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The Popular

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Square Squair

By

HOLMAN DAY

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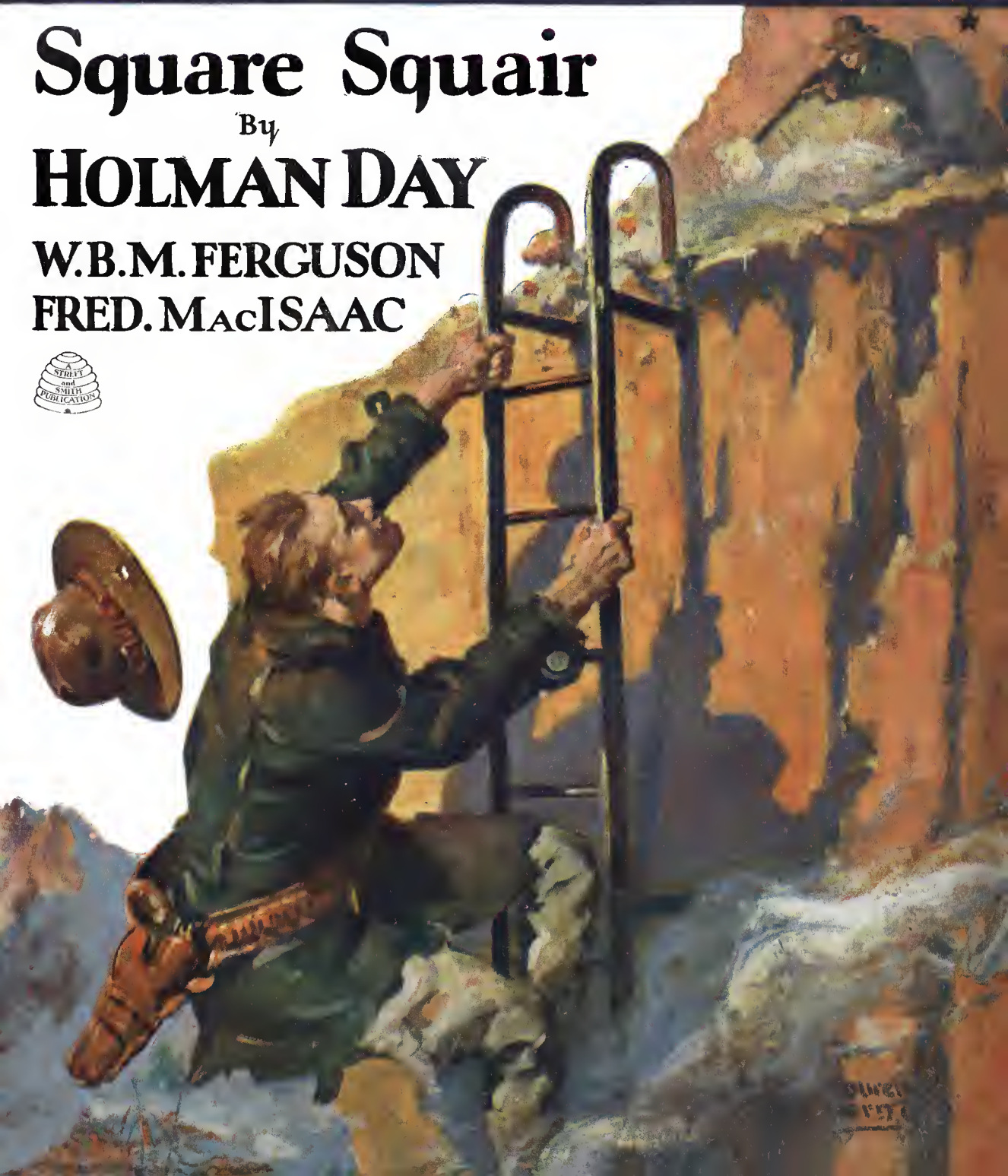

THE POPULAR next week will carry the first installment of a highly unusual, a truly exceptional novel. "Og, the Dawn Man," by Edison Marshall, is the story of a modern man who reverted to the primitive and wrested his living from the forest like an animal. Not to be missed.

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CONTENTS FOR MARCH 17, 1928

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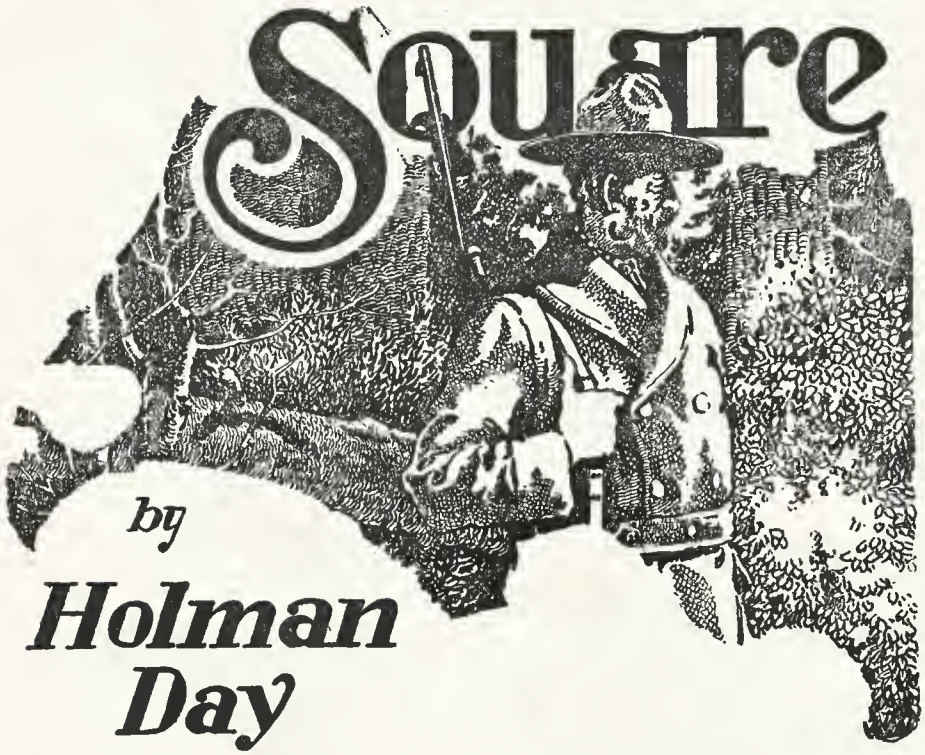
Squire



by

Holman Day

Author of "The Headfirst Fool,"

It was said of Ranger Tom Squair that he always got his man, and no wonder, the last word in stern, grim, disciplined determination. His twin brother, Tad, was down to arrest his own twin brother, was Ranger Tom less stern, less principled?

CHAPTER I.

THE IT'LL-GIT-YE CLUB.

WITH a two-week scrub growth of beard on his face, with a shabby knapsack tucked between his feet, Warner Estes, his pudgy body wedged betwixt the arms of a rickety splint chair, sat on the platform of Rodburd Ide's general store at Castonia Settlement.

The beard, so he hoped, concealed his identity as a city man of affairs; his attire was rough, too, old and frayed.

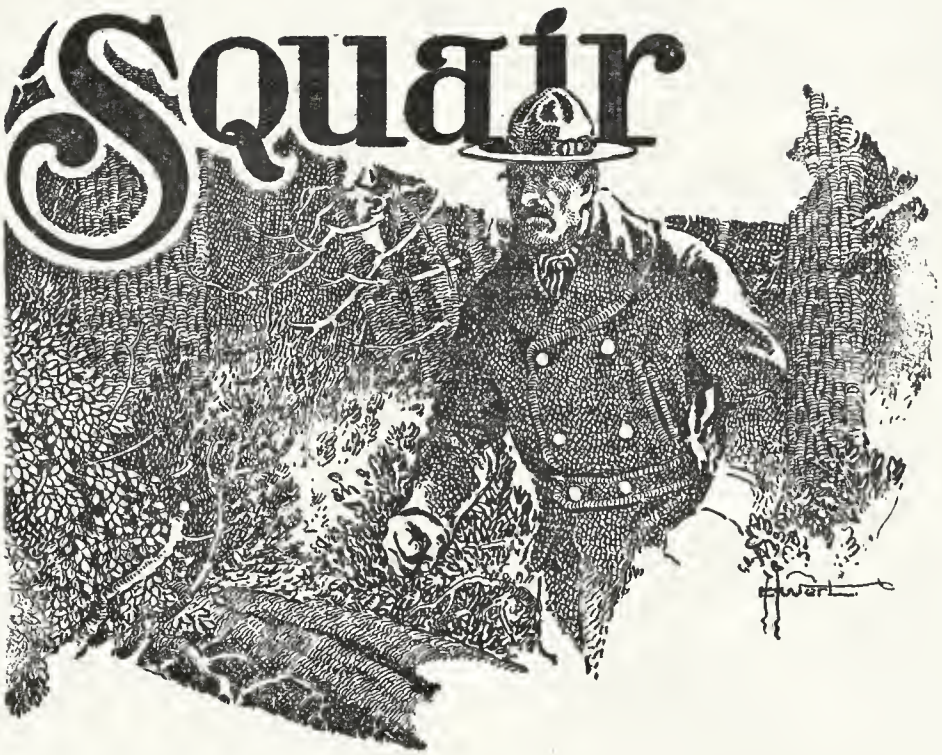
The seedy knapsack, he was quite sure, gave no hint that it contained rising fifteen thousand dollars in United States currency, taped in neat packets.

Mr. Estes, promoter of extensive projects and solid man of finance, had ventured into the north woods on a very particular and private errand where the spotting of his identity would work him damage and where spot cash undoubtedly could turn affairs to his advantage.

He had come trudging alone up the river trail; he had halted at Castonia, the jumping-off place on the edge of the forest wild lands, in order to convince himself that it would be safe to go along unattended, even if he did carry fifteen thousand dollars sagging in the small of his back.

There were other men ranged along a bench on the store porch—idle men with plenty of reasons for that idleness.

Squair



"North-woods Stuff," Etc.

for Tom, in addition to being as straight and earnest as a man could possibly be, was just the opposite. Tad was shifty, and not above shady plans. When forced to track How does a conscientious man decide when blood and duty war with each other?

There was a man with one arm; another with a leg gone at the hip; there were men who had lost fingers or parts of hands. One man carried in a sling an arm freshly bandaged. He was complaining about the hazards of the woods, while the other cripples nodded assent.

"Yes, it'll git ye—it'll sure git ye, sooner or later, the woods will," said the one-legger. "Tumbling timber, flipping ax or a howling gash fiddle in a sawmill—something will git ye!"

However, Mr. Estes was not made uneasy by the prediction; he did not intend to cut down trees or tend a mill gangsaw. The danger and the hostility of the forest, it seemed, were reserved for the men who went among the big trees to despoil timber.

But when a man with half a hand spoke up next, the money toter set both feet on the knapsack and seemed to feel his ears perk to startled attention like the ears of a deer he had surprised beside the river trail.

The speaker took his pipe from his mouth, jamming his thumb to hold the stem between thumb and flesh that was without fingers.

"And now into the woods come killers and sluggers and robbers to put the end onto the rest of the danger. I'm glad I ain't got money to lug round—and never will have! Ruther lug a daminite bumb with the fuse lighted."

"C'rect!" agreed another cripple. "When it ain't the old resks, it's some new one. It'll git ye!"

Estes, his nerves now on edge, jumped at sound of a voice behind. He snapped around his head and stared into the face of a man who was advertised by his dingy apron as the store owner.

"Mister Stranger, you're a-setting in with the 'It'll-Git-Ye Club,' holding reg'lar daily session. Hope you ain't letting 'em scare you too much." Trader Ide was grinning broadly, loafing in the frame of his open doorway. His shaved upper lip wriggled above the knob of sandy beard on his jutting chin. "The boys, here, are too apt to see everything as all knotholes 'stead o' clear lumber."

An elderly man waved a stump of an arm. Testily he yelped:

"Can ye blame us?"

"I never blame nobody," returned Ide amiably. "Can't do that and keep customers."

"And you ain't denying, hey, the woods is worse, with killers and robbers up here nowadays? Never had 'em in the old times." It was the man with the thumb pipe rest who demanded.

"Wasn't nothing much for robbers to git in the old days," stated Ide. Now he was informing the attentive stranger, noting a display of peculiar interest. "Crews was then paid off about twice a year, and down country at that. Law makes the big-timber companies pay now every two weeks and cash is sent north, and there are a lot of lonesome stretches on tote roads, and a paymaster makes good picking. We've just had a case of it in this section, mister. I got it by telefoam a little while ago—and that's why the boys, here, are a bit wowed up over another it'll-git-ye case."

"What happened?" quavered Estes, jamming his feet down hard on the knapsack.

"Dawse Borum—that is, it's figgered as being Dawse because he's that kind of a scalawag—held up one o' the paymasters of the Grand Telos this morning, peppered paymaster and the driver with slugs and double B out of a sawed-off shotgun and got away with a bag o' cash. Word has been telefoamed to here and all over."

"Were the two men killed?" queried Estes, crowding the words past a lump in his throat.

"Telefoam said they wasn't dead but had a lot o' holes in 'em. All depends on how well the holes git plugged by the Telos Company doc, I s'pose." Mr. Ide displayed only listless interest and whittled a toothpick from a match.

"You're taking it too cussed calm, Rod," the one-legger ripped out. "If it's one o' Dawse Borum's jobs he'll like enough be heading back to his reg'lar ha'nts in the Tomah region—and that fetches him past here up Castony Gorge. He ought to be laid for by somebody right here and shot in his tracks."

"That would leave the killer in fine shape before the law if it so happened that Dawse didn't do this pertic'ler job," Ide drawled. "Paymaster and driver was shot from behind and only saw that the critter had a piece o' croker-sack drawed across his face with the ends tucked up under his hat. If any member of the club wants to shoot Dawse if he happens along past here, go ahead. I'll lend the rifle out o' stock. But for myself, I'm leaving it all to Patrol Ranger Tom Squair. He has took up the trail, so it was telefoamed to me."

"Guess Tom will git whoever done it," conceded one of the group. "But if it happens to be Dawse Borum he suspects or is after, then seems to me some kind o' derrick ought to be rigged in Castony to hold Borum here for the law."

"Uh-*huh!*" returned Ide in scoffing tone, his upper lip twisting scornfully. "And you might go over now and prac-

tice by holding them falls with your hands—such of you as has got hands."

His gesture indicated the flood which poured through the jaws of Castonia Gorge, the rumble serving as obbligato for the voices on the porch.

"Or hold anybody else, no matter who he is, if he's a stranger," insisted the volunteer.

Estes flung a quick glance along the row of faces and was aware that all the men were surveying him with marked distrust.

The red of protesting innocence flamed into his face under the scrubby beard; the currency in that knapsack seemed suddenly like something hot under his feet. If some suspicious fool should call for a show-up of what that sack held! Or if he should be compelled to reveal the truth of why he was in the region! Two sharp horns of dilemma. He thanked the devil because he had provided himself with a lie to cover the sharpest horn—why he was in the north country.

"Look here, men! I realize I look rough and tough. But I've been in the hills—outdoors—on the hike. I'm a mineralogist. You know what that means, don't you?"

"No!" came in chorus.

"I'm hunting for certain metals." He plucked a little hammer from the side pocket of his jacket. "I'm no bandit. And if I've got to prove it by staying here till the thing is cleared up, I'll stay." He jammed his feet still more firmly on the knapsack. "That's fair enough, hey? And I won't stand for any foolishness."

The loafers grunted in various keys.

"Nobody wants to try foolishness on you—whatever you have in mind as foolishness," stated the one-legger for all. "Your offer sounds fair enough. We'll let all ride. Something is li'ble to come up that gorge and give you a clean bill."

Estes filled his pipe and lighted it as a help in affecting the height of serene indifference.

"Don't pay too much attention to the It'll-Git-Ye Club, stranger," Ide consoled. "Like I said, they see knotholes, mostly."

"If you should poke a gun through a knothole in your store and git the drop on Dawse Borum, taking a chance on it's being him that's guilty, you'd be doing your duty," growled an offended member of the club.

"I ain't bothering myself with what passes through Castony Gorge—water or northin' else," declared Ide. His upper lip nipped down close to the chin beard and he went into his store.

"I wish one able-bodied man could be patched together out of the whole gang of us," complained the one-legger. "Everything up this way is left to Tom Squair to do single-handed. If Dawse gits through here into the wide-open Tomah region, it'll be like hunting for a flea in a quill pig's brustles."

" 'Tain't been said yit for sure as how Dawse done it," observed one of the others.

Still another man, one who had been keeping wary eyes on the river trail, jumped all listeners at that juncture:

"Waal, here comes Dawse Borum. He may be willing to say for himself!"

CHAPTER II.

"I'LL SHOOT TO KILL!"

A STOCKY man had appeared around a shoulder of the gorge cliff. He was near the store even as the observer reported. In the hook of his arm he carried a shotgun with a short barrel, and a meal bag pack was slung behind on his back. He swayed slightly from toe to heel when he halted in front of the store and glared at them out of pig eyes set in a purplish face. He was manifestly drunk to the point of bravado and indiscretion. While he teetered he handled his gun in careless style, its

muzzle sweeping to and fro, trained on the row of men on the bench.

"Here as usual, hey, old woodchucks?" he taunted, scowling belligerently. "Every one of you looks like he'd been caught in a trap and had had to gnaw off a paw or a leg to get loose. Anybody saying anything to me?"

"Only this, Dawse," bleated one. "Don't aim that gun our way. You look dreadful careless to-day."

"Then I look adzack'ly like I'm feeling. Be blasted careful yourselves that I don't git joggled." Then he hailed the store, howling raucously. "Hi, there, old chin-whisker! Show up and do bus'ness. Here's a customer."

Ide came apprehensively into the frame of the doorway.

"How d'ye do, Dawse. Hope you're feeling all pert on a nice day like this."

Borum dragged a flat bottle off his hip and sucked. He coughed, spat and tucked the bottle back.

"I'm feeling pert all right, and know how to keep the edge on the feeling. Now, you old tenpenny-nail peddler, you do me up in a nice neat package a slab o' salt pork, bacon and aplenty of it, a few quarts o' yaller-eyed beans, couple o' salt codfish, can o' merlasses, a small bag o' pancake flour an' a can o' tea. Hyper to it, now!"

Ide trotted out of sight to obey.

"And now ag'in, to pass time while I'm waiting for that old mud turkle," said Borum, running a baleful gaze along the row of faces, "does anybody feel like making remarks?"

They all wagged heads in denial of such desire.

The renegade's eyes came to a rest on the countenance of Estes, a stranger and sized up as such by Borum.

"What the hell's *your* business in these parts?"

"Muh—muh—metallurgy — mineralogy," stuttered the city man, jumped into grievous fright by the menace of the gun's muzzle.

"I don't buhlieve ye, even if I could understand what them words mean," blustered Borum. "You look to me like a crook who has got away from State prison. And looking like that, I guess you belong in *my* class." He cackled a harsh laugh. "So I ain't a-going to hurt ye if ye mind your manners."

"I'll do my best to mind my manners," promised Estes anxiously.

"Keep your setting and your hands in plain sight, and that'll be manners, mister. And the same goes for all, even them with parts o' hands. This happens to be a pertic'ler day with me when I ain't running no chances. Hey, there, old 'Sand-in-the Sugar!' Time stacks vallyble with me!"

"Coming!" pledged Ide, and then he hurried into sight in the doorway.

"Heave the bundle from where you stand," commanded the customer.

It landed close to Borum's feet. He made a quick swoop with one hand, picked it up and set it under an arm. In the other hand he held the gun at his hip and backed away toward another shoulder of the cliff upstream. "Charge these goods to the Emp'ror of Peru. He's solid pay."

Then Borum halted. Savagely he demanded:

"I reckon that old telefoam o' yourn has been dingle-dinging and squeaking in your ear this forenoon. What did it say? And I'm advising ye to gimme straight news." He brandished the gun significantly.

"Northin' special, Dawse, 'cept as how the Telos paymaster has been robbed."

"Shot, too, warn't he?"

"Believe 'twas so said. And his driver, the same."

"Be they dead?"

"No word as yit as they be."

"Anything said about Tom Squair being on the chase?"

"'Twas him that telefoamed. He said he was on the trail."

"Did he say which way—by what trail?"

"No, Dawse. It ain't Tom's style to give out his plans in advance, as you prob'ly know."

"Well, if he comes this way you can give out to him some o' my own plans. You tell him I'm sick o' being chased for everything that happens up in these parts. Won't stand for it no more. You warn him for me. Tell him if he comes legging it on my trail, by the blue damnation, I'll shoot to kill! I might's well be a real outlaw as be everlastingly houted for one every time a gun bangs, up in this section. I'm shooting to kill, tell him—shooting to kill!"

He paced backward for a distance, repeating the threat raucously, then he dodged around the cliff and disappeared.

Ide grunted.

"If he keeps on drinking that hooch he'll git to be so goggle-eyed he'll shoot anybody that comes along, looking close later to see who he has nailed. If I had any business north o' here for the next two days, guess I'd let it keep its settin' on the nest—at any rate till after Tom Squair has been ahead with his .44-70 clean-sweep broom."

Estes inquired anxiously:

"Will this Squair go on ahead after you report that threat to him?"

"It'll be just what'll make him go on," declared Ide. "It's plain enough now that Dawse Borum is the man who pulled that job. 'T any rate, Tom will think so till he finds out diff'runt, and what Tom thinks he goes ahead and acts on according to the thinking. Yes, sir, there'll be doings to the north!"

Estes stared long in that direction, snuggling his knapsack close between his feet. He blinked like one under the menace of a giant's fist.

"Is there a tavern in this place?" he inquired huskily.

"No reg'lar tavern, no, sir," replied Ide. "But sometimes I put men up, if the woman is willin'. Guess she'll do it for you."

"I'd like to be put up," requested Estes meekly. "And if Ranger Squair comes along past here, I'd like somebody to tell him I want a word with him."

"No danger that you won't know when he comes along," pledged Ide. "He telefoamed from Quaggis station and if he heads this way it'll mean he won't be along much before sundown, even tramping it quick and stiddy. Now it's near noon eatin' time and I'll be locking up. Come along with me to the house and we'll make the woman good and mad."

CHAPTER III.

TWINS—GOOD AND BAD.

TOM SQUAIR, on the trail to the north from Quaggis station, was coming. An observer would not have seen haste in his movements. But any follower with stubby legs or short breath would have been well put to it to keep up with the patrol ranger. Squair was tall, rangy, gaunt and strode with the woodsman's lope, a pace as regular as clock ticks. He covered ground at a speed which would have made a shorter man trot to stay at heel.

Mile after mile without halting, without altering his steady gait!

Then he stopped.

A man had leaped out of covert and he came sliding down a slope into the trail. He confronted Tom. He was so nearly a double of the ranger that the effect was almost as if Tom Squair were looking at his own reflection in a mirror. Grizzled mustache trimmed to a bristle over resolute lips; face bronzed and cut with lines which merged into crows'-feet at eyes narrowed—traits of the outdoor men who are in the sunlight from dawn to dark; also, besides the marks of close resemblance in face and figure, this copy of Tom wore adjuncts of a straight-brimmed hat, mackinaw

of exactly the same hue and pattern as the ranger's, corduroy breeches, brown gaiters and yellow shoe pacs, all these plainly bought from the same store that was patronized by Tom. A rifle, too, of the caliber carried by the officer!

The ranger scowled at his counterpart; disgust and accusation were mingled in his stare.

The other gave a nasty laugh.

"Nice kind of a look you're giving your own twin brother every time you meet up with him!"

Tom leaned his rifle against a tree. He did this with a snap movement, with the air of one getting rid of something which might tempt his hands to dangerous business. Then he clenched his fists and took a couple of steps toward the brother.

"It's in my mind to knock you stiff, rip that rig off'm you and run you out o' these woods. Why don't you take the warning I've given you and stop this business of piping what I buy and wear?"

"I like the way you dress, Tom. Good taste! And it's natural for twins to copy each other. You know, old Blake don't carry many styles at the Quaggis outfitting store." But there was no honesty in the brother's tone and manner. On the contrary, a sly sneer showed through his statement.

"Give me any more of that lip and you're in for a beating up," the ranger threatened, his voice trembling with ire. "Cut the cheap guff about this look-alike hankering. Lord knows how I hate to say this to a brother—but I'm saying it all over again, like I've said it to your face over and over before. You're a cheap renegade. You've let yourself drop into cussedness in spite of all my praying to you, damning you, against all my begging and banging. You keep yourself looking like me so as to get away with your stuff. It's grown to be so up here that folks ain't sure whether I'm a square dealer or a double crosser. Damn you, Tad, they're even saying I encourage you to double for me so I can get away with crooked stuff myself. If this keeps on I'm going to be disgraced and dumped as an officer. They'll stop guessing I'm all right—and that's all it is nowadays; they're only guessing. Tad, for the sake of——"

But he broke off, realizing that he was starting in on the same old ineffectual run-around—like a squirrel in a cylinder cage—getting nowhere in the case of this hardened, persisting rake hell. The expression on Tad Squair's face, the mocking twist of his mouth, discouraged appeals to decency.

Tom grabbed his rifle and started away.

"I can't waste time on you now. Got something else to tend to. But we're due for a settlement soon."

"Think you're going to catch Dawse Borum, hey?" called Tad.

"It's no business of yours," retorted Tom, keeping on.

"He's the man, all right," Tad assured. "Hogged the job for himself, single-handed. Hope you catch him."

The officer halted and turned.

"You're deep enough in the muck to know what the other muckers are doing, I take it," he said with bitterness.

"Oh, yes! Have a handy grapevine telegraph. Same telegraph also told me you were headed north through Castonia. So I cut in and laid for you. Look a here, Tom, take me along with you. I can help."

But Tom shrugged his shoulders and twisted his face with fresh disgust.

"Your help would be in grabbing that money bag and breaking for cover with it after I get Borum. That's the only reason why you want to be in on the thing."

"Nice remark to make about a brother."

"But it's true—and that's why I'm kept in hellfire on account of you." He

shook his fist. "I'm giving you your last chance. Get out of these woods and stay out. Don't let me run across you again while I'm an officer. If I do, it's going to be bad—bad for both of us."

"Thinking only about losing your job —that's the trouble with you. Just plain selfish."

Tom took a few steps on the return trail and halted.

"Don't you worry about my getting a job even if I lose this one. I'm a good worker and everybody knows it. But I had to take an oath when I was given this job. I swore I'd keep it clean. An oath means something to *me!* And I'm going to keep the smutch off'm the ranger service in these parts. If I don't do it I can't look men in the eye. This ain't any matter where a brother counts any longer. I'm warning you like I'd warn any other renegade. You're sitting on a powder keg, my man. Take warning, I tell you!" He turned and strode away, calling: "And I tell you to get out of the woods and stay out."

Tad muttered oaths and continued to mutter.

"Calling his own twin brother 'my man!' Preaching to me like he was a parson. St. Tommy all of a sudden. Hell! A brother's a brother—he don't mean all that guff; and if I stick in his patrol range I won't get shot or jailed, like what would happen to me over in another ranger's beat. Only the same old ripsaw talk from him! I stay!"

He waited for a time, then he trudged along on the trail of his brother. He went conservatively slow at first but quickened his pace when the twilight gave him shielding coverage. He was close on the heels of the ranger when the two neared Castonia settlement.

Tom's shadowy figure turned the shoulder of the cliff. Immediately Tad heard a voice cautiously hailing the ranger, and the pursuer edged along to catch the words of a conversation.

"I heard you were headed this way, Ranger Squair, and I've been waiting for you to have a bit of a talk with you."

"I haven't any time for talk, mister."

"I'll make it mighty short. I've been hearing a lot about you to-day while I've been holding up at Castonia. They say you used to be a registered guide and know more about this region than anybody else. I'm a city man and I have matters to attend to north of here on the wild lands. I want to hire you as a guide."

"In your hearing about me you must have heard that I'm a State patrol ranger."

"Oh, yes! And I also heard a man threaten, when he stopped for a few minutes to-day, that he's laying for you up the line and will shoot to kill."

"Only one more of the same kind who've threatened in past times. Excuse me, mister, it'll be too bad to keep that man waiting."

"But *you* wait a minute!" pleaded the city man. "Why take such chances? I'm told a State ranger gets only three fifty a day and his expenses. I'll pay you twenty-five dollars a day for one month, then I'll put you into a good job of another sort. How does that sound?"

"Sounds fishy. Can't bother with it. Step aside. I'm in a hurry."

Tad peeked cautiously around a barricade of ledge and beheld the dim outline of a man who stood in front of Tom with outstretched arms, barring the narrow path.

"You'll be earning the money, I tell you, Ranger Squair. I've got to have a man of your type. The wages——"

Tom broke in.

"I know how wages run in the woods for any kind of a job. And when a man offers what you do it means a few dollars for wages and the rest for some

kind of a bribe. Don't want your job. Won't take it. I'm on my way."

Warner Estes chased along. He bleated:

"Maybe I'll have to speak out a bit plainer. I know I can trust you—they say you're as square as your name. I'll let you in on what I'm up here to do."

The ranger lengthened his stride. He called back:

"And mebbe accuse me later of peaching on you. Because, mister, I'm going to stay outside your scheme, whatever it may be. It must be a mean one if a bribe has to go along with it. Good night!"

"Confound you, it isn't a bribe," declared Estes desperately. "But I've got to have a man like you. As guard as well as guide!" He was running at the heels of the ranger, but in the night silence his words came back to Tad. "I've got to go onto the wild lands with fifteen thousand dollars in cash money."

"Ought to have brought your own guards, mister."

"But that would be blowing my plans to the world up here."

"Then the plans must be tricky and mean—so mean they've got to be hid. Not in my line, sir. I'll say nothing, though, about your cash money. Better run for home with it."

The two men faded from Tad's sight. He grunted queer sounds deep in his throat. Presently the full moon of August became a refulgent disk of golden light above the spruce mane cresting the high ridges to the east. He went back down the trail and made his way up a ravine, the lantern of the moon serving him. He came to a shelter lean-to whose location he knew, and rolled in for the night on a brush bed; he knew that fifteen thousand in cash money would not be leaving Castonia till daylight, and before daylight, he reflected, he would be able to devise some definite plan by which that tidy fortune might be indefinitely detained in the region—detained to be disposed of by a man who hated labor and loved money which was to be come at without toil.

CHAPTER IV.

CAPTURED!

WARNER ESTES ceased from his plaintive attempts to lure from duty the man of the woods, and plodded inconspicuously in the rear when Squair strode into the lamplight flooding from the open portal of Ide's store.

Ide was standing in the doorway; the members of the It'll-Git-Ye Club were on the bench.

"All the women in the place are ugly and all tuckered out, ringing handbells," reported the storekeeper with a chuckle, when Squair halted. "But suppers be cussed while waiting for you to show up, Tom! Dawse Borum has gone past here."

"I reckoned on that, Rod! How much of a start?"

"All o' six hours, Tom. A little extry time o' yours, one way or the other, won't count much. Come to my house for supper."

"Can't hang up for it, Rod. Grub enough in my pack, and I'll eat on the hoof." Squair shifted the pack into easier position and marched on.

"He's full o' hooch and swears he'll shoot to kill," warned Ide.

"Tom, he means this time to git ye!" added the one-legger.

The others of the It'll-Git Ye Club put in their individual warnings.

Then Ide shouted so as to be heard by the man marching away:

"He's so full o' hooch, I'll bet he'll be tuckered and hang up at the Thro't o' Hagas, knowing you'll have to come through there."

"I'm figgering the same way," Tom agreed, not halting in his stride.

"And he can see you crossing the flat in this moonlight—and you won't be able to spot him," cautioned Ide.

Tom's rejoinder was cryptic:

"What he sees on the flat to-night in the moonlight will be only hooch-hoopuses." Then the ranger was immediately out of reach of eyes and tongues.

When he was around the shoulder of the cliff he slung his rifle with the pack on his back and began the ascent of the ledgy wall of the gorge, zigzagging, clutching outcroppings of rock, setting his yielding shoe pacs into the crevices which his toes discovered through the leather. Only steel muscles could have served in the mastery of that jagged arête. Grimly the pursuer reflected that Dawse Borum might blink his drunken eyes at the shadowed pass or the moonlit flat and spend his ammunition to his heart's content. The man the outlaw was waiting for was coming by another route, a toilsome way not in the guessing by one whose own strength was sapped by liquor.

The feat of scaling that cliff was man's work to the limit of effort. Tom Squair had never attempted it before then. But he was employing his wits as well as strength, and the wits counseled this ruse to come unexpectedly upon the quarry, to locate him in the covert by spying from above.

The ranger gained at last the summit of the high ridge and lay prostrate for a time on the fuzzy gray moss, which was like a thin hirsute covering for the lumpy backbone and ledgy ribs of a fossilized beast.

As soon as he had won back breath and strength he went toward the north, his pacs merely whispering along the crisp moss. The spine of the cliff was irregular, with many sharp breaks, but the moon was bright and he was afforded safe footing.

After a time he grunted. He beheld what he had expected to see—a red glow far down in a hollowed pit of the ledges above the Throat of Hagas, which was a narrow pass where the river tumbled and drummed sonorously in the jagged potholes.

Borum, with his hooch-whetted appetite, would want his bacon and his tea, Squair had been thinking, and the fugitive had taken his chances on a fire, trusting to the depth of the hollow for concealment. The glow of the embers remained.

Against the gray lip of the hollow there was stretched a dark object. This would be Borum. Whether asleep or on watch was a question to be decided.

Tom found a rock the size of his fist. launched it with all the power of his arm and flung himself flat to watch results. The stone fell at the foot of the cliff and made a clatter in the bed of shale.

Borum was awake! The dark figure moved quickly. The ranger had located his man, was aware that the waiter was on the alert.

Keeping on the other side of the ridge, Tom went on toward the north. After a quarter mile of progress he descended to the river trail, making himself a crawling limpet against the wall of the cliff. From a direction opposite to that toward which Borum was looking for the appearance of the man who was on his trail, Tom made his cautious sortie along the foot of the cliff. An observer above would need a neck twenty feet long to enable him to see out and over the ribs of the steep slope. But there were sharp eyes above and the officer determined to do his best to account for certain noises which might alarm a watcher.

Not far from the spot above which Borum was posted Tom stopped, picked up a stone and rapped sharply on the ground, at the same time imitating the whickering snort of an alarmed deer.

On the night silence he heard Borum speak out with a liquored man's lack of caution:

"Dammit, I must be carrying some breath if a deer can scent me."

The sound of the voice gave the ranger a squarer edge on the hiding man's location.

Unhesitatingly Squair began to climb up the cliff, well to one side of Borum's self-announced position. He went slowly with a caution which rendered his ascent noiseless. Still he kept on the side away from the direction in which the waiter would be watching. Using infinite care, he was at last able to peer over the side of the hollow and perceived that the sentinel was lying flat on his belly, his attention on the downriver flat where the moonlight made radiance. The tumbling flood supplied a shielding clamor, and Borum was muttering a monologue in which he repeatedly declared that no damn Tom Squair could come sneaking past Hagas that night without getting hashed with slugs and double B.

"It's my best play, this is!" declared the outlaw. "While they're picking up the pieces of Tom Squair, they'll be figgering that if I can do this to the toughest man of 'em all, they'd best be mighty slow in chasing me up—and I'll git acrost the border without too much fuss. And acrost the border a man can spend money for something sensible. Plenty of spondulix now!" he chuckled.

But the bubbling chuckle was jammed in Borum's throat by the steel bands of Squair's gripping fingers. Two knees had thumped into Borum's back, two knees that had come down like pile drivers and now bored relentlessly. For a few seconds the captive was limp and breathless, unable to resist when the captor dragged the loose hands behind the back and clicked handcuffs on the wrists.

"Well!" remarked the ranger, leaping to his feet and dusting off his roughened palms. "This has been almost too easy, Dawse."

He set the toe of his pac against the recumbent figure and rolled Borum to the foot of the hollow. The man was bellowing oaths.

"Use your breath for something sensible," Squair advised curtly, after he had searched through the ledgy depression and had found no pack. "Tell me where that money is."

Borum struggled into a sitting position.

"I ain't got no money. I didn't do that paymaster job. It was your damnation brother. I see him do it. I'll so testify if you drag me into court."

"And the court will believe you to the same extent that I do," returned Squair, wholly unruffled. "At any rate, we won't try the case here. Except as to where the money is. We'll be trying that part. Tell me where your pack is hid."

"You won't git no money off'm me. Hunt, damn ye! See what it gits ye!"

"Too many holes and corners for hiding places, Dawse! Too much fun for you seeing me hunt! That part of the case will be tried right here, I'm telling you. And *you'll* be telling *me* where the cash is."

Borum had brought dry fagots up from the river bed. His food supply was scattered in the hollow.

Squair, paying no attention to the ravings of the captive, brightened the embers, throwing on fagots. With the hunting knife from his belt he cut off slices of the bacon commandeered from Ide and laid them in Borum's skillet. He set the tea pail astraddle a tongue of blaze which crept between two stones set a few inches apart.

"I'm hungry, after a tough job of climbing, Dawse, and I'm making myself right to home. Talk on, but the only talk you can interest me in is telling me where that cash is," was his insistent demand.

"Take me in! Take me in to Quaggis station—and see what it gits ye!"

"Oh, I ain't in any hurry about taking you in," returned Tom, munching bacon

laid between hard bread from his own pack. "Not till I can take in the money along with you."

"Shut up your harping on that. How be you going to git that cash off'm me when I ain't——"

"Better not lie to me any more, Dawse. I get fretty when anybody lies to me. When I'm fretty I'm apt to go too far with a man. F'r instance, I might git that money by stripping your feet bare and touching you up with a few hot coals. I'd sort o' hate to do that because then I'd have to *haul* you in, 'stead o' walking you in. And I'd be sort of ashamed of myself, too. No, I prob'ly won't touch you up with hot coals. But don't git me too fretty by any more lying."

"Then you won't git no more talk from me of any kind."

"Suit yourself, Dawse."

Unhurried, Tom drew his mackinaw belt from its loops and bound his captive's ankles together.

"It's all friendly—this is—so you can't walk in your sleep and go tumbling off the cliff. And I'll take a nap, myself."

The ranger laid himself on the moss a little way up the slope.

There was silence. The fire died, the big moon wheeled to zenith and from zenith to nadir behind the hills.

CHAPTER V.

A TERRIBLE DUTY.

THE broad sun edged up over the eastern spruces, a hot sun promising a burning day. Then Squair sat up and looked down upon the captive who was squirming in the oven of the hollow.

"Say, Squair, git me a drink o' water. I'm afire inside."

"Reckoned you'd feel like this. Too much hooch yistiddy," remarked the ranger serenely. "But I'm an arresting officer, not your hired man."

"You going to set there, be ye, and see me die of thirst?"

Tom went leisurely down the slope, drank with gulps of satisfaction the cold tea in the tin pail and dumped the wet tea grounds.

"Before your tongue gits so dry it'll only click 'stead of speaking words, you'd better tell me where that cash money is hid."

Borum cursed and rolled to and fro on the hot ledge.

Squair filled and lighted his pipe after he had eaten a frugal breakfast of his hard bread.

"It's turning out to be just the right kind of a day I'm needing in my business, Dawse," he observed. "Time ain't no great object to me just now. We'll take it easy."

Borum endured the blistering torch of the sun, moaning. At last he croaked:

"Did them men die—the ones your brother shot?"

Squair did not reply.

"I asked you a question," Borum squeaked.

"Make your question sensible and I'll answer. And you know what I mean."

"Did that paymaster and the driver die?"

"No, not yit—not by the time when I left Quaggis. As a matter o' fact, the Telos company doc said he guessed his patching would save 'em."

Borum took time for long thought.

"Then it ain't murder!"

"No, not this trip. No rope for the neck."

After another prolonged silence Tom remarked:

"Them falls sound nice, don't they, Dawse? Guess I'll go down and splash around in a cool pool and lap up some big swallows o' that water. It'll sure taste awful good."

This suggestion torched torture to white heat in the captive. He had gnawed his sun-cracked lips till blood

trickled down his chin. His parched gullet was as dry as the tube of a tin horn. Out of that trumpet came his wail of surrender:

"I quit. I'm licked. You're a hellion, and everybody knows it."

"It's well known in these parts that I git what I go after," agreed the ranger amiably. "You know it yourself and I'm surprised by your sticking it out so long. All right! Where is the cash money?"

Borum said between gritting teeth:

"Get me down the cliff and I'll show ye. And then will you let me sop myself, clothes and all, in one o' them pools o' water?" He lingered gustfully over the word "water."

"Till you're waterlogged," promised Tom. He slung Borum's shotgun with the rest of the impedimenta on his back, untied the mackinaw belt from the prisoner's ankles, slipped it in a loop under the chain of the handcuffs and eased his man down the wall, straining backward and using the outcroppings of ledge for foothold.

When they were on the level of the trail Borum kicked his moccasined foot against detritus heaped against the cliff.

"It's in a hole behind them stones," he confessed sullenly. "In the name o' hell, paw it out quick and lemme git into that water."

Squair pulled away the stones, secured the bag, unknotted it and made sure of the contents—paper money and coin. Then he teamed his man to a shallow pool into which Borum floundered, still handcuffed, sucking water feverishly, rolling and splashing, grunting like a wallowing pig. After a time the ranger dragged the man out of the water, twisting a clutch into the soggy collar of the jacket.

Captor stood in front of captive and fed hard bread into the crunching jaws.

"Now that the stock has been watered and fed, Dawse, we march."

Borum headed for the south, teetering along on stiffened legs, his feet sucking and "squashing" in the water-soaked moccasins.

Along the trail the two met up with a woodsman here and there. Each individual paused for a moment and grinned with complete understanding. Invariably the greeting was:

"Waal, Tom, you allus git 'em, hey?"

The ranger nodded, did not halt, and kept his prisoner moving.

However, he did stop at hail from a man coming down the Tomah road which split off from the Castonia trail. After the hail the man innocently heaved something very like a bombshell in its effect on Tom Squair.

"Gorry, ranger, thought I was seeing things, spying you here."

"Why?"

"Couple hours ago, coming round Tomah bog, I looked acrost and was sure I seen you headed north and teaming along a stranger like you was guiding him." The man chuckled, surveying Dawse Borum. "Not this kind o' guiding, though. Thought you had gone back to the old job."

"Your eyes are way off," remonstrated the ranger.

"No, they ain't. Not but what they can tell the same rig you're wearing. It was you so far as style and clothes go. But I twig now. It was your brother Tad prob'ly."

"Prob'ly," agreed Tom, turning his face from the other and giving Borum a push. In the countenance thus turned quickly from espionage there was an expression which the ranger wanted to conceal. His quick wits were telling him that Tad Squair was taking advantage of a resemblance, the sharper features of which had been readily accepted by a stranger from the city, meeting the other brother for the first time in the moonlight. Tom leaped to the limit of suspicion: Tad had followed and had eavesdropped; he had now in tow for easy picking a flabby

gull who carried fifteen thousand dollars on his back.

"Borum," he gritted, "pick up your heels. Hyper! Else I'll be helping you —with the butt of my rifle."

While he commanded he was unlocking the handcuffs; he gave the prisoner full freedom of movement, and forced the man into a trot.

"By the way you're acting, seems like you're thinking you've got a bigger job on your hands than I be," panted the resentful Borum.

"Save your breath. On your way!" snapped the ranger.

But when they came near to Castonia Tom ordered his man to take an easy gait, and the two came into the view of the It'll-Git-Ye Club without haste, with the matter-of-fact demeanor of officer and prisoner.

"Heh! Same as ever!" called one of the group on the store porch. "You everlastingly do git your man, Tom!"

The ranger was grimly silent, his features set in hard lines. He was thinking about a brother tempted by the bait of fifteen thousand dollars.

Again he snapped the handcuffs on Borum's wrists, pulling the man's arms behind his back.

To the one-legger Tom handed his rifle. "Keep him standing here. If he runs shoot him in the leg."

Ide was standing in the doorway. Squair tramped across the porch and took the storekeeper along with him to the rear of the long room, out of the hearing of the men without.

"Where's that stranger who was hanging around here yistiddy?"

"Why, your brother Tad blew in this morning at sun-up, waited till the man was out around, had a private talk with him and hired out for his guide. Guess it was that way 'cause the two started off for the wild lands right after breakfast."

Squair was in no mood for diplomatic speech that might shield the brother.

"What the hell did you let that man go off with Tad Squair for? You ought to know better."

"Donno know why not let him go," bristled Ide. "Tad knows the region, and the feller, so he says, is only out to hammer on rocks. Furdermore, I make it a point never to meddle in outsiders' business."

The ranger grunted a wicked oath, turned and leaped to the wall telephone. He pressed his thumb on the knob and gave the rings which called Quaggis station.

A moment's wait. Then: "Give me the sheriff's office." Another wait. "Yes, yes! Hullo, Sheriff Tondorf! Ranger Squair speaking. I've brought Dawse Borum into Castonia. I'm leaving him here penned. You'll have to send for him. Can't bring him in myself. "I'm off on another job. What's that? Did I find Borum tough to nab? No, no! Nothing to it. Sorry! Got no more time for talk. What's the new job, say you? Nothing serious, I hope. But I've got to hit the trail right now. Good-by!" He violently banged the receiver on the hook.

Then he cut a couple of yards from a coil of new clothesline.

"I'll tie Borum's feet and we'll heave him into your log storeroom, Ide. He'll be no trouble. Sheriff will hustle. Hand over this shotgun for court evidence. Borum's ammunition, too."

Squair rushed his prisoner to the log house. When he pulled the door shut and was clicking the padlock Borum squealed his final sneer.

"Allus git your man—that's been their gabble to you. I know the one you're after now. But you won't bring him in. You'll mebbe split swag with him. There must be swag if Tad Squair is on the job. But he won't be brung in. Yahaha!—you're a crook and a double crosser yourself. Else Tad Squair wouldn't be let to run all free."

The ranger left the prisoner railing, slung pack on back, took the rifle from the one-legger and paced away on the trail to the north; his long stride quickened. He gave no reply to calls from the group on the porch. His lips were set as if they were clamped with steel bands. His eyes were narrowed to slits through which showed glints like sun flashes from burnished metal. During his service as a ranger he had set forth to get many a man—but he had never before worn such an expression of desperate determination.

CHAPTER VI.

THE VICTIM.

FAR above Castonia Falls he swung into the Tomah road. He met here and there a man who hailed with the laconic greeting of the forest. And these men made it their way to add, in the line of pass-the-time remark:

"It must 'a' been your brother who's on the trail to the north with a sport or somebody. Mighty hard telling one o' you from tother."

These reports held a flicker of encouragement for Tom Squair; the fool from the city was still on the hoof with his fifteen thousand dollars, so it was plain. But for how much longer? The flicker was promptly doused in a wave of emotion where wrath, dread and awful fear were mingled.

Toward the end of the afternoon a woods journeyer stood in the trail ahead and watched Tom Squair's coming, surveying the ranger with amazed scrutiny, puckering curious eyes, scratching the side of his puzzled pate.

When the ranger came near to this doubtful person, the man spoke out:

"You sure do git round in a circle devilish quick, ranger."

"Meaning?" snapped Squair.

"Why, I saw you a couple hours ago on the trail toward Tomah Spike." He had named a rocky peak on which a Telos fire observation station was located. "Saw you from the ridge where I was calipering on the Bossum tract. I'm just down from there and here I find you headed for the Spike once more. What be ye—circling that fire that's started in Comas gulch?" He gestured with his thumb over his shoulder and Tom, whose eyes had been on the trail, lifted them and beheld yellow smoke rolling against the sky.

The officer sensed a new angle of exigency, gazing at that smoke, hearing what the man went on to say.

"Well, if you kept on going like you was hoofing it when I seen you an hour ago, guess you've had time to circle. I'm told you're a hard one to chase when you're footing it alone."

So the double was alone!

The exigency was becoming acute. This was bodeful news. Tad Squair was going on without a companion, traveling fast!

"How savage is that blaze?" asked the timber cruiser.

"Pretty ugly," said Tom, starting on, having neither time nor words for setting this come-by-chance right as to identity of the man hurrying toward the Spike.

"If it's that," said the other, "old McDuffie has helioed from the Spike to call a crew. It's prob'ly only in the Comas slash and can be stopped short o' the black growth."

The ranger wasted no breath on comment. He set his teeth and trotted up the trail.

Soon he entered an area of acrid smoke. He was reflecting. If a crime had been committed against the stranger who had been toting fifteen thousand dollars, what more likely than a set fire to conceal evidence—perhaps char a body into unrecognizable condition? A dreadful thought to hold against a brother—but Tom Squair had deep understanding of the nature of that brother.

The ranger came, after a time, to the edge of the stretch where the fire was roaring in the dry tops left from a timber operation. The regular trail was impassable.

Squair added another suspicion to the heap of the others—almost conviction this time! Tad would realize that the brother undoubtedly would be bringing Borum back to Castonia—the ranger's skill in getting his man was unquestioned in the region. Here was a conflagration which would hide a crime and block the path of pursuit for a time.

Still more of a driving conviction sledge-hammered Tom Squair. The perpetrator would be climbing to the fire station to view the conditions below, to get from McDuffie the news helioed from station to station, to act in methods of escape from the region, after the news had been received. Tad Squair, as the brother knew, had worked McDuffie on previous occasions.

The ranger halted at a place where stagnant water filled a shallow ditch, a trickle from a pugwash. He rolled in this water, sopping his garments. He soaked his hat. He bound the wet jacket across his face, leaving space for his eyes between the hat brim and soaked cloth. Then he dived forward amid cinders, smoke wreaths and swirling flames.

After a desperate fight against these conditions, trying to break through the cordon of fire and gain the trail to Tomah Spike beyond the roaring furnace, Squair was compelled to swing off the road, having the thought that he might be able to win through by means of a detour, following up the trough of the pugwash's outlet.

Part of the way he crawled on hands and knees, under the arch of crackling flames.

So he came to the edge of the pugwash, a miry tarn, the August drouth leaving only a skimming of evil-smelling water over the black mud. He heard a sound before he had thrust through the rolling smoke far enough to determine the nature of that sound. And even when he beheld an object seen through the yellow screen of the stifling smoke, he was uncertain for a few moments as to what it might be.

The moving object was wallowing in the muck, groaning raucously, whining, bleating cries. Then Squair perceived that the animal was human, not porcine. He peered at a face which came lifting from a pool whose water had afforded some relief from heat and choking smoke. The countenance was streaked with blood and mire. Several fat leeches had attached themselves to the skin of the face and were left undisturbed by the man, who was too far gone to heed the parasites.

The man, so the ranger recognized the face, was the stranger who had tempted fate with fifteen thousand dollars sacked on his person.

Squire floundered into the pugwash in order to get a little respite for himself in that inferno.

At sound of the splash the man in the pool raised his head, dragged forearm across his mud-smeared eyes and stared. He squealed like a hog threatened by the butcher's knife. He shrieked horrible anathema.

"What is there left for you to come back for, you hound of hell?" He raved more.

This was a man unbalanced, with scant sanity remaining in a head the scalp of which had been gouged deeply by a rifle bullet, so the ranger judged, looking at the wound while the victim's head swayed to and fro, chin nearly touching breast.

"You thought you had killed me when that bullet tore through and dropped me," maundered Estes. "It was the fire that brought me to my senses—and you set that fire to burn my body—I know you set it. Go ahead now! Shoot

me a second time. I'm a goner, all right!"

"I'm Ranger Squair, mister. I'm not going to hurt you."

"Don't I know you're Ranger Squair? Yah-h-h! Coming back in the morning and telling me you'd changed your mind! Taking me out to kill me—robbing me of all my money!"

The officer shut closely his teeth after he had opened his mouth to speak out the truth to the railer. Little use would there be in giving the truth to a man crazed with rage, fear and his wound! Giving aid would be more to the point.

Squair noted that on one side of the pugwash the flames had died out in the tindery slash.

He advanced through the muck, then, in spite of the beating with fists, Estes summoning all his strength in his mounting terror, he managed to drag the man to the solid shore. In order to minister to the victim with the first-aid requisites of a ranger's kit, the Samaritan was obliged to bind the furious arms with the ever-ready mackinaw belt. He dressed and bandaged the wound while the patient yelled himself into hoarse and inarticulate grunts and moans. It was the persisting attitude of a man scared out of his wits, not crediting any longer good faith in any human being.

More than ever was the ranger convinced that pledges or explanations would be wasted on this lunatic of the moment. Squair remained silent while he worked, and when he finished he gave no promise of his intention to return to render further succor. He said merely, when he picked up his rifle and his pack:

"I'll be sending help to get you out of these woods. You stay where you are, mister. If you start roaming by yourself you'll be lost inside o' five minutes, and you'll sure be a goner then! Stay where you can be located. Somebody will be coming for you."

He strode on his way, leaving Estes to struggle with mingled hysteria and puzzlement. The only touch of consolation in the affair, as the miserable man viewed it, was the intimation that this vandal, apparently of varying moods, would not be coming back; Estes waited with what patience he could muster.

CHAPTER VII.

BROTHER AGAINST BROTHER.

TO the foot of the ledgy shaft of Tomah Spike came Tom Squair before sunset, the mud caked on his garments by the heat of the August afternoon—a scorcher, without breath of breeze. The sun had been able to wreck full punishment because the broad tract surrounding the Spike was bleakly ledgy, with only stunted growth between the rocks.

The traveler was glad at last to see thundercaps in the west, rolling slowly upward to mask the flaming visage of the sun; this ominously purple curtain was welcome; that broiling day was breeding a tempest.

Squair slackened his pace, waiting for the clouds to cover the fiery disk in the west before he reached the iron ladders by which one climbed to the station on the peak. The iron would cool soon in the wind racing ahead of the promised storm.

He went boldly in his slow gait, giving any watcher from the Spike plenty of time and opportunity to ascertain the identity of the person who was approaching. Such an observer would be using McDuffie's big telescope. The ranger was testing for the suspected presence of Tad Squair on the peak.

At the foot of the sheer descent Tom had his suspicions clinched, his convictions indorsed.

From the edge of the small plateau that was a couple of hundred feet above the first of the series of ladders, Tad shouted his warning:

"Stay down there, Tom. I mean business!"

The pursuer made no reply. He tested the heat of the iron rungs, found them cooilng in the shadows from the advancing clouds and began to climb slowly.

In a measure he was protected—during the early part of his climb, at any rate. The edge of the plateau receded from the bulge of the lower cliff and a bullet could not reach a man until he came to the top, over the curve of the ledges.

"Damn you, you ought to be decent—know better'n to take in your own brother!" raged Tad. "But if you're figgering me out as only another man to be took into Quaggis station for more cussed cheap glory for ye, then you're sizing it all wrong. Stay down, I warn ye!"

The ranger kept on climbing, his silence more threatening than retort. The lisp of his pacs on the iron rungs could be heard.

"Ye know all about how big the stakes are this time!" Now the man on the plateau was fairly raving, his torturing anxiety at peak. "I'm holding all the aces, I'm telling ye! I've got McDuffie tied up—it's only betwixt me and you, Tom! By old hell's doorknob, I won't be took in! You can guess how far I'll go this time. Use your man sense if you can't use any brotherly feelings. Your head has got to come into sight before your gun does!" he yelled, his tones high-pitched in increasing hysteria. "And I'll bore your head! So help me! I'll bore your head!" As a proof of his intention, he sent a bullet whistling down the cliff, over the pursuer whose body was shielded by a rock buttress.

Another man gone crazy, so ran Tom's reflections. But his pertinacity's edge was not blunted. At the same time, the keenness of his judgment continued to be undulled.

He halted on a ladder while he was still safe from rifle-fire.

"Listen, Tad. I'm not giving you hell to live in from now on, rest o' your life, by letting you shoot me. I don't want the same hell for myself on account o' shooting *you*. So take the chance I'm giving. This man is alive. I've patched him O. K. You only ditched a bullet through his scalp. Now let him have his money back and I'll bet you can dicker to have him keep his yap shut."

"He's alive, hey?" There was relief in Tad's tones.

"Aye, and as it stands he thinks I done it—double crossing. The two of us have got to face him and wash this dirty plate clean. Do that much for help and you'll stand squared with me, Tad. Then git for good and all out o' the woods and we'll stay squared."

"I'll git out of the woods all right. Don't worry none about that. But the money goes with me. I've got my hands on it, and it makes life worth living for me from now on. I keep it, see? That's final talk!"

"If that's your stand, you fool, I'm afeared it's going to be a final clinch for one or the other of us," declared the officer, snapping his words. "And it ain't on account o' me simply trying to hang onto this ranger job. But you know how I stand on an oath given and a clean record. I ain't dickering with devilishness, brother or no brother. One more chance I'm giving you to think. One more show to be decent to yourself and me."

"I've declared myself. I won't back down."

There was no reply, while a long peal of thunder rolled beyond the peaks.

"Then I'm going to back down, myself," stated Tom.

But this torch of promise which lighted a flash of glorious satisfaction in the man above was immediately doused by what the ranger added.

He shouted:

"I mean I'm going to back down these ladders and stay till I can tackle a renegade, all sensible and sure. My man, I'm a-going to *git* ye!"

It was a resolute declaration from Ranger Tom Squair—a man who had always backed his declaration in the north country. It required neither trimming nor tag. However, Squair put on an addendum for reasons of his own.

"Hey, there, McDuffie! I'm reckoning as how you've heard what has been said here. You know how it stands. Bear witness when you're called on. I'll be cutting the ropes off'm you before the night is over."

There was no more speech between the brothers after the mutual challenge.

They were versed in the tactics of the woods, and knew the methods and the recourses of attacker and of man at bay. Each had a thorough understanding of the nature of the other, and by means of that knowldege, keenly on the alert in this special case, they were enabled to clinch their speculations with more or less certainty.

What was to happen would take place as soon as darkness could draw a curtain to mask wily and stealthy performance. Both men—brothers at the extremity of determination to prevail, one over the other—were calculating in accordance with the knowledge each possessed as to the other's natural procedure in such a crisis.

The ranger would be obliged to make his sortie under cover of the night. Only a fool would risk the hazards of daylight in attacking a foe who was posted to advantage on the peak—and Tad knew his brother was no reckless fool.

The man at bay would try to make escape under cover of that same night, the ranger was convinced.

Desire to escape would be the sharpest urge in Tad's case. To hold to the cash, to avoid conflict and the awful contrition resulting from victory by bloodletting, would drive the thief to desperate chances in getting away, Tom was certain. And in his own mind as well, the blood of close relationship moving deeply below this exigency of antagonism, there was horror provoked by the mere thought of a killing.

In both of them a mutual conviction! Tad would attempt to escape. Tom would scale the cliff, crawling as noiselessly as a fly on a wall—then suddenly the wary combination of cat and serpent, darting from the darkness on prey who could not look all ways at the same moment!

But the approaching storm was furnishing complications at that juncture when clouds masked the dawdling twilight's glow. The tempest was rolling toward the zenith. Shuttling flares of violet hue behind the peaks to the west had been promising what the skies were now spitting—zigzag dartings of mighty shafts of vivid lightning that flashed dazzling radiance over all the landscape.

Squair had no taste for exposing himself in that illumination, trying to stalk the man he was after. And to remain on those iron ladders amid that riot of electricity was as little to his taste. He descended with haste and walked around the base of the cliff, away from the dangerous metal.

Then sheets of rain came slashing down from the booming heavens.

The ranger backed into a shallow niche in the wall of the cliff. Now there was the battering of hail pellets along with the rain in the broadsides from the skies; this shelter was welcome.

He was on the opposite side of the peak from the ladders. This flank of the Spike afforded a lee against the driving fury of the missile-heaving gale. He was not worrying at this time about leaving those ladders open for a possible escape of the man wanted by

the law. The floods beating on the cliff at that point, the gale and the hail as well, were effective guards for the iron ladders, the ranger was sure.

The grapple with the quarry had been postponed, that was all.

The pursuer set his mind on methods by which he might come later upon the pursued, devising a trick that would not require a rifle bullet for its success. His whetted determination to bring the brother to justice was losing some of its edge; he hoped to prevail and to force the return of the money—making restitution a sufficient gag for the mouth of the city man, whose manner and words had already hinted that he had come into the north country with a scheme in which pussy-footing was needful.

Pondering, Tom closed his eyes against the dreadful lightning that was blazing intermittently and was signaling the thunderous crashes overhead. Repeatedly he was aware that splitting explosion followed instantly on blinding flare; his eyelids could not wholly shut out the dazzle. He constantly felt upon his skin and in his nerves the prickle of electricity.

All at once, after a time, he heard a sound apart and different from the rest of the uproar. It was the thud of a soggy mass, the ominous thump of some heavy object on the bare ledge hemming the Spike..

The hearer conjectured, but he refrained from braving the tempest to ascertain what this strange sound might indicate.

The storm had come rapidly, beating its wind wings in violent haste. It roared away to the east with as much hurry, rolling diminishing drumbeats of the thunder.

Then Squair heard the hoarse squalling of a human voice above on the peak. He strode out from his refuge and shouted in reply.

The voice quickly replied:

"This is McDuffie. Which of you is it down there—Tom or Tad?"

"It's Tom."

"Did Tad git down all right?"

"I haven't seen him." His voice was steady, but the brother spoke out of a surge of sudden sickness that enveloped heart and stomach, both. He was translating the significance of that soggy thud. "What do you mean, McDuffie?"

"Tad cut the ropes off'm me and left me, and in spite of all I could say he went over the cliff, letting himself down by the lightning rod. End of it is buried in the dirt down there. The damn, damn fool! Hanging onto that bare rod right at the height of an awful thunderstorm! But I tell ye he wouldn't hark to me!"

Not afraid to go against any man alive, the ranger slumped down on an outcropping of ledge. His awful sickness was convulsing him. He was barely able to call up to the station keeper:

"McDuffie, f'r Heaven's sakes come down here and take a look around. I can't move. Hurry!"

Squair set his palms against his forehead, closed his eyes and was motionless for a long time—not moving until he felt the pressure of a hand on his shoulder. Then he looked up into McDuffie's face.

"I have found him, Tom," said he gently, with a quaver of sympathy. "The lightning got him, like I was afeared it would. Red welts down both arms and the body. I took a look to be sure."

The brother dropped his forehead against his palms.

McDuffie declared after a long silence:

"I'm sorry it has had to happen, Tom. Awful sorry! But I heard what was said by the two o' you—know exactly how it was standing betwixt you two. 'Twould 'a' been awful either way, if you boys had had to fight it out, human style. All I can say is, I guess

the Lord took it over 'cause it warn't nothing two brothers could settle sensible by theirselves."

CHAPTER VIII.

"GET OUT O' THESE WOODS!"

AN hour later Tom Squair was on the Tomah road, going south, dragging behind him a "dingswingle." He and McDuffie had contrived the conveyance out of the crotched boughs of a sturdy sappling, the crotch lifted by a short post and riding on a makeshift runner. Across the boughs which dragged sprawled behind the runner was an object swathed in canvas.

At the mouth of the gully leading to the pugwash Tom left the dingswingle. He walked up through the shadows and came to the city man, waiting, shivering, frantic in the belief that a scoundrel had abandoned him to perish alone in the forest. Estes squinted up in the dim light, made sure of his man and began to curse shrilly.

The ranger struck his palm across the blatant mouth, not violently but with sufficient force to convince the man that more oaths and accusations were dangerous.

"Here's your damnation money!"

Estes extended grimy hands and received his knapsack, mumbling.

"I ain't going to say much of anything to you," declared the ranger, clipping his words. "Only this! The man who took your money and done what was done to you, he can't be hurt no more by truth about the thing. He was my twin brother. He was killed to-night. A man who chanced to stand by when it happened said as how the Lord had prob'ly took over the job. Maybe so! I don't know. But there's another job to be done, and I'm tending to it right now. It's this: I know why them fake caliperers have been hanging round Tomah Big Lake. They're engineers making believe to be doing something else than what they're there for—planning out the flowage limits of a big dam for a power corporation. And you brought that money up here to grab off cheap options from settlers and camp owners before they wake up. Trying to beat 'em out o' fair prices! But that money, mister, ain't going to do no more mischief up in these parts. What it has already done, that poison cash, in the case of the Squairs, gives me right to show up what you're aiming to do at Big Tomah. 'T any rate, I claim the right. You hear me! At daylight tomorrow morning you start south—out o' these woods—with your plasters on your back. Now git up and follow me—march!"

Apologetically Estes stammered:

"I'll do my best, Ranger Squair. But I'm afraid I'm going to have awful hard word walking—keeping up."

"Down in the trail is the load I've been hauling—all the load I can tug with, mister. You'll *have* to walk. But you'll be able to trail, all right. Guess you can guess what the load is. We'll be going slow—mighty slow!"

"Squair," faltered Estes, "this is terrible! I'm—I'm——"

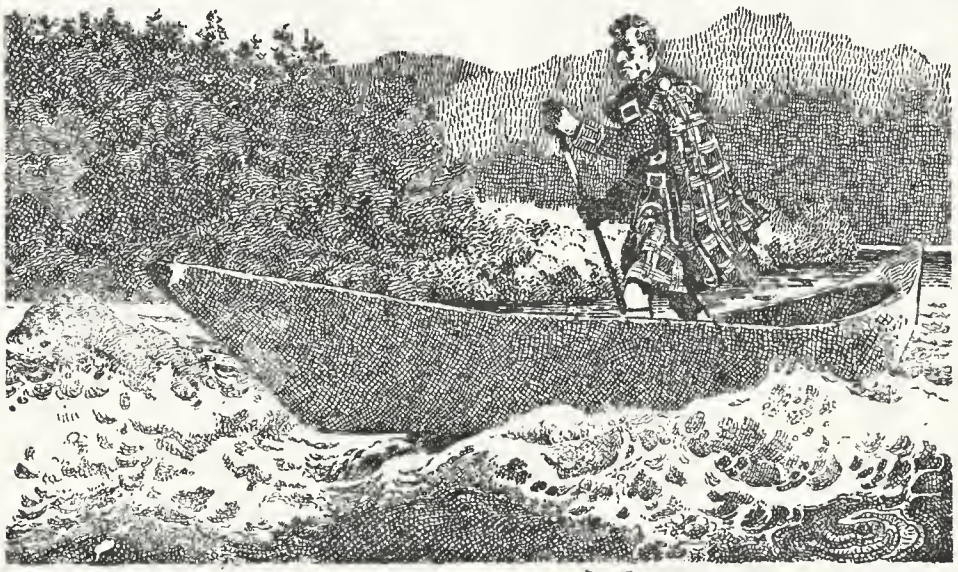
"We're doing no talking on the way out o' these woods—understand?"

Down the long trail, under moonshine, across checkered shadows, a silent man with fifteen thousand dollars sagging in the small of his back, followed the sprawled, dragged saplings, a bier on which was laid a gruesome figure swathed in old canvas.

While Estes tottered onward, that which he carried on his back became more and more a hateful burden.

"The Loot of Hourglass Island" is the attractive title of the fascinating novel of a highly adventurous treasure-hunting expedition that Frederick Niven has written to lead off next week's POPULAR. *Make certain of your copy.*

Another Son of Iver



By Theodore Goodridge Roberts

Author of "Pistols at Daybreak," "The Night Attack," Etc.

The lairdly, golden-haired Alasdair MacIver is reunited with a favorite kinsman. And between them they meet the emergency of flood, going to the rescue of others.

"BIG" JOHN MACDONALD of Glenranald informed his family and a few neighbors that he was going out to fetch home Alasdair MacIver.

"Didn't he say he'd be following us in a day or two, as soon as he'd attended to a small matter of business? And now it's seven days since we left him there blinking his eyes after cavorting all night with the military and high gentry at the governor's grand ball! He's an able lad in the woods, and a scholar into the bargain; but he's young and full of vanity. How'll the spring of his knees, or even his old dead languages, save him from the subtleties of the lawyers and magistrates? He has little enough of this world's gear. But the law will take what he has. He'll be losing the grand silver badges from his bonnet and sporran, and the pretty buttons from his velvet jacket, and the great buckles off his best brogues.

"I've had dealings with the law myself. But for me, he'd be dead now, and safe from the vanities and subtleties of the world and all the pretty byplays of the devil. And that's why it's my duty to go fetch him home. Didn't I save him from death by fire and knife, single-handed and unarmed, against three or four? And didn't I say to myself at the time, 'John MacDonald, it'll be your duty from now on to befriend and guide and protect this ranting young MacIver, since you've taken it on yourself to thrust in your saving hand between his life and the workings of Providence.'

"So now I'll go save him again—snatch him from the snares which his own pride and mad temper will be setting for his prancing feet, and from the perils of the fleshpots and sparkling eyes and red wine and all other vanities of the town."

"And look well to your own prancing feet," advised his wife.

Big John set out at sunrise next day, alone. Both his sons, "Little" John and Angus, volunteered to go with him; but he told them to remain and chop down trees, so that there should be a cleared spot of suitable size for the planting of potatoes and barley and other vegetables by the time the frost was out of the ground.

"Feeding you at the tavern would be a useless outlay of cash," Big John explained. "But if Two Blanket or Little Smoke was handy, I'd take him along for company; for a redskin may beg or steal his victuals and feel no shame, him being born and raised without respectability."

But as neither of the Malicetes was handy, both having gone up the Glenbhrec five days ago to erect a new lodge of poles and bark, Big John MacDonald stepped out all alone on his thirty-one mile journey. He walked the river's smooth path of crusted ice, which was still thick and safe, except in spots. Spring had been making herself felt of late in wind and sunshine, and there had been warm rain on Sunday, but the Waakadoggan was not yet high and strong enough to burst its icy bonds. There were air holes, of course, above certain extra-strong springs and extra-violent twists of swift water—as there had been throughout the winter.

It was into one of those air holes that Big John MacDonald stepped flat-footed. He had been tramping along with his head high, thinking of the worldly snares and vanities from which he would snatch young MacIver. And then something cracked, and he was snatched by his thick legs. A roar and clash of waters filled his ears, and icy water filled his nose and obscured his vision. He flung his arms up and out instinctively, and at the same moment he bellowed like an astonished and wounded bull. A second later, he was swept against the lower edge of the air hole, feet first and toes up. Feet and legs were dragged beneath the water-gnawed ice, but his upflung arms caught and held. He clawed with hands and elbows to maintain that hold, and even took a grip on the edge of the ice with his bearded chin.

He continued to bellow. And the furious river, with sinews as strong as iron and cold as death, continued to wrestle at his broad back and tug and twist on his thick legs. The edge of the ice crumbled under the strain; and the desperate man had to grab for fresh holds with elbows and hands and chin and neck. He was successful; but again the ice crumbled under the strain. Again he clawed and clutched and clung to the uncertain edge of life with certain death wrestling at his hips and jerking at his heels. He continued to bellow.

As luck would have it, Jud Snider was just beyond the next bend of the river. He had heard MacDonald's first bellow. He had jumped from a walk to a run, on the instant. Snider was a good runner, also a good guesser; and as he ran he twitched a rolled blanket from his shoulders, guessing the connection between the bellower's trouble and an air hole. What else could the trouble be, out there in the middle of the river? He rounded the bend at full speed and beheld the head and shoulders of the desperate Highlander. He uttered a shout of encouragement and shook out the blanket by a corner, still at top speed. He approached the air hole from a flank, halted, measured the distance with experienced eyes, drew a belt-ax and hacked deep footholds in

the ice, set his feet, and flung a corner of the blanket.

Ten minutes later, Big John MacDonald was out on the ice, chilled to the marrow, utterly exhausted, and helpless as a stranded whale.

"It's you, is it?" said Snider. "Now that I got you started, I might's well keep you goin' a spell. Don't loose yer holt."

He towed the big man ashore and up among the bushes, and there made a roaring fire of dead brush and driftwood and dried Big John out. During the drying, in the course of which there was some scorching of tough human hide and wet homespun, Snider did his best to communicate certain information to MacDonald. Snider had no Gaelic; and Big John could speak no more than twenty words of English, and did not know the meanings of ten of them. So the wonder is not that so little information was communicated, but that any got across.

"I was on my way to see MacIver when I heard ye holler," said the native.

"MacIver," echoed MacDonald, beating a spark out of his whiskers.

"I want to ask him what about this new MacIver what's come onto the Waakadoggan a-lookin' for him—— But I might as well be tellin' it to that there rotten stump as to yerself."

"MacIver," said Big John, pointing downstream.

"Ye're p'intin' right for the new one; but what the devil d'ye know about *him?* And it's our friend Alasdair I was on my way to see. It's a livin' wonder how a man could live to yer age—even a wild Highlander with heather in his whiskers—without he'd learn to talk like a human bein'."

The man from Glenranald let fly a volley of Gaelic which included just two words known to the native—"MacIver" and "Kingston." But those two were caught and made the most of.

"D'ye mean Alasdair MacIver's went to Kingston? Or is he sendin' you to Kingston? But why would he send a fool like yerself to town? Answer me that. Say it in English!"

MacDonald pointed townward again and cried: "Yes, damn! Alasdair MacIver—Kingston—governor!"

"Now ye're talkin'! Pretty nigh human, by the infernal! Playin' round with the governor, is he? I wouldn't put it past 'im. He's smart. D'ye say Alasdair MacIver's down to Kingston visitin' with the governor?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Then it's Kingston for me, an' to hell with the expense!"

Big John MacDonald, thoroughly dry and slightly singed, was ready to resume his journey. Snider led the way. They kept to the ice of the river until they were within half a mile of Snider's shack, then crossed to the eastern shore and climbed the bank. They tramped in the thick woods just behind the brow of the bank for a long and difficult mile, bursting through tangled underbrush and often sinking thigh-deep into hollows full of sodden snow. MacDonald could not see any sense in that detour from the easy footing of the crusted ice; and he said so. He said so a dozen times, in the most emphatic and forceful Gaelic; and the only satisfaction he got was the relief of self-expression. He was about to express himself in deed as well as word and return to the smooth path of the river on his own responsibility, when Snider did that very thing.

But Snider did not make a dash for it. He paused at the top of the bank and scanned the frozen river and the opposite shore through the screen of boughs before stepping from cover and descending, exactly as if he were afraid of something or some one. It was a mystery to Big John MacDonald.

It was long past sundown when Snider and MacDonald reached the little town on the big river and the door

of the King's Head Tavern. Ben Barley told them that MacIver had invited a few gentlemen to supper in celebration of a great event; and that Doctor Hammer was already upstairs, the first to arrive; and that it would not do for him, Ben Barley, to permit two sweating bushwhackers to walk up and barge into that company uninvited. Snider pushed Honest Ben aside, and he and MacDonald walked up. They were cordially welcomed by MacIver, who was dressed in the height of Sassenach fashion, instead of in kilt and doublet. Rab Webster, the tailor, had stitched day and night on that blue swallow-tail coat, that snowy vest, and those elegant, skin-tight, pearl-gray trousers.

Jud Snider addressed Doctor Hammer without the loss of a minute, for he was in a hurry to get his worry off his mind and descend to the bar.

"I'll tell you what's brought me to town in a hurry, an' you can tell it to him again, seein's you know the gibberish he talks an' understands," said Snider, the independent man. "I got another MacIver at my shack ten mile up the 'Doggan, an' he claims to be own cousin to this lad. He talks English, but not extry good. He walked in on me last night. Give his name as Ian MacIver an' said he'd crossed the ocean for love o' this here Alasdair, the minute he heard from somebody or other the name an' whereabouts o' the place his cousin had settled down at. Maybe he was tellin' the truth, an' maybe ag'in he wasn't. But I'm takin' no chances, this Alasdair bein' what ye might call a friend o' mine. So I told this here Ian I'd heared tell of a settlement of Scottish immigrants somewheres in the woods, but a long ways from there, an' to make himself at home in my shack for a day or two whilst I scouted round. I lit out bright an' early this mornin' for Gunwad Crick to tip Alasdair off to this here lovin' cousin. I didn't git far before I come acrost MacDonald here sunk to his whiskers in an air hole. An' him tellin' me MacIver's in town, here I be. You tell him. My tongue's fair powdered with drought."

Jud Snider cast an eye over the supper table, then turned and surveyed the improvised sideboard. Seeing what he wanted, he helped himself without ceremony. No one paid any attention to what Jud was doing with the glass and decanter, for Doctor Hammer was repeating in purest Gaelic the news he had just heard; and MacIver and Big John had their eyes as well as their ears on the doctor.

MacIver asked questions. The doctor repeated them to Snider, prodding the woodsman's ribs to gain and keep his attention—a prod with every question.

"Sure he's big," answered Jud. "Didn't I say so? Well, sizable at least. Middlin', anyhow. How the hell do I know the color o' his eyes? Black or blue—I dunno. Hey, doctor, don't jiggle me when I'm drinkin'. Two cousins named Ian, has he? Well, I'm tellin' him about one of 'em. That's all I know—only one of 'em. Say! what kind o' likker d'ye call this here? Right hand? Sure he's got somethin' wrong with his right hand. D'ye think I wouldn't see he had somethin' wrong with his right hand—an' me the most noticin' man on the whole 'Doggan? Shy two fingers; that's right. Asked him how come. Accident, he told me. Pistol up an' busted on him; that's how."

"Another of your victims?" asked Hammer of MacIver, after turning Snider's last answer into Gaelic.

"He's a good friend of mine," replied MacIver. "We had a misunderstanding. But it was as much my fault as his. Glad and proud I'll be to welcome him to Glenbhrec."

There was no doubting the sincerity of his words. He looked both glad and proud.

"What's his worldly position?" asked

the doctor, arching a bushy eyebrow. "Apart from his ancient, high blood. Is he another poor immigrant with empty pockets and a case of pistols under his arm?"

"He's MacIver of Kier," replied MacIver, tilting his chin and looking down his nose at the little doctor. "All MacIvers are not landless; and it would be an ignorant person who'd entertain so unwarranted an idea. I happen to be a younger son of a second son; but this particular cousin of mine is MacIver of Kier. There's worse and there're better properties than Kier; but I wouldn't call Ian a poor man."

"What would bring him across the ocean looking for you?"

"Friendship! We were like brothers. And perhaps he felt that he had been more in the wrong than I in the matter of our misunderstanding."

Doctor Hammer turned to Snider again and addressed him in English with a prod of a hard thumb.

"Snider, our friend here says that the gentleman up at your shack is everything he claims to be and a credit to any family. But he thanks you for your trouble and hopes you'll join us at supper."

"Not me," returned the independent woodsman. "There'll be overly much gentility at this here supper table for Jud Snider, jedgin' by the style o' yer coats an' weskits. I don't often come to town, but when I do I like to take my likker free-an'-easy, with a elbow on the table, or even a foot maybe, an' the fling o' an empty bottle now an' then. But thanky kindly all the same, Alasdair. And I'll make so bold as to take this stylish bottle along downstairs with me, seein' there's no more'n two-three swallers left in it."

Jud Snider made his exit, grasping a large decanter by the neck in his right hand and a claret glass by its stem in his left. MacDonald, too, refused to remain upstairs and sup with the momentarily expected company, though MacIver held him by the shoulders and asked him a dozen questions concerning the healths and spirits of his family. He was embarrassed by MacIver's grand Sassenach attire and the display of crystal and silver on the table. He stammeringly admitted that every member of his family was in good health; and that all the other settlers were doing as well as could be expected; and that Two Blanket and Little Smoke had looked about as usual when he had last seen them. And then he backed out of the room, just as three of MacIver's guests reached the head of the stairs.

Alasdair MacIver got out of his warm bed at seven o'clock, after four hours of sleep, sank his head in a basin of cold water and then yanked at the bell cord. A hardy man from Glenbhrac. The taverner himself answered the bell, with a can of hot water in his hand and a smirk on his face. MacIver asked, in a little English and a little French, if the gentlemen who had supped with him had departed for their several homes without accident. Barley guessed the nature of the question. He placed the hot water on the hearth and began to peer about the dim-lit room, at the windows of which the blinds and curtains were still drawn. He stooped and peeped here and there. He pointed under the table, upon which the wreck of the dessert still lay.

"Here be one o' them, sir," he said, with a chuckle. "Young Mr. Jones—and sleepin' like a blessed baby. An' here be none other nor Squire Bunnet himself!"

MacIver stopped and looked. Sure enough, there lay Mr. Jones of the garrison and the correct Mr. Bunnet on the carpet beneath the untidy mahogany, sound asleep. MacIver sprang to a window and let in a broad and searching ray of morning sunshine. He and Barley looked behind and beneath

every piece of furniture, but failed to discover any more of last night's guests.

"It was a grand party, sir," said "Honest" Ben, rubbing his hands. "I've seen bigger, right in this house; but never a better. The governor got clear o' the premises, sir; an' so did the gentleman in the wig—but without his wig, which same I'll take the liberty to send home later in the day, with your compliments, sir. But Doctor Hammer didn't get any farther'n the foot o' the stairs. I put him to bed behind the bar, along with Major Crilly."

MacIver did not get all of that, but he judged by Barley's tone of voice and expression of face that nothing very serious had happened to any of his guests.

That highly successful supper party had been in the nature of a celebration and a farewell. For it had been MacIver's intention, even before the arrival of John MacDonald and Jud Snider, to set out for home at an early hour of the morning after. But circumstances changed his plans, detaining him one more day and one more night. For now that Big John MacDonald had come to town for the sole purpose of taking him home, he was not so inconsiderate as to go home without John, and poor John, what with the effects of his adventure in the air hole, and Ben Barley's hospitality, and an argument with a farrier-sergeant who did not know Gaelic, and general exhaustion, was in no condition for a twenty-six-mile walk. So it was not until Friday morning that Alasdair MacIver and Big John MacDonald stepped out for Glenranald and Glenbhrec.

Whatever Alasdair MacIver had considered himself to be ten days ago, upon his arrival at Kingston to protest against the destruction of his lodge in the wilderness, and to deliver up two of the destroyers to the law—however important, however politely educated, of whatever antiquity and superiority of blood—legally he had been nothing more than a squatter in the southern angle of the junction of Gunwad Creek and the Waakadoggan. His situation had been unauthorized, his position and woodland activities something worse than equivocal. But even so, he had renamed Gunwad Creek and styled himself by the new name, "Glenbhrec," like a great landowner. It had been a proud, even an insolent, challenge to circumstances and facts.

But now, ten days later, he was actually the proprietor of seven crooked miles of that creek's artless course, and of the land which inclosed the stream to a width of half a mile—of sixteen hundred acres of that virgin valley—with the right to name or rename it as he chose, and to use the territorial appellation in the ancient, lairdly Scottish manner. The deed was in his pocket, and a true record of said deed was in the provincial office. He had made good his assumption of landed dignity. Is it to be wondered at that he stepped high and spry on his homeward journey?

Big John MacDonald experienced difficulty in keeping pace with MacIver. Big John was not at his best either in body or mind. They were across the big river and two miles on their way up the Waakadoggan before he commenced to voice the distress of his mind.

"My conscience pricks me for leaving that poor sinner Jud Snider to grovel alone amidst the snares and vanities of yon sink of iniquitous temptations," he said.

"Snider can look after himself, for he is used to it; but you are well out of it, my friend," returned MacIver.

"Snider's drunk. The trouble with me was the chill of the icy river gnawing the very marrow of my bones. But that wasn't all my trouble, Alasdair MacIver. My heart was sore and heavy for yourself."

"Don't worry about me, John. I never felt better in all my life. But I'm sorry I didn't think of warning you not to mix spirits and wines. As for myself, I've had a gay and profitable time in that town."

"Profitable!" cried MacDonald, with look and voice of contemptuous protest. "Profitable? And you flinging money like a drunken sailor? And you poor as a kirk mouse, for all your ranting, strutting gentility! How'd you come by it? Tell me that!"

"Not so loud, John. But I'll tell you; for it suits my humor to do so. To begin with, I did not spend as much money as I appeared to be spending. The taverner charged me but little more than cost for the entertainment supplied by him, including last night's refreshments—for reasons best known to himself; but I gather that he looks upon me as a lucky guest. There was some need of money, of course; but it and more was easily come by. I gave the business to Rab Webster, who seems to be something of a banker as well as a tailor. I gave him a mortgage on three hundred acres of my best woodland."

"Three hundred acres? Of your best woodland? And you with nothing but the one-hundred-and-sixty-acre holding you threw back into Pottle's face last fall, when you didn't like the company you found yourself in? Madness! Consorting with the governor and the military has addled your brains! That or something worse. I knew you wouldn't escape unscathed from the Sassenach snares and vanities."

MacIver laughed.

"Sixteen hundred acres is what the crown has granted to me through the governor and his honorable council. 'To our trusty and well-beloved Alasdair MacAlasdair MacIan MacIver, Esquire,' is the way it's written. Sixteen hundred acres, John. And for services rendered, at that—which is a compliment to yourself and all the other clansmen of Glenranald; for the governor and his advisers hold that the services I rendered the trusty MacDonalds and Camerons by fending starvation from the hearths of Glenranald was a service to the crown itself. It's all in my pocket—the deed and the governor's letter. What have you got to say now about snares and vanities?"

MacDonald had nothing to say. He was struck dumb with astonishment. This red-headed MacIver was even a better man than he had believed him to be.

They were eleven miles on their way when MacIver halted and pointed at a gash in the thick brush of the western bank.

"That should be the path up to Snider's cabin," he said. "That's where we'll find my Cousin Ian. But be careful how you address him, John. Kier's his style; and he was an ensign in Lord Drummond's company of the Black Watch, before he came into the property. So mind your manners, John; for he hasn't the democratic spirit of your poor friend and fellow-immigrant, Glenbhrec."

"Heaven save us!" said MacDonald; and it sounded worse than that in the Gaelic. "More pride than yourself, has he? This is no place for a self-respecting crofter. What the devil did I come to this wilderness for, but to win clear of strutting lairds?"

They found the trapper's shack; and they found it empty. The ashes on the hearth were cold. The Laird of Kier had evidently been gone twelve hours, at least.

"Ian was never one to sit about and twiddle his thumbs," said MacIver.

They hunted around the cabin and found the prints of boots in a patch of snow. The prints pointed toward the path which led down to the river. The river ice showed no marks—none discernible to the naked eye, anyhow.

"Thank Heaven he took to the river!" said Alasdair. "If he's gone downstream, well and good; for he'll get fresh information concerning me at Kingston. And if he's gone upstream, and if he keeps to the ice, he can't miss Glenranald."

"Unless he steps into a hole, like I did," returned Big John MacDonald. "And if he is the proud man you say he is, strutting with his chin in the air, what more likely than he stepped into the river and is feeding his prideful heart to the cold fishes this very minute?"

They saw nothing of Ian MacIver on the white river. They halted at noon, and ate and rested beside a little fire. The white path of the river ran empty before them throughout the afternoon; and the sun was down behind a black edge of the world, and a few white stars were glinting in the east, when they saw the reek of Big John MacDonald's hearth like a shadow against the dimming sky. When they came to the riverward edge of the stumpy clearing, they heard the skirl of the pipes from the interior of the house; and when they got to within a few paces of the wall of logs they heard the stamp and tap and shuffle of jigging brogues. MacDonald jerked to a halt and laid a mighty grip on his companion's nearer arm.

"And it would be the same if I was under the ice!" he exclaimed, with dramatic intensity. "Me rolling in the black depths with the eels and crayfish at my vitals which I would be but for the Lord's mercy and the strength of my voice—and my wife and bairns jigging to pipe music in the house I builded for them, and doubtless guzzling down the last of my barley brew."

Glenbhrec shook off the grip of the big fingers.

"You talk like a fool. Hark! It's MacIver music—'The Bride of Glenaora.' What MacDonald or Cameron could play that tune if he would? It's Ian himself, the darling man!"

And so it was. All the light in the room was from fresh logs of rindy birch on the hearth and a candle of bear's tallow; but that was light enough for all concerned. The piper strutted, piping as though for a wager. He was a man of Alasdair's build and height. He wore buff fleshlings, high English boots, and a skirted coat with a rolled collar. A fob of golden seals flashed at his waist as he strutted. The rest of the floor space was occupied by Mrs. MacDonald and Little John, Flora and Angus, Jean and one Sandy Cameron, all skipping and prancing like mad. The jigging of Little John, who was as big as a three-year-old moose, shook the house.

At the sight of Alasdair MacIver, Ian MacIver dropped the pipes, sprang through the ranks of the dancers, and clasped his cousin in strong arms. Alasdair returned the embrace. They stood chest to chest, eye to eye; for they were of a height to within the thickness of a gun wad.

"I searched the Highlands through for you, Alasdair. It was past the New Year when I heard of your emigration; and I've been tossing on the ocean ever since. Why did you steal away, lad, without a word or a sign?"

"The poor hand! I should have shot into the air, even as you did."

"Tut, lad! What's a brace of fingers between friends? And I tried a more daring shoot—to crease your bonnet. But I flew high, God be praised! Don't you know the half of all I have is yours—even to the half of Kier itself!"

"And the half of mine is yours, Ian—to the half of Glenbhrec, to the last cut of wild meat, and the last drop in the bottle."

They disengaged their arms and each stepped back a pace; but their smiling glances still held. The others of the

company gazed at them—at the clear-cut, beardless faces—with various degrees of admiration and curiosity.

But there was more of indignation than admiration in Big John MacDonald's black gaze and jealous heart. Wasn't this his house—John MacDonald's house? And was not this company composed of his family and his guests? And yet he had not received a word, or even a look, from any one—not from the wife of his bosom nor the offsprings of his body. Everybody was gawking at the two MacIvers, as if at two of the seven wonders of the world.

"I have been abroad three days, and in peril of my life, and I'd be glad of a cup of my barley brew, if there's any of it left," he cried harshly.

"There's more of your brew than your manners," replied his wife.

The stranger stepped over to him with both hands extended; and in the left hand was a silver pocket flash.

"Is it the goodman himself?" exclaimed MacIver of Kier, "the master of this hospitable dwelling? Big John MacDonald, himself, who saved my cousin from being roasted to a crisp? Give me your hand, my friend. And as for your barley brew, I've had my share of it. But here is some rare old stingo out of France—the very stuff to brace the heart after a long and perilous journey. But for quiet sipping beside the hearth, give me honest brew of Highland barley."

The grasp of his hand was strong and warm; the smile of his eyes and lips was frank and eager and glowing. And John MacDonald's jealous indignation dissolved like a grain of sugar in hot toddy. It was melted and gone even before the tipping of the flask. But John's astonishment was almost equal to his delight. Was this the proud Laird of Kier—the haughty ex-officer of the Black Watch? He had never met a friendlier body in all his life.

Alasdair, too, was astonished at Ian's greeting of MacDonald, even as he had been at the sight of Ian's enthusiastic part in the rustic frolic. This was a side of his cousin's character that was new to him. He had always known Ian to be just and kind in his dealings with cotters and crofters and the like, but politely aloof at the same time. But there was no faintest hint of aloofness of manner here and now.

Alasdair was surprised and puzzled. He turned a questioning glance upon the face of Flora; and even as he did so, the thought that this was the first direct look he had given her since entering the room occurred to him and added to his bewilderment. He saw, with something of a shock, that her dark and tender gaze was not turned to meet his look. She was regarding MacIver of Kier with that same earnest yet gentle intentness which had so often twanged the heartstrings and wilted the arrogance of MacIver of Glenbhrec.

A table was pulled out from the corner into which the dancers had pushed it, and Alasdair MacIver and the man of the house sat down to a supper of broth and bannock and Big John's boasted brew. The others had already supped, but they sat around. Big John was telling his desperate adventure with the air hole, and contriving to convey the impression that the air hole had been lying in wait for him, as if in ambush, and had sprung out at him like a wild beast.

But when he saw the simple fare on the table he branched off to a description of Glenbhrec's supper table of two nights before. He did the subject more than justice. And he told of the insistent manner in which MacIver and Doctor Hammer had invited him to join the grand company, grasping him by the shoulders and saying how proud they would be to present him to the governor. Only his natural modesty

had kept him from supping cheek by jowl with that great man—that and his shame for Snider, who had no notion of how to behave in high society.

But though he had not eaten and drunk in that exalted company, he had been served with the best in the taverner's private parlor. He bragged of Alasdair MacIver's importance in Kingston. He had seen it, and he had heard even more of it than he had seen. Hadn't his friend, Doctor Hammer, of the Sassenach regiment, had a long and confidential talk with him next day while he was waiting for Glenbhrec to put the finishing touches on the business that had kept him in town? Yes indeed, as friendly as if they'd been rocked in the same cradle; and thus he had learned of the amazing doings at government house and of the yet more amazing happenings which had followed.

"Never mind all that," interrupted Alasdair. "Tell us more about yourself, John, and how you pulled yourself out of that air hole with no help in the world but Jud Snider and a blanket."

But Big John, with the contents of the Laird of Kier's silver pocket flask inside him, was not to be turned.

"Glenbhrec—this same lad I saved from death one night, along with three more, single-handed and unarmed against three or four—my friend Alasdair MacIver, he was the prettiest man at the governor's party. That's what I was told by several gentlemen of the highest quality; for I wasn't there myself. And a grand young Sassenach officer, the son of a lord, and a very pretty man himself, took a notion into his head that he was being neglected by the ladies and the fault was all MacIver's. So he took to walking about on Alasdair's feet and presenting his stern to Glenbhrec, all dressed in trews with gold lace on them, in an insulting manner no Highland gentleman could put up with—nor any MacDonald, gentle or simple. If it had happened to me, it wouldn't have been the Sassenach loon who struck the first blow. But I wasn't there."

"The ladies are impatient to hear all about your desperate struggle with the river, John," interrupted Alasdair.

"We hear enough about himself," said Mrs. MacDonald.

"What did you do to him, Glenbhrec?" asked Angus MacDonald, eagerly. "If you didn't strike the first blow, then I'll wager my shirt you struck the last!"

"I'm telling this," cried Big John. "Glenbhrec doesn't have to tell of his own doings in this house so long as John MacDonald is here with the use of his tongue. What was I saying? The grand military gentleman found himself with a challenge in his craw. And the military doctor, being MacIver's best man for the occasion, asks MacIver to be merciful so far as may be without risk to his own life or honor. And Glenbhrec promises he'll do no more than dress the Englishman's claws, so that he'll not be scratching any decent respectable Highlander again in a hurry, drunk or sober. And so he did, back in a little clearing on the hill, in the first lift of morning, as easy as I drain this cup—shot away the trigger-finger from the captain's right hand, at thirty paces."

"Twenty paces," corrected Alasdair MacIver; and then he changed color and added quickly, "If some one will give me news of Two Blanket and Little Smoke, and the trapping, and the work on the new lodge, I'll be greatly obliged."

All eyes were on Alasdair MacIver.

"Man, Alasdair, but you're a living wonder, and a credit to the family!" exclaimed the other MacIver warmly. "That shot's as merciful as it is masterly. To make it once was a great thing. To achieve it twice—the eye

and nerve and merciful restraint—it isn't one in a thousand could do it once!"

"At twenty paces!" cried Angus MacDonald in an ecstasy of admiration and wonder. "And the finger on the trigger for a mark! And it twitching, like as not!"

Ian stood beside his cousin, smiling down at him. The wavering fire-shine was on their faces and on the right hand of Ian, which rested on Alasdair's shoulder. The eyes of the company shifted from the cousins' faces to that hand. It was a maimed hand, lacking a joint of the first finger and two joints of the second. This the MacDonalds had noticed before, and wondered at, and been too polite to ask about. Now, in the light of Big John's story of Glenbhrec's marksmanship, and of what little they had overheard of the first exchange of words between the cousins, the missing fingers took on a new and startling significance. The MacDonalds stared.

"That's queer—that wound you've got there, sir," blurted Little John, startled out of his manners for the moment.

"That?" replied the Laird of Kier, withdrawing the hand from sight and smiling pleasantly at Little John. "That, my friend, is the result of an ignorant, mad mistake on my part. A pistol exploded in my hand when I was shooting at a mark."

Alasdair got to his feet and suggested a resumption of the music and dance. Ian recovered the discarded bagpipe. Big John MacDonald grumbled a protest, feeling that there yet remained a great deal for him to talk about; but as he could not think of it exactly, and the need of sleep and rest becoming suddenly more urgent than the impulse to talk, he grumbled himself into a corner against the chimney and sat down and closed his eyes. The table was once more pushed out of the way.

Again the strains of "The Bride of Glenaora" filled the little room—and that is as stirring and ranting and bewitching a tune as any ever born of wind and leather and bone and reed.

Alasdair MacIver stepped as lightly as ashes blown about a drafty hearth, in spite of all the miles he had stepped since sunrise. But there was a sensation of weight at his heart. Flora MacDonald's hands rested in his; her eyes met his. But something of the old candor and tenderness was gone from them—gone or withheld.

"It was you shot away your cousin's fingers," she whispered.

"Ian did not tell you that," he answered.

"He told me nothing but what he told all of us—of a bursting pistol. But I know it was your doing."

Alasdair smiled grimly. They loosed hands. They whirled and clasped hands again.

"Why?" she whispered. "Was it for a—some heartless beauty?"

Alasdair's smile took on a pinched look, contracting from grim to bitter.

"I knew nothing of heartless beauties—at that time."

Again the figure of the dance parted them, and again it brought them together.

"It was for a woman?" insisted the girl.

"It was for an old woman's fortune."

"You fought over money—two friends of the one blood!"

"It was for a lie—which was not of my telling nor of his. It was a mistake. You heard him say so. An ancient mistake. But what of it?"

The dance parted them. MacIver's feet were like smoke, and his heart was afire. The dance joined them again.

"And you maimed another young man—only a few days ago."

"I nipped a fool's finger, while he shot at my heart. Should I have let him kill me?"

"You take advantage of your skill. You delight in maiming them."

"He insulted me. And I spared him. He struck me. Yet I spared him. I danced four times with his girl—because I thought her eyes were like your eyes."

Flora looked troubled, uncertain of herself; and when they took hands again she whispered, "Were her eyes like mine?"

"I was mistaken in thinking them like yours," replied Alasdair. "They were honest and kind."

The two MacIvers, and Angus MacDonald made an early departure next morning from Big John MacDonald's house and reached Glenbhrec before the sun was clear of the eastward spruce tops. There stood a new lodge on the exact site of that which had been destroyed by fire; the new one, like the old, was constructed of cedar poles and birch rind in the Malicete style. An azure plume of smoke went up from the hole at the apex of the roof. Two Blanket and Little Smoke were within, breakfasting.

Ian MacIver settled to the life at Glenbhrec and Glenranald as if he had been born and bred to it. To those who did not know his past and his place in the world, it looked as if the height of his ambition was to live in a lodge of bark, on a diet of bannocks and wild meat, and to blister his hands and run the wet woods. Alasdair had never suspected him of such simple enthusiasms and laborious energy. He hewed at the forest as if the resultant logs and clearing were to be for the building of his own house and planting of his own crops, and as if his very existence depended on a woodland roof and a harvest. Alasdair often reflected, with wonder, that this was MacIver of Kier—and not only of Kier, but of the high house and ten little farms of Lochluy; the one-time pride of Drummond's company of the Black Watch; the tourer of the courts of Europe, and the ornament of many an Edinburgh and London drawing room.

A warm and proven friendship existed between the cousins. It had not only survived, but it had been strengthened by, the misunderstanding which had resulted in the loss of two of Ian's fingers and Alasdair's hasty and ill-considered emigration from the glens of home. Their mutual liking was founded on mutual admiration. Alasdair had always been proud of Ian, and never envious of his better fortune. And MacIver of Kier had always considered his landless kinsmen a better man than himself.

Now Ian admired Alasdair more than ever, having heard the whole story of the past seven months from members of Big John MacDonald's family—of the menaces of starvation, and Alasdair's masterful dealings with the corrupt land agent, and Alasdair's constant and successful efforts to save the MacDonalds and Camerons from the results of their own ignorance and folly. Ian was prouder of Alasdair than ever—proud of his hold on the hearts of the MacDonalds and Camerons, and of his reputation in the little town on the big river; and as proud of those sixteen hundred acres of wilderness as if he himself had performed the services in recognition of which the crown had granted them.

The two MacIvers were the best of friends. But Glenbhrec wondered at the enthusiasm of Kier for the hardships and simple diversion of the Waakadoggan.

Warm rains and southeasterly winds and strong suns worked their magic on snow and ice. Ponds and lakes filled with snow-water and flooded their icy lids. Flocks of geese came over the Waakadoggan country, homing from far south to their northern breeding places; and sometimes the glimmer of

half-lights on half-thawed waters lured some of the homing birds down for a night's rest.

Two Blanket and Little Smoke were on the watch for the homing geese. A fat goose, roasted to a turn, is a pleasant change of diet after a winter of deer meat and smoked fish and stews of insipid rabbit. The Malicetes led the MacIvers out to vantage points from which to salute the homing geese.

One evening, when the cousins crouched elbow to elbow at the edge of a half-thawed lake, waiting for a flock to pitch down on swishing wings, Ian ventured to touch on what he was afraid might prove to be a delicate subject.

"You told me that the town girl's eyes reminded you of other eyes—of other and very special eyes. And I've been wondering about the identity of those very special orbs. What was their color, lad? Not that the color is everything—far from it!"

"If I said so, I must have thought so—at the time. But why not ask me the color of the wines I'd been drinking—not to mention the green in the Englishmen's eye."

"Wines or eyes, it's a new development of your character to me. That's why my curiosity is pricking me. I had always believed all colors in vintages or in women's eyes to be the same to you, Alasdair."

"You should know, Ian. As for wines, I was swallowing them as they came, that night—yellow and brown and pink and red."

"I've been wondering if they were brown."

"The sherry was brown."

"I mean the pair of eyes which attracted you by their resemblance to another pair of eyes."

Alasdair laughed lightly.

"What would put that idea into your head? Brown or blue or black or green? You must ask the Englishman. She's his girl. I can tell you about *his* eyes."

"Hist!" whispered Little Smoke, from a black shadow.

The cousins heard the plaintive, creaking cries of an approaching flock from high to the southward. The cries grew sharper; a rustle and whisper of wing beats filled the chill night; and vague shadows fell from the glimmer of the stars to the darker glimmer of ice and water.

Ian MacIver went down to Glenranald next morning, with a brace of fat geese for the household of Big John MacDonald. He wanted Alasdair to accompany him; but Glenbhrec and Angus and the Malicetes were too busy at shaping a great pirogue from a thirty-foot stick of pine to go visiting. The Laird of Kier did not return until long past sundown.

The brooks, swollen with rain and melted snow, broke their rotted fetters and roared down into the crooked valley; and then old Waakadoggan humped its sinewy brown shoulders and split and shattered the roof of his icy prison and tossed a foam-crested head to the April sky. He climbed and clawed his rugged banks and shook the forests with his bellows.

The lodge of poles and bark was on high ground; but not so the log huts of Glenranald. Glenbhrec voiced his anxiety for the homes of the MacDonalds and Camerons; but Two Blanket and Little Smoke said that there would be no trouble unless the running ice and drift-stuff—dead brush and uprooted trees—happened to jam at some sharp bend or other within a certain distance of the settlement. Two Blanket explained that the river was now at a reasonable pitch of high water, all things considered, and would subside gradually as the backed-up water of the brooks drained off, but that a sudden rise or a sudden drop would be some-

thing to worry about. A sudden drop would mean a jam at some point farther upstream, a sudden rise the forming of a jam downstream. The danger from the first would come with its bursting and the sudden release of pent waters and drift-stuff; but the danger of the second would lie in the flooding of the valley above it.

Alasdair posted Two Blanket to watch the river, set Little Smoke at resining the seams of the two bark canoes, and busied himself and his cousin and Angus MacDonald with the new thirty-foot pirogue. After the finishing touches were given the big dugout—a matter of gouging out a few more inches of its interior with chisel and fire—it was run on rollers to a vantage point at the top of the bank. But Alasdair MacIver was not content; though the canoes and the pirogue were ready to launch to the assistance of the MacDonalds and Camerons, and the river showed no sign of obstruction. He told Angus MacDonald to hasten down to Glenranald and explain the possibilities of danger to the settlers and warn them to watch the river and, at any sudden rise or fall of water, to retreat to higher ground.

"They'll not believe it from me, Glenbhrec," returned Angus. "And if the worst happens, and the flood rave at their walls, will they desert their goods and gear at my orders? You know them as well as I do, Glenbhrec, for the ignorant, wrong-headed, jealous bodies they are."

"Tell them it's at my orders. Tell them to pack their goods in readiness and to move back to high ground at the first sign of danger."

"You know their independence—in the matter of good advice; meal and meat's another matter. I'm not saying they wouldn't take your advice and orders from yourself, Glenbhrec; but I tell you they'll risk their pots and crocks, and their very lives, before they'll take anybody's orders from Angus MacDonald."

"Would they heed Kier?"

"They'd maybe heed Kier. Kier or Glenbhrec or Glencoe or Lochiel. A laird's a laird to those independent bodies."

Alasdair MacIver turned to his cousin.

"Will you go down with him, Ian?"

"But it's your own duty, lad—and privilege. They are your people—if any one's."

"They'll pay as much attention to you as to me. They have short memories, like children; and a laird's a laird to them, as Angus says. Anyhow, even those ignoramuses know Kier to be a better property than Glenbhrec. And perhaps there'll be no need of their moving back to the ridge."

"I'll go, lad. I'll give them your orders, and keep an eye on the river, and do my best for them."

"Two of the houses are on lower ground than the others—Big John MacDonald's and Long Ian Cameron's. We'll be after you with the canoes and the pirogue, if need be."

So Ian MacIver and Angus MacDonald set out on eager feet to travel the five miles of wet woods between Glenbhrec and the upper end of that settlement of MacDonalds and Camerons. That was about an hour before noon.

Alasdair and his Malicetes ate their midday meal in the open, before the door of the new lodge. The sunlit, windless air shook with the dash and uproar of the swollen river and the shout and splash of the flooded creek. The entire wilderness was awake and noisy with leaping waters. Two Blanket and Little Smoke kept their ears cocked even as they ate. Two Blanket had finished eating, and was licking his smoky fingers, when his experienced ear caught a change in the tone of that wild chorus.

"Hist!" he exclaimed.

He sprang to his feet and ran to the edge of the bluff. MacIver and Little Smoke dashed after him and stared down at the brown water. Its course was slower and smoother, no doubt of that. Its crests of foam tossed with lessening vigor. Its spinning black eddies span with slackening speed. A ragged, uprooted cedar tossed in its dashing course like a running horse to a hedge, flung high its raking boughs, dipped its crest and heaved up its twisted roots, swung slowly end for end, then described a slow and wallowing circle before resuming its way at a weary crawl.

"Backin' up," said Two Blanket, pointing to the tree. "Jam way down somewheres."

They carried the big bark canoes down to the edge of the rising flood. Then they dragged and slid the thirty-foot pirogues down the wooded steep. Two Blanket launched first. MacIver went next, in the big pirogue, wallowing out sluggishly from among the flooded trees. Little Smoke followed in the very eddy of MacIver's paddle-stroke. All three dug their paddles into the roily tide with all their skill and strength; but what was the plying of little paddles against the blind confusion of that bewitched and baffled flood? The canoes spun like drifting chips. The big pirogue swung and drifted broadside-on, plunged at this twist of current and backed away from that, until MacIver cursed it in four languages.

But the general drift of the river was still south, in spite of cross-currents and aimless, shifting eddies and short counter-drifts. The canoes and the dugout moved in the general direction of Glenranald, in spite of their circlings and sidelong excursions. MacIver was swirled and backed into the climbing woods; where he lost his cap in the upper branches of a big spruce, and paddled a mile among half-submerged tree trunks.

MacIver and his pirogue were the first to come in touch with the settlement; and that at its lowest and most threatened point, the house of Big John MacDonald. He surged clear of a clawing thicket of young firs and found himself in Big John's clearing. But the clearing was now a lake. And from the middle of the lake stood up the gables and wide roof of Big John's house. Along the rooftree perched the Laird of Kier, and Mrs. John MacDonald with a great bundle in her lap, and Flora and Jean and Little John MacDonald. Neither the goodman himself nor Angus, was in sight.

A cheer rang out from the roof upon the sudden appearance of MacIver of Glenbhrec from the watery depths of the forest. Glenbhrec shouted in answer. He was standing, bare-headed, stroking mightily and artfully with his long paddle, humoring the stubborn pirogue and outwitting the tricky currents. His head gleamed like a torch. He shouted a battle-cry of the Sons of Iver, and the perchers on the ridge-pole shouted it back to him. He drove the long craft at the door in the riverward gable—that door which had seemed so high at the time of building but was now no more than a hand's breadth above the flood.

He was within three yards of it; and then a swirl of brown water twisted him from his course and shot him past the gable. He shouted for a line—a line of knotted blankets, or shawls and plaids, or anything. He swung around and drove for the house again, this time for the widest mark it presented; and his cousin and young John MacDonald descended the slope of the roof to receive him, Kier with a few fathoms of rope in his hands. The pirogue made its objective and was seized fast. Alasdair sprang to the roof.

"What are you doing here?" he

asked, looking sternly at the goodwife, without so much as a slant of the eye for Flora or Jean. "Why didn't you go back to the top of the ridge? Didn't Kier give you warning? Couldn't you see what was coming?"

"MacDonald refused to budge," explained Ian MacIver. "He's still inside there, daring the water to lift another inch, and bragging of the strength of his house. Not one of these would leave without him. Angus went along to warn the others."

"The fool!" cried Glenbhrec. "I'll deal with him. Bring my boat around to the door. Get the women into it first. There's room for all."

He went to the riverward end of the roof, lowered himself, dropped, and caught on the flooded ladder with hands and feet, sprang up from the swirling flood and knocked open the door in the pitch of the roof. He burst into the dark loft with fire in his gray eyes and purpose in every movement and posture.

"Are you here, John MacDonald?" he cried. "Are you lurking here, you pig-headed loon—endangering the lives of your wife and children and your betters!"

"I'm here," returned Big John, from the shadowy darkness. "The river will never lift this house. I built it, and I know."

"You know! What do you know of this river? When the jam bursts you'll have a million tons of water shouldering your crazy hut, and tons of ice bumping it, and great trees ramming it and bursting it abroad. And if not, what of it? The house will stand as well without you growling in the loft and your wife and daughters shivering on the roof. Come out!"

Big John MacDonald knew Alasdair MacIver—his generous heart, his open hands, his indomitable will, and his invincible fury. Big John advanced from the gloom and looked out from the narrow door at the terrifying, eddying dark flood. There swung the big pirogue, with his wife and daughters seated secure within it. And the Laird of Kier was at the far end of it, splashing a paddle with a knowing air, while Little John, in the near end of it, was leaning out and holding hard to the top round of the submerged ladder. There lay safety within the step of a foot of him—and there at the very sill of that high door the cold flood licked.

He decided to go. He decided not to remain another instant. He jumped, quick as a cat—but not so light as a cat. He trampled his son John, breaking the young man's hold on the ladder. The pirogue lunged back from the doorway, with a burst of speed which astonished all beholders, and swung wide, carrying the impulsive husband and father with it, floundering in the bosom of his family.

Ian MacIver plied his paddle desperately. But he knew little of paddles, less of thirty-foot pirogues, and least of all of the old Waakadoggan in flood.

"We'll be back for you in half a minute, lad!" he cried.

"I doubt it, unless you do better than you're doing," said Alasdair MacIver, to himself. Then, "Swing to your left," he cried. "Out of that drift of current, into the backwash—and I'll swim for it."

Ian did his best, and the pirogue and the contrary current did their worst. The wet expanse between Glenbhrec and his friends continued to widen swiftly.

"It'll be a long, cold swim—there's no denying that!" murmured the Golden Highlander.

He was still in two minds about making the plunge, when he was startled and momentarily dismayed by a sudden change in the tone and volume of the river's voice. The liquid whisperings from all around and near and far quick-

ened suddenly and rose to a swishing hum, and from a hum to a sloshing, crashing roar. The big pirogue was snatched from MacIver's sight, into and through a screen of flooded brushwood, as if by magic. The jam downstream had broken, and the released flood was on its way. The floor of the loft seemed to squirm under MacIver's feet. The roof crackled and snapped, as if with frost. The heavy logs of the walls strained and groaned like the timbers of a laboring ship.

Crash! The house shook like a wet dog. Something heavy had butted its upriver side—a raft of ice, or a voyaging tree.

"I'd better get out of this before I have the roof on top of me," said MacIver calmly. He made a strong jump from the upper round of the ladder, caught the protruding tip of the ridgepole, and yanked himself up and onto the roof.

Thump! The roof tilted and wriggled simultaneously, thus shaking his feet out from under him and throwing him on his hands and knees. A mighty crash sounded from beneath the animated roof.

"That's the chimney," thought MacIver. "A wall must be gone. What next? Confound that clumsy fool, John MacDonald! Ian can't handle that pirogue. But they'll come to no harm unless she should happen to turn over."

Then the top of the chimney broke off. Half of it punched a hole through the roof and disappeared within, and half slid and dived from the wallowing eaves. Then big logs came lunging up from the swirling brown depths; and Alasdair realized that the walls of the house were deserting him. The roof flopped with a splash and spread as flat as a griddlecake. Away it drifted, surrounded and pursued and hustled by the logs which had been its walls and supports and by the uprooted birch-tree and wallowing ice-cakes which had wrought its undoing.

"This can't last long," reflected the castaway. "It's in bad company—too fast and strong for it. It'll soon be knocked all abroad. Confound John MacDonald for a stubborn, clumsy loon!"

But the drifting roof did not fall a victim to the pack of lunging logs and ice which menaced it from the flanks and rear. It did not last long enough for that. It took its deathblow from the front, within ten minutes of its launching. It struck a big, deep-rooted hemlock and fell apart to that contact like an overripe cheese to the stroke of a dull knife. And Alasdair MacAlasdair MacIan MacIver of Glenbhrec scrambled into the welcoming arms of the mighty tree.

MacIver did not shout for help. It was not his nature to do so; and he had an idea that any one who might hear his shouts might be sufficiently busy already in helping himself or others possibly in greater need of it than Alasdair MacIver. He was in no need of help. He was safe enough up in the big, deep-rooted hemlock. He was only worried; and even his anxiety was not for himself. He was worried at the thought of the pirogue adrift on that swirling flood without an experienced canoeman to guide it. The two John MacDonalds were useless on the river. The elder John had proved himself worse than useless. And Ian MacIver had shown himself to be a novice in the art of paddling. But Alasdair pinned his hope on Ian. However ignorant of the ways of dugout canoes and flooded North America rivers his cousin of Kier and Lochluy might be, still he was a MacIver of the right MacIvers, quick-witted and courageous in the face of danger.

The Golden Highlander sat philosophically in the tree and hoped for the best in the matter of the runaway

pirogue. He thought of Flora MacDonald and of the girl at Kingston whose eyes had shone so softly by candlelight. And he took note of the slow but steady fall of the flood. He moved from time to time, always changing his seat to a lower branch. By sundown he was at the lowest bough of all; and there was no more than two or three feet of water about the base of the hemlock. He remained an hour longer; then dropped with a splash and waded for higher ground.

MacIver visited "Black" Tom MacDonald's house first, guided across the soggy clearing by fireshine and laughter. There he found Black Tom's family, and "Long" Ian Cameron and his family, and Angus MacDonald and Two Blanket and Little Smoke. And there he learned that the Malicetes had rescued Long Ian and his people, and that the other cabins had survived the flood with nothing worse than a wetting and muddying.

MacIver and Two Blanket started down river at the first gray lift of dawn, to search for sign or word of the occupants of the big pirogue. The Waakadoggan still ran high and roily, and continued to spin a few sodden icepans and a few bedraggled fragments of forest wreckage. But Two Blanket said that it was well within its bounds and that it was safe enough for a year to come.

They raced along in midstream, keeping a sharp lookout on both banks. They scanned the dark slopes for smoke. The put ashore three times in fifteen miles, twice to investigate stranded tangles of drift-stuff, and the third time to question Jud Snider.

Snider was at home, frying a breakfast of buckwheat pancakes and fresh pork. The flood had no more than touched his doorsill. Yes, he had seen the pirogue, but not for long. It had passed his front and rounded the next bend with the speed of a trotting moose, fair in midstream, leaving the riding ice and the drift-stuff astern as if they were aground. He had counted six people, and recognized Ian MacIver by his lordly hat and Big John MacDonald by his whiskers. And he had noticed that the pirogue was under good control and that the MacIver cousin was handling the paddle like an expert.

Alasdair and Two Blanket resumed their course. They reached the big river, and crossed it in peril of being crushed between grinding fields of ice. They reached the front of the little town; and there, at the top of the bank, lay the thirty-foot pirogue.

As Alasdair MacIver stepped in at the front door of the King's Head, Ian MacIver descended the front staircase of that respectable hostelry. They met and embraced at the foot of the stairs. Each expressed his joy at seeing the other—the best MacIver, and therefore the best man in the world—alive and well. They stepped up together, arm in arm, to Ian's room.

"And that's not all my happiness, lad," said the Laird of Kier, after softly closing the door. "Your friend Hammer was here last night—hearing the name and supposing it was yourself—and we had a long talk—a good talk—an enlightening talk. Enlightening in my own case, at least. I've been afraid that you entertained some tenderness of affection for Flora MacDonald, lad. I was worried. I watched you close—and Flora, too—and was still uncertain."

"Why worried? What's wrong in that? Why shouldn't I entertain some tenderness of affection, as you call it, for this young woman?"

"Why not, indeed! That is why the doctor's story rang in my heart like music. Man, Alasdair, he could have overturned me with a breath!"

"What was the story?"

"What else but of your—of the girl

and you at the governor's party. You've pretended to make light of it; but I might have guessed, for there's been something strange in your manner, lad—something strange that misled me utterly. But now I understand. And what's to stop you, lad? What's to hold you—MacIver of Glenbhrec, with MacIver of Kier at his back?

"What do you understand?" asked Alasdair, scarcely above a whisper.

"The strangeness in your manner that puzzled me—and terrified me. But if she feels as she says she does—and Doctor Hammer told me of her scorn and defiance of Ruggleston and her mother and the governor, all for her love of the Golden Highlander—that's what she called you, according to the doctor—then we'll all be happy, lad! All except poor Captain Ruggleston."

Glenbhrec stared incredulously at his cousin.

"Are you drunk?" he asked.

"With joy, my dear lad!"

"With joy?" echoed Glenbhrec. "Then be so good as to ring for another bottle of it—for me."

And he turned and walked over to the window.

Another Theodore Goodridge Roberts story will appear in an early issue.

THE BOOMERANG THROWER

WHEN Rear Admiral Magruder, after publicly charging the navy department with extravagance and inefficiency, was ordered by Secretary Wilbur to go to Washington and submit a plan of reform of the abuses he alleged, the capital gossips exclaimed: "Ah-ha! Wilbur has passed him the buck, and Magruder will take it lying down! That's the last you'll hear from the admiral."

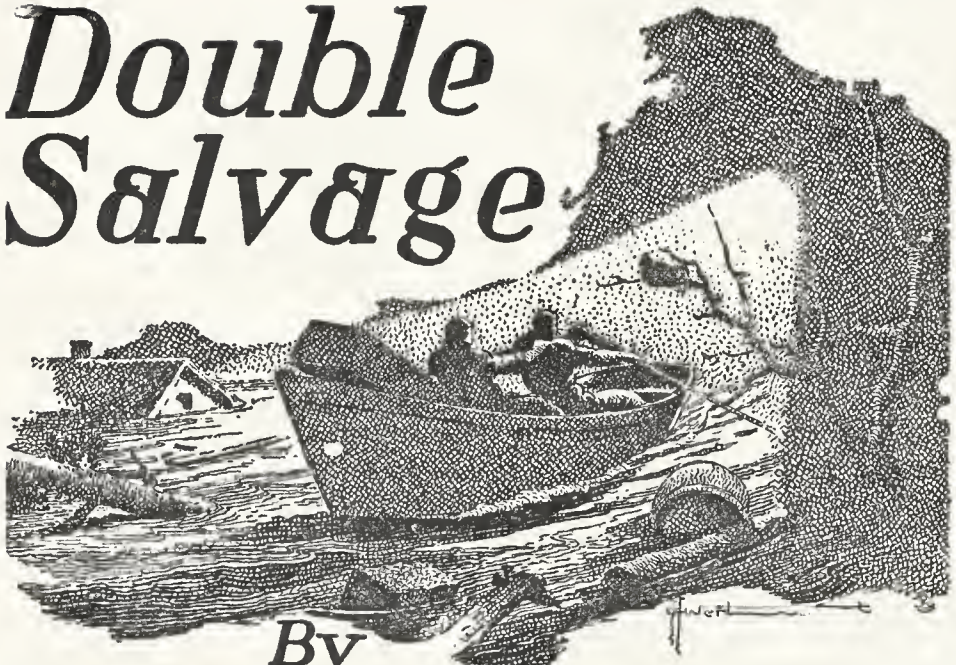
There was, however, a Republican member of the House of Representatives who took the opposite view. "Magruder," he said, "will transform that buck into a boomerang that will fly back at the secretary of the navy."

Ensued a long silence. Nothing more was heard from the admiral. His plan of reform was not forthcoming. At last he was summoned before the House Committee on Naval Affairs to tell what he knew. And he told. He specified weaknesses in naval administration. He bawled out the department. And he wound up with a denunciation of Secretary Wilbur, whom he accused of having subjected him to "calumny."

A few hours later the Republican congressman who had made the prediction about the boomerang hitting Mr. Wilbur was holding forth in jubilant mood.

"Did Magruder come through?" he demanded joyously. "I'll say he did! Toeing the mark at the foot of the long table around which the Committee on Naval Affairs forgathers, that red-headed, unterrified, Irish sea dog, with all the empressement of a magician pulling a bowl of goldfish from beneath his waistcoat, plucked from his inside coat pocket what had once been a buck but was now a boomerang, and, with a graceful flip of his wrist, flung the projectile all the way from the top of Capitol Hill to the far end of Pennsylvania Avenue, where it landed with a dull and sickening thud upon the person of the buck-passer. And at last accounts the members of the Naval Committee were crowding around Magruder, that picturesque combination of sharpshooter and boomerang-thrower, and admiring his exceedingly muscular and accurate wrist!"

Double Salvage



By

Robert J. Pearsall

Author of "The Past and Old Dan Pettigrew," "Luck's Fool," Etc.

Floods and other catastrophes usually provide excellent opportunities for plundering. Katz and Kedge were not exactly plundering; they were just getting square because of the chance. But "acts of Heaven" do not always favor dark enterprises.

NOW!" said Katz, who had nothing to think about but opening the safe. But the burglar-alarm system was not yet all clear to Kedge.

"Wait a bit,' said he.

Of course, if you opened the gate, a window or a door, you were done for. but what of the grounds—were they wired, too? Kedge, who was an electrician, had helped put in such a system once. Then there were several other things he wanted to know, for this job, their first and last, couldn't be permitted to go wrong. So they kept on working as gardener's helpers, while Kedge waited for another chance to slip into the basement whence the wires ran.

"The trouble is with these newfangled contrivances, if you cut a wire, it sets off the whole works. But if we can get safe to the front of the house, we can cut a hole in the window. 'Twon't take much of a hole for you to go through—eh, Katz?"

Katz was small and Kedge was big, and that was about all the difference between them. Both were hard-faced men—much harder-faced than they had been six months before. They had been mechanics up North. Katz had worked for a safe manufacturer, which came in handy now. The Florida boom had drawn both them and their savings, and *they* had escaped. But while they lost, they had both been bitten by the bug of easy acquisition. And, drifting west to the Mississippi, they

had come upon a wondrous opportunity to acquire with the utmost satisfaction and the least embarrassment of conscience. A chance to acquire from the man who had—acquired from them.

Coming to a long, two-story, new stucco mansion near the bank of the great river, they had marveled at its grandeur. Marveling led to talk with the natives of the near-by village. So they learned it belonged to the millionaire, Daurt, the wizard at promotion into whose tide-level subdivision scheme their savings had gently dropped and vanished.

"By the gods of graft, we stick right here," said Kedge, and Katz agreed.

Frugal was Daurt in the matter of wages, and very modest were Kedge and Katz in their demands, so they easily found work in the wall-inclosed grounds. Their next step was to rent for three dollars a week a dreary, damp and half-ruined cottage a quarter of a mile downstream. The floor of the cottage was broken and rat-eaten; curls of paper peeled from its damp walls; rushes and rank grass filled the abandoned fields around it. But of an evening, through a break in a bank of willows, they could view the whole lighted front of the mansion, and even the room where stood the millionaire's safe. And in that safe, as a little inquiry discovered, was loot enough to tempt the most honest man on earth.

"A hundred thousand in jewels, fifty thousand for each of us. Great Jumpin' Calithumpians! Katz, he promised us a profit an' we'll take it. Interest like you read about in the papers, compounded every day. Another 'opportunity of a lifetime' that we'll proceed to jump on."

"I wish we'd done made our jump," said Katz.

In truth, they both wished it was over. The way they had planned the thing, they had little fear of capture; but there was something about it that made them reluctant at times to look into each other's eyes. And though they had been nearly lifelong friends, each privately decided that as soon as the loot was divided, their trails would also be split. They were basically honest men, in short, uncomfortably planning crime; but concerning all that they were silent, and there was no doubt they would go through with the thing.

One night, Kedge, being so tall a man, removed the broken bottle glass from a section of the eight-foot stone wall which surrounded the mansion. Katz noted down-train schedules, and spared his finger tips from the rough work of gardening, so he could feel the tumblers click in the safe. Through talk with the servants, they discovered where each member of the Daurt household slept. With their first week's wages, they bought a rowboat, and anchored it behind the cottage.

"The good old river'll carry us away," said Kedge. "He's got bloodhounds up there—four of 'em—in the kennels back of the house. But we won't leave no trail in the water."

Katz joined him in cursing Daurt. It eased them to feed the fires of their hatred and despisal. They saw Daurt now and then, a middle-aged, mediocre-looking individual, tight-lipped, but with rather kindly eyes. Nothing about him indicated extreme depravity. Gossip had it in Florida that he, too, had overestimated the boom, had built his hopes too wildly. But if Kedge and Katz had heard that, they would never have believed it. For their comfort, they drove their minds to find names to call him. They made of the man they intended to rob, a fiend incarnate.

Then two things happened. Kedge found that the grounds surrounding the mansion were wired for burglars. There was a broad area all around the house across which no one could pass after the current was turned on without setting off the alarm. And while

the two beat their brains against this problem, gardening work was suspended, for it began to rain.

It rained for a day in a gentle, listless sort of way. Then it thickened and steadied. Katz grew discouraged, but Kedge took to staring out at the weather with a growing gleam in his eyes. He had a hope, so improbable and preposterous at first that he didn't dare mention it. Four days of rain, and when Katz walked into the village to buy some food, people were talking of other rains within the memory of man, and what you might expect after the last dry summer. When he returned, Kedge was down over the river dike, doing something with a stick.

"It's raised a foot," said he, with faint jubilation in his voice.

Followed three ostentatiously fine mornings, and even hours of sunshine, during which Kedge was depressed. But in the intervals, and all night long, it rained in tropical showers, enlivened by thunder and lightning, which rolled and played finely about the high-wooded hills on either side of the valley. Kedge, going in turn into the village—now you had to wade—found the inhabitants a little alarmed. And he returned, feeling quite at one with threatening Nature, and with hope raised so high that he had to explain it to Katz.

"If this thing gets bad enough, it'll be mighty good for us. Maybe we can go callin' in a rowboat, yet. Right over them grounds, and over the wall, maybe. I've been thinkin' and rememberin'. When this old river goes on a rampage, it don't know where to stop."

Hope sprang to Katz's eyes, too. "But won't Daurt scoot?"

Kedge laughed raucously.

"I've been hearin' about him. He's cussin' like everything. Seems that some of his plants have been washed out. No, he'll stay to take care of his furniture. Thousands of dollars of rugs and the like. He'll stick to 'em like a leech—see if he don't. 'Tisn't like he'd be in any danger. He can get away any time on that steam launch of his."

Then, like an answer to Kedge's hope, came the announcement that there had been more rain, inches more, up in the States to the north, that some of the levees were likely to break, and that, anyway, the real flood was all to come.

That very afternoon it came, though with only a gentle drizzle from overhead. The river flowed over its banks; it rose over the doorsill of the forlorn little cottage; it drove Katz and Kedge to the attic, from the window of which they extended the rope which secured their boat. Inch by inch, foot by foot, the boat ascended to them. They packed their few belongings and waited, while the waters, as though resuming their natural course, stretched from one range of hills to the other, and turned the whole valley into one vast and moving lake. Whole villages, north and south, were being inundated, but so intent were Katz and Kedge in watching Daurt's mansion that they never thought of that.

When darkness came, they ate sandwiches of bread and cheese, then crossed again to the window, their boots creaking and sloshing in the water. They looked out again, and Kedge's voice broke exultantly through the soft swish of the rain, the dull, stiff swirl of the water against the house.

"I told you so. Better and better. See what they're doin'."

"He's lookin' after his things, all right. The things he's stole."

"He's havin' his flunkies do it Look! They're takin' down the pictures. They're rollin' up the carpets. They're movin' all the furniture to the upper floor. And they'll all be there themselves. Gosh! What a cinch!"

"A cinch!" echoed Katz. "They won't move the safe. They can't. No

use, anyway. It's water-tight. But it ain't man tight. I'll open it."

For a long time they stood there, watching figures moving hurriedly to and fro against the lighted windows. Now and then sparks, quickly extinguished by the thin drizzle, rose from the launch's smokestack. Daurt was keeping her ready. Outside the attic window their boat was ready, too, swinging uneasily in the current. The force of the flood was increasing all the time. A dull roar as of a vast avalanche seemed to fill the air and shake the crazy cottage.

"Lucky we've got our boat," said Katz. "I doubt if this house'll last."

It was with intense relief that they finally saw Daurt's mansion grow dark.

"Now we can go," said Kedge.

A minute later, they were rowing up the valley. The current was so stiff that they had to put all their strength to the oars. Mysterious bits of wreckage bobbed up and down in the water, and now and then struck the boat. The rain had stopped altogether now, and a pale moon peeped fitfully out from behind thin clouds. Kedge and Katz could see the wreckage, but they kept their eyes away from it as much as they could. It reminded them of something they had tried to forget—that the Mississippi on a rampage is a death-dealing fiend; that there would be some who wouldn't have boats!

"Easy now," whispered Kedge, after they had passed the house and pulled into the quieter water back of it.

"We'll let her drift down easy. I'll land you on the veranda; and when you get in again, we'll pull for midstream. The current'll do the rest; it should be racing out there. We'll be a hundred miles away by daylight."

"And the launch!" said Katz, as though he had just thought of it. "If they chase us——"

"Why the devil should they chase us, unless you bungle the job? Unless you wake 'em up? Anyway, we got this whole valley to dodge and hide in. Not like havin' to stick to the river channel."

They drifted around, hugging the house close, and nowhere did they see a light. The eight-foot wall was all submerged, but of the house, which stood on a little eminence, only the veranda seemed to be awash. Certainly the flood was their friend—it had made all things easy.

Noiselessly, the boat slipped up to the veranda, and Katz stepped out upon it. Katz had for tools a glass cutter, some adhesive tape to hold the glass from falling, and a flash light with which to find and search the safe. He worked for a while on the window and then disappeared through it. Kedge waited, steadying the boat with a hand on the stone pillar of the veranda. It was not more than five minutes before Katz returned, holding a black box in his hand.

"Got 'em!" he whispered exultantly, as he climbed into the boat.

"S-sh!" cautioned Kedge, as they let the current take the boat.

But they were only a few yards away from the house when they both heard a sound—the *flop, flop* of soft, heavy feet coming around from the other side of the veranda. One of Daurt's bloodhounds! They both knew what it was —though they never knew where it had come from—even before the bloodhound stood half upright, with his forefeet on top of the railing, and bayed loudly into the night.

Katz gasped to think by what a narrow margin he had escaped. Both gripped their oars, but held them poised for a while. They were invisible from the house, and if they made no sound all might be well. The current strengthened as they drew away from the house, and they sped fast. Now they bent to their oars.

Behind them, in the upper rooms of the house, lights flashed out. They

watched those lights descending the stairs, racing through the corridors, into the room with the pillaged safe. Plain to their ears came a mad outcry of alarm, angry questions, furious orders. But the sounds diminished fast behind them, as they slipped down the roaring stream as down a slide. And the dark and trackless waste of waters into which they passed cheered them mightily.

"Safe!" exulted Kedge. "You're sure? You saw 'em?" He touched with his toe the black dispatch box in the bottom of the boat.

"Yes. 'Twasn't locked. Real sparklers, Kedge. Di'monds and pearls. A fortune."

"Two fortunes!" cried Kedge, in a voice half hysterical with triumph. "And a thousand ways to get away in. Right or left, any time we like, we'll make for the high land, and then into any town. Refugees, we be. Refugees from this awful flood. Then a railroad station and tickets north. Nobody saw us—no description—we bein' missed means nothing. Lots of folks missin', I guess. This good old friend of a flood—— What's that?"

His oar had struck something in the water. A soft and flaccid something that seemed to cling to his oar, to drag it down—only that was impossible, for the man who peered up at Kedge for one horrible instant must have been long dead. The body vanished astern before Kedge could have attempted to seize it, but he stared after it with his oar poised, while Katz pulled the boat half around.

"What's the matter?" asked Katz.

"Nothing," said Kedge, abruptly dipping his oar.

"What's the matter, I say." Katz spoke sharply.

"Nothing, only——" began Kedge. Then, almost with relief, he saw that something was very urgently the matter. Something he could discuss with Katz. "Only, they're after us. Look there."

And he nodded astern toward a long pencil of light that had suddenly shot out toward them, its luminous core bisected half its length by the water.

"A searchlight! I didn't know——"

"Never mind! Lean to it. We're a darn small speck to look for. And we're travelin' fast."

Indeed, by now they had reached the middle of the stream, and were flying along at the pace of a train. The water seemed to be still rising—something had burst above—it was a foaming, seething torrent, as though the flood gates of an ocean had been opened.

All around them floated débris, moving almost as rapidly as they did—trees and furniture, wreckage of houses and barns, and riding on the wreckage occasional animals, living and dead, cattle, sheep and dogs. They had no idea of the magnitude of the catastrophe till now. Over fields and hedges and submerged farms, possibly over submerged towns, they raced on, with the launch coming behind them, moving twice as fast.

The current carried it even as it carried the boat, and it seemed to have mighty engines instead of tiny oars. But it traveled a crooked course, dashing far to the western side of the valley and then darting back again, covering the whole face of the waters thoroughly in a long succession of zigzag dashes. All the while that searching eye scoured the water, as though imbued with the wrath and madness of its owner, the spoiler robbed of his spoil. And all the while it drew closer. The two men saw their doom coming on them, and could not pull away from it. And the same thought came to each, that the thing that doomed them was the thing that had led them to steal. For if Daurt were another sort of man, they would be completely safe.

As there were living brutes in the

wreckage that littered the water, there must be living humans, too. That questing eye must surely find them, and common humanity driving the launch must stop to rescue. But Daurt was driving it instead; the eye was searching for them only; it passed over everything else unheeding.

It was the thing to be expected of him, said Kedge; it was a thing the world should know, said Katz. It was an act that justified all they had thought of him—that picture of utter baseness they had formed of him in their minds. And, looking back upon that lancing line of light, they cursed him.

Then that line of light lifted and came to rest upon a fearful sight.

Where the river's bank had been, now in the very vortex of the current, an old farmhouse was still standing.

They saw plainly, as the light rested on it, two women and a man leaning and waving for help from a window.

"Help! They're likely to get it!" snarled Kedge. And that same instant, "Help!" some one shrieked near by.

Two men were riding a raft which was breaking up under them. They sprawled on it with arms and legs spread out, trying to hold it together. The current tore at the timbers. Now the men waved imploring hands, now clutched again at the timbers.

"If we take 'em on, we ain't got a chance," said Kedge, but held his stroke so the boat swung toward the raft. At that moment, the raft parted in the middle. The two men went into the water, and one of them clung to a timber. The other swam for the boat.

"This way!" cried Kedge. He cursed as he thrust out his oar.

The man clambered into the reeling boat. He spat out water, and pointed to his companion's head, alongside.

"He can't swim."

"What does that matter?" snarled Katz, as they drove after the man.

They took him on and started again, the boat now as unwieldly as a tub. They had to row very carefully to avoid capsizing. How quickly the launch would overtake them now! With the thought Kedge glanced back.

"He's stopped. Daurt's stopped. He's takin' 'em off! Why, say——"

Rowing on, they stared back at the amazing sight. It was their salvation, for if Daurt turned to rescue work, he would never overtake them. All they had to do was to land their passengers somewhere, and go on. But perplexity mingled with their joy. Where was the implacable monster they had pictured? Where, indeed, was the man they had robbed? The man who thought of nothing but money!

From the darkness came another cry for help. Kedge and Katz shivered and looked at the water. It was within three inches of the gunnel. They could carry no one else. At that moment, a dark bulk loomed up on the water ahead of them. It was an island that had been a hilltop, and it was crowded.

Slowly they approached the island. Beyond was freedom and fortune. Behind them, the millionaire's searchlight again traced erratic designs on the water. If they went back, he would find them, surely. If they went on, the curses they had called down on his head would come home to roost. They would be the monsters! But if—if they were rid of the jewels.

"Salvage!" muttered Kedge hoarsely. "Let's make 'em salvage."

To their wondering passengers, they transferred the black dispatch box, and told them whom it belonged to. Unnoticed, they waited on the edge of the island till they saw it in the hands of an army officer in charge of the refugees. Then the two hard-faced men went out again to scour the death-dealing waters for more precious salvage.

More stories by Robert J. Pearsall will appear in these pages soon.

The Reckoning

by W. B. M. Ferguson

In Six Parts
Part IV

Author of "The Dollar God," "Lightnin' Calvert," Etc.

Peter Calvert, the Western gun fighter, settled in Sagebrush after ridding the town of the Bargendy outlaws. At last he could marry Julie Vickers. But Peter learned that he had tuberculosis, and that he would have to go away. When he departed, he was shot by two outlaws, who left him for dead. His memory gone, he fell in with Indians. He recovered quickly, so that, when several palefaces were captured, he was able to arrange their escape. Meanwhile, Julie received a fresh shock when Major Gracie, of New York, appeared on the scene. Gracie was Peter's rascally father. The major, when he came to Sagebrush, sought out Julie, with the news that he was going to take over his wife's interest in the Vickers' store. His plans were to undo in the town, by lax rule, all the good that Peter had wrought.

CHAPTER XX.

THE BEST FRIEND A GIRL EVER HAD.

MAJOR GRACIE pursued his quest without appearing to do so. The opinion given by Scoby that the lion's share in this business would be worth far more than the money it represented, had been amply verified by examination of the accounts. This apart from the profits which should accrue in other quarters.

He found an unexpected ally in Pop, of whom he made an easy conquest, for Mr. Vickers could neither forgive nor forget Peter's supposed desertion.

"You'll listen to me for once, whether you like it or not, what I got to say about Peter Calvert!" he exclaimed to his niece. "We was deceived in him; and a man that could play the low-down trick on you that he done, could lie about Major Gracie. We ain't got nothin' but Calvert's word for it, an' his word don't mean nothin' when it comes to keepin' his promise to you.

"This is a moughty generous offer that Major Gracie's makin', an' I don't see that nothin' could be fairer. Actions speaks louder than words. He aims to stand our friend, an' I aims to let him. Besides which, there ain't nothin' else to do. I ain't a-goin' to borry money from Sam Long, an' I ain't a-goin' to let you try, nuther. I got along all these years without Sam's help—which he never offered nohow—an' I ain't a-goin' to begin now."

Julie's own condition of mind, amounting almost to apathy, also proved a help to the major who, meanwhile, was making himself a popular figure in the town. His easy manners, ready smile and democratic spirit were his passports to favor. He spoke openly of his limited means, yet he had always enough money to stand treat. No one was too lowly or insignificant to escape his attention; he talked to Bill Wyman, and others composing what Biggart called the "riffraff," and apparently he had no thought beyond making everybody happy, reconciling opposing elements.

Julie took her troubles to Doctor Day.

"I don't know what to do. It would mean, of course, that he would have the controlling interest. I know what that might mean, if my uncle doesn't."

"But if he doesn't use it?"

"What guarantee have I of that? You believe he won't?"

"Well, I don't see why he'd want to interfere with the policy and management. He doesn't know anything about the business, nor has he any ambition to learn. Why work if one doesn't have to? I must say he's quite a different sort from what I'd imagined."

They were seated on the veranda of Day's house, and she turned and looked at him in the star-flecked darkness.

"Do *you* believe that he isn't Peter's father?"

"I haven't said that, Julie."

"No, but a good many believe it, even if they don't say so—many who were supposed to be Peter's best friends. But nothing and no one can make *me* believe it. Either Major Gracie or Peter is the liar, and I've no doubt which it is. No, none in the world. Peter never lied to me."

Day said nothing; and she added almost fiercely:

"You're thinking he lied when he said he loved me? But that isn't the same. He only did it to spare me. He'd never lie for the sake of lying, nor for his own gain. The town's ready to think anything of him now, but I won't have it. I won't have it, Doodah! No, I won't. They aren't fit to black his boots!"

"You mustn't get into this state, Julie. Look here, why not chuck the whole thing? Leave the business and Sagebrush. Have you thought of that?"

"No, of course not. It's impossible. I couldn't."

"Yes, you could. Nothing easier. Sell up the whole show and let Major Gracie take his whack. You need a rest, a change. You do indeed. I'm telling you as a doctor."

"No use, Doodah."

"Why, what's here for you now? There are more places than Sagebrush, and far better ones, too. You'd have something left over from the sale, and, of course, my purse is at your disposal. Let us go, Julie."

"Us?"

"Why, yes; you and your uncle and me. There's really nothing to hold me here either. I'll sell out, too. I—I'm getting to hate the place, as I know you must. It isn't the same since Peter went."

He arose and walked the veranda, talking hurriedly.

"Some town back East—that's the place for us. Why not New York? You've never been there, Julie, and you don't know what you've missed. You're

entitled to a different sort of life than this. What is it?" He waved a hand at the dimly lighted single street. "Muck and ignorance, that's all! I could build up a great practice in New York. This hole has served its turn, given me back my health, but it's no place even to die in. Change, travel, entertainment, rest, culture, refinement —that's what you need, and there's nothing here but muck, work and ignorance."

"It's impossible, Doodah. No matter what kind of place it is, my place is here. New York's your home, but this is mine. Yes, I hate it now in a way, and I can understand how it has got on your nerves, but I also love it the more because it is full of unforgetable memories. There is also my uncle to think of——"

"You've done more than enough for him. You owe something to yourself. Age would take the last drop of blood from sacrificing youth and demand more. He'd be just as well off—better, in fact—in New York or anywhere. I'd see he got every care, Julie."

"The store is his life, Doodah. You know that. He'd die in New York, any place but this." She pressed his arm. "You're the best old friend a girl ever had, but you see my duty lies here. I couldn't think of leaving."

Day sighed and resumed his chair. He knew when he had run up against a stone wall.

"Confound your sense of duty," he grumbled. "Well, I wish I had the cash to pay Major Gracie out. If Pop won't let you borrow from Long, I don't see that there's any alternative. I must admit the major impressed me agreeably."

"Oh, he's very agreeable, but I don't trust him. Apart from anything Peter said, we know how he treated Mrs. Gracie."

"No man's a saint," said the doctor. "And there are two sides to every story —not that I think Mrs. Gracie ever said a word against him."

"No, she was loyal to the last, poor soul. It's what she left unsaid. Are you like all the rest, Doodah? You believe that just because Peter——"

"No, no. But that's very far from considering the major an utter scoundrel. Admitted that he isn't all he should be—few men are—whatever his failings, he has culture and breeding, something I found it a pleasure to meet again. As for this tale of his having been in cahoots with Tweed, politics is a dirty game at best and he may have been a victim as he says. Who knows?"

"Peter knew."

"He might have been mistaken. If you leave him out of it, what remains? I believe Major Gracie to be what he claims—a man tired of the world and anxious for peace and quietness. No doubt repentance, too. Anxious to spend the evening of his life, his last years——"

"But he's not so terribly old, Doodah. I'm sure he's no older than you."

"What? Of course he is! *I'm* not an old man. Why, I'm hardly in my prime! The major's made up to look young. He's been a good bit of a dandy, and that sort of thing dies hard."

"He has been more than a dandy, and I'm not sure that he has stopped being it."

"Oh, you're prejudiced, of course. I don't see what trouble he could make, even if he wanted to. If he meant to be nasty he would have demanded a cash settlement, as he had every right to. I think he has acted very decently."

"I dare say," she agreed listlessly. "But I don't want him to have anything to do with the store, the business that Peter and I have put on its legs. All my instinct is against it."

"You mustn't be ruled by sentiment, Julie, or the thought that this man is Peter's enemy. Put all that aside; judge him on his present actions alone.

There aren't many men who'd propose leaving the money in the business. They could find many better investments."

The girl stiffened.

"I don't think so. We're only in temporary difficulties. We're bound to reap some day what we've sown. You've gone back on the town, Doodah. Don't you believe in its future any more?"

"I've got a sickening of the place," said Day moodily.

"I understand. Well, there's nothing to keep you here."

"There's everything—you."

"Oh, but I won't allow your friendship to make any such sacrifice. You mustn't remain here simply on my account. If you think you should return to New York, please do so. Of course, we should miss you terribly, but at the same time I'd feel far happier knowing that——"

"Don't worry about any sacrifice. It would be a sacrifice to go where you aren't, Julie."

"You *are* the best old friend a girl ever had." She laughed rather tremulously as she pressed his arm. "You are indeed, Doodah."

"I—I wish you'd quit calling me Doodah," he said, as she arose and prepared to leave.

"But why?"

"Because it's such an infernally silly name."

"Then you'll have to find another song to sing. But what should I call you?"

"By my right name, of course."

"Very well," she laughed, dropping a curtsy. "Good night, James. That sounds like a butler or coachman, doesn't it? I think Doodah is much nicer."

"Jim—that's my name. I was never called James unless I was going to be caned."

"And I'm sure you deserved it. Well, good night again—Jim."

But her heart was far from light as she crossed the street to the store. This talk with Day had produced a vague feeling of disappointment, and something still more vague. She had not found the sort of help she sought. Doodah—she could never think of him by any other name—could not forgive Peter for jilting her. And now, like the rest of the town, he was ready to believe anything of him. That was the truth of the matter, however Day might try to hide it.

The thought saddened her. Doodah, for all his talk about being broad-minded and tolerant, was no better than her uncle and the rest of these Sagebrushers. She supposed their attitude only human, but she found no joy in the fact that their partisanship for her would be greater than their friendship for Peter. Day, in particular, owed everything to Peter. Only for Peter he would now be a poverty-stricken drunkard. He knew the great character that Peter was. He should not condemn him for this single action, allow anything to outweigh his sense of justice, his gratitude, his friendship. Peter himself would never have done it were their positions reversed. Yes, it was only human, but she had expected more of Doodah than that. He had fallen a little in her esteem.

She felt strangely alone. There was really no one now who saw eye to eye with her. Perhaps her uncle, Day—everybody—were right about Major Gracie and she wrong. Why worry any more or struggle against the inevitable? In any case, what did the town's future mean if Peter was no longer here to share it? They had planned and worked so eagerly together for its welfare. She wished she still possessed the energy, the enthusiasm of those days which now seemed so remote.

And yet all the time Peter had known that he would not be here to reap the result of their mutual effort. He had

worked, not for his own benefit, but for that of her uncle and herself. Dear, blind, foolish, quixotic character! Did he not know that she gained nothing if she lost him? No, nothing really mattered now; the town, the store, herself. Nothing to do but plod on alone, duty her only guiding star.

Day watched until she vanished, and even then he stood on the veranda, staring at nothing in particular. At length he went indoors and, arranging the lamps, studied himself long and attentively in a big mirror. He straightened his tie, smoothed the thick curly gray hair, pulled down his vest, threw out his chest, flexed his biceps.

"Old as Major Gracie—bah! She was only joking, of course. Why, I'll bet he's nearly sixty! Well, maybe not. But a man's just as old as his heart, and mine is as sound as a bell. It isn't years that matter but the way you live them. Gracie's an old patched-up wreck. By Jove, I look young enough to be his son! Yes, and I feel it, too. Julie certainly is a tease, but she won't 'Doodah' me any more."

CHAPTER XXI.

ROGUES' PROGRESS.

PETER'S absence imposed unexpected burdens and responsibilities on more than Julie. Sam Biggart was having troubles of his own, and, in consequence, had become Peter's severest critic. He felt that he had been callously betrayed, deserted, jockeyed into a position that was becoming more difficult daily. Nor did Mr. Sidebottom's triumphant cackle "I told ye so!" and prognostications of further tribulation, serve to restore his peace of mind.

Since it became certain that Peter did not mean to return, the riffraff, led by Bill Wyman, had been getting bolder and more assertive. Where formerly they had been only too glad to remain in Sagebrush on any terms, and escape attention, they now began to talk of their wrongs and rights. And several who had fled the town now ventured to return. Already there had occurred one or two minor affrays, and at length Biggart had a talk with Major Gracie.

He pointed out that Wyman was an ex-henchman of Scoby, and that none of this scum deserved the recognition which the major was evidently prepared to accord it.

"It only gits 'em more biggety, major," he explained. "Of course, yuh don't mean nothin' by it; yuh didn't know Scoby an' his gang an' what we suffered from 'em. Yuh're jist ign'rant an' kind-hearted. But if yuh give these jaspers half a chance they'll walk all over yuh. Yuh're becomin' a right important man in the town, major, an' they're gittin' all swelled up like p'izened pups with the notice yuh're takin' of them."

"Tut, tut!" laughed the major.

"You're too just and brave a man, Biggart—justice and courage always go together—to believe all that. Those aren't your views; they are the views of those who stick to the old Calvert régime. We want fair play all round, for the poor as well as the rich. Now the inhabitants of the east end have quite a legitimate grievance, it seems to me. Since the Lone Star was destroyed there's really no place where they can meet and have a sociable glass."

"Thar's the Come Inn. We don't object to them, purvidin' they pays up an' acts decent. We ain't a-goin' to have another joint like Scoby's. That's whar most of the trouble come from. One saloon's enough for this yere town anyway, an' the Come Inn has allus be'n run right. If we let them fellers open a joint we'd have the same trouble over ag'in—crooked gamblin' an' all that."

"I don't think so, Biggart. More trouble comes from injustice than anything else. Give every man a square deal and he'll have no cause for complaint. Blue Laws are out of date, even

in New England. I'm not what you'd call a drinking or gambling man, but I believe in the good old principle of live and let live. One man has no right to impose his tastes on another. Why should Charlie Stein, or any one, have a monopoly of the liquor trade? Competition is the life of any community. These men know that they're no more than tolerated at the Come Inn. If they patronize it at all, it's only on sufferance."

"Well, they got nobody to blame but theirselves, major. We ain't forgot what they done the night of the terror."

"That's just it, Biggart. You can't forget, and you don't let them forget either. That's only human, of course, but if we're to make anything of the town, all that must be forgotten. The hatchet must be buried, and we all must pull together. This man Calvert sowed a crop of tares that it will take time and trouble to uproot."

Biggart was by no means certain what tares meant, nor various other words that the major used on occasion, but he gathered that it was something uncomplimentary. And, whatever his resentment against Peter, there was a brand of criticism at which he drew the line.

"Calvert's a great man, major, even if he ain't acted right by Miss Julie; no, nor by me, nuther. Thar ain't a braver man livin'. He done here what nobody else could."

"Well, we won't argue that," said Major Gracie, casually presenting the marshal with a choice cigar. "He didn't treat me right, either, for that matter. I don't question his bravery, merely his morals. His actions speak for themselves. A man may be a rogue and yet have good qualities. But even granting that he meant the best for the town, he fomented trouble and stirred up class hatred. He imposed his will by sheer terror, and for his own profit. I am against despots in any shape or form. We don't want a dictator, any one-man government."

"One is a lot better than none," said Biggart stubbornly. "It was Bargendy that scairt the place. I ain't sayin' Calvert hadn't his faults, but he believed in good gover'ment an' he knowed how to git it. We aim to keep this town the way he left it, clean an' law-abidin'. Them is yuhr principles, too?"

"Certainly. Of course."

"Well, I can lick any galoot of Wyman's bunch, but when I took office I barred furrin relations. I barred 'em, 'less Calvert backed me. More of this scum's dribblin' in, and it mought be a good thing, major, to run 'em all out now; git the boys together——"

"Tut, tut. It's time the law of the gun was replaced with justice and common sense. That's the only good government that counts, and lasts. Don't look for trouble and you won't find it. I'll talk to these men, if you like. I've the best interests of the town at heart, just as much as anybody else, but we must have fair play all round.

"If my influence here should ever amount to anything," continued the major modestly, a hand on the other's shoulder, "it shall be exerted to promote universal brotherhood and good feeling. Not a town for one man, but for all. Away with melancholy, as the poet sings. Good government doesn't have to go about with a long face. It may have been necessary once, but not now. It seems to me we could do with a little life and gayety. Come and have a drink, Biggart, and forget the imaginary troubles of office."

Yielding to blandishments such as these, Biggart began to think that his fears were imaginary, but they awoke in full force with the arrival of Tim Scoby. The news was brought by Bob Farrell and another teamster.

"Yes, it's him. I seen him," persisted Farrell against Biggart's incredulity. "He's down the street talkin' with Wy-

man. What's more, I hear he's braggin' that he's goin' to stay."

"If he does, it'll be in Boot Hill Cemetery," said Biggart, with an oath. "The dog-gone brass-bound gall of him, darin' to show up ag'in like this! But I'll learn him. Go git some of the boys, Bob; I'm proposin' to run him out."

"Sho, yuh don't need help for that, Sam."

"Not personal, I don't. But this is a challenge to good gover'ment, Bob. That hellion's be'n tipped off about Calvert quittin' us. He's here to try an' see how fur he can bluff us into lettin' him boss the town ag'in."

"How do yuh know?"

"I know," said Biggart. "I've felt it comin' in my bones. It's a showdown between that crowd an' us. I ain't a-scairt of nary a one, but good gover'ment had ought to be represented in force. I sw'ar yuh an' Pod Tupman an' a coupla more in as dep'ties, Bob."

"We don't need to be swore," said Farrell. "We can lick that bunch, as we licked 'em afore, without takin' no oath onto it. We'll help yuh through in this yere job of marshal, Sam. If Calvert ain't backin' yuh, *we* are. Don't yuh worry."

"I ain't worryin'," said Biggart testily. "An' I don't need no help, nuther. But it's my dooty to have good gover'ment represented in force. I don't want to appear as no dictator, which the major says rightly is bad fur any town. It's my dooty, accordin' to the Constitootion of these yere United States, to show Scoby that the vote agin' him is unaniminous."

Accordingly the marshal marched down the dusty street at the head of an impressive body of men, practically all the available males representing the better element, who welcomed the chance of settling old scores in the name of good government and keeping the peace.

Scoby, with Bill Wyman and half a dozen nondescripts, bar flies and petty crooks who had patronized the Lone Star, was contemplating the blackened ruin of his former home, apparently oblivious of the approaching reception committee.

"Hey, Scoby!" roared Biggart, stepping forward with a hand negligently on his gun. "What yuh doin' here?"

"Why, howdy, Mr. Biggart! Howdy, boys!" Scoby mopped a perennially purple face and smiled a general greeting, which he sought to make innocent and cheerful.

He received no answer from the ring of hostile faces, which were also exchanging unflattering looks with the men at his back.

"Home, sweet home," added Scoby, nothing daunted. "There ain't no place like home. I'm right glad to be back, boys. Mighty good of you to meet me like this. How's Calvert, an' everythin'?"

"Yuh know danged well Calvert ain't here," said Biggart. "But *I'm* here. "No, thar ain't no place like home, Scoby, and yuh'd best be breezin' pronto. Don't stop to pick no flowers. We can bury yuh without 'em."

"But *this* is my home!" exclaimed Scoby. "This is my property, which was burned. I got no compensation for it, neither. I've the right to stay here on my own property."

"Who says so?" demanded Biggart. "Whar did yuh git this talk about yuhr rights? Yuh was lucky to leave this town on a rail, Scoby. An' now, if yuh ain't moughty keerful, yuh'll leave it on a shutter. Git out an' stay out!"

"It's a free country," growled Wyman, with an oblique glance from under his heavy brows. "A man has a right to go where he likes. An' he hadn't ought to be chased offn his own doorstep, nuther. Bygones had ought to be bygones."

"Shut up!" ordered Biggart. "Yuh'll go out on a shutter, too, if yuh dast

git high-heeled with me. I've had an eye on all yuh hellions. Yuh be'n talkin' plenty about yuhr rights, but we ain't heard nothin' 'bout the wrongs yuh done. If ary a man wants to argufy 'bout these yere rights of hisn, let him step up now. I'm ready fur one or all."

Not a man among Scoby's following moved.

"Yuh thought because Calvert had gone, good gover'ment had went with him, huh?" demanded Biggart. "But that's whar yuh're mistook, Scoby. *I'm* still here. An' I'm th' marshal now. I don't need Calvert's backin'. Yuh take yuhr hawss an' breeze afore I gits impatient an' lets a little sunlight into yuhr black an' miserable soul. An' don't yuh never dast come here ag'in, Tim Scoby!"

"Hold on, boys. What's all this? What's going on here?" And Major Gracie, timing his appearance to a second, shouldered his way to the front.

There now followed a scene, much of which had been rehearsed between the major and Scoby. The latter appealed to this "stranger," evidently a figure of some importance in the town, for justice. He laid his case before him, ably abetted by Wyman, despite constant interruptions from Biggart. He meant no harm. He wished to return to his home town. He had suffered in pocket, flesh and spirit, and had been more sinned against than sinning. Bygones should be bygones. Scoby spoke with great feeling, as he always did when he had three or four drinks in him, enough to make him feel "comfortably liquored."

Major Gracie now spoke his piece. He appealed for fair play, charity, brotherly love. This man had suffered, repented. Let them give him a chance to prove the truth of his words. Unquestionably, bygones should be bygones. A new era, everybody happy. The old hatreds dead, a fresh deal all round. Surely it was only justice to let this man return to his old home. Why, they'd even let a dog do that!

"He's worser'n a dog!" shouted Biggart, almost apoplectic. "Yuh keep out'n this, major. Yuh don't know this man, but we do. Cl'ar out, Scoby, or, by grab, I'll stiffened yuh! Move!"

"Listen to who's talkin'," came a drawling voice from back of the crowd, and Biggart's heart suddenly skipped a beat, turned deadly cold. That voice! Could it be possible that his pet nightmare had actually come true? His mouth dry, he turned slowly, unwillingly, as though impelled by some inexorable force.

Yes, only too true! There sat Flash Ullman and Beef White, as large as life, precisely as though the past few months had never been and Bargendy was still "king of the Panhandle." They had materialized like two evil spirits. They sat their horses negligently, their attitude seemingly one of contemptuous indifference, and the crowd had fallen back as though they were lepers.

"Why, if it ain't our ole friend Samuel Bladder!" continued Ullman, with a saturnine smile. "Who yuh-all bawlin' out now, Sam? Some pore cripple, I'll bet. Why, if it ain't Tim Scoby! I ain't seen yuh in a dog's age, ole-timer. Where'd yuh-all blow in from? This sure is like ole times, what yuh might call a happy reunion. Speak up an' act welcome, Biggart."

The marshal's prominent Adam's apple was moving up and down convulsively, and the hand that had rested so threateningly on his six-shooter now hung meekly at his side. If only Calvert were here! He cast a despairing glance at his followers, but not one in that brave array dared to meet his eye. The manner in which they had scattered at the sound of Ullman's voice, like sheep at the bark of a dog, was significant enough. Major Gracie, apparently through ignorance, was the only one who had stood his ground.

"That gent, whoever he is," said Ullman, nodding at the major, "has got the right idea of things. My podner an' me sides with yuh, stranger. Fair is fair. We says Scoby, or any man, has the right to stay here if he likes. It's a free country. What do *yuh* say, Biggart?"

Biggart gulped, moistened his parched lips. It was like that awful day when these two devils had divested him of all manhood in sight of the whole town. His fear of them had not been conquered; it was as lively as ever, indeed more lively since he had done much since then to earn this couple's enmity. He cursed Peter silently for placing him in such a position. No longer could he claim to be merely a deputy nor talk about his "jurydiction."

"The rangers is in Mobeetie," he said desperately. "Best fur yuh boys to know that."

"A man might be dead a long time before they got here," said Ullman meditatively. "We ain't worryin' none about the rangers. It's yuh we're talkin' to. We says, with this stranger, that Scoby has a right to stay here. If yuh, or any jasper thinks diff'rent, surge up an' declar' it. C'me on, don't be backward. Surge right up."

No one surged.

"Changed yuhr views, huh?" asked White amiably. "Or mebbe yuh was only foolin', Biggart? 'Tain't yuhr style a-tall to pick on a sheep like Tim Scoby. Bossin' this town now?"

"No, I ain't," said Biggart emphatically, casting a baleful glance at his silent following. "I'm only a servant of the public. I was told that the vote agin' Scoby was unaniminous, but it don't 'pear rightly to be so. Seems like I was led astray tryin' to do my dooty. I ain't no despot. I ain't got no objection agin' Scoby if the majority is fur lettin' him stay."

"Seems like they was," mused White. "There ain't no accountin' for public opinion. But it rejoices Flash an' me exceedin' to see this change of heart, this display of brotherly love an' good feelin'."

"It sure does," agreed Ullman, " 'specially as Whitey an' me aims to make this yere town our future home. We was allus mighty partial to Sagebrush."

This announcement produced something approaching a sensation.

"We have wandered far an' wide," said White, "an' now my podner an' me is ready to lay our weary heads in the buzzum of peace an' quietude, among the jovial friends of our youth. Anybody got any partic'lar objection? No? Then the vote is carried unaniminous, as yuh call it, Sam. But, hold on; there is one dear an' familiar face absent from the home circle. What about Calvert? Where is he? He might vote agin' us."

"I don't know," said Biggart, "an' I don't care, nuther."

Pod Tupman stepped out, cleared his throat. He made no pretensions to being a gladiator, for he was small and fat and slow, but, of Biggart's following, he was now the only one to say what he thought.

"If you boys aim to come here an' make trouble, you'll find your mistake. We've cleaned this town, an' we mean to keep it clean. If we ain't got a marshal who can make you obey the law, we can durn soon get some of the buckskin boys who will. If you two know what's good for your health, you'll clear out, not only of Sagebrush, but Texas."

"Hark to him, the little sausage!" exclaimed Ullman, with saturnine indulgence. "Why, he speaks up just like he was a man! But there ain't no call for such langwidge. My podner an' me ain't aimin' to break no laws. In fact, we'll help yuh keep any yuh happen to have. We sure will. An' we'll make no trouble, 'less it's made for us. We agree with this stranger that bygones had ought to be bygones, an' that it's a free country

where a man has the right to live where he pleases. That's all we're talkin' about."

"We comes here peaceful an' fraternal, my podner an' me," added White, rolling his pale-blue eyes. "We ain't got no hard feelin's agin' nobody, not even Sam Biggart who's be'n breathin' murder an' death agin' us ever since we've knowed him. We stands for life, liberty an' the pursuit of happiness, no more an' no less. Bygones is bygones, an' we're here to settle down an' help yuh boys make somethin' of this delightful little town what has allus held a tender spot in our lonely hearts. Them's our sentiments."

It was Major Gracie who responded to them:

"Then I bid you gentlemen welcome to Sagebrush. We turn no stranger from our gates. I know nothing about your past, but I'm sure I speak for the intelligent majority present when I say that it's only the future which concerns us. The past is dead, with all its mistakes and tragedies. It would be a very sorry world if none of us ever got another chance, a chance to retrieve past errors. I'm sure that you gentlemen, and Mr. Scoby, mean the best.

"Let us then go forward in harmony and trust to meet the great future which, I feel sure, is waiting for this town. Let us extend the hand of right feeling and good fellowship to everybody. Let us preach the gospel of love and happiness instead of hatred and gloom."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE MAN WHO HAD NO BACKGROUND.

IN the little New Mexico hamlet known as Anton Rosa, Peter was indulging in another period of convalescence, which was in reality but a continuation of the first.

Not only had he been unfit for such a strenuous ride as that necessitated by the escape of the little party from Seconimo and his braves, a ride which had done no good to his recently healed wounds, but it was found that he had been hit by the haphazard volley which the Indians fired as they came swarming down over the rock in pursuit. This wound, while not serious in itself, had been the prime factor in causing his ultimate collapse through loss of blood, blood that he could ill afford to spare.

"Never said a word about it, nuther," commented Hoskins. "I never knowed he was hit. Say"—as Doctor Kemp further exposed the superb torso—"danged if he ain't nothin' but a passel of wownds! I ain't never seen nothin' like it, an' I've seen aplenty. Yet he said he warn't no fightin' man. It must have be'n them redskins. They've tortured him."

"That one was made by a comparatively recent bullet," said the young doctor, designating Ullman's work. "Yes, he's frightfully scarred up. But that isn't all; he has had a bad smash on the head. Wonder it wasn't a compound fracture. Why should his own people treat him like that?"

"Waal, fambly fights is generally the worst, doc. But that ain't sayin' they was his own people, nuther. Them was mostly 'Paches, an' he says his ma was a Comanche. But it 'pears to me, doc, that he's got a moughty white skin for a breed."

"Yes, he doesn't really look as if he had any Indian blood. Yet, of course, he must have."

"I don't know about that," said the teamster, combing his long, flaming beard. "He moughtn't, an' then ag'in he moughtn't."

"But he speaks the language perfectly—acts just like an Indian. And why should he say he was a half-breed if he isn't? It's nothing to boast about, is it?"

"It wouldn't be the fust funny thing he said, or didn't say," replied Hoskins, as he bit off a chew of tobacco and mas-

ticated meditatively. "Him an' me did a lot of yarnin' last night. He claims to be a cow-punch' from Colorado, yet thar's a whole lot of things he ought to know an' don't. Fust off I thought he was hidin' his real name an' occypation, that he had done a killin' or somethin' an' had come in here to hide out, like lots of fellers does. Then I thought he mought be a bit loony. I dunno. Struck me thar was somethin' queer about him, though he didn't want to let on. As fur knowin' all that Injun stuff, he mought have be'n brung up with 'em."

"I see. The survivor, as a baby, of some emigrant massacre? I've heard of such cases. And then, having no memory of his real parents, he was taught to believe that some squaw was his mother?"

"Mebbe. An' mebbe he forgot more'n that. What about that crack yuh say he got on the head? Moughtn't it mebbe make him a bit loony?"

"Why, it's possible," said Kemp slowly. "And, of course, there's such a thing as amnesia, loss of memory. That can come from shock, apart from any physical injury. What put the idea in your head?"

"I dunno. But I recollect a feller that was wownded at Shiloh, clubbed over the head with a Springfield by the Yanks. He warn't what yuh could call crazy, no more'n me, but he had spells when he thought his pa was the Angel Gabriel, an' didn't remember much else. He'd be'n a bugler, an' he said that was whar he learned to bugle—from his Pa Gabriel. I mean it, doc. An' he did, too. That's wusser'n believin' your ma was a Comanche squaw, ain't it?"

Kemp nodded, his speculative gaze on the still unconscious form of Peter.

"Oh, it's quite possible," he said. "The nervous system can play the very devil with us. I've seen some remarkable cases of loss of memory. And that's quite apart from, say, a lesion or a piece of bone pressing on the brain. Now that you mention it, he acted rather queerly on giving his name, as though he had a hard time remembering it. My wife spoke of it. She seems to think there's some mystery about him."

"Waal, the p'int is, what had oughter be done?"

"Why, there's only one thing to do," replied Kemp. "We'll stay here and nurse him. He mustn't be moved, and he couldn't get much better attention than right here."

"But I can't stay," said Hoskins. "I got to go back an' report, git me another wagon team. An' this feller Bland won't stay; he's lightin' out to-day fur the railhead."

"I know he is," smiled Kemp. "By 'we,' I meant my wife and I. There's no business to take us away in a hurry. You see, we're winding up our honeymoon—if you didn't suspect it before—and we've got another month before I'm due home. I wanted to see my wife's country—she's from Phoenix—and we both wanted to see New Mexico. Well, we're seeing it. It won't be any hardship to stay, and I couldn't think of leaving this poor fellow in his present condition, apart from all we owe him. I've got a pocket kit and we'll get along fine."

Hoskins extended a mammoth hand, his homely face alight with pleasure.

"Yuh're shore made of the right stuff, doc. I'm moughty relievedlike. I didn't know what to do, him not bein' fit to hit the trail, an' me havin' to. I didn't want to leave him alone here, nuther. But mebbe it mought be best if yuh was to put Mrs. Kemp in my care an' let me see her safe an' sound to the railhead."

"Why?"

"I dunno. But she's a moughty purty gal, doc, if yuh don't mind an' old-timer sayin' so, an' Injuns ain't the only bad stuff in this country. I ain't got nothin' partic'lar agin' greasers, an' thar's good Mexicans an' bad ones, just the same as

other folks. A womern has nothin' to fear from fellers like Billy, the Kid, nuther. But—waal, I thought mebbe yuh mought feel sorter easier minded like if yuh knowed she were in Denver or some place like that. Times is troubled, an' this country has a moughty bad name. This is a right lonely whistlin' post, too."

"I imagine my wife would have something to say to that proposition," laughed Kemp. "Do you know anything about this particular town?"

"No, I ain't never be'n here before. It's offn my line. Folks like these yere is quiet an' peaceable as a rule, kind-hearted an' hospitable, too. But I weren't thinkin' of 'em. It's the riffraff that comes in from all over. I ain't meanin' to scare yuh, doc, an' I reckon yuh'll have no trouble, but I thought yuh'd oughter know what mought happen. Thar ain't nothin' in this world to beat a purty gal fur makin' trouble, 'thout allus meanin' to."

"Thanks, Hoskins," nodded Kemp. "I understand. I'll speak to my wife, but I'm afraid it will be no use. I don't mean to flatter myself, but I think she'll insist on staying if I do. And she'll take a hand in the nursing of Jones, if that's really his name."

These honeymooners possessed the true spirit of adventure that goes with youth and wholesomeness; and, though devoted to each other, they had plenty of sympathy and affection left over for humanity in general, which is by no means generally the case with young married couples, nor old ones either.

Though Kemp's appearance and bearing gave little indication of the fact, he was one of the leading doctors in the East, consulting specialist and visiting surgeon to Philadelphia's foremost hospital. His wife, daughter of an army officer and old Indian fighter, he had met when she was on a visit to the Quaker City, and their romance had its sequel in the recent marriage.

Their idea of a honeymoon trip, characteristic of both, was to go by easy stages from Phoenix to the new railhead south of the Ratons, camping wherever the spirit moved them, and thus they had fallen in ultimately with Hoskins and Mr. Bland.

The teamster, having no concrete basis for his fears, bade the couple farewell, promising to break his journey on the next trip, make the detour to Anton Rosa, and see how matters stood. Jones should be able to travel by then, and Hoskins could also take the Kemps to the railhead.

He took his departure with mutual regret, but not so Mr. Bland who displayed no concern for Peter. Nor did he even bid the Kemps farewell. He had no thought for any one but himself, the business trip that Seconimo had so rudely interrupted.

"I'm glad he has gone," said Mrs. Kemp. "A perfectly odious man. But I think he might have had the decency to say good-by."

Her husband laughed, his brown eyes twinkling. It was rarely that his wife expressed such an unfavorable opinion of any one.

"His excellency is highly offended, Mary. I saw his attentions were annoying you. I took him aside, and I don't think he liked what I said."

"Oh, I'd no idea you'd noticed, Harvey. I didn't want to make trouble or appear ridiculous. I'm sure he's a wicked man. I preferred his real self, nasty as that was. But this bogus paternal manner—ugh! And it's so hard to counter without appearing a fool."

"Both are his real self, the two sides of his character," said Kemp. "We had a glimpse of the whole man as, I dare say, few of his acquaintances have. Sometimes it happens that way, and then it's a revelation. No, I'm not sorry either that he has gone."

He told her what Hoskins had said concerning Peter.

"It's a suggestion worth considering, Mary. I'm going to have another look at that old head wound, and question him when he's able."

"I'm positive he's no half-breed," said the girl. "Did you ever see such tragic eyes? They haunt me. They seem to be trying to remember something, something that perhaps it would be better not to remember."

Peter protested vigorously when at length he realized the new position of affairs. He wouldn't hear of the Kemps remaining. It was ridiculous. He was all right, perfectly all right. He arose, in order to demonstrate his fitness, and would have fallen but for Kemp.

"You see?" said the doctor amiably. "Nothing like letting a man prove some things for himself. Now you'll be reasonable. Better reconcile yourself to the fact that you'll be in that bed for quite a spell. Yes, quite a spell."

"Why, that bullet hardly touched me!"

"It's not that particular bullet, Jones, though it cost you a lot of blood. Everything has a breaking point, including the camel's back. I'd say you've been through a period of tremendous stress and strain, physical and mental. If you don't want to be a complete nervous wreck, you won't try to rush things. And I'm here to see that you don't."

"But the idea of you and your wife staying in this hole simply on my account——"

"Never mind me and my wife," broke in Kemp, with his broad smile. "If it comes to that, we wouldn't be anywhere but for you. Don't think we're putting ourselves out by staying. Not a bit of it. There's grand scenery and air and sunshine, and we intend to enjoy ourselves immensely. It may be a hole, Jones, but it's quaint, picturesque. And the food is good, the Widow Suarez kind. Moreover, I'm learning Spanish and can practice on the natives. No need to worry about us. Turn over and have a good sleep, and maybe you'll be allowed bacon and frijoles for supper."

There followed golden days of peace and quietude for Peter as his racked body yielded to Kemp's skillful treatment, and the complete rest it craved. He was content to do as he was told, to lie in a sort of waking stupor, indifferent alike to the past and future, too lazy even to make an effort at thought.

His environment, apart from his condition, was conducive to such mental and physical inertia, for he was among a people whose national proverb was, in substance, "Never do to-day what can be done to-morrow"—a to-morrow that never comes. Added to this was the fact that the Lincoln County war had denuded the little hamlet of whatever virility and enterprise it may have once possessed. Which is to say that four men had gone south to sell their rifles.

Even in this far-distant little hill village, the rival factions had their adherents, though the Murphy sympathizers were in a pronounced minority. Three men had joined McSween, while but one was fighting with the forces of the Big Store. Anton Rosa's population now consisted of a few old men, young boys and women. The men sat in the sun all day, smoking brown-paper cigarettes, quarreling lazily with the Jiminez clan, whose representative had thought it more profitable to side with Major Murphy, while the boys tended the scanty herds, and the women did the work.

But even the women did no more work than their lords bade them, and not always then. And nobody really cared very much what was happening in the south. They were too lazy and amiable even to work up an active quarrel among themselves. Some day the men who had gone would return, bringing with them much money, and that was all that really mattered. Meanwhile, let

the gringos fight it out. It was good to drowse in the sun, smoke endless cigarettes, and talk of their youth.

The coming of Peter and his party caused tremendous but brief excitement; rarely had a strange gringo come to Anton Rosa, let alone five, among them a señora who was both young and beautiful. But the village triumphantly recovered from the shock and, soon after the departure of Hoskins and Bland, sank again into its invincible lethargy.

The Kemps and Peter became part of the scenery; the inhabitants accepted them, as they accepted everything, with a shrug and smile. Undoubtedly the Widow Suarez was fortunate; these people were rich and paid generously in gold. Foolishly rich, for they insisted on paying for what they might have had for nothing, hospitality to the stranger within the gates being perhaps the one shining local virtue. But if the Americanos wished to pay, that was the will of Heaven. Felicia Suarez deserved her good fortune, but they envied her.

Peter's mental inertia did not last very long; a few days of complete rest and he began the old game of trying to make something of the impenetrable past. But the most maddening puzzle ever conceived was child's play to the puzzle of his identity. Now and then he felt as if he were on the verge of discovering a tangible clew, as if a ray of light were about to penetrate the darkness that filled his brain—no longer a quiet, peaceful darkness—but the clew always eluded him, the revealing light never came.

Mary Kemp interested him greatly. His wistful eyes followed wherever she went in the room. Her presence delighted, yet saddened. She awoke in him the old sense of misery, of irreparable loss, that defied definition. In answer to adroit questions, he told her many things about the cow-puncher, Tad Jones, and these she relayed to her husband.

At length Kemp, now satisfied that Hoskins' guess was correct, taxed Peter with the truth. And he made it clear that by attempting to hide his secret, Peter was only making his condition worse.

"I know just how you feel," he said. "You think we'll imagine you're crazy, or that you're hiding your true identity on purpose, that you've committed a crime or something."

"And how do you know I haven't?"

"Oh, that would be impossible," said Mary Kemp. "There are some things one doesn't have to be told. We *know* you're not a criminal."

"Then you know more than I do, but thanks all the same," said Peter, with a smile. "No, my name isn't Jones, though it may be for all I know. I mean I'm not conscious that it is Jones. I really don't know what it is."

"We've no doubt of that," nodded Kemp. "Now you mustn't regard me merely as a doctor, but as a friend. That's why we've stayed, my wife and I; not only to cure your body, but mind. The two may be one and the same. We'll see. But my interest in you is much more than academic. You want to get rid of the idea that there is something shameful in your condition, or the fear that your true identity may be one we shouldn't care to know. All that only tends to retard your physical recovery. Far better to talk it all out freely with us."

Peter said nothing, and Kemp added:

"I've been studying you, my friend, and I should say that two of your salient characteristics are independence and pride. Not vanity, which is a very different thing, but pride of power and accomplishment. I think you've been accustomed to go your own gait, taking help from nobody, and now it has the effect of making you cover up this ailment as though it were a shameful

weakness. You've been laid low by a power outside yourself, and you aren't accustomed to being floored by anything or anybody."

"That may be," conceded Peter. "I don't know. I'm quite willing to talk, only I've got nothing to talk about. I mean I can't tell you anything about myself, for I don't know. I can't remember. I don't know how I even got this way. Nothing."

"Oh, it's quite easy to understand," said Kemp cheerfully. "You didn't invent this sort of thing, you know. Get rid of the idea that it's some rare and incurable malady peculiar to yourself. Why, I've handled dozens of cases! Every war always leaves a big legacy of that kind. I've known cases where the victim didn't even know there was anything wrong with him. You aren't as bad as that. Then there's dual personality, a more mysterious and difficult job yet. A man believes himself to be somebody else, maybe not even a real character but one he has read about in some book. Oh, the mind plays queer tricks, and it can happen to any of us. It usually happens only to brainy people, so comfort yourself with that. Of course, if one has no brains, nothing can go wrong with them."

Peter laughed. Kemp's cheerful, offhand manner was a tonic, an antidote to worry and depression, the nameless fears that beset him.

"Now your case is simply temporary loss of memory, nothing at all to worry about," continued the young doctor. "And the immediate cause is quite clear —what you went through at the hands of those red devils."

"Seconimo? I don't know about that," said Peter. "They nursed me, you know. One of them tried to kill me later on, but I don't remember that they did anything else."

"But they must have. You've had a bad blow on the head, apart from other wounds. That must have happened when they captured you. You put up a fight, of course. What I don't understand is why they let you live."

"Oh, I understand that part," said Mrs. Kemp. "Even though they themselves caused the loss of memory. they attribute the result to the Great Spirit."

"That's right," nodded Peter. "And I played up to it. Then it happened that Eagle Feather, the buck that tried to kill me, dropped dead of heart failure, and I claimed the credit of that. They thought I was under the protection of the Great Spirit, and that's all that saved me from the torture."

"And you don't know what led to your capture by the Indiana?"

"No, not a thing. I'll tell you just what my head feels like, as if it was full of some black, sticky liquid. And when I try to think of what happened before I woke up on the rock, with a buck giving me something to drink, this stuff in my head begins to boil. Bubbles come up, and I think if only one of them would burst it would give out light, make everything a bit clear. But they never do burst. I know it sounds crazy, but that's just how my head feels."

"Don't try to think," said Kemp. "It will all come out right, one way or another. It may be shock or that head wound, perhaps both. I can't say. If it's simply shock, then you'll get better as your physical health improves with rest and quiet. If it's more than that, say some pressure on the brain caused by that blow, then we'll have to have an operation. But there are no facilities here, so you'll have to come with us, say, to St. Louis.

"You see I'm talking quite frankly and in plain layman's language," he concluded, with his broad engaging smile. "There's no need to make a mystery about it, and I want you to understand that you're no freak. Think only of getting well. When you're able to travel we'll make every effort, if neces-

sary, to find your people. Whatever material clew of your past you possessed—and you must have had something—is in the hands of those redskins. But don't worry; everything will come out all right, old man, and maybe far sooner than you think."

CHAPTER XXIII.

AN ENTERPRISING OLD MAN.

ONE day another gringo, a sallow, pockmarked man who called himself Sam Adams, drifted into Anton Rosa on his way to Colorado. He was a rolling stone, one who had done a little of everything almost everywhere, including time in jail—a type common to the West and particularly New Mexico.

The Kemps were indoors and Peter was sunning himself in front of Felicia Suarez's dobe. He was growing stronger daily and only that morning had attempted to shave with a borrowed razor. But his memory had not improved with his general health and it had been practically decided that, on Hoskins' return, Peter should accompany the Kemps to the railhead and undergo an examination in hospital.

The Suarez's dobe, on the outskirts of the village, was the first house that Adams must pass, and he stopped his broncho and burro as a matter of course, to exchange greetings with Peter. Then he passed on into the village and came upon Miguel Jiminez, with whom he had further conversation.

Miguel was the patriarch of the flock whose minority in the matter of Murphy versus McSween was purely numerical. And numbers do not always count. Which is to say that, though three members of three different families had joined McSween, the solitary Murphy recruit was reckoned locally more than their equal. Miguel was very proud of this man, Pancho Jiminez, his grandson, and given to much boasting. Miguel felt his absence greatly.

"Jones, huh?" said Adams, who had straightway brought the conversation round to Peter. Is that his name?"

"*Si,*" nodded Miguel, and proceeded to tell all he knew about Felicia Suarez's boarders, and more than he did not know.

This patriarch flattered himself that he was a reader of men, and he believed that he had summed up Mr. Adams' character with exactitude. His envy of the Widow Suarez's good fortune had been mounting steadily since the night when he peeped through the Kemps' bedroom window and saw the joint treasure chest.

"They are rich, señor," he said presently, a brown claw on Adams' arm, his little black eyes on the other's unlovely face. "Of exceeding wealth. I myself have seen it. It is Señor Kemp who carries the bright gold pieces in a belt ***under*** his clothes. Mark that, señor. And the señora, she has much lovely green-and-golden paper money also concealed."

The pockmarked man raised a skeptical blue eye.

"Thought yuh said they was captured by the 'Paches?"

"So the tale goes," replied the patriarch. "But either they escaped before this great wealth was discovered, concealed as it is so cunningly, or——" He spread his hands. "But what matter so long as it is here, señor? I myself have seen it. It is great wealth."

"Huh," grunted Mr. Adams.

"It is wrong for such people to possess such great wealth," pursued Grandpa Jiminez. "They spend it foolishly. There are others who need it more and who would spend it much more wisely. Of that I am sure. Times are hard, señor, and very little real money comes one's way. It is not good to spurn Heaven's gifts."

Mr. Adams grunted again and squirted tobacco juice in the dust.

"There is no longer any enterprise

here," said Grandpa Jiminez, with a shake of his venerable head. "Consider, señor: But two men and a woman. One of the men is a coward and weakling, the other a cheerful fool. A coward, a fool, and a woman."

"Which one might yuh be namin' a coward?"

"Señor Jones. He has but arisen from many days abed from a very little wound, one at which a real man would laugh. A poor weakling."

"Huh."

"I have approached some of my friends with this matter, señor, but there is no enterprise here. They complain of years and infirmities. And such very little enterprise is needed. I should like to have some gold pieecs in order to prepare a fitting feast for my most magnificent grandson when he returns. It would be a great pity if this wealth, of which I have spoken, were to go elsewhere. A chance like this does not come twice in a lifetime, nor does it deserve to, señor.

"Consider that even if anything should happen to these people it could safely be said, if any should happen to inquire, that they went elsewhere. But I do not contemplate such a necessity. I am an old man, señor, yet I am full of enterprise. And this great wealth would be equally divided among the two concerned in its capture. Two, señor; no more. Consider."

"Well," said Adams with finality, as he arose and stretched, "I ain't one of 'em. And, if yuh take my advice, pop, yuh won't be nuther. No, sir, I don't want nothin' to do with it. I got other ideas of enterprise."

The patriarch was deeply hurt, especially at his failure to read the visitor's character aright, but he carried the matter off with a childlike smile and the assurance that it was all a joke. And Adams, apparently believing this, proceeded on his way without further delay.

But, as a matter of fact, Grandpa Jiminez had not erred in his estimation of the other's character, nor was he even ignorant of the truth that there are occasions when fear is superior to the greatest cupidity. His failure lay in not recognizing that this was one of the occasions, but then he had no means of learning that Adams had recognized Peter.

It was not superior morality but fear that induced the visitor to decline Miguel's proposal. His fingers itched to seize the gold, but his feet itched more strongly to get away. Under ordinary circumstances he would have welcomed with open arms the suggested robbery, and then refused Grandpa Jiminez his just share, but the present circumstances were far from ordinary. For Adams' real name was Royce.

Royce had been Bargendy's chief lieutenant, more intimate even than Ullman or White. He had participated with his chief in the murder of Star-eyes, Peter's foster sister. He had led the returning band of gold thieves which Peter ambushed at Sentinel Butte. Lamed by a bullet, he pleaded for his life, and Peter gave it on the understanding that Royce leave the gold untouched and make good his escape before a posse found him. Royce gave his solemn promise, and broke it.

Ullman and White, fleeing that night before the arrival of Peter, had been farther sped by the happy idea of stealing the gold for themselves. They had found Royce, lone survivor of the ambush, possessed of the same idea, and the three of them split the spoils and struck for New Mexico, where they parted company eventually. Ullman and White soon squandered their share in Santa Fe and Taos, while Royce, preferring to put more space between himself and the terrible Calvert, changed his name and drifted on down to Arizona. His life was forfeit, for Peter's last words had been that if Royce

touched the gold he would shoot him on sight.

That he should come upon the Lightning Bug sitting placidly outside a Mexican dobe in this little sequestered village, was the last thing that Royce had expected or wished. He knew the folly of trying to draw a weapon, how dangerous was Calvert's seeming negligence and immobility. He had been paralyzed with fear. Then the truth dawned on him: Calvert was not playing the cat-and-mouse game; he had actually failed to recognize him! And so "Adams," after a chat to disarm suspicion, passed on in safety.

This was the reason his advice to Miguel had been so vague. Royce did not feel called upon to warn the patriarch that "Jones" was a bad hombre to meddle with, the worst possible in the whole West, because such information would entail an explanation he wished to avoid. He must do nothing that would tend to assist Calvert's recognition of him. He did not want that devil camping on his trail. He must admit to no one that they had met before, and he must not linger in Anton Rosa. He had a fearfully narrow escape.

This meeting with Peter, and the tale he had heard from Miguel, changed Royce's plans. Instead of heading for the Ratons, he turned toward the Panhandle, which now held no terrors for him. Sudden death lay behind, not in front.

Kemp came out of the dobe as Royce bade Miguel farewell. From his window he had glimpsed the visitor talking with Peter.

"Who's that fellow?" he now asked casually, nodding at the distant horseman.

"Stranger by the name of Adams. On his way to Colorado."

"I thought he looked scared," commented the doctor.

"Well, maybe he's had good reason. He's been down in Lincoln County." Peter laughed, then grew serious. "Look here, doc; I wish you and Mrs. Kemp wouldn't wait for Hoskins. There's no telling when he may show up, and you could make the railhead without him. There are plenty traveling that way, once you hit the main trail."

"Yes, but you aren't fit to travel yet. Now you needn't argue about it."

"Well, if you insist, I could stay here and wait for Hoskins."

"But you're coming with us. When we do go, we'll go together. There's plenty of time yet. Get rid of this idea that you're holding us up. I tell you, this holiday's been coming to me."

"It's not that," said Peter. "You're carrying a good bit of money, doc, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Kemp, looking his surprise. "Far more than a man needs for a honeymoon trip like this. But most of it is my wife's. She came into a legacy, sort of a wedding present, and it took the form of cash instead of checks or drafts. But how did you know? We thought it a dead secret, and I'm sure we haven't been scattering largesse about."

"All the same it's known," said Peter. "And it's no haphazard guess either, the taking for granted that every Americano is rich. You see, I speak Spanish. Nobody knows that here. I don't know why I'm able to speak it, any more than I know why I can do other things. But I thought it might be an ace in the hole if folks thought I could understand no more than the average gringo, a few words here and there. And I've got pretty good ears, too."

"Foxy," commented Kemp, with a laugh. "I wonder how much more you've got up your sleeve. Your past must have been full of danger to make you now so instinctively wary and suspicious. Maybe you were a detective. So you don't trust these simple people here?"

"I don't trust many folk where money and women are concerned," said Peter. "Leave those two out, and there aren't many temptations left. I've been hearing a good many things. That old boy Miguel Jiminez, who looks like a sunburned saint, has been spying. He knows just about how much money you've got, and where you and your wife carry it. I overheard him talking to one of his cronies the other day."

"The venerable rascal!" exclaimed Kemp, far more amused than concerned. "And he's such a pious old fellow! Of course, it must simply have been curiosity, but we'll have a jug of water ready for him next time he comes. Of course, you aren't suggesting seriously that we're in any danger from these bone-lazy octogenarians?"

"That fellow Adams was telling me," said Peter, as though changing the subject, "that McSween's been killed and his men driven out of Lincoln. Billy, the Kid's, on the run, and his old pal, Garrett, is to be made sheriff. That means the fighting is pretty well over —if that stranger is right. You've heard maybe of old Jiminez's magnificent grandson?"

"Yes," nodded Kemp. "A fine fellow, from all accounts."

"Uh-huh. What old Jiminez would call 'full of enterprise.'"

"He hasn't been killed?"

"Not yet," said Peter dryly. "A fine cutthroat, from all I can gather, and cock of the walk when he was here. The point is, he may be here again, doc. He'll soon be out of a job, and others like him."

Kemp laughed. His experience of the West was small and, because he had met with no trouble or danger from any but Indians, he thought that all the talk about New Mexico was grossly exaggerated. Indians were a different matter, nor were their depredations and outrages confined to that particular Territory.

"Settlers are afraid to come here," he said, "but it's the Lincoln County feud that has made all the talk. Why, I believe they're even talking of sending General Lew Wallace out as governor to cope with the supposed terrible conditions! But I've seen things for myself. The rest of the country is all right, and we weren't even molested by the warring factions as we came up near Lincoln. In any case, we wouldn't think of leaving without you, especially if there's any chance of a bit of excitement."

"I thought Seconimo had given you enough excitement. Those Injuns have been rounded up by this time, but there's no law to cope with the 'simple' people here. If you take my advice, you and your wife will leave for the railhead."

"Nonsense."

"All right," yawned Peter. "Maybe I'm wrong, but I thought I'd tell you what was on my mind."

CHAPTER XXIV.

PERSONALITY PLUS.

TIME passed; days became weeks, and weeks finally a month, without any sign of Peter's warning proving true. He was now physically fit and, as Hoskins had not appeared, they meant to leave without him. Something must have delayed the teamster, for they could not believe that he had forgotten their existence.

Peter kept urging their departure, saying he was quite fit to sit a horse, and finally it was agreed to leave on the morrow. But that night the magnificent grandson and two companions arrived in Anton Rosa.

Pancho's magnificence was not apparent outwardly for he was a soiled and ill-favored-looking man, crudely and unusually robust for a Mexican. Thick, bandy legs were topped by a barrellike chest, and it was evident that

sheer brute strength, apart from his much-talked-of skill with the "pistola," had played its part in helping him to dominate his neighbors.

There was no question of this person's enterprise, and the first intimation that Peter had of Pancho's presence in Anton Rosa was the arrival of Señora Suarez in his room some time after midnight. He was a very light sleeper, and the first thing she knew she was confronting the sore end of one of the Colts that usually hung at the head of his cot.

"Don't shoot, señor! It is only I, Felicia Suarez. There is much veree great trouble. Pancho Jiminez, he have come."

"The devil!" yawned Peter. "Why couldn't he wait till morning? He has no consideration."

She glanced at him, then put down the candle with steady hand and explained the situation fully in quiet, unhurried tones. She had been a brave young girl, and she was now a brave old woman. She looked ludicrous in her night attire, yet invested it and her obesity with a certain dignity.

Pancho and his companions were in the Kemps' room. They had come for the gold, and more. No help need be expected from the rest of the villagers, for those who did not subscribe to such actions would be too frightened or impotent to interfere. They had envied her her good fortune. Pancho would distribute some of the gold and, if any inquiry should happen to be made in official quarters, all would be ready to swear that the gringos had departed from Anton Rosa long ago. They had no choice but to do as Pancho willed. She put it thus, in defense of her neighbors, though it was clear that she had little or no faith in their ethics.

Yes, they were in very great danger. Pancho, always wicked and reckless, had not been improved by his recent experiences in the south. Law of a sort was coming to Lincoln County, and he had no use for law. He was master here, and he and his companions meant to take up the old profitable game of stealing cattle. He would slit the throat of Mrs. Suarez if he knew what she was telling now. But her hospitality had been violated and she cared for her paying guests, especially Señora Kemp. Señor Jones possessed weapons, she knew. If he gave her a pistol she would do her poor best to aid him. He was not one to fight such a man as Pancho, apart from the others. But where else could she seek help?

By this time Peter, who slept in shirt and trousers, had stepped into his moccasins and slipped on the shoulder holsters. His movements were unhurried and punctured with yawns. He looked more bored than concerned. All this could have been avoided if Doc Kemp hadn't been so cheerfully bull-headed.

"That's all right, *querido,*" he said, with one of his sudden rare smiles, as he patted her opulent shoulder. "Don't you worry; I'll attend to the rest. This holy terror thinks you're asleep, or too scared or complaisant to interfere? *Bueno!* Now you trot along back to bed. You don't know anything about these goings on. You've got to go on living among these simple folk, but I don't. You leave it to me. You've done fine."

Señora Suarez eyed him for a long moment steadily. It was a revealing moment, yet perhaps she had been prepared for it in some measure. At all events she smiled, nodded, and waddled from the room without further argument or trace of anxiety. She was a shrewd and discerning old dame who had known life.

She was still smiling when she slipped into her own room. This young Americano—ah, what a caballero, what a *galanteador!* His silence and gloom had departed at the first whiff of danger. He had smiled and called her

"sweetheart," because he knew her heart was not old and wrinkled like her face. A man of surprises. He could speak Spanish like one of her own people—and he could fight. Of that she was assured. This was a man!

She stood listening, intent, keyed up, but without anxiety, the smile still on her lips. That *muchacho* Pancho Jiminez was due for a surprise from this supposed weakling and coward. Assuredly, yes.

In the same unhurried manner Peter took down his coat which he had not worn since his convalescence. As he put it on he felt a weight in one of the side pockets, and this, on examination, proved to be a bottle. He looked at it curiously. What was in it? How had it come there? Whisky, no doubt, from its color. If he had been fond of the liquor in the past, fond enough to carry it about like this, why had he no inclination for it now?

He tossed the bottle on the bed and stepped to the door, his moccasined tread soundless. His room, like that of Señora Suarez's, was at the back, the Kemps' in front, opposite the living room which served also as kitchen and dining room. These were all the house contained.

He heard voices, a laugh, a rousing oath in Spanish as he walked up the short hall. A splash of golden lamplight came from the partly open door of the Kemps' room. There was no particular hurry, and Peter walked leisurely for he knew his men. They had feasted before coming here, feasted as returned warriors, and they had all the time in the world to enjoy themselves. Pancho was sure to conduct matters in flamboyant style, ape the grand caballero.

Peter leaned negligently against the wall and looked into the room.

Kemp had passed through the stages of astonishment, indignation, profanity, violence. His skepticism had been shattered beyond recovery. It had been borne in on him that this was no prank of village louts, and that all his threats about the *soldados* and Uncle Sam were as futile as his struggles. He might as well try to expound the beauties of international law to a trio of apes in the African jungle. He sat trussed in a chair, and there was a great purple weal across his white, convulsed face.

Mrs. Kemp was crouched as far back as possible, and Pancho was thumping his protuberant chest and addressing her as: "Flower of my heart." He had been agreeably and stupendously astonished. Grandpa had spoken of much gold, but not of much beauty. It was the way of age; it had no thought but for gold. But he, Pancho Jiminez —ah, what a difference! A veree gran' caballero, a gran' *galanteador,* a great *soldado* who have fight and make fine name wiz the gringos, he lay his heart at her so beautiful feet. One leetle kees, *querido mio*——

"*Hola, amigos.* Say, what's going on here?"

They turned at the casual words, the two who were busy counting the money, and Pancho who suddenly ceased his oration.

Peter had glided like a shadow into the room, selecting his position with unerring instinct. He now stood with his back to the open window, whose displaced blanket evidenced the entry of the intruders, where the lamplight was more concealing than revealing. Ordinarily the best of strategic positions. His arms were crossed on his chest, the hands half hidden in the bagging coat as though for warmth. There was no menace in the attitude. He seemed curious, mildly interested.

Pancho's hand, and those of his companions, which had flashed to the hip, paused, dropped. This gringo was harmless, not even armed. He was obviously the coward and weakling of whom they had heard.

"Run away!" said Pancho imperiously, waving a hairy paw. "Vamos queek, if you don't wish to be veree much hurt. This ees no place for you —now. Me, Pancho Jiminez, the great *soldado,* have come, and thees leetle turtle dove, she choose another *querido.* Is ess not so, flower of my heart?"

Kemp cursed him, and the crimson leaped to his wife's cheek, but Peter remained unmoved.

"Listen, my fat friend," he said, in liquid Spanish. "You and I will discuss this matter elsewhere. For your own sake I beseech you to be reasonable. The señora is not for you, nor the gold either. Go home and to bed."

"Ho, ho, ho!" laughed Pancho, though his little eyes were nasty. "The white cockerel ruffles his feathers at the great black eagle? Let the little bird take wing before its heart is plucked out. Vamos! I have lose patience. Pancho Jiminez, the great *soldado,* is master here."

"I don't think so," said Peter. "Let's settle it outside. I don't want to kill you and your friends here; pigs always make such a mess."

It was at this moment that something swished through the air and fell with a resounding smack on the back of Peter's head. It was not his fault that the position he had selected was strategic to more than himself. He had been told that but three men were involved, and consequently had not reckoned on a fourth in the rear.

Grandpa Jiminez climbed through the window, the haft of a mattock in his skinny but capable hands, and a twinkle in his beady eyes. The old dog had proved a bit wiser than the pup, insisting on remaining outdoors. He possessed more enterprise than even Peter had imagined.

"What did I tell you, my son? Always guard the rear; one never knows," he said, contemplating with satisfaction the result of his wallop. *"Caramba!* A stick for a fool. Presently he will recover—— No, do not harm him further. A poor fool who will have sense when he wakes. Where is the gold?"

Miguel spoke far better than he knew, for when Peter awoke it was with full and complete knowledge of the past, knowledge of his true identity. What nursing and medicine had failed to, a rude blow had done. A mattock haft instead of the surgeon's scalpel. Violence had robbed him of memory, and violence had given it back.

None but Peter knew of the miracle that was being wrought in that little room; they saw merely a man recovering slowly from a knock-out blow, a fool who had learned his lesson. He had struggled to a sitting posture, holding his head with both hands, and rocking back and forth. He seemed dazed, as indeed he was; dazed by the sudden rolling up of the curtain that had hid his past. Nor could he see as yet in detail all that it revealed.

"Vamos!" ordered Miguel, as Peter gained his feet. He shook the stick at him as though the other were a naughty child, his own peculiar property. "Go, ere worse befall you, fool. Vamos pronto!"

"Listen!" commanded Peter, and stretched out a hand. "I give every man a fair break. I don't want to do murder. I reckon you've heard of Smoke Calvert, the Lightnin" Bug? Well, that's my name."

They stared, they laughed, they roared. Even Pancho forgot for a moment that he had been called a fat pig. Assuredly they had heard of Calvert; who had not? They had also heard of Santa Claus. Quite as likely that this weakling who had been caught by such a moldy trick, knocked flat by Grandpa Jiminez's lurking stick, should be either. What a feeble Americano bluff!

"The so great Cal-vairt, ees it?" said Pancho, with a smile that was a snarl.

"I veree please to meet wiz you. I greet you as one gran' *soldado* to another. I wring your so miserable neck wiz my bare hand!"

"Stand! I'm warnin' yuh for the last time. Clear out of here, yuh fat hoptoad, or come a-shootin'!"

Something in the cold, level voice and eyes, if not words, stayed the headlong rush that Pancho was about to make. Perhaps also something in Peter's pose. No sign of a weapon, but those negligently crossed arms—— Yes, Pancho had heard vivid, sinister tales even here in Mexico, tales of miracle gun play in comparison with which his own accomplishments seemed child's play. The wiping out of the notorious Wilson brothers in distant Washoo, the mirror shot in Timberly, the death of Lon Bargendy—and always the prelude had been these carelessly folded arms. *This* the Lightnin' Bug? Incredible, impossible! He, Pancho Jiminez, was not to be bluffed. Still it might be just as well to be——

His hand crept up to his hip.

"That's right, draw!" said Peter with a thin smile, not moving a muscle. "Pull her right out. An' yuh other boys, too. Let's see how quick yuh are. I can give the best man livin' five seconds, and I can give yuh three, ten.

"Stand, yuh old polecat! Drop that haft, and drop her quick!"

Grandpa Jiminez, who had another enterprising idea, that of hurling the mattock handle from his advantageously oblique position, jumped as though he had been shot and obeyed mechanically. He had had no idea that Peter could even see him. Assuredly something was wrong here. It was ridiculous to obey this man, absurd to fear him, yet he did both. Why? Personality? Or merely the power of a name?

"Shoot, my son!" he urged, though careful himself not to move a finger. "Is the great Pancho to be outfaced by an impostor? Shoot!"

But Pancho was in no hurry, nor his companions either. Pancho was not used to such a situation, and his Latin imagination was running riot. He had already lost, lost when he did not act on the instant. To fight bravely from ambush, or in the heat of battle—ah, that was very different from provoking the unknown. Superstition was also at work. Popular report had it that, apart from all else, Calvert possessed a *payé*, a talisman that made him invulnerable. It must be true. How else had he survived his many enemies? Who else would now comport himself so recklessly?

Pancho could not bring himself to break the terrible tension, a tension that hurt like physical pain. If only one of his followers would make a move, do something to snap it—but, no; they were poor creatures at best, cravens who looked to him for every lead. An impostor? Perhaps. But he could not meet this Americano's eye, that steady, freezing, sardonic stare. And in some nameless, miraculous manner this Americano had changed since first he entered the room.

Yes, it was more than the power of a name. Now it was personality plus that power. Peter knew who he was. He had a background. Hitherto instinct alone had guided him, but now he had exact knowledge. All his past rose up to support him, clothed him with the garments of authority, invincible confidence. Yes, there was a change, a change which the Kemps themselves felt, as though some great electric force were sweeping through the room.

"Come, come," said Peter, with his thin smile. "Where's all this great *soldado* talk we were hearing about? Or does it apply only to women? I'm waitin'."

Still there was no response, no movement, and he walked slowly toward the group that seemed to shrink visibly at his approach. He halted in front of

Pancho and tried to catch and hold the other's furtive eye.

"Gimme that gun, and give it butt first. Try the roll, if you like. Pronto!"

He held out his left hand, the right still concealed, and Pancho, without any attempt at trickery, reversing the weapon on its trigger guard, laid his six-shooter meekly in Peter's palm.

"You two next," said Peter. "Stick yuhr hardware on that table. You don't seem to have any particular need for it, and it'll be just as ornamental there. Now clear out, and take grandpa with you. And listen here; if you've still got any doubts about me bein' Calvert, I'll give a demonstration yuh'll remember only in hell. Let me catch sight of one of yuh around this house again and I'll stiffen yuh proper. Vamos!"

CHAPTER XXV.

FRIEND OR FOE?

BY George," Kemp was saying excitedly in Peter's room, "I never saw anything like it! I wouldn't have believed it possible if I hadn't actually seen it. It was wonderful, even granting that they're only Mexicans. The triumph of the Anglo-Saxon mind and temperament over the Latin. You had 'em buffaloed. A great piece of bluff, magnificent acting! Why, darn it all, you had even *me and my wife* believing you were this holy terror, Smoke Calvert! It's a fact. Booth himself never cast such a spell."

"But I am Calvert. It wasn't acting."

Kemp's jaw dropped and his eyes popped. Then he looked suddenly concerned, as though fearing for Peter's sanity.

"That's all right," laughed Peter. "This isn't a case of a fellow thinking he's somebody he has heard of. It's a cold, blessed fact, doc. That wallop put me right. I don't know why it did, but it did. Surest thing you know. You couldn't bluff those hombres, Mexicans or not. A gun fighter knows his kind, just as a crook knows his. I'd have blown the buttons off 'em, and they knew it. I'm Calvert, the Lightnin' Bug. I'm not bragging about it, but that's my name, all right."

"Well!" Kemp expelled a long breath. "You drop a watch and it stops ticking; drop it again, and it may start to tick. So the mystery of the mind. I believe you. Your eyes now have something they lacked; they tell the story. This is great news!"

He walked up and down the room, gesticulating, exclaiming:

"So you're the famous Calvert? I knew you must have a colorful background. The Lightnin' Bug! And a mighty good thing for us you are. I should say so. By George, you must have a story to tell! Let's have it."

"First of all," said Peter, his face hard and set, "I want you to tell *me* something, and tell me straight. Have I got consumption? I'm feeling all right, right as rain, but have I?"

"I should say not," replied Kemp, looking perplexed. "Where did you get that idea?"

Peter was stripping off his shirt with a composure and deliberation that was almost unnatural in the circumstances.

"I got it from a doctor, and a good doctor, too," he said. "One of the best. There's no question I had consumption. When I left Sagebrush I'd only one lung left. Maybe another miracle has happened and I'm cured. Anyway, I'm not dead, so I must be getting better. I've been living next to the ground, like Doc Day told me to. I want you to tell me the truth. It means a lot—everything—to me."

"Of course, I haven't the facilities for making the usual sort of examination," said Kemp, "but I guess I know a consumptive when I see one. I'll bet you anything you like that your lungs are as sound as the proverbial bell."

He tapped Peter back and front, made him exhale, examined him thoroughly.

"You're all right," he said at length, with a laugh. "I don't care if you'd no lungs when you left Sagebrush, you've picked up a fine pair of bellows somewhere along the road. Particularly fine. Nothing at all the matter with you."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. Any doctor would tell you the same. Put this tuberculosis idea out of your head. You'll never die from that. Take my word for it—and let me add for your benefit, and not my vanity, that my word means something in the medical world. I was a fool about those Mexicans, and I'm a fool in lots of ways, but I'm no fool at my own job. I'm supposed to be a whale on the lungs. You may have housemaid's knee, but not consumption."

Peter gripped Kemp's hand so hard that the other winced. This was Peter's sole display of emotion, his reception of news that changed the whole world for him.

"I tell you this is a far greater miracle than the job on my head," he said, with attempted lightness. "I was given about a month to stay above ground. It's a fact. I'd always heard that this is a great country for curing consumption, but I didn't know just how great it was. I'm the best walking advertisement it could have.

"The funny part of it is that I didn't know I was cured, just as I forgot that I was due to cash in. I wonder if that had anything to do with it, apart from the sort of life I led among the Injuns. I mean when I lost my memory I lost with it the knowledge I had consumption, and so I didn't do any worrying about it."

"Certainly the mind has a great deal to do with one's health," conceded Kemp. "Far more than most people imagine. But as for being able to cure consumption by one's mind——" He smiled and shook his head. "No, we haven't come to that yet."

"Then it was my life up on the rock, next to the ground. Certainly it wasn't Kalmetz's serum, for I didn't take any of it."

"Kalmetz's serum?"

"Yes, the great Vienna lung specialist, you know. Doc Day got me a bottle of the stuff as a sort of forlorn hope. But I jumped up a couple of old enemies before I'd a chance to try it. It was those jaspers, Ullman and White, who knocked me loco. The Injuns had nothing to do with it."

"I see. But why did you leave Sagebrush? Was it to try living in the open? For obviously you could have used this serum at home."

Peter was sitting with clasped hands, his eyes on the floor. He seemed to be thinking of more than he intended saying, marshaling all the events of the past few months and making a selection for Kemp's benefit.

"Yes, obviously," he agreed. "But then there was the big question of contagion. You see, I'm engaged to be married. I couldn't marry with one lung, and I couldn't run the risk of passing the disease on to Miss Vickers, my fiancée. I had to clear out. There was nothing else for it."

"I see," said Kemp again. "That was a mighty hard position to be in."

"It was the hardest thing I ever did in my life, doc, and I've done some."

"I'm sure it was. But what had Miss Vickers to say about it?"

"She couldn't say anything for she didn't know."

"Oh, I see. But was that quite fair to her?"

"No, but I'd no choice. If she had known, she'd have wanted to nurse me, go wherever I went. She's that kind. So I couldn't tell her anything about it. That's what helped to make it so hard.

I had to write two letters——" And he went on to explain what had happened on his return to Sagebrush, Doctor Day's fatal announcement, and then the chance meeting with Ullman and White.

"At the time I didn't know who had gunned me," he added, "but I recognized them later when I came round for a moment. I don't understand how I was able to escape, why they didn't dry-gulch me. This *payé* that they claim I have must have been working overtime."

"It's a wonderful tale," mused Kemp, his brown eyes bright with interest. "One of the strangest I ever heard"

"Well, you see now what it means to me. It means I can go back and get married!"

"It will be a shock to your fiancée, Calvert. As I understand it, she was given the second letter months ago by your medical friend, and so she believes you're dead. This would explain then why there has been no search for you. Miss Vickers must have been through a terrible time."

"You bet. If I'd only known I was cured, or who I was, I could have let her know long ago. I've got to light out for Sagebrush pronto, but I'll see you and Mrs. Kemp safely on your way."

The young doctor tossed aside his cigarette and arose.

"There may be more in this business than you imagine, Calvert," he said slowly. "I've got to tell you something: Tuberculosis isn't so highly contagious as you believe, and there's no great lung specialist called Kalmetz, Vienna or otherwise. Your medical friend seems to have made some curious mistakes."

"B-but that's impossible!" stammered Peter, staring at the other. "He couldn't have made any mistake like that. Don't think that because he lives in Sagebrush he's any backwoods doctor. He has studied at Bonn and Heidelberg, taken honors in New York."

"That makes it all the more curious," said Kemp, rubbing his chin. "But perhaps it's you who made the mistake, failed to understand or hear properly?"

"That's impossible, too. Why, the whole point was that tuberculosis *is* highly contagious! Are you sure it isn't?"

"My dear man, if it was, in the sense that you were made to believe, the human race would have been wiped out long ago. The scourge is quite bad enough as it is. There was absolutely no necessity for you to segregate yourself, no reason why Miss Vickers shouldn't have nursed you, no reason why you should have gone without seeing her, as though you were a leper. And I assure you there is no great specialist of any kind called Kalmetz, and no such serum either. I myself have studied abroad, and in more places than Germany, so far as that goes. What is more, I'm reasonably certain—and I gave you a thorough examination—that you never had consumption."

"What!" exclaimed Peter, looking dazed.

"That opinion is borne out by observation and the time factor, Calvert. If you'd only one lung when you left Sagebrush, you couldn't possibly have two sound ones now. That's asking far too much of the country. There is no miracle about your cure, because you didn't need to be cured."

"B-but I had a cough. I used to cough blood."

"I don't care. You can cough that from more than your lungs. You'd been badly wounded, hadn't you? Yes, and probably had caught a bad cold on top of it. You were run down when I met you, but you hadn't tuberculosis. And it's my considered opinion that you never had."

"But, darn it all, Kemp, Doc Day said it even showed plainly in my sputum! Do you realize what you're insinuating?

—that my best friend told me a pack of cruel lies!"

"I'm insinuating nothing," said Kemp gravely. "I'm merely giving you facts, and you'll find those facts verified by any responsible medical man you care to consult. I would have said nothing if I hadn't been sure of my facts. You'll rarely find one doctor criticizing another, but there's a limit to professional etiquette.

"I said yours was one of the strangest tales I'd ever heard, and to me this is the strangest part of it. I can't conceive any medical man, especially one of such alleged experience as your friend, making such statements. The best of us may err at times in diagnosing a case, but this is a very different matter. There are many peculiar attendant circumstances—far too peculiar. If you want my candid opinion, you've been the victim of an elaborate hoax—to put it mildly."

"But why?"

"You should be better able to answer that than I," replied Kemp. "Can you think of no reason why it would be to your friend's advantage to get you away from Sagebrush? For obviously, that is the net result."

Peter made no reply, but his expression suddenly changed. His quick mind had leaped to the only possible, if not probable, answer, and with it had come a quotation from his beloved Shakespeare:

> Friendship is constant in all other things
> Save in the offices and affairs of love.

Doodah, of all people! Could it be possible? Doodah, whom he had saved from bankruptcy and a drunkard's grave. No, preposterous! Yet, out of his own experience, whom had he not seen the victim of this and other passions? What friend had not betrayed him?

To be continued next week.

THE WORLD'S LONGEST CAR

WHEN the government's first prosecution of the Fall-Sinclair oil case ended in the scandal of a mistrial, the crash was brought about by the report that a young juror named Kidwell had been heard to say that, if Sinclair was acquitted, he, Kidwell, would "get a motor car almost as long as a city block."

While the Washingtonians were talking about nothing but the mistrial and Kidwell's remark, the Capital Traction Company started operation of a bus which was longer than any of its old conveyances. It was, in fact, the longest vehicle on the streets—so long that, when it first appeared, people would gather on the curb and watch it go by.

In one of these groups was a well-known Washington lawyer. As the elongated bus rumbled past, he turned to a companion.

"That," said he, "must be the car Juror Kidwell would have got *if*——"

Midnight, March 20th

By CALVIN JOHNSTON

MARCH at the dawn, the tern in flight
On squalls of bitter, bluish light;
A white sea with a scudding sky,
And planetlike the conqueror's eye
Of exiled winter, promising
Revenge on the usurper, spring,
Strange queen from farthest south, storm-cast
Upon our beach this midnight past.
Now sunrise's banner, zephyr flown,
Makes all the rebel land her own.

Who but must laugh the threat away
Of winter's comeback some bleak day
In far December, when between
Fares April, warm-starred, gowned in green,
The June, all bloom and berry stain,
And August trailing through the grain
Pale strands of beaded, sun-dipped rain?

The Armageddon of the leaves
Will break too late to blast the sheaves
And fruits. And who an apple bites
Before his hearth on snow-bound nights,
Rebellious, mocks his wroth old king.
Such kick is in a taste of spring.

The Little Mex

By

Mark Reed

Author of "A Carnival of Crooks," "The Sculping Kid," Etc.

When Dugan, middleweight champion, first met "the little Mex," he thought the fellow a softy. But on their trip to Mexico, Ramós displayed softness not at all.

IT was a suite in a luxurious Broadway hotel, one of those onxy-and-tapestry affairs at which all of Fortune's newest favorites hasten to register. Had his eyes been open, Pete Dugan could have seen, through one door, a rose-and-white-tiled bathroom; through the other, a sitting room furnished daintily in gray and gold. The carpet under his four-poster was so thick that he had left footprints on getting into bed. His dresser had a plate-glass top under which was incased a lace scarf, and on either side of his mirror were lights with pink shades. He had radio service, valet service, ice-water service, a telephone by his bed, a reading lamp over it. And on the inside of his windows was a balmy, almost tropical warmth, while upon the street side was a bleak December forenoon.

As he lay there, in that halfway stage between sleep and waking, Dugan was thinking of his past life. He remembered doing roadwork on the silty banks of the Mississippi above Cairo in a steaming July heat. And the time he dug for gold in the sand of a Nevada valley with the thermometer at 102°. He thought of his fights. The night he knocked out Brunneman. His first fight with Kettlety. His fights on the coast, while he trained under the big trees on Puget Sound. Then his last battle with Kettlety, which had won him

the championship and a cool hundred thousand. Without opening his eyes he sighed happily. The life of muscular exertion! Of grit under the feet and balsam-laden air! It got you. It was the stuff!

"Hey, Pete, it bane eleven o'clock!"

Dugan opened his eyes and saw a smartly tailored young man with a heavy shock of yellow hair bending solicitously over him. Then he opened the other eye, and saw the brocaded drapes at his windows and the pink shades over the lamps. He drew in a deep breath. The air was steam-heated, moist, compounded with a thousand exhalations from fabrics, paint and draperies. There was a touch of talcum powder in it, and a hint of cigarettes and gasoline. He eyed his trainer sourly.

"What yuh want, Ole?" he demanded.

"Nothing, Pete, nothing. Don't move," murmured the Swede soothingly. "I yust ordered your breakfast sent up."

As he spoke a waiter entered with a bed tray on which was a glistening galaxy of silver and chinaware. Dugan stared at the intruder and his burden for some moments, as though endeavoring to adjust himself to the spectacle. Then he flung off the coverings and sat up.

"I ain't got to having breakfast in bed yet!"

The tone was belligerent. The waiter noted the size of Dugan's neck and shoulders, his square jaw, and the close pugilistic crop to his hair, and cast an irresolute glance at Ole.

The latter stepped forward.

"Now you got plenty of money, Pete, try it," he coaxed. "It bane nice. I yust ate mine in bed."

A fury in purple pajamas rose.

"You rush that junk out of here! What yuh think I am? Some lily-white millionaire?"

Waiter and tray disappeared. Dugan eyed his trainer scornfully.

"Now you've had breakfast in bed, why don't you run down and get manicured?" he asked.

Before the Swede could think up a retort Dugan was in his rose-tiled bathroom. He decided on an ice-cold shower, as though that would in some way expiate his trainer's breakfast in bed. But while the hot water was steaming, the cold was lukewarm. He swore briskly. The glazed cubicle with its glittering fixtures and its soap-scented smell got on his nerves. On the other side of the wall he could hear the elevators running. Lowering down the swell birds he saw all the time in the lobby. Sleek, unexercised guys! Pampered dames swathed in furs and tethered by high heels! Dammit, he felt unexercised and tethered himself!

He found Ole standing before the window in a dressing gown, indolently putting new gold studs in a new silk shirt.

"'Squarehead,'" he announced, "we been in this hothouse a week and it's raisin' hell with us. We're gettin' to look like a coupla Pomeranians. Get me? I gotta have some real air or I'll croak!"

Ole looked him over with a professional eye.

"Aw, you bane crazy. You bane in pink of condition."

"Nope, this joint's too soft. I gotta have some rough stuff. I don't begin trainin' for Sid Mello for a month. I'm goin' out and locate me a nice tough little sea trip somewhere."

Ole burst into argument. But he was wasting his breath. Within thirty minutes the world's middleweight champion was out on a taxi tour that did not end until he had run up a bill of thirty dollars and covered half the steamship offices in the city. It was disheartening. There seemed to be a dearth of tough little sea trips.

After dinner, trainer and fighter established themselves on a big divan in the foyer of the Astridge for further deliberation. About them people hurried to theater and night club. Dugan scowled and fidgeted.

"It bane tough luck," said Ole cheerfully, "but I tank you bane obliged to go on regular passenger line."

"Damned if I will!" said Dugan. "There'll be a bunch of tourists aboard and they'll find I'm middleweight champion, and all I'll do will be box exhibitions and autograph snapshots."

"Pardon, señor," broke in a voice, "it may be that I can help you."

They looked up. The young man who had addressed them seemed scarcely out of his teens. He was of medium height, plump, almost feminine in voice and manner. His swarthy skin and large, dark eyes shaded by long girlish lashes bespoke the Latin American, as did his extreme politeness. When he saw he had Dugan's attention he bowed low.

"First I will introduce myself. I am Manuel Ramós. I own a coffee plantation in southern Mexico."

"Yeah?" said Dugan, getting to his feet. "This is Ole Linstad, and my name's Dugan."

"Ha, señor, introduction is not necessary. Last week I saw you fight in the Garden. It was superb. I am lost in admiration. And now as I was standing here, I could not but hear your conversation. You wish a sea trip—a sea trip that has not too much civilization in it?"

"Yeah," said Dugan, with a look about the magnificent lobby. "I'm kinda fed up with this joint. I been here a week. It ain't very healthy."

Manuel Ramós extended a gold cigarette case.

"Let us sit down, señores," he said, "and talk it over."

Ensconsed on the big divan with Dugan on one side and Ole on the other, the young Mexican planter outlined his invitation, for that is what it was. To-morrow he was sailing for Vera Cruz on the steam freighter *Gulf Queen*. Always on his business trips he traveled upon the freighters which carried his coffee. The captain was his friend, and would welcome two such passenger-guests as Señor Dugan and his trainer. Would Señor Dugan do him the honor to let him speak to the captain?

Dugan scowled thoughtfully. Outwardly this Mexican bird looked kind of soft, yet underneath there was a quiet directness and a physical vigor that Dugan rather liked. Anyhow they needn't see much of him aboard ship if he got too damn polite.

"Why, sure," he said finally. "I'll go with you if you can fix it up. And much obliged, besides."

"Yes," put in Ole, "mebbe there bane something we can do for you."

Young Ramós looked almost pained at the suggestion.

"Señor, the pleasure of your companionship will be enough—unless"—here he stopped guiltily and blushed like a schoolboy—"unless perhaps Señor the Champion will find time to give me a few boxing lessons on the quarter-deck. For which I will pay."

Dugan looked at Ramos' plump figure.

"Sure," he said gruffly. "I'll box with you if you think you want to."

The next morning the three of them went aboard the *Gulf Queen*. Instantly Dugan was "sold." Despite the freighter's feminine name there was something extremely virile about her. She was blunt-nosed and severe; there were no do-dads in her small, snug saloon; her staterooms, though of mahogany, were of monastic severity, and throughout her length and breadth she exhaled the faintest aroma of coffee. Ramós found the captain on the bridge, and in a moment the smiling Mexican had arranged everything.

It was the beginning of an extraordinary friendship. From the start Dugan and, to a lesser extent Ole, were the victims of an assiduous attention. Their new acquaintance played to them on his guitar. He sang to them native airs. He pointed out sunsets and porpoises. He palavered special dishes out of the cook. And not a day passed that they were not invited to spend a month with his parents. He would show them his plantation. They would cross the Isthmus of Tehuantepec together. He would show them all Mexico.

After they rounded Cape Hatteras, the weather became warm, and they roped off a ring on the quarter-deck.

"Now, señor, hit me!" the young Mexican would cry, dancing about in a pair of cherry-colored tights above which his plump, brown torso shone in the sunlight. "Hit me hard! Do not relent; sock me as you sock Señor Kettley."

Dugan had an agreeable surprise. The lazy, guitar-strumming Ramós possessed a fighting spirit. Though his plump torso looked soft and flabby, beneath his brown skin lay an astonishing agility, and a determination to take punishment that more than once, despite Dugan's caution, left his face bruised and bleeding. This display of grit in one from whom he had not expected it was all that Dugan needed. From now on they were friends. The Mexican youth had, as it were, won his spurs.

Only the captain was unimpressed.

"Huh!" he grunted one night to Ole, "I don't see what's come over that Mex. On the trip up you couldn't get him to so much as move his own deck chair. Now he's full of pep as a porpoise."

The *Gulf Queen* put in at New Orleans and Galveston; then headed for Vera Cruz over a sea the color of a bluebird's wing. Ramós had the captain stretch a canvas over the deck and each morning he and Dugan put on the gloves.

"Do I improve?" he inquired.

"Sure, me boy," said Dugan, "you're getting classier every day."

One evening Ramós drew the two Americans to the rail, and pointed to what looked like a thin bar of gold on the western horizon.

"To-morrow morning we will land," he said. "And you will visit me and my mother and father."

As Dugan muttered his regrets, an angry gleam shot for an instant into the Mexican's eyes, then as quickly disappeared.

"Ha!" he said, with a hurt smile, "you do not like me."

Dugan looked troubled.

"Sure I do."

"No, or you would make my home yours."

Something in Dugan warmed.

"Sure, kid," he said, "I'll visit yuh!"

The other's eyes glistened under their soft lashes.

"Señor," he said, clasping Dugan's hand, "I cannot tell you how happy I am made, and how pleased my father and my mother will be."

At his first opportunity Ole got Dugan to one side.

"Pete," he said, "I tank we better stay on boat and not visit that fella. I bane have talk with captain. He say he did not know that fella own a thousand-acre plantation. He bane under impression he was trader. I tank maybe that fella he bane stretching the truth."

Dugan's jaw set loyally.

"Sure he's got a plantation. He showed me a picture of it. It's a swell place with a courtyard and a lot of parrots in wooden cages."

"I tank we better go home."

Dugan thought of the Hotel Astridge and that steam-heated suite with its heavy curtains.

"Yah, Squarehead!" he cried, "cut

this go-home stuff. We're down here to rough it!"

Ole hearkened sulkily to the distant tinklings of Ramós guitar.

"You pick funny fellow to rough it with," he muttered.

Dugan drew in a deep breath of salt-laden air, and reached forth his arms in a vigorous anticipatory stretch.

"Oh, we'll be shown a good time," he said. "The little Mex ain't so soft as he looks."

At Vera Cruz there were provoking delays. The young coffee planter had business to attend to; baggage and supplies must be transferred from the boat to the train; his guests must see a bull-fight. And the city, situated on its low, platterlike plain, was sizzling with heat —so sizzling that Ramós could not be persuaded to attend to his affairs for more than an hour a day.

At last they were moving inland on a train, half freight and half passenger, that stopped at every excuse. Abruptly they came into tropical country. On either side of the track lay stagnant pools of water from which rose a dense tangle of vegetation. It was alive with birds. Their hoarse wrangles sounded above the puff of the engine.

The train stopped. Ole, peering out, saw no evidences of a station, only a wall of vegetation on either side.

"What bane trouble?" he asked.

Ramós, slouched comfortably in the corner of his seat, shrugged smilingly.

"Whatever it is, it will be fixed."

There were several soldiers in the car, and they unslung their carbines and began taking pot shots into the jungle. Several hard-looking civilians produced revolvers and joined them. To the warm, sticky air seeping in from the lagoons was added the acrid smell of gunpowder. In a vine-choked palm Ole made out a snake that must have been a good ten feet long. He shuddered. Suddenly there was a fusillade of shots and the snake writhed convulsively, lost its hold and slithered down through the vines, landing in the greenish water with a *plop*. The car shrieked its approbation. Ole turned and gave Dugan a hard look.

"It bane nice country," he said.

"Sure," said Dugan, "it's a corker."

Something in their tone seemed to rouse their dozing host to his duties. He uncurled himself indolently and produced from under his white linen coat a large black revolver. Then from his pocket he dug out a box of cartridges. He smiled wistfully.

"Pardon, señores," he said. "I was lost in contemplation of my father and mother, whom I have not seen for three months. Let us go to the platform and shoot."

At a station which the conductor announced as "Evangelista," Ramós assisted his two friends to dismount. The youthful coffee planter's face was wreathed in smiles enough for an entire reception committee. Dugan glanced around at the tin depot, the handful of adobe huts, and the water tank which constituted the town.

"Is your place here?" he asked.

The young Mexican looked shocked.

"Here?" he said. "Does Señor Dugan think I would have asked him to a mud hole like this? My father's hacienda is delightfully situated among the foothills. We will be there soon—to-morrow or the day after."

A few inquiries soon made it seem likely that their arrival would be the day after. The mule train and horses which the elder Ramós was to have sent down to meet his son had not come. They would have to spend the night in Evangelista. But Ramós, Jr., was undismayed. His only thought was of his guests, and he proceeded to turn the town upside down for their comfort. The station master was bribed out of his best room. Sheets and new mosquito netting were taken from the supplies. The best cook in town was

pressed into service, making tortillas and frijoles. Wine was obtained from somewhere. And as the red rays of twilight began to level across jungle-girdled Evangelista, Ole and Dugan sat down to a bountiful if somewhat unfamiliar meal.

"You will forgive this discomfort and not go back?" asked the youthful coffee planter for the thousandth time.

"Sure," said Dugan, slapping a mosquito and at the same time eying several giggling señoritas, there to sing and dance in his honor. In the face of such gracious politeness what man could turn back?

The next morning Ramós knocked at their door.

"Good morning, señores, and good news," he smiled. "My father's pack train is not here, but I have been able to procure another. We will start at your convenience."

But it was not until afternoon that all the baggage and boxes were lashed to the mules, and the calvacade finally got under way. A ragged barefoot peon rode at the head of the procession, with a rifle slung across the pommel of his saddle. Then came Ramós and his two guests on small Mexican ponies, while behind straggled the mule train, each animal led by a peon on foot.

For a few miles the road was wide enough for a wagon, then it narrowed to a trail barely mule wide. Swarms of gnats buzzed and hummed about the travelers' ears, while vines and creepers swinging out from the jungle lashed across their faces. Occasionally the peon on horseback slashed at the entangling obstructions with his machete; but in the main he preferred to duck them rather than remove them. Ole's eyes widened with apprehension; he was always thinking of the snake he had seen shot down.

It was impossible, however, to be downcast with Ramós as a companion. He was fairly bubbling with happiness. In a few hours he would be home. He told them of the gifts he had for his parents. In that big box was a radio. It would bring to their loneliness the news and music of the entire world. He had silk stockings for his mother, and a Parisian dress. They would be amazed how beautiful she still was. He had a razor for his father, an electric fan, cigars and a box of champagne which he had bought on the boat! He recounted each gift a dozen times, anticipating precisely the pleasure its recipient would have with a filial affection that was charming. Always he ended in the same way:

"Ha, señores," he smiled, "but the finest gift I am bringing them is you. They will be charmed. They will want you to stay with us a year. Our home will be yours."

There was something contagious in the youth's bubbling courtesy. As he said "our home will be yours," tears actually glistened under his long lashes. Dugan rode alongside him and put his arm across his shoulder.

"Gee, kid," he said, "you're sure a swell guy."

"My good mother——" began Ramós, when suddenly the words died in his throat.

Down the trail came a figure on the run. The peon on horseback reined in and the train jostled to a halt. The hurrying figure drew up beside Ramós' horse and burst into an excited torrent of speech. Dugan could not understand a word, but he saw that the speaker was covered with mud and that blood from a cut across his forehead had dried on his cheeks.

"Mio madre?" repeated Ramós in a queer, uncomprehending tone.

The peon nodded, and Dugan saw the young coffee planter waver in his saddle, and his face go ghastly white. Then he seemed to pull himself together.

"Señor," he said, smiling sadly, "I

regret that your visit must be postponed."

"Yeah?" queried Dugan. "What's happened?"

Ramós indicated the fugitive.

"He has brought me sad news. Night before last bandits have attacked my home. In its defense my father and mother were killed."

Dugan's eyes moistened.

"Gee, kid, that's tough."

"It is a blow from which I shall never recover."

For a moment the bereft young man slumped in his saddle. His head bent down in an attitude of inconsolable grief. Then he pulled himself together with an effort.

"You must return to Evangelista at once, señores. Four of my best men shall accompany you, that you may arrive safe."

Dugan eyed the proposal doubtfully.

"Hey, look here," he said. "If we go back, what you going to do?"

Instead of answering, the young fellow turned to the peon who had brought the terrible news. They talked in Spanish for some moments. After hearing the answer to one of his questions, Ramós crossed himself and, raising his eyes, muttered what was manifestly a prayer. Finally he turned to Dugan.

"I am told that the murderers still occupy our hacienda. But some of our laborers escaped and are hiding in the jungle, where they await my word. I shall avenge my beloved father's and my saintly mother's death, or I shall add a third grave to the two on the edge of the jungle."

The speaker's voice rose to a sibilant hiss of vengeance. Dugan scowled at him with a paternal indulgence.

"You keep your shirt on, buddy," he said, "and come back with us. We'll notify the police."

"The police, señor?" laughed Ramós scornfully. Then, as if to emphasize his determination, he cried: *"Adelante!"* and all except the four peons detailed for the Americano escort jogged off along the trail.

"Gee, Ole," muttered Dugan, "we can't let that guy go commit suicide like this."

They galloped after.

"Look here, kid," said Dugan, grabbing the Mexican's bridle, "you gotta cut this stunt stuff out. Why, you ain't got the chance of a snowball in hell, goin' into that bunch of thugs with nothing but half a dozen rifles in your whole outfit!"

Ramós pointed to a box on one of the mules.

"Fortunately, I have some other weapons. We have over two thousand acres of the best coffee land in Mexico, and my father had been warned his property might be seized. So from New York I brought two machine guns. I am too late to protect my father's property, señor, but I am not too late to shoot the dogs who killed him!"

Dugan's jaw squared.

"Then I'm going along with you!"

The other's brown eyes glistened with gratitude.

"Mil gracias, señor. It is noble of you. But I cannot permit it. You have your career to think of."

"Py yingo, yes!" trembled Ole. "We bane fightin' Sid Mello next month."

Dugan reined in his horse and dropped back until he and Ole were alone.

"Gee, Squarehead," he growled, "what kind of a guy are you? You'd go visit this feller for a month, let him play the guitar for you, and show you the sights; but the moment he gets in a jam, you'd turn and run like a jack rabbit. You come with us, or I'll toss you into the jungle along with the rest of the snakes."

"Pete," said Ole sourly, "you bane one crazy damn fool."

"Sure," said Dugan, "but I don't skip out on a guy who's my friend, do I?"

Twilight came and a flood of amber poured through the jungle. Gaudily colored birds darted hither and thither, uttering shrill, discordant cries. Then the moon wheeled up in the east and the trail became a green-walled gorge through which flowed a river of glimmering silver. The cavalcade rode for what seemed hours, until a dozen ragged peons stole out from the jungle and drew up around Ramós. Dugan, through a certain delicacy of feeling, held himself and Ole at one side. Finally the young Mexican joined them, making no effort to conceal the tears which were running down his cheeks.

"My friends," he said, "ahead, at the turn of the path, is my father's plantation."

"Yeah?" said Dugan.

"Our peons who have remained faithful say that the bandits have no pickets out. Evidently they do not expect attack. So, señores, I hope we can capture them without great danger to you."

"Aw, hell!" said Dugan. "Don't think about us."

They drove the horses into a thicket to one side of the trail, and Ramós ordered his men to unstrap two long packing cases. Inside, heavily wrapped in oiled cloth and excelsior, were two machine guns in knock-down condition. Ramós produced a flash light, and for some time he and his men struggled to fit tripod, traversing base, and the gun itself, into a single workable unit. At length the young Mexican turned to Dugan in despair.

"Señor," he said, "all Americanos understand machines. Would you be so very kind——"

"Sure," said Dugan. "Ole, you're a shark at machinery. Show 'em how these gadgets work!"

In the course of an hour, Ole had the guns together and had explained how to fire them. Then they were dismounted again, and at a signal from Ramós each peon took a tripod or traversing base upon his shoulder, and the party set out.

Ramós came to a halt at the edge of the forest.

"My home that is no more," he announced dramatically.

Dugan and Ole peered out into the open. There, a couple of hundred yards ahead of them, lay the Ramós hacienda, its white walls glistening in the moonlight. To the left stood a score of laborers' huts, while behind stretched the coffee fields, the rows of moonlit bushes giving the effect of a gigantic piece of corduroy which had flattened down the encroaching jungle. Fifty miles to the north glittered the icy crown of Orizaba. The misty silence of the night was broken only by the sharp intake of Ramós' breath.

"Steady, buddy, steady!" whispered Dugan. "Don't let it get you!"

They crept along the heavy shadow at the edge of the jungle. Suddenly one of the peons stopped, pointed under a large palm, and ejaculated something in Spanish. With a cry, Ramós ran forward and hurled himself to the ground. Dugan, following, found him stretched across two new-made graves, sobbing as though his heart would break, in his anguish ramming his fists deep into the damp, loose soil. At the head of each mound stood a crude peon-made cross. Dugan backed gently away, and returning to Ramós' followers, signaled them to put down the machine guns and boxes of ammunition and wait.

Minutes passed. The sobs of the Mexican youth gave way to a faint moaning, but he gave no evidence of rising.

"Pete," muttered Ole restlessly, "you tell him he better get up. Damp ground bane bad for him."

"Naw, let him get the grief out of his system. He'll fight better for it."

Finally a faint glow of dawn began to show in the east. Dugan figeted nervously, then went and touched the prostrate youth upon the shoulder.

"It's going to be daylight pretty quick. We oughta be getting busy."

Ramós rose stiffly to his knees, and crossed himself. Then he lifted his eyes to the still, dark sky and his lips moved in prayer. Dugan and Ole watched, abashed. In the dim light under the palm tree the tense, emotional youth seemed to take on a quality of supreme elevation. He suggested some Sir Galahad kneeling for a final invocation before holy deeds. At last he rose and came toward them.

"Thanks for this hour of sadness," he said with one of his gracious smiles.

He stood erect, his eyes glistening with excitement.

"Señor Dugan, it is my idea to place one gun here and one upon the hill back of the huts. Thus we can command all four sides of the hacienda and the laborers' quarters, too. Do you like my idea?"

Dugan scowled thoughtfully.

"Sure, I guess so. Fighting with machine guns is a little off my line."

"I am sure, señor, you will be as expert with the machine gun as with the big leather gloves. Come, you and I shall man the gun here, while Señor Linstad and Pedro handle the other."

The peons were ordered to locate themselves at points of vantage and to be ready to assist with their rifles. Then, while Ole and Pedro were circling around to their position back of the huts, Ramós and Dugan made a nest of branches and long sheaves of grass for their gun. It was an adroit position. Straight ahead they could pour their fire into the patio of the long, white farm building and cut off all access to the stone-rimmed well in the center of it. To the right they could prevent any egress from the windows; while by playing their fire to the left not a man could escape from the front of the huts and live. Ole and Pedro's gun in the rear would complete the circle of death.

"Dogs of murderers!" muttered Ramós, as he laid out clip after clip of cartridges. "I have you now!"

The east had become aflame with dawn. Great banners of opalescence were streaming up into the zenith, while from the underbrush behind them came the cry of birds and the splash of some sort of animal wallowing in a pool. From one of the huts ascended a thin white column of smoke. At this evidence of bandit activity Ramós bent forward, his eyes narrowed to malevolent slits.

"Say," grumbled Dugan, "what's the sense of all this cat-and-mouse stuff? Why not rush 'em and get it over with?"

"That would be crazy, señor. I do not wish to die, if you do."

"Oh, I ain't so anxious," said Dugan.

Smoke now began to rise from several of the huts, then a thin, white column ascended from the chimney of the hacienda itself. Though the sun had not yet risen, the air was already hot and steamy.

Suddenly Ramós jerked back the breech block of the gun and pulled the trigger. Dugan, watching, saw the moving stream of bullets cross the patio pavement, flipping up bits of stone, and pass out across the open until it was kicking up puffs of dust in front of the laborers' huts. Then Ramós stopped firing. For a moment they could hear the chatter of Ole's gun on the opposite hillside, then that, too, was silent.

As they watched, a tall, gaunt figure, scantily clad, dashed out into the patio, gun in hand. Ramós let loose a rain of lead, and the man tried to shelter himself behind the well curb. But a bullet apparently got him before he could make it, for he suddenly dropped to his

knees, when still a yard away, like a man in prayer. For a moment he held himself erect, then pitched forward over the curb and lay there, peering downward as though he expected to find his assailants in the water below.

"One, *por dios!*" muttered Ramós.

Behind the man had been a woman in bright blue. At sight of her leader's fall, she had retreated, slamming the door shut. To this door Ramós now devoted his attention to the extent of a full clip. As Dugan heard the twenty-odd bullets splinter their way through the heavy oaken timbers, it struck him as strange that a man should thus so wholeheartedly destroy his own home.

"Hey!" he protested, "you may want to live in that house."

But his embattled host paid no heed. The bandits began firing from the windows. At sound of the first bullet whining over his head Ramós started playing his fire from window to window, pouring into each a hail of bullets. He turned to Dugan grimly.

"Murderers of my father!" he hissed. "I will show them!"

"Atta boy!" scowled Dugan. "Sock 'em! I'm with yuh!"

The affair quickly reduced itself to a siege. That night one of the bandits crawled out and attempted to reach the well. But the patio lay in bright moonlight, and Dugan, standing watch at the time, spattered the court so thoroughly with bullets that the water seeker retired in a hurry. About noon of the next day a pole with a blood-stained shirt fluttering from it was run out from one of the front windows.

Ramós gave a shout of glee.

"Ha! The dogs surrender. I will send a man to tell them my terms."

It was amazing to Dugan and Ole how quickly the plantation stepped back into the ways of peace. The very next morning barefooted peons began to bring in baskets of coffee berries and spread them on the cement floor of the patio to dry. As to their host's disposition of his prisoners they were not so certain. The youthful Ramós was not as frank as he had been. Some, they suspected, had been shot; others were enrolled among his own peons; while a few were held as prisoners in one of the adobe huts before whose heavy wooden door an armed man paced night and day. In forty-eight hours, this guard, the two graves under the palm trees, and an occasional evidence of machine-gun fire on wall and door, were the sole remaining evidences of the bandit invasion.

Ramós began to entertain his guests at once. At the same hour the laborers began to bring in baskets of coffee berries, a peon led two horses to the door—excellent animals with silver-mounted saddles. Ramós waved an airy hand and turned, in his pleasant fashion, to Dugan and Ole.

"For you, my good friends," he said. "When you wish, I shall be pleased to have you accompany me on my rounds of the plantation."

They went with him each morning, and again after siesta, when the air had become cooler. It was a delightful combination of hard riding and indolence. Evenings Ramós brought out his guitar, and sang to them for hours, a radiant smile on his face, as though he was a child without a worry in the world. Then suddenly he would recall his tragedy and touch the black band which he wore upon his sleeve.

"Ha, señores, how amazing!" he said. "I am so happy to have you with me that I can forget."

One night when Dugan went to his room he found a small paper slipped under the candle.

"What the devil's this?" he demanded.

"Read it and you'll find out," muttered Ole from his bed. "It was there when I came in."

Dugan picked up the paper. Upon it was written in a dainty copybook hand:

SENOR, THE PRIZE FIGHTER AMERICANO: I have been robbed of my home and my husband shot. Ramós has me confined in the second hut from hacienda. Will you let me speak with you to-night at one? My guard will be disappeared. Honest, señor, I am on the level. LOLITA D'ALVAREZ.

Dugan drew out his watch and looked at it.

"Pete, don't you be damn fool," counseled Ole from under his mosquito netting. "Don't you keep that date!"

Dugan reread the note with mounting anger.

"That's some dirty spik plot," he muttered. "She thinks she can get me up there, and 'fix' me, so I'll desert the little Mex."

"Or bump you off, Pete!"

"Aw, she wouldn't do that."

"Py yingo why not? She murder his father and mother."

"Yeah?" said Dugan absently. "I think I'll step up there and tell that jane where she gets off."

"No, Pete, you mustn't do that. You'll get a knife yabbed into you. And besides, it ban't loyal to Ramós."

But Dugan had made up his mind.

Half an hour later he and Ole, with revolvers strapped to their belts, slipped softly out of their room, crossed the patio in stocking feet, and headed for the laborers' huts. It was only twelve, but Dugan's theory had been that if any trap was going to be sprung, it would be wise to get there before they were ready to spring it. They walked boldly toward the second hut, and as they did so the guard pacing before it committed the amazing act of doing an about-face and marching briskly off in the direction of the jungle. Dugan stepped up to the doorway barred by a grating of heavy beams.

"Oh, ma'am!" he called in a husky whisper.

There was a rustle in the darkness inside.

"Ha, señor," said a soft voice, "I am so happy you have come. I have wait three days. Not till to-night have I a guard I can bribe. Oh, señor, listen! Ramós is a villain, a bandit, and a murderer!"

"Hold on, ma'am," interrupted Dugan, "it won't get you anywhere with me, running down the little Mex."

"But, señor, don't you understand? He has made big joke of you. To everybody he boast in Spanish of the two Americano prize fighter he has brought to run his machine gun. And for not one centavo in pay!"

"Ma'am, I'm afraid you're sore."

As Dugan spoke he made out a small brown chin, two red lips, and two dark, piercing eyes framed within an aperture of the grating.

"No, señor," said the two red lips, "I speak the truth. You think he is sweet little boy who has lost his father and his mother. That is on top. Below he is a dog, and you help him to kill my father and steal our home."

Dugan rubbed his short, bristling hair nervously.

"Hold on, ma'am. You got this all wrong. We found a bunch of crooks had shot up little Mex's father and mother, so we pitched in and helped him out."

"His mother and father? He has no mother, and he never had a father."

"You're wrong there, ma'am. They are both buried under a palm tree on the other side of the plantation."

Lolita d'Alvarez laughed scornfully.

"Go look at their graves. They are what you call 'fake.'"

"Yeah?" said Dugan.

He drew Ole to one side.

"Did you get the señorita's dope?" Ole nodded. "Let's go take a look at those graves."

They circled around the sleeping hacienda until they came to the edge of the jungle and the big palm. The grave lay in a patch of moonlight. Dugan took the shovel he had brought with him and began to dig; at first respectfully, then angrily. There was no doubt about it. The two mounds across which the youthful Mexican had lain prostrate with grief were nothing but two barrows of loam dumped on the grassy mat of the jungle.

Dugan leaned against the palm and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"Gee, Ole," he muttered weakly, "what the hell do you know?"

The Swede shivered nervously.

"I tank Little Mex bane bandit himself. We better beat it, Pete!"

Dugan looked out across the pale moonlit fields to the low white-walled farmhouse, and saw, not the empty courtyard, restless with shadows, but the courtyard with a man dropped to his knees by a hail of bullets, while behind a girl in blue watched aghast. That bird must have been her husband. Dugan moved over to his trainer.

"We gotta get the farm back for that dame," he said.

"I don't yust see why."

"I'll tell you why. Nobody's goin' to say I came down to Mexico and lined up with a bunch of bandits."

Ole paled.

"But, Pete, the Mex bane sure to scrap like devil to keep the place."

Dugan's jaw set.

"Yeah? Well, you and me are goin' to scrap like the devil, too. That little son of a gun ain't goin' to get away with ringing me in on his dirty work."

They hurried back to the hut. The guard was still away earning his bribe. Dugan released the imprisoned girl, telling her his plans as he did so. She was ecstatic.

"You will capture my plantation back for me?" she cooed.

Dugan nodded.

"But are you able to, señor?"

"Sure, didn't me and the Swede here do most of the work of taking it away from you?"

A few moments later the girl slipped off to enlist some of her peons back into service, while Dugan and Ole crept back to the farmhouse. In the patio stood the two machine guns, which Ramós had courteously asked them to keep in good condition in case of an emergency. It was the work of five minutes to take the guns apart. But it required several hours to carry each section to the old positions at the edge of the jungle. By daybreak, however, each gun was in its old nest, and the forces apportioned. Dugan and Señora d'Alvarez were to man the gun which swept the courtyard, while Ole was to have his old position back of the laborers' huts, with the bribed guard for an assistant.

As the dawn began to break, Dugan's gun mate peered anxiously into his face.

"Oh, señor," she said, "are you sure this is the best way?"

"Sure," said Dugan. "The little Mex will know from experience he hasn't a chance, and come right out and surrender. Then you can do what you please with him. If we'd tried to capture him in the night, there'd been a lot of shooting and somebody might have got hurt. Watch out, ma'am. It's light enough. I'm going to begin."

As he finished speaking, Dugan jerked back the breech block and set the gun into action. With grim leisure he peppered the walls of the hacienda, flipped up chips from the pavement of the court, then turned his fire to the laborers' huts, exactly as he had seen Ramós do. This accomplished, he stopped. At the other side of the plantation they could hear the steady *put-put-put* of Ole's gun.

Dugan leaned back contentedly.

"That oughta wake him!"

As he spoke, a puff of smoke shot from one of the hacienda windows. Dugan clapped his hand to his left shoulder.

"Oh, señor, are you hit?"

"Guess so," said Dugan. "It felt like a mosquito at first."

They both lay flat on the ground while the Spanish girl bound up the wound as best she could with a piece of her skirt.

"Gee," muttered the wounded fighter, "I forgot he knew where this machine-gun nest was located."

It was only a flesh scratch; and as soon as the shoulder was dressed, Dugan picked up the gun and bore it into the jungle, where he set it up about a hundred yards from its old position. The morning wore on. Occasionally a puff of smoke appeared from the hacienda; but no white flag.

"Damn!" grumbled Dugan. "He's going to wait till he gets thirsty."

The Spanish girl did not answer. She was shading her black eyes with her hand and peering far down the road which led from the coffee fields to the hacienda. Suddenly she sprang to her feet, with an exclamation.

"Yeah?" said Dugan. "What's the matter?"

At first the girl seemed loath to reply; then she decided to take him into her confidence.

"Look, señor!"

Dugan, following the direction of her outstretched finger, made out a band of horsemen drawn up in the road, perhaps a quarter of a mile away. They had been stopped, apparently, by the sound of firing. Even at that distance he could see that some of them were in uniforms and that they carried rifles.

"Gee, ma'am," he muttered, "the Mex has slipped out some way and got help."

She shook her head.

"No, it is the *rurales*."

"Come again, ma'am."

"The *rurales*—the government police!"

Dugan rose to his feet with a grin.

"Well, thank the Lord!" he said. "We'll just turn this little job of recapturing your farm over to them."

"No, no!" The girl was drawing her shawl around her in the manner of one about to take flight. "Señor, I will confess. This plantation is no more mine than it belongs to Ramós. My husband, he steal it about six months ago when government change."

Dugan scowled. So he had broken off with one bandit only to fight the battles of another. He stared at the girl in disgust.

"So you're a crook, too, are yuh?"

The girl shrugged.

"Why not? In Mexico one does not make a living being honest."

Turning, she fled, like some blue-plumaged bird darting through the underbrush.

For a moment Dugan stared after her; then he, too, turned and ran. But in the opposite direction. As he crashed along he could hear Ole's gun at the other side of the clearing.

"Gee!" he panted to himself, "I hope that damn Squarehead hasn't started shooting up the police!"

He came upon Ole, lying prone, his back vibrating from the furious recoil of the gun he was directing.

"Hey! Cease firing!"

The gun crackled on. Dugan slapped his trainer on the back, and Ole looked around, his blue eyes still alight with the joy of battle. In a moment Dugan's story of the confession was told. But even as he told it, they heard the clatter of hoofs on the sun-baked road. With more valor than understanding the *rurales* were charging the farmhouse.

"Come on!" said Ole. "Let's help 'em out!"

Dugan jerked the excited Swede back out of sight.

"Hey!" he said. "We've been lined up with two sets of crooks already. Our stuff's all in the farmhouse, and little Mex is sure to tell 'em we're part of the gang that murdered the Spanish dame's husband."

These were sobering truths. They looked about for some avenue of escape. Behind them lay the jungle, matted with vines and treacherous with swamps; in front of them was the plantation. And already the circling *rurales* had posted men at the point where the trail led toward Evagelista. As they wavered, a group of horsemen came around the corner of the farmhouse and headed for their machine-gun position. Dugan caught sight of a clump of palms with leaning trunks a score of yards away. Flight upward seemed the only chance. He moved his wounded arm experimentally.

"Hsst, Ole!" he whispered. "I guess it's shin one of those trees or be pinched!"

From within their covert of sword-like leaves they heard the horsemen dismount, and soon guttural exclamations of joy announced that the gun had been found. But the newcomers were more interested in the black, spiderlike weapon than in any men who may have been operating it. After thrashing through the underbrush for a few minutes in perfunctory search, they galloped back to the hacienda, with the new toy across their leader's saddle.

From where Dugan and Ole clung, they could see the farmhouse and the surrounding terrain almost as from a low-hanging balloon. For what seemed hours the *rurales* stayed inside. Then six men with rifles ready for use marched into sight, and in their midst walked a hatless figure with chest thrown out and a proud, defiant toss to the head. There was no mistaking that brisk, young figure.

"Gee!" muttered Dugan. "It's the little Mex himself. What they going to do with him?"

The group headed for the jungle and disappeared from view. With bated breath the two men in the tree waited for the sound of a volley, but none came. In a few minutes the group reappeared, but there were only six of them this time. They strolled leisurely back; and soon the sound of a guitar and the popping of champagne corks drifted across the fields. The latest tenants of the hacienda were celebrating their occupancy.

Not until night had come and all sounds of revelry had ceased did Dugan and Ole dare to descend. For some time they stamped and thrashed their stiffened limbs. Then they set off cautiously along the edge of the forest to the point where the trail to Evangelista started. As they neared the big palm, Dugan, who was in the lead, suddenly stopped short. A sentry was guarding the fake graves of Ramós' parents, standing directly between two mounds, his dark figure barely visible admit the flickering moonbeams and dusky shadows. Dugan was about to withdraw when something in the sentry's posture struck him as peculiar. Dugan tiptoed forward, fists clenched, a cold shiver playing down his spine.

It was the body of Ramós. The bandit youth hung with his toes just touching the graves of his spurious parents, his face turned up to the night in a fearless smile.

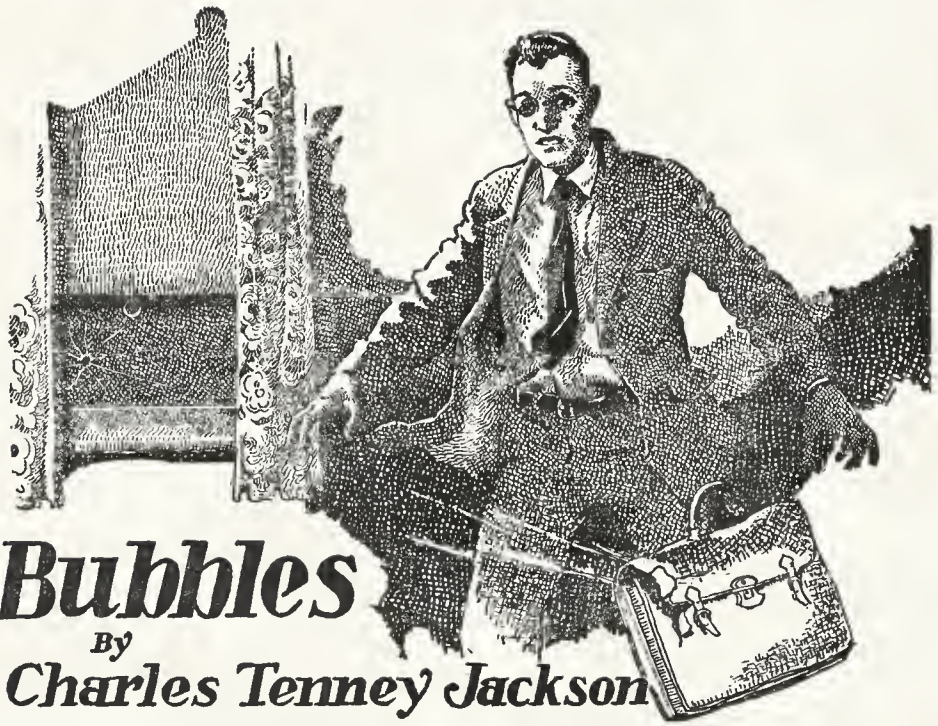
Dugan beckoned to Ole, and as they stood there, a mist came to Dugan's eyes.

"Py yingo! Mebbe yust about now I wouldn't like a room and a shower at the Astridge!" said Ole.

The other tightened his belt grimly.

"Gee, Squarehead!" he muttered, "wasn't that a swell hotel! Let's go back!"

Another Dugan story will appear shortly.



Bubbles

By

Charles Tenney Jackson

Author of "Let's See Your Thumb," "Western Stuff," Etc.

A man, standing at the window of his shore bungalow, is shot to death, and the shot came from the waterside. Three men, thoroughly trusted men, could see the entire beach as the fatal shot was fired, and they swore that no one was there.

ETHAN LANE, retired cattleman, and one of the wealthiest land owners of the coast counties below Corpus Christi, was killed at the seaward window of his bungalow at just seven o'clock on a bright sunny morning by a .30-30 rifle bullet fired from the open beach within plain view of three of his employees.

Three trusted men of Lane's bachelor household swore that that could not have happened. But it did. Old Rudy Stentz, Lane's caretaker and friend for forty years since the days when they rode range together; Cullody, Lane's chauffeur; José Lupino, the yard man, were all out beside the house—they all heard the crash of Lane's body when it struck the table and then the floor, and had rushed in to discover Sam Wah, the Chinese cook, staring from the hall at the dying man in the den off the living room.

"I tell yeh, Johnny, no livin' soul was out on that beach," repeated old Stentz, as he had to the sheriff and coroner. "The three of us was all lookin' that way. Mr. Lane had just come in from his before-breakfast tramp up and down the sands. There ain't a bump ner bit o' drift six inches high there. A rabbit couldn't find cover there, could it now? Lane comes in, goes to that window and is plugged square in the heart."

Johnny Bankson, heir and only known relation of the dead cattle king, was staring at the bullet hole in the white-birch panel of the wall opposite the window. He had hurried in quickly

as he could from the State agricultural school north of Altagorda when they had phoned him. A rollicksome, blond-headed, likable boy Johnny was, and now bewildered as the rest.

"You must have heard a shot, Rudy —some of you!"

"Nobody heard a shot. Cullody was fussin' with the car. It was backfirin' and mebbe we wouldn't noticed a shot. But one thing we can all swear—no man stood out there on that empty shore!"

"The sheriff and Captain Cole of the Rangers measured the angle and lined up that bullet. First they thought it might have been a wild shot fired by some rum runner or coast guard with a high-powered rifle a couple of miles out in the Gulf, but it wasn't. A line drawn from the wall shows it was fired from the edge of the water."

"Clear through Lane's body. A bull's-eye. Careful steady work at about two hundred yards. Yeh, they figgered everythin'. But nobody was there then. Couldn't be!"

Old Rudy's pale-blue eyes followed Johnny's to the bullet hole in the wood. It had gone through Ethan Lane's heart, through that wall and into the stair banister. Sheriff Bailey had dug it out even before Lane's body was taken away from the bungalow to the undertaking rooms.

That little hole in the wood was some eight inches below an ancient blackened square of iron with a crude emblem within which had once been famous from the Indian country to the mouths of the Rio Grande. A square of roughly hammered metal inclosing the letter "D." That old brand and a pair of .45 single-action guns in a worn belt were the sole remaining relics of days when Dennett & Lane's trail outfits and ranch holdings had dominated the upper Chico. No steer had worn the mark for thirty years, and Lane had hung it in this room he called his den. A lonely recluse Lane had become in his years of unsatisfied retirement.

"D-in-the-Box," muttered Johnny. "'D' for Dennett, wasn't it, Rudy? Then Uncle Ethan took over everything after Dennett was killed. In a rustlers' war, wasn't it, Rudy? I wasn't born then."

"Yeh," grunted Rudy listlessly. His weather-beaten, granite face set rigidly. "'Death-in-the-Box,' some o' the old waddies us't' call it. That old brand shore covered a lot o' killin's in them days. Grass wars and rustlers—big outfits fightin' out grudges. Lane was top man when finally what yeh might call law an' order come on the Chico. Him and his old iron, registered in his name."

"Death-in-the-Box? I never heard it called that. I never got much out of Uncle Ethan about his old riding days."

"No. He didn't take much to college stuff. But he liked yeh, Johnny. I guess yeh get everythin' now."

Johnny rubbed his pink face and tousled hair. He knew that, but this murder had put everything else from his mind. He turned to stare out the window. What they had told him since the five hours passed surged through his mind with sinister mystery.

"He fell right here on this rug. I wish we'd had some regular detectives down from San Antone or Galveston. Bailey and these county officers made a search for finger prints or——"

"Finger prints, hell! Lane was shot from that shore line out there. Only—well, sir, Johnny—he couldn't been!"

"What did he grab down those old dusty useless six-guns for? Have 'em in his hand when he fell? Staring out to sea?"

Rudy stared there himself. Lonely, sunny, open beach all along the cove which Lane's lonely home faced. A fenced yard of sparse grass, then a hundred feet of dry, level sand, then the wet, flat beach, beyond which was a

wide bar. Streaks of foam bubbles expiring in the sun. Shreds of froth quivering in the breeze. Sea birds wheeling. The empty, blue Gulf beyond Altagorda pass.

"Them guns puzzle me. Just relics on the wall. They was Dennett's guns, too. I remember when Lane brung his partner's body in across his saddle. Some thieves that their outfit had trouble with met the two at a water hole. They riddles Dennett bad. Well, sir, that ended the partnership. The firm papers and affairs was all in such a mess. When it was settled Lane had everything. Even the brand registered. Men walked wide o' Lane, he piled up such a power o' money and riders who was rough folks to meddle in on. Yes, sir, Johnny, them old guns has barked death a mighty lot."

Johnny hung the belt and holsters back on the wall. Notched and worn and empty. Stentz went on in his hesitating voice:

"When we all loped in here after we heard Lane stumble, first we all thought he'd fainted. Then Cullody found the bullet hole when he opens his shirt. Then we thought suicide, fer the old gun belt was in his hands. But it wasn't. They had dust in 'em years old."

"Uncle Ethan wouldn't kill himself, anyhow."

"No," muttered Rudy. "There ain't nothin' to be made o' it. The newspaper boys nosed in before yeh got here and then back to town. Reckon the State'll all be skittered with news like this."

"You'll all be at the inquest, Rudy."

Stentz grimaced patiently.

"All José and me and Cullody and the chink can say is what we said. We all saw Lane come in from the beach. We watched him. He tramped there every mornin'. Cullody had been just cussin' about how hot and still it was so early. The old man passed José not a yard away. It was just seven o'clock because the chink is on the minute with the grub. He'd just hit the gong when we heard Lane fall. The bunch all rushes to his room."

Old Stentz's desert-burned eyes narrowed just as they had to the sheriff's questions. No living man had been on that beach! Even a vegetable trucker passing on the road back of the house said that. He saw the commotion and came into the yard. The whole shore line was in his sight from cove to cove point—and empty!

Warm, windless morning then. Now, at noon the usual breeze had come and gone. The Gulf glittered in the sun. The bar, divided from the beach by a shallow run, was not covered more than five inches at high tide. A man could not swim it nor wade it unseen. A boat could have been seen clear to the deeper water two miles out.

Johnny knew every foot of this beach. To the left, toward town a quarter of a mile away, was a broken-down wharf from whose wormy piling town kids fished. Now and then some shore fisherman waded along, casting in the shallows. To the right of the lonely bungalow of shingles and wood at the edge of the dunes, only a hundred yards away, was a bit of hummocky, grassy shore closer to the tide level.

But in front of the Lane property all along, nothing but flat, wet sand, dead jellyfish here and there, bubbles, streaks left by the foam which the tide pushed in when there was no wind. Somewhere down the coast oil men were drilling on land that Lane had sold them for a million. He had bought this worthless shore before ever a derrick went up in Texas. Men said Lane couldn't lose. The old Death-in-the-Box had always stood for power, success, ruthless, uncaring of means.

"Yeh goin' to stay on yere or back to college?" said Rudy.

"Till we get this business straight."

"Ain't never goin' to be straighter. Ethan walks into his den ready fer breakfast as usual. Nothin' unusual, except——"

"What?" demanded Johnny quickly.

"As I told the sheriff, he seemed in kind o' a hurry. On the steps he turned and stared back to sea. Johnny, it was like——"

"He'd seen something?"

"See—hell! Nothin' to see! Only a funny thing—when we got to him his eyes was wide. Mouth workin'. Like he was startled."

"Scared?"

"Nothin' that ever lived scared Lane. But a bullet wings in right from empty air and gets him while he stands with his old dusty guns in his hands. He takes it on his feet, facin' it."

"Nobody ever searched the beach till the sheriff had settled that the shot came from there," retorted Johnny. "That was the first bungle. When the morning wind came up it and the tide hid any tracks."

"I tell yeh there was no tracks, fer no man was there to make 'em. We found some on the shore. Kinda like kids make flounderin' nights with a flash light. But when Lane was killed no man was there!"

The other Lane men swore to the same. Newspapers over the southwest carried the mystery story of the retired cattle king's passing. Old-timers recounted forgotten stories of Lane's career to a younger generation. But nothing threw light on his ending.

Johnny wandered on the beach while he awaited the inquest. Alverson, Lane's lawyer, and Captain Cole of the Rangers arrived to take him and Stentz to town. Johnny had started from the shore line to the motor road by the house when he looked back at the ripples on the wide sand bar. The afternoon sun flooded the shoals with a different angle of light. A gray mark wavered in the sand.

He went along to the spot. It was not a footprint though dissolving marks of feet were near. A long, draggled mark such as a pole, a boot heel—or a rifle butt might make. But it formed a square six feet each way. Then Johnny gasped. The faint, wavering outline in the sand was the Death-in-the-Box brand of the old Dennett-Lane range feuds!

Lane's heir muttered his bewilderment. Faint and vanishing, but there was no mistake. The sinister symbol of the Lane fortune had been traced on the sands at low water about daylight. A message written to be seen and then vanish as tide and wind arose.

Johnny began to reconstruct coolly what might have taken place this morning when Lane's employees were tinkering with the car on the drive at the side of the house in full view.

"At seven o'clock that mark might have been plain to Uncle Ethan when he strolled along here. He saw it—a warning or a threat. It sent him hurrying to the house. He got his old guns, empty as they were, as a challenge. Went to the window and was killed—by an invisible assassin, if the boys are correct! Now, that's impossible. But they think they're right. Nobody searched along the beach for nearly an hour, not till the sheriff determined that the bullet came from the beach. Then the tide had crept in. The forenoon breeze rippled the bar. They saw nothing beyond the beach line to make a clew."

He glanced at the lawyer's car on the road past the house. Alverson and Cole were waiting for him. Old Rudy Stentz was watching hard. Johnny went to join them. A few moments more and the faint code of death traced on the sea sands would blur to mere marks among the ripples. It would be a joke to tell these hard-headed old friends of Lane's.

But Stentz gave Lane's heir a cun-

ning look. Captain Cole of the Rangers was reiterating his views to Attorney Alverson.

"If this had happened twenty years or more ago I could understand why somebody might have done it. Lane had enemies then. When he quit the range people said he was a man marked for trouble."

"He was a man could handle it," grunted Stentz. "Feared nothin'."

"Well, Johnny," smiled Alverson, "you're well off now. Reckon you know you got everything save a few bequests to some friends."

"Yes," said Johnny somberly, "I understand that."

Old Stentz stared back from the car. The lonely bungalow lay bathed in sunshine flooding sea and shore.

The inquest had developed nothing. The jury reported that Ethan Lane came to his death at the hands of persons unknown. Not even a suspicion could be directed against any one. The local newspaper men and deputies searched and surveyed the scene again and questioned every one of Lane's household. Not a thing to be added.

The Chinaman got dinner for Stentz and Johnny Bankson and then went into town with Cullody. The affair would be talked of in the Mexican quarter and on the corners, but Johnny wanted to keep away from folks he knew just now. He went through his uncle's desk on an idle rummage and Stentz filled his pipe and smoked, rambling on irrelevantly of old days and doings when he was Lane's topside man up on the Chico. Rudy's weather-beaten old face relaxed a bit at Johnny's friendliness. He had stuck to Lane's fortunes like a feudal retainer since Lane saved his life forty-five years ago in a rustlers' war.

"Ethan taught me all I ever knowed from thirteen year on," grunted Rudy. "I was close to him as any man ever got, Johnny."

Johnny hoped this might lead to a confidence. The sunset glow was on the wide, empty bar beyond the beach. The tide was out now, but of that mysterious symbol written there nothing remained.

When the lights were switched on Rudy stared at the window.

"Now Lane could 'a' been shot any night here safe as could be. But mornin'—right in the open—don't it sound foolish?"

"Uncle Ethan saw something. You boys are mistaken about no one crossing the beach at that minute. Impossible, Rudy!"

"No, sir!" retorted Stentz. "The water was like a lookin' glass. Not even a ripple to hide anybody who tried to swim. But there ain't water enough to swim unless we got a big storm tide in the cove. No, sir, Johnny—we all noticed how bare the beach was then."

"Sam says the old man was all the time staring seaward. Just as if expecting something."

Old Rudy grimaced curtly.

"Oh, that damn chink—this quiet place got on his nerves. He's dreamin' o' tong shoots and yen."

"Well, let's turn in. You and me, Rudy, haven't got any nerves to worry us."

"Goin' to close the house here?" grunted Rudy, as Johnny was on the stairs. "Yeh know Cullody wants to quit. Yeh drive yore own car anyhow. The old place'll have mem'ries."

"I'll hang out a while. You with me, Rudy."

Rudy did not answer. When Johnny turned in he could look from his window to the sparse grass below the veranda. A huge shadow blotted it. Stentz was watching from the window where Lane had been shot, listening to distant surf beyond the bars, for the wind was rising. But Johnny slept well.

He awoke with the sun in his room. For a minute he almost forgot the trag-

edy. Then he rolled out, stuck his head to the window and breathed the good air.

The usual hot calm morning. With the sun the sea breeze would spring up and ripple all that tide water. But now the mirroring water was pushing in the oily scum. On the outer side of the bar foam would gather, beaten to a frothy ridge and then ride in with the tide. Under certain windless conditions in the cove the foam line would pile high, glittering in the sun till warmth and morning breeze broke it to streaky marks on the sand.

Johnny looked at the shore birds wading in and out of the frothy screen and went to breakfast. He tried to act his usual cheery self, but Stentz and the Chinaman could not relax.

Death-in-the-Box, the sinister heraldic device of the house of Lane, shrouded the peace of the bright day like a threat.

Johnny was glad to be out of it for a time back at his school. He returned from his car for the brief case of books and papers and was passing Lane's study when he glanced within.

Rudy had taken down the old belt and holsters from the wall. When Johnny saw him he grinned aimlessly.

"Mebbe yeh won't care for them old relics, boy. Them guns was Jim Dennett's first. After he was killed, Ethan took 'em. He wore 'em years. Boy, them guns has barked rough."

"I've no particular use for 'em. Want 'em, Rudy?"

"Well, I been thinkin'. I reckon I'll drift on a piece."

Johnny was astounded.

"What the devil? Rudy, you don't know that Uncle Ethan left you a choice eighty out at the farm and also twenty-five thousand dollars cash!"

"Much as that? Well, I figgered he'd do something. Fer the other old hands, too, mebbe?"

"Every one got a fine little bequest. Nobody else though. Not a dollar to charity or anything."

"No, he wasn't that kind. Sorteh hard, Lane was, some ways. But he treated me right. Guess I'll sell that eighty and take my money and travel. See some o' the old country Ethan and I rode once."

Johnny was puzzled. Rudy went with him to banks and courthouse and all the matters attendant on the will in the days that followed. Patient as a granite butte, simple, kindly—watchful. It came to Johnny that Stentz had become sort of a bodyguard—yet he was determined to hit the grit, as he averred with a grin:

"Jes' got a itchy foot. There ain't nothin' to be made o' this killin'. Many a good man's been killed suddenlike. Soon as I can draw on this money, boy, think I'll drift on fer a time."

Johnny said nothing. And nothing came of further investigation.

The county officers about came to the conclusion that the three employees of the Lane place were mistaken, somehow, in their assertions that no man could have shot Lane from the beach in front of his window. Somebody had shot him there. Stentz and Cullody and José just were mistaken about time or location. They had got excited and didn't notice all that happened that morning.

Cullody got disgusted and quit. Johnny ran his own car anyhow so he didn't need a driver. José went back to the Mexican quarter for a couple of weeks off till he knew that the young master of the bungalow wanted him again.

Sam, the cook, stayed on, silent, apprehensive but dependable. Old Rudy patiently awaited the settlement of Lane's bequests. He puttered about at odd jobs. Johnny resumed his class studies at the agricultural school in a few days, going out and back in his roadster, and in a week the grim puzzle

of the killing lessened its grip on Lane's house by the shore.

Johnny hung a gaudy calendar over the bullet mark in the wood panel and let it go at that. He had given Rudy the old guns with a friendly banter and Stentz had come as close to emotion as he ever did. He liked Johnny, without doubt. The two came to a tacit agreement not to discuss Lane's killing more than needful. In a week even the mystery of the sign on the sands lessened in Johnny Bankson's mind. It was just one of those things that a fellow could make nothing of. Perhaps, he thought now, some grim joker had traced it after Lane was done to death that day.

It was another clear, calm morning when Johnny dodged along the hall from his room to the bath and happened to glance out to the seaward window at the open beach. Old Stentz was down there at the water's edge. He seemed to be staring fixedly beyond. Then he watched the shore line each way. Eastward to the broken piling from which the cove curved in to the wide beach in front of the house, and then westerly to where the low, grassy dunes came down close to the shoal water. Then Stentz gave one searching look at the bungalow and waded to the bar. He began to scuffle his feet along and then crossed a space and repeated the same action. Down another side, and then, watching the sand riffles carefully, he came to the beach.

Johnny drew back from the window where Lane met his death.

"Rudy saw that sign. It was traced again—before daylight. He tramped it out. Didn't want me to see it. Death-in-the-Box! Old Stentz knows something he's never told."

But old Rudy was amiable at breakfast. Johnny kidded him back and the Chinaman as well, but the mirth was forced. Johnny decided it was useless to charge the old cowhand with knowledge of the mystery code written in the sands before Lane's windows.

But he was not surprised when Rudy brought up his idea of leaving the place now Lane was dead.

"Morton, the real-estate feller, will give me fifteen thousand for the eighty Lane left me. Pretty good, ain't it?"

"What the blazes will you sell for? You're well fixed, Rudy."

"Yeh. But I got a niece over to Beaumont that'll keep house fer me, now I'm gittin' on in years an' footloose."

Johnny grumbled but didn't argue. When he drove home from the agricultural school that evening he found Rudy's old, worn, horsehide trunk and blanket roll on the veranda. Stentz hadn't come from town yet. So Lane's heir dined alone. He determined to close the bungalow now. He wasn't superstitious, but a healthy-minded young man wouldn't find much use for the place as a home.

Then Sam Wah detained him as he left the dining room.

"Johnny, I go, too. No can do here."

"Leaving? Sam, what's the matter now? You been here years!"

"All fine. But Stentz go, I go. Too lonesome. Stentz lonesome, me lonesome. He walk too much. All time moving nights since Mist' Lane dead."

"Rudy? Up nights? What you mean?"

"I sleep 'bove garage. I see Stentz in yard, on porch—back, front, in dark, watchin' all time. No like, Johnny."

Johnny watched the old retainer's settled regret.

"Look here, Sam, what you know? Of everything—what you know?"

"No can see. All time puzzle. First Mist' Lane. Now Stentz. Then he go. Mystlery."

Nothing more was to be got from Sam. He shook his head at all leading questions. A faithful, courageous Chinaman, too, but he would not stay.

But at that he spent every evening now in town. Johnny saw him go to-night as usual, but with a sore, puzzled heart himself.

Then he was alone in the quiet house. The light fell out from the windows to the empty porches and the coarse grass of the sands. Johnny could hear the faint murmur of water at the bar, for there was the usual night breeze in the passes southeast.

He tried to read but the silence was too much. He wondered if Rudy was coming back to-night or sending for his things in the morning. Johnny would close the house quickly with its faithful henchmen gone. He grunted sourly that he wished he had stayed at the school to-night. Or brought a gang with him. Only they'd be too curious. He had all the lights going in every room to dispel this uneasy presentiment of evil. Then he thought this was childish and went to switch them off. He was in the left wing before one of the empty guest rooms when a faintly audible sound came beyond the central living room.

Johnny went swiftly along the hall. That sound had been stealthy as the jump of a cat, yet enough to be heard. The comfortable living room, brightly lighted, was empty. He passed his uncle's den beyond, peering in from the hall. There also everything was bright in the lights, the windows and the side door to the porch open as they had been.

"Must have been mistaken. It wasn't inside. But no cars were passing out in front. And the breeze's died down—like it always does by midnight. Who's about?"

He looked at his watch. Midnight and not even the sound of water lapping on the bars out in that cloudy dark. He stepped into Ethan Lane's den. Nothing about it changed since the killing. The little calendar which Johnny had hung over the bullet in the wooden panel was the gayest touch of color there. Then Johnny started.

The time-blackened old branding iron was gone. He saw the hook where it had hung, the dusty outline of its rough square and the "D" in the center.

Johnny swung back to the shadowy hall, staring.

"It was there before I left this room. Not ten minutes ago! I remember looking at it. There, and now gone! Death-in-the-Box! Who wanted the fool thing? Who traced it in the sands where we could see it first from the window? Gone—the Lane-Dennett brand!"

He passed the door to the porch, opened the screen, looked out. Dark and silence. Whoever took the iron had come in from the other door directly to the den and gone that way, undoubtedly.

There was a crawly feeling in Johnny's bones that he might meet a bullet in these shadows, but he went to the seaward side of the veranda, walked along boldly, stopped in the dark of the wall, listened, watched. A full half hour of this and he went around and into the house, breathing excitedly.

"This place is watched. Has been for some unknown time. Uncle Ethan knew it. Signs were coming to him. And then he was killed. Rudy knows it —Sam said he wandered about. They know something they wouldn't reveal! It killed Uncle Ethan. But a bullet fired right from an empty beach in broad morning with the help out in the yard: Rudy can't explain that, but he knows *why* it was done!"

He turned the lights out from the hall, went to his bedroom above. Then he drew the shade at the seaward windows, and rummaged his .32 automatic from the desk. Johnny sat on the bed long before he turned in. He could telephone to the sheriff or Alverson about this happening, but he grumbled: "What's the use?"

It didn't clear anything. It merely deepened mystery on mystery. They might laugh at him; hint that he was only confusing what theories the county officers might have about this business.

"I'll lay it before Alverson to-morrow," he muttered, "and ask Rudy when he comes back. He ought to be in. Maybe he'll stay in town to-night. The old man never's out after midnight."

Johnny tossed about for hours after he turned in. The warm calm night of the lower Gulf coast pressed down on sea and land. He slept an hour or so uneasily and awoke to stare at the level sun at the window coming from shore mists easterly beyond the flat. Not even a car had passed since he awakened. It struck him oddly to realize that he must be alone in the house. A glance into Stentz's room showed it undisturbed.

Johnny yawned, washed himself dispiritedly, dressed and went down the short steps. He hadn't locked a door or window last night but nothing was changed. A fresh bright dawn, dew on the few shrubs out the windows and on the porch rails.

"Sam didn't come back to get breakfast. He don't like this mystery stuff. When I tell 'em the house was entered and——"

He took a quick glance into the den. The dust mark where the brand had hung was plain in the daylight. Johnny grumbled—he had almost hoped this was a bad dream. But, anyhow, nothing had disturbed his snatches of sleep for the few hours in bed.

From the window he saw the same distant open water, the bar in the middle ground, and the beach closer with bits of unkempt drift here and there. That foam line which the tides on these hot, calm mornings always drifted in, piling up till it was a gray, frothy barrier from side to side of the cove, was higher than usual. It ran along like a tiny serrated mountain ridge, desert gray, here and there a peak glistering in the first sun rays. An hour, the warmth and the first flick of the morning breeze, and the stuff would vanish, the little tide creep on up the wet, hard sand. It took a certain combination of tide and windless night to bring the alongshore froth streamers in here and then pile them to this height. It was more plentiful than usual, yet the shore dwellers saw it so on many an airless dawn. The indentation of the shore caught and sheltered the fragile stuff.

Johnny Bankson drew a sleepy breath. He wouldn't get his own breakfast in this lonesome house. He'd run the car into town and find an early coffee shop open. So he turned from his scrutiny of the bare beach, to the table to pick up the big leather brief case in which he carried his books and papers. The thing was in his left hand as he raised it to hold the match box on which he struck a light for his first cigarette.

There was a rending snarl of wood not a foot from his face and the leather case swung and seemed to explode along its cover, a paralyzing twist which instantly made his own body whirl, dodge and drop below the sill of the open window. He knew swift as thought could register, with the sound still in his ears.

His moving form in the room had brought a bullet speeding in the window so close to the left side that it had torn the frame, crashed through his case and the books inside and then into the wall beyond. A muffled report had caught his ears even with the scurry of the lead and his own drop to the rug.

"Sure tried to get me!" muttered Johnny. "Me! What for? Who? No one there—out on that beach! I was just watching it from one side the cove to the other. No one—sea and sky beyond!"

He groped about, got to the hall, raised to his feet and dashed for the side porch, wishing savagely that he had

brought his automatic from the bedroom above. Peering cautiously along the clapboards of the wall past the corner under the veranda roof, he saw the empty beach again. Sunny, blue water beyond the shallow, tide-covered flat. A sea bird wheeling and screaming over the shore débris and the wavering foam line in the curly mists. He could see it all—open, empty, lifeless!

"That shot came straight in the window. Straight—it was fired, just as it was at Uncle Ethan, from the water's edge. Hold on!"

He dashed the other way along the hall, past the middle room, through the other wing to the opposite veranda and out upon it so that he could see the western expanse of beach. A hundred yards down that way the low dunes began with their scrawny bushes and coarse grass. But the man who had tried to kill him could not have run that far after the shot. Absolutely impossible.

Then Johnny grunted bewilderment. He saw old Rudy Stentz. Not on the level beach. On the dunes back of them to the right. Rudy had a gun out and stood watching the shore. Even as Johnny discovered him Rudy moved slowly forward toward the water, big pistol lowered as if expectant of something to spring from the grass.

Then he saw Johnny going directly toward the beach from the house. Stentz halted with a slow gesture which might have been relief that Johnny was not hurt. Then he kept on his slow, watchful way to the shore line as if expecting game to flush from the grass.

But Johnny Bankson had reached the wavering foam barrier. As a kid he had romped through the wall of bubbles many a time along the shore. So now he waded through the dirty, glistening stuff to the water streaks beyond. It was nearly waist-high here. Along the tide line the wading birds darted and pecked at bits of flotsam.

Rudy had reached the foam line from the dunes. Apparently he was puzzled to look along the sea side of it and find emptiness.

Then Johnny yelled at him sharply. A vague dark spot in the gray stuff was rising not five yards from where Johnny stood. A short figure uprose, the quivering shreds of bubbles clinging to his overalls. He was facing Stentz, his rifle raising, when Johnny sprang at him.

The killer whirled but Johnny's swift lunge against his shoulder knocked him out into the shallow water, the gun fell from his grasp and the younger man jumped for it. Old Rudy was shouting and charging to the spot. But the strange man was backing off. He was over his knees in the water between the shore and bar when he stopped defiantly.

"Lane men!" he yelled. "Rudy—keep off me now! I know yeh—an' I'm not to be took, hear me?"

Johnny glanced at old Stentz. Rudy seemed to be faltering with his pistol covering the other man. He tried to speak and his voice failed him. The skulker of the foam line was backing deeper to the water. Johnny swung the rifle on him and shouted:

"Halt where you are! Drop that gun!"

But the other retreated up the shore. Then he loosed something from the denim blouse he wore and hurled it up on the beach with another derisive yell. Johnny hesitated about shooting. Another look at Stentz showed that he, too, was reluctant.

They both turned to see what the stranger had thrown. It lay on the white sand—the old black brand which had vanished from Lane's room last night! Johnny's head was turned that way when he heard Stentz mutter, and when he whirled to watch the other man he knew that the crack of a pistol shot had come on the sunny silence.

The killer was down writhing in the shallow water. Stentz was lunging to his side. He grabbed for the pistol in the other man's hand, tossed it to the beach, and then got his arms under him. Rudy looked up at Johnny stonily.

"Come on, boy. Give me a hand. He stuck the gun to his ear. In a way I figgered somethin' like it. Crazy, I reckon. Anyways, I jest couldn't shoot him!"

Together they laid the dying man face up to the sun. Not a car was on the stretch of road back of the Lane property. Johnny looked down at the thin, grizzled, reddened face. A little shrunken man with calloused hands whose patched overalls were oil stiff and grimy.

"Johnny," muttered Stentz, "I was scared he got yeh when he cut loose at the house. I was watchin' fer him come daylight. But he crawled down the foam line from the old wharf. Jest like he must have done to get Lane. Same kind o' mornin'—hot, still—the stuff ridin' in from the bar like it does with the wind and tide right. It took me a week to figger how Lane was shot from here."

"Who killed Uncle Ethan? Who's the man—and why did he?"

Stentz flicked the dirty bubbles from his sleeve. The first lift of the after-sunup breeze had come and the foam screen was already dissolving in the heat and stir. Rudy laid his hat over the dead man's face.

"Well, yeh got to know, Johnny, but we orteh keep the main facts from other folks. This is my brother. Al Stentz he was, but fer years he was known as Toler. Fireman on a tanker runnin' from Tampico to Galveston and these ports along yere. Every time he come in and had time he deviled Lane. Wrote letters, telephoned and got secret word to him somehow. Mystery signs, threats he would git Ethan some day."

"What for?" retorted Lane's heir, "Revenge?"

"Kinda revenge. Think he was crazy but he was cunnin' enough to stalk along behind that froth line when he knowed it would give him cover and git Lane at his mornin' walk. Lane must have seen him at last when he discovered that old brand mark Al traced in the sand. Yeh, I reckon yeh'd call it revenge. But fer the Dennetts. Al took up their cause twenty an' more years ago. First the widda and her daughter that Al wanted to marry when he was young. Then the granddaughter. They never countenanced Al's doggin' of Lane."

"Dennetts?" cried Johnny. "I didn't know they lived, or even were any! It all happened before I was born. Jim Dennett was Uncle Ethan's partner who was killed by rustlers——"

Rudy shrugged wearily.

"My brother never believed it. He was a Dennett rider and I was one o' Lane's outfit. When Lane rides in one time with Dennett's body and swore he was killed in a water-hole fight, Al swore Ethan killed him. Yeh see, Johnny, Lane got all the property. There was no evidence o' Dennett's sharin' in, and Lane was too powerful hard a man to account them days."

Johnny looked down at the wet, draggled little man in the sand. He didn't look like a cowman but a roustabout of the ports, which was the truth. Not the kind of a man Ethan Lane would fear.

Old Rudy read his thoughts.

"Well, sir, Brother Al went kinda loco about the Dennett wimmen's wrongs. They had nothin' legal to fight Lane with. So they jest dropped from sight. But Al he pestered and blackmailed Lane fer years. Quit punchin' and hoboed around till he went on the tankers. A damn renegade he was but yeh see, Johnny?"

"I see. You couldn't kill him or

really expose him without draggin' in a lot of old stuff that's better forgotten. And in a way—Al was a sort of knight fighting for those Dennett women, wasn't he? Nothing for himself but just to force Uncle Ethan to play square."

"Johnny, yo're a white man to see it that way. Killin' yore uncle and all!"

"I can't prove Uncle Ethan was innocent of killing Dennett in the old days any more than he can be proved guilty. What about the Dennett women, Rudy?" Then Johnny gripped Rudy's shoulder: "Say, I just understand now! Rudy, you planned to convert all Uncle Ethan willed you to cash and go hand it to old Mrs. Dennett and her granddaughter, didn't you? You never had a niece in Beaumont. You were going to beggar yourself to square up!"

Old Stentz grinned mournfully.

"Well, in a way. Then I thought Al would quit devilin' yeh. But yeh see, he was still dangerous. Crazy, that's what. Got Ethan, so he figgered gettin' yeh, too!"

"You saved me, maybe, just now when I dashed out the house!"

"I figger yeh saved me, too, Johnny. Jumpin' him in the foam. He was ready to shoot it out with me. And I jest couldn't drop him."

"No," said Johnny. "I saw that you held off."

"I'd 'a' shot to save yore hide. Nothin' else. Say, he had a scheme! He knowed if he crawled behind the foam in the shallers and then shot into the house and crawled onto these dunes, that in no time at all the stuff would be scattered by sun and breeze. He was hidin' out in a sailors' joint in town, I learned. But I didn't want to prove it on him. Ain't my way to run to law. Wouldn't 'a' been Ethan Lane's either. We seen a heap o' things shot out in old days."

Johnny smiled in friendly fashion.

"Sure, Rudy. We'll drop this business. We can say that we cornered the man who shot Lane, but nobody can identify him. No use in dragging up old scores."

"Boy," grumbled Rudy. "Yo're actin' white ag'in. Only one thing worries me. Them Dennett wimmen. Lane wronged 'em, Johnny. They are pretty poor over in Beaumont. The granddaughter, Nell, is a stenographer. Fine girl, Johnny. I kept an eye on 'em. Lane was too stubborn to ever admit he wronged 'em."

"Rudy, I'm going to leave it to you. You're the judge. Uncle Ethan did swindle his partner in the old Death-in-the-Box deals?"

"He did."

"Think they'd take a hundred thousand in a quiet settlement and nothing ever known of it?"

Rudy Stentz grabbed his hands.

"Boy, I knowed yeh was square! Well, if yeh ain't made me happy, sayin' that!"

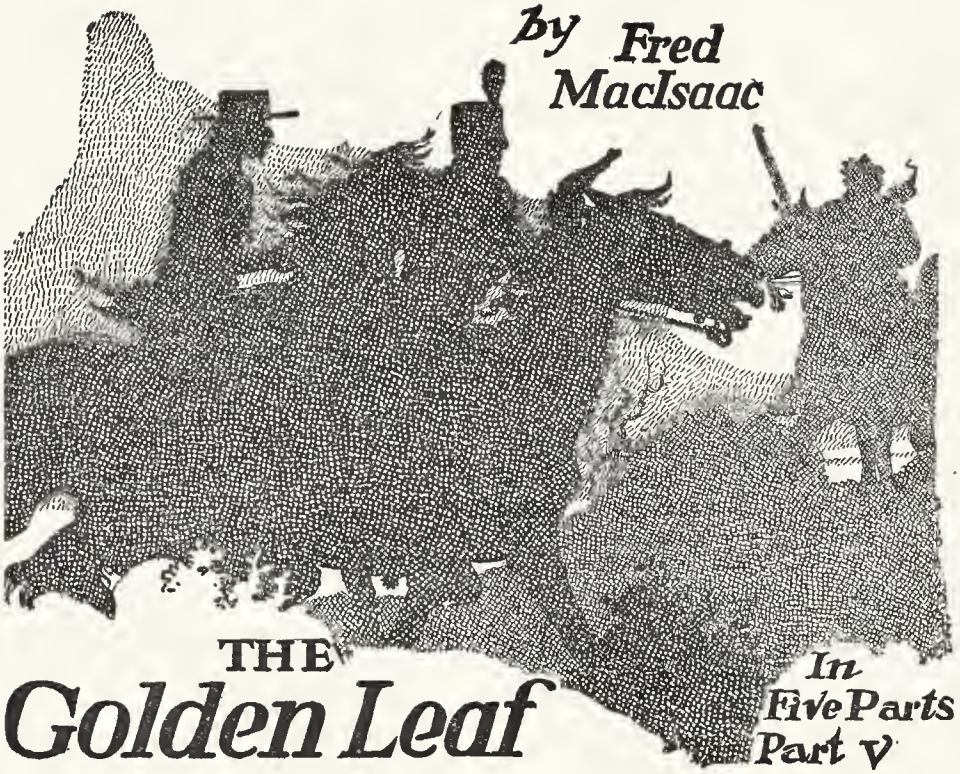
"Your word goes, old-timer." Johnny picked up the old iron on which death and fortune had ridden before he was born. "Here, goes, Rudy! Al, the seaman wanted it and I don't!"

He hurled it far out on the shifting sands of the Gulf bar.

"I bet," grumbled Rudy, "when yeh meet that Dennett girl, Nell, yeh'll be int'rested. When I was in Beaumont I told her about yeh."

"Come on!" laughed Johnny. "I'll show her I'm a square guy!"

Another story by Charles Tenney Jackson will appear in a later issue.



by Fred MacIsaac

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Exciting conclusion of the story of an American's adventures in the Near East.

CHAPTER XXIX.

EVENING GOWN AND OVERALLS.

ABOUT this time Anelda's paragon was munching another cold potato and peering through cracks in the shutters down upon the main court of the castle, as he had been doing at intervals for a couple of hours.

He had seen the arrival of King Otto and suite, three horsemen in civilian attire, without any notion that he was looking upon the rival for the hand of the princess favored by Prince Nicholas. He had been impressed by the two counts, who were military-looking persons; but he assumed the fat little man was their valet. Pete Brodie slumbered upon the ancient bed; he still had many hours of sleep to make up. The chamber the pair had preëmpted was less than a hundred feet from that of Anelda, and upon the same corridor; but that, of course, Link did not know.

He saw evidences of great activity below, and rightly assumed it was due to the search for himself and Brodie. Worried as he was by his own and Brodie's situation, he could not help being amused by the failure of Nicholas to search his own house. However, that might come later; they were still in great danger.

Deciding at last that Pete had slept long enough, and feeling the urge for conversation, he crossed to the bed and shook the truckman roughly by the shoulder.

"Gwan out o' here," snarled the still-sleeping Brodie.

"Wake up, Pete," Rafter commanded. "We've got to talk things over."

Brodie sat up on one elbow, blinked, gazed around, and recalled his situation.

"Nobody come near us?" he questioned.

"No."

"Then lemme sleep, darn ye."

"You've got to get up. We've got to decide what to do."

"All right," agreed Brodie, swinging his feet out upon the ground and sitting up. "This is a terrible old bed, but I've slept in worse places. What's on yer mind, kid?"

"Everything. How are we going to get out of here?"

"Lay low a couple of days till they get tired huntin' for us; then do a sneak. That Greek friend of yours said that the old man would take the trucks somewhere else pretty soon. He can't cash in on 'em here. Well, he'll go along with them, and take most of the help. That's the time for you to grab your girl and beat it."

"Yes. I hadn't thought much about it; but isn't it our duty to try to stop the trucks?"

"Huh! Not mine! Let me get away with a whole skin, and he can have all the tobacco in Macedonia."

"I'm an employee of the company," Link said slowly; "I'm the only one on the ground. And I ought to do something."

"Don't be a chump, kid. What can you do? Anyway, you ought to have thought of that back in Yastib. Darkrino said you was the only evidence he had of who stole the stuff, and you went off with it."

"I was thinking of Anelda; I had to see her."

"Well, you've seen her. Now we make our get-away and you tip off the authorities in Yastib."

"But it will be too late. The trucks may be gone."

"All right. You tell one. Ever try to stop one truck? Think of stopping twenty-four."

"I suppose you're right. I wonder if it would be safe for me to slip out and try to locate Anelda's quarters. She must be on this floor."

"Don't give way to that. There are people passing up and down the corridor. We're safe here—maybe; but the minute you step outside we're goners."

"It's awful to be under the same roof with her and not see her."

Pete grinned. "Which would you rather save, Link, the trucks or the girl?"

"I'm going to carry off Anelda anyway," he retorted between clenched teeth.

"All my life I've been keeping away from the women because they only bring trouble; and now I'm all messed up like this on account of another feller's girl. Wow! I'm hungry!"

"You've got potatoes in your pockets, if you haven't crushed them in your sleep."

"So I have. Forgot all about them." He drew one from his coat pocket. It was considerably crushed but still eatable; and he began to chew upon it.

"Not so bad. I've tasted worse. What say you and me have another nap."

"I couldn't sleep any more."

"I can. Call me if they break in."

In five minutes he was snoring softly, while Link returned to his window and resumed his watch. It was an interminable day. There was little going on in the square until the middle of the afternoon; then he saw Prince Nicholas in his gaudy uniform conducting the three strangers about the inclosure, evidently a tour of inspection for important guests. Darkness came. Brodie had waked and watched with him for an hour or two, then returned to his bunk and his slumber. The man's capacity for sleep was extraordinary.

Pete had acquired much patience in the hard school of war; but Link's was entirely exhausted, and he could stand inaction no longer. His yearning for Anelda was overpowering. Finally he stole a glance toward the bed, unbolted the door softly, and peered into the corridor. Some eighty feet down the corridor several oil lamps were burning; but there was no one in sight. Without quite knowing what his purpose might be, forgetting his unpleasant appearance, unshaven for three days now and wearing filthy overalls, he tiptoed into the corridor, closed the door behind him, and marked its location. Then he moved softly toward the lighted section. Here the stone floor was swept and the doors freshly painted. Evidently these were the sleeping quarters of the household. Meeting no one, he continued until he came to a gallery with a flight of stairs leading to a hall below, which was well lighted, unfurnished, and inhabited only by a footman, who snoozed near an empty fireplace. Common sense had returned by this time, and Link realized the danger he was running, not only for himself but for his loyal friend; so he turned and began to retrace his steps through the deserted corridor.

He had proceeded but a short distance when a door a few feet ahead of him opened. He drew back against the wall—a useless precaution, since the corridor was lighted and his appearance would betray him as one who had no business there. A woman stepped out and faced him. She saw him, drew back, opened her mouth to scream, when he whispered hoarsely:

"Anelda! It's Link!"

Anelda was in evening dress, dazzling in black satin, a glittering tiara in her black hair, indescribably beautiful. She rushed to him, grasped him by the arm, and drew him quickly into her chamber, shutting the door.

"Oh, Lincoln!" she cried, coming toward him with arms outstretched. "How did you escape them?"

Don't touch me, darling. I'm filthy. How lovely you look!"

"I knew they were searching for you. I did not sleep all night."

"You poor kid," he exclaimed. "Don't come near me; you'll soil your gown."

She smiled happily. "Then kiss me," she said. She leaned forward and pursed her lips. He leaned forward and met them happily.

"We tied up the Egyptian and he got away, so we knew there would be a search for us," he explained after a moment. "We figured that the prince would never think of searching this building, so we slipped in through the kitchen and got into a vacant room at the end of this corridor."

"You clever, clever boy," she murmured. "But you must be terribly hungry."

"We stole a lot of potatoes from the kitchen. We've got some left."

"But now what are you going to do, dear?"

"Well," he said, "Brodie thought we ought to lay low for a few days, until your grandfather starts away with the trucks. Pete thinks he will take most of his garrison with him as an escort, and that then we might smuggle you out and over the Greek frontier."

"Oh," she cried, "the delight of finding you made me forget. Lincoln, darling, it can't be. King Otto of Westfalisa is here in the castle. He arrived this morning. And grandfather intends to make me marry him to-morrow night, before they start away with the stolen tobacco."

"No!" he cried. "You mustn't! Surely you won't, Anelda?"

"I have said I won't; but I am afraid of grandfather when he is angry. He might force me. I'll try not to, Lincoln."

"Which of the three men who came

this morning is King Otto?" he demanded.

"The little fat one."

"Good Lord! I thought he was the valet or the groom of the others. You can't marry him, Anelda. It would be too awful."

"Of course I won't, dear," she said soothingly, for Link was almost crying. "You are going to save me."

This was putting it up to Lincoln with a vengeance. But he nodded.

"You bet I will, somehow."

"Dear, I have to go down to dinner. I have to be polite to the king, because I promised grandfather that much. He was going to lock me in my room. I told him I loved you."

"You did? But I supposed he knew. Didn't Ben Ara tell him about us?"

"Apparently not. He accused you of being spies of the tobacco company."

"That's funny. I wonder why he held back the important facts."

"It doesn't matter. What are we going to do? It's such a relief to know you are here, and that I don't have to worry any more about Otto."

"Where does Nicholas sleep, Anelda?"

"In the other wing, beyond the stairs. The king and his suite are quartered there, too."

"How many servants are there in the house?"

"The butler, the cook, two footmen, four housemen, three women. Why?"

"I want to know what we are up against. Can I see you again to-night?"

She nodded. "At eleven o'clock I'll leave my door ajar. I don't think there will be anybody on the watch on this corridor. It's the women's wing."

"I'll be back."

"And you'll have a plan, won't you, Lincoln?"

"I hope so," he sighed. "Maybe Pete can think of something. Say Anelda, you are absolutely ravishingly beautiful in that dress and with that thing in your hair. It's the first time I ever saw you as a princess."

Anelda caressed her unshaven and dirt-covered lover with her fine black eyes.

"My maid!" she whispered. "Quick! —behind the door!"

She opened it, and conversed for a moment; then he heard the woman's feet stumping along the stone floor of the corridor.

"Grandfather sent word they are waiting dinner," she explained. "I got rid of her by telling her to go down and tell him I am coming directly. Kiss me again, Lincoln, dear.

"Now," she said. "I'll step outside and see if the coast is clear. Don't forget to return."

She watched him until he disappeared in the dark end of the corridor, then resumed her interrupted progress to dine with a king, a prince and a few counts.

Lincoln found the right door by instinct, and pushed it open. A harsh voice commanded: "Hands up!" He heard the click of a cocked revolver.

"It's me, Pete," he said to the man in the darkness.

"Come in, you blamed fool," growled Brodie. "I told you not to leave this room."

"Pete!" Link cried, "I saw Anelda."

"Did you see anybody else? That's what I want to know."

"Not a soul."

They gripped hands in the dark. "Well, I s'pose it's all right; but you was covered with horseshoes," grumbled the truckman. "Don't do it again."

"I've got to," Rafter answered. "She expects me at eleven. It will be safe, though, because everybody on this floor will be asleep."

"Yeh? It's my neck you're risking, as well as your own. You can't expect a girl to think of the danger. It's just a lark with her. She knows nothing will happen to her."

"You're wrong, Pete. She's in terrible danger." Then he recounted all she had told him about King Otto and the wedding set for to-morrow night.

"You see," he concluded, "we've got to get away before then, and take her with us."

"Why did I ever get into this, me that was always so careful?" groaned Brodie. "We can't get out of here to-night, kid. They're still hunting for us. Even if we got over the wall, they'd chase us and catch us. We wouldn't be safe anywhere in Greece, even, because these wild men don't care anything about frontiers. Our only chance is to lie low till the old boy rides away with his murderers."

"And by that time Anelda will be gone with King Otto," protested Link. "For Heaven's sake, think of something!"

"Think of it yerself. I'm no Napoleon. That guy couldn't get out of this fix. He couldn't even get away from St. Helena."

They sat there in the dark arguing and proposing impossible plans until Link saw by the flash light and his watch that it was a quarter of eleven. Brodie, knowing it would be futile, made no protest.

"I'll hide down here in the dark end of the corridor," he agreed. "If you get into trouble I'll butt in, just the same as usual. Might as well—if they get you, they'll get me."

CHAPTER XXX.

OTTO OPENS A DOOR.

KING OTTO of Westfalisa was accustomed to German ladies who were frequently beautiful but almost always blond and buxom. And as he was blond himself, he was completely bowled over by the radiant brunette whom Nicholas introduced to him at luncheon as his bride-to-be. When he saw her in evening dress with brilliants sparkling in her raven hair, his infatuation was evident to the satisfaction of all but Anelda. Otto had been drinking heavily all day; and he sat in the little refectory consuming goblets of heady Greek wine until his officers insisted upon his retiring. They had to support him to his room, where they put him to bed.

Otto, however, did not sleep. Instead he law awake congratulating himself upon his good fortune, a munificent dowry and the most beautiful wife in Christendom. Her cold politeness during lunch and dinner he had set down as shyness; that she disliked him never entered his mind, for who repulses a king. To-morrow night she would be his bride. But he could not wait. During the tour of the castle Prince Nicholas had pointed out the door of his granddaughter's apartment; and it entered Otto's half-crazed mind that it would be a pleasure to stand outside her door. Who knows—perhaps she hoped for a visit?

He got out of bed and laboriously proceeded to dress. He grinned fatuously during the process. Nicholas might not like it, but he could not object too strenuously. After all, he wished Otto for a son-in-law.

Presently he was attired, and an hour's rest had restored the use of his legs. With a crafty grin he opened his door. No guards were visible. What was there to fear in Darnyela Castle? He walked softly past the doors of his suite—the old fools might object.

As he crossed the gallery above the great hall, an armed sentinel looked up, but saluted respectfully when he recognized royalty, and Otto continued on his way. In his befuddled mind he intended no disrespect to the woman who was to be his wife. Most likely he would have wandered past her door, cast it an amorous glance, and returned unsteadily to his own apartment; but

when he came to it he saw that it was invitingly ajar.

He smiled vinously. "I am expected," he muttered in German. The interior was dark; and he blinked as he entered and pushed the door to behind him. Then a pair of soft arms stole around his neck.

"Darling!" a soft voice murmured. "Wait till I light a lamp."

"So," he said to himself. "So." There is a world of meaning in that little word, when used by a German.

The lamp illumined the room. Anelda, fully dressed in traveling costume, turned to him with a smile, which froze as she recognized the leering little monarch.

"You!" she cried. "You! Why, how dare you? Get out, you beast!"

"What's this?" stammered Otto in English. "You don't want me?"

"Certainly not! Leave the room, or I'll scream!"

He shook his head. "You don't want me. So? Whom were you expecting?" he demanded.

"No one. Go! I command that you go!"

"The door was ajar," he said, perplexed. "You are dressed like this. Well, I am your husband, almost; and here I am. Come to me, wife."

He staggered toward her.

Anelda evaded him, rushed to the door, and threw it open.

In the doorway stood Lincoln Rafter, a ruffianlike figure. "Lincoln!" she cried. "Put him out, darling, put him out!"

"Who is he?" demanded Rafter.

"King Otto. He found the door ajar."

"So," observed Otto, wagging his head sagely. "A lover. She expected a lover. I'll fix him. Such a lover."

He fumbled in his pocket and dragged out a revolver. But Lincoln did not wait to be shot by an angry fiancé. He rushed at Otto and launched a furious swing with his right which caught the ex-monarch upon the left temple. Otto slid down to the floor and lay there very still.

"Oh!" cried Anelda. "You have killed him!"

"Just a knock-out," explained Lincoln. "But this is a terrible muddle. What on earth are we going to do with him? When he comes to, he will raise the roof."

"And you'll be killed," wailed the princess. "Oh, Lincoln!"

"I need help," muttered Rafter. He stepped to the door and waved a summoning arm to the man whom he knew to be hiding in the dark. In a moment Pete Brodie joined them. Link explained the situation in a dozen words.

"We got to get him away and keep him away," said Pete briefly. "Lift him up and we'll carry him down to our room. You wait, miss; we may have to make a break out of here in a few minutes."

They carried Otto down to their own musty chamber and laid him on the bed. Pete flashed his light upon the man's face. He seemed to have passed from complete unconsciousness to a natural slumber induced by his potations.

"This settles it," exclaimed Brodie. "Get your girl, Link, and we'll try to make a get-away. Down the back stairs, out through the garden, and perhaps we can get over the outer wall at the bottom of the slope. The old boy hasn't men enough to cover it all—it must be a mile around. I don't think we've got a chance; but we ain't got any here. So, you knocked out a king. He looks more like a deuce."

Nothing loath, Rafter opened the door; but immediately shut it.

"There are a couple of men in the corridor," he whispered. "We've got to wait."

Anelda had closed her door. Her maid, who slept in an adjoining room with a connecting door, had been awak-

ened, and entered to ask if she was needed.

"Go back to bed," snapped Anelda.

"But I thought you cried out," the girl persisted, eying the costume of her mistress strangely.

"You dreamed it."

"But why are you dressed like that?"

"How dare you question me?" demanded the princess haughtily. And the peasant woman mumbled apologies and withdrew in haste.

It happened that General von Melor and Count Hamish had not retired but were playing cards in Melor's chamber. The game finally ended, and Hamish entered his master's room to see if Otto were asleep, and found him gone. Alarmed, lest in his intoxicated condition the King might be moved to attempt what he actually had attempted, the two courtiers set out in search of him. The sentinel in the hall had seen him passing along the gallery and pointed the direction.

They hastened to the end of the corridor without finding him, consulted, and came to the same conclusion regarding his whereabouts. They had feared that Otto might commit an indiscretion which would affect the delicate negotiations regarding the dowry; for Nicholas, after dinner, had suggested a reduction in its amount—and this they had steadfastly resisted. If Anelda became angry at the boldness of Otto, Nicholas might turn it to his account; but if Anelda had admitted the king, then the shoe was on the other foot, and the old prince could be forced to consent to the wedding upon the original terms. As Otto had been seen passing along the corridor in the direction of the apartments of Anelda, and as he was not to be found elsewhere, it seemed obvious to them that the ardent bridegroom-to-be had been admitted.

Anelda had thrown a kimona over the street dress which had so surprised her servant, and was waiting with her heart in her mouth for the return of Lincoln Rafter. Her pretty ear was resting against the crack of her door when the two Germans arrived before it after their fruitless journey to the end of the black corridor, and she heard low-toned conversation. She threw open the door and confronted Count Hamish and General Count von Melor, who were thrown into confusion at the unexpected sight of her, and bowed low in silence.

"And what is the meaning of this, may I inquire?" she cried angrily. "Why are you gentlemen standing at my door?"

Count von Melor, very red of face, pulling his kaiser mustache, nervously found his voice.

"Most humble apologies for our indiscretion, your highness," he stammered. "Please set it down as excessive loyalty to our master, and permit us to withdraw."

"I command that you withdraw," she exclaimed.

"Ahem, you will not mention our presence to his majesty," pleaded Count Hamish. "We found his chamber empty, and being alarmed we sought for him; but we leave him in better company."

"What do you mean?" demanded Anelda, who knew very well what he meant and whose fury at his insinuation overpowered her discretion. Better let them imagine that she was entertaining the drunken monarch and get rid of them than deny his presence; but the smirking, leering courtiers warped her judgment.

"King Otto is with you, is he not?"

"He most certainly is not," she retorted. "How dare you suppose I would permit him to enter my room?"

"Then," stammered Von Melor, "if he is not, where is he?"

"I do not know and I do not care; and if you do not go away, I shall send for my grandfather."

"Pardon, madame, we do not wish to be indiscreet; but if you are not entertaining his majesty, perhaps we should notify Prince Nicholas that he has disappeared."

"I am certainly not entertaining his majesty. You insult me by the imputation."

"Most humble apologies, your highness," pleaded Hamish. "King Otto, in his joy at his approaching nuptials, took too much to drink; and it is our duty to find him. Have we your permission to awaken the prince? We wish to inform him of what has happened."

There was nothing for Anelda to do except agree, although she knew now that she had behaved stupidly. How easy to have gotten rid of the pair by allowing them to suppose—— The thought caused her to blush. Instead she had ruined everything. She stepped inside her room and shut the door—immediately reopened it to watch their retreating backs.

Suddenly Link was beside her.

"We've got to go at once," he said.

"Oh, Lincoln," she wailed, "it's too late! Those are the king's attendants, and they have gone to wake my grandfather. They thought Otto was in my rooms, and I should have let them think so; then we should have had till morning. In five minutes the castle will be awake."

"I'm glad you didn't let them get away with any such idea," he answered angrily.

"You've got to hide. Is the king dead?"

"No such luck. He's in a drunken sleep. Anyway, they can't marry you to him till they catch him. And what a fight we'll put up!"

"Go quickly; they're coming!" she cried.

He ran back into the darkness, while Anelda closed her door and quickly began to disrobe lest the dress under her negligee betray her. "If I hadn't opened the door, they would have gone away," she moaned. "What a fool I was."

Meanwhile, Otto's attendants had awakened the servant who always slept across the rug outside Nicholas' door.

Nicholas came to them in a long nightshirt, holding a candle; and the fellows babbled their story.

"There is no occasion for alarm," the old man assured them. "He may have wandered down to the lower floor by a staircase at the far end of the corridor. But he could not have left the castle, for there are sentinels at the only door that is not locked and bolted. However, I shall dress and accompany you. I am not pleased with that young man; he is a drunkard."

Hamish and Von Melor exchanged glances of dismay. Nicholas would not fail to turn this incident to his advantage. Yet Otto must be found. Both suspected that Anelda had been lying and would take advantage of their departure to make Otto slip out of her rooms—in which case they would come in for heavy censure for creating a disturbance. But if she had been truthful, it was imperative that Otto be located at once. He might have fallen down a flight of stairs and been severely injured. In such a vast old ruin walking in the dark was apt to be dangerous.

Nicholas returned fully dressed, carrying a lantern. His servant saluted and prepared to follow him, and the prince turned the light over to the fellow.

At the gallery he called to the sentinel, who assured him that King Otto had moved along the second floor gallery into the west wing and had not returned. So they proceeded swiftly to the far end of the corridor, descended by the same stone steps up which Link and Brodie had climbed the previous night, and returned along the lower floor to the great hall.

CHAPTER XXXI.

UNDER THE BED.

A PLAN of Castle Darnyela, if there were such a thing, would have shown a building three hundred feet long, sixty feet wide, and two stories high. The center of the building consisted of a great hall rising to the roof, with a gallery at the rear connecting the two wings of the second floor. The second floor at either side of the central hall was like a hotel—a long corridor, with many chambers opening on either side, and ending in a narrow stone staircase which led to the roof and to the ground floor. Beneath there were cellars and dungeons.

Several rooms opened directly from the hall upon the ground floor and corridors like those on the floor above; and there were many rooms off the lower corridor, also—most of them given over to rats and bats.

"He may have wandered into one of the vacant chambers and fallen asleep," suggested Nicholas. "I shall rouse the household and have a search made of every room in the castle."

"The cellars," suggested Von Melor.

"Impossible! The doors are heavy oak and always padlocked. The major-domo carries the keys."

"It is—er—possible that her highness may have seen him," suggested Hamish with some little embarrassment.

Nicholas crushed him with a glare. "That is impossible, sir!" he declared. "How dare you make such a suggestion!"

Hamish grinned feebly. "Young lovers, you know, sir."

"Men die in this country for such insinuations," warned Prince Nicholas. "My granddaughter, I may as well tell you, is not eager for this match. This escapade of his majesty's will not make him more attractive to her."

"King Otto was intoxicated, your highness. Surely she would make allowances."

"The princes of Molvania have always been able to carry their liquor," retorted Nicholas. "However, she must be roused, so that the uproar in the hallways will not alarm her. Remain here, gentlemen, while I call my granddaughter."

He ascended the stairs, while the two Germans exchanged glances.

"Wonder what he will do if he finds him there?" said Hamish nervously. "The old fire-eater is capable of violence."

"Nonsense! He is hot for the match, but hopes to reduce the dowry. Well, it looks as if Otto would have to accept less; and that will be bad for all of us."

"The miserable fool," snarled Hamish. "All he had to do was behave."

Meanwhile Prince Nicholas had reached Anelda's room and knocked.

"It's your grandsire, Anelda," he called. "Open, please, for a moment."

Anelda, in her nightdress and with frightened eyes, confronted him.

"I am sorry to disturb you, child," he said kindly. "But King Otto, who had too much to drink, wandered out of his room, and his attendants are greatly alarmed. I am awakening the household and am about to make a search for him and feared you might be frightened by the disturbance."

"Oh," she exclaimed. "Where can he be? Grandfather, I was not asleep. Those men have been here and accused me of having him in my apartment."

"What?" he bellowed. "The swine! The dogs! I'll have them whipped."

"Of course I informed them they were mistaken," she said with a malicious smile, "but I did not permit them to search here. However, if you would like to enter, sir——"

Prince Nicholas looked abashed. "Most certainly not, Anelda. I'll see that Otto punishes them—the insolent hounds!"

"Perhaps," insinuated Anelda, "his majesty had an engagement with one of our women. He looks capable of such baseness."

"No, no," he replied hastily. "He was drunk. He may have fallen down one of the old staircases."

"Are you sure you do not wish to search my room?" she insisted.

"I know my granddaughter," he said with dignity. "But every other room in the castle will be searched, you may be sure. Be sure to lock your door, my dear."

Anelda withdrew, to conceal the terror she felt. If they entered all the abandoned rooms, they would discover Lincoln and Brodie, as well as the king. She must warn Link; but she did not know which of the many chambers concealed him. She crouched on a chair and wept with anger at her impotence. Meanwhile the search began. The staircases revealed no injured or unconscious monarch; and now a dozen men with lights were moving along the second floor beginning at the women's wing. Some of the ancient doors were so rusted in their latches and hinges that they gave with reluctance and loud squeaking; and this she hoped would warn her lover, although there seemed nothing that he could do to save himself.

As regards the warning, she was correct; for the uproar in the corridor meant but one thing to the fugitives. And to complicate matters King Otto recovered consciousness and began to whimper with fright.

Brodie flashed his light around despairingly. "Not a closet, not a place to hide," he groaned. "We're cooked, Link."

"We've got to crawl under the bed," said Link, taking command at last, "and take that fat brute with us."

"They always look under beds," protested Pete.

"There's nothing else for us. Fix up that bed the way it was; throw that old canopy and the curtains back on top of it. Push that fellow under first. Ge him against the wall. Then you crawl in. Keep him covered with your gun, so he won't utter a peep. Come on, hurry up!"

The sight of the revolver in Brodie's hand persuaded Otto to obey orders, and he managed to crawl beneath the big bed, although it was a tight squeeze for him. Brodie followed him and Link slipped in after the truckman.

"Caught like rats in a trap," whispered Brodie. "Keep quiet, you!" he said to Otto. "We're desperate—see One yip and you get six bullets in your gizzard."

They lay there in the dark, as it seemed, for hours. They heard doors give way, the buzz of voices in the corridor, and harsh commands from Nicholas. The search was very methodical at first, door after door was opened, the searchers filed in, inspected each room, and moved on to the next chamber.

Fortunately for the Americans, however, Nicholas had no suspicion of their presence in the castle; and his men ha entered many rooms before they reached Otto's prison, the door of which Link had the forethought to unlock before he rolled beneath the bed. They were searching for a drunken man w might have wandered into a room but certainly would not be hiding; it was night and their lanterns did not shed a brilliant illumination; and by the tim they reached the room where Otto wa concealed they had ceased to be methodical. Nicholas stood in the door while two servants entered and gaped.

"Not here," snapped the prince. "Move along."

The door closed again and the men under the bed, with the exception of the unfortunate monarch, sighed in surprised relief.

"It don't seem possible," muttered Pete.

"Don't move. They may come back," warned Link.

For another hour they lay upon the cold stone floor in their cramped position, until silence resumed without and they were certain that the search party had gone to the floor below or to the other side of the building.

"I must tell Anelda," Link said at last.

"You stay put," snarled Brodie. "She knows they haven't caught us, and they've probably left a couple of men on watch up here. But let's get out of this. Come on, kingie, we're going to move."

Suddenly he chuckled. "Blamed if his royal nibs ain't gone to sleep on us."

It was true. Otto, forbidden to move or speak, had relapsed into slumber.

"Let him stay there," said Link. "He's safe while he's asleep; and we may have to dive in again."

They dragged themselves out and stretched, then feasted once more on cold potatoes.

"Say," exclaimed Link, "we've spiked that wedding ceremony. They can't marry him to Anelda till they find him."

Brodie grunted. "Lots of time before to-morrow. If they come back here in daylight, they'll catch us sure. They'll spot our tracks in the dust, and next time they'll look under the bed."

"I doubt if they come back," Link assured him. "They consider that they have searched all these rooms; and it's an awful job. They'll be looking for him and us in the village to-morrow. Imagine marrying my Anelda to *that,* and giving him a barrel of money to take her. I've a mind to kick the brute, only it's too much trouble to crawl under the bed."

"You better turn in," said Pete kindly. "I slept most of the day; so I'll keep watch. You're going to need your health and strength, kid. We're hiding in a hole with a big bear watching the mouth of it."

CHAPTER XXXII.

RETURN OF A FOX.

HOURS of fruitless search left old Prince Nicholas physically fatigued and mentally disturbed; while the king's attendants would have been frantic had they not solaced themselves with the hope that Anelda, herself, had concealed Otto. Perhaps he had fallen into a drunken stupor from which she had been unable to awaken him. Having entered every room in the vast old building save one, having been assured that exit had been impossible for the king, it was obvious to them that he must be in the one locked chamber. But Nicholas knew that this was impossible.

After posting soldiers throughout the castle, the prince sat himself down in the refectory to consider the situation. Otto had no reason to disappear; for by remaining he would gain a bride and a dowry of which he was in urgent need. Yet Nicholas, because he had personally supervised the search, was confident that he was not in the castle. Of his own volition, therefore, the king would not have departed. This pointed to an involuntary disappearance. To whose interest was it that Otto should be removed?

Suddenly Nicholas uttered a violent oath and slammed his fist so hard against the arm of his chair that Von Melor and Hamish gazed at him eagerly. Had he solved the mystery? If he had, the prince did not take them into his confidence, but continued to mutter in his own tongue.

In fact, Nicholas had hit upon a theory. Anelda had confessed that she did not wish to marry Otto because she was in love with one of the Americans who were lurking somewhere within the outer walls.

That they were daring Nicholas knew, because they had ventured into the castle—resourceful, because they

had captured Sidi Ben Ara and had evaded his search parties. Anelda, if she was in communication with them, might have notified them of Otto's presence and the imminent wedding; and it would be like their audacity to get into the castle proper and carry off King Otto, who, in his intoxicated condition, could make little resistance.

It might have been possible for them to have entered by one of the ground floor windows, although these were supposed to be closed and locked at night, and if they got in, they could get away in the same manner. They might, even now, be scaling the outer wall at some unguarded place.

Nicholas was on his feet and heading for the main door, inside which three or four soldiers stood at attention.

"Notify Captain Ralem to awaken the entire garrison," he said to their leader, "and post them immediately upon the walls. Leave no section unguarded, and capture men who may attempt to leave the castle. Wait! Send Ralem to me at once."

To General von Melor, who was at his heels, he said: "There are two Americans at large in the grounds for whom we have been hunting. It may be that these have found King Otto and are holding him for ransom. As soon as it is light, we'll find them—if we have to level every hovel within the walls."

"Americans!" exclaimed Von Melor. "But why should they be hiding here and what object might they have in carrying off his majesty; and how could they get him out of the palace?"

The prince hesitated; he could not tell him the motive of Lincoln Rafter without admitting that Anelda was involved.

"We know that he did not leave voluntarily," he replied. "So I assume that he was forced to go. He is not in this house; that we know."

And now lights flashed in the main barracks, lanterns appeared in the great courtyard, and men with rifles, their eyes heavy with sleep, were tumbling out and forming an irregular line; while Ralem, the military right arm of Prince Nicholas, appeared before him and saluted smartly. Captain Ralem received his orders and immediately set forth to execute them, while Nicholas fumed and fretted.

Nicholas' reasoning, of course, was excellent, and his one error perfectly natural. Having entered every room in the palace, he was confident that no one was lurking within its walls. Yet he overlooked the fact that his search had been for a sleeping man, who was not a fugitive, and that he had dismissed many rooms with a cursory glance.

In the morning he grimly promised himself an interview with Anelda—an interview of a different sort from any conversation which he had ever held with that headstrong and rebellious girl. If she knew the hiding place of her American, he would force her to reveal it. And to occupy himself during the meantime, he made another tour of the ground floor, to inspect all windows.

Most of these windows were sealed with wooden shutters nailed firmly to the window frames, and many of them were without glass in the window sashes. Others were protected by stout iron bars. But he found the window of the kitchen without bars or shutters, although it was closed and locked. The trembling cook was lighting his fires. It was his custom to open his window during the day, to carry off food odors, but to close it at night. The previous night he had forgotten to close it, but wild horses could not compel him to admit it. Nicholas examined it and saw that it was locked on the inside.

"How long have you been here?" he demanded.

"About fifteen minutes, excellency."

"Was this window locked when you entered."

"Yes, excellency. Just as you see it now."

Shaking his head, perplexed, Prince Nicholas departed. A new idea came to him. The Americans might have forced the locks upon the stout doors which gave entrance to the cellar; they might be lurking there with their captive. But a journey below convinced him that the locks had not been tampered with; and there were no windows in the building which admitted to the cellars.

All this took hours. The sun had risen when he returned, baffled, to the great hall, where he found Count Hamish asleep on a bench. Von Melor, the soldier, had accompanied Nicholas in his search.

Taking half a dozen men Nicholas sortied out and began a desultory hunt. He was aware that the Americans might have evaded the search parties of the previous day by doubling and getting back into houses which had already been entered. If he had to blow up the ancient dwellings with explosives, they would not escape him to-day. He sent out riders to warn the countryside, in case the fugitives had already scaled the walls, and offered large rewards for their capture.

At seven o'clock he presented himself again at the door of his granddaughter.

For the second night Anelda had not slept. A glance at the set face of the old man assured her that Link was still at large.

Nicholas stalked into the room and seated himself in the thronelike chair.

"Kneel down beside me," he commanded. "I want to see your face."

Obediently she knelt beside the arm of his chair.

"Where is King Otto?" he bellowed.

"I do not know," she replied boldly.

"Where is the American?"

"I don't know."

"Have you communicated with him since night before last in the garden?"

"No."

He read in her eyes that she was lying. He also read that torture would not force the truth from her.

"You know that he carried off King Otto," he said.

"No," she asserted.

"Anelda, I did not enter your rooms last night because I thought I knew my granddaughter; but we have searched the castle and not found a trace of him. You would not admit the king, because you do not love him; but you might admit your lover with a prisoner. So I shall now make a search of your rooms, and if I am wrong I shall humbly beg your pardon."

"It is granted in advance," she retorted. "Do as you please, grandsire."

Nicholas took her at her word. He looked under the bed, in a large wardrobe, behind the hangings; then he entered the maid's room and satisfied himself that no one was concealed in that small chamber. He returned, avoiding the eyes of his granddaughter, which he supposed would be flashing with scorn. Anelda, however, was holding back tears with difficulty. She loved her grandfather, and understood how much it hurt him to distrust her.

"I'm sorry," he muttered. She rushed into his arms. "Please don't, grandsire," she pleaded. "I know what this means to you, and I wish I could obey you in this matter, which is so near to my heart; but I cannot marry Otto, even if you find him."

He released himself from her arms. "I shall find him," he said sternly. "And you will marry him and be happy and grateful to me for making you a queen." And he departed.

Anelda, unable to understand how the three men whom she knew to be hiding in a chamber on her own corridor had escaped discovery, but thankful for so much grace, spent another unhappy morning, watching from her window the scores of soldiers who were moving through the old village.

Nicholas, troubled enough, was forced to consider another complication shortly after noon; for Sidi Ben Ara returned. He rode into the fortress accompanied by more than a score of Serbians but minus the dozen Molvanians who had accompanied him to Albania, and immediately demanded an audience with the prince.

They met in the great hall, Nicholas ugly because of ill success, the Egyptian nervous and downcast.

"What does this mean?" demanded the prince sternly. "Why are you back a day before your time?"

"A dreadful complication, sir," he said. "We must change our plans."

"And why?"

"Near Malik in Albania we were ambushed. My escort was captured, but I managed to escape."

"You would," the prince said contemptuously.

"I lurked in the vicinity and discovered what had happened. Darkrino and Vadrine are in Albania, and have gotten together several hill tribes. Naturally the tobacco companies will spend what is a great fortune to Albanian chiefs to recover the trucks; and they have blocked the main road to Polina."

"So you lost my men. What is this rabble you have brought with you?"

"I hired them in Monastir, where I have friends, to replace the men whom you lost, sir."

"I prefer to engage my own soldiers," snapped Nicholas; "but since they are here, let them remain. There is another way to Polina. I know a road some twenty miles north of Malik."

"Doubtless they will have spies in Adrianska to watch our departure from here," said Ben Ara glumly.

The Prince laughed. "No spies in Volvania. Any stranger who ventures into this territory will be brought immediately to the castle. I'll raise more men, and start to-morrow night, as we planned—if the marriage takes place.

"Marriage?" demanded the startled Egyptian. "What marriage, sir?"

"My daughter to King Otto of Westfalisa, who is in the castle—or was here," he said.

"King Otto here?" stammered Ben Ara, quite upset at this complication.

"He disappeared during the night. We are searching for him. We shall find him."

"Disappeared?" repeated Sidi, his eyes lighting up. "In what manner? How?"

"The fool was drunk, and wandered from his chamber."

"I see. And what have you done with the Americans?"

Nicholas' red face grew purple. "Curse them. They are both still at large."

"Ah!" exclaimed the Egyptian.

In a flash the astute Oriental comprehended what it had taken Nicholas hours to evolve—that Lincoln Rafter had secured the person of his rival, King Otto. Sidi's respect for the young American soared; but his hatred of him multiplied.

"Most likely they scaled the outer wall and are across the Greek frontier, by this time, with the news that the tobacco trucks are in Darnyela," he said.

"No, I believe they are still here. I think they are responsible for Otto's disappearance."

Ben Ara gazed at the old man keenly. "But what would Americans want of a dethroned king? They are interested only in the tobacco."

Nicholas had no intention of confiding what he considered his shame to this Moslem. "Nevertheless, that is my opinion," he said curtly. "A servant will show you to your room. You must be very tired."

The Egyptian followed the servant, his mind working like lightning.

If Rafter had carried off the king, he was performing a service for Sidi Ben Ara, who no more wished a mar-

riage ceremony that night than did the American. But how had the Yankee contrived such a feat? To accomplish it he must have been within the castle; and, if that were so, it explained the failure of Nicholas to capture him by searching the village.

Ben Ara reconstructed the situation of two nights previous. Rafter and his companion had discovered that their prisoner had escaped. As Link had surmised, Ben Ara had learned from an Arab fakir how to free himself from bonds. Aware that a hue and cry would be raised immediately, that all exits would be guarded and the inclosure thoroughly combed, they must have conceived the bold project of hiding inside the castle, where the thick-witted Nicholas would not think to look for them. They had got in touch with Anelda, who had informed Rafter of the arrival of the king; and they had fallen upon that drunken monarch and dragged him to their lair, somewhere under the roof of this old building.

To escape from Darnyela, encumbered with Otto, after the alarm consequent upon his disappearance, was probably impossible; so they must be still within the castle walls, and a proper hunt would discover them. If the Americans could be taken and Otto still remain concealed, Ben Ara would be pleased. But it would be inconvenient to have the king turn up, marry Anelda, and sally forth with twenty thousand pounds of the money Ben Ara had paid to Prince Nicholas.

In the Egyptian's arrangements the old prince was a cat's-paw. If all went well, Sidi proposed to secure the tobacco, recover his thirty thousand pounds, and sail away with Anelda. A tall order; but he could accomplish it, or so he believed.

His journey to Albania had been a sham, for his arrangements had been made in advance. He had taken a dozen men from Nicholas' forces to weaken them. At an inn at Monastir, the Molvanians had been captured while they slept; and a band of cutthroats had taken their places. He had not crossed the Albanian frontier; but one of his spies from that country had met him in Monastir and informed him that Darkrino and Vradine were bribing chiefs to waylay the convoy.

At present Sidi had inside Darnyela a score of his own men, who would be overpowered in a pitched battle but could accomplish much by a surprise. But he did not want an open breach with Nicholas until the tobacco was conveyed to the sea.

If Otto could be conveniently slain and the crime laid to the door of the Americans, whom Nicholas would promptly execute, Sidi might proceed cheerfully with his plans. But it was necessary to locate the missing trio before that happy event could come to pass.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

SURRENDER.

KING OTTO, after sleeping two hours, woke up, and attempted to sit up; but he was unable to budge because the weight of Mr. Peter Brodie upon the ancient bed slats caused them to press firmly upon the royal stomach.

The darkness, the cramped quarters, and the hangover of his majesty combined to convince him that he had been buried alive. He uttered a frightened squeal. But a low-voiced threat from the watchful Lincoln Rafter reassured him—at least persuaded him that he was not imprisoned inside a coffin.

"You may come out," Lincoln told him; "but don't dare utter a sound."

"I can't move," whined Otto.

He heard a low laugh. The bed shook and he found himself relieved of the weight on his stomach. Painfully he crawled out, to find himself still in darkness and to be grasped immediately by the collar.

"Your life depends upon doing exactly what you are told," Link whispered in his ear.

"I am King Otto of Westfalisa," his highness declared.

"Hurray!" remarked Pete Brodie, who was annoyed at having been awakened.

"You must release me at once, or it will be the worse for you," continued the monarch. "Who are you, and whither have you conveyed me?"

"We're bolsheviki," declared Pete, "and, *my*, how we hate kings!"

Otto shivered. "I remember," he said. "I was conversing with my bride-to-be, and one of you struck me a cowardly blow."

Link chuckled. "That's right—just as you were going to shoot an unarmed man. I have your gun in my pocket."

"You will be punished," warned Otto. "Prince Nicholas will learn of my disappearance. There will be a search made and I shall be found."

"They may find your body," hissed Pete, who enjoyed baiting the poor little king—it took his mind off his own predicament.

"Oh!" whined Otto. "You wouldn't kill me?"

"In a minute. Nothing I'd like better."

"Let up, Pete," laughed Link. "We won't kill you, King Otto, if you do as you are told. "And in a few days you will be released."

"But I'm to be married to-morrow night."

"To-night. Only the marriage will have to be postponed."

"I will pay you a large sum to let me go—a thousand English pounds."

A laugh was his answer; and he became silent, sitting on the edge of the bed between his two captors.

His presence was an embarrassment, because it prevented them from conferring. But, after all, there was nothing much to be decided.

"Lay down on the bed, kingie," said Pete presently. "Over against the wall. You lay down, too, Link. I'll watch for a while."

"I couldn't sleep," Link replied.

Otto hastened to obey orders, the others sat in silence until the morning light began to shoot through the chinks in the shutters. Then they got some entertainment watching that portion of the search for Otto which took place within their range of vision. And they ate the last of the cold potatoes, saving one for King Otto"s breakfast.

"We've got no water," Pete said. "I'm perishing of thirst already. No matter what happens, we've got to sally out when it's dark. We can't stay here till we die of hunger and thirst."

That was obvious. They had survived the previous day by sipping from a flask of brandy which Pete had in his hip pocket; but this had been emptied the night before, and the mention of water caused Link to suffer immediately from thirst. They agreed that one of them must risk detection that night, and raid the kitchen—provided they were able to be patient so long.

They saw Sidi Ben Ara return with his band, and that gave them hope that Nicholas might turn over the search for Otto to others, postpone the wedding until his return, and sally forth with the trucks that night. If he took most of his garrison with him, their own chances of escape were greatly improved.

When Otto awoke, which was about the middle of the afternoon, he refused to touch the cold boiled potato and complained of a raging thirst. Even Brodie pitied him, because he himself had often been intoxicated and knew how the human system craves for water afterward. More hours passed. Otto, like a scared rabbit, suffered in silence. Pete stood by the window looking through the cracks in the shutter. Link nodded, sitting beside the prisoner on the edge of

the bed. And then the royal endurance broke. Regardless of consequences, he yelled in German:

"I am dying for a drink of water."

Link throttled him, but the cry was out. Anybody within fifty feet of the door must have heard it. With a snarl Pete Brodie drew his gun and waited, his eyes gleaming. Link had a weapon in each hand. Otto waited in terror, for he feared an attempt at rescue would be the signal for his own death.

But there was no answering shout from the corridor, no patter of feet, no evidence that any had heard the call. Minutes passed and the tension relaxed.

"It ain't natural—our luck," muttered Pete. "Listen, king. Once more open your yap and you'll drink lead. The minute there is a bang on the door I just pump you full of bullets."

"I won't do it again," promised Otto humbly. "I suffered so I could not help it."

"It doesn't do you no good, anyway," continued Pete. "Nobody can hear you in the place where we are."

In that statement, however, he was in error. The cry had been heard. Sidi Ben Ara had convinced himself that the Americans and the king were hidden in the house, presumably in one of the many vacant rooms; that they had managed to evade notice during the search of the night before. He had been prowling about the corridors for an hour. There were guards in the corridors now, but they had no orders to interfere with this favored guest. Nicholas and the king's courtiers, with fifty men, were working through the village. Anelda kept to her rooms, in a frame of mind easily imagined. Ben Ara had the place to himself. He had ascended the old stone staircase at the far end of the corridor on the side of the women's quarters, and had proceeded but a few steps along the second floor when he heard the wail of King Otto.

He stopped in his tracks and listened. The sound had come from a room on the right. He tiptoed up and laid his ear against the door. He heard low-pitched conversation. He could not catch what they were saying, but he picked up a word or two in English; and then he smiled triumphantly.

There were no distinguishing marks upon the doors, but he noted the location of this one from the staircase. Then he moved slowly on, crossed the gallery, and entered his own chamber. So King Otto and Anelda's lover and the second American who had overpowered him in the garden were locked in that room waiting to be taken. Stupid old Nicholas had failed to find them; but they had not escaped Sidi Ben Ara. The question was whether it was to his best interests to betray them.

It would lift him high in the estimation of Prince Nicholas, restore a confidence which he sensed to be lost by his return with a strange escort. On the other hand the release of Otto would mean that the wedding would take place that night, the king would receive twenty thousand pounds in English bank notes, and would depart for the railroad with his bride. The Yankees, of course, would be executed —and good riddance.

But Ben Ara did not wish Anelda and the twenty thousand pounds to get out of his reach; for he considered that the money belonged to him, and he wanted Anelda for himself. On the other hand, again, Nicholas would not start with the tobacco the following night unless he had discovered the King and seen his granddaughter safely married. With Darkrino and Vradine stirring up trouble in Albania and blocking the main road, it was essential that there be no delay, or they might find the more northern road cut off. It was a dilemma. But its solution suddenly presented itself.

According to custom the bride and

groom would depart from the castle immediately after the wedding. Nicholas would send them with a small escort to the head of the railroad. If the Egyptian effected the rescue of the king and the capture of the Americans, he would win the gratitude of all concerned except Anelda; and if he pleaded the necessity of preceding the caravan by a day over the new route through Albania, to spy out possible ambuscades, the suggestion would be accepted without suspicion. Then he would ride away with his chosen bodyguard and lay in wait for the royal party, cut them down to a man, carry off Anelda and the dowry, and hasten with his prizes through Albania to Polina. Nicholas, who would not expect to hear from King Otto and his bride for some days, would start next night with the tobacco; and by that time Anelda and the currency would be safe on board his chartered steamer in the roadstead.

Ben Ara's mind was made up. He left his chamber and sent a messenger to fetch Prince Nicholas. "Tell him I have discovered the king," he informed the man.

In five minutes Nicholas, the courtiers, and a dozen troopers rushed into the hall. "Where is Otto?" demanded Prince Nicholas. "Concealed in a room in this house," replied the Egyptian. "It will give me pleasure to conduct you to him."

"That's not possible!" cried Nicholas. "I personally searched the building."

"Nevertheless, he is here—a prisoner of the two Americans."

"Lead on," commanded the prince.

"In a few moments the party stood outside the door of the hiding place; and Nicholas himself grasped the latch. Locked. He struck heavily upon the panel.

"Is your majesty within?" he demanded in a loud voice.

Three guns covered Otto, who dared not reply.

"Permit me, your highness," suggested Ben Ara.

He lifted his voice.

"Mr. Rafter," we know you are inside and are holding King Otto a prisoner. I advise you to surrender to save your own life."

Pete looked at Link, who decided that the game was up. He whispered to his friends; then cried aloud:

"The king is here. You'll find him dead when you break in."

Nicholas was purple with rage, but the threat stopped him. He looked at the Egyptian, who shrugged his shoulders. "I said I'd lead you to him," he said softly; "but these fellows are desperate. Better make terms."

"I won't make terms with ruffians," stormed Nicholas.

"I beg of you, sir," cried Count von Melor. "Consider that his majesty's life is at stake."

A pair of arms were flung about the neck of Nicholas; Anelda, wild with fright, was pleading with him for her lover's life."

The old man gazed at her sternly. "If I let these scoundrels go, will you make any more trouble?" he whispered.

"No, grandsire. I shall do what you wish."

"Tell them that they will be released if they surrender," he commanded. "I do not speak English."

Ben Ara repeated the offer.

"Sorry," shouted Link. "We do not trust you. We are well armed and we will hold out till the last."

"I'll tell him," said Anelda.

"Lincoln," she called. "My grandfather, whose word is sacred, has promised me to release you if you surrender and give up King Otto unhurt. You may depend upon it."

"I can't, Anelda," he replied. "You understand why."

The game is up, kid," said Pete. "I'm willing to take what's coming; but why get killed? We can't help your

girl now. We're cornered. Life may be no use to you, but I like it."

Link made a despairing gesture. "If you say so, Pete, all right."

"Please, Lincoln," the girl was crying. "For my sake do what I ask."

"Very well," said Rafter. "Draw back outside. I am going to open the door."

Anelda saw Ben Ara stealthily draw a revolver from his pocket.

"Grandfather!" she cried. "Watch the Egyptian!"

"I gave no word," said Sidi Ben Ara.

Prince Nicholas frowned. "I gave it for you. Put that gun away."

The door opened and the party in the corridor rushed into the room. Looking sheepish, King Otto rose and faced them; he was covered with dust from head to foot, but physically undamaged. The Americans had drawn back against the window. At Pete's suggestion Link had replaced his automatic in his hip pocket and handed over the king's revolver as Pete passed across his own weapon. Otto had not observed the movement.

Anelda gazed at her lover with a piteous expression.

The courtiers had bent the knee and kissed the dirty hand of their lord. Nicholas had smiled grimly at his appearance, but offered his congratulations.

"You were a long time finding me," grumbled the ruler. "You are not going to let these scoundrels go, I trust." Nicholas scowled. "I would like very much to hang them from the top of the watchtower," he replied. "To prevent you from being murdered I was forced to agree to release them. Take them out of my sight," he commanded.

"Grandfather," Anelda exclaimed, "you must give them safe conduct out of Molvania. You must not permit them to be injured. I have your word."

Nicholas shrugged his big shoulders. "I shall give them a line that will take them to the Greek frontier," he agreed. "They are brave men and cunning. Ask them how they escaped me? We entered this room."

The Egyptian put the question. Link smiled. "We hid under the bed," he replied.

"The king, too?"

"Yes. He was under the bed also."

The news made Nicholas roar, while Otto scowled. "His majesty wishes to go to his chamber to bathe and shave," the prince then suggested. "I am indebted to you, pasha, for discovering their lair. Captain Ralem, conduct the prisoners to the great hall. As I have given orders in Adrianska that suspicious strangers be brought to the castle, I must give these men a safe-conduct pass."

"I warn you that these Americans will reveal your secret, prince," said Sidi Ben Ara, whose malice at the release of the two enemies could not restrain itself.

"That is of no consequence," replied Nicholas. "There is nothing that can be done by the American companies."

Lest Anelda get speech with her lover, Nicholas passed his arm about her shoulders and led her away with him. Ralem gave a sharp command and his soldiers closed about the Americans.

"S'pose he's really going to let us get away?" whispered Pete.

"I am sure of it. He gave his word to Anelda. I wish I was dead."

"Don't give up the ship," encouraged his friend.

Once in the hall they were pushed into the courtyard. Here Ralem waited until the major-domo came out with a note which he read and handed to Rafter.

"In case you are questioned in the village," said the captain in Greek, "show this. It is the safe-conduct pass of a very generous prince."

Link bowed and thrust the letter into his pocket. Without further ceremony

they were taken to the main gate and thrust outside. Slowly, with many backward glances, Link followed his friend down the winding path toward the town below.

"Cheer up. You're lucky to be alive," said Pete.

"Do you realize that I have lost Anelda? She has agreed to marry that fool Otto. If we had killed him she would have been spared this."

"But they would have murdered us; and that would make her feel bad, too. You put up a good fight for the girl, Link. It ain't your fault."

"You don't know what love is," retorted the lover.

"Ain't I lucky! Say, when we get down to the town we'll go into the inn and eat ourselves to death. And, boy! How good that beer will taste."

"I never want to eat again," Rafter groaned. But his stomach was pleading for food and his throat was crying for water.

In half an hour they reached the village and entered the inn, where sharp questions were asked of them. However, the prince's pass was an open sesame, and they sat by the window of a tiny dining room, drinking beer and devouring roast mutton. Finally satisfied, they purchased cigarettes and enjoyed the first smoke in several days. From the window was a good view of the castle, and as they were preparing to rise they saw a cavalcade winding down the road from the main gate. Presently it was lost to sight, but a few moments later they heard hoofbeats as the troop passed down the village street. The innkeeper volunteered the information that it was the Egyptian gentleman who was such a friend of Prince Nicholas. The two Americans exchanged glances of wonder at his departure.

"Perhaps the wedding is off, after all," said Link hopefully.

But in the gathering dusk they saw the village priest moving up the hill. Then Link covered his face with his hands, while Brodie smoked and gazed at him in compassion which he did not know how to express.

"Got any money?" he finally demanded.

"Link thrust his hand in his pocket and drew out a wad of Greek notes.

"I'm going out and try to buy a couple of mules and a gun," said the truck driver. "We got to be getting away from here."

"I'll be sitting in the front of the inn," Link said. "It's awful. You don't know how terrible it is to have the girl you love marry some one else."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

AMBUSH.

IT had not occurred to Prince Nicholas that his safe conduct would be used to enable the Americans to put up at the little inn and to purchase supplies in a town closed to strangers; but its wording meant nothing to the illiterate villagers, who saw the princely arms upon the sheet of paper and assumed that the bearers were entitled to all privileges. However, Brodie, although he had taken it with him to aid his negotiations, was a long time in getting his mules and weapons and food supplies.

Presently the cannon on the roof of the castle began to boom, and then the villagers emerged from their houses in holiday attire. Although they had not been invited, they were celebrating the wedding of the lady of the castle. Link sat on a chair in front of the inn and watched them as it drew dark. After an hour or so, he heard again the tramp of the feet of many horses, saw lanterns gleaming in the road above and presently there passed a second party of horsemen. He regarded them indifferently until he saw a woman among them, and then he peered excitedly. By the light of their lanterns he recognized

Anelda, who rode in front between King Otto and Prince Nicholas. Behind them trotted Count Hamish and General von Melor. A dozen troopers were the escort.

The full meaning of this burst on him. Anelda had been married and was departing for the railroad with her bridegroom. Prince Nicholas was acting as their escort. Everything was over; she was the wife of the man who had been his prisoner, and to spare whose miserable life he had permitted this atrocious thing. He felt for his weapon; but already the cavalcade was past, and he could no longer pick off the miserable fortune-hunter.

Fifteen minutes later Brodie appeared riding a mule and leading another.

"All set, kid," he declared. "Hop aboard this beauty and hie for dear old Greece."

"She's gone, Pete," Link said dolefully. "I saw her ride by with her husband. They've gone out of my life."

"Well," remarked Brodie, "that's that. Look at this gun. It's a sixteen-shot repeating rifle, and almost new. Bought it from the mayor of the place. Get on yer mule and let's go—the sooner the better."

Link mounted, then turned the head of the animal northward.

"Not that way. We go south," Pete assured him.

"I have got to follow her," Link said. "Don't you understand?"

"Well, if that'll do you any good, all right. Only this prince may change his mind and have us shot on sight, if we hang around."

"What do I care?"

For about an hour they followed the road northward, Link with head hanging, Pete throwing glances of exasperation mingled with pity at his forlorn but headstrong friend. And then, some distance ahead, a crackling crash shattered the stillness of the night just as the moon rose over the mountains and threw its silver rays into the valley.

"Shooting!" exclaimed the truckman. "Wonder what's up now?"

Link sat up straight, and exclaimed: "It's an attack on the wedding party. Anelda!"

He kicked his heels upon the mule and drove forward at a gallop. Pete made a gesture of protest; then galloped upon his heels.

The firing continued. It was not far away now, and a couple of minutes brought the battle into view. It was more a massacre than a battle. The Egyptian had posted his men where thick woods grew by the roadside. Unaware that Nicholas would make the long trip to the railroad—being certain, in fact, that he would not, because of his sortie with the trucks the following night—Sidi had instructed his cutthroats to pick off every man but spare the woman.

Nicholas led his band without suspicion into the ambuscade, and his first warning was when a score of rifles spoke simultaneously and half his force fell from their saddles. Forgetting Otto, he grasped the reins of Anelda's horse, swung about and attempted to ride out of danger, only to find his road blocked by half a dozen horsemen who had galloped out of the woods. His men behind were shooting wildly, but the enemy ahead were not to be ridden down. Their rifles spoke, while Nicholas' heavy revolver answered; and two of the assailants rolled off their horses.

Nicholas drove on, into them; then a man thrust his gun against the side of the old prince and pulled the trigger. Nicholas fell upon the horse's neck, grasped it with both arms, and slipped to the road. A piercing shriek from Anelda told the story; and the rising moon made the roadway and its mass of fighters plainly visible to the Americans.

"Pull up!" commanded Pete, grasp-

ing Rafter's rein. "Don't ride into that. They'll get you."

Pete threw himself off his mule, turned it in the road and, shielded by the animal, at a distance of forty yards leveled his rifle. *Crack-crack-crack* went the repeater, and at every shot one of the group which had stopped Anelda and slain Nicholas dropped into the road.

The girl found her horse no longer impeded and spurred madly onward, while Brodie, recognizing a female figure, transferred his aim to those in the rear. He was firing into the mass indiscriminately, for he considered them all his enemies.

Behind the girl a horseman thundered along. She was within ten yards of Link and Brodie, when the latter turned his attentions to the pursuer. *Bang!* A miss. The man was almost even with her.

"It's the Egyptian!" cried Link, firing wildly.

"Got him," remarked Pete calmly, as he fired again and Sidi Ben Ara's horse went down. But the Egyptian staggered to his feet, aiming a revolver at the mules.

Crack! Brodie had fired again, and this time he did not miss.

Anelda was almost upon them, as Link rushed into the road with arms upraised. She lifted her riding whip but she heard his shout: "Anelda! It's Link!"

Her horse carried her ten yards farther before she was able to bring him to a stop; while Link, forgetting the battle, ran after her on foot.

She slipped from the saddle and flew into his arms.

"Darling!" she cried. "It was terrible! I think the bandits killed my grandfather."

Up the road the fight continued, but the fire was slackening.

Five or six of Nicholas' men had been quick to drive into the woods, and were fighting among the trees. But the two courtiers had closed around their king; they presented perfect targets. All three were down, their horses galloping madly ahead.

"Get out of the road—quick!" commanded Brodie, coming upon the lovers. He pushed them before him into the woods, then proceeded to reload his magazine.

The loss of Sidi Ben Ara, whose yellow face was upturned to the sky, plainly visible to his followers, and the stiff resistance of the survivors of Nicholas' escort had persuaded the Monastir men that there was no purpose in continuing, so they stole away one by one, ignorant of the enormous prize which was concealed beneath the tunic of Count Hamish, who was dead as his ancestors. Unaware of the departure of the enemy, the Molvanians blazed away for several minutes longer; then grouped around the body of their prince and uttered loud lamentations.

"Yell to them, miss, that we're friends," commanded Brodie. "If you don't, they'll probably take no chances and shoot us on sight."

Anelda withdrew herself from the protecting arms, and uttered a shrill cry that caused the group of soldiers to break up with shouts of delight. Then she stepped into the road, beckoning to Link and Brodie. Link emerged first; then Brodie followed, leading both mules.

She said something to the men in their language, asked a question, then ran madly toward her grandfather and lifted his poor head in her lap. Two of the Molvanians approached the Americans with evidences of good will. Neither party could understand the other; however, they fraternized and followed Anelda. Nicholas was still alive, but past help; and he was talking earnestly to Anelda, who was weeping.

"It was the Egyptian," the old prince

told her. "I saw him pursue you and then saw him fall. Who killed him and rescued you?"

"The Americans, grandfather," she said between sobs.

"So," he sighed. "They followed us. Is Otto alive?"

She looked up at the soldiers, one of whom shook his head.

"All of that party are dead," he said. "They were riddled with bullets."

"I do not understand why the Egyptian attacked us. Without my presence he could not move his tobacco," said the old man, whose voice grew less audible every moment. "Listen, Anelda. Get the dowry money. Keep it; it is yours. Notify the tobacco companies that they may have their trucks back. You are the head of the house, now—a wife and a widow, in a few hours. In a little while I shall die. Be good to your people." He closed his eyes and never spoke again. Thus passed a kind-hearted prince.

Brodie, unnoticed, had walked up the road, past dead horses and dead or wounded men. He came to the bodies of King Otto and his courtiers. All three had been struck by many bullets. Being accustomed to corpses, Brodie did not hesitate to touch them, and drew from the breast of Count Hamish a pocketbook thickly stuffed. He also possessed himself of three watches, and looked longingly at several heavy gold rings. Presently he rose and returned to the group around Prince Nicholas, who lay still in death.

"Guess this is that wedding money, Miss Anelda," he said. "It belongs to you. You better tell your men to collect horses and tie some of these bodies on them. The bandits are liable to come back for loot."

The melancholy procession moved slowly toward Adrianska, where a great wailing went up when the inhabitants learned that their beloved prince was dead.

CHAPTER XXXV.

HAPPINESS TO COME.

THE wounded were left in the village to be cared for, but the dead were carried up to the castle for burial. A couple of hundred people followed the cavalcade up the hill to the castle, and the shrieks and wails of these and of the garrison was torture to the ears of the Americans.

Anelda sat straight upon her horse, her face covered by her veil, apparently composed, although tears were streaming, unseen, down her cheeks. Captain Ralem gazed in anger and astonishment at the Americans, but changed his manner when one of the escort told him of their part in the battle. He knelt at the stirrup of the princess, who immediately turned over to him the arrangements for the disposition of the dead.

They carried Nicholas up to his room and laid him upon his great bed while the household servants added to the general lamentations.

Anelda turned to Lincoln Rafter, then, in the great hall.

"You will occupy the room of King Otto, Lincoln, and Mr. Brodie will have that of General Count Melor. I shall try to find proper clothes for you as soon as this horrible time is past."

For two days Prince Nicholas lay in state in the royal chamber; then he was placed in his coffin, which he had provided years before in the manner of the princes of Darnyela. He was buried in a corner of the garden, after services in the castle chapel.

The bodies of King Otto and his attendants, in accordance with the wishes of his followers in Lucerne, were sent to Switzerland. But Sidi Ben Ara had been left where he lay.

The day of the prince's funeral, Miltiades Darkrino and Vradine arrived at Castle Darnyela, in response to telegrams sent to Yastib and forwarded to Albania. Lincoln welcomed them

warmly, and related all that had transpired.

It was Miltiades who gave the most plausible explanation of the conduct of the Egyptian, for neither Link nor Anelda had been able to understand why he should have attacked the wedding party.

"The fellow was in love with your princess, and he knew the king had twenty thousand pounds on his person," he declared. "He counted upon carrying off her and her dowry, killing all other members of the party. He assumed that Nicholas would not learn of what happened until after he had delivered the tobacco at Polina."

"But it was the most natural thing in the world for Prince Nicholas to accompany his granddaughter through these dangerous hills to the end of the railroad."

Darkrino smiled. "You forget the man was a Moslem. A Mohammedan would have turned the girl over to her husband and gone about other business."

"In regard to this dowry——" said Link uncomfortably, "what should be done about it?"

"Keep it," advised the Greek. "Technically it belongs to the estate of King Otto, and only a third goes to his widow. But it was a forced marriage, nobody can prove he received the money; he died an hour after the ceremony, and the cash is in her possession. She needs it, doesn't she?"

"Yes, only consider how Prince Nicholas received the money."

"Payment for services rendered. You may be sure the heirs of Sidi Ben Ara will not claim it. He was responsible for the death of her grandfather; and she has a right to consider this, in a way, as reparation for blood. Otto deserves no consideration, because he and his courtiers must have suspected that it was not honestly come by, after being in the castle for several days. The trucks of tobacco were under their noses."

Link nodded. "I presume yours is the common-sense way of looking at it. Anyway, Anelda intends to send to Ben Ara's family about ten thousand pounds that was found on his person."

"It's a most amazing turn, from the standpoint of our companies," said the Greek. "We had very little luck in raising the Albanians against Prince Nicholas and his convoy; and if we had succeeded in capturing it, most likely we could not have gotten it away from the Albanian chiefs. I think Ben Ara would have succeeded in carrying it to Cairo if he had not been so greedy that he wanted to recover the money he paid Nicholas and carry off the princess, into the bargain. By the way, there was a reward offered for the recovery of the tobacco—an enormous reward, fifty thousand dollars. Unfortunately, as an employee, you are not eligible. So we save that."

"You don't," retorted Link with a laugh. "The companies owe the recovery of the tobacco almost entirely to the courage, skill and marvelous marksmanship of Pete Brodie. If he had not come to my rescue, I would have been caught and shot, and all Sidi Ben Ara's plans would have gone through on schedule. I shall insist that he get this reward."

The Greek nodded. "All right, I'll recommend it. After all, it is not out of my pocket, and the companies will be so glad to get back their leaf that they won't be loath to pay the reward. But think of giving fifty thousand American dollars to a truck driver!"

"This fellow is an unusual truck driver," said Link.

The long line of tobacco trucks had started for the Greek frontier, escorted by the garrison of Castle Darnyela. Pete Brodie, despite his prospective riches, had gone off upon the seat of the

vehicle which Link had driven to the castle, promising to meet his companion-at-arms in Athens.

Anelda and Lincoln sat at dinner in the refectory, at a table set for two, served by the major-domo in his gaudy but threadbare livery. The girl was in black, and her eyes were still red with weeping; but the smile which she cast at her lover promised that her sorrow was consolable.

"We are rich, darling," she told him. "I found that grandfather had fifteen thousand English pounds in his strong box. These, added to the dowry, make thirty thousand pounds—nearly a hundred and fifty thousand American dollars."

"You mean *you* are rich," he said glumly. "My salary is a hundred and fifty dollars per week."

"But that is equivalent to the income of my fortune," she declared. "So we are even. And your company has cabled you its congratulations upon your achievement. They want you to stay in Macedonia and continue in the tobacco business. And this castle will be a convenient residence for us. Will you mind living here?"

"Not with you," he declared ardently. "I would be happy anywhere with you."

"Money will make it very habitable," she continued. "I'm going to put in modern plumbing and electric lights. And I want to do something for our peasants. Of course we shall spend a few months each year in America. Do you know I'm crazy with impatience for Mary Shane to arrive. I need so to have my hair dressed."

"It's beautiful," he declared.

"Wait till you see it after Mary gets through."

"When do we get married; that's what I'd like to know."

"Don't you think we ought to wait a couple of months?"

"I suppose so," he conceded reluctantly.

"Well—a month," she yielded.

"Darling!" said Link. "Do you know I always think of you as my 'Lady Passing By.' It's from an old song by Purcell, who died two hundred years ago."

"But I know it!" exclaimed the princess. "Shall I sing it to you?"

"Will you?" he cried delightedly.

In a voice which entranced him, she sang:

"There is a lady sweet and kind,
Was never face so pleased my mind.
I did but see her passing by,
And yet I love her till I die.

"Her gestures, motion, and her smile,
Her wit, her voice, my heart beguile;
Beguile my heart, I know not why;
And yet I love her till I die.

"Cupid is winged and doth range
Her country. So my love doth change;
But change the earth or change the sky,
Yet will I love her till I die."

"'Yet will I love her till I die,'" he repeated reverently.

And slowly they leaned across the table and touched each other's lips.

THE END.

THE OLD MEN'S EVIDENCE

You get a line on prohibition enforcement by noting how many centenarians there are who say they have lived so long by taking a daily drink of whisky.

Duke Meets All Comers

By Raymond J. Brown

Author of "McGillicuddy—and Science," "The Cap Comes Back," Etc.

When four worthies of the wrestling "racket" tried to put over a crooked game on the little town of Mechanicsburg, they underestimated the alertness of its citizens.

FOR us the mat game, as the papers call it, was on the bum. The Wrestling Trust—I'm quoting the papers—again—had frozen us out. There I was with two and a half hundredweight of wrestler on my hands, and nothing to do with him save feed him.

It was the big boy's own fault. He wouldn't behave. You know, take his falls as he was ordered and leave the champ's ears alone—especially when it was the champ's night to win. You don't have to be so awful good to get by in the noble sport of tug and haul if you'll do that. But this mountain of beef, who was named Leopold Dukoff and billed as the "Champion of Lower Europe"—wherever that begins and ends—kind of fancied himself as a grappler and wouldn't do his stuff as directed. You just couldn't get the real fine points of wrestling through his egg-sized but terrible thick skull.

Jimmy Dugan, who runs the wrestling racket, let him get away with warnings for a time; but on the night that "Duke," as I called him, had to have seven falls disallowed on him in less than an hour in order not to ruin a "logical contender" as an attraction in a championship match that was set for the following week, Jimmy almost lost his temper. He hit Duke on the head with a water bucket, kicked him in the stomach and, in well-chosen but disarranged words, told him and me that, if he ever laid eyes on either one of us again, he would accomplish the most brutal and sensational double murder that modern weapons made possible.

I tried to reason with Jimmy, but I

guess he was too busy to talk things over quietly that night. Fact, he never answered me at all—unless you'd call it an answer when a guy hurls a bottle of liniment at you and just misses your left ear. So me and Duke decides to let it go at that and wander on before Jimmy breaks loose from the four bozos who are holding him and insults us or something.

Well, with our living kicked right from in under us, you might say, there was nothing for us to do but pile into my green car and start moving East, where folks ain't afraid of paying high prices for this and that. I had nothing in particular in mind, outside of a kind of hunch that a team made up of as much muscle as Duke carried and as much brain as I was blessed with wasn't going to starve to death. Anyways, there was six or seven grand in the money belt after our tour with Jimmy Dugan—enough to start a legitimate business of some kind if worse came to worst.

We're stumbling out of a lunch room in a municipal disgrace called Mayville, just on the sunny side of the corn belt, when I'm fetched a slap on the back and hear a tenor solo that goes as follows:

"Well, if it isn't old Sam Lux—the kid himself! If I wasn't so glad to see you, Sam, I'd make bold to inquire whatever the pet of Broadway might be doing so far from his native haunts."

A mess of wordy junk like that could issue, I knew, from only one set of lips in the world, so even before turning around I return the greetings by remarking:

"Well, with the way things've been breaking for me of late, I might have knew I'd be running into more trouble! Duke, it's 'Smooch' Pardee. Get the wallet indoors and keep your hand over your watch."

"Ha-ha!" laughs Smooch, complimented by my aspersions. He's about as big as a bootlegger's heart—a monkey-faced runt, with a little waxed mustache and eyes like birdshot. Giving you the complete tip-off on him: He wore, as we met, gray pants with wide bottoms, patent-leather dancing shoes, a black coat with braid, and an iron hat. "Ha-ha!" he repeats. "Your enthusiastic reception overwhelms me, Sam. But you're wrong, my lad. I have no evil designs on the exchequer, if any. I'm heeled, old kid."

"Where'd you get it?" I inquired, interested.

"None of your business." Smooch grinned.

"Whose, then?" I asked. "The cops' or the cellar-still snoopers'?"

"Maybe yes and maybe no," replied Smooch. "Ease off, Sam, you're no Congressional committee."

"I was talking out of my turn at that. But when a feller's gathered it in in so many ingenious and illegitimate ways as Smooch Pardee had in his time, you can't help but ask questions about the ways and means when he announces he's bearing a bank roll. To my personal knowledge, he'd sold blue sky, vacuum cleaners and ebb-tide real estate, run a horse-race tipping bureau, peddled rum in brief-case lots, managed a couple of ham-and-bean pugs and had a dancing part in a girlie act—all in the last year.

"Got the car, Sam?" he inquired. And, when I nodded: "Good! Glad I'm going your way."

"I ain't told you which way I'm going," I reminded him.

"What difference does it make?" said Smooch, elbowing me and winking. "We'll get there on time. Let's hop in and give her the gun. There's a couple of business associates of mine in this town that might show up at any minute now and insist on having a conference. I don't feel equal to it."

"Oho!" I exclaimed, seeing a little light. "Making a get-away, huh? "Ain't murder, is it, or grand larceny—

anything they can follow us for and shoot up the bus?"

"Behave, Sam," replied Smooch. "You ought to know I wouldn't get mixed up in anything that wasn't a perfectly clean, legal proposition. It's just that the partners I mentioned—there are ten or a dozen of them—are inclined to be long winded. They're likely to talk too much and delay you."

"And they're liable to be carrying a rope," I suggested. "Where's your baggage?"

"Oh, we won't bother about that," said Smooch carelesslike. "I can have that shipped later on."

"I've got nine to five that says you never do," I told him.

So we get into the car and set sail. Smooch ain't what you'd call an asset exactly, especially just after turning a trick that was apt to set the cops on his trail. Still, any kind of company is good on a long trip, and Duke, who was too big for the front seat and always fell asleep in the back as soon as the car got under way, certainly hadn't been much help in that way.

Of course, I told Smooch how Jimmy Dugan had requested me and Duke to resign our interest in the wrestling panic and how we were now open for business connections in other fields.

"Yeah," said Smooch; "we've got to put that big bum to work."

"*We* have!" I exclaimed. "How long since you've been in on Duke's head spins and bridges?"

"Well," said Smooch, not fazed a bit, "I'm here, am I not? And, as the feller said, two heads are better than one. I'm aiming to lead you two boys out of Limbo. Look, Sam; we could take Duke on a tour of the sticks, offering five hundred dollars to any local strong boy who Duke couldn't throw in——"

"For crying out loud!" I yelped. "Of all the old frowsy, moth-eaten gags! Why, that passed out the year Tom Jenkins sprouted his first mustache!"

"Maybe so," admitted Smooch; "but we'd do it with trimmings, what I mean."

"How—trimmings?"

"The old familiar article in a new package," said Smooch.

"As how?" I persisted.

"Oh, I don't know offhand," grunted Smooch. "I'll have to think it over."

The subject was not brought up again for a couple of days. Fact, I thought Smooch maybe had forgot all about it. Then, early one afternoon, we're rolling through a factory town when Smooch grabs my arm so sudden I near steered the green car up on the sidewalk.

"Look, Sam!" he screeched. "That feller! Stop! Quick!"

"I ought to poke you in the mush!" I growled, straightening the car out and jamming on the brakes. "What kind of a way is that to——"

"Tell me later," interrupted Smooch, all excited. "Take a slant at that bird, will you?" he whispered, pointing back in the direction from which we'd come.

I leaned out. So did Duke, who had been woke up by the sudden stop. All I could see was a burly lad in workingman's clothes, leaning against a porch railing and smoking a pipe without too much enthusiasm.

"Do you get it?" demanded Smooch, poking me in the ribs.

"Get what?" I asked, disgusted.

"That feller there," said Smooch. "Don't you see anything remarkable about him?"

"Well," I remarked, "outside of the fact that he ought to be out in the plant threading pipe, or whatever it is they do in plants, instead of holding up that front stoop——"

"No, no!" broke in Smooch. "Isn't there anything else you see about him?"

"What is this—a game?" I demanded. "Well, just to please you, I'll try again.

He don't remind me of anything else so much as a statue of ambition."

"Why, dog-gone it, he's the dead image of Strangler Lewis!" breathed Smooch.

"And, as I've said so many times, you're not the dead but the living picture of 'Johnny, the Rat.' All right, Smooch. You're my guest; I got to amuse you. But, now that you've told me the answer, let's get along."

"No, no, no!" protested Smooch, his little weasel eyes dancing. "We need that big feller! He's the—the *trimmings!*"

"What are you talking about?" I asked him.

"That scheme I mentioned, to have Duke meet all comers," explained Smooch. "I said it would go—with trimmings; and there they are."

"Smooch," I said, "each separate individual word you utter is familiar to me. Bunched, though, they stand me on my head."

"You're dumb," Smooch informed me. "Look. Any boob would bet on Strangler Lewis to throw this big piece of bologna," he said, meaning Duke and indicating that he did with his thumb.

"Hah, leetle fella! What you mean balloon?" demanded Duke.

"Shut up, hog! This is business," Smooch barked at him. "Ain't I right, Sam?" he asked me. "Wouldn't you bet on the Strangler?"

"Sure," I admitted, "but I don't get what you're driving at yet."

"Well," said Smooch, "if you would, others would too, and, if we offer to let Duke meet all comers, and then have our own Strangler Lewis ready to accept the challenge each time, I don't see how we can possibly be on the wrong end of any bets that are made."

"You mean offer the restful mechanic yonder as a phony Strangler Lewis? Merciful Peter, no! I wouldn't take a chance. Why, if the real Strangler ever heard about it, he'd take you and me and Duke and this other guy and headlock us to death! Hey! Come back!" I screeched, reaching out to stop him.

But it was too late. Smooch had pushed open the door of the car, and by the time I'd pried my bay window loose from the steering wheel, had reached the human monument on the sidewalk and was conversing with it.

"We'll give you twenty a week and expenses, dress you all up—and no work," Smooch was saying as I reached them.

The big feller took a couple of puffs at his pipe, grunted and then told Smooch something that sounded like:

"Pongo danjab ooblashgabootz."

"No 'standa da Engalish?" inquired Smooch.

"Spogatz lashpush aroobalack muntz," replied the other.

"If you stand for that, you're a coward," I told Smooch.

"Allez oop," said Smooch. Then: "Wee gates. *Mañana.* Mussolini. *Svenska*—er—er—*Erin go bragh*—er Yom Kippur."

This time the big guy only grunted.

"That's all the languages *I* know," Smooch reported to me; "and he don't savvy any of them."

"Don't know as I blame him," I remarked.

"Maybe if I name a lot of foreign cities," suggested Smooch, "he'll recognize one and then we can get an interpreter."

"Maybe if you start singing that Vulgar Boat Song he'll join in the chorus."

"Don't kid. This guy's too good to pass up," insisted Smooch. "I'll think of something in a minute. Hey, Duke!" he shouted, so suddenly that I leaped a foot. "Come here, Duke," he ordered, when my wrestling beauty shoved his big lazy nut out of the car. "Here's a boy friend from the home town that wants to talk to you."

"Look, Duke," said Smooch, when

at last there was four of us; "Alexis here doesn't quite get my Park Avenue accent. Try him out in the native tongue, won't you, like a good feller?"

"Haw?" grunted Duke.

"Talk to the big boy here in Rooshian, or Czecho, or whatever it is you gargle when you're home with the folks."

Duke let loose a mouthful that would have jarred a set of store teeth from their moorings. The big guy, who looked more like the Strangler every minute, gave Duke a happy grin and returned his flock of language with interest. Then the two of them embraced.

"Him from same place like me," announced Duke, after using a wrestling trick to get loose from the loving clinch.

"Ask him how he'd like a job," directed Smooch.

"He say, 'Job to do what?" reported Duke, after the pair of them had debated some five minutes.

"Nothing," said Smooch. "Tell him that. No work, twenty a week and expenses, and we'll buy him a couple of swell suits and let him ride with us in the car."

"Now, listen, Smooch," I tried to protest. "I got some rights in this deal. Ain't you going a little too far?"

But Duke had delivered the message and turned to Smooch again.

"He say, 'When we start?'" announced Duke.

What could I do? With a prayer for my springs, I got in behind the wheel and started the green bus on its way.

It was about six weeks later that the same green car came to a stop on a country road leading into a town called Mechanicsburg. It wasn't me, though, that was steering it. It was Smooch, which will give you some idea of how I let myself be hypnotized. Occupying the back seat pretty fully was a large, elegant person in a suit of roaring hues, with footwear and haberdashery to match. You're right; 'twas Strangler Lewis' double, all perfumed up and smoking a two-bit perfecto.

Smooch got out of the car, lifted the hood, and with wrenches, screw driver and pliers began to turn nuts and screwheads haphazard. In a few minutes various gadgets and dinguses began to drop off the motor. Smooch picked them up as they fell and, after looking up and down the road to make sure he was not seen, hurled them one after the other as far as he could into the woods.

Then he got back into the car and tried to start it. Nothing happened, so Smooch, whistling merrily, got out and sat on the running board.

After a while a car came along headed for Mechanicsburg. Smooch hailed it.

"Brother," said Smooch to the driver, "I can't get my car started. Would you mind giving me a lift to a garage?"

"Maybe I can help," suggested the other, jumping down, and snooping into the innards of my green bus. "For the love of Mike!" he yelped after a moment. "Where in hob's your carburetor?"

"That must have dropped off," guessed Smooch. "I heard something fall a couple of miles back."

"And your vacuum tank!" exclaimed the driver. "That's gone, too! I never heard of anything like this in my life! How did you get this far without them?"

"We were going pretty fast," said Smooch. "Maybe we coasted."

"Coasted a couple of miles—over this road?" barked the other.

"I can't explain it any other way," said Smooch, without turning a hair.

"I don't see how they could have got out of the car," the motorist then objected. "There ain't a hole or a crack big enough for them to get through."

"Could they have melted?" asked Smooch innocentlike. "From the heat, or anything?"

"Well, it beats me," decided the other party, shaking his head. "Say, I'll tow you into town for ten bucks."

"You've got a job," Smooch informed him, producing the ten from a roll that made the other feller's eyes bulge.

The mechanic at the garage where they finally stopped scratched his head and wrinkled up his face after he'd inspected the car.

"In this business," he said, "a feller's running up against new ones all the time, but this drops me for the count."

"Can you fix it?" demanded Smooch.

"Sure," said the mechanic. "Nothing to it—after I get the parts. That may take a couple of weeks, though."

"A couple of weeks!" exclaimed Smooch. "You mean to say we've got to lay over in this town for a couple of weeks? Why, the Strang—I mean my partner can't do it. He's got a match—I mean a business appointment."

"Plenty of trains," suggested the mechanic.

"Well, we'll have to make the best of it, I guess, till the car's fixed," said Smooch hastily. "Where's there a hotel?"

There's no need of my explaining, I suppose, that all of this monkey business, including Smooch's attempt to ruin my three-thousand-dollar green bus, was intended to furnish him and the phony Strangler Lewis with an excuse to stop over in Mechanicsburg for a while. You can't run a guy who's supposed to be one of the greatest wrestlers that ever lived into a jerkwater village without some explanations, and having the car break down was Smooth's best guess for getting away with it. I think he overplayed his hand a little, but anyway——

Smooch and the big feller went to the hotel and registered as John Smith and John Jones from New York. That didn't arouse any more suspicion that if they'd handed the bell boy a couple of heavy boxes marked "dynamite," especially since the baggage they carried was mine and bore my initials, "S. L."

Also, about the time they were registering, the garage mechanic discovered in the back of the car a bundle of calling cards bearing the name "Strangler Lewis," a couple of photographs of the Strangler, and some newspaper clippings telling about some of his important matches. When he spotted my initials on the door of the car, that clinched it. He whispered to the boy who helped him in the garage what he had discovered, and within two hours the news was all over town.

The local sports descended on Smooch in a drove, seeking introduction to their town's distinguished guest. A couple of reporters from the newspaper came around to get an interview. The owner of the hotel endeavored to move Smooch and the big feller to a more expensive room—as the guests of the management.

Smooch had locked the big immigrant in the room, which didn't bother him especially as long as eats were sent up every few hours, and Smooch himself met all callers, for once in his life telling the exact truth and denying that the big feller was Strangler Lewis, had any connection with Strangler Lewis and so on.

Of course, they didn't believe him—as Smooch knew they wouldn't. The harder he denied, the more convinced they were that they really had a celebrity in their midst, especially since Smooch kept the big boy under cover. So the newspaper printed a piece which told about the initials on the car, the photos, clippings and all the rest, related that Smocoh had to say and let the reader draw his own conclusions.

Smooch attempted further to convince those who were interested that his big playmate was not Strangler Lewis but just a guy that happened to look

like him, by digging the big boy out of bed at six the following morning, rigging him out in a sweater and plus-fours and taking him for a hike around Mechanicsburg and vicinity. When such people as happened to be around before breakfast saw the big guy jog-trotting and putting the shot with chunks of stone, Smooch couldn't help it, of course, if they jumped to conclusions and took it for granted that these were a wrestler's favorite training stunts.

Smooch also visited the local sporting-goods store and purchased some twenty-five dollars' worth of dumb-bells, elastic exercisers and the like, which he had sent to his hotel room. It wasn't his fault, was it, if folks around the hotel assumed that the noises that came from said room after the delivery of the apparatus were made by a big wrestler in the act of developing his biceps? Smooch never told anybody anything like that. As a matter of fact, the big feller never touched the athletic gear; he slept while Smooch rolled the dumb-bells up and down the floor.

The toughest part of Smooch's job, of course, lay in keeping the big guy from talking to anybody. Not that the kind of European Sioux that he chattered would have been understandable to the rank and file of the Mechanicsburg citizenry, but it might have seemed strange if some gent, addressing a wrestler who, according to the record books, was a born and bred American, received in reply a bunch of static. Smooch solved the problem as best he could by keeping the big boy locked up in the room about twenty hours out of the twenty-four and right under his eye the rest of the time. Things in this respect seemed to be working out pretty well when, on the fourth day of their stay, Smooch returned from an orgy in the barber shop to hear a barrage of foreign language being laid down in his hotel room.

"The big pinhead!" muttered Smooch. "He promised Duke he wouldn't talk to anybody. I suppose he thinks it's all right to talk to himself."

Then his heart missed a couple of beats when he realized that he was hearing not one voice but two.

He unlocked the door and hopped into the room. There in the center of the floor stood the big feller, chest out, thumbs in the armholes of his vest, head cocked to one side, chattering away like an oil-stock salesman to a squat dame in the uniform of a hotel chambermaid who sat on my big kit bag, looking up at the orator with that dying-cat expression that means the same in all languages.

Smooch may have his faults, but nobody ever accused him of not thinking fast.

"Hello, Bright Eyes," he greeted the gal. "You and my boy friend seem to be hitting it off pretty well."

"'Scoose, sir, please," said the chambermaid, all fussed and getting up to go. "Joost clean oop."

"What's your hurry, sister?" inquired Smooch. "Stick around. Glad to see my little pal's got such good taste. You kind of like the big boy, don't you?"

The chambermaid, who was built like a stuffed laundry bag and was about as beautiful to look upon as a squashed egg, blushed as well as she could, hung her head and shuffled one foot.

"Think he's pretty nice, eh?" persisted Smooch.

"Him bootiful!" declared the maiden.

"Good!" applauded Smooch. "You and I have the same idea. How long have you known 'Handsome Hans' here?"

"T'ree day," admitted the lady.

"Well!" grinned Smooch. "Fast worker, what? He's told you, I suppose, what we're here for?"

"Him great, strong mans," responded she. "How you say—wrastle. Choke

'em to death, what he do. 'Fraid him —every one, hey? Him wrastle, right away every one oopside down."

"You've got it straight from the feed box," nodded Smooch. "Of course, he told you to keep all this under your hat? You haven't told anybody about meeting him, have you? Or how he talks to you in your own language?"

"No, no, no," said the gal, shaking her head; and Smooch gave a big sigh of relief. "Him say: 'You tell what I say you, I wring um neck!' Him grand, strong mans," she said, with a sigh.

"Well, now, that's just fine," said Smooch, pulling out his roll and peeling off a ten-spot. "Take this, sister, and buy yourself something for your day off, And come back and see us again," he added, winking and tapping the roll in a meaning way.

"Yes, sir! T'ank you, sir!" stuttered the dame, her eyes popping from her head at the world-record tip she'd got.

"Only remember, sweetheart," said Smooch, pinching her cheek, "keep your little mouth shut about the big boy here. He's in line to make a lot of money and you'd queer him sure if you let it get out who he was and why he's here. Understand?"

"Yes, sir! I shoot oop *big!*" promised the gal.

"Good kid!" Smooch called her. "Now run along."

She and the big feller exchanged a couple of lungfuls of "x's" and "z's" and a few volleys of big eyes, then she beat it.

Smooch pointed after her with his thumb and gave the big fellow a wink and an approving shake of the head. The big feller looked embarrassed but pleased, which showed Smooch that he had the situation well in hand.

Well, a few days later there rolled into Mechanicsburg a light delivery truck painted a tasty shade of red and bearing on the side in yellow letters:

LEOPOLD DUKOFF

Wrestling Champion of Lower Europe
Touring the United States and Meeting All Comers

$500 TO ANY MAN HE FAILS TO THROW IN TEN MINUTES!

I stopped the truck in front of the newspaper office and Duke and me went in and told our troubles to the sporting editor. This bird looked at me kind of funny, then he started to grin.

"Your man will wrestle *anybody?*" he asked me.

"Sure," I told him.

"Nobody barred? Nobody at all?"

"Nobody at all," said I. "What are you laughing at?"

"Not a thing," he said. "You'll actually pay the five hundred if your man doesn't deliver?"

"I've never had to pay it yet," I replied. "My man Dukoff is some wrestler. Say, what are you laughing at?"

"I was just thinking how funny it would be—oh, nothing," he broke off. "I wasn't laughing at anything. Wasn't even laughing."

"You was giving a swell imitation of it," I informed him, pretending to be sore. "But how's it look for a little piece in the paper about us?"

"Oh, sure," he promised. "When do you pull off your circus?"

"Opera House, Saturday night," I told him. "Drop around and see how Duke does it."

"I'll be there with bells on," he grinned. "Wouldn't miss it for a share in the mint. Well, good luck, old-timer —and be sure to bring the five hundred."

"Say, what're you getting at?" I demanded suspiciously. "You talk like a guy that knew something."

"Don't know a thing," he denied, doing his best to keep from laughing in my face.

"Well, if you keep what you *think* you know out of the paper, you'll be doing me a great favor," I said to myself as I left.

My next stop was the Opera House where I confirmed the engagement for Saturday night that I'd made by wire, and left the manager a bunch of lithographs to decorate the town with in the interests of our exhibition. I'd picked the paper up cheap. The muscular gent it showed was "Farmer" Burns as he looked about in 1892, but I'd had some "snipes" printed in the name of Leopold Dukoff and his five-hundred-dollar challenge to all comers.

Then I sneaked into a cigar store and called up Smooch at the hotel. We were kind of cagy in our talk, but Smooch told me enough to know that all was well and the coast clear.

"How's your roommate?" I asked him.

"Huh! the big slob's having a love affair," laughed Smooch. "It's a circus for me, playing chaperon. They sound like a couple of katydids. Too bad you can't sneak up and watch them perform."

"You don't mean to say you're letting that big Bolsheviki chatter dialect in public!" I yelped.

"Behave, Sam," replied Smooch. "It's the best thing ever happened. Keeps him out of mischief and makes him easy to handle as a child. If you put through your end as well as I have mine, this affair Saturday night will be a wow."

"How about my green car?" I asked him.

"O. K. Ready to-morrow."

"Call you again at five," I promised, ringing off.

Between what the newspaper said about us that afternoon, the lithographs that went up and the miscellaneous publicity I managed to gather by driving the red truck with the yellow sign through the streets and honking the horn, we succeeded in making our presence in Mechanicsburg no secret.

And, as Smooch had predicted, it wasn't more than three hours after our arrival that various handbook men, crap shooters and other bright lights of Mechanicsburg's sporting world began to suffer from an outbreak of ideas. Smooch's first visitor was a fat man named Barney Noble who ran a speakeasy.

"Say, hear about this Polack wrastler?" he asked Smooch.

"No, who's that?" asked Smooth carelesslike.

"They's a guy comin' to the Op'ry House Saturday night who'll wrastle anybody—and five hundred bucks if he don't throw him in ten minutes."

"That so?" remarked Smooch, like he was bored to death. "If I'm still in town I may look in on the show."

"Aw, listen!" whispered Noble. "You don't kid me. That big guy you got with you is Strangler Lewis."

"You're crazy," Smooch told him. "I've denied that story repeatedly. It's been most embarrassing to me and my partner. I wish you'd——"

"Naw, I got it right," interrupted Noble. "He's the Strangler all right, and you and me's got a swell chance to clean up."

"Well, the last part interests me," admitted Smooch.

"He's the Strangler, ain't he?" demanded Noble eagerly.

"No," said Smooch.

"He ain't the wrestler?" persisted Noble.

"Well," said Smooch slowly, "he has wrestled—a little."

This was true. Him and Duke had had a couple of hours of it, all in all, just so's the big boy would know how to go through some of the motions.

"Huh! I knew it!" exclaimed Noble. "Well, then, lookit. Why can't you let your man wrastle this Polack and pick up the five hundred?"

"Five hundred!" repeated Smooch with a curl of the lip. "I thought you said something about cleaning up. Is half a grand a clean-up in this town?"

"Naw, that's only the beginnin'. We prob'ly can coax this Polack or his manager—I seen *him;* a dumb-lookin' guy —into makin' some bets. That is, o' course, if you don't let it get out that your man's Strangler Lewis."

"Let it get out!" barked Smooch. "I've already got tonsilitis and chapped lips from telling you wise bunnies that he *isn't!*"

"Sure!" winked Noble. "I get you. Only keep it dark, that's all."

"You're a clear talker," Smooch told him. "Well, suppose—just 'suppose,' now, I said—suppose I can talk my partner into doing a little wrestling on Saturday night?"

"Fifty-fifty for you and me on all the jack I can get down—up to three thou'," promised Noble.

"I'll think it over," said Smooch. "But here's another thing. This other wrestler isn't going to bet in the dark. If he thinks he's going up against a ringer——"

"He won't know a thing—if you keep your man under cover," declared Noble. "We ain't goin' to interduce him as Strangler Lewis, are we? Hell, no!"

"You're a smart feller," said Smooch, shaking his head like in admiration.

"I guess I know my onions," admitted Noble.

"Well, thanks for the suggestion. I'll think it over—and talk it over with my partner," agreed Smooch, kind of half-heartedlike.

After that came a parade, a half dozen anyway of the local sure-thing players, each putting up to Smooch as an original suggestion the proposition that he slip the supposed Strangler Lewis over on Duke on Saturday night.

All of this Smooch reported to me over the telephone that evening.

"Softest racket I ever tackled," he said. "These plungers are just begging us to take their money. We could take twenty-five grand out of this place if we had the dough to cover what they're willing to put up."

"Maybe they'll give odds," I suggested.

"Grand idea! Hold out for two to one; you may be able to tease them into giving you seven to five or so."

It was a scream from then on until Saturday night. The whole town seemed to know that me and Duke was scheduled for a surprise party. Everywhere I went I saw folks looking at me, laughing and pointing. Little kids hooted at Duke and me as we drove the red delivery truck through the streets. They didn't put it in the newspaper or broadcast it by radio; otherwise, I don't see how anybody who wasn't deef, dumb and blind could have missed knowing that a ham wrestler named Dukoff was to be broke in half and took for his bank roll by one of the real hefty boys of the game.

Smooch and me had to do a little lively side-stepping on a couple of occasions to avoid running into each other, for we were all living at the same hotel, me and Duke having a room a couple of stories up from Smooch's.

Well, things were running smooth as a hundred-dollar watch by Saturday. The manager of the Opera House reported a sell-out for the show, Smooch had lined up the local sports for more dough than the both of us could cover. There were just a few details to be taken care of—where we'd park the cars in case a rapid exit from the town was in order, how the bets were to be got down and so on. I admit it was kind of risky, but Smooch and me agreed over the telephone to meet in his room at three o'clock for a huddle.

"Better bring Duke along, too," suggested Smooch. "There'll be a few things to explain to this big hunky I've got, and we'll need an interpreter."

"Taking a big chance, ain't it?" I argued.

"Not if you watch your step," he said. "The only one who's likely to see you is the chambermaid on our floor—and she's working with us."

So Duke and me walk down the two flights of stairs, see that all's clear after a squint down the corridor and slip into Smooch's room.

There was three people there, instead of the two we'd expected. Smooch couldn't resist the temptation to throw a little comedy into the business conference we'd planned by inviting the big feller's sweetheart to be present.

She and the big feller were talking in a corner as we came in and were so interested in each other that they didn't hear us for a moment. Then suddenly the gal spots us. Her face turned the color of chalk. Her eyes popped and her jaw dropped.

"Leopold!" she gasped.

"Wilhelmina!" wheezed Duke.

The next instant a riot was in progress. Duke, the big feller and the gal were all talking at once, Duke in roars that could be heard a mile, the big feller likewise and Wilhelmina in shrill, scared shrieks.

I'm not as young or as active as I used to be, but I made one leap, grabbed Duke around the neck with one arm and clapped the other hand tightly over his mouth.

"Duke!" I yelped. "Shut up, for the love of Mike! Do you want to ruin us?"

Duke bent his back and lifted one of his shoulders a little and I flew ten feet away.

"Huh!" he growled at me, pointing at the big feller. "I feex him, beeg boom! Steal my girl from me!"

"He didn't!" I cried. "You never saw this dame before in your life! You been with me three years and I never even heard about her."

"Her my girl," insisted Duke. "In old country twenty year' ago. Him steal her. You tell me so."

I had at that. I'd repeated to him Smooch's story of the big feller's love affair as a joke.

Duke turned to the big feller and got out a mouthful of language that sounded like a barrel of dinner dishes falling down a cement stairway.

The big feller, eyes blazing and shaking his fist, replied in kind.

Duke swung around to me.

"Hah!" he reported triumphantly. "He say so himself! He say what I am a bad word, and Wilhelmina belonga him!"

"My gosh, Duke!" I implored him. "Quit it! People will hear you. You'll queer our stunt for to-night. You ain't got no mortgage on this dame. If you ain't seen her for twenty years——"

"Her belonga me!" he bellowed, "I feex him, beeg boom!"

And before any of the rest of us could move, he let loose a roar and hurled himself at the big feller.

Well, I been up against some rare ones in my time, but I never hope to tie the things that happened in that room in the next minute or so. With grunts and roars and American and imported swear words, those two big dumb Ikes —a quarter of a ton of foreign beef— went at each other with no holds barred. Over went the bureau. A little telephone table was match sticks in a second. They collided with one of the twin beds with which the room was fitted and it was a wreck.

Me, I was just stupefied. I stood there like I was planted in the floor. Smooch, though, got to work. He grabbed Wilhelmina and hustled her to the door.

"If anybody comes up, tell him your boy friend's just doing a little training," he ordered. "Understand—he's just exercising."

Then Smooch grabbed up a small chair, and without bothering much to

take aim though putting his heart into the rest of it, brought it down on the least sensitive parts of the two gladiators; namely, their heads.

It was the big boy who got it. He sort of wilted in Duke's arms, then slipped through them and thudded to the floor.

"There goes our show," I whispered to Smooch. "I sure hope you didn't kill him."

"No fear," said Smooth quickly, throwing away the back of the chair which was all that remained after the blow. "Get that big fathead of yours out of here," he ordered me then. "He ought to have more sense than to wrestle for nothing. Take this for the bets," he said, shoving a roll of bills into my hands. "See you on the stage of the Opera House to-night."

"We can't pull off the show after this," I objected, pointing to the wreckage in the room.

"Hell we can't!" snapped Smooch. "I can fix everything."

"But the big hunky," I said, "if he ever comes to, will run out on you, after the way you belted him on the knob."

"Nix!" said Smooch. "I'll get Wilhelmina to tell him Duke did it. Now get out—before he comes out of his trance and these two Romeos start fighting again."

Smart little burglar, Smooch, what? I hustled Duke out of the room, gave him thunder for what he pulled and laid low waiting for the night's events.

At seven o'clock we went to the Opera House. No sooner was we through the stage entrance than a flock of buzzards swooped down on us—the local sure-thing boys, anxious to get their money down.

"Hello there, old-timer," Noble, the speakeasy owner who'd first approached Smooch, greeted me. "We got quite some local talent for that wrastler of yours to try his grips on."

"The more, the merrier," I told him, passing on.

"We got one guy we think can take your man," he told me.

"He earns five hundred seeds if he does," said I.

"Got the five hundred?" he asked me.

"Right in my kick," I informed him, patting my pants pocket.

"Got any more?" he wanted to know then.

"Got more than I'll ever have to leave in this town," I boasted.

"Got five hundred extra you'd like to bet on your man throwin' ours?"

"Say!" I exclaimed. "Who you got—one of the good ones?"

"Naw; just a local boy, but he's good. What you say, sport, a little bet your man comes through?"

"What's this feller's name?" I insisted.

"Just Jack Smith," said Noble, using the name Smooch had put on the register.

"Never heard of him in the wrestling game," I said.

"You can take a chance, then, I guess," remarked Noble, producing a roll. "What you say—five hundred even?"

"You ought to be willing to give odds, a feller that's as sure as you."

"Nit! Even money on on amateur against a perfessional. I ought to be askin' you for odds. What, you're afraid to bet?" he inquired, as I hesitated.

"Well, before I know who this feller is, or see him or anything—— Where is he? I'd like to look him over."

"He'll be out in the audience," Noble said hastily, figuring, I suppose, that, being in the wrestling racket, I'd know the Strangler if I saw him. "You needn't bother about that. What you say, sport, you goin' to let me scare you?"

"Gimme two to one, and you're a bet!" I snapped, pulling out my roll—

seven grand of mine and nine of Smooch's.

"Aw, jump in the lake!" laughed Noble. "You think you can——"

"It's all right with me, then," said I, shoving the dough back in the pocket. "I didn't want to bet in the first place."

"Give you six to five," offered Noble, as I started to walk away.

"Nope; two to one," I held out for.

"I'll give you eight to five!" shouted one of the other sports, fearful, I guess, that I'd walk out on them with no bets made.

"You're a sport!" I called him. "Take you—for five yards."

They produced a stakeholder so quick that I'd have been suspicious if I didn't know I had an ace in the hole. He was all ready for his job, with a tan Boston bag and a little pad of paper on which to record bets.

He took my money and the other feller's, gave us each a slip of paper with the bet marked down, and the next instant the place was like an auction room. The sure-thing guys climbed all over me to get their dough down at eight to five. In less than five minutes I had just eight dollars left; the rest was in the stakeholder's satchel.

"Say, how about the five hundred you have to pay if your man don't throw somebody?" one of them asked me when I announced I was clean.

"That's O. K.," I said. "I'll get that at the box office."

For a first performance it was quite a show we put on, at that. The management filled in the time between eight, when the curtain rose, until nine thirty with some fair vaudeville—hoofers, singers and the like. Then came our part of the entertainment, and yours truly, very natty in his Tuxedo suit, took the stage and made some appropriate remarks. When I reached the part where I took great pleasure in introducing the wrestling champion of Lower Europe, the famous Leopold Dukoff, the orchestra went *"Duh-da-a-ah!"* and out stepped Duke in his green bath robe.

After a little weight lifting and similar stunts to demonstrate, as I said, his unparalleled muscular development and superhuman strength, I announced that the feature of the evening was about to be presented and laid down the wide-open conditions under which Duke undertook to throw all comers in ten minutes each. Speaking of the five hundred that was offered as a forfeit, I reached down into my pocket to get out some jack—and my heart nearly stopped beating. In my excitement and hurry I'd forgot to go to the box office and collect my share of the gate!

I managed to pass that off, though, and waited for the local strong boys to come to the stage, Duke meantime standing with his arms folded across his chest and breathing deep.

A half dozen huskies appeared from here and there, and the matches started. I'd instructed Duke to let the home-town boys look as good as they could. Three of them, though, proved capable of taking care of themselves, and Duke had to pull a little rough stuff to get them on the mat within the time limit.

Then came he event for which all of us were waiting. Out of the wings stepped the fake Strangler Lewis, his head buried in the collar of a plaid bath robe.

When I announced:

"The next contestant Mr. Dukoff will meet is Jack Smith of Mechanicsburg," the house went wild. There were cheers, handclapping, stamping of feet, whistles, hoots, boos—all the assorted noises an audience is capable of making. I looked surprised. Then I did a little acting as the big feller threw off the bath robe and I could see his face for the first time. I stared and pointed, rubbed my eyes, started forward as though to protest and then

stopped as if thinking better of it. All of which drew a big laugh from the customers, who read my actions as meaning that I had recognized Strangler Lewis and realized that me and my wrestler were in for a couple of trimmings.

That bout started with a rush. Duke bellowed out something in his own language, then gathered his legs under him and leaped. The big feller lifted one leg and swung his fist. The raised knee caught Duke in the stomach, the fist landed on his nose and he went to the mat in a heap, with the wind knocked out of him and blood coming from his nose.

"Ha-ha! Gablosh oogatz poojoob! Ha-ha!" laughed the big feller.

Duke got up—none too quick. What he said is not for me to remember, but it sounded terrible and matched the savage look on his face to a T. Again he hurled himself on the big feller, who dodged back and shoved out his foot. Over it went Duke and once again he landed—*plop!*—on the mat. This time, though, the big feller didn't wait for him to get up. With a yelp of glee, he jumped and lit on the small of Duke's back with both feet.

"Hey, foul! That ain't wrestling!" I yelled to the referee, a guy who I'd let the sure-thing boys pick. "I claim this match."

"G'wan! Sit down, fat boy!" barked this referee person.

"But that was a foul!" I insisted.

"Get back, or I'll smack you in the eye!"

The grunt that came from Duke when that two hundred-odd pounds of pork landed on his back was heart-rending—to me at any rate. Duke got up—this time even slower than before—and looked around him kind of bewildered. He hadn't done any active work, of course, since Jimmy Dugan gave us the gate, eight weeks or so before, and was in no condition to stand any pounding. The three hard matches he'd had before this bout had took something out of him, too.

"Duke! Get to it!" I roared at him.

"Shut up, you!" snapped the referee, and the crowd cheered.

"But I——"

"Get back in the wings!" he ordered me.

"But I want to——"

"Get back in the wings, or I'll forfeit the match!"

I got. I couldn't stand for the match being forfeited. Besides, I noticed nobody was taking any time out as we argued.

The next time Duke rushed he caught the big feller.

"Hurray!" I cheered. "Here it comes now!"

But it didn't. Some way or other the big feller got one hand loose, and grabbed Duke's sore nose. Duke let out a screech and his hold was broke. The theater shook with the riot the crowd raised at that.

"My gorry!" I said to myself after taking a look at my watch and noticing that four of the ten minutes had gone by. "Duke had better get going soon, or—ah! Got him now, all right, all right! Atta boy, Duke!"

For Duke had dived, caught the big feller by the legs and upset him pretty as you please.

"Duke! Duke! Roll him over, Duke!" I yelled from the wings.

Duke did, only, as the big feller rolled, one of his big arms reached down and the fingers closed around Duke's ear. And the harder Duke worked, and the more he pushed the big feller's shoulders toward the mat, the more of his own ear he removed from the side of his head! So Duke just let go his hold on the big feller's body, and devoted all his efforts to getting those fingers off his ear. He succeeded at last, but, before he could get another hold, the big feller wriggled around,

bringing up one of his feet as he did so and catching Duke on the point of the jaw. That made Duke a little groggy, and, while he was laying there, puffing and trying to collect his wits, the other amused himself by trying to pry off a few of Duke's fingers with one hand while pounding him on the stomach with his other fist.

In fact, the big feller gave no indication of knowing what he was there for; what me and Smooch and Duke expected him to do. His only idea seemed to be that here was his rival in love, more or less at his mercy for the moment, and that he'd better get in his licks while the getting was good.

Me, I was dizzy, not to say goofy. I had my watch in my hand now, and, as the seconds ticked on, more and more cold drops wilted my collar and rolled down the hollow of my back.

Six minutes—seven—eight—and still Duke hadn't got his fall! It was unbelievable—impossible! The big tramp Duke had gone to the mat with didn't know no more about wrestling than I did about preaching to the chinks in their native tongue, yet there he was, gouging, kicking, kneeing and biting a high-class wrestler into a mess! He ought to have been disqualified, of course, a dozen times. But how was me and Smooch and Duke to expect square treatment where sure-thing gamblers were running the parade?

Sixteen thousand bucks going over the waterfalls right before my eyes! Of course, there was a thousand or so as my share of the gate still to be collected, but that's no important money these days. If Duke would only come to life and——

Somebody suddenly grabbed me by the wrist.

"Come on, Sam!" came a whisper in my ear. "Let's beat it!"

It was Smooch.

"But the bout's not over yet," I objected. "Maybe Duke——"

"Don't argue; come on!" he said, pulling me toward the stage door. "I started the motor of your car. Everything's ready for——"

"But there's Duke!" I said. "And the big hunky—— We—we're a troupe!"

"If you don't get going now, you may never get out of this town alive. Come on before it's too late."

Smooch was white as his collar and shaking with excitement. I took one look at the stage, saw the big feller sitting on Duke's back, twisting his wrist with one hand and pulling his hair with the other, and decided that maybe Smooch knew something.

We were about ten miles outside of town when Smooch asked me to stop the green bus. I did, and he reached into the back and lifted something up for me to see. It was the tan Boston bag the stakeholder had used.

"Where in hell did you get that?" I yelped.

"The stakeholder invited me to a speakeasy and I got him drunk," said Smooch. "Then I lifted the bag."

"Then we ain't broke?" I stuttered. "We——"

"Broke!" laughed Smooch, opening the bag. "Take a look at this!"

And he reached in his hand and pulled out—one copy of the Mechanicsburg newspaper torn into small strips and a sheet of yellow paper—a telegram!

Under the dash light I took a look at the latter. It was dated from the Pacific coast the day after me and Duke had arrived in Mechanicsburg, and it read:

SPORTING EDITOR, *Mechanicsburg Tribune:*
A fellow can't be in two places at once stop I'm here and I guess that answers your question about the other party stop Take a fall out of him for me.
ED STRANGLER LEWIS.

"Onto us all the time!" gasped Smooch. "The dirty crooks!"

"Hell!" said I, pushing the accelerator

pedal down to the floor. "What can you expect of a bunch of sure-thing gamblers?"

"What gets me, though," Smooch roared in my ear, "is why those birds put up all that money if they knew it wasn't the real Strangler who was wrestling for them."

"Huh!" said I. "You didn't see the match! They had that won in advance. Duke wouldn't have been declared the winner if he'd thrown that big hunky in the first five seconds and held him down for the rest of the evening. A tough hombre, that referee!"

"Well, the dirty crooks!" remarked Smooch again. "Just kidding us, eh? I thought that stakeholder got drunk mighty quick and was awful careless with the dough bag! Can you imagine a bunch of hicks taking a couple of wise guys like that! I'm telling you, Sam, the radio and moving pictures and such things have got this country ruined!"

ONE COLONEL TO ANOTHER

DAVID RANKIN BARBEE, managing editor of the Asheville (North Carolina) *Citizen* and one of the most brilliant raconteurs in the South, was on the staff of the Nashville (Tennessee) *American* in 1897. Late one summer afternoon he was one of the two customers of the bar in the famous old Maxwell House. The other was the editor of the *American*, Colonel Bill Tatum, who with a bland and delightful frankness often declared that an alcoholic potation now and then quickened his literary muse.

Quiet reigned in the room. A few flies buzzed lazily against the windows. Barbee, buried in a newspaper and contemplation, occasionally glanced up at Colonel Bill, who was leaning, hot and somnolent, against the bar, having inadvertently jolted the muse too liberally.

Suddenly there was the sound of a hurrying and imperial footstep outside, the swing doors flew open before the impact of a thudding fist, and there appeared on the scene Colonel (sometimes called "Marse") Henry Watterson, journalist, statesman, and orator, of Louisville, Kentucky, suh. Colonel Henry strode to the bar, smote upon it with an eager hand, ordered a drink, and, perceiving his old friend, Colonel Bill Tatum, jovially remarked:

"Hello, Bill! Have a drink. I've come down here to deliver a lecture. I've traveled a long way, and I feel the need of refreshment."

To this Colonel Bill made no response, but gazed at Marse Henry with absolute indifference.

"I said," began Colonel Watterson again, "have a drink, Bill. As I told you, I'm down here to deliver a lecture to-night. How's everybody in Nashville? How are the boys?"

Still Colonel Bill, draped over the bar, regarded him without interest.

Colonel Henry laughed, observing:

"You don't seem much interested in my lecture, Bill. Have a little something, and maybe you'll cheer up and take notice."

And at last Colonel Bill responded.

"Lecture, huh?" he said. "What's your subject, Henry?"

"Money and Morals," replied Watterson.

Colonel Tatum staged a demonstration that was half splutter and half laugh.

"That's a hell of a subject!" he exclaimed. "What do you know about it, Henry? You never had any of either!"

A Chat With You

A VERY welcome and interesting letter from Mr. Ike Rush, of Forrest, Illinois:

"My friend and I were passing the village news stand the other day on our way to the best restaurant the town affords, and I remarked, with the confidence of an old-established reader of POPULAR: 'If you want to read a magazine that is consistently good, Smith, go in and get POPULAR before some one beats you to it.' I further extolled the merits of your excellent magazine by pointing out that you had a staff of A1 writers, and mentioned the names to him. But he said: 'What's the difference who the writers are, Rush, so long as the stories are good?'

"We went to the restaurant. As we took our seats I asked Smith: 'Why do you always come to Zellar's restaurant when there are two or three more good ones in town?' He remarked, with the confidence of an old-established patron: 'They have the best cooks in town, of course.' I said then: 'In other words, it does make a difference who the writers are, doesn't it, Smith?'

"He laughed and retorted: 'I'll get that darned magazine then and test out your theory.' Smith is now a confirmed POPULAR addict.

"You see, Mr. Editor, your staff of writers turns out good stories consistently; thus, they insure our confidence in the quality of the stories and we are never disappointed. Perhaps my theories are far fetched, but whenever I see the names of Fred MacIsaac, A. M. Chisholm, B. M. Bower and the other regulars, I promptly relegate my worries to the limbo of forgotten things, light up my malodorous pipe, give the smoldering stove a vicious shake, call up my girl and tell her I'm sick, flop in my easy-chair and turn the pages of POPULAR with impatient eagerness. Thence, an evening of unalloyed enjoyment. It has ever been thus, since POPULAR came into print, and so it shall ever be as long as you are so conspicuously extant.

"Yours is the magazine of greatest merit on the news stand. Don't weaken; and, in conclusion never be tempted to follow the horrible example of some cigar manufacturers who put a first-class cigar on the market for a couple of months, then follow up with poorer stock. That's why I'm smoking a pipe.

"Success to you and your cohorts. You deserve it."

* * * *

THANKS a thousand times, Mr. Rush! As for our following the example of some cigar manufacturers, we have a record of over twenty-four years of uniform quality. We have to live up to that.

We are willing to bet that Mr. Rush is as good a judge of restaurants as he is of stories. We have eaten a great many meals in all sorts of restaurants from Owl wagons and short-order eating houses up to those presided over by world-famous chefs, and the one thing that marked every successful restaurant was the fact that if you ordered a certain dish there you knew exactly what you were going to get. In Jack's, if you ordered bacon and eggs you might think that one hen laid the eggs from day to day and that all the bacon was furnished by one pig, the dishes were so uniform. If you ordered "saurbraten" in a famous German restaurant

you always had the same amount of beef, the same onion, the same potato pancake, the same sauce and the same flavor.

In a world-famous French restaurant you might order English roast beef. Why English in a French restaurant? But they sell a lot of it. Each dish is the same, day in and day out—a slice of beef always of the same size and tenderness, a slip of cress, and a potato which always was of the same size and taste as the one you had the day before, as well as a bit of horseradish, always the same size and of the same pungency. The restaurants that come into being suddenly and as suddenly snuff out are those in which you may get a wonderful meal one day and a terrible one the next.

One of the best restaurants we know of is run by a man and his wife. The man cooks the meats and vegetables, the wife makes the desserts. Most good restaurants have different cooks skilled in the preparation of different dishes—some for pastries, some for fish, some for meats and some for salads.

Glancing below you will see the dishes listed on our next week's menu and the names of those responsible. We think it does not look so bad.

THEY CERTAINLY DO KNOW THEIR CIGARETTES, THIS YOUNGER CROWD!

SOMETHING ABOUT FATIMA—ITS GREATER DELICACY, ITS MORE SKILLFUL BLENDING OF FLAVORS — HAS MADE IT, AS IN OTHER DAYS, A CONSPICUOUS FAVORITE WITH THE YOUNGER SET.

FATIMA

OUTSTANDING FAVORITE AMONG HIGHER-PRICED CIGARETTES!