

TWICE-A-MONTH

Complete Story Magazine

With which is combined PEOPLE'S MAGAZINE

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January 25, 1925

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Doom Canyon

A
Complete Novel

by Joseph Montague

Author of "The Flower of Fate," etc.



"LOBO" SMITH, COLD, CRUEL, RULED DOOM CANYON AND THREE CORNERS WITH A STERN HAND. WHEN JIM GARDNER BUCKED SMITH—HE PAID. BUT, WITH THE INFLUX OF THE CATTLEMEN, CAME OTHERS MORE FORMIDABLE—MORE CAPABLE OF MEETING SMITH'S ATTACK. AMONG THEM WAS STRONG. . . .

CHAPTER I.

DAWN, coming up beyond the Pecos, shone fairly on the wall of the range, turning the bare stone rosy, tingeing the trees bronze, bathing the plain in a vermillion wash, gilding the silver sage and lacy mesquite, touching the lonely, savage landscape with mystery. But the cleft of Doom Cañon showed dark and forbidding as a dead man's wound, a purple-black gash in the first tier of the cliffs that mounted in a broken mesa high against the sky.

Sheer were the walls of the cañon, seamed and pitted and worn but unscalable from the floor of the gorge

where the sun never rested, or from the weather-bitten, eroded rims that leaned toward each other. North and south ran Doom Cañon, with twisting turns here and there, a corridor of grimness, of almost legendary horror.

Here, so runs the story, the fierce Apaches herded the more peaceful mesa dwellers, penning them for slaughter, leaving them scalped and mutilated, to furnish food for the sneaking coyotes and the greedy buzzards. Long years afterward prospectors, seeking gold, ventured into the gloomy recesses, climbing the masses of lava that blocked the entrance so that one seemed to descend

into the gorge, and found a rushing, mysterious stream that gushed out of a cavern at the end of the great ravine, boiled along its length and, roaring and white with foam, rushed beneath the lava and disappeared again.

Esqueleto Creek they called it, for its banks were strewn with moldering, scattered teeth-gnawed skeletons. They brought no gold from Doom Cañon—they did not search for any—but emerged on to the plain, glad to be in the light and warmth of day again. Twice a day the sun bathes a part of each great wall, that is stained in fantastic hues with mineral solutions, that drips with oozing water and is patterned with lichens and weird fungus growths that look like cabalistic messages inscribed upon the cliffs. The stars shine down and are sometimes caught in glittering points upon the stream that comes boiling and roaring out of the resounding cavern and hurls itself darkly under the entrance ledges, but its inky, snaky coils never greet the warm kiss of the sun or the colder caress of the moon. It might be the Styx itself, and the cañon the lower court to Hades, or the fabled sacred river of Kublai Khan that ran:

Through caverns measureless to man,
Down to a sunless sea.

No Indian ever entered there or came near the place. Even the reckless Apache, wandering from his reservation with his hand against that of all men, responsible for the massacre that named the gorge as the place of doom, gave it a wide berth.

It was marked for tragedy, a hall of death that Nature herself proclaimed taboo. Towering above Doom Cañon, boldly carved from the main mass of the great mesa by the wind, the rain, the frost and snow, stood Skull Knob, a semidetached bulk of white limestone. There were cavities in it where bushes grew and there was a ledge with stunted piñon and cedar upon it that gave to

it eye sockets, nose and grinning jaws, even when the sun flared directly upon it.

And, always over the cañon, where surely few living things must stir or live, the buzzards hovered as if in memory of the great feast that was, perhaps, well within the recollection of those same ill-omened birds that, hour by hour, kept vigil, planing against the air currents in unceasing and apparently profitless patrol.

Here was a desolate land where as yet the law had not come, a wild land where the renegades of three nations, the red man, the brown and the white, prowled and robbed and harried the hardy pioneers and prospectors who adventured in the half-desert region lying between the Rio Grande and the Pecos, carrying on a lawless traffic across the border. Doom Cañon and its mesa formed part of the Organ Mountains in the Three Corners where Arizona, New Mexico and Mexico meet. It was a land of mirage and cactus, of yucca, greasewood and sage, of the puma, coyote, wolf and bear, of the tarantula, the Gila monster and the rattlesnake, the buzzard and the crow. It was a land of mirage and underground rivers, of the marvelous Seven Lost Cities of Cibola, of silver and gold, of thirst and torture, of hope and despair and death.

Yet there were grassy plains and fertile places and the rich surface of the land hid against what treasures might lie under it for the favor of the hardy pioneer, the cattleman, the rancher. Out on the plain, that looked so level and yet held valleys, prairies, and gullies, was the settlement of Laguna, twelve miles from Doom Cañon. It was naturally located beside what was almost a miracle—a fresh-water lake fed seemingly by springs, a lake that never failed in this country where the sun would evaporate a six-inch puddle in half that many hours; a deep lake of water that was hard but, compared to most of

the alkaline surface basins, was as ginger ale to the Harlem River.

Clear Lake, it was called, and the town Laguna. The Apaches called it, for some reason, the Lake of the Dead. There were trout in it and other fish, and some day, when the railroad came down to parallel the valley of the Rio Grande, the lake would furnish the main incentive for a tourist resort. At present the collection of false-front shacks and adobes, of Mexican jacals, of saloons, dance halls, gambling rooms—the three usually combined in one—one or two general stores, two blacksmiths, sheds and corrals, was the first and last resort of all the scattering population—except the Apaches, not popular and supposed to be on their reservations, of the respectable few and the riffraff many. Ranchers and rustlers, gamblers and smugglers rubbed elbows at bar and game, danced with the same women in rough-and-ready fellowship that was ever hair-triggered.

Men wore guns, not for ornament but for use. The only ones who did not were the bartenders who were considered as neutral necessities under any and all conditions—these and Laguna's one undertaker, whose dead were furnished him.

Such the Three Corners. A place that might well be called the land that God forgot and with the devil's own nook in it—at Doom Cañon.

Men came to live in the cañon. How many none were sure, nor did they know all their names. Nor how they lived. It was not deemed a wise thing even in Three Corners to discuss the men of Doom Cañon. They might come to hear of it, for there were many who carried favor with them, or perhaps were in their pay. And they had harsh ways of settling scores.

Yet every man in Laguna believed that each of that band was not merely lawless but outlawed, that the nucleus had gradually been augmented by des-

perate men who fled from the results of some wild deed. They were a hard-bitten, swaggering, hard-drinking and swift-shooting lot and, when they came to Laguna, flinging gold on the counters and the layouts as if the pieces were copper cents, the night was theirs. Bullies some of them—cowards none, so far as physical fear was concerned. The girls dreaded their arrival. There were tales of favorites among them being carried off against their will. Tales of women who entered Doom Cañon and did not leave it; yet were no longer living, because they were no longer attractive. They were wild, unauthenticated tales, born in whispers among the girls themselves. Girls came and went in the Three Corners, even as men did, without heralding and without regrets or investigation. Human life was valued lightly where Nature set scores of traps for the taking of it. Love was laughed at.

The leader of the Doom Cañon men was the one the Mexican girls—and some of the men—called "El Lobo," because of his cloudy, yellow eyes that made them silver when he turned them on them. They were the orbs of a caged wild beast, when the brute is at ease and looks toward but not at you; eyes that show no soul, that can light up under the stress of passion as if they were glass lenses for the devil's own lantern. Then the amber irises would clear and, as the eyes narrowed, you saw a glitter as of gun metal, the suggestion of a flame from hell. And if, said the girls—crossing themselves—he should chance to open them wide and look at you, you could sometimes see down through them as if they were windows of yellow glass, and there was the evil soul of the man mocking you.

Some of the breeds called him "El Halcón," because of his hawklike nose that curved out like the beak of a bird of prey—rapacious, gluttonous. Curved out and down a little, over lips that were

narrow and cruel—what you could see of them for the mustaches—and the great black beard that served him in place of collar or necktie or neckerchief, laying on his chest in its silkiness, so well groomed it was apparently the man's one personal vanity, mingling with the shaggy hair that masked his chest, as it did his massive arms, and the powerful hands to their very finger nails.

A shirt of blue flannel, open at the breast, that looked as if he could not find one spacious enough for his wide shoulders and his great barrel of a chest. Trousers of dark stuff thrust into boots, belt and cartridge belt of black leather about lean hips, black leather holsters tied down low with latigo strips, black-butted guns of blue metal that matched the high lights in his beard and the hair he let grow long. Black sombrero, black temper when crossed and a black heart. He gave the name of Smith—Sam Smith—mockingly, as if to challenge you to say he lied and it was evident very early that he neither feared man nor devil.

He was a man who could hold all his emotions under control while his yellow eyes blazed with the devilry he repressed until the moment he considered it best to unleash it. Many emotions were doubtless missing in him altogether and his followers were men after his own kidney, of his own stamp—a godless, reckless crowd.

As Three Corners was the land of no man, equally was it the land of no man's business. What one might do another might not inquire into—unless it personally concerned him and his affairs—without breaking the unwritten laws which were the only laws of the strange etiquette of the community. Collectively, Smith and his men ruled the roost. They were united, the rest were not, and therein lay the difference. The fact that they had chosen to live in Doom Cañon enhanced their mastery

over the superstitious and uneducated, and most Laguna and of Three Corners consisted of either one or the other.

Every little while El Lobo and his pack would come riding into town to sling their chinking gold pieces free and wide, to insist upon making drunk every one within the cantina they visited or closing its doors to all but themselves. They were a source of revenue to Laguna and what they caused of annoyance was considered well offset by the profits to those who secured them.

There burst one night into the Tent, most popular of the cantinas, a man whose haggard face was stamped with grief and hate in the lines marked where the sweat had trailed down his face powdered with alkali. His staggering pony collapsed as he left the saddle. The man entered the room like a spent runner, his final effort so exhausting him that, as he turned, not to the bar but facing the big room with his back against it, he would have slid, like his pony, to the floor, but for the strong arm of a kindly rancher flung about him, holding him up. The man gabbled, making strange noises, his features distorted.

"Give him a snorter," said the rancher. "Here, pardner, git this inside of ye an' then spill yore yarn."

It was clear to all the room that something out of the ordinary had happened. There was that in the man's dramatic entrance, in his appearance, that told them that here was something more exciting even than the faro and poker they were playing. The fiery stuff trickled down the man's throat, the glass held there by the rancher who still supported him. A spasm twisted his face and he stood upright, as if summoning all his powers. Then, for the first time, some of those in the room recognized him as Gardner, a cowman lately settled in the Three Corners, famous in a degree because of the good-looking wife he had brought with him. Women who

were both good looking and good were rarities.

"She's gone, boys! They've took her—those devils have took her! An' if there's a man here with the heart an' courage of a louse, he'll come with me to git her back. It—it may not be too late," he faltered and then his voice mounted again to a harsh cry for vengeance. "If it is—if they've hurt a hair of her, I'll rip their black hearts out. I'll—I'll—ain't none of ye goin' to line up? Ain't none of ye human?" His last words gabbled toward incoherence, and his eyes showed glints of vacancy, grief, and despair. The furious exertions he had evidently been through, seemed to have partially crazed him.

"It was all set," he muttered, as if to himself, while the nearest crowded him to listen, and some of those farther away turned back to their games, believing the man more or less mad; swerving aside the crowd that pushed in from the dance hall, headed by the curious girls who, swifter of intuition than the men, had already connected up the affair with trouble to Gardner's wife. Some of them, after their kind, secretly rejoiced at the misfortune that had come upon a virtuous woman.

"It was all set," went on Gardner though it was plain that he no longer saw nor talked to any audience. "We come into town three days ago for some stuff from the store. She sittin' up beside me, pritty an' proud. She said she'd come down here with me. She said she wasn't afraid of a rough country, with *me* to take care of her. A prime job I did. I might have known when that black-bearded devil set his yellin' eyes on her what he was thinkin' of. Follered us into the store, he did, an' kep' his eyes on her. Not thet I noticed it, busy with spendin' my money, but she did an' she told me about it afterward! 'It give me the creeps,' she said, after we got home. She wouldn't tell me until we did, knowin' my tem-

per. 'He almost made me afraid, Jim,' she said, an' me holdin' her close in my arms an' talkin' big—like the pore damn fool I was.

"What happened? A hell of a racket in the middle of last night and me out, with her, plucky like she was, holdin' the lantern fo' me till I find the fence down an' half my stock gone. Cut wire it was. She wouldn't have me go out after them thet night. She wouldn't be left alone an' she couldn't come along. She was afraid an' so I stayed home to comfort her. Cattle didn't count along of her.

"Why she knowed right then an' wouldn't tell me; she was feared of 'Blackbeard' Smith' with them wolf's eyes of his, feared I'd go up agin' 'em for insultin' of her an' she'd be left alone for ever, with me shot. Damn them! Damn them, I say."

Two of the younger girls broke into sobs, and a young man pushed his way into the front of the listeners, his eyes shining like points of steel, his tanned features set grimly.

"Go on, pardner," he said. "What happened then?"

The haggard man lifted his eyes and they seemed to focus on the speaker with some faint light of hope.

"What happened then? I went out this mornin' to look fo' the cattle. The sign was plain. They'd been driven fast an' far. I didn't pick 'em up till an hour after noon in a live-oak ravine way beyond Doom Cañon, eatin', contented enough, with water an' grass. No one's driyin' off cattle thet way, pardner, not rustlers, jest to put 'em where they'd sure to be found."

"I'm ridin' right with you, pardner," said the younger man. "They wouldn't."

"It was sundown time I get 'em back. Dark when I reach the house. No light thar. I was feelin' pritty perky, count I'd got the steers back, but thet brought me up all standin'. No light set for me, or in the kitchen where she used

to work an' sing. I never come nigh the house but what I heard her singin' like a lark.

"Pardner, I *knowed* somethin' was wrong. It got me in the stummick, an' like a hand had gripped my heart. That's the *way* it gits ye when you love a woman right.

"She was gone. Plumb gone, pardner!" He spoke now as if he knew of but one listener, the grim-faced young rider. "Thar'd been a struggle. Thar was flour scattered about an' the tins on the flo'. She'd been makin' a cake fo' me—fo' *me*, pardner—an' they took her. Must have sneaked in on her an' she thought it was me. I used to sneak in sometimes an' put my hands over her eyes, jest to hear her say, 'It's you, Jim. You can't fool me.'

"Heavens, pardner, she ain't ever goin' to fool me again!" He broke off in a hoarse sob, pitiful to hear. Now all the room was quiet again, the click of chips had ceased, the bar stood idle and the musicians had come from their stand. The plain, unvarnished tale of human love and tragedy had gripped them.

"Go on pardner," said the rider. "You read the sign?"

"It was dark—no moon. Jest the stars an' my lantern. I could see whar some one had carried her to the fence, right by the break I'd mended befo' I left in the mornin'. Then the devils had follered the trail of the steers. All mixed up it was. I never found it again. It ain't to be found. It left no sign on thet malpais but it leads to Doom Cañon. That's whar it leads, an' I'm lookin' fo' some men to go thar with me. If not, I'll go alone."

"You ain't goin' alone, pardner," said the other. "Not while I got a hawss an' a couple of guns. You eat anything sence breakfast?"

"*Eat?* What would I want to *eat* fo'?"

"You killed yore hawss, pardner.

You're nigh done up yoreself. You *got* to eat. I'll loan you my second-string caballo but you want strength to fork it. You eat an' we'll git us a li'le posse together in the meantime."

Gardner lurched forward, reeled, realizing his weakness. He caught at the other's forearm.

"You'll stay with me, pardner?"

"Of course. I ain't the only one. You go git somethin' in yore belly. You can't make war talk on an empty one."

Gardner suffered himself to be led to the lunch counter that was a regular feature of the place and sat up on a stool before frijoles and coffee. The other, giving assurance that he was only going to get some men together, walked back through the dance hall to the big room and sensed immediately a neutral, if not a hostile attitude.

Ramon, owner of the Tent, was talking with his pardner, Sprague, who ran the games and provided the funds for the "bank," a man whose light-blue eyes were so pale as to be almost colorless; cleanly shaven, shrewd of face.

"I didn't get your name, stranger," he said suavely. "I take it you air a stranger in Laguna?"

"My name's Strong. I got here two days ago from Socorro. Thought thar might be a chance out here fo' a man who had three hawsses an' could ride 'em."

"*And* a couple of guns," said Sprague, glancing at the heavy Colt the other sported. "I reckon you could fit in." Strong had vouchsafed considerable information for a newcomer to the Three Corners. "Only, you want to get acquainted a bit befo' you throw in too sudden. We're all mighty sorry fo' Gardner. He had a mighty sweet woman. But he ain't got no proof against the Doom Cañon outfit and you want to go easy when you buck them. They ain't rustlers, to begin with. Lobo Smith's got an eye for a pretty woman,

so have all the rest of us, but that ain't sayin' we're runnin' off with her.

"This territory's a bit raw yet, I grant you, but there's small sense in trying to pull a half-cocked trigger. What's he got but a notion in his head and him half crazy? Just the same, chargin' a man with runnin' off with yo' wife is a thing a man ain't goin' to always take as a joke. Lobo Smith and his outfit ain't what you'd call easy jesters. If Gardner goes off to Doom Cañon—he can't get in, to begin with—an' making cracks that Lobo stole his wife he'll get into trouble, pronto an' plenty. Also them that goes with him. Gardner's all upset an' he's runnin' off at the head. Most likely it was Apaches. They've been gettin' out of hand of late."

"If it was Injuns—even if they'd taken her off, which ain't likely—they'd have burned the shack an' they would sure have run off the rest of the stock."

"Thet don't make it Smith. Use yore judgment, Strong."

It was good advice, suavely enough delivered, but Strong sensed that the general sentiment backed Sprague's talk. They had been moved by Gardner's tale, more by his manner of telling it, perhaps, than by the story itself. They had listened to it largely as spectators might look and listen to something shown on a stage, without personal or real interest. And, when it came to the mention of the men of Doom Cañon all sympathy had seemed to vanish. Strong was young, halfway between his twenties and his thirties, but he had been reared in a hard school. He saw clearly enough that there was, as yet, no proof, and yet Gardner's tale had rung so true to his ears that he had developed a strenuous hunch it was correct, even to its suspicion concerning the perpetrators.

He had felt also a certain intolerance against Lobo Smith and his men, said to be living in this narrow cañon that was declared in the same breath to be

unlivable, its floor largely occupied, even in times of drought, by Esqueleto Creek. The whole damned community, he told himself, cringed before the Doom Cañon gang. Still, there was no proof, so far. When he had aligned himself with Gardner he had expected to hear some more positive evidence. It was worse than foolish to ride up to the cañon at nightfall and try to force a passage which, all agreed, was well nigh impossible on a doubtful charge, a doubtful errand.

He stood there for a moment undecided, feeling that his sympathies had carried him a bit too far and too hastily, vexed at himself for lack of judgment yet secretly riding the hunch that told him that Gardner had spoken truly—and that this smooth-spoken gambler *knew* it—or suspected it.

Then Gardner came back from the lunch counter, where the beans had turned to ashes in his mouth, though he had swallowed a cup of coffee. That, or the telling of his tale, and the support of Strong, the prospect of more help, had given him a spurt of strength.

"Well," he demanded, "who's comin' along with me? What's wrong with 'em, pardner?" he continued to Strong. "Ain't they men? Air they jest a pack of lousy coyotes?"

His eyes glittered. The ultimate source of his energy was beyond doubt the supercharging of his tissues by the passions that had dispossessed his reason, imbued him with the one idea.

"They claim you ain't got no definite proof this Lobo Smith had anything to do with it," said Strong slowly. "You couldn't read sign to-night but I reckon we might do somethin' with it by daylight. I'm pritty fair at trailin' myself."

"*Daylight!* If the woman you love—yore wife—was taken from you, overnight—would *you* wait till daylight? I tell you I *know* who done it. She read

it in his eyes—just an' the will to feed it. The eyes of a beast, she called 'em!"

Back of his high-pitched accusation there came the sound of galloping horses, a small troop coming fast with their hoofs thudding into the soft soil of the street. Then the clatter of men's feet on the wooden sidewalk, the clink of spurs, a loud laugh that provoked others. Gardner stood stock-still, his speech leaving him as he leaned a little forward at the hips, his nostrils spreading like those of a hound that catches the scent, his glittering eyes fixed.

All glances turned towards the door as it was flung open and Lobo Smith strode in with some twenty of his men crowding behind him, jesting and laughing. Smith's amber eyes swept the room, instantly focused on the figure of Gardner, his chin low on his great chest, as he gazed keenly at the shorter man, pressing down the glossy growth of black beard that lay there, catching the high lights from the oil lamps with their reflecting shades. Just for the fraction of a second the tableau held, then dissolved into action.

With a screaming oath Gardner drew his gun and fired as Sprague struck up his arm, chopping at the elbow almost in one motion. Lobo Smith's eyes turned to yellow flame as fire flashed from his six-guns and the roar of the discharge filled the room. From both hands he sent the unerring messengers of death. Gardner went staggering from the shock of successive bullets, spun about and fell like a length of chain with the last one in his back, two others already in his heart and one through his brain. The first had killed him, the rest had been fired too quickly for his lifeless body to fall before they struck it.

The reek of the powder smoke was sharp in their nostrils as they gazed from Smith, who stood with a grin on his lips that showed his white teeth flashing between beard and mustache,

and a laugh of deviltry in his eyes, to Gardner, face down on the floor, his gun tossed away from him, blood beginning to trickle out down the slants of the worn planking. The thing that held them most was the diabolical but silent revelry of Smith, as if the taking of life was the rarest jest he could have perpetrated. It was true that he had received provocation, that he was justified on the face of it in sheer self-defense, but there was something inhuman about it, in the concentrated fire from two guns, the satanic mask of his face.

Strong's hands had shot down instinctively to the butts of his own weapons. Self-defense or not, he felt, as he saw Lobo Smith for the first time, that here was a murderer, a potential criminal who was a menace to honest men and decent women. Strong fingers gripped at his elbows long enough for reason to rule over primitive emotion. It was the friendly rancher who had kept Gardner from falling when he first came in, who had bought him the drink. Smith's eyes rested for a moment on Strong, baleful, the mirth erased from his face, leaving it bleak as the back of a blizzard.

"What's the idee of the shootin'?" he asked as his men clustered about him, hostile-eyed, curiously inactive, poised for trouble; while Ramon swiftly crossed himself and silently mumbled a blend of invocations and imprecations. Sprague spoke up. Strong fancied he saw a swift glance of understanding pass between him and Smith.

"Gardner's wife was stolen this evenin', somewheres round dark," he said. "He got a notion you're responsible fo' the trick. We were tryin' to tell him he was crazy when you came in."

Smith gave a short laugh.

"Crazy enough, I reckon. Put a hole through my hat. If it hadn't been fo' you, Sprague, I'd be where he is. Stole his woman? I'll say this about it. She was mighty easy to look at. But, if

I stole a pritty woman around sundown, I'd be mighty apt to be keepin' her company, not running around town."

There was a general laugh at this. Strong felt no inclination to join. He had seen sudden death before, many times, but there flashed across his mind the suggestion that if Lobo Smith had done this thing, had let his lust run away with his discretion and realized that he might well have gone too far, even for his overlord control of Three Corners, in the violation of ranch honor, he could have done no cleverer thing than come to town in this fashion, to make the ribald answer he had just pronounced—and to *kill* the husband.

He spoke up, facing Smith, whose lambent gaze had returned to him, Strong's thumbs were hooked lightly in his belt now, they had never strayed far from his gun butts. He heard the friendly whisper of the rancher but paid no attention to its warning to "stay out of this deal."

"The man's dead," he said. "Thet eases *his* worry but it don't help his wife none. Gardner was aimin' to git some men to try an' foller her up, an' I was helpin' him. So fur we didn't git many offers. You interested at all?"

Steel-gray eyes and yellow ones met and their glances fenced for hushed moments without advantage. Then Lobo Smith showed his teeth again in his mockery of a smile.

"No, stranger, I ain't. You tryin' to take up Gardner's quarrel with me?" His right hand stroked his beard as he spoke, the tone smooth but deep, and the downward movement bringing his fingers almost within touch of the right-hand gun of the two he had restored to their holsters as swiftly as they had flashed out, once the four shots had been fired. Here was a challenge. The flames that played in Smith's eyes seemed to bring out a colder light in those of the younger man.

"I might, if I thought thar was a good reason fo' it," he answered quietly.

Men held their breath, sure of impending tragedy. They began to shuffle back, treading on each others' toes, especially those behind Strong. He was conscious of one man standing ground beside him. And he was equally conscious of the silent, watchful gang behind Smith, tensely alert, hands poised. If Smith had put four bullets into Gardner, Strong felt that he might expect to be riddled from half a dozen guns if he even twitched his fingers towards his guns. He would get in a shot first—two perhaps—for his draw was as swift as Lobo Smith's, he told himself. But that would be all. He was standing on the brink of a self-dug grave into which he would fall without sympathy, a victim of "horning-in," as a verdict. But, within him, there had flamed up a mounting hatred for the man he faced. It showed in his eyes and he knew it. It was the searing, dispising hatred of manhood for inhumanity, acid on false metal. He saw an uneasiness in the gaze of Smith though it did not blench.

"I'll tell you what I'll do, stranger," said Lobo Smith while his hand stayed at the end of his glossy beard, "you cut sign on her trail an', damn me, if I don't help you go git her. Couldn't say fairer 'n thet, I reckon, after her husband took a shot at me!" He looked round at the crowd that rose to the roar of laughter from the men of Doom Cañon.

"I'll be somewhere's around town till breakfast," went on Smith. "I reckon I crossed my luck here for to-night," he added, looking down at the dead man. "We'll try it some other place, boys. I didn't git yore name, stranger."

"It's Strong—Sam Strong."

"Good name. I'll say this much fo' you, Strong. You've got yore nerve with yo' and it suits yore name. If you ever git up agin' it fo' a job, you come

over to th' cañon. I might find room fo' you. Adios, caballeros. *Buenos noches.*"

The men from Doom Cañon left the cantina, dividing their company so as to let Smith pass through first. There was again the sound of their booted feet and tinkling spurs, the creak of leather, the jingle of chains and the sound of galloping.

In the Tent men began to cash in their chips. The cappers alone kept playing. In the other end of it the musicians played but the girls were without partners. Two men picked up the body of Gardner, another mopped at the floor with cloths and water but, despite his efforts, there were stains on the floor, dyeing the boards—a hoodoo on the luck, even as Lobo Smith had said. Ramon fussed about, trying to hold the clients; Sprague cursed under his breath. The customers filed to the bar and drank deeply but without jollity and began to pass out, wondering why Smith had left without punishing the temerity of Strong. Some fancied that Strong had called the bluff of Smith's courage and hinted as much, but they were promptly laughed at.

"Any time Lobo talks smooth, he's thinkin' rough," said one. "No, sir. First place this Strong's hands is plumb close an' handy to his guns. Closer than Smith could git with strokin' his beard. If his whiskers was two inches longer Strong would be mighty weak right this minute. Main thing is Smith was out to gamble. Killin' Gardner was forced on him an' it sp'iled his luck. You can't play across spilled blood an' expect to win when you've done the spillin'. Any one'll tell you that. He'll gamble jest the same, seein' he come inter town to do it. If he killed Strong it would copper all his bets sure. As it is his luck may swing back at midnight. Lacks a few minutes of that now. Come on, let's go see whar' him an' his gang drifted in."

"But he as good as asked this Strong to jine his gang. He ain't never done that afore. None of us ever knew where his recruits come from—or when."

"Hell! He said fo' him to come over to the cañon some time an' he might find room fo' him. He didn't say what in. Might be a hole in the ground!"

As the room emptied there came a whisper close to Sam Strong's ear, in a girl's voice, pregnant with warning.

"Don't go out alone!"

He turned swiftly to see the figure of the partner he had been dancing with, earlier in the evening, disappearing into the back room. He shrugged his shoulders. It was good advice but he did not quite see how he could carry it out very well. He was a stranger. He might go out with several others but they would promptly scatter at the first sign of trouble. He was a marked man from now on in Three Corners. It had not needed the whisper of the well-meaning girl—she was a nice little kid, who had not yet got as hardened as her companions—to undeceive him as to Lobo Smith's ultimate intentions toward him.

In their conflict of glances he knew that, while he had not beaten down the other's guard, he had passed it once and made him wince. It would not be forgiven. As for the little dancer, he had treated her decently and not as if she should be considered common property, and she had responded accordingly. Doubtless she knew Smith's methods. Probably there would be a couple of that hard-bitten, swaggering gang outside to pick a quarrel with him or even kill him without excuse, save for such as they might make up if they were asked for one.

His two horses were in a corral shed up the street, close to the fonda where he slept and took his meals. To walk there with safety he would have to take the middle of the street or risk a sidewalk. Both were dangerous on a dark night like this, with enemies abroad. On

the sidewalk he would be exposed to the ambush of the dozens of narrow ways between the shacks. In the street the space beneath the sidewalk offered fine cover for an assassin.

The rancher tapped him on the shoulder.

"Did I hear you say you were lookin' for a job, you an' yore two hawsses?"

"You sure did. An' my two guns."

"I'm needin' a hand. An' you strike me as the sort to take along. You got a hawss outside?"

"No, I walked. Mine's down to the corral next to Vierra's fonda."

"So's mine. You stayin' thar?"

"Yep."

"Better ride out with me to my ranch to-night an' we'll talk things over. My name's Bramley. No brands registered yet in this neck of the woods but I call my outfit Bar B an' I'm brandin' thet way. I've taken up a section an' thar's fair feed on it, an' water. All the open range in the world next door. Hands are scarce down here. If you want to take up the section next to mine we could make some dicker, I reckon. I'm doin' well but I'm short on help. Them I do get extry, don't stay. This is a restless pais, close to the border. Folks hate to work steady. Better come along fo' the night anyway, an' talk it over."

"It sounds good to me," said Strong. "But I'm figgerin' they're li'ble to take a pot shot at me outside fo' presumin' to speak to Don Lobo Blackbeard. They might include you in the compliment."

"I reckon not. I'll tell you why later."

They reached the fonda unmolested, saddled up and rode away out of town over the silent plain, past the lake and along the course of the swift stream that was its only outlet. Strong left his second-string horse to be called for later.

"I figger it this way," said Bramley. "If they do you in they'd either have to do the same with me or leave me as witness. Letting alone what we might

do to them, Smith is smart enough to figger thet, if he killed you in my company, he'd be gittin' in deeper than he cares to right off the reel. This pais is gettin' settled, slow but sure. The cattlemen air comin' in. Cattle air cheap. Alfalfa grows fine where thar's water. Leave yore young stock on the range till they're close to sellin' age, bring in 'em fo' solid feed an' then drive to Santa Fe an' ship. Won't be long befo' the railroad'll be down here to join up Santa Fe an' El Paso, thet's a cinch. Thar'll be good prices for furnishin' beef to the railroad while it's buildin'. Thar's talk of two lines, one of 'em crossin' the Pecos at Santa Rosa. It'll give those of us who are down here a good start. Fenced land is better than range, so long as the Injuns air li'ble to go raidin', an' they will till the government gits in an' licks 'em good an' hard an' makes a good Injun out of old Geronimo.

"Now, figger on. Cattlemen air solid citizens an' they stand fo' law an' order. Lobo Smith knows thet as fast as we do. I don't know what game he makes his money in—contrabandista of some sort, I'll wager—but I'm bettin' it ain't lawful. The funny thing of it is no one ever sees 'em leavin' Doom Cañon or goin' into it, 'cept they're on the way to Laguna or from it. An' the old-timers say only toads an' Gila monsters could live in that, anyway. Damp an' so narrer you can't turn yore hawss most places.

"He shot Gardner to-night after Gardner fired at him——"

"He didn't have to shoot him," put in Strong. "Gardner missed because he never had a chance to hit. Thar was a dozen ready to grab him or do what Sprague did the minute Lobo come in at the door. Sprague hit him back of his arm so hard it paralyzed him an' he could jest hold his gun—couldn't lift it. Why, Lobo grinned befo' he fired back. Plumb murder, I call it. I don't

say he expected to find Gardner thar, but I'll say it was a prize play fo' him to put Gardner out of the way—an' he made it."

"Twenty to testify Gardner tried to kill him. An' no one to testify to. The law ain't down this fur yet. But it's comin'. You think Lobo got Gardner's woman an', comin' in to-night was a grand-stand play in case we cattlemen should git sore. Thar's nigh enough of us to make it hot fo' Lobo if we did an' he knows it. I don't know but what I agree with you but you got to have some proof to line any one up—jest as Sprague says—an' Heaven knows I ain't got any use for thet card flipper. He's too slick at his own game. Stands in with Lobo because he wins thet gang's money. He was plumb mad when Lobo went out on him to-night.

"Lobo's done nothing you kin pin to him thet's outside the law or public opinion. If the law gits after him it'll be the Federal government, to my mind. Public opinion's on his side because most of 'em air his sort in Three Corners. Our sort is driftin' in an' he'll go too far some day. There's lots of things blamed to the Apaches thet he knows somethin' about, to my mind. Lots of things happened thet folks figger he did, mebbe, but he's a good spender with his gang an' thet's what counts between the Pecos an' the Rio Grande these days. The border's a reg'lar magnet fo' every one who thinks he wants to be a bad man or who's done somethin' thet makes the line handy fo' him to be close to."

Strong liked Bramley—liked the way he talked. Bramley had restrained him from acting rashly in the cantina, but it was Bramley who had stood beside him when the rest edged away. He was a Texan, with mustaches like a long-horn steer of his native State. He had come north into New Mexico, seeing the chance to buy Texas cattle cheap from the improvident Mexican

rancheros who thought little more of the wild-ranging brutes than they did of the prairie dogs on their wide holdings. The water, the range and soil was better near Laguna, and it was that much nearer market. Moreover, the published survey routes of the oncoming railroads, making a grand junction of El Paso and thence running on west to California, gave almost as great an opportunity to a few enterprising American cattlemen to make a fortune as did the building of the Union Pacific.

Bramley was shrewd, older than Strong by some ten years, shrewd enough to see business openings where the younger man had not yet visualized them, older in experience. He was practically offering Strong a chance at a partnership when he spoke of the latter's taking up the next section to his own. Strong had no herd and little capital but he would have his chance to buy in the start of a herd, and he was duly obliged to Bramley for the opening.

"Lobo Smith ain't apt to bother us much," Bramley went on. "Not as long as we don't cross his trail, an' we ain't likely to do thet 'cept in Laguna. We got to go in once in a while fo' supplies, but the Doom Cañon crowd air owls fo' daylight. I stayed over to-night hopin' to git me a hand an' I'm plumb glad I run across you. You an' me air goin' to be all-fired busy from now on. I got a chance to sell some agency beef fo' the new reservation. We round up the 'Paches from murderin' an' raidin' an' then they're wards of the nation. Feed 'em free fo' mo' devilment. Anyway, I'm goin' to take a chance on goin' inter Texas an' buyin' up a couple of hundred head. We'll have to cut 'em out ourselves an' hire a few Mexicans to bring 'em up with us. I've got a man I kin leave to run Bar B with the Mexican hands I have to git along with an', even if the agency deal fails through, we kin use the stock. It'll be a gamble an', if you've got any

spare dinero an' want to git in on it, I'm agreeable. If we sell to the reservation that'll mo'n treble yore capital an' give you a good show. Mebbe we kin figger out some so't of a mutual deal right along."

"You don't know much about me, Bramley," said Strong. "I sure appreciate the chance to throw in. I've got a li'l over five hundred dollars. I won some of it last night. I started to lose to-night an' quit. But it ain't many who'd offer to let me in the way you have."

"If you was me, Strong, tryin' to make a go of it down here, an' backed up fo' the lack of a man you kin leave in charge of things, you'd jump the same way I did. Thar ain't many white men down here, pardner—dernaed few squar' shooters. You kin ride, an' I reckon you kin shoot if needs be. Anyway you showed yourself willin' to-night. I told myself you'd do to take along when I saw you come out an' take up with pore Gardner.

"Here's whar we make a short cut. Crick curves here but swings round on my land. Goes through yore section too."

"What's goin' to happen to Gardner's stock?" asked Strong. "It belongs to his wife while she's livin'. Reckon he's got some relatives. Soon as it's known he's dead some one's goin' to rustle all that's loose. Likely he's got some hawsses up thet'll need waterin'. Thar's his stuff in the house. If she comes back——"

"She ain't the sort thet comes back, Strong. I've talked with her once or twice. A fine woman, the right kind. Right back of her man, helpin' an' lovin' him. She didn't go willin' an' she won't stay willin'. But we got to do somethin' about his belongings. Thar ain't no law here to settle those things unless we go to Santa Fe. We cattlemen have had a meetin' or two to sort of organize into an association fo' mutual

protection. If we took charge of his stock an' goods as a body I reckon no one would question our right. I'll have a talk with the others and take up this Gardner's killin' at the same time. Don't know as we kin do anything, under the circumstances, but it won't do no harm fo' folks—including Lobo Smith an' his gang—to know we're standin' together. Some day Lobo'll let his rope trail too fur."

"I've got a hunch thet I'll have a rumpus with him, some day," said Strong thoughtfully. "I don't take to hatin' a man on first sight as a rule. I aim to be pacific unless I'm fussed with. But thet cuss makes the ha'r lift on the back of my neck. He affects me the same way a rattler does, or a centipede. I jest know he's wrong an' I ain't sure but what he ain't yeller, if you got him cornered. His kind an' Gila monsters makes me wonder why they git created."

The ranch house of the Bar B was a long adobe building, tiled for roof, with a rough veranda, the windows shuttered but unglazed, the furnishings crude; but it was comfortable enough for busy bachelors of the range. There was a great fireplace where logs burned welcome in the chilly nights after sundown, and he had a jewel of a cook in the shape of an old Mexican woman, even if her dishes were highly seasoned. Two of her sons were employed as hands, with two more of the same type, and an elderly Texan who acted as foreman when Bramley was away.

Hurley was his name, and he was a grizzled old-timer with a limp from a leg broken by a wild mustang and never properly set. Slow and none too quick mentally, pestered with rheumatism that discounted his usefulness, Strong guessed that the old-timer had been brought up from Texas largely for ancient friendship's sake—which proved to be the case.

"He's got one prime qualification,"

said Bramley. "He kin shoot the hind laig off'n a fly at thirty paces. His hand is still good. Most of his rheumatism is in his bad laig. His eyes ain't none too good fer distances, but I'm damned if powder smoke don't seem to cl'ar 'em!"

The cattle were true Texan stock, wide of horn, wild of eye and disposition—big rangy brutes that were untamed as bison. But they were beef, and the Mexican riders handled them well enough, riding like centaurs.

"We'll git us some thoroughbred sires, soon as we kin afford it, pardner," Bramley declared.

The "we" sounded good to Strong. He said so. He was no longer a free rider, he was a cattleman, a member of the small association, with a stake in the country and a chance to become wealthy at no very distant date. There was much to be done on the ranch, much to be spent. Their capital was limited, as was their help. It was a life filled with risks and dangers but it was a life for which both of them were fitted, and they enjoyed it.

Filing for a quarter section had to be done at Socorro, where there was a government agent at regular times, and it was agreed that Strong should go there at the first opportunity. Also, when they had brought up their stock from Texas, Bramley proposed that he should go to Escondida to interview the Indian agent about the beef contract. Bramley spoke Spanish better than he did and could better control the hands, actually through old Maria, mother of two of them and aunt to the others, ruling them with a rod of iron but, of course, unable to superintend ranch affairs outside the house.

And Hurley, cramped with an attack of his rheumatism, was ever too slow and unable to furnish the unremitting superintendence that the short-handedness necessitated.

"Maria's a jewel," said Bramley. "I

don't trust every greaser, by a long shot, but she's faithful as an old dog an' she's got them buffaloes. They got to account to her fo' ev'ry time they take a drink of mescal or throw a pair of dice. We ain't so worse off, pardner. We'll make out. Couple of jacks now, mebbe, but we'll pair up as cattle kings by the time they run trains into Laguna."

Five days later Bramley rode into town for supplies, giving Strong a chance to run the ranch. He came back early, bringing Strong's other horse, his face grave.

"They found Gardner's wife, Sam," he said. It was "Sam" and "Hen" between them now. "She's goin' to be buried beside him. The cattlemen air goin' to attend in a body to-morrow. The thing's a plumb puzzle to me. They found her body floatin' in Lago Claro. Some says she must have committed suicide. They think she come back an' heard he was dead an' drowned herse'f. But thar ain't no one claims to have seen her an' Doc Williams 'lows she has been dead all of three or four days. Mebbe the springs thet feeds the lake kept her down. It seems funny all through an' the most curious thing is her body is bruised all over, nigh to a jelly, pore gal—head to foot. But the doc claims she was drowned first. It's a mystery to me."

And a mystery it remained for many days.

CHAPTER II.

Strong and Bramley went on the trail ten days later. They pooled their money and found they could spare twelve hundred dollars in all. For this Bramley expected to buy two hundred head and a bunch of cow ponies for the outfit. These mustangs could be purchased in Texas for ten dollars a head and sold at double the price at Laguna, the difference paying for expenses. They took along the two sons of Maria and managed to hire two more Mexicans

through her help. She rounded up another junior relative to drive the chuck-and-bedding wagon and to act as cook.

Fortunately the Indian contract did not insist upon steers, and what they needed most on the ranch was cows. The profits on the venture would provide many things that were needed if they got the contract and they proposed to buy a thoroughbred herd sire as a commencement of their endeavor to better their grade of cattle. If the contract fell through they would still have the cows for increase. Each rider took along five ponies, since they could not afford to buy all they would need to round up and handle their purchases.

The roping and branding would have to be done in the open, in a wild country thick with brush, with mesquite and cactus. An hour of this work after the round-up exhausted the toughest mount. All went armed. There was imminent and almost constant danger from raids; Mexican rustlers tempted by the chance to capture a herd on trail with the outfit of the herders; Indians who cared nothing for the cattle but much for scalps, the chance to torture and maim and the possession of the firearms and ammunition of their prisoners, besides their ponies and saddles.

Their destination reached on Comanche Creek, they were not long dickering for the stock from the ranch-owner who did not know within hundreds how many cattle he owned. Five dollars a head was the price agreed upon, with the loan of half a dozen vaqueros to round them up, to be paid a dollar a day by the buyers for their services.

It was heart-breaking work for man and horse under the hot sun, crashing through thorny thickets that surrounded the water holes where they were surest to find the cows bunched or pick up their sign. Often the wild cows, worked into a frenzy, charged, almost as quick of hoof as the ponies. Every panting steer, once roped and thrown, had to

be hog tied and the road brand burned on its flank lest they stampede and stray on the way home or got mixed up with larger herds. Nightfall found them wet with sweat that they dried by the blazing fires, devouring fresh beef with the appetites of giants, rolling in weary and stiff, to turn out before dawn.

It was not a large contract but the two extra men they brought were not used to the work and, though they were born riders and threw a rope well enough, they developed a fear of the crazy, lunging cattle after one had been thrown, his pony gored and escape only made by crawling into a cactus thicket at which even the maddened cow balked. The badly needled man quit and demanded his time. The native vaqueros did none of the roping, evidently considering their help an imposition on their leisure, galloping much and accomplishing little.

One man had to stand watch nightly over the remuda. They had a hundred and fifty cattle at the close of the second day. Bramley bribed two of the local riders to do herding at night though Strong suggested that he and Bramley split the watch.

"Nothin' doin', pardner. We got to clean up to-morrow. These five greasers Martinez loaned us are loafin' on the job. They ain't workin' fo' nothing but the peso a day we give 'em. They're stringin' us along. If we knew the country half as well as they do we'd have had the whole bunch by noon today. An' we can't git along without 'em. We'll git us a night's rest an' hop to it in the mornin'."

Strong woke with the stars and moon shining brightly, though there was a hint of paling in the sky. It was cold, and he hurried to get dressed, pulling on the boots he had taken to bed with him to keep them supple. The young Mexican had the fire going bravely and the scent of coffee and fried steaks was welcome in the air.

The stray herd, that had reclined during the latter part of the night, woke and commenced to bawl and bellow, the two vaqueros seated motionless in their saddles, wrapped in their serapes. By the time he and Bramley were dressed the soda biscuits were ready and they squatted on their heels close to the blaze, filling their eager stomachs. Two men relieved the night herd. A band of yapping coyotes saluted the swiftly lightening sky and then, as they got their ropes, the day was born.

The rider brought up the remuda and drove them into a rough corral where they started to circle as each man, with loop trailing, walked toward his choice and deftly flipped the noose over its head at the first chance the wise mustang gave him.

Mounted, the ponies squealing and pitching at the outset, they rode for the water hole near which they hoped to find enough cows to fill the order. Meantime the already captured herd was held.

The steers knew the reason for the drive and, as the riders neared the water hole and they caught sight of them, little bands would start off, with their tails curled stiffly, on a lope that was only a little slower than a horse carrying a rider.

The ground was uneven and the chase followed over barrancos and down ravines and gullies at breakneck speed. The riders loose in their saddles, yelled to get the cattle started and to keep them going, the ponies entering into the spirit of the race, tearing along with ears cocked and eyes protruding, dodging as the quarry dodged, whirling off at right angles through the mesquite that often masked the treacherous gullies, sliding down them and scrambling up again on the far side like cats.

Slowly they ringed a bunch, bringing them to the open where they could get their lariats into play, the sturdy mustangs set as the cow raced to the limit of

the rope and came crashing to earth. The wise mustangs strained against it while the rider raced up and hog tied, then ran to the nearest fire where he had left his iron in the hot ashes, coming back with it sending off blue smoke as it cooled in the air and, at last, pressing it to the heaving flank while the branded brute bellowed protest.

Once branded and finding themselves near their fellows, the cattle bunched as if shocked into temporary submission, allowing themselves to be kept together, even beginning to graze on grama grass after the first shock wore off.

By three in the afternoon the last fifty were being pushed slowly toward the main herd. That end of the task seemed well ended. To-morrow they would take the trail. But Bramley seemed anxious, glancing at the sky that had become overcast. Strong noticed the direction of his gaze.

"Fraid of a norther?" he asked.

"Looks to me like thar might be one brewin'. Smells like it too." Bramley sniffed the air. The cattle were sniffing too. He rode over and talked with the local vaqueros who were smoking cigarettes, waiting for their pay, having counted the herd, sitting with their knees cocked over the horns of their saddles. Bramley came back to Strong with his brows creased.

"Can't bribe 'em to stay overnight," he said. "They've got their dinero. It ain't much but it's a lot to them. They don't git more'n ten pesos a month regular. They're set fo' monte an' mescal. Claim thar won't be no storm but I'm Texas bred, same as they are, an' I don't like the looks of things. I reckon the lazy skunks air hopin' we'll have a stampede an' the work to do all over agen.

"We can't hold 'em though, their contract's up an' they've made up their stubborn minds to clear out, dern 'em. A lazy greaser—an' thet's their general

nature—when they ain't got a strong-minded female like Maria to handle 'em is the mos' shif'less thing on two laigs, or four. There they go, damn 'em. I hope every last one of 'em wakes up with his head baked an' his pockets empty. I hope they git so derved drunk they all fall into a prickly-pear thicket, like Lopez did, an' can't find no one to take the needles out. I kin feel thet norther in my bones, same as Hurley does the rheumatiz."

The hours passed and, though the air grew cold early and there were some mutterings of thunder over the distant, slate-colored hills, no storm appeared. They had water and good feed where they were camped, and Bramley hoped for a good night's recovery for cattle and horses after the exhausting chase. But the cold increased before the sun went down murkily, a glaring ball of crimson shrouded in dull-purple haze, and he shook his head.

"The cows know it," he said as they ate supper and rolled their cigarettes. "Look at 'em. Bellies full but they won't chew their cuds or lie down. It's all hands to-night, boys, cook an' all. Cook'll wrangle the remuda."

Night came on, cold and pitchy dark with the stars obscured. The herd was uneasy, never all of them down at once, and the little band of five rode around the mass, crooning to them, the vaqueros in Spanish and Strong and Bramley chatting the "Cowboy's Lullaby."

"Last night as I lay on the prairie
An' looked at the stars in the sky,
I wondered if ever a cowboy
Could win to that sweet by and by.

"Roll on, roll on,
Roll on, li'le doggies, roll on, roll on.
Roll on, roll on, roll on, li'le doggies, roll on."

Unmistakably it soothed the herd. One after another the uneasy ones ceased lowing and lay down.

Suddenly the northern sky was split open with a livid flare and almost im-

mediately a clap of thunder came with the sound of a salvo of great guns, booming away into the distance. Again and again the lightning stabbed the black clouds with its javelins, and the crash of exploding vacuums followed.

The terrified brutes rose awkwardly, shivering, watching with lowered heads for the fast-coming flashes that revealed their tossing horns, their bulging eyes.

Bramley and Strong passed the word to keep on riding, steadily round and round, and to keep singing. Once let one of the cows break through the cordon and the rest would follow for twenty, thirty, even forty miles over the broken country, unless the leaders were headed off. Many of them would surely be killed by falls, others would stray in separate bunches split up in the inky darkness.

Then the storm broke in all its fury. A flare of levin revealed lowering clouds discharging the tremendous downpour that looked like steel rods rather than water, lashing the cattle to a wild frenzy. The next flash showed their hides streaming, like sea beasts, reflecting back the lightning while the deafening thunder crashed immediately overhead, and a great bolt of fire came sizzling apparently, striking but a few rods away with an effect of an exploding mine. Their mouths seemed suddenly filled with vinegar, the air appeared to be broomed away leaving them gasping, and the wise mustangs lost their nerve and fought to get their heads down and bolt.

Cattle and riders were one plunging mass for a few delirious moments. Then the herd divided, the leaders racing away at headlong speed with Strong and one of the vaqueros from the ranch after part of them, and Bramley with the other hand and the extra after the rest. What luck the young cocinero—little more than a boy—was having with the remuda, they dared not think.

Strong saw a spurt of fire, and heard the crack of a gun faintly before the

thunder drowned it out. Bramley was shooting to try and check his section of the stampede. It was as futile as flinging firecrackers before a charge of mullah-mad Arabs. The wind had followed the rain that it had driven before it and came with a rushing sound as of trains in a tunnel, changing the stinging slant of the downpour.

Flash upon flash lighted up the racing brutes, their horns clashing, crowding each other, their hoofs flinging up the sodden earth, charging through dense thickets, plunging down gullies headlong, bellowing or lurching on with their tongues lolling.

Strong was on one side of his bunch—about half the herd as near as he could judge in that wild flurry—racing to catch up with the leaders, to turn them. The vaquero he saw across the surging waves of maddened cows with horned heads for crests. His pony flew, extended at full gallop. There was no need yet for quirt or spurs. He was gaining, little by little. At the last he would have to take the desperate chance of heading them, of being charged, if he did not gauge the speed and distance to a second, to inches. If the pony set its foot in a hole, slipped on the wet earth, he would be trodden into bloody pulp. He knew that chance, but the exhilaration of the chase was on him, heightened by the danger, the tremendous speed, the bunching of his pony's muscles as it tucked up and flung out its steely legs beneath him.

He seemed charged with the fury of the storm itself, keyed to superhuman performance with the glare and crash, the rush of the wind and the lash of the rain, the dull pounding of the galloping cattle.

He lost all sense of direction, of where Bramley was. He only knew that he was gaining, foot by foot, with the leaders, slashing at them with his quirt, that might as well have been a straw.

They burst out of the brush that

tore at his leather chaparajos, battered his stirrups, clawed at his mount. A glare, and he saw ahead of them a wide arroyo, dry an hour before, now with a surging torrent in its bed. The treacherous soil gave way and only quick effort held him in the saddle as his pony, legs trapped in the sticky mud, slid helpless. The next burst of light saw the nearest cow somersaulting, pitching down into the water, the end shut off by darkness.

They were in the flood. It was up to his girths and the bottom was mud. All about him the frantic cattle surged, threatening to gore or crush him in that frightful Stygian darkness, with the hissing rain, the bellowing cows and the harsh shout of the wind, the rush of the water. They were half afloat and half mired.

A second bolt came leaping down from the turmoil of the bulging clouds. It struck fairly among the herd that had begun to scatter, unable to find footing on the farther slope, floundering along the bottom of the arroyo. Strong tingled from head to foot; he felt his mount shudder and heard it groan as it staggered. But they were not struck. Three cows were down, the rest scrambling over them, leaping in the morass, as more lightning displayed them, and showed the vaquero still on the bank they had left, a figure leaping out of the darkness, gone in a second.

Swift as the apparition showed and disappeared Strong had seen the pointing hand, caught his meaning. If he could keep the herd going along the arroyo to its end they could turn them. His own pony was nearly spent by this last disaster, but so were the cattle.

And, though the rain beat down still and the water was rising, he fancied that the storm was passing. Surely the thunder claps were farther off, longer intervals between them and the lightning. If only the arroyo was not too long, if they could reach its end before

the torrent gained depth and strength enough to sweep them away. The instinct of the herd kept it pressing on upstream, luckily, for the played-out pony could do little but keep its own footing.

The vaquero had galloped ahead. He would reach the head of the arroyo first and be ready to turn the leaders. The tingling in Strong's limbs and body died down, his head no longer buzzed. How many miles they had come he could not guess but, if the fury of the gale abated, the two of them would have no more trouble with the exhausted cows—once they got them on the level.

The thunder was diminishing, passing to the south. The lightning came fitfully. It showed the sides of the gully narrowing in. Now they were on rising ground and he had to urge the flagging beasts on as best he could with shouts and shots as they breasted the deceitful pitch. He glimpsed the front of the herd leveling out, his helper swinging his rope at them. They toiled on through the sucking mud, hock-deep, on and up, to stand wearily, lowing plaintively, the frenzy out of them, forlorn, willing, subdued.

The cold bit at him but the rain slowing, turned to a drizzle and was gone. The wind went with it. A star peeped through a rift. There was still wind overhead, chasing the wrack. There came more stars, whole constellations, the Big Dipper clear and bright. He had his general direction now and they pushed gradually along over the sloppy soil, through dripping thickets until, at last, he saw the spark of a fire and pledged himself to liberally reward the cocinero who had managed to keep dry wood. It grew into a leaping flame. Presently they saw the tilt of the wagon that held the light of the fire. The cook hallooed cheerily, the remuda was safe, the corral had held them.

What of Bramley? Sodden, stiff,

Strong changed to a fresh mount and loped off. He guessed at the way the rest of the herd had gone and made for the highest ground, where he halted, hoping for sight or sound of them. The night had cleared crisp and fair with the air sweet with the scent of herbs, with all trace of the gale gone save for the moisture, and the sound of storm waters running in the barrancos. Strong shouted, waiting anxiously, then called again in a long ululating cry. It came faintly back as if it were an echo, but there were no hills near enough for that. Bramley was coming in.

Strong touched spurs to the mustang's flanks and the pony leaped eagerly along. Soon he saw the loom of the herd, slowly advancing, the three riders, safe and sound, flanking it.

"I lost one little bunch of four or five, I reckon," said Bramley, "but they kin go plumb to hell fo' all I care. I'm in or out, take yore choice. Save yourn?"

"All but three. Lightnin' got 'em. Nigh got me. They kin go to hell, too. Reckon they have. They must have been crisped up some. Smelled like it. The kid's makin' coffee, Hen. Remuda's all thar. We owe thet cocinero five pesos."

"You'll ruin him. He deserves it though. Corfee! Nothin' ever sounded so good."

"You wait till you taste it," said Strong, and the two men grinned at each other in the starlight, worn almost to their last shred of endurance but cheerfully conscious of hard work well done. They had lost perhaps five per cent of their herd but the rest were safe and they rolled in to sleep and watch in turn over the tired-out cows, almost too weary to graze, lying down throughout the night. They gave them the next day to rest and then broke camp, abandoning the corral and riding north again.

It was no pleasure jaunt. There were long stretches of barren, ashen, alkaline

desert land without a drop of water for forty miles through which to drive their cows, unaccustomed even to horses, restless at being away from their home with its sufficient feed and reliable water holes—perverse brutes ever ready to break loose, calling for constant watchfulness, for coaxing over the arid leagues.

"We'll make it a thousand head next time, pardner," Bramley prophesied. "We been lucky, so fur."

They had, Strong reflected, in more ways than one. They were on the old Texas Trail now and might fairly expect a raid from hostile Indians or Mexican robbers, at any time. But they saw no dust along the trail but their own and now they were nearing the line. Beyond lay the faintly blue peaks of the Sacramento Mountains.

"I reckon they're gittin' the greasers an' 'Paches whipped into line a bit," said Bramley, biting off a corner of his chewing plug. "Took the military to do it an' the job ain't finished by a dern sight. We're goin' through between spasms, likely."

"We got a good bunch of cows, Sam. A few days of good feed an' steady water'll upholster 'em in fine shape. That's whar bein' able to git 'em at short range counts. They don't lose an awful lot the first few days on trail. Call it eight pesos apiece they stand us in, countin' loss an' expenses. We'll git close to thirty-two—mebbe only thirty. Four hundred per cent. I call thet finance, pardner. Vanderbilt couldn't do no better."

"I'd like to see Vanderbilt chasin' them stampedin' cows," said Strong. "I saw a picter of him one time, in a plug hat an' side whiskers. Reckon he'd think we was wild animals, likely."

Bramley laughed but checked his mirth.

"See them buzzards?" he asked. "What d'ye suppose made 'em fly up so sudden out o' thet draw? Dropped

down to eat suthin' an' they're flyin' too free an' fancy to have filled up any. Coyotes, mebbe?"

The character of the country had changed for the better. They were on a table-land where the grass grew high with here and there groves of live oaks, here and there little, smooth-sided ravines that held running water and were top-timbered with willows. It was out of one of these that the buzzards had suddenly lifted. Strong watched the birds soaring as their set wings met the air current. They did not reach any great height and they continued to sail in great ovals, banking on the turns, as if they were reluctant to leave the spot.

"Wouldn't be coyotes," said Strong. "They eat second table to them birds. 'Tain't likely it'd be a wolf out so fur from the hills. I don't like the looks of it, Bramley. We've been too blamed lucky on this trip, seems to me. We ain't even seen any sign. If thar's a bunch thar layin' fo' us they'll smell a mouse if we switch off. Trail runs straight fo' the pass. We're kind of short-handed. No tellin' how them greasers of ours'll fight, is thar?"

Bramley shook his head.

"They ain't been tried out none, to my knowledge. May bolt fo' it. If they fight they'll likely jest waste lead. Switchin' won't help us none, as you say. They'll come out to run off the herd yellin'. You're likely right, pardner. What's yore scheme?"

"Move right along. They'll think we ain't noticed the buzzards particular. We ain't goin' to give 'em the cattle, I take it?"

"Not while I kin twitch a trigger."

"It's always been my motter," said Strong, "when I figger thar's *surc* goin' to be a fight—to start it. You reduce odds thet a way, likely. You said you thought mebbe I could use my guns, Hen. I don't like to run off at the head about my own performances but I wouldn't be surprised but what I could

team up with Bill Hurley. It comes natural to me an' I've practiced considerable. They'll figger on surprisin' us. Let's surprise them.

"Let the cows graze along way they're doin'. I'll drop down into the next gully. Ought to be one by them trees. The grass is long and I'll snake through toward the head of the draw. You keep driftin' along with the herd. They got a lookout, sure, but it ain't likely they'll guess what I'm doin'. They'll figger I'm out of line of sight back of the trees. My pony'll stand in the gully. When they start to come out on us, I'll cut loose. I aim to discourage 'em some. It'll be funny if I don't cut down the odds. You kin handle yore end of it. They won't be lookin' fo' a flank fire."

"If they cut you off from yore pony they'll shoot you up plenty."

"I ain't takin' any mo' chances than you air. It's a good plan, ain't it? I got my stake in them cows, Hen, an' I figger on playin' the bet to the limit. The vaqueros ain't noticed anything. No sense in tellin' 'em. Mebbe they'll fight, at thet. Maria would flay 'em alive if they showed up without you. I got a hunch I kin call the turn on who's in thet draw."

"You figgerin' on Lobo Smith?"

"I savvy he ain't exactly friently toward me, or you either, seein' you've took me in as pardner. I don't reckon he'll be along, either. If he is I'm hopin' he gives me a chance at him. But we didn't make no secret of our goin' after cows. If he sent some of his gang down here to do us in an' they got away with it, it'd likely be charged up to greasers, or Injuns. By the time the buzzards got through with us you couldn't tell was we scalped or skinned. So long, Hen, here's whar I leave you. Drift on slowlike."

Bramley shook his head as the other loped off. It was a good plan but a desperate one. But they were in a desperate case anyway if Strong's idea

about the buzzards was correct and, as he watched the birds still swinging above the draw, he became convinced that his partner had made a right deduction.

"I said he'd do to take along," he muttered as he examined his guns, seeing that they worked easily in their sheaths and that the cylinders swung smoothly. He knew the vaqueros were more or less prepared for a surprise. The possibility had been discussed. They each had a gun, and the cocinero, Juan, had a rifle in the chuck wagon, handy to his seat. How they would act in an emergency was doubtful but it would be folly to warn them, he considered, anyway until the last moment.

The draw was half a mile away. The cattle moved slowly, cropping the sweet grass. The sun shone out of a cloudless sky and nothing seemed more peaceable than the prospect, save for the four carrion birds wheeling, reluctant to leave their disturbed meal. They made him think of the birds that were said to always hover over Doom Mountain. A whimsy struck him that they might be the same ones. The distance was little for their flights.

In a few moments he might be fighting for his property and his life—for the latter only if Lobo had a hand in this ambushade. They would not care about the cattle, only to eliminate the outfit—to leave no witnesses. But he was cool to meet the emergency, to do the best he could to defend himself and his herd. So was Strong. Both were game to the core. He saw Strong canter down into a gully halfway to the draw and then, though he watched carefully, he saw no more of him.

Suggishly, they moved. The chuck wagon was in the rear, catching up after clearing their last camp. The horses were in a lazy walk. Bramley, calculating all chances, figured the wagon would be even with the tail of the herd by the time they reached the mouth of the draw. He had more confidence in the

little cocinero's courage than his aim, remembering how he had held the remuda, and kept the fire going, on the night of the stampede. The others had acted well enough but it was a different matter, facing flying bullets.

They had no interest in the outfit outside of their wages. If they were assured that Lobo's men were waiting for them they might fight, knowing that none would be spared. But he could not certify that to them. After all there might be no one at all. What they would do for faithfulness he had no means of judging; he had never put them to the test in such a hazard. If old Maria was here she would make them fight. Her scornful comments were better than a general's commands upon occasion. He wished Hurley was along. They could have put up a fight from the wagon—unless the raiders had rifles. That was not very likely.

The cattle seemed to crawl. Now they were opposite the gully into which Strong had disappeared. He could still see nothing of the pony, no movement of the grass through which Strong must have snaked or be still crawling. He had little doubt but what they had been under observation but now they would be lying low, satisfied that their quarry was coming on, content to wait until the herd leaders passed before they moved. The vaqueros were on the outskirts of the herd which was not very widely spread, finding rich feed without need to stray from the trail.

Strong wriggled through the long grass like an Indian, pausing to see that his guns stayed in their holsters, then gliding on up the slope between the stems. Now and then he raised his head cautiously to mark progress. There were some low bushes clumped at a spot that should command the draw and this he made his objective. His face was set, his eyes steely.

There could be no doubt of the character of the men once he caught sight

of them. Their attitudes would instantly determine that. He was sure by now that they were not Apaches. Indians would not have alarmed the buzzards, but avoided them. By this time, with the herd as close as it was, they would be out in the open, whooping and shooting as they circled with only their heels showing on their ponies' backs, firing under their necks with one elbow looped in the knotted manes.

If they were greasers he believed that his fire would effectually rout them, grimly conscious as he was of the accuracy of his aim. If men from Doom Cañon? He reached the screen of bushes, glanced toward where the leading cows were almost parallel with him, took out his guns and swiftly looked them over, set some cartridges for reloads in front of him, inched through the leafy boughs and looked down into the draw.

There were eight horsemen bunched there. White men, all of them. He could tell that by the way they sat their horses though he looked down on the top of their sombreros. One was a little ahead of the rest, leaning forward in his saddle, his left hand stretched out with the palm back, holding the rest. Men and mounts were all still.

Occasionally the ears of a pony twitched against the flies, or a flank quivered, or one pawed the soft bottom dirt of the gully. All were tense, ready to drive in spur, draw their guns and go galloping out of the draw on the unsuspecting caravan, yelling and sending lead at the drovers. A murderous ambushade, bent upon killing, having all the odds on their side, not counting the element of surprise—a dastardly lot of villains planning cold-blooded butchery. It was nothing less. With their superior numbers and the unexpectedness with which they expected to swoop out of concealment and fire the first telling shots, there was slight risk to them and Strong's gorge rose at the sight of them.

Yet he could not bring himself to shoot them down in similar fashion.

To him it seemed sure that they were Lobo's men, if only from the fact that there were no other white men banded together in such fashion who would attempt a crime like this. But it was only seemingly certain. Outside of Lobo himself, unmistakable with his yellow eyes, his hawk nose and his black beard, he had no very certain or individual vision of any of those who had stood back of him in the cantina that night. He had been too intent watching Lobo to particularize. Yet he hoped that he might recognize some of them—one would be enough to identify the gang. More than all, he trusted that the man ahead would be Lobo.

The bank beneath him was steep, almost too steep for horsemen to tackle.

Farther up, the draw widened, shallowed, curved a little. They could get up there, get back of him, cut him off from his pony—if they thought of it, or if he could not stop them.

They were farther off than he would have liked for the range of his guns. His rifle was in the wagon and he infinitely preferred his Colt for the quick work that must be ahead of him. They had rifles too, all sheathed, depending on their six-guns also for the clean-up.

He could see the mouth of the draw, fifteen yards or so ahead of where the leader stood. Bushes partly masked it but he could see two longhorns come up even, turn inquisitively as if they thought of sampling the feed in the draw, sight the horsemen, toss their heads and drift on. There was a gathering up of reins, a general drawing of guns, double-handed. The leader put his head on his left shoulder, grimaced in warning that they should hold for yet a few more seconds. He had no beard. It was not Lobo.

Strong felt disappointment, but here was the time for action. They had their guns in their hands, their intention was

not to be mistaken. He looked for a pebble but found none, picking up instead a cartridge and pitching it with sure aim at the leader. He tossed it underhanded and the brass of it shone twinkling in a beam of sun before it struck, lighting fairly in the leader's lap before it bounced off the saddle, plain to see, a challenge.

Instantly two of them, who had seen the gleam of the falling object, wheeled their mounts and fired at the top of the bank, guessing an enemy back of the bushes. The leader swore and, calling on those nearest, raced out of the draw, knowing that the shots had spoiled the surprise but still keen to get the jump if he could.

Strong stood up. He could shoot better with free swing for his guns, he told himself, but there was something else in his clean manhood that he did not analyze that prompted him to fight standing. There were only two against him. They could readily not get closer though one actually set his horse at the bank and then went reeling from the saddle.

The other man saw a brief vision of a lean six-footer in worn leather chaps, in faded blue shirt and ancient but serviceable sombrero, standing against the sky. Unshaven jaws were tight clamped and bossed with muscle, lips slightly pursed, nostrils wide and eyes puckered, gleaming like strips of polished steel between the narrowed lids. He had a gun in either hand, spurting pale flame, ejecting leaden missiles.

Perhaps ten shots were fired in that swift duel of two to one. It takes nerve to fire straight in the face of whining bullets. Strong had it. His deliberate act of standing up in the face of their shooting upset them a little.

One bullet whipped through the wide brim of his hat so close to a hit that it nicked the rim of his ear. The rest missed. And the two men fired no more. One went down with a .45 slug

plowing down from its entry at the base of his throat, where his clavicle joined the top of his breastbone, smashing both, tearing through to his heart.

The other got, what science terms the tuberosity of his humerus—the bulbous spread of the bone of the upper arm—shattered and the flesh of it ripped wide open, blood spouting from the wound and he sick from the shock. A second bullet struck him in the fleshy part of his thigh and went through to slightly wound his horse that promptly bucked him off. The third hit him in mid-air, more by luck than actual aim, perhaps, and he fell with a bullet in his brain.

Strong did not cease firing and he got a third man in the shoulder, at long range, as he followed the leader. He fell forward on his horse's neck but recovered as he kept on out of the draw. The rest were clean out of range and he ran along the top of the draw to where he could hear the rattle of the six-guns. The cattle had broken, some galloping ahead and some turning backward, alarmed by the firing but not seriously so. Within a short distance they started grazing again. The raiders had not wanted them—only the drovers.

Strong had brought down the odds practically to even—as far as numbers went. He saw that all the vaqueros were fighting—at least they were firing. A bullet from the little cocinero's rifle came singing out of the wagon and plopped into the dirt not far from his feet. He saw Bramley with both guns in play and two men after him, one riding straight for the wagon, mocking the cook's inefficient marksmanship.

Strong had whistled for his pony as he ran and the wise roan came racing up out of the gully. It had not halted before Strong was in the saddle and charging down to help Bramley. There was a quick exchange of shots between him and the nearest—it was the leader on his pintado—a bullet struck him like the blow of a mallet, glancing off a rib,

another got him in the left forearm. The man could shoot, but Strong shot better. The leader crumpled, drooping forward, sidewise, like a bag of meal that was rapidly emptying, slumped out of the saddle, his belly riven by a slug.

Strong galloped on, wheeling to overtake the man making for the wagon. His left gun had flown out of his fingers with the stroke of the bullet but he had his right, the roan answered to his knees. Then he saw Bramley's horse rear. He knew that trick to disconcert an opponent's aim. But the pony fell over backward, shot in its breast.

There was his partner caught by one leg, struggling to get clear, temporarily defenseless, with the raider shooting at him. Strong clutched his reins with his left hand, finding strength enough to bring the roan about though the blood spurted from his wound and pain racked him to the elbow. The raider saw him coming, set rowels blood-deep into his own pony and rode back for the shelter of the draw, shouting for the rest to follow.

The leader was down, another wounded, two more had never come out of the draw at all. The surprise had been spoiled by Strong. The vaqueros were standing their ground. A lucky bullet from the little cocinero had got home in the haunch of the horse of the man making for the wagon, laming him before the rider was in pistol range.

The leader's riderless horse was already in flight. The situation was too hot for them and they followed it with the vaqueros shouting and shooting after them. Strong, with a face grim as death, sent two shots after the man who had got Bramley. The first missed clean as the pony bucked under the strenuous roweling, the second sent the raider's hat flying as he ducked in his saddle, head close to mane.

Then, as Strong passed Bramley, lying in his blood, riddled, he saw his

partner's arm move feebly, heard his name called.

"Sam—Sam!"

Bramley was going fast, clinging to life without consciousness of what was passing, calling out subconsciously to his partner in the instructive knowledge that he was dying. All was blurred in his failing brain. As for Strong, all else paled in the bitterness of seeing the man who had given him friendship and partnership go down. He was filled with rage, with determination to avenge but he could not neglect that call that might be the last appeal. There was the chance too that he might save Bramley, that his wounds might not be mortal though he saw the bright blood welling from him. To leave him might destroy him if that flow could be checked. And the raiders were in full flight with the vaqueros flinging lead after them that sped, if it could not check, their retreat.

He set aside his revenge. He knew that man. His face was stamped indelibly on his memory. Some day he would meet him again. And then—

He slid from his saddle and knelt beside Bramley whose bronzed face had turned gray as the vitality drained out of him, gray with anguish, also. He had been shot three times, twice through the chest, once at the base of his throat. Bubbles of blood came from his lips, and his shirt was soaked with it. His strength was almost spent, his heart barely beating, his lungs in collapse.

"Hen!" said Strong. "Pardner!"

Bramley's weary lids opened, his eyes stared, hard as glass, then a flick of recognition came into them as Strong, lifting his head, wiped away the blood.

"Got—me—Sam. Gimme—drink."

There was a handy canteen on the saddle of a dead pony. Bramley tried to swallow, choked, coughed crimson.

"No—good—pardner!" It was only a whisper now and Strong bent to hear it. "Home—in table—drawer. Had

a hunch, I guess. Tell Maria I said—stay. You—you—"

The whisper died away in a hoarse rattle that lost itself in gushing blood. His jaw fell, and Strong laid him down, his eyes like glass again, staring up to where the four foul birds wheeled—wheeled, circling gradually lower.

The wagon was up with them now, the little cocinero leaning from the seat his face twisted with grief.

"Dead?" he asked.

Sam stood up. "Yes. Dead." Then he saw the buzzards and his grim face set like cement. The vaqueros came galloping back, vainglorious.

"They run like jack rabbit!" they announced. "But they got damn fine cavallos! Go like hell. Two inside dead. One here. Señor, the boss—he is hurt bad?"

Juan told them in swift Spanish what had happened. They swore oaths of vengeance. Strong stopped them, the bleak mask of his face compelling them to silence, to obedience.

"We've got to bury him, deep," he said. "So's those buzzards or the coyotes don't git to him. Git the herd together an' take it on home to the ranch. I don't reckon you'll be bothered none. We've had our share this trip."

"Yes, señor. An' these others?"

"Leave them for the buzzards, let the birds have fresh meat. You know any of 'em?"

They shook their heads.

"Mebbe we see them before, señor, but we cannot say," said one of them and the others corroborated his negation. Strong looked blackly at them. They might be inhibited by the dread of Lobo. He wasn't.

"It don't matter," he said. "I'm goin' to trail the rest of 'em an' find out where they come from. Git yore tools out of the wagon an' dig thet grave first."

"Señor Strong, you weel bleed yourself seek, if thet is not tend' to."

Strong nodded, washed off his wound and bound it up.

The bullet had gone clean through, drilling the flesh and missing the bone. It would heal before long. The rib scrape was nothing. Then he did the best he could to compose the body of his partner for burial, wondering at what he had meant by his last sentences about the table, about his hunch. He saw the grave prepared, saw Bramley's once stalwart figure, limp in its poncho shroud, laid for its last rest, covered over, cairned under rocks for protection. Then he mounted the roan, his second gun recovered, both reloaded, the spare cartridges retrieved from the brink of the draw.

"I'll see you at the ranch," he said. "Be thar soon as you are, likely. I don't expect to run in with that lot—now. I aim to find out some about 'em first."

He rode off, with the Mexicans watching him before they started to collect the herd again. They were of no mind to disobey him. There was a quality of determination about him that influenced them as much as the fear of Maria.

"Friends," said Juan, "his face is as if it was carved out of rock. Pedro, did you recognize any of them?"

Pedro shrugged his shoulders and started to roll a cigarette.

"*Quién sabe?*" he answered with the Mexican noncommittal shrug, adding: "Am I a fool?"

For, though they were afraid of Strong, the fear of Lobo was deeper founded. Their national characteristics prompted them to keep out of a quarrel they did not consider intrinsically their own.

They had come triumphantly out of the raid. They had much to talk about when they got back but they would talk discreetly, even among their own people. This time they had fought to save their own lives. It would be different back in Laguna, where Lobo Smith was king.

If they told Strong they recognized any one, he might want them to join him in a bid for vengeance that would surely end in disaster, or he might want them to swear to identification which would be just as bad.

There was no law between the Rio Grande and the Pecos except the law of the bullet. It was much wiser to shrug the shoulders and to say, "*Quién sabe.*"

They took what was worth while from the three bodies, got the herd together and then they started the slow drive. After a while Juan called to them from the wagon as it followed a curve in the trail toward the distant pass.

"The buzzards. They have descended."

CHAPTER III.

Strong rode on, his face like flint. The raiders had a long start, but he did not expect to overtake them, to even let them know he was on their trail.

One-handed as he was they might well overcome him. It was practically a certainty that they would. He wanted to make sure. If he could follow their sign to Doom Cañon then all his belief would crystallize into proof that could not be ignored. He had still to show that Lobo was the director of the raid but he let that rest. The man who had killed Bramley as he lay held under his horse—he would kill *him* as surely as the sun was in the heavens. And he meant to bring the rest to justice, whether the law had anything to do with it or not.

He sensed the temper of the association. Bramley had been a favorite among the cattlemen. If he could bring them proof that the raiders were from Doom Cañon, something might be done. He would organize them, clean out the foul brood. Lobo he held responsible and he hoped to see him through powder smoke, after he had killed the other.

Perhaps they might invoke the law, stir up public sentiment, purge the Three Corners. He did not care what the method, how far-reaching the result. He was going to see that the murderers of his partner chewed lead of his sending. That was immutable.

But it hung upon his trailing them. And that seemed simple enough to Strong. Others might be stopped by rim rock and malpais but he was not. There was always something to be found if a man was keen enough.

Back of his mind was the fixed thought that Lobo was the man ultimately responsible. The one who had killed Bramley must suffer but it might as well have been any of the others. They had gone out under orders—from Lobo. Those orders had been to ambush, surprise and kill—from Lobo.

From now on his life held but the one inflexible purpose—to connect the raid with Doom Cañon and then to turn their own tactics upon the scoundrels who lived there. They were cowards. None but a coward at heart would have planned such a thing, none but cowards would have carried it out—none but cowards would have quit as they did the moment the shooting proved too fast for them. They had killed Bramley, wounded Strong. The vaqueros charged but they would not have stood against similar tactics.

If Lobo and his men were ever up against a strong combination, Strong believed that they would quit.

They were a power yet. He would have to go shrewdly about his self-appointed task. There had always been a stamp of recklessness on Strong's features, just as his talk usually was savored with a jest, often with a light-hearted song. All that was changed. It was as if his face had been dipped in acid. It had aged and lined. The sparkle had gone out of his eyes and been replaced by a steady light, a spot that any one would know presaged

steady, grim purpose. Bitterness flooded out all his light-heartedness, bitterness and sorrow for the man he had learned to love in their short acquaintance, as only men can love, deeper than friendship, enduring even after death.

The roan noticed the difference. Strong's voice was crisp and cold and stern. He did not talk to his mount as he usually did when they were alone, but rode silent save for a few syllables of command.

The trail was as easy to follow at first for Strong as the green line on a subway passage to a commuter. It did not make directly toward the main pass between the two ranges, Huecos and Cornudas, but that did not trouble him. Sooner or later it would swerve that way.

To the west was the Rio Grande, beyond the Huecos, with El Paso not far away. But he did not believe they were bound for El Paso. The eastern spurs of the Huecos and mounting mesa-lands toward which he was rapidly advancing, eating up mile after mile on a trot, had plenty of rim rock over which they could travel and which would leave no hoof trace. Then he would have to go more slowly. After dark it was probable that he would have to make a dry camp and wait till daylight to pick up the almost invisible sign.

He was too late to try and cut in ahead of them and wait for them as they entered Doom Cañon. While such procedure might not sufficiently establish proof, it would inevitably lead to a fight. He knew by now that there were always lookouts at the mouth of the cañon, that it was guarded a little way inside its mouth by a fence too heavy for wire cutters to demolish, moored in sockets in the solid rock in which anchors were fixed in molten lead, the fence entered by a securely padlocked gate. The lookouts could command approach by day, but by night he could

not be sure of his men. And he meant to be sure.

The weather was fair. It showed no indications of anything that would disturb the sign he would be looking for.

At noon he watered the roan, gave it a chance to crop sweet grass in the little mountain stream and managed, despite his arm, to cut some for its later meal. Then he redressed the wound. It had reddened a little and swollen and it hurt prodigiously as he exposed it to the blistering sun before he plunged it and held it in the ice-cold water, plastered it with chewed tobacco at entrance and exit of the bullet and bound it up again. In a pinch he could use that arm. Maria was a marvel at simples—poor Bramley had told him—she had herbal ointments that would swiftly heal a wound. His scuffed rib had stuck to his shirt but he ignored that.

The trail told him several things. The horse the cocinero had hit bled badly and went dead lame. They caught another, probably the mount of the leader or the first man Strong had got in the draw, and they had killed the wounded one. It was a buckskin with a dozen brands on its hide. Small proof there and a lot of delay and trouble to skin and take along the hide, Strong decided. They had either taken the saddle or had buried it. But saddles, unless their owners' names were carved or stamped in them were not always good evidence.

He thought and considered wisely, coldly, as he rode. There would be indignation over Bramley's death which would inevitably die down. The ranchers were all short-handed, overworked. Indisputable evidence would have to be submitted to them and they would have to be worked on personally before they would undertake the hazardous job of cleaning up Lobo and his men, with most of the local population against them. Some of them were slow to action, cautious, suspicious, hard to wean from their own affairs to enter others

that might be far from profitable to them personally. They would even, some of them, wonder whether Strong did not color things to back his plea.

The vaqueros—Maria or no Maria—would never go beyond their timid denials. It was not an easy task to which he had set himself, after all. But he had years to work it out in and he must be careful not to limit that time by rashness. With him dead, no one would avenge Bramley, lying there stiffening under his cairn, unbathed, his clothes glued with his blood, the poncho about him all that there was between him and the dirt while the coyotes sniffed overhead and scratched until their pads were raw in their endeavor to dig down. They couldn't do that. He had made the pile too heavy.

He came across a place where the raiders, taking each at first his own line, had come together, had halted, perhaps discussed going back. It would not be the easiest thing, Strong imagined, for them to return to Doom Cañon with news of failure. With three dead and another hurt, Lobo would not be likely to accord them too welcome a reception though their losses were their best excuse. And even Lobo could not go too far with men who might give out the mysteries of why they lived in that seemingly uninhabitable place, why they fenced it off and how they got the gold they spent so freely.

So they seemed to have argued and gone on. Their horses had cropped some grass, had been watered. One man had lain down and there was trace of blood there on the grass. It was the one he had shot in the shoulder as he was going out of the draw, Strong reflected with hard satisfaction. The jolting of his galloping pony kept the wound bleeding. If he dropped behind he might give him an inquisition that would yield results. He was in no humor to spare such a captive.

That luck was not with him. Before

sunset he hit the malpais and, from then on, he had to slow down. He had to find some indisputable sign, since the rock showed scant trace, though here and there he found a weathered fragment that had scaled off under the shod hoofs. It was all ancient lava here and even Strong, save by deduction, could not be sure how freshly it had been broken. But there were other things, his own judgment of the way horsemen would follow contours—a burned end of a match, the stub end of a cigarette.

Once, after he had cast about for almost half an hour, with the sun sinking fast toward the Huecos peaks, he picked up sign by finding a few grains of tobacco that had been spilled or wind-blown from a half-rolled cigarette or open bag. That was the first time he was actually bothered about the trail. It had not followed the natural path that would have been chosen over that terrane by experienced riders or by horses left loose-reined.

He would himself have allowed his roan to pick its own footing. Why they should choose a defile between the spurs instead of a better trail direct to the pass puzzled him. He was sure now that they did not intend to go west to El Paso. They had gone well beyond any pass and the saw-toothed divide that now lay on his left, sharply outlined in rich indigo against the golden sunset, could not be negotiated either afoot or in the saddle. He felt sure, by his acquired mountain knowledge, that the trough in which he had found the tobacco would not long continue.

Ahead was the jumbled breakdown of the great mesa at the end of the Huecos Range, a great jutting from the main mass of the mountain chain. To the north of this Doom Cañon opened. Its southern extremity—he could see it clearly enough in the rare atmosphere though he knew it was at least twenty miles away, was a series of high cliffs

and shallow terraces towering up in pyramidal fashion.

Nor could he be sure whether this tobacco had not been spilled by the wounded man who had separated from his companions, or perhaps been left behind by them and bidden to take a roundabout way for precaution's sake, since he could no longer keep up their pace.

He cast back to the last sign he had cut, found it and resigned himself to make the camp he had expected. He gave the roan the grass he had cut for it and most of the contents of his canteen, using his punched-in sombrero crown as a bucket. For himself he munched some cold soda biscuits he had taken from the wagon and finished the water. He could have done with a good jolt of whisky, he told himself, as he pulled out an ancient pipe—better to smoke after dark without a fire than cigarettes—filled it and puffed away, the roan daintily finishing its grass and resignedly making the most of it.

Strong was stiff and sore and his arm throbbed painfully but he did not feel like sleep though he needed it. There was nothing but rock in the defile and the finding of a comfortable bed was impossible. He grudged the hours until daylight. At last, inaction becoming unbearable, he decided to try and find a way to a ledge he had noticed before it became dark.

The starlight was bright enough to help him and he went carefully, coming out at last on a considerable eminence, hoping to see the light of a fire that would assure him he was on the right track. One wounded man in a country where wood was as scarce as this one, where it would have to be climbed for, would not have bothered to build a fire so close to home. But there was no spark and he made his way back again to where the roan nickered softly in welcome and reproach at having been left alone.

What ease he could find on the inhospitable floor he exploited though it was very cold and he had no covering but the damp saddle blanket. The chill got into his arm and it pulsed like a toothache. He got some sleep, waking by pressure on his wound, and then he saw the sky beginning to gray and saddled up, riding on again to where he had found the tobacco grains.

The defile broke up into a maze of ravines. They forked like the sticks of a fan.

He searched the one that seemed to turn back toward the pass, more and more fearful that the jumble of lava hills he was now among was impenetrable ahead, as far as leading to any definite spot was concerned. It was an ancient flow; weathered down by the ages, split and crevassed, by more recent upheaval, a jumble of blind entries. It might have been traversed by the shortest route by some one initiated into its eccentricities—but to what end, Strong asked himself. He had ridden to the south of the mesa with Bramley after some strays and he felt sure that it all led into the tumbled breakdown of that table-land.

He drew blank in the first ravine and in two more. Then he found the ashes of an old fire that had been wind-whirled into a crevice with some charred fragments—those and a small brass button, no larger than a medium-sized bead. He held it, frowning, for he had never seen a button like that before. It looked like a woman's article. Perhaps it was a keepsake or a trophy lost from a man's pocket, pulled out with a handkerchief. He could make nothing of it. It was tarnished and he believed it had been there for a long time.

He rode ahead to come to other forking ways that opened up and delayed him. The sun beat down, and he got feverish for lack of water, faint for lack of nourishment, while the roan plodded on between the heat-reflecting rocks

wearily. It was definitely established, unless some passage suddenly appeared leading to the north and east, that the raiders were not making for the pass at all. There must be some other twisting way they knew. There had to be. Men and horses had passed here, not once, but often.

As he gradually worked out of the lava hills into others that were not so flinty, where cactus grew occasionally, he found, close to the only practical trail, horsehairs caught in the spiny growth where the ponies had flicked their tails. And these were not all from the same horses, but were of various colors.

He had followed the trail truly enough. They were a long way ahead of him now but the mesa was looming up, and around the foot of it a creek came out of the cliff, tumbling down in a streaming cascade and then running in a ravine that had for its northern wall the mesa itself, cut through the breakdown or perhaps merely following the easiest outlet through an earthquake split that had torn loose the original southern face of the mesa.

In that ravine he and Bramley had found their strays. On the mesa side there was no footing but, on the closest bank, there was some soil, some grass and a narrow beach of pebbles. They would have to leave their sign there and—if the trail led down to it, as it must—there was the explanation of how they could get round to Doom Cañon without going through the pass.

They figured, even if they were not immediately followed, that it was no use to leave plain sign along the obvious route that might link them up with the cañon. Probably they were following out Lobo's orders. It was simple enough, now that he had shuttled his way through the tumbled hills.

And, at last, he found himself riding down toward the creek over a precipitous but practical route. He found

more match ends, the torn-off edge of a brown cigarette paper. He was nearing the goal and he forgot his pain and weakness. Here was water for him and the thirsty roan with grass for the game pony. And the sign could no longer be covered, so he had to ride with his eyes on the ground continually.

The roan drinking carefully, wise enough to know how much to take of that icy flow. It was welcome to Strong. His bandage was dry as an old bone and he found a pool and lay down, letting the water gurgle against his inflamed arm after he had contented his parched throat.

The gap through which he had descended to the ravine was higher up than he and Bramley had come after the cattle and, even from a short distance, no one would have suspected any such exit. Even when one faced it, it did not look practical. At the end of the gorge the cascade streamed down the closing cliff like an old man's wispy beard and a cool breeze came down the ravine. The roan cropped eagerly at the scanty grass. There was driftwood that must have been brought down from the heights and there were storm-water marks at various elevations.

There was sign in plenty, hoofmarks in the shingle on the margin of the water where the horses had entered, probably to drink after their thirsty trip. Displaced pebbles and broken turf were there also. But the riders seemed never to have come out again. He had come to the end of the trail. And it did not lead to Doom Cañon.

It took him a long time to come to that conclusion but there seemed no other. They could not have ridden downstream to skirt the mesa to Doom Cañon for it was blocked here and there by great boulders, fallen masses from the cliffs above, by stretches of rapids and, in one place, by a cataract with a deep pool below it which they could never have negotiated. The beach itself

showed no sign. He waded across the hardly fordable creek to the cliff opposite the hoofmarks and found no landing place, only a vertical wall.

The last of the light came by the time he had searched all the beach that ended completely a short way above the last of the sign. He rode down toward the pass again in the twilight, just enough of it left for him to see that the herd had not yet passed, but he decided not to wait for it. He needed food and a bed. The disappointment had brought back his fever and a temperature was mounting, so he began to get light-headed, to ask himself whether he had not misread the sign after all?

It was after midnight when he reached the Bar B. Bramley's dog rushed out in impetuous alarm that changed to greeting and changed again to a howl. Strong turned the roan into the corral, gave it hay and a measure of grain—for he had ridden slowly—and bent slow and weary steps toward the house.

Bramley's death was heavy on him. Perhaps, he told himself, if he had not gone into the draw it might have been avoided. His vitality was low. A light suddenly showed and Maria appeared at the door. The dog was howling again.

"Señor," she said in her broken English, "there is trouble. Perro has howl all last night and all day he lie an' watch—watch weeth head on paws. This night he howl some more. Where is Señor Bramley? You do not speak—an' you are wounded! Where is he? He is dead?"

Strong nodded, started to enter and staggered against the wall. The stout and sturdy old woman caught at him, steadied him.

"Lobo has done this thing. I say yes. Señor, you are seek. Maria weel make you well an' then weel avenge. You do not know what Señor Bramley do for Maria. Some day I weel tell you

that. Now, I look at that wound! An' I feex you something to eat."

CHAPTER IV.

It was afternoon when Strong came back to consciousness the next day. The doughty Maria had evidently put something into the broth she had given him that had made him sleep soundly. He could not remember going to bed. There was salve on his wound under a clean bandage and his rib was plastered. The old woman had tended him like a child.

His fever had left him and he felt vigorous, clear-headed. Against Maria's desire he got up and dressed and ate some breakfast. Before he had finished the meal, invigorated by the strong coffee, the vaqueros arrived, bringing the herd. They had had no more adventures, but he heard them talking volubly in Spanish with Maria after they had turned the herd into a fenced-in pasture through which the creek ran.

Strong was relieved. He would not have to go through it all with Maria. He kept himself from dwelling on the details. The death of Bramley seemed like a dull weight that lay on his heart. He remembered the table and looked in the drawer. There was a folded paper there, torn from a ruled letter pad, addressed to himself. He remembered now that Bramley had sat up late the night before they started. His eyes misted as they read the scrawl that was Bramley's last will and testament.

In case anything should happen to me on this trip I leave all my share in the Bar B—ranch, stock, and tools and what money there is on hand—to my partner Sam Strong, who now has a half interest in it. I do this of my free will, being in sound mind, because he is my friend and partner.

HENRY BRAMLEY.

Witnessed by Maria Valdez.

It was properly dated and without doubt a valid document. He had been more thoughtful than Strong. There was a scrap of paper pinned to the sheet.

DEAR PARTNER SAM: I've got a sort of hunch we may run into something this trip. So I'm fixing things. There ain't anybody else belongs to me, but look out for Maria as long as she lives. Also Bill Hurley and Perro. He was all the real pal I had before you come along.

HEN.

Bramley had known enough not to mention Maria in the document that she witnessed. Strong read it through again and folded it up, putting it away in his wallet. He decided to tell Maria about it. How to probate it as a will he did not know and he did not feel keen about doing it—not yet.

There was a broken-down lawyer in Laguna who might advise him—a hard-drinking, disappointed man whose main practice of his profession consisted in making speeches upon every occasion for oratory and some that were not. There was a story back of him and Strong imagined he had been disbarred. But his advice was good and, when he was neither too sober nor too drunk, he had his redeeming qualities. One of these, to Strong, was his unqualified condemnation of Lobo Smith whom he denounced as an unmitigated scoundrel.

Curiously enough, Lobo did not seem to resent this but found more sport in getting Clayborne drunk—for the lawyer could not resist an invitation from any one when alcohol got its grip on him and dulled his pride—then goading him into declamatory invective.

But that could rest. There were other matters more vital. He had been so supremely confident of his ability to trail that he had made one mistake in his rage against the raiders. That was to have left the three bodies to the buzzards and, after them, the coyotes. They would be beyond recognition. It had seemed to him like a fitting vengeance at the time but in it he had destroyed his chance of identifying them with Lobo's men. And he had failed to trace them by trailing, failed utterly.

He meant to go back to the ravine again and try to solve the puzzle, but he

feared he could not do so. He had gone over the ground too thoroughly and there was no solution. In some way Lobo had been too clever for him.

But he resolved to call a meeting of the association, which should be done in any event. He would show them Bramley's will and the note, strive to urge them to some action though now, without proof, only suspicion, he knew his efforts were destined for failure.

The ranch affairs had to be attended to. There was the beef contract. He had to carry on. Bramley would wish it. Strong was conscious of feeling older, of deeper sentiments than he had believed himself capable of. It almost seemed as if Bramley was about the ranch, liable to appear at any moment. The ranch house was primed with tokens of him. Perro, coming in to sit mournfully by Strong, or following him about the ranch, no longer full of life, barking, helping to herd the cattle, was a constant reminder, staying close to him, day and night, as if aware of the mutual loss they had suffered.

The meeting of the association turned out as he had expected. There was grief shown and fitting sentiments expressed but all spoke of the folly of attempting to prove anything against Lobo. They passed resolutions of regret, offered help, advised him that in their opinion no one would disturb his full tenancy and promised him support if it was needed, but they plainly discounted his story of trailing the sign. They evidently considered that he had run across disconnected traces and that the signs by the river were those left by some one seeking strays, as he had done. Signs that, because they happened to be on higher ground, had been left when a freshet—a frequent occurrence—had wiped out others. The next time Strong had visited the ravine there had been a rise in the stream and all trail was missing.

And Lobo was away. He did not

visit Laguna, nor any of his men. Such absences on his part were periodical, sometimes lasting two and three weeks. When he was in Three Corners nothing kept him away from Laguna longer than three or four nights and, on his return from his excursions, he would invariably ride in, full force, and hold carousal, flinging gold about—always gold coins, tens and twenties. Some few men were always left to guard the cañon fence.

Those few who had ventured to explore were always warned before they reached the barrier, a voice from an unseen guard giving caution and, if it was not promptly heeded, a rifle bullet would come humming from some spot high up the cliff, unbetrayed by smoke from the high-powered charge, its source confused by the volleying echoes the report aroused. For Strong to attempt to force a way would be suicide.

Maria was stanch, nodding her old head until her triple chins worked like the bellows of an accordion, using her Mexican proverbs.

"Make haste slowlee, señor," she would say. "He who walk slow go sure. To walk to Sevilla, ees a long way. But I am a woman. Thees men of Lobo they have their girls in the cantinas. Weeth them they quarrel, and of them they tire. Then, perhaps, the women tell what they know. What there is I shall learn an' spin together, weave like Navajo blanket. Then we see the pattern."

She told him how Bramley had found her in a miserable hovel, ill from nursing her husband who had died, how he had helped her, how he had got her two sons out of trouble by giving them money, traveling to Santa Fe where they had been arrested for a larceny charge, breaking and entering an empty house with some other lads, foolish with mes-cal. How he had brought her to the ranch after he had got some one to nurse her back to health, given her

money for necessities, even for masses for her husband's soul.

"Now, since I cannot work for heem until I die, I shall help to avenge heem. I have sworn eet, señor, an' I have made my sons swear weeth me. Did they not fight weeth Señor Bramley? They have tell me they were afraid but they shoot. They do not run. An' they shall fight again."

Juan, the plucky little cocinero, stayed on the ranch. He had proven himself and he also vowed to help revenge Strong. Hurley turned stolid in his grief, moody, spending his spare time cleaning and polishing his guns. Once he called to Juan to bring him some onions and spoke to Strong to watch.

Juan tossed them in the air on request and Hurley's guns sprang from their holsters and barked. He fired right and left at will and each bullet smashed an onion as they rose and fell in rapid succession.

"So," he said to Strong. "I am an old dog. I am lame, I ain't fit for much an', when this damned rheumatics grabs me I ain't fit fo' nothin' but to feed to the hawgs when it comes to gittin' around. The boys have been tellin' me you kin throw lead whar it belongs. I'm showin' you thet I can shoot some, so's when you git the chance agin' them murderin' dogs thet done in Hen, you'll let me be along.

"Leastwise, you won't think me jest a cripple. Hen's toted me an' paid me wages when most men would leave me to lean up agin' a hitchin' rail, hopin' some one with a skinful would come along an' buy me a drink so's I could git a chance at the free lunch."

"I know how you feel agin' the cuss thet shot Hen. You reckon he's *yore* meat. Thet's all right. But it ain't too likely you're goin' to run into him all alone an' made to order fo' you. Thet kind runs in a pack. I've had my innings in my time an' I kin come close

to tellin' what a man feels by the look of his eyes an' the way his face is fixed. You're set to git out after thet Lobo pack soon's they come back an' you kin git a chance to be sure they done it. You an' me know it was them but we got to prove it.

"Maria'll help on thet. She's a woman—and an' old one. Wiser than any man when it comes to wormin' secrets. Some of those fellers'll give hisse'f away sooner or later. Mo' bad men tripped up on a skirt than any other way. Yes, suh. Those cantina gals air nigh all greasers an' you kin bet yo' last cartridge thet Maria's got her plans sot an' workin'.

"Hombre shoots another feller down or pulls some crooked deal he thinks is smart an', sooner or later, he'll brag about it. When he's cold sober he may not be so derved proud of it but when he's het up with licker he figgers it's somethin' to be proud about an' he tells the gal he happens to be stuck on, jest to show her what a wonder he is.

"You, Maria an' me, we'll round 'em up. It's all I got to live for, to look at thet crowd through smoke. I'm plumb willin' to go out with my guns hot, long as I kin take one or two of thet outfit along with me to hell an' brand 'em thar for what they stands fer. I've allus reckoned thar would be grades in hell. They won't stand for a coward, even down thar. No, suh, they'll put 'em whar it blisters most. Maria's the same in her woman's way. Perro, too. He don't know jest what's happened, but if he did, he'd pass out to git his teeth clamped in the throat of the man who done it.

"I'm workin' my jaws like a wind-mill in a gale. You think likely it's all wind. Here's an old cuss, says you, thet kin shoot some, if he happens to be on the spot, an' the way he's busted up with rheumatics the odds is a hundred to one agin' his bein' within ten mile of the right place at the right time.

Like the cannon my dad told me was left behind at Vicksburg. Mighty fine artillery but plumb useless where it was.

"But I showed you I kin shoot an' I'm tellin' you now I'm goin' into train-in'. Maria's allus been after me to try thet lot of hot springs over in the mal-pais beyond Dry Crick. She says the Injuns hev used 'em for ages to cure 'em when the git cold, or stiff. Even the bears wander down from the mountains when the git old and rheumatic an' waller round in 'em. I took all thet with a grain of salt—mebbe two.

"But I go take a look-see one day, an' I come back. You could smell them springs forty miles off with the wind right, like all the rotten aigs in the world had been brung together an' busted. I come back an' I says to Maria, 'I wouldn't try thet if it cured hams,' I says. But it was sure powerful. Now see here what I been readin'. Come with a batch of stuff in thet last dozen of pain killer I got from Santa Fe.

"Advertisin' junk, but it tells about what marvelous cures they're makin' of 'flammatory rheumatism in Europe, also Californy, with hot-mud packs. All these here steamin' peat-bogs air controlled by 'millionaire corporations,' says the pamphlet. Only those with a bank roll long as here to the mint an' back, kin afford to go thar. So this concern offers a chemical composition thet's an exact copy of the mud. You make a puddin' of it an' smear it over yourself while it's steamin' hot an' it does the trick same as the real article.

"Mebbe yes an' mebbe not. It's artificial an' it can't work like the natural stuff. Don't stand to reason. But thar's a spring of this mud stuff bubblin' up over to these Dry Crick mineral an' sulphur springs—looks like a lot of black porridge in a lava pot, blisters oozin' up an' breakin'. Jest the sort of thing you'd figger was a foretaste of hell.

"If I was a preacher, I'd take my

flock out an' preach to 'em right round thet place, 'stead of in church. Make 'em taste thet sulphur water an' tell 'em thar was hell with the lights out an' how they'd have to waller round in mud like that for a million years if they didn't line up an' sign the book.

"Yes, suh. If any one told me I'd go voluntary an' willin' an' squat in thet porridge pot like a toad in a puddle, I'd have cracked him one for insinuat-in' I'm crazy.

"But I'm goin' to try her out, Strong. I'm askin' you now for a chance to ride over a couple times a week to see how she works. I'm goin' to lower me into thet bowl o' muck an', while I'm thar, as long as my hide'll stand it, with my nose stuffed so I won't keel over with the smell of it, I'm goin' to pray. I'm goin' to pray for a miracle, so's I kin fork a hawss ag'in without bein' lifted into it, so's I kin move around without sweatin' blood every time I beat a crawl. I don't expect to grow out my laig so it mates up with the other; I don't ask fer it to be permanent. Jest so's you'll give me a chance when you go to clean up thet outfit."

Strong did not crack a smile. It was the first time he had ever felt like laughin' since he had come back to the Bar B, but Hurley's very earnestness made his talk more ludicrous in a way.

"I've heard about the mud packs," Strong said. "You hop to 'em, Bill, an' stew all you want. An' I'm tellin' you right now thet I wouldn't want anything better than you alongside of me workin' yore artillery when I git lined up agin' the Lobo pack."

"Hell, I'll be thar! I'm testin' this peat stuff till I git slick—or bust."

"Go over any time you feel like it," said Strong. And forgot the matter.

On the advice of some of the older men of the association he took the will into Laguna to see Clayborne, scarcely hoping to find him in condition to talk. Clayborne sobering up was apt to be

worse than Clayborne drunk. To his amazement the lawyer was not merely free from taint or effect of alcohol, but he was clean shaven, clean collared, and his shoes were polished, a combination never before achieved by him in the memory of Laguna. He had no office but the lobby of the hotel, with its dingy writing room for a private sanctum, and there he took Strong.

He must once have been an impressive-looking man. Strong fancied, looking at the lawyer's wide brow, his well-shaped nose and square jaw. He did not look like a man who would be easily downed by liquor or any other cause. But the tremulous hands, the watery eyes with the sagging skin beneath, showed a battle lost. Yet he held himself with real dignity as he spoke of Bramley's death.

"You know who caused it?" he asked.

"I have no direct proof," Strong answered, "only my suspicions." He did not think it necessary to go over the whole affair, but briefly said that he suspected the Lobo pack, a little fearful that the lawyer would launch off into one of his violent tirades. But he made no direct comment.

"Strong, you see me sober, sir—entirely sober—for the first time. You have not been in Laguna long, but you have heard about me. The prize drunkard of Three Corners, the jester, the butt of the cantinas. There are sometimes reasons why a man loses grip of himself. I speak without excuse. We will dismiss that plea. But now, if there is any manhood left in me, I aim to foster it. Doubtless I shall fall, but I need not fail. A man is not always beaten because he is down.

"Either I must do this or sink below the semblance of humanity. I have seen a vision of myself, sir; senile, feeble, old, in the last stage, the final scene of life's eventful history; stripped of everything, whining for gruel to suck between my toothless jaws, an object

beyond man's sympathy, that most miserable of beings, an ancient human being who has forfeited his manhood.

"What gives me this urge? Because, even here in Laguna, the bottom of the cup where the dregs gather, there is a wholesome stirring. Men like you and your late partner, cattlemen and ranchers, are leavening the stagnant life with honorable activity. The inevitable tide sets in, rising, rising.

"Men will breast the flood and swim with it to the highlands of prosperity. Others will slink away, be swept by its cleansing current or flung up on the beach in worthless flotsam and jetsam. The railroads are pushing forward. And, for me, once more comes the knock of Opportunity. The law is coming to Laguna. There must be some one to represent it here, to conduct its course after the heralds have withdrawn.

"That one shall be myself, sir. Nicholas Clayborne, of Boston, sir—of Back Bay, Boston. Once a counselor—still, by the grace of Heaven, a man. I shall once more uphold the law. I have taken steps toward it, and, when the law comes to Laguna, sir, the baying, bullying pack of Lobo Smith goes!"

There was a similarity, Strong could not help observing, between this rhetorical outburst of Clayborne with its almost pitiful determination to re-establish himself, and the declaration of Hurley to make his physical self over again for a set purpose.

He wondered whether there was any real reason for the lawyer's declaration that the law was coming and that the law would be directed against Lobo. If some word of his mysterious doings had reached the high places and offended, justice meant to strike. Clayborne proved evasive, and Strong at last believed that much of his talk was merely through his usual spigot of the desire to exhibit his oratory. He hoped so. Lobo and the man who had shot Bramley were, as Hurley had put it, "his

meat;" he did not want the law to cheat his personal revenge.

The talk turned to the will.

"I can have this probated for you," said Clayborne. "A very human document that contains the essentials of a testament. You may rely upon me to attend to it." He sat with his trembling hands on the arms of his chair, his watery eyes blinking, and drew himself up.

"I may tell you this, Mr. Strong, lest you hesitate to give me the first item of legal business that has been entrusted to me for many a day, to be the first client of Nicholas Clayborne, that I have been approached by one who is in a position of trust and authority, who has placed in me a confidence, sir, that I would rather die than forfeit. My enemies—or, let us say, those who are not my friends—have brought him tales, doubtless, but he is a judge of men, sir, necessary in his profession.

"He has honored me with his trust, and I shall show him that it is not misplaced. I may say, sir, that I never abused the interests of a client. I may have temporized, even neglected them, but never to the extent of loss. When I became, in the course of an unfortunate appetite, unable to look out for clients, I ceased to practice my profession."

Strong was sorry for the man, and there was something about his frank exposition that was not altogether pitiful. There were sparks of fire in the ash heap yet that might be blown to flame.

"Shucks," he said. "I was hatin' to bother you with it, that's all. I'll be mighty obliged if you'd look after it for me. Here it is an' if that ain't enough for the fees, let me know."

Clayborne took the twenty-dollar bill and his face flushed.

"Mr. Strong, sir," he said as he rose and offered his hand. "I have spoken thus freely to you because you have not seen as much of my conduct as others in

Laguna, though doubtless you have heard much. You are the first man to trust me with money—as a loan, a gift, or a payment—for many months. I thank you, sir, as a gentleman to a gentleman."

"That's all right, jedge," said Strong, embarrassed, gripping the flabby hand. "You'll have a seegar, seein' you're not drinkin'?"

"I shall be glad to. Glad to. I would rather it were purchased elsewhere than at the bar. There is an aroma there that disturbs my mental equilibrium. It creates an appetite that is—er—painful to control."

"Sure. They sell 'em in the office."

Clayborne wrestled with the cigar lighter, and Strong felt in his vest pocket for a match, finding none, but encountering the brass button he had placed there for safety. Maria had said that she knew of none like it. He showed it to Clayborne.

The attorney rolled it about in the palm of his hand, poked at it with one wavering forefinger, shook his head.

"H'm! Now that indicates something to me. I've seen such buttons before. Where, I am not certain. My memory is rusty. It does not respond. Lack of exercise. May I ask where you found it?"

Strong walked out of possible hearing of loungers. He did not see how the button was going to materially aid him, but it was a clew, nevertheless, and he treated it as such.

"I trailed those raiders quite a ways that day, jedge. As far as the ravine that ends the big mesa. An' I picked this up along the trail, among the lava hills. I never guessed thar was a way through them hills, an', if I hadn't been follerin' sign, I'd never have found it in fifty years. Looks like they go through that way sometimes on their trips, like the one they're on now, mebbe."

"You mean Lobo?"

"Yep."

"Ah! Strong, there's a man in town, connected with the railroad, I understand. I'd like you to meet him. I'd like to show him this button and get his opinion on it. He's a man who's traveled a great deal. I value his judgment highly. If you're not in a hurry."

Strong was waiting for supplies to be put up at the store, and he had time to spare. He guessed easily enough that this railroad man was the one Clayborne had meant when he talked of having certain confidences reposed in him by one in authority. He wondered what the railroad man was after in Laguna. Probably looking quietly around for a depot-and-yards site. That meant the workmen would soon begin to lay the rails. It meant supplies, beef. It would do him no harm to meet the man, to humor Clayborne. It might lead to later contracts.

Time had not lessened Strong's determination to avenge his partner, but he found that work dulled the sharp edge of the grief that cut into his vitality and efficiency. He was due to meet the Indian agent in a few days at Escondida. It looked as if prosperity was coming halfway to meet him and Bramley, the man who had started the ranch, could not share it. It was all going to Strong, the rover. But his saddle itch was cured now. Bramley was still in spirit a half owner of the Bar B. Strong was going to make a success of it for his sleeping partner, sleeping under the cairn of stones beside the Texas cattle trail.

They found Edmonds practicing pool shots in the room behind the bar. It was empty, save for the railroad man and the bartender, lounging in the doorway, admiring the play. Strong noticed Clayborne's uneasiness as the smell of liquor floated out from the barroom. So, it seemed, did Edmonds, for he laid down his cue and immediately suggested an adjournment.

"Have you got those papers ready, Mr. Clayborne?" he asked, with a ready tact that mollified the bartender, unable to understand why the meeting of three "gents" should not lead immediately to a "licker-up."

They went back into the reading room, where the flies droned and wooden-bladed ceiling fans driven by springs rustled ancient newspapers.

"Mr. Strong, one of my clients. Mr. Edmonds. Mr. Strong is a cattleman. Mr. Edmonds representing certain railroad interests."

The two looked at one another. Strong saw a stocky man in blue serge, with a quiet voice, an unassuming manner, nothing especial of feature save a pair of keen blue eyes that seemed to say to Strong that Edmonds had already heard all about him. He said so, frankly, the next minute.

"I have heard of your recent trouble, Mr. Strong," he said simply. "Naturally it's talked of. It is a pity it happened through lack of authority and the toleration of a certain type of so-called citizens. I'm sorry. I've known a personal loss like that myself. I can appreciate your feelings."

It was well said, and the handshake was firm and cordial. Strong began to take a liking to this unaffected Mr. Edmonds, to think that there was more to the man than his outward appearance at first suggested.

"Clayborne suggested I should show you this," he said. "I found it while I was back trailin' the hombres that tried to ambush us."

It seemed to him that there was a sudden flash in Edmonds' eyes before he finally lowered them for a close examination of the button. There was nothing out of the way in their expression when he spoke. For a moment Strong wondered whether he had made a mistake in exhibiting this clew. He prided himself on being something of a judge of men, to the extent that, when he re-

ceived a distinctly favorable impression, as he had with Edmonds, he had never yet known it to be contradicted. If Lobo's outfit learned that he had found a brass button on the trails south of the mesa that they had certainly used more than once, what might it mean to them? Clayborne seemed to sense his dilemma.

"I am not at liberty to state the exact official connections of Mr. Edmonds," he said, "but I can assure you, Mr. Strong, as my client, that he is entirely to be trusted, and in sympathy with my own opinions—and yours—concerning the outfit of Lobo Smith and his rascally associates.

"I am sure of it," Strong answered. "It just struck me that I ought to go easy, mebbe, on showin' this button round. I ain't shown it to but three people, all told, but I was merely thinkin' generally. I kin read sign an' foller trail an' handle the cattle business, but I don't aim to set up as a detective sharp."

"You're quite right, Strong," said Edmonds earnestly. "I would suggest your not showing this button any more than you have to. It's a small thing, but it might mean much. I've seen buttons like this before, and I think I can place where, without much difficulty. I would not care to be positive at this moment. It is my opinion that this may lead to the clearing up of the secret surrounding Smith's sources of income and his mysterious trips. If so, it will probably mean the disposal of his outfit where they will not disturb the peace of Laguna, or any other place, for a long while to come.

"If you could see your way to letting me have this button, I am in a position to forward it to where certain investigations are already in hand. It is an important thing in the railroad transportation of passengers and freight, especially in the West, that the type of men like Lobo is eliminated. That is public service. They seem to be just

the sort to hold up a train and this back road or trail of theirs should be an asset in their plans.

"I lost their trail in the ravine," said Strong. "Mebbe the sign was washed away by a freshet. It was, later, when I went back. That way keeps 'em clear of the pass comin' up from the south. They could rob trains near El Paso an' jump east into the Huecos an' so honte. I reckon they figger the lava an' malpais blinds their trail.

"But, if they worked north or direct east from Doom Cañon, they'd have to leave plain sign almost up to their gate. No one ever sees 'em go out or come back, but that's because the cañon's a way off an' thar's no holdin's nigh it. Also, few of 'em ever comes out befo' dark, I reckon. May go back by daylight after they've had a session in Laguna, but no one trails 'em. It wouldn't be healthy.

"Now I'll talk man talk to you, Mr. Edmonds. I'm anxious to have Lobo cleaned out, jest as the railroad is. But Lobo planned thet ambush thet killed my pardner. I want him fo' thet, an' I want the man thet did the shootin'. The law ain't come here yet, an' I want to git thet thing settled outside the law—my way. If thet button's goin' to cut me out of my chance I'll keep it or chuck it away first. I want to see those men over the sight of my six-gun."

Strong spoke without emotion, and the eyes of Edmonds rested on him interestedly. Then he nodded.

"I can respect your feelings," he said. "I gather you're looking for proof that Lobo was mixed up in the killing, and that the man who did it is one of his gang?"

"In a general way, yes. Yes, so far as Lobo is concerned. As fo' the other hombre, I'm carryin' a photograph of him right back of my eyes. I don't need no proof fo' him."

"Except to clear yourself, in case of trouble," said Clayborne.

"I'll hire you fo' thet."

"I take the case, sir," said Clayborne solemnly.

"My point is," continued Edmonds, "that I doubt very much whether this button, which is tarnished and has evidently been exposed to the weather for some time before the date of your finding it, can possibly have any direct connection with connecting Lobo with the shooting. I do think it may lead to serious charges against them. You would not wish to appear as a hindrance to law and order? It is your duty as a citizen to do anything that may enhance the peace and quiet of your community without regard to your own private vengeance. Isn't that so?"

"Reckon so." Strong spoke doggedly.

"On the other hand, I do not imagine that Lobo will tamely submit to arrest. I understand Doom Cañon is well protected. I think I can guarantee that you will be notified—as I shall be—of any action, and there should certainly be no difficulty in arranging for you to be of the posse that will proceed against him."

"I'd ruther act independent," said Strong. "In a posse you're actin' under orders. You got to go whar they put you. Might give me orders not to shoot or somethin'. Jest you see I'm notified, Mr. Edmonds, an' if I ain't pulled somethin' off befo' then, on my own account, I'll be on han' to do the best I kin. Thar's the button, if it is a button."

"It answers that general purpose, I'm sure," said Edmonds, "although it may have another name. Could you give me an idea of the way this trail ran through the lava cliffs?"

Strong pursed up his mouth. It began to look as if the law was coming to Laguna too soon to suit him, as if it might take things out of his own hands. Railroads, he knew, had detective systems of their own. Edmonds, as an

official, would be naturally interested in all branches of the service. Holdups, especially where two roads were making for the same junction point—El Paso—from the East, might seriously damage the reputation of the line attacked, prohibit profits. He meant to be orderly, and he believed he was.

"I kin give you a general idea," he said. "Thar ain't no maps of thet territory an', of course, I kin only line out from whar I cut in. I mean by thet their trail might go quite a ways farther south, might swing west down to the Rio Grande an' over to Mexico."

Edmonds nodded. Strong pulled toward him ink, pen, and an odd sheet of paper, and made a rough sketch.

"Here's Comanche Crick," he said, "where we got the cattle. Runs into the Pecos. Here's our route north over Topah Crick, swingin' west, south of Sierra Diablo, over toward Round Mountain, up over the Sierra Prieta. Here's the Guadalupe Mountains due east, beyond Salt Basin. The regular pass lies between Huecos an' Cornudas. The raiders went plumb west toward the lower end of the Huecos. It ain't really the Huecos, which ends proper with the big mesa whar Doom Cañon is. It's what we call a breakdown whar the mesa wall has give way, an' then a lot of these lava hills.

"When they struck these hills they worked north, an' I follered. But it was sure a track to break a snake's back. Here's the crick thet runs round the base of the mesa whar the trail ended when they rode into the water. I couldn't find whar they come out. The crick, risin', might have washed thet off the slate. A ravine opens above the pass in mo' or less broken country. Once thar, they could easy keep out of sight plumb to the cañon."

Edmonds took the rough but serviceable sketch and studied it. Then he put it into his pocket and shook hands again with Strong.

"You may feel that we've tried to cajole you out of what you consider your right to punish the men who killed your partner, Mr. Strong. As I said before, I can appreciate your feelings. Where there is no law, justice must find its own agents as it invariably does. Feuds are often started that way. But, if the law comes, you will not obstruct it?"

"I'm always on the side of justice an' I'll help the law all I kin," said Strong and left for the store.

"Railroad or no railroad," he told himself, "they ain't goin' to beat me out of my show to even things up. Bramley would feel the same way."

Vaguely he regretted giving over the button. In another way he did not. The law was all right, but it was coming too late for Bramley.

He loaded up the wagon and drove through the town. On the sidewalk he saw Sprague, the gambler, and Ramon, joint owners of the Tent cantina. The look they gave him was not friendly. Strong wondered if they had any further interest in Lobo and his men, outside of the money they spent with them and lost over the tables. Perhaps they had not been back since the night that Gardner was shot, on the gambler's superstition that fresh-spilled blood brought bad luck. That would account for the sour looks of the two partners.

Farther on he passed two cantina girls. One nodded to him and the other one checked her greeting. Strong pulled off his sombrero in salute. To him a woman was always a woman, whatever her status in or out of society. And this was the girl he had danced with, the one who had warned him not to go out alone. A nice kid he had thought her at the time, not too hardened as yet by the life she followed.

He drove on. He felt terribly lonely these days. Loneliness obsessed him so that he thought continually about it, and the fact that he had lost interest in all

things, driving himself to the routine of the ranch only because he thought he was doing what Bramley would have had him do. He was not aware that he was brooding until he was almost becoming morbid, but old Maria did.

There was scant satisfaction, she complained, in cooking for a man who did not know what he was eating, but sat looking into space without caring what fork or spoon conveyed to his mouth.

"You should get marree," she told him bluntly. Strong shook his head.

"That's all right," countered Maria. "You shake the head. Jus' the same, I pray to Heaven to send you the right girl. Pretty soon she come along, then you wake up."

"I'm in no humor for gals, Maria," he said.

"That's no matter. When the right one she come, she sweep you off yo' feet. That humor change queek. I hope she come soon. Señor Bramley, he would not weesh to see you all the same skeletons."

This she said to Strong, on his return from town, while she checked up what she had asked him to bring.

She was exercised also about Hurley, who had departed for the sulphur springs and had not returned as expected. Maria was afraid he had been overcome by the fumes or that his horse had got away from him. She had meant to dispatch one of the vaqueros, but they were still away, riding the range herd, turned out, while the cows Strong hoped to sell for the reservation-beef issue fattened in home pastures.

"I'll go," said Strong, got out the roan, and loped off.

It was not very far to the springs, and they advertised themselves long before one arrived by the fumes of sulphuretted hydrogen and the sulphur deposits about their rims. There were seven or eight water holes of various types—not all sulphur—including an immature

geyser that bombed intermittently. Strong did not know the location of the mud bath, but he saw Hurley's pony standing disconsolately between two bubbling and malodorous basins, and then he saw the mass of heaving, steaming peat.

There was no sign of Hurley, and he thought that the heat might have affected the old man's heart, and that he might have choked to death, swallowed up in the messy stuff, on the surface of which great bubbles slowly formed and burst, for all the world like a giant's portion of porridge.

As he gazed anxiously he heard a yell and, riding round a mound of crusty, siliceous stuff, he saw a steaming pool of green water and, in it, seated on a rock, but submerged to the neck, was Bill Hurley. His long mustache was limp and his face the color of a ripe tomato.

"You trainin' fo' the circus as a tame seal?" Strong demanded.

"Seal be damned!" said Hurley, rising naked, his gaunt form scarlet with his immersion, first in the mud and now in the hot spring. Strong could not control his mirth. For the first time since he had come up from Texas he broke into laughter, and it did him a world of good to find that he could do so.

"Laugh yore fool self into a fit an' fall off yore cayuse," said Hurley, wading gingerly out of the pool toward his clothes. He said it savagely, but he said it with a grin. "Listen, boss; if you'd been twinged up the way I've been fo' eight years an' got rid of it, you'd stay in thet pool till you plumb dissolved. Hell's bells! I'm like a kid with the toothache after he's been to the dentist! Only mine was a damn sight worse than toothache. Look at me. I don't say I'm cured, but it's a miracle, jest the same. I ain't got a mite of pain no mo' an' I'm limber as a young cottontail."

He capered, trying a pigeon wing, with a lopsided result on account of his

short leg. He cracked his fingers and pranced like a Navajo buck at a sun dance. Strong looked on with amazement, as well as he could for the tears running down his face, rocking in his saddle while he held his sides and the roan snorted.

"Cottontail!" he shouted at last. "You look mo' like a skinned jack rabbit. Ain't you got no sense of decency? Want to stampede my hawss? You ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

"Waal, I ain't. I bet if my laigs was even I could give you a hundred yards in a mile an' beat you."

He put his clothes on with a running comment of delight.

"First time I've stood on one laig an' put my pants on this a way for nigh ten years," he said. "Usually I have to lie in my bunk an' draw 'em on, with a cuss fo' every shift. Lookit! I kin wrastle my shirt on like I was a kid. I kin sit down an' bend over an' pull on my boots like I was human, 'stead of a creaky back-numbered goat. Boss, the pain jest melted right out of me when I was in thet mud. Took me nigh an hour to make up my mind to git into the mess. Took me more'n thet to scrape off with a flat stone after I come out an' then I finished in thet hot water. I feel great. I could whip any grizzly b'ar thet wanted to dispute thet cure with me. Whoop, for Maria! Two whoops an' a whizzer fo' thet pamphlet!

"Thar's a fortune thar, boss. Two of 'em. Course I ain't cured by a long shot, but gimme a sweat in thet peat once a week an' I'll run hurdle races. You watch me fork thet hawss."

"Maria figgered you was cooked," said Strong. "So did I till I saw you squattin' thar like a crimson grasshopper."

"I'll show Maria how to dance the tarantula waltz to-night."

It was astounding how the medicinal mud had relieved him, and the effect

remained for the next few days. Strong left for Encinada with Hurley a different man, many times as useful, and almost as renewed as if he had discovered Ponce de Leon's fabled fountain of youth.

CHAPTER V.

Strong left well ahead of the day that the Indian agent had said he would be at the little town, riding first to Socorro to file on his quarter section. He intended to give Hurley a share in the ranch, to let the vaqueros in on the profits, together with Maria. The cattle business in this section should soon make them all comparatively well off, if not rich. He still had in mind a talk with Edmonds about a beef contract, but he judged the time a little premature at present. The reservation deal might be profitably renewed.

Lobo was still absent, he learned, as he rode through Laguna on his way north, calling on Clayborne, who had sent the will off for probate. Edmonds also was out of town. Clayborne did not say where. Strong learned something about him from the man from whom he bought grain to carry on the trip.

"He's a good mixer, thet railroad chap," said the other. "Don't say a heap, but he fits in an' he plays a dern good game of poker. I'm figgerin' on sellin' him a depot site. Laguna's goin' to boom, Strong, jest as soon as they start layin' steel, an' don't you forget it. Say, there's a party ridin' north you might take along—cow waddie. Jest as well to have company. They say the 'Paches ain't takin' kindly to the reservation. Sojers busy roundin' 'em up every little while."

It was good advice, and Strong looked up the puncher. If the man had quit his job he had hopes of persuading him to sign on with the Bar B. It turned out that he had a sister in Socorro and wanted to visit her for a spell, not hav-

ing seen her for three years. But he promised Strong to work for him later, and the two rode together without sight of hostiles. From Socorro Strong rode down to Encinada alone, arriving a day ahead of the stage by taking trails rather than the road.

It was a hazardous trip if the Apaches were actually off reservation, but he saw nothing of them. The railroad would soon change the country, develop it. The Three Corners would soon be no longer outlaw land. It would be a long while before it was overcrowded, and that suited Strong. He did not hanker after too much civilization. Long before the dirt farmers started to encroach on the open range he would have made his pile, he figured, but even then he would not want to sit idle. He would be a cattleman all his days.

If he married—he supposed he would some day—it would have to be a girl whose spirit matched with his. There were not many of them in Three Corners. There had been Gardner's wife, whom he had never known. She seemed to have been the sort, by all accounts. Not so the cow waddie's sister at Socorro, who had entertained him royally enough, but who weighed two hundred pounds and was square as an Oregon-packed apple out of the corner of the box—a good sort, but not Strong's ideal of a helpmate. Not the kind who, according to Maria, would sweep him off his feet when she arrived.

There was a persistent rumor at Encinada that the Apaches were out, and that the cavalry were trying to round them up. The fact that Strong had seen no sign did not discount the report. It was the general opinion that they would haunt the road and perhaps molest the stage. When the latter became overdue—two hours, then four—premonition crystallized into certainty. Strong led a party, armed with rifles as well as their six-guns, to go out and meet it.

It would be a strange stroke of fate if the Indians should massacre the agent appointed to look after their interests.

In that region all things were possible. The fierce Apaches did not take kindly to confinement and regulations, any more than wild bison to a fenced enclosure. The Indian agent, Larned, had the great excitement of his life, and immediately realized the serious nature of his duties.

They met the stage six miles out of Encinada, coming along with four horses instead of six, and one of them limping. There were arrows sticking in the coach, a passenger beside the driver had his arm bandaged. The driver himself was loud in his declamations.

"Here I go," he said, "actin' relief for Bob Somers, because Bob's got a bile on the back of his neck, an' I have to run into this. One swing an' a wheel'er plumb ruined. Then devils shot 'em full of arrers as a porkypine has quills an' I had to drive the pore devils at thet till they dropped. If I hadn't had this gent on the box an' two more fightin' passengers inside, we men would be splayed out on the stage wheels roastin' over slow ashes an' the li'le leddy—waal, it's plumb lucky for us those yell-legged cavalry showed up when they did, I'm tellin' you.

"You've got a woman aboard?" asked Strong.

"Use yore eyes, pardner, like the rest of yore outfit. We've got a young leddy with the voice of a thrush an' the looks of an angel, who fit like three wild cats rolled in one. Thar's one passenger inside—three all told, inside fares—who toted a rifle, but he jest natcherully got seasick or somethin' when he heerd them 'Paches whoopin'. It ain't no love song at thet. Anyway, he gits so nervous he don't know one end of his weepen from the other.

"What does the gal do but grab it an' start shootin' out of the right-hand winder while the remainin' gent does the

same on the left. An' the gal's the best shot of the two. Brought down one red devil nice as you ever see. Got him through the laig an' busted up the internals of his hawss same time.

"While I was tryin' to make the change with the hawsses this gent alongside of me gits his through the forearm. The gal keeps on a firin', cool as an iced cucumber—saves my life, you bet.

"Jest as it looked like it was wet clouds an' harps, with the red devils ridin' so thar wa'n't nothin' to shoot at but the hawss, circlin' in an' gittin' ready to rush, I thought I heard Gabriel's horn. It couldn't have sounded sweeter, an' it was almost my resurrection. I could feel my scalp liftin' when thet heavenly bugle blowed an' I saw them cavalry streakin' it.

"Off goes the 'Paches, knowin' they was wrong. Up comes the lieutenant, sweet as pie. Kin he help us, and kin we proceed under our own power? I reckon we kin an' he goes off after the troop, reluctant, on account of the gal.

"She never turned a ha'r. Usually they faint after it's all over. 'Stead of thet she cossets the gent who lost his nerve—railroad man by the name of Foster, he told me. This gent beside me is sellin' hams an' sichlike, an' he kin git my order for his brand any time. He ain't so much on shootin', but he's long on sand. So's the third inside fare. He fired as if he knowed how to handle a rifle, but he didn't hold ahead enough, I reckon.

"Mebbe"—the driver sank his voice to a harsh whisper—"mebbe he didn't want to kill 'em. He's the Indian agent. It's a prime joke on him, the way it lays. Him feedin' them Indians, showin' the squaws how to use a cook stove an' wipin' off the snoots of the papooses, teachin' the bucks their sums, an' comin' close to havin' the wards of the country make a fricassee out of him. He ain't seen the joke yit.

"It's a joke on me, too, first time I

drive this line—an' the last. I ain't hankerin' for post-mortem notoriety none. You ain't got a drop of lick with you, have you? No? Then I'll git along toward the stop. It's dry work handlin' the ribbons with both hands full of crazy hawsses an' no chance to fire back at the devils thet's makin' a game out of who kin hit you first. They streaked one clean through my hat."

He started up his horses, and Strong dropped back. He thought it best to leave the Indian agent alone for a while, until his ruffled dignity should subside somewhat. He felt a mild interest in the railroad man. It wasn't Edmonds, he was sure of that. Edmonds would have fought. But this one probably represented the other road. The two would be making a race of it to El Paso, and there were profitable contracts in the air.

As for the girl, she sounded interesting, but he discounted the driver's glowing description of her charms. She was likely the leather-faced wife of some old-timer who had handled a rifle many times before, used to going out to get her own deer when they needed meat, rather than bother to ask her husband to butcher a calf. Plucky enough.

He loped on without looking at the occupants of the coach, about which the rest of the escort buzzed. But, when the stage drew up at the Encinada road house, Strong gasped at sight of the girl who lightly jumped down and stood interestedly gazing about her.

It was *the* girl. Maria had been right. Strong's heart thumped hard and he felt the blood rushing to his head, leaving him a trifle dizzy, pounding in his finger tips.

She was in dark-blue gingham with a traveling cape of gray above it. She wore a cap with a frill like a cut-down sunbonnet, fitting closely to her well-shaped head, a stray lock or two of hair escaping in tendrils yellow as corn,

golden as a sunset. Eyes that were almost purple, a nose straight, save just at the tip, where it tilted ever so slightly—adorably; a mouth like some kind of rare flower, softly scarlet, curving.

Swept off his feet—that was the expression. He stood there gawking like a fool, he fancied, unknowing the impression his six feet of lean straightness made, with the serious brown face beneath the wide sombrero, a man that no woman could look at without knowledge that here was a provider and protector, one who could be both grave and tender, a man still young, but who had been tempered by experience.

The girl looked up, and their glances met. She grew slowly a rosy red, and Strong gasped again. He wanted to talk to her, to meet her, but he felt infinitely awkward, conscious that he had been rude. He doffed his sombrero and walked away, busying himself with the cinch of his saddle until she had gone in, piqued at his attitude a little, but with the glow that had shown on her face growing deeper.

The Indian agent came to him, still upset by his experience, determined to see the new reservation better handled. They fell into talk, and the agent reiterated the statements about the girl's pluck. He did not mention her name, but said that she was booked for Laguna, a scrap of information that Strong was duly grateful for.

"I'm sorry for this railroad chap, Simpson," said the agent. "He's the purchasing agent for the P. & S. W. If it ever gets out that he fuked it, he'll have a hard time living it down. Seems he's got heart trouble, an' the shock brought on an attack. It wasn't faked. Do what you can for him, Bramley; it won't hurt you any to help let him down easy. They'll be buying beef before long. What sort of a proposition can you offer me?"

The mention of his partner's name came as a shock. He had imagined that

Bramley knew the agent personally, but it appeared that the acquaintance came through a mutual friend who had recommended Bramley as a man to be relied upon. Strong was forced to explain. The agent was all commiseration.

"I've got a shack here," he said. "I haven't seen it yet, but it was all arranged for me. I shall use it as my office temporarily. It's furnished, I believe, and there's even a cook. I've got cigars and a bottle of good liquor with me. Come over there with me, Strong, and we'll talk this contract over. As a matter of fact, it isn't strictly a contract. There isn't time to get out bids for this first issue.

"Orders are to placate the tribesmen—I feel more like flaying them—and a beef issue is the first thing on the program. Washington says to treat them with all consideration. Not the consideration they deserve but under all circumstances. The colonel at the post is likely to get hell if he fires at one of them to-day. If he should kill one, they'd retire him. I wish, Strong, there had been some of our estimable committeemen who handle Indian affairs inside that coach to-day.

"Think of what they might have done to that glorious girl. Strong, she's not married. Coming out to live with a married sister, I understand, on a ranch near Laguna. If you don't grab her—you're not married, I hope?—you're next door to being an idiot."

Strong let that go by. He didn't want to discuss such an intimate matter as marriage with her. It seemed impossible. She was infinitely dainty, beautiful. He was a coarse cow waddie, once removed by luck to be a ranch owner. Still, she had handled the rifle and hit her mark. She was of the West.

"She told me she was brought in Colorado," went on the agent. "She knows how to ride, shoot, fish, hunt, and rope a steer. Strong, if I was single and twenty years younger, I'd go after

her myself. Here's to her health, suh. Brave as she is beautiful. Back in Kentucky, where I hail from, she'd be the toast of the State. A heroine, as modest as a violet and as sweet as a rose."

The agent had more than one bottle, and he was a convivial type, fond of following to the end his own lines of talk. It ended with Strong staying the night with him, with business put off until the morning.

Then Strong got his order for two hundred head at thirty-five dollars a head, seven thousand dollars, of which over five thousand was profit, but which had been dearly paid for just the same. It would have set Bramley and he on their feet, he thought. For him alone it was more than sufficient capital to launch out on a big scale. And he knew that he had the agent's favor in the future.

But the glory of it all was tarnished. He had little satisfaction in the transaction now. That he was on the high road to fortune was certain. Maria, Hurley, and the vaqueros would profit by it, but Strong had no one to share it with. Unless—he thought of the girl—and the agent jested, accusing him of his actual thought, and he reddened.

"If she don't take you," said the other, genial at the evening's end, mellowed by liquor and the satisfaction of having had an excellent listener to all he thought of the faults of the country and his own improvements thereon, "she don't know a man when she sees one. You get in with these railroads, sell 'em beef, and you'll be rich in five years. You've got something to offer a girl, suh. An' that counts with the best of 'em. Strong, I wish I was standing in your boots."

When Strong turned in he was wondering if he could stand a chance. He resolved to try it.

The stage had gone on early in the morning, long before he could get the

agent to let him go, settling the terms of the delivery and payment. Strong did not know whether he was relieved or not. He had debated whether or not he should go back in the stage, and had given up that idea from sheer shyness. But he resolved to meet her. If she was going on a ranch, that would be easy. He found himself building golden dreams as he finally started out early that afternoon.

The Apaches had been rounded up, the railroad man, whose name turned out to be Thompson, had stayed over at Encinada to recover, and the agent had introduced Strong to him. The man was upset, and Strong managed to put him at ease. Altogether it had been a great trip.

He could short-cut to the ranch by avoiding Laguna but he decided that he had some errands there—chewing tobacco for Hurley, for one thing. He would see if Clayborne had heard anything about the will and also find out what Edmonds knew about Thompson, if Edmonds was back. Clayborne had said that the latter expected to return by now.

And all the time Strong knew that his real reason for not going directly to the Bar B was the hope that he would see the girl again or at least learn her name and find out to what ranch she had gone. It was amazing, the difference just seeing one particular girl made to a man. Significant, he told himself, that this must be *the* one for him, if he was man enough to win her. The change in everything was inconceivable, as if he had been in darkness all this time and the light had suddenly been turned on.

Even his determination to avenge Bramley had been relegated to the immediate background—not shelved, not forgotten, but no longer assuming supreme, entire importance. There were other things now in life. And all because of the glimpse of a girl, one

glance of her eyes. It was magic—that was the only word for it. Not many girls had such power. Not many girls were like her—none.

CHAPTER VI.

It was close to sunset when he arrived. He did not really expect to see her. She would be out on her brother's ranch, or her brother-in-law's, whichever it was. He tried to figure which rancher was likely to have such a sister, which rancher's wife, and gave it up. But he meant to cultivate the stage driver and find out what he could about it.

Up till now Strong had neither been woman-shy or woman-crazy. Now he was in earnest. This perhaps was a form of madness since he did not seem able to reason about it, but he was sincere.

The stage did not leave again until the next day, and he found the driver at the hotel in all the reflected glory of having been attacked by Apaches, recounting his tale for the fortieth time to an admiring audience, bringing gifts, while the Jehu added artistic touches with fictional license. The drummer, who had sat with him on the box, had succumbed to the numerous rounds of drinks in which he had been practically forced to partake, but the driver had absorbed all of them without much more harm than stimulus to his imagination. His breath exhaled alcohol as perfume comes from an uncorked scent bottle, his pockets bristled with cigars, his speech was a trifle blurry but it flowed on like a river and Strong realized that he would probably not have to ask any questions.

"This railroad hombre's got a bad valve in his pump," said the driver. "He's got no right to be out in a ha'r-raisin' section like this. The first whoop makes his heart turn over an' git all clogged up, and leaves him weak as a kitten. The Injin agent, he's all riled

up at the cheek of them wards of his not recognizin' the fact he's aboard an' he pumps a ca'tridge inter the breech. The ham drummer we put to bed a li'le while ago, he takes my guns—me bein' some 'busy with handling them hawsses, believe me, arrers makin' a pin cushion out of 'em—an' he blazes away.

"An' then the li'le lady—God bless her!—face like an angel, voice like a wild clarino; like a medder lark. She takes the railroader's gun an' she lets go out of the right-hand winder. She kin shoot some, I'm tellin' you. It ain't easy to hit an Injin streakin' it on a painted mustang an' only hittin' the high spots. But she's cool as ice in Greenland. An' she gits one of 'em right in the laig. C'uldn't have done it better myself.

"Do you know what she says when I congratulates her about it afterward? She says it was thrillin' an' wonderful. 'Wasn't you afraid,' I asks her? 'What fer?' says she. 'Thet wouldn't have got us nothin'.' Beat thet? The stage comp'ny ought to give her a gold medal studded with diamonds."

"What's her name?" asked some one.

The stage driver scratched his head.

"Somethin' like Hansen, or Nansen—anyway it's on the waybill. I know her first name is Lucy, 'cause thet was what the feller called her who drove up in the rig an' stopped the stage seven miles out of Laguna. He was foreman for her brother-in-law, he said. She told me she expected some one to meet her but I reckon she thought it would be in Laguna. She seemed some surprised, but the feller told her they was savin' miles an' time, an' her folks was anxious to see her. Said her sister was kind of poorly an' her brother-in-law was lookin' out for her. Thet started her off, quick. Last I seen of her was a cloud of dust, an' her leanin' out to wave back at me. Say, they could cut my laig off if I thought she'd nurse me—both of 'em. You should have seen her eyes

when she heard her sister was sick. It was some different from the way they snapped when the Injuns was playin' tag with us."

"What was her brother-in-law's name?" More than one asked that, fired by the driver's eulogy which had been more than confirmed previously by the drummer.

"I'm derved if I know," he acknowledged, and saw his stock decline. "She didn't mention it, an' the feller thet drove up, he didn't say. Jes' says to her, 'Is this Lucy?' like folks do out here, not meanin' to be familiar, I reckon. She says 'Yes,' an' soon's he says her sister's sick, out she clumb."

There was a discussion of various ranches to which she might have gone. It was evident that Lucy Hansen, if that was her name, had aroused interest sufficient to insure her almost a public reception when first she came to town. It was evident, also, that Strong was not the only one who would have made some excuse to drift out to her brother-in-law's ranch beforehand if they could have located it.

In one way he was not too vexed at the driver's lack of memory. He left the little crowd in the lobby and went down the street to a restaurant and in to supper. There a man came over to his table. It was Laguna's postmaster, a somewhat shiftless incumbent who had never been able to grasp the idea that his position did not officially entitle him to inquire into the nature of the mail he handled.

"You're handlin' Gardner's affairs, ain't you, Strong?" he asked.

"I'm looking out for his interests." That was another matter he had decided to take up with Clayborne, now that the attorney showed permanent sign of redemption. "Why?"

"Letter come for Mrs. Gardner—marked 'Important.' It's got no return address on it. In a ordinary course I'd have to send it back as a dead letter,

but it might mean somethin' could be attended to best by you, seein' you're representin' their int'rests, as you put it. I see you go inter the hotel an' I put it in my pocket, figgerin' I'd give it to you. Here 'tis. I reckon if you give me a receipt for it as Gardner's agent it'll be all right. I suppose a dead man *kin* have an agent.

"I ain't got time to read all the stuff they shoot in to me to go through. I'm runnin' the regulations by common sense. I ain't stuck on the job anyway. There ain't much in it, an' nobody else wants it. I'm just hangin' on till the railroads git here an' then I suppose they'll want to run me out of it an' give it to some dude politician.

"It come by the stage. Not this one—last week. Thought you might come in an' I'd see you but they tell me you've been away. Here's the receipt. Ain't you goin' to *open* it?" he asked disappointedly, as Strong signed for the letter and put it in his pocket.

"I'll open it with Lawyer Clayborne," he said. "I reckon mebbe it's the right thing to give me this but I'd ruther open it when he's present. Or not open it at all if he says not."

"Huh! Tell me he's makin' out to git along without licker. He *can't*. All peaked up now. A man who's drunk as much as he has, and as long, has got to depend on it. Won't be able to digest 'thout it. An' I reckon a postmaster ought to know as much about the rights of his office as any half-reformed lawyer that's forgot how to practice. He's ten years behind the law."

"Jest the same he's the only lawyer we got in town." Strong grinned at the offended postmaster and mollified him. He had a smile that had more than once served him. Since he had laughed at Hurley in the mud pool he had been able to grin again.

"Lobo Smith's back again," went on the postmaster. "They come into town last night, closed the doors down to the

tent an' raised high hell. I'll bet they sure do stir up devilment when they shuts themselves in thet way," he said enviously. "They say they throw eagles an' double eagles round like it was grain for the chickens. Them cantina gals is the chickens all right," he added with a wink, "an' Ramon an' Sprague do their share of scratchin'."

All signs of the grin had faded from Strong's face. Things closed in once more about a grim purpose. If he had come back last night he might have met the man who killed Bramley. He would probably have come in with the rest of the lawless crew, confident in their numbers. But, whether the doors of the Tent had been locked on them or not, Strong knew that he would have got that man if he had been sure he was inside.

He would have broken in and held them all up while he singled him out and then he would have given him a chance at the draw. Lobo himself might have meddled. If he did, so much the better. Lobo's draw was like a lightning flash, his aim deadly, but something in Strong's soul assured him that, when it came to a show-down between them, he would get his man. He might not go unscathed—and even through the tense desire that now mastered him once again, bound him to the one resolve—he knew that he wanted to live. The face of the girl, as she had looked at him outside the Encinada road house, flashed between him and the vision of death he had once contemplated with serenity.

He had been able to analyze the look she gave him after he regarded it through a perspective glass of memory, unfiled by his own temporary sense of having been rude. It had not been one of anger. It was not wrath at his staring that had made her turn rose color beneath her bonnet. It had been almost as if she had seen in him something of what he had seen in her, a startled,

pleased surprise at finding some one who was different from the rest of the world. Strong was not conceited and he had come to this conclusion after due allowances.

Lobo was in Three Corners! Strong finished his meal in silence after the postmaster left to join the lobby group, still listening to the stage driver outdo Hank Monk, and then he went to find Clayborne with his face once more set hard.

His roan was outside the hotel. As Strong walked up the street a Mexican who had just ridden into town and had hitched his pinto next to Strong's mount, followed him.

Clayborne had an office now, a modest back room to a general store. It was not yet dark and he found the lawyer seated by the open window, vigorously chewing tobacco.

"I find it helps to allay certain cravings," he told Strong as he cut himself a fresh morsel. "How have things been going with you? I hear the stage got attacked by Apaches. Railroads will stop all that sort of thing. Edmonds should have been on that stage but he told me he might take a private rig if certain matters became urgent." He cocked an eyebrow at Strong and went on. "The will has not been probated yet. It takes time. The machinery of the law has a great many cogs. What can I do for you?"

Strong showed him the letter and retailed the postmaster's decision for giving it to him.

"Ah!" said Clayborne. "You are not a lawful agent; you have no power of attorney. Your looking out for Gardner's interests is based upon the law of kindness, for which we can find no legal authority. I do not think that you have the slightest right to receive this letter.

"That ass of a Taylor should know that, the moment that two-cent stamp is placed upon the envelope and it is committed to the mails, it becomes in-

violate under the regulations of the Federal government. And, while the law has not yet come to Laguna in the general sense of that word, the Federal law reaches over all the territory of this United States, as many have found out to their sorrow and more will. The Federal government acknowledges no lawlessness when it chooses to exercise its functions."

Once more he cocked his eyebrow at Strong as if he reserved some secret in which the latter and the Federal government might be involved. This time Strong noticed it.

"Meanin' thet I have let myself in fo' a term in the penitentiary?" he asked.

"Hardly that, sir. Taylor is the more guilty party. I do not imagine that either of you will be called to account. Circumstances alter cases. Even Justice sometimes slips her blindfold and regards with an orb beaming with humanity those brought before her bar. Have you ever advertised for relatives of Mr. and Mrs. Gardner?"

"I never thought of it," Strong replied. "I was meanin' to ask you to take the thing over. Thar's quite a few assets in the way of stock, an' thar's the ranch. We cattlemen have been takin' turns lookin' out fo' the stock but we never got around to action. I reckon they left thet to me, an' now I'm puttin' it up to you."

"Very good, sir. It shall be attended to. Who's this?" he asked of the young Mexican who knocked and came in without being invited, ignoring the lawyer, his eyes only for Strong.

It was Miguel, the younger son of Maria, a lithe, handsome figure in his vaquero's costume. He spoke fairly good English and, as he illuminated it with illustrative gestures, his speech was more comprehensive, more dramatic than the ordinary. He took off his high-crowned hat and addressed himself directly to Strong, his eyes flashing as he

talked, though it did not seem at first as if he had much to impart.

"Maria, she tell me to come to Laguna, señor," he said, "since she did not know whether first you come here or to the rancho an' you say you return this evening. If you go first to the rancho then Maria, she tell you what we find out. Perhaps eet it not verree much but she want you to know firs' that Lobo is return, an' then there is some other theeng I fin' out—about the ravine." He flashed a glance toward Clayborne that showed at once his suspicion of any listener, and the question to Strong whether he should go on.

Strong nodded. He said assuringly, "Go ahead." The blood stirred in him quickly. His intuition, his hunch, was working. The ravine could mean but one thing, the place where he had lost the trail of the raiders. But he knew that he would have to let Miguel tell things his own way or he might get twisted and leave out something important, even forget it, for the time being.

"Last night, señor, Lobo comes to town. They go to the Tent, where they pay much money to Ramon an' he lock the door and keep every one out. They dreenk, they gamble, they dance, they do what they please." Miguel's expressive face showed sulkiness as he said this. It was clear that for some reason he did not approve of the unlimited license allowed to Lobo and his pack, by Ramon. His dark eyes shot fire and his fists clenched.

"Ramon Jamarillo is a dog! So long as he get the gol' he do not care what happen to those girl' he have to work for heem. Señor, there ees one girl there who say she know you, that you are caballero to her. She like you verree much. Her name is Josefa. One time she tell you not to go outside alone. You remember! The night Señor Gardner was killed, the night you first come to Bar B with Señor Bramley?"

Strong nodded. That seemed a long time ago. He felt more strongly than ever that Maria, working in her own wise ways, had uncovered some of the pattern she had spoken of, and that in that warp his own fate was interwoven.

"Josefa—her othaire name is Montez, señor—she has perhap' not always been what you call good girl, but maybe she cannot help herself. *Si?* For Ramon Jamarillo is a great rascal. Eet does not matter. I love her an' she love me. Maria she has seen her an' she say all right, after she talk long time weeth Josefa. Eet make me happy. *Si?* I hope that you weel let her come to the rancho, in time. But firs' she mus' leave that cantina. Ramon, he have her always in his debt. An' Rudd, who ees one of Lobo's band, he ees verree much fond of Josefa.

"She tell my mother that, an' Maria she tell her to make Rudd dreenk plenty to mak' gran' fool of heem, to mak' heem talk.

"Las' night, Rudd get drunk. He dance all the time weeth Josefa, he mak' love to her an' she mak' fool of heem for now she is betroth' to me an' she would keel herself before she would not be true, señor. For I mak' her my wife.

"He beg her to come weeth him to live in Doom Cañon. She say no, she weel not go to such place weeth all those rough men an' he tell her she weel not be alone. Then he laugh an' weel not tell her why except that eet ees one beeg joke. She tease heem an' he tell her part of that joke. He say Lobo ees to send heem thees morning to fool a señorita on the Socorro stage——"

"What?" Strong sprang to his feet and Miguel stopped dead at the terrible sound of his voice, the look in his face. "Go on, pronto," he ordered and his tone was like the grating of steel blades.

"Lobo, he know thees señorita ees to come on the stage because he have a letter that he find an' Rudd ees to stop the stage out of town an' tell the girl he

ees come to meet her. Then he weel take her to the cañon an' eef she ees as pretty as her sister, El Lobo weel take her. Eef she is not so pretty then perhaps the men weel throw dice for her.

"But Rudd—he ees verree drunk now, señor, an' he does not see that Josefa look at heem as eef he were a rattle-snake. Eef she had a knife she say she theenk she mus' have keel heem. But the place ees all full of Lobo's men, who would keel her too. But she ees smart. She theenk of me, an' of what Maria ask her to fin' out, so she laugh, she talk an' try find out some more. Also, she mean to see me so I can tell that señorita on the stage to be verree careful she know the man who want to take her.

"But she cannot do that. Ramon he weel not let the girl leave the cantina. They sleep there always an' there is an old woman who lock them in. I theenk this woman, she suspec' something. Perhaps Ramon tell her to be extra careful because he see Rudd talk so much to Josefa. She make Josefa sleep weeth her, an' the ol' woman she sleep like the watchdog, weeth one eye open, so Josefa cannot come to the rancho unteel late thees afternoon. She ees there now, señor. I do not want her to go back. An' the stage has come in. That young señorita——"

"They've taken her," said Strong. "Go on, boy, what more do you know? Quick."

"Onlee thees: Rudd tell Josefa that she need not be afraid he weel want the señorita eef she does not please El Lobo, that he love onlee Josefa an' weel give her anything eef she weel come to the cañon. An' then he ees so drunk he start to laugh at the joke again an' she get that from heem too. Señor, the señorita on the stage ees the sister of the Señora Gardner who ees come to stay weeth her, who does not know she ees dead."

"Hell! Clayborne, where's that

letter? We've got to open it!" He snatched the letter from the desk and read it swiftly in the fading light.

"She says she is coming on the date that she set in her last letter, not having heard to the contrary, that she does not know whether this letter will reach here ahead of her or not, but for them to please be sure to meet her. Good Heavens, Clayborne, think of it! I saw this girl, at Encinada. They've got her in that wolves' den, but I'll get her out if I have to blast the walls down!"

"You can't do it alone, man," said Clayborne. "You won't have to. So it was Lobo who took Gardner's wife. He found that first letter from this sister of hers—she probably carried it in her gown, like women do. That don't matter. He got it, the devil. He murdered that woman and shot her husband down and now the brute thinks to have the other. They won't stand for that, even in Laguna. Come on up to the hotel!"

"There's no time to lose in making speeches, Clayborne. I tell you I've met that girl. I love her——"

"Confound it, Strong, don't be a fool. All the more reason not to go alone. You couldn't begin to get through that fence they've got there. They'd shoot you down like a dog. We've got to get plenty of men. We'll have to blast our way in, perhaps, but you can't do it by yourself."

"Señor——" began Miguel. Strong swept him aside.

"Come on then," he cried to Clayborne. "If you ever talked in your life to win, talk to them now. Come on to the hotel, first."

But they found the lobby almost deserted. Laguna was beginning to start its night's entertainment. The twilight was sifting down fast, and lights were beginning to show all over town.

"Most of them will be at the Tent," said Clayborne. "There's a fandango on there to-night."

They found the place crowded, early as it was, with the customers taking their after-dinner drinks. It was a sober enough lot at that moment, tough citizens, many of them, but with a sprinkling of cattlemen and ranchers. The gambling layouts had not started up and the crowd was idling the time away until the fandango should commence—a device of Ramon's to fill his place with spenders.

Miguel entered with them. There was a shout at sight of Clayborne that hushed a little when they saw Strong's bleak face beside that of the attorney. The jibes at what they thought the lawyer's fall from his good resolutions died down. The sense of something unusual leavened through them and they gathered about Clayborne as he strode across the room to a table and mounted to its top by a chair, Strong beside him, Miguel close by. Sprague was not present. It was early for him. He was not interested in fandangos but the uneasy countenance of Ramon appeared, pressing through.

"What ees thees?" he demanded and subsided as Strong shoved the barrel of a gun into his ribs, bidding him keep still. The crowd was silent, expectant.

"Men of Laguna," said Clayborne. "On this floor, not so long ago, a man was shot down. The stain of his blood is still there, in the boards. You will say he was killed fairly.

"He fired at the man he believed had abducted his wife.

"The dead body of his wife, bruised beyond belief, was found in Lago Claro not long afterward. There are not many men here who did not attend the funeral. Some went perhaps because of curiosity, yet all because they had a feeling, however dim, of sorrow in their hearts for this woman, cut off in the ripeness of womanhood.

"She had a sister, a young, beautiful and brave girl whose exploits have this day been upon the tongues of all of you.

This girl wrote to Mary Gardner that she was coming here to live with her.

"She had made her arrangements, she set the date of her arrival. This letter was close to the person of Mary Gardner. The fiend who abducted her, who violated the sacred rights of wifehood, obtained that letter. He determined to possess the sister.

"This morning he did so, sending a man to stop the Socorro stage, to greet the girl by her first name, to proclaim himself the foreman of the Gardner ranch, to beguile her through her affections by telling her that her sister was ill—knowing that sister lay moldering in her grave, next to the husband who was killed, there in the midst of you. Killed, you say, by fair play, but I say foully and deliberately murdered by the brute who had killed the wife.

"If you have memory of your mothers, of girls you held pure, if you have a drop of manhood in your veins, I call on you to rescue this girl from the fate that met her sister, to take her to-night from the debauched brute whom Satan himself would deny as kin, to wipe out the pack of Lobo, to arm, and storm Doom Cañon. If not, you are guilty of black cowardice. You are lower than the skulking brutes that strip the bones of the dead."

He had held them, gripped them with the power of his invective, the denouncing eloquence of his voice. He was no longer the town drunkard but a whipper-in of their manhood, what of it was left. Yet at the mention of Lobo most of them held back while some pressed forward, a dozen, not more, ranchers and cattlemen, coming through the press to stand by Strong, beside the sweating Ramon, whose face was a sickly tan.

Others had come in, standing by the door. Among them was Sprague. He came forward.

"What are you raving about?" he demanded without any of his usual

suavity. "What are you wasting your time listening to that old soak for? Calls himself a lawyer—maybe he was one before he got disbarred—and brings charges like that with the other man absent. You can bet your last dollar he wouldn't be chirping his head off if Lobo was on hand, and he won't chirp any more when Lobo hears about it. Why, you lush, you've tossed off a thousand drinks Lobo's paid for and now you try to start something like this. Where are your proofs of this guff?"

Clayborne started to speak but, following Sprague's lead, they began to hoot and jeer at him. Only the ranchmen remained silent. Strong's guns came out.

"You give him a chance to finish his talk," he called above the gibing cries, "or some of you will quit talking right now. And that goes for you, Sprague, first of the lot."

They saw his silent allies, his guns, slowly, steadily moving in arcs that menaced them all. They saw that the man himself was holding his control by a strenuous effort, that some stress was on him that made him dangerous as a coiled rattler and, little by little, they quieted.

"I've got the proof," said Clayborne. "I'll give you enough now. And there's plenty more." For a moment his eyes roved over the crowd. His face lightened as he surveyed the group that had just come in.

"Here's one man I want," he said. "Here's my main witness, gentlemen—the man that drove the stage in. Now we'll give you your proof."

He spoke quietly, but in a tone of utter conviction. Not yet had he used any of his usual oratory. He had talked to them straight, knowing the value of time. Now, much of his former dignity had come back to him. His mien had the assurance of a successful counselor, sure of his case. The stage driver stepped forward.

"I just come in," he said. "I don't know what this is all about."

"So much the better. An unprejudiced witness. Your name, sir?"

"Seth Larkin."

"Tell us what the man was like who stopped your stage this morning and told Miss Lucy that he was foreman of the Gardner Ranch."

"Why, he was a sort of tall chap, well as I could judge, lookin' down on him like I did from the box. He was a bit bald, had a straw-colored mustache, trimmed kind o' short, and a powder mark on his right cheek up by the eye. What's the idea?"

"He said he was foreman of the Gardner Ranch and that Miss Lucy's sister was sick and her brother-in-law, Mr. Gardner, was staying with her?"

"He sure did. Anything wrong?"

"And every man in this room knows that Gardner and his wife are in their grave together, that there never was a foreman to the outfit. As for this man I, myself do not recognize him. He is probably a newer recruit of Lobo's. But I will venture my own life on the assertion that his name is Rudd and that there are plenty here who know him as a member of Lobo's gang of ruffians, abductors and murderers. You know him, Sprague, lie as you may. You know him, Ramon."

There were more murmurs now, but still reluctance.

Strong's voice rang out once more.

"You keep yore hands whar they are, Sprague, or I'll drill you between the eyes."

There was no doubt of that threat, of the willingness that backed it. Strong's eyes were flashing like bright steel in the sun. This Rudd, with the powder mark, the stubby, straw-colored mustache, the partly bald head, was not merely the man who had carried off the girl he knew was the only one in all the world for him, but the man who had killed Bramley. Comparatively a new

comer, there were doubtless many of Lobo's men he had never seen, who had not been with him the night Gardner was killed, but Rudd was one of the outfit and Lobo was indisputably linked with the raid, with the death of Gardner's wife.

"Lobo is a fiend!" cried Clayborne. "Are you going to let him turn this place into a hell or are you game to send him to the one where he belongs? I'm giving you your chance, men. I'm not begging you," he added and his voice changed to a note of domination, the voice of one who no longer pleaded but ordered.

But none stepped forward to join the little company by the side of Strong save the stage driver.

"Why, you pack of lousy coyotes," the driver said, "you bums, that gal's little finger is worth all yore miserable hides an' the muck they hold together. She fit agin' the 'Paches yestiddy. Likely saved my life an' others an' you stand thar like you was made of straw. I had a notion thar was somethin' wrong this mornin', but she seemed to think it was all right, goin' off to her sick sister. I'd have twisted that Rudd's neck off at the roots if I'd guessed the least part of what he was up to. I'll do it yet. I'm with you, old-timer," he said to Strong. "If thar's any more here with the guts of wood ticks, they'll jine in."

"You can't git into the cañon, no way," demurred a voice.

"Hell! You kin try," said the driver, and the sarcasm in his voice had the rasp of a file.

"Come on," cried Strong. "We can't wait, boys. You know what happened to Mrs. Gardner." His voice was hoarse, the whites of his eyes blood-shot, his fingers twitched on the triggers as if he expected opposition and would welcome it. But it was not forthcoming. Aside from any other consideration, the rest were afraid, sure that they could not force the cañon, sure that

those who went would be killed and that Lobo would have bloody vengeance on the rest who might be suspected of sympathy. They would not stop Strong—they feared him—but they would not follow.

"We'll wait just a minute, Strong. It won't delay the result."

Strong faced Edmonds who had come forward from the door, standing now by the side of Sprague.

"This is my affair—not a railroad matter," Strong declared. "Let us get out of that door, or——"

"I am a United States marshal," said Edmonds coolly, and there was such an air of efficient authority about him that Strong was momentarily checked, staring at him in surprise. "I'm after Lobo Smith for other matters than these, but he'll stand trial for them. We've been watching him for some time. It was you, Strong, who gave me the clew with that button you picked up on the back trail. It is the kind Chinese use to fasten their blouses with. It was the link we needed.

"Lobo has been smuggling Chinese across the Mexican border at a thousand dollars a head—gold money.

"If you stir, Sprague, I'll put a bullet through you. That goes for you too, Ramon. You've been helping them distribute the chinks after they got them here. You've got some in your cellar now. You are both under arrest. Get them, boys."

Two of the men who had come with him snapped handcuffs on the two owners of the cantina and marched them behind the bar for temporary keeping.

"So I'm here to get Lobo Smith," Edmonds went on. "I've got eight men with me. I could swear every one of you in for deputies, if I wanted cowards. As Mr. Clayborne says, you've got a chance to volunteer. If we can't get through to the cañon with what force we can muster, I have authority to use the United States cavalry. I

have sent a messenger to the post already. They will be here before midnight.

"You boast, some of you, that the law hasn't come to Laguna. You're wrong. Uncle Sam is on the job right now and, where the Federal law once comes, the civil law will follow.

"Under the circumstances, I am not going to wait for the cavalry. I am going to get into that cañon if I have to blow it apart with dynamite. It interests me a little right now to know how many of you are plain skunks. When I find out, I may be still more interested. The law has come to Laguna."

He eyed them severely and they shifted uneasily, shuffling on their feet, wondering what he might know of their own especial crimes.

"Strong, here's your chance to help get Lobo."

"I'm after Rudd first," said Strong. "After we get Miss Lucy. For Heaven's sake, Edmonds, don't let's talk any mo'. Think of what may be happenin' to her."

The tide had turned. There were those who slunk off, behind more who pressed forward. Edmonds called for arms, ammunition, for dynamite and lanterns, crisply organizing those who hurried to rally round the supreme authority. The law had come to Laguna. Three Corners was due for a sweeping and the first cleansing was to be in Doom Cañon. Many who were uncertain of their own standing were eager now in the hope of later immunities.

Strong ran into the street to get his horse. He acknowledged the wisdom of using this massed posse, the necessity of it, but he burned for a surety of personal vengeance. Now it had been taken from him, unless he could fight his way through to Rudd—Rudd first—and then Lobo. They would fight and, whatever they might decide themselves, he vowed they should not

be taken alive, Federal government or not.

Miguel ran beside him toward the hotel.

"Señor," he pleaded. "Señor, you would not listen before. I have not told you all. There ees a back way out of the cañon to the ravine."

"*The ravine!*" Strong stopped.

Down the street men were pouring out of the cantina, mounting, racing off for rifles, opening up a store for dynamite, for tools and lanterns.

"What's that you say?" asked Strong and his voice cleared with a new hope. "A back way to the gorge?" He had not been deceived after all. The raiders he had tracked had not come out of the water. In some way they had entered through the cliff.

"*Si, señor.* What eet ees, I do not know. Rudd was verree drunk when he tell Josefa that so all their gold came to them. He did not talk of Chinamen but——"

"All right. Git on your hawss. We'll go to the ranch!"

There was dynamite there, used for blasting post holes. He would find the entrance and break through with Hurley—thanks to the steaming mud—with Miguel and his brother and the cook, Juan. Josefa was there at the ranch, afraid to return to the cantina. She might know more than Miguel could tell. They would get through while the rest stormed the cañon gate, rescue Lucy, find Rudd and Lobo, attacking in the rear.

"Ride, like hell!" he called to Miguel. And the two went tearing down the main street through the assembling posse, out past the lake where Mrs. Gardner's body had been found, out to the plain with pounding hoofs, manes and tails streaming in the wind of their own going. It was full night now, stars glittering, a moon slowly rising. The ravine at the back of the mesa ran east and west. The moon would light it; if

not, there were lanterns. They would light a roaring fire from driftwood—he could carry some kerosene to start it and for torches.

Somehow, they would get through the cliff.

Strong was sure of that. The wind was cold to his face as the horses raced, belly to ground, and the blood was cool in his veins. At last he would even scores and now he was to fight for the girl, for her dead kin, as well as for Bramley. To win her and to hold her. Only he sent up a brief prayer that he might get there in time.

A dog barked. Perro! There were the lights of the ranch. Strong shouted, fired his revolver in the air and a figure came hurrying to the ranch gate. They thundered through. Off saddle at the porch, they went into the room where the girl Josefa and Maria started up as Strong strode in. Hurley limped in from the next room, his wrinkled face filled with expectant inquiry, his eyes shining.

"Git yore guns an' saddle up, Bill," cried Strong. "Here's where you git yore chance fo' shootin' straight. I need you. We've got 'em. They've stolen Gardner's sister-in-law. The U. S. marshal is out after the outfit for smugglin' chinks. Cavalry's comin', but we'll git 'em from the back. Kin you ride?"

"Kin a frog hop? I been waitin' fo' you to show up. Hell's bells! boy, I'm with ye, cartridges to coffins. I went out to the mud hole again yestiddy an' I'm limber as a pine sapling." He hurried off to the corral, and Strong turned to question Josefa more closely.

CHAPTER VII.

The moonlight sent a slowly widening belt of silver along the top of the western wall of the gorge when they entered it. The stream was still high from recent rains, and it was so dark on the floor of the ravine that they were forced

to pick their way along the narrow beach at what seemed to Strong's alarm and impatience a snail's pace, though the wise ponies did their best, with eyes far better than their masters' in the night.

Josefa had not been able to tell him more about the nature of the back way that led out from the mesa and through which Lobo convoyed his Chinese in from beyond the Mexican line. It was no wonder he could fling his gold across the cantina bars and gaming tables with such an inexhaustible supply of the smuggled Orientals willing to pay high so that, in the forbidden country, they could make in a few years' effort the fortune denied them in their own land after the toil of a lifetime.

Once safely in the mesa's recesses, they would be taken after dark to Ramon's, when Lobo had bought the cantina out for the night, thence to be passed on as occasion offered, dispatched by the "underground" throughout the country, relayed through Chinese laundries in the settlements, helped and hidden out by the Chinese cooks on various ranches until they drifted at last into the great cities, merged in the web of Chinatown until the time came when they were ready to go back home without hindrance under false papers, easily enough obtained.

The Exclusion Act was a farce while holes like these were kept open. It was small wonder that the government was keen to plug them when they were found and to punish the principals.

But the Chinese did not cause Strong any concern, save that it had been his finding of the brass button that had once fastened the blouse loop of a coolie that had tipped off the source of Lobo's wealth and led to the assembling of forces that would ultimately eliminate Lobo's rascally pack and bring law and order to Laguna. He cared only to make his way through the cliff before the posse had broken down the fence and forced their entrance.

Strong rode in an agony of mind whenever he thought of what might be happening—what might have happened—to the girl, an agony that dulled his brain while it flooded it with hot, swift-moving blood and brought a red mist before his eyes. The sweat broke out on his forehead, and he clenched his fists until his nails dug into his horny palms. To have seen the one girl in all the world, alighting from the coach, filled with gayety and animation, looking at him with the blush that told of the mysterious affinity that had been established on sight between them, even as the electric spark bridges the gap between the nodes.

To have seen her thus, to imagine her getting into the buckboard with the hypocritical Rudd, chosen by Lobo because he was not likely to be known to driver or passengers, seated beside that killer, thief and criminal, asking questions about the ranch, her sister's welfare. And then the agony of entering the gloomy cañon only to find that she was trapped—with Lobo's leering face appraising her as he stroked his black beard and his amber eyes.

Such things sapped at his reason and his manhood. They threatened to unnerve him so that he could not even shoot straight—once they got through.

For the first time a doubt assailed him of that possibility. He gazed at the wall across the rushing creek, with the web of moonlight, slowly—all too slowly—widening, reaching down in tardy certainty, while he strove to recall how it had appeared opposite to where he had lost the hoofprints, had waded the stream. There was hardly any verdure on those steep heights, only a few shrubs here and there.

He remembered the face of the rock as he had examined it, looking for some ledge up which horses might travel. It revived itself now before his mind's eye, ribbed and seamed here and there, plain as the side of a building and al-

most as sheer, visible to his insight as an actual photograph. The course of the whole ravine was imaged in his brain. He knew the landmarks as they passed them though this was night and he had surveyed it by day.

They had passed the pool and the cataract. Ahead the ravine curved, narrowed, widened out again and curved once more to where they would see the ghostly wisp of the waterfall streaming down. Then, on their left, masked by projecting juts of rock, the stony trail he had come down. He would not miss that. How about the way in to the mesa?

They had dynamite with them, and pine which, steeped in kerosene, would act as flares to enable them to examine the face of the mesa wall or to start a ramping fire for the same purpose. They had passed plenty of driftwood, logs brought plunging down from the heights in the winter storms, stripped of bark, bleached, showing in the dark like the flayed bodies of dead beasts. Use of the explosive must be a last resort for fear it might warn those within.

He figured that he should have a good hour before the posse could reach the cañon. That would take Lobo's forces to the front at the first alarm. They would leave the girl—she might yet be unharmed.

The beach widened, the horses quickened their pace automatically. They sensed well enough the urge that communicated itself to them through the sympathy between them and their masters. Hurley brought his mount up even with the roan. Next came Maria's two boys with Juan, the cook, bringing up the rear. A forlorn hope it might have seemed, five only, but the same spirit animated all of them, save that it burned more strongly within Strong, lighted by the flame of the love that had come to him so suddenly and so imperiously.

Yet he knew that Hurley could hold

no more of determination, and he did not doubt that the loyalty of the boys and the doughty little cook would prove valiant enough. For Miguel, there was his Josefa, for his brother, the pride or scorn of Maria, for Juan, his already established reputation in the fight against the raiders. And, in Hurley, there was the memory of years of steady friendship from Bramley to him, a cripple, barely able to earn his keep.

Hurley wore a grin in the darkness that was more happy than grim. He was going gleefully to help discharge the debt he had set against himself, going once more into the action that had been so long denied him, reviving once more the old turbulent times when Bill Hurley had been the cock of all the ranchos, an old cock, whose crow was rusty from disuse but whose spurs were ready for action.

He rode without ache or pain. What the mud had not purged away, excitement did. His right hand rested on the butt of his six-gun and occasionally he patted it. Old fire eater that he was, he loved the thrill of the encounter, the chance of the draw, the prize of penalty of the aim, the game for life and death with bullets for dice. He could still shoot and he was well satisfied with this adventure, even if it turned out to be his last, even if he went down with the smoke fading from his gun muzzles as the last breath went up out of his body. He would not lie there alone, he told himself.

"I reckon that mesa is reg'lar honey-combed," he said to Strong in a low voice that the place seemed to call for. "Some of 'em is. I've gone through a heap of caves, mostly washouts, in the Mogollon. Some places they was open to the sky, rifts from earthquake, likely, reg'lar little valleys. I'll bet, now, thet Lobo found some sech openin' through thet cave they say the crick comes out of. Mebbe cliff dwellings. Them Pueblos knowed the inside of the mesa

like a rat knows the run of a Swiss cheese."

"They claim thar was a hull tribe massacred in Doom Cañon one time. Thet's how it got its name. I've been thinkin' about thet," said Strong. "Looks like as if thar was any back way out, them Injuns would have escaped."

"Not necessary," returned Hurley and his words brought comfort to Strong. Doubt, assailing him, had brought up the position they would be in if they failed to find a way after all, if Rudd's drunken talk had been only babble and brag or if Josefa had misunderstood his thickening speech. By the time they had exhausted all their efforts in vain and, giving it up, had reached the Doom Cañon entrance again, the issue would be over.

"They might have got massacred all right an' then the water opened up a rift workin' through the soft soil between the rock. Mesas air built thet a way, like so much plum puddin', with the rocks fo' plums.

"It's thet way in the Mogollon. Lots of caves, you see, thet get gradually connected up by the water. Suthin' happened thet a way, likely, between the time them Injuns was massacred an' the time Lobo goes round lookin' for a likely place to run his chinks. With a back door, thet would be perfect, an' the big fence an' gate an' all across the entrance to Doom Cañon would make you think sure thet was the only way in or out.

"We're likely to meet them backin' up if we don't work our passage quick. If Uncle Sam once gits goin', them cavalry sojers'll stay with the job till it's ended. Likely they'll tote a field piece along. I wish thet moon would rise a li'le earlier. Sure moves slow, don't it, when you're watchin'?"

Strong did not answer. He was watching for landmarks in the dark, wondering what they should look for in

the cliff. It might be a door of wood or steel, painted and perhaps sanded over so as to look like the native rock. That seemed like a romance of fiction. Let such an entrance fit ever so closely, he did not believe that he would have missed it on his previous inspection.

But there *must* be some way—

The water actually washed against the northern cliff. The Chinese coolies might be brought on foot through the mountains but he doubted it. And this meant that the entrance must either be close to normal creek level for the horses to cross its threshold, or there must be some landing ledge, some practical trail leading to it. And he was quite sure there was nothing of that sort.

If there was a door it would open from within. There would have to be some one on hand to open it on call, some means of communication from the ravine that would summon the doorkeeper and, perhaps, a guard.

The problem grew as he neared the twisting way by which he had descended into the gorge. At last they came to the bend where they could see the filmy scarf of the waterfall and hear its rush above the chatter of the creek. Presently Strong stopped, held up a hand. The four gathered round him.

"Here was where I came down," he said to Hurley. "It don't look much like a trail, does it? But here she was, with the sign leadin' into the crick. I rode across to see if thar was any way out on the other side but thar ain't. Now we'll go look fo' some sign of a door. Might be made some queer shape so's to fit in a natural fissure, or they may have squared the natural openin' off. It might be a man-made tunnel, but I doubt it. One thing's a sure cinch: if it ain't close to the water's edge, thar's got to be a trail leadin' to it. Git them torches goin' an' each grab one. Anything you see looks like it might be the place, holler out."

Now the night was lighted by the flaring torches flinging a ruddy light on the cliff, reflected in the swift water like streaks of blood. They crossed the stream in the saddle, holding the kerosene-soaked wood high, examining every foot of wall from water line to as high as they could throw the glare. They searched for sign of ledge or trail, downstream as far as the creek bed could be waded and then up, where the boulders were not so large and the going easier. And they searched in a silence, save for the creek, the fall, the crackle of the torches, that momentarily seemed to close in about them in the lonely gorge.

"It sure beats me," said Hurley at last. "I reckon thet fella Rudd must have been stringin' yore gal, Miguel. If they git beyond thet cliff I figger they've got to fly or else they're like the chap in the story I read when I was a kid, who come to the robber's cave an' says 'sesame,' or somethin' like thet, an' the rock rolled open an' in he goes to pick di'monds off the trees. *Hell!*"

He summoned the last note of exasperated invective into the exclamation of acknowledged defeat. Strong was still in the water, riding upstream. If there was a way in, there was just one place left to look for it, though so far it had not occurred to him as a logical one. Desperation suggested it but, as he splashed through against the current, finding the going quite easy until at last the roan was actually walking on sand, it seemed more possible and hope, that had nearly failed him, began to filter back again.

He had, in the beginning, supposed, quite naturally, that the raiders, once they entered the gorge, would follow the creek down and then swing north along the mesa wall to the home cañon. He now realized that he might well have been obsessed by that idea, contradicted though it seemed to be by the nature of the lower waters and the lack of sign

on the sand. He had gone as far up the gorge as the beach permitted, and he had ridden up the bed of the creek, examining the opposite cliff, almost as far as he had come to-night.

Just ahead was the basin into which the fall emptied, foaming and bubbling, undoubtedly deep with the age-long pounding of the high cascade, its sides sheer rock about which the eddies circled darkly, untouched by the gleam of his torch. To examine it would have seemed folly at any other time save this crisis when it looked as if his hunch was to be a lamentable failure, as if his impetuosity had defeated itself.

The pool was roughly circular. At its head was the cliff down which rushed the fall from mysterious sources that only the eagle and the buzzard knew—a never failing supply.

At its foot was a smooth-lipped outlet between low ledges where the creek commenced, coming out with oily smoothness in one surging wave. It was all streaked with foam and dark with suggestion of slippery sides funneling down to the bottom. Man and horse, or man alone, once in that whirling pool, would be, one could imagine, like a rat in a bucket. But there were places where the surface was fairly smooth, where the flow seemed, by reason of some inequality of the lining, to lack force. So to the right of the pool, Strong fancied.

The roan did not like the place. It was like a pit, damp and smelling of water and lichens, of decay and things primeval. If a horse has memory, something might well have stirred there to revive ancient days when its ancestor came to that pool to drink and some frightful monster arose and dragged it down. At last it refused to go closer to the margin, to the break where the black water slipped through. Yet its footing was still good—surprisingly so.

Strong rode back to the end of the beach where the rest stood about a fire

they had kindled which flung their shadows grotesquely about. He took a fresh torch and kindled it, dismounted, selecting a long branch from the drift they had brought together for their fire.

"Have you found somethin'?" asked Hurley half-heartedly.

"Not yet. But thar's sure one funny thing. The bottom of thet crick is all-fired level up thar close to the pool. My hawss don't like it, but it's mostly on account of all thet water tumblin' down in front of him an' the pool *looks* bad. I ain't so dead sure it is. I'm goin' to find out."

They watched him as he waded the icy water—thigh-deep, waist-deep, up around his ribs. He had taken off cartridge belt and guns, and he went on, slowly emerging again as he neared the pool. It looked as if he was mounting a ramp and, beneath his feet, the rock felt foreign to the surrounding formations—almost artificial. Then he was on the edge, less than ankle-deep beside the smooth-lipped notch where the main flow came through.

They saw him holding the torch at various angles, probing with his pole. Then, gingerly stepping down into the pool itself, proceeding more boldly, close to the right-hand wall and with the water no higher than his calves at any time, he went partly through and barely behind the showering spray of the fall itself and disappeared!

CHAPTER VIII.

The boast of Lobo that he feared nothing on this earth and believed in nothing concerning the next was, in the main, true. His conscience, whatever there may have been of it at birth, had been warped and atrophied, its voice set aside for the louder call of his lusts and appetites, which he indulged to their top bent.

Being a man of great strength, of fierce quickness of action, of undoubted courage when compared with his as-

sociates, he soon became a sort of leader among them and in that commonwealth of criminals, gathered together in Three Corners, went to the greatest possible depths of villainy to create a constant envy and admiration of his prowess as the biggest and most daring miscreant of them all. He made a sort of frolic of his wickedness, stimulating his own evil instincts to think up such revels as might make him the terror of the countryside and inspire his own followers with the idea that he was the only real devil existent.

"We can make a better hell than the one they rant about, any day," he said. "And a better heaven, for that matter."

There was within him, however, the undying nucleus of a soul that still distinguished right from wrong, however feeble its promptings had become, however he smothered its with debauchery. It took the form of superstition, of various premonitions that certain things would bring him bad luck, though he did not recognize such misfortune as only another form of punishment that threatened his continued misdeeds.

His powerful frame had withstood all the orgies, public and private, that he continually devised and carried out, but he had reactions from them that he did not attribute to that cause. Despite himself, carousals palled upon him, women no longer intrigued him, the flinging of his gold on bars and layouts, and the fawning of others, half servile, half mocking when they cheated him—as he knew they did—soured him.

From a purposeful bully, deliberately overtopping and overmastering his men by bursts of fury, he grew moody and irritable. Small things caused great friction, he lost sleep, magnified all setbacks and losses, and found that liquor no longer gave him the roaring reactions that once led him into excesses which even the most casehardened of his pack talked of in whispers.

Only one man had he met who had

made his own glance falter, and that was Strong, the cowboy, who had become the partner of Bramley after the death of Gardner, who had stood and out-faced him when Lobo's own guns were drawn. The thought that he had backed down from a second killing that night came upon him in a sort of blind fury when he could not sleep, sodden though the rest were with liquor.

It was this that had caused him to send the raid out after Strong and Bramley. The latter had been killed, but the former had not only escaped, but had shot down three of his own men and put the rest to rout. His rage over the account given him had left the other members of that ambuscade a trifle sullen.

From the night of the killing of Gardner, Lobo believed that things had gone wrong with him. It was bad luck, he told himself, to shed blood in the place where you were going to gamble, but he had done no better elsewhere that night. Superstition hinted that it was bad luck to kill the husband of the woman he had taken by force and who had killed herself.

Ghosts and spirits he laughed at, but sometimes, of late, the laugh rang hollow even in his own ears. He began to have visions of a woman's figure in clothes tightly molded to her body by the torrent in which she swirled, with her eyes glassy and wide open, fixed upon him, not with reproach, or even threat, but with an awful stare that penetrated his own closed eyelids. Nor could he be always certain whether he saw this phantom when asleep or awake. Sometimes, he felt certain that he was wide awake and watched it fading away until nothing was left but the staring eyes, blankly accusing.

Beyond doubt he drank enough to bring on a species of delirium, but it always assumed the same form, and he drank deeper to banish it from the sleep that was never sound, from which he

often started with face dripping in a clammy sweat, his nerves disordered. At times his hand shook slightly, and he suspected that others noticed it, that they talked about him as of a man whose luck had forsaken him.

He lost big amounts to Sprague and others, the ambushade had resulted in disaster, this last run of Chinese had been only half successful, and his Mexican colleagues had warned him that it must be discontinued for a time, that there were indications of spies, that they might find it more profitable to make arrangements for a better crossing. Infuriated, he had threatened them, and they had shrugged their shoulders. The Chinese were landed in the Gulf of California on Mexican soil. Their alliance was absolutely necessary to him while they could get along without Lobo. There were other borderers who could act with them.

Without funds, he felt his hold slipping on his men, but he hated to strike out elsewhere. Doom Cañon, with its haunted reputation, with its almost impregnable entrance, the exit back of the waterfall, the open, parklike space beyond the cave whence the creek issued, was almost impossible to duplicate. To leave was to acknowledge defeat, as he saw it, and his pride would not permit.

He had sworn to get rid of Strong after this last run, and after one other deed had been carried out, through which he hoped by blacker villainies to blot out the visions of the drowned woman with her staring eyes, whirling through the coil of seething waters. His men he still dominated, could still steep in liquor with promises of greater loot.

There was the letter that the dead woman had carried in her gown, together with a silver print of the writer, the likeness of a young girl whose face conveyed an almost startling impression of innocence coupled with vitality. It was the somewhat crude result of an itinerant photographer's camera, but

even the operator's lack of artistry and the cheap process could not rob the subject of its charm.

It was a constant irritant to Lobo. It spurred him to outdo crime with further evil, and to-night his plans had succeeded: he had the girl, the sister of Gardner's wife, in his power. At least he could work his will upon her.

If he had known how she was regarded by Strong, if he had guessed how she, even in this hour of peril and despair, remembered the stalwart man whose glance had met and mingled with hers, he would not have forborne to carry out his vicious determinations. Nor did he dream that Strong had tracked his raiders to the ravine, had found the tarnished brass button of a coolie's blouse, was even now with Hurley and the three Mexicans coming on through fissured passages while a United States marshal and a posse rode hard to the cañon's mouth and, at the post, "boots and saddles" was sounding.

He considered himself still omnipotent, save for the one hardly acknowledged crevice in the black armor of his villainy, pierced but by one type of weapon—the hardy look of Strong, the staring eyes of the drowned woman, and now the serene fearlessness of the glance of the girl who stood before him as he lolled, stroking his glossy beard, in the chair of the shack he had built for his own quarters in the inner, hidden glade, the existence of which Hurley, with his knowledge of the mysteries of the great Mogollon mesa, had suspected in this lesser, water-swept formation.

He had threatened her with the loss of all she held dearest, he had taunted her with the fact that her sister was dead, her brother-in-law in the same grave and still, though the agony and sorrow of the shock showed in her drawn face and pallid lips, her glance was unflinching.

She was not afraid. The beast in

him was held back, for all its promptings, by her lack of fear.

She told him so, and her low voice was steady.

"You can do horrible things to me," she said, "because you are stronger, because you are evil, but your sin cannot prosper, any more than the night can keep away the sun. I am not afraid of you. There is a hell for men like you, and I think you are very close to it." Her eyes, so like those of the drowned woman, made his own flicker—even as Strong's had made them.

"I'll make you flinch," he said. "I'll make you beg for mercy."

"You cannot make *me* beg. All you can do is to kill me—unless I can kill myself!" His eyes flinched again, as if the eyeballs twitched. He could *feel* the pupils contracting. Why did she say she would kill herself? The other one had done that, and he could not get rid of her.

"You can burn wood," she said, "but the smoke goes up—to Heaven."

He laughed at that with an effort—it was an effort—at derision, and drank to the bottom of the glass of whisky he had beside him. It had no more effect than water. It did not even warm him, and he felt cold.

"Heaven? When you get thar you tell 'em about me."

"They know already. Just as they know your punishment. You are only a coward!"

The scorn, the desperate scorn in her voice, for her body was beginning to fail her—as she summoned all its forces to support her will, stung him. There was a boisterous shout of laughter outside where his men were gambling round a blazing fire.

"They're playin' for gold out thar," he said. "I'll give 'em a better stake to gamble for. You!"

He swept her into his arms, his beard, reeking of tobacco and whisky fumes, for all its luster, blinding, half smoth-

ering her as he strode out into the night, shouting to his men.

CHAPTER IX.

Hurley, the two boys, and Juan surrounded Strong as he came back to the strip of beach and remounted, telling them to keep close in his wake.

"I'll lead the roan through first," he said. "Then I can ride, and the others will follow. There is a ledge runs round the rim of the basin. It may have been natural, to start with, but it looks to me as if they'd built it up more level. Easy goin' once you git a hawss so it'll take it. You'd hardly guess it was thar to look at the pool, but it is, and thar's a cave back of the fall with a passage leadin' out of it. We'll have to use the torches for a ways, but I reckon we'll see whar we kin put them out befo' they glimpse 'em. We've found the back door, boys. We may have to make the last of it on foot. We kin shoot better thet a way an' the hawsses might nicker if thar's any others nigh whar we come out inter their hideout.

"Miguel, an' you Pedro, an' Juan, don't chuck away yore lead. Squeeze yore triggers an' the guns won't throw up or sidewise. Aim befo' you loose, an' aim low. A body's a dern sight better target than a head."

"Thet's the talk," endorsed Hurley. His whispering voice was like the growl of an old dog, unleashed on a strong scent. "Count yore shots an' try to be nigh cover for reloadin'. An empty gun's a pore weapon when the other man's loaded, but you don't want to fer-git *they're* goin' to run out of shells same as you do. If we rush 'em, an' I reckon thet's your idee, Strong, they'll be rattled some an' shoot fast. The faster they shoot the mo' li'ble they air to miss. If you don't aim, you're jest givin' away cartridges."

"Don't shoot till Hurley an' me start," warned Strong. "Now then, wait till I coax the roan round the edge of the

pool an' ride him back. He'll be steady once he savvies he's got his footin'. Thar's an eddy thar, but it don't amount to much."

The roan went through safely, led by its bridle, returning confidently, while the other horses watched and, though they snorted a little, trailed the leader back behind the fall. They had brought all their torches with them, but used only one at a time, Strong bearing it, in the lead.

The fissure was shaped like an A some ten feet high, and, all along the way, smoke blurs showed its constant use, besides ends of charred wood, hoof-prints in the soft soil of the floor that sloped upward and then down again, the way winding by sharp turns, gradually descending well below the surface of the creek. Once they came to where three openings showed, and Strong dismounted to make sure of the right turn.

"I reckon they use mules for the chinks," he said. "Most of the sign is mules' shoe. They're surer-footed an' quieter, mostly, for this work. It's the last time chinks'll come through here," he added grimly. "What's wrong, Pedro?"

The Mexican had uttered an exclamation and crossed himself. He had made a light and looked into one of the confusing passages.

"There is a skeleton, señor," he said.

"Some one Lobo disciplined, I reckon," said Strong. "Mebbe a sick chink. If you're goin' to be feared of dead men, you better go back, son."

"No, I'm not afraid, señor, but a skeleton, eet ees bad luck."

"Bad luck for Lobo. Come on."

Still they descended, and now the walls dripped moisture, and they could hear the running of hidden streams.

They came to a pit that filled the passageway and forced them to drift down a series of perilous ledges like rough steps to a trail that hugged the damp wall and bordered a black pool

whose surface was broken by gurgling, gasping bubbles. The sound was fearfully distorted in the inclosed place. A chill wind blew through the cavern, and there was the fluttering of wings.

For better discipline, Hurley now brought up the rear, with the superstitious Mexicans ahead of him. Miguel whispered with chattering teeth and awe-struck voice.

"Thees ees hell itself. Señor, surely there are devils here! Men I do not fear, but devils——"

"I don't see 'em. Come on."

"But, señor, the wings!"

"Bats. Want to go back?"

"Heaven forbeed, señor. I stay weeth you."

They passed through a chain of connecting caves. The coolies must have arrived at their destination in a state of stupor at the strange surroundings through which they passed. Miguel's suggestion of purgatory was well taken. They crossed places where weird formations on the walls looked, in the flickering, gusty light of the torch, like strange monsters gazing down or crouching, ready to leap upon them.

Always the cold draft of air flickered and always there was the noise of hidden water, now back of the oozing walls, now overhead, or beneath their feet. They passed bats hanging like grapes from the ceiling. They rode through several hundred feet of guano deposits, so old that they were like ashes under their feet, though they still gave out a stale stench of ammonia that brought the water to their eyes.

Once, they skirted a great jut of rock and, again, they came to two upthrusts like domes. Their lofty tops were corrugated so that they resembled mammoth stems of asparagus, one of them lofting up to the high roof, both surrounded with glittering stalagmites.

There was one vast chamber with a flinty floor where the hoofs rang and echoed through the pillars of pendant

stalactites, reaching down to meet corresponding forms reared from the constant siliceous flow that made the slender pendants gleam like crystals, or icicles, where they caught the light of the torch and sent it back prismatically reflected, until it seemed as if they were indeed in Aladdin's garden of jewels, while the clang of the hoofs was changed to music, as if a giant had softly struck his tuning fork.

Some formations were shaped like elephants' ears, others like the spread wings of enormous birds, like sponges, like toadstools—many of them snowy white, flashing like moonstones. Even the desperate need for haste and the grim nature of their mission could not stay their admiration, though they passed in silence—the Mexicans in awe.

Down, ever down, they descended, and it became steadily colder. It seemed as if they had been hours on the way. Finally, they came to where a gorge opened left and right, the torch incapable of piercing the height of it, its depth a frightful abyss crossed by an unrailed bridge of planks over which the horses passed cautiously. On the far side Hurley's mount dislodged a fragment, and it went down through the gloom, descending silently into the gulf, to disappear in silence.

A sharp ascent commenced along a narrow corridor. There was a difference in the air current. It blew more strongly. It was no longer musty like the wind from a crypt, but had a tang of open air, of grasses, a faint taint of wood smoke. Again, they came to cross galleries that Strong had to explore to determine which one to take, and so, climbing fast, they arrived at a vast amphitheater and, looking upward, saw a star. It was a great shaft from the very top of the mesa.

Their direction had been steadily north and east, leading always toward the cañon. Fresh tracks showed them their path through a tunnel where they

had to crouch low, and it was difficult to handle the torch. The current became a draft of wind that was sweet and pure, and it was clear that they were coming to the open, clear that the Lobo pack did not live in caves as they had fancied.

Strong passed the torch back to Hurley, who dropped it behind in the trail where its light served them for a while. The tunnel opened out into a vaulted room with a pool, a great arch beyond, and, through the arch, the glimmer of a fire.

They held swift debate. Their torches were all gone. To return the way they had come would be difficult, if not impossible. If the attack on the cañon gate materialized soon, the situation would be altered. By themselves they could not hope to wipe out the whole crowd with odds of eight to one, hardly to hold them off. The girl must be rescued, and the disposal of her raised a problem, with scant time to solve it.

They could hear ribald laughter, the booming of a deep voice and shouts of loud acclaim. Strong slipped from his saddle and went forward to reconnoiter.

He looked out through the arch upon a glen walled in by stupendous cliffs that rose far to the rim of the mesa. High up was a field of deep purple studded by stars, not yet reached by the moon, though in the east her coming radiance could be distinguished. A fall came tumbling down a thousand feet, and from it there ran a torrent that seemed to disappear beneath an archway at the other end like the one under which he stood, doubtless the cave from which Skeleton Creek issued into the cañon.

There were trees growing here and there in little groves or standing apart—bushes and rock masses that must have fallen from the cliffs long since, vine-clad now. Along one cliff there showed the dim bulk of several cabins with

lights in the windows of one or two of them.

His quick eyes took it all in before it centered on the group that had gathered about a great fire. They seemed to be standing about a flat stone or rude table. On it he thought he saw a gleam of light fabric that caught the firelight, but was motionless. A swift stirring in his veins announced that this was Lucy.

The deep voice boomed out again, clear above the muffled roar of the fall. A chorus of "Huzzas!" followed the end of the speech.

Strong's decision was made. His heart told him that this was the girl he loved, and that she was in deadly peril. The words of Miguel rang in his ears as he raced back to his horse.

"If she did not suit Lobo," Rudd had confided to Josefa in his drunken boasting, "he would let the men throw dice for her."

This incredible thing was happening.

"Come on," he said hoarsely. "Out with your guns. Scatter the devils."

They came out on a run that changed into a gallop, a charge, increasing in speed at every stride. The Mexicans had one gun apiece. Strong and Hurley rode with one in each hand, poised, muzzle upward, guiding their horses with their knees, though once they sighted the fire and the men about it the wise ponies needed no more, knowing their objective, fired with the spirit of their masters, dodging between the blocks of stone, racing over the dense turf that carpeted their footfalls so that the eager pack did not hear them, did not heed them until after they entered the zone of the firelight.

Fast as he had come, Strong looked about him for some place to make a stand if he could not drive them. He had not been able to locate their horses. They would scatter them, save those they stretched on the grass, but the foe would rally, fight desperately.

Now the men surged together, hilarious. The booming voice had stopped. It had belonged to Lobo, without a doubt, and Strong tried to distinguish him, but failed as they came sweeping on. He could see the girl upon the table where Lobo had placed her like a slave in a market place. And she saw them—saw Strong. He was sure of that.

He saw her raise her head that had drooped, for all her bravery, at the sight of the ruffians dicing for the prize their leader had, for some strange reason, spurned. She stood erect, one hand to her breast as if to still the fluttering pulse of hope that might betray her.

On they came, the foe intent upon the cast of dice.

A roar went up, a shout of exultation.

"Double six! Match that, one of ye!"

It was Rudd, his baldness shining in the glow, his stubby yellow mustache clear—even the powder blotch. He reached for the girl and was pulled aside by others who had not yet cast. He fought with them, flung them off, and, facing the flying horsemen, stared dumb at the sight of Strong, leaning slightly forward in the saddle, with the roan's head outstretched on a snaky neck, teeth bared, nostrils wide. The light shone on the gun barrels, revealed what might be the van of a squadron, charging down.

The girl called in a glad cry and, from one side, there came the loud bellow of warning from Lobo, who, unarmed, turned and ran toward the cabins.

He was trapped, caught in his own den, the only place where he ever let his hands be beyond grasping distance of his weapons. He had no gun, and Strong, with blazing eyes that flashed crimson in the fire, was coming like a thunderbolt. Neck and neck raced the gray of Hurley, the old puncher's weathered face grim as granite.

Rudd managed an inarticulate cry, his hand dropping to his holster. His gun came out, lifted, as the pack turned, snarling, to face the little cavalcade that seemed to have risen out of the very ground.

There came a streak of fire from Strong's right-hand gun, then spurts of flame in rapid succession from the rest.

Rudd leaped high in the air, twisting, crashing down with a bullet scoring just above the powder blotch, searing through bone and brain, tearing loose the back of his skull, as the roan leaped his prostrate body. With one gun holstered, Strong swept the girl from the table into the saddle before him, and wheeled the roan through the yelping, disconcerted mob that fired wildly as the excitement-maddened horses plunged and the shots went home.

The Mexicans shouted as they rode, welded to their saddles, riding down their men and firing at close quarters, trampling others as they fled and stumbled.

There was the sharp crack of a rifle and Strong's hat flew. Lobo had gained a weapon, and only the great leaps of the roan had spoiled his aim. His deep voice roared out orders, and the pack retreated, seeking cover in the shrubbery and back of the rocks, making for the cabins and, Strong guessed, the corral. As far as he knew, they were unscathed on their side, but the rifle cracked again, and a bullet struck the neck of the roan high up, close to the roots of its name. It shrieked and plunged, and he wheeled again to seek the safety of the group of rocks he had marked as he came out. Alone he would have charged Lobo in a duel to the death, but the girl, clinging to him, with the wonderful pressure of her arms about him, her face close to his, her breath upon his face, must be taken out of danger.

In turn, he called to his own men and gathered them, going back toward

the archway, but discarding that in favor of the stone ramparts that would form a bulwark for them while they could still deal death.

Now Lobo came tearing out on a great black stallion that neighed as it galloped, other riders back of him, rifles and pistols blazing at the invaders, bent on the annihilation of the audacious little troop whose numbers they now saw, who had left twice their number on the ground, dead or writhing in final agonies.

The rocks Strong had chosen were roughly assembled in the shape of a diamond, with one angle open, through which they rode into a hollow space that held the five horses with barely room for their riders to stand beside them on account of the smaller rocks inside the great boulders. These would serve for platforms on which to stand while they held off the outlaws with their fire.

If they had gone to the arch they might have put the girl out of the line of fire behind one of the walls, but they must have been themselves exposed, and a desperate charge might well have carried through from sheer weight of odds. Now, in the knowledge that Lobo did not hold, that, before long, there must come a challenge from the end of the cañon, they were well located for a defense that should be sufficient.

Lobo undoubtedly chuckled, sure that they had made a fatal slip. He could even, if he liked, draw off his men to rifle distance and leave the invaders penned in their rocky fort to broil in the sun, perish for lack of food and water, slowly capitulate. Something of that sort drifted through Lobo's mind, but he dismissed it for a more immediate reprisal. He had both man and girl here now. He linked them together in a flash of intuition, backed by the cry she had given when she saw Strong, a cry that held more of gladness than relief.

Now he could glut his devilry by

playing off one against the other, unless he had to kill Strong. That would be a pity, for he had no mind to give him an easy death. But he was shrewd enough to know that, unless he forced the issue, he would lose ground with his men. His supposedly impregnable retreat had been entered, and he could only suppose treachery. He already suspected Rudd of talking too much when he was drunk, and he had accused him of it, only to be indignantly given a denial which had strengthened his conviction rather than weakened it.

Rudd was dead, and he was glad of it. Rudd had started the beginnings of what might grow into a revolt when Lobo had tongue-lashed him after his return from the ambushade without killing Strong. The main insurgent was disposed of, but he would have to wipe out this setback of invasion, recover the girl and his own prestige.

He recognized the shrewdness with which Strong had chosen what Lobo believed could be at the best only a temporary refuge, and he gave orders for his men to gallop about the place to draw the fire of the defenders, while two of them, expert hunters of beasts and men, clambered up the cliff to where they could command the inclosure with a plunging fire. Both were sharpshooters. The moon was due over the mesa rim within a few minutes now. It would be shining down on the inclosure by the time they gained their vantage point, and he gave them strict orders to kill off all but the girl and Strong.

"I saw five of them," he said. "Wait till they show, and you ought to clean off two the first shot. Git the other white man first. The greasers'll quit. You two air allus boastin' about shootin' out a buck's eye at a quarter of a mile. Let's see what you kin do now."

"You needn't worry none," said one of the men. "Jake an' me ain't done no boastin' we ain't backed up with the

venison. Them hawsses'll nigh fill up the space inside those rocks, but I reckon the men'll be takin' cracks at you. They'll tuck the gal in on the ground. If either of us git a good chance, what's the matter with lettin' thet Strong fella have it in the laig?"

"So long as you don't kill him."

"We won't. Jake'll work along the ledge some so we'll git 'em from two angles."

It suited Lobo and he said so, getting his men together and explaining to them what he had in mind. "Soon's 'Butch' an' Jake git goin', we'll rush the dump. We'll git Strong an' let him watch the procedin's. Rudd was high throw, wasn't he? Waal, he's lost out. You kin start the game all over. Now then, herd 'em. Hit 'em if you kin, but don't any of you plug Strong 'less you kin help it."

CHAPTER X.

Strong slid from the saddle after the girl dismounted, and, without thought, they were in each other's arms, welded by an impulse stronger than their wills, though these consented. And there was more to it than the mere bodily contact that sent the blood surging through both of them, caused their lips to meet in their first embrace as naturally as mates should meet. The swift, warm caress told Strong that the girl realized that he had come for her, told him that she had wanted him to come, that, to each other, each was the chosen one, bound by ties that mocked conventions.

Yet at the very outset she opposed him when he would have made her stay down with the horses while the men clambered to where they could see and shoot between the vine-screend crevices of the close-standing rocks.

"Give me a gun—one of those rifles," she said. "I can shoot—and hit."

He compromised by letting her take the rifle from Hurley's sheath to guard the gap by which they had come in. He

had her now. He had rescued her from a horrible fate. She was his by force of arms, by the instinct that had made him seek the way through the mesa wall, find it back of the waterfall—his by the fervor of her lips, the beat of her quick heart against his own. And he meant to hold her.

They were swept off their feet—both of them. Maria was right. It was thus that love should come, love that was lasting and worth while. His blood was still quick with the desire to meet Lobo, to shoot it out with him, to see him fall under his own hand, but, for the present, he must hold the little refuge they had found.

With the touch of the girl's lips still lingering on his own, he might almost have been content with Rudd dead, but for the fact that Lobo had shot down Gardner cold-bloodedly after Sprague had numbed the latter's arm, had killed him, knowing that he had destroyed his home, had stolen his wife. Strong held no doubt of that for all the mystery of Mary Gardner's body being found in the lake. And, since he had come through the heart of the mesa and heard the running waters surging, falling, he had a glimmering of the solution of that mystery.

Lobo might not be held for murder, lacking actual proofs. On the charge of smuggling, he might be sent for years to the penitentiary, a punishment far from sufficient in Strong's conception. The man was a monster of evil. Worst of all, he had deliberately given over the girl Strong loved—and who loved him, for Strong knew she had sealed herself to him with the kiss—to his men if they could recapture her. Only Lobo's death could wipe that out. He was worse than Rudd, who had already paid the penalty. A clean bullet was too good for Lobo. A dog's death was his desert.

Strong could not see the two marksmen making their way afoot, under

cover, toward the wall that the moon would leave in shadow, but he saw the growing radiance of the planet and rejoiced to note it lifting its silver disk. It made better shooting, and he set re-loads out beside him as he watched, crouching, peering between two great stones, standing on a smaller fragment.

Then came the pounding of hoofs. Lobo had assembled his men under cover. Now they swept out from between boulders, Lobo leading on the black, heading a single file of horsemen, crouching low in their saddles, racing round and round the little fortress in Indian attack.

The moon lifted, full and serene, shedding placid light on the little glen where guns were barking and where already men lay stark, staring up at her dead world with sightless eyes. The heavy Colts vomited red flame, and the bullets went humming, spitting against stone, ripping through shrubbery, now and then thudding home.

Hurley and Strong standing, half exposed, sent their missiles more successfully at the greater targets of man and horse. Once Strong got the black in the flank with a snap shot, but did not cripple it. Then he brought down a horse with a bullet in its head, and the next shot snuffed out life in its rider, spilled on the ground. He had no mercy. Hurley accounted for another, though the range was extreme for all but experts.

Strong wondered why they kept so far away. The shooting was all in favor of the defenders, standing, though they had but flying targets. A splinter of lead glanced from the rock below him and cut his forehead. The blood flowed into his eyes and he wiped it away.

He heard the crack of the girl's rifle and feared that her fire might draw a fatal reprisal. But she was of his own spirit, and he gloried in her pluck, after all she must have gone through.

Hurley called across to him.

"She's brought down one of 'em. Damn 'em! Why don't they come in? They're all of seven to one. Hell!"

A spot of fire had bloomed on the cliff. A bullet had plowed through the back muscles of his left shoulder. Another hummed by Strong like an angry wasp. Only his instinctive turn toward Hurley had saved him. They were firing from the cliff. Then Miguel flung up his arms, his gun hurtling out, its metal flashing in the moonlight as he fell among the plunging horses.

Strong shouted to them: "Down! Git close under the rocks. They've got snipers on the cliff!"

He leaped to the ground, calling to the horses, half falling as Juan lurched against him and dropped, shot through the chest.

They gathered at the gap, prepared for a rush, safe from the plunging fire, but with forty per cent of their little force gone, and Hurley wounded. Miguel lay on his face, the girl bending over him.

"Water! Water! For the love of Heaven, water!" he begged.

And Hurley, his shirt soaked with blood from his lacerated shoulder, cursed, not for himself, but for Miguel, as he realized that they had brought no canteens, had not thought of them. He leaned against a boulder on his left side, his left gun at his hip, his right in free play, commanding, with Strong, the entrance.

From the dark wall of the cliff another flower of fire bloomed in the night, and the bullet came whining down to strike Pedro's horse. There was only room for two of them in the gap itself, and now the circling horsemen had stopped that method, and were gathering somewhere for a rush.

Strong spoke to the girl, bidding her be careful, for the marksmen, seeing no more human marks, were bent on killing the horses. Pedro's mount was down, cramping the scant quarters where

Miguel begged for water and Juan breathed with the air whistling through his chest.

Lucy had set her rifle against a rock and Strong took it, saw that a shell was in the breech, and waited for that next scarlet efflorescence to show itself, estimating the distance with eyes used to night ranges. The shot came, with a scream from Hurley's gray. Mingling with the echoes that were flung back from the walls came the roar of the sharpshooters. Strong had guessed that the man was probably finding little more than standing room on that steep cliff, and he aimed below the flash. There was a cry, a hurtling figure crashing down—and one sharpshooter silenced.

Then Pedro came to him, his voice harsh with rage for his brother and for Juan.

"Señor, if they charge. Look, we have thees."

It was a stick of the dynamite they had brought along to blast the way into the mesa. Pedro had capped it and attached a short fuse, slicing that and setting in it the head of a match.

He said: "Eef they charge, we blow them all to hell!"

"Give it to me," Strong said. He took the explosive, rolled a cigarette swiftly, and lighted it, wondering why no rush took place. And, while he smoked, he watched the cliff. But no more shots came from there. Jake, the nerve out of him at that marvelous aim, dizzy on the narrow way that was little more than a few inches of outcrop, seeing Butch whirl down to a smashing finish, had lost his stomach for that end of it.

To fire again meant another bullet coming up unerringly. He had no cover. He could not move fast. His shot would expose him to a fusillade that, with a man like the one who had killed Butch at the trigger, meant that shot after shot would come, and one would

surely find him. It might not kill, but it would send him down, and he had heard the death cry of Butch torn from his throat as he fell.

There they were, blobs of shadow in the shadow of the nearest brush, dismounted, gathering for a rush. Strong turned his head, drawing on his cigarette, careful that the glow should not be seen. He had forgotten the dynamite until Pedro brought it. Now there was the risk that Lobo might have some and, reminded, toss a stick into them in turn. It was common enough on ranches, used for blasting post holes in the rock. Whether Lobo had any was a possibility that must not be overlooked. A half stick would annihilate them all. Lobo might want to get the girl unscathed, but if Strong used the stuff with its frightful havoc he would not consider her in his rage.

"We'll shoot it out," he said, and put the stick away into a crevice. "Here they come, Hurley. Soon's we're shot out, Pedro, you come up, while we reload. We've got to stop 'em. Too many of 'em."

"Thar'll be less," growled Hurley. "Let 'em come, damn their black souls!"

The blobs of shadow suddenly lengthened with men back of them, leaping on, firing as they came. The lead tore through the gap, but Pedro had backed the roan and the two unhurt horses—the roan's wound was only a scratch—out of the line of fire behind the protecting wings of rock, across from Lucy and the wounded Miguel and Juan.

It was a murderous fire, though much of it went astray in the headlong sprint, and it wilted, died away, with the attackers dodging for refuge from the deadly aim that met them, checked them, flung them back, with Lobo's voice railing at them. Four sprawled in the moonlight, throwing scant shadows now. Strong's guns were empty, as were Hurley's, and they stepped back to fill their chambers again, to let Pedro keep

up the fire and stop the rally that Lobo tried to bring about, guessing that here was his best chance.

Strong saw Pedro glide forward and then another figure. Lucy, with Miguel's gun! He caught at her arm to check her, and there came a scattering volley from the bushes which the retreating outlaws had reached. She fell back into his arms. She was bareheaded and, in the moment that her slackening body passed through a moonbeam, he saw her golden hair dabbled with blood.

He believed that he himself had pulled her into the line of fire and a groan came from him as he let her down, despair crazing him. She was gone, and there was nothing left for him but to hunt them down, to kill until death sent him to join her whom he had failed to keep.

"Look out for her, Hurley," he cried. "She's dead, but, by Heaven, I'll make 'em pay! Don't let any of 'em get by to touch her."

"Not while I'm crookin' a finger. We'll hold 'em off."

Hurley knew how Strong felt, knew that he wanted to ride amuck among them. And, if this was to be his own finish, he wished no better. His wound was stiffening, his left arm almost useless, but he had reloaded, and he stood, half supported by the rock, ready to go out through the smoke. Pedro was beside him, stern to avenge his brother and Juan as Strong, on the back of the roan, came past them, his guns refilled.

His bullets raked the bushes, and the attackers ran, scuttling, like so many rabbits, for their mounts.

There came a distant shout—louder, closer—as two horsemen raced from the far side of the glen, giving the alarm.

Back of them, muffled, the patter of guns, the dull roar of high explosive. The posse had arrived at last. They were blasting the fence down, driving in the guard.

Strong sent the roan hurdling over the brush, firing, but not at random. His brain had never worked faster or more clearly. His mad rage was a cold one now, concentrated to take toll, to make every bullet tell, and to save his fire for Lobo.

He saw his man at last among a scurry of mounting men. If he saw Strong he gave no sign, standing high in his stirrups, calling to his men, realizing that the net was closing in about him. The great black flew into the lead. Those who followed screened him from Strong, who, raking the roan as it had never been spurred before, pursued the pack that rushed to repel the law clamoring at the cañon entrance, already past the fence, galloping after the fleeing guard, two of whom had already suffered justice.

Strong followed, through the arch where the clacking of the hoofs was his only guide for a while, until he saw the light gleam on the torrent that surged through the cave and rushed turbulent down the cañon bed. He had gained a little, had flung one or two shots in front of him, but the one thought left to him now was to break through to Lobo. Whose bullet had struck down Lucy, had shattered his own dream, he did not know. Lobo he held responsible, and, if the law was charging to capture Lobo, then he would cheat the law.

The cañon rang with the discharge of six-guns. The posse filled the narrow way beside the stream, the mass of them looking like an army. The gorge widened and now they came on abreast, their fusillade spraying wide.

Men went plunging from their saddles. Horses screamed and fought. And Lobo, knowing the game was lost, wrenched the great stallion round and pounded his cursing way through the ruck of his own men who strove to follow him, seeking the last hope of the caves.

The big black, wounded in the flank,

wild with rage, shouldered the rest aside, tearing and snapping at them, while Lobo swore at those who, in the wild confusion, blocked his escape, striking at them with his gun, shooting down one man who cursed back and clutched at him.

Only at this hour did the full moon come near the floor of Doom Cañon. Now its light reached the faces of the men as if a calcium had been turned upon the tragic scene, while their bodies and their mounts were shrouded in the dusk.

Facing him, barring the way, was Strong. Lobo saw his set face, his blazing eyes, and his own flinched while the stallion, braver than his master, hurled himself at the lighter roan. There was a crash as two shots blended. The roan went down, Strong with him, a bullet in his shoulder. And the black, riderless, went clattering through the cavern to the glen.

Lobo crashed to the ground, shot through the throat, half choking, his head striking the rock, and rolling, half senseless, clawing to find no hold on the slippery edge of Skeleton Creek. He slid into the flood that gripped him, dragged him down, swept him along, reviving enough with the shock of the cold water to thrash helplessly as the coils of water wrapped themselves about him, and the blood, flowing from mouth and nose, mingled with its resistless tide.

As he swept on, sucked under, and then flung half out as if in sport, the fight turned to a flight and a chase. Once his eyes saw the sky, and then he was dragged beneath the ledge of lava where the creek foamed and raged in its tunnel, flung against the sides, the top, the quickly ebbing life bruised out of him. With him, to the last flicker of his brain, rode the phantom of a woman whose staring, accusing eyes seemed filled with gratitude as the corpse of her abductor, her husband's

murderer, rolled on down through the subterranean conduit, mile after mile, to be flung up later, as hers had been, in its unsuspected outlet, Lago Claro.

Strong, half rising, saw Lobo roll into the creek, saw his clutching hand thrust out and disappear, to show no more. The roan was on its feet again, standing over him, and he climbed into the saddle, suddenly spent, riding slowly through the cavern where the pursuit had passed, back to the glen that held for him only the end of his swift passion, its brief response.

He saw the posse herding the broken-up outlaws who, cut off, disheartened, surrendered to save their lives. He saw the little rocky fortress, with Hurley seated on the ground, his head sunk on his chest, weak from loss of blood. He slid out of the saddle with a groan. To go inside—

"Señor, she lives! Her heart beat. But breeng water."

Unbelieving still, he knelt beside her, sought her wound in the hair that was wet and sticky, found it—a shallow gouge.

The night that had been pitchy dark suddenly lightened, with the moon glorious.

"I theenk, señor, mebbe the bullet not heet her. Onlee a piece of rock ees knock' off."

"Go get water, Pedro. See if you can find some one to look after the others. I'll attend to her."

Edmonds came, coolly triumphant.

"Let me see what I can do, Strong," he said. "We've cleaned up. Only Lobo got clear, it seems."

"I shot him from his horse and the creek drowned him. Look after the men, Edmonds; I'm afraid they're hurt bad."

"Who's this?"

Then Edmonds saw it was a girl who lay with her head in Strong's lap. Her

eyes were open, but she did not see the marshal. She saw only Strong.

"She was struck by a splinter," said Strong. "I'm looking out for her."

"You're hurt yourself?"

"That'll hold over."

Edmonds turned to where Pedro was striving to revive Miguel. Juan was past help. The plucky little cocinero had gone over the range.

Hurley came out on the porch where Maria sat stringing red peppers. He limped as ever, and his arm was in a sling to ease his healing shoulder.

"I ain't had an ache or pain since I got all that bad blood out of me," he said. "Reckon most of the rheumatiz went with it. I'm goin' over to the mud-hole to-morrer to take a waller an' make sure.

"If you don't mind, I'll set out here with you. Outside of Pedro, the ranch is jest a reg'lar nest of love birds. Danged if I won't be glad when the four of 'em git married an' settle down."

"You ever in love?" Maria asked.

"So long ago I have forgotten it. Why?"

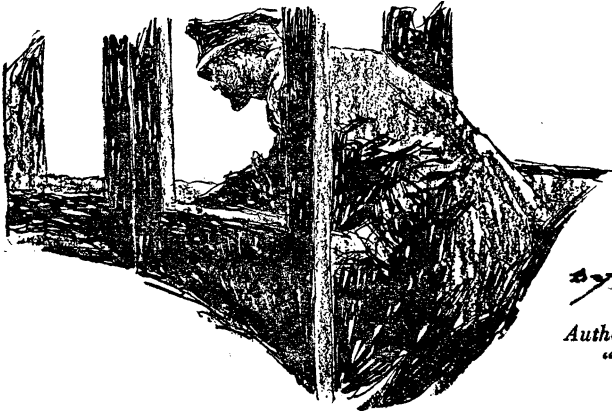
"There ees some sort of love that never what you call settle down. Mebbe my Miguel an' Josefa are that way. I hope so. An' Señor Strong an' his señorita, who shall be his señora nex' week, I, Maria, who have seen much love, tell you, señor, those two hav' that kin' of love."

Hurley shifted his quid.

"Mebbe you're right," he grunted. "Me, ever since I sat in that mud, I believe in miracles."

On the side porch, Miguel was telling Josefa much the same thing that Maria had just pronounced.

In the orchard, side by side in a hammock that had been swung in the shade, Lucy and Strong did not exchange assurances. They knew.



It Will Out

by C. C. Waddell

Author of "An Innocent Bystander,"
"Smiler's Tenth Chance," etc.

"SMILER" FOSTER CAME OUT FROM LUNCH TO FIND, IN THE TONNEAU OF THE LIMOUSINE HE DROVE FOR DOCTOR SPRAGUE, A—WELL, SOMETHING AT ONCE VERY GRUESOME AND VERY EMBARRASSING. AND LITTLE BY LITTLE, AS HE SEARCHED FOR A MEANS OF RIDDING HIMSELF OF IT, A SERIES OF NEFARIOUS COMPLICATIONS WAS UNCOVERED.

SMILER" FOSTER sauntered out of the lunch stand, familiarly known to the chauffeurs of the neighborhood as "Garbage Joe's," where he had been regaling himself with a light, midday snack of pig's knuckles and sauerkraut, topped off with two cuts of pie and a cup of coffee.

As he paused at the door to brush the crumbs from the front of his trim Norfolk jacket and exchange a word or two of playful badinage with Tessie, the black-eyed cashier, never had Smiler felt more at peace with the world.

His stomach was full, his mind easy. Another chauffeur had just imparted to him the secret of a new method of temporarily disconnecting the speedometer, so that not even the most vigilant employer could suspect the unauthorized use of his bus. Furthermore, his boss, Doctor Herschel Sprague, a crusty surgical specialist, had yielded that morning to his demand for a new battery and an improved style of bumper, and Smiler saw in prospect a distinctly

fruity commission in the purchase.

"Nothing to worry about," he hummed cheerily as he crossed the sidewalk to the doctor's limousine standing parked at the curb. "No need to worry at all."

It is not wise, says the Chinese proverb, to provoke the gods by a show of excessive complacency.

As Smiler started to climb into the driver's seat, he observed that one of the robes inside the car had fallen down and lay in a crumpled heap on the floor. He stepped back to fold it up and hang it on the rack.

But he had hardly opened the rear door and reached inside, before he jumped back as if a snake had bitten him, and hurriedly slammed the door shut again.

Thrusting his hand under the robe, his fingers had brushed against the face of a dead man.

For a moment Smiler stood stunned, incapable of either thought or movement. Then as he recovered his wits,

he glanced quickly about him, up and down the street, to see if his agitated behavior had attracted any attention. But, apparently, it had passed unnoticed.

The block was practically given over to garages, and the few loafers about the fronts of them showed no sign of being stirred from their customary torpid calm. The driver of a passing coal truck, the only vehicle in sight, was staring stolidly ahead at his horses. Behind, in the lunch stand, Tessie was perfunctorily joshing another customer.

Everything was so placidly normal—the fact itself so staggeringly improbable—that Smiler began to question if he might not have been the victim of an hallucination.

Nerving himself to the effort, he guardedly opened the door again to make a more convincing survey.

But he had only to turn back the rug and give a single look to satisfy himself that there had been no mistake. Under the rug lay the huddled body of a young man, clad in an old coat and trousers, with a pair of worn-out shoes on his feet. Dead beyond the shadow of a doubt. The marble coldness of the skin was enough to prove that, but, in addition, the whole side of the man's skull had been crushed in by a terrific blow of some sort, and was bound around with a blood-stained strip of burlap.

Smiler flung back the rug over the upturned face, hastily closed the door again, and leaned against the side of the car, white and a little sick.

How had the thing gotten there? In the turmoil of his thoughts, he tried to recall his movements for the day. He had driven Doctor Sprague on his usual morning round of visits to hospitals and private patients, had left him at the college where he was scheduled to deliver a lecture, and then, dismissed for the afternoon, had headed straight for the garage, stopping only at Garbage

Joe's across the street to eat his lunch before putting up the bus.

Where, in that tour through the city streets in broad daylight, could a dead body have been smuggled into the car without his knowledge? The thing was obviously impossible. And yet it had happened.

"Without even the aid of the needle," muttered Smiler dazedly. "Cold sober as an unborn babe. How in thunder did they work it?"

But that question, he realized, must for the present yield to a far more pressing consideration. What was he to do with the grisly encumbrance that, as Smiler put it, had been wished upon him?

The natural step was, of course, to report the affair to the police and let them puzzle it out. But the police, Smiler had learned, were singularly lacking in imagination, and would be apt to scoff at so fantastic a story.

From the nature of the victim's injuries—and from Smiler's very spotted record in traffic court—they would simply set it down as a case of reckless driving, in which the man, after being knocked down, had died on Smiler's hands while the latter was trying to get him to a hospital.

And, in fact, Smiler himself was very much inclined to agree with this theory of the tragedy, saving that the culprit chauffeur had meanly shifted the responsibility to him.

"It wouldn't be so hard," he reflected, "for a guy to range alongside while I was feeding my face in the lunch stand, and then, while he pretended to look at his tires or somethin', switch the cut on me."

Still that, he realized, didn't help the weakness of his own alibi. The cops would not go hunting for a problematical offender when they had what looked like a sure thing right at hand.

No, the station house was distinctly not his play. The best that he could

get out of it was hours of endless grilling and a detention of several days. And, if a manslaughter charge was pressed, he stood a chance of going up the river for twenty years.

At this grim suggestion, Smiler paled and looked nervously about him, as if already feeling himself an object of suspicion. The sudden shouting of his name caused him to jump as if he had been shot.

It was the garage keeper hailing him from across the street.

"Hey there, dopey!" he called. "What 'smatter with you? Must be in a trance, the way I had to yell my head off to rouse you."

Ordinarily Smiler would have come back with a suitable retort and would probably have crossed the street to pursue the verbal contention. But he did not dare now to leave the side of the car.

"Whatcha want?" he stammered uncertainly. "If it's to set in a poker game, tell 'em I—I got a engagement."

"You said it." The garage keeper grinned. "But 'tain't to go joy riding with no dame like you're planning. Doc just phoned over that he's changed his mind about not using the car this afternoon. He says for you to wait here at the garage, and he'll be right along."

Smiler clutched at the side of a fender to keep himself from collapsing. Doctor Sprague wanted to use the car and was coming right over to the garage! Could anything have happened more inopportune? Impossible now to keep concealed the ghastly secret that lay underneath the rug.

For a moment, the world heaved and whirled around him. Then, with a couple of swift leaps, he was across the street and feverishly beseeching the garage keeper.

"Jerry, you're a friend of mine, ain't you?" he gulped. "Then, for God's sake, tell doc I wasn't here when he

called. Tell him, I had to go down to the service station for some little thing or other, and I'll be right back. You see, Jerry"—he caught at the suggestion the other had offered—"I gotta explain to the lady. I can't go off and leave her flat, without a word, can I? Do that for me, Jerry, and I'll never forget it," he pleaded. "You will, won't you?"

"Aw, you love birds give me a pain," growled the garage keeper. "Nothin' counts with you but some jane what, week after next, you'll be hard put to remember her name. On your way, though, if you must," he consented. "But take a tip from me, buddy, and make it short and sweet. Doc ain't one to be stalled indefinite."

His final warning, however, was addressed only to the circumambient air, for Smiler was already aboard the car and scooting down the street, fearful that the doctor might heave in sight before he could make his get-away.

Turning the corner, he whirled madly around three or four blocks, until at last feeling safe from immediate peril, he settled down to a more sober pace and gave himself a chance to think.

It was idle to deny that he was in an ugly jam. With a whole afternoon and night at his disposal, he had been staggered to conceive of any feasible way of ridding himself of his incriminating burden. And now the time in which to act had been whittled down to minutes. Doctor Sprague, as the garage keeper had indicated, was not a patient waiter. Unless Smiler showed up pretty promptly, he would be kissing his job good-by. And in the event of a prolonged absence, the doctor was quite capable of ordering him apprehended on sight—no very difficult job, for, even in New York, Bolls Joyce limousines are not so plentiful but that they are easily spotted.

In short, it was a case where, if

anything was done, 'twere better done quickly.

Yet the very desperation of his predicament seemed to benumb Smiler's usually agile wits. Try as he would, he could think of nothing more original than to duplicate the trick that had been played upon himself by transferring the dead man to another car.

Simple enough in conception. In execution, anything but.

Smiler cruised around at least a dozen blocks before he found conditions and a car to his liking. Then he had no sooner dismounted and started on the strategy of pretending that something was wrong with his chassis, than a group of curious kids gathered to watch him, and refused to be either driven or cajoled away.

On a second attempt a few blocks farther on, everything seemed to be going swimmingly, until just as he had the doors of the two cars open and was about to effect the transfer, he happened to look up and saw a woman interestedly regarding his movements from a third-story window above him.

"I bet her sink's full of dirty dishes, too," railed Smiler bitterly, as he scrambled back into his seat and got away from there. "Housework don't mean nothing to that kind, when they can plant their elbows on a winder sill and get a eye full on somethin' what ain't none of their business."

But it was the third trial that caused his heart to somersault and set the cold sweat to trickling down his spine. As he was sliding into position beside a car parked on a slope leading down into Riverside Drive, a policeman suddenly sprang from concealment out into the roadway ahead, and threw up his hand.

"Wh-what you after?" Smiler could not keep his lips from trembling.

"Just taking a test of your brakes," said the cop. He eyed Smiler shrewdly. "But you seem to be pretty hard hit by it, Jack. I guess I'd better take a look,

and see if you haven't got a case of hooch stuck back there in the tonneau."

He started toward the side of the car. But, under the stress of emergency, Smiler clicked back into poise.

"You must have a nose like a blood-hound, cap," he laughed. "Hooch is there all right—a case of it, too, I should say—but it's all inside a pal of mine that's snuggled down back there somewheres. I was taking him home, but you can have him if you want him."

The officer, peering through the window, saw the huddled figure under the rug which seemed to substantiate Smiler's bold fiction, and hastily sprang down from the running board.

"Thanks." He backed away. "He's your friend, not mine."

As Smiler had cleverly surmised, the cop had no desire to lose his next morning's sleep and appear in court for nothing more sensational than a drunk.

"Beat it." He gave a peremptory wave of the hand, and Smiler lost no time in obeying the injunction.

Coasting down into the Drive, he stepped on the gas, and kept stepping until at least twenty blocks separated him from the scene of his late narrow escape.

"Gee!" he murmured, as he finally eased up and mopped his perspiring brow. "Another shave like that and there'd be two corpses in this blooming old hearse 'stead of only one. Them guys that played the game on me must have cast-iron nerves. No more of it for this mamma's boy. I gotta dope out something that's less strain on the arteries."

One Hundred and Sixteenth Street loomed ahead of him as he spoke, with its wide curve leading up from the Drive and its tall, gray apartment houses fronting the river. The sight of it gave Smiler an inspiration.

"That's the ticket!" he exclaimed.

"What I need is to consult a specialist."

Turning up the hill and passing the broad front of Columbia University, he drove briskly across town until he came to the neighborhood of Lenox Avenue, where, after a little search, he discovered what he was seeking—a chunky young man, modishly attired, who, at the moment, was having an extra high polish buffered on his nails by the manicure of a barber shop.

This was "Mutton" Rosen, head of the Harlem Hummers, and the reputed hero of at least a dozen killings. Murder and assault was Mr. Rosen's profession, with a definite schedule of fees for services rendered—so much for merely beating a guy up, an increased tariff for crippling or maiming him, and a maximum for giving him the "works."

As one who, from the nature of his calling, lived under the constant hazard of reprisals, Mutton, as Smiler approached, gave him a quick, sidewise glance of scrutiny and, sliding his hand out of the manicure's clasp, dropped it swiftly toward his coat pocket.

Recognizing the intruder, however, as a mere sap who worked for a living, and by no chance the emissary of a rival gang, he relaxed slightly and, in response to Smiler's greeting, bestowed a condescending nod.

"You got the best of me, young feller," he said dabbling his fingers in the bowl of soapy water, although his heavy-lidded eyes never lost their guarded watchfulness. "Kind o' off your beat, ain't you? Don't recall seeing you round this end of town before."

"Not much lately," admitted Smiler. "But I used to hang around here some when I was driving a taxi. You ought to remember me, Mr. Rosen. I took you and a bunch out to that Casey-Stenger fight at White Plains about a year ago."

"Oh, sure. I got you now. Knew that map of yours was sorta familiar."

The gangster with an affectation of indifference held up his short, stubby fingers and inspected the row of gleaming nails which the manicure girl had just finished.

"Some little polisher, 'Babe,'" he complimented her. "I'll say you are. Might almost have them claws set, and wear 'em for a di'mond necklace."

He was evidently waiting for Smiler to make the next move, but the latter's attention was temporarily distracted. Nervously keeping an eye on the limousine which he had been compelled to leave unguarded out in front of the barber shop, he was on tenterhooks every time a passer-by paused casually in its vicinity.

"Well, what's on your mind, kid?" Mr. Rosen spoke a bit sharply. "You didn't drop in just to pass the time of day, did you?"

"No. Oh, no." Smiler came back to himself with a start. "What I wanted was to talk over—well, a matter of business with you. But it's—it's sort of private. Couldn't you step outside a minute?"

The killer's hard eyes studied him. Mutton had not failed to notice the other's perturbed manner, nor was he oblivious to those uneasy glances cast in the direction of the waiting car. For all he knew, that big, strange limousine might be filled with armed enemies ready to riddle him the moment he presented himself as a target. It would not be the first time that a seemingly innocent decoy had lured one of his stripe into ambush.

"We'll wait until Miss Babe here gets through with this other mitt of mine," he said curtly. Then, as Smiler, murmuring something about meeting him outside, started for the door, his voice took on a menacing ring.

"Sit down," he ordered. "When we

go out of here, bo, we go together. Get me?"

So while the clock ticked away the precious minutes, Smiler had to sit there, nursing his impatience, and not knowing at what instant some prying youngster or inquisitive stroller looking the car over might discover and proclaim the secret it contained.

But at last, with nails polished to his fancy, Mr. Rosen got up from the table, lingered to exchange some parting banter with Miss Babe, and, with maddening slowness, readjusted his tie, donned his hat, and submitted to being brushed off. Then, when he had distributed largesse about the shop, he moved over close to Smiler.

As their shoulders touched, Smiler felt the poke of something hard against his side where the gangster's hand rested in his convenient coat pocket.

"Listen, you!" Rosen muttered out of the corner of his mouth. "You walk right in front of me, when we go out of that door, see. And don't try to duck or pull off any funny business, either. If you're on the level, nothing's going to hurt you. But if you're steering me against a plant, I've got my gat right up against your ribs, and at the first sign of trouble, I blow you wide open. So now go ahead, and watch your step."

Smiler of course knew that his intentions were perfectly honorable, but, even so, he could not help quaking as he made that lock-step exit from the barber shop. Suppose some person on the sidewalk should take an impulsive step toward them or make some other unexpected move of which the suspicious Mutton might mistake the purpose? Explanations, Smiler was sure, would come too late for him.

Fortunately, however, the street, when they emerged into it, pursued the even tenor of its way, and Rosen, satisfied finally that he was not being led into a trap, eased up on his precautions.

"All right, kiddo!" He slapped Smiler on the shoulder. "Guess I can take a chance with you. Come along and spill what's troubling you," piloting the way as he spoke into the entrance of an office building near by. "We can talk here, without no chance of somebody snooping up, and getting an ear full on us."

But Smiler, now that the opportunity was his, found himself a little stumped just how to broach the subject on which he desired to interview Mr. Rosen. It is a rather delicate business to inquire of a comparative stranger the methods whereby he disposes of his murdered dead—especially when the comparative stranger has already shown evidences of a touchy temper and is so extremely facile with an automatic.

"Well," he hesitated, "you see, I wanted to ask a kind of favor of you. Suppose, f'r instance, you—that is, I mean—well, suppose a guy had bumped off another guy—by accident, y' understand, but that prob'ly wouldn't help him none if 'twas found out—and suppose nobody didn't know nothing about it yet? Well, whatcha suppose is the best thing the guy can do with the—the deceased?"

Mr. Rosen, who had been lighting a cigarette as Smiler made his stammering explanation, flipped away subterfuge with the match.

"Look here," he said, "if you want any help, you gotta come clean with me. Who is this bird you bumped off?"

"No! No!" protested Smiler in a panic. "'Twasn't me that bumped nobody off. The—the deceased was shoved onto me."

Then, seeing no other way out, he told the whole story.

Its reception by the gangster convinced him more than ever that he had done wisely in not reporting it to the police, for Mutton was openly skeptical.

"That's just plain apple sauce, bo,"

he jeered. "You crashed this baby with your old boat. 'At's what happened. Don't tell me it wasn't.

"Still, at that," he admitted, squinting his eyes reflectively, "'tain't such a bad stunt, if a feller was looking for a way to get rid of somebody he'd croaked. You have gave me a new idea, pardner.

"Howsomever," he returned to the point at issue, "don't make no pertickler difference whether you swatted the guy, or somebody else did it. You got him on your hands, and what's bothering you is how to get shut of him. Is that it?"

Smiler indicated that it was. Also, that speed in attaining results was a prime element in the problem confronting him.

He glanced at the clock over the doorway of a bank across the street and was horrified to see that almost three quarters of an hour had elapsed since he had left the garage. Doctor Sprague would not bide much longer without starting something.

"What sort of a looking guy is this bozo you put out?" asked Rosen. "Any class to him? Somebody that the papers'd kick up a row about?"

"Oh, no." Smiler shook his head, thinking of the worn-out shoes and shabby clothing. "A down-and-outer, I would say. Prob'ly just a bum."

"Well, then, that makes it easy. I'll take on the job for you, kiddo. All we gotta do is drive up into Westchester County, and dump him out along one of the bootlegging routes. When they run across him, they'll put him down for a hijacker that's been bumped off, and not bother no more about him. Birds like that is picked up every week or so round there. It'll cost you only a hundred smackers. I'm doing it cheap because I sorta like you."

"How far up into Westchester would we have to go?" Smiler hesitated.

"Oh, quite a piece. We might have

to cross the Connecticut line, before we found a likely spot."

Smiler made a rapid calculation. It would certainly be late in the afternoon, possibly well into the evening before he returned, and by that time Doctor Sprague would be beyond listening to either argument or excuse.

"I tell you," he suggested. "I can't be of no special use to you, and this here bus of mine is pretty noticeable. Wouldn't it be better if you took a flivver sedan or something of that kind, and let me shift the—the body over to you, and be done with it?"

"Well, of course it could be handled that way," granted Mutton with a pitying smile at what he evidently regarded as a manifestation of cold feet. "But not for no hundred berries. I'd have to hire a feller to help me, and what with using my own car and all, I'd have to charge you at least an extra century."

Smiler emptied his pockets, and counted up his available cash resources. Pay day, fortunately, had been only the Saturday before and, in addition, he had been lucky in the poker and crap games at the garage. Yet, even so, the sum total reckoned only one hundred and sixty-five dollars. He counted it over bill by bill, and reluctantly tendered it to the gangster.

But Rosen backed obdurately away.

"Two hundred or nothing," he declared. "If you're hunting for cut rates, you'll have to go to another shop. That's my price, and you'll either pay it or keep on carting your old stiff around until the bulls land you, which"—there was a covert threat in his tone—"according to my way of thinking, won't be long."

"All right. All right," agreed Smiler hastily, remembering in his necessity the new battery and bumpers which the doctor had empowered him to purchase. "No need to get shirty about it. I'll dig up the money for you. Where can I

meet you in, say, about twenty minutes?"

"You'd better come up to my private garage." Mutton gave the number and location of it. "I'll pick up a pal to go along with me and be there waiting for you, and then we can shift your freight easy and comfortable, without nobody piping us off. 'Sides," he added more interestedly, "I've got a new Radillac up there—sweet a little boat as you ever seen—that I'd like to have you look at."

Smiler had stipulated for twenty minutes, but it was not more than half that time—so energetically did he push the collection of his commissions—before he arrived at the rendezvous, and found Rosen awaiting him with another of the Harlem Hummers, known as "Dead-eye."

"Got the kale?" Mutton greeted him.

Smiler handed it over.

"K. O." The gangster verified the amount and stuffed the money in his pocket. "Come on, then, Dead-eye, and bear a hand here with little Percy."

He opened the door of the limousine as he spoke, and, with callous indifference, jesting and laughing the while, the two reached in and laid hold of the still form inside.

But no sooner was the rug thrown back from it, than Rosen started back with a gasp of mingled amazement and terror.

"Look, Dead-eye! Look!" He pointed. "How did he get here?"

And Dead-eye, as his gaze followed the pointing finger, betrayed no less consternation.

For a moment, the two hardened ruffians stared at the dead man, their teeth chattering, their faces blanched in a superstitious awe. Then, seized by a common impulse, they turned and dashed from the garage. The last Smiler saw of them, they were rounding the corner below, still traveling at top speed.

He could not understand it, could not

puzzle out what it meant. But it was borne forcibly in upon him that they were gone for good. They had no intention of coming back. And with them, also, was gone his two hundred dollars, while he was left no better off than before, his problem still unsolved.

Or was it still unsolved? The sudden idea came to him. He knew, at least, what Rosen and people of that sort would do in such a predicament. And there was nothing to prevent him from carrying out their formula.

True, by the time that he had driven up into Westchester County and back again, Doctor Sprague would be fit to be tied. But he had already been absent long enough completely to shatter the doctor's patience, and he might as well be killed for a sheep as for a lamb. Besides, there was nothing the doctor could say or do that would equal the chill finality of a judge's "twenty years!"

That last reflection decided him. Stepping over to the limousine, he laid back the rug to cover the figure inside, mounted to his seat, and, with a set, resolute face, drove away.

Choosing the less frequented routes of travel, he toiled carefully along, sedulous so long as he was within the city limits to obey every traffic regulation, so as to avoid any possibility of being held up and questioned. But as soon as he reached the country roads, he hit up a freer pace, and presently was well out beyond the suburbs.

And now as he drove through fields and past estates, he began to keep an eye out for some spot to serve his purpose.

At last he found it along a narrow, woodland lane between Tarrytown and Kensico Reservoir—a marshy, overgrown copse which looked as if nobody ever invaded it.

Smiler got out and, pushing aside the tangle of briars and underbrush, investigated. It would be no very difficult

task, he decided. The man was light and slender. He could probably be lifted out of the car and held above the weeds and bushes that fringed the road so as to leave no suspicious trail. Then, once inside the copse, he could be carried a short distance to a sort of hollow that offered a natural concealment, and be covered over with dead leaves.

It was all very simple, and yet, for some reason, Smiler's step was slow as he returned toward the car, and his face wore a troubled frown. Now that he was about to do it, it seemed a brutal thing to leave that poor clay there, unclaimed, unhallowed by sepulture, as one might leave a dead dog.

Mastering a natural repugnance, he turned back the rug and took another look at the dead man.

He was a fellow of not more than his own age, and evidently, in spite of the shabby clothes, not a bum. The features were clear cut, showing no traces of hardship or dissipation—the hands were well tended.

"He looks like a regular guy," Smiler muttered unhappily. "It might be me, or anybody else. How'd I like it to be bumped off that way, 'thout nobody ever knowing what had become of me? Mebbe he's got a old mother somewhere what's wondering why he don't show up, and what'll keep putting a lamp in the window for him."

The sentimental picture thus evoked gave Smiler a distinct jolt. Hard boiled in a way, he was yet strong for what movie directors term "soft stuff." He closed the limousine again.

"Oh, damn!" he groaned. "Here's something if I do it, that's going to haunt me all my days. And, if I don't do it, it'll have me saying, 'Yes, warden,' and wearing a number 'stead of a name."

But the vision that his words called up of stone walls and iron bars served to wipe out in great measure that of the old lady placing the lamp in the win-

dow. Smiler shivered, and steeled his wavering resolution.

He stepped purposefully toward the limousine, but, as he laid his hand on the door latch, his ear caught the approaching chug-chug of a motor cycle, and he paused until it had passed.

In a moment or two, the rider appeared around a bend in the road ahead, and Smiler recognized with a qualm of trepidation that he wore the slouch hat and conspicuous gun of a State trooper.

With seeming inadvertence, Smiler moved to the side of the car so as to screen the interior from observation, and stood there, pretending to hunt for a match to light his cigarette.

The trooper came up.

"Are you shy of matches, Jack?" he asked. "I guess I can help you out."

"No. No, thank you." Smiler hastily produced a card of them.

But the other still lingered.

"What's stopping you?" he inquired.

"Waitin' for a party," said Smiler aloofly.

"Queer place for that." The officer's glance swept the lonely, secluded hollow. "Only people you ever see around here is from the old Delpit mansion, back yonder on the hill. 'Tain't any of them, is it?"

"This is—is a party from town."

"So? Well, it struck me that maybe you was waiting for somebody from the Delpit place. Folks in this end of the county are kind of interested in them since the disappearance of young Julian Delpit last week.

"Well, he's the heir to all this land around here and considerable other property—close to half a million altogether, they say—but for the last six years he's been over in France getting educated, and his uncle, Louis Delpit, has been managing the estate as gardeeen. Then about ten days ago he lands in New York unexpectedlike, and notifies his uncle that, being now of age, he's ready to run the show hisself, and

when will it be convenient to pass over the jack?

"He didn't come out to the old place here—mebbe he had his reasons for that, and also for not sending no advance notice of his arrival—but he made an appointment with uncle dear to meet him at a trust company.

"Come the time, and Uncle Louis was on hand with his books and papers, but young Julian fails to show up. They waits about an hour, and then a messenger boy blows in with a note from him, saying that he was starting off on a hunting trip up into Canada with a friend he'd met on the boat coming over, and that his uncle was just to let everything ride until he got back."

"Huh!" Smiler sniffed impatiently. "There's nothin' very funny about that 't I can see. It's just the sort o' thing a fool kid like that 'd go and do."

"Sure," agreed the trooper. "That's what anybody would say, ain't it? But along in the afternoon a lady calls up the trust company, sayin' she's Mrs. Julian Delpit, and she wants to know what's keeping her husband so long. Yes, sir. The boy, it turned out, had got married as soon as he was twenty-one, and just the day before he sailed for this country. No mistake about it. She had her marriage certificate.

"Furthermore, when she heard about that note to Uncle Louis, she was sure that something must be wrong. How, she asked, could Julian have gone hunting with a man he met on the boat, when he was seasick all the way over, and hadn't never poked his nose out of the stateroom? And was it likely, she says, that Julian would break up a perfectly good honeymoon?

"Well, the trust company advised her to consult a lawyer, and then some more things come out. Uncle Louis claimed to have torn up the note from Julian, but them he'd showed it to said the handwriting in it wasn't nothing like that in a bunch of Julian's letters that

young Mrs. Delpit had with her. Strangely, though, it was the same as the signature to a lot of vouchers and receipts for big sums of money that Louis claimed he paid to Julian."

"Oh, I see!" Smiler gave a quick nod. "The old geezer had been gyping the boy right along and forging his name to cover it up. Then when the lad suddenly turned up and called for a show-down, he—why, he musta bumped him off."

"It looks that way, don't it?" agreed the trooper. "But how are you going to hang it onto him, without a corpus delicti?"

"A which?"

"Corpus delicti. That means positive proof the party's been croaked. Granted that everything points to murder, you still gotta remember that it had to be done in broad daylight, and on the way from the hotel where Julian was stopping to the office of the trust company. Why didn't nobody see it? Also, what was done with the remains? 'Tain't no such easy thing as you might imagine to get rid of a dead body.

"Likewise," continued the trooper, "'tain't beyond a reasonable doubt that this note was on the level, and that Julian has really gone off on a hunting trip like he says. Anyhow, until a corpus delicti shows up, Uncle Louis is sitting pretty. Course, the appearance of a wife probably threw a monkey wrench into his plans. It makes her Julian's legal heir instead of him. Still, biding the five years that it'll take for the courts to decide the boy is dead—and you can get away with a lot of things in five years—Uncle Louis stays in control of the estate. That is," he added, "unless we get something on him.

"And it's on that chance"—he eyed Smiler speculatively—"that I'm scouting around here. I've got a sort of hunch, you see, that if Julian's been done for, this old place is where Uncle Louis'd most likely try to dispose of

the body. So, naturally, when I see you monkeying around here——”

“I’m waiting for my boss, Doctor Herschel Sprague,” Smiler lied quickly. “Easy enough for you to take my number and satisfy yourself that this is his car. He wanted to stretch his legs, and he told me to jog ahead until he came up.”

The trooper was obviously impressed with the plausibility, yet hesitated.

“Well, I guess I’ll be moving on.”

The trooper, chugging leisurely down the road, was squinting back over his shoulder at him. Smiler could stand it no longer.

“Hi!”

The trooper, halting, waited for him.

“I give up!” Smiler half sobbed.

Then he blurted out the whole story.

The trooper, trundling his machine beside him, walked back with Smiler to the car. One look inside sufficed him.

“It’s Julian Delpit all right,” he said with a touch of awe. “We’ve got the corpus delicti at last.” Then, with rising excitement: “And you say, Mutton Rosen and Dead-eye threw a fit when they saw him? Get in there”—he gave a jerk of his head toward the driver’s seat—“and come over with me to White Plains as fast as you can make it.”

At eight o’clock that evening, the trooper with a subdued and shuffling Smiler in tow presented himself at Doctor Sprague’s office.

“You don’t want to be too hard on this poor dub, doctor,” he said as he concluded his narration of events. “Bonehead as he was, it was through him that we got the tip on Mutton Rosen and Dead-eye what cleared up the whole thing. All unnerved from stumbling onto a victim which they thought was safe at the bottom of New York bay, ’twasn’t no trouble to make them come clean. They told how they’d been hired for the job, how they crowded young Delpit into a cellarway, where they

slugged him with a section of lead pipe, and then dressed him in old clothes and dumped him that night into the East River. It’s all complete and, on the strength of their confession, we’ve also got old Louis Delpit under arrest.

“Only thing we can’t figure”—he shook his head—“is how, over a week later, the body came to be planted in your car.”

Doctor Sprague’s lips took on a slightly grimmer twist.

“Not so difficult of explanation as you might think,” he said reluctantly. “Shortly after my return from the medical college at noon, it was reported to me that a group of students in the attempt to perpetrate a gruesome joke had stolen a body from the dissecting room and, while part of them diverted the attention of my chauffeur, had smuggled it into my machine. With a desire to secure the immediate return of the body and avoid unpleasant notoriety for the college, I telephoned at once to have Foster here await me, and I started for the garage.”

“But how on earth did the body get into the dissecting room?” puzzled the officer.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

“It was picked up out of the river, I suppose, and taken to the morgue, where it failed of identification, and, in due time, was turned over to the medical college.

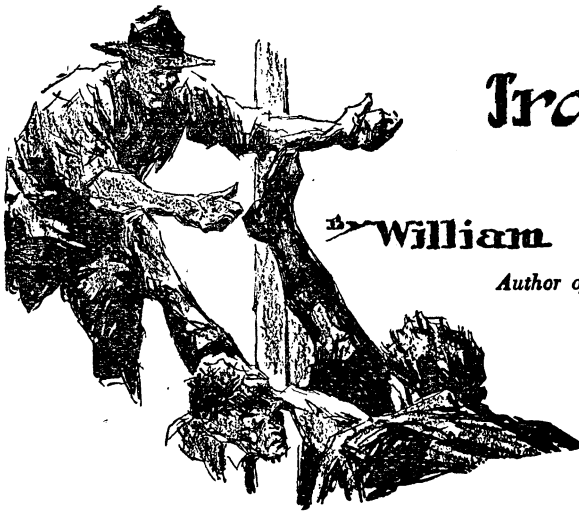
“No,” he repeated reflectively, “there is nothing especially surprising in that. The incredible thing to me is the amazing chapter of coincidences that led to the unraveling of the crime.”

Smiler broke in.

“And what do them rah-rah lads draw out of it?” he inquired sharply.

“The students?” Doctor Sprague pursed up his lips. “Oh, they will probably be expelled.”

“Huh!” growled Smiler vindictively, as he thought of his nightmare afternoon.



Trouble

by William Merriam Rouse

Author of "The Buried God,"

"The Two Musketeers," etc.

"HUNGRY JACK" BARCLAY WAS A BOOTLEGGER. OUT ON BARN ROCK ISLAND HIS WAS THE ONLY REFUGE. IT WAS FOR THIS LAST REASON THAT WHEN A STORM SENT ANNETTE CROY OFF THE TUMULTUOUS WATER SHE CAME TO HUNGRY JACK'S. SHE SAID HER FATHER CALLED HER "TROUBLE." AFTERWARD, HUNGRY JACK AGREED HEARTILY WITH HIM.

HUNGRY JACK" BARCLAY lived in the only house on Barn Rock Island, half a mile offshore, but he was never allowed to be lonesome. His place either was or was not a den of iniquity, according to the point of view. Two things were certain: A thirsty man seldom needed to go dry, and there had never been a crooked game of poker played under that roof, not since Hungry Jack had owned it. But it was sometimes rough at Jack's place—so rough that the very air was like sandpaper to a timid soul.

On a fall night when the wind was blowing up Lake Champlain with a roar like a bootlegger's truck there was a good-sized game going on the big table in the front room. It was the beginning of the hard-cider season and some of the best and worst-known citizens of Bildad Road had come out to the island with money to lose. One fight had been quelled by the heavy hand of Jack, and all in all it was a fine evening.

Jack himself was eating 'em up, which

most favored expression of his own had earned his nickname, and he devoutly attributed his good luck to the horse-chestnut that he carried only for big games because he did not want to wear out its virtues. "Squire" Bill Potter had given it to him to keep off rheumatism, but he had held four aces on the night of the gift and thereafter he firmly believed that this particular horse-chestnut leaned to poker instead of rheumatism.

Except for some anxiety about his buddy, long-legged, good-natured, careless Jimmy Dane, the spirit of Hungry Jack was untroubled. Although Barclay pretended to himself that he didn't know anything about it he had a pretty clear idea that Dane's sloop, loaded with Scotch, was anchored in a cove. Jimmy ought to be on his way instead of playing poker, as he was already under suspicion.

Otherwise all was well. A dozen men sat around the table. Petey Bumps, a small, round man with a round face

and a round head, was losing enough to keep him interested. Squire Potter, who sometimes forgot his dignity as justice of the peace and horse doctor, was breaking even. "Slush" Gargan, a bad character with a rust-colored mustache and a slithering eye, was winning something to the regret of all present. The principal interest was being furnished by two outlanders who had come across the lake from Vermont looking for excitement. They were getting it.

Hungry Jack shifted his weight—two hundred and four pounds by the scales at the Corners general store—and drew a deuce and a pair of queens. He already held two deuces, and he allowed a grin to widen his generous mouth and crinkle around his warm-gray eyes. The Vermonters would think he was grinning because he hadn't caught anything and wanted to make them think he had.

The room grew still, except for an occasional wail from the wind. The blue haze of smoke thinned a little as men forgot their pipes for the moment. The fourteen-quart pail of cider remained undisturbed. It became evident that everybody had drawn something. There was a lot of confidence in that hand.

It was at the peak of the strain that the sound of a knock went reverberating through the house from the back door. To tense nerves it seemed as though the knuckles of fate were pounding brazenly. The sound jerked chins up and sent eyes glancing toward windows and doors.

"Prohibitioners!" Whispered Petey Bumps.

At the word Squire Potter faded, like a hoary wraith, into a bedroom. Chairs scraped but the rest sat tight. It was distinctly up to the host and master of ceremonies.

Without perceptible effort Barclay left his seat and started for the kitchen. His compact shoulders swung easily, with a lithe movement not often found

in a man of his size. The hand would have to be dealt over. He was most certainly annoyed and he was willing to show it.

As he opened the door he took those precautions which a wise man takes in opening a door at night. He stepped back lightly with one arm swinging, ready to strike or jump aside as the case might require.

Hungry Jack Barclay had been surprised by many things in his thirty years, from a club over the head to a royal flush, but he had never met with quite the shock he received when the owner of the hand that had sent that fateful knock resounding through his entire house stepped boldly into the kitchen.

It was a girl, as dazzling as the night was dark. Jack blinked and drew in a hoarse breath. Her hair was a dark flame and her skin was milk-white, even under the light of the smoky oil lamps. She smiled, and the smile was bright with the gleam of little white teeth, and a dimple. Her eyes were the deep blue of the lake in summer, and just now filled with a look of exceeding caution in spite of the smile. A hundred pounds of girl with the self-confidence of a champion boxer.

"Good evening," she said, as she pulled off a rubber coat that flapped from her shoulders.

"Well," chuckled Barclay, "you can call it that if you want to! It's pretty heavy going on the lake, I guess!"

"Yes!" She smiled again, while her glance went appraisingly about the room. "Is your wife home? Or the womenfolks?"

A stranger, thought Barclay, or she would have known that his was the only place on Barn Rock Island.

"No womenfolks," he replied, willing to pass over that lightly. "Who's with you?"

"Nobody."

"*Nobody?*" he gasped. "You don't

mean to say that you're running a boat alone in this blow?"

"I blew in!" she laughed. "I'm Annette Croy, the lighthouse keeper's daughter, off Chimney Point. I started to row out to the lighthouse just at dark and lost an oar. I've been blowing up the lake in a skiff ever since."

That was an experience to try a man of stout heart and she was taking it with a laugh. Either she had more nerve than any woman Hungry Jack had ever seen or else she was romancing. Why? Was she a spy for the prohibition officers? He had heard of such things.

"Have a chair, anyway," he invited. He tried to steel his soul but it was not easy to look at her and work up a grouch. Hungry Jack Barclay felt it his duty to stand against all minions of the law except the county sheriff and old-fashioned officers like Squire Potter, who would arrest a man in a neighborly spirit if they had to do it at all.

"No womenfolks," repeated the visitor as she sat down, with the blue eyes meditating upon him. "What do you do out here all alone?"

"Do for womenfolks? Don't need 'em!"

"For a living!" she said emphatically.

"Oh, yes!" Jack scratched his head and wondered whether she were trying to make fun of him. Everybody except the totally deaf had heard of his place. "This is Barn Rock Island. I'm Jack Barclay."

"Well!" she exclaimed. "Those are names, not a living! I don't think our conversation fits very well, do you?"

Barclay grinned amiably. He was willing to be playful, although he was getting a little anxious about the poker game. He had to do something with her pretty soon.

"I keep a health resort," he told her. "The boys come out to rest, from Bildad Road, and all around this section."

"Oh!" Her gaze became speculative, and in a measure enlightened.

Suddenly she started, with a quick intake of breath. The unlovely and, seen without an accompanying human body, almost grotesque face of Petey Bumps had peeked around the edge of a door. He ducked out of sight as Barclay turned.

"Just one of the boys—patients," explained Jack, soothingly. "He won't hurt you."

"Do you think I'm foolish?" demanded Annette Croy, in a low and somewhat anxious voice. "I know now! You're the one they call Hungry Jack!"

"That's me!" he admitted, and not without a touch of pride.

She looked him up and down with a long and peculiar stare. He felt a warmth increasing about his heart although he wished most fervently that she were somewhere else. If he could have got acquainted with her under other circumstances! It was no place for her here on the island with a poker game running and Jimmy Dane to be looked after.

"My boat's stove in on the rocks," she said, out of the silence.

"I wouldn't take you ashore in a skiff, anyway," said Jack. "Some of the boys'll be going in a motor boat after a while. I'll send you as soon as I can. Meantime, make yourself comfortable here."

She nodded with that slow, searching look still upon his face as he backed out of the room. He hoped she wasn't afraid. He couldn't leave the boys, and Jimmy, now. Darn it! How was he going to get her ashore in the right kind of company?

They had started to play without him. Petey Bumps grinned knowingly as he entered the room, and Slush Gargan looked up with a leer. Squire Potter had come back from retirement and resumed his normal peace and dignity, but he looked at Jack over his spectacles with a grave and disapproving stare.

"Hadn't ought to have no women

mixed up with poker!" he said decidedly.

"I don't blame him none," said Petey. "I seen her."

"She's a girl from down the lake," explained Barclay, with a profound inward objection to the look upon the face of Gargan. "Her small boat stove in. I got to get her ashore some way to-night."

"Want to get rid of her?" chortled Bumps. "You must be crazy in the head."

"Shut up!" replied Jack. "Deal me a hand."

"Of course he wants to get rid of her!" snorted Squire Potter. "He's running a respectable place."

"Like hell he is!" growled one of the Vermonters. "I'm losing my shirt!"

"I'll take her ashore," volunteered Gargan, as though that settled the matter.

"The Squire'll take her," said Barclay frowning.

"Hey? No, sir! No women in my boat!"

Hungry Jack grunted, being deep in consideration of whether to draw to a bobtail flush, but in the back of his mind he determined that Slush Gargan and Annette Croy were not going ashore in the same boat. He would wait until he got Jimmy off and then take her himself if need be. It wouldn't be so unpleasant.

With the next hand Gargan and one of the Vermonters pulled out of the game. The outlander had a good excuse for pulling out, and for his grouch, because he had lost not only his shirt but the collar buttons with it. Gargan, however, stood about even. Barclay became uneasy when Slush left the room, ostensibly to draw a fresh pail of cider.

The game needed all of his attention but Hungry Jack could not give it although he was helping to run up one

of the best jack pots of the evening. As time passed and Gargan did not come back he grew worried, and it was just as he was pulling in an armful of chips and a brace of black looks from the heaviest losers that a cry, ringing with urgency, came out of the kitchen.

"Jack Barclay!"

That the girl had called him by name gave wings to his feet. His chair spun backward as he leaped up. Silence and immobility descended upon the players as Hungry Jack charged through the doorway.

She was in a corner of the kitchen with the stove poker swinging in front of her. Slush Gargan stood beyond the arc of the poker, pulled by two minds. He glanced over his shoulder, scowling. Barclay felt proud of the girl. Not for nothing was her hair that rich, dark red. Instead of hysterics she had taken to the poker.

"Let her alone, Slush," he warned, advancing.

"Blah!" snarled Gargan. "If you don't want her yourself what do you care?"

"She don't want to be bothered," Barclay told him. "And that's quite enough!"

"A girl that comes to a joint like this——"

The muscle-padded hand of Barclay moved with that quickness which had deceived the eye of the enemy many a time before. It took Slush Gargan by the coat collar and jerked him backward, over a tripping foot. He piled up in the wood box, with his feet higher than his head.

"I'm running this joint, if it is a joint!" said Hungry Jack. "There's different kinds of joints!"

Slush Gargan pulled himself out of the wood box and in a silence discreet but far from loving took himself out of the kitchen.

"Neat!" exclaimed Annette Croy, in

a small and slightly shaky voice. But she managed a laugh.

"Keep your nerve," chuckled Barclay approvingly. "I'm having a little extra trouble to-night, that's all."

"That's what my father calls me," she said. "He calls me 'Trouble'—and I guess he's right."

"I'd like to have that kind of trouble," blurted Jack, somewhat to his own astonishment. With silent fury he realized that he was blushing and, just to show that he wasn't as simple as he must look, he decided that it was necessary for him to try to kiss her. He took three tentative steps. The poker raised itself.

"Shucks!" he said, stopping. "You needn't be afraid. I wouldn't hurt you!"

"I know you wouldn't!" Her mouth quirked. "You're a nice man!"

"I'm a roughneck!" protested Hungry Jack stoutly. If he were a nice man he might as well join the sewing circle at the Corners. If that was all the impression he had made upon her he was discouraged with himself.

"Why don't you quit?" she asked irrelevantly.

"Quit what?"

"Whatever you're doing!"

"Now look here!" he exclaimed firmly. "I'm busting up my luck in a poker game to take care of you, and I'll get you ashore safe and sound, but I'll be cussed if I'll be reformed! That goes as it lays!"

"Nobody wants to reform you!" she flared. "I don't think you're worth it, anyhow!"

Hungry Jack plunged to the depths of contrition. It was awful to have her look as mad as that when she looked at him; it was all right for her to look that way at Slush Gargan but not at Jack Barclay.

"I guess I was scared of being reformed," he admitted, "and that's what made me bark at you! Don't get mad!"

He stood grinning his most doglike grin. Slowly a smile curved her lips again as the lightnings faded.

"You ought to be spanked! A man like you running a poker game—bootlegging, probably! Heaven knows what else you're up to!"

"I'll bet I get more of a kick out of life than you do!" chuckled Barclay. It was a long time since he had enjoyed anything so much as this evening.

"Don't be too sure about that!" she told him darkly. "I've a good mind to take you in hand and make you behave yourself!"

The heart of Hungry Jack leaped and cavorted. More and more he liked this girl. He approved of her. He admired her. While reform was far from his thoughts he knew that he would enjoy having her try to reform him, and yet something whispered to him that her methods might not be as gentle as a man would like. Of course he didn't want to get married but he couldn't help wondering if a girl like that would marry him, all steeped in iniquity as some of the people at the Corners said he was. Probably not; so that was all right.

"If you'll let me come to see you some time I'll let you preach to me," he told her. "I could listen a long time to most anything you wanted to say."

"I'd do more than preach! I'd——"

It was written that what she would do to him was not to be told Hungry Jack Barclay at that moment. Her words were clipped off by the swooping passage through the room of Squire Bill Potter. Barclay had never seen him in quite such a hurry but he hung fluttering for an instant in the kitchen, like a white-haired humming bird, to fling at them one word.

"Prohibitioners!"

Then he was gone through the back doorway. From the front room came the crash of glass. Some guest had carried away a window in his eagerness

to depart. The sound of a shot came from outside. Suddenly Jimmy Dane was in the kitchen, his face stamped with a look of hurt bewilderment.

"They've jumped me!" he cried hoarsely. "Slush Gargan signaled 'em with a lantern! I caught the skunk at it myself!"

Jack Barclay had three things to think of at once—the girl, the safety of his buddy, and his own fate. There was only one way to save the other two.

"Beat it, Jimmy!" he cried. "I'll hold 'em some way long enough for the sloop to make a get-away!"

He pushed Dane bodily out of the room and turned to the girl. He noticed that she still held the poker. She was a little pale, but even in that crowded moment he was conscious, with a thrill of admiration that she showed no signs of panic.

"Get into the pantry!" he commanded. "Stay there! You don't want to be found here!"

She hesitated but she went. He saw that she left the door open a matter of two or three inches. Then came a rush of heavy feet in the front room. Towering into the kitchen, a six-foot stranger with an ugly look in his eyes swung an automatic pistol. Barclay remained motionless. The stranger flung back his coat and showed a gleaming badge. Behind him crowded two other men with pistols, and then Slush Gargan. Gargan laughed.

"Well!" snapped Barclay. "What's it all about?"

"Where's the hooch?" demanded the leader.

Evidently Gargan had not known that Dane's load was on board his sloop. So much the better. By the time they got through looking for something that wasn't there Jimmy would have run a long way before the wind.

"What hooch?"

"Cut it out, you bum! Come through and save yourself trouble!"

"Find it yourself!" grinned Jack.

"Watch that guy!" growled the leader to one of his men. "Come on, Gargan! You know the place!"

Slush Gargan started toward the pantry and the complacency of Barclay went like a puff of smoke. No matter what happened he would not let that girl be brought forth to the shame of being found hiding at Hungry Jack's place on Barn Rock Island. No, and if Slush should lay his hand upon her Barclay rather thought he would get himself shot.

"Keep out of there, Gargan!" he roared. "There's no hooch in the pantry!"

"Shut up!" commanded the big leader.

"And keep shut up!" added Gargan with a sneer. "We're running this show, you big stiff."

Slush reached out and curled his fingers around the knob of the door, pushing slowly as he glanced back in triumph at Barclay. A glance that endured for an instant only. Then his rusty mustache lifted to a howl of utter woe. He danced, and shook frantically the hand that had been on the door-knob. He thrust that hand into his mouth, still dancing. Barclay understood that he had seen something lick out of the darkness of the pantry, like the tongue of a snake, and he knew that Annette Croy had not taken the poker with her in vain.

To the others in the room there was no such explanation of the phenomenon. To see a man dance upon the air without visible cause is enough, for a moment, to take one's mind even from a prisoner held at the muzzle of a pistol. The three invaders had turned as one toward the strange antics of Slush Gargan.

Up to this point Hungry Jack Barclay had not been in danger of jail—at least not so far as he knew. But now, for the sake of that girl, he threw

away the hope of that liberty which was to him more precious than life. He leaped and kicked, and the pistol that had wavered slightly from its pointing at him during the past three seconds rapped up against the ceiling. Before it struck the floor Barclay had driven his mighty fist, wrist-deep, into the stomach of the leader.

One down, and three more to go. The room filled with the heavy roar of an automatic but as it spoke Hungry Jack was lifting the still helpless Gargan by shirt collar and belt. The shot brought down only a sparkle of plaster from the wall. Barclay sent Slush crashing against the man who had fired and turned to meet the enemy from whose hand he had kicked the pistol.

The man was bending down for the gun. It spoke as he straightened up and Barclay felt a red-hot line drawn across his thigh. For the first time in years he was really angry from the soles of his feet to his bristling hair. With a grunt of rage he twisted the pistol away and drove the man the length of the room with a single blow. He wished there were forty of them instead of four.

He'd take them all prisoner and hang their hides on the barn in the morning! That is, he would tell them that was what he was going to do. Pick on a poor, innocent girl, would they? He remembered the cellar as a nice place to keep people who got too fresh and with a swooping paw he grabbed the man who was just struggling out from under Gargan.

He dragged him to the cellar door and cast down into the blackness there. Slush Gargan went next, and then the big leader of the raiding party. When the last one had gone thumping down the stairs Barclay shot the bolt on the door and stepped away lightly, glaring and breathing hard through his nose. He was almost sorry that it was over.

Annette! He ran to the pantry and

burst in. Empty darkness met him. He was bewildered until a gust from the wind-blown night came through an open window. He told himself that she had fled in terror from the crash of battle in the kitchen. He went back and gathered up a pistol. He would need that when they began to try to break out of the cellar. He wanted to look for the girl but he hesitated whether to leave the guarding of that door.

Then without warning the outside door burst open and Annette Croy dashed into the room, bronze hair flying and the light of battle in her blue eyes. Her glance swept the kitchen and came to rest upon the face of Barclay. The doorway behind her filled with what seemed to him like an army of men, bearing rifles. She lifted a small hand and laid a finger upon her lips.

"It's all right!" she cried over her shoulder, with a warning glance at Hungry Jack. "Come in, gentlemen! What have you done with those fellows, Mr. Barclay?"

"Huh?" he gurgled, staring from her to the half dozen grim faces which looked at him.

"Oh, they've shot you!" She nipped the pistol from his grasp and thrust him limply into a chair. Sure enough, one leg of his trousers had been slashed by the bullet. Probably this second army of prohibitioners would fix the other leg for him. He felt himself growing red, like a fool. Why couldn't he get shot somewhere else when there was a girl around

"Where you got 'em?" demanded a square-jawed man who came and stood over him. This one also had a badge upon his waistcoat. Hungry Jack waved a discouraged hand toward the cellar door. It was too much to have two raids in one night, and now he'd go up for a hundred thousand years and never see the red head of Annette Croy any more.

He saw the streaking white shafts

from flash lights and heard harsh commands issued upon the cellar stairs. Annette Croy was fussing at his wound, while he squirmed with embarrassment. She bent close to his ear and whispered fiercely.

"Wake up, you dumb-bell! You're a hero! You've captured a lot of boot-leggers, or something, for the government! Those other fellows are faking! These officers are the real thing! I know Tom Blanchard, the chief, and everything's all right! I looked out of the pantry window and saw Tom's face with a flash light on it while they were sneaking up on the house, and the rest was easy! I got out and told him that I was stranded here and that you were saving me from a gang of rough-necks!"

"Hijackers!" gasped Barclay. "I don't care if they do get pinched!"

Up the cellar stairs came a procession led by Slush Gargan, from whom the triumph had gone utterly. It limped across the kitchen, under the guns of the officers, and out into the night, Blanchard remained behind for a moment.

"You sure are a bird, Barclay!" he said. "That big fellow is a chink smuggler and a man-killer! You're all right! Only— Say—I'll forget that I came here for something else—this time. I won't remember that I thought I had something on you. Get me? You're a good guy. But keep out of trouble after this! Want us to take you along, Miss Croy?"

"Oh, no!" she said sweetly. "Mr.

Barclay was just going to run me over to the mainland when all this happened."

When the door had closed behind Officer Tom Blanchard the honeyed quality left the voice and face of Annette Croy. She considered Hungry Jack Barclay with three straight lines running up and down between her arched and delicate eyebrows.

"Now!" she cried. "What are you going to do about it?"

"About what?" asked Barclay feebly. He rubbed his leg and became intent upon the slash in his trousers.

"Look me in the eye," she commanded. "You know what! You're all respectable now—and everything! Are you going to stay that way or not?"

"I——" began Barclay. His head whirled. A change of heart might be worth while but he didn't want it to come on him too suddenly. He swallowed. "Maybe—I'll——"

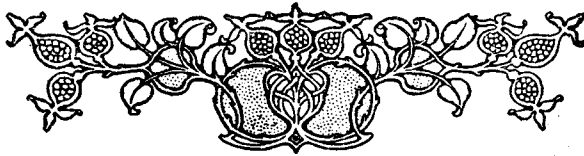
"Oh!" She flung up her head. "I don't think I'll bother with you any more."

He saw the copper sheen of her hair, the soft curve of her cheek, and visioned them as lost. The man-eating rough-neck trembled.

"I'd made up my mind to quit!" he cried hastily. "Only I didn't want to call it reform!"

"Ah!" Her eyes suddenly became lakes of smiles. "I knew you were a nice man from the first minute I saw you."

"Trouble," said Hungry Jack, with perfect resignation to his fate, "is the right name for you!"



Wrong Number!

Miles Overholt

Author of "Nothing But the Truth,"
"Dug Turner Gets a Close-up," etc.



DOUG TURNER CERTAINLY HAD IT IN FOR THE TELEPHONE COMPANY AND HE TOOK IT OUT ON THE TELEPHONE COMPANY'S PRESIDENT. AT FIRST IT WAS INNOCENT AMUSEMENT, BUT, ALL OF A SUDDEN, MATTERS BECAME SERIOUS. HOWEVER, DOUG FOUND HE COULD FALL INTO THE SPIRIT OF THINGS THAT WAY, TOO, WITHOUT ANY GREAT EFFORT.

IF they'd use a ouija board instead of a switchboard, I don't suppose we'd get any more wrong numbers than we now do—maybe not so many.

It's got to be so easy to get a wrong number over the telephone that I always ask for two wrong ones first so's the third time will be the lucky one.

And Doug Turner, he does the same thing—only he ain't quite so lucky as I am.

Doug owned sixty-seven head of fat steers which he had acquired by different kinds of methods while working for old man Wortham, and he wanted to sell 'em and use the money for buying houses and lands and supporting a family—a bootlegger's family—and for banking it and playing pool and a few things like that.

The buyer from Kansas City, whose name was Abe, and therefore not to be trifled with, was waiting at Keystone for Doug to telephone him when the

cattle would be ready to ship. So Doug tried to tell him.

No, ma'am, the phone wasn't working that day, it being a hollerday, I reckon—anyway, everybody was hollering at the phone—and so Doug, he didn't get his number.

For the sixty-sixth time he went into one of those little telephone bugaboos and said to the operator, he said:

"Hello, is this the wrong number?"

And a voice that was sweet enough to eat without sugar and cream on it came back, "Yes."

So Doug, he said, "Thanks," and hung up the receiver and came out for air.

Then we took it upon ourselves to walk about town a bit to see if we couldn't walk off some of Doug's pent-up cussing. It was giving him hardening of the arteries.

Well, sir, wherever we went we could see folks trying to get themselves a tele-

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phone number to see if they could use it for any purpose, but they weren't doing it. Men and women, widows and orphans, hired girls and bald-headed men were not making any headway whatsoever in their mad endeavors to connect up with the right party at the right moment of time.

So it looked as though it was a kind of hopeless case in favor of the telephone. Because Doug had to get word through to Abe, the hand-talking buyer, right pronto or there wouldn't be any sale. And if there wasn't any sale there wouldn't be any jack, which is one simple way to starve to death.

"I'm getting to be a regular telephoniac," said Doug as we sashayed about the sidewalks of Galt. "I'll bet that if I was a receiver for a defunct telephone company, they wouldn't let me get my hooks on it. That's how lucky I am. No, sir, I don't suppose I could even get a hearing then!"

Then he found a pay station and tried to buy himself some conversation, but all he got was language.

The telephone office closed at ten o'clock that night, and as the clock was striking the hour, Doug was still trying to pour himself into the mouthpiece. But it didn't do anybody any good. He didn't make it.

The best he could do was to file a telegram and then go forth and gaze at the moonshine through a glass.

We stayed around till the telegraph office opened the next morning and Doug plucked himself a message, sent collect, from the open-handed Abe at Keystone. The message alleged:

Could not wait any longer for your answer, so bought Ed Myers' cattle. All I can handle now.

ABE HESSE.

"That settles that," said Doug, kind of savagely. "From now on, me and the telephone are comparative strangers. If there was any way of doing it, I would declare a vendetta on 'em," he said.

"What's a vendetta?" I asked him.

"It's an Italian dish with garlic on it," said Doug, after thinking it over for a while.

"Gosh!" I said, "I thought it was something you sang."

Well, sir, I reckon it was what you would call the ornery fate that caused J. Fred Powley, the president of the Galt-Keystone Telephone Company, to make up his feeble mind to come to old man Wortham's ranch to rest up his nervous system for a couple of weeks.

But that's what happened. Yes, ma'am. We hadn't any sooner seen the old man that morning that he up and told us. It was right after Doug had gone and called the telephone company some harsh names that Mr. Wortham said:

"Now that's a right smart coincidence, ain't it?" Then he kind of chuckled between his whiskers. "Mr. Powley, the head of the phone company, will be out here to-morrow to spend a few restful days—he and I being old collie's chumps—and I want you two boys to see that he enjoys his stay on the ranch. You take him hunting, fishing and the like, and do anything he wants. That'll be your job for the next couple of weeks."

Doug's face fell. Well, mebber it didn't fall, but it slipped its mooring quite a bit, and I turned away to keep from swallowing my Adam's apple, or something, and to grin me a few vendettas.

That evening Doug said to me, he said:

"It has casually occurred to me that somebody ought to be made to pay for them cattle. It wasn't my fault or Abe Hess' that they weren't sold and the money turned into the Sunday school, or wherever I pleased to turn it. 'Whose fault was it?' I ask in morbid tones!"

"Mrs. Telephone's," I answered, stepping briskly to the head of the class.

"Wrong," said Doug, preparing to make me stay after school. "Powley's."

"Shucks, he didn't stop you," I argued, so's I wouldn't have to stand in the corner, or anything. "He's only the head of the company, Mr. Wortham says."

"He ain't the head of anything," scoffed Doug. "That telephone company ain't got a head. I'll bet he's only a foot—with corns on it."

"It wouldn't surprise me if he was only a callous," I remarked, trying to "yes" the foreman of Mr. Wortham's cow rancho.

"He's calloused, all right," grinned Doug. "I guess mebbe it's up to us to trim him, in that case. Mebbe then he won't ache so much."

"But you can't go and make him pay for them cattle," I argued. "You still got 'em."

"Jesse James never put up no such an argument," Doug said. And then I knew he was planning to do something financial to Mr. Powley, which is something new in cow-punchers.

Yes, ma'am, by reading swiftly from left to right it could be seen that Mr. Doug Turner was in a kind of a mood—one of them seething, ominous calms before a storm, or something.

"First, I'll torture him for a few days," Doug went on in a serpentine manner. "Then when he is plumb dejected and life ain't hardly worth the scandal, I'll figger out something else—with that guy's signature on it."

So you see how it was—Doug had gone and turned into a him of hate, and it looked as though he needed another note from Mr. Powley in order to make it popular.

Next morning, Mr. Powley arrived all wrapped up in wrong numbers and a sickly grin. His nerves were all on edge, he said, so Doug decided he would file 'em off right pronto.

In the afternoon, Mr. Wortham and Mr. Powley came forth, Mr. Wortham

bringing a few words with him. Mr. Powley, it would seem to the casual observer, would like to take a little trot into the hills and slay himself a few beasts of the fields and some birds of the air and some fish of the sea. Mr. Turner and Mr. Hazard, which was me, would kindly ride forth with the said Mr. Powley and see that everything went off well—especially the gun.

Well, Doug went and roped out old Yellow Fin, the bucking bronc from Buckinghamst, and led him gaily forward so that Mr. Powley might mount and ride—if any.

That was Doug Turner's aim and ambition. Only it didn't work.

Mr. Wortham's long-distance eyesight ain't any too good, but she seemed to be in working order that gladsome day. Instead of mistaking Yellow Fin for Buckskin Sam, as Doug so fondly hoped, the old man recognized the yellow streak and came out and said so in short, understandable words.

"I thought I told you that Mr. Powley was to be treated more or less like a gentleman," said Mr. Wortham, our boss and provider. "You and I both know that any time Mr. Powley climbs aboard that there yellow hyena, he would be thrown so far he wouldn't get back till the new moon. Go and catch Buckskin Sam for him, like I told you. He's gun-broke."

So Doug had to go and drag Buckskin Sam out and saddle him. Then Mr. Wortham came and looked the noble steed over.

"Sure you haven't gone and slipped a cockle burr or something under the saddle blanket?" inquired our boss gently, thereby hurting Doug's feelings something distressing.

"Of course not. Look for yourself," said Doug, rolling up his sleeves so that there would be nothing to deceive Mr. Wortham. Then, as he deftly threw the blanket onto the back of the yellow hawse, he slid a corkscrew, which he al-

ways carried for such emergencies, under the blanket and it was well. Buckskin Sam did the rest as soon as he felt the weight of Mr. Powley pressing on the corkscrew.

Yes, ma'am, Buckskin Sam did very well indeed. He threw his head down among his forelegs and pitched about quite entertainingly, speaking from a mere spectator's standpoint. Then, as a climax, he flipped our good friend, Mr. Powley, into a bed of cactus and kicked at him, just to make it snappy and educational.

I went over and retrieved Mr. Powley from the bed of unease and spoke words to him that were meant to soothe and to mollify.

"You'll have to excuse it, please," I murmured into the ear of the telephone person. "Seems like," I said, "that there was something wrong with the line. Mebbe we ought to call 'Trouble.'"

But the head of the Wrong Number Company was too badly wrecked to frame a snappy reply. He was pricked with remorse and cactus, and he was stabbed with pain and thorns. But I propped him up and uncactused him, while Doug went and caught Buckskin Sam and uncorkscrewed him and brought him back for the second act.

We persuaded Mr. Powley to try it again, Mr. Wortham marveling in a strange, subdued way and wearing a glint in his weather eye, and this time the yellow steed, being made to understand that the show for the time being was over, let the telephony man get on and ride. Buckskin Sam is a gentle, mild-mannered old cayuse when you don't go and try to make an illicit something out of him, and he trotted amiably alongside Pinto Pete and Old Gravy as we dangled over toward Verdant Mesa.

We made camp early in the evening, and while Doug went around looking for something of an unusual nature, I massaged up a few biscuits and wrestled a group of beans, and the only reason

we didn't up and eat 'em was because Doug had found what he was looking for.

Our very good friend, Mr. Powley, it seems, had laid down under a tree and Mr. Turner had gone out into the highways and byways and procured for purely entertainment reasons a well filled and totally inhospitable nest of disgruntled hornets. This he had carried at great risk of physical discomfort to himself to the tree under which Mr. Powley was reclining with his eyes closed and his mouth open like a railroad tunnel that had caved in.

And then, placing the nest on a limb directly above Mr. Powley so that it would be an unanimous affair entirely, why, Doug went and hurled a couple of stones with sermons in 'em at the nest, and left the rest to nature.

Well, sir, it wasn't hardly any time at all till Mr. Powley was absent. Yes, ma'am, he leaped to his feet like a nimble fawn, or something, and went on away from there in an aimless and haphazard manner. He backtracked and seesawed and jackknifed. He ran up hill and down dale, and back again and forward to center, to say nothing of do-se-do and right hand to partner.

It was an awe-inspiring sight, and my only regret was that I wasn't one of them hornets so's I could have seen it all.

Powley finally was stung plumb into the creek and there he languished like a crippled fish and yelled till he went and awakened all the echoes there were in the mountains. Doug said at the time that he'd bet an echo was the only thing that ever dared talk back to Mr. Powley.

After the hornets had retired to talk over the unusual warfare tactics in which their enemy was indulging, why Doug and I, we stalked down to empty Mr. Powley from the damp stream and asked him did he want central.

"Chase those dad-daddety, dashedty-

dashed bees away and help me out of here!" he yiped. "I'm freezing!"

"Well, now, I'm right sorry," mourned Doug, "but we can't do it. You see, we can't throw you a line because the line is out of order."

"Mebbe 'Information' could help you out," I suggested. "If I knew the number, I'd sure like to connect you," I said.

"Oh, well, the party has hung up, anyway," sighed Doug.

All the while the telephony man was floundering away there in the creek like a flounder and trying to scramble himself over the slick rocks and slipping in deeper with every passing moment and cussing in a telephonic manner.

A couple of times he fell in past his neck, which, if you ever had seen his neck, looked entirely impossible, and when he grabbed at a sapling and missed it, Doug said to him, gently:

"If you take your receiver off'n the hook that way, your line will be reported out of order."

Well, we laughed right heartily and we thanked Mr. Powley very profusely for providing us with the little diversion. We told him that it was as good a show as we ever had seen for the money, and could he repeat that last act?

Other folks, we said, could brag about their radio performances, but as for us, we told Mr. Powley, give us the telephone. We told him any number of things like that when something interrupted the conversation with words. Some of the shorter and uglier words were:

"Doug Turner! You and 'Hap' Hazard ought to be ashamed of yourselves. The idea!"

"Gosh! I didn't know this was a party line!" said Doug, turning, as I did, to see Mattie Downs flip her rope over Mr. Powley's shoulders and drag him onto terrible firma.

Then she dismounted from her old

pony and undid the rope and said it was a shame.

"It sure is," agreed Doug. "Rotten service, ain't it!"

Mattie was a widow on her husband's side and owned the ranch adjoining Mr. Wortham's place, and Doug and I had made it a practice for the past two years to go over and ask her to marry us, at least once a week.

Powley managed to stand up all in one piece after a while and thank Mattie for saving his life. But he was as unfriendly with Doug and me as if we hadn't paid our telephone bill for the last three months and were protesting the tolls on the long-distance calls.

"Why didn't you pull him from the water?" Mattie turned on me. "He might catch his death of cold."

"Shucks! I didn't know he wanted to get out," I told her. "We saw him doing some tricks in the water and we thought he was some kind of a fancy swimmer, or something."

"Yeah, it looked to us like a new kind of a vaudeville act," Doug said. "Mr. Powley is a stranger to us. We didn't know that he wasn't doing it so as to take up a collection. We been fooled that way lots of times," he said.

Well, sir, we finally induced Mr. Powley to believe that we didn't know there were hornets in that tree, or if we did, that they were the stinging kind. And as for the creek, we told him we thought he was only kidding us. And he tried to act like he believed it. But Mattie couldn't be flimflammed any.

After the widow had gone home, we told Mr. Powley that we would have to make mud plasters and plaster all the stings on him so as to draw the inflammation out. He had read that in some book or other, anyway, so it wasn't much trouble to talk him into the idea.

The trouble was, we couldn't find the right kind of mud, Mr. Powley arguing that clay was the only kind that would

do the work, and there not being any clay in the mountains.

But we did the best we could till Doug could ride down into the valley and bring back some adobe mud. What Mr. Powley didn't know was that Doug had gone over to Charlie Jones' and had got a sackful of cement, which we carefully mixed with the clay and plastered it quite extemporaneously upon Mr. Powley's person. Then we told him to lie quietly till morning and everything would be jake.

Which it was—with us.

Yes, indeed, Mr. Powley was in solid with us after that. We had cemented his mouth shut and his arms were held to his sides. He looked more like a mummy than mummy herself. He couldn't talk and he couldn't make signs, so how were we to understand that he wanted us to remove the mud?

Along about noon of the following day, after Mr. Powley was fully as starved as six or seven Armenians, why, we went and got the ax and some other tools and started to work on him. I guess we bumped him a good deal, but we left the mouth till the last so there wouldn't be any argument about the matter.

We told him while we worked that his wires must have been crossed, and we asked him if he would like to talk to the complaint department. We said that while he was running away from them hornets, it looked to us as though he had the buzzy signal.

It took us a couple of hours to un mud him, and he wasn't any too beautiful when we had finished with him. No, ma'am, you can say all you want to about clay as a beautifier, but it didn't work with Mr. Powley.

He looked as though he and the switchboard had become switched. Yes, sir, he looked exactly like a wrong number, himself.

But he managed to drag himself over to the food I had gone and unlimbered,

and then he lay down and went to sleep. I guess he didn't sleep much the night before, the mud and cement sort of pulling at him here and there, and drying up his pores and otherwise making a stone foundation out of him.

Mattie Downs came riding past the next day and stopped in to see if we were behaving ourselves, she said, and she and Mr. Powley began to get on first-rate. Which was another reason why we decided he hadn't had enough.

Doug and I, we went over under another tree and tried to figger out other means of entertaining Mr. Wortham's guest and we pretty nearly sprained something doing it. There didn't seem to be anything handy, when, all of a sudden, I saw what we had been looking for—a porcupine!

Mattie mounted her cayuse and started away when we hollered at her and told her we would be over on Sunday.

"I don't think I'll be 'home," she said. "Was it something important?"

"Oh, no," we said. "Only it's been about ten days since we asked you to marry one or the other of us, and we kind o' thought we'd renew the question so's you won't forget what it is we intend to ask you some day."

"Well, that'll be all right," she smiled, snakishly. "You don't need to worry about it. I'll remember it, all right—whenever I want a good laugh."

Which didn't add any to our joy, so I went and caught the porcupine and slipped it among Mr. Powley's sleeping bag while Doug engaged the telephone head in interesting conversation pertaining to this and that.

The prickly porcupine made a good deal of fuss for a while, and it wasn't any easy job snaking him along into the bag, but I did it all by myself. Doug looked, and then the playful little animal fretting himself pretty nearly sick long before bedtime, and we talked loud and laughed long so's Mr. Powley wouldn't

hear him making merry with his bedding. And then when it came time to call it a day, why, I got up and rattled the dishes in a promiscuous manner so that it would drown out the other sounds, and Mr. Powley got himself all ready to hit the hay.

Then he opened the bag and the porcupine went and stepped on him. Yes, ma'am, somehow or other Mr. Powley had got himself in trouble again, and the fretful porcupine had slapped him several times about the legs and places that the hornets, in their haste, had overlooked, and then the playful little animal went hurriedly away to tell his folks about it.

But Mr. Powley's legs looked like a pincushion that had got itself mixed in a cyclone. He was as stuck up as the wife of a plumber, and he yowled like a man that had been give the dog pound when he had asked the phone operator for K-9.

Doug hollered at him, "Hey, mister, your line is busy!"

And it was, too. Anyway, his line of language was. During the war I heard men swear in thirteen or fourteen different languages, but Mr. Powley, he did it in thirty-eight. I reckon that our telephonic had got so much practice talking over the telephone free of charge that way that he didn't have any competitors any more.

"Which one of you blankety-blanky blanks put that animal in my bed!" he shouted like he was talking to the chief operator.

"What animal?" we wanted to know, innocently.

"That four-legged prickly pear!" he yiped. "It stabbed me from hell to breakfast."

"Shucks! that wasn't no animal," I told Mr. Powley. "That was one of them rolling dinky-doo-dads—half bird and half vegetable. It flies down off'n a tree and rolls into things. I've killed 'em by the dozens," I said.

"Yeh, it's a kind of a habitat of these mountains," Doug said. "Sometimes they get into the biscuits and make life perfectly unbearable."

"But this one didn't roll," said Mr. Powley, plucking some quills from his shin. "It ran and it slapped."

"Oh, well, I guess that was one of them slapdoodles," said Doug. "It is a different species, but similar," he went on. "It only runs when it meets a superior foe. Still the principle's the same."

Then we helped extract the quills from Mr. Powley's better self and kidded him along till it looked as though he believed us. But I don't think he slept very well the rest of the night. He seemed to feel that mebbe the mountains wasn't exactly a restful spot. A nice jail somewheres, or mebbe the crater of an active volcano appeared to be more appealing to him.

Anyway, he told us next morning that, if it was all the same to us, he would like to go back to the ranch, and we said it was O. K. There weren't enough features of entertainment up there in the hills, anyway.

We reached the ranch that evening and Mr. Wortham looked kind of fish-eyed at Doug and me after he had let his eyes linger on Mr. Powley for a minute.

"Everything been all right?" he asked the telephone president, and Mr. Powley, not being certain whether all them accidents were done on purpose or were they figgered out ahead of time, said, "Sure."

The telephone man stuck pretty close to the house all next day and sort of recuperated himself and visited with the old man and slept and loafed and we were afraid that he would tell our boss of his suspicions, if any, but Mr. Wortham didn't fire us or anything, so it looked as though it was all right so far, as the optimist said while falling out of a twelve-story window.

On the second day, though, Mr.

Wortham suggested to his little playmate and guest that there was a stream down in the lower forty that was plumb running over with trout, and why didn't he let the boys get him some tackle and go and take a fling at 'em.

Well, it sounded perfectly reasonable to Mr. Powley, and while I dug up some fishing lines and one thing and another, why, Doug, he went and chased old Gotch-ear, the ungentlemanly bull that has a mad on at most everybody, and got him into the south forty. Gotch-ear's specialty is hazing folks who travel on foot, and, the day being hot, the bull was plumb sore and bull-headed by the time I had coaxed Mr. Powley down into the field.

I showed our fisherman just where to fish, watching Gotch-ear out of the corner of my other eye, and then I climbed the fence, waving a red handkerchief in a surreptitious manner as I did so.

Doug and I, we weren't present when old Gotch-ear came looking for the insulting guy that had waded the red bandanna, but Mr. Powley was acting as a welcoming delegation.

Yes, ma'am, Mr. Isaac Walton Powley had managed to catch himself a couple of fish by the time we had completed all our bullish arrangements, and he was wrapped up in his piscatorial efforts when Gotch-ear bellowed in a cold, harsh tone of voice practically in Mr. Powley's best, or telephone, ear.

Well, sir, in less than eight tenths of a fractional part of time our good friend, Mr. Powley, fled the scene. He faltered into the creek and then he faltered out again. He ran in a given direction faster than the eye, and then Gotch-ear took it upon himself to make the occasion a festive one. He hurried along behind Mr. Powley, halting only long enough to emit an occasional beller. And with every beller, Mr. Powley would make an extra leap, so that by the time Gotch-ear had called him

eight or ten names, our guest had busted all world's records, and was going after those of the other planets.

Doug said he never saw anything faster than a taxicab meter till he had observed Mr. Powley hastening on that way. So he yelled at Powley:

"Hey! Long distance wants you!"

Well, long distance got him. Heck, old Gotch-ear might have been nimble and fleet-footed in his youth, but Mr. Powley, he went and showed up the bull for a has-been.

As for long-distance foot racing, I never heard of a man running faster than sixty miles an hour, but our guest must have beaten that record. Because in less than eight consecutive minutes he was plumb out of sight of the human eye and was passing long-winded jack rabbits and fast-moving coyotes as if they were standing still.

"Now, that was quite a break," said Doug, as we went and caught our cayuses and chased Gotch-ear out onto the open range. "It'll take quite a bit of work to get it fixed so's we can use the line again. I guess we'd better run out the emergency wagon."

Then we started in to trail Mr. Powley and try and intercept him before he reached the Mexico line.

"That was a bully race," I said to Doug as we rode along.

"Yeh, fair," said Doug, worrying a bit. "Did the old man go into town today?"

"Yes, the telephone line doesn't work and he went in to see Josh Biggs about some calves," I told him.

Well, sir, it looked as though our telephone man had flown a good deal of the time, and that made it a hard job to track him. Then, whenever he did hit the ground, he did it so lightly that we couldn't tell whether those were his tracks or were they shadows.

"Mebbe he melted down somewheres and ran off into the creek," I suggested, educationally.

"Shucks, that guy wouldn't melt," said Doug. "You can't melt anything that you can't cook up—and he's already hard-boiled."

The farther we traveled, the more certain we were that Mr. Powley was part kangaroo, because his jumps were averaging about sixty-seven feet, and I don't know of any better jumper than a kangaroo, unless it is a Polish checker player.

It was about two hours later that we overtook the fleeing citizen. We weren't looking for him, either, when we found his voice. We had kind of sneaked up to Mattie Downs' place for the pleasurable purpose of saying soft, apple-saucish words to her, and as we dangled around the corner of the house we stopped and listened a few ounces.

"Yes, indeed," we heard Powley say. "If those roughneck cow persons are trying to convince me that our telephone service is poor, they certainly are succeeding. But I didn't think it was *that* bad."

I looked through a window and saw Mattie Downs putting bandages and things on Powley's arms and face, and otherwise nursing him just as though he had that minute returned from the front.

"Oh, I don't believe they would wilfully hurt any one," Mattie defended. "All of those coincidences might have just happened."

"Do you really think that?" wondered Powley.

"Well—h'm!—well, of course, I didn't witness any but the hornet episode," she dodged.

"Well, now, if I may use your phone I think I shall call up Mr. Wortham and tell him where I am—and why," said the telephone man, and then with his words still ringing in my ears, I sneaked around the house and cut the telephone wires, promising myself to fix it before we left.

So Mr. Powley had quite a time trying to get his number. He nearly

cranked his arm loose at one of the joints, but all he got out of it was a dull, aching sound. Then he went back to where Mattie was at and grinned.

"It's almost as bad as the boys seem to think it is," he said.

"You're not—you won't make them any trouble with Mr. Wortham, will you?" Mattie then asked, and I wanted to go right in and ask her to marry me, but I didn't do that same. I didn't go in and make any kind of a proposal to Mrs. Downs because Jeff Higgs, Mattie's hired man, drove into the corral about that time and looked at us as though he was wondering in a vague sort of a way if we were burglars or what. He yelled at us to come and open the barn door. So we acted as though we had just flown down out of a tree to pick up a worm or something, and then went down and became Jeff's hired men for a few minutes.

After a bit we went into the house with Jeff, and Mr. Powley said he wondered where we had gone after he had started fishing for fish.

"Oh, there was a calf in the field and we went and drove it out," Doug told him.

"It was a kind of a playful young calf and we had quite a job getting it to leave the nice fresh grass," I said.

"But we were determined," Doug busted in. "Never," said Doug, "have we let a calf skin us."

"Did you say it was a calf?" wondered Mr. Powley.

"A calf," answered Doug.

"In that case," grinned the telephone man, "I guess I must have had the wrong number."

Mattie motioned for me to come out into the kitchen. I went. Said the widow:

"Before you go, Hap, I wish you'd repair the telephone line. I might want to call the sheriff, or somebody."

"What telephone line?" I blinked, like

a window shade. "Oh—you mean the telephone line?"

"Yes, the telephone line—the telephone wire you cut."

"Oh—that one!" I said, knowing darn well she had seen me cut it. So I went out and fixed it while nobody was looking.

Mattie drove Mr. Powley home in her flivver, and Doug and I, we cut through the fields, beating them home by half an hour. We told Mr. Wortham, who was back from town, that Mr. Powley was having a good time fishing, and that Mattie Downs saw him fishing that way and was bringing him home in her car.

"I hope he hasn't any complaints to make at the way you boys are treating him," said Mr. Wortham. "Why's Mattie bringing him home?"

"He couldn't carry all the fish," said Doug.

"You couldn't have driven out after him, I suppose," said good, kind Mr. Wortham.

"Sure," answered Doug, "but Mattie was coming over, anyway."

As soon as Mr. Powley and Mattie arrived, Mr. Wortham spoke right up.

"I hear you got so many fish you had to hire a flivver to bring 'em in."

"Yes, I—er—did pretty well," said Mr. Powley, looking for Doug for the next cue and not getting it any to speak of. So he looked again at Doug in a sterner manner and said,

"Where—er—what did we do with those fish?"

"Fish! Oh, yeh, the fish," said Doug.

"Sure, we got to consider the fish. Hey, Hap," he turned to me, "what did you do with Mr. Powley's fish?"

"Fish! Oh, gosh!" I yipped. "Was them fish? You mean that gunny sack full? Why, I fed 'em to the hogs. I thought they was tomatoes!"

Old man Wortham didn't say anything, and Powley grinned at Mattie Downs, and everything seemed to have

passed off quietly. But, of course, you never can tell about old man Wortham.

Well, sir, Mattie Downs came over next morning and loaded Mr. Powley into her flivver. She was going to show him her ranch and some funny caves or something down in her field. Yes, ma'am, they were getting right friendly, and none of that friendliness boded Mr. Powley any good, lemme tell ya, Mr. Powley being a widower and all.

Doug and I, we were pestivating around the ranch that morning when we saw a snappy, red roadster come trotting down the lane like a new moon and stop in front of the big house. Then a snappier-looking girl got out and said some words to old man Wortham, and we would have gone up and asked could we do anything when she slithered back into her car and went zipping away.

Mr. Wortham told us a few minutes later that the girl was Gloria Powley, her father being the telephoniatic, and that she had tried to call him up the evening before, but that the phone wasn't working, so she drove out to see him, and he had sent her on to the Widow Downs' place.

Which is no way to treat a gal like that.

"Seems that Mike Blake and 'Snowy' King, those bandits from down Tularosa way, have been laying for Mr. Powley for a couple of years to try and shake him down," Mr. Wortham told us. "They were seen over on Verdant Mesa only yesterday, and the girl came to warn her dad to come back to town and safety."

"Shucks! I don't believe those hombres have nerve enough to tackle anything but rustling a few steers," Doug Turner said. "Heck! I know three or four of that gang personally."

"Which doesn't surprise me in the least," grinned our kind-hearted boss. "I wondered why your herd increased so fast."

Well, sir, it is surprising the way things can happen sometimes. There we were drilling around the ranch as carefree as a roll of linoleum, without having any more knowledge than a large-sized jay bird, when all the while a tragedy was taking place right under our noses, or between the face and eyes.

Mattie Downs and Mr. Powley were spinning blithely along toward the Wortham ranch that evening when Mr. Powley took his eyes off'n Mattie's face long enough to look and see what was that red object obstructing the road in such an unseemly manner. Then he gasped himself a couple of gasps and looked closer.

It was his daughter's little red car loafing there like it didn't have a thing in the world to do. It was standing right plumb in the road, gentle and unharmed, just as though the driver had met a bootlegger and had taken a walk with him, or something, but that was all. There wasn't any note or a lock of hair, but Mattie Downs, she being a kind of a woman with the eye of an eagle and the instincts of a married person—Mattie, she looked and read the signs.

The signs said to Mattie:

"Two horsemen—meaning gents on cayuses—rode alongside the car while it was stopped. Apparently the driver had tarried to fill the radiator at the spring at the side of the road. Two pairs of footprints, one large pair and one teeny-weeny pair, showed that there had been a kind of a struggle in the dust. Then, a short distance from the car, the little tracks went plumb out of business, and a horse stepped in their shoes, as you might say."

Getting right down to hard, brass-covered facts, somebody on a hawse had up and eloped Gloria Powley away from there, and you could lay to that.

Well, sir, Mr. Powley, he went wild. He went so goofy that while they were speeding along toward Mr. Wortham's

cow domicile, he attempted to lend a hand on the wheel and a foot on the gas, or something, and Mattie became excited through it all—and the flivver went over the embankment right above the gate leading into the Wortham's front, back and side yard.

Two or three of the cow hands saw the episode, or chapter, as the case may be, and rushed up there, expecting to pick 'em up with a blotting pad, but they weren't scattered much. They carried 'em into the house in two pieces, and then Mr. Wortham, he went to the telephone to see what about a doctor. But as was customary, the phone wasn't working that day.

Everybody took a turn at twisting the tail of that there farmers' cuss machine, but the results weren't worth putting down in a little red book or anything. So Mr. Wortham, he turned to the standing-around-helpless punchers and said:

"Hap, you fork a bronc and ride to Galt for Doc Sawyer. Henry, you do the same—only ride to Ryepatch for Old Doc Warren. Sim, you beat it over to the Muddy and bring Doc Green back with you. Mebbe some of 'em won't be home and we can't take any chances."

So we all started forth to see could we snag us a doctor apiece, and the other hands and our boss went to see what could be done with the injured and the halt.

We weren't any sooner out of the house than Mr. Powley up and revived himself and told Mr. Wortham it didn't make any never-mind about him, but what about his daughter!

Well, that was something else. Mr. Wortham went to the phone and tried to get the sheriff's office, and nobody gave him the wrong number. Nobody gave him any number.

Then Doug Turner went outside and gulped himself full of remorse and mountain air, and saddled up his pinto mustang.

When I got back to the ranch with

Doc Sawyer, and Hen Marvin had brought Doc Warren over from Rye-patch and Sim Blackburn had snagged in Doc Green from over on the Muddy—when these doctors and surgeons and what not came marching into the house, why, all the ducks on the ranch began to quack!

But Doug Turner, he whistled to me and poured forth the tale about Gloria Powley having been kidnaped by Mike Blake's gang of rustlers and said it was his fault, or mebbe mine and his together.

"If I hadn't got the idea of picking on Powley, this wouldn't have happened," he said, nervously jangling his spurs and tearing a homemade cigarette in two. "I'm going after her. Do you want to go along—or ride with the sheriff?"

"Shucks! I want to get back the gal," I told him. "I don't want to go on no sheriff's picnic party."

So we sneaked away while a couple of the other fellows rode for the sheriff. Mattie was sitting up talking to the doctors about how well she was when we rode past the house, and Mr. Powley was biting holes in the no-good telephone.

Then, one of the boys told us afterwards, the phone suddenly started ringing as if its heart would break, and a voice asked for Mr. Powley.

"We got your gal an' we're gonna keep her till you stick fifty thousand bucks under the rock twenty feet south of the county line monument, six miles south of Wortham's ranch," said the hard egg over the wire. "I suggest that you put the dough under that boulder to-morrow night—and then beat it away from there."

Then the voice stopped and Mr. Powley, after working half the night, learned that the tough egg was talking through a lineman's portable outfit, but that's all he did find out.

But Doug and I, we didn't know the

gal really had been kidnaped. We were just kind of playing a hunch.

Well, it wasn't such a bad hunch, at that, because we found some fresh tracks in the moonlight along about midnight, and followed 'em down to a creek where they disappeared. But, shucks! that didn't fool us any. We had trailed too many cows and rustlers to worry about that. One of us rode down and the other went up the creek, and when Doug found the trail again two miles farther on, why, he shot his six-gun once and I went and met 'im.

The only trouble was—trouble.

Yes, ma'am, the rustlers weren't very far away, it looked like, and six or seven of 'em took it upon themselves to see could they shoot us so's we would look natural at the funeral. They shot at us from the darkness in a stealthy and ungentlemanly manner, and we went and hurried away from there in about as spontaneous a manner as you'd care to witness with the naked eye.

But them kidnapers hurried after us, too, and that made it kind of unanimous. They shot rings around us, and little parabolas and a few right-angle triangles, and every one of them bullets seemed to say:

"I am trying to get your party!"

Well, one of 'em did it. I don't know when it happened, but something had gone and zinged its way through my shirt sleeve and fooled around there till it found my arm, and then it dug in for the winter and stayed there. I didn't know it, I say, till I thought I'd use the arm for something or other, and it wouldn't be used. No, ma'am, it just hung there like a pair of pants on a clothesline, and then I came to the conclusion that mebbe I was shot.

That is one reason why I kept on riding back toward the ranch. I was afraid them outlaws would get sore and puncture one of my tires in a whole lot fatter spot. Anyway, I had lost Doug, or he had lost himself, or something,

and what was the use of me making a bull's-eye out of myself when all I wanted to be was a homing pigeon!

So I pigeoned home!

But Doug, he fooled them bandits. He was riding on ahead of 'em like a feather blown by a cyclone, as the poet says, and they got so close to him that he could smell their breaths with licker on 'em. Which made him homesick or something, and when he passed under a tree, why, he swung up a couple of arms and grabbed a limb and let his pinto keep a-running.

The rustlers chased his pony plumb ragged, thinking Doug was in the saddle, and our hero, Mr. Turner, went back up the gulch a ways on foot and saw the camp fire of the kidnapers.

Not only that, but he saw Gloria Powley sitting in a cave, surrounded by two men and a wall.

Having lost his six-gun in the scramble to become a monkey, why, Doug had to see what could be done with a few fingers and a couple of thumbs.

He sneaked up on them guards and jumped down the throat of one of 'em, or pretty near it, and knocked him plumb silly. Then before the other one could club him to death with his sawed-off gun, why, Mr. Turner kicked him very industriously indeed, till you would have said he ought to go into the thrashing business and flail flaxseed.

In less time than it could have been done in the movies, he had tied up them two bad guys and had taken their guns and the gal and had gone pit-a-pat down the gulch, because he was afraid the rest of the gang would come back and make goulash out of him.

But by the time the others had returned to find their home in a state bordering onto hysteria, why, Mr. Turner and Miss Powley were wedged in behind a flock of boulders, waiting for daylight to show 'em how to get out of the darn gulch, quite a ways from

the cave which the rustlers were using as a summer home.

But, as the poet says, they reckoned without their host. Because Mike Blake and his shifty-eyed partners could read tracks pretty well, themselves, and they went and followed Doug and Gloria to their resting place.

It wasn't right, they argued among themselves in a friendly fashion, for a single gent to come along that way and take away their meal ticket like that. What was the world coming to, anyway, they said, if an honest kidnaper isn't permitted to make a living any more? Or words to that effect.

The fleeing pair hadn't traveled more than three or four miles as the old crow flies, and the bandits found 'em right soon and began plowing up the ground around 'em with bullets, just as though they were going to plant a spring crop of something—wild oats, mebber.

So Doug and the gal began looking around for a place to kind of ooze into, and the gal found it. What she found was a cave right back of them, and they went into it and made themselves perfectly at home. They went into that there domicile because Doug discovered that the guns they carried had only three cartridges apiece in them, and you can't go and shoot nine men with six bullets, unless they catch 'em when they fly up from the ground. Which bandits hardly ever do.

So Doug shot all but two of the cartridges at the rustlers, saving those two for a rainy day, or something. And then, when the firing ceased, why, the outlaws began shaking hands with each other and commenting on the beautiful summer's day, and kindred subjects.

But they couldn't shoot the cave to pieces, or anything like that, so Mike got the idea that mebber they could smoke the pair out, he being kind of fond of smoked meat in his early youth, and that is what they proceeded to begin to commence to do.

They stole up and built a fire at the mouth of the cave so the smoke would go inside and get into the gal's eyes and make her cry. And then they waited for Doug to wave 'em a flag of truth.

Which didn't work out the way they figgered it. Because Gloria Powley, she scouted around till she had located an opening at the top of the cavern, and while the outlaws were playing pinochle with one eye and guarding the cave entrance with the other, why, Doug and Gloria, they went up the flue.

They crawled out of said flue and sneaked over the hill at the rear, and skipped lightly down another gulch and kept on walking, hand in hand, like they had just got out of school.

Then when the gal became too tired to walk, why, Doug, he picked her up and carried her in his arms, which is a fairly good way to become acquainted with the daughter of a telephone president.

Well, sir, Doug he went and staggered along with Mr. Powley's only child in his arms all the rest of the day, only stopping to rest when night came on apace. Then he covered her with his coat and wished a sandwich cart would come along and wreck itself at his feet. Which no sandwich wagon did.

And by the time they were so nearly frozen that they were afraid to sneeze for fear they would fly all to pieces, why, they got up and started on again.

Along about sunup the next morning, Doug saw a sight that would have caused a blind man to throw away his crutches. It was a ranch house in the hills, and over the gate was a sign which said:

J. P. SMITH

JUSTICE OF THE PEACE

Judge Smith and his wife fed and watered the pair and made them take a rest. Then the judge, he called up Mr. Wortham and told him to tell Mr. Powley that his unmarried daughter was safe and prosperous, and how was all his folks?

Sheriff Jim Caywood and some of his hired hands then went and found Mike Blake and his playful friends, and I sat under an apple tree in Mr. Wortham's orchard and made up my mind to get married and settle down to a steady ranch life and quit chasing kidnapers, as soon as my arm got well.

Mr. Powley didn't worry about his daughter as soon as he knew she was all right, and went over to see how was Mattie Downs feeling after the automobile accident and could he do anything about buying her a new car.

Doug and Gloria stayed at Smith's nearly a week, enjoying the air, or the scenery, or something.

Doug told me afterwards that Justice Smith said to him and the gal one day, he said:

"Can I do anything for you folks? You see, I am a justice of the peach"—looking at Gloria—"I mean, justice of the peace——"

"Well," said Doug, grinning.

"Well," said Gloria, blushing.

And later that afternoon Justice Smith, he called up Mattie Downs' place and asked for Mr. Powley. And Mr. Powley, he wanted to talk to his daughter. So Gloria took the phone.

"Hello," said Mr. Powley. "Is this Gloria?"

No answer. Gloria giggled.

"Is this Gloria Powley?" inquired the old man once more.

"I guess you have the wrong number," his daughter gurgled. "This is Mrs. Doug Turner talking."

Mr. Powley gasped, chuckled, and beckoned to Mattie. Mattie took the phone and asked could she speak to Mr. Turner.

Doug took the receiver.

When Mattie said, "Hello, Doug," why, Doug, just to make certain, said:

"Hello—is this Mattie Downs?"

"No—you must have the wrong number. This is Mrs. J. Fred Powley speaking!"



The Stage Driver

by Robert Terry Shannon

Author of "May the Best Man Win,"
"The Ordeal of Mr. Kiddle," etc.

AMOS KIRBY WAS THE SCOURGE OF THE HILL COUNTRY. POWERFUL BOTH PHYSICALLY AND INFLUENTIALLY, HIS WAS AN IRON RULE. CONFIDENT, HE SAW NO REASON WHY HE SHOULDN'T DEFEAT DAVID AND MARRY THE BOY'S SWEETHEART HIMSELF. BUT A LONG ROAD LAY AHEAD—AND DAVID WAS SOMETHING OTHER THAN A MERE STAGE DRIVER.

THE red disk of a summer sun was setting beyond a bulking timbered range. David Duncan pulled up his dusty three-seated mountain wagon in front of Amos Kirby's rambling general store, which was also the post-office at the sparse settlement bearing the pleasant, if misleading, name of Harmony View.

A lounging, familiar group on the store porch awaited the arrival of the mail. From the railroad at Gum Fork, forty miles away, David had started in the morning; had stopped at Pineville to throw off a mail sack, change teams and eat dinner. A traveling man in a checked suit—the only passenger on the trip—clambered out of the vehicle, paid his fare and lugged his two pieces of baggage across the dusty street toward a dingy frame tavern.

For the alien, it had been hard, punishing travel over the rutted, jolting roads. His rotund body moved in an aching aura of fatigue that contrasted sharply with the smart vigor of David Duncan as he tied the horses and

stepped around to the rear to unstrap the mail sacks.

David Duncan, barely nineteen, concealed in a frame that was almost fragile in its slenderness an amazing energy—a force, perhaps, that came from some mental rather than a physical source. He was the youngest man who had ever driven the stage—who had been intrusted, as the postal regulations set forth with the "care, custody and conveyance" of the United States mails. By virtue of his responsibilities he was obliged to travel with a heavy revolver in his possession, an impressive symbol of authority and solemnly sworn duty.

The carrying of the revolver was purely perfunctory. David had never possessed a taste for weapons. He was as indigenous to the mountains as the pines and oaks, but his was not the gaunt, powerful frame of the mountaineer or the mind of the feudist and moonshiner.

Whereas blue eyes predominated in the region, David's were soft and brown and his skin neither pale as some, nor

leathery as most, was richly olive with a delicate, scarcely discernible, pinkness in his smooth cheeks. With clean, regular features and small hands and feet it appeared that the contractor who held the franchise for carrying the mails had intrusted the actual employment to one who, physically at least, was dangerously close to childhood. A certain shyness of demeanor confirmed such an impression.

Weighing no more than a hundred and twenty pounds at the outside it was doubtful if David Duncan would have been a match for any ill-disposed man in the county. Yet the contractor had never given any worry to such qualms. He had known David's father and his grandfather before him, able, honest men—men who had seldom fought but who had never been unduly worsted in any contest.

The mail sacks were not heavy and David carried two of them on his back into the store and behind the wicket at the far end. Amos Kirby came out of a side room which housed a millinery department and at once busied himself with distribution of letters and packages.

Later, after supper, David returned to the store. With its kerosene lights, counters, harness, hardware and groceries it was a natural gathering place for the few unattached males in Harmony View. Whatever Kirby's sinister reputation, it was not forbidding enough to thwart the herd instinct of his fellow citizens. Sometimes, in the evening there were as many as nine or ten present.

David was minded to refresh himself with a bottle of Kirby's soda pop. He passed through the little group on the porch and into the cluttered interior. Totally without expectation, he observed that Helen Bristow was in the place, that she seemed to be arranging a display of bolted calico on a table that stood in front of the mail wicket.

Something in her manner conveyed the amazing but definite impression that she had been "hired." At the sight of David, approaching her with perplexity on his face, she lifted her blue, candid eyes with a steady gaze.

The boy looked at her, hesitating for speech. She was David's age and, like him, she gave a suggestion to frailty. A gleaming mass of chestnut hair redeemed her clear-skinned face from plainness and bestowed upon her some slight claim to beauty.

"You—you oughtn't be workin' here, Helen," David told her, with nervous abruptness. "This ain't no place for you—for any girl."

Helen Bristow moved a bolt of material and smoothed its surface with a deft hand. David had come quite close to her. "Why do you say that, David?" she asked. "The money's good and it's needed."

The protective sensation in David's breast became almost acute. The house and forty acres close to town was his own, now that both his father and mother were dead. It was lonesome living there alone, shifting for himself. Unrealizingly, he felt the urge of an instinct which he could not at once identify.

"Helen," he said in a voice suddenly tensed and serious, "did you yourself want to come here in Kirby's and work?"

"I said the money was good and was needed," the girl returned. "Ain't that enough?"

"Not for me it ain't. I knowed your father owed Kirby money—notes—but that ain't no call for you to work close around a man like Amos Kirby——"

Helen stopped him with a warning frown that gathered in a little pool between her brows. "Hush! Mr. Kirby's around somewhere and if he was to hear you——"

"I ain't frettin' about Kirby," David asserted warmly, yet lowering his voice.

"Your pap could make a livin' for his family if he'd only pitch in an' work. If he sent you here to take a job——"

"He didn't. Mr. Kirby asked me and it was better than I could get teaching school."

"But Kirby!" objected David. "A man with his record! Didn't he shoot an' kill that feller in a card game down at Good Hope? An' didn't they find that revenue officer killed not far from the still that the whole country knows belongs to Kirby? An' that weak-minded furriner that he run out of the county after borrowin' money from!"

"Hush, David!"

"An' that ain't all, by half. They's other things, too, that ain't fit for a girl like you to know, Helen. I ain't talkin' behind his back—I ain't sayin' a thing that the whole county don't know. If your own father ain't got sense enough then I—I——"

Suddenly, the vast bulk of Amos Kirby interposed itself between them. He had come around a counter piled high with merchandise. He was a towering man with a wide chest; upon his heavily boned face with its wide-set pale-blue eyes was a muddy flush of unwonted color.

"I happen to hev hearn what you was a-sayin', young feller," he pronounced in a smoldering voice. "I hope you won't pay no mind to any sneakin' back-biter, Helen——"

The man's familiar use of the girl's name stung the boy worse than the descriptive language applied to his own person. He was conscious, all at once, that a nerve in his cheek was twitching—was burningly aware that Amos Kirby, if he desired, could smack him to the ground with one swing of a great, open-palmed hand.

"I said it behind your back but I don't have no objections to tellin' it to your face," David Duncan found himself saying in tones oddly controlled. "A man of your character ain't got no busi-

ness hirin' a girl like—like her, an' forcin' her to associate with you here in this store——"

Amos Kirby's face began to take on an ashen hue; his pale eyes to narrow into fish-colored slits.

"You don't mind him, Mr. Kirby!" said Helen Bristow sharply. "He's just a boy and he don't realize what he's sayin'——"

Kirby was silent, motionless, for a moment. Almost with a visible effort he was struggling to restrain himself. Then he laughed mirthlessly.

"That's right, Helen—he don't realize," he pronounced. "But if he's talkin' that a way there'll be others sayin' the same thing—an' that kind of talk's got to be stopped. I don't want you to git it in yore head that I'm a varmint, Helen. You an' me is goin' to be awful good friends in this store an' I'm payin' you good money, too."

"She don't have to work here!" burst from David.

Amos Kirby dropped a paw on his shoulder with apparent nonchalance, but there was an iron grip in his strong fingers.

"Helen," he said, with a show of geniality, "you put on yore hat an' run along home. I ain't goin' to hurt this dern fool critter. But I am goin' to take him out back an' give him some good advice. I'm goin' to talk to him in private."

The girl's face failed to respond to the show of toleration from Kirby. Her eyes now were cool, calculating.

"I'll put on my hat and go home," she said levelly, "but it'll be the sorriest day of your life, Amos Kirby, if you harm David Duncan. He ain't said aught but what others have said—and you're twice his size."

Kirby tightened his grip on David's shoulder but he managed a tobacco-stained grin. "Pshaw, Helen," he laughed. "This little runt wouldn't pay for the trouble of skinnin'. It'd be like

pluckin' a sparrow. Now you run along home, girl, and don't pay 'tention to nothin' you hear from yore boss ag'in."

Amos Kirby stepped toward the back door of the store, beckoning David to follow him. Both went outside. An incredibly large orange moon glowed in the dark blue of the sky. The night was cool, rich with the deep odors of the darkened, timbered thicknesses. Whippoorwills cried faintly from a distance. By the simple process of closing the door behind him, Kirby projected himself and David into this world of primitive nature. By no chance would any one overhear them. They were alone, man to man—each in the grasp of a timeless instinct, an immemorial conflict.

"I hearn what you said to her, an' I thought I'd better set you right on the subject you was mouthin' so freely," Kirby said, complacently superior.

"I didn't say aught but the truth——"

"Yep, but you didn't tell it all. What you said was true enough but there's twice as much untold." Kirby laughed slightly, with a creaking noise in his throat. "Of course, I ain't in no danger admittin' this to you—you'll never tell, an' you couldn't prove anything if you did. But it's a good thing to have you understan' that I don't give a damn what I do—they ain't nothin' holdin' me back any place. An' you'll remember I ain't never been proved guilty of nothin'. That's 'cause I don't leave tracks, young feller."

A breeze from a glen slipped past. Something in its strange, almost icy coolness, disturbed David. In an unexplained manner the momentary cold breath seemed to coincide with the creak that had been in Kirby's muffled laugh. The boy's hand sought the knob of the door.

"I don't want no trouble with you, Kirby," he said.

Pulling, he became aware that the

other had a solid foot against the door. "I ain't through, yet," Kirby resumed. "I'm a slow man but I'm dead sure. Now, you got some notion that you're sweet on that girl. If you was a grown man an' you come between me an' a woman I'd shoot you down an' swear you pulled a gun on me first——"

One hand crept up David's coat lapel. The long, bony forefinger of the other hand tapped the boy on the chest with a prodding harshness.

"I'm goin' to marry an' settle down. That's why I don't want no trouble," Kirby went on. "I'm givin' you one chance—first, last an' only. When you drive the stage to Gum Fork to-morrow, *don't come back!* Take the railroad an' go. If you don't, some fool squirrel hunter along the road is apt to fire an' accidental shot through yore skull. Me, I expect to be huntin' all next week. An' if you got any idee I'm foolin', young feller, jest walk out to the cemetery in Gum Fork an' look at that tombstone they got up over that gambler feller—for one."

Kirby moved his foot away from the door and, with an easy motion, opened it. For an instant David looked full at the high-cheeked, evil face.

"I'm not afraid of you, Kirby," he said, forcing his voice to steadiness. "No livin' man can run me out'n the place where I was born."

Kirby lifted one hulking shoulder. "Suit yoreself, bub. That gambler feller, he warn't afeard of me, nuther,"

With his small shoulders straight as an Indian's, David Duncan marched back through the store, without a glance behind at the burly form that followed him to the front door and watched him start off down the gray ribbon of a road that lay winding into the obscurity of the night.

Until he was, beyond question, out of Amos Kirby's sight he walked steadily. Later, he sat on a rock beside the road

and strove to assemble his thought, his intentions. He had told Kirby that he wasn't afraid of him—that was a lie. David was afraid. For the first time in his life that necessity had been put upon him. In his blood was an icy chill like the presence of imminent death.

From the lips of any man other than Amos Kirby he would have discounted the threat to kill him. He had heard such talk before—loose, unmeant gabble—from other men, especially when they were drunk with corn liquor. The declaration of violent designs against somebody or other seemed to be a common part of such reckless conversation as germinated around the stills. But Kirby never drank—and he had meant exactly what he had said. Out of a swirl of impressions that one stood out inescapably. Kirby could kill a man with as little compunction as he would a squirrel.

"But I didn't let on I was afeared," David told himself. "He might 'a' shot me right there if I had."

In a fog of gloom he considered the proposition of complying with Kirby's demand—tried to weigh the consequences if he should go or stay. On either side was a great wall of impossibility.

"Helen Bristow wouldn't marry Kirby if he was the last man on earth," he decided. "I reckon she'd just about die first." A tremulous fear based on her father's character assailed him tormentingly. Old Severnby Bristow was notoriously improvident, his family was large. That he was deeply in debt to Amos Kirby was commonly known. In a crisis Helen would go a long way to help her father. If she conceived marriage with Amos Kirby to be a duty—if family loyalty demanded it—

The thought was too agonizing to pursue, and some merciful mental censor excluded it from his thoughts. How long he had sat thinking David did not

know, but he was conscious that he had solved nothing. The drain on his vitality had been excessive. With a slow lessening of the tension, physical fatigue crept over him and he moved toward home.

After a hundred yards he knew, suddenly, that he was not alone. Somewhere, close by, there was another person. The consciousness was as sharp as any other reality. He grew taut all over, alert in every nerve. In the bracken beside the road, everywhere, he peered with quick nervous glances. Tree, rocks, bushes were silvered by the radiance of the moon.

"David!"

At first he did not recognize the cautious voice. Then, Helen Bristow stepped out from behind a tree.

"I didn't want anybody from the store to see me loiterin' along the road," she said, coming forward. "But I couldn't go home until—until I knew, David. Don't you see?"

She moved with him down the road. "You oughtn't to have waited," he said. "'Twasn't nothin' to fret yoreself about."

"It's the only thing in my life that was ever important enough to fret about," she said. "I want you to tell me the whole truth about what happened after I left. If I got you into trouble I'll get you out. You don't have to lie to me about it, David, and I know you won't." As she voiced her candid demand, brave and erect at his side, David Duncan felt clearer inside. She wasn't like most girls. For a fleeting second he was again conscious of the menace of Amos Kirby, a menace that seemed to disintegrate before a superior and unseen force.

"Kirby says he'll kill me unless I clear out. He says he's going to marry you."

"That's a lie—I mean about marrying me. But he might do the other—unless you did clear out, David."

"I reckon I can't let myself be run out, Helen."

"But—but with a man like Amos Kirby you ain't able——"

David touched her arm lightly and took her elbow in the hollow of his hand.

"Why, that's a chance I have got to take," he said simply. "Some time or other most people have got to face things like this. Most of my kin—the men folks, I mean—have been through it. You stay home from the store tomorrow, Helen, an' I'll soon have it over with. I'll just take my pistol an' go down where Kirby is an'—an' it'll be settled. That's the only proper thing for me to do, Helen."

Helen Bristow stopped suddenly. In the moonlight David began to observe the pattern of the dress that hung to her slight, girlish figure, for he had not the power to look at her clear, shining eyes.

"You would risk your life for empty pride!" she said accusingly. "With all your years ahead of you, you'd go down to death because you'd be too proud to make the best of a bad situation an' clear out!"

"I reckon there ain't no argument there," David said humbly.

"If arguin' could convince you I'd talk till my tongue wore out," Helen Bristow told him. "But I know you—it ain't no use. You ain't qualified to save yourself, David. You wouldn't have a cat's chance against Amos Kirby. If you—if you only cared enough about me——"

David Duncan's voice was muffled. "Don't—don't talk like that——"

"If you cared enough about me," insisted the girl, forcing the words from her own lips, "you'd pack your grip—in the mornin'—and ask me to go with you!"

An hour later, David was alone in the house of his birth. He found him-

self wandering from room to room. There were four of them. His grandfather had built generously, according to old-time conceptions. The logs of seasoned oak, the puncheon floor boards, were still sound—good for a hundred years yet. For the last year, after the death of his mother, David had clung to the place. A lonely and unnatural existence for one so young, but he had never been able to bring himself to the livelier experience of "boarding out." Amid the familiar objects of the interior he found his perfect environment.

The broad, comfortable chairs had been worked from the raw wood by the hands of his father and grandfather—the same hands that had woven the seats and backs of enduring hickory withes, that had sawed out and mortised tables, stools, and bedsteads with an appreciative understanding of maple, of cedar, of chestnut. From childhood David had trod upon the same woven-rag carpets and hooked rugs, the product of loving feminine hands once alive with the vital force from which he himself had sprung. He slept that night, fitfully, under a quilt of his mother's patchwork.

In the morning he wrenched himself away. The forty acres of thin soil had never been especially productive. He had always thought, because of their southerly slope, they might grow fruit profitably. In Caldwell County, not forty miles away, men were making comfortable livings from orchards on just such land. It would have been a more prosaic undertaking than the freedom and responsibility of stage driving.

The stage had satisfied some potential streak of romance in his make-up. He had enjoyed rolling over the timber-bordered mountain roads with the great vistas of the fertile valleys which occasionally came into view—the clean crisp air of winter, the fragrance of summer. Too, there was the always entertaining talk of chance passengers, the conscious-

ness that his dexterity with whip and reins created admiration. With the lash of his long whip he had acquired almost unbelievable skill in flicking flies from the horses' backs without stinging the animals.

But, weighed in any balance, all such things—house, land and stage—were insensate. They were obliterated in the thrill of the swimmingly idealistic emotion aroused by Helen Bristow. Her brave offer had been the only solution. They would be married at Gum Fork, would take a train to the city, would adventure in life forever and ever, hand in hand. A new, more mature fiber in David Duncan tingled at the realization and dulled the inescapable pain as he closed the windows and locked the door of his house.

If only they were fleeing voluntarily, if the hateful menace of Amos Kirby did not exist. It was borne upon him that, in such a case, they would not be required to flee at all.

Kirby's clerk helped him strap on the mail sacks. Kirby himself stood on the store porch, his faded blue shirt open at an unshaven gullet, and observed the pasteboard valise on the front seat of the stage.

"Leavin' us for a little trip, Duncan?" he inquired with a trace of sarcasm.

David, busy easing a collar on one of the horses, made no answer. The obese traveling man of the previous day's trip stowed his grips in the stage. "No use hanging around here all day," he grumbled. "Came all the way up here to sell a bill of drugs and they ain't a drug store in the damn place."

From across a wide, dusty area that passed for a street, came a slender gray-haired man with straight-shaven lips—Vance Clavinger, who conducted the smallest of possible banks in conjunction with his business of selling and mortgaging farms. In his hands was a

closely wrapped parcel of brown paper tied with a string.

"I wish you'd take this into the State bank in Gum Fork and have it credited to my account, David," he said. "They'll give you a certificate of deposit for a thousand dollars."

Amos Kirby drew down the corners of his mouth. "Better let me register that for you and make it government mail, Clavinger. It's safer."

"Reckon I won't," Clavinger said shortly. "Fifteen cents in stamps wouldn't make David any more honest." He turned his back and retraced his steps.

David looked at his silver watch, put the package of money on the front seat but himself made no move to climb up. "Waiting for some more passengers?" the lone passenger inquired.

"Yes—for one." David bent his head to look down the road, but Helen Bristow had taken a short cut across a field and was, even then, near at hand. But he didn't know this.

Amos Kirby's face underwent a sudden transformation from its amused contempt, changed to surprise and suspicion. The girl carried a matting suit case, a piece of lace was pinned to the collar of her serge suit. She wore her Sunday hat of black straw with a band of artificial daisies. Her face seemed radiant. David moved swiftly to her side, relieved her of her suit case and assisted her by the arm as she put her foot on the iron step that led to the front seat.

"You, Helen!" Amos Kirby called out to her throatily. "You come down out of that!"

David loosened the weight that had held the horses and carried it to the back of the stage.

"You keep yore tongue off speakin' to her," he said coolly.

The crafty brain of Amos Kirby sprang alive with comprehension. "Why—so that's the game!" he cried.

"Runnin' away together! You-all must 'a' met an' planned it last night——"

A swinging motion carried David upward to the seat beside the girl. He was unwinding the reins from the whip upright in its socket. In a matter of seconds Amos Kirby would have been definitely thwarted; a realization of the imminence of defeat stimulated the man to quick, positive action. With one hand he grasped the head of the nearest horse.

"No, you don't!" he declared vigorously. "It takes more brains than that!" His face was working, was livid. "You, Hawkins," he called to his clerk, "you git inside an' bring me my squirrel rifle—an' a box of shells. An' my hat. I'll take a day off an' go huntin'. I'll ride down the road on the stage—mebbe as far as Gum Fork!"

The vehicle creaked with his sudden weight as he threw himself into the rear seat beside the traveling man, which was the only available space since the middle seat was piled with baggage.

"You seem to make up your mind in a hurry when you get started, brother," said his seat mate, moving over.

"It's a public stage an' he's got to haul me," Kirby asserted. Back of his evil countenance his sinister brain was working like lightning. A seething tide of jealousy and chagrin enveloped him, shattered all of his established confidence. In an effort to check a public exhibition of impotent fury he bit his lower lip with his murky teeth until the skin was cut.

Until the clerk reappeared with a long, slim rifle and ammunition David made no effort to start his horses. By that time, Kirby had brought himself under partial control.

"I go huntin' about ever once in so often," he said in a swaggering voice to the other man. "But it's the first time I ever had the pleasure of ridin' along with a runaway match."

The stage started with a jerking motion, wheels scraping as it turned. The salesman raised his eyebrows inquiringly at the pair ahead.

"Family objections, eh?" he offered cautiously.

Kirby raised his voice to a pitch that would insure its being heard on the front seat.

"A fool girl lettin' herself be tolled off by a worthless runt!" he observed in a vindictive, carrying voice. "One of these here Chollie boys with purty dark-brown eyes—an' a dark-brown taste in his mouth!" Kirby laughed uproariously at his own wit. "A fool girl that's breakin' her pore old father's heart," he resumed, more moderately. "As sure as sin she'll regret it to her dyin' day—onless she comes to her senses an' turns back home afore she gits to Gum Fork."

On the front seat David gave expert attention to his horses, despite a thumping heart. The girl beside him sat primly upright, acutely conscious of the fixed gaze of Kirby and the stranger on the back seat.

"You plumb sure you'll never regret it to yore dyin' day?" David asked her guardedly.

"Whatever comes I'll be the happiest person on earth till my dyin' day," she responded, her face straight ahead and hidden by the rim of her flower-banded hat.

After a time, the road grew more and more wild. There was a gradual climbing to the roof of the range that would have to be put behind before the way dropped downward to Gum Fork. Mile after mile of unbroken, virgin timber spread gloaming shadows along the route, small clearings with stark, meager cabins appeared infrequently and were speedily swallowed up in the silent expanse of trees.

An abrupt mountain towered to the right, scraggly and inhospitable. By a

detour the rocky, washed road avoided its bulk and plunged steadily on into the somber-wooded expanse.

On the rear seat there was a diversion. Amos Kirby had slipped a cartridge into his rifle and was explaining the excellence of the weapon to his companion.

"It's nothin' but an old single-shot but I'll stack her up agin' any repeatin' gun on the market," he was explaining. "She's filed down to a hair trigger so's the pull won't spoil the aim—a puff of wind almost could get her off when she's cocked."

"They tell me you folks up here develop fine marksmanship," the salesman remarked conversationally.

"A squirrel—as fur off as I can see it I can kill it," Kirby told him. "I'll keep my eye open an' if I see one I'll show you."

Here was a matter of touching upon David's responsibility for the stage and without hesitation he spoke over his shoulder to Kirby: "I wish you wouldn't fire that rifle," he said. "It's liable to frighten the horses, explodin' so close to 'em."

"That's right," the traveling man exclaimed. "You might scare them—and on a road like this——"

Kirby scowled. "Say," he blustered directly at David, "who you givin' orders to? I'd fire off a stick of dynamite if I felt like it!"

Again the stranger broke in. "That's all right, brother," he said soothingly. "Nobody's trying to boss you. It's just a matter of common sense."

In the sullen, balked mind of Amos Kirby there was at the time room for but a single, concentrated blast of hatred. The man at his side meant nothing; Kirby scarcely distinguished the other's placating words. Then, suddenly, he was seized with a gloating purpose to make light of David; to demonstrate to Helen Bristow the boy's weakness.

"I'll shoot off my rifle any time I like," he threatened, "an' it'll take a real man to stop me. Furthermore, I don't like the way you been snappin' the whip at them horses. The lash flew back here an' almost cut me across the cheek." There was a shadow of truth in his statement, but his design was to humiliate the boy. "The next time you do it I'll snatch it out of yore hands an' break the handle across my knee!"

The girl's cautious hand stole out and touched David on the arm with an unseen, restraining gesture. The swift pressure said, as plain as words, for him to refrain from a retort—to avoid being drawn deeper into a purposeless but potentially dangerous dispute. The whip was now in its socket. By a force of will David restrained an impulse to defy Kirby and crack it wildly, letting the lash fly where it would.

The continued insults of the older man had all but worn away the last wall of David's determination to avoid trouble at any cost. Deep down in his innermost core some hitherto unlighted fire was beginning to glow in the boy. Outwardly it took the contradictory manifestation of a whitening of the cheeks.

"Say—look out with that gun!" The warning came tensely from the salesman. "If you lean it that way across them grips ahead it's apt to go off the first jolt we hit. For Heaven's sake, man, let that hammer down—don't leave it cocked. Chances are it'll put a bullet in one or the other of them on the front seat!"

From the tail of his eye, David caught a glimpse of the rifle reclining across the middle seat of the coach; the muzzle, he estimated, was aimed at his back. It was decidedly ticklish.

"Why, I hadn't noticed that!" The truth burst from Amos Kirby. As a matter of fact the placing of the weapon had been entirely accidental; as an instinctive reaction to the warning he

reached out to move the rifle. Halfway, he arrested his hand——

Whatever thought that had sprung into being from the alarmed suggestion of the salesman worked a quick, sinister change in Kirby's hostile features. A mask passed over his previous expression, like a shade being drawn at a window. With low cunning the malevolent brain of Amos Kirby was functioning, was pulsing, with a desperate idea.

The firing of a bullet into David Duncan's back would pass for an accident in any court. Such fatalities were fairly common. So much of sweet satisfaction could be accomplished at one easy stroke: The death of a despised rival, the forced return of Helen Bristow to her home—yes, back even to the store. And there might be money in it, too. There was a package containing a thousand dollars——

Best of all was the alibi ready-made, prepared and suggested by a stranger—an honest, impartial witness! But the main thing required was a cool head—a cool head. To cover up the previous disputations and pass them off as banter—as jokes!

Amos Kirby simulated a rueful smile on his lips, and moved the rifle until its barrel pointed out sidewise, although he left it still cocked.

"There now," he remarked, with a bold assumption of heartiness, "wasn't I careless, though!"

"I'm always joshin' David," Kirby told his companion confidentially.

When the sun was in mid-heaven the few stragglng houses of Pineville were reached. Here came the business of dinner and a change of horses at an isolated roadside tavern. Outside, the men washed their faces at a wooden trough preparatory to a steaming meal.

The proprietor, a gaunt man with baggy trousers made secure by stout, red suspenders, observed Helen Bristow with a strange expression of joy and peculiar relief. He knew the girl.

"I wish you'd run upstairs and see my wife, Helen," he said anxiously. "She's kinder bad off."

When Helen came down, minutes later, her face was grim, toward the tavern keeper almost antagonistic. "Your wife is in a bad way," she announced to him frankly. "There'll have to be a doctor. David can send that one at Gum Fork right out on horseback. Me, I'll have to stay here—what with her new baby and everything."

Helen disdained to eat.

"I'll have to stay several days," she found opportunity to tell him hastily and privately. "The colored woman they had has left. You wait in Gum Fork. I'll get the poor creature's husband to drive me over in his buggy."

In a daze, David gave his entire approval. Such things—— Women were absolute in authority at such times. He managed a word to the tavern keeper.

"You watch Helen an' don't let her out of yore sight," he ordered him. "Kirby's botherin' her a lot——"

The high-pitched voice rose in a thin whine. "If that low-down houn' even looks at her I'll drill his heart!"

The stage resumed its journey with David alone on the front seat, Kirby and the traveler again in the rear. Kirby's spirits had risen perceptibly.

"I reckon I might as well ride on into Gum Fork an' git measured fer a new suit of clothes," he announced volubly.

After a time, the road began to drop. In the distance an oily wisp of smoke floating in the air marked the far-off passage of a train. David had occasion to flick at the horses with his whip on a short, sharp grade that humped in the road.

Kirby grinned stealthily. "I got an idea to Jonah him with," he whispered to the other man. "I'm always at David."

Kirby winked slyly and leaned out, searching the bank at arm's length until

he found a thin stone the size of a half dollar. Craftily, he gained possession of the long lash of David's whip without disturbing the handle in the socket. At the end, the braided lash frayed out into three or four thin leather thongs; these Kirby wound around the stone and tied securely.

"When he tries to unsettle the next fly that lights on a horse he'll find a surprise," he chortled secretly to the man he was trying to impress with an outstanding fact. "That'll shore be a joke on David—him throwin' rocks at horseflies."

The descent was now precipitous—a long, winding stretch of road heavily masked by treetops. Without warning, Amos Kirby reached for his rifle.

Deliberately, yet with studied carelessness, he started to return the gun to the middle seat.

The muzzle, this time, pointed directly at the back of David Duncan's head. The traveling man could not see as Kirby leaned forward that his finger was on the hair trigger.

A premonition, like an electric shock, struck the stranger, a foreboding that the gun was about to go off.

"You darn fool!" he shouted.

Nervously he struck out with a pudgy hand. The sharp crack of the rifle was almost simultaneous—but the impulsive movement had been enough to destroy Kirby's aim.

Singing, the leaden pellet passed through a horse's ear. In an instant the animals were rearing and plunging, startled at the sound of the gun.

Out of the chaos, as though by some devilish mutual accord, the animals leaped ahead, tearing wildly down the dropping crooked road. Standing up, David Duncan pulled steadily on the reins and gave the stage the brake.

At the last curve he knew it was hopeless. The whole thing toppled over, crashed, smashed and dragged in a confusion of flying dust and stones.

Consciousness came to him after a time and he dragged himself to his feet. The traveling man beside him was sitting up, stanching at his own bleeding forehead with a sopping, red handkerchief. Beyond a curve just ahead was the faint sound of wreckage still being dragged boundingly over a rough road.

"I'll have to git on—an' look for Clavinger's money," said David.

Amos Kirby scrambled down the side of a bank, his empty rifle in his hands.

"I hope you find it!" he snarled.

From the ground the salesman lifted a shaking, accusative finger at Kirby.

"I seen you take a package up that bank and hide it under a rock!" he cried. "I know it was the money."

For a single instant, Amos Kirby stood stark still. Then, all reason left him.

The rifle in his hands reversed itself, seemingly with an automatic movement—The hoarse cry on his lips was the cry of an animal on the kill.

The heavy butt of the gun was swung at the skull of the traveling salesman. With upraised arm the blow was partly warded off, a bone snapped audibly.

"Damn you—I'll finish you later!" Kirby screamed. With a rush he turned to David.

David had spied his whip that had shaken loose from the overturned stage. He was more active, quicker, than Kirby. It was the only weapon of defense at hand.

The long lash uncoiled itself directly toward Amos Kirby's head. The boy stood braced with his feet apart, hatless, eyes blazing. Just for a fraction of a second he remembered an old story from the Bible—the story of the boy David and his sling—the slaying of the gigantic Goliath with a stone.

The whip snapped. A red, sunken spot spread slowly on Amos Kirby's left temple, and he sank to the earth to rise no more.

When Royalty Enters the Scheme



by Julian Kilman

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THAT THE PRINCE OF WALES SHOULD HAVE A HAND IN SOLVING THE MYSTERY SURROUNDING THE DEATH OF MR. TROTTER SEEMS ABSURD, BUT MRS. BURGER, WITH HER TREMENDOUS INTEREST IN AND ENTHUSIASM FOR HIM, PROBABLY WOULD NOT HAVE SCOFFED AT THE IDEA. CERTAINLY AFTER THE THING HAPPENED, SHE WOULD NOT HAVE.

IT seemed that perturbation of spirit had communicated itself into the pace of the woman who scuff-scuffed rapidly along the narrow village sidewalk.

In the mellow solitude of the Indian-summer dusk that, with the fireflies and the dying song of the seventeen-year locust, had descended upon the hamlet and its faithful inhabitants, her haste took on the quality of unseemliness. For in Ridgeway life, as it should be, was leisurely, unhurried, uneventful.

At the doctor's driveway, grass-grown in the center and margined with wind-wrecked hollyhocks, the woman, as if suddenly conscious of her violation of the atmosphere, paused and glanced nervously back in the direction from which she had come. Then, completely losing poise, she broke into a run.

She mounted the steps of the physician's residence and tapped the door. As yet unobserved, the man seated at the far end of the porch, studying over

a cross-word puzzle in a Sunday newspaper, lifted himself from the wicker chair and shuffled into view. The woman gave a start.

"Oh, doctor!" she breathed, putting her hand to her bosom.

As the physician regarded the wearied angularities of the little woman who for years had done his washing, he maintained his professional calm.

"What's the matter, Mrs. Burger?" he asked patiently.

"I've just come from Mr. Trotter's place. He—he don't answer his door."

For an instant the physician diverted his gaze in the direction of the brick dwelling of his eccentric fellow villager. He shrugged his shoulders expressively.

"Well, Mrs. Burger, I haven't visited him in twenty years. The last person I know to try it was Joe Simpson of the bank. That was a long time ago, after some one tried to rob the old man and Joe went to remonstrate about his hiding his money in the house. Old Ezra met him with a shotgun." Then,

as if the thought had just struck him, he added, "But what were you doing there?"

Mrs. Burger fumbled with the basket she carried.

"If I speak out, doctor," she said, "you mustn't tell, because——"

"Oh, let's have it!"

"Because I think something dreadful has happened, and I don't want——" She stopped.

"Will you go on!"

For a moment the woman remained twisting her thin hands and trembling violently.

"Doctor," she said, "Mr. Trotter was queer, but, in spite of what everybody thought about him, he could be kind."

"Kind!"

"Yes. After my husband deserted me, Mr. Trotter used to give me food. Twice a week, a basket of it. But he made me promise not to tell a soul—said he'd kill me if I did. I was to come each Wednesday and Saturday evening at exactly fifteen minutes after nine, and tap four times, slowly, at his kitchen door. Then I had to set my basket down, go back into his rose garden, and wait five minutes. When I returned my basket would always have something in it."

The interest of the physician in this recital was evident.

"And the basket you used," he stated, "is the one you now have, the one in which you fetch and carry my things?"

The woman nodded.

"Yes, I brought your washing back in it to-night."

Doctor Joslyn took a turn about the porch. His medium-sized round shoulders and rather slouchy figure, while stamping him for a man indifferent to personal appearance, entirely failed as an index to his face. This proved to be shrewdly plump in its cast, carefully barbered, with deep-set eyes and a clipped mustache.

"And why do you assume there is anything out of the way?" he asked.

"Last Wednesday night I went as usual, but my basket was left empty. I didn't think so much about it, as it had happened a few times before. But to-night, when I tapped, it just seemed to me, for no reason at all, that—that——" She hesitated. "Doctor, I peeked through a window, and the room was all topsy-turvy."

Abruptly the doctor caught up his hat.

"Let's have a look," he said.

The Trotter dwelling, a short distance down the dirt road on the opposite side, stood on a slight rise of ground which gradually fell away in the rear to the waters of Wampers Creek—a turgid, lily-padded, meandering stream.

Here, in the creek and the adjoining two-mile area of swamp land—merely called "The Swamp" by the natives—abounded the long-legged lesser bittern and the muskrat, thriving one and all on the precise conditions which introduced malaria among the villagers and increased somewhat the number of semiannual statements which Doctor Joslyn mailed out to those who paid tardily.

In the northern outskirts of the village, the Trotter house was, except for the presence of a neat cottage recently built on the far side by Jason Ellsworth, the village carpenter, the only structure beyond the doctor's.

Darkness was fast settling as the two visitors came along the walk and turned in, Mrs. Burger being put to it to keep pace with the doctor, who strode ahead. It seemed that common hesitancy caused them to stop at the moment.

Black and repellent, the dwelling appeared to frown down. The low area of the front construction, with its prisonlike doors, was adorned at each end with a tower—all structurally regular enough, and thus, in a way, reassuring, so long as one was unable to see the rear construction.

But the mental picture of the erratic turns and twists with lofts, reputed to be reached only by ladders, and the low passageways, visible from the road as one passed by—a veritable nightmare of wood, stone, and brick, jumbled together by the deviltry of a mind unhinged—this it was that gave room for pause, indeed.

Tremblingly the woman started to place her hand on Doctor Joslyn's arm. The doctor, a bachelor of long standing, may or may not have interpreted her mood.

"Here," he said, with a short laugh, "is where the old fellow takes his exercise. He goes around it a hundred times each evening."

They stood within a circular footpath of perhaps the diameter of two rods. From years of use it was hard and well beaten. In the center was a rustic chair, evidently there as a temporary resting place for the pedestrian. Something of her accustomedness fell away from the woman, for the well-known sight of old Trotter, in a black cape and slouch hat, eternally drilling around the little circuit now recurred vividly as a fresh-seen thing.

"I'm afraid," she whispered.

"Nonsense!" ejaculated the physician, starting forward. "Come along and we'll try the door."

There was no response to Doctor Joslyn's knock. He repeated it vigorously, grunting with the effort. The window Mrs. Burger had mentioned next drew his attention. With a word to his companion to wait at the door, the physician smashed the glass and crawled through. The musty smell of a house untenanted greeted his nostrils as he remained a moment, rubbing his elbow where he had scraped it, while his eyes endeavored to penetrate the darkness.

"Oh, Trotter!" he called in a loud voice.

The sepulchral stillness continued.

At a step forward he stumbled heavily—his foot had caught in a ragged hole that seemed to have been cut through the flooring of the room. The door he found to be doubly barred. Fumbling a moment, he drew the bolts and flung open the door, filling his lungs with the fresh air. The woman stood shivering without.

"I think there's murder here," uttered Doctor Joslyn. "We'll try a light."

With the aid of matches he presently discovered an oil lamp. In the next room, which was a cell-like bedchamber with no outside window, he located that for which he searched.

There was a gasp from Mrs. Burger as she edged up and gazed at the figure which was in a half-sitting position on the bed. The conical tip of the nightcap, having fallen down and covered one eye, gave an inconceivably rakish look to the face, the effect of which was rendered all the more extraordinary by reason of the lifelike, sardonic expression on the features of the dead man.

The physician bent forward to make his examination while Mrs. Burger, her mind intrenched in her eyes, her mouth half open, cast quick, birdlike glances about the strange room. A dish of prunes sat on a stool by the head of the bed, along with a lamp. This had apparently burned itself out, for not only was the oil gone, but the wick was charred and the chimney itself smudged. Numbers of newspapers were strewn about; one of them, the illustrated portion of a metropolitan Sunday edition, lay on the floor at the foot of the bed.

Severe economy of years had placed a brake on the washerwoman's indulgence of her love of pictorial news. She hesitated an instant, but, seeing the doctor still preoccupied with his self-imposed task, she covertly rolled up the paper and stuck it under her coat.

Doctor Joslyn cleared his throat presently.

"Strangled to death," he announced as he stood up.

The sound of footsteps startled the two.

"Hello in there!"

"That you, Jason?" called the doctor.

The carpenter, lurching over the débris which the doctor himself had encountered, came into the room. His narrow-set eyes, from which depended a long nose, the very symbol of alert inquisitiveness, were snapping with interest.

"I saw the light from my place," he said nasally, "and run over, thinkin' something had happened to the old man."

"He's dead," said Doctor Joslyn.

The gaze of the carpenter traveled to the bed. It leaped again to the physician, to Mrs. Burger, and back again to the physician.

"Murdered?"

Doctor Joslyn nodded.

"And the house ransacked thoroughly." He turned again to the bed. "He's been dead, I should say, for a number of days."

Jason Ellsworth came closer, dropped to his knees, and peered intently into the very face of the dead man.

"You sure, doc?"

"I am."

As he straightened up, the carpenter's eyes held an expression of tremendous acuteness—that of a shrewd fellow about to propound a poser.

"What if I told you I saw him last night in his black cape, joggin' about the ring-around-the-rosy in the front yard?" His voice became high. "Eh, what about that!"

"I'd say, Jason," Doctor Joslyn remarked, "that you're mistaken. Rigor mortis has permanently set in, and that old man died at least four days ago."

"Then I say," retorted the carpenter, "some one else has been doin' his

exercise for him, because I not only saw him at it last night, but the night before, and the night before that."

Seriously Doctor Joslyn regarded the carpenter.

"That is most extraordinary. You'd better hunt up Jimmie Teal. I saw him drive by about six o'clock on his way home from the county seat."

The quick beat of Jason Ellsworth's feet as, freighted with his news, he legged it for the home of the deputy sheriff, had hardly died away when Doctor Joslyn and Mrs. Burger came outside.

"I'll wait here, Mrs. Burger," said the physician casually, "until Jason returns. You can do nothing and you'd better go home."

The woman moved off, but came back at once.

"Got any idea who done it, doctor?" she timidly ventured.

There was an appreciable lapse of time. Floating up from the swamp came the quavering cry of a screech owl. It was answered from a point farther away. Doctor Joslyn seemed to be listening. He turned to her.

"Mrs. Burger," he said, "I saw Sam hanging out at Huffman's road house a week ago."

"Sam!" broke from the woman. "Why, he ain't been home in a year."

The doctor went on: "It was because of that attempt to rob Trotter, years ago, that Joe Simpson went to see the old man, and though Sam was never charged with the crime, everybody felt certain he was the culprit."

Mrs. Burger shook her head.

"My son ain't been home in a year," she reiterated. "You saw some one else."

Leaving the physician staring after her, she hurried along the front walk to the first corner, where, detained an instant by her inveterate curiosity, she heard numbers of the villagers and saw their bobbing heads by the light of a

street lamp as, led by Jason Ellsworth, his voice crackling with excitement, they ran toward the scene of the crime.

The cow path along the bank of the creek had for years served her doubly in that it afforded some secrecy of movement on her nocturnal visits to old Trotter and was at the same time a short cut to her home. This was located beyond the railroad. Tripping and stumbling in her haste, she crossed the tracks and started up the dilapidated board walk toward her house.

It was, she observed, darkened and the front door closed, as she had left it. There were voices from her neighbor's porch, the cry of a child and the gruff reproof of the father. With pounding heart she stood, endeavoring to regain her breath. Then she walked along quickly and entered the front door. Her advent caused the canary to utter a sleepy *cheep-cheep!* The odor of tomato catsup, which she had been preparing earlier that evening, came to her, but it was blended with something even more penetrating—the smell of tobacco.

"Sam!" she exclaimed in a hoarse whisper.

The figure in the rocking-chair stirred.

"I'm hungry," it proclaimed.

The glow of the hurriedly lighted gas jet disclosed a loose-framed, collarless individual, somewhere around thirty years of age. A three-day growth of whiskers robbed the face of any appeal it might make. He stood up, yawning as he did so and stretching luxuriously, while his mother regarded him.

"You allus make such a devil of a fuss," he said sullenly.

Turning from him, Mrs. Burger set her basket down and went to the kitchen.

"I'll boil you some eggs," she said.

Later, while he consumed the food, she went about her household duties.

This included, among other things, the putting of some soiled clothes to soak in a copper kettle for the morrow. From time to time she glanced covertly at the man eating silently, but she refrained from speech. She discovered presently the illustrated portion of the newspaper she had picked up in the Trotter home. It was rather badly crumpled, as if something had been carried in it, tightly wrapped.

In straightening it out, her glance went at once to the several pictures of the Prince of Wales, the news feature that for weeks had held her interest as avidly as if she had been a high-school girl in her teens. Over and over she had read the stuff, saving all the papers to go back to them, and, as were millions of her kind, reveling in the fairy-tale marvel of such an existence for a human being.

The Prince! Such a good-looking young fellow! She smoothed the wrinkled sheet out, annoyed to find that the last photograph, the one at the lower corner, was torn in a careless zigzag line across the royal face, so that only the tip of the nose was visible above the neat cravat and herringbone suit.

"What you readin'?" demanded the son.

He peered over her shoulder.

"I'm savin' the prince's pictures, Sam."

"That bird! He ought to go to work like the rest of us poor guys."

"He treats his mother better than you treat yours—and don't go away for years at a time and never write to her."

"Is that so! Well, how do you know he writes her?"

"I read it last week. He writes regularly, and even telegraphs."

The son grunted contemptuously. Then from the chair he had been in he picked up a neat package. He held it out. The mother was mollified.

"What is it?"

"A present from the prince."

Mrs. Burger examined the tablecloth. It was of cheap weave and overornate design, far below the quality she had frequently washed and ironed for the Millers who owned the bank. In spite of herself, she betrayed disappointment.

"Where did you get it?"

"Never could satisfy you," he growled.

The woman scrutinized him.

"I heard you were at Huffman's road house this week," she said. "Why didn't you come home sooner?"

He looked at her quickly.

"How did you know?"

"Doctor Joslyn saw you."

"That guy gives me a pain."

"Sam!"

Headed for the cot in the kitchen, there seemed to be something in the voice that held him, for he stopped in the doorway.

"Well?"

"Old Ezra Trotter has been murdered."

Slowly, like a man picking his way, he came back, staring at his mother.

"What! What's that you say?"

"Murdered," she repeated, "and Doctor Joslyn says it was at least four days ago."

The eyes of the son continued to probe his mother's. He presently lighted another cigarette, snapping the match expertly with his finger nail.

"You needn't worry," he said, turning back again. "I ain't the buck who done it."

It was a knock at the door that aroused Mrs. Burger the following morning. Always an early riser, she had on this night of nights incomprehensibly overslept.

"I'll be there in a minute," she called, adding to herself in her mind, "Some one to see me about old Ezra's death." However, before answering the summons, she stepped to the kitchen. The cot was empty.

A tall, stoop-shouldered man met her. At sight of him her breath quickened.

"You ain't arrestin' me, are you, Jim?"

The deputy sheriff laughed good-naturedly.

"No, Mrs. Burger, but I want you to come along."

"What for, then?"

"You're to come to the town hall. There's a sort of examination goin' on about old Ezra's killing."

The official had moved on into the house. Casually he edged into the kitchen.

"Sam been here?" he asked.

The woman watched him anxiously.

"Yes," she admitted.

"Where is he now?"

"Jim, I don't know."

The deputy's eye lighted on the new tablecloth. He picked it up, studying it with evident care.

"Where'd you get this, missus?"

The manner of the questioner, intended to be casual, did not deceive the alert perceptions of the mother. She hesitated a second before replying. Jim Teal interpereted this.

"Better answer me the truth, Mrs. Burger," he said in a kindly voice. "It's the only way."

A species of helplessness seemed to overcome her.

"I know what you're thinkin'," she uttered hastily, "an' you're all wrong."

Stolidly the deputy looked down at her.

"Mrs. Burger," he stated, "I ain't accusin' you nor any one of anything. I'm just askin' proper questions."

"Well, if you want to know, then my son Sam gave me that tablecloth last night."

Fumbling the cloth into its original wrapping paper, which lay on the table, the deputy tucked it beneath his arm. He urged the woman toward the door.

"Why didn't you say so in the first place?" he complained.

The peace and dignity of Ridgeway had indeed been sadly disrupted. Unwonted numbers of automobiles were parked along the road, their owners being gathered in talkative knots. On the stoop of the post office lounged a group. The appearance of the deputy sheriff and Mrs. Burger constituted a distraction for their eagerness, and the crowd trailed after the pair on the way to the hall.

An automobile raced up. It pulled to the sidewalk where the deputy walked along, and a snappily dressed young man leaped out. Racing ahead, he propped his camera on the sidewalk.

"This is for the *Times*," he called authoritatively. "Get back there, you boobs, and let me get this right."

Amused with his eagerness, Jim Teal posed himself with Mrs. Burger.

"She ain't the murderer, my lad," he said.

Another crowd had filled the hall, and on the platform Mrs. Burger saw Jason Ellsworth and Doctor Joslyn seated next to the ample figure of the local justice of the peace. Red-nosed and excessively important looking, this person sat waiting until a measure of quiet could be imposed on the throng. Mrs. Burger, being led through, was given a seat near at hand.

For the first time she saw the swarthy, black-eyed foreigner. On the table rested his pack, while, humped on a stool at the end of the platform, he darted swift glances at the fair-skinned, gray-eyed men using a language he could understand only with difficulty. Hunted he certainly looked, yet the Oriental cunning of a thousand years' experience with his oppressor, the Turk, peered forth from his sloe-black eyes. He was called to the table, and a hush fell as he slumped into a chair.

"You understand English?" demanded the justice.

This was answered by the inevitable shrug of the shoulders.

"What is your name?"

"Moirad Hackadoorian," stated the peddler easily enough.

"Spell it."

Difficulties ensued—the foreigner could say it, but was unable to spell. The justice went on.

"What country do you come from?"

"Armenia."

"Are you a citizen of the United States?"

"Me pay one dowlar for first paper."

"You were in Ridgeway four days ago?"

"Me here, yes."

"What time did you leave?"

"I was go eight, nine o'clock."

"How did you travel?"

"I walk."

"Did you go to that old brick house at the edge of the village to try to sell something?"

Fully cognizant of the trend of the cross-examination, the Armenian sat stiffly silent, his complexion whitening until it became a sickly pallor. Finally he assented.

"Me go there, yes."

"And what happened? What did you do?"

"Me see old man. Me ask him if he like for buy someding prett' to gif mebbe his womans. Old man swear, call me names, an' grab club."

A smile on the part of the spectators met this testimony. The Armenian, sensing a lessening of the tension, grinned feebly.

"Did he strike you?" pursued the justice.

A quick nod replied to this. The Armenian clapped a hand to his shoulder, simulating pain.

"And what did you do?"

"Noddings."

"What's that!" The justice sharpened his voice.

"Noddings."

"Didn't you chase him into the house with a knife?"

A whispered colloquy followed between the justice, Jason Ellsworth, and Jim Teal, the deputy. The justice produced a five-dollar gold coin. He held it before the Armenian.

"This was found on you. Where did you get it?"

The eyes of the prisoner lighted up.

"Me get dat from youong faller. He buy tablecloth."

"Is this the tablecloth?"

With sinking heart Mrs. Burger saw exhibited the tablecloth her son had presented to her the night before.

The Armenian identified the tablecloth.

"How much do those things cost you?"

The peddler demurred. This impinged on his professional secrets.

"How much?" was the stern query.

"Ninety-eight cents."

"And you received this for it?"

The justice held out the five-dollar gold piece which had been taken from the possession of the peddler when searched on his arrest in Midvale, twenty miles away.

There was a gleam in the Armenian's eyes.

"Yes. He gif me that money."

"So you made four dollars and two cents on the deal?"

The crowd enjoyed this demonstration of the foreigner's skill as a salesman. After another conference between the justice and Jim Teal, Mrs. Burger was sworn. She felt faint. Dr. Joslyn moved to her side.

"Keep cool, Mrs. Burger," he said. "You have nothing to fear. Merely tell what you saw."

Some one had sniggered at that portion of her testimony which told how she had received alms at the back door of the dead man's house, and there had been doubt in the face of the justice when she said that she didn't know when or where Sam had gone. Anyway, hadn't Sam a right to buy her a

tablecloth? What relation had that to the fact that some one had killed old Trotter? She sat, dumbly considering these things, while Doctor Joslyn followed her on the stand.

At first, full of her own thoughts, she gave little heed to what he was testifying to. Then, in a sort of blinding flash, she realized that that which he was uttering so calmly was aimed straight at Sam. With a shock she heard him telling of a telegram he had received that morning which stated that Sam had been in jail in the city for a year and had been released ten days ago; that, apparently, for he had been seen at Huffman's road house last week, he had come straight back to the locality.

Timid enough by nature, yet Mrs. Burger started from her chair.

"He's no more guilty than you are, Doctor Joslyn," she cried out.

"Please be still!" cautioned the justice.

Joe Simpson followed with his account of the bank's former dealings with the murdered man. He identified the five-dollar gold piece as one of a large number of double eagles, eagles, and half eagles, brand-new coins, which had been turned over to old Trotter many years before.

"How can you swear that this coin is one of that lot?" pursued the justice cautiously. "All five-dollar gold pieces look alike to me."

"Because it happens not to have the words 'In God We Trust' inscribed on it."

The justice examined the coin interestedly.

"But I don't see how that fixes it."

"It fixes it in this way," explained Simpson. "That issue of gold coins was back in 1907. That was when Roosevelt ordered the words 'In God We Trust' left off. You'll remember that people all over the country complained, and the next year Congress or-

dered the words restored by the mint on all future issues.

"The United States treasury officials then sent out a call to pull in all the 1907 issue of those gold coins, and they are, as a result, at a considerable premium with the collectors. Before that call came from Washington, I had turned a lot of the coins over to Ezra Trotter, and though I've tried several times to get him to give them back to me, I never was able to succeed."

As the significance of this evidence in linking up Sam with the crime came over her, Mrs. Burger sat still lower in her chair. She felt faint and a glass of water was given her. From then on she heard no more of the proceedings.

On her way from the hall, the crowd, with some show of sympathy, made room for her. Outside, men equipped with rifles and rubber boots were starting for the swamp.

"They're goin' to hang Sam," she thought.

That morning she spent in futile endeavors to work. It did not do. She would get out her newspapers and try to lose herself in the life of the Prince of Wales. But his youthful features only stared back at her coldly—as if she were, in very truth, the mother of a murderer. Late in the afternoon of that day she gave it up, and drawn by something stronger than herself, proceeded along the cow path to the Trotter home.

More people than ever appeared to be coming to the village, for great crowds moved about the premises, while two solid rows of automobiles honked along the road, filling it with noise and dust. A hot-dog vender had had the temerity to set up his stand in the very center of the ring-around-the-rosy and was doing a brisk business.

"Get a red-hot and enjoy yourselves!" he bawled.

At each window people were trying to peek inside the house.

"From cellar to garret, the whole house is ripped up," one man exclaimed.

"Sure!" retorted his companion. "Old Ezra had his gold hidden in the walls. The son of a gun who got it had to dig for it. That's why he needed time, and so he did the old man's exercise stunt for him each evening so's people wouldn't get to wondering if anything had happened to the old man."

No one appeared to notice little Mrs. Burger as she stood about, wearing a shawl and shivering even though the day was warm. Feeling weary, she sat down on the chair in the yard. Jason Ellsworth came up.

"You oughta stay to home," he snapped at her officiously.

"I got as much right here as you."

She slept ill that night and was wide awake when some one pounded at her door in the morning early.

"It's Sam!" she whispered. "He's come home."

But she was mistaken. A boy, the son of the postmaster, had a morning paper for her.

"Tells about the murder, and your picture's in it," he announced.

The headlines screamed the tragedy. She glanced at these and then turned to the daily page of news pictures. Yes, there she was, standing with Jim Teal, the deputy sheriff, as if she had been arrested. And what a picture! Why, she looked thin and all worn out.

"Important witness in sensational murder at Ridgeway," she read the legend.

There were photographs of the interior of the house, showing holes torn and hacked in the wainscoting, a brick fireplace wrecked, and numerous piles of débris. An exclamation escaped her as she alighted on yet another photograph. It was of the Prince of Wales. There he was, in polo togs, standing a bit to the right of her own picture!

She ran to get her shears. The implement was in her bedroom. As she got

it, she caught sight of a man coming through her back yard. It was Sam. And he was acting furtively.

Before she could speak, there came a shout from the road and several men ran around the side of the house. Jim Teal threw himself at Sam. The two rolled to the ground, fighting and turning over and over. Quick assistance was given the deputy, and Sam Burger was handcuffed.

Then and there they searched him and found not a single coin of any description on him. The deputy lounged off toward the chicken coop, calling one of the party to accompany him.

The prisoner glared sullenly after the two. In a few minutes they returned, the deputy carrying a small cloth bag in his hand.

"I guess this'll help some," he commented, and poured out into his broad palm a stream of bright gold eagles.

Two days later Mrs. Burger was able to make the trip to the county seat. The jailer had Sam brought into the waiting room.

Burger's sullenness had not left him.

"Sam!" the mother exclaimed finally.

"Well!"

"Tell me you didn't do it."

"Well, I didn't kill him, then." He stopped and confronted her, his face twisted with harshness. "You don't think I done it?" he challenged.

"No, Sam. But how did you happen to have those gold pieces?"

"Listen," he said finally. "I'll own up to this much: I stole 'em because he owed me money for digging that drain years ago. The old skunk never paid me; you know that. So I got into his house one night and found a bag of the money hidden in his fireplace. I never touched the old fellow. He was sound asleep in his bed. That was right after I got back to Huffman's, and next day, after I was in his house, I saw the old man in the front yard."

"Have you told any one else about this?"

"Yes. Jason Ellsworth. He knows."

"But why Jason, of all people?"

"Because he's a first-rate snooper and knows everybody's business. He come over here to see me, and I figured that if anybody under God's heaven could find out who was the murderer, it was Jason Ellsworth."

"And who does Jason say did it?"

"You can ask Jason himself, but it won't do any good."

That night Mrs. Burger tried to see the carpenter, but he was not at home, and no one seemed to know where he was.

"I never saw such a man," complained his wife, a large, raw-boned woman with a baby at her breast. "Since that murder was committed, Jason ain't done a tap of work. He's lost six days' pay, and ain't even been able to sleep nights."

For her the time dragged now, waiting until the grand jury would convene in the county seat. On the following Wednesday evening, pursuant to her schedule, she called at Doctor Joslyn's to get his washing. Though the evening was warm, the door was closed and locked. This meant that the doctor was out on his calls, and, according to the system, Mrs. Burger procured the key from its hiding place under the doorstep.

She entered, feeling her way about in the darkness with the certainty of long habit. In the bedroom she struck a match and lighted the gas jet. The soiled clothing lay in a pile on a chair and she thrust it into her basket. As she cast about for something to use as a cover, her glance fell on an illustrated section of a newspaper. One piece, though torn, sufficed. She tucked its edges in neatly.

When outside, she replaced the key in its hiding place and started toward the gate. At the moment a figure stepped into view on the driveway.

Somewhat startled, Mrs. Burger saw that it was the carpenter.

"I guess the doc ain't to home," he said.

"No. I just got his washing."

Mrs. Burger wanted to converse further with Jason, but he slouched off, as he had on all other occasions when she had approached him. When she reached her house, she set the basket down and rested a bit from the climb up the hill. Then she set about straightening up her kitchen. There were a few dishes to wash as she had left them immediately after supper to go to the post office.

She came back finally to the basket of dirty clothes, regarding it in terms of wearying toil over the washboard on the morrow. With a sigh she removed the contents. The newspaper covering she tossed on the table. At once something about it arrested her attention, and she stood a moment, staring. Suddenly she took it, ran to her kitchen, where she picked up another sheet, and started out of the house.

The neighbor woman seated on her porch next door called after her as she ran, but Mrs. Burger did not respond. In front of the post office she discerned two men in conversation. These proved to be Jason and the deputy sheriff, and they fell apart as she came up.

"I just want to show you these," she cried.

She held out the papers as she continued talking. All three moved closer to the window to take advantage of the light.

"Come on, Jason," muttered the deputy. "We'll have a talk with him."

They proceeded rapidly toward the home of Doctor Joslyn, where a lamp on the porch evidenced his presence. He stood up as the official preceded his companions along the walk.

"Hello, Jim," he called affably. "I saw you working on one of those crossword puzzles yesterday, and you're the

fellow I want to talk to." He held a newspaper in his hand.

"Speaking of puzzle work, what do you think of this?"

Carefully the deputy unfolded two sheets of newspaper. He spread them on the table, placing them edge to edge and showing the exact fit of the irregular tear straight through the picture of the Prince of Wales.

"Amusing, I must say," he said easily. "But how on earth does it justify you in your ridiculous behavior?"

"Only this; Mrs. Burger found one half of the paper here this evening. The other half she discovered in the Trotter house the night you and she first went there together. Evidently you used that portion to carry something in, possibly some tools, including the chisel with the nick in it, now in your woodshed, which was used on Trotter's wainscoting and left its trace."

A frown gathered on Doctor Joslyn's face.

"Then I am to understand that you arrest me for the murder of Ezra Trotter?"

"That's the way it sounds to me."

"Very well. I'll go, but it will cost you dearly, Teal."

He flung down the paper he still held and started into the house.

The deputy demurred—made a show of it at least.

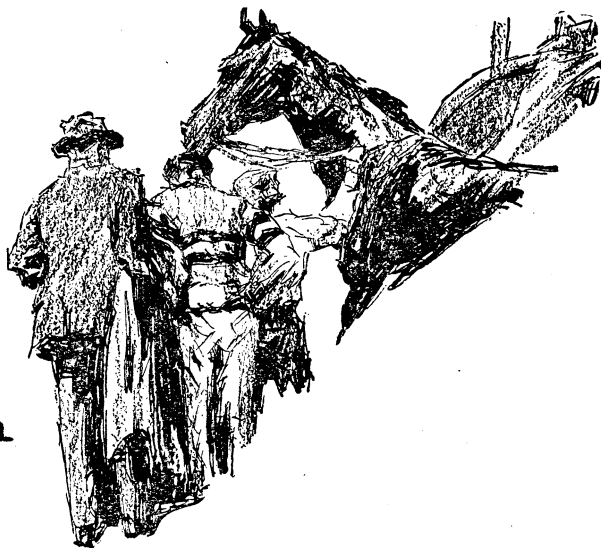
"Oh, I'm just getting my coat."

On the porch, the three stared at each other as if doubtful about the propriety of their course and the correctness of their deductions. Several minutes passed and the deputy moved closer to the door.

"Look out!" he suddenly cried.

He made a dash at the door. But he was too late. There came a pistol shot. When the two men burst into the physician's bedroom they found him sliding to the floor with the grin of death on his face. Doctor Joslyn had solved his own puzzle nicely.

Twilight Hour



by Eric Hatch

TWILIGHT HOUR WAS WHAT HER NAME WAS WHEN HARRIS FOUND HER. BUT YEARS BEFORE HE HAD KNOWN HER AS A MIGHTY STEEPLECHASE MARE UNDER THE NAME OF STAR O' NIGHT—BEFORE THE TRAGEDY HAPPENED. COULD SHE WIN AGAIN, WITH THE PROPER HANDLING? THAT WAS THE QUESTION HARRIS FACED WHEN A GHOST RODE IN HER SADDLE.

I WAS strolling across the clubhouse lawn at Pimlico, when I ran square into Frank Poor. When you run into a man like that, you know it, for Frank weighed a hundred and eighty and was about ten feet tall. He was the last person I had expected to see for, although his wealth made it natural for him to follow the races, I had long since despaired of turning him into a turfman—not that sporting, wild-looking bird, invariably clad in checks, who resembles a cross between Beau Brummel and Jack Johnson, but a nice quiet owner of good horses.

“Well, well, Harris!” he bellowed, then showing that although his sporting proclivities might have developed, his command of English had not, added, “Well, well!”

“So am I,” I answered. “But what in Heaven’s name are you doing here? Whence the sudden interest in the sport of kings?”

“Why I tell you, Fred. I’m now the proud owner of a race horse or nearly one, anyway.”

I didn’t understand. “You mean you’ve bought one on installments and in another month you’ll nearly own it?”

“No, Old Sporting Print!” he answered. “I mean I own a horse. Head, tail, legs, such as they are, everything in fact. She happens to be near a race horse.”

“She’s not so good, eh, Frank?” I asked him.

“My dear boy, the best way I can answer that is by frankly admitting to you the painful fact that the only time she’s ever really near a race horse is when she’s going to the post and happens to be alongside of one. The rest of the time—well, she’s always finished within the time limit, anyway—that is, almost always.”

I suddenly had a great desire to know more of this horse that had hauled my

old friend from the rut. I thought she must be an unusual animal for she had done what a lot of women I knew had been trying unsuccessfully to achieve for years.

"What's her name, Frank?" I asked him.

"Name? Oh! I haven't found out yet. You see I only met her last night. She's going to the party to-night, though."

It dawned on me that Frank had either been drinking or had acquired a female centaur for a companion. "I should think her hoofs would cut the carpets," I said mildly.

"Oh!" said he, walking up. "You mean the horse? Why her name is Twilight Hour. Damned well named she is, too. Twilight comes after everything else at the end of the day! Bah!"

I didn't know the name, so I tried another tack. "That's a pretty name, but I don't know it. How long has she been racing?"

"Years and years." His voice was almost sorrowful. "She's had to, I guess. I don't know whether she's finished the race she started in last Saturday, yet. I think she's about ten."

Nearer sweet sixteen I thought when he said this, and remarked: "She might have had a dozen names. Describe her."

"Bay mare, aged, lightweight, very breedy looking, shy on weight. Black tail and boyish-bob mane. Not much, you see."

"Know her breeding, Frank? Or doesn't that matter to you?"

"Why, of course I do, Fred!"—indignantly. "By Darkness out of Fairy Star. That's what I bought her on."

"By Darkness out of Fairy Star. Bay mare, aged, very breedy——" Memories stirred in my mind. Vague memories so dim and far off they were really only the ghosts of memories. "Bay mare, aged. By Darkness out of Fairy Star——"

I seemed to see another race track, a cheering crowd, pleading for a horse to win—an accident—— A crowd carrying something with an unled horse walking behind. But it was all so far away. Ten years ago, I guess. No, it couldn't be the same horse, yet it might—— Perhaps if I saw her I'd recognize her. I might even remember why it was that her description made me feel a little queer, sad, as when the name of some dead friend comes up. She was a great race mare if she was the one I knew, but the next race was starting and Frank ran off shouting over his shoulder:

"So long, Old Starting Flag! I say, meet me for dinner—Elkridge Club—seven thirty—what?"

"Right you are!" I yelled back, resolving to do something else first.

As Poor carried himself and his gray suit out of sight, I headed for the stables. Going past the paddock I fell to thinking about horses I had ridden in hunt races here and there—their individuality, whims and temperament. If this mare of Frank's should happen by some stroke of fate to be the one I knew, I wondered what made her sulk, what was wrong with the way she was being handled. I was convinced that it wasn't her fault.

After walking past rows of box stalls with little heads protruding and velvety muzzles quivering at my approach, I came to one bearing a sign twice as large as any other, "Frank Poor, Esquire." I wondered for a moment, if he lived there instead of the horse, then my eyes were caught and almost blinded by a wide strip of purple and green, painted across the door. Frank's colors. I thought perhaps the outrageous combination might account for the horse's bad showing. If I ever had to carry colors like that, I wouldn't finish until the crowd had gone home. But, ignoring this I went in, and, slipping my hand through the halter, led her out into the sunshine.

Once she was out in the light, there wasn't any doubt about whether she was the mare I knew or not.

Her barrel tapered into great quarters that seemed to spell power. Her slim legs were clean as a whistle, except where she had rapped them skimming some jump too close. Then I remembered why I had felt so queerly when Frank first described her. It all came back with a rush and I looked more closely at her. Yes, there was a change. Her eyes lacked their old fire. They were brave eyes, but tired, almost hopeless, dimmed like flames that have turned into embers.

I remembered a shout I had once heard a jockey use to urge his horse toward the finish of a race. Involuntarily I called out that cry. The mare heard me, threw up her head, snorted. I watched her, fascinated, and saw her eyes were flaming again. She was quivering all over like a Derby winner. Man! She was *there!*

Queer, her recognizing that shout; I couldn't understand it, but it gave me an idea. I hadn't ridden chasers for years without learning something of their mysteries, without learning that weeks before a race they know to a day when it's coming, that as soon as you throw a leg over them they know whether you're game enough to stay with them.

But as I say, it gave me an idea. I heard a legend about one of the Northern tracks. Something about horses that ran in the night when the moon was full in June. Strange tales about races that never had been run. I'd always laughed at it. Still if I could persuade Frank, there might be just a chance.

Frank arrived at the club at eight, full of cocktails, and talkative, so I felt encouraged to ask him about letting me take over Twilight Hour for the race I had in mind. I didn't want the purse. All I wanted was a chance to work out

my ridiculous, wild theory. I didn't dare explain it to Frank, as his materialistic tendencies would make him absolutely fail to understand.

"Hullo!" he howled across the room when he saw me. "I searched about a bit for you after the last race this afternoon. Couldn't wangle any scent of you at all. Wanted to show you the string in the approved manner."

"Thanks, old man, I saw her." I spoke lightly, appearing only half interested. "Nice little animal. Wouldn't wonder if she might win something—properly handled. Had her long?"

"Dear boy, what questions you ask! I've had her too long, if you must know. No; I don't mean that. I really think she has great possibilities. It's just a question of getting the right man to handle her. Wait! I have an idea." He held up his hand dramatically as we entered the dining room, waiters rushing to our side at the gesture. I could see this had been planned ahead and the spontaneity was feigned. "Why don't you buy her? There! That's a great idea! Whyn't you buy her? Here, you're one of the nation's foremost authorities on steeplechasing. You could take this filly and more'n likely clean up with her."

It amused me, hearing her called a filly. Rather complimentary, for a nice old mare. I thought I'd tell her. It might make her feel young enough to show her heels to something beside the starter. I parried:

"I'll tell you, Frank. I don't know as I want to buy a brush horse. Timber toppers are more my line. Besides, you haven't given her what you might call a startlingly good reference."

"What of it, old feller?" he answered. "You're not hiring her for a housemaid. You said yourself she had possibilities."

"So have the oil fields of Russia," I interrupted him. "No, Frank, I don't want to buy her, but I tell you what I will do. That's bet you one thousand

good American dollars that if you'll let me take her and do what I want with her for six weeks, I'll win one race with her. What do you say?"

Poor put his hand to his head. He groaned, patting his heart.

"Poor feller, my heart bleeds for you. Tell mother all about it and you'll wake up in the morning feeling so much better."

"I mean it, Frank, I'll take a chance on the mare, but only on the condition that you let me treat her like my own and no questions asked."

Frank seemed peeved. "I'm afraid I don't get you, Fred. Where do you get all that no-questions-asked idea? What the devil good is there in owning a race horse if I can't even ask any questions about her? Ridiculous."

I knew that Frank was a little tight and that made his tongue a little loose. "Ask all the questions you like now. If you take me up I wouldn't dare tell you my plans because your hair would stand up and you wouldn't sleep for a week. No, Frank, better take the bet and let it go at that."

Frank lighted a cigarette after struggling with the match. His peculiar gyrations led me to believe that he had so much alcohol in him he was afraid he'd catch fire. Then he held out his hand, saying: "Done, my lad! And I firmly believe you're the one that's done! I'll take your bet but it seems only fair to give me one little inkling about what's going to happen to her."

I saw his point. In my eagerness I had almost forgotten she really was his horse. It seemed incongruous for him to own one, anyway.

"All right, Frank, it's a go! Briefly, this is what's going to happen: I'll ship Twilight Hour to Belmont Park Monday, keep her in training there, get a boy I know to ride her in the Memorial Steeplechase on the twenty-third of June and after she's won, turn the purse and horse over to you provided you'll

keep her in 'Pension' for the rest of her days. Nothing unusual about that, is there?"

"No, not about that, but why don't you bubble forth with the deep secret?"

I smiled as I answered, "That really is the gist of the situation." I hoped Frank might forget the subject now, but he had just enough liquor in him to get his mind on one track and not enough to switch it off.

He continued:

"Now, once and for all, don't try an' tell me that a man who knows as much about horses as you do would get himself associated with a horse that even a man who knows as little 'bout horses as I do, knows is only good for ornamental purposes and writing up as income-tax losses. Spill it, ol'-timer, spill it."

I wanted to evade the issue and was about to give up hope when I saw Billy Carey coming toward our table. So, trusting to luck, I said: "Fred, you're right. There is something else to it, but what I'm going to try is so utterly fantastic that I'm honestly afraid to tell you. But, I can promise you it's nothing that will cast reflection on those horrible colors of yours."

Carey arrived then, so Frank rose and, with a wave of his hand, said: "Lo, Bill. You know Fred, 'course. Every one does. Well, Freddy and I are now racing partners. Just consumed a deal an' he has the gall to razz my colors. You think they're pretty, don't you?"

Carey laughed. "How did you happen to pick 'em out? Only one left unregistered?"

"Not at all," replied Poor, annoyed. "It's like this. I've lots of girl friends—lots of 'em. I take 'em to the races and sometimes pay their debts. They never pick horses—just bet because they like the color of the jockey's shirt. Well, I knew my horse couldn't win, so I picked out a set of colors that nobody'd like if they were in their right mind."

After the laugh that greeted this statement died down, he capped it with the following sad tale:

"Would you believe this? Last time my horse started I had a girl with me who was color blind!"

I was down at the stable early Monday, with a letter in my pocket to the effect that all whom it might concern were to consider Twilight Hour as my property until the twenty-fourth of June.

They were getting the mare ready for the trip when I arrived. It amused me to watch the groom strapping her and to realize that if he knew what I knew he wouldn't trust his superstitious hide within ten miles of her.

When we finally put her on the train I decided to ride up in the car with her alone. I wanted to see how the mare acted as we came nearer Belmont Park. I was pretty sure she'd know where she was going and I thought she'd understand why. If she began acting strangely in the night, I wanted to be on the job.

She was sort of sleepy as the train pulled out, like a horse about fifty years old, but when we hit the north-bound track, she began to get nervous. It was dark in the car then, just bright once in a while when the moon broke clear of a cloud and shone in through the open door. The mare stomped and threw her head up and down. I gave her water, but she just splashed it and pulled her head away from the bucket. I knew something was wrong for her eyes were glowing with a queer light, like the eyes of wild wolves at night, and I began to get jumpy myself.

We were passing through absolutely deserted country and we hadn't stopped anywhere since we left the little race-track station, but I couldn't get rid of my spook idea. I looked out and the sight of the moon peering through the branches of tangled trees didn't serve to reassure me any.

So things drifted along, the mare getting steadily worse, stomping, curling her lips back from her teeth so they shone in the half light, and, now and then, whinnying until I began to feel the hair on the back of my neck itch. A tree swished along the side of the car, its leaves slapping in through the door. I leaped back and crouched against the other side. I knew I was behaving like a fool, but the thing was getting on my nerves.

Pulling myself together, I started over toward the mare. Then, I stopped in my tracks as if some one had grabbed me. I saw an object in front of the stall. I didn't dare go near her, she looked as if her mind was wandering and I thought she might try to kill me, so I stood quite still. The form I had seen seemed clearer and I could have sworn it was a man, about the size of a jockey, too, only it seemed heavier. Then it happened; I saw a shape, dead white, flash past me out the door. The mare screamed, that awful horse scream that lives always in the mind of any one hearing it—a scream almost human, filled with unbelievable anguish and longing.

I went over to the mare, then. She was standing with sweat pouring off her, trembling all over, but her eyes were quiet again and she nuzzled me as I stroked her sleek neck. I was horrified. Until that moment I had been so terrified I couldn't think. Then I remembered the date. The twenty-third—an even month from the day of the race I was entering her in, the same day as another race, years ago, and the moon was full. Everything was exactly the same.

A cold sweat broke out on my forehead. I thought, perhaps, those legends I'd heard were not so wild. I put my hand to the mare's soft nose and said, sort of without thinking, I guess, "Poor old girl, he stuck by you to the finish, didn't he?"

We were pulling into Wilmington. The lights of the station and the town made me feel better. I got out and went over to the news stand where I invested in a pack of cigarettes and a magazine.

I just managed to swing aboard the train as it pulled out and, knowing there was a long ride ahead of me, I lighted the stable lantern and made myself comfortable on some straw with my back propped up against the door which I shut, tight. I wasn't able to do much reading because *Twilight Hour* demanded constant attention.

I don't ever remember seeing a horse so grateful for the company of a human being. Poor old lady, I guess it was because I was a *human* being she felt she needed me so much. We both got some sleep, though, after a while and I didn't wake up until we were going through the tube onto Long Island. On arriving at Belmont, my own trainer was there to meet us. He gave me a strange look when he saw the horse and still stranger on hearing that I had come up with her in the car.

"What do you want done with her, Mr. Harris?" asked Grant, the trainer, "I don't recall knowing her. You goin' to race her over the timber?"

"No, Grant," I answered. "I'm going to try my luck with her over the brush. She has possibilities."

As she came down the ramp from the car her head went up and she sniffed, turning her neck from side to side and staring.

"What's the matter with her, Mr. Harris? She acts like she was looking for some one."

This troubled me. I didn't want to go into details, yet didn't for the life of me see quite how it was to be avoided, for the mare was acting queerly.

"She's looking for oats," I said with a forced laugh. Grant watched her as the boy held her.

"What stabling arrangements have you made for her, Grant?"

"She's to be in No. 3 barn, sir, with your other jumpers. That's all right, ain't it, sir?"

"Why, no, Grant. You see her case is different from the others!"

As soon as I said that I knew I had made a mistake, so I qualified the statement: "The others are young. Most of them haven't raced yet and some of them are timber horses. She's a veteran. You know that as well as I do, Grant."

Grant apparently did, for he had been scratching the side of his head as he watched the mare and now he came out with:

"Say! I know that horse! Isn't she the one Harry Hollocks died——"

"Yes," I interrupted quietly, not wanting any one to overhear; "she is. She's a beautiful thing, Grant, isn't she?"

"Beautiful, yes, sir! D'ye mean to tell me ye don't know the story? You haven't heard what's been goin' on around here since that night? How ye go out in the mornin' and find hoof-prints on the course when there hasn't been a live horse near it? D'ye mean that——"

"Steady, Grant," I warned him. "I don't want to hear anything more about it. I don't own the mare, I'm running her for a friend. I want you to get a stall for her in the same stable she was in the last time she was here and, if possible, get the same stall. Understand?"

As I said this his face turned white. I had half expected it would.

"Yes, sir," was all he said.

"I want the mare walked every afternoon for three hours. No galloping or schooling and don't say a word to any one about recognizing her. Get me?"

"Yes, sir," he said; "believe me, sir, you need have no fear of my saying a word to any one about Star o' Night."

"*Twilight Hour*," I corrected him.

"Hell!" Grant swore, "why don't they

give her a name that has something to do with a Christian time of day. Always something about night. Star o' Night, Black Evenin', Moonsglow! Mr. Harris, why d'ye bother with her? It ain't natural you havin' a loony mare in your string."

I decided to ignore this somewhat doubtful compliment.

"We're starting her in the Memorial," I said. "Do everything in your power to keep her quiet. Sleep in her stall if necessary."

He turned and followed the mare toward the stables without a word, so I got in my car and just in time for lunch pulled through the gates of what I called home. Lord! it looked nice and restful after the wild night I'd had with that crazy horse.

I turned in early and slept until about six next morning when my man woke me with a telegram. I knew it had something to do with that confounded horse before I opened it.

Grant taken nervous breakdown ordered away leaving at once. MRS. GRANT.

That was a great little piece of news to start the day off with, but I called up a trainer named Quest whom I knew, explained my predicament and asked him to take charge of Twilight Hour for me. Not knowing her, he took the job, but I think he resented my peculiar instructions for keeping the mare fit.

Two weeks later Frank Poor came up from Baltimore and camped himself at my place. The first thing he did was ask for a drink, the second was to ask for another and the third was to ask about the good health and, as he put it, "general pinkiness of Twilight Hour." "She's in great shape," I told him. "She looks like a different horse. We'll go down some afternoon and watch her work. Like to?"

"Afternoon!" he spluttered, spilling his highball. "Why the devil doesn't she

canter in the morning? Doesn't like to get up early, I suppose?"

"Do you?" I interrupted him.

"Rot!" he retorted, annoyed. "Good night! what a horse!"

Without thinking I said, "She is pretty tired in the mornings, sometimes."

An odd look crossed Frank's face. There was almost intelligence in it. I tried to cover my break, by filling half his glass with my best whisky, a thing I wouldn't dream of doing under ordinary circumstances—knowing Frank. Apparently I succeeded, for he changed the subject.

Things went along quietly after that until two days before the race when, just after dawn as I was on my way to the track, I noticed Frank's car was gone. Then I knew he had remembered what I'd said about "mornings," and I drove like a demon for Belmont Park. Knowing the back roads and short cuts I managed to get ahead of him and it was easy then for me to stall my car in the road, feigning engine trouble. He stopped to help me and after I figured it would be safe to let him see the mare, I repaired the "damage" and we went on.

When we came to Twilight Hour's stall Frank jumped out and ran to the door. It was half open and the mare was inside pacing up and down with sweat drying on her. Frank almost lost his eye teeth when he saw it.

"You certainly are one hell of a fine horseman!" he stormed. "What are you trying to do, kill the horse? I never heard of such an outrage—allowing a horse to stand wet like that!" Then a crafty look came into his face. "Besides, how did she get up a sweat like that in the night? Come on now, Fred! This is too damn much! What are you up to, trying to throw the race?"

Several stable boys turned up.

"Where's the trainer who's supposed to be looking after this horse?" he roared at one of them.

"Mr. Quest don't come near her till eight o'clock. Mr. Harris left orders no one was to be near her afore then. I ain't goin' to, I know that!"

"What do you mean, boy?" asked Poor angrily.

"Nothin', sir, only after de toid night she come, it don't need no orders to keep guys away from her box till the barns get light as hell!"

Poor turned on me with a fresh outburst. "What the devil do you mean by this? You made her a man-killer. Come on, out with it."

This got my goat. I'd been doing it all for the love of it and because I wanted to win a race for the poor boob—and now this!

"You damned fool, Frank Poor! If you weren't a friend I'd shoot you dead for saying a thing like that. Who do you think you are, talking about me throwing races? I've got a bet up of five thousand this mare'll win that race. Who are you to talk, anyway? You bought an old crock that couldn't get out of her own way! Now look at her. Have you seen that fire in her eyes since the day you bought her? You have like hell! Now shut up and get away from her!"

I turned my back and walked off to the car, disgusted and wishing I'd never heard of Twilight Hour. I drove many miles before I had my temper under sufficient control to take a chance on seeing Frank. It was almost dusk when I arrived home.

Frank must have heard me coming for he was at the door to meet me with outstretched hand.

"I'm sorry, old man," he said, and he meant it. "I guess I forgot my end of the bargain."

We shook hands.

"That's all right, Frank. I'm going to send you a bill for about two hundred gallons of gasoline I've used up trying to get my temper cooled out, but I'll forget this morning, if you like."

"I really am sorry," he answered. "To show you I mean it, I made a little bet on the mare myself to-day, and I need the money, more than I like to admit."

We patched it up then and tried not to talk about the race, but somehow kept drifting back to it, and it was past three when we finally got to bed.

The big race was scheduled for three thirty and by three you couldn't squeeze another human being into Belmont Park. The old place was beautiful with the sun shining on the freshly harrowed track and the steeplechase course where the red-and-white flags on the jumps looked like butterflies in the soft haze that hung over the track, making the blue heavens seem far off. I guess it didn't seem so far off to the boys who were riding, though, for it was a tough race with a big field and a killing pace for three miles.

When the saddling bell rang for the big chase Frank and I joined the crowd in the paddock and went together to her stall. Lord! she was lovely with her satiny coat and that look in her eyes that thoroughbreds have when they wait the great test. She was going to win. She as much as told me so when she stuck her velvet muzzle under my arm. As they put her blanket on over the saddle. I took my jockey aside.

"Willie," I said, "you're going to win this race. You don't know it, but you can't help it. Can you remember instructions as near as this to post time?"

"Yes, sir, I think so, sir," he said, clasping and unclasping his hands.

"Then listen carefully. Give the mare her head the moment you start. She's going to take charge. Just sit still. Don't try to place her. Don't do anything to her at all, and when you come to the last jump—get this, now—you'll be almost even with the leaders. Fall forward on her neck as though you were dead—I mean asleep. She'll come up then and win. Watch out when you

cross the line. She— Hello, we're late. Get yourself up now, and good luck."

I gave him a leg into the saddle myself and saw that his tack was all right. Then they paraded down the patch onto the track, around in front of the stands once and out onto the green sea of grass with Twilight Hour craning her neck and taking little dance steps like a three-year-old at her first race.

They were at the post only a moment before they were away, a surging mass of color sweeping on to the first jump and over like some great wave of the ocean which, with the sun shining through it, rushes a rock-bound reef, springs over and is on.

At the second jump one of the leaders fell, and another horse tripped over him sending both boys flying through the air, clear of the horses following. This left sixteen in the race and Twilight Hour was running somewhere in the middle of the bunch.

On they came at the water, scattering turf in every direction, their steel shoes twinkling as the sun fell on them. Frank's mare sailed over beautifully and I saw with joy that Willie Parks was riding right, letting the mare have her way entirely. It takes nerve to do that in a fast race where you almost jump on the hocks of the horse ahead of you and are hard pressed from behind.

They stayed in about the same positions the first time round, two more falling by the wayside. The pace held, too, but Twilight Hour hung on without an effort.

As they came over the water the second time, she was rushed and pecked on landing, Parks going up on her neck as the water splashed. I remembered the same thing had happened when she last raced there. It struck me then as a strange coincidence.

I could see some of the jockeys take shorter holds as they started the third

circuit. A mile and a half more and it would be all over. The mare had come up to third place and was running like a bird, clearing everything in her stride and managing her own race with Willie riding as if he was dazed. At the Liverpool she took off too far back and tumbled, but got going again after Flashlight had passed her. So she stuck in fourth place and the pace began to slacken.

You could hear the heavy breathing of the field now, and three more came down at the next leap. The occasional "Hy-yup!" from one of the jocks told of a tired horse going sluggishly at his fences. Hilaire and Glory, who with Flashlight, were ahead, were not running so strongly. Hilaire's boy went to the whip. I saw Willie's hand start for his bat, but he checked himself and steadied the mare as she swung round the turn leading into the stretch.

The stands were now roaring: "Hilaire! Come on, you Glory! Flashlight, come up!" but not a sound for Twilight Hour who looked as they slapped at the next to the last jump for all the world like a beaten horse, licked, with her tail waving the distress signal and the spring gone from her stride. Her age was telling, for the pace had been hot.

Flashlight spurted and the shout of the crowd was for him, those who had backed him throwing their hats high in the air and pounding each other on the back.

"Oh you Flashlight!" they howled. "He wins, he wins!"

Then, as they came tearing down at the last fence, there was a sudden stillness. Something was in the air, and the crowd was tense. A strange thing happened. From Willie Parks' mouth came a cry, "Alee—yo hup!" but it was not his voice. All the old-timers recognized it, and the rest of the crowd seemed to feel there was something unnatural about it, for the quiet was un-

broken except for the hammering of hoofs on turf.

"Alee—yo hup! For me, hoss, for me!" it came again. There was pleading in it and the old-timers knew then that it was the shout of little Harry Hollocks as he had used it the day he won the race that killed him. Twilight Hour pricked up her ears, faltered once in her stride, then pulling her tired muscles together, shot forward with a rush. Like lightning and thunder her little steel-shod hoofs spurned the ground. Up—up she came and as she cleared the last jump, Parks slumped forward in his saddle.

Then the storm broke. Belmont became a bedlam! Her bay neck stretched out, she caught the leaders and nosed past them to win by a head. She stopped in her tracks so suddenly that Parks fell and she trotted back to him to stand her head hung low.

It was great to see the mare as they came from the track with a wreath on her neck, the crowd all cheering and yelling their heads off at her and a bunch of stableboys carrying Parks around on their shoulders. Frank ran out and, throwing his arms around her sweaty neck, pressed his cheek to it. I guess he cared more than I thought.

When the stands had quieted down and Twilight Hour had been taken away to be petted and spoiled by every groom on the track, Frank took me by the arm.

"I say, 'Old Water Jump,'" he said, beaming all over, "come over to the jockey room with me. I want to give that boy a present."

I knew there'd be trouble, but I said:

"All right, old man, but let me tell you right now there isn't another boy in

the country who could have ridden the race he did to-day. Treat him accordingly, no matter what he has to say about the race."

We arrived at the door of the dressing room just as Parks was coming out. He wasn't smiling, nor did he seem particularly pleased—just dazed. He almost bumped into us before he saw who we were.

"Yes, sir?" he said in a scared voice. "Did the mare go all right? I'm glad she won."

"She went fine, Willie," I said, shaking hands with him. "You rode a damn good race."

Frank broke in: "Here, boy, here's a little present for you. You rode a damned fine race."

Frank gave him the check, but the boy shook his head as he studied the piece of paper, then, his face coloring as he saw the amount, he started to give it back.

"Sorry, sir, I can't take it—that is—somebody else rode Star o' Night—I mean Twilight Hour."

Frank Poor exploded. His nerves were all on edge anyway.

"Hell and damnation!" he roared. "What in the name of hell d'you mean? You were on the horse. If you don't get it, who in the name of heaven should I give it to?"

A queer, sad look came into the boy's face as he answered. He seemed awfully tired, and wistful:

"Why—why I've known about it all along. I think you'd better give it to—Harry Hollocks' mother. I live there, you know, since—he died. I—I—that is—he, Harry Hollocks rode Twilight Hour."





The Get-Together Club

THE COMPLETE STORY MAGAZINE seems already to have established something much warmer than friendly relations with—we were about to say its readers—but it occurs to us that that term might, as a matter of fact, be too exclusive. We wonder how long it may be, at the present rate of development, before we will be obliged to substitute for “its readers” the great “American public.”

That’s what the magazine is growing into—American. It may seem like a strange thing to say, considering the fact that it is made in America; but because a thing is made in America does not necessarily prove that it is American. No matter what its characteristics—even its merits—may be otherwise, it cannot be essentially American unless it satisfies American cravings, ideals, if you please, though we don’t like to use a word that has been driven to death as that one has in the past few years.

The chief American craving at present—as we see it, and of course we may be wrong—is for the two-fisted kind of stuff in life. Or, to put it more elegantly, as does the writer of the letter which we print below, in speaking of the novel in the number for November 25, the longing is for the epic story. “Stories of Gods and Heroes” is the way old-fashioned compilers of myths used to put it, and with the

modifications and adaptations necessary to fit twentieth-century conceptions we don’t, at the moment, think of any phrase which so satisfactorily describes the idea we have in mind for COMPLETE STORY MAGAZINE.

When you come to think of it, isn’t it true that stories of men like “Wild Bill” Hickock parallel, to some extent, some of the mythological tales of Greek and Roman heroes, so-called? At least the human type that they represented was very much the same. And J. Allan Dunn’s story, “Wild Bill,” in the September tenth number, made a hit.

We’d like to hear what you people think of this?

PITTSBURGH, PA., December 3, 1924.

DEAR MR. SESSIONS: You’ve gone and done it. The November 25th issue of COMPLETE STORY is a wonderful volume in an *always* unusual series.

“The Flower of Fate” is epic, a gripping story out of all story grooves. If I am a judge, then, it will stand side by side with “The Pride of Palomar” and “The Sea Hawk.” My unlimited approval to Mr. Montague.

And the short stories are fit to round out this epochal novel.

Long live COMPLETE STORY, its contributors, and its editor.

HENRY GUIMOND.
1750 Hower Avenue, East Cleveland, Ohio.

The following letters are further notes of good cheer to swell the chorus that has been gaining in volume since