive Alexander II. for taking the opposite side. I think the fact will go down in history against him."

"How about Victoria?" Yanovisk asked with a slight suggestion of heat. "Her personal attitude showed that she didn't want the Union broken up. Of course her officials and the ruling class were strongly pro-Southern, and to say that England was neutral during the war is to joke. Your queen, on the other hand, was at least neutral, if indeed she was not pro-Union."

"Monarchs have strange ideas these days," Karl observed. "They are more liberal than the peasants."

"You said one thing, in your toast, that I don't fully understand," Templeton went on seriously. "You said 'the things the

South stood for,' instead of 'the things the South stands for.' Am I to believe there is any change in Southern sentiment since the war?"

"Mr. Templeton, I am sorry to say there is some slight evidence of it. Occasionally you hear a man say—the older men, who should know better—that perhaps slavery was wrong; and in the long run it will be better that we are still in the Union. There are some who are willing to forgive and forget, looking upon the great war as something that might have been avoided if there had not been hot-heads on both sides. There are some of us, sir, who do not subscribe to those sentiments. We are proud to say that we can never, never be a loyal part of the Union again."

"None of us blame you, you can be sure of that," Baron Karl told him. "We are all with you. Every one in Europe who stands for the old régime instead of this new mob rule is firm on your side."

The company now drank the health of England's queen, and as this third glass began to warm him, to gladden his heart and to dull, slightly but perceptibly, certain delicate processes in his brain, a bold and reckless idea came to this young Southerner at the governor's right. It suddenly occurred to him that here, at this select little gathering, was the fitting place to confess his real mission in Alaska. Here was his chance, without waiting longer, to thwart the enemies of the South.

He was perfectly aware that his disclosures would create a profound sensation. There would be no more laughter and carefree toasts at the long table for this present hour at least: not one of them here dreamed that negotiations between the president and the czar were already practically concluded: that Alaska was about to slip out of the monopoly's grasp. There would be no further delay in the conclusion of the treaty between the Russian-American and Hudson's Bay companies, no further haggling over terms. The result of his news would be that the two great corporations would immediately reach an agreement, the former would accept the czar's offer as to the renewal of its charter, and Seward's dream would not come true. Any hope of Alaska becoming United States territory could be definitely given over. As Seward had explained, England, the friend of the South, would fall naturally into possession.

He had not planned to show his cards at least for a few days more, taking time to scrutinize every detail of the situation; but that need of caution was past. Why should he not act at once?

The idea brought a sparkle to his eye apart from that induced by heady liquor; and he was quite pale from suppressed excitement. Had his great moment arrived? Surely there was nothing to gain by delay, and perhaps everything to lose. The circumstances were not in the least open to question. He had looked at the matter from all sides; and there was but one answer. The chance had come to deal a stinging blow to the Union that had crushed his beloved South; to repay England for her friendship to the Southern cause—and only a coward would hesitate to act.

"I have something to tell you," he began; then leaning forward in his chair he waited for a lull in the conversation so that he might be heard by every one. He was not now interested in their talk. So intent was he upon his purpose that he heard them but dimly; nor did he even discern the subject of their conversation. His preoccupation was so deep that it resembled sleep.

Presently his interest began to quicken. The fact now went home to him that while he was deep in reflection the spirit of the affair had undergone a significant change. There was a more familiar note in the conversation that passed back and forth; speech was less guarded; the gentlemen spoke with an added fervor. Jeff noticed that in his mental absence his glass had been filled with an unfamiliar liquid—a cloudy-white drink that burned his lips like fire—but the glasses of his friends were empty. Plainly they were one drink ahead of him.

This last libation evidently had been one of considerable potency, because the spirit of the gathering was now one of recklessness rather than of well-bred restraint. On the contrary, the effect of his own three drinks seemed to be wearing off, due perhaps to his mental activity of the moment before. The warmth and pleasant cordiality that had blessed him had largely passed away; and he found himself clear-headed and keen, able to give their remarks the most careful and accurate consideration.

"Yes, we lost our great chance," Templeton was saying. "We should have got into the war at the outset. It was a smashing blow to us all."

Of course he referred to the Civil War, still the evident subject of conversation; and Templeton's sentiment was one with which Jeff could surely find no fault. Yet he found himself suddenly vaguely suspicious, and anxious to hear more.

"But how could you get into it, with the queen neutral or pro-North, and your common people all hoping to see the Union stand?" Yanovisk asked.

"Oh, our queen is a fool—sometimes. Like your own czar, championing the people against us. You know it's the truth. They are so secure in themselves, these monarchs, that they have turned liberal, seeing the peasant point of view before they see ours. Our common people would be naturally in favor of the North, simply because they are enamored of the idea of popular government. That ought to show you our danger, Yanovisk. You ask me how we could have managed to get in on the Southern side. It would have been easy enough if we had all put shoulders to the wheel—the noble class in your country and mine. We almost succeeded in England—you failed miserably and offset all the work we did."

"The trouble with us was that some of our people could not see how we were concerned," Baron Karl observed. "As you say, Templeton, it was a most good, a most fortunate chance to smash—what you say?—sky-high the whole republican idea; but my friends did not have intelligence to seize it. Naturally the idea of helping the South was nothing to them any more than to you, Templeton, or to me—what did we care about their State rights, and their self-rule and all the rest of it?"

Jeff, listening keenly, started ever so slightly; but he gave no further sign that he was attentive.

"But you see that was the argument we had to go on," Templeton argued. "We couldn't tell the people that we wanted them to go to war so we could keep them under our thumbs later. We had to make them feel that we really cared what happened to a few sentimental provinces south of the Mason and Dixon line. My friends, the internal squabble of the republic was the monarchies' opportunity. If we had done what we should—I mean by 'we' the noble class in your country and mine, and in France—this liberty-equality idea of which we hear so much would have had a setback it couldn't recover from in a thousand years, simply because the republic idea would have been proved a failure. By this time there would be two or three other civil wars, the Southwest possibly breaking off from the Southeast, and the Northwest seceding from New England. The movement toward liberty and democracy would have been definitely checked. Our people would see that countries can't get along without a king—and without a noble class. This new power of America would be broken to fragments. And then—what a chance for international spoil!"

"For the safety of the English people, her majesty would be obliged to 'establish a protectorate' over the States adjoining the Canadian line," Yanovisk suggested with a grin.

"England would have to hurry to get ahead of Russia," Templeton laughed. "The czar's advisers would pursuade him that the safety of his kingdom demanded the expansion of his American possessions. Washington Territory, perhaps; maybe the entire American Northwest."

"The wabbling French king of Mexico would be glad to establish himself firmly by an increase of Mexican territory," young Staritsa remarked. "Of course he would take California, all the Southwest territories, and Texas. The French crown would of course receive added prestige and my yearly visits to Paris would not be haunted with the fear of another revolution."

"Yes, our friends in France would never need fear the return of the republic," Baron Karl remarked. "But gentlemen, in our partition of America we have forgotten its very garden." Then, speaking rapidly in French: "What lucky nation would take over the South itself?"

The noble Russian could not dream that the man at the governor's right, evidently half drunk and toying with his glass of vodka, had the least gleam of his meaning. French was the tongue of courts, Greek to the rail-splitting Indian fighters of America. The loud laugh that greeted his question was in compliment to his cleverness; it was quite diverting to discuss the dismemberment of a country in the presence of one of its patriots.

But the Southerner had not failed to understand. He not only understood the Russian's remark, but interpreted correctly all the talk that followed. He was never more sober in his life. The effect of the three drinks had miraculously passed away. His memory was sharpened and alert, and he recognized French words that he thought he had forgotten long ago.

"Yes, who will take over the South?" Staritsa echoed, laughing immoderately. "Of course, if we fought on the Southern side we would be entitled to look out for its welfare. I met a lovely lady once, on shipboard, from Virginia. I would insist that Russia take Virginia. You could have all the rest."

"The Southern gentlemen would be allowed to gather cotton beside their own former slaves," was Karl's next sally.

"None of you should have any of it," Templeton informed the party. "You know what country depends on cotton—England would have to keep the South for herself!" His laugh ended with an oath. "But we are talking moonshine, and you know it. The Civil War is over. The Union is stronger than it ever was—at least it will be when the war hatred begins to pass away. We lost our chance. It won't be long till we have a people's government in our own countries—for that matter, the House of Lords is losing prestige every year. A man can poach rabbits on my place in Devonshire, and can I hang him to the first oak? I cannot—I do well to get him a year's sentence in jail. The old days of privilege are gone—I am afraid not to return. We won't be able to hold the people down as we used to—we'd better stop this, and remember our guest."

All laughter had died away when Templeton ceased speaking. The stately dining room was now oddly quiet. Smiling brilliantly, Staritsa turned to the guest of honor.

"I'm afraid we interrupted you a few minutes ago," he said in English. "We got to talking about the greatness of your country; and I fear we were rude, yes? You said you had something to tell us."

Jeff looked him in the eyes. "It was nothing of importance," said he.

CHAPTER XI.

ON THE KOLOSH RYEKA TRAIL.

JEFF rightly felt that his first work in connection with the commission given him was a close scrutiny of Alaskan conditions. He did not care to work in the dark. He felt that a full understanding of the international and local situation was a debt he owed not only to Seward, but also to himself; he believed himself, in a sense, a free agent who must act in the end according to his own conscience and wisdom. The first day in Sitka had been enlightening; but he was as yet far from a decision as to his ultimate course.

In the week that followed he spared no pains to dig out the truth. He talked to otter hunters and trappers, to tradesmen and clerks, to members of the clergy and to soldiers of the garrison. He conferred with the officials of the company; he investigated all rumors dealing with the proposed Russian-British treaty; he tried to learn the people's real sentiment toward America.

It appeared that some rumor had already got about that the United States was interested in Alaska; but the officials of the monopoly as well as of the Hudson's Bay Company seemed to regard it lightly. They were taking their time over the new treaty; and were probably still haggling over details. The understanding seemed to be that Russia would make no move to find a purchaser for Alaska at least for some years.

As he was quietly making his investigations, Jeff did not fail to allay suspicions as to his real mission by pretending a great interest in the now abandoned transpacific cable, as well as in certain minor disputes that had come up regarding fishing and trading rights between the people of Washington Territory and the Russians. Nor did he hesitate to take part in the gay Sitkan social life.

As he still made his quarters in the ship he saw a great deal of Molly, and although she was not included in the social life of the post she was a pleasant companion in his idle hours. They had many a fine walk together along the beach and back into the forest, and she was his companion at the first Indian potlatch he ever attended—given at the shack of a successful Aleut sea-otter hunter.

It came about that after the affair was over, the moon beguiled them into a midnight walk along the Kolosh Ryeka Trail, across the quaint bridge and up a path leading toward Mount Verstovia.

Almost at once the forest closed around them; and they were hushed and awed by the presence of the giants. There was a magic in the moonlit Northern woods that even the wild creatures seemed to feel; a mystery that mere reason could not reach, a brooding loneliness, the sense of an eternal and secret wisdom. Though they were not unaware of each other, both the man and the girl were busy with dreams.

Although Jeff was dreaming, his eyes were wide open. He suddenly paused in the trail, and Molly, walking behind him, pressed against his shoulder.

Instantly she saw what had halted him: a momentary silhouette of a man's form at the brow of a low hill, just above the forks in the trail. Almost at once it faded in the shadows; and although they waited, it did not at once reappear.

This was not just a late traveler from the mountain. His furtive movements indicated that he was lying in ambush beside the trail. Jeff touched Molly's arm, and together they drew farther into the shadows, waiting for what might transpire.

For some little time nothing whatever happened. The girl breathed softly beside him and he felt the pleasing touch of her warm shoulder. Whatever the crisis, Molly at least could be counted on to stay out of the way.

"It's a false alarm, I think," he whispered. "Did we imagine that figure?"

But it might not be, after all, a false alarm. Presently he heard the distant pat-pat of moccasined feet on the path, and peering intently between the trees they saw the long shadow of a man moving in jerking motions along one of the side trails toward the forks. What part he had in the hillside drama as yet they did not know; he was making no attempt to walk silently or in any way to conceal his advance. If there was indeed an ambush at the forks of the trail this man was walking straight into it.

Before Jeff could fully realize this possibility and make any move to warn him the man had reached a small opening between the trees where a moment before the skulking figure had disappeared. He was in plain sight in the moonlight as he started to walk through. At this instant the affair lost its commonplace character.

There was a sudden confusion of swiftly moving figures in the small clearing. The foe had not been content with decent odds; not one, but three, sprang from the thickets and fell upon the lone pedestrian.

The rest that Jeff saw he saw as he ran. He saw that the three men evidently lacked faith in their naked hands to master a lone foe and were chivalrously armed with clubs; and he saw further that the pedestrian, instead of instantly yielding to overwhelming numbers, was putting up the gamest kind of a fight, meanwhile looking for a chance to take to his heels. Jeff saw these things as he ran, and he was not obliged to look back over his shoulder. He was running with the idea of getting into the affair in the shortest possible time.

He felt quite sure that it was none of his concern. He was unarmed except for his cane, he had a lady in his charge, and sooner or later he would meet an unhappy end simply by this sort of interference in other people's affairs. Nevertheless, it was not in him to stand aside when one fought three. Love of fair play is deeply ingrained in Southern youth—part of the heritage of chivalry that has come straight down to the sons of the cavaliers—and his legs would have wilted under him had he tried to run away.

He sprinted up the trail as fast as he could go, hoping in his heart that the excitement would not be over until he reached the scene. He forgot his fine clothes, any stateliness that he might have fancied he possessed, and he went eight feet at a jump. His eyes flashed and he brandished his stick about his head like a battle-ax.

But there was serious business enough when he charged up into the small clearing. The three men had launched a most brutal attack; and death might come at the end of it. He was presently aware, now that he came near enough to see plainly, that if his old war gods were not with him still this adventure on the hillside might easily put an end to him. There was valiant fighting before him if he were to come through.

He realized now that the fight had significance beyond what he had first thought. It was not a mere attack by footpads. The aggressors were evidently desperate, or they would certainly make some effort to flee as he sped in among them. Their victim was now shown to be an Indian, doubtless on the way home from the native potlatch; certainly not acceptable prey to roadside bandits. The three men evidently were soldiers, as they wore the uniform of the garrison.

And now there was no time to deliberate further. The nearest of the three men lunged at him as he ran past to give aid to the Indian, and in an instant they were grappling like wrestlers.

The conflict was a desperate one from the first instant. Jeff's man was a powerful Russian of about his own age; and the grasp of his strong hand precluded any attempt on the Southerner's part to use his stick. With his left hand, a fighting tool that seemed of forged steel rather than mortal human flesh, he reached and seized Jeff's throat.

The sport and the adventure of this fight on the Kolosh Ryeka Trail speedily passed away, and left it a grim and terrible business neither pleasant to see nor sweet to know. With the closing of those iron fingers on his windpipe the brawl became literally one of life and death. Jeff forgot how he came here, how it had all happened and what had been the issues involved, and only remembered he must break this hold or perish.

He did not have any large amount of time. Inability to breath may be tolerated for a few seconds; but thereafter comes a noticeable slump in one's prowess, accompanied by acute disorders in all the physical and mental processes. Unlike most things, an enemy's hold on one's throat grows stronger with passing time, simply because of increasing inability to struggle against it. Jeff dropped his stick, and wrenched with both hands at the cruel pinchers which were depriving him of life.

He gave all he had, and it was just enough. The Russian was forced to let go to save the bones of his wrists and fingers; but the throat skin was flayed off under his raking nails. Jeff's breath came back in a torturing sob, but his strength came with it; and he met the Russian's next attack with considerable power.

Bearlike arms encircled him, and with a terrific wrench his foe hurled him to the ground. He wished to have him where, when an opportunity presented itself, he could hold Jeff's windpipe undisturbed. Jeff had never met a more satisfactory opponent than this strapping Muscovite, or encountered such ungentile alacrity as this with which he was now laid upon his back. If he lost, at least it would be to some one worthy of his steel.

But he had not lost yet. The fight had just begun. In fact, he had no intention of losing, and he struggled like a demon against his foe's effort to pin him down. The two of them rolled about on the hill, too intent on the business of fighting even to howl, and though their clothes and skins were torn and their faces battered, at first neither could seem to gain the slightest advantage. The Russian sought in vain for another grip on Jeff's throat, and the latter, relying on American methods, could not at first break through the foe's guard to the vulnerable point of his bearded chin.

But now, with the passing moments, a great self-confidence overswept Jeff.

With a strong effort he put his foe beneath him, and slowly and patiently began the work necessary to keep him there. His superior stamina was now making itself manifest. The foe struggled desperately, but Jeff could not be driven off, nor did his iron hold relax. And now there was but one flaw in his perfect happiness.

As his foe had gone down and Jeff had wheeled up he had glanced toward the other fighters, and what he saw filled him with concern. It was true that the Indian seemed to be making out fairly well. He was fighting the biggest man of the three—the veritable giant of the lusty trio—but he seemed to be a singularly powerful fellow, and although he was hard pressed Jeff saw in a glance that he was still far from defeat. The thing that now troubled Jeff was not the fate of the savage, but the activities of the third Russian.

Until a moment ago this man had aided his companion in the combat with the Indian. The battle proving too hot for his liking, he had turned now in search of easier prey. In a little half glimpse between one blow and another Jeff caught sight of him in the act of circling about through the shadows to attack him from the rear.

He could not get up to meet that attack in the teeth. His man kept him too busy for that. He could not even turn his head to watch. And now he knew that very real terror and most hideous anticipation of cold steel being driven into his back.

All these soldiers were armed with knives, and were altogether too fond of using them. Blades were particularly useful in hole-and-corner business of this kind because, unlike a rifle, they struck without noise. Unable to break the hold of his first enemy, who now clung desperately to his arms, unable to wheel him over as a shield for his own body, there was nothing for Jeff to do but to pray to his gods of chance and wait for what might befall.

One second passed, and then another.

Nothing whatever happened except that which had already been happening—the interchange of a few pleasantries between himself and the man on whom he lay. The time lengthened almost to a minute; and instead of a renewed attack with reinforcements on the part of the foe there was only a strange and growing silence. The third Russian did not come in sight, nor was any sound to be heard from him. Nothing remained to believe but that he had had no intention of helping his friend, but that Jeff had seen him in the craven act of retiring from the company.

Now he had lost his chance. In another instant Jeff would be free to handle him. His first opponent was limp in his arms now, quite unconscious from a short tap which Jeff had dealt him under the curve of his jaw; and although no grave after effects were to be anticipated, he would not be able to resume the fight for some moments at least.

Jeff knocked away his restraining arms, and jumped to his feet. He wanted to make sure about the third Russian. And then he uttered a long, tired gasp that was partly wonder, and partly a mixture of other emotions too complex to trace.

The man had not gone away, after all. He was lying down. A knife lay near his hand. Jeff had guessed right as to his murderous intentions. The Indian, who had put down his man, walked near and looked him over, discovering at length a slight but evidently effective abrasion at the side of his head. He also would not be himself for some moments to come.

Old generals had taught the young soldier always to keep his eye open for the unexpected, the intruding circumstance that turns the tide of battle. Here it stood, most wonderfully beautiful in the moonlight that streamed down between the trees.

It was Molly; her eyes lustrous with tears, but her capable hand still firmly clasping Jeff's heavy-handled cane.

CHAPTER XII.

A BIG, STRONG WOMAN.

JEFF was a rather fluent young man ordinarily, with a nice speech usually ready on his lips, but for a few seconds following his discovery of Molly's presence on the battlefield he was as silent as if he were born mute. There was simply nothing possible to say to tell how he felt; or the meaning that this moment had for him.

However, Jeff did some clear and able thinking. Molly might not be his kind of girl, the kind that fulfilled his ideal of womanhood, but every spark of manhood made him admit that her fine courage and steadfastness had saved him from serious injury or death. She had done him a service that even in this northern land he would probably never have opportunity to repay; and he would always be her acknowledged debtor. In addition to this, there was born in this memorable night a comradeship between them that ought never to pass away, the inevitable result of their common danger and victory.

Strangely enough, the romance of their relationship seemed lessened rather than increased. His romantic nature had been deeply stirred some nights before when this same capable, companionable girl had danced with him in mask and fancy dress; but it was quite lifeless now. He was moved, deeply grateful; but his emotion was something far different than she might be dreaming. He was certain that this courageous woman who had plunged into a fight and with a man's weapon repelled a murderous attack upon him, was not and could never be the romantic ideal he had cherished so long. His heart's image was something far different from this. In his dreams he was the knight who saved the helpless and wistful lady, and never was he rescued in a brawl by a young Amazon who knocked men down with clubs!

"I can never thank you," he told her gravely. "It was the finest thing of the kind I ever saw."

The Indian had got up by now, after examining the clubbed Russian, and his face as he regarded Molly was comical to see. His stern mouth was rounded, his eyes showed a vast and incredulous admiration. "Heap big squaw!" he breathed. "Knock'm down—pretty near kill'm. Indian woman, she fight'm—never saw white woman fight'm before. Skookem big, big, strong squaw."

Jeff and the girl looked at him with frank gratitude. He had saved the situation which had passed almost beyond them. Their laughter was a safe mask behind which they could hide their hearts.

"I agree with you perfectly," Jeff said. "Now, chief, tell us what this means. Had we better try to bind these three men? They will be coming to, in a minute. One of 'em is stirring now."

Coming originally from the Stikine country, the chief had many times held parleys with the factors of Hudson's Bay and understood a few words of English, but Jeff's remark was too complex for him to follow. Grunting, he indicated inability to understand.

"Tie 'em up?" the white man simplified. He brought his hands about his ankles in a suggestive gesture.

"No tie 'em up. Skin out quick. Company catch me, catch you, catch big strong woman."

Jeff experienced a queer, dim quickening in his memory. There was something oddly familiar about all this. He stared into the native's face.

"What's your name?" he demanded.

"Name—him Big Eagle."

Big Eagle! Jeff remembered, now, his first morning in Sitka and a conversation he had had with a grizzled workman in the fur warehouse. Jeff had not believed the man's story then; but he could not very well doubt it now. The argument on the hillside had been all too convincing. The man had said that something of a disagreeable nature would happen to Big Eagle; and so it had: he had been neatly waylaid as he walked home from the potlatch, and just what was to have been done to him was at present locked in the minds of the three Russians who slept so peacefully there in the spruce needles.

It was an efficient system that Baron Karl operated in the provinces of the czar.

Jeff was for a moment absorbed in his thoughts; but he emerged swiftly when he heard Molly in conversation with the native. The girl was speaking a language that Jeff did not know: a queer, guttural tongue, full of harsh consonants.

Big Eagle was looking into the girl's face with every sign of intense interest; and nodding vigorously as he answered her questions. His admiration of her was more obvious than ever; and Jeff was reminded of a dog with his master.

Presently she turned to Jeff. "Big Eagle tells me it was a conspiracy against him on the part of some men in the company," she explained. "He is going to vanish at once in the interior—up to his old hunting grounds on the Upper Stikine—because he says it is his one chance for life. He says that you and I had better get back to the ship as soon as possible."

"I suppose it means trouble for us, too. These men are certain to recognize us."

"But they are not certain to tell!" Molly informed him. "It isn't human nature for three men, selected on account of their strength and prowess, to enjoy confessing a defeat at the hands of two men and a girl, particularly when they had all the advantage of ambush. They'll make up some sort of a story about how Big Eagle's Indian friends came to his rescue—and although they knocked out a score or so, in the end had to retire before superior numbers. Jeff, I don't think we'd better wait any longer. Good luck, Big Eagle!"

"Heap seals, great white mother!" the native returned. And as they looked at him, he seemed to vanish into the empty air. The forest he had known and loved so long instantly hid all sight and sound of him, and where he stood was only moonlight and the long shadows of the trees.

CHAPTER XIII.

WANTED—AN AMERICAN.

MOLLY had a perfectly simple explanation for her ability to talk to the native. "Traveling around with Uncle Dave I've picked up a smattering of several tongues," she told him when they were safely aboard the ship. "I have been in the woods, too—up the Stikine in a bidarka—and I've learned to talk a jargon that most of the tribes understand. It has often been useful to me."

Talking the matter over with Captain Skinner, they decided to make no report of the fight on the hill, but quietly await developments. After a few days it seemed likely that they would never hear from it again. The cordial manner of Semanof, in command of the garrison, remained unchanged; and Jeff decided he was either playing a deep game or, which was far more likely, that the three soldiers had failed to make a true report to their commander. Perhaps, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, the men were simply three desperadoes who had laid in ambush beside the trail for the purpose of robbing chance passers-by.

Jeff told himself he had heard of even more unusual coincidences. He must have further evidence before he would believe all the old workman had told him.

The smarting wound his self-satisfaction had received at the governor's luncheon had mostly healed by now. The conversation he had heard had dimmed in his remembrance. Now, with the passing days, the adventure on the hillside had ever less meaning to him. Its ugly significance was forgotten or questioned: from a really black crime it became an event of neutral shade which he might have interpreted entirely wrong. Big Eagle was not here now to plead his case. The wilderness had swallowed him, and none of the officials of the Russian-American Company who used to buy his otter skins knew where he might be found.

The more Jeff saw of Sitkan official and court life, the greater its appeal, the more obvious its superiority over anything to be found in his own country. Surely the peasant existence in the northern States and Middle West could not be compared with it. Since the South was now crushed it also failed to measure up. The gay social life, the refinement and especially the European charm and culture certainly made up for many things. Strict discipline of the natives was of course an absolute necessity, and perhaps the somewhat harsh treatment of Big Eagle had been justified by serious crime.

He was dined, fêted, flattered, and treated like a nobleman himself, none of which offended him in the least. It was true that a remark was made now and then which he could not fully appreciate, and sometimes something that looked like a skeleton stalked out of the imperial closet, only to be quickly confined again; but on the whole these first weeks in Sitka were more to his liking than any term of equal length in his carefree youth. Yet it was not to be that he should continue to see only those things that official Alaska cared to show him. The outside view of the Russian-American system was most pleasant to behold, but Jeff was carried on the inside in spite of himself.

One October evening no social engagements demanded his presence; and after supper he sat alone on the deck of the *Ethan Allen,* wondering at the blackness of this Alaskan night. Clouds had massed in the sky imprisoning the least faint gleam of a star; and the sea was actually like ink except where the harbor lights threw a dim and fitful gleam. The town lights were like small, yellow holes in a black sheet. Although the hour was still early the last gray strand of twilight had vanished apparently into the blackness of the sea: he was tasting the long autumn nights of Sitka, a Northern city in spite of its comfortable climate.

As Jeff watched the distant lights, oppressed somewhat by the depth of the gloom about him, he heard a subdued splash close to the water and just beside the curving hull of the ship. At first he thought it was merely a leaping fish, but as he listened a wooden object scratched the side of the ship. Of course it was a small boat of some sort, but Jeff found it almost incredible that any sort of a boat could approach unheard over that hushed sea, in the dead silence of the night. The fact that it had done so would have been fair proof to an old sour dough that the man who propelled it did not wear a white skin. Only the red man is adept at paddling a canoe without the paddle splash that a moose can hear.

Jeff stood up and peered over the rail, but it was like looking into an unlighted tunnel. He could not even make out the boat's outline. But at that instant a voice came up out of the deep.

It was a moving and mysterious sound in the utter darkness, and Jeff felt as if he were being addressed from another world. Its subdued note indicated the message was for his ear alone; and the fact that the language used was not English, but rather a guttural tongue that he did not know, added rather than detracted from the mystery.

"Speak English," Jeff replied. "I can't understand."

The man at the waterline evidently could not speak English, because he merely repeated the sentence. On this repetition, however, Jeff caught a single word that he thought he knew. As near as he could tell, it was *"Americansk!"*

He assumed at once that the man was trying to ask if Jeff were an American—possibly if the ship had American registration. It had not been his practice since the war to use the term "American" in regard to himself; but now, vaguely excited by the mysterious visit, he all but answered in the affirmative, remembering his unfailing pride just in time. "It is an American ship," he replied, his voice also subdued. Then, trusting that the man would know the Aleut word for boat—a word that Jeff had heard frequently since coming to Sitka—he added: "American bidarka."

This information apparently reassured the visitor, for a long silence ensued; and when

Jeff heard him again he had paddled silently as a drifting cloud around the bow of the boat and was tying up at the dock. One of the lights of the quay showed faintly a long, native canoe at the water line, and two lithe, long-haired natives.

They immediately started across the plank on to the ship, and Jeff got up to meet them. He did not attempt further conversation with them, but assuming that their business was with Captain Skinner, led them immediately into the latter's quarters.

It was Molly who in the end had to translate the vernacular into English. After the first sentence she turned to Jeff with a look of question.

"I think this will be a matter for you to attend to, Jeff," she said. "He tells me he wants to talk to a representative of the American government, and is probably after American protection. Since we haven't an accredited consul in Sitka, I guess you'll have to give it to him."

"But I am here as a special correspondent, Molly."

"I know that is your official standing, but everybody seems to think that you are close enough to official Washington to look after American interests up here. Your influence would be certainly greater than the captain's or mine, the only other citizens of the United States. I think this will be your affair."

There followed a long conversation between the girl and the natives, the former asking questions, the latter muttering long and seemingly unintelligible sentences in their harsh, guttural tongue.

"They seem to have come on a rather delicate mission," she explained at last. Her heightened color, lovely under her yellow hair and her brilliant eyes showed she had found the story keenly interesting. "They were sent to get some kind of an American official if such could be found, and if not, an influential American whom our government would look after. At first I had quite a time getting them to be frank with me. They wouldn't go on till I made it plain that while you, Jeff, are not an official, at least you are a 'chief' and could do more for them in Washington than any one else in Sitka. "If they couldn't find a 'chief' they wanted the captain of an American vessel. With good luck, they found both."

"You're worse than the Indians, Molly," Jeff complained. "Can't you get at the story?"

"I will, quick as I can. It seems there is a disabled steam schooner in the harbor behind Barabara Point. Do you know where that is, uncle?"

"Sure. That's the native name for a place on the mainland, at least twenty hours' run from here. The Aleuts built a big barabara on the point to use in otter hunting. Who is she?"

"She is the *Boston Dame.* She's been trading off the coast of Siberia. She's not badly damaged, but she's stuck up there in the lagoon for at least a moon. She's in command of Captain Cooper, and she wants help."

"What kind of help? A tow?"

"No. I asked about that particularly. She wants an American official to get a ship and come up there and take off part of her cargo to save it. What can the man mean by that?"

"I know right well what he means, and so do you."

"To keep some one else from getting it?"

"Sure. He's been trading with the natives for furs, and he's probably got some fine ones. Course he calculated to shoot right through to an American port; and he's hung up the last place on earth he would have picked out. He knows what will happen when word reaches the Russian-American Company that he's gone aground."

"What?" Jeff demanded. His tone showed that he resented, in spite of himself, the captain's knowing manner.

"They'll come up and seize his cargo, that's what, and maybe his ship too." He whipped to the girl. "Has Cooper got papers showing permission to trade?"

The question had to be repeated, in laborious detail, to the natives, and their answer returned. "They say he has all his papers and was entirely in his rights," the girl translated at last.

"I don't doubt it. Yankee skippers as a rule don't go to smuggling," Captain Skinner commented with vigor and emphasis. "Just the same, he knows them permits won't save him a minute. Baron Karl's gang won't even look at his papers, and if he tries to show 'em they'll tear 'em up and chuck 'em into the harbor."

"You mean they would unlawfully confiscate the cargo of an American trading vessel?" Jeff demanded incredulously.

"They won't confiscate it. That's too big a word. They'll just pinch it. Furs are too hard to catch to let a chance like this go by, and they resent the czar's liberality in granting trading permits, and deny his right to do so. They'll just report that they caught him trading in their waters, and that's all there's going to be to it. Maybe they won't take the trouble to make any report at all—especially if the boat would happen to sink! It'd be something the same if the Hudson's Bay Company boats come along and spied him, because Barabara Point is on the Panhandle which they've chartered from the company, but in that case he'd likely be given at least the chance of a trial in London."

"How does he think we can help him?" Jeff asked.

"That's plain enough. He knows that the company here or the Hudson's Bay Company is bound to learn about him before he can make repairs and get out. He wants you to come up there in a boat and take care of part or all of his furs for him, and keep 'em for him. In other words, use the power of United States government to keep the gang from taking them away from him. They're only too tickled to rob an American; they think he can't fight back. What you going to do about it?"

"I'll help him all I can, of course, if he deserves it. I wasn't given any instructions to take this kind of affair under my wing, but since I have influence in Washington it's for me to help him."

"It's for all of us to help him," was the emphatic reply. "Ain't he from our country?"

"I must say, however, that I think you misjudge the company officials," Jeff went on stiffly. "I don't think they'd confiscate a cargo of furs lawfully taken."

"All right, wait and see. A lot depends on how valuable the furs are. Prince Maksoutof plays a square game as far as I know, but he is only an agent for the owners of the company, such as Karl, and what you don't know about that fellow would fill a dictionary. But don't think I'm trying to persuade you not to help the poor devil out. It's the least we can do. Only see that you're properly rewarded for exerting your influence with Washington and the officials here, as well as for the risk you're taking."

"Pooh! Where do you get the risk?"

"Any time a man has gold in his hands—and furs are gold—he's in danger. I'm not fooling, Sharp, and I say it could be a serious danger up here. Where you going to get a boat to go help him?"

"I don't know. Do you?"

"How about this one? We're an American outfit, and would take pleasure in it."

"But you're disabled!"

The captain looked down his nose, and his expression was so peculiar that Jeff's interest was immediately aroused. "So we are! Molly, what are we going to do about that?"

"What can we do, captain?" the girl replied. "Don't you think you could patch us up somehow, enough for the short run out and back?"

"Oh, maybe so. Molly, show the natives into the galley and see that they get some coffee—with plenty of sugar. I'll go down and talk to the chief engineer. I guess we can make the brig run, and the sooner we get started, the better our chance to save the cargo of the *Boston Dame.*"

Before long Jeff was to understand why the fame of the Yankee skippers carried over the five oceans, a tradition that would endure clear until that unhappy time when American youth chose the city rather than the sea, and our strong ships were guided by alien hands. Captain Skinner went below, gave certain orders, and then went to bed, at which time the fires in the boiler room were all but out and parts of the engine were dismantled. When Captain Skinner got up again, in daylight, all that remained to do was to stand upon his bridge and give his orders.

He gave those orders in a voice that could be heard over most of Sitka. The wounded bird took wing. In the chill morning hours—bravely as her famous namesake advancing on Ticonderoga—the *Ethan Allen* steamed out from the dock. Soon she had passed the harbor mouth and once more felt the long roll of the seas under her stout keel.

CHAPTER XIV.

ALASKAN TREASURE.

IN the dawn that followed the crew of the *Boston Dame* experienced a moment of acute anxiety when a determined-looking ship steamed into the harbor behind Barabara Point. Because the time was halfway between night and day, there was not sufficient light to distinguish her nationality.

They did not, however, remain long in

doubt. Captain Skinner cast anchor at a convenient distance, then stepped on to his bridge and began to converse with them. To the great delight of Captain Cooper and his men, he informed them that he was an American, that he commanded an American crew, and the *Ethan Allen* was decidedly an American vessel; and he inferred they would all greatly resent being mistaken for any other nationality.

"Who you got aboard?" the *Boston Dame* skipper called.

"I got Jefferson Sharp aboard, second cousin to General Grant," was the reply. Jeff Sharp was no relation whatever to General Grant, however; and he could not imagine where Skinner got the idea that he was.

"Then put over a boat and you and him come over."

This suggestion was immediately acted upon, and in a few minutes Captain Skinner, Molly, and Jeff were climbing a rope ladder to the *Boston Dame's* deck. They found her a stanch sailing vessel with spotless decks and none of the signs of disreputability that mark so many traders in Northern waters.

Jeff was introduced with a flourish. "He ain't exactly an official in Sitka right now," Skinner confided, "but he's hand in hand with the president, and the telegram that told me to wait pretty near two weeks for him came straight from the White House. He calls Mr. Seward by his first name; and if you've got business with official Washington he's the man to handle it for you."

When on the bridge of his own ship Captain Skinner was the monarch of all he surveyed; but now, after he had made his little speech, he found himself second in command. So quietly and calmly that no one had seen him do it, a black-eyed youth in stylish garb had taken complete charge of the situation. Jefferson Sharp was now the important person present. It lay with him to say what help could be given Captain Cooper of the *Boston Dame*. He was like a pilot who, hauled aboard at the harbor mouth, lights on the deck with a ringing command on his lips; but to-day it was the cargo, rather than the ship, which must be piloted through dangerous waters.

"Let me see if I get this straight," he addressed Captain Cooper. "You have been lawfully trading over west, and are homeward bound with a cargo of furs. For fear they will be taken from you, you want me to take charge of all or part of them?"

"That's the ticket," Cooper replied. "If you don't take 'em off my hands one of the big companies will. Any hour one of 'em might happen along."

"Regardless of the fact that you have your permits?"

"Why, mister, they wouldn't even look at my papers. All they could see is what I have on board. I was counting on giving this end of Alaska a wide berth, because I knew they'd want to search me if they saw me. And here I am, held up tight."

"They evidently know you."

"They know I came up here trading—spotted me on the way out. They know I've got my papers, but—excuse me—if you think them papers is going to keep 'em off you ain't very well informed on the trading business. For my part, I was countin' on a fair wind and a good head of steam."

"I'd like to see your papers now, if you please."

Jeff rather expected the man to back down, but instead he went straight to his cabin and promptly appeared with the necessary permits, duly signed, sealed and witnessed. They were plainly genuine.

"They're all right," Jeff admitted. "I don't see what you need of me. They show absolutely that you are in your rights."

"A lot of good that does me. Mr. Sharp, I want your help—your private aid and your influence officially—and I'm willing to pay for it. Come on down below. I've got something to show you. You never in your life, I guess, saw anything like it."

He turned, leading the way down a ladder that led into the forward hatch. The advancing dawn had scarcely reached here yet, but the captain's lantern threw a yellow gleam into a strange, lustrous darkness that was no part of the gloom of the hold. Piled about them high as a man could reach was bale after bale of furs.

All sea otter. One of the last big rookeries."

Skinner's eyes began to glitter and dance in the gloom of the room. Molly, who knew something about furs, gasped audibly; Jeff was lost in the very beauty of the living, quivering heaps.

"Oh, Lord, there must be two thousand of 'em!" Skinner exclaimed.

"Not two thousand. The bales aren't as big as they look. But there's a thousand, with just a couple of skins extra. And they're worth both our ships put together."

"And a whole fleet besides. Four hundred dollars was the last quotation for the common run of skins."

"These are extra large and fine. They'll bring that figure net. That's four hundred thousand dollars. Captain Skinner, will I ever get into port with 'em?"

Captain Skinner shook his head so gravely that every one present stopped the wheel of their thoughts to look at him. Real gravity was uncommon in this boisterous Yankee skipper. "Cap'n, I doubt it. Though I could carry all those bales over in a few loads of the dory, they'd sink any ship. Violence and sudden death happens to people with them things on their hands."

"How about the American embassy at Sitka? Can it protect 'em for me?"

"There ain't any American embassy at Sitka. The only American flag in the town is on this ship when she's at the quay. My friend here is the nearest thing to an American official around there, and his great influence is personal rather than official. Can he protect 'em for you? Well, there are places, places that has got kind of acquainted with the American flag, where it would go a long way toward protecting an American's property. I don't know about Sitka. I must say I doubt it. But if any American can keep 'em for you, Sharp here's the man. They know he's powerful enough to make 'em a lot of trouble; at least he wouldn't be as safe to bother as an unknown skipper. He's close friends with the high men of the company. Over and above all this, he hails from a State where they don't believe in giving up without a fight."

"What do you think, Mr. Sharp?" Captain Cooper asked. "Do you think they'll try to get 'em away from you?"

"I know they won't," was Jeff's emphatic answer. "The idea is ridiculous. It's absurd to think they'd bother you here, either, except to ask to see your papers. I know those skins are tempting, but the officials of the Russian-American Company do not yield to that kind of temptation."

"Maybe so and maybe no. I've heard right smart about Baron Karl. Will you take the skins off my hands?"

"If you want me to, yes. It might be that they would be safer from piracy. You will have to turn over your permits to me, in case I was ever questioned."

"I expected to do that. I only wish I was confident as you are. But I know Baron Karl, and I don't know you; and it looks to me like my cake was dough." He paused, sighing. "Now here's my proposition. You and Captain Skinner take these skins off my hands, keep 'em for me, don't let anybody know you got 'em till you have to, and get 'em down to an American port soon as possible."

"I think we can make a special trip down there with 'em as soon as some repairs can be made on my ship and we can fill her bunkers," Skinner told him.

"Good. They'll be some little trouble, and some risk—maybe more'n a little. I am going to make this thing worth your best efforts. If you get these thousand skins down to an American port where I can put 'em in safe hands, you get five hundred of 'em to divide between you."

Captain Skinner made a queer clucking sound; but aside from that, only his eyes talked. Those bright Yankee eyes made unmistakable appeal to Jeff. The latter whirled to face Captain Cooper.

"Did you say five hundred skins to divide between us, if we bring the batch through?" he asked, steadily as he could.

"Yes. Half of 'em. Isn't that fair?"

"Man, those five hundred skins are worth two hundred thousand dollars!"

"Don't I know it? That's the contract I'll make with you. Half of 'em left to me is better than none of 'em. None of 'em is what I'd have when Baron Karl's crowd found me here with 'em."

"Of course you'll put the deal down in black on white?" Captain Skinner suggested.

"Sure. You give me receipts for 'em in exchange. Are you ready to take 'em? If so, I'll have the boys lower the longboat."

Jeff hurried out of the hold and into the captain's cabin, where in a few minutes all arrangements for the transfer were completed. No wonder he was silenced and bewildered by this sudden tide of fortune, exalted by new hope, keyed to a new interest and zest for life. He was only human, and he had tasted that bitter drink, the particularly cankerous sort of poverty that is commonly called genteel; and no wonder his outlook on life was now changed and brightened. It seemed to him that the golden harvest of this fur bringing was already pouring over him. Never for a moment did he doubt his ability to bring the skins through. He really believed that Cooper's fear was utter nonsense.

The crew of the *Boston Dame* was at once set to work carrying the bales across in the longboat, to be stored in the hold of the *Ethan Allen:* an easy job soon done. Jeff and his party returned to the latter ship, and were soon ready to sail.

"Good luck, and don't worry!" Jeff called to Captain Cooper as the gray sea widened between them. "Your skins will be safe."

"I ain't worrying," the latter called back. "I'm either busted or I'm rich. It's up to you to do the worrying from now on."

Such seemed to be the case. Bearing down toward the harbor mouth was a large ship, in the haze of distance apparently as stanch and formidable as a man-of-war. She paid no attention to the disabled vessel in the harbor. Evidently her captain had seen, through his glass, the passing back and forth of the longboat between the two American traders. She was headed straight toward the *Ethan Allen.*

CHAPTER XV.

"I'M WITH YOU!"

ALMOST at once Captain Skinner recognized the approaching ship as the *Queen,* one of the Hudson's Bay Company's fleet and plainly in her rights. Barabara Point and all of the Alaskan mainland north to Cape Spencer was, by right of the treaty of 1839, the great English company's trading ground. Skinner noticed also that she was a high-speed ship compared to his own safe and steady vessel; and it might be that this observation was a factor in his subsequent conduct. While it was true that from time to time he had been known to run a race, he firmly decided that such conduct would now be extremely discourteous to the British captain. Like an honest man with nothing in particular to do, he steamed out until he was some three miles offshore, and headed into the sea with just enough power to hold his own against the tide, waiting for what might befall.

At length the *Queen* drew up in easy shouting distance, and she too headed into the tide. As far as Jeff could see, Captain Skinner was not even watching her maneuvers. He leaned comfortable on the rail of his bridge, smoking peacefully and making weather predictions for the next day. It was not until the stranger captain began to shout through his megaphone that the old Yankee showed any knowledge of his presence.

"Who are you and where bound?" the *Queen's* master called. His angry tone indicated any one of several things, perhaps that complications had risen in what seemed to be a very simple, expeditious, and not to mention profitable affair; perhaps merely that Skinner's air of calm and indifference had grated unpleasantly upon him.

"Schooner *Ethan Allen,* American registry, bound for Sitka," was Captain Skinner's reply. "Who are you?"

"Captain Lennox, of Hudson's Bay *Queen.* You took some of the cargo off the *Boston Dame,* didn't you?"

"Yep. All what was any good."

"We want to see the papers showing that stuff isn't contraband. Heave to—we're coming aboard."

Captain Skinner took his pipe from his mouth. It is a regrettable face that he spat—seemingly with no shame—smack into the sea. "Who's coming aboard?" he asked.

He was speaking quite softly now; and there followed a curious rustle and stir among the men of his crew. They began to think that there might be something to this business, after all. When the captain used such a tone of voice it was usually indicative of impending action, often of a disagreeable sort.

"Myself and some of my men," was the answer. The decisiveness of his tone could not be mistaken. Decisiveness is a British quality that Skinner thoroughly respected; and now he watched like an eagle the activities on the deck of the *Queen.*

Captain Lennox evidently wished to make good time rowing across. No less than twelve oarsmen preceded him into the longboat. Skinner waited very patiently until they had pushed off, and until the morning light glittered on certain instruments leaning in easy reach of their hands. The crew of the *Queen* was plainly prepared for an argument. Each man carried a rifle and, in case the debate waxed hot, a cutlass, that time-honored and most effective sea argument at close range.

At this point Captain Skinner gave certain commands, in a voice not to be misunderstood. He was not posing now. His men leaped to obey, in a moment reappearing on the deck with every piece of armament that the ship's chests contained. They were told to load their rifles and line up at the railing to await commands.

Skinner gave just one of his valuable minutes to Jeff. "Go down and get your rifle, Sharp, if you've got one," he said. "It looks to me like war. If you ain't got a gun, get one of those down there and line up with the others."

Jeff straightened, looking the skipper in the eyes. "You can't do that, you know," he objected.

"I can't, huh? Wait and see."

"Those people probably are in their rights."

"I'm in my rights, too. This is an American ship. No armed force is going to board her on the high seas. A war was fought on that point once before. A proud gent like yourself would look fine in irons, down below, while the ship went to London with a prize crew!"

The approaching boat was in fair rifle range by now, and again Skinner put his megaphone to his lips. "If you want to see my papers go back and leave those weapons on your deck," he called. "You can't come alongside with that armed force."

Across the water they heard Captain Lennox speaking quietly to his men; and for a moment they rested on their oars. "We're not afraid of smugglers," was the reply. "We're coming alongside and we're coming aboard."

Captain Skinner addressed no further words to them. He turned to his crew and gave his orders. His men were to stand ready with their rifles, and when the long boat was approximately sixty yards distant Captain Skinner would command the first volley. Thereafter they were to fire at will. From their higher position, and being the kind of riflemen who habitually pick their targets instead of shooting in the enemy's general direction, it seemed probable they could inflict numerous casualties. Since Skinner was no longer careful to lower his voice it was likely that his orders were overheard.

When he stopped speaking an ominous silence enveloped all. There would not be much more waiting. This was the pause before the storm; and it could only endure a few seconds more. The affair was rapidly reaching a crisis; and indeed, it was only the reluctance of either side to take the offensive that had prevented bloodshed so far. Both captains realized the possible far-reaching consequences of such an encounter, and therefore hesitated to give the command to fire.

"We're going to board you," Lennox called. "If you fire on us you do it at your own risk."

"At our risk let it be!" was Captain Skinner's answer. His manner was not without dignity. "If you come nearer, we'll open fire."

Jeff knew, just as the British captain knew, that Skinner meant what he said. This was no idle threat; and now there seemed no further hope of peace. Every alternate man of the longboat's crew had now picked up his rifle, holding it ready to aim and fire when Captain Lennox gave the word. His tactics were now plain: half his crew would keep the enemy engaged while the other half rowed alongside, whereupon his entire force would attempt to board. On the deck of the *Ethan Allen* was heard the grim sound of the cocking of rifles.

In another moment, it seemed, the first volley would ring out over the hushed sea; and how many souls would fly and how many women weep before its far-carrying echoes had died away, no man could dream. At this range there was certain to be heavy casualties on each side, even though the battle stopped immediately thereafter. And if there ever was a vain dream of foolish men it was that any great question can be decided with a single volley.

Jeff was aware of no sharp distinction between right and wrong. Probably the British captain felt justified in attempting to board, with an armed guard, a possible smuggler; certainly Captain Skinner believed in the inviolacy of his deck. It is part of the old curse of strife that in hours like these all abstract thought is clouded, and men know neither right nor wrong: they may only follow the blind dictates of their hearts. In this stirring moment, as the October clouds darkened above as if they were the lowering wings of death—in this momentary hush before the rifles spoke—Jeff's heart led him into a strange, unexpected course.

At first the impulse was vague, but as the tension increased and the crisis neared the dim urge became an immutable command. It grew within him as the low whistle of the wind's breath grows to a yelling climax, as the long gusts sweep through the trees. Yet not until he heard his own answer to

Skinner's question did he know his own mind.

"Open fire if they raise their rifles to their shoulders," he had just ordered his men. Turning, he looked Jeff full in the face. "You haven't your rifle, that I told you to get."

"No, I haven't got it," Jeff answered. He spoke in a low monotone, in the voice of one overcome with wonder.

"Are you going to get it? Sharp, are you with us or against us?"

At these words, and at his answer, a lightning flash seemed to illumine Jeff's sky and sea and world. All at once he saw clear and far. The time might come when the light would dim and die, when bitterness and hatred would shadow him again, but now he knew the way.

"I'm *with* you, Captain Skinner!" he cried. And he banged a heavy fist on the railing of the bridge.

CHAPTER XVI.

REACTION.

THE crew of the *Ethan Allen* saw Jeff's stand, and were upheld by it; but to none of these did it have a gleam of the meaning known to the girl who watched from the door of the pilot house. To Molly, it was significant beyond her power to tell. It was veritably an answer to her prayers.

Why, she did not know. She felt in her heart that she was nothing to this man. Conduct as a rule counts more with women than abstract principle; yet this upholding of principle on the part of Jeff had personal meaning for her—and perhaps that was why it was so dear.

Captain Lennox also was made aware of Jeff's decision; and it possibly had a large influence on his conduct. From his place in the longboat he saw the young Southerner leap to the deck, procure a rifle, and immediately return to the bridge. It was true that here he made a good target for the enemy guns, but it was also an advantageous lookout for a marksman, giving him a fine vantage whence to direct his fire.

It did not occur to him to take his place on the line. In this moment Jeff remembered that he was an officer; and now at the eve of battle he instinctively leaped to the superior position. Over and above this, it was wholly characteristic of the gallant Confederate major to do more than he asked of his men; and to expose himself freely to fire if by so doing he could benefit his cause.

Such conduct not only inspires the men who follow, but also lessens the resistance of the enemy. On this present occasion Jeff's gallantry had tangible influence on Lennox and his men. The fact suddenly went home to these brave Britishers that the Yankees meant serious and certain business. A man does not so expose himself to fire unless his heart is in the battle with him, and therefore a dangerous foe. If this showed the attitude of the men of the *Ethan Allen* it might pay to proceed with extreme care.

There were other considerations which helped shape Lennox's course. He knew that if the Yankees actually showed fight it would be next to impossible to board from the longboat. Finally, there remained the possibility that the cargo contained nothing of great value. He was risking his life and the lives of his men on a blind chance.

In any event, Captain Lennox changed his mind. He gave the command to resume rowing, and without crossing the danger line Skinner had drawn, to return to their ship.

"We'll get you yet, you freebooters," he told them cordially as the longboat moved away.

The effect on the men on the deck of the *Ethan Allen* was electric. The hard gleam in Captain Skinner's sea-blue eyes instantly softened and changed to a very pleasant light of happiness—for indeed, he knew that almost incomparable happiness of a crisis past, a great disaster warded off. Being the master and aware of that fact—never forgotten by skippers of an older school—he did not take part in the hilarity on the deck, but he beamed down upon it as a father beams on his children's play. His men, stand-up fighters when the occasion arose, had a very human and natural dislike for whistling bullets, and now they showed their delight at their escape. They did not call insulting remarks to the British, because they held them in the respect due a worthy foe, but they pranced and they danced, they gave imitations of Lennox's actions and accents, and finally they joined hands with the rapturous Molly and did an extemporaneous dance that should have been recorded for posterity.

The tall man who had stood exposed on the bridge neither joined in the frolic nor shared in Captain Skinner's unspoken delight. So silent he stood, seemingly so self-absorbed that at last some of the joy-mad sailors stopped their dance to look at him. His cheeks were even more white than in the moment of greatest danger. He looked like one just wakened from sleep; and indeed that which he had just done seemed more like a dream than fact.

He now realized that he had borne arms under the Stars and Stripes! He had taken the side of his foes against the South's great friends, the incomparable monarchy to which he had proposed to pledge allegiance. In a moment of hysteria and madness he had renounced his own cause!

Was he made of no stronger stuff than this? He was remorseful and embittered; and what was worse, he felt disillusioned and cheapened. He had known a great pride, Jeff Sharp; and he was born of proud people. No one could deny that. No one could ever question the intense and magnificent patriotism that had upheld so long the Confederate armies in the war just gone. When he had seen evidences of what he thought to be backsliding on the part of the Southern people—a tendency to forgive and forget, and the beginnings of a new loyalty to the Union now that their fervent sectionalism had begun to pass away—he was angered and revolted. What could he say now? He had thrown down the torch he had held high. His life had been consecrated, he thought, to the Lost Cause; that cause had been his staff and his altar, and for its sake he had been willing to endure poverty, exile to a foreign land, martyrdom if necessary. He had lived by it, and it had given his life aim and purpose. It was true that many of the old Southern slogans such as those concerning State rights, had lately seemed rather unimportant; yet he had still known what had seemed a deathless loyalty to the idea of a noble aristocracy, sustained by slavery, and he had felt only contempt for a people's government. In a moment of crisis he had disavowed all that he held dear.

He dreaded to see Molly climbing the steps to the bridge to speak to him. He felt that to be praised for what he deemed treason was almost more than he could bear. Sometimes he felt that this girl knew his thoughts almost before he was himself aware of them; but to-day she had no glimpse of his mood. "It was just wonderful," she told him. The hushed tone with which she spoke gave her trite words imponderable meaning.

He had never seen this gay, capable girl so moved. In his images of her she was always close to laughter; and it was amazing to see her so grave, even though she was at the same time visibly exalted. Her eyes alone moved him to wonder; strangely large now, they were, and brimming with light that seemed no part of the light of the sea and the sky.

"I can never tell you how much it meant to me, and to us all," she went on, smiling gravely. "It was the finest thing I ever saw."

But so lost was he in bitterness and self-anger that he looked at her unmoved. The warm luster of her eyes could not thaw the ice of his heart. His own gaze was cold, and his lip curled in a smile of scorn. "I'm a fool," he answered.

Puzzled, but still not daring to guess at the truth, Molly shook her head. "Maybe we're all fools, sometimes, willing to risk our dear lives just for a dream; but it's a wonderful kind of folly." The girl was visibly inspired. "It's the kind of folly that will lift the people up from darkness."

"I'm worse than a fool. I'm a traitor to my own side," he told her bitterly. "The people!" he echoed with infinite scorn. "I hate the people. It was the mob, the mob idea, that destroyed all I loved!"

"I am of the people," she told him, her eyes never leaving his. "I'm just one of the mob."

"And a patriot of a mob-ruled government! I wish I had never heard of it."

The girl did not misunderstand. It might be that his wild words were mostly boyish frenzy and extravagance; yet they showed certain truths. The cut would not have been so deep had he merely renounced the nation that she held so dear—she was a woman before she was a patriot—but he had not been kind enough, even, to exclude her.

She turned away, and walked very bravely down the steps and across the deck. She stopped and spoke, smiling, to a group of the crew. She watched, for an instant, the slowly moving shore line, seemingly absorbed in its dim and mysterious beauty. But at last she went to her stateroom, shut the door and closed the port, so that no ray of light might come in and read what was written on her face.

CHAPTER XVII.

PURELY A MATTER OF FORM.

WHEN Molly had gone, Jeff had a feeling that he had rather overdone the business on the bridge. Such emphasis as he had expressed had hardly been called for. He wished vaguely he had not covered so much territory in his condemnations. Possibly his strong words to Molly did not in the least palliate his disloyalty to the South, but rather enhanced it, in that by so speaking he had been false to the South's most treasured tradition, that of chivalry.

He was a tender-hearted boy; and very soon he was really sorry that he had expressed himself so bluntly. He hoped he had not hurt Molly's feelings. Of course a brave, self-reliant girl like Molly was not likely to be easily hurt; yet this fact did not excuse his own inconsiderateness. How really deep the hurt was Jeff Sharp did not dream.

He found himself speaking politely to Captain Skinner, who joined him on the bridge. "Well, we got through that safely enough, thanks to you and the boys," the skipper observed. "Jeff, that was a narrow squeak. We pretty near lost our skins as soon as we got 'em, and wouldn't that old *Boston* skipper had a laugh on us then?—only he'd laugh out of the wrong side of his mouth."

"I don't believe they would have taken them," Jeff answered, but with none of the fire he had heaped on Molly.

Captain Skinner did not seem to hear him. His thoughts were down in the hold with the bales of glossy treasure. "It was mighty lucky for us them Britishers didn't know what we had," he went on. "I don't blame 'em for not wanting to risk their lives when they thought maybe they wouldn't get nothing but a bunch of coarse island fox and a couple of skunks to pay for their trouble; but for a thousand sea otter—my boy, we'd 'a' been fighting yet!"

"I don't believe we'd have had the least trouble if we had let them come aboard in peace," Jeff argued. "I can't help but think we took a serious risk in repelling them when they were in their rights."

"Well, you sure are hard to convince. They wasn't in their rights."

"They had a right to come and see our papers."

"I'll admit that, but not to bring an armed force alongside. You think Captain Lennox would ha' turned around and stepped off polite and nice, and left them furs in the hold? He'd laugh at you for thinking any such foolishness. We'd be mighty lucky if he wouldn't seize the ship as a prize."

"Of course his crew might have mutinied at the sight of all those skins. I'll admit that such is possible. But I'm just as sure as can be that no English gentleman like Lennox would board us, ostensibly to see our papers, and then seize our cargo by force."

"You don't know some of these here English gentlemen. A lot of 'em act like us common folks when they see a thousand sea-otter skins."

"Well, we got through safely. We don't have to fear anything at Sitka, at least. I did not know Lennox, but I do know those Russian noblemen."

Captain Skinner did not argue the point, but as he walked away he made a curious snorting sound which Jeff could hardly interpret. He seemed to infer that he took all kinds of noblemen with a grain of salt.

If Jeff had doubted his own words certainly he was reassured when in an early evening the *Ethan Allen* pushed again into the Sitkan harbor. The picturesque old Russian town lay dreaming in the twilight, its lights subdued, its bold lines softened, its roofs and spires blending into the dusk; and its Old World charm and peace were for all to know and love. The harsh, wild Alaskan background was forgotten, and to-night this town belonged to old Europe instead of raw America. It was a quaint and gentle place; and crime and violence in connection with it were simply unthinkable. Jeff decided that Skinner was an alarmist of the worst type, and that likely the skins were as safe here as they would be in an American port.

The first day in Sitka seemed to bear out this supposition. No one came to marvel at the treasure in the hold. Life resumed its normal, happy course except for one minor change. Molly seemed to avoid his presence. Somehow he had fallen into the habit of spending a great deal of time in her company; but this first day of his return to Sitka he scarcely glimpsed her from morning until night. It was a small matter to one of his tastes and interests, yet it was annoying that she would absent herself on a day when he most needed her company. Why did he need it particularly today? Because everything seemed to go wrong, somehow, and the minutes took their places like carriages in a parade—with long, aggravating pauses in between.

She was doubtless in a huff from his ill-selected words of the day before, but since she was just Molly she would likely be herself again soon. He could hardly reconcile a girlish sensitiveness with one so capable and self-reliant, a tomboy and hale-fellow-well-met like Captain Skinner's niece. Except for his firm resolve to keep all thoughts of his late madness out of his mind—his inexplicable attitude in the crisis of two days before—he would make some sort of apology to her; but for the sake of his own pride and self-satisfaction he could not bring himself to mention the matter again. Anyhow, she would certainly be herself next day.

He believed this as surely as he believed in the continued safety of the otter skins. The long afternoon had worn away, never brightened with a smile or a moment of gay talk from Molly, before he guessed that he had been altogether too optimistic regarding her. This was not the worst. When another gray twilight lay over the sea he was brought face to face with the fact that he had been similarly optimistic in regard to the otter skins.

Late in the afternoon the *Queen* had come into port, and after the supper hour there were official visitors on the deck of the *Ethan Allen*. No less a personage than Spaskii, the czar's commissioner, accompanied by Count Yanovisk and young Lord Staritsa, came up the gangplank for a short conference with Captain Skinner and the American correspondent.

They were all exceedingly courteous, and indeed were a courtly and polished trio. They bowed low over Jeff's patrician hand, as well as the horny appendage with which Captain Skinner pulled lowly ropes. They made pleasant remarks concerning the weather, and urged that the Yankee sailor and the Southern gentleman pay them early calls. It was at this point in the proceedings that Jeff felt a faint touch of annoyance, almost of suspicion. It was wholly fitting that Cavalier Spaskii should wish to entertain him, but when he also invited this hardy, ill-spoken Yankee sailor his sincerity was open to question. It was also vexing to make out the dim form of Baron Karl, tramping up and down the docks as if waiting for the official party to return.

"As a mere matter of form we have presented ourselves to talk with you regarding your dealings with Captain Cooper, of the *Boston Dame*." Yanovisk got to business at last. "His majesty's commissioner will assure you it is a mere matter of form only, yes?"

Spaskii could not speak English, but he evidently recognized a cue. He said a few words in soft, purring, soothing Russian. Certainly—so Jeff thought he said—this visit was a mere matter of form!

"You had certain negotiations with Captain Cooper, the commissioner understands," Yanovisk went on.

"I understand so, myself," Captain Skinner replied in obvious American. "What about 'em?"

"As a mere trifle—a mere matter of form—we would like to see what cargo you removed from his ship. This inspection is required on all goods taken into Russian America, to provide against importation of contraband. If it meets with your esteemed favor we should also most like to see such papers as Captain Cooper put in your hands."

He addressed these remarks to Jeff, who answered before Captain Skinner could put in a word. It would be quite like the old sea dog, given to untoward suspicion of his betters, to employ some sort of subterfuge to conceal the otter skins from the Russians' eyes, perhaps leading them to some other part of the hold to show less valuable cargo. Sometimes the barrel-chested Yankee seemed well named. Jeff felt certain, however, that only trouble would result from any attempt to deceive the officials—there were likely other channels through which they could learn the real nature of Cooper's goods—and besides, Jeff had no real reason to suspect unfair dealing.

"Of course you may see the stuff," was his reply. "It is immensely valuable and we are trying to guard it with care. If you want to take my word for it, instead of climbing below, it is—a thousand sea-otter skins."

The two Russians who understood English did not speak, plainly, because they could not. They were not used to such tidings. In such moments the delicate mental functions necessary to translate excited Russian into courteous English were quite too much for them.

Cavalier Spaskii was aware that something was going on beyond him. The startled silence was significant, and in one glance at his friends' faces he was sure he had missed a trick of which he should have knowledge. He spoke a few Russian words in a questioning and somewhat excited tone.

Yanovisk replied, stating the Russian equivalent of a thousand sea-otter skins; whereupon there were three noblemen in the same strange pathological condition—no longer courtly, no longer garrulous, but all three temporary victims of instantaneous paralysis.

Of course they recovered almost instantly, but they had set Jeff to thinking. He could understand how Count Yanovisk, a man of humble means, might be stricken breathless at the thought of a half-million haul of furs. That Staritsa and Spaskii were similarly stricken was unintelligible. He had idealized those men—at least he had tried to—and their mercenary instincts shocked him. Skinner, on the other hand, thought he understood perfectly. An old seafaring friend of his had once told him that, contrary to rumor, Americans were less gold crazy than any people in the world, and that for sheer excitement at the sight of some actual money the foreign count led all the rest; and now Skinner believed him.

Staritsa seemed to be particularly affected. He was the last man of the three to make complete recovery. Did he not know it was never becoming to one of noble blood to show such base interest in mere wealth? Could he not remember that high birth put him above such thoughts? And now Jeff was not only shocked, but vaguely uneasy, too. There was suddenly a most disconcerting gleam in Staritsa's eyes.

Neither this, nor the little hard lines on the young Muscovite's face, or yet his intense preoccupation were lost on Captain Skinner. The latter paid no more attention to the Russian-American conversation. He watched Staritsa.

"Prime?" Yanovisk asked suddenly.

"Yes. They seem to be first class, and all mature otters."

"Our Lady of Kazan!"

Shortly after this Spaskii bowed himself away, but obeying his look, neither Staritsa nor the governor's secretary followed him. He seemed to have forgotten the formality of looking over Captain Cooper's permits. However, he was gone only a few minutes, during which Staritsa and Yanovisk looked at the furs.

Not long thereafter they heard the thump of heavily shod feet on the dock, and certain hoarse and unintelligible commands battered into the hush of the twilight. Four Russian soldiers, armed with muskets and bayonets, marched up in the command of a corporal. They came to a noisy order arms just below the plank.

Even Captain Skinner, scarcely famous as a pacifist, did not so much as consider offering resistance to the Russian half squad. He was in the Sitkan harbor and therefore subject, within certain limits, to the officials of the port; and besides, he could not whip the entire Alaskan garrison. As yet he did not know the run of the cards, so he quietly awaited the next deal. His only regret was that he had ever returned to Sitka; yet if he had read aright the smoke on the horizon behind him no other course had been open. The *Queen* was a fast ship, and she had some long-range guns. Jeff also waited, and a spark that had lit in each of his black eyes was of deep significance to Skinner.

Cavalier Spaskii advanced up the gangplank, and bowing profusely, spoke a few words which Yanovisk immediately translated. "His excellence begs your indulgence for his absence of a moment ago, yes," the latter explained. "He compliments his friends from the great American republic."

"What else?" Captain Skinner asked, evidently failing to appreciate the fine points of the Russian's address.

"He says he is most regretful, but for the time being, until the goods can be legally cleared, he is required to post a guard of four Russian soldiers over the ship—purely as a matter of form."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE CHALLENGE.

WHEN the official conference was all but over and the three Russians were about to take their departure, Yanovisk asked to see Captain Cooper's papers, thereby disproving Skinner's prophecies that no one would so much as glance at them. For once the old captain had surely misjudged the high-born Muscovites. Going into the captain's quarters, they not only looked at the permits and charters, but read all the fine print on the backs of the sheets and otherwise examined them with minute care. Yet their interest in the documents was no great triumph for Jeff. In the first place, reading them did not cause the governor to dismiss the guard. In the second, the incident itself was not without certain disquieting aspects.

As Yanovisk bent over the papers Staritsa spoke swiftly in Russian, a remark of course unintelligible to Captain Skinner and to Jeff. Yanovisk glanced toward Spaskii, saw him nod, and continued his reading with every sign of added interest. Yet it did not seem to Jeff that he was looking up some doubtful point. His absorption in the papers looked now like pretense, and fully on guard he waited for enlightenment. It was not long in coming.

"They seem quite correct, your excellency, yet I would like to suggest further scrutiny," Yanovisk began. "Mr. Sharp says himself that he does not personally know Captain Cooper, and it is our custom under such circumstances to make most complete investigations." He turned to Jeff. "You will not mind if I take these papers to my quarters to examine them at my leisure, yes?"

Jeff got up and with grave dignity took the documents from the Russian's hands. "I would prefer to keep them on the ship," he said.

"Yes—we won't," was Captain Skinner's comment.

Staritsa moved into the center of the group; and there was nothing about him to suggest the gallant, courtly nobleman of an hour before. "Your excellency, I believe you have the authority to seize those papers, if the American does not yield them freely."

Jeff's answer was to slip a band about the documents and put them in his pocket.

"You've got no more right to seize them than my crew has to seize you—and heave you head over heels over the railing," Captain Skinner observed pleasantly. "And just about as much chance."

All three Russians eyed Skinner intently, and undoubtedly they received impressions not altogether favorable. He did not appear to realize that he came of an inferior nation; and indeed, he might create some little disturbance before submitting to their own noble wills. They observed that his face was lighted with a cheery smile—indeed, a smile of encouragement—but somehow they were disinclined to take advantage of it. Jeff, who should know better, seemed likewise unimpressed by their several highnesses. There was also a look about his lips that boded no good. Perhaps it might be well to postpone the interview until a more likely time.

The commissioner bowed, stood up, and speaking a Russian farewell, led the way out of the cabin. A moment later the trio strode down the gangplank and disappeared. The four soldiers took their posts on the deck.

Jeff and Skinner, left once more to their own devices, eyed each other in silence. The latter's grim and deadly smile slowly changed to a grin of real amusement; and presently he cackled, a strange sound in that cabin hushed and breathless in the aftermath of the crisis just passed.

"It's not very funny, I should say," Jeff remarked gravely. "We're virtually prisoners on your own ship."

"Sure. They weren't going to take any chance on us getting away some time in the night with them otter skins. I was laughing at the mess we've let ourselves in for. My boy, we'll be lucky to get out of here with our own skins."

"Of course if we had let him have the documents we would never have seen them again."

"Sure not. The next thing, they'd confiscate the fur and maybe the ship, and when you registered a kick through Uncle Sam they'd say there never was no papers. They'd make out they caught you trading with the natives."

"This is all Baron Karl's work. I think Maksoutof is pretty much all right. Now what's going to happen, Captain Skinner?"

"You know as well as I do; but we're not licked yet. Who knows?—maybe an American gunboat will come into the harbor. Lord, how I'd love to see one."

On serious reflection, Jeff decided that he'd rather like to see one himself.

"What comes next?" This was the question that was frequently on Jeff's lips in the next few days. These days were entirely calm, the business of the town moved quietly ahead, and except for the presence and periodical change of the guard there was nothing to remind him of the delicate situation brought about by the acquisition of the otter fur. But official Alaska had not forgotten him. Skinner never guessed that it had.

On the afternoon of the fourth day Jeff was called to a conference at the executive mansion; but although he was on guard Jeff could not detect a single suspicious circumstance in connection with the meeting. The furs were not even mentioned, but only some matters dealing with America which Maksoutof and himself had discussed before. Staritsa came in about five, and seeing that the two Muscovites wished to confer, Jeff immediately left. As he walked down the hill he met Baron Karl and Templeton, the Englishman, on the way up.

Except when a deep bias blinded him, Jeff was ordinarily not slow in perceiving ulterior motives; but now it actually did not occur to him that there might be collusion behind this meeting. It seemed the most natural thing in the world. He assumed that these men were also on their way to confer with the government head. Perhaps because Maksoutof had quieted his fears, perhaps because he still had utmost faith in Templeton, he willingly paused to exchange a few words with the two men; and he was not particularly on guard.

"Here is the new fur lord, I understand," Templeton remarked pleasantly. "You Americans certainly trust each other—to hand about among yourselves a million rubles in otters."

Karl's remark seemed a natural development of his friend's idea. "Americans are a trusting race, is it not?" He smiled pleasantly. "Innocent, honest backwoodsmen trusting everybody—and not forgetting to expect every one to trust them in return, yes? And then when we trust them—well, you know what happens." He made a suggestive motion with his strong, deft hand.

Jeff had been twitted before about Yankee shrewdness—a trait which he, a Southerner, indignantly disclaimed—but he hardly thought that this was playing the game. If this was a joke, it was a poor one. "Your relations with Americans have not been happy?" he suggested.

"Americans are overly—what you say—appreciative, of the trust that monarchs and governors give to special correspondents and so on," Karl went on. "By arranging with their fellows they can manage to turn the freedom allowed them into a handsome profit. Naturally, as you suggest, Templeton, good business demands that they keep trust with each other during these operations. What is the saying about honor among—how does it proceed?"

This was so bald, the insult so perfectly apparent, that Jeff actually wondered whether he had heard right. In any case, it seemed impossible to ignore the remark. "The expression is—'honor among thieves,'" Jeff replied quietly. He was only slightly pale, and with his cane he accurately struck off the top of an outlaw weed. "Do you mean to tell me that you and your friends do not retain even this?"

Templeton's smile showed plainly that this thrust was not lost on him. A bold, resolute, none-too-scrupulous man, this Englishman was not without a sporting sense that he never quite left behind him, a trait of all his breed. He liked fast and clever work, and even such deadly games as this had their entertainment for him.

Karl's eyes flashed; and his manner showed that Jeff's prompt reply had taken him somewhat by surprise. He turned to his friend. "Templeton, was that remark merely an instance of a rail splitter's usual clumsiness at social conversation, or was it some sort of a veiled implication?" he asked. "I wish to be sure of my ground before I go ahead."

"You are perfectly free to go ahead," Jeff told him casually, "any way you like."

"Good! I haven't seen you in such an agreeable mood since the night we met in the governor's gardens. By the way, Sharp, I have never heard from you in regard to the subject that came up that night."

"No. You have been reticent about it yourself."

"I take it, then, you merely wished to postpone the matter until such time as you could give it your attention? You are still, I trust, in the same mind?"

Jeff's hands shook, but by putting them behind him, he hid them from the sight of his foes. He was ashamed of their slight tremor. "I am at your disposal any time you wish," he said.

A look of triumph overspread Karl's face. "Good! I shall enjoy meeting you. Shall it be to-morrow, just after sunrise?"

"That will be entirely to my satisfaction."

"Up Kolosh Ryeka Trail, beyond the Governor's Walk?"

"Yes. That seems a favorite place for your operations, Baron Karl."

"Indeed? I shall ask Mr. Templeton to

be my second, and any further negotiations may be carried on between him and the person you choose to represent you. Perhaps it might be well now, however, considering the shortness of time, to appoint a master of ceremonies. Perhaps you, Mr. Templeton, could suggest a friend of both myself and Mr. Sharp, yes?"

"I would suggest our mutual friend, Staritsa," the Englishman replied. "He is known as a sportsman."

"He is satisfactory to me," Jeff told him.

"And to me," Karl agreed. His face was startlingly pale except for the red wound. "Perhaps you will find out also, Templeton, whether Mr. Sharp prefers sabers or pistols. I believe it is his right to choose."

"Pistols," Jeff told them.

"It should be a very pleasant adventure for every one concerned," remarked Templeton.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE PLOT.

As Jeff continued on his way down the hill he was able to estimate his true position. There was no chance of further self-deception. He had walked into a trap and the jaws had snapped home.

He realized now that this meeting on the hill had been carefully staged. Whether Maksoutof was a party to the conspiracy he did not know—he believed he was not—but certainly Staritsa was; he had purposely arrived a minute or so ahead of his friends so that they might have an opportunity to encounter Jeff as the latter descended the hill.

He had been forced into the snare partly by the machinations of his enemies, mostly by his own tragic, all-compelling pride. Oh, they had known how to take advantage of this pride! Karl had been careful to stage the meeting in Templeton's presence, thus making it certain that the Southerner would not ignore his insults. The plan had worked well. Although Jeff had known the Russian's reputation as a duelist, and that this was nothing less than a murder plot, it had been beyond his power to avoid or decline the challenge.

An affair of honor! Romantic youth though he was, he laughed at the thought. There was no more honor in this thing Karl had plotted than in an assassination by a footpad. There was less: the footpad ran the gantlet of the law, while Karl was careful to remain within the law. The footpad's victim had some sort of a fighting chance while Karl, secure in his own tried skill, meant that Jeff should have none at all. The stakes in either case were something of the same nature. The Southerner was no longer deceived. Not honor, not revenge, but a cargo of otter skins was the certain target for this shooting on the hill.

Yet Jeff could not turn aside. Knowing all that he did know, it was not in him to run away. Such was the price of his pride.

Karl had arranged everything to his own satisfaction. Jeff had permitted him to name—through a confederate—really to appoint the master of ceremonies; and his choice was that of a man whom the former mistrusted and disliked. This seemed only a minor point, yet it increased the odds against him. Questions might possibly arise, the decisions on which would be vital to Jeff's chances; and the chance for fair play on these was long and far. It was absurd to deny that Staritsa was biased in Karl's favor. Indeed, he was one of the conspirators who had forced Jeff into the duel, and without doubt would share in the plunder in case of the Russian's victory.

For one instant Jeff found himself questioning the virtue and justice of a system that could sustain a man like this in a place of glory and power. There was one fear, however, that Jeff was spared: actual betrayal on the dueling field itself.

He did not doubt but that he would be given the duelist's chance—almost hopeless though it was against a superior opponent—and this was an immeasurable consolation to the youth who to-morrow, far from his own people, must play a lone, deadly game. He felt secure in this, partly because his faith in princes was not yet dead—even a degenerate nobleman, he thought, could not stoop to black betrayal of the old, honored code of fairness to a foe—and partly because Karl was perfectly secure in his own prowess. Such had been the Russian's record that, without recourse to base trickery, he could surely rely on victory over this inexperienced adversary. In this lay Jeff's one hope, and he had seen or heard nothing to make him forsake it.

Some of his ideals lived in him yet; and kind circumstance had made no provision that to-night they should perish. No strange coincidence brought him under a certain window of the governor's house, to overhear an enlightening conversation. Only the old ghosts that haunted the garden and often hovered at the casements to survey the scenes where once they had known life and laughter, heard the hushed words; and they could not carry them to Jeff's ear.

The darkness hid the speakers, sitting in a side room; and the sound creeping out was as of two disembodied voices. The language used was an old tongue from beyond the sea; and sometimes the ghosts were chilled with cold gusts of laughter.

"So everything turned out well—just as you planned! You are a genius, my friend. It is by all means the best way."

"I think so. It will look better to certain people in St. Petersburg—it saves us trouble and embarrassing explanations. You are to be master of ceremonies, as we planned. Templeton is my second. I don't know who his second will be."

"How did he seem to take it? Terrified, I'll warrant."

"To tell the truth, he took it with considerable spirit. That is the one thing I can't understand. I expected him to accept; he was virtually forced into it, and as you know, he prides himself on knowing the code—on being a gentleman; but I didn't expect him to be so easy, and I was surprised how calm he seemed. He is either a braver man than I give him credit for, or very self-confident."

"Of course he has seen considerable fighting. The Civil War was no backyard squabble. I should say the explanation is that he is unaware of your reputation."

"No. I don't think he can be. The girl on the ship—Molly, they call her—seems to know a good deal about me—probably because of an idle feminine curiosity—and probably she has repeated everything to him."

"I can think of only one other explanation—a rather disquieting one."

"I know what you mean. You think he is confident of winning."

"Precisely. That he has had such experience with a pistol that he thinks he can beat you at your own game."

"And you say, it is a disquieting possibility?"

"It is at least a possibility. Listen, my friend. You know there is no one who has greater confidence in you than I; otherwise I would not have followed you into this wilderness after the scrape in Moscow. But how do we know about this American? You know what Lennox told us; how he climbed on the bridge in plain view of the riflemen and stood——"

"Perhaps he is just a fool. Perhaps his seeming bravery is merely folly."

"Perhaps, but Lennox did not get that idea. He is a soldier, in the first place—a major whose service was so distinguished that Lennox heard of it in England."

"Even a little bravery might carry far in an army of rail splitters."

"Just the same, what do we really know of him? Let me bring up another point. Have you ever heard of the gunmen who throng the American frontier?"

"Who hasn't! You don't think it possible——"

"I think it entirely possible! I don't mean that he is, strictly speaking, a gunman, but he may know how to handle a pistol in a way that would surprise us. You know that the best duelist in Europe could not stand against one of those plainsmen whom the archduke described. How do we know he doesn't know that game? It must be considered!"

"By our lady, perhaps he does know!"

"It would be a sweet thing, would it not, for you to fall with a bullet through your throat in combat with an American plowboy? It would be a fine tale to tell around St. Petersburg. And I would play false to you if I did not urge the possibility of it occurring."

"You have done exactly right. I am careless about such things. But what good does it do to tell me, my friend, unless you can also suggest a remedy?"

"There is no remedy, as long as you both stand up and shoot. It does no good to urge you to take special precautions, because a man who gambles with his life always does take precautions—even if there is a country dolt behind the engaging pistol. You know, my friend, accidents sometimes occur. The only remedy that is sure is—one that is sure."

"You mean some such little assurance as no powder in the fellow's gun?"

"Yes. No powder in the cap, which is better. A cap can be easily lost in the grass, but an empty gun is conspicuous by its emptiness. I have often devoted idle thought to such problems as this, and have hit upon several safe means of solving them."

"Perhaps they occurred to you after your little affair in Moscow."

"Quite likely. Sometimes they are difficult to put into practice, but not when one's best friend is master of ceremonies! The only difficulty that remains is—a certain natural reluctance to employ such tactics thus to protect oneself. You know, I would be the last one in the world to suggest such an artifice in an affair of honor; but you would think me a comedian if I should refer to to-morrow's affair in that light. The laws of chivalry have always held that a duel can only exist between men of the same station; that when an engagement occurs between people of opposite station—I mean between a noble and a peasant—it cannot be called a duel. Therefore it seems to me that we are under no obligation to observe the duelist's code. To-morrow's engagement is simply an expedient, and you know that fact as well as I do."

"You argue the case very well. In fact, you have me convinced. There is no reason why, in a case like this, we shouldn't make assurance doubly sure. But, little brother, we must have safety. Safety for you as well as for me."

"Leave that to me. There will not be the slightest risk. We shall load both pistols and the czar himself may look at them later and find nothing wrong. It will be no fault of ours if the percussion cap used in firing the enemy pistol proves defective! As you know, sometimes inferior caps are fabricated, and this one—to our great sorrow—will contain no powder."

"And later, when the seconds make examination, they will find that the man was felled before he had time to fire his own weapon?"

"To be sure. The worst that could possibly happen would be that they should pick out the defective cap and examine it, but even in that case we could plead entire innocence. However, that would be bungling. No such thing will occur. The moment you fire I will run to the man's side and will snatch up the weapon to see that there has been no foul play. As I look at it the cap will fall out and will not be seen again, and if necessary the weapon itself can be recocked to indicate that it has not been fired. I will put it into the second's hands before he has had time to more than glance at his man, and he will never even question but that everything has been entirely regular and fair. The only precaution is—you must not miss! In that case he might hear his gun misfire, would investigate, and would of course refuse to go ahead with the duel on the grounds of conspiracy. You must take your time; otherwise all our trouble would be for nothing."

"Don't worry about me. Make the duel at ten paces and I won't miss. I can drive a nail at that distance, almost. Now about Templeton. He would have to be informed of the plan in order to insure its proper execution—and Templeton might not see this thing the way we do."

"I'm quite sure he would not see it the way we do. These Britons have queer ideas as to the fitness of things—especially when a contest is involved. I fear we will have to leave out Templeton."

"Then we give up the plan?"

"Most certainly not. I will have the pistols in charge, and when I offer them the seconds will naturally select the nearest pistol to them in the case. What more is needed? The fewer who know about our plan the more certain its success—and the less danger of an unpleasant tale getting back to our royal master in Petersburg, to whom too many unpleasant tales have already gone. If by some great mischance Templeton or the enemy second should reach to the farther pistol, instead of the nearer, and I see no easy way to get them to change, I shall simply suggest that both men examine their weapons thoroughly before engaging—like the zealous master of ceremonies that I am. When you examine yours the cap will accidentally fall out, and you shall ask me to provide another. Of course in that case it will be—the best man wins."

"You are certainly thorough, my son! I give you more honor than ever. It seems, then, that everything is arranged."

So it seemed. Evidently no effort had been spared to make to-morrow's affair an overwhelming success for every one concerned. The old ghosts whimpered in the darkness outside the window, but they were but airy dreams of the glory and strength they once had been; and the movement of events was beyond their power to influence. Meanwhile Jeff walked the Sitkan streets, unaware of such gray forms as might now be walking beside him and trying so vainly, —perhaps in atonement for wrongs done in their own brief hours, when time was a moving river passing them by, instead of a silent sea on which they sailed at will—to make their whispered voices heard. For all he knew he was utterly, eternally alone.

CHAPTER XX.

SURRENDER.

MUCH cruel disillusionment had been Jeff Sharp's portion in the last few days. He had lost much and he had gained nothing to take the place of that which he had lost. Many of his fondest precepts had been proven untrue. Many of his gods had shown feet of clay. Now, in this bitter hour of an October night, some of his own self-belief passed away not to return.

He was so proud, this Sharp. He could never, since his childhood, admit defeat. He had built a strong house to shut himself in, in the black days following his return from Lee's army—a house of estrangement, of scorn, most of all of stern, unconquerable pride—but now it was falling down about his head. Now he had learned that the mere desire to believe a thing did not make it true; that reality followed him even into his secret castle of dreams.

He had never tasted real loneliness before; and he had never known how bitter it was. In this last night before the dawn of his destiny he knew only too well. For the first time in his life there was no friend to seek, no hand to touch. It was good to go into battle for a high cause with cheering comrades at his side; but the way was cheerless and dark when he must walk alone. The men to whom he had offered friendship had either refused it or had so fallen in his estimation that they were no longer acceptable as friends. In all this town of Sitka, the abode of noble gentlemen from beyond the seas, he knew of no one whom he could ask to stand beside him, as his second, in to-morrow's hour of trial.

The Russians all wanted him to lose. They coveted his furs. Captain Skinner he had belittled, patronized, and lorded it over throughout their acquaintance; he had felt scorn for him in his heart even if he had not shown it in his conduct, and he could not ask his help now he was in need. It was not that he feared Skinner's refusal. The old Yankee would not only serve to the best of his ability, but probably start a few duels on his own account if the fight went against his young charge. Jeff was simply too proud even to let him know about the duel with these men he had exalted, much less to ask his assistance against them.

It came to him with a poignant sense of loss that there was still another whose help would be precious to him but whom he could not ask. This was a certain companion of these past stirring weeks, a steadfast comrade who had served not only as his second but as a stanch ally in a previous affair of honor on the Kolosh Ryeka Trail. The help she could give him was moral only; yet he wanted it as he had wanted few things in his life. Perhaps that was the trouble with Jeff; he had never known, until this hour, what real longing was.

Everything would be quite different if he could talk over the affair with her; if he could walk out in the dawn to meet Baron Karl with her Godspeed lingering in his ears and the memory of that strange light, seen now and again in her eyes, guiding him on. Yet now when he needed her most he could not have her. He had estranged her with vain, foolish words.

Yet he was too proud to go to her with an admission of his vanity and folly. Again his great pride had come between him and peace. The trait once had been his secret boast—he had taken a childish satisfaction in it—and he had regarded it as a birthright, an obligation owed to himself. Now he thought about it, he had always been conscious of great self-debts; he had owed himself this and that, he must take this stand or that one because such was his due or was seemly to one of his exalted place. Could it be that in his zeal to do his duty to himself he had forgotten duty to others? In flaunting the banner of his pride had his standard of service fallen in the dust? In building his high tower had he missed his shift in the common work crew who built for all humanity? In gathering to himself ramparts to sustain his station had he lost much that was priceless and that could not be regained?

Perhaps he should have given more thought to this. It might be that the time had come to forget himself and to remember some one else. His great pride had not humbled his enemies, but had only estranged his friends. It had not hurt those who had hurt him, but had cut to the quick those who had meant well by him, those who might have loved him and helped him. Perhaps the hour was at hand to put it by, and to seek some other faith.

As this thought gleamed, like a star, in the darkened universe of his mind, he changed his course and turned down toward the sea. He made straight toward the old quay where the *Ethan Allen* was lying. It seemed to him that considering the cloudy night and the dim oil lights the path was amazingly plain to see and follow. It was almost light.

There was no hesitancy in his step now; only a trembling, boyish eagerness that once might have shamed him. He wondered how he had failed to miss this path until now. It was the plainest thing, lying waiting for him to take now he had passed through the iron gate. He had stumbled about in the fearful dark, like a lame child, and all the time the happy road was open. He could hardly keep his feet from running as he proceeded.

He crossed the quay and walked up the plank to the deck of the American ship. Captain Skinner was taking his ease on the deck, smoking his clay pipe; but Jeff gave no sign of pausing to talk. He did, however, call to him as he walked past.

"Where's Molly?"

"I don't know. In her stateroom, I reckon. Where you been and where you going so much in a hurry?"

Except that he went aft in the direction of Molly's stateroom Jeff made not the least response. Followed by the skipper's wondering stare he went down a short flight of steps, into a passage, and halted before a stateroom door.

"Who's there?" a voice called at his knock. It was incredible to him that he had ever, by vanity and folly, let this voice be shut away from him when it was so real a need.

"Jeff," he told her. In the long pause after he spoke he thought he could hear her troubled breathing, so deep a spell of silence had been cast over the ship that floated on the dark sea, in this hushed, dark night. At first the girl seemed unable to answer him.

"Are you sure, Jeff, that you care about seeing me?"

For an instant he felt the throttling hand of his pride—lifted up again to hold him aloof and from the comfort of surrender—but he tore it away. He could not deny her her moment of pretended aloofness.

"Molly, I'm sure," he told her. "I've come to ask help."

He knew that these words would open the door. He knew also that they atoned as far as he ever could atone for his slight to the girl a few days before; they revealed the fullness of his surrender.

There is nothing so effective in dispelling clouds of suspicion and enmity as a request of this kind. Molly opened the door, wide as it would go. Jeff bowed his erect head and stepped through.

She looked at him breathlessly, and as his eyes met hers he saw that she was pale, drawn, and worn looking as he had never expected her to be. Somehow he had never thought that her bright tints could fade or that pain could shadow her eyes and track over her face; so capable she seemed, so self-reliant that he had deemed her beyond the possible reach of pain. She had always ridden boldly above all disaster and untoward circumstance; but now he knew her as a childlike, stumbling, fragile human being just as he himself was. This fact brought her nearer to him.

She was plainly startled by his coming; but now she had a look of disbelief, too, as if an impossible, glorious thing was coming true before her eyes. And indeed, the bowing of this proud man—the change since she last saw him—had to be numbered among the few miracles that her life had known.

"I was a cad on the bridge that day, Molly," he told her simply. "I didn't mean anything against you. I couldn't bear to leave you without saying this."

"Are you leaving?" She seemed almost unable to shape the words.

"I'm meeting Karl in a duel to-morrow, and since I probably won't live to see you again—I want to be sure that you have forgiven everything."

CHAPTER XXI.

JEFF'S SECOND.

IN a few brief sentences Jeff told of to-morrow's crisis, of the challenge and his acceptance. Molly was pale when he came in, but that mere absence of her usual gay color was not to be compared with this stark, chalk whiteness in which her eyes now burned. At last she stopped him by her hand, icy and leaping, touching his.

"You can't, you can't, Jeff!" she told him, shaking her head and searching his eyes.

"You must not do this thing! If you won't stop on my account, you must remember your duty here, for America! Jeff, you must go away to-night."

He smiled gravely at her zeal. "Molly, you wouldn't have me run away! You couldn't bear to have one of your countrymen show the white feather!"

"Oh, you can't mean this." Her hands groped again at his. "Don't you see your life isn't your own now, and you have no right to risk it? You have your work to do—to put through this big thing you were sent up here to do. You can't betray that trust!"

His rounding eyes showed his amazement. "Molly, do you know my real purpose up here?"

"Of course. How could I keep from guessing it in these weeks we have been together? Jeff, you must escape from here to-night. I'll find a way."

"If there were a thousand ways of escape I couldn't take one of them. I can no more avoid that duel now than I can avoid breathing. You don't understand and I can't make you understand, but just the same, the keeping of that contract with Karl is the first law of my life. It is a matter of honor more sacred to me than anything else in the world."

"Oh, what do I care for your idea of honor? I only know you are walking up there deliberately to be killed by an assassin. You say yourself it was a trap."

"A trap that I walked into and can't walk out of. Now I must see the thing through. Not only my honor—which you make light of—but my self-respect is at stake. Please don't ask me not to go, Molly. I'll have to go anyway. It won't make it any easier."

"I know you'll go, well enough." Her tone now had changed to one of profound bitterness. Suddenly she realized that her tears were wasted on him; and this was not a mere belief—otherwise she would kneel at his feet, if need be—but unqualified conviction; he would go to meet his man in spite of her. She could not change him. Though men are children in women's hands in some things, in others—strange, witless things in women's eyes—they are like iron. "Men will always go to fight, no matter if their own babies plead with them to come back. What do you care for us—what does any man care for any woman, when she gets in the way of some wicked thing he wants to do!"

She looked up with blue eyes flashing with the light of her vision. He took her fluttering hand and held it in his.

"You don't understand," he told her. "I suppose women never can understand about this. But you haven't interpreted this thing right, Molly, though I suppose I can't convince you. I came here to get your good wishes before I go into the night."

"And I give them, with all my heart. But that won't turn his bullets away from you."

"You don't know. I want to be sure you forgive me, everything."

"Yes, everything. Even going, Jeff, in spite of my prayers. We always forgive you, even when you are going to throw away a life that doesn't belong to you."

"But I'm not going to throw away my life." His hand tightened on hers until she felt pain. "Molly, I'm going to come back. I'm going to win."

Convinced that he was merely trying to cheer her with assurances which he knew to be false, she glanced dully into his eyes; but at the first glance her interest quickened. They suddenly held a vivid, magnetic light she could not deny. Certainly he was buoyed up with new hope.

"You said—when you first came in—that probably you were going to your death."

"But that was—when I first came in!" His brilliant smile flashed over his face. "A great deal has happened since then."

"Nothing has happened. I just pleaded with you not to go—and you said you would go—anyway." A gleam of hope flashed across her stark-white countenance.

"Yes, I'm going anyway—I have to go. Let's not talk about that phase of it any more. Molly, something has happened—something that matters more than I ever dreamed. You've given me your good wishes."

"Can that make any difference—to *you!*"

"When I came up here I had just tasted a more bitter drink than I ever dreamed was brewed on the earth. The name of that drink was loneliness. I felt that there was no one in the world who was really interested, except maybe regarding the furs, whether I came through that fight to-morrow or whether I fell. I didn't mind so much not having a second actually at the front with me, but I wanted—and I needed—a second somewhere behind the lines, praying for me to win. I'm not the man I thought I was, Molly. I can't play a lone game. Once I thought I was independent of every human being in the world, but I found out differently to-night. When I came in here a few minutes ago I was already beaten and down. Somehow, my hope seemed gone; and a man can't fight without hope."

No one could doubt his earnestness. He spoke quietly, yet his tone rang like a bugle call. "Molly, I was afraid. I tasted fear at its worst. And now, just because I've come back to your friendship, all my fear is gone."

"But just because a man is not afraid it doesn't mean he will win. Brave men die, the same as all the others."

"Just the same, confidence of winning helps a man to win. At least I'm not beaten at the start, as I was. Why shouldn't I win, Molly? I've handled a pistol all my life. I used to clip off the head of a wild turkey with an old flintlock pistol of my father's. I'm fighting on the right side, instead of the wrong, and that's a factor too."

Certainly some of his confidence passed to her. Her color once more glowed faintly in her cheeks, enhanced by the glamour of her flaxen hair. "You *must* win, Jeff," she told him with deep solemnity. "Now tell me—what were you going to ask me to do? You said you came to ask help."

"I didn't have any definite thing to ask. I just knew I needed help and I came here for it, and you have given it to me. New heart—that is what you've given me."

"And you don't mean any real material help?"

"You've given me just that thing."

"I don't know whether I have or not, but I'm going to if such a thing is possible! Jeff, who are you going to ask to be your second?"

"I haven't anybody. The way I feel now, I wouldn't mind asking your uncle."

"I don't want you to ask Uncle Dave. He would do it, gladly—but he's a man himself, with man's folly. He'll be too absorbed in the game to watch as I want you to be watched. You know who is going to stand beside you to-morrow?"

"No. Who is?"

"Molly Forest!"

He stared at her to see if he was to take this literally; and he read his answer in the bright, intent beam that reached his eyes from hers. Molly meant exactly what she said.

Jeff knew in advance the folly of arguing against the girl's stand; but it can be said of him that he made an earnest and determined effort to dissuade her. He explained that it might be a most terrible ordeal for her, that a dueling field was no place for a woman; and in addition to this, such a thing was wholly unprecedented as far as he had ever heard. Dueling was a man's game, he pointed out; and it was not quite playing fair to introduce into it a factor that might have a disturbing effect upon his opponent.

She smiled throughout all his remarks; and he had the uncomfortable feeling that he was making no headway whatever. At last she summed up her position in a few words. "I'm going, Jeff, whether you like it or not," she told him emphatically. "I'll be on the scene to-morrow whether or not you let me officiate as your second. You will say that I have no right, and I say to you a woman doesn't have to have any right to do what her instincts bid her do. If we went by men's rules of right and wrong this would be a far different world to-day.

"I only hope my presence *will* have a disturbing influence on Baron Karl. The more I disturb him the better I will like it; if he thinks best, he can refuse to go on with the duel. I have only hatred for the whole thing, and don't admit that it's an affair of honor—the thing was forced on you, and you say that yourself.

"I'm going with you, my friend. I am going to stand beside you—just as real women have always had to stand beside men. I think you will have a better chance if you have at your side some one to uphold you as only a woman can uphold a man, and some one to watch over you—and that better chance is all I care about. Nothing else can influence me.

"We'll fight this thing through together, man!" She stroked his lean hand. "My brave man!" Then, smiling wistfully: "My brave little boy."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE DUEL.

WHEN the gray dawn lay over this Alaskan shore, Jeff arose and dressed in the best street clothes he owned. Thus it was to be seen that some of his great pride still lingered with him; but this was not the kind of pride that would cast him into darkness. His sleep had been broken, disturbed by wretched dreams; and now he felt tired and listless.

He found Molly waiting for him on the deck. She greeted him with a smile; and truly it warmed his chilled heart. Last night he had really deplored the girl's decision to act as his second; but he could not even pretend to do so now. He was a veteran of one of the most terrible wars that was ever fought upon the face of this earth; but at the same time he was Jeff Sharp—lonesome, an exile, and less than thirty years of age.

He found himself brightening in the clear, steadfast gleam of her eyes. His listlessness passed away, and he was able to direct his mind to other channels than that of the deadly business awaiting him on the Kolosh Ryeka Trail. He listened to her talk, and he made intelligent answers. Very soon he resumed his old carriage, something of his usual high spirits.

She had breakfast ready for him, and they had it together in the galley. She did not need to encourage him to eat; and they talked of varied things. She did not, however, offer him strong drink, and he did not ask for it. It was true that the fiery liquor might give him false courage, drive away the last little chill of fear from his heart, but at the same time it might induce a fatal recklessness. He needed all his powers today. The delicate processes of his brain, and the fine coördination between mind and muscle must not be impaired.

After breakfast they walked through the town, across the bridge, and up Governor's Walk toward Mt. Vestovia. This was a still, somber morning; and except for Molly's presence he might have been depressed by it, and believed it was prophetic.

When they reached the appointed place—a little clearing among the tall, dark trees—they found Staritsa waiting, accompanied by Stevock, a surgeon from the hospital. The former had his case of pistols, the latter of bandages and ligatures.

Staritsa's smile was serene; yet he was plainly susceptible to the atmosphere of excitement and suspense that already lay over the glade; not only keenly responsive to it, but perhaps enraptured too with that dark ecstasy remembered since first the cliff folk chattered and howled at the sight of a bloody combat. This was the kind of thing that soon stretched human nerves to the breaking point. Fortunately there was no long waiting. Baron Karl, accompanied by his second, came up the hill and joined the company. He looked surprised when he saw Molly.

"My opponent has a fair second," he said to Templeton. "What a pleasant little family matter this is!"

He bowed to her, then to Jeff. The latter, hoping to play the game according to its best traditions, bowed in return with stately composure.

The Russian's air of perfect confidence could not be mistaken. His smile as he bowed to the company had the faint suggestion of a leer; yet if he had hoped to lessen Jeff's resistance by his own self-assurance it was in vain. The man from North Carolina was beyond that now. In spite of the increasing suspense, the hushed breathlessness of the hour, he was really amazingly cool. He felt someway upheld by a strength emanating from a brave heart other than his own, safe as though held in sheltering arms that he had long ago known and loved.

Staritsa's first official duty was to load the pistols, which he did in plain sight of both principals. They saw him put in powder and wads, and in each a cruel pellet of lead which, propelled by the powder's savage force, could find its way to the fount of a man's life. Every one watched his motions as he took two small disks from a box of percussion caps, placed them with care, and lowered the pistol hammers lightly upon them. Then replacing the pistols in their case, which now rested at the base of a great tree, he stepped off ten paces in the middle of the clearing and drew two lines in the soft earth. Then he called the two principals to his side while he gave final instructions.

They were very simple. After the first hit, either man could withdraw from the fight or, if the injury was slight, they could by mutual agreement fire again. They were to take their places at a distance of ten paces and face opposite directions until he ordered "Fire!"—upon which command both men were to turn and discharge their pistols. The surgeon was to stand ready to treat any injury.

His entire discourse occupied only a few seconds of this fleet hour. He now picked up his pistol case and held it for the seconds to make their choice of weapons.

Molly took the gun nearest her in the case; and Templeton the one nearest him.

Now the time had come for the two principals to take their places. Standing back to back at a distance of ten paces, they waited for the word "Fire!" their weapons pointing in the air.

Jeff's blood was leaping swiftly now, but he still had that most meaningful of all eminences, mastery over himself. The hand that held the pistol was fairly steady; and even now those strange, secret forces of brain and nerve and muscle—mysterious monitors of his being—were focusing on the thing he meant to do.

He had already decided on his tactics. He knew that this duel had never been engineered to satisfy outraged honor; no romantic complex let him think it had been. It was merely a pleasant way out of a serious difficulty, an effective means of removing an obstacle that had come between Karl and the success of one of his schemes. Certainly, then, Karl would shoot to kill. He would take precautions to place his bullet in such a way that his adversary would not readily interfere with him again, at least not until after a long period of helplessness in the hospital. To take such deliberate and careful aim took a certain appreciable part of a second—even on the part of one who made dueling his genteel profession—and this fact gave Jeff his chance.

Baron Karl would certainly take time to aim with care. He was probably fully confident of his ability to launch a telling shot in actually less time than his opponent could let fly an aimless one. If Jeff was to live, he must prove that his foe's supposition was not true.

He must shoot fast, but he must shoot straight. He must catch sight of Karl's tall form over his sights in the first movement of his pistol. It was jump shooting such as now and then he had practiced on deer, in low, warm mountains far away.

The scene might now be moving in the extreme to one who could appreciate its romance and forget its cruelty. The two principals, handsome and stylish figures, stood facing in opposite directions, their pistols held erect. Jeff's good looks were never more appealing, and to Molly, outwardly cold eyed, watchful, and remorseless, this view of him was almost beyond woman's high-born strength to bear. He was so young, so valiant; even though this was his last second of life his tragic pride still commanded him. No doubt he wanted to play this wicked game according to its best traditions. There was a distant hint of gayety, unthinkably splendid and fine, in his manner; a quaint humor of resignation such as the great have always reached for. Vain still, with that dear, pathetic vanity of youth, his pose seemed purposely picturesque; one hand resting on his hip, the other, brown in contrast with the turned-back cuff, holding the richly ornamented pistol, his tall form in linen and broadcloth perfectly erect, his fine head held high, his chin lifted. Molly could not forget the signal change that the next second might bring; the courtly form cast down in hopeless ruin, the white, proud face in the dust, the strong hands impotently waving and then lying still, the flashing eyes spending the last of their noble fire in that weird glare which, seen in the eyes of stricken comrades, haunts the dreams of veterans of great wars.

Karl's was a courtly figure too, and something of the certain strength of the man was seen in his hairy hand which, though latently swift as a snake's head, was now steady as iron; in his easy position and confident air. Now he was stark pale for all his Slav darkness of skin, his somber eyes glowed, and the old scar on his cheek looked like a new, red wound. Even if her eyes were not needed elsewhere Molly could not look at him, simply because of his obvious confidence of victory. She watched the master of ceremonies, now pale as either of the two principals, and Templeton, who now waited, grave and sedate yet keenly alive to all sporting aspects of this meeting, safe to one side of his man.

The romantic side of the affair was enhanced by its picturesque setting. As the sun peered up over the hills the land had that happy, radiant look that all early risers know: a look of exultant welcome akin to that seen on the countryside in spring; and for the moment the dark presence of the spruce could be forgotten. Long shadows, like bars, lay across the glade. The frosted leaves of the underbrush in the forest beyond were spotted with ominous red. There was no hint or suggestion of sound on the whole hillside.

Staritsa spoke in that deep hush, and the men quivered and their hands moved on their weapons. "I will count three—in English—and when I command you 'Fire!' you are to turn and seek your satisfaction. Get ready! One!

"Two!" The pause between the numbers was silent beyond thought.

"Three!

"Fire!"

At that word, both men whirled. The eyes of each, drawn in and intent, saw the other's face as if in a calcium light, in this little flash of an instant before the first pistol spoke. Jeff's face seemed hardly his own, so drawn it was by the fury of his purpose. Every line on Karl's Slavic countenance showed supreme confidence as to the confiict's outcome; and a leer of contempt was on his lips.

When Molly saw that look she knew that Jeff had been put upon and cheated. It was incompatible with human frailty, that Karl could face a chance of death with such an air. Jeff saw the look too, knowing instantly by means of those keen perceptions that come to men in the ultimate crisis, that an evil plot had been made against his life; but further than that, there was no time to know. There was no time for terror, nor even for regret that he had not guessed the truth before. There was no time left except for playing out this iniquitous game to its inevitable end.

He saw Karl's tall body over the pistol barrel. At this deadly range—only a few paces—there was no need of careful aiming. Just as he had been taught to do in shooting swiftly moving game in his Southern hills, he pressed the trigger as the pistol came to rest.

There was a single sharp report. The look on Karl's face was now one of vast incredulity, grotesque and terrible, through the smoke of Jeff's pistol. Then with a mighty effort—ghastly and evil as the snapping of a dying animal—he took desperate aim with his pistol and pulled the trigger.

All of them heard the hammer snap harmlessly against the breech. Then the only sound was the subdued impact of Karl's body on the soft earth.

CHAPTER XXIII.

KARL STRIKES.

THE moment immediately following Karl's fall was marked by various incidents mostly lost on Jeff, standing as if in a dream with the last filaments of smoke streaming up from his silent pistol. He saw the surgeon rush to Karl's side and begin to administer first aid; he saw Templeton kneel beside his man, then, evidently realizing he could not aid the physician, pick up Karl's pistol from beside the fallen duelist and, oblivious to Staritsa's shouts, begin to examine it. He saw Staritsa attempting to take it from the Englishman's hands, an effort that met with small success; and finally, the most moving sight of all, he saw Molly coming toward him, ready to stand at his side during all the stress that this fierce moment might bring to pass.

He glanced at her, saw that she was stark white with terror but evidently able to hold up, then turned his eyes toward Karl's two friends. Torn though he was by the dread crisis of the second before, his eyes now held a notable intentness, a vigilance never wavering. He was perfectly aware that the business of this October morning might not yet be complete; and that the time had not yet come to rest.

He saw Templeton cock the pistol, point it in the air, and attempt to fire it; and again the hammer clanged impotently down. His next act was to examine the small percussion cap; and his face showed considerable enlightenment when finally he turned his ear to Staritsa's clamor.

The latter had first talked in excited Russian, but now remembering that Templeton could not understand this tongue, he once more attempted English. "It is a cheat!" he was crying. "It is a plot—he and his second have killed Karl by a trap. Give me that gun, Templeton! He shall pay for that wickedness with his life!"

"It wouldn't be quite the thing, Staritsa," Templeton answered. "Your free ways aren't quite the thing. There has been cheating somewhere, certainly, but it will have to be taken up through the governor."

"We shall make him squirm for this! His second must have replaced the good cap with a defective one while the guns were in their case."

"On the contrary, I should say you merely got the pistols mixed up, through your own stupidity," Jeff observed.

"We will have to go into it further," Templeton told him. "The cap I have in my pocket contains no powder, and it looks to me as if it had been deliberately taken out. However, Staritsa, I believe we must declare Karl's honor satisfied, providing that conspiracy cannot be proved against the opposite party. Even if the cap had been good, the outcome would have been the same as far as my man is concerned. Mr. Sharp, you remember, was able to send in his shot before Baron Karl found his aim."

The full meaning of these words was not lost on either Molly or Jeff. They showed a certain amazing trait of English character. This Templeton's very profession was that of unscrupulous intrigue. He was more or less of a free lance—not an uncommon type in the older diplomacy—and he was open to any kind of engagement short of actual murder which would offer sufficient remuneration. Yet he retained, far down in an enfeebled conscience, a distinct sporting sense. Perfectly aware that this duel had been forced on Jeff, and doubtless a participant in the spoils that were to accrue therefrom, yet he had kept the letter if not the spirit of the old code of dueling.

Interest now fastened on the injured man. The ball had passed into his left side, but it had missed the vital organs, and Doctor Stevock announced there was at least an even chance for the man's recovery. He would not, however, care to resume the duel at once. Templeton went to procure stretcher men; and nothing remained now for Jeff and Molly but to return to the ship.

Captain Skinner was an eager listener to the tale that was told on the deck that morning. "Why didn't you let me come along!" he cried in a tone of sincere reproach. "Why do you leave me out on all these fine mixups you and Molly get into? I wasn't with you when you fit the Roosian triplets, and I wasn't with you this morning."

"Well, there's one thing you can be sure of. This isn't the end of the mess."

"I wish I could believe it was."

"You needn't try. They'll spring something else soon. I only wish I didn't have those sour-faced Muscovites on board; we'd get our plant together somehow and tear out." He smacked a big fist into his palm. "By Judas, I believe I'll get a chance to use this old meat ax yet, in a week or so!"

It turned out that Captain Skinner was all too generous as to time. According to the best traditions of the imperial system, delays of a week or two are strictly out of order and indecorous when profitable business is afoot, though months and years are soon enough to tend to some peasant's welfare. It was not to be, however, that Skinner should have an immediate chance to work the stiffness out of his huge, rope-pulling hands. He was not a fool, this Yankee skipper, and in his highly colored lifetime he had learned a certain discrimination between bravery and rashness. He could usually recognize an occasion to fight, and during such an occasion he was more like a whirling dervish than a staid New Englander, howling over his deck and leaving summary destruction in his wake. He also knew when to look prim and innocent, quieting his foes' suspicions until such a time as he felt free to act.

It was the Russians' lead, in this million-ruble game, and not days or weeks, but only hours saw them make the next play. Just before the supper hour four soldiers from the garrison, in command of a corporal, came tramping up the gangplank. They were not merely a detail of the guard. Walking behind them came Yanovisk, the governor's secretary, and he bore in his hand an important-looking document bearing the seal of Spaskii, the czar's commissioner.

The soldiers were halted and Yanovisk made a short speech. "I am most sorry," he began. Although still uninformed as to where the play was leading, Jeff paused in his wonderment long enough to give Yanovisk credit for a certain amount of real regret; although the young Russian would not refuse his share of the spoil, he was a decent sort and probably deplored some of the Machiavellian methods practiced on Jeff. "I am most sorry," he repeated, "to be the bearer of unpleasant tidings, but one must obey commands. Doubtless it will be a matter of small moment."

"Go ahead," Jeff said. "What's the bad news."

"Give us the worst," Skinner urged. Then under his breath to Molly: "These fellows can take longer getting to the point than a New England peddler."

"I have here a warrant which, by your pardon, I must serve." Spreading the paper in his hands he read it first in Russian, then translated it into English. It was addressed to the commanding officer of the garrison of his majesty's troops, and it was a warrant for the arrest of "one Jefferson Sharp, on the charge of committing a bloody crime against his majesty's servant, Baron Karl Pavlof." It charged that "said Sharp had conspired against Karl's life, and through fraud, treachery, and villainy had taken advantage of his opponent in an honorable duel, said fraud, treachery, and villainy resulting in serious injury to said Baron Karl, for which crime or crimes he was to be incarcerated in prison until such time as he could be tried."

Yanovisk's foreign-sounding English offered no chance for a mistake. Far from the protection of the courts of his country, Jeff was to be arrested and confined in prison on what was very plainly a trumped-up charge.

It was not because they failed to realize the gravity of this charge that Skinner and Jeff attempted no resistance. In the first place they guessed that the troops had received certain orders, not written in the warrant, which dealt with this very thing. Even the slightest resistance would be an excuse for a volley from four rifles at close range, a lesson that Jeff would surely take to heart. Should a stray bullet from one of the rifles or from the corporal's pistol find the brave heart of the Boston captain, it would be a regrettable accident—but accidents cannot always be avoided in the enforcement of law. Indeed, both Jeff and Skinner knew that some resistance on their part was just what Baron Karl's friends were hoping for, since it would pave the way for a prompt and efficacious settlement of a troublesome affair.

Beyond this, both knew that resistance was the height of folly, even though they could conquer the half squad who had come to arrest them and the Russian guards who would promptly leap to their fellows' defense. The entire garrison could be called if needed.

"You will doubtless be free, shortly—very doubtless," Yanovisk explained. "It is a mere matter of form and most to be deplored. But for the present——"

He glanced toward the corporal of the guard who, standing near, slipped iron bands about Jeff's wrists, leaving them only a few inches play. Captain Skinner stood erect, and curious bright sparks—like the phosphorescence of which sailors speak, trailing their ships through these Northern seas—whirled in his blue eyes; but his arms hung limp at his side.

"I must say you fellers are taking a chance," he observed to Yanovisk. "You kind of forget he's a citizen of United States."

"His cause will be taken up with the United States authorities, doubtless," Yanovisk explained. "For the present he will be confined as a—what you say?—precautionary measure, then will be turned over for his own government to deal with."

"Doubtless—if some accident don't happen to him first. Accidents happen you know, duke. I must say that I wish you'd recall them guards so I can go down and tell the president all about this deal. He'll settle somebody's hash for this. How long you think you'll keep us here?"

"Not long, surely. The American captain still has repairs to make on his good ship?"

"A couple of weeks' work, yet. I hope you'll take off the guards by that time."

"Perhaps. The matter will be settled to the satisfaction of every one. Now, Miss Forest, and you other gentlemen, I must bid you farewell for the present." Then in Russian: "Lead off your man, corporal."

The corporal gave a command, and with their prisoner between them the men marched away. It did not surprise Jeff to be taken to an underground prison dug in the hill on which stood Baronof Castle; he had heard rumors of a dungeon where more important prisoners were confined. Here was a corridor on the stone floor of which the soldiers' tramping feet rang loud; and here were certain cells so dark that the eye could scarcely make out what they contained.

An iron door was opened, and in an instant clanged shut behind him. The sound of tramping feet dimmed and finally disappeared. Except for his bitter thoughts that peopled these dusky cells like ghosts, Jeff was left alone.

CHAPTER XXIV.

DISILLUSION.

THE single window in Jeff's cell was but a small, barred aperture higher than his head, and only a glimmer of the dying day came into it. Its walls and floor were of stone, and by straining into the dusk Jeff could see the one article of furnishing that the cell contained; a wooden cot on which lay two fur robes.

His arms were still chained; and perhaps this fact aided him to concentrate. As he could only move them a few inches apart there was nothing he could do with them to divert his attention from his one simple theme, which now held him like an iron chain itself.

This theme concerned a certain abstract thing that he had heard of all his life, but which he had never given a moment's sober thought. The name of that thing was liberty—a name he had heard so many times it actually had begun to lack meaning for him. Now he thought of it, he could not remember that he had ever known its real meaning.

He had been taught to believe, before ever the Civil War shook the land, that America was the "Land of Liberty," and when he had come to hate the institutions of America he had someway lost faith in the liberty which was its watch cry. He had thought it an empty name. He had secretly concluded that it didn't matter; at least his attitude tended to show that conclusion. When some of his comrades at arms had tried once more to reconcile themselves to the United States government—believing that it had qualities worth their loyalty since it had been decreed they could not have a government of their own, exactly as they wanted it—he had decided to leave America for good. There had been nothing there worth holding him. He had concluded that the republican idea—which is only another way of saying the liberty idea—was not worth retaining. In other words, this thing they called liberty was not worth staying for.

No wonder, as he sat on the floor in the darkness, his arms confined, that his mind was so busy he was almost unaware of the passing of time.

Jeff Sharp felt that perhaps it would have been better to have done this thinking quite a long time before.

Before he had half exhausted the topic, there came an interruption; and at first he was inclined to resent it. It turned out, however, that the ensuing talk threw even further light on this subject which now had become so interesting to him. He had a visitor in the person of the nobleman Staritsa, and the latter, admitted by the lone guard who stayed in quarters just outside the building, came and talked to him through the barred cell door.

In the end Jeff was actually grateful for the conversation, although he was inclined to doubt if it were aimed to please.

"You look very pretty in there," Staritsa told him, frankly complimentary. Staritsa had been imbibing freely of the Russian national drink, doubtless to drown his sorrow for his friend's injury, and now a pleasant recklessness was upon him. Dusky though the corridor was his eyes glowed, and sometimes his white teeth caught the light. "Why do you hold your hands in such a fond way? Have you forgotten the Christian teaching, 'Let not thy right hand know what thy left hand doeth?' Here you sit with them within an inch or so of each other. I fear, Mr. Sharp, that position might prove awkward if you tried to duplicate this morning's feat. You were most clever—to spike Baron Karl's guns."

Jeff looked up, but no anger was in his eyes, and he was merely interested in what Staritsa would tell him next. He felt that he would like to draw further confidences from the young noble. "They are somewhat awkward this way, I fear," he observed carelessly, "yet I think I could pick up a dog—not an honest dog, but a cur, a fawning, treacherous wolf whelp—such a dog I could pick up by the scruff of the neck and beat out his brains against these bars. If you care to ask the jailer to let you in——"

Staritsa tried to laugh; but it is part of the curse that lies upon such men that laughter is forbidden. "That will be added to the rest that we owe you," he said. "You were clever to change the guns, Sharp, but I don't think you will be successful in changing the whips. We have had one kind for many centuries, and although we love to comply with a great American's wish I fear we will be unable to change it for any other. You will get to know all its fine points—over there."

He jerked his hand toward the west.

"Over there, of course," Jeff agreed smiling. "If I am sent there there will only be more dogs to kill when the final settlement is made."

"My friend, no one will ever know where you are." Staritsa's tone was serious now; evidently the system he was about to describe moved him to the most fervent admiration. "Perhaps you noticed—to-day—the *Neva II.*, lying in the harbor. Perhaps you did not know she is sailing to-night, out west. She will have aboard her certain exiles for the prisons—out there where the sun sets—or rather where it never rises. Certain native thieves, a murderer or two—and perhaps a few others.

"The warrant arresting you to-day said that you were to have a trial. Baron Karl never made a better joke. Injured though he is, he ordered that warrant. Little brother, you have already had your trial. You have already been sentenced. All that remains now is to give you your number."

"So I am to sail to-night, am I?" Jeff asked. His voice trembled ever so slightly, and Staritsa rejoiced to listen.

"All track of you will be lost. When you lie buried, you will also wear a number—but that time will not be soon. Oh, not at all soon. There will be years and years. The life out there is very healthy, so they tell me.

"Soon the American government will start inquiries as to what has happened to the special correspondent. They will write to the czar, and the czar will not know. Believe me, I am telling the truth; the czar will not know. There are many things that he does not know. He will be greatly disturbed but he will not find you. He cannot disbelieve the account that will be sent out, and your president will not disbelieve it either. Oh, such a regrettable incident; that Jeff Sharp, summoned before the commissioner for a talk concerning a duel in which he became engaged, disappeared into the forest, evidently afraid for his life, and cannot be found! Oh, it will be a great shame—try hard as we could, he could not be found. Of course no one will think of looking out there. If they did look, after certain years, they would never recognize the grand American diplomat. Why, he was tall, beautiful, and proud. That thing? That shrieking, stooped creature, licking the boots of the guard? That broken, detested thing? Why, that is not a man at all!"

Staritsa shook with glee in the corridor. Jeff had never seen such spite as this with which the noble Muscovite described his victim's fate. Evidently his love for Baron Karl had been an emotion of great power. Besides, the evil jinni that lives in the vodka jar had hold of him and put ideas in his head.

There was no hope, however, that the plan Staritsa had described was but a drunken phantasy. Jeff knew that the *Neva II.* was lying in the harbor, and he knew that she sailed that night. He was a disillusioned man, at last; and he had adjured false hope for good and all. To-night he was going west.

When the *Neva II.* passed the harbor mouth he might say farewell to American shores—except perhaps dim glimpses from shipboard of the bleak peninsula, like the Siberian shore itself—because he would not come again. Such prisoners as he would be do not return to make trouble. His plan to migrate from America was to be executed.

He would get his wish, after all. He would become the subject of a monarch, rather than one of a governing people. He would spend the rest of his days in a country ruled by a privileged aristocracy, just the sort of a régime he had favored. Fate has queer ways of making one's dreams come true.

Jeff Sharp had drained his cup to its bitter dregs. Now, as if his cup were poison, the stream of his life seemed to have ceased to flow. So silent he stood, seemingly so bereft of all motion, that he suggested a wild thing crouching terrified in a woodland covert, by remaining motionless hoping to escape the searching eyes of a beast of prey; but the cruel beast that hunted Jeff to-night was his own thoughts. He was alone, at last; wholly and terribly alone.

There was no one to go to now. Iron bars stood between. There was no one who could come to him. He had danced, but now the music was still and his companions had gone away, and he was left alone in the silence and the darkness. As far as Jeff dared to dream his game of life had been played—and lost.

Here, in the darkness, out of the sight of all men, his proud head was bowed. He was alone in fact as well as in the lonely sea of his mood. Staritsa had reeled through the corridor and away into the twilight. The dusk deepened, and the black Alaskan night obliterated the last ray that wandered through the window of his cell. Still Jeff stood in one place, and the wheel of his thought was far and wide as the orbit of a star; but the shadows that lay over him were black and chill with never a starry gleam.

CHAPTER XXV.

VISITORS.

IT could not be that Jeff could remain thus for long. The tide is never still, but dropping to its lowest level, immediately begins to rise again. There is no motionless body in heaven and earth, and quiescence is intolerable to the moving spirit of the universe. If it were true that his hopes could not fall lower they must certainly rise according to the changeless laws of change. Three hours after nightfall marked the slack tide.

Jeff at first was not interested in the voices that he heard so dimly at the head of the stone steps that led down to the corridor. Perhaps Staritsa was coming to talk to him again, more likely it was merely the conversation of some of the governor's guests walking in the gardens. The language used was unknown to him; and at first the sound did not arrest his brooding thoughts. But presently he started and his eyes opened wide.

He had heard a familiar voice. It was a girl's voice, like a low-murmuring stream and full of marvelous, gliding tones. He had often heard it plaintive and appealing, but now, although it was subdued, it was charged full of a bewitching coquetry such as he had never imagined it could possess. At intervals a man answered her, rather grimly, but with rough familiarity and, unmistakable in his tone, a certain gruff humor.

They spoke in a tongue he did not understand, and although he did not discern a single familiar word, the larger import of the conversation was not lost on him. The girl was employing all her feminine arts to win some favor from his jailer. She was bewitching him with her voice, charming him with the sheer music of her tones; and there was an invitation all but veiled in her manner to which Jeff, waiting in the darkness below, was keenly conscious. This girl knew how to appeal to men. There was nothing coarse or obvious about her coquetry; it was the kind which men regard as unconscious, and which is therefore all the more flattering.

With the possible exception of the night of the governor's dance he had never heard her speak in this tone before; yet now that he heard her distinctly he could not for an instant question her identity. This was Molly, of course. Even in his moment of deepest despair he might have known she would come.

Again she had proved to him her linguistic skill, in that she made herself easily understood to the jailer. What was their common language he did not know, but he assumed it was some coastwise jargon she had picked up while traveling with her uncle. Evidently her purely feminine language was likewise lucid to him, because she soon won her plea. His tone indicated hesitating compliance with some request on the girl's part. Jeff's guess was immediately confirmed by the rattle of a latch on the prison door and the tramp of feet on the stone steps. Beams from a lantern leaped about in the corridor, casting running, chasing shadows on the walls.

The yellow light showed two visitors beside the jailer. One was Molly, of course—she who had never failed him. Jeff saw with mounting hope that the other was the barrel-chested, unrefined old Yankee skipper, Captain Skinner.

It was plain now that the girl's charm had not been the only sesame. She had had substantial aid in the shape of a prime sea-otter skin which the jailer now carried under his arm, the luster and beauty of which was almost past imagining as the lantern beams glided over the quivering, shimmering fur. It was evidently an argument hard to answer.

"Impress it on him that piece of fur is a high price just for a farewell word to Jeff," Captain Skinner told the girl in English as he paused in front of the cell. "It'll pay off his debt and get him back to Russia."

The girl repeated Skinner's message; then turning, talked through the bars to the prisoner. Instead of speaking English, which Jeff had every reason to expect she would do, she spoke in a tongue unknown to him, evidently the same language with which she had addressed his keeper; and at first he could conceive of no possible explanation for her strange conduct. Yet in a moment he guessed the incredible truth. It was plain now that this message bearing was a ruse, and that she was repeating unimportant tidings purely for the keeper's benefit and to quiet his suspicions. Evidently this midnight visit had another theme.

He nodded, pretending that he understood. The girl smiled, then turning, spoke again to the jailer, and resting her white arm on the sleeve of his uniform, drew him up beside her. Jeff's eyes were not shadow filled now, and they glittered in the beams of the lantern that was now held close to the bars. Obviously Molly had requested the jailer to throw his light on the prisoner's face—asking, probably, for a last clear view of him before they parted—and urged by her moving touch, he had not been able to refuse. Now on pretense of getting the light nearer, she reached, thrilled him with the touch of her hand on his, and gently took the lantern from him. Just for an instant she held it so that it shone on Jeff's face.

Then without warning, with a motion swift as bird's flight, she dashed the lantern against the bars of the cell.

Jeff was only aware of a swift trail of light, a sudden bright flicker that showed the whole scene in minute detail, and then overwhelming darkness.

In that final glimpse Jeff had discerned certain things of considerable moment to him. He saw first the look of grotesque amazement on the jailer's face; evidently this lantern breaking was not in the bargain he made. In the same glance he saw that Captain Skinner's wish had come true and that he was getting into action at last. In the final gleam before the darkness obliterated everything he saw the old skipper with outspread arms, come diving through the air.

The darkness that dropped down was absolutely blinding; and only such sound as reached him through the bars conveyed to Jeff what was taking place in the corridor. He heard the distinct impact of Skinner's head against the jailer's back, and the thud of their bodies on the floor. These sounds were all but obscured by a queer gobbling sound, largely unintelligible except that it was not unlike the utterances heard when human breathing is summarily shut off. This was followed by other noises that might have been made by struggling bodies rolling about the floor and against the walls.

It was a strange sensation to Jeff to stand helpless behind the bars in the presence of an unseen battle. He was glad when the more heavy sounds abruptly ceased, and the corridor lay in silence except for the subdued whisper of troubled breathing. A moment later he heard the scratch of a matchhead against the wall, followed by its soft explosion as it ignited.

Molly had scratched that match, and she had not broken it in the attempt. Neither did she have to scratch it twice, and so firm was her hand that it burned with a candle's steady flame. The fact that her face was stark white did not thus seem to argue scattered faculties. She lighted the lantern, holding it high and touching the little torch to its wick.

The jailer was at present lying prone in the corridor. He was plainly unconscious, and furthermore he was now being confined against such time as he should waken. Captain Skinner had produced cords from his pockets—indicating that this enterprise had been worked out in considerable detail—and he not only bound the man's hands and feet, but also tied a handkerchief over his mouth.

The skipper's next act was to unhook the key ring from the fallen jailer's belt and unlock Jeff's cell. "Get a jump on," he cautioned the late prisoner. They put out the light, took the steps of the corridor two at a time, and glided through the darkened gardens. "We've got to get back to the ship before that guard mount."

Jeff did not understand fully, but he paused not at all to ask questions. Still with his arms bound behind him he followed his friends through the shadows and on to the deck of the ship. And now it became apparent that this night's activities had not in the least been confined to the prison, and that the main business of the evening had occurred on the ship itself.

As soon as Jeff stepped aboard he detected a pleasant rumble in the hold of the ship which had great meaning for him; and he noticed also that the ship quivered slightly in its place at the quay. At first he saw no sign of the guards, but on the way down to the engine room in search of tools to break his bonds, he encountered all four of them lying side by side in a passage. They moved their eyes toward him as he walked by, but they did not speak. The practiced skill with which Captain Skinner had pinioned the unfortunate jailer could not be misunderstood.

As the mess boy filed at his wristlets, Jeff was told the larger aspects of the night's work. The ship had been put in running order in record time, and it was plain that Captain Skinner had purposely deceived Yanovisk when he had told him, the preceding afternoon, that repair work would last a fortnight. In reality there had been very little to do; but he had thus put the Russian off his guard. Now the giant of steam thundered in the boilers. Led by Captain Skinner the crew had procured all the armament aboard, made a concerted attack on the guard, disarmed them in silence, and stored them below for safe-keeping.

Even now Captain Skinner was on the bridge, calling down commands to his men.

The gangplank was taken in, the screw churned the waters, and the ship moved grandly out to sea.

CHAPTER XXVI.

ESCAPE.

THROUGH the long hours of that chill October night Captain Skinner drove his vessel down the island shore and south and east into the Inside Passage. He was making for an American port, there to turn over his furs, the runaway prisoner, and the Russian guardsmen to the strong arms of Uncle Sam.

Captain Skinner was taxing his engines, hoping to gain such a start on the company ships, which were sure to follow, that he could not be overtaken. No wonder the slow dawn found him standing on the bridge, looking down his long wake through a glass.

A tiny gray cloud hung motionless just at the farther curve of the sea, and this he watched for a long time. To most eyes it would have been almost invisible; to any eye but one trained by the sea it would have had no definite meaning. Captain Skinner, however, understood only too well. He left his post and gave certain orders to the boatswain. Then he went into his cabin where Jeff and Molly were waiting.

His determined look stopped their talk and instantly fastened their attention. "The *Resanof* is after us," he told them.

"The fastest boat in the company's fleet!"

"Yes. Their flagship. Fitted out with Whitworth and Armstrong guns. She has half a knot on us in speed, on inside waters. That means she'll overtake us some time to-night."

Jeff got up, and his head all but touched the cabin ceiling. He paused to smile into the girl's white face. "I expected nothing else," he said quietly. He had learned a great self-discipline in these last days. "I suppose you aren't very much surprised, either, captain."

"I thought maybe something like this would happen, sure enough. We could have skinned all hollow the other Russian ships. The *Resanof* wasn't in the harbor when we left. I guess she came in since."

"Yes. And she's already overtaking us." Once more he smiled to reassure the heart-sick girl, at the same time wondering that one of her basic strength should ever need his reassurance. He remembered how she had reacted to every crisis they had met together, and he knew now that when this affair reached its inevitable climax, she would be one to lean on rather than to support. "Cap'n, there is only one possible course."

"What is that?"

"Give 'em the furs. It may be if we let them have 'em they won't try to take me."

"But they will take you, anyway," the girl cried. "Don't you see they will? They'll be afraid that you'll make trouble for them through the government if they let you get away. That is the system, Jeff; you will be taken where there's no chance of you making trouble for any one."

"Give up the furs," Jeff repeated, "and if we can't get out of it I'll go back with them."

The man from North Carolina was not posing. He was in earnest, and he wished to be taken so. He had not conquered fear—fear is as much a part of the world as sunshine or rain or any other of nature's devices—but he had declared what seemed to him the only possible thing to do, the only decent course for him to follow.

"We haven't a chance on earth to fight, and you know it," he went on. "They can stand off and hammer us to pieces with those long-range Armstrongs. It just means sacrificing you and the lives of half the men aboard, without saving me. The thing to do is to let 'em take me, if we can't bribe them out of it. Then you go on to Washington and do all you can to get me free."

"You might be dead before then," Skinner answered. "Just the same, you told the truth when you said there was no use trying to fight. I don't intend to fight. I've got another scheme—the only possible scheme under the circumstances. Jeff, we have to let you off."

"Of course. I should have thought of that."

"About noon we'll turn into the passage back of Upreanof Island—beyond Frederick Sound. Here is deep water and quiet, and we'll put you off opposite the mouth of the Stikine River, in that native skin boat we've got aft. It's light and handy as a canoe, and I've told the bos'n to fill it up with a winter's supplies—flour, rice, and other necessaries. You will have a rifle and plenty of shells for taking your meat, a few tools, a light camp outfit, and a wolf-skin robe. You should cross the flats into the Stikine, and paddle or line your way up the river as far as you think best. Then go up some little tributary and make a camp. I don't think they'll ever find you; they won't see you get off, and when they overtake us and find we haven't got you aboard I think they'll just take the skins and never trouble to look for you. If they did look for you they wouldn't know where to find you, because they wouldn't know at what point along these hundreds of miles of island and mainland shores we let you off.

"This scheme'll give you your best chance. Of course your skins are goners—unless a miracle happens—but at least you'll get away. I guess you won't feel bad about them skins if you save your own skin, and that's what it'll amount to. You'll make out somehow for the winter, and meanwhile I'll go below and state your case to the president. When we come up to look for you we'll come in a gunboat."

Molly got up, and now stood beside Jeff. "It's the only thing, of course," she told him. Then, turning with a mysterious look to Captain Skinner: "Uncle Dave, are you sure the men are putting in plenty of supplies?"

"Sure. Enough to carry one person over the winter."

"There isn't going to be one person. There are going to be two." Her face flamed; they saw its light beyond that of the dawn; and she lifted her arms in a noble gesture. "Oh, do you think I can let him go alone!"

To Jeff Sharp, lost in his wondering thoughts, this was simply destiny. Somehow he knew, as well as she, that he could not go alone. There was no known reason why; it had just been ordained. He was pale, but his eyes glowed like lanterns; and he sensed the inexorable movement of events.

"After all I've been through with him, do you think I could let him go alone?" she asked, turning first to one and then to the other. Her voice broke, and she sobbed and laughed in the same breath. "Am I to be thrown out like ballast? Besides—who would take care of him, if not me? Uncle Dave, he can hardly find his own clothes, much less find his way in the woods. Oh, of course I am going with him."

The captain eyed her, but he did not attempt to dissuade her. He had wisdom even beyond that of his long years. He glanced once at Jeff, smiled at his bewildered look, and turned toward the door. "Yes, ma'am," he replied, in a tone that Jeff had never heard on his lips before. Plainly it was something learned long ago and which had lingered in his body until this hour when it should again be fitting. In it was that assurance of strict obedience that was still the tradition of the sea; Skinner was not speaking as a master now, but as a seaman to his officer. "I'll go and see about it right away."

He turned and left the two together. Perhaps he was glad to escape from a scene in which his presence would only be an unnecessary complication. Jeff still seemed unaware of her.

She glanced covertly into his face, and at last she stood before him and touched his arm. "You are not angry with me, Jeff, for being so forward?" she asked, her voice low as distant bells. "You know I have to play this thing through with you to the end, now I've started, and I could have waited forever and you wouldn't have asked me to go."

"I couldn't ask you to take such a risk—for me."

"I know you thought you couldn't. That is why I had to ask myself. You couldn't go alone, Jeff—you always must have some one to take care of you. It was either a case of speaking or staying here on the ship while you dropped off, and that couldn't be. Jeff, the girls you like aren't so bold, and they let you take care of them instead of taking care of you, but just the same I couldn't hold back. You won't hold it against me, will you?"

"My God, Molly!" he cried fervently. "How could I hold anything against you? You've been my guardian angel, all the way through."

"Just the same, I know how you regard me." A dim smile lighted her tender lips. "We'll be getting off, then—together."

"Yes." Their eyes met with no evasion. "It's a blessing I never deserved."

This was not just polite talk. He had told many chivalrous lies, in his short days, and many times he had concealed his true thoughts from this girl who now strained to read his every glance; but for once Jeff Sharp was speaking from his heart. In his hour of deepest humility he had received the highest honor ever paid him; and although he could not begin to understand, at least he was ready to kneel at her feet in gratitude.

She slipped away to make a few preparations. Just before noon she rejoined Jeff on the deck. The boat of tough leather was loaded almost to the gunnels, now, and the ship was drifting to a slow stop. When at last it floated easily on the tide the bidarka was lowered, and the two stood ready to climb down into it.

"Good-by, you two children," Captain Skinner said. The familiar grin was gone from his weather-beaten face; and some nobleness upon it—still veiled from Jeff's eyes—called forth Molly's honored and honoring tears. "Take care of yourselves."

"We'll try to," Molly replied with her old warm, wistful humor. "I don't see how you're going to run the ship without me."

But Jeff was in no mood for gayety, even though the laughter came through tears. "I'll take care of her," he promised Captain Skinner. "I just want to tell you this——"

"Yes——"

"She will help me more than I can help her, but I want to tell you that no harm will come to her while she is in my charge. Your niece will be safe in my care."

The master shook Jeff's eager hand. "I know she will," he assured him. Then, because this scene was getting beyond him, he added slyly: "I'm not worried about *that* gal."

"Then good-by, cap'n!" said Jeff. The girl echoed the parting word.

"Good-by—and don't worry about me not coming back to look for you. You won't, will you?"

"No," Jeff told him earnestly. "We know you'll help us all you can."

"We Americans has got to help one another these days, when so many people want to see us fall."

"Yes." The man from North Carolina looked him in the eye. "We Americans must look after one another."

CHAPTER XXVII.

BIG EAGLE.

INTO the mouth of the broad Stikine the two voyageurs guided their laden bidarka; and it was like starting anew into the river of life. Fugitives though they were, they meant to make the best of this canoe adventure, reconcile themselves to its hardships, and take all that uncertain pleasure which is to be derived from close communion with raw, robust nature. At least this free journeying through pleasant water vistas was more pleasant than pacing a darkened cell.

Both knew something about handling a canoe, but since Molly seemed to be the most skilled she took the stern seat. When the river flowed quietly they made their way by paddling; but a large part of the way the boat was "lined" up the bank—the two voyageurs walking along the water's edge and pulling the bidarka by means of a rope fastened at bow and stern. When night lowered they pushed just far enough into the heavy timber to hide their supper fire, beside which they made a primitive camp.

Almost after the first hour they were in the deep wilderness. They saw no other living things but the wild creatures in the water and on the bank: hair seal and water fowl, fur bearer and big game. On the frowning cliffs of near-by mountains the flocks of wild goats looked like minute patches of last winter's snow; and often a surly, peevish, sulky old grizzly, fishing on the bank, looked at them with sullen eyes, no doubt resenting their intrusion into his fastnesses. Once they glimpsed that scientific curiosity, the glacier bear, and although they had scarcely reached the edge of the moose country they met on the fourth day out an old cow moose that was also a voyageur—swimming stanchly on some adventure across the wide river. This was the "backwoods" of which Jeff had often spoken with contempt—but that was before he had met it face to face. He would never scorn it hereafter. Before the end of the first day he learned that, compared to it, his proud strength was less than a leaf that the wind ravishes and hurls down.

This was the spruce forest, unbroken except for its waters and the heights of snowy ranges. Here were wonders past any man's imagining: gentleness and at the same time savagery; deep peace, and in the same breath the realization of never-ending war; desolation and eternal hospitality. He saw scenes of moving beauty: glaciers, cataracts, sequestered lakes, snowy peaks dreaming in the sun, hidden sloughs flashed over by wings of mallard and brant, rivulets creeping through ferns, a wooded sky line between him and a rising moon.

He tasted of the hardships of the trail, the rough life that is the only possible life in the wilderness. After paddling or pulling all day he knew what it was to make camp in the gray, bleak twilight; building fires, cutting fuel, spreading their canvas fly that was all they had in the way of a tent. He ate the rough food, much of it poorly cooked over the camp fire: laborer's food, he thought it was, yet sustaining him in his toil and satisfying his strengthening body. When they made their permanent winter's camp, almost a hundred miles up the river and a half mile back from its shore on the bank of a small stream, he knew the arduous labor of cabin building.

Molly helped him a great deal, but the heavy work naturally fell to his greater strength. He had to cut trees and float the logs down the creek to the selected site, haul them out on the bank beyond high-water line, then lift them into place. He made many mistakes, he was awkward from sheer inexperience, and the work which an experienced woodsman could have done in three days took him almost a fortnight. He had to hunt meat—the caribou and moose that thronged these more open forests back from the coast line—packing it on his back into camp; and to lay in fuel for the Northern winter which was surely encroaching upon them.

Trying though they sometimes were, these days in the wildwood were good for Jeff. From this far place he seemed to get a perspective on all of life; and his standards underwent revolutionary change. Things mattered deeply that before were as nothing; and many things he once set store by were now as dust. He did not believe he would continue to deplore the absence of a vested nobility in America. Nobility, meaning exalted birth, would not count for much out here, when there were trees to fell and logs to lift and cabins to build. It was even possible that the nation governed by and for a hardy, industrious, adventurous rank and file was in some ways to be preferred to that where a cultured aristocracy sat comfortably on the necks of crushed and hopeless peasantry. It was a revolutionary thought, yet it haunted his meditative hours.

He had never been proud of America. It was a backwoods nation, and even its oldest cities were but yesterday the haunts of wolf and deer. The mighty marching spirit that had made America was shut from his sight; and thus he had not been inclined to appreciate the victories it had won. Now that he had cut a few trees himself he experienced a healthy wonder at the vast areas newly cleared and sown to grain. He made at last a surprising discovery—that America was rich and great purely because her eagle's brood had made her so.

He found himself regarding Molly in a new light. He no longer patronized her, nor did he measure her by any scale other than that of intrinsic worth. She had served him a long time, but now the hour of reckoning was at hand. Fully appreciative at last of all she had done for him, he soberly concluded that it was now his time to serve—and this he did to the limit of his power.

He was willing to work his fingers to the bone to add to Molly's comfort, meanwhile trying to spare her all except the more pleasant tasks. He spared no pains to make the cabin comfortable for her, and in every way to prepare for the rigorous winter which was encroaching so swiftly upon them. He maintained a constant attitude of cheer so that she might be cheered, and his unvarying consideration and chivalry was actually a wonder—worthy of the best traditions of the South. In these passing weeks he did, indeed, pay some of the debt he owed her in the past, although he was not blind to the fact that her very presence here, beside him in his hour of trial, was a cumulative obligation that never could be fully paid. On one occasion he risked his own life to hold her when she slipped on a steep mountainside.

With the deepening cold and lengthening nights they knew a growing need of mutual service. The Northern wilderness is dreary and dark in the late fall, stricken by the threat of coming winter, and only by a fine, gay companionship could the two exiles escape its brooding mood.

They learned to find manna in the wilderness, and to derive certain happiness from their sylvan home. The fear of capture by the Russians was largely past now. Since they had left the *Ethan Allen* they had not so much as glimpsed a human form; and naturally Jeff could hardly believe his eyes when, one chill November morning, he saw unaccustomed traffic on the broad Stikine.

From the bank where he stood gaffing salmon for winter use he distinguished a black, moving speck far up the stream. At first he thought it was a piece of driftwood

—perhaps a treetop such as often floated by like a green-sailed ship—but flotsam does not hasten toward the sea with the aid of flashing paddles. Peering intently Jeff saw that it was a canoe manned by a single voyageur; and without waiting for further scrutiny he scrambled up the bank behind screening thickets.

A wild animal could have scarcely found cover more quickly. Even in his few weeks here he had picked up something of that strange furtiveness that marks all denizens of the hushed woods, a power to drift away like smoke into the maze of light and shadows of the underbrush. Now he lingered out of sight, watching intently.

The voyageur was plainly an Indian. White men do not as a rule race the salmon down the riffles with such slight effort; besides, his skin showed bronze against the long, blue sheen behind. Following the deepest part of the channel the boat swung in and approached within fifty feet of him. And now Jeff recognized the brown, aquiline face past any possibility of doubt.

"Big Eagle!" he called suddenly. And he stepped out on to bank so that the man could see him.

Big Eagle started and whirled, but he did not snatch up his musket. He knew perfectly that the voice from the shore was not that of an enemy, simply because it issued from human vocal chords instead of from the maw of a gun. He had offered a good target and it was the way of his foes to shoot first and speak afterward. He saw Jeff, and turning his canoe in a swift, graceful circle, he made a skillful landing just at the white man's feet.

"Heap fighter!" the Indian observed eloquently. "Lick'm Roosian soldiers on Kolosh Ryeka Trail."

"That's right, Big Eagle! What in the world you doing here?"

But the native was still absorbed in what seemed to him a miraculous meeting. "Big Eagle's friend," said he. "Where big, strong, skookem squaw?"

"Molly? She's back at our cabin."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

JEFF'S RESOLVE.

ALTHOUGH the Indians are not usually a demonstrative people, Big Eagle's joy at seeing Molly again was so apparent that it was almost embarrassing. These two had a bond of language; and she at once essayed to find out what chance had brought him here. He spoke briefly at first, but at the girl's eager question he went into a long explanation of some kind of which Jeff could not understand one word. And now the latter found himself waiting with breathless interest for Molly's translation. Something in her manner indicated that the native's story was of extraordinary import to her.

"This is the strangest thing," the girl told him at last, with shining eyes. "Templeton and Staritsa are up at a Hudson's Bay post a long, long way on the river. He's a bit vague as to how far, but he says it is almost a month's journey from here upstream."

"They went up there searching for us?"

"That would be the natural supposition, but Big Eagle says not. He says they weren't searching for him, either—although he has been doing his trading at the same remote post. This is his home country, you remember. He tells me that when he brought in some water furs to sell, the men were at the post, and as soon as he got a glimpse of them he recognized them as two of the men in power at Sitka. He named Staritsa, and described the other as an Englishman, Staritsa's friend, so of course he means Templeton. He thought at first they were in pursuit of him, but when he inquired from his friends he found they had not even asked about him."

"Did they recognize him?"

"He didn't give them a chance to. He left at once to join his people, who have a summer village on the headwaters of the big tributary below—the Iskut, I believe they call it."

"Then what was their business up here, if they weren't looking for us or for him either?"

"That's the mystery. Big Eagle says that some men in red coats—English soldiers, of course—and some other big chiefs had come from afar to meet Staritsa and Templeton. They had many horses, and according to the accounts the natives told Big Eagle, they had come a journey of many moons—as many as Big Eagle has fingers. That doesn't seem reasonable, does it?"

A grim look overspread Jeff's face. "It might easily happen—if they had come across country from Ottawa!"

"He says they brought papers which the Indians understood were of great importance, and these were given to Staritsa and

Templeton to carry back to Sitka. He said the parley was almost completed when he got there; and the men in the red coats were getting ready to start back—overland."

"Good! This thing is straightening out pretty well. It is astonishing how much the natives can pick up about white men's business—they are a great deal like our servants down below, finding out more than their masters know themselves. Molly, this man has let us in on a mighty important piece of news."

"What is it?"

"That a certain treaty is going through between England and Russia—or rather between the semi-imperial Hudson's Bay Company and the Russian-American Company. Those men undoubtedly were messengers from high-up government officials in Ottawa, accompanied by soldiers, and Staritsa was sent to meet them as an agent of the Russian-American Company. The business was carried on way out here in the backwoods for only one possible reason."

"Secrecy?"

"Perhaps, but mainly, safety. They wanted to travel in Canadian territory all the way to avoid any risk of being intercepted and their documents taken away from them; a possibility if they went by way of sea. Of course they weren't looking for us, or for Big Eagle either. We are small fry compared to this."

"A treaty that concerns—America?" Molly asked, somewhat breathlessly.

"Of course—ultimately. It is of very great concern to America who gets control of the great northwest end of the continent. That treaty, Molly, will decide the ultimate ownership of Alaska. It was the thing I was sent up here to check."

The girl's eyes opened wide. "And you're too late!" she cried. Her manner indicated that Jeff's affairs were her own. "The treaty has gone through?"

"Molly, I don't think so—yet. Neither Staritsa nor Templeton could possibly have had authority to sign such a document as that would be—one a secret agent, and the other a confederate of Karl without official position. I think likely they were empowered to state the Russian company's terms, and probably they reached an agreement with the agents of the Hudson's Bay Company, but certainly the document has to go down to Sitka before the deal can be closed. Certainly Karl and Prince Maksoutof will have to sign it, one as part owner of the company and the other as governor of the province; and I wouldn't wonder if it would have to be carried to St. Petersburg." He paused, his thoughts too engrossing to permit speech. "Of course Karl would have come except for his wound—and if he had? In that case, I wouldn't feel so sure the deal was not already closed and the treaty signed. Perhaps that bullet I sent into his side will yet make history!"

"It is a renewal of the treaty of 1839, of course," the girl remarked. "I've heard something about it."

"Yes, only more comprehensive in character. Molly, there's no use of my keeping Seward's instructions from you any longer: you have guessed part and the time has come to tell you the rest. You are sure this native cannot understand English?"

"Not this kind of English. He can't follow you, possibly."

"Good! You know, by the treaty of 1839, the Hudson's Bay Company had leased all south of Cape Spencer on the mainland. This treaty has expired, and in renewing it, undoubtedly the two companies have joined hands for the exploitation of all of Russian America. It is to be trapped by Hudson's Bay agents, settled by English citizens, and of course the province will soon be an English province by right of settlement. England wants it to complete her American possessions and give her a full sweep on the three oceans. America doesn't want England to have it, for many reasons, one of them England's attitude during the war; and for equally many reasons, wants it and needs it herself. But if that treaty goes through before February 1st America won't get it. On that date the czar will authorize the sale of the province to the United States government, provided that the Russian-American Company does not renew their charter in the meantime. If the company makes this profitable deal with England they *will* renew the charter, harsh though it is—and our chance to own Alaska will be gone forever.

"Now let us suppose what would happen in case that treaty should be intercepted somewhere between the post where it was put in Staritsa's hands, and Sitka—in other words, somewhere on this river. The English officials have already started back, overland, and they could not be overtaken. In a very few weeks—possibly days—the winter will close all travel in the mountain regions, at least until the snow is packed. The possibility suggests itself that even if Staritsa and Templeton lost the treaty itself they could go on into Sitka, report in general the terms agreed to, and the Russian company would get a renewal of their charter from the czar on the expectation of getting the British to sign up again in the spring. But this would be risky business. Things might look entirely different in the spring, and the Hudson's Bay Company would have Karl and his crowd just where they want him. He would be bound to a charter which would ruin him and the company too, unless Hudson's Bay Company helped him out.

"I must admit, however, that Karl might do that very thing: sign up with the idea of rewriting the treaty with Hudson's Bay next spring, provided he is aware of their terms. The only sure way the deal can be blocked would be that Staritsa and Templeton should become snowed in for the winter, and unable to get back to Sitka until after February. In that case, Karl and Maksoutof would have no way of knowing what terms had been agreed to, and they would have to wait till spring to renew their charter with the czar. The latter, suspicious of Karl and some of his other agents and wanting to let go of a province he can't protect, will in the meantime sell out to America.

"There will probably be a lot to this agreement which is not down on paper, but which Staritsa carries in his head. That makes it all the more important that he report personally to Karl. I think the terms concern ultimate betrayal of the czar to England, not to mention other points not meant for the liberal monarch's eyes. Molly, if you and I wanted to do a great thing—perform a service for America that will be appreciated a hundred years from now far more than it can be appreciated now, or any time in the near future—we would see to it that the treaty never arrived in Sitka!"

Molly's eyes spoke as plainly as the ringing words with which she answered him. This was a universal language—the changing, welling light in her eyes—and the dusky Indian grunted, wondering at this white goddess from beyond the forests. "Then what can be your answer?" she asked.

"Wait, Molly. We must see where we stand. We can't look at the natives' side of the case—the fact that with England to protect the Russian-American Company against the czar they will be exploited as they never were before. We can't look from the czar's point of view either—that Karl undoubtedly is planning to betray him. We must only look from America's side. Are we justified in descending to force to stop that treaty?"

"England didn't hesitate to commit overt acts against us when the Union was jeopardized. Privateers fitted out in England didn't hesitate to stop our ships. The British government is no friend of ours, Jeff, with the exception of a few liberals like Gladstone and the queen herself. I don't think what you propose need rest heavily on your conscience."

They brooded a while on this. Remorse showed no more in Molly's lovely face than in the bronzed, weather-beaten countenance of her companion. The Indian grunted, darkly stirred by what he read in their eyes.

Molly seemed to be waiting for Jeff to speak. She clasped her hands, perhaps only to hold them from entreating him, and her look was one of such intense anxiety that it was akin to terror. It was as if her whole world hung precariously on the thread of his next few words.

He reached his hands, finding hers. Their pulses leaped together as if in united purpose. "It's destiny, Molly," he told her in hushed tones. "This chance has come to me to atone for all my folly! We'll see to it, my girl. Molly, we'll see what can be done!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE TRAP.

MOLLY and Jeff spent the next few days making detailed arrangements for the entertainment of Staritsa and Templeton when they should come gliding down the river. In Big Eagle they had an ally not to be despised, strong as a bull, crafty, and faithful to the death; but even with this help they were three against four, and they must overcome this disadvantage by strategy.

"We must separate them before we make our attack," Jeff explained. "It's our best chance. We must think of some way to separate the canoes."

Molly made no suggestion at once, but repeated the message to Big Eagle. He grunted derisively. He saw no use in such tactics.

"Maybe lay on bank. Current swing'm in close. Shoot'm in canoe!"

Certainly Big Eagle had the idea, the primitive and therefore the natural idea, as Jeff had to agree on looking the matter squarely in the face. But civilization had reached above this. He shook his head, smiling.

"If we could only decoy the two white men away from the Indians," the girl said thoughtfully. "We could, if we had the right kind of excuse——" Her words trailed off, simply because the intentness of her thought precluded articulation. Presently the dreamy luster left her eyes, and she was seen to grope with her finger ends down into the pocket of her jacket. Apparently satisfied, a little, sly pucker at her lips conveyed an idea of quaint humor, peculiarly her own. "Jeff, I believe I see a way to separate them. I think of a bait they can't refuse to take. Jeff, what is the prize Staritsa is working for?"

"I suppose—Alaska!"

"Yes, but what does he want to get out of it himself? He is not altruistic by a long way, or patriotic either, and I understand he followed Karl out here partly to escape a scandal he was involved in, partly to recoup broken fortunes. Jeff, the thing he wants is—gold."

"Yes. I suppose we all want that."

"Good fishermen used to tell me that the best bait is the particular kind of bait that the fish are feeding on. We should work the same principle in catching men." She paused again, and a little thoughtful line hovered on her clear brow. "My friend, I believe I see the way to win."

In a few words she confided her plan. Much of its success depended on Big Eagle. Molly took it upon herself to coach him in his part, making him go over it again and again until he was perfect in it. Dissimulation is a natural gift of savage peoples—as every one knows who has seen some of the more picturesque native pageants—and the bronzed Indian seemed to take real pleasure in the enterprise. In the first place, Big Eagle had debts of his own to pay. In the second, these two white people were among his lesser gods. They had won from him that strange adoration which members of other races sometimes bear to the whites—not often seen, but as inexplicable as the unquestioning love that a noble dog bears his master.

The hill just back of the camp commanded a view of the long azure curve of the river, and here Big Eagle watched for a distant glimpse of two canoes. To a white man this kind of sentry duty would have been almost intolerable—the long hours of waiting with only the trees and the chill November wind for company—but the Indian thrived on it. Inexhaustible patience is a noticeable trait of the American aborigine, simply because it is a essential postulate to the success of savage methods of hunting—and so still the native crouched, his eyes fastened on the sheen of the distant river, that he seemed an appurtenance to the landscape; and the little, restless, furtive woods people went about their hillside occupations without heeding him. Sometimes Jeff or Molly relieved him, and since there was no occasion for watching after nightfall—the voyageurs would certainly camp on the shore at night—he found the post quite to his liking.

The fifth afternoon after his arrival he saw what looked like a pair of ducks swimming on the farthest curve of the river. His quiet eyes peered from under his lowered brows until their wings flashed in the wan, winter light; then he turned and ran silently as a wolf down the hill to Jeff's camp. The white man saw him coming and guessed his tidings, but because he had glimpsed something of Indian psychology he sat quietly at the door of the cabin.

"They come," the native began in evident excitement. "Big Eagle see 'm."

Jeff looked up steadily into the bronzed face. "Is that so, Big Eagle? That means we'll have to get busy." He puffed once at his pipe, yawned, and quietly knocked the ashes on to the ground.

This little mummery was exceedingly good for Big Eagle. It steadied him; and indeed, so susceptible are the savage peoples to suggestion, that some of his master's self-control passed to him. "Big Eagle go now—get in canoe?" he asked.

"Yes. You know your part. Big Eagle, if the ruse doesn't work—if they won't come, Big Eagle, what you do?"

"Tip'm canoe. Play didn't mean to. Act like help pick'm up white mans. Tip'm other canoe."

"That's the idea. We'll be there to help 'em out of the water when they swim ashore. They will swim to our bank because they'll be close to it. However, I don't think you'll have to tip the canoes. You know your part."

Big Eagle did not follow this, but Molly swiftly translated. The native then turned and trotted away down toward the river, cool and able to handle his part. Molly at once procured her revolver and strapped it on her slim waist, while Jeff got his rifle. They were ready for their work.

"It will take fifteen minutes more, at least, before they'll get into shouting distance of Big Eagle," Jeff said. "Perhaps we shouldn't let him start down so soon. A long wait might play havoc with his nerves."

"Don't worry about Big Eagle," Molly assured him. "He'll do his part. Any nervousness he shows they will attribute to fear. They know he's a runaway from Sitka; treachery is the last thing they'll think of."

"Good! Just the same, Molly, there's some risk. There is some risk even if he does do his part and lead them up to us. You never know how two men are going to react even to such a situation as this. They might open fire."

The most friendly, cheerful smile danced into her face. It was not just at her lips—a feigned smile, to encourage him—or was it merely a message of tenderness. It was in her eyes and her raised brows; she had smiled with something like joy in their mutual adventure, perhaps even in anticipation of a great patriotic service that was in their hands to do. He glimpsed her gay, brave soul as never before. He sensed her greatness, never to lose faith in it again. "They'll wish they hadn't, if they do," she told him. "If I see one of them reach for a pistol——"

"I know, Molly. We have taken every precaution for safety."

"For *my* safety," she corrected him. "You are taking the only possible risk."

"Something might happen to either of us," he persisted, "and that's the reason, Molly, that before we go into this thing I have something to tell you."

There was only a glimmer of her smile left now, a wistful and childlike fragment; and the profundities of mortal nature which were thus revealed—the fact that her mood now could be compatible with her intrepidity of a moment before—moved him to wonder. "What is it, Jeff?"

"If this thing goes through—the way that we want it to go through—I want you to know that you will get all the credit. You are the hero of this affair, all the way through. It has been your influence, more than anything else, that has put me on the right track at last. It has been your brains and your courage and your inspiration that have held me up."

"But what could I have done alone! A woman can't make a lone struggle, Jeff; there always has to be some one to fight for, if she is to go on. A woman can't fight for a principle, Jeff, unless it has personal meaning for her. Where would I have been without you?"

"We have only a moment now, before we make this last, big play," Jeff went on. "No one can tell how it will turn out, so I want to tell you—only I can't tell you—what these weeks with you have meant to me. You've made life worth living again. You've given me a theme to fight for. You have put some of your own ideals in me. And most of all, you have blessed me with the finest companionship, the dearest loving kindness that I ever thought to find in this world. I'd go on my knees to you, if it would do any good, to beg forgiveness for all of my folly toward you. And no matter what happens from now on, I'll never cease to bless you and worship you. From now on my life is yours—to do with what you will."

He could not tell more than this—with words. Yet the shine in his eyes spoke volumes, and his arms, widening to let her in, were eloquent. For a certain time they stood thus, lost to the world that wheels in space, swept through the vault of heaven on a dream world of their own, glorified by that old mystery which—beyond the reach of doubt or scorn—proves godhead to lost, lonely human souls. He felt her heart pulsing against his own. He knew the sweetness of her lips.

CHAPTER XXX.

JEFF STRIKES.

WHEN Staritsa rounded a long bend in the river into a stretch of almost still water, he saw what seemed to be a native fisherman, drifting slowly down about a hundred feet from shore. The Russian was not greatly surprised, and not in the least alarmed. A few native trappers plied their lines through this Stikine country, selling their furs to far Hudson's Bay posts, but except when poisoned by lye concoctions sold by outlaw traders they were not in the least hostile. He glanced toward his rifle—just to know where it was in case he needed it—and drifted down toward him. The native was facing downstream and apparently did not hear the soft sound of the paddles.

It now became apparent that Staritsa's complacency was entirely justified. Instead of proving a menace the native was plainly terrified by the white men who had paddled up behind him. Evidently he did not see them until they were within a few yards of him; and his subsequent conduct could hardly be misinterpreted. He started, then seized his paddle as if in a desperate effort to escape.

The white men behind him were able to follow his mental processes with entire ease. Plainly he realized that flight was impossible—that at this close range he would be promptly shot down with the white man's revolver—so he threw himself on their mercy. They saw him raise both arms in token of surrender.

"What's the matter with the fool?" Templeton called to his friend in the foremost canoe. He directed the native in the stern to let his craft drift. "Hasn't he ever seen a white man before?"

But now Staritsa was not heeding Templeton. He was listening keenly to the broken sentences uttered by the obviously terrified savage whose canoe now floated within twenty feet of his own. As he was speaking in the bad Russian commonly used by natives in Russian America, Templeton of course could not understand.

The native was begging Staritsa not to shoot, and was promising to yield without a fight and permit them to take him back to Sitka. They had pursued him far, but he had given up at last; and if they would be merciful he would violate no more of the company's commands.

Staritsa opened his eyes, then turned to Templeton, whose curiosity had been quickened by the unintelligible talk. "He thinks we're after him," the Russian explained in English. He studied the bronze face. "Templeton, I have seen this man before. I believe he's a runaway from Sitka. By Heaven, I know him! His name is Big Eagle—or something of the kind—and he's the fellow who tried to send a protest through to the crown. I have a notion to arrest him and take him back with us."

But now he had occasion to listen even more carefully to the native's broken Russian. It appeared that the latter was offering some kind of a bribe for immunity, and bribes were particularly in Staritsa's line. And now an expected gleam between his eyelids and a curious look of strain about his lips and in his deep facial lines told Templeton that this conversation was decidedly worth hearing. If Jeff had been present instead of somewhere out of sight on the shore he would have had cause to remember Staritsa's eyes when he had looked at a thousand sea otter, piled in savage magnificence in the ship's hold. For a moment he hesitated as if reluctant to make explanations to his friend, but presently recognized the need of his coöperation.

"Can either of our two men understand English?" he asked, turning to Templeton.

"You know they can't. At least, not more than an occasional word."

"We've run into a marvelous piece of luck, I think. This man is frightened nearly to death—I told you he supposes we came up here in pursuit of him—and he says if we will let him go he will enrich us both. He tells me that in these weeks he has been a fugitive he has been living a few hundred feet back in the brush, and has found gold—tons of gold, by the way he describes it. It is apparently the free gold, and although he has small idea of the value of such a find as this he describes, to me it is an argument for the truth of his story. Certainly he believes it himself."

"You think it's worth investigation?"

"I am forced to think so. He wants us to come and see for ourselves. He says a third will go to each of us if we let him go free—and you know, my friend, what that means."

"A third means half, in this case."

"If I am not a fool or a child! I think it will be wise to look into this matter, Templeton."

Big Eagle was speaking again now, and the Russian took pains to listen. Big Eagle would show him a sample, perhaps, to prove that his story was true—such yellow dust as might have clung to his clothes. With Staritsa's permission his hand groped inside his buckskin shirt, and drifting near with his canoe, he put a minute object in the former's outstretched hand.

"What is it?" Templeton asked.

The Russian peered intently at a small

piece of yellow metal about the size of a match head, cupped in his palm. His hand shook as he gave it into his friend's keeping. "What do you say it is?"

"A nugget, of course. A small one—but surely a nugget of pure gold."

"No chance for a mistake?"

"None. A man may see many things that he thinks might be gold. When he sees gold, he knows it. Where in the world could he have picked it up, man? This will be the biggest thing that ever happened to us. You don't doubt that it's gold, Staritsa?"

"I know it to be gold, and there must be more in the same pot. It will mean a fearful rush up here when the truth comes out. Tell your man to shove into shore. We can take time to investigate this thing."

The mine was only a few hundred paces, Big Eagle told them, so no attempt was made to pitch camp. The canoes were left at the river's edge. The native was prepared to suggest that the two canoe men be left behind to mind the cargoes—on the plea that he disliked to take them into his confidence as to the location of the mine—but no such suggestion was needed. Until the gold was definitely in their hands the two white men had no intention of sharing with any one the knowledge of this incredible windfall.

"We might be able to get you a pardon, if the mine proves rich enough," Staritsa told Big Eagle as they walked in single file on a bear trail which led through the woods. "You find out, Big Eagle, that you could not possibly get away. We have followed you a long time, and we overtake you at last."

Templeton knew those quickening suspicions that curse men in the presence of gold, and demanded a translation of Staritsa's remark. "I was merely assuring him that he has been our quarry for a long time—to prevent any possible perception of the real truth," Staritsa explained. "We wish him not to become suspicious."

It was mutual. Big Eagle, fired with his masters' purpose, hoped that the two men behind him would also refrain from any untoward suspicions.

There was no need to fear. They could hardly walk fast enough along the trail. They were not given time to notice suspicious circumstances, much less to dwell upon them. Jeff's strategy centered about the idea of one swift, telling blow, and the distance to the native's "mine" had been made purposely short. About two hundred yards from the river the trail touched the bank of a small stream, and here, in a small rift in the underbrush, stood a smoked cooking rack about which were strewn a few pieces of camp equipment, some fuel, and other signs of a native establishment. Muttering earnestly, Big Eagle picked up the iron kettle that was evidently his only piece of cooking ware, and carrying it to the creek, partly filled it with sand and gravel. This he washed, as if the kettle were a gold pan.

He was very deliberate about it, exceedingly careful. Staritsa and Templeton watched him with fascinated interest. Raw gold makes men mad far more than moonlight ever did; and the strain was beginning to tell on these two silent, breathless spectators.

Soon almost all the gravel was washed out. He knelt down to examine his washings. One on each side, the white men knelt also, craning their aristocratic necks to see into the kettle.

It was at this instant that Staritsa had an acute feeling of discomfort. It grew upon him, and he glanced uneasily across the stream. He found the black eye of a rifle barrel looking squarely into his.

A tall figure stood on the opposite shore, with a rifle pressed against his shoulder. He and his friend were snugly and comfortably covered.

"Put up your hands and don't make a sound," Jeff Sharp told them.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE NUGGET.

IF Staritsa had any desire to ask questions he quickly smothered the impulse. The voice behind the gun had cautioned him not to make a sound of any kind, and there was an unpleasant possibility that it was in earnest. The rifle, he noticed, shook not at all. The eye behind it gazed along the line of sight with no wavering or evasiveness whatever. The voice had a rasping note which grated upon Staritsa's fine sensibilities.

His arms went quickly into the air. Templeton, never a fool, made the same gesture Neither man so much as paused to grope into the kettle to make sure it was empty—quite empty, if the truth must be told.

The native, however, made no sign that he was disconcerted by the turn events had taken, and made no effort to comply with Jeff's request. He did, however, step around behind the two white men, feel over their bodies for weapons, disarm them, and lying close to the ground so not to interfere with his master's bullets in case the affair reached the shooting stage, put cords about the ankles of each man in turn. This done, he tugged at Staritsa's arms, indicating that he wished them lowered, but the young nobleman continued to hold them stiffly up as if they were frozen there. It was only when Jeff gave the word that he permitted them to be drawn behind him and tied.

This did not mean that Staritsa was, in every sense, a coward. Undoubtedly under certain circumstances he would take his chance with the rest. His actions now were guided by but one thought; that this man behind the gun owed him various debts of hatred and evil which he was likely eager to pay. If he, Staritsa, misunderstood any of Jeff's commands, if he hesitated for one instant to comply with them, the latter would have an excuse to pay in full.

He was not inclined to call out. Never Jeff's enemy in the sense that Staritsa was, Templeton was a gentleman of many sporting instincts, but he also concluded to remain silent. He had an unpleasant idea that the rifle would interrupt any remark he should attempt to make.

Big Eagle tied his arms and then prevented any further danger of outcry by slipping a gag into his mouth, tying it firmly behind his head. Staritsa was likewise silenced, and then they were laid side by side in the grass.

As yet no one had taken the trouble to tell them what was to be done with them. Staritsa thought that the impulse behind the attack was surely vengeance; and it was no wonder that his heart quailed and his life stream was chilled and repressed. The winter clouds spreading overhead were no more cold and white than Jeff's face; the tall, dark spruce no more calm, inexorable, and impassive than this bronze-skinned native who swiftly, deftly tied his bonds. Templeton had only the vaguest theories to account for these strange happenings, so he lay quietly on the earth and awaited developments.

It now appeared that there was a third conspirator whose presence neither man had guessed. Molly stepped out of a thicket just behind, and at the sight of her revolver Templeton was increasingly glad he had not attempted resistance. Now with her help Jeff searched Staritsa's person.

In a leather case they found a sheet of parchment, bearing the seal of Hudson's Bay Company. Glancing over it assured them beyond any possible doubt of its true nature; it was the treaty between the great English and Russian companies which, if permitted to become operative, would destroy any hope of American possession of Alaska.

"It is even more drastic than I thought," Jeff said. These were the first words between himself and the girl since they had emerged from ambush. "Its terms would have justified a renewal of the Russian company's charter with the czar, and surely it would have ultimately made Alaska an English possession."

"And it will be an American possession, now!" the girl exulted.

"If all goes well. But we must make no mistakes, Molly, if our plan is to succeed."

Jeff now read the treaty carefully, familiarizing himself with its few paragraphs. Then, striking a match, he gave the parchment to the flames.

"Am I doing the right thing?" he asked Molly, as the blue flame crawled across the sheet.

"According to the best we know," she answered quietly, the fire reflecting in her eyes. Her tone showed she was deeply moved; not often the case with this strong heart. "That's all we can hope to do. Right and wrong are far beyond us."

Staritsa was still afraid for his life, and his mind was far from the burning script; but Templeton stirred in his bonds and a dim, subdued half gasp escaped through the cloth of his gag. The ratification of this treaty meant much to him. Men in high circles had promised him great rewards if he should see it through. Now this backwoods diplomat whom he had scorned had beaten him at his own game.

When the paper was destroyed and its ashes scattered on the damp earth Jeff was ready to take the next step to win Alaska for his country. "I'm going to take off your bonds, Staritsa," he said, "then you will walk with me down to where you left your canoes. You will give certain orders to your natives—and since this lady going with us understands every language you understand, it would be wise to give only the orders that we tell you to give. In my pocket I shall carry a cocked revolver, and it will be pointed at you every second. If you make one suspicious movement, if you play false with us in the least detail, I shall press the trigger without waiting. I shall not take pains to be sure. Your life is not so valuable to me that I'd feel like taking a chance. Besides, your men would not try to save you. They are friends of Big Eagle and they will join with us if we ask them to."

Searching the Russian carefully for any weapon which they might have overlooked, Big Eagle took off his bonds. Jeff meanwhile stood back, guarding with the revolver. Then leaving the Indian to guard Templeton, the two Americans walked their prisoner down toward the river.

He was a docile captive. Any warlike impulse that quickened within him was speedily quelled when he remembered the revolver muzzle, pointing through the cloth of Jeff's pocket. He walked out on the river bank, and standing at Jeff's side, obeyed his orders like a soldier.

"We are not going on," he said in the vernacular. "New business has come up which keeps us here. When I have paid you, you will go back to your people on Upreanof Island and remain there until I come for you, which may be four moons from now. If in the meantime any Muscovite asks of us, you will tell him that the parley with the red coats came to nothing, and that we are off on a new track. Otherwise, still lip is wisdom, and the less you talk of us the greater your reward when we meet again."

The natives apparently were prepared for any sort of madness on the part of their employers; perhaps there had been similar revolutionary changes in program earlier in the journey. Their brown faces scarcely changed expression. Stolidly they went to work to load certain of the supplies and the two white men's personal possessions in one of the two canoes. A few minutes later they boarded the other of the two crafts and paddled away down the river.

They progressed with that steady, tireless, mile-speeding stroke of the native voyageur, and although Molly followed them with her eyes, not once did she see them turn to look behind.

Staritsa was marched back to join his friend, and both captives were firmly but not uncomfortably confined. The former was given leave to speak, now, but apparently he could think of nothing worth saying. Perhaps he had talked himself out on the night of Jeff's arrest. Templeton spoke a few words at intervals, and his tone showed that he bore little resentment toward his captors. Although bitterly disappointed and deeply chagrined, he seemed to feel that the game had been played according to the rules, and that the secret agent from America was simply a smarter man than he had taken him for. He was a diplomat of all schools—a secret-service man who knew the code—and he would make no complaints. Besides, he was an Englishman.

Jeff commented on this attitude later the same evening, when the cabin hearth was red and Big Eagle stood guard over the prisoners. "They are sportsmen, those fellows," he observed, speaking of his race brothers across the sea. "We'll have to hand 'em that—even fellows like Templeton, in the game for himself more than for England, and personally unscrupulous and dishonest. Molly, I think our relations with England will be different as the years go by—when they are willing for us to dominate the New World, themselves content with supreme power in the Old. I believe—I feel sure—that when England has more of a popular government than she has now, when peers count less and just people count more, she will be America's first friend. It was her governing classes, not the people, who wanted to see the Union destroyed. I'll try to look out for Templeton's comfort when we send him into his winter quarters."

His hand groped and found hers. The ruddy light showed her almost-hidden smile and shone into the amazing blueness of her eyes. Her hope leaped like the flame.

"Of course you'll be kind to him," she said thoughtfully. "I am only afraid you'll be too kind to Staritsa, now he is in your power. Jeff, did you ever dream that the thing could end like this?"

"It isn't ended, yet. You can be sure that Templeton still has hopes of turning the tables on us. If no unexpected developments occur between now and February—the expiration of the time limit granted the company by the czar—we'll win; but it is too soon to say for sure."

"I don't see how you can help but win

now. Surely you won't let those men escape."

"Not a chance, Molly. The guard that will be put over them never relaxes vigilance and is the safest in the world—Old Man Winter!"

"I should say that the only danger now is a personal danger—to us. We're not home yet. Karl will be wild for vengeance when he learns you've tricked him."

"I'm afraid he won't take it kindly, sure enough. But Molly, what do you mean by saying 'you?' Why don't you say 'we?'" A sober look, ineffably dear to her, hovered about his lips. "For that matter, why don't you say 'I.' We've been going on your brains all the way through."

The pressure of her hand was suddenly intense. "That isn't true, Jeff," she told him earnestly. "I only thought of the trick. Women are especially good at thinking up tricks—we have a tricky streak in our minds—but usually it takes a man to put them into practice. I couldn't have possibly outwitted Staritsa without your help; that is the truth, Jeff, if I ever told it."

His sober mood passed and he grinned widely as he recalled the day's strategem. "Molly, that tricky streak of yours will probably win Alaska for America. They swallowed hook, bait and sinker. But there's one thing you haven't taken the trouble to explain to me, and at first I was resolved I wouldn't ask. I thought maybe I could figure it out for myself: I wanted to take credit for that much brains, at least. But Molly, I just can't get it. It pains me to inquire—but where did you get that little nugget?"

The girl's shy smile touched certain responsive chords in his heart until now unguessed; and he beamed like a schoolboy. "Are you sure it was gold, Jeff?"

"If it wasn't it was the best imitation I ever saw. I would swear it was a nugget."

"Well, I suppose I could call it a nugget. Jeff, it was real gold, sure enough, and when I saw how mystified you were I just couldn't help but try to play on your curiosity. Now I'm almost ashamed to tell you where I got it."

"Surely you didn't find it?"

"Well, in a way. Jeff, do you remember that awful toothache you nursed me through one night?"

"I fancy I won't forget it."

"Well, that nugget was the filling."

CHAPTER XXXII.

KARL AGAIN.

THE next morning Jeff and Big Eagle started downriver with their prisoners. Jeff sat in the stern of the skin boat, paddling and guiding, and Staritsa was permitted to help the boat along with his rather awkward paddling in the bow. Since the nobleman's feet were securely confined, he was not in the least inclined to rock the boat and escape from his captor by swimming. Templeton, comfortably but securely confined, paddled in the bow of his own canoe—left by the natives the previous day—and Big Eagle guided from the stern. The winter was impending, so they did not loiter along the way. Traveling early and late, they reached the mouth of the Iskut in a single day's travel, and camped on its green bank for a short rest. For four days thereafter they paddled and lined the boats up the wild waters of the Iskut, fetching up at last at the fall fish camp of a small tribe of friendly Indians.

Five days' delay would have brought them in too late for the success of Jeff's plan. The natives were even then breaking camp preparatory to going into winter quarters beyond the mountains. At this point Jeff gave the prisoners into the complete charge of Big Eagle, at once turning back toward his cabin where Molly had been left alone. There was no need to concern himself further about Templeton and Staritsa. He had left them in safe hands, and Sitka would know them no more, at least until spring.

They were to go with the tribe into winter quarters, and since the ranges would soon be overspread with thirty feet of soft snow, they could not readily retrace their steps until the late-winter winds crusted the drifts and reopened the passes. Big Eagle had plenty of men to help guard them—natives who looked up to him as chief—but the white captives would require little guarding after the great cold closed down in earnest. As Jeff had hinted, the white sea could maroon a man beyond any hope of delivery. The natives were told to feed and care for them, and when the day and night were again of equal length, to turn them loose.

The winter was advancing swiftly now; and Jeff raced it back to Molly. The four-day climb to the fish camp was retraced in one day with the Iskut's surging waters behind him; and traveling light he made phenomenal time up the Stikine toward home. Only the great river's depth and power kept it open now to the easy passage of his craft; the shallow, glittering woodland pools had died, their sweet vivacity repressed by the dour frost; and the little rivulets flowed under gray ice. Every night the Great Cold encroached farther onto the land.

One bitter twilight he saw his familiar landing through the softly falling snow. Paddling swiftly the boat soon touched the shore. The snow-laden branches of the underbrush lashed at him as he trotted up the dear, familiar trail—as if they hated him and resented his safe arrival and it had been the wood gods' plan to snare him in some distant covert and still with frost the red rivulets of his veins. The gleam from an open doorway guided him home; as it would always lead him through the forest and the night. And now he saw Molly, standing waiting.

Winter had little terror for the two exiles in the rude cabin in the Stikine. The fire was bright in the hearth, they had abundant food of a rough, coarse, but healthful kind, and their companionship was known and tried aforetime. On snowshoes or skis, fabricated rather clumsily by their combined efforts, they tasted all the rough joys loved of old by a hardy Northern people; they hunted wild game, eating the meat and sewing the skins into garments; they trapped the fur bearers; they tracked the small, shy, forest people over the snow. When the blizzards swept the land or when they were tired of forest adventure they had pleasant, comfortable hours before their cheery hearth; and they knew hushed nights of wonder and mystery.

The river became a hard road to walk on, and the late-winter winds blew off the snow and left it glare ice, on which a sled moved almost of itself. The nights lengthened and the twilight lingered long under the trees; but the tide slacked and changed, and they began to grow long again. Neither of them dreamed that the weeks could fly so fast. It was no wonder that the calculations Jeff made one clear morning of sunlit, glittering snow were a revelation to them both.

He came to table for breakfast with something on his mind: Molly had learned to interpret the sparkle in his black eyes and the grave, rather boyish wonderment in plain sight about his lips. Presently he smiled at her, and she walked about the table and stood at his chair. "Molly, have you any idea what day this is?" he asked, solemnly.

She puzzled a moment. "It must be late in January."

"It's the sixth day of February, that's what! I've just been counting the notches on my calendar. Molly, what does that mean?"

"It means you have won. It means Alaska is ours."

"I think so, Molly. Unless some unforeseen thing has come up, the Russian company's time limit in which to renew their charter has expired, and the Russian minister is on his way to Washington, authorized by the czar to sell Alaska to us. I don't doubt but that the deal is practically settled, by now."

"It is a great victory!" she told him solemnly.

"Yes, I think it is," he agreed thoughtfully. "Just the same, Molly—there won't be any firecrackers shot off, or flares lighted on the streets of Washington. Alaska means very little to most of our people. They think it is just an iceberg, and will probably call Seward a fool for buying it. But we know, don't we, Molly?"

"A territory equal in size to the original thirteen States! Surely they won't make light of that."

"They won't know any better; but they'll find out in time. Molly, posterity will be mighty glad we own Alaska. It is a new land for us to tame. It is a frontier to go to—to try our thews on—when the rest of the continent is fenced and under the plow. We are a pioneer nation, Molly, as you once told me yourself. We can't cage ourselves up in cities if we are going to maintain the breed; we must have a mountain to climb, a trail to follow, a new horizon to beckon us on. If the old daring, fighting, mastering strain is to survive, there must be something to dare, a foe to fight, a new world to master! The restless ones must have a far country, Molly—and Alaska is the answer."

"I suppose it will be a long, long time before it comes into its own."

"A century, perhaps. In the meantime Sitka will probably almost die away. As you say, Americans are not spoilers; and the great fur-bringing system that made Sitka will pass away with the departing Muscovite. But Sitka will be born again when the home makers come to stay.

"There's one thing more, Molly, that I don't believe Seward has given much thought to: that Alaska can be America's great playground. There are thousands upon thousands of square miles of territory that will never grow wheat and can never support a dense population. Here the rivers will always swarm with trout, the waterfowl will fly in flocks to blacken the sun over the marshes, and the moose and bear, caribou and sheep will roam at will in the forests and the ranges. These things are worth more than gold, Molly; never doubt that for a minute. We are naturally an adventurous people, a race of hunters who perish if kept too long indoors; and here we can find our recreation. I think that in this we may find Alaska's greatest value."

It transpired that Molly made no immediate answer. These two had reckoned without their host if they had dreamed that their Alaskan affair had run its course. As Jeff's earnest, ringing tone trailed off both quickened to a subdued sound just outside the cabin door. It was not the way of wild beasts to come so close, even in this land where man had not yet proved mastery. The pack had fed well and ranged far from the pungent wood smoke; the dour old grizzly slept deeply in a distant cavern. Jeff turned to get his rifle from its rack of caribou horn; but he was to miss the feel of the trusted steel. The door suddenly opened.

A bearded soldier in the winter uniform of a sergeant of the Russian army stood on the threshold. His squad stood with ready rifles behind him.

Karl's wound smarted still, and even here his hate had found its way.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE CZAR!

JEFF glanced toward Molly for guidance—a frequent act of late—and her smile told him not to attempt resistance to the foe. He nodded in token of surrender, and the sergeant, uttering a guttural command in his own tongue, came in and quietly seized his weapon. He took the rifle from its rack, and he did not overlook the heavy revolver in the holster suspended on the cabin wall. He was evidently a thorough soldier—a picked man—for from Jeff's belt he slipped the hunting knife which might have other uses than quartering game.

Meanwhile Jeff waited quietly for what might befall. At no time since they had met was he more keenly conscious of the girl's presence, or more thankful for it; in hours like these she proved her worth. Molly had filled the breach before now, and she was not through yet.

"I wish we had your precious nugget now, Molly. The chap looks as if he might be bribed."

"Never mind, Jeff. They must have come with dog teams, so we'll get a free ride down to Sitka, anyway."

Such seemed to be the program, without aggravating delay. This Muscovite proved an expeditious fellow; and since the morning was yet young he made immediate preparations for departure. He signaled for the two to procure their wraps and a few of their more essential supplies, and to prevent accidents slipped a pair of loose wristlets on Jeff. Calling in one of his men to guard the prisoners, he stepped out and ordered up his dogs.

"Can this lad talk English, you think?" Jeff said to the girl.

"Try him and see."

Jeff addressed the man, but his stony look indicated either that he failed to understand or that he obeyed implicitly the old-time military order concerning conversation with prisoners. To be safe Jeff stepped to Molly's side and spoke in an undertone. "Slip our little file in your pocket, if you can," he instructed. "We may get a chance to get away during the night."

"I will, but it won't do us the least good," was the whispered reply. "They could track us anywhere in the snow, and overtake us with their dog teams."

She spoke cheerfully. Jeff appreciated her good spirits; but at the same time he wondered if she fully realized what this arrest meant. The *Ethan Allen* was not in the harbor, waiting to fly with him. But this time the *Neva II.* might be ready to sail again.

The dogs were driven up to the door and the strength and size of the teams indicated they had been imported from far in the interior. In a few minutes the entire party was under way, down the wide, glass road of the frozen river.

Karl was plainly eager to greet his guests, as every arrangement had been made for a quick trip. They were not to walk, as is usually necessary in traveling long distances in the North, but were given seats on different sleds, each with a single guard. The teams started off at a running pace, leaving the pack sleds and the remainder of the squad far in the rear. Except for the fear that burned him the winter journey would have been the keenest delight to Jeff, and surely no mode of travel in the known world could compare with this, experienced now for the first time. It was a most novel and invigorating experience; the sled swinging behind the long, running pack, ice shod; the air cold and thin and preternaturally clear; the winter forest whipping by. If Molly had any fear she certainly did not show it. Of course she was merely trying to encourage Jeff, but the way her voice rang when she called back to encourage his somewhat slower team, and her laughter on the wind that swept over his head seemed so real that it actually embittered him.

They were to make the trip in three days' run, unusual time indeed for such a distance. Two supply depots had been established at intervals between the cabin and the river's mouth, winter camps made, robes provided for the prisoners' beds, food cached for the dogs and fuel cut for roaring fires. These things had been done purely to expedite the journey, yet they added materially to the comfort of the captives. It was also true that the guards were fairly courteous and considerate, not by Karl's orders but probably in spite of them. Indeed it was highly improbable that Karl had relented sufficiently to order fair and decent treatment toward the prisoners; but the men were average, kindly peasants and a rigorous system had taught them particular respect for people of Jeff's apparent caste. However, they obeyed strict orders as far as maintaining vigilant guard.

When they reached the second supply camp—after two days' hard journey—Jeff again broached the idea of flight. "We might slip out after they leave us for the night, and with a long start we could possibly get clear away," he whispered to Molly in the darkness of their tent. "You know we are close to the mouth of the Iskut. We could follow up the river on the ice and cross the mountains to the Indian encampment where we sent Staritsa and Templeton. I know approximately where it is, and the snow on the range is probably passable by now, even without snowshoes. It would be a long chance, I know; but any chance is better than none at all."

"You couldn't possibly make it without snowshoes, Jeff," was the answer. "I know the snow is packed and crusted by now, but even if it would hold you up, you'd give out before you could ever get across."

"You don't think there's any chance?"

"A good chance for immediate death—that's all. It is a long, long way, Jeff; and men can't travel these winter woods without supplies and equipment. They would catch us before we ever got started. If they didn't catch us, we'd perish of hunger and cold before we could ever find that native village."

"A man can stand more than you ever dream, if he has to. That village is somewhere on the headwaters of the Nass River; and we might be lucky enough to run into it. Molly, do you think Karl means any harm by you?"

"No. I'm not important enough to harm. I'm not afraid for myself."

"You don't seem very much afraid for me, either. Just the same, Molly, I put no trust whatever in Karl, and I don't believe I would feel too secure. Except for this I'd leave you and try to slip away to-night. It is plain you won't come with me."

"I couldn't let you go, even if you wanted to," was her answer. "I couldn't let you throw away your life on such a reckless chance."

"But you admit it is a chance—and I don't see how I have any kind of a chance if we go to Sitka. Of course I wouldn't leave you—if you'd beg me to—but just the same it is the only possible hope for me."

But the girl was stubborn. "It's the slimmest kind of a hope, at best. Jeff, you must stay and help me."

This was so unlike Molly that Jeff was amazed. Evidently she had no real conception of the fate that awaited him. Hopeless, more or less embittered, he turned from her and sought the oblivion of slumber.

The party started on in the dawn, taking advantage of the river ice past the mouth of the Iskut and almost to the sea. When the warm breath of the Japan current began to make itself felt, the sleds were drawn up on the snowy river bank, and at a much slower pace guided between the trees down to the beach. Here a boat was waiting to take them on to Sitka.

In the afternoon of the next day they stepped again on the dock of the old Russian town. No courteous princes stepped down to meet them to-day; and among the few loiterers on the dock Jeff did not recognize a familiar face. Molly appeared to be more fortunate: as he waited for the guard to march him away he saw her approach a man in uniform—plainly a soldier from the garrison, at present off duty—and speak to him in a quiet voice. He immediately turned and left the dock, and though Jeff was mystified, the time did not permit an explanation. The guard stepped to his side and at once escorted both himself and Molly up the hill to the governor's house, historic Baronof Castle that had seen the beginning of Jeff's adventure and now would doubtless behold its end.

Evidently he was to hear his fate at once. It appeared that Prince Maksoutof was absent from the city, but he had not left his chair unoccupied. Count Yanovisk was present to take care of routine matters, and erect and handsome in the governor's place, the fountain head of Alaskan law, was Baron Karl, last seen when Jeff had left him injured on the dueling field.

He had made a startling recovery. Karl was wholly his picturesque self. His paleness seemed more likely the effect of quickened emotions rather than the aftermath of his long confinement; and it actually became him. He bowed to Molly; and now, as Jeff looked him in the face, he had the bearing of supreme triumph. This was plainly a long-awaited hour.

"Well, Sharp, we meet again," he began in his not ungraceful way.

"Yes, Baron Karl. Under not such pleasant circumstances, however, as the last time we met."

"That was quite a triumph for you," Karl observed. At this point he glanced toward an officer who was just entering the room, but it was apparently an unexpected call and did not long divert his attention from Jeff. The latter recognized the officer as Colonel Semanof, in command of the garrison; and since he sat down quietly to wait his chief's leisure, his business appeared to be of no great urgency.

"Quite a triumph," the man in the governor's chair repeated. "I suppose you felt you had risen high, to have shot down Baron Karl. You were even more self-congratulatory when you escaped from prison. What must your triumph have been when you successfully blocked our treaty with Hudson's Bay Company—and through them, with England—I cannot imagine. The backwoods American certainly moved into great company."

"So the treaty is blocked, then?"

"The czar has just notified us of his intention to sell all of Russian America to the United States. I think this news will undoubtedly keep you cheerful during any disagreeable situation in which you may find yourself in the future. You have had many signal triumphs, Sharp, and it will be a great pity that we cannot watch your further progress."

"I am to go away?" Jeff asked.

"Rather speedily, I fear. The captain of the ship is impatient to sail. Your affair is just one of many which we wished to clear up before America occupies the territory. No, I am afraid I have seen the last of your great exploits, my friend."

"Before I go I will gladly give you an opportunity to see one more."

This shot went home. The vein at Karl's temple throbbed and leaped; and for a moment he actually forgot the dim echo of a smile that until now had lingered about his clean-shaven lips. This room was full of listening people: Yanovisk, Semanof—providing the latter's meager knowledge of English permitted him to understand—Molly, who smiled into his eyes, and various under-secretaries. Karl was a proud man, secure in his strength; yet he could not answer this challenge as in former days. There are certain limitations to every man's courage, and this was his. Their last meeting had taught a bitter lesson.

"An affair of honor is impossible between you and me," was his sober reply. "A duel must of a necessity be fought between people of something like equal rank and similar traditions; thus each can be fairly sure that the guns are loaded—and the caps contain powder. I have tasted enough of your kind of dueling, my friend."

"You were simply hoist by your own petard, Karl, and you know it."

"We will not discuss that further. My friends realize the truth, and what you say will not likely change them. We are wasting time; we must get to the business in hand. You will have time in plenty later to dwell upon these matters. Sharp, you have won from us many things. We supposed you were in your own country, out of our reach; but fate has put you in our hands at last."

"The *Ethan Allen* escaped, then?"

"A fog came up and we lost her among the islands. We supposed that you were aboard her until a story leaked through from Upreanof Island of your capture and murder of Staritsa and Templeton—a story I was able to piece out from the most meager details. Although the truth reached us too late to save Alaska, at least we can collect a certain measure of payment from you. It helped console us for our loss to learn you were still in easy reach."

"We did not kill Staritsa and Templeton. They are at present in a winter village on the upper Nass River, and will return later in the spring."

"Yes?"

"That is true, as I stand here. I owed Staritsa something better; but Americans are not dogs, to tear a victim when he is down."

"This is very good news for us, but I fear it will not change your fate. America has not occupied Alaska yet, Sharp, and will not for some weeks. Our law is still supreme. We still have power to take care of you; and the report that goes to Washington of your deeply deplored and mysterious absence will never be questioned. If it *is* questioned there will be no one to answer. I will be in a far country where I may not readily be found. You will be given a number—over there—and of all living beings, I will be the only one to know what name corresponds with that number. Partly through your efforts we have lost Russian America. Now you are to lose your very name. Perhaps thus we may teach a peasant not to interfere in the concerns of his betters. The guards may lead you out now, and to-night they will put you aboard the ship. Special guards will see that there will be no further jail breaking. We bid you farewell—to Alaska."

The full meaning of this sentence silenced Jeff; yet Karl was not to go unanswered. In the little, moving pause following his words of hate, a clear voice reached him from an unexpected quarter. An amazing clear voice, it was; not loud, but remarkably penetrative in the hushed room.

"He is not to go at once, Baron Karl," this voice said.

Karl turned to find Molly's clear eyes looking straight into his own. He did not know why this glance disconcerted him in a way never previously experienced; and why dark forebodings, mysterious as a distant cloud, bore heavily upon him. "What are you saying?" he demanded. "Do you dare question my order?"

"I question a great deal more than that," was the girl's reply. "Mr. Sharp is not going to Siberia; never think for a moment that he is. I believe, Baron Karl, that during your dictatorship out here Colonel Semanof has been directly under your command, and his troops have put your commands into effect. Colonel Semanof is here to-day to see to it that a higher law than yours is obeyed, one that no one here dares disobey. He will agree with me that you never made a greater mistake than to think this American citizen would go to Siberia in chains!"

Her voice had a ringing tone of conviction not easy to mistake; and her eyes flashed and warm waves of color came and went in the higher curves of her cheeks. Karl stared at her, then turned to the chief officer of the garrison. "What are you doing here, Semanof?" he asked in Russian. "I did not tell you to come."

"I was told to come in the name of our royal master," was the reply. "I know nothing else."

"You will know in an instant," Molly told him emphatically. The conversation was now unintelligible to Jeff, but to his amazement Molly seemed not only to follow it but to take part in it. "Colonel, I have something here that is of interest to you to read."

She produced a small folder of black leather, and from this she drew a folded sheet of parchment. Semanof's wondering eyes glanced down the lines.

There was only a paragraph or two written on the sheet, but their effect upon this quiet soldier was instantaneous and sensational. His heels snapped together with an audible click, and with a stiff gesture he held out the paper for Molly to take. As soon as her fingers closed upon it, his right hand went up in a rigid salute; and he held the position without a tremor until Molly spoke certain quiet words which Jeff did not comprehend.

Karl was not such a fool as to misunderstand; yet he smiled wanly in his place. For all his iniquity this Russian nobleman was a man of iron. "It must be a most interesting document, Semanof," he observed. "I can't help feeling curious——"

"It is an order dated June 1, 1866, commissioning the bearer, Mary Forest, as his majesty's special representative in this territory, with authority superior to that of the governor and all other agents, and subject only to imperial countermand," Molly explained. "It supersedes all previous edicts and commissions heretofore granted in Russian America."

"You have certainly been a long time bringing it to the light," Karl remarked pleasantly. No look or tone hinted at his realization of certain downfall. "May I ask who signed the document?"

"The czar!"

At that name every man in the room was on his feet.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

JEFF MAKES A SUGGESTION.

ALL this did not make very good sense to Jeff. He felt that he was making some sort of a show of himself, standing with round eyes as if he had lost his wits. He simply could not adjust himself to this extraordinary situation; and which was doubly unfortunate, Molly was at present altogether too busy to explain matters to him.

It appeared that she had to give certain directions to Semanof, Yanovisk, and other high officials of the company as to the governing of the province until America could take possession. Prince Maksoutof, still a trusted friend of Alexander II., was to retain nominal control of the province, and since he had escaped from Karl's dominance, no one anticipated misrule. Semanof, subject at last to a higher law than Karl's, would remain in control of the garrison, while his former dictator would go to Russia to face the charge of treason.

Indeed, the tempered light of early evening lay over the town before Molly and Jeff had a word alone together.

At last they walked side by side up Lover's Lane—the Governor's Walk—and Molly explained everything to Jeff's satisfaction. "You see, Alexander II. was suspicious of Karl and his crowd," she told him. "The Russian company had fallen into evil ways, due to the rise in power of a little group of men headed by Baron Karl and Staritsa; and the czar knew—or believed—they were playing fast and loose with him. As you know, he wanted to sell Alaska to America—for various reasons—but pressure was brought to bear upon him and he gave the company until February 1st to renew their charter. He feared that Karl would betray him in connection with the proposed treaty with the English company; and when I left St. Petersburg last summer he instructed me to represent him personally in his American possessions, so if it became necessary, I could oppose Karl and counteract all his evil works.

"I was told not to exert my authority, or even to reveal it, until I was forced to do so. You can see why: Karl would have carried on his activities under cover instead of in the open and he would have certainly rushed matters in closing the deal with the English company. I didn't want to reveal my true position until their time limit had expired, and Karl had shown his true colors."

"I suppose you are a subject of the czar, instead of an American," Jeff commented in a somewhat regretful tone.

"Jeff, did you ever hear of Thadeus Forest?"

"I remember his name. A statesman of some sort, wasn't he? I don't remember just what he did."

"He was our ambassador to Russia, some years ago. It is strange you never connected me with him."

"You are his daughter, of course." Jeff smiled, and she knew that some of his humor prevailed in him again. "Molly, you needn't ever be surprised at any of my omissions. I'm just a very common and ordinary variety of fool!"

"The present czar became attached to me when I was a child at the Russian court," Molly went on. "He always liked me, called me Pouschka, rode and talked with me, and had a surprising lot of confidence in me. I have continued a friendship with him ever since, and trusting me a great deal—much more than I deserve—he asked me, when I left St. Petersburg last summer, to take this post out here, to protect his interests all I could against Karl and his friends. He told me I could do it as well as any man he knew, and was less likely to waken suspicion. Mr. Seward was aware of my appointment, and knowing you—better than you know yourself—he sent you up here too. He knew you could help me and I you."

"I'll admit you have helped me, but I can't remember that I've been any great help to you—except to get in scrapes for you to get me out of," Jeff commented. "I suppose I was told to sail on the ***Ethan Allen*** because you were on it. You are no more relation of Captain Skinner than I am. Instead of the niece of a humble seaman you are the daughter of a great man, an ambassador from America!"

"You are not looking at the matter quite straight, Jeff. That has been the trouble; you have been inclined to do some of your thinking in circles. You must not assume, in America, that the niece of a humble man cannot be the daughter of a great one. Here, thank Heaven, lies America's greatness! You must not suppose that a cobbler cannot be the brother of the president. The United States is neither Russia nor England; it is the land of poor man's hope, and I pray it will ever be. Greatness can come from any environment in our country. David Skinner does not happen to be my own uncle, but he is my mother's uncle, and I have always been proud to call him that. He is the kind of skipper who in the War of 1812 made it unhealthy to stop and search our ships—the kind who overthrew the Barbary pirates when they had the whole world cowed."

"His ship was never out of order at all, I suppose. He kept it in Sitka for any use you might have for it."

"It wasn't very seriously damaged, that's certain. Jeff, instead of muttering in your throat you ought to be jumping up and down with joy to think that he got away, that day in the inside passage. Those skins are as safe as if they are in a bank."

"Of course I know what it means to me. I hope I'm a patriot at last, but at least I'm human, and I'm only too glad to take the spoils of war. It means more than you perhaps realize; reëstablishment of a home I loved, in my own country. We people in the South know what home love is."

"I know you do, Jeff," the girl told him softly. "I believe I know how you feel."

"I want you to tell me one thing more, Molly—something you've kept from me a long time. I know why you kept it—you didn't want me to be under any more obligation to you than I already was—and I'm sure, now, and have been sure a long time, that you know the real explanation. How did it happen that Karl got the empty gun, and I the loaded one, that day on the Kolosh Ryeka Trail? I don't believe for a moment that Staritsa got them mixed in their case."

"No." The girl smiled into his eyes. "He was very careful. Indeed, he was altogether too careful. That was what wakened my suspicions."

"What did you do?"

"I kept my eyes open, Jeff. I wanted to come with you especially to watch out for treachery. I saw him holding the case like a basket of eggs, careful not to turn it about in his hands, and I was sure he meant a certain pistol for you and a certain one for Karl. Just to be sure I walked close, and, watching my chance, simply turned the case around on the ground."

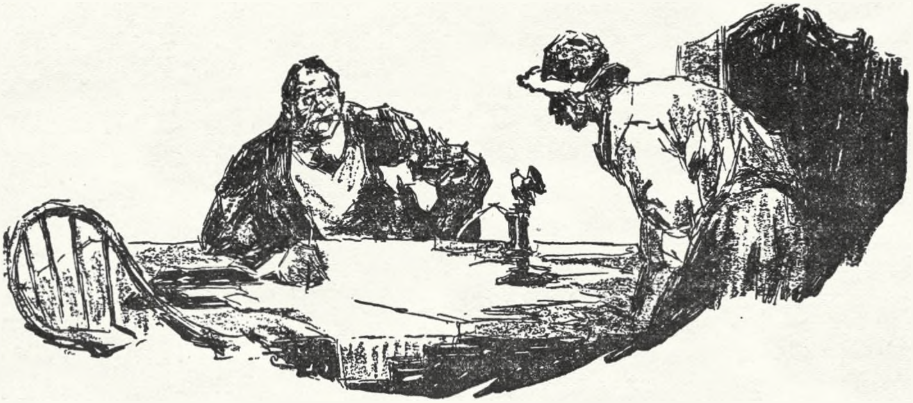
"There is just one thing I want distinctly understood," Jeff remarked after a significant and very pleasant pause. "When you are the mistress of my house, I want you to forget that you are a capable and industrious Yankee and become—just a sweetheart. Hereafter I want to run things to suit myself. When there is something to be done, in the future, I want to be the one to do it. I expect to be the important member of our household."

"So you shall, Jeff, so you shall." She kissed him without warning. "You have been the important one all the way through, Jeff, my dearest. I just suggested things to you." Her tone now became serious. "Except for you, the big things we have tried to do up here would have never come to pass, and that is truth if I ever spoke it. Up there in the woods you came into your own."

"Just the same, I want to make a few suggestions from now on—by my own self. I suggest now that you walk straight into my arms and do just what you did a moment ago."

She obeyed—like the dutiful wife she soon would be.

More of Edison Marshall's work will appear in future issues.



Sign Language

By Talbert Josselyn

Author of "Pigeon Pie," "The Desert Audits an Account," **Etc.**

The crooked land promoter reads the future—in a sign.

TWO men sat facing one another across a flat-topped office desk; Henry Hardick, rancher, and Wilkinson Barry, land promoter.

The clothes of the rancher were dusty, ill fitting, and showed signs of long wear; his lean and tanned face was thrust forward, his deep-set eyes flamed with an intensity in keeping with his taut body and clenched hands; seamed and stained hands they were, heavy worked, now lying on the desk top outthrust toward the comfortably seated Wilkinson Barry, land promoter. From Mr. Barry's necktie with its florid stick pin to his light-tan shoes there was no suggestion of apparel long worn; about his heavy figure there was no tenseness; over his pink, smooth face ran a series of light smiles. In his prominent eyes, however, there was a glinting look wholly at variance with these smiles as he continued to take in the man opposite.

"But I'm telling you," said Henry Hardick, "that the land won't grow a thing."

"And I'm telling you," retorted Wilkinson Barry, "that that don't mean a thing to me."

The stained and seamed hands of Henry Hardick grew a little tighter gripped.

"The land won't grow wheat. I've tried it. It won't grow alfalfa; I've tried that. It won't grow fruit trees. It won't grow anything."

Wilkinson Barry tilted farther back in his desk chair, put finger tips together, and set the chair to slow rocking, his sparse, light eyebrows slightly raised as his prominent eyes continued to look through and beyond the dusty figure with the clenched hands.

"Then I guess," said Wilkinson Barry, "that you'd better go back to house painting."

A wild surge of color flamed in Henry Hardick's cheeks. He half raised his fists, then dropped them. It was plain that he was fighting to hold himself. He snapped his head up, then down.

"When you sold me that place a year ago I was so sick of the twenty-year-long smell of paint that I was ready to buy any sort of land, and that's just the sort of land you sold me. I wasn't wise enough to ranching then to know that all the new irrigation in the upper part of the valley would raise the water table down my way so as to drown out my land. You were."

Mr. Barry's pink expanse of features continued to be rippled with light smiles. His eyebrows raised themselves just a little higher.

"You've got all that put down in writing, I suppose?"

The angular form of the man across the desk almost writhed.

"You know I haven't. You know I haven't got a thing, except a deed to fifty drowned-out acres and a lot of promises of help that you've peddled me from time to time. You know that I'm at the end of my rope and haven't any money. That's why I've come to you, like one white man to another; that's why I'm asking you to lend me the money to put in a ditch at the lower end of the land to drain it. I'll pay it back as soon as I can, God knows I will!" The doubled fists unclasped; the work-bent fingers grew straight. "Or you put it in. It ain't for me altogether. You know that that new project that you're opening up to the east of me, even though it is higher ground, will get flooded out sooner or later, and unless you drain it whoever buys of you will go to smash like I have done. Now I'm asking you, will you do it? Will you help me?"

"No, I won't!" Wilkinson Barry and his chair shot upright; a pudgy forefinger extended itself. Gone were Mr. Barry's light smiles. Over the pink features ran a look that paralleled the glint in his eyes. "You bet I won't. And now get out of here! For more than half an hour I've been fool enough to listen to your whining. Get!"

For several seconds Henry Hardick continued to sit rigidly still, as though he had not heard. Then he was on his feet and leaning full across the desk. So swift were his motions that Mr. Barry, in order to keep from being collided with, was forced to lurch wildly backward. His face left off being pink; it went paper-napkin white, and the glint in his eyes whipped away. Fear laid its heavy hand upon the seller of choice properties. His mouth opened; a fat finger groped for the button of his desk bell. Then he too was on his feet, wheezing, face now the hue of his florid stick pin. In a doorway two of his office force had appeared. Savagely he indicated the dusty figure before him.

A snort of contempt came from Henry Hardick

"They don't need to throw me out. I'm going. And I wouldn't have laid hands on your fat carcass. It isn't worth laying 'em on. Somebody else can pitch you out the window some time; I'll get you in my own way. Don't forget that!"

Head up, he strode out of the suite of offices and slammed the door behind him. His head still up, he made his way out of the building and to the place where he had parked his car, a vehicle as dusty and hard worn as himself. He clambered aboard it, and as he swung into the seat his knees went out from under him, his head slumped forward. The pretense was over. There was no way out, no way of striking back, and he knew it.

Just how well he knew it was shown some two hours later. The hard-worn machine had come to a stop beside a small frame house set a little back from a straight road running the length of a great and broad valley that upstretched gently on the far side toward distant blue mountains almost hidden in summer haze and on this side lost itself near at hand in a row of barren low hills. A fair country, toward the distant mountains, green in lush alfalfa fields and roadside cottonwoods; a stricken one, toward the near hills, with yellowing patches of alfalfa and runty-leafed young fruit trees; the bottom of a basin, drowned out.

The dust-covered man in the little car was leaning over its side tightly holding the hands of a woman who had hastened out of the one-story frame house at the sound of the car's approach. His eyes were full upon hers. Then they shifted away.

"It's no use, Ruth," said Henry Hardick. "He won't do a thing. The place will have to go for taxes."

The light that had been in the woman's eyes as the car swung from the long road into the narrow driveway, and which had still persisted even as she guessed at the truth from her husband's face, now died out as though extinguished by some great wind; then rekindled again, higher, fiercer, of a far different quality; a quality that expressed itself in her cry:

"Yes, and he'll buy the place back again for those taxes! The sneak! Henry, isn't there some way——"

Henry Hardick shook his head.

"I did the best I could, Ruth." He looked far away.

Over Ruth Hardick's face, a face still bearing traces of youth and wistful beauty, swept a flood of compassion. She caught at the turned-away head, tugged it down, kissed a lean cheek.

"Of course you did your best! Nobody could have done better. But——" Compassion for the man who had failed found outburst against the man who had caused him to fail. "Of course he wouldn't do anything; he's just that kind. Promises and promises of help; delay; easy words that put us aside. And now——" She broke short off, forced a smile, caught at her husband's hands, and drew him out of the car. "You come in to supper. We'll have an early one. That's what you need; food. Things won't look half so bad after a hot meal; you just see." Swiftly and lightly she talked as they went toward the frame house.

All through the meal she strove to raise the spirits of the man across the table, and thereby to raise her own.

"If it wasn't for the water, the land would grow anything. Somehow we've simply got to get that big drainage ditch in, that's all. We aren't going to let that pop-eyed smooth-tongue lie around and wait until we're forced to abandon all these acres, and he then take them in for taxes. No, sir. We'll fool him yet."

Henry Hardick drove his fork into another potato. "By thunder, I want to. He sitting there in his chair and calmly suggesting that I go back to house painting!"

Ruth Hardick stopped, coffeepot halfway between stove and table. "He did?" Color mantled her cheeks. For years had she striven to get her husband away from a trade for which he was not constitutionally built; scarcely a year before she had succeeded, and now, for him to be forced back to that grind! Her color heightened, then died away; she turned upon him pleadingly. "Did you put it up to him in every way? Not only about us, but about the other people? About his new tract and the people who will get drowned out in turn as we have? If he could drain the land for all of them and us——"

"Not a chance," said Henry Hardick. "I went at him from every angle, over and over. No go."

"And the tract sale begins to-morrow."

"That's so," said Henry, brows furrowing. "I've been so busy on work and worry that the date had slipped me. To-morrow."

"City greenhorns will come and buy, same as we did," said Ruth Hardick. "They'll try alfalfa."

"And it won't grow," said Henry Hardick.

"They'll try fruit."

"And it won't grow."

"They'll try one thing after another."

"And one after another will fail."

"And then," concluded Ruth Hardick, "they'll be just like us." She paused, then swiftly put out her hand. "Henry, we've got to stop it some way! Even if we can't help ourselves, we've got to help the others. And maybe"—her eyes widened to their fullest as though in sudden thought—"maybe by helping them we can help ourselves! Maybe we could let them know in some way, through our own experience, and then this Wilkinson Barry would have to help us." She rose, walked to the end of the room and returned. "I'm getting it! Advertising. He told you that you'd have to go back to house painting, did he? All right, you're going back to it, you and I. Not quite as we ever expected to, and certainly not quite as he'd want us to time we get through with him. You've got some cans of paint left out in the barn, haven't you?"

"Sure," said Henry. Puzzlement was written large on his face, and yet something else besides puzzlement. Shadowy hope was there; shadowy hope and belief in this woman who, as a girl, had given up school-teaching to become his wife; had guided and helped through all the years. "Yes," said Henry. "We've got paint. Green and white and red."

"Good glaring colors," said Ruth. "And the lumber; the lumber that was to go into making the new shed; planed on one side—just the sort. Hammer and saw; nails. That does it. Supper's over! Work! Henry Hardick, you've got a contract job to be done by morning. Mr. Wilkinson Barry," she apostrophized that prominent-eyed and pink-featured gentleman, "perhaps you are going to have a surprise party at your land opening to-morrow."

The surprise party began for Mr. Wilkinson Barry just as he was abreast of the Hardick ranch house the next morning. He was in a hurry, having been delayed in the city with the final arrangements for the opening of the new tract, one of these arrangements being for the transportation of all interested city persons in a fleet of motor buses timed to arrive at the tract for the grand free barbecue at noon. Noon was less than two hours away and many things remained to be done. Hence it was, as he went full tilt past, that the corner of his eye caught merely what appeared to be a huge signboard fronting the long road from within the Hardick property. He turned his head only in time to glimpse the first of a number of foot-high words, then he was gone; but these words, flashing diffusedly though they did on his brain pan, were sufficient to make him raise his foot from the throttle, to halt scowlingly within a hundred yards, to back up.

He found himself face to face with an announcement done in red letters surrounded by a staring green-and-white checker border:

THIS LAND WILL NOT GROW WHEAT
I HAVE TRIED IT
OR ALFALFA—I HAVE TRIED IT
OR FRUIT—I HAVE TRIED IT
THIS LAND WILL NOT GROW ANYTHING
ASK ME WHY

Wilkinson Barry read the sign several times, his sparse eyebrows going higher, his pink face more and more approaching the hue of his florid stick pin; yet so occupied was he with the new tract and the necessity of getting to it, that there was only an outward registering of feeling. He gave a savage grunt.

"Huh," he sneered. "That all? Let 'em ask him." He stepped on the gas.

Not until he had covered a quarter mile did the full relation of the sign and the new tract stand glaringly illuminated in his mind, did he comprehend what the answer of the sign maker Henry Hardick might be to certain questions. "Hell!" cried Wilkinson Barry, and whirled his long car about with a fine crashing of gears that did not help the expensive mechanism. Mouth pulled down in a horseshoe curve, eyes roundly protruding, he sent the machine back along the road. A hundred yards short of the sign a brush-lined lane branched off. A second thought struck him. He yanked the big new roadster into the mouth of the lane, and from this hidden vantage point settled himself to wait, a glowering eye on his watch.

He did not have to wait long. Down the long road came a car traveling at a rate that enabled its driver to look about as he drove. His eye caught the sign. He looked; looked more; pulled up. He leaned out of the car and studied the glaring combination of red and white and green. Then he started on again, his gaze going out questingly across the Hardick field as he put the car in motion. He came opposite the mouth of the lane, saw Wilkinson Barry, grinned, and shook his head. It was the mere grin and head shaking of one stranger to another, but Wilkinson Barry saw in it all the elements of cynical comprehension. He shifted in his seat and glowered the car out of sight. And another car took its place.

The second car stopped opposite the sign as the preceding one had done; it stopped slowly, the driver craning his neck as he brought it to a halt. There were two people in the car, a man and a woman, and after long staring and apparently a debate, the man swung out of the car and walked up the Hardick driveway. At closer range he studied the sign, then approached the Hardick house. The Hardick barn cut him off from Winkinson Barry's view, and the latter had reached the stage of wild suspicion and hoarse breathing by the time the Hardick visitor reappeared.

Suspicion and hoarse breathing were in no way allayed when the man, on getting into the car, had earnest conversation with the woman who awaited him, and then turned the car around and drove back cityward down the long road.

The Barry car fairly bolted out of its hiding place. It shot into the Hardick yard like a racer drawing up at the pits. The contorted visage of Wilkinson Barry came face to face with the tanned one of Henry Hardick; a Henry Hardick in whose deep-set eyes there was the stamp of lack of sleep, yet also wherein the taut, drawn look of the day before had wholly disappeared.

"Take down that sign!" roared Wilkinson Barry, and shook his fist.

"Why, hello," greeted Henry Hardick. "I thought you never went away from your plate-glass office."

"Those people," said Wilkinson Barry in a choking voice. "If I find out you lied to those people about my property, I'll have the law on you so damned fast——"

"*Your* property?" said Henry Hardick, eyebrows puckering. "This happens to be my property."

The owner of the Barry Home Tract boiled completely over.

"I'll have you arrested! I'll have you jailed for libel!"

A look of seeming understanding came to Henry Hardick. "Oh, you mean the people that were just here? You mean that I talked to them about your new tract? Why, they came in to ask about a road, and when they found they were on the wrong one they turned around. Haven't you ever done that before?"

Over Mr. Barry's red features swept something new in the way of emotion. Belief in this statement, knowledge that he had exposed his hand, consuming rage at the calm speaker, all these fought for the right of way. And as they fought a machine came throbbing up the rutted driveway and stopped beside the Barry roadster.

A family was in the car; husband, wife, children; even the dog. Their manner was that of people bound for a picnic or some other sort of gay doing, and who were on their way a little ahead of the others in order to avoid the rush. The husband looked from Wilkinson Barry to Henry Hardick, singled out Henry, and grinned by way of greeting.

"Say," he said hesitantly. "If you don't mind, just a minute. I saw that sign of yours out there, and we——" He paused, looked at his wife, and continued. "You see, we're bound for this land opening and barbecue. We're kind of interested in looking for land, and when we saw that sign of yours, and your land not being a great ways from this new tract, we thought we'd come in and ask you what it all meant."

Henry Hardick grinned in turn.

"It means just what it says, pardner. Nothing will grow on my land. It's a water problem."

"Water? You mean you don't get enough for irrigation?"

"Mean I get too much, from somebody else."

The man at the wheel stared about him, a puzzled look at length coming into his eyes.

Henry Hardick shook his head. "No, it's not from their ditches breaking up above; not surface flooding. Subsurface; a rising of the water table until the roots are drowned out. Want to see?"

His hand closed upon a shovel standing against the barn; the man at the wheel swung a leg over the side of the car and joined him; together they strode to the first row of what had been the beginnings of an orchard. Henry stopped. Swiftly he dug a round hole in the earth, and before he had swung up a dozen shovelfuls the deepening face of the hole was oozing moisture; at two feet little jets of water were bursting forth from the soil and the hole was filling.

Henry looked at the man. "Savvy?" He began to walk back toward the barn.

"Why, now," said the man, "that's hell. But can't you stop it? And how about this land——"

"A big ditch along my lower line, deep enough to lower the water level of all this subsurface drainage so that it can't drown out the roots, would solve the whole thing. But I can't do it alone. It'd have to be all along the lower line of the valley, beginning off that way." Henry threw out an indicating hand.

The man's eyes widened. "Why, that's off where this new tract is, ain't it?" They had by now reached his car; also Wilkinson Barry's. "Say," said the man to Henry Hardick, his countenance changing, "believe me, I'm going to ask a lot of questions when I get down there, and I'm going to ask for a shovel. And if there is water and they don't talk draining, here's one fish they don't hook." The speaker paused; once more his expression changed. He put a hand on Henry's shoulder. "Say, did the bird that's putting on this tract sell you this land? He did? And that's why you're—— Believe me I'm going to ask questions. Will he be there in person."

Henry Hardick studied the distant, haze-hidden mountains.

"I can't say for sure," said he. "It might be a good plan to ask him when he's somewhere else. For instance——"

The roar of a motor at Henry's elbow drowned out speech. Wilkinson Barry's control had completely given way. With face working insanely, he tramped on the throttle. As the car leaped forward he flung out a fist at Henry Hardick. "I'll get you for this!" he cried. The roadster slashed into the long road and went rocketing down it toward the Barry Home Tract—Pleasant Places for Pleased People. Though Mr. Barry went in the direction of his tract it was hardly to be supposed that he was hastening there in order to be present when the inquiring land seeker and family should arrive. Yet his speed spelled some definite urgency and some definite plan. What this plan was Henry Hardick was soon to learn.

A quarter of an hour passed. Seated on a disused wagon seat, now set against a side of the barn, the man who had been up all night with paintbrush and hammer tried to fight off sleep, rallied a couple of times, and fell into a drowse. He awoke with the rumble of a truck in his ears, opened his eyes upon a group of men descending from this truck where it stood in the road. The men were swarming into the yard; swarming into the yard and making straight for the sign.

Henry Hardick grabbed the first weapon at hand, his shovel, and raced toward the sign. He reached it simultaneously with the leader of the group. The latter carried a crowbar. Crowbar and shovel met, and as iron parried wood, the rest of the Barry Tract working gang swirled about the sign and laid heavy, prying hands upon it. One heave, and the sign creaked; another, it began to lean. One more would have brought it down. But the one more did not come.

A woman's voice rang sharp above the tumult:

"Get away from that sign or I'll blow your heads off!"

The wrecking gang turned to look and found themselves staring into the front end of a double-barreled shotgun. Sweepingly the twin mouths of the gun took them in. They let go of the sign.

"Clear out!" Ruth Hardick, her face white as her apron, her eyes blazing, her forefinger curved about a trigger, advanced a step closer. The twin muzzles came to rest upon the leader of the crew. He ducked, dropped the crowbar, and ran for the road, and the others ran with him.

Henry Hardick cast aside the splintered shovel handle and took the gun out of his wife's hands. He swung it into the crook of an arm, muzzle pointing at the road, and put his other arm about Ruth Hardick's shoulders; and Ruth Hardick sagged against him.

The discomfited wrecking crew clambered aboard the truck, and the conversation that they had with some one in a roadster at its far side was both spirited and personal, dealing mainly with their fluent opinion of any one who would send unarmed men into so shocking an ambush. Personalities swelled and died down. A low-voiced conference followed. Then the Barry roadster shot ahead, and the truck took up a rumbling course in its wake; and the course of these two machines was cityward, down the long road in the direction whence a fleet of buses would be coming within the hour.

"Well, they won't try that trick again," said Henry Hardick. Once more he took his wife in his arms. "Thanks to you they won't. Girl, we're getting him! Did you see the look on his face as he started off? Body blows, I tell you; and when the cars begin to come by in flocks for the barbecue, it'll be a knock-out to the jaw."

Together they went into the house. Henry stood the gun in a corner, motioned his wife into a chair, and poured out two cups of coffee from the large pot on the stove. He raised his cup in salute.

"Us!" he said.

And, "Us!" returned Ruth Hardick.

Henry sat down and slowly drank; refilled his cup and drank again. With the cup almost empty he suddenly paused, put his head on one side, and listened.

"What is it?" demanded Ruth.

Henry rose. "It isn't what it is; it's what it isn't! I don't hear any cars. They should be coming by thicker and thicker, and there hasn't been one in minutes." He ran out into the yard, Ruth following. Their eyes went down the long road, cityward. The road was empty. No approaching cars were to be seen.

Their eyes met, and surmisal in one pair reflected surmisal in the other.

"He's stopped the road somewhere!" said Ruth, face blanching. "He's detouring them around us!"

Henry darted into the house and emerged with the gun. He handed it to her.

"Guard the sign; I'm going to see!"

He ran to where the dusty and hard-worn little car stood; coughingly the little car bounced out of the yard. Its course was the one that had been taken by the Barry roadster and the Barry truck.

A half mile to the west its brakes went grindingly on. An obstruction—a roughly whacked-together fence—stretched across the road. Guarding it were a number of the Barry crew who had made the attack on the sign, guarding it, and turning cars off it up an intersecting road. Even as Henry Hardick brought his car to a stop the guard crew detoured an approaching machine, motioning with their hands and crying out, "Take that road; follow the signs; this road's impassable!"

Then they saw Henry, and a mocking howl went up. Several of them started toward him, the grins going off their faces.

Henry yanked the wheel hard over. The little car whirled, dropped into a ditch, clawed its way out, and went bucketing back along the road whence it had come. Dwindling yells of derision sounded in its driver's ears. He kept on going. He had no plans, yet he must have plans. He must act, and act quickly. He drummed his brain, sent his eyes searching here and there, and came plump upon Bill Jeffer, a neighbor, swinging out of his gate with a high-piled, two-horse load of alfalfa hay. Sight of the load whipped him into action; a plan came winging out of space. He held up his hand, leaped out of the car, and within a minute had placed the case of Henry Hardick against Wilkinson Barry before the high-perched man holding the reins; had placed it, and had formulated the last chance of attack.

"Turn your load right around," said Henry, "and drive up through your fields to the next road on the north, then swing west; and when you get where the road's the narrowest, and low and wet on both sides, drop a wheel off there; bust right down in the middle and they won't be able to get a wheelbarrow by. Then they've got to come by my place. They won't have time to reroute themselves. Go get 'em!"

Bill Jeffer shortened his grip on the reins and began to chew on his tobacco at double quick.

"You bet I'll get 'em!" he shouted down. "I ain't never liked that cuss and here's my chance to even up with him. You, team! Get around there!"

The team got; back into the Jeffer yard and up through the fields it went at a speed the like of which no other hay load had ever attained, short of a runaway.

Henry Hardick, hands tightly gripped, sat and watched it go; then roused the little car to life and sent it spinning down the road and into his own place. Once more he took the double-barreled gun from his wife's hands. Briefly, crisply, as they went toward the house, he told of the road blockade and of the last-chance attempt at checkmate. Then tensed himself to wait.

The minutes crawled by. In his mind's eye a host of images went unceasingly past—Bill would arrive at the upper road too late; he wouldn't be able to get to the narrow, wet part of the road in time; they'd catch him taking off a wheel; they'd find some other detour. The minutes dragged on and on and no sound of an approaching machine came. To-day had been the day to strike, before the Barry forces could organize; on the morrow some sort of defense would have been driven forward by the owner of the Barry Home Tract—Pleasant Places for Pleased People. The minutes lock stepped past and suspicion came thrusting in on Henry Hardick that somewhere the last chance had failed.

When the hum of a motor finally struck upon his ears he dared not raise his head until his hearing told him for certain that it was not hallucination; even when positive, he avoided Ruth Hardick's face. Stiffly he rose and looked out the window, and Ruth looked with him.

Wilkinson Barry came roaring into the yard.

There was no need for husband and wife to ask of each other a question; no need to wonder whether Bill Jeffer had succeeded. The look on Mr. Barry's one-time-pink face sufficed to answer many things. "Steady, now," said Ruth to Henry. Husband and wife stepped out the doorway.

"You!" choked Wilkinson Barry, not getting out of his car. He flung up a hand. "I'll buy your damned place. Pay you what it cost you. Here—I'll make out a check right now!" He dived into a pocket, yanked out a check book, and wrote furiously. He thrust the rectangular piece of paper at Henry. "There! Give me a receipt. And then yank down that sign!"

Henry studied the check, and a fuming sputter came from the quivering man in the roadster.

"What're you looking at? It's good; hurry up with that receipt!" He glanced over his shoulder down the long road that led cityward.

Henry Hardick shook his head and handed back the check. "I don't want to sell."

Wilkinson Barry's eyes nearly started from his head.

"What?"

"No, I intend to keep this place. Have intended to right along. It'll be a fine one—when it's drained. So, since you seem ready to do something this morning, if you'll just jot down an agreement about putting in a drainage ditch for me and for your new property——"

A bellow came from the seller of Pleasant Home Tracts.

"I'll see you in blazes first! I'll take this whole thing to court."

The lean, tanned rancher shaded his eyes and looked down the long road.

"Isn't that dust, down there? Maybe it's the buses for the barbecue. Maybe they'll have a newspaper man or so aboard, looking for interesting notes." His glance went toward the red-green-and-white sign. "Maybe they'll find some."

For a heavy-set man, Wilkinson Barry bounced on the cushions like a rubber ball. And the dust down the long road grew heavier.

"You're a thief!" stormed Wilkinson Barry. "You're a jailbird. Here—I'll write out an agreement."

"Make it two," said Henry Hardick. "One concerning the ditch. The other, an agreement to turn over your new roadster to me until the ditch is done. Checks, you know, have a way of getting short circuited, sometimes by telephone, before their bearer can get to the bank." Boringly the deep-set eyes of Henry Hardick fixed themselves upon the prominent ones of Wilkinson Barry. The eyes of Mr. Barry fought back, wavered, and fell.

Never did a fat man's hand, gripping a pen, travel faster over paper in the making out of two agreements. By an eyelash it kept pace with the pressing demand for speed; as the skeleton agreements were being signed and handed over, the first of the fleet of buses, bearing a throng of home-seekers busy with eye and tongue, came rocking along toward the Hardick place.

Wilkinson Barry fell out of his erstwhile roadster. Like a sprinter he raced toward the sign, caught up the crowbar that had been abandoned by the leader of his wrecking crew, and swung it mightily. He shivered a board; another, and another. Piecemeal, the sign fell away.

The caravan of buses jolted past. Interested of eye, the caravan riders took in a carmine-faced man standing beside a demolished sign.

"Why, look at that man," said an elderly woman. "He's been knocking down a sign. Ain't it fine that country people are beginning to do away with unsightly advertising!"

More stories by Talbert Josselyn in future issues.

❧

WISE PRECAUTION

GOSSIP loud, long and unrestrained broke loose in the capital of this fair country when Congress passed the bill appropriating $500,000 to finance prosecution of the "war grafters." The sum of money involved was not what aroused interest. Congress dishes up half a million dollars any time without batting an eye. But the debate ran high on why the thing had been done. Was it a bluff? Who was suspected? What would it amount to? Seers and prophets had a field day.

"I wonder," said Senator Morris Sheppard of Texas in the cloakroom one day during the excitement; "I wonder why they made the appropriation so small."

"That's easy," Senator Heflin of Alabama instructed him. "They were afraid if they made it big enough to be worth while the war grafters would grab it."

❧

WHAT KILLED HIM

THE late John Wanamaker, himself a king among salesmen, had no patience with the modern theory that the more you talk the more you sell. He discouraged the man who made extravagant claims for his "line" and promised more than it justified.

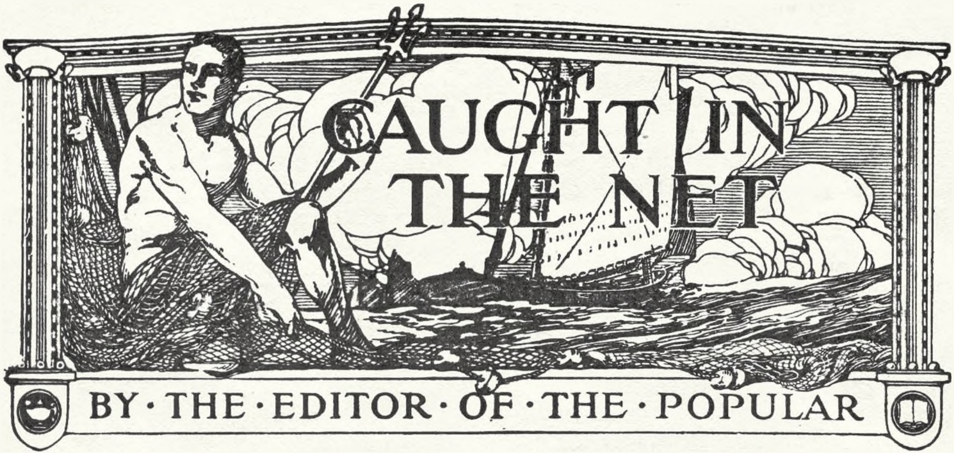
One day he encountered one of this kind on a South-bound train.

"You got to give 'em the gab," explained this young genius. "You know—persuade 'em, make 'em see the stuff as you see it; in a word, give 'em the bull."

"Watch out, young man!" exclaimed Mr. Wanamaker with his dry smile. "You're in danger of being a dead one; you may be knocked out the way the little girl said Martin Luther was."

"How was that?" asked the youngster nonplused.

"She had asked her father how Martin Luther died, and he had replied that he had forgotten. 'Well, I'll tell you,' she said. 'He was excommunicated by the bull!'"



CAUGHT IN THE NET

BY · THE · EDITOR · OF · THE · POPULAR

THE GREAT WORKMEN

GREAT workmen have a common quality that distinguishes their product, whether it be paintings, novels, tables and chairs, or far-flung empires. They are indifferent of consequences. Kipling expressed the idea better than we can hope to when he said that the ambition of all of us, if we only knew it, is to follow our private bent and:

> Paint the thing as we see it,
> For the god of Things as They Are.

All of us would really rather do that than anything else. But few of us have the courage of genius which defies circumstances and sets its hand to the work it loves with no thought of the effect that work will produce. Most of us are doomed to be pleasing. We work for a boss—not for the joy of working.

The great workman has no boss. Not even the public is his master. And this bold indifference to effect is apparent in every touch of his hand. If children were born with the skill of experience, all children would be geniuses of one sort or another, for they too work with no thought for effect. All their work is what we call play, and they do it solely because it gives them pleasure. They are not in the least concerned with pleasing anybody else when they mold mud pies. The child's mud pie has this in common with the works of Michelangelo, that both are the spontaneous expressions of an unconscious impulse to produce for the fun of producing.

Self-consciousness is the curse of most of us. We cannot work without an eye to the audience to see how the dress circle is taking it. We can never entirely rid ourselves of this preoccupation unless we are geniuses. But we can make an effort to lose ourselves in our work, at least. And we may make some progress. This much is certain. The more we think of what we are doing, and the less we think of the compensation we shall receive for our product, the pleasanter we will find our lives, and the richer our material reward is likely to be.

LUBRICATION

THIS business of running the mechanism of life is so full of contrarieties! Belts are forever slipping off the pulleys; shafts are never done with breaking; bearings have a way of gripping. It is such a complicated mechanism—and you can never learn all about it, for it changes from hour to hour and day to day. Every time we make a fresh human contact we add another set of gears to the delicate machine. And the more gears we add the greater grow the chances of disastrous friction. Getting life to run smoothly is a problem that is apt to increase in complexity the more we delve into it. Lubrication is the big difficulty—the elimination of friction.

Various people try various sorts of lubricants. Some pour flattery in the gears. Others employ duplicity. Still others resort to weak-kneed compromise to keep the cogs from grinding. These things make for smoothness but they cost high in terms of moral currency.

There is one class of folk who imagine the machine ought to run without any oil at all. In fact their method is to fill the gears with sand. These are the people who believe in blurting out the truth regardless of its pertinence. They "speak their minds" whether anybody wants to know what they think or not. Their courage may be commendable, but it might be better employed. Their lack of discretion and considerateness is deplorable.

They are the folk who always remind you that you've left your spoon in your cup. They are the glooms that inform you you look a nervous wreck. They are the demons who explain how easily you could have made two more tricks for game rubber if you hadn't been such a fool; and who spoil a good story for you with dry remarks about Noah. In more important matters they are the souls of honesty who blurt out their hearty hatred of your friends; who reveal the ages of their wives—and yours, too, if they know them; who sneer at your hobbies and decry your opinions. They will even take helpless little children into a corner when the parents' backs are turned and tell them there is no Santa Claus!

They pride themselves on their forthright candor, and, no doubt, they mean well. But they do ill. And the fact that they are punished for it by the grinding gears of their own machines helps not a whit the people they afflict.

Truth is the thing that—we are promised by the sages—is going to make us free. None the less, there are times when truth is not only too trivial to make articulate, but too impertinent to be suffered. The great truths are eternally good. But the little truths are apt to be only infernally exasperating. There are some men who resent the candid jocularity of the neighbor who twits them on their false teeth.

When it comes to running the mechanism of life, silence is one of the great lubricants. Opposed to the wisdom of the philosopher who linked truth with freedom is the common sense of the mortal who wrote: "Silence is golden."

A JOB FOR JOIE RAY

WHEN the Olympic athletes who have survived the preliminary heats of the 1,500-meter race take their marks for the final of that event in the Colombes Stadium near Paris next July, Mr. J. W. Ray of the Illinois A. C., more commonly known to followers of sport as "Chesty Joie," is likely to find himself confronted by one of the most difficult tasks ever undertaken by an American athlete—the task of winning for his country what is likely to be the blue-ribbon event of the international games from a field of the most remarkable middle-distance runners who ever have worn spiked shoes.

This 1,500-meter run is the nearest thing on the program of the Olympic Games to the time-honored "mile" of American and British track sports; a race 120 yards short of the mile. Barring accidents and the pranks of racing luck, the three fastest mile runners in the world should fight it out in the final: Ray, Paavo Nurmi of Finland, and Ernest Wide of Sweden. Another runner worth watching will be Wiriath of France.

Although he was the winner of two distance runs at the last Olympic Games, it was only recently, when three world's records were claimed for him, that the name of Paavo Nurmi became known to most Americans. At a meet in Sweden last summer he ran the mile in 4 minutes 10 4-10 seconds, beating our own Norman Taber's world's record by two seconds; and also established new marks for 1,500 meters and three miles. It is probable that these records will be accepted by the International Amateur Athletic Federation. Finishing second to Nurmi in the mile, Wide was timed in 4 minutes 13 2-10 seconds.

On paper, Nurmi's 4:10 4-10 makes him the greatest mile runner in the world, but races are not won on paper. Joie Ray can run the mile under 4:20 more consistently than any man in competition. Since 1915 he has won the American championship eight times; his fastest time, in 1919, was 4:14 2-5; his slowest, in 1915, 4:23 1-5. He holds the American indoor record, 4:14 3-5, made in 1919, and numerous other records. Above all, Ray is a competitive runner. His form is perfection; he knows just what he can do and has the ability to estimate just what his opponents can do; and he has the fighting heart.

If Ray, Nurmi and Wide meet in the 1,500 meter, the race should be the high spot of the games. Our own idea of the outcome is a new Olympic record and an American victory.

SHOOTING AT THE MOON

WHEN we, who write this, were younger, a man of still tenderer years was pointed out to us.

"See that chap over there?" we were asked.

We admitted that we saw him.

"Well, take a good look," we were advised. "That young man has great talent. He has everything that a man needs to horn into a reserved seat at the top—with one exception. He isn't practical. He aims too high. He is always shooting at the moon. And he won't get much of anywhere."

And so it turned out. The young man in question is a middle-aged mediocrity to-day, with a modest home in the suburbs and a small laboratory in the city. We say he is a mediocrity, because that is the way he would be described by most of his neighbors, who know very little about him.

To tell the truth, he is one of the greatest successes we know. His success is measured in satisfaction, however; not in dollars. He has been shooting at the moon ever since we first laid eyes on him. And time and again he has hit his mark. Things that were scientific impossibilities twenty years ago he has made familiar commonplaces.

His interest in practical miracles is not great. What engages his whole attention is the conquest of the impossible. Hitting the moon is his profession and his hobby. And more practical minds than his have taken the by-products of his experiments and turned them into vast fortunes. But he is not envious. He lives and works for the fun of it. Life is a game to him—a game in which he pits his scientific talents against the mysterious forces of nature. He gets the same satisfaction out of each advance he makes that the college football player gets out of each first down for his own team. There is little or no money in it, but there is a world of gratification for him, and of inspiration for those who watch him.

Professor Robert H. Goddard of Clark University, says he will take a shot at the moon next summer. Not metaphorically but actually. He has devised a projectile, in the nature of a skyrocket, which he hopes will propel itself by successive explosions, all the way to the earth's satellite. Even if he succeeds, no direct practical benefit to mankind is expected. And scientist and layman alike are snickering at the absurd impracticality of the undertaking. We are not snickering. Professor Goddard's shot at the moon isn't going to raise our income or reduce our taxes, but we are strong for any man who is willing to tackle the impossible—even the absurdly impossible—for the fun and the inspiration that come from the playing of a difficult game with the odds on the opposition.

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POPULAR TOPICS

IF you lift a wicked tile at Mah Jong beware of dermatitis venenata.

The pastime that made the Chinese backward has taken its place on the list of dangerous sports with games like football and polo, according to two doctors who contribute letters to our old pal *The Journal of the American Medical Association.*

The lacquer with which some tiles are covered is made from a plant that is a distant relation of poison ivy and dermatitis venenata is a disease with all the entertaining qualities of ivy poisoning.

Mah Jong players run the risk of being poisoned by handling the tiles.

Of course, you may be one of those who think that people who play Mah Jong deserve to be poisoned.

MR. HENRY FORD has purchased the little schoolhouse which he attended a half century ago and a lot of people are wondering what he will do with it.

We aren't familiar with Mr. Ford's boyhood ambitions, but if his were anything like ours it is our guess that he bought the schoolhouse just to have the fun of burning it down.

SPEAKING—as everybody seems to be, these days—of oil, 1923 was a record-breaking year for the production of the stuff that put Teapot Dome on the front pages and Mr. Denby into the political discard.

More than 725 million barrels of crude petroleum were produced in the United States during the year, an increase of .31 per cent above the production of 1922, and an increase of 192 per cent above the production of 1913. Oil men expect an even greater output this year.

Most of this oil is turned into gasoline, which in turn is converted into automobile mileage. Four million new cars were built last year, and manufacturers expect to sell five million more this year.

HERE is a man who is going to have a busy time attending veterans' reunions when he grows old. Pierre Richard, a young Frenchman born of Belgian parents at Longwy, near the Belgian border, was drafted into the Germany army during the war and had to serve for more than two years. After the war the Belgian military authorities caught him and made him perform military service for Belgium. Now the French authorities have arrested him and are incorporating him in the French army.

After he has finished his French military service he probably will emigrate to the United States and some one will invite him to enlist in the National Guard.

But we won't be that some one.

Do you, by any chance, want to live to be one hundred and twenty years old?

If you do, listen to the advice of Doctor Thomas Darlington, who used to be the head of the department of health of New York.

Do not overeat. Give your toothbrush a little exercise at least seven times a day. Eat vitamines. Keep your temper. Don't be afraid of work.

THE last three years have been the most healthy in the history of the United States and Canada. The health records of fifteen million industrial policyholders in the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company prove this. The death rate in 1923 was 8.9 per thousand; in 1922, 8.8; and in 1921, 8.7. Last year lowered death rates were reported for typhoid fever, diphtheria, scarlet fever and tuberculosis. Deaths from measles, whooping cough, influenza, pneumonia, homicides and automobile accidents were more frequent than in 1922.

A CONNECTICUT woman has divorced her husband because he spent all his evenings listening in on his radio set. Probably she felt that she was capable of doing all the talking necessary in the home, without importing any conversation via wireless.

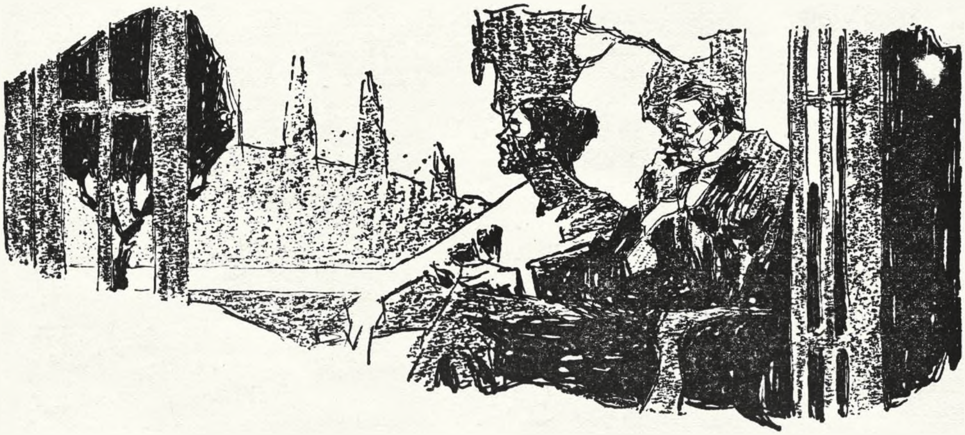
Radio has got into the English divorce courts, too. A London woman recently got a divorce because her husband broke up and burned their radio outfit after she had refused to stop playing the piano when he wanted to tune in.

A WEALTHY Long Island woman recently paid the government a hundred thousand dollars for the abandoned Sands Point lighthouse and five acres of land on the shore of Long Island Sound. She did this to assure the privacy of her estate, which adjoins the government land.

A hundred thousand dollars is a lot of money, but the purchase will enable the lady to economize.

How?

By doing lighthouse-keeping.



Dragour, the Drugmaster

By Bertram Atkey

Author of "The Barford Heirlooms," "The Entry of Dragour," Etc.

III.—THE FOLLY OF ELAINE LEAHURST.

Salaman Chayne and Kotman Dass, that extraordinary partnership of brilliant cowardice and obtuse intrepidity, deliver another victim from the coils of the Machiavellian criminal, Dragour.

MR. SALAMAN CHAYNE darted an irritated glance at his partner and cotenant of No. 10 Green Square, Mr. Kotman Dass, and rustled his newspaper very loudly indeed. Also, he shuffled his feet on the floor and gave vent to a series of short, barking, irascible coughs.

It was evident that the dapper, fiery little man was desirous of attracting, or rather distracting, the attention of the enormous Mr. Dass from the writing pad at which he was working and the imposing array of books piled before him on the table, into which he occasionally dipped; but it was equally evident that no rustling of newspapers, shufflings of feet or strainings of the human coughing machinery were likely ever to divert the attention of the mountainous man hunched at the table from the labors which so clearly enshackled his whole attention.

A klaxon motor horn, a factory steam whistle, a falling thunderbolt might have lifted the mind of the fat student from his studies, but nothing short of these attention compellers would have done so. For the large Mr. Dass possessed the faculty of fixed concentration to an extent which Lot's wife, in her saline incarnation, might have envied. At all times absent-minded, Mr. Kotman Dass was now so much more so than usual that he might be said to be practically mindless as far as Salaman Chayne, or any other ordinary incident of his everyday life, was concerned. For Mr. Dass was engaged upon the actual writing of the great work he had long projected, viz.: "Dass on the Origin and History of Life and Thought"—a comprehensive task designed by its big-brained conceiver to deal exhaustively with the inceptions, rises and falls of all known philosophies upon this planet, as well as of many scarcely known, of innumerable slightly known, and a few unknown—plus Mr. Dass' own. The work was to include a survey of all 'systems of existence' ever devised; their faults and virtues; the sources, fallacious or otherwise, from which they sprang, and the trend of thought which inspired them. It was to begin with a detailed consideration of the first faint stirrings of the "mind" of a small piece of jelly stranded on some primal shore and was to end with a brief consideration of the vibrations of some such modern mind as that which, for example, conceived the idea of the average five-reel film.

A task of spacious dimensions—and obviously one calling for strict concentration.

But Mr. Salaman Chayne was not the man to allow "The Origin of Life and Thought" to stand between him and his pressing affairs. And that morning he had received a letter dealing with a very pressing affair.

To a man of Mr. Chayne's type there was nothing attractive in the prospect of having to seek the aid of Kotman Dass. As a general rule Salaman preferred to do without anything not offered willingly, and rather than enlist reluctant assistance he normally would choose to do a thing himself.

But in the present affair that, unfortunately, was impossible. He had already churned his brains to a standstill considering the contents of the letter and he had arrived nowhere. It was necessary to get the lucid white light of Kotman Dass' brain and memory shed on the problem—if possible. But that strange person was lost utterly in his own gigantic problem.

Salaman put down his paper, removed his cigar from between his teeth, and stared at his partner, his lips moving ominously as he muttered to himself.

"I've got to be drastic—and that without throwing him into a panic," he said. "It's no use to threaten to pull off a shotgun in the bird room—I've threatened something of the kind once before and he's too cute to believe I could do it even if I wanted to. And if I give him a hiding—or keep threatening to—now he's so lost in that crazy 'Origin of Thought' research—bah!—he's quite capable of bolting off into some obscure hiding place where he can fiddle away his time on this philosophy without interference. No—I'll have to scare the life out of him some other way."

He took out and reread the letter which was so exercising his mind.

"If I could get him down to Stellingham—on the spot—by some ruse. It's only a short motor run——"

The fierce face of the little man suddenly brightened up and he moved to the telephone, rang up a big garage and ordered a touring car round at once.

Then he turned to the rapt Mr. Dass.

"Dass!" he said.

There was no reply. Intent and utterly absorbed the dusky Mr. Dass craned over his work, blind, deaf and dumb to everything outside his own tensely concentrated mind.

"Dass!" said Mr. Chayne, his voice rising.

Silence.

"DASS!" shouted the little man furiously. It was incredible that so edged and acrid a yell should fail to pierce the dreams of the thinker—but nevertheless it did.

Salaman Chayne stepped to the table and extending his arm, slightly crooked and very rigid, across the end of the table, swept it violently from one end to the other—so that books, writing pad, ink stand, notebooks, cloth, ash tray, everything, fell in a crashing cataract to the floor—leaving the startled Dass staring blankly at the shining empty expanse of mahogany which magically had usurped the place a second before occupied by a pile of the raw materials of the "Origin of Life and Thought."

"Your rudeness is intolerable, Dass," shouted Mr. Chayne. "I won't put up with it a second longer."

He kicked several big books across the room.

"I try my utmost to treat you as a white man and a gentleman, Dass—and what do I get for it? Rudeness! I treat you with the most anxious consideration"—here he slung the inkstand into the grate with his toe—"and you return—what? Insult! Who fed your birds for you this morning—simply because you were so submerged in this 'Thought' stuff that you were like a graven image? I did. And what return do you make? You ignore me when I address you civilly with the intention of telling you something for your own good. But I don't intend to stand it!"

Kotman Dass, intensely agitated, stared, wide eyed, at his partner, and his mouth moved for a few seconds without a sound issuing from it. But at last he recovered his voice.

"Oah, I beg ten thousands of apologies, my dear fellow, mister. Please excuse great concentration of every facultee on serious problem. I am veree sorree——"

"Cut," said Salaman, "all that out! I've heard it before. And listen to me."

Kotman Dass sat rigid, listening as commanded.

"I was discussing you, Dass, with a doctor at the club last night and he told me quite frankly that if you didn't take more exercise you'd shortly perish more miserably than the beasts of the field. I questioned him.

Of your brains, Dass, he spoke highly—but of your body, your organs—your interior arrangements, in fact—he spoke in terms of withering contempt. 'The man is a mass,' he said. 'He is growing two ways, outward and inward. He has all the room there is for growing outward—but for inward growth he's restricted like every one else. If he doesn't take more exercise he will keep growing inward so quickly that he'll probably grow solid and choke himself!' Is that clear to you, Dass? I speak as a friend."

It was the purest invention—but it served. Kotman Dass was a very scared and startled man. He stood up.

"I will goa instantlee for sharp walk round thee square," he said, but his partner stopped him.

"No, no, Dass. Mere walking round the square won't help you. You are coming for a motor run into the country with me. We'll have a good healthy walk on the breezy downs and then motor back to town. *That's* the kind of exercise you need to save your life. Strolling out to a seat in the square and sleeping there for an hour won't do it!" He glanced out of the window.

"Here's the car—waiting outside already. Come on—get your coat and we'll be off. Briskly, Dass, briskly."

The enormous one did his best to move briskly—with more success than one might have expected. It was very evident that the fat thinker had no desire whatever to grow "solid" and so "choke himself."

II.

By the time the car was twenty-five miles out of London the quakings of Mr. Dass had subsided to mere tremors, and Mr. Salaman Chayne proffered him a cigar.

"A good cigar can hurt no man, Kotman Dass," he said, "no matter how ill he may be."

"Noa, certainlee not, my dear fellow," agreed Kotman anxiously.

"Are you feeling better now?" continued Mr. Chayne.

"Oah yess. I was not feeling ill before—but I am feeling much better now, by all means."

"Well, well—after all, threatened men live long," said Salaman affably. "Look at me—threatened by that scoundrel Dragour—but I'm still alive, you observe."

"Oah, yess, veree much alive," chuckled Kotman Dass nervously.

"By the way, Dass, speaking of threats, what do you make of this letter?" continued Mr. Chayne, and producing one read it aloud.

It was very brief—being from a lady who, writing from Stellingham Castle, Stellingham, Sussex, announced to Mr. Chayne that she was in dire trouble and had been advised by her friend the Countess of Barford, to beg him for his help.

> " . . . I know, for she has told me, how splendidly you saved her in a terrible situation, and it is because she was so sure that you would help me that I implore your aid. My need is even greater than hers, and if I do not succeed in winning the help of such a man as you, then I am face to face with ruin. I dare not, in a letter, tell you the facts, but the enemy attacking me is the same as attacked Lady Barford. I entreat you to come."

The signature was "Elaine Leahurst."

Mr. Kotman Dass turned a little pale during the reading of the letter.

"That means thee scoundrel Dragour!" he ejaculated nervously. "I observed, *sotto voce,* to myself yesterday that there were indications evident this deadlee scoundrel was at bottom off mystery off thee village doctor found drowned in lake at Stellingham Castle, yess, indeed. There were several points——" He broke off, as another thought struck him.

"If you are proposing to take motor drive to Stellingham Castle, mister, I beg you to do me honor of letting me get out of vehicle here and walk backward to London forthwith. Stellingham Castle is very dangerous place to visit," he said urgently.

"Sit down, Dass—sit down, damn you, and don't be such a white-livered coward!" snarled Mr. Chayne. "I'll take care of your valuable carcass in the event of any danger. Now, then, what's this about a doctor found drowned at Stellingham? It's the first I've heard of it."

"Oah, it was onlee paragraph in newspapers, my dear fellow," said Kotman Dass. "I saw it."

"Yes, you see everything—when you look for it," growled Mr. Chayne. "I'll say that much for you. Hero!"

It was true. Kotman Dass glanced through about six newspapers every day, appeared to see everything in them—and forgot nothing that he saw.

"It was just reported that doctor of Stellingham village was found by the maid of millionaire's wife—Mrs. Leahurst of Stellingham—drowned in lake on thee estate. And now, I think I wish to go home. Thank you veree much for delightful motor ride which has restored my health veree great deal."

"Sit where you are, will you, Dass? And so you believe Dragour is at the bottom of it? Well! That's what Mrs. Leahurst says. What do you think Dragour is after?"

"Oah, it is impossible to say. There is no data at present available."

"Oh—not?" said the fierce-eyed Salaman, grimly. "Well there soon will be—for here we are at Stellingham!"

He eyed the uneasy Dass sternly.

"Understand me, you brainy white liver, I am going through with this and I need your brains. You're going to help me and I'll guarantee that you shan't be hurt. Not a hair of your head—not a finger. So pull yourself together and face the music—for if you don't you'll have to face me and I'm no melody when I feel rough, Dass."

Of two evils the unheroic Mr. Dass not unwisely chose the lesser. He subsided in his seat, glancing about him timorously as the car swung, snarling softly on steel studs, along the well-kept avenue leading to the castle.

"Remember anything about these people, Dass?" asked Mr. Chayne in a more amiable tone.

"Thee occupier is Mister John van Allen Leahurst, of New York. Veree rich—many lacs—no, no—millions of dollars. He lives in England because climate suits him veree much better and he purchased Stellingham Castle on occasion of his marriage with Elaine, daughter of Major General Stonor-Rolls, just prior to recent war. That is all I know."

Salaman nodded, eying his partner with reluctant admiration.

"Not bad, Dass," he grudgingly admitted. "Where did you read that?"

"In copy of *Daily Mail* eight years ago," said the fat man, sighing.

"Humph—and *I* can't remember on Thursday what I read in Tuesday's paper!" muttered Salaman. "If only some scientist could graft a gorilla's courage gland into Dass' carcass what a man he would be!"

Then the car drew up at the imposing entrance to the castle—one of the show places of Sussex.

Five minutes later Messrs. Salaman Chayne and Kotman Dass sat at a table facing a tall, graceful woman, very dark, still young—Mrs. Leahurst, wife of one of the richest Americans of the present day.

"Lady Barford said that you would come, Mr. Chayne, and I am grateful—oh, *desperately* grateful. I am in a terrible position, and I have a strange story to tell—to confess—to you," she said in the voice of one barely self-controlled.

She glanced at the huge and shapeless figure of the dark-faced Kotman Dass where he sat hunched in a great carved chair.

"Only—forgive me—Lady Barford said nothing of this gentleman and I did not want to tell my story to more than one."

Kotman Dass leaped to his feet with surprising agility.

"Assuredlee not, madam. Thatt is veree highlee reasonable and I will withdraw and go away instantlee——" he began.

"Sit down, Dass," jarred Salaman ferociously.

Kotman Dass sat down guiltily.

"Please accept my personal assurance that your story can be told before Mr. Dass as safely as to me, Mrs. Leahurst," said Salaman, adding, with an air of confession, "he is my intimate friend—and partner."

"Oh, I see. I understand," said the woman hurriedly, and, leaning to them, her elbows on the table, her white fingers interlacing, unlocking and again interlacing restlessly, ceaselessly, her great dark eyes burning in her pale beautiful face, she told them her story.

She spoke for ten minutes without interruption, and it was an unusual confession that she made.

"It may seem to you and your friend that I shall speak of the things I have done in a—oh, a cynical, a hard, even callous way. But I beg you to believe that I do not, that I never have been so and in doing those things I have suffered very much and may suffer a great deal more. Only, time is so pressing, and the danger is so urgent and close, that there is not a moment to spare. I must be quick. Somewhere, in some secret place on this great estate, there are hidden certain papers—papers that in the hands of an enemy would mean my ruin, the lifelong unhappiness of my husband and the destruction of my son's future. An enemy is seeking these papers—they were hidden in a place which he himself named, and even if he has not already possessed himself of them, at any moment an agent of his may come to take them from the hiding place. They must be found—oh, they must be found." She wrung her hands, drawing in her breath sharply.

"The papers were hidden at the order of this secret enemy. I do not even know his name, but Lady Barford told me that she thinks he is the same man as troubled her —Dragour was the name she used. He is —is—reaching out for me. The doctor—Doctor Allenmore—was ordered to ste—secure them and hide them. He must have done so—and he was so ashamed that I think he threw himself into the lake immediately after. Life could not have meant very much to him—he was dazed with drugs —or distraught for lack of them. He stole the papers, but I forgive him. Just a victim, you see." She began to tremble under the strain of some long and, to Mr. Chayne, so far inexplicable stress.

Salaman interrupted.

"Forgive me, Mrs. Leahurst. I don't understand. You are naturally a little upset and it is not quite clear what——"

But Kotman Dass broke in with an altogether unusual and rather surprising authority in his voice.

"Pardon me, dear mister, thee lady is perfectly explicit. If you please, do not confuse. There was doctor victim of Dragour who ordered him to steal and hide certain documents in place from which Dragour would fetch them. Thee doctor did thatt obediently and it made him ashamed and he destroyed himself. Thatt is summary."

Salaman was silent. Kotman Dass turned to Mrs. Leahurst, the big carved black-oak chair creaking under his colossal weight.

"If you please, tell us contents off papers," he continued in his deep and sonorous voice. "It is not just curiosity. I am veree sorree for you and wish to help you, if you please."

She stared, her white hands gripping, then drew a deep breath as she looked intently at the huge and grotesque partner of Salaman. A sudden light glowed in her eyes and curiously much of the anxiety and terror left her face.

"I see that you are trustworthy men. A woman can come to you for protection and be sure of receiving it."

"Oah, yess indeed," said Kotman Dass comfortably. "Little wild birds fly to us and are never afraid, certainlee not. If thee little birds can trust us, what has any woman to fear."

"Absolutely so," agreed Mr. Chayne, eying his partner angrily. Salaman did not enjoy the task of playing chorus to Kotman Dass.

"I will tell you the secret of the papers," said the woman. She rose and took from the mantelpiece the photograph of a boy. He was perhaps ten years old and was standing at the head of a pony, the bridle in his hand. He was evidently just about to go riding and he was laughing in the sheer delight of anticipation. A handsome little boy, with a bright face and gay, straightly gazing eyes.

"My son," said Mrs. Leahurst. "He will some day inherit and administer many millions; the enormous wealth of my husband —and he is so much richer than people dream; the colossal sums that his uncle Greame Kingsland van Allen of New York continually increases; and the huge accumulations of several relatives of my husband in America. That boy—my little boy—will some day inherit or control perhaps as much as thirty million pounds. He is my husband's—John van Allen Leahurst's—heir. But he is not my husband's child."

Her face was white as pearl, and her fingers closed tightly on the photograph.

"He is the son of a man whom I married years ago. But my husband does not know that. His son is—not here. Oh, don't misunderstand me. The boy I bore to John van Allen Leahurst is being cared for as if he were a prince—only he can never be—be—fit to control all that gigantic accumulation of wealth. Do you see? I will be quite frank—listen carefully."

She told them then the real secret—and it was as though she threw a fragment of her soul upon the table before them.

It was easy enough to understand.

She had married John van Allen Leahurst a few months after the birth of her boy, Alwyn, and the death of her first husband, the boy's father, one George Belton, a handsome scoundrel with whom she had been infatuated and whom she had married secretly —for she knew that it was hopeless to seek her parents' approval. All that had been fatally easy, for she had at that time been living in London, studying music, and living in a furnished flat with an elderly woman relative so absorbed in her own pursuits that she was worthless as a chaperon.

Had Belton proved even ordinarily decent no very serious harm would have been done and her life might have been very different. But in less than three months after the secret marriage Belton had been arrested on a serious charge of forgery. He had been convicted after a sensational trial into which several well-known names had been dragged, and sent to penal servitude. He had died of pneumonia at Dartmoor Prison a week after the birth of his son, in Brussels, whither the young wife, on the plea of visiting an old school friend, had gone.

Then the girl made her first mistake. Mortally ashamed of her folly, she had been unable to bring herself to confess to her people that she was married at all—to a man whose crime people still occasionally discussed. And so she had gone to an old nurse who adored her and whom she could trust, and placed the boy in her charge.

Soon after, she had gone home, abandoning her music study—and a little later she had met at a house party John Leahurst and had married him—without confessing or confiding in him the fact that she was a widow or telling him of the events of the crowded year before.

So far she had done no real harm—except foolishly to conceal what would have been better revealed to those who loved her. And, at first, she was fortunate. They had been happy—far happier than she had ever dreamed she could be again. Leahurst idolized her and she had come to love him with a still passion that was fraught with a ceaseless, ever-increasing gratitude.

She had borne him a son, John Greame Leahurst, shortly before he left England on a trip to the steel manufacturing districts of Germany. War broke out and Leahurst had been detained. Later he had been reported missing. No further news of him had ever come from Germany.

It was during this period that Mrs. Leahurst, alarmed at the slow development of her child, consulted Doctor Allenmore and learned what she had already come to fear—Leahurst's child, her second son, was mentally imperfect. He was now nearly four years old. She had assured herself that Allenmore by no possibility could be mistaken—not a difficult matter, for the sharp eyes and wits of a mother are sometimes more penetrating than those of a physician.

She had gone away to the seaside with her little son, taking no servants. Nearly eighteen months later she had returned to Stellingham Castle with the boy improved beyond recognition. From the pale, big-eyed, silent baby he had been he had developed into a fine, sturdy, quick-witted, inquisitive boy.

Leahurst, returning unexpectedly from a conquered Germany, where he had been secretly interned from the outbreak of war, was delighted with the child he had not seen for so long. And, with the sole exceptions of the doctor, Allenmore, whom she could not hope to deceive, and her old nurse, not a soul knew that she had changed the children—that the sturdy little heir to the Leahurst millions was not Leahurst's son but Belton's, and that Leahurst's son, his mentality that of an infant still, was in care of that old nurse of Mrs. Leahurst who had originally taken the first child.

She had been successful beyond her wildest expectations. Leahurst adored the child and he was growing up into a fine boy. She saw that nothing that could be done for the real Leahurst child was left undone, that no opportunity of a cure was neglected; that the finest medical opinions and care were secured; and that money was lavished unsparingly for the sake of the other child. But it was all fruitless.

Then, when Leahurst's heir was eight, the run of success came to an end. Like a silent arrow flying out of the dark came a demand from a nameless stranger—sent through Doctor Allenmore. She was required to pay a hundred thousand pounds to this person, who signed his demand only with the letter "Z," as his price for silence in the matter of the changed children. Blackmail—the terrible, venomous reptilian attack she had always feared.

She knew that to yield meant a lifetime of misery, and she had refused, through Allenmore.

"Z's" reply was that failing payment of a heavy portion of the money within a week complete exposure and proof would be sent to John van Allen Leahurst.

She ignored this, for she believed that the only proofs in existence were to be found in a minutely careful record of the whole affair, written by herself, and witnessed by Doctor Allenmore and the nurse, which, in view of the magnitude of the inheritance involved, she had prepared—and which never left her possession.

Nothing more had happened for some weeks. Then, one evening, when she went to dress for dinner, she found the record missing from its place—a secret drawer in her writing desk. A light spring overcoat left behind told her at once who had taken the documents—Doctor Allenmore, the only person who knew where she kept them. The coat was his—evidently he had thrown it off when setting to work on the writing desk. It was amazing that he had not been caught while forcing the drawer, but by some curious chance he must have had the room to himself for an hour or so. And once outside the room none of the servants were likely to question him, for he was often at the castle. In a pocket of the coat Mrs. Leahurst had found a brief letter from "Z"—thus:

> DOCTOR ALLENMORE: You will get the papers by June 12th, and on that day put them in the place which has already been indicated to you. On the day after you will find fresh supplies in the same place. Until the papers are in my possession no further supplies will be sent. Z.

"That was from Dragour!" said Salaman Chayne acridly.

Kotman Dass nodded his ponderous head.

"The doctor was a victim to the habit of taking a certain drug—that letter was from the scoundrel who supplied him with this particular drug—a secret drug which, ordinarily, was not procurable even by a doctor" explained Salaman.

Mrs. Leahurst nodded.

"Yes—no doubt. I have known for some time past that Doctor Allenmore keyed himself up with drugs—it began during the overwork of the war days. It was not only the army doctors who were overworked."

Kotman Dass broke in.

"Thee position is as follows—thee doctor stole papers, placed them in secret spot, then remembered thatt he had left behind his coat which would convict him of thee betrayal and, in despair, he proceeded to throw himself in lake. Thee difficulty is where to find papers again."

"Ah, yes, yes, that is the difficulty!" She leaned to him, staring desperately, with parted lips.

"They must be recovered if you are to be saved——" began Salaman.

"I? It is not for *my* sake that I care. I have suffered too much in the past ever to care about what happens to me again—it is to save my husband from the bitterness of knowing the truth—that his son is—is—unsound; that the boy he worships and believes to be his son is not so—and that I have deceived him so. Oh, for God's sake, get me back those papers!" she wailed. "It means so much to everybody—except my poor little son who is—is—who understands nothing, who never will—never can—understand anything. There is so much, so much that I haven't had time to dwell on. I have not been so bad as perhaps you think—some day you will see that, when I have time to explain. But now it is urgent—urgent—it is desperate——"

"Iff you please, be quiet, for I cannot think quite so lucidlee if I have to talk at same time," said Kotman Dass. He was staring straight before him, his eyes fixed and glassy.

Salaman signed to the half-frantic woman and she went rigid.

"Thee papers have not yet been removed from hiding place," said Kotman Dass presently.

"How d'you know that, man?" snapped Salaman.

"Thee doctor drowned himself on day of June thee thirteenth, you see. Dragour ordered papers to be deposited on day of June thee twelfth. On evening of June thee twelfth highlee probable Dragour's emissaree searched spot and found nothing. Thee doctor placed them in position June thee thirteenth—one day late. Highlee probable he could not steal them before that day. Since then thee police and company have been numerous on and about scene of tragedee. Dragour's man will wait patientlee for few days before returning to look again for papers in hiding place, certainlee. Be silent while I think."

He thought through several strained minutes, then spoke nervously.

He desired a plan showing the relative positions of the castle, the lake and the doctor's house.

That was unexpectedly simple to produce, for the doctor's house was only some fifty yards beyond the end of the lake, and the lake was five hundred yards from the castle. Mrs. Leahurst swiftly sketched the plan and the fat man beamed. He marked a spot with an X.

"If you watch thee spot at X in company of good dogs for several nights you will assuredlee capture messenger or emissary off Dragour when he comes for papers. Oah yess, indeed!" he declared with absolute confidence.

They stared.

"How d'you know that, Dass, man?" Salaman demanded.

"Simple problem onlee," said the fat man. "You see it is soa—thiss way." He took the pencil and a blank sheet of paper and redrew the plan bit by bit as he spoke.

"Thee doctor deposited papers in hiding place before he drowned himself—for they were not discovered on his body. Let us say that he hid them at X. Naturalee some distance from castle—Dragour would not desire secret place to be near thee castle." He drew an X. "Leaving X he remembered overcoat suddenlee. He knew that it would betray him as criminal—he dared not return for it. Deprived off drugs, ill perhaps, and dazed he decided to commit suicide. He threw himself into lake to drown. But in his house not veree far were swift poisons such as every doctor keeps for medicines, each in proper proportions. Why did he prefer to drown miserablee—to choke and struggle—when not far off were poisons veree swift and painless? Thatt was strange. Thee reason was because lake was nearer to him than his house, certainlee thatt must be soa."

The huge hand added to his map a wavering line to indicate the lake and a tiny square for the doctor's house.

"Thee lake was between him and his house and he used thee lake. Dragour would choose his hiding place as near thee road as possible—soa, therefore, thee hiding place is near X!" He passed his plan to Salaman. It matched perfectly with that drawn by Mrs. Leahurst.

"It is onlee necessary to watch within the circle of which X is thee center," said Kotman Dass.

"With a dog and a good man or two," added Salaman Chayne. "But how are we going to account for all this to Mr. Leahurst?"

"My husband is in London and will be there for two days," said the woman. "I can give you one man who is absolutely trustworthy—a relative."

"Good—that will be two of us."

"Two——" She looked at Mr. Dass questioningly.

"Two onlee, yess. I shall not have courage to lay out in thee dark, watching. Ten thousand apologies, Mrs. Leahurst. I have no courage at all—veree sensitive to outside influences—a veree lamentablee shocking coward, I am sorree to say to you."

She looked at him, strangely, a curious expression on her pale face. Salaman, blushing a coppery hue for his partner, explained haltingly that Mr. Dass' indifferent health reacted unfavorably on his courage.

"Noa, noa, that is onlee kind excuse. I am poor, miserable, dirtee coward, and thatt is great misery—onlee it is true—and I apologize veree much for what I cannot help. Onlee I have tried to help otherwise——"

Mrs. Leahurst went to him where he sat, as abject and abased as a dog that has done wrong, and offered him her slim hand.

"All men differ and you have done for me to-day what many a braver man could not do, and I could not be more humbly grateful to you if you were the bravest man on earth!" she said in a low voice.

Shamefacedly, Mr. Dass touched her hand, muttering something about honor—and then Salaman took charge.

III.

Late that night Mrs. Leahurst sat with Kotman Dass at a high window of the castle, the woman nervously straining her eyes across the wide, moonlit park. Somewhere out there, in the dark shadows under the belt of trees encircling the estate, the indomitable little Salaman Chayne crouched alone save for a big Irish terrier belonging to Mrs. Leahurst. The friend of whom she had spoken had proved to be away from home and Salaman was single-handed.

The two watchers were very silent. Kotman Dass gazed fixedly into the night like a man fathoms deep in thought—as he was. His mind was fast on the great work which the affair had interrupted. Otherwise he would have noted, and endeavored to calm, the strained and painful excitement of his companion.

Two hours had passed since, at the coming of darkness, they had settled down to watch and listen, and for the whole of that time she had stared out, trembling and eager, without a word. But as the clock over the distant stable chimed one, she spoke desperately, without taking her eyes from the park.

"Oh, if I have to endure this for many nights, I shall——"

She never finished, for at that moment far off down by the lake a white ray suddenly flickered with a ghostly will-o'-the-wisp radiance—and Kotman Dass emerged abruptly from his trance.

"Thee emissary—perhaps Dragour himself," he said, staring out.

A single bark reached them. The ray from the powerful torch which Mr. Chayne had taken, disappeared, reappeared, then disappeared again, and silence and darkness once more shut down.

Kotman Dass scowled, glaring out.

"What has happened?" cried the woman in a kind of hushed frenzy. "Oh, why is it so dark and still again? I heard Cormac bark—but he's quiet now. Something happened——"

The ghostly radiance of the torch wavered again on the background of shadow—the dog barked savagely, and suddenly a pinkish-red flash threw a momentary sinister glare on the dark trees, followed instantly by a sharp, echoing report, and another immediately after it.

The haunted eyes of the woman sought those of Kotman Dass.

"Pistol shots," she said. "They have shot him."

Kotman Dass was trembling.

"Oah, noa—not at all!" he replied nervously. "Probablee that is sound of Mr. Chayne's revolver, certainlee. Be patient, if you please—wait for little period more—and Mr. Chayne will arrive."

But the big face was anxious. He peered out, muttering.

"Oah, what abominablee horrible coward—itt iss soa veree shameful to sit here trembling safely—onlee I am afraid to goa out there. Alreadee Dragour has made threats to kill him and he is swift and cruel as cobra."

Ten minutes dragged by. Then abruptly Mrs. Leahurst turned away.

"I cannot endure this any longer. I am going out to learn what has happened. I must——"

Kotman Dass looked round.

"Noa—noa! Wait—listen iff you please—*look!*"

Down in the park moved the figure of a man—slowly approaching the castle. By his side moved a lesser shadow—a dog.

"Itt iss Mr. Chayne," said Kotman Dass, and lumbered heavily after Mrs. Leahurst as she went quickly from the room and down the stairs.

It was indeed the fiery Salaman—with a bullet through his forearm. He was already faint from the loss of blood, for the wound was bleeding badly, and he reeled rather than walked into the great hall, the dog, excited by the smell of blood, growling deeply by his side.

The little man stood for a second, staring at them with dulling eyes. Then he dragged a bundle of papers from his pocket and thrust them toward the woman.

"It's all right," he said. "They're just as he took them from the hollow tree—intact. I—floored him with the butt, but there were two of them and the other shot me from behind. But he carried away a bullet of mine—carried away—bleeding too fast—to chase—papers—papers more—important—more—besides—not Dragour himself—only hirelings—only——"

He grinned a livid grin and pitched forward into his partner's arms.

It was not till next morning that Mr. Chayne, his wound bound, and most of his accustomed jauntiness restored, was able to explain exactly what had happened.

Kotman Dass had indicated the whereabouts of the hidden papers with almost uncanny precision, for the spot at which Salaman had chosen to wait was not fifteen yards from the hollow tree to which, just before one o'clock, the emissary of Dragour had come.

Salaman had watched him take the papers and then without hesitation had felled him with his revolver butt, seized the papers and, on the point of securing the man himself, had been wounded by the second emissary of the drugmaster. Made aware from the gush of blood that his time of consciousness was short, Salaman had shot at the second man, evidently wounding him, for he made no further attempt to win back the papers, and then, with the dog guarding him, he had made his way back to the castle.

That was all. He spoke of it as a mere nothing—as was Salaman's way. But Mrs. Leahurst would not have it so.

"No, no—it was splendid. Oh, it was fine. How many men would have done as much for a woman who a few hours ago was a stranger? I owe you more than I can ever repay—you have saved so much for me—for us all. Some day, perhaps, in some way, I shall be able to prove my gratitude."

Salaman faced her, speaking gently.

"If you feel that you owe us anything, Mrs. Leahurst, repay us by accepting a word of advice. Dragour is beaten off—for the present. He has lost the papers, but he will not rest satisfied with this defeat. It is only temporary—he will try again for this big plunder, from another angle. You can defeat him once and for all in only one way—and that is by going to your husband and telling him everything. It will have to be that sooner or later. Too many people know your secret—and that unhappy doctor—Allenmore—must have told Dragour everything."

She looked at him oddly. Very pale still, with tragic eyes, she was like a woman utterly unstrung, worn out.

"Oh, I could not—I cannot—I——" She turned to Kotman Dass suddenly.

"Must I? What do you advise? Tell me. Do you, too, advise that?"

The big, unwieldy man looked at her intently, and spoke very seriously.

"Permit thatt I speak franklee, lady. I say to you that it iss your onlee one hope of ever any happiness thatt you go to your husband and tell him whole story—thee whole truth and ask him please to forgive you. To say to him how sorree you have ever been—and tell him how little entanglement grew to great shackles. If you please, I wish to say to you thatt to hide longer thiss tragic secret is same thing as to cast yourself down into deep pit, veree dark and full of snares and many dangers and alarms. I, Kotman Dass, am onlee miserable coward in my body, but itt has been ordained thatt my wits should be perhaps different from those off some men and it is given to me at some times thatt I see things perhaps little clearer than other men."

His voice deepened oddly, became more sonorous.

"Goa to your husband, lady, saying the whole truth, thatt you are in coil of perilous serpent who seeks to enlap you with yet more coils to your destruction and, sorrowfully, humbly, ask him to lift you out from thee coil and to protect you from other coils—and tell him thee whole truth. Thatt is the great shield and weapon for all people in trouble—at all times—just onlee to tell thee truth. I have studied veree much all my life long and yet I have not found—and probably may not ever find—greater pearl of wisdom than thiss—that lies are onlee shield of paper but thee truth is a shield of fine steel."

She stared for a moment, wondering, and slowly a light dawned in her eyes of torment.

"Oh, but I have been so blind—so blind!" she cried strangely, dropped suddenly to a couch and buried her face in her hands, turning away.

"You've set her crying," snarled Salaman, whispering furiously.

Kotman Dass looked at him oddly.

"Oah, noa," he said. "I have onlee set her praying. She will do as I have advised—and I have sure instinct thatt she will be forgiven. So let us goa now."

And, together, they went out to the car awaiting them.

Another story of this series in the next number.

UNMASKED

THERE is a congressman in Washington who has two sons nearly grown, one of them strong as an ox and as big as his hefty father, the other of slighter build and somewhat inclined to wear an air of bored distinction and cynical lassitude, a habit which peeves the lawmaker considerably.

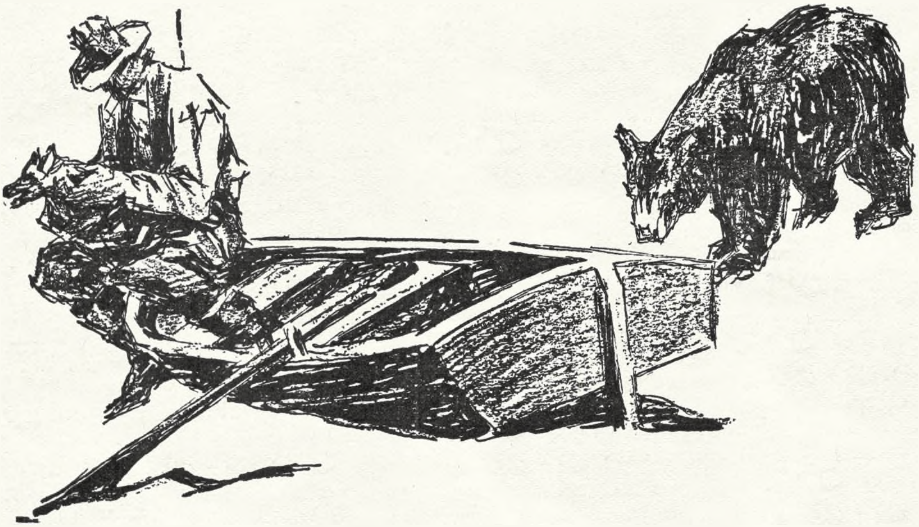
The three of them were at dinner one evening when the congressman mentioned the name of a well-known prize-fight referee. The smaller son, who had been looking more bored than usual, chirped up at that and remarked:

"That fellow's all right. Square as they come."

"What do you know about him?" demanded the bigger brother, full of sarcasm and scorn.

"I know this much," said the other: "he gave me slightly the best of everything one night."

"Gave *you? You?*" shouted the father. "Sure," said the smaller one coolly. "I fight under the name of Nally, and he gave me a mighty slow count when I was down."



Blue, of the Arctic

By Kenneth Gilbert

Author of "The Saga of Silver King," "The King of the Canon," Etc.

The arctic fox defeats an enemy and makes a friend.

THE ancestral fox den which was Blue's home for the first six weeks of his existence opened on a sunny slope, and all about the mouth was delightfully warm, deep sand. It had been dug on a knoll near one end of the rugged Alaskan islands—an island so large that Garrett, owner of the fur farm, had not known for years just how many arctic foxes he possessed. They ran wild and free until such times as he captured breeding pairs to be sold to other fox farmers in the States. Despite these regular shipments, and likewise there were many pelts taken, the shy little blue animals seemed just as numerous as ever. They knew him by sight, but never did the elders accept him as a friend. He typified Man—and Man was the greatest enemy. Although the youngsters at first were inclined to regard him without fear, they quickly assimilated the warnings of the others—the man, being a man, was not to be trusted.

By night they skulked forth from their burrows and ate the food he had left for them; yet they relied upon him only when the beach failed to supply stranded fish, crabs and other crustaceans. They were as untamed as the limits of the big island permitted. If they approached his house it was only after dark, and for the purpose of joyously making away with whatever edibles they could get at. Yet Garrett, by inclination a student of wild things, loved them despite their steadfast refusal to accept his overtures. Being lonely and without companionship save that offered by an ancient Thlinget Indian, a taciturn man who did his work well with a minimum of conversation, Garrett sought to bestow his affections on Muskwa, a young brown bear which had been presented to him by the trader who visited Norton Sound every summer.

Muskwa had been kept mild tempered on a diet of canned milk and mush, but with the coming of summer, having attained full growth, he exhibited symptoms of "going bad." Particularly did he hate old George, the Thlinget. It may have been that the Indian, about whom lingered a suggestion of stale wood smoke which all the soap and water on earth would not have effaced, symbolized a long-recognized, hereditary enmity. In any event, between the two there smoldered undying feud.

Every race or breed has its social stratums, and Blue belonged to an aristocracy of arctic foxes. Chena and Kobuk, his mother and father, were a beautiful pair of the mighty Koyokuk strain, untainted descendants of the finest founders of the colony. The prowess and wisdom of the big Kobuk made him a leader of vulpine nobility. No more implacable foe of Man was to be found on the island; although he was too wise to permit this hatred to go beyond the bounds of prudence. Chena was equally shy and furtive, and communicated her fears to her offspring. Garrett, who often watched the inhabitants of this particular den, through field glasses from his house half a mile distant, would smile as he descried the pups playing outside, while mother or father kept alert watch. He regarded the dog fox Kobuk and the vixen Chena as the most valuable pair on the island—and the wildest.

Into this atmosphere of man fear and hate was born Blue, on a day in May when the rock crannies along the shore were alive with sea parrots, cormorants and gulls, at the end of their flight to the northern breeding grounds.

His size and robust spirit distinguished him from his brother and sister; never had Chena in her long experience mothered such a magnificent specimen of the breed. From the start Kobuk singled him out for special attention; here was a dog fox that would be worthy the name. By the time he was six weeks old Blue's aggressiveness, his bulk, and the wonderful hue of his coat even drew the eyes of Garrett. Once the man walked up to the den, hopeful that he might fondle the pups; but when the old ones saw him coming they drove their young into the burrow. An hour later, through his glasses, Garrett saw the pups outside again, frolicking in the warm sand.

But the spirit of Blue, an adventurous bent that even outstripped his remarkable growth, soon became a source of worry to the dog fox and his mate. Only by dint of the severest discipline did they keep him at the den, although his brother and sister were tractable enough. Blue was yet too young, the parents decided, to venture far from the protection of home. Yet this restraint was terribly irksome to him; the world was too lovely and mysterious a place to remain unexplored. There were many tempting places to be investigated—the caches of other foxes, and, most alluring of all, the tempting, fishy odor from the sea, a mile away. The beach drew him like a magnet.

Once Kobuk caught his son headed toward the shingle where the greenish-gray Northern waters beat incessantly with a hollow booming sound. Blue fled for home with shrill cries of alarm, his father's sharp fangs clashing savagely at his heels. Blue did not understand what the dog fox did; that along the rocky cliffs, fierce sea eagles had their nests and watch towers, and by long experience relished young foxes.

But one day a week later, with his father away on a foraging trip and his mother dozing within the burrow, Blue tried again. Stealthily he slunk away from the den, and when he reached the security of the brush he broke into a run. He would not be satisfied until he had solved the mystery of that monotonous, rolling noise that sounded so much like thunder, and learned what it was that made the delightful, fishy smell—a scent which by instinct passed down to him from countless generations, suggested food.

Like a slaty shadow he slipped through the brush, turning aside from time to time as he encountered strange foxes who regarded him with thinly veiled hostility. He was careful, however, not to encroach too closely upon these feudal duchies and kingdoms, intuitively sensing that invasion would be met by tooth and claw. At last he came out at the lip of a cliff, some twenty feet above the water, and against whose base the high tide rose and fell.

For a moment he stood there, drawing in deep lungfuls of the salt-tanged breeze with its hint of good things. Suddenly he shrank, and stared upward, as a tremendous, whistling sound filled the air.

Garrett, seated in a skiff and "jigging" for rock cod off the point, had for nearly twenty minutes been watching the tactics of a huge black sea eagle that apparently had its nest in one of the dead stubs just back of the stony shelf. Three times the man saw the eagle launch itself from its watch tower and drop like a bullet to the water just as a glistening salmon turned on its side at the surface and started lazily again for the bottom. From where the bird sat, the movements of the fish could be seen clearly, yet always the dark fisherman failed—he would be the tiniest fraction of a second too late.

But persistence triumphed; he made a "strike." A giant king salmon's black back showed at the surface, and the eagle's sharp pincers of bone instantly set themselves in the fish. With an astonished flirt of his tail the king "sounded."

Ordinarily, the powerful wings of the bird would have enabled him to lift the fish clear of the water the moment he transfixed his prey, but this was no ordinary salmon. He weighed fifty pounds if he weighed an ounce, Garrett guessed.

There was a smother of foam and the eagle went under. But his strength almost matched that of the fish, and the next instant he had reappeared, still gripping his catch.

For a distance of fifteen feet he flapped along the surface, dragging the fish, both floundering wildly. Yet the frantic king had just begun to fight. With a mighty heave and lunge he "sounded" again, and with him went the eagle.

The water swirled, and then the eagle bobbed up, empty taloned.

"Bit off more than he could chew," reflected Garrett, with a chuckle.

Now, to his apparent alarm, the eagle discovered that his wings, water soaked, had lost much of their lifting power. Highly indignant, he flapped toward shore, striving his utmost to rise. He rested a moment, then tried again, skittering the surface with tiny wavelets with his battering strokes.

Inch by inch he lifted himself, like a sluggish seaplane, and he put every ounce of his strength into the effort. Higher and higher he rose, and the terrific beating of his wings began to free them of water. Now his body was clear—now his feet. Straight as an arrow's flight he climbed toward his watch tower.

Reaching it, he slumped there, draggled and with wings drooping. Hardly had the eagle settled himself when Garrett saw a young fox come out of the brush at a point below and to one side of where the bird sat. Something about the size and color of the animal told the man that this was the royal son of Kobuk and Chena, to whom he had given the name of Blue.

Garrett yelled lustily as he saw the eagle drop from his perch like a plummet. Only the fact that the bird was almost exhausted saved Blue from instant death. The swoop and strike were just a bit slow, leaden; and this gave the young fox an opportunity to shrink aside at the warning whistle of the killer's wings. As Blue whirled, the eagle, with a baffled scream, whizzed over the spot where the fox had been.

Banking sharply, the eagle came after Blue with a yelp. Quick though the bird was, Blue was quicker. In that fleeting instant he knew that he could never make the screening brush. He doubled about and raced back toward the edge of the cliff, the eagle after him.

Back and forth they shuttled, and every moment, it seemed, was Blue's last. Garrett, angered by the sight of a valuable fox about to feed the appetite of the savage preyer, and cursing the fact that he had no gun, slashed his anchor rope and began rowing for shore, certain, however, that he would be too late. Before he had gone twenty yards the chase reached its breathless climax.

His heart pounding with the greatest terror he had ever known, Blue dodged this way and that, but always the extended talons and gaping beak of the big eagle were just behind or over him. He shot for the lip of the cliff, hoping to confuse the bird so that he could whirl and scuttle for the brush. At the brink of the drop, his tiny legs stiffened for the shock and swerve, but to his horror he found himself slipping. His claws scratched frantically on the hard rock; then with a *yak-yak* of fear he went over in a whirling dive for the water.

Under he went, with a splash, at the precise moment that the eagle's scythelike beak snapped viciously just over him, and the fearful talons clutched convulsively. Then the bird, startled by the sight of the man but a few feet away, wheeled off with a cry of rage and disappointment.

A few moments later the baby fox, swimming courageously, felt himself seized back of the ears; and with a yap of fear, although his stout little heart was still unconquered, he sought to twist and bite the thing that had him. But he was lifted from the water, and rolled helplessly in some kind of garment that smelled strongly of Man, until only his sharp little nose and beady eyes showed. Then the creature that had caught him made queer sounds which seemed to have the ring of mirth rather than menace.

"Wanted to meet you for a long time, buddy!" chuckled Garrett. "Gosh, but you're some pup!" The coat in which Blue was wrapped tightly vibrated under the rapid beating of his heart, and his widened eyes regarded the man intently.

"How'd you like to be my pal, Blue?" went on the man, as he took up the oars and headed the boat for home. It was his fashion since coming to this lonely spot to address any living thing as though it could understand. "Muskwa's got to go one of these days, or he'll murder old George, sure." Blue continued to stare unblinkingly.

They reached the beach below the house, and Garrett pulled up the boat, tied it, and started up the trail. Then he stopped, for he saw Muskwa shuffling slowly toward him. For a moment Garrett studied the bear, looked down at Blue; then turned and retraced his steps to the boat. He took out one of the oars, and sat down on the bow to wait.

Muskwa, head down, came on slowly, and when he was within ten feet of the man he topped with a questioning *"Whuff!"* Then, growling a little, he advanced a pace, stopped again and sniffed; his reddened eyes clouded in sudden anger. His nose had recorded the fox smell!

"Steady, Muskwa!" called Garrett warningly, though his grip tightened on the oar. But the bear seemingly did not hear the voice of its master.

He came forward muttering, rolling his head in a strange fashion, and Garrett's heart tightened as he recognized the warning sign of the aroused plantigrade. It may have been mere jealousy of the young fox he knew the man had, or it may have been the lifelong hatred of bear for fox that was springing to the surface, for the next instant he reared and delivered a lightninglike, smashing blow at the head of the little captive peering from beneath Garrett's arm.

Only by virtue of the fact that the man had half expected the move was he able to cope with it. He jumped back just in time to save Blue, dropped the bundled fox into the boat, and swung with the oar, the blow catching the bear on the head, staggering him.

The battle-roar of the terrible fighter of the North filled the air. Garrett swung again, and with the greatest luck struck the bear's jaw, half dazing him. The man had a confused vision of standing almost toe to toe with the brute, and striking, striking, while the now thoroughly enraged Muskwa advanced, paws fending off blows like a skilled boxer. Out of the tail of his eye Garrett saw the Indian coming, waving an ax, and shouting.

Bravely the Thlinget went into the fray. He swung mightily at Muskwa's head, but a sweep of the latter's paw deflected the blow. Nevertheless, the flat of the ax struck him under the ear, and with a wimper of pain he decided that the odds against him had suddenly become too great. Dropping to four feet, he loped up the beach, with the raging Thlinget in hot pursuit.

"Don't!" yelled Garrett, as the old Indian swung the ax aloft once more. "He's had enough."

With a grunt, the native let the weapon fall harmlessly, and Muskwa vanished among the trees. Then George, the taciturn, drew heavily upon a month's ration of words:

"White man damfool. Muskwa kill him some day."

So it was that Blue, son of Kobuk and Chena, and taught from birth to shun Man, came unwillingly to Man's domicile, and remained to worship. Within a few hours Garrett had the confidence of the young fox; within a few days his love. Of Muskwa they saw nothing. Garrett, who had been really fond of the bear, despite the latter's growing ill temper, promised himself that he would search out his sulky pet and make amends. Yet he hesitated at the thought of Blue. If he brought Muskwa home the bear would certainly kill the young fox at the first opportunity. Likewise, the faithful George had succinctly intimated that when Muskwa came back Garrett would do well to hire a new helper.

Within a week Blue had the run of the place. Seemingly he had forgotten the den on the knoll. The man filled his mind's eye to the exclusion of father, mother, brother and sister. Garrett began teaching his pet such tricks as playing dead, rolling over and sitting up. Blue's capacity for learning seemed limitless.

But although Blue apparently had forgotten his blood relations, they quickly showed they had not forgotten him. Frequently Garrett observed the dog fox and the vixen stealthily approaching the house where they had discovered their errant son to be. They contented themselves with sitting sorrowfully at the edge of the woods; doubtless planning ways to rescue their offspring from the cruel captivity. Three weeks after Blue had been brought there, Garrett determined to test his loyalty.

He carried him fifty yards from the house and put him down. Then he went inside and closed the door, watching through a window. Kobuk and Chena, half minded to flee, nevertheless stood fascinated at sight of their son. The man's actions seemed to hint of a trick, yet as Garrett reëntered the house, they decided to wait, and squatted flat like dogs.

For a minute Blue stood in indecision, sniffing. Then he looked toward the house. He had decided for Garrett. As Blue started back the man laughed in sudden triumph. But the laugh froze on his lips.

For Kobuk was running swiftly toward his son. Blue heard him coming, and whirled, lips wrinkling in a snarl. Seemingly stunned at this unfilial exhibition, Kobuk hesitated; then came on. He was trying to tell Blue something, warn him; yet the words he used fell on deaf ears. Determined at last to gain the safety of the house, Blue spun about and fled.

But he was not to escape. In two long leaps Kobuk was upon him, had seized him by the loose skin of his neck, and was fleeing madly for the woods, his squirming, squalling son dangling from his jaws.

Garrett was out of the house, yelling, and racing at top speed after them. Though the dog fox could have distanced the man with ease if unencumbered, there was now the handicap of Blue. The man was gaining on him. Now he was but a few yards behind, and the pounding of his feet came nearer. Another terrifying yell, and Kobuk felt that the man almost had him by the tail. It was too much for the old fox's nerves. Dropping the protesting Blue, he vanished hurriedly in the brush.

Garrett picked up his somewhat bedraggled pet, and talked to him as he would to a child.

"Didn't play fair, Blue," he muttered. "Maybe you do belong to 'em, but you'd rather stay with me. I won't let 'em kidnap you."

As though he understood every word, Blue sought to lick his master's face.

There came a windy, squally night two weeks later, when the waves pounded thunderously on the beach before the house, driving such spoils of the sea as dead fish and crabs far up on land, and making deep pools of water in the depressions. When the tide went out the beach would have delighted the heart of any fox. With the clearing of the weather, Garrett, followed by Blue, struck off along the sand, having learned that this was the most effective way to take a census of his furred wards; for most of them would now be hunting along the shore. At a rocky point, beyond which was a pool of flood water sure to entice foxes in search of crabs, Garrett hid himself, and waited.

They came, by the dozens, by the hundreds, and the man fell to computing the aggregate worth of the blue legion. Many thousands of dollars. They represented all ages, from pups just large enough to travel with their parents, to magnificent beasts whose pelts were fit to grace the necks of queens.

Suddenly Garrett missed Blue. Then he saw him, a hundred yards away, down there among the others. The sight of that tremendous gathering was too much for the youngster's curiosity; he wanted to mix with them. But Garrett, starting to his feet, had seen something more.

From out of that throng Kobuk had appeared like magic, and, singling out his truant son, was racing toward him with a businesslike deadliness of purpose. Blue saw him coming, and with a yap of fright turned to flee, but in a second the big dog fox had him by the neck.

Then he was dragging him toward the pool, as though he had long planned what he was about to do. Wading out until the water was breast deep, he thrust the wriggling youngster under and held him there with forepaws.

For a moment Garrett was inclined to laugh, thinking that Kobuk was merely punishing his son. But the seconds ticked on, and still Blue was under water; and to the man, now racing toward the spot, there flashed the truth. Kobuk was drowning his son rather than allow the man to have him! Why he killed in this fashion, instead of murdering him outright with a snap of his strong jaws, was something that only Kobuk knew.

Had Garrett been armed, Kobuk would have died on the spot. Pausing in his run only to catch up a stone and hurl it, he raced on. At the splash of the missile, Kobuk whirled about and saw him. With a bound, the dog fox was out of the water, and fleeing; while Blue, struggling weakly, was on the surface, trying to swim.

Plunging in, Garrett caught up his pet, hugging him close, and swearing in a strangely soft voice as he waded ashore. But Blue was more frightened than injured. He wriggled contentedly in Garrett's arms, trying to lick the man's face.

Just why Garrett whirled about then, he does not know to this day; it may have been an intuitive sixth sense, for he had heard no warning sound. Nevertheless he turned abruptly to see the advancing Muskwa, now scarcely forty feet away.

The presence of all the foxes, giving him an opportunity to feed fat an ancient grudge against the tribe, may have drawn the bear to the spot; their flight following the man's appearance may have angered him; the sight of his one-time master cuddling the hated Blue may have fanned the murder spark in his brain. In any event, with a bellowing roar he charged.

Even then Garrett saw that Muskwa's reddened eyes were fixed not upon him but upon Blue. Yet knowing this, Garrett refused to drop Blue to save his own life. Holding the little fox with one hand, he seized a stone and threw it with all his strength straight at the oncoming beast.

It caught Muskwa in the chest, and he grunted, but came on. As Garrett stooped for another missile, Blue wriggled from his grasp.

Then and there the son of Kobuk and Chena showed the fighting heart of his kind—a race called cowardly. Let what he did be pronounced the foolhardiness of the young. In him there burned the age-old hatred of fox for bear—and Muskwa had tried to kill him. Whatever these reasons, Blue, with an infantile bark, dashed toward the charging bear.

Garrett hurled the stone just as Muskwa swerved to get at Blue. To this day the man swears that the apparent show of courage in the little fox saved his, Garrett's, life—distracted the attention of Muskwa for a precious three seconds—for a moment later, when the enraged brute recovered himself, and reared menacingly over the man, the high-power rifle of the ancient Thlinget, who was as sparing of ammunition as he was of words, cracked once.

Old George, running up, damned himself to two months of silence by making one of the longest speeches of his life:

"I see Muskwa tracks 'long shore yestiddy. I folla you. I guess I come right time."

But Garrett had caught up the little blue fox who was yapping ferociously at the dark, immobile bulk of his enemy.

"Blue," he whispered, "I guess you're mine now for keeps!"

More stories by Mr. Gilbert will be published in future issues.

❧

"EVERY DAY IN——"

MR. ELIHU ROOT is about the last person we know of likely to take up the catch words of the passing moment. But in a speech delivered in Washington last winter he almost committed a Coueism.

Mr. Root was addressing the National Civic Federation. "We are learning something," he said, "every day in every——"

Chuckles from the audience.

But Mr. Root was equal to the occasion. "——in every respect," he concluded.

❧

AN UNEXPECTED TRIBUTE

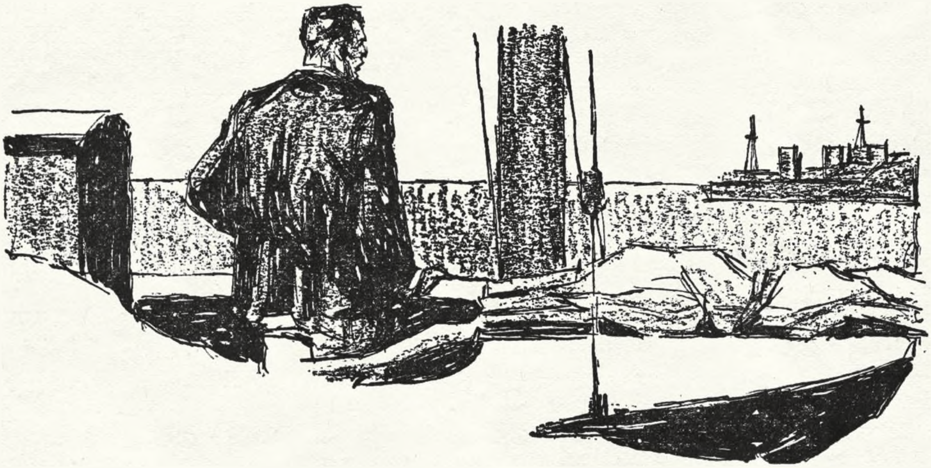
THE Reverend John Wesley Hill, whose campaign speeches helped to make William H. Taft president, was walking down the street in Brooklyn one afternoon when he saw a dozen boys crowded around a dreary-looking pup.

"What are you doing, my little men?" he inquired paternally.

"Swappin' lies," piped up an urchin. "The feller wot tells the bigges' lie gits the pup."

"How shocking!" Mr. Hill rebuked them. "Why, when I was your age, I wouldn't have told an untruth for the world, much less a dog."

"You win, mister," said the boy regretfully. "The pup's yours."



Gold and the Girl

By H. de Vere Stacpoole

Author of "Ocean Tramps," "The Garden of God," Etc.

(A Four-Part Story—Part IV.)

CHAPTER XXXIII.

APPLEJOHN.

THEY rise early in Havana. At half past eight Sheila and Dicky had finished breakfast and were out looking at the shops; the fruit shops showing in their cool and dark interiors banana bunches like great candelabra, custard apples—*pommes cannelles*—christophines, monkey oranges and limes green and yellow; egg plants and pommes d'Haiti; the fish shops with their great blocks of ice and *such* fish, fresh in from the sea; perroquets black and red; sardines like mounds of silver; tunny, and pink-and-orange-tinted souris—all colors like the jeweled fish of the "Arabian Nights," all shapes, all sizes. They inspected the cathedral and opera house, lost their way and found themselves at the railway station of the Eastern Line. Here they went in to inquire their way back to the British consulate, and, as they were coming out again, almost ran into the arms of Captain Shortt.

Shortt looked in a flurry and was carrying an attaché case hastily packed, to judge from the fact that part of a sock was exuding.

He was about to pass them when, suddenly putting himself in irons, so to speak, he came up all standing, dropped the attaché case and took a paper from his pocket.

"Here," said Shortt, "what do you make of this? Do *you* know anything of this; have you heard from him?" He handed the paper to Dicky. It was a telegram.

"Come at once to Santiago by rail. Meet you at the station. Urgent. Corder. Pinos."

"Where's Santiago?" asked Dicky, handing the thing to Sheila, who read it.

"Other end of the island, hundreds of miles. But what I want to know is what he's doing there, and what mess he's got into and why did he send the message from Pinos? Why, he left in the *Tennessee* for N'York and unless he left her at Key West and came back in some other boat, how did he get to Pinos? It's above here, first station out. He must have been through Havana. What's the sense of it?"

"I don't know," said Dicky. "I've heard nothing from him, and what's more I don't want to. You'd better go and see him. It won't take you long."

"Long!" cried the captain, "it's days, what with these island railways and the lazy scamps that run them." He put the telegram back in his pocket, furiously caught up his baggage and bolted into the station.

"Nice civil sort of chap," said Dicky. "Kindly soul. But I say, what *can* have happened to James?"

"I don't know," said Sheila. "He's the sort of person that anything might happen to—he got on to the wrong boat perhaps."

"Well, he's got into trouble, anyhow," said Dicky, "or else why should he be wiring for Shortt? He can't be in prison, else he wouldn't say he'd meet Shortt at the railway station. What on earth can he have been doing?"

"I don't know—but there's one thing I *do* know. Captain Shortt suspects that we have something to do with the business—I could tell it by his manner. He thinks maybe we are shady characters. Dicky, isn't it horrid the way this gold seems to cast suspicion around it on every one who has anything to do with it? We suspected Morgan, who seems all right, and Monsieur Bompard. Captain Shortt suspects us—even though he knows nothing of the gold. It's just as if the thing had some wicked power—and not only that, it began by killing two men——"

"Don't," said Dicky. "Let's forget all that and keep clear of superstition about it. We have trouble enough without imagining things. It's just as if we had an elephant we had to keep hidden and to sell without any one putting in a claim for it. Well, we'll do it or die. Here's the consulate."

They went in.

The consul was away on holiday. His substitute received them, a thin young man with sandy hair, horn spectacles; a Canadian with an American accent and his ear to a telephone.

He received them out of the corner of his eye and without removing the instrument from his ear asked them to be seated, finished his conversation and then wheeled round in his seat.

"I've come to see you——" said Dicky. Then he paused. He did not know how to begin.

"Just to ask a question," said Sheila.

"Yes, that's really it, but before I begin, I take it that anything I say will be considered as a matter of the very strictest confidence?"

"Yes," said the substitute—Applejohn was his name. "You can confide what you want as long as it's not contraband, murder or petty larceny. Have a cigarette?"

"Thanks. No, it's just a question of buried treasure."

"Oh, my," said Applejohn. "Well, I'm listening."

"It's just this. If I knew where treasure was buried, let's say on the coast of Cuba, could I get a permit to dig for it?"

"Well, I shouldn't wonder," said Applejohn.

"You don't know for certain?"

"The only certain thing I know about buried treasure is that the chaps who go digging for it never bother about permits for there aren't any chaps that go. It's a frost. It used to be one of the industries here, but it's bust. It's like the Spanish-prisoner business—even the suckers have dropped off, and if you offered any man in Havana streets the finest treasure chart stained with blood and all for two pesetas, he'd turn you down—wouldn't look at it, not if you had black whiskers and rings in your ears. If any one has been trying to sell you stock in this gamble, don't buy; let them keep it. There never was such a thing and never will be and the proof is the men who've been stung. Now I'll prove it to you. I'm going to ring up Bostock, the sugar man. He's the archbishop of all speculators, Yankee, knows every possibility in everything and what he refuses isn't good enough for you to touch."

He took the phone and rang up Bostock.

"Are you there? It's me, Applejohn, speaking. Yes, quite well, thanks. See here. I've just heard of a big thing and believe it's real; treasure buried right on the coast. Which coast? This coast, Cuba. Are you there—are you there?"

Applejohn hung up the receiver. "He's rung me off," said Applejohn. "Now you see how buried treasure stands in Havana."

"Well, it's this way," said Dicky. "No one has been trying to sell us a location. The fact is, I got one in England from an old sailor and I believe the thing is all right, and that if we dig we'll find the stuff. What I've really come to ask you is whether, suppose I get a permit to dig and the stuff's there and I bring it to Havana, the authorities would try to nab it—or put up a lot of difficulties."

"That I can't tell you," said Applejohn, "simply because I don't know. But this I *can* tell you, that if you brought a treasure ship into Havana harbor with real Simonpure treasure on board, in one week, or maybe two, the streets of Havana wouldn't be passable."

"How?"

"With the crowd. Every root hog from Key West to Klondike would be on the job. Your name would be in every paper in the world. No. I should think the authorities oughtn't to put up any difficulties. They'd more likely give you a medal, for it would be the making of Cuba."

"I hadn't thought of that," said Dicky.

He hadn't. It was the bother with this expedition devised so hastily, rushed through in such a hurry, that new and unthought-of things were always turning up barriers or pitfalls right in their course.

Dicky had never thought of the tremendous publicity the bringing of the gold openly to Havana would give them. James had never thought of it, nor had Sheila. It had seemed to them quite simple, once the permit was obtained, to bring the gold in, take it to a bank and deposit it. They had forgotten publicity and the fact that never yet has buried treasure been discovered except in a story book, and the use the press would make of this fact. Their photographs would be in every paper, and photographs of the *Baltrum,* and the story of her voyage. Hildersditch would read of it, so would London and Paris and Berlin, for the story would be of universal interest. Then what questions might not arise? In the blaze of this fearful limelight how would they stand before an inquiring world?

If the MacAdam crowd existed in reality as well as in their imaginations, would they take their defeat in silence? One question anonymously put to the British government —what might it not lead to?

They had never thought of all this; indeed, now, seated in the presence of the wise and wily Applejohn, it was only beginning to dawn on Dicky.

"Of course," said Applejohn, "if you've got some location you're set on exploring, I could go into the matter for you and see about the concession business, but I frankly tell you, you will be wasting your time—and money."

"Thanks," said Dicky. "I'll think over it."

Then they said good-by and departed.

Out in the street he explained to Sheila what was in his mind. It was not difficult, for the fact had begun to dawn on her too.

"It's just this," said Dicky. "We can't make the thing public like that because, as a matter of fact, the thing is crooked. We're crooks, Sheila. I know there's not a respectable man in London who would not have gone into the business just as we did, there's not a man who would really blame us in his heart for doing what we have done. All the same, we are outside the law. We *ought* to have gone to the Board of Trade and told them, and had the stuff taken away from us, but we couldn't. No man could. Even old Forsythe—and he's the law itself —couldn't. He gave us the tip about burying it and digging it up again, and if he hadn't been tied to his rotten old business he'd have been with us. The Archbishop of Canterbury himself couldn't have resisted it. The stuff belonged to no one, it fell into our hands—no man could have thrown it away. Still, there you are—we're crooks and we'll have to go on being crooks, and what we want is some one to help us who is in our way of business; a fence, some rich man with ways and means of disposing of the stuff. I wonder would that man Bostock be any good? We'd have to tell him the whole story."

Sheila said nothing for a moment. The fact that she was called a crook did not worry her in the least. They say women have no morals in this way. Sheila had plenty of morals, but she had common sense; the gold that belonged to chance, that had been hidden and camouflaged by unknown people, that had been put into their hands by chance, was a gift impossible to throw away without rupturing every instinct that has made man an adventurous, battling and acquisitive creature. Angels might have gone to the Board of Trade and handed over to authority what luck had bestowed and what selfishness sprang to guard and keep. Men couldn't. If the law was against them, it couldn't be helped. They must risk it.

Then she spoke.

"We don't know anything about this Mr. Bostock. We only know that, considering the way he is set against treasure digging, we would have to tell him the whole story in every detail—put ourselves completely in his hands."

"That's true."

"I think what you were saying about crooks and all that is nonsense. The law mightn't approve of what we have done, but I'm sure there are plenty of quite honest men who would help us if we knew where to find them. Why not try Monsieur Bompard? He knows every one here and I'm sure he's to be trusted—anyhow, I'd trust him, though I distrusted him once."

"Bompard?" said Dicky meditatively.

"Yes, he's good—I feel it—and he's clever too, and I think he likes us."

"Well, we might do worse. Anyhow, it would be doing something."

"You must tell him everything. It's a risk, but I don't think it's much of a risk."

"We've got to take risks," said Dicky. "The whole thing has been one long risk. I think you're right. Let's get done with the thing. What's the time? Half past eleven. Well, he'll be at the hotel most likely, déjeuner is at twelve."

They turned their steps to the hotel.

As they took their way along the Calle del Sol, Sheila, who had been silent for a moment, suddenly spoke.

"I don't know why it is," said she, "but I'm uneasy about James—I mean about that telegram. Why has James gone to Santiago. Why has he sent for Captain Shortt? Why has he not sent us a word? He said in his letter he was going to New York. I don't know, but I feel uneasy."

"Maybe there'll be a message from him at the hotel," said Dicky.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE REAL BOMPARD.

But there was no message, no telegram on the board, or word from the attendants.

Déjeuner was served in the long room overlooking the courtyard, facing north and protected from the sun. They saw Bompard and his wife and family at the far end. They did not approach his table, but took their seats near the door so as to catch him when he went out.

"There's no use bothering him when he's eating," said Sheila. "When he's going out catch him and take him somewhere quiet. I'll wait in the lounge for you; and, oh, Dicky, be careful that no one's listening. I wouldn't give him any exact details as to the place where it is, but there's no harm in telling him everything else."

"You can trust me," said Dicky.

The meal seemed interminable, at least the meal of the Bompards, but at last it was over and the party made for the door, madame leading. Then Dicky rose, captured the big man and passed out with him, Bompard's hand upon his shoulder.

The smoke room only contained one old gentleman, a Spaniard, yellow as ivory, seated in an easy-chair, with a red handkerchief bound round his forehead and a cigarette between his lips; some tobacco planter in from the country, a quaint survival of the old régime such as may still be met with in Havana or Matanzas.

Leading Bompard to a quiet corner and accepting a cigar, Dicky plunged right into the business on hand.

He spoke in English, slowly, arranging his facts carefully and telling practically the whole story, Bompard listening and only interrupting to ask a question or two.

Sometimes he chuckled as though at a good joke, but the strange thing was he did not express surprise. It was as though he were listening to the recital of a business deal that interested and tickled him without creating amazement.

"That's all," said Dicky. "It's a queer story—do you believe it?"

"But of course," said Bompard. "The thing is plain. That was German gold."

"German gold?"

"German money. And you have got it. *Mon Dieu,* yes. German gold camouflaged like their guns, being taken to who knows where, for always under the surface, Monsieur Sebright, there is German gold, trickling, stealing, going into the foreign banks, going here, going there; paying for this or that, being secreted, and sometimes, as now, being lost through the cupidity of agents. Russian? No—Germans!"

Bompard was not a Germanophile. If there was one thing the good Bompard had on his brain, it was Germans, and Dicky, with amazing insight, saw this in a flash, saw it in the hatred disclosed by the other's voice and manner, and played up to it.

"Yes," said Dicky, "I think you are right. And now we've got it we want to keep it. But there's no use keeping it where it is. The question is what are we to do with it? How are we to turn it into money? That is why I have come to you—you know Havana, and we will offer you a share——"

"Non!" cried Bompard, "it is outside me. I, my friend, am a business man. I do not want any adventures. I am too old, I have a wife and family and as for money—why, it suffices!"

Dicky felt crushed. He saw at once Bompard's meaning. Though he rejoiced at the Germans being robbed of their gold, he would not help. The thing was shady and he would not risk burning his fingers.

"But——" said Bompard.

"Yes!"

"Though I do not care for outside business affairs of this sort, this nature, there is one I know of who may help, but he would want his not inconsiderable share without doubt."

"Well, he can have it, if he is any good."

"No, he is bad, but he would not play his tricks with me. I am in tobacco, I have my interests in sugar and many things here; so has he; and my interests hold him, so to speak. I hold him and he would play no tricks. He is Mordiaz. You do not know the name?"

"No."

"Ah, well, you do not know Havana. Every one knows Mordiaz. He is the one man who can help you, the one man who can take what you want to dispose of—the one man who does not fear governments. If you care I will say to him: 'Mordiaz, this gentleman, my friend Mr. Sebright, knows where a large store of hidden gold is to be found.' I would not tell him your story. I would just say: 'This gentleman knows where gold is and he will give you a share if you will take it from where it is and put it on the market.'"

"Do you think he'll take it up?"

"Oh, yes," said Bompard. "Why not? It is only a question of buying what you call salvage. He will not go shares with you in this matter, he will not be a partner in what might bring trouble, but he will buy from you the—what you call location, paying you a sum to be agreed on after he has made good with it."

"I see."

"In that way he protects himself and me."

"How you?"

"I am his partner," said Bompard, with a laugh.

"His partner!"

"His what you call partner that sleeps. My name is not on his business nor his name on mine, yet often I can say to Mordiaz, 'Here is a good thing to be done. Do it and we will go shares.' Last year for instance, I was at Barcelona when I had news before any one else that the *Pablo Poirez* was gone to the sea bottom off Andros Island; a cigar ship, with half the Vuelta Abago crop in her hold—one very special brand of cigar. Across the deep-sea cables I speak in the ear of Mordiaz. Mordiaz puts telephone to his mouth and that night he buys all the rest of those cigars for sale in the Havana market. Those cigars go up twenty cents apiece in the markets of New Orleans, Philadelphia and New York. The clubs will have them, so we make a profit of twenty cents on each cigar. Just a whisper on the deep-sea cables and a large profit. That is business. So now with you. You come to me, I believe you because I have seen you at Teneriffe in your little boat, I believe you because you are honest man—your face tells me. I go to Mordiaz and say: 'Take this matter up.' He takes it and I get my share without sharing with you in any trouble that may be. I am plain with you—my life is all business. I am business man first.

"I am two men, the man who enjoys himself and the man who makes profit. I enjoy myself with friends, but for no friend would I go in danger of trouble in business. If you chose to say to me, 'I do not care to deal,' then I will forget all you have told me; but if you say, 'Take this matter up,' I will answer, 'Yes,' and more, I will say, 'Do it at once, Mr. Sebright, and do not let grass grow on your feet, for from what you have told me you may have trouble.' Gold is like a beautiful woman—there is always some one after her."

"You think those fellows I told you about may be after us?"

"It is possible; not after you but the gold; but if Mordiaz takes the matter in his hands you have no cause to be afraid, and as to your share, it will be as safe as my own."

"I'll see Mordiaz to-day if you will take me to him."

"Yes. At five he is to be seen every day at his office."

"Then I will meet you here at five," said Dicky.

They parted and Dicky went to find Sheila in the lounge.

So that was Bompard, a man light-hearted as a boy, always ready for fun, irresponsible—on the other hand a man of business, swift as lightning to grasp at a deal, yet cautious as a cat in a strange larder. In this business, if it came off, he would receive his profit without the slightest danger to himself. It would be just an introduction, nothing more. If it didn't come off he would lose nothing, this Dicky saw, and also the fact that not to satisfy his hatred of the Germans, not for profit, or love of a friend, or any consideration on earth would Bompard risk entanglement in the law. It was Dicky's first encounter with a southern French business man; a perfect specimen in full flower like a blossom grown in a hot-house.

"Well!" said Sheila.

"I believe it's all right," said he. "But, Sheila, it will mean losing a lot of the stuff; we'll have only to take a share."

He explained everything and Sheila listened. She understood.

"We never could have had it all," said she when he had finished. "It is too big for us to grasp alone. I see quite clearly that these men will want the most of it. Well, it can't be helped. I don't want a great fortune, but I do want enough to live on. If I could only get that I would be content."

A lump rose in Dicky's throat. He knew now the worst feeling that can come to a man, the feeling that the future of the being he loves is in danger. If he failed with Bompard and Mordiaz he would be left with little or no money, and Sheila with that tiny income which was a mere pittance, not enough to support herself and Larry on shore.

It was a thought paralyzing to a weak man, stimulating to a strong.

CHAPTER XXXV.

MORDIAZ.

At five o'clock to the minute Bompard appeared in the smoking room where Dicky was waiting for him.

"We will walk," said Bompard. "It is only a little way."

Out in the street he linked arms with his companion. This big man seemed unable to stand alone; his hand was always on some one's shoulder or on some one's arm, and as they walked he talked about everything but the business on hand, about the new dredging scheme for the harbor, the tobacco crop, the condition of the streets. Sometimes he broke into little snatches of song—"The girls of Avignon" or "Morbihan." "And here we are," said he at last, leading the way through a stone entrance up a stairs and into a business office filled with the clacking of typewriters.

Bompard seemed quite at home in this place. He opened a door with ground-glass panels, showed Dicky into a little room furnished with a table, two chairs and a flaming almanac of the Union Générale's and told him to wait. He closed the door and Dicky waited.

Nearly twenty minutes passed. Then Bompard reappeared, led him through the main office and into a room where behind a desk table and writing with the aid of a pair of thick-lensed glasses, sat Mordiaz..

Mordiaz might have been fifty; a small man, stout as Sancho Panza, with a sparse gray beard and nearly bald, he looked very commonplace. You never would have imagined him to be a genius, a genius of affairs, an alchemist who extracted gold from all sorts of unlikely substances, men, conditions.

Nominally in the cigar business he moved behind everything in Havana. Hundreds or men were his shadows, bringing him information or doing his work. He had agents in Santiago and Matanzas and among other things he was the motive spirit in the Havana Los Pinos Salvage Company.

"This is the gentleman who wished to see you," said Bompard, introducing Dicky. Then as Mordiaz motioned the newcomer to a seat, Bompard went out and closed the door.

Mordiaz finished what he was writing, took off his glasses and turned in his chair toward the newcomer.

"Well, sir," said Mordiaz, speaking in English, "my friend who has just gone out has told me of this business on which you wished to see me. I never touch affairs of this sort. Let us make that clear between us once and for all."

Dicky rose from his chair.

"Sit down," said Mordiaz.

He stretched out his hand for a cigar box, opened it, presented it, struck a match and, rising, held it to Dicky's cigar.

Then he lit up himself.

You could not buy those cigars in any market. They filled the air with a fragrance heavenly beyond description, and leaning back in his chair, Mordiaz seemed for a moment to forget the newcomer and the business in hand.

"But," said Mordiaz at last, "though the question does not interest me, I may be able to tell you of a man possibly useful in the matter. He is in no way connected with me, but the business might interest him. In fact," said Mordiaz, "he puts so much trust in my sense of affairs that should I say to him, 'Take this thing up,' he would do so. There only remains the question of terms."

"Yes," said Dicky.

"In a business like this," went on Mordiaz, "there can be no contract. A contract is the child of the law, and the law—well, señor, it cannot have anything to do with this business. My friend will no doubt say to you, 'I will give your so much.' He will keep his bond because, this introduction coming from me and from Señor Bompard, it will be necessary for him to do so. You understand?"

"Yes."

"He will say to you, 'The gains from this business we will divide into three shares. I will take two and you one.'"

"He will want two thirds!"

"Yes, señor."

Dicky, for a moment, felt crushed. It seemed to him that for the first time in his life he was standing face to face with rapacity. He knew quite well that this third party, whoever he might be, was only the agent and tool of Mordiaz, that Bompard had so put the case to Mordiaz that Mordiaz would take the matter up and run it through—but at what a price!

"You will remember," said Mordiaz, "that all risk will be gone from you, all work will be done for you, and the cash placed in your hands in dollar notes. That is how this gentleman does his business."

Dicky was still thinking. Curiously enough this evidence of business rapacity, after the first shock of it, seemed to point toward reality and security. It was, in its way, an indication of honest intention. He remembered that James was out of the business and they were the richer by his share—still, one third! It seemed robbery.

"Do you mind if I don't give you a definite answer right away?" said he. "I have a partner, a lady—I would like to consult her."

"Most certainly," said Mordiaz, "but please remember that the terms I have said to you will not be altered by this gentleman, and should you decide to-night you will call and see him to-morrow. I will write you his address. He is an American. Captain Kane of the Havana Salvage Company, 30 Calle Antonio—that is it." He handed the address on a piece of paper.

Dicky put it in his pocket, and saying good evening to Mordiaz, departed through the outer office where the clerks were knockign off work for the day.

One third of the gold, one third of the gold—the words kept repeating themselves in his mind as he made his way back to the hotel where Sheila was waiting for him in the lounge.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

LARRY.

"NEVER!" cried Sheila. He had described the whole interview and given her the terms.

"Never! Never! One third! I'd sooner give the whole thing away."

Dicky remembered her words, spoken only that day—how she had said she did not want wealth, only enough to live on; he did not know that her revolt against the terms was inspired not so much by greed for money as by the fancied injustice of them. She explained this. There was perhaps another reason. What woman has ever been satisfied with the business bargain a man makes? Women have little ideas about concession.

Dicky actually and for a moment found himself almost taking sides with Mordiaz.

"I know you're right," said he. "The terms aren't good. All the same, let's look at the thing fairly and squarely. All responsibility is taken from us, they run the risk and they pay us in dollar notes which is as good as payment in gold. We can't do anything alone and they are the only people I see that can help us. After all, Sheila, a third of that stuff will mean a lot of money."

"Yes, and how do you know they will pay us?"

"We've got to risk that. We can make no contract with them, but just take their word—we've got to depend entirely on Bompard, and I believe we can depend on him. Bompard is straight. He has introduced us to Mordiaz and he will not let him run crooked."

Sheila sighed. She believed Bompard to be straight and like Dicky she felt the very hardness of the bargain to be a guarantee of good faith on the part of the bargainers. All the same she felt it was dreadful to be done like this.

That's how she put it to herself. The

Irish rose up in her, pure anger took the part of reason and out of some black and unexplained part of her mind came the voice that rose to her lips.

"I won't," said Sheila. "I'd just as soon bring it here and sell it in the streets for old metal. They have no right to squeeze us like this. You say they are straight. Maybe! but they are not straight to squeeze us like that. You can tell Monsieur Bompard that we won't—at least I won't—take less than half."

"Do you really mean that?" asked Dicky.

"I do."

He did not answer for a moment. This decision meant that there was no use in him seeing Captain Kane in the morning. He would have to go back and fight with Mordiaz for better terms and he felt in his soul that Mordiaz, having the whip hand, would not give in. Days would be lost. The terms were bad, but in his heart he knew it would be better to take them, perhaps because he knew that he was a bad bargainer and that Bompard and Mordiaz, having summed him up would never lower their flag.

But he could not say this to Sheila.

However, events of which he knew nothing had taken charge of this business.

He was just about to speak when a page boy who had entered the lounge as if in search of some one, came toward them and began to speak in Spanish.

"Señor" and "hombre" were the only words Dicky could make out, but Sheila knew. "He says there's some one to see you," said Sheila. "Perhaps it's Monsieur Bompard; whatever you do, be careful."

Dicky left the lounge. He returned in a couple of minutes looking perplexed and put out.

"It's Larry."

"Larry! What on earth does he want?"

"He says he got a message from us to come to the hotel, that we wanted him."

"A message from *us?*"

"Yes—what's the meaning of it? I sent no message—did you?"

"Never. Who gave it to him?"

"They sent it over from the *Dulcinea,* said it had come there by mistake. Come outside and see him."

Sheila followed into the hall where Larry was standing twisting his cap in his hands.

"Larry, what on earth is this?" said Sheila. "Who brought you that message?"

"One of the chaps from the *Dulcinea,* miss. He rowed over and said a message had come from you and I was to put ashore wid the boat and leave her at the quay and go to the customhouse office in the street beyond and wait at the door there for you, and if you weren't there in an hour, I was to come to the hotel for you."

"What time did you get the message?" asked Dick.

"Eight bells, sor, four o'clock."

"And it's now after seven," said Sheila.

"Some one's been fooling the *Dulcinea* people," said Dicky.

"But, Larry," cried Sheila, "you shouldn't have left the ship without any one on board."

"I didn't, Miss Shaila. The chap said he'd stick wid her and look after her till I came back."

"Well," said Sheila, "this is the most extraordinary thing. It couldn't be James, could it, that's playing some practical joke? Anyhow, we've got to go and see."

"Where?" asked Dicky.

"We'll go to the *Dulcinea* and question them. It must be James—remember that telegram he sent Captain Shortt."

"If it is," said Dicky, "I'll break his neck—if I catch him. Come, let's go."

Sheila had not taken off her hat. Dicky fetched his from the lounge and they started, Larry following them.

Darkness had fallen when they reached the wharf and the boat moored and under the care of the wharf keeper.

They got in and Larry took the oars. The moon had not risen and the harbor lay vast and vague under the first stars. The air was filled with sea scents and harbor perfumes and noises from the dockyard—the rattle of a cargo winch, and from somewhere at a great distance and borne on the wind, the tangling of a guitar.

Lights everywhere. Havana all aglow with electrics and out on the harbor water the lights of the shipping.

Sheila, seated beside Dicky in the stern sheets, felt lonely and depressed, perplexed. Who had sent that message, and why? James? But why? It was not the sort of thing that James would do—he might be a fool, but he was a gentleman. Who then? She could not tell, but in her mind was the old uneasiness, the sense of people antagonistic to them, people unseen, hidden, and with one objective, the gold.

"There's the *Dulcinea's* light, I think," said Dicky, who was staring ahead through the dark. "But I can't see the *Baltrum's.*"

Larry turned his head.

"That's her and there's the gas buoy, musha, but them fools haven't put up our ridin' light. I'll scrag that chap—I'll put the sinse into him——"

He took to the oars.

Suddenly Sheila spoke.

"She's gone," said Sheila.

The gas buoy flung its low and intermittent light across the water at them; it seemed like an evil eye winking. The *Dulcinea* showed outlined on the night. No other ship lay near her. The *Baltrum* was gone.

"Don't stop to talk," cried Sheila, cutting short the language of the two men. "Get up quick to the *Dulcinea.* She's been stolen, that's all. I felt it—oh, dear."

"*Dulcinea* ahoy!" cried Larry.

"Ahoy!" came a voice from the yacht.

"Drop us the lather—and what have you done with the boat? Where's the *Baltrum?* Who's stole her and what were you meanin' to let her be gone? Oh, be the powers, if I get a hold of you——"

"Now then," came the voice of the old quartermaster who had been at the rail when the *Baltrum* anchored—Benson was his name. "What are you talkin' about? Nobody's stolen your boat, not to my knowledge. Mr. Morgan has took her out. Here's the ladder—mind my paint with that boat huk."

"Morgan!" cried Sheila.

"Yes, miss, Mr. Morgan took her out." He held a lantern while they came on deck, Sheila first, Dicky following, Larry remaining in the boat.

"Mr. Morgan took her out?" said Sheila.

"Yes, miss."

"Come down below," said Dicky. "We can't talk here. Put on the lights, Benson."

They went below, Benson switching on the light. Then in the saloon it was Sheila who took the wheel.

"Tell us exactly what happened," said she to Benson, "everything."

"Well, miss," said Benson, "it was gettin' on for four bells. I was in the fo'c's'le with the others when Mr. Morgan sent for me here and he says to me: 'Benson, I've been expectin' a message from Mr. Sebright which hasn't come. Send a man over to the *Baltrum* and tell that Irishman to get ashore and wait at the customhouse for an hour, and if Mr. Sebright hasn't turned up by then, tell him to go to the hotel'—he give me the name on a bit of paper—'and meet Mr. Sebright there. You'd better tell him that Mr. Sebright has sent the order here, for that Irishman is such a thick-headed chap,' says he, 'that he'll start arguin' if he doesn't get the order explicit,' he says, 'and you can tell him we'll look after the *Baltrum* while he's gone.' And I says to him, 'I'm to send a man to the *Baltrum* and tell the chap Mr. Sebright's sent an order for him to get ashore at once and wait an hour at the customhouse and failin' Mr. Sebright's turnin' up, he's to go to the hotel,' I says.

" 'That's it,' says he, 'and when you've done that, tell Longley and Hearn to get their bags ready for I'll be wantin' them on special business,' he says.

"Well, sir, I sent the order and the Irishman went ashore and Mr. Morgan he says to me, takin' me to the after rail: 'Get the dinghy down,' he says. 'I'm goin' on board the *Baltrum* to take her out and whisk her down to Matanzas, for it's a question of contraband,' he says, 'that Mr. Sebright has got himself mixed up in and there'll be hell to pay,' he says, 'for Mr. Corder and us all if the *Baltrum's* caught here with the stuff on her. I'll dump it at sea,' he says, and with that he put aboard her, takin' the dinghy, and they put out."

"Good heavens!" said Sheila.

"Yes, miss, and he'll have dumped the stuff by this and you'll find the boat at Matanzas," said Benson.

Sheila turned a chalk-white face to her companion. Dicky sat down.

He checked the outburst rising to his lips. They were done, absolutely done, at least for the moment. There was no use abusing Benson or raging or storming. Morgan was away for Crab Cay; that telegram which had fetched Shortt to Santiago was a fake; the thing was clear; there was only one chance—pursuit.

"Benson," said he at last, "we have got to get out and follow them right away."

"Yes, sir."

"Get the auxiliary going. You have the rest of the crew on board, I suppose?"

"Beg pardon, sir," said Benson, "but if you mean taking the yacht, I can't move her. Mr. Morgan gave me strict orders not to move her till the captain is back, and she's goin' into dry dock to-morrow sunup."

"Rubbish!" cried Dicky. "She's got to go—it's life or death. You've got to take us. I tell you——"

"Dicky," said Sheila, restraining him. She was a sailor. She knew quite well that a man of Benson's type left in charge would die before disobeying orders.

Morgan had foreseen everything, blocked them at every point. Shortt would not be back for maybe two days, the *Dulcinea* would be in dry dock when he arrived—there was just one chance for them, something that Morgan had not foreseen and so could not guard against. Bompard and Mordiaz. If these proved rotten ropes, then everything was over.

She turned to Benson:

"You absolutely refuse to take us out?"

"I can't indeed, miss, not nohow."

"Dicky," said she, "come. There's no use in wasting time, and I have an idea."

"You'll be sorry for this," said Dicky to Benson.

"I can't move her nohow, sir," cried Benson.

"Come," said Sheila. She led the way on deck and as they were getting into the boat, Sheila turned to Benson.

"You are quite right," said she, "in not disobeying orders, but you see how we are placed. We have a boat and a man here. Will you take Larry when he has rowed us ashore and give him quarters till the *Baltrum* is back? I don't know what we can do with him at the hotel."

"Yes, miss," said Benson, "I don't mind obliging you by that. There's room enough aboard."

"Larry," said Sheila, leaning over the rail, "when you've put us ashore you're to come back here and take up your quarters. Your bag is gone in the *Baltrum*, but she'll be back soon."

"Yes, miss," said Larry. Like a dog he read the tone of his mistress and knew that he was not to ask questions in the hearing of others.

They pushed off. Then when they were out of earshot and as he bent to the creaky oars, she told him. "And all you can do, Larry," she finished, "is just go back to the *Dulcinea* when you have put us ashore, and wait till you hear from us. We have friends ashore who may help."

Dicky heard nothing of what she was saying. The appalling fact had just occurred to him that all his money, with the exception of twenty-five pounds, was in his locker on board the *Baltrum*. He had left it there for fear of pickpockets ashore!

CHAPTER XXXVII.

IT NEVER RAINS BUT IT POURS.

IT was in the Calle San Pedro just beyond the wharf that he told her.

Their home was gone, their money was gone, their prospects seemed almost hopeless.

Sheila took the news of the lost money with a little shudder.

"How much have you left?" she asked.

"Twenty pounds—a little over. How could I have known? What could have been safer than leaving it on board with Larry looking after the ship?"

"It never rains but it pours," said she. "There's no use thinking of it—there's no use thinking of it. May our bad luck go with it. I know it's awful. No matter, we have a chance, our last chance."

"Bompard."

"Yes, Bompard—for one moment I fancied that Bompard might have had some hand in this, but I know he hasn't. No, that beast wanted no one to help him. Now you know why Captain Shortt got a telegram calling him away, and why it was sent from Pinos, just close here. Morgan most likely slipped ashore and sent it himself. Longley must have been spying on us at Crab Cay."

"Longley hadn't sense enough for a spy."

"Sense enough to see what we were doing. It was Morgan, of course, as first officer, who picked him and Hearn to go with us when I asked for two men, and I—I never thought of that. We were children, Dicky—we have been children in this business—but there is a Providence. Don't let us talk any more. What time is it?"

"Twenty past ten."

"We may catch Monsieur Bompard at the hotel."

"Do you intend to tell him this?"

"Everything. He is our one and only chance. I don't mind now the bargain about the two thirds—anything—so long as he will fight Morgan. Walk quicker!"

The streets were filled with the usual Havana night crowd, negroes, yellow men, whites. Not a cab was to be had, and sometimes they had to take to the roadway from the footpath.

Never even in nightmare had Dicky imagined such a walk as that. The idea of Sheila stranded in this glaring, heartless, terrible place, of himself almost helpless, of the prize just out of reach, of Morgan calmly sailing under that moon with a favorable wind—rogues always get that—of James, who could have made everything different had he been here—all these ideas projected themselves, became part of and clung to the blazing fronts of cinema palaces, the flash-light advertisements of Merilliers, Menthe, Juan Bangos tobacco, and Cacao Santa Anna.

The smells helped; Chinese and bay rum, Cuban earth, cigars and the eternal cigarettes; negroes, flowers, rotten bananas, rum.

Sheila took his arm so that they might get along quicker, and the feeling of her hand on his coat sleeve did not give him a thrill. Love has no part in shipwreck and disaster unless in the form of heroism and devotion.

They reached the hotel and took their seats in one of the great basket couches in the outer hall to rest a moment and pull themselves together. Then Dicky went to find Bompard.

"Yes. Monsieur Bompard is in. He probably is in the dance room." Dicky went there.

The eternal band was sawing away and nearly a dozen couples were fox trotting. The chairs were filled, for residents in the town came to the Mercedes for the dancing at night.

Yes, there was Bompard, talking to a girl in pink, and Dicky, catching his eye, signaled to him.

He led him out to where Sheila was sitting and there, between them, they told him all.

"Coquin de sort!" cried Bompard, when the tale was finished; then for a space he fell dumb.

"Quick," he said, "you have told me all but the name of this place and the distance."

"Crab Cay," said Dicky, and gave the distance.

"Then," said Bompard, "there is yet a chance. We must go now and at once to the Captain Kane. It is late, but we may find him."

He rose up and called a boy and sent him running for a cab. Then he lit a cigar and sat down.

He was in evening dress; he remembered this and went off and fetched a light overcoat and his hat. Then he sat down again.

"The question is, can he find at a moment a boat that is quick enough to catch Mr. Morgan?" said he. "Who knows?—we will see."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

KANE.

SHEILA remained at the hotel. The cab took them through the blaze of streets, through squares lit as for a festival, down cutthroat byways to the waterside, past the Santa Anna wharf and the Gholem yard to a big building where it stopped. Telling the driver to wait, Bompard led Dicky through an archway, down a passage, to a big stone hall where a single electric cast its light on all sorts of junk, anchors, hawsers like coiled anacondas, oars, diving pumps, diving dresses hung on the walls—a deep-sea ship seemed to have been wrecked there as in some submarine cave and the divers to have just knocked off work.

Bompard went to a door through whose ground-glass panels light showed, knocked and entered.

It was an office and two men showed through the haze of tobacco smoke that filled the place, a big man and a small man. They were playing cards. The big man was Kane.

"Good!" said Bompard. "We have found you. No, Monsieur le Capitaine, do not rise. We will find us seats. This is my friend Monsieur Sebright. Monsieur Sebright will tell you why we have come." He opened the door and looked out to see if by any chance there might be a listener. "This is a business sent by Señor Mordiaz," finished he, "and all expenses will be chargeable to him."

"There's no one to hear," said Kane. "Hank here is all the same as myself. Bring yourself to anchor and spit it out." He moved a chair out of a corner for Dicky. Bompard took his seat on an angle of the table, and Hank, who had picked up the cards, began spreading them on the table before him as though he were telling his fortune or engaged in a game of patience.

"Everything?" asked Dicky, with a glance at Bompard.

"Yes, monsieur, everything," said Bompard. "Everything—location and all. It must be the all together or nothing."

Dicky started. As he talked he insensibly took in these two new men upon whom depended, now, his fate and Sheila's fortune. He knew that this was the hub of the whole business and he guessed Kane to be the linchpin. Kane's appearance did not justify the title of captain; he wore a guernsey under a rough coat and his hands wanted washing, but his face would have pleased an artist. It was a fine face, but rough cast. It might have been the face of an actor battered by seafaring and tanned by the tropics; he had extraordinary eyes, level gazing and far sighted, eyes that whisky or battle could fill with the fire of insanity.

This was the man who salved the bullion from the strong room of the *Paraquay,* wrecked on the black strand of Martinique and only reachable from the sheer cliffs three hundred feet high. The man who was Mordiaz's right hand in sea affairs.

On the other hand, the leathery, wizened Hank playing with the cards and seeming to hear nothing, scarcely impressed Dicky. He told everything with scarcely an interruption and Kane, when the story was over, made no comment on its strangeness.

"He'll have got seven hours' start by now," said Kane, "and it's four hundred odd miles from here to Crab. I know your boat, saw her come in and her copper wants cleanin'. With this wind he'd be making good, maybe, and there's nothing to follow him with but the steam dridger and the mail boat."

"Coffeepot," said Hank, without looking up from the intricate pattern of the cards.

"Oh, her—will she run?"

"Depends," said Hank. "If her fans will hold out and her propeller stick on her, she'll go. I was goin' to take her to Matanzas next week to the breakers. Her bunkers are near full."

"An old torp Mordiaz bought off the Cubans," said Kane in explanation to Dicky. "Fifty cents, I think it was he gave for her, or maybe it was a bunch of bananas. She's a holy howlin' terror, but if the string and sealin' wax will hold she may get us to Crab."

"What is a torp?" asked Bompard.

"T'pedo boat. Come out of the ark or the Spanish-American war, I forget which. Engine's a jazz band, but it plays. Hank."

"Yep."

"Off with you—we count out under three hours. Fetch Lomax, Tearle and that chap Antonio; they'll be on the dridger. Get the men busy and the rest of the coal in her and fire up. Get all the stores out of the dridger on board of her—there's grub enough for a week. I'll bring the charts—guns—no, we want no guns."

Hank swept the cards together, put them in their cardboard box and the box in his pocket, took his hat and went out.

"That's done," said Kane. "You goin' with us, of course?" turning to Dicky.

"Yes—rather."

"Then," said Kane, "you'd better be off and make your will and get your traps. I'll want you to be at the Poirez wharf in three hours, sharp." He turned away and took charts from a locker.

"Where is it?" asked Dicky.

"I will show you it," said Bompard. "I will take you there. For the present goodby, Monsieur le Capitaine." Taking Dicky's arm he led him out. Kane seemed to have forgotten them, up to the eyes in his charts.

The cab was still waiting for them as Bompard told the man to take them back to the hotel.

"What a night!" said he as they started.

The good Bompard was flustered. He was used to doing business in a leisurely way, and with all sorts of precautions and screens, in a case like the present. Morgan had shattered all that.

All of a sudden it had become necessary to jump right into the arena, to take Dicky to Kane and mix himself up in this affair at firsthand. Mordiaz was still sheltered; if there was trouble over the business no man could say that he had any hand in it. He had only given an introduction, but he, Bompard, was helping to set the affair going "with his two hands" as he expressed it to himself.

However, there was no use in worrying.

"Suppose," said Dicky as they drove, "we pull this thing off and recover the gold. Is Kane to be trusted?"

"Oh, yes," replied the other. "He will get his little commission. Again, he is one of Mordiaz's men who are all to be trusted. Again, it would be no use to him—he could not dispose of it, alone, no more than you can. This Monsieur Morgan must be either a very great fool or he has men behind him who will help him to dispose of it."

"He has men behind him," said Dicky.

"They got at him before we left England, of that I'm certain. Once he gets the stuff on board he has only to go home with it—he has stores enough on board for the journey and he needn't worry. He knows we can't touch him. If we cabled to stop the *Baltrum* at any port, we'd have to accuse him of running away with the ship. He knows we can't do that without giving the whole show away."

The bitterest thing to Dicky was the thought that Morgan could go in safety to England and not only go there, but, with the aid of the crooks who were backing him, cash the gold.

Another bitter thing was the almost sure fact that only for James' tomfoolery in telling MacAdam his name and position, the MacAdam crowd would never have achieved the lightning stroke of getting at Morgan and corrupting him.

However, as in Bompard's case, there was no use in worrying, and in any case there was no use in worrying about the past. The present held quite enough worries and difficulties as he found when he came to the hotel and full face with the fact that he would have to leave Sheila.

It would be impossible to take her on this business. He would have to leave her at the hotel.

She was waiting for them in the lounge when they came in and they sat down beside her and Dicky began explaining things.

"I've got to leave you, Sheila," finished Dicky, when he had told her everything. "You couldn't go on this stunt. It's too dirty and too dangerous." Bompard will look after you."

He spoke in short chopped sentences and with a catch in his throat; the idea of leaving her alone here, even with the Bompards, the idea that he might never see her again brought him as near to sniveling as a man can come without disgrace.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THEY PUT OUT.

THE electrics were on at the Poirez wharf when Dicky and Bompard arrived. Dicky had forced Sheila to take the remainder of his money to pay the hotel bill at the end of the week. "There'll be some left over," said Dicky, "and Bompard will help you if—if—— And there's James, should anything happen. If I don't come back or anything, he must help. You've got his address, 'Hotel Plaza, New York.' Nothing's going to happen. I'll come back all right. I was only thinking of—there, good-by—good-by."

Forgetting Bompard and the night porter who were standing by, he squeezed her in his arms and kissed her hair. He had never breathed a word of love to her, it all came out then, in that last moment, without a word being uttered.

Then he was in the cab, with Bompard beside him, rattling through streets now empty and only half lit, and it seemed to Dicky that he was leaving all his life behind him, all his happiness, all his hopes. It seemed to him that he would never—never—never, see Sheila again, and behind that dark obsession stood a monster calling itself the future and asking him: "What will happen to Sheila if you never see her again, Sheila alone here in Havana, without the *Baltrum,* without money?"

Through two streets and a dim-lit square this question held him and tortured him. Then with a turn of a corner and a breath from the harbor he was himself again and confidence had returned. He would come back, nothing could hold him or stop him; come back with his hands full of money, alive, to the woman he loved.

The cab drew up.

The Poirez wharf has a low freeboard; it is used for lighters discharging and the small craft that ply along the coast.

To-night, under the moon and the sizzling arc lights, it showed forms moving here and there and echoed to an insistent drumming from the naked feet of the fellows running with the last sacks from the great coaling shed to the wharfside where the torp was moored.

Kane was standing with Hank in talk with the wharf master and a harbor official. Kane was not only captain of the salvage company; he had a hand in dredging operations and diving, and besides being Mordiaz's shadow, or one of them, knew personally all the harbor men. He could make things go, and make them go without questions asked.

"That's her," said Kane, leading the newcomers to the wharf edge and handing Dicky's attaché case to Hank for disposal on board. "That's her—she's still holdin' together."

Dicky looked down on a narrow deck

along which the last of the coal sacks were being carried, a deck stripped of everything, showing nothing but its steel plates and a double-ender boat lying on it, keel up, abaft the funnel. As he looked the head and shoulders of a man black as a fiend out of Gehenna rose from a hatchway. This was Lomax, naval artisan and one of the salvage company's most priceless possessions—though he didn't look it. Close to the engine-room hatch stood two negroes, Sam and Billy, taken on to help in the stoking.

"How's it shaping below?" asked Kane when he had introduced Dicky.

Lomax wiped his hands with a piece of cotton waste.

"Pressure's rising if the gauge isn't telling a lie. Got all your dunnage on board? Then you'd better drop down and let's get—I don't want her to blow up beside the wharf."

From the engine room a voice could be heard singing "My Coal-black Mammy"—that was Tearle. Antonio and Hank were forward of the funnel waiting to attend to the shore fasts.

Kane dropped on to the deck plates, and Dicky, having shaken Bompard by the hand, followed.

"You will bring it back here," said Bompard. "The Captain Kane has orders and will know what to do. No, you will not fail. Au revoir."

Then, as Kane took the bridge and the wheel, Lomax vanished from sight, the mooring ropes were cast off and for a moment the night hung in silence, a silence broken by the tingling of the engine-room bell and the first vibration of the engines.

The wharf began to slide away astern and now where it had been was glittering moonlit water. Dicky, glancing back, saw Bompard's figure for a moment, waving an arm, and beyond Bompard and the wharves and the cranes and great storehouses, the city sprinkled with lights.

They passed the *Dulcinea* and the gas buoy; a three-masted schooner and a tanker waiting for the morning light to get in to the wharves; then the passage showed before them and, beyond, the wide-rolling stretches of the open sea.

Dicky went below.

He found the once wardroom stripped clean as the deck, stores flung in corners, his baggage hove into a bunk that had neither blankets nor bedding, and a kerosene lamp, hung above a swinging table, lighting the desolation that could be smelled as well as seen.

Cockroaches, kerosene, fruit and the smell of stale tobacco took him by the throat and made his heart rejoice. Sheila was saved from all this. The more intolerable his surroundings the better; the more he had to toil and work and strive the better. The gold that had taken so many forms had resolved itself at last into a permanent shape—Sheila.

She and her future were buried in the sands of Crab Cay. They had to be rescued from Morgan, and this very real fact gave him a power and an inspiration that gold never could have bestowed, and a desire for self-sacrifice, sweat and toil that gold never could have hinted at.

He left the place and sought the engine room, oven hot with the fires of the furnaces. Lomax, stripped to the waist, was oiling. He was greaser and chief engineer and would-be stoker too when his turn came, Tearle taking his place and he relieving Tearle. He shouted this news through the music of the "jazz band" and right on his words came the ring of a bell and the swing of the indicator to full speed.

With the sound of the bell and the springing to life of the engines came a gentle roll. They had cleared the land and gained the open sea.

"Now you'll see hell," shouted Lomax through the drone of the fans and the shouting of the engines and the clash and clang from the stokehold where Tearle and Antonio were firing up. "Sixteen knots if she's doing one, and she ain't fit to be doing ten. Get into the stokehold and lend a hand. They'll show you how to shoot the coal—and you'd better be learning. We'll want you."

CHAPTER XL.

DISASTER.

At dawn, Dicky, coming on deck half blinded and half roasted, saw the coast of Cuba far to starboard and almost astern; day on the hills and darkness in the valleys. Kane was still at the wheel, where he had remained since leaving the wharf, and one of the negroes coming up from the fo'c's'le was pausing for a glance at the far-off coast before dropping down to the stokehold.

The chief, or one of the chief reasons of

Mordiaz's power and wealth, was his knowledge of and his choice of men. Suddenly and without warning this gold proposition was put before him and almost without thinking he was able to put his finger on the men in his employ fit to work it. It had been the same with the wreck on the black strand at Martinique; she was being broken up by the sea and another tide would have done for her; Kane had salved the valuables off her because he had taken the wrecking ship out 'naked,' raced her against time and worked for fifty-two hours without sleep.

He hailed Dicky peremptorily now from the bridge.

"There's grub in the lockers down below," cried Kane, "biscuits and beef most, and there's a Primus. You can make some coffee—coffee cups and a pot in the basket by the doorway, can opener you'll find in the starboard after locker and knives and such. You'd better be can opener on this expedition, for we don't carry no cooks. Bring me a cup of coffee up here; I'm going to stick a while yet."

Dicky dived below to the wardroom. He found the stores and the Primus stove, and a breaker of water brought aft from the water tanks. Nothing was forgotten. That was Kane again—neither spoons nor condensed milk, nor salt.

When the coffee was made he brought a cup up to the bridge, then he gave word in the engine room that breakfast was ready and Tearle went aft with Hank and Antonio, leaving Lomax in charge and the negroes at the fires.

It was a strangely run ship. No watches were set, there was no lookout, no confusion, no grumbling. No man seemed to reckon on sleep except maybe a cat nap of half an hour or so. They reckoned to raise Crab Cay in twenty-four hours or under if the steam pipes held and the propeller stuck and till then they would carry on.

It was not a voyage, it was the rush of a hawk; and at eight o'clock Kane, who had given the wheel to Tearle was figuring that they ought to be overhauling the *Baltrum* soon, and almost on his words the strong bowling breeze that had been blowing straight from the Gulf of Mexico for the last twelve or fourteen hours began to flag. Then it died. Died suddenly as if a door had been shut across the Florida and Bahama channels; a blue crystal door whose threshold was a line of deep-blue crystal sea.

"We've got the blighters!" cried Kane. "They're done." He pointed out to Dicky that the *Baltrum* with an eleven-hour start would not have made more than a hundred miles in that time. The torp that had now been running five hours at sixteen knots had laid eighty miles behind her already.

The *Baltrum* becalmed would be simply waiting for them and it was only the question of a little time. He sent Tearle forward on the lookout and Dicky with the chanting of the engines in his ears turned and stood looking at the wash they were leaving on the glassy sea.

Antonio was in temporary charge of the engine room.

In a few hours, more or less, they would raise the *Baltrum;* they would board her, they would seize Morgan. When Dicky had done with Morgan, Kane would see after the remains. They already had decided what to do with him; he would be put ashore, he and his companions, somewhere, either Turtle Island or Caicos—it didn't matter where so long as it was well out of reach of Havana and sufficiently desolate.

As he chewed the cud of these grateful and comforting thoughts, he heard the voice of Antonio through the sound of the engines, Antonio singing songs of his native land:

"Estramadura—estramadura — something —something estramadura," came the voice high pitched and plaintive and only wanting a guitar and the moonlight of Seville to complete itself.

Then on the voice came a sudden chatter of the engines, a yell and a burst of steam from the hatch. Lomax, a biscuit in his hand, came running forward. Dicky saw him fling the biscuit away and plump on his knees beside the hatch opening, shouting down to Antonio, while through the manhole of the stokehold the two negroes were crawling on deck as the boat, loosing way, turned broadside to the lift of the gentle, slobbering swell.

Estramadura—indeed!

"No, he ain't hurt!" yelled Lomax to Kane, "but the engines are gone. He's lettin' loose the steam. Come out of it, you perisher!" He clutched Antonio coming up the steel ladder and dragged him on deck through the steam clouds, Antonio, scarcely scalded, but weeping and crying aloud to his saints. Then, as the steam dispersed, they descended.

No, the engines weren't gone, and by the opening of the steam cocks the boilers had been saved, but——

The forward piston crosshead, for want of proper oiling, had heated and seized, in other words, stuck; the piston was bent and the concussion of the stoppage had dislocated Heaven knows what else.

Kane, Hank, Lomax and Tearle, four supermarine engineers, experts, magicians, and used to playing with disaster, stood contemplating the wreckage, knowing at once the cause, yet saying not a word of reproach or criticism.

Repairs to a plain mind were plainly impossible without a staff of fitters and engine-room artificers and the resources of a dockyard. They had not come unprovided for possible repairs. Kane had brought over from the dredger and the salvage company's storehouse a full outfit—still the whole business seemed impossible, and Tearle, the first to give an opinion, frankly said so.

"Get to work," replied Kane.

CHAPTER XLI.

SUSPENSE.

To Dicky, almost more terrible than the disaster was the coolness, absence of haste and seeming indifference of these men as they set to work on their seemingly impossible task.

But they knew better. They worked as all good workmen do, without haste or fuss. Removing the cylinder cover and the piston, straightening the rod, freeing the crosshead, doing other repairs, Kane estimated all this as a two days' job—maybe three. It was all right working without pause, without sleep and almost without food when it was a matter of stoking and steering and simply chasing the *Baltrum*, but engine repairing was a different matter. It could not be rushed, and to Dicky, helpless as a woman in this matter, the leisurely sounding noises from below, the hammer blows, the voices in discussion, brought despair alleviated only by one good thing, the calm.

It still held, held all that day while he took his post as lookout or went below to prepare food for the workers; held all that night while Lomax and the negroes continued slowly with the work, and Kane and Tearle took a rest; breaking only at sunrise when the westerly wind renewed itself, blowing full and steady and giving life again to the *Baltrum* and the scoundrels who manned her. It was bitter to see it breezing up the water, coming up against the splendor of the east, and to think of the *Baltrum* taking it with all her canvas spread and Morgan at the wheel.

It lasted all day and all night, dying down at dawn only to revive again when the sun was above the horizon, and still the tinkering went on, the hollow hull sounding to the hammer blows, voices, the rasping of files, while the driven blue of the wind-swept sea showed nothing but the occasional wing of a great ocean gull sweeping above it, only to rise and vanish in the cloudless sky.

At noon on this, the third day, Dicky had almost given up hope. Wild ideas came to him of raising sail on the hulk, futile because there was not a square inch of canvas on board. Even had they been able to extemporize a mast and sail, there was no one to work her; every hand was on the engines. By night, with a still freshening breeze, hope definitely left him.

They would never be able to catch up with the *Baltrum* now, of that he felt certain. The malign something that had dogged them all along would never let them succeed; no, not even if the engines were suddenly and miraculously made whole again. Something else would happen. The prize was too great. The gold was accursed. It had begun by murdering those two men and it had finished by robbing him of all his money, leaving Sheila stranded at Havana and himself, here. And that was not the end. What would the end be?

He asked himself this as he made coffee that night for the workers. He had asked Kane at sunset how the work was going on and Kane had replied, "Bully." Nothing more. Kane seemed to have forgotten all about the *Baltrum* and the chase; his whole mind seemed concentrated on the engines. That was mainly the fact, for to Kane the work in hand was ever the all-absorbing thing.

Having made the coffee and brought it in a can to the engine-room hatch, he went back and lay down on a locker. If he only could have helped, but that was denied to him. He was useless and only got in the way of these experts, who said so quite frankly; useless, done for, drifting, with everything lost and Morgan triumphant.

He closed his eyes to shut out the sight of the kerosene lamp and the steel beams and the whole of the rest of that cavelike and gloomy interior. Then he fell asleep.

He slept for hours and was awakened by a sound that made him sit straight up. A sound like the sound of trampling feet, a vibration that made the lamp chatter on its gimbals. The engines were going! Before he could get his legs onto the floor came a voice, the voice of Lomax coming down the steel ladder.

"She's whacking up," cried Lomax. "They're turning over, but Lord knows how long they'll last. Where's the biscuits?"

Dicky looked at his watch. It was four o'clock in the morning.

CHAPTER XLII.

A PROBLEM.

HE came on deck. The westering moon fronting the dawn lit the sea, and the following breeze blew strong, piling the funnel smoke and festooning it against the stars. Tearle was at the wheel.

The thrud of the engines filled the night and through it came the vague sound of the bow wash from the shearing stem.

She was going, doing maybe ten knots, maybe not as much, and the *Baltrum* must by now be where? Dicky, for the first time, tried to calculate. She had eleven hours' start of them to begin with, Kane had estimated her speed with the current at ten knots. She had done perhaps a hundred and ten miles before they left the wharf in pursuit at three o'clock in the morning, close on a hundred and sixty miles before the calm took her at eight o'clock.

Then she had started again when the calm broke and had been sailing ever since. The calm had broken at sunrise the day before yesterday. She had done since then nearly forty-eight hours' sailing at ten knots, that would be nearly five hundred miles—the whole run from Havana to Crab was only four hundred. She had reached Crab by this—how long?

The wretched Dicky, trying to solve this appalling problem mentally, rested his forehead against a funnel guy. The *Baltrum* had run a hundred and sixty miles before the calm took her and, say, four hundred and eighty since the calm broke. Six hundred and forty miles. The distance of the Cay from Havana was four hundred miles. Therefore if she had passed the Cay she would now be two hundred and forty miles beyond it, that is to say, twenty-four hours' sail beyond it. But she had not passed it. She had stopped there, and she had stopped there twenty-four hours ago.

That was the way Dicky reasoned, half crazy, his thoughts all shaken up by the vibration of the funnel guy. If nothing had occurred in the way of an accident Morgan would have had nearly time by now to get the stuff on board and raise sail.

He turned to the hatch and came down the steel ladder leading into the engine room. Kane, an oil can in hand, was standing watching his work.

"Ten knots," said Kane. "They won't stand for more than that—considering they're standin' at all," said Kane, "it's not so bad—hark at them."

They weren't running sweetly, and that's the truth. There was the trace of a stutter in their speech, the ghost of a hiccup in the gasp and hiss of the pistons—yet they went. They who had been scrap iron not so many hours ago, went, and the man who had made them go, standing with a cigarette behind his ear and another in the corner of his mouth, contemplated them not without satisfaction.

"I reckon," said he in answer to Dicky, "we ought to raise Crab in thirty hours or under, say by eight o'clock to-morrow morning. Oh, Morgan, he be damned! Got the bulge on us, has he? Well, maybe he has, but being underhanded he's got a job, my son, and as sure as rogues ain't saints, he'll try to rush that job, seeing what he is and seeing what he's after, and he's not the man to do it without coming a mucker. These double-dashed yacht sailors are pretty well all tripe when you take the gold bands off them."

Dicky left him and went into the stokehold, releasing Antonio.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE FOOTSTEPS OF TWO MEN.

AT sunset that evening the wind dropped again to a dead calm that held all night and remained unbroken by the dawn.

The sun rose immense and palpitating in a haze that increased till by seven o'clock visibility was reduced to less than a mile.

"Fog maybe," said Kane, "but there's not damp enough somehow in the air for fog.

See those gulls? We ain't far off now, I reckon. Oh, Lord, no. Keep her as she's going, there aren't no reefs to the west of Crab to bother about. Hark at that!"

Through the haze from far ahead came a voice, the faint chanting of gulls, a weary, creaky sound, dying off to silence and breaking out again as if in complaint.

"That's her," said Kane. He went forward with the glass. Then came his voice: "I've got the trees."

He came running aft, took the wheel from Tearle and ordered them to stand by the anchor. Dicky, standing with Tearle and one of the negroes waiting to let go, could see the trees now and vaguely through the haze the white line of beach. Sign of the *Baltrum* or any craft there was none.

The gulls were thick on the sands, held maybe from the distant fishing grounds by the haze they loathe. No sign of other living thing was there and no sign that any one had been since the *Baltrum* had weighed anchor on the morning that seemed so long ago.

Kane rang the engines off, then astern. Then came the order, "Let go!"

He dropped down from the bridge, helped to get the boat over and then, with Tearle and Lomax at the oars and Dicky in the bow, he took the yoke lines.

Not one of them spoke, not one of them dared to utter what the silence and desolation and the absence of any sign of sand disturbances was saying to them: "You've done Morgan—he's missed the place—he's never been here."

"He's never been here!" cried the terns while the "Ha! ha! ha!" of the laughing gulls from the southern spit answered back through the haze as the stem of the boat grounded, and Dicky, springing out, helped the others to run her up.

"Well, what do you think?" said Kane, standing for a moment, his hand pushing back his hair and his eyes wandering round. "Seems we've done 'em—eh? Seems——" He stopped short, went forward a few paces and knelt down. "No, b'gosh!" he cried, "they've done *us*." He pointed to a footstep almost imperceptible, yet there.

"Sure," said Lomax, "and there's another."

Dicky hardly heard him. He had broken away from the others and was running toward the trees.

Here, midway between the trees, in the deep sand between the mounds of earth from which the trees grew, was a pit; in the pit, half sanded over, lay two shovels, heart-shaped Spanish shovels—the ones they had bought at Teneriffe. There were no mounds of sand beside the pit to betray its existence from a distance; the westerly wind had blown them away.

When the others came up they found Dicky on his knees by the pit like a person by a grave. It was a grave. The grave of all his hopes and ambitions, of Sheila and her future—everything.

He didn't say a word, but just pointed. He couldn't have spoken just then, for his lips were as dry as pumice stone and his throat constricted. A moment like this takes a couple of years off the life of a man; it hits the very life centers and leaves a stain on his mind never quite to be eradicated.

To the end of his life Dicky would be liable to dream of that pit in the sand, those shovels, those voices deriding him that were yet only the voices of the gulls that haunted the cay.

Lomax was just going to jump into the pit when Kane stopped him.

"This is where you dug the stuff in?" said he to Dicky.

Dicky nodded.

"Your shovels?"

"Yes," said Dicky, regaining his voice, "ours. There's no use us bothering. We're done."

Kane said nothing for a moment. He seemed turning something over in his mind.

"Sure it's just here?" asked he.

"Yes."

"Well," said Kane, "I'm used to sand. This hole's been dug a couple of days maybe, maybe not so much, but what gets me is that those footsteps down there on the beach were left some time last night. They're new, and there's only the tracks of two men. There's not a trace of a step round here because this is all powder sand; the beach stuff is harder. But it's not hard enough to hold a man's traces for any time if there's a wind blowing.

"Those tracks were made after the calm fell at sundown last night, that I'd swear. There's more'n that. You noticed the rum look of the beach sand, same as if it'd been swept. That's crabs. Crab swarms come up here same as they do on the spit south of Caicos. Night's their time, and last night they were here—those indications aren't more'n a few hours old. Well, those man tracks were made after the crabs had been, else the crabs would have wiped them out. I tell you folk there were men here, two men, not more'n a few hours ago. Well, that being so, where's their boat? Unless they went in a power boat or a rowboat, which isn't likely, how'd they get away? It's been dead calm since sundown."

"There's no show of a boat having been beached or pushed off," said Lomax.

"No," said Kane, "because it's high tide. If she'd beached or put off at low water or half flood, her traces would be covered. You can get into the pit, Lomax, if you want to, but you're wastin' your time."

He stood with arms folded and brow contracted while Lomax, dropping into the hole, grubbed about, finding nothing. Then he turned back to the water's edge, the others following, and took his stand by the boat.

Kane had twenty years' experience of the cays and islands, of the ports and harbors, of the tricks of men and sand. He knew for a certainty that two men had been on the beach quite recently; the crabs he had never seen had told him that; but Kane had also a sixth sense, half psychic, half common, born, perhaps, from his long trafficking with events. He felt almost certain in his mind that these two men he had never seen were from the *Baltrum*, and that the *Baltrum* had been here only a few hours ago. He smelled her. How then had she put out without any wind to fill her sails?

She was gone—how?

Standing considering this matter, he suddenly struck himself on the side of his head with the flat of his hand.

"Say," cried he, turning to Dicky, "has this chap Morgan been used to the waters round about here?"

"I think so," said Dicky. "He was with Mr. Corder, first officer on his yacht, and they used to be often round here."

"Get aboard," cried Kane.

He seized the starboard gunnel of the boat and helped to run her out.

"What's up?" asked Lomax as he took an oar.

"Get aboard," said Kane. "Put your backs into it. The blighters have let her drift, that's what they've done: finished getting the stuff aboard her, couldn't get away for want of wind and funked staying—pulled the hook up and let her go on the current. That's what they've done. It runs hard from here and strikes right northeast—three knots maybe it would be, with no wind to break it."

They scrambled on board, the boat was had in and Hank, who had been playing a game of patience with the old greasy pack that never left him, came forward. He had been playing with one eye on the cards and one on the exploring party.

"I reckon those chaps have got us," said Hank.

"I reckon they haven't," said Kane. "Get down to the stokehold and swing a shovel. Where are the men? Raise steam on her."

He called to Lomax and Tearle to stand by the winch. It was a steam winch fed from the boilers. Then he went up to the bridge and stood by the wheel, looking across the cay to the sea beyond.

The visibility had become a bit better with the climbing sun, but it was true heat-haze weather. Supersummer. Weather so gorgeous that one forgot the heat, weather that suggested less the tropics than an English July of the old-fashioned type—magnificent.

"We've just got to steer nor'east with the current," said Kane to Dicky, who had come up and was standing beside him. "If what I'm thinking is true we'll hit them unless this durned haze turns to fog. If what I'm thinkin's bunkum, we won't." He called down the speaking tube to the engine room, then he shouted to Tearle to start the winch, and the rattle of the winch pawls sounding across the cay made the gulls rise in flocks, rise and scream and pass in a cloud like a spiral nebula beyond the southern spit, only to return and circle far above as the ringing of the engine-room bell started the engines and Kane at the wheel turned the spokes to starboard.

They sheared away from the beach and then, Kane altering the course, they rounded the north spur of the cay and headed nor'east, the heat haze holding them in a gauzy blue circle, a magic haze of mist giving visibility now for less than a mile.

"Oh, cuss the thing!" said Kane. "If we had clear weather we'd spot them. They're dough dishin' round somewhere on the current line, I'd swear to that, but whether we'll hit them, or miss them by a foot there's no saying—by a foot. I tell you in this sort of thickness if you can just see a thing a mile off, and shove it a foot farther, it's gone."

With his eye on the binnacle card he relapsed into speechlessness.

One thing was certain: if his suppositions were right and if the message that the footsteps and the crabs had given him was not a lying message, and the theory built on it not a house on sand, the *Baltrum* and her crew would not be far off.

Very likely Morgan was within earshot, for the trumping of the engines would carry across long distances of his calm dead-silent water.

And what a row they were making just now.

Antonio on the deck below looked up at Kane.

"De engines are knocking," said Antonio.

"Yes, damn them!" said Kane. He knew it was the packing of the piston that was at fault, that and a lot of other things. The engines were not suffering alone from the carelessness of Antonio; age had its grip on them. Age and neglect.

The rest at Crab Cay had broken them down. You often find that in men and machinery; it is a dangerous thing sometimes to rest. If they could have gone on driving they might have made those engines keep going till the bunkers were swept. It was easier for them to go than stop, but the fatal rest had given them time to think; things had contracted with cooling, packings had found themselves insufficient to hold the steam.

There was nothing dangerous, but they were working in a steam bath that nearly choked Hank, who had come down as a consulting physician.

"They're deader'n doughnuts," said Hank. "Goin' because they've forgot to stop—now they're remembering. Gosh, it's like a sheep coughing. It's not us; it's the packin', and we hadn't any other. And them nuts in the cylinder head—they weren't much more than solid rust. There she goes."

With a vast shudder the engines died and ceased to move. There was no need to open steam cocks to save the boilers, steam was exuding from all sorts of places where it shouldn't.

Still he opened taps and things and they came on deck in a cloud to find Kane leaving the bridge.

The firemen came up. They would not be bothered any more with rake and shovel and that was a comfort. All the same, the situation was unpleasant.

It was no longer a question of the gold; it was a question of the current taking them out to sea, sweeping them into the Atlantic on a helpless hulk.

The *Baltrum* would be in quite a different position. She had masts and sails. There was nothing at all on the torpedo boat that could be used for locomotion. They had the boat, it is true, but they had no mast and sail for her. They might row, but had they all crowded into it the boat would have been dangerously overloaded. They were at least eighteen or twenty miles northeast of the cay. To row back they would have to row against the current. They had no boat compass.

It was not a cheerful prospect. As Kane stood considering it, the glassy circle of sea within the haze ring dulled to the northeast and the rag of bunting on the jackstaff gave a lift.

Wind was coming, heralded by the phantom of a breeze that died off and then revived and strengthened.

"It's going to clear," said Kane.

"It's clearin'," said Hank.

They held silent for a moment gazing to windward.

Then as they looked a picture showed revealed by the thinning haze, the vaguest outline of a boat with sails set, ghostly, vague, a phantom that seemed to have materialized from the mist.

Then as the flag on the jackstaff lifted again, and the wind came stronger, the picture strengthened in outline and the sun laid a finger on hull and canvas.

It was the *Baltrum*.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE "BALTRUM."

OVER with the boat," cried Kane.

The boat was got over; Dicky, Hank, Tearle and Lomax crowded in, and Kane took the yoke lines. The distance was perhaps a mile and a half. The movement of the air had strengthened to a steady breeze and the sails of the *Baltrum*, clear to the sight and with the sun full upon them, filled now to the wind and now, as though the helm had been shifted, shook the wind from them.

Kane, staring straight ahead, suddenly spoke.

"She's derelict. Put your back into it, boys. Derelict she is and driftin'. Here's luck—make her go—make her go!"

He had no need to urge the rowers.

Yes, the *Baltrum* was derelict. Clawing and snatching at the wind, now filling, now falling off, she shouted the fact across the sea. As they came up with her no sign of life showed above the rail and as they fastened on, no man stood to receive or prevent them.

Kane was the first on deck. After him came Dicky, then Tearle, Lomax and Hank.

On the deck now shadowed by the mainsail, now sunlit as the main boom swung to the wind, lay two forms, Morgan and Hearn, stretched on their backs dead—with sleep. Dead with exhaustion.

Kane, kneeling by Morgan, shook him.

"Wake up, you blighter," cried Kane.

Morgan's eyes half opened, closed, opened again. Then he moved, lifted himself on his elbow and stared at the men before him. He saw Kane and Lomax and he saw Hank and Tearle, who were getting Hearn on to his feet, but he did not see Dicky.

Dicky had dived below. There was no sign of the gold on deck nor in the saloon. He made for the ballast.

Yes, there it was, laid just as when they had left Hildersditch. The extra sand ballast they had taken up at Crab was gone. How these men must have labored, how they must have worked and strove, discharging the sand ballast, digging up the gold, casting it block by block on board, stowing it —always in dread of pursuit or the coming of some fishing boat. No wonder that sleep had fallen on them like that. Well, it was over, and everything was right at last—or seemed so.

He rose up and came on deck and gave the news to Kane, who was standing over Morgan, sitting now propped against the port bulwarks. Hearn was on his feet, leaning against the rail.

"Good," said Kane when he got the news. Then turning to Morgan, he took up again something that he had been saying while Dicky was below.

"So you hadn't no other man with you," said Kane. "Well, just tell that to Mr. Sebright."

"Morgan," said Dicky, "what have you done with Longley?"

The sight of Dicky coming on deck had brought the color to Morgan's cheeks. The others had been quite unknown to him. Where they had come from he could not tell, or why they had asked him the questions they did.

Now he knew everything at once. He struggled to his feet and stood holding on to the rail, then he hooked his arm round it.

"Longley," said he. "Don't be asking me about Longley. Ask Hearn. He knows."

"You lie," said Hearn.

Kane, who had been watching both men, suddenly put up his hand before Dicky, who was about to speak. Then he turned like a tiger on Morgan and Hearn.

"One word more out of either of you two," said Kane, "and I'll clap you in the fo'c's'le and take you back to Havana, see? I want to hear nothing more about the chap Longley. I guess you're both liars. Now get forward. Tearle, take the wheel and run us down to the torp. Come below."

He took Dicky by the arm and they went below to the saloon.

"They've murdered him," said Dicky.

"Looks like it," said Kane. "That's why I stopped their jaw. Another moment and they'd have been accusing each other and then we'd have had to take them back to Havana to have them tried and hanged."

"Aren't you going to take them back?"

"Oh, gosh, no—where's the good? That chap Longley was either done in for his share of the money, or maybe in a quarrel, but there's no witnesses. Those chaps would never get hanged, but the whole of this story would come out—gold and all—and where would you be?"

"Then what are you going to do with them?" asked Dicky.

"Make them a present of the torp. Of course they'll get took off by some ship—bound to be—but they're muzzled. They never dare go back on us, or peach, or say a word; seems like Providence, don't it?"

They came on deck.

The *Baltrum* was hove to a couple of cable lengths away from the torpedo boat. Kane ordered Tearle and Lomax to bring the two negroes on board; when that was done he ordered Morgan and Hearn into the boat and rowed them off.

Dicky watched them crawling up the side of the hulk followed by Kane. Kane, when he led them on deck, seemed lecturing them. He didn't take long over it and they did not seem to be making any reply to him.

Hank, who was standing beside Dicky

chewing tobacco and spitting into the water, chuckled.

"Them chaps have done a lot of work," said Hank, "an' they'll do a lot more if they want to get thim ingins to go. I reckon they'll get through most of the grub on board her before they get picked up by some ship, and the worrying will do them good."

It was the first time Hank had held any conversation with Dicky since coming on board. Then he turned and went below to continue the interminable game of patience, which the events of life were always interrupting.

Dicky saw Kane drop into the boat which turned back to the *Baltrum.* In all the wheel of sea stripped now of haze to the horizon there was sign neither of wing of bird or sail of ship, nothing indicative of life but the *Baltrum,* and the hulk and the boat moving toward the *Baltrum.* They got the boat on board and, Lomax going to the wheel, they put the *Baltrum* before the wind.

The two men on the hulk, watching, stood motionless as two figures carved from wood. Then as the ketch drew far away, one of them, Morgan, Dicky thought, ran along the deck and up to the bridge and then down again to the deck; ran forward and then aft and then forward again; the tiny figure moved like quicksilver and Dicky shuddered as he watched it reappear on the bridge, only to vanish and resume the race along the deck.

He went below and straight to the ballast. He did not go to reassure himself of its safety, he went urged by the instinct that draws men to the dramatic, the curious and the terrible. There before him lay the sinister rust-colored painted pigs, the sheer mass of dead metal that was yet a machine infinitely more powerful and intricate than any engine conceived by man, a machine that took men on to act as its working parts, destroyed their bodies with labor and their souls with lust and flung them away, only to renew itself with the bodies and souls of other men.

So it seemed to Dicky, and again, as he looked at those metal oblongs, it seemed to him that he was looking at something more wonderful than radium; at energy, condensed, trapped, always active, always ready to strike, yet never diminishing in volume and power; not though it worked till the end of time.

He would have been afraid of this thing but for the fact that fear was taken from him by the thought of Sheila.

The thought of Sheila, actually like a good fairy, had been with him all the way from Havana. He had worked for her, not for the gold, and so was not its slave.

He rose up and came to the saloon; the thought had just come to him, and only now, of the money he had left in his locker.

He found the locker. It had been ransacked, everything in it was turned upside down, but the precious bundle of bank notes was there, safe in a corner. Morgan had found them, of course, and left them there, thinking them safe enough as long as he was on the ship. It seemed a good omen.

When he reached the deck again the hulk had all but vanished from sight astern and the gulls of Crab Cay were shewing in flight far away on the port bow. The *Baltrum,* going free before the increasing wind, was on her course for Havana, and Kane, standing by Tearle at the wheel, had the air of a workman well satisfied with a completed job.

"There's two things I like about this hooker," said Kane as Dicky drew up to him. "First and foremost she don't want stoking and oiling, and second, the damned engines can't break down."

CHAPTER XLV.

THE END OF THE CRUISE.

AND was that the end of the labors and intrigues, the worries and dark works that seemed inseparably connected with the gold of the *Baltrum?* Oh, dear me, no.

From the moment when the *Baltrum* touched sides with the Poirez wharf and Dicky departed for the hotel, leaving his fortune and Sheila's in the hands of Kane, there began a series of intrigues and dark works in the subfinancial world of Cuba that Mordiaz alone could cast light on and that were guessed by Dicky owing to the queer manner and absences of Bompard, the disappearance of Madame Bompard, who had gone to Santiago on a mission, the vanishing of Kane, who went to Matanzas, and the fact that Mordiaz, when Dicky called one day to make inquiries, repudiated any knowledge of any business that Kane might have been engaged in.

The conversion of nearly a million in bullion into fluid money, and with secrecy, takes time. But a day came when Bompard entered the lounge of the Mercedes, his hat on the back of his head, a big cigar in his mouth and all anxiety gone from his face. Finding Dicky and Sheila, he linked arms with them, whirled them into the street along the Calle Antonio, across the Plaza del Sol into a building and up a stone staircase to a door marked "Saumarez."

Through an office where typewriters were busy into a private room filled with cigar smoke and where at a desk table sat a yellow little man to whom Bompard said: "This is the gentleman, Saumarez."

"Oh, this is the gentleman," said Saumarez. He made a little bow to Sheila and bade them be seated. Then opening a drawer he took out a filled-in check.

"A gentleman," said Saumarez, "who wishes not to be named, has left with me a benefaction to be delivered to you, sare—for services of great value rendered to him in past times. He wishes not to be named, nor do I know his name. With me he left this amount in notes of the Bank of Brazil, in dollar notes of Amerique and in a draft on Gundermann's payable to bearer, which I have deposited in amount in the treasury of the Bank of Cuba and of which this is the chaïque."

He handed the check to Dicky.

Bompard had asked Dicky's Christian name yesterday, and Dicky now knew why.

It was a large pale yellow check made out to R. Sebright, and Dicky read after the dollar mark these figures: 1,200,000. Twelve hundred thousand dollars—two hundred and forty thousand pounds sterling!

Out in the street, holding Sheila by the arm and making for the Bank of Cuba, Dicky felt neither pleasure nor excitement. He was stunned. After all the labor and difficulties, the sweat and toil, the suspense, the heart burnings, this great success, this enormous fortune had knocked him out of time. The thing was so complete.

These experts of Havana into whose hands he had drifted by chance had—it was like a beautiful surgical operation—separated the gold from its past, cut all avenues connecting it with them and him, converted it into currency—and played fair with him. It was the full knowledge that these men were so great in their strength, so subtle in their dealings, so widespread in their connections, that gave him the sense of security which made the punch of success so powerful. There was no dread attached to this money, no anxiety.

"Oh, Dicky—Dicky—Dicky!" Sheila kept saying; she could not find any more words. She was white, on the verge of tears, leading him, for during Dicky's absence she had explored Havana thoroughly and knew every building. Looking at them as they went you would have said they were the victims of some tragedy.

As they drew near the great bank building with its flight of marble steps and as Sheila pointed it out, he began to come to.

Halfway up the steps he stopped, placed his hand on Sheila's shoulder and laughed. It was all coming to him now with a rush, the pleasure, the joy and the excitement of the new life made possible for Sheila and himself by the piece of yellow paper in his pocket, that note of introduction to Midas signed in an impossible scrawl:

Alphonse Saumarez.

That is the end of the story of the *Baltrum's* gold and the beginning of the life story of two people who were married a fortnight later at the British consulate in the presence of Bompard and Larry, who was no longer a guest on board of the *Dulcinea.*

Shortt, who had got back from his insane journey to Santiago to find Morgan and two of his best sailors gone, and Larry in their place, was about to fire the unwelcome guest off his ship when the latter, taking him aside, unveiled the story of the stolen *Baltrum* in such a way that the unhappy captain, fogged, bewildered and amazed, almost began to believe himself an accomplice of the thief.

A cable from James calling the yacht to New York gave him an excuse for departing before the return of the *Baltrum;* but no cable ever came from James to Dicky and Sheila; no letter, no word; for James could excuse a man for calling him a good many names, but never for calling him a quitter.

THE END.

The first installment of another serial by Mr. Stacpoole will appear shortly.

The Original Prospector

By J. H. Greene

Author of "Something New," "A Queened Pawn," Etc

There was gold in Drewitt and gold in his mine—and Shannon's business was finding gold.

PADDY SHANNON walked through the town named after him, the town his lucky pick had evoked from the west Australian desert by striking his big slug—three pounds of virgin gold.

Trees still stood in the center of the one street, gaunt hungry-looking gums; the houses were of tacked Hessian frame, tents, lean-tos of all kinds, set in vague alignment.

This hot afternoon Shannon's was somnolent; men slept in shadows, only stirring as the sun crept to their faces; men debated monosyllabically by their camp embers over uncertain new finds; the mill of the Iron Duke grinding worthless stone throbbed in the hills. Shannon's was worked out; it was a duffer field, fading fast from its brief hectic magnificence of a year ago.

Paddy looked as woebegone, as exhausted as the field he had discovered. His tousled hair sprouted through his hat; his shirt was ribbons; his trousers were split to the knees; he wore but one boot, for his left foot was slippered in a "Prince Albert"—a wrapping of sacking tied around with string. Even his prospecting dishes were eaten by rust; his shovel showed daylight through the blade. He was red with the dust of the fields; more dust blew on him with the winds from beyond; the droughty desert was reaching for his bones, as it had taken most of his flesh.

Suddenly he stopped and began shoveling into his dish. The first rattle of the gravel stirred the loafers. Not for months had any one dry blown round the town; all this ground had been tried, condemned, abandoned. Shannon's was amused at any one, on this late day, prospecting Victoria Street.

Paddy saw them coming. Some carried dishes. Paddy dropped his and began pacing out his claim and pegging it out with anything he could find—twigs, splinters, meat tins. Secure in his possession of his claim he began pouring the earth from one dish held high to his shoulder into the other at his feet. The winnowing wind that was his partner in separating the heavier pebbles and the heaviest gold—if any—blew a thick cloud of dust right into the doorway of Reilly's general store. Reilly, aroused from his doze, appeared through the haze, hot tongued and flaming. With a volley of bull-driving profanity he ordered Paddy away.

"I've got a perfect right, Reilly, to prospect here or anywhere," answered Paddy with exasperating composure, "so long as I repair surface damage."

"Ye're ruining me stock. Look at them shirts," gasped and gesticulated Reilly.

"Ye'll have to charge what they're worth now."

A vicious little whirlwind choked Reilly with Paddy's tailings.

"After all I've done for you——" he managed to splutter.

"You—— But conthra account, what have I done for you? Didn't I find this field? Ain't this Shannon's? My name's on the map, not yours. Dry-blowing prospectors out of their gold has made you weak in your moral arithmetic, Reilly. You made your pile out of men like me. You're rich and soft and——"

The grinning crowd grew larger; Shannon's was promised a fight; Reilly was bigger and better fed than Paddy; the fight would possess a sporting uncertainty with a political bias, for many agreed with Paddy's verdict on the storekeeper.

But Reilly had retired and closed his door. He knew he could not oust Paddy from that claim.

"Reilly," shouted Paddy easily through the thin fabric of the house, "give me a bag of flour and a little tea and I'll withdraw me remarks as unparliamentary. I'll pay you out of me next slug. I got a color yesterday at the Six Mile. I'll pull up me pegs here—and I'll sweep out your store."

Not a word came from within.

"And me and Reilly was mates once," continued Paddy, transferring his eloquence to the crowd. "But he quit prospecting; went to the bad; worked for wages; started storekeeping. Soon he'll buy white collars and a bell topper, and go east telling the papers he's a pioneer of Shannon's. Him—that refuses a bite to me, the man that found the field, the original prospector——"

The door of the store opened suddenly and Reilly ventured his head out.

"He's a liar!" shouted Reilly. "I've stood by him again and again. He owes me hundreds of pounds for grub and water. He had his pile and blew it in on barmaids and race courses and champagne, and now he expects——"

Reilly withdrew his head and turned the lock, for Paddy was rolling up his sleeves, as delighted as a dog that has drawn a rabbit from its hole.

"Them's fight words, Reilly. A just provocation any jury would admit. Come out—be a man for a minute. Fight me for a week's tucker."

Paddy tugged at the door handle till the flimsy structure tottered to its shallow foundations.

"Not here, not now," answered the voice from within. "Last time we fought you wrecked me premises. Take him away."

At the first touch of a leading hand Paddy flung its owner from him. The man accepted his throw in the dust. Paddy's six feet of lank, bush-trained bone and muscle was impressive. He surveyed the crowd with contempt; they were mostly drifters from the city who had expected easy gold; the huddlers by their kind, afraid of the lonely searchings demanded by the desert beyond.

"Don't any of you lay hands on me. Don't you know who I am? I am Paddy Shannon, the original prospector. I gave this field to the world, I gave it to all of you."

He waved his hand royally to the wretched dwellings, the vacant worked-out alluvial fields, the stark hills, the inscrutable immense distances.

The crowd was not impressed by this generosity; many were as ragged and as hungry as Paddy, weak resourceless despairers, lured from their streets by delusions, trapped by those distances, merely waiting on their luck, or on somebody else's luck. Their numbers gave them courage to jeer.

"What's the good of your blasted field?"

"There's no alluvial."

"No reefs; the leases are laying off men."

"There never was any gold."

"What do ye know about gold?" shouted Paddy, "ye sweepings of Little Bourke Street and Wooloomooloo! Laying down in daylight, thinking you're doing a perish if you're out of cigarettes, thinking you're thirsty if you miss your morning beer; talking to me! I found this field and I'll find it again—I'll find it again."

He strode off with a strut; the defiance of that ragged figure clinking his tools awakened a faint response. The man Paddy had thrown was gathering stones to pelt him. He was restrained; for a moment another fight was imminent; but the sun, the dust, the desolation, the enveloping futility settled on the men; stones and arguments were dropped; languidly they slouched back to their sheltering shadows.

Paddy's camp was on a hillside of one of the Last Chance leases at the Three Mile. He crossed the alluvial gully where he had made his first find, sinking knee-deep in billowy heaps of soft red tailings. The workings had been shallow; bed rock was but a few feet down. That sand, first stirred by Paddy's pick and dating back to the primeval fires that had exuded the gold had been worked over and over by the sheeplike men who had come after him. Dry blown by dishes, by sieves, by bellows—machines that caught the finest fly speck, the gully was gutted of its gold. The men had left it; it would harden to its old inertness; barren grass, salt bush, and scrub would sprout from the rare rains; the heaps of tins, the bones of a dog picked by blackfellows, a cart with one wheel lifting its shafts like arms palsied in appeal, would be assumed, absorbed, obliterated by the bush.

Despite the faith he had shouted Paddy had to face hard facts when he reached his camp. His water bag was dry halfway down, his tucker nearly gone.

Across the gully were the Iron Duke leases, a stretch of mines, the clutch of a big Eastern syndicate. Windlasses, piles of diorite, gray granite, and yellow shale crowned the hills—faint and impotent scratchings on the prostrate body of the bush. Few of the windlasses were manned; the little engine of Iron Duke Number One puffed as if every gasp were its last; the mill ground out the poor quartz in a death rattle.

Paddy could see the duck-trousered manager of the Iron Duke scratching his head. Many heads were being scratched this summer over the future of Shannon's. Shafts cost money to sink; machinery had to be transported by team and ate more gold than it won, owing to the high price of water; shareholders were becoming shy of calls for developing expenses; syndicates were getting shaky; shares were down to pence with no buyers. As a reefing field Shannon's had not arrived.

Paddy needed tobacco more than food; he prospected his pockets to the last speck of leaf; he scraped up barely half a pipeful. The Iron Duke manager was smoking a cigar. Paddy did not want to approach him. Those clean-laundered fellows from the East who wasted water by washing their clothes annoyed him.

The whinnying of a rough ax-hewn windlass drum and the clanging of buckets floated down to him. Looking up the hill he saw the Last Chance top man hauling up the man below. Paddy sneered. The men had timed their knock-off hour well, for after a few minutes of pretentious cleaning of the shaft head the Iron Duke whistle tooted its short gasps; it was economic of its steam. The men dropped their shovels and reached for their water bags.

"Loafers—eight-hour-a-day men. Pioneers—in me eye," Paddy growled scornfully as the men scuttled from the shaft.

"Got a bit o' tobacco, mate?" he asked.

"Just bit my last. God knows where the next's coming from; we're just laid off."

"Laid off? Has your boss sunstroke? Him with the likeliest lease on the field. Just over the alluvial of the Original Find! Look at the lay o' them rocks. He's on the right side—Iron Duke ain't. The reefs that shed that gold must be east."

Paddy proclaimed his prospector's pick-and-shovel geology to indifferent ears; the man was hurrying away.

"Don't know nothing about that," he shouted back out of the shadows of the gully, "I'm not a miner. I'm not trying to be. I'm going back to the Australia with jobs and shower baths—s'long."

Paddy was left alone on the hillside; the swift night was invading the gully; Last Chance was closing down, cutting its men to the minimum of the regulations, perhaps preparing to give up altogether.

The shadows closed in around Paddy; he could see lights lit on Iron Duke; they would be quitting soon; he would be the last on the field where he had been the first.

He lit his pipe; the lean filling burned out in a few puffs. He came to a decision and climbed the hill to argue, to persuade, and if necessary to abuse Drewitt of the Last Chance for giving up. He had never spoken to Drewitt—a fat little fellow who rode around his leases on a bay horse and who wore a puggaree on his new straw hat; another of those mining managers out of brokers' offices.

Drewitt's camp was in a hollow, three hills away. It was dark when Paddy saw the illumined canvas of his tent through the wind shield of laced brambles. Paddy felt for the opening in this hedge, scorning the city man who fenced himself in like this.

The camp fire burned in the inclosure; something savory bubbled in the billy; Drewitt could cook if he could not mine.

The tent flaps were down, but on the slant sides Paddy saw the shadow of Drewitt's pug nose, of his double chin and his little mustache. Then another shadow lifted to Drewitt's face, the shadow of a hand with something in it; an abnormally long finger seemed pointing to Drewitt's mouth. Paddy went cold to his heart as he recognized the outlines of a revolver. The weapon was magnified by projection to the dimensions of a cannon.

With a strangulated cry Paddy leaped to the tent door and lifted the flap. Drewitt was sitting on his bunk, before his candle, toying with a Colt.

"Don't—for God's sake, man! Don't! You don't know how sorry you'll be—you'll feel such a fool!"

Paddy was afraid to reach for that revolver, afraid lest his words should precipitate the pull of Drewitt's finger. Drewitt did not appear surprised; his face pink with its first tan was wrinkled with a frown and a crooked smile.

"How would I know?" he murmured. "I was just wondering something like that."

"I did it once when I blew in my last tenner in Melbourne. I jumped off Prince's Bridge. It seemed years till I struck the water. Hundreds of years of feeling a fool. And I knew I'd feel it after. I knew—I know—I know it more'n I know anything. Give me that revolver."

"If you wish. I was only cleaning it."

There was a crow's wing feather, some soiled rags and an oil can on the box before Drewitt; but there was also a box of cartridges; the revolver had been cleaned, but it had also been loaded. Paddy was wondering if he had been another kind of fool; Drewitt was so collected, so amused.

"Sit down, old man. There's some tobacco in that tin. What made you jump off Prince's Bridge and what happened? Were you picked out of the water?"

"Picked myself. Swam ashore. Was arrested and discharged with a caution."

"What did it—drink?"

"That was contributory," said Paddy regaining his vocabulary. "But it was the town. Too many people that didn't know me when my money was gone. I wanted me bush. And the steamship company wouldn't trust me with a lift back. Me—that had started the rush and packed their ould tubs with men and horses and cargo. They said I'd have to wait till the rush was over. So, with the drink and me disgust, I told them I'd swim back—and I tried."

"So you're Paddy Shannon?"

"Yez. Paddy Shannon that found the field, that got the Reward Claim and a town named after him. But just now—if you could spare me a little tea and flour I'd be obliged to yer."

"Of course; but I don't think I ought to let you keep that revolver."

Drewitt reached for it.

"Why not?" asked Paddy.

"You're flat broke in this God-abandoned country—after all that luck. What can you do? What is left to you to do but——"

Drewitt's hand closed on the weapon which had slipped from Paddy's fingers. The Irishman had instinctively let go; he hauled himself erect, stiff with defiance, with scorn.

"You lied to me, man," he said. "You were going to blow your brains out just because you were broke. As if that's a reason! You don't know what being broke means. Come out in the spinifex with me, to the north, to the Never-never; go broke; do a perish there; with your tongue hanging black from your mouth, your skin burning, out in nowhere with nothing and nobody, dying of thirst without God, man or devil to care."

Drewitt dropped his face into his hands, and his answer came from between his fingers.

"I've never had that experience, Shannon, but—read that letter. It's from our directors, ordering me to let the lease go."

"Ah, to the devil with companies and directors—bell-toppered bandits."

"But here's another—from my wife. I've sunk all I had in this venture. Your perish sounds pretty bad, but it was only your own. How about seeing your family doing a perish?"

Paddy, with his head near the ridgepole, looked down on Drewitt, but no longer in scorn, rather in pity, in an endeavor to understand. The little man did not whine, or rave; he summed up his situation like an accountant.

"I had heard how strangely gold happens over here, upsetting all the experts back East. So I thought a know-nothing like me would be as good a manager as any, at least as far as shallow sinking. So I took the job. I have thrown all I possess down those holes. I—a man with a wife and six children. How's that for being a fool, Shannon?"

Paddy was listening and at the same time reading the letter on the flamboyantly letter-headed company's paper.

"Is it your company's lying down or you?" he asked keenly.

"I've been advising them to keep trying, to sink new shafts. But the shareholders are tired of paying calls. Maybe they're right. We're putting in more gold than ever we'll take out. It's foolish to go on."

"And you'll be out of a job?"

"Out of everything—out in your Never-never—out in the never was—the never will be."

The little man's mournful crooked smile perplexed Paddy, who was used to men who hit back at their troubles.

"Then how about going mate with me?" he said, sitting by Drewitt and offering his labor-lined hand. Drewitt took it, but without warmth.

"Thanks awfully, Mr. Shannon."

"I'm Paddy to me mates. And you're Ted. Misters only rob each other, in my experience."

"All right, Paddy; but what are we to go mates in? Twice nothing is still nothing."

"To blazes with your arithmetic. It's that that's ruining prospecting and prospectors. Look at Reilly. I am going to jump this lease—for you and me. Your conscience will be aisy; your company is deserting you. We'll work it together—on your tucker and my experience."

"But it's no good; not a streak of quartz, not a sign of a reef on it."

"How do yer know? You haven't tried. Them loafers you had weren't prospectors —they were just digging a hole, and spitting on their hands and lighting their pipes between every stroke. You and me are going to work till our skeletons can fall down the shaft but can't crawl out."

Drewitt had the necessary papers. Paddy filled them and the two came out into the wonderful starlight to fix notices to the boundary posts. Paddy pulled up the old posts, tore the old papers from their wrapping of wire, slipped on the new ones, claiming the lease for Shannon and Drewitt, and then put the posts back in the holes.

"That makes them new pegs; this lease is ours," said Paddy.

Drewitt had been drawn by Paddy's fervor; but stumbling over worthless workings, avoiding the black mouths of shafts so like the gun barrel he had gaped into, crawling about Last Chance, a mite against the glittering galaxies above, Drewitt's soul shriveled again, to his fears, to his suspicions.

"I expect you've found something, Paddy. An outcrop we've missed, eh? A leader? Why keep me in the dark? Between mates, you know——"

The big breath Paddy drew warned Drewitt that he had blundered.

"I have found nothing. Only consideration for your miserable pen-and-ink education prevents me asking you to put up your hands. Your Assam silk suit has stopped me knocking you down the gully. You think I've got the dirty drop in me; I'm a lease pirate, a pettifogging jumper; a wardens' court prospector with law books for me dishes. I'm taking what your crowd is throwing away. So far as I know I have only a diorite quarry. But I'm willing to give it a try."

"But why—why should you?"

Paddy lifted his haggard face to the sky; in the hollows below his eyebrows were lights, gleams of an indomitable soul, star dust of worlds to be.

"Ye see, I have no hen nor chicks to blow me brains out for. Shannon's is all I've got. If this proves a reefing field, Shannon's will be a real town with thrams, and theaters, and churches and restaurants and hotels and—and maybe a race course."

Long before whistle time next morning Paddy and Drewitt stood on the top of the shaft. Drewitt had changed his Assam silk for moleskins and a flannel shirt. Paddy lowered him in the bucket, and then dropped himself down the ladder. This ladder was a tree trunk, the stumps of the branches serving for rungs; it was used as an emergency in case the rough-and-ready ax-hewn windlass should jam. The shaft was barely twenty feet deep.

They stood on the mullock, Paddy inspecting the walls of gray, uncrystalline diorite; above his head was gray granite; near the surface, shale and ironstone gravel. Paddy thought he could see the faint thread of a quartz leader.

"I say stop sinking and drive west," he said, slapping the rock.

Paddy showed Drewitt how to hold the drill while he swung the hammer. Drewitt took his schooling; it was one thing to shout orders down a hole; quite another to hold the drill steady to take the blow, turn it in the hole after every hit, not to get nervous at the heavy clank of the steel, not to shrink, or have a shaking wrist, or stir the fraction of an inch. Paddy swung the hammer in that narrow shaft, getting full force of the swing without hitting the walls; the man on the drill had to be as sure, as steady.

After some hours, when the shaft was dust laden, its air thick from the breathing of the two men, when the sun, creeping down its sides, glinting on the crystals of the granite, made it hot and almost sunny, Drewitt wanted a drink, a smoke, a spell. Paddy grumbled.

"That's how your wages men work," he said.

When the hole was big enough to blast, Paddy slid in the two sticks of dynamite. Drewitt wanted to put the cap on the fuse.

"No, Ted, your hand has the jim-jams. You'd touch off the fulminate. Go up. I'll fire her."

Drewitt climbed up the ladder while Paddy set the firing cartridge. The sputter of the lit fuse reached Drewitt's ears as he was near the top. Involuntarily he hurried. The tree turned and shook with his unbalanced climbing; he caught at the shale; a shower of it fell on Paddy's upturned, waiting face. The smoke of the fuse was pouring out of the top of the shaft before Paddy appeared.

"Never hurry after you've lit, Ted," he said gravely. "You know how many seconds you've got. Take advantage of 'em. A lot can happen in a second. It took me only one and a bit to fall off Prince's Bridge."

The thump of the dynamite interrupted his homily; only a small geyser spout of dust and gravel blew from the mouth of the shaft, for dynamite strikes down, and Drewitt tried to peer down the shaft; he was starting to descend.

"Wait, Ted. Them fumes has put many a good man out. Let's go to dinner and let her air."

"But the whistle hasn't blown," said Drewitt, anxious to atone for his earlier slackness.

"We won't work by whistles. To-morrow we'll start at daylight. Come on—you need grub, and so do I."

A week passed. Paddy shared Drewitt's camp fire and tucker. The two men were undisturbed. No one was interested enough to observe the change of notices on Last Chance. Last Chance was idle, but no one thought of jumping it. Drewitt was supposed to be hanging on to nothing, like the rest of Shannon's. Paddy was—well, no one thought of Paddy. He had drifted off somewhere—died somewhere.

The drive was now well in; the quartz leaders had grown thicker, determined in direction, pointing to a reef; the men were encouraged.

Near evening, on top, Paddy was examining a bucketful of quartz-streaked diorite hauled up from the last shot. He was turning a piece in the low light of the setting sun. He uttered a quiet grunt and handed the stone to Drewitt.

"Gold!" cried Drewitt.

"A color. Maybe we'll blow into the reef to-morrow."

Drewitt turned the faint smear, a mere paintbrush streak of yellow, till it glittered. It dazzled him; it was a sunrise of luck on the dark stone.

"Why not blow into it now?" he cried. "Why not work all night? You said we ought to. We have candles."

Paddy lit his pipe and looked at him solemnly. The nearer they had come to that reef the less optimistic Paddy had become. Drewitt had wondered if Paddy was repenting of taking up the lease. Now that they had actually struck gold he seemed as unpromising, as despairing, as the sorriest loafer in Shannon's.

"The reef—if it's there—won't run away, Ted. I ain't going to swing a hammer by candlelight."

Drewitt had to yield; Paddy had become manager, engineer, and the whole board of directors of Last Chance.

Drewitt asked a thousand questions on the way back to camp.

"The next shot will know. I don't," was the utmost of Paddy's answers.

Paddy turned in early. He had moved his camp over to Drewitt's; but he preferred rolling in his blankets by the fire to sleeping in Drewitt's tent. All night long he was disturbed by Drewitt tossing in his board bunk. Next morning Drewitt was first up; he boiled the billy; he fired the bacon; he talked all through breakfast.

"We must keep this find dark as long as we can," he said. "We haven't filed our papers at the warden's office yet. And when we get the lay of the reef we can take up some more leases. We'll need capital, of course, to hire men to hold them. And machinery later. I'd suggest a new company—say of twenty thousand shares at a pound apiece——"

"I see you have been doing night work; back in your Ballarat office again," said Paddy with a grin of scorn on noting further that Drewitt had buttoned his shirt at the neck and had put on a silk tie.

"I've been going into this," said Drewitt perkily. "That's the side I do understand, Shannon."

A flush of sudden anger burned in Paddy's tan.

"I am Paddy to me mates," he said quietly.

"Of course," said Drewitt, ignoring the triviality, "maybe the reef will strike through the Iron Duke leases. They're getting ready to quit. We can jump them and have the advantage of their developments. Lord, the whole field will be ours, Shannon."

Paddy arose hastily and strode away to the shaft; Drewitt, seeing nothing but soaring prices and battling brokers, followed.

He found Paddy back in the tunnel inspecting the wall; the blank stone was a cold shock to Drewitt's dream! it looked as black, as barren as ever. He waved his candle to and fro; no glint of gold answered him; the gray-and-white vein of quartz seemed barren till Paddy put his tongue to a streak; the gold gleamed, cleared of the dust of the last shot.

Drewitt shouted deliriously; he wanted to swing the hammer himself; he said he would give Paddy a rest. Paddy paid no attention, and lifted the hammer.

The new hole was drilled, the dynamite slipped in; Paddy came out in the daylight at the bottom of the shaft to fix the copper cap on the fuse. Drewitt had unwrapped the oily paper of the firing cartridge and nervously was gouging the dynamite with a stick to make a hole for the cap. His face was as yellow as the innocent, sugary-looking explosive. Paddy's hand, that had been reaching for the cartridge, dropped, sought his pocket and took out his pipe which he lit slowly.

"Ted," he said, "have you considered what you'll do if this turns out to be a duffer?"

"Can't. Do you think I don't know gold when I see it?" snarled Drewitt.

"No—but there mightn't be any more. There's no run to W. A. gold. If there's a reef it might pinch out. You'll need more than fly specks to catch investors if you want to be high cockalorum o' Shannon's."

Drewitt wet his lips; Paddy was right.

"Are you man enough to take a loss?" continued the man who had lost so much. "Can you climb out o' this hole and say 'I don't care; to hell with you; let me have another whack at you!' Ted, I don't like shooting this shot; I'm afraid for you. You're not our kind. If you—if you—— Man, put that Stock Exchange jamboree out o' yer head! I don't want the fuse to shoot off your Colt. Get up the ladder and let me shoot, and if it's a duffer we'll say, 'One to you!' and try again."

Paddy uncoiled the fuse that he had hung around his neck and crept into the tunnel.

Drewitt had taken Paddy's harangue with narrowing eyes, with a pinched, incredulous smile. He did not go up the ladder; he dropped to his knees and stealthily crept in after Paddy.

Paddy had slipped in the firing charge and was tamping it with pebbles when he became aware of Drewitt. He turned his head slightly and then continued his delicate work. He began paying out the fuse.

"Get back; I'm going to give her a long fuse."

He backed out, his heels driving Drewitt; the end of the fuse came out into the shaft between his feet as Paddy rose.

"Now, Mister Drewitt," said Paddy, replacing his pipe in his mouth from the ledge where he had left it, "why didn't you go up? Why did you come after me? You needn't answer. I know. Ye were spying on me and I know why."

"Of course you do. You know all the tricks," answered Drewitt jauntily. "I wanted to see those charges were in the hole. I wanted that wall really blown in.

I did not want the hole filled up with dirt; a shallow shot; a little dirt; a report that it's a duffer, Shannon."

Paddy bit into his pipestem.

"The dirty drop; it had to come out of you. Why didn't I let you pull that trigger? There'd be one less of you!"

The pipe had dropped from his clenched teeth and fallen between his feet. Red sparks spilled from its bowl on to the bared end of the fuse. The fuse lit and began sputtering. Drewitt saw it first.

"The fuse—the fuse!" he gasped.

"It will burn for one minute," cried Paddy, with exaltation in his face, sparks of a kindled soul leaping from his eyes. "Ye've got one minute, Drewitt, to make yourself a man."

The air was stifling with powder smoke; the writhing fuse was as alive as a snake; it jerked convulsively, spitting a stream of sparks at their legs, burning their trousers, their flesh. Drewitt tried to stamp on the fuse, but Paddy held him back.

"Forty-five seconds, me laddie buck. What's your time to the top, you and your paunch? Say you're sorry. Say ye've been a fool not to know an honest man. Ain't you got a bit o' God's gold in that fat mullock heap of your carcass?"

No medieval inquisitor could have been more fanatical than Paddy; till Drewitt suddenly ceased struggling.

"Can't you pull the fuse out of the hole in time?" he said.

"Of coorse—but I am prospectin' you."

"Let me do it!"

Drewitt dived into that suffocating smother and tried to enter the mouth of the tunnel, now belching smoke and fire like a squib.

"Glory be!" cried Paddy, drawing him back, "I didn't think it was in yer! Up the ladder, Ted boy."

"You first, Paddy, mate," smiled Drewitt.

"Hooray for you, mate, but——"

Paddy drove with his big fist and struck Drewitt hard on the chin; the blow jerked Drewitt's head against the rock behind; Drewitt fell, knocked out two ways, by Paddy and the rocks of Shannon's.

Quicker than those hurrying sparks, Paddy hoisted Drewitt to his shoulders and began climbing the crude ladder.

Drewitt came to, dazed from the blow, stupefied from the smoke and the fumes, aware of his smoldering clothes burning his legs. The shaft head was still reeking with blue smoke and dirt. He could not see Paddy. He tore away his burning rags and staggered to his feet. He heard the clatter of stones down the shaft. The mouth emitted more dust, more smoke, and out of it appeared Paddy, gasping, blue in the face, his big chest heaving for oxygen.

"Did it, Ted. Two seconds down, three up. See?"

Out of his shirt he pulled handfuls of richly auriferous quartz and poured them over Drewitt.

Drewitt sat a long time fingering those splendid promises, that certainty that Shannon's was a reefer's field. Paddy had left him.

Drewitt turned over the stone; one inch of it displayed in a broker's window he knew would stampede men and money, would skyrocket shares. He tried to think, to plan, to calculate; but he could see nothing, he could hold on to nothing but a demoniacal prospector toasting him over an explosion, burning out the dross in his soul.

Shouts filled the valley. He looked down; men were breaking through the scrub, hopping over the tailings like wallabies. The Iron Duke whistle began to toot, not a despairing wail now, but in crackerlike pops as if the engineer was trying to get a tune from it. The crowd came nearer, all Shannon's; they were carrying Paddy; they were cheering, singing, they were in new clean shirts flung on hurriedly, flaunting like flags.

Drewitt refused the congratulatory hands.

"Hold on, boys," he shouted, "it's not mine. I had nothing to do with this find. It's Paddy Shannon's. I'll go to work for wages for him, for what I'm worth."

"Have I got to hit you again? Where are you? Come here till I knock some sense into you." Paddy was blinking round blindly, feeling for Drewitt; Drewitt saw both his eyes were black and closed; blood was dripping from his mouth. Reilly, who was leading him, was almost as battered.

"Paddy—you're hurt. The blast——"

"Blast, me eye! That was Reilly. Him and me settled our accounts and I made him disthribute his shirts to the boys."

"You're a liar again, Paddy," said Reilly, "it was a free gift."

"All right. It's done anyhow. We'll need capital and Reilly's going to back us. Ted, Shannon's is going to be a methropolis."

Clarence Rowe

Talks With Men

By Martin Davison

IX.—VARIOUS PROBLEMS.

THE letters that come to me are surprising in their variety. Before I started this department I had thought that there would be a certain sameness in the messages I received and that all the requests for advice would divide themselves into three or four broad, general classes. It is not at all like that however. There are more different sorts of men reading THE POPULAR MAGAZINE than I had imagined. For instance, in my mail this morning there is a letter from a boy working in a bicycle-repair shop, another letter from an indifferently educated man who earns his living being exhibited as a giant in a circus, and a third letter from an Episcopalian clergyman of wide general culture and marked ability. I answer all that are accompanied by a stamped, addressed envelope. Sometimes I can be of definite, specific help, at other times my advice must be more general, but in every case I try sincerely to help. I can only publish a very small percentage of the letters I receive. I would like to select specimen types but it is hard, for most of those who write are strongly individual rather than types. However, here are three that are interesting.

THE first is from a man on the Pacific coast whom I will call Clifford. He writes:

"I have read with real interest your talks in the last few numbers of THE POPULAR MAGAZINE, and I would be more than pleased to receive any advice that you may see fit to give me in my problem.

"When I was younger my father was well off and I was never particular whether I worked hard or not. I made friends easily as I went along and fell in the usual bad habits of gambling and drinking a good deal more than was good for me. When my father died I found that his estate did not amount to so much as I thought. Still I had left me a very nice business. It was small but with proper attention would have paid very well. What I did was to spend all that was in it and close up, although I paid all my debts before doing so.

"From that I floated from one job to another. I made fairly good money but spent it as fast as I made it. Even after I married some years ago, although I cared for my wife, I kept up the same habits. Last year I had an excellent position with a Western company traveling the West coast, but they were forced to let me go, due to financial trouble. I had commenced to think that it was time I settled down and made something of myself and losing that position hurt me more than all the rest of the jobs I had had in the past.

"I went to a library and made out a list of all the companies dealing in the line I handled. I wrote eighty letters and got thirty replies.

"Here is my problem. I have landed a real job. I am getting more money than I ever made in my life before. I have got a promise of further advancement if I stick. My wife and I have both been raised in the same Western coast city and have lived there all our lives. Holding this position means that we must give up our home town for good and my wife is not at all reconciled to that.

"Now I have a chance, through friends, of a civil-service government position. That means that if I take care of it in the proper manner it will take care of me for life. The money part is just about what I get at the present time. My wife thinks I should take this position. I have given it a great deal of thought and have come to the conclusion that the place I now have is the one that brought me to my senses and brought out the talents which I had but never before used and that I will go farther and feel better sticking than by taking a political job which of course is sure.

"I don't know what analysis you may be able to arrive at from this communication but I would ask your advice in the matter. I know in my own mind what I want to do but I have others to think of and I don't want to make a mistake they will suffer for. I must come to some decision within the next few weeks. May I have your assistance?"

Now, Mr. Clifford, here is what I have to say to you. I have been considering your letter and making up in my own mind a picture of the sort of man you are. I would give different advice to another man placed in your position. But here is the advice which I think fits you.

You have ability and strength of character. You started life with a handicap. Being left money is nearly always a bad thing for an American. Least of all does a Westerner need to have money left him. You had no incentive to work but you worked a little and came out of it surprisingly well. Even with your interest and energy only partially aroused you could probably make a good living, but now you have fallen in with something that has really wakened you up and aroused you. The opportunity is knocking at your door.

I can understand Mrs. Clifford's view. The government job is a cinch for the rest of your life, a sure thing. Also it is nice to live in the old home town. But ask Mrs. Clifford whether she has no confidence in you. Ask her whether life does not hold out more when it is regarded as an adventure and a discovery. I say I can understand Mrs. Clifford's view but I cannot agree with it, and I know that in time she will come to be of my opinion, for she has in her the blood of the pioneers as well as yourself.

A government job is a splendid thing, but not for you. The fact that you used to drink and gamble but do so no longer is the best evidence in the world that you are adjusted to your present job and are able to put into your work the energy that you used to burn up in late hours. You are not the sort of man for a civil-service job. Stick to what you are doing now and make good at it. No matter what I told you, that is what you probably would do in any case, but I am glad to send you a message of encouragement and good wishes. Mrs. Clifford will agree with us in time.

HERE is a letter from a different sort of man but an interesting one:

"I am thirty-eight years old, a machinist by trade with thirteen years' experience building automobiles, guns, engines and adding machines and six years' experience teaching shop work in public schools, also three years of employment work, but I have not yet decided my life work. From your articles I find I am a roamer. I like to start and organize new things—started an Employees' Benefit Association and collected sixteen thousand dollars. I am a steady worker and have saved eight thousand dollars but three years on a job seems to be about my limit. I am not interested in the sporting page but in the financial page. I don't happen to smoke or drink, but am not the goody-goody type. I like to go to school and study. This trait seems the chief reason for quitting jobs. I studied at the Drexel Institute, at the U. of P., at Columbia and Rutgers and Temple University, also I studied employment management at Harvard.

"Life suddenly has changed for me. I want to be successful, have a home, settle down, get married, and be of some use to the world and myself. Here most of the people are not of an inspiring type. I cannot stay another year at my present location for I have finished what I set out to do. I do not desire to work at the machine business or teaching. I seem to have grown away from both. I would like your advice. E. C. Watt."

My advice, Mr. Watt, is to get away from the town you are in. I am not printing your address because you would rather, I suppose, remain incognito, but I have been through your town and it is no place for you. I take it, that when you say that life has suddenly changed for you, you mean that you have fallen in love with a girl and want to marry her. Your place is in a big city. You have an eager, inquisitive, restless mind. You can never be happy without a good many mental contacts with people of your own grade of intelligence. That is what makes you restless and impatient with the various jobs you have held. You have gone to school enough. You will keep on learning things all your life, but you ought to be doing things as well. I cannot advise you specifically as to the kind of job you should go in for. Your letter shows that you would be successful at a variety of things. You need the stimulus of new associations of a more or less intellectual type, and there is a far better chance for that in a big city than in the factory town where you are at present. Some men I would advise to go away from the city to the small town, but with you I say, "Come cityward." There are classes and concerts, plays and clubs—a lot of things in a city you need.

AND now a third letter. This time it is from a much younger, less sophisticated man—but nevertheless it is just as interesting. R. E. B. writes:

"I have just finished reading your talk in The Popular. I found it very interesting and would appreciate it very much if you could give me a little advice on a personal matter. I am twenty years of age. I have a high-school education and I am earning money now to go to college. There is one thing that I can't seem to do. That is to talk, be happy and enjoy myself when I am with other people. I read about all my spare time. I can see now where this will hold me back later on in life but I don't know how to start to conquer it. Please talk plainly to me. Hoping to hear from you——"

Here is your answer, young man. The psychologists divide people into two general types—those who are centered on themselves and those whose interest centers mainly on outside things. Most of us can, if we will it, decide how much of each type we shall represent in our personalities. You are in danger of thinking too much of yourself. Pay no attention to what other people think of you. Let that take care of itself. It is what you think of them that counts. Don't try to "enjoy yourself" when you are with others. Try rather to enjoy them. Make a point of forcing yourself to get acquainted with people. It will come hard at first. Your remarks and queries will sound stilted and unnatural, but as time goes on something will loosen up inside of you and you will find yourself. Practically every man goes through some such period as you are experiencing. The unfortunate ones are those who never get over it. Now is your time to get over it.

Remember there is no sense in being sensitive, there is no sense in caring whether others laugh at you. The important thing is your opinion of, and interest in, the other people. You ought to start now. Join a club, take a girl out to a show, go to church, go calling on Sundays. You see I am speaking plainly to you.

And that will be about all for the present.

After the Ice Bridge—

By Larry Barretto

Author of "A Conqueror Passes," "Masks of Confusion," Etc.

A skeptic goes to see.

JUST a minute before, the people on the ice bridge had been idly admiring the frozen magnificence of the Niagara River stretching in icy convolutions of twisted shapes flung up and seemingly permanent above the swiftly running water which they covered. The ice bridge itself was posed almost at the edge of the open water which rushed along too rapidly to freeze.

The girl in the long fur coat had even become a trifle bored, perhaps a bit chilled, wondering if after all the spectacle were not somehow monotonous—that far-famed spectacle which drew tourists from a radius of hundreds of miles—and if she might not now, her duty done, begin her homeward journey over the smooth-beaten ice floor to her hotel.

She glanced at the man who stood beside her, a few feet away, speculating perhaps on his emotions, or lack of them, he seemed so impassive; and then with keen interest, recognizing in him the speaker of the previous evening at a local theater, who had crowded the house to its doors. "The Modern Bob Ingersoll," his enterprising manager had advertised him—"The Great Exponent of Nature's Might, who has done away with a personal God."

Rather cheap, she reflected—straight atheism thinly veiled, but withal the man was sincere. Of that there could be no doubt. And he had the power to sway people. There had been an uncomfortable silence after his speech, more significant than applause, while the audience had looked at one another uneasily. She herself had been touched, her calm faith turned for the moment to doubts. Such men with magnetism were dangerous. They should be restrained. Her thoughts wandered on. His face was too bitter—aloof; but the eyes were compelling. How old? Perhaps thirty-five——

All this just a minute before. And then it happened. All was quiet, the thin cold air of late winter stirred by only a faint breeze, the crunch of a horse's hoofs on the opposite bank plainly audible. The girl in the fur coat turned to go. There was a sharp crackling underfoot, a number of loud and ominous sounds. Like pistol shots they seemed. People were scattering, running terrified along the ice bridge toward either bank. A woman tripped and fell; a man stumbled over her and slid along on his hands and knees, cursing. They helped each other up and stumbled on. The solid ice bridge which stretched from bank to bank swayed upward and sank again, lower in the water now. Somebody screamed shrilly:

"The ice is going out!"

It was taken up and echoed along the banks—thin, distant, but freighted with panic. Sudden realization came to the girl and she began to run, blindly, stumbling like the other woman she had noticed just a moment before. The first people had reached the banks; they paused at the edge of safety, eager to help others now their own danger was past. It seemed incredible that the ice should have been cleared so quickly, but the hour was near noon and people had been starting to make their way toward the shores; only the girl in the fur coat and the man who had spoken the night before remained in the center of the bridge.

There came another snap and then a tearing crash. The girl paused, arms outflung; then she turned and started to run the other way. A fissure had been rent in the ice; white water, bubbling and boiling rose as the crack widened. A man might have leaped it, but now it was too late. In all directions the ice was breaking, shivering into cakes, some large, some small, floating toward the open river beyond.

Something struck the ice floe with terrific force, flinging the girl to her knees. Water was sweeping over her, drenching her; she was slipping toward the edge of the ice and the water. Once she screamed, her mouth pressed into the frozen snow so that it sounded like a muffled voice, not her own, which had cried out. Then hands had clutched her—hands which wrenched at her arm, and fingers that moved upward seeking a surer grip in her hair. That—and then a black cloud enveloped her, blotting out consciousness. Through it she seemed to hear the sound of distant shouting.

When memory returned she was being drawn back from the dangerous edge of ice. But there was a peculiar bobbing motion underneath, such as she imagined might be the sensation of an earthquake, although her careful life had been far removed from any such catastrophe of nature. She opened her eyes to look out on water. The ice was rocking slightly and the banks were slipping strangely past. They seemed far distant now.

Her first instinct of terror was instantly submerged in disgust because of her soaking clothes, then gratitude welled up and overwhelmed her.

"You have saved my life," she said to the man who knelt beside her. "I should have been washed away."

Her voice sounded very small and thin out there in the middle of the river, and at once she became translated by the mere sound of it into a new world—a world which seemed unutterably large, impossibly vast; a world with which she had no contact.

The man answered her. "Perhaps I have not saved it." His voice, clipped, brief, with nothing of the magnetic quality which had stirred her the previous evening at the theater, frightened her again.

"Why not?" she demanded sharply. "Won't this cake of ice hold together?"

He withdrew his gaze from the river ahead and looked at the floe. His manner was preoccupied and it irritated the girl. Not in any circumstances had men ever been indifferent to her.

"Yes, I think it will hold," he answered again. "As you see, it is quite large and it must be very thick."

"Oh, then we are all right." She breathed her relief. "As long as we can stick on we'll be all right."

The man became alert, staring at her in astonishment. "Be all right until what?" he demanded.

"Until they take us off!" She wondered at his denseness. "You don't suppose they are going to let us float around here in the middle of the Niagara River, do you?"

"Take us off? With what?" he demanded incredulously.

"Why, with boats of course. A boat." It was extraordinary that a man who spoke so brilliantly could be so stupid. It gave the girl a faint feeling of superiority. She permitted it to grow. And yet he had been quick enough when drawing her back from the water.

His thin face lighted suddenly in understanding and the large gray eyes were flecked for a moment with humor such as one might have for a child who had asked for the moon. Then he became impassive again, almost contemptuous.

"Boat! Why, there isn't a chance. No boat can live in this river; the current is too strong. And below us are the rapids."

The girl's face became so white that he thought she might be going to faint again. Her mouth half opened to scream, but she checked it.

"You—you don't mean that," she whispered. "I—I c-can't believe——" Her mouth was trembling while she fought for control. That satisfactory feeling of superiority vanished. Involuntarily she moved closer to the man. He seemed suddenly very strong—her only safety. "Please, it isn't true." She began to cry helplessly.

"Don't try to get on your knees when you move," he said sharply. "It rocks the ice. Crawl." Nevertheless he permitted her to shrink up against him and even made some shift to make her comfortable, flinging some chunks of snow out into the water. The girl continued to weep and he did not speak to her again.

The river about them was filled with bobbing floes from the ice bridge which now lay behind them, only shattered remnants still clinging to the banks. The banks themselves had become populated as if by magic. It seemed incredible that in so few minutes so many people could have reached them. They stood staring, tiny figures, very distant, shading their eyes with their hands, or ran along the roads waving, gesticulating and pointing, frantic and helpless.

At that distance their gestures seemed silly, all suggestion of tragedy removed by space. Automobiles were arriving and parking in any place of vantage, and very far off the clang of a fire engine could be heard. It might have been a great spectacle, a thrilling event, at which the early comers got front seats, the man reflected. They were the hounds eager to be in at the death.

Well, it was death—his death. No soldier, no martyr had ever had the opportunity to die so conspicuously, so—so publicly as it were. The phrase annoyed him, and he thought for a moment of his manager. Rennie would have made a good job of this, but he could hardly have stage managed it better than Nature herself. He, Burton, must not spoil the show. He could die as he had lived—aloof, alone, unafraid.

The sobbing of the girl crouched at his feet brought back his thoughts, and he had a quick irritation at the realization that he was not the only actor. Of course she would spoil things. An hysterical woman. For himself he could not have wished for a better way. He would like to go out with a gesture—thumbing his nose at the universe which he could not control but which he might defy. No, he had no regrets—a little early, perhaps; his doctrine of life was gaining converts. People—some people were beginning to learn that life was sufficient in itself; that the grandeur of being even a tiny atom in the great scheme of things was sufficient reward without hopes of a puerile and man-conceived heaven afterward. What greater destiny than to nourish the roots of some field flower! A line of verse occurred to him. He had quoted it often in his earlier lectures before he had become famous:

I sometimes think that never blows so red
The rose as where some buried Cæsar bled——

The girl was no longer crying. She stretched out a hand and touched him timidly to draw him back.

"What happened?" she asked.

Burton wanted to ignore her. After all, what had happened would be unimportant to them in a few minutes or a half hour, but the conventions of life were still strong upon him.

"The ice bridge broke. I think it must have been the heavy thaw of the last few days rotting underneath it, or a freshet swept down from farther up. It sounded like that."

"Was—was anybody else caught?" she asked faintly.

"No." He shook his head. "We were the only ones unlucky enough to be directly in the center. The others had some warning."

"I'm very cold," announced the girl. "I'm wet through." She began to shiver violently.

Burton made a move to draw off his coat, but he stopped. They had both been drenched when the ice had broken loose. His wet clothing would not make her warmer.

She was studying the nearest bank, watching the little people who still went through their frenzied waving, still pointing as they had pointed for the last ten minutes at the floe moving down river. She had always been interested in people; now she could watch these with utter indifference since they were so immeasurably removed from her life. Without question she had accepted Burton's verdict. He had said no boat could live in the river, and instinctively she knew that he spoke the truth. He was not a man who made unconsidered statements, and he did not lie.

"They might be in China for all it means to us," she said, referring to the crowds on shore. And it was so true that he did not even bother to nod agreement. "My mother will be waiting at the hotel," she added. The thought made her cry a little, quietly, but she soon stopped. Burton gave her some attention. After all, she had a type of courage.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Elizabeth." It did not occur to her to add a last name. Anything but the essentials had become unimportant.

"My name is Burton—John Burton," he replied, and was astonished when she nodded recognition. For the moment he had forgotten that he was almost famous.

"Yes, I know. We heard you last night at the theater. I—I think your doctrine is horrible."

If he were not so near death he would have been flattered, he thought. No one remained quite indifferent to him after he had spoken. Even this girl in what were almost the last minutes of life paid him that tribute.

"Is there no hope, do you think?" she asked wistfully. "It is hard when one is so young. I'm not yet twenty-two. There is so much—so much I might have——" She did not finish the sentence.

"You know there is not," he answered quietly. "But you will face it bravely, I think."

The ice floe was moving more rapidly now, careening slightly, and the girl's speech became abrupt, hurried, as if she feared there was not time to say all that was necessary.

"I will face it—somehow, but I am afraid. A week ago, yesterday, it might have been easier. But now you—you have done something to me. When I heard you last night, and this morning again—I doubted. My faith is gone and I am afraid to pass on into nothing. That water looks very cold." She shivered again and the man knew that it was not because she was wet.

Phrases of his lectures occurred to Burton. He thought of explaining to her, platitudinously, that their deaths, as individuals, were unimportant, that man's egotism and only that demanded a reward—a continuance of living, in another world; that life itself, the privilege of being only a tiny atom in the great scheme was sufficient. But he did not say it.

"Why should your faith be gone?" he demanded. "Keep it—that is, if it helps you any."

"You have taken it," she repeated in a low voice. "Now, out here alone, so very much alone, with only you, I believe what you believe, deny what you deny. I cannot help that. But it has made me afraid to die. A week ago it would have been different, but now I cannot. Is there nothing you could say that might make it easier?" Her voice was anguished, tormented.

"What would I say?" asked Burton dully.

"Only that you believe—a little. Only that, but I think it would make things easier at—at the end. You must believe something. Please." She was pleading with him.

Burton shook his head. "No, I cannot say that even now. It is incredible that you should ask me. I cannot lie even to help you."

Elizabeth began to study the water intently, staring with widened eyes at the chunks of ice which swept past, hearing the slap of breaking wavelets against the floe, the crash of distant cakes, and above it the sound of thin shouting which had seemed to stop for a moment.

Burton had time to look at her. She had demanded the comfort of words and he had refused them to her. He had expected more tears, reproaches, hysteria, but she crouched there saying nothing. In spite of her silence she was obviously frightened; the dry lips that she touched from time to time with her tongue, the hand on his knee which did not cease to tremble told him that. She was pretty even now, no—lovely. The great dark eyes—he could not determine their color—the delicate oval of her face, now drained white, the lips, soft and unformed as a child's—— Abruptly he dragged his thoughts away.

It was terrible, this waiting. Even his steady nerves were shaken by it. He, too, began to stare at the water. An exclamation rushed to his lips, but he checked it. There was no kindness in raising false hopes within the girl. A few minutes before he would have been indifferent to that. Instead, he began to stare at the nearest bank. When he had made sure:

"I think we are drifting backward," he said quietly. "For the last few minutes I have noticed that we have not crossed a certain point. Perhaps, just perhaps——" He stopped abruptly.

"You mean, you think there is a chance that we might drift up near shore where they can reach us?" she asked breathlessly.

"There is always the chance of that. But I should not count on it," he answered gravely. "We can only be ready if it comes. If we are near enough it might be wiser to jump off the floe and try to swim it. They will thrust out boards when they see. This is probably only an eddy. Notice how all the small ice revolves around us, while near shore it is rushing past."

He watched the water intently, shading his eyes from the snow glare. "Yes, we will drift very near. Swimming seems our only chance. We'll get rid of our coats. About twenty or thirty strokes, and we may lose at that. Will you take it?"

Elizabeth did not answer for so long that he looked at her. "Will you take it?" he repeated impatiently.

"It is the only chance. Take it," she answered at last. Burton did not notice the evasion in her words.

"Good! You go first. I will follow."

The girl shook her head. "No, you go first."

"Are you afraid?" he asked almost contemptuously. "If I follow I may be able to help you close to the bank—draw you in. At the beginning you will be on your own. Even a strong swimmer could do nothing for another; the water is too swift."

"You will have to go alone."

"What!"

"I cannot swim a stroke," she finished flatly.

They stared at each other in silence. The shore seemed to drift nearer. For the first time definite panic seized the man. Before, drifting downstream, he had instantly realized the impossibility of being saved. In a sense resignation had come to him at once, and there had been hardly time to realize completely. Here, with safety almost at hand, the fear of losing it pushed him forward as if a giant hand had shoved, and a sharp cry was wrung from his lips. Instinctively he began to edge toward the end of the floe, his eyes gauging the distance to shore—wary, desperate.

Men had climbed down the bank—their faces were no longer a blur—and had formed a chain with linked hands; some of them shoulder deep in the rushing water, and the foremost, a huge man in a Mackinaw coat was thrusting a fence rail at him, the end of which was continually being swept away by the water.

People were running toward the spot, shouting words which were almost articulate, and a great roaring filled the air. Far off the clang of fire bells sounded again. The space narrowed, remained stationary, began to widen again. Behind him the girl Elizabeth cried shrilly:

"Jump, Mr. Burton! Jump!"

As though he had been drenched again in icy water Burton awoke. He had been crawling to safety while this girl remained behind to die. She had made no outcry at his cowardice; no, more, she had tried to force him by cunning to leave her, to save himself. The icy feeling left him and he was swept by flame so terrible, so searing that he felt himself shriveling before the thousands of eyes that watched. He stared at them once, indifferent to their contempt in the depths of his own degradation, and was astonished to see cheeks wet with tears, men sobbing hysterically. Then they grew smaller, blurred, as the floe swept in slow circles toward the middle of the river. John Burton began to creep back toward Elizabeth.

She greeted him with a little cry of distress, and her eyes burned bright with anger. He saw now that they were blue. That curious trick of his of continuing to notice details no matter where he was!

"You fool!" she stormed. "You fool! Why didn't you jump? They were waiting and you could have done it. Now it is too late. You could have been saved and you didn't do it. Oh, you fool!" She beat on the ice with her clenched fist. Fury had left her oblivious to her own danger.

"I could not have swum that far; I was afraid to try," he muttered.

"That is a lie! You were not afraid before."

"Yes, that is a lie," replied Burton quietly, and waited.

The girl became silent, so silent that he believed she had not heard. Then she spoke in a very still voice.

"I understand. You would not go because you would not leave me. Because I could not swim you would not go." It sounded like a refrain.

"No. I could not go because you wanted me to. I could not go then. Before, I had forgotten you, but I remembered in time."

Elizabeth began to cry. "You are too fine to die," she whispered.

Burton continued, speaking as if to himself: "You tried to save me, forgetting yourself; you were willing to be left, a girl, alone, afraid. I cannot believe it! People do not do that." His voice held wonder. "The old instinct of survival is too strong. People fight to be saved. But you—you would have saved me!"

"You are too fine to die," Elizabeth repeated monotonously.

The river was rushing past now. The big cake, caught in the swift currents, drove ahead, dipping slightly—a desperate ship. Small pieces of ice were flung against the sides of it, tossed off and left astern. A cold wave washed their feet. All the banks had become hazy, straight lines far off from the widened river that must still be crowded with gasping humanity. Burton and Elizabeth had forgotten them. Before them loomed the great suspension bridge.

The man measured the distance ahead with strained eyes, seeking the white line of rapids which meant the end. Three minutes, five, ten perhaps, and the time was so pitifully short for what he had to say. Abruptly John Burton began his strange courtship.

"Not that. You have made me too fine to live. I could not live, nor would I, without you. It is recompense for all, even in these last minutes, to have found you. But, oh, my dear, if it could have happened otherwise I might have made you care. It is so short, so short a time to tell you all I feel. I cannot——" He faltered.

Elizabeth moved closer to him and her wet hands, red with cold, slipped up and about his neck. A miracle had happened; she was drawing his face down to hers.

"I love you," he heard her whisper. "My dear, I do love you!" Then his mouth pressed against her parted lips.

They clung together without speaking, Burton's hand brushing back again and again the hair which blew about Elizabeth's eyes. Only once did the girl speak, sighing against his shoulder.

"I have a lovely new dress—black and silver—you would have liked me in it."

Something in the words touched Burton to anguish and brought him quivering to his knees, clenched hands extended menacing the blank sky.

"There is no God!" he cried. "I was right, there is no God! No decent God would let this happen. It *is* a lie!"

Elizabeth dragged him down beside her, trying to stop the words with her hand. "Don't say that. John, don't! This is nothing, because we will be together. Say you believe we will be together."

"If there is a God He has cheated us," he answered bitterly. "If there is a God let Him save us both, or you, now."

The girl gave a little moan. "You frighten me more than—than that ahead."

The floe was rocking beneath them now, and continuously waves swished over them, numbing cold. Elizabeth cried out again and Burton wondered at the note in her voice. "Look up! At the bridge," she was saying. "And believe."

In his despair, his unbelief, Burton had not thought of this: The great suspension bridge ahead, flung high above the water, steel filaments linking it to the shore like an incredible spider web, tarnished by weather, was crowded with people. Its rails were lined with faces staring down, faces which had no bodies but only eyes concentrating on the struggle below. Beneath them, suspended from the rail of the bridge, were ropes like thin tentacles which swayed in the breeze, stretching down and down toward the water, almost touching it. One would not think that ropes could be so long. Burton counted eight.

In the center of the bridge a fire ladder, inadequately short, was being withdrawn slowly. Then as Burton stared the faces gave way as if by a magic command and were seen no more. Some one must be shouting orders in a voice that carried instant authority, but it could not be heard from the river below. Instead of them, the firemen who carried the ropes began running the length of the bridge, dragging their burdens behind, trying to determine the spot at which the ice cake, tossed by treacherous cross currents, would sweep beneath. The clang of fire bells sounded again—clearer now.

Burton sprang to his feet, dragging the girl up with him. In him the desire for life—the life of this girl—leaped up again like a fierce white flame. The ice was moving forward now at tremendous speed, shivering and twisting in the grip of the water. It was impossible, the man saw, for him to fasten ropes about them both; twenty seconds might be perhaps all that was allowed him. Elizabeth was incapable of helping herself. Numb and exhausted with cold, she leaned against him, almost her full weight pressed against his body. A minute more one would be swinging high above the water—swinging to safety. For the other, perhaps thirty seconds of life on the cake. A hundred yards beyond the rapids began, spray whirling high in torn clouds, the edges of black rock showing in the rifts beneath.

John Burton crouched forward, staring at the ropes which swung toward them. His left arm supported Elizabeth while he held his right arm free. His lips moved, repeating over and over again: "I will believe. I will believe." What he meant was, "Save her and I will believe."

A rope trailed over the edge of the ice cake and was lost in the water. Another dropped directly across his shoulders. Burton grabbed at it. In that second no thought, no memory remained in his mind. The river, the bridge, the rapids, even the girl herself were forgotten in his endeavor to knot the rope beneath the arms that lay loosely about his neck. His death depended on making the knot secure, but he had forgotten that also.

His desperate fingers, stiffened and raw, tried to make a loop. They failed. He was trying now to wind the rope about the girl's body, but as if sensing his purpose she pressed still closer to him. A shadow fell upon the water, and they were beneath the bridge. The rope was drawing tight. Why didn't the fools pay it out? It was slipping through his numbed hands which would not close tight enough; and where it slipped a stain of bright blood appeared. John Burton caught it in his teeth and his lips, too, became blood smeared. Then his hands were suddenly free and the end of rope splashed and trailed behind them in the water.

Bright sunlight was about them again. The bridge was passed. Burton glanced back just once at the impotent white faces once more lining the bridge; then he took the girl in his arms. The air was filled with the roar of crashing water. Elizabeth was whimpering now at the rapids beyond. Gently Burton pressed her face against his shoulder.

"Keep your head down," he said quite clearly. "In just a minute we shall see God!"

* * *

Statement of the Ownership, Management, etc., required by the Act of Congress of August 24, 1912, of THE POPULAR MAGAZINE, published semimonthly, at New York, N. Y., for April 1, 1924.

State of New York, County of New York (ss.)

Before me, a Notary Public, in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Ormond G. Smith, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is President of Street & Smith Corporation, publishers of The Popular Magazine, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 443, Postal Laws and Regulations, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: *Publishers*, Street & Smith Corporation, 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; *editor*, Charles A. MacLean, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; *managing editors*, Street & Smith Corporation, 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; *business managers*, Street & Smith Corporation, 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

2. That the owners are: Street & Smith Corporation, 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., a corporation composed of Ormond G. Smith, 89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; George C. Smith, 89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; Annie K. Smith, 89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; George C. Smith, Jr., 89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; Cora A. Gould, 89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; Ormond V. Gould, 89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company, but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

ORMOND G. SMITH, President,
of Street & Smith Corporation, publishers.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 27th day of March, 1924. Francis S. Duff, Notary Public No. 183, New York County. (My commission expires March 30, 1925.)

A Chat With You

A FRIEND of ours, a gifted man, writes us about the magazine.

"I feel," he says, "that your right and proper glorification of youth and all its splendid possibilities makes me suspect I ought to go into the chimney corner and give up work. Yet I don't feel so very old, though I should get old mighty quick if I gave up working."

In cold truth, youth is not a matter of time but of spirit. Anyway, Mr. Einstein and other scientists have arrived at a conclusion which many people have long surmised by intuition—and that is that our notion of time and its passage is more or less of a delusion and that if we could only see things properly we would find that past and present and future were all one, a sort of beautiful eternity in which we lived. The only people who are old are those who have lost their faith in life.

* * * *

WE never realized, for that matter, that we were trying to glorify youth. It has been quite unconscious. We have been trying hard to get out a good fiction magazine. What do we mean by that? What is the difference between a good fiction magazine and a bad? And what is it that makes our magazine different from others? We will try to tell you how it seems to us.

* * * *

NOBODY ever wrote a really good story or got out a good magazine just for the sake of making money. The money is a most desirable thing, but there is more to it than that. And why does an author write a story? Because he has something to say. Well, if he has something to say, why can't he say it plainly without intimating it in the form of a narrative? The reason is that the really valuable truths can scarcely ever be communicated directly. The books of the great religions are not collections of cold statements. They are narratives.

* * * *

A GOOD author is a man who sees something interesting, romantic, noble and glamorous in the human drama that he fears others may miss. He wants them to see it too. He cannot be content to keep the vision to himself. That is what starts him writing. To every writer the glorious quality of the human drama appears in a different guise. It is transmuted through the medium of his own, individual personality. When you read a story by Stacpoole or Lynde or Dane Coolidge, you are getting something more than entertainment. You are seeing things with their eyes.

* * * *

A MAGAZINE, if it is worth anything, acquires a personality too. This is not the personality of any one man. It is made up of the publisher's personality, the editor's personality, its readers' personalities as well as that of the authors. The magazine has a spirit just as real as that of a human being. It comes to have its own way of looking at things. The magazine as it grows into consciousness and life begins to know that too many people go plodding through the world without realizing that life is anything but a humdrum affair, but instead is an intensely romantic adventure. It tries hard to get others to see with its eyes. Sometimes it may seem to glorify youth, sometimes hard work, sometimes manliness and heroism, sometimes the beauty and pathos and tenderness of things—but always the underlying effort is to show how adventurous and fascinating a place the world is.

* * * *

SO, if you have not already read it, turn to the opening pages of this number, mount a horse with Dane Coolidge, join the hard-hitting riders from Texas, smell the dust and hear the drum of the cantering hoofs. You feel the lift and surge of the cow ponies and breathe the wind of the high plateaus. You are riding into a promised land where you will find the last romantic standard bearers of the chivalry of old Spain. How could you get this feeling of the place and its people from books of cold facts and statistics? This one warm and vital tale will give you more of the West than all the geographies ever written.

* * * *

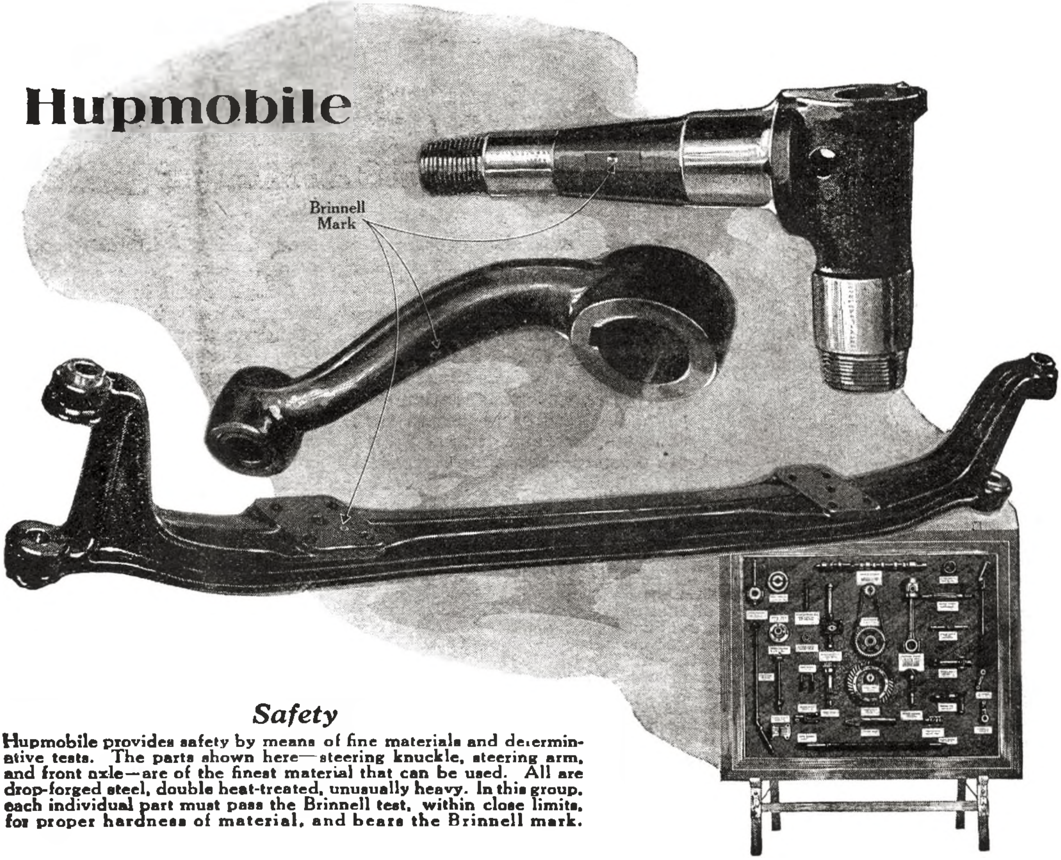
OR read "The Silver Moon," the book-length novel by Francis Lynde, that opens the issue out two weeks from to-day. Here is another tale of the adventurous and romantic West—and yet it is not the West that Coolidge sees, and yet it is just as true a West as his. Or, if you want to go South, read "The Ape's Business" in the same number, by Harris Dickson. Or perhaps you would like to follow a trail in old Mexico with Robert Welles Ritchie, or hunt the ibex in Tibet with Craven Hill. Also, in the same issue, Bertram Atkey may show you, in one of his inimitable short stories, how thrilling and dangerous life can be in the most civilized of countries.

* * * *

BEFORE we stop we want to call your attention to a great mystery story by Eden Phillpotts also starting in the next issue of the magazine. It is called "The Voice from the Dark." "The Red Redmaynes," and "The Gray Room," also by Phillpotts, have already taken their place among the classics of their type. They are books that will be read for years and we are glad that it was our good fortune to publish them. When "The Voice from the Dark" finally comes out in cloth it will go on the same shelf. It is just as good.

Whether it is the glorification of youth or not—whatever it is, there is something stirring and fascinating about the next issue of the magazine. You would do well to order your copy in advance.

Hupmobile



Safety

Hupmobile provides safety by means of fine materials and determinative tests. The parts shown here—steering knuckle, steering arm, and front axle—are of the finest material that can be used. All are drop-forged steel, double heat-treated, unusually heavy. In this group, each individual part must pass the Brinnell test, within close limits, for proper hardness of material, and bears the Brinnell mark.

Now You Can See

Why This is the Best-Value Car You Can Buy

Any Hupmobile owner would tell you that each dollar he paid for his car brought him the best and largest 100 cents worth of superior motoring it is possible to purchase.

He has learned the significance of those thorough and costly processes of manufacture that have always characterized Hupmobile methods. He knows now what real motor car values are.

What he knows through ownership, you can discover through observation.

Those "invisible costs," that have so much to do with the proverbially substantial Hupmobile qualities have now been made visible for you.

Step into the nearest Hupmobile salesroom and see the parts display.

The tickets on the parts tell in black type what they are for, how they are made, and what they are made of.

The same ticket, in red type, tells a similar story about similar parts in cars not so carefully made.

If these cars could match the Hupmobile in excellence and reliability of performance, in durability and economy of up-keep—you might then be justified in laying your money on the "red."

But wisdom says black is the safe and sane color when it comes to investing hard-earned money in an automobile.

The Secret of

Clearer skin · Easier digestion · Regular elimination

Better Health . . .

THESE remarkable reports are typical of thousands of similar tributes to Fleischmann's Yeast.

There is nothing mysterious about its action. It is not a "cure-all," not a medicine in any sense. But when the body is choked with the poisons of constipation—or when its vitality is low so that skin, stomach and general health are affected—this simple, natural food achieves literally amazing results.

Concentrated in every cake of Fleischmann's Yeast are millions of tiny yeast-plants, alive and active. At once they go to work—invigorating the whole system, clearing the skin, aiding digestion, strengthening the intestinal muscles and making them healthy and active. *Health is yours once more.*

"When all the other girls were wearing their first low-necked dresses, I was staying at home—all on account of a breaking-out on my back that I simply couldn't get rid of. Dad is a druggist so I tried all the medicated soaps and creams that he had in stock, but finally gave up. It was awful. One day my chum told me about Fleischmann's Yeast and urged me to take it. I took half a cake dissolved in water before every meal—it is not only easy to take but delightful—and in two weeks every trace of the eruption had disappeared. It worked like magic, really, and made me feel like a different person."
(A letter from Miss Esther Shaw of Sanford, Calif.)

"At the age of forty, when I had most at stake, I found myself slipping in health. I was troubled with indigestion, constipation and nervous debility. I had read about people taking Fleischmann's Yeast, and ordered some.

"A while later, in answer to a friend's inquiry, I was surprised to hear myself reply, 'I feel like a prize-fighter' and realized then that I had not felt any sign of indigestion for some time, and was putting in ten to twelve hours' hard brain work daily. I knew I was back again."
(A letter from Mr. W. L. King of Washington, D. C.)

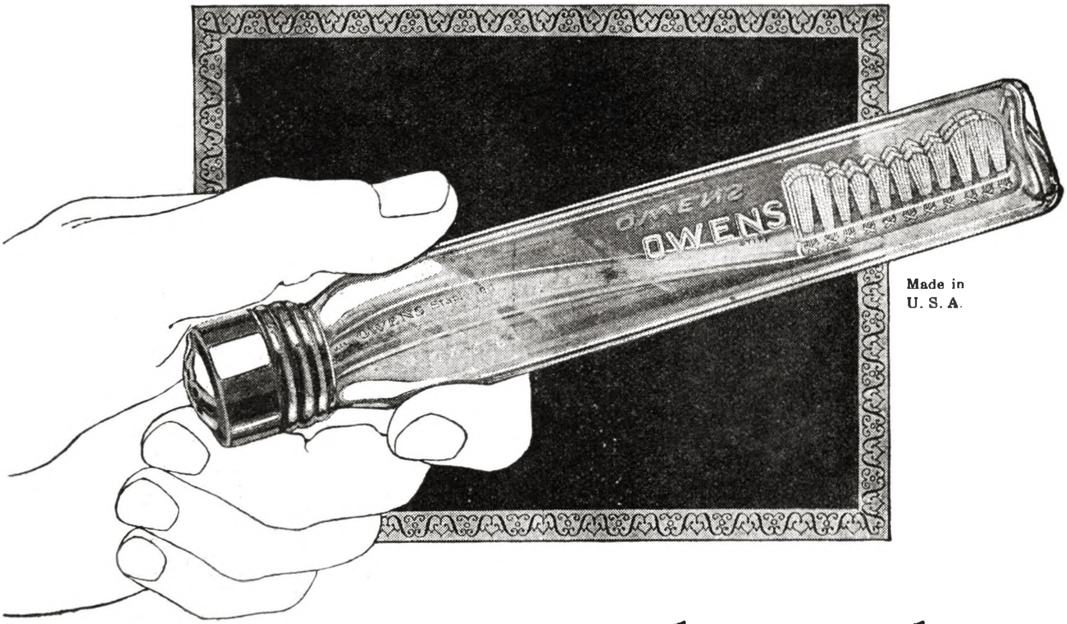
"Came a period of real worry; of haphazard living; of irregular sleep and diet. The result . . . a distressing case of nerves . . . misery from my digestive system, a rough and unclear skin. When someone suggested yeast I laughed. . . . Secretly I tried it, and now, knowing how simple the remedy, I laugh at nerves, scorn a skin that is not smooth and clear, and find my digestive system a thing to be ignored."
(Mrs. Betty Knight of Los Angeles, Calif.)

Dissolve one cake in a glass of water (just hot enough to drink)

—before breakfast and at bedtime. Fleischmann's Yeast when taken this way, is especially effective in overcoming or preventing constipation.

Or eat 2 or 3 cakes a day—spread on bread or crackers—dissolved in fruit juices or milk—or eat it plain. Fleischmann's Yeast comes only in the tinfoil package—it cannot be purchased in tablet form. *All grocers have it.* Start eating it today! A few days' supply will keep as well in *your* ice box as in the grocer's. Write us for further information or let us send you a free copy of our latest booklet on Yeast for Health. Address: Health Research Dept. Z-4, The Fleischmann Company, 701 Washington Street, New York.

EAT FLEISCHMANN'S YEAST FOR HEALTH
The Fleischmann Co
YEAST



Protection when you buy—convenience when you travel

EVERY Owens Staple-tied Tooth Brush is sold in a strong, clean, transparent glass container. It protects your Owens from careless thumbing and handling in the druggist's store. It also makes a wonderfully convenient, sanitary container for traveling.

You'll prefer using this clean tooth brush! Many dentists have declared it to be the finest ever designed for the correct care of the teeth! The trim is shaped to clean every part of your teeth thoroughly. Bristle tufts are wide-spaced and wedge-shaped to reach every crack and crevice. The softly curved handle makes correct brushing easier and more natural.

Each bristle tuft is permanently tied into the handle by a hidden staple. Handles are in six distinctive colors—one for you personally.

No other tooth brush can bring you all these advantages! Yet the Owens—*in the glass container*—costs you no more than ordinary tooth brushes. 30, 40 and 50 cents each, in child's, youth's and adult's sizes. *See* it at your druggist's.

OWENS

Staple-tied TOOTH BRUSH

THE OWENS BOTTLE COMPANY, TOLEDO

Formula of R.J. Forhan DDS
Forhan Company New York
Forhan's
TRADE MARK
FOR THE GUMS
BRUSH YOUR TEETH WITH IT
Specialist in DISEASES OF THE MOUTH
DENTAL PROFESSION

Are you the lucky one in five?

Not if your gums bleed easily Check Pyorrhea with Forhan's

Pyorrhea, destroyer of teeth and health, plays no favorites. Dental records show that four persons out of every five past 40, and thousands younger, too, are Pyorrhea's victims.

Heed Nature's warning—tender, bleeding gums—before it is too late. Better still, stop Pyorrhea before it strikes by regular visits to your dentist and by brushing your teeth twice daily with Forhan's For the Gums.

At all druggists, 35c and 60c.

Forhan's

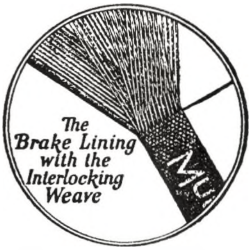
FOR THE GUMS

More than a tooth paste—
it checks Pyorrhea

10¢ brings you an up-to-date Auto Map

HERE'S an unusual opportunity! By special arrangement with Rand McNally, we can send you, for a limited period only, any one, or all, of their series of Official Auto Trail Maps, covering every state in the country for only 10c apiece. Absolutely up-to-the-minute maps—give trail signs, hotels, garages, service stations and much other valuable touring information. In ordering, please be sure to tell the section of country you want to cover and give us address of shop or dealer where you go to have your brakes relined. Order now as this offer is limited.

MULTIBESTOS
THE BRAKE LINING
with the Interlocking Weave


The Brake Lining with the Interlocking Weave
MU

THIS is the famous brake lining that lasts so long. The lining that is specified as factory equipment by a majority of American car manufacturers. And the lining that will give you the feeling of absolute security that your brakes will work whenever you need them.

MULTIBESTOS COMPANY
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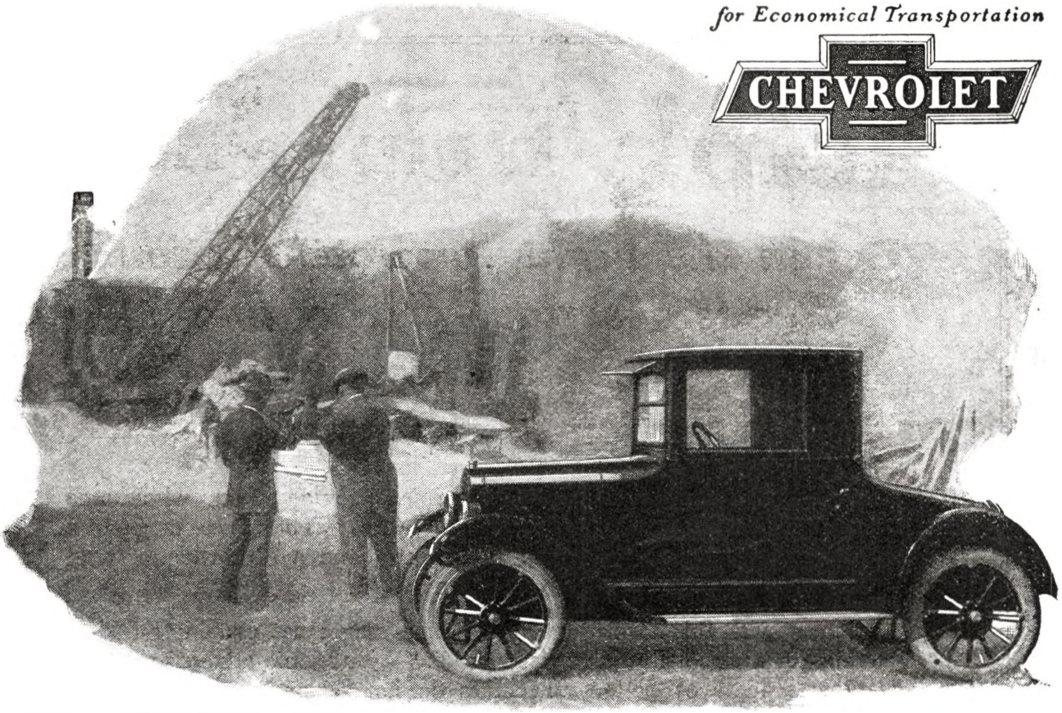

Superior
Utility Coupe

$640

f. o. b. Flint, Mich.

Prices f. o. b. Flint, Mich.

Superior Roadster	$490
Superior Touring	495
Superior Utility Coupe	640
Superior 4-Pass. Coupe	725
Superior Sedan	795
Superior Commercial Chassis	395
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Utility Express Truck Chassis	550

Fisher Bodies on closed models

First Aid to Business

The popularity of this car has at all times taxed our large productive capacity.

It meets completely the requirements of most business and professional workers.

The quality of this Chevrolet model is high and along strictly practical lines. The design, construction and finish of the body pleases discriminating motorists, and the economy of operation averages lowest for this type of car.

The mammoth rear compartment is of constant value to all who must carry luggage, equipment, samples, etc.

The best salesmen of this car are the people who use it daily. Ask any Chevrolet dealer, or talk to owners anywhere.

Chevrolet Motor Company, Detroit, Michigan

Division of General Motors Corporation

In Canada—Chevrolet Motor Company of Canada, Limited, Oshawa, Ontario

Five United States manufacturing plants, seven assembly plants, and two Canadian plants give us the largest production capacity in the world for high-grade cars and make possible our low prices.

Chevrolet Dealers and Service Stations everywhere. Applications will be considered from high-grade dealers only, for territory not adequately covered.

Help! Help! Help!

Get in the Fight to Prove Fiction Readers seriously read and consider advertising in Fiction Magazines

It is a well-known fact that fiction magazines provide clean, wholesome entertainment for millions of discriminating readers. That these magazines are taken into the best homes in the community and are thoroughly read and appreciated by every member of the family.

Logically then, with this family interest, fiction magazines provide an ideal introduction for a nationally advertised product. But some advertisers have the idea that readers of fiction magazines do not seriously read and consider the advertising section. We want you to help prove differently by selecting from this magazine the particular advertisement that appeals to you and to tell us briefly in a letter which advertisement you have selected and WHY.

We know you would willingly do this as a friendly service but to instill the spirit of competition we have arranged a contest for cash prizes. It costs nothing to enter this contest. There are no rules. We only ask you to mention the magazine and issue you are criticizing. Prizes will be awarded to the four best letters submitted and the prize list is as follows:

FIRST PRIZE	- -	**$15.00**
SECOND "	- -	**5.00**
THIRD "	- -	**3.00**
FOURTH "	- -	**2.00**

Contest for advertising in this issue closes June 2nd, 1924

Let's Go!

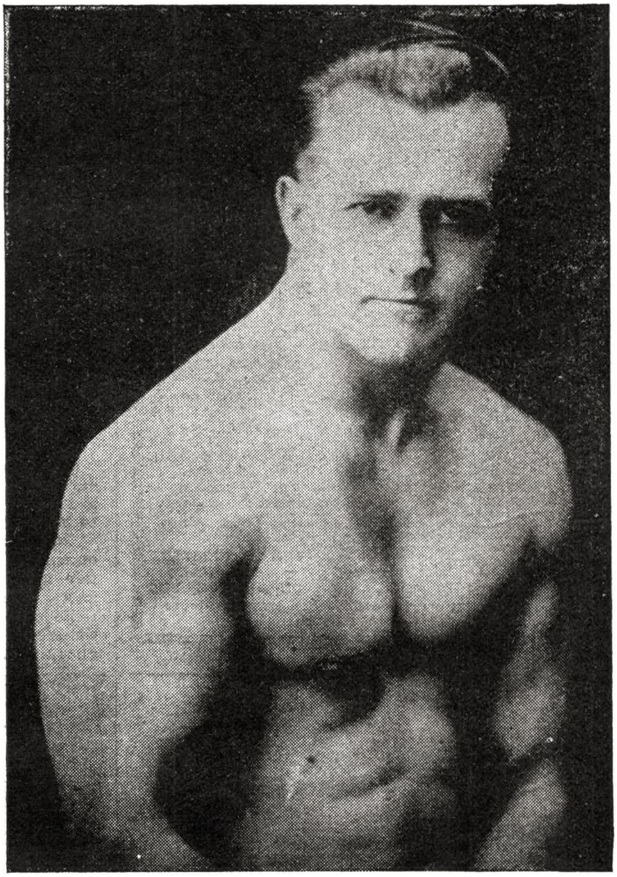
The Muscle Builder

Show me the man who doesn't want muscle, with abounding health, and I'll show you a man who is ready to be measured for a wooden box—he's dead and he doesn't know it. A body without muscle is like a house without foundation—a little storm, and over it goes.

Get wise, fellows, I shouldn't have to tell you these things. You can't enjoy life with a weak, sickly body. There is no pleasure like the feeling of health and strength. And when I say strength, I don't mean any half-way business. Do it right, or forget it.

The Whole Works

I build muscle—good, big, solid muscle. Let other fellows knock this idea if they want. I know what I'm doing and I guarantee *you'll like it.* I'll put an arm on you that can be made pliable one second and bulge out hard as steel the next. An arm that will be equally useful in weight lifting and any kind of skilful athletics. Just for a starter, I'll increase the size of that arm at least one full inch in the first 30 days. I'll put a chest on you to be proud of. A full, deep chest with a pair of lungs that will take a man-sized load of rich oxygen with every breath, and you know what that means. Your lungs feed your blood, shooting a kick through your veins that will make you just bubble over with vitality. I will build up those inner muscles around your heart and every vital organ. I will send a thrill up your old spinal column that will make you feel like tackling a wildcat.



Earle E. Liederman
America's Leading Authority on Physical Education

A New Body in 90 Days

Some wise crackers say it takes years to put a man in shape. That's because they don't know any better. I want just 90 days and I'll change your body so you won't recognize yourself. By that time every muscle in your anatomy will literally bulge out. And what's more your whole being will just tingle with excitement. You will have a spring to your step and a flash to your eye that will radiate personality wherever you go. You will feel like shouting: "I'm a man—and I can prove it."

Come on now, fellows! Why waste more time? I'm not just promising these things. I guarantee them. If you doubt me, make me prove it. Are you ready? Let's go!

Send for My New 64-page Book

"MUSCULAR DEVELOPMENT"

It is Free

It contains forty-three full-page photographs of myself and some of the many prize-winning pupils I have trained. Some of these came to me as pitiful weaklings, imploring me to help them. Look them over now and you will marvel at their present physiques. This book will prove an impetus and a real inspiration to you. It will thrill you through and through. All I ask is 10 cents to cover the cost of wrapping and mailing and it is yours to keep. This will not obligate you at all, but for the sake of your future health and happiness, do not put it off. Send today—right now, before you turn this page.

EARLE E. LIEDERMAN
Dept. 5005, 305 Broadway, New York City

EARLE E. LIEDERMAN
Dept. 5005, 305 Broadway, New York City

Dear Sir:—I enclose herewith 10 cents, for which you are to send me, without obligation on my part whatever, a copy of your latest book, "Muscular Development."

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No. 27
Dazzling, Blue White perfect-cut Diamond. Solid 18-k White Gold. $100
ALSO AT $75, $150

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Blue White, perfect-cut Diamond. The ring is Solid 18-k White Gold.
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We import Diamonds direct from Europe and sell direct by mail.

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Over 2,000 illustrations of Diamond-set Jewelry, Watches, Wrist Watches, Pearls, Mesh Bags, Silverware, etc. Sent prepaid for your

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TERMS: All orders delivered on first payment of one-tenth of purchase price; balance in equal amounts within eight months.

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All Platinum, $25 up. With Diamonds: Three Diamonds, $65; five Diamonds, $80; seven Diamonds, $95; nine Diamonds, $110; surrounded by Diamonds, $225. Solid White or Green Gold, $5.00 up.

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NEW MODEL HOWARD, 21 Jewels, Adjusted to 5 Positions. Extra quality Gold filled Case - - - - - - $80
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THE OLD RELIABLE ORIGINAL CREDIT JEWELERS
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Stores in Leading Cities

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Are you self-conscious about the impression you make on people?

FEAR is probably the greatest handicap anyone can have in life. It keeps you from being your own real self—from doing your downright best and from getting on in life as you should.

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Listerine Tooth Paste cleans teeth a new way. At last our chemists have discovered a polishing ingredient that really cleans without scratching the enamel—a difficult problem finally solved.

You will notice the improvement even in the first few days. And you *know it is cleaning safely*.

So the makers of Listerine, the safe antiseptic, have found for you also the really safe dentifrice.

What are your teeth saying about you today?—
LAMBERT PHARMACAL CO., St. Louis, U. S. A.

LISTERINE TOOTH PASTE
Large Tube—25 cents

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Conns give you most pleasure and quickest opportunity for profit because they are *easiest to play—beautiful in tone—perfect in scale*—handsome in design and finish.

Send for Free Book, "Success in Music and How to Win It," by John Philip Sousa and others—and details of Free Trial, Easy Payment plan on any Conn instrument. Mention instrument.

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Don't Hide Them With a Veil; Remove Them With Othine—Double Strength

This preparation for the treatment of freckles is so successful in removing freckles and giving a clear, beautiful complexion that it is sold under guarantee to refund the money if it fails.

Don't hide your freckles under a veil; get an ounce of Othine and remove them. Even the first few applications should show a wonderful improvement, some of the lighter freckles vanishing entirely.

Be sure to ask the druggist for the double-strength Othine; it is this that is sold on the money-back guarantee.

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Limited quantity fully guaranteed standard make Typewriters. **5 Days Free Trial.** Lowest prices ever offered. Some at $45.35. Easy payments as low as $3 monthly. Send today for **FREE booklet** of Valuable Typewriter Information and Special Sale Bulletin.

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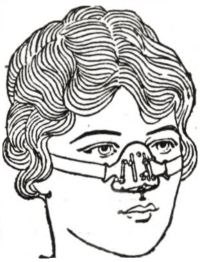
A PERFECT LOOKING NOSE
Can Easily Be Yours



Trados Model No. 25 corrects now all illshaped noses quickly, painlessly, permanently, and comfortably at home. It is the only safe and guaranteed patent device that will actually give you a perfect looking nose. Over 87,000 satisfied users. For years recommended by physicians. 16 years of experience in manufacturing Nose Shapers is at your service.

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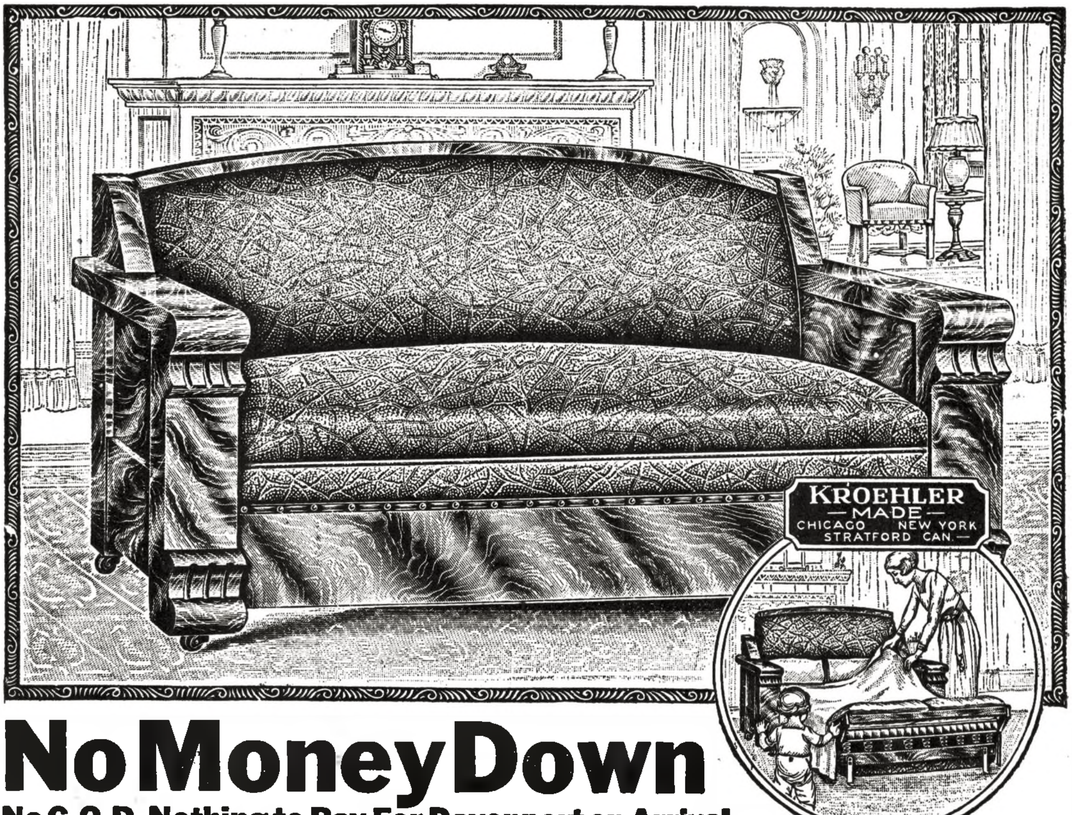
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No Money Down

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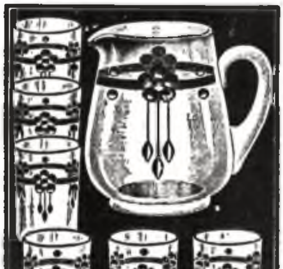
Not one cent now. Just mail the coupon and Hartman, the Largest Home Furnishing Concern in the World, will send you this splendid Kroehler Bed Davenport, and with it, absolutely FREE, the handsome 7-Piece Glass Water Set (pictured below). Nothing to pay for goods on arrival. No C. O. D. *Use them 30 days on Free Trial*, and if not satisfied, send everything back and we will pay transportation charges both ways. If you keep them, pay only for the Davenport—a little every month. Take nearly a year to pay. Not a penny to pay for the Water Set either now or later. It is absolutely FREE—a gift from Hartman.



FREE 7-PIECE Cut Glass WaterSet

Beautiful Glass Water Set sent absolutely free with the "Kodav." Includes a one-half gallon pitcher and six 9-ounce tumblers ornamented with cut band and drop design. Pay nothing for this fine set at any time. It is FREE.

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Golden Oak, Fumed Oak or Mahogany Finish

Really two splendid pieces of furniture in one—a beautiful davenport by day; a luxurious bed at night. Massive frame of solid oak in golden oak or fumed oak finish; or selected birch in brown mahogany finish. State which you want. Dimensions are: Height, 34 in.; height of back from seat, 18 in.; depth of seat, 21 in.; length over all, 59½ in.; length between arms, 52½ in. Opens to bed measuring 72x48 in. Arms, 8½ in. wide; front posts, 3½ in. Heavy imitation Spanish brown leather upholstering. Soft spring edge seat with 24 springs.

Nearly a Year to Pay

Hartman cheerfully sends the "Kodav" and free Water Set on *30 Days' Free Trial*. If you keep them, take nearly a year to pay for "Kodav" only—in small monthly amounts. Davenport shipped direct to you from nearest Kroehler factory.

Order by No. 143FMA62. Bargain Price of Bed Davenport, $49.85. No Money Down. $4.50 Monthly. The 7-Piece Water Set is FREE.

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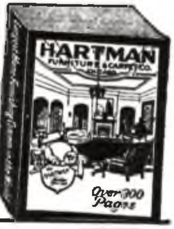

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Send the
Bed Davenport No. 143FMA62, Price $49.85,
☐ Golden Oak ☐ Fumed Oak ☐ Mahogany Finish

as checked in square above, showing finish I desire, and with it, absolutely FREE, the beautiful 7-Piece Glass Water Set. I am to pay nothing for goods on arrival—only the freight charges. I am to have 30 days' free trial. If satisfied, I will send you $4.50 monthly until full price of Davenport, $49.85, is paid. Will pay nothing at any time for the Water Set. Title remains with you until paid in full. If not satisfied, after 30 days' free trial, I will ship both Davenport and Water Set back and you will pay transportation charges both ways.

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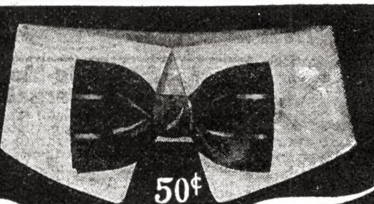

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JUST AS THE HAWAIIANS DO!
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Special courses on Violin, Tenor-Banjo, Banjo--Ukulele and Ukulele.

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For Tender Faces
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Marmola Prescription Tablets are made from the famous Marmola Prescription. Thousands have found that these handy tablets give complete relief from obesity. And when the accumulation of fat is checked, reduction to normal, healthy weight soon follows.

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As he is Today

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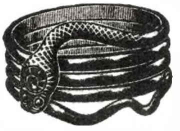
WHY BE UNLUCKY?



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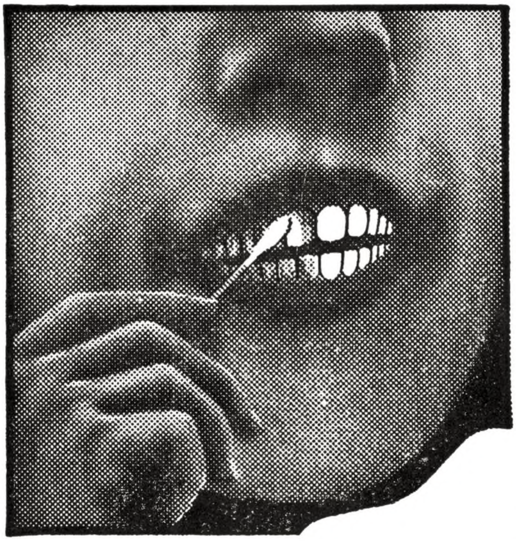
Dept. 544



New Safe Way To Remove Teeth Stains

New Discovery Bleaches Dark Teeth Instantly!

A new safe treatment has been discovered which dissolves teeth stains instantly, giving dull, dingy teeth a charming new whiteness and lustre. This new treatment is called the Bleachodent Combination. It consists of a safe mild liquid and a new kind of paste. The liquid instantly curdles or softens the stains, while the paste removes them and if used daily prevents the formation of future stains. You just brush your teeth with a few drops of the liquid, then use the paste, and before your very eyes your teeth acquire a clear, flashing whiteness that even ten times the scouring by old-fashioned methods could not give them.

It is vitally important that only a safe, mild preparation like Bleachodent Combination be used on children's teeth, which are especially subject to stains and decay. Bleachodent Combination is safe and harmless, for its mild ingredients are especially combined to act only on surface stains. It does not affect the enamel in any way. Gritty and abrasive dentifrices should never be used. If you want sparkling, white, pearly teeth get Bleachodent Combination today. Costs only a few cents. Distributed by Bleachodent Dental Laboratories and sold by drug and department stores everywhere.

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$1,000 Cold Cash says I can clear your skin of the above blemishes.

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Guaranteed 5 Years.

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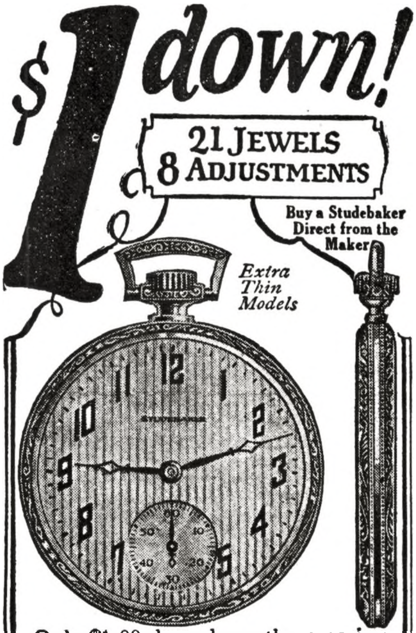

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21 Jewel ~ Extra thin

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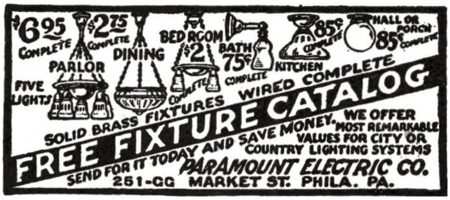

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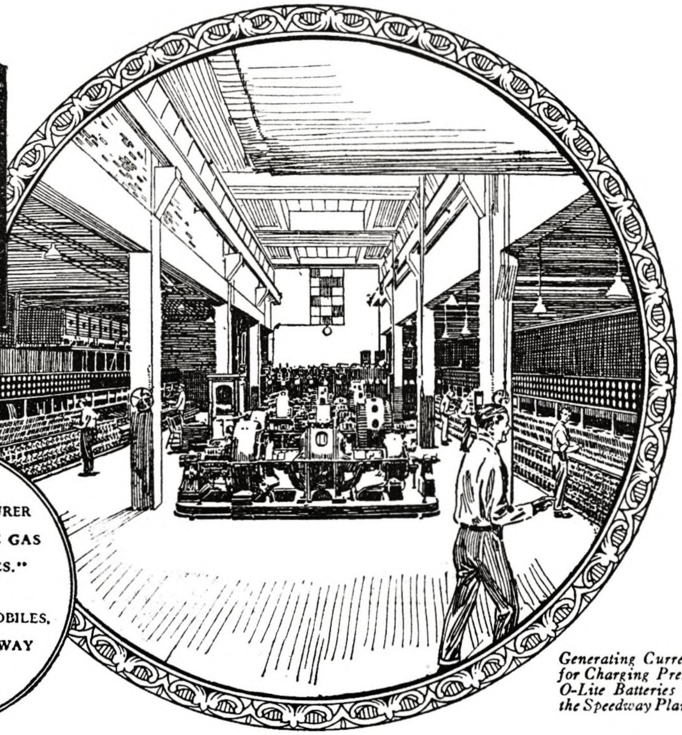

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Prest-O-Lite could not afford to put its name on a faulty product....
—which is your assurance of satisfactory performance.

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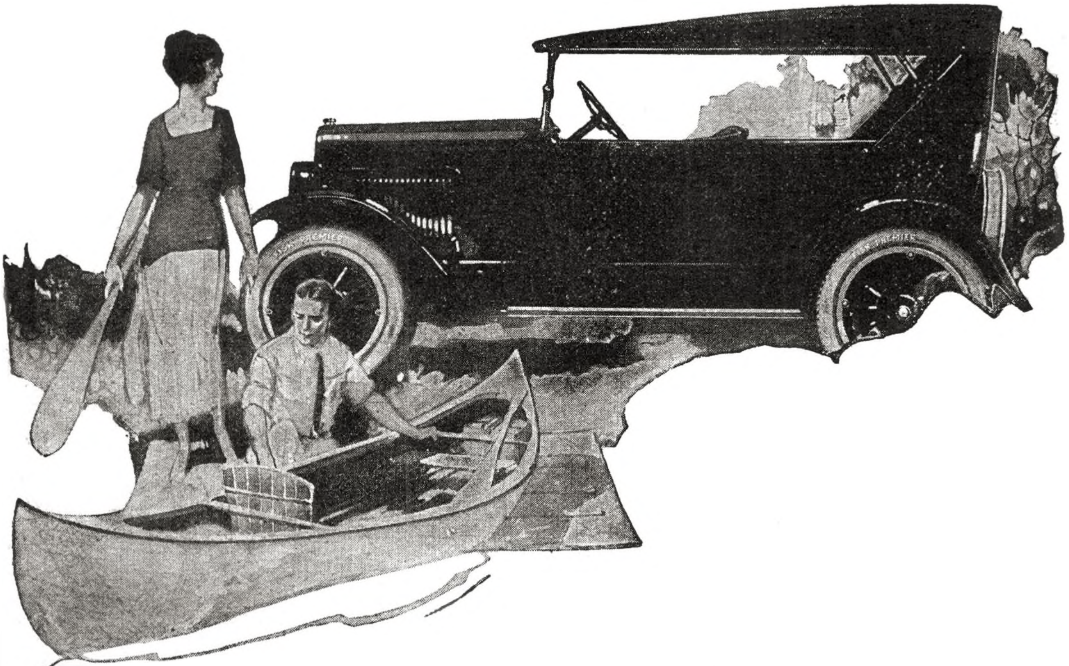
Service Stations Everywhere

For your Radio get assured performance in the Prest-O-Lite Radio Battery.



Live on the Sunny Side of Life

When it comes to real pleasure, nobody gets more out of an automobile than Overland owners. Overland is scattering sunshine in hundreds of thousands of homes—all over the map. It is making people happier, healthier and *wiser* about automobiles.

Overland has swept aside the old notion that you have to spend a lot of money for a quality automobile. In Overland you get big-car power and big-car comfort—and all the easy-handling and low-upkeep advantages of a light car. Hundreds of two-car families leave their heavy, cumbersome car stand in the garage most of the time while they drive around and enjoy themselves in an Overland.

You can drive Overland from sun-up to sun-down, week in and month out—drive it without mercy—and you'll find it dependable. Overland is at once a *joy* and a *saving*—from the first day you own it on and on through a long, long life of faithful service. Owners have good reason to call it the most automobile in the world for the money.

Other Models: Chassis $395; Roadster $495; Champion $655; Sedan $795; Spad Commercial Car $523; all prices f. o. b. Toledo. We reserve the right to change prices and specifications without notice.

Willys-Overland, Inc., Toledo, O. • Willys-Overland Sales Co. Ltd., Toronto, Can.

Overland
Touring $495
f.o.b. Toledo

Keep a Kodak story of the children

Autographic Kodaks *$6.50* up

Eastman Kodak Company, Rochester, N. Y., *The Kodak City*

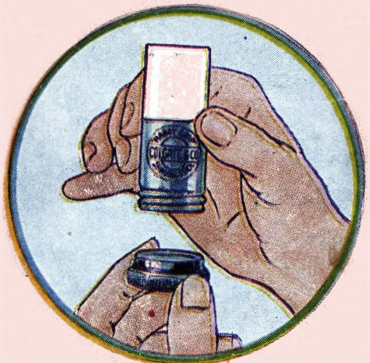
COLGATE'S
Shaving Stick
"HANDY GRIP" AND REFILL

Comfort,
Convenience,
Economy

Comfort

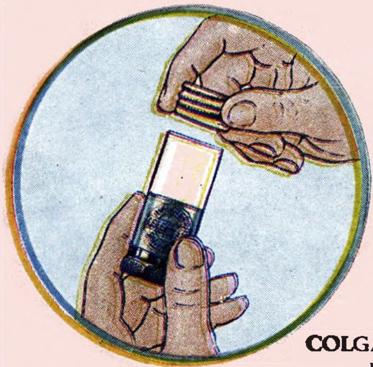
Comfort

Colgate's Shaving Stick fully deserves the enthusiastic praise it receives daily from hundreds of thousands of men. With hot water or cold it makes a wonderful lather for softening the beard and assuring an easy shave. It leaves the face cool and refreshed.


Convenience

Convenience

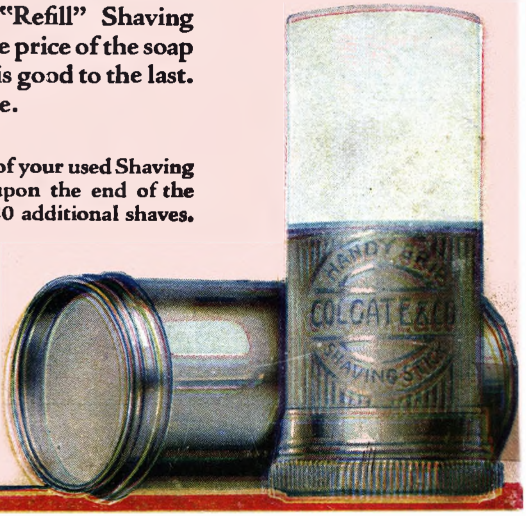
Colgate's "Handy Grip" is convenient and serviceable. It has no complicated parts to become loose or disconnected. Screwing a Refill Shaving Stick into the "Handy Grip" takes but a moment, and is very simple. The soap itself is threaded.


Economy

Economy

Colgate's is economical. The "Handy Grip" and metal container last for years. "Refill" Shaving Sticks cost you the price of the soap alone. The soap is good to the last. There is no waste.

Moisten the last bit of your used Shaving Stick and press it upon the end of the refill, thus getting 20 additional shaves.



COLGATE & CO.
Est. 1806
New York