COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL EACH ISSUE
TWICE-A-MONTH FEB. 20. 1924

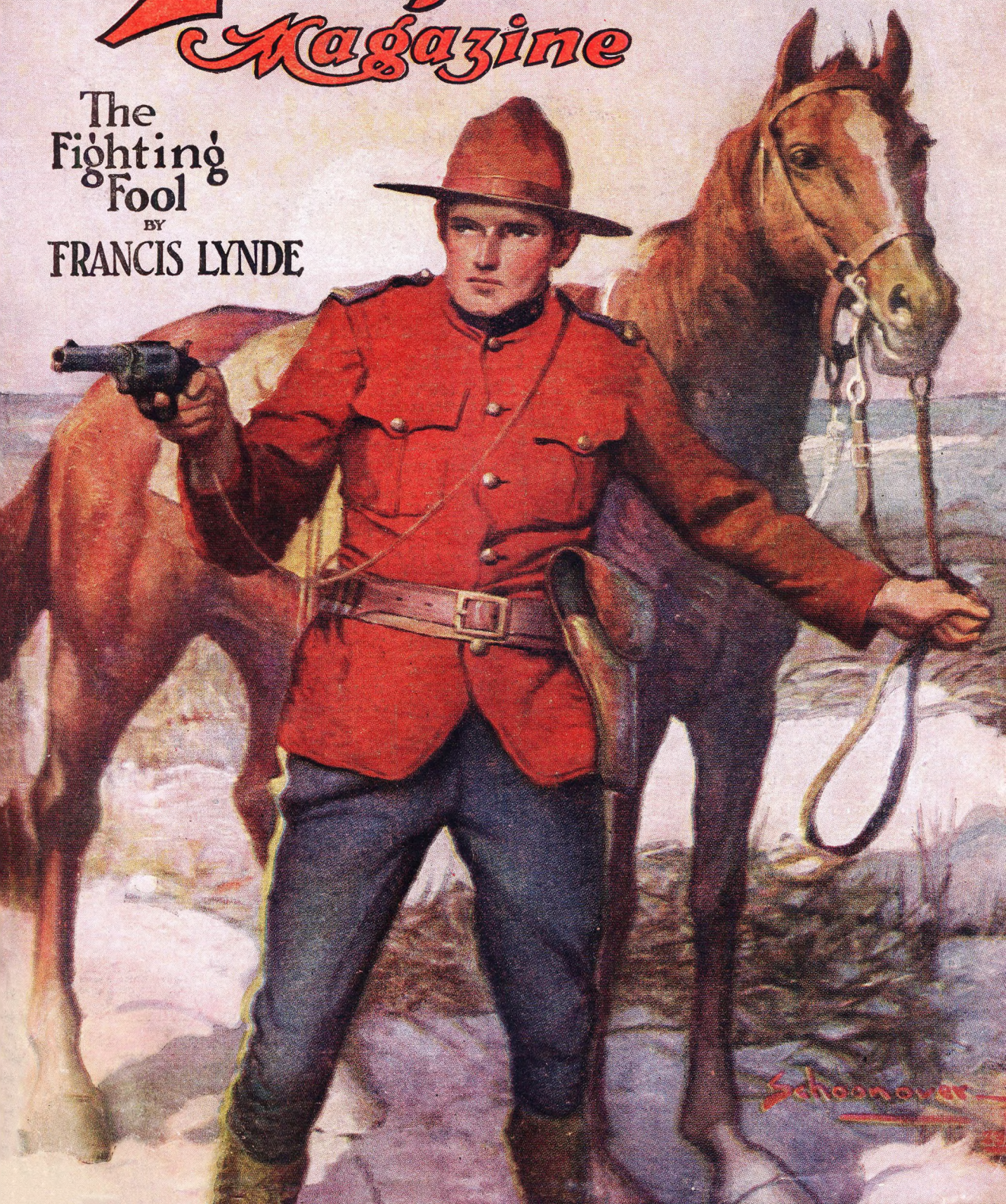
The Popular Magazine

25 cts.

The Fighting Fool

BY

FRANCIS LYNDE



$1.00 Brings 4 Congoleum Rugs

For *LESS* Than the Price of *One*

One room-size 9 x 12 ft. Congoleum Gold Seal Art Rug and a **Gift** of three extra small rugs to match. Your choice of two of the loveliest Congoleum patterns ever produced!

Each pattern comes in five sizes. With all the sizes our offer guarantees a lower price and one or **more** companion rugs included entirely as an **extra gift.**

Never has anyone brought you an offer like this. We may never be able to repeat it. We do not show this wonderful offer even in our own regular catalog.

This offer is open to everybody **now** — no matter where you live or what your circumstances are.

We will send you either pattern in any size you select for only one dollar pinned to the coupon below — on thirty days' free trial. We will include one or more companion rugs extra. Each companion rug measures 18 x 36 inches. We will allow you a whole year's time to pay.

The Universal Rug—for *Every* Room in the Home

Sent on Approval — Credit Without Asking—Year to P

Nearly everybody knows all about genuine **Gold Seal Congoleum Art Rugs** and every housewife is familiar with them and wants them.

They offer all the artistic and colorful beauty of woven rugs. You don't have to tire yourself beating dust and dirt out of them. Swish a damp mop over their smooth, waterproof surface, and in just a jiffy they are spotlessly clean.

They lie flat from the first moment without fastening. They never curl up or kick up at edges or corners. Dirt cannot accumulate underneath. Mud ashes, grit or dust cannot "grind into" them. You never have to send one to the cleaners. Not stained or marred by spilling of hot liquids.

People of taste and judgment are glad to use genuine Gold Seal Congoleum Rugs in their very best rooms. It is the ideal rug for kitchen and bathroom.

The Price of Genuine Gold Seal Congoleum Rugs Is Standard Everywhere

Go anywhere, look everywhere, in stores, catalogs, magazines and newspapers. The price of a genuine Gold Seal Congoleum Rug is always the same. Our price **on all sizes** is lower than the regular standard advertised price. In addition, we give you small companion rugs to match **without added cost.**

The New Tile Pattern No. 550

A brand new design, duplicating the effect of imported straight line linoleum. It is shown directly above in the kitchen scene.

An all over mosaic pattern with background of little square tiles of alternating creamy ivory and creamy brown colorings This effect is rich, warm and colorful

The large figures are the same little squares of mosaic in dark blue—with a delicate Dutch blue for the center.

The border is designed to harmonize, the outstanding feature of it being a delightful use of block tile figure as a triple design

Order by No. F4C550—be very careful to state size wanted. Send only $1 with coupon.

Oriental Pattern No. 534

This is the beautiful Gold Seal Congoleum Art Rug as shown at the top **at the right.** The richest blue color dominates the ground work. Mellow ecru, old ivories, and light tans, set off the blue field. Mingled with these lovely tints are peacock blue, robin's egg blue and darker tones. Old rose, tiny specks of lighter pink and dark mulberry are artistically placed. Darker browns and blacks lend dignity and richness.

Ecru and tan shades form the border background. An ideal pattern for any room of the home.

Order by No. F4C534—be very careful to state size wanted. Send only $1 with coupon.

The Gold Seal on Congole Is Like the Sterling Mark on S

There is only one guaranteed Congoleu tified by the Gold Seal shown above — on t This Gold Seal is pasted on all genuine, first Congoleum Rugs, even in the smallest size.

PIN A DOLLAR TO THIS COI

I Want the Size I Have Checked Belo

Put a Cross (X) in square opposite size that y

- ☐ **9 x 15 ft. size,** with 3 small rugs extra. $1 down, $1.75 monthly. Price $
- ☐ **9 x 12 ft. size,** with 3 small rugs extra. $1 down, $1.50 monthly. Price $
- ☐ **9 x 10 1-2 ft. size,** with 2 small rugs extra. $1 down, $1.25 monthly. Price $
- ☐ **7 1-2 x 9 ft. size,** with 1 small rug extra. $1 down, $1.00 monthly. Price $
- ☐ **6 x 9 ft. size,** with 1 small rug extra. $1 down, 75 cents monthly. Price

Spiegel, May, Stern Co., 1119 W. 35th St.,

I enclose **$1** for your special **Gold Seal Cong** bargain—exactly as described—in the patte **below,** on 30 days free trial. If I return it, refund $1, also all transportation costs I ha the size I want in the proper space **above** w the price and monthly payments and also the extra small rugs I am to receive.

I SELECT PATTERN No. ____

Be sure to write here the number of the pattern

Name _____

Street, R. F. D. or Box No. _____

Post Office _____ *State* ____

Shipping Point _____

Also send me your latest Free Furniture Bo

Ask for FREE Catalog

Spiegel, May, Stern Co.

1119 West 35th St., Chicago, Ill.

Ask for FREE Catalog

THE POPULAR MAGAZINE

VOL. LXXI. FEBRUARY 20, 1924. No. 3

A Fighting Fool

By Francis Lynde

Author of "A Madonna of the Snows," "Somewhere in the Caribbean," Etc.

In this story of the modern West, Francis Lynde has taken a moral and hidden it cunningly in the folds of one of the most attractive literary wrappers we have ever seen. You won't miss the moral, but neither will you find its presence irking you. You will be too much fascinated by the story of Prentice Rathburn's vision—and the fight he made to realize it—to concern yourself about the moral at all. He was a tenderfoot in the Quesada, a tenderfoot in business, and a tenderfoot in love, yet he carried himself like an old-timer in each of these perilous demesnes. Now that we come to consider it, there are two morals to this story. The one we have just remembered is this: A good man is a good man, no matter where he comes from—and can prove it almost any time and anywhere. The other is: Never trust a fat boy. He may be a fighting fool in disguise.

THE EDITOR.

(A Complete Novel)

CHAPTER I.

THE WAY OF A MAID.

THOSE who knew Prentice Rathburn even casually in his undergraduate years were unanimous in calling him a glutton for punishment, but this was chiefly because he was at that time earning the title of "Die-hard Rathie" in certain athletic events in which his college took part. Later, after the college period had become a memory, and his retired-banker father had died and left him what, measured by Milford standards, figured as a comfortable fortune, the people of the Middle-Western town where he was born and bred soon acquired the habit of shaking their heads and saying they guessed that,

after all, with all his college education and money, Prent Rathburn wouldn't be likely ever to set the river afire.

This mildly censorious attitude on the part of his fellow townsmen was not based upon anything he did. It was rather the other way around; it grew upon the fact that he was apparently too lazy to do anything. Weighing a neat hundred and sixty pounds of good, clean athletic bone and muscle when he came home from the university, a life of easy-going inaction soon began to pad him up to such an extent as not only to take the nip out of his serve in lawn tennis, but, what was even more important, to put him sadly off his game in the semioccasional round of golf which Betty Norton was now and then able to shame him into playing with her.

"It's no use, Prenty, dear; you're coming to be a regular fat boy!" she sighed one afternoon when they had quit at the ninth hole to go and absorb cooling drinks of shag in the shade of the clubhouse veranda. "I never saw anybody go stale the way you have."

"Thanks, wretchedly," grinned the stale one, making a long reach to put his empty glass on the serving table because he was too lazy to get out of his chair. "Why shouldn't I put on fat to my heart's content, if I want to?"

Quite apart from her other charms, which were by no means negligible, Betty Norton had the brown eyes that grow black under the stimulus of emotion; also, she had the Cupid's-bow upper lip that curls easily when its possessor chooses to be scornful.

"I should think you'd dislike yourself horribly," she remarked. "You play a worse game now than you did at the beginning of the summer, and, goodness knows, it was bad enough then." After a little pause she added: "This hustling world of ours hasn't much use for the jellyfish, Prenty."

"Help!" he cried weakly. "I'm devoluting rapidly. Day before yesterday you called me a Digger Indian because I dubbed a few times; and now I've gone back to the Paleozoic age!"

"Well, haven't you?"—coolly.

"Oh, I guess maybe, if you want to put it that way," he returned good-naturedly.

On the young woman's forehead, which was the smooth brow of the completely self-contained, there appeared, for a flitting instant only, a shadowy wrinkling of impatience.

"Prenty, dear, haven't you any ambition at all?" she demanded.

"To bring up my game of golf, you mean?"

"You know perfectly well what I mean. Your bad golf is only a symptom. Don't you want to make something out of yourself; to make money?"

"Dad took good care that I shouldn't have to work for a living. Why should I try to bant by chasing more of the nimble dollars?"

Betty's pretty upper lip curled again.

"Two hundred thousand!" she said contemptuously. "That is only bait in these days; something to put on the hook for the catching of a fish worth while."

Rathburn knew very well to what this twist of the talk was tending. A number of times within the past few weeks Betty's father, Milford's leading "realtor," as he chose to call himself, had tried to interest him in a Far Western irrigation project which promised handsome returns to investors. Rathburn had been slow to warm himself at this fire of enthusiasm, not because he especially doubted the reality of the blaze but rather because he was totally lacking the urge of the money getter.

"Two hundred thousand, at a good, safe five per cent—and some of it is earning a bit more than that—is ten thousand a year," he offered.

"Well—you couldn't support a wife on ten thousand a year," said Betty.

Rathburn had the boyish grin that a man with light-brown hair, blue-gray eyes, a wide mouth and a skin as fair as a girl's can sometimes carry over into his middle twenties.

"Lots of men do it on a good deal less," he countered. "It depends a little on the wife, doesn't it?"

"No!" the answer was emphatic. "You couldn't ask any woman of the kind you'd care to marry to live on her half of ten thousand a year; you know you couldn't. It isn't done nowadays."

"Then you'd say I'll have to have more money before I can settle down and marry and raise a family of kiddies?"

"Of course you will. And you could make it easily if you weren't so——"

"So lazy," he filled in for her. "Always tell the whole truth and shame the devil,

even if it does take the hide off the other fellow. And you have right, as Johnny Crapaud phrases it. I *am* lazy. What would you recommend?"

Once again the exceedingly attractive young woman in the other porch chair did not reply offhand, and a student of physiognomy might have said that she was carefully weighing her answer.

"What's the use?" she said finally. "I suppose you'll stay right here in Milford and vegetate to the end of the chapter."

"Well, why not?" he teased, lighting a cigarette and lying back luxuriously in the deep lounging chair. "Milford is a pretty good old dump, isn't it? Trifle slow, perhaps, but what's the hurry?"

"Much too slow for people who are really alive."

"But you are alive and you're here."

"Here to-day and gone to-morrow," she answered lightly, adding: "But I suppose you've heard?"

"I am like the three Chinese monkeys; I hear no evil, see no evil, think no evil. What have I missed?"

"Daddy has sold out his real-estate business and we are going away."

If the black-brown eyes were set to mark the effect of this announcement upon him, Prentice was serenely unconscious of the fact.

"Going away?" he echoed. "Why all this suddenness?"

"Business," she replied shortly. "Daddy has found a chance to make some real money, at last."

"May I hear about it?"

"Making money doesn't interest you"—this with a toss of the pretty head.

"But your going away does."

It was one of Betty Norton's many gifts to be able to laugh in divers languages. "Much you care!" she scoffed, with the laugh to fit. "Or, if you do, it is only because you won't find anybody else who will put up with your rotten golf."

"No, but really," said Rathburn, rousing himself sufficiently to sit up. With characteristic small-town assurance Milford gossip had had these two as good as engaged ever since Rathburn had come into his money, and there were a few who were spiteful enough to add that the match was largely of Betty's making, with the Rathburn money for its principal object. This ungenerous elimination of Prentice as an active participant was scarcely just. He had known Betty all his life; had grown up with her. And there were no other girls on any of his horizons. Just now he was realizing, as poignantly as an idle person may, that a Bettyless Milford would be but a stale and unprofitable thing.

"If you really do care, Prenty—enough to want to know, I mean," she said. "It's like this: Daddy has always been watching for the one big chance and now it has come. He has talked to you about Quesada Park, Colorado, hasn't he?"

"Often," said Rathburn shortly.

"Well, it is the last of the mountain paradises. You know what I mean; a desert now, but one that will bloom like a Maréchal Niel rose when it is irrigated. You probably know that a company, with some of daddy's friends in it, is building the irrigation works?"

"Yes; he has told me that."

"Then the rest is a mere detail. He is going out to manage the farm-selling part."

"Fine!" exclaimed the listener. "I hope he makes a million."

"But the prospect doesn't tempt you?"

He looked at her through half-closed eyes.

"*You* tempt me, Betty."

Silence for the space of half a minute. Then: "Why don't you come along, Prenty, and reap some of the golden harvest for yourself? You're going to need it, you know—if you ever marry and raise that family you speak of."

"Do you want me to go along, Betty?"

"Of course I do—but not unless you are going to make it your opportunity."

"To get into the game, you mean?"

"It is exactly what I mean. You can turn your two hundred thousand into a half a million or more, just as well as not."

Rathburn leaned back and lighted another cigarette. Two years earlier—before he had come into his inheritance, and while his banker father, half convinced that inherited money wasn't likely to be an unmixed blessing to a young man of the Prentice type, was considering the advisability of leaving the bulk of his fortune to charity—he had asked Betty to marry him. She had refused; as one might refuse to accept the gift of a handsome horse while still holding the halter firmly in hand. There had been bald frankness in the refusal, however. She had told him plainly

that love in a cottage had no place in her cosmic plan.

Now, as it seemed, her ambition had been growing larger as it grew in age. He did not blame her. Jasper Norton, shrewd, narrow eyed, rather grasping as Milford knew him, had always been a money chaser of sorts but somehow the quarry had usually contrived to elude him. Betty had been sent to an expensive finishing school in the East and had played around with the little daughters of wealth. Therefore and wherefore——

"How are you going to live in this Quesada paradise of yours?—in a tent?" he inquired at length.

"Oh, no; nothing at all like that. There is a brisk little mining city—Ophir is its name—a few miles away across some of the mountains, and our living headquarters will be there. Daddy was out there a month ago and he says the Chinquito is a comfortable up-to-the-minute hotel as modern as the best."

Prentice heaved himself out of his chair and stood looking down at her.

"You haven't a particle of sympathy for the tired business man, have you?" he said, with the good-natured grin wrinkling the corners of his eyes. "You know well enough that I'm not going to let you run away and leave me here to fry in my own fat. When does the procession start for this paradise place?"

"I told you a few minutes ago: to-morrow."

"All right"—with a sigh of the long-suffering. "I'll pack a couple of grips and toddle along with you."

In a flash she was standing before him with her hands on his shoulders, a pretty picture of pleased excitement duly tempered with firm determination.

"Not one single step, Prenty, dear, unless you are going to make it your opportunity—as daddy means to make it his!"

"And if I do, will you marry me?"

With a quick little side-step she slipped away from him. "Wait and see," she laughed, and again the laugh was strictly fitted to the occasion. Then, with a glance at her wrist watch: "Heavens! it's five o'clock and I have half of my packing to do yet. Be a good boy, Prenty, and drive me home this instant!"

He qualified dutifully as "a good boy" by bringing his car around to the clubhouse steps, helping her in, and covering the mile and a half between playground and packing scene at speed. Afterward he drove at a more law-abiding pace to the old-fashioned brick mansion at the head of High Street; the house in which he had been born and which was now a part of his inheritance.

Crossing the well-kept lawn, after he had put the car in its garage, he entered the house through one of the French windows of the library, cast himself into the easy-chair which had once been his father's favorite seat, and filled and lighted a pipe. On the table at his elbow was the packet of mail which had come in the afternoon delivery, and having nothing better to do he began to open his letters.

A cursory glance sufficed for most of the inclosures. Like the majority of communications that pour in upon persons known or supposed to have money, the collection was evenly divided between appeals for sweet charity's sake and glowing prospectuses of enterprises guaranteed to yield fabulous returns to the prompt investor. But at the bottom of the pile there was a long, official-looking envelope bearing the San Francisco postmark, and in the upper left-hand corner the card of a firm of attorneys.

With an idle curiosity Rathburn looked the long envelope over speculatively before opening it.

"Another gold-brick offer," he mused. "The lawyers' card says that much. Lucky I don't have to answer 'em all; I'd get writer's cramp." Then he ran the paper knife under the flap and extracted the letter.

Unlike the others, this particular communication called for more than a cursory glance, and the changes of expression writing themselves upon his broad, good-natured face as he read made it plain that here, at all events, was something entirely different; different and mildly exciting.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he said softly when, after a second and more careful perusal of the letter, he laid the two closely written sheets upon the table. "Poor old Uncle Jeff—after all his disappointments and all these years!" Then the slow smile which was always more than half a grin twitched at the corners of his mouth. "All right, uncle; rest easy in your grave. I'll see to it that justice is done, though I'll never believe the fault was all yours. And as to the other thing—gosh! I wonder what

Betty will say when I tell her? Believe I'll phone her—no, I'll be darned if I do. I shan't tell her, or anybody—not just yet. It's a bolt from the blue."

It was in the evening of the same day and Betty Norton had finished her preparations for the long journey and had gone to meet her father by appointment at Brown's New York Café—private tables for gentlemen with ladies—for the farewell Milford dinner.

When they were seated opposite each other at a table for two the shrewd-eyed realtor looked over his glasses at his daughter and table mate.

"You were with Prentice again this afternoon?" he queried.

She nodded brightly.

"Did you succeed in putting it over, at last?"

"When have I ever failed to 'put it over' when there was need for it?"

"Not often, I'll admit. Prent is with us?"

"He'll be on the train with us to-morrow."

"But that doesn't necessarily mean anything."

"It will mean all you want it to mean, later on. If, as you say, the psychological moment has arrived, he'll back you to the limit of his two hundred thousand. But there is this about it, daddy, dear: you've got to win, this time, and make him win. I'm twenty-four and I'll never be a day younger than I am this minute."

"Don't worry," was the crisp adjuration. "With Prent's money to push us over the hill we'll win hands down. Then you can wear diamonds and ride in an imported car and have the houseful of lackeys you've always wanted. And you won't have to take over the incumbrance of a happy-go-lucky, college-athlete husband along with the other luxuries unless you particularly want to."

And with that pronouncement Mr. Jasper Norton addressed himself to his dinner with the nervous avidity of a person blessed, or cursed, with a thin man's voracious appetite.

CHAPTER II.

THE WILLIE BOY.

OPHIR, namesake of the biblical Klondike where King Solomon's friend and ally, Hiram of Tyre, dug his gold, had ups and downs in its history, like other mining camps. In the roaring 'eighties, when the placers were first discovered, it was a blatant shack-and-log camp at the head of Tourmaline Cañon and its boast was that it had a man for breakfast every morning. Later, after the placer ground had all been worked over, it died as other placer camps have died, and the shacks, winter-wind blown and snowed in, passed peacefully into decaying desuetude.

Later still the great gold reef on Chinquito Mountain was discovered and Ophir awoke to a clamant resurrection. After another and shorter period of the blatancies two railroads built branches up the Tourmaline, the shacks disappeared to give place to substantial brick-and-mortar structures, the trails became paved streets, and the camp acquired a city charter, with all the emoluments and drawbacks incident thereto.

It was upon this latest Ophir that Prentice Rathburn looked out when he threw back the bed covers and went in his pajamas to a window of his room on the fourth floor of the Hotel Chinquito on the morning after his late-at-night arrival. What he saw was a compact little city deeply buried between two astonishingly big mountains on the slopes of one of which were perched the shaft houses and ore sheds of a number of mines. From another window he looked out across the brawling torrent of the Tourmaline and down upon the two railroad yards with their station buildings, roundhouses and coal sheds.

Opening this second window he stood for a minute or so at it, taking in deep breaths of the crisp, clean mountain air which at the Ophirian altitude had all the exhilarating and heady attributes of a draft of champagne.

"Some jazzy little town. Shouldn't wonder if I learned to like you right well," he said, apostrophizing Ophir as a whole. Then: "I wonder in which direction our paradise valley lies?"

There was nobody at hand to answer this question; but later, after he had taken his bath in water that had the invigorating tang of the snow banks in it and had dressed and gone down to join the Nortons, father and daughter, at breakfast in the onyx-plated dining room, he learned that the Quesada was some twenty miles distant on the other side of the southern mountain range, that its altitude was somewhat less than that of Ophir, and that it was reached by a wagon

road over Navajo Pass; a road which was practicable, in summer, for automobiles.

"So you see, there's no danger of your having to carry your weight and walk," was Betty's laughing assurance added to her father's information geographical and topographical.

"That is something to the good, anyway," Rathburn conceded. "When do we go in, or over, or across, whichever it is?"

It was Jasper Norton, bolting a liberal breakfast much as he had bolted the farewell Milford dinner, who answered.

"Braithwaite will send one of the company autos over for us some time this forenoon. I wired from Denver to have a car meet us here to-day."

"Then the company has no office in Ophir?"

Norton shook his head. "Not yet. It seemed an unnecessary expense during the construction period. A little later, after the land is put on the market and the purchasers begin to come in, we'll have to open up headquarters here. But by that time we shall be running a regular line of autos."

"I see," said Rathburn; and after this the table talk languished, as breakfast talks are prone to.

Learning from Norton that the auto from the Quesada could hardly be expected much before ten or eleven o'clock Rathburn killed some of the waiting interval by taking a stroll about town. It was after he had sauntered the full length of the two chief business streets and was returning toward the hotel that he came face to face with a bearded young man in brown duck and leggings who was coming out of a building which advertised itself in its window signs as the office of the Ophir Consolidated Gold Mining Company. Recognition, on Rathburn's part, had barely penetrated the masking beard when the unshaven one grabbed for him.

"Rathie—you old beef-eating center push!—when did you turn up in the tall hills?" was the astonished greeting. Then: "Why, by George!—you've been putting on fat till I hardly know you! How's little old dry-as-dust Milford?"

"Milford's all right; but you go easy on the fat," laughed Rathburn, gripping the hand of college fellowship and adding: "It sure does me good to see a familiar face in a strange town. What the devil are you doing out here, Roddy?"

"Holding down a man's job: I'm assistant in the Consolidated's engineering bunch; came here less than a month after commencement. How long have you been a citizen of our fair city?"

"Since about ten o'clock last night, and it's only a chance that we didn't miss. I'm leaving for the Quesada in an hour or so."

At the mention of the Quesada the young mining engineer linked an arm into Rathburn's.

"Come back to my workshop with me till we rake up the past a bit," he invited. "I can take a little time off and I can't have you dodging in and out between two minutes like a condemned jack-in-the-box without stopping long enough to say 'Hello.'"

Duncan's workshop proved to be an assayer's laboratory in the rear of the Consolidated building, and when the engineer had planted his guest in the only chair in the place and the pipes were lighted the talk swung around the reminiscent circle in clipped man fashion, Rathburn telling what he had done, or hadn't done, since their parting on the memorable commencement day, and Duncan playing an able second with his experiences in the Ophir district.

After a time the conversational give-and-take got around to the present and its belongings.

"What good wind blew you out here, Rathie? Just having a little look-see in the not-so-wild-and-woolly-as-it-used-to-be?"

"Call it a vacation trip," was the evasive reply. "I'm here with the Nortons; I think you met Betty Norton the senior-year Christmas you spent with me in Milford."

"I sure did: some little Indian-cling peach—with the soft down on, take it from me! Is she out here?"

"Just down the street a piece, at the hotel with her father. We're all waiting for an auto to come over and fetch us."

"From the Quesada?"

"Yes. Father Norton's interested in the irrigation project."

"I see—Mark Braithwaite's scheme. I hope Braithwaite isn't pulling Father Norton's leg."

Rathburn grinned.

"I think a lot of Bettina, Rod; she's all that you say she is and then some. But Mr. Jasper Norton is quite a different hill of beans. When it comes to a matter of leg-pull the Braithwaite person will have to be out of bed pretty early in the morn-

ing if he wants to put anything over on Betty's father. But tell me about this irrigation scheme. Anything wrong with it?"

The young mining engineer shook his head.

"What I don't know about the scheme would fill a book. Here is the lay-out, so far as I know it. The Quesada is one of the show places of the Timanyonis; another Yosemite, on a smaller scale. It's a sunken valley with a stream somewhat bigger than the Tourmaline flowing through it, and with noble mountains hemming it in on all sides. At the present moment it is a cattleman's paradise, as it has been ever since the year one, when Major Houston Carter's Diamond-X outfit found the way into it over Navajo Pass—mild winters, good grass, plenty of water."

"All to the merry, eh?" said Rathburn. "And the cattle are there now?"

"Surest thing you ever knew. Some years ago, when Ophir was enjoying its placer boom, the major moved his headquarters into the Quesada. He was one of the cattle kings of Timanyoni Park, but the wheat farmers got too many for him and crowded him out."

Rathburn was neither too fat nor too lazy to be able to put an obvious two and two together.

"And now he is about to be crowded out again?" he offered.

"That is the way it would look to a man up a tree. Braithwaite's dam is advertised to make farming land out of the entire Quesada; and when the settlers come the cattle will have to go. We've all been looking to see Carter make a man-size fight to hold his own, but there has been nothing militant, so far; nothing but a little rough stuff on the part of the Diamond-X cowboys, pulling up grade stakes on the ditch lines, and things of that sort."

"A few minutes ago you said that what you didn't know about the irrigation project would fill a book," Rathburn put in. "What is the unknown quantity?"

"Little mysteries, mostly. The Quesada Land & Improvement Company is supposed to be a stock company, but the stock isn't listed on any exchange known to the public, and nobody in this man's town has ever seen any of it. Next, there is Major Carter's lack of opposition. He is a Texan and a fighter from the word go. But, so far as can be seen he hasn't put a straw in the way of the Braithwaite scheme. It's the other way around; he discharged two of his men who were caught pulling up the ditch-grade stakes and apologized to Braithwaite for the sabotage."

"Anything else?"

"Yes. There have been delays in the work that you would think would drive any bunch of investors into fits of apoplexy; cement and building material weeks on the way, labor shortages, strikes, flood losses, the devil and all in the way of slow-down handicaps. Braithwaite is either the poorest excuse for a promoter that ever lived or he is short of capital or——"

"Well," said Rathburn, with his laziest smile, "what's the third 'or?' "

"Or else he has something up his sleeve that nobody knows about."

"But there is money in his project if it is ever completed, isn't there?"

"Big money. The Quesada is about twenty miles long and anywhere from four to six miles wide. It has a soil that will grow anything under the sun if you'll only put water on it; and while it is some distance from a market, there is a good chance of a trucking road over the pass. But even the rich land reclamation is not the biggest thing in sight."

"All right; what is the biggest thing?"

"Power," said the engineer succinctly. "The Tumblestone—the stream that runs through the valley—is quite a considerable little river; bigger than the Tourmaline here, and with a steady all-the-year-round flow. We're in the grip of an electric monopoly in Ophir; an Eastern-capitalized outfit that cinches us for all the traffic will bear. We are paying picture prices for the current used at the mines, with the supply, which has always been inadequate, often so short as to make shut-downs necessary. A hydroelectric plant in Quesada Cañon, with a transmission line that needn't be over eight or ten miles long over the mountain, would be able to knock our monopoly higher than Gilderoy's kite."

"And nobody has seen this juicy chance?" said Rathburn.

"Seen it? I'll say we've seen it! Just before Braithwaite showed up, a local company, backed by Ophir money, was formed to go over there and develop the power. But just as we were ready to move Braithwaite bobbed up with a charter covering the only location in Quesada Cañon where

a dam was feasible. This whole town blew up with a loud noise. Half the population was for hanging Braithwaite at sight and the other half was for paying his price and buying him out. When it came to dickering Braithwaite refused to sell; but he told us this: that while his company had been organized for the sole purpose of reclaiming desert land for agricultural purposes, its charter was broad enough to include a power plant. Such being the case a power plant would be added to the Quesada Company's plans and the relief Ophir was seeking would be accorded it."

"Good enough," Rathburn commented. "What more do you want?"

Duncan made a wry face.

"We want what we want *when* we want it. Braithwaite has been fooling around over in the Quesada for one whole season and part of another, and people who have been on the ground say that possibly, some time within the next ten years or so, he may have his dam built and a generating plant in operation. But here; I didn't mean to bore you with the story of our local troubles. You say you are going over the pass to-day? When will you be back in Ophir?"

Rathburn helped himself to a match from Duncan's desk box and lighted a cigarette.

"I can't say as to that—not definitely, Roddy. I'm in the hands of my friends. But knowing Father Norton and Betty as I do, I'll venture a guess that they won't stay any great while in a dam-construction camp. I'll be seeing you again before long, never fear. Mighty glad we collided." And with that he took his leave.

At the hotel entrance he found the Quesada Company's auto already arrived and waiting, with Betty, a very chic and well-tailored Betty, comfortably bestowed in the tonneau seat.

"There!" she said as he got in beside her, "I told daddy you were off somewhere gadding with somebody. He has gone in to have the clerk send up to your room."

Rathburn excused himself.

"Your father said ten or eleven and it's only half past nine. I took a walk and ran up against an old friend—a college classmate. Nice boy named Roddy Duncan. Perhaps you may remember him. I had him home with me on my last Christmas vacation."

"I certainly do remember him," she laughed. "I met him at one of the Country Club dinner dances and he was making love to me before the evening was half over—which is more than you ever did, Prenty, dear."

"Temperament," said Prentice, with his slow grin; "Roddy's, I mean—not mine. Shall I go in and tell your father I'm here?"

"Too late," she pointed out; "he's coming." And after Jasper Norton had climbed to his place beside the chauffeur and the auto journey was begun: "Now tell me all about Mr. Duncan. Where did you find him and what is he doing out here?"

It was an hour later, while the Quesada Company's auto was grinding in second speed up the zigzag grades on the approach to Navajo Pass, and Roderick Duncan was still furnishing desultory talk material for the pair in the rear seat, that a conference of two was in progress in the private office of a three-room suite in Ophir's tallest—and only—office building.

Of the two, the man tilting easily in his pivot chair behind the flat-topped table desk was the younger; a clean-cut type of the modern corporation executive, well groomed, alert, with brown eyes that smoldered when they were not snapping, and with a neatly trimmed, curling brown beard to hide the hard lines of a fighting jaw. The other, a big-bodied man, clean shaven and heavy faced, had an extinct cigar clamped between his strong teeth; and as he talked the half-burned cigar took an upward tilt at the aggressive angle, as if his words were so many challenges to any listener temerarious enough to doubt them.

"We've got to be pretty sure about this before we make any bad breaks, Grisby." It was the man sitting behind the desk who was speaking. "You're certain you have the right dope on this fellow?"

"I'll bank on it," was the shotlike reply. "Soon as I got wind of this land-selling deal, with Norton to handle it, I wired a pal of mine in Chicago to jump a train and slip down to the hick town where Norton lived and get it straight. He didn't miss any of the bets, and he's been keeping me posted by wire. Norton was hunting money in big chunks and hunting it hard. He found it at last—or his girl did for him. This fat willie boy they've fetched along with 'em has the kale, and he'll put it up if they say so."

"You're sure of that?"

"Straight goods. The day before they started West the willie boy and the girl played golf. My pal spotted 'em and heard what they talked about. Girl puts it up to willie boy flat: if he goes along he's got to get into the game with both feet and pull down the purse. She wins and he's here."

"How much can he put up?"

"Six figures, doubled, if he goes the limit."

Silence for a moment while the snappy brown eyes smoldered thoughtfully. Then: "Two hundred thousand, you say? The land deal doesn't need any special capitalizing, but that much money turned over to Braithwaite would raise the devil if he's planning to double cross us, Grisby. I don't more than half trust him. Once a crook, always a crook. What's the answer?"

"If I find the answer, what is there in it for me?"

"Good money. You know that."

"And you'll give me a free hand?"

"As usual—on the one condition: that you play a lone hand. I'm not in it and the company isn't in it. I don't even want to know how you go about it. And if you come to grief you'll have to paddle your own canoe."

"Needn't put that in. I've pulled enough chestnuts out of the fire for your darned corporations to know what's coming to me if I fall down. Nor I won't worry you any with the details. What you find out about what's doing you'll read in the newspapers —maybe." And the conference being concluded the big-bodied man heaved himself out of his chair and left the private office.

Half an hour later a second auto left Ophir to pit its engine power against the grades on the Navajo Pass road. Its driver and single occupant was a heavy-set man in a shapeless pepper-and-salt suit and a gray felt hat pulled well down over his eyes. And, held well bitten in the corner of his mouth, there was a cold cigar.

CHAPTER III.

APPLES OF GOLD.

THOUGH he had been chiefly distinguished for the facility with which he earned athletic honors in college Rathburn had sufficient imagination fully to appreciate the magnificent prospect afforded by his first view of the Quesada, obtained as the ingoing auto topped the range marking the watershed between the drainage basin of the Tourmaline and that of the Tumblestone.

What he looked down upon was a vast depression; a spacious sunken valley shut in by towering mountains on either hand, huge upheavals forest clad as to their bases and lower slopes save in areas so rock ribbed that no vegetation could obtain a foothold, and rising to bald, high-pitched summits upon which, though the season was midsummer, the snow still lay in drifts and patches. From the altitude of the pass the valley bottom appeared as level as a floor; a fallow, dun plain broken here and there by scattering trees single or in miniature groves, and, in its lower half, dotted with moving specks which Rathburn imagined to be grazing cattle.

Tracing a silver path throughout the length of the valley ran the mountain stream whose waters were to work the miracle of fertilization, and in places faint scorings of the yellow plain marked the courses of the main irrigation canals. As one respectful of the hazards of mountain roads, the sunburned young fellow who was driving, and who looked more like a cowboy than a chauffeur, stopped the car and got out to inspect and adjust his brakes before attempting the long descent; and in the waiting interval Jasper Norton twisted himself in his seat and waxed eloquent upon the money-making opportunity spreading itself before them.

"There are simply millions in it, Prentice; millions! Fifty thousand acres of the finest soil the sun ever shone on; soil that will grow anything that can be grown in the wheat latitudes, orchard land that will rival the Wenatchie and Yakima region—a farmer's and fruit-raiser's paradise! As it stands now it's a locked money box, and the key to unlock it is water; that's the only key and we're going to have it safely on our own little key ring. The land will be owned when it's bought and paid for, but the water will still be ours, and it will go on grinding out dividends forever."

Now the theory and practice of college athletics may not constitute the whole of a liberal education in themselves, but they at least foster the growth of a healthy respect for fair play and a fighting chance. So Rathburn broke in with:

"Oh, I say; that's a little tough on the

settlers, isn't it?—never to be able to own their own water rights?"

Jasper Norton proceeded volubly to demonstrate that it was nothing of the sort; that land was land and water was water; that water rentals were only the equitable reward due to the foresight, initiative and money expenditure of capital. Long after the auto had begun the racing descent to the valley level he hung over the back of the seat enlarging upon the justness of a perpetual water rent and the sure and safe returns it was bound to yield an investor in Quesada Land & Improvement. Rathburn listened because he had to, but the listening was entirely without prejudice to an underlying convincement that Betty's father was merely running true to form. Enthusiasm was his stock in trade and no one knew better how to display it.

After the last of the down grades had been negotiated the road led through a region of foothills, the scenic wonders of which were as marvelous in their way as the famed stage settings of the Grand Cañon. Erosion and the attrition of the ages had wrought weird miracles of sculpture in the many-colored sandstones, and it required but a slight stretch of the imagination to figure the columns and arches and the stratified cliffs and mushroomed pillars as the ruins of a vast city of a vanished race.

"Monument Park," announced the little realtor, with an arm wave to include the impressive and almost uncanny surroundings. "Pretty to look at, but no money in it unless you could fence it off and charge an admission to tourists. But, say; even that may come after we get a better road over the range. I'm telling you, Prentice, there are millions in this valley, any way you look at it!"

Again Rathburn listened perforce. Norton's twisting of everything into the money-making channel was beginning to give him a metallic taste in his mouth, but long acquaintance with the Norton point of view enabled him to ignore it in some measure. Yet he experienced a decided relief when the road finally came out at the valley head in a basin with the foaming mountain torrent cutting it in halves, with the log shacks of the dam-construction camp dotting the hither half, and with the cañon portal cliffs backgrounding the scene.

A delayed dinner, served in the camp mess shack, was the first number on the program after the guests had been given time in which to remove the dust of travel, and it was at this meal that Rathburn met Braithwaite, who had been absent in the cañon when the travelers arrived.

Oddly enough, his preconceived picture of the man, outlined upon Duncan's story of the Quesada project, proved singularly at fault. To the appraisive eye the head and front of the irrigation project figured as a bluff, good-looking giant, clad in working clothes and bearded like an explorer. His manner was the genially hearty bonhomie of the West. To Rathburn he looked and acted more like a working construction engineer than like the president of a corporation and he was not greatly surprised to learn in the course of the dinner talk that Braithwaite was, indeed, actually serving as his own chief in the building of the dam.

In the breaking of the ice of unacquaintance Rathburn was relieved to find this genial superman ready to discount Norton's continual belauding of the irrigation enterprise and his harpings upon its potential earning capacity.

"You mustn't let Jas Norton's skyrocketing carry you off your feet, Mr. Rathburn," he threw in affably. "Of course, we're sold on our own proposition; we believe we've got a good thing here in the Quesada, and we hope to be able to prove it to you from an investor's standpoint. But that's a future. By and by, after you've had time to look us over, the project itself may interest you. But there's time enough for that."

All through the meal, the mainstay of which was rainbow trout fried to the exact delicious turn which proved that Braithwaite's economies, whatever else they might be, did not extend to skimping the pay of his camp cook, Rathburn was trying vainly to make the visible Braithwaite, and the Braithwaite of Duncan's implied dispraise, approach within speaking distance of each other. Betty Norton's light-hearted chatter favored the process but the results were disappointing.

As a typical promoter and shrewd money chaser the jovial, good-humored man at the table head seemed to be a distinct failure, and by the time they were rising and preparing, at Braithwaite's invitation, to walk up the cañon to the site of the dam, Rathburn was wondering not so much at the crumbling of his preconceived idea of the president of Quesada Land & Improvement

as at the fact that such a man had chosen a blatant little windbag like Jasper Norton for a business associate.

On the tramp up the cañon trail Rathburn walked with Betty.

"Sorry you came, Prenty, dear?" she inquired, as they dropped a little behind the other two.

"Not yet," he grinned. "Give me a little time, won't you?"

"You shall have all the time there is." Then, lowering her voice: "How do you like Uncle Mark? Isn't he a delightful old rough diamond?"

"Old?" laughed Rathburn. "But I'm forgetting. Anything over thirty is old to you, I suppose."

"He is forty if he's a day. And I heard this morning in Ophir that he is going to marry a girl young enough to be his daughter."

"That is nothing new or strange. Men much older than he is have been doing that ever since the world began. Who is the fortunate—or unfortunate—girl?"

"She lives over here in this valley. She is the daughter of the cattle king Roddy Duncan was telling you about."

"Oho," said Prentice; "a Texas cowgirl, eh? It ought to be a good match."

"Good, bad or indifferent, it *is* a match," she averred, adding with seeming irrelevancy: "I just thought I'd tell you."

Rathburn laughed. "Thanks tremendously. Due warning for me to keep off the grass in Uncle Mark's preserves, is it? What made you think I needed it?"

"Just a bit of fire prevention"—with a charming little grimace. "They say the girl is awfully attractive and she is—well, not exactly poor, perhaps, but relatively and potentially so. And we mustn't forget that you are figuring out here as a young Crœsus, you know; the money god who is going to save the Quesada project."

"Oh, I am, am I? But no Crœsus to you, Betty, dear; you've taken pains to assure me of that. Still, I'm a bit in the dark. Didn't you say that this young woman is the daughter of a cattle king? Doesn't that spell money in large chunks?"

"The day of the cattle king is over in this part of the world. When irrigation begins in this valley the cattle will have to go, and there is no place for them to go to. But Uncle Mark will be rich—and so will you, for that matter."

"Cheering prospect," said Prentice, with the boyish grin; and then, as they turned a rocky shoulder in the cañon, they had their first close-up of the Crœsus-making dam.

The half-completed structure rearing itself across the narrowest part of the great gorge seemed at first sight curiously inadequate to the part it was to play in the creation of wealth. Rathburn had chosen the line of least resistance in college by taking the liberal-arts course, but since his Alma Mater included an engineering school of note, and Duncan had been his roommate for two of the four years, he had acquired more or less engineering knowledge as a sort of by-product.

What he saw was a concrete wall rising in sections like mastodonic broken teeth in the waterway, with the torrent they were eventually to impound rushing in foaming jets between them. In the foreground, and fairly in the shadow of the dam, were the foundations for a power house; but these were hardly more than indicated. On the high opposite wall of the cañon half a dozen quarrymen were drilling and blasting the cut through which an outlet canal would pass; and on the dam itself a few carpenters were setting forms, a few concrete men were placing steel reënforcing bars and a scattering gang was running the single concrete mixer, the one derrick, and the cableway.

In declamatory tones to make himself heard above the noises of the industries and the thunder of the partly choked torrent, Braithwaite outlined the general plan for Rathburn. The dam was to be thus and so high, and it would form a reservoir holding so and so many gallons. The greatest demand that would be made upon this storage lake with all the arable land in the Quesada under cultivation would be a certain number of second-feet of flow; and, as the figures of the United States Geodetic Survey would show, the volume of the Tumblestone, even in the dry season, was far in excess of this demand.

Still declaiming he went on to say that there had been serious delays in the prosecution of the work, but these had been owing to the difficulty of persuading capital to come out to the Quesada to see for itself what an opportunity lay before it. The speaker confessed that money raising was not his forte; he was merely an engineer with a vision. The project, as far as it had

gone, had been financed by himself and a few of his friends, and Rathburn was assured in bluff sincerity that he was actually the first man with real money to invest who had ever seen any part of the undertaking at close range.

"To-morrow we'll drive over the valley and get a bird's-eye look at the future farms and orchards," Braithwaite went on. "We want you to see everything there is to see and draw your own conclusions. As I said a while back, we think we've got a hog-tied bonanza; but if we are too enthusiastic about it we'll be glad to have some level-headed person from the outside show us where we get off."

Rathburn would have been something less than a normal young man if he had failed to be impressed by this workmanlike exposition of the irrigation project and even more by the apparent honesty and transparency of the bluff expositor who admitted so frankly that his gifts were those of the builder rather than those of the financier. Too unavaricious to take fire easily at the torch of a money grubber like Jasper Norton, Rathburn was not beyond seeing visions of his own. With the dam and irrigation system completed, he could see a little army of the land-famished trekking over the high pass into the Quesada; he could envision a desert made to blossom as the rose, and contentment and prosperity filling the chosen valley and yielding dividends of satisfaction far more gratifying than any mere money return. In some such fashion a capitalist of even moderate fortune might fertilize a little corner of the earth and thus do his bit toward leaving the world and his fellow men somewhat better off for his having lived in the one and among the others.

Returning to the camp in the basin later in the afternoon, again with Betty for a walking companion, Rathburn was unloverlike enough to allow the burden of talk to rest upon the shoulders of the one who was never at loss in carrying it, letting his thoughts wander businesswise with the irrigation scheme for a field. The conclusions to be drawn were obvious. Here was the basis for a good work, a great work by which many homeless people might be benefited, and it was perfectly evident that the project was languishing for lack of money to push it along. The scantily filled gangs in the cañon and the slowness with which the construction of the dam was proceeding spoke even louder than Braithwaite's frank admissions.

"You're not listening to a word that I'm saying!" was the impatient protest his silence finally evoked; and he admitted it with a deprecatory apology.

"I'm a brute, Betty, dear. I was thinking about this scheme you've hurled me up against out here. I more than half believe you have builded better than you knew, as Emerson once remarked of the fellow who 'rounded Peter's dome.' This undertaking appeals to me, fat as I am."

"Oh, Prenty!"—lovely excitement upgushing—"are you going to take hold with daddy and Uncle Mark and make a real fortune?"

"I wasn't thinking so much of the fortune part of it. But if I can help out and make a lot of new homes for homeless people possible——"

"You can be just as altruistic about it as you want to," she broke in laughingly. "*I* shan't care. The main thing is to see you succeed."

He shook his head. "Money—big money—means a lot to you, doesn't it, Betty?"

"Of course. It means a lot to most people who haven't got it. You are the exception. But that is all right. Keep your eye on the homeseekers, if you want to, and I'll keep mine on the big money. That's fair, isn't it?"

Rathburn did not say whether or not he thought the division of eye labor was fair or otherwise; but as the camp shacks and the end of the stroll came in view the speculative half of his brain was dabbling in the mysteries of heredity. For there were times when Betty's eager worship of the money gods produced a faint recurrence of the metallic taste in his mouth; the taste that Jasper Norton's blatant money talk invariably evoked.

CHAPTER IV.

FLINT AND STEEL.

HAVING had what figured, in his easy-going life, as a rather strenuous day, Rathburn was content to sit on the puncheon-floored porch of Braithwaite's three-room log bungalow—which had been hospitably turned over to his guests by the working president of the Quesada Company—smoking an after-supper pipe while Norton elaborated plans for bringing settlers

into the chosen valley, with Betty lying in a hammock at her father's elbow and presumably listening—as Rathburn was not.

From where he was sitting on the bungalow porch Rathburn could look across the small open plaza to the company commissary and store, a long, low-posted building with corrugated-iron weather boarding and a roof of the same material. There was no light in the front part of the store but the room at the back apparently was occupied, its curtained windows showing as yellow squares in the soft darkness of the moonless night.

Behind the curtained windows two men sat on opposite sides of a pine table desk upon which a bottle and glasses shouldered the inkstand and wire letter baskets. One of the two was the bearded president of Quesada Land & Improvement; the other a big-bodied man, clean shaven, hot eyed, and with a half-burned cigar tilted at the aggressive pitch in the corner of his mouth.

"You can't afford to play horse with us for a single minute, Braithwaite," the hot-eyed man barked out, after a pause in which the close air of the small office room had grown electrically surcharged with suspicious antagonism. "We've got you dead to rights. You've indorsed enough O. L. & P. checks to put you behind the bars a dozen times over if it comes to a showdown. Now, once more, I want you to come clean on this side deal you're working with the fat willie boy the cat's brought in, and I'm tellin' you in advance that lies don't go, not with me."

"You make me very tired, Grisby, with all this talk about double crossing; and Hardwick is even worse than you are. You know the ins and outs of this business as well as I do." Braithwaite interrupted himself to pour a stiff drink of colorless liquor from the black bottle, gulping it with a single gesture. "For a hand-out—which has been none too damned generous, at that—I agreed to hold this job down and mark time until your people in the East were ready to pay my price. I've done it; I'm still doing it. But there is nothing in the contract to forbid my making as many side bets as I please."

"That's all right," snapped the big-bodied inquisitor truculently. "But I want to know what this present side bet is. You've accounted for Norton—and I'll say you've got your nerve to begin selling water rights to intending settlers under the circumstances—but you didn't say anything about bringing this rich fat boy into the game."

"If you and Hardwick would only keep your shirts on!" Braithwaite retorted. "What if this young fellow that Norton's hooked up with wants to take a hand and put up a bunch of real money? Am I going to give the whole snap away by telling him what it is he's trying to buy? That would be a hell of a note, wouldn't it!"

Grisby got up, reached for a match, and relighted the chewed cigar—which immediately went out again.

"Oh, so it's just a plain case of highway robbery, is it?" he sneered, pushing his hat to the back of his bullet head. "All right; we'll let it rock along at that for the present. Just the same, you can bet on one thing, and bet to win. I'll know every little move you make in this side game, and every move the fat boy makes; and if you start to going crooked something will drop. D'ye get that?"

"What I get most pointedly is that you and your bunch are a lot of suspicious asses!" said the handsome giant, with a scowl that turned his broad, good-natured face momentarily into a mask of ferocity. "Now that you've seen fit to come here and threaten me, I'll tell you straight that you've tipped over your own gravy boat. I had a little scheme in view that promised a winning big enough to split two ways. But if you are going to hold a gun on me, I think there won't be any split."

"Make it plain," was the crisp command.

"All I expected to make out of Norton's come-on was a little sweetening; maybe enough, as I say, to sugar a couple of pieces of pie. But since I've met the young simpleton and talked with him—well, there's more to it than a handful of sugar. If he wants to go in deep enough—and if I'm any judge, he's already got the bug—he can turn this fake of a reclamation project into the real thing, power plant and all."

"Like hell he can!" barked the man who was afoot. "What would we be doing, meanwhile?"

"Setting a gang of gunmen on him, I suppose?" said Braithwaite coolly. "That would be right in line with Hardwick's ideas."

Grisby dropped into his chair and tilted it against the wall.

"Braithwaite," he said, with the extinct cigar clamped at its most offensive angle, "I wouldn't trust you as far as I could throw a bull by the tail. You agreed to come out here and thimblerig this job for the O. L. & P. Company, and you went crooked the first dash out of the box by getting the charter in the names of your own dummies, instead of using the dummy incorporators our people had provided. You don't deny that?"

"Sure I don't. Where would I be now if I hadn't taken that small precaution? Your bunch would have had me drawn and quartered long ago."

"What you did shows that you'd have had it coming to you. With the charter for a club to hold over us, you've bled us to the queen's taste, and I'm tellin' you, right now, that we're about fed up. You've got to surrender that charter!"

"I'm perfectly willing to surrender it; I've been willing all along," was the even-toned reply. "All I ask is that your people pay the price."

"Yes, and you make the price a cold-blooded robbery!"

"Calling it hard names won't change the figure. You can't bully me, Grisby; both you and Jim Hardwick ought to know that by this time. Since you have come over here to read the riot act to me about this fat fish Norton has hooked I'll put in a word or two for myself. The charter will be surrendered—on a majority vote of the stock of the Quesada Land & Improvement Company. As the matter stands at present your people don't hold that majority; but they can acquire it by purchasing the block of treasury stock I'm holding up—buying it at the figure I've named. I'm tired of this picayune waiting game, Grisby, and if the chance offers I'm going to quit. That treasury stock is in the open market now and it's going to be sold—at my price. You go back to Jim Hardwick and tell him that if his people won't buy it maybe somebody else will."

Grisby stood up again and buttoned his coat.

"I'll tell Hardwick nothing," he announced curtly. "I'm running this end of the show and you know what to expect if you try to buck me. We can put you on the rock pile if we try hard enough. You've been double crossing your own stockholders in the East and we've got the goods on you." Then, with an evil leer: "Any word you want to send to the little girl at the Diamond-X?"

Again, for an instant, the angry scowl masked the Braithwaite face of good nature.

"Does that mean that you are driving down to the Carter ranch to-night? What for?"

The big-bodied man laughed.

"You're afraid of me, Mark; and for that reason I'm afraid of you. I shall sleep a lot sounder under the same roof with your sweetheart than I should in one of your camp shacks here. It's a safe bet that you wouldn't set fire to the ranch house for the sake of burning me in my bed."

Braithwaite rose to his feet and his eyes narrowed.

"It sticks in the back part of my head that I'll have to kill you yet, some day, Grisby. If you open your loose mouth to Carter or his daughter about the business we've talked over to-night you may as well sling another forty-five under your coat—in addition to the one you've got there now. You'll need 'em both."

Rathburn, smoking his third pipe on the porch of the bungalow a hundred yards away, saw the door of the commissary back room open and two shadowy figures emerge.

CHAPTER V.

CAVEAT EMPTOR.

FOR two matchless summer days Rathburn suffered himself to be driven over the length and breadth of the Quesada in Braithwaite's roadster, viewing the reclamation project at large and listening to the promoter's explanations. Though the work had been begun upon only one main canal there were to be two, thus covering the arable land on both sides of the river. From these main "high lines" lateral ditches were to be taken off for the distribution of the water to the potential ranches and orchards, and Braithwaite showed how the configuration of the land made this process the simplest of problems.

"This ditch digging is the easiest and least costly part of the job," he explained as the roadster was turned campward at the close of the second day. "The dam is what is eating the money. Our freight charges on material over the range from Ophir are high; the Ophir truckers cinch us to a fare you well."

"You ought to have a fleet of trucks of your own, I should think," Rathburn ventured. "It would save money in the end."

"And cost money in the beginning," was the smooth addendum. "And we haven't had the money to put into it. You've no idea how difficult it is to finance a proposition like this. You go to money people in the East and the first thing they say is that western Colorado is a long way off. Then they begin to talk about the low prices of farm products, and that sort of thing."

"Yet in spite of all that there are tens of thousands of land-hungry people in America who would jump at the chance to make homes in such a place as this," Rathburn put in. "It's a man's job to give them that chance; or even the comparatively few of them that this valley would hold."

"Of course; that is the idealistic side of it," Braithwaite conceded.

"It is the side which appeals most strongly to me," Prentice asserted. Then, in a burst of that confidence which an older man is sometimes able to inspire in a young man: "Mr. Norton has intimated that you might sell me some stock in Q. L. & I. if I wanted it, and he has talked me blind on the money-making side of it. That part of it doesn't interest me very much, but the feeding of a lot of hungry people does. If you like, you may show me your records when we get back to camp and I'll tell you then how far I can go toward financing you."

This was how it came about that in the evening of this valley-quartering day, in the back room of the commissary and across the pine table desk which now held a pile of account books instead of a black bottle and glasses, Rathburn was made familiar with the state and standing of the Quesada Land & Improvement Company, and was taken, as he believed, into the fullest confidence of its president and promoter. Fortunately, as it seemed, there was a very considerable block of treasury stock which had not yet been issued; which had been held, so Braithwaite declared, as a last resort in an emergency.

"Not that it's worth anything like par at the present stage of the game," was his bluff admission. "I doubt if we could dispose of it at a better price than fifty cents on the dollar in the open market. But it's the best we have to offer you."

"I'll take it," said Rathburn promptly.

"How much of it?"

"All of it."

"I'll say you are some nervy little plunger, Mr. Rathburn; either that or else you have a longer head for business than I have—which isn't at all beyond belief. But I can't let you have it all—for two reasons: in the first place I'm honest enough to want you to go in easy; nibble off a piece and chew it and see how you like it before you cut the whole cheese. Secondly, if I should let you have the sixteen hundred shares you'd hold a voting majority and could tell me to put on my hat and coat and clear out. As you see, the capital stock is only three hundred thousand."

Rathburn grinned, tapping the papers which Braithwaite had covered with figures.

"According to your own estimates here it is going to take at least four fifths of my eighty thousand to finish the dam."

"I know," was the ready answer. "But we're figuring on getting a little something as we go along from the land and water-right sales."

Deftly engineered by the seller, the battle of bargain and sale went on for a time, and in the end the buyer won an essential victory, though not without a show of sorrow on the part of the vanquished that was almost pathetic.

"It's a little like a blind man selling his dog to get something to eat, Rathburn," the bluff giant protested. "I've eaten with this thing and lived with it and slept with it until I've grown to love it like an only child. And I've got to hang on to a little of it, if only for a keepsake. You shall have fourteen hundred shares and leave me two hundred, just so I can say that I'm not dead broke."

"Done," said Rathburn. "I'll ask you to lend me your car to drive over to Ophir tomorrow. I'll have to do some telegraphing, and there will be a little delay, necessarily; but you can go ahead and make your plans for pushing the work on the dam while I'm gone; and I'll see what I can do toward hustling in an additional supply of labor. The summer's half over, but if we put our backs into it we can have water running over the spillway of a finished dam before snow flies. That is what I want to see."

For some little time after the plunger had gone across to the surrendered bungalow to go to bed Braithwaite sat with his hands in his pockets and a cold pipe between his

teeth, shaking his big head and muttering to himself.

"My Lord!" he chuckled; "he was easy, just as Norton said he'd be; and I'm the dehorned goat of the whole flock for not holding him up for all there was in it. Never mind; it's never too late to mend. Yet I shouldn't wonder if I've bit off as much as I'll want to chew with this youngster. He'll want to see his seventy thousand dollars get action; and it'll be my job to see that no more of it gets into circulation than the law allows. And that's going to be some job! But I'll work it. There'll be a neat little rake-off for yours truly out of that seventy thousand, even if we do have to spend some of it to keep the neighbors from talking. And there'll be other thousands to follow, if I work it right. Besides, it's worth something to be able to put Jim Hardwick and his nickel-pinching crowd in a hole. I'd like to have a look-in at Jim when he gets the news—I would, for a fact!"

CHAPTER VI.

RODDY DUNCAN ENLISTS.

RATHBURN got an early start on the morning following the bargaining with Braithwaite. He had had his breakfast, had backed Braithwaite's roadster out of its shelter shed and was on his way to Ophir before either Norton or his daughter had put in an appearance.

Driving at moderate speed to get the handling of the unfamiliar car before he should come to the grades and zigzags and hairpin curves of the mountain-climbing reaches of the road, he had gone no more than a few miles and was traversing the foothill valley of the curious sandstone formations when he saw what he took to be one of the Carter range riders galloping to meet him. Hailing from a densely automobiled region where what few horses there were were well used to motor cars he merely gave a fair half of the road for the passing, without slackening speed. Hence, he was startled and not a little horrified when he saw the galloping horse stop short, rear wildly and throw its rider precisely in the path of the car.

It was with some return of the instant reactions which had enabled him to win football honors in the college period that he killed his engine, jammed on the brakes and brought the heavy car to a stand within a few feet of the motionless figure lying in the roadway. And the reactions were still functioning capably when he leaped out and ran to help the fallen rider, though they were transmuted into a prickling shock when he stooped to lift the recumbent figure and saw that the victim of the rearing broncho, instead of being one of the Diamond-X cowboys, was a young woman.

She was opening her eyes when he reached her, and her lips were twisted into a sorry little smile as she sat up and blinked at him dazedly.

"I'm horribly ashamed," she said. "You wouldn't think I'd been riding horses all my life, would you?"

"The thing I'm thinking hardest is that I ought to be kicked around the block for running up on you the way I did," he said, helping her to her feet. "Where I came from the horses don't mind autos any more. Are you hurt?"

"Only jarred a little in my self-respect. When I found that I had to go I just relaxed and tumbled in a heap. That's the way to fall, you know; that's why a drunken man never hurts himself when he falls. He's already relaxed. I wonder what has become of Pete?"

"Your horse? He can't be very far away. But I didn't notice which way he went. I was too busy trying to keep from running over you."

"Well, you did it nicely," she replied, the twisted smile coming again. Then, out of a clear sky: "You are the rich fat boy, aren't you?"

Rathburn grinned handsomely. "That seems to be the name I have acquired lately. Did you get it by wireless?"

"N-no; not exactly. But I heard somebody call you that; and I didn't hear your right name."

"It is Rathburn—Prentice Rathburn. But you may call me 'Fat Boy,' if you think it fits any better. I don't mind."

"I think it doesn't fit at all—in the way it was used," she said, letting him look straight into a pair of slate-blue eyes that were as fearless and as innocent as those of a child. Then, again out of a clear sky: "I was hoping I might meet you somewhere. That is what I was riding out this way for."

Rathburn was cudgeling his brain trying to guess who she was. Then, suddenly, he remembered what Betty Norton had said about the daughter of the cattle king. "Aw-

fully attractive," was Betty's phrase; and the slim, almost boyish figure standing before him answered the description admirably. It was at the same instant that his feeling for Braithwaite began to undergo a vague change. The bluff promoter was all right, in his way, of course, but the bare thought of his marrying this slip of an innocent-eyed girl who was, as Betty had said, certainly young enough to be his daughter, was grotesque.

"You say you were riding this way in the hope of finding me?" he prompted.

"Yes. I thought I ought to tell you to look out for yourself. They are going to do something to you; I don't know what it is, but it is something bad. And I thought you ought to be told."

Rathburn had a feeling that he would like to rub his eyes to make sure he was awake.

"'They?'" he echoed. "Whom do you mean?"

She shook her head. "I mustn't tell you that. It's just that you mustn't let them do it—whatever it is. And you mustn't ask me any more questions, because—well, because I can't answer them if you do."

Rathburn's grin was meant to be brotherly.

"What are you?—a woman or a child?" he asked quizzically.

"I'm Anita Carter and I'm nineteen years old," she replied, quite as if his question was meant to be answered categorically. "Why? Did you think I was just an overgrown baby?"

"I didn't think a single thing that I ought not to," he laughed. "But—will you forgive me if I say that you're not quite like any other person I have ever met? That is a compliment, though it may not sound just like one. Shall we try to find your horse?"

They tried but didn't succeed. After they had looked futilely into some of the nearest draws and gulches the young woman said it was no use; that the broncho probably had gone straight back to the ranch corral.

"Then you must let me drive you home," Rathburn offered promptly; so they walked back to the car and he put her in.

"You will have to pilot me," he said as he swung in behind the wheel. "I'm new to the Quesada as yet, though I hope I shan't be, very long."

"You are coming over here to stay?" she inquired.

"I hope to; for the summer at least. Perhaps I can work some of the fat off me if I do."

She made no reply to this and after he had started the car and she had pointed out the road leading to the lower end of the valley the drive was begun and continued in silence. From time to time as the roadster bounded along over the primitive side road Rathburn stole a glance at his silent seatmate. The bewilderment which had begun when he had found that she was a woman and not a cowboy was growing rather than diminishing. What had she learned to make her think he was in danger? And who had said the threatening thing? More than all, why had she felt it a duty to seek him out and warn him?

Rathburn would have been either more or less than a normal young man if he had not felt touched and immensely flattered. Every man has his romantic side, and the Betty Nortons are rarely able to appeal to it. But here was romance in its most alluring guise. He had a growing conviction, built up on the stolen side glances, that this girl who had gone so far out of her way to try to do him a service was not only the most unconventional young woman he had ever met, but also one of the most—— He hunted vainly for the exactly right word and couldn't find it. It wasn't merely "beautiful" or "pretty" or "attractive;" it was rather a combination of all three.

To go with the fearless slate-blue eyes she had a straight nose with the barest suggestion of an uptilt to it, a sweetly serious mouth, and adorable chin, and, under the cowboy hat she was wearing, masses of hair that was like dead gold finely spun. And her skin: he wondered how she could live the outdoor life of a ranch dweller and still keep it looking so much like white satin.

These speculative reflections were chasing each other through his mind for the better part of the ten-mile drive to the lower end of the valley, which, notwithstanding the bumpy road, was made in record time. It was when the ranch house and its surroundings came in view on the crown of a gentle hill to the right that she asked him to stop the car and let her get out.

"Shan't I drive you on up to the house?" he asked

"No," she objected; and it was not until after he had handed her out of the car and had thanked her for what she had tried to do, that she said: "It was nothing. But you *will* look out for yourself, won't you?"

"I'll try to," he returned. "But I could do it a lot better if I knew where and how I'm due to be hit."

"I can't tell you that, because I don't know it, myself. Only——"

"Well?" he encouraged. "Only what?"

"Only I know this much: that one of the men who might try to hurt you is bad."

He smiled. "All men are more or less bad. Haven't you learned that yet?"

"Oh, but this one—they say he has killed people."

"I see," he nodded; "*that* kind of a bad man, eh? All right. I don't know that I've been doing anything to be killed for, but maybe I have. Anyway, I'll keep an eye out. And thank you again."

After she left him he purposely refrained from starting the car until he had seen her well on her way to the ranch house. As he lingered he saw that she was not taking the shortest way. There was a grove of cottonwoods to the right of the ranch buildings and she was skirting this and keeping in the shelter of the trees.

"Um," he mused as he turned the roadster and headed it back toward the main road, "it's fairly evident that she wants to reach the house without being seen. Now what does that argue?"

He had measured six of the ten miles to be retraced before he found the answer to that question. It was at the crossing of a mountain brook and he had stopped to assure himself that there was water enough in the radiator to last through the long upgrade pull to the top of the pass. In the damp sand of the brookside he saw the print of an auto tire, a different print from that made by the car he was driving.

"That Sherlocks one edge of the mystery, anyhow," he decided. "Her 'bad man' is at the ranch and she didn't want him to see her coming in—or to see me. That was why she wouldn't let me drive her on up to the house." Then: "By George!—imagine Betty doing a thing like that for a man she'd never seen! Betty, or any of her kind."

Though he had traversed the mountain road but once and then only as a passenger Rathburn sent the borrowed roadster over the pass in safety, reaching Ophir by the middle of the forenoon. His first care was to look up Duncan, whom he was lucky enough to find in his assay shop.

"Hello, Rathie!" said the young engineer. "Back again, so soon?"

"You've said it; and I want to use you. I suppose there is a bank in this brisk little city?"

"Sure; a couple of 'em."

"Take me to the one you know best and introduce me, will you?"

Duncan laughed and said, "What?—already?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"It's quite the regular thing, you know. Nice, juicy young tenderfoot comes out here and sits in a quiet little game at 'Horny Joe's' or 'Mexican Frank's' and the next morning he's hunting up some friend to introduce him at a bank."

Rathburn's laugh was a shout. "You're a mile wide of the mark, this time, Roddy. I've still got money enough in my poke to pay my board. But come along and tell the bank people who I am. I'm not going to make you indorse for me. I merely want to open a checking account."

Duncan had a few drops of Scottish blood in him, as his surname would imply, so he did what was necessary and asked no question. But since he was present when Rathburn made his arrangements at the Ophir Bank & Trust, he could hardly help hearing what was said and drawing the obvious conclusion.

"Heavens!" he gasped, when they were once more in the street together. "Does that mean that you're going to buy into Mark Braithwaite's dead-alive reclamation project, Rathie?"

"Again you've said it," was the cool rejoinder. "Steer me around to a telegraph office and then I'll go back to your shop with you and tell you all about it."

The wire office found, and the authorizing telegram sent to the Milford banker to sell such and such bonds, transmitting the proceeds to the Ophir Bank & Trust, the two returned to the laboratory of the Consolidated and Rathburn filled and lighted his pipe.

"It is a short tale and soon told," he began. "I've been all over Braithwaite's project, his plans and records, and I'm all set to help him make that valley do its bit toward feeding the multitudes. Do you

know any good reason why it shouldn't? Or why I shouldn't?"

Pressed thus for a definite answer to a plain question Duncan was silent. But when he spoke it was not to cast a doubt upon the feasibility of the reclamation project.

"It looks like a sure thing, Prentice; I grant you that: it has looked that way from the beginning," he conceded. "The good soil is there, and the water is there, and the two put together will work the miracle. And yet——"

"All right; what is the 'and yet?'"

"I can't put it into words that will convey any convincing meaning. You've met Braithwaite and I suppose he has made the same impression on you that he does on everybody: stacks up as a straightforward, shoulder-hitting fellow, bluff, good-hearted, and seemingly as transparent as a piece of plate glass. His project has everything to recommend it, and nothing, so far as anybody can see, to make it smell like a fake. Yet Braithwaite's backers, whoever they are, are mighty bashful about putting up the money; at least, that seems to be the only reasonable excuse for the way in which the construction has dragged along for nearly two years."

"It is the excuse," Rathburn put in. "Braithwaite explains the money lack by saying that it has been next to impossible to get his stockholders to come out here and see for themselves. Also, he admits very frankly that he wasn't sufficiently businesslike in picking his backers—just took his neighbors and friends—little people—because he was afraid of Big Money; afraid he'd be frozen out."

"That sounds reasonable enough," Duncan commented, "and we'll allow that it accounts for the slow speed. But apart from that there is the bad luck I told you about the day before yesterday—no, I mean the day you were here. A superstitious person would say that the gods themselves were fighting against Mark Braithwaite. When it isn't a cloudburst in the cañon, or a labor strike, or a carload of cement lost in transit, or a rotten piece of foot rock under the dam, it's something else; some unheard-of accident knocking in to delay things. One week it will be a breakdown in the machinery; the next some fool of a quarry foreman will miscalculate a blasting charge and blow everything sky high. Mark Braithwaite is a capable engineer—took his degree in one of the best schools in the country; but if he were the poorest dub in the world he couldn't have had worse luck."

"I'm not superstitious," Rathburn put in. "I suppose some bad luck is always to be expected on any job as big as the building of the Quesada dam. Anything else?"

"N-no," Duncan yielded hesitantly. "I don't recall anything else in particular, except this: Braithwaite tells you—and I guess it's true enough—that he can't get his Eastern backers to put up money freely. Yet there has never been a time when he couldn't have floated his project, financially, right here in Ophir if he wanted to. If he had dropped the land-reclaiming end of it and confined himself to the installing of a power plant, or even if he would show some signs of carrying the power-plant end of the thing along with the other, the mining companies over here would back him to the limit. They've told him so, time and again. But for some reason or other he seems not to want Ophir capital. Garford, president of the Consolidated, asked him once in my hearing why he fought so shy of Ophir money. His reply was that he was afraid that if he tied himself up with Ophir that, sooner or later, Ophir Light & Power would get in and wipe him off the map."

"Is that a reasonable fear?"

"It's admissible. If there should be a rival power plant built in the Quesada, O. L. & P. would move heaven and earth to get control of it; or if there seemed to be no chance of that the company would doubtless do everything in its power to prevent the building. Jim Hardwick, the resident manager, is one of those smooth, clean-cut, unflinching, businesslike man-devils you read about. He wouldn't kill a man or break a business rival openly for anything under the sun, and he wouldn't hesitate a second to do either or both if the man or the business were in his way and he thought he could wipe 'em out and not get caught at it."

Rathburn looked at his watch.

"I'm driving back to the Quesada this afternoon," he said. "Can't you knock off and go to luncheon with me?"

Duncan said he could and would; and over the meal in the Hotel Chinquito's dining room Rathburn discussed with him plans for getting more labor for the Quesada project; that, and the buying of more ma-

chinery, a small fleet of trucks for transporting material from Ophir, and the purchase of a car for his own use.

"I'm going into this thing for blood, Roddy, and there's nothing like beginning right," he said. "And that brings me to another thing. How good a job have you got here with the Consolidated?"

"Not so good as it ought to be for the length of time I've been here."

"Then I'll go on. This thing of ours may seem like kite flying to you, but how would you like to come with me? Right this minute we ought to have somebody here in Ophir to handle things till we get started. There is the new machinery to buy, and the labor to rustle up and get in to us, and a lot of truck forwarding to be looked after."

"That would only be at first and for a little while," said Duncan, Scottish caution to the fore.

"I know; but after that there will be a place for you on the work itself. Braithwaite may be the best construction engineer in the world, but his methods at the dam are—well, they're not modern, to say the least. I'm no engineer, but I could see that at a glance. Besides, he's president of the company and he has no business to be his own foreman. I don't know what salary you're getting, Rod, but I'll raise the bet, whatever it may be."

"When would you want me to begin?"

"Right now; to-day if you can break away from your present job. The summer is half gone and 'rush' is the word."

"Can you hire me without consulting Braithwaite?"

Rathburn's nose wrinkled in the boyish grin.

"When I get my bank business straightened out I shall be the owner of a little more than forty-six per cent of the Q. L. & I. capital stock. Don't you think I ought to have something to say about the hiring and firing?"

"Good Lord!" Duncan ejaculated; "have you taken that deep a dive?"

"Yea, verily," laughed Rathburn.

"It is very pointedly none of my business, but what was the price?"

"Seventy thousand hard metallic dollars."

Duncan shook his head. "I heard that your father left you a tidy bit of money. Are you putting it all into this thing that you saw for the first time only yesterday or the day before, Prentice?"

"No; not yet. Dad's gift to me—all in good, sound, marketable securities, as you'd imagine—will tot up to about two hundred thousand. My investment of seventy thousand in Q. L. & I. may not put the thing over the top; I doubt very much if it will. But I'm prepared to go the limit. I'll not quit until I have sunk the last of the two hundred thousand. That will show you how effectually I'm sold on the undertaking."

Duncan drew a long breath. "Well," he said, "if you're that kind of a fighting fool, Rathie, I'm with you."

And so it was settled.

CHAPTER VII.

SLACK BRAKES.

DUNCAN had some little difficulty in severing his connection with the Ophir Consolidated on such short notice, but a compromise was effected. For a few days, until another assistant could be found, he was to divide his time between the mining company and his new job. As a part of the compromise Rathburn was allowed to commandeer him for the remainder of the day, and a start was made toward putting some sort of fresh life into the Quesada project. More labor was the first requisite, as Rathburn saw it, and a good part of the afternoon was spent in getting into telegraphic touch with labor agents in Denver, Colorado Springs and Pueblo.

Next, a couple of powerful trucks to form the nucleus of a transportation line over the pass were ordered for immediate delivery, and inquiries were set afoot to determine at what cost and how soon additional dam-building machinery could be shipped; a second and larger concrete mixer, a tower hoist and spouting to take the place of the slow and clumsy derrick rig which Braithwaite was using to convey the concrete from the mixer to the forms, a gasoline-motor-driven lighting plant to make the addition of a night shift possible; all these preliminaries prompted by Duncan, who was forming his estimate of the most pressing needs upon Rathburn's description of the Braithwaite inadequacies.

Lastly there was the purchase of a driving car which Rathburn said he wanted for his own use, and this he was able to buy at an Ophir sales agency. Since he had Braithwaite's car in which to return to the camp at the dam he arranged to have the

new roadster delivered the following day, the agent agreeing to have it driven over to the Quesada by one of his own men.

"I guess that will do for a starter," Rathburn said, at the close of the busy afternoon. "The next pressing thing is a telephone line across the mountain. What did you say the shortest distance is, straight across?"

"A little less than eight miles, as the crow would fly," said Duncan. "But see here, Prentice; the building of that line is going to climb into money mighty fast."

"Even so," Rathburn conceded, "we've got to have it. Ophir is our base of supplies and it's simply absurd to think of having to drive twenty-odd miles over the top of a mountain, killing a whole day, when we need to jack somebody up for delays. If you can't get off to run the line yourself hire some surveyor to map it out and let the locating be such that we can use the same right of way for our power transmission lines when the dam is completed."

Duncan pursed his lips in a soundless Scotch whistle.

"So you're going into the power-furnishing end of it, too?"

"Surest thing you ever knew. I have all sorts of faith in the land-reclamation project, and, from my point of view, that is the important thing—to provide a lot of new homes for a lot of new people. But there is no use in having only one string to your bow when you can just as well have two. We may need the earnings of the power plant to carry the land scheme, until enough land is taken up to make the water rights pay."

"Um; I've told you enough to let you know that you'll have Ophir Light & Power fighting you to a standstill if you cut in on their business, haven't I?"

Rathburn laughed easily. "You roomed with me a couple of years, Roddy: when or where did you ever surround the idea that I'd sidestep a fight of any sort, business or otherwise?"

"This won't be a business fight," was the dubious assertion; "not in any ordinary sense of the word. I tell you, Prentice, I know Hardwick like a book. He won't stop at anything If I were bucking him, I'd carry a gun every minute of the day and sleep with it under my pillow at night!"

Again Rathburn laughed. "That's pretty old stuff, isn't it, Rod? I suppose there was a time when big business took the law into its own hands, more or less, but I guess we've safely outlived that stage of the game. Let the galled jade of the corporations wince. We'll run our telephone wire, and later our transmission line, in spite of the devil and high water."

"All right," said Duncan; "again I'm with you. But we won't have to locate the line across the mountain. That was done two years ago by the Ophir people who were going to develop the power on the Tumblestone—before Braithwaite came in with his charter. I can get the maps and profiles for the asking, I'm quite sure."

"Good. That saves just so much time. As soon as you are footloose, buy the poles and wire and jump in. Now we'll go eat again and then I'll vanish into the tall hills."

Since it was too early for the regular dinner in the Hotel Chinquito they went to Duncan's club and had a short-order meal served in the grill. Over the beefsteak and hashed browned potatoes and coffee Rathburn put a plow in a small field that had been lying fallow since his adventure of the early morning in the valley of the curious erosions.

"You told me a little about Houston Carter, the cattleman, the other day, Rod. I haven't met him yet. I believe you called him 'the major.' Does that connote what it usually does when you speak of a Southerner?"

Duncan laughed grimly. "Not in the least. He is as far as possible from the type you're thinking of. He's rather more on the bad-man-from-Bitter-Creek order, if you know what I mean. They tell some pretty fearsome stories about him, if you care to listen."

"Like what?"

"Oh, I don't know; I'm no gossip. The story goes that he was a crooked gambler in his younger days in Texas and that he killed a man and had to disappear. I don't know how true it is, but he looks the part, all right."

"You said he was a good neighbor to Braithwaite, didn't you?"

"Braithwaite says so."

"I've been told that Braithwaite is going to marry the daughter," Rathburn put in. "Is that so?"

"I've heard it," said Duncan shortly. Then, after a pause: "There's a mystery

about that girl, Prentice. I don't know what it is; but she's no more like her father than chalk is like cheese. And from all you can hear she's had a mighty hard life; no advantages, no schooling, not even a whiff of the social side of things. And yet she's a born little lady, if ever there was one, straight as a string, and—well, just manly, if you can get that as applying to a woman."

"You've met her?" said Rathburn.

"Just once. Garford, our president, had some friends out from Boston early this summer and they wanted to see the scenery in the Quesada. Garford couldn't go with them so he sent me; seven-passenger carload of look-sees. They saw the cattle and wanted to see a real cattle ranch. I knew Houston Carter's general cussedness well enough to make me try to shy off, but the women of the party insisted, so I drove to the ranch headquarters in the lower valley. Luckily Carter was away and the little girl did the honors. She fair astonished me. She was just as easy and self-contained as any lady in the land and the impudent curiosity of the Bostonians didn't feaze her a particle. I wondered then, as I have a good many times since, where she got her good breeding."

"She strikes me as being something a bit too fine to be wasted on a man like Braithwaite," Rathburn volunteered.

"Then you've met her?"

"Once," said Rathburn; but he did not say when or where, and as if he were afraid Duncan might ask him when and where he turned the talk into the business channel.

The early supper finished they left the club to walk around to the garage where Rathburn had left the borrowed roadster. On the way Duncan said: "Aren't you taking something of a chance, Prentice, driving that mountain road in the dark? Why can't you stop over and go back to-morrow morning in daylight?"

"Oh, I could, I suppose; but I can drive the road all right in the night. I've been cutting a pretty wide swath with the company's money to-day and I mustn't forget that I have a partner in this business. Braithwaite will be looking for me and I guess I'd better get back and tell him what's doing."

Duncan said no more and when they reached the garage he helped Rathburn get the roadster out.

"Have you looked your brakes over?" he asked as Rathburn was pulling himself in under the wheel.

"No; but they were all right this morning."

Duncan came around to the driving side of the car and spoke hurriedly in low earnest tones.

"You're not taking my warning about the O. L. & P. people seriously enough, Prentice. I'd be willing to bet anything you like that Hardwick or some of his strikers already know every move you've made to-day."

"Well, what of it?"

"Just this; if they do know, you are a marked man. I wish you'd drive around by way of my rooms and let me give you my automatic."

Rathburn's laugh was easily carefree.

"I believe you're actually rattled, Roddy!" he scoffed. "I shan't need a gun, and I wasn't raised in the woods to be scared by an owl. Don't you worry about me. I'll be seeing you again in a day or so—after I get my new buzz wagon. Until then, so long." And, letting the clutch in, he drove away.

For the three or four miles of the down-valley run on the approach to the mountain-climbing zigzags he had daylight, or rather pale twilight; but on the first of the upgrades he had to switch the head lamps on and complete darkness overtook him before he was halfway to the summit of the high pass. Still, the borrowed car was behaving beautifully and there was something exhilarating in the storming rush up the mountain, with just hazard enough in negotiating the short "hairpin" turns to make it exciting. Luckily, he told himself, there was nothing to be met or passed in the lonely road, and where the grades and tangents admitted he stepped on the gas and sent the roadster along at its best speed, hoping to be able to reach the construction camp in time to go over the day's doings with Braithwaite before the promoter should have gone to bed.

Under such conditions the flight up the mountain was made without incident or accident, and at the summit of the pass he cut off the power to let the car coast down the long descending inclines on the Quesada slopes. Since he was no novice in driving hill roads he left the engine in gear so that the compression in the cylinders would help

the brakes, and the downward race was begun.

It was on the second of the zigzags that he first discovered that he was losing control. With the gears in "high" and the brakes, both of them, jammed on as far as the levers would go, the speed was increasing with every leap and bound of the flying car, and his driving sense told him that unless he could check it he could never hope to make the sharp reverse turn at the foot of the tangent. The obvious thing to do was to shift gears to intermediate or low to give the compression a better holding power, and he took the risk, knowing well enough the size of it at the speed the car was making.

What happened when he jerked at the gear lever was what he was more or less expecting. With a tearing grind which sounded as if the entire power plant were being ripped out of the frame the gears refused to mesh and the car shot ahead with nothing to hold it but the strangely inefficient brakes. Rathburn saw the sharp looping turn rushing up to meet him in the broad beam of the head lamps; saw, and did the only thing there was to do: spun the steering wheel to try to make it. To his horror he found that the car would not answer the wheel. Something had given way in the steering mechanism.

There was no time to jump; no time to do anything. But just as the turn was reached a miracle was wrought. A loose stone on the left-hand side of the roadway caught the forward wheel on that side and knocked it around into the turning position, at the same time checking the wild flight sufficiently to let Rathburn snap the transmission into gear. That, and a mad jamming on of both brakes, brought the runaway to a stand, and Rathburn got out, shaking as if he had been stricken with an ague. There was reason. In the swift dart around the loop of peril he had had a glimpse of what would have happened if the turn had not been made successfully. The loop was on the brink of a deep gorge and if the providential stone had not served its timely purpose there would have been a plunge to certain death in the deep ravine.

As soon as he could control his shaking nerves he got a flash light out of the roadster's tool box and began to investigate. The steering-gear trouble was simple—and fatal. A connecting bolt had dropped out, leaving the front wheels free to turn as they would. Rathburn found a bit of wire in the tool box and contrived a makeshift toggle which would answer temporarily. Next he examined the brakes and found both the service brake and the emergency so loose as to be almost useless. A careful adjustment of the take-ups remedied this, and he was ready to go on.

On the long and judiciously controlled drop down the remainder of the zigzags and throughout the windings of the valley road after the descent was accomplished Rathburn had ample opportunity for a good bit of thoughtful speculation. That the car brakes had been in serviceable adjustment when he had made the forenoon trip out of the valley he was quite sure. Therefore it was an obvious conclusion that they had been tampered with while the roadster was in the Ophir garage. As to the lost bolt in the steering knuckle, that might have been pure accident; nuts will sometimes rattle off with the vibration. But if the brakes had been purposely loosened by somebody it was a safe inference that the failure of the steering gear had been planned by the same person.

The conclusion pointed very definitely to a thing as sinister as an assassination plot of the Middle Ages. Rathburn recalled Anita Carter's warning, and its follow-up in Duncan's parting words. Was it possible that he had been spied upon during the day and that because he had arranged to make an investment in Quesada Land & Improvement, lawless business opposition would go so far as to sanction an attempt upon his life? It seemed incredible; unbelievable. Yet there were the facts. But for the intervention of a chance stone in the mountain roadway he would now be lying at the bottom of the deep gorge, a mangled corpse in the wreck of the borrowed roadster.

It was quite late when he reached the camp in the basin at the valley head, and all the shacks and huts were dark, including the commissary and the surrendered Braithwaite bungalow. Rathburn put the car in its shed, and, crossing the plaza, let himself quietly into the bungalow and went to bed.

"It's a queer old world," he muttered as he rolled himself in his blankets; but his last waking thought was not of his late narrow escape. It was of the great undertaking into which he had stepped so impulsively; of that, and of the episode of the early morning whose central figure was a slim-

bodied young woman in riding clothes—a girl with dead-gold hair and slate-blue eyes who had ridden afield to do a service to a man she had never seen.

"Fat Boy," he murmured sleepily, recalling her naïve naming of him. "It runs in my mind that this job I've tumbled into is going to peel the fat curse off, if it doesn't do anything else."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE WHIP HAND.

OH, but see here—hold on, my dear young live wire; there are our other stockholders to be considered in this breakaway. What are they going to say when they learn that we've been jumping in and spending the company's money like drunken sailors, without consulting them?" Thus Mr. Mark Braithwaite in shocked deprecation.

It was after breakfast on the morning following Rathburn's trip to Ophir; the place was the office in the rear of the commissary, and Rathburn had just told the story of the previous day's activities.

"I don't see that it makes much difference what the stockholders say. Now that we've secured the needed capital there is no reason why we shouldn't go ahead and get somewhere."

"But, say—you don't understand," Braithwaite persisted. "I'm not sure we're within the law. I don't believe we have any right to spend this money without the O. K. of the chairman of the executive committee."

"I don't know anything about the strict legalities. But this is my money and I propose to see that it has a show to buy something worth having. I want to see this dam completed, and so do you. Together, we—you and I—own a majority of the capital stock. When it comes to dictating the policy of the company, the other forty-odd per cent can go hang, especially when we're fighting its battle as well as our own and not asking it to put up a single additional penny."

"Still you don't understand," the promoter objected. Then, with a swift return to the bluff-sincerity attitude: "We'll have to do this thing according to Hoyle, my boy. I'll call a meeting of the stockholders for next month, and then this business of rushing the job can be thrashed out in the open—all fair and aboveboard. You'll be present at the meeting, of course, to vote your stock, and then nobody will have a kick coming."

"I'll agree to that, on two conditions," said Rathburn promptly. "One is that you call the meeting at once; the other that you give me a proxy to vote one hundred and one of your two hundred shares of stock."

At that he saw a lightninglike change flit across the face of the big man sitting opposite. But the good-natured smile succeeded it so quickly that he almost doubted the evidence of his own eyes.

"You have a good business head on your shoulders for a young man, Rathburn, but you're not up in the little details and quibbles. It's in the bylaws that a stockholders' meeting can't be called without a month's notice being given," said the promoter in his most temporizing tone. "Of course, when the meeting meets, if you won't trust me to vote my stock with yours, you may vote it—all of it. Does that satisfy you?"

"No. A month's delay will make it impossible to complete the dam this summer—which means another year. I'm ready to put my capital into the project now, but I am certainly not going to lock it up and wait for returns on it for a year longer than there is any necessity for."

Braithwaite's eyes narrowed. This was not at all the easy-going young gull of Norton's description, nor yet the half-careless enthusiast who had driven over the Quesada with him two days earlier. It had been no part of his plan to have the gull step in to take an active part in the building operations.

"Does that mean that you're calling the deal off?" he asked craftily.

"It means that I shall call it off if I'm not allowed to get action for my investment."

Braithwaite relit his pipe and so gained a few seconds respite. Then he said: "I suppose we might put it over the other fellows and go on and get the dam part way up—high enough to make a good showing—without the formal approval of a stockholders' meeting. But I'm an engineer and an old hand at this business. When you're damming a swift river like the Tumblestone you can't hurry the construction. If you do you're simply inviting disaster."

"We'll take a chance on that," returned Rathburn briskly. "As I told you, I've

found a good man to head the construction. Duncan won't make any disastrous mistakes. Do you withdraw your objections to going on as I've begun?"

"Oh, anything for a quiet life," laughed the giant. "If you put Duncan in here it merely means that I shall have more time to loaf."

Rathburn took a new check book from his pocket and filled out a check.

"That's to bind the bargain," he announced, tossing the check across the table.

The bargain thus concluded, the plunger set himself to wear out as best he could the time which must elapse before the new impetus could get under way. There were visits to the dam, where the same leisurely pace was still being set, and, after his new car was delivered, drives with Betty up and down and around and about in the park-like valley. One of these took them past the Carter ranch, where they saw Braithwaite's roadster parked, Rathburn marking it with a curious stirring antagonism.

"Have you seen the little bride-that-is-to-be?" asked Betty.

Rathburn evaded the direct question. "The cattle king's daughter, you mean?"

"Yes. She was at the camp the other day; rode in with some mail for Mr. Braithwaite that her father had brought over from Ophir. She's a queer little savage."

"Why savage?"

"Primitive. She stared at me as if I were a curiosity; merely nodded like a boy when Mr. Braithwaite introduced us. I don't know what that big, handsome giant sees in her."

Rathburn thought he might answer that question if he chose, but instead he said: "Where was I, at that time?"

"I don't know; off up the cañon, I suppose. You spend a good deal more time with that old dam than you do with me."

This was not strictly true; but it was true that the more he saw of the fruitful possibilities of the undertaking the more impatient he became to see the work advancing at something like modern speed. Slowly, because in his previous human contacts he had never met a man of the Braithwaite type, he was reaching the conclusion that the big promoter was either a visionary or worse, and as his own interest deepened he became more and more curious to ferret out the reason for Braithwaite's apparent indifference.

"Somebody has to spend time at the dam, since Braithwaite doesn't," he countered. Then: "That is what you got me out here for, isn't it?—to make money and then more money?"

"The dam is going on all right, isn't it?"

"Like a snail; yes. But we'll change all that in a few days, now."

This prophecy had its fulfillment the following week, when Duncan came over the mountain with one of the several truck loads of machinery, bringing mechanics to set the machinery up and to build additional shacks for the new labor gangs now stringing in over the pass by every conveyance that topped the range. In short order the young engineer changed the entire face of the industrial project. With the new equipment installed, the number of workers greatly increased and the construction speed doubled by the putting on of a night shift, the dam began to grow visibly from day to day; this in spite of a string of accidents that Duncan wore himself out trying to account for and prevent.

"If I had any superstitious blood in me—as I hope I haven't—I'd say this damned job is hoodooed, Prentice!" he exclaimed one evening when he was smoking an after-supper pipe with Rathburn in the shack, half office and half sleeping room, that Rathburn had had built for himself in the camp enlargement. "That overcharged blast this afternoon sets us back a full week."

"What did it do?" asked Rathburn, who had been driving Betty over from Ophir and had learned of the latest accident only after his return.

"Tore out the forms on the south abutment and dumped tons of fresh concrete into the river. That's three of them in ten days, and I'm getting fed up!"

"I suppose accidents are part of the game, aren't they?"

"Yes, but we're getting more than our share. Prentice, I'm beginning to smell fire. I've told you what sort of an outfit Ophir Light & Power is."

"You're hinting that the accidents may not be accidents?"

"You can add two and two as well as I can. I've run these mishaps down and in each case there has seemed to be an accountable reason. But they are hitting us too often and too hard."

"You've combed the working force for possible trouble makers?"

"As well as I could; yes. The men all seem sound and loyal."

"Well, luckily, we haven't killed anybody yet. That's one blessing."

"No; but—well, we came so near getting a whole gang this afternoon that I had to swallow hard to get my heart back into place."

"Was Braithwaite here when the accident happened?"

"He may have been here at the camp; he wasn't up at the dam."

"What did he say when you reported it?"

Duncan pulled hard at his pipe for a few moments before he answered.

"He took it easy—too damned easy, I thought." Then, after another pause: "I don't get Braithwaite, Prentice."

"Nor I—not altogether," was the sober agreement. "I'm having a running fight with him right along on the money-spending question. He's acting treasurer, you know."

Duncan shrugged. "That's another thing, Prentice. You told me at first that you were putting seventy thousand dollars into this project. I don't keep books for you, but we must have spent a good proportion of that amount already, what with buying the new machinery and running the telephone line and carrying an army-size pay roll."

"You've said it," Rathburn nodded.

"Well, where do you come out, at that rate?"

"I told you in the beginning that I shouldn't stop at seventy thousand. I am trying to buy some more of the stock, right now."

Duncan grinned. "It wasn't for nothing that we used to call you 'Old Die-hard' in the football games. But when we met that first morning I thought you'd—well, you looked as if you'd been letting yourself get a bit soft."

"I had; but that was before I realized that my legacy from dad wasn't big enough."

"Money hunger? Don't tell me anything like that! I know you too well."

"But you don't—or you didn't—know Betty."

"Oho! So that's the way the land lies, eh?" Then, with the freedom of a tried friend: "You two don't act much like a pair of lovers."

"I've been thinking so, myself—and wondering a bit about it," said Rathburn, with a half-absent smile. Then: "Betty isn't wearing my ring yet."

"But she is going to after you've made a million out of the Quesada?"

"That is the inference."

"But if you don't succeed in making the million?"

"Don't worry about that; I'm going to make the money. But I've got to find some more stock and buy it. And I don't know where to get it."

"Won't Braithwaite sell you any more?"

"There are only two hundred shares standing in his name on the books and he won't part with them."

"Well?"

"Of course, the stock isn't listed and I can't pick it up in the open market. The original investors are apparently scattered far and wide. I made Braithwaite give me a list of the people he'd sold stock to and I've been fishing hard in that pond."

"Any bites?"

"Not a nibble. There's a mystery about it. I can't get in touch with any of these original investors. I've had the Ophir Bank & Trust make inquiries and they can't find any of these investors who still have the stock."

"That puts you up against it good and hard, I should say."

"It does. But I've concluded an arrangement with Braithwaite by the terms of which I'm to advance more money when it is needed on interest-bearing notes, the notes to be extended from time to time until the dam is completed, and then to be paid out of the first earnings."

"I think I'm sold on this proposition as completely as you are," Duncan said after a little pause, "but I hate to see you putting all your chips on a single turn of the cards. If I could feel sure that you're getting or are going to get a square deal—but I don't know."

"Turn it loose," said the plunger. "What have you seen?—or heard?"

"Nothing to tie to. But I can't believe Ophir Light & Power is going to let this thing go through without at least trying to smash it."

"Listen," said Rathburn soberly. Then he told of his narrow escape on the mountain road on his return from his initial financing trip. "That looked as if somebody were trying to get me out of the game, right at the beginning," he finished. "I've been won-

dering since if Braithwaite knew anything about it."

"Good Lord! Hooked up with O. L. & P. to kill his own project?"

"Let's hope not. Yet I don't like this stock mystery—fourteen hundred shares out that can't be found. That amount, with Braithwaite's two hundred, swings a majority, with Braithwaite holding the casting vote. However, we won't borrow trouble. Shove the job, Roddy; shove it for every pound of energy you can put behind it. And for Heaven's sake, kill off the accidents if you can."

A day later Rathburn drove to Ophir for another conference with his banker. There was still nothing to report, but Dalton, the bank president, ventured a word of caution to his customer.

"These notes you are taking for advances, Mr. Rathburn—you ought to have some better security than Mr. Braithwaite's signature as acting treasurer."

"I know," Rathburn said. "But the work has to go on."

"Still, the company ought to secure you in some way."

Rathburn smiled. "I'll admit I'm not much of a financier, Mr. Dalton. If I could only get hold of a little more of the missing stock——"

"Exactly. But the stock, like the holders of it, seems to have vanished. Er—doesn't that incline you to be a little suspicious? Our correspondents have made diligent inquiries, and while some of the original holders have been found, not one of them will admit that he still owns any of the stock. If there have been transfers you should be able to trace them in the books."

"There are none recorded. The names I gave you were taken from the books."

The shrewd-eyed bank president shook his head dubiously.

"It is a mystery, Mr. Rathburn, and I need hardly say that financial transactions are, or should be, intolerant of mysteries."

"Say it, Mr. Dalton—what do you suspect?" Rathburn blurted out.

For an instant the shrewd eyes harbored a half-quizzical twinkle.

"For one thing, I suspect that—er—youthful enthusiasm is blinding you to possible consequences, isn't it? You have told me what your Milford resources are, you remember—the patrimony left you by your father."

"I know I have."

"Well, at the present rate you will soon have the entire sum invested in this Quesada enterprise; and however promising that may look, you are taking, as a minority stockholder, a tremendous risk."

"The risk of being frozen out in the end, you mean? I've realized that. But you haven't told me what else you suspect, Mr. Dalton."

"Let us put a hypothetical case. Supposing the completion of your project threatens the earnings of another corporation which we needn't name. Supposing, again, that this other corporation is unscrupulous enough to—er—descend to methods not strictly ethical."

Rathburn nodded. "I'm supposing it, Mr. Dalton."

"Very well. There are two ways in which such an opponent might gain the desired end; by letting you exhaust your means before you can complete your dam—in which case your project falls to the ground and becomes harmless; or by acquiring the control in your company, which would mean your extinction, and, in a reorganization, hostile to your interests, the possible loss of your entire investment."

"Yes; but if this nameless enemy of mine has bought in all the outstanding shares, it still lacks a majority by quite a bit," Rathburn put in.

"Quite so; just as much of a lack as yours is; no more, no less."

"By Jove!" said Rathburn, as one whose eyes are suddenly opened. Then: "Have you any reason to believe that Braithwaite would sell me out, Mr. Dalton?"

"We needn't be too confident; neither need we fall back upon the cynical saying that every man has his price. But you can readily imagine a condition in which tremendous pressure might be brought to bear."

"And your advice to me?" Rathburn pressed.

"Is to protect yourself at all hazards and without loss of time. In other words, to buy your majority control in the only market that offers and at whatever price—within reason—you may have to pay. That is my advice. And if I were you, I wouldn't lose any time about it. If Braithwaite means honestly by you he will let you protect yourself. If he doesn't—well, in that case I should counsel you to bid high and bid to win. It will be your only chance."

CHAPTER IX.

"MARRYING LOVE."

SINCE Duncan had given him a number of commissions to execute in Ophir, it was late in the afternoon when Rathburn left the mining-camp city on his return to the Quesada, and as he sent the new roadster racing up the mountain road he was forcibly reminded of that other evening drive when death had snapped at him, missing only by the intervention of a miracle.

The talk with Dalton, emphasizing the probability that the Light & Power Company would not sit idly by and let a competitor break its monopoly, had its sobering effect. There was evidently a fight for life in prospect. Rathburn was loath to believe that even the most unscrupulous of monopolies would sanction a murder, or would definitely plot the accidents at the dam, any one of which might easily have taken its toll of human life. But on the other hand, he knew well that when a master's nod opens the door to lawlessness on the part of his henchmen there is no telling where the outlawry will stop.

But apart from sheer violence the threat of extinguishment was even greater. If Ophir Light & Power had been buying up the missing stock it was entirely within its legal rights. Assuming that it had all of the outstanding stock, it would still lack one hundred and one shares of a voting majority. Could pressure enough be brought upon Braithwaite to swing him over to the side of the monopoly? Or was it a question of pressure? Mightn't the big-bodied promoter be merely waiting until he got his price?

Rathburn grinned in self-derision as he saw what he might be in for. His plunge into Braithwaite's pool had been taken almost wholly on impulse, as he realized now. A careful investor—any ordinary investor—would have probed more deeply into details. But he had done nothing of the sort; and now, if Ophir Light & Power held the original stock and Braithwaite chose to sell out, the modest fortune accumulated by one John Rathburn, and passed on to his son, was gone.

On the sentimental horizon, too, there was a small cloud. Betty, enthusiastic at first over the new life which was being pumped into the Quesada enterprise, had grown unmistakably cooler. More than that, she was quite obviously attaching herself to Braithwaite. Rathburn smiled at that. It was a part of Betty's life to try to charm any new man coming within her orbit and the fact that the promoter was supposed to be engaged to another woman would cut no figure; it would merely add zest to the chase.

Whirling his car at speed up the mountain road, Rathburn wondered a little that he didn't resent the slight Betty was putting upon him; not even when the tiny suspicion that she might be regarding him as rats do a sinking ship crept in. Was she hedging because she believed the promoter was going to be the one to win the big fortune? It was a thought to make the small cloud spread and cover the entire sentimental heaven—but it didn't. He merely grinned again and stepped on the gas.

Having learned his lesson of caution on an occasion not easily to be forgotten, he pulled up on the level of the pass and got out to examine his brakes and steering gear. Finding no evidence that his car had been tampered with, he began the descent to the valley, taking the reverse curves at moderate speed and keeping an eye out for obstructions in the roadway as he sped along. As it appeared, the precautions were uncalled for. In due time he reached the valley level without accident or incident and with vigilance relaxed sent the roadster spinning toward its destination at the valley head.

The sun had gone behind the western ranges when he came into the winding stretch of road running through the pocket valley of the weird sandstone monuments, but the upper air was still golden with its level rays. It was just as the car was approaching the place where he had come so near running over a thrown rider that a double explosion crashed upon the still sunset air and a bullet tore through the hooded top of the roadster over his head.

In a flash he had the car stopped and was out and running back toward the place from which the shot had been fired, recklessly unmindful of the fact that he was unarmed. It was instinct more than definite knowledge that guided him to the spot—an ambush afforded by a roadside boulder. But where he should have uncovered his assailant he found only a dropped rifle, shattered and useless, with the stock and under barrel containing the magazine torn apart as if by

an internal explosion. And there was neither sight nor sound of the would-be assassin from whose hands the damaged weapon had fallen.

Blankly bewildered, Rathburn was still standing with the shattered gun in his hands when a slight noise made him spin around quickly. What he saw was a slender boyish figure clambering down from a fissure in a crenellated sandstone battlement above the road. At first he thought it was a boy, and then he saw that again, as once before, he had mistaken Anita Carter's sex. Also, he saw that she was carrying a small, high-powered rifle carelessly slung in the crook of her arm.

"Y-you?" he stammered as she ran down to stand before him. "For Heaven's sake —it wasn't you who took a pot shot at me, was it?"

"I should say not!" she denied, with a twist of the pretty lips. "Didn't you hear two shots?"

"I thought I did—yes."

"Well, there were two; and I was scared almost to death for a minute for fear I'd waited too long."

Rathburn looked again at the shattered gun and understood.

"There was somebody waiting here to ambush me?" he asked.

She nodded.

"And you shot the gun out of his hands when he was aiming at me?"

She nodded again.

"Why, good Lord!" he gasped, sensing fully now how great his peril had been; "at this distance he couldn't have missed me! What became of him?"

"He ran that way," she said, indicating the road that Rathburn had just traversed. "He was out of sight before you had your car stopped."

Slowly Rathburn was getting a grip on himself; was beginning to realize that what had just occurred was not a bit of melodrama scissored out of a Western picture film. He had actually been shot at by some one who had meant to kill him, and the catastrophe had been averted only by a marvelous piece of marksmanship on the part of the girl standing before him.

"I'm doing my level best to get down to earth," he said, with a catch in his laugh. "This is all new to me, you know. I guess I must have been missing a lot before I came out here to the Quesada. Why should anybody want to kill me? And how did it happen that you were—er——"

"That I was stalking him?" she finished for him, with a childlike smile that was the mate to the one she had given him when he had picked her up in the road on the morning of their first meeting. Then she explained soberly. "It was just an accident. I was riding up to your camp with a letter for Mr. Braithwaite, and as I passed here I saw a man sitting behind this rock with a gun across his knees: he wasn't hidden as well as he thought he was. I thought he was some tenderfoot hunter from Ophir sitting down to rest himself. At your camp Mr. Duncan told me that you were in Ophir, but that you were expected back this evening. Then I *knew* and I nearly ran the legs off Pete getting back here."

"How did you know?" Rathburn asked.

"How does a person know anything? I just knew—that's all."

"So you came back and stalked my assassin?"

"That part of it was easy enough. I left Pete hidden in one of the draws and what I meant to do was to get past the place by keeping out of sight up there among the rocks, so I could run to meet you. But I had just got up there when I heard your car coming and knew I'd have to do something right away. I wasn't a minute too soon."

"Or a minute too late. Did you shoot at the man or at this rifle?"

"At the gun, of course. I wouldn't want to kill a man—not even a bad man."

"And you hit the gun at that distance? —and in a snapshot? It's wonderful. Who taught you how to shoot?"

"Uncle Ben. He has taught me almost everything I know."

Rathburn knew little of the ménage at the Carter ranch and the little contained no mention of an uncle. "Uncle Ben?" he queried.

"Yes; he lives over on the other mountain, across the river; he has a sort of a mine. He isn't my real uncle, but he is a blessed old dear and I love him. But perhaps you know him?"

Rathburn shook his head. "No; there are a good many things that I don't know. Why anybody should want to kill me, for example."

"Uncle Ben would say it's because you are building the dam."

"I know there are some people who don't want it built. Do you know the man who was trying to shoot me?"

"I've seen him before, but I don't know him."

"Is he the one you warned me about before?"

"Yes."

The golden light had faded out of the upper air and the valley twilight was deepening to dusk.

"I think I shall have to make the acquaintance of your 'Uncle Ben,'" Rathburn ventured. "Perhaps he will be willing to tell me some of the things that I don't know. Shall we walk back to where you left your horse? Or maybe you'll let me drive you in the car."

"It's only a little way," she replied; and together they walked along the road, Rathburn carrying the shattered rifle which he tossed into the roadster as they passed it.

"I haven't thanked you yet for saving my life," he said as they entered the tree-darkened ravine where the broncho was hidden.

She laughed. "You don't need to. Anybody would have done what I did."

"Apparently there are more people in this valley who wouldn't," he commented grimly. "Just the same, the Quesada dam is going to be built."

"They won't let you build it if they can help it."

He did not ask her who she meant by "they." Just at the moment the machinations of the obstructors were pushed into the background by his late escape and the manner of it. In his mind's eye there was a vivid picture of a girl, to whom he could be nothing more than a blundering young tenderfoot capitalist bent upon putting through a project which must eventually drive her father out of the Quesada, riding for life to try to save *his* life. It was heart mellowing and his attempt to thank her adequately broke down in the midst.

"Please don't," she protested as he went stumbling around among the inadequate phrases. "Of course I'd try. I couldn't do any less, could I?—not when I knew that man was sitting there waiting for you? Why, I'd have been a murderer myself if I hadn't tried!"

"Yes, but——" What he wanted to add was that it was a mighty dangerous thing for a girl to do unless she wanted the saved man to put her on a pedestal and worship her. He felt that he could do that very thing pretty easily just then. The thing she had done was so splendidly heroic.

"I thought I knew a little something about the world and the different sorts of people in it," he said as he untied the hitching strap and started to lead the broncho out to the road, "but it appears that I have a lot to learn yet."

"Uncle Ben says we live and learn. I'm learning things every day."

"Good things?" he suggested.

"No; mostly bad. Sometimes I wish I could run away from it all."

There was an appeal in her voice that thrilled him. The urge to slay dragons and release beleaguered damsels may belong to a forgotten age but it is safe to say that it still lies dormant in every normal man. And when the beleaguered damsel has just saved the man's life——

They had reached the road, and the pony was straining to crop the bits of bunch grass at its edge. When the girl would have taken the reins to mount, Rathburn detained her.

"Wait a minute," he interposed. "Can't I help to straighten some of the bad things out for you?"

"Maybe you could. Uncle Ben tries, but he's old." Then, with the childlike frankness which had both astonished and charmed him at their first meeting: "You are going to marry Miss Norton, aren't you?"

He laughed because he couldn't help it. "I'm not so sure about that. Miss Norton hasn't admitted it yet—not to me."

"But you've asked her to marry you, haven't you?"

"A dozen times, I should say—though I haven't kept a strict account."

"Would you want to marry her if she didn't love you?"

"What a straightforward little inquisitor you are!" he laughed. "Don't you know that sentiment is regarded as a hopeless back number nowadays?"

"You don't believe that, any more than I do," she asserted calmly. "And you haven't answered my question. Would you want to marry her?"

"No; I suppose I shouldn't."

"Would you think it right to marry her if you didn't love her?"

"No."

"That helps some," she said musingly. "Now if you can tell me what love is like

I mean the kind that makes you want to marry somebody."

She was so evidently sincere that he throttled a wild desire to laugh.

"I wonder if anybody in this world could put the answer to that question into cold words?" he said; adding: "I doubt it very much indeed."

"But you know how you feel, don't you? I mean you, yourself."

"Do I? I doubt that, too. I——" He stopped in sheer honesty. Now that it was put thus baldly he realized that his feeling for Betty had never been very maddening. He wondered if the exciting cause was only her trick of charming and then eluding him? Was it only the common human urge to chase something that always slipped aside just as it was about to be captured?

"I'm afraid you have me cornered," he went on after the momentary break. "You see, Betty and I have grown up together, and that makes it different. We have always known each other since we were boy and girl and——"

"Still, you are going to marry her."

"That is for her to say; I have done my part."

It was growing quite dark now, and while he couldn't see her face well enough to read its expression he could and did see the firm little shake of the well-poised head.

"I thought maybe you could help me, but you can't," she said decisively. "You don't know any more about such things than I do. Love, marrying love, is something different; it *must* be something different. Don't you *know* it must?"

As if her sober question had been a torch to set off a hitherto unsuspected train of combustibles within him, Rathburn found himself suddenly glowing with a mad desire to take this sweet bunch of innocence and childlike naïveté in his arms.

With an effort that left him sweating he forced himself to say, as calmly as he could: "You mustn't say things like that—not to any man, unless he is the man you are going to marry. And you are wrong, too: I do know more about such things than you do, and because I do, I'll say this: You must never marry any man until you have come to know fully just what 'marrying love' is. Will you promise me that? You've just saved my life and that gives me some rights."

With a pull at the broncho's head to make him quit nibbling at the bunch grass she swung lightly into the saddle.

"No; I can't promise. I wish I could, but I can't. Good-by."

"Wait," he said quickly. "I'll walk back with you as far as my car. Why can't you promise?"

"I can't tell you that," she returned, and they went on until they reached the roadster.

At the moment of leave-taking Rathburn remembered that the man who had shot at him was still at large and that he had gone in the direction in which the girl must ride on her return to the Carter ranch.

"I mustn't let you go home alone," he protested; "not with my would-be assassin roaming around in the valley. Can't you turn your horse loose and let me drive you?"

"No, indeed," she refused promptly. "Nobody will hurt me; *I'm* not building a dam. Besides, I have this"—tapping the light rifle which she had slipped into its saddle holster under her leg. "And I mustn't keep you any longer. You'll be missing your dinner—with Miss Norton. Good-by."

Rathburn stood beside his car as she rode away, making no move to get in until the rapid fire of galloping hoofs had died away in the distance. And when he finally pulled himself in under the steering wheel, switched on the lights, pressed the starter button and sent the powerful roadster bounding on its way to the valley head he was thinking not at all of the drive he was determined to make upon Braithwaite. The thing that engrossed him so completely that he was oblivious to everything else was the delicious madness that had run like a consuming fire through his veins when he was standing with Anita Carter in the gathering darkness beside the grazing pony.

And, somehow, he failed to feel properly conscience-stricken, or even disturbed, when he remembered that she was engaged to marry the bluff promoter, and that he himself was pledged to Betty Norton.

CHAPTER X.

QUICKSANDS.

THOUGH he was late for supper, and ate alone in the mess shanty, Rathburn still had the evening for a renewal of the attempt to purchase safety from Braithwaite, and the assault was made vigorously

as soon as he had found the promoter in his commissary-office den and the pipes were lighted.

Having fully convinced himself that the bluff giant was less a promoter of beneficent enterprises than he was a shrewd opportunist in marketing his wares, Rathburn went straight to his object, making a series of mounting bids for any fraction over an even half of Braithwaite's stock.

At first the promoter merely laughed at him; refused to take him seriously even when he bid par for the desired stock. Beyond that, it was the irresistible moving body hurling itself against the immovably fixed object. Rathburn increased his offer until it reached the figure of two for one—three for one; still Braithwaite held out with jocose inflexibility. The stock was his nest egg; his one ewe lamb; his only child. It wasn't a question of money, altogether; it was sentiment; and he went off upon an exuberant laudation of the sweetening, uplifting, rejuvenating influence of sentiment upon the human atom that ran on without a break or falter for a full quarter of an hour.

And, at the end of the ends, when all was said, Rathburn had to acknowledge defeat. For some reason—which he was quite sure was not sentimental—Braithwaite held out, good-naturedly but firmly refusing to be tempted. "No, Rathburn; I love you like a younger brother—as I ought to for the way you're taking hold and blowing yourself on my baby enterprise here—but, really, you know, my dear boy, you haven't money enough to buy that stock. Call me a fool, a ninny, a doddering old idiot if you will, but don't try to tempt me any more. It's no manner of use."

Rathburn recrossed the camp plaza to his office-bedroom shack chewing this final refusal as a bitter cud. The hidden meaning in the wording of it had not escaped him: "You haven't money enough to buy that stock." This could mean only one thing; that the promoter had some better market in view. What that market was there was now little room to doubt. It was Ophir Light & Power.

In the office shack he found Duncan checking estimates and told him the results of the two conferences; the one with the banker and that with Braithwaite. "I'm up against it, Rod," he said in conclusion. "If the Light & Power people don't succeed in killing me off Braithwaite will sell me out."

Duncan nodded soberly. "It looks very much that way. Of course, Braithwaite is within his rights in selling to the highest bidder; but there are some other things I'd like to have explained before it comes to a show-down."

"For example?" Rathburn queried.

"I've been digging into that last blasting accident. You haven't ordered any sixty-per-cent dynamite for the quarrying, have you?"

"No; nothing stronger than forty per cent."

"All right; I found a box of sixty, which was what Moriarty loaded his drill holes with, thinking it was forty. No wonder it tore things up."

"Where did the sixty come from?"

"That's just what I've been trying to find out. Somebody stole a box of forty and substituted one of sixty. The markings were smudged so they could hardly be read. Which means that we have a murdering devil here on the job."

"And a mighty slim chance of finding him in the big gang we are working now," Rathburn put in.

Duncan pursed his lips. "I'm not so sure about that. If Mark Braithwaite would cut your throat in one way perhaps he might do it in another."

"Gad!" gritted Rathburn; "if I could only get the goods on him, just once! I'm getting pretty well fed up on this thing, Rod. Let me show you." He stepped into his bedroom and got the shattered Winchester to show it to Duncan, saying: "The man who fired that gun last came within a couple of feet of putting the bullet through my head!"

"Good Lord!" gasped the engineer. "When was that?"

"This evening as I was driving back from town."

"But how did the gun get blown up this way?"

Rathburn briefed the story of the attempted assassination and its frustrating. At the finish, Duncan was pulling hard at his pipe.

"The plucky little jewel of a girl!" he exclaimed warmly. "I saw her ride off like a shot the minute I'd told her you had gone to Ophir and were expected back this evening; but of course I had no notion of what

was in the wind. Did she know the man who was gunning for you?"

"No; but I think she knows something about him."

Duncan swore. "This is pretty serious. I've told you that Hardwick, resident head of Ophir Light & Power, wouldn't stop at anything. Are you sure nobody overheard your talk with Dalton this afternoon?"

"No, I'm not entirely sure. Dalton and I sat in his room. The door was open and from where I was sitting I could look out. There was a man waiting outside the counter railing. I should have said he was too far away to overhear what Dalton and I were talking about, but maybe he wasn't."

"About what time was this?" queried Duncan.

"Between one and two o'clock; nearer one than two."

"Did you notice the man particularly?"

"Why, yes; in a sort of half absent way. He was a big, barrel-bodied fellow dressed in pepper-and-salt clothes and with a soft hat pulled down over his eyes. The thing I noticed most was that he had an unlighted cigar between his teeth and he kept shifting it from one corner of his mouth to the other and cocking it up at an angle."

"You didn't leave Ophir until about five o'clock, did you?"

"It was later than that. I made good time over the mountain."

"So this fellow would have had plenty of time to get ahead of you?"

"All he would need and a lot more, if his car was good for anything."

"If one of Hardwick's strikers overheard your talk it was enough to fire the powder train. Don't you see it? You were to be bumped off before you could get a chance to dicker again with Braithwaite. And it means two things: that somebody else is trying to get control of this project and that the somebody doesn't trust Braithwaite any more than we do."

For some little time Rathburn sat in silence. Then: "Don't you know, Rod, I can't seem to orient myself out here. It isn't like any world that I've ever lived in hitherto. Braithwaite is a crook and high-binder, but he isn't like any other crook I've ever known; and this Hardwick person, you say, is another of a still more desperate breed. Who ever heard of the head of a corporation getting down to sheer gunman methods? Then this girl—the cattleman's daughter. She doesn't belong in our century at all. She dates away back in the home-sheltered ages, and still it's pretty evident that she hasn't had any home-sheltering whatever."

"I can help you out a bit on Anita Carter," said Duncan. "She's all you say she is, but it is chiefly because she has lacked contact with the world. She has always lived on a cattle ranch; most of the time here in the Quesada. She has never seen the inside of a schoolhouse; never mixed and mingled with other girls; or with men, apart from the cowboys. She is about what you'd expect her to be, after having been brought up that way."

"No, by Jove! she isn't—not at all," Rathburn objected. "What you'd expect would be a masculine sort of wild woman—which she isn't. She is more like an innocent child; looks at you that way; talks that way. And she isn't ignorant, either. Her English is as good as yours and mine—better, for that matter."

"I've told you all I know," said Duncan.

"Let's see if you have. Do you know an old prospector who has 'a sort of a mine' over on the southern mountain?"

"Old Ben Halkett, the hermit? Everybody knows him."

"Ever been at his mine?"

"Yes; I climbed up there when I was running levels on the southern ditch. He is driving a tunnel on a thin streak of quartz carrying free gold. About once in three months he picks out enough ore to fill a sack or two, loads up his burro, and makes a trip to the Ophir sampling works. It is pathetic. He doesn't make enough to pay him day wages. But he says it buys him bread and meat, and that is all he needs."

"Know anything else about him?"

"Only this, that he seems to be an educated man. At any rate he is a bookworm. His cabin is lined with books; secondhand wrecks, most of them, but good stuff; all the old authors and classics; no modern books at all."

"Um," said Rathburn thoughtfully. "That partly explains the little girl. She calls Halkett 'Uncle Ben,' and says he has taught her all she knows."

"The heredity part of it is what puzzles me," said Duncan. "I'm a bug on heredity. I can't place that girl as Carter's daughter. There isn't a single feature or characteristic of resemblance."

Rathburn turned up his mental picture of the cattleman, who had twice or thrice ridden into the construction camp to be closeted with Braithwaite for an hour or so; a swarthy, hard-faced man with cold, sloe-black eyes and a cruel mouth curtained by a drooping black mustache.

"The mother," he suggested. "Do you know anything about her?"

"No; there has never been a mother; at least, not here in the Quesada."

"Well, I don't know much about heredity but I do know that the childlike little lady saved my life this evening and I'm her everlasting debtor. It's a thousand pities she's going to marry Mark Braithwaite."

Duncan made no comment upon this, other than an outthrust of his square Scotch jaw. What he said, was: "We've got off the track. You say you've shot your bolt with Braithwaite in the stock deal—which can't be dealt. Having jumped off the edge of the precipice, where do we land?"

Rathburn's smile was mirthless. "So far as anybody can see we've already landed—in a quicksand. Braithwaite can choke us to death any time he's ready. I've soaked most of dad's legacy, and it seems I can't go out of sight of camp without taking a chance of getting murdered. Good. Now we'll see who comes out on top in the end."

Duncan was regarding his former college-mate with narrowed eyes.

"Prentice, you may not know it, but you are going to come out winner in this game, no matter what you lose," he prophesied.

"How so?"

"As I've said once or twice before, you were going soft, and that's the worst that can happen to any man. What you needed was a swift kick, and you are getting it. The good, old 'Die-hard' has been there at the bottom all the time, I guess, only it was coming to be overlaid and overgrown with the fat of idleness and soft living. Just the same, I wish the kick wasn't aiming to be quite so damned hard."

"On the pocket nerve, you mean?"

"Oh, that's tough enough, to be sure, but that doesn't need to be fatal for any man who isn't cursed with a weak heart. But—you are going to be hit somewhere else besides in the pocket."

"Let's have it," said Rathburn doggedly. "This seems to be my day for getting hit."

"I hate to say it, Prentice—or to have it to say. But I'd be a worse friend to you than I want to be if I shouldn't say it. It's Betty."

"What about Betty?"

"I can't believe you've been as blind as most lovers are said to be."

"Braithwaite, you mean? That's nothing. Betty would flirt with the devil himself if nobody else was in sight."

"You mustn't begin to throw the furniture at me if I say that it is more than a flirtation—on Betty's part, and Braithwaite's, too."

Rathburn's eyes darkened as he said: "I hope, for your own sake, Rod, you can prove up on what you say."

"I can. I only wish I couldn't. I've been an eavesdropper—without meaning to be. It was in the tunnel we're driving through the spur at the south end of the dam. I was in there this forenoon, looking over the cave we've broken into and trying to figure out a way of filling it up at the least cost. While I was exploring my candle went out and before I could light it again I heard voices and waited."

"Go on."

"It was Braithwaite bringing Betty in, supposedly to show her the cave. But they were not talking about natural wonders. They didn't see me, and when Braithwaite had stuck his candle in a crevice in the rock and had taken Betty in his arms I took good care they shouldn't see me."

"Um," Rathburn grunted, and his eyes were somber.

"What they said was enough to make a man loose faith in his kind, Prentice. I don't want to repeat it to you."

"It'll be kinder than not to, don't you think?"

"Maybe. He was talking money to her—telling her she'd wear diamonds with him. He said you were done; finished. She laughed and let him kiss her. Then something was said about Anita Carter. I didn't catch it all. But I heard what Betty said at the last. She said: 'Oh, well—I'm not mid-Victorian. You may have the little savage—for as long as you want her.' Prentice, it actually made me sick!"

"Anything more?" queried Rathburn.

"No; they went out pretty soon, without exploring the cave."

For a time there was a dead silence in the cramped little room. When Rathburn broke it he was up and stretching as one tired and ready for bed.

"I am glad you told me, Roddy—though you couldn't well do less. It runs in my mind that the good Lord has sent me out here to read a lesson to quite a number of people and I shall proceed to do it. All I need is to catch Braithwaite napping, just once. And I'll do it. I'm losing weight every day, and you know that is a hopeful sign when you are in the training squad. Two things for you to do, Roddy, if you love me: Shove the job, and don't let Braithwaite make a single move in the cañon that you or somebody you can trust can't check up and swear to. I'm going to bed. Good night."

CHAPTER XI.

REVELATIONS.

RODERICK DUNCAN, at his effective best when he was carrying out rush orders, not only keyed the dam building up to a harmonious concert pitch of accomplishment; he also bent himself rigorously to the task of preventing further accidents. Meanwhile, Rathburn, apparently as cheerfully optimistic as if no featherweight of anxiety were oppressing him, continued to pour money into the company treasury, taking Braithwaite's notes as collateral; notes which the jovial promoter signed offhand and always with a jest for Rathburn's uncurbed enthusiasm.

"You'll go broke on this thing yet, before you're through," he would say. "Isn't there any bottom to your long purse?" And to such remarks Rathburn had a stereotyped reply always ready: "You'll know it when I'm broke."

Naturally this process of money pouring necessitated frequent trips to Ophir, and these Rathburn made in his car, going unarmed, though Duncan besought him not to take the risk. To the beseeching the plunger had but one answer: "No; if I'm due to be potted it will be from ambush; in which case a whole arsenal of guns in the roadster wouldn't do me any good."

Since the enthusiast pursued the businesslike course of confiding in his banker, the shrewd gentleman at the head of the Ophir Bank & Trust did his best to beacon his customer off the rocks. But Rathburn appeared to be far beyond the reach of any prudent advisings. Indeed, he seemed more cheerfully resolute than usual on the day when he gave Dalton written authority to draw once more upon the now sadly diminished Milford patrimony.

"That's the last of it, Mr. Dalton," he grinned. "When Graves sends you the price of those steel bonds I shall have bet the last dollar my father left me."

The banker shook his head in regretful deprecation.

"As it appears to me, you have little, if any, assurance that you are not riding straight to destruction, Mr. Rathburn," he said soberly.

"I grant you it looks as if I might be. But you've hit upon my fatal weakness, Mr. Dalton. I don't know how or when to quit. They used to call me a fighting fool when I played football in college, and I guess I earned the name."

"I suppose you realize where you stand? Even if you succeed in making the project a going proposition, you are still only a minority stockholder, and the majority can so manipulate things that you may never see a dollar of your investment or a penny of earnings from it."

"I fully realize all that. Still, I haven't sense enough to 'cease firing' as long as there is any ammunition left in the locker."

The banker gave a grunt which was not altogether of disgust.

"I can't help admiring your persistence, Mr. Rathburn, misguided as it may seem to be. If you were determined to make a poor man of yourself, you could scarcely have adopted a surer method."

"Who knows but that may be exactly what I want to do?" Rathburn laughed. "People at home used to say that dad's money was spoiling me, and perhaps they were right. Telephone me when you hear from Graves about those steel bonds and I'll come over and sign the papers."

This was the state of affairs in the last week in September when, in spite of the drawbacks and handicaps, the dam was actually nearing completion under Duncan's sleepless watchfulness and energetic driving. At the construction camp there was no visible change in the relations of those who ate at the reserved table in the mess shack. Braithwaite was the same bluffly genial, mildly enthusiastic corporation head, and Jasper Norton still coruscated in wordy fireworks over the richness of the prospect afforded by the coming redemption of the Quesada. Betty amused herself as she chose, and though she was oftener with

Braithwaite than with Rathburn, her attitude toward the latter was outwardly unchanged. She rallied him upon his devotion to the "job," and commented jestingly upon the fact that he was losing flesh and beginning to grow hard and brown like a workingman. Once—and it was in Braithwaite's presence, at that—she asked him mockingly how long he was going to keep her waiting for the big fortune.

He answered the light question lightly at the time; but later in the same day, when he had persuaded her to climb with him to the summit of one of the castellated foothills to see the sunset, he reverted to it soberly.

"You threw a brick at the 'big fortune' this afternoon, Betty," he said as they sat together on the battlement with their faces to the west. "I wonder if you knew how near you came to hitting the mark?"

She was silent for a little time, and when she spoke it was to say: "You haven't measured up, Prenty, dear. You are not a big enough man."

"Then you know that I am just about down and out?"

"I know that you've rushed in and spent all your money, and that everything you have done has cost twice as much as it would have if you had taken the advice of those who know more about such things than you do."

"Braithwaite's advice, you mean?"

"Certainly. Didn't he warn you that you couldn't rush the dam building through in a single half season without making it cost more than it is worth?"

"Something of the sort," Rathburn admitted.

"You wouldn't take the advice and now you've got to take the consequences. Isn't it true that you have spent all the money your father left you?"

"It will be in another week or so."

"Well?—don't you think you owe me something—an apology, at least?"

Rathburn smiled at the sunset. It was so like her calmly to put him in the wrong; to make his loss her grievance.

"Consider the apology made, most humbly," he offered, not without a touch of sarcasm. "Haven't you something else to say to me, Betty?"

"If it needs saying—yes. You've disappointed me a lot, Prenty."

"I thought maybe I had," he returned.

"When we came out here I meant to marry you some day," she went on. "But you've made such an awful mess of it. How do you ever expect to support a wife in any decent style with no money at all—not even the nest egg you had when you came out here?"

"I still have my two hands; which is all that my two grandfathers had—or yours, for that matter."

"That may have been enough in their day, but it isn't in ours. I've told you over and over again that I'll never marry a poor man. You got your head so full of the idealistic notion of making homes for a lot of people you don't know that you couldn't think of the main thing at all."

"Which, of course, was to make money and more money?"

"Certainly."

Rathburn found his pipe and filled and lighted it.

"Let's clear the ground once for all, Betty," he said, after the tobacco was well alight. "Are you trying to tell me that I'm ditched?—that without money I'm an undesirable?"

"If you need telling."

"And you are going to marry Mark Braithwaite?"

"Mr. Braithwaite's wife will be riding in her limousine when yours, if you have one, will be washing dishes in the cottage kitchen."

"But I thought you told me that Braithwaite was going to marry the cattleman's daughter."

"The little savage? That was only gossip; good-natured gossip. No doubt she would be glad to have him marry her."

Rathburn's blood ran hot at the malicious innuendo and he recalled the words Duncan had overheard in the canal-tunnel cave: "Oh, well—I'm not mid-Victorian. You may have the little savage—for as long as you want her."

"I guess we understand each other, Betty," he said, forcing himself to say it calmly. "As you say, I suppose a poor man, or even a potentially poor man, has no right to ask you to share his misery. Shall we go back to camp?"

She got up without replying and together they returned to the camp in silence. It was not until he was leaving her at the steps of the guest bungalow that she gave him a final thrust.

"The next time you go into business, Prenty—if you ever do again—you'd better be sure first that you can match wits with a real man. You're damning me to the queen's taste now, but you must remember that in this world nobody loves a loser."

"And that everybody loves a winner," he added grimly. "I'll try to remember." And with that he turned away to cross the plaza and let himself into the shed garage where he kept his roadster.

Five minutes later he had the car out and was heading it westward. Knowing what he did, his duty seemed clear. The young woman who had saved his life was likely to become the victim of a diabolical plot. Rathburn knew of only one way to break in and he took it. Twelve miles from the camp on the western road a cart track branched off to the left, running to one of the few fords practicable for an auto crossing of the Tumblestone. Half an hour after leaving the construction camp he had crossed the ford and was sending the roadster over a dim trail toward the foothills of the southern mountain.

The moon had risen before the trail came to an end in a maze of uptilted hogbacks and rounded buttes, and he was forced to leave the car and go on afoot. From Duncan's description of the locality he had little difficulty in finding his way or in identifying a gray, beardlike excrescence on a gorge slope as the dump of a tunneling mine. Climbing to the top of the dump he found the object of his search; a one-room log cabin. And on the doorstone, placidly smoking a long-stemmed Indian pipe, sat the owner of the cabin, a venerable figure with a long beard and silvery hair.

The old man rose as Rathburn came up. "Mr. Rathburn, isn't it?" he said.

Rathburn shook hands, wondering a little that the hermit should recognize him and call him by name. Also he wondered at the gentle voice and correct English, this until he recalled what Duncan had said about the book-lined cabin.

"I'm a dilatory neighbor, Mr. Halkett," he said. "I've been promising myself a visit to you for a month or more."

"Better late than never," said the gentle voice. "Shall we go inside?"

"It's very pleasant out here in the moonlight," Rathburn said, taking a seat on the step. Then: "Don't put your pipe away; I'll join you."

For a few minutes the talk rambled aimlessly. But Rathburn was only waiting for an opening, and when it came in the mention of the coming of agriculture and the passing of the cattle industry, he stepped promptly into it.

"I've never been able to find out just how your neighbor across the river feels regarding our project," he said.

The old man drew himself up. "Houston Carter is no neighbor of mine."

"Oh, pardon me. I understood from what Miss Anita said——"

"You understood too little, or too much," was the grave rejoinder. "I have nothing in common with Houston Carter."

"But you have been a good friend to Houston Carter's daughter."

For a long minute the old man did not reply. When he spoke at last it was to say: "I wonder how far I may trust you, Mr. Rathburn?"

Rathburn's answer was prompt and hearty. "In any matter that concerns Miss Anita you may go the limit. I'm pretty deeply in debt to her."

Another silence, and then: "The little one is in deep trouble—and so am I. If she knew something of the world and the people in it—but she doesn't and I haven't been able to teach her. You've heard she is to marry Mark Braithwaite?"

"Yes."

"It is purely a matter of duty with her, or she has been led to believe it is. Houston Carter tells her that the existence of the cattle industry in the Quesada depends upon his keeping in with Braithwaite. He has made her believe that Braithwaite can and will leave the lower half of the valley undisturbed by his irrigation scheme if she will marry him."

"How much of that do you believe?"

Again the old man straightened himself.

"Braithwaite is your business associate, but since you ask me, I must tell the truth. I wouldn't believe either of those men under oath."

"You are quite right as to Braithwaite," said Rathburn evenly. "I am perfectly willing to admit that he is the greatest scoundrel unhanged. Does that clear the ground a bit for you?"

"It does; but it doesn't lessen the trouble. This marriage will be a crime, Mr. Rathburn!—a sacrifice of innocent virtue upon the altar of——"

Rathburn cut in savagely. "I know even more than you do, Mr. Halkett. Braithwaite has no intention of marrying Anita Carter!"

"What?"

"It is true. He is going to marry another woman. And you may be sure that other woman will hold him to his promise, unless something——"

"Unless what?"

"Unless Braithwaite's foot happens to slip and he should turn out to be a poor man where she believes he is a rich one."

"But Anita?"

"I have Braithwaite's own word for it that he has no marrying intentions in that quarter—the beast!"

Again a silence, prolonged this time to the explosion point. Then the old miner, in a voice broken and tremulous: "I have been weak. Anita is more to me than anybody else in this world, and yet, from a mistaken sense of pity, and a great fear for what the knowledge of the truth might do to her, I have kept silence when I should have spoken. She is not Houston Carter's daughter, Mr. Rathburn."

"Not his daughter?"

"No. Sixteen years ago, in San Antonio, Texas, Carter shot a man—in self-defense, he claimed—and a jury acquitted him. The shock of her husband's death killed the man's wife, and she left a baby girl three years old. Shortly after the trial Carter disappeared and about the same time the baby was stolen from the orphan asylum where it had been placed. It took me four years to trace Carter and the stolen baby, but I did it finally."

"Good Lord!" said Rathburn. "But what was the motive?"

"Carter's? I don't know. At first I thought it was sheer hatred. The man he killed was his rival. At other times I've wondered if it might not be remorse; such remorse as a man of his nature might suffer."

"But you?" said Rathburn. "Are you really Anita's uncle?"

"No; you may be sure I'm not. If I'd had any legal right to interfere—but I hadn't. In Texas I was merely a prematurely old, broken-down tramp Anita's father had taken in and befriended. Carter doesn't know who I am; probably he never knew. Like everybody else here in the Quesada he thinks I'm only a harmless old maniac, which is probably the reason he has never tried to stop Anita from coming here. She was seven years old and just a neglected baby growing up among rough men when I found her. I've done what I could for her—the only good use a wasted college education has ever been put to."

"And what you did was as much as her own nearest could have done," said Rathburn warmly. "You have reason to be proud of your job, Mr. Halkett. In a world that's gone mad over jazz and all manner of crazy foolishness she is—well, there isn't another one like her that I know of. Will you tell her now that she doesn't owe Carter anything?"

"I'm afraid to," said the old man. "You see where it will leave her. She has nowhere to go; nobody to turn to. I'm too old to fight for her. Carter would think no more of killing me than he would of blowing out the candle when he goes to bed." A pause; then: "I've been suffering the torments of the damned ever since this Braithwaite affair came up; and now you tell me that it's even worse than I thought it was."

Rathburn knocked the ash from his pipe and got up.

"The game isn't played out, yet," he said quietly. "There may be developments in a few days that will change the face of things. When you see Anita, do what you can to gain time; that is the most important thing just now. If a crisis should pop up before we are ready you must find means to let me know quickly. I am a long way from taw at the other end of the valley and I wish——"

"I'll let you know," was the prompt reply. And then with a sigh of relief: "You've taken a mighty heavy load off my shoulders by coming up here to-night, Mr. Rathburn. I'm getting right old and I've been out of the world so long that I'm not of much account any more. You are young and strong and you'll know what to do for my little girl. She likes you, and she will do whatever you say—I am sure she will. Good night and God bless you!"

CHAPTER XII.

AN EMPTY TREASURY.

RATHBURN left the cabin on the mountain with a strange feeling of elation fighting for place with generous wrath. He was prodigiously glad to know that the girl

to whom he owed his life was not the daughter of a murderer and kidnaper; and out of the gladness grew a man-size determination to smash the big-bodied beast who was plotting against her.

Retracing his steps down the trail he climbed into his car. The evening was still young and in half an hour he was back at the camp. As the car rolled past the guest bungalow he saw three figures on the porch and identified them in the moonlight; Norton and his daughter and Braithwaite. Running the roadster into its shelter shed he went to his office shack, letting himself in by the back door. In the front room Duncan was sitting at a desk littered with sheets of paper, each sheet covered with figures. When the engineer looked up his eyes were blazing.

"Sit down, Prentice!" he barked fiercely; and after Rathburn had drawn up a chair: "Do you know what I've just found out?"

"No; and I shan't know until you tell me. What's the new grief?"

Duncan's reply was prefaced by a ripped-out blast of strong language.

"Prentice, you're done—held up and robbed—flimflammed—skinned alive! This afternoon when I was running ditch levels for Kelly on the first section I got a notion into my head that those grade lines were too high, though they checked out accurately with Braithwaite's profiles. Just to satisfy myself, I took a series of back sights. Those ditch lines are all twenty feet above the level of the outlet at the dam! The whole ditch system is that much too high. In other words, the dam will have to go twenty feet higher than the plans provide for before a drop of water will flow into the ditch system."

"Good heavens!" Rathburn ejaculated. "A mistake as big as that?"

"Mistake, nothing!" yelped Duncan. "It's a fake—a frame-up! The whole thing is a confidence game! Braithwaite has never intended to complete this job. He's been merely putting up a front to steal somebody's good money! I don't suppose he ever took the trouble to find out whether his ditch lines were above grade or on grade or under grade. It didn't make a particle of difference to him. All he needed was to make the thing *look* like an irrigation project."

"Well," said the plunger, "it seems we've landed properly, at last."

"You're done, Prentice—that's the size of it. It'll take another hundred thousand to straighten this mess out, any way you go at it. If we rerun the ditch lines, all the work that's been done in the valley is thrown away. If we build the dam twenty feet higher—well, you can guess that cost."

"All right; you've carried it a step farther than that, haven't you?"

"Sure! Braithwaite's been in cahoots with O. L. & P., probably from the very beginning, but he's been shrewd enough to work for his own pocket first. That is why he's been holding on to his little mess of stock. He got you into it for a double purpose; he wanted to steal your money, or at least a rake-off out of it, and at the same time make your investment a club to knock Hardwick into line—make the O. L. & P. people pay his price."

Rathburn got out of his chair and went to stand at the single window of the office room, which looked out upon the moonlit plaza.

"What is your advice, Roddy?" he asked, after a silence in which the tenseness of strains approached the breaking point.

"There is only one thing to do—save the pieces as you can. Braithwaite has been keeping the books and doing the bill paying, hasn't he?"

"As acting treasurer for the company—yes."

"Then you can bet he has taken his rake-off. You have plenty of nerve, Prentice, and if I am not much mistaken he is only a big bluffer. Hold him up—with a gun if necessary; make him shell out what he has grabbed from you; and then drop the whole sickening mess!"

"But you forget that Norton has already sold a lot of water rights to intending settlers," Rathburn put in, still with his face to the window.

"It's hell, I know!" Duncan gritted. "But you can't put the fire out, Prentice. You'll do well if you save a few charred ends for yourself."

Rathburn did not reply at once. In the bright moonlight he could see only two figures in the shadow of the porch across the plaza; the third had disappeared. In a moment the disappearance was accounted for by the upcoming of Braithwaite's roadster, with the promoter at the wheel. The car paused in front of the guest bungalow, and Betty ran down to it and was helped

in. With its complement of two, the roadster whirled away. Then Rathburn saw the remaining figure—Norton's—leave the porch and go into the house.

"Braithwaite's guardian devil has deserted him for the moment," he said. "Our man has gone joy riding with Betty. Let's amble over to the commissary and see if we can find out approximately where we stand."

They found the door of the commissary back room locked but Duncan picked the lock with a bit of wire. Gaining entrance, Rathburn switched on the light and Duncan went to the safe in the corner, an old-fashioned iron box with an obsolete combination lock.

"Shall we dynamite it?" Rathburn asked.

"Oh, no; I've opened 'em easy enough before now—back numbers like this," and laying his ear against the safe door he began to manipulate the combination. At the third trial the lock clicked and the records of the Q. L. & I. Company were at their disposal.

A very cursory examination of the books and papers sufficed. Apparently Braithwaite had made no attempt to keep a complete record. The books were in slipshod confusion. But a glance at the file of bills payable revealed an astounding state of affairs. None of the huge bills for material and machinery had been paid in full, though small payments—enough, as it appeared, to keep the creditors hopeful—had been made upon all of them. But most significant of all, there was a bank book issued by a Brewster bank in Braithwaite's name which showed deposits aggregating upward of sixty thousand dollars.

Rapidly the two investigators ran through the evidence and jotted down figures, and they were so deeply engrossed that neither of them saw a man's face raised slowly to eye height outside of the window. When either of them moved the face disappeared, only to reappear a moment later.

"Well?" said Duncan, after he had checked through the file of bills and added up the amounts paid and unpaid; this while Rathburn was checking the carelessly kept record of moneys received and disbursed. "What's the verdict?"

"Roughly, about a third of the amount I have blown in stands unaccounted for; in figures, about sixty thousand dollars—just the amount Braithwaite has in his Brewster bank. He has been paying the pay rolls—he had to do that, of course. But he hasn't paid anything else that he could stand off."

"The damned robber!" Duncan barked. Then: "You'll do what I advised, Prentice? —clean him with a gun and then drop this infernal fake of a project and let it slide into the hell where it belongs?"

There was a pause and in it the man at the window whipped out his knife and with it pried up the lower sash the tiny fraction needed to enable him to hear clearly. Rathburn rose and stretched his arms over his head.

"You've called me a fighting fool more than once, and the gibe still fits. Your advice is perfectly sound and sensible and anybody but a glutton for punishment would take it. But I'm not dead yet. The Quesada dam is going to be built, with all the appurtenances thereto. All I want is to catch Braithwaite napping—just once. Now let's put this stuff away and go to bed."

It was after they had left things as they had found them and gone across to their sleeping quarters that Rathburn said: "It daggers me a little in my tenderest spot to think that Braithwaite has me sized up for such a simpleton that he didn't think it worth while to cover up his crookedness."

"Adding insult to injury," grinned Duncan, seating himself at the desk.

"Not going to turn in?" asked Rathburn.

"No; I'm going to do a little figuring on a dam that's going to be twenty feet short of getting itself born when it's done!"

Whereupon the plunger chuckled and moved off to his bedroom.

CHAPTER XIII.

TWO OF A KIND.

IT was a long time after Rathburn had gone to bed, and Duncan was still immersed in his engineering calculations, when Braithwaite's roadster returned, dropped one of its occupants at the bungalow steps, and was trundled across to its shelter shed. As the stalwart promoter was thrusting his key into the lock Duncan had picked a man came out of the shadows and joined him.

"Been waitin' for you to show up," was the upcomer's greeting. Then he added bitingly: "When you get the hell out of this world, it'll be a woman that's draggin' you into the next."

Braithwaite laughed, opened the door and snapped the light switch.

"You're safe there, Grisby," he jeered. "A woman would have to be mighty hard up to be dragging you anywhere. What's eating you, this time?"

The barrel-bodied man slumped into a chair, found a cigar, lighted it and cocked it at the offensive angle.

"It's come down to brass tacks," he began belligerently. "You've had time enough to gather up all your pickin's and stealin's. We want action."

Braithwaite sat back easily with his hands pocketed. "You know how to get action. All Hardwick has to do is to pay my price."

"No, by gad! No more holdup business! You'll take par for that stock you're holdin' and assign the charter, or we pull out the props and let you down."

"Are you talking just to hear yourself make a noise?"

"Not this time, by cripes! I've got you where the hair is short, to-night, Mark. I've got you, and the fat boy's got you, too!"

"The fat boy isn't troubling me. I've got his money and his woman."

"But there's one thing you haven't got, and that's his goat—his nerve."

"What good will his nerve do when his money is gone?"

Grisby relighted the belligerent cigar, which immediately went out again.

"When it comes to fat things, your head's the fattest thing there is," he said. "What do you keep in that safe that you don't want other people to see?"

"That's nobody's business but mine."

"The fat boy's made it some of *his* business. He opened that safe a while back; him and that engineer pal of his; and they went through it good."

Braithwaite started up with an oath. "What's that?" he rasped.

"You heard me," grunted the other.

The promoter dropped heavily into his chair. After a hard-breathing minute he said: "Grisby, what will you take to put that fathead out of the running, once for all? That's right in your line."

The barrel-bodied man laughed jeeringly. "Oh, no; not now, Mark. There was a time, along in the beginning, when that looked like the easy answer—for the people on my side of the fence. But that was before he'd spent his roll on this flimflam of yours. Now the shoe's on t'other foot. He's got the dam pretty well up and the power house built. What we want now is the title to that plant. If there's goin' to be any killin', you've got to do it—not me. More than that, you're the one that needs it. If this young chap makes you show up you're good for ten years or so on the rock pile."

Again a heavy silence settled upon the little room. Braithwaite sat back in his chair with his brawny arms folded and every trace of the masking geniality wiped out of his face by a scowling frown. At last he said:

"You'll have to give me a little time. I'm going to be away for a week. Tell Jim Hardwick I'll see him in Ophir a week from to-morrow."

Grisby eyed the speaker suspiciously over the end of the cocked cigar.

"That's straight goods this time, is it?" he demanded. "You'll be ready to talk turkey a week from to-morrow?" Then, in a fresh access of suspicion: "What's the game? What you stallin' for a whole week for?"

"That is my private affair and it has nothing to do with this deal."

"You ain't forgettin' the fat boy, and what he'll likely be doin' after what he's found out to-night?"

"I'll take care of the fat boy—damn him!"

"All right; the ax'll stay up in the air till one week from to-morrow. If you don't show up then with the loot in your fist, down she comes—on the back of your neck."

At the word the moody giant sitting opposite suddenly leaped aflame.

"Don't you threaten me, Matt Grisby!" he bellowed, starting from his chair. "I've got all I need for one night! You've been a four-flusher from the start, but you're through. Neither you nor Jim Hardwick can drive me a single inch! You couldn't drive even a little yellow dog!"

Grisby got up and for the third time relighted the half-burned cigar.

"You think we couldn't smash you now?" he said, with a snickering laugh. "What if we should throw in with the fat boy? After what he's found out to-night, don't you reckon *he* might have a little Q. L. & I. stock to sell? I guess yes; especially if we'd agree to get behind him when he shows you up and sends you over the road. For the last time, Mark, don't you try to play horse with us. You show up in Ophir a week from to-morrow ready to do business,

like you say you will, and bygones'll be bygones. Otherwise, hell opens."

For a long time after Grisby had gone out the burly giant sat in his chair with his arms folded and the scowl on his broad face frozen in permanence. When he finally got up it was not to go to bed in the small alcove partitioned off from the commissary office room. Turning off the light, he left the building, and keeping well in the shadows until he had passed the camp confines, he crossed the Tumblestone on a narrow footbridge and climbed a bare hill on the opposite bank of the stream to a small isolated building walled and roofed with corrugated iron.

Reaching the iron-built hut he unlocked the door and entered, coming out again in a few minutes with a half-filled gunny sack slung over his shoulder, to lock the door and trudge away with his burden. But instead of taking the path leading back to the camp he followed the stream up its left bank and into the cañon portal, climbing as he went until his stooping figure was lost in a wooded gorge; the gorge whose farther slope and clifflike battlement held the cavern into which the quarrymen driving the outlet-canal tunnel had broken.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE TRAP.

IT was at the mess-shack breakfast on the morning following the night of discoveries that Braithwaite, with bluff geniality once more firmly in the saddle, announced his intention of going to Brewster, the thriving metropolis of the southern Timanyoni, for a few days.

"You young fellows have euchered me out of my job and I'm going to take a vacation," he went on, including Rathburn and Duncan in the playful accusation. "Don't hurt my feelings by telling me that I shan't be missed."

It was Betty who assured him that he would be missed; and Rathburn, keenly alert, marked the swift look of intelligence flashed across the table to go with the regretful assurance. He thought he knew what the look meant. On the joy ride of the previous evening Betty had been primed for this announcement.

"You'll be back in a week, won't you?" she asked.

"In one week from to-day. You may be sure I'll be here to see the final pouring of concrete on the dam." Then to Rathburn: "We ought to have a celebration of some sort to mark that day, oughtn't we?"

"We'll celebrate when we finish," said the plunger, matching the promoter's genial smile. "When we do, you mustn't be left out of the picture."

"Never fear. But we all know where the spotlight will fall, if it's aimed as it should be. You've been the driving power behind this enterprise, Rathburn. I haven't been much of anything but a figurehead lately."

Being a young man, unschooled in the art of making his face say one thing while every fiber of him was striving to yell out another, Rathburn kept his eyes on his plate. But generous wrath was making his ears burn. Did this Judas of a crook think that he was such an idiotic dolt as not to realize yet what had been done to him? But Braithwaite was speaking again.

"By the way; before I go, there is a thing I want to suggest to you and Duncan, if you'll take a suggestion from an old has-been. It's about that cavern we've struck. It's a pretty bad hollow tooth, occurring, as it does, in the shoulder that forms the southern abutment of the dam. For safety's sake I believe it would be a good idea to spout it full of concrete. Suppose you both go in there and look at it some time to-day—before the mixers are moved from that side of the cañon. I think you'll agree with me."

"Perhaps we might shoot the roof of the cave down and use the spoil to fill the crevices," Duncan offered; this merely to fill the pause.

"Um; I don't know about that—possibly that would do. Anyway, you two go and dig into it a bit more, considering it in the light of my suggestion. Will you do that? And don't put it off. Do it to-day, while the equipment is still where you can use it if you decide to concrete it."

"We'll go up and have a look at it," said Rathburn, meaning to give the suggester all the rope he required. "Anything else before you leave us?"

"No, nothing that I think of. Oh, yes, there is, too. When I was in the cave yesterday I saw that the quarrymen had left a lot of dynamite in there when they stopped tunneling. That's rather careless. I spoke to Moriarty about it three or four

days ago, but I guess he's forgot it. Look out you don't stumble over it and get blown up."

"Thanks," said Rathburn. "We'll look out."

Immediately after breakfast Braithwaite got out his roadster and made ready for his departure, declaring his intention to catch the early-forenoon train from Ophir. In Rathburn's office Duncan was hotly protesting.

"I tell you, Prentice, we'll never see hide nor hair of him again if he gets away now!" he raged. "I'll bet all I expect to earn in the next ten years that he's making his final get-away!"

"Hardly that, Rod. He'll come back; don't worry about that."

"What makes you think he will?"

"I don't have to do the thinking; Betty is doing that. They were wirelessing to each other across the breakfast table. I saw them."

"All right," said Duncan resignedly. "It's very pointedly your funeral—not mine. But my bet stands. I don't believe we'll ever see him again."

Rathburn laughed. "It wouldn't break my heart if he never comes back, Roddy. If he disappears we'll petition the court for a receiver for the Quesada Company. I'm its principal creditor, am I not?"

"But suppose he sells his stock to O. L. & P. while he's gone?"

"That's a chance we have to take, of course. We can't plug all the holes in the skimmer. But let's see how many of them we can plug. Last night when I went to bed I left you figuring. How did you come out?"

Duncan drew some sheets of paper from a desk drawer.

"Here are some rough estimates. With the dam at the sixty-foot height, as it is now planned, we can develop between twelve and fifteen thousand horse power in the power plant. With an eighty-foot head, the output can be increased to twenty thousand or more. With the sixty-foot dam the irrigation scheme, as originally designed, falls to the ground, of course, and the earnings must all come from the sale of power to Ophir purchasers—which means a fight to a finish with Ophir Light & Power to get our poles and wires into the mining camp."

"All of which we've considered before," said Rathburn. "Go on."

"There are two alternatives. With the sixty-foot dam we can run a new series of canals and irrigate possibly one third of the area we've been figuring on. Or we can raise the dam to eighty feet and irrigate three thirds. Either alternative will add from one hundred and fifty to two hundred thousand dollars to the cost of the project. Besides, there are all those outstanding accounts that Braithwaite hasn't paid. How much of the money your father left you have you in reserve, Prentice?"

"About twenty thousand."

Duncan hastily jotted down a few more figures.

"At our present rate of expenditure your twenty thousand might keep us going for a fortnight longer. That's for current expenses only, and saying nothing about these past-due bills which may drop on us any minute. You're done, Prentice; sewed up in a sack and pitched overboard to drown."

"Looks that way, doesn't it?" was the cheerful reply. "But we won't say die till we're permanently dead, Roddy. Norton has been busy selling water rights for the land: how many of the rights already bargained for are covered only by the high-line ditches?"

"Fully half of them, I should say."

"Then that settles it. Those people mustn't be disappointed. Make your plans for the high-level dam and get to work on it."

"But, man! where is the money coming from?"

Rathburn smiled. "Suppose we fall back on the faith of the fathers and say that the Lord will provide? Where is your good, old Scotch Covenanters' religion, Roderick? —or didn't any of it come down to you?"

Duncan sat back and fixed his former classmate with a probing eye.

"I never know when you are going to break out in a new spot, Prenty, and that's the fact. Any other man in the world would be running around in circles just about now and yelling for help. All the same, what you say goes—for as long as anything will go. Sit down here and I'll go over the plans and estimates with you."

For an hour or more the two sat at the desk while Duncan explained in detail the plans he had worked out during the small hours of the night. At the close of the protracted technical lecture he said: "There you have it, and you see what you're in for.

I don't see how you can turn a wheel without a lot more capital, but if you do, it's all right."

"That's the talk!" was the plunger's light-hearted rejoinder. "Now let's chase up to the dam and look at that hollow tooth: not because Braithwaite told us to, but just to see how it is going to figure in the changed plans."

If the amateur capitalist had wished to be prideful, the contrast between the aspect of things at the site of the dam on the day of his first visit, and that which presented itself now, would have been a sufficient cause. Instead of a series of jagged concrete teeth, the dam now stood as a fair white wall, with only the temporary spillway through which the torrent thundered still to be stopped off. On the wall the carpenters were building the forms for what should have been the capstone pouring. The power house, which had been little more than a potentiality a few weeks earlier, was now ready for the dynamos.

Crossing the stagings, Rathburn and the engineer entered the canal tunnel bored into the southern mountain shoulder; the tunnel which, under the new plan, would be twenty feet below the water level. This fact, of course, made the plugging of the cavity a sheer necessity, since otherwise it would be a constant menace to the safety of the dam.

"Here goes your twenty thousand dollars, and more, too," said Duncan, snapping the switch of his pocket flash light and sending the beam ahead into the dark bore. "What a perfectly damnable waste of money—driving this tunnel where it couldn't possibly be of any use!" Then, Scottish thrift, outrigged beyond endurance, found expression in a blast of hot language.

But Rathburn only laughed and said, "Why should Braithwaite care, so long as it wasn't his own money he was wasting?"

Fortunately the tunnel had not been driven very far into the mountain before the break into the cavern had called a halt. Elevating the beam of his flash light, Duncan called attention to the texture of the rock overhead.

"You see what I meant," he said. "If we were going to use the tunnel we could blast enough spoil down from the roof to fill the crevices. That's a back number, now, of course. I wonder where that dynamite is that Braithwaite was talking about?"

The words were scarcely uttered before Rathburn grabbed him and snatched him back so quickly that he lost his balance and fell down.

"What the devil——" he was beginning; but Rathburn thrust a restraining arm in front of him and reached for the flash light.

"Don't you see it?" he demanded, playing the beam of light back and forth across the floor of the cavern.

Duncan rubbed his eyes and stared. From wall to wall of the cavity, and about a foot above the floor, a wire, so fine as to be almost invisible, was stretched in such a way that any one entering the cave must stumble over it.

"What is it?" he breathed. "A trap?"

Rathburn cautiously traced the wire to its right-hand end and found it made fast to a rock drill driven in a crevice. At the other end——

What they found at the other end of the tripping wire was a skillfully constructed infernal machine. An electrical blast-firer was firmly fixed in a pile of rock with its plunger up and weighted with a heavy stone. A wooden trigger held the plunger, and to this the fine wire was attached in such a manner that a sudden twitch of the wire would pull the balanced trigger and release the plunger for its firing stroke. Leading from the terminals of the firing mechanism two insulated wires ran across the floor of the cavern to disappear in a second heap of broken rock.

Carefully disconnecting the wires, they took the broken-stone heap apart. Deeply buried in it they found enough dynamite to wreck a skyscraper, with the terminals of the firing wires adjusted to give the spark when the plunger of the electric machine should be released and driven down by its weighting rock.

"The cold-blooded assassin!" Duncan gasped. "There wasn't a blind man's chance that we'd see that wire before one of us kicked into it!"

"No," said Rathburn quietly; "he didn't mean that there should be. In some way he discovered that we'd been through his records and the only way out for him was to push us both off the earth. And the plot was cleverly covered. You remember, he warned us at breakfast, and he has two witnesses, Betty and her father. He told us there was dynamite here."

"No one would ever have known how it happened," said Duncan, shaking as if in

the grip of an ague chill. "We would have been buried in here and it would have been days before the men could dig out what was left of us. And it would have passed for another 'accident,' of course."

"And yet we are in luck," Rathburn put in. "I've been wanting to catch him in something like this. It's the strangle hold I've been waiting for."

"But, see here; you can't prove it on him!"

"You'll see what I'll do—when he comes back. Give me that gunny sack and we'll take care of this dynamite."

With the explosive removed, Rathburn rebuilt the rock cairn so that it looked much as it had before they dug into it. Then he left the firing wires and the firing machine just as they had been found, with the tripping wire still stretched and the trap apparently ready to be sprung.

"Just a precaution," he explained. "We may need all this for evidence. The next thing is to keep everybody out of here until further notice."

"The order has already been given. I've been afraid this roof might fall and the men all have strict orders not to come in here."

"Good," said Rathburn. Then: "I'm only sorry that Braithwaite has got away. I'd like to spring this on him while it's fresh. But I guess it will keep. Bring that sack of dynamite and we'll put it back where it belongs."

Taking the trail through the gorge up which Braithwaite had climbed in the night they reached the isolated powder house on the southern hill and stored the explosive. As they were crossing the footbridge to the camp side of the Tumblestone one of the night-shift men, an Italian, met them and delivered a message to Rathburn.

"Old-a mans—w'iskers, so"—measuring with his hand at his waist line—"hees want-a you to com' queeck."

"All right, Angelo. Where is he?"

"Hees been gon'; ride a 'orse. 'Ees say you know-a w'ere to com'."

Rathburn nodded and the Italian turned back toward the bunk shacks.

"What is it?" Duncan asked.

"You got Angelo's pantomime, didn't you?"

"It fits old Ben Halkett. What does he want of you?"

"That remains to be seen."

"I didn't know you'd met him."

"Just once." Rathburn added nothing to the bare statement of fact.

"You'll go?"

"Certainly. I'll drive over to his mine. While I'm gone you might do a bit of investigating. I'm confident Braithwaite set that dynamite trap last night. Dig around among the night-shift men and find out if anybody saw him."

"Call it done. Now about those changed plans: you are fully committed to the eighty-foot dam?"

They had reached the shed where Rathburn kept his car, and he was checking up his gasoline and water supply.

"Fully committed; yes," he answered briefly.

"In spite of the fact that you are down to the last twenty thousand dollars of the fortune your father left you?"

Rathburn looked up with a return of the old boyish grin.

"In spite of hell and high water, Roddy. Go to it with every pound of energy you can put into it. Get busy with the phone and telegraph and rush in more men and material. The sky is the limit. Don't worry about the money. If any question of credit comes up refer everybody to the Ophir Bank & Trust. But first get Dalton on the phone and tell him I'll see him shortly."

"But see here," said Duncan, as Rathburn pulled himself in under the steering wheel, "you're coming right back, aren't you?"

"That," returned the plunger, with a broad-mouthed smile, "that is on the knees of the gods, Roddy. 'Sufficient unto the day—' you know the rest of it. Get extremely busy and don't let a single spear of grass grow under your feet. Good-by." And the smart roadster shot out of its stall and disappeared in a cloud of dust across the camp plaza.

CHAPTER XV.

THE WAY OF A MAN.

HAVING traversed it by moonlight only a few hours earlier, Rathburn was able to make quick time over the road to Halkett's mine, and guessing that the old man's summons meant a crisis of some sort in the affairs of Anita Carter, he wasted no moment.

One small circumstance added to the emphasis with which he pressed the accelerator pedal. In the main road on the northern

side of the valley, at the brook crossing where he had once before seen and speculated upon a strange tire print in the damp sand, he had seen the track of Braithwaite's roadster. He knew it was a fresh print. Like all snow-fed mountain streams, the brook rose during the first half of the night from the snow melting of the previous day, and fell during the latter half. Hence the print must have been made after the night rise of the creek had subsided.

This could mean only one thing. Since the brook crossing was below the point in the main road at which the climb to Navajo Pass began, Braithwaite had not gone to Ophir to catch the early train; he had driven on down the valley. And in that direction there was nothing but the Carter ranch.

Following the dim southern trail into the foothills Rathburn stopped his car in the small opening where he had parked it the previous evening and got out to take the footpath up the gulch. Halfway to the steep mine trail he found Halkett waiting for him.

"I hope I wasn't asking too much of a stranger," the old man began hurriedly. "There is trouble. Mark Braithwaite is at the Carter ranch. He has come to get Anita and take her over to Ophir to marry her."

Rathburn shook his head. "Not one step with Braithwaite; not if I can prevent it. What does she say?"

"She is troubled. She doesn't know what to do, and now that the pinch has come I don't know how to advise her."

"Where is she now?" Rathburn asked.

"She is up at my cabin. She overheard Braithwaite telling Carter what he had come for and she slipped out and got her broncho and rode over here to beg me to tell her what she ought to do. Forty years ago I might have known what to say to her, but I don't now. She saw she had me out of my depth and wanted to ride up to your camp and talk to you. I told her I'd fetch you, and I nearly killed her pony getting up there and back."

"What can I tell her that you couldn't?" Rathburn asked in some perplexity. "You have been the nearest approach to a real father she's ever had."

The old man wagged his beard. "She is young and so are you. Youth speaks to youth. She will tell you what is troubling her and you'll know what to say to her—as I don't."

"All right; I'll do what I can. She mustn't be allowed to go away with Braithwaite, whatever happens; that's flat. What was her real father's name?"

"Dabney—Maurice Dabney."

"And her mother's?"

"It was Lucille Temple, before she married."

"Will you go up with me?"

"I'd better not. I'll stay here and give you warning if they come after her. They'll be sure to come. Carter knows she spends half her time over here."

Rathburn turned away and climbed the steep slope of the gorge. When he came upon the cabin terrace he saw her sitting on the doorstone. She was in riding clothes but she had taken off the cowboy Stetson and in the forenoon sunshine her hair became a lustrous golden aureole. He went to sit beside her, saying: "I've come."

"Has Uncle Ben told you?" she asked.

"He has told me all he could—all he knows."

"I want to know what I ought to do."

"I can tell you better what you must not do."

"I'm listening," she said.

"Tell me one thing first; do you love this man?"

"I don't know. Once I thought I did. In a way, he was kinder to me than dad. But—I guess—it wasn't—marrying love. And now I—I'm afraid of him."

Rathburn shook his head. "There is never any 'guessing' about marrying love, Anita—the real kind. You either have it or you haven't it."

"Have you ever had it?—the real kind?" she inquired, looking up.

"Yes; once," he admitted.

"How does it make you feel?"

"I can tell you how it made me feel—that once. I wanted to take the girl in my arms and never let her go—to carry her off with me and keep her for so long as we both should live."

"Oh!" she breathed, with a little gasp. "Then I do know. I felt that way one time, just for a few minutes. I thought it must be wrong and I tried—I have tried awfully hard—to stop thinking about it."

Rathburn frowned. "Don't tell me it was for this man we're talking about."

"Oh, no; it was somebody else."

"Then that 'somebody' is the man you ought to marry, and none other."

"But I can't!" she protested quickly. "He—he doesn't want me."

Rathburn stole a glance aside at the face for which there was no adequate word descriptive and wondered what manner of man it was who didn't want her. But there was no time to waste in idle speculation. Even now Braithwaite and Carter might be on their way to Halkett's mine.

"You mustn't go with Braithwaite. He isn't fit to look at you."

"But what else can I do? Dad swears and says I'm a little fool; that it's my big chance and I've got to take it."

Rathburn's jaw set itself and his hands involuntarily made themselves into fists. There are moments in the life of any red-blooded man when a return to Stone Age methods of righting wrongs would be welcome.

"You haven't any friends to go to—apart from Uncle Ben here?"

"No; I don't know anybody. I'm just a little savage. That is what Miss Norton calls me."

"Did Braithwaite tell you that?" he asked; and she nodded.

He got up, walked to the edge of the small plateau, and stood looking out across the valley. Somewhere in the mountain-bounded area two men were doubtless searching for this girl. He turned and strode back to the cabin and the girl.

"There is only one way out, that I can see," he began; "and that is going to ask for a lot of—er—well, confidence in a man you hardly know. You must give somebody the right to care for you and protect you. Nobody has the right, now; not even Uncle Ben Halkett."

"Dad would kill Uncle Ben," she averred calmly.

"I don't doubt it," he agreed. "Besides, Uncle Ben is no fighting person, and a fighting friend is what you need. I'm wondering how far you'd trust me?"

The frank eyes met his with as little of doubt, of embarrassment, as if they had been the eyes of a clean-minded boy.

"I don't know what you mean, but I'll do anything you tell me to."

"All right. We'll do the only thing possible; the only thing that will give me the right to fight your battles. Come!"

He held out his hand and she took it and stood up, a slender, boyish figure in her faded khaki riding clothes and leggings. Together they went to the head of the trail, and from the unobstructed height Rathburn caught a faint, far-away echo of a familiar sound; the drumming of an auto engine with its cut-out open. Shading his eyes from the sun he searched the maplike prospect spread below. To the left and across the valley were the buildings of the Carter ranch, and a faintly yellow line running west from them marked the course of the main valley road.

Under the shading hand he traced the windings of the yellow streak with the ranch buildings for a starting point. In the clear mountain air even the cattle grazing on the hills were visible, and a mile or more from the ranch he found what he was looking for; a moving dot creeping westward over the yellow road. Though its movement seemed slow he knew that that was due to the distance. The dot was Braithwaite's car, and it was not creeping.

"Do you see it?" he asked.

"Yes. He is driving up to the fork of the road. There is only one place this far down the valley where an auto can ford the river."

"It is our signal to vanish," he said. "Let's go."

Hand in hand they ran down the steep trail to the gulch mouth where the green roadster was parked. Halkett came stumbling to meet them.

"They're coming!" he panted. "You can hear the auto."

"We know," Rathburn acquiesced. Then: "Can I get out of here with the car without going back over the road?"

"If you drive carefully you can. Go around that hill and you'll come back into the road just this side of the ford."

"Good! Hide the pony and then go up to your mine. When they come, play innocent and delay them as long as you can. That's all we'll ask."

"Have you—have you found a way out?" asked the old man tremulously.

"We have," Rathburn returned shortly, and with that he put his companion into the car, pressed the starter button, and with the big motor purring softly the green roadster rolled away around the base of the small mountain that Halkett had called a hill.

The circuit was made without incident

and when his sense of direction told him that he must be reapproaching the road Rathburn pulled up behind a little grove of stunted pines, throttling the motor to its softest humming. He had scarcely done so before the roar of a wide-open motor shuddered in the air and Braithwaite's car came by, with its owner at the wheel and in the seat beside him the dark-faced cattleman. The promoter was driving fast and neither man looked aside as the car bounded past.

"Ought I to be sorry for dad?" the girl whispered.

"Not for a single minute!" Rathburn gritted as he cut the roadster out of its covert behind the pines and sent it away to and through the near-by ford.

With the river behind them he spoke of a small matter of moment.

"Have you—er—some other clothes besides those you have on?" he asked.

"Oh, yes; but they are all at the ranch."

"Is there anybody there who would try to prevent your getting them?"

"Nobody, now that dad is away. There is only old Aunt Mandy, the negro cook. The men are all out on the round-up."

They were coming to the main road and Rathburn swung the roadster and headed it for the ranch. "We'll have time," he said. "We'll drive to the house so you can get your clothes."

The detouring miles were covered quickly and he drove boldly up to the ranch house. The place seemed deserted save for a pair of wolfish dogs that came bounding around the house, growling open mouthed. But the girl quieted them.

"Be as quick as you can," Rathburn directed. "Don't stop to pack; just make up a bundle. We may have all the time there is—and we may not."

When she was gone he turned the car, wondering a little that the ranch headquarters should be left entirely deserted. The wonder had hardly shaped itself before a man carrying a branding iron came up from the corrals; a tall man in overalls, his battered hat shading a face made sinister by a disfiguring scar.

"Howdy, stranger?" he drawled, as he came up. "Lookin' for the boss?"

Rathburn hastily took the questioner's measure; scarred fac , sinewy arms, general air of truculence.

"No," he returned evenly. "I'm waiting for Miss Anita."

"The hell you are!" snapped the man. "Who said you might?"

"I hadn't thought to ask anybody's permission but Miss Anita's."

"Didn't, hey? Where's the gal now?"

Rathburn found a cigarette and lighted it methodically, but with an eye fixed upon the hand dangling the branding iron.

"That, my friend, is something that needn't worry you a particle," he replied coolly.

In a flash the branding iron was up swinging as a club and at the same instant Rathburn heard behind him the light footsteps of the girl coming out of the house. The threatening man spoke softly.

"So that's it, is it? You get in that car and light out, afore I muss you all up with what you ain't got in your head, you——" The rest of it was a blasting eruption of profanity.

Rathburn waited until the clubbed branding iron was descending. Then, in a swift, ducking dive, he got a neat football tackle, low down, and heaved the swearer in an arching curve over his head. On turf or soft ground the fall might not have proved a knock-out. But the ground in front of the ranch house was bare and hard packed and there was only the man's battered hat to cushion the impact. When Rathburn spun around to continue what he had begun his antagonist had left the field, so far as consciousness was concerned.

"Who is he?" the victor asked, taking the slender bundle of clothing from the girl and helping her into the car.

"Sam Kelly—dad's foreman. Have you k-killed him?"

"Oh, no; nothing like that," grinned the plunger, racing the roadster down the hill and out to the road. "He'll be all right again in a few minutes. Is there a car at the ranch that he can chase us with?"

"Nothing but an old worn-out runabout."

"That's good. Now if we can beat that other car back to the forks of the road—— Say, I hate to have you holding that bundle, but I don't want to stop just now to put it in the deck locker."

"Never mind me," she said; and that was all she did say until after the critical road fork had been safely passed and the green roadster was storming up the grades of the mountain climb toward the high pass. But here, on one of the longest tangents, she broke the drumming silence to say:

"You haven't told me yet what you are going to do with me."

Rathburn laughed joyously. "Wait and you will see. Ophir is our next stop." Then: "You are still trusting me?"

"Of course I am," she said in childlike acquiescence; and from that on the drumming silence held its own.

CHAPTER XVI.

"TILL DEATH DO US PART."

AS Rathburn had promised, the first stop of the flying car was at the door of the Hotel Chinquito in Ophir. Taking his companion to the waiting room, he went to the lobby desk where, to his great comfort, he found a clerk whom he knew.

"Dibrell, I want a room for a lady. Let me have one of the best—one with a bath and a dressing table, and so on; you know what I mean."

"Sure!" was the reply. "Two-sixteen. Where is the lady?"

"She is in the waiting room. Give me the key and I'll take her up."

Three minutes later Rathburn was opening the door of No. 216 for his charge.

"There you are, right side up with care," he said cheerfully, depositing her bundle on the bed. "I think you'll find everything you need; if you don't, just call the office on the phone and tell 'em about it. Will you change your clothes and be ready to go with me in, say, half an hour? I'll be waiting for you in the mezzanine lounge, one floor down."

The frank, slate-blue eyes met his as bravely as ever, but now there was bewilderment in them.

"Can't you tell me now what it all means?" she queried.

"Futures," he laughed. "It is going to mean all you need; care, protection, the right to live your own life. Suppose we leave it at that until I come back. That will be within half an hour, at the very farthest."

On the ground floor he had a few more words with the friendly clerk and then went out to park his car in the nearest garage. That done, he walked briskly up the street to the courthouse where he applied for a marriage license. The clerk gave him a blank to fill out, grinning as he did so.

"What's the joke?" Rathburn asked.

"Just thinking that you folks over in the Quesada seem to be pairing off right swiftly these days."

"Yes?" said the plunger. "Who else?"

"Braithwaite got me out of bed last night to sell him a license. He had Miss Norton in the car with him. I take it they were married a little later. I saw a light in the reverend's study up at the church as I was going home."

For a moment the red mist floating before Rathburn's eyes blurred things so that he could not see to write. So this was what the joy ride of the previous night had meant! Only stage villains grind their teeth nowadays, but Rathburn experienced all the emotions that go with that stock early-Victorian gesture. Though he had good reason to suspect Braithwaite's purpose in seeking to carry Anita off there had been no direct evidence until now. And Betty had been a consenting partner in the vileness! Rathburn steeled his heart. He had been sorry for Betty, with a broad-minded inclination to condone and spare. But now she must take what was coming to her.

The license procured, he went on up the street to a small church and knocked at the door of the built-on study. The man who admitted him was a broad-shouldered young athlete with wide-set eyes and a pleasant smile, and his handclasp was the grip of a man.

"Come in and sit down, Mr. Rathburn—you see, I know you, even if you don't know me. What can I do for you?"

"May I smoke?" asked the plunger, taking out pipe and tobacco. "I've been having a pretty strenuous day of it, what with one thing and another, and——"

"Surely," was the instant permission. "Light up and I'll join you."

With the tobacco burning, Rathburn told his story tersely, or so much of it as concerned the girl and himself. "I'm telling you all this merely to be fair and aboveboard," he added at the end of it. "I know your church puts some restrictions on marriage and I want you to know the facts."

The athletic young minister pulled reflectively at his pipe for a bit.

"Of course there is no obstacle, legal or other, in what you've told me," he said at length. "Eighteen is the legal age for women in this State, and even if Carter is her legal guardian, which seems unlikely, she is free to marry without his consent.

But—well, you haven't asked me for advice and I shan't thrust it upon you."

"I wish you would," said Rathburn heartily. "This thing is all new to me; it hadn't entered my head three hours ago."

"Well, there's this about it: marriage is a pretty solemn thing. While it isn't as often for life in our America as it ought to be, it is every decent man's duty to try to make it so. You admit you're going to marry this young woman merely to acquire the right to care for and protect her; that there isn't any love on either side, and——"

"No," Rathburn objected. "I didn't say that, exactly. I want the right, to be sure; I've got to have it. And if she will let me exercise it as her husband in fact as well as in name, I shall be happy. What I tried to say is that she is not awake to the meaning of love, she doesn't know what marriage or marrying love means."

"Very well; we won't split hairs, ecclesiastical or ethical, over it. When will you come?"

"Just as soon as I can go to the hotel and bring her here. Will you provide a few witnesses?"

"Yes, I'll be ready for you." Then, as if the indignant underthought could no longer be suppressed: "What an unspeakable pair of villains those two men must be! And to think that I married Braithwaite last night to a young woman who seemed to be all that was good and pure and high minded!"

"Don't reproach yourself too severely," said Rathburn dryly. "The young woman knows her world very thoroughly. And as to Carter; perhaps we'd better give him the benefit of such doubt as there may be." And with that he took his leave.

In the mezzanine lounge at the hotel he found a transformed and most alluring vision awaiting him. He was a woman's man, at least in the sense that the feminine, even in clothes, appealed to him. Something of this sort he attempted to say when he went to sit beside her, and, naturally, said it badly—in deference to the tremendous proposal he was about to make.

"I'm glad you like my dress, because I made it myself. I've made my clothes almost ever since I can remember—with old Aunt Mandy's help," she said; and to follow this bit of artless boasting: "Will you tell me now what you are going to do with me?"

"It is not what I am going to do with you, Anita; it is what you are going to do with yourself. Are you willing to stand up with me before a minister and let him say a few words over us?"

"Marry us, you mean?"

"Yes."

"But I—I thought you—I thought you were going——"

"Never mind what you thought. It was all a mistake. But for you—you *must* give me the right to stand by you, dear. I can't take it; you must give it."

She drew a long breath. "But—but I thought to marry was—was something different!"

"It is what any two people agree to make it. I know you haven't any 'marrying love' for me, but it is the only way out of a life which has become unbearable for you and which will be made still worse if you don't give me the right to say that it shan't. I'll be good to you, and you shall be quite free, you know; as free as the air you breathe. Can't you trust me?"

"Trust you? It isn't that; it's—it's because I'm a 'little savage,' just as Miss Norton said I was. I didn't know how to use half the things I found in that room upstairs. I don't know anything except what Uncle Ben has taught me out of his old books. And you——"

"I am just a man, like other men," he hastened to say. "Those things you speak of don't make a pin's weight of difference to me—any more than the fact that I've lost nearly all the money my father left me does to you. You don't care about the money, do you?"

She laughed. "I don't know why I should. I've never had as much as ten dollars of my own at any one time in all my life."

"Well, apart from that—you don't actually dislike me, do you?"

"Of course I don't! Why, I lo—I *like* you!"

Rathburn groaned in spirit. As he heard her declaration it sounded much like that of an innocent, trusting child, and he told himself that it made his task all the harder. It seemed shameful to use the argument compulsory; to point out the peril in which she stood if she were to stand alone. But there seemed to be no alternative.

"You are safe here, Anita, only for the moment. Those two men have doubtless gone back to the ranch long before this and

the foreman has told them you have gone off with me. We are living on borrowed time. This marriage need have no more binding effect on you than you choose to give it. I'll be nothing more to you than just your good friend—your big brother, if you want to put it on that ground; but it will put into my hands the weapon I must have if I am to defend you. Think fast, dear girl: any minute those two men may show up, and then nobody knows what may happen."

Still she hesitated. "You're sure you won't be sorry? I should think you'd want a—a real wife when you marry."

"I have no present want bigger than the desire to stand by you."

"But afterward—if you should see some girl you'd like better?"

His laugh was rather brittle. "You mean if you should see some man who could wake up that part of you that is now asleep?—in that case the knots shall be all untied; I'll see to it that they are."

She looked away from him.

"If you'll promise me that when you find the other girl, you'll——"

"I'll promise anything you ask," he broke in impatiently.

"W-e-ll, as you've said, it's only a few words that a minister will say."

In something more nearly approaching a panic than he would have cared to admit he hurried her to the elevator, and was in a fury of impatience during the few seconds of waiting for the car to come up. Crossing the lobby, he reconnoitered the street through the windows. There was no enemy in sight, but he did not breathe freely until they were halfway up the hill to the church. Just before they got there she spoke for the first time since they had left the hotel.

"I don't know anything about weddings, except what I've read in Uncle Ben's books. Can you—can you tell me what I'll have to say, or do?"

"It is perfectly simple," he assured her. "You'll just repeat a few things after the minister. And it will be over in just a few minutes."

She was a little breathless when they reached the high-perched church and he put his arm around her to help her up the steps. As once before, the impulse to crush her soft body to him and give way to an up-bubbling of emotion thrilled him, shook him. But he was man enough to resist.

The light came dimly through the stained-glass windows as they entered, but save for a few witnesses scattered in the pews the church was empty.

"Do I take my hat off?" she whispered as they stepped inside.

He nodded; and when she had removed the simple toque that made her look even younger than she was he put it with his own hat in an empty seat. Then he whispered in his turn:

"I forgot to get a ring: see if this will do," and he gave her his signet ring.

"It's lots too big," she said as she tried it on.

"Never mind; we'll make it do for the present. Are you ready?"

She put her hand on his arm and they walked up the aisle to the rail where the athletic young missionary, looking more athletic than ever in his vestments, stood waiting. As Rathburn had predicted, the short ceremony was soon over; the adjuration, the solemn troth plighting, the joining of hands, the still more solemn pronunciation: "Forasmuch as Prentice and Anita have consented together in holy wedlock . . . I pronounce that they are man and wife . . ."

Knowing the conditions precedent the young minister did not kiss the bride, but neither did Rathburn. There was a momentary adjournment to the study for the signing of the register, and after he had written his own name Rathburn put the pen into the hand of the bride.

"Write your name on this line," he said, indicating the place and hiding, with the blotter, the names—Mark Braithwaite and Elizabeth Norton—just above his own.

"My married name?" she asked.

"No; your maiden name—Anita Dabney."

She looked up in blank surprise. "Anita Carter, you mean, don't you?"

"No; I mean just what I say: Anita Dabney. I'll explain later."

Quite obediently she wrote the new name, halting a bit over the spelling until Rathburn helped her. Afterward there were a few words from the minister, then they went out through the church, pausing a moment at the door while the bride put her hat on.

"You found it very simple, didn't you?" Rathburn asked as they walked down the street toward the hotel.

"So simple that I can't realize that any-

thing is different. But why did you make me sign my name wrong?"

"I promised you I would explain, and I will—but not now. It is twelve o'clock and I'm savagely hungry. Aren't you?"

"I can eat if you'll show me how to behave; I've never eaten in a hotel."

Rathburn caught his breath at the sheer innocence of it all. But the childlike request and admission submerged him in a rush of tenderness.

"God bless your sweet soul!" he bubbled; "you don't have to think about how you should behave! Just be your own sweet self." Then: "Good Lord—I ought to be the happiest man in America!—but I'm not."

"Why aren't you happy?"

"I'll tell you that, too, some time." Then he added, as if it were an unwelcome afterthought: "Maybe."

The hotel luncheon was hardly a wedding breakfast, but through it Rathburn made talk desperately, drawing her out about her schooling uuder Uncle Ben, and the books she had read; anything and everything to take her mind away from the present and recent happenings. When the meal was finished he sent her up to her room and slipped out and bought a suit case for her, sending it up with a note asking her to pack and be ready when he should return with his car. In these dodgings back and forth he kept a sharp eye out for Braithwaite and Carter, and out of the failure to see either a hope grew.

In view of the changed plans for the dam an interview with his banker was a pressing necessity, but there was another matter of even greater importance demanding his presence in the Quesada—a matter which the events of the forenoon had hindered, in a way, and in another way had possibly helped. If Braithwaite were still in the valley, as there was now reason to believe——

Rathburn speeded up his preparations for leaving. With the car at the hotel curb he ran up to No. 216 and tapped at the door. "If you are quite ready?" he called; and she came out at once carrying the new suit case—which he promptly took away from her.

"We are going back to the valley?" she asked after he had stowed the single piece of luggage in the deck locker.

"As swiftly as this old boat will take us there. And while we're about it, let me say that I haven't much to offer you at the camp; nothing but my trumpery shack, for the present. Can you stand to rough it for a little while?"

"I can stand anything you want me to."

"Spoken like an obedient little wife," he laughed; "only you mustn't begin that way with me—or with any man. It's dangerous."

The flight over the mountain was made at such a pace that there was little opportunity for talk, and Rathburn was glad to discover that among her other charms the girl at his side had the priceless gift of keeping silence when silence was golden. His brain was busy with a dozen things of immediate importance; things contingent upon the hope of finding Braithwaite still in the Quesada; and under such conditions his driving, even over the hazardous road, was more or less mechanical.

At the speed he maintained it was still only a little after the middle of the afternoon when the green roadster, dust covered, rolled into the camp plaza to stop in front of Rathburn's shack. He saw Duncan coming down the trail from the dam, and made haste to get Anita out of the car and into the bedroom at the back; to say, "It's all yours—please make yourself at home," and to get out again before Duncan came up.

"Well!" said the engineer; "it's high time you were showing up. There's the devil to pay and no pitch hot. Carter's daughter has disappeared and he seems to think you're the guilty man. He was here a while back, swearing he'd have your scalp. Where the dickens have you been all this time?"

"Oh, just chasing around the country in the car. You say Carter is out gunning for me? What about Braithwaite?"

"He's gone, of course; he's in Brewster by this time, I suppose."

"How did Carter come? Horseback?"

"No, afoot; and I wondered at that."

"He didn't come very far afoot, Roddy. Braithwaite drove him in his car—and kept the car and himself out of sight while Carter came into camp."

"Braithwaite, you say? Then he didn't go to Brewster?"

"I guess not; I hope not. What did you find out about the trap?"

"All we need to know, I imagine. Braithwaite was up at the south end of the dam last night about midnight. Two of the men saw him go into the tunnel. He was carry-

ing something in a sack—they didn't know what."

"Good! I can bluff him with that. And I think I've fixed it so he won't leave the valley right away—taken away his motive for leaving. Also, I think he'll be back here, to-night. The stars in their courses fight for us, Rod. Will you lend me your gun?"

"I'll lend you one of them with all the pleasure imaginable, but only one because I may need the other for myself. After that round-up with Carter a while ago I made up my mind I'd beat you if you continued to chase around barehanded. There was blood in that man's eye—and it's a bad eye, at that. He seemed to think you had the girl hid out around here somewhere and I had to get right peevish with him before I could make him believe she wasn't here, and that you weren't—hadn't been since morning. Let's go in out of the sun."

"No," said Rathburn shortly. "I've got a few things to tell you first."

Duncan eyed him suspiciously.

"You mean that you've got somebody in there that you don't want me to see? I saw you from the trail when you drove up. If I'm not mistaken there were two of you in the roadster."

"There were. My wife was with me. She's inside, now."

"Your wife! Great Scott! if that isn't hell with the bells on! You did run away with the girl, then?—and marry her?"

"Both," was the laconic answer. "But that isn't all of it. You remember that Braithwaite went joy riding with Betty last night?"

"Sure."

"Well, they drove to Ophir and were married."

"But—oh, good Lord! it's too vile even to swear about!"

"It is. I ought to kill Braithwaite; maybe I shall kill him. That's what Halkett wanted me for this morning. Braithwaite had gone to the Carter ranch to take Anita away with him. He said he was going to marry her. She slipped away and rode over to Halkett's mine to ask him what she ought to do."

"And you ran away with her to Ophir and married her yourself?"

"You've said it. I meant to have the right to fight for her and I've got it. She's just a sweet, innocent child. And Carter isn't her father; he's her real father's murderer, according to Halkett's story. You'd have done the same in my place, Roddy."

"Like hell I would!" grumbled the profane one. Then: "But good heavens, man! Having married her, you shouldn't have brought her here! It's a safe bet that Carter has some of his cowboys scouting us, and if they saw you come in there'll be merry hell to pay to-night. They'll come up here and mob us!"

Rathburn's smile was not the smile of an easy-going idler living off the income of a fat inheritance. It was much too grim for that.

"You said once that I was getting soft, Roddy: I'm not soft any more. They may come, all of them, if they'll only bring Braithwaite along. And he'll come, too, because I've brought the bait. Now you get a bunch of the men and go knock that empty shack over there into shape for an office and sleeping room, and move your engineering traps out of here. This shop belongs to Mrs. Rathburn, now, and she needn't have us messing around. Go to it and see how quickly you can make the shift."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE GOOD BROTHER.

WHILE Duncan was obeying the order to vacate the office Rathburn rejoined his newly made bride in the little cubbyhole sleeping room at the back.

"You can see now why I apologized for this dump beforehand," he said. "If you can make it answer for a little while—I'll have one of the workmen's wives come in and clean up for you."

She was sitting on the iron bed, looking at the medley of boots, clothes, pipes and tobacco, the careless disarray of a camping man's night shelter.

"This is your room, isn't it?" she asked.

"It was mine, but it's yours now," he returned, seating himself in the one chair the cubbyhole boasted. "The whole shack will be yours as soon as we get it cleared out."

"But that isn't right! You mustn't turn everything upside down just for me!"

"I'm only sorry there isn't more of it to turn upside down," he deprecated. "But this is only temporary. The bungalow across the plaza is occupied just now, but as soon as it is available you shall have that."

"You are too good to me," she said, and now the slate-blue eyes were suspiciously bright. "And I can't pay you back; I don't know how."

He forced a laugh. "Haven't you married me? What more could anybody do? But let's talk about something else. Has it ever occurred to you that Houston Carter might not be your real father, Anita?"

Her eyes grew wide. "Not my father? What makes you think he isn't?" Astonishment was written on her face.

"I don't think; I know. Uncle Ben knows and he told me. Your real father was Maurice Dabney, and he was—er—he died before you were old enough to remember him. You don't remember, do you?"

She closed her eyes and there were tears trembling in the long lashes.

"It's like a dream—sometimes it seems as if I remember a pretty lady who cried. That's all."

"Your mother," he said gently. "She cried because your father had been—because your father was dead. Uncle Ben knew your parents and loved them. That is why he came to the Quesada—to be near you and look after you."

"Did dad—I mean Dad Carter—adopt me?"

"Um—we'll call it that," said Rathburn. "Now you know why I made you sign your right name in the register and why I said you didn't owe Houston Carter anything."

"But I do owe him something. He has been good to me; as good as he knew how to be, I think. He is just a—a rough man; and it's a rough life at the ranch. I know, because Uncle Ben taught me. Dad said I ought to marry and get out of it; that the ranch wasn't a fit place for me. And he said Mark Braithwaite was going to be rich and could take good care of his wife."

"Wasn't there something else, too?"

"Y-yes. He said Mark could push him and the cattle out of the Quesada when the dam was finished; but that if I'd marry him it would be all right."

"I see," Rathburn nodded. "But that's all a back number. You're safely married, and while everybody will tell you that you have married a poor man, I guess we shall manage to find enough to eat and wear and a place to sleep. Now if you'd like to lie down and rest? I've got to be frightfully busy for a while. You are not to worry about anything. If your—er—adopted father comes after you I'll take care of him—and of Braithwaite as well."

As he got up to go the pretty eyes filled again and she held out her arms to him.

"You are such a good—brother. That's what you said you'd be, isn't it?" she murmured, and it was too much. He took her in his arms very gently and kissed her—on the forehead because he didn't dare to kiss her lips.

"I am anything you like to call me, dear girl—just anything. Now take a nap if you can. One of the women will bring your supper when it's time."

"And you'll come back?"

"Maybe. But if I don't I'll not be far away. You can lock your door and nobody will bother you. You must remember; you are the boss' wife now, and every man in camp would fight for you if necessary. Good-by."

When he rejoined Duncan he found that the engineer had obeyed orders promptly and literally. The new engineering office had been set up in the near-by empty shack, the electricians were shifting the telephone and at the back of the single room Duncan had set up a cot bed, but only one.

"Good work," Rathburn approved. "But where am *I* going to sleep?"

"Um," said Duncan, with his dourest Scotch look; "you're moving out, too?"

"Naturally." Then: "Let's stand this thing upon its rightful feet, Rod. I'm a married man but I have no wife. Can you grasp that?"

"No, I'm damned if I can."

"Well, it's a sober fact. I'm married only in name. Get that?"

"Um," said Duncan again. "I told you it was hell with the bells on. What's to be the end of it?"

"God knows. All I know is that I've done the only thing there was to do. When the fireworks are over—but that's a future. All I can say is that she may go footloose and free, afterward, if that is what she wants to do. And I think it will be what she will want, if the right man ever shows up."

"You are not the right man, then?"

"Lord, no! Just now as I was leaving her, she called me her 'good brother.' Let's cut it out and get down to business. Have you begun to get things in shape to push the new plan?"

"I sat at the wire for two solid hours this forenoon. Denver will send us more

men as fast as they can be collected and shipped in, and I have the promise of quick deliveries on the added material needed. I think I've run you in debt about another twenty thousand since this morning. And where the money is coming from I don't know; and I don't believe you do."

"Don't worry," said Rathburn, with his cheerful laugh. "How about Dalton? Did you get in touch with him?"

"Yes; I told him you'd be over in a day or so to arrange money matters and asked him to back us with references if the material people asked for them. You didn't see him while you were in Ophir, did you?"

"Not any; I was much too busy with other things—and in too much of a hurry to get back here before Braithwaite could make his get-away."

"You think Braithwaite is still in the valley?"

"I'll bet on it. We'll see him again—as soon as he gets news of my late arrival."

"H'm! yours and—er—Mrs. Rathburn's?"

"Exactly. He'll come and so will Carter. And that reminds me. Have you a couple of men who can be trusted with guns?"

"Why, yes; Mike Moriarty and Jack Hagan. They'd both fight for you."

"All right; find 'em and put 'em on guard at the other shack. Then we can ramble up to the dam and have a look around while it is still daylight. Tell Moriarty and Hagan to shoot first and ask questions afterward if anybody tries to mess or meddle."

With the Irish guards posted, one on the front step and the other at the back door of the somewhile office shack, Rathburn and Duncan went up to the dam. There Duncan explained at some length how the structure could be built to the eighty-foot height with the fewest changes; showed how the changes were planned and how the raising of the dam would make a canal tunnel needless.

"And how about the hollow tooth?"

"That will have to be plugged, of course; but since you say money doesn't cut any figure——"

"I didn't say any such foolish thing," Rathburn retorted. "But we'll skip that and plug the hole when we're ready. You haven't disturbed anything in there yet, have you?"

"I've done nothing but to put up a sign warning the men to keep out."

What with the time spent in clambering about over the stagings and discussing the changed plan the night-shift gangs were beginning to straggle up to take their places when the two young men turned their faces campward again. As they entered the plaza the masthead electrics came on and by their light Rathburn saw Betty and her father sitting on the porch of the guest bungalow, evidently waiting for Lee Sing, the Chinese cook, to call them in to supper. How much or how little Braithwaite's new wife knew of the happenings of the day he had no means of knowing; but he shrewdly suspected that she had discovered the presence of Anita in the camp, at least.

That his suspicion was warranted was proved when Betty ran down the bungalow steps and came across the plaza. Duncan saw her coming and very promptly faded out of the picture.

"Hello, Prenty," she said as she came up. Then, vindictively: "You had to go out and pick up a bit of consolation, didn't you? But you might have been decent enough not to insult me by bringing her here. Luckily, I don't have to stay and be shamed. Will you order the camp car for father and me after supper? Then you can have things all your own way."

"You may have the car, and welcome," he said, constraining himself to say it calmly. Then he added: "I'm glad you have tired of the Quesada. I was going to ask you and your father to let me have the bungalow, anyway. As to the other thing: the 'bit of consolation' you speak of happens to be my wife. We were married in Ophir to-day and we wrote our names in the church register next under yours and Mark Braithwaite's."

He expected an outburst, knowing from past experience that she could rave as well as cajole. But with a single explosive "Damn!" she turned and left him.

Dismissing Hagan, Rathburn told Moriarty to go to his cabin and ask Mrs. Moriarty if she wouldn't cook a bit of supper for the boss' wife and bring it to the shack.

"The woife, is ut?" grinned the Irishman. "Now, then, we'd be wondherin', Tim Hagan and me, fwhat it was we was guardin' wid guns. 'Tis much joy I'm wishin' ye. But who'd be hurtin' yer woife, Misther Rathburn, that ye'd set two men to kapin' watch over the shack?"

"I hope nobody would. But you can't

always tell. Make it honey hearted to Mrs. Moriarty, Mike. I'll wait here until she comes with the supper."

In due time the foreman's wife made her appearance with a towel-covered tray and Rathburn let her in. Then he went to the mess shanty for his own meal, joining Duncan when the engineer was half through.

"No signs of trouble yet?" Duncan queried.

"Of a cowboy raid? No. It is too early. If there is going to be anything of that sort it won't come until after the camp is quiet for the night."

"But it will come then?"

"I have a sort of hunch that it won't. Braithwaite may try to bring things to a head that way; most likely he will if he can persuade Carter to back him. But it sticks in my mind that Carter won't do it."

"I don't know about that. They tell some pretty fearsome stories about the way he started his own private cemetery over in the Timanyoni when the wheat raisers began to crowd him. He was sure one dangerous man when he was over here to-day looking for you. And if Braithwaite comes it won't hurt to be a bit cautious in that quarter, too. I've an idea he'll fight when he's cornered. I'd be ready for him if I were you."

"I'll take care of Braithwaite. I believe I shall enjoy breaking a few bones in him for what he has done—and more particularly for what he meant to do."

Having finished his supper, Duncan left the mess shanty to put on a couple of extra night watchmen, grumbling a bit as he went about it over Rathburn's impulsive action in introducing another explosive factor into the affairs of the now well-nigh moribund Q. L. & I. project. Though he had gone through the day doggedly obeying orders and whipping things into line for the changed plan, it was wholly without confidence in Rathburn's ability to finance the enormously increased load, and he saw nothing but failure ahead. And, in the very midst of things, the plunger had had to go off at a tangent sentimental and chivalrous and drag in more trouble.

But the trouble dragger, calmly finishing his evening meal in the now deserted mess shanty, exhibited no signs of depression or discouragement. On the contrary, the light in his eyes was that of battle rather than of disheartenment. Critical as the hour was he waited for the camp cook to bring him another cup of black coffee, sipping it leisurely, when it came, between puffs of an after-supper cigar. "Poor old Rod!" he mused, with the boyish smile once more in place. "He's like the Marthas—careful and troubled about many things. But loyal? I'll say he is!" A pause, and then: "I wonder which one of them will show up first? Or if they'll come together? That's on the knees of the gods, too; but on the principle of taking the worst first I'm hoping Braithwaite will come alone. I believe I can settle with the man-killing Carter pretty easily, if he doesn't come shooting."

At the leisurely last he went out to stroll across to the lately evacuated office shack, to sit on the doorstep and fill his pipe. There was a light in the back room and he wondered what Anita was doing and how she was fitting herself into her changed conditions. Again the wave of tenderness submerged him when he realized how innocently she had put herself into his hands, and what a world of new responsibilities he had shouldered in becoming the arbiter of her life and future.

He had been sitting on the doorstep but a few minutes when the company service auto was driven into the plaza to be pulled up at the steps of the bungalow opposite. Next he saw Betty and her father come out and get into the car, followed by Lee Sing bearing luggage. And when the luggage was stowed the car rolled away out of the circle illuminated by the masthead electrics, disappearing in the direction of the road leading to the high pass and Ophir. "Hail and farewell, Betty, dear!" muttered the doorstep watcher under his breath. "You shall have the sham goldfish you've caught—or what there is left of him after I'm through with him." Then he added with a sigh: "It's going to be a pretty bitter lesson, but it won't teach you anything. Women of your sort never learn, I'm afraid."

After the coming and going of the auto the camp area took on its nighttime air of desertion. One by one the lights went out in the different bunk shacks and the huts of the family men, and to break the silence there were only the distance-diminished noises of the activities in the cañon. While Rathburn was filling his second pipe Duncan came to report.

"I've put on three more watchmen, posting them where they can see and give notice if there's a raid coming," he said.

Then: "I saw the company auto going out a little while ago. Did you send it?"

"I put it at the disposal of Norton and his daughter. They have deserted the sinking ship."

"At your invitation?"

"Well, yes; it amounted to that. I told Betty I wanted the bungalow."

"Humph! Going to set up housekeeping, are you?"

The plunger looked up with a grin that was not altogether pleasant. "Don't rub me the wrong way too hard, Rod. I'm accountable to no man to-night."

"Humph!" said the engineer again. "Any orders?"

"Nothing special, only you might stick around and see what happens. If Braithwaite comes alone, leave him to me and stand by here and see to it that nobody disturbs my—er—my little sister."

"All right; here is that gun I promised to let you have."

Rathburn stood up and buckled the holster belt under his coat.

"Maybe I'll need it and maybe I won't," he said. "But thanks all the same. It's a kindly thought."

Duncan grunted and disappeared, coming back a moment later to say: "That light in the back room; hadn't you better tell the gir—I mean your wife, to turn it out?"

"Perhaps it would be best," said Rathburn; and he went in to tap at the door of privacy.

"Yes?" said a voice within.

"It's your—brother," he said. "May I come in?"

"Yes; the door isn't locked."

Anita had found one of his few books and had switched the cord light around so that she could see to read.

"I came to ask you if you wouldn't turn the light off."

"Why, yes, if you want me to," and a round white arm reached up to feel for the snap switch.

"Night, night, little girl," he said. "Pleasant dreams!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

SETTLING THE SCORE.

AS he closed the door behind him Rathburn heard a low humming sound coming to mingle with the distant rattle of machinery at the dam and in a minute or so a single-seated auto rolled into the plaza and was brought to a stand in front of the commissary. Waiting only long enough to assure himself that the big-bodied man climbing out of the machine was alone, Rathburn crossed over to the auto.

"Hello!" growled the promoter. "I saw the house all dark and thought maybe I'd have to break in. Didn't expect to see me back so soon, did you?"

"Why, yes," was the measured reply. "To tell the truth, I did."

"Well, I suppose you know what I've come for?"

"Not being a mind reader, I don't know."

"Of course you do! What have you done with Carter's girl?"

"Nothing that I'm not willing to answer to Carter for."

"You took her away from the ranch this forenoon in your car and you brought her to the camp this afternoon. By gad, I thought better of you than that, Rathburn! What have you done with her?"

Rathburn laughed. "A slight mistake but a natural one," he said. "I did take the young woman over to Ophir, to be sure. But the lady I brought back with me was my wife."

"Your wife? How the devil is that? I didn't know you were a married man!"

"You didn't?" said Rathburn easily. "I supposed everybody knew it."

"Why, damn it all, Betty said——"

"Miss Norton has always been fond of her little joke," Rathburn cut in smoothly. "She knows I'm married."

The big man sat down heavily upon the running board of his car.

"But, say; what became of Carter's girl after you took her to Ophir?"

"Don't ask me. I was pretty busy after I set her down at the hotel."

"Did she tell you she was running away from home?"

"No."

"Well, she was. And that isn't all. Didn't you know she was engaged to be married to me?"

"No," said the plunger. "You never told me she was."

The promoter swore fluently, the cursings including a certain "Curly" Simms, one of Carter's men. "Curly was up here this afternoon and he said he saw you taking a woman out of your car at the door of your shack yonder," he wound up. "He said he'd take his oath the woman was Anita."

"Another natural mistake," was the cool reply. "I can assure you that the lady was none other than Mrs. Prentice Rathburn. If she hadn't gone to bed—but she was very tired from her long trip and I'm sure you'll excuse her."

"But see here," Braithwaite exploded, intent upon his own affair; "you say you left Anita at the hotel. Did you give her any money?"

"Money? I? Why, no; of course not. She didn't ask me for any."

"Damn!" said the big man. "She didn't have any money of her own. If the hotel people took her in she's there yet. Let me get at the telephone."

Rathburn led the way to the newly established headquarters, explaining that he had had Duncan move the business office in deference to Mrs. Rathburn's coming. Just before they reached the new office he dropped behind to whisper to a shadowy figure dogging their steps, as the result of which there was a click of a pair of wire nippers and the gruff giant sat at the desk with the receiver at his ear, jiggling the hook and swearing bitterly. "The damned line's gone again," he rasped. "Can't get a whisper!"

"Sorry, I'm sure," said Rathburn softly. "You'll have to drive to Ophir, won't you?"

"Hell, yes!"

"Well," Rathburn went on calmly, "I suspect you'll find the future Mrs. Braithwaite at the Chinquito. In fact, I'd be willing to bet on it. But now you are here I wish you'd take a few minutes to set me right in a matter that is troubling me a bit. Duncan's got it into his head that the ditch levels in the valley are higher than the top of the dam."

"Pshaw!" grumbled the giant; "the levels are all right."

"I was sure they must be"—this placably. "But let's get the profiles in your office and go over them—so I can convince Duncan."

The promoter acceded ungraciously, grousing at the delay. Opening the little office room at the back of the commissary and turning on the light he took down the roll of blue prints and spread them on the table. Rathburn sat opposite, listening to an explanation which did not explain; and again his gorge rose. The big man was imposing crudely upon his hearer's supposed ignorance of engineering projects.

"You see it's all right," Braithwaite ended, rolling up the blue prints. "Duncan's a fathead on everything but plain concrete construction."

Rathburn fixed Duncan's defamer with a hot-eyed stare.

"Your estimate of other people and of their intelligence is about the weakest thing in your make-up, Braithwaite," he said crisply. "You've gone on from week to week and month to month, robbing me right and left, apparently in the calm assumption that I didn't know what you were doing to me. No, keep your hands on the table—spread them out flat or you'll get a bullet low-down, where it will do the most good; I've got you covered, under the table. As I say, you not only robbed me, but when you found out that Duncan and I had the evidence on you, you deliberately set a trap to kill us both in the outlet tunnel, and it wasn't your fault that it didn't work."

"It's a lie!"

"Oh, no, it isn't; it's the truth. The trap is still there, just as you set it—only its teeth have been drawn. And we've got you on that. Two of the men saw you carry the dynamite in there last night and were curious enough to wonder what you were doing. They'll testify in court."

The big man's face had grown livid. With a movement too swift to be followed he hooked his thumbs under the table edge and shoved. Rathburn tried to back away but he was not quick enough—was caught between the tilting table and his chair and thrown to the floor in the tangle of furniture. In a way, the fall saved his life. Braithwaite had leaped afoot and was whipping a pistol from his hip pocket. With a bellow of rage he stepped back to get a clear view of his target, and in that instant Rathburn sat up, braced himself, and sent the table back, spinning upon two legs.

By a lucky chance the clumsy missile went true to its mark. A corner of the whirling piece of furniture caught the big man in the stomach and doubled him up for the moment necessary to enable Rathburn to spring to his feet. At the shock of the table shove he had dropped his gun, but he did not stop to look for the lost weapon. Instead he hurled himself upon the giant, jamming him between the tilting table and the wall and disarming him with a quick jujutsu twist learned in the college gymnasium.

"Now!" he panted, kicking the fallen re-

volver under the stove and stripping his coat, "now we're even! I'll give you your thirty pounds excess weight. Jump in and get what's coming to you, you thief—you highbinder!"

The battle that succeeded lacked nothing but a little more room of being Homeric. Rathburn was a fairly good boxer, and while his antagonist apparently knew nothing of ring tactics, his enormous weight and strength made him formidable. Cramped in the small room, with the table and two chairs in the way, Rathburn had his work cut out for him to stop the big man's savage rushes. He knew well that if Braithwaite ever closed in he would be likely to die with cracking bones in the clinch, and there was scant space in which to dodge or side-step. Twice, and yet once again, Braithwaite's huge hamlike right, clumsily swung, landed, and even the clumsy blow was irresistible. At each impact Rathburn went to the wall, but only to recover swiftly to resume the rain of quick, stabbing blows that were slowly but surely telling upon the wind of the heavier man.

At last, with no referee to call "time," the battle became a sheer struggle for endurance; and in this Rathburn's clean living and his football training stood him in good stead. Braithwaite's mad-bull rushes began to lose their impetus and twice Rathburn pinned him in a corner and hammered him wickedly before he could break away. At the third corner-pinning the giant, bloody and gasping for breath, went to the floor in a broken heap, trying weakly to shield his beaten face with upheld arms, and the battle was over.

Panting scarcely less breathlessly than the cowed giant Rathburn righted the overturned table and picked up the borrowed automatic. He had not escaped his share of the punishment; the blood was running down his face from a knuckle cut over an eye and he wiped it away with one hand while he covered the crouching promoter with the gun in the other.

"I've got you now, you devil!" he gasped. "Get up and open that safe!"

While one might count ten Braithwaite did not move. Then, out of one of his battered eyes he saw the gun.

"You haven't the guts to shoot," he growled.

"Oh, yes, I have; and I have the motive, too. Listen, you scoundrel! I told you I brought my wife over from Ophir this afternoon, and so I did. What I didn't tell you was that she is the girl you were going to try to persuade into a mock marriage this morning—less than twelve hours after you'd married Betty Norton! I ought to kill you right where you are. I shall, if you don't get up and open that safe!"

Braithwaite turned over, got upon his knees with groanings and worked the combination of the safe.

"Get out the books and bills!" was the next curt order, and the beaten swindler emptied the small safe upon the table while Rathburn stood over him with a thumb on the safety catch of the automatic.

"You've robbed me of something over sixty thousand dollars in the past few months, and the loot is in your bank in Brewster. You sit down there at the table and write a check payable to my order for fifty thousand dollars."

"I'll see you damned first!"

"It's that or the finish. One—two——"

The thief saw death peering at him out of the black eye of the aimed gun and pawed among the papers for his Brewster-bank check book. When he found it he took a fountain pen from his pocket, or rather the remains of one.

"Can't write," he said. "Nothing to write with."

Rathburn supplied his own pen, which had miraculously escaped breakage, and Braithwaite filled out the check. Rathburn looked at it and tossed it back across the table. "Try again," he snapped. "I happen to know your proper signature."

Cursing sourly, Braithwaite wrote again, and this time he did not attempt to make his signature look like a clumsy forgery.

"Anything else?" he gritted.

"Yes. In that stock book there is a certificate for two hundred shares of Q. L. & I. common, standing in your name. Fill out the transfer blank on the back of it to me."

"No!" shouted the trapped scoundrel. "You can't stand over me with a gun and rob me that way! You know perfectly well that I can repudiate a transfer made under duress!"

"I'm not robbing you," Rathburn pointed out coolly. "After I cash this check you will still have a balance of ten thousand dollars of stolen money in the Brewster bank. I'm going to write that amount off and call the account square when you trans-

fer that stock to me. At that, I'm giving you the same price that you made me pay for my fourteen hundred shares. And I'll not shoot you if you don't do it; I shall merely tie you up and phone the sheriff to come and get you on a charge of attempted murder. You may take your choice. There is no duress about it."

Again the beaten swindler bubbled profanity gross and blasphemous, but he found the stock certificate and wrote the few needful words on its back. "What more?" he barked, flinging the certificate across the table.

"Your resignation as president of the company. Write it out!"

"Damned glad to," was the brittle rejoinder. "You've skinned me, but you haven't put any feathers in your own nest. You're sold. This thing's a fake; it's been a fake from the beginning. If you hadn't been an easy mark you'd have found it out long ago."

"I did find it out long ago," was the quiet reply. "I've merely been waiting for the chance you gave me when you planted that dynamite trap last night. Write that letter!"

The letter was written and signed and the giant staggered to his feet.

"You've got everything there is now; let me get out of here," he rasped; adding with a groan: "I think I've got a broken rib."

"You may go," Rathburn snapped. "I've only one thing more to say to you. If you try to stop payment on this check the sheriff gets his tip. Gorham is pretty good, I'm told; doesn't often miss when he goes after his man."

Braithwaite stumbled to the door and opened it.

"I wish you joy of your addled egg!" he spat out viciously. "If I'm broke, you are, too; or you will be when Jim Hardwick gets through with you. Also, I wish you joy of the little fool you've married. I——"

Rathburn's leap afoot overturned the table with its lading of books and papers but he reached the door only to have it slammed and locked in his face. Before he could open a window and clamber out the promoter had disappeared and there was only the diminishing roar of an auto engine to signal the manner of his flight.

After his futile attempt to add something to the beating he had given Braithwaite, Rathburn returned to the locked door, broke it open with a thrust of his shoulder and went in to gather up the scattered books and papers and put them in the safe. That done, he set to work to change the combination of the safe lock; a process that Duncan had explained to him when they had broken in the night before.

He had taken the back off the lock and was trying to remember what Duncan had told him about changing the tumblers when the sixth sense that is neither sight nor hearing, taste, smell nor touch, warned him of impending peril, and he looked around to find the swarthy-faced cattleman standing in the open doorway, revolver in hand.

"Thought maybe it'd be you in here," he snarled, entering and shutting the door. "I'm aimin' to kill you, you yellow dog! What've you done with my daughter?"

Rathburn, sitting on the floor with his back against the open safe door, understood fully that he was looking sudden death squarely in the face. There was no mistaking the meaning of the cold glitter in the Carter eyes. And he realized that he must talk fast and talk straight if he wished to go on living.

"Wait till you hear the truth, and then fire away if you want to," he said, and he tried to say it calmly. "Passing up, for the time being, the fact that Anita isn't your daughter, I may say that I've done what your friend Braithwaite told you he was going to do—and what he couldn't do because he is already a married man."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I'll try to make it plainer. Braithwaite married Miss Norton last night. Therefore he couldn't marry Anita to-day. Therefore, again, I took her over to Ophir this morning and married her myself—with her consent and approval."

In the lately closed passage at arms with the promoter Rathburn thought he had heard all possible variations upon the theme of mad profanity. But the cattleman had resources apparently unknown to Braithwaite.

"You're tellin' me the truth?" he ripped out at the end of the eruption. "You're tellin' me that Mark Braithwaite wasn't aimin' to marry my gal?"

"I'm telling you that he couldn't—not without becoming a bigamist. I'll go further and venture the guess that he has never meant to. If I had him here I'd make him admit it."

"Where is the son of a skunk? Show him to me and I'll cut the rotten heart out of him!"

"Easy, Mr. Carter," said the plunger, and now that the crisis seemed safely averted, he got up to draw up one of the chairs. "Sit down and we'll wrestle the thing out. First, let me say that Braithwaite has got his. He was here a little while ago, looking for Anita. I didn't quite kill him, but after I'd battered him and beat him up for myself, I put in a few punches for —er—for you. Past that, I made him hand over most of the money he's been stealing from me and with it the control of the Quesada Company. I know the threat he has been holding over you and I'll say right here and now that you're not going to suffer loss by the completion of this project. If there isn't room in this valley for your business and mine—but that's a future and when the time comes I'm sure we can settle the matter without artillery."

"Um. And you say you've married 'Nita?"

"Yes; this morning in the little church in Ophir. I'm willing to admit that I did you an injustice. I thought you knew Braithwaite's purpose and were consenting to it. That's handing it out pretty cold to you, but I knew your record—all the way back to Texas. So I decided it was time for somebody to hop in and straighten things out."

"But you ain't been courtin' 'Nita none, not as I've seen."

"No; as a matter of fact we had met only twice. But on one of those occasions she saved my life."

"How come?"

"Somebody—perhaps one of Braithwaite's accomplices—tried to ambush me in Monument Park. She shot the gun out of his hands."

"Umph!" grunted the cattleman; "I reckon that was Matt Grisby—one of Jim Hardwick's killers. Where'bouts is 'Nita now?"

"Over in that shack across the way; abed —and asleep before this, I hope."

The man who had once been known as the "Terror of the Timanyoni" leaned forward, his haggard hard-lined face outthrust and his dark eyes glooming.

"Say, young feller—d'you 'low you're goin' to be good to that li'l' gal?"

"She shall have everything she wants."

"But you're busted; leastwise, Mark Braithwaite said you was."

"I know. Other people will tell you so, too. But as long as I have a dollar, half of it will be hers."

"Um. Now one thing more. You say you know my record; just how much of it d'you know?"

"I know who Anita's father and mother were and how you come to be figuring as her foster father."

The cattleman's lean fingers closed suddenly upon the butt of the huge six-gun which was still lying across his knees.

"Hell's fire! Who told you that?"

Rathburn carefully screened the old miner. "There are people in San Antonio who still remember," he said.

A silence, electrically surcharged with murderous possibilities; and then, in a voice that was like the purring of a great cat: "Was you allowin' to tell the li'l' gal?"

"No; at least not while you're still on earth. It's not for your sake, mind you, but for hers. What is done is done and can't be helped. There is trouble enough to go around as it is, without making any more."

Another silence, and at the end of it the man who had come to kill holstered the big revolver and held out his hand.

"I'm takin' you at your word, young feller. Time you get the blood washed off your face, I allow it won't be such a hell of a bad face, nohow. Reckon you're goin' to let the li'l' gal come to see me oncet in a while?"

"I'll drive her down to the ranch any time she wants to go, and be glad to."

"All right; if she's sure-enough married I reckon that lets me out. Now then, I'll go kill me a rotten-hearted skunk that's already lived a heap too long. Which a way did he go from here?"

Rathburn's blood-caked face crackled in a grim smile.

"He was heading for Ophir, I think; and possibly for a doctor. He was in pretty bad shape when he left."

After Carter had gone Rathburn finished changing the combination, locked the safe, and crossed to the new headquarters, where he found Duncan sitting on the step with a rifle across his knees.

"I stayed out of it, as you told me to," said the engineer. "Saw you chasing Braithwaite off the lot. Is he gone for good?"

"Here's hoping. If he comes back I'll give him some more of the same."

"What happened?"

"Just what was scheduled to happen. He tried to kill me and I beat him up, made him disgorge his stealings, took his stock away from him and ran him off. I'm boss of this dump now, Roddy. If I wasn't so sore I'd flap my wings and crow."

"And Carter?"

"That was different. He didn't come shooting, but his gun was out. He had me scared stiff for a minute or two. Luckily he gave me a chance to get in the honeyed word, and it was all right after I'd told him what I'd done and what Braithwaite had meant to do. He's gone off now to hunt for Braithwaite and kill him. We have a clear field now, Roddy. All we have to do is to finish that dam and stand this job on its honest feet. Get me a bucket of water from the river and let me wash and go to bed. It's been the biggest day I've ever lived through and I'm dead on my feet for sleep."

CHAPTER XIX.

FOUR MILLIONS.

BRIGHT and early on the morning following the night of many settlings Rathburn tapped at the door of the bedroom in his former office shack.

"It's your—er—big brother again," he announced. "Are you up and dressed?"

For answer the bride of a day opened the door to him, starting back with a shocked little cry when she saw his battered face.

"Oh!" she gasped; "did—did a horse pitch you?"

"No," he smiled grimly; "it wasn't a horse; it was a mighty mean mule. I don't look very pretty but I'm perfectly all right. Did you sleep well?"

"Fine; but I always sleep like anything."

"That's good; it's the way little girls ought to sleep. I've come to move you out. This place isn't fit for you. Come with me and I'll show you where you're going to live."

Together they walked across the camp plaza and up the steps of the deserted guest bungalow. Since it had been his own headquarters, the promoter, always regardful of his own comfort, had built it well and furnished it adequately—almost luxuriously. The bride went from room to room in wide-eyed astonishment.

"You mean that we're going to live here?" she queried.

"It is all yours, until I can give you something better. There is a Chinese cook, and in a day or so I'll get you a maid, if there is one to be found in Ophir."

"Oh, you mustn't do that!" she protested, and her laugh was like the chiming of wind-blown bells. "I shouldn't know what to do with a maid. And we don't need the cook. I can cook for both of us. Aunt Mandy taught me how."

"But, my dear," he put in gently, "I'm not going to live here. This is your house—your very own."

"But—but—aren't we married?"

"Sure we are. But that doesn't mean that you'll have to live with me. Besides, you know, I'm in and out at all sorts of hours, and all that. You'll be comfortable and happy here, won't you?"

"I'll do anything you say," she acceded meekly.

"That's the talk," he said, leading her to the tiny breakfast room where Lee Sing had already laid a cover for one. "I'll begin to give orders on the spot. Eat your breakfast and then get ready to go to Ophir with me. I'm going to make you spend some money. Step out on the porch when you're all set and I'll see you and come after you with the car."

"But"—she was looking at the single plate on the table—"aren't you going to have breakfast with me?"

"Oh, I had my breakfast in the mess shack. I'm just a workingman, you know."

As he turned to go, she went with him to the door, and at the moment of leave-taking: "Did dad come last night?"

He nodded.

"Was there—was there any trouble?"

"Not a particle. I told him what we'd done and he went away satisfied. All he asks is that you go down to the ranch to see him once in a while."

"I'm *so* glad! And if Mr. Braithwaite comes, I—I—please, I don't want to see him at all."

"Never fear; I wouldn't let him see you if he should come—but he won't come. I think he has left the Quesada for good and all. We'll hope so, anyway. There goes Lee Sing taking your breakfast in. You mustn't let it get cold."

For the barest fraction of a second she hesitated. Then with the child look in her

eyes that made him melt with tenderness, she said, as one wishing to do her full duty: "Don't married people kiss when one of them is going away?"

Almost reverently he took her in his arms and kissed her.

The trip to Ophir materialized as planned, and on the drive over Rathburn made shift to keep such talk as the swift flight permitted harmlessly impersonal. In the mining-camp city he drove to the bank, and leaving Anita in the women's waiting room, closeted himself for a brief space with Dalton. When he reappeared, the shrewd-eyed bank president came with him.

"I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Rathburn," was the banker's old-fashioned acknowledgment of his introduction. "Mr. Rathburn tells me you wish to do some shopping, and Mrs. Dalton, with whom I have just been talking over the phone, will be glad to chaperon you. She will be down with the car in a few minutes to call for you."

As Rathburn turned to go with the president, she beckoned him back.

"Please tell me what-all I'm to buy," she begged.

"Clothes for yourself; and anything else you see that you'd like to have."

"But—but—didn't you say you'd lost all your money?"

Rathburn laughed. "Not quite all of it; not so much but what my wife can have anything she fancies, in reason. You lean on Mrs. Dalton and do what she says; and take all the time you need. Have your packages sent here to the bank and we'll lunch here with the Daltons before we start back. I'll be busy with Mr. Dalton until one o'clock."

A little later the bride found herself taken in charge by a motherly lady who looked as if she might have been hewn out of the same piece of fine-grained timber as that which had furnished the material for the making of her banker husband, and the shopping excursion began. When it, and a quiet luncheon in the bank grill with the Daltons, were over, and Rathburn was putting his driving companion into the car for the return to the Quesada, he found the deck locker of the roadster piled high with packages for which his seatmate was breathlessly apologetic.

"I just couldn't make Mrs. Dalton stop," she protested. "I'm afraid you'll simply hate me after you find out how much money I've spent."

"Don't you worry about that," laughed the husband as he let the clutch engage. "Did you have any adventures? See anybody you knew?"

"Only Miss Norton. She was standing in front of the hotel as we drove past and she looked as if she'd like to kill me. I've been wondering why."

"I wonder too," said Rathburn, with a quizzical grin. Then he stepped on the gas and the homeward race was begun.

Again, with only such snatches of talk as the roaring motor sanctioned, the twenty miles were covered; and after Rathburn had handed his companion out at the steps of the bungalow and had carried her numerous purchases in for her, he fumbled in his pocket and fished out a jeweler's box.

"Your rings," he said, giving her the box. "I don't want you to miss any of the things that go with a girl's wedding."

She opened the box and looked at the rings; a plain gold band and a diamond in an exquisite platinum setting. Then, slowly, she snapped the lid shut and gave the box back to him.

"They are beautiful, but—but I've been talking to Mrs. Dalton, and I think I oughtn't to wear them."

"Nonsense!" he exclaimed. "You have all the right in the world to wear them. What did Mrs. Dalton say?"

"Please don't make me tell you now—some other time, perhaps." And with this no-reply he had to be satisfied.

The next day marked the beginning of a period of activity in the upper Quesada that put to shame all the strenuous efforts of the summer. Men, material and machinery poured in over the high pass in a steady stream, and Duncan, from working alone, now had a staff of young assistants. As soon as there were men enough to fill them, three shifts were put on in the place of the two, thus making the working day continuous through the twenty-four hours, and the clash and clatter of the industries in the cañon of the Tumblestone knew no pause.

In the rush and hustle of the race against time in the now rapidly closing season no workman on the job took fewer hours for rest than Rathburn. Constituting himself at one and the same time president, treasurer, auditor, purchasing agent, tracer of delayed deliveries, and even at times emer-

gency repairman of trucks broken down on the mountain road, he set an example of industry and energy that was fairly contagious and put the driving animus into all with whom he came in contact.

It was Duncan the plain spoken who finally cut in on this program of fierce activity. The time was an evening when Rathburn had left his mess-shack supper only half eaten and had gone to the little room back of the commissary to bury his nose in the paper work.

"What the devil is the use of your wearing yourself like this, Prentice?" he began. "Good Lord, there's another day coming, or if there isn't, it doesn't make any difference to any of us. Why don't you let up and shove some of the damned routine onto other shoulders?"

"I'll stop when I see the final course of concrete placed on the dam."

"It's idiotic!" declared the plain-spoken one. "A body'd think you were carrying the whole universe on your back. It's enough that you're doing the financing—though Heaven only knows where the money's coming from: I don't."

Rathburn looked up with a grin. "We have a bank in Ophir, haven't we?"

"We seem to have—one with no bottom to its money chest. How much are we in debt now?"

"You mean how much have we spent since we got rid of Braithwaite? About a hundred and twenty thousand. It costs money to rush things the way we are crowding them now."

Duncan pursed his lips in a soundless whistle.

"Holy smoke!" he exclaimed. "But I suppose you'll tell me that it's your affair; and so it is. I'm only a hired man."

"You are much more than that, Roddy; you are a mighty good friend," said the plunger soberly. Then: "The time has come at last when I can tell you a few things that I've been obliged to keep bottled up from everybody but Dalton. When I was in Ophir to-day I had it out with Hardwick. With Dalton's help, and that of a good detective agency, I was able to put the clamps on Hardwick. He has had a 'killer' named Grisby in his employ, and Grisby was the man who tried to do away with me in the beginning—tried to wreck me in an auto smash on the mountain, and a little later tried to ambush me with a gun. Grisby got wind of my sleuthing and ran for it, but he was caught in Denver, and under pressure he turned State's evidence to save himself."

"Matt Grisby!" said Duncan. "I always thought he was a crook!"

"He was—and is. While we were trying to get the evidence on him, we also did a little prying into the history of this Quesada project. It was a brazen fake from the beginning. Braithwaite was employed by the O. L. & P. to organize a dummy company to come in here and camp on this water power—for two purposes; one was to keep other people out, and the other was to secure the right for the O. L. & P. Braithwaite double crossed Hardwick by getting the charter in his own name and those of his own dummy incorporators. That gave him the whip hand over Hardwick, and it's been a fight between them all along; Braithwaite bleeding Hardwick for bribes, and Hardwick trying to get Braithwaite in a hole where he could squeeze him and make him let go. That was the state of affairs when I broke in."

Duncan nodded. "We've been guessing a good bit of this. Anything else?"

"Only details. Braithwaite had put out some fourteen hundred shares of his stock among easy marks in the East, selling it for what he could get for it, and as the fight went on, Hardwick's people bought up this stock, meaning to force Braithwaite to sell them enough more to give them the control. As you know, Braithwaite unloaded fourteen hundred shares on me, retaining the two hundred which gave him the balance of power."

"Yes; I know."

"Well, he was still sitting pretty until he got rattled and tried to kill us, thereby giving me the chance to hold him up and take his stock away from him. With the voting control in the company and Grisby's confession in my pocket I went to Hardwick to-day and cleaned up. He saw where he stood and came across. I bought his fourteen hundred shares at half par and got his signed agreement not to oppose the stringing of our wires in Ophir."

"Good work!" Duncan breathed. "But will he keep the agreement?"

"I think so. I'm still holding Grisby's confession, or rather it's locked up in Dalton's safety vault. It's good security, wouldn't you say?"

"Plenty good. But you say you paid Hardwick half par for his stock? Where the devil did you get another seventy thousand dollars to blow in on that?"

Rathburn smiled. "That is another little item that I've had to keep dark—for various reasons. You knew—everybody has seemed to know—the exact size of my resources; just how much money I inherited from dad's estate. I didn't mind: I was rather glad to have it that way. If your enemy believes that you have only a short-range pistol, he won't trouble to unlimber his heavy artillery. As it happens, I wasn't limited to the short-range pistol, Rod—luckily for me. Years ago an uncle of mine left Milford under a pretty black cloud. He stole some money from my father's bank and ran away with another man's wife. The two were never traced. Just before I started west with the Nortons—on the very day when I had let Betty persuade me to come out here and try my luck at making money enough to 'support a wife,' as she put it—I had a letter from a firm of attorneys in San Francisco. It gave me the first news we'd ever had of Uncle Jeff. He was dead, and he had left his property to me, with a single proviso: I was to see to it that the two daughters the woman had abandoned when she ran away were each to have an income of ten thousand a year during their lives."

"Heavens!" ejaculated the canny Duncan; "did that leave anything at all for you?"

"A little something"—and here the boyish grin, which had been noticeably absent for the past few weeks, slipped into place. The old man had gone into the Oregon lumber business under an assumed name and had accumulated quite a bit of money. Under my instructions, the lawyers set aside enough of it to provide the required income for the two young women, and that left a round sum of something over four millions for me."

"F-f-four millions?" stammered the shocked listener.

"Yes. It was all safely invested, so I just let it alone and said nothing to anybody; thought I'd save it to fall back on if I should happen to play ducks and drakes with my father's two hundred thousand in this deal into which Betty had dragged me. I saw, pretty nearly from the first, that Braithwaite was out to rob me; but I also saw what a big thing this Quesada scheme would be if it were put through honestly; what a lot of home-hungry folks it would provide for and make happy. So I woke up and went to work, determined to see the thing through. And I'm going to see it through, Roddy."

Duncan was breathing hard and shaking his head.

"Man, man!" he exclaimed; "and I thought you were going soft! Why, good Lord! Ophir Light & Power couldn't fight you for a single minute! You could buy it, lock, stock and barrel and put it in your pocket."

"I know I could. But I'm not vindictive."

Silence for a minute or two, and then Duncan again: "I know why you didn't let Betty know about the millions, don't I?"

"I guess you do. It's a hard thing to say of any woman, but Betty is just a little money hunter. She took Braithwaite because she believed I was down and out and he was on top."

Another interval of silence, and again it was Duncan who broke it.

"A little while ago you said I was your friend, Prentice, and now, by the Lord Harry! I'm going to take a friend's privilege," he broke out warmly. "You've buried yourself up to the neck in this job till you don't know anything but cubic yards of earth moved, cubic yards of rock quarried and cubic yards of concrete placed. That's all to the good, of course; but while you've been showing the world what an unbeatable scrapper you are you've been doing the devil's own job in another way. Damned if I don't believe you've forgotten you have a wife over on the other side of the plaza!"

"Oh, no, I haven't. I was over there yesterday."

"Yes, and for how long? Five minutes, by the watch, I dare say! That's a fine way to treat a girl, isn't it?—marry her and then fight away from her as if she had the plague!"

"I don't do that, Roddy. I'm with her as often as I dare to be."

"What d'ye mean by that?"

"You know as well as I do. There was no question of love—marrying love—in this; not on her side."

"And on yours?"

"I wasn't so lucky."

Duncan shook his head. "You've got me

running around in circles, Prent. You marry a girl that you say you're in love with, give her some good clothes and a house to live in, and then turn your back on her and let her go straight to the devil."

Rathburn looked up with a little frown wrinkling between the good gray eyes.

"You'll have to English that, Rod. Just what do you mean by 'going straight to the devil?' "

"Why, don't you see? I've three young cubs here on my staff—four if you include Cantrell, the map maker—and it's a mighty chilly evening when one or more of them can't be found sitting out on the bungalow porch with your wife. No, don't blow up—wait till I get through. It just so happens that the three or four are mighty decent young fellows; I don't believe there's a black sheep in the lot. But you know what will happen—and it *will* happen as sure as God made little apples: all those boys know, the whole camp knows, for that matter, that there is something wrong with your marriage. They don't know what it is, but they do know that you take your meals in the mess shack."

"Well?"

"It isn't well; it's damned ill! If you've made up your mind that you're not going to protect that girl as a husband should, then for God's sake hire some woman to come over here and occupy the bungalow with her. That's what I came here to say to you—why I followed you from the mess shanty. I've said it, and now you can jump in and curse me out all you like: I've got it off my chest. Good night: I'm going up to the dam for an hour or so."

For quite some time after Duncan left him, Rathburn sat staring abstractedly at the wall opposite the table desk as if the rough wall-board surface had somehow hypnotized him. But at length he broke the spell, and lingering only long enough to put away the books and papers in the safe, struggled into his coat and left the commissary office to turn his steps in the direction of the guest bungalow.

CHAPTER XX.

LITTLE KISSES.

BEFORE Rathburn had left the shadow of the commissary building he saw that the bungalow porch was occupied; and when he mounted the steps it was young Cantrell, the topographer on Duncan's staff, who got up to give him a chair. Though the porch was in shadow it did not escape him that the chair the fresh-faced boy was offering had been placed affectionately near the hammock in which a trim little figure in a short-sleeved gown was sitting.

"Don't let me disturb you, Canty," he said; but the young draftsman murmured something about having to go back to work and vanished.

"I'm sorry to have driven Canty away," this to the silent figure in the hammock, after the plaza shadows had swallowed the draftsman. "You like the boy, don't you, Anita?"

"He is nice," was the quiet answer. "He comes over nearly every evening, when he has time."

"The other fellows come, too, don't they?—Schofield and Talbot and Harris?"

"Oh, yes; but not as often as Howard. They are too busy at the dam."

Rathburn marked her use of Cantrell's Christian name and it gave him a sharp little twinge. After a pause in which he dimly realized that he was trying to prepare himself for a blow, he said, very gently: "Have you found out yet what love means, Anita?"

Her "Yes" was almost inaudible, but he heard it and the sharp twinge came again.

"I knew you would, in time. Canty is a mighty decent chap, and so are the other young subs. From what Duncan tells me, you couldn't go far wrong with any one of them. I'll side-step, as I promised you I would. Of course, you know that our marriage is no marriage at all, as it stands. Any court would set it aside. Shall I go to Ophir to-morrow and see a lawyer?"

"Oh, please don't do that! Have I been doing anything you didn't want me to?"

"Why, no, dear girl! Of course you haven't. But you don't deny that the right man has come along at last, do you?"

Again he had to listen closely to catch her faint "No."

"Then that makes it all straight."

"But—but it doesn't!" she denied, and he could almost fancy there were tears in her voice.

He got up and went to sit in the barrel-stave hammock beside her.

"Tell me all about it, Anita, dear," he urged. "You can lean on me just as hard as you want to. Haven't you learned that yet?"

"I want to be really married, and I—I can't be!" she faltered. "And I'm just mum-miserable, here all alone by myself!"

"Why, bless your dear heart, you've got things wrong—all wrong!" he protested, slipping a comforting arm around her. "If you've found the right man you needn't worry a single minute."

"But I can't help it. He—he hasn't found me: he doesn't *want* me. Even Mrs. Dalton is sorry for me. She *said* she was!"

"Mrs. Dalton?"

"I told her—the day she took me to buy my clothes; how we went off and got married just so I wouldn't have to marry a bad man, and she said, 'Oh, my dear; I'm sorry, sorry!' I asked her why, and she said you were not like most men or you wouldn't have done a knight-errant thing like that, but since you had I must remember that I wasn't your wife in any real way. I didn't want to remember; but after you gave me this house and then didn't come to see me—not even as often as Mr. Duncan did——"

Slowly, but insistently, like an importunate guest kept standing too long before a locked door, the truth was beginning to batter its way into Rathburn's brain to make the calm autumn night sing with the music of the spheres and to paint glorious aureoles around the plaza masthead lights.

"Anita, girl," he said, "do you remember once when we were talking about 'marrying love' you asked me if I knew how it felt, and I told you I did—and you told me you had felt that way once for a man?"

"Yes; I remember."

"You wouldn't tell me then who the man was. Will you tell me now?"

There was blank wonder in the slate-blue eyes when they were lifted to his. "You don't know?" she queried. "I would have told you at the time, only I was ashamed. I had seen you only twice, then, and——"

"You white-winged angel!" he burst out. "What makes you think the right man hasn't found you—that he doesn't want you? You darling—I've been starving for you ever since I brought you here!"

It might have been an hour later, and the moon had risen, when Duncan came along on his way back from the dam. Glimpsing a light-gowned figure in the hammock, and not seeing that it was held immovable in a pair of arms that had been joyously making up for lost time, he ran up the steps for a good-night word with the neglected bride, deeming it no more than his brotherly duty.

He was stumbling in the porch shadows over the chair Rathburn had abandoned an hour earlier before he made out Rathburn and the clasping arms and stopped short with an explosive: "Good Lord! Excuse me! I didn't know——"

"Neither did I, Roddy," returned the plunger, with his best grin. "That's been the trouble all along—I didn't know. But it's quite all right now. We both know. 'Nita, dear, you may kiss Rod if you want to. If it hadn't been for the savage tongue-lashing he gave me this evening we might have gone on missing each other for goodness knows how long."

Duncan tried to take it like a man, but after the soft white arms had untwined themselves from his neck he stammered other excuses and made haste away.

A little later Rathburn and Anita stood at the end of the porch from whence the wide and distant vista of the mountain-bound Quesada could be seen stretching away in the moonlight.

"Our good old valley, dear," he said in quiet exultation; "yours and mine. We are going to make it blossom like the rose of Sharon, you and I, and a generation yet to come will rise up to call us blessed. In a day that I hope we'll both be here to see, it will be filled with happy homes and laughing children, green fields and bursting barns. Money can work the miracle, and money will."

"But Prentice," she murmured; "haven't you spent all your money? Didn't you tell me you were a poor man?"

"Not exactly that, if you will remember. I said that other people would tell you I was. It is true I have spent all the money my father left me, and a good bit more besides, but, like the careful little dog who is afraid the folks may forget to feed him, I had a bone buried. An uncle of mine died in California a few months ago and left me a lot of money. I'm a rich man, 'Nita, dearest; most people would call me very rich. Don't tell me that the rich Prentice isn't as lovable as the poor one!"

What she replied had nothing to do with riches material; only with those of the heart.

"The Fields of Fear," a book-length novel by Holman Day, complete in the next issue.

The Bite of the Desert

By Howard R. Marsh

Author of "The Sign Painter of the Desert," "Because of a Cook," Etc.

"Little Mac" hated the desert with an undying hatred—and loved it with an invincible love.

"THE desert has bitten him," say the men of the settlement when a prospector packs his heavy-bellied burro out on the trackless waste. "The desert has bitten him and it will never let him go."

The imagery of these settlement men is true. The desert bites. It is a leopard, tawny skinned, with regular black blotches of creosote. It is a leopard in disposition—untamed, cruel, ferocious.

First it bites a man's face, leaving it red and scarred; then it clips away his hair and eyebrows. Finally its teeth sink into the body and it sucks the blood until the man is weak and exhausted. Always it is stalking man. For days, months, years, it may wait, confident in the immensity of its strength, until the moment of the kill. Then it strikes, pitilessly, surely.

Yes, the desert even bites a man's name, clips off the syllables. So it was with Mac.

Back in Michigan or New York State he was probably MacBurney, McCulloch or MacBain. But the desert soon clipped it to Mac, or occasionally "Little Mac," to distinguish him from "Big Mac" who runs the oil station over at Cactus Springs.

Mac is a small-boned, spare man with thin, bleached hair. His features all seem to point to the left; his mouth quirks downward on that side, his nose is twisted, and his left eye sags. Even the left one of his big, saillike ears projects farther from his head than the right.

The contortion of his face is not sinister. He looks what he is—a harmless little one-hundred-forty pounder, gazing wide eyed at life and constantly wondering at the suffering of it. Because of long hours spent alone Mac is taciturn and his voice husky. Words come with difficulty to his lips as if his throat were dust covered; yet on occasion there comes a lilt into his voice, evidence of underlying humor which even the desert hasn't killed.

Little Mac took a long and adventuresome route to reach the desert. He came from a good family, a good school, but something in his blood caused him to run away. As a boy he was scullion on a Great Lakes vessel, then pantry boy and finally cook. Love of adventure and the rumors of high wages paid in the galleys of the Pacific attracted him West. There, in the forecastle of a coastwise freighter, a knife in the hand of an enraged deck hand pierced one lung. When he left the hospital the doctors advised him that time on the desert would improve his condition.

One morning Mac drifted into Lone Pine. All desert men eventually reach Lone Pine; all trails cross in that little settlement whose back yard is the High Sierras range and

whose front yard is the Mojave Desert, with the Cottonwood Mountains as curbstones.

That was fourteen years ago. And always, as the seasons roll, Mac finds his way back to Lone Pine. If the water holes on the desert dry early, then Mac comes in before the end of May; occasionally it will be a torrid July day, when Lone Pine dances and quivers in the heat, before Mac leads his mouse-colored burro down the main street.

During the fourteen years since he came to the desert much has happened to Mac. He has toiled along the trails which lead toward death; he has been so close to death that its wings scarred his face and marked his soul; he has gazed on the unforgetable desolateness of Death Valley; on the lone trail he has seen the mountains glow pink in the first radiance of the morning sun and watched the stars loom nickel and near in the black well of night. He has met other men, walked with them, suffered with them, on occasion fought with them.

There was only one woman, one love, in his experience, and mixed with that life chapter was hate. Perhaps the love has gone from Mac's thin little breast, but the hatred grows and grows in its intensity. The hatred is for the desert, the stalking, death-waiting, implacable desert; the love was for a slim, brown Indian girl.

The story of the one romance in Mac's life will not be known, for it is not good form to ask a man of the desert about his Indian wife. Somewhere he met her, wooed her, married her, and the two trudged the long trail together. Then the desert took the girl in its rapacious maw. In some distant spot on an unmarked trail Mac buried her.

A week later he staggered into Lone Pine. His little eyes were red and swollen half shut; his thin hair was wildly tousled and there were great furrows through the dust of his cheeks. Duret never molded a mask of suffering more poignant than Little Mac's face.

In the middle of Lone Pine's main street he stopped, raised his fists in the air and shook them at the burning sun. Slowly, coldly, with an almost insane ferocity he began to curse. He cursed the desert, cursed the winds which blow over it, the sun which bakes it, each and every stone of it. He called it every profane name which he had learned in his profane life. At the conclusion he swore he'd never look on the desert's face again. Then he toppled, heat struck, sorrow stricken.

Five years ago, that was. And the next fall Mac was back from the coast, back to Lone Pine and bartering for a burro to take him out on the desert. Each succeeding fall he appears.

"The desert has bitten him," the men of Lone Pine say. "It will never let go."

II.

The Red Horn trail was not intended for automobiles. It zigzags up from the sandy floor of Owens Valley, over the foothills, and drops with precipitous haste into Thompson's Valley beyond. At some time in the past a mining company had endeavored to make a road of it, and perhaps for a few months, before some small lode was exhausted, it was actually used by wagons.

But it has become a seldom-traveled trail overgrown with encelia and white buckthorn. In places its sides are washed away; at overhanging curves it is smothered in miniature avalanches of rubble.

No, the Red Horn trail was not intended for automobiles. So when Little Mac drove his two pack burros up it last spring on some quest of his own he paid little attention to the course the animals took, nor cared which side of the road they chose.

Probably Mac was staring out over the desert valley which was spread below him, his little blue eyes dreamy and wistful. Perhaps he was thinking of the slim brown Indian girl lying out there in the waste; perhaps he was fashioning new words of hate for the desert; perhaps he was without thought, as men seem to be for long hours on the desert.

Whatever his mood he was startled from it by the honk of an automobile horn, a shout and a crash. Around the ridge curve and on to him and his two mousy little burros careened an automobile. A collision seemed unavoidable. Little Mac was too dazed to do anything but to clamp his knees tighter to the lead burro's big belly. His eyes were wide now and his face horror marked.

Another shout from the seat of the automobile, and the car jerked to the outer edge of the road. The left front whee hung over the precipice.

Mac turned to watch.

It was a small automobile, stripped of mud guards and top, painted a brilliant green and inclosed with tin in cheap imitation of a racing car. Whatever its size or value it was doomed. One front wheel was well over the edge of the road and the back wheels were revolving rapidly toward the edge of space.

"Hi!" shouted Mac, and because there was no time to say anything different, "Hi!" again. He caught a quick glimpse of a young face turned toward him, a red thatch of hair, and a grin, half fear, half bravado. Then, as he watched, the young man in the car swung his legs over the side door and stood on the running board, still wrestling with the steering wheel in an effort to raise the car back to the road.

It was a vain effort, for the back wheel near the edge slipped over and the car bumped along uncontrollably. For a second or two it seemed to balance, then slowly, surely, it toppled off into space.

"Hi!" yelled Mac again, fearful for the young man's life. But at precisely the proper moment the driver stepped from the toppling running board to the road.

He stood there, gazing interestedly at the spectacle of the little green automobile bounding down the mountainside. Little Mac watched it, too, from his point of vantage on the burro. Over and over the car turned, bounding into the air, striking rocks, upending and side-slipping in a manner that seemed grotesque and ridiculous. One wheel separated itself from the car and went bounding away by itself. Another joined it. A door slipped off and stuck behind a granite boulder. Pieces of tin were strewn over the mountainside. Finally the car was motionless, a mass of crushed and twisted metal in the bed of a dry wash far below.

"It's gone," said Little Mac.

"Gone?" echoed the young man, turning around. "Yes, it looks—gone."

Little Mac felt that some words of sympathy would be appropriate, especially because he was partially to blame for the disaster. "Hard luck," he said.

"Some," agreed the red-haired youth.

"How did you happen to try this road?" asked Mac, outlining his defense in his mind.

"I thought it would take me to Lone Pine. It isn't used much?"

"Used much! There hasn't been an automobile over this road, ever. It's hard enough for me and the burros. You had a bum hunch, that's a cinch."

"I guess I did," agreed the young fellow.

The two men were silent for a moment as if there were nothing more to say. Then Mac realized that the stranger was stranded with miles of desert separating him from water and shelter. He grunted. Then: "Guess I'll have to see you through," he suggested. "You haven't any pack left."

The young fellow gazed ruefully over the edge of the precipice. "No," he said. "Just what I've got on."

"You were going to Lone Pine?" primed Little Mac. Inwardly he grimaced at the thought of plodding the weary miles back to the settlement from which he had started two days before. "Well, we might as well be starting."

"That's good of you. I suppose I'll need some chaperoning through a place like this but—say, I'll go where you're going. That'll make it easier for you. My name is Temple, Dick Temple. Hope you won't mind my company?" He extended a big hand to Mac.

Mac took it gingerly and mumbled. "Name's Mac." Then louder, "Reckon you won't want to come with me where I'm going. I'm going on over the ridge and knock around the rocks."

"Prospecting?"

"Well, in a way," agreed Little Mac hesitantly.

Immediately Temple was enthusiastic. "Let me join you," he begged. "That's why I'm out here now. I wanted some real experience. You see," he explained, "I just graduated from Cal. Tech., specialized in metallurgy. The idea hit me to get a little tin Ford, paint her up, drive her out here to the desert and conduct a little mineral exploration. Temple's Private Mineral Expedition."

"You'll find a burro a lot slower than that car of yours," said Mac. "But you'll have to ride one until I get you to civilization. As to your joining me in prospecting, nothing doing. The place for you is back where you came from. Come on!"

III.

Mac looked up from the can of beans he was opening and found himself staring into the black O of a revolver. Behind the revolver was Dick Temple, tense and flushed.

Undisturbed, Mac went on with the task of opening the can. He seemed thoroughly preoccupied. "Say, hand me that pie plate, will you?" he asked after a minute.

"Now, look here, Mac," asserted the youthful Temple angrily, "I mean business. I've always heard that when a man means business on the desert he lets a gun talk for him. Well, I've got my gun. It's almost the only thing that didn't go down the mountain with the car," he added ruefully. Then with determined brusqueness, "Will you or won't you?"

"Will I or won't I what?" questioned Mac, prying open the cover of the bean can with his knife.

"You know well enough. I've been arguing it with you for six hours and now I am letting the gun do the arguing. Will you or won't you take me with you prospecting?"

"Well, now that you put it that way, maybe—where is that blamed pie tin?" Mac leaned forward on his hands and knees, crawled a couple of feet toward his pack. "There it is." He extended one brown hand for the tin.

Suddenly he uncoiled. His body seemed to jerk in the air. Zing! The sharp edge of the pie tin descended resoundingly on Dick Temple's wrist; the revolver somersaulted to the sand. Mac placed one heavy foot on it, then confronted Dick Temple with a three-inch-bladed knife conspicuous in his hand. "Now, Mr. Temple, what was it?" he asked.

There was no grin on Mac's face. He appeared savage, but a less flustered youth than Dick Temple would have seen an amused glint in Mac's eye. Mac was undoubtedly enjoying the situation thoroughly.

"Did you ask a favor of me, Mr. Temple? Didn't I see you playing with a toy gun a minute ago? Is that the way to treat a man who's sharing his food with you?" The series of questions was a long oratorical effort for Mac. He seemed suddenly ashamed of it. "Come on, let's eat," he said stooping down and picking up the revolver and tossing it back to Temple. "These beans smell good. Be careful of that pancake cactus. It's devilish stuff to sit on. Come on, sit down."

Grudgingly, Dick Temple squatted in the sand across from Little Mac. He ate his meal in silence, pretending not to relish it. When he had finished his plate of beans and two cups of coffee he spoke again.

"Mac, isn't there any way to make you see reason? I've tried to coax my way into your prospecting party. I offered to buy my way with fifty dollars and then I tried to bluff it with a gun. Have you taken such a strong dislike for me that you won't have me with you at any cost?"

Little Mac gazed at the eager youth speculatively. Then he raised his head and stared out over the desert. Before his gaze the land extended, mile after mile of creosote bush and sage, a wavy green sea marked at intervals by the weirdly writhing yucca trees. To the west the sun, a molten ball of red, was poised on the tip of the purple mountains, ready for its plunge into the valley beyond. The mountains loomed mysterious, foreboding. Over all the scene was a deathly quiet, a quiet which comes to no place in the world as to the desert at dusk, when the last cactus wren has lowered its head for the night and even the scurrying sand lizards have sought cover under heat-retaining stones.

To Dick Temple the desert at that moment was beautiful; to most men it would have been beautiful, in its subdued colors, its boundless expanses, its soft warmth tempered by the snow-cooled night breeze which descended from the mountains. But the desert was not beautiful to Mac. To him it was cruel, desolate, unfeeling, and now he was trying to find words in which to warn the boy. He passed the back of his brown hand across his mouth; he bit into his knuckles. His little blue eyes were half shut. He was laboring, was Mac, laboring for words.

"Listen to me, lad," he said. "It isn't that I don't like you. I do like you and that's why I'm trying to get you out of here. It's an awful land, Temple, a terrible, cruel land. Oh, yes, it's beautiful enough, and that's the danger of it. Its beauty gets a hold on you. The silence of it, the awe of it, sinks into your soul. It sank into even such an ornery little soul as mine.

"But what I was trying to say was that the desert gets you and never lets go. It's like a coyote with its teeth in the flank of a thirst-weakened antelope. Yes, it gets you and it hangs on. After a while you grow to hate it. You hate its glaring light which hurts the eyes, you hate the stones you stumble over and the sand that holds your

feet. Most of all you hate the everlasting dancing of it all—the air dancing, the mountains dancing, every bush and cactus and rock on it dancing in the heat waves. You hate it, but you can't get away. Once the feel of it gets into your blood, you're doomed. I know. I've cursed the desert for years. I've tried to get away. But I always come back and I suppose that some day my bones will whiten under that desert sun I've cursed."

Little Mac's face was twitching now as if in pain. His hands were clenching and unclenching. He had made the longest speech of his life and he wasn't done yet. He must persuade this fresh-hearted youth to leave the desert lest it claim him, too, in its purple shadows.

"Don't stay here, Temple! Get away, for God's sake! I've seen as good men as you come out here, planning to make their stake and then to leave. But they don't leave, Temple; they stay. They stay until they're old and withered, and the heat, and work and hardships have sucked the life from them. They grow old, boy, wandering back and forth across this sun-baked pavement of hell. They don't get anything out of it, not money or love or anything else."

Mac was silent for a minute, watching a last buzzard as it swung mountainward against the graying sky. "For the love of God, lad, get out while you can!" he pleaded, and his heart was in his words.

Dick Temple watched Mac's twitching features, fascinated. When at last he spoke there was respect for Little Mac in his voice, a suddenly born affection. "I'll go, Mac," he said simply. "I'll promise absolutely to go when you say the word. But let me join you this time. We'll call it a vacation if you want to, and when it's over I promise I'll go inside if you tell me."

Little Mac shook his head doubtfully. "I'm afraid you won't," he said. Then more brightly: "But of course you will if you promise. I tell you what, Temple, if you find a fairly rich mine on this trip, and can sell it for a pretty figure, you'd be more willing to take the stake and go, wouldn't you?"

"Of course," Temple agreed. "We all want to get some easy money. And if I get mine I'll swear to you to leave this land and never come back to it."

"Done," said Mac. "It'll not be easy money. There's no such thing on the desert. But I've an idea that you and I can locate a nice little vein that I've been thinking of going after. I marked the place last May. Let's turn in for an early start in the morning."

IV.

"It's like this," said Mac as he clambered over the rocks in the second range of foothills. "The first thing you look for is this brown stain. It's iron oxide, of course, and you'll not find a mineral vein without first finding some of this brown coloring where its washed on the sands and rocks around. After you find the iron stain you begin to look where it comes from. Sometimes it's easy and sometimes it's hard, but when you find it you can be sure you've got a mineral vein. Then you break off some pieces to see if it's pay ore."

As Mac talked he acted. Like a hound on the scent he traced the red-brown iron stain through the rocks. At last he came to an uptilted pillar of white quartz at whose base the sand and rocks were red with iron.

"Here we are!" Mac shouted exuberantly as Temple peered over his shoulder. "I marked that lower oxide outcropping a year ago, and now I'm right at the place it came from. Look at this, will you?" With his prospector's hammer he knocked off some jagged pieces of quartz. The bulk of it was a hard white, but through it ran irregular markings of deep black and in places a dull golden gleam.

"It looks like real stuff." He handed a piece to Temple. "That doesn't look like iron pyrite to you, does it?"

Temple turned the piece over and over in his hand. "No," he admitted. "It looks like gold to me, but I'd want it assayed before I was sure."

"Of course," Mac agreed. "We'll knock off some pieces at different places, then we'll pack for the settlement. Here, you hold the bag and I'll do the hammering."

"Hadn't we better stake out our claim right now?" asked Temple. A dream of sudden riches was heating his youthful mind and at the same time making him fearful he might lose it. "Suppose some one comes along and takes the claim ahead of us?"

"We'll not worry about that," declared Mac. "This place has been here for seventy years while hundreds of men have been prospecting this land. There's not much chance of any one stumbling on it in a week

or two. We want to be sure just what we've got before we stake off. The government determines the amount of proving up, you know, by the size of the piece we take. Here, hold the bag!"

An hour later Little Mac, the old prospector, and Temple, his pupil, were urging their mousy burros northward with an enthusiasm strange to those patient little beasts. "We've got it, I tell you!" Little Mac kept saying over his shoulder to Temple. "We've got the real stuff!" And a moment later: "If it pays out, you've got to remember your promise and get out of here forever."

Then he resumed his own plannings. "We won't have this stuff assayed in the settlement," he determined. "If it's rich rock the whole town would be on our necks in an hour. Some of the tougher desert rats would follow us out here and steal our claim. My idea is to pull up at Ingot Springs and send the stuff straight to the Los Angeles *Times* with our initials. They run a department down there for prospectors, and their expert will report in the paper about any rock sent in."

"If I had my equipment here," said Temple, "I could assay it myself. But the last I saw of my kit it was five miles down the mountain, covered with a lot of green tin from my lizzie. Yes, your plan sounds good. We'll send it to Los Angeles. But, gosh, it'll seem a long time before we get a report."

"Time," said Mac, "is nothing on the desert." But just the same he whacked the bony hips of his burro and leaned forward as though he were pushing it ahead.

V.

For four successive days Dick Temple staged a semiserious holdup of the Owens Valley stage at the southern edge of the settlement. Each time he leaped from the greasewood the driver reached automatically for the revolver at his side. But when he saw the eager face of Dick Temple he laughed and tossed out a Los Angeles paper.

The sample rock had been sent into the city for examination and the hours passed like years to the hopeful Temple. Daily he resolved to await the arrival of the stage in a dignified manner at the four corners; daily, long before noon, he hiked with long strides to the edge of the settlement so that he might secure his paper a few minutes earlier. For four days he had fairly devoured the paper with his eyes, turning the pages with trembling fingers.

On the fifth day the same mock-holdup scene took place. It was Sunday and the stage was late.

"Here you are!" shouted the driver, tossing the bulky paper toward Temple's eager hands. "Criminy, but it gets me what's eating you. Do you expect an announcement that you're a new father or something?" The stage driver's laughter at his own feeble joke mingled with the rattle of the stage as it pounded over the rocks in the sandy road.

But Temple was paying no attention. It was important business, this. Somewhere in that thick mass of newspaper there might be a paragraph announcing, in effect, that young Dick Temple and old Mac had become wealthy.

Sheet after sheet of the paper dropped from Dick's hands to the sand. He was surrounded by paper, seemed about to be buried in paper. Suddenly he gave a shout. There it was—a small paragraph in a long column. But it was the only thing on the entire page to Dick Temple's eager, searching eyes.

"R. T. and M.," it said. "The sample you sent is exceedingly rich. The gangue, as you probably know, is quartz, but there is an extraordinary amount of free gold in vein. Trace of sulphide. The ore seems to compare favorably with that of the famous Comstock Lode."

Once, twice, Dick Temple read the report. He was too excited now to shout, too breathless. Holding the paper in front of him he ran toward the settlement. At the edge of the town he turned eastward, racing through sand and sage, leaping over creosote bush and tripping over mesquite roots. He was taking the short cut to reach his partner.

Little Mac had chosen a rambling, freight-trainlike frame house as his headquarters. Perhaps he chose it for its name, "Prospectors' Inn;" more likely because there he was sure to find a half dozen other desert rats like himself with whom he could swap experiences and weave dreams. Most of the day Mac sat on the front porch of the Prospectors' Inn where his saillike ears seemed to wiggle as they took in his own extravagant words and those of the other desert adventurers.

He was on the front porch when Dick Temple rushed up to him.

"We're rich, Mac, we're rich!" shouted the exuberant boy. "Just look at this. It says——"

"Aw, hell!" sneered Mac. He turned his back on Temple and resumed the tale he was telling, but Temple was too excited to heed the rebuke. He grabbed Little Mac by the shoulders and lifted him from his chair. "Look at that!" he shouted, thrusting the paper in front of Mac's face and pointing with shaking finger.

"You're drunk!" said Mac shortly. "Come on, we'll walk it off for you." He took Temple by the arm and led him out to the hot sandy street.

Once out of earshot, Mac turned on Temple. His eyes were small and hard, his face contorted with sudden anger. Temple had never seen Little Mac aroused and he was suddenly fearful of the old man.

"You fool!" said Mac. "You damn fool!" His voice was cold incisive. "Give away a gold mine!"

"What do you mean?" The exuberance had gone from Temple's voice. He was astonished, frightened.

"What do I mean?" echoed Mac sarcastically. "Just what I said. You've tried to give away a real gold mine. Those rats back there on the porch will trail us to hell and gone if they have to, but they'll steal our claim. You watch 'em!

"Oh, I know 'em," he went on bitterly, "I know 'em. They've driven off braver men than we are and they've stolen smaller things than gold mines. They wouldn't hesitate to kill half a dozen men if they could get a real lode by doing it. Just watch 'em."

Mac turned and pointed down the road. "There they go now. There's Pete Saari, that yellow-faced Finn, leading 'em. He's got 'Dike' Webster and 'Calico Pete' with him. Three coyotes, and they're smelling game. They'll have a copy of that paper in ten minutes and then they'll stick to us like ocatillo until they've found our vein. Come on! Don't stand there! Our chance is to get away before they get back, and let me add it's one hell of a small chance!"

A half hour later Little Mac and Dick Temple, each astride a spindly legged burro and leading another, went caravanlike southward. Ten minutes behind them and on wiry desert ponies followed Pete Saari, the yellow, flat-faced Finn and his two able assistant thugs, Dike Webster and Calico Pete.

Little Mac grimaced as he noted the dust cloud. "There's trouble afoot, lad," he said to Temple. "We're in for a game of hare and hounds. We'll have to do some fancy dodging around these foothills and through the cañons. And I think," he paused for effect, "I think that Little Mac can reach goal."

That night the camp fires of trailed and trailers were not two hundred yards apart, yet no word passed between the two parties. It was grim business, this, a miniature battle requiring courage, strategy, strength, and perhaps in the end, deadly marksmanship.

"It's like this," Mac explained to Temple when the latter suggested keeping watch that night. "We're perfectly safe until we get to our claim. Their game is to stick to us until they find it. Of course I might go chasing in circles around the desert and then go back to the settlement. But that wouldn't end it. They'd watch us for months if they had to. So I prefer to bet my hand now. I'll take my chance of losing them somewhere in the foothills. It won't do us any good to watch them to-night. They'll be watching us. Turn in and get rested for a hard day."

At dawn Mac and Temple were on their way again, plodding ahead mile after mile through the gray sand and sparse brittle brush. Mid-morning Mac led the burros into the bed of a deep dry wash. There he thwacked their bony hips until they charged headlong through the rubble and smoke-bush thickets. For a mile he raced the animals. Then he turned northward again and dropped into a second wash a hundred yards away. This he followed to the foothills. Once around the first spur, he turned southward and rapidly climbed a scarcely discernible trail. By night he had reached the summit, but still he plunged ahead and down the western slope.

Dick Temple had lost all sense of the passage of time or distance. He ached from toe to crown. Every muscle of his body seemed to cry out despairingly as the jolt-jolt-jolt of the burros continued through the night. He had lost all hope or desire except for one thing—rest. By sheer force of will he clung to the burro. Still Mac showed no sign of stopping.

Then it seemed to Temple that he went

to sleep—a horrible agonizing sleep. When he awoke it was dawn and the burros had stopped. He tried to climb down but his muscles refused to obey and he toppled. The feel of the sand was good to him and he stayed there, his long body limp on the ground.

Little Mac, as spry as ever, unpacked the burros and threw a blanket over Temple. "Here we are," he announced. "No coffee this morning. We can't have a fire. Those coyotes would see the smoke. Just lie there for a few minutes, then get up and walk. If you don't, you won't be able to move for two days."

Temple was too exhausted to care.

VI.

Noise and burning heat awakened Dick Temple. The sun was directly overhead and seemed so low that one could reach its burning whiteness with his fingers. The noise was a regular pound-pound-pound, with exclamations by Little Mac added.

Gingerly, as though each of his aching muscles were glass, Temple rolled over and sat up.

"Hello," cried Mac, wiping his red brow preparatory to driving another stake into the sand. "Feeling better?"

"Some," Temple agreed doubtfully.

"Then get up and help me run the chain," ordered Mac. "We want to lay out our claim so as to include that quartz butte over there, a little working space around it and not much else."

Temple forced his rebellious body into action. Soon he was running one end of the steel chain under Mac's direction and holding stakes for Mac to pound into the sand.

"That's a nice kite-shaped piece we've laid out," Mac declared at last, tossing his small sledge hammer to the sand. "Now we'll pick out some landmarks and measure up—hello, what's that?"

Up over the ridge from the south came three desert ponies; on their backs were three desert thugs, Pete Saari, Calico Pete and Dike Webster. They weren't a pleasing sight as they raced their horses toward the quartz butte. Their faces were set and surly, their bodies hunched forward in a fighting attitude, their hands on their holsters.

At sight of them Little Mac and Dick Temple simultaneously leaped toward the packs for their revolvers. "Stop!" shouted Pete Saari. A revolver flashed in his hand. Two others were leveled by Calico Pete and Dike Webster. "Hands up!"

Little Mac obeyed meekly. His thin dirty hands went above his head. But Temple seized a revolver and stood waiting.

"Don't get funny with that shooting iron," cautioned the yellow-faced Pete Saari, pulling his calico pony up beside Temple. "Just raise it as high as your hip once and I'll bore you!" He turned to his companions. "Boys, watch this bean eater while I talk to Mac."

Saari swung from his pony and strode over to Mac. His huge bulk loomed above the thin little desert man like that of the Sierras above a single mountain pine.

"What are you doing on our claim?" demanded Saari, waving his revolver threateningly in Little Mac's face. "A claim jumper, are you? Well, get to hell out of here! Pronto!"

"But—but——" protested Mac feebly, "this ain't your claim. It's ours. Young Temple there and me. We found it and staked it out."

"You're a liar!" Pete Saari declared as vehemently as if the truth were on his side. "It's our claim, ain't it, boys?"

"You bet it is!" chorused Calico Pete and Dike Webster. "If it wasn't ten minutes ago, it is now," Webster added. He left Calico Pete to watch Temple and nudged his pony toward Mac.

"Listen, Mac," he said, "don't make any trouble. It won't get you nowhere. We aim to have this claim and the quicker you get off'n it the better. We've got the word of the three of us that we found it against the two of you. And what's more, if you try to make trouble for us there won't be two of you a-tall; there won't be none of you left. Understand?" He tossed his revolver in the air and caught it as it somersaulted. "So just clear out. The three of us will measure up this little piece of ground and beat you back to the registry office, anyway."

"That's right, Mac," Pete Saari chimed in. "Might just as well take your medicine. Just get away from here as quick as you can and never open your peep about—look out Pete!"

Calico Pete, who was supposed to be guarding Temple, had become interested in the conversation and gradually nudged forward, forgetting his duty. Temple had seen

his chance. Suddenly he pitched himself over a low creosote bush. Momentarily screened, he crouched and raced across the sand. Overhead he heard the bullets from Pete Saari's revolver sing past. Then he rounded an uptilted piece of granite. That was his fort.

From behind the rock wall Temple leveled his revolver at the legs of Pete Saari and fired. He was not an expert marksman and his first shot missed. He fired again and had the satisfaction of seeing the huge Finn clutch the calf of his leg. There was a howl of pain, then a wild scramble for cover on the part of Pete Saari, Dike Webster and Calico Pete. The attackers had suddenly become the attacked.

The three desert bandits were ranged on one side of the cleared space at the base of the quartz butte. On the other was Dick Temple. Between them, and in the range of their bullets, was Little Mac. The old-timer of the desert seemed wholly at a loss as to what he should do. If he moved to join Temple the unerring aim of Calico Pete and Dike Webster would be fatal. Yet he didn't wish to join the claim jumpers. After a moment's puzzled indecision he adopted the neutral course. Holding his arms high above his head he walked toward the quartz butte midway between the warring factions. Suddenly he dropped from sight.

Meanwhile Dick Temple was pondering his next move. He dared not even peer from behind the rock wall now, for the appearance of any part of his body was greeted with a fusillade of shots whose accuracy could not be doubted. Suddenly he was sent spinning by a mighty thwack on the shoulder. As he fell a second bullet creased the top of his head and he sprawled lengthwise on the sand. It was obvious that one of the bandits had edged his way eastward and was now firing at the youth point-blank from the flank. A third bullet spurted sand in Temple's face and ricocheted whiningly toward the foothills.

Dick Temple was dazed, helpless for the moment. Then hands grasped his ankle. For a despairing breath he thought that the fight was over, that he was doomed.

"It's Mac," came a rasping voice. "Don't set up! I sneaked along the base of the butte. Can you run?"

Temple nodded.

"Then come on!" Mac ordered. "Quick! In three minutes they'll have you surrounded and they'll pick you off like a cherry. Follow me!"

But Temple had no wish to leave the battle. His head rang and reeled from the bullet which had cut his scalp; his shoulder throbbed; blood trickled down one side of his face, but there was in him a fighting rage which demanded that he keep his rightful claim, and which demanded more—the blood of the bandits in return for that which he was shedding.

"Come on!" pleaded Mac. "Quick!" Then as Temple leveled his revolver toward the brush, Mac swore. "By God, lad, if you don't come, I'll stand up and let 'em plug me. Are you coming?" There was a moment's silence. Only when Mac made a motion to carry out his threat did Temple grunt a regretful: "All right, I'll come."

Little Mac and his companion snaked their bodies across the sand toward the foothills. Down into a fissure they slid, along the base of the quartz butte, then into the bed of a dry wash. Ten minutes later they were concealed a mile from the scene of the fight.

"Now," said Little Mac, "I'll take care of those punctures of yours.

"They aren't bad," he reported after examining Temple's wounds. "Let me wipe off some of the blood and tie a piece of my shirt around your shoulder. That'll fix it. Your head's O. K. The bleeding will stop quick in this sun."

"What about our claim?" mourned Temple. Then he groaned aloud. Forgotten was the pain in his head and shoulder, forgotten was everything except the thought that his impetuosity the day before in the settlement had cost Little Mac his gold mine. Suddenly a glimmer of hope. "Can't we beat those devils back to the registry office?" he asked.

"Not a chance," Mac declared. "They've got ponies. They'll beat us by hours."

"That means," said Temple lowering his head in his hands, "that I've lost us our gold mine, just like you said I would."

Little Mac placed one thin hand on Temple's shoulder. It was the nearest he had ever come to showing affection for any man and he seemed ashamed of it. He jerked his hand away, but there was a lilt in his voice as he said, "Lost our gold mine! Lost hell! Do you think I would leave a trail that a blind pinto could follow to our claim? *Our* claim? Our claim is five miles west of

here. That place back there just looked a little like our claim, that's all. But Dick," and his hand fidgeted as though it desired to touch Temple's shoulder again, "that fight you put up will make those three thieving coyotes think it's the real gold lode they've stolen."

VII.

It's probably in the statistical records of the director of the mint that the Five Mile West gold mine is one of the richest producers of the Sierras; it's probably on the records of the county clerk that this property was sold to an Eastern syndicate for sixty thousand dollars by one, L. Mac, and Richard Temple. Perhaps the county clerk points at the figures and says to the casual visitor: "See, that's what happens! A couple of prospectors locate a wonderful vein and then sell out for one twentieth of what it's worth. Then they have a high time for a couple of years and go broke. Back they come again to look for another gold mine, which generally they never do find."

But the county clerk doesn't know the whole story in this case. He doesn't know that a little brown man, uncomfortable in store clothes and walking as if his shoes hurt him, led another tanned man, bigger and younger, into a compartment of the California Limited at Los Angeles.

"There, Dick," said Little Mac, "we've started. I've made you keep your promise about leaving that blasted desert country forever. And I'm still sticking to you."

Dick Temple's answer was a grin. In his pocket were nearly thirty thousand dollars, which was a fair enough stake with which to start a career. He put one arm affectionately across Little Mac's shoulders. The desert man rattled on as if talking would relieve the embarrassment of strange surroundings.

"And now I'm going East myself. Back to little old New York State to look up my living relatives, if any, and the dead ones, if any. No more of that damned desert for me. Lord, lad, it's an awful land! Sun, heat, thirst, cactus, side-winders—and then some more heat of hell thrown in. There you've got it. You'll not go back to it, ever, will you, lad?"

"No," Temple agreed good-naturedly. "I promised, and I owe you too much, Mac, to break that promise. Pete Saari is not such a friend of mine that I want to see him every day, either."

"Well, Pete wasn't so bad a sort," protested Mac in defense of his kind. "I remember once over in Lost Valley——"

And as the train sped across the coast plain Mac reminisced. He was still telling his adventures as the train pulled laboriously up Cajon Pass, over the summit and started to speed eastward across the desert.

At dusk, when the train stopped at one of the ugly red-and-black tank stations on the desert, Mac rose from his cushioned seat. "Guess I'll stretch my legs a little," he explained to Temple.

Five minutes later young Richard Temple began a wondering search for his pal of the desert. He looked in the diner, the buffet, the observation car, without success. Something had happened to Little Mac.

Yes, something had happened. In the words of the men of the settlement, "The desert had bitten him." He had dropped from the train just to bid adieu to his old sweetheart, and she had taken advantage of him. From the sand beneath his feet the lure of her infiltrated his body; the broad smooth expanse of her breast beckoned him back to rest; the red-gold sun, perched on a mountain tooth in the west, promised him wealth and health and warmth.

Then something broke in Little Mac. Tears filled his little blue eyes. Youth and hope flowed through his body, quickened his blood. He turned his back on the luxurious train and ran out on the desert. He pitched himself into the sand, the clean-smelling, heat-retaining sand. His nostrils caught the odor of the sage. Somewhere in the distance a coyote cried a snarling answer to the train's whistle.

"Oh, I can't leave you!" Mac cried. "I can't! You're beautiful and big and—and you have me."

Mac poured the clean sand from one hand into the other, as the train grew smaller in the desert distance.

Mr. Marsh will have a story in the next issue.

Mah Junk

By C. S. Montanye

Author of "According to Doyle," "The Wages of Simm," Etc.

The excruciating Scandrel does a bull in a Chinese tea shop.

PARIS, France, supplies the feminine style; the Prince of Wales tells the world what the swell-dressed man shall wear, but it took the Chinese to supply the hit in dogs and games. Society formerly went to the hounds with such enthusiasm that not long ago a limousine wasn't considered furnished unless it had a Pekingese to match the upholstery. More recently the smart set, discovering that shop-girls in particular and the bourgeois in general were taking a fall out of bridge, went to Mah Jong like a beagle after a cottontail. They figured they had found a safe pastime and doped it that whereas anybody can get a pack of cards for a shilling, a regular Mah Jong set with all the fixings would cost more than the yearly salary of the average clerk.

So it was Mah Jong.

"It's an established fact that the pasteboards and the outline of bridge broke up more homes than a few and sent plenty grist to the mills of the divorce courts. Mah Jong, in the cradle of its popularity, hasn't had enough time to do any deadly work but there is at least one case written into the records where the ancient hobby of the laundry-ticket mandarins slapped one party for a rack of tiles. The victim in question was no other than the well-known Ottie Scandrel, ex-pugilist, ex-movie actor, ex-ball-club owner and one of the best-dressed men in Gotham—in his own opinion.

There's a story—as Alex Dumas used to say—tied up with the game of Mah Jong and the Honorable Otto. The scene of the drama was The Fiery Dragon Tea Room and among the characters that put it over might be mentioned Sing Lo; the sweet little, complete little Rosie Ray; Mrs. Mortimer Mayfair; Orlando Ovington; the stately Miss Beverly Mayfair; myself, and a few crumbs from the upper crust.

If you're ready we'll proceed.

On one of those chilly midwinter days popular with nearly everybody except bathing-suit manufacturers and ice dealers I spied a familiar motor on the corner of a certain downtown street that connected directly with Madison Avenue. The expense vehicle was painted a vivid green, picked out with a delicate blue line, but what made me sure of it was the padded-fist-rampant-bull coat of arms on the panels of the tonneau door.

Modesty was Scandrel's shooting costume!

Even as I stared a chauffeur in livery alighted from the bus, flung open the door and stood at attention. Friend Ottie, the height of foppishness in a gray tweed cape, spats and a dapper dicer whose brim ran a front-porch awning a dead heat, stepped out. I noticed then that the sartorial exhibit was finished off with a monocle suspended on a narrow silken cord and a puffed

piece of neckwear in which a couple of grand worth of hock rocks glittered.

"Listen," I began, "you want to be careful. They've given men twenty years in the stir for less than this."

Ottie promptly curled a lip.

"Running over with comicals, ain't you? It's a cinch that if you knew nothing you'd be one point less than half-witted. Er—the style's the thing and all the world is a stage—as Shakespeare used to tell his neighbors. What are you doing down here, Joe?"

I explained I had journeyed down from the Bronx to see a firm of physicians about ordering some medicine balls for the gym. Ottie wrapped his cape closer about him and sneered.

"You and them box-fighting lowbrows gimme a pain! Ain't you never going to trap some sense? For the life of me I can't figure out how I ever played around with them bolognies. Still, all the time I knew it was the blah set and high handshakers that matched my complexion. Yes, I'm going to mingle only with the best now. Within a couple of days the swellest members of the '400' will be giving me the weather, the Stock Exchange and all the latest dirt from Park Avenue."

"What family do you contemplate buttling for?" I inquired.

Ottie stuck out his jaw.

"I'll buttle you one on that thing you call a nose! Forget that small-time humor of yours, come with me and I'll give you the inside low-down on a grift that's got all the others helpless. Er—walk this way."

"I can't," I said as he started off, "it requires practice."

Curiosity, if nothing else, made me match my steps with his. We went down the aristocratic side street where the lower floors of a number of private houses had been remodeled and rented by fashionable shops selling Third Avenue merchandise at Fifth Avenue prices. Twenty steps east and Ottie, swinging his cane, led the way down to a basement where a bright yellow sign reading "The Fiery Dragon Tea Room" lighted up the neighborhood like a sunset rainbow.

There was a custard-colored front door to the left that had a red character painted on it that might have been Chinese, Yiddish or Sanscrit. I had little time to more than steal a glance at the draperies in both windows when Scandrel threw open the front door and a blast of incense nearly tripped me for a fall.

"Get that innocence?" he chuckled with the best of humor. "This is the real Flannigan and no mistake. There's more China here than there is in a set of dishes. Pull yourself together and come in."

The interior of the dive was what might have been expected after a peek at the outside. Really, it brought the opium dens of the underworld uptown. All that was missing were a couple of Mongolians with knives up their sleeves, some bunks and a few poppy pipes.

I looked around dizzily and saw hanging Chinese lanterns, a dozen square bamboo tables and chairs, a bowl of joss sticks, a four-foot statue of Buddha, a couple of suspicious-looking cabinets decorated with lily bowls containing the real fruit and a floor paved with matting. There was no one visible—a fact that bothered Scandrel the same as a mash note does a show girl.

He dropped the silly cape, hung up his lid, sat down and yawned.

"Nearly all mine, Joe! This is what I mean when I say the grift that's got the others feeble. I'm running this in partnership with a tong whose name is Sing Lo. The class, what? Notice them josh sticks and roll an eye at the tables—they came direct out of Sing Lo's palace in Canton—where he used to live before he went broke in the flannel business. The genuine article, I'll tell the pigeon-toed world, even if they did cost me a pretty nickel!"

I gaped witlessly.

"So you've gone in for hop? It's the pen as sure as ink is used to scribble with. Honest, money has made a total ruin out of you!"

"One side with that noise!" Scandrel bawled. "What do you think I'm running—a shuffle pavilion for dope fiends? This here is a—now—profession the same as selling overcoats or pianos. Get it?"

I shook my head.

"I can't say I do. It's a tea room by the sign—but what else?"

Ottie smirked.

"A Mah Junk parlor. Ring me up some rainy afternoon when your spirits are dampened and make an appointment to shove the tiles—at a ten-bill throw an hour. Didn't I tell you it was sweet?"

"Mah Jong?" I repeated.

He hurled a careless cigarette into a

holder dripping with gold bands and snickered.

"Ain't it amusing—me going in for the pigtail stuff? But why not? A dollar's two fifty-cent pieces no matter if you get it putting wood alcohol up in whisky bottles, teaching beginners to toy with the Chinese dominoes or sticking 'em up with a rod. No fooling, what paper dolls are to a kindergarten, cosmetics to the fair sex and jazz to a Forty-fourth Street kafe—that's what Mah Junk is to the boys and girls who have more time on their hands than a night watchman. We don't officially open until Thursday and we've got to get a waitress yet, but already we've got applications booked solid for the next twelve years. All it cost to get them was one buck seventy-five sent in for an advertisement in the *Evening Discord*. Laugh that one off if you're able."

He went on to explain that while watching Mah Jong being demonstrated in the window of a Sixth Avenue department store inspiration had called. Ottie, so he said, had immediately breezed into the shop and introduced himself to one of the players—the same Sing Lo who had the fifty-per-cent drag on the gate.

It seemed that Scandrel had taken the Oriental out for a bucket of chop suey, had clicked the idea, received a nod from Slant Eyes and had closed the deal there and then.

"It listens fair," I was compelled to admit. "If you've got a chink putting up real money there must be something in it after all."

He coughed.

"Well, between you, me and the kitchen door, Joe, this here Sing Lo gimme his note for his share of the partnership. As I said, he's broke. Otherwise he wouldn't no more think of learning people how to play this game than I would go in for ballet dancing. He's a big guy in China, but don't make no mistake. I got the bulge on him. Any time I don't like Sing's music I can hand him the boulevard hastily. However, there's scant danger of that. Back in the old country he was a mandarin. He's got polish like a kitchen stove and what he don't know about the game makes the eyelash of a gnat look like a California giant redwood. Stop in and watch him do his stuff. The kid certainly handles a nasty tile!"

As he finished speaking the front door opened and in tripped a blonde with looks sufficient to tie up the traffic on any thoroughfare.

She wasn't small and she wasn't tall, she wasn't fat and she wasn't thin. She wasn't expensively dressed and she wasn't shabby. And while she didn't bear any striking resemblance to a débutante with shaved eyebrows she didn't look like a ribbon-counter clerk without any.

I took Ottie's nudge and lamped her again. The second glance showed me blue eyes as large as saucers, fluffy hair that was as yellow as some of the prize fighters up at the gym, a nose that could only be termed adorable and lips that no rose could equal for tint or texture.

For a fact, her looks were such that the simple little black dress she had on might have been an evening gown direct from the Rue de la Pay.

"Is this Mr. Scandrel?" she began in a voice that went with her appearance.

Ottie was on his feet with the speed of a bullet shot from a gun.

"I'm him, baby. We're a little full up on applications but don't worry a thing. I'll have you playing this game like a champeen inside of a week."

The young lady registered surprise.

"I think there's some slight mistake. Aren't you the gentleman who answered the advertisement I had in the paper yesterday for a position?"

At this Ottie's mouth was as open as Montmartre.

"Why—er—yes, to be sure. But listen, I got you wrong. The job open here is for a gal willing to cart the tea truck in from the back room and clean the cups afterward on a twenty-bill weekly insult. Your advertisement didn't say nothing about what brand of work you wanted. I guess you're not interested in this Emanuel Labor party, hey? Well, my error, so if you will just leave your address——"

"To the contrary," the little blondie interrupted, "I'm very much interested. I left my last position—that of a stenographer in a wholesale grocery house—because the boss insisted upon bringing me candy every morning and sending out for my lunch. Since then I have discovered that situations aren't any too plentiful. Frankly, I'm not above taking a position as waitress—which, I gather, is what you want to offer me. So if you——"

"Hang up your hat. You're engaged!"

Ottie barked. "And what did you say your name was?"

"I didn't, but it's Rose Ray," was the answer.

"Sister of Violet Ray, perhaps?" the big buffoon snickered. "So much for that. You don't even have to know how to brew the Ceylon. With this crowd of smacker packers I've got coming we could drop a grain in a bucket of hot water, tell 'em that was how the hopheads served it in the Flour Kingdom and it would register heavy. Pardon me, Joe, while I show Rosie where we've got the kitchen hidden."

With that he shot his cuffs and swaggered off, Miss Ray following, her amazed blue eyes riveted on his plaid spats.

As promised, The Fiery Dragon threw open its doors to the genteel mob on Thursday.

To see how Ottie could give and take it was the magnet that drew me to the tea shop the same afternoon. Somehow, my boy friend hobnobbing with the cup tippers and the society gorillas aroused my sense of humor. I figured that if Mah Jong could put a polish on him after his years of life with the roughnecks it would be more than worth while to stick around and watch the marvelous silk purse being stitched from the common sow's ear.

So, with a clean collar and ten cents' worth of shoe shine present, I pushed open the mysterious custard-colored door and crashed in.

The first thing I saw—outside of Ottie—was three ladies whose chins were running into second editions. They wore more diamonds than Tiffany's front window and featured lorgnettes which they used more than frequently. The three of them were parked at one of the bamboo tables where they were being chaperoned by Sing Lo and at the sight of Scandrel's rice-eating partner my jaw dropped.

To begin with, Sing Lo measured a scant six feet three or so, had a pair of shoulders on him good enough for a stevedore, and a jaw that any of the Bronx leather pushers would have been immediately interested in. The Mah Jong expert was as yellow as a crate of grapefruit, had eyes that might have slanted more and finger nails a foot long. In addition to that he was wrapped up in what looked like a red-silk portière with hanging sleeves, sported a small round lid under which his queue was tucked and wore tightly rolled linen socks and a couple of felt bedroom slippers.

Yes, Sing Lo was very Mongolian.

Ottie presented me to the three at the table and gave me a knock-down to his partner. Sing Lo rose, folded his arms and bowed like a head waiter.

"The sun that warmed my honorable ancesters shines brightly to-day for me. My heart rejoices at our meeting."

"Get that, Joe?" Ottie yelped. "Didn't I tell you he had a smooth line? Take a chair and sit in on this. It's our first lesson and the girls think it's immense."

The first of the three giggled.

"It's so intricate but *so* intriguing," she gushed.

"This ain't no sucker game," Ottie explained. "You've got to have a headpiece and know how to use it if you expect to find out what it's all about. The pinochle sharks and the penny-ante hounds don't figure here. Over in China, so the kid tells me, only the best people are allowed to play it. The laboring class get the box if they're caught with the sets. I'm speaking now of the collies."

"Collies?" one of the others interrupted. "Aren't they the underdogs?"

Sing Lo coughed like bronchitis.

"The fates decree that our instruction begin. I kneel in the dust at your feet."

"That's all right," Ottie snickered. "You'll find a whisk broom in the closet. Go ahead—let 'em ride!"

There were as many tiles to Mah Jong as there are to an ordinary bathroom floor. Because of the different Winds it was a very breezy game. Sing Lo shook dice to see who was the North Wind and half a glance showed me Mah Jong itself was merely a combination of crap, dominoes, brick laying, rummy and day labor, with a couple of Um Kongs, Gongs, Chees, Pungs and Hai Kongs thrown in to make it baffling.

"A game for imbeciles," Scandrel declared when we went back across The Fiery Dragon and sat down near its tail. "They also call it Punk Chow, whereas if they called it Chow Chow it would be all to the mustard. Listen, there's a dame coming in later on tagged Mrs. Mortimer Mayfair. Prove you're a real pal and stand by to back me up when she shows. I've got as much crust as a bakery and all that, but some of these society dolls chill me like a refrigerator."

"Mrs. Mortimer Mayfair?" I murmured, recalling that the lady in question was to society what Firpo is to South America. "Flying high, eh?"

Ottie nodded carelessly.

"Why not? This Mrs. Mayfair broad give me a wire buzz this morning saying she wants to see me on an important matter. I found out these bill collectors are all the same. Anything from buying a package of hairpins to picking out a big estate is important to them. A laugh, really."

There was a little excitement at this minute over at the table.

"Oh, Mr. Scandrel!" one of the three students cried, as the blond Rosie hustled in a teapot and cups. "What do you suppose? Mr. Lo tells me I just dropped the moon in the sea!"

"Yeah?" Ottie shot back. "I lost a pair of cuff buttons the same way last year!"

Sing Lo handed him a strange look and began slipping the tiles back in their racks. The trio of chins finished the brew, tipped Rosie a buck apiece and after pulling on a fancy assortment of mink and sable tottered out to fall into a pair of expensive gasoline trucks.

"The next bunch are due in fifteen minutes," Scandrel murmured with a glance at his pocketpiece. "Er—I'll give you a hand on them dirty dishes, Rosie."

The sweet little blonde smiled dreamily. Ottie took the tray and breezed. As he went out Sing Lo lighted a cigarette and sighed like a blast furnace.

"His clothing dims the radiance of the stars," the expert instructor mumbled. "But no dumb-bell is more supreme. Eagles circle distant mountain peaks and it is written that my fist shall circle the peak of his jaw if he don't lay off. Soon the golden tide of money will roll in no more. Frogs croak when kings pass but no shopkeeper may jeer at his customers."

"What's that?" I asked.

He blew smoke through his nose, smiled oddly again and continued piling up the tiles.

Exactly twenty minutes later the front door burst open and the famous Mrs. Mortimer Mayfair, herself, entered. The woman who made society sit up pretty and bark was a person of distinction and pounds. She was as pompous as a hall boy with a five-dollar raise, dolled like a pot of Easter lilies and equipped with both money and teeth. On the level, any self-respecting dentist would have written off the suggestion of a plate and recommended a platter the second he flashed her dining-room china.

"So this is—now—Mrs. Mayfair!" Ottie hollered, bustling out of the kitchen and pocketing a dish towel on the way. "I'm certainly delighted to know you. Have a chair—have three chairs!"

She looked him over with the cheaters on a stick before sitting down.

"What I have to say," were her first words, "must be imparted strictly in confidence."

"That's K. O. with me. If you don't see what you want ask for it. This boy with the loud necktie is Joe O'Grady and he wouldn't dream of opening his face without getting written permission off of me. As for Saffron, leave him to me. Hey, Sing," Ottie bawled. "Take a walk for yourself around the corner and get me a pack of snipes. Fast now!"

Sing Lo got up and bowed.

"Shall the humming bird venture to disobey the command of the hawk?"

"Ain't he the limit?" Ottie giggled when the front door opened and closed. "Now go right ahead and spill it, Mrs. Mayfair."

The woman coughed.

"I have learned," she stated, "that several gentlemen of our set intend to learn Mah Jong here. Can you recall their names?"

Ottie scratched his head.

"Yeah—H. Tonsil Adenoid is one. J. Hamburger Stake and Pierpont Herring, who swims with the best of them, are some of the others. Why?"

Mrs. Mayfair leaned a little forward.

"And Mr. Orlando Ovington?" she breathed.

"Him, too," was Scandrel's reply. "We've got 'em big and we've got 'em little. If you want to trade in two short ones for a tall one, it's all right with me."

"My daughter Beverly tells me she also has reserved a few hours a week," the other interrupted. "While not what one might term a match-making mother, I'm anxious that Beverly be thrown in contact with young Ovington. They know each other slightly as it is. Confidentially, my daughter is inclined toward wildness and impossible escapades with people far below her in the social scale. Will you believe me when I tell you I saw her walking on Fifth Avenue one afternoon with a creature we

later discovered was a bookkeeper out of employment?"

Ottie looked dumfounded.

"You did? How perfectly notorious! So you want her and this Ovington boy to get mushy on each other, eh? Leave it to me. Pay me the same as I charge for Mah Junk per the hour and I'll juggle the books so that when he takes a lesson she'll be doing it too. I'll hurl them together. Er—I suppose this mock orange is disgusting with jack?"

Mrs. Mayfair gave him a look as cold as lake water in early January.

"He is wealthy, yes. This, however, is a matter more of family than of money. His social ties are quite irreproachable. Manhattan remembers the Ovingtons as the First Settlers."

"That settles it," Ottie barked. "We've got back-yard privileges connected with this den. If Ovington don't pop the question to your daughter after a week of lessons I'll take him out there and beat him like a rug. That's a promise!"

Mrs. Mayfair looked at her arm clock and stood.

"You have taken a load from my shoulders. Do everything you can and you won't regret it."

"Leave it to me," the big clown said, escorting her to the door. "I'll have the two of them shopping for a wedding license soon if not quicker. Gimme a ring on the phone once in a while and I'll hep you to how things are breaking."

The society woman had hardly aired and Ottie had had time only for a cigarette and a word in the pantry with the remarkable Rosie when a brand-new 1924 sport Joyce-Rolls purred up to the front curb and a curly bear cat accompanied by a cane got out and strolled in.

"Your pardon," he said to me, "but will you kindly tell the proprietor that B. Orlando Ovington has arrived?"

While I called for Ottie I looked the newcomer over with more than ordinary interest. He was bored, he was blasé, and he had a set of clothes on that were enough to make my boy friend blow out the gas in a pang of sheer jealousy. The suit was pepper and salt with a little egg on the lapels, the brogans were freaks of the bootmaker's art and the hosiery, shirt and cravat had evidently come out of the same bolt of silk.

It was true that his nearest approach to a chin was an Adam's apple and that nature had been more than generous in the matter of a smeller but there was no one who could deny he had a couple of roguish eyes, a cute little fur-bearing lip and a manner so weary that it seemed to suggest he hadn't been in bed for years.

"I say, old thing," Ovington drawled when Ottie approached. "You know, really—haw-haw—I have to cancel my lesson for to-day. Most ludicrous thing, upon my word. I had an engagement all along with a young person but the jolly blotter on my engagement pad quite covered it up and concealed it. Haw-haw! A while ago I conceived the frightfully brilliant idea of looking under the beastly thing. And there it was—this engagement—in my own handwriting. Only fawncy!"

Ottie removed his gaze from the other's double-breasted waistcoat.

"For a fact? Haw-haw—you must think you're at Oxford or some of them other shoemaking colleges where you can get out of your lessons by moaning about it. I'll let you off this time but see that it don't happen again. Leave your address and I'll drop you a card when I can squeeze you in for an hour."

"My rooms are over at Rockcliff Hall," Ovington explained. "Don't forget, old dear. Really, one must learn to play Mah Jong. I'll expect to hear from you, then. Au revoir."

"And remember me to your tailor!" Scandrel muttered when the wealthy youth took the street. "No fooling, Joe, we're going to have a piece of fun, ain't we? So the old lady wants the daughter to team up with him. There's more to this Mah Junk than I thought at the beginning. How about it, Sing?"

The Mongolian bowed.

"I am but the echo of your voice, a twig under your foot."

Scandrel nudged me.

"I'm glad you know your place, fellar. A twig under my foot, you say? If you want to hang onto your soul look out for my heel!"

Sing Lo pulled another of his trick smiles.

Miss Beverly Mayfair put in an appearance at the tea room two afternoons later. For a débutante she wasn't so terrible. A brunette, with eyes as dark as a coal mine, lashes a foot long and a complexion that

was perfect plus, she didn't resemble her mother in the matter of weight, teeth or hauteur. The girl was sweet nineteen, a perfect thirty-six and as democratic as Albany.

Two minutes after Ottie had introduced us she was seated opposite the massive Sing Lo, getting a verbal sketch of what was going to happen and asking as many questions as a district attorney. For a fact, she wanted a reason for everything and while I expected the Mah Jong expert to crown her with a rack the boy from the Far East seemed to enjoy telling her what everything meant.

He had finished a yard of information when Orlando Ovington, rigged in another volume of class scenery, staggered in and gave me his cane and hat.

"A trifle late, what?" he declared, spreading the broad A like butter. "Haw-haw! Do we play now?"

"This here is Sing Lo, your teacher," Ottie said, giving him a glare. "And this here is Miss Mayfair, who's also trying for a diploma."

Ovington's beautiful brows shot up an inch and a half. It was difficult to determine whether he felt happy or scrappy at the meeting.

"Oh, I say, this is terrifically opportune, you know, Bev. Fawncy running into you here, of all places."

"Astounding, isn't it?" the girl said in a voice similar to the water you get in New York apartment houses—neither hot nor cold. "So we're to be fellow pupils, Lannie?"

"Rawther—haw-haw!" the dizzy tomato laughed, sinking into a chair and giving Sing Lo's bath robe fascinated attention. "So this is Mah Jong!"

The chink gave him a look hard enough to drive spikes with, the fourth member of the table flopped in to drop anchor, the tiles were spilled and the game was on.

Ottie, once things were running as smoothly as could be expected, led the way into the kitchen where the enchanting Rosie Ray was putting soap and water on a flock of dishes that made the Alps look like a quartet of mole hills on anybody's front yard. Scandrel, almost breaking into sobs at the sight of her, grabbed a towel and handed me its double.

"We'll help you, baby!" he bawled. "This here will be the best kind of practice. Can't you picture the both of us doing this after we get married—you in the dishpan and me with my cuffs rolled up?"

"I can't seem to get the view at all," Rosie giggled. "So we're going to get married, are we?"

Ottie shoved out his chest so far that three buttons on his pink silk shirt parted company with it hastily.

"Didn't you know that? Sure, we're going to open a health farm for millionaires. We'll reduce their weight and their bank rolls and fix 'em up if they got chilblains or chilly feet. We'll rent a pair of acres up around White Plains, Joe will loan us some Indian clubs and a punching bag and we'll get a building that will hold forty or fifty patients. You can cook for them, Cutey."

"Haven't we fun?" the little blonde laughed. "And will you let me wait on the table too?"

"Get me right!" was Ottie's answer. "Positively, you can! I ain't one of these here hogs that don't give their wives no liberty. For all I care you can do the cleaning, scrub a while, take care of the garden and keep the car clean. What more do you want?"

They were still bouncing the ball of conversation briskly about when Sing Lo stuck his head in the door an hour later.

"The lesson has concluded, Illustrious One."

"Then here's where we pass the hat!" Scandrel yelped. "Stand aside and leave me get to them."

He did a Jesse James on the three students, tossed Miss Mayfair a smile and asked Ovington what he thought of the pastime.

"Interesting! Oh, quite! Haw-haw, really, you know, it's more exciting than parchesi. I say, could I reserve three hours every morning until I become beastly proficient?"

Scandrel made a note on his cuff and nodded. Ovington rambled over to the doorway to wait for Beverly Mayfair, who drew alongside and gave Ottie a word.

"This game," she declared, "has so much more to it than bridge. To-day's lesson shows me how little I know. I would like to become adept in the shortest possible time. Do you suppose I could reserve two or three hours each morning for a sequence of lessons?"

She was assured that she could and sev-

eral minutes later Ovington was observed handing her into his big boat. Ottie chuckled as the car purred off.

"Pretty sweet for a starter, hey? I'll have the two of them running each other ragged yet. This love stuff is the same to me as anything else. When I dip into it I hang up a big score. Pardon me a minute while I seek a telephone booth and give Teeth the inside low-down on this."

He picked up his castor and rushed out. I turned to Sing Lo and found him gazing at a handkerchief as if it was something he had never seen before.

"Where did you get the wipe?" I inquired.

He indicated the chair beside him.

"It belongs to the radiant one whose hair traps the mystery of the dusk—the cuckoo for beauty and class. Ha! It is scented with the breath of the dreamy lotus. I will keep it and return it when she brings the glamour of the new day in with her on the morrow."

"You deal a wicked line, kid," I remarked. "Where did you pick up the Times Square patter?"

He rolled an eye toward the ceiling and smirked.

"For many months I have dwelt among you—far from the land of the graves of my exalted ancestors. Evil times have befallen me even as the winter follows the summer's warmth. I was in vaudeville for two years before the saps fell for this Mah Jong thing. In vaudeville," he added, "one receives a liberal education. Get me?"

A week and a half later both the dapper Ovington and the aristocratic Miss Mayfair couldn't have known more about the ancient game of the mandarins if they had been born and brought up together in Peking. They kept regular hours, they obeyed Sing Lo like a pair of tots in kindergarten and they took it all without a rumble—including the frequent bawlings out the almond eyes passed whenever they pulled a bone. It was true that Ovington burned half the chink's eyebrow off with a cigarette in a four-foot holder but that didn't even the score by a little. Anybody else save the overdressed Smart would have smacked the Oriental proper for some of the razz received. Sing Lo's temper didn't improve with practice. More than a couple of times I had an idea that the big chink was r'arin' to go.

Ovington gamely drank gallons of Rosie's tea, tipped the blond waitress five bills a swallow and bore up nobly under the hot-water cure. Scandrel claimed his silly laugh preyed on his nerves and a half a dozen times the only thing that kept him from slapping the society youth was my reminder of Mrs. Mortimer Mayfair. We both had to admit that familiarity was breeding what bore every resemblance to sentiment.

Beverly Mayfair departed daily in the gilded jobbie's motor and while she didn't spend her hours at the table gazing into his lovely eyes, the very fact that she had asked for the extra-study periods seemed to indicate she was finding something in Ovington that a detective couldn't have located with a warrant and a dark lantern. And Scandrel claimed the budding romance was the thing responsible for Sing Lo's uneven temper. Even that seemed reasonable. Just to watch them matching tiles and building their Walls showed any one that Sing was thrilled the same as a sardine at the sight of a can.

"It's due to click at any minute now," Scandrel informed me a week later. "The both of them couldn't learn nothing more and this here is their last lesson. I'll find out something this afternoon and you can scribble that in your diary. Teeth's been spending half the family fortune on phone calls and crying her eyes out for action. I'll get a line on when the wedding bells are due to jingle and pass it along. If she don't crack now I'll tell Mrs. M. to send down for an East Side wedding broker. I done all I could."

When the Winds had blown themselves out, the moon had been lost four times in the sea and the Seasons ran for the end book, Orlando Ovington crawled into a hairy topcoat that only needed a set of paws for a cage in the zoo. He picked up topper and stick, paid for the day's lesson and coughed.

"I say, Bev, old thing. Can I give you a lift?"

"I'll give him one myself with five knuckles if he don't take the air!" Ottie mumbled.

Miss Mayfair finished something she was saying to Sing Lo and shook her head.

"Thanks, not now, Lannie. I'm—I'm walking home."

Ovington tripped out and the instant the débutante had nodded to Sing Lo and turned away Ottie tapped her on the shoulder and ushered her into a corner.

"Er—now—one minute, girlie. I don't want to be sticking my beak into your personal business but you've got me in flames. Listen, I can see through you like a glass window, so don't play innocent. Wise me, girlie. When are you and that sweetie of yours going to stand up and get hooked?"

To my surprise the girl's pretty face grew tomato red. She gazed at Scandrel with round eyes and registered the utmost confusion. Then she moistened her lips and looked nervously about.

"So—so you've guessed my secret! I can rely upon you to keep it! Oh, you must —you can't—you simply can't understand what it means!"

Ottie rubbed his hands.

"Fear nothing. Me and Joe are misers with information. Honest, we wouldn't tell a stranger in town how to get to the Grand Central if he begged us on his knees. But don't be mean with it yourself, girlie. Just answer me one thing and we'll lay off. Is it due to break soon?"

Beverly Mayfair blushed all over again and kept her eyes on the floor.

"Very—soon. Don't ask me anything more. And now I must hurry. Somehow I feel that you have helped our romance along —you wonderful man with your wonderful intuition! Good-by—wish me lots of happiness!"

"Wonderful man!" Scandrel exclaimed when Sing Lo had dropped us a bow apiece and had shuffled out. "Ain't she the observing frill? I told you there was something to this Mah Junk game. Well, as Shakespeare says—laugh and the world laughs with you, weep and they give you the laugh. So much for so much. I'll collect Rosie now and air myself. I'm taking her to dinner over at a hash house on Second Avenue and to the pictures after that. I guess I deserve a little treat after this strain on the top piece."

He buttoned his jacket and strutted off in the direction of the kitchen. But he hadn't taken a dozen steps when two things happened in quick order.

The first was the arrival of a covered automobile outside and the other was the appearance of Mrs. Mortimer Mayfair, who flounced in, her teeth gleaming with indignation and her eyes snapping.

"Mr. Scandrel! So there you are! You needn't try to get away either!"

Ottie whirled around.

"Why, if it ain't Mrs. Mortimer herself! Just the little woman I was going to drop a nickel in the slot for. Yes, I wanted to telephone you the glad tidings. You'll be surprised——"

"I am surprised!" the woman said with considerable vehemence. "I took you at your word and trusted you. You've evidently made a miserable fiasco of things—I mean so far as my daughter and young Ovington are concerned!"

Scandrel looked at her dumbly.

"Stop right there! Your daughter's as crazy about Ovington as most foreigners are about garlic! And if you don't think so *you're* crazy!"

The society leader drew herself up to her full height.

"Then will you kindly explain how it is the young man has been spending nearly all of his evenings in company with some dancing girl in a Rialto café? Not an hour ago I had tea with his mother and the poor woman told me the worst!"

"Dancing girl—Rialto café?" I murmured, to give Ottie a chance to pull himself together.

"You're out of your mind!" he yelped. "Stupid and her are set for the preacher! His old lady must have been listening in on a busy wire. Dancing gal, is it? This sounds like a song and dance!"

If looks had been stilettos Mrs. Mortimer Mayfair would have been half of Italy.

"I hardly think I'm wrong. Still, seeing is believing. I want you both to accompany me to-night to this resort. Mrs. Ovington has begged me to break off this sordid flirtation and since you are the one responsible in a measure, you may do the breaking. That is final!"

"You're on!" the big tramp bellowed with a goofy grin. "And if you're right on this I'll break his jaw while I'm at it! Gimme time for a bath and a chance to slip on an evening frock and I'm with you. Flirtation, you say? I'll wear one of Silly's ears for a wrist watch, I will for a fact!"

Ten o'clock the same evening, as the expression is, beheld us cruising down Longacre Square in one of the Mayfair motors. Our destination was the Palais Paresis, one of the Broadway playgrounds whose popularity dated back to the days of cracked ice and brass footrails. The café was one of those places where you spent money from the time you checked your hat until you

got it back again—if you did. The place was famous for its orchestra, its meat and drink and the green-dollar boys that wore out their shoes on its polished floor.

You know what I mean.

We alighted at its portals and charged up the steps. Once inside the front door, however, a big banana dolled like the admiral of a Siamese flagship stepped forward and gave us his palm.

"One minute!" he barked. "Have you reservations? We're capacity this evening."

Our hostess promptly pushed a way to the fore.

"Reservations indeed!" she said in a tone cold enough to make an Eskimo turn up his coat collar. "Young man, you must be a new employee here. I am Mrs. Mortimer Mayfair. Inform Jules that I have——"

Pompous kept the hand up like a traffic cop.

"Listen, lady. If you were the Queen of Bulgaria you couldn't get in here to-night without a reservation on the board. Are you deef? I told you already we're capacity. We're full—if you get my meaning!"

Scandrel, licking his lips, waited until Mrs. Mayfair stepped aside. Then he dropped a careless left hook into the doorman's waistcoat, handed the society woman over the other's prostrate form with courtly grace and threw me a wink.

"We're capacity, are we? Never mind jewels, Mrs. M. I'll get you a table if I have to fight the whole place. Come on, Joe!"

Another round of minutes and we were halfway down the crowded aisle. In the middle of the building was a deserted ringside table that proved to be Ottie's prey. Stopping only to nonchalantly tear up the "Reserved" card that adorned he center of it, he pulled out chairs, waved us into them and sat down himself—as pleased as a horse with a red, red apple.

Then, as he tied a napkin under his chin, Mrs. Mayfair gave vent to an excited exclamation.

"I knew I was right! There he is now! How contemptible of Orlando—how low!"

She nodded fiercely out at the dance floor while Ottie and I stared.

Sure enough, Ovington, in a dark-blue dinner jacket with black-velvet lapels, was drifting along in the throng, dancing a carefree rigadoon with a strikingly pretty girl who wore a silver-net evening gown, hair one shade blonder than Rosie Ray's and a demure smile.

Ovington was looking into her eyes as if hypnotized by them!

"So this is the way he's been foxing me with them Mah Jong lessons!" Scandrel hissed. "Sweet mamma! But what a gal, can't you hear me saying it? Look at them little feet on her, Joe. Wouldn't you enjoy having her step on your neck? And look at them little hands—what a pleasure to drop the pay envelope into them on Saturday night! And look——"

"Her name is Pearl Parmentier!" Mrs. Mortimer Mayfair moaned. "Are you going to sit there and admire her or are you going to do something?"

"Something!"

Tearing the napkin away Ottie cleared the side lines in a leap and a bound. He knocked a few couples out of his way and dove into the center of the floor. When we saw him again he was leading Orlando Ovington back by the back of the neck. The girl in the silver evening gown followed a few paces behind, her eyes and mouth wide.

"I knew I shouldn't have believed all those tales he was telling me about his wealth," she mumbled. "What's the charge, officer?"

"Don't worry your little head about it," Ottie said over his shoulder. "Run along now and roll your hoop and I'll give you the broadcasting some other time. This," he snarled at Ovington, "is a swell way to feed the hand that's been biting you and fixing you up with a wife who plays a dashing game of Chinese dominoes. Get your hat and coat—I'm going to stick beside you until you're wed—if I have to read the ceremony myself!"

Orlando Ovington looked at Mrs. Mayfair, at me, and then at his captor witlessly.

"You insufferable blighter!" he raved. "What does this outrage mean? Are you demented or is this some sort of a hideous joke?"

"Matrimony," I pointed out, "is never a joke."

"Ain't Joe right?" Ottie cut in. "Come, Mrs. Mayfair. We'll take Idiotic up to your house and if your daughter Beverly is at home we'll get her and run them over to Jersey where they can be married."

"Beverly!" Ovington cried, as if seeing a

dazzling light. "Haw-haw! So that's what is in the wind? You don't have to go all the way up to East Sixty-fifth Street, Mrs. Mayfair. Dear old Bev is just across the way—with her sweetheart. There she is now, looking at us, the jolly old soul."

"Sweetheart!"

The society leader helped herself to the smelling salts and made a dash across the polished dance floor with the speed of galloping consumption.

In the next dozen heart throbs the four of us were planted in front of a choice table where the dark-haired Beverly, an etching in some six-o'clock clothes worth a fortune, sat with a tall, broad-shouldered young man whose appearance was as Celtic as the County Mayo.

"Beverly!" Mrs. Mayfair screamed. "What does this mean? Who is this——"

The girl lifted a finger for silence and nodded toward the café customers whose eyes and ears were hanging out like a Monday wash.

"There is no need for excitement, mother. The deed has been done We obtained our license this morning and were married at half past seven. Let me introduce you to Terry Noonan, your new son-in-law. Oh, he's just the cleverest thing! He's been in vaudeville, playing a part in that sketch called 'A Night in Chinatown' and——"

She was interrupted by the final moan Mrs. Mortimer Mayfair gave before she passed entirely out of the picture for keeps.

"'A Night in Chinatown?'" Scandrel hollered, while Ovington and four waiters threw glasses of water on the fallen member of the "400." "Hey, listen——"

Noonan, pushing back his chair, stood.

"Illustrious One, Confucius tells us that the road of life is short. Long have I waited for this hour of my rapture!"

Ottie fell back, his mouth as open as Cuba.

"Sing Lo, or I can make a submarine out of a derby hat!"

For a fact, it was!

"Push out your pan and let's get it over with!" the ex-chink snapped, sending over a right jab that was twice as fast as electricity.

The punch caught the dumfounded Scandrel on the button and added another point to the score of those on the floor!

Two afternoons later I reached The Fiery Dragon Tea Room and found a van from a secondhand furniture store backed up at the curb. Two colored boys were busy throwing bamboo tables and chairs into it with joyous abandon while in the shop itself, friend Ottie, as spruce as a tree, was giving directions with the tip of his walking stick.

"Have a care with that statue of Buddie," he said when I entered. "Look out for them crates of dishes. Hustle it up, fellars. I can't be wasting my time around here."

"So ends the adventure," I mumured, joining him. "What of the fair and deft-handed Rosie?"

Ottie curled an immediate lip.

"Don't you never read a paper, Joe? She and Nonsense—you know, Ovington—eloped last night together, were married, and the two of them are now on the kid's private yacht bound for Paris or Palm Beach or some of them other European watering places. You can't tie them money babies can you? Well, maybe it's just as well at that."

I looked at him suspiciously.

"What do you mean—just as well?"

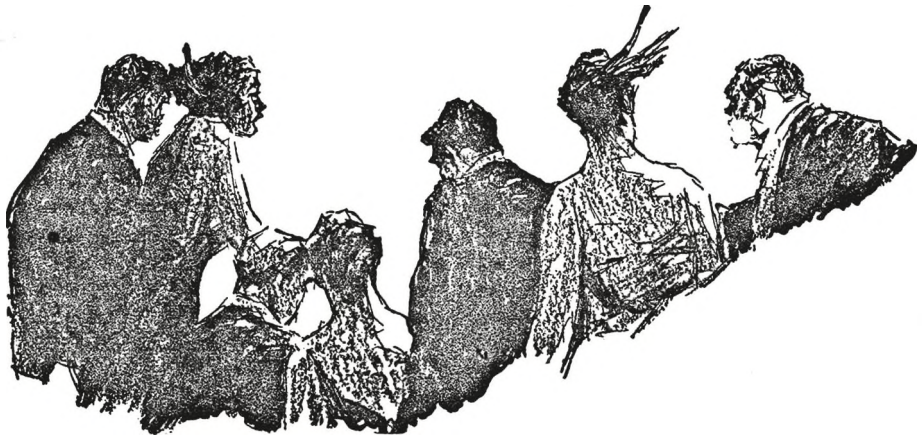
Scandrel laughed and stole a glance at his watch.

"I mean don't be asking me questions when I've got a date on the half hour with the most beautiful thing on Broadway. The name is Pearl Parmentier, so maybe you've heard of her. And listen. Besides her beauty she knows absolutely nothing about Mah Junk and don't want to. What could be nicer, I ask you?"

Another Montanye story in the next issue.

MOVIES MAKE 'EM MILK

THE problem of how to keep the boys and girls "down on the farm" seems to have been solved by Mr. J. A. Chaloner, of Cobhan, Virginia, who, to keep the help on his dairy farm from emigrating to the cities, converted a large barn into a motion-picture theater. The project was so successful that he hopes to see the scheme adopted all over the country.



Red and Black

By Percival Wilde

Author of "The Poker Dog," "The Run of the Cards," Etc.

The reformed gambler solves a little problem in elimination of chance.

SOME men are born mean; others achieve meanness; still others have meanness thrust upon them. Whitney Burnside was all three.

If there was anything in heredity Whitney had inherited largely from his father, Jeffrey Burnside, who had gone to an unlamented grave leaving behind not a single person to call himself his friend. Jeffrey Burnside had begun life filled with the conviction that if he did not look out for himself, nobody else might be expected to do so, and he had looked out for himself so exceedingly well that long before his fortieth year he had been compelled to retain a firm of lawyers whose exclusive business was to extricate him from his troubles. Not that Jeffrey Burnside ever violated the statutes: far from it. Well posted, well advised, and utterly unscrupulous, Burnside had sailed very close indeed to the wind—and had never capsized.

After his notorious falling out with his partner, for instance, Burnside had been decisively blackballed at the Windsor Club; but Faulkner, his victim, had been compelled to admit that he had been ruined by strictly legal methods. Burnside had grimly seized a sheet of ledger paper, had entered in the credit column the amount of which he had despoiled his trustful partner, and had set opposite it, as a debit, the item "Blackballed—Windsor Club." He had grinned. "At that rate," he had reflected, "I'd like to be blackballed at some more clubs."

He ended his life as stormily as he had lived it: dropped dead in an apoplectic seizure, and left his seventeen-year-old son an estate mounting far into the millions.

Whitney Burnside bade fair to carry on in his father's footsteps. Tall, powerfully built, heavily muscled, he had never succeeded in whipping an adversary even approaching him in size. Picked at sight for his college football squad, he had been ignominiously dismissed after two or three scrimmages had revealed the presence of a large, ineradicable streak of yellow. He had revenged himself by betting heavily against the team, a proceeding which had not added noticeably to his popularity, and the fact that he won regularly from less affluent classmates and thereupon bet upon a still larger scale made him disliked still more acutely.

His roommate had preached the subject of loyalty to him. Whitney had listened with a superior smile, to counter heavily with the question, "What do you expect me to do? Throw away my good money because we've got a rotten team?"

"Other fellows are doing it: fellows who can't afford it nearly so well as you."

"I know that." Whitney laughed and slapped his trousers pocket. "I've got some of their losings right here."

With an effort his roommate kept his temper. "I've got just one request to make of you: if you won't bet on the team, at any rate, don't bet against it."

"Why not?"

"Well, hang it all, man, it's our team, don't you see?"

Whitney did not see and most emphatically did not want to see. "I bet to make money," he proclaimed. "I can make more money betting against the team than betting on it. That's what I'm going to keep right on doing."

There may have been no connection between the two events, but exactly twenty-four hours later a self-appointed committee escorted Whitney from his room to a secluded spot far away from the campus, laid him over a barrel, and paddled him until he howled for mercy.

After graduation Whitney ran true to form. It was not for him to settle down into the dreary rut of business: his father had left him so large a fortune that Whitney could never hope to spend it. It was far more congenial to the young man's temperament to become a gentleman of leisure, to spend his winters in Florida and his summers abroad, to extricate himself from one embarrassing episode only to become entangled in another.

There was Carlotta, for example, daughter of the good-natured Italian who ran a fruit stand around the corner of the street in which the Burnside mansion occupied its place in the sun. The newspapers never ascertained just what took place, but it was an undeniable fact that Whitney staggered home one night with both eyes blackened and his coat in tatters, while Joe, Carlotta's father, strutted up and down at his stand, proud as any fighting cock, and without a mark on him.

After that adventure Whitney invariably carried a cane, artfully made of a steel tube painted to resemble wood. It weighed several pounds and would undoubtedly crush any head unlucky enough to be struck with it. Whitney consoled himself with the reflection that it would be useful were he ever again cowardly attacked by a man half his size.

There had followed the usual adventures with susceptible members of the chorus—rather more than the usual number—and at the ripe age of thirty Whitney had decided to settle down. His choice had fallen upon a nice girl—a really nice girl—a girl so nice that after accepting him, because her family was poor, the thought of Whitney somehow cast the Burnside millions into the shade and caused her, most unexpectedly, to change her mind and reject him. Wealth had its advantages, she had reflected, but not ten times Whitney's wealth could make Whitney's wife happy. She allowed Whitney's engagement to drag along three months. At the end of that time she gave Whitney's self-esteem a sad jolt by eloping with another man. Whitney declared he would never forgive her, but in spite of that she lived happily ever after. For his part, Whitney reached the age of thirty-three with a short temper, a well-developed paunch, and a sluggish liver.

II.

Back in the eighteen-eighties a group of Westerners, well supplied with money, and in need of a gathering place where its researches into the great American game of poker might be pursued undisturbed, founded the Himalaya Club. To it the original founders elected their friends—and the friends of their friends—and the friends of their friends several times removed, the sole and sufficient membership qualification being the ability to pay one's losses. The natural result was that the club became a compound of new-rich and old-rich, of suddenly made millionaires to whom plunging was the breath of life and of men who, along with their wealth, had inherited a taste for gambling. Scions of the oldest and staidest families rubbed shoulders with men who had been unheard of a few months before, with men, in many cases, whom they would not have dreamed of introducing into their own homes.

In time many of the newly rich settled down and became staid. But more than once enterprising sharpers, seeing a golden opportunity, obtained membership in the Himalaya and lined their pockets richly before departing. In the Himalaya social distinctions simply did not exist. A plethoric bank roll was the best of all possible introductions. Further than that it was unnecessary to go.

"Once," Tony Claghorn liked to explain, "a man was blackballed because he had the Asiatic cholera. But that was long ago." Being one of the respectable minority which came to the club in search of a thrill, Tony could afford to jest. But Whitney Burnside, who had joined promptly upon graduating from college, proudly spoke of the Himalaya as "my club." Subconsciously, perhaps, Whitney realized that there was not another club in the metropolis to which he could have been elected. Wisely he made the most of what he had.

Whitney's visiting cards bore the legend "Himalaya Club" in a lower corner; the Himalaya Club was Whitney's forwarding address; most of Whitney's evenings were spent in the club quarters. And when Whitney had a tale of woe to tell he could always buttonhole some fellow member of the Himalaya and pour the story into his ear. The response would generally be a series of sympathetic grunts. Whitney found them consoling.

"I've been robbed," he complained bitterly to Tony one evening. "I've been robbed just the same as if highwaymen had pushed me up against the wall, pointed a loaded gun at me and cleaned out my pockets."

Tony Claghorn smiled. One of Whitney's endearing traits was a chronic inability to lose graciously. Tony had seen him play poker, at a ten-dollar limit, match coins, at twenty-five dollars and more a throw, and indulge in bridge at a dollar a point; had seen him lose at all three pastimes, and had yet to hear him attribute a loss to the superior skill of an antagonist. If Whitney won, and that could not help happening at intervals, he never tired of relating how his expertness had brought about that result; but if he lost, and that happened much more frequently, he had invariably been robbed —and did not hesitate to say so. "I seem to have heard those words before," Tony commented, stifling an impulse to throw a convenient ash tray at the fat, foolish face so near his own. "According to my recollection you are the most-robbed man I ever met. It's about time for you to put a new record on your phonograph."

"I'm serious, Claghorn. I've been robbed: shamelessly robbed."

"Again?"

"I may have been wrong in the past. But this time there's no doubt about it."

"Well, what do you take me for? A policeman?"

Whitney seized his arm. "Listen, old man," he pleaded, "I heard how you helped Ted Wayland out of a hole. Do as much for me."

"And how do you expect me to do that?"

"I wish I knew," confessed Whitney.

Tony leaped at the chance to end the interview. "If you don't know, I'm sure I don't. Good night."

Again Whitney seized his arm. "Just a minute," he begged. "They've gotten into me for more than a hundred thousand."

"What?" gasped Tony.

"More than a hundred thousand," repeated Whitney.

"Dollars?"

"Good American money."

Tony made a wry face. "If you had to lose that much, why didn't you invite me to sit in the game? I'm one of the few men who would have known just what to do with that amount of change."

"Be serious," Whitney urged. "I'm not talking about stage money."

"What were you playing? Poker?"

"No."

"Well, what was it?"

Shamefacedly Whitney hung his head. "The game was—ahem—it was roulette."

"The poker game at the Himalaya wasn't stiff enough for you? You had to go outside?"

"I thought I'd have better luck."

"Perhaps you did," Tony philosophized. "You've lost so much that now you'll lay off gambling for a while."

"But it wasn't gambling: it was just robbery."

"If you knew that, I don't see why you played."

Whitney swallowed hard. "I thought I could beat it," he confessed. "Of course there's nothing in playing the numbers: the odds are too heavily against you. But red and black, even money, ought to win in the long run if you keep on doubling your bets every time you lose."

"But you didn't win?"

Tony's informant shook his head. "You've got no idea how soon bets run into real money if you just double them half a dozen times. Do you realize that you can start betting as little as ten dollars, and that if you double every time you lose, you'll be putting up over five thousand dol-

lars on the tenth spin? And then, if you win, you're ahead just ten dollars, and if you lose, you're out ten thousand."

"That's a good game to keep away from."

"Of course, it's a million-to-one shot that you won't lose ten times hand running."

"But I take it that that's just what happened."

"Even more so," Whitney confessed. "I was betting on the red: and the ball dropped into the black thirteen consecutive times."

Tony whistled. "I've always heard that thirteen was unlucky."

"It was for me. I stopped doubling after the tenth loss. They wouldn't let me bet any higher. I just strung along, playing the limit."

"And lost a hundred thousand at a sitting?"

"No," corrected Whitney, "it took three evenings."

"Even at that," commented Tony dryly, "you got action for your money. Nothing slow about roulette!"

Whitney Burnside brought his fist down on an ash tray with a crash. "Claghorn," he declared, "that game was crooked! Thirteen consecutive blacks prove that! I'll give anything to show it up!"

"And how does that affect me?"

"I want you to do for me what you did for Ted Wayland."

Tony smiled. Ted Wayland, his wife's relative, had fallen in with a sharper. Tony had tried to help him; with the result that Tony himself had been artistically shorn. Thereupon Bill Parmelee, a reformed gambler, had come to the rescue, and, as told in the tale of "The Poker Dog," had neatly turned the tables on the crook.

Nevertheless Tony was receiving credit which he hastened to disclaim. "I tried to help Wayland," he admitted, "and I made an awful mess of it."

"That's not what the boys say."

"But it's the truth nevertheless. I thought I was going to show how smart I could be," said Tony candidly. "I found out I wasn't nearly smart enough. Then a fellow named Bill Parmelee, a man I had met on my vacation, came down to New York and did the trick so easily that it was almost a joke."

Whitney Burnside nodded. "Then Parmelee's the man I want."

"What do you want of him?"

"He's got to prove that roulette game crooked! Nobody can fleece me and get away with it! He's got to show up that gang, and then I'll run them out of town!"

"And what makes you think that Parmelee would help you?"

"He's got his price, hasn't he?" With millions at his command Whitney found few things in life which could not be purchased. "Name his figure—I'll pay it."

Tony reflected. On two separate occasions Bill Parmelee had come to his aid. On the first, his recompense had been a few words of thanks. On the second, his fee had consisted of a mongrel dog with a market value of rather less than fifty cents. Tony had not even been allowed to defray the cost of Parmelee's railway tickets. But sober second thought told Tony that Whitney Burnside did not fall in the class of men for whom other men gladly did favors. About Whitney there was nothing lovable. His talent for making enemies was highly developed. It would take him barely five minutes, Tony foresaw, to antagonize Bill Parmelee, easy-going and good natured as the latter was. Tony himself, patient and long suffering, had been on bad terms with Whitney more than once; had, in fact, been secretly delighted when Whitney confided the huge total of his losses to him.

"Name his figure," rasped Whitney a second time. "What's his charge? Out with it!"

"Five thousand dollars," said Tony decisively.

"What?"

"Five thousand dollars," Tony repeated.

"It's robbery!" declared the young millionaire. "I won't pay it!"

"Then that ends the matter." Tony heaved a sigh of relief and headed for the door.

"Wait a minute! Wait a minute! Perhaps he'll take less."

"I won't allow him to."

Whitney hesitated. "You think he'll show them up?"

"I don't know. But there won't be any charge if he doesn't."

Whitney's eyes narrowed. "All right, Claghorn," he said. "If Parmelee proves that roulette game crooked I'll pay him five thousand dollars. Is that satisfactory?"

Tony extracted a blank check from his pocket. "I believe you and I keep our balances with the same bank. You might write out a check for the amount to my order."

"What's the matter?" blustered Burnside. "Isn't my word good? Don't you trust me?"

"Who does?" countered Tony candidly. "Honest, Burnside, would you trust yourself?" He filled out the body of the check and passed the pen to Whitney. "Here," he invited, "sign on the dotted line."

III.

"Infernal cheek, I call it," declared Whitney. "Here I hire this Parmelee fellow to come to New York and do a job for me, and he writes me to meet him at the station. He must think I'm a taxi driver."

Tony laughed. "Perhaps you expected him to crawl into your presence and kiss your hand."

"I didn't expect him to start ordering me around. I'm the employer, you know. Any orders that are given will come from me."

Tony nodded sagely. "I can see that you're going to get along well with him."

"He's taking my money, isn't he?"

"And giving you value received for it."

"That reminds me," said Whitney. "There's a point I want to discuss with you before we meet him. Really, don't you think we've agreed to pay him too much?"

Young Burnside had apparently given the matter considerable thought. Half the agreed sum; or even a quarter, or a tenth, had struck him, upon careful reflection, as being ample compensation for the proposed service. He mentioned as much to Parmelee when they met in the lunch room at Grand Central Station, and felt freer to mention it when he noted that Parmelee was of slight build and rather less than half his own weight. "When Mr. Claghorn recommended you to me," he explained, "I expected to find you a man of at least fifty, with a lifetime of experience behind him. Instead of that you're just a young fellow, not thirty——"

"Not twenty-five," corrected Bill genially.

Whitney accepted the correction. "Not twenty-five," he repeated. "I expected you to be a man of broad knowledge, not—if you will pardon me—just a hick." He smiled engagingly. "I hope you will pardon my frankness. I'm always outspoken. I say what I think—just like that."

"Go right ahead," Bill encouraged.

"To a man of mature years I would have paid a fee commensurate with his standing. Indeed, Mr. Claghorn and I tentatively spoke of an absurdly large sum. But to a young man like yourself, a young man with his future before him, the chance to work for me should be almost enough compensation in itself. Don't you think so?"

"I'm not doing any thinking. I'm just listening to you. Go on."

"If you handle this case successfully," pursued Whitney, "the advertising should be valuable. I will recommend you to my friends—in my clubs——" Whitney belonged only to the Himalaya, but Bill could hardly be expected to know that. "I'll do my best to put some business in your way. I'll even do better than that: the minute I'm satisfied that you've earned the money I'll hand you a couple of hundred dollars. It ought to go pretty far in the country." He beamed upon Parmelee. "Now, what do you say?"

Bill exploded into laughter. "Burnside," he remarked, "I had heard that you were a cheap skate, but I didn't think you were quite so cheap!"

"What do you mean?" sputtered Whitney.

"Don't I talk good English?" inquired Bill. "You're mean—you're petty—you're contemptible—you're small. You have a soul which would be too little for a dried-up bacillus and your ideas of honesty would make an ordinary self-respecting sneak thief blush. Aside from that I don't like your face, and I don't like the way you dress, and I don't like your manner of speaking. Now, if I've said anything you don't like, just put it in your pipe and smoke it."

Tony rose in alarm, expecting Whitney to leap at his friend's throat. But the young millionaire did nothing of the kind. Perhaps he had decided that Bill's slight frame was too well muscled. Perhaps he had made up his mind that a certain freedom of speech must be permitted to a farmer, a mere hick. Whatever the explanation he said nothing whatsoever in reply, while a sickly smile spread frozenly over his features.

Bill nodded his approval. "You've been doing a lot of talking. Now you'll do a little listening. You think I asked you to meet me at this station because I've just arrived on a train. You're wrong. I've been in New York forty-eight hours, looking over the ground. I visited the gambling house at which you played last night. I played red and black myself. I've made up

my mind on the question of whether or not the game is crooked. And I've asked you to meet me at this station because I know all about you, because I know the kind of tinhorn sport you are, and because if you went back on your word—as you seem to want to—all I would have to do would be to jump on the next train home." He pulled out his watch and glanced at it. "You've got just seven minutes to make up your mind. Either you come through—live up to your agreement to the letter—or I drop out of this, here and now. To be perfectly candid, I don't care particularly what you do. I'm not hard up. I don't need your money. And I won enough at roulette last night to pay me for my trip a good many times over." He glanced at his watch again. "Six and a half minutes left. Well?"

Whitney smiled ingratiatingly. "My dear fellow," he said, "you don't imagine that I was serious in what I said before? I promised Mr. Claghorn to pay you a certain amount. You shall have every cent of it. Why, Mr. Claghorn doubtless has my check in his pocket this very minute!"

"Doubtless," assented Bill. He smiled grimly. "Burnside, if you mean business, if you want me to go further, you might give me an earnest of your good faith by telephoning your bank and revoking the stop-payment order you issued on that check the morning after you wrote it."

IV.

When Whitney Burnside, after a brief visit to the telephone, had departed, oozing cordiality and overflowing with what Bill described as "slimy politeness," Tony turned to his friend. "How on earth did you know that he had stopped payment on the check?" he demanded in utter amazement.

Bill laughed.

"I didn't know it myself," pursued Tony, "and I haven't the least idea how you could have found it out. Even if you knew on what bank he had drawn—which you didn't—you couldn't have walked in and asked questions about the private business of one of their depositors. They wouldn't have answered them for a stranger. How did you know?"

"I didn't know," admitted Bill, "but I knew the kind of man I was dealing with. Friend Whitney was running true to form—that was all." He put on his hat and led the way to the door. "Come; let's walk uptown. I have some business to attend to."

Much to Tony's bewilderment his friend turned into an obscure side street and piloted him into an establishment dealing in optical goods. "Finished?" he demanded of the proprietor.

"Not fifteen minutes ago."

He handed Bill a curious affair of leather and metal, which the latter promptly examined with care.

"What is it?" inquired Tony, with eager curiosity.

"Well, what do you think it is?"

"It looks like a pocket camera—but when you look at it more closely you see it isn't a camera; and it looks like a pair of binoculars—but it's quite plain that it isn't; and it has some resemblance to spectacles—though it can't be that."

Bill nodded vigorously. "You're right—and wrong—on every guess. It isn't any one of the three, though it's a little of all of them."

"What do you call it?"

"Considering that I didn't invent it until this morning, at precisely ten minutes of six, I haven't gotten around to naming it yet." He smiled at the aged proprietor of the establishment. "What would you call it?"

The man flung up his hands. "I made it according to your instructions, Mr. Parmelee, and I hope you like it, but I can't even guess what you're going to do with it. If it's an invention, why don't you patent it?"

"Now that's not a bad idea," assented Bill. "Maybe I will." He waved a solemn hand toward the curious instrument. "This," he announced, "is what I call a roulettoscope."

"A what?" inquired Tony.

"A roulettoscope."

"There's no such thing!"

Bill grinned as he patted his invention. "There is now."

To Tony's vexation he refused to answer innumerable questions during the remainder of the afternoon. "It may not work," he admitted frankly, "and if it doesn't work I'll be glad I didn't do any blowing in advance."

"But it may work."

"I expect it to work," said Bill, "and if that happens I promise you you'll have a chance to see it in action."

Tony snorted. "Do you know what I think? I think you're kidding me."

Bill nodded. "I may be kidding myself too," he confessed. "I wasn't brought up to be an inventor. This is my first attempt and it's quite possible that it won't be a good one. Now, let's change the subject: do you believe the Lord created Whitney Burnside, or is he just something that sprouted in a mushroom cellar?"

V.

Once upon a time, when the present generation was younger than it is to-day, a widely known and popular song celebrated the fame of "The Man Who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo." But no song has ever been written to celebrate the innumerable banks which have broken men in nearly every city in the world. Such a song would not be popular. So rarely does the man break the bank that the event deserves headlines. So infallibly does the bank break the man that the episode is not worth notice.

Luck—the greenhorn's idol—whispers that he may be the fortunate person who is an exception to the rule; that he may be the rare individual who leaves the roulette table richer than when he sat down at it. Science—and to this the professional gambler bows—points out cold-bloodedly that in the long run approximately six cents out of every dollar hazarded in the game will find their way into the bank's coffers. It is the percentage in favor of the house: the dividend mathematically earned by the zero and the double zero. There is no escaping it; no getting away from it. For a time a player may win—not from the bank, but from other players—but sooner or later, as decreed by the immutable laws of chance, he will part with every dollar that he has. To the bank it makes not the least difference who wins and who loses: the percentage is there. Winner and loser, whatever their ups and downs, will pay it in the end. The bank, for the convenience of providing a wheel, a croupier, a dozen chairs, a floor underfoot and a roof overhead, will eventually take its toll.

When "Honest Jim" Floyd—any professional gambler who reaches the age of fifty without a trip to jail has a right to the sobriquet of "Honest"—first started in business, it was his intention to give his patrons a run for their money: to use a fair wheel and to be content with the percentage that it earned. The rewards were ample. Honest Jim had simple tastes: a peck or so of five-carat diamonds distributed over his person; a town house and a country house; a pair of prize-winning trotting horses—this was back in the 'nineties; and the game enabled him to gratify them. The patrons of his various establishments were supplied with unlimited champagne, with the choicest cigars, and when their turns came to part with their last dollars it was Honest Jim's boast that no gambling house, in any part of the world, sent them on their way in better style than his. His own carriage would take them to the station; transportation in the Palace cars of the period would be supplied gratis, and the departing victim of the laws of chance might reflect that even losing—if one lost to Jim Floyd—had its compensations.

But with the coming of the twentieth century there was a change. The percentage—six per cent—was no longer sufficient. More than that was demanded by corrupt officials for protection, and if it was not forthcoming, raids, with their destruction of furniture and with their damage to the following of the house were even more expensive. In desperation Honest Jim had moved from city to city, to find the same conditions prevailing everywhere; to find himself, for the first time in a long life, contending with a game which was even more unbeatable than his own. One by one his diamonds vanished; his town and country houses went under the hammer; his fast horses died off, and were not replaced. The times, reflected Honest Jim, were sadly out of joint—and getting out of jointer.

The year 1910 found him acting as a croupier in a Chicago establishment; 1915 saw him following the same pursuit in San Francisco; 1920 witnessed him amassing a small but sufficient capital, and the following year inaugurated his own little game, discreetly housed in the mazes of New York City itself. He had fallen into the depths, had risen again, and now, having deferred to changed conditions by investing in a wheel that was gifted in strange and mysterious ways, was rising very rapidly indeed. Instead of the conventional six per cent, Honest Jim's game now could be made to pay very nearly one hundred per cent. Diamonds were again sprouting in his ample shirt front. A sporty roadster had replaced

the trotting horses of the previous century. Honest Jim was on his way to prosperity.

When Bill Parmelee and Tony Claghorn made their way to Floyd's establishment in the evening, Whitney Burnside was already there.

"You can come and watch, if you like," Bill had told him on parting, "but remember that you don't know me. It would make Floyd suspicious if you brought anybody along with you."

That Whitney had remembered his instructions was evident when he gazed into Bill's face with no sign of recognition. But the young millionaire had not been able to resist the lure of the game for the few minutes he had been compelled to wait. He was one of a group gathered about the roulette table and the pile of chips at his elbow showed that he had not been content to remain a spectator. He was not betting on the numbers: that he considered too risky. As always, he was playing red and black, hazarding small fortunes on each turn of the wheel.

Quietly Bill dropped into a vacant chair and pushed a ten-dollar bill into the square representing the black. He won. He waited a few minutes, and bet a second bill on the red. Again he won. A third time he bet, apparently at random, and won still again.

He rose from the table, and beckoned to Tony. "Looks easy, doesn't it?"

Tony gazed into Bill's innocent face, noted the twinkle in his blue eyes, and smiled. "Why are you stopping?"

"Oh, I'm here for business—not for pleasure."

Drawing his friend into an inconspicuous corner, Bill extracted the roulettoscope from a capacious pocket, leveled it at the gaming table, and gazed through it intently.

"Does it work?" whispered Tony.

"Like a dream!" chortled Bill.

"Let me see."

Bill handed over the instrument. "First you focus it," he explained, then you press this lever, and when you're ready, you press the little button."

Tony followed directions, to witness nothing more than a brief flash, during which, for a fraction of a second, roulette wheel, croupier, and players were visible.

"Get it?" whispered Bill.

"Get what?"

"Can't you see the wheel's crooked?"

"No."

Bill nudged him violently. "Well, act as if you did. Floyd's coming this way."

The proprietor of the establishment sauntered in their direction with the dignity befitting his years and prosperity. Tall, erect, with a clean-shaven face and kindly eyes, he bore little resemblance to the popular conception of what a professional gambler should look like. Diamonds he wore galore: but the heavily waxed black mustache, the paunchy abdomen, and the huge cigars generally associated with the rôle were conspicuous by their absence. Such an appearance, Honest Jim Floyd knew only too well, would more readily repel than attract patrons. It might be in order in a Western mining camp; but in the metropolis it would be far too striking. He found it more profitable to cultivate the outward aspect of an elderly clergyman—if one can imagine a clergyman lavishly adorned with jewelry.

"Something new, Mr. Grant?" inquired Floyd, addressing Bill.

"A little invention of my own," said Parmelee. For obvious reasons he had thought it well to adopt a *nom de guerre.*

"And what do you do with it?"

Bill lowered his voice. "You point it at the roulette wheel while it's revolving, and then——"

"Yes?"

"If you know what to look for, sometimes you find it. Is that correct, Mr. Claghorn?"

Tony, who had not understood a word, nodded with owllike solemnity. "Yes, indeed," he asserted. "Very remarkable invention."

Honest Jim Floyd stretched out a hand. "May I?" he asked.

"Of course," said Bill, and explained the operation of the instrument.

Being a professional gambler, Jim Floyd had cultivated a poker face, and not a muscle in it moved as he gazed through the roulettoscope for what seemed an eternity to Tony. Time and again he set the lever; time and again he pressed the little button. His hand did not tremble as finally he lowered the apparatus from his eyes. "Very wonderful, Mr. Grant; very wonderful. Am I correct in assuming that this little instrument is for sale?"

"Of course."

Floyd bowed and waved his hand with dignity. "If you will walk into my office I will be glad to discuss the price with you."

Whitney Burnside, watching out of the

corner of his eye, had expected nothing less than a hand-to-hand combat. He was immensely surprised as he saw Floyd and Parmelee, arm in arm, conversing amiably, stroll out of the room together. He was still more surprised when Tony, fifteen minutes later, whispered into his ear, "It's all over. Parmelee says you're to meet him at my apartment to-morrow morning."

VI.

When one has looked forward to a sensational exposé, a quiet evening, unmarked by any unusual feature, is likely to be disappointing. Whitney Burnside felt it so. Waiting for the bomb to explode, he had not hesitated to play even more recklessly than usual—in the brief space of half an hour he had separated himself from some thousands of dollars—and then the bomb had not exploded. He had expected a grand climax, having for its central feature a ceremony in which Floyd would return to him the sum total of his losings. Feeling this, he had not hesitated to lose still more. And then the climax had failed to put in an appearance.

Whitney Burnside was distinctly vexed as he applied his brakes with a screech and leaped from his car at the entrance to Tony's apartment. But his hopes revived as the elevator whisked him skyward. Perhaps the lovely sight of Honest Jim Floyd in handcuffs, with a detective on either side, might greet him. Perhaps the table in Tony's living room might be covered an inch deep with the yellowbacks with which Whitney had so reluctantly parted. Tony had said, "It's all over." Whitney's spirits rose an inch or so.

But no tableau greeted him as he entered the apartment. Instead, Bill, nodding a curt greeting, led him directly to a huge object occupying most of the room, and whisked aside a cloth. "Recognize it?" Bill inquired.

"Of course," said Whitney coldly. "It's a roulette table."

"Not *a* roulette table," corrected Bill; "it's *the* roulette table; the table at which you played last night. Sit down and I'll demonstrate. You're betting on red, let us say. Now watch!" A dozen times Bill spun the wheel; a dozen times the ball dropped into a black compartment. "Get it?"

"How many more times will black show up?" inquired Whitney, fascinated.

"As often as you want it to. Twenty times; fifty times; a hundred times."

"Then all I have to do is bet on black."

Silently Bill twirled the wheel, and for the first time the ball came to rest in a red pocket. "Betting on black wouldn't help you."

"But I could shift," persisted the slow-witted young millionaire. "I could bet on red and black alternately."

"And the ball would drop black and red alternately. Watch." Again he turned the wheel, and the ball, as if charmed, obeyed his directions. "You asked me to prove that Floyd's game was crooked. Have I proved it?"

"How is it done?" countered Whitney.

"Very simply. A roulette wheel is supposed to be divided into equal compartments by copper bands."

"This is."

"Yes; but here there are two sets of bands. One set is connected to the hub; the other set, and that includes every alternate band, is connected to the rim. And underneath the wheel, if you lift it out, you will find a neat little mechanism, controlled by a push button, which will turn the rim on the hub a fraction of an inch."

"But what difference can that make?"

Bill smiled patiently. "Very little—but enough. If I don't touch the button I have a fair wheel: a wheel on which every compartment is of exactly the same size. But if I do touch the button, the rim rotates on the hub just the least little bit, and the black compartments become just too small to let the ball drop into them. That's what happened every now and then when you had bet on black."

"And if I bet on red?"

"Then I touch another button, and the rim moves the other way. You see?"

Under Whitney's staring eyes the red compartments abruptly narrowed as the black opened.

"You couldn't force the ball into a red compartment with anything less than a hammer!" explained Bill.

Whitney frowned. "They could never have gotten away with that."

"Why not?"

"In the first place, I would have seen the croupier press the buttons. I watched him."

Bill laughed. "Of course you watched him. But you couldn't watch the electric wire which ran to these buttons, and the

man who operated them—just often enough not to make you suspicious—in the next room! For your convenience, I've hooked the buttons close up to the table. Floyd used them on the end of a twenty-foot connection."

Again Whitney frowned. "Even that would have been too raw. Look: I can tell with my naked eye that the black compartments are wider than the red."

"But you can't tell if the wheel is revolving rapidly at the moment! Floyd took no chances: whenever the wheel was motionless you could have measured it and found nothing wrong. The buttons were pressed only when it was rotating—when the eye couldn't follow—and everything was all right again long before it stopped. As a device for winning, and for winning fast, I have yet to find its equal."

Tony broke into the conversation. "Tell him about your invention, Bill."

Bill smiled shyly. "I had heard of wheels like this, and I suspected I was looking at one when I first visited Floyd's. But suspecting and knowing are two different things. I had to prove my case, and prove it up to the hilt. It would have been easy if I could have examined the wheel—but something whispered that Floyd would never allow that. For the moment I was stumped, and then, suddenly, it occurred to me how to solve the problem: a fast camera would show the wheel motionless! Take an exposure of a five-hundredth of a second—a thousandth of a second—and the wheel, revolving at top speed, would appear to be still. It was a lovely idea," commented Bill, "and I thought I had my answer until it struck me that I would need a flash light to make a picture possible: that no plate on earth would register anything at all at such a speed without better lighting than Floyd provided. Once again, something whispered that Floyd wouldn't take kindly to a flash light. He wouldn't know what I was about, but he might be depended upon to raise objections.

"Then, at ten minutes of six in the morning, the final solution came to me. The human eye is a better camera than the best camera made. Equip a pair of binoculars with a photographic shutter. Get a flash of the wheel—a flash lasting only a thousandth of a second—and your eye will tell you if there's anything wrong!

"That's all there is to the story," concluded Bill, "except that I let Floyd look through the instrument, and Floyd, being a good sport, presented me with his roulette table in exchange for it."

Without a word Whitney seized his hat and stick and dashed for the door.

"Where are you going?" demanded Tony.

"Downtown, to clean out Floyd's!" He tore open the door, and dashed down the stairs three at a time.

"Stop him!" shouted Tony. "That stick of his is made of steel! He'll do murder with it!"

"Not on Floyd," rejoined Bill calmly. "Floyd's an old man. He's had his ups and downs, but what he's taken from Burnside in the last two weeks will support him the rest of his life. He told me last night that it was time for him to retire—he came to that decision right after he looked through the roulettoscope—and if he stuck to his plans he left New York on an early train this morning."

Tony gazed at Bill and grinned. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

Bill nodded. "When Burnside finds that Floyd has left town——"

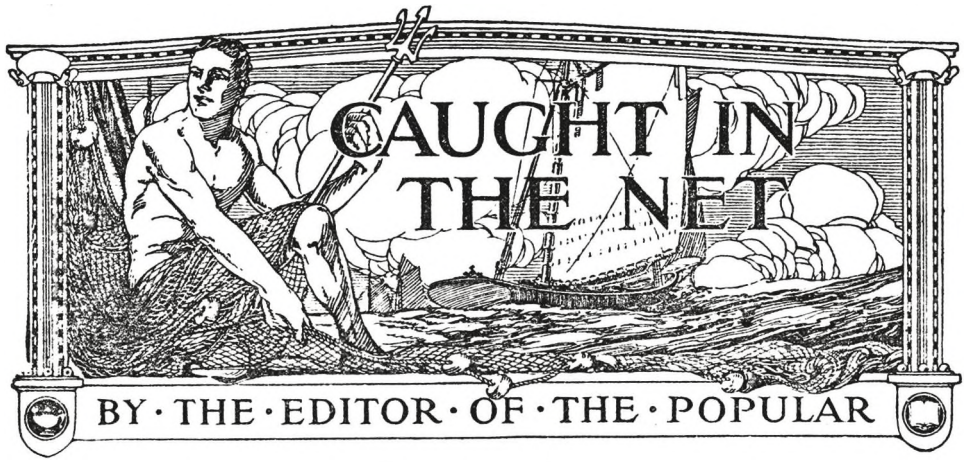
"He'll make a trip to his bank!"

"And stop that check a second time!" laughed Bill. "Lucky we cashed it yesterday, isn't it?"

Mr. Wilde will have another story of this series in the next issue.

A BIOLOGICAL EXPLANATION

YOU hear so little about flappers now," said Litt Mallory, the Virginia philosopher, "because so many of them have got old enough to figure on teaching their daughters the folly of being flappers."



THE KILLERS

BACK in the roaring days of the old frontier it used to be said in grim jest that an up-and-coming mining camp had to have a man for breakfast each morning. Murder had become commonplace, and what becomes commonplace soon becomes a matter for jest.

Murder has become commonplace again. The drug-soaked gangster and the big-city pay-roll bandit have taken the place of the mining-town bully and the two-gun man of the open range, and each year the toll of their victims grows larger. In 1921 twenty-eight of our cities, with an aggregate population of something over twenty millions, reported 1,910 murders—a murder rate of 9.3 per one hundred thousand inhabitants. In 1900 the rate for these cities was 5.1. It increased 82 per cent in twenty years. When these figures are announced again they will be even more alarming.

As murder has become more common jokes about it have become more numerous. The bandit and the strong-arm man have become the favorite subjects of some of our cartoonists and jokesmiths; and many a law-abiding citizen takes a sort of grim pleasure in opening his morning newspaper and having his "man for breakfast."

We wonder if this national trait of regarding one of the most terrible of all crimes with grimly humorous toleration has any connection with the hard facts that the city of Chicago has more murders in a year than has all of England; that Cleveland's murder rate is twenty times that of London; that in the United States your chances of being murdered are eight times as great as they would be north of the Canadian boundary? Of course there are more direct causes for the increase of this crime. Unwholesome conditions in the crowded districts of our great cities develop criminals; the automobile has made the get-away from the scene of a holdup comparatively easy; the use of narcotic drugs by criminals makes for recklessness; most important of all, so many crimes are committed without the criminals paying the price that the weak and vicious are convinced that they too can kill and go scot-free. When the American people come to regard murder as a crime that must not be tolerated, and insist upon their police departments and their courts making sure that the fewest possible number of murderers escapes without paying the penalty of crime, then the murder rate will drop.

OUR RAILROADS' TROUBLE

WHAT is the trouble with our railroads? That is a question that has been asked many thousands of times in the last few years. It has been asked by disgusted stockholders who have seen their stock depreciate in value and their dividends diminish, sometimes to the vanishing point; by would-be investors who are attracted toward one of the basic industries of the country but who are afraid to put their money in it because that industry seems unable to earn

even the modest 5¾ per cent return on its property valuation allowed by law; by men in other businesses who see a threat to our future industrial prosperity in the fact that in 1921 and 1922 two thousand miles of railroad were abandoned and less than a thousand miles built.

What is the trouble with our railroads? The best way to answer that question is to answer another one: What are the troubles of our railroads?

Their big trouble is too much regulation. Of course, as the railroads are public utilities it is only just that the public should have a voice in their management, but railroading is the most regulated business in the United States.

Take the corner grocery store as a small-scale example of the average American business. The grocer buys a barrel of sugar. The price he has to pay for it usually is out of his control; in a smaller degree his fixed charges and labor cost are out of his control. But he can charge what he pleases—within reason—for the sugar that is sold over his counter. He can sell it for enough to make a profit on the transaction. The competition of the store on the next block is the public's safeguard against overcharging.

The business of the railroads is the manufacturing and sale of transportation —freight-ton miles and passenger miles. Into the manufacture of transportation go materials and labor. The cost of the materials is out of the railroads' control; the cost of the labor is pretty much dictated by powerful labor unions.

So far the railroads are no worse off than is the corner grocer. But here regulation steps in. The Interstate Commerce Commission decides upon freight and passenger rates—sets the price at which the railroads must sell their only commodity—transportation. Rate increases haven't kept up with cost increases. Since 1900 the costs of materials used in the manufacture of transportation have increased 91 per cent and the average wage of railroad labor has increased 185 per cent. Yet to-day traffic rates are only 50 per cent higher than they were in 1900.

That is why railroad officials are fighting against further freight-rate reductions. That is why, in the first ten months of last year, the roads could obtain only 4.1 per cent of their new funds from the sale of their stocks. That is why railroad expansion has stopped.

People with money to invest refuse to become partners in a business that is not allowed to make fair profits.

That is the trouble with our railroads.

THE CART AND THE HORSE

REASON is a very generally abused faculty. Judging by our acts, few of us have learned the correct application of reason. Yet we all profess to know that we were given it as a tool with which to shape our conclusions. Not often do we so employ it. Most of us start at the other end, using our conclusions as the mold to which our reasoning processes must conform. What we do is to act or think instinctively at first, subsequently justifying ourselves by reason. We set the cart at the horse's nose.

Examine your own experience in this matter. If possible, examine it with an open mind. Don't conclude at once that what we have affirmed is wrong and then proceed to prove your conclusion by a hand-picked selection of contrary evidence. Take one of your fondest convictions—about prohibition, for instance. How did you come by your opinions on prohibition? Personally we never knew a man whose attitude on prohibition was the gradual outgrowth of a logical series of thoughts on the subject. All our friends have been wets or dries from the start. The instant the issue was raised they were for or against. They have since debated the question at length with themselves and are now in a position to demonstrate logically that they were right in the first place! They have "reasoned it all out and cannot escape the logical conclusion that prohibition——" Then they tell us what they have reasoned out. And to our impartial editorial mind there is nothing to choose between their arguments. As to our personal views on this embittered subject, we have

thought the whole thing over coolly and judicially for several years and our reason tells us that we still have our own opinion.

Reason is the quality that distinguishes man from the animals. The animals act on instinct and abide by the consequences. Man never does that. He acts on instinct and finds an alibi if the consequences don't suit. If it weren't for reason we should have a mighty hard time accounting for some of our instincts.

Once there was a wise old ward politician who always voted the straight ticket. He was asked, on the day following a certain election, what reason he could offer for failing to support an independent candidate whose policies were unimpeachable.

"Well," said the ward heeler, "I'll tell you. In the first place I don't like that man, and in the second place I don't like that man in the first place."

PERSISTENCY

SOMETIMES it is confused with pig-headedness. Often it is mistaken for presumption. Something of each of these goes into its making, but they are only small fractions of the whole. Just what its ingredients are no one can say with accuracy. It cannot be analyzed and reduced to a formula. Your doctor cannot sum it up in a prescription. Its nearest vertebrate relative is the bull terrier. We have called it persistency. It has other names. The best and most picturesque of these is Fighting Spirit.

But under that name it is seldom recognized. We think of Fighting Spirit as associated with violence. We concede it to victorious armies, and football teams, and prize fighters. We do not accord it to familiar personages, like our neighbors—or ourselves. The fact is that Fighting Spirit is manifest all about us. It is only faded and obscured by monotony, like old pictures on old walls. We have grown so accustomed to its presence that it escapes our conscious vision. Only when it is freshly illumined by the reflected glamour of a romantic background do our jaded eyes perceive its outlines again.

After all, what is this Fighting Spirit but homely, everyday persistency? And what is persistency but the refusal of the spirit to make terms with defeat? We recall a football star at whom we used to marvel long ago. This man was all but impossible to tackle. He seemed to explode through tacklers like TNT through a brick wall. The other day we met him. And we asked him how he managed to keep on going when every spectator in the stands would have sworn he was already thrown for a loss. He told us that he didn't know himself. "I seemed to have a feeling that no man could stop me," he explained. "I was always a persistent cuss." As we recall it, no man ever did stop him. It took at least two, and sometimes four or five. We used to say of that man that he had the Fighting Spirit. He himself called it persistency.

It comes to the same thing. Which reminds us that we had an idea to illustrate. Persistency is a quality that occasionally draws down adverse criticism. Don't let that scare you off. We never heard of a great man, or an especially successful man, or even a good average self-supporting citizen who didn't owe to persistency most of his progress toward whatever goal he had set himself. Persistency is at least half the secret of success. Sometimes it is three fourths or four fifths. Ability and knowledge are valuable but it takes persistence to drive them through the opposition. If you don't like being called a persistent cuss then credit yourself with Fighting Spirit. One works just as well as the other, for there is no real difference.

POPULAR TOPICS

DELEGATES to the New York State convention of the W. C. T. U. expressed disapproval of the filmy attire of the girls of to-day, of the comic supplements of the Sunday papers, and of the writings of Darwin.

Perhaps Darwin will pay some attention to them.

WE are going to talk about women. Women are a safe subject. We don't know anything about them and neither does any one else.

But we do think that women are curious people.

They fought for years to put themselves on a basis of equality with men although all the time they were perfectly sure that they were very much better. When they got what they wanted, what happened?

Previous to 1919 the death rate of women insured in one of our largest companies was 13 per cent lower than the death rate of men policyholders. In 1919 Congress adopted the amendment to the Constitution that gave the ladies the right to vote. That year the death rate for women was only 5 per cent lower than the rate for men. In 1920 women all over the country took up voting in a serious way. For that year the death rate for women was 2.6 per cent higher than the rate for men.

It was trying to make up their minds who to vote for that did it.

FOR two or three years the girls' skirts and the protests of their elders rose higher and higher. Then when they—some of them, anyhow—had vindicated the principle of the freedom of the knees they suddenly lengthened their skirts until they could trip over them without half trying.

Now they have discovered knickers and can dress just like men. But it takes them longer to do it.

ONE thing about women that we don't like is that they are so revengeful. One day last spring a New York motor-cycle policeman arrested a girl motorist for speeding. "I'll get even with you some day," she said to him after she had paid her fine.

A few weeks ago they were married.

THE meanest crooks on earth are the ones who broke into a Long Island home for crippled children while the kids were at dinner and stole their radio set.

We hope that the wave length was properly adjusted for them to get H E L.

FOUR million automobiles were manufactured in the United States last year. It cost over five billion dollars to own and operate the fourteen million motor vehicles already in service here.

No wonder Northwestern University has found it advisable to offer a three-hour-a-week course to teach its students how to walk properly.

IF your wits are sharp enough for you to live on your wits, they are sharp enough for you to dig them into a real job that will make living on them unnecessary.

THE New York *Herald,* quoting George Bernard Shaw's views on prohibition, heads the column: "Shaw Still Hitting Liquor."

Mr. Shaw is a believer in prohibition. "America has blazed the way," he said, "and I am sure that England will follow."

Mr. Shaw is the gentleman who was sure that Carpentier would beat Dempsey.

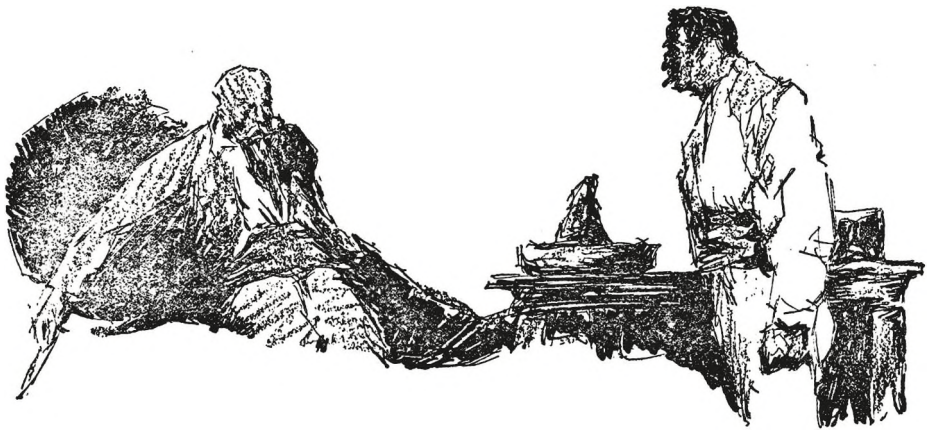
NEW YORKERS neither roll their own nor are "rolled" by their own. The home-made cigarette seldom is seen in the big town and—according to Judge Mancuso—seventy per cent of the criminals arraigned in New York courts are natives of other cities.

"THE other modern home has become merely a place in which to sleep," said the Reverend Doctor Stetson of New York in a recent sermon.

The dickens it has. The modern home is a place in which you have to entertain your wife's relatives, carry the screens up to the attic, take care of the furnace, carry out the ashes, carry the screens down from the attic, and cut the grass.

AN English judge has decided that real port wine must come from Portugal.

Probably he would decide also that real gin must come from the home town of the League of Nations.



The Road to Dolores

By Roy Norton

Author of "The Conspiracy," "Miss Ling Tan Foo," Etc.

David and Goliath almost lose their professional reputations—and their lives.

THE combination train of a few rattling old freight cars and a decrepit, unkempt coach that for an hour had crawled from a junction down the branch line of a railway leading ever farther into the wilder interior of Mexico, came to a grinding halt and a stocky red-haired little man, followed by a well-built big man, descended and stood on the sand that served in lieu of a platform. There was nothing about them to prove that they were lifelong partners save the single suit case that the big man carried which was initialed "F. & O'L." as if it belonged to a firm. Field and O'Leath they were properly, but over the great Western mountains of the United States whence they came they were known, due to that marked difference in stature, as David and Goliath, always partners, always together.

"Not even a dobe house. And nobody here to meet us," growled Goliath, the giant.

"And nobody else to get off in this place at all," remarked David, the pugnacious small man.

"And that's where you're wrong again," exclaimed the big man, with a grin, pointing ahead to where a box-car door was sliding open, and from the cavern slipping with peculiar awkwardness a figure that came flopping down to a sitting posture, disclosing a white, begrimed, cropped head, bent shoulders and a sleeve that flapped emptily, proving that this other traveler had but one arm. The man reached for a battered straw sombrero that had fallen off, but, before he could reclaim it, was pounced upon by an officious, burly brakeman who swore a steady stream of vile Spanish and catching his fellow countryman by the folds of his jeans jumper, lifted him up and then deliberately knocked him down. He was about to repeat the punishment when he was unexpectedly seized by the ears from behind, lifted aloft squealing like a tortured rabbit, and given a kick that landed him a dozen feet away. He turned angrily and in the act of rising drew a knife; but before he could make use of it again was seized, thrown to the ground, and the knife kicked from his grasp. His objurations died in a gasp of astonishment when he perceived the size of his conqueror; for even ordinary valor hesitates when overpowered by six feet and seven inches of agile fighting flesh surmounted by a face grimly set into lines of remorselessness.

"It's all right, hombre, you're not fighting a crippled old man now," Goliath remarked in Spanish as fluent as the Mexican's own.

"Don't come any farther or you'll wear holes in yourselves," he heard his partner's

voice, and glanced up to see David stopping the onrush of the train crew to the brakeman's assistance.

"Oh, that's the how of it, eh?" Goliath muttered, and thereupon picked the entirely subdued and terrified brakeman up as if he were but a straw figure, carried him in his hands a few steps to the open car, threw him inside with an almost effortless movement, then shut and fastened the door.

"You're all ready to go now," David called. "Get out of town before I count ten. Now—vamose!"

The train crew did not wait to hear him count. It was a wise crew. It had learned to avoid red-headed citizens of the United States who were armed and resolute. It went, and the locomotive started so hurriedly that its drivers slipped before they caught hold and moved away. And then Messrs. Field and O'Leath, partners, sat down on a truck so long disused that its wheels were half buried in sand and laughed as if highly amused. The man they had rescued from ill treatment advanced upon them expressing his gratitude, his wrinkled face grave and unsmiling, and his sharp black eyes looking quickly from one to the other.

"Señores," he said in better Spanish than the partners had expected, "I am your debtor. If I had not fallen as I got out of that——"

"But why on earth did you get out here, of all places?" demanded David.

"I am no ignorant tramp," the old man answered with considerable dignity. "In my better times of youth I have been a school-teacher—before—— But that doesn't matter. I come sometimes to visit a daughter who lives at the mining camp—over there." He vaguely waved an arm toward the distant range of bleak gray mountains that cut the pale-blue sky line. "And I have been unfortunate. This time I had no money to pay fare. And—you have saved me from a beating. I forget neither service nor injuries."

And then, somewhat to the partners' astonishment, he turned without the torrent of words they had anticipated and, almost like an ancient but sadly broken hidalgo, marched away over the dusty trail that cut out across the desert toward the far foothills.

"Poor old cuss," said Goliath softly. "Think of a big, husky greaser like that brakeman bustin' up a helpless old cripple like that!"

"Bet that brakeman's got two disjointed ears," David chuckled approvingly. And then: "Hello! Cloud of dust coming our way. Must be our people, eh?"

A few minutes later the cloud of dust opened sufficiently to show two mounted men leading two extra horses. They came forward at a gallop, pulled up with a flourish, and the men dismounted. One of them, ornate in dress, gold-braided sombrero, and loud with the jingle of spurs, advanced and introduced himself.

"Señores, I am Don Andreas Camite y Patrillo, the manager of the Dolores mine, and I am pleased to meet the two distinguished mining men who I presume have been sent by Señor Heald of San Francisco to pass upon the advisability of further investments in our property."

The partners shook hands with him while he continued a voluble apology for his tardiness, attributing it to the fact that the train was on time, which must have been a mistake, because usually it was from one to five hours late. Neither of them thought it essential to tell him that their friend, Mr. Heald who had employed them for the mission, had told them to not only try to learn why forty thousand dollars were requisite for a new road, but also to find out why the hundred thousand dollars' worth of stock he held in the said Dolores mine paid no dividends despite outside reports of its apparent prosperity. In earlier times the partners had passed too many years in Mexico to leave them unaware of the fact that oily politeness could usually be taken as a warning to move slowly.

"Yes, señor, Mr. Heald sent us to investigate the Dolores," David, who by common consent customarily did all the "chin work" for the partners, answered somewhat noncommittally.

The don's man lashed their suit case to the back of his saddle and the little cavalcade mounted and moved away with the suave manager still volubly explaining his confidence the mine could be made to pay well if it but had a road to facilitate transportation. They overtook the old Mexican whom the partners had rescued as he slowly plodded through the heat and dust of the sand on his tedious journey. Mere humanity and friendly sympathy impelled David to pull his big, bony horse to a stop as

they came abreast of the pedestrian and call, "Here, hombre! You're going our way and I reckon it won't kill this horse to carry two such lightweights as we are. Get up behind and I'll give you a lift."

"Oh, let him walk," protested Don Andreas. "He's a worthless old fool. I know him. His name's Mariano. He's been on the wrong side of a revolution or two. I booted him off the mine one time and I can tell you furthermore——"

David turned, thought he saw a scowl of annoyance on the manager's face, and became more determined.

"Well, you say it's a long way to the Dolores, and this Mariano, as you call him, is a pretty old chap, and this horse of mine is big, and so why not——"

"Oh, certainly, if the señor wishes," said the don with a shrug, and on David's insistance the one-armed derelict was hoisted up behind.

The foothills seemed to recede and the worn pack trail to become ever rougher as they advanced; but as the afternoon waned they overtook the first ramparts and began to climb. Once in the mountains the trail became so difficult that they had to ride in single file and even the don's volubility gave way to silence. Up and up they climbed until they came to a narrow pass in the very crest of the divide, and out upon a tiny flat.

"There she is," said the don, removing his sombrero and wiping the dust and dampness from his forehead with his handkerchief.

The partners looked down into a deep mountain cup already drowned in purple shadows as the sun set across the western peaks and ridges of high, precipitous and barren mountains. They expressed astonishment at the size of the town that lay in the hollow far beneath, its white adobe houses, red tiled, closely huddled together as is customary in so many ancient Mexican villages, and its little forested plaza appearing a diminutive square of comforting green as if it were the town's heart.

"Oh, it's not nearly as big as it was a hundred or so years ago," the manager answered. "It wouldn't be as big as it is now if it wasn't that, having no wagon road, it is inaccessible and—well, it's a safe place not only for the sheep-herders from the hills, the occasional ranchers that farm some of the little valleys, but also for a good many men that the government would like to catch napping."

"Outlaws, revolutionists and——"

"Yes, all that. But we have no trouble with them. Child's bargain. We leave them alone and they leave us alone. But, señores! You will have no occasion to mix with them and I would advise you not to go near the town. Keep away from it. There are men there who would murder you for—for your suit case and watches. Our mine is over there across the valley. You can see the top of the mill stack just over that ridge. See it? And I live in what was once an alcalde's palace on the shelf just this side of it—there above the town."

"So the Dolores mine is clear beyond, eh?" Goliath asked as he studied the opposite side of the mountain cup.

David saw the manager turn his head swiftly, and thought he glanced at Mariano; but the latter was still sitting as dumb, unmoved and incurious as a bag of bran, still holding to the saddle cantle with his one hand, and dangling his gnarled brown toes earthward as if the beginning or end of a journey mattered not at all to him, so long as he was left unmolested.

The manager did not answer the giant, but cautioned his guests to ride carefully as they descended, because the trying part of the trail was yet to be overcome.

"This place needs a road all right," Goliath growled as they debouched upon the flat which held the town. "But forty thousand isn't enough to build it."

"Forty thousand is enough if I build it, señor," declared Don Andreas, reining his horse abreast of Goliath's mount. "I hold this town in my hand. I can get more work out of a peon than any man alive. I've handled them before, when Diaz ruled!"

Goliath glanced at the handsome, hard face with its parted lips and brilliant teeth and thought: "So you're that kind, eh? And proud of it, are you? I'm not sure how much I like you." But he said nothing as they rode forward skirting the outer edge of the town. David heard a mumbled request behind him and pulled up until the bent Mariano slithered to the ground. The bare feet came down with a spat, the empty sleeve dangled grotesquely, and without a word of thanks or the slightest expression of gratitude the old Mexican turned and without looking back plunged into the entrance of the first narrow, uncobbled street, and

disappeared. David watched him with a look of half-amused, half-annoyed appraisement.

"I told you that thieving, murderous old dog was no good," the manager remarked. "You never get any thanks for anything you may do for a man like that, señor. He is one of the kind that, if it were worth the trouble, I'd have put out of the way."

The old palace of the former alcaldes was reached in a few minutes more and its neglected gardens, broken fountains and weather-burned double doors suggested a past grandeur as well as present decay. Its narrow windows, heavily grated with ornate but rusted iron grilles, and its imposing height of two and a half stories told a mute tale of days when the alcalde of a town like this must live like a petty monarch, cloaked in authority but prepared for defense; governing imposing territories in space on maps but extorting from those who had the misfortune to dwell therein the means for gay, extravagant and dissolute holidays in the capital city of Spanish Mexico.

A man as lowbrowed, sullen and morose as the servant who had accompanied the partners from the railway opened the door to the don and conducted the visitors to their room. The don followed, apologizing for the paucity of his hospitality. The man who had been with them brought up the rear of the procession carrying that close-partnership suit case marked "F. & O'L." The partners were left alone in the twilight; in the heavily barred room; in the scantily furnished room which had but one wash-basin, cracked, a water pitcher with a broken spout, one towel, one narrow rug, and two camp beds comfortably placed as if for companionship in one end of an apartment whose ceilings were twenty feet high, whose dilapidated plaster cornices were three feet thick, and whose area would have served for a suite in the San Francisco hotels which they had visited.

But to them these incongruities were not sufficient to evoke comment. They washed their faces noisily, spluttering, blowing water from their lips like porpoises, and combed their wet hair down into the "cowlicks" which for many years they had believed the fashions of politeness and etiquette to dictate. They dusted the alkali dust from their shoulders with the company whisk broom from their suit case, then used it on their boots, and felt themselves well dressed and fit to dine with kings.

They found their host awaiting them in a huge dining room that in long-past days might have served for banquets. The table, though adequate, looked small in the midst of such vastness, and the oil lamps in an ornate chandelier inadequate to dispel the gloom of lofty ceilings, wide doors, great squares of worn tile, and window embrasures a yard in depth and guarded by those curved and heavy iron bars. Faded frescoes depicting simpering señoritas, splotched here and there with white where the plaster had peeled away, bespoke the extravagance of more glorious days. Shadowy patches on the walls indicated spots that pictures had once adorned, and a great fireplace, long unused, seemed to eye them sardonically from the distant end of this spaciousness. But Don Andreas proved a host and a provider. It was not until their appetites were gone and the black coffee served that he broached, almost apologetically, the subject of their plans. Goliath looked at David, and David at Goliath, and then, as usual, David spoke.

"The fact is, Don Andreas," he said, "that when Mr. Heald got your letter saying that the reason he had never had any dividends on the stock he held was because the cost of transporting the refractory ore ate up the profits of the free milling, and that you could make the Dolores pay if you had forty thousand dollars cash to build a wagon road, he employed us to come and see if this was so. That's what we are here for, and we shall want to go through the mine, and the mill, and the assay house and perhaps, later, the books, before we can decide."

"Quite naturally! Quite reasonable!" the manager declared in a voice that expressed heartiness and concurrence. But regardless of this outspoken agreement the partners thought they caught a slight tone of disappointment. Yet this was dissipated by his additional words, "And you shall! You shall have an opportunity to go through everything—everything—mine, mills, assay reports and books, unmolested, undisturbed. And after that I am certain you will agree with me that the expenditure of forty thousand is justifiable. Besides, such a sum can mean nothing to a man like the millionaire, the great financier, the distinguished American, the Señor Heald."

He went into detailed figures of amounts

of production and costs of extraction until the two practical but simple miners of the far-distant Big Divide kept their eyes open with difficulty and were grateful when he permitted them to retire.

Their sleep came quickly. Their awakening was tranquil and free from suspicions. Their appetites were good and well served, and their first surprise was when they reached the mine and found that Don Andreas, in a zealous excess of fairness, had laid off all the employees save the foreman who was to guide them through, assist them in all ways they might suggest and "Give them the run of everything." It was the first time they had ever inspected a property under such remarkable, such peculiarly liberal, such extraordinary conditions. And they inspected, and sampled, and thought, and discussed, and began to believe all that had been told them. They cautiously admitted as much that night to the don over the after-dinner cigars and modest drinks. And Don Andreas rubbed his hands with undisguised satisfaction and assured them that on the morrow when they inspected the stamp mill and its files of slips they would be more than ever convinced that all the Dolores mine required was the trifling outlay of an additional forty thousand dollars to put it on a positive paying basis.

"It is only because we of Mexico who hold the stock not owned by Mr. Heald are poor," he said, "that we appealed to your employer's generosity and wealth to enable us to pay. The Dolores is crippled and held fast because it requires this additional investment. Once it is made, as you will see and know, the Dolores becomes valuable. You came over our only road. You know what it is. You know how much it must cost to transport the refractory ore, wherein the profit lies, by pack mules. It is just that difference which counts."

His conclusions seemed justified, reasonable and unquestionable. And on the following day when they were given full access to the stamp mill and its files, unmolested, they found no lack of confirmation. But again there was that extraodinary feature, that they were alone. The millmen had all been laid off.

They had checked the mill slips of ore handled, and recoveries, until their eyes were wearied with pencil-scrawled numerals, before they strolled to a bench for a smoke and then they heard a soft hiss evidently intended to attract their attention and finally saw Mariano, his head thrust through a window on the side of the table room beckoning to them. Tolerantly and somewhat scornfully they obeyed his urgent summons and joined him, standing inside and eying him.

"Senores," he said, "I have learned something you should know. You have helped me twice. And—I told you I am not one who forgets. Therefore I have come here to tell you——"

He paused and stared behind them as if to assure himself that none other than his friends were within hearing, then climbed through the opening. David, with a half grin at Goliath, said, "Well, amigo, get it off your chest! Let us in on the big secret. We are here and alone."

And all the partners' humorous good nature and casual banter were speedily dissipated when he said in rapid monotone: "You came here to inspect the Dolores mine. The Dolores mine! I know that from what I overheard when you helped me to come here, and Don Andreas thought I was not listening. He wants you, or some one you represent, to give money—much money. He ordered all the men from the mine and the mill so you wouldn't find out that you had been fooled. Down in the wine shops of the town they talk of this lay off and that they are to keep away until you are gone. But I am not a fool. I put two and two together and I add together this: That you think you are learning all about the Dolores mine. And so I ask you to know this: That this is not the mine Dolores, but the mine of San Galos; that the mine of Dolores is fifty-odd miles away, although it is owned by men who own the San Galos, and that Don Andreas is the manager of both. You have been shown one mine when you thought you were looking at another."

They heard him through and then for a full minute stood stupefied with surprise as the depth of this peculiar plot crept through their minds. Many little inconsistencies marshaled and paraded in their mental review. Tiny things they had overlooked at the time. The care with which all information to correct their mistake had been kept from them; the urbane but constant hospitality of the ever-courteous and ever-smiling Don Andreas; his advice deterring them from visiting the town where some stray

sentence overheard might have warned them.

"Don Andreas asks you for forty thousand dollars to build a road to the Dolores mine," the voice of Mariano broke in on their meditations. "I gathered that from what I overheard. Nonsense! The Dolores mine has a well-built road. It needs no forty thousand. It pays well—to those who are on the inside, Don Andreas and that gang who work with him and take the profits. They would get the forty thousand through you to build the road and then, if some years from now they were asked to show where that forty thousand went, they would point to the road which is already there and say, 'Señores, there is where your forty thousand was spent.' Can't you see it all?"

He had mistaken their shocked dumbness for stupidity and spoke as if annoyed thereby; but now when they broke into a slow torrent of angry exclamations he seemed satisfied that his information had sunk home. He glanced fearfully around, still imbued with caution, and then checked them with, "Not so loud, señores. Not so loud, I pray you! There is more I should warn you of."

Instantly they became again attentive, absorbing his words. He spoke in an even lower pitch and swiftly.

"Take heed. If Don Andreas learns that his imposition has been discovered your lives are in jeopardy. Grave jeopardy. For he cares nothing for life. In any other province than this, where he is a little king and where judges and prosecutors are his partners and tools, a score of murders could be brought to his door. And—señores, men of your country are not popular here. If he were to kill you openly in the plaza of that town down there it is doubtful if of the hundred witnesses there would be one who would testify against him. I say if Don Andreas discovers your knowledge, you will find it difficult, perhaps impossible, to escape."

"But surely," David exclaimed, "if we reached the railway——"

"The railway, señor? Bah! The telegram ordering your arrest on any charge moves faster than the train."

He stopped, shook his head and then added, "Also, it is a long ride to the railway and a still longer walk. Haste would be imperative, and haste means good horses, and good horses stolen would be quickly missed and quickly pursued."

"Suppose we gave you money to buy them?" Goliath asked, and Mariano looked up at him with eyes that changed from slow surprise to warmth.

"The señor would trust me with gold?"

"Trust you with anything I've got! Why not? Haven't you proved your friendliness?" Goliath answered, staring at the bent and broken old revolutionist.

"I am grateful for your confidence," Mariano declared, straightening himself and then bowing. For a time he meditated and then said, "I have a son-in-law here. He might buy horses without attracting attention, and furthermore I think he might be willing to leave San Galos. He is out of employment because—well—because lately Don Andreas has been making it unpleasant for my daughter. Yes, we could try that. It might take a day or two, but—we shall see. I can think of no other way. And when the time comes, if you can befool Don Andreas——"

Goliath and David simultaneously began to reach for their money belts.

"But you are giving me too much," the old man protested. "Half this sum would be more than enough."

"It's just as well for you to have plenty on hand. We don't want to waste time haggling over prices and—besides, gold always comes in handy."

"I have so discovered on many occasions," dryly responded Mariano as he concealed the gold pieces in his clothing. Then he added, "You must delay matters. Keep Don Andreas from suspecting you and I will try to communicate with you to-morrow or next day. But it is not wise that we be seen together."

He nodded his head, slipped quietly across to the window of the vanner room, looked out, and with surprising agility leaped through the opening and disappeared. The partners went to the window and watched him as he ran, half doubled, until he gained the shelter of a ridge and was lost to view, and then gravely discussed all they had learned and their own serious situation. From any viewpoint, it appeared menacing. They had no very definite plans when they left the mill.

"Since we've got to play for time, the one thing I'm afraid of, Goliath, is that you'll give it away that we've been wised

up," David remarked as they approached the old palace.

"I ain't much good at pretendin', but I'll try, Davy, I'll try," the giant promised with an air of almost boyish self-reproach.

But for that evening at least he had no occasion to exert histrionic abilities, for the don was absent and had left an apologetic explanation pleading an evening's business engagement. The partners, troubled, retired early, and once inside their room David went to the suit case and took out the two guns with which they had not thought it necessary to encumber themselves while at work.

"If we needed proof that something is wrong," he said, turning toward Goliath with a scowl, "here it is!" He threw the heavy revolvers on his partner's bed and the latter picked the nearest up and twirled the chambers.

"Emptied 'em, by heavens!" he exclaimed, staring at David, as he threw the useless weapon back into the suit case.

"Yes, emptied them," David answered. "And when we see the old man to-morrow we must not forget to tell him to buy a box of cartridges; for we may need them before we are clear of this mess."

The don did not join them at breakfast and they went to the assay house, which they found open and as untenanted as the mine and mill had been. And here throughout the day, while pretending to be engaged in assays, they kept a close watch for Mariano; but to their disappointment, and somewhat to their anxiety now that they felt the need for ammunition, he did not appear. When they came to dine that evening the don again was absent, and the partners wondered if it was oversuspicion, or hypersensitiveness that caused them to think they discovered a difference in the attitude of the beetle-browed and morose Manuel as he served them—a certain lack of deference, sometimes a covert sneer, and a possible malignant gloating in his furtive eyes. He cleared the table and the partners conferred in desultory whispers after he had gone, apprehensive and disquieted by the nonappearance of their evil host.

The moon, full and flaming in a hot night, was visible through the heavy iron grille. It brought glittering reflections to the motionless palm fronds of the neglected garden and wrought black shadows at the foot of each tree and shrub. Crickets and katydids joined in a monotonous rasping chorus and from the distance they heard the languorous efforts of a band in the plaza where they could picture the population making its regular and habitual evening parade. The cracked bell of an ancient clock struck nine and they were considering retirement when from the interior of the house they heard rapid footsteps over the uncarpeted floors of the huge and resounding hallway, and outside the big doors of the dining room they heard a mumbled conversation in which they caught the words, "Yes, you are to stay here in case anything happens and I want you."

And then the door opened and Don Andreas entered, glanced at the partners sharply and closed the door behind him. For a moment he seemed puzzled by their air of lazy motionlessness and then, when David spoke to him in his customary level voice, moved across the room and seated himself in a chair on the opposite side of the table and with his back to the door through which he had come. He made some inconsequential remark and gained from David an equally inconsequential reply.

David, watching him with his clear, keen eyes, thought he detected an air of expectancy, or perhaps of challenge, as if his host were waiting for something, and Goliath, to conceal his impatience and hatred of this delay and play acting, got up and sauntered to the window, where he stood looking down upon the lights of the town in the valley below, at the shadows, and at the clean cuttings of the mountains against the eastern sky line beyond which they must pass to escape. And as he watched his dark eyes caught a movement, mysterious, stealthy, in the shadows of the garden. A deeper shadow flitted swiftly across an open space, halted at another, and seemed skirting the side of the house. It came closer and now Goliath could see the paler shade of a face upraised as if its owner were scanning the upper windows of the old palace. The man moved from sight and the listener thought he heard a sharp hiss, a similar noise in reply and faint, broken, hasty whispers. So intent had he been that he was heedless, although somewhat annoyed by the resumption of conversation behind him; but now a sharp exclamation caused him to turn and face the room. The truce was broken. The don was standing by the table

resting his knuckles thereon, with his head thrust forward and snarling between those white and brilliant teeth that the partners had envied. David was leaning forward in his chair, tensed as if prepared to spring.

"There is no use in keeping up this damned pretense," the don said threateningly. I know that my plans have been upset by that meddlesome son of a dog, Mariano. And I know that you know and that you hope to escape. But you can't leave here now until that forty thousand dollars has been received! Understand? Not until it's here. And your dear friend, Mariano, is where he'll be kept safely until I choose to let him go or to slit his throat—something I ought to have done long ago. Now what have you got to say for yourselves?"

"You're losing your temper, aren't you, Don Andreas?" David drawled with exasperating calmness. "What makes you think that Mariano has told us that——"

"Bah! Don't try to fool me. The time for fooling is past," the don cried in interruption. "Manuel heard part of the conversation between you and your grateful friend down there in the mill—enough so that if he hadn't been as stupid as a burro he'd have knifed that meddler before he escaped."

Both David and Goliath started slightly and David said, "Escaped, did he?"

"Oh, you needn't pin any hopes on that bet," the don sneered. "It simply gave us a little trouble to locate him. We nabbed him this evening and he's where he'll not get away, either. Well, now what are you going to do about it? Are you going to be wise or do I have to—let us say—persuade you to reason?"

There was a chill significance and suggestion in his words that was not lost upon the partners. Goliath moved irresolutely, as if holding himself in restraint, and rumbled, "You filthy, treacherous thief! What's to prevent my twisting your neck?" He turned toward David and said almost appealingly, "Davy, shall I kill him now?"

But before David could reply they heard a strange, peculiarly sliding noise beyond the door, a groan, and the soft thud of something falling upon the tiles. All three men were on their feet now and staring at the door as if that interruption might be pregnant with possibilities for either side. They listened expectantly for what seemed in the strained tensity of the moment a long time and then the don shouted, "Manuel! Manuel! Are you there?"

As if in response the door slowly opened and inside stepped a blood-smeared figure, crouching until its white-cropped head seemed sunken between the hunched shoulders.

"My God! It's Mariano—and they've been torturing him," David exclaimed in a voice filled with supreme indignation and surprise.

Mariano, still crouched and facing them, but with eyes fixed only upon Don Andreas, gently closed the door behind him and said: "Yes, señores, they caught me this evening and this hidalgo—this fine Mexican gentleman—Don Andreas Camite y Patrillo, endeavored to make me disclose all our plans by the infliction of torture. He then left me in his torture chamber in the top of this palace to meditate until to-morrow, when he promised to do even worse things to me."

Goliath started forward with an oath of anger but the dull, unemotional voice of the old man checked him with: "Patience, señor! Patience! I have more to say. It is now my personal affair."

He hesitated, thrust his tongue between his teeth and moistened his lips as if torture, or restrained speech, had rendered them dry and went on:

"It is my pleasure to tell you all, Don Andreas—to now let you know the things you sought to learn." There was something deadly and incredibly chill in his manner and speech, something that held them all in a spell of immobility as he proceeded. "My son-in-law has purchased horses, good ones. Likewise he has spread the report through the town that you, Don Andreas, are departing to-night on a journey with the two Americans. My son-in-law missed me. He suspected that I was here and found me. He threw me a most excellent blade through the upper window—into the room where I was confined. I decoyed your guard, Diego, into the room on the pretext that I was ready to confess. And—I used the knife! The noise you heard outside just now and which seems to have disturbed your conversation, was when I cut the throat of that murderous, torturing dog—the estimable Manuel. And may his soul dwell in purgatory—with yours, Don Andreas! With yours!" His voice had arisen as he spoke until it seemed to writhe and

twist around the walls of the great room whose vapid, faded frescoes of simpering women seemed staring down upon them, still simpering but with a curious appearance of expectancy. His voice arose still higher, shrill, sibilant, forced from between his shut teeth as he screamed, "They were told down there in that hell hole where you are master that you were going on a long journey, Don Andreas. And you are! On a very long one—thus!"

He had begun to advance, step by step, tigerlike in his controlled movements, still crouched but with his head thrust forward and his blood-streaked cheeks set in a wrinkled snarl of menace as he spoke. And the don, white, terrified, cornered, took a step backward each time Mariano stepped, as if they, pursuer and pursued, were impelled to move in unison.

The suspense that seemed quivering through the room was broken suddenly by a confused chorus of shouts, David crying, "No, no! Mariano! You've done enough! Leave him to us!" And Goliath's voice booming, "Look out, Mariano! I think he's got a gun in his pocket——"

And then even as the don suddenly swept a hand back to his coat pocket and produced a pistol, Mariano's single arm swept upward and outward in a long arc and his fingers seemed to write through the air a long flashing line of sinister light. It ended in the don's body, where the thrown blade drove home. The pistol fell from the don's fingers and clattered on the tiled floor. Both his hands clutched at the handle of the knife that seemed to have pinned the lapel of his coat to his body in a grotesque and awkward fold. His terrified eyes stared wildly into vacancy. He swayed, gasped, lurched forward upon the table and from there slowly sagged to the floor where he lay upon his back, twitched once or twice, drew his knees up stiffly in a last movement, and lay still.

"Well done, old one!" A voice from the window caused the three living men to turn, and there, outside, leaning calmly against the grille and with the smoke from a cigarette curling languidly upward, stood a man with folded arms. Goliath sprang toward him as if to seize him through the bars but Mariano's voice halted him with, "Steady, señor. It is my son-in-law who waits with the horses. I will open the door and let him in while you will please close the wooden shutters."

He advanced to the big door and with no sign of trepidation or regret, nay, casually, stepped over the body that lay in front of the opening. The partners heard him unbolt the huge outer door before their spell of inactivity was broken, and then, when they had closed the shutters of all the windows in the dining salon, looked around. Mariano and his son-in-law were disappearing through the door, carrying between them what had been the manager of the Dolores mine.

"For certain reasons," Mariano called over his shoulder, "we shall bestow the bodies in the cellar. We must take all precautions to gain ample time for our escape."

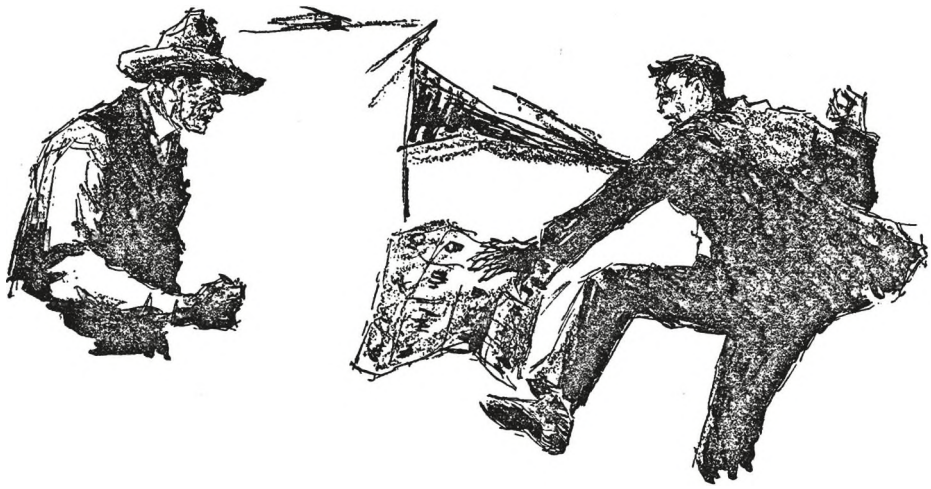
"He is right," David said, controlling the swift revulsion that, although sudden death was no novelty to the partners, momentarily overcame him at the unperturbed callosity of the one-armed man who had proved his loyalty.

Goliath appeared to read his mind for he shook his head and said, "If we had been treated as that old man has, I reckon we'd be cold-blooded too."

They waited, hearing the sounds of shuffling feet in the hallway for what seemed a long time, talking in whispers, until Mariano returned. He had cleansed his face and bound a handkerchief over his wounds. His face in its white setting appeared calm, grave and purposeful. He glanced about the room and moving toward the ornate hanging lamps, said, "We must make haste. It is a long ride to the railway where we must catch the early train, you to depart for your own country, I to safer parts of my own. My son-in-law has taken your suit case outside to where my daughter awaits with the horses. Come. Let us go!"

And then, one by one, he extinguished the lights, leaving the simpering women to stare from the walls upon the ghostly and tragic darkness where, unless as a ghost, Don Andreas would plot no more.

Another David and Goliath story by Mr. Norton in the next issue.



Bill Stuart—Fighting Man

By A. M. Chisholm

Author of "The Country of Strong Men," "A Dozen Eggs," Etc.

WHAT HAPPENED IN PREVIOUS CHAPTERS.

If you have read the preceding installments of this story we do not need to tell you that every line and every paragraph is interesting. If, on the other hand, you have missed the opening chapters of Mr. Chisholm's tale, then we tell you now. No part of "Bill Stuart—Fighting Man" is wholly dependent for interest upon anything that goes before or comes after. Every bit of it is worth reading for its own individual and particular charm. You do not need to know that Stuart is in Sitkum to clear up certain mysteries surrounding his father's land and mining interests in the territory. You do not need to know the early details of Graeme Campbell's questing for health in this remote region of the Western highlands. It is well to know, of course, but the story will not charm you the less because of your ignorance. The distinguishing characteristic of Mr. Chisholm's art is its quality of making each element in the finished product so fine and appealing a thing in itself that it requires no collateral support. To find this out you have only to commence reading. One page—and you are lost! You will not be able to tear yourself away. We are not sure why this should be so; no one, not even the artist himself, knows just why a fine piece of work is vital. But we think one of the secrets of Chisholm's magic is his ability to make his characters real—real in a romantic sense. You cannot escape the hypnotic reality of a man among men like Bill Stuart. Or a girl of girls like Graeme Campbell. Nor can you keep your gorge from rising on sight at people like Charlie Wills, the smooth gentleman of tortuous ways and ignoble ends; or his less-polished henchmen in the business of land grabbing, fur running, and claim jumping—Jerry McCool, Orme, Sam Cole, and their Indian allies, Jerome, Isadore, and the squaw Mathilde. And the old-timers that Chisholm creates for you—Graeme's ancient relative, Dan Gardner; Stuart's elderly mentor, Ed Walsh, and the not-so-old "Red" Hoobin, who doesn't know the difference between a real woman and a bit of backwoods fluff like Fay McIlree—they are unforgetable, lovable, mirth-provoking, and soul stirring. These people are all *real*. They are like folk you meet every day—you don't know what lies behind them, but they are worth meeting, or worth avoiding, just as they stand.

(A Six-Part Story—Part IV.)

CHAPTER XVIII.

UNTIL the approach of dusk any passer-by might have seen Ed Walsh sitting outside his cabin, reading and smoking. When the light began to fail he did his evening chores, splitting kindling, filling his water buckets. Then he went in and lit a lamp. After an interval he blew it out. Thereafter he sat in the darkness. When he lit his pipe he shielded the flame of the match carefully.

At last his patience was rewarded by a gentle tap on the back door. He had heard no footstep. Outside stood a dark, mysterious figure.

"H'st!" said this visitor. "P'st! Like-

wise hush. The red devils were as many as the leaves of the forest, but Chingachgook the Great Sarpint——"

"Come in, durn you, and bring your dog," Walsh grinned. "You did savvy. I thought you would."

"If you want folks to take a short cut to this dump you might cut a trail," Bill Stuart complained. "I'm shy half a leg of my pants because I slipped going down a coulee. Well, what's the bright idea? Why are you sitting in the dark like a darned old horned owl?"

"If anybody was keepin' tabs on this shack and saw the light go out a while ago he'd figure I'd hit the blankets for the night. Then likely he'd go away."

"Don't tell me too much all at once," Bill requested. "I might not grasp it. What I deplore about you, Ed, is your tendency to tell your best friends all the details of your business."

"Well, you see," Walsh elucidated, "a few days ago I got the notion that somebody was keepin' mighty close tabs on me. So I started out to make sure, and everywhere I'd go there'd be an Injun turn up—one of the Jerome bunch mostly. Somebody's been watchin' the shack, too. That's why I sent you word to come the way you did. And that's why I'm in the dark."

"I get you. Go on."

"Near as I can figure it, whoever has them beaver skins is gettin' ready to run them out, and is usin' the Injuns to keep a line on my movements. Besides, I got a tip from an Injun that's sore at Jerome and Isadore over some deal. 'Tenas alki,' he says, 'him klatawa mamook haul skins,' meanin' that they'd move 'em pretty soon. That's all he'd say. He don't know where the skins are cached—or he wouldn't tell. So with what he says and the way I'm bein' watched it looks like he's right. They think I know more than I do and they're playin' it mighty careful. Every move I make is known. If I went out and laid for them along the pass they just wouldn't come; and if I don't they'll make the break mighty soon. About the only way to fool 'em is to make 'em think I'm some place plumb out of the way—and not be there."

"Yes," Stuart nodded, following this reasoning.

"And so I'd be glad of your help, if you can spare the time. One man can't do much alone. He can only be in one place and he has to eat and sleep and look after his horse. Then trouble's more apt to start if there's only one against a bunch. I don't look for it, special, but a feller alone is up against it lots of ways."

"Count me in. To-day Wills told me that the land deal was off. Last night——" He broke off suddenly. "By gum!" he said in soft exclamation.

"Let's have it," said Walsh.

"Last night O'Halloran tried to beat me up. McCool brought him up overland. I cleaned him finally, but by a darned narrow margin. If you could see my face you'd think so. Now I'm wondering if there was any connection between that attempt to put me out of business for a while—I'm sure it was that—and this. Did they frame it because they thought I was connected with you?"

"They might. That'd mean McCool and O'Halloran are in the fur business."

"Not necessarily O'Halloran. He had a grudge. They used him. But McCool and Orme and perhaps Wills. Don't forget Wills. The more I see of that bird the less I find to like about him."

"Same here. But he keeps under cover if he's in these things at all."

"And that's where he wins. But he'll have to come out some day. Now what is your plan?"

"Well, I got a claim up the Old Bull. She ain't so high up, but it's over on the west side clean away from Cole's. About this time of year I go up and do a little work on her. Now my idea is to get Red and his team and maybe another man, and you and me. We load up the wagon with an outfit—some powder and steel and a grubstake—and we take our saddle horses along and a couple more pack ponies. That's to pack our outfit after we leave the road and the wagon. We make the bluff right. Go up to where the trail to my claim starts in and camp there at night. Naturally somebody'll keep cases on us. But if he does and sees us start up that trail in the morning with the pack ponies, and Red start back on the road, he'll figure it's the real thing. So he'll come back and report that she's all clear. Then if the play is to get them skins out they'll start right away.

"But you and me don't go more'n a mile on that trail with the packs. We come back and saddle up and come back along the road a ways to where I know of a place to

ford the creek; and we hit along the foothills south, and cross the valley headin' east; and then we strike a pass that leads over into the valley of the Stone River. She ain't much of a pass nor much of a trail, but you can get over it in daylight if you have to. Then we go up the Stone till we strike the trail from the pass back of Cole's. By hard ridin'—maybe all night—we ought to be able to head off any outfit they start goin'. What do you think?"

"You're the doctor. Looks all right to me. Go as far as you like. Shall you tell Red, or let him go it blind?"

"You'd better tell him. I guess he's to be trusted. The other man I'll get, Swan Sundberg, he hasn't much to say anyway. I won't tell him. He can go on up to the claim and do some work. So can Red if he wants to. I'll go in to-morrow and make a bluff at hirin', and buyin' a grubstake and so on."

And so the next day everybody in Sitkum who had the least curiosity knew that Ed Walsh was going up to do some work on his claim; taking with him as crew Red Hoobin, Bill Stuart and the taciturn Swan Sundberg.

Bill had never seen Sundberg. He appeared with his blankets as they were harnessing Red's team at daylight on the morning of their departure. His acknowledgment of Red's introduction was a nod and a faint grunt. He was a long, lean individual with huge hands and feet, powerful humped shoulders and a stringy neck. His face, which was quite expressionless, was lit by a pair of pale-blue eyes and adorned by a straggling mustache which, originally of a whitish-yellow, now presented a fumed effect; for Mr. Sundberg was addicted to tobacco in the form of snuff which he chewed, and chewing tobacco which he smoked. As a morning bracer he was doing both. He did not speak at all.

"Lively bird," Stuart commented. Red grinned as he backed his mares to the wagon.

"He can say less and more of it—gee over, Jennie; whoa, back, Jess—than any man I ever saw. He don't talk even when he's been drinking. I'll have some fun with him later."

Walsh appeared with his saddle pony and another pony packed. The latter's load they transferred to the wagon. Walsh, too, elected to ride in it, as did Stuart. Thev rumbled out of Sitkum, the men in the wagon, the four ponies behind.

After a while they began to climb by steep gradients from the lower floor of the valley. Soon it lay beneath them, a panorama of winding river, silver-sheeted lakes and occasional ranches whose fields of young grain, shortened by distance, resembled lawns. They were now on the upper levels, great plateaus miles in extent, running back to the foothills.

Bill Stuart lay back smoking contentedly, half asleep. Beside him Swan Sundberg slept, his back resting confidingly against a box of dynamite, his head fallen forward lolling and rolling to the jolts of their progress, apparently at risk of snapping his neck. Red, humped on the seat, let his mares take their time. Walsh, beside him, had nothing to say. The hot sunshine poured down on men and horses; axles clanked in the wheel boxings; leather strained and creaked; vagrant scents drifted from the hillsides; the smell of wet gravel and rocks struck the nostrils; and always the deep, rumbling rush of the creek was in their ears.

But toward noon Red pulled up on a little flat beside one of the numberless little tributary creeks. While he unhitched his team Walsh and Stuart looked after the led horses. Swan meanwhile started a fire and got the tea pail going. In abysmal silence he sliced bacon, fried it, and filled the pan with eggs. When these were done he set them beside the bacon, indicated both with a large and generous gesture and helped himself. All morning he had not uttered a word.

Red, having taken the edge off his appetite, considered him gravely, holding out his cup " 'Nother shot of tea, Swan." He got it and resumed his silent inspection. Swan, feeling the regard, met it with a blank pale-blue stare.

"What was it you said?" Red asked him. "I wasn't listenin'.

Swan, thus wrongfully accused, silently indicated a negative.

"Now let me tell you something, Swan," Red warned him seriously; "you want to cut out this talkin' to yourself before it gets to be a habit." The amazed Swan merely stared at him. "Before it gets too much of a holt on you," Red repeated. "It catches chatty folks like you, that likes to talk but is alone consid'rable. You think right out

loud and you don't know it. What you said just now was all right, of course, but some day you might give something away."

The puzzled rockman broke his half-day silence. "Ay ent said not'ing," he declared.

Red shook his head sadly. "He means it," he said to Walsh. "Just like I said; he don't know he was talking."

"He don't seem to," Walsh agreed with entire gravity.

"Ay ent said not'ing," Swan repeated. But he began to feel the force of suggestion. His pale-blue eyes became questioning. "What Ay said?" he demanded.

"It ain't so much what you said," Red told him. "It's that you don't know you said it. I can tell you how to cure that, though."

"Ay tenk you ban dam' fule!" Swan offered garrulously.

Apparently Red did not hear.

"You haar me tal you you ban dam' fule?" Swan repeated.

"You say you told me that?"

"Sure," Swan affirmed stoutly. "Mebbe you ban deaf. Ay tal you twice. Now Ay tal you t'ree time."

"I'm deaf or you're crazy," Red told him. "You only said it the once. Did you hear him?" he appealed to Walsh, who shook his head.

"Not the first time he claims. Just the once."

"You see, Swan," Red told him, "you don't think you speak when you do; and you don't speak when you think you do."

"You ban big liar an' big stiff!" Swan bellowed. "Ay tenk all you faller hear dat, mebbe!"

"You spoke right out that time like other folks," Red congratulated him. "You can get over them bad habits if you try. I hate to see you this way and so I'm going to tell you when I hear you talkin' to yourself. That will cure you. No, don't thank me. I wouldn't want to see you headed for the brain hospital."

The baffled Swan looked from one to the other helplessly.

"All right," he said at last. "You tal me ven Ay ban talk by myself."

"I'll cure you in no time," Red encouraged him. And a few minutes later he said, "I wouldn't do that. Keep it till we get to camp, anyway."

"Hey?" the bewildered Swan returned.

"I said keep your bottle till we get to camp. You said you had a good notion to get it out of your blankets and have a drink now. Don't. Keep it."

Which like most exhibitions of clairvoyance was merely playing form. Red knew that the chances were about one hundred to one that the rockman had a bottle in his blankets. Swan stared at him in apparent awe.

"Ay tenk at first you ban dam' liar," he admitted; "but Ay guess Ay ban talk by myself. Ay yoost tenk how gude a drink she go. But Ay skal keep her like you say."

Red, highly pleased with himself, winked at Stuart. Walsh, grinning covertly, got up and wandered off. He did not return for half an hour. Then Red threw on the harness. Swan stood watching him. From his lips came words of inner thought.

"Das ban purty gude team; but dae driver he ban dam' fule."

Red wheeled. Swan was placidly sucking at his deadly pipe.

"What's that you say?" he demanded belligerently.

Swan stared at him. "Ay ent say not'ing."

Bill Stuart, who had overheard, regarded Swan with respect, even with awe. He could scarcely believe his ears. From a low place in his opinion Swan leaped to a lofty niche. Red looked dazed.

"You didn't, hey?"

"You mean Ay talk by myself again?" Swan asked innocently. "What Ay say dis time?"

"Never mind," Red returned and went back to his harnessing, his brow clouded with dark suspicion. This suspicion became certainty when as they settled themselves in the wagon Swan tested the ropes of his bed roll.

"Ay guess she ban all right," he said in a low but perfectly audible soliloquy; "but Ay better drink him purty soon, or Hoobin he gat him and drink him. He steal Ole Swenstrom's visky vonce."

Red turned and regarded the rockman darkly.

"You're a liar," he said flatly. Swan met this accusation with a look of blank amazement.

"Me? Ay ent said not'ing." Red glared at him and gulped. His proud spirit was humbled. He faced front.

"Giddap!" he ordered with an unwonted rasp.

They went into camp at night by the beginning of the trail leading to Walsh's claim.

"We're followed," Walsh told Stuart, "just like I said. When I mooched off by myself at noon I climbed up a ways and got where I could see the road. Nobody on it. But back in the trees there was a cayuse feedin', saddled, and an Injun, it looked like, sittin' on a log. Looked some like Isadore. He's watchin' us now from somewhere, likely. But our play in the morning ought to fool him."

Before dawn Swan's cooking fire glared in the gloom of the spruce. When daylight came they packed the ponies, staging this elaborately for the benefit of the hidden spy, shook hands with Red with equal ostentation and with Walsh in the lead the pack outfit took the trail. Red, left alone, pottered about for a few minutes and then hooked up his team, filled his pipe, climbed to the seat, turned his team and began his homeward journey, driving slowly.

In an hour he was overtaken by Walsh and Stuart. Each had a rifle under his leg and a rolled blanket on his saddle.

"See any tracks?" Walsh asked, peering at the road.

"One cayuse," Red replied. "Makin' time, too. Barefoot."

"It's workin'," Walsh said with satisfaction. "We left Swan a ways up the trail. He'll go on with the two ponies and come back for the loads we dumped. I said you'd be waitin' for him."

"What lie did you tell him about quittin' him?" Red queried.

"Told him I just remembered I'd left the bread in the oven with the drafts on," Walsh replied. "I think he was gettin' ready to call me a liar when we pulled out. So long."

"S' long. Good luck!"

They settled down for the long ride. After a time they left the road and descended to the creek level with intent to ford it. They did so, but at cost of a wetting, for the creek had cut through a bar Walsh had forded by before. However, the day was warm.

Across the creek they struck cattle trails, which in a hill country usually represent the easiest way, the line of least resistance. These they followed, threading a maze of rocky hills and precipitous coulees. Once from a high shoulder they caught sight of Sitkum, far away below them and to the northward. When at last they struck the floor of the valley and turned eastward they were many miles south of the town. Walsh pointed to a notch in the line of the hills to the eastward.

"That's it," he said; "that's the pass."

"How far over?"

" 'Bout twelve miles to the summit and four or five down the other side. There's good feed about a mile ahead, and I could eat something myself. The cayuses need a spell, anyway."

CHAPTER XIX.

"FEELIN' stiff at all?" Walsh asked when they had their pipes going after a cold meal, and their horses were feeding contentedly on lush grass.

"I'll tell you more about it to-morrow."

"Liable to catch a man if he ain't ridin' steady." He picked up his rifle, removed the breech block and began to dry it, for it had received a wetting at the ford, and the water lay in globules on the meticulously oiled mechanism. Stuart followed suit with his own. The weapons by chance were of the same make and model; plain, serviceable, lever actions, taking the powerful .303 British cartridge. The only difference between them was that Stuart's had an open rear sight and a gold bead; while Walsh's had a receiver sight.

"Since when?" Stuart queried, pointing to the latter.

"Since my hind sights begun to blur on me," Walsh returned regretfully. "I'm gettin' a mite far-sighted. At first it was like tryin' to find a knothole to look through in a fence, but I can get her just as quick now." He regarded the weapon approvingly. "There's a darn good gun. And I've shot most of 'em since flintlocks. I learned to shoot with a muzzle-loader and p'cussion caps. I've shot the big old Sharps' .45—120, too. There was the best single-shot gun ever made. I've killed a heap of meat with the .44 repeaters when they were pop'lar. Then come along the smokeless powder and high velocity, and small bores. I've tried a lot of them, but this suits me."

Refreshed by the rest they saddled and pushed on toward the foothills which now rose before them. Here there was no gradual approach. A narrow trail swung up across a shoulder and dipped down the farther side. Following it they found them-

selves at once in the pass, here a narrow gut carved by the mightier waters of some bygone day, of which the little stream that now ran at the bottom of the defile was the puny survivor. On either hand great hills, shaggy with timber below, smooth with bare rocks above, shut out all but a narrow opening of blue sky. In the high, sheltered gulches there were still great drifts of snow. Not till the heat of midsummer would these feed the little creek.

Walsh inspected the trail. "Nobody's come this way for a long time," he said with satisfaction. "She ain't a good enough trail to be popular. She's mighty rough in places, and narrow when we get high up, but we can make her."

After an hour of vile going the trail rose from the creek bottoms to higher and more open ground, with lofty, bright-barked tamaracks. There they made good time, working upward toward the summit. And here again their progress became slow, for though they were free from the embarrassment of brush and windfalls the trail clung to the sides of bare cliffs with sheer drops below, crossed steep slopes of ever-sliding shale of gravel, turned sharply around corners where one stirrup brushed rock and the other hung over space. At such places the sagacious mountain ponies felt their way carefully, testing the ground with wary hoofs, making sure of one firm foothold before they tried for another.

"The dear departed makers of this trail," Bill Stuart observed when wider space made conversation possible, "obviously had the single-track mind. They built for one-way traffic alone."

"Injun trail," said Walsh. "I guess a goat or a sheep laid it out first."

"I'm not so darn sure it wasn't a bird. And I'll bet he got sore feet just flying over."

Walsh grinned. "She ain't no trail for pilgrims, that's a fact. How'd you like to meet an old Katie grizzly on one of these narrow places?"

"I would not," Bill replied with sincerity.

Once more they were forced to travel in single file and Stuart fell back, allowing Walsh to lead. They entered upon a narrow rocky shelf. On their left bare rock walls rose almost perpendicularly. Below, on the right, the drop was almost sheer for two hundred feet save for a few stunted and warped trees growing miraculously in crevices. Ahead the narrow trail was visible for some fifty yards. A sharp turn hid what lay beyond.

But abruptly, with a whistling snort, Walsh's pony stopped so suddenly that Stuart's Jim, following closely, almost bumped into him. Bill, wisely leaving it to his horse and paying little attention to the trail, looked up startled as Jim duplicated his companion's snort of alarm.

"What the devil?" he called to Walsh.

"Darned if I know," the elder man threw back across his shoulder. "This cayuse don't see ghosts often." The allusion was to the habit of some mountain breds of becoming wildly alarmed without visible reason. "He acts like he smells——"

Around the sharp turn ahead shambled a huge, lank, loose-flanked shape of a dirty, grizzly brown. The gait of it was a queer, apparently awkward, lurching, swaying shuffle. Great paws edged with straight chisel-edged claws padded noiselessly upon the rock floor.

At sight of the intruders the great she-grizzly, overlady and supreme mistress of those rocks and ledges, halted. The hairs along her back roached, and her furry neck ruff stood out, seeming to frame the comparatively small head with the flattened skull which was yet broad between the small, rounded ears, producing an effect peculiarly sinister and ferocious. For an instant, taken by surprise, she half rose as a bear will to see better; but immediately she dropped her forefeet to the ground. As she stood she seemed to typify the spirit of these wild and savage fastnesses.

What would she do? The decision rested with her; for though both men were willing and even anxious to give her the trail it was too narrow to turn their ponies. These snorted in alarm. Stuart could feel Jim trembling between his legs.

Very slowly Walsh's hand crept toward the butt of the rifle beneath his leg. "Bad!" he said speaking over his shoulder so softly that the words were scarcely audible; for the human voice, when raised, seems to irritate a grizzly which is already hostile. "Get organized, Billy!"

But here Fitz, who had lingered behind to investigate the domicile of a mountain marmot and was making speed to overtake his master, entered the narrow trail and caught sight of the bear. He dodged past the horses' legs to a front-line position. He

had seen bears before and he had a healthy respect for the big plantigrades. He knew the deceptive qualities of that seemingly awkward bulk, the lightning quickness of those great, shaggy forearms, the tremendous power that dwelt in them. He did not wish to force the issue; but if the bear forced it—why, then, his place was in front of his master. He stood on guard, bristling stiffly, warning and menace rumbling deep in his throat. A very old and simple creed, Fitz's; the creed of a love and faith unsurpassed by human heroes of song and story—the creed of a dog!

"Fitz!" said his master softly. "No! Steady!" Gently, as had Walsh, he began to draw his rifle. It stuck. Something—it was a hole in the leather scabbard which was an old, outworn one of Walsh's—had caught his foresight. He twisted, wrenched at it; but still it stuck.

But the appearance of the dog settled the bear's course. The men might or might not be hostile. The dog, however, was an enemy. Her lips writhed back, her mouth opened, exposing gleaming tusks. Without further preliminary she hurled her bulk into an instant charge. She came hurtling along that narrow shelf and as she came she emitted a sound that was neither cough nor bellow but which seemed to partake of both and was entirely ferocious and nerve-shaking.

It was lost in the smacking, high-pitched voice of Walsh's rifle. Walsh, when he saw the dog, had gauged the effect of his appearance and had jerked his weapon free. But his horse, veteran though he was, swerved, sought to turn, but recoiled from the edge of the shelf. The action destroyed Walsh's aim entirely.

But with instant decision he leaped from the saddle, necessity lending him momentarily the agility of youth. As his feet struck the ground he planted them solidly and pitched his rifle to his shoulder. For an instant it hung, steady, silent. For an instant man and gun might have formed a statue guarding that narrow pass. Then as the old master of the rifle caught his foresight fairly in the center of the charging, savage mistress of the ranges the muzzle leaped a little, settled, leaped, settled in a succession of movement as exactly spaced as the ticking of a clock and of about the same speed. From the muzzle thin lines of fire lanced; a thin vapor hung above them. The reports, echoing back from the rocky wall, flung themselves outward to be caught by other rocks. Multiplied a hundredfold they sprang from peak to peak, rolling along the mountain range.

Into this sudden inferno of sound that shattered the stillness of the hills cut the voice of another weapon, blunter, flatter, lower in pitch; a stuttering, coughing, vomiting uproar. Bill Stuart, pressed for time and embarrassed by Walsh's horse in front of him, had abandoned the attempt to draw his rifle, the use of which would require both hands, which he could not give it if he wished to avoid being thrown off the trail by the swerving riderless pony. Holding Jim by rein, knee and heels he jammed him into Walsh's animal and with his free hand jerked his heavy automatic from its holster. The weapon at short range had the shocking power of a rifle. He turned a sudden stream of soft-nosed bullets into the charging bear.

No ursine flesh and blood could make head against that leaden sleet that tore through vitals, smashed limbs, carried away the jaw. The great bulk, a moment before vibrant with power and savage life, staggered, swerved, and with a last roar that changed to a coughing moan pitched outward from the narrow trail down, down, bouncing from projection to projection until it struck solid rock, seemed to rebound, and lay still.

Ed Walsh, his last shell still rolling on the rocks at his feet, hammer down on an empty chamber, removed his hat and wiped the sweat from his forehead with a hand that now was not altogether steady.

"By gum!" he said with a deep breath of relief; "that was about as close as I like it. When I heard the hammer go 'click' on an empty gun last time I pulled I could just hear a voice sayin', 'Go on up to Peter, Ed, and get your time check!' What for did you use the belt gun, Billy? I was expectin' every second to hear you cut loose with the rifle, and when you didn't I thought maybe the horses had tangled you up or throwed you off. But I couldn't look round."

Bill explained. Walsh shook his head.

"Shows what a little thing'll do. I been intendin' to patch that hole in the old scabbard, but havin' the other I didn't. A feller can't be too partic'lar about his riggin'. May come a time when you need it.

This is the first time I ever had a bear tackle me, cold. I've give 'em the trail before, of course, when they had cubs or acted like they wanted it worse than I did."

"Perhaps it was the dog."

"Helped her make up her mind, I guess, but she was hostile anyway."

The sun was low when they reached the summit and looked down into a valley which was the bed of the Stone River and divided them from the next mountain range. Beyond that there were more, line upon line of peaks, the snow still agleam upon their summits.

Viewed from the summit on which they stood the descent appeared to be steep. Later it appeared to be almost perpendicular in places. But they made it without mishap, and gained the valley as the sunlight vanished from the western faces of the eastern peaks.

The horses were plainly tired from the long ride, the climb and the limb-racking scramble, but that could not be helped.

"We need all our time," said Walsh; "so we'll ride long as we can and comb everything out of 'em we can. Then we'll rest and eat. When the moon's up we'll get goin' again. The trail ain't bad except in spots."

So they pushed on till dark through a fairly open country with the river to their right. Then they unsaddled, made a fire, ate and rested.

Men as well as horses were tired. Stuart, who had ridden little for a couple of years, felt saddle stiffness. Walsh, tough of fiber but lacking the resilience of youth, knew that he would stiffen with the rest. But he was thankful that rheumatism, that scourge of the mountain man, so far had passed him by. Stuart presently dropped into an uneasy sleep, in which he struggled again with a sticking gun. He felt the bear's paw seize his shoulder and woke with a gasp. Walsh was shaking him.

"Time to get goin'."

A wan, spent moon was coming up over the eastern ranges. There was light enough to travel.

Half an hour worked off Stuart's stiffness, for which the cure is the hair of the same dog. Walsh led the way. Once or twice he lost the trail, but found it again. As they rode through the night they disturbed the creatures of this remote valley. Now and then they could hear the thumping getaway of deer. Other life, furtive and mysterious, withdrew from their path with faint rustlings and cracking of brush. Horned owls hooted mournfully. Now and then, perched on the extreme top of a spirelike spruce, they could see dimly the rectangular shape of one of the great predatory night birds; and once they heard a vicious, long-drawn, rasping screech of some great feline disappointed of meat or venting other displeasure.

But imperceptibly the wan light increased. The radius of vision lengthened. Objects, dim before, began to have definition. Little fluting notes of awakening birds sounded from the bushes. A chorus of coyotes in the draws swelled suddenly. Day was at hand.

With the light which enabled him to see the trail and ascertain his precise whereabouts Walsh hit a faster gait. Presently he pulled up on a little, level flat. From the left a second and more distinct trail joined the one on which they had been riding.

"This here," he said, "is the trail from Whisky Pass—the one back of Cole's." He dismounted and examined it, going back to where it entered the flat. "Nobody come along here recent," he said with satisfaction. "We're ahead of 'em—if they come at all."

"Good news," said Bill Stuart. "But, merely as a suggestion, Ed, how would a little breakfast catch you about now?"

"Can you stick it out for an hour? I was figurin' we'd go up the pass a ways and cache ourselves where they couldn't slip by us. Here they might."

"I won't hunger strike on you. But I tell you, Ed, I could eat half that old bear, raw."

An hour later Walsh halted well up the pass, at a point where the trail, though its general course was downward, switchbacked up around a rocky hill. Behind the hill there was a spring and ample feed for the tired horses. Walsh was afraid to make a fire lest the smoke be seen; so they breakfasted coldly but heartily on bread, meat and spring water, sitting among the rocks beside the trail where they commanded a clear view of it near at hand, and beyond could see certain sections.

"You're asleep," Walsh charged as Stuart's eyes closed and he nodded above his pipe. "Go to it. I'll watch."

"No, no," Bill refused. "I love the pajamaless life. If my eyes closed it was merely in reflection. How can one waste the night sunk in stupor on a set of springs when one can float gently along a lovely trail in a downy stock saddle? I believe, however, I was thinking of coffee. After flooding my tanks with that clear nectar which gushes cold from the bowels of the earth I can feel a great pity for the debauchees who start the day with that dark and deadly beverage. War has slain its thousands, but coffee its ten thousands. Think of it, Ed! A dark, reddish brown, with a rich, seductive smell that entices the poor victim. Think of it, with yellow, gobby cream, with sugar, or even clear——"

"You quit talkin' about coffee or I'll kill you and scalp you. I'd give ten dollars for a quart of it right now. Go on and have a sleep."

"Take some yourself."

"Can't sleep in the daytime no more. Go to it."

"Oh, all right," Bill consented, stretching himself on the softest spot he could find. "Far from his dear old Texas, he laid him to rest, with his saddle for a piller and his hardware 'crost his breast. Bury me not on the lone prairee, and if you're waking call me early, call me early——" His voice trailed off into a mumble. His right hand holding his pipe fell by his side and a gentle snore proclaimed that Bill Stuart was temporarily out of it.

Old Walsh regarded him with some affection and a little envy. "Dead to the world—and in half a minute," he muttered. "Great to be the right side of thirty—when you ain't." He refilled his pipe, lit it and resumed his scrutiny of the more distant reaches of the trail. The pipe went out and he put it aside. He sat motionless, waiting and watching with the inexhaustible patience of a wild animal.

At last this patience was rewarded. Far along the trail a horse and rider came into view, and following him three ponies apparently heavily packed. Another rider brought up the rear. Walsh brought his binoculars to bear. Then he woke his companion.

"They're comin', Billy. Sam Cole and Jerome and three pack ponies. Smaller outfit than I thought."

"Do we stand them up?" Stuart asked as he blinked the sleep from his eyes.

"Not unless we have to. I don't think they'll make any trouble, but you might be ready just in case. You don't need to show yourself at first, and not at all if they behave. We'll let them come right up."

The pack outfit entered on the stretch of trail that led to the ambush. Cole rode ahead. He was a big man, bearded, slouching. He rode carelessly, smoking a pipe. He carried a rifle in a saddle scabbard and a gun in a belt. Behind him the ponies plodded up the trail. Two of them carried neat, flat canvas-wrapped packs. The rear one seemed to be packed with a camp outfit. The Indian, Jerome, brought up the rear. He, too, wore a gun.

When Cole was almost beside him Walsh rose among the rocks.

"Good mornin', Sam!"

Cole started in his saddle, almost losing grip of his pipe. He appeared completely surprised as he scowled at Walsh.

"It's you, is it! What you tryin' to do?—scare these cayuses off the trail?"

"I didn't aim to. Where you headin' for?"

"Up to a minin' claim," Cole replied after what seemed to be a moment's hesitation.

"Didn't know you had a claim up this way."

"There's sev'ral things you don't know," Cole told him. "Well, so long."

"Hold on a minute," said Walsh. "As you say, there's several things I don't know and I'm sorter curious. For instance, what you got in them packs?"

"My outfit," Cole replied shortly.

"Well, I want to look at it," Walsh said mildly.

"You can keep on wantin'," Cole told him. "You don't think I'll strip them ponies to show you my outfit, do you?"

"I know you will," Walsh replied. "I got reason to believe you got beaver skins in them packs, and I'm searchin' 'em. You throw off them lash ropes and open 'em up."

"You're crazy," Cole protested. "I ain't got no skins. I've got my outfit and I don't open it up for you nor no one else." His eye ran over Walsh. "You're gettin' just a little too darn gay for your job, old-timer. I don't want no trouble with you, but if you crowd me you won't find it healthy."

"Well, now, do you know," Walsh returned, "I ain't worrying a little bit about my health. And I'm seein' what's on them ponies before you go on."

"You see that Injun?" said Cole pointing to Jerome who was coming forward. "Well, he don't like you, and for about six bits he'd beef you. If you know what's good for you you'll get off this trail and forget you ever saw me."

Walsh's cold blue eyes glinted at the threat. "You think so, do you?" he retorted. "I arrest you both for havin' beaver skins in your possession contrary to law. Get off that horse and open up them packs!"

"Arrest me, will you?" Cole snarled. "Get to hell off this trail or——"

His hand hovered close to his gun. Jerome, his dark face sinister, duplicated the action. Bill Stuart decided that it was time to cut in. He rose among the rocks.

"Put 'em up!" he ordered crisply. For a moment surprise held both men motionless; but if they made no move neither did they obey. Now the law of the gun as well as common sense demands that instant obedience to a command backed by a gun be enforced by the gun itself. A threat repeated ceases to be a threat. Numerous gentlemen have exchanged a six-shooter for a harp—presumably—because they were weak enough to indulge in argument.

The automatic coughed. The ponies leaped. Jerome's tall hat lifted and fluttered down like a wounded bird. Four hands reached for space with commendable promptitude. But though their owners scowled convincingly at Stuart there was something in their faces that puzzled him. He had not played poker without learning to interpret expression. To his eye they did not look like men who had lost a stack.

"Better take their guns, Ed," he suggested. Walsh did so. He approached the nearest pony which bore the neat pack. He jerked the hitch free and laid the packs on the ground. He turned back the canvas.

Instead of beaver skins the pack contained a pile of neatly folded ore sacks!

CHAPTER XX.

WALSH stared at the sacks, for a moment refusing to believe. His countenance expressed incredulity, amazement. He had had no manner of doubt but that he had intercepted a cargo of beaver skins. Everything had pointed to it. But apparently he had been wrong. He looked up to meet Cole's wide grin.

"Beaver skins, hey?" the latter chuckled. "Ho, ho, ho! Beaver skins that we have contrary to law! Got us right with the goods, ain't you? Go ahead and open up the other packs. You might find more. Better look inside them ore sacks, too. We might have been sharp enough to hide 'em that way."

Walsh took him at his word. He opened every pack and investigated every sack. The two leading ponies had been packed with empty sacks and folded blankets; the third bore an ordinary camp outfit. He had been tricked, that was all there was to it. He did not believe for a moment that Cole was making a bona-fide trip to a mineral claim. Somehow the gang had learned of his—Walsh's—stratagem and had deliberately, to mark their contempt for him, done this.

Walsh considered these things with Cole's laughter ringing in his ears. It brought a flush to his weather-beaten face; but he held his temper.

"No skins in your outfit," he said quietly, though it cost him an effort. "All right, Cole, you can go ahead."

"Ain't we pinched?" Cole taunted him. "Ain't you goin' to take us in? Seems like you ought to. Look at all the evidence you got. Somebody's sure to say we greased you."

"That will be plenty from you, my friend," said Bill Stuart, who to a lesser degree shared Walsh's chagrin. Cole eyed him insolently.

"Your gunman, huh!" he said to Walsh. "You," he went on to Stuart, "was sneakin' around my place one night—you and that darn' big worthless cur you got alongside you now. Found out a whole lot about me, didn't you?"

"You have a place, have you?" Stuart responded pleasantly. "Tell me where it is, and I'll drop in and tell your squaw we met you." Cole scowled at the insinuation but it got no rise out of him.

"I'm wise to you," he jeered. "You and Walsh don't know each other, do you? You just drift into his shack and ask him for a hand-out! Ho, ho, ho!"

There was no very obvious retort. Plainly the gang knew more than he and Walsh had thought. But Stuart merely smiled pleasantly, a course which is often more irritating than words. So it proved in this case.

"Yeh, *grin!*" Cole snarled, suddenly

vicious. "You'll grin the other side of your face one of these days. When we——"

He broke off suddenly.

"Go on," said Stuart, "finish it. When you—yes?"

"That'll be all right," said Cole with sudden caution. He turned to Walsh. "Anything more you want of us? You're sure you don't want to go through our clothes? We want you to be plumb satisfied."

"You can ramble," Walsh told him.

"Ain't you goin' to pack them ponies again for us?" Cole asked. "Looks like the least you can do is to leave things the way you found them."

Walsh gazed at him for a moment in silence. There was something in the old mountain man's eye that caused Cole to shift uneasily in his saddle. Then without a word Walsh turned to the packs. Stuart protested indignantly.

"Kick his junk off the trail, Ed, and let him climb down for it. Do him good."

"Nope," said Walsh. "I'll pack them cayuses for him." He proceeded to do so. Stuart after a moment's hesitation helped him. Together in silence they performed the humiliating task. Then Walsh turned to Cole.

"There you are. Them packs won't work loose." He paused for a moment. "You know I used to do some trappin', I s'pose?"

"What about it?"

"Nothin' much," said Walsh, "only I've trapped a lot of coyotes—not poisoned 'em, you understand, but trapped 'em. And coyotes think they're plenty cunning."

When Cole and the Indian had disappeared down the trail in the direction in which they had been going, Walsh and Stuart left their place of ambush. Apparently there was not much to be said. They had been done brown and that was all there was to it. They lay down and lit their pipes in the shade near their feeding horses. But though there was now nothing to watch for they were disinclined to slumber. Presently Bill Stuart's mental engine began to turn over. There were features of the game that he did not understand. He looked at Walsh. That worthy sat smoking meditatively, his eyes puckered. He seemed to be working something out for himself in a silence that Stuart respected. Presently, however, Walsh spoke.

"Now I wonder why?"

"Same here," said Bill. "I don't get it all, Ed. I suppose it isn't possible that Cole is telling the truth about going to some claim?"

Walsh shook his head. "Them packs was made up on purpose. They expected that the outfit would be stopped and the packs opened. Say they did want to have the laugh on me—to show they could put it all over me. But that don't just explain."

"No," Stuart agreed. Walsh reflected.

"Cole overplayed his hand," he said at length. "It was too good a chance to have the big laugh on me, so he run that bluff—to let me drop good and hard." He cogitated further, smoking slowly. "Of course whoever was keeping tab on us saw us come back. I b'lieve they were all ready to start with the skins, and just waitin' for him. Then they fixed this up. All right. But if they wanted to clear us off the trail they couldn't do much better than to let us know they knew we was layin' for them. Because then we'd know they wouldn't come. They could outwait us and we'd give it up."

"Yes," Stuart nodded, following this line of reasoning.

"It might be," Walsh pursued, "that Cole was sent out as a decoy—a sort of feeler. They might not have been dead sure about us. If we was on the trail we'd stop him, sure. If he wasn't stopped, with that outfit of his, it would come pretty near proving that the trail was clear—anyway, as far as he's gone. In that case he'd make 'em some signal."

"Now you're logging!" Bill exclaimed. "What signal?"

"Some, I guess," Walsh replied. "Anybody might make a smoke, of course. We might. But if Cole was to make it in a certain place, where it could be seen from high up back there on the trail, it'd sure be him if they saw smoke there. If he made a smoke it would show the trail was clear. Or, to make dead sure—by gum, Billy, I believe this is it!—to make dead sure they'd make a smoke first, back there; and if Cole answered it from a certain place there wouldn't be any room for mistake. But if he didn't—all off."

"You old son of a gun," Bill exclaimed, "I believe you're on the right track! Now where would Cole be likely to get to for this signal?"

"He'd have to get where he could see theirs and they could see his. And that'd be across the river part way up on the other

side. Not too far, or the hills would hide an ordinary smoke."

"Play the hunch!" Bill advised.

"I will," Walsh decided. "I don't like the taste of that crow I ate for Sam Cole—not a little bit. We don't want to let them get too far ahead, either."

"Let's go," said Bill.

Immediately they saddled and took the trail for the river, which they forded without difficulty. On the opposite side the water was still muddy in the hoofprints of Cole's outfit.

Half an hour later they came upon the outfit halted on a little plateau on a hillside. Apparently it was an old camp ground, for tepee poles lay on the ground and one set stood skeletonlike near a line of green willows that told of a spring. Below them lay the valley. Across its treetops one had a clear view of the range to the west. The notch in its summit through which the trail could be seen. It was an ideal signaling point.

Cole seemed puzzled and decidedly displeased at their appearance. Walsh had searched his outfit and found nothing. Then why was he following him? He did not know what to make of it, but he did know that he did not like it. Walsh had been badly fooled, but he knew him to be cunning. Then there was his deputy—so he sized up Stuart—who seemed to be bad medicine, as witness the affray with O'Halloran of which he had heard, and was certainly a wizard with a gun, as witness the hole in Jerome's hat. Though that headpiece was of lofty architecture Cole knew that nobody would take such a chance unless he were certain of his ability to shoot to an inch. So though his greeting was surly enough he was not prepared to risk active hostility.

"Well, what do you want now?" he demanded.

"Thought we'd keep you company for a while," Walsh told him.

"I don't want your company."

"That's because you don't know us as well as you will later," Walsh retorted. "You'll like Billy, here, when you get to know him."

"I will like hell!" Cole snorted.

"Everybody does," said Walsh. "Billy's real popular."

Cole eyed the popular gentleman and decided that any other candidate would get his vote. "I can get along fine without him."

Stuart grinned his appreciation; but Walsh shook his head.

"You may think so," he said; "but if you was to try it after a while—or even right now—you'd find you couldn't."

Cole thought that over. But whatever his conclusion he made no comment, returning to the job of unpacking his ponies.

Walsh and Stuart dismounted, unsaddled, and sat down.

"Cole ain't got no brains, much," said the former. "When he saw us he ought to have kept on goin'. But this was where he was to stop, so he stops. Can't think quick. We'll just play a pat hand and see what happens. We copper every bet he makes. If he wants to make a smoke we won't let him; and if he don't show no signs of makin' one after a while we'll do it for him."

Cole and his partner pottered around, going through the motions of making camp; but to the experienced eyes upon them these motions seemed perfunctory, even though they went so far as to gather a supply of green boughs which, though prima-facie evidence of an intention to sleep comfortably, may also be used on top of a fire to produce smoke in quantity. Then Cole picked up an ax and split some dry sticks into kindlings. These he proceeded to manufacture into shavings with his knife.

"He's going to make his fire now," Walsh said to Stuart. "No smoke back there yet, that I can see. Looks like I called it right."

"We won't let him make it," said Stuart. "You do the talking and leave the rest to me. I'd like to throw a scare into that bird. He's far too gay."

On the site of an old fireplace Cole arranged his shavings, put the split sticks on top, and took out a bunch of matches. Then Walsh spoke.

"I wouldn't do that."

Match in hand Cole turned and regarded him with a scowl.

"You wouldn't do what?"

"I wouldn't make a fire; not right now."

"Why not?"

"It might spread."

"Spread, nothin'. I'm goin' to cook some grub."

"Better wait a while," Walsh advised. "Don't make no fire, Cole. I'm tellin' you!"

Cole eyed him for a moment; then deliberately he struck a match, stooped and

applied it to the shavings. But as he did so the flame whiffed out, the shavings scattered close to his fingers, and the mountains roared back the report of Bill Stuart's automatic.

Cole jumped backward so suddenly that he tripped and sprawled on the ground. The Indian, who had been bending over the grub sack snatched at his gun and turned—to look into the muzzle of Walsh's.

"Mamook kopet gun!" Walsh ordered. "Drop it. You ain't up on top of a hill this time, Jerome. You've been crowdin' me for some time and gettin' away with it—but no more. Unbuckle that belt and let it drop. You too, Cole. And do it careful as if you was handling a rattler."

Cole cursed him whole-heartedly but obeyed. The Indian's black eyes were venomous. Walsh picked up their weapons and ejected the cartridges.

"What's this for?" Cole demanded through a very geyser of oaths. "Do you think you can pull stuff like this and get away with it? The law don't back you up in no plays like this, Walsh."

"I'm backin' my own play," Walsh told him; "and I'm backin' it with a gun, and you remember it. You don't light no fire. If you're hungry you can eat cold grub. And you stay right here."

Cole and Jerome obeyed because they had to. Walsh's tone showed that he meant exactly what he said. They sat down and conversed in low tones. Walsh and Stuart resumed their watch of the distant hills.

Half a dozen times Stuart thought he saw a smoke haze rising but as often he found that the expectation of it was playing tricks with his vision. Then at last, well up in line with the notch that indicated the summit crossing, a thin thread of gray seemed to grow in the still air. Walsh saw it.

"There she goes, Billy!"

"You called it," Stuart congratulated him.

The thin thread thickened, grew sturdier, became a tall, gray, vertical column. Then it seemed to break off at the base. The shaft, disconnected, rose slowly.

"They've throwed on fresh brush," said Walsh.

In a moment a gray, mushroom head surmounting a fresh column, rose. The mushroom drifted lazily, thinned and was gone. The column remained. No doubt Cole and the Indian saw it, but they gave no sign.

"Up to us, I guess," said Walsh; "but I'm darned if I know what the right play is supposed to be."

The distant column was broken. This time smoke ascended in distinct puffs.

"They're callin' for an answer, and if we don't make one of some kind they'll know something's happened to Cole. He ain't got much sense. Maybe I can bluff something out of him."

He got up, rearranged the shavings and kindling and struck a match. He did these things deliberately. Surreptitiously he extinguished the match and struck another which he managed to break. Cole, watching him, took the bait.

"I thought you didn't want no fire," he said.

"Well, the fact is I'm sorry about that," Walsh told him. "I was sore at you and just tryin' to deal you all the misery I could. My dirty temper got plumb the better of me. But now I'm goin' to make a good fire and you can go ahead and cook your grub."

"I won't cook on no fire you make," Cole refused.

"Then you can go plumb!" said Walsh angrily. "Eat cold grub, durn you!" and with a vicious kick he sent shavings and kindling flying. But as Cole's face betrayed relief he gathered the materials again. "I always heard you was a poor poker player, Cole," he said, "and now I know why. Your face gives your hand away. It'd be a durn shame to let your friends back there go to all that trouble to talk to you and not make no answer."

He chuckled as he applied a match and watched the flames catch the kindling. He added more fuel until the fire roared strongly upward; but because the wood was dry and nonresinous its smoke was the thin smoke of hot fire. He cured that by throwing the green boughs aboard. Immediately a thick, white column soared aloft.

"And now I'm at the end of my string," he admitted. "I don't savvy smoke talk. Maybe Jerome does, and maybe Isadore is back there talkin' to him. It's all guesswork with me. But I know Cole didn't want no fire when I made it. You notice they ain't cuttin' their smoke with the blanket no more, so maybe they're satisfied—or we may have told 'em just what we didn't want to." He kept his smoke going till the distant one had thinned and van-

ished. Then he let it die and took counsel with Stuart.

"All we can do is to play 'em as if we had 'em. If that outfit is comin' this way we'll meet 'em. We're about out of grub, so we can't stick it out much longer."

"What shall we do with Cole and Jerome?"

"Can't do nothing with them. Can't rope them up and leave them; nor I can't take them with us without arrestin' them, and I haven't got anything to do that on."

"They'll make another smoke as soon as we're out of sight."

"So they will. But I can fix that by startin' a little bush fire. It won't do no harm here—just burn itself out. The other outfit will think Cole's fire has got away from him and they won't take no notice of any other smoke. I'll take their guns and leave 'em at Cole's ranch. And I'll run a blazer on 'em, besides."

Immediately he set to work on the bush fire, starting it in half a dozen places.

"Now, Cole," he said when it was burning well, "you're footloose. Do whatever you're a mind to. I know how your gang is handlin' them beaver skins—though I ain't quite ready to take you in yet—and I can tell you you'll never get them out over this pass nor any other, because if I don't get you at this end somebody else will farther on. You don't really need them guns to do minin' with, so I'm takin' them with me, and you'll find 'em when you get home. So long—and remember what I told you about my luck trappin' coyotes."

Having delivered this valedictory he paid no attention to Cole's, which rose to rare heights of impure eloquence. The Indian said nothing. Such expression as his face held seemed to indicate scorn of mere words. His eyes were those of the caged animal which bides its time. While Cole addressed his effort mainly to Walsh, the Indian's hard, straight stare was focused on Stuart, who was quite aware of it.

"That buck is bad medicine," he said to Walsh when they were riding together on their back trail.

"Yes," the elder man returned. "Now Cole, he fusses a lot. He'll maybe do what he says he will; but he has to say it first. The Injun, though, don't rattle nor hiss; but he'll coil and strike without no warnin' at all. Most of the other Injuns are afraid of nim."

They recrossed the Stone, traversed the valley and late in the afternoon began the ascent of the trail they had mounted in the early morning. Walsh had no definite plan. There was no certainty that they would see anything of the fur smugglers. Indeed there was every chance that something had been wrong with the signal smoke, in which case they would have taken warning. About all that Walsh could do was to post himself at some advantageous point—preferably at the place where he had intercepted the dummy outfit—and wait. With this objective they pressed forward.

But before they reached it darkness began to fall. At a distance of a hundred yards objects were indistinct. And it was under these conditions that, as they emerged from a tangle of brush and rocks through which the trail threaded to a comparatively open space, an outfit of men and horses entered it from the other side. The surprise was mutual. Both parties halted.

"That you, Sam?" came a sharp demand from the front. Walsh did not reply but began to ride forward. "Cole?" the voice snapped query again. Then: "Stay where you are!" it barked.

"This is Walsh," the game warden called back, "and I order you——"

A lance of flame stabbed the dusk. Walsh's words were lost in the smack of a gun. Stuart's horse jumped, alighted with his head cached, and began to pitch.

Bill Stuart was a fair rider, able to stay with a horse under ordinary conditions. But he had every reason to consider Jim thoroughly well behaved and he was quite unprepared for this sudden reversion to type. He was conscious of a most infernal racket, of shooting, of the snorting and squealing of frightened or wounded ponies, and then Jim took him off the trail into the brush and with a sinful weave piled him. As he hit the ground his head came into contact with something much harder, so that he saw a wonderful constellation and seemed to drop down a well. Jim, having thus achieved the right of self-determination, wheeled and took the back trail.

Bill came out of the well with somebody slapping his face with what felt like a warm, wet towel. In a moment he identified it as a dog's tongue. Fitz whined joyfully as his master put an arm around his neck and pulled himself to a sitting posture. He saw that he was lying behind a huge boulder

fringed with bushes, a lone sentinel of the jumbled rocks through which they had passed.

"You there, Billy?" Walsh's voice called anxiously from the dusk.

"Right here, Ed."

"Are you hit?"

"The ground hit me," Bill replied with chagrin. "That sinful cayuse piled me as if I'd been a fat tourist. He went to it quick and hard, though, I'll say that much for myself. What's happened?"

"Lot of ammunition wasted. I emptied my gun just to be sociable, but unless maybe I plugged some poor pony I didn't get nothing. Too dark. They backed up on the trail and I come looking for you."

"I'm all right. But the horse took my rifle."

"He won't go far and I guess you won't need no rifle. Reason I say that is that ahead the trail is narrow and goes up steep. A couple of guns up on top could stand off a dozen. I ain't out to get killed, so we'll just stay here."

"Couldn't we work around them?"

"Not in the dark. There's places like the side of a house. I wish now that we had waited a mile or so back."

"Did you recognize any of them?"

"Not enough light. The voice of the feller that done the talking sounded sorter familiar, but I couldn't quite place it. It was somebody else fired the first shot."

"What's their next move likely to be?"

"To'rds home," Walsh prophesied. "They'll want to get them skins cached again soon as they can, and lie low for a while. So I figure they're goin' now with the pack ponies, leavin' somebody behind to hold the trail till morning or till they get start enough."

"I hate to see them get away with this," regretted Stuart.

"You don't hate it as bad as I do. But when the cards is runnin' against you it don't pay to set in your whole stack."

So they waited for morning. Before dawn Walsh crept up the trail. At the bottom of the steep ascent he threw a stone upward and immediately ducked behind a rock. As the stone clinked and rattled down three shots were fired from above. Satisfied, he rejoined Stuart.

With daylight Stuart took the back trail, returning in an hour with his pony. The raw weal of a bullet which had just broken the skin of the animal's belly accounted for his action.

"I guess he thought he was stung by the daddy of all the hornets," said Walsh. "The trail's open now. I was up to the top and didn't see nobody."

They finished their last scraps of food and took the homeward trail. Walsh deemed it useless to attempt to overtake the fur smugglers. It was a clean get-away.

Cole's place when they reached it was deserted. Walsh investigated stables, corrals and trail.

"They come through here," he reported, "but I'm pretty sure their cache ain't here. No tellin' which way they've gone, neither. There's so much stock rangin' that it'd puzzle a story-book Injun to pick up their trail. They won't make no move now till they see Cole, and of course he'll tell them what I said about the trails bein' watched at the far ends. They may think it's a bluff, but all the same they'll check up on it before they try again. By which time maybe it won't be a bluff. So we may's well go home. Could you eat a few ham and eggs and drink a little coffee with an egg beat up into it, Billy?"

CHAPTER XXI.

AT first Graeme Campbell had found her new surroundings strange, almost unreal; but speedily they became the realities. And strangely it was her previous life, her round of work and habit that now appeared to lack actuality, to partake of the quality of a perfectly remembered dream. In these weeks she seemed to attain a different perspective. The once important things lessened in values. She looked back on them with a sense of aloofness, as one regards an episode over and done with, the stages of a journey which has ended.

She was aware that this mental attitude was quite wrong, even dangerous. This feeling of detachment from her wonted daily life was, she recognized, inimical to success. She had got ahead by a keen interest in her work, by a mastery of its details which would have been impossible without that interest. She had not worked to hold her job, or even to get a better one. It absorbed her for its own sake, as a game fascinates a studious player. The material rewards of success were desirable; but apart from them the game had seemed worth

while. And now she found herself regarding it with an indifference which was almost distaste.

When first this feeling became clear to her she was inclined to consider it an aftermath of her illness. But now she was strong, filled with a sense of well-being. It could not, then, she told herself with that frank quality which compelled her to look things in the face, be the body acting upon the mind.

But was that so sure? Was it possible that the new feeling of bodily fitness was itself responsible for the distaste she felt for her old work. Was she after all created to be a cog, even if eventually an important cog, in an intricate financial machine? Before she had been thrown on her own resources she had never contemplated such a career. She had been forced into it and she had played the game. She had adjusted herself, forcibly at times, to the new life. At first it had cramped and chafed, but she had become used to it as to a confining conventional garment. Now the garment was cast aside for a breathing space and she knew relief. But she knew that when she donned it again, as she must, she would have to adjust herself once more to its confines. The process would be unpleasant; but it seemed inevitable—unless, indeed, Gardner's dream of finding a gold lode should come true.

As to that, when she listened to the old prospector she caught a little of his optimism; but when she was alone she realized that the chances were very much against him. It would not do to build upon them.

And then she came to a second realization —that subconsciously she had been seeking an avenue of escape from a life with which on the whole she had been very well satisfied. But now it did not satisfy her. It seemed to lack much, even in prospect. Suddenly it had become flat, colorless. The game had become a treadmill.

But was there an alternative? She had developed herself along one line, that of her work. She had invested her salary in herself for further development. If she left her present firm her only means of self-support would be by getting like employment elsewhere; and she was not dissatisfied with her employers but with the employment itself.

Of course there was marriage. Numerous young women of her business acquaintance had taken that way. They were always getting married. Sometimes they came back after the lapse of a few months or a year. They seldom offered explanation, but it was fair to conclude that in these cases the experiment had ended in failure. But these cases were the minority. In the majority of them the young women simply vanished and their offices knew them no more. But nobody in the old life had proposed marriage to her. There had been no sentiment in her relations with the men with whom she was thrown in contact in business and her social life for years had been negligible.

That brought her down to the present, to Sitkum. Stuart had asked her to marry him under circumstances so peculiar as not to constitute a proposal at all. She liked him, but what did she know about him? Only what he had told her; and this, boiled down, was that he was the son of a logger, himself a logger out of a job, and that he had some intention of buying land and going to ranching. Not a very colorful future. Suppose he should ask her again, in earnest this time?

That also she looked in the face. What sort of a husband would he make, what sort of a companion, not for a few blissful months but for the next thirty or forty years? Would he wear well? Would she herself wear well? And where would those years be spent? The answers to these questions were not easy.

She admitted to herself that he attracted her strongly. It might be the beginning of a warmer feeling. Did love grow gradually or was it a sudden, flooding emotion? Likely it varied with the personal equation. Like hate, it fed on propinquity. Strange that the two great primal emotions should have a common stimulus! If she felt for him that overmastering emotion which theoretically at least was love, no doubt she would marry him if he should ask her again, oblivious to other considerations. But so far she could weigh the pros and cons dispassionately. Was she prepared as an alternative to a life of office work and as apart from love, to become the wife of a logging foreman, a timber cruiser, a small rancher? The answer was an unqualified negative. Then why, her reason asked with remorseless logic, should she put herself in the way of falling in love with him; which would involve the very material consequences

which made marriage as an alternative out of the question? She had no answer to that. She confessed to herself that he came into her thoughts often, without any special reason, but since her visit to Hoobin's shack she had not seen him. He had vanished, as had his friend Red. Walsh, too, was absent.

Men in this country seemed to have a casual way of disappearing. The trails and mountains swallowed them. She saw men go from time to time, jogging out of town with a pack horse or two behind. They might be bound prospecting or for distant homesteads, or on other errands more obscure.

These outgoings fascinated her. They held the romance of outward-bound ships. Not the dingy tank hulls or the ramping, sleek-sided, scheduled liners of to-day; but the old, glorified craft, the three deckers, the ships of John Company, lord of the Indies, the moon-raking, old skys'l yarders of the Western Ocean. That was it. They were of the Past, wherein lies Romance. Pony and pack were of a day long past its zenith, fading into the last twilight before oblivion.

But in their day they had opened up the West. Before the breech-clouted savage had bent from his bare war pony to scan wonderingly the first track of wheels in the prairie sod, pack trains had brought wealth of beaver skins from the unknown sources of great rivers in unknown mountains. Pack trains had threaded wild passes and deserts, ahead of the steel, ahead of the transit, carrying the outfits of the trail makers. All honor to the old pack pony, overworked, overloaded, underfed; kicked, clubbed, cursed; handy with heels and teeth, full of original sin—but a maker of history, an unsung hero!

To the girl's eyes, too, the men of the scanty outfits she saw typified the romance of America. The like of them had ridden out from the old settlements into an unknown land. Long haired and buckskin clad they had forgathered at forgotten trading posts, at the rendezvous and councils of the old beaver men. In her eyes the glamour of that bygone breed of adventurers, semi-savage, exuberant in their vices and in their virtues, whose like the world will never see again, surrounded their more prosaic successors.

Now and then a little hesitantly, because the person of active imagination is shy of voicing its workings, she revealed part of these thoughts to Dan Gardner. The old-timer partially understood.

"Well, I guess I felt like that when I was a young feller startin' out on my first long trail," he admitted. "But then there was somewheres new to go—a lot of open country—though the old men used to say it wasn't like it used to be, and all cluttered up with trails so's you couldn't ride more'n two or three hundred miles without meetin' somebody."

"That feeling wore off?"

"Mostly. In time. All feelin's does. But it's funny how they come back now and then just for a minute. I dunno's I can explain it—just. Likely you ain't old enough for it to happen to you. But odd times there's something—and mostly it's a smell like maybe wood smoke at dusk or dawn or a breath of air off a hot hillside or out of a cool creek bottom—that brings old days right back for half a second. It don't last, though. It's come and gone quick as the snap of a cap."

"Uncle Dan, when are we going into the hills?"

"You're restless, too, ain't you? It won't be no picnic."

"I don't want a picnic. When?"

"There's snow in the hills yet, where we're goin'. When that comes down the creeks we can make a start. The Injun is comin' to-morrow. Him and me are goin' to mamook tumtum—sorter talk things over."

The blind Indian, Isaac, appeared the next day, riding a staid pony with one of his grandchildren for guide. Because of his blindness he carried his head bent in an attitude of perpetual inquiry or listening, but otherwise he was surprisingly straight for his years. His features were good, high, clearly cut. In his time, Graeme thought, he must have been a handsome man. He knew a little English; but like most of his people west of the Rockies he depended mainly on the Chinook trade jargon in his intercourse with whites. With Gardner he went down the trail toward the spring, his moccasined feet following the path without difficulty. Soon after she picked up a book and followed them, establishing herself in a favorite nook close by the spring.

A short distance away, beside a patch of clean, moist sand dappled with sunshine through foliage, the two old men squatted on their heels. They paid no attention to

her. They smoked and talked in a confusion of clucking gutturals and long-drawn vowel sounds, with an occasional word of English or near English, and others which were in fact corruptions of voyageur French; for the Chinook being essentially a trade jargon has incorporated many of the words of those early traders, but altered in speech beyond common recognition.

Looking up from her book after some minutes she became aware that the blind man was playing with the damp sand, or at least so it seemed. With his hands he was molding it into small piles and curving rows. Meanwhile Gardner whittled a number of little pegs, which the blind man stuck here and there in his constructions after careful investigation with his fingers. It seemed a childish game and she wondered at her uncle's absorption. He bent above it, his whole attitude expressing concentration. He repeated words or phrases of his companion, seemed to ask questions. Now and then he would guide the Indian's fingers to a certain peg. His interest seemed out of proportion to such a pastime.

Graeme moved slightly to get a better view and perceived that the work seemed to be governed by a general design. It had a meaning; it was intended to represent something. And then she realized that she was looking at a bit of topography, a crude attempt to reproduce in sand the salient physical features of some part of the country. The pegs, which she now saw were of different shapes as to the tops, were intended to mark certain points, presumably landmarks or what had been landmarks, and the difference was to enable the blind builder to distinguish them after they had been set in place.

The task would have been difficult for one with vision who had recently seen the territory he attempted to represent thus crudely. But for a blind man who for twenty years had not seen what he endeavored to reconstruct it was marvelous. And yet because of that very lack of sight his mind seemed to retain clearly the image of what his eyes had beheld before darkness fell upon them.

Now almost as interested as her uncle Graeme leaned forward, watching. The construction went on more slowly as it advanced, as the subsequent became more dependent upon the preceding. More often the hands of the man with sight guided those of the man who lacked it to some part of the model which seemed to be a landmark known to both. At times the blind man shook his head as if his memory were at fault. He verified and reverified the work of his fingers by touch before adding to it, with long, thoughtful pauses between the additions. It was a work of patience and memory extraordinary.

At last the work of construction was finished. The old Indian, his fingers passing lightly over the miniature dunes that represented the mountain ranges, valleys and basins he could never see again, began to trace a route for the man with sight. Certain words descriptive of natural objects were repeated again and again. The pauses of the fingers as they encountered the pegs meant definite points attained; as a trail, the spur of a mountain whence one looked across a valley, the ford of a creek, a waterfall. From these points one saw certain landmarks carefully described.

Dan Gardner bent above the tracing brown fingers in frowning concentration. He followed them with his eyes; but from the words of explanation which accompanied their pauses his brain was engaged in transmuting the little rows of sand into the things which they symbolized. That is, his eye photographed the actual little model of sand and sticks upon his brain; and then his brain built a vision from the verbal description and fitted it to the model. Little by little the model itself took on to his physical eye the semblance of the things it was intended to represent.

It was a feat of memory and construction that would have been impossible to most white men, for it demanded an acquaintance with primitive methods of making route maps plus a knowledge of natural objects and the physical features of mountain country, so that their images leaped up in the mind's eye at the spoken word. It was akin to the ability of architect or engineer to see the structure through the details of the blue print. Dan Gardner, holdover from an earlier day, with half a century's intimate acquaintance with mountain and desert, accomplished it if not easily at least without thinking that he had done anything remarkable. He had known men who could have done it more easily, and better.

It was the Indian whose sharpened sense of hearing first detected an alien sound.

"Listen! Somebody is coming," he said in his language. Gardner turned his head. A frown crossed his face but he did not move from his squatting position.

"Stay as you are," he said.

The intruder was Wills. He greeted Graeme deferentially and her uncle carelessly. He explained that failing to find anybody at the house he had come to the spring. He eyed the sand model for a moment with a curiosity which changed to puzzlement. Suddenly his eyes narrowed. Quick comprehension flashed into them. Then it was gone. His expression was merely blandly curious. "You have that sand staked like a new placer," he commented.

"It does look some like it," Gardner admitted. "The Injun has been showin' me some country he used to trap in. Them piles is hills and the stakes is about where he had his old camps. I was just goin' to ask him if he'd ever run across anything that looked like gold." He addressed the Indian. "Isaac, ikta pil chikamin stop okoke illahee?"

The blind man shook his head. "Ha-a-alo!" he drawled, the prolongation of the word signifying emphatic negative.

"He says no gold stop in that country," said Gardner. "I guess the old-timers would have found her if she'd been there."

Wills let it go at that and devoted himself to Graeme. When he had gone and Isaac had departed under the guidance of his grandson, she questioned her uncle to verify the guess she had made.

"Just what was Isaac showing you, Uncle Dan?"

"If you're as bright as I take you for you've guessed it already. He was showin' me how to get to that gold showin' he found."

"I thought so. But when you asked him about gold he said 'Halo,' which means there was none, doesn't it?"

"He was lyin', of course. That was a safety play. That feller, Wills, hadn't no business to ask questions."

"But he merely said that the sand was staked like placer ground."

"He knowed danged well what we was doin'," Gardner returned. "He savvied. I saw it in his eyes just for a minute. He hadn't no business to say a danged word. I've seen the answer to less than he said come through the smoke."

Through the old-timer she was beginning to have some conception of the old border code with its niceties of convention, its meticulous avoidance of all personal questions, of all curiosity as to the affairs of others. She shifted ground.

"Do you think you can find what Isaac says he found?"

"I could come pretty near it if things is as they was when he seen them last," Gardner replied. "If he'd struck that showin', comin' at it from where my old camps was, I'd have had a better chance. But as I told you he was on a sort of prospectin' trip for a huntin' ground and the way he went is the way he remembers. That's the only way he could tell me. So I have to go over the ground he did."

"You think he *does* remember?"

"Sure he does. If he could see he could go there straight as a gun bar'l. Them old Injuns never forget country they've hunted over once, no more'n you forget your letters. Reason is they learn't country about the same way. They was trained to take notice of it. They had to—that is, the old men had to. The young bucks, nowadays, is diff'rent."

Gardner now began his preparations methodically, taking his time, for there was no hurry. He had to wait until the high snows melted. To some extent his niece complicated matters. Playing a lone hand as had been his custom most of his life had been a simple matter. His grubstake consisted of articles all easy of transport, all furnishing a maximum of sustenance in a minimum of space and with a minimum of weight. Otherwise his outfit was the clothes he stood in with a change of underwear, two blankets and a tarp. Now, however, he had agreed to take his niece with him. That meant that he would have to double his supplies and add to them what he considered luxuries, take a tent and more bedding. And that would require another pack pony. He was becoming fond of his niece; but—"Dang all women when you want to git anywheres!" said old Dan Gardner to himself.

CHAPTER XXII.

GRAEME CAMPBELL was not unmindful of the kindness of Mrs. McIlree, whom she liked very much. She struck up a warm friendship with the older woman. But her daughter was of a different type.

She was at once amused by and a little sorry for the girl.

Fay McIlree, a trifle in awe of the young woman from the city, had at first adopted a manner and conversational style which she fondly believed to be sophisticated. But to her surprise she discovered that the tall, self-possessed girl knew very little of and cared rather less for the things which Fay had supposed made up the daily—or possibly nightly—life of the city dweller. And so after a time she discarded her stilted style and polished manner as being wasted.

"Don't you go to dances, and shows, and cabarets, and places?" she inquired one day when her conversational leads along these lines had drawn practically blank.

"Not very often. I'm busy all day and I'm usually in bed by ten o'clock."

"I wouldn't be. I'd be out every night."

"Perhaps not, if you had important work on hand and a good deal of it to do. I think you would find that you would be too tired to enjoy going out. And if you were out late every night you couldn't do your work. One has to remember that. The work comes first."

"I wouldn't let it stop my fun."

"But you see," Graeme explained patiently, "it isn't optional to neglect work one is paid for doing. Business men—or business women either, for that matter—don't make allowance for anything that interferes with efficiency."

"You want to get a stand in with the boss," Miss Fay advised with an air of wisdom.

"The way to do that," Graeme told her, "is to make good and a little better."

"I s'pose that's one way," Miss Fay returned with some contempt. "But there's others. Did you ever try vamping your boss?"

Graeme chuckled at the mental picture this question called up. "Unfortunately my boss has several grandchildren."

"Them old gran'pas are pretty foxy sometimes," Miss Fay hinted darkly. "You see in the papers all the time where old birds fall for young girls. Of course," she added with a certain condescension, "you ain't so young—I guess you'd be about twenty-five—but you're rather good looking if you ain't exactly pretty. You got nice hair and eyes and a swell shape if you wasn't so thin."

"Thank you," Graeme laughed, genuinely amused. "But I'm afraid my business superiors never think of my good physical points. And 'vamping' isn't in my line."

Miss Fay's face assumed a knowing expression. "Oh, I dunno," she said wisely. "You ain't doing so bad." Her tone and expression puzzled Graeme.

"I don't think I know just what you mean?"

"Oh, well," Miss Fay returned, "if you don't want to talk about your fellows it's all right with me."

"But I haven't any 'fellows.'"

"You say it all right," said Miss Fay. "But how about Mr. Wills, and Red Hoobin's friend, Bill Stuart?"

To her disgust Graeme felt her cheeks grow hot. But she forced a smile.

"I'm sorry. But Mr. Wills and Mr. Stuart are not what you call 'fellows.'"

"Well, then you don't need to redden up about it," Miss Fay retorted with embarrassing perception. "It ain't any of my business, of course."

"No," Graeme agreed coldly. Her tone, which showed her annoyance, was not lost upon the younger girl. It pleased the latter to see that it was in her power to ruffle the calm of this composed young woman of whom she had stood a little in awe.

"Bill Stuart used to come to see me once in a while," she invented on the spur of the moment. "Maybe I strung him along a little. But I ain't jealous, of course. You're welcome to him."

"Thank you!" said Graeme, hating herself for her inability to say it otherwise than stiffly.

"You'll find him sort of shy at first, maybe," Miss Fay elaborated with an air of experience. "He was, with me. Still, as I told him, you're just about the style he'd like."

But by this time Graeme had herself in hand.

"Yes," she said pleasantly. "You and he discussed me, then. Did he share your opinion?"

"Now you're asking," Miss Fay giggled. But she did not like the new, cool affability of the young woman's tone. Perhaps the fiction she had reared upon so slight a foundation might make trouble for her. "We were just talking sort of general about girls—not about you particular. You might have heard every word we said."

"I'm sure whatever you said was very nice indeed," Graeme assured her.

But inwardly she seethed with indignation. The thought that Stuart had discussed her with this poor piece of fluff was intolerable. It was not her estimate of him, but why should the girl lie? After all, what did she know of him? If that was his caliber —if he placed her in the category of this pinhead—she wanted no more to do with him. Some men, she supposed, were like that—ready to flirt with any girl. In that line he seemed to have a certain facility. She remembered that she was under obligation to him. But to class her—*her!*—with girls of Fay McIlree's type! Intolerable!

And so when Bill Stuart after an unsuccessful search with Walsh for the fur cache returned to Sitkum and rode out to Gardner's he met a reception verging on the frosty. He stood the lowered temperature for a while, decided that something was wrong and went to the point.

"What's the matter?" he asked bluntly.

"The matter?" Her tone was coolly puzzled.

"Old shoes," Bill elucidated. "That's me. Real old ones; out at the toes, run over at the heels, busted out along the vamps. How did I get that way in your estimation?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, yes you do," Bill stated in flat contradiction. "I hear a distinct knock somewhere. Suppose you tell me what is wrong."

"There is nothing to tell you."

" 'Some enemy hath done this,' " Bill said with conviction. "Cross my heart, I don't deserve it. Won't you give me even a Chinaman's chance to straighten whatever it is?"

"There is nothing to straighten, Mr. Stuart."

"Oh, well," said Bill with resignation, "I suppose it will come out in the wash. Many a card is lost in the shuffle that turns up later in the deal. Not as a leading question at all, has Bre'r Wills been paying his respects to my character?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"He hasn't told you, for instance, of the time when I was bouncer in a Seattle waterfront dive and was charged with manslaughter?"

She stared at him, uncertain how to take this startling question. "No."

"Nor of my bigamous marriage with a dancing girl of the dive aforesaid; when I had a wee wife waitin' in a wee but an' ben —which is music-hall Scotch for a shack—down in Idaho?"

"No."

"But surely," Bill pursued hopefully, "you now know that only a legal technicality saved me from a twenty-year stretch when I held up my last employer and got away with his pay roll? You must know. Your manner shows it."

"I suppose," she said, "that this is intended for humor. Mr. Wills has not told me anything at all about you."

"That's too bad," Bill said in genuine disappointment.

" 'Too bad?' And why?"

"Well, somebody has slipped the skids under me," Bill told her frankly, "and I rather hoped it was Wills."

"Why did you hope that?"

"Just a preference I have."

"You don't like Mr. Wills?"

"Don't I?"

"Why do you dislike him?"

"Not admitting anything," said Bill, "and speaking without prejudice, I never knew a fellow to make much of a hit by knocking a rival in business or in—anything else."

The last two words were plainly substitutional. Graeme flushed a little. Rivalry? She had not thought of it in just that way before. And yet Wills' attentions had recently become rather pronounced. But it shed a new light on Stuart's expressed hope that Wills had said something derogatory. In plain English he would be glad of an excuse to force a quarrel. In that respect his attitude was primitive. No doubt it was reprehensible; but nevertheless she was conscious of a new emotion, a strange thrill which, though she could not analyze it, was the sensation of the primitive female through all time contended for by the male.

"Have you any reason for disliking him, or is it just a case of 'Doctor Fell?' " she persisted.

"Gently lady," said Bill. "If I dislike Bre'r Wills, as you say I do, you are exactly the last person on earth I'd tell why. As I've already said, slamming the other fellow never wins you anything. And besides, it isn't done."

Here she glimpsed a new code masculine. She was forced to acknowledge the fineness of it. Was it, she asked herself, reasonable to suppose that a man who lived up to such a code should discuss her with the McIlree girl in the way the latter's words had indicated? She was tempted to ask him the direct question; but pride and her relations

with him made her hesitate and finally decide against so doing.

And so when Bill left her he was still in the dark. The frost had thawed slightly, but he was puzzled.

"She's heard some darn' thing," he growled to himself. "Somebody's been handing it to me. Not Wills, for she wouldn't lie about it. But what the devil could she have heard, and from whom?" He could not even make a guess.

In due course Red Hoobin rumbled into Sitkum. He had left Swan at Walsh's claim.

"And you bet," said Red, "I'm glad to hear human speech again. Outside of cussin' in his sleep, which he did steady, that Swede don't average one word in two days. Not that he didn't fool me right. He did, and I got to hand it to him. How's my girl gettin' along?"

"If you'd ask after her mother I could tell you. How'd you like me for a father-in-law, Red? I don't suppose the lady would have me, but her pie and coffee and doughnuts have inspired something like love."

"They're swell," Red admitted. "Fay can't cook like the old lady, durn it. You ain't seen her, you say?"

"Oh, yes, I've seen her. She's all right."

Red eyed him for a moment.

"Some other guy's been hangin' around while I've been away, huh?" he said. "Was it Jim Holmes?"

Bill Stuart made no reply.

"It was him," Red decided. "I warned him off once, and when I go to the hills he sees his chance. I don't like him anyway. You don't need to say no more."

"I haven't said a word, darn you."

"I know you haven't. I guess he's out of town now, but he'll be back for the sports.'

The "sports" were an annual event. They partook of the characteristics of a field day, of horse races and of a picnic. They were held a mile or more from town on a flat surrounded by groves of cottonwoods, birch and spruce. At night the festivities wound up with a dance.

This information came late to Bill Stuart, but he acted on it at once by requesting the pleasure of Graeme Campbell's company on the festive day. But to his disgust he learned that she had already accepted a similar invitation from Wills.

Hence, on the day aforesaid, Bill found himself utterly bored by the whole thing. An occasional glimpse of Graeme, who seemed to be enjoying herself with Wills, did not help matters.

Bill Stuart, outcast, one of the submerged, watched them from afar, chewing a cigar after the manner of his father, and cursed his luck. He found some relief in buying pools on the pony races. Though he did not know one horse from another he cashed in on the majority of these purchases. These winnings, however, he dissipated across a piece of oilcloth bearing numbered squares, being the layout of a hard-faced gentleman who had drifted into town a day or two before, much as a buzzard scents a meal arranged by Providence.

"You'll win it all back, brother," this gentleman encouraged him as he showed signs of abandoning this unprofitable pastime. "Don't be a quitter." But Bill was not in a sweet temper, though his losses had nothing to do with that.

"You don't think I'm bucking this game because I think I can win at it, do you?" he said contemptuously. Which remark being overheard by a crowd and scarcely being a boost for his game, the hard-faced gentleman thought fit to resent.

"Don't make no cracks like that across no layout of mine, feller, because I don't stand for them," he announced belligerently. To make it more binding he thrust his hardened features forward, favoring his patron with an intimidating glare. But Bill Stuart found the words and glare merely irritating. And just then he could stand little irritation.

"Oh, go to hell, you cheap tinhorn!" he returned wearily as he turned away. And it might have gone at that if the gentleman had not misinterpreted the action of withdrawal so badly as to retort with an intensely personal remark such as no man should employ unless mobilized for war. It was too much for Bill, as he was feeling just then. He needed a safety valve and this looked like it. So he turned and promptly kicked the layout into space. Its indignant owner, attempting reprisal, found himself the target of a pair of fists of unexpected velocity and shocking power.

It was all over in ten seconds. Gentleman and layout mingled on the ground before any but the immediate bystanders realized that an impromptu feature of entertainment had been introduced.

Bill Stuart modestly effaced himself, min-

gled with the crowd and then went away from there. Only those close at hand knew of his connection with the sudden commotion. He hoped that Graeme Campbell would not hear of it. What had possessed him to start anything with a two-bit tinhorn?

Disgusted with himself he strolled away alone. In a few minutes the trees hid the crowd. Their shade in their full leafage was pleasant. Shafts of sunlight sloped through it. There were well-defined trails, perhaps made of old by vanished herds of elk, and deepened by the hoofs of ranging stock; and there were little openings green with new grass.

On a convenient log he sat down and filled his pipe. The tobacco and the peace of his surroundings soothed his jangled nerves. So did the thought of a particularly well-timed right cross which the hardened gentleman had intercepted. Bill decided that after all the world was a good place and that he had done no serious wrong.

As he sat enjoying his pipe and the quiet a girl appeared, coming down the trail toward him. She was walking slowly, in a drooping attitude. A handkerchief in her right hand was applied to her eyes. As she removed it momentarily he recognized Fay McIlree.

Grief, screen representations thereof to the contrary notwithstanding, does not add to a lady's attractions. Tears, other than the glycerin variety, most unfortunately puff the eyes, redden the nose and otherwise raise merry Cain with the feminine complexion which, whether natural or artificial, is seldom salt-water proof. Fay had been crying—in fact was still crying. When Bill had seen her an hour before she had been a fairly well-finished product of Nature plus Art. Now her face, as revealed by the pitiless afternoon light, presented a reddened and lumpy, not to say bulbous, effect. Miss Fay, to employ delicate simile, looked like a washout on the grade of love.

When she saw Bill Stuart she endeavored to blink back the oozing tears, and failing had recourse to the handkerchief, already overworked to the point of saturation.

"Whatever is the matter?" Bill asked, rising from his log.

"Boo-hoo-hoo!" Miss Fay returned; a reply which, though phonetically somewhat owlish, seems to be the accepted spelling of sounds indicative of the lachrymal process. She took an uncertain step forward.

"Hold on, now," said Bill. "You don't want to go back to the crowd looking like that. Sit down here till you feel better."

"I'll n-never f-feel b-better!" Miss Fay sobbed pessimistically; but she adopted the sensible suggestion.

"Oh, yes, you will," Bill comforted her. "The one good point about trouble is that it doesn't last. Do you feel like telling me about it. Maybe I can fix it."

"I wouldn't tell you for w-worlds!" said Miss Fay; and immediately gave this statement a negative. "I've been in-insulted!"

Bill had suspected a hard kink in the tangled affairs of what Miss Fay doubtless considered her heart; but this was altogether different.

"What!" he said sharply. "Insulted? Just now?" Miss Fay nodded moistly. "Who insulted you?"

"S-somebody!" Miss Fay sobbed cryptically.

"Who?" Bill pressed.

"Boo-hoo-hoo!" Miss Fay informed him in a fresh outburst of grief, and collapsed neatly on his shoulder, burying her face in his coat. Bill, after an unsuccessful effort to protect himself in the clinch, made the best of it.

"Now, now, stop that darn' crying," he said, at the same time patting her shoulder in the way which man in his wisdom considers soothing when applied to women, horses and dogs.

But Miss Fay did not stop. Flood water was coming down and Bill reflected that when this was the case the only system was to open the spillway and let it run. So he sat pat and patting, at the same time eying the trail down which Fay had come. And thus he did not observe two people who, approaching from the other direction, distinctly saw him, and his companion, and the patting process in operation; and who, after a moment's silent contemplation, considerately turned and beat a tactful retreat.

Quite unconscious of this Bill waited for flood water to subside, and when it showed signs of doing so repeated his question.

"Who insulted you?"

"S-somebody you wouldn't think it of," Miss Fay replied more intelligibly.

"But who was it?"

"It was—it was—R-red!"

"Red?" Bill exclaimed in amazement min-

gled with incredulity. "Nonsense! Red wouldn't insult any woman."

"He did me!" Miss Fay wailed.

"How?"

"I'd rather die than tell anybody."

"Well, you don't have to do either," Bill soothed her. "Only I don't believe it."

"He did, he did!" Miss Fay asseverated.

"No," said Bill firmly, "not Red. I know him."

"I thought I did, too," said Miss Fay. "I thought he was a g-gentleman."

"So he is," said Bill loyally.

"If I tell you what he did," said Miss Fay, "you won't tell?"

"Not a word."

"Of course I came to the sports with him, but he saw a man he wanted to talk to and Jim Holmes came along. He asked me to go for a walk with him and we came down here where it was quiet, to get away from the crowd. I wasn't going to stand around alone while Red talked to a man. But Red he found out somehow where we'd gone, and he followed us up, and he had a fight with Jim."

"I see," Bill nodded. "Did he lick him?"

"He licked him good at the finish," Miss Fay admitted not without a certain pride surprising under the circumstances; "and when Jim had gone he bawled me out."

"For going with Jim?"

"Yes. And I told him I'd go with whoever I pleased, any time I wanted to. And he told me I had another guess coming. And I told him maybe he could lick a man, but he daresn't lay a hand on me. And I dared him to. And then he—he——"

Miss Fay sobbed afresh.

"Yes. And then?"

"I—c-can't tell!"

"Yes, you can. Get it over."

"He sp-spa-hanked me!" Miss Fay blurted; and at thought of this outrage she buried her face and sobbed again.

"Spanked you!" Bill exclaimed in admiration. "Good for—er—you don't mean it?"

"Yes, I do. And he said he'd do it again next time."

"Then I guess he will."

"You're a b-brute!" Miss Fay told him with some spirit, "and so's he!"

"When are you going to marry him?" Bill asked.

"I won't never marry him now," Miss Fay sobbed. "And I—I was going to."

Down the trail came a masculine figure which on closer approach resolved itself into the form of Red Hoobin. Mr. Hoobin bore visible marks of combat. Jim Holmes, in the vernacular, had been a tough baby. But the victor had a certain assured air as of one who has arrived, as of one who after long experiment has found a winning system. Opposite the log he paused and favored its occupants with a critical inspection, in which perforce he was limited to the use of his right eye, the shutters of the left having been put up by Mr. Holmes.

Miss Fay, sobbing again on Bill Stuart's brisket, did not see him. Bill once more patted her shoulder, eying Red. Between the two passed a glance of masculine understanding. They grinned at each other.

"I know all about it," said Bill. "Congratulations!"

"Thanks," Mr. Hoobin returned with modest pride.

Miss Fay, startled by the brute's voice, raised her head from the shelter of Stuart's shoulder. With a gesture of abandonment, not to say repulsion, she broke from that erstwhile refuge and cast herself bodily upon Mr. Hoobin.

"Oh, Red!" she cried tearfully.

Bill Stuart, removing himself swiftly and tactfully from that vicinity, reached into an upper pocket and brought forth a cigar. The wrapper was broken. He threw it away and extracted another. That, too was crushed. So was a third.

"A vicarious sacrifice," Bill murmured sadly as he discarded his last perfecto, "on the altar of Love!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE sacrifice had far-reaching results, for Graeme Campbell, walking with Wills, had recognized Stuart and Fay McIlree. She had laid a detaining hand upon her companion's arm and stepped from the trail into the concealment of the trees.

"Our friend Stuart seems to be improving the shining hour," Wills had commented with a grin.

"It would be a pity to interrupt, don't you think?" she had smiled tolerantly. "Suppose we go some other way. They haven't seen us."

But she felt a hurt which she would not acknowledge. There could be no mistake as to what she had seen. So after all the

McIlree girl had been telling the truth—or less than the truth. She and Stuart were on terms of—well, intimacy. The latter, then, was one of those who took his *bonnes fortunes* where he found them.

She had a profound distaste for that type of male; and what she had seen seemed to mark Stuart, definitely to brand him as belonging to it. What made it worse was that superficially at least he had nothing in common with the McIlree girl. He was her superior. Even their manner of speech was as far apart as the poles.

Well, she had made a mistake. She had thought him of finer fiber than he was. She regretted that she had admitted him to a certain mental intimacy, had revealed to him a part of her inner mind, which he had seemed to understand. But privately, no doubt, he had laughed at her. He had merely played a game with her as he had played it more crudely with the McIlree girl, and perhaps with others. At any rate she had found out in time. There would be no more of it. She could not forget that she owed her life to him, or to his dog; but the old feeling of camaraderie, of mental intimacy, of little flashing glimpses of inner thought could never be regained.

And so her outward attitude toward Stuart became impersonal, indifferent, that of mere acquaintance. It was worse than her former coldness, because there was a finality about it.

Bill Stuart, by no means dull of perception, realized that for some reason unknown to him he had been weighed and found wanting. His perceptions, too, told him that this new attitude dated from the day of the sports; but they did not give him even an inkling of the truth. Instead they led him astray; for, casting about in his mind for some explanation, he remembered his difficulty with the tinhorn gambler. He never even thought of the affairs of Red and Fay as having a bearing on his own. It did not occur to him that his actions might have been seen and misinterpreted. Indeed as to that his recollection of the affair was simply that he had kept the girl from meeting people until she had recovered her composure. But the row with the tinhorn was a different matter. A fight in public was not creditable. It was, he now admitted to himself, a piece of folly.

And so he explained Graeme Campbell's new attitude on the hypothesis that she had seen the fight or that some one had told her of it. A fight in public across a cheap gambling layout! To make matters worse it came on top of a lot of other rough stuff that he seemed fated to pull in her presence or to her knowledge. She had every reason to think him a bad actor, a fighting fool. And naturally she would be disgusted. Well, if that was it he wanted to know it. Therefore he sought a show-down at the first opportunity.

"I asked you once what I had done to get in the liability column," he said bluntly, "and you wouldn't tell me. Do you think you can tell me now?"

"What, exactly, do you complain of?" she asked. Her tone was not encouraging. Bill, eying her, decided that he was up against a hard game.

"Of course I have no right to complain. I didn't use that word. But your whole attitude toward me has changed. You used to be friendly; but now——" He completed the sentence with a gesture.

"You don't find my manner friendly enough? I'm sorry, but I don't think I can change it."

"Will you tell me what has changed it?"

"Aren't you a little imaginative?"

"Oh, well, you can stand me off with that line of stuff," Bill admitted. "You know your reason and I don't. Speaking as one of God's creatures to another, I ask you what it is, so that I may have a chance to explain whatever it is."

For her pride she could not tell him.

"There is nothing at all to be explained."

"If I don't get to the bottom of this it won't be for want of digging," Bill said firmly. "Since the day of the sports you have congealed noticeably. It was bad enough before, but since then it has been worse. I ask you if anything that happened that day is responsible?"

"Your amusements are your own, Mr. Stuart. I do not presume to criticize them; nor do I wish to discuss them." Which naturally confirmed Bill Stuart's erroneous theory.

"But I can explain that," he offered eagerly. "Let me tell you how it happened. Perhaps you saw it, though I didn't see you."

"You were somewhat—occupied. I didn't want you to see me, or to see any more. So I went the other way."

"You were disgusted, of course."

"It was a matter of complete indifference to me," she told him coldly.

"I know I shouldn't have done it," Bill admitted humbly; "but it was rather crowded on me. It wasn't one-sided at all."

"I thought not—from what I saw," she returned.

"We were both willing enough," Bill damned his cause still farther. "Of course it wasn't the thing to do in public. Bad form and all that. But it didn't last long."

"How unfortunate!" she said with cold irony.

"I broke away as soon as I could," Bill proceeded, sinking deeper into the mire. "You may think it's a habit with me, but it isn't. I try to keep out of such affairs but they are forced on me now and then. Still, this wasn't very serious. Really it didn't amount to a hill of beans. We merely mussed each other up a little for a minute and——"

"I am not interested in details, thank you."

"No, of course not. I'm sorry. Well, now you understand everything."

"I understand what you have told me; but really I don't understand how you can tell it."

"Why, there's nothing like talking things over frankly," said Bill. "I hope it will make a difference."

Graeme was silent for some moments.

"It makes this difference," she said at last. "It is better that you should discontinue your visits."

"Eh!" Bill gasped.

"Under the circumstances you must see that it is best."

"No, I'm hanged if I do!" he protested. "I don't see it at all."

"I hoped you would—after what I saw, after what you have admitted. It is difficult to say; but I don't wish my name to be associated with yours in any way—now."

Bitter medicine! Bill Stuart, amazed, took it standing up—literally.

"I'm afraid I've been very dense," he said. "I'm sorry that you have been forced to tell me that. In future, of course, I will see that you are spared the necessity of speaking to me at all, at any time."

She was taken aback. She had not anticipated this abrupt acceptance of her decree. "I didn't mean quite that," she admitted. "Only that it would be better that you should not come here to see me."

"But I mean it," said Bill with the quality which invariably made him carry a fight to an opponent. "Your name won't be associated with mine if I can help it. Good-by."

"Good-by." With slight hesitation she held out her hand. Bill looked at it and shook his head.

"You won't? I'm sorry. We—we need not part bad friends."

"We don't part as friends at all," Bill told her bluntly. "Shake hands—no! And there was a time," he added regretfully, "when I half hoped you'd give me your hand—in a different way."

"You can say that—now?" she flared indignantly. "After what I saw, after what you have told me! Haven't you any sense of propriety, of shame!"

"I have as much as most men," Bill retorted. "I've been more or less ashamed of plenty of things I've done, and I know I shouldn't have done what you saw me do; but as a matter of fact it was a sort of safety valve. I was blowing off steam. I saw you with Wills and it got my goat. So when——"

"Oh, you are impossible!" she cried. "Your principles are—I mean they are *not*. Please go!"

She heard him go, at an easy trail jog, the hoofs of his Jim pony padding softly in the dust. She reflected that he was not, as some men might, taking his anger out on his horse.

So that was over. She was through with him and he was through with her. An acquaintance which had promised friendship and perhaps a more intimate relation had withered utterly. It could never be resumed. Finis to that! She knew that she had done the right thing, taken the only course under the circumstances. And yet, somehow, she felt something approximateing to a sense of loss. But she put this feeling from her indignantly.

Stuart came no more; but the visits of Wills became more frequent. She knew, or thought she knew, their object. Sooner or later he would ask her to marry him.

Well, there was a way of escape from noncongenial tasks—if she would take it. But she felt no affection for Wills. He was an interesting companion, but nothing more. Marriage with him reduced itself to a business proposition. Considered impersonally it was not without attraction; but it could

not be considered impersonally, because the relation of marriage was too intensely personal. She now knew that, no matter what theories she had indulged in, she could not marry for material reasons alone. That eliminated Wills. She longed for the time when her uncle should see fit to go to the hills. Then, for a time at any rate, there would be relief from these besetting perplexities.

Wills, when she told him that she would accompany the old-timer, seemed surprised.

"But *you* can't prospect," he told her. For some reason the information appeared to displease him. "It's too rough a game for any girl."

"I'm told that if I stay in camp and don't wander off and get lost I won't be in the way," she laughed.

"But it's preposterous," he argued. "A girl like you on a job like that, putting up with all sorts of discomforts, even if you stay in camp."

"My uncle says he can make a comfortable one."

"What is comfort for a tough old-timer may be positive hardship for a girl. Take my advice and stay at home."

"Oh, no. I've made up my mind to go. I think I shall enjoy it."

He argued the point, stressing the drawbacks—wet weather, rough going, hard beds, flies. She wondered a little at his insistence, but he did not shake her decision. She was prepared for a certain amount of hardship. Wills gave it up.

"Do you know where you are going?" he asked.

"Only in a general way, up Old Bull Creek."

"Which fork?"

"I don't know."

"Can you tell me," Wills queried, "in confidence, of course, whether your uncle has anything definite in view?"

"I don't quite understand."

"For instance, is he going back to some showing he may have found last year, or is he just prospecting generally in the hope of finding something?"

"I can't tell you that," she felt justified in replying.

Wills asked no more questions and presently took his departure. It occurred to her that his seeming curiosity contravened the code of the old West, but she attached no importance to it.

CHAPTER XXIV.

WILLS lived alone in a small log house of bungalow type on the outskirts of Sitkum. A Chinese who did his cooking and housekeeping occupied a small shack to the rear, but separated from the main building. This arrangement secured absolute privacy.

Late one night Wills sat in his living room with Orme and McCool. The occasion appeared to demand privacy, for the blinds were down and the door was locked. The three men had dragged chairs together so that each might face the other two. A blue haze of tobacco smoke swam lazily above their heads.

"As I told you," Wills was saying, "I got just a flash at it. I hadn't time to examine it closely."

"We had plenty of time," Orme returned. "It's the richest piece of gold ore I ever saw. Now the question is, where did he get it?"

"He never found it in place," McCool put in, "or he'd have staked and recorded. He hasn't recorded; so it's just float."

"Say it is. Where did he get it? Did he find it himself? And, if he did, was it in this country? How do we know?" He looked at Wills.

"We don't know," the latter replied. "But I can tell you a number of facts, not amounting to much separately, perhaps, but all pointing to the conclusion that Gardner found the float somewhere in this country."

"Let's have 'em," said Orme, disposing his bulk more comfortably to listen.

"Yeh, shoot," McCool nodded.

"It may help to remember," Wills began, "that we found gold in a surface showing on one of the Dolly Gray group of claims. Of course we didn't dare to uncover it, and we covered up what the slide had exposed, which was only a few feet. Then we tried to buy, but McKellar, who had bought in Predie & Thompson's assets, smelled a rat and we were afraid to increase our offer. As it was, he sent in some sort of an expert, but the expert confined his investigations to the claim they had done the work on. We might have staked claims adjoining the property but that wouldn't have given us the ground we wanted. So we dropped the thing temporarily. But the point is that we know of the existence of gold quartz in this district, which was supposed to be confined to silver, lead and copper, though the creeks all carry a certain amount of gold in non-

paying quantities. So that, coming back to Gardner, it is at least possible that he found the float somewhere in these hills.

"Now, let's check up on Gardner. He came in here over a year ago and the first thing he did, before he went into the hills at all, was to rent the place he lives in now. Evidently, then, he intended to winter here. But the old mining boom had petered out long ago. There is nothing, so far as we know, to attract an old stampeder like Gardner. Why, then, should he come here unless he had something to go on?"

"You can't tell what an old-timer will do," Orme objected, shaking his head. "They stay on in busted camps, just hoping. Or they get some bug and play a million-to-one shot. They hear a ghost story about a mine and they spend years looking for it. No, you can't tell a thing about them."

"That's true," Wills admitted, "but let's go a little farther. So far as I've been able to find out Gardner asked no questions about the country, asked for no directions, which goes to show that he knew something about it already, however he got his information. He outfitted and pulled out. He came in once during last summer for a fresh grubstake and then he pulled out again and stayed out till snow. One man ran across his camp up high on the Old Bull, but apart from that nobody saw him or knew where he had been."

"That doesn't show that he had anything to go on."

"He has the float to go on now," Wills pointed out. "Either he found it last summer or he had it before. And that puts something I heard last winter in a new light. You know that he was drinking heavily at that time."

"He was drunk off and on all winter," said Orme; "but if he ever spilled anything I never heard of it."

"This is what I heard," said Wills. "I overtook him one night when I was going home. He was drunk, staggering along, muttering and talking to himself. 'I'll find her yet,' he was saying as I came up with him. 'She's just a-waitin' for me. I'll find her before I'm planted.' At the time I supposed he was muttering some maudlin stuff about some woman, perhaps his wife or a daughter who might have left him years before. But now I think he was talking to himself about a strike he hoped to make."

"Every prospector hopes for a strike," Orme commented, "and half of them talk to themselves."

"Here's something a little better," Wills pursued. "You know that blind old Indian, Isaac, but you may not know that his people are in the habit of taking him to Gardner's shack and leaving him there. The old men seem to be friends, and I happened to speak of it to Joe Naas, Isaac's son-in-law. He told me that they had known each other years ago. You see what that means?"

"Oho!" said McCool. "The Injun has lived here all his life. I don't s'pose he's ever been more'n two hundred miles away. So if they're old tillikums, Gardner's been here before."

"Exactly," said Wills. "But when you say the Indian hasn't been more than two hundred miles away you're wrong. Gardner took him out last winter and Joe told me that they had gone to see a 'tyee doctor' about the old man's eyes. Likely they went to Spokane, but Joe said it was no use. 'Halo mamook,' Joe told me. 'No more see um.' The blindness is permanent. Now a few days ago I happened to go out to Gardner's. The house was open but nobody seemed to be inside, so I went down to the little creek where he gets his water."

"To find Gardner?" McCool suggested with a grin. Wills glanced at him coldly.

"Any objections?" he asked.

"No."

"Then suppose you mind your own damned business," Wills told him deliberately.

"What's biting you?" McCool snapped back. "You'd better——"

"Shut up, Jerry!" Orme silenced him. "Go ahead, Charlie."

"Down beside the creek," Wills resumed with another cold glance at the scowling McCool, "I saw Gardner and the old Indian squatting beside a patch of sand that had been worked up into little ridges with pegs stuck in them. The Indian was following these with his fingers, about the way you'd feel along a shelf in the dark for something you knew was there. Get what I mean? And all the time he was talking to Gardner. When he heard me he stopped. Just for a moment the thing had me guessing, and then I tumbled. It was a route map, such as an Indian will draw for you in the dirt with a stick; but as this Indian couldn't see he had made ridges he could

follow with his fingers while he explained to Gardner."

Both Orme and McCool were interested now.

"You couldn't tell anything from what you saw?" the former asked.

"Nobody could. But there is no doubt that the Indian was tracing a route for Gardner. Now, connect that with the trip to see about his eyes. Why should Gardner take him to an eye specialist? Perhaps because he had known him long ago; but more likely because he needed the Indian's eyes for a certain purpose."

"It sounds reasonable," Orme nodded.

"It's more than reasonable—it's reason," Wills said. "The sure thing is that the Indian was trying to explain some route to Gardner. The only thing Gardner would be interested in finding would be mineral. We know he has rich float. My opinion is that the Indian knows where there is a surface showing of rock such as Gardner has described to him, and is trying to tell him how to get there. What do you think?"

"As a rule," Orme returned after a thoughtful pause, "I don't go much on Indian's yarns of mineral showings. They don't know rock. But this is different. There's no doubt about the float. If there's a showing in this country anything at all like it, whoever found it could turn it over for anything he liked to ask. It's a big bet—too big to overlook. It's worth taking chances for. What do you think, Jerry?"

"Like you," McCool concurred. "When Gardner starts out this time he'll try to follow the route the Injun showed him. But at that it ain't likely the Injun could tell him the exact spot. He wouldn't mark it himself that close, 'specially if he didn't know what he'd found, when he found it. So all he'd be able to tell Gardner would be the general location. He couldn't mark it down to yards and maybe not to miles. But Gardner will go to about that location and then he'll camp and go to prospectin'. So if we trail up Gardner to where he makes his main camp we got pretty near as good a show as him. There's no law against prospectin' the same ground, and he can't kick. If he does it won't do him no good. We may beat him to it and of course that'd save trouble. If we don't—well, he'll be by his lonesome, of course."

"No," Wills told him. "Miss Campbell is going with him."

McCool swore indignantly. "Don't the old rooster know that women is a holy nuisance if you want to get anywhere or do anything? A klootch is some use in a camp, but a white woman ain't none at all. Can't you fix it so she won't go?"

"I've tried. I've told her she'd find it rough."

"She will, too, if we have to jump Gardner," McCool prophesied. Wills frowned.

"I don't want any rough stuff in this, boys," he said.

His companions stared at him. Orme laughed.

"What's the new idea, Charlie? Gettin' religion?"

"You know what claim jumpin' is," McCool told him, "unless your memory's failin'."

"I don't want the old man hurt; and I don't want Miss Campbell to be roughly handled or frightened."

"Nobody wants to do either," said Orme. "But this is a big thing or it's nothing at all. We're gambling that it's big. We can't be too particular."

"I know," Wills returned, frowning. "But I have a reason."

"I know your darn' reason," McCool told him bluntly. "You're stuck on the girl. That's why you told me to mind my dam' business. Well, this is my business now. You're tryin' to mix women and our business, and it won't work. I'm tellin' you! You think back—run over the old bunch in your mind right on from old Soapy's time in all the old camps—and tell me what's become of the boys that tried to mix women and business. Come on, now, tell me!"

"What Jerry says is dead right," Orme corroborated as Wills kept silence. "I can name you a dozen offhand, dead or in the pen; and every last one of 'em got the gaff or the give-away through a woman. You know it as well as I do."

"And I know the kind of women they were."

"Women are women," said Orme, "and they all play their personal feelings for high cards. If a woman is straight she won't mix with crooked deals; and if she's crooked she's crooked all the way. She always wants to go too far, to grab too much. And she'll double cross you sooner or later. Now take this thing we've been talking about. It's nothing—or else it's the biggest thing we ever struck and worth taking chances on.

We're game to take them. But you want us to jump a claim and be ladylike about it. Not any for me. It's got to be understood that the main thing is to get the goods."

"You said it," McCool backed him up unhesitatingly. "It's a show-down right here. And right now I'm serving notice that I'm through with these foxy kid-glove plays that don't win you nothing but trouble."

Wills eyed him for a moment in silence. "What do you mean by that?" he asked at last.

"You know dam' well what I mean, but all the same I'll tell you," McCool answered truculently. "You take them beaver skins. My tumtum was to run 'em out over the pass in a bunch as soon as the snow would let us; and if Walsh or any one else horned in to down 'em cold and plant 'em down some rock crack with no bottom to it. But you wouldn't. And then this guy Stuart shows up and things has gone wrong ever since. I want to bump him off, but you won't stand for that. You frame it to nick him for his roll, but he's too wise. I frame it to have him beat up—and O'Halloran ain't over the punchin' he got, yet. Then Stuart comes right out in the open as Walsh's deputy. They hold up Sam Cole and his dummy outfit and it's just blind luck they don't get us. Instead of cashin' in on them skins we've got to cache them, and even if we put them in the old mine there's the chance of flies gettin' at them. We can't move them out this year, because Walsh has the trails stopped. The whole deal's shot by that kid-glove stuff.

"Then there's the land graft. You've been notified not to make no more sales pendin' reclassification, or some such stall. That graft is shot, too, and I'll bet it's Stuart again. There ain't a thing gone right since he's showed up. He's bad medicine, pure poison for us. None of us can place him, but my tumtum is he knows us and our record, and is here to land us. And yet you let him run around loose, makin' more trouble all the time. Cripes! You'd think that bumpin' off a trouble-makin' guy was something new. Darned if I know what's happened to you. You always had a long head and a cold nerve; but now it looks to me like the one's gone mushy and the other's cracked."

The little ruffian spat out this tirade venemously, working himself into a passion as he proceeded. His eyebrows twitched nervously, his fingers opened and closed, his eyes glinted with baleful lights. Orme, fog gray of eye, unemotional, cold as stone, nodded agreement.

"Jerry's said it for me, Charlie. We can't afford to have our record dug up just now."

Wills eyed his companions coldly. He turned slightly in his chair, an action which brought his right-hand coat pocket uppermost. His hand rested carelessly near it.

"You can find out how much my nerve has cracked any time you want to try out your own," he said.

"We don't need any smoke in this, Charlie," Orme refused the challenge, shaking his head. "Your nerve is all right that way. But here it is: You've been trying to run crooked deals on straight lines and it won't work. You frame a play that needs rough stuff to get across and you try to get along without it. You've been laying off the rough stuff for fear it would make talk and trouble. You're a leading citizen now, and you're respectable and so on. I admit that's a big asset to us. Only it's making you too careful. In the old days when we pulled something we'd make a get-away; but now we've got our hooks in here a get-away would mean starting all over some other place. That's so, and I'm not blaming you at all. We've been cutting out the rough stuff to play it safe; but now you shy from the rough stuff when it's the only safe play. All along we've been looking for something with big money in it, and if your dope on old Gardner is right, here it is. We can turn over a surface showing of rock like that float for half a million, and you know it. That's worth taking a big chance for.

"And now, about Stuart: He's been coppering our bets right along. He's wise to the land graft, and he may know a good deal more about us. As Jerry says, he may be here trying to land us. Very well. Now, suppose Gardner strikes it rich, and we jump him. What chance would we have to get away with it—to get title to a claim—if Stuart knows our record and spills it? Not a chance on earth. Well, then, Charlie, the way I look at it we don't need Stuart any longer."

"You bet we don't," McCool agreed emphatically.

Wills understood that he was being invited to concur in a sentence already passed by a majority. Whatever his decision might

be, it would not affect theirs, already made. But he considered the matter from the angle of expediency for himself. Was it, on the whole, advisable to remove Stuart?

"All right, boys," he said at last. "If you say we don't need him, I guess we don't."

"I thought you would see it," Orme nodded with satisfaction. "It's the only safety play."

"It may be, but it has to be played mighty safe," Wills insisted.

"Don't worry," Orme assured him. "When Stuart put a hole in Jerome's hat it would have been better for him if he had held about four inches lower. Jerome, Isadore and the klootch are all out to get him. We have nothing to do with it. Stuart will simply disappear. They're laying for him now. That's settled, then." He spoke as one who dismisses a routine matter. "Now, how about old Gardner? Have you any line on when he'll make a start?"

"No. He should go any time now. His niece doesn't know. The old man doesn't seem to know himself."

"Don't fool yourself," said McCool. "He knows, but he ain't tellin'. That old rooster's as cunnin' as a coyote."

"If he got too much of a start we might have the devil's own time finding him," said Orme. "Me or Jerry will tail him from now on. You want to be all ready, Charlie."

"Ready?" Wills queried.

"You're coming, of course."

"You don't need me to handle the old man. I don't want to show in this, at all."

Orme and McCool exchanged rapid glances.

"We savvy that," the former said. "We can handle Gardner, of course. But if he makes a strike and we have to jump him we'll need you to prove that the ground was open when we staked it. Maybe it would be best for you to stake and record yourself. Bein' a leadin' citizen you can get away with a lot."

Wills' eyes narrowed a trifle as he regarded his partners. He knew that he was getting his orders. They intended to realize upon the asset of his standing. That was part of the game, as they had played it, perfectly understood between them. There was no connection apparent between him and them. The whole value of his testimony in a pinch, all had recognized, must depend on that. Now he pointed it out. It would not do to accompany them. That would discount in advance any evidence he might be called on to give.

"That's right enough," Orme admitted, "but there's no reason why you can't go alone. You take your own outfit. You've done it before. We meet by accident. We happen to camp near each other, and if we make a strike naturally we tell you about it and advise you to stake, too. We show you our ground, all staked regular. You see that yourself on such and such a day. You don't know anything at all about Gardner; but you do know that on a certain day—bein' before the day he claims we jumped his claim—we showed you over our ground regularly staked by us and you saw and read our location notices. Then you went on about your business. That's the way to frame it. It's an absolutely safe play all round."

Wills could not dispute it. It was profoundly simple.

"You see," Orme explained further, "if we have to jump Gardner we just claim he tried to jump us. We'll say he acted like a crazy man or as if he was drunk. We'll beat him to the recording, and with your word to back us up he can do what he likes about it."

"You don't think the old man will get hostile?"

Orme shrugged his shoulders. "He takes the chance of that himself."

"You don't figure that old rooster can make trouble, do you?" McCool asked contemptuously.

"No. But go easy. If he's hurt it may make trouble for us all."

"Do you want him to get away with it?" McCool retorted with asperity. "Are we out to jump him, or ain't we? I thought that was all settled."

"It is settled," Orme announced with finality. "Isn't it?" he challenged Wills.

"Yes," Wills acknowledged.

To be continued in the next issue, March 7th.

The Unusual Adventures of the Texan Wasp

By James Francis Dwyer

Author of "The Villa of Exquisite Torture," "The Green Lash of the Hapsburgs," Etc.

XI.—THE IRON CHEST OF GIOVANNI THE GRAND

In ancient Florence Robert Henry Blane answers the lure of an old love and saves a family tree from the blight of destitution.

IN the lobby of the Hotel Miramare at Genoa sat Robert Henry Blane, the handsome adventurer from Houston, Texas, known in many cities as The Texan Wasp. Mr. Blane was amused. The conductor of a touring party, a lean, bad-tempered man, full of that vicious intensity and driving capacity that a tour conductor must possess, was rounding up his leg-weary victims. He herded them together in the center of the lobby, jerking out instructions regarding trains and baggage, counting them at intervals as if they were so many sheep that he, a hard-faced human collie, had to guard.

Mr. Blane, watching the fellow, thought of the song of the tour conductor that begins:

You longed to roam from your cozy home
You bragged of your wanderlust;
You studied the map like a crazy yap,
Now you'll travel, by gosh, or bust!

A perspiring fat woman seized a moment when the tour conductor's eyes were off her and moved fearfully to a small table near which The Wasp was sitting. Hurriedly she emptied the pockets of her big traveling coat of catalogues that she had collected in the mad rush through Italy. Catalogues of museums and picture galleries, printed descriptions of monuments, a torn, week-old copy of an English weekly newspaper printed in Italy.

The fat tourist found the eyes of Robert Henry Blane upon her and stammered an excuse for unloading. "They're so heavy," she murmured apologetically. "And they're not a bit of good to me."

The tour conductor sprang upon the fat lady and dragged her back to the group.

Robert Henry Blane stretched out his long legs, lit one of his favorite cigars made from fine Algerian tobacco, then, from idle curiosity, reached out an arm and picked up the torn copy of the newspaper that the fat lady from Moline had thrown upon the table. He glanced listlessly at the headings. There was the perennial "List of British and American Residents in Florence," the "Weekly London Letter," "Church News," "Cab Fares in Florence and the Suburbs," "Doings at the Galleries," and all the other futile and noninformative matter which the editor of a sheet in a town where nothing happens is forced to use in making up his paper.

The Texan Wasp was on the point of tossing it back upon the table when a name sprang from a column headed "Movements in Society." A name that thrilled him. A

name that hurled itself from the page and cuddled down in little mental arms that reached out for it. Soft little arms of memory that had longed to embrace it.

For an instant Robert Henry Blane was unable to read the encompassing paragraph. The printed name stunned him, then love-famished eyes fell upon the few lines. Again and again he read the little announcement. It ran:

> The Comtesse de Chambon and her niece, Miss Betty Allerton, of Boston, U. S. A., have arrived in Florence and are staying with friends of the comtesse on the Lungarno Amerigo Vespucci.

For a second Robert Henry Blane remained immovable, then he tossed the paper from him and sprang to the desk of the pompous concierge. "When is the next train for Pisa, with connections for Florence?" he cried.

"In fifteen minutes," answered the gold-laced one. "It will be the Rome Express and you will change——"

"My bill! Quick!" interrupted The Wasp. "Get my baggage down! Room 28! Hustle!"

A startled bookkeeper fumbled with figures, and the tall Texan cursed the intricacies that surround hotel bills in the Italy of to-day. The fellow protested nervously. "I must calculate the taxes," he whined. "On the total go the special taxes. They must be added. It is the law."

"Confound the law!" roared The Wasp.

The frightened bookkeeper wrestled with the different taxes—tourist, de luxe, tax for the mutilated, tax for sojourn and service—that make the traveler's days unhappy ones, and, at last, from the welter of figures he built a total. The grips had been brought down with much rushing and wrestling. A taxi had been found.

Robert Henry Blane looked at his watch. "Fifty lire if you break all records to the station!" he cried to the chauffeur. "Let her go!"

Through the twoscore tunnels that make the ride from Genoa to Spezia recall memories of New York subways! On and on to Pisa, whose Leaning Tower, visible from the train, has grinned at the laws of gravity for nearly six hundred years.

The Wasp changed at Pisa, and, during the little wait for the Florence train, he asked himself the reason for his mad rush. Would Betty Allerton be pleased at meeting a tall adventurer from Houston whose deeds had made strange gossip in all the capitals of Europe? Would she wish to speak to a man whose doings had the same relationship to honorable life as the Leaning Tower had to the well-plumbed buildings of to-day? Modesty sprang upon him and tore the little dreams to pieces.

On and on swept the train, The Wasp a little despondent. The great man hunter, No. 37, had spoken once of the Law of Compensation that rules the world, and his words came back to Robert Henry Blane. A paraphrase of Emerson who told how Crime and Punishment grew on the one stalk so that the hand that plucked the one assuredly plucked the other. The Wasp damned the theory. He told himself that it was not true, and he was still trying to believe it wrong when the train roared into the city of the Medici, the city of Cosimo the Grand and Lorenzo the Magnificent! The City of Art and Poetry!

On the open piazza in the center of the Ponte Vecchio, that strange bridge of shops that spans the Arno, stood The Texan Wasp. Mr. Blane was not in a good humor. Somewhere in the sweet and wonderful city of Florence was a person he wished to see, yet that person was, for the moment, unfindable.

The tall American had visited the office of the newspaper in whose pages the little paragraph announcing the arrival of Betty Allerton and her aunt had appeared. The editor was sympathetic but helpless. He had gathered the item from some source that he had forgotten, and he regretted exceedingly that he could not tell his distinguished visitor where Miss Allerton was located.

Robert Henry Blane had walked the Lungarno Amerigo Vespucci at every hour of the day. He had spent hours staring into the windows of its art shops where the hastily painted copies of the fat-jowled "La Gioconda" wait for purchasers. And with each moment that went by the belief that he would come face to face with the girl he loved was slowly dying. Florence seemed a city without a soul; a dead city because Betty Allerton was not there.

And then, on this third morning after his arrival in the city of Cosimo, something happened to stir the dead monotony of the days. As The Wasp stood upon the little open place in the middle of the Ponte Vec-

chio a beggar, whose feet had been carefully twisted in childhood so that he could earn a living without work, separated himself from the stream that passed between the little shops of the jewelers and crawled onto the open space beside Robert Henry Blane. A queer beggar. His nether portions rested on a soap box to which were fixed four little wheels, and he propelled this box by leaning forward and clawing at the roadway with two iron hooks.

He halted the soap-box chariot close to The Wasp, and, with the iron hook held in his right hand, he began to scratch the dusty roadway. His queer, contorted face was upturned. Cunning, pain-smeared eyes endeavored to get the attention of the handsome Texan.

Robert Henry Blane glanced at what the fellow was doing. The cripple showed delight at getting the tall American's eye. Hurriedly he scratched the title "Signor" in the dust, then, to the surprise of the Texan, he scrawled after it the word "Blane." For a few seconds he allowed his handiwork to remain, then hurriedly rubbed it out as if fearful that it would be visible to the passers-by.

The Wasp moved closer to the soap-box chariot. He leaned down so that he could speak to the deformed thing on the ground and put a question in Italian. "How do you know my name?"

"Kavados the Greek told it to me, signor," answered the cripple.

The ears of The Wasp conveyed the name "Kavados" to his brain, and the brain went questing. It flung up a picture of a small street running off the Faubourg Poissonière in Paris, a little street called the Rue de Dunkerque, and in a filthy house in the little street sat a spider. An extraordinary spider. He sat in a gloomy room on the first floor, and it was whispered among the people who had dealings with him that he knew of things that happened in far-away places long before the newspapers spread the information to the people on the street. He was a Greek from the slopes above Corinth, where the little grapes that become raisins ripen in the sunshine, and, like many another wanderer:

> True patriot he, for be it understood
> He left his country for his country's good.

Robert Henry Blane was not pleased at the remembrance of his dealings with Kavados the Greek. The fellow had bred a queer dislike in the mind of the Texan. There was something about him that seemed unearthly, something that savored of black art. He was a dank person who seemed to bear a strange relationship to that slimy, many-tentacled family of cephalopods that throttle and choke their prey with their dreadful feelers. .

The Wasp put another question. "Why did Kavados the Greek tell you my name?" he demanded.

"He wishes to see you, signor."

"How did he know I was in Florence?"

"Yesterday he saw you on the Lungarno. He drives each day in a closed carriage, signor. He looks from a little hole that is cut in the blind and he sees everything. Everything that happens."

"And where am I to see him?"

"In the Via di San Gallo. I am to show you the way, signor. Pardon me a little. I have forgotten. He told me to bow myself before you because you were an illustrious American. It is difficult for me to do so because you stand above me as the Duomo stands above the kennel of a hound. Pardon."

The Texan Wasp considered the sly and smooth-spoken occupant of the soap box. The Wasp was a little annoyed. The fact that a person in a side street of Florence—a person whose affairs were strange and mysterious—had sent a beggar to arrange a meeting with him was not pleasing. The name "Kavados the Greek" did not stand for Romance. It stood for trickery, intrigue and deviltry, and, for the moment, Robert Henry Blane had no longing for such matters. He craved Romance, soft, sweet Romance such as should be found in the old, old streets of Florence through which, in the colorful days, Lorenzo the Magnificent took his daily walk with his following of artists and poets.

"What is the business that Kavados wishes to discuss with me?" snapped the Texan.

"Ah, signor, if I knew I would be wiser than the three judges," answered the cripple. "All I know is that he wishes to see you at his place. It must be important because he pays me all that I could beg, and, as the English and Americans are many at this season my charge will be high."

The Wasp smiled. "Go ahead," he ordered. "I'll keep your chariot in sight."

Kavados the Greek had a face that looked as if it had been used as a scribbling block by a legion of devils. Every known hieroglyphic of vice had been etched on it. Sin had crept over it, crossing and recrossing, leaving little marks like those left by the feet of the stinging centipedes of Brazil. There was no necessity for the evidence of a recording angel when Kavados stood up in the Big Circuit. Like one of those engines that records its speed, its stops, and direction on its own indicator, the face of the Greek had written upon it an autobiography that was a little terrifying.

The eyes had retreated as if fearful of the things they might suddenly see. The mouth had tightened lest a word might drop from it in an unguarded moment—a word that might be twisted into a hempen rope that would swing Kavados into the next world. And, although the present world was annoying at times to the Greek, he had a tremendous fear of the one to follow. On the slopes above Corinth, where he was born, the clergy took a keen delight in picturing the torments of the other world to the children of the raisin growers, and the vision that the young Kavados had formed of those torments had never quite been obliterated. Sometimes he cursed the clergy for their dreadful capacity in picturing punishment in places that they had never visited.

Obsequious and smirking he was before Robert Henry Blane. His home was honored. His poor home, which was not a home but a refuge from the world, was too mean for a person like Monsieur Blane to visit.

With his skinny hands he brushed the big brocade chair on which he invited his visitor to rest. It was a chair, so he gabbled, that had rested the legs of the great. Some said that Savonarola had sat in it. He didn't know. It had come to him in queer ways and its history could not be traced. He had many things that were precious. The house was a museum. At times, so he chattered, he was afraid. He lived alone and there were murderers in Florence. Many of them.

The Wasp smiled. Kavados the Greek, who had popularized murder, was beginning to grow afraid for his life.

The Greek suggested refreshments. He remarked that he had a wine more wonderful than the finest and silkiest Lachryma Christi. A wine that could not be purchased in the open market. It was deftly smuggled so that the liquor tax would not spoil its flavor. Did the illustrious signor know that a revenue tax spoiled a wine?

"I will not drink," said The Wasp, interrupting the babbling Kavados. "What is it you wish to discuss with me?"

"Just a sip," pleaded the Greek. "It is so very——"

"Not a sip," snapped the American. "Come to business."

Kavados crept close to the big American. Fear—a queer, sickly fear—was enthroned within the fellow's eyes. He looked around him continuously. The old house that, in the days of the Medici, had been the palace of a Florentine noble, seemed to be waiting for some confession that he wished to make. The Texan Wasp felt that the evil deeds of the Greek were riding hard on his heels; that the ghosts of men that he had robbed and ruined were waiting in the shadows of the big rooms to throw a lariat around his feet when the moment came.

"It is a strange story," began Kavados, "but you have heard strange stories before." He tried to laugh but the effort was not successful.

"There was an affair in Brussels in which you took a part, Signor Blane," he went on, "and this matter of mine has some points in common with it. I mean the affair of The House in——"

"We won't discuss my affairs," interrupted Robert Henry Blane. "Let's keep to your matter. What I do or do not do has no concern with you. Tell me what you want of me."

The sickly grin widened. The long, lean hands of the Greek writhed around each other as if seeking sympathy. He swallowed spasmodically.

"It is this, then," whispered Kavados. "I have got something that I am afraid of. Something that has come to me by strange ways. Say that I bought it, that I stole it, that I found it on the street. Say anything that you like. The point is that I have it and I do not know what to do with it. Listen, I am afraid of it! Terribly afraid of it. But I must see what is in it. Here in this town I am a Greek, and the Italians do not love the Greeks. I am a recluse, and I know few. I mean I know few that I would trust. That is why I sent for you. I saw you on the Lungarno and I thought

you would be the person that I needed. I know that you have no fear."

He paused, wiped the cold perspiration from his face and looked at The Texan Wasp. "The price is anything that you wish," he murmured. "I am rich. I can tell you that I am rich because—because the Signor Blane is a gentleman. The money is here in the house to pay you when the work is done."

"And what is the mysterious job?" questioned The Wasp.

"Come with me," whispered the Greek.

He stood up and turned to a door in the rear. The Wasp followed him. The statement of Kavados seemed to have increased the mystery of the place. In the big rooms was a sort of cold fear, a grimy terror that detested the sunshine and the fresh air.

The Greek led the way through a long corridor, a corridor that in the days of the Medici must have been splendid in its gilt and colors but which was now a damp and evil-smelling place. The two reached a thick nail-studded door which Kavados opened with a large key.

"Wait," said the Greek. "We must have a light. Be careful. There are steps here that lead down to the cellars."

The trickster from Corinth lit a lamp and preceded The Wasp down the stairs. The American had little interest in the business, but the fact that he had spent uneventful days in the city by the Arno made him inclined toward any adventure that might relieve the monotony.

Kavados stopped at the bottom of the stairway, stood for a moment as if listening, then led the way across the floor of large tiles—tiles whose green coloring had been extracted by the damp of the ages. The place was dark, but the lamp seemed to give a feeling of confidence to the Greek.

In the center of the large basement room he paused before a heavy-legged table—a table such as one might have found in the refectory of an old monastery; a long table whose boards were of black mahogany, and whose legs looked as if they could hold up all the necessaries for a million banquets of the old gorging years that seem so far distant from our days of quick lunches and our eternal chatter of vitamines and proteids.

Upon the table rested something large that was covered by a heavy rug. A huge thing that bulked under the covering like a small coffin. The Greek put out a thin paw, tore the rug quickly aside, and held the lamp high so that the American would have a good view of the object.

It was an iron box of a type that Robert Henry Blane had never seen. An iron box such as youngsters might dream of as the receptacle of pirate treasure. An iron box such as Tamerlane might have used to carry the most precious objects of the gorgeous plunder his elephants dragged from Persia to golden Samarkand!

An astounding box! A box of hammered iron with girdles of brass! A box that raised visions of fat dead coins—dropsical golden pieces that had been captured and stored by strong-armed robbers. A squat thing that had a bulldog look about it, a threatening, truculent look that was quite sufficient to make the nervous investigator pause. It carried the impress of big days, days when things were made to last. It had rolled through the centuries knowing no age, no period. It had the queer quality of eternal life that at times is a little revolting when compared with fleeting human existence.

Kavados the Greek lifted the lamp higher. The light splattered on the brass girdles of the box, on the polished corners of it, on an inscription that ran along the great lid.

"Do you know German?" he asked.

Robert Henry Blane stepped closer and looked at the words of brass that had been welded onto the iron. Translated into English the German inscription ran:

The god of vengeance acts in silence.

The voice of the Greek was a thin thread of fear that came tremulously to the ears of the big American. "This is the work that I want you to do," he murmured. "I want you to open it. I—I am afraid of the thing. Open it and I will pay your price!"

Robert Henry Blane took his eyes from the iron box and studied the face of Kavados the Greek. The fear that was upon the fellow had brought out further traces of hidden infamies. Terror had acted like one of those chemicals that, poured upon lettering that is nearly invisible, brings the script miraculously to view.

The big American's curiosity was stirred. What was in the great iron box? What precious thing did it hide? The face of the Greek expressed a terror that was a little disgusting in its nakedness, a fear that was

revolting. Yet, struggling with the terror, combating it, snarling for its share like a hungry hound, was a chattering curiosity, a longing to see, to know, to find out, that really defeated the great dread.

The Wasp smiled. "It has got your nerve," he said quietly.

The Greek moistened his dry lips. "Yes, yes," he admitted. "I am—I am afraid of it."

"What do you think is in it?" questioned the American. "Have you any idea?"

"None! No, no, I have made no guesses!"

"But you have been led to believe that there is something wonderful inside?" persisted Robert Henry Blane. "Some one has told you things?"

"No, no, I swear I know nothing," stammered Kavados.

The Wasp put his right hand on the iron box and the frightened Greek stepped backward as if he feared some uncanny happening. There seemed a possibility of his dropping the lamp. Blane took the light from him and placed it on the table.

The big American walked around the iron mystery. The huge lid fitted down tight, showing only a slight cranny at the junction line; the hinges were invisible, and from the preliminary survey there was only one spot on the iron hide of the thing that suggested a possibility of opening it.

This spot held the attention of The Wasp. It was a circular depression, some four inches deep and some two inches in diameter, and it looked to be the point upon which the attack should concentrate. Robert Henry Blane held the lamp close and examined it. There was no keyhole at the bottom of the depression as he thought there might be, but, instead, there were five characters in the form of a circle. They looked to be flourished letters of the German alphabet, each encircled by a little ridge of brass.

The Wasp pointed to the opening and addressed Kavados. "I think the secret is here," he said. "Possibly a trick combination. Have you tried?"

"No, no," stammered the Greek. "I have done nothing."

.Blane grinned. He was on the point of thrusting the finger of his right hand into the depression with a view to testing carelessly the result of pressure upon the characters, but he suddenly reconsidered the advisability of doing anything of a hasty nature with the mystery box. He stooped, picked up a short stout stick from the floor, inserted it in the opening and pushed one of the characters.

The effect was startling to Robert Henry Blane. The pressure on the characters brought forth a surprising happening. From the side of the hole, at the bottom of which the characters lay, there flashed out a circular blade that cut with amazing ease through the stick and disappeared again, leaving the severed piece in the depression.

The Wasp turned upon the Greek. The gray eyes of the angry Texan fell upon the shivering form of Kavados, and Kavados came to the sudden belief that the basement was not a healthy spot. He snatched the lamp and made a rush for the stairs leading to the first floor; a little squeal of terror came from him as he fled. The anger stirred in the big American was too much to combat after the nervous strain.

The Wasp stood for a moment beside the iron box, his face turned to the flying Greek upon whom terror had pounced. The big American was on the point of ordering the fellow to return with the light, but the order was throttled by an unexpected happening. From the head of the steps down which Kavados and Robert Henry Blane had descended into the cellar there came a quick flash, the hard noise of a shot echoed through the cellar, the lamp in the Greek's hand crashed to the floor, and Kavados went down with it.

The cellar was in darkness, complete and absolute darkness. Not a pin point of light came into the place. The walls of heavy masonry were unpierced by windows, the nail-studded door at the head of the steps evidently was closed.

Blane, catlike and alert, moved from the table. He was uncertain whether his presence in the cellar was known to the person who had fired the shot that had bowled over the Greek, but he was determined to take no chances. With noiseless feet he moved toward the rear of the cellar, in the opposite direction to that in which Kavados had been moving when knocked over by the shot.

The scratch of a match came from the head of the stairs, a whispered curse as it failed to strike. Another scratch, then the tiny flame showed high up in the surrounding darkness. The Wasp watched it. It began to descend. The American made out

an uplifted arm, the side of a bald head, then another face, lean and ratlike, thrust forward, searching the sea of darkness with questing eyes.

The match died out. Another took its place. Another still. The two descending the stairs were moving cautiously. They were evidently anxious about the condition of Kavados. The odor of kerosene from the broken lamp filled the cellar.

They found the Greek. The match was lowered, waved above him. The dull sound of a shoe thrust hard against a body came to The Wasp. The two laughed, then advanced toward the table upon which was the iron box.

The Wasp came to the conclusion that his presence in the cellar was unknown to the pair. They evidently had reached the door at the head of the stairs at the moment the Greek had decided to fly from the anger of the American, so they had heard nothing to make them believe that another person was in the basement.

Blane listened. Scraps of whispered conversation came to his ears. They reached the table. The match was lifted, then a stream of blasphemous exclamations expressing pleasure and surprise came from the two. The iron box that carried the admonition concerning the god of vengeance was made plain to them.

Their words were throaty with excitement. They gasped and gurgled. They cursed softly to express their delight. They called in profane language to the whole calendar of saints, urging the holy ones to look with wonder eyes upon their find. There was something childlike and ludicrous about the stream of impious language which they unloosed in the delirium of joy that came upon them when their eyes fell upon the iron chest.

An interval of darkness came as a match burned out. One of the two stumbled back to the place where the Greek had fallen. The ears of the Texan heard crunching of glass and understood. The fellow was dragging the wick from the shattered lamp.

The wick made a fine light, a light that was hailed with more joyful profanity. It lit up the table and the box; it fought with the encompassing darkness. Blane moved farther into the gloom. The voices of the two blended into a soft, slobbering drool. They evidently were beside themselves with delight.

There was an argument concerning weight, the possibility of moving the thing. It was put aside hurriedly. Moving it was out of the question. The wick flared up like a torch. It moved around the box as the two sought a method of opening it.

The flame halted, dropped lower. The two heads were thrust together. Into the chatter came a tense note. They had located the depression, at the bottom of which were the five flourished characters, each surrounded by a ridge of brass.

The Wasp held his breath. There was a silence in the cellar, a soft, quivering silence that seemed to realize its own evanescence.

And the noise that the silence seemed to fear came with appalling suddenness. It was a howl of pain and fear that filled the cellar, crashing through the darkness in a manner that seemed to illuminate it. A dreadful howl. It might have been uttered by some prehistoric animal trapped by the cunning of a cave man.

The howl was followed by curses and inquiries. The lamp wick was dropped and trampled on. From the darkness came whimpers of pain, pleadings for quiet, blasphemy that reached a plane that made it really artistic.

Blane listened. More matches fought with the darkness, the wick was found and relighted. There was a remark concerning the possibility of poison, then more yelps of fear. The Italian mind of the injured one had pounced on a further horror connected with the injury. He surmised that the medieval mechanic who had planned the infernal mechanism that slashed the inquisitive finger thrust into the depression, had made his device more deadly still by poisoning the blade. A terrifying thought!

The uninjured man fought the belief of his friend. Fought it unavailingly. Dread of a quick death in the darkness by methods that the brain of a Borgia might have originated killed for the moment all interest in the iron box and its contents. The fellow staggered toward the stairs, his companion following him. They clumped up the steps, stumbled through the nail-studded door, and The Wasp listened to their footsteps as they went along the corridor through which he, Blane, had followed Kavados. The whole time of the visit had not exceeded ten minutes, and the startlingly dramatic quality of the happening left the American breathless.

The Wasp moved across the cellar, struck a match and located the Greek. He stooped and made a quick examination. The revolver bullet had struck Kavados high up on the right shoulder, making a nasty and dangerous wound. He had lost blood, a great quantity of blood.

Robert Henry Blane lifted the Greek in his strong arms and carried him up the stairs and through the long corridor to the big room in which they had talked. Mr. Blane was a little puzzled as to what he should do with the fellow. The Greek lived alone and it would be difficult to get in outside help. The Wasp cursed his own childish curiosity that had brought him into the idiotic tangle. The fact that he could not locate Miss Betty Allerton had brought to him an ennui that had made him an easy victim of the Greek's note.

Kavados came out of the swoon into which he had slipped. The Wasp found a small bottle of cognac and forced some of it between the trickster's lips. He questioned him as to what he should do.

"You should have a doctor at once," suggested Blane. "Possibly the hospital is the best place for you. Do you understand? The hospital."

The Greek nodded feebly.

"Do you prefer the hospital?" questioned The Wasp.

"Yes," he gasped. "The Hospital of Santa Maria. My name will be—will be Calimara. Understand?"

The Wasp rushed out upon the Via di San Gallo. A lane ran beside the house, connecting San Gallo with the Via San Reparata. The lane was deserted. Blane considered the passage as a means of covering his tracks so that the police could not locate the house of Kavados by interrogating the cabman who drove them to the hospital. He ran back into the house, picked the Greek up in his strong arms, and carried him swiftly along the passage into the Via Reparata. An empty one-horse carriage turned a corner, the Texan hailed it, placed the Greek on the seat and drove off.

Kavados muttered during moments of consciousness. "Don't forget name—Calimara—Signor Calimara. And I—and I have no address. Found me on the street."

"As you say," said The Wasp.

They reached the hospital and Robert Henry Blane carried out the wishes of the tricky Greek. He stated that he had found a man on the street, badly injured. The man said his name was Calimara and he desired to be driven to the Hospital of Santa Maria. That was all.

"And your name?" questioned the receiving medico.

"Mine?" said The Wasp. "Oh, mine is Blane. Robert Henry Blane. Address? Well, I have none in particular. I'm leaving Florence this afternoon. Put my address down as care of Barclay's Bank, Paris."

The medico hesitated. He muttered something of police complications, and then the polite and affable person before him was suddenly replaced by an arrogant and domineering double. The doctor was appalled. He cringed before the gray eyes of the handsome Texan.

"I have nothing to do with this filthy matter," said The Wasp. "I have been kind enough to bring a wounded man to your institution. I have given my name and address. I wish you good day."

The Wasp found a taxicab and drove back to the Piazza Vittorio Emmanuele. He was a very angry and discontented person. The affair of Kavados had stirred his temper, and, mentally, he consigned the Greek to a spot much more distant than the Hospital of Santa Maria.

He dismissed the cab on the Piazza and walked aimlessly along the Via Strozzi till he reached the corner of the Via Tornabuoni. And there, by the Palazzo Strozzi beneath the monster corner lantern and the iron link holders that put our present-day work to shame, the bustling street became, like that wonderfully alley in Bagdad, a place where dreams come true!

Robert Henry Blane found himself talking to some one whose presence made him forget everything but the fact that she was there before him on the crowded pavement. Golden words, minted of throbbing emotion, sprang to his lips. The little sunbeams plaited themselves in the meshes of her soft hair and made a golden aureole for her. Her lips had the redness of hollyhocks surprised by the dawn!

The hurrying crowds were blotted out. Kavados and the great iron chest were dropped into a limbo of forgetfulness. The bustling corner of the Via Tornabuoni and the Via Strozzi became an open gate to paradise. Betty Allerton—a Betty Allerton

more charming than even Blane's dreams had pictured her—was talking to the tall adventurer from Houston, Texas! Actually talking to him!

She seemed delighted to see him. He felt sure that she was. She flung questions at him. Why was he in Florence? Did he know that she was there? How did he find out? When? Where? How long was he going to stay?

She didn't wait for replies. Her questions were little explosive remarks bred of sudden happiness. They had not seen each other since the night at the Villa Kairouan at Algiers when Robert Henry Blane had played peekaboo with the great man hunter, No. 37.

Hours later, when The Wasp reviewed the thrilling encounter, he wondered if he had suggested the walk along the river. He told himself, with a little gasp of surprise at his own impudence, that he must have put forward the idea, and he marveled at his boldness. But Betty Allerton had made no objection. Side by side they walked down to the Arno, the broad, yellow Arno that flows by the City of Lorenzo the Magnificent. The sun was dropping down toward Bellosguarda and the old houses along the Lungarno were tinted golden by the afternoon rays. The Ponte Vecchio was a fairy bridge that an imaginative artist might paint to illustrate a story that he loved. Boys sat on the century-whittled parapet and fished for gudgeons who were too busy enjoying the afternoon to bother about the hooks baited for them.

They passed the weir over which the hurrying waters thundered. They wandered on and on. A gypsy girl with a strange green mole on her cheek and with great hoop earrings of gold that rested on her shoulders, was playing a guitar softly by the river wall. The wench curtsied low before Betty Allerton and The Wasp paid for the curtsy with a handful of coins.

"Isn't she romantic?" murmured Betty.

"Who? Where?" stammered Robert Henry Blane. "I—I didn't look at her. Pardon."

Miss Allerton smiled softly as she glanced up into the handsome face of The Wasp. He could see nothing. He could remember nothing. Kavados the Greek and his iron chest that had the trick lock were as lost to him as the history dates that he had learned at college.

Had she been to America? To Boston? To New York?

"Yes, yes," cried Betty. "I spent a month in Boston! A wonderful month! It was beautiful! I motored out every day to places that I loved! No, no, it hasn't altered. Boston is like Florence. It goes along in its old-fashioned way and grows older and cosier with the years."

"And New York?" questioned Blane.

"For three days only," answered the girl. "A delirious three days. Plays and parties. When I got to the boat I slept for twenty-four hours although we ran into a gale. I wanted to stay longer. I wanted to go West, but—but auntie wanted to get here. I didn't know why, not then, but now I know."

A little touch of sadness came into her voice, and the Texan noted that the light left her wonderful eyes. He longed to know the reason.

"Is—is something wrong?" he asked.

The girl looked straight ahead and disregarded the question.

"Is there anything that I could do?" continued Blane. "Anything at all?"

Betty Allerton glanced up at the tall, handsome adventurer at her side. She told herself that there was no man in Florence as good looking as Robert Henry Blane. She sighed softly, then spoke.

"You have a habit of doing—doing reckless things," she said haltingly. "I am wondering if you would do something for me?"

"Anything!" cried The Wasp. "Anything at all! Do you—do you want me to kill some one?"

Betty laughed nervously. "I wouldn't like you to kill him," she said softly, "but if he could be wetted a little! I mean if he could be thrown into the river and then taken out again I would be pleased. Do you remember a fat youth you capsized into Lake Kezar? I will never forget how he spluttered when he came to the surface."

"Tell me who is the man?" cried The Wasp. "Tell me his name?"

"He is some one that Aunt Diana is trying to marry me to," said the girl softly. "It's really not his fault altogether. Aunt Diana is nearly as bad. Nearly. You see he has a title. He—he is a count, and Aunt Di thinks—thinks that——"

Miss Allerton broke off abruptly. She had glanced up at the man at her side and the look upon the face of Robert Henry

Blane choked back the little confession that she had begun. In the gray eyes of the Texan there was a look that did not bode well for the person seeking the hand of the girl. The scar upon his jaw showed like a white line in the tan. She was startled, amazed, a little terrified.

Bravely she tried to counteract the flame she had stirred by her words. "It is nothing," she stammered. "I was joking and you have taken me seriously."

"But you spoke as if some one were forcing you," cried Blane. "If some Italian count is annoying you——"

"No, no, no!" protested the girl. "Please forget what I said. Please do! Now, it is all forgotten, isn't it? Just say that you didn't know what I was talking about."

Robert Henry Blane's face lightened but he wouldn't admit that he had forgotten. The little confession had upset his temper. He understood the title-hunting aunts that are ready to sell nieces who are heiresses to small European persons with empty heads and empty pockets.

The sun slipped behind the hills, and the quiet of the Cascine, the park laid out by the pleasure-loving Medici, held them in a strange enchanted spell. Robert Henry Blane wished to talk, but he could not. There were a thousand things that he wanted to ask the girl who had believed in him in the long ago; the girl who thought he might climb to wonderful heights and do great things. But the courage of the Texan failed him whenever he made an attempt to express himself. The nerve that had made him a reputation among men who knew little of fear was routed by the presence of the girl. They sat together and looked at the wagons upon which the reapers were stacking great piles of the new-mown grass. The memory of golden days came up before them and speech became difficult.

Blane thought how unworthy he was to sit in her presence. He wondered what she would have thought of the happening of the morning in the cellar beneath the house of Kavados the Greek. Kavados who had picked the Texan for the job of opening the iron chest because he thought him an adventurer who knew no fear. Three times he nerved himself to ask the name of the Italian count to whom Aunt Diana was intent on marrying Betty, three times he failed.

"I must go," said Betty. "I have an appointment with auntie. I am to meet her at Pellini's."

They held hands for a long moment at parting. Robert Henry Blane tried again to speak, but words would not come.

Back to his hotel went The Texan Wasp. A rather depressed Wasp. Away from Betty Allerton the world was dark and dismal. Florence was now an ordinary town with little to differentiate it from a lumber camp on a wet day. So thought the big Texan.

He paused on the landing before the door of his room. A queer sense of impending danger came to him. For a few seconds he stood undecided, then his strong hand turned the handle and he entered.

Three men acted as if the scene had been well rehearsed beforehand. Two, one on either side of the door, stepped between the opening and the incoming American, the other, hand thrust hard into a loose coat pocket, stepped close to him. The third person was evidently the person in whom authority rested.

"Signor Blane?" he murmured.

"Quite correct," answered The Wasp. "And what, may I ask, are you doing in my room?"

The big American spoke in Italian, with an accent so perfect that a little look of amazement passed over the face of his questioner. "You are an American, signor?" he said.

"I believe so," snapped The Wasp. "But answer my question before you put any others. What are you doing in my room?"

"It is this," said the man. "To-day you carried to the Hospital of Santa Maria a man who was wounded. A man who said that his name is Calimara. We are of the secret police. We do not think his name is Calimara. We are also doubtful about where you found him. You said that you found him on the street?"

"Correct."

"We doubt it, signor."

"You are welcome to your doubts, but not to my room. Don't you think a little fresh air would do you good? Wouldn't it be a good idea if the three of you took a turn around the block?"

His coolness amazed the trio. They, brought up in the Italian school of emotional explosiveness, were a trifle astounded.

"But signor," protested the leader, "we are of the secret police. Do you under-

stand? This man who says his name is Calimara is a person under suspicion. We wish to know where you found him?"

"And I have told you."

"But it is not true."

The gray eyes of the Texan hardened. The slight scar showed white and menacing. Hands that were wonderfully made, inasmuch as they carried the greatest possible strength as well as elegance, bunched themselves quickly into fists.

The leader of the intruding police saw the movement and took a quick step backward. The hand thrust into his coat pocket brought an automatic into view. "Be quiet, signor," he commanded. "I have but told you of our suspicions. We wish the address of the man you brought to the hospital?"

"I do not know his address."

"Listen," said the officer. "His name is Kavados and he is a Greek. See, we know a little. Does that help your memory?"

"Not at all."

"Then listen again. Possibly you may know something of this. Kavados had in his possession an iron chest whose worth cannot be measured. It must be regained immediately. That is why we have waited here for you. We have waited three hours, signor."

"I have nothing to tell," said The Wasp. "Nothing."

"Then you must come with us. You are under arrest."

Into the mind of Robert Henry Blane came a fear-screened picture of an arrest, of slow Italian court procedure, of possible imprisonment. He saw the bleak reports of the case in the English paper printed in Italy, wedged in with the "Church News," the "Gallery Notes," "Cab Fares in Florence and the Suburbs." It would be a tremendous find to the editor. And Betty Allerton and her aunt would read the scurrilous stuff!

The Wasp took a step toward the window and made a signal to the leader of the police. The fellow followed him. His two companions remained beside the door.

The Grand Hôtel occupied a corner of the Piazza Manin, and the room of The Texan Wasp was on the angle made by the little Via Montebello as it entered the Piazza. To the right ran the Arno; to the left the packed, old houses toward Santa Maria Novella and the Stazione Centrale.

"I'm going to tell you where I found him," said the American. "From the window here I can show you his house."

"His house?" repeated the officer.

"Sure. I took him from his house. I'll show it to you. You can see it from here."

The Wasp leaned out; the alert, black-eyed secret officer stood beside him. Robert Henry Blane scanned the street while pretending that he was making an effort to locate a house in the huddle toward the east. Down the Via Montebello from the direction of the Cascine came a swiftly moving wagon piled high with green grass. Blane recognized it as the wagon that was gathering up the new-mown hay in the park as he and Betty walked together. A strange flood of sentimental memories rushed over him. Thoughts of Boston, of New York, of Texas. He pulled himself together. What did the little fool beside him want? Ah, yes! He wished to find the house where Kavados the Greek lived. Yes, yes. The house was in the Via di San Gallo, a mile away from the Grand Hôtel, but that didn't matter. Any house would fit the bill.

"See!" cried The Wasp. "See that house with the high, red roof? No, no, to the right!"

The beady eyes of the officer sought to find the building to which the big American pointed. The Wasp took a quick glance at the wagon that carried the piled hay. A great bed of hay. It reared itself up from the wagon, a mattress for a giant. The sweet odor of it went out and filled the street. Again came thoughts of Betty Allerton—Betty whose plotting aunt was endeavoring to marry her to the penniless scion of a Florentine family whose genealogical tree was all that he could boast of.

The little officer was speaking. "Keep your hand steady," he ordered. "One minute you point to one house and the next minute you point to another. Will you——"

His remarks were interrupted. The wagon was directly beneath them. The Texan Wasp, with one thrust of his strong arm brushed the officer from the window, then, with a swift glance at the moving wagon he sprang! Sprang through the open window into space! Beneath him was a mattress of green grass, piled feet high, a mattress that Betty Allerton had looked at with wonder, a mattress that was made to break his fall!

He landed on it! Landed squarely in the center of the great bed of grass! Landed

with a thump that shook the wagon and startled the horse! Clawing for a grip on the slippery bed he glanced upward. The little officer was at the window. His arm went up, the crack of an automatic pounced on the soft noises of the street.

The bullet seared the rump of the horse. Startled, the animal sprang forward, nearly jerking from his seat the driver who had stood up in the attempt to discover what it was that had fallen upon the wagon. The fellow's screams to the horse were futile. The animal had an idea that it was under fire. It bolted across the Piazza and swung eastward along the Via di Porcellana, leaving chunks of nice green grass to mark the track of the rocking wagon!

Halfway down the Via di Porcellana, Robert Henry Blane slipped from the end of the wagon and dived into a side street. He picked the wisps of grass from his smart suit and congratulated himself on the fact that he was wearing a blue serge.

"Curiously I had a desire to wear this in place of a gray suit," he murmured thoughtfully. "Gray would have shown the marks of that grass dreadfully."

The evening had closed in swiftly. Robert Henry Blane, hurrying up side streets, considered his position. Florence, for him, had claws of steel. In the city of Lorenzo the Magnificent was the girl he loved. There would be, of course, a legion of little officers of the secret police searching for him, but he cared little for the Italian police.

He made half a dozen purchases at the shop of a coiffeur, carried these purchases to a small hotel and rented a room. For a full hour he worked upon his face. worked with a knowledge and industry that would have done credit to the greatest actor in the world. He walked out into the street wearing a small mustache and a tiny-pointed beard.

He visited an outfitter's and bought a complete stock of necessary articles, packed them in a new grip, called a cab and drove to the Hôtel Grande Bretagne. For the moment he discarded the name of Robert Henry Blane. He registered as Sir Humphrey Linburn, was shown to a suite on the first floor, and there leisurely improved upon the alteration he had made in his appearance. He changed from the light-blue serge suit into a close-fitting walking costume, the rakish velours was replaced by a silk hat made in the latest Paris style; collar, tie, and gloves shifted from plain common sense to dandified æstheticism. Shoes also. A monocle was added. For fifteen minutes Sir Humphrey Linburn paraded before the big mirror, then feeling that the last traces of Robert Henry Blane had been extinguished, he walked out onto the street. He was prepared for all the secret police of Florence. He ambled along like a boulevardier. Male passers-by looked enviously at his clothes. Women glanced shyly at him. They though his mustache adorable, his manner elegant.

Robert Henry Blane, alias The Texan Wasp, alias Sir Humphrey Linburn, made a gallant effort to forget the information that had dropped from the red lips of Betty Allerton. He tried to find distractions that would blot out the knowledge. He visited the Politeama Fiorentino to watch a Russian ballet and left in five minutes. A Parisian dancer at the Pergola held his attention for less. A variety show at the Alfieri was appallingly dull. He tried dives and cafés chantants with no better result. One huge and appalling fact met him at every street corner and tried to throttle him. Betty Allerton was going to be married. Betty Allerton of Boston was going to be married! Betty Allerton who had pinned a red rosette upon his breast when he had broken a college record was going to be married!

He called the unknown count by many names. He called him a subway digger, a fruit peddler, and worse.

His own affairs were forgotten. It was the menace that faced Betty that occupied all his attention. Now and then he did recall that he had gone to a house that morning in the Via di San Gallo, a house occupied by a Greek named Kavados who was afraid of an iron box that carried a curious inscription. The inscription said the god of vengeance acts in silence. The Wasp repeated the words over and over. Well, the god of vengeance had worked in silence for Robert Henry Blane. The god was making him drink the dregs of bitterness. Fight as he might the gloom caused by the news clutched him. Betty had told him that she disliked the fellow, but what could a girl do against a designing aunt who had made up her mind about the man that her niece should marry? The aunt would win.

The Wasp recalled also the affair at hi.

hotel. Not with any thrill. It was a small matter in his checkered career. He had given the slip to three little officers of the Italian secret police, but he had done that on many other occasions. The big incident of the day—the one thing that stood up above everything else was the news that Betty was to be married against her will to a penniless nobleman, a person of supposed blue blood who was buying wealth with a genealogical tree that wasn't worth a row of pins. A fellow who couldn't ride or fight, a niddering, a weakling, a chap whose one fighting forbear was the fellow who way back in the Middle Ages earned the title that was on the market for American gold. Well, the dollar was high; lire were shrinking every day!

"If it was an American I wouldn't grumble," soliloquized Robert Henry Blane. "I could stand that, I think. But a dollar-hunting European gets me——"

He broke off abruptly in his meditations. A man, leaning carelessly against the wall at the corner of the Via dei Lamberti straightened as The Wasp approached. The eyes of the fellow were upon Robert Henry Blane. Strange eyes—eyes that were cold and merciless; eyes that looked like brown-tinted and hard-frozen hailstones. There were other outstanding features. A short, big-nostriled nose that suggested the ability to analyze the air it breathed; a chin that had thrust peace to the winds. The man was No. 37, the most expert thrower of the lariat in the employ of Dame Justice!

The gray eyes of The Wasp did not flicker under the scrutiny of the man hunter. He kept straight on, twirling his nobby cane in the style of a leisured dandy. It had been a day of surprises, so one more or less would not matter.

The man hunter sauntered forward and addressed Robert Henry Blane, alias Sir Humphrey Linburn. Addressed him in English. "Pardon," said the sleuth, "are you the gentleman who told me to get you the price of the two pictures in the Morini Galleries?"

Sir Humphrey Linburn laughed loudly. "Out of bounds, old top," he said gayly. "Pictures? That's a good un! What the devil would I be doing with pictures?"

A doubt, which had been visible in the cold eyes of the detective, grew larger. His voice showed the effect created by the Piccadilly drawl of the dandy. He begged pardon.

"That's all right, old horse," said the imitation Sir Humphrey. "I don't doubt your mistake was genuine. But I don't know a picture from a prayer rug. Rotten bad taste, I know, but that's me."

He flicked an imaginary morsel of dust from the thumb of a glove and went on, a seemingly carefree and contented man. From the corner of one eye he glanced at the man hunter. The face of No. 37 expressed the most profound amazement and surprise.

The Wasp crossed the Piazza and returned. The sleuth had not moved. He was still standing with his back against the stone column, the cold and merciless eyes watching the stream that passed. Blane was upon him before he noticed. The dandified Sir Humphrey Linburn pushed the man hunter playfully in the ribs with his walking stick and addressed him.

"Fooled you that time, old dear," he drawled. "You said to yourself here's Bob Blane of Texas and you ran into a snag. Eh, what?"

The great sleuth stared at the dandy before him. "I'll own up," he said. "After you passed I looked at your back and said to myself that *is* Blane, then—well, you fooled me. That's all. And I was so darned pleased when I saw you coming. You see I was just aching to see you. Just aching to see you!"

"Why?" asked The Wasp.

"To get an address from you."

"Whose address?"

"The address of Kavados the Greek."

From the lips of Robert Henry Blane, alias the Texan Wasp, alias Sir Humphrey Linburn came a soft whistle of astonishment. For an instant he wondered if his capable wits had turned traitor. Kavados the Greek! The day seemed to be nothing but Kavados the Greek! Mentally he damned the Greek. Why had the tricky scoundrel from Corinth demanded his services in the matter of the iron box?

"I know nothing about Kavados!" cried Blane. "Yes, I took to the hospital a Greek named Calimara whom three little secret-service men have told me was Kavados, but as to——"

"Listen, Blane," interrupted the sleuth. "Listen to me! I know about the visit of

the police to your hotel and your get-away. I heard it all. That's nothing. The house where you found Kavados is the place I want to find. Let me talk—here, come down here!"

The man hunter gripped the arm of Robert Henry Blane and half dragged him down a side passage to a cheap wine shop. The band upon the Piazza made confidential talk impossible.

"Let me have first say!" cried the sleuth. "Please! In some way that I don't know of you met Kavados the Greek. Leave that for the moment. What I want to tell you is this. On the night before last there was stolen from the home of a Florentine nobleman an iron chest. An extraordinary chest. It is known to many as the Iron Chest of Giovanni the Grand. Are you following?"

"As well as I want to," snapped The Wasp. "I'm tired. Had a sort of hard day. If you can cut the story in any way I'll be delighted. You see——"

"Don't be whimsical!" interrupted the man hunter. "As a favor to me, please listen. I was at Venice. I got a wire and came here. The chest was in charge of an honest man. A splendid man. His family is of the oldest stock in Florence. But they're poor. Dog poor! He has a son, a fool. The fool son wanted money and he listened to a bait. Not from Kavados. No, no! From a crowd bigger than Kavados. The box held papers that would cause trouble in three countries. Secret documents and the Lord knows what. It can't be told what is in it. The men who know weep when you question them. That's why I'm here."

"Interesting, I'm sure," drawled The Wasp.

No. 37 sat for a moment and regarded the big American. The hope that had flamed across his face seemed to be slowly dying as he studied the face of the dandy before him. Robert Henry Blane dismounted his monocle, polished it carefully, then put it back into place. He seemed fearfully bored.

"Continue, my good fellow," he said languidly.

"They got the chest," said the man hunter slowly. "Got it into the street. Something went wrong with their arrangements then. I don't know what. Fright, maybe. They got stampeded and were afraid to take the chest to the place appointed. Thought they were followed, perhaps. They looked for a place to hide it and one of their number suggested Kavados the Greek. He's a fence. They took it there. That's about all I can tell you. You know the rest. Kavados turns up in hospital with a bullet through his shoulder and near dead from loss of blood. You brought him there!"

No. 37 looked intently at Robert Henry Blane. Blane yawned. "Playing the good Samaritan in Florence is a foolish business," he said. "The next time I see a perforated Greek on the side of the street I am going to leave him there."

The cold eyes of the man hunter were warmed for an instant by the flame of temper produced by the attitude of the American. His strong hands were clinched. The lipless line of the mouth was hardly visible.

"You won't tell?" he demanded.

The Wasp paused in the act of lighting a cigarette and looked with calm gray eyes at the great rounder-up of criminals. "You have had your moral sense ruined by consorting with cheap people," he said coldly. "If I did know I wouldn't tell, and, as I don't know, the possibility of your getting the information is more remote still."

No. 37 half rose from his seat and thrust his jaw across the table. The audacity of the Texan maddened him.

"There are a few things that I have forgotten," he growled. "A few things that concern a dashing devil from Texas!"

"Dig them out and be damned!" snapped The Wasp.

The man hunter sank back into his seat and drummed with his knuckles upon the table. Robert Henry Blane blew smoke rings and stared at the blackened ceiling. From the Piazza came the strains of the Italian national anthem.

The swinging door of the wine shop was suddenly pushed open. A queer white face was thrust into the room. The small eyes in the midst of "made-over" features that represented a triumph of modern surgery brought into being by the war, noted the sleuth. The owner of the face advanced. Blane recognized him as the strange assistant of the man hunter.

"I was looking for you," said the newcomer in a high-pitched voice.

"What is it?" questioned the man hunter.

"The Greek has thrown a seven," replied the owner of the manufactured features.

"Turned up his toes an hour ago. Lost too much blood."

The great detective glanced at Blane. The Texan stared at the ceiling. The man with the made-over face hung around waiting for instructions.

After a long pause No. 37 began to speak in a low voice. His words were not addressed to any one in particular.

"It's the very devil to have pride and ancestry and have no money," he began. "The folk of this old man that's in trouble run right back to the time of the Guelphs and the Ghibellines. They rubbed shoulders with Charles of Valois and Cosimo. With Lorenzo the Magnificent and Giovanni the Grand. He showed me a genealogical tree to-day that looked like the plan of a skyscraper. They were in the ring seats, so to speak. When one of 'em bought a palace the other three hundred and ninety-nine that formed his set came and bought houses around him. And now the boodle has flitted and they're as poor as church mice. A nice white-haired old man with a fool son."

He paused, waited for a few minutes and went on. Robert Henry Blane had another fit of yawning. The man with the "triumph-of-modern-surgery-face" watched his master.

"It's not like that in America," went on the sleuth. "There a man can go out and gather up a new fortune if his father and grandfather have dissipated the one they had. America is a land of golden opportunities."

Robert Henry Blane tossed his cigarette into the box of sawdust on the floor and reached for his gloves.

"This place is different," said the detective, looking hard at the big American. "This place is altogether different."

"I didn't say they resembled each other," murmured The Wasp. "You have the appearance of a man who wants to start an argument."

"No, no," protested No. 37. "I was trying to get you to take a fair view of this matter. What chance have these people got here? They've squeezed old Mother Earth till she's dry. They've got no chance. They've lost everything but their damned pride, and the poorer they get the prouder they get. This boyish ass who is responsible for all this trouble had a dream of putting the family on its feet. That's why he fell for the scheme of the trickiest scoundrel in Europe who paid him a bribe to let his thieves into the house. He wanted ready money for his own little scheme. The aunt of an American heiress had flattered the fool and he thought that he might marry the heiress and rebuild——"

"What is the name of the heiress?" snapped The Wasp, turning fiercely upon the man hunter.

"I don't know," answered No. 37, a little amazed at the Texan's sudden change of manner. "Why?"

"Can you find out?" demanded Blane.

"Yes, in one minute. I can phone to the boy's father."

"Please do!"

The great detective entered a little phone booth at the rear of the shop. Robert Henry Blane, alias The Texan Wasp, alias Sir Humphrey Linburn, walked to the door and stood looking out into the soft night. He was thinking of Betty.

The door of the telephone booth banged. The Wasp turned as the great sleuth came toward him.

"The name of the young lady is Miss Allerton," said the detective. "She has shown him no favors, but he thinks her aunt is friendly."

Blane thrust the swinging door open and strode into the night. A taxi was coasting across the Piazza. He flung himself into it, followed by No. 37 and the person with the made-over face. The detective whispered an address in the Via Toscanella, and the car rolled westward toward the Ponte Vecchio, the bridge of jewelers on which the crippled beggar had spoken to Robert Henry Blane.

No. 37 glanced at The Wasp as the taxi pulled up before the door of a mansion that had seen better days. A tired, decrepit mansion. The two stone lions before the door were earless and noseless. Their tails had been chipped away by legions of youngsters who had played in the street. Upon the house had fallen the scum of the centuries; the scum of death. A few yards away were the Palazzo Pitti and the Boboli Gardens, visited every year by thousands of Americans who come to admire the treasures and ponder over the old-time glory of the city.

No. 37 sprang to the pavement and looked at The Wasp. The eyes of the big American were upon the house. It showed

in the moonlight like an old hag. It brought to him a feeling of disgust. It belonged to another era. It was connected with a dead past. Like its owners it had lost vigor and life. It was a battered old thing that should have been torn down to make way for homes built in accordance with the laws of hygiene. To Robert Henry Blane came a longing for Texas, a tremendous longing for places that were new and clean, places where the wind of God was fresh and wholesome, untainted by the hates and feuds of dark days that we have outlived. He longed for America—for home!

"Will you come in?" questioned the detective.

"No," snapped Blane. "Bring him here! The young fellow! We've got a job before us and—well, he might be useful if there's a fight."

The detective gave a cluck of delight and dragged at the doorbell. An old servant answered the ring, the sleuth pushed him aside and entered. The Wasp remained in the taxi.

Within three minutes the man hunter was back, accompanied by a tall and pallid young man who was carefully and meticulously dressed in evening clothes. To the cool gray eyes of Robert Henry Blane the young man resembled one of those effeminate gentlemen who wait like well-groomed spiders in the anterooms of fashionable Parisian dressmakers, ready to wind their skeins of humbug and flattery around the unwary women who enter the places.

The man hunter presented the fellow with a grin of amusement. "Count Angelo Ammanati," he said slyly.

The big Texan took the soft hand that the count extended. He wondered what in the name of creation was happening in the old dark house that forced the fellow into evening dress. "We interrupted you," said Blane. "You are entertaining, eh?"

"No, no," drawled the count. "I am alone. I dined alone."

The Wasp moved over on the seat. "Then step up here," he said sharply. "Step up and take a ride."

"Oh, no," said the aristocrat. "I don't know you and——"

He didn't finish the remark. Robert Henry Blane leaned quickly forward, grabbed the right wrist of the young man and literally dragged him into the cab. Count Angelo protested, but his protests fell on deaf ears. The big American, without exerting any great amount of force, crammed the last branch of the Ammanati genealogical tree onto the seat beside him. He thought the branch was a very weak thing indeed, a sort of feeble twig on a dead trunk.

The Wasp had taken charge. He turned his head to find that No. 37 had jumped upon the running board. The sleuth was amused. He leaned forward as if seeking an address.

"Via di San Gallo!" cried Blane. "Tell him to pull up opposite the School of Medicine."

Count Angelo Ammanati's protests were deafening. He demanded reasons and The Wasp, gripping him tightly by the wrist, gave them. "Listen, little Angelo," he said, "a friend tells me of the loss of an iron chest through a brain storm of yours. We are——"

"You—you mustn't speak to me like that!" shrieked the Italian. "How dare you? Stop the car and let me out at once!"

Robert Henry Blane laughed. "We are going after the chest," he said softly. "Going after the Iron Chest of Giovanni the Grand. There might be trouble and we wanted an extra man. I know where the chest is but there are others who know too. There might be gun play, so we——"

The count tore himself away from the grip of the American and tried to thrust himself through the window of the cab. Robert Henry Blane dragged him back and placed him gently on the floor of the machine. Mr. Blane wondered about Aunt Diana and Betty Allerton. He thought it was unlucky for Betty to be in such close relationship with a lady like the Comtesse de Chambon who, through marriage with a French nobleman, had conceived a great regard for titles. Blane wondered what Betty could do with Count Angelo, and, while he was wondering, the count bit him fiercely on the ankle. The scion of the Ammanati's was nearly off his head with injured pride not altogether unmixed with fear.

The Wasp rescued his ankle from the teeth of the highborn one as the automobile pulled up before the School of Medicine in the Via di San Gallo. Mr. Blane was considerably annoyed with Count Angelo. He considered the fellow ungrateful, and, with no tender hands, he rushed the aristocrat across the street and up the steps to the

house where he had interviewed Kavados the Greek some twelve hours before. A rather exciting twelve hours, thought The Wasp. Twelve hours crammed with excitement and trouble; threaded by a golden interlude when he had walked with Betty Allerton along the river in the soft afternoon.

The house of Kavados was in darkness. The door was locked, but No. 37 was an expert in the matter of locks. He dropped upon his knees, fumbled for some few minutes with a queer instrument that he carried, then thrusting his shoulder to the door he pushed with all his force. The door opened and the detective went sprawling forward on the carpet.

The Wasp, holding to Count Angelo, stepped into the reception room; the man with the made-over face followed. The sleuth got to his feet and closed the door.

No. 37 spoke. "What are the orders, Blane?" he whispered. "You know the way."

The Wasp did not answer for a moment. He was listening intently. From a distance came a dull scratching noise, a noise suggesting that an object of great weight was being dragged along a tiled floor. He reached out a hand and touched the arm of the detective.

"What is it?" murmured the sleuth.

"They are moving the box," answered Blane. "Listen! It is in the cellar at the end of a long corridor. Listen!"

The noise increased in volume. There came to the ears of the listeners the tramp of heavy feet upon the stairs leading down into the cellar. Grunts, whispered curses, and curt orders came out of the darkness. The nail-studded door that Blane remembered at the top of the cellar stairs was banged fiercely.

The volume of noise increased. A will-o'-the-wisp light appeared afar off. More grunts; curses without end, then a deafening crash as the chest was thrust up into the corridor.

No. 37 leaned forward and whispered to Robert Henry Blane. "Better tackle them now," he said.

The cool Texan grinned softly. "It's an awful weight," he murmured. "Let them carry it along the passage. It weighs a ton."

Count Angelo Ammanati thought it time to go. He figured out the position of the street door, made a sudden break from the clutch of The Wasp and bolted.

Angelo didn't go far. His bump of location was not well developed. He tripped over a chair, screamed like a startled jack rabbit and fell full length upon the floor. Then Old Man Commotion broke loose in the house of Kavados the Greek.

The light of the lantern at the end of the passage was immediately doused, some one shouted an order; then there came the hurried tread of feet along the corridor. The carriers of the iron chest had left their job for the moment and were intent on finding out who had invaded the house.

Robert Henry Blane acted quickly. He sprang across the room to the point where the hall entered the chamber, and hurriedly tipped an enormous chair so that it lay in the path of the charging gang.

The effect of this strategy was remarkable. The hurrying bearers of the Iron Chest of Giovanni the Grand tripped over the obstacle and came sprawling into the reception room. One, two, three, four! They came over the capsized chair; curses and yells of rage adding to the noises made by falling glassware and battered furniture.

An automatic barked and a string of profanity became a scream of pain. Blane's fingers came in contact with a large brass pot and he brought this weapon down on the head of a person whose accent was foreign to him. Again the revolver spoke. A mirror crashed! The table in the center of the room was overturned. Some one had found the door and was fumbling at the lock.

"Blane?" whispered the detective.

"Here," answered The Wasp.

"Good," snapped the sleuth. There was a spurt of flame, another report, and the fumbler at the lock dropped. From somewhere in the corner came the frightened scream of Count Angelo Ammanati.

There was a moment of near quiet. Tumult fled for a space and left nothing but choking groans and curses. No. 37 pressed the button of a flash.

There was an immediate report. A bullet crashed through a piece of pottery. Some one swung a chair, there came a deep groan, then the voice of the sleuth's assistant came softly. "I think you can flash again," he said softly. "The four are knocked out."

No. 37 pressed the flash. Upon the floor,

in the débris of battle, were four men. Two were unconscious, one—the fellow that The Wasp hit with the brass pot—was sitting up holding his head in his hands, and the fourth, although wounded badly, was still fumbling with the lock of the door in an effort to escape into the street.

No. 37 pounced upon him. Like lightning the bright handcuffs of the sleuth were upon his wrists. A gurgle of joy came from the thin-lipped mouth of the man who worked night and day for justice. He had made a killing!

"Blane!" he cried. "Come here! Do you know this chap?"

The Wasp stumbled across the room as the sleuth's assistant fell upon the only other conscious one of the four. The detective held the flash light, and Robert Henry Blane looked down into a white, thin face in which were large dark eyes, set close together and lit up with a brilliancy that suggested fanaticism. The thoughts of The Wasp flashed to Como, then to the Promenade des Anglais at Nice! The person before him, whose long, lean hands were clutched together, was the Mystery Man from Prague!

There came a knocking at the door, the demands of the police aroused by the firing. No. 37 signaled for Blane to open it. "I'm hit somewhere," said the sleuth faintly. "I don't know exactly where. Keep your eye—keep your eye on—on this bird, will you? I—I——" He stopped talking and slipped softly to the floor beside the mysterious person whom old General Rumor blamed for half the unfortunate happenings of Europe.

Blane opened the door; the lanterns of the police illuminated the room.

An hour later Robert Henry Blane stepped from the door of the old mansion in the Via Toscanella. A white-haired man clung to his right arm and thanked him again and again. The son of the old man, a trifle sulky and unrepentant, followed the big Texan. Mr. Blane had read the riot act to Count Angelo Ammanati, and the young fool had not quite recovered his temper. But he was a much sobered Angelo. Thoughts of American heiresses whose money would rebuild the glories of the Ammanatis were, for the moment, dispelled. He had agreed to leave immediately for a little farm in Tuscany owned by a poor relative.

"And let me give you a farewell word," said The Wasp, addressing the youth as he stepped into the taxi. "Try and dig your fortune out of the ground with a plow. With a plow and a couple of Tuscan bulls. It's the best way. Good night."

Robert Henry Blane made a hurried call at the Hospital of Santa Maria. No. 37 was sleeping peacefully after a slight operation. There was no danger, so the night surgeon said.

Blane came back to the taxi. He stood a moment on the pavement, thinking. The chauffeur watched him. The Wasp pulled at the little mustache that was part of his disguise as Sir Humphrey Linburn, and, to the great surprise of the chauffeur, the little morsel of hair came clean away from the lip of the Texan.

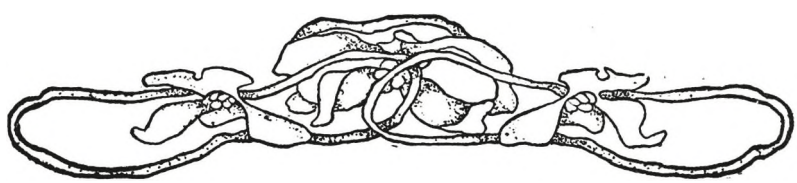
The chauffeur grinned; Robert Henry Blane frowned. The handsome adventurer from Houston recalled his escape from the Grand Hôtel. He thought of the newspapers, of the silly things that Betty Allerton's aunt would find in a story of his arrest.

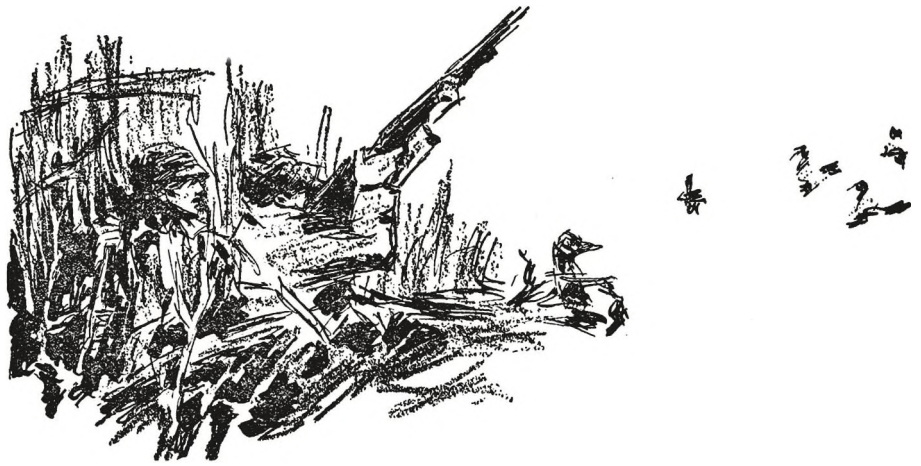
"To the Stazione Principe!" he cried. "Hurry! I want to catch the one-ten for Genoa!"

In the cab The Wasp carefully affixed the little mustache, took from his pocket his monocle and adjusted it. He stuffed a silk handkerchief into his coat sleeve, then lay back on the seat. For a moment he had a desire to sleep, but he overcame the desire and warbled in a Piccadilly accent:

"You longed to roam from your bally home;
You bragged of your wanderlust;
You studied the map like a crazy yap,
Now you'll travel, by gosh, or bust!"

The next Texan Wasp adventure will appear in THE POPULAR *for March 20th.*





The Greenhead Judas

By Kenneth Gilbert

Author of "When the Red Death Rides," and other stories.

A wild duck points a moral and adorns a tale.

"A NORTH wind brings ducks, but a south wind means shootin'," Stradley, the guide, announced oracularly. "A north wind brings 'em down but keeps 'em blown out on the bay, while a south wind drives 'em ashore and into gun range. She'll hold from the north to-morrow, which means poor shootin'—for everybody but us!" He grinned and winked significantly.

Men who knew Stradley best said that at times he was a bit queer, yet he was a good guide, and respected as such. There was not the slightest doubt but that he had an uncanny insight of the minds and manners of the wild kindred, and no man in the great Puget Sound basin would do more for a person whom he really liked. Of strong likes and dislikes, as most men of the woods are, he was extremely sensitive, and at this moment he was openly trying to rectify what inwardly he knew to be a mistake—inviting Brent.

The three men sat on the porch of a clapboard shack. At Stradley's right, Brent, florid and thick necked, and the fresh newness of whose garb told of the "city hunter," nervously clicked the sliding forearm of a repeating shotgun which lay across his lap. Well apart from them, "Pop" Stradley, octogenarian father of the guide, nursed a blackened corncob pipe and kept his own counsel. Seldom he spoke, and then argumentatively, for he had grown querulous and irritable with age.

The dead-brown surface of the tules at the delta was rippled like water by the wind which held with frigid persistence. Banked in the west, the heavy blue-black clouds were edged with the most gorgeous of orange and red. It was fall weather, and duck weather, and out of the northern sky were pitching great flocks of mallard, teal, widgeon and pin tail, giving ground before the southern advance of winter.

They were striking far out on the bay, blown there by the wind, until they could get their bearings. Many of them young birds who had never heard the dawn and twilight drum fire of shotguns, they were guided by the wisdom of elder flock members. Thus they knew that by night the tules would be infested with prowling mink; they could not know, however, that by dawn of the morrow the rank clumps of tall grass would shelter flat-bottomed skiffs carrying canvas-clad men armed with single barrels, double barrels, pump guns and automatics.

It was zero hour for the migrating hordes. As yet but halfway to the watery fastnesses

of the South, they would, on the morrow, be bereft of the protection of law; it was the eve of the open season for ducks. From here on until the inaccessible morasses and bayous of their destination swallowed them they would run a gantlet of chilled shot. Many would win through—and many would not—and the foxes and mink in the wake of the flight would feed fat on the cripples. They were fewer in number than they had been the preceding year, yet their legions were countless.

"Good old duck!" said Brent.

In the shallow backwater of the river a few feet distant there sat the biggest mallard of all the gray-feathered companies hurling themselves out of the northern void. His markings were of the noblest, and of harmonious contrast. His bill was light orange, while his head was of the hue that has earned the male bird of his kind the sobriquet "greenhead." Below was a collar of white on magenta. The back was grayish brown, while the coloring of the lower breast and beneath the wings was grayish white, finely vermiculated with black. His powerful wings, which he occasionally stretched and fanned, were barred with dashes of white and green. Fastened to one yellow leg was a cord, the other end being tied to a stake driven at the edge of the water.

He was feeding, at times fairly standing on his head until not more than two inches of his tail showed above water, his long neck and bill groping in the ooze for grains of cracked corn and wheat which Stradley had flung there. This was a characteristic of the "tipper" family, which, it is said, will starve to death in four feet of water.

At other times he would sit motionless for the space of a minute, an eye cocked at the dark, fast-moving specks in the heavens, a shred of dripping muck hanging from his bill. Those dots in the sky—always moving from the north—held a vast interest for him. For days now, ever since the first sharp breath of approaching winter had shriveled the saw grass, there had stirred within him an impulse, at the beginning hard to define. The first arrivals from the north—the honking calls of the female mallards, and the more subdued cries of the drakes—had crystallized that feeling. He knew now that he, too, wanted to soar and take his place at the head of one of those great flocks; to feel the rush of high air currents and see the panorama of earth swiftly unreeling below. Likewise the impressions on his memory cells were less indistinct than they had been; he seemed to recollect long, placid lagoons of just the right feeding depth, whose shores were choked with wild rice, while about him were myriads of his kind, happily busy with their individual affairs.

Yet he had never seen those lagoons; it was instinct that told him they existed. Born in a reedy pond in northern Canada, he had been one of the flankers of young ducks in his first southern flight, that of the preceding fall. He did not remember what had occurred, save that he was striving his utmost to keep up with the flock when there had been a flash and a rumbling noise on earth, and out of the heavens he had dropped in erratic spirals, with a broken wing tip. Then he had been captured and his wing put in splints.

As food had proved abundant, and Stradley kind to him, the drake speedily became tame. He thrived prodigiously on the cracked grain, attaining in one year greater proportions than he would have in twice the time had he been compelled to forage as did his wild kinsmen. Stradley was experimenting, putting all of his accumulated and inherent craft into the working out of a theory.

The big drake never knew hunger. Stradley was forever tossing grain into the water and the mallard delightedly shoveling in the ooze after it. Here was paradise, and he wanted to fly out there on the bay, where his fellows huddled in flocks, and tell them about it. Danger never occurred to the drake's mind; the man meant him no harm. He wanted to bring the hungry wanderers to where the finest of forage could be had for the taking.

Once he had been granted his wish it became habit with him. The second stage of Stradley's experiment began with the first arrivals from the north. The guide had unleashed him, and the big drake, after a preliminary stretching of wings, had skittered across the water and bounded into the air. Straight for the flock in the bay he had gone, settling confidently among them.

For a long time they regarded him suspiciously, and then, perhaps, the telepathic interchange that passes for much of the dialogue between wild things had reassured them. Certainly he imparted news of the

feeding place ideal, for presently he lifted from the water, followed by two of the females. Then others took the air, and finally the whole flock was a-wing, following his leadership.

But the instant they sighted Stradley's shack the flock veered off in alarm, as though suspecting a trick. The drake, apparently puzzled, alighted at the customary spot. The guide, chuckling, slipped the noose on his leg once more, and fed him.

"Brought 'em straight to me. Just wait till the season opens!"

Straightway Stradley got into communication with Brent, who, the guide had heard, was an assiduous duck shooter. Brent was wealthy; he would pay well for such service as this—shooting over a *live* decoy. The idea singularly appealed to him and he agreed to the high price Stradley stipulated without a murmur. The eve of the shooting season found him at the guide's shack, impatient to begin. Instinctively Stradley disliked him.

Stradley now stepped to the edge of the water, unfastened the cord which moored the drake, and gently drew the bird toward him. The captive, thinking that he was to be given more food, made queer little muttering noises and suffered himself to be picked up.

"Money couldn't buy him," the guide said feelingly. "I've changed his nature; I've done something no one else can do."

Brent grunted, and essayed a joke.

"At least we're sure of one duck," he said. "We can shoot him if he doesn't make good." Stradley flashed a look at him.

"You're foolin', of course."

Pop shifted in his chair and spat.

" 'Twon't work." His voice was high pitched with the shrillness of senility. "Ye can't twist the good Lord's ways around like that, makin' an innocent and unsuspectin' bird toll his friends and relatives to death. Why, he'd be wusser'n a Benedict Arnold. He'd—he'd be a Judas!"

The son frowned.

"Don't mind him," he said to Brent. "Just wants to argue."

The thrust told. Pop stiffly arose, and waved his pipe emphatically.

"Don't ye say it!" he quavered. "Ye're flyin' straight in the face of the Scripters, and it won't work, I'm tellin' ye!"

Thereupon, having delivered the last word, he stalked inside the shack and closed the door with a bang. The first half of Pop's life, with the country newer even than now, and wilder by far, had been less influenced by the "Scripters" than one would have suspected.

Brent stood up and yawned boredly.

"Bed for me, if we're to turn out at daylight."

Yet sleep did not come soon. For a long time Brent lay awake in the growing gloom, listening to the lapping of waves at the river edge, and the occasional booming of a bittern, on a night hunt for the last of the season's frogs. Once there came to him a distant cry—*Honnnkk—honnk—honk!*—which he interpreted as the call of a disturbed female mallard, and he thrilled in anticipation of what morning would bring. There were lots of ducks, and with this live decoy of Stradley's, there seemed no reason why he shouldn't take a record bag.

He smiled in the darkness as the thought of what Pop had said recurred. A Judas bird! Why not? Clearly the drake was content, as if it were glad to be of service for the kind treatment it had received. Surely it was no more unsportsmanlike to use a live decoy to bring ducks within range than to use one made of wood. And the law, strict as it was, permitted that.

Yet even to Brent it seemed a bit raw—making a deadly pawn of a tame and trusting bird. But, shucks, what of it? Ducks are ducks, and if they aren't shot they die of old age, or some mink or fox gets them.

Still, the argument was not convincing. Brent decided that the deception stirred his conscience—then smiled grimly at the thought. Had he a conscience? It seemed that the bothersome attribute with which he had begun life had died longer ago than he cared to remember. Unpleasant thoughts, and he did not like to dwell on them. Still, in a way the battle of life, as he saw it, was between men with consciences and men without them.

Business success demanded shrewdness, and shrewdness was ever intolerant of restraint. It was all very much like shooting ducks—one needed decoys. Now, for the first time he was going out to slaughter birds with the aid of a feathered accomplice; he'd be shooting over a live decoy. Wasn't there some vital principle in that, something

that could be applied to business? It seemed like a new thought.

More and more of it, and then the guide was shaking him by the shoulder.

Dawn was raw with fog. The wind still blew chilly from the north, yet not strong enough to clear away the cold mist that steamed up from the waters. Brent and Stradley, seated in a skiff well hidden in a long bayou among the tules, shivered in canvas hunting clothes and drank deeply of hot coffee from vacuum bottles. Within a few feet of the boat sat the mallard drake, alternately "tipping" in search of the grain which Stradley tossed to him and turning his head curiously toward the open bay, as though listening. The men heard nothing, yet the drake often paused in the midst of feeding and became statuesque. Maybe his diaphragms were more sensitive, or else the water itself communicated messages—or it may have been instinct—for he knew that out on the bay, screened by the fog, were thousands of his kind. They swam this way and that, always urged offshore by the breeze, and debated among themselves the topic of food. Had the wind been from the south they would have been driven in toward the tules and the problem would have been solved, yet with it forcing them away from the feeding grounds it was characteristic that they might arise and fly to other marshes rather than beat against it. This was as Stradley had foreseen when he had predicted that the wind would hold from the north.

"Well, let's start the ball rolling," said Brent, eying the drake somewhat doubtfully. "Remember, I'm paying a fancy price for that bird's work. Let him earn it."

The guide untied the cord. Freed, the mallard swam away from the boat. As it became clear to him that he was no longer secured, he half raised and skittered along the water for a few rods; then, wings beating the air with a whistling sound, he began to climb and circle. Back he came over the boat; then veered sharply to the left toward the bay and was gone in the fog.

Silence settled over the two men. They sat hunched in their hunting clothes and waited. Time dragged on interminably—ten, fifteen, twenty minutes. They shifted about to ease their cramped limbs, and warmed their fingers, red with the damp cold, inside their shirts. If they talked it was in whispers, for sound carries far on the water in fog. Still the subduing spell of early, misty morning remained unbroken.

Brent spoke jeeringly.

"My gun against yours we never see your tame duck again. He's gone south."

Stradley did not look around, but replied:

"You wait and see. He's out there palaverin' with 'em now. He'll come back." He said, it however, as though he might be delighted if Brent were disappointed.

"Listen!"

Hard on the heels of the guide's adjuration came a vague whispering sound—the flatwise beating of many feathers against air. It swept rapidly to a crescendo; then out of the vapor were flung dark bodies, headed straight toward the boat.

Brent's gun went up, sought one of the black dots, found it.

"Not the first one!" hissed Stradley. "That's *him!*"

The gun sight "led" another bird, just the right distance. A jagged tongue of flame leaped from the muzzle; the mist swirled under a rush of air from the explosion, and a gray hen mallard, driving herself through the air at forty miles an hour, spun like a pinwheel, striking the water with a resounding splash. But before she struck the gun muzzle spat redly again and again, and the sky seemed to rain ducks.

Then the startled flock, splitting sharply, was gone, leaving behind feathered, floating bodies that rocked gently with the waves.

"Didn't I say he'd do it?" Stradley's eyes were alight with childish triumph. "Didn't I say it?"

"Six of 'em," said Brent, ignoring him. "Big ones, too. All clean kills." Flushed with prowess he crammed more shells into the magazine of his gun.

"You saved your duck in the nick of time," he went on. "That bird was never as near death as he was then. I was 'leading' him just right."

The guide's face darkened.

"I'm *glad,* Mr. Brent, you didn't kill him," he said meaningly. "Why—that bird's just the same as if he were my own flesh and blood! Money couldn't buy him. If I hadn't thought he'd be safe I'd never chanced it out here with him to-day."

Brent's eyes narrowed. He did not like Stradley's tone; there was something improper about it.

"Bet he's so scared he'll never come

back," said the city man after a pause. There was veiled insult in his words. "Still want to gamble against my gun?"

"Your blazin' away might have made him gun-shy," grumbled the guide. "But I don't want your gun. Just be careful you don't hit that bird!"

They resumed their wait, but no more ducks came. At last Brent became disgusted.

"If this is what you call duck shooting, let's play marbles," he grunted. For no particular reason he had taken a violent dislike to Stradley. "You've gone nutty about that fool duck. Let's try the 'potholes.' Anything is better than this."

It was quiet and secure by the pool in the tules. The tall saw grass and wild rice served at once as a windbreak and a warning. The growth was crackling dry, despite the dampness of the fog; no enemy could approach the spot without heralding his advance by the rustling of dead stems. It was such a hiding place as the feathered kindred would seek when ridden hard by fear; when even the air held a menace. Yet it was usually a death trap during the shooting season. "Potholes," such places are called. Hunters conceal themselves so as to command the pool and "pot" the ducks as they alight.

The tame drake had been sitting there motionless for nearly half an hour, trying—if his emotions could be gauged by human scale—to reconstruct his viewpoint from the wreck of confidence. He was frightened; he who had not known fear since man won him over and inspired trust in his wild heart. That thunderous roar, the red flash, the whistling shot that screamed of death, a backward glimpse of falling bodies—all brought back memories that had been nearly erased, and his once-shattered wing tip, now knitted perfectly, seemed again to be wrung with pain. But more poignant was the terrifying sense of helplessness, as though he was ringed by enemies. He dare not take flight, lest he hear again that deadly rumble; man, who had treated him kindly, was seeking to destroy him. Instinct told him if he remained here long, that dark-furred haunter of the marshes—the mink—whose long, sinuous body could slip between grass clumps with the least sound, would be seeking him.

Yet there was certain comfort in the situation; he was not alone. Hard by in the grass, likewise hidden, was a hen mallard, who, for no reason at all, for it was not the mating season, had paired off with him soon after he had dropped out of the fog and alighted with the flock in the bay. Obediently she had followed him when he set out to lead the flock to the spot where there was food in abundance—beside Stradley's skiff. She was winging close behind him when Brent's gun had spoken, and her proximity to the leader probably saved her life; to have shot her would have endangered the tame bird. Therefore Brent had chosen the third one in line.

Perturbed she had been when she alighted in the saw grass, but she rapidly was forgetting her experience within the hour. The drake, given more wisdom, was less incautious. More important to the hen was the fact that she was hungry and lonesome. She knew the big drake was somewhere near, yet she could not see him. She quacked loudly—a summons.

He replied in softer tones, warningly, it seemed. Low but penetrating was his call, and the hen mallard did not answer, but came waddling toward him. Yet out of the fog above there came a reply and the next instant the air was filled with a familiar whistling as a dozen dark bodies glided toward the water at a steep slant; poised with fanning wings, and then settled with scarcely a disturbance of the surface. The remainder of the depleted flock, flying in great circles, had finally sought the pools in the tules and had been reassured by the voices of their kind.

They sat silent a few moments, eying the big drake and his companion; then apparently the two were accepted as part of the flock, for the newcomers started search for succulent roots. They made no sound, except an occasional light splashing and gurgling, and the invariable fanning of wings, yet it was hard to believe that no word of intelligence passed among them. It seemed logical to suppose that as they foraged they discussed the delightful bayous to the southward, where they would be within a few weeks. The hen mallard fed with them, apparently content, and after a time the tame drake joined.

Yet the fare was not wholly appealing to the big greenhead, accustomed to the nourishing grain which Stradley cracked for him; therefore he ate sparingly, and always

he listened, as though for the approach of danger. They fed for an hour, undisturbed.

Then, within twenty feet of the drake the grass rustled, and there was a light splash. Instantly he sprang into the air, and the flock, thoroughly alarmed, and accepting him as its leader, followed. They winged upward swiftly, too swiftly to see what had caused the noise. A slate-colored mud hen, who had been blithely wallowing through the grass toward the "pothole," gazed after them in wonder, unaware that she was a disturber.

Up, up, above the fog they climbed, until the heavens were blue as deep water. Then they swung in a great circle over the mist that rolled billowlike on earth. On a five-mile orbit they moved, aimlessly, it seemed, yet in reality with a purpose. They were seeking another feeding place. Failing to find it in the tules, they might move southward on the next leg of their journey. They were uneasy with the migratory instinct.

But the big drake was not minded to leave this spot; there was a certain loneliness in his heart for Stradley. Intuition told him where the pools in the tules lay, despite the fact that they were veiled with fog. And so, when they had all but completed their wide swing, he dove sharply downward through the gray blanket, the flock following.

Nearer and nearer to earth they came; then straightened out on a long glide, until the yellowed grass seemed to rise toward them. What appeared to be an irregular fragment of dark glass showed, and the slant of their flight became a steep volplane. With a whirring of wings they slackened their headlong rush, and poised like great insects; then they were in another pothole.

The big greenhead was first to alight, and it was significant that he struck in the grass growing near shore, instead of on the exposed surface of the pool. The others followed his example.

Not without suspicion of the immediate world, and what it might conceal; still, the veneer of tame civilization was not entirely stripped from him. Yet no sooner had his wings folded, and each strong feather fitted itself neatly in place, than he craned his neck and listened. Then he froze into rigidity, as his flight muscles tautened.

For to his diaphragms there had come an insignificant sound, so subdued that it would have passed unnoticed by the other flock members. It was a faint click, as of steel striking steel, and while to the wild birds it was unintelligible, to the greenhead, once captive, it spelled man! In a lightning flash of memory he was once more sitting in the river before Stradley's shack, and the shiny blue tube in the hands of the stranger who was with Stradley had made that noise.

Two impulses the drake knew: To take flight; mad, headlong flight, that might carry him to safety; or to go to the spot whence came this sound—a clump of grass scarcely a hundred feet distant—to be petted and fed delicious cracked grain. But within the arc of his vision were the other members of the flock; unwitting, unsuspecting, and among them the gray hen mallard who had seemingly chosen him for her mate. It may be, too, that in bold realism there lived again the picture of the feathered, falling bodies; the ominous scream of the spraying shot, the wild desire to escape from danger.

For he decided. His wings spread wide, and with a warning cry he buffeted the air for the upward leap. As he did so there licked out and back from the grass a tongue of flame; there was a bitter, clapping report, and the drake's legs, which were drawing close to his body for the flight position, suddenly hung limp, while fire itself seemed to sear through him. But his wings —powerful, sweeping, glorious wings—they beat strongly and without interruption, carrying him away from that flame and roar and the shriek of countless lead pellets in the air.

"God!" cried Stradley. "You've hit him!" Never would there be any mistaking the identity of that giant mallard.

Smarting under his failure to kill outright, Brent whirled, gun raised threateningly.

"Certainly I hit him!" he gritted. "A duck is a duck to me; I've paid my money. And don't curse *me!*"

He did not intend to do it, yet somehow it was done; a reflex of taut nerves. The weapon thundered; the heavy duck load whistled close to the guide's head, the explosion deafening him.

Catlike, Stradley was on his feet, swinging an oar. He struck again and again with the flat of the blade, beating Brent to his knees, beating the gun from his hands—dealing smacking blows until the craven soul of the man, bared, whimpered and begged under the punishment. Then, his gusty pas-

sion blowing out, Stradley stood ashamed of what he had done, for Brent, although but slightly hurt physically. had been shaken to the roots of his being; always thereafter there would be a furtive, fearful look in his eyes that had not been there before. The warning of senile old Pop Stradley—"ye're flyin' straight in the face of the Scripters"—rang brassily in the guide's ears. He shuddered as the thought struck him—he might have been a murderer.

What was happening the mallard did not know; his one desire was flight, with every ounce put into the effort; flight that would take him far from these enemies. He could not know that his abrupt and unexpected take-off had been the salvation of the flock; an atonement.

And the flock, terror-stricken but unscathed, had vanished in all directions, as though blown off by a mighty breath. Nor would it reunite until late that afternoon, and then far out on the bay.

These things he did not know, nor would he have cared. He was utterly wild once more and the safety of unknown and secluded bayous to the southward beckoned him. An invisible little compass in his brain pointed the way. A thousand feet in the air he climbed on a long gradient before he straightened out.

Mile after mile he winged, until the fog thinned, and below him were long stretches of green that he knew to be woodland. Patches of silver he knew to be lakes, but he did not pause. He was striving as though to reach his goal with uninterrupted flight.

But nature could not be forever disregarded. His wounds were paining him more and more now, while a great weariness seemed to grip him. His wings beat less strongly; they gave more of a flap than a powerful thrust downward and backward. Soon it seemed that he could move them no longer; he began to sink in a long glide. Water showed ahead, and, without caring who or what its shores might conceal, he dropped gratefully to its unruffled surface.

Hardly had he struck, it seemed, when there was a sound above them, and he looked up, for the moment startled. The hen mallard, admiring and faithful, though a bit winded, skittered along the surface of the little lake, and then came swimming toward him.

Until late afternoon they swam and fed, while the chill of the water drew the fever from the drake's wounds. And it may be that they discussed many things, as the migrating instinct grew stronger. Perhaps the hen mallard told him of an even better feeding ground miles beyond, where they could spend the night before resuming flight to the semitropical lagoons, for at last they rose from the lake, and with the greenhead leading shaped a course for the delectable Southland of shallow pools teeming with food.

The sins of Judas were washed out.

More stories by Mr. Gilbert will appear in early issues.

THE UPWARD CLIMB

THOMAS D. SCHALL is now a member of the national House of Representatives from Minnesota, and for the past twelve years he has been totally blind as the result of an electric shock. He says now that when as a young man he became a bush-league baseball player he got his first look at the softer and easier side of life.

At the age of three his father died, and his widowed mother was left without means to rear the future statesman. Here is Mr. Schall's list of what he did to help his mother and to earn a living as a boy and a young man: He sold newspapers, blacked boots, gathered and sold old iron, picked up buffalo bones from the Minnesota prairie, cleaned furnaces, sold clothes, sold books, worked gardens, milked cows, herded cattle, worked in the harvest field, broke bronchos and drove oxen, cleaned cuspidors in a saloon, sawed wood with a bucksaw, ran a hand laundry, had an ice-cream stand, sold bath cabinets, worked in a brick yard and, at last, played on that bush-league baseball team. In between times he gave himself a good education.

Talks With Men

By Martin Davison

IV.—ON BEING POPULAR

NOW and then you meet a man who has the attitude of not caring what people think of him. Generally it is a case of sour grapes. Popularity, the good opinion of neighbors and those you work with, a multitude of friends—these are all desirable and valuable, provided you do not pay too much for them, or rather provided you pay for them in the proper sort of coin.

There are just as many different kinds of popularity as there are of pickles. With pickles, preference is a matter of taste. With popularity, some kinds are actually worth more in cash and moral value than others. The best kinds are worth money, and more than money; they buy things that money cannot buy—help when you are working, good company when you are playing, sympathy when you are in trouble. The different sorts of popularity are caught with different baits.

When I was at law school I first got an insight into the different kinds. Professor Singer taught us elementary law, Professor Talker taught us real estate. One subject was about as interesting, or uninteresting, as the other.

SINGER was a man with the obvious gifts of popularity. He was a big husky fellow, he was good-humored and approachable, he was good looking and had been an athlete—just the man to make a hit with fellows of the college age or a little older. Moreover he played for popularity. He introduced jokes into his lectures, he played up to his audience. He fancied his line of talk and wanted others to like it. A laugh did him a lot of good.

Professor Talker was a different sort. He was not at all prepossessing as to appearance, being an albino who wore a wig which fooled no one. His clothes were baggy, his voice was not a pleasant one, and he made no jokes. If he had any personal magnetism he kept it up his sleeve. None of it was visible. After the first period, however, every one in the room had him placed. If he cared what the boys thought of him, it was a different kind of caring from Singer's. He was profoundly interested in his subject and still more interested in trying to communicate his knowl-

edge and method of reasoning to the students who had paid their money for it. At no time was there the slightest obtrusion of his own personality, but the personality came out and filled the room like a fragrance. It was made up of sincerity, modesty, real ability and an earnest desire to teach the student all he knew.

There were morning, evening and afternoon classes in this law school and the only time the crowd ever got all together was at examinations, which were held in a public hall capable of accommodating seven hundred or so budding Choates.

I remember that Singer walked through the room, looking to left and right, evidently expecting a little attention. He got it, a sort of mild friendliness. A little later old Talker came in and waddled down the long aisle between the desks. At the same second, in different parts of the room, young men began to clap their hands and stamp their feet. It swelled into a thunderous roar of applause that seemed to rock the room and lasted for minutes. I have heard demonstrations at political gatherings and theaters, both of the pumped-up and of the spontaneous kind, but never in all the years between have I heard anything so stirring, so heartfelt and spontaneous, so touching and affectionate, as this tribute to a man who gave the best he had. The old boy did not turn his head, but I fancy there were tears in his eyes. There must have been, for he was human.

Here you have the two kinds of popularity.

THE main requisite for popularity is that you should be a square fellow. Of course a sap who appears to be square because he does not know any more seldom makes the grade. There must be a punch in the man, a quality of power, the sincerity must be a positive quality and not simply the absence of dishonesty. The way to get this, the only way, is to put everything you have into what you are doing, whether work or play. Vanity, which in this instance means thinking of yourself and your effect on others, rather than of what you are doing, is the second deadliest thing. A swelled head, a genuine swelled head, is the first and worst. A vain man may give away thousands and get only sneers for his generosity.

Another form of vanity is the superior kind, which is even worse than the ingratiating kind. If you think yourself superior to those about you, you are not. The only time you are really forging ahead is when you have forgotten all about yourself and are interested in the thing or in the other man.

To be capable of a genuine interest in others is a big asset. One way I have of sizing up a man is to get him to tell about an interview he has had with a third party. If he tells you everything he said himself and very little of what the third party said, I'm off him. If he tells everything that the third party said and has very little to say as to his own remarks, he has something in him.

Don't flatter a man. A man who falls for that is not worth the trouble. Don't paw a man all over. Nobody in the world likes that. Above all, don't think of the effect your personality makes. That's as bad as trying to make a pretty picture when you play golf or tennis. Never mind the gallery. Do your stuff and hit the ball.

THE most dangerous gift is that which we call "brilliancy" or "personal magnetism." The man with this quality, unless he confines himself to the stage or the movies, generally is dangerous. He is fed on flattery and attention. He sells himself too easily and gets to thinking too much of himself. I have known two such men. They started well but ended badly.

One, who combined the habit of strong drink with his magnetism, could make friends with any one in his younger days. He never held his friends. He lost money for all of them and wound up by shooting himself. The other had more control but developed quite as much vanity. He could raise money in bunches. One

man told me that he backed him to the extent of three hundred thousand and lost it all because he believed in the personality. He is down and out, he owes money everywhere and there is no comeback for him.

WHEN I started these talks I asked for letters. I have been answering those which came with stamped addressed envelopes and will continue to do so. I am printing a few because they are typical of a great many others.

Here is a letter that is typical of a great number. I had no idea there were so many fat young men in the United States:

> DEAR SIR: December 1st I weighed 246 pounds. By close dieting I have reduced 23 pounds. We have no Y. M. C. A. with a gymn here, neither have we any one who gives instruction in reducing. I would thank you very much if you could furnish some simple exercises which would help me to reduce to normal weight. I am 37 years old and five feet eight inches in height.
>
> Very truly, W. S. HASSEN.

I have already sent a few exercises for cutting down weight. For the fat man the first exercise should be a jog trot under wraps. Wear rubber bandages round the waist. Practice bending exercise and floor exercise in your room. Wrap up after this and drink a pint of hot water. You should be in a sweat by this time. Follow with a tepid bath and a change of clothes. Begin slowly and take it easy for the first week or so. The idea is to get into a sweat and breathe deeply every day. To start and stop spasmodically is worse than no exercise. Keep it up without missing a day for three months, but don't get too winded and don't try too much any one day. Stick to the diet if it is a well-balanced one and agrees with you.

Here's another typical one:

> DEAR SIR: How can an office worker prevent himself from growing round shouldered? Thanking you in advance, Cordially, E. ELLENBERGER.

The most important thing is to form a habit of standing straight and sitting straight. Watch yourself for this. In walking keep the back straight and the chin about even with the chest. Walk and stand with the feet parallel. The following are the exercises recommended by the experts at West Point for the correction of round shoulders in the army. Practice them till you know you have been working, three times a day:

Stretch arms sideward from front horizontal, turning palms upward, muscles tense.

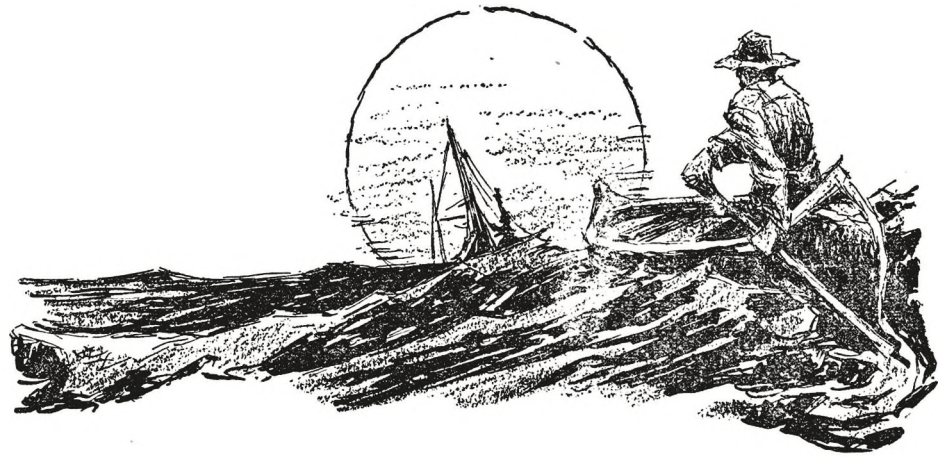
Swing arms forward and backward, muscles relaxed.

Circle arms forward and backward, slowly, energize backward motion, muscles tense; forward motion with muscles relaxed.

Circle shoulders backward, move them forward first, then raise them; then move them backward as far as possible in the raised position, muscles tense, then lower to normal position, muscles relaxed.

J. G. HOFMAN: Although you need it less than most, the course at the outdoor school would be well worth while. Were I in your case I'd try it.

THIS is about all for to-day. The above two letters represent two large groups. Round-shouldered men are rarely fat, and fat men generally stand straight. If there is any subject you want me to talk about especially, let me know.



Clinging

By Theodore Seixas Solomons

Author of "The Haunted Gun," "Caverns of Night," Etc.

The first duty of primitive man was to live, and Bill Trimbo wasn't far from the primitive.

NEVENS, seated on the martingale, holding to the stay, thought he heard a voice.

When the crash came and it had been every man for himself, Nevens was spraddled upon the bowsprit, clearing, with knife and hatchet, the wreckage cluttering the jib boom and the broken flying jib boom. The vessel filling almost instantly and going down by the stern, he had clung to the bowsprit, watching his mates—those he could see through the flailing spume—leaping into the black, looming water. Hours ago the boats had been stove in and cut away, and the pitiful resource of these leapers was but a chance spar, an empty cask, a bit of flindered deck house rising with them from the fast-settling decks of the doomed vessel.

Nevens, feeling the rise of the bow, had preferred to stay with the wreck though he dreaded the suck of the hull when she would founder completely. He had small confidence in man power in a boiling, gale-hurled sea, or in the reefs that had given the *Nancy Bell* her death blow. He was nimble, enduring, but not a strong swimmer. The canted bow for him as long as the old wooden tub might stay afloat!

Cautiously he had climbed and clung to the bowsprit, washed clear of cordage until the increasing steepness of the slimy boom forced him to look for a less slippery hold. The martingale, jutting under the jib, was now of a better slant, and he climbed down to it, cautiously. It swung, for the martingale stay had been wrenched away with the snapped pole; but the inner stays held it securely enough, and Nevens, gripping the light cable, the iron martingale under him, had sat, his shoulders hunched under his jammed sou'wester, his slicker buttoned about him, soaked, shivering, peering down at the ghostly, wind-driven seethe of the sea, listening to the moaning hum of the wind, his face blenching spasmodically, his eyes blinking out the stinging rime that filled the arctic air. Then the voicelike sound!

The tight little sailorman cocked his ears, slanting down his head. It *was* a voice! In a momentary lull of wind and water, again it came out of the dark, almost distinctly: "Who's aloft, there?"

From the height of the bowsprit, thrust monstrously out of the sea by the upended vessel, Nevens, twisting his head, descried, against the faint phosphorescence of the tossing water, the shape of a man hugging the bobstays. His lower part, submerged,

seemed wedged between the stays and the stem. He was making clutches at the martingale brace which, dangling in the water, was borne near to him every few moments by the wash of the sea.

"Wait!" yelled Nevens. He reached down, drew in a fathom of the heavy line and swung it toward the figure crouched in the bobstays. The man caught it, understood, and fastened it clumsily about his waist.

"Can you haul?" he shouted.

"Sure!"

" 'Ithout tumblin'?"

"Sure!"

Nevens, leg and arm around the inner stay, his hands free, pulled on the stiff line, giving the man just the upward tension needed. He clambered slowly up the bobstay to the martingale and sat upon it by the side of Nevens. They looked in each other's faces.

"Well, Bill Trimbo!"

"Hullo, Barney," said the other, panting. "Where was you?"

"The old man had me out for'ard clearin' the mess. I was near shook off the bowsprit when she struck. How'd you get down there?"

The newcomer, Trimbo, was a thickset, muscular seaman, square browed, square jawed. One hand tightly grasped the slender iron dolphin striker—the martingale spar—on which he sat. The other, reaching past Nevens' shoulder, clutched the inner stay above the smaller man's hand. It was a precarious lodgment.

Slowly he replied, whispering hoarsely in Nevens' ear, for spray and wind made a chaos of sound once more: "Thought she was a-goin' down sure, and swum clear. But the sea heaved me back. I was on the windward side when we all jumped. I hit the bow and near drowned, scrapin' along the hull till I must have drifted into them bobstays—under water I was, but liftin' out and in with the heave and go. If the bow hadn't of riz and gimme more air I'd sure be with the rest, shipmate. Bimeby I seen I was high and dry, stuck 'tween stem and stays. I seen you then. Looks like we're all there be, don't it?"

"By God, Bill, you're right I guess! Where was the chance for any of 'em?" After a pause. "What's keepin' her afloat?"

"Oil casks, empties, and her bein' all wood, of course," Trimbo replied.

"Some good, bein' a old wood tub, anyhow!"

"I dunno," was Trimbo's reflection. "What good is it to be half drowned now and the rest pretty soon?"

"You can't tell. We might get out," said the other hopefully.

"Too cold. Can't last till mornin'. Must be on'y nine, ten o'clock now. Daylight come, and us holdin' on—well, what chance we got of bein' picked up in the arctic?"

"That reef meant land, didn't it?" argued Nevens.

"Natives, mebbe!" Trimbo spat out salt water for contempt. "Nothin' showin' but a old spar. Think them lazy devils is goin' to stir out in a stormy sea?"

"She's lullin'," asserted Nevens.

"Gawd, I'm cold!" was Trimbo's shivering answer. "Layin' there in the wash, I'm wuss'n you!"

In truth there was little difference in the state of the two men, for both were soaked and the air was colder than the water. It was October, and only their oilskins, breaking the cruel wind, kept them from freezing. Yet their hands had no protection, and here was menace for men clinging with fingers to the stay of the swaying martingale on which they sat, insecurely balanced. Nevens, however, had all the best of it there, for he hugged the stay with arm and chest and pressed his thigh into it, while Trimbo had only the help of his arm, thrust out and over Nevens'. With his other hand he clutched the martingale itself, but it was two broad for a secure grip and the cold iron stung his fingers to insensibility. He suddenly let go and, reaching up, tried to grasp the stay, but the effort nearly cost him his balance and he grabbed the metal spar again with a muttered oath.

"Try somewheres else, Bill," suggested Nevens, seeing Trimbo's roving eyes. "Hold on to me if you like," he added as the burly fellow turned once more and tried to raise himself by the aid of the stay. He got his knee on the spar, pressed his body against Nevens and slowly got to his feet. Now, two hands and chest against the stay, he steadied himself in comfort—until his hands, numb before, began to lose all feeling. Always his eye roved about him—to the outcurving stem and cutwater of the submerged whaler, the bowsprit, thrust into the blackness above his head like a huge stanchion, a still-taut inner stay; finally the

jib boom, like a short flagpole. These, all of the vessel that stood above water, were steep almost to sheerness, wet, slimy, impossible. The martingale alone, normally thrust down from the bowsprit, was now horizontal, or nearly so. It was the only place in that sea and that storm and that cold where men might cling and live. He stood upon it, but his supporting hands could support him but little longer. He looked down upon the bent head of Nevens.

He cleared his throat to speak. When the words came they were harsh, almost guttural. "I'm tellin' you, Barney, before I do it. I got to have your place!"

The little sailorman looked up, puzzled "It's mine. What you mean?"

"Yours if you can hold it!" His limbs being less numb than his hands, quick as lightning he slipped one foot and leg between Nevens and the stay line. He had now a very secure foothold on the martingale, Barney being between his feet.

"None of that," growled Nevens angrily. "The place is mine, I tell you!"

"I can't hold on, I'm tellin' *you!*" said Trimbo fiercely. "It's who's the best man."

Nevens trembled. "Wait," he whimpered. "Try to keep ahold!"

Trimbo bent down. In the dark he had to bring his head very close to look the other in the eye.

"If I wait I ain't goin' to have no strength to pry you loose. I'm tellin' you. I'm on the square, shipmate."

"You want to tumble me off? You call that square? Bill! Bill, you don't mean it. You're larkin'!"

"You'd do it, too, if you was like me and I was like you. You wouldn't go down in that water if you could help it, would you? It stands to reason." He was whispering hoarsely almost into the face of the shrinking, frightened Nevens. "I got to, ain't I?"

"Bill! I saved you, didn't I? Didn't I throw you that cable end and haul you in?"

"And didn't I ask you first if you could haul *'ithout tumblin'?"*

"Sure you did."

"Then what yer talkin' about, shipmate. You took no chances."

"I hauled you in," persisted Nevens, whiningly.

"So would I haul you in if it didn't hurt me none!"

As suddenly as before he gripped the hands of his fellow castaway. He could scarcely feel with his fingers, but their muscles and those of his great palms still could clumsily press. Slowly he forced the little sailor's hands down the stay rope!

"You're gonna *do it!"*

Realization was upon Nevens. He had feared before, while he argued and pleaded. But it was the fear that is vague, the fear of the thing that is scarcely believable, the fear of the death that is not imminent. But now he *knew;* and fear flickered and fled the presence of the rage that entered him. Its incandescence transformed him.

He uttered no word. He had no words that this sudden possession of fury had not consumed within him. Nor had he members with which to grapple or fight—save one. Instantly, instinctively, he pressed his teeth upon the forcing hands of Trimbo, found their fleshiest part, the palm muscle at the base of a thumb. Into this he sank his strong teeth until Trimbo cried out in monstrous pain.

The wind had ceased. Only the wash of the sea against the timbers, the seethe of foam on wave crests, made sounds. In silence, their labored breath alone filling their ears, the two castaways strove against each other, Nevens' body held tautly, its thews pressing the stay like a tree grown about a rod, his teeth, bared, ghastly, crunching into the hand that pressed his hands slowly down the cable. Trimbo, his mouth wide open, his pain venting itself in stertorous gurglings, was bending, bending, thrusting downward his weight upon the other's hands. Sweat poured from him, blinding him.

Nevens' body was bent almost double. He rocked, his hands now too low upon the stay to give him support. He held to the swaying martingale literally by his teeth in the flesh he was tearing. He knew his time had come, and Trimbo knew it too. He jerked his hand away from Nevens' face, and, instead, thrust his foot upon the little sailor's clutching fists, crushing them down, crushing them off.

"I pity you, Barney," he gritted at him. "But God gimme strength. *He* drawed the lot, not me! Goo'-by!"

Nevens, swaying, looked up at him clearly before he tumbled. "You black-hearted scum o' hell, I'll get you yet, livin' or dead, you——"

The impact of the water was almost a re-

lief. More, it stimulated him. Half crazed, in the iron grip still of the fury, he struck out cautiously. He treaded water, got out of his loose oilskin coat, and throwing himself on his side, determined to swim to land, though it were a thousand miles, and come back and kill the man on the martingale—the fiend! He forgot he was a poor swimmer. He was deceived, exalted by his hate.

His span of life, swimming, would not have been long. He was buffeted, slapped in the face continually by surge crests which, though the night had turned starry, he could not see to avoid. His breath was being beaten out of him when his drooping, valiantly kicking legs encountered an obstacle—a sand bank!

He came to his feet upon it, holding himself with difficulty against the tide rip that had all but swept him past a sand spit. He discerned this low land upon wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. It would be circling out from some lagoon off Point Hope, he thought vaguely. But instantly with the thankfulness for salvation that sprang within him the prepossession of his hatred gripped him anew, and he could scarcely leave the sea and drag himself to safety.

With the walk through the frozen sedges of the sand spit his brain cleared, but his passion for revenge remained steadfast; and when he dimly saw Eskimo igloos and came upon canoes a daring project conjured itself. He almost ran to the nearer igloo and crawled through its tunneled opening.

Kind hands would have busied themselves with the castaway, but he waved them aside, and asked in the trading patois of the arctic whaler for only a dry parka and fur boots and a canoe to "catchem white man." He searched in his drenched pockets for what treasures lay therein—some paper money and coins, a pipe, soaked tobacco, a clasp knife.

He was safe, the other probably lost. But this was no revenge to Nevens, the turmoil of whose soul demanded that the other should *know!*

Though the wind had died, and the stars were out, death still lurked in the high-running sea; but Nevens gave no thought to this as he launched the canoe and paddled to the spit's end where the tide rip had cast him shoreward. He knew that the derelict *Nancy Bell* could not be far. He watched the land, his paddle idle until he saw the direction of the drift. Then he paddled in that direction, sure of overtaking the wreck. His hands, cased in fur mittens, bruised from the crushing of Bill Nevins, were a constant inspiration to him.

The late moon rose presently, divided by an upright line! Terror seized the superstitious sailorman till he divined what it was, and then he smiled and paddled straight for the strange phenomenon—the moon standing for him on the horizon and lighting up the rising, dipping jib boom where clung—if he had not yet fallen into the sea—the brute that had cast him from his perch of safety. In an hour he was close, but he did not pause, tired though he was, till he had seen the small round blur under the bowsprit which was the figure of a clinging man. Then he rested, lying in the canoe bottom. With its every rise he feasted himself upon the sight and gloated in the thought that Trimbo must have seen him, must have his eyes riveted upon the canoe, must feel his heart leap and pound for job at the sureness of his saving. That was fine, for his despair, when he came to know the truth, would be all the blacker!

Slowly Nevens paddled close to the drifting wreck. He noted that, with the gradual water logging of the half-rotted hull of the old whaler, the stern had sunk deeper, the unsubmerged bow timbers had risen higher, and the figure of the clinging man was nearly twenty feet above him as he moved under the bowsprit.

He brought the canoe farther aport of the timbers above him so that the moon, shining on Bill Trimbo's face, would reveal to him the man's look when he——

But Trimbo's eyes were closed. Hugging the stay, his legs jackknifed under the martingale, he was in the last stages of exhaustion. He had seen nothing. Nevens, cheated so far was to be cheated no longer. He called out, "Hullo, aloft there, Bill!"

Trimbo's eyes came open with a start. He stared down at the canoe.

"You!"

For reply Nevens laughed uproariously and clapped his mittened hands. "Sure it's me, in a fine boat, too. Look at me furs. Dry I am, you can bet your money. An' warm. Comf'table. Huh, huh! You done me a good turn, Bill, when you pried me loose and dropped me into the sea. I thanks you right kindly!"

"Fine," said Trimbo. His voice was

weak, but there was now only a soft lap of mild waves against the planking of the vessel's stem, and Nevens heard his words distinctly. "Room for two?"

"For three or four, you mean," corrected Nevens generously. "But no room for hell's spawn. I'm out here to see you drop and drown, damn you!"

The light skin boat, rising and falling on the smooth surge every few moments, the two men could see the whites of each other's eyes. Trimbo, freezing, blinked at his tormentor. He was slow-witted. He said: "If there had of been room for two up here I'd of let you stay. There wasn't room. God gimme the wantin' to live and the strength to force you off. What you beefin' about?"

"Nothin'!" shouted Nevens, enraged anew. He was deeply disappointed. "I'm comf'table, I'm tellin' you. I got a seat for a two-bit show—a-watchin' you freeze—and drown, in a few minutes. I'll see you on your way to hell's pit, where you belong—you, that called me *shipmate!* Then I'm on me way. Haw, haw!"

He began to feel better, purging himself thus of his righteous venom. For now Bill Trimbo *knew!* As he watched the silent man in his patient hug of the bar and stay he realized that it was not Trimbo's death that he had longed for; he thought that he was just indifferent to that; he had hated this fellow sailor for climbing to the martingale and then thrusting him from it. As the weaker man he yielded no moral credence to the dogma that the fitter should survive. Nevens' belief was quite a different one. It was that the seat of safety had been his by right of discovery and preemption; and he felt in his accidental saving by fortuitous currents a triumphant vindication. That vindication he had meant to rub into the heart of the man that had cruelly cast him into the sea as one might rub salt into a bruised and bleeding face. Revenge was sweet.

Yet, as it was a revenge of the mind, of the feelings, it must, to be sweet, be fully understood. So Nevens, his paddle moving slowly in the water to keep his canoe directly under his freezing enemy, kept looking up at him and telling him what he had done, taunting him with his perfidy, his tyrannous cruelty perpetrated upon him Nevens, shipmate and smaller, weaker man. In dudgeon at the silence of Trimbo, he essayed to call him vile names, but at the first-flung epithet, shame unaccountably smote him; for the man was beyond power to punish him for insult, beyond power, too, for lengthy rejoinder. Nevens would be a vengeance taker by exhibiting to the fiendish man the power of the miracle by which he had come safe; but he would be no coward and heap abuse upon a creature powerless, one on the brink of eternity.

Once more, only, Trimbo spoke. "What you think of yourself, Bill Trimbo?" Nevens had shouted to him. "You and your strength that God A'mighty give you?"

The man opened his eyes and peered down. His clutch was loosening on the stay, and he knew it.

"Nothin'," he muttered down by painful effort. "I'm a square man. I only done what you'd 'a' done."

"With your strength, hey!" Nevens shrieked up at him. Somehow he felt baffled, and it maddened him anew. "Lookin' out for yourself with what you had. Well, shipmate, as you calls me, I'm doin' the same. When you come down—and you're a-comin' pretty quick—I'll be lookin' out for meself with what *I* got, and that's a skin boat none too safe for two in a sea like this. You'll drown, Bill Trimbo!"

"Aye, I'll drown!" came the sudden answer with a force of despair. "I'm a-comin' shipmate. Stand clear from under or I might capsize you!"

Huddled, like a clumsy ball, he shot down into the water.

Nevens, warned by his last words, had made one frantic swipe at the water with his paddle and shot clear of the dangerous missile that was Bill Trimbo. But the words rang—sang—in his ears, trumpeting the message to his soul that the man in whose doom he had gloated forgave and spared him, for the skin boat once struck on its edge, scooping the waves, would have been done for.

Horror broke out in perspiration upon Barney Nevens; and he knew in a flash that it was the cruel sea and a creature's urge to live that were at fault, not miserable Bill Trimbo.

With a quick stroke he shot to the risen body. "Got you, Bill!" he croaked to him.

When the man was safely in the boat he pulled the slicker off him and replaced it with his own warm parka.

" 'Shipmate' you called me, Bill. That's me!"

Who Fights and Runs

By Robert H. Rohde

Author of "The High Sign," "Dead Reckoning," Etc.

Macumber, the magician, again takes brief leave of the footlights to effect another masterly miracle of practical criminology.

A TALL, straight, rain-coated figure that was the Great Macumber's waved to me one murky morning from the rail of a steamship slipping down the Hudson toward the open sea. I stood watching until man and vessel were swallowed in a swirl of mist; and though for all I knew that glimpse of the Great One had been my last, my heart was lighter than I had felt it for many a day as I walked slowly back to the taxicab in which we had journeyed together to the pier.

Loneliness was already upon me—but the dread was gone. Every mile that the liner should put between Macumber and me would be a mile, also, between Macumber and those who plotted his destruction. And when it should be the breadth of an ocean that separated us, so much the better. The Great One I might never see again, but at least I would know him freed from the menace of that urbane assassin and director general of polished crime whom the underworld called the Red Duke. For all the implacable ferocity I knew to be hidden beneath the insouciance of His Grace, for all the punitive resources his ascendancy in New York's underworld put to his hand, his arm would not be long enough to bridge the Atlantic. But whether or no, we could count at any rate on the innate practicality of the debonair and cultured little English rogue whose flair for crime had first exiled him from his own country and then brought him to a place of leadership over the élite of American crookdom. The object of his stalking of Macumber, after all, was no more than to sweep from his field of operation one who seemed to have developed a habit of materializing uncannily at moments and in manners most disastrous to his subtlest contrivings. Revenge for defeats of the past would be smallest among His Grace's motives for wishing the Great Macumber dead. The enemy's retirement, safe to say, would satisfy him quite as well as execution of his outlaw death sentence; the Red Duke would not be the general to harass so altogether gratifying a retreat.

Such had been the reasoning by which, after weeks of prayerful argument, I had finally prevailed upon the Great One to make a voyage abroad. It had been my hope to extract from him a promise to remain in Scotland or on the Continent until in the logical course some miscalculation should have delivered His Grace into the keeping of the law, but on that point he had stood firm.

"I'll take ship," he had said, "because the suggestion is good and the time is propitious, and also because I am not unmindful of a

sterling adage. Was it a famous general, lad, or wise Mother Goose who said it?—'He who fights and runs away may live to fight some other day!' Aye, youngster, and were His Grace himself here to twirl his wicked mustache at me, there's another historic line I'd be quoting to him: 'I go—*but I will return!*' "

In such spirit, too, choosing to jest over perils he insisted upon regarding as chiefly imaginary, he had left me at the pier; and on my way back to the Rawley in the taxi, passing through streets thick with traffic, with the competent blue and brass of the police conspicuous at almost every intersection, I came a little toward the Great One's point of view. But when I walked into the suite we had shared so long a visual reminder was before me that I had been right and Macumber wrong. A workman was putting a new lower pane into our living-room window, replacing a pane that not twenty-four hours before had been smashed by a bullet fired from some high place over the way and meant for the Great One's head. And that had been but one—the crudest—of several attempts which had been made on Macumber's life in as many weeks following his third thwarting of the execrable organization we thought of as the "Underworld Rotary."

Into the details of those other efforts launched against the Great One during the period ending in his embarkation I will not go here; nor is it needful, nor possible, that I put onto paper any lengthy expression of the wretchedness of spirit that our separation brought upon me.

A month went, and still I had not heard from Macumber. Again I was obsessed by fears for him; I wondered if we might not have mismeasured the fervor of the Red Duke's vows of vengeance, if either at sea or on the other side Macumber could have come to grief through an encounter with pursuing "Rotarians."

While in this mood of harrowing uncertainty I scoured the newspapers daily for accounts of crimes behind which I might see the diabolically deft hand of His Grace. But it seemed either that the Duke was resting or that for the time being he was content to take his nefarious profits from forays lacking that spectacular dash which the Great One always had held to be his sign manual.

For a time, it is true, I believed His Grace to have had a finger in the Cosmopolis Trust affair; but the arrest and confession of Baillie, the trusted special officer, of course put the idea from my head in that case. Later I was moved to attribute the death of Octavius Hanscombe to the same sinister agency, and went so far as to communicate my suspicion to one of Macumber's good friends at police headquarters. The upshot of that matter, though, was no less disappointing, promising though it had seemed; and certainly it was an amazingly elemental and typically practical answer which the Westchester coroner found to a puzzle which for a day or two had me by the ears.

There had been the old collector, Hanscombe, dead in the armory of the granite castle he had built him in years gone by on a height overlooking the Hudson—stone cold, they'd found him, in the midst of his precious clutter of medieval tin hats and chain shirts and steel leggings, with one of his most highly prized Samurai swords plunged clear through his heart and the one door giving entrance to the place barred and bolted from the inside.

"Hear of the impossible, then look for His Grace!" Macumber had remarked to me once upon a time. And here, surely, was the impossible hurled into my face from the newspapers' front pages: a man slain and his murderer gone through a solid wall or through a strong and doubly secured door.

For the conventional forty-eight hours the press made much of the mystery. Then, very suddenly and rather sheepishly, they let go of it to scramble after the letters in the Keating breach-of-promise suit. The coroner's verdict had been disillusioning. He had listened, as patiently but not so sanguinely as the reporters, to the stories of members of the household and friends of the deceased. Then he had closed discussion with a verdict that Octavius Hanscombe had come to his death by his own hand—that same hand having first, naturally, made fast the door of his citadel against ill-timed intrusion. Was there yet a question? His honor the coroner begged the press to consult the pedigree of the weapon used by deceased. They'd find it a sword to suggest suicide; deceased's own records would show that two former owners, gentlemen of Japan, had redeemed their honor with its steel by practice of the

panacea called in the native idiom harakiri.

That verdict, I will confess, represented a hard let-down for me, for I had displayed a considerable amount of cocksureness and perhaps some asperity in striving to interest the detective bureau in the Hanscombe case as having the stamp of the Red Duke's handiwork. Through some days ensuing my newspapers went unread, and I had just brought myself to a renewed study of their columns when my mind was taken to other and concrete matters by a letter which arrived at the Rawley inviting me to call on a gentleman in Brooklyn who claimed friendship with the Great Macumber, deplored his absence and suggested that perhaps I might be in position to stage a solo exhibition of magic at a benefit in which he was interested. The name signed to the letter—C. T. Ray—was not a familiar one to me; therefore I was not inclined to accept it at face value without a bit of private advance investigation. Quite possibly, I thought, it might be as well for me to avoid Mr. C. T. Ray, whose object might be to lead me into a trap set for small game by hunters balked of bigger. I could not forget that with me, too, His Grace had a little score to settle.

Two o'clock of the afternoon following the day on which his letter arrived at the Rawley was the time set by the writer for my visit, but I allowed myself an extra hour for reconnoitering. The address given by Mr. C. T. Ray was on Columbia Heights, which in my ignorance of Brooklyn I had taken to be a remote and probably semi-suburban district. It proved instead to be not more than a five-minute walk from the first stop made by the subway after its dive under the East River; and within a half hour after I had left Times Square I was walking along a street whose like I had seen before only in woodcuts of early New York. Here and there an apartment house reached toward anachronistic altitudes, but this was a street in the main of private dwellings very plain, very prim, and old.

The houses on one side of the thoroughfare, I discovered, lined a bluff rising from the river. Looking to the west at an intersection I found presented an astonishing view of the many-pinnacled mountain of masonry that covers lower Manhattan, directly across the river.

A block farther on I came to the residence of Mr. C. T. Ray, a dwelling self-contained and simple, discreetly retired from the street behind an iron rail inclosing a tiny square of green—an introspective abode, wholly absorbed in its past, with its back shudderingly turned on that incomparable sky-line vista of newest New York and its shades drawn against the intrusion of what might be new in old Brooklyn.

Once I passed the house on the opposite side of the street that called itself a "Heights." For a moment I stood irresolute at the corner beyond, then I crossed the pavement and walked back over my course. But I did not pass the place again. The door opened at the instant of my approach and from the darkness behind it at the head of the time-proved marble steps a high-keyed and asthmatic voice called to me:

"Ah, you're early—but welcome! Pray don't feel it necessary to patrol the street until two. Come in, sir!"

I must have been the picture of guilt, but I felt the time for hesitation had gone by. Thus challenged I took a firm grip on the heavy stick I had thought it wise to carry with me, mounted the marble steps and entered the gloomy hall. Immediately the door closed, before I had had a chance for a look at Mr. C. T. Ray; and the light in the entrance corridor was so dim that my eyes, adjusted to the dazzling sunshine outdoors, made the man out only as a bulk looming half a head above me.

"May I relieve you of your hat and cane?" wheezed my host. And since his hand was already on the walking stick I surrendered both.

I could see, vaguely, a hatrack standing to my left, but Mr. C. T. Ray did not step toward it. Instead he made a slow upward motion with the hand that held my possessions, and before my startled, half-seeing eyes hat and stick vanished.

"What the devil!" I cried. "What——"

My host chuckled. A switch snapped and light flooded the hall. Neither hat nor stick was I to see until later; but then and there, bent in a travesty of his professional bow, stood the globe-trotting Great Macumber.

II.

There have been several occasions in my life—which thanks to my association with Macumber has not been a too-prosaic one—when I have found myself bereft of that

readiness of thought and speech that are as much a part of the magician's equipment as skill at legerdemain. Such an occasion was this.

From the Great One I got no help in gathering my wits. He merely stood there smiling, obviously as well pleased with the situation as if there were a gallery at hand to applaud.

When words did come to me they were inane. Adequate speech remained beyond my call.

"Well," said I, "so you're back!"

"I'm here," grinned Macumber.

"When did you get in?"

"Really," said Macumber, "I haven't been away."

"What are you talking about?" I demanded. I looked him over carefully, for there had come to me a sudden thought that he might not be altogether master of his mind. Had he perhaps run afoul of agents of His Grace—been struck on the head? I was working out a pretty theory, all in an instant, when the Great One's calm voice assured me:

"Of course I haven't been away."

"But I saw you off for England—for Scotland!"

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"You know, lad, that is, that I was aboard a vessel bound for England when she left her pier. Isn't that what you mean to say?"

"It's the same assertion in another form," said I. "What difference does it make? The ship's first stop was Liverpool, was it not? Wouldn't you say that a man who'd even been to Liverpool and come straight back had been 'away?'"

"But I didn't get so far as Liverpool. I never intended to go there."

His placid indirection goaded me to irony.

"You could have swum back, of course. Having the season in mind, I hadn't considered that as a strong likelihood."

"I didn't have to swim," said Macumber evenly, with the dancing light in his eyes. "On the contrary, my return trip was quite as comfortable and infinitely more interesting than the voyage across aboard the *Baronic* would have been. Don't look at me in that silly way, lad, I beg of you. I came back in the obvious way, of course, aboard the pilot boat!"

"You did!" I cried. "Then you've been back——"

The Great One put a hand on my arm.

"I've been here—forgive me, lad—since the day after you bade me that brave and fine and truly affecting farewell at the pier. This house is the home of a friend of mine who chanced to be leaving New York soon after you began insisting that I remove myself from the city. He was good enough to leave the keys with me, and I took further advantage of his generosity by borrowing his name to sign to that letter inviting you here. So there is a 'C. T. Ray,' you see. But will I not do as well?"

Still with that friendly touch on my arm, Macumber steered me along the hall and into a room at the rear which ran the width of the house. It was a room furnished not as library or den or music room, but as all three—a room in which a man of means and catholic taste might find all that he loved at hand. High bookshelves lined one of the walls and part of another, fetching up against a huge fireplace of rough-hewn stone whose only counterpart I had seen had been in an Adirondack camp. Three or four pictures which I recognized instinctively as "good" occupied the wall spaces not preempted by books and a glistening big grand piano filled a corner.

The Great One walked to the bay window at the far end of the room and raised a shade on that startling panorama of skyscrapers.

"Look, lad! New York! Would you not think you had only to reach out the window to *touch* it? But here, closer to the very vitals of the city than I'd be at the Rawley, I've yet been quite as far away as if I'd kept on with the *Baronic*. It's a rare wonderful place, this Brooklyn. They may call it New York's sleeping porch if they will—but ah, what a port for missing men!"

He pulled chairs and a table into the window, produced a tray on which a circle of glasses surrounded a promising decanter and then brought from the mantel a tobacco jar I knew well.

"Help yourself, lad," he invited. "It's not the MacPherson, worse luck, nor yet the MacVickar, but you'll agree the taste of Mr. C. T. Ray is not so bad. The soda will be in that seeming phonograph at your right."

I invaded the masquerading ice chest, and when we had drunk a silent toast to our reunion the Great One filled a pipe with that

terrific Lousiana shag which I believe no other man in the world could smoke unblended with even an appearance of enjoyment.

"Now that we're comfortable," said he, "I suppose you'd like to know why you've not heard from me before this, and what I've been doing and what I propose to do in future, and the like."

"It seems to me," I told him, "that you might at least have taken time to phone me."

"Time!" exploded Macumber. "Do you think it was that?"

"No matter about your failure to let me know that all was well with you. You should have gone on to England. That was your promise."

The Great One lifted an expostulating finger.

"I didn't promise to go to England! No, lad, you wrong me there, for I am always the man of my word. I did engage to 'take ship,' and that is precisely what I did. You saw me fulfill the promise. Give me my due."

His words came back to me then and I yielded the point.

"I can't compete with you as a quibbler," said I. "But you're not safe either in New York or near New York. You must get away and stay away for as long a time as the Red Duke has his liberty."

"So far as that delightful little man is concerned," said Macumber, "I'm in Scotland at this moment. Truly, lad, I owe you a thousand thanks for the suggestion that brought me to this fair haven, via the *Baronic* and the pilot boat. 'Twas a *coup de maître,* no less. I am half a world away from His Grace, and yet I am at his elbow. I am the fox that has doubled on his trail and hides in the hedge to see the hunt go thundering by. Aye, youngster, the sport of the chase is not all for the huntsman. Consider Reynard. From this thornless hedge of mine may I not enjoy the spectacle of a rider gone flying at the jump?"

The Great One poured himself a second drink; a drink—in which I saw he had held to form in his solitude—scarcely half the size of his first.

"No, lad," he said presently, "even if flight would have put me beyond the Red Duke's reach, which I doubt, I could not have brought myself to it. I am one man, I will make free to say, who can take the fellow's measure. At headquarters they are far better equipped than I to deal with the ordinary criminal. But from every point of view His Grace is extraordinary. He thinks faster than the law, and moves faster. He is an artist in conception and execution. Headquarters has no form on which to classify him. But I have studied, intensively, the man and his methods. My mentality chances to be—perhaps unluckily for myself—of the type to cope with his. We think along parallel, although far-separated lines, with the line drawn by society between us.

"So I felt it my duty to stand by. With you I dared not communicate for the simple and obvious reason that news I was near would be likely to show up on you like rouge on a lady of the chorus. And they would have been watching you, of course. Had they read in your actions a hint of the trick I'd played on them, then where would have been my advantage?"

"Good Lord!" I ejaculated. "What if they've followed me here? Of course I took no——"

Macumber made a gesture of impatience.

"When I asked you to come," he said, "I was naturally well satisfied there would be no one on your trail. For the time being, at least, it's safe to assume His Grace has charged off the Macumber account to profit and loss. Other matters have arisen to engage his attention." He broke off to relight his pipe, and then asked: "May I hope you've been reading the newspapers, lad?"

"Faithfully," I assured him.

"Have you seen in them anything suggestive of the Red Duke at work?"

"The Cosmopolis Trust case seemed——"

The Great One shook his head sorrowfully.

"If that affair were characteristic of His Grace's touch I'm certain he and I should never have met. To my mind there was never a question of Baillie's guilt. The whole thing was clumsy, amateurish."

"Well," I resumed, "when I read of Octavius Hanscombe's tragic death, I wondered if His Grace might not have had a hand in it."

Macumber lifted his eyes quickly to mine.

"Permit me to compliment you, lad, on a dawning of intelligence!" he exclaimed. "Now you've hit it!"

"But," I protested, "that case is closed. Wasn't it established that——"

"Nothing has been established. Had it suited my purpose I could have proved at the inquest that Hanscombe was murdered. For once the newspapers got off on the right track; but of course they showed their usual lack of pertinacity."

"I'm to understand that you've investigated in person?"

"Indeed I have," replied the Great One amiably. "Since my departure for England I've looked not only into the Hanscombe case but into three others in which I thought I might lift a thread that would lead me to His Grace. Would you think I'd been sitting here idle?"

I admitted that idleness would be the last thing to expect of the Great Macumber, and joined with the admission a reproof for his foolhardiness in exposing himself.

"Tush!" said he. "What have I been waiting for but a chance to come to grips with His Grace on a terrain of my own choosing? And why do you suppose I have finally brought you to me? You're to be in at the death, lad—as I'd always have you. The chase is nearing its end. Aye, but our huntsman has made the mistake of his life by forgetting the fox and coursing on. He has——"

I snapped a half-burned cigarette into the fire.

"Please, maestro," I implored, "talk plain English."

Macumber laughed.

"Excuse me, lad," he said. "It was so pretty a figure I was carried away by it, but I can see I was getting a bit involved in my imagery."

He stared down for a moment at the ribbon of river beneath our window, and then resumed:

"In the plain English you request, I've a rendezvous with the Red Duke of which His Grace himself has not even a suspicion. Not only do I project his capture, but it's my conceit to take him in a magicianly way—to force him, even in his downfall, to admire not only my enterprise but my art. True, it was not easy to persuade a certain unimaginative official to consent; yet——"

In my eagerness I would not let him continue.

"When," I demanded, "do you anticipate another meeting with His Grace?"

"This night, to be sure," said the Great Macumber.

III.

It was an interesting if incomplete analysis of the Hanscombe case which the Great One let me hear over another pipe. I had wanted to know in the first place, of course, how Macumber reconciled the locked and bolted door to the escaping murderer of his theory.

"Why that should trouble your mind I can't see," he sighed. "The man who killed Hanscombe didn't leave by way of the door you're thinking of."

"But there was no other door."

"I saw none."

"Windows?"

"They are just as the newspapers described, close up under the high ceiling and all securely barred."

"Yet you say another person was in the room when Hanscombe died, and that this person found a way out? What's the answer?"

The Great One sighed again.

"What a question to be asked by a fellow who's followed magic since boyhood! What's the secret of every last one of our cabinet illusions?"

"You mean there's a trapdoor, or a secret panel?"

"Something of the sort."

"That doesn't sound like the twentieth century—and Westchester County."

"I grant you. But Hanscombe's, you must consider, is not the typical country house. When he built the place in the early 'nineties he had already brought together a notable collection of arms and armor of the Middle Ages. In putting up his home at Fraunce Hill he let his hobby and his fancy run off with him. Not only has the residence the aspect of a castle, but there's a secret passage leading from somewhere out on the estate into the lofty hall in which Hanscombe stored his medieval hardware. Even Tony Hanscombe, the old man's nephew, who's lived with him since childhood, doesn't know where the passage begins and ends—but it's certain some one else does. And by all odds, lad, that some one is our friend the Duke."

"May I ask how you arrive at that conclusion?"

"You may, lad; and you shall have a sufficient if not detailed reply. I may say in the first place that I was on my way to Fraunce Hill when you were reading the account of Octavius Hanscombe's death—

unless you've lately become an early riser. *I* had been through the newspapers that morning at seven.

"Others preceding me had smiled at young Hanscombe's insistence that his uncle had been murdered; and by the greatest good luck his resentment had been so aroused that he had not mentioned the existence of the secret passage. This information I persuaded him to keep to himself for the moment. He also consented to withhold it at the inquest, after I had convinced him it would be in the interest of justice to do so and had pointed out that such proceedings can always be reopened.

"And now, lad, I'll tell you why I was so anxious there should be no speculation concerning the secret passage. Just about a week before his death, I learned from the nephew, Octavius Hanscombe was visited at Fraunce .Hill by an impoverished young baronet, one Sir Herbert Tracey. Between faith in a fallible system at Monte Carlo and devotion to an equally fallible American actress whom he was gentleman enough not to name, Sir Herbert had brought himself so close to insolvency that he contemplated selling off divers family treasures which he had been told Hanscombe would be glad to buy.

"But far more interesting to me than the baronet's plight was Tony Hanscombe's description of him. He was a small and slender man with a ready smile, and conspicuously well turned out. His hair was of a vivid red, and his beautifully trained little mustache was——"

"His Grace!" I gasped.

"Who else?" queried Macumber. "Having in mind what was to happen to Octavius Hanscombe, why doubt that for a moment? But at any rate Sir Herbert Tracey, to give the man the name he picked for himself, found a sympathetic friend in Hanscombe. He remained over the week-end at Fraunce Hill as Hanscombe's guest, spending a good part of the time in the armory, so called. His was purely a scouting expedition, I fancy, but luck ran for him as usual. It's almost certain that the old man, carried away by pride in his all-but-forgotten toy, showed his visitor through the secret passage. I do know, through Tony Hanscombe, that on one occasion his uncle and Sir Herbert turned up most surprisingly from outdoors a while after they'd been seen to enter the armory together."

"Assuming that Sir Herbert Tracey were in reality the Red Duke," said I, "what would he have been after?"

The Great One shrugged.

"The answer to that question may be waiting for me when we arrive at our destination to-night. The nephew himself was able to make no plausible suggestion. He knows of nothing in the house which would be likely to tempt a freebooter of His Grace's caliber. The one thing of which he's sure is that Octavius Hanscombe had no enemies to wish him out of the way."

"How about the estate? Could Hanscombe's will——"

"I scarcely think the trustees of the Duryea Museum would be guilty of plotting the murder of so generous a patron," smiled Macumber. "The museum gets everything, unreservedly. Hanscombe provided magnificently and permanently for his nephew more than a year ago, and there are no other surviving relatives." He glanced abstractedly at his watch. "No, lad, the old man was killed because he showed up at the wrong time that night. Tony had left him reading when he turned in, and apparently there'd been a noise in the armory that took him there to investigate. And once he'd opened the door—— Well, that was the finish of him."

"You think it was something in the armory that His Grace wanted so badly?"

"There's no telling. It may be that he merely had used the secret passage as the easiest way into the house. Whichever way, I believe he'll be using it again the night. I'm gambling that with Hanscombe dead the man didn't linger long, and I've positive knowledge there's been no intrusion since."

"But what makes you so confident the Red Duke will make another attempt to-night?"

"Presently," promised the Great One, "I'll show you." And when we had seated ourselves for an early dinner in a small but excellent restaurant near the Brooklyn Borough Hall, after another hour or so of desultory chatting, he pointed out to me a news item which two of the evening's papers carried on their front pages. This was an announcement that Anthony Hanscombe was quitting the house in which his uncle had ended his life; that the furnishings were soon to be removed to a New York auction room and that on the following day the fa-

mous Hanscombe Collection would be transferred to the Duryea Museum.

"It pays, lad," remarked Macumber, "to cultivate the press. The information which you see printed may not be precisely fact—but is it not well calculated to force His Grace's hand? Like myself, the Duke is an omnivorous reader of the news. I'll lay you whatever odds you say that what you've just read will bring him to Fraunce Hill before to-morrow's sunrise."

Later, as we were bouncing along the east bank of the Hudson on a suburban way train, the Great One inquired in a tone which seemed rather ominously casual if it had occurred to me to arm myself before journeying to Brooklyn to visit the mysterious Mr. Ray. His question was the more startling for having popped out of a moody and unassailable silence in which he had been immersed since we had risen from dinner and started by subway for the railroad terminal in Manhattan.

I pointed to my stick—which I had found standing innocently in the hall rack with my evanescent hat on its crook when Macumber suggested it was time for us to be leaving the house on Columbia Heights—and told him I had no other weapon.

The Great One's face showed relief rather than disappointment.

"My own automatic insures us all the protection we'll be likely to need," he said. "I doubt it will be necessary even to parade it, for the party I've planned—eh! What's that station the conductor's calling, lad? Fairways, is it? Then here we are!"

"I thought we were bound for Fraunce Hill," I objected; but Macumber already was hurrying toward the front end of the car. He hailed a tinny little taxi when I had climbed down onto the station platform beside him and bade me sit in it until he returned.

"I'm going to take a look about," was his only explanation, and when he returned he gave an intricate set of directions to the driver, involving a half dozen roads whose names I had never heard before.

As we rumbled at a leisurely pace out of the little town of Fairways we were followed for a time by a big closed car which hung so persistently on our rear that I began to find my thoughts more concerned with what might be behind than with what lay ahead. But at a fork a couple of miles out of the village the car sped off on an independent course. Macumber, who merely had smiled when I confided to him my misgivings, looked after it speculatively but said nothing. A while later he volunteered:

"Don't you think, lad, it would have been the height of silliness for us to have marched through Fraunce Hill on our way to Hanscombe's? That village I've meticulously avoided from the first. Fairways is the safer stop."

The Great One's instructions to the chauffeur had not indicated a wish to be anywhere in a hurry, and the man loafed along at a rate which suggested a resolve to make the best of a good thing. He was a taciturn individual who had signified his comprehension of the complicated course laid out for him with no more than a nod; but when after an interminable threading of country roads Macumber called to him to stop he was surprised into speech.

"*This* where you want to get out?" he demanded incredulously.

"Right here," replied the Great One. "What's the tariff?"

"Sure you know where you are?"

Macumber had stepped from the machine and was standing alongside the driver's seat, wallet in hand.

"It will be my own fault if I do not. There'll be no need for you to wait. I'll settle with you now."

"There ain't a house," said the chauffeur, "within a mile o' here."

And then, abruptly and with a sense of injury apparent in his rusty voice, he named his charge; for the well-meant intelligence had inspired the Great One only to congratulate him on his intimate knowledge of the locality.

Macumber stood in the road until the taxi had turned and had vanished in the direction whence we had come. When the red flicker of its tail light had been lost around a curve he hopped across the roadside ditch and calling on me to follow him swarmed over a head-high hedge to which a hidden fence of steel wire gave solidity. He was down on the other side and clear of the hedge as I started up; but as I was straddling it, my hands grasping the pipe-like top bar and my full weight on my two wrists, I felt the fence gently swaying.

That, I knew, could not have been imagination, and its yielding when I had climbed it made me certain of what had caused the structure's brief vacillation.

Somewhere, and not far away, some one else was scaling the fence!

This conviction I imparted in a whisper to the Great One when I had gingerly let myself down onto the ground.

"Wait here," he breathed. "Don't stir from this spot until I return." And then like a shadow he was gone among the trees, leaving me alone in a darkness which my eyes could not penetrate for a dozen paces in any direction.

It might have been an hour that I waited there with my stick held ready, straining my eyes and my ears—wishing for my nerves' sake that I dared smoke and yet hesitating to strike a match. At last came a rustle of leaves behind me. I spun on my heel, the stick upraised, and stayed my descending arm just in time to spare the Great One's head.

"Do you wonder I was pleased to learn you had no pistol along, lad?" he chuckled. "It's altogether too easy to turn loose with one of the things."

I asked him if he had located the other fence climbers.

"Yes," he said. "They've gone—up toward the house. We're on the Hanscombe estate now, as you probably have suspected. We would as well have gone through Fraunce Hill village behind a brass band as have entered by either of the main gates. My guiding thought is that we can never give His Grace too much credit for canniness."

He lifted a wrist and I saw by the glowing numerals on his watch dial that it was already after eleven; then, cautioning me to walk warily, he led away through the woods.

There were many acres of the trees. Tangled creeping vines covered the ground and we made progress slowly. Macumber presently fell back to walk at my side.

"They have no roads at this end of the estate," he told me. "I'm sorry for your shoes, but the night's work should be worth a new pair."

"Did you see the Duke?" I asked. "Was he with them?"

"No; but he will be with them eventually."

"How strong are they—in numbers?" I then inquired apprehensively.

"Those who came over the fence back yonder, you mean?"

"Yes."

The Great One's voice seemed to have tightened a little as he answered:

"I think I counted eight, all told."

"Eight!"

"That," said Macumber softly, "was what I expected. It will be a lovely evening!"

This was terrific news to me, but I had no chance to question the Great One further. We had come suddenly out of the timber and stood at the edge of a close-cropped rising greensward surmounted by a vast pile of stone dominated by a square tower. Even in the dim starlight the Old World implication of the outline stood clear.

"They say," Macumber murmured, "that the architect had the very devil of a time persuading old Octavius to leave out the moat, and drawbridge and portcullis. But his secret passage he would have. I fancy it lets out somewhere in that thicket to the south."

He sat himself down on the grass and waited in silence, his cold pipe clenched between his teeth, as the lights which had been blazing all through one end of the place began one by one to disappear.

At last all the building was dark save for two windows midway in the tower. These, scarcely more than loopholes, gleamed down on us like a pair of malignant yellow eyes. When they finally had blinked out the Great One got to his feet.

"Now," said he, "the sport begins."

"But eight of them!"

"Right you are, lad—and none too many," spoke Macumber blithely, stepping off toward Octavius Hanscombe's extraordinary dwelling. "Keep a good grip on your stick!"

IV.

Macumber had been provided with a key to one of the rear doors of the Hanscombe place against this nocturnal visit. Behind the door not a glimmer of light showed. Lord and vassal, seneschal and scullion, the castle's people had retired to regions above, leaving no reception committee to await our coming.

I bumped into something, waist high and hard, as the Great One was softly closing and securing the door through which we had entered. This object I made out by sense of touch to be a billiard table. Macumber found me sitting on its edge.

"Come, lad!" he whispered. "We may have time for a string later, but not now."

Confident of his ground he moved away, with a leading hand on my sleeve. We passed, I thought, through several spacious rooms and then traversed a long stone-floored corridor. The Great One's free hand was running along the wall as we walked, but he finally was forced to resort to his electric flash. Twenty feet or so ahead of us the little lamp's beam picked out a heavy door which might have given entrance to some huge ice box.

"The armory's beyond," Macumber told me, and produced yet another key.

The rest of the house had been warm, but on the other side of the door the air was chill. I shivered the instant I stepped over the threshold—and became aware that the hand which gripped the stick was nevertheless moist with perspiration. *Eight!* What arrangements the Great One had made to discount the amazing strength of the enemy he had not been impelled to tell me, yet at this moment I could only feel that the adventure on which we were embarked was the maddest of Macumber's career. Vital magic indeed it would take to prevail over such odds as we might face.

This door of the armory, too, the Great One locked behind us. I heard the click of the key in its lock and a subdued clanking as the bar of which I had read in the newspapers fell into place; then Macumber tiptoed to my side. He had a bit of information for me in which I found no cheer.

"Right about here where you're standing, lad," he said, "is where Hanscombe must have stood when they got him with that Japanese sticker of his. Like to have a look about you?"

His pocket torch flared out again and its bull's eye swept swiftly around the walls. Upon them were hung literally hundreds of weapons of the sort which men used in their wars before the dawn of the age of poison gas, air bombs and flammenwerfers. There were broadswords, claymores, scimitars, battle-axes, halberds, lances, pikes, crossbows; and standing rigid at intervals were figures so like humans that I all but choked in stifling the cry of alarm that rose in my throat at sight of them—suits of armor rigid and upright which might have been peopled by risen Knights Templars standing guard over this hall of tragic death.

Such was the start given to me by the apparitions in steel surrounding us—the very shells, the thought came to me, of fighting men who perhaps had followed Richard into the East—that Macumber must have felt me trembling when he laid his hand upon my arm.

"Buck up, lad!" said he. "Remember, to-night's party is ours, and not His Grace's."

The Great One seemed not disposed to leave the neighborhood of the door. For that I was thankful enough, although rather far would I have had it open and offering easy egress from the armory should discretion dictate a retreat. I stood motionless beside him, fighting to hold down the wheeziness I thought was coming into my breathing and trying to gauge the passage of time, my eyes glued to as much of the face of Macumber's watch as showed beneath his coat sleeve.

When the wait became intolerable I put my lips close to his ear and asked a question as idiotic as any he had ever heard from me. When, I wanted to know, would they be coming?

The Great One had stiffened at the whisper.

"Hark!" he breathed.

I listened with him. In a moment I had convinced myself I was hearing footsteps. The sound was muffled. It seemed at first to be in the corridor through which we had passed a while before. Then came a scratching and a grating. About that noise there could be no doubt. It was in the room in which we stood. Macumber's hand again was on my arm. Its clasp tightened. The footsteps were now distinct, nearer, within the same walls that inclosed us. More than one pair of feet were stepping about, I was sure.

The Great One still made no move. I was most painfully aware of a flaw in his strategy as an electric glow that was not from his flash blazed into incandescence at a far end of the hall. He had waited too long in the open. We should have been in hiding a full minute before. No longer could we count on surprise as an ally. Whatever the arrangements at which he had hinted, they could avail us little in such a pinch as this. A cordon of police around the place, a houseful of them on floors above, would be of scant assistance here. For all the help we'd get from them, with the one door barred and the other entrance unknown to them, we might be shot down in Octavius Hanscombe's hall of hollow men with no

more chance for our lives than old Hanscombe himself had had.

These extremely painful speculations scorched through my mind all in a second. But Macumber's ears, it seemed, had missed that multiplicity of footfalls which mine had caught. Foolishly—fatally, by all odds—it was his thought that for the time being there'd be only one man to deal with. The beam of his flash shot out and ringed the holder of the other torch. This, I saw, was neither the Red Duke nor his fellow executive of the Underworld Rotary, but a plump and bearded person strange to me whose fat hands clawed up into the air at the Great One's challenge:

"Stand where you are!"

As instantaneously as if vibrations set in motion by Macumber's voice had touched it into life, a third flash lamp spat white flame through the hall. It came from behind us; and from behind us, too, came words which in inflection might have been an invitation to tea.

"Let's *all* stand where we are! What an awkward situation! We didn't realize we'd be intruding, really."

Another voice spoke up from the rear.

"Can you beat it, Duke? Know who we've got here?"

The languid one withheld reply until gentle reasoning to which an ominous click gave point had convinced Macumber that the situation was one in which he might better yield. The Great One made no answer, but after only the briefest hesitation placed his pistol on the floor and kicked it away from him—both actions having been softly suggested by the man he had thought to trap. Then said His Grace:

"Know them? No, I took it for granted they'd have the advantage of me—in a sense. Can I claim acquaintance? Later on you must remind me to do something about my eyes. Turn on a couple of those wall lights, like a good fellow, and let me have a look."

And when the lights were on, and the Great One turned at his request to face him, His Grace demonstrated again his gift of concealing all emotion beneath a glacial calm. He plucked at an end of his radiant mustache, but the hand which held the revolver did not waver a hair's breadth.

"My good Macumber," he murmured. "How jolly that we should all come together again! Did you have a pleasant crossing?"

"One could hardly call it a crossing," said the Great One diffidently. "I did no more than run out and run back."

"Ah! I'm sorry you couldn't have made the trip to Scotland—although I may say I've wondered at times whether you really got so far. There's health in that Scottish air, Macumber. And didn't I once hear you speak of a dear old maiden aunt on the other side?"

The man with the brown mole—it was none other than "His Nibs" of the Underworld Rotary, I saw, who had turned on the wall lights at the Red Duke's bidding—was growing impatient.

"We're wasting time, Your Grace," he grumbled. "We ought to be thinking about what to do. This little complication makes our——"

The Red Duke tossed his bulky collaborator in crime a fleeting and chilly glance.

"In the circumstances, of course," said he, "the thing to be done is obvious. I dare say Macumber can guess what that is. And as for wasting time, I've always a spare minute for the professor. Very likely this will be our last chat. You must bear that in mind, Edgar. He'll be going on a long voyage to-night from which I doubt there'll be any running back, for all of good Sir Oliver's convictions. And now, Macumber, won't you be kind enough to tell me how you happened in here? Did you doubt Mr. Hanscombe killed himself?"

The Great One nodded.

"I was satisfied he was murdered."

"You should have spoken to the coroner in that event. What, may I ask, did you expect to gain by snooping—pardon the word, won't you?—by snooping around here in the dark to-night? Surely you're not sold on that ancient superstition that the murderer is drawn back inevitably to the scene of his crime?"

Macumber met the cold blue eyes frankly.

"I thought," said he, "that he *would* be back."

The Red Duke stared at him with an expression which seemed to hold something like reluctant admiration.

"Damme," he exclaimed, "you are a cool hand, professor! Imagine a fellow being in your boat and making so rash an assertion as that. Oh, well, I suppose you think it makes small difference what you say; and you're right in that, quite right. So, altogether, as between old friends soon to part

forever, I don't mind saying you were right in your guess as well. Yes, Macumber, the man who killed old Hanscombe is here. It was on him, oddly enough, that your light fell a while since. If he'd been alone you'd have had him, wouldn't you?"

The bearded man, who had drawn close, glared at His Grace.

"Why you talk so? Fool!" he snapped.

"Don't let's quarrel, Troublitz," urged His Grace, still with his eyes on Macumber. "You don't understand the situation. Anything I tell this gentleman is not likely to go farther. But to put it baldly, you did make rather a botch of it. A tap on the head would have served as well. You Slavs are as excitable as Latins. His Nibs and I should not have brought you. As like as not you've spoiled the show. Things being as they are, I doubt—— What was that, professor?"

"I was remarking, my friend, that your insistence on regarding me as a detective has often irritated me."

"The irritation," said His Grace with a small inclination, "has been mutual, I'm afraid. If you, for instance, had paid as strict attention to your own business as I to——"

Macumber folded his arms across his chest.

"It was in part, at least, as a magician I came to Fraunce Hill to-night."

"Really?" queried the Red Duke skeptically.

The Great One's voice displayed a trace of eagerness.

"I can prove it to you."

His Grace exchanged another fleeting glance with the man of the mole.

"Unless it's something especially good—and something that can be done where you stand, with your hands out of your pockets—I think we can dispense with it. I'm scarcely in a mood for magic to-night. You don't realize how you've upset me, Macumber."

The Great One smiled cheerfully.

"I won't have to lift so much as a finger," he promised. "Have I your attention?"

"Very briefly," said His Grace.

"And may I crave o e indulgence on your part? Would you be so considerate as to restore that revolver to your pocket?"

The Red Duke felt once more for his mustache.

"Upon my word, professor," he protested, "I can't——"

"It will serve only as a trouble maker for you," Macumber serenely assured him. "As a matter of fact, Your Grace, you've come walking into a trap from which there'll be no escaping."

The red one's eves darted invol tarily toward the opposite wall of the armory.

"A trap, professor?" said he. "That's interesting—if true."

"Only too true," the Great One told him. "It's magic I'm falling back on, Your Grace, to work your undoing—if you don't mind a touch of melodrama in the phrase. Look about you! Are we alone, do you think?"

The blue eyes searched Macumber's.

"We seem to be," said the Duke slowly. "You've at least aroused my curiosity, professor. What's the idea?"

"To make the Templars march again," replied Macumber. He raised his voice. "Awake, my Knights!"

I had been gazing absently at one of the Hanscombe suits of armor not more than a dozen feet away from me. Motionless so long as I had observed it before, it came crashing down now from its low pedestal. The whole hall was ringing with the clangor of warrior steel; others of the iron men were on the march. As they approached from all sides gauntlets and arm pieces dropped off, loosely fastened leg coverings fell away, helmets were tossed down. By the same magic which had brought the knights to life, revolvers appeared in the hands of all—guns which I recognized as of the New York police regulation pattern.

As they came the Great Macumber bowed low—so low, indeed, that his hand reached to the floor and swept up his discarded pistol. It was leveled at the Red Duke before that for once astonished personage had recovered his wits. He dropped his own weapon into his pocket and emulated the example of his companions by raising his hands.

"Very clever and very spectacular, professor," he said, almost enthusiastically. "How could one ask for a fancier finish?"

V.

When our three prisoners had been disarmed and the groaning detectives had been relieved of breast plates and back plates, which alone of their late metallic habiliments had been securely fastened on them,

Macumber turned to me with a beatific grin overspreading his face.

"I rather expected His Grace to make a dash for it," said he. "He could have paid me no greater compliment than that implied in the consternation inspired by my magic. The thing could have been led up to a bit more deftly, it's true—but our friends had my solemn promise I'd keep them harnessed not longer than an hour. By private arrangement they'll be rewarded for their discomfort, you may be sure."

"But you said there'd be eight——"

"Tush!" exclaimed the Great One. "Count 'em—our allies! It was the men from headquarters that came over the fence near where we did. I had a forgathering with them in Fairways. They were in the closed machine that followed us, and came along to Fraunce Hill by another road. Good news I had from them, too, so far as clearing what remains of mystery in the Hanscombe case is concerned. Yonder Troublitz, there—aye, he's the key to it."

"I could have guessed that," said I. "Who is he?"

"A Russian."

"That's something else I could have guessed."

"Well, I can do better by way of description than that. Under the old régime he was Count Troublitz. He came over here with one of the early Russian purchasing commissions."

"Then," said I, recalling many a story of graft and corruption that had been circulated concerning the czar's men of business in America, "he should be rather well fixed. Why should he be mixing up with His Grace, et al.?"

"That," replied Macumber, "remains to be seen. But I can give you a fair general answer now, since the police were lucky enough to pick up the trail of the duke's whiskered friend this morning and learn who he was. Prince Varinoff, another member of the same Russian Commission, got quite thick with Octavius Hanscombe. He was suddenly called home, and died in Petrograd shortly after he arrived there. I learn from Tony Hanscombe that Varinoff left a dispatch box with his uncle before starting for Russia. I dare say the box, which Troublitz somehow found out had come into Hanscombe's possession, contained his share of the purchasing spoils as well as the prince's. We'll see shortly. Tony's fetching the box now."

A few minutes later a tall, fair-haired and much-flustered young man, who had been in and out of the armory once before immediately after the capture of His Grace's burgling party, brought to Macumber a metal case.

"This is what Prince Varinoff put in my uncle's charge," he said. "But have we the right, do you think, to open it?"

The Great One already was at work on the small brass padlock, using one after another the little keys which play so large a part in his tricks with handcuffs and which he always carries about with him.

"I'll assume responsibility," said he, "and claim the privilege of having a look into the box as my reward. Ah, here's the key that fits!"

Slipping the lock off its hasp, Macumber lifted the lid of Prince Varinoff's treasure chest.

"Great Cæsar!" he gasped, and began rapidly to run through the contents of the box, removing nothing. "How long ago, did you say, was this thing left with your uncle? In 1915, eh?"

The Great One broke into a laugh. Then suddenly he sobered.

"Either for himself, or for himself and Troublitz," he told me, "Prince Varinoff got away with what would amount to more than a million from the government of the czar."

"A million! It's there?"

"Just as Varinoff left it with Octavius Hanscombe. Probably he feared to trust it with a bank or in a vault lest it be reclaimed."

"But who can claim it now? With Varinoff dead, and Russia in the hands——"

Macumber thoughtfully closed down the lid of the box and snapped on the lock.

"It's scarce a matter to worry about, lad," he smiled. "The stolen treasure that cost Octavius Hanscombe his life and the Red Duke his liberty, that has laid His Nibs by the heels and will likely land Monsieur Troublitz in the electric chair, wouldn't buy even a moderately good five-cent cigar today. The frugal prince, you see, never changed his winnings out of rubles!"

Another Great Macumber story in the next issue.

A Chat With You

MOST of us will get a day off soon because it is Washington's birthday. Once we learned that the original life by Parson Weems was mostly hokum, and that Washington was an extremely human being, he became for us one of the most satisfactory of heroes. Notable as the Adams family and Thomas Jefferson are in American history, they lack something of the dramatic and picturesque qualities that attach to Lincoln, to Hamilton, to Andrew Jackson, and to Washington. We like Washington because his life was an intensely dramatic story.

* * * *

IN ancient Greece some of the most successful of the tribes claimed that they were directly descended from Hercules, who was the ideal heroic type of hard-working pioneer, performing tremendous labors and never sparing himself. They probably meant it in a more or less figurative way, believing that they were the spiritual heirs of the hero who cleaned the Augean stables. We do not describe ourselves as the children of Washington, but we call him the father of his country, which amounts in a way to the same thing. Any great man leaves behind him something more than the tangible evidences of his work. He leaves an intangible presence which influences men as long as his life story is remembered. There are spiritual children of Napoleon Bonaparte fulminating in Europe at the present moment, and there are those whose thoughts are unconsciously influenced by the Washingtonian tradition doing their work in America to-day.

We got a letter from a man a while ago in which he said that a single sentence uttered by a character in a POPULAR story had influenced him more than anything he had read in years. It had carried him through a crucial period and driven him to action which he would not have taken otherwise. The sentence was in a story by Frank L. Packard, printed a good many years ago. The man in the story pounded the table with his fist and said:

"God Almighty hates a quitter!"

When we think of Washington we don't think of the cherry tree or the hatchet, nor do we see the smoothed-out and prettified portraits that the artists have made of a big, rough man. We think of a man who held, deep in his soul, the knowledge that "God Almighty hates a quitter."

* * * *

WE never got much of a thrill over the tale of Robert Bruce's watching a spider and being heartened by its persistency. We can't imagine Washington going to a spider for moral lessons, or indeed wasting much time in the contemplation of any sort of insect. When we read history we read it for its story value. We are more interested in stories than in anything else, and the best story is always that of the man who is apparently down and out and who shoves his way through by good hard grit. The story of George Washington during the winter of 1777-1778 is one of the best in history. It is sound fact and not embroidered with romantic trimmings as most stories in earlier history are. We know what happened during that hard winter. We would like to see a play built after the fashion of John Drinkwater's "Abraham

Lincoln" with Washington for its central character and the setting in Pennsylvania during those winter months.

* * * *

IN spite of the fact that Washington was pronounced by so competent a judge as Frederick the Great to be the ablest general of his time, it looked for a while as if he had been fought to a standstill. Lincoln fought against party faction and intolerance. Washington also had these to contend with. At the same time he had to fight a winter campaign under as hard conditions as any general has ever faced. American frost and blizzards are even more unkind than European mud and rain, especially when men are half clothed and insufficiently fed. There was a time during that winter when the Revolutionary cause seemed absolutely hopeless. The betting, if there had been any betting, would have been at prohibitive odds against Washington. And yet at that very moment Fate was preparing her biggest surprise and the luck was already on the turn. In April the French fleet sailed for America and the progress to victory had started. Washington is the classical example of the man who proved that if you stick out long enough the luck will finally break in your favor.

* * * *

WE can't think of him as a man unable to tell a lie. He could have told lies if he wanted to only he didn't choose. He was the supreme embodiment of all the qualities that are never found in a quitter. His are the qualities that we would like to put into the stories we publish. We think that now and then we succeed in putting across something that will brace a man up and encourage him when he feels that he is up against it. Holman Day's great novel, "The Fields of Fear," which appears in the next issue, communicates some of this spirit to the reader. So does Chisholm's "Bill Stuart—Fighting Man," and Marsh's Western tale in the same number. So does Lynde's novel in the present issue and so does practically all the work of Ralph Paine, Stacpoole, and a half dozen others. If we feel that once in a while we have helped a man to resist the temptation to be a quitter, we are satisfied. It is the finest Americanism that we know of.

Years to a Day

erful it
ır bodies
one-hoss
on going
collapsed
What joy
rom pain
ed with
and fol-
ıl passing
ıple stop-
ut heart!

another
y more
m heart
m tuber-
or pneu-
y of them

not the
ible and
fliction it
e.

earts can
ıeir work
rest and
art has
tive pow-
l mend it-
ınce. But
have some serious organic
not lose hope. A noted
said: "The cases in which
ead from heart disease
y few."

"Have you heard of the wonderful
one-hoss shay,
That was built in such a logical way
It ran a hundred years to a day,
And then, * * * * *

* * * *

* * It went to pieces all at once,—
All at once, and nothing first,—
Just as bubbles do when they burst!"

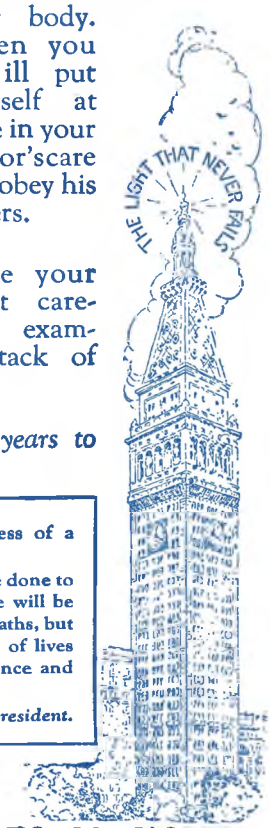
We are grateful to Mrs. Howard Pyle and Houghton Mifflin Company for permission to reprint Howard Pyle's historic picture of Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes' wonderful "One-Hoss Shay."

Find out how to live so you will not over-tax your heart. Learn the kind of occupations that are safe for you. Let your doctor tell you what you may do and what you must not do.

A lot or people are suffering from imaginary heart disease. There is scarcely a sensation associated with heart disease which may not be caused by some other disorder. The most important thing is to keep yourself strong and well, so that disease germs will have little chance to attack your body. When you are ill put yourself at once in your doctor's care and obey his orders.

Have your heart carefully examined after every attack of serious illness.

Aim for "A *hundred years to a day.*"



l that 2% of the population
s, or more than 2,000,000,
disease. The annual death

ulosis caused more deaths in
ın any other disease. Since
ads.

where people have learned how to fight tuberculosis, it becomes less of a menace each year.

As fast as people understand what can be done to prevent and relieve heart disease, there will be not only a decrease in the number of deaths, but also a splendid increase in the number of lives completely transformed—from dependence and anxiety to usefulness and happiness.

HALEY FISKE, *President.*

Published by

ITAN LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY—NEW YORK

d, More Assets, More Policyholders, More Insurance in force, More new Insurance each year

Your Own Initial on Every Piece

Set Includes: 12 Teaspoons, 6 Tablespoons, 6 Knives, 6 Forks, 1 Butter Knife, 1 Sugar Shell.

No Money Down!

Not a penny now. Just mail coupon and **Hartman, the Largest Home Furnishing Concern in the World**, will send you, **all transportation charges prepaid**, this genuine Wallace 32-Piece Silverware Set, and with it, **absolutely FREE**, the handsome **7-Piece Luncheon Set.** When goods arrive, make first payment of only $2.00 on the Silverware alone. **Pay nothing for the Luncheon Set—it is FREE.** *Use both sets for 30 days on Free Trial*, and if not satisfied, send them back and we will refund your money and pay transportation charges. If you keep them, pay a little every month for the Silverware only. **Keep the Luncheon Set as a gift from Hartman.**

Genuine Wallace 32-Piece Silverware Set, "Briar Rose" Pattern

This is the famous "Briar Rose" pattern—exquisitely beautiful and of superb quality. No design more pleasing or popular. Every piece is extra heavy silver-plated and **guaranteed for ten years' service.** A complete set—32 pieces—12 Teaspoons, 6 Tablespoons, 6 Knives, 6 Forks, Butter Knife, Sugar Shell—**with your initial on every piece.** You will be amazed and delighted with your bargain. Mail the coupon now.

IMPORTANT!
This set is genuine silver-plated and guaranteed for 10 years. It is not nickel silver. Beware of cheap imitations!

FREE Handsome 7-Piece Luncheon Set pictured above comes free with Silver Set. Includes 36-inch centerpiece and six 12-inch doilies to match, all of "Indian Head" linene with scalloped edges embroidered in colors. Limited offer. Send today.

FREE Bargain Catalog

Over 300 pages (of which 68 pages are in actual colors) of the world's greatest bargains in **home furnishings:** jewelry; also farm implements and accessories, etc., all sold on easy monthly payment terms and **30 days' free trial.**

Free Gifts

This book explains how you get glassware, jewelry, table linens, etc., FREE with purchases. **Send a postal today.**

"Let Hartman Feather YOUR Nest"

Order No. 317FMA39. Bargain Price $9.85. No money down. $2.00 on arrival. Balance $1.50 monthly. Luncheon Set is FREE.

HARTMAN FURNITURE & CARPET CO.
Dept. 6049 Chicago, Illinois

Largest Home Furnishing Concern in the World

Mail the Coupon NOW!

HARTMAN FURNITURE & CARPET CO. Dept. 6049 Chicago, Ill.

Send the **32-Piece Silverware Set No. 317FMA39, Price $9.85,** prepaid, and with it the 7-Piece Luncheon Set. On arrival I will pay $2.00 on the Silverware Set. Luncheon Set is FREE. I am to have 30 days' Free Trial. If not satisfied, I will ship both sets back and you will refund my $2.00. If I keep them, I will pay you $1.50 monthly until the price of the Silverware Set, $9.85, is paid. Title remains with you until final payment is made.

Print Initial You Want Here

Name .....

R. F. D., Box No. or Street and No. .....

Town ..... State .....

Occupation of Head of Household .....

How long have you lived at present address? .....